

When Tardi finally walked from the surf, Carl the VS techie surged forward. Rowan stayed on the boardwalk, where she stood with her arms folded and her foot tapping, Tardi suspected. Did she really think he was going to react to her attitude?

There was no hue and cry. As he had guessed might be the case, no one on the shore saw the monster fish pretending to be a wave.

“Are you okay, Tardi?” Carl said, unaware of any irony.

*A monstrous alien fish attempts to drown me, I just lost my best friend to the same entity, my little brother is listening in on the EMBERS and the man asks me if I’m okay?* “I’m quitting,” he said.

“Headquarters says the only problem was a glitch in the transmitter signal for the last couple of waves you rode,” Carl said. “Hence all your drylanders are out here to watch you in your actual reality?” He smiled.

Tardi wondered who else was using his shorthand terms?

“VS is wondering if you could stand by until the trouble is fixed?” Carl said.

“You mean, *you’re* hoping I’ll stand by, and *they’re* demanding that I do it all again,” Tardi said. He grinned to tell Carl no hard feelings.

“So that was a joke? About you quitting on my shift? I ignored it because I hate black humor,” Carl said.

Tardi breathed to calm himself. *How come I get to hang around with so many deep thinkers?* “No, I’m not joking. Yes, I am quitting.”

“Look, we’ll work it out.”

“I mean it,” Tardi said.

“But why?” Carl said. “What have I done?” The guy looked like he might cry.

“Everything you did was fine. I smiled to let you know it isn’t personal. Don’t worry, VS will take the next candidate on their list and everything will be back to normal by tomorrow.”

“I signed a contract, and so must you have,” Carl said. He slung an arm over Tardi’s shoulders, trying to stop him. “At least stand by for a debrief about what happened out there today?”

As Tardi shrugged Carl off, Rowan took his arm. The crowd, his so-called drylanders, parted in front of them and applauded. He didn’t know what was worse, the way Rowan simpered along or the applause. He knew himself as red as a strawberry latte.

“Haven’t I told you to separate your work and play?” Rowan said.

*Ouch. She said that specifically to distract me, he realized. To stop me shrugging her off in front of our audience.* “What? Surfing and surfing, you mean?” He straightened his arm.

Walking cozily beside him, she took his hand instead.

He shook himself loose with finality. "And you keep reminding me that you got me the job? You've never been interested in surfing. What are you even here for?"

She smiled mysteriously.

He recalled the subject of Steve's call. Rowan planned a surprise for him. She would want to intro the subject of the surprise herself. He walked into the zooter-hire lot where he parked his geriatric hydro-cell scooter these days. An agreement VS had got him. Rowan followed him, why did he even expect her not to?

His scooter was independent of the mag strip that ran along all the pavements through town. He handed Rowan a mag-zooter so he could free his scooter. Mag-zooters was a fancy label for magnetic scooters and they were limited to the mag strip.

Rowan allowed the credit eye-baller a look at her eyes, so she could take the zooter out of the hire-yard.

"Good thing I've got a couple of days at the depot ahead of me," he said. "All this excitement on the waterfront can die down before I hit the water again." He settled himself on the padding over the engine block, swaying briefly to overcome his imbalance because of not having his surfboard in the holster.

Rowan carried her zooter to the magnetic strip that divided the foot pavement. She had to stand to ride, zooters having become so lightweight as to do away with seating. "Speaking of the depot," she said. "Steve says your father won't need you till noon?"

*Here it comes.* "Yes, it'll give me time to go kill the apartment lease. Not having the VS money will put the apartment out of my reach. Luckily I only signed my name to a weekly contract."

"Why don't you hang onto it for a day or so?" Rowan reached over and hugged him with one arm as he pattered along beside her zooting silently along the strip, almost toppling them.

He shrugged her off. "Careful!"

"I've got a proposition that will solve all your money problems."

He frowned. While it was true that he couldn't afford any of the apartments if he didn't work two jobs, part of the reason he'd decided to go home was Steve. Didn't sound as though things were that good for Steve with Tardi not living at home.

"If your father paid you a decent wage you wouldn't need any other jobs," Rowan said. "And that is not the first time I've said it. So listen?"

His turn for silence, though Rowan would of course believe him to be attending. He shrugged. He recalled the number of times they had analyzed the topic of pay rises, or lack thereof, by TLC. He glimmer-smiled. *And I'm still on the same rates?*

When they got to the bottom of the Slummery, he locked his scooter into the Slummery's carousal. He'd pick it up one day when he did deliveries and was in a truck. Scooters, zooters and all transport of that ilk was banned from the Ewingsdale Causeway, still the only road out of town.

Rowan locked her hired zooter in a vacant hire-slot, meaning she didn't intend using hers anymore either. "Let's go upstairs, get comfortable."

He stepped by her to prevent her starting up the stairs. "I don't want you up there. Everything I need to do I can do quicker by not getting sidetracked."

"But my proposition?"

"I'll hear it over a coffee or not at all."

She laughed indulgently. "Oh, but you are a hard man!"

*She batted her eyelashes at me as if we were right back at the flirting stage? Was she joking? Hard to say. He couldn't help being wordy, to prevent more misunderstandings, and excruciatingly formal.*

"You have a proposition that will solve my money problems, you said. If it is any good, I'd rather consider it without the additional side dishes you also seem to be offering." All this when he'd already decided. Why? Still the same reason, he needed to know how she had involved him in her scheme.

She sparred at him with her imaginary sabre. "Too-chay!"

He ran up the stairs, locked the door after him and pulled across the privacy cloth. He never could trust Rowan not to become nosy, or impatient, or both. He peeled off the remnants of the VS suit. While he showered, he ruminated on the wiles she was using on him.

For instance, he would bet that she wore a new perfume. Something expensive and therefore wasted on him—a yokel—as she often said. Next, he wondered where the monster hung out while he showered. He now half-expected input from the monster whenever he posed a mental question. *Because it answered me that one time? What if it has me on an intermittent reward system and is training me?* A bleak thought.

He dressed in trucker-jeans and a t-shirt. He got out a hooded sweatshirt for later and stuffed the rest of his clothes in his bags.

He hung the wetsuit remnants in the drying cage. Locked it with the VS code so they were the only ones who could open it, and messaged Alys with that information.

He added the rest of his belongings to the bags and set them by the door. He programmed the cleaner bot for an end-of-lease cleaning with extra attention for the kitchen bench and bathroom cubicle.

He locked the apartment behind him, loaded himself up with the bags and rattled down the stairs.

Rowan frowned at his bags. "Don't you trust me?"

*Not even as far as I can throw you.* "If your offer is really so great, I'll go for the third-tier flat that became vacant during the week. I wouldn't mind a view from my front door." *Another red herring and why isn't there a red overlay when I picture the sea view?*

Rowan's face cleared. "Okay, sounds good."

"All right if I stash my bags in Sef's hoverole?" Which was him subtly figuring out what her next step after dealing with him might be. If she had the use of her boss's hoverole, she'd probably be news blogging later.

"Sure."

*That seemed over-easy or is that me getting paranoid?*

Rowan led the way to the Head Start Cafe. Apart from cheap hole-in-the-container-wall places like Len's, only a couple of actual restaurant-type eating-places could afford to rent on the Cape itself.

"Here just for *coffee*?" His suspicions were on overtime.

"The Wide Game Consortium is paying," Rowan said.

He didn't believe her. "Because you're suddenly working for them?" As he slid into a booth, the tabletop menu for breakfast loaded, of images of all the dishes available.

"Yes," she said. "But actually, they're after a combo pair. I suggested you and me. It's very convenient that you just left Virtual Surfing."

"And that's the proposition?" Tardi said. "We're not and never again will be a combo pair."

"Fine," she said. "They asked me to put it to you and I did."

Tardi frowned. Her little smiles were the most dangerous. He'd have to order so he could feed out more red herrings. "The only thing I like about the Wide Game is that it gets me Steve as my trucking buddy while he gathers clues."

"Oh? How does that work?"

"Why wouldn't you know already?" Now he was crabby because she acted dumb. "You've had more than twenty-four hours to research it and I know you would've started the minute you got into the hoverole that night."

He keyed in a starter of raw nuts to be followed with buckwheat pancakes suffused with real orange juice and wild honey.

Rowan ordered a black coffee. She pressed her thumbprint under the grand total on the digi-docket without hesitation.

Meaning that she *had* signed herself up and very probably him, too. The images making up the menu cycled and became a tessellated surface.

"I researched with the aim of getting a job in their human resources department," she said. "They gave me the go ahead. A week's self-training. So now I'm getting a sense of the baseline experience from an actual player. Research, again."

"You should talk to Steve," he said.

"I'd rather you told me."

"As I said, Steve comes with me and we do the puzzles together. Deliveries have been more interesting since we've been playing."

"Which rabbit hole did you use? I ask because apparently all personnel take their turn at quality control?"

"Rabbit hole? As in the entrance point into the game? Bit of a waste, human resources doing quality control of the product?" *Why am I trying to compete with her when I don't know anything?*

The raw nuts arrived by way of a vintage, tea-towel-over-his-shoulder kitchen bot. It set the dish in front of Tardi and retreated without using its voice function.

"Just tell me how you got started," Rowan said.

Maybe even Rowan was out of her depth with Consortium-speak. "We were making a delivery at one of the art galleries," he said, nibbling and sipping. "Steve saw a print of the ancient Stonehenge on display among a whole lot of paintings of sea life. The business had a sticker on their window saying The Wide Game as part of a web address."

"How did Steve even think they were related?" Rowan said.

"We'd noticed the same web address in various places around the Cape. He webbed there a couple of times to no avail. I mean, there is this search box on the homepage and no way of getting past it because it always throws up a message saying something about a password."

"So Steve goes back to the shops to study their displays. Figured that because the game is supposed to be about the town, a place in the town might be a clue."

"It starts here and then goes into the hinterland," said Ned, the owner of the cafe, arriving unnoticed by Tardi, with the pancakes and Rowan's coffee.

"Thank you, Ned," Rowan said.

Tardi waited until Ned retreated behind his counter. "Anyway, Steve typed Stonehenge into the search box on the homepage. The second page told him the next clue."

"A lot of work for a dinner coupon."

"It's the fun. Sometimes it takes a bit of running around, talking to people to get solutions for the clues." He ate and drank. "I still haven't solved the one I got the other night at Len's. Mind you, I haven't asked Steve yet."

"His sort are the trouble," Rowan said. "They're quick and they set up blogs offsite to talk about the clues. The Consortium decided to use moving targets to prevent cooperative bloggers waltzing away with the prizes."

"How will that work when the PoleWatcher network can find anyone?"

"Only players wearing tracer codes will be able to log into the new level."

“And I suppose tracer codes will cost?” he said.

Rowan smiled just with the corner of her mouth not nearest Tardi.

He just happened to see it reflected in the mirrors lining the wall. Going on previous experiences, she only enjoyed herself that way when her words were the dust in his eyes to throw him off track. He’d have to get Steve to check the rumor mill.

‘Don’t even dream of asking for a takeaway container,’ Rowan said.

He laughed, though it didn’t feel like a joke. ‘Oh, you expect me to eat and spar at the same time?’ He raised his arm.

Ned came with the container as if he knew Tardi’s troubles.

“Thanks,” Tardi said. “These are good but filling. I’ll have the rest for lunch.”

Ned grinned. “I’ll add some cream.” He walked back to the counter with the rest of Tardi’s pancakes.

Rowan’s smile this time meant that Ned wouldn’t be back until she signaled him. She continued. “The new strategy is to do with attracting more players on the ground. That’s where you and I come in. The pay will be far better than what you got from Virtual Surfing.”

*Why am I still here?* He answered himself, answering himself in the next breath. *I’m trying to stop whatever she signed me up for.*

“At least half the crowd down at the beach today were groupies hoping to see you in action,” Rowan said. “TheWide Game Consortium figures that by having you as mobile destination, your groupies will pay to follow you around.”

“Sounds like the strategies I’m trying to escape by quitting VS,” Tardi said.

“All you’ll have to do is wander around in a town or somewhere in the hinterland. My job then is to put out clues as to where you are, using the website and whatever ComLink is available, but not making it too easy. Players will sign up to find you and be snapped in the same shot as you to prove their claim. There’ll be prizes and all the usual media hoopla.”

“Media hoopla? I guess you and I will never be on the same wavelength.” He was suddenly sick of pretending to be a hooked fish. He got up.

Ned brought Tardi’s pancake. “Long live the Wide Game,” he said.

“Are you being ironic?” Tardi said, surprised.

“Not at all. We carry the site address on our window just the same as everyone else in town.”

“Do you any good?” Tardi said.

Rowan sent Ned away with one of her looks. ‘There’s something over at Benzi’s I’d like to show you,’ she said.

Finally the surprise. “The guy who reprograms preloved robots? You’ll recall I don’t use live-

minds?”

“You are such a dinosaur,” she said. She caught his hand as they both pushed through the doorway, twining her fingers through his. “But you’re *my* dinosaur, you hear?”

He shook loose. “Listen to yourself rabbiting on. I am neither yours nor a dinosaur.” In fact, he was better than anyone with live-minds. He just avoided them for personal use. How was it a good thing to give a machine a mind and then expect it not to want to rise above being used?

But of course, Rowan’s attitude was his own fault. He always made sure she wasn’t looking over his shoulder when he programmed live-minds.

“I saw that friend of yours throw herself at you. You hugged her,” Rowan said in her most accusing tone.

Tardi continued walking. *If pinpricks were all she has left, I’ll make it.*

Rowan went on. “Threen Jason. A surfing friend I thought you said. Lives in that hole-in-the-wall down from Len’s. With her looks, I don’t blame her for liking to blend into the woodwork.”

Tardi stopped. “Say one more thing about my friends and I’m out of here.”

Rowan swallowed what else she might’ve said about Threen. “I’m doing all this for you.”

“You’re doing it for yourself.” He baulked as she led the way into the alley beside Benzi’s reprogramming shop.

“Now what?”

“Poul’s workshop is the only place down this way.”

“I’m sure there’s a good explanation. Perhaps he sublets,” Rowan said.

“First I heard if he does.”

“I know you’re friendly, but do you live in his pocket?”

He followed her to protect Poul’s interests wherever the man himself was right now. The concrete underfoot was shiny. Polished by all the barefoot surfers trekking to Poul for their fittings, as Tardi had for his VS suit.

The alley opened onto a roofed area behind Benzi’s workshop. Today the backdoor between Benzi’s and Poul’s workshops was snigged back to the wall. An opaque heat-saving force field filled the doorway.

Poul’s cutting table with the narrow runway around it took up all the space between the building and the shed at the very back of the property, while his plastic picnic table and chairs where his customers waited, stood in what was technically the end of the alley.

The store shed had its sliding door pulled so far across that it had overshot its rail and stuck out a good metre beyond the end of the shed. Tardi started toward it. “I’m pretty sure Poul

would hate for his shed door to be left open like this.”

Rowan stopped him with her arm across his middle. “Just wait,” she said. “Allow the situation to unfold.”

He laughed. “This is the same news blogger who must always hurry events along?”

She smiled distantly. The force field snapped as a man stepped through, his right hand curled loosely, possibly over an injury in his palm.

“Benzi! There you are,” Rowan said.

“Rowan. Glad you came by!” Benzi veered to Rowan. They hugged with Benzi protecting his hand all the while. Benzi smirked at Tardi watching. “Wanna hug too?” He seized Tardi in a full-on bear hug, rubbing Tardi’s back with his whole, obviously uninjured hand.

What was that about? Tardi raised his arms to get loose and stepped away.

Rowan laughed. “Show him the vest, Benzi. Get him out of his surly mood.”

Benzi closed the shed door.

“It’s beautiful!” Rowan said about the costume on Poul’s mannequin.

Tardi stared at the maroon, scarlet and gold wetsuit jacket hidden from view until this moment. *It looks remarkably like a sweetener for the fall guy.*

“What do you think, Tardi?” Rowan said.

“Too bright for me, and going by Poul’s vintage timepiece, I need to be in the truck in forty-five minutes.” Tardi pointed to the old plastic clock hanging on the wall.

Rowan sat down and patted the other chair.

Tardi wondered if Poul was still alive. This might be Tardi’s last time on this chair in this workshop. He sat down.

“See Tardi,” Rowan said. “I knew you weren’t suited to the VS job. So I jumped at the Consortium’s offer for you. The vest is their welcome-aboard gift.”

Benzi fetched the mannequin and began to show off the vest’s advantages while Rowan described them, reminding Tardi of a Sea-Cat robot explaining a life-saving device. “Check out the nifty Wide Game Consortium logo. I believe it is based on the VS model.”

He interrupted. “Complete with the transmission tower link capabilities? What I just left.” He rose. “It’s time to go. It’s not my style at all,” he said, being polite while gritting his teeth.

Rowan became the picture of dejection. She glanced at Benzi for help.

“Sir could try it on,” Benzi said. “Make sure we have the correct measurements.”

Tardi laughed. “I’m sure you have those already. Because I’m pretty sure you’ve borrowed more than just the workshop. And, Rowan, since you promised to get me home on time and you’re comfy here, I’ll just borrow your transport to get back to Quarry Lane. Okay?” He



walked out.

Rowan followed in a hurry.

Quarry Lane is quite a hike from town, he thought cynically.

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Sef 's hoverole travelled smoothly over the sunny causeway between the Neck and Ewingsdale. Most local hoveroles would've been coughing and wheezing over the imperfections in the road deck, but Sef 's was more than equal to the causeway's state of disrepair.

Rowan chattered about the behind-the-scenes workings of the Wide Game as if nothing had happened.

"I'm warning you, I'm not in," he said.

"You *are* in. Talk to Game Admin yourself if you want out. Your stop, I believe?"