

EXIT WITHOUT SAVING, by Ruth Nestvold

Spending credit illegally was difficult, but there were ways, if you were clever. There were always ways. Using a morph unit illegally was even more difficult, but to Mallory it was worth the risk.

Friends like Lorraine made it possible. Lorraine was a lab technician for Softec, and she was both clever and greedy; to make a little extra on the side, she allowed Mallory to use the units during off hours. Mallory had no idea if any of the other morph agents were also clandestine customers—Lorraine could be trusted to keep her mouth shut.

"I don't understand why they don't market these things for entertainment purposes," Lorraine said as she adjusted the download cap on Mallory's head.

"I'm testing them for that," Mallory said, grinning.

Lorraine frowned. "It isn't a joke. Softec just lost Max to identity scramble last month. You be careful, girl."

"I am."

"Hope so. Another thing I don't understand is why *you* of all people feel the need to change shape." She looked pointedly at Mallory's bare breasts, which men had a tendency to describe as perfect.

Mallory glanced in the mirror behind Lorraine and shrugged. She might not have anything to complain about as far as her own appearance was concerned, but that wasn't the point. As a morph, she wasn't tied down to herself, to her own identity; she could get out of it, escape to any shape she wanted, be anyone she wanted.

"It doesn't have anything to do with that, Lorraine."

"Yeah, I know. You're just not an easy gal to satisfy. Now lie down." Looking grim, Lorraine hooked the body Mallory would soon be leaving to the life support system.

Some agents disliked the sensation of the actual morphing process. Mallory was not one of those. As she settled into the cushioned pallet, her stomach was churning in anticipation. On the other side of the transferal equipment was the long, dark morph unit. It looked inanimate, but it was actually a DNA matrix controlled by a neural network. With the mind upload, it would become her home for a couple of hours, and with its assembler technology she could become anything she wanted to be.

"Ready."

But Lorraine didn't start the download immediately, looking instead at Mallory with something other than greed in her dark eyes. "You make sure you tell me if you ever start feeling the effects of brain drain, you hear?"

"Of course," she replied impatiently. It wouldn't happen. Her extra excursions were nothing. She'd never had a bout of dizziness, let alone the more serious symptoms like a fainting spell.

Finally Lorraine began the transferal, and Mallory felt a sense of elation as her mind left her body. She was free.

"Transferal complete," Lorraine said. "Begin anthropomorphing process."

The unit began to take on human shape and sensation, and once done, Mallory adjusted the appearance of the morph to be her own twin, a double of the empty husk lying in the body case on the other bed.

She would change that soon, but she had to leave the Softec complex as she had come—herself.

The bed unit cooled the naked skin of her back, absorbing the warmth created while she morphed. She remained there for a moment, enjoying the sensation of cold against her hot skin.

"I want you back in no more than three hours," Lorraine said. "Well before the next security audit."

Somehow, things always looked more beautiful to her in a morph—even the glistening, rain-wet streets of the Softec corporate zone at night. Of course, the neural network of the unit was enhanced, hearing, sight, and memory all heightened. But it wasn't the neural network that stared at the halos of light beneath the street lamps sparkling on the rain-coated pavement of Pill Hill, marveling at the pattern of shine and shadow. It was her own mind, free of her life, of expectations, free to change and choose.

The Softec complex was fairly close to both Elliot Bay and Broadway and a wide selection of bars and bands. Mallory chose Broadway. On the way, she ducked into an empty alley. It was already dark, but it was better to err on the side of caution. She had chosen her clothes carefully, an androgynous outfit of baggy pants with a draw string which could be let out, a wide silk tank top, loose blazer, and light rain jacket. Behind a garbage bin, she stood with her face to the wall as if she were a man about to relieve himself and loaded an image of the appearance she wanted into her processor-brain. The warmth of the morph process coursed through her veins and along her spine. She could feel her shoulders widening, her chest flattening, her clitoris transforming into a penis. Sweat broke out on her forehead, and she wiped it away with the back of a hand which was now more square than before.

After about five minutes, she left the alley again. Her hair was still the same, a shaggy shoulder-length dark gold, just in case anyone had noticed her enter the alley, but the rest of her was gloriously different.

She had left the female morph agent who couldn't maintain a relationship behind and had become the guy who didn't need one.

Mallory headed for the Down-And-Out, where she could always count on getting good music, and maybe more if everything played out right. She descended the stairs into a generous black and neon room full of noise and flashing light. The band was putting on an elaborate holo show, with half a dozen of each of the band members projected all over the bar. It was still too early to be full, but the illusion kept customers from noticing—it wasn't even ten and the place had people or projections at almost every table.

She sat down at a table off to the side but still close to the front. She liked to be in the thick of things, but while she was morphing, it didn't do to draw attention to herself. There were a few women glancing at her surreptitiously, though—it invariably happened when she morphed into a likeness of her brother Dane.

She wondered where he was now. Not that she cared. He had abandoned them, abandoned her, chosen a life in the burbs, outside of the protective walls of the cities, an enemy of the corporations. Because of him, she had changed her name, had given up the last connection she had to their parents.

The parents who had always loved him best.

Mallory ordered a martini, giving them cash rather than her thumb, and watched the band and the audience, keeping an eye out for someone she might be able to spend an hour with before she had to go back to Softec. While she was trying to choose a candidate, the singer approached. Mallory smiled her most suggestive male smile and was rewarded by an armful of singing female. It was the real singer, not just a holo, and the body she was wearing sprang to life.

They really were fools at Softec for trying to keep morph technology secret; they should be perfecting it for entertainment, not industrial espionage. She wouldn't be the only one addicted to the transformation and the sensations of another body.

The singer continued to sing, pressing her ass into Mallory's lap, while Mallory moved her hips subtly to the music. With time and opportunity, she had often played this game to the end. Perhaps it was strange, but making love to women as a man had never led her to want to try anything with a woman when she was in her own body. The reason she wanted sex as a man was for the male sensations. But she wouldn't want to give up the female sensations permanently either—she wasn't a candidate for a sex change. What Mallory wanted was both.

Everything.

The singer got up, giving her a look of promise, and Mallory returned her attention to her martini and the other guests in the bar. One guest's gaze was trained on her with unusual intensity.

It was her friend Sue.

A fist closed around her stomach, tight. She had morphed to look like her long-lost brother, and her brother looked a hell of a lot like her. Sue was sure to notice the resemblance.

Sue started to get up from her table and Mallory pretended to concentrate on the stage. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Sue winding her way through the tables to her. Mallory got up casually and headed in the direction of the restrooms, but as soon as she was out of sight, she changed directions and exited the bar.

Nervous, she walked fast to the alley she had used for her transformation and leaned against the wall as a violent bout of dizziness swept over her. She forced herself to breathe slowly and deeply, and the dizziness faded.

It wasn't brain drain, it couldn't be.

Not her.

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Mallory was not in the best of moods when she went to work the next morning. She didn't much care for office work, the sifting and filing of information on other corporations, keeping abreast of even the faintest rumors of new technological developments which could lead to better weapons or a wider sphere of influence. Alliances between corporations were uneasy in the best of times, and the best of times were rare.

"Have you reconsidered?"

Mallory looked up to find her recently ex boyfriend Ethan leaning against the wall of her cubicle, dark rings under his almond eyes.

"Have you?" she asked back.

Ethan pulled a vacant chair into her cubicle and sat down. "I've been doing some thinking," he said, his voice low.

Mallory nodded. Now he would apologize. They had broken up because Ethan had asked her to give up her position as morph agent before the critical point established by Softec, had asked her to join him in *research*. Agents had to retire all too soon anyway because of the danger of identity scramble, their

minds weakened and lost amid the remnants of all the other minds which once inhabited their morph.

Or at least that was the theory. The unrecoverables among the morph agents could have been the result of *anything*.

Ethan took her hand, gently stroked the skin between thumb and forefinger. "I meant what I said the other day about you giving up morphing, but I'll compromise. I'd like you to take a new test I've been developing for brain drain. If your levels are safe, I won't say anything else about you working as a morph agent during your remaining time."

She stared at him, panic taking hold of her gut. Why would he ask that? Did he know about her illicit morphing activities? She pulled her hand out of his. "This test, it's not official yet, is it?"

He shook his head.

"So you want me to act as your guinea pig?"

"You know it's not that."

"It isn't, huh?" She couldn't keep the anger out of her voice. "Just because Softec doesn't even know yet what exactly happens in the case of identity scramble doesn't mean I'll put up with experiments being done on me."

"It's not an experiment, Mallory."

"Of course it is. I'm not allowing you to use me."

Ethan pursed his lips. "Perhaps I shouldn't have asked you to quit, but just doing a test for my peace of mind—is that really too much to ask?"

Mallory glared at him. "You just want a reason to make me stop."

He leaned forward, searching her eyes. "You really think that?"

Mallory looked away. "I don't know what to think."

"And you won't do the test?"

"No."

Ethan stood up, pursing his lips. "I thought I was coming halfway with this. But you don't want to meet me, you just want me to follow you."

"*You* want me to give up morphing."

"Because I worry about you."

"Because you're selfish."

"No, Mallory, you're the one who's selfish." With that, he left. Mallory told herself she was glad.

By the end of the week, it was obvious Ethan wasn't coming back a second time. It didn't matter. He wasn't willing to let her run her life the way she wanted, and it wasn't in her nature to mourn. She'd learned long ago how useless that was.

So Ethan was gone too. She would get over it.

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She and Sue were scheduled for a morph job at Hypersystems the next week, and they met daily to plan the sting.

"You have a brother, don't you?" Sue suddenly asked one afternoon while they were going over the floor plan of the Hypersystems building in the holo well of Mallory's desk unit.

Mallory nodded curtly. "Why do you ask?" Of course, she knew why Sue was asking—she'd been expecting it ever since the incident in the bar, but all they had talked about had been her break-up with Ethan.

"I think I might have seen him last week."

"What makes you think that?"

"I saw a guy at the Down-and-Out who looked a lot like you."

"I doubt if it was Dane." The blood was going to her head and she shook it briefly to rid herself of the feeling.

"Funny," Sue said, "The resemblance was uncanny."

"My brother wouldn't dare show his face in Seattle."

"Why not?"

"Look, I don't want to talk about him, okay?" She shouldn't care. Dane was AWOL, hiding out somewhere in the ruins of the burbs, doing God knows what. He'd disappeared a decade ago, leaving his home and family for some cheap ideals. What choice had Seattle and other bankrupt cities had after the epidemics and the depression of twenty years before but to privatize the police force, privatize the cities themselves? Dane and his kind called it selling out, but at least the enclaves of the corporate zones were safe.

At the thought of Dane, Dane whom she had loved and then envied and then hated, her head began to hurt. Heavy, it was so heavy, she couldn't hold it up.

"Mallory? What...?"

The rest of Sue's words sounded as if she were on the other end of a tunnel.

Mallory got up from her desk, fighting a bout of dizziness. "I'll be right back."

Somehow she made it to the restroom. After dousing her face in cold water, she leaned her forehead on her arms on the counter. It was nothing. Thinking about her brother always upset her. There was absolutely no reason to be worried about the morph job next week. None at all.

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Mallory hated windshield wipers, but the heavy mist was too much to leave them off. It was a gray, dismal day, and not even the exhilaration of being in a morph, of heading south to the Renton corporate zone on a new job could keep her from feeling low. Besides, she didn't much care for the body she was in: old, male, beginning to show its age despite treatments and appearance adjustments.

Sue was already in the Hypersystems complex, posing as an attractive job applicant. According to their plan, Sue would draw Tom Reich off, chosen for the sting because of his rampant libido. Other agents

had already collected all the information they needed on him in a similar way. Then when Reich was safely out of the building, Mallory would waltz in and take his place—a perfect simulation right down to the thumb prints.

She parked the car just outside of Hypersystems and waited until she received word that Sue and Reich were far enough away. Then she pulled on a Laurentina raincoat (just like Reich's), opened her umbrella, and walked the short distance to the main building. At the entrance, she placed her hand on the identification panel. "Welcome, Mr. Reich," the security system said. "I thought you had gone home for the evening?"

"I seem to have forgotten my AI. I need to go back up and take a look around."

"Good luck." She could have sworn there was sarcasm in the security system voice.

Adrenalin from the danger of being caught slowly began to banish the depression she'd been feeling earlier. She walked briskly through the halls to Reich's office, opened the door with her (his) palm, locked the door behind her, and sat down in the desk chair. "System active."

"Active." Reich had programmed his computer with a low, slow female voice. Figured.

Morph agents were all trained security experts, and with the voice, thumb, and retina simulation of her morph, she was soon able to access the classified information on tech innovations presently being realized. Of course, the files were all encrypted, but the neural network she occupied and controlled made short work of that final hurdle.

Mallory scanned the information she'd found as the recording function in her neural network stored everything she viewed. Normally during a job of this type, she was only superficially aware of what she was reading, skimming files and plans as quickly as possible to gather all the information she could in the time at her disposal.

But this time, she found herself reading more slowly, reading to understand rather than just reading to store. Most of the material had to do with a so-called RLA—Remote Link Android: essentially, a morph unit without the mind upload. Hypersystems had gotten around the inadequacies of artificial intelligence by creating a kind of remote control technology which would allow corporate agents to control androids from a secured location. And the androids being developed for the purpose were based on an adjustable DNA matrix. Like morph units.

Mallory sat back and stopped reading. The advantages of an RLA from a corporate perspective were immediately obvious. While corporations tended to regard human resources as cheap and easily replaced (and were thus less worried about hypothetical brain drain than Ethan wished), the disadvantage of human agents was that they were unpredictable. Versatile but unpredictable. They could react more quickly in complicated and potentially dangerous social situations than an AI, but they were also prone to human error. An RLA would combine human and artificial intelligence, while making control of agents much easier.

It would also make morphs obsolete.

Her earphone crackled on. "Mal, Reich is heading back to the office—seems he forgot something," came Sue's voice in her ear. "I'm heading back to Hypersystems and will meet you at the southern entrance of the parking lot."

"Ok, shutting down right away," Mallory responded.

But somehow she couldn't. She continued to stare at the model of the android in the small holo well, while her neural network busily stored the images. How long would it take for Softec to recreate the technology from the information she had collected? She didn't know. She suspected they were farther in the actual morphing technology than Hypersystems: adjust the unit for the remote link and equip the neural network with a fully functioning AI and they would have an RLA.

And Mallory would never morph again.

Perhaps Ethan would come back. But perhaps he wouldn't. Perhaps he'd had enough of her, danger or no danger.

Mallory had a headache. Or her morph did.

She shut down the recording function in her morph unit. "Exit."

"Would you like to save your changes?" her internal system asked.

Yes, that was it: she simply would have no material for Softec when she returned. The mission had been cut short. "No."

But there were backups, and she couldn't erase the system before her mind was downloaded again. Somehow, she had to keep Softec from getting the information stored in her unit, despite her efforts.

She had to run.

Mallory turned off Reich's system and left the building, opening her umbrella and pulling the designer raincoat tight around the simulated body of Tom Reich. She was almost to her car when she saw a small brunette bombshell get out of a blue sports car. Sue's morph. She picked up her pace.

"Mallory!"

She glanced over her shoulder. Sue was hurrying after her. Mallory reached the black sedan, slid into the driver's seat, and shot out of the parking lot. When she was safely down the block, she looked back. Sue was already pulling out after her.

She had to lose her.

The communications system in the car came on. "Mallory, what's going on?"

Mallory felt sweat break out on the palms of her morph unit. But she wouldn't panic now. She had to get away with the morph, had to keep Softec from getting it.

She turned left in the direction of 405. The trees to either side of the freeway loomed above, reaching for the gray sky, while the windshield wipers beat an insistent rhythm, urging her on.

Sue's voice came over the system again. "Is something the matter, Mal?"

Mallory's forehead felt hot. It wasn't like her to panic. She wouldn't. She gazed in the rearview mirror.

Sue's car was right behind.

"Don't follow me, Sue," she told the communications unit. Her voice sounded fuzzy in her own head, as if there were dozens of people whispering to her in a low, dull undertone. She turned onto the on-ramp—south instead of north—relieved that she could finally give the car more speed.

"Mallory, I'm worried about you. You're not acting rationally. Pull over and let me drive you back."

Mallory shook her head, trying to concentrate on the road, the speed, the car.

"No, I have to go..." But she didn't know where she had to go, just that she couldn't go back to Softec. It was urgent, though, she knew it. The murmurs, they wouldn't let up. Mallory pressed the accelerator button. She had to get out of here, away from the voices, away from Seattle, away from Sue. Fast.

Away from Sue? But Sue was her friend. She was all Mallory had left. Dane was gone, her parents were gone, Ethan was gone, and now she was running away from Sue.

Sue's voice came over the communications unit again, but Mallory could no longer make any sense of the words. She gave the vehicle more speed. The voices were urging her on, growing louder.

An exit was coming up; maybe she could lose Sue there. At the last minute, she swerved into the exit lane and took the off-ramp full speed. She thought she heard someone calling her name, but it was drowned out by the clamor in her head, whispers like a dull roar, dizziness like a presence at the back of her mind. It was all she could do to concentrate on driving.

Then she heard a crash.

She braked the car and pulled over to the side of the road. Behind her, the blue sports car was crumpled up against a tree.

She got out and stumbled back through the wet grass between asphalt and trees. Sue was wedged into the crushed driver's seat, her head at an unnatural angle. Mallory tried to wake her—she should already have been repairing the damage to her morph, for God's sake! Nothing worked, nothing. She checked the data upload field at the bottom of the morph unit's spine—cracked. Mallory could only hope the neural network holding Sue's mind wasn't seriously damaged.

She staggered up, breathing deeply, and rested her hand on the frame of the vehicle. She couldn't let Softec find her, but she had to make sure they found Sue. Had to.

Her car. The AI in her car was undamaged. She could send out an alert from the black sedan.

And get away. If she didn't, they would take the morph from her.

Mallory slogged through the wet grass again, the raincoat over her head. Without making voice contact, she turned on the emergency signal to Softec. They would be here in less than half an hour, pick up the broken unit that held her best friend.

She was feeling dizzy again. Mallory closed her eyes, concentrating. She couldn't take the car—it had to stay here so they could find Sue.

But not Mallory. She could be someone else, anyone else. She had the morph.

She pushed herself away from the black sedan, moving toward the forest at the side of the road. She had to hide, had to escape before they came for her. The trees, she would hide in the trees. She would be alone there, safe.

But she wasn't. She wasn't alone. They were following her, surrounding her, closing in. Their voices gnawed at her consciousness, eroding her control. She ran. Or she thought she ran. She couldn't feel the body she was inhabiting, could only hear the voices, see the memories of so many others, the pieces of identity left behind in the morph, taking over the neural network her own weakened mind could no longer

control.

She was losing herself. Slipping away; slipping, slipping away. Her lips curled up in a smile.

But slipping away wasn't far enough. They would get her if she didn't flee.

And then she was running, wet grass slapping the legs of her designer suit, trees looming above. She ran and ran, her breath coming shorter, the voices in her head like the whirl of a helicopter. Her foot caught on a stray branch on the forest floor, and she went down. She was kneeling, kneeling in a puddle of rainwater, acid rain, she was crouching in the damp earth next to a tree on the edge of the forest. The forest was green and she was wet. Wet and cold. The voices. She was drowning in the voices, drowning in the wet forest, a jumble, a babble, a babbling brook. Cold and wet, taking her away.

The forest was green and she was far away.