

26: What Am I?

Tardi's eyes snapped open. *Nothing to see. Low hanging cloud? Fog. Underneath me?* Wet to his skin and his tree bark. Feeling around with his hands, he thought water might have dammed up against his upstream side. A rivulet seeped slowly from under him on the downstream side.

Vaguely, through the fog, he discerned black canopies hanging over him. Tall sedges on a high bank clumped against a sky glowing with ... Maybe the moon rising?

A blunt thing—what was that?—snorted and pushed into his side.

When he did nothing, it growled and pushed harder. He turned to see it. A pair of silver eyes swayed by his side. A silver animal came into existence hair by silvery hair. Like a video on fast-forward of the creature being sketched, the image resulted in a live, glowing dog. *Where have I heard about silver dogs?*

“Wroof,” said the dog. It pushed against him with its snout.

He tried to roll over in that direction. *No go.* He peered as best as he could down his sides. Hundreds of roots sprouted out of him like he was a Gulliver?

The silver dog growled as if saying, “Put a bit of effort into it, mate.”

Where it nosed him on his bare human skin, human sensation zinged with a vengeance. *Is the fricking animal nipping me?*

“Ow! All right! I’m trying!” He rolled away from the animal and all along that side of him, the roots holding him down snapped off. *Right.* He rolled the other way and made short work of the rest. He sat up easily as it appeared that his feet were cemented to the rock.

Oh no! His heel bones had grown centimeter-thick roots that bored down into the gap between two slabs in the creek bed. *What am I?* He sweated from his human skin, resulting in patches of wet cold. Where he had tree-bark, there was only a neutral temperature.

A part of him tried to do the cool and flippant stuff. *What did you think would happen but weird stuff with an alien in you?*

But this, this was weirder still. He listed all the people he was, first muttering them then throwing the names out into the silence. “I’m *Tardi Mack* to the world. I am *Tarboy* to myself. I am *Tar*, brother to Steve. I am *Hermie Mack’s* older son. I am my *Stormy uncle’s* nephew.”

The dog pulled back the corners of its mouth.

“You’re agreeing?” He didn’t know enough about dogs to know whether the animal might mean something with its smile.

He wrenched his feet loose and rose. His wet clothes flapped around his wood-trimmed body. *Not a nightmare I am going to be able to wake up from but good that I can still think. It’s got to prove something. That I’m still human? I hope.*

The silver dog pointed his snout to the west.

“Go there?” Tardi said. Damned if his feet weren’t having a go at growing into the rock! *Slop, slop*. “Best foot forward.”

The dog thrust his wet nose into Tardi’s palm. *Spark and frizzle*.

“Call you Silver?” He held out his hand for the dog to smell his intentions.

The dog nosed agreement into his palm.

No spark or tingle that time, just a fleeting, wet touch. It was an *actual* dog at the same time that it was an alien dog?

Silver sprinted up the creek bank.

Tardi followed, also on all fours. At the top, he stumbled getting himself upright. *So, better start planning the steps you want to take. Relearn the art of walking*.

They came to a footpath behind some homes. The way the dog’s ears moved, always seeming to want to catch any far-away sound coming from the forested ranges far away, had Tardi directing his hearing towards the ranges too. Because, no sounds near at hand. Nor house or hoverole lights. He saw only yellow streetlights pin-pricking the dark hill.

Silver stopped at a metre-and-a-half-high gate, an extension of a paling fence, and pushed his nose suggestively at the gate.

“Something we got to do here?” Tardi said. Recalling how to operate the latch, he pushed the gate open and swayed into the yard.

Four paperbarks stood in the middle of a grassy area beside the concrete path to the house.

What am I doing here, I should be up with Steve? I can’t do a thing. I am so sorry. Why me in this state? You know why. Vaccinated. A partial ...

“Wroof!” Silver stood in an open door at the top of a set of stairs.

The dog barked to get his attention? *You’ve got it, dog*. Tardi climbed the steps, closely supervising his numbed feet. The broken-off toes bled with a reddish sap. He entered the house.

Silver waited in the middle of a timber-floored room—a kitchen—and stared at him.

“Wroof,” he said.

Tardi looked aroundt for a clue as to what Silver meant him to be doing.

Helplessness flooded him. He shrugged. “I don’t know.” Then he saw the decks. Remembered them. “Mine. Mine and Steve’s.” He stretched the elastics with his right hand, and helping it with his teeth, guided the decks around his woody left arm. He set them one behind the other, snug over the striated bark. He checked Silver, to not start thinking about Steve again.

The dog had started to fade. By degrees, Tardi could see that much. The lightest silvery hairs were already gone.

Now the medium silver hairs faded.

Now Tardi could see the varnished kitchen floor through the dog.

Now Silver's darkest hairs went.

Now he could see only Silver's happy, half-open mouth outlined in black skin, his pink tongue and his silver eyes.

Now only his eyes.

Now nothing.

He stared at the place where the dog had disappeared. *I will not scream.* He swallowed down a gob of fear. *Need something else to think about.* Like the fact that his toe roots grew fast enough that he could see them getting longer? Might heat by friction stop them? He dragged his toes, left foot, right foot, along the floor. To and fro.

His jaw dropped when he looked at the guy reflected at him from the floor to ceiling windows. He swung ... no, blatted ... his dreads around his ears and the guy's dreads blatted around his head. Blatted was the sound they made, a kind of wet, slapping sound due to them being made over into casuarina tree leaves. *If I have that right.* The guy's clothes were shredded like his were shredded.

Can maybe do something about that, since the largest of the paperbark trees down on the volleyball court probably will have no more use for clothes? He wandered through the house. Main bedroom. Wardrobe. Sef's camping getup. *Is this also who I am, a natural-born salvager?* The jeans were too narrow in the legs to get his tree feet through. The cargo shorts would be good. Not the boots, because he couldn't get his new feet into them.

The bathroom. Its lights brightened for his all-over inspection in front of the mirror. He stared at the patch of bark on his left shoulder, too big to ignore. Several more down his left side. He slathered everything unnatural with Mrs Sef's sorbolene cream and covered up with a sweatshirt.

His hair he knew already was a sight to be seen. Dusky green with a bronze overtone, the texture and each strand the thickness of number four spaghetti. Where a normal hair used to pull out with only a slight sting, a single strand of this new stuff resisted so much it lifted his scalp. Pulling a handful at the time hurt worse than a toothache and all he was left with in his hand was a bunch of broken-off bits.

His freckles were gone but no way would he be able to shave. His gorge rose when he took a really close look at the ghastly green nubbing along his jaws, and grimaced strenuously to chase away the nausea. Halleluia, the taps still gave water.

So, stay positive! The ComTooth. He still had the ComTooth in his mouth. Out of pure habit he subvocalized a brothering at Steve. "Tō teina?"

The link buzzed and that was all. Maybe Steve's transmitter had ended up on the outside of Steve's tree and the wind was in his ears the same way the sea was always in Tardi's. *I'll check that one day.* In the meantime, he filled his pockets from the bowl of muesli bars and breakfast snacks on the kitchen counter.

"Wroof." The dog reappeared, a reversed sequence to how it disappeared. With its tail wagging, it led Tardi slowly down the trippy steps and into the night. No question but that he would follow the dog.

The monster had helped him help himself where the malady was concerned, but Silver seemed to offer friendship. Though Tardi was pretty sure the zapping wasn't what a normal dog could do. *Duh, Tar-boy.* Though normal dogs did sometimes turn up and attach themselves to people, as this one had. "Please don't disappear on me again, Silver."

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But the dog had disappeared again by the time Tardi reached the track at the far edge of the Hottentot suburb. This time his heart didn't hammer quite so hard. He swabbed his dry mouth with new spit.

And dammit, the tree bug bulged past its old boundaries while his attention was on his fears. He swiped his hands down his left side, breaking off the thin roots trying to grow outward. *No more fear!*

The path snaked into the open forest, what he could see of it in the interrupted moonlight. "What am I meant to do?"

No answer, because no dog.

A backpack lay abandoned a few metres in. The backstraps looped around a coachwood sapling.

"Mate," Tardi said. "I'm so sorry." He felt foolish saying it as he still didn't know whether any of the new trees could understand or even hear. *Oh Steve, oh Steve. Don't go there. Not helpful.* He briefly checked inside the pack, all kinds of food, and it had a wok tied to the front.

More interesting at the moment was the blue tarp tied on top, which was just the thing for stopping his roots growing into the ground. "Would you mind if I borrowed your pack?" He'd have to take the lack of response as a no-I-don't-mind.

He unbuckled the straps from around the tree's trunk, unrolled the tarp and sat on it cross-legged. Waiting for the silver dog, he picked at the skin along his jaws where tree needles attempted to push through the hair follicles. Then he winkled nubbins of tree flesh off the edges of his feet where they wanted to root.

Might be that the only thing that could stop the growth was him on the go? Maybe he could walk himself free of the disease? He rose, rolled up the tarp and swung the pack onto his back. The trail took him west, nearer the dark cliffs of Koonyum Range, then split.

I don't know which way to go. He threw the pack down. Both his heel bones bulged. *I should get the tarp out.*

“Wroof! Wroof! Wroof!” The dog appeared out of nowhere and nosed Tardi’s hands, stopping him from rechecking his feet.

“I need boots, you hear?” Tardi said, shrugging back into the backpack.

Silver yipped.

Tardi laughed. What did dogs know about boots? He plunged into the bush after the dog, between the two branches of track. The way was darker than the night. He tripped. Fell. Got up. Now and then Silver glowed bright enough that Tardi could see where to put his feet. Not a natural dog thing, that aspect. He narrowed his thoughts to the trail.

One good thing, the wear and tear of their progress trimmed his toes back to their human length. Then they started hurting, which was another welcome thing since, he reasoned, hurting toes were human toes. Maybe finally he’d just have his strange hair to worry about.

They angled west, climbing all the time. Where Silver slunk under the underbrush, Tardi had to crash through a growth of whippy saplings. Up and up they went. Making, he suspected, toward where the ridge joined the ranges.

He followed Silver dogging a path through the rubble broken off from the cliffs through all the ages of their existence. Twenty-three million years, he might’ve learned at school. *The dog and I are ants in time and space.*

As the cliff receded to the left, Silver curved their way to the right and downhill into forest which then thinned to clumps of trees with tall pasture grasses growing between them. The slope still quite steep.

“Aaaahhh!” Someone further down the hill screamed.

Thud!

Tardi just about pricked up his ears, if that was possible. Because that sounded like thump of a club connecting with flesh-and-blood. Then a child cried, and such a mess of snarling and baying and barking burst out, that he knew exactly what Silver had brought him to.

He let the pack slide from his shoulders while he jack-rabbed a mile-a-minute down the hill to help save them down there from the notorious baskervilles, a pack of cyborg hounds meant to be kept inside their enclosure up the valley.