

## 6: Learning the Virtual Surfing Suit

Tardi tongued the ComTooth. "So, baya Steve, how is it at home?"

"Tar! I am that glad to talk to you. Dad and I are in the yard, in that cab without the rest of its truck. Sentinel duty, Dad calls it. I call it a nightmare. Dad says the dogs wanting to eat the chooks will come back. He says they always do. So he didn't buy his favorite sort, just a couple to use as bait he told the man where we got them."

Barely stopping to take a breath, he continued. "All the ones we had are dead because you aren't at home and Dad was asleep and too far away, and I was too scared to go out and chase the dogs away. Straight after breakfast we fetched more. I'm talking about our hens."

"I guessed that," Tardi said. "Now what?" He slid down carefully over his newly healed skin to rest with his head against the doubled pillow. His call to Steve was going to be a saga.

"The moon is out but we're in the cab without its truck that is sitting in the middle of the yard that you used to pretend to drive. The dogs can't see us, Dad says," Steve said.

*Wonder if the dogs will smell Herm and Steve in the cab and so not come?* Tardi's nose started itching. All the rubbing he did and squeezing his nostrils together did not help.

"The new chooks are sleeping with their heads hid under their wings," Steve said.

"Hunkering on that old bumper bar lying in front of the cab. Dad built a little wire pen around it and them, and has got his vermin stick ready. And remember how there is no glass in the cab window between the dark and us?"

Tardi pictured Herm sighting along the gun's barrel resting on the old cab's dash, pea-sized bits of broken windscreen scattered everywhere.

"The moonlight makes things silver," Steve said. "Even the wire between the chooks and the dark, and all of a sudden I'm seeing a silver dog, half in with the chooks and half out."

Now Tardi's nose itched so much that his eyes leaked as well. The red moon rode the only bit of sky he could see when he lay on the mattress. *This is your doing, isn't it?* He grimaced until the itch was gone. He could cry, or ...He narrowed his focus to just this disquiet. Steve was hallucinating too? "Tell me that again?"

"A silver dog half in with the chooks and half out. He's cut in half by the wire without his guts hanging out," Steve said. He started counting. "One. Two. Three ..." Which was one of the routines Steve's helper-AI taught him to meditate himself out of upsets.

*Not working all that well tonight because Steve is having the horrors.*

"That can't be," Herm said in the background.

Amazingly, his little brother collected himself and went on. "The dog shakes his head and snaps his teeth ... blood on his muzzle. Feathers are floating on the air. Three chooks have fallen off their perch. Hear Dad swearing?"

"Dad isn't swearing about the chooks; he knew they'd likely be killed," Tardi said. "So what's happening?"

“Another dog of the same sort has come up alongside the first one. They both grabbed the same dead chook in their mouths and then pulled out of the wire and sort of blended in together while they jumped for the shadow of the old dump truck.”

“Steve,” Tardi heard their father say. “See that?”

“Exactly what I am telling Tar. Why didn’t you shoot?”

“I didn’t know whether I’d be making things worse,” Herm said. “We’ll see what we will see tomorrow in the daylight. Sleep now. Daylight isn’t far off.”

“PS Tar,” Steve said.

“Yeah?”

“I found another great place for lurking. The ancient blog of a dead geologist made into a remembering thing by his mates, about when they all went to Moogerah west of the Gold Coast, to camp and to search for meteorites. When can we go camping?”

Thankfully, Herm had drawn the line at going camping with Steve. *Time to change the subject.* “How come you can do all that hacking but not know what ordinary words mean?” Tardi said.

“Hacking is keystrokes and actions to read from the screen. They always mean the same thing. When will you come home, Tar? Dad and me and a mob of trucks aren’t enough people for a family. Over and out.”

*Click.*

Tardi tongued his ComTooth to close the channel his side. Steve was still so young sometimes. Just as well, since the face they gave him at SoHAB had to be replaced every year or so. The Steve who should’ve been eighteen by now still wore a face that said he was a young fourteen. Tardi punched himself on his thigh. *Don’t go there. Count waves. Sleep.*

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The sound transmitter on the Virtual Surfing wetsuit hanging in the locked cage outside his door activated with the sound of old-time radio static, and followed that with a shout from Alys, his Virtual Surfing contact. “Calling Tardi. Calling Tardi Mack.”

Tardi leaped up off the mattress, then outside. *For pity’s sake, there’ll be no sun for another half-hour.* The air was cold enough that his skin crimped into goosebumps.

“Calling Tardi. Calling Tardi.”

He’d forgotten that to open the cage outside, he had to have his eyes scanned by the gadget on the wall inside the door. Inside again for that, then outside again to get the suit.

*Thung. Thung.* His neighbor on the right was beating on the steel wall of his apartment, then shouted. “Shut it up! I’m trying to sleep!”

Tardi brought the suit inside and tried to turn down the volume. “What?” he said into the transmitter.

“I have you down for an intro?” Alys managed to state an immovable fact and ask it as a question at the same time.

“It’s my day off,” he said. “I did the intro the day before yesterday.”

“The customers are demanding credit when we show them repeats. The boss caved in. You were unavailable last night or he would’ve told you himself.”

*Thung thung.*

“What’s that noise?” Alys said.

“Neighbor. The damn suit transmitter volume won’t turn down. Please don’t say anything more until I give you the okay.” The only way to turn down the transmitter volume would be to get into the suit.

Apparently the transmitter defaulted back to loud? The reason, probably, that it could do exactly what it just did. Allow VS to run his whole life, not just the hours they paid him.

The suit was cold from hanging outside. The sleeves and leggings were flattened and wouldn’t let him step in. Swearing, he threw it into the shower cubicle and programmed warm steam to soften the material.

Finally he could shir the leggings over his feet and legs, stick his arms into the sleeves and drag the rest up over his shoulders and chest. He brought the front edges together. *Snap*. He settled the transmitter sensors over his sternum for them to read his heartbeat and lung function. Then he could finally thump the damned noise-maker to turn down the volume.

*Now what?* Obviously not back to bed all suited up. He hated giving VS what they demanded but what else could he do? He even hated giving Alys, aka VS, advance notice of his intentions. *So fine, no advance notice.*

He closed the drying cage after also taking out his surfboard, and rattled down the steel stairs with it under his arm. “Calling Alys,” he said halfway down, deciding he did after all need to tell her of his intentions.

“I hear you,” she said.

“I will do one more intro and then grab a couple of waves that you’ll be able to use whenever.” The waves were the sweetener.

Right in front of him, on the ground at the bottom of the stairs, a central column of water reached its height, fell and splashed into a sandstone overflow basin over a jelly-like mass of thousands of transparent eggs.

*Not real!* Except that he couldn’t see where to put his feet. He stopped and clung one-handed to the handrail. A human woman wearing a white scientist’s coat walked from the shadows and scooped a little swimmer in its protective jelly casing from the basin.

She cupped it in her hands and seemed to walk on the spot. A familiar-looking enclosure, separated from the ocean by a tall mesh fence, spooled toward her under her moving feet. When the enclosure had fully arrived, the woman bent to release the swimmer into the water.

Some of the images were from his memories. The fountain. The sandstone basin. Frog eggs by the hundred. The enclosure was at the Reefarium, not that he'd ever seen it in reality. *What will we call this sort of thing?* he thought flippantly. *When the things shown me aren't my memories?*

Because he'd never seen the enclosure, just heard it described. He wasn't acquainted with the woman either. Silver-haired, broad, a figure some would call matronly. He walked slowly down the final six or seven steps, through the whatever he would end up calling it. A vision?

His ComTooth burred. *Good distraction.* He tongued it.

"Tar, are you awake?"

"Man alive, Steve. It's still pretty early." Tardi put his head in the hood above the Slummery's scooter-parking carousel for the machine to read his eyeballs. His scooter clicked free.

"Yes it is early," Steve said. "Not even sun-up yet. But light enough to see by. We jumped down from the cab and Dad cracked the gun and took out the things that fly out of the muzzle when he pulls the trigger. He held me back from the ground where the dogs were, and we looked it over for tracks."

Tardi set the tail end of his board, skegs outward, into the holster he'd hung from the scooter frame for that purpose. "And finding them?"

"Yes. Near the pen. They were medium-sized friendly prancing doggy tracks, like my fist pressed into the sand, and lots more of the same where the dogs danced in the moonlight. Then Dad quartered round to the place where we saw the dogs meld. The tracks there suddenly were nearly as big as two of my fists together."

"What did Dad say?" Tardi sat on the scooter seat with his two outstretched legs on the ground either side to balance him, to wait for the end of Steve's story.

"Dad likes it that they aren't fists of our imagination. He handed me the gun to hold and got out his magnification glass that is made of olden-days plastic, and got down on his knees to get a close look at the wire of the pretend cage.

"The chooks got real interested in what he looked at. They pecked through the wire at his nose and his fingers and the magnification glass. He said ah! He even had what every old-time video show investigator had, little plastic bags to put the evidence in."

"Evidence?" Tardi said. He'd forgotten that he wasn't listening to one of Steve's online adventures.

"Silver hairs he got off the wire. Do nowadays investigators use them?"

"No idea. Steve, I've got to go to work now. You can tell me the upshot later."

"Tar, we never did any shooting. I told you."

"Yeah, you did say. I meant for you to tell me the results later."