

Sard walked away from the kid. Make that, he *pretended* to fly away. Bunching the underlay in his fists he stepped off what must be the smallest cliff in history and landed on a ledge barely a man's height below the plateau. *Didn't turn my ankles—which is good—and getting out of the kid's sight instantly. Also good.*

But too bad he had to walk away. Would've been fun teaching the kid to fly. And while teaching him, they could've slowly made their way to the delta and surely the people there would've been glad to see Sard bring back their long-lost son? In the meantime he, Sard, would've recalled everything Rider said about the delta, everything Sard was meant to do. And with the help of his new friends, he would've achieved ...

*Yeah, yeah. Ramble on, Sard-man. You might as well accept that bird has flown.* He stopped walking to think that through. The ledge not nearly wide enough to be taking his attention off his feet. *Where am I going with that story?* Fun to teach the kid the mechanics of flying? With the entity in the life-suit mis-calling my every second command?

*So sure always of myself in my mind. Making like none of the shit getting this far happened. Keep walking.*

He walked along the ledge to where it joined another going into a zig-zag. Away from the kid, the wing, and the life-suit with its entrapments. "I'm free," he said aloud to get into a different frame of mind. Though he could cry about leaving the wing. *I had plans for that.*

< Do not cry. We cannot spare the water >

*How far till I can stop? How far do I need to go till the life-suit has no influence over me?*

*Stupido! With the life-suit and the homo-dolphin-chimera-insert having the wing they can reach me in five minutes.*

*Huh! Make that maybe after the suit and the damned implant teach the kid to fly.*

He cast his glance here and there to make sure that stopping, he stopped in a safe place on the ledge. Savaged himself the next second. *What's safe, you fool? Think! Yeah okay, I remember what to do.*

He shredded a bit of a dried stalk, same as he did when he prepared to cross a chasm. Only this time to find out which way the wind blew. He searched for an appropriate stone by his feet. Wrapped it with shreds of the stalk. Tossed the bundle underarm as high as he could. Stone fell and the shredded veg languished up there on the wind.

*All good. Wind direction north to south across my path. I like it. The life-suit-and-homo-dolphin-chimera-insert not coming this way anytime soon.* He wrapped himself in his magic underlay, kneeled, lay down in the angle where the ledge met the cliff. *The dark is my comfort.*

— — — —

He woke to the sun beating down onto his eyes, even through his eyelids. Rolled over and viewed the edge of the stone and beyond it the valley below. *Thank the universe I didn't roll further. But the sun? So hot already.* Still on his knees, he folded the underlay in half, quarter, eighths. Lay it on the ledge in front of him, and worried at the point with his knife.

*Knife blunt?* Toughest cloth in the world he recalled himself saying. *And it is!* He set his teeth. Sawed at the point.

< Why? >

*Making a hole. A hole for my head. Need a poncho to keep the sun off me.*

The toughest cloth in the world parted.

*I wore it down and hey presto I've got me a poncho. Sounds like a line from a play. Whatever. Keep the sun off me. Too bad I don't have that breast-piece sun visor any more. Sun's that fierce.*

< The middle cut-off bit is big enough to lay on your head and strap it down under you chin with a couple of lomandra leaves. >

*If there are any. No lomandra in these climes, just spiny spinifex. Pass on that.* He put the plate-sized middle bit in his pack. *Might come in handy for something.*

After a while he pulled the poncho up over his head. *Am I a fool or am I a fool? Nope, not about this. They're travelling into the southeast last time I checked the wind and I'm heading east. I'm not following them.*

< You *are* a fool to travel in the heat of the day, half-naked and not wearing a life-suit >

He stopped. Stock still. "Who's talking at me?" he whispered, because out here ... *there's no one. I'm going crazy.*

< Saving your life >

< Lie down under the sheltering vegetation. Shade your exposed side with the underlay >

*Can't win and the sun is out to get me too.* He kept walking, always following the edge of the plateau. All morning with the sun in his face. All afternoon with the sun burning any exposed part of his back.

When he stopped to bleed water from plants he tried hiding foetus-like under his underlay. The sun always found him and added more layers of burn. Nights he sometimes remembered to set a snare.

"How come I'm not hungry," he asked the universe. "Are you feeding me?"

< What on? >

"Who *are* you?"

< You need to stay ... alive. The chimera-insert ... needs your help >

"What? Why?"

< I've been torn ... from my seatings ... I've killed ... zapped a goyle ... Didn't help ... I'm in *his* hands ... the herder who took my sweet host ... he *companions* her ... the minx ... how could she? ... They swim ... we swim ... I am lost >

Sard waited. That so so didn't sound like anything Youk would've been able to program,

smart as he was. *And I knew that. Just didn't want to believe it. I'm a fool. It means that I've been in control of the so-called implant the whole time.*

He waited some more. Silence from the entity. Silence from the life-suit. All he heard was the singing insects, a breeze rustling lightly through the vegetation. The dome of the hot sky pressed down on him. Pressed him to the hot stone. Sweating like he melted.

*No words or thoughts from either of the entities.* He shook his poncho. *Dead.* No blue spark when he rubbed two bits of itself together and there should've been bits of the fireworks show still in it. *Be reasonable. How long since I did fireworks?* He curled his lip against his own unreasonable expectations.

He shook the cloth again and it barely rumbled. *Heavy. Turgid, like it is filled with stale gel.* Still the same double-sided *cloth* heavy now with dead electronics? He started to frown, then stopped because his sunburned face didn't take kindly to it. *Idiot. But if I'm not getting any tech, what about the chimera-insert all on his lonesome completely encased in a non-operational life-suit?*

Straightaway he felt the poncho's heavy unhelpful heat bearing down on him. It shaded him and that was about all. Make that, it protected him from the sun's direct rays and *that's* about all. He turned. Walked back along his ledge until he found a place where he could scramble up onto the plateau-proper.

Studied every direction where the entity might've taken the chimera-insert. East. South. Variations thereof. He saw nothing. But then ... he gulped. High-up and far-away — almost exactly in the southeast and gliding on an air-current? A threesome of vultures?

*Vultures? A mythical bird from stories.* He hardly believed his avatar-augmented eyes. *I've always wanted to believe that ... that they're mythical. Not real. Not the birds that clean up a death, diving into the carcass and worrying at the bones.*

He swore. *The chimera-insert is in trouble! Get going!*

He walked as fast as he could for some distance. The stone under-foot was hot but so was the ground. He had no time to negotiate the vegetation in their islands of spike. *My legs. Don't look.*

Inevitably he slowed. *Need water.* He reached the edge of a chasm across his path so suddenly he teetered. *Was that synchronicity? Did I just call up a water source?* He swung his head tiredly side to side searching for a way down. There. An old rock fall. Plants growing on it.

Started the climb with a drumbeat in his head. *The kid is in trouble. Hope the life-suit is tougher than a bunch of bird beaks. I need water to save him. For him and for me.*

He made it to the base without falling. *Trembling and weak.* He clung to the shadowed cliff wall beside the rock-fall. Could he smell water? Avatar augmentations, after all. He breathed in, tasted the chasm's air.

Only then did he smell smoke. *People in the chasm?* He turned, meaning to pivot. *Felled like a log,* he had time to think.

— — — —

Hands on him. Voices. Words he didn't understand. Water trickled down his throat. He relaxed with it. *Saved*. He was saved. *But the kid, still up there. Vultures, remember?* He shocked back into consciousness. Grabbed at an arm. *Who are these people?*

Adult hands gripped his head, either side of his face. Someone else sat on him. A girl no bigger than the chimera-insert, who was still out there. He choked as more water was trickled into him. Coughed. Finally scratched out some words. "The kid! Up there!" He raised his arm pointing. "Vultures!" His throat like it bled. "Wing," he said. *My wing* he meant.

One of the hands gripping his head let go.

A few seconds later a shredded figure passed, with whiff of death-stink shrouding him, and bits of skin hanging off him. Accompanied by two youngsters, the figure—maybe a young man—*maybe no older than me*—climbed up the rock-fall, and disappeared into the bright sun-seared day up there.

"Soon have the youngster." A woman, the one who held his head, replaced her hand.

"They'll get sunburned," Sard said.

"There's a good mud down here. What *they* are wearing against the sun," she countered. "You are a yonker."

"Sardonix Yon *Kerr*," he said, still scratchy.

"Far from home," she said. She gestured for more water. A young woman glopped the water into his open mouth. She was maybe a couple of years older than him? She wore a baby on her back.

Dragging himself up to sit, he dislodged whoever had been sitting on his legs. Had a whole circle of people looking at him. Apart from the woman behind him, all of them were young to very young. He cricked his neck and recognised Ahni's wallet hanging from the woman—older woman—who'd held him by the head.

*The Seapeople!* The escapees that he'd saved. *Never mind telling them. They're saving me now. And they'd got a long way. But camping in a chasm?* He looked up and down it as far as he could see. *How safe is it in here?*

"This chasm is a stub," the older woman said. "Around the corner there's a plug, another rockfall. "You are safe here. I am Sanna-Sister."

He blushed. He knew he must be red because the heat in his face. "Was thinking about *you*. Women and kids." And because she obviously didn't believe him, explained the other after all. "I beat down the life-suit's supernumerary program about you. It wanted me to find you so it could chase you back to the Ridge, to help entertain the masses."

"She's here? With you?"

*Huh?* He didn't know who she was talking about. *No one with me other than the chimera-insert, I thought that was obvious?* He shrugged but couldn't leave the subject of the mysterious program hanging. "Something happened at CAVE. It's gone. The life-suit's original entity too. Silenced. I don't know what happened. This cloth," he plucked up a wad of the poncho. "It's as dead and inert as ... as ..." He cast about for a comparison.

“As old leather,” she said, pinching up a fold of her skirt.

He shuddered. “Yeah. And the kid is in my life-suit. To save his life. He was so so sun-burnt. I don’t know how we’re going to get him out of it. Can he even breathe? It’s the worst damn toughest stuff for cutting.” He lifted the poncho up over his head to show her the ragged hole for his head he’d worried through it. “Probably need to save his life again getting him out of it.”

The women and children in the circle had started to quietly chatter. Even the leader began to talk at some of the others. “He’s of the delta,” he added. “The program called him a chimera-insert.”

Her attention snapped back to him. “What did you say?”

“Chimera-insert?” he said innocently.

She frowned.

*Yeah, okay. Not the time and place for smarty-pants tit-for-tat gaming.* “The program?” he said. “Or, he is of the delta?”

“The program is the implant,” she said.

“And it’s a her?” he said. Saw her answer by the way she frowned like he should know. “I saw CAVE’s medics take it out of Ahni back at the Ridge. They called it the implant, and the implant called the kid a chimera-insert, it knew he is of the delta. I gave him my life-suit to save his life and my wing to get home.” He sipped water from the bag that’d been laid—reverently—within reach. So would he be reverent. *Water saved my life, after all.*

“You’ll need that contraption,” Sanna-Sister said. “Orion ...” She gave a string more instructions that Sard didn’t catch. Another of the death-warmed-up stinks wafted along with another shredded guy. Bigger guy. He too climbed the rock fall and disappeared from view.

“I sent him to check that they are bringing your wing, and to help them. They’ve been out there long enough. What else do you know?”

She just stared at him now, waiting for what other gem of information he had up his sleeve. He narrowed his eyes. “You said I’ll need my wing?” Him the brashy avatar, that sounded like, even to his own ears.

He weakened under her continuing stare. “Sorry. You have a plan?”

Her mouth quirked the briefest flicker of a smile. “We’ll wait for Niko and Rollo.”

*Interesting.* She didn’t say we’ll wait for everyone else. Just the two men. And one of them barely more than a boy. *OK, same as me.* She most definitely is the leader. Sanna-Sister.

“I see you thinking mere gossip. I’ll give you something useful to chew on,” Sanna-Sister said.

*Doesn’t sound like food unfortunately. I’m ravenous.*

“We’ve been to the eastern edge of the plateau,” she said. “We saw many fliers landing in the delta, and many city soldiers. Fliers camping out at night. Soldiers guarding them. Too

dangerous for us to tangle with.”

Then she added, while he was still taking in the meanings, “Rona-Mah, you others. Help me ...” Again the dialect that he didn’t understand. Just everyone scurrying at her bidding.

After lifting his poncho off him, they pushed Sard back down. Slathered him with mud. A herbal scent to it. Sanna-Sister had the wallet open and passed more, and different herbs to Rona-Mah. Rhymes, too. She said a rhyme and Rona-Mah repeated it before laying a twig or three on Sard’s burns, plastering mud over them.

“Lie still,” Sanna-Sister said. “These herbs will disinfect and heal your burns. The mud will cool your skin. The sun’s heat keeps burning if not cooled.”

He must’ve looked disbelieving because she said, “You think we’re primitives?”

He blushed again. “Hardly, when you’ve got that implant telling you your every move?”

Sanna-Sister like bit at the air.

“Tss,” Rona-Mah said. She glopped mud over his mouth and smoothed it.

— — —

Before sending him on his way, Sanna-Sister said for Sard to sit down at a place spread with dry sand. “I will show you where we will travel and where you should.”

So he watched sketchily because he didn’t want to need *her* to show him the way. First he learned that the women and children climbed in and out of chasms only at dawn and dusk. The men, who were almost always up on the plateau, watched for clouds and the directions where they rose. Clouds in far distances meant rain which meant the chasms were replenished but also flooded.

*Sorry for my attitude afterwards, of course.* The L-shaped chasm bothered him ... was it the long arm or the short arm that opened into the delta? If it was the long arm that then meant the Sea-people could safely camp in there, waiting for Sard to achieve his piece of the work. If the short arm, then the long arm would be connected to the inner chasm-warren with the danger of flash floods. Too dangerous for camping.

