

9: Learning the Monster

Tardi stepped onto the walkway outside his apartment, naked to feel the real-world evening air move over his bare skin. Goosebumps raised his body hair. *Nippy*. He breathed deep of the oceanic ichor, its smell—made of the lives and deaths of every kind of marine creature mixed with salt—rising up the outside of the wall from the sea at its base.

Did the thing in him feed off him? Expand by dividing cells? Was it a disease, in other words? Normally he could've been prescribed a good bug to eat the bad one. But in the hospital he'd had antitoxin and more antitoxin. And he had to believe that all the antibodies that he had collected over his life weren't useful either.

He waited for an intrusion into his thoughts. *Nothing*. He savored the sound of surf churning on the other side of the wall. Waited again. *Still nothing*. He took the VS suit from the drying cage. The apartments around him murmured like a large organism with the sounds of all the residents at home and getting ready to go out.

He brought the VS suit inside and laid it on the mattress beside him. He laughed. *An early night with my VS suit. What a partnership*. In the early morning, as soon as the suit's transmitter began its wake-up call, he'd smack the chest area with the back of his hand. Slapped against a slightly giving surface, the mattress instead of his chest, the transmitter instantly faded.

His deck was next. He deleted a dozen calls from Rowan still stubbornly trying to contact him. He now he had the excuse that he was on a ripple and she still down in a trough. Apparently, her Uncle Zachie invented the term Ripplettime for the years since the Moogerah Monster fell to Earth and specifically in Eastern Australia.

Uncle Zachie said that the splashdown by the alien entity caused ever-expanding ripples of disorder in society in the same way that a stone falling in a pond caused ripples of movement in the water.

Rowan blogged the idea far and wide, from the beginning professing a horror for Ripple Riders, as she called them, when most—like him—probably were swept up accidentally.

A weird feeling, like a huge hand reaching into his ribcage, squeezed his lungs. He coughed explosively. "Ugh ugh ugh." And next thing, he sat on his board on his bed alongside an eye the size of the air-intake of a jet engine.

"All of that board-riding alongside you I did back in the hospital?" he said. "I don't want a repeat of that."

The thing squeezed his lungs again and again. He could not stop himself coughing. *Wait a minute*. He'd once heard a similar hacking sort of coughing while he waited in a broken-down truck for Herm and Steve to arrive with tools.

Where was that again?

I remember. The car park at the Beauty Labs, the local place where people went to have hair styling, manicures, pedicures and the like. The Beauty Labs were a good customer of TLC. That coughing was the huffing and chuffing made by a koala he heard that night. The animal in one of the trees surrounding.

But right now? Should he try to ignore the monstrous thing in him or try to distract it? *That first.* He tongued his ComTooth and waited for Steve to open the channel his end. “Steve toh teina, did Dad remember the delivery to the Beauty Labs?”

“Tar, it’s all good,” Steve said. “Dad and I went there yesterday.”

In the tiny moment between the end of Tardi’s question and the beginning of Steve’s answer, the presence withdrew. Or faded. Or disappeared. As in, he could no longer feel its fist round his lungs. Meaning the entity left him to it when he talked with someone? *Good to know.*

Steve continued. “But you know how Clarice, the boss of the Beauty Labs, is like me? Wanting a window to see what happens everywhere in her domain?”

“That’s a pretty good reading of her, Steve.”

“You mean I decoded her behaviour?” Steve said. “Good. Maybe I’m learning it finally. Anyway, she got me into her office to program a window on her desktop Compiece to see into the building’s basement ...

“She said they closed it without asking—I think she meant the original window—when they reprogrammed us. Can you do an override, Steve?” she said ...

I said, “Who are *they*?” And she said, “I’m not allowed to say.” Then I said, “Reprogrammed you how?” And she said, “I’m not allowed to say that either.” I didn’t ask her why the reprogramming, I already knew the answer. Good problems, eh, Tar?”

“Interesting,” Tardi said.

“Yes. Very. The override wasn’t real hard. But testing it I had the biggest startle. Sweat on my brow, brother. There are silver dogs in the basement! Five cages. Three empty and waiting with their hatches lifted up, and two with a medium-sized silver dog in each one. Hatches closed. Clarice said, *excellent*. She paid me in the usual way.”

“What? With a kiss, a hug and a couple of Beauty Lab products?”

“Yes. Except that just then Dad came looking for me. He said to Clarice, “Steve has enough of the products, what about a few credits for his savings account?” Clarice laughed and said, “Maybe next time.” Over and out.”

“Wait! PS Steve,” Tardi said.

“Yes Tar?”

Sometimes Tardi got Steve to research for him. “You know my friend Poul? He got in contact with a girl chemist at SoHAB and mislaid her details. Would you have any idea who she is? Where to find her?”

“Girl chemist,” Steve said. “I don’t recall a girl chemist. But I’ve got a photo here of a Zebe Maloney. Yes, it says here she has a PhD in Chemistry. Will Poul want her email?”

“That would be good, bro.”

Steve laughed. “I wondered when you’d start to repeat yourself with the brotherings. Over and out.”

Tardi emailed Zebe right after he had sweet-talked himself through his guilt at deceiving Steve. He told Zebe who he was and what he knew of her. He said that Poul knew nothing of this mail and that he wanted it kept that way.

He added in a postscript, "I'd like to talk to someone on the same ripple as I am. Is that you?" He said nothing about the possibility that she and Poul had infected themselves purposely. He thought it stupid and at this point in his experience, not at all beneficial.

Beneficial? Huh. You have to be joking! But did he have the same kind of adventures in his life as Poul? No and never will. Zebe might be like Poul in that, an extreme risk taker.

He was almost asleep when the VS suit transmitter crackled. He whopped the chest area to turn it off.

The heaviness in his gut was back. Then his mouth made sounds like a rattling and clanging. *Ha-ha-ha. Not since I was twelve years old was I the king of making sounds!* "What are you trying, I-spy with my ears?"

No answer except that he swore entirely without his personal input. How frightening was that? But he laughed, if hollowly. "I remember that one too. The old man exclaimed in his usual way when a spanner fell into the guts of a petrol-fueled engine."

Scraaang! "That's a plastic chair base on a concrete floor." He cast about for something good about what was happening. The sounds were randomly presented? It would be good if the monster didn't discover all there was to know about Tardi while the man himself remained ignorant about the monster. Ignoring it obviously wasn't going to work.

Scraaang!

"Chair in Poul's workshop," he said. "Had that one."

Silence. He didn't enjoy it. There was the suspense factor.

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Tardi realized he'd forgotten to close his ComTooth channel when he heard Steve's voice.

"Tar? Are you awake?"

He must have slept for a *few* hours. "Moi braht, what's up?" Steve, bless his electronic SoHAB brain, was an early bird every day.

"I don't know that brothering. Is it Russian?"

Tardi yawned. "I don't remember. What's up, bro?"

"Rowan's been asking me stuff about you. What should I do?"

He woke up properly. "I'm busting to know what she already asked," he said. "That's just a way of saying I'm curious."

Steve started straight into his story. "This is how we talked, Tar. Rowan said, "Steve how are you going? Is your father there?" I said, "Dad's out in the yard, switched off." She said, "Oh? You mean that your father isn't listening to anyone? I'm talking for Tardi, also switched off

and not listening to anyone.” Was she really talking *for* you, Tar?”

“No. I haven’t seen her for days. We split up weeks ago. Go on.” He punched up his pillow, and half-sat up.

“I said, “Tar is never switched off, he just has the volume turned down.” She said, “That’s what I mean. He’s in the water. I don’t suppose you know Tardi’s starting time on Friday?” I didn’t want to tell her anything, so I said, “Starting time for what?” See how I was trying to stall her?”

“Mmm,” Tardi said encouragingly.

“She said, “It’s the Inundation Fiesta at Bruns Beach on Friday. Tardi usually takes a vintage truck there.” I said, “Oh, that starting time.” And then she said, “I’ve got a surprise for him tomorrow morning and I’m making sure I’ll have enough time.”

“What did you say, Steve? That I don’t like surprises?”

“I was going to, but she said, “Would you mind telling me why your brother is called Tardi? I can hardly believe his family calls him that because he is always late.” I laughed and I said, “It’s got nothing to do with that. When Tar was born, Dad couldn’t spell because he was so excited.” She said, “So what does it mean?” I said, “Trader, of course.”

Tardi laughed. “I bet she just looked at you as if she was thinking, Trader? Why would people call their kid Trader? Exactly why I never told her.”

“Then she said, “What about you Steve?” I said, “My name is Steve and I wear the golden crown.” She said, “I so don’t get that.” I said, “So you better ask your favorite search engine.” She said, “I should, shouldn’t I? So what time on Friday should I bring Tardi home?” See how she tricked me?” Steve said mournfully.

“By distracting you?” Tardi said. He kicked himself mentally. “I guess she might’ve heard me do it sometimes.”

“You don’t ask trick questions at the end.”

Hot guilt had him sweating. Why oh why had he explained this strategy to Rowan? He was glad that Steve couldn’t see his discomfort. “Then what happened?”

“I said, “Bringing him home once is enough. Not later than twelve.” She said, “Thanks Steve, that’s what I wanted to know.” Tar, I’m busting to know the surprise.”

“You’re amazing! Jokes left and right!” Tardi said.

“Jokes?”

“Yeah. You told Rowan to bring me back only the once and you said you were busting to find out her surprise. Two jokes.”

“Ha. I can do jokes. That’s good news. But PS, Tar. I’m feeling sick about the other mysteries.”

“What other mysteries?” Tardi said.

“Remember the little bags of silver dog hair? Dad and I took them to Dad’s friend Jack Fusel

the same day we went to the Beauty Labs because he lives near there. And Jack took them to a different friend to find out the DNA. And guess what?"

"What?"

"The DNA in all the three bags is exactly the same and not a lot of it is natural. What does that mean?"

"Not natural?" Tardi had uncomfortable thoughts about the new-natural coral.

Steve went on. "Jack Fusel said it was probably all part of the Ripple. And then Dad just looked at him and so Jack stopped talking. And Dad looked at me like he told me not to research it. How can I stop myself? There's nothing in the whole wide world that can explain how two real dogs can become one real dog except if one ate the other."

"Well, Steve, you're not wrong. You've got hold of a couple of serious mysteries there."

"No Tar. They still have got a hold of me."

"Okay. Sorry. They are a pair of mysterious mysteries. I think Jack Fusel is right in this case, they will be part of the Ripple."

"Over and out, Tar." Steve closed his channel abruptly.

Tardi closed his end. What part of what I said upset him? As he rolled from the mattress, a weird smell rose from it. Sweetly sharp like apple cider.

He sniffed the mattress and found an undertone of mold. Perhaps he hadn't aired it for a while? A bit of maintenance around the place would keep his mind in the moment.

He stepped into a pair of board shorts and wrestled the mattress outside and over the gangway balustrade. Breakfast next. He opened the fridge. *Pew!* Soured milk was the main flavor though green meat came a close second.

That first then. He took the contents of the fridge down to the community bio-charring unit. On his return, the interior of the apartment still smelled off. Must be the facilities as Rowan called them.

He checked the shower stall corners, was that black slime? He sealed the cubicle and programmed the steam unit to emit dry heat. Five minutes should do it, to be followed with the spray-and-rinse cycle to wash the desiccated mold down the drain.

Next he burned off the lint collected in the ionizing washer. Not that it smelled. The VS suit did though. Richly, of dried sweat and old seawater. He turned it inside out and scrubbed and rinsed it and hung it in the drying cage. The whole time not a peep out of either the transmitter or the monster.

Last, he showered himself with the soap spray, then with the steam. He finished off with a burst of cold. Except it wasn't a burst of cold water. "Argh!" He got a face full of muck smelling as if it was drawn unfiltered from a sewer ditch. In a second the stink was all over him.

Impossible! He checked himself. *Clean?* He tasted the water, from a fingertip. *Normal.* His heart galumphed in his chest. *Am I in the coral polyp reality?* Had the monster taken over his

sense of smell without weighing down his gut?

Hardly breathing, he toweled himself and grabbed jeans and a shirt. Sniffed. His clothes stank as badly as the muck. He had to get out of here.

One of his neighbors stopped at the bottom of the ladder waiting for Tardi to come down. "Pee-uw! What *is* that stink?"

"It's what came out of the tap, mate," Tardi said. How was it possible that the monster influenced his biology? *It has to be a kind of sweat output. And I was getting used to it influencing me by augmenting my perceptual reality?* He thought back. *Perceptual reality? Colours in the sky?* Rowan hadn't seen a thing.

The next guy he met detoured past him. So, him taking the long way to Len's via the stairs of Middle Way, might be the better idea. From the bottom to the top of the stairs, the stink modulated from sewer bog to rotted fish to green meat to rat pee. He gagged whenever he got a whiff of himself. He ran open-mouthed. *No lunch today.*

He ran past Len's, all the way down Main Street and into Poul's workshop.

"You don't normally get sunburned," Poul said.

"My face red-brown, you mean?" Tardi dropped onto one of Poul's polymer chairs. "I'm blushing from the embarrassment of stinking like rat pee. And you started breathing through your mouth when I came in. So even your nose is catching it. I've steamed, showered, used half a liter of soap and every step I take, I stink more than it's bearable."

"How?" Poul said.

"It's a coral-polyp reality courtesy of the monster in me. I don't know how. Last night I beat it at its version of I-spy. Now this. I'm calling it a game of You Smell Of. How will I eat, if everything edible smells of rot and slime? I just tossed all my supplies for no reason, I realize now. I can't play it at something like this. It's won. Probably I should turn myself into SoHAB or Procyon Products."

"Pack of bloody vultures, both of them," Poul said.

"Wait a minute, do you notice anything?" Tardi said.

Poul sniffed.

Tardi laughed. Poul resembled a rabbit questing left and right for a predator.

"Smell's just about gone," Poul said. "Good. Because I've got a customer coming for a fitting." He herded Tardi toward the alley. "Think it through. How you overcame this and why you're allowing your nightmares to work on you."

Tardi laughed again. "Even with the damned polyp monster producing a stink in me like you wouldn't believe, you don't believe it's doing things to me I don't have a hand in? What is it doing to you? Don't bother denying you infected yourself, you and your chemist girlfriend both."

"The human brain works in amazing ways," Poul said.

“Are you listening to yourself?” Tardi said. “You sound like an evangelist.”

Poul ignored him.

“See you later?” Tardi said.

“The weather isn’t up for it,” Poul said.

Tardi continued down the hill. *What did I just learn?* Something happened that caused the monster to stop producing the smells? *What?* He went over Poul’s and his conversation at that moment. What did Poul say? “Pack of bloody vultures, both of them?”

Significant to the monster? *I don’t see how. What did I say last thing before I noticed?*
“Probably I should turn myself into SoHAB or Procyon Products.” *The monster is housed at SoHAB, and Procyon Products does science relating to the monster. The monster perceives one or both of those as a threat?*