

Sard is still in shock but is beginning to get his act together. He feels cheated that his care-mother never took him to the secret places they now visit. The old man they meet, Rider, has to be a such a fake that Sard plans to out him the minute he's free ..

## 2: Plan B

Ghulia sat beside him. "You look like you've got a week of work to do in three minutes."

"Srese is it." Sard indicated the mini-monitor above the bed. "What does that mean for me?" How could he trust someone as scatty as Srese to look after his interests?

His care-mother leapt up onto the bed—he was amazed to see—and switched off the mini-monitor.

"People think because there is no sensory-felt in the Nest, there are no receptors. Never dreaming that the communication gear itself might carry signal," she said shakily.

He stared, his mouth agape.

When she noticed she hugged him hard. "Sard-baby, this is it. The first day of your new life." Cheerful when obviously that wasn't how she felt. "How much time do you think until Phin and Youk notice you missing?" she said.

"Probably around lunchtime when Phin will want to make sure I don't eat. They'll find their clothes ruined in the ionizers and suddenly they'll care a lot. Why?"

"You have no more time at their disposal. In fact, you have no more time at all for ordinary things. Get into some nondescript clothes and smoothe down your hair. I'll call in sick, which everyone will consider perfectly understandable."

If it hadn't been for her fear—utter and stark—Sard wouldn't have gone along with her chivvying. He didn't understand half of what she was on about but changed into ordinary jeans and shirt. Moccasins on his feet. His hair combed as flat as it would go. He could but coast in her wake until the facts came out.

"We need to go to the Dining Hall," Ghulia said.

"I wasn't there that long ago."

"Nevertheless."

The corridor walls, though still mainly grey, fluttered with blue stalks and leaves. Sard started every time a bird shadow exploded from the undergrowth. "That's how you feel?" he said.

She talked from behind the bit of her scarf that she covered her mouth with. "Ignore it. It's Gammy guessing." She led him into the Dining Hall, empty of breakfasters, and into the kitchen-office cubby and introduced him to that fool, Gregorius the Dining Hall Manager, as though Greg and Sard had never met.

“You know my care-son?”

“Sard,” Greg said. “Will I put you on the roster for early breakfast?”

“There is a roster?” Sard’s amazement wasn’t a put-on.

“Only for the early session, mate,” Greg said while he made them a coffee each.

Ghulia was like, go on this is an emergency, and it was an easy thing to commit to when Sard had no idea of what was blowing in the wind. “Yeah sure, put me down for a couple of weeks.”

Ghulia took the coffees and led him to a table. No one else around helped make it too weird to enjoy. His care-mother waved him down opposite her. She stared pointedly, dragging his gaze along with hers, at every sensor within their range – alongside every light fitting and behind every air-filter screen.

Because of them, she explained without a word, she wouldn’t be saying anything about the emergency in here. She allowed him about two minutes to gulp down what was a *hot* drink. She drank hers as if it had no flavour and no heat. Like it was water straight from the moldeckery. He followed her out into the corridors. “Where are we going?”

She shrugged and brushed her ear.

*Oh yeah. Gamester all ears.* They’d exited in the Lane alongside the Dining Hall, walked Neilson-wards. Left into First Circle, crossed Neilson Street and into the lane alongside the silk weaving workshop. They went to its back entry in the corridor parallel to First and Second Circles. As they entered, Ghulia grabbed the doorbell with a practiced move. Obviously to prevent the bell jangling.

She pulled him down onto his hands and knees with her to crawl under the silk stretched from the wall to the loom. The woman already under there apparently had the task of tying off the beginnings and ends of the silk cocoons after their filaments were woven into the new fabric. Ghulia mouthed, “Mab, this is my care-son.”

“One of the avatars, Ghulia.” Mab likewise spoke voicelessly. Sard was like he attended a ball game, his eyes following the action.

“Not chosen for the game,” Ghulia said.

“Plan B?” Mab raised her eyebrows.

Ghulia nodded.

Mab tossed her head to indicate that the person they wanted, whose name Sard was not able to read from her lips, was still up there. Wherever that was. She waved Ghulia and Sard out from under the loom and Ghulia pushed him through a curtained doorway into what was at first glance a kitchenette.

Or maybe the place where they cooked up dyes, he decided seeing the various cooking vessels with coloured slops. The whole rear wall was draped with silks.

“The drying racks,” Ghulia said. “Vents in the floor and ceiling.” She bent and felt for something under a swag of silk scraps in a basket. “Go on through.”

“Huh?” he said pointedly when he could’ve said a ton of other stuff.

She pressed a headband into his hands that had a torch on the front, and pushed past him through the curtaining. A passage? How was it that when he and Srese had investigated every corner of the habitat in their single digit years, Ghulia and he now stumbled along a passage Sard hadn’t even known existed?

He nodded his head to swing the torch up, across and down. The sandstone walls were darkened with age. So, not a newly carved passage. The floor was ordinary polished-with-use stone-krete. He felt betrayed by the way Ghulia, who might have shown him the tunnel as a treat but didn’t—ever—showed no hesitancy in her walking having obviously been through here many times.

“Mind the ceiling.” She led him up a set of steps. He had go bent for a couple of paces before they went down again, and that for only a couple of steps before they had to do it all again. Why not a straight tunnel for pity’s sake? His temper started to build. “Where are we going?”

“The sooner we get there, the sooner you will know,” Ghulia said.

He ignored the tartness in her tone in favour of a bit of his own. “How is that an answer?”

No answer.

*Fine.* The way the passage slung about twisting and turning, they could be going anywhere. About all he was sure of anymore was that they’d entered the passage in the silk workshop in the Neilson-and-Everard Quarter.

“Ouch.” He forgot to duck and did his mother stop to commiserate?

She had entered a foyer. The two sets-of-doors-setup made it like the foyer into the Nest, that he and Srese called the airlock. Where they used to play their spaceship games. He wasn’t attending when he should have been, he thought dismally, when he just about *fell* into the room beyond. It was so large and light and round, he was totally overwhelmed.

By the time he’d collected himself, Ghulia had abandoned him and was stepping out a pattern in the middle of the room with an old joker already there. The person they’d probably come to see. The man’s features were certainly something to see. *Grey hair* and *wrinkles* that Sard only ever saw in videomentaries and then only because he’d searched beyond the common tripe. Most people he knew would prefer to be moldecked rather than grow old.

The grey-head continued to step and turn and gesture, completely unselfconsciously. Sard’s hands grew clammy from embarrassment about the weirdness of someone ignoring bystanders. Personally, during a public performance, he had to have everyone involved in the action of the moment. He’d sent people out if they refused to be with the action.

Finally the oldster made a namaste-type ending to his routine. After a minute on hold, he turned and came. Ghulia would be no help as she continued on hold, Sard saw. She wore her

unapproachable I-am-meditating expression.

The oldster arrived in Sard's face while Sard was still thinking daggers at Ghulia. At the same time—like the old man timed it—a vast bright light sprang into being at the top of the rock rim above the per-glass dome ceiling that Sard had had no spare time to see yet. A sun event. He'd bet on it.

"It's the sun," the old man said. "Too hot in here when that gets going. I'm known as Rider."

Sard didn't nod to say he understood, because he understood nothing. He shook Rider's proffered hand to express a minute vestige of politeness.

"Have a seat," Rider said.

There was only the floor. Polished stone. No rugs or cushions. Sard remained standing. Damned if he was going still further out of his comfort zone without knowing why. His skin crawled as he felt the man studying him.

Sard pointedly studied the scene. The per-glass dome perched on rickety columns of stacked stones. Nowhere did the dome meet the walls. In the gaps between the stone pylons, the room's air must mix freely with the outdoors. Or what it looked like.

Seeing where Sard looked, the old man said, "Originally the dome sat on that rim of rocks." He pointed at an edge far above the dome, that just now was limned with sunlight. "Lucky for us the glass didn't break when it slid down, though naturally it needed stabilizing."

"Naturally," Sard said. The floor was of the usual polished stone-krete. Including the one they'd come through, three dark entrances broke the encircling wall.

"When it rains, it's all hands on deck for bailing," the old man said.

One point to Sard for having moved his attention on while the old man was still on about the gaps between the dome and the wall.

Above the dome hung a circular piece of what would have to be sky, brown-tinged by the aging UV barrier in the per-glass. "The dome dislodging from its original mounting caused this hall to be abandoned by the community," Rider said. "One of Gamester's engineers' mistakes. Serendipitous for us."

Ghulia finally came to grace the meeting with her presence. "Rider, this is my care-son, Sard. Superfluous to Gamester's needs."

"Mmm," Rider said.

Ghulia nodded. Something she was doing a lot around these people. Sard interrupted the flow of meditational discourse or whatever they thought they were doing. "I don't need plan B. Srese will get me into Plan A with her. What we planned when the competition was first posted."

Rider stared at Ghulia. "He doesn't know?"

“I brought him as soon as I was sure.”

“Yet it is *his* life,” Rider said. “*He* needs the knowledge. I think Plan B, Scene 2, Ghulia. You know what to do?”

She bit her bottom lip then seemed to come to some conclusion. “Yes.”

“I thought you just agreed to no more decisions without my input?” Sard said. What did he care about the whine even he heard in his voice?

Amazingly, Ghulia laughed. “Rider, you know him better than I do.”

“I was him once,” Rider said. “Still am sometimes, though I try to keep those moments private. We should get out of here. The heat,” the oldster explained to Sard. He hustled them towards the doorway they arrived through.

Sard let Ghulia take the lead back down the secret passage. He felt like his ears had burned off. He decided he’d go to the hardcopy museum next, and read the Name Book. *But there is no Rider in it, the man is such a fake.* That grey hair had to be a wig.

Ghulia stopped well before they reaching the curtaining of drying silks. “I want to show you a couple of things before you’re too old to enjoy them. You take Two Forty and Second Circle. Don’t let anybody see you. Hide in the overhang of Crystal Cave. I’ll be there in half an hour.”

Sard frowned.

“Indulge me, son. You owe me for that tantrum back there. I thought I did a better job than that, socializing you.” She had him by the ears then, and not gently either. She shook him. “Wake up to yourself, Sard-baby.”

Tears in her eyes and her voice. What could he do but indulge her?