

Frustration

'The damned thing's not working again,' Jol shouted, flinging a wrench across the room in disgust. 'That's five times this week.'

'Try putting jam on it,' Paulie suggested from the comfort of her hammock.

'What?'

'Jam, best thing ever invented. I've always said that you can't go far wrong as long as you've got some jam about your person.'

'You're mad, Paulie, you know that? Fruit loop.' Jol hauled himself to his feet, ignoring the creaks and groans from the pipework as he did so, and plodded across the room to collect his discarded wrench. Tucking it into his utility belt, he hit the door switch, waiting impatiently for its old, wheezing mechanism to swing open, and strode out of the room. A melody of invective marked his progress up the corridor in fading volume.

Paulie waited for the door to cut off the noise, then swung carefully from her hammock. A moment's guddling in the steel locker beneath soon yielded what she was looking for. She crossed to the data panel where Jol had spent a fruitless hour with his plasma wrench, placed the jar on the top edge and pulled out her knife. Lights flickered across the desk as she spread the thick strawberry goo, back and forth in even strokes like a master patissiere at her craft. Slowly, almost rhythmically, the surface began to ripple, skin caressed by a lover's fingers, as the jam was absorbed into the panel. A gentle hum rose from the console, undulating in time to the flickering lights. Like a purring kitten, Paulie thought as she licked the last of the jam off the knife and put the pot back in her locker. Around her, the ship hummed louder. A gentle, almost imperceptible lurch made the empty hammock sway, then settle as the compensators kicked in.

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The behemoth flowed through the black depths like a monstrous eel, silvery trails of phosphorescence marking its passage. Twin scoops on its flanks drank deep,

sifting trace elements and heavy metals out of the sea, splitting the very water and storing everything in its holding sacs. It swam through the icy wastes with deceptive speed, its vast size making it seem sluggish whilst it far outpaced any other living thing. Sensors all along its outer skin felt into the murk, searching for the richest seams, the thickest shoals of aquatic creatures, devouring all in its path. Its hunger was insatiable, never-ending despite the increasing bloat of its swelling guts. It felt nothing but the need to feed, constantly, an urge that blotted out all else. Where there should have been a spark of intelligence, something alien squatted, dark and enveloping, blocking the world out. Only the hunger was allowed through, and a deep weariness that screamed into the empty void of its mind.

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'Hey, Paulie, nice going girlfriend.'

Venner sat in the com chair, surveying the inky blackness that was the viewscreen. Occasional flashes of startled marine life flicked across the wall like frightened missiles. The bridge was darkened, not for any security or operational reason, just because that was the way Venner liked it. Slumped in the deep, supportive leatherette cushions, she turned her attention to the tall, dark-skinned woman who had sauntered in.

'It's a gift, what can I say?' Paulie shrugged.

'Jam again?'

'Jol's convinced he can get the thing working with that cute little wrench of his,' Paulie said, not answering the question as she settled herself into another chair and lit up the systems console with a swipe of her hand. 'So like a man.'

'Tell me about it,' Venner laughed. 'He came in here screaming his head off about waking up the beast, how we were all going to get eaten. Chizz, the man's a sheer bundle of joy.'

'Still, I'll be happier when we're full and ready to go.'

'What you saying? You don't like this paradise?' Venner swept her arm in the vague direction of the wall screen. Dawn was rising somewhere over the ocean surface above them, turning the blackness to green. Occasional flashes of refracted light sparkled like emeralds, highlighting her features. High cheekbones, thin nose broken long ago and never properly set, cruelly short hair all picked out in flickering pale lime.

'Sixty-five percent and rising.' Paulie read off the glyphs that spread across her console. 'Y'know how it is Ven, I get goosebumps with all this matter about me. I'm a vacuum kinda girl.'

'True, you're a regular space-babe, girlfriend, but you've got to stay the course. Full tanks and fly home. That's the drill.'

'Yeah, but how long's that gonna take? Damn beast's been on and off like a cheap pair of kecks at a flyboy reunion. I've never know it be so dammed awkward.'

'Point taken, Paulie.' Venner lay back in the com chair and let the encroaching dawnlight wash over her face like a shower. 'We'll get her checked out when we offload. That OK?'

'Sure thing, Cap'n'

'Right, now go and find Jol before he damages something with that wrench of his.'

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The behemoth broached the surface in a roar of foam and crashing waves. As the sun played over shiny, smooth skin, it changed from pale sea white to deepest black, absorbing the energy. Pulsing lines of power flowed through its veins, collecting in muscle tissue like some vast living battery. It crackled, alive and tensed, bulging full with an electricity that raged. Yet still there was only hunger and weakness, a deadening in its mind. Too much effort to think, something holding it back. Far better to give in, sleep, let the water's caress take it down and deep until nothing mattered anymore.

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'Din't touch nothin', me.'

'I never said you did, Jol.'

'What're ye doin' here then. Come to gloat?'

Paulie stepped through the hatchway into the darkened room. It was a part of the ship she only vaguely knew, somewhere she had visited on the induction tour and never needed to come again. An unsettling red glow emanated from thick, irregular pipes set into the ceiling and walls. They seemed to pulse to the rhythm of a dozen or more different pumps. Occasional snaps of static electricity arced from one to another, lighting brief areas. Jol crouched in a corner, his plasma wrench held tight against a heavy metal container that looked strangely out of place in the otherwise womb-like room.

'This here's the source of our problems, Paulie,' he said, a hint of triumph in his voice. 'Scanny bit of hardware put here by some fellow reckoned he was an engineer. Hah.'

'What is it?' Paulie asked, before realising that she really didn't care.

'Something old.' Jol made the word sound like it had watched continents drift. 'Older'n me. Older'n the Company if you ask me. Gizmo must've been welded in just after the ship was launched. Prob'ly worked fine for a hundred years or more, but it's fucked now.'

'You sure?'

'Yeah, course I'm sure. Traced it din't I? What you think I've been doin' all that time you'n cap'n Venner've been over each other? Watchin?'

Paulie ignored the jibe. Tours of duty on the planet cycle were long and boring. Not counting herself, there were three men on board and one woman. Groundel and Jones were deep in cargo, perhaps ten miles away from the com centre. She hadn't heard from them for weeks and she didn't expect to see them until the ship hit vacuum again. And besides, it had taken her less than twenty

four hours aboard to decide who's company she preferred when the isolation hit. Men were like planets, too much density going on. Too self-centred.

'Gotcha,' Jol shouted as a dull metallic clang meant he had succeeded in removing the panel. 'Oh.'

'What is it?'

'Nothing.'

'What did you go 'oh' for then?'

'No, nothing,' Jol said. 'Nada, zip, zilch. Is jus' a box fulla some weird brown stuff like, I dunno, rubber.' He picked at it with his wrench. 'Nah, it's soft, like grease. Smells foul too.'

'So it's not the problem,' Paulie said.

'Could be an insulator. Hang in there Paulie. I'll soon have this baby running again. An' no need for your jam nonsense.' He reached into the box and scooped out a large handful. 'Feels like... what?'

Paulie fell forwards into the room as the whole ship lurched sideways then plunged downwards. Klaxons rang out, echoing up and down the corridor 'Shit Jol, what've you done?' she screamed. 'Put it back. Now.'

Struggling against the sudden pull of momentum, Jol slapped the strange gooey mass back into the hand shaped dimple where he had removed it. Bits stuck to his fingers as he tried to smooth off the surface, but the tremors and lurching of the great ship calmed as he slowly filled the gap.

'Jesus wept, girlfriend, what's going on?' Venner's voice filled the echoing silence left by the abrupt cessation of the klaxons. Shaken, Paulie keyed the communication switch by the door.

'All under control now, Ven,' she said, staring hard at Jol as he fixed the cover back on. Strips of dark, greasy material still clung to his fingers. And was it her imagination or did the whole ship seem slightly out of kilter now? Had there always been that rough edge to the whine of the thrust motors? She couldn't really remember having noticed the whine of the motors at all before, come to think of it. 'I think Jol's going to give up with the plasma wrench though.'

Paulie put out her hand, palm upwards. Jol looked at her, then dropped his eyes from her gaze and passed the tool over. It was wet with the greasy substance, tingling as it came into contact with her skin.

'Get yourself up here quickest, Paulie. We'll be full soon enough, and you know how tense that makes me.'

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For a moment it was awake. Blazing seconds of awareness swept through its body like an electric shock. A ripple of sensation flowed along its gargantuan body, an ecstasy so potent it could almost kill. And it had control. Briefly it felt its body, barely supported by the water, so full, so dense. In a spasm of pain, it plummeted under, rocking back and forth, trying to shake the shackles that still hung around its mind. It could feel them now, know that they were there, driving it on, compelling its actions, making it feed when there was no room left for food. And still the tiredness was its familiar companion, closing in around it even as it stretched itself out and let the cooling waters soothe its blackened flanks. Slowly, like so many times before, the behemoth drifted away from itself, frustration clawing at its mind as, piece by piece, it lost control over its body. Only this time it was different. This time there was a fraction more clarity, as if a tiny piece of consciousness had slipped the chain and now was free to roam.

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'Damn them both to hell,' Jol said to no one in particular. Sitting on his grubby bunk, he could see Paulie and Venner on the viewscreen he had rigged up. There was no erotic thrill to be had anymore from watching their sex; that particular excitement had dried up months ago, not long into their tour. Watching them now was the only way he could feel any power. To know that the secrets

they thought they kept from him were all there, recorded and catalogued. When they were finished, Paulie would come back down to the mess room, shower and climb into her hammock. Why she didn't just share quarters with the Captain was anyone's guess. Then again, the ship had comfortable living quarters for hundreds and facilities that wouldn't shame a stellar hotel. Yet for some reason he and Paulie shared this engineering space, had kitted it out with a crude bunk and a hammock rather than lock themselves away in isolated luxury. Too many spacers went mad not seeing another person for months on end. You had to share with someone, even if you couldn't stand the sight of them.

Jol itched at his hands, rubbing the skin raw where it had touched the strange goo. He had tried to wash the stuff off, thought he had succeeded, but every time he looked down there it was, brown, drying and flaky like a layer of skin peeling off. It didn't exactly sting, but there was a constant sensation, a bit like the thought of pins and needles but with razor blades and lemon juice. Every so often he would catch a whiff of something foul, as if there were a rotting binful of dead fish in a room down the corridor. Close up, the substance plastering his hands was odourless, masking even the normal nail-ingrained lube grease that was as much a part of Jol's persona as was his name.

And he was tired, so tired. Yet he couldn't sleep. Every time he closed his eyes, the itching in his hands grew heavier, the smell wafted through an open door and his mind raced with someone else's thoughts: vast starscapes in impossible clarity and a calling voice so lonely, so mournful it brought tears to his eyes. So he sat on his bunk, watching Paulie and Venner as they ground away at each other in a surprisingly violent search for pleasure. Killing the time before the harvest was complete and they could all go home.

A sudden lurch rocked Jol out of his miserable reverie. He felt the weight of his body sinking away from him as the artificial gravity failed. The whine of the motors increased in pitch, climbing even as it faded until it was gone, like a kettle out of water. Even the omnipresent swish of circulating air died from the vents as the lights flickered once and then cut into emergency mode.

'Damn this useless fucking machine,' Jol shouted at the darkened orange glow of the room. Only the control panel on the far side was still lit, that and the flickering screen where the captain and her first mate were still going at each other as if nothing had happened. 'And damn you two as well.' He searched around for his plasma wrench before remembering that Paulie had taken it, given it as a token of her loyalty and love to the captain.

Jol stared at the control panel for long minutes, waiting for the call to come through telling him to get on with it and fix the problem. The forms on the screen writhed and punched and caressed and moaned but remained oblivious in their ecstasy.

'OK, then. Fuck yourselves silly. I'll get the ship running on my own.' He levered himself up off the bunk. Paulie's locker contained three jars of jam: strawberry, raspberry and plum, and a flat, blunt spreading knife. Jol took them all, making his way carefully across the weightless room to the control panel. It pulsed with the rhythm of the ship, a dozen or more pumps playing a complicated harmony in perfect time with the itching of his palms.

The knife was an awkward tool, Jol found. Great globs of jam fell off it, floating away into the darkness or sticking to his grease-stained overalls. What little he managed to spread on the console disappeared with hungry speed. Frustrated, he grabbed a large globule that had just slipped off the knife and slapped it onto the console with his hand. And with that contact, everything changed.

For a brief instant he could see the whole ship, a hundred miles from tip to tail. He felt the weight in its cargo stomachs. He knew the sleep-deadened frustration of its consciousness. Outwards at the speed of thought, Jol's mind expanded like a balloon in vacuum, thinner and thinner until, with a tiny gasp, it exploded.

Stuck to the panel by his hand, Jol's corpse did not float away with the inertia of his last death spasm. Slowly, like an artist working with a new medium, the console swelled and puckered, pulling first the hand, then the arm and finally the whole body into it. Along with its two unopened comrades, the open jar of jam, floating in the cabin where it had been released, plunged to the floor as the lights came back on and artificial gravity reasserted itself. Splats of jam fell from the air like solid, rubbery rain. Where it hit the floor and walls of the cabin, the sweet ooze soaked into the surface, leaving behind little mottled patches that glowed like healthy skin.

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The behemoth shuddered in its watery cradle, a joyous gout of feeling that filled its entire body. For a few moments it was ecstasy, burning from within. But all too soon the pleasure turned to pain. It was full, so full it wanted to vomit. Great gutfuls of minerals and nutrients sloshed around in its stomach sacs, yet it could not digest anything. Hunger gnawed at the edges of its reason like a teething dog, and weakness sapped its brain of reason, made thought all but impossible.

Yet it thought. Even through the miasma of pain and conflicting sensation, it focused on the one source of power, the joy, the taste it yearned. For a brief instant it had shared minds with another sentient creature, shared its existence. Together they had been able to transcend the purely physical, reach up into higher dimensions. There was strength to be had in those impossible places and it drank deep for the short moments before its companion faded away.

Frustration tugged at the beast then, as it sensed the tiny fleas crawling around its body, felt the irregular, crusty tumours on its carapace. But frustration was an anchor. Frustration was awareness.

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Crossing the floor from the shower cubicle to her hammock, Paulie's relief at finally being off-planet, back in the vacuum, was snatched away as she felt something sharp and painful slice into the underside of her foot. Blood sprang from the wound, dark red and spreading. It stained the floor in splatters as she hopped across to her locker cursing.

'Dammit, Jol, what the fuck do you think you're playing at?' She shouted to no reply. Fingers slick, she pulled a long, pointed shard of glass from the ball of her foot. Red smears slicked the locker door, the shelves and everything else she had to move in her search for the first aid spray. Its cooling touch sealed the wound instantly, slow-release drugs built into the polymers dulling the pain as they killed off any infection.

With tacky fingers, Paulie held up the fragment of glass to the light, turning its crimson edge this way and that. It was curved at the bottom, with tiny ripples moulded into the surface in a manner that was at once familiar but unplaceable. Looking across the room to where the glass had lain, Paulie noticed the strange stain spots on the wall and floor. The pools of her blood seemed oddly flat too, as if they had been absorbed into surface. And sitting on top of the console, balanced precariously but motionless, her knife.

'Shit Jol. What have you done?' Looking again at the shard in her blood-cracked fingers, she knew at once what it was. There, in the locker, a space where three jars of finest jam should have been.

'You little fucker, I'm going to kill you,' Paulie said, quiet determination in her voice as she imagined Jol's face through the airlock door, white with terror, then reddening as his capillaries filled and burst, bulging eyes and cheeks, veins pushing through the skin of his forehead and that final, messy explosion. 'This ship's not big enough to hide in.' She stood, wincing more in anticipation than actual pain as she put her foot back down on the deck, and crossed to the console. The knife was cleaner than she had ever seen it, sparkling like it had been polished. The bulk of the broken glass was piled on the floor at the base of the console. Underneath it, in that inaccessible space the designers of the control system had left for such purposes, three screw-cap metal lids lay face down.

Paulie had to lie on the floor and stretch to reach them, but she pulled the three metal discs out, one by one. They were all as shiny as if they had just been made. The glass shards, with the exception of the piece that had been lodged in her foot, were all as clear as air. There was not a trace of jam to be seen. A tiny nugget of fear appeared in the back of her brain then, an irrational pricking of the hairs on the back of her head. Reaching up to the console to heave herself upright, the back of Paulie's hand brushed the polished metallic surface. She itched slightly where the brown goo on Jol's plasma wrench had stained her skin. Closer to the console that stain felt warm, inviting, almost exciting. Without thinking, she placed her hands palm down on the top surface to push herself upright.

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Freed from the planet's gravity, the behemoth felt the weight of its bloated stomachs easing, the pain lifting. It was still full, far too full, but at least now it could think. Something was controlling it, forcing it towards a beacon far beyond the light horizon. It smelled tantalizingly like the hive, but there was a wrongness about it, some subtle nuance that jarred. Intrigued, it sent out a questing call, pleased to see that it could still communicate, frustrated that it could not speed its painfully slow flight through the heavens.

Silence filled the void, a frightening, lonely finality. No creature responded, not its own hive, neither any foreign voice.

And the stars were all wrong. The familiar patterns were changed. Individual systems were recognizable but their complex dance around each other was out of rhythm, as if the behemoth had blinked and missed a whole verse. It was a creature of space, at home in that vastness. Yet unease filled it, a nausea of uncertainty. Afraid, it keened again, calling out to its kind for reassurance. Still there was no reply and disquiet started to grow into fear. Acting instinctively, it reached out for the one almost-familiar thing, the smell of the hive. Folding space around it like a cloak, the behemoth jumped.

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It was as if someone had pulled the lid off her mind. Suddenly Paulie was far too big to fit into the four dimensions she was used to occupying. Her body was tiny, shrivelled and unimportant, a tie to the material that she really didn't need. Even the vast vacuum of space, her home for so many years, was a little thing. The impossible distance between the stars was nothing when you looked at it properly. No more than a step from one to another, if you just went in the right direction.

Avenues opened up to her, all to be explored. New tastes, new colours, new sounds and a thousand other senses that had no name. Everything was within her reach and everything had to be tried now. But time was only an abstraction, a shortening of experience. Paulie dipped into this and that, travelled across galaxies in a blink, was a fish and the shark that ate it. She created worlds and fathered nations, invented the wheel and faster than light travel at the same time (they were, after all, the same thing). Everything blending into one endless, ever-expanding now that swamped the essence that was her self.

Something screamed past her, exploding like a fireworks factory. It was pain and pleasure and fear and delight all mixed together. Secrets of a life, of two lives, personalities, prejudices and passions. For a fleeting instant Paulie thought she recognised the two crewmen, Groundel and Jones, hideously amalgamated, pleading for mercy. Like an image from a medieval hell, they twisted and burned in flames that bubbled their skin but never ate it away. And then they were gone.

Venner came to her, motherly and afraid. Her face was a picture of awe, her lover's caress both tender and excruciating as Paulie began to understand what was happening. She tried to reach out for the captain but Venner was ephemeral, more of an idea than a reality and fading fast, stretched beyond reason by the need to be everywhere at once. All too quickly she was nothing but mist, then nothing at all.

Paulie could feel herself being pulled apart. Like the others, whatever was doing this would spread her so thin she would no longer exist. Fear gripped her, shaking what little control she had, unsettling the notion of who she was. Doubt came over her like a murderer in the dark.

And then the ship was with her, all around her. Somehow she knew it was the ship, had known its sentience all along. It swarmed about her mind like an overprotective parent, guiding her back into the small and mundane. 'Don't go too far, don't climb too high,' it seemed to be saying to her. With gentle hands it directed her back down through the layers of existence, the colours of time, down and ever down to the tiny little cell that was her brain, the single point in all infinity that was Paulie. Smaller and smaller she shrank, faster and faster until it felt like she was rushing with impossible speed towards a vast black wall.

With a snap like electricity, Paulie was flung from the console. She crumpled to the floor in a boneless heap, head snapping back with a vicious crack. Blood trickled from her ears and nose; her eyes stared sightless at the ceiling above. Her chest rose once, twice; thin breaths gasping out of lungs that could not remember what they were supposed to do. And then, with a tiny, wet rattle, Paulie stopped.

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It felt the presence like a child crying out in the night, terrified by all that it could not see. A spark of intelligence purer far than the other base emotions that had so briefly flashed before it only to evaporate in the infinity that surrounded them. There had been nourishment in their ending, but this touch was too narrow to feed. And besides, the behemoth was curious now, not hungry. Even though its base systems screamed eat, it could feel the vast bulk of its full stomachs. Something had control of it and it needed to find out what that something was, yearned to be free of whatever force controlled it. This tiny flicker might have answers.

But first it must be protected from the onslaught, lest it dissipate like the others. Slowly, as gently as it could, the behemoth reached out, closed itself around the essence. That a mind could be so fragile was a marvel in itself, that a mind so fragile could survive in the universe was little short of a miracle. The behemoth understood then that the creatures that crawled through its carapace, so small they would not be noticeable but for the damage they had caused, were vessels for these tiny thoughts. And what frail vessels they were. The life was gone from all of them. Already its deformed skin was breaking them down, filtering their essences. Separated from its bodily functions, the behemoth could only watch helplessly as the tiny bodies dissolved away to nothing.

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The ship arrived at the terminus months early, as if it had crossed the distance between the stars in the blinking of an eye. It put in to its berth, alongside a thousand thousand others and began to disgorge its minerals, nutrients and raw energy into the storage tanks that fed the manufacturies. A maintenance crew was despatched to the control centre when the crew failed to report in. The story of their disappearance soon spread around the docks, passed by word of mouth from bar to brothel, chandlers to merchant's warehouse. Some believed it had been attacked by pirates, others that the crew had gone mad and walked out an airlock. Hardened space captains refused to go near the beast, but there were plenty of eager young recruits who would leap at the chance of a command.

Before the ship could be recommissioned, a service team had to be sent in. These were the elite, the core of technicians whose knowledge of the great ships had been handed down over generations, for a hundred thousand years. Even before they came on board, they knew what had happened, knew what to do. That was why they entered the ship wearing full-exposure hazard suits. A brief search of the living quarters brought two of them to the bunk room.

'It's always the same,' the older of the two technicians said. 'You create them a vast complex of living and recreation facilities and they end up bunking down in the damn central plexus.'

'Someone's been doing a bit of spying, I see,' the young technician said, poking at Jol's viewscreen. Looks like he's tapped into the sensory system. That might have woken it.'

'Nah,' his companion said. 'It'd take more'n that to trigger a warp.' He reached down to the floor in front of the console, running thick-gloved fingers through the broken glass and picking up the three round metal jar lids. 'Now, three jars of good quality jam might start things rolling.'

'You what?' the young technician asked.

'Jam. Concentrated sugars, pectins and several enzymes that readily break down the control substrate.' The older technician answered, fingering the throat mike on his isolation suit. 'Control, looks like one of our errant crew has been using jam to coax a wayward beast. Best guess is it jumped when they weren't shielded. I'd say their minds exploded. Ship would have absorbed them as waste if they weren't breathing.'

'Roger that alpha team,' the bodiless voice of control came back. 'Head up to the pituitary and prep the control box. I'll send a crew with fresh dopa.'

'C'mon junior,' the older technician said, turning his back on the room and its ownerless contents. 'Let's go put this beastie back to sleep.'

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The behemoth felt the relief of its disgorgement as an almost religious experience. Such pleasure flooded through it that at first it forgot the fear and loneliness that had brought it to this place. The sight of so many of its kindred, all huddled around the hive, feeding the young, cheered it so much that it was a while before it realised its calls were still going unanswered. And the hive was corrupted, too. It swarmed with the creatures that had crawled in its skin, countless millions of them. They clambered onto it once more, headed for the

point in its body where it could feel itself locked out, where its control had been taken from it.

There was a moment, it remembered from the last time, when it could break free, once more flex its own muscles. Yet, somehow it was too weak to grasp it, too tired even to fight the waves of sleep that washed over its mind, softened the edges of its reason. Like a frog in cold water, slowly brought to the boil, its consciousness was gone even before it could realise what was happening.

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Darkness surrounded her. There was no temperature, no sensation, only black. Paulie tried to lift her hands, feel her face for reassurance, but she could not find her arms. She tried to stand but there was nothing to stand on, tried to speak but no words came out of her mouth. Surrounded by the nothing, she could not even be sure that she had a mouth. There was only the thought that she was Paulie and the fear that she was alone. She was sure she was breathing, but then again could not feel her breath, could not even hear her heartbeat. With no cues, she had no idea how long she had been in this place, if it was a place. She wasn't even sure that time had any meaning anymore.

Unable even to curl up into a foetal ball, Paulie existed in nowhere and screamed an endless, silent scream.