

16: Steve in a Dark Place

Bio-Steve stood against a trailer wheel lonely without Tech-Steve attending to him, Steve knew in his thoughts. He couldn't sense the wheel he leaned against. Couldn't sense the ground he was standing on or the air all around him. Was the air warm? Cold? Was there a breeze? He didn't know without having his techs attend.

Did normal bio-people sense all that, all the time? He couldn't remember back to when he was a normal bio. He'd become so interested in one of his projects that he'd forgotten to service his bio-body. Something the recovery robot at SoHAB warned him about over and over.

Let it pass.

His brother entered Tech-Steve's visual field. "Come on mate. Let's hit the road," Tar said.

Tar to me, and always will be. Steve was so separated that he couldn't answer poor Tar. His voice was part of bio-Steve. He sympathized with Tar having to lift Steve into the truck cabin by an arm and a leg, and helped by being as stiff as a wooden boy. *Though a Pinocchio I am not.*

Tar manoeuvred Steve half into the cab. Getting himself onto the step, he pulled and bent Steve into a sitting shape, jumped down after ensuring all of Steve was on-board and gently thunked the door shut. If he'd been able, Steve would've cried about that—Tar making it a gentle thunk.

He heard Tar run to where the bikes lay and sort his tools. Probably he left a couple of spares for the tourists to repair their bikes themselves. Next, Tar was back in the cab and Steve's bio and tech selves still hadn't incorporated.

Tardi pulled out the ignition switch. With a diesel-mode petrol engine he always had to wait for the petrol to prime the engine before firing it up. Tar rested his head on his arms on the steering wheel.

Finally Steve felt back together. "Tar."

Tar sat up and smiled. He always acted like he'd achieved Steve's return to normality himself. Next he would ask Steve a question that would lead to a diversion for both of them to get their minds from the scary thing that just happened.

"What's the most interesting thing you've got on your wrist deck?" Tar said.

Steve swallowed. He had no time for diversions. "Tar, there's a whole lot Procyon Products doesn't know about their monster." He rushed on before Tar could put in one of his marking-time expressions.

"Like how SoHAB has got pages and pages of code that the monster sent down before it fell to Earth, that no one has managed to decode. It is all just sitting in behind a lot of other pages on the SoHAB site."

Tar dropped his arms from the steering wheel. "And that you now have on your wrist deck?" he said.

Steve hated the way Tar's shoulders slumped. He pressed on despite hoping that the monster wasn't reading Tar's mind. "What if I can work it out?" he said.

"When all the scientists can't?" Tar said.

A live-mind-and-jockey freighter blared their displeasure at having to overtake the Mack.

"Why in such a fricking hurry when the damned road will be shut another six hours?" Tar shouted at them through his open window. "Aaahhh!" He grabbed his head.

Steve sensed the Mack's live-mind taking over the driving. Tar's feet on the pedals would be useless.

"How can I live like this?" Tar said. "Turning every word over twice?" He breathed with small quick mouthfuls.

"You've got a pain in your head?" Steve said.

Tar agreed. "Like my brain is bulging and will soon be too big for my skull."

"You used a water tag. You called it," Steve said.

Tar shuddered and stared at the windscreen.

Nothing there that Steve could see. "Is there something you can see on the windscreen?" he said anyway. It would have to be something the monster was doing to his brother.

"I see a giraffe-sized door made of bars," Tar said. "Now a golden ball is rolling from around a curved wall beyond. It stops against the bars. The ball unfolds itself into a gold-colored insect about the length of of a couple of doormats? Waist-high were it reared up?"

All Steve heard was the strange expression at the end. *Waist high were it reared up? Remember that. Might that be Stormy talk? Tar knows them so well he speaks their dialect? When did he learn that? Why didn't I know?*

"The ball will easily fit between the bars. That's what it meant me to see," Tar ended mournfully.

The truck indicated a left turn onto the ramp from the highway.

"It's taking us to Uncle Tom's?" Steve said. "Maybe a delivery it regularly made?"

At the roundabout at the top of the ramp, the Mack slowed enough not to roll straight over the garden in the middle. They travelled at a sedate sixty kilometres per hour toward Uncle Tom's Freighter Service Station.

Tardi blew his nose and mopped sweat from his face.

"You see?" Steve said in a normal, breaking-the-spell type of voice. "I *should* try and figure out the monster's code."

The Mack drew up on the tarmac in front of Uncle Tom's and powered down its systems by way of a handful of indicative engine sounds that Steve recognized from every other live-minded truck. "So much for the disconnecting process," he said. "I reckon the old man

definitely wasn't in the zone."

"Lucky me," Tar said. "We might as well call ahead to the fiesta manager. Find out where to park." He tapped the code into his deck.

The voice squeaking out of his wrist deck said, "Ant Brunelle, Event Organizer Extraordinaire."

Steve laughed. "It's Tony Brunnel." He addressed Tar's wrist deck. "Tar used talk about you when he was still in school."

"Speak of the devil. I saw you two on the video wall just now," Ant said.

"Was it the police or was it a pair of cyclists videoing us?" Tar said.

"The police. But don't sweat it. I love free publicity," Ant said. "You telling them you were coming here you did us a free product placement. We've already had inquiries as a result."

"We're about to come in," Tar said.

"Don't bother," Ant said. "Your site isn't ready." The call terminated abruptly.

"Damn, he signed off," Tar said.

"I'm calling Dad," Steve said.

"Go ahead. My guess is that if he stopped drinking when we left, he'll hear you out. If not, he won't answer and we'll think again."

Steve tapped the icon for the code for Herm's yard deck that Herm kept in his pocket.

Herm's face swam into view. A brown bottle stood beside him.

Tar isn't always right, that's interesting. "Hey Dad," Steve said. He concentrated on sounding as much as possible like the kid Herm thought him to be. "We're at Uncle Tom's having a few troubles."

"Give me your brother," Herm said.

Out of sight of the display, Steve breathed out, relieved. He'd made it work again.

"You're in the steam house," Tar guessed.

Herm sipped his beer. "What troubles?"

"I'm thinking the live-mind lay low while you worked on the machinery, it's taken so much control. We're at Uncle Tom's wondering if the previous owner had a scheduled delivery here," Tar said.

"It'll be the town ban," Herm said.

"Remind me of the town ban?" Steve said.

Herm frowned. When he was drinking, he had difficulty recalling detail.

Steve sagged. He and Tar both hated Herm drunk.

Herm suddenly came good. "A town ban is from the days when towns first decided no more highway freighters in their narrow streets. Programming began with the town bans. The previous owner would've met his retail contacts at Uncle Tom's, they in their vans for his town deliveries."

Tar squeezed Steve's arm and mouthed, "He'll stop now."

Steve nodded.

"So," Herm said, ignorant of the byplay. "Park in the Gulgan Road overnighting stop, your side of the motorway."

Overnighting stops began as tourist camping facilities and were quickly adopted by truckers.

Herm continued, "I'll bring out the Isuzu prime mover for us to get the trailer to the fiesta. We'll camp at Bruns in the trailer, and in the morning, you can drive Steve and me back to the Mack where we will disconnect the live-mind properly before we all drive home. How's that sound?"

"Like a plan," Tar said despite that the plan had drinking and driving in it.

Steve grinned. The Isuzu had a breath-analysis lock. It would force Herm to take the alcohol neutralizer however much he hated it.

— — — —

The Mack's live-mind granted Tar the manual over-ride after Steve *explained*, by way of reprogramming, the live-mind's need for freshening up its coasting skills. Tar steered it through the sequence of roll-and-adjust maneuvers also planned by Steve. Consequently, Tar and Steve had a lot of time to take in the scenery.

"Amazing how good a forest smells!" Steve had his nose out the window, savoring leaf rot and insect work. The trees carried their greenery high overhead and the consequent leaf fall added continually to the tree litter on the road. Fallen branches and dry leaves crackled under the Mack's tires.

This part of Gulgan Road, being an access road to the motorway, wasn't much used by wheeled vehicles these days.

The Mack parked itself without any dramas. Tardi set out the glow-in-the-dark reflectors as per regulations. "Now what will we do?"

"I'm having the rest of my lunch," Steve said. "You want some?"

Tar took the sandwich Steve passed him. "Unfortunately, I left my breakfast pancake in Rowan's boss's hoverole."

"What are you going to say to Rowan?"

"Mmm-mm," Tar said around a cud of sandwich.

“She must have signed you up to the Wide Game days ago, you know.”

Tar swallowed. “Why do you think?”

“Awful quick uptake when you consider the business at Tyagarah. I wonder.” Steve put his half-eaten sandwich aside on the seat and worked his deck.

“What?” Tar said.

“I’m on the SoHAB site now, the EMBers’ part of it. There’s a chat room in progress for Obstructers. There’s a bunch of trees babbling about almost obstructing a couple of cyclists catching up with a Target. There’s a pic.”

Steve felt his heart start to race. He hated it that his Tech-self had no control over his bio body’s reaction to fear. “It’s you! Your dreads! Lettering across you, WANTED! I told you the EMBers would want to burn you!”

It must be true what the recovery robot at SoHAB said. Half his brain was still a bio brain, because it was the nerves and synapses that serviced his lungs, heart and gut and arms and legs.

“Let me see,” Tar said. The image, a low-resolution point-and-click sported a cinnamon-sprinkled latte face and nose-length dreads. “That *is* me. Which is scary,” he said, confirming Steve’s fright. Then he laughed. “I get it, the trees from the Tyagarah Rest Stop are doing the blabbing? Maybe, like Mel, they didn’t switch off their holo devices because they didn’t want to be identified while slowly reappearing?”

“Most ComLink plans don’t allow holo uploads and downloads,” Steve said. “Being too greedy on memory. It would be pretty funny to see Obstructers suddenly unmasked because their ComLink cut out.”

Tar rolled his eyes. “You’re getting older and wiser by the minute, mal chick.”

Steve turned his head, opened his mouth and allowed his half-chewed food to fall out of the window. He dropped the rest of his sandwich out there too. He stared fixedly through the windscreen. “Exactly what I am, Tar. A mal chick.”

“What? You’re exactly a Russian boy kid?” Tar said.

Steve pushed through Tar’s feeble attempt to tease him. “I’m a mal chick, Herm’s sick kid. Is that why he keeps so many chooks around? So I’ll feel at home?”

“Don’t change the subject.”

“It *is* the subject, Tar. I’ve got a lot of things not right with me.”

“Not a real lot.”

Steve punched him. “Yes a real lot. When I forget to attend to my bio body, it stops.”

“To me you’re alive.”

“To you and to Dad maybe.”

“And Clarice, and Jack Fusel,” Tardi said.

“They only see who I *was*. They treat me like a little kid.”

“Why don’t you check into the help site? SoHAB might have some advice?”

“They updated me. Did you notice?”

Tardi nodded.

“And guess what? They gave me more ways of doing things with words.” Steve laughed.

“Like words are the world and I only have to work at them to make it fit me. Since you left home, I’ve been twirling around Dad like a bull chick without a roar, and he disappears because I am going so fast. When I don’t feel him, I freeze. He throws me in the shower and I melt again. SoHAB couldn’t fix the real parts of me, could they?”

“Well, remember I’m just a spoon of jelly out of the same dish.”

“But you’ve got your bull still in you, Tar. Dad’s has all leaked out. And SoHAB never put mine back. Dad cries when I deviate from the story he input into me.” His thoughts stuttered past the time just after he was brought back to life, when he used to get distraught at the different versions of the same events Herm and Tar told to create his new memories.

SoHAB’s recovery robot taught Steve that every person was separate from every other and that everyone had their own understanding of how things had happened. After studying both Tar’s and Dad’s stories, Steve-then decided that Dad’s memories were mostly overlaid with bitterness.

All the time Tar had been away, Steve had had to conform to Herm’s story. “Dad can’t handle me growing up and I don’t want to be a mal chick for the rest of Dad’s time. Promise me that next time I freeze, you won’t try to wake me.”

“When you freeze, that’s just your CPU hiccupping. Your hands, your arms and legs, your body, all keep going. Why wouldn’t I try to jump-start you?” Tar had sweat standing out on his forehead.

“I don’t want to be a computer with miscellaneous living bits hanging from it,” Steve said.

“Promise me!”

Tar sucked up whatever leaked from his nose and made the sound that had revolted Steve forever. Despite Tar’s efforts, obvious even to the super-critical tech-Steve, tears streamed down Tar’s face.

Next, Tar clutched the harsh polypropylene driver’s seat. Then the cab door. Then the cracked old steering wheel. It must be that the monster had his brother in its clutches again. Because tears are water? “Promise?” Steve said.

“You alive,” Tar said. “That feels so good. ... I’ve got someone to care for, to care about. And when the old man hates me ... you’re the only friend I have.”

“I don’t like how you’re letting your tears just run down your face now,” Steve said. “Calling the monster like nothing matters.”

Long silence while Tar mopped his eyes and worked at controlling his face. “You’re right,” he finally said. “It’s pure selfishness.”

Steve hardened his heart. “Yes it is. So, do you promise?”

“Yes ... I promise. Told you. A spoonful of jelly.”

“And don’t bother trying to work double as hard to keep me from freezing,” Steve said.

Tardi shook, then laughed. “A bull chick without the roar, I think you said. You *are* getting that good with words.”

Steve laughed too, hesitantly at first. “You mean I made another joke?”

Tar laughed harder.

“Okay. Okay,” Steve said. “I guess I’m going to have to listen to every track I own all over again, to get the jokes.” Keeping half his attention on Tar and what Tar might see in his surroundings, Steve sat back and tapped into his wrist-deck.

Tar looked outside. Steve looked there too. Those same cyclists arrived. They stacked their bikes against a tree to the side of the clearing. Allowing their tent to unfold fully, they pegged it to the ground, threw their gear inside and set off in the direction of Uncle Tom’s. For the first of their pie dinners, Steve assumed.

Tar’s face glazed like it did when he thought about things he didn’t want Steve to know about.

Have to try a lot harder, bro. You are transparent to me. Then he recalled Tar’s contacts with the Stormies. He felt bereft. What else didn’t he know? He absolutely depended on knowing everything about Tar. Who else could he model himself on, growing up?

He’d give Herm forty minutes, given the old man had to get out of the steam house, get dressed, check over the Isuzu, and then finally get rolling.

Tar beat him to it. At thirty-five minutes he clicked his fingers in front of Steve’s face. “On a count of three you will wake up. I’m calling Dad. He should’ve been here already.”

Tar’s deck’s phone function didn’t engage.

“What have you done to it this time?” Steve said.

“Don’t heavy me, tiddler.”

“Give it here.” Steve keyed and flicked screens on Tardi’s deck, then his own. “That’s funny. I can’t get a signal on mine either. It must be a network outage.”

“Whatever. We’re going. I have to find Rowan and talk to her before she gets too busy with her blogging to want to know me.”

Steve quoted Herm. “Rule one, never leave a vintage truck without personnel.”

“Extraordinary circumstances, Steve.”

“Dad will be here soon.”

“It’s been more than an hour,” Tar said.

“You go. I want to practice being strong. I bet we pick you up in five minutes.”

Tar smiled that sick lop-sided smile he used when he was trying to encourage Steve. “Bet you a set of tracks from the Truckin’ Bard that the old man drives straight past me.”

Steve laughed. “How is that good for me when I’ll be reminding Dad to stop? Telling him, Look, there’s Tar.”

“Oh. Yeah. All right, bet you a set of tracks that ...”

“Go ahead. I know you want to get me the tracks.”

Finally Tar opened his door, jumped down and set off. Waved.

Steve remembered that the SoHAB site would always be available. That SoHAB had promised to be online even if the tower on Mt Cootha fell down the mountain. *Open my Com-Tooth channel and remind Tar?*

No. It felt like cheating when he had just said he wanted to be strong.