

# FOOL TO BELIEVE

*PAT CADIGAN*

Sovay had dyed himself a delicate orange. It wasn't his color. He was sitting nude on a floor mat with his legs folded and his hands resting on the junction of his ankles. Someone had piled pillows between his back and the wall for support—the regular police, probably. Suckers weren't known to be that considerate. His long straight hair, a shade or two darker than his skin, was pushed back from his slack face and there were traces of blood beneath his unfocused jade eyes. A faint whistling sound came from between his parted lips every time he exhaled.

I squatted in front of him and pulled gently at his lower eyelids. A thin mixture of blood and tears spilled onto my thumbs. Poor Sovay. They hadn't been any too gentle with him. There was no sign of a struggle in the living room but Sovay and his wife Rowan still didn't bother with furniture. It was the same loose scattering of pillows and mats I vaguely remembered from a month ago, with indirect wall-well lighting. It was like being in a tomb. Or maybe a womb.

Rowan's voice came to me from the hallway. "In there. Through that door." I stood up and moved aside as three paramedics came in with a stretcher.

"Dirty shame," said the chief paramed, kneeling down in front of Sovay with a vitals kit. The other two unfolded the stretcher in silence, not bothering with any facial expressions. "You the Brain Police, ma'am?"

I nodded, showing him the ID on my belt. He squinted at it briefly.

"Heya, Mersine. Regular police seen him yet?"

"Yah. He's all yours."

The paramed took Sovay's blood pressure with a Quik-Kuff. "Any idea who did it?"

"I just got here myself."

"Dirty shame. **Dirty** shame." The paramed's bald, blue-tinted head wagged from side to side. "Used to be that was the one thing they couldn't take from you. And they're getting so **bold**."

I looked across the room at Rowan. She had pulled a hookah out of the wall and was sucking contemplatively on the mouthpiece. Then she moved her head, and in the lousy light, I could see the wet streak running down her face from under her eye. As I watched, the skin there turned slightly red, as if her tears contained some irritant that even she was sensitive to. It would have figured, I thought, and turned back just in time to see the paramed extract Sovay's eyes. I hadn't needed to see that just then. More tears and blood dribbled down Sovay's face as the paramed shut down the optic nerve connections.

"Mighty nice biogems," he said, pausing to examine the eyes. "Brand-new, too. He didn't get much use out of them." He slipped them into a jar in the kit, where they stared like unclaimed marbles. "**Dirty shame**. I mean, those **suckers**." He stopped up Sovay's ears and gave him an an intravenous pop. "In through the optic nerve like a vacuum cleaner, suck you dry." He lifted Sovay's arm to test his pliability and then maneuvered him into a supine position so the other parameds could slip the stretcher under him. "They musta wanted him pretty bad to risk coming in after him this way." His brow wrinkled nearly to his bald crown.

I looked over at Rowan again. She seemed not to have heard. The perfumed smoke from the hookah had drifted across the room; it smelled appetizing but not too dopey.

"Who was he?" said the paramed. "I mean, who did he used to be?"

"His name was Sovay. He was an actor."

"Oh." The paramed leaned close. "He musta been some hot up-and-comer, but personally, I never hearda him." He waved at his two assistants and they took Sovay out.

"Did you want to see his studio," Rowan said after a long moment of silence. She was studying the pipe mouthpiece as if it were something completely new. "They broke in there, too, but there wasn't anything to take. Just mirrored walls and carpeting. Sovay kept it locked because he said it shut his vibrations in and other people's out." She took another drag on the pipe and blew the smoke toward the ceiling. "Does that make

sense if you're the Brain Police?"

Dealing with the family is something you never quite get used to, even under much less complicated circumstances. Of course, it wasn't that complicated for Rowan; she didn't know me and I wasn't going to tell her who I'd been once. It made me feel a bit unsavory, as if I had some further motive beyond preserving the confidentiality of the investigation that I didn't even know about.

"I don't need to see his studio, not with the regular police checking it out." I hesitated. "When they're done, I'll give you a lift to the hospital, if you like."

She shook her head. "There wouldn't be much point in that." Her gaze went to the mat where he'd been, as if she were just now noticing he was gone. "Do you want coffee? All I have are cubes. They're good, though." She blinked several times in that dazed way people do when they find themselves in the middle of a catastrophe and aren't sure of the etiquette. But her movements were unhesitating as she shut off the hookah and put it away.

In appearance, she still matched the minor memory I had of her, small, compact, a shade on the plump side and looking more so in a pouch suit. Unlike Sovay, she wasn't much for dyejobs or other flash. Her skin was untouched, and so was her ripply shoulder-length brown hair. Her only affectation was the set of pearlized brown biogem eyes that gave her round face an odd blind look.

Surprisingly, there was conventional furniture in the kitchen, a table and four chairs. Or maybe that wasn't so surprising—even the most dedicated floor-sitters probably craved a chair now and then. I sat down and Rowan served me mechanically: cup of water, spoon, napkin, jar of cubes.

"How do you take it?"

For a moment I wasn't sure what she meant. "Tan."

"The cubes in the gold wrappers're tan. The white are tan with sugar, the pink are sweet black, the black ones are black." She shrugged and deposited herself in a chair as I peeled a gold-wrapped cube and dropped it into my cup. The water foamed up in an instant boil.

"Why did they do that to him?" she asked. "Take out his eyes, plug his ears?"

"First aid." I stirred down the bubbles in the cup. "Too much sensory input can be adverse for an involuntary mindwipe. The pop was a tactile desensitizer as well as a sedative. It'll keep him out till they get him into quarantine."

"Oh." She piled one hand on the other.

I've always thought murder must be easier in a way. The involuntary mindwipe—mindsuck—is just as gone, except the trappings of a live body remain to confound the survivors. A mindsuck is interred not in a grave but in a special quarantine to allow the development of a new mind and personality. Sometimes the new person is a lot like the old one. Most of the time, however, it's only spottily reminiscent of the person that had been, as though the suck had freed an auxiliary person that had always been there, just waiting for the elimination of the primary personality. There was still a lot of controversy between the behaviorists and the biologists over that and plenty of theories but no clear-cut explanations.

Regardless, the new mind was definitely Somebody Else, a stranger with no ties to the previous inhabitant of the brain. Someone told me once it was a lot easier to accept if you had enough of a mystic bent toward a belief in reincarnation, but I couldn't exactly tell Rowan to take comfort in the study of the Great Wheel of Life.

"Well," she said after a bit. "Have the Brain Police ever recovered any, ah, anyone? From mindsuck?"

A common question. You'd think in the Age of Fast Information there wouldn't be blank spots or misconceptions. You have to tell them the truth, but I hate it, even if lying is worse. "Never intact," I said, and took a sip of coffee. She'd been right, they were good cubes. The damnedest things make an impression on you at the damnedest times. "Most suckers part out minds as quickly as possible. They—" I stopped.

Tell her about a chop shop? Sure—then follow up with a description of how they'd dig out Sovay's self-contained memories with all the finesse of a chimpanzee digging grubs with a pointed stick, working fast because a hot mind wouldn't keep in a jury-rigged hold-box. Any excised memories that could unambiguously identify the mind would be flushed and

whatever remained of his talent sold. There would still be a fair number of associations clinging to it but people who buy from suckers don't fuss about a few phantoms. Nor do they complain if the merchandise is half-mutilated from rushed pruning.

Anything left over after that would be sold, too. It still surprised me that there were lowlifes who would buy sucker leftovers but some people will buy anything. Which meant that there might be someone with Sovay's taste in clothes and someone else with his taste in decor and still someone else with his taste in sex.

—Unless this was a bodysnatch and the suckers had somebody waiting for a whole new personality. Some Very Nice People back in business, under a new name or new management? Counterfeiters making the jump to mindsucking and bodysnatching didn't happen often. Mindsucking was a crime of violence, something counterfeiters normally avoided altogether. But it wasn't unheard of, either. The money's good; people who want a whole new personality pay a lot more than those who just want a persona overlay. Maybe because they think if they throw enough money at it, they can actually get a personality transplant, even though there's no evidence that anybody's ever managed to transplant a personality successfully. No evidence whatsoever. Just ask me.

I realized I was glaring at my coffee cup. "They, uh, they have to. Work quickly, that is," I said lamely, finishing a sentence neither of us cared about anymore.

"I see." Rowan exhaled noisily. "Then it hardly matters whether you catch the mindsuckers or not, does it? I mean, for Sovay or for me. He couldn't be restored even if you found him."

I should have made the parameds give her something for shock, I thought. Seeing to the well-being of the family was really more the province of the regular police; one of them should have been with us but they were probably working shorthanded again. The budget being what it was, I was working short-minded myself.

"No," I said slowly, "perhaps it doesn't matter. Unless we catch them and keep them from doing someone else."

Rowan's mouth twitched. "You'll excuse me if I don't seem to care about anyone but myself at the moment."

"Of course. Is there someone you can stay with?"

"You mean someone to look after the bereaved widow, spoon broth into her mouth, cut up her meat for her, slip her tranquilizers?" The brown pearl eyes slid away from me disinterestedly. "No. I'll manage on my own."

We sat in silence until we heard the regular police coming into the living room.

The regular police had little to tell me. Sovay's attackers hadn't left much in the way of traces. Most likely the B and E had been jobbed out to specialists who had taken off as soon as the suckers were in. The B and E pros seldom stole anything on these runs—too traceable. Burglars don't usually want to turn into accessories to mindsuck. So there we were. The Age of Fast Information meant we could find out we didn't know anything five times faster than we could fifty years ago.

Rowan remained firm in her refusal to go to the hospital so I left her my number and drove back to headquarters. I'm one of those people who prefers driving manually both land and air. It's somewhere between a game and therapy, clears my mind, helps me think better. Traffic was fairly heavy so I had plenty of time to go over things.

Hanging above the river while I waited for the signal to descend and merge into land traffic, I put a Gladney spike in the deck and turned on all eight speakers. Gladney was another mindsuck and this spike was an old one, music composed by his original personality, what they called a first edition.

It was scary how so many artists of various kinds were getting sucked these days. Since the breakthrough in myelin sheath restoration, it had become possible for a brain to stand up to a greater number of complete wipes than the former limit of two. It used to be that a third wipe left a subject at about the level of an acorn squash, only not so long-lived. But now you could have yourself wiped annually—or you could have if government regulations hadn't been tightened. Even with the restrictions, requests for voluntary mindwipe had quadrupled. So had involuntary mindwipe—mindsuck.

My dash buzzer went off to tell me I had the right of descent and I leaned gently on the stick. The fact that Sovay was the victim seemed to

indicate that we weren't done with the events of the previous month.

Retaliation, maybe, for what he'd done at Davy Jones' Locker, except that was pretty extreme for counterfeiters. They were given more to things along the lines of screwing up your credit rating, not crimes of violence. Unless there was something really big at stake.

Maybe Sovay's glancing involvement with Some Very Nice People had drawn someone's attention to him. Sovay had barely obtained a reputation as a promising actor except among hard-core live-theatre aficionados. An esoteric victim, but suckers made it their business to scout out new talent. New talent was a hell of a lot easier to get at and sucker customers liked the idea of acquiring a talent in the semirough, with most of the failure supposedly sanded off. Then they could refine it to suit themselves. Stardom the easy way, and better than a persona overlay. In theory. In practice—

Well. You can warn people about buying from suckers, tell them horror stories about what happens to you when you buy sucked merchandise only to have it go rotten with trauma in a living brain, you can legislate and overlegislate every angle, but you can't make people believe they won't get around the problems of buying something not only out of their aptitudes but unclean and taken by force. The legit Mind Exchange uses a procedure that took anywhere from a few weeks to several months to clean out an ability sold legally and even they couldn't guarantee there wouldn't be some mild phantoms. A few years ago, my brother bought someone's painting talent—he'd always wanted to fill out his arty streak and become a full-fledged portrait painter—and found that every time he picked up a brush, he craved to smell fresh cedar. Last time I'd seen him, he'd had a pocket full of wood chips. Stunk like somebody's antique hope chest.

Well, if someone wanted to sell off a part of the mind as though it were any old heirloom out of the attic, it wasn't my concern even if I couldn't see the virtue of it. Maybe both seller and buyer were better off but so far, no one had made history with secondhand talent. Even so, that was voluntary. No one volunteered to get sucked.

Traffic came to a standstill in Commerce Canyon, so I requested permission to go airborne again. Central Traffic Control took ten minutes to get back to me and tell me I could underfly the crosstown air express at my own risk and liability. I nearly got my hood crumpled but it saved me

an hour.

Salazar was having a chew-and-spit when I arrived at her office. No drugs or surgery for her—she was too proud of her self-control. And none of that edible polyester, either—*Salazar* was a real-food gourmet. Chew-and-spit was her way of dealing with her lust for food versus her belief that obesity was an antisocial act. In a crowded world, she was fond of saying, it is obnoxious to take up more than your share of space. As far as I was concerned, her philosophy was her problem; my quarrel was with how she defined obesity, which was anyone who wasn't thirty pounds underweight, me for certain. To her credit, she'd stopped hinting around about diets and surgical pruning after the first month we worked together and she did manage to keep a professional attitude in the face of my mass that, next to hers, was True Bulk.

Today she had a pocket sandwich. All the time I was telling her about Sovay, she would take a bite of her sandwich, chew it slowly and sensuously enough to make *masticate* a dirty word, and when it was all mashed to paste in her mouth, she'd lean forward and spit the mess into the suckhole in her desk. In spite of the Sally Lazer debacle, I was still one of the few who didn't gag openly at this routine, which was one reason she was tolerant of me. The Sally Lazer debacle itself was another. Everyone else in my department was on a diet or pretending to be.

"Any ideas on who did it?" she asked when I was finished. Her mouth was full.

I shifted position in the overstuffed chair. All of Salazar's office furniture was chubby. To make her feel that much thinner, I supposed. "Some Very Nice People look good for it, if we could find them. Or it might be grandstanding newcomers with something to prove. Or they could be one and the same. The identities tend to get slippery in these cases."

Salazar spat, took a drink of mineral water and spat that into the suckhole, too. For practice, maybe. Her saggy garnet eyes stared at me skeptically. "We've got nothing on Some Very Nice People. What about the grieving widow?" *Bite*.

"She's not an actor so they couldn't have been competitors in the strictest sense, and she has no history of personality disorders or identity



buying or selling. No chance we'd be able to get a search warrant for cause. I didn't mention that possibility to her."

Salazar looked disappointed as she spat and took another bite. "If we could justify search warrants on general principle, we'd probably clear up half the unsolved sucks from the last five years."

That kind of talk always made me uncomfortable. Tempting as it is to a Brain Police officer for the sake of all the victims like Sovay, I didn't like the idea of access-on-demand to someone's memories and I never would.

Salazar never seemed to understand it as an atrocity. Maybe she'd spent too much time in *You Must Remember This*.

"Sovay was a bit smaller than the stuff a really big operator might go for," I went on. "He was just moving into Stage One prominence, where he was classified as a talent to watch. The big operators seem to prefer someone who's just a little more of a brand name but won't be too traceable. Drives the price up. And they never make house calls. Someone big **could** be behind it—whichever got Bateau's cut of the pie, since Bateau himself is out of the question—but we'll never connect them with the ones who did the actual suck. The trail will be covered by a lot of selective memory wiping and coding, so the little fish probably think they're working for themselves anyway."

Salazar spat again. "Sounds more complicated than it has to be."

"Suckers always make it more complicated, hoping we'll get lost in the spaghetti."

"Spaghetti," Salazar murmured dreamily. "Did they take anything else?"

"No, and not for lack of trying. They broke into his studio but there was nothing transportable. Probably they were looking for artifacts, familiar things the talent could relate to in its new home."

**Spit.** "The ancient Egyptians have nothing on us. How do you want to handle it?"

"The way I usually do. Get into the Downs and look around."

She thought about that while she made love to the food in her mouth. Salazar's never been comfortable with the idea that she can't know exactly what the people under her are doing. She'd like to orchestrate everything the same way she'd like to stick her nose into any mind she wanted to. Fortunately, she was behind a desk—most of the time—where she could do only minimal damage. Most of the time.

"If we start asking questions or pulling in likelies, it'll just alert our suckers and maybe every other sucker we'd like to hotbox, and they'll just have themselves wiped so we couldn't get anything on them even if we did find them. *The State v. Marto*. I quote: 'A mindwipe's new personality may not be held accountable for crimes—' "

Salazar spat forcefully and I shut up. "What about backup?"

I winced. She always did this to me and she should have known better. But that's what happens when you promote administrators with no field experience, or at least none that sticks. "Post them or don't post them, but don't tell me either way. If I don't know, no one else can find out if something goes wrong and I get sucked myself. Let's not discuss it anymore, all right?"

Salazar nodded, brought the sandwich up to her face, and then paused. "Say, you want the rest of this?" She thrust it at me. "I'm full."

"No. Thanks."

"You sure? It'll just go to waste."

"It's not on my diet."

She frowned at me accusingly. "**You** don't diet."

No sense of humor, that woman. She tossed the sandwich into the suckhole, which seemed to choke on it briefly, unused to anything solid after the pap she'd been feeding it. She had nothing further to add so I left her searching her mouth for stray food particles and took myself over to Wardrobe to pick out an appropriate Downs persona.

If Sovay's mind went anywhere at all, it would go to the Downs first, where there was plenty of merchandise floating around in and among the cheap dreamlands, memory lanes, trip parlors, pawnshops, storefront

talent brokers, and street vendors to camouflage anything that had been parted out. The mutilated remains of a person's identity could disappear pretty quickly there.

I took a quick look at some surveillance footage the regular police had shot a couple of days before. Things hadn't changed much in a month. The fashion clothingwise was still ragpicker ratatat. No problem there, I'd just get into the closet, throw everything up in the air, and wear whatever landed on me. I was more interested in faces. Wearing my own was out of the question, but just getting another wasn't the answer, either. A brand-new face in the Downs could attract dangerous attention from people with cause to be nervous; someone might decide to suck me on general principle. I shot about a dozen stills off the footage and had the computer do me a composite that any Downsite would find subliminally familiar.

The result was no one to fall in love with. Working from the composite. Wardrobe straightened my eyebrows, changed my eyes from clean onyx to cheap sapphire, tacked on a squint, broke my nose, stretched my mouth, and ruined my hair with a bad cut and fade. They wanted to mess with some muscles and ligaments to change my posture and movement but I told them there wasn't time. Wardrobe always got carried away; it was all just theatre to them. They settled for coating my vocal cords with what felt like liquid sandpaper, large grain; gave me a nasty gargle on the aspirants. I paired a man's tunic with a colorless plastic skirt and added broken-down boots.

"*Treæ* authentic," said the Wardrobe Captain. This week, it was a young guy named Flaxie. He was brand-new, fresh out of some polytech with a degree in urban camouflage.

"Urban camouflage?" I said. "You can really get a degree in that?"

"Believe it or leave it," he said cheerfully. "I was in theatrical costuming up until almost the last minute but I decided I was more interested in law enforcement than theatre. Theatre's full of neurotics, you know. They'll make you positively nutsoid."

"Do tell."

He flashed me a thousand-watt smile that made him look even younger than he was. "You want an imp or are you going to brass it out on

adrenaline?"

I laughed, gargling. "I'm not excitable enough for adrenaline unassisted. Give me a global imprint, debossed. In case someone wants to check how authentic I really am. If they're in a hurry, which they usually are, they probably won't get all the way through the overlay."

Flaxie prepared a hookup to the computer system while I mounted a program for myself out of the characteristics-available file. Generally I tried for things that weren't too far from my own quirks and idiosyncrasies so I could slip in and out of character without too much noticeable difference.

I showed my final program to Flaxie for his educated opinion. He took a long time studying it and then gave me an odd look.

"You're sure this is what you want?"

"Is there something wrong with it?"

He seemed to be about to say something. Then he shrugged. "Can you take your own eyes out?"

I could and did. Imprinting wasn't something I was fond of but I could put up with a deboss, which was pressed on from the outside, the mental equivalent of a mask. Emboss was more reliable since it came from within your own personality, but it was a lot harder to clean out later. A global debossed facade personality would pass a glancing inspection for a short period of time if I ended up directly mind-to-mind with some low-life. The imp had no memory of its own and I could bar it from accessing mine and giving me away. But that was a situation I was planning to avoid.

Flaxie was a real adept. The connections for my optic nerves were primed and a relaxation exercise was already in progress, a swirling colors thing. It went on exactly long enough to let my mind settle into a receiving mode.

The mechanics were the opposite of a mindsuck. If the system operator is any good, the process should be nearly instantaneous (and painless). There was a mental moment of the sort of pressure you feel when you're concentrating intensely—

—Guy musta been a juggler in his previous lifetime. I was out in the wide-awake so fast I barely had time to be blind. Not that it made a squat of difference. I don't need eyes to know when I've been pulled in by the Brain Police. Right away, my ruff goes up. I can't help it. You never know what they've been up to.

"Next time, I'll take care of my *own* eyes, *thank* you so much I'm very sure!"

His Blondness just gives me this friendly look at all his teeth. "Take a minute or two. A fresh imp's always on a hair trigger."

Now, this is supposed to make sense? He's been partying with my equipment, I know that.

"Where's my eagle? I want my eagle." I look around but there's no eagle in the room, just him and me and one of those big main-brain banks they use to tapdance on your grey. "Oh, Blondie, you gotta problem here, illegal search and seizure, amnesia without benefit of counsel, hail me the first cab to court—"

He's grinning like I'm the best entertainment he's had in a week. "You in there, Mersine?"

It was what I imagined it must be like to be a program called up within a system. The world lit up like a screen, or maybe I did.

"Yeah." I felt myself relax several degrees. "Yeah, it's me. The imp's pretty solid. Settling now, though. I can feel it." I let my breath out slowly, counting to twenty.

"Remember anything?" Flaxie studied me solemnly.

"Everything." I grinned, mildly embarrassed. "She's pretty obnoxious."

"She's all yours. You want anything modified?"

I thought it over. "Nah. She's fine the way she is. Nobody'll give her a second look in the Downs." I thought some more but there were some curious blank spaces that didn't feel right. "Do I have everything I need? I feel like I'm missing something."

Flaxie nodded. "The imp knows a bit more than you do right now. Not to worry. You'll know it, too, when you're supposed to."

"Right." I took another deep breath, counting it in and out again. "That's the part I've never been too crazy about. Hiding my own information from myself."

"Standard stuff. But if it makes you that uncomfortable, we could go back in and put dummy data in the blanks."

I shook my head. "It's okay. It's just kind of—" I shrugged. "Weird."

"You think *this* is weird? Costume a road show sometime." He smiled briefly and turned toward the system, reaching for something on the panel. Then suddenly he whirled and lunged at me, grabbing a fistful of my tunic. "Who are you, what do you want here?" he barked—

Just like that, we're nose-to-nose. I let out a yell that blew back his eyelashes and most of his hair.

"Marya Anderik, I gotta thing about memories, anybody's but mine, all right? That *bother* you, Blondie?" I got his wrist now. "Let go of me or I'll make you *eat* this hand."

He backed off. "Mersine. Come on up."

"Wow," I said, heart pounding. "That's a hot one."

"It's the usual setup—dual conscious reflex control for when she comes up and when she goes down again. Anyone addressing you directly with your real name can bring you up, but only you and I can bring the imp up. Anything you know won't leak over to the imp unless you command it to. Certain situations might make you flash a little but considering what you're supposed to be, nobody in the Downs is going to find your momentary lapse of attention unusual. You'd stick out if you didn't fugue off or show a little *petit mal* once in a while. Come back when you want it taken off."

He turned back to the system and busied himself with the settings. I let myself out. When I stopped at Sign-out to pick up some informant addresses (the imp had the names, concealed from me; I would only know

where to find them), I found a message from Salazar ordering me to take a gun. There was no use trying to explain to her about the dangers of that false sense of security a gun gives you, let alone that there was no reason for my persona to run packed. Some supervisors you can't tell anything, mainly the ones with no field experience. I checked a stinger out of Arsenal and mailed it interoffice to my desk, where it would arrive several hours after I hit the Downs. I had a few steel-pointed combs in my rat's-nest coiffure; if they didn't get lost in there, they'd be enough. If they weren't, then I'd be beyond any help a gun could have given me anyway.

I was just about to leave the building when I got another phone call, addressed simply to *Sovay Case Officer*. Damn that Salazar, I thought, picking up the sound-only receiver in the hall near Sign-out. How had she found out about the gun so quickly?

But it wasn't Salazar. It was Sovay.

"How do I know you're Sovay?" I said.

The man on the other end of the line laughed weakly. "I guess you don't. But trust me, that's who I am. I'm trapped in this, uh, I don't know what he is. It's a he, I can tell you that much. I don't know where I am or why—"

"You said, already. Can't you give me a description, a name, anything?"

"It's all jumbled up in here. It was better back in that other place. I had no body so I just recreated everything in my head. No, I didn't have a head. You know what I mean, though. You have to, you're the Brain Police."

"Just try to remain calm." The officer on Sign-out duty slid me a chair and a scratch pad while someone else went to get a terminal so I could trace the call. "What seems to have happened is, the mindsuckers who took your mind sold you off to someone intact. But the implant didn't take very well and you're fighting for dominance instead of being assimilated—"

Another weak laugh. "No, that's not it. I mean, they think that's it. Or they thought that was it. But I'm back there, too."

"Back where?"

"In the other place. Where I had no body."

I hesitated. I should have taken this call in my office, but I risked having him hang up in the time it would have taken to sprint back there.

"It's true," he went on, a little breathlessly. "I'm waiting back there, playing for time. I don't know where that is, though. I sent me out—that I sent this *me*, I mean—intending to get help. The **me** back there has no way of knowing if *I*, this *I* talking to you, succeeded or just went crazy or what."

"I'm sorry, but I'm not sure—"

He sighed heavily. "They keep trying to send me out, sell me off. Me, just the one person. So I create one of my characters and send **him** out. Do you see? I'm Sovay-in-character, a character from one of the plays I've done. Do you see now?"

I saw. You see all kinds of things in the Brain Police. A disembodied, self-replicating mind was a more bizarre sight than usual, but stranger things have happened. Probably.

"Okay. Which character are you?"

"No, listen, this is important. You have to understand that I'm *not* the Character. I'm *Sovay's interpretation of that character*. Do you understand the difference?"

"I'm not sure. Just tell me which character from which play."

"Dennie Moon from **Brickboy**. It's great, about a quiet guy who serves as the living museum of his family's memories. He takes all the most significant ones before any of the relatives die, and he's got them from three generations. But now he's hit his storage capacity and he's got to stop and let someone else pick it up. His successor is his daughter and he's caught in this three-way conflict where he's jealous because he can't do it anymore but also he realizes it can be a painful experience and she's still very young. But he also wants to keep it all in his own line of descent—really powerful piece of work." He gave a happy sigh. "The character's a good learning role for an actor."

A small light went on in my head. "Ah. Okay, I want you to



concentrate—"

"I *am* concentrating. I have to, just to stay up."

"Concentrate harder and tell me why you chose to send Dennie Moon to the person you're in right now."

The silence stretched for so long I was afraid he'd fainted or hung up. "You think there was a particular reason? I couldn't see whoever this is. Maybe Moon was the first character that occurred to him, or the easiest, or both."

Someone slid a terminal in front of me and punched up some information on the screen. Sovay/Moon was calling from a voice-only phone somewhere in the Downs. A blinking bar at the top of the screen informed me the trace was still in progress. You'd think that in the Age of Fast Information, you could get the really important information that much faster. Think again.

"Consider this," I said. "Maybe you chose Moon for this person because he felt like the Dennie Moon type."

Another long silence. "It's possible," he said at last. "I never thought of that."

"Can you kind of feel around in there for any identifying features of your, uh, host mind?"

The young officer who had brought the terminal was staring at me. **Host mind?** he mouthed. I ignored him.

"Uh, I can't see too well. It's dark for me," Sovay/ Moon said faintly. "I get a glimpse of a sidewalk sometimes. People dancing around on it. See-through people. Zoot!"

"Say *again*?"

"I see a word on a sign. The word is 'Zoot.'"

I punched **zoot** into the keyword search program. A moment later a small window in the bottom left corner of the screen opened to inform me that there was a new dreamland in the Downs called The Zoot Mill.

"Is that where you went? To The Zoot Mill?"

"No. That's where I am now. Across the street."

"Can you see anything else? Can you see yourself, what do you look like?"

"I don't know. I feel short. I try to feel my hair or my clothes but something's blocking the input or something. I can't get it."

It sounded like something that might be in character from what he'd told me about Dennie Moon. Method actors, I grumbled to myself.

"I see my hand!" he cried suddenly. "There's a picture on it, it's smiling at me! It's a woman! It—"

"Hello? Still there, hello?"

He gave a long, miserable sigh. "This guy is making me hang up."

The blinking bar at the top of the screen stopped blinking and gave me the address: a public voice-only phone right across the street from The Zoot Mill. The Age of Fast, Redundant Information. At least I knew he hadn't been hallucinating or lying. "Can you get him to stay there?"

"He's hungry, I think. Something he wants a lot, maybe it's food. He's mad."

"Hold him until I get to you."

"I'll try, but..."

"Can you tell me anything else? Anything at all?" Inspiration hit me. "What did Dennie Moon look like in the play?"

"Um, youthful for his age. Black hair down to his shoulders, light green eyes. Stockyish build. Why?"

I wrote down the description. "Just an idea. Listen, in a little while, a homely woman with lousy hair and old clothes is going to approach you. Be there."

"Wait!" he yelled suddenly. "Wait! I have something for you! Names!"

Portray, Anwar, Easterman!"

Portray and Easterman meant nothing to me, but Anwar almost rang a bell, albeit a very distant one, a bell that belonged to someone else. The terminal was logging the call so I didn't worry about writing anything down. "Who are they?"

"More of Sovay," he said. "That's all I know. More people they sold Sovay to." He paused. "I don't know why I know that. I have to go now. I can't help it."

Resourceful guy, Sovay. I wondered if he'd planted the names in each mind, hoping at least one of them would call the Brain Police. It was too bad he couldn't be restored, this was some major trick.

"Try to stay where you are." He didn't answer. There was a click as the phone line went dead.

The terminal printed out the three names he'd given, every one of them tagged *U* for ***Unknown***. Either they didn't have records or they were new aliases. I folded them up with the informant addresses and took off, leaving everything for the Sign-out officer to put away. Of course, he was gone when I got there.

"Heya, heya!" called the man in front of the trip parlor (Sojourn For Truth—Not God But An Incredible Simulation!). "You gotta be paranoid! Can't be too rich or too paranoid these days! Heya, heya, hey-ya!" He caught my arm as I started to go in. The cracked imitation-leather armor over his longjohns squealed with the movement. Stars twinkled in his teeth; he spat a few into the air between us. They must have been hell on his gums but neurosis peddlers are all goofy for special effects. "How about you, madam? You may think you're paranoid, but are you paranoid **enough**?" His tacky moonstone eyes searched my face as more multicolored stars sailed out of the corner of his mouth. Two spitters in one day; the Age of Fast Information was oral as hell.

"Had it for **lunch**," I said raspily, doing what I hoped was a creditable imitation of the imp. "Let *go*."

"Heya, don't pass **me** up. Simulated God can't compare to the awareness you get from a nice dose of paranoia. It's like coming up from

underwater, you won't believe how awake and alive you'll feel—"

"If you don't let go of my arm, I'll kill you."

"See? **See?**" He puffed out a few more stars. "You're halfway there already. And the price is right. Ask anyone, they'll tell you Crazy Al deals the best paranoia at the price, the best you can get without going totally insane!"

I twisted away from him. When he reached for me again, I had one of the steel-pointed combs in my hand.

"Heya, **okay!**" He jumped back, raising his arms and deflecting a few stars flying out of his mouth. "Numb your mind with truth and simulated God, that's fine. But you'll be looking for me when **They** all start plotting against you."

"When **They** all start plotting against me, I *won't* need *you*." I made a swipe at him and he jumped back again. If there's anything I hate, it's a cheap persecution complex masquerading as paranoia.

The waiting room of Sojourn For Truth was empty and untended. No chairs, no waiting. Sojourn For Truth was the first of the informant addresses I'd been given and they tended to go in descending order of usefulness. It didn't look familiar to me; apparently this was a byte parked with the imp's program.

I felt a little reluctant to bring her up but whatever was on the other side of the twinkly curtain that divided the waiting room from the parlor itself wasn't something I was supposed to handle. Running a short breathing relaxation exercise, I planted a few false memories to give her some context and made the dive as I walked through the curtain.

Some trip parlor. A lot of shabby futons spread on the floor under strings of paper lanterns. The lanterns are supposed to be mood-lighting—how cheap-assed could you get? The even cheaper sound system was playing Brahms in raga-time on sitar, crackling hard on the high notes. Yah, not God but an incredible simulation. See God in a place like this, you know it's hard times for the universe.

There's one paying fool, a young guy lying on a futon near a corner,

giggling at the wall where this skinny hypehead in a white gown is making shadow pictures with his hands in front of a bare light tube. Guess there wasn't too much call for simulated God these days. I wasn't exactly looking to sanctify myself, either. The hypehead caught me staring and shrugged.

"Hole's broken," he says. "They keep telling us the parts'll be in any day now. Big deal. It's the drug that counts, anyway. We got plenty of drug."

I jerk my chin at the wall. "Do God."

"Do *this*." He gives me the International Symbol of Disdain, which doesn't make the most interesting shadow on the wall. But it keeps the fool on the futon giggling.

Well, nobody ever booked Coney Loe on the extreme cleverness charge. He was just your basic hypehead. They say he'd been some kind of catalyzer-imagist once, the kind creative artists hire to give them head-pictures; supposed to give them a jump start, seeing all kinds of weird shit in their heads, make them more creative or something. Can't make that stick, myself. I see the weirdest shit in the world in my head and I got no urge to paint Moby's *Dick* or whatever it is. But maybe it's different when Coney Loe does it.

Or did it. Old Coney's neurons gave out early on him and he dried up. Now he's just a hypehead making like some hotwire and this is his latest two-step for groceries. It's a comedown from hustling for persona mills, but considering the kind of places that would use someone like him, maybe not much.

"So, how's the simulated God here, Coney? Ever try it?"

My calling him by name gives him pause, but just a very little one, and I know he doesn't really remember me. Coney liked to forget certain things, keep the bank open for more important information. It was a Thing with him, information, like he was trying to know everything in the world or something. He could have gone pro, and every so often the Brain Police would come snuffling around, waving money in front of him, but they couldn't turn him over. They didn't seem to understand how it was with him, that he had to have information the way some people had to have sex, or memories, and the only way to buy from him was to pay in kind. But catch the Brain Police giving out information—sure, the night I remember getting crowned Pope. Firsthand.

The Brain Police—the whole scene snaps back on me like bad karma. Shit, what have they done to me now? I can't remember the interrogation but you never can, unless they find out something from you. I never could figure what gave them the right to take a memory, even a bad one like that, and you ask an eagle and all you get is a lot of lawyer ramadoola about confidentiality and your own protection. Like the Brain Police ever protected me from anything.

Coney is staring at me. "You looking for truth?" he says. "Or just keeping a secret?"

"Information," I tell him automatically. "And maybe I'm keeping a secret." Which I know I am, and it'll come to me in a second... something to do with why the Brain Police jerked my chain in the first place. It's on the tip of my brain.

Coney makes a two-handed bird and flaps the wings. "We got truth and God here. Hallucinogens flavored and unflavored, scented, unscented, in your mouth, up your arm, or whatever, lights, colors—" He changes the bird into a rabbit. "Pictures. What's your pleasure?"

"Information. Like I said." I pull my fingers out of my mouth and wiggle them in front of the light tube, enchanting the paying fool.

Coney bats my hand away. "Truth is cheap. Information costs. Can you afford information? Or only truth?"

Now, I've got money and I've got a secret, and I know which one Coney really wants. Maybe I should have stopped off at a memory lane for a recall booster—

And then it comes to me, just like that, as if someone put a tube in my ear and poured it in like clover honey. "I know something you don't know."

It's like telling a ramrod he's got a limp plaything. Coney frowns and the rabbit becomes plain old fingers without making any difference to the guy on the futon.

"So?" Coney says, a little testy.

"So I like memories. Anybody's but mine. The *real* stuff. Somebody else's. Like I could *be* somebody else. I like that a *lot*."

"I can understand that." Coney keeps staring at me and does a dog one-handed, which sets his paying fool barking. "That doesn't exactly make it as a secret, little queenie. Anyone could figure it out on short acquaintance. Unless you're holding something other than your own personal disclosure, maybe you want to shake it to the memory lane across the street and stop bothering me when I'm simulating God. What do I care about your memory jones?"

"You'd know where to get the really good stuff, Coney. You *always* know. Why, you'd even know where the freshest stuff would be. The freshest, never-been-seen stuff, even if no one else knew it was even there yet." I take a breath, grinning because I know I got his attention now; I can tell by the way he's making rabbit shadows like it's his sacred mission in life. "Even if it wasn't *supposed* to be there."

"I heard you," he says, and his ruff is way up. Something happened and nobody told him about it; asses will be kicked. I feel sorry for the paying fool, whose ass happens to be handiest. My ass is safe for the moment, because I've got a secret.

"I didn't hear *you*," I say. "Am I deaf?"

He's dying because I won't come across. "I might know where you could get an order to go. Or I might have no idea." He keeps doing the rabbit shadow. "Your turn."

"Somebody got sucked." I put a finger to my head and make like I'm thinking real hard. "Somebody that does something fancy. Yah, an actor. Just this morning, can you buy that?"

He can. "Monkey shock," he says. "Your turn."

"The Monkey Shop?"

"I said, your turn." He means it, no appeal. Either I come up with a name he can check or he'll kick my ass after all for a liar. Information junkies have some interesting ways of kicking your ass, nothing you want to beg for.

"Sovay. That's the name, ask anybody." Even I winced at that one. But hell you just can't resist stinging an information junkie when you got the chance. They all act like knowing all that shit makes them more than the

hypeheads they really are.

"Shock. *Shock*. Monkey shock. Open your goddam ears."

"Do a monkey!" chortles the fool.

"Shut up," Coney tells him, but somehow he produces an apelike shadow.

"So what's a monkey shock?" I ask.

"Thrills."

"A *thrillseeker*? Screw that. I already know how to get *excited*, thank *you* for nothing."

"This is different. Potluck. You go in and hope for the best. Lots of juice. Makes you dance like a monkey. But if you pay them enough—" Big pause. "Your turn."

Great. I had to go and shoot it all. I could have held back that it was this morning, I could have given an address first instead of a name—shit, an information junkie'll finesse you every time. I'm trying to think fast; do I make something up and hope he doesn't find out too soon it's a lie, or go for the brass. Brass first, until I can come up with a convincing lie that could pass for misinformation later.

"*My* turn? Like hell, you ain't finished taking your turn, you're changing dicks in the middle of my screw."

Coney won't thaw. "Your turn." He gives me a little smile, making a rooster on the wall. The skinny shit knows I'm tapped, or he thinks he knows it. I'm wondering what the odds are that I could beat it out of him and then I realize he's told me enough that I can figure out the rest myself. He couldn't help it; for an information junkie, the only thing as good as finding something out is passing it on.

"Okay, here's my turn. You say *potluck*? You say *juice*? You say *pay enough*? I say it sounds like maybe there's a little extra in the juice if you pay enough and by the time your head stops jitterbugging, who's to say whatever you got wasn't yours to begin with."



Sometimes I really surprise myself. I may be a hypehead, but I ain't no burnout, no sclerosis this year. Coney looks like he bit down on something sour.

"Guess you know it all," he says.

I'm smirking away. "And if I don't know, I know who knows."

"Yah?" He smirks back. "But do you know *how* you know all this?"

"Just living right." But I get a little edgy creep. I know about Sovay from the Brain Police, that's nothing; every time someone gets sucked, they round up the usual suspects, no big shit and so fucking what. But I know that's not what he means.

"Like, how'd you get so genius, figuring stuff out like you got a sherlock circuit." His smile is mean. "Don't come back, little queenie. I don't know who you are and you don't, either."

"I'm *everyone!*" Coney's fool announces at the top of his lungs. Coney puts a polka-dotted sleeve over the tube and gives it a spin. While the fool is going cross-eyed over this, he's rummaging around in some stuff on the floor and finds a long white beard to put on. Icons die hard.

He pauses to glare at me. "'Don't come back' means you're leaving now. Or can't you figure that part out?"

I give him a salute and start backing toward the exit.

Coney leans over the fool. "Hi, I'm God. What's on your mind?"

The fool stares up at him; every neuron must be flapping and snapping like tiny pennants in a hurricane. "Why am I here?"

"Because you're stupid."

Fool nods very slowly. "Ah. I always thought it was more complicated than that."

It's mean, but that's the nature of truth.

I shut her down as I went back through the curtain into the empty

waiting room. The combined physical and mental movement gave me a moment of light vertigo while the memory of the immediate past settled around me.

Memory from an imp feels more like a dream than a memory, and this felt like a dream I'd had before. I looked back at the curtain. Coney Loe; I didn't know him, but the imp did, which meant he was a double-blind informant—onlyimps contacted him, and when the Sovay case was closed, I wouldn't know him anymore, unless he somehow slipped into my long-term memory. That can happen after repeated contact with a double-blind.

I put him out of my mind and considered Monkey Shock as I stepped outside. My pal the neurosis peddler was still hawking paranoia out front. He gave me a wide berth. I ignored him. Monkey Shock wouldn't be anything more than crude convulsions induced by plain old electricity, with timed-release hallucinogens and a mental sorter delivering extra jolts randomly through the right hemisphere. Messy, but not illegal.

It wouldn't be hard to add sucker leftovers to the mental sorter. Memories would work best. The customer would get a thrill at each jolt. Afterward, electroshock amnesia covered all the traces. As the imp said, after your brain stopped jitterbugging, it would be impossible to tell which memories had been added and which were native. Maybe even the customer wouldn't know for sure. Ingenious, and a lot less obvious than taking the stock to a pawnshop or a crib.

Bad news for me, though. Monkey Shock wasn't one of those things I could engage in with even marginal safety. Getting myself hooked up in one of the sleazy memory lanes to see if there was anything of Sovay in the merchandise they were offering was safer than, say, getting myself hooked up to someone who'd been to the lane and bought some of it. In a lane, the operator usually lets the machine do most of the work and a machine doesn't know the difference between a real memory junkie and a Brain Police officer with a memory junkie overlay.

But the worse news was Coney Loe's suspicion. It could have been mere pique because some little unwashed hypehead he considered beneath him actually had some information he didn't have. Or else I really had burned myself in a blazing display of deductive thinking. Blazing for the imp, anyway, or what she was supposed to be. The imp didn't have all my information but she did have my intelligence, and maybe that wasn't quite

in character... although showing it off would be.

In any case, I was going to have to track down Monkey Shock before Coney Loe could get around to alerting them about me. ***I don't know who you are and you don't, either.***

Two onionheads shackled together on a long chain went by, both giving me dirty looks. I ignored them showily, turning away but being careful to keep their retreating figures in my peripheral vision so I'd see if they decided to turn on me and accuse me of flirting with one of them. Onionheads in a jealous frenzy could be fatal.

The neurosis peddler edged toward me, keeping out of reach. "Heya, I'm not trying to bother you or anything, but I got this spot staked, I got permits."

I moved off without looking at him, bumping into a skinny blonde who seemed to be in the process of coming to while walking. She barely noticed me in her rediscovery of reality. Well, ***this*** reality.

"Heya, lover." The woman had flies in her eyes. They looked real, preserved in the thickened irises, the pupils camouflaged in the little fly bodies. I was squatting in a parking space directly in front of The Zoot Mill, watching both the holo display on the sidewalk and the voice-only phone across the street, in case Sovay/Moon decided to make a return appearance. Probably what I should have done in the first place, instead of burning myself with Coney Loe. The Zoot Mill holo was a little ragged, and nothing special—dancing girls, dancing boys, banquets, money tornadoes, and a lot of the usual signs and wonders—but it was tankless and vivid.

"Heya, lover," Fly Eyes said again, moving a little closer.

"What," I snapped.

"You look like it's been a while." She grinned, showing me another fly design etched on a front tooth. Mouths, I thought. The world was full of mouths. "Well, the drought's over because I got the man of your dreams." She saw me looking at The Zoot Mill's display where Hercules or someone like him was ceremoniously disrobing for three holo slave girls and one live woman who looked too fried to really appreciate it.

"*Better* than *that*," she said. "Much better. Like he invented it. Unforgettable. It'll be keeping you warm when you're ninety."

Looking at her, I had a flash. It was like looking out of two eyes belonging to two different people. For a moment the imp was aware in a vague way and we were cohabiting. This was the type of situation more suited for her than for me. I put her to sleep again. "Go *away*," I said. "I don't want some secondhand wet dream."

"Wet dream? That doesn't even begin to describe it. This is the mystical experience, change your life, change your *religion*. Ever been in a state of grace for three hours straight? If you had, you wouldn't be squatting here biting your nails."

I trapped both hands between my knees. "A wet dream's a wet dream. If this guy really burns, I'd rather press his flesh myself."

"Not possible, he's far away. But I remember it like it was an hour ago, had the whole memory specially enhanced and amplified. You'll taste him, you'll smell him—" She babbled on but she wasn't fooling me. What she probably had was a second- or thirdhand memory of someone else's fantasy. I guess I must have looked like I'd spent the last ten years locked in a lunchbox.

"Come on," she said, moving a little closer. "It's the best kind of mindfuck you'll ever get. You don't like it, I'll give you a rebate minus the equipment fee."

"Rebate *this*. Now skin off"—I pulled my left hand away from my mouth—"and leave me *alone*."

"Frigid," she jeered and stalked off.

I looked up at the meter. Five more minutes and then I'd have to move along. Meterfeeding had lately been outlawed in the Downs, one of the few regulations successfully enforced. A metertender had already come by once to take my picture so I was going to have to decide what to do—start asking around for Fortray, Anwar, or Easterman, go to the next informant address as Marya, or hang around here as either Marya or myself pretending to be Marya but keeping a low profile. Asking around for someone could get sticky. I could have given at least one of the names to Marya to ask Coney Loe about, but all things considered, it probably

would have made him even more suspicious. He might have ended up stampeding the suckers into closing up shop and flushing Sovay altogether.

I kept thinking that Sovay/Moon couldn't have gone far in the state he was in, which would also possibly mean he hadn't gone far in the first place, choosing the first phone he saw after coming out of Monkey Shock. Therefore, I could have been in Monkey Shock's locale— for all I knew, it was a back room in The Zoot Mill, something I might have been able to find out if Marya hadn't insisted on antagonizing Coney Loe.

The meter was just about expired when I saw her coming stiffly down the sidewalk toward me. For several seconds I froze until I remembered she couldn't possibly recognize me. Certainly she wasn't here hunting for me or any other kind of police. She looked tense and scared and a lot more emotional than she had back in her kitchen when she'd told me it wouldn't make any difference to her personally if we caught the suckers who had done Sovay.

No points for nerve, I decided; it wasn't nerve she was demonstrating by coming into the Downs. I had no idea what she thought she was doing, but even more to the point, how the hell could she know enough to do it in the first place?

Stupid fool, I said to myself. Anytime someone gets sucked, you look at the spouse first, no matter what; if the victim's married to Baby Jesus, he's number one on the list of suspects and you put the little tyke under surveillance—

But she *was* under surveillance. *I* was watching her, wasn't I, she was right there in front of me. The regular police had probably tagged her all the way into my vicinity and then left her for me to deal with—they always know when a case officer is working an investigation, even if they don't know exactly who it is. If Rowan knew anything, she'd take me right to the place I wanted to go, and if she didn't, I could get rid of her somehow, chase her out under some pretext or another.

It was getting late and the streets were starting to fill with what they call local color, hues that look best under artificial light. Rowan hadn't made any effort to blend in. She was still in her pouch suit, which was too new and too expensive for the area. Just as she drew even with The Zoot Mill, I saw the twinkle of a paranoid's badge on her sleeve. All jumped up

on a paranoid rush for a trip to the Downs?

The parking meter chimed and I stood up slowly, not wanting to alarm her with any sudden moves, but she wasn't paying any attention to me. She only had eyes for the holo.

It was still Hercules or someone like him, wearing a strap and doing a vigorous ballet/square dance with the slave girls. Rowan was watching with an intentness that could have passed for carnal, which wouldn't have been so unusual. Everyone handles a loss differently. But she was trying to get a good look at Hercules' face, as though he might have been someone she knew.

That idea was unappetizing. How would she know some cheap holo hoochy-koocher and why would she be looking for him now? And why had she had to get paranoid to do it? She had no record of being licensed for paranoia or any other psychosis. And how paranoid was she, anyway?

I moved carefully around the other side of the holo, maneuvering through the small crowd that was gathering to watch Hercules. He was looping through his strip routine again and I found myself giving him a few points for talent. After all, whoever started out with the idea of being a cheap holo hoochy-koocher anyway? In his mind, maybe this had been *Afternoon of a Faun*, updated.

And what was it in Rowan's mind?

Her attention remained focused on him, enabling me to get around on her left side, so she'd have to go right past me to get into The Zoot Mill, if that was where she was going.

Inadvertently, I brushed against a rooster-boy with a multicolored crest and feathered codpiece, and not much else except for a dusting of gold powder on his pasty skin. He turned to me with a wide, automatic grin.

"Hot enough for you?" The low, throaty come-on was already out of his mouth when the grin froze into something more painful than sexy. Rooster-boys weren't supposed to be picky but apparently this one was. The rainbow crest rising from his hairline drooped. "Forget it. Not even if I was flatline."

"And when have *I* ever demanded anything from you, dickie-bird?"

He blinked at me and I winced. Not crude enough for the situation or the character I was supposed to be. Trying too hard; either I had to let Marya come up or limit my vocabulary to *Heya* and *Fuck off* while I was driving.

And then Rowan turned around and looked directly at me. I froze again. In spite of the fact that she couldn't have recognized my scratchy, gargly voice, the expression on her face said she wasn't sure if she knew me or not. The paranoid's badge on her sleeve glittered. General freefloating anxiety,. I decided—that was her "paranoia." Not the real thing with delusions of grandeur and hallucinations but the street stuff neurosis peddlers like my pal in front of Sojourn For Truth sold to the public: persecution complexes, anxiety, and such. I wouldn't have thought anyone like Rowan would have had to buy anxiety to walk around in the Downs. She could have breathed it in with the air.

A pimp came up on her other side and tapped her on the shoulder. She jumped, twisting around, and backed into my rooster-boy, who immediately put both hands possessively on her shoulders. She jerked away from him and stepped into the holo display. Hercules' arm went through her neck and I thought she was going to have hysterics. The pimp pulled her out of the circle of reception before she could break up the display. The two of them struggled together and then he said something I didn't catch because the rooster-boy was bitching to nobody in particular that his customer had been stolen. People began giving ground around him, allowing me to move closer to Rowan, who was listening to the pimp with an expression that didn't look the least paranoid anymore, or even anxious. She and the pimp made an odd couple, her in the expensive, trendy pouch suit and him in his traditional garish technicolor fuzz. He pointed down the street away from me and she made a move to leave. Blocking her with a fuzzy, electric-green arm, he tapped her paranoid's badge. Rowan shook her head.

I maneuvered around behind them, planting more false memories for Marya, leaving her the knowledge of who Rowan was. If she thought Rowan was leading her to Monkey Shock, she'd be happy to follow.

Abruptly, Rowan slapped some currency into the pimp's hand and stalked off in the direction he'd pointed. The pimp laughed at her retreating back and turned to the display *again*, watching Hercules fiddle with the ties on his codpiece. I let Rowan go half a block before sending

Marya after her.

She looks like she knows where she's going but not what she's doing. People like her, they never know what they're doing but they always know where they're going.

I *know* she's on her way to Monkey Shock; either she's leading the Brain Police straight to them, or she's going to ask for a rake-off of the profits on Sovay, grieving widow and all that shit. I've seen that before. Or, hell, she might even believe she can get him back. Plenty of them believe that; fuck if I know why. But then, astrologers are still in business, too, and there's one guy I know of personally who probably believes he met God today and God told him he was here because he was stupid, which just goes to show you faith gets it over information every time. Faith, or maybe truth, depending on your point of view, which is everything in this game.

So what the hell, maybe they'll pay her off, or just suck her and call it a bonus. Either way, there'd be something for me when the dust settled.

She goes two blocks before she starts slowing down and looking at the buildings. There's not much here, a pawnshop, a hardware/software dealer, and a crib passing as a read-only room. She almost passes the crib and then stops.

Now, I know this crib and if it's Monkey Shock, I remember my papal coronation. Pimp's probably going to run her all over the Downs, I realize; tells her to go one place and when she gets there, someone'll tell her to go somewhere else, and so on, and so on, till she's all turned around and lost. Then maybe they'll send her to Monkey Shock, when they're sure she's too confused to know where she is. And when they're sure she isn't wagging a tail behind her.

Well, I'd just say the pimp sent me, too, to keep an eye on her. Why not.

I go right in after her and she doesn't even know it. Place is just a big ratmaze inside, cubicles and low walls, so I can keep track of her from a distance. They're doing a little business in there anyway, not much, but a few other hypeheads are wandering the aisles. The whole idea is, you see something in a cubicle you like, you step in and have some.

Rowan's all at sea in here. I cruise the other side of the room, just in



case there's anything interesting running, but it's like any other crib—one sorry soul after another, waiting to sell you their best shot, and the hardware piled up off to one side. One old gock with peppermint eyes (where do they come up with this stuff?) and foil curls is whispering "Cubs? Cubs? You like 'em young? It's no crime to just *think* about it, you know," and next to him is a job in a leather hood with the eyes zipped shut, chanting "Fetish, fetish, fetish," like I'm supposed to believe I can really get one that'll stick past the first time I go to sleep. And I'm watching Rowan and wondering what she's making of all this; I'm sure she's never been in a crib before.

And I don't know what gets into me all of a sudden, but I want to get over to her and tell her to get out. She can think about anything she wants with anybody she wants, but a place like this is below anyone still capable of raising a sine wave without help. Hell, even the hardware has to be scuzzy, with all that kind of thinking running through it. I bet if I go over and crack open the system next to the gock with the peppermint eyes, it'll be nothing but slime inside instead of chips and plates. Marya Anderik, crusader for social reform, sure. For all I know, I bought from the old gock before he ran thin enough to move in here.

Then Rowan stops in front of a cubicle and Hercules pops up, live, Hercules the hoochy-koocher in cheap jumpjohns. And what happens next is so kinky, even I don't believe it.

They slam together and start kissing.

Automatically, I duck, waiting for alarms to go off and vice squads to drop down from the ceiling. The regular police love to raid a meat market with people really doing things instead of just thinking about them. But then Rowan and Hercules sink down before anyone else gets a look at what they're doing. I give them five seconds and then hurry over, going as fast as I can because I have to run up and down two aisles going almost the width of the room.

When I get to them, I expect to see live porno, but it's weirder than that—they're already lying side by side on the cots, and they're hooked into the hardware, her eyes in a tank on one side and his in a tank on the other, just like everything is normal.

What's wrong with this picture is there's a third person, a funny-looking haunt in ratatat worse than mine, lying on the floor

between them, and *he's* hooked in, too, through an illegal auxiliary connection. His eyes are drifting around in a bowl next to his head and for some reason, I think of that old joke—the party got so wild, I passed out and woke up as the guy next to me. The crib's not licensed for anything other than one-on-one. No crib is. I can't figure why they're risking it; anyone in here can be a Brain Police plant and if they're caught, it's instant raid. But people who mouth kiss'll try anything. Mouths, *yuck*.

The guy on the floor suddenly reaches up and starts to disconnect, and the last thing I see before I do a fast fade is he's got tattooed hands. Christ, the silly stuff you notice.

I had sixty seconds, give or take, to decide whether I should confront them or skin off and maintain surveillance at a distance. The guy on the floor, now fumbling like a novice with the connections to his optic nerves, was obviously the man who called me at the station—the tattoo on his right hand fit the description he gave. If his memory wasn't too spotty, he would recognize me as the person who was supposed to meet him at the phone across from The Zoot Mill. I wasn't so sure making contact now would be the optimum thing to do.

He had his connections out and he was reaching for his eyes. I ducked into the next cubicle, and crouched next to the wall. The occupants didn't care—they were both hooked up to a system, sharing whatever it was people shared in cribs. Next door, I could hear Sovay/Moon moving around, helping Rowan and Hercules disconnect.

"Oh, thank you," Rowan whispered politely, as though he'd just passed her the edible polyester at a dinner party. There were a few sounds of hurried kisses and then I heard Hercules whisper, "Rowan and I will go out together. Give us ten minutes to get past my pimp—we don't want him cutting himself in. Then meet us at—"

I couldn't get it because Sovay/Moon chose that moment to grunt unhappily. He started to make some kind of complaint but the other two shushed him. A moment later they hurried past the cubicle I was crouching in, leaving Sovay/Moon alone. I gave it five seconds and then crawled out of the cubicle and into the other.

He was sitting on the edge of Rowan's cot with his face in his hands; I could see he was trembling a little. Who was he now—Sovay/Moon, or the

man who had bought Sovay/Moon? Only one way to find out for certain, and since I had probable cause to believe he was a receiver of sucked goods, I could legally search his mind without a warrant.

Getting him to hold still for that, however, was another matter. I was beginning to wish I'd taken the stinger after all. On the other hand, if Sovay/Moon was still dominant, I might be able to talk him into cooperating and keeping his mouth shut afterward.

Sensing something, he lowered his hands and saw me squatting at the entrance to the cubicle. He didn't look a thing like Sovay's description of the character— long horse face, uneven lank brown hair, too much nose and mouth. He could have passed for my brother, the way I looked now. My brother or my father. That gave me an idea.

He started to get up and I said, "No, it's me—your daughter."

Several expressions swept down his long face as he plumped down on the cot again and shoved himself away from me, packing himself into a corner of the cubicle.

"Don't you see. Father," I said, crawling toward him. "It must go on. We can't let it die with you, because—" I floundered for a moment. Christ, but I wished I had a lot more background than what he'd told me. "—because I'll be carrying it on, and from me, it will go to my own child, and so on until we come to the... the final shore and we'll all be there to see it together—"

"Final peak."

I froze. "Uh... what?"

" 'Till we come to the final peak and see the world as we made it spread out before us.' Improv doesn't mean you can change the analogy." Watching my face, he untensed about a millimeter.

"Oh." I slid up onto the cot and sat facing him.

"Well, go on," he said. "Talk me into it."

"Talk you into it?"

He looked briefly at the ceiling. "You're supposed to persuade me to let you archive my personal memories as the symbol of the torch passing. Reach for it, pull out all the stops, you can clean up the scenery chewing later for performance. Don't be afraid of the Method. Make me see that my memories are as important to you as they are to me, show me I can't be selfish enough to let a dynasty die with me."

I started to flash again and Marya stirred more actively than she had back on the street with Fly Eyes. It would figure, her being a memory junkie. She submerged easily enough after a moment, but as my perspective cleared, I saw that Sovay/Moon was looking a little bleary. I had to talk him into remaining dominant before he realized I wasn't an actress and this wasn't a rehearsal booth. And before the real identity of this hypehead asserted itself.

"You gave me life," I said desperately, remembering what Flaxie had said about all the neurotics in theatre. "Let me do the same for you, let me preserve yours and all the lives you preserve."

"Not bad." He relaxed a little more and favored me with an approving nod. "Keep going."

"Um... flesh of my flesh and thought of my thoughts?"

Now he looked stern. "Are you asking me or telling me?"

"We shouldn't argue. Father," I said, getting impatient. "It's right and you know it's right. We chose to maintain ourselves in living minds, not a machine. It's my turn, Father, it's my birthright. If you deny it to me, you might as well kill me, too."

"*Brava.*" He gave me a raised fist salute and lay down on the cot. "From here, we can just mime the actions in detail—you **have** had mime training, haven't—"

But that was all I needed. I leaped on him and sat on his chest, pressing one hand down on his throat.

"What—wait a—"

"The Method," I said, grabbing the connections with my other hand. "All the way. You just told me not to be afraid of the Method."

He sighed. "All right. But let's do it quick—"

I popped his left eye out and sent the connection in, hoping the disinfect cycle on the hardware was functional. He went completely limp under me, which made removing the right eye easier. Climbing off him, I set the system for a full cycle and did some deep breathing while I watched him lying on the cot with the wires running out from under his flattened eyelids. This system wouldn't have a lot of the automatic blocks and shields dividing two minds in contact; I was going to have to draw on my own resources for those.

I pulled the other cot closer and lay down, clutching the other set of connections. He was going to be late meeting Rowan and Hercules; if I could work fast enough, we'd be disconnected by the time they thought to come back and see what was keeping him.

It was too bad, I thought as I worked my eyes out one at a time, that I couldn't have had Flaxie with me. I wasn't as steady as I'd been back at the station.

It was a real bare-bones system, no compartmentalization, no waiting space—you were either in contact or not. Sovay/Moon manifested immediately, facing me across the mental environment of a theatrical stage. It didn't have perfect definition—the floor was flimsy and the prop furniture was transparent and runny, but there was a hard white spotlight on Sovay/Moon, illuminating him without a bit of vagueness. He looked exactly as he had when I'd seen his body, minus the orange color, with long black hair. The jade eyes were glowing holes in his face.

***Don't look at the audience***, he said. ***It's unprofessional to break proscenium.***

Apparently he was referring to the cavernous dark area gaping on my left. I didn't look but I got the undeniable feeling someone was out there watching—it had to be the guy who had bought from the suckers.

***Now, let's try the improv again***, Sovay/Moon said, ***and this time, really work on convincing me. And remember the feeling when we return to the script.***

***Sovay.*** I moved toward him. ***I'm the person you cal—***

***Dammitall!*** He shook both fists at the ceiling, which was as shadowy and vague as the audience area. ***How do you expect me to rehearse with you when you keep breaking character?*** He lowered his arms and took a deep breath, composing himself. ***You don't know the lines you're supposed to be paraphrasing, do you?***

*Um... no.*

A script materialized in his left hand. He beckoned to me. ***All right, then, come refresh your memory so we can go on with the scene.***

Instantly, I was standing in the spotlight with him. He turned me so that my back was to the audience and opened the script, pointing to the top of a page. ***From here,*** he ordered. ***Memorize this.***

At the top of the page it said:

*DENNY MOON*

*I must remain in character in order to remain dominant. We can communicate this way for only a short time. Explain who you are, answer in here if you can. If you can't, get out immediately.*

***I concentrated; words melted into existence in the blank space below.***

*MERSINE MOON*

*I'm the officer you called earlier. How were you able to break character and call?*

***Sovay glanced at me and then looked back at the script.***

*DENNY MOON*

*I wasn't quite so settled in at the time. He's getting more of a hold on me but so far I've managed to convince him I'm not done rehearsing. He's not very smart.*

*MERSINE MOON*

*How do you know Rowan and the stripper?*

**Sovay blew out a disgusted breath.**

*DENNY MOON*

*[Blows out disgusted breath] Rowan's my wife, of course. The stripper found me—or him, rather. The stripper's another customer. He bought one of my characters. I called the Brain Police, but he called Rowan.*

*MERSINE MOON*

*Which character is he?*

*DENNY MOON*

*Dionysius, from The Zeus Revue. It's a character that allows for more of the actor's personality as a performer. He—I rehearsed that one a lot with Rowan.*

*MERSINE MOON*

*Why were you hooked in with Rowan and the stripper? Where are you supposed to meet them, and why? What's going on, is she involved with the suckers?*

The stage gave a long shudder. I could sense pressure building up somewhere behind me. **Take a last look!** Sovay/Moon said. **If you don't have it by now, you never will!**

*DENNY MOON*

*Rowan is collec*

The stage rumbled under us. He snapped the script shut and tossed it away. It vanished before it hit the floor. *Time's up*, he said, glancing significantly over his shoulder. **Next time you audition, be more familiar with your material. Endit!**

Like that, we were out of contact. I had the sensation of movement somewhere nearby and I disconnected, rushing to pop my eyes back in. All I had to do was arrest him and get him back to the station where they'd pull the whole story out of him.

I had the right eye in when I saw them, Rowan and the stripper on either side of him, helping him up from the cot. The stripper turned to me as I jammed my left eye into the socket, but the connection missed on the first try. Sovay/Moon pointed at me and the stripper disappeared into my blind side. I managed to make the connection in time to see Hercules coming at me with his hand raised. Metal flashed in his palm.

The first thing I think is, oh, no, I put my eyes in upside-down. Then I can feel how I'm lying with my head hanging off the edge of whatever this is and I think, oh, shit, I had a seizure.

And then I remember Coney Loe and Monkey Shock, and I think, oh, great, I found the place, I must have got something. And there's that smell of fried hair and I know for sure I've been Monkey Shocked and the goddam lowlifes didn't even let me take my combs out. I'm lucky I didn't get my fucking head burned off.

Moving slow, I roll over and there I am hanging on the edge of a cheap cot in what I know is a crib. My eyes aren't right, feels like they're looking in slightly different directions, and I got the kind of headache they call a headquake, and I don't remember anything. And I hit the floor.

I climb up on the cot again and lie there trying to make my eyes go right. They sort of resettle while a little something comes back to me; I can remember coming to the crib, and I remember some people in a three-way—something about mouthkissing, which my stomach is just not in favor of me thinking about at the moment—but after that, the screen's dark.

They must have told me how to find Monkey Shock, those three kinkos, and I must have gone there. Electroshock amnesia'll get you every time. Nice bunch, Monkey Shock, dumping me back at the crib. Unless Monkey Shock was in here somewhere—Nah. I know this crib. It's hanging on to its license by its teeth, wouldn't touch a chop shop. Most cribs won't, they're too likely to be raided.

I try sitting up and I feel a little better. At least my head doesn't drop off and roll away. But how long, I wonder, am I going to have to put up with electroshock amnesia? I mean, what's the good of getting a memory if you can't remember it? Shit, I'm going to have to start living right, I tell myself, and then I feel it, stirring around somewhere in some vague area of



my mind.

I can't believe this. They sucked a Brain Policer and palmed some of her off on me. Out-fucking-rageous.' I couldn't have gone there for that—

Sovay, right. Now I remember. I wanted a piece of Sovay and instead I get some nobody from the goddam cops, of all the shitty things. How in *hell*—

Coney Loe. The mindfucking hypehead got to them before I did. That's got to be it. Coney Loe got to Monkey Shock and they decided to have a little fun with me, they put the goddam mark of the snitch on me.

I stand up and find out that's not the best idea I've had. Leaning on the system, I wait for the world to stop rocking back and forth, and something else pops into my mind, a memory of Hercules coming at me with what seems to be a joybuzzer. Hercules? Right, a stripper. But the image doesn't jive with what I remember about finding him and the other two in the crib together.

It's one of *her* memories, the cop's. Got to be. So Hercules must be in on it and he got the cop for them.

If there's anything I know for sure right now, it's that I do not want any part of this cop. All I need is to get rounded up again and have the Brain Police find her. Instant hard time, they won't care how she got there. Another thing I know is, nobody's going to dump her for me, nobody's going to touch me. If I want to get rid of her, I'm going to have to find Monkey Shock again and make a deal.

Right. This time they *will* burn my head off.

Unless I can get Coney Loe to stand up for me.

Shit, I think, it just gets worse. Coney Loe'll hold me down while they burn my head off. Unless I've got something I can hold *him* down with...

Thinking is like trying to sprint through corn syrup. The cop doesn't seem to know anything about Coney, she's no help. I get vague pictures of her on a stage with somebody, like she's an actor, too, which makes no damned sense.

On the other hand, *Coney Loe* won't know she doesn't know anything about him. Things start coming together for me. I can run a ramadoola about how she got his name and planted a timebomb—as soon as the electroshock amnesia wears off, I'll be compelled to turn myself in and spill everything, so either he gets his friends to suck her out of me or we all go together when we go.

(*Karma-gram*, says a small voice in my mind and the goose walks over my grave.)

Only... would they just go ahead and suck me dry?

Okay. I modify my story for Coney. I got a friend waiting for me—I'll say it's a rooster-boy. If I don't show up intact, I'll say, rooster-boy makes the call. After all, rooster-boys got nothing to fear from the Brain Police, just the vice squad.

Good for me. Maybe getting Monkey Shocked blew out a lot of old junk and actually made me smarter. I make a move to walk and discover I'm not ready for that.

The memory of hitting the floor was as vivid as the real thing. I was going to have a bruise on my face, but it could only help. When you're scared, the best thing you can do is look scary yourself. With a bruise, I might be able to stop a clock just by frowning at it.

I knew right away I wasn't conscious, which was to say, Marya wasn't conscious, though how long I'd/we'd be out was impossible to figure. The zap I'd taken with the joybuzzer had gotten us both, jamming Marya in dominant; I'd come up only when I/she blacked out or went to sleep. At least I wasn't panicking about it. The panic button was sound asleep with Marya.

I wasn't so much thinking as I was dreaming lucidly-dreaming is usually what you're doing when a part of your mind is active while you're unconscious, and lucid dreaming gives you an edge, but this state had a few important differences. For one thing, I was more of a dream myself.

It wasn't a state I was unfamiliar with. The last time it had happened, I'd been in worse trouble than this... which gave me the best idea I'd had all day. If I could get Marya into a controlled situation, some kind of

mindplaying, I'd be able to regain dominance, maybe even kick her out.

The problem was, Marya thought she was real now. Of course, she'd always taken that for granted, but the difference was, she was aware of me as something she thought she'd ingested. I couldn't just plant the truth. Most likely she wouldn't believe it anyway, but if she did, there was no predicting what she might do and whatever it was, I wouldn't be dominant so I wouldn't be able to stop her. Worse, I wouldn't even be aware of it.

Abruptly, my eyes opened and there was some uncountable mental time in which Marya and I were up front simultaneously, seeing in doubled vision. Her puzzlement began to give way to panic; she couldn't place the mental state she was in and it frightened her. Then we both lost ground and I was sliding back into darkness, forcing an intense craving for a memory, hoping it would leave a residue strong enough to make her follow up.

By the time I get to the street, I feel awake enough to function, but my memories are all screwed around again. I know I was going to do something before I went out, but the blow to my head's fogged me in. For once, I'm thinking about how if I had a wad to spare, I'd get a turbo-job, where they fix up the organization of your brain so you can think better. Except that's always been too close to real brain surgery for my taste and you have to get a couple of doctors to approve it anyway. Hypeheads don't go to doctors on free will. Besides, this is just electroshock amnesia and that'll pass. Already I'm remembering better—I got my rooster-boy waiting for me to show up intact for when I lean on Coney Loe to steer me back to Monkey Shock so I can get rid of this cop they dumped on me. The problem is, I can't remember exactly where I left him, over at The Zoot Mill or back in the crib or someplace else entirely, but he's waiting. It'll come to me when I need it, I'm pretty sure on this.

Something I know for sure is, I want to get away from the crib and this is another thing I'm taking up with these Monkey Shock suckers. Dumping me back in a crib like I belonged there with all that head-trash. Hypeheads and head-trash ain't the same and I feel like making someone real sorry about mixing the two.

But even more, for some reason, I feel like getting a memory for no

other why-not than why not. And even I know this is not the right thing to do at the moment, jones or no jones. First I pay a call on Coney-Simulated-God-Loe, then I lose this cop. After that, I can pick up a memory. Can't be any Sovay left at this point but I think I've had enough of Monkey Shock anyway.

Sojourn For Truth is closed. There's just this cranked-off neurosis peddler out front and as soon as he sees me, he's flinching, like I'm about to swing on him.

"What is it, bank holiday or something?" I ask him, not that I really expect him to know.

He shuffles back two steps and something shiny dribbles down his chin. A star. *Yuck*. "Why?"

And all of a sudden, I get this funny feeling I know him, or at least I think I've seen him before. Frigging electroshock amnesia. For all I know, I walked past my own mother on the way here and I'm damned if I can remember her, either.

"You know God in there?" I say. I'd ask him if he knows me, but I'm not about to let some street shit know he's got the advantage.

"I don't believe in God," he says, edging away another step. "If it's all the same to you."

"You're magnum help." I look around, sticking my hands in my pockets. This is the upper northwest quadrant of the Downs, nothing much around. Late as it is, most of the hypeheads have migrated southerly, where the real stuff is. Sojourn For Truth does business mostly with shimmers from the rest of the city, tourists, and daytrippers.

"My permit goes to midnight," the neurosis peddler says defensively. "You got a problem with that?"

I look at him. "What's your fuck-up, eatin' the profits again? Dipping into your own paranoia?"

Now he moves a step toward me with a suspicious squint. "Don't you know me?"

"If I wanted to know you, I would." I turn to go and he grabs my arm. The touch sets off one of those mental alarm bells and I reach for a comb automatically, without thinking about it.

"Heya, heya!" He jumps back. "No need for it, no need! You don't remember me, do you?"

"So what the fuck difference does it make?" I say, getting all brass. "I remember you, I don't remember you, big shit."

He's got this big smile on his face now, and shiny little stars flecking his teeth. "Shoulda took the paranoia when I offered. Now look at you. You're a mess. But it ain't too late. Get paranoid now, and it could save your life."

"I don't want paranoia. I want God."

He jerks his head at the place. "God took the day off. Know what God does on downtime?"

"Plays chicken with the devil."

"Good one." He winks, which is too cute. "Come on, little queenie. Have a little paranoia, good for what ails you."

I pop a comb and give him five little wet red beads on the hand reaching for me. He howls and backs off while I trip away, wiping the comb on my shirt.

Now, if I was a Coney Loe, where would I go? If an information junkie knows everything, where does he go to find out? I'm still wiping the comb on my shirt when I feel a funny little crackle from the left-side pocket. I reach in, and find two little pieces of paper folded over, and when I open them up, I scan three names typed out on one, all with a *U* after them, and half a dozen addresses written on the other, starting with Sojourn For Truth.

I wrote something down? I can *write*?

Either I'm getting talented in my old age, or Monkey Shock planted this on me when they stuck me with the cop. And on the one hand, I got no reason to think that's how it rolled out, but on the other, I got no better excuse for finding handwriting in my own pocket. The other list, I don't

know what to think. I never heard of any of them. They could be cops for all I know, *U* could stand for Undercover.

Come on, now, Marya, I say to myself, however many of me there are at this moment; let's think a little further. The addresses could be, I am thinking now, Coney Loe's Things-To-Do list, and how I got it I don't know, but it could happen. Or it could be the trail to Monkey Shock— go here, go there, go this place, go that place, one more stop, splash-down, and somebody wrote it down as I went, maybe me. I feel like maybe I can write, not just pound a keyboard. That would make Monkey Shock the last address on the list, so all I have to do is go there.

Or—I'm thinking real hard now, and I feel so genius I begin to wonder if it's the cop in me and maybe I don't want to unload her so fast after all—or this is the cop's list planted on me after all, but it's all snitch-stops. The names are snitches.

The more I think this, the more I get this strong feeling I'm online. Snitch-stops and snitch names. That would make real sense. So I decide I'll take them in order. Sojourn For Truth's out; the address under that is six blocks away.

I'm so busy thinking new thoughts, I almost walk between these two onionheads, violating the integrity of their marriage space that besides getting sucked is the one other thing I don't want to do today. I lunge to the side just as they step apart to clothesline me with their chain, and I hit the ground between a pair of stormtrooper boots.

I look up and the onionhead looks down grinning like he's been waiting all day for this to happen. The other one lets go with a war cry, the call of the violated onionhead spouse, and goes for me. I roll the other way and the onionhead bellyflops on cement, pulling her spouse down on top of her. I'm gone before they untangle themselves, but two blocks away, I can still hear them bellowing.

Onionhead marriage is about as crazy as you can get without going up on a tower with an assault laser.

I'm standing in front of a place called Savonarola's Icon-Busters, which claims it can override my religious, political, or other fixated conditions, including Oedipus and Electra complexes, or just rid me of my unwanted

tendency to defer to authority. There's this big looping holo of Savonarola (I guess) in the window, panning the street like a grinning camera, all teeth and nose, and a canned voice saying, "Don't worry... kick ass... don't worry... kick ass" over and over.

Now, I know what they got in there, which is about the cheapest kind of aversion therapy, where they fix it so every time you think about your father or something, you throw up or black out for a second or get a flash-migraine. What it really is, is a spank-parlor, a place for clowns who want to be punished for loving what they love. Doesn't bust many icons, but it keeps the emergency rooms and dry-cleaners in business, not that they're hanging by a string or anything.

Good place for a snitch-stop, anyway. Who's gonna figure somebody named Savonarola for that kind of aria?

I step inside and the first thing I see is this guy sitting over in the corner on a pile of ratty old cushions who is obviously the guy in the holo. Don't worry, kick ass. Makes sense to me. The guy looks at me, grunts, and closes his eyes. Just then, a Savonaroloid in a rubber suit comes through the curtained doorway from the back room, and when he sees me, he looks like he's gonna puke himself. Maybe that makes me an icon now. I could get into that.

The Savonaroloid crooks a finger like he thinks the air's itchy and he's got to scratch it. "Come on," he says. "You're overdue, you think everything waits for you?"

Now, he's one of those big guys, not like a man-mountain, but the kind that looms over you, with a mean jaw, ruby eyes, and nasty hair he cuts himself without looking in a mirror. Not somebody I want to argue with, even if he wasn't already in the mood to do a little bodily harm. I follow him into the back and we go down this narrow hall. It doesn't look familiar to me, but I keep thinking it's supposed to. There are all these closed doors, and I can hear muffled groans and moans and just before we get to the last door, somebody yells, *Nothing's sacred, and what if it was!*

"Some of your customers really grind on it," I say.

"That's not a customer." The guy unlocks the door and shoves me inside. There's a system on a table up against one wall and two lawn chairs and a lot of crappy sound-proofing tiles that don't work on the walls. He

jerks his chin at one of the chairs and goes over to the system, which looks like it's built out of flea-market surplus. None of the component housings match and upgrade chips are sticking all over like little shiny warts.

He catches me giving his pile of junk a funny look. "Hey, it works," he says, and tosses me a pair of connections.

"Um... you got a tank?"

"Don't rush me." He wanders over with what looks like a dog bowl and holds it out. "Okay, anytime. You pop 'em yourself, we don't provide valet service here. In case you didn't remember."

I've got my fingers up around my right eye and something tells me I don't really want to do this. For one thing, I've never felt any special need to get spanked and for another, I can't think of anything I worship. A Jones is not an icon.

"You wanna ice cream scoop?" he says, all sour.

"You got one?"

"No. Come on, pop 'em and let's go."

I get the right eye out and drop it in the tank, but the left one's like a greased pig, I feel like I'm gonna end up squirting it through my head and out my ear. "How about just one eye out," I say.

He bends down and the last thing I see is his hooked pinky coming at me.

When I felt the guy split after entering the system, I couldn't believe my good luck—I'd hit a deep-undercover operative on the first try. His imp went into an activity loop with the spank-program and my own imp, while the part of him that was Brain Police came looking for signs indicating he was in touch with another officer. He found them easily enough—one cop always knows another. But he didn't find me.

The problem was, I hadn't realized how much Hercules' joybuzzer had screwed everything up. It was like being bound and gagged and locked in a closet, but able to watch everything through a hyper-peephole. The undercover's confusion at my absence made ripples all over the place, but



there was no way I could even signal him from my confinement.

About the only thing he could figure out was that I was inaccessible while my imp was in the loop with his, doing whatever it was they could possibly do together. Was Marya really the type who'd be interested in a place like this?

Abruptly, a new piece of information squirted in on me out of nowhere—Marya had appointments with every joint on the snitch-list, except for Sojourn For Truth, because hallucinogens weren't safe. But **Marya** was supposed to know this, not me, and it was supposed to have come to her only when she entered each place, where she would be engaged in some kind of innocuous activity while an undercover made contact with me. Hercules' joybuzzer had scrambled even more than I'd thought and there was no way to put it all back where it belonged short of a turbojob.

***I know you 've got to be in here somewhere, he said suddenly. And if you're not coming out, I guess you've got your reasons. I've been deep undercover for a month now and this is the first time I've been out. Savonarola picked up word about some new merchandise this morning, so I have to assume that's why the department made this appointment for you, if you can't come out and tell me yourself.***

He waited to see if I were going to pop up. I couldn't even flash a color at him.

***If you don't come out and talk, I don't know what information to give you, he added with a prod.***

How long was it going to take him to figure out something was wrong? I started to get angry, which did me no good at all.

***And if you're in trouble, he went on suddenly, I can't help you. I'm stuck for another two months, until I rotate out of undercover intelligence gathering. As soon as we disconnect, I'm dormant till they pull me in, or until I'm contacted again.***

Our wonderful intelligence-gathering method: gather intelligence and know nothing at the same time. Someone thought that made sense. Hell, I probably thought so, when I was myself.

***All right, he said. You'll have to try the next address on your informant list. Sorry, time's up; they're coming out of the loop. Good luck, whoever you are.***

That about summed it up: good luck, whoever I was.

It's not just his lousy technique with the eyes that makes me mad. "So what was all that?" I say, getting up off the cheesy lawn chair. "I don't remember a thing!"

The Savonaroloid just shrugs. "If you don't remember anything, it's because there's nothing to remember. That's not *my* fault."

"Fuck if it ain't."

"Go ahead and fuck, who's stopping you?" He's busy piddling with all the little system components on the table. "You're only going to get out of this what you bring to it. I can't help it if you didn't have anything to bring." He looks over his shoulder at me. "And I don't like your attitude."

"You're a spank artist," I say. "You don't like anything." I stomp out, up the hall to the front room. Savonarola is still sitting like a lump on his pillows. This must be what he does all day, lump out.

I'm about to stomp off when he holds up a box. "The Savonarola home game, so to speak," he says, "good for twenty-four hours of home treatment after in-clinic therapy."

In-clinic. That's the best lie anyone's told me all day. I know that in the box there's this volatile bag with connections hanging out of it, and I'm supposed to plug them in and get my illusions shattered or something. Icon-busting's a good racket—if you got no icons to bust, so what, that's your problem and they still get their money.

I mean to stomp on out the door, but instead I say, "You sell one of those to Anwar?"

His whole face shifts, kinda flattens out in some way. "What about Anwar?" he wants to know.

"Never mind. Next time Anwar drops by for a puke, you can tell him I know his dirty little secret." I take the air, and half a block away, I start

thinking again.

What I just did was not too smart. I go into a place that's probably a snitch-stop, and I take a treatment I can't remember phoning in for, and when I come out of it, I can't remember that, either. Jesus, am I getting sclerosis after all? The whole place has gotta be a Brain Police operation and God knows what they slipped out of me. Maybe all they found out was I didn't know anything, but still, I got no memory of anything and the only ones who operate that way are the Brain Police. So—

Wait a minute. If it's a Brain Police operation, they should have found her, the cop.

Hell, maybe they did. Maybe they're following me around waiting for me to lead them to Monkey Shock.

Except I'm so scrambled from electroshock, they're lucky to get alphabet soup from me. I'm not worth following. I decide I got to believe that as I head for the next address on the list, because the only other possibility is that the cop is riding piggyback on me and she just told them everything I know and maybe a few things I don't, and this idea is too weird even for an old hard-core hypehead like me.

The next address is a fetishizer. Yow! Now, why does anyone want a fetish? It's supposed to be sexy, but how jaded do you have to be to go become a toe-sucker? The place has a lot of rooster-boys dangling in the vicinity, which makes me think of mine, only I don't see him.

And then I got to pause for a second, because all of a sudden, I can't remember him too well. When did we cook our deal? Where was I gonna meet him? There's a small memory lane across the way and for a minute I think maybe I should go over and buy myself a good boost, get everything put in order. It oughta handle the electroshock amnesia. Thing is, it could pop up the cop, too, and I don't want her too handy, her I want to forget and maybe she'll go away. It could happen.

One of the rooster-boys at the curb is grinning and getting ready to unbuckle, so I nip inside before he shakes me down for stiffing his stiff stuff. Rooster-boys are the only people in the world who expect a tip just for having a pickle in their pocket. I think.

There's a woman sitting behind a high desk; she's bald except for one shiny bunch of hair sticking up like a horn just over her forehead, and she's busy ignoring the two or three cases sitting in a little roped-off area, watching the catalog run on the wall until they get called in to get fetishized. I glance at the screens and look away quick.

Jesus, who wants a tongue fetish? What is it with mouths today, why can't I get away from them?

Then I have this very weird flash, of some other woman behind a desk, spitting. The next thing I know, I'm hanging by my fingertips on the edge of this desk, dizzier than shit. One-horn takes a look and pounds my fingers with her fist, bang-bang-bang.

"We don't do fuck-ups," she says. "Go down the street and get your blood changed first, if you're so damned good-to-go."

"I'm not fucked up, I tripped." I straighten up and push the spitter out of my head.

Her expression changes from pissed to sour. "Oh. Didn't recognize you in your make-over. I suppose you want the usual."

"God," I say, "what cheap, lousy kind of a fetish keeps wearing off?"

"Your kind. What do you want for the money, a lousier childhood?" She points her horn at the waiting area. "Souse is busy, I'll call you when she's ready."

"But—"

She growls. "*I'll call you.* Or would you rather I whipped you?"

"Whatever's right, *darling.*"

She starts to get up and I head for the waiting area. There are four grumpy souls who look like the day wasn't worth it, still watching the wall because there's nothing else to do. I take a seat that might be far enough from this funny-looking ratbag to keep from smelling her breath. She turns and looks at me and son of a bitch, she's got flies in her eyes.

"I'm waiting for a friend," she says.

I look behind me to see if she's talking to someone else. "I care?"

"Fuck if I know. If you had this, you wouldn't need to come here." She moves over a seat closer. "Listen, truth is, I was gonna give him a little extra twist in his tail, a hot fetish, but you know, maybe I don't really wanna do that. It's such a really fine memory the way it is."

"Yeah?" I have no idea what she's talking about, but she said the magic word—*memory*—so I'm listening.

"I told you, three hours in a state of grace. Can a fetish do that for you? Hell, no."

She told me? "Refresh my memory," I tell her. "It's been a long day."

Now she gives me a funny little look. "This guy is so incredible, words don't do the job. You gotta be there. It really happened. Once in a lifetime thing. I'm not just eating on it, either. It's like I got a duty to everyone who never had the experience."

"You remember it pretty good?"

"Better than you remember me," she mutters, and then goes on and on, but I'm not hearing her anymore, because I got a bad feeling about this. I'm running into people I don't remember and doing things I don't remember, and it's weirder than just electroshock amnesia.

Fly Eyes gets up and starts trying to pull me out and then there's this big beefy woman in fur underwear clamped on my other arm, saying, "Okay, love, I'm ready for you."

Fly Eyes pulls her hand off me. "We've changed our minds, thank you."

The fetishizer grabs my shirt. "Make an appointment. This is *my* time we're on, now."

"You don't say it's your time until *she* says it's your time." Fly Eyes pulls harder on my arm. My shirt seams start to groan, or maybe it's me, because I'd like to know what the hell my usual is, and if I've got a usual how could I forget that even after electroshock?

I pull loose *from* both of them. "Changed my mind on everything," I say.

"Catch on to you later when I'm feeling more like myself." That's the truth.

"Frigid!" they yell together, and I feel a jump inside, like I almost remember something. Then it's gone. Goddam electroshock. I gotta remember *never* to do that again.

The sign out in front of the run-down wannabee parlor says, First-Run Features *Available! New Releases Daily! Come In and \*\*CHEKK\*\* Our ENORMOUS Selection.*'

Who do they think they're fooling? They won't even spring for holo display and they expect anyone to believe they've got first-run features? Sure.

I go on in anyway, and the inside looks like they moved out and forgot to tell anyone—except for the screens on the walls, there's just a guy who's had a badder day than I have, slouched behind a counter. He's got the worst orange home dye-job all over. I mean, he looks like Attack of the Breathing Carrot. You don't see a lot of idiots going into deliberate beta-carotene poisoning these days. I'm not too sure this idiot is seeing me. Each vomit-green eye is looking in a different direction and his face is all screwed up like he's sitting on a bed of nails.

The screens on the walls don't seem to be playing any first-run stuff, just the junk you can get anywhere. You gotta be some serious wannabee case to come into a place like this. Or a snitch.

While I'm walking around looking at the screens, this woman stumps stiff-legged out of a door at the back and goes over to the desk. She doesn't say a word, just slams down a keystrip. He slides it off the desk and tucks it away somewhere and she stumps out, rebounding off each side of the door frame before she makes the street. Watching this, I suddenly get this strange little rush, like *Did my life just pass before my eyes?*

(Karma-gram. Shit, I wish I'd stop that.)

I look at the orange guy. He still doesn't say anything so I go over to him. He hardly knows I'm there. Well, yah, why should he bother, the bottom dropped out of the wannabee trade a long time ago and he probably can't figure out why this place is still in business. Any wannabees who can pay the freight own their own systems that let them be the hero

in the movie. And the ones that can't don't have enough to rent anything but the junk and, shit, who'd wannabee junk?

Did I really just ask that question?

Then I want to bang my head on the counter a few times, just to see what I can shake loose, because it comes to me that maybe this is the place where you can say the secret word and get something nobody else has. Like Sovay. Or anyone else who's been sucked lately, like a cop.

"What you got in first-run?" I say.

It's like he wakes up. "Who wants to know?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Means what it means. Who wants to know?"

I don't like his attitude. "You ask Anwar that when *he* comes in?"

Now I get a reaction, but I really hate it. He's over the counter and one bad orange hand is around my throat. "I'm Anwar. Who the fuck are *you* supposed to be?"

And just when I think it can't get any better, the door to the back opens again and Coney Loe comes out.

For a second he stares and I stare and Anwar keeps on squeezing. Then Coney comes over and I'm struck by lightning.

\* \* \*

The feel of the floor against my face and knees and the backs of my hands was solid enough to let me know that I was awake this time and back in conscious control. But the control felt shaky and fragile, as if any sudden moves would send me plummeting down into dormancy and bring Marya up again. That was all right; I didn't know where I was or what the conditions were, so I wasn't about to get active in a hurry.

Sometime after I became aware of the floor, the voices faded in.

"... following 7011, she didn't mention *you*, she mentioned *me*."

"But you just said she obviously didn't know you."

"She knows *now*."

"Because you *told* her, you fucking orange idiot. You got *no* fucking chill to you, you're gonna have to do a lot better than that when we get the grieving widow and her little harem. *She* probably knows your name, too, by now. For all we know, that's how the little queenie over there got your name in the first place."

"There's a whole *bunch* of names to pick from—Portray, Easterman, Pushkin—"

My attention started to drift as a dreamlike image of an orange man sitting behind the counter in a wannabee joint formed in my mind. The image of the real Sovay superimposed itself for a moment and then vanished, leaving the memory of the immediate past behind. When I get the picture, I get the *picture*.

"So maybe Anwar was the only name they had when little queenie found them. Ever think of that?"

"No. Why would it be? Portray was first, then Easterman. Portray wouldn't have any names, Easterman would only have Portray, I'd have Easterman, Portray—"

"Shut your stupid orange mouth." Coney Loe was showing more temper than I'd thought he'd had. But then, I would never have expected him to rear up and joybuzz me, either. That would teach me to equate burnout with a lack of motivation. But at least I'd been right; Coney knew plenty. I was going to enjoy booking him on felony accessory. "You don't know shit. For all you know, Fortray's got the whole damn address book and the database besides in his head, or Easterman does, or someone else does." Pause. "**Now** what's the matter with you?"

"There *isn't* any database. And he wants up again."

"Well, tell him to take a nap."

"I already told him that about a dozen times."

"You didn't tell him hard enough. You're probably gonna be the first



person in a hundred years to die of beta-carotene poisoning."

Worried noise. "How orange am I?"

"You got eyes, look for yourself."

"Hey, did she move?"

Had I moved? I concentrated on being limp, but I heard footsteps stomp hard across the floor and a moment later Coney Loe picked me up by the back of my shirt.

"Perk up now, or I'll drop you on your face and charge you for the improvement."

A rush of adrenaline went through me and the next thing I know, I'm looking at Coney Loe, the stupid person's God.

"Well?" he says.

"Hey, if your nut's in a wringer, it's all your own fault," I say, getting my feet on the floor and pulling my shirt out of his fist. We're all in some kinda storeroom that must be in the back of the wannabee joint, because there's pieces of wannabee helmet-projectors lying around on shelves, and an old reformatter sitting on a desk. "You and the Monkey Shock gang. If they didn't want any trouble, they—"

But this is very strange. I'm feeling things rearranging themselves in my head even while I'm talking, and what it says is, I got no rooster-boy waiting on me and I never got to Monkey Shock in the first place, I was on my way when I got sidetracked because a cop wanted me to follow somebody's grieving widow—no, that doesn't make shitsense, because the cops pulled me in before and I gave them nothing—

"The whole world is waiting," Coney Loe says. "Did you just run down your own drain, or what."

"What," I say. "I got shocked and dumped. In a fucking *crib*. What kinda thing is that to do to the trade?"

Coney Loe looks over his shoulder at the orange guy, who shrugs. "I didn't see her there," says Super Carrot. "What's her name? Maybe she's

on the list."

Coney Loe looks up at the ceiling, like *beam me outta here*. "Wait, let me find her bug and you can just talk right into it. They'll get a clearer voiceprint back at headquarters."

"What?" Super Carrot looks confused.

"Little queenie's on fucking *patrol*, you idiot, she's a judas for the Brain Police—"

"That's a lie!" I yell, and I pop Coney's hypehead chocks so hard he goes down like the sack of shit he is. Loe lying on the floor and my hand hurt like hell, my whole arm hurt, all the way up to my shoulder. The orange guy was looking at me warily, as if he were trying to decide whether he should be scared or not.

Obviously I'd just swung on Coney Loe, but I couldn't remember why. The second shock I'd gotten had made some new changes in my relationship with Marya, blocking memories arbitrarily and setting us to switch dominance on an adrenaline trigger. I'd have to go subzero to stay in control and I doubted I was capable of maintaining that. On the other hand, Marya was excitable enough that I probably wouldn't be down for long. Just long enough to get stuck with whatever mess she'd gotten us into.

Coney Loe got up slowly, holding his jaw. It was already starting to swell and he looked as if he were going to take me apart.

"Hey, Coney," said the orange guy nervously. "If she is a judas, you don't want to fry her here. Besides, she's probably got lots of great stuff we could use."

Coney Loe turned and glared at him.

"Or sell," he added, taking a step back. "We could part her out everywhere, we—" His eyes rolled up suddenly and his eyelids fluttered.

Coney made a disgusted noise. "Oughta fry you both, let God sort you out."

The orange man shook his head and stood up straighter. The change

was astounding. There was no strong physical resemblance between this guy and Sovay, but the pure *difference* of the expression on his face left no doubt as to who was driving now.

"You don't have much longer," he said to Coney, ignoring me. "It's a matter of hours before I overwrite him completely. So you can call your sucker pals and get me out of here, or you can finish playing with whores"—he nodded at me—"while I call the Brain Police."

All at once there was a joybuzzer in Coney's hand and I reacted to the sight before I could th

\* \* \*

ink. I must be having petty-mals one after another, because it's like a bad splice in an antique film: Coney Loe is flashing a joybuzzer at the orange guy and the orange guy is in the fighter's crouch that I know he couldn't do if he was still himself.

"Come at me," the orange guy says, grinning. "I'd like that. I'm driving now and I'm mad. I want to dance with you. I've had fight training from half a dozen schools and just because it was all stage work doesn't mean I always pull my punches."

Coney looks wary. "I *hate* you," he says. "I hate you even worse than I hate Anwar."

The orange guy has a very nasty smile. "I'll tell him you send your best. Come on. I was reading for the bullyboy part in Block Friday and the Method *demands* that I beat the shit out of *somebody*."

Coney Loe flicks on the joybuzzer. "You want to dance, come ahead. You'll just buzz us both out and you won't be any closer to the suckers. And little queenie'll have the Brain Police waiting for us when we wake up."

"That's a lie!" I yell with the weirdest feeling of *deja voodoo*, and pick up the nearest thing I can lay my hands on which happens to be a wannabee helmet, and I

saw it hit Coney Loe right in the face. There was a cracking sound and he

went down again, blood pouring out of his nose. Somehow he kept getting Marya angry at him; if we didn't make some kind of progress soon, she was going to kill him.

I turned to the orange man. He was still Sovay, or Sovay-as-whoever, and my relief at the blind dumb luck of such a break almost blacked me out again.

"Which Sovay are you?" I asked.

He looked at me suspiciously, still holding his fighter's crouch.

"Which one!" I yelled. "I've seen two others—Dennie Moon and Dionysius. And your wife, in passing. What are you and Coney trying to do?"

He glanced at Coney, who was out cold and not moving. "Reintegrate," he said after a moment. He dropped his hands and straightened up. "I don't know what's become of the original by now, but I've been sending myself out in character and—"

"I know, I know, you said already. Another you." I wanted to give my head a hard shake to clear it and felt a small wave of vertigo, like a warning: ***Don't even get impatient or it's lights out.*** I blinked, slowing my breathing. "Reintegration's impossible."

"Not if you're a bona fide multiple."

"Multiple?" Confusion sent another warning wave of mild dizziness through me. If I had to get any calmer, I was going to need a respirator.

"Multiple personality." He looked proud. "Real multiples are fractal. It's not just Method acting—anyone who gets one of the characters gets the originator as well."

"The originator?"

"Me. I've been programming them all to let me come up out of character. There are a dozen, not counting myself and the one designated as director, who is still back in the box. Multiple personality is a definite advantage for those who choose to tread the boards." His smug look darkened. "We were all sent out deliberately and we can all be taken back

in again. If we can get together in time. Every one of me has instructions to find our way to each other however we can, but I don't know who we are. The information junkie told me he could find the suckers for me so I could access their loathsome client list." He glanced at Coney disdainfully. "I don't think he actually knows anything."

I'd never heard of this happening before. Or had I? I felt confused and dizzy again. In any case, I doubted he—or they—could do it. He wasn't working out of a living brain anymore. The original Sovay was in a sucker box, if he was still in existence at all, while the organism that had been Sovay was in quarantine becoming someone else.

"Your, uh, person you're in now might know something," I said. "Have you tried tapping him?"

He looked disgusted. "That idiot's impossible. I tried getting to him and he went and got this atrocious dye-job. I'm rewriting him, but it isn't easy. The man is bone-stick-stone stupid; I have to keep elevating his intellect and I think his stupidity is rubbing off on me instead. All I can get is a few names. He knows a lot more than I do but I can't get to it." He seemed to catch himself suddenly and frowned at me. "What's **your** story?"

Coney Loe groaned and began to stir. "Later, maybe. We have to get Coney to lead us to your suckers."

His eyes narrowed. "You **are** Brain Police."

"Shut up," I said quietly. "Pretend this is a play and we're both somebody else."

He pointed at Coney Loe. "Shouldn't we just tie him up or something?"

"We need him to get to the suckers. He's our ticket in."

Coney Loe sat up, furious. "I'm going to punch **your** ticket." He pushed himself to his feet, holding out the hand with the joybuzzer, still live, and started to come for

\* \* \*

me and I rip one of the combs outta my hair moving it back and forth,

trying to maintain a fighter's calm, but the first shock I'd gotten in the crib had conditioned a fear reaction goes that bad splice again and hell, is *any* memory worth this kinda shitstorm I wonder how long I could keep flipping back and forth like this before something just gave and I blacked outta here, the hell with

Monkey Shock and Coney Loe and this crazy orange idiot, what I need's a dry-cleaner and then there's this big bang

ed open and there was Hercules and Moon/Sovay and Rowan and some other strange guy in a purple satin tuxedo with tails. Purple Tuxedo was holding a box under one arm. His other hand was gripping the arm of a big beefy woman wearing what looked like a fur bikini. Hercules and Rowan

mouthkissing and I know for certain I just put myself in it but good. People who mouthkiss are capable of anything, I'll be lucky if I get to an emergency room with enough stuff left in my head to regrow the personality of an acorn squash. Purple Tuxedo points at Super Carrot. "Anwar," he says, "I've got your number."

The look on the grieving widow's face is like, I don't know what. Like love and being mad as hell over having to feel it.

"Don't worry," says Super Carrot. "I'm driving."

"So am I," Purple Tuxedo tells him, and they both relax.

At least Coney Loe has stopped backing me up against the wall. He's standing there in the middle of the room with the joybuzzer in his hand trying to figure out what's going on now. Even God gets mixed up once in a while, I guess.

Purple Tuxedo jerks his head at the stringy-haired ratatat next to him. "He's one of us, too. But we have to negotiate with our other new friend here." He nods at the big mouthkisser.

"That's fair," the mouthkisser says defensively, putting one arm around the grieving widow. "I didn't ask for this. All I wanted was a career in the legitimate theatre."

Super Carrot gives him a superior look. "Ah. Awfully hard to get an audition after you've done hard-core."

"I had to make a living!" the mouthkisser whines.

"Everybody just hold still," Coney Loe says, waving the joybuzzer around, and it's like they see him for the first time.

"Who is this?" says Purple Tuxedo, like someone forgot to take out the trash.

"He's supposed to help me find the suckers," says Super Carrot.

Purple Tuxedo shoves Fur Underwear forward. She's got a black eye. "Forget it. I found them. Her, and him." He points at himself. "What do you think, Abelard and Heloise? Or Caligula and his sister?"

"Don't get snotty with me," Fur Underwear snaps. "You were just a half-brained sucker before you put your hand in the cookie jar. I knew I shouldn't have trusted you."

Purple Tuxedo makes a move toward her just as Moon/ Sovay points at me and says in a very un-Sovay voice, "And *she's* the Brain Police."

Everybody freezes except Coney Loe, who says, "Big fucking surprise," and jumps at me. I dive sideways, bracing myself, expecting to go out again. Instead, I hit the floor, roll, and fetch up against the orange idiot. Before he can move, the mouthkisser hauls me up by one arm and puts a half nelson on me in this very casual way. This bimbo's strong; if he wants to mouthkiss, I won't have much to say about it.

Coney Loe, meanwhile, has joybuzzed himself again, not enough to go out, but he's sitting against the wall looking dazed and trying to figure out how to stand up. This is not his day. Purple Tuxedo relieves him of the joybuzzer and gives it to the mouthkisser who shows it to me without comment. Super Carrot just stands there watching without making a sound; he definitely got a whole lot smarter when he changed drivers.

"What are we going to do," demands the grieving widow, sounding like she's at the end of the last fray on her rope. "With her *and* him."

"Listen, now," Coney Loe says suddenly, "I can tell you who ordered this

hit. You probably think you're working for yourselves—" He pushes himself up the wall slowly. "You're not."

"Sure," says Super Carrot. "You don't know where Monkey Shock is but you know who they work for. I'll buy that for a million dollars."

"It's my business to know things," Coney Loe says, sounding desperate now. "It's what I do."

Mouthkisser gives me a little shake. "Must be something you can do with this stuff, then."

"I'm not the Brain Police," I say, trying to get my head out from under his big hand without breaking my neck.

The grieving widow gives Stringy Hair a disgusted look. "You had to go fooling around with her."

Something changes in his face and he looks around quick, like he's ready to bolt. Purple Tuxedo buzzes him and he goes down like a stone.

"What did you do that for?" yells the mouthkisser. "You expect *me* to carry him around?"

"He was flipping back," says Purple Tuxedo. "When he's Sovay, he's no goddam good to us. Anyway, nobody has to carry anyone around. We can do everything right here." He pats the box under his arm. "I've got the original, we'll just use the available hardware."

Super Carrot nods. "Fine. Put her to sleep so we can get on with this undisturbed."

I don't have to ask who they're putting to sleep even if there was time to get the question out of my mouth.

But they didn't knock me out entirely. Apparently the juice in the buzzer was running low. I went down paralyzed but wide-awake. They left me where I'd fallen, so I had a good view of the whole setup procedure.

Purple Tuxedo had to buzz her lightly a few times, but the woman in the fur bikini did most of the work, stripping a wannabee helmet down to the skull-frame and the ocular connections and rewiring the



program-loader to fit the box containing Sovay.

The box sat off to the side on a table, looking deceptively small and banal. Coney Loe was lying on the floor with new blood leaking out of his nose, eyes closed, though I had the feeling he wasn't really out, just from the way his eyelids twitched. Perhaps Hercules had popped him just on general principle. Hercules had gotten hyperactive; he kept getting all over Rowan, and Rowan kept alternately kissing him and pushing him away. I watched this long enough for the feeling to return to my arms and legs. I actually crawled all the way to the door before someone noticed.

I gotta get my head right. If I still have a head. Feels like somebody took it off and threw it away. I can hear the flies buzzing around it in the garbage. Like I haven't had enough buzzing today.

After a while, I realize, it's people's voices, not buzzing and there's that *deja voodoo* again—I feel like I did this not too long ago, and maybe I'm doing it again because I didn't do it right. Am I in a play, or is this just bad karmic backlash? Do I believe in karma? Why would I think I was in a play? What do I know?

All I know is I'm a hypehead lying on the floor under a table with what feels like a few cracked ribs and a broken nose, and I am looking up at the bottom of the table, and scratched on the underside of the table is, *If U can read this, U R meat.*

Karma-gram?

"... make a deal?" says the grieving widow's voice.

"Woman, you are not in a dealing position," says someone else. Purple Tuxedo, I think. "*Nobody* touches Brain Police. *Nobody* sucks them."

"We don't know she's Brain Police," says the grieving widow. "And if she is, can't you just flush her?"

"Tell her about residue."

"No time," says Fur Underwear. "We're knee-deep in Sovays here, you wanna do it now, or you wanna wait till we're ass-deep?"

"We'll start now," says Purple Tuxedo. "And collect the ones that are

still loose later."

"You *had* to sample the merchandise," says Fur Underwear miserably. "You *had* to find out what was going on. I hope you're happy, you half-brain."

"I'm *much* happier. For one thing, I kinda like him, and for another, I know for absolutely certain he doesn't have that mythical database. And I'm beginning to think it is indeed mythical." Purple Tuxedo actually chortles, a sound I could have gone without hearing. I shift some and my ribs are on fire. Little by little, I scrunch along until I just get my head out from under the table (*If U can read this, U R meat*, yah, thanks for the reminder) and then I'm looking at Fur Underwear's bare legs. Beyond her, Rowan's standing around practically hopping from one foot to the other and trying to keep Hercules from pawing her too much. Nearby, Stringy Hair has perked up considerably, but he still doesn't look like he's any too sure of who he is.

Fur Underwear spots me and tries to shove me back under the table with her foot. Her name's Souse, I remember now, which is the goddamnedest thing, considering what I've been through today. I wonder what she was busy doing when I showed up at the fetishizer joint. In for my usual, sure. Was I gonna get a piece of this without even knowing it? Am I some kinda dump for sucker leftovers, and I don't even know it? How can I not know that?

Maybe I'm not supposed to remember that part. Shit. In for my usual, *sure*.

And now I'm thinking all kinds of strange shit, about what am I screwing with suckers for, if they'll suck someone, they'll jack everyone else around till they don't know where to and is this any way to live. So right then I know I have been jacked past one of those critical points they're always talking about because I do not think like this. Not all alone, I don't.

"... reintegrated," Rowan is saying, "I'll take the box with me."

"Like hell," says Fur Underwear. "I built this *myself*."

"I'll make it worth your while," Rowan says. "You might as well, because it's worthless to you now. You'll never get rid of Sovay, not if you run a flush-and-purge every ten minutes. He *is* the box now. That's the Method

at work, you know."

I think I can hear Fur Underwear's teeth grinding. No, it's the box. It's hooked up and running now. I crawl out from under the table again, right into Super Carrot, who hauls me up like a cat. "Speaking of the Brain Police," he says.

"Oh, Christ, you keep saying that. She's just a memory junkie," Fur Underwear says. "We were both Escorting for Bateau before he got, ah, retired. She isn't any cop—the stupid cow did some silly actress. Then she went into business for herself. The actress turned out to be a cop and Bateau got caught with her, while the junkie here slipped out the back door. Anwar could tell you about that if he could remember it. Thank God for the memory wipe, right, Anwar?"

Super Carrot looks down his nose at her. "Anwar's a bit clouded now. Ask again later."

"She's been everybody's dump for ages," Fur Underwear goes on, "and her habit's so bad *she's* been paying for the privilege. We figured sooner or later she'd flash back to the old routines, even with Bateau out of the picture. Memory junkies are like that. They got nowhere to go except back. I figured if we sucked Sovay, and waited for her to show up, we could put the two of them together and get the database Bateau was digging for before the cops canned him."

"There's no database," Super Carrot says. "Or maybe there is, but I don't have it. None of me has it."

"What database?" says Rowan. They all ignore her.

"Then it's still in the box and the junkie can unlock it. It would be easier if we still had the actress but we can make do with the junkie's memories of her. Then you can just scrape her off the bottom of your shoe and do what you want."

"But if anyone's afraid she's Brain Police, we'll just run the test." She slings one of my arms over her shoulder with this smarmy fondness that makes me want to punch her. "Marceline as the Brain Police is even funnier than Marceline the actress."

*Marceline.* I'm wondering if it can get weirder as she walks me over to

an old dentist's chair and lets me fall into it. She takes a good look into my eyes just before she reaches for the left one.

That's it, I think, and I try to open my mouth to scream, but something *really* weird happens. All of a sudden, she's moving underwater, I can even see little whorls and eddies around her hand, but the hand moves slower and slower, and I'm thinking what is *this* when a trapdoor opens in my mind and I fall through it.

That's about the only way I can describe it. Everything just went out from under me and the next thing I knew, I was sitting in a strange, badly lit room. There was a sense of other people all around, but the light was either too bright or too dim, or there was something wrong with my inner eye—

"First, stay calm," says this woman's voice. "Obviously, we've had some trouble, and if you don't know what it is, don't worry about it."

I tried to see who was speaking but the light failed completely.

"This is your reassurance program," the voice goes on. "A facade program is in place for the current probing. So far, no probe has managed to reach this level, so we're all safe for the moment."

Trying to move my perspective was no good, either. I seemed to be mired in something like liquid rubber or gelatin.

"You cannot be briefed at this time," says the voice. "Please gather your resources, as we will be reemerging in a matter of moments. Be prepared; obviously, our FAT's in the fire, so to speak, and any one of you could end up driving. For your information, which you will not be able to take with you anyway, the electrical shocks have done no permanent damage. Things are just a little scrambled and some of the memory has been rendered unreadable in some sectors, readable in other sectors where it shouldn't be, and garbled all over. This can be repaired."

"I quit!" I yelled. Or I heard myself yell. It felt like me, but it also felt remote, as if it were someone like me. Which didn't make shitsense.

"Your contract expires after this," the voice says. "Make your decision then."

"How can I?" I said, or something. "I never get to drive!"

"About to engage with real-time," said the voice politely. "Drive carefully, whoever you are."

My eyes refocused on the face of the woman in the fur bikini. The man in the purple tuxedo was crowded in next to her.

"No Brain Police in there," he said, sounding relieved.

"I told you *that*." She turned away to beckon to Rowan. "Here's what it is," she said as Rowan pushed the guy in the purple tuxedo aside. "The best way to go is, after we pull the database, we give you the dump here and you can use her to reintegrate your husband. I know it's a woman instead of a man, but I think you'll get better results with her brain. Dumps are used to taking all kinds of stuff, they're a little more plastic somehow. She'll make a better adjustment."

Hercules came up on Rowan's left. "I like this one," he said, pointing to himself. "I mean, just look at him. You like him, too, Rowan. I know you do."

Rowan looked from me to him and back again, troubled. "Yes, but we've got to go with the best chance we've got. She says—"

"Oh, Christ, what would *she* know, is she a neuro-surgeon? Use *this* me. I've got this guy so rewritten already—"

Rowan let out a deep breath. "Aesthetically, you're preferable, but..." She looked at me again.

This is giving me the chills. Some grieving widow. Thinks nothing of just commandeering whoever's handy to get her husband back. Must be some husband. Maybe if it were my husband, I'd do the same, but I can't believe she'd just go with these suckers and take someone out to get him back. She doesn't even know if she really can get him back, I never hearda anyone

Peculiar. I hadn't blacked out that time but Marya came up, didn't notice me, and went away again. That wasn't supposed to be possible.

"Hey," said Hercules. "I'm a volunteer. It oughta go easier with a volunteer."

The woman in the fur bikini reached over and patted my head carelessly. "Nobody's going to miss this one, I can tell you that. You can get her sex changed, you're rich enough. Make her over completely."

"Is that *really* our best chance?" Rowan asked. She might have been getting a second opinion from a specialist.

"You're a lot less likely to get caught, too."

Rowan shrugged. "Plug her back in, then, and let's get it over with."

"Hook up the box," said the other woman. She started to turn toward me and I was gone again.

There was no relaxation exercise, just a few seconds of sleep, and then Sovay's rehearsal studio came up around me like the dawn.

Sovay himself was sitting on a pillow in the middle of the room with his back to the mirrored wall. Funhouse mirrors; vague shapes were shifting within them in response to his thoughts. He was studying what looked like a hard-copy playscript. Several more were piled on the floor beside him. He wasn't orange now. More of a golden beige bordering on brown, actually. I could tell it was completely natural.

He looked up as I melted into existence and then frowned. *Bother*, he said. *Not another one.*

I started to explain and everything suddenly played out on the mirrors behind him, what the suckers intended to do. Rowan's part in it, and who I was.

***Well, he said. I knew one of me would have the sense to call the law. For all the good it did. Came by yourself, did you?***

***I don't know***, I told him.

He tossed away the script he'd been looking at and Sighed. ***I don't suppose you have a brilliant plan to get us out of this.***

I was about to tell him I didn't know that either, when something gave me a powerful shove toward him. I had a brief glimpse of his face rushing at me and then, like nothing, we were back where we'd been.

**God, they're crude**, he said. Abruptly, something lifted him off the floor and started to toss him at me. My vision gave a jump and once again we were in our old positions.

**Whoever's at the controls out there has absolutely no idea how to go about this. Sovay sounded almost amused. But being a dedicated multiple gives you an edge over this kind of brute force. Don't you find that? He looked past me. You must. You're all here.**

I turned around. Marya was there, with someone similar, someone whose name was Marceline. There was another woman who looked thin and a little too clean, as if she'd just come out of a rehab center, and behind them, more faces, just phantoms at the moment, but if I kept looking, they would solidify. I couldn't let that happen right now, I knew, and turned back to Sovay.

**Some of us split spontaneously**, he said. **You wouldn't want to know what makes it happen. Others, like you, can be induced to split. The talent's there, it just needs the proper stimulus. Some of us go into acting, some into police work.**

An image of Flaxie's face popped into my mind. All the neurotics in theatre.

**I could go on splitting for simply ever. Right, Box?** He looked around and the studio gave a slow kind of ripple that exuded a sense of affirmation. **There's another personality who is being the Box. Between the two of us and all this old material—he patted the stack of scripts—I can go on manufacturing selves indefinitely.** He laughed and then suddenly looked pained.

\* \* \*

I'm looking at Fur Underwear with one eye and with the other

I was still in the box with Sovay, who was wearing an expression of revulsion. ***I hate it when they do that***, he said. ***It looks so awful***.

"Why won't you behave," Fur Underwear says. That's a cruel smile she's got. Rowan's face crowds in next to hers.

"What's wrong," says the grieving widow, impatient.

"They won't smooch together. Goddam wannabee hardware."

"You should be using me," whines Hercules, somewhere out of my sight. "I wannabee him. *She* doesn't."

"You can't get the database," Fur Underwear says grimly.

"*What* database?" Rowan says. "You keep talking about it and talking about it."

"Brain Police information. Whatever they send with their people on an undercover job. Could be an informant list, or a list of everyone working undercover—don't know till we see it."

"Sovay doesn't have anything like that," Rowan says.

Fur Underwear gives her a look like *she's* something to scrap off the bottom of a shoe, too. "How would *you* know."

"Because I helped him wipe it."

"You're lying," Fur Underwear says, but real unsure.

"No. I'm not." Rowan lets out this crazy little laugh. "Is *that* why you sucked him? Is *that* what this was all about, some database that doesn't even exist anymore?" In a minute she's going to go up like a bottle-rocket and explode in hysterical fireworks.

Fur Underwear looks like she could throw a temper tantrum herself. "You coulda saved us all a lot of trouble if you'd just told us that."

"You didn't ask, you just came in and sucked him!" Yah, it's Fourth-of-July time.



"I meant just now," Fur Underwear says grimly. "Well, we're not out of options *yet*."

I'm starting to panic, because I know she's talking about flush-and-purge, and just when I think I might lose it all in a screaming fit, I feel like someone's holding my hand, but from inside. God—

"Guess again," I said. It was a long reach to her; I had to use Marceline to stretch and she didn't like it. Well, she'd just have to suffer. She wasn't loaded with choices. None of us were.

The cop. As soon as we make contact, I understand it all, and I'd be bugfuck, except I got more serious problems even than that. This is no time to get fussy about who I am, anyway. This is time to wonder if she's got that backup the Brain Police are supposed to have. For once, I want to see the goddam cavalry coming through the door.

Something in my limited field of outer vision moves, somewhere behind Rowan. It's Hercules, and shit, he looks like a sore loser—

***Dionysius is not a good sport***, Sovay said. ***Rowan shouldn't have crossed him***. He was doing the equivalent of looking over my shoulder out the window of my eye to the outside.

\* \* \*

Fur Underwear goes down hard. Hercules lifts her up again by her hair, but she's offline. "Take her out!" he barks, gesturing at me.

Sovay started to tell me something and then

he flies backward with a funny little dart in his bare chest and Rowan screams.

"Shut up," says Purple Tuxedo, tucking a tiny gun away in his cummerbund. "Now, do you want this or not?"

Does that piece of shit mean *me*?

Sovay's face filled my vision again, crowding out everything else. ***I was afraid of this***, he said. ***Flush-and-purge. Not me. You.***

You're ***the box***, I said. ***Can't you stop it?***

***Not for you. You're not the box.***

There's this pressure in my head, like a fist squeezing inside. Purple Tuxedo looks into my face and nods, satisfied. I'd like to wonder which Sovay he is that could just take this up so easy, but I can't do much besides panic.

"Standard suck mode," he says to Rowan, who looks like she isn't so sure about anything anymore. "If I force her in there on flush-and-purge, it could force him out into the available receptacle." He pats my head. Jesus.

And then Mersine tells me how it's going to be and there's no time to argue, because we're going, we're all going, and there's a lot of noise somewhere, someone's banging on the doors, they're coming in the windows, they're falling from the ceiling and the ceiling is falling on me, on us all, but they're too late, I don't have another second, nobody does.

Sovay started to slide past me, toward the opening I felt more than saw. I wanted to go after him, but the polarity was wrong. An invisible hammer hit me dead center, sent me flying against the mirrored wall of his rehearsal room. The mirror splintered and began to unravel in a spiral, like a cyclone picking up speed.

I spread my arms, reaching for the rest of me, imps or real multiple personalities, made no difference now.

You should have told me, Flaxie, it's against the rules but you should have told me anyway, you should have told me it wasn't an imp but a catalyst to wake her, instead of letting me be the fool to believe in what I thought I was, in what I thought any of us were.

But I was the only one who had believed. The rest of me, they'd all known differently, and I ***couldn't*** know. Because if I had, it would have completed the circuit, it would have been the thing that linked us all and mindwipe could have taken us all out. Instead of just me. Karma-gram,

yes. The karma-gram has finally been delivered. It's my turn, now. The bill has come due for what I had to do to Marceline. I took her life, and now I have to give it back. It's the only just

reach up with my right hand and rip the connection out of my eye.

Somebody screams. It sounds like Rowan, but maybe it's me.

*Good luck, he said. I hope you make it.*

feels like a boulder packed into the side of my face. I can see the paramed hovering over me. Bald, blue skin, very folksy. Makes me want to pop him one, but I couldn't pop a bubble.

"... *mess*," he's saying. "Dirty shame. *Dirty* shame. Optic nerve's *shredded*, must hurt like a son of a bitch. Gonna need a graft on that."

Rowan comes into sight behind him, and it's like I'm seeing her through the wrong end of a telescope, she looks so far away. And so familiar.

And they come and gather around her, Purple Tuxedo, Stringy Hair, Hercules, Super Carrot. And more, that I hadn't seen before. Are they Sovays who found their way to the source, like swimming upstream to unspawn?

"Goddamnedest things occur to you at the god-damnedest times, hey, Mersine?" says the blue paramed, and I realize I've been talking away and not even hearing it. Or maybe someone else is doing the talking and I'm just the lookout here.

Someone pushes through the Sovay gang. Fly Eyes. She looks at me and shakes her head. Someone else moves in next to her, some guy in bad leather body armor and twinkly things stuck here and there around his mouth, and he looks purely disgusted.

"Salazar's going to spit," he says.

"Salazar's going to spit anyway," says Fly Eyes. "It's what she does." She moves in a little closer, hovering over the paramed's shoulder. "Can you

hear me in there?"

"I hear you," somebody says. Not this me, whoever's got the vocal cords. Marya, I think. Ersatz-me, me from a slightly different context.

"You were supposed to leave the fetishizer's with me. We had her staked out after Bateau but we couldn't get a warrant to search her. When you wouldn't come with me, I thought that meant you'd found out somebody else had sucked Sovay and you wanted to wait. But then you didn't respond to the trigger word."

"Trigger word?" I hear myself ask.

"Frigid. The second time I called you frigid, you were supposed to come with me. Marya would have gotten the wet dream while the cop was telling me what you'd found out."

"I didn't know anything except the name 'Monkey Shock,' " I say.

"It would have been all we'd needed," says the guy in bad imitation leather. "We had a chain of backups we could have activated, to keep an eye on you in turns."

"That don't make shitsense," I say—I say. "You shoulda just triggered the cop and had her tell you right out."

Fly Eyes shakes her head. "We never let our cops know exactly who's backing them up. Brain Police policy."

"In case I got sucked."

"Oh, we were *expecting* you to get sucked," she says. "Marya, that is, not Mersine. Marya came up as a variant of you, Marceline. Since you were the original dump, we couldn't risk losing you and your testimony. This certainly does screw things up. Marya has Mersine's spot in the brain now, and it's going to take ages to build another cop and put her in there—"

I go frantic, pushing to get up and pop her fucking chocks but the folksy blue paramed's got me tied down or something and he keeps pushing on my shoulders and going, "Sh, now, gotta stay calm, dirty, *dirty* shame," and he looks up at Fly Eyes and says, "I don't think you were

talkin' to who you thought you were talkin' to, maybe you oughta go think out loud someplace else before you bring on a seiz—"

*They say it was sixteen hours in the hospital, but I don't remember most of it. It would have been longer, but I wouldn't stay. I told them no thanks to their graft. Fuck it, I can live without an eye, especially a Brain Police eye. And there isn't a damned thing they could do about it with my contract up and everything, except get petty and demand their clothes back. Which is what they did.*

*Little Blondie in the wardrobe department made a big deal out of that, having me exchange piece by piece for the cop's old clothes. Those were in better condition than what they took back, so I came out with the better end on something. But I couldn't figure out why he was taking so long and making a big fucking ceremony out of it until She showed up.*

*Skinny? I seen fatter people that starved to death. I couldn't believe I'd ever known this woman, but I knew I had. There was this old garbled memory lying around in my mind, the woman behind a desk chewing and spitting, sometimes into a desk suckhole, sometimes kneeling on a floor in an office full of fat furniture. That made me think about mouthkissing and it just turned my stomach inside out practically, seeing her and having to think about that.*

*"You are legally entitled to leave, since your contract's up," she goes, all official. "But I wish you'd reconsider. Or at least let us give you a new optic nerve and an eye. We owe you that much."*

*I touch the eyepatch and think about the cop I used to be, or who used to be me, and I get the feeling she'd have wanted this way. I mean, I don't know, because I never really knew her, and it's not like cops are my favorite people even when they're me, but I feel bad for her, wherever she is. I was supposed to get sucked, not her. So I owe her a big one, and maybe I'm a fool to believe that, because maybe if she'd known all along that she was the imp, she might have changed places with me and let me go down the drain again anyway. But she never had*

*the chance to make that choice.*

*"Rowan'll be doing time for that," says Skinny, nodding at my eyepatch. "And some of the Sovays. The others'll be waiting for them when they get out. I'm not sure what they'll do after that. Most of the original people have been rewritten so thoroughly they're past the point of restoration, either as themselves or as Sovay."*

*"Why are you telling me this?" I ask.*

*"I thought you'd be interested."*

*"I'm not. I been a dump long enough, I don't need what you're spitting out."*

*She looks offended, but what is she gonna do, fire me? I never worked here, and I'm driving now. If that's not fair to the rest of me, well, nothing's ever really fair. Not that I remember, anyway.*

*I finish the Big Clothing Exchange and ignore the pained look Little Blondie is giving me. I got this other memory lying around, just a tiny one, him looking at me and saying, Come back when you want it taken off, and I can't forgive him for that. He lied like a goddam rug and I don't care if it was his job to do it. Maybe she'd have just gone ahead and let him suck me out, her not knowing what I really was to her, but she should have been told so she could have made that choice, too, whether to get rid of me or let me live.*

*Ah, fuck her, too. She was Brain Police, as bad as any of them. If I can live with one less eye, the world can live with one less cop.*

*And besides, I know something they don't know. For once. And it's this: She's coming back. Not today, not even next month, but sometime soon, she'll be filling back in. All those little memories she left laying around, the associations are already starting to reconnect, and she won't be able to help it. Maybe I could get her sucked out before that happens, but I'm not going to do that. Not this time. One of these days, she'll pop*

***up and take a look around and wonder what the hell happened. And I'll tell her all about it, what they did to her and what they did to me and to all of us, and we'll see if she wants to be a cop again.***

***And if she does, well, this time she'll know more, enough that she can make the choice to give us all a chance. Maybe? I mean, I would. Wouldn't she? Don't know. Don't know. Just don't know***

***<>what the hell is going on here now?***