

PAT CADIGAN

*Deadpan Allie, the pathosfinder, is a character familiar to Pat Cadigan fans, who've followed Allie's career through several science fiction stories (a few of which appeared in OMNI) and the sf novel Mindplayers (Bantam). Because of my fondness for the character and because so many of her "cases" seemed to verge on the subject of vampirism, I asked Pat to write a Deadpan Allie story for this book.*

Com 1879625-JJJDeadpanAllie

TZT-Tijuaoutlie

XQWithheld

NelsonNelson

NelsonNelsonMindplay Agency TZT-Easct.Njyman XQ.2717.06X0661818JL

GO

So, NN, how's the family? Ah, sorry, I mean the agency. Of course. Yes, of course. I'm sending you this instead of coming back myself. Sorry to cut into your Bolshoi Ballet viewing time like this. I won't be transmitting a vocal. I haven't spoken for, I'm not sure, days. Lots of days. Something's happened to my speech center. I'd have to put a socket in my head to vocalize and there doesn't seem to be a surgeon handy. Anyway, I know how much you hate sockets. Then, too, I don't speak any

Romance language. But just about all the merchants sign, so I make my needs known that way. I used to sign a lot back at J. Walter Tech when I was getting my almost worthless education and learning to read Emotional Indexes—Indices?—and I'd forgotten how much I enjoyed it. You know, NN, I like it so much, I'm thinking about just letting my speech center go. I haven't sustained complete damage to language. I can write, and I can read what I've written for as long as my short-term memory cares to hold it. It's a capricious thing, short-term memory. Where was I? Oh. Ever hear of that kind of damage before? I don't know if I can understand anything said to me because I haven't heard any English or Mandarin since I got here. But then, maybe I wouldn't know if I had. I hear them talking here in their own language and it doesn't sound right, it doesn't sound like language. It sounds like noise. Clang-clang, clang-clang. Being a mute may be unnecessary in this day, but it's hardly a handicap in my profession. People talk too goddam much.

*You* wouldn't see it that way. *You* talked me into this job. Big bonus, you said. Buy the apartment I've been scouting, you said. Just a job, where's my professionalism, you said, and you said, and you said. Nothing wrong with *your* speech center.

But you know it—you would love me if you could see me now. Because one of the other effects of this half-assed aphasia I've got is my facial muscles are paralyzed. You'd never ask me again if they called me Deadpan Allie for nothing.

That's what you asked me when you talked me into this. I can remember. I've got one eye out and I'm plugged into the memory boost (all the equipment's here, I wouldn't want it to fall into the wrong hands. Like yours.) Left eye. I tried the other eye but I don't think my left hemisphere wants to talk to you because I can't type and remember at the same time plugged in on that side. Typing lefthanded, too. I guess I've got enough language on that side of the brain.

I'm meandering. You'll have to bear with me.

I told you when you talked me into this I don't do dirty work. People like me because I'm clean. I was clean with the fetishist, I was clean with the mindsuck composer, I was clean with your son-in-law and he pushed me. But you wanted me to do this one. Do you remember what I said or do you need a boost for it? I told you anyone who insisted on working with an empath didn't need me.

Fine. It's a silly prejudice. Maybe I wouldn't want anyone to get that close to me without the decency of a machine between us. It's my right to feel that way. Why did you send me when you knew I felt that way? Professionalism. I know that. Don't try getting in touch with me to tell me something I already know. Fine. They asked for me. They asked for me. Fine. They asked for me. They asked for me. Fine. They asked for—

Excuse. I got a bounce on that, a real ricochet. I'm not myself today. Or maybe I am, for the first time in a long time.

I'd always thought of the entourage as a thing of the past. Not just entourage, but Entourage, as in the people who tend to accumulate around someone who happens to be Somebody. Now, I've seen performance artists who keep an audience on retainer so they can hone work as they go but an Entourage is a lot more than that, and a lot less, too. Caverty had a whole houseful of Entourage—highly unusual for a holo artist, I thought—and there was a hell of a lot of house. I'd already been told how it was with him—hell, I knew about the empath, didn't I?—but that didn't mean I could anticipate the experience of opening the front door and finding them all there.

Yes, I did open the front door myself. Noisy crowd, they didn't hear me ring so I tried the controls and the door swung open to the entry hall. All those done-over mansions in the Midwest retained the original entry halls, complete with chandelier. Yesterday's gentility, today's bright idea. This one was tiled in a black-and-white compass pattern. When you came in, you could see you were standing just slightly east of true north, if that sort of thing mattered to you. The Compass hasn't permeated everything the way the Zodiac has, but then it's a pretty new idea. Personally, I think *What's your direction?* will always be as dumb a question as *What's your sign?* None of the half-dozen people standing around in the entry hall asked me either question, or anything else, including *Need some help?* as I unloaded my baggage from the flyer. The pilot watched from the front seat; she was union and definitely not a baggage handler, as she'd told me several times on the trip out.

It wasn't until I had all my system components piled up on the center of the compass—excuse, Compass, I mean (they'd want it that way)—that someone broke loose from the group and came over. To examine the boxes, as it turned out. She refused to notice me until she heard the whiny hum of the flyer as it lifted off outside.

"Are these for Caverty?" she asked, putting one hand on top of the pile proprietarily.

I put my own hand atop the pile, even with hers. "Not exactly. I'm the pathosfinder."

The silver-and-gold-weave eyebrows went up. In the middle of the day, they gave her the look of someone who hasn't yet gone home from last night's party. So did the rest of her outfit, which seemed to be a collection of swatches from this season's best fabrics or something, predominantly silver and gold with the textures varying. Some people I know would have tried to buy it right off her back.

"Pathosfinder," she said, tasting the word uncertainly. "I don't think—" she shrugged. "I'm sorry, I don't remember us ordering a pathosfinder." She turned to the other people still clustered over near the foot of a curving marble-and-ebony staircase. "Anyone put in an order for a pathosfinder?"

"Caverty did," I said before any of them could answer. "You should ask him."

The gray eyes widened; not biogems, I noticed, but eyes that looked like eyes. It seemed kind of out of character for her. "Oh, no," she said. "Caverty works with an empath, everybody knows that."

"He still works with an empath," I said, "only he's also going to be working with me temporarily."

The woman shrugged again. "I'm sorry, I don't think you understand how things are. If Caverty ordered some equipment from you, I'm sure he means to use it himself somehow, but I know that he didn't order you to come with it. You can leave the equipment here and I'll see that he gets it and sends your company a receipt but—" She was starting to show me the egress when the chandelier said, in a cheery, female voice, "You're a lousy doorman, Priscilla, you should stick to partying. I'm coming right down."

For several moments, all Priscilla did was gape up at the chandelier with her mouth open. I stole a look at the little group by the stairs; the Emotional Indices ranged from apprehension to mild indignation to somewhat malicious satisfaction. I felt myself going over a mental speed bump. The milieu here was going to be a bitch to get around, and it would no doubt be reproduced in some way in Caverty's mind. Terrific, I thought. As if the job weren't already hard enough, I had a complicated social structure to clamber around on. *NN, you old bastard,*

Then another woman came trotting down the staircase. "Ah, here we are. The pathosfinder. Alexandra Haas, right? Deadpan Allie?" Somehow her hitting the foot of the stairs shooed everyone, including Priscilla, away; they flowed off into a room to the left, or west, according to the Compass.

"Sorry about that," said the woman. She was all business, tailored, no frills, brown all over, including her eyes, which were some kind of artificial gem the color of oak. "Sometimes the Entourage gets a little out of hand around here. I'm Harmony. At least, Caverty hopes I am." She laughed. "I'm kind of the general factotum, grand scheduler, traffic director, hall monitor. I try to keep things harmonious. I'm the one who contacted your agency about you. I've done quite a lot of research on pathosfinders; I'm really happy you were able to take the job."

I nodded. "Thanks. I need a place to stash my equipment and then I'd like to meet Caverty."

"I've had a room prepared for you upstairs, away from the general fooforaw and infighting—"

"Somewhere close to Caverty, I hope?" I said, as she tried to herd me toward the stairs. "I like to be as available and accessible to a client as possible."

Harmony's face clouded slightly. "Oh. Well. I, uh, I'd really have to check that out with Caverty. He has his own section of the house where no one else stays, out of respect to his need for a private working environment. You're experienced with creative people, so I guess you know how that is."

"I understand completely. However, clients sometimes feel that they have to see me right away, in the middle of the night or whatever. I need to be easily available."

Harmony smiled with indulgence. "There's nowhere you can go in this house where you would not be available to Caverty on a moment's notice or less. Everyone here understands that. It *is* his house, after all."

I opened my mouth, thought quickly, and shut it again. Trying to explain to her that I was not just another body added to the general Entourage population wasn't going to penetrate; I could tell. She was sure she knew the kind of people who stayed in Caverty's house, she was one of them. "My system—" I said, gesturing at the stack of components still sitting in the center of the Compass.

"I've already taken care of that. It'll be moved up to your room for you."

"I'll just wait here, then, until I see everything moved."

The professional mask almost slipped. She caught herself before she could sigh and spoke into her brown bracelet instead. "Entry hall right *now*." Four people with straps and handtrucks emerged from a door half hidden by the start of the curve of the staircase. They weren't exactly in uniform but there was a sameness to them and I knew immediately from their posture that they weren't Entourage. They were employees.

"We don't do that much heavy lifting and moving large objects around here," Harmony said as the hired help labored along behind us with my system. "The people who come and go here tend to travel light, although we haven't actually had anyone leave for a long time. Leave permanently, I mean. Which is good. For all of Caverty's—oh, I don't know what you'd call it, wildness of heart or freedom of spirit, I guess—for all that, he really needs a stable living situation. And things have really stabilized here. It's good. I think you'll see that while you're here."

Even though I was getting short of breath on those damned stairs I had to do breathing exercises to maintain the deadpan. She was making my skin crawl.

Whoa. Have to stop sometimes. That boost. Too vivid sometimes. I don't know why I'm reliving this for you anyway, NN. I mean, can you appreciate it? What do I think I'm doing, making art or something? I'm no artist, not in that sense. But I'm the best pathosfinder in the hemisphere. Right? You made me the best pathosfinder in the hemisphere, remember? You did it. And you know, that was nothing compared to what some people can do to you.

I know what you're saying right now. I went into it with a bad attitude. Isn't that what you're saying? I know it is, even though—chuckle, chuckle—I doubt I could actually understand you if I were there right now and you were saying it to me. Clang-clang, clang-clang.

Um, bad attitude. Yes, you'd say I'd gone into it with a bad attitude. Now what kind of a thing is that for someone trading on the name Deadpan Allie, and my reputation and all. Well, I'll tell you. It's knowing when you're in a bad situation. I wanted to pack up and go right then. Leaving aside the skin crawling and that stuff (interesting mental image, there, pack up and go and leave aside the skin crawling; there I go meandering again, bear with me, it happens, did I mention that? I guess I did but it's too late to go back and see if I really did because I can't read that part any more). So. Even if my skin hadn't been crawling like a lizard, like a million little tiny lizards, I should have seen it was already too hard. Pathosfinding you need privacy for. Go down and root around in somebody's soul like that; the client gets embarrassed in front of *me* sometimes. Facing someone else can be impossible. Caverty should have known that, he was a professional, he'd worked with a pathosfinder years before, before he'd discovered his empath.

So that was mainly why I stayed, you know. I wanted to check that out, see this empath and Caverty, get a feel for how they worked and why Caverty wanted to work that way. But I think I must have had it in the back of my mind that I was going to leave after that, unless Caverty could disentangle himself from his empath and his Harmony and the rest of the Entourage. So I could work him properly.

Disentangle? Did I really say that?

I don't know. I can't read it any more.

Harmony gave me the house tour. Done-over mansion, the usual things overdone as well as done over. Ten thousand rooms, not counting bedrooms. Ballrooms, dining rooms, sitting rooms, room rooms, an art gallery, a theatre where Caverty showed his holos if he felt like it. That last wasn't the way Harmony put it but that was the general idea, or so I gathered from her Emotional Index.

Reading the Emotional Index of someone who is trying like hell to give you the best impression can be amusing or annoying, depending on your mood. Occasionally I found myself feeling one way or the other about it but mostly I felt uneasy. She'd fallen into some kind of PR ramadoola that she was running on me. Silliness; you don't give a pathosfinder PR because she finds out what the truth is right away. But Harmony was straining to make me happy or get some kind of approval from me. Maybe because she thought then I'd do a better job with her boss?

No, that wasn't it. She was trying to *sell* me something.

Or convert me.

Oh, yes. Once I saw it, there was no way not to see it. But never mind. Sooner or later, I'd get to Caverty and I wouldn't have to bother with Harmony or Priscilla the Party Baby or anyone else in the Entourage.

"I need to see Caverty as soon as possible," I told Harmony as she led me down yet another upstairs hall toward yet another room she thought she had to show me. "He *is* my client, I have to let him know I've arrived."

Harmony turned to look at me with mild surprise. "But—were you thinking of starting work today?"

"If Caverty wanted to start in five minutes, I'd do my best to be ready."

"He won't want to start today, I'm positive. And I'm sure someone must have told him you're here." The smile turned a little hard. "Perhaps Priscilla. Anyway, wouldn't you like to get comfortable, settle in a little, get to know the place? Not to mention all of us. Caverty's group. I know he'd like you to feel like you're a part of things. I mean, if you're going to be here awhile—"

"I don't actually know how long I'll be here. I won't have any idea until Caverty and I begin working together, and even then it'll be hard to say. Pathosfinding isn't a simple business. And that doesn't even come into it. Some extremely complicated jobs have taken less than a day to complete while others that were more straightforward took weeks." I resisted the temptation to look apologetic; not hard, really, because they *don't* call me Deadpan Allie for nothing, but her proselytizing was working at me, trying to find a way in, at least to my politeness sympathies. "I really must speak to Caverty, whether we begin working today or two weeks from now. He's my client."

Harmony spread her hands and then clasped them together with a little sigh. Her nails were also painted brown, I noticed. That shouldn't have seemed bizarre. "Well. If you must, you must. Could I at least phone him and tell him we're coming? Is that all right?"

"Of course."

She stepped into a room which seemed to be a souvenir gallery of some kind—still holos alongside flat pictures promoting one or other of

Caverty's works, things that might have been awards, props, or just items he (or someone) had wanted to keep for sentimental reasons. Not a junk room; it was all neat and very organized. I glanced around while Harmony used a talk-only phone on a seven-tiered ceramic table. She didn't say much and she didn't say it to Caverty, I was pretty sure. The Entourage has a completely different way of talking to the Man (or Woman) than they do to each other, and for each other, they had their own pecking order that was never quite congruent with the Man's idea of who was over whom. Harmony was talking to an equal, without a doubt and, without a doubt, that wasn't the empath.

"He says come right up," Harmony said, replacing the phone. "Caverty lives at the top of the house; starting on this floor, there are elevators so we don't have to climb a million stairs." The smile was forced now, though I wouldn't have been able to tell if I hadn't known how to read an Emotional Index. She really hadn't wanted to take me to Caverty today at all and I couldn't figure that out. She'd chosen me (according to her, anyway); her own comfort was contingent on my helping the Man but she was reluctant to let me near him. Not completely reluctant—just for today. Tomorrow. Mariana, no problem. Entourages could be funny things. I had a passing thought that Caverty had better turn out to be worth it after the obstacle course I was having to run to get to him.

Well, of course, he had the whole top floor of the house, though the main room where he did most of his living and working was a big studio at the rear of the building, where he could look out a fan-shaped, floor-to-ceiling window at cultivated rolling country. He was sitting at the window when Harmony led me in—I was never going to walk with Harmony, I saw, she was always going to lead—off to the left side, looking away from the sunset, which was visible through another much smaller window behind him. A woman was sitting at his feet, one hand resting casually on his ankle. I could just barely hear their voices in quiet conversation. Harmony looked around, saw no one else and nearly panicked.

"I talked to Langtree, *he* told me to come up," she said, ostensibly to me but actually so Caverty would hear and know that she hadn't just taken it upon herself to barge in. Whatever happened to *Caverty says come right up*, I wondered.

"It's all right, Harmony," Caverty called out. There was a slight echo off the mostly empty walls. "I sent Langtree out."

"Oh," she breathed, pretending to fan herself relievedly with one brown-tipped hand, "that's good, I'm glad I wasn't interrupting anything important—"

"You weren't," Caverty said good-naturedly. He had one of those voices that would sound good-natured all the time, even when it was chewing someone out. "You're okay, Harmony, thanks for everything. You can go now, too, take a break, get some rest. Have a drink, have kinky sex, whatever you want."

Harmony gave one of those full-bodied *ha-ha-ha* laughs and sort of backed out of the room, looking from me to Caverty and the woman on the floor and back again.

"The pathosfinder," Caverty said to me.

"The pathosfinder. Yes." I looked around. The holo equipment was in an untidy pile in the righthand corner nearest the door. Except for one of the cameras and a couple of colored lights, it all looked as though it hadn't been touched for a long time, not even to be cleaned. For me, that will always be what a creative block really looks like, in the mind or in the world: a pile of mostly unused equipment, gathering dust.

Caverty didn't get up. "Come closer," he said. "Please."

I walked across the room slowly enough to have time to look at both of them. Caverty was a solidly built man, more good-looking than he really needed to be. Sculpture, of course; these days everyone's from Mt. Olympus, with bone structure to die for (which, of course, you have to pay for and only the filthoid rich can pay for custom designs like the one Caverty had). But on Caverty, there was a sense of overkill about his attractiveness, too many nice things crammed into one place.

The same could not be said about the woman sitting on the floor. There was a naturalness about her that was also very expensive, except she hadn't bought her looks. She stopped short of being delicate—*fine* was the way that old bastard NN would have put it. Aquamarine eyes; the facets in the pupils glittered

like tears. Thick, dark straight hair cut ragamuffin-style. Thin as a ballet dancer but without any sense of a dancer's liveness. I realized belatedly that she had stolen my attention away from Caverty completely.

Caverty looked up at me with the start of a smile. "My empath,

Madeleine." He pronounced it *Mad-a-LAYNE*. "We were just enjoying some quiet moments at the end of the day. No matter what I'm doing I try to take time to enjoy those few moments before the daylight fades." He shifted position slightly, adjusting his caftan. It was gray, very thick and heavily textured, mimicking a hand weave. "Although we never watch the sunset. I don't believe in such things of course but Harmony says that west is definitely not my direction. I'm northeast. Which is why this house is perfect for me. According to the Compass, I mean, if you believe such things. I don't imagine pathosfinders put any more stock in them than holo artists." He looked at Madeleine. "Or empaths?"

She gave a short, breathy laugh. "We've known each other far too long for you to have to ask that."

"How long is that?" I asked conversationally.

They had to look at each other before they could answer me. "Fifteen years," Caverty said, while Madeleine nodded. "That is, we've known each other for fifteen years; we've been working together for eight. Of course, just knowing Madeleine affected me deeply, even before we began working together. Affected my work. So perhaps we have been working together the whole time we've known each other. She's been working *on* me, anyway." He chuckled, looking at his empath fondly while she sat under his praise smiling demurely at her knees.

"Before that, how often did you work with a pathosfinder?" I asked.

They both looked up at me with mild surprise. "Maybe once, twice a year," Caverty said. "It isn't the sort of thing you can do all the time. Why?"

"I was just wondering. For the sake of the job. It can help before we start if I know a little about your last mindplay experience."

"Bless me, Allie, for I have sinned. It has been eight years since my last mindplay experience. With a pathosfinder. I can barely remember it now, it seems."

Madeleine gave him a soft pat on the leg.

"Could I ask why you feel the need to work with one now after all these years?"

Caverty took a deep breath. "I need something different. My work needs something different. Have you seen any of my holos?"

"I've seen all of them, including your last release, *Dinners Between Dinners*."

"Retitled *Food Fight* by the critics," he said with a hint of hurt feelings. "Not that there wasn't something to what some of them said. There is no easy way to look at yourself and see that you're getting stale. Especially when you were considered an innovator early in your career. You have no idea how excruciating it is to have to give up the position of Promising Young Turk because all your Promising Young Turk stuff has become an old story. People begin to recognize the devices you fall back on as, well, the devices you fall back on. I thought it was time to explore some different things."

"And what about you?" I said to the empath.

She sat up slightly, blinking. "What do you mean?"

"What will you be doing?"

"When?"

"While Caverty's exploring these different things?"

"Why, what I always do. I'll be empathizing." Her tiny smile grew even tinier. "Won't I?" She looked to Caverty.

He leaned over to say something to her, paused, and frowned up at me. "Won't she?"

Time for the tightrope walk fifty yards above the glass net. "There are, I'm sure, pathosfinders who will work with a tandem of any kind. And there are pathosfinders who work with empathis—"

"Is there something wrong with empathis?" she asked. Not a bit defensive, either; her Emotional Index was devoid of any hostility. She just wanted to know. I felt myself relax a little.

"Well, when you're mindplaying, the system facilitating the contact between minds imposes a certain amount of order on the encounter— there's a medium for the minds to interact within, strict boundary conditions that keep separate entities truly separate so that there isn't any confusion as to whose thoughts are whose, and a certain amount of protocol that reinforces the personal sense of security."

She nodded. "Yes."

"Yes." I waited and she waited with me. "I mean, that's it. That's what it is."

She looked at me doubtfully. "That's what's wrong with empathis?" Caverty's posture changed very subtly to a protective position.

"I'm sorry, I didn't actually mean there was anything wrong with empathis. What I mean is—well, that's why I don't work with empathis. I thought the agency made that clear."

Caverty rubbed his chin with two fingers. "They didn't."

"I'm surprised. My agency has always been careful to spell out exactly what the mindplayers do. And don't do."

"Well, that's all right anyway," Caverty said, warmth flowing into his voice from somewhere deep inside. "You don't have to work with an empath. 7 work with an empath. That will do."

"Will it do for you not to work with an empath while you're working with me?"

Caverty's smile shrank somewhat. "You mean while we're hooked in together or the whole time you're here?"

I didn't look at Madeleine. "The whole time I'm here."

"Oh..." He slumped back in his chair and stared intently at the toes of his slippers. Doeskin slippers, possibly synthetic but then again, perhaps not. This was the home of the filthoid rich, after all. "I—I'm not sure."

Madeleine reached out to put a hand on his knee and then changed her mind, showing me that she was letting him make his own decision this time.

"I'm not sure I'm capable of doing that," he said. "Madeleine and I—we've been together for so



long—not working with Madeleine is—it would be like not working with air."

"Oh, Caverty," Madeleine said. "You have to do what is best for your work."

I wasn't sure I could take the sudden emotional charge pressurizing the room. All at once, there seemed to be a heaviness on my solar plexus, the way you feel when you barge in on some kind of intimate scene, or perhaps when it barges in on you. But they don't call me Deadpan Allie for nothing. (For fun, maybe, hey, NN? Depends on your idea of fun.) I waited it out; Caverty and the empath rode it out. Without moving, either.

Presently, she said, "You should try it, Caverty. You have to try it, you owe it to yourself, you owe it to your work. We both know you've gotten stale—"

"Don't say that too loud, the critics might have the place bugged." They smiled sadly at each other in lieu of laughing.

"Try it," she said. "It'll be... different. You need something different. Something besides me."

Did she think I was completely stupid? Or just stupid enough not to know how to read an Emotional Index? Hers said she believed he needed nothing of the sort, that she would continue to be the one and only thing he needed, work or no work.

But then, she was an empath. Maybe it wasn't her Emotional Index I was reading but his.

I resisted the urge to blink several times and maintained as much neutrality as I could, which, under the circumstances, wasn't really very much. Just by being there I was pitting myself against her, forcing a choice between us.

She got up suddenly. "Try it now. Just here, just the two of you."

He reached out for her, about to protest.

"No. I insist. This is your *career*, Caverty. It's all right, I'm not going anywhere except out of the room. You know I'll always be here for you."

She gave me a quick, level, professional-to-professional smile as she passed me on her way out. Caverty looked after her with dismay, fear, and guilt fighting it out for dominance on his handsome face. He stared at the door for a long time after she shut it. Then finally his attention came over to me.

"And now what?" he asked, spreading his hands. They were shaking a little.

"Now not so much. I thought we might talk. Get acquainted. I don't like to go cold into contact with someone's mind and I'm sure you wouldn't want to, either."

"Oh, no, certainly not." He shifted position in the chair, trying to get comfortable. It was a very comfortable chair, not one of those living contour things that adjusts itself to your every little move, just a very receptive inanimate, but it was impossible for him now that Madeleine was out of the room. "What, ah, do you need to know? Oh, dinner's coming up. We don't want to miss dinner. The meals around here are *prima*."

The sun had gone down and, as it had grown progressively darker outside, the lights had come up in perfect equilibrium with the fading sunlight so that you almost didn't notice the change.

"We won't miss any meals. Pathosfinding doesn't require that anyone starve for their art." I wanted to go

over to him but I had no intention of sitting at his feet. I looked around for another chair, spotted one near the pile of equipment and dragged it over so I could sit across from him.

"That's good," he said, stealing a glance at the door again. "I doubt that I could, any more. I've grown too used to eating regularly and well." Pause, and then a rueful smile. "That being why I called you in."

"At this point, you wouldn't starve if you never worked up another holo. It's a different kind of need now."

He squinted at me with thoughtful surprise. "You *know*."

"Yes, I know. I've worked with many, many artists of many different kinds." *And empaths aren't the only ones who know how other people feel*, I added to myself. "You can do lots of things to keep from starving, but only one thing to produce your art."

"Absolute. Just absolute." He nodded, feeling comfortable for all of three seconds. "That's the truth." He put his hand on his stomach. "Was that me? Did you hear that? My stomach just roared like a wild animal. I think I can smell dinner from here."

Let him go, said some small part of my mind. Probably the last shred of my common sense. Let him go, let him cling to his empath and later you can hook in with him and fail and go home none the worse for wear.

"I need to be able to look at any holos you have available for viewing around here."

"Oh. Certainly."

"And it would be best if we could look at them together."

"Oh... Yes, I guess it would."

"But we don't have to do that before dinner."

"After dinner?" He looked a little pale.

"Tomorrow will be soon enough. I did just get here, after all."

Now he really came to life. "Oh, of course, this is really thoughtless of me, keeping you here when you'd probably like to get some rest and you must be hungry, too—"

He babbled both of us out of the room. I broke away and made a stop at my quarters before heading down to the dining room, which in any other place would have been known as a banquet hall.

Now, NN, I *know*, I just *know* you're picking up on my hostility toward the empath. The poor innocent empath. What on earth have I got against empaths? And how can I be so unprofessional as to show it?

Hang me, shoot me—emotional criminal!

I told you, I didn't work with empaths. It feels indecent, doing something like that without a machine.

Hang me, shoot me—emotional prude! You just can't win in this business. I always knew that.

But I'll tell you what else I don't like about empaths. I know all about empathy; you know that, you taught me everything I know, right? You do still claim that, don't you? Sure you do, I know you. Yah, I know all about empathy; empaths are something else.

There's something about empaths touching you—not even touching you, being around you. You just know they're soaking it all up, whatever it is. They're always just—soaking it all up. Drinking you in. You're supposed to feel such kinship with them. You're not alone any more, someone knows exactly how you feel, someone's walked a mile in your moccasins. But what's that for, anyway? Yah, I know, so you feel you're not alone any more, right, we said that, didn't we. Didn't I, excuse me, I'm doing all of the semitalking. But what's it really for? What possible survival value can that have? For you, I mean—you the regular person. What's the survival value of feeling such kinship with someone, of not feeling alone any more emotionally. Pretend you're a regular person instead of a dried-up old bastard just for the sake of example, okay, NN? The survival value of, yes, empaths in terms of you, the regular person. Well, there is none. Not for you

It's all for the empath. When you know exactly how anyone—*everyone*—feels, that's a pretty powerful survival tool. In fact, you'd probably end up doing a lot more than just surviving with it. Survive and thrive, yah; and soaking it all up all the time, you'd get terribly—*accustomed* to it, more than accustomed, *addicted*. Except that's not quite the word. I mean, are you *addicted* to air?

Yah, so what's in it for you, the regular person? (You pretend like you're a regular person, okay, NN, or have I already asked you to do that?) What's in it for you? I mean, shouldn't you get something out of this? Well, sure you should, and you do.

You get to *like* having someone crawling around in your emotions, feeling them with you, and letting you feel other emotions from other people.

Except maybe *like* is the wrong word.

Do you *like* air?

Caverty had thirty pairs of moccasins, by the way, and Mad-a-LAYNE had had her sensitive little soles in every one of them.

It was a banquet hall, but the type of place where you sat down in one spot only if you really wanted to, if you were tired or something. Most of the Entourage were gypsy diners, the type of people who seem to be reluctant to light anywhere even semipermanently, in case they should see a better place to sit. So they were all cruising around, plates or cups or whatever in hand, cocktail-party style, working at enjoying themselves.

I'd stopped off at my room for a change of clothes and a dose of solitude so I could refortify myself. There wasn't time for even the quickest mental exercise with the system, unless I wanted to miss a good portion of the dinnertime dynamics and something told me I didn't want to miss very much in this house.

I managed to arrive in the dining room before both Caverty and Madeleine, which meant dinner was not quite underway. You could tell that by the general demeanor of the room. The entire Entourage was in a waiting mode.

Quite a mixed bag, this Entourage. There had to be at least thirty of them, acting out their inner lives. A few were dressed after certain animals; bears or lions seemed to be the fashion, though I spotted a couple of chicken people. At least, they looked like chicken people to me. A peacock might have been appropriate in some cases but no one cared to be quite that obvious. There was an umbrella woman who took up a lot of space; at various times, her umbrella skirt would open or shut for some private reason of her own, following no pattern I could see. I saw Priscilla with her little group; she'd changed some of the swatches on her outfit and polished her metallics so that she twinkled under the chandeliers. The members of her group were now each wearing an outfit made from one of her swatches. You might have briefly mistaken them for the focal point of the Entourage. On second glance, they'd have reminded you

of nothing so much as some kind of in-house organization. Like security guards. It would figure, I thought, helping myself to a bowl of something fragrant.

If definite job assignments weren't made, individuals within the Entourage would automatically fall into certain roles, depending on their personalities. Priscilla was a natural for the cops.

I was looking around for a place to sit when someone finally chose to notice me. I'd noticed him wading along behind me as I'd made my way to the buffet. It would have been hard not to notice him. He was at least six-three and bulky and where he wasn't bulky, he was hairy; the kind of person who makes you feel crowded just by being nearby. I'd figured I'd mix in among everyone as though there were nothing unusual about my being there but he planted himself in front of me, cutting off most of my view of the room and said, "You're new here."

His tone was politely matter-of-fact, not accusatory at all; wherever he fit in here, he wasn't the cops. "Yes, I am," I said, shifting position so a woman in a harlequin-esque outfit could pass behind me.

"Did you come to join?" he asked, reaching around me for a bowl of the same stuff I had. His arms were so long he barely had to move.

"No, I'm—"

"Didn't think so." He smiled cheerily. "I always know when someone's coming in to join. Hasn't happened in an awfully long time. Came alone, didn't you?"

I nodded "I was just upstairs talking to Caverty and Mad-a-Layne."

His eyebrows went up very slightly. "It's a good group here. Good balance of all different kinds." Priscilla cruised by closely enough to hear what we were saying. My bulky friend looked at her for a few moments with mild hostility on his dark furry face. "Mostly a good balance. When you've got all kinds, you've got *all* kinds. But as long as they serve their purpose and don't just take up space and eat up all the food, you can tolerate just about anyone." He looked down at me again. "Of course, we're all on the same side here," he added quickly. "There may be a slob here and there, but they're *our* slobs. If you get what I mean."

"Couldn't be clearer."

"I'm Arlen. Some people call me The Bear, but not to my face." He chuckled into his beard. "Of course, they don't know *I* started them calling me The Bear. Planted the name myself. I figured if they were going to be calling me something, I might as well have some say over what it was."

"Is that name insulting to you?" I asked.

"Hell, no. But *they* think it is." He laughed again. "Some people, if they think they're insulting you, it's all they need to know. And that's how you survive in an Entourage." He herded me a few feet away from the buffet table. "What's your name and what are you planning to do here besides survive?"

"Allie. Deadpan Allie, actually, and I'm a pathosfinder."

I'd finally managed to rumple his smooth. "Pathosfinder?" He actually stepped back from me. "For *who*? Not Caverty?"

A white-blond woman in a shimmering blue Japanese-style kimono turned around. "Pathosfinder?" The word echoed, flowing out into the people immediately around us and I found myself in the middle of a minor group within the group instead of just being among them.

"Who called you?" the Nordic-looking woman asked, worry large on her luminous face. "Is it *my* fault?"

Arlen The Bear patted her shoulder gently with a huge pawlike hand. "That's not quite the right question, Lina. Poor Lina thinks any time something goes wrong around here, she's somehow to blame for not spotting the problem early enough."

"For some people, sensitivity has to be cultivated, worked on every moment, waking *and* sleeping," the woman explained to me anxiously. "Otherwise, they get hardened to everything without ever realizing it because being *insensitive* is their natural state of mind. And it can be contagious, too, insensitivity can. It can spread from just one person to infect a whole group and pretty soon you can have a whole population incapable of feeling for their fellow human being."

"Yes," I said, "but—"

"So that's why I asked if our needing a pathosfinder was my fault." She looked up at Arlen with begging eyes. Icy-blue eyes, I noticed. "Is it me, Arlen? You'd tell me, wouldn't you?"

Arlen's laugh was kindly as he gave her a gentle hug. "Sure I would, but by the time I did, you'd already have been told several times by everyone else. Stop worrying. She isn't here because of anything you've done wrong. But she hasn't yet said why she *is* here." His expression was a little less kindly now; I'd upset one of their own. God knew how they were going to receive the fact that I was going to be messing with the entourage's *raison d'être*. But we can't lie to anyone directly involved with a client, whether it's a friend, enemy, parent, Entourage or something even more baroque. Not unless it's to save someone's life. *Suppose it's your own life?* I'd once asked NN. *Don't be silly*, he'd said. *Who'd want to kill you?*

I thought about that as I said, "I'm here for Caverty."

Nobody said anything. A third of my audience backed off.

"Caverty called you?" Arlen asked finally. "He must have. I can't believe it. All these years with Madeleine and now—" He shook his head a little. "What are you going to—I mean, are you—"

"I'm not replacing Mad-a-LAYNE permanently." I could hear the sighs of relief above the general chatter in the room. "I really hadn't meant to create a disturbance," I said, glancing to my right, where the umbrella woman was getting the news that there was a pathosfinder at large from a waifish type in black secondskins. "I'm going to do some work with Caverty and when it's done, I'll be leaving and life will go on."

"Maybe you won't want to leave," said a chubby man in a pouch suit, ordinary except for the fact that it seemed to be padded to make him even chubbier.

"Yah. You might really get to like it here," said the Nordic woman. "That happens."

"I have some things to go back to that are very important to me," I said politely.

"What?" asked The Bear with what seemed to be genuine curiosity.

"Ah..." Something told me they weren't going to perceive my career as suitably important. I seized the first thing that came into my head. "There's Nelson Nelson."

"An important *someone*?" asked the Nordic woman.

"Ask him to come here. He might like it," the Bear suggested.

"I, uh, no, I couldn't."

"It's up to you," said the man in the pouch suit. "But don't count it out completely, staying here. You just might. You never know."

The general babble in the room changed its tone and I knew without even looking that Caverty had come in.

Immediately, their attention went directly to him, allowing me to slide out of the spotlight and into the general crowd. Slipping between derelicts and duchess types, I made my way over to a small raised area containing a few small tables where I could sit and regroup. A few chiffon fanciers lingered by the steps up to the area; I managed to pass them unnoticed, in spite of the fact that I'd dipped the corner of somebody's scarf in my dish. If he didn't care, I didn't.

Relieved to be out of the general crowd, I didn't see that there was someone else sitting at the table I'd chosen until I was about to sample the night's entree.

"You're new here," he said.

I paused with my spoon nearly at my lips.

"Only the new people choose to sit up here. The very new and the very old." He smiled with the left half of his mouth; his diamond eyes twinkled. Diamond biogems are seldom a good choice but his olive skin kept him from looking too much like a willing victim of blindness. He was older than someone you'd expect to find in an Entourage, and not as done over as the average citizen. The nose had been broken at least once, but the effect wasn't homely. He'd have reminded you of your father, if that was your orientation. It wasn't mine. To me, he looked only like a graying, older man in comfortably baggy shirt and pants, too sensible to be here but staying anyway for some reason of his own.

"It's Madeleine they're all so worried about," he continued, watching as the room rearranged itself around Caverty's presence.

"Not Caverty?"

"Oh, of course, Caverty. Both of them, really. We don't have one without the other here, as you must know. But they're worried about Caverty in terms of Madeleine and what you mean for her. I know. I've been here with the Entourage since before it was formally an Entourage. I may have founded the Entourage. Or helped found it. I came to him, others came. Then we were a caravan." He paused to watch a woman wearing a jewel-encrusted cage over her face and neck make her way through the room. One of the chicken people stopped her and they embraced warmly.

"I know all their dynamics, small and large. I direct the domestic drama here. At one time or another, I've gotten all of them to play at least some small part. Caverty finds it amusing, I think, to watch other people besides himself have problems, even if they're just staged. And once he based a holo on one of my scenarios—*Dinners Between Dinners*, after my scenario, *Food Fight*."

"You don't say."

"That was the only instance, though. Usually I cribbed from him now and then. As a kind of tribute to his work. And as a kind of tribute to being fresh out of ideas at the time, too." He fell silent, watching Caverty moving among his Entourage.

The Entourage both moved aside for him and crowded around him all at once. It was as though a new element had been dropped into simmering waters. Caverty slipped among them much more easily than

I'd been able to, maneuvering effortlessly, balancing socializing and finger food. He ate a little, held court, ate a little more, held a little more court—a reception, I realized. Every night, the Entourage gave him a reception of the type he'd probably gotten on the debut of a new holo. Not so unusual, really. Performers become addicted to applause quite easily. But Caverty had found a way to get a fix of applause every day—more often than that, if he wanted—without having to go through the tiresome business of working for it.

"Get it direct, from producer to consumer," I muttered.

"Pardon?"

I shrugged. "Just a stray thought."

The man got up with a smile and tossed a cloth napkin onto the table. "Well, I should go say 'good evening' to the great man."

"Do you always do this?"

"Every night, dinner's an occasion here. Didn't they tell you?"

"I mean, you personally going over to pay your respects."

Mildly troubled frown. "I stay here by his good graces. I eat his food, take up space, ply my trade, all by virtue of his hospitality. Once a day, I can let the man know how I feel." He paused, studying me for a moment. "You have to mean something here, you know. Whether you stay or not." Then he looked toward Caverty, prepared a friendly smile, and moved away, straightening his clothes.

It took him over a minute to make his way through the cluster around Caverty, not because it was so crowded, really, but because some of the *couture* was voluminous, like the umbrella lady, and because they were all deferring to each other as well as socializing among themselves, while Caverty favored each person who reached him with more than just token conversation. Didn't the novelty ever wear off, for any of them?

Off to one side, I saw that Harmony had appeared amid the near-fringe of the ragged circle around "the great man" and was subtly directing traffic, moving people along so they could greet Caverty in turn and moving those who'd already spoken to him away without seeming to. Caverty was facing in her general direction, reinforcing the idea of them getting in line for him. It might have been engineered, but it had the look and feel of incidental choreography—they'd fallen into doing things this way and as long as it worked they'd keep doing it.

I tried to catch the expression on each face as the Entourage members paid their respects and turned away but I wasn't close enough to see them all. The ones I could see looked content, or satisfied, or, I don't know—appeased, somehow, the way children look when they all go home from the party with a gift. Which was probably the case.

Caverty looked the same way; a little drawn and besieged, perhaps, but generally content. Appeased. Happy, even.

He shouldn't have been. He should have felt tired and put upon and too in demand. *But then*, I thought, *if he's not giving any of himself to his work, he has plenty left to give to his Entourage, Right, Allie?*

No, wrong—he supposedly wasn't doing any work because he didn't have any inside him, so he shouldn't have had anything to offer this live-in applause machine. So what exactly was he giving them

and where was it coming from?

I scanned the room again and found her at last. She was at the opposite end of an invisible straight line that ran from Harmony through Caverty. That look. She could have been in religious trance; she could have been gazing at her firstborn child; she could have been dreaming of a lover or fantasizing a murder behind that look. Her Emotional Index shifted, melted, segued through a thousand different states in less time than it took to think about it.

The food, I noticed, had been completely forgotten. Or maybe not so much forgotten as dropped, like any other pretense.

All right, NN, three quick choruses of *What's It All About?* and if you haven't figured it out by then, you're a candidate for brain salad.

Yah, well, what do you think I did after that? I got the hell out of there and went off to my room, my luxuriously appointed room with the singing, vibrating bed and custom-built lavabo and tried to compose a message which would convey beautifully and inarguably why the Entourage had to leave as soon as they could pack themselves up. Halfway through the start of the sixth draft, I plugged into a memory boost and relived the scene for myself, for reinforcement, so I could make it more—I don't know, urgent? Real? Immediate? So he could see it as I saw it. And then I realized he couldn't see it as I saw it and not be too alienated to work with me. I was already separating him and Mad-a-LAYNE. Madeleine. But I kept thinking of her in that exaggerated way. Mad-a-LAYNE. Mad-a-LAYNE. Mad-a-LAYNE in PAIN falls MAINly in your BRAIN.

I'd started yawning midway through the second holo. By the start of the third, I had to ask Caverty for coffee. He roused himself from the stupor I'd nearly fallen into and dialed some up from the bar near the projection booth.

"Am I supposed to ask you what you think?" he said as we perched on antique stools together.

"I really don't know what you're *supposed* to do."

Caverty laughed a little. "Neither do I, most of the time. As you can probably guess. Actually, I don't have to ask. I was comatose from boredom myself."

"Your own boredom with your work isn't much of a barometer. However you feel about your work is tied up in the difficulties you're having right now, so you're not a terribly reliable judge."

He glanced over his shoulder briefly and I squelched the urge to tell him Madeleine wasn't there. Today he was a bit less uncomfortable in her absence but he was still looking around for her. "Maybe not, but I used to know when the work was good. At least, I thought I did. Now I'm beginning to think I spent close to two decades fooling myself." He stared gloomily into his coffee cup.

We'd watched one holo from his beginning phase and one from his experimental. Both had been narrative pieces, the stories simple while the embellishment was complex, especially in the experimental work. He'd been very young when he'd done that one, though it had come after the previous piece. He'd just been discovering how much fun it was to break the rules and from time to time, ghost images of himself with his holocam had drifted through the piece, recording other ghost images as well as the central scene in progress. It was the sort of thing most artists do sooner or later and usually it's a bad choice but somehow, Caverty had made it work, either through luck or sheer talent, or perhaps a combination of the two. It left an aftertaste in the brain; your memory kept returning to it, going over the core story—boy meets self, boy gets self, boy loses self, boy buys new self—while the trimmings drifted around as vividly in memory as they'd been in the holo itself.



The interesting part was that Caverty had used minimal sound—no dialog, no musical scoring, few sound effects except as a kind of punctuation here and there, and yet you tended to remember more sound than he'd used. While I wasn't sure that I really liked it, it did seem to summarize all of Caverty's strong points as an artist. I didn't want to ask him how autobiographical it was; artists never really know exactly how autobiographical any of their work is. I could find out later if I really wanted to know.

"You're very quiet," Caverty said. "That, uh, well... *scares* me."

"I'm not a critic. You have to stop thinking of me as some kind of master evaluator."

"But you are, aren't you? Evaluating my talent, how you can help me. *If* you can help me." Pause while he drained his coffee. "*Can* you help me? How bad off *is* this patient, doctor?"

"How bad off do you feel?"

"If you're going to tell me it's all up to me—"

"Not exactly. It's a matter of how much help you're willing to accept; then it's a matter of how much help you'll be able to accept. Plus a lot of other things." I pushed my coffee aside. "This isn't something I discuss in detail with my clients, as it tends to make them far too self-conscious. I don't want you getting in your own way."

He nodded absently, glancing over his shoulder again. "Well. How many more holos did you want to see?"

"One representative piece from each stage of your career would be fine. And if there are any others you want me to look at, that's fine, too."

He nodded again but his gaze was on some point off to my right, as though he were daydreaming or suddenly remembering something very pleasant, or perhaps getting a new idea for a holo. For a moment, I was uncertain as to whether it was any of those things but then I realized, and just as I did, it touched me.

It was a very light touch, a brush that might have been accidental. A pathosfinder's mind isn't at all receptive to casual telepathy or an empath just cruising; it's all that self-definition and controlled concentration we engage in during the course of mindplay. After a while, it becomes second nature. It's going on all the time somewhere in your mind, an engine on idle. Madeleine brushed up against me and passed on, like someone who'd accidentally knocked on the wrong door and didn't wait for an answer. She was gone before I could sense how close she was.

Caverty sighed cheerfully and then looked down at his hands resting on his thighs. "It's just good to know she's there."

"I can't have that."

"Pardon?" He didn't look up.

"I can't have her coming in like that. Especially when we're hooked in together."

"Oh, she knows that, I asked her to look in on me, as it were. Just so I'd know she was there."

"You'll have to ask her not to do it."

"She knows that, too." His hands came together, gripping each other tightly and I realized she hadn't quite

left yet. I let him be until he raised his head and I could see that the faraway look on his face was gone. "She understands, she really does. I know she does."

"Good. I'm glad. We can look at the next holo."

We looked at six more—a couple of display pieces normally presented on loop for continuous exhibition, a juvenile piece that had been badly received, and a thematic trilogy having to do with growing older. The juvenile piece was negligible in terms of his work as a whole—he no longer had any idea what it was like to be a child. The trilogy was interesting as a precursor of his present state; after viewing it, you might have thought he was having difficulty accepting the fact that he himself was growing older. But while he'd alluded to that earlier, I didn't think that was the bulk of his problem.

It was close to suppertime when we finished, so I let him go, pleaded fatigue for myself and headed for my room so I could review/relive everything on boost.

The last thing I had expected her to do was to come to me. How could Caverty possibly cope with his Entourage without her somewhere in the room doing whatever it was she did—I still hadn't figured out exactly what her function was, but whatever it was, she was good at it.

She didn't even knock. Knocking wasn't customary in this house, apparently. I was taking a semimeditative breather from boosted reviewing and she slipped into the room like a bit of cloth blown in by an errant draft.

"Hi," she said shyly, standing with her back against the door.

I gestured at one of the pudgy spot chairs. Not the closest one. She sank into it gingerly, keeping her hands on the sides of the cushions as though she might have to launch herself out of it on short notice.

"I know you must be wondering why I'm not at dinner," she said. "I don't always go. Sometimes I take a night off, eat in my room. But Caverty loves his public."

"Do you think a private Entourage qualifies as a 'public'?"

"In Caverty's case, yes, I think so. Public as opposed to the privacy of his mind."

I didn't feel like arguing it with her so I let it go.

"We live a very balanced life here. You may not think so but it is. Every element is carefully balanced against every other element. The Entourage population stabilized a little while ago and it provides Caverty with the security he needs to be able to work."

"But he isn't able to work."

"Well, no, not now but before he hit this rough patch in his creativity, he was able to work very well."

"You're the second person, I think, who's told me that the Entourage has 'stabilized.'" "

She nodded. "And?"

"I wouldn't call it stabilization."

"What, then?"

"I'd call it entropy."

She drew back slightly, as though I'd taken a swipe at her.

"Or stagnation. I'm sorry if that hurts your feelings."

Mad-a-LAYNE laughed. "*My feelings?*"

"Or whomever's you've got."

Still smiling, she leaned forward. "I could have anybody's. Everybody's. You know us empaths. Especially those of us with a stronger telepathic bent than most."

I felt that brush against my mind again; she didn't persist.

"You're resistant, though. I guess most mindplayers are. All that holding yourself together that you do when you're in contact with someone else's mind. Holding your identity together. Holding tight to what you are. Isn't that the way they put it in mindplayer school, or wherever it is you go to learn how to handle those *machines*'? Hold tight to what you are, am I right?"

I had the sensation of the room rearranging itself around us so that we were squared off against each other. Beside me, my system was assembled, the optic nerve connections capped but primed and ready for use.

"Am I right? Hold tight to what you are?"

"Generally the client isn't trying to get *at* what you are. So it isn't really necessary to go around clenched like a fist."

"Then why do you?"

"I'm sure it must seem that way to you, having such free access to all the people around here. But I'm really quite normal."

"Normal in whose terms? Them, out there in the world, where you use that *can opener* to break into people's minds?"

I shook my head. "I think I'd better go."

"What?" A look of panic, now. "Wait—why?"

Half out of my own chair, I paused. "*Why?* You must know."

"No, I don't. I *would* know if you didn't shut me out."

I saved my laugh for later, on the trip home. "It's not the sort of thing you need empathic powers to know."

"For me, it is."

I started to disassemble the system. "He's going to know. Caverty, I mean. He'll know what's happened between us just now and he won't be able to work with me."

She got up and came over to me, intending to put her hand on my arm; I stepped away from the system quickly. "Sorry," she said, putting the hand behind her back. "I wasn't thinking. I just wanted you to stop that. You mustn't leave."

"I don't think there's much choice any more."

"I really didn't mean to do this, to try to force you out of here. I was just—" She blew out a frustrated breath. "I'm sorry. I don't even know how to begin to try to explain it to you, I'm so used to just letting people know how I feel. Especially when the feeling is so complex. Do you know how that is, to feel so many different things at one moment?" She paused. "Or is that not being properly *deadpan*?"

She wiped both hands over her face and through her hair, turning away from me. "So many misunderstandings because *words* get in the way. People unable to imagine how other people feel because you can't explain to someone with just *words* a feeling of jealousy and gladness mixed up with the desire to see a loved one succeed."

I refrained from pointing out that she just had. "Just because you don't have emotional access to me doesn't mean that I have no understanding. I don't *have* to feel exactly what you feel to know what it is." I shrugged. "In any case, I still have to leave."

"No. Please don't. Caverty would never forgive me."

"Sure he would."

She allowed herself a tremulous, momentary smile. "Yes, he would. But I don't want to put him through the effort. *I* would never forgive *myself*, and the effect of that on Caverty would be horrible. I agreed to your conditions voluntarily, I urged Caverty to go along with them. If I sabotage everything, Caverty won't have a chance."

"Of course he will," I said quietly, though I tended to doubt it.

She looked over at me sharply. "I meant he won't have a chance to find out whether this could have worked for him or not."

"Oh. Yes, that *is* different."

"You see? Another misunderstanding because of *words*. If you'd been open to me, you would have understood what I meant instantly."

I did not tell her I didn't see why that was necessarily a better arrangement than the usual conversational mode of imparting information, emotional or otherwise. Not to mention the fact that there wouldn't have been a misunderstanding had there been *enough* words. NN, I thought, was going to give me a medal for self-control when he reviewed my report.

"Anyway," she said, softening, "you mustn't leave. Please. I promise I won't interfere any more."

"It's not that," I said. "It's that Caverty's going to know what happened between us."

"You'd tell him?"

"No. But you would. You couldn't help yourself."

She drew herself up. "Yes, I can. I can hold as tight to my own as you can to yours. I can keep feelings from him or allow them out as I choose. And I promised not to touch him while you're working with him, so I

won't even have to make the effort. I *will* keep from touching him. And you. I *will*." She paused. "Stay?" I nodded, without words.

I could tell he'd slept well and it surprised me. I'd have thought the prospect of meeting me in his studio/sanctorum shortly after dawn without Mad-a-LAYNE would have kept him on the thin edge of wakefulness for most of the night. It must have been a terrific dinner for him, the whole Entourage love-bombing him with lots of acclaim and reassurance. Either that or Mad-a-LAYNE had been with him after all, in spite of her protests to me. As I worked at reassembling the system, I found myself hoping she had. I would hook in with Caverty, discover she'd lied, disconnect, and go home. End of story.

The way I was wanting forever to get out of there, you'd have thought I'd have done just that, said to hell with it all and risked whatever NN's professional wrath would have brought. If anything. I'd turned down jobs before and NN hadn't sued me. I'd even cut some short and NN had seen the correctness of my action. But I'd never backed out of one and I just wasn't sure how the old bastard would take that. Of course, I hadn't wanted it in the first place but I'd allowed myself to be talked into it—my own fault, really. Which I guess was why I kept reassembling the system in Caverty's studio, and primed the optic nerve connections and got him all settled and comfortable on a chaise and removed his beautiful biogem eyes and hooked him into a building-colors relaxation exercise. It had been my own idea to skip the real-time outside exercises. Somehow a round of *What Would You Do?* or *What Do You Hear In These Pictures*'! just didn't seem right for him. There were a couple of others I might have tried with him, including *Finish the Following*, which NN himself had invented for visual artists, involving real-time completion of a partial image but no doubt that would have made him feel as though I were forcing his hand. As it were. Besides, I felt the more time he could spend getting accustomed to being inward without Mad-a-LAYNE, the easier it would be to work with him.

I had the system run continuous checks on his vitals while I prepared myself to meet him mind-to-mind. He showed no signs of panicking or disintegrating so I took my time. I had to; there were a lot of feelings to put away.

He'd been in the relaxation exercise for nearly half an hour before I felt prepared enough to remove my own eyes and slip them into solution and a little longer after I hooked myself up to the system before I allowed it to bring my consciousness and his together.

The contact was gradual. I chose a new color as a vehicle and slipped in among the others he had been forming. He sensed me immediately and accepted the contact just as quickly. The colors cleared out, leaving us in a visualization not of his studio but of the banquet hall where dinner were celebrated every night.

*Well, he said, here we are.*

*Is this where you keep your holos?*

*No. It's where I keep myself. My self, I mean.*

*What do you do here?*

He looked around and I looked with him. The room seemed pretty much as it was in realife, down to the buffet tables, except he had not visualized food on them. I saw the area where I had sat with the domestic actor the first night I'd been there; it too was empty. I was about to repeat my question when the room began to darken, first in the corners and then spreading out in waves of shadows.

*This is what I do here, he said. I don't be alone here.*

*I don't be alone* is an awkward verbalization of what it was and not quite what he said but that was the way I received it. Before I could get meaning around it, the shadows had formed themselves into images of the Entourage, ghostly and nowhere near as substantial as our own representations but somehow no

less present. Immediately they were cluttering up everything, hanging all over us as though we were underwater with a lot of rags and scarves,

*Come on now*, I coaxed, holding my patience. *You can dear them all out.*

A ghost of the umbrella woman flowed over his face. *Yes, I can*, he said.

I waited and he waited to see what I was waiting for. I felt the warm brush of someone's presence and for a moment I was nose to nose with the woman who'd had a cage on her head. Admiration, envy, a sense of accomplishment... the emotions belonged to several different people. I brushed her away.

*Caverty?*

*If I want to. That's what it is, you see. I can clear them all out if I want to. But I don't want to. I don't want to! I! DON'T! WANT! TO!*

It was a mental blast that blew me into the center of the room. I flew through the ghosts, tasting a thousand different emotions in a second, the admiration, the desire to be close, the envy, the sorrow, the loneliness, the gladness, the fatigue of routine followed by the sense of security, the euphoria, the craving that is addiction and most of all the appeasement that came both from having received something and having had something taken, the sweet need of being increased, the even sweeter need of being diminished.

They meant to pin me but ghosts can't really do anything, not even mental ones. I spread them out easily, clearing an area around myself big enough to accommodate myself and Caverty's ego.

*I know you don't want to, Caverty*, I said, calling to him through the wraiths wrapping themselves around his face, *but if you're willing to join me here, you can and it won't be me forcing you to do anything. Understand?*

*Understand*, they all said, Caverty and all of them together. *Don't want to, though!*

*Then that's it*, I said. *We don't have anything more to do.*

Arlen The Bear floated over me with his big arms held out. *Are you sure about that?* he asked with Caverty's mental voice.

I pulled all the way into myself so they—*he, Caverty*, I reminded myself—so he wouldn't feel my anger for the time and effort wasted when he'd never intended to try working with me. For several mental moments, I was aware only of composing myself. When I came out of it to face Caverty again, he was much closer than before, almost intrusive. My alarm nearly showed; after eight years without any mindplaying, he shouldn't have had that much skill at creeping up on me. Time to go, I thought, threw myself out of the visualization into the relaxation exercise. Caverty followed me and the colors caught him like quicksand and held him.

Even so, the taste of his consciousness seemed slow to fade out of my own mind, as though he were still chasing me anyway. My problem, I thought; sometimes the most unlikely people can get a hook into you and it's hell to get out. When I got home, I'd have myself dry-cleaned. And at NN's expense.

I disconnected from the system the moment it told me I could do so without trauma, groped for my eyes and couldn't contain the sigh of relief at finding them still in the container. I popped them back in and just sat for several minutes in Caverty's comfortable chair, rocking back and forth and breathing my way down to a calm state.

We were alone in the room. I hadn't expected us to be. I'd expected to come out and find them all there, waiting, wanting to—I forced the thought away before my heartrate could increase again.

Caverty lay on his chaise, completely relaxed. I had a strong urge to just leave him like that, limp and blind and harmless, and sneak out of the house and run all the way back to the agency. We hadn't even touched on ideas or holos or creativity or anything vaguely related. I hadn't even found any *memories*—just that damned Entourage, as present in his brain as it was outside of it.

Except for Mad-a-LAYNE, I realized. I hadn't felt her in there anywhere. As though she didn't exist.

I shook away my questions. Ask later; get out now. *Now*. But it was another minute before I could bring myself to touch Caverty even just to disconnect him from the system and put his eyes back in.

"Jesus," he said, sitting up slowly. He rubbed his forehead in a dazed way. "I didn't realize that—I didn't realize." He looked up at me pleadingly. "I don't know what to say to you."

I capped his connections and slipped them into a drawer in the system. "You don't have to say anything. I'll be going now."

"We aren't going to try again?"

"I don't think we can. Not until you do something about the general population in there."

He touched his forehead again. "They are all in there, aren't they?"

"Oh, yes."

"And I think if you hooked in with each of them, you'd find me in every single one."

"That's right."

"Madeleine?"

I nodded. "Prolonged empathy."

A slow smile spread across his face. "Sometimes I was afraid it hadn't worked. But Madeleine was right." His eyes narrowed. "And that's why you don't want to try again. Because I like it."

"Not the only reason, but that's part of it."

"And you *don't* like it."

I shrugged. "If you like it, it doesn't make much difference about me." Without saying anything, he got up, stretched, and walked over to the pile of unused holo equipment. I paused for a moment, watching him, and then capped the set of connections I'd used. "I'd appreciate it if Harmony or someone would call me a flyer." No response. He didn't even look at me. "As for your fee, my agency may give you a partial refund. Minus expenses and time spent in the system." Still no response. I couldn't even get a clear reading of his Emotional Index. Maybe he was thinking about what it meant to give up the art for the audience. I didn't know and I really didn't want to. I moved around to the other side of the system to run a three-second diagnostic before disassembling the components and turned my back to him. It was the dumbest thing I ever did.

Coming to from a state of unconsciousness when you're hooked into the system is like going from death to a dream. For a while, you don't even know you're conscious and when you finally do realize it, the vertigo is furious. You fall in every direction at once, through every idea and thought you have. It seems

like you'll fall forever and then you grab onto something, some concept, some belief, some identity thing, and you hold as tight as you can for a long time. And then, a mental century later, you feel steady enough to look around and see where you are and why and who else is there, if anyone.

I was back in the banquet room again, except this one was *my* banquet room, not the one in Caverty's mind, and there was no one there but me. At the moment. I could sense him nearby, though, waiting for me to tell him to come in.

*I don't work that way, Caverty,* I said and strode to the door. It was a big wooden antique with a shiny carved handle. *I'm coming out to you.*

I yanked at the handle. It wouldn't budge. Smoothing out the panic ripples, I stepped back from the door and gathered my strength into my hands, making them big, even bigger than Arlen The Bear's, and took hold of the handle again, intending to crush it. It swelled to fit my palms and even as I pressed on it, my hands were shrinking.

I jumped back, looking around for another way out.

*Forget it,* said the chandelier. *Harmony. You don't want to leave. You don't know what it's like to feel that way, to not want to leave. If you did, you'd feel differently.*

I didn't want to deal with that absurdity, nor did I want them to sense how trapped I felt. *All right,* I said, *standoff. I don't get out and you don't get in.*

*Wrong.*

Softer than a whisper; quieter than a brush against you in passing. She stood in the center of the empty room, very small. Delicate, even; a delicate vessel filled with so many feelings. She came toward me. I tried to back away but the floor shifted under me, keeping me in the same spot but still letting her approach.

*They'll know how you feel and you'll know how they feel,* she said gently. Cracks appeared in the wall behind her. *Without a word needing to be spoken.* Her arms reached for me.

Somehow, I managed to pull back a little. The cracks in the wall grew larger; faces showed through. Not ghosts this time.

*We're all here now. We thought it could work made contact with Caverty after you hooked in together, but we were wrong. Your concentration would allow only limited contact. We were all ghosts and I couldn't even appear. You didn't even recognize us as being present. So I made contact with Caverty and then we hooked you in with him. Much better. It's working now.*

She did not quite have me, though; she couldn't quite reach through the layers of deadpan to my core.

*Every relationship is something like this,* she said, trying to pull me closer. *People feed on each other whether it's lover to lover, friend to friend, audience to artist. We consume, we are consumed. You couldn't live otherwise. We've just refined it, made it more efficient—more satisfying. You'll see. Dinner here is always an Event. Especially when we finally get something new in. A nice change, to have variety in the menu. It's been a long time since the last one.*

I struggled back a little more, gaining ground even though the cracks in the walls were opening wider. *The only problem is I'm not willing.*

And as soon as I said it, I knew *that* was the dumbest thing I'd ever done. Admitting to it, admitting to



anything at all gave her the lever she needed to pry off the last of Deadpan, leaving naked Allie.

The walls, as they say, came tumbling down while Mad-a-LAYNE lowered me to the floor. They swelled around her, blocking out the light with their faces.

*Unwillingness*, she said, face close to mine, *is a feeling. We know how you feel.*

And they did, every single one of them, while she directed traffic. Caverty. Harmony. Arlen The Bear, the chubby man, the domestic drama guy. The Nordic blonde in the kimono. The umbrella woman, the chicken people. Even Priscilla. Even Priscilla. Over and over again. Over and over arid over.

Maybe it went on for days. Maybe only hours. When Mad-a-LAYNE disconnected me, I was asleep. In Caverty's studio. They were all gone. Sleeping it off themselves. I staggered around and when my vision cleared, I figured out how to pack my system up.

They should have caught me going down the stairs with it. Priscilla the cop, you know. I got to the bottom of the stairs and that Compass and I thought I *was* caught because someone came out from behind the staircase. I didn't recognize the face but I remembered the style of dress and the manner. Employee. That's when I found out I couldn't talk, right then, because I was going to beg for mercy and nothing came out. Like the record skipped the groove. You remember records. He didn't say anything, either. He just took one look at me and went over to the panel near the front door and pressed a button. I was too fried to run for it so I just waited for them all to come swooping down on me but the house stayed quiet. A little later—I don't know how little, my sense of time was still gone—I heard the flyer land outside. Completely automated, no pilot. I looked through the navigator program and found a picture of a place I liked. Not telling you what it looked like. I just punched for it and off I went and here I am and that's about all.

Yah, so maybe they meant to let me go? Could be. Maybe they figured I'd be too disoriented to turn up anywhere. I guess maybe they didn't want to keep me because they'd *stabilized*, you see. They were all so proud of having *stabilized*, they didn't need a new item on the menu permanently. Just for a change of pace.

Yah, so. I could let you find me and you could get them, right. I mean, this is big-time mindcrime here.

So you go ahead and go get them.

But you're not getting me.

It's peaceful now. I won't ever have to hook in with anyone again or talk, ever. I like that idea. It appeals to my basic deadpan nature, see. I don't want to know how anyone feels anymore. And I don't want anyone knowing how I feel, either. Caverty's Entourage, they're not the only ones who feed off each other's emotions. Everybody does it, even just a little bit. I'm not taking any chances anymore. Nobody else is going to feed off me. They all know how I feel and that's enough. That's enough.

Clang-clang. Clang-clang.

Ever since the first story about Deadpan Allie, "The Pathosfinder," appeared in 1981, there's been the potential for a story involving vampirism. "Dirty Work" was, in fact, the second story I set out to write, but after two pages, I put it away. It was too soon. Five years later, Ellen Datlow began putting together this nontraditional vampirism anthology and we both agreed Allie was a natural.

Ellen got upset with me for what happened to Allie. "How could you do that to her, you creep?" she said. I thought, *gosh, maybe I should have given Allie more of a break—maybe I've been entirely too*

*merciless.*

And then I thought, *Naaah.*

*Pat Cadigan*