

2: The Nightmare

Tardi lay face down on an examination table. He could see the floor through a face-sized hole at the top end. The medi-staff searched his shredded back for coral splinters and tweezed them out. He ignored their exclamations on their finds and their chatter about their social conquests.

With his eyes closed it was easier to see the hallucination. Red clouds bulked over the horizon. The top of a red-gold V-shaped wave glinted where its sides forever threatened to heel over. A vast grey creature, while it powered itself along just under the surface, caused that little bow wave by holding its snout with nose holes above water.

Seen that, Tardi thought. Now he rode an unshaped wooden surfboard. On and on over an unending ocean. Redwood splinters, loosened by the shifting of his soles on the narrow plank when he stood, stung his back and his butt when he sat and when a pair of tweezers missed its target. “Aah!”

“Sorry,” said a nurse.

Tardi twitched. “It hurt, but I forgive you,” he said. “It’s a good pain, it grounds me.” There was no time to explain. If dreams were a mishmash of memories and experiences, when had he ever seen a sun so nearby and so red? Or surfed a redwood plank? Or was it that just then the staff shifted him from the examination table to a bed? There was no hole to see through and he lay with his head sideways, on one ear.

I am wide awake. I am awake. I am awake. He closed his eyes and the hallucination reappeared. A fat fuzzy shadow and a sharp thin shadow trembled after him over the ripples. *Two shadows means that there should be two suns.* One was big and red, the other little and yellow. There was still no land in sight.

— — — —

He opened his eyes. He never got sunburned, but in the real night in a real hospital bed he felt hot enough that he might be as red as that imaginary sun. His skin stung.

The night nurse turned down the thermostat of the air conditioning until Tardi felt cool air rising to his hot face. She brought him a bottle of water with a clear tubing spout to suck on, and told his bedside bot that she had increased the antitoxin.

Next day, more of the tweezing.

“We’re done for today,” said one of the nurses. She swung away the antiseptic sprayer on its concertina arm and pulled over a warming lamp. The second nurse puffed an antiseptic powder over him as his back dried. This time they rolled the examination table with the table’s undercarriage collapsing into a machine that resembled a giant eye.

“We’ll leave your head sticking out so you can breathe,” said a talkative one.

“Why this rocket science thing?” he said.

“The tube? To draw the coral splinters to the surface. Tomorrow, another session.” They snapped their penguin-beak tweezers toward him, laughing.

— — — — —
The first day he lay in the machine, Tardi rode the red wave whenever he relaxed. The next day he had company sitting near his head. Rowan. She had blond curls today, he noticed with a sidelong glance. Why did she even come? They'd broken up.

She smiled as if he was still her special lover. If he ever was ... he closed his eyes to her. If he'd been well, he would've gone surfing. Stop the trance state with the real ocean's requirement that he stay in the moment.

His father didn't come. No surprise there. Herm would say that Steve couldn't be left on his lonesome and that either Steve's cyber add-ons or the hospital's equipment, or both, would malfunction if Herm did bring him.

Tardi worried that he couldn't contact Steve until the psychologist mentioned that the hospital was netted with signal-disrupters.

"So ... if I have a hallucination constantly on the go," Tardi said. "It can't be caused by any signals coming from outside?" He was only half joking.

The dude was instantly on his case. "*Have* you had hallucinations?"

"On and off. A red world. A red fish bigger than a whale by a couple of football fields."

"Your copper and zinc levels may be out of kilter due to the toxins," the psychologist said. "Hence the red dreams. I'll organise some supplements. Try to steer your thoughts into pleasant places. Your dreams will surely follow."

After delivering the zinc capsules, the psychologist didn't come by again.

The zinc capsules disappeared. The tutting night nurse, Tardi suspected. Not that she'd steal them. A lot of people *still* didn't believe in zinc's healing powers.

The antitoxin injections had no effect on the trance. The labs, trying to trace the coral, had hit a legal injunction supposedly stopping people from approaching the silver coral. More like somebody was trying to stop people collecting it.

Every time he tried to imagine something he knew, such as him surfing a wall of blue green water, the wave would morph into a weeping red mountain range.

My colours are gold and blue and green. In his imagination, he dived down a column of blue-green light.

The blood-red sun doubled in size and covered the sedate round of Earth's golden sunlight trembling on the sand below. Otherworldly swimmers like giant waterlily leaves died of extreme sunstroke and rotted while shoaled along the edges of continents rising from waters evaporating in the red sun's death throes.

He knew the stink of rot. He refused to take in the scent of the rotting shallow red waters and desperately breathed in the hospital's astringent odors. To no avail, the hallucination pulled him down, and he slid into his own day-and-nightmare that began eight years ago, a few days after he turned fifteen.

It was the height of summer. Steve was ten. Herm drove them deep into the hot hinterland then stopped by the side of the dirt track they were on. The track, though it was graded, must be the reason they were in one of the vintage petrol-burning vans. Tardi was proud to have worked out at least that, for he had no idea *where* they were or *why*.

Tree canopies woven together by vines shaded both sides of the track, but with no sea breeze the scene was hotter than Hades. Immediately, they all three dripped with sweat.

Herm motioned Tardi into the back of the van. "Hand down the boxes marked with S."

After stacking the four boxes on his hand trolley, Herm checked the time on his vintage wristwatch. "They'll invite me for a mug of tea. I can't say no. I'll be gone for about an hour."

He didn't tell Tardi and Steve who *they* were, or why he couldn't say no to a cup of tea.

"Can we go down to the creek in the meantime?" Steve said.

"I want you to help Tardi pump up the rear tires a bit. They feel soft," Herm said. He rolled the hand trolley into even narrower path that Tardi hadn't noticed up until then.

"Can I come?" Steve said to Herm's back.

"I need you to be here when I get back," Herm said without stopping.

Tardi shrugged at Steve, commiserating. Herm normally never snapped at Steve. He set up the foot pump. "Want to have first go?"

"Do all the hard work?" Steve said. "I don't think so. I'm going for a swim." Steve fetched his towel from the shelf in the cab.

"Dad said to stay here," Tardi said.

"Dad said he needs me to be here when he comes back in an hour. He said for me to help. When I get back, I'll help you by putting away the pump. There'll be a creek at the bottom of this slope." He gestured. "I'm going for a dip."

It was too hot to argue and far too hot to tussle Steve into some sort of cry-baby agreement. "Fine," Tardi said. "Go away then."

Steve pushed through the overgrown lantana at the track's edge and crackled away through the bush, leaving Tardi alone in the zinging heat of the track.

He thought he was sweating before he started the pumping, but he was dripping in seconds. His clothes stuck to him, and he had to keep blinking to keep the sting of salt from his eyes. By the time he'd done the two tires, his hands were so slick, he kept dropping the pieces of the pump. He *deserved* a swim. He left the pump's pieces on the ground at the back of the van for Steve to pack away.

Tracking Steve by the broken branches and scuffed-aside leaves, he was halfway down the hill before he heard the creek's gurgling and burbling. "Steve!" he shouted. "Which way? Up or down?" He meant upstream or downstream. Then realized Steve wouldn't hear him

through the noise of the water.

He ran the last few metres over the boulder-strewn overflow. The water fell from a height to the right into a black pool. Boulders overhung the sides. He saw Steve trying to lift his leg up over the rim of the pool near where the creek overflowed to the left.

Even from a distance, Tardi could see how hard Steve tried. His bottom lip was a red streak where he'd bitten it. What was this place? A dam? A cistern? The water was so dark that he couldn't see into it.

Steve fell back again and splashed weakly to the surface.

He'd be tired out from trying. Tardi scrambled down the rocks, dropped his towel and sloughed off his jeans. He slid into the water. It was colder than he would've thought possible on a midsummer's day. Four strokes. He grabbed Steve by the back of his shirt.

Steve screamed. "Tardi! Help! Help!"

"I'm here, mate. It's all right."

Steve clamped onto Tardi.

Tardi ducked out from under Steve's strangling arms and resurfaced. "Steve, listen. Feel my hands on you. I've got you." He turned Steve in his arms. "Breathe easy. Float on your back." He cupped Steve's chin and with one foot pushed Steve's butt toward the surface to make him float flat on the water.

Steve screamed. His voice rang like a bell along the water and echoed within the cupped pond. "No! No! No! There are eels! Longer than I am! They'll eat me!" He turned himself over like a dumpling in hot fat, and with stretched arms wallowed blindly back to Tardi's neck.

This time Tardi pulled Steve underwater to force him to let go. There was no bottom, not even any mud. He felt himself being felled by Steve's hysterical squeezing and the unnatural cold. His kicking to get them back to the surface was sluggish. He gasped for air. "Steve, please. Let go of me a little."

Steve stared unseeing into Tardi's eyes. Their noses bumped, Steve's hold was that close. But he was unreachable.

Worry squeezed Tardi's gut. Herm sometimes turned the hose on Steve when he was like this. He let himself sink just a little this time.

Steve clambered hysterically toward Tardi's back.

Tardi got his hand up under Steve's just in time to not get strangled from the back, then had to spend half a minute just treading water to hold them both up and to get his breath back. Now to get them out. It could only be where the creek poured over the lip of the pool. He swam to the overflow. "When we're out, we'll warm-up on stones hot from the sun," he promised.

Steve clung to him, not acknowledging that he'd heard.

They bumped against the pool's side. It went straight down and was slippery with algae. The pool *had* to be a water supply of some kind. Tardi tried to loosen Steve's hands from each other, to place them onto the rock rim.

His plan was for Steve to hold on with Tardi's one hand on Steve's hands, never letting go of him. Then, after he hauled himself onto the side with his other hand, he'd drag Steve up after him. But telling Steve the plan was no use until he could listen.

Panting from the cold now, Tardi wrenched loose from Steve's legs and turned to face him. Steve had his eyes squeezed shut. He slid a hand into Tardi's hair, not yet in dreads. With the other he felt the rock above him. He set a foot against Tardi's knee and levered himself up.

Tardi only barely managed to hold onto the slippery stone lip when Steve kicked him where it hurt most—pain lanced through him—on the way to a kneehold in Tardi's gut. Then onto his shoulder, from where Steve flopped himself over the rock above them, his arms out wide, his fingers scrabbling for a hold.

Tardi seethed with understanding. "You little bastard! No way are you so out of your mind that you don't know what you were doing!" He saw red. "And you've probably been shamming these fits all your life!" He swung out from under Steve's feet on his shoulders, from under Steve's almost successful effort.

Steve's fingernails scrabbled uselessly at the stone.

Tardi, knowing at once what he'd done, tried to support Steve rounding himself to the boulder's shape.

But Steve slid down with his head juddering over the ungiving stone. *Crack, crack.* He slipped between Tardi's hands and sank with hardly a splash.

Tardi dived and dived, at first without taking proper breaths. He didn't notice the cold or that the visibility was less than night. He felt the eels looping below him by them skimming his feet when he hung from the surface getting his breath, or when they swam by his searching hands. They were all over an inert shape. Tardi feverishly felt for arms and a head. *Yes! Could only be Steve!*

He slow-punched the eels where he could reach them, and whacked them from his brother's head. The water made him slow! He towed Steve to the surface, having to stop to kick away the more persistent of the predators.

He screamed when he saw Steve's face without his cheeks or lips or nose. Even his eyes were gone, empty sockets. He screamed with crying, roaring, grieving fear. His brother's face was a mass of raw flesh. How could he live? He wanted to let him descend. Let the eels finish their work.

A bubble of blood expanded and burst at the end of a pale, torn tube, as wide as one of his fingers. Another bubble formed. Tardi sobbed in horror. This was what was left of Steve's nose? That bubble burst too. Another bubble began. *Wait a minute, Steve still breathed?*

Tardi put his shoulder under Steve's head and with that hand held the edge of the pool. He

trod water and steadied his brother with his other hand. He aimed and connected hard kicks at the blue-black eels to convince them he owned their prize.

A long time later Herm appeared at the top of the waterfall. He shouted with such horror that Tardi heard him above the sound of the falling water.

His heart lurched. His father ran ineptly over the boulders.

Four thin, wildlooking, sleep-in-their-clothes sort of men leaped past Herm like mountain goats. One of them grabbed Tardi's jeans from the rocks and draped them over the boulder. With two mates holding his legs, he wriggled down until he could hook the pants over Steve's chest.

With his own arms heavier than lead, Tardi raised Steve's arms one by one and put them over the pants seat. Steve's rescuer crossed the pant legs behind Steve's back to keep him from slipping through. The men dragged their mate and Steve sideways until limp and lolling Steve could be pulled onto the stone lip. They lifted him into Herm's arms.

Tardi felt himself weighted down under his father's accusing gaze and let his water-wrinkled hand slide from the stone lip. Fingers twisted into his hair and stopped him from sinking.

"Your father's in shock," said the face that belonged to the hand.

Tardi noticed the clear, blue-green eyes. The face looked like grooved brown leather with grey stubble. The man pulled at Tardi, helped him slide stomach-down onto the lip of the hole. "They'll need you if he's aiming for what I suspect. Your father and your brother both."

Tardi gasped crying. "He's dead. The eels. Dead but breathing." By the time he sat up, helped by the man, the medi-evacuation helicopter hovered above the waterfall.

"I called them right away. They're stationed not far from here," the man said. "And when they know it's us ... well, there are still a lot of useful superstitions."

Tardi glimpsed his father clambering toward the helicopter, cradling Steve to his chest.

"I'm your uncle Ace," the man said. He signaled one of the men to start a fire on a flat place away from the water. He sent another to fetch blankets.

Tardi shivered by the fire despite the blanket around him. *Uncle? What uncle?* There were only Herm, Tardi and Steve in their family. No uncle that he knew of. When his overloaded mind threatened to forget his crime for a minute, he'd only have to remember his father's expression of blame and disgust.

Ace fed him bread and jam and hot, sweet tea.

— — — —

Every time during the night that Tardi woke in the dark, disoriented, Ace's hand comforted his blanketed shoulder. In the morning, with Ace next to him directing him along secret bush tracks and firefighter roads, Tardi illegally drove the van to Jack's house. Jack, who was Herm's driver. Two more years before Tardi could get his driving license.

He stood by, downcast, remembering his father's hate-filled stare.

Ace explained how Tardi tried to rescue Steve.

"Trying isn't succeeding," Jack said. He was Herm's best friend, after all. "It's what the kid's father will say. Did that medi-vac go to the School of Human and Alien Biology in Brisbane?"

Ace frowned. Maybe at Jack's attitude. "They have the best medical facilities for this sort of injuries," he said.

"I'll get the kid there, of course. Favour to you," Jack said.

"Favour to you?" Tardi said when Jack had gone to get ready. "What does that even mean?"

"Jack is a man who does not want to get on the wrong side of the Stormies," Ace said.

"You're a *Stormy*?" Tardi said. A couple of things about Stormies flashed through his mind. They were said to be the only sustainably living people in the world. That they weren't human. That they were other. Or they were super human.

Ace didn't say yes or no. He pulled Tardi around to look at him. "Remember what I said last night?"

Tardi shook his head. His barely dammed-up crying overflowed. "I remember Steve. The eels ate his face. He's only ten. Why didn't they eat me?"

Ace gripped Tardi's shoulder. "Repeat after me: I take after my Uncle Ace. He is a Stormy and he is the Tamer."

Tardi repeated the words without recalling them when he was done.

— — — —

Tardi stared at the night-time sea-patterned hospital floor. For the first few years after that day at the waterfall, trying to puzzle together what Ace had said and what Tardi was meant to repeat, were the only things that kept him from ... *don't go there*.

He and his father had cobbled together a life centering on Steve. But still ... every day since, Tardi remembered the heat under his breastbone. The pounding in his ears. His need to hurt. *Anger is my curse*.