

19. Testing Himself, Testing His Wing

Sard sighed. There, all his disappointments, gone. He breathed deep for starting again. *Have a look at a map. Redirect my travel. It's still only middle of the morning.*

< We'll cross the right arm and be on our way, swinging round northeast and then southeast. >

That's Youk's program, it's the one that says we instead of you + I. Sard summoned up an argument. I want to go west and southwest so I can rescue Ahni. CAVE lies southeast. Why there?

< It's a question of reach. CAVE's signals reach no further than the outer arc we are standing on. >

Why does the Mark II version want me back into the home range and is so blatant about it? I'm pretty sure that Rider switched off the need for signals between the life-suit and CAVE. Why else would he have talked about the delta which is so much further east? Mark II is so sure I need it, that it thinks I'll just fall in with its plans? That is so like Youk. He snorted.

Staring out across the canyons, he wished he could fly. *Well, fly properly.* No way was he going to trust himself to his ignorance crossing the chasm. *I'll fall like a stone and end my story.*

< Attention. >

He attended, reluctantly? The life-suit made a series of images. Sard harnessed up and dragging the wing behind him. Sard running into the wind. The air cells filling and the wing lifting him. Sard drifting across the chasm to the far side.

Where did the life-suit get all that info? How? *It's nothing like Mark I which complained whenever I asked it something it couldn't touch.* He smiled at the reminiscence. *The only thing I know about tech programming is that superseded software stays on the hard drive unless they are purposely deleted. My program is still in there.*

"One problem I see is that the air above the chasms might not hold us up this time of day." What did he know? He was just marking time, giving Mark II more rope to hang itself. "We crash into the chasm, another storm, and then what?"

The life-suit once more looped through the Sard-harnessed-up-and-drifting-across-the-chasm sequence.

"Another problem is this sea-breeze stroking over the chasm and replacing cold air with warm. My wing would take me north out over the junction and then if we were lucky to that side. I'm not risking that either." Whatever. His voice squawked like a lone seagull's when he talked down into the chasm.

Again the life-suit looped the Sard drifting across the chasm sequence.

Youk programmed the damned suit with that streak of stubborn? How? *If I didn't know better I'd suspect an AI identity. Which should be impossible with the digital walls CAVE installed to prevent that kind of takeover.*

Sard stepped back from the brink. *All this is taking time I don't have and I know enough*

useful things to get me across. He bent his thoughts to lessons back home and all the research he'd done. *The sun warms the land and hot air rises should be enough to get me across.* There is no alternative other than walking back and joining the road and why would he risk his life again like that?

He broke a couple of stems from the nearest clump of spinifex and set to splitting them into short fibrous lengths. After laying a handful on the stone at the rim, he turned to work on the wing. He had had it in and out of the pack so often to camp under it that the lines were utterly tangled.

A little past noon the spinifex stems he launched boated down slowly. He lay out the wing and shrugged into the still separate harness, then loitered at the edge. A breath, just an air of warmth, touched his face when he leaned forward. He stepped back. "Won't hold us yet."

The life-suit showed Sard crouching and turning in under the lines and crossing them in front somehow. Then apparently he was to gather the wing in his arms and throw it forward into the air fountaining up in the centre of the gorge.

"I take it that this is you telling me to get ready. Good idea, for a change." He arranged the wing like an extra long train on a wedding dress. He grinned. Like it was one of Srese's over-the-top designs. He stepped over the strings to the jump-off stone and connected the brakes to his harness. Threw a couple of pieces of grass toward the middle of the gap.

They twirled up.

The life-suit made a picture of late-afternoon light. Sard sinking in air past its peak heat.

"Okay! Okay! So do me that launch again. Step by step!"

The life-suit waited for each achievement as Sard turned and twisted and gathered lines in his hands and with his fists full castled the wing's fabric onto his arms. How will I have enough strength to fling it all the necessary distance, metres of string as well?

The suit allowed the strings to droop down the cliff. The next move was the preparation for shooting-the-tiger-with-the-bow, a tai ji move.

"But my hands, the wing?"

< The hands as for flinging the net. >

A virtual performance, long ago. He had no time to sweat over Youk's perfidies.

< Do it and attend to my count. >

Sard tightened his muscles for the screwing-down move to the right, gathering his strength for the fling.

The suit pulsed. ...four ... three ...

Sard flung the wing into the air above the gap. Stepped back as the wing unfurled in front of his face, smooth as smooth. The wing floated up so leisurely that he barely felt it take him from the ground. Above the depth he tensed himself for the fall. The harness straps tightened around him and he didn't plunge down.

He twisted his body into an air punch. “I did it!” The whole assembly, himself a part of it, rocked. Sard’s heart leaping into his mouth, is what he felt but the wing flapped and righted itself. Sard crouched in his harness for the touchdown the moment he had crossed the gap.

Wind and wing had other ideas and they took him high, and then higher as he circled the Y junction in slow loops. After he fought down his nausea—seasick, up here? No thank you—he started to enjoy himself. Not that he dared shift his hands into a different configuration. No way did he want to encourage a twirling back down into the chasm.

What he enjoyed was seeing his options. If he forced a landing in the cup of the Y, he’d be going backward. This observation despite that a minute ago he’d intended just that. From the height where he looped and swayed, he could distinguish camels and herders—with lots of both of them—and even the pale brown of many clay masks camped right next to a green place in the southwestern quadrant on the coast, that he would assume to be the swamp. Seeing them like that—as a force to be reckoned with—he decided he couldn’t help Ahni. He’d be throwing his life away.

Next loop round he studied the life-suit’s second option. All the land that lay to the west of the Y shape of the canyons, was a downward sloping desert covered with the saltbush and spinifex mix. He’d be alright for water but what would he be eating? Rats were the only life he’d seen. *And* he’d be in Mark II’s control.

He studied the area some more however, he might need to know it one day. CAVE’s home ridge bounded about a third of the farther edge, backed by the ocean which was bigger than he ever knew. West of CAVE’s ridge wandered a maze of single file dirt paths looping and traversing a nearly straight double track path suggesting the camel herders also used carts.

In the north east, his third option, were more of the single file tracks mazing round a set of cart tracks travelling in as straight a line as was possible. Interestingly, all the tracks stopped at the edge of an escarpment that even from the height where he soared, he could not clearly see beyond. The horizon in that direction glittered, that’s all that his augmented avatar eyes could see.

He looped again trying for higher by briefly tilting the brakes so that the forward edge tipped up slightly. *Ha, it worked!* He rose on a slow slant. Except that now he had his back to the escarpment and still couldn’t see beyond it.

A stony plateau a long way down and beneath his feet was all he could see of his third option. It lay to the left of the Y shape when he imagined the place where he’d taken off from. If that plateau went all the way till it met the wall closing the delta off from the desert, Sard expected to see one of the cities he’d heard about, on the point of the so-formed elbow. Zeolite.

Beyond the escarpment were flatlands cut into rectangles. Cropland maybe. The vast glitter bordering the fields was the inland sea if his geography sources were correct. A sluggish river, guarded by ancient crocodiles, was said to maintain a seeping flow at the base of the plateau. Out of his sight, it was still a fable, a mighty river that had been reversed and now flowed, however slowly, in the opposite direction.