

Harry was sober, which complicated things, and now uncertainly was niggling at his confidence.

“Please try and remain calm. Stress can seriously skew the results.” The tech’s voice was soothing, even wholesome.

“Okay, Harry Quinn,” he whispered, looking down the long shiny tubing of a photon-emitter. Its large red/violet mouth-like apparatus was apparently trying to swallow his arm. “You’ve been in worst situations. Let’s get this under control.” He tried to recenter his arm in the 3-dim target imager, but the shaking was not helping. “It’s these straps, and they’re not designed for a man of . . . of my size.” He laughed, over-flexing a toned bicep. Three years of hard living on the streets of Calcutta had turned his beat-up six-four, 225pound frame twenty years back to his military years.

“Okay.” The tech stepped out from behind a mass of equipment. “We’ll take a short break. I have only, like, ten minutes left for this trial. Once the light array is initiated, it takes several minutes for the cycle to complete.” She unbuckled the arm bracings. “That gives you about five minutes to prepare yourself. If you need the restroom, we should reschedule the test,” For Harry, her diminutive olive-skinned body did not seem to match her dominant authority.

“Whatever you say, young lady.” He smiled at her beauty, with the frameless round glasses intensifying her brown gold-flecked eyes.

“Good. I need to check up on the next participant.”

As Harry stood from the imagining machine’s chair, she had to step back into the cramped room. “If you can draw up some nice memories, it may help calm you down.”

Warmed by her empathy, Harry turned away, having to quell a sudden surge of emotion. Hold on, boy, you’re just feeling the lack of alcohol talkin’. As he leaned on a machine for balance, she politely left the room without comment. The odd flapping of door dilation told him it was safe to scan the room—that was much larger than it seemed. With serious-looking electronics filling most of the space, the tall ceiling squirmed. Covered with an absorbent organic skin-like material he’d seen in military mission-brief rooms, it’s constant shifting still creeped him out. Yesterday, they had explained that they were using photon entanglement beams—whatever that was. He’d been pretty hungover then and couldn’t recall the details.

The last three years have been tough but doable. Harry didn’t blame anybody for his current situation, nor did he blame himself. It was just the way life rolled. At fifty-two, he was convinced that the state of deprivation that held him was the universe’s answer to his prayers. After what he’d endured in life, the quiet of obscurity was almost welcome. He’d commanded troops in combat, worked a business that had fought unions in Chicago, and survived thirty-five years of marriage to a hell-cat, but all that was past. When OSHA shut down the business, he moved to Calcutta to build a plant that recycled SiC—Silicon Carbonate—from old monitors. After investing the last of

his resources and buying some political favors, he had the plant built, and not one month into operations, he was ruined when the market for SiC collapsed, landing him on the streets of Calcutta. The week had been a tough one. Harry's last meal was a vegan one at the Mission three days ago, and now the hard rains were making the beg scarce. With only two weak-ass men and a tribal chick, their spack often got kicked from the restaurant bins, but what they lacked in brawn, they made up in smarts. When things got scarce, they got inventive. Two days ago, in their dank hidey between run-down apartments, the tribal chic Lucia—who did odd at the local university—brought another research gig to the spack.

“It’s a two-dayer, but they set ya up in a place with two Gov-cards for the kitchens.” She held up a food card that had three meals marked on it.

“Any drink?” Carl asked excitedly before looking down. He already knew the answer: food cards were just that, food only. Expiring in twenty-four, they rarely traded for skate.

“What’s the deal this time? The young Kashan spoke up, “If they’re looking for more psych data, I’ve already bared my soul.” Shaping his fingers like binoculars, they all laughed nervously, having served as psychological lab rats for hire at one time or another. Kashan was a psych ward cast-off. He’d kicked a meth habit, a tough thing, but the effort depleted him and his former life. He joined the spack a couple months ago, and even with the starvation diet, he was putting on some solid meat.

“No, nothing like that. These people only take certain psych profiles. If you fit, it’s seventy-five and two cards.”

“That’s a lot,” Harry slurred, sprawled out on the ground.

“Yeah, and if we don’t have to bust no law, I’m in.” Carl, sweat-soaked in the humid air, leaned back against the mildew-stained wall. Rivulets of tepid water seeped down his back, pooling at Harry’s outstretched legs. Harry stirred. Carl was some kinda doctor back in his day. He says he went street from some legal issue with his ex, but Lucia doesn’t buy that. She likes to think he killed her over some infidelity.

“Lucia, did they send you to us?” Fairly hammered, a faint spark still remained. “Did they know our names?” He had to keep one eye closed.

“You know they got files on everybody—we’re no different.” Lucia smiled. “Why, you got a better offer?” Of the spack, Lucia was the tough one, ruling over the boys like some kinda she-wolf. Harry’d see her lay-in to a guy once, beat him mercilessly for just shoving Carl. He could trust them, so it was ok for Harry to lose himself in the drink.

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Willing his arm to be steady, Harry was now ready.

“And three, two, one . . . and, we’re locked. You can relax now.” The tech crawled out from behind the mechanical monster.

A tingling ran up Harry’s arm and tried to make his scalp crawl off. “What was that?” He asked, a little startled. His arm had just faded in a shimmering grid of small square sections before solidifying again,

“It’s processing a path to take.” Her tone was reassuring, normal.

“A path?” Harry tried to move his fingers, and although he could feel the arm, he could not control it.

The tech looked up from her datapad. “Yes. For the entangled atoms to reorder, a magnetic corridor needs to form in space-time.” She looked concerned. “Wasn’t this all explained to you?” You signed the disclosure sheet, didn’t you read it?”

He leaned forward. “Not really.”

She flustered. “Then I will . . .”

“No, no, everything’s just fine. Never mind me, just a little out of sorts—this is all a bit unusual.” He dabbed at the sweat on his brow with his sleeve, thankful it didn’t smell too bad.

“Yes,” As she pushed up her round glasses, color slowly returned to her face. “Photon cloning can be disorientating,”

“Photon cloning? I was under the opinion that this was a photon entanglement experiment.”

“It is—well, that’s the mechanism being tested. In our collector, your arm is currently being rebuilt.”

“How’s that . . . rebuilt? From what material?”

“Well, I don’t know . . . that’s not exactly tech stuff, but as I understand it, the entangled atoms are structuring themselves in accordance with their specific patterns of particle spin.”

Harry sat back. He knew what the words meant, but put together like that, it was gibberish. After a brilliant flash from behind the emitter, the tech made more notes. “How’s the arm?” She unbuckled the harness.

“Fine.” Harry could now wriggle his fingers. “So, this is kind of like a long-distance 3-d printer.”

“Yes, I suppose. Only that 3-d is a dimensional reference to time.”

“Thanks, but I figured that one out.” Rising from the seat, he watched her work the datapad.

“The test results are instantaneous. Your trials margin of error was less than a factor of neg-five.” She smiled pleasantly. “If you like, I can set up a meeting with Dr. Corbeil, and I’m sure he’d like to meet you.”

“Sure thing.” He was a little leery: she seemed way too eager to have a nobody meet with her high-and-mighty boss. “Lunch first?”

She laughed. “Sure, stop at the front desk, and I’ll have a cafeteria pass waiting there for you.

Harry crossed the crowded cafeteria, looking for a quiet place to eat. It was like trying to find solace in a kindergarten playroom. The place was abuzz with young people trying to out-relate each other.

“Hey, Harry!” A shout came from behind. Harry nodded and backtracked through a maze of gangly legs and backpacks. Must of walked right past them, he thought, joining his spack at a long table. The college kids seemed to shrink back, giving them all the room they needed.

“How’d your test go?” Carl was armed with half a flask.

Harry paused at the smell of the liquor. “Okay, I guess.” You don’t get me just yet, he warned it, handing the flask back untried.

“Didn’t they tell you?” Lucia asked.

“No. Not really. Why?” He shook himself before launching into the hot lunch.

They all exchanged looks.

“Okay, guys, what’s up?”

Lucia explained. “The chick at admin said they want you back here tomorrow. They gave us all dorm and food passes if you stay here and agree to continue the sessions.”

“Well, that’s something.” Harry’s appetite was improving. The smell of the chow-mien/ramen noodle concoction was causing his stomach to rumble.

“We can’t drink much here, though,” Carl warned, taking a pre-tot glance about the room.

Kashan laughed. “I wouldn’t worry about that, kids been sneaking alcohol in long before they thought up dorms.” His head tilted in his peculiar way. “What’s so special about you, Harry?”

“Don’t know, but obviously, it’s not just about me. Why drag you bums into the game?”

“After I tested,” Kashan looked at the others for confirmation. “They pulled me into a room and told me to wait. I didn’t think anything of it until the rest of our guys started showing up, then they told us the gig.



“Yeah,” Lucia interjected. “They were asking if you were a greedy person or a recluse. I told ‘em I didn’t think you had anything to be greedy about but when there’s enough . . .” She looked down. “Well, you’re no hoarder.”

“I told ‘em how you always share beg spots and ain’t the type to chase the mad-dogs off.” Carl looked down, his tone dropped. “And other things . . .” Harry always found enough skate to keep him going whenever Carl got it bad.

“We all talked about how you’ve kept us together.” Kashan looked at the others. “And without a big dumb-bull like you around,” He laughed, “the other spacks would have merc’d us for sure.”

“Thanks, guys, but you’ve all done the same my way too. So, what’s the big deal?” Harry unconsciously slid his dessert roll over to Lucia before standing to go.

Carl’s plea bordered on a whine. “What? You’re not staying?”

“No, Carl, and I’d advise you guys the same. If you don’t break contract in the street, you still have rights, but these guys write their own rules here. Besides, it smells like an ambush to me.” Harry walked off.

“Will he sign on?” Dr. Trombold asked, rubbing his eyes. As the project’s final phase hung in the balance, Corporate pressure was bearing down.

“I think so. I ordered room and board for his streetpak. They’re talking it out now.” Major Benning walked to the kitchenette to pour coffee. “The subject was also offered a meeting with Dr. Corbeil here, but apparently, that was of no interest to him. Didn’t I tell you to offer more money?”

“Money doesn’t mean what you think it means to these people.” Trombold straightened his slouch. “Besides, on the street, anybody who is even suspected of largess is quickly swallowed. It’s like hyenas bringing down a lion, so the balance of power is delicate. Besides, after reading his record, this guy will not be so easily lured in.”

Maj. Benning turned to Dr. Corbeil. “Then are we sure this guy’s the right choice, Doctor?”

“He possesses the right profile. What else can I say? In two weeks of trials, nobody else has come close.”

“Well,” Chin-fold Lee, the only suit in the room, moved his large bulk to get a refill. “I can say that the project has been a complete failure and that not one of your so-called ‘photon pilots’ has returned.”

Maj. Benning sighed. “We’ve gone over all this before, Chin. There are no guarantees in science, and just because an invention has promise does automatically mean it will be successful.”

“My associates think otherwise. We have invested billions in this project and expect results.”

“Results? The Maj. Benning fired back. “You have more than made up for your expenditures in heavy equipment teleportation alone. You can move an entire tank division across the globe in a moment’s time.”

“Yes, but at such a cost. Do you realize how expensive it is to transport materials that way?” Besides, there are still some kinks to work out when mixing in organics. Chin sat down next to Dr. Trombold. “Doctor, since you took over, you have led this team to new heights. What are your projections? I need to take something back other than abject failure.”

Well, that’s just great, Dr. Trombold thought, glancing over at Dr. Corbeil. Our normally bombastic Chin-fold—or should I say—Colonel Lee is obviously shaken, and if he’s rattled, we’re all in deep. I just don’t know what to do. Two months ago, after the third successful live animal transport, they tried porting a human. The subject was a severe brain trauma patient declared unrevivable, so after the next of kin had signed all the necessary documents—for a tidy fee—the experiment was launched with high expectations. The body never materialized. When a corpse was sent through the same procedure, the body materialized as it should. After a month of speculation and trials, the same experiment was run with the same results. Then Dr. Corbeil, the lead at that time, offered a theory.

“What if the will plays a role in the magnetic field tunneling?”

This argument was met with rancor from reductionist physicists and lauded by holistic interpreters. The comments made on the company’s social media were barely within respectful margins. Unable to agree on anything, word came down from corporate: they were to develop a testing battery on willpower. Of the 465 intercompany candidates, all of the top examinees were female. After ten more varying attempts at transport, not one materialized.

An outside consultant was brought in to examine the testing parameters’ failure. The main problem was that these potential “photon pilots” knew they were being tested. After explaining the fundamental differences between the force of will and just plain stubborn resolve, a new series of tests were devised. Armed with a whole new staff—like the test pilots, the old team never materialized—the consultants developed a new system, and the current testing paradigm was established. After five more attempts met with little success, Dr. Corbeil’s head was on the block, and then Dr. Trombold stepped up in his defense. He spent days arguing that the evidence was clear: Corbeil’s invention did work. After all, the transportation of live animals continued with great success, and from the simple to the complex, no biological system failed not to transport—only live humans didn’t.

Now looking for a non-systemic solution, philosophers and psychologists were called to debate the differences. At the corporate-funded symposium, the debates were highly energetic, to

say the least—nearly riotous would be more descriptive. After five hubbub hours, the central theme that rose to the top was something the human-is-animal advocates could not defend: subjective reasoning. Defining reason was tough because there is no standard to measure it up against. Reason can only describe it in terms of ontological paring, stripping away what it's not. Reasoning can be considered subjective, such as weighing something out by experience or wisdom, Or objective, like studying results on an action. Since reasonable action in a person is judged by their projected self-image or some image projected upon them, ultimately, reason does not define who we are but who we are becoming. At the time, this definition was not all that helpful. But like most things of that nature, only what is self-evident remains.

Three days after Harry had turned down their offer, the rains had finally let up long enough to pay a little visit to his friends foraging the tech fields. Before e-waste is dumped, most precious metals are stripped, but some profitable materials can still be extracted. He remembered the silicon carbide *SiC* company he worked at in Chicago—before the unions and OSHA had shut it down — and that LED monitors were full of the stuff.

Three years ago, he'd offered to buy a local family's old Robert ceramic forge and set up a recycling facility. After reviewing the dangers of handling the talcum-like substance, he developed a system to process them. The monitors had to be crushed then heated to 1500c to process the silicon carbide from the e-waste. After doing all the leg work to get the facility up and

running, he lost everything when the industry collapsed from a pandemic, so he sold the facility back to the landowners, who—out of an act of kindness—paid more than it was worth. Unable to buy his way out of Calcutta, the money from the sale barely sustained him for three months before he lost his house, car, and girlfriend. Well, she took the car.

Two years later, due to advances in high voltage wire coating, the market for *SiC* had quadrupled. After securing a capital improvement grant from the Government, the family updated the ceramic facility and began to produce the expensive *black SiC* in sustainable quantities. From all over the province, old monitors were now being shipped to the facility for recycling. The family worked hard, but with little manufacturing experience, the going was tough, so Harry helped when he could, and they paid him when they could. Looking over the newly installed minecart rails, he worked his way through the scrub brush. The rails seemed to be holding nicely, so he bent down to inspect the odd-looking rail base.

“Looks like they melted the circuit boards and mixed in some clay.” A distinctly British voice came from behind him. “Clever use of materials, eh what? I’d guess somebody’s been teaching ‘em proper.”

“They’re a pretty inventive lot—these Indian locals. They’ve been scratchin’ the ground ‘round these parts for millennia.” Harry did not bother to look back at the man. He’d wondered why it had taken this long to be contacted.

“I hear this place used to be yours.” When Brit’s shadow covered Harry, he finally looked up.

“I owned the buildings, not the ground. Everything you see here is the result of the community at work—they exploit no one.” Harry rose to his full height, towering over the plainly dressed corp-man. “A lesson long forgotten by the West.”

“The industrial revolution taught the whole world many things. Without the class system, who would have the time to be inventive; take the necessary risks? Not everyone is geared the same.”

“I often wondered at that, in the end, who exactly were the ones at risk?”

The man laughed, “Well, Mr. Quinn, you don’t disappoint.” He offered his hand. “My name is Carter. You be a hard man to track down, and Calcutta more sprawling than we were led to believe.”

“I’m sure . . .” Harry nodded, and without taking Carter’s hand, he continued down the railway to the tech fields.

“Let’s be reasonable,” Carter pulled out his cell phone. “They’re prepared to offer you ample compensation for just a few days of your time. I mean no offense, but they’re even willing to send you back to the lab in the States.”

Harry stopped walking, and he understood all that that meant in a single moment. These people were not hiring—they were conscripting. He turned to face Carter. “Would that be by air or photon travel?”

Carter’s laugh suggested he’d scored a mark. “Either way, as long as you agree to participate in the program.”

Back at the university, Dr. Corbeil rose from his desk. “It’s finally good to meet you, Mr. Quinn.” He did not offer his hand. “I’ve heard so much about you. Please, take a seat.”

“Let me ask you a couple of questions first, doc: why in the hell is an outfit like yours so interested in a down-in-out drunk from the foul streets of Calcutta?”

Dr. Corbeil’s smile collapsed. “Well, for one—it’s not my company— and secondly, we care little for drunks in Calcutta, foul or otherwise.” He returned to his seat. “What we do care about are ex-army rangers, with high aptitude, that are down-and-out drunks.”

“And just how many of these have you met in your career?” Harry sat down, holding onto his left wrist to hide the shakes.

“Well,” Corbeil’s smile returned. “I have to be honest—you’re the first.”

I think like this guy. Harry nodded thoughtfully. “I see . . .”



“What’s your second question, Mr. Quinn?”

“Why are your experiments failing?”

Dr. Corbeil sat back. “What makes you say that?”

“The way I see it, the project you’re working on is either under serious budget cuts or lost its creditability.”

Corbeil scribbled something down on a pad. “And, what leads you to that conclusion?”

“Well, for one, you’re here.” Harry looked out the window at the sprawl of Calcutta. The doctor followed his gaze.

“Okay.” The doctor laughed. “Next point?”

“From the technology I saw in the particle mapping experiment, you’re seriously funded and well connected. So why are you dragnetting the streets of Calcutta? Anonymity? I doubt that, so let’s play it straight, doc. Why am I here?”

The doctor made more notes. “Curiosity, mainly. . . .” He looked up. “But I think you can help us. Your . . . worldly outlook and, type of character, are, I think, ideal for this experiment.”

Listening as carefully as he could, this threw him. “Worldly outlook?” What’s that supposed to mean?”

Dr. Corbiel steepled his hands. “Look, Mr. Quinn, I’ve had . . . I’m the one who requested you. Your control through willpower is what I think is needed for this project to succeed. In addition, your molecular reimagining at the collector pad was the most accurate—no, let me rephrase that—the pattern was the least corrupted of any we have seen to date.”

“What happens when a pattern is overly corrupted?”

“The computer fills in the gap with DNA sequencing—but let’s not get ahead of ourselves. Suppose there is over one-thousandth or a factor of ten to the negative three. In that case, the sequencing machine will gate, stopping any transfer, and the target is rebuilt. Your sequencing was accurate beyond a factor of five.”

Harry stood. “That may be impressive to you, but it’s meaningless to me. In any experiment, there is no guarantee of success.” Carter now stood as well. “You know, doc, that when predicting events, there is only probability. In any type of event sequencing, a complete understanding of all possible variables, and more importantly the facts of those variables, is pretty much impossible to know.”

“Unless by experimentation.” Carter countered. “When the planned event becomes highly predictable, we don’t necessarily need to understand every truth of the mechanisms for the event to occur. We just know that under controlled circumstances.” He threw up an arm. “It works.”

Harry smiled. “Well, I’m no theorist, but ya got me there. So, what mechanisms have you changed that will lead to success?”

Carter smiled in amazement. “You don’t even know the history, yet you ask that?”

“I don’t have to know—it’s only important you do. The only facts I have is that you believe you have found the perfect subject for this transfer, this teleportation . . .”

“Entanglement transfer . . .”

“Okay, the entanglement thing. Basically, you found the perfect lab-rat, and you won’t risk losing it on a whim.”

“I’m afraid you’re more correct about that than you know.” Carter sighed and turned to look out the window. “Your life is not the only thing on the line.”

“I can read it all over you, doc.”

“What do you know?” Carter wheeled about. “You don’t understand me, all the ‘lab-rats’ have disappeared, and not one has yet to rematerialize.” His face became hard. “I won’t accept that they are gone—I can’t. I have to believe they are still alive in some kind of . . . dimensional flux.”

Harry was impressed with Corbeil’s intensity. “That don’t sound very scientific there, doc.”

“It wasn’t intended to be. We can transport inanimate objects, animals, bacteria, all other living things except humans. We even can transport corpses, but when a living being is transported, they do not materialize—they vanish. So, what’s the difference?”

“I get it. Humans have will. You’re saying they don’t want to rematerialize?”

“Or can’t.”

Harry considered that. The guy was obviously blaming himself for the disappearances. “So doc, if I agree to undergo this . . . entanglement transfer. What can you do for me?”

“Well,” Dr. Corbeil smiled, “What do you want?”

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The pain was intense. Harry felt as though he’d been liquefied and pushed through a small hose before solidifying into a lump of clay that was then forced through a tight metal screen. Needles of pain shot through him. Then, warming like thawed frostbite, the pain intensified. He felt as though he’d been thrown into a Robert’s forge, but since there was nothing to burn, he suppressed the animal instinct to flee. He’d felt severe pain before. Hell, the physical and mental anxiety of no possibility of a drink was, in some way, far worse. As living colors exploded around him, the sensation of being drawn out into the universe opened up as if all the pressures of gravity

and atmosphere were suddenly released. The feeling was unnerving, and the urge to fly off into the void was intense. Instinctively knowing it was his only connection with reality, he focused on the agony and willed himself to remain, thinking it had to end sometime. It did, and soon the pressures of existence returned.

“How do you feel today?” The same lab tech cheerfully announced with a bouquet of flowers in hand. The colors were alive to him, leaving a faint trail as they moved through space-time. He blinked and rubbed his eyes, but the colors were still overly vibrant.

“Like I’m made of lead.” He faintly smiled. “I think I lost track of time.”

“It’s Tuesday, March 23<sup>rd</sup>, and you’ve been in a coma for two weeks. Two days ago, you awoke, and we moved you up from ICU. Do you remember that?”

“Not really.”

“Doc says that’s to be expected. All of the large animals had trouble walking after the ET. I guess it takes the brain a couple of days to get things sorted. I was thinking about making you dinner if you’re up to it. The kitchen here is better stocked than my house.” Her smile seemed to falter. “If that’s okay?”

“Sure, but on one condition: what is your name?” Harry laughed, surprised that his stomach muscles hurt.

“Marina-Beth Valderas.” She blushed slightly before turning back to the kitchen. “My father was Spanish, and my mother was a Brit.”

“Your parents have passed away?” Harry swung his legs over the edge.

“Yes, died during the uprising in twenty-two—along with many others. If you feel good enough to . . .” She stopped her chatter, watching him walk towards the bathroom. “My, do you recover quickly.”

Her tone caused him to stop at the doorway. Her eyes were brightly luminous. “I’ll just be a minute.” As he shut the door, he caught his reflection in the mirror. He looked way younger than he remembered. It’s the clean shave, he thought, no grey showing. He was surprised that his eyes were muted when all the other colors in the room were radiating. They were like dirty smudges.

Marina-Beth was cleaning up after a great dinner of fresh greens in vinegar and some kind of firm-fleshed, curried fish when Dr. Corbeil announced his presence. “Oh darn. I was hoping to watch the sunset on your magnificent porch.” She pouted. “I guess tomorrow’s another day. Hi doctor,” she beamed, “I’m seeing to our lab-rat like you asked.” She winked, “I suppose you boys have business to discuss.”

“We do.” He patted her head as she passed. “Sundra is down in the lot; she wants to know if you will go shopping with her for the window valences you spoke of.”

“Sure,” She grabbed her things. “See you tomorrow Harry!” And like the wind upon the clouds, the room lost part of its sunshine.

“What was that all about?” Harry shook his head, humorously bemused.

“Oh, my wife has some partum need to replace things in the house every nine months.”

“No.” Harry smiled, “With Marina-Beth.”

“No one calls her that. She goes by M-Beth.” An odd look crossed his face. “Only her mother called her Marina-Beth.”

“You knew her parents?” Again, he caught the past tense.

“Sure, died when she was three—we adopted her.”

“Yet, she calls you doctor.”

“Yeah,” He looked away. “So does my wife. It used to be annoying, but I got used to it.” His mood darkened, and with it, his eyes dimmed, losing part of their radiance.

“It’s not all that bad—least you got people.”

“Yes, and that’s why I’m here. I have some bad news for you.” Corbeil walked into the kitchen to start a K-cup. “Would you like anything?”

“Earl Grey would be nice.” Harry was having difficulty wrapping his head around civilized living again.

“It’s about your people— your ‘spack,’ I think you called it.”

“It’s a bum’s term for street-pack. Why, what about them?”

“There’s no easy way to say this.” Corbeil rose to his full height. “They all were subjected to ET and have not . . .” He walked to the window. “I had nothing to do with the transport, and I was not aware any more were scheduled. After you survived an unsuccessful transfer, everybody agreed to debrief you before another attempt was made.”

“Apparently, not everybody.” Harry’s tone was impassive. “When? How long ago?”

“Found out about an hour ago.” Corbeil faced him. “I’m truly sorry.” The light in Corbeil’s eyes somehow intensified with his empathy.

“I thought you were in charge.”

“No, you didn’t. You only wanted to believe I was in charge. Due to so many failures . . . no, lack of success, I was replaced as head of operations three months ago.” His eye-light diminished. “Dr. Trombold now heads-up operations.”

“But he’s not in charge either.”



“You have no trouble seeing things clearly, do you? I can only surmise the powers-that-be were eager for confirmation.”

“Why my spack?” He knew before he asked it. These kinds of men think without subtlety.

“After your transfer, that girl Lucia—who worked part-time at university—was nosing about looking for you. She . . . she must have found something because the rest of your spack was secretly locked-down in a dorm. After she discovered your transportation attempt, they were to be turned over to Government.”

“But that’s not what happened, was it?”

“No.”

Harry got up and began to pace. His route carried him closer and closer to a bulky dark-stained bureau. He stopped, tapped a panel once with his fist, and out-sprang a secret door revealing several bottles of liquor.

“How did . . .”

“I can smell it.” Harry threw the tea on the floor, refilling the mug with Bombay Sapphire.

“Look, Harry, you shouldn’t . . . “

“What do you know of it?” Harry wheeled, the colors began to bleed from the room. “Go back to your Masters, doctor. You’ll get no absolution from me.”

Two days later, Harry noticed M-Beth entering his old plant. “Did they send you here to fetch me?”

“Who? Nobody sent me.”

He could tell from her eye-light she was wounded. “The Brits or Chinese or whoever it is that holds your daddy’s strings.” At least she’s not crying, he thought. Don’t think I could stand that BS.

“I’m here for myself. I wanted to see the real you.”

Harry stood, turning his face to one side. “Look.”

Silence.

“I don’t know why you’re doing this; you’ve nothing to run from. My father asked you to help find those people, and you agreed. Why are you running?”

Harry did not respond to this line of reasoning.

“Or is it something more chronic? Daddy says the liquor cannot physically hold you anymore because the body that now encompasses you, holds no memory. In fact, I’m to remind you that the liver you have is not the same one.”

Harry was getting pissed. “Just what, exactly, are you driving at?”

“You know the girl Lucia? She was in love with you. Did you know that? Are you aware that she asked to be ET’d so she could find you? I hunted down that Dr. Trombold and threatened to expose his illegal actions to his benefactors, and you know what he said?”

Harry tried to look deeper at some kiln specs he was reading, but it was no use—she was not going away.

Moments passed.

“He said that I’m in love with you.”

“You what?” He looked up for the first time.

“His reasoning was simple.” She walked around some dilapidated machines and set an old toolbox down so she could sit. “What he really asked me was: why do I care?”

“Why *do* you care?”

“Because you do, and you don’t trust yourself. You think you’ll screw it up like everything else you’ve touched.”

“Now wait one damn minute . . .”

“Remember when you almost cried in the lab?” She shot right by him. “I think it was the real you trying to get out. I think all this drinking and running about goin’ nowhere is you trying to get out. But you can’t, can you?”

“I can do anything I set my mind to.”

“You see?” Her smile irritating, “*That’s* just what my father says about you, that people like you are a rare and precious thing.”

Harry couldn’t respond, as feelings of inadequacy and failure began to swamp him, his defenses went up. “Your father’s wrong young lady. The streets are filled with rare and precious things, and nobody cares to notice.”

“You don’t wear sarcasm very well, Harry Quinn.” She frowned, “Nor should you run from people that love you.”

“Enough with the love thing.” He raised his voice, “I can see love. Did you know that? I see it everywhere except in the mirror.”

She considered that. “Well I can see it in you, and so does my father. I see that when he looks at you. You can’t see it, not because you don’t know how to love, but because you forgot how to love yourself.”

“This is all nonsense, and I have work to do.”

“Yes, and you’re coming with me right now to do it.”

Harry looked at her, and he could see the color in her eyes radiating from halfway across the old shop. It was beautiful. He followed her out without another word.



This time, when the pressures released, Harry set aside all concern and allowed himself to be drawn into the universal fabric. The sun’s rays were everywhere, blasting matter off objects in a barrage of color. What I’m seeing must be the photo-electric response, he thought, flying above the buildings. Trying to steer the slippage he was experiencing was useless. When he relaxed and just let it flow, he could accelerate at breakneck speeds with just a thought, an expression of will. Since there was no friction, no resistance of any kind, he felt more deflected than pushed by any accelerant. After slowing over a rain forest, he saw that living things were absorbing the light. With them, there was no reflection. Accelerating upward, he hit a ribbon of white light that touched

his consciousness. Hovering next to the fluttering ribbon, he reached his hand into it and felt a wave of utter desolation, an emotion so strong it sickened him.

Following the ribbon up, he soared into near-space and what he saw astounded him. He expected dark space punctuated by dots of light. Instead, light seemed to be coming from everywhere. No matter where he looked, light came straight at him. Moving into outer space, he could adjust the light's intensity by mentally squinting. It didn't make much sense, but he could do it, and the more he squinted, the more distinct the ribbon became. Following the ribbon's path, the universe was revealed to him in a glimpse. It wasn't spherical but an infinite elliptical plane filled with light-defined objects. It was bounded by two other planes. One held a vast array of warm colors, like millions of Christmas lights moving through gelatin, where the other was a writhing sea of deep violet clouds set in darkness.

As his velocity increased, he saw waves of granules everywhere. They flowed backward when he moved faster, only to race by when he slowed, then becoming imperceptible when speed was matched. He didn't know how much distance he'd covered because it wasn't about distance, it was about placement. Where he was in relation to the events around him. Since any velocity was achievable, distance didn't matter because time was irrelevant. As he thought about these things, the planet Saturn began to bloom in front of him, and as the planet became more immense, he backed his speed more out of instinct than danger. As he traced the ribbon into swirling clouds of

color, static energy flowed through a myriad of minute crystal beads. Shifting threads of color formed a shimmering web that seemed to react to his passing. When he looked at his arm's image, he realized that his changing perspective had created the illusion.

Once free of the clouds, he saw a semi-liquid landscape where ice peaks formed mountain-like structures. Enormous ice flows drifted like islands in the sea of liquid mercury. It was beautiful. As he drew near, forests of tall crystalline stalks populated the icescape in shifting waves of color that ebbed and flowed like trees in the wind. On the outcrop of an enormous frozen wave-like structure, the ribbon terminated on a small dark spot. Cautiously, he slowed his approach to examine the terminus of the ribbon. He could see Lucia, mesmerized by the majestic beauty of the crystal forest. He formed an image of himself next to her and materialized.

“I thought I lost you.” She turned to him, eyes filled with sadness.

“Are you not happy to see me?”

“Of course I am, but I'm sad because now we both are lost. I felt you emerge, and it's been so long I'd forgotten what you looked like. Whenever I feel sad, I come here. How can anyone feel sad in this place.”

Harry looked out at the boundless vista where time didn't matter. It reminded him of how music can transcend people into deep emotion. He felt immersed in the hypnotic icescape. There's

nothing here, he thought. Knowledge without purpose is barren, useless. The understanding flowed through him. It's like beauty without admiration—it holds no worth until given purpose. He felt himself as though rousing from a dream. Snap out of this useless gazing, he ordered himself.

“Lucia,” He gently probed. “Life was not given to be thrown away. There is nothing here.”

“Who are you to mock this glory?” Her despair turned to rage, and he was overwhelmed by the force of it.

“There is nothing to glorify here. It's all barren, shifting endlessness. We have to get you back.”

“Get me back where?” She spat out. “All is gone. All is forsaken.”

“No, you're wrong. What compelled you to enter this place?”

“I was . . . I needed to find you. Why did you leave, you bastard.” Her accusatory tone was so pleasantly familiar he laughed. Lucia was returning to her old self. “Let's get you back.”

The ribbon had vanished, but Harry knew how to get back. After forming the collector site's image in his mind, within moments, they were hovering over the force-distortion vortex centered on the collector.



“You need to enter there.” He pointed to the center of the whirlpool that was flashing with sparks of matter-energy fluctuations.

“Are you crazy?” Lucia sounded afraid.

“See the singularity at the center of the vortex? That’s the way back.”

“The what?”

“The . . . see that black spot where no light is bouncing off?”

“Oh, you mean that stain in the center?”

“Yes. I want you to transfer your image into the stain as you did on Saturn.”

“But that will destroy me. The stains eat light. Don’t you know that?”

“No, I don’t, but . . .”

“I watched as one of the others dove into one. She was torn apart, her screams were . . . horrifying.”

“This is not like that. Watch.” He looked for something to throw into the vortex. The entangled clothes, he thought, both of us are wearing clothes. He looked down at his shoes. “No, I might need those later.” He held out his hand. “Your shoe, please. Will it to me.” Consistent with his explanation, she used her will, and the shoe deconstructed, reforming into his hand. He tossed it

into the vortex. When the shoe passed the event horizon, beams of pure white light flashed from the vortex. “After all the entangled photons get released, the shoe should reform in the collector.”

By the look on her face, she wasn’t buying it. “You first.” She smiled that same sultry smile when she wanted a man to do things her way.

“I can’t . . . I have to find the others—get them back.”

“Don’t bother. They’re lost inside themselves like I was.”

“Yet, you are here.”

“Yes, but I believed—believe in you. They don’t.”

“I have to try.”

“You realize that by doing this, you may degrade.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I ran into a ribbon that was . . . tattered, is the best way I can put it. It was degrading.”

“Did you touch it? Was there any emotion?”

“No, I wouldn’t touch it, it didn’t feel right to do so, but I’m tellin’ you it was degrading.”

“Okay. Thanks for that, but I’m going anyway.”

“You a brave man Gunga Din.”

“Not really, but that reminds me. Tell the doctor that I love his daughter, and when I return—I’ll be fed up with running.

M-Beth and Dr. Corbeil watched as the transport beam systematically sectioned Harry’s body in the emitter room. Turning to the monitor in the transmission chamber, she squeezed Dr. Corbeil’s hand as she watched the last part of Harry vanish. “Daddy, are you sure this will work?” She turned misted eyes up to him.

“I think it will.” His tone was soft. “If anyone has the strength to return, it’s that. . .” The chamber suddenly burst with a brilliant flash, signaling reception. Only a women’s shoe had materialized.

“Is this some kind of joke, Doctor?” The CEO of Engen Global Corp was puzzled. All of the company directors were watching it on the net.

Dr. Corbeil was devastated. “I’m very sorry,” He turned to M-Beth. “I . . . I don’t understand.”

After another burst of brilliant light, M-Beth gripped Dr. Corbeil’s arm as she excitedly pointed at the monitor. Lucia was in the collector, a triumphant look on her face. Tears began to stream down M-Beth’s face as she looked up. “I understand.”