

Composite Soup

By Giles D Hobbs
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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 21st 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 20th 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 doctor's 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 21st 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.

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 the vessel.

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Jerry had boosted his ship away from the town near the energy composite an hour previously. They had stockpiled a large supply of compressed scrap metals that had made the ship a little sluggish. He had then dropped these off at one of the miscellaneous manufacturing factories, avoiding conversation and was now scooting a specially designed set of curved

glass panels over to the bio-technology Composite. They were a strange bunch. They engaged in significantly less open sharing of information than was traditional among the factories, who historically trusted each other pretty well. As far as he could tell there was little known about their activities over the past six months. They had also specifically requested that he do the drop when they had previously used the transport composite quite happily. As planned he was about an hour ahead of schedule and feeling that some time in the soup would be refreshing he decided to trust his new equipment and settled the ship onto a small hilltop about a mile from the bio-technology composites walls. He undressed and strapped himself into the gel-harness that would suspend him within the cylinder of soup positioned in the cockpits corner and allowed the mechanical hoist to lift him and lower him into its nourishing embrace. 'Just an hour' he thought 'to ease the muscles a little'.

Unfortunately he got 20 minutes before a siren sounded and the hoist quickly lifted him from the silent peace. As was the soups nature it sloughed from his body leaving him dry. Only a small amount remained in his hair, which he slicked back while running to the view screen. The computer had selected one target and was requesting authorisation to initiate its attack sequence. He held off the command and looked at the object that had strayed within his defence perimeter. It was, he could only assume, standing about 400 yards from the ship. The magnification of the defence screen showed it clearly. It was a metal cylinder about 6 feet in height, held above the ground on four metal articulated legs. Three exceptionally flexible arms radiated from about one third of the way up its main body, each articulated in 5 or 6 places. They were designed for intricacy rather than power. It had no apparent openings or windows but what could be a connection valve and two speakers sat at the lower extremity of the cylinder. It then did something that seemed incredibly out of place for a metal monstrosity such as this. It settled down until its casing touched the floor and then in a very human gesture seemed to fold its two side arms in front of itself, while the third began to wave at him from above the metal casing. Its right-most foreleg then began to tap with seeming impatience. "What the fuck is that" he exclaimed and sat down to observe a little longer.

The strange creature had obviously lost its patience for waiting so it stood and scuttling over to a small rise in the arid ground it used one of its arms to scratch the words "HELLO?" into the soil. It then turned and began to beckon him with two arms, at the same time moving closer with obvious caution. Jerry stabbed a communication channel open shouting "don't move an inch, wait", dressed, grabbed a powerful laser rifle, slung it over his shoulder and grabbed a remote that he could use to initiate the ships defence program. A metal signature strip that ran through his clothing,

down his arms and legs would prevent the ship firing on him, however the new optical technology he had employed should be able to tell him apart by itself.

By the time the cockpits circular platform hit the dry floor the bizarre creature was significantly closer. A little surprised, Jerry rotated the gun from his shoulder to a firing position and dropped to one knee. "Stop there and identify yourself!"

"Please Mr Kurow, Jerry; you are in no danger."

Although the voice was artificial it was not much different than had a human been speaking through a microphone. He could now identify what he assumed were a ring of lenses that ran around the circumference of the cylinder.

"Who do you belong to? You're very advanced for a mechanoid, you don't look it but...your behaviour....or are you simply a remote drone?" it moved forward a little, "Stop there and identify yourself"

"Jerry, my name is Professor Delaross and I am neither a remote drone nor a mechanic, well not in any way you have seen before. It will take some explaining, but I personally requested your presence and the cargo you carry. Although these efficient legs will carry me back to the factory in minute's maybe you would trust me enough to give me a ride back, the dust is a little abrasive on my joints."

The message requesting his delivery had indeed come from a Delaross but...this was amazing and Jerry didn't know what to think. His hesitation showed.

"Jerry, this is the bio-tech Composite, I am its leading scientist, I have tried something new which is apparently quite amazing, judging by your face, and I Professor Delaross am inside this contraption probably permanently and by my own free will. I will not harm you. Please, I have a lot to discuss with you and I think we can find somewhere more comfortable, for you at least. So can we go?"

"Aw Fuck," Jerry stood, "If your some clever bomb I'm going to be really pissed off." He waved the rifle towards the ship and walked backwards observing the agile scuttling movement of the mechanical Professor Delaross. They both travelled up on the platform together, Jerry feeling a little close for comfort to something he understood so little.

Once inside the professor started talking again. "Ahhh now I see how best to explain. If you could actually pilot your ship from within your soup cylinder, which can be arranged by the way, then you and your ship would be similar, in part, to me and this machine. The only differences being that I am a permanent resident and my interface with the computer that controls this machine and the soup in which I am suspended is entirely new, to the point that I now see us as indistinguishable. The metal" He clanked one hand against the shell," is as much part of Professor Delaross as the

somewhat degraded, no not degraded, adapted physical body that sits inside. In only months organs have been changing their function. I still need to recycle the soup from the composite stores but my liver is already adapting to deal with soup detoxification in the same way it used to deal with my blood. It's been a fascinating process and one that I honestly don't understand."

"Don't you miss the communal soup tanks in the composite?" Jerry queried.

"Do you?"

"I've never been part of a composite. Not my thing, you know, maverick type, anti-social personality traits, tendency to selfish introspection."

"It sounds like you once applied. That sounded like the psych test results of a composite"

"Naahh, Just read a lot."

"Well Jerry, we may be quite similar. I love the freedom from physical sensation that the soup offers, but I never really enjoyed the transcendence bit much and I've never been very community spirited. It interferes with my focus for a start. I'm too cerebral for my own good.

Anyway, you think this is impressive?"

He indicated to the console. "Press buttons, waggle that stick thingy, lets get going I have important things to show you."

As they lifted from the hilltop Jerry turned to the Professor. "You know you mentioned flying from within the Soup tank? Well I don't mean to brag but its just fancy translation software. I could rig that up with my eyes closed."

"I know you could Jerry, that's why I asked for you."

It took literally moments for them to arrive and with some communication from the professor the Hanger bay doors swung open. The Professor had not spoken while they flew which Jerry guessed was unusual as he reckoned he liked the sound of his own voice. He was likeable though.

He guessed either the professor felt that Jerry's task required more concentration than it did, or that this was a novel experience and he was either terrified or entranced by the flight.

They disembarked together again but Jerry felt less threatened by the proximity of the professor. Delaross stopped.

"Jerry one second, please. Before we proceed to my workshop I would like to request something from you. I could have used anyone to ferry the components I needed but it's possible I may want to hire your services to help with a small technical block I've hit. It's just some fine programming and hardware configuration that is eluding me, a bit of a puzzle. I know all about your skills, you not only practically built that craft of yours, you also did all the AI work and your new optical translation software that powers your defence system is known to us, although I know it shouldn't be. We

are aware that you have developed the exact 'soup-time piloting system' we discussed earlier and have installed it in a number of your competitors freight craft. However the nature of my work is quite sensitive and although I trust you on first instincts, I would like to request you spend a few hours in the analytical section of our soup complex and submit to a brief test. I just need to get a concrete profile. If you accept the job the rewards could turn you from a sole trader to a fleet manager if you desired. We have the resources; we are the most lucrative composite on this continent. What do you say?"

"Well I need a rest, and we can discuss terms if your tests show me to be the trustworthy guy you hope. Lead on."

The tests were not at all intrusive and he was almost fully transcended for the 4 hours it took. A brief conscious question test took only 20 minutes before the professor was satisfied. He felt rested and ready for work.

"Professor, this is the bio-tech composite, theoretically full of the best in the field. Why can't you manage this puzzle between you?"

"Simple. In the main, the composites are not full of geniuses, they're normal folk. Admittedly the bio-tech attracted more than its share of good thinkers but the composites were never meant to be elitist. They were set up for the common man, remember? Also, the composites are now very specialised entities. We produce products or ideas of one type only. It's lead to the biggest failing in the system and the main reason I have stepped outside the system while still managing to live within it. Tell me, why do people ever hire you to trade?"

"I guess, from what I've been told it's because I work outside of the Composite structure. I pick up on trades from a variety of sources, and I bring novel goods into a closed system. They get stuff from me that the composite freighters don't provide."

"Yes Jerry, we need you because they only trade efficiently within the system and we only think efficiently within the system. We sleep together, we share space, and to some extent we even share thoughts directly while we are transcended. If an idea is eluding a composite then it is unlikely that any freak thought will emerge that will allow us to step outside the mould. If someone bucks the system we suppress it. Human life thrives on mutations of body and thought, it's what keeps us changing, allows us to adapt. I'm afraid we maybe loosing that. And it's why we have had to reach to a mind outside the system to help find a solution. That's you Jerry"

"Ok, that's makes sense and to be honest your getting my juices flowing. You guys have produced some pretty wild stuff out here, so I'm guessing this is some impressive plan you're working on."

"Follow me"

They left the small Analysis centre with its two tube baths similar to those on his ship, understandably mostly separated from the main soup pools. After one hundred yards of silent corridor they reached a doorway. As they walked Professor Delaross spoke only once. "Jerry, I need you to know that I would never allow you to join this composite and I strongly hope that you never accept an offer from any others. I wouldn't ask anyway because I know you would refuse but composites are nothing but the factories they reside within. We have become the machine as I said earlier and our days as thinking entities are almost over. You asked why I called for you; well I am seriously getting little creative input from the composite group. We operate with blinding efficiency and the ultimate aim has been achieved, happiness and a source of income to maintain that happiness.

We essentially have over a 1 in 24 hour rating, even higher than the Energy composite. They run off energy which requires little physical input, we run off ideas which apart from putting them into place requires very little and the machines cope with the implementation, but they are insipid and uninspired ideas that mostly leak from the communal thoughts of the transcended mass. I'd like to slip some stimulants into their precious Nirvana and give them a Jolt but I'd be out so fast I wouldn't have time to oil my joints, and I need them. Well, we're here."

They were at a door. It was unremarkable except for the fact it began to talk. "Welcome Jerry, when you are done please consider joining the composite. Your test results show that you would be a helpful addition to our community. I'm sure you will wish to discuss enrolment with the professor. We currently have a 1 in....."

Music began to blast out from the professor's speaker, it was impressive, but Jerry understood it was not produced to entertain. The door opened and they stepped through.

The room beyond was a mass of storage shelves for a variety of equipment that would normally have entranced Jerry was it not for the central space that housed a large globe of metal and black glass. It was at least 30 feet tall and had a cylindrical protrusion to one side that suggested that the sphere would eventually become modular. Jerry recognised the shape of the Glass panels that formed the globe from the cargo he had carried over and guessed that the panels he had bought would form a second globe to sit alongside.

"This is my work Jerry. Now I see it again I feel you may think of me as a hypocrite after all I have said, but I believe if these fools want transcendence then we may as well put it to use. Before I depolarise the glass and show you what's inside I will warn you that this device contains human volunteers. There were initially just two who were, incidentally, lovers. Well actually that was the point considering what they had volunteered for. Jerry, we fused them, physically. Their neurones, nerves

and bodies became as one being. It was a major feat and it didn't end in disaster, luckily. The initial results have been translated into three outputs, an audible signal, a pure data stream, and a visual output but unfortunately we haven't progressed much beyond that initial signal, and that's where you translation expertise comes in."

He scuttled over to a console facing the globe.

"This is the audible signal" He hit a button.

What came from the speakers was like something from a pornographic movie. It was, simply, an ecstatic throbbing moan, gender-less but expressing above anything else pleasure. Jerry was amazed to find that the sound alone began to arouse him.

"The visual signal has been nothing but this." The Professor's arm touched a sensi-screen and moved a digitised slider up one notch. A larger screen to the right came to life and produced nothing but a vibrant red pulsating light. The moan and the light throbbed in unison and Jerry suddenly had to rearrange himself to cover an embarrassing reaction in his trousers. He desperately tried to take some professional control.

"This is all very well Professor, but what actual data are you getting from whatever this is. It would help if I could also see what we are dealing with here".

"Very well Jerry, but I'm afraid it isn't at all as sexy as it sounds, quite the opposite really."

Delaross stabbed at another button. The glass sphere depolarised and revealed the familiar green glow of a soup pool but inside the translucent liquid was a writhing monstrosity.

"Oh my god" Jerry was awe struck.

He counted the bodies; twelve in total formed a mesh of gently flexing torso's and limbs. It was obvious who the initial participants were because they formed the centre of the mass and were fused almost along their entire physical length. Another four were joined at the skull to the original two and from there limbs joined heads, with again more limbs spread to meet with various extremities of later additions. They filled the sphere in a net of distorted arms and legs, all fused into a giant Siamese mass. Jerry walked closer. The throbbing moan and the red light filled the room but he was no longer aroused. The bodies writhed in synchronicity to the throbbing sound but they were all obviously unconscious. Just inside the shell of the globe sensors ran along supporting struts that held the glass frames together, emitting bursts of near invisible light into the green fluid.

Some wires ran into the mass and connected to the bodies, fused to the flesh. "Is this reversible? Please say it is"

The Professors voice rose above the sexual reverie, "If you ignore how it looks you can understand why people volunteered to join up, it sounds like fun, but to be honest I really don't know if we can undo this or not. I'm not

pessimistic. I don't see any reason why we would need to."

Jerry was swinging between revulsion and fascination. As he got closer he could see small black shapes moving around in the fluid, small robots probably monitoring for damage to the fused sites and capable of repairing any tissue damage.

"What about the data stream?"

Their voices were raised close to a shout to compete with cacophony.

"Well, I told you the output hasn't changed significantly since the original two were in place. It responds in much the same way as you would expect, it answers questions based on the combined knowledge and experience of the two volunteers. We did extensive tests on the first two volunteers whilst they were still individuals. Now their response is unmistakably different from their independent answers when separated so it is clear they are working with the soup, computer and within the feedback system as a cohesive pair. The problem is we haven't been able to extend the data stream to successfully include the new additions. They must be feeding into the system but maybe the initial pair is in some way dominant.

Our translation process is somehow stuck with the original calibration and we can't look outside it."

"So you want me to somehow improve the translation to reflect the thinking of the whole?"

"Exactly, what do you think?"

Jerry quickly moved to the console, closer than he had managed to get so far. He hit the same two buttons that the professor had used to open this grizzly scene to his senses. The glass darkened and the sound and light cut dead.

"Give me a few days and I'll see what I can do"

"Jerry I'm so pleased you'll help us."

"Sure, just one thing. I work best on my own, and give me 2 days. Deal? Leave me the schematics and test data. OK?"

"I expected as much, and anyway I don't want my blocked thinking interfering with your progress, I'll be happy to leave you alone. I really enjoyed our little jaunt in your ship earlier. I think I'm going to request a chartered flight, get to see some countryside. I'll explain that I need it as part of my research, looking at the networks that exist between population centres or something these numbskulls will swallow. I'll have everything you need together in half an hour."

Jerry walked around the entire circumference of the sphere until he returned back to the main block of consoles. He located a chair, based on an old design with wheeled feet and a seat with a backrest, both of which swivelled on the pedestal. Pulling it towards the monitors he spun it so it twirled three or four times, cracked his fingers and dropped into the seat.

Cecile had traversed the outer residential areas of the town and was in a busier district close to the town centre. She could see her final destination. The building had an illuminated red-cross on its roof, a medical clinic. She decided, partly because she was nervous but also just to soak up some atmosphere that she would stop in a market. It was obviously for regular folk; it didn't have a drive-in underground car park, but instead, as much ground space was given over to a vast covered parking area as was dedicated to the market itself. She stepped under its shade and made her way between the forty or fifty cars that rested there. As she approached the door she mused at the society around her. If someone from 200 years ago woke today they would find that the sun burnt, the medical industry turned on its head, a much lower population and a stratified society mainly symbolised by the imposing factories, but otherwise a world where regular folk shopped, worked, fucked and played.

Population centres had changed, characterised by fairly small but discrete towns, certainly not the Mega-Cities once envisioned and fairly arid unused land between. Government went about its usual business, and was pretty much democracy the world over. There was tension between the Composites and the outsiders, tension between the outsiders and the Sun-worshippers and lots of tension and some fighting between the Sun-worshippers and the Composites. There was subtle terrorist action and occasional all out battles between the latter two and bands of outsiders ranging from disorganised protesting rabbles right up to paramilitary trained assault teams would lay siege to the heavily armed composites or freighter craft on occasion. The composites had the governmental support mainly because they fed a sizeable chunk of their production into the government structure and this ultimately made its way to the people. All this considered, at the end of the day, here she was in a market selling designer labels, consumer level technology and toys just like there had always been.

Once inside she began to wander aimlessly, looking more at the people than the goods themselves. However there were always moments at times like this when she coveted some small trinket or personal item she passed. As Doctor Joplin had stated they individually possessed no money, so the purchase of a frivolous item was out of the question. She stopped near an optical goods stand. A sleek, but small and quite cheap set of binoculars sat within a glass cabinet. As an 'inside people' there were no personal binoculars at the composite, screens could relay what the computer defence system saw but she liked the idea of taking a walk with this neat bit of technology. She thought a little. There was a way. The outsiders had a much more established sense of fun than those in the

composites and although modern values were starting to impose an almost prudish approach to sex it was not unknown for a suitable deal to be struck.

An attractive man in a cheaper version of her own style of body suit but with a jacket over the top instead of her almost weightless cloak stood browsing sunglasses some 20 feet away. She turned, approached and to imply the right message was received used the traditional signal of one finger placed at the solar plexus before she coughed for his attention. She tilted her head and smiled.

“There’s a lovely but modest priced set of binoculars behind me that I would love, but unfortunately I have no money. Could we strike a deal?” her smile flashed. Even considering her current health state, being a composite member meant she almost glowed with well-being and good health. The man looked unabashed and smiled back. He looked admiringly at her.

“I’m sorry, but unfortunately I have an established personal obligation in place.”

“How very modern of you” she laughed lightly to show she was not scolding him too much.

“What skills do you have? We could sweeten my obligation partner if you had anything to add to the deal.”

“You can pretty much name it, but currently energy system management has to be my best asset.”

“Well, well, our air conditioning unit is well overdue for a check-up and I have the parts handy” he smiled further, “let me just communicate with her, one second.” He turned his back and pressed his comm-stud in his earlobe.

“Hi babe. I’ve got a lovely young lass here looking for an X-trade, I was wondering what your feelings were at the moment....whoa, one sec... bearing in mind she’s competent with energy systems and..” at this he turned and looked her up and down “I’m pretty sure she’s from the composite.....yes I know she’s taking a risk, one of those wild ones we hear about now and then. Uh huh, hold a second.” He took his finger away from his ear, “My partner says if you know how put a block on a window polarizer unit, stop it going below 80, she’ll throw herself in on the deal.”

Cecile held out her hand and he shook it. “And I wasn’t wrong was I” he added, “You are from the composite”.

She simply nodded and looked about her, suddenly unsure.

* * *

She sat in the clinic waiting room. The ‘Gamleys’ as the couple was called had warned her not to attempt this but she wanted to be well again, without

transcending her precious hours away. They had been a nice couple and knew each other's bodies well. She felt flushed and excited. She had fixed up the air-conditioner, and limited the window to 80% and above.

Their young son had come close to being blinded by a child's prank so they wanted to lock the window setting. They had talked about the Composite and she had said she would put a word in for them. They so badly wanted to be on the inside, dreamt of it. They spent the majority of their earnings on a six-hour per day soup habit, eight for their son, but getting accepted into a composite was hard. It would ride on how their EM signature fitted with the composite whole, and if the psychometric tests would show them to be of value. The birth rate in the factory was low, inevitable due to the amount of transcendence time so new blood may be welcome at this time. She promised she would go back and see them later, when the clinic was shut. She reached to her waist and felt the small pouch that held her little binoculars. She knew it was silly but she liked the ownership of them. They were hers, damn it, she'd worked for them.

She had been seen briefly by a doctor who had asked her to wait while he made some calls. A young pretty girl of about 11 years old left one of the examining rooms. She had a bandage on her right forearm. The girl walked over and stopped, looking at Cecile.

She spoke. "You're pretty. One day I'm going to look like you"
"Thank you, that's sweet" Cecile replied.

The girl smiled endearingly, put on some sunglasses and skipped away out of the building. Cecile knew from her clothing and the sun-block that she was a member of a family that refused the restrictions of legislature regarding the sun. Her family must be able to afford treatment, if that's what she was here for; the fresh bandage suggested she was. She wondered how they met the costs, they would not get health insurance and the girl didn't look wealthy. There were schemes set up by Sun-worshipper co-operatives that helped cover cancer treatment but there was also an underlying criminal racket that had worked its way into much of the health care system. Not here though, this was a safe little town, the Sun-worshipper community was tiny, not enough to attract any organised criminal or terrorist groups. Anyway it had been checked out.

She knew there would be some payment deal she would personally have to meet, they were not going to treat her for free but she had made out she was here visiting family and the Gamleys had agreed to back her up on that. It was just a case of reaching some mutually acceptable agreement.

She was young and she could meet their terms.

Cecile picked up a magazine, glanced at the receptionist who quickly looked away. Cecile frowned a little.

It was getting dark and a shape was approaching. The factory sensors alerted the weapon systems to power up. A single living figure headed onto the causeway. The sensors around the area began to take samples. From the electromagnetic aura it established the figure was a human. It took a weight reading, skin analysis and scent reading from the causeway sensors, and searched its database. The data spiralled through its logic circuits and for some reason it felt the need to double check a small discrepancy, the scent of blood, logged it and requested a diagnostic which began immediately, but within a fraction of a second it had identified Cecile, Cecile Khan-Ewing. The wanderer had returned. The doors opened for her and a voice chimed. "Welcome back Cecile, please log a request to see Dr Joplin immediately." The door closed and the outer weapon systems powered down for the second time in two days. The figure walked a few moments hunched over, then began to pick up the pace. She immediately headed down a dark corridor to the right, into the factories most unpopulated areas. The dark figure was barely visible and it expertly darted away, following the continuous shadows. It ran left, left, up a small flight of stairs and then stopped crouching, still totally hidden. From under the hood a soft sobbing sound came, the slim shoulders shook. Jumping up again it ran another 20 yards and opened a door that slowly began to swing shut behind her. Inside, the small figure approached a computer console that sat next to some piping. A bottle was removed from the cloak, it was streaked in red. The bottle was then screwed into a valve that sat in the piping. A small hand reached to the lever that would open the valve. The door behind her finally swung shut with a faint click, a click that was perfectly timed to hide a barely audible sound, 'schinnng'. Before the small hand could apply an ounce of pressure to open the valve there was a fast movement and the robed figure fell into the arms of a larger figure dressed entirely in black. It slid the long black dagger from the body and looked at it. The face of a small pretty girl, barely eleven years old looked up, the last of her life slipping away. Her face was lightly stained with a few red streaks, as was her dark thin clothing. She had a bandage on her forearm. Her back, resting on his arm felt strange. He pushed the robe further aside and a groan of despair issued from his mouth. Tied round her neck, covering her head and lying down the full length of her body was a blood streaked robe of human flesh, hidden beneath her own light cloak. He collapsed onto one knee. He knew immediately whose skin it was and he knew the woman's name, Cecile. Her features were barely visible in the distorted skullless face that covered the girls blond hair. His own tears joined those on the small girls face. He and Cecile had

been lovers before he agreed to join the factories stealth unit; he had never been able to speak to her again.

He forced himself to move. As he soundlessly traversed the corridors the entire evil subterfuge that had brought this girl here was already mapping itself in his head. He was pretty sure by the look of the girl's bandage that this horrible act was probably in order pay for the extortionate medical care bills some families ended up with. Medical care on the outside was part of and funded a bigger organised crime syndicate than drugs ever had. They had given this girl the horrific choice of dying or wearing another person's skin in order to fool their security system and infiltrate their factory. His body screamed out with pain and rage. They must have extracted information about the layout of the factory somehow, and then set about to strip Cecile's gentle flesh from her body. He would make them pay. He found an unused corridor and plugged his finger into the wall, refusing to look at the bundle he held.

"Intruder neutralized. Send Lorna, immediately. She will find the body. I'm sorry I can't bring myself to take it to the recycler and I have something else I must do."

Ten minutes later the black figure that was Felix stood within the factories turbine unit. He could just hear the roar of water that passed through the huge pipes over the loud whine that came from the rotating turbines themselves. In his hand he held a bottle, the same one the girl had sneaked inside. He had retrieved it and come here to execute his revenge. It contained a dense clear liquid, a potent toxin that had been intended to poison the composites soup system. Hauling himself up onto the top of the turbine unit he located what he was looking for. Breaking a seal from the top of the bottle he then screwed it into an opening of a small valve unit like the one the girl had found. His fingers were shaking as he placed them on the lever next to it. The whole town was not to blame but they contained a group of people who were getting far too clever and too close. They had also destroyed the one tender memory that remained from his previous life. He pushed down on the lever. The computer didn't know what he had done yet and he knew how to hold the thought back when he plugged back into the system, for a while at least. By then it would be too late. Even now, and slowly over the next week this bottle would drain its contents into the water that fell down to the plain below. Not everyone would die immediately but the powerful toxin would destroy their own soup system and directly poison most people through their drinking water.

He was part of security after all, and very soon the river village would cease being a threat to the composite population he watched over. At the end of the day their lives were going to get a lot easier. He may even get

to increase his own soup time to something more in line with the rest of the composite's population. He walked away, all the while trying to recall his memories of Cecile as they had been before the horrible events of tonight that had marred them forever.

As he walked away he heard the turbines begin to wind down. He heard valves open that would redirect the water harmlessly away from the bottle and out through another route to the river below. He stopped and turned. No! How had the system known?

"Felix" a woman's voice called from behind him.

Turning, he saw Lorna standing in the semi-darkness. Her knife was sheathed. He started walking and as he passed she fell into step beside him.

They said nothing. A few moments later a drone whizzed past on its way to remove the bottle from the turbines.

Once back at the cell, and safely in the gentle womb of the soup he plugged his finger back into the system. Thoughts flooded through him, some of them attempting to form some kind of explanation, but nevertheless they attempted to provide comfort. Cecile was dissenting; she was becoming out of control and putting herself in incredible risk. The computer had made a decision independent from the security team. It needed clear information about the locations of any threat from the town. It knew there was a small terrorist cell growing there and Cecile had been perfect bait.

For her the outcome was inevitable anyway, eventually. This way they now had exact details, she had been bugged without her knowledge. The computer had scent samples, EM signatures, locations and numbers. He mustn't doubt that they would use his anger, there would be revenge but killing them all served the composite no purpose. In time they would all be useful. Before Felix slipped into transcendence the computer indicated one more thing. The bug they had attached to Cecile should have powered down when she died. It was still transmitting.

* * *

"Professor Delaross, report immediately to the hanger"

With stunning agility that belied his bulk the metal figure of the professor scampered through the corridors of the Biotechnology composite. He entered the hanger to find the bay door closing and Jerry's ship gone.

"What the hell is going on" he called out. A man ran over to him, shaken and breathless.

"We couldn't stop him. He threatened to fully fire up his thrusters if we didn't open the bay doors. The damage would have been horrific. That's considering he didn't open up his weapon system. We don't know why he left in such a hurry; there is no reported damage anywhere in the compound. We are beginning to check for theft but I think that's unlikely

considering the payoff he could have expected for helping us.”
Delaross spoke as he spun and headed out. “I’ll be in the main lab.”

When he arrived in his lab the sphere glass was clear and nothing looked out of the ordinary. He approached the console where a chair was overturned. One of the console monitors was flashing his name. He began to read.

“Professor, I wish I hadn’t succeeded but I did. The recalibration is accessible through the original slider settings. You were right. The readings you were getting were being filtered through the original pair. You now have a data stream that makes full use of all members of this monstrous hell. For god sake professor undo what you have created!!!”
The professor looked to the digital slider and with trepidation activated the pure data stream. His computer-enhanced mind could already hear the difference in the signal. He slipped it another notch to the visual setting.

The same pulsing red light filled the room with its erotic overtones. Then finally he accessed the Audible setting.

A vast chorus called out from the surrounding speakers but they no longer sounded vaguely erotic. Twelve voices screamed in unison, a scream of pain, terror and despair. Over and over it echoed off the lab walls. The bodies pulsed, just as before but it was now clear that they had never been writhing in ecstasy, their mouths were gasping, faces contorted. He looked back to the red pulsing light and saw that it alone had been calibrated correctly and had been giving the right signal all this time. A red flashing, mistaken for the red of love, but now seen in reality to be an alarm, a warning, the red of pain, blood and horror.

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