

Mark 1 versus Mark II

The breeze all around Sard slowed. *What is the problem?* He glanced up. His wing's air cells lost their fat sausage look as he watched. He didn't plummet, but started circling downward in a tight spiral. A different kind of breeze.

< Very nice. A lovely scene in my latest entertainment. >

Ignore. Still spiralling downward, he looked between his feet, and watched the plateau become a dangerous landing ground of a stony floor with tussocky vegetation here and there. He clenched his jaws. *Needs must.*

< You'll need to bring us nearer to the home ridge for me to transmit your doings. >

Sard pulled on the brakes, then on the strings above them, to try and slow his progress. He intended landing to the left of the chasms.

< I warned you-ouou-ou! >

Mark II's voice faded out. *Thanks be the universe.* Sard touched down, and ran along a narrow stony slab for a half dozen paces while remembering to yank down hard on the strings to the rear of the wing to empty out the cells.

He stopped without tripping and the wing fell over and around him. He dropped to his knees and after catching his breath, untangled himself from strings. *How will I know that Mark II really is gone?*

Do nothing. Rest up. He grinned. *It's a plan.* He tented the wing over the vegetation. Crawled under and made a comfortable nest.

The life-suit pulsed. Damn, he was just asleep. "What?"

< Input of energy is required. >

"I doubt it when I'm resting."

< At rest the organism needs 70 units of energy per hour. The support system an additional 30 units to be able to maintain shelter from the elements. >

Sard lifted the flap of the wing. Dark night with only the stars. "Go to sleep. I don't need you."

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He woke shivering so hard his teeth rattled. *Get up. Move. Warm up.* He tried leaping, windmilling his arms. Stumbled. Trembled. The life-suit wasn't working? His gut felt hollow from hunger. "Wake up! Wake up!" What was the correct instruction again?

< Wake up is the correct command. >

"Frosty." Sard laughed despite his gut pain. *Relief, probably.* "You're right. We need food. Though there isn't that much left." He upended the pack over the wing. Only a few food packets tumbled out.

< Think the food types at me and I will compute the eating plan. >

“Okay,” he thought, then said it. “Two of Greg’s savoury potato cakes. Mulberry and fried grub slice, my favourite, so only one of those. Sweet potato slice, not my favourite, so four pieces of that. Six cubes of mock cheese. Half a packet of shake mix.”

< There is choice. With enough water we can have many days of rest. Seven days if things need to be done. Half that with hard labour. >

“Seven days, of course. Even I understand we can’t stay here and expect to live. What can I have?”

< The fried grub slice. Two wet fingers dipped in the drink mix. >

“And that’s it? I could eat the whole lot, no problem.”

The suit made no answer.

“Just joking. You’re making me eat my favourites first. Less temptation. So what’s required is me getting us to a place where I can get more food. Do you know any?”

The only answer was the wind whistling among the sedgy tussocks. “Of course you don’t. My apologies. Do you have any suggestions?”

Zero on that too.

After a while he recalled the suit’s original programming. Cuffed himself on his forehead. *Fool. The life-suit doesn’t understand anything not connected to it. And this is that programming back in spades. The one I yearned for. Fool again for taking so long to remember it.*

Eyes open, Sard-man. Ears, all my senses. A low wind soughed and rustled the vegetation, also low. Sard clambered up the nearest taller than knee-high boulder. He stared in every direction, trying the imprint everything in his memory.

Half the circumference, to the left, west through north to east, he sensed rather than saw the drop off. In that 180 degree half circle, the vegetation, the sedgy tussocks and low shrubbery stopped abruptly about ten metres from where he stood and were backed by blue sky. *Ten metres, that’s not a lot.*

He overpowered his instinct to instantly move in the opposite direction. From west again—the direction behind him—but through south to east this time, the same vegetation types went on and on and became a brown haze. *Remember, though, the chasms intermittently and not visible until you get near.* He looked for the smoke specifically. Sniffed. Something he remembered. From Greg teaching him? He hardly remembered Greg. Did it matter? *Can’t smell smoke or see any. What about the breeze, then? Where’s that going?*

The breeze came whistling over the edge of the escarpment in the north (on his left hand) and went south (to his right). Smoke and smell both would be carried away from him. He stepped down from the boulder. Peered closer at the surrounding landscape. Underfoot were rivers of bare rock and islands of grit and stones bearing the plants.

This is a desert as much as the red sandy one in the west. Spinifex here the same vegetation as there. Probably the same animals too. And no birds the whole time I’ve been looking.

Except ... he glanced skyward. A raptor up there, would you believe? What is there down here for it to eat?

If in answer, a finger-length red-and-blue locust hopped from one bush to the next. Before Sard could think what to do about it, the bird swooped down, grabbed the insect and was up and away again. *A little raptor. Hobby falcon. Too small, too fast and too smart to catch. The insect. Red-and-blue. How was that camouflage? The bushes. Ah. Little red flowers. Blue shadows.*

Got to find something bigger than a little raptor and or more than a single locust. Both of them need too much energy to catch. But also, I can't stay in one place here the same as I couldn't stay in the dip down there after I ate that one single rat. But still. If I can find a dip here, maybe I'll be able to catch a rock rat. Make a fire and cook it. There's no one up here.

He packed up the wing as well as he was able in the circumstances, not being able to lay it out flat on the ground. Make that he crumpled the wing's cells to his chest to empty them, and gathering in the cloth, stuffed it into the backpack. But he gathered in the lines methodically and after coiling them inserted the bundles neatly between pack and fabric. Set the pack on the boulder and shrugged into it.

Set off away from the edge of the land toward a *region*—he scoffed at his continuing internal pretentiousness—where the vegetation seemed taller. That might signify a depression where any rain on this benighted plateau might have drained to and the veg as a consequence had grown taller.

Following the rivers of rock he was easier on his suit-legs, less cutting from the prickly vegetation. No answer to that. The incumbent version of programming was not nearly as chatty as the other.

< Following the rivers of rock will take you twice as long to get anywhere and using more energy. >

Uh oh. It's the Mark 2 program back. How did that happen? Sard trembled. He felt the shiver go through him from his throat to his toes, him trembling from the fright of being encased in an unfriendly entity. His mouth dried. His outer covering, aka the fucking life-suit, narrowed its elasticity—somehow—resulting in a lengthways squeezing like that python trick way back when.

My own stupid fault. I thought at it—I'm still gaming it when I should know better by now. I told it I was following a rock river. And it answered me. Proving right there, that this is the other program.

He stopped. To his left he could hardly see where the veg cut off at the edge of the plateau to his north. *I've come too far south.* He zigzagged back north to his safe zone. *Keep walking. Get really safe. Falling off the plateau might be the lesser of the two evils.*

After a long time hard walking, he stopped again. Stood there, pack still on his back. Not giving the entity any more clues than need be. *My shadow getting quite long. Sun sets in the west, behind me, and I'm not even going to check that. Need to find somewhere to lay down and sleep.*

The moment the sun sank all the way below the horizon, the air cooled. *Damn. Nearly cold.* He half expected—hoped—the suit to instantly tell him to get into shelter. Suit obdurately

silent. *Walk walk.* The runnels of stone became harder to see. Shadowed shrubs. *Almost dark, I might as well say.*

Put his foot down on a place that wasn't there. *Huh?* His knee collapsed and the rest of him plunged after.

He fell deeper than how he remembered a dip in the landscape. *What is this place?* The pack on his back pressed him down while he lay on ... he felt about ... on rock. Struggling out of the pack's restraints he looked up at the edge of the ground where he'd been. Rock edges all around, the dusk grey sky beyond. The depression was maybe waist deep?

Down where he was, there were already black-dark places. A bunch of ledges over hollows? If I had a flash light ... *don't need one, I have a life-suit. Grim dark thought—what else don't I know about it?* Should he appreciate the fact that the exterior of the suit started to glow? Didn't know it could do that either. *Is Youk so far ahead of everyone with his programming?*

< A silly boy who dressed Roman-style for his capture by the Clay Faces. >

What? Youk? Captured?

< You should attend to the shallow business of surviving in this hole. >

The suit squeezed him to get his attention, is what it felt like. *Is that the way to talk?* A thought that might have got to it because the exterior of the suit started glowing. In patches. His right side leg and arm when he had his head turned that way because of the way he lay, but now directed his gaze into the overhangs there.

Three separate overhangs no higher than about fifty centimetres. No deeper than a body sheltering. Their gritty floors scuffed. A lot of random human handprints medium-size and small scattered about. *People getting comfortable in the only shelter available, that might mean.*

Sard rolled to his left side slowly enough to give the suit the chance to light up the dark on his other side. One side faded. The other lit up—greenish, then bluish then white. *Good approximation of a flood light.* Yep, the suit knew what he meant. His thoughts or his actions.

This side the holes were both deeper and higher. The adults might've slept here, he thought. He searched for large handprints and found them. Also the imprints of weaving. Rounds and sloppy ovals.

< Where they rested their baskets. I must know who they are. >

Yeah right.

< Sleep. I will study the matter. Perhaps this benighted community has technical expertise I need. You do not have enough energy stored to serve both me and your body, and I will take most of it. You will need to cover yourself. >

Huh? He could parse that out but was in fact he was too tired. He registered the last fact and pulled out the circular underlay that was to have helped him do magic. *Huh.* He lay where he lay and covered himself.