

### 23: In the Dawn

A signal from tech-Steve's eye to his brain said it was sunrise, 6.52 AM. His brain booted up. Once he was properly aware, he accessed his visual sensors. Only a tinge of grey light reached him in the cargo hold of the hoverole. It'd be lighter outside. He wriggled toward the rear.

*Screech!*

He opened the hatch to its full extent, not caring about the noise. He clambered out and walked to the front, expecting the racket to have woken Tar. He laughed. Tar slept crouched like he stood on a surfboard.

Steve smacked the metal-plex by Tar's head. "Tar, shake a leg! Sun's up and we want to be home before dark. I'm just going for my piss over the cliff."

Tar opened one eye ... "Go for it!" ... then went back to sleep.

Steve pushed through the waist-high bushes beside the drain and stepped onto a rock ledge a couple of meters wide with a five-meter drop according to his deck's GPS function. He checked his connectivity. Nope, still only the SoHAB link showed as live.

He couldn't see the bottom of the cliff because fog similar to yesterday's paintball fog blanketed the valley, right to his feet at the edge of the drop. His brother, last night deliberating over walking home in the dark where there might be fog, had hesitated. *Why wouldn't I notice anything and everything about Tar?*

His brother not wanting to walk in the fog had confirmed Steve's suspicions. He hadn't believed the story Tar made up about Mel, but what could he say with the girl's father right there? Emotions got in the way of knowledge quite often, he found. And the poor bio-brains, unlike him, would always be at the mercy of their emotions.

An experiment sprang into his mind, whole and perfect. The cyclist's conversion was the last piece in the puzzle for him—despite that he'd had to work hard to convince Tar that he still believed otherwise. No accident that he'd be the best subject for such a trial.

The tech-system in his brain that simulated dopamine release went wild. *Yes, yes, yes! It's a great plan!* He loved having something new and positive to look forward to instead of just the freezing and dying.

The Smith's ComLink appeared to be powerful enough to source signal from beyond Byron Shire. Yesterday, he'd committed their passwords to his memory without effort and accessing their system now, he piggy-backed his ComLink onto theirs. He set his logic-ware to trace mentions of the Stormies.

Then he enjoyed himself replaying Tardi's version, more cheerful than Herm's, of the Steve-pissing-over-the-cliff story. After watering the fog, he moved along to where he could rest his back against a gnarled tree growing in the rocks almost on the edge of the cliff. There was just enough of a ledge to sit and finalize the work on his deck.

The data the system had discovered about the Stormies scrolled onto the page. Naturally, it said nothing about how his father, Herm, had gotten to know a Stormy woman well enough to

marry her. Did he meet her in that village?

How did the Stormies terrorize? He should think that through first. Maybe the way he himself had been terrorized by Tardi's absence from home? This was when he had truly learned who his father was. *I was scared all the time*, he thought obliquely. But because Steve, and probably most ordinary people, felt terrorized didn't mean that Stormies, or Herm, were purposely doing the terrorizing.

Some of the known facts about Stormies were that they carried live snakes. Venomous snakes, Tar said. Most people were instinctively scared of snakes so that could be a frightening aspect. Steve set his logic-ware to search out snake venoms.

Bunches of Stormies went to high places to enjoy storms. Would that make them frightening? Seriously, anyone could like that! *If I hadn't been totally dependent on my electrical circuits I might've liked to do it too.*

Some Stormies were said to have the second sight. They called it *weit sicht*. Was that scary? *I don't know*. He had no way to test whatever was meant by the term. He certainly had no sight other than that his camera-eyes provided him with.

Stormies called themselves the only truly sustainable people on Earth and they lived in carbon-neutral villages networked with others like them throughout the Australia Archipelago. That was only scary because it showed up everyone else.

But what he was most interested in was where they came from and where and when they originated. There was no mention of their beginnings anywhere. *Here's hoping they have a secret history.*

No ironic laughter from his one-man fan club. It was so weird, so lonely, with his brother only a few meters distant but not to be reached. At home, when Steve didn't have Tar, he had Dad to watch over and to placate.

He saved a link to a chart on snake venoms and their effects on human physiology to his wrist-deck. It detailed how much and what kind of treatment you would need if you were bitten. The experts called it being envenomed. He saved another link to an article on Stormy villages.

He opened an auditory sensor ... an ear in human-physiology speak ... to check for sounds of Tar stirring. *Nothing*. Okay, so he should deal with the alien's file. Every day he wondered why all the interested parties persisted in calling it the *Moogerah Monster*.

The parties most interested were Procyon Products and the Brisbane-based EMBers. Why did they even call themselves the EMBers? Mmm. Their website said they thought of themselves as the embers of the fire keeping the Earth alive?

*Are they for real? In my not-so-humble opinion, the Stormies actually live the fire.* And the EMBers were as down on the Stormies as everyone else? *It does not compute.* This was the cliché he'd adopted as his motto.

*I can accept that the monster fell to Earth somewhere in the Moogerah Valley. But in reality, what people are calling a single entity is a bunch of alien life forms somehow hanging*

*together. They were as different from each other as they were different from humans.* This last was a fact he'd picked up while he was at SoHAB.

Tar told it like the thing doing the thoughts-and-influencing in him was a part of the whole, though *he* called that single thing the monster, when everybody else meant the whole collection when they said *the monster*. Confusing.

Steve's analysis led logically, as was his intention, to his idea of naming the part of the monster inhabiting Tar, a Virtual Alien Life form. VAL. Next he opened the mysterious data file the VAL had sent to Earth while it was still in orbit.

Words in English and mathematical symbols proved that the VAL had studied the Earth before it touched down. English was still the global language of science and technology. *Wonder what the VAL hoped to gain by making it possible for humans to read its stuff?*

He transcribed the material into more obvious English. By making it easier for Tar to make sense of the VAL's discoveries, Steve could help Tar think of a way to control the virtual part, and so also maybe, the real parts. He grinned.

Tar had everybody, including their father, thinking he was down on live-minds. Only Steve knew his secret. *Tar, if you still hate how simple machines are powered with plus-potential brains smart enough to outgrow their tasks,* he typed, *you'll welcome my decision. I'm a lot like a live-mind and I've outgrown being Herm's boy brought back to life.*

He sent a sensory message to wriggle his toes. He had about twenty-seven circuits to remember to practice where the average bio-brain had fifty bunches of neurons. But bio-brains had their unconscious to keep their processes going with no input necessary from their awareness. Twitch, jangle, stretch. All that.

His toes felt ...?

The skin on his toes felt tight and stretched. They were swollen? Because he'd been sitting still too long and the blood pooled down there? He looked over the edge of the cliff. The fog was retreating.

He grinned wide. His plan was working. His lower legs were elongated and covered with smooth brown bark, and he hadn't even felt when they'd changed. The recovery robot warned him hundreds of times not to get too engrossed in anything.

Surgery hadn't advanced yet, it said, to be able to connect all his neurons into the add-ons. All the different bits of his bio-body would need regular bursts of awareness to operate. But he grinned because Step One of his plan had anchored him to the cliff face. *Happy days!* He could now think without having to worry.

Then he laughed. He was but swapping one prison for another. But—as Herm used to say when he changed the furniture in Steve's bedroom around—a change is as good as a holiday. His joints loosened and his feet rotated. His toes quested into grooves in the rock and none of it hurt.

He was wimpery about pain now. Tar always said, "Not a problem, anyone with your experiences would be." But anyway, not a problem because the recovery robot disconnected

the most deeply aching of the circuits, leaving Steve with just his skin circuits, for example.

Though even those proved too much. When Herm or Tar touched him, for instance. How could he explain his crying when they meant to be loving? He'd reprogrammed the rest of his circuits as soon as he learned how.

He forced the jockey bracelet up past his elbow to let Tar know he went willingly into the process. *Damn!* He'd dropped his deck! And double damn, it clattered at least once on the rocks going down. *It mustn't be broken!*

It was much too late for crying. The covering over his elongated legs made them so stiff he could stand up like on stilts made of rolled-up cardboard. *Quick!* He grabbed his t-shirt hem with crossed arms. Raised the t-shirt on his spread, lengthening fingers. Laughed to see them pronging through the soft old fabric. What would the tree-disease make of his head?

The head-sock was a rubbery mycelial fabric. Organic. The alien process treated it the same as every other bit of skin. *Dimple, peg and punch.* Well and why would it know organic? The tree-disease was a part of the alien organisms in Zoo Hall, and it was recruiting Earthly substances to expand. In the same way that another of its kind was using Tar as its VR glove, expanding its influence that way.

*That's it exactly!* If only he could still talk with Tar. And how was he going to recharge his batteries? One thing his previous body had been good for. Would it still ...? Maybe he could convert ...? Sun ...? Wind ...?

Sleep mode.