

23: Over the Wall

Tardi had Steve to think about, but he also had Steve to help him with the programming that would enable them to make their getaway. “What can we do?” Meaning how and where Steve could interfere with the computer running the place. In a big place such as this, gates, house doors and windows were usually all operated by a central mainframe. “I’d love to lock Mr and Mrs in their house. A week of downtime seems fair.”

Steve chuckled. “No problem. Take them offline as well?” He gestured at the oversized dish.

“Better not. They’d be climbing through the skylight and in our hair in half a minute if their favorite show disappears from their video wall.”

“Me at the charging station, I’ll be making busy sounds,” Steve said. “You’ll need to make some busy sounds, as well.”

“Good thinking, cherub,” Tardi said. “I’ll move the truck around. It’s dual power. I’ll gun the engine as if I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Cherub? Is that a brothering?”

Tardi laughed. “No.”

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With Steve in the runabout’s passenger seat beside him, Tardi remote-locked the entry hatches. *Two can play that game.* He checked the LED display again. The runabout was old enough to have a dual-fuel option and no live-mind. Or it was disconnected. The battery gauge indicator approached the red for EMPTY and the liquid fuel gauge indicated a tenth of a tank of hydrogen.

The three rows of jets underneath apparently could be operated independently. He felt for the pedals with his feet. *Yep. Three pedals.* He switched to manual operation with the liquid fuel option. “Why don’t you check if the local ComLink is back up?”

“I have, it isn’t,” Steve said.

“Might’ve been a sun flare.”

Steve rolled his camera-eyes at Tardi’s theorizing. “Let’s get going.”

Tardi turned the ignition switch all the way and gently pumped fuel into the engines.

“Never mind the silent start,” Steve said. “Remember we’re supposedly parking it in its charging slot?”

“It’s the vertical lift-off I’m worried about. There’s not a whole lot of fuel. See anybody?”

“Not even a zombie.”

The hoverole whined warming up. Tardi conned the mirrors once more for activity within the house. The flickering light emanating from the skylights said there was a surround video wall operating and that Mr and Mrs were ensconced in their snuggery.

When the runabout's skirts were filled with air, he put both his feet on the jet-accelerators while inputting the coordinates for a long incline toward the top of the wall.

The engine stuttered when they were two meters from the ground and still five or so from the wall.

"No!" Steve said.

"Don't worry. If the tank was dry, we would've fallen straight down." Tardi pumped fuel past the vapor bubble he suspected was causing the trouble.

"I dare you to scrape her belly over the top," Steve said. "They deserve every scratch we can give them. You said cherub back there. You're thinking you're an angel? That you can fly?"

"Avenging. Avenging angel."

Steve laughed. "I like it."

Tardi nursed the hoverole to the wall. "Better hang on to something in case we do fall."

Steve hung himself up on the nearest handholds.

Tardi switched off the middle row of jets, and then those on his side. "To save fuel," he explained.

Steve gasped. "Keep on telling the story." He hung insecurely from the webbing.

When the passenger-side hatch was higher than the top of the wall, Tardi said, "I'll need your foot ready to power the jets on your side as soon as we're level again. Get my meaning?"

Steve moaned. "How?"

"Each of the three rows of jets will need to be worked independently as soon as we get higher than the wall. Hurry it up." Tardi gave the middle row and his side a burst each. The hoverole righted itself.

Steve did gymnastics in his webbing and got his foot to the gas.

"Good! Watch this bar light." Tardi stabbed at the left-side indicator on the dash. "Raise it to four blocks out of the ten. We have got to start easing over." Tardi disengaged his arms and rethreaded them through the seat restraints while giving the driver's side jets a bit so they'd begin to help Steve's side. "Build up to five now." He engaged the middle row of jets. Got them slowly up to five blocks.

R-i-i-ii-p-p-p.

"That was the skirt your side, hung up and ripped," he said. "But anyway, we just about made it."

Red. Red. Flash. Flash. Flash.

"The fuel gauge! It's empty!" Steve shouted.

The hoverole fell all of thirty centimeters and settled teetering onto the top of the wall.

“Awk!” he said.

Tardi rolled in his webbing as the cabin tilted down toward the road, touched ground lightly and fell over onto its dome. He ended up hanging upside-down. No input from the monster? Not for a while already? “You okay?” he asked Steve.

“So far.” The straps holding Steve recoiled before letting him loose. He swore.

The upside-down hoverole rocked.

“Wait!” Tardi said. “My weight will de-stabilize ...”

The hoverole see-sawed with the dome screeching against the road’s gravel with a nattering sound as the vehicle swiveled and slid down a gravelly slope.

Steve fell onto Tardi by degrees. Legs, body, arms, head.

They stopped.

“Phew. Just a little slope,” Tardi said. “We could be in the storm-water drain?” He was crumpled against the driver’s hatch. “Safe to straighten out?”

He froze as the hoverole slowly swung over. “Okay, dome against the outside edge of the stormwater drain, I think. A couple of times I had a vision of us rolling edge-ward down the mountain.”

“I’m straightening out,” Steve said.

“Go for it. I can but patiently wait my turn,” Tardi said. His hatch was below ditch level. Trying for Steve’s up in the air was unsafe as there was still the cartwheeling possibility. They had no lights or any moonlight. “Go for the rear hatch.”

Steve shoved and crawled toward the rear hatch. It sprang open after a breathless wait.

Tardi joined Steve outside, stretching the crimp out of his back.

“We’ll have to walk home,” Steve said.

Dawn couldn’t be far off. “I’d rather we wait a couple of hours, for sun-up. Have a sleep in the meantime,” Tardi said. “We’re safe from the Smiths. How long will they not be getting out for?”

“A week. You *said* a week. If you’re worried about the Stormies, I doubt they’ll have me with all my hardware.”

“Our mother was a Stormy,” Tardi remarked. He sensed Steve’s amazement. “Shut your mouth, toh teina little brother. Just don’t malign them when we’re alone.”

“Don’t even dream that you’ll stop me searching for a mention of her,” Steve said.

“I doubt that any Stormies are in the normal records,” Tardi said. “Why they take poisonous snakes around with them would be good to know.” *Is that a red enough herring to deflect him?* “We’re not walking now because there’s no moon,” he said. “And there’s that ... mist

rising from the valley. It looks like the same goop we've already met."

"I want the parcel tray so I can stretch out," Steve said. "And for pity's sake seal yourself in the cab so I don't have to put up with your snoring as well."

Tardi grinned. Once he was in the cab, he raised the partition by hand. He swung round, put his feet on the lower window and his shoulders against the passenger window in an almost upright position. He could sleep anywhere anyhow.

When he'd arranged himself, he felt the data cubes on the two bracelets in his pants pocket digging into him. He fished them out and hung his own on the rear-vision mirror by his hip, then lowered the partition. "I got you this at the fiesta." He tossed it through.

Steve scrabbled. "A jockey bracelet? What's on it?"

"Music cube. African Trucker Ballads."

"Hey, thanks, tuākana."

While Tardi wrestled getting the partition back up, Steve said, "Was that the right brothering?"

"It was." Tardi felt a light, happy feeling. He loved his little brother, add-ons and all.