

10. Sard Learning Himself

Dawn to sun up, when Sard had agreed to meet Greg, felt like hours yet. Out of pure boredom, he started collecting rocks for the border between Gammy's influence and freedom, placing them every few meters.

Damn, but the day isn't lighting up! He turned to where the sun should be rising. For a couple of seconds he didn't know what he saw.

Clouds? He scoffed at himself. *I knew that.* They bulked up, rising above the ridge as if on fast-forward. The red from the fire of the sun staining their grey portended something awful, a story would say.

Everyone he knew would be gathering in the Pit with Gammy moderating the event. And he'd be out here Storm-Watching on his lonesome? *Sick.*

The rest of the sky grayed imperceptibly while the anvil, a type of storm cloud that Gammy had introduced last vigil, leaned over him. When Greg took him the five kilometres out, Sard felt small. If that cloud fell on him, he'd be a gnat-sized blot.

He started. What was that?

A bolt. Pure white light zapped to the ground. *Never saw that before.* His heart thumped. Remembered the word for it. *Lightning.* Next, the sky like split open—that was the sound—a vast crack! His guts, heart, everything inside him tremored. Despite the suit, he had time to think. Icy stones thumped on him and rattled to the ground and he just stood there?

< Most incidences of this particularity last 10 minutes or less >

After the stones came the water. Sheeted down. More than he'd ever seen. More water than he'd ever been in.

< External temperature = falling. Fuel intake recommended. I ≠ alive-to-background > The suit sleeves over his arms and legs blotched.

"Go for it," Sard said. "I'm not staying out in it." He jogged Simmond's way—couldn't at this moment recall the proper term—along the Clay Face road along the bottom of the ridge. Angling his face against the slashing rain he searched for a place he might recognise. The suit's eyepieces did not cope and he had to keep wiping them.

There. The roofless room where Ghulia left him about a lifetime ago. What it felt like. The stones lining the slope looked smoothed, machine made. When he was up there before, he'd had no idea he'd be running up them so soon.

The hatch were wedged open, with roll of tent on the floor track. He had no time to wonder who'd organised that. He grabbed food as he went by and ate the energy bars as he negotiated the blessed dark. The lie-suit was dry and him cosy. He relaxed.

In fact, he loitered along First Circle. What a fish out of water he was in his present mode. He

hated how he had to be. Even about that kite Rider was putting together for him. What would Sard do with a kite, when he didn't plan on wandering very far at all? Rider's plans weren't his and Greg's plans weren't his. What was the use being a hero with no one to be a hero for?

Finally he arrived in the cave with the holo entrance into Crystal Cave. You could say despite his best negative efforts. *Uh oh*. A shadow jittered in the opening. The person was backlit by the amber glow of emergency lighting. It was the wrong shape for a minion. He cleared his throat, made a noise to test the situation.

"There you are," Greg said. He handed Sard a roll of clothes. Jeans and shirt. "Clothes in case we meet someone. I don't think Gammy will know you're here. He's pretty busy."

Glancing aside while he dressed, Sard saw that Greg was in his closed-mouth mode. *Fine*. The Pit, next door to Crystal Cave, was abuzz with the storm vigil. Much more interesting. Greg pulled him away. "We've got business elsewhere." The corridors were eerily empty.

When they stepped in the dome, through a curtain of water, Rider was dragging sandbags from the water tunnel. Water gushed through the gaps between the pylons. Greg pointed Sard at Mab's airlock, himself staying at Rider's. Rider slid bags at them and Sard and Greg built dams around their airlocks, while Rider also strung a net across the water tunnel's maw.

Sard marveled at the depth of the river flowing over the dome floor and down into the water tunnel. Ankle deep, then shin-deep, three layers of sandbags and still the water rose. A lull in the water sheeting down the per-glass dome allowed them a breather. "What's with the net?" Sard said.

"If you were swept down when the system is in full spate, and it's getting that way," Rider said. "You'd arrive down in the cubby jungle as a slow-rot case. For obvious reasons, we'd bury you rather than report you missing."

Right. Think of something else. Interesting, Sard thought, how the life-suit coped with the downpour, keeping him warm but wet now, instead of dry and perhaps cold. He'd certainly never been as wet. When it came again, the rain was deafening, numbing, an unrelenting barrage.

< With adequate fuel intake, you + I + exterior input = continuous >

I remember. Fuel intake is required. Can't do anything about it right now.

When the rain eased into splatters on a gusting wind, Rider and Greg fitted plasti-boards to broomsticks—both stored in the ceiling of the water tunnel—and began to shove out the pooling water. As a swath of floor was cleared, Sard dragged sandbags forward and mopped the floor behind them.

"That's it," Greg said. "We've still got a dome. I'm off. The kitchens call me."

"Sard, why don't you stay awhile?" Rider said.

Was there a choice? Sard wondered about the conditions outside. What did he know? "All

that water down in the cubby jungle ... aren't the trees floating?"

"Another tunnel beyond and a fall into the sea," Rider said. He restrung the net along the ceiling of the water tunnel and hung his clothes from it to dry.

Sard added his jeans and shirt. The life-suit underneath was dry already. When he stripped off the top half of it and let it hang from his waist, the last of the breeze was like a balm on his bare skin. He fetched mats from Mab's airlock. Rider divided his last meal for them both.

"It feels like I'm marking time, in here or out there," Sard forestalled Rider asking Sard about his adventures.

"You have learned all you need to know about your suit?" Rider said.

It felt like a trick question. "Mmm. Probably not." He sorted through a couple more possible answers. The life-suit would best be tested when Sard was tested? Which might lead to uncomfortable inquiries into how he tested his suit now. He settled for his main thought. "It's like something in me is refusing to get excited about the whole deal?"

Rider's expression was noncommittal. "And you've been thinking that through and trying to come to a conclusion?"

Sard started with the explanation he'd come up with. "My project at the delta is far away in time and place. Between then and now there are only survival skills to be managed and those are taken care of by the life-suit. That's my problem. I don't have any way of influencing things to happen and hardly even myself to organise. I'm bored. Already."

Rider did not smile or act appreciative of Sard's problems. "I suggest then that you spend the whole next week out. You'll get the chance to experience many unforeseen situations all requiring their own strategies. Which will also give us more time to work on the kite, progress of course being put on hold by this storm."

Fine If it was going to be like that. Sard wanted to tell Rider he didn't want the kite. What use would it be when he'd be staying around the ridge. Waste of everybody's efforts.

But never mind, Rider was up and ready to take Sard through a couple of patterns. "Ward off the cold," Rider said. And after that, still not giving Sard any quarter, caught up a pair of staves and clickety-clack fought Sard to a stand-still.

Only then was Rider ready to farewell Sard into the dark tunnels with advice and instructions on what to take for his week-long jaunt into the desert wilderness.

The trouble with it all is that I not only need a *positive* reason to leave, I also would've liked to have time to figure out my path myself. How was that hard to understand? Especially since Rider once was me? He knows and I know that I need something to make all the effort worthwhile? Not being allowed to stay is just not enough.

That was the crux for him. He felt incredibly relieved at his insight into his thought processes. He couldn't leave yet because he wasn't nearly ready. There. The problem, stated

in his own words.