

### 13: At the Depot

Tardi motioned to Steve who was already up in the eighteen-wheeler Mack's cabin. "Give's a hand?" Herm had parked the vintage truck in the driveway ready to go.

"This is all your gear?" Steve said. "You quit VS?" There was hope in his stance; he was expectant, like a kangaroo about to take off.

*Smack!* Tardi's facial bones twanged and ground back together. "Aah!" Snot and tears exploded from his eyes and nose. Someone had punched him? But there was no one here except Steve.

"What's wrong?" Steve said hesitantly, with one of Tardi's bags in his hands, as if he would drop it and run.

Tardi touched his face. Forehead. Nose and mouth. No swelling. He tasted only tears and snot. No blood. He grimaced to straighten the bones of his face. "Feels like someone punched me in the face."

"The monster that is still in you?" Steve said.

"It comes and goes. I wish I knew how."

"It might be that it can't keep tabs on everyone it inhabits at the same time, and so you must still be relatively unimportant for it to take its attention off you sometimes," Steve said.

"I'd love it if it worked that way," Tardi said. "I was thinking that it seems to take notice of me every time I think of water."

"It's using the concept of water to tag you? That *is* interesting," Steve said.

"Thanks."

"Sorry," Steve said.

Tardi hugged Steve's shoulders. "I mean it. An insight I wouldn't have had working through it on my own." He squeezed Steve's neck playfully, sniffing up his worries along with his snot.

"Snot snuzzle!" Steve shrugged free. "Dad is waiting. Better get that over with."

"He's rampaging? Right. Right," Tardi said, trying to not hyperventilate. The house was an L shape in the right front corner of the depot. The living- room-made-over-into-an-office and the kitchen were in the short horizontal bar facing the lane, the bathroom and laundry squatted in the corner and the bedrooms lay along the side fence.

Steve drifted back toward the Mack, the lines of his body making him resemble a shy wild animal. Steve's face couldn't do expressions, being a neo-skin head-sock inset with eye-shaped cameras. Tardi and Herm had had to learn to read Steve's body and voice for what Steve might be feeling rather than look in his eyes.

Steve's mind was a whole other story. One minute, like just then, he behaved like his online personality. The next he tried on a trait or mood—cool or happy or angry—in the same way

that Rowan experimented with styles of clothes.

Tardi blew his nose before shoving open his bedroom door and thumping his bags onto the bench along the back. He still didn't understand why Herm didn't sell a couple of trucks to give Steve a living lab-grown face.

Herm darkened the doorway. "Son."

Tardi could smell the liquor on his father before he turned to face him. *This is going to be difficult.* "Long time since you called me that."

"You made me a hell that I need you to share." Herm gripped Tardi's arm. Not a friendly hold. "I would leave you to carry him by yourself if he didn't remind me so of your mother. That hell I made myself."

Tardi's heart sank. His father was in his self-pitying mode. No wonder Steve was ready to take off. "You could forgive me," he said. "Us working together would make it easier to bear?"

"God rot you, boy!" Herm shouted. "When I can't forgive myself? You're a clone copy of me. How could I forgive you?"

Tardi cringed. Bludgeoned by the words, he made himself small again. He *was* a clone copy. He had the same build and height as the old man, the same medium-hazel eyes and dark brown curls. When the sun had finished sucking the latte from him, he'd be the same dark shade as Herm.

He tried again to break through to the walled-off thing by forcing himself to ask it through his nausea and his fear. "Forgive yourself for what?" he said, dry-mouthed.

Herm laughed raucously then dissolved into loud sobbing. "I walloped my beauty good. Not like the half-hearted thing you did to your little brother. I let my beauty die properly."

Tardi stumbled against the bunk. His mouth opened and closed wordlessly. His father was drunk. It couldn't be true. "Why? When?" he said, without really wanting an answer.

Herm gripped him harder. "We were in Brisbane. She had you by the hand. I chest-packed the baby. The stupid scientists had the Moogerah Monster out in a street parade, in a cage on wheels pulled by a mob of raffle winners, would you believe? Before they knew better. It took them a couple of parades to realize that every parade they lost people to the bastard's long ape arms and its appetite.

"We were late and had to make do at the back of the crowd. She was a whinger, your mother. We can't see, she said. Herm made his voice whinge. Put Tardi on your shoulders and help me stand up on this dumpster. So help me God, I slung you onto my back to watch."

Tardi remembered the feel of his father's soft flannel shirt on his broad safe back. He remembered clambering to Herm's shoulders, holding on by the baby-harness straps. It was the last time he felt sure of anything.

"Your mother pulled at my elbow to hurry me. I snapped. So-help-me, I elbowed her in the face. She hit her head on the wall behind. Between the hammer and the anvil. She fell against

me and slid to the ground. I pulled you down by your ankle and put you behind me. Held you there. Too late because you knew something was up or you wouldn't have served me *this* hell. *Bastard!*" He sprayed hate into Tardi's face.

Tardi wrenched loose and shoved his father backward onto the bed. "Shut the fuck up!" He breathed deep. His father was unreliable when he was drunk. It wouldn't do for both of them to be out of control. Steve was waiting.

Herm talked to the ceiling. "I waited while she convulsed and died. I used to think it was because I was stunned. Now I think I knew even then that I wanted to mourn her properly." He dug his elbow into the bare mattress and levered himself up.

Tardi watched his father narrowly, waiting for him to be done with his unusual talkativeness.

"I knew you suspected something," Herm said. "You were always whining at me why she left without a goodbye. You delivered me into this living hell on purpose, as a payback! You—" He grabbed hold of Tardi again, pulling him onto his chest. He slumped and started snoring.

Tardi lay in his father's slackening grip. He drifted in the lake inside him made of hot salt tears, thinner than seawater. This water was for drowning in. He wouldn't mind eternal peace. If this was Herm's great secret, then it could never be resolved, because where was she even buried?

They would have to continue to travel to Brisbane every anniversary to lay flowers on a bronze plaque inscribed with their mother's name. She was meant to have been taken in the last Life Lottery Street Sweep.

But once he was old enough to be able to do the math, he'd known the woman represented by the bronze plaque must be a stranger, because that street sweep happened several years before the Moogerah Monster arrived and started to orbit the Earth fifty years before. Millions of people died after the aliens ate all the communications satellites.

His father's heart beat turgidly against Tardi's chest. *The old man is a wreck. How long will he last, the way he's drinking? The future will be me in the depot fussing like a hen around just the one boy chick.*

He drifted on his board on the curve of the alien planet, far from land and on the red sea, what did he care.

*Marhahaharppp!*

Herm startled. He gripped Tardi's shoulders. "She always wanted more than I had in me. She wanted me to rise above myself because she had. She was the old woman in the vinegar bottle. Never happy with what she had."

*Marhahaharppp!*

Herm smiled indulgently and releasing Tardi, lumbered from the bed. "Steve is at the Mack's horn. Reminding us he's waiting."

Tardi shook his head in disbelief. Did Herm even remember baring his soul? The pattern was that next he'd threaten to leave.

Herm waited in the doorway. "I'll be gone when you get back. I'll take my hell with me, leave you yours. That's fair."

"Steve is waiting," Tardi said. When Herm sobered up, he wouldn't remember what he'd said. Tardi wouldn't remind him.

They walked to the driver's side of the Mack's cabin. Though Herm swayed somewhat, he smacked the truck's rear corner as he passed, the way he always did. "You'll need to keep your wits about you with this one. He's a crossover model and still has a bit of a live-mind."

Their company ran electric live-mind freighters to keep the tax office happy, but Herm had always loved the mindless old petrol guzzlers better. Tardi drove or jockeyed all of them without favour. "A live-mind that you have disconnected?" He swung up into the cab. Needing a way to get in good with his father after Steve's accident, he pretended to share Herm's distrust of live-minds.

"Which I have not as yet fully disconnected," Herm said. "Tried to, but I started drinking, didn't I? And as a result, the Mack's fine-tuning is probably disrupted. Steve will help you."

Steve spent his early childhood fetching spanners and reprogramming truck computers. The story then was that Steve would one day run the depot. Tardi always yearned for the driving. The story now, neither Herm nor Tardi liked to think about as it loomed ever nearer.

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Steve was along to practice the social chitchat that went with taking old truckers for rides. Then, with the rides over early in the evening, the fiesta got underway and Tardi and Steve could join the celebrations. That was the plan. Tardi crossed his fingers. Steve and crowds weren't that good a mix. People stared if they didn't know Steve, and Steve flustered easily. He often threatened to freeze.

"Hey, thanks." Tardi took his BigEye sunshades ready for him from the dash.

"I knew if Dad caught you, you'd forget them," Steve said.

Tardi pulled out the ignition switch. "Yep, everything is still where I remember it." An ongoing joke he shared with Steve.

Steve flashed one of his artificial aquamarine eyes at him, faster than the flick of a fish's tail. How did he do that when he had no facial expressions?

That flick thing was exactly what reminded Tardi of their mother. The only clear memory he had of her.

"I'll be taller than you one day," said Steve. "Then you'll get a crick in your neck staring at me."

"In your dreams." Tardi pumped fuel into the engine.