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BLIND SHEMMY

By Jack Dann

After covering the burning and sacking of the Via Roma in Naples, Carl Pfeiffer, a famous newsfax reporter, could not resist his compulsion to gamble. He telephoned Joan Otur, one of his few friends, and insisted that she accompany him to Paris. Organ-gambling was legal in France. They dropped from the sky in a transparent Plasticine egg, and Paris opened up below them, Paris and the glittering chip of diamond that was the Casino Bellecour. Except for the dymaxion dome of the Right Bank, Joan would not have been able to distinguish Paris from the suburbs beyond. A city had grown over the city: The grid of the ever-expanding slung city had its own constellations of light and his Haussmann's ruler-straight boulevards, the ancient architectural wonders, even the black, sour stench of the Seine, which was an hourglass curve dividing the old city.

Their transpod settled to the ground like a dirty snowflake and split silently open, letting in the chill night air

with its acrid smells of mudflats and cinders and clogged drains. Joan and Pfeiffer hurried across the transpad toward the high oaken doors of the casino. All around them stretched the bleak, brick-and-concrete wastelands of the city's ruined districts, the fetid warrens on the dome's peripheries, which were inhabited by skinheads and Screamers who existed outside the tightly controlled structure of Uptown life. Now, as Pfeiffer touched his hand to a palm-plate sensor, the door opened and admitted them into the casino itself. The precarious outside world was closed out and left behind.

A young man, who reminded Joan of an upright (if possible) Bedlington terrier, led them through the courtyard. He spoke with a clipped English accent and had tufts of woolly, bluish-white hair implanted all over his head, face, and body. Only his hands and genitals were hairless.

"He has to be working off an indenture," Pfeiffer said sharply as he repressed a sexual urge.

"Shush," Joan said, as the boy gave Pfeiffer a brief, contemptuous look-in Parisian culture, you were paying only for the service, not for the smile.

They were led into a simple, but formal, entry lounge, which was crowded, but not uncomfortable. The floor was marbled; a few pornographic icons were discreetly situated around the carefully laid-out comfort niches. The room reminded Joan of a chapel with arcades, figures, and stone courts. Above was a dome, from which radiated a reddish, suffusing light, lending the room an expansiveness of height rather than breadth.

But it was mostly holographic illusion.

They were directed to wait a moment and then presented to the purser, an overweight, balding man who sat behind a small desk. He was dressed in a blue camise shirt and matching caftan, which was buttoned across his wide chest and closed with a red scarf. He was obviously, and uncomfortably, dressed in the colors of the establishment.

"And good evening, Monsieur Pfeiffer and Mademoiselle Otur. We are honored to have such an important guest, or guests, I should say." The purser slipped two cards into a small console.

"Your identification cards will be returned to you when you leave." After a pause he asked, "Ah, does Monsieur Pfeiffer wish the lady to be credited on his card?" The purser lowered his eyes, indicating embarrassment. Quite simply, Joan did not have enough credit to be received into the more sophisticated games.

"Yes, of course," Pfeiffer said absently. He felt guilty and anxious about feeling a thrill of desire for that grotesque boy.

"Well, then," said the purser, folding his hands on the desk, "we are at your disposal for as long as you wish to stay with us." He gestured toward the terrier and said, "Johnny will give you the tour," but Pfeiffer politely declined. Johnny ushered them into a central room, which was anything but quiet, and-after a wink at Pfeiffer-discreetly disappeared.

The room was as crowded as the city ways. It was filled with what looked to be the ragtag, the bums and the street people, the captains of the ways. Here was a perfect replica of a street casino, but perfectly safe. This was a street casino, at least to Pfeiffer, who was swept up in the noise and bustle, as he whetted his appetite for the dangerous pleasures of the top level. Ancient iron bandits whispered "chinks-chinks" and rolled their picture-frame eyes in promise of a jackpot, which was immediately transferred to the winner's account by magnetic sleight of hand. The amplified, high-pitched

voices of pinball computers on the walls called out winning hands of poker and blackjack. A simulated stabbing drew nothing more than a few glances. Tombstone booths were filled with figures

working through their own Stations of the Cross. Hooked-in winners were rewarded with bursts of electrically induced ecstasy; losers writhed in pain and suffered through the brain-crushing aftershock of week-long migraines.

And, of course, battered robots clattered around with the traditional complement of drugs, drink, and food. The only incongruity was a perfectly dressed geisha, who quickly disappeared into one of the iris-doors on the far wall.

"Do you want to play the one-armed bandits?" Joan asked, fighting her growing claustrophobia, wishing only to escape into quiet; but she was determined to try to keep Pfeiffer from going upstairs. Yet, ironically-all her emotions seemed to be simultaneously yin and yang-she also wanted him to gamble away his organs. She knew that she would feel a guilty thrill if he lost his heart. Then she pulled down the lever of the one-armed bandit; it would read her finger-and odor-prints and transfer or deduct the proper amount to or from Pfeiffer's account. The eyes rolled and clicked and one hundred international credit dollars was lost. "Easy come, easy go. At least, this is a safe way to go. But you didn't come here to be safe, right?" Joan asked mockingly.

"You can remain down here, if you like," Pfeiffer said, looking about the room for an exit, noticing that iris doors were spaced every few meters on the nearest wall to his left. The casino must take up the whole bloody block, he thought. "How the hell do I get out of here?" Before Joan could respond, Johnny appeared, as if out of nowhere, and said, "Monsieur Pfeiffer may take any

one of the ascenseurs, or, if he would care for the view of our palace, he could take the staircase to heaven." He smiled, baring even teeth, and curtsied to Pfeiffer, who was blushing. The boy certainly knows his man, Joan thought sourly.

Am I jealous? she asked herself. She cared for Pfeiffer, but didn't love him-at least she didn't think she did.

"Shall I attend you?" Johnny asked Pfeiffer, ignoring Joan.

"No," said Pfeiffer. "Now please leave us alone."

"Well, which is it?" asked Joan. "The elevator would be quickest, zoom you right to the organ room."

"We can take the stairs," Pfeiffer said, a touch of blush still in his cheeks. But he would say nothing about the furry boy. "Jesus, it seems that everytime I blink my eye, the stairway disappears."

"I'll show you the way," Joan said, taking his arm.

"Just what I need," Pfeiffer said, smiling, eliminating one small barrier between them.

"I think your rush is over, isn't it? You don't really want to gamble out your guts."

"I came to do something, and I'll follow it through."

The stairwell was empty, and, like an object conceived in Alice's Wonderland, it appeared to disappear behind them. "Cheap tricks," Pfeiffer said.

"Why are you so intent on this?" Joan asked. "If you lose, which you most probably will, you'll never have a day's peace. They can call in your heart, or liver, or-"

"I can buy out, if that should happen." Pfeiffer reddened, but it had nothing to do with his conversation with Joan, to which he was hardly paying attention; he was still thinking about the furry boy.

"You wouldn't gamble them, if you thought you could buy out. That's bunk."

"Then I'd get artificials."

"You'd be taking another chance, with the quotas thanks to your right-wing friends in power." Pfeiffer didn't take the bait. "I admit defeat," he said. Again he thought of the furry boy's naked, hairless genitals. And with that came the thought of death.

The next level was less crowded and more subdued. There were few electronic games to be seen on the floor. A man passed dressed in medical white, which indicated that deformation games were being played. On each floor the stakes became increasingly higher; fortunes were lost, people were disfigured, or ruined, but-with the exception of the top floor, which had dangerous games other than organ-gambling-at least no one died. They might need a face and body job after too many deformations, but those were easily obtained, although one had to have very good credit to ensure a proper job.

On each ascending level, the house whores, both male and female, became more exotic, erotic, grotesque, and abundant. There were birdmen with feathers like peacocks and flamingos, children with dyed skin and overly large, implanted male and female genitalia, machines that spoke the language of love and exposed soft, fleshy organs, amputees and cripples, various drag queens and kings, natural androgynies and mutants, cyborgs, and an interesting, titillating array of genetically engineered mooncalves.

But none disturbed Pfeiffer as had that silly furry boy. He wondered if, indeed, the boy was still

following him.

"Come on, Joan" Pfeiffer said impatiently. "I really don't want to waste any more time down here."
"But I always thought it was the expectation that's so exciting to seasoned gamblers," Joan said.
"Not to me," Pfeiffer said, ignoring the sarcasm. "I want to get it over with." With that, he left the room.

Then why bother at all? Joan asked herself, wondering why she had let Pfeiffer talk her into coming here. He doesn't need me. Damn him, she thought, ignoring a skinny, white-haired man and a piebald, doggie mooncalf coupling beside her in an upright position.

She took a lift to the top level to catch up with Pfeiffer.

It was like walking into the foyer of a well-appointed home. The high walls were stucco and the floor was inlaid parquet. A small Dehaj rug was placed neatly before a desk, behind which beamed a man of about fifty dressed in camise and caftan. He had a flat face, a large nose that was wide, but had narrow nostrils, and close-set eyes roofed with bushy, brown eyebrows, the color his hair would have been, had he had any.

Actually, the room was quite small, which made the rug look larger and gave the man a commanding position.

"Do you wish to watch or participate, Monsieur Pfeiffer?" he asked, seeming to rise an inch from the chair as he spoke.

"I wish to play," Pfeiffer said, standing upon the rug as if he had to be positioned just right to make it fly.

"And does your friend wish to watch?" the man asked, as Joan crossed the room to stand beside Pfeiffer. "Or will you give your permission for Miz Otur to become telepathically connected to you." His voice didn't rise as he asked the question.

"I beg your pardon?"

"A psyconnection, sir. With a psyconductor"-a note of condescension crept into his voice.

"I know what it is, and I don't want it," Pfeiffer snapped and then moved away from Joan. But a cerebral hook-in was, in fact, just what Joan had hoped for.

"Oh, come on," Joan said. "Let me in."

"Are you serious?" he asked, turning toward her.

Caught by the intensity of his stare, she could only nod. "Then I'm sorry. I'm not a window for you to stare through."

That stung her, and she retorted, "Have you ever done it with your wife?" She immediately regretted her words.

The man at the desk cleared his throat politely. "Excuse me, monsieur, but are you aware that only games organe are played in these rooms?"

"Yes, that's why I've come to your house."

"Then, you are perhaps not aware that all our games are conducted with psyconductors on this floor.

Pfeiffer, looking perplexed, said, "Perhaps you had better explain it to me."

"Of course, of course," the man said, beaming, as if he had just won the battle and a fortune.

"There are, of course, many ways to play, and, if you like, I can give you the address of a very nice house nearby where you can play a fair, safe game without hook-ins. Shall I make a reservation for you there?"

"Not just yet," Pfeiffer said, resting his hands, knuckles down, upon the flat-top Louis XVI desk. His feet seemed to be swallowed by the floral patterns of the rug, and Joan thought it an optical illusion, this effect of being caught before the desk of the casino captain. She felt the urge to grab Pfeiffer and take him out of this suffocating place.

Instead, she walked over to him. Perhaps he would relent just a little and let her slide into his mind.

"It is one of our house rules, however," said the man at the desk, "that you and your opponent, or opponents, must be physically in the same room."

"Why is that?" Joan asked, feeling Pfeiffer scowling at her for intruding.

"Well," he said, "it has never happened to us, of course

but cheating has occurred on a few long-distance transactions. Organs have been wrongly lost. So we don't take any chances. None at all." He looked at Pfeiffer as he spoke, obviously sizing him up, watching for reactions. But Pfeiffer had composed himself, and Joan knew that he had made up his mind.

"Why must the game be played with psyconductors?" Pfeiffer asked.

"That is the way we do it," said the captain. Then, after an embarrassing pause, he said, "We have our own games and rules. And our games, we think, are the most interesting. And we make the games as safe as we can for all parties involved."

"What do you mean?"

"We-the house-will be observing you. Our games master will be telepathically hooked in, but, I assure you, you will not sense his presence in the least. If anything should go wrong, or look as if it might go wrong, then pfft, we intercede. Of course, we make no promises, and there have been cases where-

"But anything that could go wrong would be because of the cerebral hook-in."

"Perhaps this isn't the game for you, sir."

"You must have enough privileged information on everyone who has ever played here to make book," Pfeiffer said.

"The hook-in doesn't work that way at all. And besides, we are contract-bound to protect our clients."

"And yourselves."

"Most certainly." The casino captain looked impatient.

"If both players can read each other's mind," Pfeiffer said to the captain, "then there can be no blind cards."

"Aha, now you have it, monsieur." At that, the tension between Pfeiffer and the desk captain seemed to dissolve.

"And, indeed," the captain continued, "we have a modified version of chemin de fer, which we call blind shemmy. All the cards are played face down. It is a game of control (and, of course, chance), for you must block out certain thoughts from your mind, while, at the same time, tricking your opponent into revealing his cards. And that is why it would be advantageous for you to let your friend here connect with you."

Pfeiffer glanced toward Joan and said, "Please clarify that."

"Quite simply, while you are playing, your friend could help block your thoughts from your opponent with her own," said the captain. "But it does take some practice. Perhaps, it would be better if you tried a hook-in in one of our other rooms, where the stakes are not quite so high." Then the captain lowered his eyes, as if in deference, but in actuality he was looking at the Ceer screen of the terminal set into the antique desk.

Joan could see Pfeiffer's nostrils flare slightly. The poor sonofabitch is caught, she thought.

"Come on, Carl, let's get out of here now."

"Perhaps you should listen to Miss Otur," the captain said, but the man must have known that he had Pfeiffer.

"I wish to play blind shemmy," Pfeiffer said, turning toward Joan, glaring at her. She caught her breath: If he lost, then she knew he would make certain that Joan lost something, too.

"I have a game of nine in progress," the captain said. "There are nine people playing and nine others playing interference. But you'll have to wait for a space. It will be quite expensive, as the players are tired and will demand some of your points for themselves above the casino charge for the play."

"How long will I have to wait?"

The captain shrugged, then said, "I have another man waiting, who is ahead of you. He would be willing to play a game of doubles. I would recommend you play him rather than wait. Like you, he is an amateur, but his wife, who will be connected with him, is not. Of course, if you wish to wait for the other . . ."

Pfeiffer accepted, and while he and Joan gave their prints to the various forms, the captain explained that there was no statute of limitations on the contract signed by all parties, and that it would be honored even by those governments that disapprove of this particular form of gambling. -

Then the furry boy appeared like an apparition to take them to their room where they would be given time to practice and become acquainted.

The boy's member was slightly engorged, and Pfeiffer now became frightened. He suddenly thought of his mother and the obligatory hook-in service at her funeral. His skin crawled as he remembered her last filthy thoughts . . .

The furry boy led Joan and Pfeiffer into the game room, which smelled of oiled wood, spices, traditional tobacco, and perfume. There were no holos or decoration on the walls. Everything, with the exception of the felt top of the gaming table, cards, thick natural carpet, computer consoles, and cowls, was made of precious woods: oak, elm, cedar, teak, walnut, mahogany, redwood, ebony. The long, half-oval gaming table, which met the sliding partition wall, was made of satinwood, as were the two delicate, but uncomfortable, high-backed chairs placed side by side. On the table before each chair was a psyconductor cowl, each one sheathed in a light, silvery mask.

"We call them poker-faces," the boy said to Pfeiffer, as he placed the cowl over Joan's head. He explained how the psyconductor mechanism worked, then asked Pfeiffer if he wished him to stay. "Why should I want you to stay?" Pfeiffer asked, but the sexual tension between them was unmistakable.

"I'm adept at games of chance. I can redirect your thoughts-without a psyconductor." He looked at Joan and smiled.

"Put the mechanism on my head and then please leave us," Pfeiffer said.

"Do you wish me to return when you're finished?"

"If you wish," Pfeiffer replied stiffly, and Joan watched his discomfort. Without saying a word, she had won a small victory.

The boy lowered the cowl over Pfeiffer's head, made some unnecessary adjustments, and left reluctantly.

"I'm not at all sure that I want to do this," Pfeiffer mumbled, faltering.

"Well," Joan said, "we can easily call off the game. Our first connection is just practice-"

"I don't mean the game. I mean the psyconnection."

Joan remained silent. Dammit, she told herself. I should have looked away when Pfeiffer's furry pet made a pass at him.

"I was crazy to agree to such a thing in the first place."

"Shall I leave?" Joan asked. "It was you who insisted that I come along, remember?" She stood up, but did not judge the distance of the cowl/console connections accurately, and the cowl was pulled forward, bending the silver mask.

"I think you're as nervous as I am," Pfeiffer said appeasingly. .

"Make the connection, right now. Or let's get out of here." Joan was suddenly angry and frustrated. Do it, she thought to herself, and for once she was not passive. Certainly not passive. Damn him and his furry boy! She snapped the wooden toggle switch, activating both psyconductors, and was thrust into vertiginous light. It surrounded her, as if she could see in all directions at once. But she was simply seeing through Pfeiffer's eyes. Seeing herself, small, even in his eyes, small.

After the initial shock, she realized that the light was not brilliant; on the contrary, it was soft and diffused.

But this was no connection at all: Pfeiffer was trying to close his mind to her. He appeared before her as a smooth, perfect, huge, sphere. It slowly rotated, a grim, gray planet, closed to her, forever closed

Are you happy now? asked Pfeiffer, as if from somewhere deep inside the sphere. It was so smooth, seamless. He really does not need me, she thought, and she felt as if she were flying above the surface of his closed mind, a winged thing looking for any discontinuity, any fault in his defenses.

So you see, Pfeiffer said, exulting in imagined victory, I don't need you. The words came wreathed in an image of a storrrri rolling angrily over the planet. ,

She flew, in sudden panic, around his thoughts, like an insect circling a source of light. She was looking for any blister or crack, any anomaly in the smooth surface. He would gamble his body away without her, that she knew, unless she could break through his defenses, prove to him how vulnerable he really was.

So you couldn't resist the furry boy, could you? Joan asked, her thoughts like smooth sharks swimming through icy water. Does he, then, remind you of yourself, or do I remind you of your mother?

His anger and exposed misery were like flares on the surface of the sun. In their place remained an eruption of Pfeiffer's smooth protective surface. A crack in the cerebral egg.

Joan dove toward the fissure, and then she was inside Pfeiffer -not the outside of his senses where he could verbalize a thought, see a face, but in the dark, prehistoric places where he dreamed, conceptualized, where he floated in and out of memory, where the eyeless creatures of his soul dwelled.

It was a sliding, a slipping in, as if one had turned over inside oneself; and Joan was sliding, slipping on ice. She found herself in a dark world of grotesque and geometric shapes, an arctic world of huge icebergs floating on a fathomless sea.

And for an instant, Joan sensed 'Pfeiffer's terrible fear of the world.

Mindjucker! Pfeiffer screamed, projecting the word in a hundred filthy, sickening images; and then he smashed through Joan's defenses and rushed into the deep recesses of her mind. He found her soft places and took what he could.

All that before the psyconnection was broken. Before the real game began. As if nothing had

happened.

A man and woman, wearing identical cowled masks, sat across from Joan and Pfeiffer. The partition wall had been slid back, revealing the oval shape of the gaming table and doubling the size of the wood-paneled room. The dealer and the gamesmaster sat on each side of the long table between the opponents. The dealer was a young man with an intense, roundish face and straight black hair cut at the shoulders; he was most likely in training to become a gamesmaster.

The gamesmaster's face was hidden by a black cowl; he would be hooked in to the game. He explained the rules, activated the psyconductors, and the game began. Joan and Pfeiffer were once again hooked in, but there was no contact, as yet, with the man and woman across the table.

Pfeiffer cleared his mind, just as if he were before lasers or giving an interview. He had learned to cover his thoughts, for, somehow, he had always felt they could be seen, especially by those who wanted to hurt him politically and on the job.

White thought, he called it, because it was similar to white noise.

Pfeiffer could feel Joan circling around him like the wind. Although he couldn't conceal everything, he could hide from her. He could use her, just as she could use him . . . had used him. They had reached an accord via mutual blackmail. Somehow, during their practice hook-in, Joan had forced herself into Pfeiffer's mind; shocked, he attacked her.

So now they knew each other better.

They built a simple symbol structure: He was the world, a perfect sphere without blemish, made by God's own hands, a world as strong and divine as thought; and she was his atmosphere. She contained all the elements that could not exist on his featureless surface. She was the protective cloak of his world.

They built a mnemonic in which to hide, yet they were still vulnerable to each other. But Pfeiffer guessed that Joan would remain passive--after all, she always had. She also had the well-developed conscience of a mystical liberal, and she was in love with him. He had seen that--or thought he had.

She would not depose him to danger.

Pfeiffer congratulated himself for being calm, which reinforced his calmness. Perhaps it was Joan's presence. Perhaps it was the mnemonic. But perhaps not. He had the willpower; this was just another test. He had managed to survive all the others, he told himself.

Joan rained on him, indicating her presence, and they practiced talking within geometric shapes as a protective device--it was literally raining geodesic cats and dogs.

When the gamesmaster opened the psyconductor to all involved, Joan and Pfeiffer were ready. But they were not ready to find exact duplicates of themselves facing them across the table. The doppelgangers, of course, were not wearing cowls.

"First, Mesdames and messieurs, we draw the wager," said the dealer, who was not hooked in. The gamesmaster's thoughts were a neutral presence. "For each organ pledged, there will be three games consisting of three hands to a game," continued the dealer. "In the event that a player wins twice in succession, the third hand or game will not be played." His voice was an intrusion; it was harsh and cold and came from the outside where everything was hard and intractable.

How do they know what we look like? Pfeiffer asked, shaken by the hallucination induced by his opponents.

But before Joan could reply, he answered his own question. They must be picking up subliminal stuff.

The way we perceive ourselves, Joan said. The doppelgangers became hard and ugly, as if they were being eroded by time. And Joan's double was becoming smaller, insignificant.

If we can't cover up, we won't have a chance.

You can't cover everything, but neither can they, Joan said. It cuts both ways. She noticed a fissure in the otherwise perfect sphere below, and she became black fog, miasma, protective covering. Pfeiffer was afraid, and vulnerable. But she had to give him credit: He was not hiding it from her, at least. That was a beginning . . .

Did you pick up anything from them, an image, anything? Pfeiffer asked.

We've been too busy with ourselves. We'll just wait and be ready when they let something slip out.

Which they will, Pfeiffer said, suddenly confident again.

From deep inside their interior, symbolized world, Joan and Pfeiffer could look into the external world of croupier, felt-top table, cards, wood-covered walls, and masked creatures. This room was simply a stage for the play of thought and image.

Pfeiffer was well acquainted with this sensation of perceiving two worlds, two levels: inside and outside. He often awakened from a nightmare and found himself in his living room or library. He knew that he was wide awake, and yet he could still see the dream unfurl before him, watch the

creatures of his nightmare stalk about the room-the interior beasts let loose into the familiar, comforting confines of his waking world. Those were always moments of terror, for surely h^o was near the edge then . . . and could fall.

The dealer combined two decks of cards and placed them in a shoe, a box from which the cards could be slid out one by one. He discarded three cards: the traditional burning of the deck.

Then he dealt a card to Pfeiffer and one to his opponent. Both cards landed face up. A queen of hearts for Pfeiffer. A nine of hearts for his opponent.

So Pfeiffer lost the right to call the wager.

Just as the object of black jack was to draw cards that add up to twenty-one, or as near to that figure as possible,

the object of blind shemmy was to draw cards that add up to nine. Thus, face cards, which would normally be counted as ten, were counted as zero. Aces, normally counted as eleven, became one; and all other cards had their normal pip (or face) value, with the exception of tens, which, like aces, were counted as one.

"Monsieur Deux wins, nine over zero," said the dealer, looking now at Pfeiffer's opponent.

Pfeiffer was Monsieur Un and his opponent Monsieur Deux only because of their positions at the table.

A hell of a way to start, Pfeiffer said.

Keep yourself closed, Joan said, turning into mist, then dark rain, pure sunlight and rainbows, a perceptual kaleidoscope to conceal Pfeiffer from his enemies. Look now, he'll be more vulnerable when he speaks. I'll cover you.

Your choice, said the gamesmaster. The thought was directed to Pfeiffer's opponent, who was staring intently at Pfeiffer.

Look now, Joan said to Pfeiffer.

"Since we both turned up hearts, perhaps that is where we should begin," Pfeiffer's opponent said, speaking for the benefit of the dealer. His words felt like shards of glass to Pfeiffer. "They're the seats of our emotions; so we'd best dispose of them quickly." Pfeiffer felt the man smile. "Do you assent?"

"It's your choice," Pfeiffer said to the dealer tonelessly.

Don't let anything out, Joan said.

Pfeiffer couldn't pick up anything from his opponent and the woman with him; they were both empty doppelgangers of himself and Joan. Pretend that nothing matters, she said. If you expect to see his cards and look inside him for weakness, you must be removed.

She's right, Pfeiffer thought. He tried to relax, smooth himself down; he thought innocuous white thoughts and

ignored the knot of anxiety that seemed to be pulling at his groin.

"Cartes," said the dealer, dealing two cards from the shoe, facedown, one for Pfeiffer, the other for his opponent. Another two cards, and then a palpable silence; not even thoughts seemed to cut the air. It was an unnatural waiting . . .

Pfeiffer had a natural nine, a winning hand (a queen and a nine of diamonds), and he looked up, about to turn over his cards, when he saw the furry boy sitting across the table from him.

What the hell -

Call your hand. Joan said, feeling his glands open up, a warm waterfall of fear. But before Pfeiffer could speak, his opponent said, "My friend across the table has a natural nine. A queen and a nine, both diamonds. Since I called his hand-and I believe I am correct, then . . ."

The dealer turned Pfeiffer's cards over and said, "Monsieur Deux is correct, and wins by call." If Pfeiffer's opponent had been mistaken about the hand, Pfeiffer would have won automatically, even if his opponent held better cards.

The dealer then dealt two more cards from the shoe.

You're supposed to be covering my thoughts, Pfeiffer said, but he was composed, thinking white thoughts again.

I'm trying, Joan said. But you won't trust me; you're trying to cover yourself from me as well as your opponent. What the hell am I supposed to do?

I'm sorry, Pfeiffer thought.

Are you really so afraid that I'll see your true feelings?

This is neither the time nor the place. His rhythm of white thought was broken; Joan became a snowstorm, aiding him, lulling him back to white blindness. I think

the gamesmaster is making me nervous, having him hooked in, privy to all our thoughts . . .

Forget the gamesmaster . . . and for God's sake, stop worrying about what I'll see. I'm on your side.

"Monsieur Un, will you please claim your cards," said the dealer. The gamesmaster nodded at

Pfeiffer and thought neutral, papery thoughts.

Pfeiffer turned up the edges of his cards. He had a jack of diamonds-which counted as zero-and a two of spades. He would need another card.

Don't think about your cards, Joan exclaimed. Are you picking up anything from the other side of the table?

Pfeiffer listened, as if to his own thoughts. He didn't raise his head to look at his opponent, for seeing his own face-or that of the furry boy's-staring back at him from across the table was disconcerting, and fascinating. An image of an empty, hollow woman without any organs formed in his mind. He imagined her as a bag somehow formed into human shape.

Keep that, Joan said. It might be usable.

But I can't see his cards.

Just wait awhile. Keep calm.

"Does Monsieur wish another card?" the dealer asked Pfeiffer. Pfeiffer took another card, and so did his opponent.

Pfeiffer had no idea what cards his opponent was holding; it promised to be a blind play. When the cards were turned over, the dealer announced, "Monsieur Deux wins, six over five." Pfeiffer had lost again.

I'm playing blind, Pfeiffer said anxiously to Joan.

He couldn't see your cards, either, she replied.

But that gave him little satisfaction, for by losing the first two hands, he had lost the first game.

And if he lost the next game, he would lose his heart, which, white thought or not, seemed to Pfeiffer to be beating in his throat.

Try to calm yourself, Joan said, or you'll let everything out. If you trust me, and stop throwing up your defenses, maybe I can help you. But you've got to let me in; as it is, you're giving our friends quite the edge. Let's make a merger . . . a marriage. But Pfeiffer was in no mood for irony. His fear was building, steadily, slowly.

You can fold the game, Joan said. That is an alternative.

And give up organs I haven't yet played for! The smooth surface of Pfeiffer's sphere cracked, and Joan let herself be swallowed into it. The surface of the sphere changed, grew mountain chains, lush vegetation, flowers, deserts, all the mingled moods of Joan and Pfeiffer.

Pfeiffer was no longer isolated; he was protected, yet dangerously exposed. Inside him, in the human, moist dark, Joan promised not to take advantage of him. She caught a fleeting thought of Pfeiffer's dead mother, who had been a fleshy, big-boned, flat-faced woman. She also saw that Pfeiffer hated his mother, as much now as when she was alive.

In the next hand-the opening hand of the second game -Pfeiffer held a five of clubs and a two of spades, a total of seven points. He would not take another card unless he could see his opponent's. But when he looked up, Pfeiffer saw the furry boy, who blew him a kiss.

You're exposed again, Joan said, and they thought themselves inside their world, thought protective darkness around themselves, except for one tiny opening through which to see into their enemies.

Concentrate on that image of the empty woman, Joan said to Pfeiffer. She has to be Monsieur Deux's wife or woman. I can't quite visualize it as you did. But Pfeiffer

was trying to smooth down his emotions and the dark, dangerous demon that was his memory. The image of the furry boy sparked memories, fears, guilts. Pfeiffer remembered his father, who had been a doctor. There was always enough money, but his father extracted emotional dues for every dollar he gave his son. And, as a result, the young Pfeiffer had recurrent nightmares that he was sucking off his father. Those nightmares began again after his mother died: She had seen that homosexual fantasy when Pfeiffer hooked in to her on her deathbed.

Pfeiffer still had those nightmares.

And now, against his will, the image of him sucking off the furry boy passed through his mind, drawing its train of guilt and revulsion. The boy and his father, somehow one and the same.

You're leaking, Joan said, her thoughts an ice storm. She could see her way into Pfeiffer now, into those rooms of buried memories. Rather than rooms, she thought of them as subterranean caverns; everything inside them was intact, perfect, hidden from the harmful light and atmosphere of consciousness. Now she knew him . . .

Pfeiffer collected himself and peered into his opponent's mind. He thrust the image of the organless woman at the man.

It was like tearing a spiderweb.

Pfeiffer felt the man's pain as a feather touching flesh: The organless woman was Monsieur Deux's permanent wife. Pfeiffer had broken through and into his thoughts; he could feel his opponent's

name, something like Gayah, Gahai, Gayet, that was it, and his wife was used up. Gayet saw her, in the darkness of his unconscious, as an empty bag. She was a compulsive gambler, who had spent her organs; and Gayet hated gambling, but she possessed him, and he hated her and loved her, and was just beginning his self-destructive slide.

Now she was using him up. She was gambling his organs.

She's used up, Pfeiffer thought at Gayet. But Pfeiffer could only glimpse Gayet's thoughts. His wife was not exposed.

Nor was she defenseless.

She thrust the image of the furry boy at Pfeiffer, and Pfeiffer felt his head being forced down upon the furry boy's lap. But it suddenly wasn't the furry boy anymore. It was Pfeiffer's father! There was no distance now. Pfeiffer was caught, tiny and vulnerable.

Gayet and his wife were swallowing him, thoughts and all.

It was Joan who saved him. She pulled him away, and he became the world again, wrapped in snow, in whiteness. He was safe again, as if inside Joan's cold womb.

Look now, Joan said an instant later, and like a revelation, Pfeiffer saw Gayet's cards, saw them buried in Gayet's eyes with the image of his aging wife. In that instant, Pfeiffer saw into Gayet and forgot himself. Gayet's wife was named Grace, and she had been eroded from too many surgeries, too many deformation games. She was his 'Blue Angel (yes, he had seen the ancient film) and Gayet the fool.

The fool held an ace of hearts and a five of diamonds.

Now Pfeiffer felt that the odds were with him; it was a familiar sensation for gamblers, a sense of harmony, of being a benevolent extension of the cards. No anger, no fear, no hate, just victory. Pfeiffer called Gayet's hand, thereby preventing Gayet from drawing another card, such as a lucky three, which would have given him a count of nine.

Pfeiffer won the hand, and he thanked Joan. His thoughts were of love, but his repertoire of images was limited. Joan was now part of his rhythm and harmony, a constant presence; and she dreamed of the victorious cats that padded so gracefully through the lush vegetation of Pfeiffer's sphere-the cats that rutted, then devoured one another.

Pfeiffer won the next hand to take the second game. Pfeiffer and his opponent were now even. The next game would determine the outcome. Pfeiffer felt that calm, cold certainty that he would take Gayet's heart. The obsession to expose and ruin his opponent became more important than winning or losing organs; it was bright and fast flowing, refreshing as water.

He was in a better world now, a more complete, fulfilling plane of reality. All gamblers dreamed of this: losing or winning everything, but being inside the game. Even Joan was carried away by the game. She, too, wanted to rend-to whittle away at the couple across the table, take their privacies, turn over their humiliations like worrybeads. They were Pfeiffer's enemies . . . and his enemies were her own.

Everyone was exposed now, battle weary, mentally and physically exhausted, yet lost in play, lost in perfect, concentrated time. Pfeiffer could see Gayet's face, both as Gayet saw himself and as Grace saw him. A wide nose, dark complexion, low forehead, large ears; yet it was a strong face, and handsome in a feral, almost frightening way-or so Grace thought. Gayet saw himself as weak; the flesh on his face was too loose.

Gayet was a failure, although he had made his career and fortune in the Exchange. He had wanted to be a mathematician, but he was lazy and lost the "knack" by twenty-five.

Gayet would have made a brilliant mathematician, and he knew it.

And Grace was a whore, using herself and everyone else. Here was a woman with great religious yearnings, who had wanted to join a religious order, but was blackballed by the cults because of her obsession for gambling and psyconductors. But Pfeiffer could see into her only a little. She was a cold bitch and, more than any of the others, had reserves of strength.

This last game would be psychological surgery. Tearing with the knife, pulping with the bludgeon. Pfeiffer won the first hand. This was joy; so many organs to win or lose, so little time.

Pfeiffer lost the next hand. Gayet exposed Joan, who revealed Pfeiffer's cards without realizing it. Gayet had opened her up, penetrated all that efficiency and order to expose anger and lust and uncontrolled oceanic pity. Joan's emotions writhed and crawled over her like beautifully colored, slippery snakes. Pfeiffer had been too preoccupied to protect her.

Joan's first thought was to revenge herself on Pfeiffer, expose him; but he opened up to her, buried her in white thought, which was as cold and numbing as ice, and apologized without words, but with the soft, rounded, comforting thoughts he equated with love. She couldn't trust him, nor could she expose him. Right now, she could only accept him.

The dealer gave Pfeiffer a three of diamonds and an ace of clubs. That gave him only four points; he would have to draw again. He kept his thoughts from Joan, for she was covering him. She could attack Gayet and his whore, expose them for their cards. Gayet's heart was not simply his organ-not now, not to Pfeiffer. It was his whole life, life itself. To rip it away from him would be to conquer life, if only for a moment. It was life affirming. It was being alive. Suddenly he thought of his father.

Close yourself up, Joan said. You're bleeding. She did not try to penetrate his thoughts; that would have exposed Pfeiffer even more dangerously.

Help me, Pfeiffer asked Joan. This hand would determine whether he would win or lose the game . . . and his heart.

Once again she became his cloak, his atmosphere, and she weaved her icy threads of white thought into his.

This was love, she thought.

Pfeiffer couldn't see Gayet's cards and nervously asked Joan to do something. Gayet was playing calmly, well covered by Grace, who simply hid him. No extravagance there.

Joan emptied her mind, became neutral; yet she was a needle of cold, coherent thought. She prodded, probed, touched her opponents' thoughts. It was like swimming through an ever-changing world of dots and bars, tangible as iron, fluid as water. It was as if Gayet's and Grace's thoughts were luminous points on a fluorescent screen.

And still she went unnoticed.

Gayet was like Pfeiffer, Joan thought. Seemingly placid, controlled, but that was all gingerbread to hide a weak house. He was so much weaker than Grace, who was supporting and cloaking him. But Grace was concentrating her energies on Gayet; and she had the fever, as if she were gambling her own organs once again.

Undoubtedly, Grace expected Joan and Pfeiffer to go straight for Gayet, who had read the cards. So Joan went for Grace, who was in the gambler's frenzy as the hand was being played. Joan slipped past Grace's thoughts, worked her way into the woman's mind, through the dark labyrinths and channels of her memory, and into the dangerous country of the unconscious. Invisible as air, she listened to Grace, read her, discovered: A sexual miasma. Being brutally raped as a child. After a riot in Manosque. Raped in a closet, for God's sake. The man tore her open with a rifle barrel, then inserted himself. Taking her, piece by bloody piece, just as she was taking Gayet. Just as others had taken her in rooms like this, in this casino, in this closet.

And Gayet, now Joan could see him through Grace, unperturbable Gayet, who had so much money and so little life, who was so afraid of his wife's past, of her lovers and liberations he called perversions. But he called everything a perversion.

How she hated him beneath what she called love.

But he looked just like the man who had raped her in that closet so long ago. She could not remember the man's face-so effectively had she blocked it out of her mind yet she was stunned when she first met Gayet. She felt attracted to him, but also repelled; she was in love.

Through Joan, Pfeiffer saw Gayet's cards: a deuce and a six of clubs. He could call his hand, but he wasn't sure of the deuce. It looked like a heart, but it could just as easily be a diamond. If he called it wrong, he would lose the hand, and his heart.

I can't be sure, Pfeiffer said to Joan, expecting help.

But Joan was in trouble. Grace had discovered her, and she was stronger than Joan had ever imagined. Joan was trapped inside Grace's mind; and Grace, who could not face what Joan had found, denied it.

And snapped.

In that instant, Joan felt that she was Grace. She felt all of Grace's pain and the choking weight of memory, as souls and selves incandescently merged. But before Joan and Grace could fuse inescapably, Joan recoiled, realizing that she was fighting for her life. She screamed for the gamesmaster to deactivate the game. But her screams were lost as Grace instantly slipped into the gamesmaster's mind and caught him, too. She had the psychotic's strength of desperation, and Joan realized that Grace would kill them all rather than face the truth about herself and Gayet.

Furiously Grace went after Pfeiffer. To kill him. She blamed him for Joan's presence, and Joan felt crushing pain, as if she were being buried alive in the dirt of Grace's mind. She tried to wrench herself away from Grace's thoughts, lest they intertwine with, and become, her own. She felt Grace's bloodlust . . . her need to kill Pfeiffer.

Grace grasped Pfeiffer with a thought, wound dark filaments around him that could not be turned away by white thought or anything else.

And like a spider, she wrapped her prey in darkness and looked for physiological weakness, any flaw, perhaps a blood vessel that might rupture in his head

Joan tried to pull herself away from the pain, from the concrete weight crushing her. Ironically, she wondered if thought had mass. What a stupid thought to die with, she told herself, and she suddenly remembered a story her father had told her about a dying rabbi who was annoyed at the minyan praying around him because he was trying to listen to two washerwomen gossiping outside. Many years later, her father confessed to her that it wasn't really a Jewish story at all; it was Buddhist. She held on to that thought, remembered how her father had laughed after his confession. The pain eased as she followed her thoughts: If thought had mass . . .

She was thinking herself free, escaping Grace by finding the proper angle, as if thought and emotion and pain were purely mathematical.

That done in an instant.

But if she were to save Pfeiffer's life, and her own, she would have to do something immediately. She showed Grace her past. Showed her that she had married Gayet because he had the face of the man who had raped her as a child.

Gayet, seeing this too, screamed. How he loathed Grace, but not nearly as much as she loathed herself. He had tried to stop Grace, but he was too weak. He, too, had been caught.

As if cornered, as if she were back in the closet with her rapist, she attacked Gayet. Only now she had a weapon. She thought him dead, trapped him in a scream, and, as if he were being squeezed from the insides, his blood pressure rose. She had found a weakened blood vessel in his head, and it ruptured.

The effort weakened Grace, and a few seconds later the gamesmaster was able to regain control and disconnect everyone. Gayet was immediately hooked in to a life-support unit which applied CPR techniques to keep his heart beating.

But he was dead

There would be some rather sticky legal complications, but by surviving, Pfeiffer had won the game, had indeed beaten Grace and won all of Gayet's organs.

As Pfeiffer gazed through the transparent walls of the transpod that whisked him and Joan out of Paris, away from its dangers and sordid delights, he felt something new and delicate toward Joan.

It was newfound intimacy and gratitude . . . and love.

Joan, however, still carried the echoes of Grace's thoughts, as if a part of her had irreversibly fused with Grace. She too felt something new for Pfeiffer. Perhaps it was renewal, an evolution of her love.

They were in love . . . yet even now Joan felt the compulsion to gamble again.