

LUNATIC BRIDGE

By Pat Cadigan

“There’s divorce and there’s divorce,” said Nelson Nelson. “You ever been divorced, Deadpan?”

I lit a cigarette, using the time to decide if NN were asking me an honest question or just gassing. I had no doubt the old fox could have wormed his way into my personal data; most employers can. And he was a great one for asking questions he already knew the answers to. He’d told me once he did it because he was interested in other people’s realities.

“No,” I said after a bit.

“Certain philosophers say real divorce is rare because few people ever make truly solid connections with each other.”

“Philosophers?” I tapped my cigarette over the suckhole in the low desk between us and shifted around uncomfortably on my couch. NN’s practice of conducting business in a reclining position had become tiresome and the vulgar gold lamé was making me itch all over. “So who are the philosophers of divorce?”

NN looked wise. “The other members of my Restaurant-of-the-Month Club, actually. We suppered in the Jet Stream last night and the subject came up with the cranberry soufflé.”

“You discussed a case?”

NN’s forehead puckered. His eyebrows were nonexistent these days, which made a frown one of his more peculiar expressions. “Don’t be absurd, Allie. Someone else brought the subject up. I listened.”

“Did you hear anything that would help me?”

“Hard to say. I’m old enough to have seen several swings of the togetherness pendulum. For a few years, everyone’s getting Two’d and Three’d and Gang’d. Then suddenly everyone’s an island again, nobody wants to be committed to anyone else. But regardless of what people think they want, they clump. They can’t help it. Even outcasts align with other outcasts. Nobody wants to be completely outside the tribe.”

I said nothing and scratched my rash. Sooner or later, NN would find his way to the point.

“Take an extreme case of clumping gone to bond,” he went on in his listen-to-this-you-could-learn-some-thing voice. “You remember the LadyBug Twins from a few years back?”

I nodded, still scratching away. “They were big news when I was in training in J. Walter Tech.”

“They were big news everywhere in the mindplay business. We were all wiggling to see how that one would come out and what precedents it would set.”

I remembered the two identical women grinning from holo tanks almost hourly. The resemblance was strictly manufactured and they’d decided that it wasn’t enough to seal their friendship. They’d wanted their brainwaves synchronized as well and the request had taken them into court—some kind of free will/civil rights problem. No one wanted to rule on the case until a sharp lawyer pointed out that their petition was interpretable as a desire for a particular brand of psychosis, which meant they were entitled to psychomimics’ licenses, just like anyone else. The LadyBugs had faded out of the public fishbowl quickly after that. The last anyone had heard of them, they were still happily thinking alike.

“Don’t tell me,” I said, sitting up. “The LadyBugs have split up, one of them wants to be a ballet dancer and I’m supposed to pathos-find her.”

NN gave me one of his looks. “You get some funny ideas, Deadpan. The LadyBugs are still happy as sandbags and loony as Klein bottles. You follow contemporary composers?”

“Not on purpose. Why?”

He thumbed a button on his couch frame. Music came up out of the walls and floated down from the ceiling. “Recognize this?”

“Sure, That’s the Poconos Movement from *Transcontinental Elopement*. Jord Coor and Revien Lam.”

NN looked satisfied for no reason I could readily think of. *Transcontinental Elopement* was hardly an obscure piece of music in spite of the fact that it was 408 hours long. You were supposed to listen to it all in one sitting, but who has seventeen days to spare for uninterrupted

music? Seventeen days was allegedly how long it had taken Coor and Lam to go from one edge of the continent to the other by a rambling overland route, composing as they went. The novelty of its length had contributed to its popularity at first—the *Transcontinental Elopement* listening party became the event of the hour, with people camping out in suites, following the journey on 360° holo. Real purists hired overland transportation and recreated the trip while those with less stamina or spare time took it in doses. The Poconos Movement was one of the more favored doses, all frisky piccolos and galloping guitars. You wouldn't have thought piccolos could describe the Poconos so well, but they did.

“Still with me, Deadpan?”

“Oh, sure.” I squirmed into another position, scratching my left calf with my right foot and clawing at my ribs. “I always liked the Coor and Lam stuff.”

NN turned the volume down a little. “Likewise. It has great spirit, isn't it so? Coor and Lam produced a fine body of work together, right up until two years ago, when they went their separate ways.”

“Yah. Which one hired me?”

“Coor.” NN raised himself on one elbow. “And if you don't stop that scratching, I'm going to have you flayed alive to save you the trouble. What in *hell* is wrong with you?”

“I'm allergic to this goddam gold lamé.” I stood up, trying to scratch everywhere at once. My over-blouse clung to me, snapping with static when I pulled it away from the slight potbelly I'd been too lazy to exercise off. Fusion power we licked; static cling has us on the ropes. It's a funny world.

“Here.” Nelson Nelson produced a small tube and tossed it to me. “Suddenly everyone's allergic to gold lamé. I had Lindbloom in here about a thrillseeking assignment and she could barely hold still.”

Well, that sounded like Lindbloom, gold lamé or no gold lamé. Most thrillseekers have a tendency to prowl when not hunting a kick in someone's brain. All mindplayers seem to end up acting out. Dream-feeders wander around looking absent, belljarrers are usually secluded somewhere if they aren't on a job and neurosis-peddlers bounce off the walls. Cackling. I wasn't quite sure what effect pathosfinding was having on me, except I'd noticed lately that I'd taken to sightreading the Emotional Index of the odd stranger here and there.

“Better?” NN asked as I swabbed cool blue jelly on my arms.

“Much. What is this stuff?”

“Home remedy. Take it with you.”

“Maybe I ought to leave it here. For next time.” I glanced at the couch.

“Deadpan, I’m hurt. You’re sneering at the future I looked forward to in the dear, dead days of my youth.”

“Pardon?”

“Gold lamé. Back when I was a kid, they promised us a clean, glorious future of prosperity where positively everything would be covered with gold lamé. They stopped making the stuff forty years ago and now I have to have it specially manufactured. But I figure I’m entitled.”

I pulled up one loose pantleg and smeared his home remedy on my thigh. “Tell me about Jord Coor. And I wasn’t sneering.”

“There’s not much for *me* to tell you; I put all the information in your data bank and you were too sneering. Coor’s trying to put himself together for a solo career and having a bad time of it. The six-month hiatus he took after the split has stretched into a year and a half and he’s feeling desperate.”

“He waited a year and a half before hiring a pathos finder?”

“Some people have to take the long way home just so they know they’ve been somewhere.”

“Is he really ready to try it alone?”

“*He* says. That’s something you’ll have to determine.”

“What about his ex-partner?”

“Out of sight but traceable. Part of their separation agreement was a clause promising a certain amount of cooperation in any future individual endeavors, musical or otherwise.”

“Was their split really that amiable?”

“Who knows? Divorce is a funny thing.”

“But they weren’t married. Or were they? I don’t keep up on celebrity statistics.”

NN’s forehead puckered again. I couldn’t wait for his eyebrows to grow back. He did some odd things and I had yet to figure what it was he was acting out. “Maybe not in the conventional sense. But they worked mind-to-mind for ten years. What do you think that means but marriage? More than marriage. Follow?”

I nodded.

“So if you look up Revien Lam for some reason, don’t hook in with both of them. Don’t put them in a composing situation together.”

“But they don’t want to compose together.”

“Who said so?” NN snapped. “Did I say so?” He shook his head. “Deadpan, the thing you gotta remember about divorced people is when they have a real crisis, they think about jumping right back into the old situation, even if that’s the worst thing they could do, and it usually is. The whole music world would love to see them together again and they don’t really want to be back together. Which, paradoxically, gives them common ground and pushes them closer together. Follow that?”

“Yah.” I finished applying jelly to my other leg. “And I didn’t sneer. They don’t call me Deadpan Allie and lie.”

“You sneered, woman. Inside if not outside. I could tell.” He cut off the music and put the Bolshoi Ballet on the ceiling holo by way of dismissing me and having the last word. “It’s a mutually wished-for and consummated divorce, Deadpan. Leave it that way.”

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Fandango sneaked up behind me and propped her chin on my shoulder. “Hi. I’m your two-headed transplant.”

I kept staring at the read-out screen. “I’m not going to encourage you.”

She tickled me under the chin with one of her dreadlocks. The

damnedest things come back into style. “Why are you researching the LadyBugs?”

“I’m looking at a case of extreme togetherness that worked. Or has yet to fail, I’m not sure which.” I pushed back from my desk and went down the three steps into the living room to flop on the couch. Fandango tagged after me, pausing at the bar near the steps to dial up a couple of birch beers.

“You think there’s a difference?” she said, handing me a glass before she climbed into the pouch chair to the right of the couch. “Between something that works and something that has yet to fail?”

“Glad you asked.” I waved at the coffeetable. *Full Day*, another Coor and Lam composition, came on softly. This one was only twenty-four hours long, looped for continuous play. “According to a tract I read by one of the leading experts on human relationships—who also happens to be a member of NN’s Restaurant-of-the-Month Club—there are three main theories on the patterns that two-person bondings of any nature follow.”

Fandango turned her bloodstone eyes on me. The bloodstones were new. With the dreadlocks, they made her look like a cross between a werewolf and a witch-doctor. I didn’t mention it to her. She’d have just gone and added fangs for effect. “Let’s hear it. I know you’re itching to tell me.”

“Don’t use that expression. One theory says a two-way partnership that lasts until the death of one or both partners never reached its ultimate peak and thus never got the chance to deteriorate. Another theory says that all partnerships end before the actual split. In the last stage, there are two sets of elements thrown together behind a façade of unity.” I put my birch beer down on the coffeetable. If I was going to get rid of my potbelly, I couldn’t be pouring birch beer into it. “The third theory states that all partnerships are illusions. One personality dominates and absorbs the other. I guess the LadyBugs would be a rather extreme example, in a way.”

“The LadyBugs are loono and have licenses to prove it,” Fandango said, with not a little disdain.

“Then there are all the variations on those theories. The most interesting one postulates that whatever happens between two people, a third entity is created which can, in some cases, attain such definition and strength as to be a different person.”

Fandango finished her birch beer and hung out of the chair to set the

glass on the carpet. “And what does all this tell you?”

“It tells me experts probably work alone.” I stared at the meditation maze on the ceiling. Researching the LadyBugs, I decided, was the wrong approach. They weren’t partners, not the way Coors and Lam had been. Congruence wasn’t necessarily complement.

“Turn up the music, will you?” Fandango said, sinking down a little more in the chair. “It just entered my circadian peak.”

I obliged her. Only her head was visible in the pouch chair now. I’d never cared for the idea of being swallowed by a piece of furniture, no matter how comfortable it was supposed to be, but then, it wasn’t my chair anyway. Fandango had dragged it over to my apartment from her place. That was the advantage of living at the agency—you could get out of your apartment and take it with you.

The LadyBugs were still grinning from the console in my work area above the living room. I abandoned the maze and wandered back to my desk to punch for Jord Coor’s entry. He was an emphatically plain man with a wide face and long, straight black hair. His eyes were the same flat black, onyx biogems according to his data. The overall effect was *blah*, as though his life’s ambition was to pass unnoticed. Not the acter-outer type, which probably meant there was more than the usual amount of energy pent up behind that broad forehead. If he ran just loosely to form, he was prone to what I thought of as the creative tantrum, as well as bursts of creativity alternating with blocks. His being half a team had probably masked a lot of that.

After awhile, I punched for Revien Lam’s picture. The screen swallowed Coor and delivered his ex-partner’s image with an electronic burp. Time for another tune-up. Revien Lam seemed to have tried to make himself as different from Coor as possible. He’d had a bleachout, hair and all. Against his color, or lack of it, the sapphire eyes were startling. His features were pointy where Coor’s were blunted, the face almost an inverted triangle. Only the knobs of his jawbone kept him from looking too pixie-ish.

Just for the hell of it, I shrank Lam’s picture and recalled Coor’s, putting them side by side. They stared at me and I stared back. Art makes strange mindfellows. It was hard to imagine the two of them hooked in together, Coor through the left eye and Lam through the right, working both in real time and the eternal Now of mind-time. A rather trippy experience.

And a very long trip at that. Ten years of continual mind-to-mind contact was a lot more intimate than two people should have been with each other, as far as I was concerned. They had to be a couple of pretty rugged individualists to have kept themselves sorted out.

“Rugged individualist,” I said aloud.

“What?” asked Fandango, coming out of her musical trance,

I looked over my shoulder at her. “I said, ‘Rugged individualist.’”

She waved at the coffee table, lowering the music. “Who?”

“Just a thought. Go back to your rhapsody and forget I said anything.” I turned back to the screen and stared at the ex-collaborators some more.

If you stare at something long enough, sometimes it will begin to look wrong. Lam’s picture was on the right and Coor’s was on the left and the arrangement was making me uncomfortable to the point of irritation. I tried looking at them with my right eye covered and then my left, but I’d never been that good at isolating my visual fields without mechanical help. Feeding an image into one hemisphere of the brain alone can sometimes give you a different perspective on something, but all I was getting out of the effort was more uncomfortable.

When I switched the pictures around, I felt a lot better, even both eyes open. Aesthetically, the new arrangement was more pleasing though I was damned if I could have said why. I sat back and put my heels up on the desk, gazing at the pictures through the V-frame of my legs. The system had placed Lam’s picture on the right when I’d called for Coor’s. Maybe if I’d made the placement myself I’d have liked it better? I shook my head. That wasn’t it and I knew it. I rested my gaze on the dividing line between the pictures for several seconds and then nearly fell out of the chair.

The resemblance between them was so marked I felt like an ass for not having seen it immediately. It wasn’t exactly a physical resemblance and yet it was. The similarity lay in their expressions, especially in the eye and mouth areas—the same things that make the long-married look alike. I had the screen enlarge those portions and remove the distinguishing coloration.

I marveled. It was almost possible to forget which features belonged to which man. Just for the hell of it, I patched Coor’s eyes and mouth into Lam’s face and vice versa. My system wasn’t programmed for fine detail

graphics and the result was crude, but not unreasonable.

“And what does that tell you, Dr. Frankenstein?” Fandango called, hanging out of the chair to see what I was doing.

“Take a nap,” I said and punched for pictures of Coor and Lam as they had been prior to becoming collaborators, careful to keep Lam on the left and Coor on the right.

The youthfulness of their faces startled me. I checked the dates. The pictures were fourteen years old, which made it something close to two years before they’d met. At twenty, Coor had that I’m-an-adult-I-know-things look to him while the seventeen-year-old Lam appeared to be the sort of twink you could sell a perpetual motion machine to.

I made more enlargements of their features and side-by-sided them one at a time. There was a definite similarity of expression around their eyes, as though they might have been looking at things in the same way, literally. They’d just had to meet and discover it.

I punched up pictures from three years later. A year into the partnership, Lam had dyed himself black with red accents. The struggle for differentiation had already begun.

Forward another three years. The haunted look of Lam’s opal eyes was reflected by Coor’s. I went to my auxiliary screen and called up a list of their compositions for that time. *The Freak Parade*, *Persimmon Dances*, *The Abstruse Pillow*. I listened to short excerpts from each one on my phones. It was easy to hear the conflict, but they’d conflicted so well together.

I jumped ahead to their last full year together. Coor looked weary and Lam looked crazed. By then it must have required incredible effort to keep from merging. Lam had been in the first stage of his bleach job and it struck me that his decision to be bleached this time instead of dyed was probably a strong statement of his perception of what was happening between himself and his partner. And there was Coor, looking the same as always, making a statement by making no statement.

I leaned my elbows on the desk and looked from one face to the other. If I’d been shown all the pictures and then been asked to guess which man had hired me, I’d have probably picked Lam, not Coor.

And what about Lam? I punched for any available data. There wasn’t

much—some vital statistics, a facsimile of the separation agreement, and his last known address, two years out of date. Probably safe to assume he'd given up music entirely. Considering how he'd been pulling away for ten years, it was in character—another and final way to differentiate himself from Coor, a pattern of behavior he was locked into for good.

“And what does all *this* tell you?” said a voice in my ear. Fandango had crept up behind me again. Served me right for having my work area in an open space just off my living room.

“It tells me some people gain freedom by trading one form of bondage for another.”

“Yah? You don't have to tell *me* that. I'm a neurosis-peddler, remember?”

“Well, you asked,” I frowned at the screen. “I think my basic problem here is just training someone to be a unit after being half a team for ten years.”

Fandango looked at the screen and wagged her dreadlocks. “Ah, they never should have broken up.”

“That's a matter of opinion,” I said, amused. “An opinion that my client's been struggling against. Maybe Lam, too, for all I know.”

“Sorry. I guess I can say it because I won't be doing the dirty work. But speaking as a member of the listening audience—” she made a face, which, considering the way she looked, was actually quite an accomplishment. “I don't know.” She pulled one foot high up on her thigh in a sloppy but limber half-lotus and absentmindedly massaged her sole. “Maybe I don't know what I'm talking. All I do is make people wash their hands a lot and associate sex with the color orange. But maybe it's better to be half of something wonderful than a whole nothing at all.”

“It hasn't been determined that Jord Coor is nothing on his own yet,” I said a little sharply. “If it had, I wouldn't be on this job.”

“Yah. But maybe this kind of mindplay only postpones having to admit something like the truth, huh?” She bounced back to the pouch chair, dreadlocks flying, and hopped in.

“Thanks for the moral support,” I said.

“Anytime.” She turned the music up again.

* * * *

“This part of Massachusetts used to be such a mess that they put a 200-year ban on external construction even after they cleaned it up. It’ll be another eighty-four years before you see anything but naked landscape, if then.” Jord Coor’s square face was impassive in the near twilight. I wasn’t sure that I hadn’t met someone even more deadpan than I was. He pointed to the horizon. “Those low hills are called monadnocks, according to the locals. About half of them are occupied, hollowed out, like this one.” He tapped his foot on the soft dirt.

“Pretty,” I said.

He almost smiled. “For centuries, nobody knew that. It was all defaced with factories, ugly little industrial towns. Poison all over the place, in everything. I’ve seen pictures.” A small wind pushed a strand of hair over the lower half of his face and he tossed his head to remove it. The motion put us unexpectedly eye to eye. The onyxes were like two bottomless holes.

“I thought this would be the ideal place to hide out, weather the first of the separation. Really go underground, in a place that was also coming back into its own.”

A chill crept into the air as the sun slid closer to the lumpy line of monadnocks. Jord waved at the manhole we’d climbed out of earlier and I nodded. The hole led down to an uncomfortably small (for me) elevator that took us back into the big empty chamber at the top of the stacked rooms he persisted in calling a house.

We went down to the living room, which was five times larger than it had to be, considering what he used it for—namely, very little. A designer who apparently went to a lot of parties had shaped it so that it was punctuated with conversation areas and gathering spots all around an off-center bar. It all had an untouched, still-not-broken-in look. Jord just wasn’t ready to make himself at home and that wasn’t a good sign.

He wasn’t ready to begin work either; he was treating me like a guest, or maybe an insurance agent, anything but a pathosfinder. Not that clients ever start pouring their hearts and minds out the moment I hit their turf. The first meeting was always uncomfortable, but Jord Coor’s avoidance was among the highest I’d come up against. He sat me in one of the nooks

around the bar and dispensed birch beer and chitchat until I was bloated and more knowledgeable about north-central Massachusetts than I could ever have wanted to be. I let him run. Eventually he was going to blurt out something having to do with the reason I was there and that would give both of us the momentum to go to work. Best for him to make the first move.

When it came, it came without preamble. He looked up at me from his fourth glass of birch beer and said, "I just want it back."

"It?"

"Whatever it was I had before I met Revien. Sometimes I can almost feel it. It's almost there. But it's like stepping forward and finding the floor suddenly gone. Nothing there, just emptiness. And I realize all those years with Revien — I've come away half an artist." He set his glass on a small shelf by his elbow. "That's how it feels, anyway. I've been changed."

"Did you expect that you wouldn't be?"

"Changed, certainly." His face hardened. "Changed but not diminished. Not shortchanged. Apparently what we added to the partnership we subtracted from ourselves. Or what I added to the partnership I subtracted from myself. I don't know about Revien." He blinked. "And you'd think I *would* know, wouldn't you. Ten years in and out of each other's heads, you'd think we had no secrets." He stared past me. "But we were only half hooked in. That was close enough. Early on, we went all the way just to try it. Only twice, though. It was too much. Felt so strange, as though we were asleep, dreaming, and discovered there was someone else dreaming the same dream." His gaze slid over to me. "You ever feel that way with a client?"

"Mindplayers are specially trained not to get loose and runny around the borders, though most people don't have problems keeping self divided from non-self. It sounds like an effect peculiar to your relationship."

He nodded slowly. "Perhaps it was." "Who first brought up the idea of separating?" He took a deep, uncomfortable breath. "I don't know if it's a matter of an idea that came up. More like a sub-theme that was always there and evolved into being the main melody. We were always pulling apart as much as pulling toward each other." He frowned, wobbling between a hasty retreat from the subject and a headlong plunge into the problem.

"This might be a good time for the first session," I said casually.

“While it’s at the top of your mind.”

He licked his lips, preparing an objection.

“It doesn’t get any easier,” I added.

His smile was sudden and unexpectedly warm. “No, I don’t suppose it does, does it?”

* * * *

The studio was a strange room, windowless and just big enough to keep a claustrophobe from stampeding. The acoustical walls and ceiling caught even the brush of our feet on the carpet and the whisper of our clothes and seemed to focus on them, making each noise into a significant sound before it was gone. In the center of the room, a marvelously restored barrel-house upright piano stood back to back with a techno-crazy chunk of synthesizer bristling with wires and stepladdered with keyboards, as though inviting comparison and choice.

“A synthesizer won’t always do the job,” Jord said as I touched the rich old wood of the piano. “Sometimes there’s no substitute for the real instrument.” One hand hovered over the yellowed keys, his fingers falling into position for a chord. Then he looked up at me. “What made you choose cat’s-eye?”

“I found them interesting.”

“Look toward the light.” He lifted my chin and studied my eyes. “Revien would like eyes like those. They shimmer. The same way he does.”

I pulled away from him gently. “Revien shimmers?”

“It’s hard to explain.”

“Then don’t explain. Show me.” I went over to my system stacked by the far wall and began putting the eight components together. I could feel him watching, unspoken objections and excuses piling up between us, thickening the air.

“This is smaller than most of the systems I’ve seen,” he said suddenly, from just behind me. I had just enough presence not to jump. After you’ve been pathosfinding awhile, you get to where you can not only

sense an Emotional Index without looking but also judge a client's physical position relative to yourself. I hadn't thought one could come up behind me without my knowing.

"My agency developed this model," I told him, keeping busy with the connections so he wouldn't know he'd startled me. "This one's only for pathosfinding and enhancement, which is why there's so little to it. Your last pathosfinder probably had a standard, multi-purpose system."

He made a skeptical sounding noise. "Revien and I used a composing box. It wasn't a lot bigger than this. Are you sure it'll do the job?"

I was grinning on the inside. "Back at the agency, we've got a system the size of a small canyon. You have to let it eat your head to use it. It does a job and a half, just about anything by way of mindplay, but it wouldn't do anything more for us than this does. Which is to provide a medium for the meeting of our minds. It works, but only as well as we do. You know how it is with machines."

He moved around to my right, frowning at the assembly. It looked like a model of a building designed by an architect with recurring Cubist nightmares. "Revien used to call our composing box the lunatic bridge."

"Why?" I asked, pulling some flat pictures out of a drawer.

"We'd send a piece of ourselves down the wire into the box and the pieces would fuse into the lunatic that composed the music."

I didn't raise my eyebrows. "Interesting way to look at it. Did you—do you—see it that way?"

"A lunatic on a bridge?" He wouldn't let the smile come, attempting to out-deadpan me. "I tried not to. Try not to." He looked at the pictures I was holding.

"This is something my agency developed strictly for musicians. Some are flat photos, others are repros of old paintings. You take a good look at them and tell me what you hear. Are you more comfortable lying down or sitting up?"

"Lying down. I'll get some mats out of the storeroom."

"Just one. I'll sit up, if that's all right."

I pushed the chair at the synthesizer over while he fetched a mat and went about molding it into a contour for himself.

He almost froze on the first picture, but we'd built up too much momentum and it carried him into the exercise whether he liked it or not. But he took his time with the photo of a man and a woman in the middle of a glitzy blow-out. The woman was Lindbloom, several years younger, before she'd started dyeing herself midnight blue. Even in plain flesh-tone she was striking, which may have contributed to his stalling. People like to stare at Lindbloom.

"A lot of laughter and chatter around those two," he said at last. "An old Coor and Lam piece playing in the background, very old. One of our first. He's caught between nostalgia and looking ahead to the possibilities, mainly with the woman. She doesn't think in terms of past or future, it's all a big Now to her. When she gets far enough from one experience, it's like it happened to someone else. She's timeless and that's her strength. He isn't, and that's his weakness."

For someone who had been slow to begin, he'd made a strong start. I went on to the next picture, a low aerial view of some half-above-ground homes in Colorado, with Pike's Peak taking up the background.

"Wind," he said after awhile. "Rustling. The air is colder than usual for the season. No birds singing. There's a far away machine sound; no one could identify it even if they could hear it. They're all dug in, hiding, and they don't make a sound."

He barely hesitated on the third picture, a repro of a Magritte, a man with an apple obscuring his face. "He's trying to talk but the fruit muffles him. All that comes out are these 'mmf-mmf' sounds."

The Magritte was the real breaker; he went quickly through the other nine pictures. By the time he finished, he was agitated and antsy, ready either to get started or beg off for the night. I pulled the connections out of the system drawer and untangled with wires.

"Give me your eyes," I said, kneeling down beside him. Obediently, he popped them into my cupped hand. I put the system connections to his empty eyelids and let them crawl in to engage the optic nerves. I had programmed a tonal exercise for him instead of the usual color or pattern building. Judging from the way he sagged on the mat, it seemed to have been the right choice.

I took half a minute to examine his eyes. They were almost brand new and well taken care of, which was a good sign. I put them in the lefthand compartment of the solution jar, breathed myself into near-trance and then popped out my own eyes.

I had intended to let him feel my presence gradually, to avoid contact-shock but he seemed to have been waiting for me. At the first taste of me, he drew me in with a smoothness born of years of working mind-to-mind with someone else. I hadn't expected him to receive me as easily as he had his former partner. Old responses live long, die hard, and frequently leave a troublesome corpse. But that was normal trouble.

There was no visual. Absolutely no visual at all and that wasn't normal trouble. My mind translated the lack into the dark of eyelessness. The urge to visualize was almost overpowering but I managed to check it. The tonal exercise was still running and that was my next surprise. Most people hear bell-like sounds when you hook them into a tonal. Jord Coor's reaction was something completely new to me.

He heard seagulls. Very musical seagulls—their cries complemented and harmonized the way they never really would have in the outside world. It wasn't at all unpleasant but in the sightless night of his perspective, it was rather spooky. I prodded gently, thinking that perhaps he'd been waiting for a sign from me before he turned on the pictures.

Sea? I asked. Actually, I wasn't sure whether I'd thought sea or see at him.

A secret sea, he answered without disturbing the gulls. I caught undertones of surf, a whispering rhythm and the not-quite-voice of the wind fading in and out. A perfect sound-picture, waiting for someone to add sight.

Do you never visualize? I asked. Carefully. Deadpan outside, deadpan inside.

It's the sound that matters. Or is it just pretty pictures you want, holo matinees? The last word came out more like *hollow* matinees.

It's a matter of what you want, I told him. The cries of the seagulls died away as the exercise came to an end. We let it go. His presence grew stronger, becoming a pressure in the darkness, filling all the space around my own self. New sounds began, all the pleasurable sounds he could

remember, footsteps on a hard surface, people humming, the sharp clang of metal on metal, whispers, whistles, whales. His inner ear had remixed them into a harmoniousness that hadn't been there when he'd first heard them.

Some would say all this is music in itself, he said. But it isn't. It needs translation. Interpretation.

A tumble of conventional music drowned out the sounds. Shreds and snatches of various things, including old Coor and Lam compositions passed through me, as though he were trying to find the frequency at which I'd vibrate.

I felt for his Emotional Index. He was in a sort of performance mode. I let him go on throwing music while I did a gradual spread, sliding around him and into his terrain. It was exceedingly strange without visuals, but not unpleasant. Texture began to mix with sound and I had a sudden, vivid physical impression of him standing with his eyes closed, listening. What he was listening for I couldn't quite tell—the music within that would be sparked by the sounds without, or perhaps the elusive music of the subconscious spheres. I couldn't even make out whether this was a memory of something he'd done or the image he held of himself in the act of composing. His mind was stew, everything melting into and flavoring everything else, much more so than I'd found in many of my other clients. Stew is a wonderful thing, free of the over-compartmentalization and learned behavior that can (and does) cripple more than one artist. But stew could be too thick and formless, a mass in which ideas lost definition and coherence and ultimately dissolved, leaving behind only a hint of what they might have once been, just old seasonings boiled out and gone dead. Jord Coor was nowhere near this state, much to my relief.

I kept coming across abrupt, intense concepts and ideas sticking up like barbs—barbs and bait combined. The temptation to supply the missing visual element was nearly overwhelming. Trying to move around the barbs rather than directly into them was impossible; I'd come to depend on visualization the same way I'd depended on my physical sight. I sank down deeper into his terrain, careful not to probe too hard, looking for some sign of suppression.

It was like sinking blindfolded into a sensory stimulation tank. Very sensual man, this Jord Coor. The undertones said he'd just never been terribly taken by the visual experience. He was not an habitual admirer of sunsets or scenery, his earlier bit of showing me the Massachusetts countryside notwithstanding. Most of his concentration had always been on

the auditory and, after that, the tactile.

He answered my question before I asked it. *Revien. He liked pictures. Always Revien. He supplied the pictures, if that's what you're looking for.*

I was still troubled. There should have been pictorial memories stashed about here and there, pictures of Revien's pictures, but I couldn't find them. Either Jord had buried them that deep or—highly unlikely, I thought — Revien Lam had taken them with him in an act of mindwipe. (And if so, had the mindwipe been forcible—or submitted to? Or, even more disturbingly, had Jord forced them on his partner? Expulsion? It was almost too much to think about.)

I went deeper into his sensory terrain. Not much effort on my part now; he was drawing me down in a movement that felt much like an embrace. The sensations became more intense, taking on a sort of insistence. Sensory offerings, all fragments wanting completion. I began to get that besieged feeling I always got when a client was trying too hard.

Easy, I told him.

Mild wave of surprise from him. But it's always this way.

You're coming and going in all directions. Do you have a focus?

His mind immediately went to Revien Lam. I felt it rather than saw it, but there was no doubt as to whom he was thinking of. A memory of what it had been to share his presence, intense but dreamlike, something that might have happened only in his own imagination. And now a sensation of stretching out, reaching across a distance that might have been the span of a table or the emptiness of a universe, reaching for con

fall

fall

falling, plummeting down a long tunnel and nothing nothing nothing
nothing

tact.

In the distortion of mind-time, it was over before it had begun. I might

have lost consciousness. It seemed that way. I found myself at rest far above the terrain I'd been delving, in the upper, superficial layers of his sense-memory. His energy level was markedly diminished.

Always, he said. Always like that. Without him.

I reached down into him again but his mind was drifting now. It was like pushing into layer after layer of silk streamers floating in mid-air, and about as substantial. I could receive no clear impression of anything except fatigue. Quitting time.

Just before I withdrew, it came to me, a wisp from a wisp, an actual visual that lasted for half a thought-beat, if that long.

Revien Lam, at last and of course. With a wire winding out from under one eyelid like the trail of a dark tear.

* * * *

Jord Coor was more than happy to have me leave him alone. I wheeled my equipment down to the big, emptyish guest room (taking the ramps instead of that box of an elevator) and plugged into the long-term eidetic fixer. Reviewing a session so quickly—or rather, reliving it—isn't always the wisest thing to do in terms of wear and tear on the psyche, but I had to study this one.

It didn't take long for hindsight to kick in and show me what had been wrong with the whole mission in the first place. He had drawn me in so quickly on first contact that I hadn't consciously noticed—there had been no personality/identity barriers to pass through, not even so much as a mild mental fence.

Why hadn't I noticed, I wondered. Had I just assumed they'd been there the way they were in every other mind?

My professional reflexes spoke up, maddeningly in the voice of Nelson Nelson.

Think about it, Allie. Those barriers would have proved an inconvenience to him and Lam. My brain helpfully provided the image of NN's office, picturing him in recline behind his desk. I began to get a psychosomatic itch. Gold lamé. And maybe that's your key, Deadpan. Help him build up his barriers again—help him by helping him resist

your help.

I'd never gone mind-to-mind with the old fox so it was rather unsettling (and infuriating) to find I'd given him a position in my brain as a persona for self-dialog.

Which just goes to show you, he/I went on, that the most affecting contact isn't always mind-to-mind, is it, kid?

I disengaged in a hurry, itching to get away from him.

* * * *

I let a day go by before the next session, hoping the breathing space would allow us both to regroup. But when we hooked in again, it was more of the same, more stew, more chaos, that long reach toward something followed by the fall and the weightlessness, drifty mind-state of exhausted semi-consciousness, or quasi-consciousness, or something.

"The blank spot," lord said after we unhooked. He was lying on the mat in the studio, blinking at the ceiling. "The place where I used to compose. Nothing there any more."

I had no intention of accepting that, but after three more sessions, I began to think I was licked. It was astounding just how little information I was getting from him, mental stew notwithstanding. Most people's minds teem with associations, memories, and all the rest of the mental furniture and decoration that accrues during a lifetime. His seemed to be all put away or suppressed—I could receive only-the briefest of impressions concerning episodes in his past that didn't involve Revien Lam. Did he really expect me to believe that for ten years there had been nothing in his life but composing with his partner? In another few sessions, he might have convinced us both. Except that would have meant Big Obsession and there was none of that unmistakable, dangerous flavor in his mind.

Still, the only visual I could get from him was that same image of Revien Lam. Sometimes it was as static as the flat pictures I had showed him for *What Do You Hear?* Other times it was alive, the movements barely discernible, dreamlike but still there.

It was that lone visual that gave me the idea to try what I did. Nelson Nelson would have advised against it and five days before, I wouldn't have considered it myself. But we were falling into a feedback loop. If I could not

shift him away from the idea of Revien Lam as a missing part of himself, then perhaps Lam—the Lam in his mind—could serve to trigger new reactions.

“Just one eye this time,” I said, when we began the fifth session.

He looked up at me from the mat. That studied expressionlessness left his face like a mask melting away, leaving behind naked panic.

“Why?” His voice seemed to crackle.

“It could be helpful to use a method you’re accustomed to.”

He almost flinched from the wire I offered him and for a moment I thought he would refuse. Then he took the connection, removed his eye himself, and held it out to me.

I’d known this would be a very difficult type of session but even so, I wasn’t prepared for the bizarreness of it. It was something like being awake and asleep at the same time, only much more so. More like being only partially in existence. I had to adjust my concentration radically and I wasn’t sure that I hadn’t asked too much of my mind. I might not have managed at all if it hadn’t been for Jord Coor himself.

He fell easily into our configuration, his mind coming alive—*really* coming alive. He had no problem at all with the mix of textures. Mind and real world spilled over into each other for him, each one feeding the other. Now he could generate visuals, picking up little bits from his right eye. I saw myself as he saw me, a sort of professional mechanism sitting in a chair, as composed as could be. The visual of Revien Lam oozed over into the real world and shimmered in and out of being around me, a cross between an hallucination and a ghost. Sometimes it faded out of existence on its own; sometimes Coor blotted it out. But the feel of him was always there— or rather, the feel that was the lack of him.

There was never any point of actual stability or equilibrium; he teetered back and forth between perceiving the outside world and then the inside of his mind as dominant. The remaining eye renamed occasionally with waking dreams cannibalized from actual visual and the mind. A keyboard that seemed to be a hybrid of the piano and the synthesizer spread out before us, an hallucinatory horizon. The keys sank as ghost hands danced on them. I couldn’t tell whose hands they were; the music itself was mostly inaudible.

Something new? I asked.

You can't hear it, either? The right eye fixed on me momentarily. *I think it might be something Revien and I were working on before we . . . went.*

Can you turn up the volume?

But the keyboard was already gone. There was a sensation of movement forward, acceleration, and then the real world paled. An image of Jord Coor appeared with his back to me, walking away.

Jord?

He paused and turned toward me slightly.

Where are we going?

The corner of his mouth twitched so realistically I almost forgot I was seeing a mental image. Very briefly, I had a glimpse of his face in the outer world, duplicating the movement.

Jord?

He began walking again. I traveled along in his wake, undecided as to whether I wanted to catch up with him. He kept glancing over his shoulder at me, always the left shoulder, his eye hard and too bright,. We were moving through a landscape that I couldn't quite make out, except that it felt bleak and barren, a wasteland or badland, an image out of some old dream.

Eventually, I felt us descending. The landscape darkened and rose up canyonlike. No stew here; everything was locked away behind rock. Nothing grew here. You could wander around in it for the rest of your life with empty hands.

The landscape leveled off after awhile and I could discern a lighter area ahead. The end of the wasteland, I thought. So basic and literal. I should have expected it in this man.

I was covering my bemusement at this when I realized the man himself was gone—or at least, his mental image of himself was missing, though a good portion of his concentration remained, urging me forward. I didn't like the feel of it—no words, nothing like a mental signal, just an

urging that was not quite a push. But I went. There was no firm reason to pull back yet and I was curious. The undertones barely registered, as though he had managed to vanish and remain at the same time.

Abruptly, I was standing at the edge of an abyss. I waited. Light was coming up from somewhere.

Jord?

Far away, I caught a slight movement. Jord Coor and I faced each other across the chasm. His head was a blur. I looked around, trying to find some way to reach him.

Then the light grew brighter and I saw he was walking toward me on empty air.

No, not air; a bridge that formed itself under him with each step. Lunatic bridge.

Halfway across, he stopped. There was a long, frozen moment when nothing happened and it seemed as though nothing would, ever again. I leaned forward and saw him clearly for the first time. The right side of his body was blank.

With no more thought than anyone would have given to an act of blind instinct, he yanked me to him.

It would have taken a lot more magnetism than he had to eat me alive but it was still a bumpy experience. Rather than pull back against him, I rushed down, through and out the other side. His realized half brushed me like tentacles, not quick enough to latch on and incorporate me. Disappointment followed in cold waves as I kept moving, back up the wire to break the link.

* * * *

“I *am* sorry,” he said for the fourth or fifth time.

“It’s all right,” I told him while I puttered around with the system. I still felt off-balance, with a psychosomatic brown-out in my right eye. It hadn’t really been such a close call; subconsciously, I’d probably been prepared for an attempt at absorption. Still, it’s rattling to have someone try to merge with you, change you into a stranger. “You didn’t hurt me.”

Jord fisted his left eye in a childlike way. “I knew you weren’t Revien, I really did. I knew it the whole time, but I was going to take you anyway.” He drew his legs up and rested his chin on his knees. “I guess I’ve been incomplete for so long, I’ll take anyone.” No more of that careful expressionlessness now; all masks were off for good. He looked forlorn. I’d seen that look before, on clients who had just realized how alone they really are in their own heads.

“He’s got it, you know,” he said. “Revien. He’s got the other half of me. He *is* the other half of me now.”

We do indeed adore our delusions, I thought as I tested the connection he’d used. I didn’t tell him he was mistaken. I could have talked at him for the rest of the day and most of the night and maybe have made him admit he might possibly be mistaken, that he’d only atrophied and he really was complete if unused to working alone. And then the next time we hooked in, it would be the same thing all over again. I was going to have to demonstrate it to him—or rather, get him to demonstrate it to himself.

But the only way I could do that was to get a different perspective on him and the old partnership —and that was something only Revien Lam could give me.

* * * *

Nelson Nelson was grumpy about it. Or perhaps he was just irritated at having to interrupt his viewing of the Bolshoi to take my call. It amazed me that anyone could watch *Swan Lake* and *Coppelia* so often without tiring. Seeing him through his ceiling holo was unsettling; it felt like I was going to drop down on him and mash him into his itchy gold lamé.

“Sure I can find Revien Lam for you. It’ll take a little while so you might want to take that time to work with your client a little more.”

“NN, the man tried to eat me. He’s close to pathological in his insistence that Revien Lam either has half of his ability or *is* half of his ability. I’ve got to feel things from Lam’s point of view.”

“Feel *what* things?”

“The partnership. As it was. All I can get from Coor is an absence of something and he tried to fill the absence with me.”

“You really think that’s going to help you?”

“It’s more information than I can get from Coor and that’s *got* to be helpful.”

NN actually harrumphed. “Seems to me any pathosfinder worth her neurons ought to be able to probe someone skillfully enough to get all the information she needs.”

I teetered on the edge of a tirade about having to work with a client who sincerely believed a good portion of himself was actually somebody else. Apparently no one had ever tried to eat NN. Who would have wanted to actually *be* that old fox, anyway? “Any pathosfinder worth her neurons also knows when to back off from her client and find her data elsewhere,” I said evenly. “My man’s on the defensive. The only way I can reach him effectively—and with minimal trauma—is to show him I’ve got the information he’s hiding from himself. And the only way I can get it is from Revien Lam.”

We stared at each other through our respective screens. To be fair, I think I had the upper hand, literally—it’s hard to stare someone down when you’re lying flat on your back.

“I’ll have Lam’s location for you in a couple of hours. What are you going to tell Coor?”

“I’ll think of something. The truth is always good,” I said and switched off before he could object.

Actually, I had no intention of telling Coor the truth, or at least not the whole truth. A lie would have been pointless and cruel, since he’d have felt Lam’s impression when we hooked in again. I ended up telling him I was giving us both a couple days’ thinking space. He surprised me by being disappointed and apprehensive rather than relieved. It wasn’t until I was on my way to upstate New York that I realized he’d just gotten used to having me around. Sometimes it doesn’t do a lonely person any good to keep him company.

* * * *

It wasn’t so surprising that Revien Lam had chosen to alight in an area not terribly far from his ex-collaborator. But while lord Coor was living completely alone in an underground enclosure, Lam had opted for the Park.

I'd heard of the Park, though I'd never been there before. It was a sort of continuously running circus/picnic/freakshow/camp for those who didn't want the party to end. The Park population, which varied from week to week, roamed freely over a few hundred acres of weather-shielded countryside, eating, sleeping and playing as the spirit moved them. There were no clocks, no calendars and few rules. Violence was punishable by immediate, permanent expulsion but other than that, the Park people did as they pleased. It was probably the best way to lose all touch with reality short of buying a psychosis. A lot of people tried to lose themselves in the Park for just that reason. Some could and some couldn't; the rest, the hard-core Park People, would have been lost anywhere. The Park just kept them from cluttering up the rest of the world.

I wondered what Revien Lam's motivation had been for signing himself into the land of silk and funny. Whatever it was, I was willing to bet it had something to do with his wanting contact with a lot of people on a superficial level. Ten years of extreme intimacy was the sort of thing that could give a person a real appreciation for the superficial.

My first glimpse of the Park was shortly after dawn from the air, in the backseat of a flyer while the pilot snored behind the stick. Tents and pavilions dotted the rolling green landscape while people streamed among and around them like small currents of confetti. The Park wasn't an easy place to find someone but NN's office had contacted a guide for me, to help me find Revien Lam. I wondered, though, how I was supposed to find the guide.

The pilot snored through the landing, leaving me to unload my own equipment at the front gates of the Park. People accumulated along the flimsy fence to watch me, drifting over like colorful bits of cloth blown by an idle wind. It was an amazingly quiet audience—no chatter, no laughter, hardly a whisper. The faces, most of them dyed or polished or both, weren't exactly solemn. A few of them looked apprehensive, some even envious (of what, I wondered). Most of them had what I could already identify as a 'Park Look', as distinct as the sound of a regional accent in a voice. Had Revien Lam traded in his likeness to Jord Coor for a facial uniform?

I wheeled my equipment up to an ornate little kiosk at the entrance. There was no one inside, no bell to ring for service and no indication that I should either wait for someone to take charge of me or just go in myself. I looked left and right at my audience lining the fence. They stared back, unmoved. I thought of cows. Finally, a man with a stiff fringe of apple-red hair detached himself from the watchers on my right and ambled over. He almost stopped, his gold starburst eyes looking me and my equipment over

critically. Somehow, I failed to measure up as anything sufficiently interesting to make him stop.

“Excuse me,” I called after him.

He turned in slow motion without actually ceasing to wander away.

“How do I go about finding someone in here?”

His expression said I was sixteen different kinds of fools. “You look around.” He moved into a loose gaggle of men and women on their way to a tall green tent.

No one else along the fence showed any inclination to come forward and offer any hints, suggestions, or even idle conversation. I moved my equipment further inside the Park, trying not to feel overly conspicuous. A laughing group of people playing some kind of game with big balloons materialized out of nowhere and surrounded me, allowing me to be part of their playing field briefly before they skipped away, shedding one of their balloons as they went. It bounced gently at my feet and I picked it up.

“That was an invitation,” said a female voice behind me. I turned around.

You see it all, eventually; all the ways people play with their bodies. Dye-jobs, bleach-jobs, certain kinds of transplants, alterations that border on mutilation. You see people displaying just about anything of themselves, but this was something that could have been an image straight out of someone’s troubled brain, come down the wires of a mind pi ay system and into the outer world to be made flesh. At least, sort of.

She let me stare at her. From a distance, I might have thought she was wearing a very close-fitting helmet that ended a few inches above her eyebrows, with some long strands of hair hanging out from underneath. But up close, it was too easy to see that her skull was made of glass.

Well, not real glass, of course, but something transparent. It was nauseating and fascinating all at once. There are certain kinds of minds I refuse to enter and I was fairly sure this was one of them.

“I was a pathosfinder once,” she said.

Surprise number two. “You must be my guide.” It would be hard not to choke NN for this when I saw him again.

“I’d have known you were a pathosfinder anyway. Just by that look on your face. All pathosfinders get that look. Even the ones named Deadpan Allie.”

“What look is that?”

“Like you’re trying to see through solid objects.” She caressed her transparent skull with her fingers. “Watch out. This is what you’re headed for.”

I wondered if she were punning.

“It’s what you’re really after, you know. Letting everyone dip into your head, dipping into everyone else’s. What makes you think anyone’ll have need or desire for you in here?”

“I thought my office explained.”

She put her hands in the pockets of her loose, wrinkled pants. “They did.”

I could have sworn her brain changed color, flushed. “Then you do know where I can find Revien Lam.”

“In a way. Once we get to him, you’ll have to figure out how to find him on your own.”

I nodded, thinking she must have been a pretty lousy pathosfinder.

Her lips stretched in a hard smile. “Only because of the telepathy. Mindplaying activated it, since you didn’t ask.” She patted her skull again delicately, as though she were smoothing her hair. “I’m used to receiving thoughts. It’s made me a different person. Many different people.” Her right lobe swelled slightly. “Do you know how many people you are? Or have you stopped counting?” She frowned. “Oh. Haven’t started yet. Well. Never mind. I’ll take you to Revien Lam. He’s one of the tent people. It’s a long walk.”

An hour later, I knew for certain she hadn’t been gassing when she’d said that. I plodded after her, struggling with my system, and reading Emotional Indices at random (including some of the balloonatics, who reappeared twice more to make an invitation). There were a lot of anxious people in the Park, from what I could tell just by sight. It was catching; I

could feel it beginning to chew at me around the edges. Glass-Skull (I realized belatedly she'd never told me her name) seemed unaffected by it, for all of her telepathy. She marched through the groups lounging on the grass or milling around aimlessly or spilling in and out of the carnival-colored tents which apparently dispensed food, toys, and other kinds of amusements, just for the asking. The daily charge for living in the Park had to be something past phenomenal.

My guide didn't slow down until we reached the shore of a small lake in the center of a lightly wooded area. On the other side, I saw a collection of the usual multi-colored tents with the standard multi-colored people passing in and out of them in the eternal quest for diversion. Glass-Skull gazed at them across the quiet water while I shifted from one tired foot to the other.

"Would you like me to tell you what you're thinking?" she asked without looking at me.

I shrugged.

She laughed and led me along a dirt path around the pond, pausing again at the outskirts of the tent grouping.

"Which one is he in?" I asked, since she didn't seem disposed to go any farther.

"The largest one," she said, pointing to a red tent trimmed with gold braid and tassels. "It's a sort of dormitory, so you won't have any privacy. Except, of course, in your own mind. A luxury some of us wouldn't be able to stand even if we were capable of having it." She put her hand on my arm as I was about to wheel my equipment forward. The contact was electric; I felt my mind jump in response. Being touched by a telepath is always a jolt.

"You can go on by yourself. Some can't." She let go and stepped back, and I was relieved to have her pressure fade from my brain.

The tent wasn't exactly crowded but there was an aroma of healthy bodies, or a healthy aroma of bodies, that made the air heavy and close. It reminded me less of a dormitory than it did of some kind of ward, one abandoned by its keepers. I left my equipment just inside the entrance and took a walk around, stepping over the people strewn about. Two men and a woman invited me to join what seemed to be a complicated game of marbles (played, I noticed undelightedly, with biogem eyes) and burst into high laughter when I declined. A baby-faced woman with wiry, metallic hair

and silver eyes pressed an orange into my hand. I dropped it into my pocket and maneuvered between a man who was tattooing something upside-down on his naked chest and the woman who was dictating it to him.

I knew him immediately. His natural skin tone was just beginning to return from the bleaching, but his flesh still looked tight and stretched, too delicate for exposure to direct sunlight. He was lying on a scatter of pillows as though he'd been tossed there, head thrown back and eyes closed, a funny little smile on his mouth. I squatted down next to him.

"Revien Lam?" I had to say his name twice before he raised his head slowly and looked at me.

My first thought was that he'd had a stroke. The two sides of his face seemed to have little to do with each other. Each eye perceived me independently, traveling over my face in separate patterns. Then he covered his right eye and said, "Do you know me?" The words came out with effort—*Do. You. Know. Me.*

"Not exactly. I know Jord Coor."

"Ah." He covered his left eye, surveyed me briefly with the right, and then went back to looking at me with his left again. And then I knew. I moved up on his left side and put my lips close to his ear.

"When did you have it cut?"

"*Cut.*" His mouth worked silently. I'd have to be more specific.

"When did you have your corpus callosum severed?"

"Cut. Cut. Three months after Jord cut. After we cut ourselves apart." The words came a little easier now, as though he were getting back into the practice of speaking out loud. His head turned slightly and the sapphire eye glittered at me. "You are?"

"I'm a pathosfinder working for Jord Coor."

He turned his head all the way toward me and looked at me with his right eye again. "Music," he said, and began humming.

"You've had your visual fields rechanneled, too, haven't you?"

He went back to the left eye. "Completely divided. Right up the

middle. What the hell, it's company."

"Company?" I had a queasy feeling I knew what he meant.

"Company. Not so lonely in here with the two halves. See, completely divided but not so completely. One final cord, one spinal cord still. I can feel each other."

"Is there someplace we can go to talk?" He waved one hand clumsily. "I live here. Nobody cares."

"I'd like to delve you, if you'd give permission."

"Permission." He nodded. "But can't go outside— skin. After dark, all right. But really, nobody cares in here."

"Would you be willing to hook in with me?"

He frowned and went to his right eye. "Repeat?" He must have been one of those people whose verbal and comprehension skills were spread over both hemispheres like birdshot. "Would you be willing to hook into my system with me—" I pointed to it over by the tent entrance. "Meet me mind-to-mind."

Back to the left eye. "Which mind did you want to meet?"

"Either. Both, if possible."

That funny little smile again. It was a composite smile from two different faces. "Do our best. Haven't been delved since the split, never before without Jord, eye to eye. To eye."

As it were. I went to get my system.

* * * *

Nobody paid much attention to me while I set things up, including Revien Lam. He went back to daydreaming or dozing or whatever it was he did with his hemispheres. As soon as I was ready to go, however, I found myself with a sudden dilemma. Did I hook in with him one eye at a time or both together? I considered asking him and then decided not to. Depending on which hemisphere took the question, the answer might be different. I went for the left eye first, removing it for him and plugging him into the same tonal exercise I'd used on Coor.

I put my hands up to my own eyes and paused. Now, what about me? Should I use both eyes or just one—and if only one, *which* one? I ended up removing both. Since I had nearly no idea of what I was going to find in there, it was probably best to go at it with all my concentration.

The tones translated to this half of his brain as a human voice singing syllables. His own voice, interestingly enough. The visualization was weak and fuzzy but I could make out the image of himself as a creature with a great big head and a negligible body. The head was stretched and distorted at the top, too wide, forcing the eyes to look in two different directions. The left eye was bigger than the right.

It got so lonely, he said, and the words were completely clear, almost firm enough to be tangible. *I never knew it could be that lonely. A peculiar thing. The nature of attachment and disconnection.* The top of his head stretched wider. *One and one equal one, sooner or later. Couldn't let that happen, we knew it. Merge into one person and we'd never sort him from me. But so lonely. Now I feel the ghost of his essence—or the essence of his ghost.*

I cast around some but I couldn't feel it in all the fuzzy vagueness.

Other side, he said.

I unplugged just long enough to switch the connection to his right eye and give that side a minute with the tonal. Then I went back down the wires.

It really was like entering a different mind. The personality barrier here was thicker and similar to, but not the same as, the one I'd gone through when he'd been hooked in through his left eye.

The moment I pushed through, I heard them-seagulls. The same ones, singing the tones. I lost my equilibrium and found myself sprawled belly down on sand, the damp grains rough against me. The sunlight was nearly blinding. A very well realized wave licked at me.

Revien?

The tonal faded away and the beach went with it. I pulled myself together just as the abyss formed. Lam had me floating disembodied over it, like a dream observer.

Whose abyss is this? I asked the empty air.

Ours, came the answer from below me.

The image was absurdist, impossible. A chasm could not have just one side or a bridge that connected the side with itself. My inner eyes crossed, uncrossed, crossed again; then the visual steadied down, translating into a Moebius strip. A composite of Coor and Lam was standing on it.

This is where I live now, the composite said, touching Coor's dark hair on the left side and pressing Lam's cheek on the right. *Hidden away like the bastard child I am. I'm even still composing music, but he can't get at it.* Just beyond the composite, a pale image of Revien Lam shimmered in and out of existence; Lam's awareness leaking through from the other side via the spinal cord connection. (Final cord, he'd called it at first, I remembered.)

Why can't he get at the music? I asked.

Other side. Have to send it to the other side for it to come out.

But if Coor's composing ability is really here, you should be able to express music using this side alone.

Not outwardly. The ability to express is not what he left here. Only the ability to compose.

And your own ability to compose? Is that here, too? There was no answer. *Lam's ability*, I clarified.

Yes.

Then you're not two opposite halves rejoined. You're the same side, superimposed. You're congruent, not complemented.

The composite wavered. *Coor is the complement to Lam. The congruent is complement.*

No, I said reasonably. *If you were hooked in through opposite eyes*—I stopped. I'd forgotten that in a normal, undivided brain, the optic nerves fed equally into both hemispheres, not right into right and left into left, the way they did in Lam's mutilated organ. The notion that maybe Coor wasn't

deluded about Lam having a portion of himself began to creep up on me and I wondered belatedly what would have happened if I'd hooked into Coor through his right eye rather than his composing eye.

I was moving forward to examine the composite more closely when the visual cracked like a whip. For something like an eternity or thought-beat, everything was jumbled and whirling. Then it all came back into ultra-sharp focus and I was standing on the edge of the abyss, where I'd been in Jord Coor's mind. No more Moebius strip—there was a real bridge across the chasm with three figures on it: the composite, Revien Lam and Jord Coor. The real Jord Coor, blank on the right side, no delusory presence. He was right there with us, in the Park, in the tent, in Revien Lam's mind. Somehow, for whatever reason, he'd tracked me down and sneaked up on me again.

Withdrawal and disconnection would take too long. I rushed toward them, but even as I did, it was already happening. They each had hold of the composite and were pulling at it, stretching it like heat-softened rubber. The whole visual shuddered and bucked, pushing me back away from the bridge.

This is between us! Jord said hostilely, and I wasn't sure whom he was talking to.

You have no right! Lam hurled repulsion at him and somehow managed to draw him closer. *Mine now! Mine!*

You stole it!

You forced me to take it! You gave it up willingly!

I strained toward the bridge and they almost merged in their joint effort to knock me away. I backed off quickly.

You're part of me now, whether you wanted it or not, whether I wanted it or not! Lam said.

I have a right to be whole!

The composite between them was becoming a shapeless blob.

You refused to be whole. You gave away, Lam said.

Not gave. You just couldn't give back. You sucked it all without giving in return!

You wanted to be part of me, the better to love yourself!

Then that's how it is, Jord said. We've both been after the same thing all along—you want me and I want me.

The composite suddenly swelled and enveloped them. A million images spewed from the bridge, scenes from their respective pasts, now juxtaposed, double exposures. I pulled back even further. There was just one figure on the bridge now; its body kept shimmering and changing. Sometimes it was all Coor, then all Lam, then various mixtures of the two, Lam dominant, Coor dominant, both equal. Shimmer, melt, change.

I withdrew, put my eyes back in and without looking at the two limp bodies still hooked into my system, went outside and vomited into the neat, short, emerald grass.

* * * *

"I did warn you," Glass-Skull said. She wiped my face with a damp rag. "You can go on by yourself. Some can't. Even so, how many different people are you?"

I looked up at her from where I was sitting, still trying to pull myself together enough to call NN and ask him if this meant my license had just been voided.

She smiled. "Go ahead, think about it. A little bit of one mind here, a little of another there . . ."

I had an intense, swift impression of a whole world of people hooking in with each other, unhooking, changing partners to hook in again, myself among them, and all the little bits left behind, the little bits carried away in exchange, the things that stay with you once you've touched another mind with your own.

"Transformed," Glass-Skull said. "Modified. You're polluted, stained, dyed, altered. And you will never be the same." She rubbed her head gently. "This is what you're heading for." I swear I saw her brain writhe in its transparent case.

I leaned forward and vomited again.

NN visited me every day in the hospital. He always showed up at mealtimes, relentlessly cheerful, applying the nutrient patch to my arm himself and chattering away about only the most innocuous things. He didn't bring up what had happened until I reached the point where I could keep down somewhat substantial fluids, but he was very brisk and all business when he did. I was about to have my noontime frappe when he lit on the edge of my bed and said, "You know, in a way, it's always been true that we're made of all the lives we've ever touched."

Nausea rose in me and I set the frappe aside. "Thanks. You've made my day."

"Now, now, Allie." NN picked up the tumbler and stirred the contents with the straw. "Just what is it about that idea that you find so revolting? Is it really so bad?"

"Every time a mindplayer pushes through those barriers of personality and identity, something is weakened in both the mindplayer and the client. We're losing the individual; we're getting homogenized. Someday, everyone will be everyone else. It'll be like *that*." I pointed at the frappe and burped.

"If you play that back, you'll realize how hysterical it sounds. Do you really feel like you're losing yourself? You're as Allie as you ever were. Maybe not so Deadpan at the moment, but we'll make allowances for trauma, and that's all it is, you know. You saw something bizarre happen to a couple of weak people and you were in mind-to-mind contact with them when it happened. Watching that kind of unnatural act—being forced to take part in it, even—that would put anyone off their feed." He tried to offer me the frappe and I pushed it away, burping again.

"*Allie*. Think straight for a minute. As a personal favor to me. When Coor and Lam merged, did they try to incorporate you?"

"Coor tried to eat me once, you know that."

"Ah, but when he got hold of Lam, did he make a grab at you?"

"No."

"Well, that's it, then."

“Yah, that’s it. I’m already part of both of them. And vice versa.”

“*Not* the same.” NN moved closer to me, edging the frappe up to my mouth. “Look, maybe it’s not pretty, but it’s what they really wanted. Like the Lady Bugs. They tried to run from it and they couldn’t. Face it—some people have to be part of somebody else. Maybe they’ve always had to be each other and you really had nothing to do with it.”

I remembered the resemblance between them, present before they’d even met. “Made for each other,” I muttered.

“Coor and Lam, sure.” NN tapped my lips with the straw.

Coor and Lam. Coor . . . and Lam? Unbidden, it popped into my head. Coor and Lam. Coeur et L’Ame.

“Heart and Soul,” I said aloud.

“What?” NN frowned. His eyebrows were just beginning to fill in again.

“Nothing. Just an old song from a few hundred years ago.”

“Song is gone but the memory lingers on, eh, Allie?”

“Not exactly.”

“ ‘Not exactly.’ Deadpan goes hysterical, then cryptic. You probably wouldn’t even tell me the truth as to whether you’ve been divorced or not.”

“Sure I’ve been divorced,” I said sourly. “Hundreds of times, from all the clients I’ve ever had.”

“Don’t start that again.”

I opened my mouth to tell him I was divorcing him, too, but he shoved the straw between my lips.

“Suck,” he said, and I did.