

1: Sard

Sard strode through the pastel yellow arch out of the Nest. He needed the roiling colours of his envy and disappointment and anger. Because how come Srese won the contest when he was always the better producer? He wanted reds and blues and greens storming along the corridor walls alongside him. Where were they?

He stopped. The Nest doors souged shut behind him.

The walls, what he could see of them, were grey. And all the holos, one on every block-end, were extinguished.

Some kind of power cut? *I don't think so.* He stepped back seeking with his fingertips the comforting painted story on the Nest's doors. A fill layered into the dark green paint made the bas relief trees. A rectangular brown roughened area signified a door into a tree trunk. Zoya, the kiddy-carer, regularly pasted the profile of a different infant over the door as if they were then pushing it open. She'd painted a tremble of golden light as if it came through the aperture.

The doors slid open behind him because he still stood on the sensory-mat. He breathed relief. Phew. At least a couple of doors still worked for him.

A chatter of voices neared from the Wingham direction, the group still out of sight around the bulging-out curve of the Nest. Dorms and family apartments fronted First Circle on that side. This late in the morning it was probably Tye and his girls. Sard almost bolted back into his hole. What good, though? He had to eat.

"Bad luck, mate," Tye said as he passed Sard. "Not winning, I mean."

Sard was slightly comforted. If that was all Tye knew, he could probably brazen it out and go to breakfast at least.

Tye hugged Relda to him. Both had dressed gypsy-style. She swirled a shin-length red and yellow skirt. Tye's pants were about the same length, with the cuffs artfully folded up and he wore a neck-kerchief the colour of Relda's headscarf. Gold coins sewn over both. Caro arm-in-armed Viva, twirling so each could add her play to the hotspots in the holos.

So far they'd conjured a carved gypsy caravan pulled by a horse plodding along a sandy track in a high summer scene of green and gold. The ceilings round about were now blue and they seemed to walk on the same gold sand track.

"What do you think?" Caro said.

"I like it." Sard touched the opposite wall, near where he walked, where flowers burgeoned in a field of green. His touch killed off a swatch of flowers. He jerked back. *Hope no one saw that.*

"You want to input your alterity?" Viva said. "Since you're not costumed?"

"No. Go ahead. You two are doing a great job." They were all represented in the mural. The couple strolled in the meadow and Viva drove the horse. The Caro-alterity did cartwheels alongside.

The gypsy caravan followed them across Second Circle and pulled into a meadow forming on

the Dining Hall's long wall between Second and Third Circles. The horse began to graze and the alterities followed their people around the corner toward the Dining Hall entry where they pixilated into the scenery.

Sard walked into the Dining hall among them. His heart hammered when for the five or six seconds that he was the only one on the sensory-mat, the doors started to slide shut. He pressed back the near one. Should he suspect that the door utility suddenly didn't know him anymore?

Youk and Phin were already in there, shovelling scrambled eggs down their respective gullets. How he hated them. Obviously he was late, along with every other trouble this morning.

"Don't let them get to you," Tye said.

"Thanks." How, was the question. He fetched his porridge aka the white pap, his eggs aka the yellow pap, on the baked and toasted pap. If he was slow about it maybe his tormentors would leave. But they were still at the table and so, because he dormed with Phin and Youk, he had to go sit with them.

As usual Youk across the table from him watched everything he did. Didn't the guy ever have anything better for his yellow eyes to do than make sure the avatars didn't get ahead of him?

Youk said, "Shovelling it in rather, aren't we?"

"What?" Sard could've kicked himself. When would he learn not to react?

"Shovelling the food in like the farmers didn't grow it to your taste."

"Ha ha," Sard said around the egg. "Since I'm one of the farmers."

Phin, diagonally across from Sard, smiled benignly. He kicked Sard's feet out of his way under the table and hooked his own under Sard's chair.

"Finished?" Youk said. "Good. You and I have business." Loud enough for everyone to hear, he said, "Fare thee well, oh golden avatar! Do you wend to your Herculean labours?"

Of course everyone remaining at the other tables looked up and laughed and commented.

"Do you join him, Youk, to be dusted by his benison?" Tye said. He winked. At Sard when of course both Youk and Phin could not miss seeing.

Thanks Tye, for nothing. Sard thrust back his chair, hopefully doing damage to Phin's hooked-up toes. Sard rose off the chair in a hurry to catch it before it fell. All he needed was a whip, to tame his lions. He put the chair down and shoved it hard against Phin's outstretched legs. He didn't say sorry because he would pay whatever he did.

Youk followed him near enough that he looked like he hustled Sard from the Dining Hall.

"Master and slave. Youk in his favourite role," Tye shouted after them.

The doors closed when Sard and Youk stepped from the sensory matting, shutting them off from any further ribaldry. Because he had Youk breathing down his neck, Sard made for the dorm he supposedly shared with him and Phin. He dived into the lane beside the Dining Hall,

and took a left into the corridor between Second and Third Circles. Walls, where available, were grey.

The dorms fronted onto the lane with doors and windows, and backed windowless onto the Circles allowing a lot of wall to be given over to holos. "Surely the walls should've been flaming red on black?" Youk said. "Gammy-the-damned-AI loves strong emotions all said and done."

Youk was of course commenting on Sard's lack of nano-bots. Yesterday Sard hadn't had any nano-bots either, but he'd been a whizz at programming holos. The same as Caro. Today, because he didn't win the programming competition he suddenly was a nobody? It still didn't make sense. He stood back for Youk to unlock.

Youk stood back, too.

It looked like it would be a stand-off.

"Well?" Youk said. "You're the golden-bloody-avatar!"

But how much of an avatar could Sard ever have been to be so instantly excised? "No nano-bots, remember?" he said. "You'll be missing lunch along with me if we stand here all morning." As if Youk will miss lunch, he thought. "Funny how the corridor walls don't reflect your mood. Shouldn't they be a dirty green? The colour of envy?" Youk had envied Sard and Srese all their lives.

"The stupid AI wouldn't dare try," Youk said. He stepped forward. "He knows I'd hack into him with no respect."

"Yeah right. Full of gas as usual." Sard pushed past Youk's fist.

The main room was a disaster. Any clothes that Sard hadn't taken to the Nest were trodden into the rest of the mess. He started picking them up. "That's what we're here for? For you to tell me that the walls aren't reacting to me?"

"And the rest. But why would I help you? You're so stupid."

"Oh, you mean you're now not going to tell me the walls aren't reacting to me today?" He sprang aside to escape Youk's kick.

"The Pit would've been the better place."

"Why would I have gone in there with you, with every man of your friends joking and laughing at my expense."

Youk slung his arm over Sard's shoulders and sidestepped him into the bathroom. Dirty clothes underfoot wherever they stood. Phin refused them the use of a laundry basket.

"See what I just did?"

"What you just did?" Being thickheaded was often Sard's best defence against Youk.

Youk shook him. "Stop that. I was demonstrating how friendly I can be."

Sard laughed. "You hate me. I'm the golden bloody avatar, remember?"

“You’re an insufferable know-it-all clone. Just like my father. Just like Gammy. You and your sister both are just a pair of damned Gammy-clones.”

“Srese would remind you that we are twins, same DNA, womb tanks side by side.”

“Trust me, Srese is half Yon Kerr doubled, and you’re Yon Kerr.”

“What would you know?” Sard said. “Though *why* would you know is probably more to the point.”

“Ferd is my father. He’s the Yon Kerr clone of his generation. I’m his natural-born son.” Youk stood up straighter. Even puffed his chest out.

“They say that about you,” Sard said. “So what?”

“I wasn’t made in a test tube or decanted out of a womb tank. My mother was the desert woman Yon Kerr got in for my father to romance. He won a contest to star in a cave-wide entertainment.”

Like Srese just did. Sard swallowed.

“Ring a bell does it, that phrasing?” Youk said. “I was going to show you what happens to remaindered avatars. It’s why we should’ve gone to the Pit. Walked through a holo there into the next disused complex.” Youk punched Sard’s disbelief back into him. “You didn’t know that there are more habitats than this one, did you?”

*Punch.* “Too bad, I could’ve shown you my hide. I have a standalone there with all the info you would’ve been likely to want.” Youk shook his head. “There’s history there you wouldn’t believe. You’re so superior that you don’t even want to know? When Srese has so obviously won and you’re remaindered?”

Youk let Sard go as if he was suddenly poisonous. He flung himself onto the couch.

Sard bent and picked up a pair of pants. “I’m not worried,” he said. “Srese and I have an agreement.” Whichever of them was picked for the role would hoist the other twin up with them. He’d been so green with envy himself, he’d forgotten. People said they were the best CAVE actor-and-producer team ever. Not that he’d swirl that cape in front of Youk.

And anyway, Srese and he knew the habitat inside out. Spent years finding all the nooks and crannies. No unused complexes that he knew. As for the other thing, he’d have to believe she’d remember their pact.

“So what will you be doing about it?” Youk said, almost friendly.

How stupid did Youk think he was? Sard shrugged. He wished Youk would go. He went round the room picking up his clothes. “My laundry.”

“You could do some of mine.”

“You wish.”

“You know what Phin will say.”

“What will Phin say?” said Phin, coming in.

“About Sard doing just his own laundry,” Youk said.

“Phin will say that that isn’t right,” Phin said. He gripped Sard by his arm. “Wait right here. Youk!”

Youk piled the rest of the clothes from the floor, overalls, towels, the lot, on Sard’s armful. “Go at it, young fellow.” He opened the door into the corridor.

Phin put his foot on Sard’s butt and shoved him out.

The walls should’ve been incandescent but stayed obdurately grey. The corridor’s laundry was centrally situated. That no one else was in there to witness his fury, was one good thing, and very convenient for his plan was the other. But would he even be able to program the damned ionizers?

He seethed as he sorted clothes and stuffed them in three separate machines. Right, yes. Probably the laundry was on a slave circuit, not yet changed. He grinned wolfishly changing the settings for Youk’s and Phin’s clothes.

His own clothes tumbled about for the regular two minutes. He took them out clean and creaseless. Folded them and packed them flat in his washing bag. The twelve-minute cycles finished. Folding those clothes would be pretty well impossible, storing them like having a set of minions falling out of the cupboard every time you opened it. He walked away.

Not back to the dorm. The Nest was where he seemed to spend every second night these days. Thank Gammy, his care-mother had kept his room in her apartment. Make that, thank Gammy his care-mother had been allowed to keep her apartment in the Nest after Sard had been assigned his dorm. *Yeah, ha ha.*

He let himself in through the apartment’s street door. Another slave circuit. Not everyone need know Sard was sleeping at Ghulia’s again this week and he’d rather not meet Zoya, the kiddy-carer who also was Srese’s ditzzy care-mother. Or even Srese and her tears and dramatics.

He dumped his clothes in his drawers and switched on the mini-monitor above the bed. Might as well watch a movie. He wouldn’t go to work at all.

The same words again appeared on the screen. < Srese Kerr awarded the main role in the new cave-wide game >

Sard closed his eyes, dozed. Words still there when he opened his eyes the second time. His gut churned. There had to be worse things in life than not being picked to be the primary avatar. There had to be worse things in life ... It was no good. He didn’t know anything worse right now.

He wanted to yell and scream. Not fair! Not fair! Srese was so young still! He ground his teeth. He’d never believed they were identical, or twins. He wished now he’d let Youk be victorious. What did being remaindered mean?

“Oy,” Ghulia tweaked his toe.

He hadn’t even heard her come in? Sard sat up swinging his feet over the side of the bed. Ready for answers.



