

# Composite Soup

James-Johann approached the heavily polarised window and looked out from his bedroom to the brightness of the town beyond. He had been drawn there by the sound of children playing in the street outside his family home. He regarded a group of four kids, close to his age, who sat by the dusty roadside, giggling and poking at each other. The buildings around them were all painted in bland colours, chosen to balance between reflection of heat and reduction in glare from the blinding sun above. Wherever possible the streets were covered by awnings in a variety of styles. Some was authority provided roofing but much of it, erected at personal expense, consisted of wooden screens and cloth sheets that whistled and flapped in the wind. Where the children played there was no cover from the sun. Blatant disregard of the sun laws was a clear mark that these children were born to sun-worshippers. Sun-worshipper families were avid freedom believers who held personal rebellions against the new state order that had arisen some 300 years ago, a time when a revolution in thinking about health and responsibility had made the individual pay for any illness directly related to personal risk. It had started with smokers and marched on from there. It was a legislative move that preached individual responsibility and choice but effectively destroyed personal freedom. These families chose to risk the sun, refusing to scurry like moles from one building to the next, yet even they were not stupid enough to do so totally unprotected. The children were all smeared

in the standard sun-block, making them a sickly white and all four wore state subsidised sunglasses. They were clearly not wealthy.

He looked to his left and could make out the 'Energy composites' factory like a giant metal limpet growing from the mountainside that loomed over their town. It harnessed the huge river that fell over the cliff face. The water that finally reached the town, although technically the same clear water that had seeped from the rivers source, somehow seemed man made, spewed back to the riverbed from the guts of the turbine wall that spanned the cascading water.

Two huge chimney-shaped cylinders thrust at an angle from the top of this shining metal building, a building that seemed to defy gravity sitting up on the hillside like it did. These chimneys, like giant stakes seemed to be the one thing that should allow it the grace to hang at such a precarious location. The chimneys were giant geothermal pylons that plunged hundreds of meters into the rock below. The energy that flowed through that building was unthinkable, but it was not his energy, not his mothers, or the children's outside. It belonged to the composite, sealed away, safe in their exclusivity.

There had been a remarkable societal change some 200 years ago. The world had been treacherous then, factions were squabbling, anarchists took advantage of the chaos and the little person suffered. Then through a chain of events it became possible for swathes of society to retreat from the daily troubles, risks and excitement of regular life. It first began when many large production centres began to close their gates, offering protection, independent health care and good money to those who were willing to make the factories their home. With their workers housed inside they began to defend themselves, heavily. They were all over the globe, and were now an entirely different, wholly segregated society. They traded almost exclusively between themselves, and if the outsiders, which included him

and those kids on the street, had anything the composite factories needed then towns like this may get the chance to trade as well, but it was quite rare. Luckily the town made enough energy for domestic needs from their solar panelling. The vast energy created by the factory mainly supplied the manufacturing needs of similar factories. They served each other for safety and they served each other for efficiency. That was their purpose for existing. Their reason for existing was the *soup*. He was just learning about that in his history and chemistry classes. ‘Semi organic unguent plasma’; It had grown out of a complex history and fiendishly hard chemistry. He looked back to the road.

One of the children was looking his way. Pointing at James and then smiling to one of his young accomplices he began to squirm in mock agony, collapsing and rolling around on the floor as the sun beat down on their bodies. The second boy joined in. A third child, a slightly older girl giggled behind one hand. “I’m burning, I’m burning” the first shouted. He stretched a hand, claw like in his theatrical pain towards James-Johann’s window. It was an old joke. He would have looked away but for the fourth child, a slightly younger girl with blond hair who looked passively from behind her sunglasses, neither smiling nor laughing. Then, as the others stood and jumbled away she remained looking towards the window, standing with her hands behind her back. She smiled warmly and took a few steps forward in curiosity.

James’ hand went to the dimmer switch that controlled the polarising strength of the glass and dropped the windows protection by 50%, something his mother would have beat him for. He wanted to see her better. She glanced to her left, frowned deeply and turned back towards him. He glanced right to see what had vexed her, saw nothing unusual and returned his gaze to where she stood. The moment he did so a blinding light blasting from her chest creating a hammer of pain behind his eyes, he collapsed to the floor covering his face. What had it

been? Had something destroyed the young girl right there on the street? His eyes screamed like fire and he was terrified that they would be permanently damaged. Scared and confused he began to sob.

Out on the street the pretty girl put her hands behind her back again and half walked half skipped back towards her friends. Had James been able to see he may have noticed as she moved away that there was a small mark on her right forearm. He may not have known it for what it was, the beginning of a malignant melanoma, a cancer that would untreated, spread throughout her young body. There was something else he hadn't recognised for what it was. Clutched in her delicate hands was a small but very shiny mirror that slashed a violently bright beam of light back and forth across the road.

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At the same moment that James-Johann lay writhing in agony on his bedroom floor wishing for a Doctor, a young woman in a tight, blue shimmering suit was realising that her Doctor was the last person she wanted to be with. They were within a small room in the western end of the large limpet like composite factory that hung on the cliff face above the town. A small permanently darkened window allowed a distorted image of the land below. The glass was about 4 inches thick. She had come here hoping the doctor had something to offer her. He was offering her nothing.

“Miss Khan-Ewing,.... Cecile, you knew the risks!”

“This is insane! You’re saying I can’t receive any treatment!” Cecile was stood, pacing between each reply, her arms gesticulating wildly.

Doctor Joplin raised his arms, almost in resignation “You know I had to pass the test results through the authorities. I’ve been your family doctor since your parents were young and I want the best for you but no treatment can be authorized. It would set an unacceptable precedent. The doctor reclined in his chair looking at the 17-year-old girl in front of him. He knew that she was fully aware of the implications of her reckless behavior; she also already knew all the answers he could ever give her. This conversation was all part of the process of accepting her position, but it was futile.

“Is there nothing we can do?” Cecile Khan-Ewing continued pacing around the surgery.

“This shouldn’t be allowed, we have no freedom anymore”.

“Please Cecile, you studied history, this is exactly the argument that the ‘Right to smoke’ campaign used when tobacco users fought against the no-treatment ruling of 2014.”

Dr Joplin rubbed his tense jaw through the greying sideburns that he grew long, a retro look he rather liked.

“Yes I know Doctor, it was deemed fashionable at the time to remove prohibition of any kind in relation to drug use. Having done so the state felt that it was also acceptable to deny free treatment for diseases that could be directly associated with risk taking behaviour.” She looked directly at the familiar face of Dr Joplin.

“Yes, and under most circumstances it’s very difficult to prove. Most Cecile, but not here.”

Her Hands went to her hips and felt the shimmering blue material shift its form, adapting its heat and moisture properties in response to the warm sweat on her palms. She knew she had recited that piece of history straight out of the text book. He knew that she had wire-learnt

more history lessons than probably anyone in this composite and 21<sup>st</sup> century history was her particular interest.

The 'Responsibility Bill' of 2014 that served to deny smokers the right to free treatment for ailments that were deemed to be related to their smoking behaviour led to a revolution in political and social philosophy. In time a society developed that denied nothing, but expected an informed individual to accept full responsibility for any strain that their reckless behaviour imposed upon society as a whole, even to the point of denying free treatment by their health care system. Inevitably risk taking became unfashionable except among the fashionably risky and basic survival needs forced new healthier lifestyles.

This whole social revolution had been compounded fifty years later by the incredible discovery of 'Semi organic unguent plasma', affectionately or hatefully referred to as 'Soup'. This breakthrough had increased crop production, tissue healing, reduced ageing, and eventually twisted society out of any recognizable form. In time it was tweaked, improved and attached to complex computer feedback systems. It became such that an individual could essentially live, suspended in it whilst being provided with all the body's needs. It also seemed so convivial to mental well-being that some rich citizens simply set up a safe haven, hired servants and transcended the real world for the rest of their vastly extended lifetimes. This was exactly what the huge self-contained factory units like the 'energy composite' attempted to do for the common man. Only in order to do so, those common men and women had to separate themselves from the masses and hence became fairly uncommon. The aim, the challenge, the issue of pride for of any of the huge 'factory composite groups' as they became known was to achieve as high a level of transcendence time as possible for the workers they housed. The energy composite, this factory was rated at 1 in 24, which essentially meant that any worker could if they chose spend only 1 hour in 24 working, and

therefore the other 23 being incredibly happy and healthy floating in a gentle, slightly sticky plasma goo. As a doctor, Charles Joplin was therefore normally no more than an intelligent, often challenging but kind man that people went to see every so often.

Cecile put both hands on the doctors' desk and leant towards him. "Even the 'uncovered' out there" she pointed in a random direction, "can get treated. Can't we just buy the drugs!"

"Firstly, yes, the uncovered communities do have treatment facilities but clinics like the one in the town beneath our factory are expensive and over-stretched. How would you pay for it? Individually we have no money. The freedom clinics, run by sun-worshippers only treat their own for free, and even then the patient is often desperate enough to resort to helping out with some piece of terrorist activity in lieu of payment. If you were unlucky they may just kill you out of jealousy just because they despise us. As it is outsiders pay over the odds for cheap materials and according to estimates they have 20 percent of their population in need of treatment. They were never quite as committed to the ideal and now they are paying the cost, it's that simple. This is exactly why our system runs as it does. There are consequences for breaking the 'norm of risk'. Regular outsiders can only afford to transcend a few hours a day in a pay pool, then they have to sleep in beds for god sake, they get not much better than the 8 hours sleep that the 20<sup>th</sup> century could offer, they have a tough life and work hard. I hear the Market composite out by the lake, if they can claim to be a composite at all, claim they have a 1 in 6 rating but they have no defences and could be overrun at anytime," He laughed. "and 1 in 6 is hardly civilised, admittedly good in comparison to the normal 6 hour work days that some of the less advanced groups have to put up with, but not to our standard. We are nearly the highest rated across the entire covered composite society, and it's all due to our belief in the individual putting the minimum strain on the composite whole."

Now he leant forward and a more serious look crossed his features.

“As for the composite itself funding your treatment, yes we could pay for the drugs with energy supplies but the whole point of our existence is that people like us stopped covering each others backs when one person chooses to be different. The composite will not change that for you Cecile. As I said, it’s why we have a 1 in 24 rating”

Cecile sat down. She lifted one leg onto the edge of the doctors desk, noticed him glance at it, a fleeting frown played across his features. She could have had this argument with herself just as well. She knew everything the doctor was saying to her.

Doctor Joplin himself worked 3 hours a day, a grossly uncivilized amount of productive activity in many people’s minds. However he considered it more an interesting hobby, time used in the way many others used time for artistic or sporting pursuits, although so few people did either these days. Transcendence had taken over as the overriding leisure activity. Few people suffered any real ailments anymore. He sighed heavily. Maybe he’d knock off early, get some well-earned time in the soup. He was missing its warm, silent embrace more than usual today. Just 200 yards down warm temperature regulated corridors and 30 seconds to fit his gel-harness and he’d be back in its safety again, shoulder to shoulder with his composite family. The regenerative nutrient plasma would ease the tension he was getting in his neck, and the gentle sharing of near thoughtless existence with his friends would wash away the emotions that this encounter had stimulated. This session with Cecile was upsetting him for certain. He rarely craved its embrace this strongly.

“Cecile please, you know as well as anyone that if you stick to your recommended transcendence time the soup will more than likely suppress the cancerous growths that are forming. If it doesn’t than it will slow them down so effectively that you’re unlikely to suffer any problems for 50 years or more.”

“Yes Doctor, and you know that a growing group of people here in the ‘Energy Composite’, are not finding the ‘oneness’ of the soup very appealing. We’re craving something more individual and expressive. You know we’ve upped our active labour hours to 3 per day. We accept the extra burden that our movement, use of facilities, the wear and tear exerts on the composite structure, and that it needs to be balanced. We don’t mind. Only yesterday I accessed the ALDS just to learn automotive robotics so I could overhaul some of the automated systems. I’m going to scrub it tomorrow, it’s not my thing but you know, ‘We’ like doing things.

“The *accelerated learning data system* shouldn’t be abused young lady, especially if you’re going to scrub your memory too often. It’s not fool proof, it has been known to scrub a little too hard. Without the balancing effect of the transcendent state within the soup your mind can rebel if you pipe too much information into it. I don’t want to have to go relearning psycho-neural biology again when your memory centres start fusing.”

“soup soup soup....it bores me. Do you know how good it feels to go out and get some sun on your skin doctor?, see the world outside lit by that beautiful glowing ball we all owe our life too?”

“That sun you talk about is what we are having this entirely academic conversation for in the first place” the doctor stood, the girls recklessness was beginning to rile him. “It is what has irreparably damaged your skin cells, and given you that tasteless tan. As it is you have a malignant melanoma and secondary cancers which we have no resources to treat. You step out of sanctioned cover within daylight hours you forfeit your right to sanctioned cancer treatment, just as you would have been refused some treatments as a smoker back in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Now as your doctor I am offering you the only treatment that won’t get me kicked out. I will write out a note to register you for unlimited Soup immersion for a month period.

You could, if you wish stay fully immersed. For that period you have the right to a zero productivity rating. The longer you stay there the more likely you may suppress the cancers in your body.” He grabbed a pad from within his desk draw and wrote, scowling harder.

Even this small gesture went against the society belief that she should get nothing from the population in way of help.

”That’s it, as your medical officer I have provided you with the way that you can best help yourself, I can do no more. Talk to your parents, they worry.”

He opened the door to his office and handed the girl the prescription sheet. “I know you’re not going to take my advice Cecile. Honestly if you spent 20 or more hours a day immersed for life, still less than most people crave on a daily basis, you may well get no worse. Bye for now”

Cecile walked out looking at the prescription. She turned and managed a fleeting smile at the doctor. Since reducing her Soup time she had found her baser urges were becoming more apparent. Her smile broadened, as she looked him up and down. “You should come and spend some time with my friends and me. She winked. There are other ways of relaxing you know.”

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The metal door slid open. The Composite computer, ‘Genna’ chirped a warning in a scolding tone. “Leaving the compound without authorisation and fully sanctioned protective clothing will invalidate any claim to treatment for ailments directly induced through the risk you are

now taking. You have been warned and by stepping through this doorway you fully consent to the conditions laid out within the norm of risk, amended 2287. You have been warned.

Please report to your doctor immediately on your return”

“Tell me something I don’t know computer” Cecile retorted. She then chuckled, thinking about the futility of reporting to her doctor.

“I may not come back this time” she said quietly as she looked out onto the causeway that stretched out in front of her.

There were only two entrances to the factory. One opened out underneath the overhang of the factory but it was used even less frequently than this, requiring lift access. This doorway opened onto the upper plain where the backed up water from the turbine dam flooded the plain for some distance. A long stone causeway stretched to a bank on the left. She knew that as she stepped out the computer system would be switching to alert and weapon systems would have powered up. It continually tracked movement around the factory. It would not recognise Cecile by her visual shape, did not acknowledge her blue cape, or her silver boots, but instead it assessed her as a life form due to her electromagnetic aura. It knew she had mass and was singular because of the sensors that were spaced around the causeway and the water. It knew it was *her* because with a brief skin analysis and scent marker it could recognise that she belonged. The computer itself was integrally combined with the soup, providing feedback monitoring of its content, absorbing electromagnetic resonance from those who slumbered within it, tweaking levels of nutrients and toxins. It was one with the soup and therefore those who slumbered within it, and so it recognised this girl as a part of itself simply from the smell of her. In a complex but unique artificially intelligent fashion it felt sadness as she left. A part of itself was leaving. It scanned around for movement. A bird

flew past, it could pose no risk. It began to return its weapon systems to standby while a part of it forlornly watched the scent marker that was the girl fade into the distance.

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Jerry walked backwards from beneath his freighter, eventually taking his eyes off the new toy he had just fixed to its underside and surveyed the bulk of the craft in its totality. The workshop mechanic was now beside him.

“Well friend, that’s one nice new bit of kit you just fitted there, riles me when someone comes in to my own workshop and does better work than me, but that was the deal. We have the contract back here.”

Jerry followed the mechanic to a small desk.

“Right, as it says here, use of workshop time, 12 hours plus optical condenser, mag..well, parts, blah blah, they’re all listed here..... given to Freelance fright handler Jerry Kurow in exchange for initial designs, in part, for his new optical recognition software and related circuit diagrams and one full load drop of High explosive shells to ‘Nutrition composite delta’. Oh, plus exclusive access to foresaid technology for a 3 month period.” He smiled, “well it should give us the edge. Sign here.”

Jerry did. He had little to say, he was itching to get on. With a few days heavy schedule of pick ups and drop offs ahead he would have only 12 hours a day within his freighters self contained soup unit. Also he wanted to find a few trees to blast with his newly installed weapon.

“Cheers mate” he turned and walked away. “I assume I’m loaded up?” he didn’t wait for an answer but pulled a remote from his pocket, pointed it the ship and pressed a button

repeatedly. A large and bold logo covered the bulbous cargo container that sat nestled under the insect frame of his beloved craft. Initially this logo was in the shape of a bolt of lightning but it faded as the current running through the electro-conductive paint job changed. It rotated through a number of similarly blocky shapes, first a set of two cogs, then two large ears of corn, then finally settling on the simple torpedo shape of the Weapons composite alpha. Then, stepping onto a circular pad under the cockpit he pressed another button and it slid him up within the body of the ship.

The mechanic hit a button on the wall and a conveyor began to slide the craft until it nestled under the hanger doors at the extreme edge of the giant vehicle-sized workshop. He pressed an intercom, and spoke to the security station. "Requesting clearance". The reply came some 5 seconds later. "Security clear, go ahead Pete" He hit a second button and the bay doors yawed open and a blast barrier rose to Thirty feet, just in time, as the reckless idiot onboard blasted his jets and the laden cargo craft rose into the air. A moment of fear rose in Pete's throat as he saw the newly installed laser hanging below the ship rotate in a complex and lightening fast series of movements and finally settle dead still, in his direction. He laughed, "show off" he said and the ship blasted away into heated outside air.

Jerry wriggled himself further into his seat and smiled. Although heavily armed, any craft was susceptible to one thing, large crowds of attackers. Out in some of the wilder areas ships that had landed for a rest period could be ambushed by hordes of outsiders. Not surprisingly, these ships were good loot. The reason for this flaw in security lay in the fact that technology had never really developed an effective optical recognition system that was safe enough not to make mistakes, yet self directing so it could operate at computer speed rather than the

sluggish pace of a human aided direction. He had developed a solution and it was now installed to a brand new all singing all dancing laser system. This thing could fire off ten perfectly aimed shots within one second, and each shot could be placed anywhere within a field of vision that was only restricted by the ship that sat above, essentially 70% of a complete sphere. He could now guarantee to stop 100 attackers dead in their tracks within 10 seconds, and all he had to do was give the authority to fire, based on his analysis of the hostile situation.

He put one hand behind his head and throttled the ship towards the nutrition composite some 20 minutes to the north.

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Most of the inside structure of the factory lay in darkness. Many of the corridors and internal spaces were steadily less and less needed for human occupation. As an 'energy factory' it made little noise so it seemed the place was deserted. The darkness within the corridor between 'monitoring section two' and 'mechanical system storage hanger three' was still and uniform, until voices sprang up. Dim light began to seep up from the storage facility and grew steadily. Lights switched on and off in time with the two figures that walked down the corridor, following their progress.

"Have you seen Cecile this week?"

"Yes I saw her on the way to the Doctors office this morning"

"I was hoping she'd Nanny me for a bit of hyper-cortical stimulation this evening."

"Good God, are you still doing that?"

“Yes, and its those sort of comments that mean I won’t ask *you* to watch over me”

“I’d like to hear what the doc would have to say about it”

“I see you’re still as safe as soup Tilly, Safe as soup.”

“I am not, its just that’s a little *too* risky.”

“But Tilly! The stuff I’ve put down on record, 5 minutes later I don’t understand a bit of it, but the computer does. I’d have to spark up again to get a word but it all adds to the systems flexibility and learning. And even if it’s stuff that you don’t understand once you charge down it can look absolutely mind blowing to the un-sparked brain. I Nannied Cecile while she did a visual art piece based on some scary math’s formula she’d worked on. It was mad, I couldn’t believe what she was coming out with, all mapped in 3D but it looked...well you can access the computer to look if you like.”

“Well at the risk of being called boring and safe, I’ve been out for four hours now. I’m back to the pool. Bye Ricky”

“Sleep well, soup girl” Ricky called with a smile.

He continued on to the Monitoring centre. He had a Spark kit there. If Cecile didn’t show up he might just go in without a Nanny, what the hell.

From the darkness of a side tunnel a figure watched him pass. A masked figure dressed entirely in black stood motionless. After Ricky had passed the figure slid back a small hatch in the wall and pushed a finger into the hole that was revealed. He spoke into the air.

“Ricky Baker continues as expected. It’s all harmless. Kid’s stuff. We can see it all on monitors, there’s no need for me here. Returning to the pod.”

The figure stepped back further into the darkness and without a sound turned and walked five steps, reached up, grabbed something and then shot vertically into the ceiling. Ten seconds

later he was being lowered into a cylindrical glass vessel. The tiny room had three such containers. They glowed a dark green. Each occupant was dressed in black and was otherwise featureless except for a black dagger strapped to the thigh. Each had its finger plugged into a socket at the side of the tube, and all were submerged in the same soup that the rest of the composite shared. However these 3 figures did not share the large communal tanks with the rest of the composite. For the majority, the communality of the soup was part of the point, the closeness allowed the electromagnetic auras of the whole to fuse. The soup that these three figures shared was the same but they were isolated from the rest, and according to all official computer records they were all dead. As the black clad man plugged his finger into the socket just like his associates around him he was immediately given an update of all that had passed. A nutrient delivery was due in a few hours, one of the freelance transport pilots. His ship would be fitted with a self-modified weapons system. The pilot had made use of the 'weapons composite' workshop and parts and had got them for free in exchange for some details on his new optical targeting system. One of them would observe, although the man was among the most trusted of the freelancers. The black figure also acknowledged the records of the Cecile girl leaving the compound again, a shared thought between them and the computer rippled through their collective minds, she would not meet with Ricky, and he would be hyper charging his brain matter within minutes. He would be scared and thrilled taking that risk unsupervised, without someone to Nanny him, or so he thought. He had the whole computer and 3 people doing just that, right here. They would not let anything go wrong. He was being lined up as the next member of their team and he'd be good at it.

A motor started up and the black clad figure next in line began to rise out of the liquid. Two minutes later she dropped silently to the floor within a vast space that held the capacitors for

the Geo-thermal pylons. It was a mundane task but one she had purposefully requested. They could get mechanicals to do this job, or set traps and get the normal population to collect the corpses, but why taint the image of cleanliness for the rest. Something's were best kept quiet. They had a nasty rat infection down here and the buggers could get anywhere. Lorna unsheathed her knife with a barely audible *shinnng*. She enjoyed the hunt, it was good practice.

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Cecile had reached the bottom of the winding path that ran from the top of the cliff down the gentler slopes that lay to the north and finally to the plain below. She looked over her shoulder at the vast mollusc of the factory spilling over the cliff edge. The dark shape of a delivery freighter could be seen approaching the factory from the horizon to the south. The 'transport composite beta' ran a linking chain of delivery routes across a 500 mile square. The freighter roared towards the factory on vast legs of flame. As it got closer Cecile could see how heavily armoured it was. She always felt it was a bit over the top. Enough weaponry to destroy a city. She snorted, shaking her head. She could now recognise the markings on the vast detachable cargo container that hung like a pregnant belly under the ships comparatively minimal frame. A small symbol, a broken chain link immediately indicated to her mild surprise that this Freighter was freelance, not formally part of any transport composite. They had their advantages as they often traded outside of the established supply chains. Therefore they could furnish some more varied commodities. However the larger symbol next to his small sign of independence, two bold ears of corn marked in yellow pigment confirmed that it was a regular nutrient delivery. Its contents were

a complex paste that would be drip fed into the soup system over the next month.

Occasionally they allowed themselves the luxury of banqueting on solids so it might also contain a small supply of old-fashioned food. It was a burden to the system nevertheless because their bodies then created waste products that were not in tune with the soups delicate chemical mechanics. It was becoming less popular. If the majority chose to give it up then that would be it. Ultimately most solids were shown as increasing cancer risk, treatment may be revoked.

The town that she was heading for lay on the river. It was about another mile off. She started walking. Today was a hazy day. There was less risk from the sun and she pushed back the hood of her cloak, breathing the air deeply. She rarely went to the town, preferring the countryside but she would have to take the risk. She had a thin silver dagger in her waistband and a pouch in her leg held a small but powerful projectile weapon. She would be safe enough.

A short while later she reached the vast greenhouses that held the soup-fuelled food production for the town. Through the glass she could see white suited figures move among the plants. They would be on a strict 1-hour rotation. The atmosphere inside would be stifling and would drain the energy of the fittest worker. Soon after she was walking through a residential area, all the windows were either darkened or had solar panel shutters. Vehicles with opaque windows stood close to the entrances to the buildings under a protective covering. This was a middle class area. All of its occupants would strictly follow the rules about being in the sun. If it had been a more affluent area the cars would have been underground. People of higher standing practically never felt outside air on their bodies. It was crass. Some cars slid past silently, one beeped a warning horn at her. She could hear

some raised voices calling something through the windows, although she could not make out the words or see their faces.

Her goal was about another half a mile where this residential area met with a retail district. She heard a loud roar to her left. The freighter ship had obviously finished its nutrient drop and began to settle on the outskirts of the town further south. Its engines roared. It was against protocol for it to be burning those pillars of fire so close to the town. The cargo hold of the craft had changed its markings. The paint-job on the side conducted electricity and could fluctuate between displaying any number of markings depending on how the current flowed. Now two bold yellow cog wheels sat on the side of the cargo bay. It would be transporting on behalf of the Mechanics Production factory gamma, some 70 miles to the south. Theirs was a smaller composite with a lower rating than hers. They had obviously decided to trade with the town for scrap metal and other raw materials. The payoff to the town could come from any of the local composite factories. It may even come in the form of extra energy from her factory. If this cloudy weather was long lasting the town may need a little boost. The balance would be settled when her factory received goods from the mechanics composite itself. She recalled they needed a new service robot, and the capacitors needed some wiring overhauls. It was not unknown for the final payment to come from a factory 3 or 4 steps down a payment chain. The Mech-factory may buy scrap from the town. Her own composite may feed the town some energy in payment but they may not need mechanics at the time so the mech-factory may pay a nutrient factory in mechanical parts. The Nutrient factory could provide nutrient supplies to a weapon's composite who may then supply their own factory with ammo, thus finally completing the transaction. The freighter disappeared behind the houses and she continued her walk, thinking how all of the pilots' dealings would be done from within his cockpit. They didn't take chances.