

18: Tardi, Saved?

Tardi walked along the beginning of Tweed Street Embankment. He put out his thumb to try and stop the hoverole approaching. Amazingly, it was Rowan in her boss's ride. He shouted. She had almost passed before she stopped, as if she saw him just then.

"Thanks for stopping," he said, clambering in. "Pretending not to see me, what was that about?"

"I'm not early." She was in the driver's seat with the controls on auto-drive.

"You threw me right into the Wide Game despite me saying I didn't want a bar of it." He gazed at her profile. Her stern jaw said he wouldn't get an explanation or apology. Waiting for her to mellow might take forever now that they'd split up. "Who do I talk to about it?"

"Where do you think everyone will be?" she said, ignoring his questions completely.

They passed the entry to the illegal petrol outlet hidden in the dip between the highway and the embankment, and a minute later swept into the Bruns Beach village. The end of the official parade was only a couple of hoverlengths ahead.

Rowan pressed down the command key on the dash and said, "Speed up to tack onto the end of the traffic file ahead."

"Instruction confirmed," said the hoverole's machine voice.

The number of people lining the embankment cheering the parade gave him the clue. *Duh, Tar-boy. Get your brain into gear.* "You're saying all Wide Game admin are here. Tell me a couple of names and I'll look out for them."

"I really don't believe you'd rather be a nobody," Rowan said.

How is that even an answer? He fell to studying her clothes. A videocam goggles-and-mic set pushed back her hair done up in gold ringlets cascading down her shoulders. He couldn't recall her style when she visited him in hospital. She changed her hair colour weekly.

She wore a leopard-patterned mini skirt, a singlet top with bronze spots—the spots probably live-minded—with gold sandal boots. He glanced at the gold satin coat and virtualing gloves on the back seat.

"Why are you staring at my coat and gloves?"

He could never sustain a fit of aggro at Rowan, she matched him every step. He back-pedaled, making like he thought she'd be blogging. "I'm surprised Sef still has you working with gloves. You're so good, I would've thought he'd have you fitted out with a data input skin by now."

"He has," she said. "I have it at home. I wanted to wear my glam wear tonight. Turn left into the Brunnel compound," she instructed the live-mind.

"Instruction confirmed," the hoverole said as it slowed almost to a standstill to allow the crowd to give way.

Rose Brunnel directed Rowan into a parking spot. “Hey, Ro. Good to see you. Ant is on the island, he said to tell you. Tardi, hi. Too bad I’m working at my primary job. I’d love to have got a snap with you.”

“We part ways here,” Rowan said, smiling. “Time I earned a bit of the jam I’m wearing.”

“You obviously don’t need my help tonight?” he said. But what was the use trying to be sarcastic when Rowan had the upper hand?

The great steel giraffe door at ZooHall squeaked. He barely saw it swing open against the pink painted cement wall behind it, before clamping his attention back on Rowan. A tiny victory, he hadn’t given the water tag time to be used and he was getting better at throwing the monster out of his thoughts.

Apart from that, he’d like to let his anger free to steam, simmer or boil. The word triumphant described Rowan’s laughter exactly. He’d probably missed a move or three in the ongoing game called Keeping Your Wits About You.

Rowan scrambled down the rocks lining the Mullumbimbi Street Causeway and stepped onto the mudflats. She drew the elbow-length V gloves on and slid the videocam goggles-and-mic down over her face.

The causeway was as busy with strolling crowds and playing children as on any anniversary day. Rowan swept her goggled gaze to and fro to illustrate her commentary as she broadcast in real time, courtesy of the goggle-mounted mic, a dedicated news blogger communication tower and the Blarion’s mainframe in Hottentot Mulum.

Her viewers would be seeing the time of day by the colour of the sky, rose pink merging into a band of bluing night in the east, and the state of the tide, the grey-blue sea with only a small surf burbling against the rock wall which historically had enclosed the Brunswick River’s south arm.

She’d fill a band running along the bottom of the viewers’ screens with experience data that couldn’t yet be transmitted efficiently—such as the tang of salt in the air. *Knowing all that about her is a sign I’ve been around her too long.*

“He’s here, finally!” someone shouted.

He turned to tell the owner of the hand on his arm to keep it to themselves.

A mob of twenty or thirty bright-eyed people surrounded him, staring expectantly. He didn’t know any of them. They dressed in Rippletime fashion with prints of alien physiologies. He saw none of the extreme board shorts, violently colored sun shirts or artfully bleached hair-dos of surfer fans.

A brunette barged through from the back of the circle. She did homage to Zoo Hall’s permanent aliens exhibit with one lavender leg. The rest of the crowd lined up behind her. “Smile!” she said through a wide smile of her own. “The camera is offshore.”

Tardi looked offshore.

Rowan was in the mud alongside, her videocam goggles directed at him. She shuttered them

by hand, faster than she could manage with her facial muscles.

He froze. A storm of fury rose in him but he had no time to anguish over Rowan's trickery. One of the gamers pulled Tardi to his side. "My turn!" Another ambushed him with her face thrust in for the second or third shot. "Me next!" He felt like the carcass of a fish being pulled apart by a bunch of minnows.

Ignoring the clamor, he shoved where they didn't move fast enough, pushed through where their arms tangled him, and walked away at a speed they hopefully wouldn't match. When he glanced back to see if he was escaping them, an arm slung over his shoulder. "I am glad to meet you, Aussie surfer," someone said right beside his ear.

Bleached on dark hair flopped into Tardi's face. "I surf my wave pool, always knowing what comes next. Force 2. Force 5. In my holidays I go to see wild-water surfers. This time, I study your moves. Maybe I will ride Force 10 when I get home."

Tardi visualized the wave pool and the monster dropped him down the deep green face of a Force 10 water mountain. His board nosedived to the seabed and flipped him, arms and legs akimbo. He blinked the loop away.

A second surfer fan slung over his arm from the other side. "It is the announcement of the new name for the drinking house, is it not?" This one was blond on blond.

"The prize is 366 free beers. One a day," said a blond on rose-brown girl walking backward in front of them.

"Overstaying your visa by 345 days," the guy on Tardi's right said. "If we win, we will ask for free beers for everyone in the house until free is gone. We give it a go convincing the house boss."

Tardi glanced back over their arms. The gamer crowd loomed close behind. The moment he broke loose, they'd be onto him again. He cricked his neck the other way. Rowan was nowhere in sight.

He allowed his surfer fans to take him to the island though he should be on his way back to the embankment where the display vehicles normally parked, to see whether Herm and Steve had arrived yet with the Isuzu.

Market stalls lined the outer rim of the island. The pub's forecourt was stall to wall with people. His saviors pressed relentlessly past the Iceberger Ices Tent with ancient ice brought daily from the nearest berg, freshly shaved and drizzled with fresh tropical-fruit cordial.

Next to it was the Trucking Bard's stall packed with every kind of trucking music known to the industry. Tardi elbowed his fans for their attention. "I'm stopping here, okay?"

They merely dropped their arms and continued without him.

As he ducked under a steel arch lined with magnets hidden by swagging, and past the battery to power them, the gamers surged past. "You've got signal disruption?" Tardi said.

The proprietor grinned. "Stops my customers sending their unpaid samples straight into their online collections."

Tardi moved along the display machines. The back flap of the tent was up, probably to encourage a flow of air. He glanced through the triangular gap. A Stormy sat just outside on the wall surrounding the isle, a steaming mug in his death adder tattooed fist. "Ace? How's it going?" Tardi said. *Huh?* Ace's green, dark blue rimmed eyes jangled something in his memory.

Tardi rocked, almost losing his balance as Herm's nightmare reeled through him on fast forward. He gulped a breath. *Ace has the same sea-green eyes as our mother had.*

The monster's images appeared. Rain plopped on the grey surface of a lake. *Why grey? The alien planet's landscape was a weeping grey world. Why grey?* He almost wept himself trying to understand it all.

Right. Right. He collected himself. *Think about something else.* He hated to notice that the monster presented the water tag first this time. What Steve said, the monster was learning him.

By the time he had himself under control, the tent flap hung closed. He concentrated on the image and sounds he'd clicked on. Moh Knees' Grab Bag of African Trucker Ballads with a promo shot of a typical African freighter: sixteen wheels a side and chewing through biodiesel like any of TLC's heritage fleet, but with a guy with a log drum in the passenger seat and the rest of the musicians stomping out a pattern on top.

Its pounding beat was enough to chase Zoo Hall from his mind. Had to be weird enough for Steve. He paid for the cube and hung it from a spare clip on his jockeying bracelet.

"You're a trucker yourself?" the owner said.

"I'm with the Local Freight Company. This is for my brother. He collects the weird and wonderful."

"Here, I'll throw in a trucker look-alike chain with three clips. If it is a gift you might like to fill the two spares as well?"

Tardi laughed, hollowly it seemed to him. "Good try at the value adding. But thanks for the bracelet." Just out through the archway he hesitated. *Contact Steve? Haven't heard from him for a while.* But if Herm had arrived, he'd be short-tempered with Steve for talking with Tardi. *Better leave it.*