

## 25: Tardi in the Dawn

Tardi's brain hadn't finished with the night's dreaming and it effortlessly took Steve into the plot. "Tardi! Shake a leg! I want to get home before dark. I'm just going for my piss over the cliff," Steve said. Everywhere Herm used to take them, little Steve would want to piss over the cliff. Still dreaming, Tardi waited for Steve's return.

The next thing was for Steve to tell Tardi all about it. How far down, how far out, how the stream separated into golden drops as it fell. Tardi had learned to discuss rates of fall in relation to gravity. In the dream he grinned.

His own childhood thing was always the surf, waves, bubbles arriving on the final sprint of the forward wash. In those days Herm didn't yet hate. Herm was slimmer, wet to the neck, and pushed Tardi forward again and again.

Tardi re-surfed his first ride alone, the teeth on his board painted there with tire blackener. The great monster lay on the seabed, well offshore, breaking the swell and delivering small enough waves for a learner. Then it rose. A great expanse of grey flattened the waves. Little Tardi glancing back at the beach. Herm ran through the wash, eyes popping, staring seaward. Disbelieving.

Tardi woke at the affront of it, the way the monster invaded his dreams of the past. *Leave my father out of it!* He tripped over his feet trying to find up and down. He vaguely recalled opening an eye to the dawn. *Ages ago.* Where was Steve now? He crawled out. "Steve!" His throat was drier than a six-year drought. "Steve?"

He tongued the ComTooth. Silence. Tardi recalled the part of his dream with Steve in it. Steve's intention. He bashed through the scrub to where Steve might've stood at the edge of the little cliff. He looked over. The ground at the base was leaves and sticks and bark.

Damp and white with a latex-look courtesy of the mist that in the middle distance still lay in hollows and gulches. But no Steve. *No, wait a sec.* Was that one of Steve's boots by the rock face? And to the left along the ledge were a couple of trees. One was a crotchety old fig that had been there for a hundred years by the look of its trunk grown into a crease between two rock slabs.

The second was a fig sapling largely hanging over the edge. It had Steve's t-shirt knotted among its branches. Where Steve might've wedged it, if he ... *If he what? If Steve took off his shirt in the cold of the early morning? Doubt that.*

Tardi edged nearer. Supporting himself on the slim trunk with one hand, he reached over and lifted the side seam of the shirt. The two main branches grew through the sleeve holes. The trucker bracelet hung near one sleeve, with one side taken into the wood, the bit of chain with the cube hanging free.

He blinked and involuntarily counted twigs further up. *Ten. Ten twigs for ten fingers?*

*Of course,* he thought on a spurt of sarcasm. *Steve stood here bending branches down so he could thread twigs through his shirtsleeves purely to bamboozle his brother.*

Tardi hung his full weight from one of the branches. It bent only a little. To be honest, he

hardly knew what Steve was capable of these days, with SoHAB reformatting him every tick of the clock. His gaze fell to the cliff face where the sapling's feet grappled the rocks. A wrinkled bracelet, the remains of one of Steve's boots, clasped a sapling ankle.

Usually Tardi had no trouble divining Steve's symbolism, but this? He leaned further. Steve's jeans seemed to have a long fig root growing through one pant leg. The second boot lay beneath, where he saw it earlier.

He stared into the distance, resting his bamboozled mind. The normal sun burnished the familiar ocean. It must be about eight AM. Normally this time he'd be in the surf. How he wished he were goofy footing now, his right foot forward, riding a glassy green water slope to its end in the spent soup near the beach.

Blinking was a huge effort. His eyelids felt leaden. He did not want to have to decide what had happened here.

The monster flopped in his gut. *I called it myself, with the damned water tag.* It slid and flopped, like it was actual and alive in his innards. He retched uselessly. Sweat sprang out all over him despite him being parched. *Please get out of me.*

*Begging? As if that's going to work.* The monster was nosing at his stomach wall. He shuddered. Is it turning into a worm? Some parasite? He gasped. Tearing pain! It felt as if it dug through the organs adjacent, toward his back. He fell, to his knees. Screamed, expecting to taste blood in his mouth. The internal injuries ...

Feeling around his chest with his fingers, he could detect no broken ribs grating against one another. He grimaced, recalling one of Steve's recovery robot's edicts. "A kinesthetic hallucination may affect pain receptors."

The hallucination didn't stop. The monster fish flopped into a place between his back ribs and skin. *That's what it felt like.* There was no change when he explored his back with the back of his hand, despite the thing proceeding to trample down a nest by shrugging and twisting and loosening his skin.

He panted through the pain. *It isn't real. It isn't real.* Stomach acid followed the fish into its cavity, burning and annealing the organs lining its path. "Finished?" he asked, trembling, after a minute's worth of relief.

He screamed. The annealment burned upward between the skin on his back and lung, bone and muscle. A biological periscope-like extension exited beside his neck. If he'd wanted to, he could glance aside to check if it really existed. What he really wanted was to faint and wake up normal.

Tick-tock, tick-tock, said Herm's egg-timer. *Not nearly finished.* A blond little fellow pissed over the cliff.

"That's Steve," Tardi hissed. "And well you know it."

A forest of arms swaying to a beat at a concert was followed by a screen-grab of a virus out of a school project Tardi barely recalled. This was followed by an image of a blue planet with its landmasses in the wrong places.

“Finished?” he said again. He felt stronger. The imagery, although rifled from his memories, told him an important fact. “I don’t believe now that you do know any words apart from the acronym describing the place where you’re being kept. What are you trying to say with all that?” Would his tone of voice be enough, like with a cat or a dog?

The only reply was an image of a vast weather front, a long white cloud stretching across a blue sky, almost upon them.

*Almost upon whom?* he wondered.

The fish sagged on his back like a badly balanced backpack. His skin complained with pins and needles and nervous twitches. *Distract it by distracting myself.* He stood on the little cliff. With the blue sky above and the ocean four kilometres distant. “Steve!” he yelled with a cracked voice. “Steve!”

Not even an echo. The boot at the bottom ... did that mean Steve fell and maybe crawled into the shrubbery? *Unlikely.* But still, he should check. He climbed down. Head-high impenetrable-seeming bush started half a pace out from the cliff. Tardi pushed through here and there. Would Steve really have tackled the prickles and spikes in only his undershorts? *Doubt that, even for a joke.*

Something skittered under his feet.

A snake? He looked down in a hurry. *Steve’s deck!* He had it up, open and waking from its sleep-mode in a moment. The home screen was crowded with new stuff. *Thanks be, it isn’t broken.* Folders galore, each one protected by a variation of the same not-very-difficult-to-crack password. STVSMNM.

STeVe iS My NaMe, a trembling joke from when Steve had to relearn who he was. Ten or so new folders were presented as if for someone other than Steve himself. *Duh, Tar-boy.* Who else but me knows all that Steve has an interest in? One of the files pulsed like a police name-tag, and he made out the title with difficulty.

This-One-First-Tar.

He cracked the password and swiped the icon to open the file. “Remember what you promised” ... Blood roared in his ears as loud as surf. “I’m choosing this,” Steve had typed. “What if I can still see, hear and feel things? The wind. Sunlight. Sun warmth. Even sap flowing through my blood vessels. I won’t know till I try it. Why would I not? How much better than first freezing and then dying?”

Tardi wanted to stop—this couldn’t be happening—but his eyes went on reading. “There will be three proofs if you need them. Dad might. The bracelet. The ComTooth. The add-ons. Please don’t let SoHAB chisel out my add-ons.”

That idea ... SoHAB chiseling ... Tardi fell to the ground and everything went black.

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He revived tangled in vegetation. Flat on his back on the ground, he discovered by feel. Stones, sand, broken twigs and crushed leaves were underneath him. *No fish in me now.* The sun burgeoned brightly overhead. His eyeballs felt cooked and seemed too large for their

sockets.

He rolled onto his front and wept on the shadowed dirt until he could close his eyes to rest them, meanwhile recalling what went before. How could he go home with that explanation? He was going to have to spin a different reality. Funny that this time his tears didn't call the monster.

What will I tell Herm? I found Steve's deck and Steve's clothes scattered about. I didn't bring the clothes in case Steve back-tracked to fetch them. But I brought his deck, too precious to leave lying around if he doesn't back-track. *Herm will go ballistic.*

Tardi slid Steve's deck onto his arm next to his own. His eyes were still too sore to open. More tears would be good. The monster was still not present. Maybe Steve got himself involved in an online alternate-reality quest? Maybe walking home in his undershorts was one of the requirements?

Maybe this is the moment that SoHAB warned us about, when we're supposed to let Steve suffer the consequences of his decisions? The doctors at SoHAB were always at Herm and Tardi for not letting Steve grow up. "Easy for them to say," Herm said and would say again.

Could Steve's brother Tar believe it? Or rather, could he believe it convincingly? He'd have to start now to get into the habit, and never think of what he suspected. He'd have to allow his little brother to wander home in his undershorts, by the route they came.

Himself, he'd go home via Hottentot Mullum. He'd call in at the *Blarion* to beg for some transport. Then, if Steve didn't make it ... *Duh, Tar-boy. Steve will not make it.* You'll tell lies or the truth depending on the old man's state of mind. Or you can jump him, tie him up and bring him out to Steve's tree to talk him through the three proofs Steve left him.

He shuddered getting to his feet. He shuddered taking his first steps and pushing through the shrubbery. He shuddered picturing his arrival home. His father. One thought led to another. His father. His mother. Ace. Away from there, Tamer. Retreat for now, retreat for the getting home part.

He pictured the whole long way home, up hill down dale, walking it while he wondered how Steve felt, if he felt, why he really did it. How he, Tardi, could've improved Steve's life. What had he forgotten to do? What should he have thought to do?

Away from there, Tamer, he thought whenever his thoughts wandered too near to the black cistern. He wondered where the monster was. Was its attention on Ace? On the woman at the Reefarium? Or on the others of its conglomerate?

He walked blindly back to the crossroads and then down the flank of the hill. The valley glinted here and there with the tide creeping in over the mangrove flats. No red was a blessing. Ditto the slopping sliding horror in his gut. He strode down the final slopes and hurried ankle-deep through the lukewarm tide over the road.

He was not harassed the whole way. Staying in the moment worked. Steve's whereabouts faded. A ride would've been good but there was no traffic of any kind. Might it be Sunday? No idea. The first hoveroles were remarkably bitchy vehicles. The ground they travelled over had to be smoother than the proverbial mirror.

Town fathers everywhere still chewed their lids over the fact that roads had to be maintained even when most vehicles travelled at least thirty centimeters above the road surface, with only the hoverole skirts sometimes dragging over the ground.

The upside for him was that the smooth macadam underlay, scoured free from mud and gravel twice a day, made for a much easier wade. The road that he followed was knee-deep at the moment and speared straight at the sodden heart of the old low-lying parts of the town.. The invading sea, by way of the river—tidal at this point—had drowned the centre of town.

Residents shifted to the Hottentot and Tallow-wood estates in the south, or to Convent Hill in the north. Most low-lying roads had been transformed into boat-ways. Tardi waded between lines of old road markers.