

The Dream, or Was It?

Sard woke. How many more times would he have to wake in this story? *When we gamed in CAVE, we don't bother with night and day. It was always day.* He let his thoughts continue on to CAVE.

“Oh look, he's waking up,” said someone. A girlish voice. Sard turned to see her but there was no one with him in the rock hole. “Where will we have him?” said someone else he almost knew. He started to try to remember him.

“We haven't seen him do anything real yet.” Different boy. *Just figuring how many players is all I have time for?* “Can you believe that it's one of the avatars in that suit?” *First boy again.* “I thought they'd all been cast out?”

“Let's try that village at the edge of the salt lake,” the original girl said.

Sard gave up.

Someone sounding a lot like Gre...Greg?...chuckled. “You mean Sard and Srese Yonker, and Youk Kerr? You are a dim-witted bunch if you've forgotten them already. Do it. I want to see *Sard* in that village. I want to see how *Sard* reacts.”

Being warned, Sard held onto stone left and right. He heard swearing off-stage. He scoffed at himself, *How did I even know that the swearing is off-stage?*

He closed his eyes—his thoughts went fuzzy and his whole body shook—bones, flesh, heart and head. His ears funnelled in a loud incessant buzz. *This doesn't sound like somewhere I want to be.* He pinched himself. *Ouch. I'm awake?*

He opened his eyes. Where is this place? *Village at the edge of the salt lake* reverberated in his thoughts. Can't see either a salt lake or any houses. Only thing he could see straight in front was the underside of his stair-set of drawers that he'd had since childhood.

Was it them at an arm's length distance? He marvelled running his fingers over the silky timber undersides of the fourth, fifth, and sixth drawers. *I wonder if the crabby life-suit entity brought all my treasures in the drawers as well?* He lay back, thought about the actual drawers to distract himself. Old and older, maybe the oldest piece of furniture in the habitat, according to Ghulia, and inherited through her from her forebears.

Passing concrete objects down through the generations shouldn't even be possible, given the anonymous way they were made. *How did she manage it? And why the drawers here*—he looked beyond the staircase they were part of, and through an open doorway—in *this white lime-stone house at the edge of a salt lake?*

No one out there. No. Wait. A bunch of people dressed in white, walked half-heartedly, even hesitantly, out onto the salt. They all wore a thing over their eyes. *Looks like a swim-mask, people. You look ridiculous.* He felt his face. No mask himself.

< You don't need virtual-world goggles. You are wearing me. >

Sard laughed remembering who and what. *I am wearing a life-suit colonised by an AI entity.* It confirmed his suspicions. *Apart from that, I am inside a virtual building somewhere, as well as in an actual rock-shelter.*

“He went in here,” said a voice he knew. Greg came into view, also with swim-goggles over his face, and leapt up the stairs. Dust from between the treads spurted into Sard’s face. He was under the stairs he saw, recognising the boxed-in treads. *They are the drawers containing my life.*

< You’re wondering how a life-suit knew about your drawers? >

“Not really,” Sard said. The way the entity said “life-suit” gave the game away. If it was a game. Preening and so superior, as if an ordinary life-suit was far beneath what the entity itself was capable of. *Which might be true.*

The people watching, or involved in the interactive play, seemed to think they were involved in a game. Sard listened interestedly to the stomping on the floor above, and the high, excited voices up there. Everyone ran up and down the stairs at least twice each.

Then the search continued in the room alongside the stairs—with him in plain sight he would’ve thought—and then the room beyond, a kitchen maybe. Plenty of people called out they saw him whenever someone thought they found him.

Nobody did, though he wasn’t hiding particularly, just laying on a pallet under the stairs. All they had to do was glance aside. But they of course wore the goggles that were in the control of the entity that also controlled the life-suit.

< These people have had things too easy for far too long. >

Whatever the stupid entity meant by that, apart from the glaring fact that it—the entity—was now in charge. Not only uncharge of him, apparently. It now seemed to Sard that Gammy—the AI owner of CAVE who once was Gamester, a regular human being who had his brain pattern uploaded into a computer—had ruled by division. All energy-chewing tasks were separated. Life-suits could not communicate with the virtual goggles. Gammy’s strategies were to preserve the system for as long as possible.

The new entity obviously had no such desire. *Does it even know what it wants?* And what did it know about Sard’s people thinking they had it so easy? How easy was it to know that every move you made was being judged, and if you didn’t come up to the expectations of the pernickety AI in charge, you’d be moldecked without regrets? You were told a fantasy that you’d be reborn. Better luck next time, people had learned to say to each other.

So who or what is *this* entity?

“Got you!” Greg said. He’d shoved his mask up on his forehead. He grabbed Sard by an arm and dragged him into the open. “Let’s get you into the daylight. I knew you’d be somewhere in plain sight.” He stood Sard on his two feet.

“I’m surprised to find you in the game, oh noble warrior,” Sard said. “It’s quite a short trip, it seems, from standing back all your life to suddenly being as involved as any Tom, Hinnny and Darren.”

Greg hesitated. He dropped his hands from Sard, and tore his mask from his head, but did not drop it. The mask squawked as if the life-suit entity had an audio channel in it. Greg’s bewilderment cleared to an expression Sard recognised. “Same old Sard. You calling me out?” Greg said.

“Just wondering what the hell is going on?” Sard said. “Not like you to be taken in by anything an AI serves up?” He replied with the same tone Greg gave him.

Greg frowned. “An AI? Other than Gammy, you’re saying?”

Sard gestured at the houses made from blocks of pristine limestone, at the sheet of white glare beyond. “When did Gammy ever serve us up with this? Or peopled it with swim-goggles and a life-suit at the same time? I think he’s been overwritten. You probably know better than me what with.”

Greg grinned. “What’s it like, wearing it?”

The thing in the life-suit slammed Sard to the ground hard enough that he hurt. < Next time stay where I put you >

Next it slammed Greg down beside him. It must have, no way would Greg ever purposely throw himself down beside Sard, and lay there winded and looking concussed.

Thinking to check Greg’s life-status, Sard put his hand on Greg’s chest. The AI messaged Greg and it reverberated up Sard’s arm. < Don’t make me over-write you as well >

It could do that? “Drop the mask,” Sard mouthed at Greg.

Greg nodded minimally. Freeing his fingers from the mask’s strap, he leapt to his feet. “Come on, Sard. Let’s go. Save yourself.”

The life-suit squeezed Sard the way he had come to know. The python trick. “You,” he gasped. “You save yourself!” The life-suit picked him up and forced him to run at Greg on four feet, like a beast.

Greg grimaced horror, turned and ran into a corridor.

< Your body lies on the plateau. There is no going or coming other than with me. > < Wait here. >

The life-suit forced Sard back into the hutch under the stairs.