

30: Shad, a Stormy

Gobsmacked, Tardi watched the hover-ute drive away. *What? Del didn't offer me a lift or even hint that I might need to ask for one? She just drove off?*

The tarp shaded into purple while he folded it, and when he looked up to check his reality, the sky was red and the cliffs a deep orange. Like the light of the red world was overlaid onto his green and blue world.

Maybe Del left in a hurry due to the weird colours. She certainly would've doubted her sanity seeing an angry red sun rising from behind the ranges. *But—if she did see all of this, doesn't that mean she's infected too?*

He felt tension draining out of him. He drew a couple of *deep, restful* breaths. *Huh?* He was calm even while all these wild thoughts rocketed around in his head? His facial muscles arranged a *smile* on his face. *What's that about?*

Like my face or my body isn't my own.

The monster is telling me I should smile? And does the damned monster control my body now? He frowned. Pressed his lips together. Kept smoothing and folding the tarp. "Here, at this time of the day, the Earth's sun is above the ocean," he said, willing the monstrous entity to leave him.

Peering from under his casuarina dreads, he saw the sky and cliffs fade to a bland buff colour, and Argie become a maroon dog sporting a luminescent red tongue and silver irises set in scarlet eyeballs.

Meaning the red was back again, and with a vengeance. He blinked and blinked. What had he just learned? *That the monster now targets my emotions?*

Test that.

Argie is nearly my only friend. He colored the thought with enough sadness that he might cry if he went too far along that road.

Right, Tar-boy. Probably overdid it because not a twitch anywhere. Though the monster does not do irony. And anyway, it wasn't in him any longer. And he knew that because ...? Because it left behind an emptiness, in his mind and his body. In other words, it had freely accessed his visual, auditory and kinesthetic memories and now it accessed his emotions. *Slop, slop.*

What else did he know about the monster? *That it comes and goes at will, and while it isn't with me, I should think up a plan. Right. Right. A plan.* What did he know about the silver dogs? Two things he could do to find out.

He could read Steve's file and he could go and see Zachie Cortin, Rowan's uncle, the person who knew more about Procyon Products than anyone. *Might as well go check up on the old man while I'm at it. A plan, I have a plan.* He tied the tarp to the top of the pack and shrugged into the pack's strapping. "I'm dropping down to the valley," he said to test the dog and maybe the monster for their understanding of plain words.

Instead of following Tardi as a well-trained dog might, Argie slipped past him and preceded him along the track. He leapt down the bank and stood in the road staring toward the valley. Obviously understanding very well.

But I'm being a dumbcluck. According to any media I ever read, the Moogerah Monster lived in the Moogerah Swamp for fifty years before it was brought to Zoo Hall. It had to have dozens of people already in its power. And would've learned plenty.

"Looks like I'll assume a good grasp of the prevailing language from here on in." The dog's laughing expression clinched his suspicions.

Argie stared at Tardi as though willing *him* to understand. Which reminded him of the way Steve behaved when something that was about to happen was particularly weird. "I want that to be a coincidence, you hear? Not something you worked out about me."

As if that doesn't sound like a mental problem. Slop, slop.

A one-word beat started in his mind. *Trust. Trust. Trust.*

Trust? He was required to trust Argie the way he trusted Steve?

Trust. Trust. Trust.

And do what? Rephrase the words he'd said earlier to confirm them? *I don't think so.* He set off down the road.

The sky turned blue. In the distance, the ocean became its more-normal blue-green.

What did I do? A sequence of imagery flashed through his mind: Tardi following Argie down the bank. The dog waiting in the road. Tardi following Argie as Argie walked down the road.

Ha-ha-ha. The monster had misread his internal cues. *That is good to know.*

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The gravel road gave way to a smoothly grassed hover-road. Fraser's Road, said a sign pointing in the direction he'd come from. He skim-glanced past a black bean tree growing through a deck chair.

Beside him, Argie shimmered into invisibility. Could that be because Lilly's Silver was in active mode, he wondered. *Because, also, the monster is not present in me.* He woke Steve's deck and logged into Steve's *Silver Dogs* folder.

His innards griped when he read about the dogs' origin. About ten years previous, a newborn male pup of a canine species wriggled from between the bars of the Moogerah Monsters' cage. Nobody suggested putting it back. Procyon Products added it to SoHAB's dingo pack. Nature took its course and a litter of silver dingo pups eventuated.

Tardi studied Argie, visible again and walking sedately beside him. "I'm keeping my mind open about your fur. Cyber, gene-enhanced, or natural. That on/off thing you and Silver do is also quite a trick."

He tried to not see a guy stilted on aerial roots over and through his vehicle forever washing his hoverole. *The mist came all the way up here?*

“Zap me?” he said. *Interesting*. When Argie *did* nose Tardi’s hand, there was this exchange of whatever it was, and Argie glowed a little brighter. This only threw up more questions. Didn’t anyone wonder who put the pup into the cage in the first place? Or did SoHAB’s scientists believe the pup was part of the monstrous conglomerate?

He accessed another of the folders on Steve’s deck—Virtual Alien Life form. He read Steve’s commentary. Steve thought Tardi was a virtual glove? *Slop, slop*. He was standing still too long and too often.

He took the lane with the dry-stone stairs to the top of the ridge out-flung from the ranges and encrusted with suburbia from top to bottom. If they walked along the top, they might miss most of the mist-caused horrors. Argie followed him without hesitation.

Reading while he walked, Tardi dropped back down into the VAL file. According to Steve, the monster in SoHAB was not just an alien, but a bunch of Earth and alien life forms known among the scientists as the Huddle. One of the Earth creatures in the Huddle, Steve said in bolded letters, was dog-like.

Before SoHAB knew what to feed them, the Huddle ate all and any male animals that came within reach. Nobody found out yet why. Male security guards, a male scientist, male cage cleaners, male guard dogs. They left females alone, though in Moogerah Valley, where the Huddle had lived for fifty plus or minus years, female animals and humans both were also taken.

Steve’s source was Claire King? *Where and or when have I heard of her?* Skimming the file now, he could see that PP had purpose-bred a litter of monster-augmented silver dingoes and sent them into the Byron Bay hinterland to refine the dogs’ return-to-base instincts.

“They sure ain’t had no success there yet,” he said. Argie looked at him. Had Argie noted the sound of his voice, like any dog would? Or had Argie, with the help of the monster, noted his thoughts? Was Argie a virtual glove too? “Anyway, I don’t believe that is PP’s whole purpose in bringing you down here. They could have trained you anywhere at all.”

He put Steve’s deck to sleep. Argie faded as they neared the bridge over Mullum Creek. Tardi smelled smoke and saw a little fire in the patch of ground beside the bridge. A Stormy slipped from among the bamboo stems lining the creek there and hunkered down to tend the flames. He laid a skinned and gutted rat-sized creature onto an umbrella tree leaf beside him. Tardi angled in.

The Stormy wore the usual outfit. Blue-brown shirt. Narrow denims. Boots. Leather vest festooned with snakeskins. Brown hair, tied back. “You see me, Tamer?” he said.

“You’re wearing a vest pinned with shed snakeskins?” Tardi said.

“That’s good, Tamer. I don’t see you as you were.”

“A touch of the tree bug.” Tardi slipped the tarp from the pack, opened a couple of folds and

sat cross-legged down onto it. "What can I call you?"

"Shad, for family."

"Thank you," Tardi said, meaning more than just politeness.

Shad's smile reached his eyes. "Some of us has difficulty seeing their nearest and dearest. They tell us we are shadows. After a while they work out who we are."

Tardi recalled his own recent problems. "You've got more people like me, changed partially? They'll have had prior contact, making it like they were vaccinated."

Shad nodded. He cut any further talk on that topic to a standstill with a short decisive hand gesture.

A Stormy sign? "You were going to say?" Tardi encouraged him.

Shad shook his head. "It were a bound promise, Tamer." Then he smiled. "We'll get together one day and compare taming tricks."

"I'd like that," Tardi said. "Seeing as you'll probably see Ace soonish, there's things happening now with me that I would like you to tell him."

Shad nodded and Tardi continued. "That I'm going to speak wishy-washy like, and with wandering words. To keep the main player obfuscated, if you get my spiel."

Shad laughed. "You know spiel? You talking like a Stormy, we'll be good."

"What I realized," Tardi said. "The player has been talked at for fifty years plus and knows a babel of words. Meaning, the party understands most spoken lingos of the land without too much grief. Probably even this one."

"Go on."

"When I'm alone, I don't get into discussioning much. So when I do tickle my vocal chords, and the dog is listening, understanding is being signaled. When I merely think, there's misinterpretation."

"You recommending that them of us blessed with the essence keep silent or maunder on in the old tongue?" Shad said.

Tardi was aghast. "There's more than just Ace?"

"We believe the way to deal is thinning it down and spreading it far," Shad said. "Some among them others think to keep it pure and use it for who knows what."

Shad's *others* referring to the non-Stormy population, Tardi thought. And the *some* to corporations like Procyon Products.

"You don't carry a snake?" Tardi said.

"I'm in training for road-crewing without them. But also haven't got one because I need to

stay good with all of them. Because I wrangle the critters that get left in the snake-pit when the troops are at home or have to go without.” Shad kept his stare glued to the place where Argie sat invisibly. “And that there is?”

“The dog,” Tardi said. “Silver-white when he’s visible. I call him Argie. The other one that I know of is called Silver.”

“They are invested with the essence?”

“I believe so,” Tardi said. “To my mind they have three states of being: silver, grey, and invisible depending on the levels of energy provided.”

He didn’t tell Shad his suspicions about Steve’s virtual-glove idea. “Good to have around for the likes of me as the dog earthes me when he is silver, taking excess electricity from me. Why I have extra electricity, I have no clue. My brother thought there were more of these dogs about.”

“We’ll keep a look out,” Shad said.

Tardi sneezed. He wrinkled his nose against the sharp smell of the smoke.

“Yeah,” Shad said. “I’m cindering this overgrown grass.” He thumbed at the bamboo behind him. “I hesitate to cook over it. But what else to burn?”

“The new ones haven’t been trees long enough to have bits falling off them,” Tardi said.

“You’re reminding me that dead wood is still okay.”

“And plus—” Tardi shuddered, remembering. “A tree up on Fraser’s Road gave me his arm to beat on some wild dogs. What I mean is that the new trees might still have their humanity. I put his arm by him afterward, but didn’t check this morning what might’ve happened to it, you know?” He hadn’t wanted to see the tree ineptly hold up its canopy with only one arm.

Shad stared dark-eyed, thoughts unfathomable. “There’s a few of ours didn’t come home from the roadside. You know where I mean?”

“Yelgun?” Getting Shad’s nod, Tardi said, “The long grass in the dip. Them waiting. I used to give them rides. You hear the story of that adder free in the upholstery?”

Shad laughed. Sobered. “Remember where we used to live?”

The nightmare flipped into Tardi’s mind. Diving for Steve in the cold dark water, among the eels. He felt sick. “The black cistern?”

His resemblance to Ace when Shad nodded got Tardi over the abyss.

“It’s misty down there,” Shad said. “Lucky for us we moved straight after.” He rolled his nod toward the south-west where Steve stood.

“You know about Steve already?” Tardi said.

“Ace is that good with the essence. He winkles things out of it you would not believe.”

Could that roil in his gut be due to his own feelings? Tardi was hardly acquainted with his own discomforts anymore. *I really do not like the idea of Ace winking things from the monster.*

“One good thing,” Shad said. “The mist has stopped people complaining about having to live on the ranges.” He grinned. “Welcome to pay us a visit. An’ you come from the coast, route in over Sky Line. From out this way, you start climbing at the end of Blindmouth. You mind the map I’m working from?”

“Where the Main Arm’s water slides by the opening to the Pocket between the ranges and Red Hill?”

Shad nodded. “When you get to the top, follow the path meticulous-like. The snake pit is up there too, the only secure place presenting itself.” He picked up his food by the tail and rose.

Tardi rose too, stepping off the tarp and reaching down for it in one move. *Slop slop.* His feet in tandem with his thoughts. “Stops my roots growing into the ground,” he said at Shad’s interest.

“I’m going Yelgun-way directly. I’ve yet to check on them that are treebound,” Shad said. “You see them ashes we are walking away from, Tamer? The patterning of them sticks? Any Stormy comes by will know you and I met.” He slipped between two bamboos, became a shadow, and was gone from sight.

Tardi studied the remains of the fire. At Shad’s side there was the shape of a humpy, a sloped roof over two uneven walls made with three sticks. He smiled at the play on words. His side, there was a big T with a crossbar a little way down to add in a smaller capital T. Another play on words. Big Tamer and smaller Tardi. Or the other way round. *Take it anyway you want.*