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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 your 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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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“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.