

What Matters



James R. Hardin

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by James R. Hardin

Shahn Ka's hand paused above the "Enter" key, as if some other hand restrained his from that final drop. "We are the Seekers of Truth," he said softly. "We shouldn't be fabricating and disseminating a lie."

Clo Niher's chair squeaked as she leaned forward, looking as if she were about to climb onto Shahn's desk. Her intense expression somehow intensified further. "We've discussed this before. We agreed that it would minimize the violence."

"Yes, and that's another issue. The Seekers' purpose is to help people find meaning and peace. We shouldn't have plans that require us to minimize violence."

"We're still trying to find meaning and peace. But finding peace isn't always a peaceful pursuit. If Manager Brutan would just listen to reason and lift his ban on religion, none of this would be necessary. God knows you've tried negotiating with him enough times."

Shahn nodded slowly. "That is true. But I'm not certain that this new approach is the best."

The chair complained again as Clo sat up straight and huffed once. "This is a unique opportunity to promote our cause by discrediting Hul Brutan to the masses, and we have to act while it lasts. People are wondering why he and his wife suddenly went charging off to Earth with no explanation." She smiled, a little. "A field barren of information is the best place to plant a rumor. And since he can't possibly be back here in Industry for several weeks, his considerable personal influence is missing. For once, you can control the debate more effectively than he can."

Shahn's hand drifted back to his lap. In all his years with the Seekers, both here on Mars and previously on Earth, they'd focused on scholarly debate and education. Activism had never been part of their agenda. Everything had become much more difficult since this young dynamo Clo had left the failed settlement of Langtown and joined his staff. "I feel like I'm betraying Hul," he said. "When I came to Industry fifteen years ago to organize the Seekers living here, I assured him that we've always been a philosophical

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organization, not a religious one. That's the only reason we've been allowed to operate here at all."

"We don't promote any religion, but we don't suppress any either! It's hard to seek the truth when we're barred from exploring a large region of wisdom where it might be."

"Still, I've discussed this topic with Hul many times. He genuinely believes that religion causes more problems than it solves and that it's his duty to suppress it. He wants to do what he thinks is right. If we could just make him see our side of the argument—"

"You've talked to Hul many times over many years," Clo said, "and he's never budged a single millimeter. He's not really listening; he's just pretending to. He knows you're almost as popular with the people as he is, so he doesn't dare alienate you too much. That's one of your biggest weaknesses, Shahn. You insist on trying to see some good in everyone."

"I prefer to think of it as one of my strengths. It's why I've been able to pick out the good counsel you bring from the bubbling anger down inside you."

That soothing comment didn't have the intended effect. Clo's bubbling anger boiled up to the surface. "Sure, I'm angry! Aren't you? This isn't just about us Seekers; it's about a basic freedom for every citizen of Industry! I can't believe Hul had the audacity to write a prohibition of all religious speech into Industry's charter in the first place. It's high time we stood up against him. Seeking the truth requires taking some action, not just sitting around meditating about it!"

She was right. He used to be more outspoken about truth and freedom, back when he was her age. Had he achieved greater inner peace, or just greater complacency? Without another word, Shahn raised his hand and plunged it down on the key that transmitted the message to the twenty people Clo had selected. They, in turn, would spread the ripples further.

"You've got to turn this thing around," Hul Brutan said.

The ship's captain leaned back in his chair and stared at him, one eyebrow raised. "Just like that, eh?"

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"I'll pay the other passengers whatever damages they think they deserve. And I'll pay *you* whatever you think *you* deserve. I'll do anything. You've seen the news feeds from Mars. I have to get back to Industry right now."

"Believe me, I'd like to take what I deserve, but it wouldn't help. Physics is not impressed with your money. Now, follow me on this." The captain paused and gazed into space, apparently trying to think of small enough words to explain the situation to this simpleton. "We're only about halfway back to Earth. We've been accelerating the whole time. We'll flip over and start decelerating pretty soon regardless of what you want, because that's necessary so we can arrive at Earth without splatting into it." He smacked his hands together in a tiny pantomime of their potential disaster. "We can't just 'turn this thing around' like some kind of bus on a highway. Two weeks from now, you'll be on Earth whether you like it or not. Then you can worry about catching the next ship back to Mars."

Hul had expected this answer, though not quite so much condescension, but it was still maddening. He turned and tried to storm out of the small bridge, but he bounced upward off his first step and banged his head on the doorframe, ruining the dramatic effect. These interplanetary flights slowly changed their acceleration from Mars gravity to Earth gravity throughout the trip, to gradually acclimatize the passengers. Hul was pretty comfortable in Earth gravity, thanks to his daily workouts in Industry's centrifuge, but he found the gravities between Earth's and Mars's awkward.

His wife, Lau, was waiting for him in their stateroom. Despite the accumulated years, Hul believed she was still as lovely as when he'd married her. More than that, she'd always been his backer, his partner, and his private fountain of good advice—advice that perhaps he should have taken this time. "I know," he said. "You told me so."

Lau muted the sound on the news she'd been watching and gave him a bright, momentary smile. "I didn't say that. Though maybe you could have been a little more forthright about your reason for going to Earth. Not even anyone on the Industry Council knows enough to contradict the rumors the Seekers are spreading."

"But how could I have ever guessed they would go this far? Sure, everybody knows the Seekers have been going on about religious freedom more emphatically lately. And that their new staffer Clo Niher has been pushing for civil disobedience or riots or

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something." His hands clenched involuntarily into fists. "But now they're claiming I got wind of a possible uprising and actually ran away! Went charging off to Earth because I don't care about Industry and just wanted to protect my own skin! When have I ever run from a fight?"

Lau just sat silently on the edge of the bed, watching him.

"Doesn't this prove I was right? That it's time to ban the Seekers too?"

"You can't just ban everything you don't like."

"Not everything—or your little digs like that would be long gone." But he smiled when he said it. Hul knew how much he needed Lau's reality checks. "But my ban on religion is one of the reasons Industry has been the most profitable and successful settlement on Mars. We don't have religious arguments, or religious schisms, or religious terrorists. We don't have people wasting their time and energy trying to figure out the will of some invisible phantom." He shook his head as if to clear it, but it didn't help. "And the Seekers are just as bad. They're just a club for religious-minded people who don't happen to believe anything. Their motto should have tipped me off years ago. 'The truth cannot be known, yet we must seek it.' What a pointless contradiction! It practically screams wasted time."

"I think you're being too humble—for once. Maybe the reason Industry has done so well is simply that you're good at running it. In any case, other people don't see religion and philosophy the way you do. They think these things are important. So, naturally, they'll get angry if you take them away."

"They should've thought of that before they came to Industry. The ban on religion has been in the charter, plain as day, from the beginning."

"So why weren't you that open about wanting to ban the Seekers?"

Hul scowled. "When I sent the request to modify Industry's charter to the board, I thought approval would be a formality. They've always given me pretty much free rein, and no one has complained about the religion ban—well, I think that new member San Smith doesn't care for it, but Chairperson Miro and the others seem to ignore her. Then all of a sudden I get summoned—*summoned!*—to Earth to explain my position to the Board of Industry in person. I don't want to tell the population of Industry that I'm being called home like a disobedient child. And I don't want to tell the Seekers I was trying to outlaw

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them if the board doesn't let me. It would create a lot of ill will, and make me look weak besides. Any explanation I could give would be a no-win for me."

Lau looked back at the screen on the wall she'd been watching. Protesters with signs were marching down the main aisle through the center of Industry. The head of the Industry Council stood to one side, watching the protestors go by. "It looks like giving no explanation was a no-win as well," she said.

When nuclear spaceships had become practical a quarter century ago, nations had begun scrambling to establish settlements on Mars. The World Court, worried about the wealthy nations creating a new colonial era, ruled that Martian settlements were not to be considered part of the originating nation, and the US Supreme Court accepted that decision. This had the side effect that laws in a settlement didn't have to match those of the founding nation, which opened up many possibilities for social experiments on Mars.

The investors who formed the Board of Industry weren't worried about social experiments when they approached the young CEO and rising star Hul Brutan to run their new settlement. They just wanted to be in this game early, in case anyone figured out how to make money with these settlements later. Industry was actually named for the human attribute, but the board liked the more business-oriented interpretation too.

Hul didn't consider himself a social experimenter either, but he did insist on a great deal of control before he'd leave a wealthy lifestyle to go live in a small climate-controlled building on an uninhabitable rock millions of miles from Earth. He'd always believed that religion created conflict and wasted human effort, so he demanded including a ban on churches and all religious discourse in the settlement's charter.

Other settlements appeared on Mars as well, some growing and some failing, but Industry developed into the most successful of them all. It had even begun returning a small profit to the board several years ago, partly from dues (settlement owners weren't allowed to impose "taxes"), and mostly from the export of the unique Marscarlet jewelry an enterprising gemologist had developed from the local minerals. Citizens appreciated their comfortable, expanding settlement and generally held the manager who'd guided it throughout its history in high regard.

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Hul had sent a statement to Industry denying the Seekers' version of events and assuring the citizens he'd be back as soon as he could. The ship was far enough on its way that the radio time lag was several minutes, making real-time conversation impossible. Hul longed to be in Industry. Personal influence and interactive communication were invaluable in a situation like this. Instead, he had to just sit beside Lau and glare at the news coverage from his home, feeling like a caged lion watching someone beat his cub.

So much had changed since the early days, when Industry was just one hundred people in one sealed building, and the harsh Martian environment was the only enemy he had to fight. How had things come to this point? His racing mind slammed into an interesting idea and his head popped up. "I blame the matter," he announced.

Lau turned to look at him. "The matter transporter?" Physicists called the device the quantum energy/matter matrix reconstructor, since, as they pointed out, nothing was actually "transported." Rather, the quantum linking of the energy/matter matrix caused an identical object to be created in the new location as the original was destroyed. But everybody else called it the matter transporter or, more often, just the matter. "Why?"

"It's made Mars too easy. They can afford to be picky now." Lau cocked her head like a thoughtful poodle. Hul continued, "Sending anything to Mars by spaceship is very expensive. Before the matter, settlements had to get by with hardly any supplies. Life on Mars was harder, so investors like the board had to take whoever was willing to go and run their settlements, even if they imposed some unpopular conditions—like my prohibition of religion. Now, settlements can get whatever they need mattered from Earth right away, and they can send exports back pretty cheaply too. It's easy to start a new settlement now."

Indeed, almost all deliveries between Mars and Earth were by matter, except for animals and people, of course. Even Hul's and Lau's luggage had been mattered ahead of them.

"So now more people are willing to move to Mars. There have been more settlements started in the last five years than in all the time before that. Now people like the board can start throwing their weight around instead of having to let people like me do whatever we please. I could be replaced now."

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Lau straightened her head and narrowed her eyes. "You might have something there. But do you think the board wants to replace you?"

Hul frowned. "I doubt it. Now that we have our own matter chamber to send our products to Earth, Industry is making more money than ever. And I think I'm still pretty popular with the citizens, despite all that," he said, waving at the scenes of demonstrations on the screen. "Maybe the board just wants to show me who's boss. Or maybe San Smith is trying to get rid of me—she's never liked me anyway."

"You know, maybe it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world if they did want to push you out. You've been at this a long time, and you've done very well. We deserve a nice retirement."

She might as well have slapped him. He stared at her as if she'd suddenly grown purple tentacles. Lau usually understood him so well. Didn't she realize how much of his soul he'd poured into Industry? How could she think he'd want to retire?

Or maybe *she* wanted to, and was hoping to ease him into the idea. That was a disturbing thought.

Before he'd decided how to answer her, the screen signaled the arrival of a new download. Hul turned back to it and watched the latest news from Mars. It was even more disturbing.

As soon as Clo stepped through the door, Shahn slammed his hands on the desk and stood. The river of anger foaming through him was an unfamiliar sensation, straining against the banks of his well-trained self-control. "It wasn't enough to lie about Hul Brutan," he snarled. "Now you've lied about me too!"

She recoiled like a scolded puppy. "I have? What did I say?"

"What do you mean, what did you say? You told the press I wanted to be the next manager of Industry! Some of the Seekers are interpreting that as a call to revolution! So are some of the police! People have actually fought! Some have been beaten and dragged off to jail!"

Clo frowned. "Yes, that was an undesired side effect," she said in a voice calmer than her usual strident tone. "On the other hand, it'll play well on the news feeds. This

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might even help sway the Board of Industry itself. After all, my statement wasn't inflammatory or anything."

"Not inflammatory? How can wanting to take over an unelected position not be inflammatory?" He blew out what should have been a calming breath, but all it did was ruffle Clo's hair. "Besides, I don't want to be manager."

"Really?" She looked genuinely surprised. "You should. You could fix this whole religion ban in a moment. People would follow you, Seekers and non-Seekers alike. They respect you. They trust you."

"Maybe," Shahn growled, "the reason they trust me is because I've always been honest with them!"

"Well, then, all those years of honesty are paying off now. You have the reserve of goodwill built up for when you need it."

He shook his head and stared at the desk. She didn't get it at all. She seemed to have forgotten the first half of the Seeker motto, "The truth cannot be known." Clo was entirely too certain she knew it intimately.

But then Shahn recalled his own past, when he'd left a large, comfortable Seeker group on Earth and come to Mars, certain that he could sway Hul and help bring enlightenment to everyone in Industry. Maybe misplaced certainty was a natural aspect of youth.

Clo continued, "Look, honesty and peace are important principles, but you have to be willing to face a few half-truths and conflicts for the sake of something even more important. My plans are working. We're beginning to diminish Hul's influence and increase ours. We can finally win the battle you've been avoiding for years! Establishing religious freedom in Industry can be your legacy! How could you live with yourself, knowing that there'd been a chance to save Industry and you'd been too afraid to take it?"

Shahn's next calming breath worked better. Clo didn't mean any harm. She was focused on a worthy goal. Her focus was simply too narrow.

But if they could gain freedom only by sacrificing honesty, were the Seekers any closer to truth?

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Hul paced in the tiny stateroom, bobbing in the strange gravity, trying unsuccessfully to burn off his angry energy. Lau sat quietly and watched him. "How could Shahn Ka do this?" he said again. "Even though he heads a wacko organization, I thought he personally had some honor. I thought he could be trusted." He ricocheted off the far wall of the room with a thud and began tromping back, teeth gritted.

"This might actually help you make your case against the Seekers with the board. If you—"

"I can't meet with the board now! How can I claim that my policies are working? They're rioting in my corridors! Smith will want my head, and the others might go along!"

Lau didn't answer.

"I need to be there, hands on, and prove I can get things under control! Sending messages and issuing statements isn't cutting it! Earth is still twelve days away. And at the current planetary alignment, it'll be at least six weeks more before I can be in Industry. I don't know if I can stall the board for that long. Or the Industry Council. With me missing and all this pressure, those yokels might actually vote and *do* something! Who knows what it would be?"

Thud off the wall and reverse course. Then he stopped in front of Lau and stared above her head at nothing. "Unless—I can go back early."

"What?"

"*I can go back.*" His resolve solidified. He brought his gaze down to her face. She wasn't going to like this. "I can be mattered."

She didn't. He saw the fear in her eyes first, quickly replaced by the fire. "You can't. First, it's illegal."

"I'm not sure that it really is. It might just be strongly discouraged. Anyway, I can probably get Miro to pull some strings for me. For something this important."

"But Hul, there are *reasons* it's discouraged!"

"I know, every now and then a mattered cargo simply fails to show up at the other end. But that's rare. If I do it only once, the odds are heavily in my favor."

"Don't play stupid." Lau had apparently, and not surprisingly, seen through his attempt to deflect the conversation to a safer path. "Have you forgotten about Edgar Barr?"

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The first two sets of experimental mice to be mattered had seemed unharmed, but were strangely listless and uninterested in food after their experiences. Several of them died later. Human volunteers weren't forthcoming after that, but finally a washed-out test pilot with a history of depression and self-esteem issues presented himself. Edgar Barr was not the ideal candidate, but he was the only candidate, so he was mattered between two chambers on Earth. Afterwards, a team of doctors declared him to be in perfect physical health. He wouldn't talk to the psychiatrists—he wouldn't talk much to anyone; he just stared into space a lot with an empty expression. But he answered the doctors' objective questions accurately and succinctly, even if unenthusiastically. They all agreed there was no evidence of brain damage. They didn't get much time to investigate him further. That night, he hung himself in his room at the research center. His handwritten suicide note said only, "Why wait?"

After the first matter chamber was installed on Mars, they tried sending one sheep. It refused to eat, and gradually wasted away and died. No animal or human had been mattered since.

"Of course I remember Edgar Barr," Hul said. "But everybody knows he had psychological problems to begin with. Many people say the fact that he volunteered for such a test in the first place shows that he wasn't thinking quite right."

Lau stared at him. "Hul. *You're* volunteering. You're making my case for me."

"But unlike Barr, I have a reason to take the risk. I'm not doing it just because I'm crazy. Besides, I like to think I'm made of tougher stuff than Edgar Barr and a bunch of mice and sheep."

The heat in Lau's face faded back to the fear, which actually bothered Hul more. But this was too important to let his feelings for her stop him.

"You know," she said quietly, "some people say that the reason the animals and Barr were like that ... is that the soul doesn't make it through a mattering."

"C'mon, Lau. I thought you didn't believe in souls and things like that."

"I don't—I guess. But whether you call it a soul or not, there might be some aspect of a brain's organization or electrical charges or something that doesn't get replicated

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correctly." She stood up and leaned against his shoulder. "I don't want to lose an aspect of you. I don't want to lose you."

Hul's resolve stumbled, but he pulled it back upright. "You're not going to lose me. But I have to take this risk. Don't you see? Industry is my life. Demonstrating the benefit of removing religion and groups like these Seekers is my legacy. How could I live with myself, knowing that there'd been a chance to save Industry and I'd been too afraid to take it? What kind of life would that be?"

Lau pulled away from him and dropped onto the edge of the bed, staring at the floor. "It would be a life with me," she said. "I'd hoped that was more important to you than who controls a piece of real estate on some other planet."

He didn't say anything. It was pretty clear he'd already answered that implied question.

"This is a disaster," Clo said again, pacing around Shahn's small office. She'd come straight over as soon as the news about Hul's plans was broadcast. "He'll be here in just a few days. Worse, it's a major public relations coup. People already think he's some kind of hero for being willing to take the risk. If he arrives unharmed, he'll be a superstar."

"That's a big 'if,'" Shahn said. "I'm worried about him."

Clo stopped her wandering. "You have a good point. His brain might be scrambled by the matter. But we can't bank on that."

"That's not what I meant. I just really am worried about him. Can we not still have a simple human concern outside of a political plan?"

She didn't appear to be listening. "We have to stop him, to get him out of the picture somehow. He could ruin all our plans!"

So young and inexperienced she was! Apparently she'd never known the frustration of watching cherished plans fail. She seemed to think Hul was taking this desperate measure just to spite her personally.

Suddenly she focused her gaze on Shahn. "But maybe ... Now we know where he's going to be at a particular time. And since I work at the matter chamber distribution center, I have access to some of the restricted areas. Maybe ... We might be able to set up an assassination."

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That one word was too big to fit in the box where Shahn had been stashing his previous reservations. He suddenly seemed to rise up and see the entire situation, similar to the wider vision imparted by a mystical experience. He didn't like the scene.

Shahn stood up. "No," he said firmly.

"It wouldn't have been my first choice either. But just think about it a moment. We can—"

"No. We can't. Lies, then violence, then more lies, and now you're talking about murder."

"It's just one person, sacrificed for a basic human right. Far more people have died for far less. If you think about any war—"

"We are the Seekers of Truth, not some paramilitary force. No, stop," he said, as she took a breath and started to open her mouth. "This ends now. People with differences should discuss them in mutual respect, not hatch schemes against each other. I'm going to go to the matter chamber when Hul arrives and speak with him. I need to expose these lies so he can trust me again, and then talk to him about religious freedom."

"He won't listen!" she whined.

"Maybe not. But he'll have a fair opportunity. Also, there will be plenty of news cameras there. They'll listen. I'll call for a referendum vote. People will like that; they want to be empowered. Industry isn't a democracy, but the will of the people still carries power."

Clo stared at him, her eyes glistening with restrained tears. "Your mind is made up," she said.

"Yes."

"Let me come with you."

Shahn frowned. Why did she want to do that? What new scheme might she be hatching now?

No, that wasn't fair to Clo. Perhaps she just wanted to be part of the process leading to religious freedom, even if it wasn't following the path she'd laid out. She did, after all, truly care about this important principle, despite her ill-judged methods. He sighed. Now she would benefit from a strength of his that she had belittled. He would try again to see the good in her. "Very well," he said.

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The corridors were crowded even a few blocks from the matter chamber. Shahn and Clo strode through the masses, who parted for them. Shahn felt as if he were cutting to the head of a line, unfairly using his good reputation among the populace to advance his own agenda. But his agenda was theirs too, and his errand was important enough to justify cashing in on that reputation.

Hmm, that sounded entirely too much like something Clo would say.

The density of the throngs and their noisy hubbub reached their peaks as Shahn and Clo passed the park, where Hul was scheduled to speak soon. It was the only large open space in Industry, built during the most recent expansion, immediately after the matter chamber had been installed. It was covered by a huge domed roof that let filtered sunlight in, giving one the illusion of standing outside on Mars without suffocating. The paved paths leading to the moss-covered field were surrounded by plants ranging from colorful delicate flowers to trees that reached the dome. The flora here helped replenish the oxygen in the settlement, so even this beautiful place actually had a practical purpose, like everything in Industry. But it was still a beautiful place.

The crowds were thickest at the park. It became slightly easier to progress as they continued on to the matter chamber. Clo stopped by a plain white door labeled "Sorting/Staging" in small black letters and pressed her thumb against its scanner. It clicked, and she pushed it open. "My job has its uses after all," she said.

Shahn said, "But if we go to a restricted area, we won't be near the news cameras. Doesn't that defeat one of our main purposes?"

"You need to catch Hul before he makes his speech, preferably before he mingles with the crowds at all. If he starts talking about how he's come to fight the Seekers, he'll have staked out a position that would be hard for him to back away from. If you want to make peace, you need to do it privately first, *then* talk to the press."

She had a point, as usual. He followed her into a bright, spacious room. It was mostly empty, but a few neatly organized stacks of containers stood inside yellow rectangles marked on the floor. A large sliding door opposite them was closed tight. "That goes into the antechamber and control room for the matter chamber itself," Clo said, jerking her head toward the big door. "Through here is the most direct path from the

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chamber to the park. They'll probably come this way. If we can just find a place to hide among some of these crates—"

"Hey!" a voice called. "You aren't supposed to be in here!"

Two police officers were heading toward them, heads visible over the tops of the crates. Shahn just waited for them, but Clo crouched and slipped behind a large metal box nearby.

The officers paused when they rounded the last container, a few meters from Shahn. "Mr. Ka?" one of them said. "You really shouldn't be here. Please put your hands where we can see them." They drew their stun guns from their holsters and advanced slowly.

After the rhetoric Clo had given the press about Shahn wanting to take over Industry, Shahn could only imagine what the officers might think he was planning. He held his open hands in front of him. "Don't worry, officers," he said. "I only want to speak briefly with Mr. Brutan."

Suddenly Clo popped up from behind her crate and pointed a gun—a real *gun*; where in the world had she gotten a gun?—at the policemen. But then she swiveled toward Shahn. For an instant, he saw Clo's one wide-open eye and the end of the barrel above her hand. Then her trigger finger twitched, and the image vanished in a bright flash. The enclosed space was filled with a monstrous thunderclap. A huge, angry mosquito seemed to whine past his ear impossibly fast and slam into the wall behind him.

But he was still alive and unharmed. Clo glared at her gun and pulled the hammer back, apparently determined to remedy that. Before she could, one of the policemen snapped his stun gun up and fired. There was a soft sizzle and Clo collapsed, still conscious but unable to move. The officers ran over to her. The first one retrieved her gun from the floor with his hand pulled up in his sleeve. The other aimed his weapon at Shahn.

Shahn stared at Clo twitching on the floor, as shock and disappointment struggled for dominance within him. "I thought you wanted to kill Hul," he said. "Why me?"

"Plan B," she slurred between gasps. Perhaps the stunning had loosened her judgment and her tongue, for after a moment she continued, "Couldn't get Hul now. Couldn't get both cops. Get you, blame it on police." She gulped another breath. "People would believe it, since I've been saying you and Hul are enemies. Soon I, your loyal

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supporter, would be elected Leader of the Seekers. Then I could push for freedom harder than you ever did."

"And this plan was worth murdering someone who thought he could trust you?"

"Had to. For the cause." She managed to focus both eyes on Shahn. "Nothing personal."

Shahn turned to face the officer who was pointing the stun gun at him. "I had no idea," he said. "I apologize for bringing her here. Haul her away and do whatever you want with her. I just want to talk to Hul."

The officers exchanged a glance, then returned their gazes to their captives. "That may be, Mr. Ka," the nearer one said, "but for now, I think I'd better search you both and bring you in to the office for questioning."

Hul stood on a shipping pallet and watched the large gray door slowly sliding shut, listening to its quiet groan and the tense throb of mysterious machinery just beyond the walls. He pictured the identical matter chamber in Industry being pulled down to near vacuum at this moment, to reduce the interference for the new matter that would appear, recreating every molecule, every atom, every quark in this chamber. All of his own quarks were about to vanish, going one by one to wherever quantum things went when they were reappearing elsewhere. Each quark would be replaced simultaneous with its destruction, but the machine had only so much bandwidth, so it would take nearly a second for all the matter in this chamber to be recreated on Mars. During that time, he would not properly exist.

Well, actually, only *most* of the quarks would be replaced. All the important ones would be included, he hoped. Theoretically, the only energy required was that to adjust the potential and kinetic energies of the mass for its new location, but inefficiency always claimed a small amount of mass from the outer surface of the volume being mattered. That was why he was standing on a nice, thick pallet.

Only a narrowing sliver of light shone through the door's opening now, trying to reflect off the dull gray walls around him. It hadn't occurred to him that matter chambers would not have lights in them.

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All the things that could go wrong, which had seemed such unlikely, hypothetical possibilities before, suddenly crowded in on him, very real and suffocatingly close. He slowed his breathing and tried not to think about lost matter shipments and suicidal sheep.

Getting permission to matter had been easier than he'd expected. Digital signatures from Hul and a majority of the Board of Industry had been required, and Nak Miro had rounded them up quickly. Miro's message had said he agreed that the Seekers were out of control, and he felt the board would probably now be more sympathetic to Hul's request to ban them. On the other hand, San Smith, who was doubtless not sympathetic to Hul's request, had also signed readily. Considering what had happened to every other living thing that had been mattered, Hul suspected Smith had her own motive for wanting him to go through the process.

Getting permission from Lau had proven impossible. When their shuttle from the Mars/Earth ship had landed, she had told him she would book passage back to Industry on the next ship to go see what was left of him. Then she'd headed for the taxi stand, leaving him standing on the platform. He hadn't spoken with her since.

The last bit of light vanished abruptly, and the door sealed with an authoritative thud. The unseen rumbling rose to a high, loud roar.

Everything flashed to a flaming bright orange, and he was hurled through a searing plate of glass. Billions of tiny, scalding slivers tore through every cubic millimeter of his body. His mind wanted to cry out, but he seemed to have no mouth, no lungs, no body at all. Then what was being torn to shreds so painfully?

Fortunately, mattering took only a fraction of a second, so this horror should be over at any moment. But it wasn't. The invisible glass pane seemed endless, and he kept being shoved through a continuum of hot, jagged shards. If he'd had a body, it would surely have been cut into small bits by now, and the pain would have stopped. But he didn't, and it hadn't.

Minutes passed. Hours. Or something. It was impossible to judge time, but surely this had taken far too long. Something must have gone wrong. But he was still conscious. That had to mean something, didn't it? Didn't it? Where did matter shipments that disappeared really go?

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Or had Lau inadvertently been right? Perhaps his body had appeared on Mars long ago, but his "soul," whatever that was, was left behind here.

Days passed. Weeks.

Yet he hadn't acclimated to the pain at all; it was as fresh and terrible as in that first instant. He couldn't shield his nonexistent body from it, nor even shut his nonexistent eyes against the burning glare. Clearly the mattering had failed. So he was presumably dead. He hadn't expected death to have any kind of perception to it—when he'd thought about it at all, he'd supposed it would simply be nonexistence. But here he was.

Months passed. Years.

And more years.

He'd long ago stopped thinking about what had happened, or thinking at all. He'd passed from denial to acceptance and finally to only existence. He just existed and hurt terribly, all the time, forever, forever.

Forever passed. Or maybe it was a fraction of a second. He couldn't tell. He couldn't care. He was empty of himself, and full only of agony.

The fiery brightness and the pain vanished suddenly. Something flat, hard, and solid struck his hands and face—he had a face!—but it felt like a gentle tap compared to what he'd been experiencing. A narrow band of light appeared beside him and began to widen. Two human silhouettes squeezed through it. They seemed horizontal, and strangely elevated.

No, no, *he* was horizontal, lying on a cold, metal floor. The light gradually brightened. Two men now crouched beside him, concern and fear all over their faces. They seemed familiar, but he wasn't sure; it had been so long. One began poking gently at him with some kind of instrument, while the other stared into his eyes and said, "Manager Brutan! Can you hear me?"

He didn't answer right away, but just lay there, taking in the scene. A plain, gray, square room—a matter chamber! And the worried man looking at him was, um, Jay, um, something. He'd been one of Hul's staff in Industry. Industry! They must have found a way to bring him back! After all this time! He was alive again!

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The second man slipped his device into a bag and said, "I'll need to check him over more thoroughly later, but he looks OK. Just a nasty knock on the head from falling down just now."

Hul struggled into a crawling position, trying to get up. "Jay," he said. His voice was a weak croak. He tried again. "Jay. How long?"

"You can talk! Thank God!" Embarrassment interrupted the anxiety on Jay's face. "Sorry, sir, I mean, um, thank—well, anyway, how long what? You popped in here right on schedule, and the crowds are already gathered to hear your speech. Can you stand up?"

Crowds? Speech? That's right ... he'd been mattering back to Industry. To talk about Seekers. Then it hit him, and the strange truth became clear. Jay said he was "right on schedule." Jay and the doctor had been here waiting for him. The mattering had gone fine. Whatever had happened to him was "normal."

Hul pushed backward and sat on his shipping pallet. "Give me a moment," he said, speaking more forcefully this time. His brain hadn't thought for a long time, but freed of the pain, it was beginning to cover ground surprisingly quickly. What *had* happened to him? Some kind of time distortion, to be sure. But during the perceived time—was that what Edgar Barr and the mice and sheep had experienced?

"Um, Manager, we should go if you can," Jay said. "People are waiting, and rumors will start really fast if we don't get out there."

Hul let himself be pulled to his feet and guided through the wide doorway, but he was still immersed in his own thoughts. Was his experience just a side effect of the matter? Or maybe—he'd technically not existed for almost a second. Was that death? Could a state of death be experienced after all?

Jay led him slowly across another room toward a small, closed door visible beyond a stack of boxes.

Maybe others had experienced glimpses of death before. Maybe the images of hell, with bright flames and pain, came from that. Then the realization slapped him: he was going to die again someday. Did he have that to look forward to again? Did it have to be like that? Was that hell only for "bad" people? Was he a bad person? Or, dropping the religious associations, was there any way to influence the experience of death?

They reached the door.

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Many religious people, and many others who'd had near-death experiences, claimed death could be quite pleasant. Literature was full of stories of peace and tranquility and meeting deceased loved ones. Actually, even the stories of ill-tempered red guys jabbing at him with pitchforks sounded pretty good compared to what he'd gone through.

Or was he wasting a lot of deep thoughts on something that was really just a side effect of quantum energy/matter matrix reconstruction?

Jay put his thumb on the door's scanner.

Questions this big would require research. But how could he research something like this? Hul racked his spinning mind. He could read about metaphysical experiences recorded by others and see whether any of them seemed relevant to his. Perhaps experiments could be devised, like sending a live camera through the matter—why hadn't anyone ever tried that?—or inducing temporary death in a volunteer. But, because of the time distortion, he wasn't eager to volunteer for even a moment of what might be his experience in the matter. And if someone else did it, he'd be stuck relying on the testimony of some Edgar Barr.

The door opened and Jay led him through it. The loud babble of excited voices washed over him, and people pressed forward, held back by police. Some of them, presumably reporters, began shouting questions at him, but Hul wasn't paying their words any attention. His predicament seemed hopeless. How could he ever possibly learn about a phenomenon like this, whatever research he did? Yet it was too important to ignore. He had to try, whether it was impossible or not.

Farther down the wide corridor, Hul saw a policeman leading Shahn Ka and that young accomplice of his—Clo Niher, was it?—away.

The truth cannot be known, yet we must seek it. The Seekers' motto described his situation perfectly.

"Shahn Ka!" he called.

The policeman stopped. The surrounding voices fell to a bubbling murmur. Shahn and Clo turned and looked at him. Clo looked dazed, and stumbled a bit when she turned. "I need to speak with him," Hul told Jay. Then he set off through the crowd toward Shahn

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as police cleared his way and Jay chased along behind him. The crowd watched expectantly, and the reporters circled, vultures anticipating a kill.

When Hul reached Shahn, he stopped and said, "We need to talk."

"Yes, we do," Shahn said. "First, I have to assure you I'm not trying to take over your job, no matter what Clo here has told the reporters."

"Hmm? Oh, you don't want it? Whatever. I'm sure the council and the board can find a new manager when I quit."

The crowd fell completely quiet. The reporters froze, then those who weren't holding cameras began frantically writing, typing, or dictating on various devices.

"Well, um ..." said Shahn, clearly bewildered. "Actually, I just came here to talk to you about ending this recent madness peacefully and granting religious freedom to these people."

"Oh, right. Sure, they can have it. I'll probably need it myself to do some of the research I need to do."

"Um, research?"

"Yes." Hul stood straighter and looked Shahn in the eye. "I have a research project that I think will interest you, and I need your help. I want to become a Seeker of Truth."