

“Don’t give me that crap.” Angie spun, fiery-eyed, and stabbed me with an accusing finger. “Whatever it is, you tell me. It’s my problem too.”

Over her shoulder, where a wall should have been, I saw it again. Movement, just a glimpse, like faint holograms flashing and fading away. The wall insubstantial, a sense of space beyond, where there should have been kitchen.

“Dave, at least look at me when I’m talking—”

I brought her back into focus, caught a trace of fear in her still angry expression. “I think you better get me to a doctor, Angie.” I pulled open the front door, reached for the car keys on their hook. Watched my hand pass right through them, sun shining bright outside a window that wasn’t there. Then closed my fingers, deliberately, and pulled the keys back from the ether. Dropped them into Angie’s hand. I swallowed, my throat dry and tight. “And I think you better drive.”

Girlfriend or wife, what was the difference, Angie was there for me and I needed all the help I could get. She steered me out the door, shoved me into the passenger seat of her yellow eco-trike. I stared out past the hump which housed the big single front wheel, tension a knot in my gut. Beside me, Angie had buckled up and turned the key. It was the kiss, her thoughtful peck on the cheek, that took me to the next level.

There was no transition, just a change in my body posture and the color, the intensity of the sunlight. Tinted, faintly purple-blue. The car was sleek and tiny, room enough for two behind one another, like a motorcycle with four small wheels and a flaming red fibreglass frame. In front of me, driving, a woman with raven hair streaming out from under her blue helmet. And the street, at least twenty meters wide and crowded with similar cars. Tall apartment towers on either side, the road a canyon between glass walls, its river a streak of flashing metal.

Then I was back in the yellow eco-trike, sucking air like a fish seeking water. Hyperventilating, dizzy. Angie had pulled the trike to the kerb, fifteen meters from the house.

“Dave.” It took a lot to get Angie this upset, gray eyes huge with concern. Voice steady, calming, in spite of the stress I read in the lines of her face. “Dave, are you OK?”

I’d thought for two years that I loved her, and it had been over a year since I’d first told her so. But not until that moment did I really know it was true.

“Whatever’s going on, I don’t know that a doctor will be any help.” I was near panic, but Angie kept me focused. “Either I’m cracking up, really fast, or I’m—kind of jumping between different places. A second ago, I was in this red car speeding down a shining river...”

The color had drained from Angie’s cheeks. Worse against the chestnut of her hair. She’d squirmed out of her belt, sat gripping the wheel and looking desperate. I pulled her close and the world changed again.

Someone, I was holding someone. Just as close as I'd been holding Angie. But the hair falling across the back of my hand was golden, soft and pale. It was not a car this time but a bus, and we were surrounded by people. Nobody seemed to spare us a glance. The vehicle was at a stop. This time the buildings outside were small and squat, with a consistent blunt ugliness that suggested deliberate design to a taste very different from mine. The sun shone bravely through dark shreds of flying cloud, stippling the ground with bright patches and streaming forth in stark streaks across the sky. Small stunted dark green trees shook in the moving air. The figure in my arms sat up and looked at me.

Blue eyes, gentle but with a hint of strength. Narrow straight nose, high rounded cheekbones, full wide lips, confident smile. A familiar tilt of the head.

"Angie!" The word was distorted, far away, but I knew I'd spoken it.

The smile widened, merged, and Angie was sitting beside me in the yellow trike, a brave smile on her tear-streaked face as she held me at arm's length. "What are we going to do?" she whispered.

"It's real, or something," I said. "Like instant teleportation. I'm just somewhere else." But the eerie feeling of having been with Angie, another Angie, would not let me stay quiet. "Angie," I said softly. "I was with you, somewhere else, but—not really you. I guess, probably not really me."

Her expression hardened. "David you've got to help me, to help yourself. Tell me what you're seeing—all the details. We need to figure out how it's happening, whatever it is." I could see the emotions warring in her eyes. "Or do I just take you to the nearest psychiatrist?"

"The first time, at breakfast, I thought I saw someone else walk past our sink. Only a faint outline, nothing solid. Then when we were doing dishes, there was movement outside the window, only it looked like a room with people in it. Still very transparent, like a faded projection. In the hallway I saw—almost through you, through the wall, into a big room, or maybe a garden, there were vague movements that could have been branches or bushes waving in the wind." I looked at her, glad she was still with me but afraid to touch her. "I put my hand through the wall when I reached for the keys."

She took it all in. I sensed her mind working, that logical, reasoned process which had never been my strength, but sparked the engineer in her. "What first triggered it? What, what is it?" She seized me by the shoulders, and I felt rather than heard the words. "What brings it on..."

"Something to do with emotions," I heard a voice say. Resonance in my vocal chords, movement of my mouth and tongue. I was standing in sun-dappled forest, gazing into the face of another Angie, this time with deep auburn hair cut short on the sides but long at front and back, pulled into a tight spiral on the top of her beautiful head. Her hands gripped me by the shoulders, and there was a bemused expression on her face. Then her green eyes flashed, a spark of anger.

“And not the first time.” Her voice was harsher, more threatening than my Angie’s, with an unsettling edge. “You fuck around with telepathy, and see where it gets us.” She slapped me across the face, raking a pair of gem-encrusted rings over my right cheek.

A trickle of blood ran down my face, dripped from my chin onto my clothes. But I was merely an observer in another body, unable to move or speak, rooted to the spot. I caught a gentle murmur of water from my left, a glimpse of sunlight glittering off a stream that flowed through the flower-covered grass. A perfect, beautiful, peaceful place, except for the tempest that stood before me—and stirred inside me.

“You got anything to say, David? About that parallel evolution crap? Your almighty contraption that takes you to other worlds or some shit?” She hit me again, in the same place. There would be a scar. “That much for your stories about us being together in every world. I’m here, asshole, not all over the timelines. If this thing is so great, sell the technology and stay. I give you today, and that’s it. Otherwise I’m gone. And see how that fucks up your precious parallel worlds. Where we’re together.”

She turned and stalked away through the trees, intermittent sunbeams turning her strides to stop-motion.

“Wait!” Finally, my voice. My will forcing the body to move. Changing the timeline. I could feel my other self resisting, fighting me.

Angie stopped, five meters away. She did not turn. “What do you want?”

“You’re not going to do this to us. To me and my Angie.” I was moving now, stiffly but ever more quickly. I put a hand on her arm and pulled her round to face me.

And it was my Angie. She stood there on the street, only ten meters from our house, her yellow trike just visible behind me out of the corner of my eye. My Angie. Her face grim and hard, a bluish welt puffing her left cheek. “What did I say?” I asked.

“Dave?” Her expression melted, the arm I was holding flew around my neck, and she held me. “Thank God you’re back. Thank God.”

“What did he say, Angie? The other Dave?” I looked again at the growing bruise on her face. “What did he do?”

“Told me I was his. I would never get you back, and I had to do whatever he asked. I told him to shove it.” She pulled away to look at me. “You’re still here?”

I was. In spite of the close physical contact, I was still in the here and now. “He’s trying to deal with his own home situation,” I said. I ran a hand tentatively over the right side of my face – undamaged, but sore with the memory of pain. “His Angie. A real piece of work, like him.”

“Dave, don’t let him come back.”

“If he decides to come, I can’t stop him. I don’t know how. But it has something to do with a technology he’s created, in a parallel existence. Like an alternate timeline, where—”

“—where the two of us are together, but not the same.” Her eyes lit up, like little candles. I knew to stay clear when she got like this. “I get it. He’s jumping from world to

world, disrupting the normal course of events and screwing up each timeline he enters. If he makes the technology available to others, no telling how many parallel worlds will cease to exist.”

“So how do we stop him?”

“Destroy the apparatus. Or the world he’s from. Or both. Maybe—”

There was a momentary twinge across Angie’s face, then a furious glare in her eyes. She looked quickly around, then back at me. “Where the fuck am I?”

It took me a moment to realize what had happened. “The other Dave, your telepath, he’s—”

“Out cold. I hit the bastard on the side of the head. Hard. Then I go into his workshop to shut down that filthy gizmo, and I end up here. With another feeble look-alike.” Her hand went to my throat. “Listen dripface, I’ll make your life living hell if you don’t help me get back. And shut down this crazy parallel hopping for good.”

I took her wrist and squeezed, finding I had more determination and strength than I’d expected. She let go. “You’re not the only one who wants this to settle down,” I said. “So help us. When you get back, don’t look for the off switch. Blow the damned thing to pieces. I believe your boyfriend has been slumming it across the timelines, just as you probably suspected. He deserves whatever you give him.” I pulled her close, looked straight into those fiery green eyes. “You’re just the woman for him.”

For a moment, she glared me down. Then suddenly she seemed to relax. And laugh. First a harsh, derisive, mocking laugh. But then—one I remembered from so many moments of joy in the past. “Angie?”

And she was back. My Angie. Laughing with joy. “It’s done,” she said at last. “Whatever he’d developed, it’s gone now. I set the lab alight with an electrical fire. Watched it catch, before I faded out. And your namesake, lying unconscious in the forest beside that beautiful stream.” She grinned wickedly. “I gave him a kick from both of us.”