

Swap-Out

by Shane Tourtellotte

When the world offers almost unlimited options, people may have to set their own limits.

Egan Brock sat down to work early, linking his office mainframe to the back of his shaved head. His personal module was plugged into the center socket of his implant suite, so he worked with the power of three brains. Well, two and a half: the natural item didn't measure up, in his opinion.

Coworkers filed into the office, taking their fastidiously arranged places. Even with telecommuting the modern norm, some people liked to see and interact with a traditionally staffed office. This firm obliged, enticing volunteers from its workforce to occupy an office designed to put forth the perfect impression to walk-in traffic.

Egan thought of it as easy bonus money, when he thought of it at all. Very few of those people came to interact with him, fortunately, so almost nothing distracted him from his work.

He had a fresh cache of designs from the firm's architects to test, and dove in. Every blueprint submitted had to be tested on a range of vulnerabilities, from wind to flood to earthquake to urban attack. Egan oversaw the process, and added some creative ideas of his own when the main programs got a little too predictable.

"Gotcha." The thirty-story office building projected into his optic center was supposed to be impervious to winds up to Category Two hurricane level, but that didn't factor in the channeling effects of nearby edifices. The model swayed and bucked like that old Tacoma Narrows flatfilm, until it collapsed from the puny force of a whole gale.

The spectacle was all numbers and images, but to Egan it was tactile, tickling nerve endings deep inside his head. It wasn't pleasure as such. That was too wet-brained a concept to comprehend the sensation. The buzz he got from sending back the model file with an attachment of its demise was much more old-fashioned.

He plunged back into work. Lunch hour arrived, and Egan ignored the shufflings of his coworkers, heading to the office pantry or out to diners. He worked until twenty before the hour, when his module reminded him to eat. He unplugged the cable with a sigh, got his bag lunch out of a drawer, and worked through it with vigor.

He was almost done when he noticed Kell approaching him. Kelly Borzas was in Accounting, a couple of years younger than he was. Not bad-looking, but hopelessly timid and shallow. The fact that she still had all her hair was proof positive.

"What can I do for you, Kell?" he rapped out.

She took a long second to answer. "You're the office expert on brain adjuncts, Egan. I was wondering ... do you have any advice on my getting one of the new external models?"

Egan snickered. "I think it would suit you perfectly."

"Really?"

"Sure. You're the target market: a shrinking violet who's afraid of change, but not quite blind enough not to see she's falling behind the visionaries. You gladly take what you think is a baby step into modern times -- but Kell, you can't cruise into the future on training wheels."

Kell took a step back. "I was hoping you'd be less dogmatic about this," she said, so slowly to Egan's senses that it took an effort to pay attention. "I've been reading up on the

science, the short-range signal penetration and reception. It looked valid to me."

"Like Eskimo sex," Egan said. "Too many layers between the participants to get the real effect. I'm telling you from experience: if it isn't connected to the brainstem -- " He gave a gentle pat to the module hanging onto his head. " -- you aren't really cybered."

"From experience?" she said. "From experiencing it one way, you mean."

"From experiencing it the right way, since I was nine."

"Nine?" Kell gasped.

Egan relished the moment of shock, and followed it up. "It isn't so bad. Just shear it down to skin in the back, get one little operation..." He watched Kell's hand move protectively toward her hair. "Ah, so that's it."

She dropped her hand. "Didn't you ever find it ... invasive? A violation, physically?"

"I don't have the kind of inhibitions you do. And even if it was, you shouldn't expect gains without a little sacrifice." He looked straight at her for the first time, smirking. "It's called future _shock_, Kell. You can face it, or stay tucked away in the twentieth century. You're welcome to come to my century any time, if that matters."

Kell shook her head. "I should have known," she said to herself, rather sadly, and walked away without elaborating. Egan shrugged, and reached for the cable to plug himself back into work.

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"Have people always been such reactionaries?" Egan exclaimed. "It's a wonder we ever advanced to computers in the first place."

His home computer's voice interface rendered his words into text, and sent them to his friends currently occupying his Zone. Their computers had samples of his speech patterns on file, so they could turn the text back into a good rendering of his voice, thus conserving the bandwidth that always seemed scarce these days.

"It isn't just the wet-brains," Bay said, her voice rendered likewise. "I know a couple of cybered people who are planning on having their implants taken out so they can go with externals."

"What?" he howled. "And I thought Kelly the Hollow Girl was bad. That's -- that's betrayal, turning their backs on human development. What's next, living in trees?"

"Power down, Egan," Garvey said. "I know someone like that myself. She's had trouble with inflammation, the implant area getting infected. She might even have had it removed if there weren't the fallback."

"Now that's just her fault. Some simple maintenance, some hygiene for freak's sake, and she'd be fine. God, I don't understand some people."

"You're being pretty harsh," said Lou. "Even if they're making mistakes, let them. It doesn't affect the rest of us."

"But it does. It retards the whole society, more than usual. Brain implants have existed for a quarter century, and still only 20 percent of people in this country have them. It should be 20 percent still wet-brains, at most. We should have had a cybered president by now. We shouldn't still be the stereotyped minority, played as brainiac zombies in half the stuff you see. Every implant taken out, every person who settles for an external setup, makes it harder on the rest of us."

"So what do we do?" Garvey asked. "Hit-and-run implant surgery?"

"I wish, but it has always been a matter of public opinion. A little constructive ridicule, some 'Where did I leave my brain' jokes, and we might get somewhere. I -- whoa, my kitchen's signaling. Time to refuel. I'll link with you later, gang -- and tell Lynne we missed her tonight."

After a chorus of good-byes, Egan thought a few commands to close his netlink and shut down the computer. He groaned, but his friendly module picked up the slack. He walked to the kitchen to unload the microwave, bending his neck to work out a kink.

Soon he was ready for bed. He undressed, leaving on just briefs and an undershirt, with its extra slack in the neck to accommodate his module. He sat on the edge of his bed, opened the toolkit sitting on his night-table, and picked out a lint and static-free swab. He cleaned out the cable jacks with practiced ease, inserting the swab without needing to feel around for the openings.

For the main socket, he wired himself to a small processor on the table before unhooking his module. Different brushes worked out the three prong-holes. With that finished, Egan picked up and attached his night-module. Technically he wasn't supposed to sleep with an implant, but that was old advice from over-cautious and short-sighted doctors.

He eased himself down on his ergonomic pillow, built with a notch for the hardware, and let himself drift off.

* * *

The smoothness of the dreamscape turned jagged. Shards pierced his brain. His mind began tearing apart.

He awoke, frozen. Gingerly, he moved his head, and felt the prongs click back into place. He lay panting in relief, until the sleep-facilitating program reasserted itself.

I have to find something to stop me from tossing, he thought before falling back to sleep.

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Two weeks later, a pause while a new file uploaded allowed his eyes to drift to the contraption on Kell's head. A thick band arched along her crown, supporting a squarish block at the back of her neck that was also braced on her collarbone. Dense brown hair spilled off both sides of the block, leaving a channel between her shoulder blades.

Egan unhooked from his workstation, walked over, and waited until Kell noticed him. "You're kidding," he said.

She flipped up her monitor visor. "Actually, yes." She smiled at his puzzlement. "It's a test brace, so my doctor can adjust the real thing to minimize the stress on my upper body. This is just a weight," she added, tapping the block.

Egan snorted, exaggerating the natural derision. "And you expect to go out in public looking like that. Boy, if you thought losing the Rapunzel look was going to crimp your social life -- "

"It's only for work. The company will cover most of the cost that way. When I go home, it stays here." She arched an eyebrow at him. "That's all I ever meant it to be."

He leaned in close. "That's not all it will be. You'll find out. You'll want to use it for something outside work, just for convenience. Then it'll be something more, and something more, until it becomes a part of your life." He ignored Kell's shudder. "So since that's going to happen anyway, why not go all the way?"

"Anything I can help with, Mister Brock?" Grete Larssen, the office manager, walked up, trying to appear casual.

Egan's tone shifted. "Just inquiring about her ... device." He withdrew to his desk before Larssen could suggest it. He watched Larssen speak to Kell, with a subtle gesture in his direction. Kell shook her head.

Larssen came over. "Work going well, Mister Brock?"

"As well as always," Egan said, jacking back into his workstation.

"You're still comfortable working in an office environment? The position was never required to be permanent. You can return to working from home any time, without prejudicing your standing with the company."

"It would prejudice my bonus. No thanks."

Larssen's voice dropped. "Then recall that this arrangement exists for customer and image relations. We need to look our best."

"And a cyber doesn't look right? That could be fun to argue in court."

"You know I didn't mean that," said Larssen, but she looked shaken. "Nothing insulates you if you're confrontational with other employees."

"I wasn't having a confrontation." Egan called up a model. "I've got nothing against Kelly Borzas -- as an employee."

Larssen walked away, having had enough. Egan knew he wasn't finished, yet.

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He sneaked a camera into work the next day. Fortunately, Kell still had her trial headgear. He snapped a pair of photos without being spotted.

That evening, he and two other pals from his Zone with similar pictures distributed them to one of the largest advocacy websites for cybers. Egan had composed captions, but the webmaster thought them excessive. Egan didn't mind. The ludicrous images spoke for themselves.

Those images got picked up by other sites, and eventually made it to one of the larger newspapers for an article on external brain adjuncts. The piece wasn't derisive enough of externals for Egan's tastes, but it was a start.

Kell had stopped wearing her device the next day. Egan said nothing to her. If she had come to her senses, he didn't want to bungle it with a misplaced word. The next Monday, though, he wished he had said something.

This device looked almost the same as the first, but the big giveaway was the cable now running from the neck-band beneath her right ear to her desktop computer. Kell had gone cyber, in her pathetic little way.

Egan could see from across the room how happy she was with her toy. Officemates were equally enraptured, making excuses to come over and ask questions. He heard Kell answering them, her voice carrying more than usual.

"Yes, much faster."

"No, it doesn't hurt. Not even the tingles Doctor Shea told me about."

"My thinking isn't different. It's ... more. I feel in control, and that's a relief."

She was the center of attention, the same way he was back when fourth grade began. No, not quite. These people were more childlike, all innocence and wonder and uncritical acceptance. Egan's old classmates -- the ones who taunted him, made up insolently clever and humiliating rhymes, or just shunned him -- they had the more adult attitudes.

So typical of people, proclaiming their openness to change, as long as it doesn't change much, doesn't give them some appearance they can't get their minds past. Kids were better. At their most brutal, they were more honest about what they thought.

He had proved himself better than his boyhood tormentors. He'd do it again with this self-satisfied choirgirl playing at being just like him. He had the first step in mind already. All he needed was a couple of days to get himself ready.

* * *

"How's that thing working?"

Kell's half-closed eyes didn't blink. She was probably still having trouble getting

accustomed to internal projection. "All right," she said.

"It's crunching all of your numbers properly? Wait, your desktop always did that job. I guess you just shuffle those numbers into place faster now."

"Oh, I do some of the math myself. I always did. I enjoy it." She opened a drawer on the side closer to him, and lifted out a calculator that had once occupied her desk. "I don't need this anymore, though. Not that I always did before."

"Wow. You're pretty confident of your abilities."

She finally smiled. "I've always been excellent at math. With this," she said, tapping her headset, "I'm faster than ... well, faster than you with your implants, I'd bet."

Egan fought not to grin. This was almost too easy. "Bet? Sounds like a challenge, Kell. Double-entry bookkeeping at ten paces? And the winner gets what?" He started to turn away, affecting marginal interest in the matter. "Maybe gets the loser to take his next pantry duty."

Each employee in the office took weekly turns keeping the pantry clean, a universally detested job. Egan let it float there, like a casual notion, and walked back toward his desk.

"I'm game if you are."

He stopped, grinning. He hadn't angled often, but he knew the feeling of having a fish strike.

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The showdown came on Friday, two days later. Egan and Kell chose Mike Leung to create a suitably complex accounting problem, at the cost of the loser taking over Mike's next pantry shift as well. They petitioned Larssen to let them hold the match during a lunch hour at the office. Egan let Kell do the convincing, knowing Larssen would mistrust him.

Noon arrived on Friday. The other workers moved the two receptionists' machines into the main office area. They had identical capabilities to make things fair, and the only external monitors in the office to allow for spectators. Kell offered her hand before they sat down, and Egan took it with a good simulation of sportsmanship.

Over half the office stuck around to watch. Most of them hovered around Kell. Egan did not mind. Sympathies are always with the underdogs -- until they get trounced, and the winner's domination is all you remember.

Mike walked up with two jewel cases, and placed their contents in each separate disk tray. "On my word 'go,' push your buttons to insert the disks. You will have to calculate net balances for three separate dates, which are listed. Faster time wins. If you get one answer wrong, I double your elapsed time as a penalty. Get two wrong, and you're disqualified." He raised a stopwatch. "Ready, set, go!"

Egan got off an instant slower, and the data that then flooded into his head daunted him. Mike had created an utter tangle of receipts, remittances, accounts payable and receivable, interest tables, and all of it jumbled together, so randomized that there was no underlying pattern for Egan to find and exploit. Mike had earned his pantry relief.

That was the last thought Egan spared for the outside world, as he plunged into the problem. He had drilled on three varieties of accounting software to prepare himself over the last two nights. He started imposing order with his brains, while the mainframe handled the math. Yes, he could handle this.

She was probably peeking over right now, checking his progress. He counted on that indiscipline to distract her, slow her down. That's how wet-brains worked, and no toy supplement was going to change that.

"Done!"

He unplugged from the computer, leaning back in his chair. He craned his head over

to look at Mike's stopwatch. The top number had stopped at 4:20.06.

"It took my computer half an hour to crunch the numbers, before I randomized the entries," Mike whispered. "You are fast."

"Yeah, I -- "

"Done."

Kell sighed and wiped her forehead. Egan blinked, then looked at the stopwatch again. Kell had finished just fourteen seconds later than he had.

He sat stiffly while Mike consulted a card. "Kell and Egan got the same answers, and the right answers. The winner, and champion, Egan Brock." Mike raised Egan's unresisting arm.

The workers applauded, and some came over to congratulate Egan. More went over to console Kell for her near miss.

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Egan awoke with the same racking questions he had left behind in the night. He linked to his nightstand machine to swap modules, then went into the bathroom to run the shower. He stepped inside with a plastic cap over the back of his head, keeping the important stuff dry, and started obsessing properly.

He should have humiliated her. Instead, she came off as the gallant competitor who fell just short, gaining honor in narrow defeat, winning sympathy. Getting routed by her would not have been much worse.

He was going to get the Stealth Bomb. He didn't care that his Zone pals thought he was overreacting, or that he was lucky to beat her at her specialty. He needed a stronger, faster module, to show them all.

His implanted connections could handle the extra volume. There was always an engineering margin, in bionics or architectural design or anything else. Getting fresh implants would be too costly, and would take him away from work for a week. Kell would know for sure that he'd upgraded, another moral victory for her.

Besides, he didn't trust a hospital to let him perform his own maintenance routines. More reactionary attitudes, clothed in fears of liability suits. They were too bound up in the biological to see things clearly.

He toweled off, and went into his computer room to link to the net. No reason to put off ordering. He needed that Stealth Bomb soon. He needed it now.

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Nobody took a second look when he walked into the office a few days later. The Stealth Bomb was designed to appear just like a regular manufacturer's module, and the match with his old module was perfect. Only its abilities were different.

He held himself back while testing the latest building designs. Doubling his productivity in one day would look unusual. Better to spread it out, make it look more natural -- even though the speed and power pulled at him, begged to be tested to their limits.

It took an effort to separate himself from the mainframe a couple of hours later, to go to Kell's desk. "Yes, Egan?" she said, resignedly.

"You came awfully close to nosing me out last Friday. Interested in a rematch?"

"No, thank you, Egan." Even with that pretend augmentation, she still talked as slowly as a wet-brain. "I can't match your experience with using an adjunct."

"Hey, you're the one with the accounting experience. Then again, sometimes experience counts for less -- say, when one side's got the superior hardware."

Kell's shoulders shifted under their braces. She said nothing.

"Come on, Kell. If you're using second-best equipment, better that you learn that

now."

She still wouldn't look at him. The approach of Larssen sent Egan packing before he could try again. He fumed for the rest of his shift, when work didn't occupy his mind.

He linked up with his Zone that evening, and found Lynne there, returned from her long absence. Conversation stopped dead when his presence registered with them.

"What did I do wrong?" Egan quipped, then more ominously, "Lynne?"

Others started to speak, but Lynne stopped them. "I'm not afraid to tell Egan, any more than I was with you. I had my implants removed three weeks ago, Egan, to switch to externals. I got spooked by some health reports, maybe more than I should have, but it's working out all right."

The screen blurred in Egan's eyes. He grunted, with a small trailing snarl in his throat.

"Now don't be ripping into her," Garvey warned.

"Did I say anything to her?" Egan shot back. "Guess I don't have to. You people already told her exactly what I think. There's no reason for me to be here at all."

And with a thought, he left. He spent a long, listless spell flitting around the net, fastening on anything that kept his brains active, involved, functioning the way they were meant to. Only belatedly did he retire to bed.

Egan went to work the next day doubly determined. No more holding back. Cybers had been too restrained for twenty-five years, almost apologetic, and now willingly diminishing themselves when they had the chance. No, he was going to prove his superiority, leave Kell in his dust.

He worked with fervid intensity. He stayed linked up and operating for the few minutes it took to bolt down lunch. He tried to keep working despite the nagging raps on his shoulder, but the body appearing before him was too imposing to ignore.

"It's half an hour past closing," Grete Larssen said. "Why are you still here?"

"There's still work to do. You go on home. I'm fine here."

"I'm not locking this office with you in it." She put a finger over the computer's power button.

Egan glared scornfully at her, and thought the machine off himself with a wince. "I'll just keep working from home," he said while unjacking.

Larssen looked somber. "I imagine so. Good night, Mister Brock."

He did as he promised, filling with his disaster simulations the time he would have spent in his Zone, and more. He turned in well past midnight, but was up before dawn, returning to the intricacies of the simulations that had followed him into sleep.

He made a show of arriving at the office precisely on time, not a minute early, to spite Larssen. After that, she couldn't stop him from working, putting building models through every test he knew, and a few he thought up on the spot. They all failed eventually. They couldn't resist him in the end.

Soon his work cache was empty. He sent messages to all the firm's architects, asking them to send more. He called on his fellow stress testers working at their homes, cadging excess files from them. Some came, but they didn't last long.

"What do you mean, you don't have any more blueprints? Get on the stick and draft some more. Do they pay you wet-brains out of feelings of charity?"

He felt the presence by his shoulder, but ignored it until she spoke. "Why don't you take the rest of the day off, Mister Brock?" Larssen said. "You look under the weather."

"I'm fine. Just let me work."

"And how much work do you have?"

Her expression was neutral, but Egan could feel the smugness beneath. Had she

planned this?

"Fine," he said, raising his voice. More people joined those looking at them. "But I want it in your work log that I completed everything in my files, and that I'm leaving under protest."

"So noted," she said, raising a handpad to write on it.

Egan braced himself for disconnect, weathered it with a grimace, and walked proudly to the door. He got one last look at the office, and saw Kell walk up to talk to Larssen. Disgusted, he stalked off.

He caught the bus just before it pulled out, boarding by the rear entrance. He sat midway forward, studying the passengers around him: their gestures, where they looked, whom they talked to and in what tones. They were all so transparent.

A woman laughed, and he stared her down. "I'm not a freak," he snarled, and she couldn't muster a response.

He turned away sullenly. "I'm better than you. I'm better than all of you. I embrace progress. I commune with the future. I've made it part of me. But you people -- not one of you is cybered. You're all weak. You're all afraid!" A few of them looked it, too.

"Pipe down back there," the driver growled, "or I'll toss you off this bus."

"Might as well," he said, standing. "This is my stop." He took a look back at them all from the front, as the bus stopped. Something in the back caught his eye, someone he hadn't noticed before. A bowed head obscured the face, but exposed the long brown tresses.

Egan hastened off the bus, stumbling at the curb. He was getting paranoid, seeing things. Maybe he did need a break. He knew just the relaxation webpage he could plug into.

He reached the apartment building door as the bus lurched past. He stroked the touchscreen of the security computer, for voice recognition. "Let me in."

"Me too, Egan."

He whipped his head around. He was seeing Kell again, right behind him.

"Confirmation, please," said the computer. "Include or exclude companion?"

"It doesn't matter. She isn't there." He hauled the door open, and crossed the lobby.

"I am here," he heard behind him. "Egan, you're blazing hot and turning delirious. You need medical help."

"No doctors, thank you." He pushed the elevator button, got inside, and saw with annoyance that Kell, or whatever, followed him. "They wouldn't know how to treat me. I'm beyond them. They'd probably withhold my sleep module, and see where that would get me."

He shut his eyes, shook his head, and opened them again. "Still there. I'm gonna demand a refund. Their module's buggy." He grinned lopsidedly. "Still, it's got power. You're the most convincing human simulation I've ever seen -- but why you? No, it's obvious. You're so insubstantial in real life, and here you are insubstantial now. Might as well be the real you."

Egan exited into the hallway. "I must be persecuting myself, generating you. Getting beaten by you was bad enough; now you're haunting me. Open." He walked into his apartment. "You'll understand if I don't invite you in, but I suppose you'll walk through the walls. I -- I..."

The floor felt soothing, after the initial bump. He felt hands on him, fumbling toward his neck. He slapped them away ferociously. "Don't you touch that! Murderer!"

The hands moved to his midsection, and dragged him onto the couch. He curled

himself tight, pushing his module into the corner. Then he began to drift, as the apartment dissolved into myriads of fluctuating data points.

There were sounds at intervals: what sounded like a woman making a phone call, a wooden rapping, a hushed conversation. He was lifted again. He locked his arms tight around the back of his head, hitting something hard that gave a yelp of pain. He alighted somewhere soft, and felt damp coolness on his head from something that covered his eyes.

"I've seen this before, Kelly," said a man's voice. "It isn't as rare as I'd like. His module's processing power is probably past the rating of his implant. It causes excessive electrical activity in the spliced nerves, and the areas of his brain stimulated by the augmented cognition. It creates a feedback cycle in his neurotransmitter use and production, which causes psychological dysfunctions, but it also triggers an autoimmune response we don't quite grasp yet. That produces the fever, worsening the existing symptoms."

"Is he --" Kell lowered her voice, a futile gesture. "Is his life in danger?"

"The fever's rather easily controlled. The neurotransmitter cascade will burn itself out." A sigh. "I may be trained in cyber-dependence, but I'm still just an attendant. I'd feel better with a doctor here."

"He said no doctors, John."

"Sure did," Egan thought he said.

"Yes, and you had to be honest enough to tell me that. But the law's on his side, so we're stuck." There was a settling sound. "So many cybers push themselves too far. With that extra thinking capacity, you'd think they would know better. It's tough to have sympathy sometimes."

He didn't want sympathy. He tried to tell them, but his thoughts didn't get through. Must be a bandwidth bottleneck. Just like wet-brains.

"He told me recently he got his first implants at age nine."

"Nine? Hmf. I take that back. Having that feeling of superiority instilled from a young age, when he isn't in control of his life? I can understand him better now."

He didn't understand anything. It was inferiority, being the slow one in class, enduring the kids' teasing, and the teachers who frowned or pitied. He knew how desperate his parents were, knew the sacrifices they had to make to help him, knew that it was his fault. Why would he want to return to that life, to retreat one inch toward it? Why would anyone not want to escape from mediocrity? He found the way. Why couldn't they?

Something brushed his cheek. "He was right about me. I was holding back, afraid of changing myself. When externals came out, that gave me a way around the dilemma. Now I'm afraid again, afraid that I'll end up like him."

"External adjuncts mitigate the neurological effects. The signals impinge on more nerves than the direct connections, spreading out the load."

"I don't mean the physical breakdown, John. I mean losing control of myself, turning egotistical, obsessed, as intolerant of change as ... as he thinks I am."

Egan tried to look at her, but the damp cloth still covered his eyes, and his arm didn't feel like moving to lift it.

"Or am I rationalizing my prejudices, making excuses for staying safe and detached -- literally?"

Feet shuffled over. "I can't claim expertise on your personality, Kelly, although you strike me as pretty level-headed. As for comparing adjuncts, working with dependents probably colors my judgment."

"But?"

"But externals strike me as the more ... elegant solution. More efficient, less crude. The greatest effect for the least disturbance. That seems rational enough to me."

Kell gave a melancholy chuckle. "So what about Egan? I could keep him comfortable if that was all he needed, but it isn't."

"We can't yank out the module, not against his will. Legality aside, you don't want a cyber holding a grudge against you."

"I always thought that was paranoia, John, the fears of cybers crashing nets, wrecking commerce."

"Probably so, especially with the protections in place today, but one person can still be vulnerable to one other determined, capable person. That's part of why everyone's tiptoed around the issue of cybers as though it were a live grenade. Even a fringe can be dangerous."

The counterarguments bubbled in Egan's mind: that persecuted minorities were the likeliest to become fringes, to lash out; that they would follow the avenue of attack they knew best. He made no effort to express those thoughts. It seemed so futile.

He drifted in and out of catatonia. Sensations on his skin reached him, like the replacing of cold compresses, or the application of a stick-tab thermometer. He held back the urge to fight out of his torpor, husbanding his strength.

His hearing faded out for a while, the silence penetrated only by indistinguishable voices. When he could make out words again, it was John. " -- take the couch."

"No, John, go home and rest. You've helped me enough. I'll stay with him. No argument. It can't be you: He wouldn't recognize you. I'm not convinced he'd know me."

"I know," Egan said.

John grunted. "Call me if he starts saying actual words, or agrees to treatment, or anything."

The roar of his own thoughts running in tightening circles came back. Egan fought out of it, trying to scream. "Why can't you hear me?"

The fourth time he said it, Kell answered. "I can hear you, now."

He cracked his eyes open, and turned his head. "Ow. Ohh, my neck."

"I'm not surprised. You're lying on your module. Would you feel better without it?"

"Ugh. Really subtle, Kell." He gasped for breath. "But yeah." He rolled himself over with painful slowness. "Hand me the wire on the table."

Kell walked around the bed, and picked it up with distaste. "This one?"

"Yeah. That processor will support me. Give it." He saw her hesitate. "It's a less powerful machine. That's what you want, right? Oh!" His thoughts started swirling into a vortex again. "Hurry!"

She moved, but clumsily. Egan took the plug from her searching fingers, and slipped it in on his first try. He took a deep breath, then grasped the module with both hands and pulled. He spasmed, and almost put it back, but Kell's hands came bearing it away. His plea for its return dissolved in his agonies.

"Egan? Egan!"

"Don't -- call -- the Marines." His knees pulled up toward his chest. "It's just -- a long step down." He flopped onto his back, disarranging the bedsheets, and panted. He could feel Kell's firm grip on his shoulder, see her alarm. The world was coming a little closer. He let it, for a long while.

"Why are you here, Kell? Or do you prefer Kelly?"

"Either's fine. My brother-in-law likes 'Kelly.' And how much did you hear?"

"Some. Dunno how much. Now what about my question?"

Kell stepped back. "You were sick. You needed someone looking after you, and -- "

"And what?"

She opened and closed her mouth, then turned half away. "And I didn't think anybody else was going to do it."

Egan said nothing. He shut his eyes, waiting for more of his strength to return. It was some while before he decided it wasn't coming back. "Exhausted."

"It is late. You should get some sleep."

"I should. It's in the drawer." He waved with an arm.

Kell was puzzled, for a second. "Yes, you mentioned a sleep module." She opened the drawer, but would only peer inside. She almost looked guilty at having it in her sight.

"Geez, you'd think it was a drug needle." He reached in, careful not to yank out his connection, and lifted the module onto the night-table. There he stared at it himself.

"What's wrong?"

"I -- " He went silent for a few minutes. "I don't dream anymore, you know. With my modules in, my brain didn't produce enough of the right waves."

"What about when you weren't connected?"

Egan laughed. "The last time I wasn't connected was when I had my last implant replacement, when I stopped growing in college. Eight years ago." Kell exclaimed, but he scarcely noticed. "They produce these modules to stimulate the right pattern of brain waves. It simulates the effect of REM sleep. It gives you changes in the -- the texture of unconsciousness that you can perceive. It doesn't give you dreams." His hand began to slip off the sleep module. "I think I miss dreaming."

Kell mustered a smile. "One step at a time, Egan. One step at a time."

"Yeah." He lifted the module a few inches, then dropped it back into the drawer. "You oughta know by now, Kell, I don't take baby steps." Before she could move, before his reflexes could kick in and stop him, he unplugged the wire from the tabletop processor.

Egan violently clenched into a tuck, whipping the cable by its purchase in his neck. The reaction wasn't physical, but mental. Intensely, tearingly mental, but what remained of his mind clamped down hard to stop it. As Kell held him steady, the tremors subsided.

His eyes stared ahead, hot with fear, but he made himself hiss, "Take it out." Kell detached the wire and stuffed it into the drawer. His body very gradually loosened. Concentrating on each part of his body as it moved distracted him from what was no longer there.

Kell shifted a soft, unmolded pillow under his head. He lay down, wondering at the odd sensation of his neck resting on cool linen. It soothed him, and he felt himself sinking.

He rolled his head, seeing Kell through closing lids. "It's not my style," he whispered, "but you do have nice hair."

"Thank you, Egan," he heard her reply, just before his eyes closed.