

Activation

Time for a trip.

Tomas L. Martin

Rover wasn't the smartest in the flock, or the fastest. He had no great augmentations to speak of, no echolocation pulse or altimeter. He couldn't even broadcast his location without dying. But Rover was small, and sometimes that's what you need.

When the man entered and news of his scent buzzed around the flock, Rover found himself becoming excited. His lesser systems powered up from their dormant state, and his share of the energy flowing through the flock grew. Detaching from the honeycomb grid of the Flock Hub, Rover fell gently into the warm current of plasma that flowed around the con-

course. "Is it true?" the other drones whispered to him in flickers of electronic code as he passed. "Is it him? Will you be going outside?"

Rover didn't know, so he pulsed happy endorphins out in response, but refrained from sending anything more explicit until he had more information. He advanced his tiny frame — barely seven micrometres of him — towards the core gateway's fingered villi. Other excitable drones were also bumping into the sticky gate, hoping they would get the honour of being selected, but the villi's chemical barrier refused them entry.

"Rover!" Emmie, the shimmery custodian of the gateway called out to him. Her ornately filigreed nanowires curled in a most beautiful way, and her scent was an alluring blend of zinc and cadmium.

"Just the probe I was hoping to see!" she said in flurries of green luminescence, stroking his diamond shell with a delicate frond of thiolated polymer, pulling the two of them tightly together. "The council is desperate to see you! We've wasted precious milliseconds already!"

More tendrils tickled his surface, sending shivers of energy through him. Emmie pulled him out of the plasma flow, into the sticky arms of the villi.

"Hold on tight!" she told him. Rover held tight.

The passage through the villi was dark and unnerving. Encircled by Emmie's loving grasp, Rover could sense nothing and in the nanoseconds it took to diffuse across the barrier, he was alone with his simple thoughts. Rover had never been beyond the barrier, let alone outside the hub. He wondered what he would see, and whether

he'd be the one to bond to the man.

The noise and smells of the council chamber overpowered his senses when they passed through. The probes on this side of the barrier were more powerful than the simple friends he'd left behind. Their communications shot past him in streams of peptides and blasts of focused light.

He felt a wrench as Emmie's tendrils disconnected and his surface reterminated. Emmie gave a final wave as she sank back down into the villi.

"Goodbye little Rover!" she called.



"Good luck in the outside world!"

Rover watched the last friend he had in the world disappear. The eddying plasma of the council chamber seemed so complex; photons and chemicals shot past at the limits of his primitive detection functions. The warm currents carried him to the centre of the chamber. He let some of his functions go dormant until they were needed, to save power.

"This one will do."

Something vast and incomprehensible snatched him in a violent electrostatic grab, sending crackles of painful charge across Rover's surface. He let out an involuntary squeal of photons to discharge the unwanted potential. When his senses cleared he found himself observing the Control.

"Hello Rover," it boomed, its wideband communication beam nearly blinding Rover with binary. "We have a job for you."

"You mean it's really him?" Seldom-used

circuits inside Rover's shell began powering up at the news.

"The target has been confirmed by visual and DNA scan. Fingerprinting is under way. Are you prepared?"

As those words were transmitted, Rover felt the ravaging stabs of a scanning probe that descended from the chamber ceiling, scratching along his surface with rough attention far removed from Emmie's welcome embrace. A thread of nanowire slipped within him, demanding information about the status of his systems.

"Stop!" Rover said as Control laid bare every piece of him. "You don't need to do this. I am ready."

"You understand that you will never return and should your task require battery death, you will not be recovered."

"I understand that this is the job I was built for," Rover said, spreading the tiny filaments of sticky gecko-like fronds beneath his scales with pride. "I will report on the location of the suspect to the limits of my design."

"Fine." The probes withdrew and the hold on him released. "Prepare probe for dispersion."

A flux of pulsed charge flicked at him, repelling his tiny body away from Control and the hurried frenzy of the Council. Rover felt a rush build up in him as he whooshed into a tiny tube leading away from the chamber. One last buzz of energy from the hub hit his thermoelectric cell, filling his battery for the journey ahead.

Then he was released, the pressure in the tube venting suddenly. The familiar plasma around him disappeared, and Rover was blown out of the tube. His instincts let his body open, the carbide scales on his back breaking free, allowing the adhesive strands on his back to spread their clutches towards the surface rushing up at him. He could smell the scent of the man on the organic surface above.

"Here I come!" he called to the world.

The man passed through the security checkpoint, unaware of the hive of activity in the scanner briefly beneath his palm. He picked up his bags from the revolving belt and hailed a taxi. And when the passenger left the airport terminal, Rover went with him. ■

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