

### In the Dark

Srese hadn't even left the new Nest and already worries buzzed round inside her head. Finally she picked out what seemed like the most important thing. Greg said to come-to-an-understanding-with-the-suit. What was that about?

< With me. >

A tiny tinny voice, talking in her neck. The suit?

< Do you want to go round like this? >

White sparks spattered from every place where the suit showed outside her clothes.

< Or this? >

Red streaks this time.

Had to be the suit. She didn't like its tone. "Just stop the light show and get me out of here," she said. "I only have an hour. North, Greg said. Do you know about north? I'm guessing it is equivalent to Neilson."

She walked to the doors they'd arrived through. In the habitat where she grew up these would've been the Nest's inner doors. She felt over the jambs for the touch pad, and over the doors for their slide handles. Whatever method there was to get out. *Never had any trouble with them at home.*

< It isn't wise to leave here knowing nothing. >

If she pulled the hood up, it'd be squeaking straight into her ear. *Thank you, but no.* "A suit is telling me what to do?"

The doors slid back into their slots. Srese breathed out, releasing the sudden fear that she'd been locked in. She walked into the Nest's foyer.

The overhead lights dimmed and faded, then stopped giving any light whatsoever. The dark without a torch was as bad as being shut in. She panted shallowly. "Can you do a glow?"

< Something like this? > The suit's gloves began to glow with a white moon ambience.

"Yes. That's good." She wouldn't need to backtrack and find where Greg and his crew kept the spare torches. She waved her hands to and fro near the surface of the door to look for the controls.

< You search but will not find. Do you not realize that *I* opened the first set of doors? >

"How did you?" It seemed too knowing to be a life-suit.

Silence.

Affronted silence? "You're a life-suit for a person to wear. A servant to that person."

The glow of the life-suit's gloves faded until she could barely see through the gloom. Better in a way because, with the gloves duller, she could see more beyond them.

The suit mightn't be as helpful as Greg had hoped but she should be able to figure out where she was by herself. Easy. Curving roads were circles or lanes. Straight roads were one of the four mains or the radials.

In the home habitat, one set of doors from the Nest connected to Simmonds, the other to Neilson. As here. She'd take Neilson to be directly opposite Simmonds, as they were at home. And she bet that Wingham here would be exactly between Neilson and Simmonds on the left when she faced Neilson-way.

But at home, and here too, First Circle was a wide avenue lined on both sides with apartments built into the Nest's walls. Should she maybe travel through the byways, where minions wouldn't straightaway look for her? Yes. She decided to zigzag towards Neilson through the lanes and radials joining the Circles.

The suit started to fizz and spit.

She ducked into a doorless apartment. "The roman candle effect, I presume?" she said sarcastically. "Could be useful one day." Furniture and fittings were all gone, she managed to see through the sputtering of the life-suit.

The candle-effect extinguished and she was left in the dark.

"How about some light?"

Suit did or said nothing.

"Fine. I guess I know the way well enough." She stretched her arms and went zigzagging from wall to wall. The end of the lane heralded with space to her right. She kept her left hand on the corner, gritty sandstone under her fingers, swung outward into what should be a radial. One Fifty. Zigzagged until she came to the mouth of Second Circle. Made the opposite kind of corner into it, turning to her right.

She froze. Bet she was pale. *Nearly turned into a minion tunnel.*

< Stupid girl, any minions coming after you will be using the same roads as you. >

Srese stopped. To listen. Steel limbs brushing along one another? Steel feet clomping dully through the dust? Nix and neither. Just that hissing near at hand. *Has to be the suit.*

< Why aren't we moving? >

*What will it take for the suit to give me some light? "I'm lost."*

The suit laughed and outlined Srese's hand bones in a ghostly green light.

"Very pretty," Srese said.

< Stupid girl. It's radiation. Very bad for the flesh. >

"I know what radiation is. But these suits are to save lives. Why would *Gammy* have built radiation into them?" Her whole body was suspicious now, and she fought not to cringe away from the suit touching her everywhere. She turned back into the lanes lined with gaping apertures that were doorless and windowless dorms and apartments.

< Lost again? >

"Intending to get a couple of answers in the safest place handy," Srese said.

< There's no rush. The stupid home-mind has frozen the doors. My supporters cannot get out of the live habitat to fetch you back. >

"I knew it! You're the implant!"

< The stupid technicians are struggling to hook me up to a translator. Paradoxically, this construct allows me to use the same programming that I used for communication in my previous hosts, with the added bonus that it converts my signal into speech. >

Srese shuddered. For a couple of seconds she was slick with a cold sweat. She'd be like Ahni with this thing running her life. The implant nattered on.

< Your physical parameters tell me you are frightened. That's a good start. I may be able to review my instructions to my people if and when I get what I want. >

“You seeing through my eyes is not how these suits work,” Srese said. She’d have to start being more careful with her *physical parameters*, if and where possible.

She’d never felt as claustrophobic as this minute enclosed in a life-suit being moderated by the Seapeople’s implant. She sat down. Because that’s the other thing rabbits did. Freeze. She stretched her legs in front of her and rested her back against the cave wall. She closed her eyes.

< Do something. Don’t you know I’m beaming you live? >

“The translator is suddenly operational, is it?” Srese visualized the whole population crammed into the Dining Hall, watching her every move. “Why *should* I go on?”

< Because the *show* must go on. >

The sputtering turned to pricking, like pins-and-needles, all over her skin.

Srese rose. Walked about as slowly as she could and only within the confines of the apartment’s empty rooms. “I’m supposed to come to an understanding with the suit I’m wearing. Not that suit coming to an understanding with me, its user.” *Hope I said it the right way round.* “It means I’m supposed to be the boss.”

< I can hardly believe it to be so. Perhaps you use the language differently. I was so looking forward to a measure of independence. >

Srese scoffed. The entity running the life-suit made itself sound plaintive? *Huh.* She ploughed through the dust of Parks and Gardens towards the perimeter wall. She turned and trailed her right-hand-fingers along the wall feeling for the opening. *Here!*

The most feared place in her own habitat and she was going into the equivalent one? Its names and its uses reeled through her mind. The moldeckery. Where molecular destruction took place. Where the dead and the broken and the mortally sick and vitally injured were ... Where the minions hung out. *Needs must.* Her belly griped but she turned into the place.

< Your parameters tell me you are endangering yourself. >

“There’s nothing here now except an empty cave.” Srese told herself as much as the implant. She could feel her parameters – heart racing, mouth dry, her hands trembling – going crazy. “Once upon a time it would’ve been the minion fortress.”

The suit splattered light-blues and sickly yellows. < I told you that there is no need to hide. >

She didn’t trust it. “Not talking to you for a bit. I need to find out what the *life-suit* can do. As you do, if you want the ride. But right now you’re one too many loads on my back. The straw, as they say.”

No repartee from the implant, good. Srese stroked the suit where she could reach, awkwardly over and under her clothes. The yellows, chrome and pale lemon and washed-out primrose spluttered from the hood and her heart. The blues appeared to strobe from her arms and legs.

< Ask me about colour and I will tell you about your state of being. >

“Oh!” It was the language she knew from the games, Gammy’s programming. Sudden, thankful, tears wet her eyes.

< Clothing interferes with the learning process. Nuances are better experienced whole. >

She kicked off her boots and sloughed off her clothes. Went to stand in what felt like the center of the fortress. Breathed.

The yellows strengthened, becoming daisy yellow and wattle gold and saffron. They were separated from the deepening blues with a banding of green malachite.

Her breathing steadied and the spattering rounded and became ripples flowing down the surface of the suit. First the blues went to the ground. Then the greens. Finally the yellows.

Srese blinked. She was still in the black dark and so she was still in the minion fortress. She sighed a long shuddering disappointment.

At once the colours returned. Chrome spattered from her heart and her head. Pale blue from her arms and legs. She breathed again. Steadied herself and deepened the colours. "What else can you do?"

< Ask rather how you + I are when the dark is held at bay with electrical discharges and the silence is filled with an imaginary accompaniment of auditory elements. >

Srese rocked, heel to toe, heel to toe, gulping away tears. "I ask that!" The life-suit was nothing like the querulous old implant.

The suit blazed with gold and orange flames, and sang with noble strings, swaying curtains of radiographic sound, and of colour mixed, and the sun and the stars and the Earth swaddled in its magnetic bed.

< This is the state of rest and safety. Choose another. >

She pictured herself without the auroras.

< What you want is what you have. >

And probably she did. Because, not seeing anything. And she had no torch. She'd have to get to where light could show her the result of the suit's labor. She walked arms outstretched.

"Where were the walls? Ouch, my head!"

< The hood prevents pain and injury. >

Srese put her knee to the wall, to not lose its whereabouts, hauled up the headgear, then handed herself along the wall to the edge of the doorway. She dithered. "Which way?"

< Your + my sensors recommend a left-hand-turn for the eventual northerly exit. >

"There's light. Up ahead."

She came to where at home the perimeter walk through the cubby jungle melded with the corridor around the performance complex. Here, finally, was light.

< Light from the sun, > the implant said.

"Go away, you." Srese started to put her hand against the wall to do what everyone automatically did coming out of the cubby jungle, which was lean against the wall with one hand and brush sand and twigs from their feet, lifting one foot at the time.

Except that she didn't have a hand. She could *feel* it, but there was nothing to *see*. No arm either. She jerked herself every way, searching and not finding herself. She had no feet. Though she could *feel* them. *Help, I don't believe in this kind of invisible. How?*

< You asked you + I without electrical discharges. >

She recoiled. Her head connected to a wall. Without pain, as promised. She was overwhelmed with inexplicable stimuli. She shut down. Slept.

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She woke well rested.

< Twenty hours have passed. It is 10 AM >

She remembered the life-suit's voice among her thoughts. Recalled it comforting her, then her fright of having no body. "Are we still invisible?"

< During your downtime I learned your firing patterns and your connections. >

She didn't know what to feel. Pleased or ravaged. It was like the life-suit staked its territory in her. No place inviolate.

< Without you I am not. Without the you + I amalgamate, the foreign entity will enslave you, using the I circuits. I recommend an intake of fuel. >

Still, she hardly dared to think her normal thoughts. She cast about for a harmless topic. "Breakfast *would* be good," she said. Now she heard a scuffling about, someone talking to *himself*. We must be silent, she thought at the suit. She moved nearer.

The talking stopped. The scuffling moved on.

The shelves either side of the airlock literally dripped with goods. As if someone had rifled through them, not thinking that anyone else might be coming this way. Not Ghulia and Srese when they were here.

Srese crept past the shelves to the doorway. The base of a fat column of light lay on the floor of the airlock. The hatch beyond was wedged wide open. She high-stepped over the two sills and arrived in another place like a lobby if you didn't count the blue ceiling impossibly distant.

< You are looking at the sky, > the implant said. < Blue due to the ... >

"I told you to keep out of my hair," Srese said. She scuffed her suited feet through a thin layer of reddish sand. The front of the stone-kreet lobby opened to a wide plain.

< This ridge behind you is your home, > the implant said implacably. < In front are the desert uplands, the remains of a great mountain mined of its ore. The slots criss-crossing the plain are the chasms, channels eroded down to bedrock. >

Srese dropped her gaze from the tiring distances.

Youk sat at the edge of the platform. He wore his all-time favorite costume, the roman toga. While she watched, he leaned forward peering towards the right. As if he was trying to see if anyone was coming yet.

She cleared her throat.

"You took your time," Youk said.

Had she misheard?

"When you didn't turn up, I changed my mind about our plot. Why should I actually bother myself with you?"

"What are you garbling on about?" Srese said.

Youk turned sharply while pulling a fold of his toga over his head. "Srese! What are *you* doing here?"

She was sure that he shadowed his face so that she couldn't read his expression. "You were expecting Sard. Is he around?" She tried to ask it casually but her spirits lifted. If Sard was here, they could hang around together. The two of them together could surely handle Youk.