

When the life-suit *gripped* him—like it shrink-wrapped him—how he'd always imagined it might feel—Sard closed his eyes ahead of being forcibly cowled with the mask. The suit expanded again and he relaxed into it. Shrinking. Easing. It was like part of a rhythm. Like breathing.

He shoved up the mask. All he could see was darkness. Not the seven wooden drawers of his boyhood above him. All he could feel, above him—with his hands questing—was rock, a handspan above his face. Searching down by his left side one-handed he found the rounded curve of the ceiling meeting the back of an overhang. With his other hand he found flat pavement. Exploring upward with that hand, he discovered the ceiling at maybe knee-height. From under the stairs in the limestone house back into the stony overhang atop the plateau ... he'd had no sense of the transfer being a journey.

He rolled from under the overhang. A long way above stood the half-sickle moon in the cold night. Stars, too. Pin-pricks of light that he knew were even farther away. Unimaginable distances. *Why I like to imagine that they are beads on a net surrounding the ball that we live on. A star in every angle is enough for me.*

< Sit up and stare at the rock-edge >

Oh right. It tells me to sit up and stare at the overhang's edge in the dark? To what end?

The suit gripped him with its shrinking-lengthways trick. < I am merely elongating this entity's muscle fibres. It's a possibility I'm proud of discovering. The first new thing I caused to happen since I was released from my bondage >

Sard breathed to the limits of his lung capacity. A fraction of what he needed. He wheezed. "Enough." The image of the suit as a bio-construct was enough to give him the heebie-jeebies. Life-suits were lab-grown human skins? Couldn't be. What about all the tech they also had? They couldn't be. He'd lived in a large tech-construct all this life. Couldn't live in bio-construct and a cramped little one at that.

The suit relaxed, but only a little, obviously expecting resistance.

"Okay. Okay. Sit up you said." The gap between the two opposite overhangs was double his knee-length. Or make that the length of his whole leg. Plenty wide enough for him to scrabble to his elbow, push on that to sitting. Stare-at-the-rock's-edge meant sit with crossed legs and turn ninety degrees.

Slouching somewhat, his eyes were level with the rock's edges which were about as thick as his forearm's thickness—he pressed his arm along the ledge—a thick dark line separating the very dark below from the dark sky above. "Staring," he said. *Reporting for action. Yes sir. No sir.*

< Close eyes. Wait for light >

"That's hours yet. What will I be looking for?"

< Less than an hour. Places where humans bumped up against these edges. Or scraped by >

"And then what?"

< You will suck the human substance from these places so that I can discover their DNA. If

they are my people—runaways—we will overtake them. We will force them to return to the cave habitat where I need them for the entertainments >

Sard pulled off one of the gloves and rubbed a rock edge with his bare fingers. *Granular feel. Like sandstone.* He could almost see the group escaping, running for their lives, resting here overnight. Maybe while it rained and their usual roads, the chasms, flooded. And in their hurry to get to safety, some of them scraping up against these rocks hard enough to lose skin and blood.

Then he imagined sucking on the ledges. Why not just licking? He slopped his tongue over a dark place for a try out. *Mmm. Could almost be smooth, sinewy and leather-tasting.* He whipped off the life-suit's face mask to see what he tongued.

With the help of the faint pre-dawn light, he made out a dark handprint imprinted on the stone right there in front of his eyes. The sight burned into his brain. *Dried blood?* He gagged. Spat saliva. Coughed.

Every little thing he knew and remembered about Ahni reeled through his mind. How the bio-construct was cut out of her—and her just abandoned—and about Ahni's people running for their lives into the right direction to meet up with the clay-faced slavers. What if this handprint was of someone who got away?

He found scuff marks, half footprints, a place where five small toes had pressed into the thin sand. Where a basket sat *Saw all this before the dream. None of them would want to be caught. Not one will want to return to CAVE.*

And neither did he—as a matter of hoity-toity fact—want to deliver anyone, least of all the Sea-people into that bondage. *Which means I shouldn't follow them. Or it means that I shouldn't take the life-suit to them.* He livened up. *Yes. That.*

A dozen ideas, things to do, things to achieve, things to watch out for, barged into his mind. *Plans. I bared my hand and my face. I've started already. There's been no squeak from the life-suit since then. Such peace.* He chuckled. Tore loose the chest piece and loosened the tie that gathered the suit edges over his ribs. Shoved the suit down over his shoulders one by one and pulled his arms free. The dawn air on his bare skin like he was in a cool bath. He crawled to the place where he'd stashed the pack. Unpacked it to discover things useful in the journey he planned.

— — — —

But here he still stood at the end off the channel in the stone platform, taking time to think through what'd happen when he developed sores on his shoulders. Dressed in just his outer wear—shirt and pants—the pack's straps cut into his shoulders. Plus the sun was rising almost dead ahead, give or take a few degrees, and while the sky there was a glory of red and pink, he couldn't see anything else ahead.

I need a sunhat and I need more padding. About turn. Leaving the life-suit behind is a dumb idea. The chest piece will do me for a hat. The suit itself folded and stuffed under the straps. Now ... no more hesitations, hold-ups or hang-ups brought on by stupid impulsivity.

He strode into the grasses.

Repeat of the country that he walked yesterday. Stony channels between islands of tussock,

gravel and sand. Here and there a twisted wind-worn shrub. The plateau, what he saw of it, could've been an unending plain of tussocks. But he knew—first hand experience—that it was riddled with chasms. Probably with caves underneath. What did he know. Better to stay at the edge.

Walking, he kept his attention on the ground he covered. Safer. And it meant the sun didn't shine straight into his eyes because he could angle the life-suit's chest plate just-so, giving himself a shaded outlook. Which got easier as the sun rose.

Some people, apparently, believed that the Earth spun like a top and turned east day and night. Making it seem like both the sun and the moon rose in the east and set in the west. He never got much further studying how they got seasons and all that. No seasons in CAVE apart from the ones the games demanded and the techies organised.

Uh oh. Careful now. A damned chasm across my path. Lost in my thoughts. He evaded what might have been a sticky end by turning south. *Saw it just in time.* How far would he need to go? He now resented any foray into that direction. Sun shining on his left side.

Finally the end of the crack in the plateau. Wouldn't he like to have a drink of cool mountain water right now? *Don't have any water. Not wearing the suit. Need to make camp while sun still shining for getting water from plants. Good old Greg, teaching me that.*