

THE SHADOW DANCERSTHE SHADOW DANCERS

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For Will F. Jenkins,  
who as "Murray Leinster"  
took the parallel world concept  
and made it infinite so the rest of us  
could play in his yard.

1.

A Summons From G.O.D.

Cleopatra Jones stared down at the twinkling lights of the city from her luxurious penthouse apartment; her city, the city she protected and watched over. Her slim, glamorous face and form reflected back from the window, a ghostly angel of perfection against the night scene . . .

Oh, hell, who was I tryin' to kid, anyway? Yeah, it was dark and I was lookin' out the window, but all cities look glamorous and mysterious at night, even Philadelphia, and only thing the woman starin' back at me in the glass had in common with tall, lean Cleo was that we were both black females who'd come up in the world.

It hadn't taken me long to put the weight back on that I'd lost back in that Garden place, though I wasn't as bad as I had been. Truth is, the most fattenin' stuff in the world is also about the cheapest, and when you're dirt poor you wind up with lots of peanut butter and real fatty stuff cause it goes further and fills better. Oh, the tummy was still okay, but the hips were growin' and so were my tits, which seemed oversized even when I was down at my model weight (thanks, Ma!). At five six, with a naturally round face and lots of bushy hair (I know it's not in fashion but it's the only way I could ever control it without spendin' two hours a day on it) I looked, well, plump, anyway.

I guess we was the only self-made poor folk in the Camden ghetto back then. Daddy was a retired Army colonel; he coulda done better by just bein' retired-there weren't too many retired black colonels then. But, no, he'd been a cop in the Army and he was a little too old to be a cop after and a little too black in that day and time to be a commissioner or police advisor, and he had this dream.

Back then there wasn't a single black-owned and operated private detective agency in the area-those that had the background didn't have the bread to get started. He pumped it all into settin' that agency up. Not much-a dingy office overlookin' a side street in one of the lousier sections of the ghetto even back then, some secondhand furniture and files, and a phone and a sign on the directory and the glass door to the office. Spade & Marlowe, PI. With Ma as his secretary he got enough clients to pay the bills, with a little help from his pension. Trouble was, the clients weren't exactly the well-to-do types and we pretty much got peanuts even when he did his job right-if we got anything at all.

My comin' along pretty well finished off any surplus, although I always knew that I was the one thing Daddy loved as much as that agency. We got by, but then Ma died young-she always had a real blood pressure problem and never did much take them pills-and he had the agency and me and the agency was the money for us to live. I dunno, I guess maybe I wanted all his attention and got very little, since he was in and out at all hours and I had to be pretty much on my own. I got to be somethin' of a wild child, runnin' with a bad pack, never carin' 'bout school or the future or nothin', just blowin' reefer and drinkin' booze and gettin' into lots of trouble. Just about the only thing I really paid attention to was makin' sure Daddy didn't know-we used to steal blank report cards and fill 'em out real convincing-like, and I could always come up with the right answers for his questions. I guess now I was rebelling against him in a way, and



fantasizing 'bout bein' a hooker was all about. Any girl who has that trade as her sole ambition ain't got much sense of herself. When men pay, then you got worth, right there, in dollars and cents. I was fat and slow and no matter how good a shape I whip into I ain't never gonna be no Tina Turner. Daddy and the agency, then, became my whole life, my whole identity. I don't blame nobody, but it's just the way I am. I can't change that any more than I can change how I look or how I talk. Nobody would believe it if I told 'em, anyway-except maybe Sam, who knows it but just can't figure it. But one night Daddy didn't check in-the cops did, and I had to go down and identify the body. He hadn't even taken his gun with him on that job, but he got far too many holes to go anywhere afterwards. It was kinda weird standin' there, in the morgue, lookin' at his water-soaked and bloody, bullet-ridden body. One part of me said it was him, but with all the life out of him he just didn't look real, somehow. I couldn't even cry, but all through that night and the next few days I just got madder and madder. The cops had no real leads and he'd been pretty closemouthed about it all even to me, 'cept that it was something big, bigger than he'd ever had before. I cracked the case, after two months, when the cops couldn't, and I got some reputation as hot shit for it but it wasn't all that damned hard. Sure, I didn't know anything about that case, but whoever it was didn't know that and I just began to put out the word that I had leads and knew more than I did and set myself up as a target. The cops thought it was real gutsy of me, but truth was I'd just had all I had left in the world snatched from me and I didn't really care if they killed me so long as I got at least one of the bastards involved. Detective shit is more guts and dull routine than anything else; there ain't no real Sherlock Holmeses. The only thing is, most of the crooks around ain't all that smart, either-they just got smart lawyers. I set myself up, got invited to a meet just like Daddy, and I went, just like Daddy, only I took the magnum. 'Course, the gun didn't do no good, but the fact that I also called the cops helped nab the triggermen in the act of tryin' to kill me and led eventually to the indictment and conviction of a popular young black politician on the way up who just happened to be in the mob's pocket. All that didn't help, though. Fact is, I got no new cases worth much and lost some old clients even though I got a reputation as a PI at least as good as Daddy out of it. Big Tony and the mob never did get touched by it all, even though they ordered it; the white folks had gone scot-free and the black folks had taken the fall, as usual, and for some reason I got blamed for that. Crazy thing was that the only folks who would toss a case or two my way were the smalltime crooks in the ghetto. Seems they were impressed and wanted me on their side. Still, not enough came in to make even the basic bills, and I sold the house and lived on that for a while, takin' a one-room dump near work. I was just goin' through the motions, though, and I knew it. I just didn't know anything else to do. Oh, I had a bunch of relatives, mostly cousins, in the area, but about the best I could hope for was some kind of job as a domestic or cab driver or something. I didn't have no skills to speak of, no real contacts, no diploma-and you needed that just to collect garbage-and only me as a job reference. Couldn't get no unemployment-I was self-employed-and welfare didn't mean shit unless you had a couple of illegitimate kids. The only guys I knew who might be marriage bait were either ones I couldn't stand, ones who wanted some kind of house nigger, or ones that were already as high as they were gonna go and were like street cleaners or handled the drive-in window at McDonald's. Here I'd done somethin' the cops couldn't or wouldn't do, and dumb luck or not I done it good, and instead of gettin' the gold stars and thanks and all the rest I got shut out. I got to admit that my fantasies turned back again, and every time I passed one of the hookers I got more and more tempted-and without Daddy around I had offers from a couple of local pimps. The cops, though, had at least a little soft spot for me, since I'd given them some good collars. I mean, a couple of white cops got to bust a bunch of meddlesome black dudes in Camden, and that was gold stars on them. That's why,



same place, only nobody and nothin' in one can see or hear or sense the existence of the others. They all started from the same creation, but they spread out at different speeds and don't ask me no more. I ain't the smart one, and even Sam can't really explain it. They say there seems to be no end to them-they stretch onwards to eternity on both sides of us. Because there's so many, almost anything that mighta happened in our universe but didn't happened somewheres else. Like, everybody says how lucky I am-I always seem to get better when it can't get no worse, like I told you. But there's maybe a couple of hundred other worlds so close to ours that I exist, and this is the only one in which I married Sam. The other me's wound up whores and maybe addicts or stuck in lousy marriages or dead or somethin', but I'm the lucky one.

Now, not too many people know about this, but one world found out that this was so and figured out a way to go between the worlds. How the hell they ever did that, or even figured out that the other worlds existed, I can't imagine, but they did. This network to go between is kinda weird, like a long tunnel, but it runs mostly like a railroad, with switchmen and stations and stuff like that. Of course, even the ones who run the thing, called the Labyrinth, which Sam tells me is a word that means a maze and comes from one of them ancient mythology stories, only have stations on a few hundred, or maybe thousand, worlds. They're pretty closemouthed about that. They keep explorin', keep lookin' in at ones, until they find ones that have somethin' they might need. Might be an invention, or just a bright idea, or some raw material they need-anything. When they find somethin' like that they set up a station and put in a permanent crew and then they also recruit locals to help run things.

They don't really care about the worlds they move into, 'cept as how they can make a profit from it, and one of the things they move into and eventually take over is organized crime, which seems to exist one way or another everyplace. Like here the Mafia and a bunch of other big crime groups are really wholly owned and operated by these dudes from another world-and most of the crooks don't even know it. They also got a legit arm, the General Ordering and Development Corporation, or G.O.D., Inc. as we all call it when we don't just say 'the Company.' You may never have heard of it, but chances are you're one of their customers. You know all those things they advertise on late-night UHF TV stations and all them cable stations-knife sets, pen sets, crazy gadgets that never really work, discontinued and outdated merchandise, cheap imports, that kind of shit. You know what I mean. They have an 800 number to call to order or an address at the station, but down right at the bottom, in real small print, they have to put their name and headquarters address of who they really are and where they're really at. Well, that's where you find General Ordering and Development, Inc.

Most all the folks who work for that company don't know who or what it really is, neither. Just the ones at the very top, and some of the company security people, and them that run and secure the stations.

They can't have a station just anywhere. First of all, most places each world is totally isolated from the others, but there's always a bunch of weak points. A lot of disappearances, people bustin' into flame, visions, ghosts, you name it come from them weak points. Most of them ain't too useful, though; I mean, you build a station in downtown Philadelphia somebody's gonna find out sooner or later. They go for the isolated, middle-of-nowhere places, which are few and far between these days, and they also got to be ones they can buy up lock, stock, and barrel. The big station here's out in a hick town in redneck Oregon called McInerney-the only place they could buy up and control that was away from everything and everybody. They got a second little station up near State College in Pennsylvania, which is also middle-of-nowhere wilderness, but since they stuck both Penn State University and the biggest state pen up in there it ain't the favorite spot. It's mostly automated and used only when necessary.

They got the company headquarters smack in the middle of downtown Des Moines, Iowa. It's on a weak point, but they can't risk usin' it. All they can do there is send messages back and forth through it.

They don't have but a fraction of the worlds with stations. They only been here

since the early fifties, and not in force till later'n that. I guess it was only then we came up with somethin' worth stealin'.

The Company and the Mafia and whatever pay real good and more than pay all expenses, and also cover up whatever it is that faraway home world wants here that we got and they want to steal. Don't ask me what it is-that's a closely guarded secret.

Still and all, we came out winners from that one in spite of a bunch of close scrapes and even more cliffhangers. We also did the company a big favor by exposing some rotten apples, and unlike the last time we got somethin' out of it. A fair amount, really, considerin' where we came from. We got a small suite of offices for the agency in a midtown Philadelphia high rise the company owns rent-free, our old bills paid off, several thousand bucks in seed money, and we also got some pretty good payin' clients referred to us by the Company or their people.

Not that the cases were any different or any more thrillin' than the old ones were, but there were lots of clients and they all paid and paid real good. At rates that started at two hundred and fifty bucks a day plus expenses, we did all right. Got us a fancy two-bedroom apartment in one of the new developments right in town, too, which is where I was that night, lookin' out the window and wishin' Sam were around. He wasn't, though; he was in Pittsburgh until the next afternoon, checking out an accountant livin' way beyond his means.

It was crazy, but right then, with a lot of what I'd always dreamed of all around, I was thinkin' 'bout quittin' the business. It was really Sam's anyway, now-I just helped out and gave support and advice now and then. Fact was, I was what the bankers call more a liability than an asset. We was movin' in higher circles and higher society with these clients. They was all educated, well off, rich-and I ain't talkin' 'bout race here, since some of 'em was blacker'n me. I wasn't the good-lookin', glamorous type, didn't know what fork to use or what wine went with what-in my old circles, Thunderbird was a step up-and it was like them and me come from different parallel worlds. You didn't have to walk the Labyrinth to find that kind of thing. All I had to do was open my mouth and I was low class, uneducated, ignorant. Most folks thought I was the receptionist anyway, or maybe the cleaning lady.

Oh, Sam made a big thing about how he needed me, couldn't get along without me, and all that, and I think maybe he believed it himself, but it wasn't true. Just goin' in to work was gettin' more and more depressin' every day, even when I had a lot of work to do. We needed more people, sure, but we needed nice, clean-cut young folks who were college grads and talked just right and all that. Most of my friends, the few I had, were from the old neighborhood in Camden or among some of my cousins all over the place. Now that we had money I was discoverin' just how many relatives I had, too. I could sure buy company, but none I felt good with.

In the end, I guess, it was just that I was beginnin' to feel useless and without much to do. We was just too removed from what I'd been used to and brought up with. All this new wealth built a wall between me and the kind of poor folks who were all I knew all my life. I could drop over there, but it was never the same. I had what they wanted and probably would never have and they knew it. Crazy thing was, too, I didn't really feel safe over there anymore. See, that was the reason for all the trouble I got in, and maybe the reason a lot of black kids get screwed for life. I mean, there you are, a kid in a neighborhood where there's so many poor folk a lot ain't got nothin' to lose and a lot more just give up. Crime's real big and deep rooted there, simply 'cause it's the only real source of jobs and steady income. Most folks there don't wanta kill you, they just don't think two steps ahead. If you're wearin' a jacket and one wants it, he'll just go up and off you and take it. The only way a kid's got any real chance if they don't wanta be like that themselves is to join a gang. I guess it's always been that way. I seen West Side Story twelve times. The boys in the gang, they give you protection 'cause it's the code, and the girls, well, they give the boys whatever they want. Most times, you're as safe as you can be, but you grow up feelin' dependent on folks and with no real confidence in yourself, even though you wind up actin' tough and talkin' tough

so nobody knows how scared you are, and the boys grow up thinkin' of girls as dependent, weak, things and not people.

The leaders of them gangs ain't got much smarts; they're all muscle and nerve, so they don't like anybody to be smarter than they are. You gotta talk gutter talk, like what they like, do what they say. That way you wind up with your first kid at fifteen or so and a life on welfare.

That's why when Daddy took me outta the gangs he also took most of my protection, my security. By the time he took me out, I was set, you know. A part of me will always be that little girl, and I'll always talk and act like I had to all them years.

Over there now, though, I was nothin' but a target. Nailin' Daddy's killers got me some respect but it didn't do nothin' for my nerve deep down. When I was with Daddy, or Sam, or the cops, it was somethin' else, but all alone I'm just a scared little ghetto girl.

I never was much for church goin', neither, so I didn't really have that to fall back on. Most of 'em I knew were either preachers on the make for some kind of political office or cause or decidin' on how the blacks got to hold a revolution or make some new country somewheres, while the rest just sat there and sang and prayed and said we might be down now but wait till we die and then we'd be in the Promised Land. Well, I never seen where that country was gonna be, and they wouldn't let Sam in, anyways, and I just ain't so sure about no Promised Land, or at least if they'd let me in when I got to the gates. Lookin' at the folks who were sure it was there and sure they'd get there, I ain't so sure a place filled with them types is where I want to be trapped for eternity, neither. Daddy never did have much belief in God, even on the battlefields, but he belonged to a church 'cause it brought in some business. Maybe that's why men got more power in business than women-they make better hypocrites.

So, I was cut off from my old neighborhood and people, and my relatives weren't no damned good to me when I needed 'em and I didn't see why I should be so damned good to them, now, and I didn't feel comfortable anywhere in the business society of most all our clients-Sam didn't like 'em none, but he could pretend he did for the money and jobs-and 'cause I was rough and foul-mouthed and talked like a poor ignorant nigger I wasn't invited to no parties or social occasions. Not that I wanted to go back where I was. Uh uh. I ate real good, the sheets were satin, and I had a jacket in the closet there that was genuine mink, and folks who woulda laughed in my face a while back now kept tryin' to get me to take their credit cards. We was doin' real good-maybe eighty grand a year or more, before taxes, and we had a shitload of deductions. It was crazy. Years and years I worked like a dog and got nothin' but poorer and poorer- I'd'a made a profit goin' on welfare-but now I had all this stuff and not only didn't I have to work for it, it was better I didn't. If Daddy had this agency the way it was now, then maybe I'd'a grown up fancy and speakin' all clear and nice like some TV newscaster and have gone to all the right schools and I'd be right up there now. I mean, I seen some of them high-steppin' black folks around, and they seem to be real in and real popular. They're even more uncomfortable when I'm around, though; guess I remind 'em too much of their roots or what they beat. Maybe kinda like that sergeant in Soldier's Story who thought black society couldn't afford blacks like me no more.

Thing was, them oreos wanted to forget where they came from; I couldn't help but bring it with me.

That left Sam as the only important person in my life. He was my lover and my best friend, but he was really my only friend. He was everything rolled into one, but when he wasn't around I had nothin'. I needed something of my own, some place where I'd feel comfortable and something to do I felt important at.

I'm also not gettin' no younger. Oh, sure, with our connections with the Company we can get a lot of fancy stuff that keeps us lookin' and feelin' better than we should and maybe give us real nice lookin' old ages, but I never yet seen a drug that didn't have a price and I sure wouldn't start on them things if I was gonna have kids. I'm thirty-two now, my clock's tickin' on that no matter what magic they can pull, but I don't want to bring up no kids in a downtown apartment.





none I ever knew.

"The machine for loading them is small and very portable and has its own internal power. It's a highly restricted device, but as with all highly restricted devices it's not impossible to get one or many if you really want them and you have Company or home world contacts."

Home world. That was the world that was supposed to be some kinda paradise off what it ripped off of all the other worlds. They didn't invent nothin', but what he was show-in' us wasn't of this world for sure.

"It's real handy. You can take something—a drug, for instance—and transport it almost any way you like in bulk, then just load it into the little machine, load a bunch of these in as well, and press start. At the other end, the little capsules come out filled with whatever dosage you put in as the load, all precise, stacked and arranged like sugar cubes. These things themselves are tricky to perfect, but once you have the mold in silicon anybody can turn them out."

"I never liked shots much, but so what?" Sam asked. "It's not too far off what might be around here in a few years."

"Maybe. Maybe not. Think about what this might do in, say, the heroin racket, or freebase, or anything like that. Measured doses, different strengths, all safe, and everybody gets their own fresh needle every day so there's no chance of infection or contamination."

"I'd make a guess they already have," I put in. "Otherwise, why tell us about it?"

He shrugged. "They haven't come in here, anyway. There was a move to get them into the narcotics trade here simply as a safety measure, something we could do, but that talk's all but died out now. But elsewhere, we're facing something new, something even the opposition is a little nervous about."

The opposition. That meant any folks in the Company or workin' for it or on the home world who didn't like things the way they was and wanted changes, by fair means or not. Control of the whole multi-universe business was really in the hands of just a very few people, nameless and faceless to us, who were called the Board of Directors, and from what they told us this Board was basically one big family. It was kinda like a kingdom, with the same few families holdin' all the top jobs and top power, and that always left other folks unhappy. Anytime you had this much power in so few hands you was bound to have a lot of lower-downs after your hide. That was one reason why gettin' in to the home world was so hard and so restricted, and why them Directors never left.

"A drug?" I prompted him.

"Yeah. A drug and more than just a drug. You two have been around. You know what the usual drugs will do. There's a fair number of addicts who couldn't get off if they wanted to, and if they need a fix bad enough they'll kill their own grandmother."

We both nodded. We knew that all too well.

"There's a new drug. At least we call it a drug, although it doesn't act like any drug anybody has ever seen. It acts a little like it's alive, although if you saw it under a microscope you couldn't believe it could be. It looks almost like water, maybe just a touch brownish, and if it is injected anywhere into a Type Zero human it heads straight for the brain, checks it out, takes over, then moves in and starts doing its thing. It actually manufactures duplicates of enzymes in your brain and then replaces your natural enzymes with its duplicates. The duplicates are of the same sort, but not exactly. They're purer, actually more efficient. When they first take over control, whatever those enzymes control gets a pure jolt of what it likes and so do you. There are pleasure centers in the brain. When stimulated, the body sticks in these enzymes and you feel pleasure. In this case, the pleasure would be prolonged and absolute."

"That's a fairly simplified description of the way drugs like heroin work, Bill," Sam noted. I got to admit I got a little lost with all them enzymes but I figured the result.

"That's true, but that's because the plant enzymes, highly refined, are injected

directly. In this case, the process is indirect. We have a controller, almost a control center, that uses the body's own materials to make what it needs, but it controls things. With heroin, rejection sets in, the plant substances or chemicals are expelled, and it's kind of like an engine suddenly losing its oil. Unlike the engine, your body will eventually replace and start making those chemicals again, leaving only the memory of the stimuli, but between the time the enzymes or chemicals are expelled and the time the body needs to replenish and regear it's like running an engine with very little oil. It gets very, very sick."

That was the best way to explain withdrawal to a lay person I ever heard.

"It does pass, though, without killing or doing real harm to the body," Sam pointed out. "You only wish you'd die."

"True. But a lot of what we do is based on pleasure-pain stimuli. The memory of the rush, just how great you felt, remains, and a fair number are inclined to get hooked again even if they're forced off. Now this stuff is different. It's more like a parasite. It spreads over your body, but doesn't duplicate itself to the extent of harming any part of it. It gets what it needs from the body, and it's pretty stable once it's complete, but it knows you. Don't ask me how that's possible, but it does. If it gets into the brain it sort of takes over. The body abruptly considers it natural and normal. Your body defenses won't fight it. It survives by controlling that chemical balance, the blockers and the enzymes, in your brain. If it needs sugars and starches for some reason, it'll stimulate its host to eat particular things. Ditto for things rich in various minerals and whatever. It can suppress urges, emotions, desires, or heighten them to near compulsion."

I got to admit I was gettin' a real sick feelin' inside. "You mean it takes over, makes the body a slave? It thinks?"

"No. I doubt if anything like this ever could think as we understand thought. And it just manages the body and stays where it is and gets what it needs and it's happy, leaving the host to still be him or herself, subject to its requirements. There actually are some microscopic life forms like this here on Earth, but all in the lower animals and all known here so far in marine organisms. We think this is a natural organism. We think that on some world, somewhere, it was allowed to evolve so that it reached a very high state and operated on the highest life forms, and on land as well. You can't just catch it, like a disease. A specially organized cluster-still microscopic but definite-must invade the new host. Its remote cousins here reproduce by sex between two hosts-and it can compel its host to have sex, and does. The trouble is, from its point of view, it doesn't work that way in Type Zeros, so we think this is from a world quite different from ours."

I didn't remember much from our lessons on the Company, but I remembered what he meant by Type Zero. That was the type that the home world was-which also happened to be the type we were, too. Just plain folks. The further away you got from us, though, on both sides, the more real strong differences came on. Humans developed in different places than here, or with maybe different ancestors. Some of 'em was ugly as sin and looked like folks from a bad horror movie, but they was still basically human anyway. They just went to show how different we could have turned out with just one little thing goin' another way. Those they called Type One, and no matter how weird they looked, they was all close enough to us that we could probably have sex and produce somethin' neither of us would really like to claim. Sorta like you can breed a lion and a tiger, or a cow and a buffalo; like that.

Type Twos came from different ancestors and weren't close enough to breed with us. At best they'd produce sterile offspring-like mules-and mostly nothin' at all. Type Threes and beyond were so far off us that they might as well be from Jupiter or somewheres for all we had in common. We couldn't even catch their colds.

Trouble was, there was millions of worlds side by side that was only different in smaller things, then millions of Type Ones on both sides of them, and so on. A lot more than the Company could count, let alone know everything about.

"So we can catch it but we can't give it," I said. "That's somethin'."

"Yeah. It means real addiction. We think it's a Type One organism, but we haven't been able to locate where it came from and considering the number and range it might take years, even decades, if all resources were put on doing just that. It's a needle-in-a-haystack proposition. On our own, we'll find this one only by the kind of luck you have hitting the lottery. Now it does a nice, neat job inside of us, but we're not what it evolved in and it runs into problems. Something in our air, or our body chemistry, or whatever gets to it after a while. It begins to slow down, then break down. The only thing that can restore it is a fresh module of itself. What it does inside the body is very complicated; suddenly it can't handle the task. It starts cutting back. It starts to die and it tells you about it by hitting the pain centers. It also becomes a massive infection in the brain, fighting off all comers and struggling to survive one more minute. The withdrawal becomes the ultimate agony-and the host dies before the parasite does."

Sam was kinda disturbingly clinical, but, then, he'd been a vice squad man. "How long before this breakdown?"

"About thirty hours, give or take with the individual. Never less than twenty-four and never more than forty as near as we can tell. Our samples have been very limited, our information mostly second-hand or eavesdrop or observations by people not trained in this sort of thing. Withdrawal takes another six to eight hours of increasing agony before you pass out and the heart stops. Brain tissue disruption or destruction begins shortly after the pain button is pressed, though, and accelerates from there. We think that's what kills, eventually. The autonomic nervous system-heart, breathing, whatever-is disrupted. Let it go too long and a fresh infusion will get the body going again but it won't repair whatever brain damage you get. The effects are wide ranging and inconsistent from individual to individual. There could be memory loss, or some sensory loss-vision, hearing, taste, smell-or some motor function problems or intelligence, talents, abilities-you name it. But pain's the last to go." I listened, not understandin' all the biology shit but understandin' the effects on the people good enough. "Bill -how do you know this?" I asked him. "The only way you could know this is if it was done on people."

"It was," he said softly. "But not by us. This isn't something we'd ever fool with. It's too scary."

"Can you kill it?" Sam asked. "Without killing the addict, I mean?"

"Sure. You can kill anything. If we had enough cases, we could easily isolate whatever starts breaking it down. Without tipping off the opposition and letting them know we're on to them, we just don't know for sure if we could cure it or not and if so what the price would be. We got hold of some raw samples, strictly by accident, and ran them through every test and every expert and computer the home world has. We have been unable to make it grow in the lab, and it ignores test animals, even chimps. The only way it'll reproduce is inside a human, and since the reproductive clusters humans produce lack something it needs and can't get, they aren't any good, either."

With that kind of setup, Bill Markham then let us have the whole load.

I got to admit I don't understand the Labyrinth, and I ain't sure nobody really does. I sure can't figure out how them early scientists guessed it was there, let alone built this network, this inter-world railroad. I been in it a few times, but I still can't figure what's happenin' in there. It's like a real long tunnel, stretchin' out in all directions, only you're inside a cube with windows. Windows up top, windows beneath, and on all sides 'cept the ones that keep you in the Labyrinth. That means you always got a choice of four worlds to exit to. Every once in a while, there's a switch junction, with a control room and Labyrinth in all directions. That switcher punches his buttons and you go which way he decides, into a whole set of new cubes in all directions until you get to other switch points.

Sam and me we went to a bunch of 'em, and we always walked, but there's enough room in there to drive a truck through-if you could figure out how to make a truck go up or down instead of just forward, back, left, and right. Of course, it probably ain't left or up in there; none of the usual rules mean much inside

there, 'cause you're outside everyplace else. They must have some kinda trucks or flyin' saucers or whatever they use, though, 'cause they move trainloads of shit through that thing.

Three guilds, which I guess are sorta like unions or somethin', run the thing. One controls the switch points, one runs the stations, and a third moves the cargo through from one point to another. Ain't no way the biggest, baddest computer in creation could look at all that stuff all the time, though, so security mostly monitors the switches 'cause just about everybody and everything has to pass at least one of 'em.

The first way they check is that everybody who has any real business in there's got some kind of code thing in your bones. Fact is, there might be a whole hell of a lot of Brandys, even with the same fingerprints and eyes and all that, but they ain't the same person no matter how alike they are. I got a code planted somewhere inside my bones- don't ask me how or where. They stuck me in a thing like an iron lung, punched a bunch of buttons, I didn't feel nothin', and that was it. But now any switchman can look at his or her board as soon as I'm inside that cube and read out not only who I am but which I am. The code's big, random, and total nonsense. It's all in computers, of course, but they tell me that even if you got into the computer you couldn't find the numbers.

If you don't have no number, and you look suspicious, they shoot you off to some siding, someplace on a world where people just never came about, and you sit there till they're ready for you, if they ever are. We had that happen. If you don't have no coding but you sound like you know what you're doin', you can sometimes bluff 'em with a convincin' destination, but they can send messages at about the same speed as they can send you, and they call security on both ends. At least, you could, 'cause we did it, but I'm told they tightened that up now. No code, and you get dumped no matter what.

They tightened up a lot of other shit when we breezed through their system. Now before you go in you got to file a destination and any stops with the stationmaster who sends it to the security computer, and you're checked as you go along. Guess they were kinda sloppy and cocksure of themselves till we screwed 'em.

Still, somebody first found the world with this drug disease thingie, whatever it was, then figured out how to bottle or can it or whatever and brought it down the line to the Type Zero-our type-area. There ain't a lot of switches up in Type One and Two territory, and lots of unexplored worlds in between them, so it was possible that somebody could be goin' from one legit point to another and stop off just long enough to pick up the goods.

That meant there had to be somebody who knew just what they was doin' in the world where this shit came from, then somebody who could get messages back and forth without security knowin' to set up the deal and the pickups, then somebody in the transport guild to actually pick up and carry the stuff, disguised as part of legitimate cargo, and drop it off at its destination, where other big plotters would make use of it. Pretty complicated stuff.

The Company didn't know who discovered it, or how, and how they managed to both figure out what they had and keep it quiet, even settin' up this scheme. They didn't know how long it had taken to set up. They did know that it was well organized and involved some real bigwigs someplace and lots of corruption, but that was it. They just bumped into it, when they had an accident or something in one of the cargo haulers or whatever that they use and found it strictly by luck. They didn't let on they knew, and it seemed like the transport guild worker was innocent. They'd already switched it and he was now on a legit run. They put a tracer on it to see who'd pick it up, and somebody did.

"Rupert Conrad Vogel," Bill said, showin' us a photo of a guy who looked like a fugitive from a cheap World War II movie. "He's a stationmaster, which means administration and a Company man, or so we thought. He got the shipment, took a lot of it, then sent some back disguised as something else, again looking very routine. The pickup courier was legitimate, but he encountered another courier along his route and somehow that second courier got the package and dropped it clandestinely at a world where we didn't have a station but did know. We picked this courier up, stuck him in a hypnoscan, then erased any memories he had of

being picked up and discovered and let him continue. He didn't know much. He just got some nice little extras all in things he and his family could enjoy but we wouldn't particularly notice, and for that he got a message slip passed into his pocket now and then that a shipment-he didn't even know what it was, nor cared-would be with so-and-so as unlisted or misaddressed cargo. He'd meet the other courier, either get the parcel or note that it was wrong and offer to take it back to headquarters for resorting, then drop it when his route took him near this other world. That was it."

"You dead sure this ain't just the tip of the iceberg?" I asked him.

"Pretty sure. Their supply is limited. There's no clear routine as to when the shipments come, but that's probably just to disguise their origins. Vogel's their dispatcher. He gets it, he holds on to it, and then he sends it out in measured amounts. As far as we can tell, he's handling the real experimentation himself, and very effectively and ruthlessly. He's well placed to be able to do so, as you'll see in a minute."

"And the other place?" Sam asked.

"A world not too far from this one and very similar in a lot of ways. They're getting only about three thousand doses every twenty to thirty days, so there's only enough to sustain maybe a hundred people. They appear to be going to a local organized crime underboss who's never had any known connection with us and shouldn't even know about the Labyrinth. He, in turn, has one man supervising it and they seem to be using it in a very low-level way, to maintain a group of young women as prostitutes. This thing's ready-made for that on a petty level-I mean, this thing compels you to have sex a lot. We don't know what connection they have to Vogel, or why they were picked, or why they're being allowed to use something like this for such a petty and ordinary thing. Company people don't go there, except our wayward courier, of course, and we've had a monitor on that gate ever since and nobody but that courier ever approached. We sent in a small team of agents, and they couldn't find anything odd, either. There's a connection there, but we can't find it."

"But they know about the Labyrinth," Sam noted.

"Yeah, they do-but not many," Bill replied. "The big boss has had a lodge up near the central Pennsylvania weak point for years, and this place happens to be one of those on the way from here to there that's weak enough that when we open that Labyrinth route it can be accessed without a station-like the dead end you two were shoved into that time."

"Yeah, only here nobody jumps in but something gets tossed out. All we could find was that they were being paid off to do just what they're doing and ask no questions. There's lots of ways you can do it when you have a crime boss on the hook, including checking close other worlds, getting inside information he can use, and feeding it to him. You can feed him just enough, wrapped around the parcel, to keep him quiet and on the hook."

"You mean," I said, "that somebody just pops up once and bribes this crime boss into this? We'll pay you if you find fifty or more girls and hook 'em on this?"

"That's about it. We don't know why. Makes no sense on its face, and except for the fact that most but not all of the girls they hooked are relatively young, there's no connecting thread between them. None. There's no reason to think they know much. Just hired help, like the courier-but a lot harder to snatch and interrogate. You see what kind of a bind we're in?"

We could see, too. "You can't snatch any addicts for information 'cause they'd be dead in two days," I noted. "You can't take out the courier without killin' all them girls and lettin' whoever's doin' this know you're on to 'em. Ain't nobody in this chain that knows anything worth knowin' 'cept this guy Vogel."

"Yeah. Vogel. He knows a lot, even if he doesn't know it all. He had to be directly contacted if only to corrupt him. He had to be sold on becoming a traitor, which is much harder considering the risks. He's got one hell of a racket where he is that fits his peculiarities to a T, and he's got a reliable reputation. He'd have to be offered something really big to switch. He also knows exactly what he's got because he's in charge of the experimentation, and as a stationmaster he's well positioned to move people and goods when he wants."

"Why not just take him out, then?" Sam asked. "Get him out of there on a pretext, fry his brain, and then take what results he has as well?"

Bill Markham sighed. "I wish it were that easy, Sam, but it's not. This is a class A operation all the way. They're very good, whoever they are. Vogel will spook and run at the first suspicion, and probably has people there working for him even he doesn't know about whose only job is to take him out if he gets nabbed or exposed. The labs, the whole place he's got, are wired for one hell of a big explosion should anything go wrong, and we don't even know who might trigger it or how. We could kill him, of course, anytime, but that only buys us time until they can set up another site like his that we don't know about. We've tried tricking him out, but he's always come up with a plausible excuse not to leave. If we press too hard, he'll blow that joint and split to a safe line." Bill sat back in his chair and sighed. "You see," he continued, "he's our only real lead and he's eggshells. He's no good to us dead. And we have to know what the hell is going on. We don't know what this stuff is, where it comes from, who's bringing it in and how, and, worst of all, we don't know what they plan to do with it. We have a lot of pieces, very few real live suspects, and none of them fit. Why go to all this risk? What's it all about? All we know is that clearly they can't synthesize it, either, so they're pretty limited, and that means they have a very specific plot in mind-but what? Something big, real big, or they wouldn't take all these risks. Very big people are involved just to do what they've done. Who are they? How did they manage it? What are they planning? You see?"

I did see. Bill had one hell of a problem on his hands. "But, Bill-you got agents, all that technology, all that power. Surely you can do a snatch-and-grab with this guy," I said.

"You'd think so, wouldn't you? The trouble is, this guy's stationmaster and he's smart. He wouldn't have turned traitor without taking that into consideration. He knew what he was up against, and who. Cranston was a station-master, top, you remember, and he'd even set up a resort on a weak point with a Labyrinth substation in his basement, and he came damned close to getting away."

We remembered. We had to chase the bastard through the Labyrinth and he still almost killed us.

Markham slipped some switches and the room went dark and a panel came down in back of his desk. Another button, and some slides appeared on the back, the first of a really enormous mansion that looked like a cross between a fancy home in the country and Fort Apache.

"Looks like a federal penitentiary with a nice house in the middle," Sam noted.

"Are those machine gun towers on that outer wall?"

"They are, and you have three rows of fence before you even get to the wall. The distance between the first two fences is wide enough for men with nasty dogs to go through, which they do, and there are sensors on the fences for any kind of disturbance. Even a rabbit brings the dogs running. The third fence line is electrified with enough juice to fry anybody. Then there's the wall, which has both machine gun coverage and is thick enough for riflemen to stand between the towers. A hundred and eighty-six guys held a far less secure wall against five thousand infantry for twelve days at the Alamo."

"But they eventually lost," Sam pointed out.

"Yeah, they lost-but you could hold this place for a while, anyway. Long enough to realize you were going to be overrun, burn the papers, get out of there and blow the whole complex. The entire estate is honeycombed with tunnels packed with explosives that would leave a crater half a mile wide."

"There's gates front and back," I noted.

"Not much better. Built like Sam's prison. Reinforced metal and concrete and heavily defended so that any assault on the gates would have to be over open ground. We could use a small missile to blow them, but we'd never get enough people inside without tremendous losses and, of course, enough time to blow the place."

"Air drop?" Sam suggested.

"Again, possible, but he's got radar and air defenses that could pick up a pigeon at half a mile. A small force could get in, we think, but it would be



"So he's trapped inside his own fortress, afraid of his own people," Sam noted.  
"Some paradise."

"It's not as bad as all that. Probably no worse than guarding the President here against nuts. But when he's at home and in control, he wants to make sure that nothing happens to him and his, and, of course, we couldn't allow a station to fall into the hands of somebody we didn't control. That's why we went along with the mining and explosives part. As usual, our people set ourselves up as the standard. If we can't crack it, then it's safe, and we did a good job here. Trouble is, we never allowed for having to crack it ourselves. We can blow him and the Labyrinth station to hell, of course, but that won't get us anywhere. We need Vogel alive. He knows the results of the experiments. He knows the plot, at least the outlines of it. He might know just about all of it."

"You're sure he's not the ringleader?" I asked him.

"No, he can't be. He's never had any experience outside Type Zero lines, and he hasn't been involved with anybody who has. He's also a field man; he works stations, not the Labyrinth. He wouldn't have the knowledge or ability to set this off, although he's an important man in making it work."

"You think this is actually the competition, or is it maybe either an attempt by some Type One culture to take over down here?" Sam asked him. "Or, could it be some internal plot among the bigwigs of the company for control?" The 'competition' is what Company types liked to call anybody not workin' in their best interests.

Markham shrugged. "Who knows? Whoever this is is certainly in league with the competition. Vogel may know. That's why we need him so badly."

I shifted in my chair. "Look, Bill, I see this puzzle of yours and it's kinda interestin', but what's it hav'ta do with us?"

"I was getting to that. I've described to you how it's impossible to make an unobserved entry to Vogel's lair. Even inside the manor house, there's TV cameras, hidden monitors, you name it, and security all over the place.

There's only one place where the snatch could be put on Vogel, and that's a medium-sized room that's dead center of the second floor of the house. It's called the Safe Room, and it's double-insulated, soundproofed, and unmonitored. It's entered, if you can believe this, through Vogel's private bathroom, and the door itself can be locked and secured from the inside. You could live through a bomb blast in there, and you could also not hear a full-scale invasion. It's his retreat-the one place in there where he feels totally safe. It's reinforced top and bottom as well, and is as secure as a bank vault. He spends a lot of time in there. We built it that way because the records and codes for the Company and Labyrinth that are the sole privy of the stationmaster must be kept somewhere safe and it was the easiest and safest point at which we could modify the place and install such a thing without ripping the old building down."

"Yeah, but so what?" Sam said a little cynically. "Even if you had some way of getting somebody in there with him, somebody who could take Vogel-and I'm not sure you can-then what? You can't get him out. I'm sure the place has no windows. So, anybody would have to take the leader out the only door, and all he'd need to do was give some signal, some indication, and you were dead."

"Give us some credit. We weren't going to build a place like that where the stationmaster, in a crisis, couldn't get put before it all blew. There's another door-an exit only, in the floor. Not even Vogel can use it to get in-it's booby-trapped and designed to jam and trap somebody inside who tried it. One way only. An emergency exit. It leads down through the walls to the basement area, then into a tunnel that runs out back of the house and all the way to the station, coming up here, near the control room stairway. The final defense is very simple, really-a bunch of rods that support a particular part of the tunnel ceiling. Even try opening or blowing your way through from the station end and the rods collapse-and so does half the tunnel. From inside, though, you only have to throw a few levers to move the rods to a safety position, allowing the door to open. When it closes again, the rods slip back into place. One way only, as I said."

This was suddenly gettin' interestin', although I still wasn't too sure I liked where it was goin'.



















nor famine nor in fact even real crime as you think of it, except for crimes of passion."

We saw. A whole world of peace and plenty with none of the dirty shit. If you just grew up here, and lived here your whole life, how would you ever be able to understand them other worlds, let alone make decisions that might cost lives? If you ain't never felt no pain or sufferin' or misery firsthand, if your idea of bein' hungry is that you're stuck in a city after all the restaurants are closed, if you never had nobody look at you funny 'cause your skin was black or you talked funny, then how you gonna understand the problems and see the big picture. Not that these folks would care in the end if they killed a bunch if it was for somethin' they wanted, but at least they had to look into the faces of some of the folks they'd be doin' in.

They'd been at this a long, long time.

We got to the surface and saw that the whole place had been cleared for us. We walked across a kinda lobby area that looked like some luxury airport waiting lounge, out a side door, and right into a funny-lookin' big car with no wheels that just kinda floated there at the door. A side of it was dropped down so there was steps leadin' up and in. The whole thing looked like some roast beef plate with a half a cigar on top. There was windows all the way along, although it'd looked solid from the outside. We could see out, but nobody could see in. Inside it was kinda like a millionaire's camper van. Nice furlike carpets even on the walls, real plush recliner chairs around a table that looked like polished marble, and compartments all over the place. I expected the thing to wobble when we got on, but it was steady as a rock. I couldn't figure what was holdin' it all up.

There wasn't no driver, neither; not even a driver's seat. This fellow Aldrath-we found out quick that they said their first names last and last names first, like the Orientals do-he just went up front, took some kind of card out of a little pocket in his toga, and stuck it in a slot. The door closed, and off we went, no seatbelts or nothin'. You had to look outside to see that we was even movin'-and was we movin'! Up, up, and away real fast.

I could see the place below us clearly now, just a little round dome of a building in the middle of a bunch of trees in the middle of a bunch of low mountains kinda like the Poconos, but with no roads, no power lines, no nothin'. It was a sunny day with just them cotton candy clouds, but we stayed just below them, so you had a right good view of the country below for miles and miles. Here and there you could see round towers and groups of domes and cubes and other funny shapes, but none of the places were real big and there was no roads at all.

Aldrath punched something in one of them compartments and brought out some drinks. I kinda figured they was somethin' like that. He saw that Sam and me were mostly lookin' out and down at the country, which didn't look the least bit familiar but really didn't look all that strange, neither. Sorta like central Pennsylvania or upstate New York, only before all them folks stuck all them roads and wires through it. 'Course, if your cars and buses and trucks all fly like this thing we was in, you don't need all that.

"If you are looking for major cities, we have them," Aldrath said, "but not in this area. Our cities are mostly in the subtropical and tropical climates. When you can control or eliminate all the pests and divert big storms and manipulate the rainfall, those places are like gardens. This is mostly an area of wilderness and balance, with a few towns for special purposes or simply because people like to live here, and a number of broad estates mingled with forests and game reserves."

"Id've thought sheer numbers would have populated a lot of this," Sam replied.

"Or is the population stable?"

"It's stable, but reasonably large. We keep it worldwide at about a billion, which is more than adequate to preserve what should be preserved. It's not that we're restrictive, but we have many outlets for a population, both in settling and preserving certain other Earths that are truly wonderful places to live but which never developed a higher race and also the planets and to a limited extent the stars."

Even I was startled at that one. "You mean you don't just go next door, you're also up there?"

He smiled. "Getting to the near planets is no great trick, nor is colonizing a place like Mars. The stars are trickier, and we're still in our infancy regarding them, but who is better qualified to go than we if there are in fact alien civilizations out there? It provides us with a limitless and exciting future, you see. The parallel worlds go from infinity to infinity, and each universe is in itself so vast and varied it will end before anyone can explore more than a fraction of it. That's the secret to keeping a civilization as successful and prosperous as ours from rotting and decaying, you see. There is always someplace new to go, something new to learn, something wonderful waiting to be discovered. We have never become jaded or yielded to rot."

Yeah, it sure sounded like one of them-what'cha call it?-Utopias, all right, and maybe it was about as close as we get, but I couldn't help think that we'd gotten sucked into all this 'cause some folks with real power, probably right here on this planet, ran at least one and maybe many rebel groups that tried to sucker and screw up and take over parts of the Corporation's territories and worlds, and we was here at all 'cause there was at least one known traitor and he had some boss higher up. They was askin' me to risk my mind and my neck against them folks, so I figured I had a right to bring that up, and did.

Aldrath shrugged. "Humanity is by nature imperfect, and so perfection is not attainable without also costing humankind the things that are most important to it. Creativity, a measure of freedom, curiosity, drive, willpower. We can remove these things, but then we make not perfect humans but perfect automatons. In spite of the fact that the lowest of the low here have things your richest and most powerful people would envy, we have classes. It is a part of our culture and our heritage. Our very language, our accents, are differentiated by class so that merely by a person's speech we know their station. Our very names are actually descriptives chosen for their poetry, their symmetry, and their meaning. My name is actually-" He gave one of them pretty songs. "The names we give you are rough transliterations of these sounds according to English rules. The corporate chiefs are the highest class and marry only among their own families. The professional, or managerial class does the same. The working, or common class is likewise separated not merely by name and accent but by family and society. As always, this causes strains."

"And I don't suppose there's anyone really anxious to let people move up," Sam commented.

"Not many. I, for example, am from the professional class and would not be anything else. The big limits are all on the corporate class-the people you will be meeting. They have all the real policy-making power, but they can not abrogate that power or that responsibility. That's determined almost from birth. They have very little choice in their lives and much of it is quite boring. I, on the other hand, am what I am because that's what I wanted to be. I could have chosen any profession I liked, and if I made the grade I'd have gotten it. If I didn't, or found I hated it, I could have chosen another. I work as hard as I like to work-and I very much like working-and get tremendous benefits. I don't have a private estate here or elsewhere, but I can avail myself of the desirable parts of any of them."

"Yeah, that's all well and good for you," I said, "but what about the common folks?"

"Those who greeted you today are so-called common folks. There's no heavy labor; it's mostly a service and maintenance economy here, and most of what we have that's really odious is automated. We automated everything once, but finally cut back so we automated only what people shouldn't ever be required to do. They, too, have a choice of many jobs, no real stress or pressure they don't wish to take upon themselves, and much in the way of benefits and opportunities. For example, how old would you say that trio who met you were?"

"No more than eighteen for the oldest," Sam answered.

The security chief laughed. "The girl is thirty-seven, and the two boys are thirty-one and forty. When you do jobs you enjoy and have conquered all the

diseases and defects inherent in our ancestry, it's amazing how long a span you can have. I, for example, am sixty-seven just last month. From your standpoint I'm probably about half that, which is the way I feel and act. The average lifespan here is about two hundred and nine years, and you begin to get gray hairs and a few wrinkles at about ninety, but you really don't start looking old until you're about a hundred and sixty, and I know several two-hundred-year-olds who still swim a few kilometers a day and do mountain climbing for a hobby. That's true no matter what class you're in."

"Yeah, but what if some commoners think they can run things better than you, or maybe want to be scientists instead of lab assistants or something like that? What then?" I asked, gettin' an idea of how even this kind of society could get rebels.

"That's what I meant by outlets and expansion," Aldrath replied. "If there are commoners who believe they have superior talents and abilities and can demonstrate them, there are ways for them to be educated every bit as good as, say, my own son. We just can't have them here, since that would upset the system and the balance. They are welcome to go to a colony where they might find a place, or even found their own. Only the corporate level is closed absolutely, since there can be only one set of people controlling the Labyrinth and they are born, raised, and trained to do that and safeguard both us and the other worlds from one who might use that power for evil. We are not dictators to other worlds and cultures, Madam Horowitz. We are thieves. We steal things we need, and, most of all, ideas, art forms, even stories from unique and different cultures. In exchange, we keep the would-be dictators and oppressors of universes out, and we try as hard as we can to preserve worlds that have not destroyed themselves from doing so. Other than that, we do not tip balances."

"But you're much of organized crime on many worlds, including ours," Sam noted. "That's sure as hell interfering."

"I didn't say we didn't interfere. I said we do not tip balances. Those things were there before we came and would be there with or without us. We don't even increase their efficiency, and we leave it in local hands. Think of the alternative. We could easily take over any government, even all of them, and thereby safeguard everything, but we do not. We do not actually even take over the criminal societies, we just use them to help us covertly get what we wish. The vast bulk of the criminals do not know or even suspect us."

"Yeah, but you still got traitors and rebels," I pointed out. "I mean, we only got into this thing 'cause some folks from here got ambitious."

"That's true," he admitted, sippin' his drink. "As hard as we try, there are just some people who'll never understand the system. You see, we're thieves as well as explorers and preservers. We get a lot out of this. Our medicine, our power systems, this vehicle—all stolen ideas. To preserve this wilderness, we import raw materials we need and which we buy at a fair price and never in quantities that would impoverish a world. There are some who, nonetheless, see us as inherently superior to everyone else. Our religion teaches that all the gods of all the universes are real, and that together they form a powerful overmind, a Supreme Lord. We were selected by the Supreme Lord to master the Labyrinth and oversee the universes. Some take that a bit too far, and see us as the natural and Supreme Lord's choice as rulers of all the universes. They simply never grasp the essence of the system: thieves never steal everything from the last rich man on Earth. If we came in and took over, destroyed cultures and replaced them with an autocratic government, they would soon all be like us, only under us and never able to attain freedom again. Without that freedom, there is no creativity. If you make them subjects, they will reflect your own will imperfectly and, as a result, will never produce anything new or unusual or creative. In short, nothing worth stealing."

It was a real crazy way of lookin' at things, but it made a kinda lopsided sense. I turned and tried the wine, which was real sweet and went down good. I always had a thing for sweet stuff; it's why I ain't never been able to keep weight off.

"So what's next?" I asked the man. "Why bring us here?"

"We have some time, and we thought we'd make the best use of it," Aldrath told

me. "There's no place more secure than here, although nothing is absolutely secure. We are going to Mayar Eldrith's estate, which is both private and isolated. He is a senior vice president of the Corporation and chairman of the Security Committee. His staff were all handpicked and are constantly checked by me and are as secure as we can get. We have all the medical-technical apparatus needed to prep you for this job, and we'll do that as well as practice the system as best we can. When we're ready, we'll also be ready over in Vogel's pesthole of a world."

The flyin' bus turned and started down, and below we could see a real big house, a bunch of smaller houses that were still bigger'n most of what we had back home, with gardens and woods and stuff. It was the kind of country place you might expect the Queen of England to have, and the kind I always dreamed about. There weren't no funny cubes and circles here; this place had real charm and the outside, at least, looked like real wood, though it was real modern-lookin' and had all kinds of crazy angles.

We was met by a small group of young people all of which looked just as beautiful and just as perfect as the ones in the station. I was already feelin' real self-conscious about my looks, kinda like bein' the only black in an all-white town someplace out west. They wasn't white folks, but they was all the same and they was sure different than any of us.

The main house was big-I think it coulda been the biggest hotel in Philadelphia with room left over, though it was only four or five floors. It just went on and on forever. They didn't take us there, though, but to a smaller place down a hill and in some woods.

The inside was gorgeous, anyways-all wood paneling, thick carpeted floors that felt and looked great, real modern-type furniture, soft lighting that seemed to come from everywhere and went on when you came in and went down when you left-all that. The upstairs rooms all looked out on a balcony onto an enormous livin' room, kinda like in them luxury hotels.

"We use this place when we want privacy, even from the main house, where there are a lot of comings and goings," Aldrath told us. "You'll find clothing and the basics in the closets and bath upstairs. Your meals will be prepared by my security staff and served below in the dining alcove. If you wish to go outside, please limit yourself to the walks out the back of the house and do not go to any other buildings or speak to anyone not on the staff without my permission. We have very little time and much to do. I know you must be tired now, so Bill and I will leave you for now, but we start bright and early tomorrow morning and the sessions will be long ones."

I had thought Bill would stay here, but it looked not. The whole place was ours. "Now, this is somethin' else!" I breathed. "The kinda place I always dreamed of havin'!"

Sam was glum as usual. "Yeah, they treat the condemned with all the luxuries. I still got a bad feeling about all this. It's too complicated."

"Five million bucks, Sam! We can have our own place like this."

"Yeah-if we don't pay too high a price for it."

His name was Jamispur Samoka. He was another of them beautiful people, fifty-one and lookin' maybe in his twenties, and wearin' a pale pastel blue outfit that seemed to be the same here as lab whites were back home. He wasn't no doctor-they didn't have doctors here like we did-but he was the same kind of thing. His workroom looked like some mad scientist's shit from old horror movies, but they was all designed to do different things to and for people. I was scarer of him than of the mission.

"Much of this equipment was developed because our own people need some modifications before venturing into other worlds," he told me. "Also, it's often not possible to get an exact replacement for someone else when we need to infiltrate a place. This equipment can make a close match seem an exact match. It can't work miracles but it can do wonders. Fortunately, we have had the opportunity to get all the physical and genetic data from the woman you are to replace, and that makes it a lot easier."

That didn't sit well with me. "How much of a change will there be? I know I

ain't no beauty queen, but I kinda like me the way I am." Five million bucks, I kept tellin' myself. Just think of that.

"It's important to emphasize that there is nothing we can do here that can't be undone here," he replied. "The trick is doing it in the first place. Whatever we do we have an exact record of doing and so we know the way to reverse it. In your case, we do not need to do anything really major or radical, anyway. The biggest problem here, which we don't face all the time, is that you might be subjected to tests available to someone who knows of and has some access to our technology. In effect, it must be so perfect that even we can't detect what we've done. This fellow Vogel is a paranoid and sadist at best. You must hold up to get close to him, and even though he doesn't know we've made him as a traitor, he's bound to have been even more cautious and paranoid because of his fear of discovery. Let me show you something." He reached down, pushed a button, and pointed.

The place where he pointed flickered, then took on an outline of a woman that quickly faded in and became solid and real three-dimensional. It was a black woman, stark naked, and still as death.

"That is who you have to be," Jamispur told me.

I looked hard at the woman, seein' now that it was just some kinda 3-D photograph. "Don't look much like me," I said. "That hair's long and straight. I never could get mine straight long enough to do much with it. Complexion's wrong, too, and she got a damn sight better figure than me or what you're gonna get out of me in two weeks."

"You underestimate yourself. No one really sees themselves as others see them. I know you're not all that modest about yourself or you wouldn't have taken this job. Will you disrobe and go stand next to the image, on that small dot in the floor, there?"

I did it-hell, he was gonna see more of me than this-and went over. The woman's picture didn't look so real right up close, kinda faded and with lines like bad tuning on the TV. There was a click, and he said, "Now come back over here and we'll look at what we've got."

I came back over and turned, and saw two women standin' there. The other one was me, but the doc was right-it really didn't look right, somehow. I started think-in', is that the way I really look to Sam and the others? And I started makin' little critical notes to myself. Fact was, I was kinda cute, though, and I didn't have much different a figure than she did after all. A little more hip and thigh, that's all. The face, hair, and skin tone, though, just weren't right. I looked taller, but that might have been the bush hair.

And then he started puttin' me in his machines. They didn't hurt none, but sometimes they used drugs and sprays that might have hid just about anything. They was fast, though. I got the feelin' that if I broke my leg in the mornin' I'd walk out whole in the afternoon.

At the end of three days, Sam, who'd been spendin' his time with planners for the mission, was a little uncomfortable. I was changin' more than either of us bargained for. For the first time in my life, my hair was straight and silky-black like it'd been born that way, and it was growin' at one hell of a rate. By the end of five days my hair was thick and down below my shoulders and was just as big a pain to comb and wash as I always figured. It really changed my appearance, I'll tell you. My skin was a little lighter and almost a uniform chocolate brown. A couple of old scars and lots of stretch marks were gone; so was my vaccination scar, and my skin was a little oilier, almost shiny. I was also gettin' thinner, back in shape. The doc said the machines used my own body to do and lock in a lot of the changes, and that it took from the too fat parts. Not that I was skinny-but she wasn't, neither. Still, every time I looked in the mirror it was some strange girl starin' back.

It got worse, though, when the dental stuff started. I had more than a few fillin's, and they was wrong and had to go. They put me under with somethin', and when I woke up I was almost a stranger. The stuff in my teeth, and one or two new teeth, now felt a little dead in my mouth, like caps might, but there was no way by lookin' or even X ray to tell that them teeth weren't the way nature intended. My nose looked different, and so did my smile. My round face

seemed a little more oval. I also always had a deep voice, but they tuned it a bit-it sounded funny when I talked, a little higher and a lot huskier. The new face also done somethin' to the way I could talk, too. I had real trouble with s and r sounds; it was a hell of a lisp. Still, in only five days, when he took another picture of me and put it next to that one of the other girl and I stepped away and looked, we was close. Damned close. It was more the way she held herself, and that idiot's smile on her, than anything you could measure. "You thure you can change thith all back?" I asked him worriedly. "I nevah thought 'bout thith kinda thuff when I took the job."

"In the same five days," he assured me. "Except for the lost body weight, of course. That you will have to replace yourself, if you want to."

"I thure don' wanna talk like thith the west of my life."

Sam couldn't help but make fun of the lisp till he saw how self-conscious I was about it; then he stopped. "Remember, you agreed to do this," he said. "You don't like the price you paid so far-and neither do I-but this is the easy part."

"I know, I know," I grumbled. "I already got to the point where I just wanna get goin' and get thith over with."

I think what disturbed him most was the last thing they did. It was on the inside of my left palm, and it was nothin' more than a long number tattooed there in purple ink. Sam had an uncle and a coupla cousins with numbers like that, souvenirs of Hitler's camps. And, in the end, that was the bottom line of what was buggin' him. This world I was gonna get dropped in was a Nazi world, a world where the Jews had been wiped out and we was the new Jews. It was like I was volunteerin' to be a Jew at Auschwitz. That didn't set none too well with me, but none of them had Sam just outside holdin' a gun on G.O.D., Inc.

Not that I wasn't startin' to get nervous. I was. The closer the dates came, the more doubts I had, the more second thoughts, and the scarer I got. I began to really wonder if Sam was right all along. I wasn't no Cleopatra Jones, no Jane Bond. Undercover was always the hardest and riskiest thing any investigator could do, and this was undercover in a whole world that considered me no better than a pet monkey and would treat me the same or worse.

Then we started through the simulation exercises. They had a room in the big house rigged up kinda like they thought Vogel's Safe Room was-but they wasn't sure- complete with secret passage, and they took me in there naked and in light but limiting arm and leg chains to where a big guy about Vogel's size and weight played the mark. The first three days of this, twenty times a day with analysis, I never even come close to takin' him, and I got real discouraged. Still, every time I blew it they took me aside, showed me a recordin' of the whole thing, and explained what I done wrong, what tricks I fell for, what opportunities I missed. I learned quick-this was my ass on the line, and I wanted to live to spend that bread. By the fourth day of trainin', I took not only the fellow playin' Vogel but two other guys even bigger and meaner about half the time. By the time there was only two days left, I was takin' all comers in that room three out of four times.

It wasn't good enough, but it had to do.

We also had all sorts of briefin's, goin' on and on and makin' us all memorize everything till we talked it in our sleep. Timing, other things, and most important the emergency procedures in case it went down wrong. I knew just what was gonna happen when and if, and there were only a few things they didn't tell me, 'cause if I didn't know then I couldn't be made to tell Vogel.

That night, we got dressed up in fancy-colored silks for the last real night we'd have until it was over. The way I talked, the last thing I wanted was guests and a dinner party, but this weren't no last meal. The ones comin' to dinner were the folks with the five million bucks-the Security Committee.

"You got to do all the talkin'," I told Sam. "I couldn't open my mouth 'round nobody now."

"Yeah, well, I'll try, but you're what they've come to see and neither Aldrath nor I like it much."

"Huh?"

"Babe, these guys dreamed up this thing and passed the job of actually doing it down to Aldrath, who passed it on to Bill and then to us, but until now it's just an abstract thing to them. Beyond Bill, Aldrath, Jamispur, and a tight circle of security personnel who have their brains laundered every morning to make sure they're secure, nobody knows who is doing this, or when, or anything else. Now all of a sudden the whole damned committee shows up and demands to meet with us. They're all corporate class people- untouchable even by Aldrath unless he catches them with a smoking gun in their hands standing over a freshly dead body. They're all ambitious up-and-coming corporate types, sort of like Congressmen. They're a potentially leaky bunch and you can do a lot in forty-eight hours."

"But thurely the Thecurity Committee is checked out!" Trouble was, I was startin' to get used to talkin' like a black Elmer Fudd.

"People leak things for their own advantage. If one of 'em gets concerned with a bigwig he's trying to impress and gets pressed on what's being done about this security threat, he might blurt it all out just to make an impression, or leak it if there's rumors going around that he hasn't been very effective. Now, we're going to block out that whole time line from the Labyrinth, so nobody and no messages go in or out until you're safe, and anybody who leaves here not on our team will be monitored like a hawk, but these are big shots used to intelligence work. It's an extra added pain in the ass."

I couldn't help but notice that the Security Committee was all male. In fact, I found out when I pressed, just about all the senior officers were men. It wasn't that this place was out-and-out sexist, but women somehow never made it to the top spots. Some of it was that these guys tonight were mostly in their seventies and maybe had a hundred years or more before there was much of an openin', and the Chairman of the Board, they said, was a hundred and five and nowhere near retirin', but I think there was more. This sorta trickles down, too. If women aren't in top spots, they don't tend to be treated as good further down. Kinda like Russia, where all women are equal and work at jobs, but never get high up in the government 'cept as the head of culture or arts or somethin' like that, and are still expected to come home nights and clean house and cook dinner. Here, nobody really had to work, and a lot of women didn't, stayin' home with the kids and stuff. Lots of the artists were women, I found out, and dancers and entertainers, and lots in the common classes had all sorts of regular jobs, but almost never on top unless they was the absolute best. Nobody seemed to care 'bout this, though. They all had one of them religions that believed in reincarnation, and you was a man one life, a woman the next, and so on. Me, I was thinkin' I might like to be a housewife and full-time mother to some kids, 'specially if I had lots of money, but I sure as hell would hate to be required to do that.

They trooped in, one at a time, and got greeted like one of them diplomatic receptions. More of them beautiful golden people, all of 'em, only Iookin' a little older and maybe a little shiftier, like politicians or salesmen. Mayar Eldrith, our host, was tall and strong and real slick lookin'; he brought his wife, Eyai, who looked somethin' like some Hawaiian goddess. She had that special smile and way of talkin' that all politicians' wives seem to have, and Mayar talked like he was some big shot Senator runnin' for office. Real smooth voice and delivery.

He was followed by Hanrin Sabuuk, who looked and sounded enough like Mayar to be his brother, then Dringa Lakuka, who looked older and wiser and was a real quiet type but with real bright eyes. You got the feelin' he was some god slummin' and havin' a ball doin' it. Then there was Basuti Alimati, the youngest and newest member- only fifty-seven and lookin' a good thirty-who seemed real stuffy and businesslike. They told us he was the only one of them who never married and never seemed to fool around, neither. They wasn't very hung up on sex here-you could have as many wives, or even husbands, as you could talk into it, swing with either or both sexes, and have unlimited lovers on the side. This guy, though, was never even known to swing with himself.

The last one and just slightly older than "young" Basuti, was Mukasa Lamdukur. He looked much like the others and was maybe the most human of the bunch, and he

was the only one who brought along others, much to Sam's and Aldrath's distress. They looked so young I figured it was his kids, but they weren't. Mukasa's job was keepin' the records straight and generally runnin' the committee on a day-today basis, and Dakani Grista, a real young hunk of a boy, and Ioyeo, who was a little small as the women went here and looked maybe sixteen or so, were the administrative assistants, or so we were told. Only Dakani was of the manager class, though; Ioyeo (their women never seemed to have but one name, all vowels-I guess it was the way things was translated) was actually a commoner class person whose big talent was that she was oversexed and net real bright. She had one hell of a figure, though, and that sari looked painted on, and I guess that's one of the things they wanted around the office. Even on a world of beautiful women, she was a real stunner, and she even had one of them dumb blond voices-you know, high-pitched as all get-out and whispery to boot-and all the right moves. I had to poke Sam more than once that night to get his mind back where it should be.

They all treated her kinda like some servant, though, but she fetched and smiled and giggled and didn't seem to mind. I couldn't help thinkin' that if there was a leak or a traitor at the top, that's the one I'd look first at. Nobody was like that in real life.

The talk was mostly small talk, and I did almost none of it.

"So, tell me, what's your world like?" Mayar Eldrith asked Bill Markham.

"A stroke seven world, sir," Bill replied pleasantly.

"Oh, yes-atomic weapons, superpowers, big and little wars," Mukasa put in. "An interesting world. Not at all boring."

Bill choked down what he might really wanna say. "Yes, sir, it is definitely interesting. You've been to a stroke seven?"

Mukasa chuckled. "Long ago, when I was very young. They were fighting a big conventional war then, and there were lots of diseases and abysmal ignorance about them. I remember that. I suppose it must have been your world, since that's the only stroke seven we've developed for many years so far. Who won that war, anyway?"

"Depends on which one it was. If it was a world war, then it was probably the U.S., England, and Russia against Germany, Italy, and Japan. The U.S. side won. Now they and the Germans, Italians, and Japanese are on the same side and the Russians on the other."

"Fascinating," Hanrin put in. "I should like to see a full-blown war one day-from a safe distance, of course."

"They're very destructive and not very pretty or glamorous," Sam couldn't help but put in. "In fact, they're the ugliest side of human nature."

"Perhaps, but they are incredibly valuable. Progress and inventiveness accelerate a hundredfold during a war. Most great inventions and ideas come out of them, you know. I fear it is the nature of the human beast and just as necessary to him as love."

"I notice there haven't been any wars here," Sam noted, a little ticked off at this.

Mayar Eldrith sensed Sam's irritation. "Come, come! Yes, you're right, we don't have wars here, but we're a pretty static culture because of it. Our progress comes from what we learn from others. Still, we are not ignorant of the horrors and cost of wars. The Labyrinth came out of a war, in fact-the last war fought on this Earth between our people. In point of fact, it was terribly ugly. It destroyed in the end all human life on this planet. Only a small band of brave pioneers managed to escape through the Labyrinth, a very primitive thing then, and wait it out. When they were at last able to return, they found a wasteland. All that you see-the animals, trees, flowers, everything-they imported from other worlds. They redesigned the entire planet into a garden, and they swore that never again would violence sear us. Out of that came the Corporation and the system we now have."

That sorta explained a lot, like why most everybody looked like everybody else. Ten to one that class thing was really who was related to who when they came back. That was more'n a thousand years ago, but if they lived a couple hundred

years plus each it was to them like maybe the World Wars were to us.

"Ancient history," muttered Basuti, the cold fish and also youngest at fifty-seven. "We're too damned fat and lazy for our own good, I say. No discipline, no motivation. We've become a bunch of whores, that's what."

"Now, Alim, don't start that again," Dringa Lakuka put in. He turned to us.

"Basuti, there, was a priest and holy man until his older brother was killed in an accident, forcing him to assume obligations in the real world. I think he'd only be happy if we turned the entire world into a monastery."

"Many of us here would be far better off if we were closer to the gods than the flesh," Basuti muttered, giving the eye to Mukasa and his girlfriend.

"We strive for balance on committees as vital as this one," said Mayar Eldrith, clearing his throat nervously. "I humbly suggest that we confine ourselves to pleasantries for now. Our disagreements are none of these people's affair, nor their concern. What concerns us is whether or not we are vulnerable to evil. Someone very powerful has gone to a great deal of trouble to import this alien organism and test it. We must know why. It surely isn't to take over a mere Earth or two. Anyone with enough power to do that is hatching something aimed clearly at us."

Sam and I exchanged a look, and I knew we was both thinkin' along the same lines. All of a sudden, with two days to go, I felt like one big, fat, brown worm on the end of a hook. Somebody real powerful set this up. Somebody like one or more of the folks in this room. Somebody-Aldrath or maybe Mayar-already figured that one out. To keep that shit comin' down without tippin' off security as to where, it had to be somebody with a lot of knowledge and power in security. One of these guys. So they was trottin' out their sacrificial lamb and lettin' whoever have a good look, then they would all be watched like nobody ever been watched before, hopin' somebody would try and tip off Vogel.

I mean, guys who thought other folks' wars were neat and ran criminal syndicates on a bunch of worlds sure as hell didn't give a shit about me. I started feelin' a little sick and forgot all about eatin' or my talkin' or anything else.

"You have to excuth me wadieth and gentamen," I said softly. "Unweth theah's thomething vevy impowtant foa uth to tawk about, I have much to do and thith ith my wath night with my huthband foah a wong time." Damn! It was gettin' so bad I couldn't say no I's, neither. Mix that with my usual accent and I must sound like an idiot!

"Oooh! That's a cute way of talking," Ioyeo whispered loud enough for me to hear. "What did she say?"

That did it. I kinda rushed away and nearly ran upstairs to the room. I felt so damned miserable I was cryin' before I hit the bed, and still cryin' when Sam came into the room.

He closed the door, came over, and just started gently rubbing my back. He always knew what I needed, and I could feel his own hurt and shame. Damn it! I'd asked for this! I really wished now that I'd listened to him and not spent all my time feelin' sorry for myself. I never wanted dear old Philadelphia and that mink-lined apartment more than now, and I'd've even given it all up and moved back to roach heaven in Camden right then.

"I'm sowwy," I sniffled. "I juth-it ain't what I thought it would be."

He sighed and kept on rubbin'. "I know, babe, I know. But it is just like putting on the hooker outfit and staking out the hourly motels. It's just a higher league. They can make the disguise so perfect it's scary. When you figure they can make themselves pass for us, and learn English in their spare time with a gadget, they just don't think of what it can do to us poor primitive mortals."

"I'm thcared, Tham," I told him. "Weal thcared. I want to caw it off."

He sighed again. "You saw them down there. You saw how they regarded us, how they talked about the other worlds. We're their toys, their playthings. They want this Vogel because he's a threat to them, not us. Their only opening is in two days. Not enough time to recruit and train somebody new."

"They can't make me do it!"

"You want to walk down and quit? Come on, babe, get hold of yourself. There's nothing I'd like more than for you to cancel out. They'd send us back, but they'd be damned angry at being inconvenienced. They'd have to come up with a









as a weapon. We didn't move. This was the last test, apparently.

Finally, a man came out of a far door, dressed in brown pants and shirt and leather boots. He was a big guy, and chunky, but in real good shape, with a rounded face and short brown hair. He had a small thing in his hands that might have been a short whip or riding crop, and he had on a pistol belt and holster with the pistol in it.

He walked up to us and got a queer half smile on his face. Finally he said, in a rather mild and gentle voice, to each of us in turn, "What is your name?"

"Daisy, suh." "Beth, suh." "Lavinia, suh."

"Come on in back with me."

They said the entrance to the Safe Room was through the bathroom, but they didn't say that the bathroom was bigger'n most folks livin' rooms. The door in the back was open inward, but it looked less like a door than a bank vault, and the wall through it was a good eight inches thick.

The Safe Room itself was about the size of an average bedroom, but there was storage in the walls for all sorts of stuff, a desk and chair, and the whole thing was carpeted in a thick, spongy wool. Vogel closed the door with a chunk. And I slowly returned. It was a weird sensation, like Brandy was being poured from a bucket into the vast empty spaces of Beth's mind. The setup continued to hold Beth forward, on automatic, but it was almost like I had two minds, and the other one could take control anytime it wanted to. Vogel came over, took off his gun and belt and put it on the desk right in back of me. I knew I could get it before he could react, but I didn't even consider it. It was one of the first tricks I'd fallen for in trainin', and I would have bet my life that the gun was totally empty. There was a clip somewhere real near if he needed it, but anybody who made for that gun would just be trapped.

No matter what happened, I didn't dare make a move till that security light come on, tellin' me that the diversionary attack had started and that the station was being invaded and secured. This room was a vault, all right; I had a little twinge of worry that the warning light might be burnt out or somethin'.

I also figured Vogel was real kinky, but he wasn't as near far out as I had been afraid he might be. He wasn't one of them game-playin' types, anyways-I guess he did enough of that in real life. He had real clever ways of usin' all three of us, though, and once he got naked and got started, showed a few things I filed away for reference. He had a real good body, real hairy, too, and a tight ass, and one humongous pecker. I just let Beth have free rein and waited.

The soft white light in the room suddenly changed, blinking a real weird-lookin' red. He was so turned on and so into it that he didn't notice at first, but when he came up for air he saw it. I never saw a guy come down that fast, but he just got up, pushin' us out of the way, and went to the desk, opened a drawer, and got put a handset phone and plugged it into a wall outlet. The girls just kept goin' on with each other; even I was so turned on at that point it was tough. Vogel was clearly real pissed at the alarm, and if it had been anything less than it was somebody woulda died on that wall out there. He calmed down the moment he was told, though.

"An attack? Who? Well, try and find out, damn it! Can you hold? I don't care what weapons they're using-you hold them! No-I'll wait it out here, but I'll keep the line plugged in. You give me two short buzzes if they breach the wall, one long if you want me to pick up the phone. Have all emergency procedures in full effect as of now!" He put down the phone and turned back to us. "Sorry, loves, but we have a problem. Don't worry-we'll get back to our business, I promise. Now I need you. Get up and help me move this desk."

We didn't feel none too much like work but we got up and helped him pull the desk away. It was pretty easy-the thing was not that heavy-but his kind didn't do no work when he had other folks to do it for him.

We pulled up the carpet where the desk had been and there was a door there with a kind of combination lock built into it, like a safe. The emergency tunnel! We didn't know about the lock, but I wasn't gonna make no move till he twiddled it and then threw the switch and pulled the thing open. A long, deep, black hole was all there was.

I really thought that maybe we was gonna luck out on this, that he was gonna go





if I pick the right access track and don't go through a switch. We don't have far to go once inside. There I can take stock of things, with enough equipment to discover what I must know and perhaps make contact with others."

"You 'spect me to just sit 'round all dat time?"

He chuckled. "My dear, are you that naive? You are on a mission into an alternate world and you have failed in your objective and you have failed to elude capture. Surely you realize that they cannot allow this. You know top much, and you might be of value to someone against their interests. Everyone can be broken. Everyone. Were I, however, to try to break you or subject you to physical, mental, or artificially induced interrogation, it would be automatic. You would be blocked out, the process reversed, and you would again be only poor, sweet Beth, my willing, eager, and appallingly dumb slave. I couldn't even bring you back with hypnoscan and the best equipment."

It wasn't no bed of roses in that little chopper naked and in chains, but I got a real sick feelin' when he said that so confident and smug, 'cause I knew deep down in my gut he was tellin' the truth.

"Don't let that worry you," he said smoothly. "In fact, if I had to flee, they gave me a perfect tool and assistant. You will be a great help to me. It will be amusing to watch it happen more slowly. Beth, all of her, is still inside you, whole and complete. Your willpower keeps her down now, but the more tired you get and the more you sleep the more she will merge with you. Those are powerful programs, and very complete, since they have to fool even the devices that create them. It's still for their protection-at your expense." He laughed, but suddenly got real cold and crazy. "You listen to me, bitch! You are my property! I own you! What sanity you have depends on me. If I put this down and let you go right now, you would become Beth instantly in this world, a world where power is everything and your skin alone marks you as having none."

I figured he was tryin' to scare me, and he was doin' a pretty good job. He was sure right that I wouldn't last long in these parts alone. He was also right in that all of Beth was still in my head, and I almost had to fight her to keep from actin' like her. The only chance I had now was Sam and Bill and that crowd. I knew they was coverin' the most likely substations, and they also said that somehow they could track me-but that was no sure thing, if we got away clean before they knew it. That was some takeoff and nobody figured on this chopper. What if they thought we was both dead? That scared me the most, 'cause that left me as Vogel's slave forever.

I dozed off after a while; I couldn't help it. I was dead tired and there wasn't much more to say. Trouble was, I dreamed, and I didn't dream Brandy's dreams. I started to, but they were all made up of my fears and I ran from 'em-into Beth. Those were simple, pleasant, secure dreams, of lots of sex and no worries or cares or responsibilities.

The helicopter landed, wakin' me up, but I just lay there, half asleep, not really awake. It was daylight now and the sun was shinin' and it looked like a pretty day. My arms hurt and I couldn't remember why. Chained in back ... I must be bein' punished for somethin', but what?

Vogel came back and got in and looked at me carefully. "Beth?" he asked.

"Yessuh?"

"Now, listen close. You got a demon inside you, a real bad one that wants to hurt you and me and everybody. You can feel it in your head. I bet it's trying to get in right now."

And it was. I felt it, comin' in like a mass of mud.

"You can fight it, Beth. Don't let it in! You must fight it with everything you have! You will fight it. You will not let it in!"

But Beth couldn't really fight it, the knowledge and understanding, and I was more or less back in control, but shaken. Vogel saw this, but didn't seem terribly upset. "You ought not to fight it," he said. "It is inevitable. Here-I will prove it."

He got me out of the helicopter and then undid my arm bracelets and chains. The relief was enormous, almost orgasmic, both the ultimate pleasure and pain at the same time.

We was in a grassy meadow and there was cows in the distance, but the sun was fairly warm and the air humid and it felt okay after that gray chill.

"There's a farm just two kilometers that way," he told me, "and a town another two beyond that. You want to get away, just go ahead. I won't stop you or shoot you. Go to the farm and see what reception you get. Go to the town and see what happens. Or, perhaps, go wild in the fields here and try and live on what garbage you can steal until you're caught. Go ahead."

I looked around. "You made yo' point," I told him, and actually for the first time I could at least understand the poor, late Lavinia. Even slaves in the old south had a place they might run to, if they had the guts and the energy, up north. Not here. Not anywhere. Latin America, maybe, but I didn't know enough about the rest of this world to know for sure or how far down. And them old runaways, they didn't have to fight no Beth every time they got tired or slept. Even if all the shackles were off, there was just no place to run. Hell, I didn't even have any idea where in hell we was!

He unpacked a basket that had sandwiches and a jug of what proved to be cider and gave me some. There was enough Beth in me to find the meat in the sandwiches unappetizing and the cider pretty bad tastin', but I managed. After, he told me to pick up all the stuff and repack the basket and put it in the chopper and I did. There wasn't anything else to do but play along. It was all out of my hands now and I knew it. I'd just have to be good.

But I sure would like to get Vogel someday in a world where the black people were on top. There were some-I asked once.

Vogel surprised me by also removin' my leg chains. Not bad treatment for somebody who'd kicked him in the balls and cost him his empire.

"A final demonstration," he said, enjoyin' it. "I need some sleep, and the men with the gasoline can't be here for a few hours. Since I still can't be certain you won't try to grab my pistol and overpower me, I will lock myself in the cabin. Unfortunately, that means you remain outside. Go where you will, but not out of sight, please. Almost anyone who found you around here would be far less kind than I, and you would lose any hope that your friends could find us." And, with that, he climbed into the cabin and locked both doors and settled in.

This, I decided, was the nuttiest situation I could imagine. I was stark naked in some cow pasture, and I was free and my kidnapper had locked himself in to protect himself from me.

As a demonstration, though, it beat all the lectures in the world.

There was no way I was gonna live in no cow pasture, and trees and hills of any size was few and far between here. Last thing I wanted to be was a slave to a bunch of farmhands, and the town would have the usual Nazi everything. I sure wasn't about to kill myself so long as there was any hope of bein' rescued, but I thought I might do it if it was this for life or death. So I just moved out a little into the warm sun and sat down in the grass and waited.

The gas truck came a couple of hours later, driven by two typical cracker types. I pounded on the door and woke up Vogel and he got up and came out. The two drivers just stared at me and I thought at first it was because I was naked, but then I realized they probably never saw a black person before in their lives. Vogel noticed it, too, and enjoyed every minute of it. "You want to feel her up a little? Go ahead. She likes it." He took a manacle with chain and held it sorta like a whip. "She won't do nothin', will you, Beth?"

I hated his guts but the only protest I could manage in this situation was to not reply. It was a horrible situation, almost but not quite a rape, but just as degrading and humiliating, and I flipped out. Brandy shut off and Beth took over, as Vogel figured would happen. The only thing Beth had was her body; her skin limited anything she might want to do or anyplace she might want to go, and any mind was a liability. She wound up givin' both of 'em blow jobs and enjoyin' every minute of it. That's how Vogel paid most of the gas bill.

We was in the air when I managed to creep back into control, and now I knew what havin' a split personality was like. I was so completely disgusted and humiliated that I was on the edge of just givin' up and lettin' Beth take over. The only thing that stopped me was that I knew I was this man's and this world's prisoner, but I was damn well not his property or slave. It was the only part of













"The one with the airhead mistress."

He nodded. "Alas, so. And Basuti Alimati, who is something of a fanatical personality but whose office handles much of the routine business communications between our many divisions. I cannot rule out the other two, since Dringa heads Research and Development and Hanrin holds the security purse strings, but neither of those two have as much day-to-day interaction with operations. They would need a good number of support and managerial personnel to do the actual work. Neither is particularly technically oriented."

Even Bill was surprised. "You mean the head of R & D isn't technically oriented?"

"He authorizes a lot of things depending on what his advisors, both technical and political, recommend, but he understands little. He is a typical executive. What can I say? Basuti and Mukasa, on the other hand, are both inquisitive and highly intelligent and make a point of learning as much as possible about their responsibilities. Mayar understands almost nothing, being a politician, but if he wished he could through his vast power and position arrange practically anything."

None of that helped much. We still had five big, fat suspects, no real motive, no real clear knowledge of the plot, and while two was most likely suspects and one was in the best position to do just about anything, the fact was the least likely suspects couldn't be ruled out. Back to square one.

"Listen, like I told your men, I didn't get much out of Vogel, but whatever else that bastard was I don't think he was no traitor. He was real surprised and real upset when he learned that it was the Company after his hide, and the reason he didn't face us was 'cause whoever he got his orders from was high enough up that it woulda been his neck in a noose. He was had, though, by this dude. I think he got routine orders from somebody to set this thing up and he didn't think it was crazy 'cause he had the perfect setup to experiment on people, and he didn't ask no questions not only 'cause it was from so high up but also 'cause he was gettin' payoffs for it, like that hypnoscan in the basement. Imagine a paranoid like him with a hypnoscan!"

"Agreed. He knew and we blew it," Bill said. "I mean, our computer simulations actually said that an attempt within the Labyrinth was a likely thing, but that was if the whole plan went down pretty much as it was. When he escaped with you and then lost us for over a day and a half, all our resources went into locating and then tracking you. I was constantly shifting people inside the Labyrinth from one track to another to cover all the possibilities. The fact was, the other dangers just weren't important if we didn't have Vogel alive in the first place. When we got him, we were just so damned happy and smug we forgot to put everything else in place before moving him. It really was our fault, and I don't know any way around that."

"All right, I'll buy that," I told them. Hell, if they wanted the guilt trip, let 'em have it. Their lapse was understandable but, damn it, it was their fault. I had my own problems to worry about-I couldn't do their job, too. "The thing is, what happens now?"

The question seemed to catch both of 'em off guard. "What do you mean?" Aldrath asked.

"You got a skunk, a traitor, high up. Somebody who makes even Vogel look human. That skunk's gone to a whole lotta trouble to set somethin' up that is definitely aimed at the Company, maybe at its heart, and it comes right out of the Security Committee."

"But we lost Vogel!" Bill protested.

"Yeah, so you lost Vogel-but so did he!"

That seemed to hit the both of 'em like some new concussion grenade. I guess in a way they was just like Vogel-you get so much power, you get so arrogant and self-confident, you can't see your damned nose in front of your face.

"Go on," said Aldrath Prang.

"Look, how long you figure this has been goin' on? This drug thing, I mean?"

"Two, maybe three years so far. Why?"

"What's two or three years to a guy fifty to seventy who expects to live another hundred to hundred and fifty years? That's why he's takin' the time to

experiment and movin' so slow and cautious. But we just blew a lot of that research down the drain. We don't have it, but neither does our big boy, and he ain't gonna get no more from Vogel or his world. They wasn't done-that's clear. How long was it supposed to go on? Another year? Five? Or maybe until they found out what they wanted to know no matter what. Well, they ain't found it yet 'cause they was still doin' research and experiments. We don't know what they're lookin' for and why, but it's pretty damned clear that if they don't find it then there's no plot, no threat, no scheme. They just lost their main man and the technicians who done most of the work, but they still need the work and now the heat's on real hard. Now, he's got two choices. Either open up somewheres else and start from scratch, or step up in a place he's already at. You tell me which one's less risky and less trouble."

Bill thought a moment. "Aldrath, who knows about that second world except us and your immediate staff? Was it in your report to the committee?"

"No. Since we were doing only surveillance activities there, I thought it prudent not to mention it or we might drive the operation totally underground. They do not even know we intercepted the courier. They were told that we discovered it by accident during routine checks of Vogel's station." He paused a moment. "Sometimes you find it best and prudent to tell your superiors only what they need to know. We needed a plan for Vogel, lots of manpower and appropriations, all the rest. We had to take a station, have an attacking force, plus all the monitoring both in that world and within the Labyrinth. The committee had to be told."

"And I'd say that would be used, since it already is set up," Bill added. "To try the same thing that they did with Vogel with a new stationmaster would be too risky for words now that we know how he did it, and it would take a long time. I think you're right. I think they'll step it up where they already are and go with what they have. If it goes bad, then they can always start new." Somethin' just sorta snapped inside me. Maybe it was my brains, but it all come together. "Look," I told them, "I want this bastard. I want him bad. You know the odds on Sam. They grow longer every day, every week. I tell you, if he goes, there ain't much I got to live for and that's the truth. All I got is a burnin' hatred and will to get this man and nail his hide to Sam's tank."

Bill looked at me and shook his head. "You've done your bit, Brandy. More than done it. You have millions, you're still young and attractive, you still have quite a life ahead no matter what happens to Sam. You're in shock now, and grief, too, and I can't say you're going to ever forget that, but you'll learn to live with it just like others have. Besides, what if Sam comes out of it and you're back in the fire again?"

I didn't really believe that, any of it. I accepted that much. I had no family, no friends, and all I could look forward to was the best friends money could buy. I wasn't real unhappy in that broke-down office in Camden with the roaches and shit once Sam was there. Half of me was down in that damned tank or in splatter on the Labyrinth floor. I didn't want to learn to live with it.

"I want this bastard no matter what the cost, and I think Sam would, too."

Bill sighed, and I could almost see his brain workin'. Half of him was wracked with guilt and embarrassment over blowin' this at the end, and the other half was real tempted. He really wanted me to do it; he just didn't want me on his conscience right next to Sam.

"Look," he said carefully, "this isn't the same thing. We don't have a Vogel to snatch here. We don't even have a station or operation on that world, just some agents, a communications link, and some weak points. They only have access to it because the Pennsylvania weak point is between two heavily traveled worlds and the Labyrinth comes on for brief periods spontaneously there, and we can't build a substation without getting the authority and approval of the committee. There's no spy satellites, no big team with all sorts of connections, nothing. There's no backup."

"If I can be watched and get word out, then that's the only backup I'll need. If I get in too deep, even the damned United States Marines ain't gonna be no help to me."

"It's a string of hookers and the mob, you know," Bill reminded me. "To get close there, you run a real risk of getting hooked on this stuff yourself, even without meaning to. You're over the age they like, but if they find out who you are or suspect you're working for us, they'll do it."

When you been broke as a naked slave in chains, bein' hooked don't seem so damned horrible no more. "I know the risks. But if I nail this bastard, it'll be worth it."

"Yeah, but what if you do and then Sam comes around? So we break 'em, but you're hooked for good or die from a supply cutoff. No, I can't allow it."

"You told me they could break the addiction. Here, probably."

"We have had some success, yes," Aldrath admitted, "but it is very unpleasant and very ugly and quite often results in irreversible brain damage. Come, let us go over and we'll let you see just what we are facing and what you are truly talking about."

We went to one of the separate buildings, away from the main center. This was a security building, with all sorts of controls on gettin' in and gettin' out, but with Aldrath Prang along there weren't too many doors you couldn't get through. In some ways it was hard to think of the Center as a hospital, since even though you had patients and some regular kind of rooms none of the treatment rooms or labs looked anything like treatment rooms or labs. We went into this room that looked more like some computer room or library. There was a bunch of screens, chairs, and both microphones and keyboards all around, 'cept them keyboards had about a hundred keys and the symbols on them made Arabic or Chinese look real familiar. Aldrath sat down at one and typed a few things and the screen came on. It looked like one of them medical shows where they blow up the blood or cells to giant size.

"There is the enemy," he told us. It all looked like icky brown slime to me with lots of little things floatin' in it. "I'll blow it up and you can see it face-to-face."

The thing zoomed in, and suddenly there was a real pretty pattern of multicolored see-through shapes. They looked kinda like them Christmas stars with all the points comin' out like sunbursts, but somehow they all fit together. Inside, they seemed to be made up of millions of little strings, like jellied shredded wheat.

"I never seen nothin' like that," I told him.

"Neither had we," he replied. "Separately, they aren't much, and the amount of magnification needed to get them this large and this clear is enormous. They're not quite as big as a common virus, but much more complex. The raw stuff has a different pattern than you see here-really colorless, with fewer spikes and more tightly packed granules. When it invades a host, it makes the entire trip through the bloodstream in a minute or so and finally settles in the brain, but it takes a grand tour first. When it settles in, it changes, and it's never the same twice in any two individuals. It adapts to what it finds in incredible ways. At the start, it seizes control of vital chemical areas of the brain, turns off the body's defenses but only to it, then reproduces and grows to a certain size that the body can support without harming it, then stops. As a body manager, it's actually quite good and unique to each individual."

"You mean-it thinks?"

"No, we're pretty sure it doesn't, not in any sense we think of it. It can live only in a host, and its sole imperative seems to be survival of itself and its host. It cleans house, and much more efficiently gets rid of invading bacteria, viruses, you name it. Cancerous and precancerous conditions are identified, attacked, and dissolved. Arteries are unblocked. Body chemistry works at maximum efficiency. Hosts are actually healthier and in better condition than any human we find naturally."

"You make it sound almost like somethin' worth havin'."

"We think that in the world where it evolved, it is something worth having. The only way you can catch it is by sexual transmission. I could take a vialful of the stuff and inject it directly into you and you couldn't get it, since it would be individually adapted to its host. To reproduce, it actually builds a cluster of virgin and unadapted units encased in a gelatinlike shell with a mind

of its own and some real power. It not only goes in with sperm, it can appear in females as well and actually invade upstream, as it were, through the penis of the male. The world where it comes from has no addiction problem, since they live with it naturally the same as we live with a host of beneficial bacteria, and, as I said, it pays its own freight by making a more efficient body. We know that host is a Type One because it's close enough to us that this thing can adapt, recognize, and use our body so well, but it's not a hundred percent."

I nodded. "Bill told us. It can't keep livin' in our bodies, right?"

"Right. First of all, there seems to be something, some element, that it needs that our bodies lack. It forms its reproductive units, but they don't work. They fall apart and are gobbled by the would-be host's immune system. Therefore, it can't reproduce-but it doesn't know that and keeps trying anyway. Second, this element, which defies isolation, is present in the clusters we see, but since no more can be made in our bodies it starts to break down and be expelled or changed, perhaps by the chemicals of our own bodies, into harmless material. We suspect the latter, since that would explain why we can't find it. Within thirty-six hours the thing starts to die, and starts killing the host in the process. Only a fresh infusion of virgin material will restore it. Hence, we have a dangerous and deadly addiction."

He turned back to us. "You see, we can't even take material from another host and inject it, since it changes to be specific only to that host and it's using every bit of it for its own use anyway. The virgin cells won't grow on their own-they need a host-and so we can't make our own supply. Since the carrier in the drug modules appears to be semen, we've made a genetic analysis of the host and we're trying to find the world it comes from. The problem is, we've not yet found an exact match and there are hundreds of thousands of worlds in this genetic category. We'll find it, eventually, but it takes lots of time. I mean, you just can't walk in to every world, walk up to the nearest male, and demand a semen sample for lab analysis."

Yeah, I could see that. Pardon me, sir, but we in our protective suits to keep from catchin' nasty diseases want you to lie down and jerk off into this here tube for us ...

"But Bill said you could cure it."

Aldrath sighed. "Sort of. The trick is to get a host when the thing is in full control, not breaking down. Then the subject is somewhat frozen and suspended, life support slowed, and the entire organism is then attacked at one time throughout the body. It is a foreign organism; our scanners can isolate it and attack it with equal strength all through the body. That kills it, and keeps it from killing the host, but it doesn't replace the body chemicals the thing was managing. We then have to keep the host in suspension for many weeks while we stimulate the right areas of the brain and get it used to doing things the old way again. Then the body is okay, but the mind is something else. Most of them resist cures to the last moment. When we cure them, they feel terrible physically and they would go back on the stuff in a moment no matter what the price, even months later-which is all we've had to study this. It requires the hypnoscan and psychiatric techniques to remove that craving. The hypnoscan is a wonderful invention, but it cures nothing. It can only add and subtract and distort."

"I see."

"Only slightly. All of our subjects came from projects run by Vogel, outside of his compound, and snatched in convincing ways so neither he nor his people knew we were involved. We've found none without some evidence of brain damage, although we suspect this was the result of experiments or somebody not getting their injection in time. The long-term users also retain their habit patterns. Their inhibitions remain suppressed, their selfishness remains high, their sexual drives become insatiable in an attempt to recapture that ultimate high. No one has yet completed therapy sufficiently to be restored to total normalcy. Come on. I'll show you just what we're up against."

We went down to a lower section of the building that began to look more like a luxury jail than a hospital. I seen good-lookin' young guys and pretty young



world, other than with their own kind, and rape would be pretty quickly reported, particularly by a Type One individual. They might hook a few people before they were caught, but they wouldn't get close to the classes with the power by then and, once caught, we could find the home world this thing comes from from the one who came in. Besides, one of the things we do when you enter is read your genetic code. We know their basic genetic code, and we're even attempting to clone some cells to see what they really look like and give us more of a limited range to hunt for them, but so far without success. Clones in any case don't come out as full-blown adults; it takes the same time as with natural development. So far we've had no real luck, and the code only gives us that vast range of worlds I talked about. Unfortunately, it's a pretty common species type, almost as common as our own. To further minimize the risk, no one from that family of genetic relatives is permitted in here at all. And nobody from here, once they take a post in the Corporation, leaves."

It did seem like they thought of everything this time.

Sure, you might hook a young one out exploring but he'd never come back 'cause he couldn't get his supply of the stuff while he waited around for twenty or thirty years to get an important job, if then. This was a puzzler, all right. If not hookin' the Board, then what? Or, rather, who?

"What about transport and switchmen?" I suggested. "Control them and it don't matter what happens here."

"We know what it looks like so we can test for it," Aldrath said. "We test everyone four to six times a year for a variety of things, and anytime we suspect or see anything unusual or have someone in a critical area. They didn't even hook their couriers for that reason. You might hook some stationmasters, but what does that get you in the end?"

Bill thought for a moment, then said, "It could get forbidden stuff in and out of places. Ever think of that?"

"Of course. But Vogel got his hypnoscan without it, and there's not much beyond this organism that's so dangerous and so valuable to make it worth the risk. Besides, if that was all, why test it? Why hook fifty young, pretty girls and make them sell sex for hire? Other substances do as well for that. Why only women down there? Vogel's people experimented on men and women equally, with equal results. We have lots of pieces, but whenever you build a frame they don't go together."

I couldn't help thinkin' how Sam woulda loved this-did love this. Even though he was against my goin' undercover, he still had real joy at the puzzle itself and a real yen to solve it. So did I. Havin' seen the price, though, I just couldn't quite talk myself into it. The price of solvin' this one was a one-way ticket to hell.

After six weeks, I went back home. Sam was still in the tank and there was no change, and I was beginnin' to get used to the idea that there might never be. There was sure no reason to hang around; headquarters world was friendlier and more comfortable than Vogel's for me, but I was still an outsider in more ways than one.

Goin' home, though, proved only a temporary relief. The agency was pretty well a dead duck; Sam had handed off his cases to other PIs before we left and there wasn't much to pick up on, and I just didn't feel much like tryin' for new business. I might no longer care what that class of people thought of me, but that didn't mean they was gonna keep comin' in with new jobs. Sure, I could have picked up some work just from the Company-but it woulda been charity work, just Bill and the rest tryin' to give me somethin' to do.

Not that I had to do much. At first them bastards tried to get away with payin' just half the money, since they didn't have Vogel alive, but I shamed 'em into the full amount. I didn't need it; just the two and a half million was more than I ever expected to see in my life. It was just the principle of the thing, damn it.

I took a quarter of a million out and put it in liquid funds so I had cash and let Whitlock at Tri-State Savings keep and invest the rest. Then I got out all the bills we owed, big and small, and paid them all off. It was kinda rough

lookin' at the check register and seein' Sam's handwritin' on most of the stubs. In fact, Sam haunted everything. I kept wakin' up in that apartment expectin' to find him next to me, or maybe in the livin' room or kitchen. The phone would ring with somethin' or other and I'd instantly think it was Sam callin' from Pittsburgh or some other place and have it picked up before I realized that it couldn't be him.

There wasn't no sense in keepin' the office, so I closed it down and sublet it to the end of the lease. I didn't want to stay in town no more, neither. Seems like once you got money word gets around fast, and every fast-buck artist and get-rich-quick schemer and con artist finds you real fast. I had to get out of town, go off by myself awhile, but I couldn't think of anyplace I wanted to move to lock, stock, and barrel. I went up to New York for a while, rented a shabby little studio apartment just off Greenwich Village, under the name Beth Parker. I know, I know, but I was feelin' more'n a little like poor Beth right then, kinda lost without nobody around. I picked New York 'cause I was always a city girl at heart, and I didn't really know nobody up there and nobody knew me. The Company arranged for driver's license, credit cards, and a local bank account in that name. With the straight hair and smooth complexion even some of my relatives wouldn't'a knowed me anyways.

I was rich, but I didn't feel rich, and I didn't want nobody to know that I was. Sam had married me when I was a ghetto girl in cockroach heaven. I took very little with me, and bought what I needed from second-hand stores in Manhattan. When I was bored and lonely and depressed I ate a lot, and since that was the case most of the time I satisfied my every whim. Started smokin' cigarettes again, too, and quickly got up past two packs a day. Every kind of drug you can think of and a lot you never heard of were easy in the Village, and I tried some of the ones I knew about. They helped for a while, but I knew I was only runnin' from myself.

I at least started one thing I always meant to do and never had. There was a congregation of black Jews in New York and I went up there and started takin' classes in instruction. They was a little surprised-the Jewish faith takes converts, but doesn't go after 'em, and you really have to work to join that religion-but I found it real interestin' and a real relief from the Bible thumpers of my childhood. Sam wasn't exactly the world's most religious Jew, but deep down it wasn't just cultural. Deep down he really believed it, and that was more than I could say about myself, so it seemed to make sense. Actually, tellin' the rabbi about Sam-and his condition-without, of course, revealin' the hows and wheres, hurt me a little 'cause he got real skeptical. "If Sam were a Catholic, I think you'd be entering a nunnery now," he said. It took some time to convince him that I really meant it.

New York's not the best place to be alone, though, particularly if you're a woman. Go into a bar and either ten guys would try and put the make on you-and five women, too, if you stayed in the Village-or you'd be wallflowered out. Same with discos and other dance places, and it didn't feel right goin' to the theater alone. About the only place was the movies, and I went to see a bunch of 'em. And, yeah, I did allow myself to get picked up a few times and I even went to bed with a couple of one-night stands. I needed it. I thought-hoped-Sam would understand. They was like the drugs, though. They helped, but only for a little while.

I called Bill's office in Philadelphia often about Sam, but it was always the same news. No change. Finally, one night, I was standin' there naked lookin' at myself in a mirror and thinkin' how fast and easy the fat goes on and how hard it is to get off. I finally had it out with myself in that mirror, too.

Okay, girl, now what? You keep on like this, you'll slit your wrists in a year or wind up in a permanent heroin haze. You got so much money you could light your cigarettes with it. You can go anywhere you want, do anything you want, and what good is it doin' you? You don't want to go nowheres or do nothin'. You can go out and buy some business and run it, but you don't know no business but investigations and you done all you could in that. You could just screw around, until you got to be a fifty-year-old three-hundred-pound diabetic who had to buy it. If this was reversed the way you thought it could be, you knew Sam could

handle it, but you can't. Find some nice guy and shack up with him? You already played with that, and you know that wouldn't be fair to him or you. It'd be a lie, a let's pretend.

Yeah, that was part of it, too. You don't know no business but investigations .

. . . Anyone who gets close enough to learn anything will probably get hooked. . .

That other world is the only thing they got left. . .

There's no possible cure for these people unless we find the origin world...

"Sam? Do you think it's possible to do it? Do you think I can do it?"

My conversion would have to wait. God knew how I felt, anyways. The next day I took the train back down to Philadelphia and arranged with the Company to visit Sam at the Center.

Aldrath Prang met me personally when I arrived, which surprised me. "News?" I asked him.

"Some. Not about your husband, although there are some recent encouraging signs of increased brain activity. I thought you had a right to be informed of the progress, or lack of it, we're making."

"I'm very interested."

"You were quite right about the shift of activity. Larger quantities are going to the other target world, and they seem to be preparing to set up some facilities in a South American country where absolute privacy and absolute license can be bought and paid for. They're still limited to the one Pennsylvania access, but they seem to have recently completed a minor substation. It's no more elaborate than Vogel's or Cranston's and far less versatile, but it gives them some freedom."

"Yeah? That costs money and lots of expert manpower, don't it?"

"It does, but they seem to be willing to pay any price- and able to do so-and most of a substation could be built, in unrelated modules far apart, within your own country right now, requiring only some small but vital sections to be added from other worlds. It's not difficult to do, unfortunately. The competition, as you know, has a number of safe worlds with just such substations. One could easily be dismantled and reestablished component by component. They did basically that in setting up the ambush in the Labyrinth. Which reminds me-how is your wound?"

"Gone," I told him, and that was the literal truth. I never seen nothin' like it. When it was ready to go, that bandage, which withstood showers and rain and all the rest, just fell off and there was nothin' there. No scars, no marks of any kind, no skin discoloration. It was a hell of a gash, yet you couldn't even tell now that anything had ever happened there. "But gettin' back to the other-what about the bad guys? I mean, there's got to be a couple who really know what's goin' on now, both local and from off-world. They need a Vogel type for this."

"There is, alas, no shortage of Vogel types. A number of locals may be being raised up and prepped-there is also no end to the scientific amoralist who would jump at the chance of a project like this, although the same problem exists as existed with Vogel's researchers. They are experimenting along given lines with a license to freelance off on their own, but none are actually told what they are looking for. The only off-world presences are a man who is overseeing the South American operation and a woman who is handling things up north. The man is called Dr. Carlos, the woman is known only as Addison, both cover names, naturally. So far we have been unable to get photographs, let alone more intimate data, on the pair, except that Carlos is dark, looks like an Indian-that's the description, I can only offer it-and speaks with an odd accent, and this Addison is young, not terribly attractive, and has very short hair, wears glasses, and is described as a cold fish who likes men's clothing. We suspect that they were part of Vogel's team on his world and were not present at the compound when it blew and therefore used other exits."

"Better than nothin', but not much. And you can't catch 'em at the substation?"

"We have it covered all the time, but no. Only the couriers. Remember, though, they did have access to a stationmaster who could both legitimately and

illegitimately request sufficient spare parts for almost anything, and we didn't know about the one Vogel tried to use."

That stopped me. "You mean it's possible there's another someplace there? One you don't know about?"

"It's possible. There are a thousand weak points of one degree or another across any world from the Arctic to Antarctica. We have very few people who even know of this world and we are limited that way. Sensing, let alone tracing, a power drain and tracking it to its source is bad enough with full resources."

"Uh huh. Like tracin' a phone call." I did see, too. With all them points, so long as they turned the power on, used it, and shut down real fast, that small a drain might not even be noticed and definitely not traceable. The bet was it wasn't noplacе geographically convenient, though. If it was, they wouldn't be riskin' improvin' the Pennsylvania substation unless that was some kind of diversion-and if it was, then they knew we was on to 'em so why set up all this new stuff? No, bet on the other station bein' in the middle of nowhere, like the Andes or the Congo or maybe Fiji. Useful, but not convenient. And to get enough bread and people to do anything major, they have to tip off the man behind it. It was real tricky.

"Any progress on your science detective work?"

He shook his head. "We're as far as we can go without new people to try new things on, and we don't dare pull any from this other world or they will pack and run. We have well-placed operatives there, but they can't get too close and at the minimum safe distance it's too far to learn much more than this."

"The Security Committee's still in the dark about all this?"

"Yes, but not for much longer. We can't go on static like this or we just watch them do their job in ignorance. Sooner or later we will have to vastly expand, increase our monitoring, and perhaps go in with all we have. That takes money and people and technical support and that means the committee. It might drive them underground, or we might get lucky. At least it will set them back, and if we're fortunate enough to nab an Addison or Carlos we might well win."

"Not without somebody inside, you won't. See, they got somebody inside-right here. Without somebody to tell, gettin' a Carlos or Addison would be sheer luck."

I asked him two favors. One was to visit the ex-addicts again, the other to see Sam-alone.

"No problem, but there are few patients left now. We had several suicides, and a few whom we were able to treat with hypnotherapy and find places for. The few left are those for whom, for one reason or another, we have found no place, but who can be monitored against doing away with themselves."

The patient I decided to talk to was named Donna, and she was at one time a secretary in the Atlanta of Vogel's world. She had fallen in love with a young Party man with ambition, fed him some information on her bosses that would help his advancement, and then got caught doing it. She had been tried by a Party court and sentenced to "useful imprisonment," which meant being sent to the Montrose Hospital and Asylum near Houston, site of many medical and psychological experiments on humans and one in which Vogel's people had a part. It was unnerving to talk to her. She had stuck in my mind from before because she was one of the ones who had stayed naked in her room always feeling herself up. She still was. She was also a little unnerved by me; I don't think she'd ever seen a black woman clothed and with more than one thought in her head before and she couldn't quite believe it.

"Every day they'd take me in a little room and give me a jolt of juice," she told me. "It didn't take right away. You get that rush-" She shivered and closed her eyes, remembering it, and it took a minute or so for her to pick it up again. "-then you get a little sick and that's it. After a week or so, though, it took."

"What's it like?"

"You ever had an orgasm? Well, it's like that, only all over your body and a thousand times more intense. Like nothing else. You come out of it, but you don't feel down, you feel good, but you want that rush again. You live for it. It's what keeps you going-the thought that every day you'll get it again, always

as good. The rest of the day-well, it's kinda funny. You're all right-I mean, you feel great, the best you ever felt-but you get these urges. Compulsions, really. You never know when they'll come on. You slowly get real turned on, I mean real up, and then you can't think of anything but sex, and you got to have it, and you stay up at real high tension until you do. Another time, you just got to exercise. You only feel good doing it. You get hungry sometimes for crazy things, like you're pregnant or something, but other stuff, things you've always loved, taste horrible. It's like you're not really in control of yourself, but yet you're still you. You lose all modesty, all integrity, all the brakes. Inhibitions, that's the word. Brakes get put on, but not by you. Almost in spite of you. I can't explain it. It's like you lose all sense of what's right and wrong, but something else decides-and it might not decide the way you would have."

"It sounds like you become some kinda robot or something."

"Uh uh. It's not like that at all. You're still you, and there's lots of time in the day when you are. You know what's happened, but you don't really care. You're basically free-they never even bothered to watch over me most of the time and I was never locked in-but you won't go. There's no way you're going to miss your next juice shot. That's the control. If the one person in the world who can give it to you asked you to stand on your head or shoot somebody, you might feel bad about it but you wouldn't hesitate to do it. If you had an unlimited supply of the juice you'd tell 'em to stuff it, but if it's obey orders or no juice, you'll strangle your own mother."

"You sound bright, intelligent, and you're not hooked anymore. Why do you stay here-like that?"

"It's what I mean that I can't really describe," she told me. "The juice needs its own juice. It changes you. First time they tell you to do something horrible or disgusting and you won't, so they don't give you the juice and you go to hell real fast. One thing they wanted to know was whether they could cause the stuff to change the body and brain if one particular thing was demanded to get your jolt and they kept it from you for a while. They ordered me to go, every evening, down to the military and staff wings, stark naked, and proposition every man and woman I could find and do whatever they wanted. Every night. I fought it. Some of them were brutal, sadists and the like. They kept me from the juice for a while until I finally had to agree. They did this every night for weeks. Finally, the juice learned. One day, I woke up, and that was all I wanted to do. It told me when to eat and like that, but the rest of the time I only wanted that. I was totally turned on and I stayed turned on. Not in the head-it was physical."

"It made you a raging nymphomaniac?"

"I guess that's the right word. I didn't want clothes, I didn't want anything except I was compelled to go down and do that. I wanted to do it. I had to do it. I lost any will to fight-anything. I still can't. My voice got higher, my breasts and hips got bigger, everything."

"But that's over now," I said. "It's not there anymore."

"I'd take it again in a minute, if I could," she told me. "Right now they got me on half a dozen drugs. Otherwise I'd be all over you begging for it. They say my brain's permanently locked in that pattern-chemicals and all, and that my hormone level is monstrous. The drugs I'm taking now are blockers, that keep the worst of it from being triggered, but without them I wouldn't even be human. I'd just be a bitch in heat all the time."

"But-can't they do nothin' for you? I mean, physically?"

"Sure. A oophorectomy and brain surgery. They say I'd come out sexless, a nothing. That's bad enough, but they say there'd be side effects because of where the damage and changes are and what they know from having to replace the areas in natural brain damage. At the very least they say I'd have no feelings. No love, no hate, no envy, no greed, no friendship, no loyalty, no compassion, no mercy, no- nothing. I would think, and remember, but I'd be like a machine. I still have feelings. I wouldn't want to be some machine. No hopes, no ambitions, nothing. If that's the way it is, I'd rather stay right here, just like this."

It was hard to think of this pretty, intelligent young woman a neutered machine, and I could see her point-and the Center's. She was still a fund for research and information. They could "cure" her, sorta, but since the cure would be worse than the disease they wouldn't force it.

The interview was sobering in a number of ways. I didn't underestimate what them Nazis who could gas millions and make lampshades outta 'em and sleep like babies and even go to church every Sunday could come up with. The scariest thing was, somebody with a real strong will and sense of identity and purpose could break even heroin, though it sure wasn't easy, or at least live a fairly normal life on methadone. But this-no self-cure possible, no methadone-style alternative, and if you got cured you wound up like Donna between a rock and a hard place. Donna, though, made me mad. She was bright, alert, good-lookin', and she had real potential. Anybody born and raised in a south where Martin Luther King got gassed as a kid if he got born at all and who come from some Nazi background to boot who could learn to talk to me and accept me as an equal human being in that time could adapt to other, better societies. They cheated her-and how many others? They never saved more than two dozen here, all they could sneak out and treat without revealin' their interest. How many more Donnas died in agony when we took Vogel out as supplier? Hundreds? Thousands? How many more was they gonna make in this other place, and maybe other places as well if they went underground again or got whatever they was goin' after with these projects. And for what? So some shithead born to power and gold silverware here could get a little more personal power.

Then, too, Donna got me to thinkin' 'bout Sam, who I was gonna go see now. Different cause, but they both had brain damage, and there was still only so much that could be done. Sam was all wrapped up and still floatin' in that tank, but for the first time I began to wonder not just if he would ever wake up but whether it would be a blessin' if he did. Would he remember me? Be palsied? Be unable to tie his own shoes?

"Sam, I know you can't hear me or understand me, though they say my voice gets through at least," I said outside the window lookin' at his chamber, "but I'm gonna talk anyways, 'cause I never made a big decision or took a big case without talkin' it over with you.

"I can't hack it alone, Sam, not back home. Without you, there's only one thing I'm good at and that's investigations. I know the last one didn't go none too well, but that was them and their experts and their damned computers. There's a lot of innocent, good folks bein' crippled and put through hell out there, Sam. Bein' put through it by a whole bunch of cruds at least as bad as Vogel. I'm gonna take a crack at 'em. All of 'em. I want the bastards. I want the ones who did this to you and are doin' worse to others and who'll be in charge of all this if whatever they're plannin' comes off. The damn company's foul enough as it is; I can't sit back when I see firsthand that it might well wind up in the hands of Vogels and Hitlers and all the rest. Maybe I can't lick it. Maybe it's bigger'n I am. Maybe I'm just gonna sell myself into slavery and hell. But I got to try, 'cause there ain't nobody else and it needs doin'. If I can't be Nora Charles to your Nick, then there's nothin' for me back home.

"It'll be just my luck if you come outta that damn pool ten minutes after I'm stuck beyond any hope myself, but if you do, then you just play support like always, 'cause the only hope I got is findin' the source world and nailin' them bastards to the wall. You'll cuss and scream and yell, but you'll break it with or without me, 'cause we're the best, Sam. We're a damn sight better than this fancy security and we're better than their crooks." I stopped a moment. I was cryin' too much, and I really wanted him to thrash around in there and scream at me, but nothin' happened and the monitors showed no real change in his condition.

"So, so long, sweetheart. The problems of two crazy people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world."

I walked out and went to find Aldrath Prang.

6.

The Shadow Dancers

"You must understand what you are contemplating. The dangers involved . . ."  
Aldrath Prang told me gravely.

"I know the risks. Look, I'm not goin' in there to get captured or to get hooked. If I can keep from either one, I swear I plan on doin' just fine without 'em. I'm realistic enough t'know I might and I'm willin' to take that risk just like I was riskin' as much for you three months ago. Besides, don't give me no jive, Aldrath. You been expectin' me to do this for some time and probably got itchy when I took so long."

He looked hurt but you got to be a decent actor in his line of work.

"I assure you I did not. However, I am willing to listen and see if you have any chance."

"Like on the last one, huh? Look, this is strictly me and you. No big operation, no giant backup team. If they don't catch me I won't need backup, and if they do it won't make no difference, now will it? What I'll need from you, aside from a complete briefin' on this world, these people, all you know to now and who you got workin' the case so I don't shoot the wrong fella, access in, free access to the Labyrinth if I got to get out, and some way to monitor me so I can get information out to the right people, meanin' you, without gettin' caught."

"We have a resident agent there now, somebody local but she knows about us, and she uses local talent who don't know about us. She will have to know, and at least arrange signals and means of passing messages-if you can pass them."

"They don't keep these folks locked up, do they? Why bother?"

"Good point. The other question is, if they catch you and hook you instead of killing you outright, will you want to pass anything to us? Those who have this thing inside them have an overwhelming urge to self-preservation at all costs."

"Then we got to agree absolute to the opposite," I told him. "We got to agree that if I get hooked and then make no attempt to communicate within, say, a month of my first observed opportunity, you'll come in and snatch me."

"But that might kill you! At the very least-well, you visited and talked with Donna."

I nodded. "That's why. If it takes self-preservation, or preservation of that thing, to keep me motivated, that should do it."

He nodded. "Yes, yes. Very clever and original. All right. But just what do you propose to do?"

"I don't know and that's the God's honest truth. I won't know till I'm briefed and then there on the scene with time to check it all out and learn all the ropes. Uh-will I have any trouble like in Vogel's world?"

"If you mean color, no. At least, not any more than you would have operating in your own. You will be in a rough democracy which has the same sort of failings and virtues as your own, although it's different. But-I can't let you go in alone, with no plan, no backup."

"Sure you can, if you want results. That's part of your problem all along. You're so Mister Future, high tech, computer modeled and the rest you don't have no gut abilities or feelin's. That's why you keep lockin' the barn door after the horse has already gone."

"Such confidence. Anyone can be broken."

"Yeah. Vogel came damned close to doin' it to me, so it don't take a lot to break me, but I was ready the first opportunity I got to wring his damned neck. I ain't never gonna be no Beth again. I might hav'ta act like her, or worse, but I'll never become her. I got you all to thank for that much, and Vogel, too. I learned the difference between havin' 'to be a Beth and wantin' 'to be a Beth. That Donna girl down there-for all her problems and for all that she's a shadow of what she coulda been 'cause of this, doesn't like it. She's broken, body and soul; she's been raped in the mind as well as the body. Even if she didn't have no permanent brain damage she'd be broken and in shock. But if she could get the ones who did it to her, she would. If she could pass judgment on 'em, she'd demand justice. That's the difference."

"All right." He sighed. "I'll make the preparations. Fewer than six people will know, all under my control except the resident agent and her people, who you'll have to watch out for." He paused a moment. "You know, you're taking me at face

value, too. If I were in your position, I, too, would be a suspect."

"You are," I told him honestly, "but I got to trust somebody. It's that thing about feelin 's again. I can't get it out of my head that you really love what you do, that you wouldn't do nothin' else, and that the only thing that could scare you would be if you had to quit. I can't see how you could be bribed to sell out, and somehow I kinda suspect you got somethin' on everybody who could fire you.

He smiled, but said nothin'.

The next few days I spent goin' over all the materials. I didn't trust no hypnoscan, but I'm a quick study when I'm on a case. I memorized everything I could of this world, the important people, the way the opposition's organization was set up. Aldrath, in the meantime, arranged to transfer some of my funds into slush funds in the money of the new world, so I wouldn't even be takin' a dime from the Company on this.

We agreed only on objectives. How much did the players in the game there know? Who knew the most? Did they have any orders on what they was doin', or was all the stuff they did directed from above by the two controllers? Who were Addison and Carlos? Could they be snatched? I didn't expect to hand the whole thing over-that woulda been beyond belief-but if we could get one of them, another Vogel type, we'd have what we needed. Incriminating, absolute evidence against their boss who would tell Aldrath what he needed to know about the rest of it. If I could also somehow put together just what it was they was plottin' to do, then we would be able to make sure that nobody else could do it.

I went back home one last time, to close out a few things and register a will. It was funny; just like last time, I was calm, I didn't have nightmares or other scary ideas-I was all business. Not even this late in the game, not this time. I don't think I was committin' suicide in a noble cause, not now. I think it was just that, like Aldrath, I knew and loved my job and I did one thing well and this time I was in control.

All that stuff about clearin' up personal things back home was really an excuse to see Bill Markham without nobody suspectin' or knowin' nothin' about it. I had the idea that Bill's remorse over Sam was genuine, and even though he was white and blue-eyed, he was one of my own kind. Since his office was in the same downtown bank buildin' as my account and financial advisors, it wasn't hard to arrange a meet.

I told him what I was gonna do, and he did all the usual things and said all the usual things, and a little bit more. I asked him if he trusted Aldrath Prang.

"Yes and no," he replied. "If you mean, do I think he's got any interest in this except catching these people, no. If he could nail a Company director it would be the highlight of his life. On the other hand, he sees people as game pieces, not human beings. I guess it comes with the territory. If he thought he could get more from exposing or sacrificing you, or me, or all of us, he'd weigh the odds and then do it and feel he was right. Are you sure he didn't plant this idea in your head somehow?"

It was a sobering question. "I don't think so, but with all them gadgets who'd ever know for sure? Do you? About yourself, I mean? You can get too paranoid in this job and then you're as crazy as Vogel. Bill, what the hell would you have me do?"

He sighed. "You see the Inquirer this morning?"

"Nope. Why?"

"They had to cordon off four blocks of Philadelphia- right here-because an interracial couple moved into one of those white working class neighborhoods and there was rioting, mob violence, and all the racist talk in the world. We've elected black politicians, even mayors, and we're decades after full legal civil rights and lots of progress, yet this still happens-not far off down south, but right here."

"I know a little bit about that myself," I reminded him.

"I'm real sorry to hear it, but what's that got to do with this?"

"That's the kind of hatred and violence and unreasoning fear and madness that breeds Vogels and Hitlers and all the rest. They're not just out there, on other worlds, or over there, in other countries, or down there in Mississippi or

someplace. They're right here. Over there, you're going to be on unfamiliar ground, at a distinct disadvantage, on their turf and alone. If you have to fight this type of thing, wouldn't it make more sense to fight it here?"

I thought about that. "Bill, what you say is true and maybe I'm nuts, but I think I'm right on this. Our little Hitlers and Klansmen and the rest do a good bit of damage here, but that kinda thing's part of what we have to live through and fight all the time. This is the Company, damn it! Good old G.O.D., Inc. They didn't pick them initials for nothin'. That's power. Real power. Lord knows they're a pretty unpleasant bunch as it is, but suppose instead of a Board they had a Hitler? Never mind this drug shit, I'm talkin' 'bout the Company. I got just a taste of what we folks could do to ourselves with a Hitler a few months back without the Company's power and resources and knowledge. They could impose that on lots of worlds and hold 'em till the end of time. Billions, trillions of human bein's, all of 'em their toys and playthings forever. Uh, uh, Bill."

"Damn it! You're only going to get yourself killed-or worse!"

"If Sam's uncle knew what was comin' back in the thirties and he had a big family but he also had one shot at bumpin' off Hitler, even though he'd get caught and tortured to death, I think he'd'a done it. Instead they sent that family to Auschwitz, where they lived hell for years, and only one distant cousin survived at all and him a broken man. Better to have gotten Hitler."

Bill nodded, but made one last try. "A worst-case scenario. You get in, they catch you and hook you and try to turn you to them. Sam survives, recovers, and in the meantime you find yourself blocked and trapped, learning nothing. Finally we take you out, as we would have to, and rush you to the Center, and you wind up like this Donna, say."

"Then I'd say I'd still be better off than bein' Beth all my life, or walkin' aimlessly around through life watchin' this thing go down bad and always wonderin' if I coulda done something to prevent it. And it wouldn't be nice, but Sam would be no worse off than if Vogel had killed me."

He threw up his hands. "All right, then! It's your funeral! Now, what do you want me to do?"

"Be an independent monitor. Use whatever you can to keep some independent track of me-without Aldrath knowin'. And be here in case they double-cross me so somebody gets what I know."

He thought a moment. "I'm pretty limited here, and I'm just a regional security man. Compared to Aldrath, I'm next to powerless. But I'll do all that I can, I promise you that. I'll tell you something nobody is supposed to know that may help. When we went in for Vogel, we also went into his two chief experimental labs in North Carolina and Houston. That's how we got Donna and some of the others you saw still in advanced stages. We also captured more than three hundred doses of the stuff. Some of it went to research, of course, but some didn't get reported. Some of us wanted to make sure that nobody got us hooked so we had no way out and no supply to get to the Center fully charged. I have more than a month's supply in a safe-deposit box in this very bank. As far as we know it'll keep almost forever at normal temperatures and conditions. I doubt if I could get a line of communication in there much; you'll be on your own with just Aldrath's few people. But if it really goes bad, and you can manage somehow to get into the Labyrinth and get here, I can keep you going until the Center."

I stared at him. "If it comes to that, you better damned well be here and answer your phone."

It was like our world, and it wasn't nothin' like our world, all at the same time. In this world, we lost the Revolutionary War. Washington was hung as a traitor and Benedict Arnold was a great hero. The French Revolution started different, but it still happened and it wound up the same, so they had a real fight with Napoleon anyways. The British claimed and seized most of what we called the Louisiana Purchase by force, not cash. Texas and California revolted and set up their own republics, which Britain recognized and helped defend. California later came into the Empire after the gold rush. That's more history than I knew in school, but that's what they told me happened.

So we had in the end a Dominion of North America, except Texas and some parts of

New Mexico and Arizona. Spain hung on to Mexico and most of Spanish Latin America 'cept Brazil and the places the Brits had colonies, but they mostly governed themselves.

Britain wiped our slavery in the whole Empire in the eighteen thirties, but it was the old pattern here, convertin' slaves into sharecroppers. As machines and industry grew up, as we had it, in the north, a lot of black folks went up there lookin' for work and you had the ghettos formin' anyways pretty much as they looked back home. But, in a number of ways, it was worse.

There hadn't been near as many wars, they hadn't yet discovered the bomb or transistors, for that matter, airplanes was still for the rich and was real funny lookin', and radio was there but TV, while invented, wasn't a big commercial thing and wasn't in nobody's homes. The public schools was really private schools, and the ones for the poor folks was lousy. There was still segregation of sorts, too; not no back-of-the-bus stuff, but there was black schools and white schools, black neighborhoods and white neighborhoods, and the blacks, as usual, got the poorest education, lousiest jobs, and most of the unemployment. Not that there wasn't black doctors, dentists, lawyers, and the rest, but they came from black colleges and had black practices. You needed money to vote, and that was where the power was. This was an America without the Votin' Rights Act, the Civil Rights Act, and a lot of the rest.

Each of the commonwealths, which was what they called states, was much bigger-Pennsylvania, which still called itself a commonwealth in my world-went all the way to the Mississippi, for example, and parts of Canada and Michigan were in New York. They ran themselves like little independent countries 'cept for money, trade, and foreign affairs, which was taken care of by a national Parliament with only them powers. The country's capital was Philadelphia, of all places. Washington, D.C., just didn't exist. It was like steppin' back in time to the forties, or maybe the thirties. The cars looked funny and old-fashioned and drove on the left side of the road with the steerin' wheel on the right, and although they had penicillin and a few other things medicine wasn't that great, neither.

The American pound was the currency, divided into twenty shillin's or a hundred pennies. Football was soccer, somebody did invent basketball but there was cricket fields instead of baseball. The national drink was tea, but somehow Coke and Pepsi managed to get invented but beer was the standard. The pound bought about what a dollar buys here, but the average wage was less than a hundred pounds a week. What medical care there was, though, was free, only if you had money you could see somebody real good and real quick. Abortions was illegal and back-alley affairs, and the only birth control they seemed to have was condoms. I had the Center do their version of tyin' my tubes; it was quick, painless, and you couldn't tell, but it relieved my mind a little in a place like this.

I had to come in down in Tennessee; they forced the weak point open just long enough to get me in and close it down again. The other side controlled the only regular substation -and it was theirs, not ours-and that was in Pennsylvania near State College, which wasn't called that or nothin' else, there bein' no Penn State there. There was only a few sleepy little farm towns around there-and .the country estate of one George Thomas Wycliffe, a real nice name for a country gentlemen who happened to be the boss of organized crime from New York to the Virginia border. It also happened to completely contain not just the weak point there but also just about all views of the weak point.

I stepped out into the late afternoon of what in my world would be the Tennessee countryside but was now just the Boone District of the Commonwealth of Virginia and the Labyrinth closed behind me. Aldrath worked it so it opened when it did by forcing a spontaneous opening of the thing so one of his agents could go to a world nearby on that track on some pretend mission. Fact was, only three people really knew I was here-Aldrath Prang, Bill Markham-and Aldrath's resident agent in the world who was meetin' me. She was supposed to be born here, and knew her way around. Even she was told as little as she could, only that I was on some mission for Aldrath. To her, too, I was Beth Parker. No sense in takin' a chance that this Carlos or Addison might know who Brandy Parker Horowitz really was. She was there, all right; a thin, slightly built young woman maybe five two or

three, with shoulder-length black hair. Her face was long and she had a real sharp nose and thin lips. She was wearin' a fur jacket, knee-length skirt, and high-heeled boots. Me, I had on a blue wool sweater, jeans, and sneakers, and I had one of my satchel handbags packed with toiletries and stuff and a small suitcase with just things I thought I might need and might not be able to pick up here.

"Hello," she called to me. "Over here." She had one of those middle voices and middle accents that seemed just about average for American women. I half expected some kind of British accent or something, but I guess we was already polluted in our talk by the time of the Revolution. Of course, the Canadians of my world had been with the British and they didn't sound like no Brits, now that I thought of it. As I went over to her, though, I could see on her face that I wasn't exactly what she was expectin'.

"I'm Beth Parker," I told her, bein' friendly as I could.

"Lindy Crockett," she responded, but she didn't offer a hand. "I-I've seen that thing work a couple of times, but it always gives me the chills. Sorry."

"That's okay. Somethin' else is botherin' you, though. Better clear the air right now; I'm gonna hav'ta depend on you a lot from here on in."

"Uh-nothing, really. I just wasn't expecting you to be a Negro."

My old defenses went up automatically, but I was under control. This wasn't my world and I wasn't invited, I invited myself. I might not like the place much, but it was better to have a comment like that than to be what that meant in, say, Vogel's old world.

"You got problems with that? If so, we better try to set up some alternate people right now, before this goes much further."

"Uh, no, no. It may even work to our advantage once we begin, but it does complicate things a little. We're going to have a very long drive, and this commonwealth has some pretty rigid segregation laws. Until we get out of Virginia, there might be some problems just finding restaurants we could eat in or motor inns if we need to sleep. I planned on driving to Richmond and taking the train from there, giving you a feel for the place and briefing you as best I can, but we wouldn't even be in the same cars."

Just like home, huh, Aldrath? Of course, they was still blockin' off a whole neighborhood of the good old northern City of Brotherly Love back home 'cause a black woman moved into a neighborhood, and my daddy grew up in a place and society like this.

"Then how 'bout we drive north instead of the train?" I suggested. "Or would a black woman and a white woman in a car prove embarrassin'?"

"Not so long as we were both women, no. The roads aren't too great, but we could go up to Huntington and get the train east from Cincinnati to Philadelphia. If I got a compartment we wouldn't have problems."

"Let's do it, then. Anything else?"

"Well, women in pants are pretty rare in this country, and those shoes aren't seen much off the squash courts. Did you bring anything else to wear?"

"Well, I got one skirt in there and some high boots, but I didn't expect to risk my lone pair of pantyhose so early."

She stared at me. "What are pantyhose?"

Now I knew I was livin' in a primitive place.

I changed in the woods and got pronounced all right to travel, although I got the idea that my stuff was a little out of style here. We hiked over the fields and through the woods to a country road where a small car was parked to one side. It was a real tiny, boxy car and it bounced a lot, but the only real problem I had with it was that I was sittin' where I felt I should be drivin' and she was sittin' in the passenger side with a steerin' wheel and we drove opposite of all I was used to. It took some gettin' used to, I'll tell you. Crockett also was the kind of driver who liked to go sixty on roads you wouldn't dare do thirty on and brake at the last minute.

She was a cigarette smoker, though, and relieved that I was, too. She smoked these long, thin, unfiltered things, though, and I began to realize that I better hoard my two cartons 'cause I was universes away from any more Virginia

Slims menthol.

Lindy-her real name was Linda but nobody called her that-was originally from Buffalo but she went east like so many did in my world to make her fame and fortune in New York. Most women here were housewives and you could still live here on one income, but the professional types tended to wind up as secretaries and clerks. Lindy was from the well-off middle class, and she'd gotten a law degree from one of the two colleges in the whole east that let women study law. She never could get into no law firm, though, and couldn't get much business on her own, so she wound up a full lawyer workin' as a legal secretary for a big law firm. She met a guy there who did their PI work, they got married, and she moved over to be his secretary. About a year and a half later the husband died from pneumonia he caught on a long stakeout and she inherited the business. She was twenty-six then.

The thing wasn't no Spade & Marlowe, though. It was a nice, comfortable operation with five full-time male investigators all of whom were willin' to let her be the boss so long as they kept doin' all the real work. It was only after a while that she discovered that one of her most regular clients who had 'em goin' all over and doin' all sorts of seemingly crazy things was really the Company. Because there really wasn't no Company here, only a few of Aldrath's agents tryin' to run down what they could, security employed a bunch of private eye companies to help it get information. Since some of her agents had contacts inside "Big Georgie" Wycliffe's organization, she was the one they finally picked as resident agent.

"In a sense, it saved my agency," she told me. "A number of the men didn't like working for a woman and were looking around to jump to other agencies, and business was drying up. Not any more. Plenty of cash, plenty of work, as you probably know."

Yeah, I knew what the Company could do, even if it wasn't in a world where it was set up and fully operating.

"The Gurneys-sorry, the National Police-have been trying to nail him for years, but he always slips away," she said about Big Georgie. "He came up as a dock union leader and made the big time by being smarter and tougher than anyone else. He got where he is by a combination of big favors, mostly assassinations, for the higher-ups and while still a union leader he seized control of the illegal narcotics trade and made millions. Opium, heroin, cocaine -you name it, he controls it, north of the Mason-Dixon Line. Officially, if you can believe it, he is a brewer in northern New Jersey and also a tea importer. He's highly visible, at charitable events, sporting events, and the like, but very well protected and insulated by a top organizational staff."

"And you think he knows about the Labyrinth and the rest?"

"He knows, because what is being done is being done by his subordinates in his territory. It couldn't be otherwise. The main man for this horrible new drug, though, is a lieutenant named Arnie Siegel who controls the narcotics underworld in the south New Jersey and Philadelphia areas. He works this part of the operation out of Atlantic City, New Jersey, rather than Philadelphia because the mob owns and controls Atlantic City, while Philadelphia is the headquarters of the National Police. They run the Philadelphia vice, too, and own some of the best politicians money can buy, but there's no use in tweaking them too far."

I nodded. "But so far this operation is only the fifty prostitutes? No more?"

"That we know of, although things do appear to be changing. The work done up on the farm-the estate up-country-on the gate there seems to be very extensive, and they wouldn't do that if they weren't planning some real expansion. We also believe that they are importing a lot more of the drug than before, and one dose a day is not only the minimum but the maximum you need. Any more has no real effect on an addict. Then there's this Addison woman. She tends to show up now and again, much more in the last few months than ever before, but she never uses the Pennsylvania gate. She has also been seen in the large compound they're building in Guiana."

"Then why don't you have pictures of her? At least I'd think you would have them places staked out as best you could."

"We do, and we've had half a dozen chances, brief ones, to photograph her and a

couple of opportunities to photograph Dr. Carlos, but no matter what the photos turn out too blurry to be used. They must have some sort of device that makes it impossible. That's all we can figure."

Well, to folks who could build and run the Labyrinth, a gadget like that would be no trouble at all, I thought. Still, it brought up a real point. "If they don't want their pictures taken that bad, then there must be somebody somewheres who might recognize them," I pointed out. "That means they ain't no flunkies and messengers. Have you tried composite sketches?"

"Oh, yes. We sent some fairly detailed ones to security, but they were unable to get anything from them. It's another of those mysteries."

"Other than this Addison, has there been any contact between this Carlos and Siegel? Anything?"

"We think there must be, but we haven't been able to document anything as yet. Consider that the National Police at least know of the drug and are scared by it, too. They think it's locally made and they're scared stiff that it might be mass-produced for general use. They, and we, have staked out, bugged, and tapped both operations as much as humanly possible and come up with nothing at all. The odds are very good that Wycliffe and Siegel have anti-bugging technology far in advance of ours. For them, this is a strictly business proposition. They are getting new technology for their operations that make a joke out of the police efforts, and in exchange they are doing this on the side. None of it, however, makes sense. I mean, why hook fifty young girls on it, all under nineteen when hooked, when you can use far more conventional drugs the same way? And why no men?"

"Any link between the fifty? Families? Anything?"

"The first thing we looked for. Most are runaways or the sort that decided to go on the street on their own. None come from powerful or influential families, although a few are from the middle class, God help us. They are all well built and attractive, but none are much more than that. The bulk are white, but there are some Negro girls in there and also some Chinese girls. At the start, when there were only a dozen or so, they were kept together, but now they're in small groups working in various cities along the eastern seaboard, no more than six to eight. Siegel keeps three around his personal home at the Jersey shore as virtually his slaves, although even they occasionally work the streets."

Well, we managed to make it to Huntington. After bein' Vogel's Beth I didn't mind eatin' mostly carry-out food and mostly sleepin' in the car. The train ride was real nice-we don't have trains like this back home, I'll tell you-and most everybody just assumed I was Lindy's personal maid or something like that. Their assumptions pissed me off a little, but I played along with it because it was handy and the laugh was on them. Most of the train crew was black, though-the porters, cooks, waiters, that sort of thing- and every damned black man on there seemed to think he was God's gift to women and were the most arrogant bunch I ever was around.

Philadelphia was very much different and still pretty much the same. There was no Schuylkill Expressway or I-95 or like that-no expressways to speak of at all, and no U.S. 1 as such, either-but it was still a big city, it was still laid out based on Market and Chestnut, and it had elevated railways, streetcars down every street, and trolley buses, too. The downtown buildings, even the new ones, tended to look old-fashioned and not all box and glass, but it was familiar enough, and out on all sides was the row houses and tiny streets lookin' much the same. They had a couple of northern bridges across the Delaware, but the big ones I was used to, like the Franklin, Whitman, and Ross, just didn't exist. Most folks took ferries across the Delaware to Camden, which was more wide open than in my world.

Blacks lived in their own sections and only there, comin' out only to work or shop, but things wasn't so bad otherwise. Philadelphia stores took the same money no matter what the color, although some of the big department stores had separate dressin' rooms for colored and white. On the other hand, you rode anywhere on the trolley or train you wanted and all but the fancy restaurants didn't care if you ate there so long as you had the money. The most real trouble

I had was that I kept lookin' the wrong way before steppin' into a street and almost got run over, and when a streetcar-they called 'em trams-or somethin' stopped, I half the time would have to keep from walkin' to the wrong side, without the door. Same with taxis, which were all real old-fashioned types and black.

Still, I managed to pick up a decent and in-style wardrobe. Seemed most skirts was at or above the knee, and worn with stockings and real high high-heeled leather boots with fur trim. While they hadn't thought of pantyhose yet, they did have nylons. Tops were mostly blouses, although you could get leather open vests to match the boots and stuff. Bras were real old-fashioned and real stiff, but all "decent" women wore 'em. My biggest problem used to be fit. I needed a lot of half-sizes and I got real wide feet, and it's always been a problem to get a good fit, which was why I dressed so casual and cheap most times even after I had money, but in Lindy's world they actually would measure and tailor stuff for you and have you pick it up-in twenty-four hours! There was something to be said for this world. Guys came out and pumped your gas and cleaned your car windows and checked your oil all automatically, for example.

I admit I had trouble gettin' cabs and the attention of salesclerks and waitresses, and I knew why, but white folks almost never did-even if the waitresses or cab drivers or clerks themselves was black, which some were. I ain't sure it was the color itself so much as in this place bein' black signaled "poor."

Once I started to feel comfortable gettin' around here- learnin' the rules, you might say-and got all the briefings I could, it was time to go to work. Lindy had a service where you could call collect from most any phone anyplace and either get hold of her or leave detailed messages, even information, that would be taken and passed on in strict confidence. She also had contracts with local agencies in Philadelphia and New Jersey who'd come runnin' if I called with the right code words. I also had a driver's license, passport and other documents, and a bank account as Beth Louise Parker in an Atlantic City bank. I needed to have some ready cash around, since they didn't get around to inventin' the MasterCard there yet and I wasn't a likely candidate for individual store accounts. I did like the fact that all my IDs listed my right birth date but the wrong year. It was nice to be so suddenly under thirty again, even if only on paper and only by half a year.

Atlantic City was never much in early November, and here it didn't have the casinos. The boardwalk was mostly deserted, most of its businesses shut down till summer, and the place was left to the permanent residents. The rest of the city didn't look no better than it did in my world; the whole place looked and smelled like the worst of Camden. I took a small apartment in the black section of the city that was no great shakes as a furnished apartment but wasn't no roach motel, neither. I also hired a small car-no problem parkin' on the streets in November-that was old and sad-lookin' but ran okay, but it took a little time for me to make a turn and wind up on the left side of the road.

The general agreement was that I would call Lindy's special number once a week without fail, even if I had nothin' to report. Of course, I could use it sooner to get information and the like if I needed. If she didn't hear from me for two straight weeks, she would assume that I was taken and check up on me. If she couldn't find me or I didn't report for a full six weeks, she would communicate with Aldrath to send in the Marines.

I spent a couple of weeks gettin' to know the city and its haunts and own special rules, and checkin' out Mr. Siegel and his operation. He had a real nice house right on the ocean down near Ocean City, with high fences and a gate and gate guard. The land around there is so flat that there was no way to really see inside except by air or by boat. Since I knew what kind of crates these people flew and a balloon would be a little obvious, that left boat and I was no sailor, particularly in fall's rough seas and changing weather. They said that Siegel tried to buy here a few years before and was told it was "restricted"-no Jews allowed. So all of a sudden a lot of houses down here started catchin' fire, and there was a real crime wave, and lots of businesses them WASP folks had suddenly went bad or had troubles, and then this strictly blonde and

blue-eyed bank came in and made nice offers and bought a lot of the property-and that's how Siegel came not only to have the place, but privacy, too.

But Siegel wasn't no prisoner. He liked goin' down to the lowlife sections, to the bars and clubs he owned and the projects he controlled, and he spent some time in the Oceanside Tea and Spice Company, Ltd., offices, which was just a big warehouse and a small, stucco office in front. He drove a fancy-lookin' red Daimler sports car and was pretty easy to spot or find.

He turned out to be young, fairly good-lookin', thin and trim with a thick, bushy moustache. He was said to be somethin' of a health nut, and drank little if at all, didn't smoke, and swung both ways. He'd go to bed with women, yeah, but he didn't have much other use for 'em, 'cept to wait on him maybe. You had to know your place around him. I took one look at him and knew that if he hadn't been Jewish he and Vogel's blackshirts woulda gotten along just fine.

He didn't manage nothin' personally, of course, and particularly not illegal stuff like prostitutes, since the law would just love to get him on most any technicality. That didn't stop him from visitin' the worst districts and payin' calls on the little fish who worked for him. They was just old friends, see, and what they done for a livin' was no bother to him. Their boss? Heaven forbid! He was in the tea and spice business and that paid just fine . . .

I needed to get closer in to get a real look at things, and that was one thing I'd done many times before. After you cruise a district for a while you get a feel for it, and this one wasn't much different than most. I got to admit I didn't exactly get excited over dressin' down to it, since them streetwalkers wanted to advertise and I was still havin' trouble with a November chill and a brisk wind from the ocean just with a short skirt, but it was part of the job. The' uniform of the place wasn't that much different. Real high spiked heels, fishnet stockings, a real short leather skirt and top that left little to the imagination, real heavy makeup with some sparkles mixed in, and the only concession to cold weather allowed, a fur coat, usually rabbit, that was never buttoned. There was always new girls comin' on and old ones vanishin', so that wasn't no big thing, but it took some outside detective work to give the right answers if questions came up, and they always did.

Armed with all that, I had no trouble fittin' right in and almost vanishin' into the scenery. This was the kind of neighborhood I grew up in, and these were the same kind of people I always knew. There were, however, some problems I knew I'd have to face. I'd used an identity as a whore many times, but only for a day or two, on stakeouts and like that. Now I had to blend in and stay in for some time, till folks got used to me and talked relaxed and felt I was one of them. That meant movin' into a flophouse room right in the district with only the stuff I'd be expected to have-stuff that could fit in a handbag, mostly-and very little money. I could stay independent for a while, but there was no question I'd have to turn a few tricks to be completely accepted. Gettin' a barmaid's job or somethin' like that was out of the question; November was the off season and there was only so much of anything, even tricks, to go around.

So, in a way, I finally completed my destiny and it was anything but glamorous or even particularly pleasant, but I actually took money for sex. Not bad money, either, considerin' my expenses and the fact I didn't have to split with no pimp. Not that several didn't try to move in, but I managed to put 'em off without them gettin' too riled. That wouldn't last forever, but I didn't plan on this bein' forever.

Still and all, doin' a few tricks and scorin' a little pot did just what I hoped. In under two weeks' time, I was a part of the scenery and I had enough credibility to sit around a burger joint or places like that and just talk friendly to people. I started learnin' one hell of a lot, and I even got some warnings about Siegel. They bought my story-ex-stripper from Philadelphia who got married to a real stud and took a hike the second time he beat me up. It was familiar.

My best friend and source turned out to be a guy named Harley who ran the only porn shop I ever seen with a sandwich thing on the side. Harley was fat and fiftyish and only about five feet tall and as flaming swishy as a three-pound

note, but he liked to talk to "the girls." I think he wished he was one of us. One night we got to talkin' 'bout the odd types even for the district.

"You seen a shadow dancer yet? Now there's one to give you the creeps!" he said, shiverin'.

"Huh? I heard that name used by some folks talkin' to other folks. What's it mean?"

"That's what we call 'em on the street. A string of half a dozen girls run by Fast Eddie Small-one of Arnie's pimps. All real young, real pretty. They work the streets like bitches in heat, sometimes do real vulgar strip shows-it's an art form, you know, or should be. You know-you were one."

I nodded. "Yeah, but where's the name come from?"

"They got hooked on something new, some new drug we think they're making in a lab someplace and it's scary! Not like dope-hell, half the streetwalkers here have fifty-pound-a-day habits. They're like, well, slaves, damn it. They wash his car, they clean his house, they do everything he tells 'em. He has fun showin' them off to people, making them do disgusting things just to show what a big man he is. I mean, I look in your eyes and I see a person there. You look in their eyes and you get a chill. Nothin' there. Not even hope. Shadows of pretty girls dancin' to Fast Eddie's tune. I hear there are others around, in Philadelphia, New York, Baltimore, all over. You watch out and stay away from them. I don't want to ever look in your eyes and see only a shadow dancer there."

Well, of course, to stay away I had to know how to find one, and where, and where they sometimes did their simply vulgar shows, too. Fast Eddie and his girls worked out of a joint called the Purple Pussycat about three blocks over diagonally from the bright lights, on the edge of the district. I'd been warned more than once not to work that area, that no freelancers were allowed. I decided to check it out first, so I went back to the original apartment where most of my things were. I put my hair up and put a blonde wig on over it. It looked good, but it was pretty obviously a wig and not a dye job.

One thing I learned on the street was that Lindy had been right. Any girl who put on long, tight pants, and went braless under a shirt or sweater, was automatically a lesbian to just about everybody. I didn't want to get roughed up or raped or anything bad by workin' in an exclusive territory, and respectable women just didn't go into them neighborhoods or places alone. Some butch girls, though, got a real charge out of strip shows, although they usually went in pairs or more. Still, this was a more repressed society than mine, and I'd already seen a couple of women come down to the district, usually under wigs, glasses, and the like, alone to see a show and even pay a female hooker for a good time they didn't dare have or try in their ordinary lives. Lots of closeted gay men did it with male hookers, after all.

So it might not be unusual for a black lesbian, whose culture was real macho, to come over in disguise and see a show and maybe try for a good time. My eyes ain't great, like I said, but I used contact lenses I brought with me when I was on the streets and regular glasses off-hours. Now I got my tinted sunglasses, even though it was night. It was the right added touch. I did have to go out and buy a butch leather jacket, to make it just right, but while the saleswoman looked at me real odd she sold me the coat and took the money.

About nine-thirty that night, I took a taxi up to the Purple Pussycat. The driver hardly said a word to me. I got out a block or so before the club, so I could kinda cruise the area. It wasn't a lot of joints and shit like the main street of the district, just real run-down old houses and a mission and the one club near the end of the block with a garish neon sign and blinkin' lights, but I could see why Arnie wanted it. The corner near the club was one of the main drags in or out of Atlantic City, and it was on a main feeder street to there. The lights at the intersection was maybe five minutes long one way and three the other. In season, you could probably proposition or check out a hundred cars, and a John lookin' for it would be able to find it and set somethin' up without ever bein' obvious. There was even a big arrow sign on both streets for the club sayin', free car park in rear!

There wasn't much traffic now, particularly on a Wednesday, and nobody seemed to

be workin' that intersection.

Now, undercover work's like method actin' only more so-you really got to get into and live the part, 'cause if an actor bombs she maybe gets tomatoes or boos, but if somebody undercover makes a slip, just one, they can wind up floatin' in the ocean. That's why when I moved into the district I had to take some tricks, like it or not. If I didn't, they'd smell cop or narc or somethin' and it was bye-bye Brandy. I'd played a few dykes in my time, too-sometimes it was the only way to get information-and I had it down pretty good. Like back home, this only had to be a one-night stand, but I would be pretty damned conspicuous.

I stuck a cigarette in the side of my mouth, lit it, and walked into the Purple Pussycat.

As expected, it wasn't exactly New Year's Eve in there. Maybe a dozen customers, all men in suits and ties, one barmaid and one cocktail waitress. They all gave me a look when I came in, but I could see right away that their first impression was exactly what I wanted. The juke box, which was piped into the whole place, was playin' some jazzy French song with naughty lyrics. I sat down at an empty table and the mere fact that not one of them guys in there made a move was nice. The waitress had on a sort of bikini, though they didn't call 'em that in this world, the fishnet stockings, and spiked heels, all with purple glitter stuff in them. She came up to me. "What'cha havin', honey?" She looked like she should be out findin' Johns, but she didn't look like no shadow dancer.

"Rum and Coke," I told her. I'd eaten well before this, and also drank a whole glass of buttermilk. I figured I might have to drink a fair amount.

Now, one trick in this kinda thing is that you got to show you got money, and a fair amount, without showin' so much that somebody's tempted to just take it the easy way. I brought a hundred pounds, not super dangerous money but still an average week's salary in this world, and I brought it in mostly smaller bills. The money was different colors and sizes for different amounts so it was clearly not a huge wad in real value to an experienced spotter-like the waitress-but it was a huge wad physically and it made an impression. She gave my order to the barmaid, waited, brought it, got paid and saw the wad, then vanished in the back for a minute before reappearing.

For a while, nothin' happened, but I saw that none of the guys left and a couple more came in. My first rum and Coke tasted mostly like Coke, but my second tasted mostly like rum-the over-a-hundred-proof variety. I was mostly through it when the show they was all waitin' for started.

It used canned music and hokey lights and the runway down the center of the bar, but the show was like no other these joints ever did. I knew from the joints on the strip that what they had in prudery everywhere else they didn't have in their shows, at least not here. There seemed little you could do in a joint like this that was against the law. But this-this was somethin' else.

The show involved three girls with the best bodies I ever seen in my life, one white and a real blonde, one black, and one Chinese. They got naked 'cept for real high spiked heels in record time-no pasties, no nothin'-and then they started really doin' it to each other in ways I never even dreamed of. I didn't even know the human body could bend that way or that three girls could do it to one another all at the same time with no conflict of interest, as it were-and all to the beat of the music! And they was all three clearly really enjoyin' it. It didn't take too long to see what Harley meant. The three girls didn't look real somehow. For one thing, they looked absolutely perfect, and I do mean perfect. They had them lady bodybuilder's muscles, too-had to do the kind of things they was doin' and hold them positions while doin' 'em. There was also somethin' else, harder to describe. A feelin', really, but real just the same, 'cause Harley and the folks who'd named them felt it, too. An emptiness, somehow. The feelin' that you was watchin' three perfect and perfected Disneyland robots, not livin', thinkin', feelin' women. Shadow dancers . . .

I was told by everybody that all the shadow dancers was twenty-one or under, even by Lindy, but that was true only of the white girl and the Chinese girl. The black girl was older, though she still looked real young and fantastic. I

couldn't take my eyes off her, almost from the start.  
The black shadow dancer was me.

7.

#### Unmasking in Hell

All right, all right, I knew right off from seein' her that it couldn't be no accident. It broke all their rules, for one thing. But this Brandy was me and wasn't me. I kept my straight hair from Beth; she had my old bush neatly trimmed. And my body-nobody human's body-never looked that perfect, that good, or could.

Fact was, the more I watched, the more I got turned on myself. Really turned on. They could do it to a stone, no matter which sex. But I was a pro, and I knew somethin' was not right. The odds against a Brandy bein' in this world was about even-we wasn't that far off my world's line and it was possible Daddy would have married the same woman, maybe even founded an agency. The odds of that Brandy bein' a stripper or whore wasn't all that low, neither. Fact was, I knew I was pretty much that in most of the worlds where I existed at all. But the odds of my bein' in this particular bar in Atlantic City in November as a victim of what I was put investigatin' and just happen to be a performer the night I show was beyond any odds of hittin' a jackpot lottery I knew.

There was no doubt that these bastards knew I was here, who I was, and why I was here. The only thing I couldn't be clear on was if they did this every night till I finally showed up or whether they had made me that night. Yeah, I knew who that dancer was, but did she, or they, know who I was? That was a big question. I had to guess they didn't-not yet, anyways. Why bother with this show if they did? Just slip somethin' in the drink and they had me. I had to figure they trotted put their Brandy every time there was a black woman in the house, with or without friends and companions. This was bait, and you don't bother to feed bait to a hooked fish.

Thing was, I was hooked good and proper, but I wasn't 'bout to get reeled in right then if I could help it. One thing they hoped to do was to throw me so off guard I couldn't think straight and they come close-but only close. It was tough, though, when the act was over and they all bounded from the runway to the center bar counter and then into the place itself, naked, wet, and drippin'. And the black one, the other me, came straight over to me.

"Hey, sista!" she whispered in my ear. "Don't that look good? I seen ya here, feelin' yo'self up. Want a private lesson?"

My voice never sounded like my voice to me, but it was close enough to know it really was. Not the accent, though. She was more ghetto-southern, more damned ignorant-soundin', too, in the way she used the words. Damn it, though! I was tempted! Not so much by the real offer as by getting this girl, this other me, alone somewhere in a room. Just us. But, then, that's what they figured on. And this wasn't me! Maybe we was genetically the same, maybe even the same fingerprints, but this Brandy had taken a different route than me a long time ago and made a lot more wrong choices, and we was literally worlds apart. On the other hand, "sister" was more than just a friendly term here.

"No," I answered huskily, tryin' to lower my voice a little 'cause it always sounded higher to me than it really was. "I just ain't up to you girls." And weren't that the truth!

She pressed a little, and I was real nervous she'd see through it all and feel who I was, but she didn't. You don't look the same lookin' at another you as you look even in a mirror. She backed off while I played it cool, and then started workin' the guys. I relaxed a bit, but continued to drink. I was real shaken, but I wanted out of that place in one piece and without tippin', and if they was lookin' for me then I didn't want to leave while she was still in the same room. They all three got customers with no problems and disappeared in the back, and the barmaid come back over. "What's the matter hon? No guts when it counts?" I looked up at her. "Not with them. There was just somethin'... I dunno. Now you I could go for."

There was something in the waitress's eyes and expression when I made that first

comment. "I understand," she whispered, more like talkin' to herself. "Hon, after watchin' that I might take you up on it, but not tonight. I got to work till two and I been here since four. You come 'round tomorrow this time, though, when I don't work late, and maybe we'll watch the show and have a little fun, huh?"

"Maybe I will," I told her. "My name's Sam, by the way. Short for Samantha but I never use that." I took a twenty out and slipped it to her as a tip. She took it real smooth.

"I'm Deb. You come 'round tomorrow a little earlier, like eight, and we'll see." I finished my drink, got up, and walked slowly out of the bar and onto the street. I had to walk a couple of blocks over just to get some distance, then waited in the cold until I finally got a cab back to my apartment. My mind was really in a kinda roar, and I needed to sort things out.

First I called Camden information and tried numbers for Harold Parker, Spade & Marlowe, and a few more. I drew a blank, but I kinda expected to. I wanted to call in to Lindy or her people locally and run this thing down, but I wasn't sure I could. Fact was, they knew I was in this world and workin' to find them. The only ones who knew and could get the word out would be Aldrath, Bill Markham, or- Lindy. Not necessarily Lindy herself, but definitely folks within her organization. If so, I couldn't use her, or them, much again.

Things started to tumble into place now, bit by bit. Maybe this world was a damn sight more important to this whole plot than Aldrath and Bill had been led to believe. Maybe Vogel took care of the far-out research, but this world was the center of the actual plot, whatever it was. No investigator is ever any better than the quality of his or her information. Aldrath depended on Lindy's organization for most of the information that he got. Maybe, in fact, Vogel was a red herring, somebody to be discovered as a big player in the game when in fact he was a side operation.

If they was feedin' a stock line, and givin' just enough information that some of Aldrath's boys could independently check out as right, then they had it made here. They might even, in the end, raid both Fast Eddie's harem and even the compound in Guiana and blow it to hell and never really touch what was goin' on here. But, then, why reveal the Guiana thing at all-unless that, too, was a cover, the base to be exposed. That was research, while this was some kinda little thing involvin' the local mob.

Then I showed up and got involved. I'm a real danger, not to the operation, but to Lindy or whoever it was in Lindy's crew that was really workin' for the opposition. They got to send out my reports-Aldrath will be expectin' 'em. So they decide to see just how far I can get, and even set a trap with an alternate me.

That only made sense to a point, though. That other Brandy weren't no new addict; she'd been hooked for a long time to get that look about her and get so practiced at that act. That meant they had her before we got involved, maybe long before we ever was brought in to go after Vogel. They just switched her here to Atlantic City 'cause they knew it was flypaper and honey to me. And there was only one reason they'd have another me all set up before all that took place.

They was plannin' a switch. Her for me. But either somethin' went wrong or we got directly involved and they couldn't risk it. No, wait-Vogel. That was the key. They was gonna pull the switch after the Vogel job, which they'd been plannin' in that Security Committee for months before tellin' us. That meant my not gettin' shot serious in the tunnel wasn't no accident. That also meant that Sam was supposed to be shot, maybe killed. That's why they took the time to shoot everybody. They couldn't be sure in that small area and time which was Sam.

Then why hadn't they made the switch? I looked at myself in the mirror once more and then I knew. I kept my hair straight and my complexion a little lighter and smoother! They couldn't move this big-time equipment over here; the heat was on too much. They couldn't get enough big medical shit over to make it take. They didn't have Doc's or the Center's big experts and gadgets where they could make her over into me. That explained somethin' else, too. Why they might get Vogel a

hypnoscan.

Maybe there weren't no Brandy in this world. Maybe she was from someplace else, just like me. I know there was a couple in worlds just near our own. Ones that went bad. Ones that never met Sam. The competition had used folks from one of them worlds the first time we'd tangled. Maybe this one was from the same one. But why me? And why make a switch with somebody like me? I didn't work for the Company. About the only one I could see was Bill Markham, and they could try for him without me if they really wanted to. Or was it even worse?

Could somebody be a good-enough shot and a cool-enough head to nail everybody in a Labyrinth cube 'cept Sam and me, and then nail me in an unimportant spot and Sam exactly in a way that would cause what happened? Maybe not, but even if Sam had died I'd'a had special status with the Company. Access to the Labyrinth, access even to headquarters. But that didn't make no sense, neither. I had a special, unique, unbreakable code inside me. I knew it was unbreakable 'cause if it was breakable they had all sorts of ways of sneakin' in and out. That twin of mine might be able to learn how I walked, talked, thought, and be made over to be a perfect double, but she could never have that code.

Still, I knew now I was on to somethin', and it was big. I was sure right to have gotten involved-I now had proof positive that the enemy was plannin' to draft me, anyways.

Still and all, there was a number of missin' pieces. Even grantin' they had some way to get her in headquarters as me, so what? It'd hav'ta be real quick, since they hadn't managed to get any of this damned super drug in and she was sure on it. Most she'd dare risk would be a few hours. What could I do in just a few hours, takin' nothin' in with me and dependin' on Aldrath's folks to get 'round the place and even translate? The answer was nothin'. A big, fat zero.

That was the thing 'bout this case. Every time you thought you had somethin' figured, it just asked another crazy question. Still, I was gettin' more and more convinced that the answers to many of 'em was right here-or, over there, in the Purple Pussycat. Trouble was, they was layin' for me, and if they missed me tonight they might not miss me again.

I had a sudden bad feelin' and told the driver to let me out a block down and around the corner from the apartment. I was pretty sure they never knew 'bout my streetwalker life, but they did know Beth Louise Parker, and her bank, and the apartment she had in her own name. I'd gone back there tonight for the first time in a couple of weeks. I guess they got sloppy. After all, I walked in dressed like a whore but I'd left to go shoppin' as me and come back, then walked out dressed like a dyke. I had to figure they'd be on their guard and fully staffed this time. Trouble was, my streetwalker clothes was up there, and all I had on me was a hundred and twenty-one pounds. I had another two hundred and fifty up there, enough to use for a switch without goin' to the bank where they was sure to stake me out.

I hadn't figured on this. I was on the run from the people who was supposed to help and support me while the people I was tryin' to check out still hadn't discovered me. Without Crockett I didn't have a way in to the Labyrinth or any way to contact Aldrath; they'd just keep sendin' progress reports from me out and everything would look real fine.

Thing was, this was now pretty clearly the place where the real action was, not no backwater joint. More than that, they knew from the start through Crockett's people that security knew about this place and they didn't seem to be slowin' down. Why should they? They was puttin' up a real nice front here, showin' Aldrath just what he wanted to see but not enough to get him to take any real direct action. That was bad, too, 'cause it meant more'n likely that they were very close to findin' what they were tryin' to find, or maybe they'd found it and were just makin' sure. This thing was both a drug and a disease; you don't let somethin' like that loose in alien worlds until you make sure you can't get it yourself.

I checked the area around my apartment. Normally you wouldn't see nothin', but I'd done a hundred stakeouts myself and I knew just what to look for. I was pretty sure they weren't in the apartment itself; the place was real close with

nosy neighbors and paper-thin walls and if they got in for more than a visit they'd be noticed. This was one time in this world when it was a real advantage bein' black; the Crockett types wouldn't have no Spade & Marlowe to use, or wouldn't think to use 'em, and white PIs would stand out in this neighborhood. Of course, Siegel probably had loads of black gunsels to call on-the mob always was somethin' of an equal opportunity employer-so it paid to be careful. There was a medium-sized black car parked with its lights out about half a block down from the apartment with two men in it. That was one. In the alley behind, where the fire escapes was, I thought I could see movement beyond the trash containers, like somebody shiftin' uncomfortable from the cold. If they didn't have nobody inside, though, I could probably just walk right in bold as brass. The problem would be if one of 'em was bright enough to figure out why that whore went in, I come out, and there was nobody else there. You got to be thin and light to be a second-story type, and I was neither. I turned and headed down to the district.

Harley squinted. "That really you, luv? I didn't know you was no lezzie. Not that it makes no difference here."

"I'm not, but it's a disguise," I told him. "My ex caught up with me and he's got an in with Siegel. I got to blow, Harley, but I can't get back in my darktown flat to get my money, my workin' clothes, or even my damned contact lenses and regular glasses." I told him about the place, and the stakeout.

"You got some money, then?"

"Some cash up there, and I put the rest of what I had in a local bank. That's what he's mad about. I got his money. And I can't get to it 'cause they figured out the name it was under, 'cause the flat's under that name, too." I never knew how important an automatic teller machine was till now, but first they had to invent the computer here, and a phone system where you didn't need no manual switchboard operators.

Harley chuckled. "Got the stash in a bank, huh? Well, let's see. I think I know a fella who might be able to get the small stuff out of your apartment, particularly if it's bein' watched. He likes that kind of thing. You make a list of stuff that can be carried in no more than a handbag. I'll make a call and see if he's interested. He keeps the cash, of course."

I nodded. "Okay, but then what do I do?"

"When he gets your checkbook, you write one out the way I tell you. Not to me, and not for a big amount, but some. How much you got in there?"

"Lots."

"Three hundred quid?"

"Yeah, more'n that."

"I can see why he's interested and why you laid low. Okay, you give me a check for three hundred and I give you two hundred. Fair?"

Of course it wasn't, but I was in no position to argue. "Fair."

"All right, then. You give me the address and particulars and we'll see what we can do."

I spent the night in a small room in back of his store, uncomfortably but it was a place to hide at least. I didn't wake up until well after noon, then blew some money buyin' some sandwiches from the clerk at the store. The clerk had been told I was stayin' there but not why. You don't go far askin' too many questions down here.

Harley come in about two, lookin' like the cat that just swallowed the canary, carryin' a shoppin' bag. In it was my glasses, contacts, checkbook, fake IDs, makeup, toiletries, and the rest. No cash and no clothes, but I coulda kissed him. I wrote the check and now had a fair amount of money for the time.

I had been tryin' to figure what to do next, and I pretty well decided I had only a couple choices. I could either give up, stay in this world, and go somewheres outside Wycliffe's territory and work the streets-I could never use the fake identity again, after all, so I had no education, no records, and I was a female member of a race that had thirty-percent unemployment here now-or I could keep goin'. This Deb was a way in, but a real risky one. I needed more than a one-night stand to get information, and my money was limited, so I needed an edge. On a crazy thought I checked out somethin' I never even thought of.

Back when they did that dental work they loaded that tooth with shit that was supposed to make Vogel real nice, only I never got a chance to use it. I figured when they put my face back they took it out, but since now half my teeth was capped and they left 'em that way I decided to check. I scrunched up my mouth the way I was supposed to and pushed. The loaded tooth moved.

That was no guarantee they'd left it loaded, but maybe the Center just hadn't noticed or known about it. It was worth a try. Of course, I didn't really know much about what it did or how long it lasted, but it couldn't hurt and might give me an edge.

I got some locals in the district to help. I needed to look different than this other Brandy even when I wasn't dressed like this and with dark glasses. When you never was able to have straight hair, and then you did, you didn't want to go back, but even though it broke my heart I had it cut real, real short and styled in a man's style. My face would never look like a man's or boy's, but it sure changed my looks. I hid the documents in a place that was as safe as any, and got a fresh wardrobe that, with the leather jacket, made me about as butch as they come. Private ownership of guns wasn't allowed and it woulda cost me more than I could raise to get one quick, but a nasty little needle-tipped switchblade with a real strong spring was only five quid if you knew where to get it, and after a few weeks down here, I knew. I had to still go with the blonde wig, and I just hoped nobody had second thoughts about the one there the night before or compared notes with the watchers on the apartment.

Thursday was a busier night, but other people was workin' the Purple Pussycat. Deb was in there, but out of uniform and in fairly ordinary street clothes, sittin' and talkin' to the barmaid. Even though she wasn't dressed like she belonged there, there was that hardness in the face and coldness in the mannerisms that everybody on the street got that said she was right at home. She came right over when I sat down in a small booth.

"Hello, there. Buy me a drink and watch the early show first?" she suggested, real friendly and professional. I had to wonder if she did this normally with girls or if this was a new experiment. Work in these joints long enough, though, and you see and do most everything.

The show started at eight-fifteen, and was pretty much the same as the night before but had one extra girl, another black girl more in keepin' with the other two and not my twin. This time I was ready for it and began to look at the others. There was just somethin' 'bout them, something different even from the other Brandy. Black, white, and yellow, but they was almost the same height, they had near identical perfect builds, and their faces, while different, didn't seem all that much different. They all had the same noses, kinda, small and neat, and the same size mouths, and their eyes looked a little different but even the blonde had brown eyes. Their hair was different-the blonde's was shoulder-length and straight, the black girl's was short and curly, but big curls, not the natural type I normally had or that my twin still had, and the yellow girl had a pageboy with bangs. Still, one seemed no thicker or thinner than the other, and you could almost see any hairstyle on the other two.

Why fifty girls, all female, all just workin' the streets and clubs? Why no men? Why these fifty? Did most of 'em look kinda the same? Suppose all three of them up there had dark brown hair and golden skin . . .

They finished up and went to work the crowd, ignorin' us. Deb sighed, turned, and said, "My place or yours?"

"Yours," I told her. "Mine ain't exactly a nice place right now."

She lived in a room about a block in back of the place. It was a pretty run-down row house that had been made into little tiny apartments with just a tiny refrigerator, hot pot, and plug-in portable stove for cookin'. It was a little messy but it had that lived-in look. Odds were that Fast Eddie owned the place. I pulled out one of my few remainin' reefers and we split it, then started to get to it. The reefer had made it easier for me to turn tricks on the street and it made it easier to do this, too. It ain't bad and can be a lot of fun, but when you get all hot and up there ain't nothin' to put where you want or need it. I did manage to toggle that trick tooth and turn it some, and some sweet

kinda liquid, not much, come out and got delivered into her mouth by tongue. Took me a bit to realize she'd stopped doin' much and was just lettin' it happen with a dreamy smile on her face, eyes closed. I figured I might as well go for the whole nine yards. I started nibblin' her ear and whispered, "You love me, you want me, you need me, now and forever," which wasn't exactly how the whispers usually went. "All the men was just for money but this is the real thing. You'd do anything for me, believe anything I said, trust me forever. Don't try to explain it or think about it, it just is and it's wonderful." And she smiled, mumbled, and repeated it-and repeated it again. Suddenly her eyes opened, and she looked at me like it was for the first time, like the wonder in a little kid's face at a new toy, and then she really tore into it so passionately I just let it rip.

I didn't know how long the stuff would last, but it was powerful stuff all right, if you hadn't been immunized to it. It was hours before it stopped, and then she insisted on cookin' somethin' for me and generally actin' like a cross between a puppy dog and a little kid. "Might as well," I sighed, feelin' really achy. "I ain't got no place to go anyways."

She was startled. "What d'ya mean?"

"I mean I got fired and tossed, lock, stock, and barrel. I been walkin' the streets, sleepin' in women's flophouses, and watchin' my money go down."

"Stay here, then!"

"But-"

"Look, I know this sounds crazy, 'cause it does to me, but I think I'm in love with you. You don't owe me nothin'. I owe you, 'cause I never thought I'd have this feelin' again." She was a mixed-race girl, mostly white but a noticeable quarter black, which was why I hit on her, but it was still kinda funny to hear her start talkin' like me.

"I like you, too," I told her, and I did. I felt sorry for her more than anything. "But ain't no way I can stay here without payin' some freight."

"It's okay. It wouldn't even be like you was the first one or only one around here like that. A lotta girls 'round here can't get close to no men. They all act alike under the skin. We lean on each other a lot. Maybe I can get Fast Eddie to find you a job 'round here."

Funny thing was, she did. To this day I ain't sure if that potion was strong or just a little temporary thing that worked as a starter set for what might already have been there in her head 'cause it seemed so natural for her. Of course, the potion made it quick and painless. By the time she took me 'round to meet Fast Eddie Small a couple of days later I'd already kinda settled in and knew most of the girls in the house. And that's how I became Samantha "Sam" Marlowe, my third undercover identity. I ditched the wig and used the dark glasses, which I was gettin' used to even in dark places. I had the contacts but decided not to use 'em since they didn't have the real thin contacts here and I thought it was a little too much of an invite to compare faces with Brandy the Shadow Dancer.

Fast Eddie looked like a guy who sold furniture. Thin, mid-fifties, moustache, little gray eyes, balding and graying, always in a brown or gray tweed suit and real thin tie, usually with a cigar in his mouth. I was real nervous about meetin' him since he almost surely saw Brandy most times and also knew to look out for another with straight hair, but with gum in my mouth, a real Brandp manner, and dressed like I was it never seemed to enter his head. "I don't really need nobody so I can't do much," he told me, "but just 'cause it's Deb I'll make an exception. You'll help clean up the place after it closes, mop up, restock the bar, that kind of thing. Thirty a week for part-time on trial. After that, we'll see."

I took the job, and I was on the inside. The basic expenses for all the "employees" was taken care of, and they turned their money over to Small 'cept for twenty percent, although Deb as waitress made a flat eighty a week and got to keep ten percent of any fringes. Of course, she skimmed like they all did, so it wasn't too bad. It bothered me a little that I took so easy to the dominant role in the relationship, in bed, even on the street, but I learned a lot in a very little time.









while, it got dark again, but I didn't bother to turn on no lights. What was the use when I couldn't even clearly see the bottom of the bed from the top of it? She left the little plastic cup, and I couldn't believe how thirsty I was. Drink four or five cupfuls, then pee about fifteen minutes or three songs later, then drink more.

I checked my chain and nearly burned myself, but it was real clear that the other end was welded on to that radiator. Short of a welder's torch or a hacksaw and a lot of time, I wasn't gonna break it easy. I went over to the window; the blinkin' lights from the Purple Pussycat signs gave off real pretty patterns and constantly changed the look inside the room. I thought the windows themselves were frosted over from the cold outside and the heat within, but with my eyes I couldn't be sure. With luck I might break the glass but I'd never get them bars out-they was sunk in concrete sills. All I'd do was wind up freezin' my ass off when it already was uneven in the room and if I caught anybody's attention at all down there it would probably be the wrong folks. If I had my glasses and a lockpick I might have been able to pick the lock on the leg shackle, but probably not.

Later on, Brandy Two came again, this time with what seemed to be a coldcut sub, a piece of chocolate cake, and two opened bottles of beer. I found I was real hungry now, and it went down just fine. I coulda used cigarettes, though, but she told me they was not allowed. Too much danger in givin' me a fire. They didn't even give me silverware, and the beer bottles turned out to be clear plastic and fairly soft.

I could smell her perfumes and tell she was real made up and all now, and she had on her show outfit, which wouldn't last on her long, and her heels. The early show.

"Cain't talk now but I be back lata on," she promised. I listened to the show as I chugged the bottle.

It was late when she came back, but we talked for a little bit. Not about us, though; I don't think either of us was ready for that yet. They had to blame somebody for the breach so they blamed Deb; she was bein' shipped someplace out of state. Word was she'd be lucky if they didn't kill her just to make an example out of her.

She was probably too well known locally for that, I tried to tell myself, feelin' guilty about it. If she turned up dead there might be eyes turned this way that couldn't be bought so easily.

I was also right about Brandy Two. She-we-didn't exist in this world. She'd been in a string in a Camden that sounded frighteningly close to my old world when some mob men had come for her. They drugged her and she woke up a prisoner in an awful place that sounded a lot like Vogel's estate. There they both hooked and conditioned her, but then she was brought down here and kept for a long while at the country estate in what I thought of as central Pennsylvania. They didn't hypnoscan and made no attempt to brief her or rehearse her to be me, which was another thing that didn't make sense. Then she was brought down here and with her larger size and distinctive looks she was rehearsed and worked into the show act. It wasn't a whole lot more information than I had before.

Then, late in the evening, she gave me the second shot. If anything, it was better than before and seemed longer and it also seemed slower coming down. The dizziness was worse and I had diarrhea bad, but that was all.

From Brandy Two I also learned about the life of a shadow dancer. She had not heard the term but liked it. You always felt a little high and a little turned on and mostly great, but during the coming down period you was suggestible, at least that's how I see it. A new shot of juice in under twenty to twenty-four hours had no real effect. It was like injecting distilled water. Withdrawal, for Brandy Two, started at thirty hours and got worse and worse. By forty hours she would be in hell. That's how they "conditioned" you. They let you go into withdrawal, then told you what you had to do and gave it to you. When you woke up in that mellow, suggestible time they reminded you of what was expected. They didn't need to do this too much, 'cause while the juice wasn't smart or nothin' it kinda pushed you to do whatever it took to keep gettin' a new supply as

needed. No matter how crazy or against your nature it was, it became just like normal to you in no time.

I thought 'bout Donna bein' forced to go through that barracks, day after day. Them patterns was damned hard to break.

After the third day they didn't give me a regular shot. They waited to see if withdrawal would come on. On the fourth day, it did. In its early stages it was almost as bad as heroin withdrawal; you got real sick, bad sick-upchuckin', the runs, hot and cold spells, everything at once. I was hooked and I knew it. Fast Eddie Small was blunt about it. "Until they decide when or if they're gonna use you and for what you're stuck here," he told me. "Until your hair grows out enough to get styled decent, you'll have to wear a wig. Wear it any time, all the time, you ain't in these rooms. Brandy'll get you all the right jewelry, cosmetics, perfumes, powders, and like that. Use what she don't. You never leave here without 'em on and on right. You want to work into the act, fine. You don't, then you go down after wearin' nothin' more than the girls do at the end-and nothin' less-and you get customers. Two a night minimum, twenty-five minimum a trick. If you don't have enough in the club, then you go out and get 'em. They pay the barmaid, satisfaction guaranteed, get it?"

"Yeah, I get it," I replied, wishin' I could rip his guts out. "You mean I got to work the streets in nothin' but shoes with it twenty degrees out there?"

"Naw, I got heart. A big heart." One of the girls- Lambda, I think, the blonde-went when he snapped his fingers and brought back absolutely the most gorgeous, sumptuous fur coat I ever seen. It was gray, but otherwise close to the coats the girls were wearin' when I made my fatal bump into them. It was silver fox, mink lined, and it had a belt around its middle and two deep pockets inside. "You wear this and you take care of it. If it needs repairs or cleanin' you tell the barmaid. Now, you get this straight. You want more of a wardrobe, you earn it by goin' over your quota. You don't handle money, never. You want somethin', you come see me or one of my people and you convince us you're worth it. One way is to follow all our rules. You all got the same rules. You follow them and you'll learn fast enough. You break the rules, any of 'em, or you see one of the other girls breakin' the rules, and you get real hell."

He was really enjoyin' this. It was a real turn-on for him. I hated his stinkin' guts. The only thing worse than big Hitlers was little Hitlers.

I was unchained, unlocked, and left on my own. I didn't know if there was any guards around, but I never saw none. He didn't need 'em. Brandy took me under her wing, though. "Can't call you no Brandy, too. Both of us'll go nuts," she noted.

"That's okay, just call me Beth. I kinda feel like I come full circle on this case now anyways." And that's the way we agreed it would be.

In a way, it was worse, 'cause now I was the property of two masters, one allegedly human, the other inside me. I found out what that was like real quick. First, my sniffles, which I'd had since God knew when, just went away, as did all of my old sinus problems, but that was only the tip of it. You sure followed a routine, like it or not.

When you was supposed to eat, you got hungry-and I mean hungry. It became an overpowering urge, the only thing you could think of till you ate, but it was a little specific. You got more irresistible and otherwise repulsive cravin's than a pregnant woman. Pumpkin washed down with pickle juice. Raw hamburger with chocolate sauce. Steamed fish a la mode. Now, it wasn't always that way, but it often was, particularly the first few weeks. The other girls swore to me that it stopped after a while and only popped up after that occasionally, but until then I could tell one of the bar staff what I wanted and they'd hold their nose and go get it. I had to fix it myself, though, in a neat but antique kitchen they had. And when you wasn't hungry, you couldn't even look at anything at all.

The upstairs of the club went over into the row house next door, I found. Even after workin' there I hadn't knowed that before. They was kinda like dorm rooms, but each one had a double bed, small closet, a switched speaker that would bring the bar music in with volume control, and some fancy lights. There was two bathrooms with both tub and shower on each floor, one attach end. The sheets were pink, purple, or crimson satin with down comforters. We was all responsible

for keepin' our rooms absolutely clean and neat and perfect, and either Eddie or one of his boys could pop in at any time to inspect them like some Army sergeant. All of us was responsible for keepin' up the inside of the house, includin' scrubbin' halls and common areas, vacuumin' with real antique-style cleaners, kitchen, bathrooms, and the rest.

On the top floor was a room that was somethin' of a gym, with weights, exercise machines, and all the rest. That was 'cause this thing inside us wanted a perfect house to live in, which was us, so just like the meals you got these-well, not urges, really, more like compulsions. To run, to lift weights, exercise every part of your body you could every day. It wasn't easy at the start, but when you did what this thing wanted you got little pleasure jolts; when you didn't, you got misery. You did it.

Likewise, I no longer wanted cigarettes. Couldn't stand to have one in my mouth, though it didn't bother me none to be in a smoke-filled bar. You could drink, but the more you drank the more you went to the bathroom and you never got drunk or even tipsy.

And when it decided you was to have sex, you got so tense and worked up that nothin' else mattered. You had to have it. Male, female, horse-I don't think it mattered none. Only the knowledge that you had to turn two tricks to get the juice kept your mind in the act.

Of course, I was still a naughty and disobedient girl at the start with anything this shit inside didn't force me to dp, like Fast Eddie's rules, but they took me down a few pegs in a hurry. They let you go real deep into withdrawal, just to the edge of where it might really start causin' brain or nervous system damage, then they'd stand there and keep insistin' that you repeat all the rules and swear to obey 'em. There was no way you couldn't. The sickness was bad enough and got worse and worse and you knew it could never get no better but that you could be all well and feelin' great in just a minute or so if you swore on your mother's grave to obey, and then that thing would start pushin' the pain button in your head slowly down, more and more, till you couldn't stand it no more.

You didn't get that far but once.

They reinforced it when you came out of the pure pleasure high and loved the world by havin' somebody there whisperin' all the rules and havin' you repeat 'em and swear to act just that way. One day you just wake up, and doin' everything their way is the most normal and natural thing in the whole world. You know it's not the way you used to do it or think about it and not the way other folks do, but it's the norm for you and you do it automatically. It wasn't like no hypnosis or conditioning they could change the rules any old time and that would be the new normal thing.

Turnin' two tricks in Atlantic City deep in winter wasn't always possible no matter what the decrees. There was snowstorms and power outages and bad rain and ice storms, and not many people. Christmas through New Year's was great, though, with lots of parties and winter getaway specials and the like, although it was real depressin' for us to see the Christmas lights and displays and people shoppin' and feel isolated, alone, and left out.

By "us" I mean Brandy two and me. The other girls, they didn't seem none too touched by Christmas or much else. They didn't seem to remember no past at all, no growin' up, nothin' but bein' what they were. Even with the never-ending compulsions there was time, and thinkin' was still there, and memory, too, good as old. My eyesight gradually improved to where I could see pretty good from a distance and close up was blurry. It was much better for gettin' around, but it was hell to read anything like a book. To Brandy, the idea that anybody'd read books for fun was near impossible for her to her in her head. As I suspected, her own readin' was on the Dick and Jane level.

After New Year's they moved us up to New York, which was a surprise, to a club in the Manhattan entertainment district where almost anything went so long as you gave the customer value for his money and didn't roll or stiff him. The district's boundaries were pretty clear but unwritten; the law and the adult entertainment district kept their ends up. Outside the district, wham]

Inside-well, just keep it there. Of course, it wasn't immune from things like robbery, murder, rollin', and hard drug sellin', but the fact was it was pretty well self-policed and while there was drugs aplenty there was no big scorin' to be done there. You did that uptown in Harlem or over in The Bronx.

By the end of January, I'd undergone some radical changes that at the time I was only partly aware of. My body was lean and muscular, the best it probably could ever be. I could run for miles and hardly work up a sweat. If I flexed all my muscles, I looked like one of them female bodybuilders, and I think I could bench press more than Sam ever could. They paired Brandy Two and me in a duo strip and sex act as The Double Brandys, of course, and slowly my skin was goin' back to its normal tone, which was her tone, and my hair was gettin' all woolly and curly as it used to be. Whatever tricks the Center had pulled was bein' undone. By spring, we figured a trim for her and we would be so identical that even we couldn't tell each other apart. Only our dialects and our relative educations told any difference. We even had the exact tastes in perfumes, lipsticks, and cosmetics of all kinds, even toothpaste.

Mentally, it was strange. On the one hand, you lived for that glorious hour of the juice, and you spent part of the time tryin' to recapture it, push it just a little. You did that by followin' your impulses, which was guided by the juice itself. The normal physical things that brought intense pleasure, like orgasms, produced much more intense feelin's of pleasure, so you went for 'em.

Kinky was normal. We'd take walks in the afternoon wearin' only the shoes and coats and think nothin' of it, and not be cold, and we'd window shop or even go into stores and look over fashions and mentally dress each other, sometimes try on things. I didn't feel no sense of right and wrong when it came to me. We didn't steal stuff we liked only 'cause we understood that gettin' caught and goin' to jail was a death sentence with no juice. No guilt, no shame. When we saw somethin' we wanted, we had to beg and plead like little kids and hope they'd buy it for us, and we didn't care. If you wanted to do it and it wouldn't cause punishment or death, you did it. When I was workin' freelance on the street I always felt guilty 'cause of Sam. Now I had no guilt, no shame, no conscience, no pride, neither.

And that was the other crazy thing, 'cause I thought about Sam a lot. Not just Sam, but especially Sam. I still loved him, wanted him, and cared for him. I still remembered it all.

And I still wanted to solve this damned puzzle if I could. That was part of me, part of my nature, as much a pleasure giver as the rest and also in my best interests. I don't know if they thought of that or not, or if they cared.

Whether or not I could bring myself to deliver that solution wrapped and sealed to Aldrath or Bill Markham even if I got the chance I didn't know-I really did love the juice most of all. Deep down, I didn't know if there was any way I could consciously and deliberately cut it off on my own. Bill was kiddin' himself with his thirty doses; you didn't want to get to the Center even if they gave you a complete cure, 'cause you could never feel that intense pleasure again. That's what hung up Donna and some of the others in the end. Even if physically cured, they couldn't forget the yen for that feelin' and recapturin' even a slice of it meant everything to them.

Fact was, I wanted to solve it all not to bring nobody to justice or stop no plot but 'cause these folks had pulled out before and left those on the juice to die in agony. What they done to others they could do to me, anytime, anyplace. The only fear I had was fear of not gettin' the juice.

I wanted to be this way forever.

8.

## Unravelling Threads

Brandy Two was as fascinated by me as I was by her. The idea that I'd taken over the agency, educated myself, and married a white guy she found both incredible and unbelievable, but Fast Eddie's respect for the old me was more than enough testimony. The problem was, she'd gone wrong even earlier than me. Mama died

even younger in her world, and Daddy stuck her-as he almost did me-with a couple of cousins who didn't give a damn. She'd been into drugs early, maybe in grammar school, and she was even wilder as a teen than I had been. She'd been caught stealin' when she was only fourteen, and when Daddy threw a fit she'd run away all the way to Washington-which existed in her world as in mine-and had run the streets. By sixteen she had a habit and was in the string of one of them pimps with the fancy coats and Superfly image. Daddy had tried to find her, of course, but considerin' how hard it is to find runaway kids who want to be found, it's pure luck if you find one that don't.

She was a whore 'cause she'd been one all her adult life and didn't know how to be, or imagine she could be, nothin' else. It all went into the body, the looks, the moves. She had always been dependent for everything, and the mind was the one thing in her kinda life that it was better off not payin' much attention to. She didn't read and had no knowledge of or interest in the world. The fact that I'd come from the same start and I'd made somethin' of myself gave her somethin' of a feelin' of worth by association, but it was too late for her to change, she thought, and what was the use anyway? We was both stuck in the same groove. In a real way, she was less my twin than my shadow; she looked like me, but there was nothin' left down there.

The problem was, as time rolled on, I was becomin' more and more like her. On the road, we was even further removed from Small and Siegel and all that lay behind 'em. We slept, ate, exercised, had as much sex as we could with anybody, worked out new routines for the act, and for fun went to stores and tried on all sorts of clothes to make us look even sexier, experimented with new cosmetics and perfumes, and spent a long time in mirrors gettin' it right. The future was the next jolt of juice.

The only thing that tempted me durin' that time was tryin' to go thirty hours between juice jolts. They generally gave us a week's supply at a time, since you couldn't overdose on it and even with a week you wasn't goin' nowheres. I figured at the end of a week I'd have an extra, and then maybe I'd go over to Lindy Crockett's place some afternoon, hold her down, and give her a taste of the stuff. I never did, though. It's the curse of an addiction that you never give it away or delay gettin' it when you got it and it's due.

We went back down to Atlantic City at the beginnin' of May to get ready for the high season at the club there, and for the first time I was back in the same town as Small and Siegel. By now it was clear that I was stuck and that I couldn't do or learn much more than I did unless things was taken out of my hands and moved from a different source. My big worry was that Aldrath would get itchy after all them faked reports from me and nothin' really happenin' and decide to come snatch me. I didn't want to be snatched or cured, no matter what the price. What I wanted was a way to be independent of the beck and call of the bastards who doled it out.

I mean, name me a girl over thirty, or a guy, either, who suddenly had the body of their dreams and found keepin' it that way a pleasure? Who couldn't get sick if they stood all day in the wind and rain. Who had been an old thirty-two and now looked a young twenty-five. Add to that an absence of hangups, of any guilt, second thoughts, regrets for anything you done from that point on, and a high, charged-up energy level that kept you always active, always feelin' good, never feelin' bored or down in the dumps, and just a little bit playfully high all the time. The only real problem was the man who doled out the juice. You had to dance to whatever tune he played or it all came crashin' in, and you was never secure he just wouldn't end it someday.

"Get all your things packed up," Fast Eddie told us. "You're goin' for a little ride."

I was shocked and surprised, but you don't ask no questions in Fast Eddie's string. Pack up for what? And where? Another club, another city? It was just gettin' real nice and warm in Atlantic City and the crowds was startin' to pick up, at least on the weekends. I put on my metallic blue dress that was real short and super-revealin', as was almost all my stuff, with matchin' shoes and made myself up to go. Then I packed the rest in this big steamer trunk, all I had in this world, closed it, and took it downstairs. It was awkward goin', but























































































touched. Now this fellow started to wonder what a Typhoid Mary, or perhaps many Typhoid Marys, would do to this world. Suppose they were introduced as professional courtesans at a party like this one, for the high and mighty. Not everyone would partake, of course, but some would, and there would be other opportunities. Now you begin to go into withdrawal, but someone, an agent for the top man, could offer you not a cure, perhaps, but a daily fix that would keep you going and even cure what you might catch. Ask your doctors-no mind can tolerate that withdrawal, not even any of yours. Right, Jamispur?"

The doc nodded. "It is true. Within a few hours of the onset of withdrawal you would kill your family and cut off your leg for it. It is not a matter of will; the thing is in control of your mind and its sole imperative is survival."

"They wouldn't snare Basuti," Mukasa chuckled. "He has a permanent vow of celibacy." He stopped a moment. "Say-that's right..."

Eyes went to Basuti, all lookin' at him funny, but he ignored them. "The plot is an infantile concoction of this madman," he said. "First, you would have to find the missing agent. Second, you would have to get that agent into this world, something I find impossible to believe. Third, you would have to have some way of continuing to import it."

"Oh, once they had enough people-most of you, say, and some key security people, they wouldn't need subterfuge. They could get all of it in they wanted," Sam pointed out. "But, you're right. The thing was, that original, stranded exploiter team finally figured it out. It was literally under their noses all the time but it was so obvious and yet so alien they failed to recognize it. The staple food here is haipi, and pardon my mispronunciation. There's some haipi in these snacks right here. Where I come from, it's potatoes, rice, beans-you name it. The rainbow weed was the number-one staple of the origin world. It grew like wildfire all over the place and was eaten all the time in every imaginable way by just about everybody. They long suspected it was something in the diet or something in the forms and balance of radiation in sun, soil, or water, and they very courageously self-experimented to find what it was, but rainbow weed was the last thing they tried because it was everywhere.

"When they discovered this, they sent the seed pods down to Carlos to analyze and grow others, and our man went into action. Under a cover, he had agents on the colonial worlds of your people recruit, perhaps even kidnap, young women under twenty years of age, and, by virtue of his committee authority, flagged their Labyrinth IDs as security recognized and moved them out. Carlos had already prepared a place for them, a camp in a world without Company personnel but near the so-called stroke seven worlds like mine, in a primitive jungle where there was an uncharted weak spot. There the girls were hypnos-canned to be unable to access their entire past, and a new, simpler, rougher past consistent with that world was brought forward. They were given cosmetology treatments to change their hair, alter their eyes, vary their skin color, and the rest. They were hooked on the drug, which made them quite suitable as prostitutes and dancers. The only problem was, Carlos had few people and a lot of other work to do. There was no way he could handle up to fifty girls, as there eventually were, about the limit for the amount of the agent, or 'juice,' that the team up in the origin world could produce and ship, allowing for accidents and unexpected losses. In the end, it was decided to take a leaf from the Company's own method of operation."

They was all ears now, and all of 'em looked downright uncomfortable. I begun to worry that maybe they was all in it.

"Oh, I forgot to mention Addison. I shouldn't, she's a key player and there are things even the one here who knows her well doesn't know about her. She had relatives in one of the colony worlds, and she was a mistress of a Security Committee member so she had a security code and legitimate reason to go back and forth. She was, then, the liaison between our man here, who couldn't leave, and Carlos. She had a safe world where she could undergo a rather startling metamorphosis into a cold, plain-looking woman who had only superficial resemblance to the women of this world, and she did it all without high tech machines. She came from a family of professional performers and she knew just how to do it and do it right. She was also a quite accomplished method actress,

who, when Addison, was really a different personality. Colored contact lenses and tinted glasses added the final touch. She approached Arnie Siegel, a major criminal boss in the northern hemisphere, about the girls. He was big and powerful enough to cover for her, and she was able to hand him some Company gadgets and secrets that made it easy for him to evade the law and gave him an edge on possibly knocking over his own boss, a fellow named Wycliffe, who was ignorant of the affair. The only ones he let in on it were people he owned, body and soul, such as the master pimp Edward 'Fast Eddie' Small, who would take over Siegel's position when Siegel moved up, and gunmen personally loyal who would oversee the project's security."

"You mean they turned fifty girls of our race into whores for this-this-filthy world?" Hanrin Sabuuk seemed real angry and upset at that.

"Yes, because this not only assured them the preservation of the fifty with no effort on their part, and also because by then Aldrath, here, had by sheer accident stumbled into the very existence of this agent, or drug, and knew just from its existence that the plot had to be very ambitious and go very high. His big attention was on Vogel, since that's where the experiments were and he knew Vogel had to know who was behind it, but he sent a couple of agents to scout around this other world and set something up just in case. The agents went completely by the book and followed absolutely standard procedures; as a result, they were led by the nose by ones who already knew the book to Lindy Crockett, a New York private eye with mob connections, and were highly impressed with her. They should have been. She was carefully coached on what to say and do to impress them. She was more than connected; she was the chief private eye agency handling the Wycliffe mob's investigations. From that point on, there was a constant flow of information from Crockett, all of it written by the very people she was supposed to be investigating. It checked out and was mostly truthful; it was just worthless. She gave Aldrath Addison and Carlos, which was safe enough, but said they couldn't be photographed and gave slightly distorted descriptions and sketches so they wouldn't be recognized even if they were next to the sketches. She sent the news of Carlos's operation in Guiana, but only after it had served its purpose and was already pretty well closed down. And you, Aldrath, took that information and fed it into the computer and came to all the conclusions they wanted you to."

Aldrath shrugged. "A detective is only as good as his information."

"But you were so certain that this was a sideline, a minor offshoot, that you didn't even keep permanent security personnel there to independently check it out. You see, you're vulnerable to this because you all have sealed yourself off here, away from the action. All of you are only as good as your information, and your computers believe what they're told to believe. The origin world was listed as lethal and useless, so you ignored it. Nobody even dared poke their head in and check it out. The data banks were sacred, couldn't be tampered with. Maybe they can't be-but all that means is that you tamper with the data you feed into them. You were had. You've got thousands of stations out there. Who's going to check to see if a hypnoscaner was really ordered by a station authorized to get one and that they received it? So long as the order is proper and lawfully entered, and so is the receipt, you don't really know where that damned equipment went."

"A physical audit of everything is impossible in so vast a system," Mukasa noted. "We know there's a certain amount of built-in graft, but we try to keep it to acceptable levels."

"Uh huh. The trouble is, you don't know when that level's reached unacceptable. So, now we're set up. They are rolling and they have their active agent. The rainbow weed even grows well and apparently normally in worlds more in our line. Its molecular structure and balance seem identical to the parent's. The trouble is, it doesn't work. The addicts like it, but they still need their shot. It grows quickly, so you plant it every damned place you safely can-on the hundreds and hundreds of safe worlds. Nobody cares about the safe worlds except as havens and rest stops, so nobody ever bothers to look, say, ten, or perhaps a hundred, miles from the rest areas and supplies. I'll bet if you do you'll find this

crazy-looking stuff multiplying like crazy. It's going to be the kudzu of parallel worlds."

"What is this kudzu?" Hanrin asked.

"Never mind. You'll see what I mean in time. At just this time, we threw them a real curve. Aldrath revealed that he was going to kidnap Vogel and had sealed off access to Vogel's world. Now Vogel couldn't be reached without betraying a hand. You know that story, too, in gruesome detail. We went crazy trying to figure out how in hell you could know the precise instant from three different parallel worlds that some specific person would be going through the particular entrance cube. Then it hit us. Vogel gave us the slip but took Brandy with him; as a result, we could track him because her security code included a tracker and was superimposed over her old code. The ambush was painfully simple. They simply waited until their devices, set to Brandy's tracking broadcaster, all went beep together and moved. The object was first and foremost to kill Vogel, of course, but if they could they were also told to spare Brandy. She got away with a wound, since in that confined space it was impossible to guarantee anything. I got a head wound, which was real bad but not fatal. They couldn't do much, but they were prepared in case anyone survived except Brandy, since they would certainly be rushed to the Center-after quarantine and examination. That gave them, ahead of time, the names of any survivors, namely me, and the nature and extent of the wound. Again, they pulled their favorite trick.

"Care at the Center for most things is automated and computer controlled and monitored. The physician with his diagnostic computer just puts in the treatment and the like and it's done. Knowing it was a head wound and which doctor was alerted, they used the standard security taps on all medical emergencies and intercepted the doctor's instructions, adding a small extra detail, a slightly higher level of a support drug that would keep me comatose indefinitely. It was such a fine difference it took months before any doctor noticed it and questioned it."

"Who could tap into the medical line with such knowledge and finesse?" Mayar asked.

"In a minute, sir. First, why Brandy? Well, first of all, they'd just lost their experimental subjects and the heat was on. It was going to be dangerous to bring in more than small quantities of the needed semen in the future. My death- or, as it turned out, my coma-sent her into severe depression. They knew her well, had her entire mental profile. She would go in after the only lead left. This did them several favors. First, since Brandy went in and would be giving detailed, inside reports, Aldrath would hold off on a major commitment there pending what she found. Second, they could control those reports, via Crockett, and keep Aldrath more concerned about Brandy's safety than about what was actually there. Finally, they already had a Brandy of their own, one taken in the usual manner from a world close to ours but where the duplicate's life was, shall we say, less fortunate and the individual more opportunist."

Brandy Two smiled. "How sweet."

"The idea was an eventual switch. Brandy Two would be primed and sent back as Brandy One. They were very impressed by our Brandy, and none too sure that she could or would carry out their orders implicitly, hooked or not. There were a few circumstances in the Vogel tests where people committed suicide rather than face an impossible alternative. They couldn't take the chance. Brandy Two, as Brandy One, would have Aldrath's confidence here and Bill Markham's at home. She would also be an effective test case if they found the right element for their plot, since she could walk right into this world of yours on a security pass."

"Impossible!" Mukasa shouted. "You go too far. It is precisely because such twins exist that we have our unique security codes. Even twins from adjacent worlds who have precisely the same history and development will show up as different individuals under our system."

"And so would both of them-but they don't. They don't, because Brandy One's original code still has the security code and tracker superimposed on it and that drowns out and supersedes the old code. That code is intended to be temporary and so it's not in the master identification system as such."

"But only the security medical technician who imposed it would know that

specific code and be able to provide it for duplication!" Mayar pointed out.

"Exactly so. Isn't that right, Chief Medical Security Advisor Jamispur?"

The doc jumped. "Look here, if you're implying that I'm a part of this conspiracy-

"I apologize, sir. I was not implying anything. I am saying that you are the medical technician who knew and took Carlos under your wing when you were younger. I am saying that you were the ambitious and frustrated scientist tapped by our man to set this all up. That's why you got promoted to Chief Medical Security Advisor, so you could be in the best position for this."

"Now, hold on! I picked Jamispur!" Mayar said.

"How?"

"Why-computer records, job performance and proficiency, medical and psychiatric evaluations. The usual. He was the best man for the job."

"Of course he was. Because for several years our man had been letting the computer know all about Jamispur- exactly what they both wanted. He probably scored ninety-nine out of a possible hundred. Doesn't pay to be absolutely perfect. Your computer picked him from among the staff after that tragic flyer 'accident' killed his predecessor. Garbage in, garbage out. How does it feel to be garbage, Doc?"

"This is outrageous!" Jamispur stormed. "I will not sit here and allow any more of this insanity to continue!"

"Oh, yes, you will," said young Dakani softly, speaking for the first time. The tone left no doubt that the doc was gonna stay, whether tied up and muzzled or comfortable. Dakani and he was the same class; no political or jurisdictional problems there.

"It had to be Jamispur all along. He was the only one who could duplicate the security code. He was the only one who could feed that code to Carlos and his accomplices, via Addison, so that they could set their own tracers for the ambush. He was the only one who had the complete medical and psychiatric history of Brandy One and even had the opportunity right from the start to plant the seed in her mind that if anything happened to me she'd do what she did. As chief medical security advisor, he could tap into any of the Center's lines as well as just call security at the station and know exactly what to do to neutralize me-all by phone, or its equivalent, here, with his trusty little computer and all those wonderful access codes a top security position gives you. What was it, Doc? Ambition? Blackmail? Or did they just keep refusing to let you experiment on your own with people?"

"I have rights here. I do not have to answer to the likes of you," the doc responded kinda surly.

"No doubt. And no doubt you're good enough to have booby-trapped your own mind and memories. We start probing and prying and it all goes away. Don't worry, Doc. We're not even gonna try that stuff. We'll just walk you down to this little room, strip you, tie you to the bed so you can't hurt yourself, and give you as many jolts of this stuff you seem to love so much as it takes until you're hooked. We'll let the two ladies, here, handle it all. They know all about how to do it, thanks to you. All we need is a name. It's a name we already know, but your supporting testimony will give Dakani, here, the right of immediate arrest. I'm sure our big man hasn't booby-trapped his brain. We'll learn the rest from him."

Jamispur was sweatin' somethin' awful. I didn't even know these people could sweat till then, and it looked mighty sweet to me. "Don't," he managed, his voice just a hoarse whisper. "I'll tell."

"Sorry, Doc, that ain't enough," Sam told him. "You could give any name here and then stall for time, hoping that you'd get sprung. It has to be our route, while these gentlemen here remain as the vice president's pampered guests."

Suddenly Jamispur leaped from the couch toward Sam. Me, my twin, and Dakani all moved 'bout the same time, shovin' him back so he fell right into that whole mess of Directors. There was absolute chaos, everybody strugglin' with everybody and shoutin' curses in two languages, nobody clear what was what, when, just like in one of them thirties thrillers, the lights went out and plunged the room

into darkness.

There was more shouts, but the lights was back on in maybe a minute and we finally untangled. Well, most of us did. Considerin' how much melodrama we seen so far, I really wasn't all that surprised to see that Jamispur didn't get up. He had one of them fondue forks right through his throat, and he was gaspin' for air but not makin' a sound. By the time we did what we could, he was dead. Sam looked over at Dakani, who was lookin' back at someplace in the hall. The young man then turned back. "Did you get it?" Sam asked him.

"I got it. But I kind of hoped it wouldn't be fatal."

"Sorry," Sam replied with an apology. "I thought he'd use one of the butter knives. I'm out of the wrong society to even think of fondue forks."

Basuti turned, sweatin' too, and wiped his face nervously. "All right-you've convinced us there's a true traitor here, but you've just lost your only identification of him. You'll never get any prints off that fork handle. It's a rough-grip handle."

"Nice of you to notice that. You might be a detective yet. Well, I admit I didn't really expect more than an attempt, but this will do nicely. I regret not being able to deliver a smoking gun, but I think a smoking fondue fork will do just as well, although from the sound of it I can see why nobody ever used it in the old stories."

I watched Dakani Grista vanish back into another room, then come back, lookin' real grave. I had to hand it to Sam. I never woulda believed that anybody this slick woulda ever gone for it. I mean, our man still had lots of friends around. Bide your time while the doc got juiced and make your getaway.

"I'm afraid you've all been the victim of a very melodramatic setup," Sam told them. "The fact was, though, I really couldn't lose by it. If Jamispur hadn't lunged at me, or tried for a getaway, we wouldn't have pulled it and we'd have taken three to five days to get our absolute evidence. Fortunately, none of you have ever seen a vintage detective thriller movie. I presented the motive, opportunity, and method to commit a murder here tonight, and after all was chaos, partly aided and abetted by my two lovely cohorts in crime here and the very dubious Dakani, we even killed the lights, an obvious setup if ever there was one, but since we had our man backed into a corner and made certain we didn't give him enough time to think about good fortune, he took what appeared to be a wondrous stroke of luck to do away with the only witness who could credibly finger him. And so we can all let Dakani do his duty and get it out in the open now, by fingering the man we-Brandy and I, at least-have known was behind this from the start."

"Mukasa Lamdukur," said the security man, "I hereby suspend your rights under the Security Act on the grounds of treason and murder."

Mukasa stared at him. "You are both insane. You have no right to do this."

"Well, it wasn't hard to figure out once both Brandy and I were thinking straight again," Sam told him. "At that first, brief, dinner meeting in this very room, before the Vogel affair, you made a slip and had to cover it. You betrayed a fairly complete knowledge of my world, something you shouldn't have known unless it had been of particular study and interest to you."

"I told you-I was there, or very near there, when I was young."

"Yes. World War II, I believe. But we were told that no one from your class is allowed to go to any world that does not have a full station and Company operation, for obvious security reasons. The Company wasn't even there in the forties. It didn't establish its first outpost there until the mid-fifties, ten years after the war, and it didn't establish a full station until the sixties. We had been discussing war, so when you made your slip you covered with a war. The war Vogel's side won in his world and lost in ours. Why lie, unless you had something to hide? Unless you had been personally researching the world of Brandy and me with the idea of making a switch and eliminating a number of possible irritants at once? It wasn't enough to hang anything on you that would stick, but it was enough to tell us which one of you it was. When I was able to check, I discovered that, four years ago, you had the communications post now held by Director Basuti, the newest member and the cause of the musical chairs in the group. Communications-who would get the first frantic messages from that

exploiter team. Communications-which, by its very nature, is the post that gets all the information fed into the computers first. And now, operations, where you can issue clearances, monitor all security personnel, and get any question answered with no problems."

"You are guessing. You can prove nothing," he snarled.

"Dakani?"

The security man clapped his hands, and a big paintin' on the wall over the fireplace winked out, much to my surprise. It was like some kinda big, flat, square TV screen. The scene on it was of lousy quality but it was clear enough. All of our clearly recognizable outlines was there, and then Jamispur lunges, we go into our act, forcin' him between Basuti and Mukasa, and there is Mukasa's hand, almost by accident, hittin' the fondue fork, takin' it out, and then rolling and stabbin' the doc in the throat while he pushed against the doc's head with his other hand. Then he rolls away.

"I'm not against high tech when it's useful," Sam told them. "We often use infrared and other means to get photos and information in the dark back in my world. I figured they'd have an even more improved model here. We mounted it last night behind the mantelpiece. At least five technicians in various places caught it independently on their own machines. Two were witnessed by representatives of the President and the Chairman."

Mukasa seemed almost to wilt. In a flash he'd gone from the most confident man around to a scared little boy.

"Oh, relax, Mukasa," Sam told him. "The truth is, you just did yourself a favor. When is your mistress, Ioyeo, due back from visiting her sisters and mother in the colonies?"

"S-she's back. Oh, the curses of the Nine Hells, she's dead, damn it all. I had to do it. Don't you see? She showed herself to Brandy, here. They knew she was Addison. But Ioyeo played around, as she was told to. She's serviced everybody here except Basuti."

"Maybe it was all for .the best," I put in. "For her sake, too. Then she never got to make love to you one last time."

He looked strange. "Yes, she did. Last night. That's when I ... Oh, gods! She just looked up at me, her eyes wide, and even in death she had this look of total surprise."

"Not half as surprised as you gonna be in a few hours, honey," Brandy Two noted sourly.

Dakani was quick. "Did you make love to any other woman since? Or anybody else where semen was exchanged?"

"Why, yes. I felt-charged up. It was the first time I ever had to do anything like that myself and I got-a thrill. It was exciting. It was pure power. I slept like a log afterward, and after I woke up today I had the longest, most passionate session with my wife I've had in years. If she'd turned me on like that in the past ten years I'd never have even had Ioyeo."

Dakani was already on the communicator. I just hoped his missus wasn't feelin' so turned on she had a few boy whores on the side. Hell, this scheme of theirs might work anyways!

Sam looked at him. "It's almost a fitting punishment. You never knew just how much she hated you. You never even guessed how much she hated all of you, this Company, this world, this whole system. She was the fifty-first Typhoid Mary, and the first to come in. She hated you so much that she was willing to destroy her own mind, kill that brilliant if tragic intellect, just to make you the first victim. To spread it beyond any hope of containment. This thing thinks that humans are only turned on for a few days a year, so every day it sees we can screw profitably, it forces us to do just that, early and often. It's just a virus; it doesn't think. Every day is just one of those few to it."

"Oh, my gods and demons!" Mukasa moaned. He knowed now what we already did.

"Carlos, too, sacrificed much," Sam continued. "You see, she loved him. He was-is-a genius, a brilliant man from apparently a very poor and very oppressed race. He had passion, commitment, and was everything she ever dreamed of in a man. He loved her dearly, yet he did this to her, at her request. He is one hell

of a man, and, after this, if we can't track him down and pick him up through the agents here, he will be the most dangerous and deadly human being in all the universes."

An obviously shaken Mayar Eldrith got some of his composure back. "But-so she was double-crossing him? Why? She had everything. Everything!"

I looked around at all them silver-spoon, upper-class, First Royal Family types and I felt sick. "They ain't never gonna understand, Sam. Let 'em eat cake."

"But what, exactly, was the plot?" Basuti asked us when all had been calmed down. "I can understand motive, yes, on both their parts, but I just can't see how they were going to take control and get that substance in."

"First of all, it didn't matter to Addison-Ioyeo-or Carlos if they did get the substance in. They had thirty hours from their last drink of the rainbow weed pulp to get the girls in after the setup and party was all arranged and infect as many upper-class types as possible. Because of Mukasa's last embrace with Ioyeo, we wound up with six cases so far and maybe more. Imagine what half a dozen initial ones would have done. The cornerstone of security and the corporate classes would have been devastated before they knew what hit them. That was all Addison and Carlos wanted. The destruction. But they did have a way, and they made Brandy prove it would work by walking through."

"What? How's that?"

"Once they found the one that worked, or actually a way to get almost any normal rainbow weed to work, they gave it to both Brandys and took samples from their vaginal areas. They found live, complete viral reproductive units there. They gave them pulped but not pureed bulbs that grow on top of the stalks-the seed pods. They contain millions of tiny seeds and they are resistant to tremendous amounts of things. They are, among other things, indigestible but harmless. Only some of those fifty girls, restored to their original looks, being the correct race, would be used to spread the infection. The first, small group, only a couple, would be brought in as mistresses from the colonies under their original codes. Everyone of your race has the right to come here, at least for visits. The families are too closely interrelated. The scanners would pick up swallowed balloons, and even just clusters of foreign things where they shouldn't be. But they were not set to pick up addicts alone-a very complex process, finding one virus that you could only kill by killing the person-but only unusual things. Each of the girls would be fed till they burst with seed pods. Once away, they would be given diarrhetics. The human feces, with the seeds, would have been spread in a private greenhouse. The girls could then conveniently be discovered to be addicts in withdrawal and sent to the Center."

"Yeah," I added. "In just two or three weeks that greenhouse would be up to its armpits in rainbow weed."

"With all the alien races coming in and out and all the field people, it was impossible to scan the normal food and wastes that might show up in the scan, even if that scan showed odd material. It usually did, since people have different foods and diets," Sam pointed out. "Short of forcing everyone, regardless of race or class or what, to take an enema and have their stomach pumped, there's no way to guard against this."

"And what was the secret of the plant's missing ingredient?" Mayar asked.

"It wasn't soil, certainly, nor geographic position. The thing was a plant that converted sunlight into food without chlorophyll. It was sunlight-dependent if it didn't need much else. There are differences in the amount of solar radiation, and the type and degree, even within one world, and they subtly vary every world away. The exact balance of the origin world was required for maximum efficiency. Any variations and it was below maximum photosynthesis. It was actually a slight excess of one of those chemicals that made the difference.

You'll have to get the chemists to tell you just why it's not obviously different in analysis, but I think it's the same stuff as on the other worlds, only when it has an excess it converts it somehow into an allied chemical, and that's the one. No excess, no biochemical waste. Any good greenhouse with special lights and the exact radiation balance of the origin world can duplicate it, giving you perfect rainbow weed that will sustain this virus indefinitely."

"Yeah, and if they hadn't made two big mistakes, it'd all worked and most of

this world would have been under 'em in a couple of weeks," I pointed out. "One was fallin' for the same trap y'all was in here. Things was goin' so good, and they was so dedicated and radical and ruthless they got real cocky, started doin' side deals they didn't have to do. Me, for example. They figured when I come back from Vogel's place they'd stick me under Jamispur's machines and he could restore me and program me and all the rest. But I got shot, and Sam wasn't dead, so I went to the Center instead, and I had them do it. But not all of it. I ain't never been able to have straight hair in my life and I hate cornrows with a passion. Friend of mine went bald wearin' them things. And we girls spend millions a year tryin' to get our complexion creamy smooth and totally even. I kept the hair and the complexion. When I finally showed up down there, I didn't look like my twin. They couldn't make no switch, so they had to nab me and hook me, too."

"Then, when they knew they were near, they got arrogant," Sam said. "They did a quickie search and recruitment for a down-and-out Sam Horowitz who was corrupt as hell. We didn't think they'd do it, but we were ready for them when they did. There aren't very many of me. I'm not sure if that's reassuring or depressing. I nailed him in the Labyrinth. I talked to him first, because I just wasn't sure I could kill myself. I forced him into an available world and we had a talk. He had Nazis and concentration camps in his world, too. He lost the same relatives I had. It didn't bother him a bit. Not a bit. Before I knew it, I'd blown his fucking face in."

"That meant they thought they had Sam Two when they actually had Sam back home," I added. "We had a real go-round. He finally showed us that only by helpin' him did we guarantee our supply. He turned us in and our job was to press, finagle, or in some way get one or both of us to the origin world. See, that was their final and biggest mistake. More'n once they used that damned trackin' gizmo inside me for their own ends, includin' wastin' Vogel. Carlos was so busy and so sure of himself, and Addison had so much on her mind and one corner of it on the clock, they never bothered to take it out or turn it off. Since we was the only two addicts they had left not of their own race, Sam and Bill felt sure that they wouldn't do nothin' bad to us till they had their cure, their agent. We was the only guinea pigs they had."

Sam sighed. "Well, that about wraps it all up." He downed the last of his drink.

"Uh uh. You forgot one thing. Who killed Siegel and then helped me escape into the Labyrinth? That's the only part that has me completely confused," I said.

"Oh, Addison killed Siegel, just as you thought. The only thing unusual was the reason for that argument. It was you."

"Huh? Me?"

"Yeah. She wanted you for experimental or sentimental or whatever purposes; she had personally dropped off the load of filled shot capsules earlier in the evening. That's why the Labyrinth was running when you first saw it. The guards knew her, so they didn't think anything was wrong with it. Then she went into town to make some phone calls, probably to discover why Carlos, who should have been there, was not. She was just going back, but saw the office light on and went in to have a talk with him. She had seen you earlier out running, so she knew you were here, and decided to take you with her, probably to their safe world hideout, until the rest of the plans played out. Siegel refused. They got into a bad argument in which Siegel revealed inadvertently how much he knew and understood about all this, which was far more than he should have. Whether this was just his people monitoring Carlos closely and the Brandy Two project or what we'll never know. She lost her temper and shot him. She was used to being in charge, but suddenly it occurred to her that she was in a very bad position in a house completely surrounded by Siegel's most trusted bodyguards. She did a force on the Labyrinth with a remote device, which drew the guards, and she couldn't get away.

"In the meantime, you'd discovered the body, gotten rashly accused of the murder—you know better than to pick up a murder weapon, damn it!—and tried to shoot your way out. Addison had no choice when she saw this. You polished off a number of the guards, and she picked off the rest. This meant you would get

away, something she hadn't planned on, but also cleared the way for her to come out, blame you for the crime, and take a leisurely exit of her own."

"Uh huh. Two things wrong there, though. First, where did the rest of the juice go? I shoulda had hundreds of capsules in that case. And, second, how do you know all this? Everybody who was there 'cept me is dead, and I didn't know."

"The rest of the capsules had gone directly into Siegel's office wall safe, of course, to be picked up and sent down to Fast Eddie the next day by plane. The remaining package was yours. He planned on you being around awhile. For some reason, he wanted you bad enough to risk Addison. In the end, for all his power and money, Arnie Siegel was a very lonely man whose own success required him to be totally paranoid at all times. He couldn't have the shadow dancers permanently. You were probably the only human being in his whole world he could trust absolutely. As for my source of information-you're still a hell of a detective. You figure it out." He got up like he was goin' someplace.

"Sam-

"Not now, Brandy. We'll talk tomorrow." And, with that, he made his excuses and left. I started after him, but Aldrath stopped me, then took me over in a corner.

"I think you proved conclusively tonight that it was time I retired," he said.

"It was a rather stunning and embarrassing collection of deduction, hard work, and theatrics, but the root cause was my own failures."

I kept lookin' after where Sam disappeared. My mind wasn't on no more small talk.

"Don't you know how he knew, Brandy?"

I started and turned to him. "Huh?"

"He was there. Once he recovered here and then found out what had happened to you from me, there was no stopping him. He wanted no one notified, not even Crockett. He trusted nobody and nothing. In the close to a year you were shadow dancing, he managed to research and even worm his way into confidences. He had a fair amount of money-he took it in in precious metals and converted it-and he knew his job. In only three months he managed to get a job with the Crockett agency. I have no idea what sort of means he used to come up with the credentials and background, but I suppose he knew just what she would look for and how she'd find it, being in the business himself. He watched over you, Brandy. And he kept me from going in full tilt with squads and invading the operation. He felt we could get far more by letting it run."

"He was sure right." Sam . . . there all the time.

We was fast approachin' that time I didn't want to think about. "What will happen to us? And to the shadow dancers?"

"The events of tonight will not be kept under wraps very long. When Carlos hears that the plot is compromised, he will undoubtedly finish off the shadow dancers and regroup. When he hears that Ioyeo, his Addison, is dead, he will redouble his efforts. He has no clearance to headquarters, but he has a lot of skill and knowledge and equipment and at least a small organization. As Sam said, until we capture or kill him, he will be the most dangerous man alive. Undoubtedly they will be going through every single detail of Jamispur's life trying to figure out the connection. They must have been together quite some time. At least we'll find out who he is and where he came from."

"And us?" We'd been in on everything, but both Brandy Two and me had been kept under close watch and restrictions. We was Typhoid Marys, too.

"Well, everyone with the live reproducible virus will be under strict quarantine restrictions. You will be kept with your double here tonight and locked in, as before. Tomorrow, you both will be transferred to the Center for tests, after which you will have some hard decisions to make."

"What kinda decisions?"

"Options for the future. Someday, perhaps soon, we might be able to stabilize this thing, but its very nature will require taking something every day for life. Wait for the doctors. They'll explain it."

"Aldrath-promise me. Promise me that you won't let Sam leave till I made them decisions. Will you do that much for me?"

"I think I can guarantee that much. Farewell, Brandy. You and Sam cost me my

job, but you saved my world. I have children. I can't be angry with you for that."

Then they came to take me back up to my comfortable prison I shared with my twin. I didn't see Sam till the next day, and it was clear he was comin' off a real drunk. Still, they let me have some time with him.

"Sam-I heard what you done back at Siegel's. Damn it, I do love you, Sam. There's gotta be a way for this to work out. For us."

"How?" he managed, his head poundin' somethin' awful. I could tell. I knowed they had hangover cures here and I got the idea he just didn't want one.

"Brandy, they're going to convert Carlos's old safe world into a quarantine colony. Any who have the full virus, and any who for some reason wish to join them, will be able to do so. They will be researching this thing for years to come. In a short time that colony will be able to provide a small supply of the semen for capsules, allowing some people limited mobility elsewhere so long as they take the capsules and can't transmit the virus. It'll be a leper colony, but a very pleasant and self-governing one. Owl" He felt his head.

"Sam-you know how hard it is. The only way out for me is to take the cure, and you saw all them folks who took the cure. Not a one of 'em is right. I love you, Sam. I really do. Come with us to this place. It ain't so bad, and we'd still be together. Maybe they need a private eye."

"Forget it, babe. I can do a car chase at a hundred and ten miles an hour through city traffic but I can't stand roller coasters. Know why? I can't stand not to be in full control. Besides, it wouldn't be the way you imagine. You have your full intellect, but it's untempered. You have no inhibitions and no brakes except what is necessary for your own survival. You know that even now you're only being civilized because they'll shoot you if you aren't. You aren't human anymore. Love and lust are synonyms to you. The only meaningful concept of right and wrong you have is that what gives pleasure to you or is necessary for your survival is right. It won't let you get hurt, it won't let you get depressed for long, and there's no guilt, no sense of responsibility. That's why I couldn't take the stuff myself. A Jew without guilt is just a Unitarian. The Almighty would strike me dead for it. Right now, you want me, and you have that cultural and intellectual knowledge of right and wrong, but there's no sense on the gut level. I can't handle that."

"Damn it, Sam! Then I'll take the capsules. Move back in to Philadelphia and our world. It can be like it was before."

"Really? You'd be picking up the cab driver and the laundry man and every jock you met at the health club or on the streets while you exercise. I wouldn't have a wife, I'd have a wildly promiscuous and uncontrollable daughter I couldn't depend on personally or professionally."

"Look-you control the capsules. I'd have to do just what you said, act just the way you wanted."

He looked appalled. "My god! You can't even see how that sounds. I don't want to own somebody. I don't want a slave. I want an equal partner who sticks with me and puts up with me because she loves me." He looked up at the security guards and made a motion. "Good-bye, babe. I need a drink."

12.

Fate and Fortune

The doctor's name was Chidra, and he had me strapped down and surrounded by so many gadgets that I couldn't move. They'd already poked and probed and scraped and sampled and quizzed and tested us so much I was dizzy. Now it kinda looked like the moment of truth.

Fact was, I was totally incapable of kickin' the juice, even though I was no longer expectin' that massive high. I felt great, and just a rest or heavy exercise was enough to wash away guilt and lingerin' doubts and memories. I wanted Sam. I loved Sam. But I thought Sam was bein' totally unreasonable. If he really loved me, then he'd take one of my offers. That's how you thought.

"First, since you are intellectually unimpaired, I am going to explain the

options to you," Chidra said. "I'm going to be blunt, and I already know your answers so I don't wish or expect any. Just listen. Clear?"

"I guess." What was the point if he already knewed?

"First, you can elect the colony. It won't be fancy, but there will be people there you have known and work will go on studying this thing. You would be provided with all the basics and be expected to submit from time to time to studies, but otherwise it would be a carefree life, much like the life you shared with that stranded exploiter team, with some amenities and no strange natives. I must be blunt. With this thing managing and protecting your body, you might well live a hundred and fifty years. Even if we eventually found a miracle cure or stabilizer that would render you harmless and nondependent, which may be years, even decades away or might not be possible at all, you would remain there, since your patterns would be fixed and there would be, I'm afraid, little purpose or use in allowing you out. You simply have no means to contribute." It didn't sound too awful. Plenty of sex, lots of room to exercise and play, and no work or responsibilities, plus flush toilets.

"A second choice would be to return to your world where, I'm told, you still have a substantial sum of money that would guarantee supporting you comfortably. Your half would come to a bit under two million dollars, if that means anything to you. I have no idea what a dollar is worth. You would be maintained on the capsule with the pure virus as you were for most of your addiction period. When you needed a supply, thirty days or so at a time, you would go to a Company representative and draw it, like from a bank. You already have a high level of nymphomania; this would probably proceed unchecked."

That sounded even better.

"We would, in either case, make some adjustments that would be in our mutual interests. We would not tamper with your intellect, but we would have to tamper with your memories. We would eliminate all memories of Sam, of your marriage, of your career, of the Company and the Labyrinth. There would be gaping holes in your memories of the past, but you would not be bothered by it and you would never be curious about it or want to know. You would dismiss it if you found it out somehow. You would be perfectly content the way you were.

"The third and only other option would be to allow us to treat the illness and cleanse your body. The cleansing itself is relatively simple and subjectively painless, but curing and treating the results in mind and body would be a long and difficult process with no guarantees. If you want your Sam, though, that's the only road. We've done some fairly good analysis of him, and we believe he will be dead or as good as dead within a year without you, and that's the plain truth."

"I'll bring him around. I'll take number two. You even get the high with that, don't you?"

"I said you weren't to choose. Not now. The reason why you are so secured is that in a few moments I'm going to feed a charge through the body at a low level. It will stun the virus and confuse it. It will not be able to deal with it. There will be no permanent harm, and the whole process will take many hours as we compensate. During that period, and particularly near the end of it, since the virus will adjust eventually and reseize control, you will have your thoughts clear, organized, and unfettered. Then I will ask the question again."

"Now, wait a minute, I--"

Suddenly I felt a real sensation through my whole body, kinda like when you touch an electric light socket that ain't grounded but weaker, almost pleasant. After a while, I just went to sleep with it, hardly thinkin' at all.

Now, I know what they done. I even kinda suspected it at the time, but it didn't make no difference. They used that neutralizin' current and a hypnoscanner not to program me, but to feed in subtle visions and suggestions, provoke old feelin's. Memories of life with Sam, of just lyin' there sometimes while he was still asleep and just watchin' him and feelin' love. All his habits, his quirks, his idiosyncracies. Knowin', too, that it was mutual, that he both loved and respected me just the same. And then other visions-one vision. Sam, in the Labyrinth, tryin' to block the killer from shootin' in my direction, takin' the bullet, part of his head splatterin' . . . and what I felt then, and after.

And there was other visions, superimposed one on the other. Me, screwin' Calvin or somebody, havin' a ball, gettin' into that high, always over the sight of Sam's bloody head. The meanin' was clear. All I had to do was nod my head and get a life of highs, pleasure, and ease-all at the expense of Sam, all paid for by Sam's destruction.

And, through it all, I could think. Really think, 'cause the juice was too busy handlin' the distractions to block out the negative emotions. Guilt, shame, regret, all was there; I had a sense of right and wrong, good and evil I hadn't had in over a year. I had perspective. Yeah, I'd be happy. Oh, I'd be sad and cry if I was told that Sam blowed his brains out, but it wouldn't last long. But they was honest. I also got views of them wards of Vogel refugees, of Donna and the rest. What if I did take the cure and wound up crippled or brain damaged? Would that be any more of a service to Sam? And I knowed it would. I knowed that even then, he'd be there, always, doin' what he could, 'cause he loved me. I was the only thing left to him that had any importance, any meanin'. In the end, the bottom line was, who did I really value most? What was most important to me? Who was more valuable, more precious? With the juice in force, of course, the answer was simple. Self-preservation of me and the juice inside was all there was. But the juice wasn't talkin' now. It was just me, all by myself. I still loved the juice, the way it made me feel, but I loved Sam, too. I owed him.

"You simply have no means to contribute."

And there it was, in the doc's own words. Without Sam, I had no reason to exist except for pure pleasure. Brandy One and Brandy Two would merge. It would be as if Sam had never existed, like the agency died with Daddy. Not only Sam, but all that I had accomplished, or might have accomplished, would be gone.

You could live a hundred and fifty years . . .

As a fucking dumb vegetable. What kinda livin' was that?

He was there, watchin' over me, even though he was sick at what I'd become . . .

Values . . . worth. You ain't human, he said. The juice needed to survive. It needed a host and it needed a weed and both was equal in importance. That's all I was or would be. Some stinkin', worthless weed. Not a human, a thing who'd turn its back on somebody who needed me even when that somebody'd been there when I'd needed him. Once he'd been willin' to die for me, and me for him. I was willin' to get in this fix just to avenge him. If I really loved him, no matter what the power and lure of the juice, I oughta have the guts enough to live for him, too.

I was still under; I knowed they wasn't even ready for me to come out of it yet, but I still fought it off and screamed, "Do it, Doc! Get this thing outta me! Hurry it up and do it now, fore it changes my mind!"

They learned enough from the early ones to know how to do the easy part. They put you in a chamber, out cold, the juice in you and doin' fine, and all at once, evenly through the body, they put this ray that was very specific and very deadly only to it. The death of the juice was instantaneous and uniform throughout the body. There was no chance for it to curl up and mount a defense or do more damage than it done already.

The trouble was, the damage it done makin' you over into a comfortable and controllable home for it was done, and on top of that its absence was more painful and rough than you knew.

All our lives we live with some pain. Gas pains, joint pains, muscle aches, you name it. We tune it out, learn to tell the new pains from the old, the important ones from the routine. With the juice, you didn't have no real pain 'less it was somethin' serious, and then only long enough for the juice to take care of what was wrong. I woke up in real pain. I needed a pill somethin' bad. I was in so much agony that I pleaded with them to put me back on the juice, that I couldn't stand it no more. I knowed Sam was there, but I couldn't see him or talk to him. I couldn't face him with the idea that I was too weak to take this, that I couldn't hack it no more without the juice. They gave me a few pills to help me sleep but that's about all they did. No juice. Lotsa sympathy, no juice.

They was always there, though, watchin' and monitorin', tellin' me it would get

better, but it didn't. It got worse and worse and finally I just couldn't stand it no more. I sunk so deep in depression and pain and misery I couldn't even think straight and all I wanted was out. They stopped me twice from killin' myself.

They begun a program of physical and mental therapy and drove me hard. I didn't feel no better, but at least I was doin' somethin'. Fact was, the lousy way I felt was called normalcy. It was somethin' you just didn't know or notice till you didn't have it. Then, when I was ready to at least see Sam, to get some reinforcement, I couldn't.

I was in a kinda isolation ward. Seems the juice took over most of the job of my body's immune system. It took a lot of their medicines and a lot of time to build itself back up where a common cold wouldn't kill me.

They had a lot of pills for me to take without fail, and my mind worked funny tricks there. I kept tryin' to understand why if I had to take these damned pills all the time they just couldn't give me the juice and cure it all at once. God! How I wanted it! I thought about it, craved it constantly.

Finally I was built-up enough to see Sam, but all he had to do was come in and say, "Hi, babe," and I collapsed into his arms and just cried and cried and begged for him to hold me and never let go. A few days later, when they decided that the benefits outweighed any risks, they let him move in with me. I just wanted him to hold me and kiss me and make love to me and nothin' else mattered in the whole damned multiple worlds.

I wore him out, and I knew it. He was exhausted and a little ill himself and wound up with what they called a "minor coronary episode," and that was crazy, too, 'cause all of a sudden he was more of a patient than I was and I was gettin' shit for him and tendin' to him.

The docs got fancy names for it. They claim I subordinated and fixated and all the rest of that crap on Sam. All the energy, all the emotions, all went to Sam and Sam alone. It was, well, like when you first fall deep in love with somebody. You can't think of nothin' or nobody else but them, you damn near worship them, you just wanna be with them always. It kinda wears off and settles in after a while-what they mean when they say the honeymoon's over-and it had some with us, too, but they say this kinda thing might not wear off for years, maybe not ever, this time, and I don't give a damn. Sometimes you just about gotta lose what you most want before you realize how important it is. I had almost murdered half of myself, and it would never happen again. I was Sam's rainbow weed and he was mine and we was each other's juice. Neither of us was much damned good without the other, but together we was one hell of a team.

"Sam?"

"Yeah, babe?"

"I love you Sam."

"I love you, too, babe."

"You still gonna love me when I'm old and blind and ugly wrinkled?"

"If you can love me the way I look now, why the hell should I be any different?"

"I don't want it to go back like it was, Sam. You was miserable with that high-class clientele and chasin' down computer embezzlers in Pittsburgh and I was miserable 'cause I wasn't chasin' down them white collar bastards with you. I don't wanna be separated again by no job or no funny lone wolf missions to other worlds. We're a team or we're nowhere. Even in this business, even though we didn't know it, we was a team. Ain't nothin' gonna break us up again."

"You impressed a lot of people here, babe, including me. Even the bad guys were impressed. They made most of their mistakes because even though they had you on a gold leash they couldn't keep their admiration and fear of you in check. Half that summation was yours, maybe more. God, though, wasn't that great! You couldn't sell it to Hollywood. They wouldn't believe it."

"I'm through impressin' nobody but you. I talked myself into this mess in the first place 'cause I kept tryin' to impress all them folks who looked down on blacks, on women, on people with bad grammar or ignorant table manners. All them stupid, meaningless rules."

"I always loved you just the way you were," he told me seriously. "I never asked for anything else."

"Then piss on 'em all. If they don't take this coarse, foul-mouthed black bitch the way she is, I don't want 'em. If I ain't learned nothin' else, I sure as hell learned that. Look what that kinda shit caused here. I bet that damned Chairman of the Board shits just like everybody else, just in a gold pot. Hell, them highbrows kept makin' them remarks but we impressed the hell outta them, too! Just bein' what we are and doin' what we do best. Better'n anybody!"

"I don't think we have to impress people when we get home," he said real casual. "I think people have to impress us."

"Huh?"

"Well, even putting aside the post-tax nearly four million we still have in the bank for the Vogel job-you remember how I started that summation? A wager. A fee, if you will. If I lost, I paid with my life. But I'm still here."

"What in hell did you win?"

"A retainer, more or less, with fringe benefits. They pay us a flat fee, adjustable for inflation, every month for the rest of our natural lives for the right to consult us on Company business. We don't lose the retainer if we refuse the job. That only gives 'em the right to talk. The fringes include medical care, miracle pills and drugs, and everything else that the Center can provide to their own people. We also have unlimited access to the Labyrinth. If we want to get away from it all, we have an infinity of choices."

"Sam-how much of a retainer."

"Well," he sighed, "it starts at ten thousand dollars a month. Of course, it'll come from the Company so we'll have to pay taxes, but it's filtered through a number of foundations and tax gimmicks to minimize things. I figured if we let the foundation let us live in one of its houses and use its cars and stuff we ought to be able to get by for a few years, letting that four million just roll over and multiply."

"Sam, that's over a hundred thousand a year!"

"Sure. Plus expenses. The consultative services of the highest-regarded private eyes in a few thousand known worlds is cheap at that price."

"Oh, my God . . ."

Well, that's most of the good news, anyways. The rest was that the Center's microsurgery techniques was so good that reversin' my sterilization was a breeze for them, though I had a long waitin' period before they was sure my system could take it without hurtin' no kid.

We got to thinkin' 'bout adoption, but never followed up on it. Sam wanted to adopt an Asian baby. I think he just wanted to see the looks on teachers' faces when both parents show up for the PTA, not to mention the bar or bas mitzvah. Oh, yeah-I had to take the instructions over from the start, but now any kid I have will be born of an official Jewish mother. We took a trip to Israel to celebrate, then went down into Kenya and Tanzania and Zimbabwe and Malawi, too. I got to admit it was a charge bein' in places where black folks run the whole thing and people was starin' sideways at Sam.

I ain't gonna give you the good vibes jive, though. It took almost a year and a half, longer than the damned case, to get me to where both my mind and body worked reasonably well. I still have dreams of them super highs and periods sometimes when I kinda blank out and flash back to feelin' the bad old mellow times. My eyes got so bad I can't see the end of my nose without glasses, and I need the kind of special high-tech glasses they ain't invented here yet to see reasonable at all. I can't drive 'cause every once in a while when I see a ripplin' effect or some shimmerin' colors I kinda trip out for a few seconds to maybe a minute. I can read fine with the glasses and do, but I gotta keep from concentratin' too hard on any one image, whether it's a printed page or a paintin' or even a big unmovin' object like a parked car, or it kinda does a flip in my head and I'm seein' everything backwards, like in a mirror, sometimes for up to an hour. Sometimes when I stub my toe or hit my head or somethin', instead of pain I get a pleasure rush.

And, every now and then, I get these episodes, as the docs call 'em. Like suddenly gettin' super turned on for no reason at all and usually at the worst possible time and situation. Or I'll get up and put on makeup and jewelry for no

real reason and come down and not realize I didn't put no clothes on till somebody points it out, or we'll be eatin' out and I'll pour ketchup on my ice cream and eat it without noticin'. I didn't get away scot-free; that damned thing did some damage up there. I'm gettin' control of the worst of it, though, and Sam's been super supportive.

Then there's my twin, only she ain't so much my twin no more. She didn't have no Sam or nothin', so there was no way she could kick the stuff. She controls her own juice supply now, but she decided that she knowed one thing best and made a deal. She's back workin' for Fast Eddie Small in that world, on a fifty-fifty split, still packin' 'em in. They sent Mukasa's brains to the brain laundry, and now he's happily workin' in the labs at that juice leper colony of theirs. His poor wife and her lover are there, too, as are the whole set of them from the exploiter team. Hell, their top folks are in charge there.

They still ain't found Carlos, which worries everybody, but they did find forty-two of the fifty shadow dancers in a safe world stop, all with their throats cut. What he's doin' with the other eight I don't want to know. We can't always be savin' their damned world. The cost's been too high, even though the rewards are good. Ioyeo was right about one thing, though; that society and that Company ain't gonna change 'less it's forced to, and the longer they don't the more loyeos and Mukasas and Jamispurs they make. Dakani's still got the security post, but also still with "actin'" in front of the name, but he's pretty secure now. He has old Aldrath Prang outside in the Labyrinth and the field seein' how they can keep the kind of computerized foolery from happenin' again. He was by not long ago, and sat and watched our tapes of every Thin Man movie and every Raymond Chandler film ever made.

The way they worked it for us was that Mayar Eldrith got us a Company job. It's well disguised and a new post, but it's one they needed for years. It comes with a two-hundred-and-forty-four-acre estate in central Pennsylvania near Bellefonte and State College, a manor house with fourteen furnished rooms, huge livin' room and fireplace, an indoor hot tub, and an outdoor pool, plus horse stables. Most of it is used for contract farmin' - the trust which is the Company cover here leases out the land to local farmers, mostly for corn. The horses are part of a deal with Penn State's agricultural college and they mostly take care of them, though I'm learnin' to ride a horse and not doin' too bad at it. That leaves our ten grand a month for groceries and livin' expenses and a few luxuries, like the Mercedes sports car and my minks and jewels.

See, in a wooded patch up part of a hillside on the property is this big, round, concrete-lined pit with a fence around it. Seems like the lock on that fence been gettin' broke a lot, posted or not. We see that it ain't used unless it's supposed to. I guess you could call us substationmasters; at least, this one's needed somebody to oversee it for a long time. Makes gettin' visitors and goin' visitin' a breeze, too. We even got a number of local friends now. The area's too cold for too long, but the folks in general are real nice and friendly with none of the usual hangups. It's the university what does it. They don't know nothin' 'bout no Company or Labyrinth, and we intend to keep 'em in the dark.

Well, the docs at the Center finally give me the go-ahead, and it didn't take long at all to get me pregnant. I didn't want to put it off no more, and if this one don't make me swear off it we might have more. We really do love kids, and, just as important, we need something more than just each other to center our lives on. Sam's got his ailments like I got mine, but with the Center's help and some commitment on our part there's no reason we couldn't live to be a hundred or more if we wanted to. But in case one of us didn't, there's gonna be at least one more reason to keep on livin' and doin'. It sure done in the last of my hopes of keepin' my old good looks, though. I'm puttin' on weight like mad and I ain't in no mood to take it off. Sam ain't gonna love me no less fat or thin, so why kill myself? I'm already married-for keeps. If that fat bothers them jocks joggin' up and down the road come snow or sun, then tough shit.

Ain't nothin' I get more of a charge out of than walkin' arm in arm with Sam down College Avenue to a restaurant or over to the university for a show or up to a movie, with my diamond earrings and seven months' belly stickin' out from under my mink coat. I just wanna shout to people. "I got Sam in love with me and

millions of bucks and the acclaim of a people who routinely walk between the worlds and you don't! Eat your hearts out!"

We got a few disagreements, of course. I was kinda hopin' for fraternal twins and name 'em Nick and Nora, but I know the odds against that. If it's a boy, Sam wants to name him Dashiell. It ain't bad, but any kid who's gonna start life half black and all Jewish don't need nothin' more on his shoulders. Almost in retaliation I threatened if it was a girl to name her Mignon or Agatha, after some pretty good mystery writers of my sex. We'll find compromises someplace. After all, I get to fill out the birth certificate.

One thing we did agree on, and it was easy. We was in Philadelphia closin' out the last of our business there and we walked by this mall pet store window and in it was a small wire-haired terrier puppy we just couldn't resist.

We named him Asia.