

33: Rowan in the Night

Rowan had just about had enough. *What was it with Tardi?* She shuddered thinking about the changes in his body. What if they *were* real, as he kept saying?

She'd been so happy back at the Gondola. Feeling so four-leaf clover lucky. She had just accepted that the communications outage had thrown normal life into disarray when Tardi turned up. Out of the blue. Like he actually homed in on her.

A little fairy story that lasted for all of the ten seconds or whatever it took for them to get to the Saddle. He was like he'd rather toss their start-again friendship to the wind. "Why *not* throw ourselves onto the hospitality of the Jasons at Uncle Tom's?" she said. Usually he wilted after she said things a few times.

"Tomorrow morning I'd rather break off my roots without an audience," he said. "Though you're welcome, of course."

There. He still blatantly denied reality. "So that's a no?" She sounded upset even to herself. He was supposed to ask her her opinion which was how *friends* decided things.

He laughed. "Did you even hear me? What I said?"

"The sun is already practically touching the ranges." She made herself sound plaintive.

"Yeah. You're right. We should get going."

She was hopeful for a second that he was capitulating but he spoiled it the very next second.

"That mist forming under the trees is a worry," he said.

She glanced over at him. He was poker-faced under his tree wig. He surely had to be joking? "You're worried you'll transform completely if it touches you?" she said as sarcastically as she could manage.

"Worried it'll get you."

I don't have any itchless ticks on me, she was going to say but he'd already walked away. She almost took an inadvertent step back from the shock. But, with his back to her, its effect would be wasted. All she could do was follow him.

He walked to where a laser boom gate stopped vehicular access to the Saddle Light Industry Complex. He lay down and rolled under the tinted beam of the gate.

What was in there but a bunch of factories? She so didn't see how any of them would be useful to either him or her, and debated whether to follow him. Still, if he was actually trying to teach her a lesson, she'd need to turn that intention back on itself.

She glanced at the sun. More than halfway behind the ranges, its rays sparkled unnaturally brightly through the mist gathering here and there. She hurried to catch up. If there really was something weird in the mist, she wasn't going to be caught out in it by herself. She rolled under the gate's beam.

Ee-oh! Ee-oh!

She startled badly at the live-minded gatekeeper's outcry, with her elbow slipping further into the alarm zone.

"Someone at the gate!" shouted the gatekeeper. "Business hours are Monday to Friday, 8 AM to 3 PM."

Tardi chuckled. "I've been caught more than a few times here."

Oh, how she hated him for a minute.

"Never mind," he said. "We're going to a place that doesn't have a gatekeeper of its own."

Next gate they passed, Rowan rattled the netting. No noise meant no electronic gatekeeper. She realized with a sudden hurting insight that only when Tardi was his placid biddable self could she be her normal decisive self. Well, she definitely would just have to knuckle him down again.

The next gate she rattled, the keeper went berserk. *Eeeoooh! Eeeoooh!* "An intruder at the fence. Guards, take that individual's DNA!"

"I'm just helping," she said sweetly at Tardi's irritation. "Testing it." She was talking to his back again by the end, but that was all right, she'd got to him. *Uh oh. Better keep an eye on the action.*

Tardi swarmed up the left-hand panel of a pair of steel-pipe and cyclone wire gates fastened together with a chain and an ancient padlock. People still used padlocks? No alarms went off. He jumped down inside the yard. "Your turn."

She hesitated. Not accidentally. She read the divided sign on the gates. "Recycled Hoverole Parts. Do you know these people?"

"They're on my delivery schedule," he said.

She reached for the top of the gate with both hands, wedged a foot against the wire and clambered up. Then down, on the other side. The dog was already there however he'd done it. She distinctly heard a crackle when he nosed into Tardi's hand. "Why does he keep doing that?" she said.

"He's earthing me. Keeping me human."

As if that told her anything. "You're not being the person I fell in love with," she said. It was like he no longer recognized plaintive. He ignored her again and made for the shed at the back of the yard.

He slid aside one of the two hangar-type panels. "Mind out. The door's coming," he said.

She tried to think up another snide comment. Him glancing at the setting sun silenced her. She let him precede her inside. He seemed to know the place quite well.

The last of the sunlight gave him enough light to wave his hand at a bank of switches. An array of LEDs hanging from the central post holding the roof up sprang into life. *Recycled Hoverole Parts* considered him one of its staff?

He spread his arms to indicate the size of the workshop. "Our shelter and plenty of it."

She looked around. Various hoveroles in various stages of break-up lay about on a bare concrete floor. The far reaches of the workshop were lightless and therefore shadowed. She could just make out workbenches along the corrugated metal walls. A lot of tools laying about on it. A corrugated roof above.

Tardi touched her. Only on the elbow, but she flinched before she could control herself.

"Sorry," he said. "Just telling you, there's the office and lunchroom." He indicated the freight container in the left corner nearest the doors.

She walked ahead of him. An old computer mainframe and an excruciatingly old monitor were, apparently, the office. A picnic table and a couple of benches graced the center space. A hot-and-cold food and drink dispenser sat against the back wall.

"The only thing operating will be that air freshening unit chugging above the food dispenser," he said.

"A drink would be good," she said, basking in the airflow. "I still don't understand why you refused Uncle Tom's for dinner?"

"If you ask the machine nicely, it'll probably microwave you a pie from its freezer compartment," Tardi said.

That made *three* times that he'd ignored her. The dispenser required tokens, of course. And the token machine beside it required credits. Which required the still offline ComLink. "I can't access my credits."

"Yeah, sorry. I forgot. Umm. Too bad the token-machine is as secure as a safe." He brightened. "I can get you a cold pie and a cold drink?"

"By magic, I suppose." She was starting to feel disgruntled. Hunger did that to her. They should've been at Uncle Tom's, debriefing. Laughing about all this. What she hated was that it felt like he was doing it out of spite. *How am I supposed to react to that?*

Tardi kicked the dispenser twice and very fast. Two cans of soft drink rolled into the slot at the bottom. He kicked the machine again, using a different pattern. She was past caring. A frozen pie plopped into the chute. Ever, ha-ha, the gentleman, he handed her one of the cans and the pie.

"Thank you. Interesting."

"What is?" he said.

"You in this mode." She watched him breathe deep before starting to explain himself. She almost laughed that he might think *her* recalcitrant. She quite often had to breathe deep to control herself when she had to deal with stupid people. How the tables turned themselves.

"We are in survival mode," he said evenly. "And plus, I know this machine quite well."

"And that's all you're going to say on the subject?"

He stared and that was all.

“You’re a whole bunch of fun today.”

“It’s been a long one for me. Eat, drink and pick a hoverole cabin to sleep in.”

“Oh, you think you can just dismiss me?” she said.

“I’ll be sleeping on the floor here.” He dropped to his knees then butt. “The concrete will stop my roots growing into the ground.”

“You. Are. Unreal.”

He took two decks from his arm and set them on the floor beside him.

“Why two decks?” she said.

“This is mine. This is Steve’s. You’ll remember I told you he was transformed?”

She shook her head longer than she needed to say no. She just didn’t want to hear it again.

“I’m so totally tired of this nonsense,” she said to maximize her impact.

And then she almost fountained with fury because he shrugged, lay back and closed his eyes.

She had to walk around a good while to process her anger. Then it became that she walked around checking out her accommodation possibilities. Five or six hoverole cabins lay about. She chose one which sat level and had luxurious padded fold-out bench seats. There was even a crocheted knee rug on the rear shelf.

She set the drink on the hoverole floor next to the bench, and took off Sef’s precious newshound shirt, making herself ten times more comfortable. Ordinary shirt back on. Drink. Eat. A cold pie? *Yech*. Drink. Check her deck’s status.

She’d definitely want a shot of Tardi later in the night, when he was asleep and with no way to act the fool. *Or should I say, to act the tree? Ha-ha-ha.* Later, when all this idiocy was finished with, she’d have a great little reminder of his fantasies for whenever he thought he might escape her.

She sneered and it felt good. The sight of that Threen-person throwing herself at Tardi back at the beach was Rowan’s wake-up call, no mistake. *Damn, my deck memory is full.*

She peered through the cabin toward Tardi. The way he sprawled, so relaxed, damn him, he looked to be well on the way to dreamland. She’d give him another half an hour to get into his deep sleep.

Obviously, she’d need to borrow his deck. She chuckled, not letting the sound escape her throat. *Make that Steve’s deck.* It’d make a lot more sense for Steve to have a pic of his brother.

Rowan tiptoed barefoot toward Tardi and lifted Steve’s deck from where Tardi had set it by an island workbench. She tiptoed to the back of the hoverole where she took the rug to tent over herself and the deck, needing none of the deck’s light to escape, but needing to know Steve’s settings. It wouldn’t do, for instance, if Steve used start-up tones.

She tapped her fingernail on where start-up was on her own deck. *Good guess.* Now the utilities. *Tap. Tap. There, sound gone.* Next, find the cam function.

She couldn't find the cam function? *Impossible.* She cycled through each of Steve's directories. His passwords were the latest in idiocy. She giggled and changed them. Now, where had Steve hidden his camera function?

There. Finally found it. In the directory named SoHAB? She remembered that that was the place where Steve had been put back together. Weird place to keep a cam function, but then SoHAB hadn't done as good a job as they might've coz Steve was a pretty weird kid.

Would the cam function be working? Yes, said the test shot of her knee. She pushed the rug aside and rose silently to check the scene. Tardi slept on his back, in a sprawl. His artfully interwoven hair splayed in a swirl around his head. She almost laughed out loud as she pressed the switch.

Snick.

Oops. She'd forgotten the flash. It brightened every corner of the shed and she felt like a startled rabbit. Tardi rolled over onto his side. But phew, his eyes stayed closed.

She unfroze herself and went to see about hiding her scoop somewhere on Steve's deck. She cycled out of the cam function with a finger-touch, and searched for Steve's family snaps.

A pale man with a flick of platinum-white hair, in his forties she would guess, stepped into the frame.

Now she did startle. *Fright of my life!* Like he'd been waiting.

He mouthed words, which also, helpfully, bannered along the bottom of the screen. "My name is Whit Smith. I'm the head of the EMBers and we thank you for your auto-send, drawing our attention to this plague carrier."

"Auto-send?" she whispered, both shocked and lividly angry at the invasion of privacy. She clenched her jaws. *Please, please don't let my comment also be auto-sent.*

"You seem to be as concerned as we are of the possibility of this individual contaminating our genetic heritage. He's still a young man. Think how much of his DNA, by way of his wastes, has the potential to infect our natural world?"

Huge sigh of relief. Then she raged, albeit silently. The EMBers were so stupid they couldn't tell real from fantasy? They knee-jerked on hearsay and rumor?

The banner continued. "We encourage you to fill out the form below, letting us know where the plague carrier was sighted, when, and under what circumstances. Do it now and we'll have him tidied away by sunrise, leaving the world a much safer place for our natural life forms."

She grimaced. She'd known that SoHAB kept a close watch on their ex-patients. Tardi often mentioned Steve's regular software add-ons. But how was it that the EMBers were allowed access? The form asked for detailed directions for how to get there.

I thank my lucky stars that automatic geographical co-ordinates are still not a thing. Something lost, not forgotten, but definitely not needed by me at this moment. Yeah, okay, often regretted by me. But definitely not today.

“Be sure also to leave your forefinger print in the space provided. We know you are not the licensed user of this unit but want to make sure the reward goes to the right person.”

As if I'm stupid. The character smiled as if he knew her personally and faded away, leaving the form for her to complete. *Nice show of teeth, buster. I don't think.* She fingertipped the ESC icon to get away from the form and then the CLOSE icon to shut the deck down.

All she'd wanted was a joke picture. She'd swear to that if, when they picked up Tardi, they got her as well. How dare they trick people like this! She let herself be tremblingly angry. The EMBers were meant to be ethical!

She had to do deep breathing for a good while to contain herself, to be silent, before she could even think about putting the deck back. *Ha-ha*, she thought weakly as she bent to deposit the deck on the floor near Tardi, *the tables are turned again.*

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She tossed and turned, trying to get to sleep. She was too angry and might as well spend the time thinking up a way to forestall the precious Earth Maintenance and Biohazard Re-engineers, or whatever their label was.

Pity that she'd never taken much interest in them, begging their pardons. She'd never blogged their press releases or promotions. Sef, her boss, reckoned the EMBers would kill off Christmas if they could, the way Christmas impinged on the environment.

And Sef said that the only reason the EMBers were bigger than their boots was because their sponsors, the Green Gaians, were the government, and had been since the alien hit its orbit around Earth causing havoc to anything electronic. *I wouldn't know. All of it way before my time.*

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She must have slept. A vague dawn fought the dimmed lights they'd left on. The windows were thick with dust and spider webs. Was it worth it to check Tardi? *Might as well.* She tiptoed toward where he still slept.

He'd rolled over again. Brown threads from his heels, from his elbows and from his toes quested every which way over the floor.

Her heart lurched. They looked like roots. *If only I'd believed him.* She closed her eyes. Opened them. Still the roots. She couldn't stop her mouth trembling. She'd despise herself for life if the EMBers picked up Tardi on her say-so. *How can I stop them?*