

36: Red Water, Blue Water

Slop, slop. Slop, slop. How was he meant to not arrive at the truck before Rowan, with only five hundred metres to where he and Steve parked the Mack way back when? *And why should I arrive?* He could take off. To where? *I need a plan.*

Hurriedly inflating hoverole skirts squealed along a road surface as, what could only be the Jason family's hoverole, took off from the truck stop. Its racket receded into the south.

Toucan Jason was the suave Jason, Tardi recalled. Rowan is very good at playing up to suave. *Slop, slop.*

They'd gone south. Where Wide Game's management and Procyon Products both had toeholds in that same building at Flag Hill. *Why do I think she's going there? I know her quite well and so it's a desperate feeling I have.* The way she acted this morning he doubted she went to check in with the Wide Game's management. *Slop, slop.*

Argie walked beneath his hand. *Ztt. Za-ap.*

Slop, slop. He should work up a pattern. Because he'd decided to hang around to find out her purpose? *Which will surely bite me very inconveniently at a later date, if I don't.* One small step forward. *Slop, slop.* Step back. A step to the north-east. *Slop, slop.* A step back. He did all the directions. North, north-east, east, south-east ... getting into the rhythm of it.

Clopple clop.

Huh? Water slopping against the underside of a punt. He stopped. "No boat here. No water, red or blue."

Argie leaned into him.

"Ow! My knee! All right!" Did the dog and the monster just do one of their synchronicity things?

Argie lay down opposite, leaving a couple of metres of bare ground between himself and Tardi.

"Oh, so I am meant to stop where I am?"

Argie's hair ends glowed the answer.

Take it to mean yes.

Then the air between him and the dog glittered. Points of light coalesced until a small human holo-figure capered about in the space.

Impossible.

The little holo-man moved as jerkily as if the computer generating him had the hiccups. With a head of green hair, it was a copy of himself in last night's scene, making ready for bed and taking the two decks from its arm.

Slop, slop.

The little holo-man vibrated and lost cohesion then reformed and placed the two decks carefully in the recess for the kickboard of the repair island in the middle of the concrete floor.

“I did that so I wouldn’t roll over onto them,” Tardi said. The punt that he seemed to be standing on rocked hard enough that he almost fell. “All right. I’m looking.”

Now the vaguely outlined windows enclosed dawn-colored rectangles. The little holo picked up the decks and slid them over the rough bark-like skin on his wrist.

Now night-colored rectangles again. The holo took off the decks and slid them carefully under the overhang, next to the kickboard.

Dawn again and his image picked up his deck from under the overhang and Steve’s from around the corner.

“Wait! I see it. Steve’s deck wasn’t where I put it last night!” *Duh, Tarboy!* He stamped his anger into the ground. While Rowan distracted him with some twaddle about it being time to get dressed, he’d retrieved the decks without noticing one of them had mysteriously displaced itself.

He strode across the road. Turned. Strode back, Argie with him. *What are you up to, Rowan?* “Wait a minute, I’ve got Steve’s deck!” He stopped. “I can check.”

A gout of virtual red water splashed over his feet.

He shook his legs one by one. “I’m not wet, not red. But Rowan is real. I need to know what she’s thinking.” He woke Steve’s deck. No wake-up jingle. His ears burned with anger. “She changed Steve’s settings so I wouldn’t hear. And his passwords!”

He restored everything, the passwords one by one. *Uh oh!* His toe roots had started digging into the soft forest soil underfoot. *S-l-o-p. S-l-op.*

Without my help you will grow to the ground, the monster said fully, with words.

Fine. Tardi pulled his feet one by one from the non-sentient ground. *Bleed. Bleed. Bleed red blood,* he ordered his tissues. *I am too worried about Rowan’s schemes right now to also worry about you.*

Argie skimmed by him then sat down with space between them again, alerting him to another performance. *Slop, slop.*

This time the dots formed into a pattern of Tardi sleeping with his tree hair raying out from his head. The concrete floor showed through his ghostly substance. In the here and now, the smell of the dusty concrete teased his nose. *Slop, slop.* “Where are you getting that image from?”

His right arm rose!

He tried to force it down but it curved round an invisible someone’s neck. Corded tendons formed under his fingers. Outlining a ... a pair of shoulders with arms clenching the armrests of an old office chair. The head he shared nuzzled in under a jaw. “Tardi is my friend,” said a

childish voice from the head he shared.

Tardi jerked his head back from Lilly hugging Del. “What are you doing?” He forced his arm to his side. Glanced round. *Phew*. No one to see his antics. *Slop, slop*.

The bit he could see of Del’s face was stern from hiding fear. Lilly Pilly stood by her. He looked with them at the white hair on their monitor screen asking them about the tree hair. “That’s the EMBer who wants to ceramicise me,” Tardi said. “I’m looking through Lilly Pilly’s eyes—Lilly Pilly and Del are getting a call from Whit Smith, their EMBer contact. They’ll be linked to SoHAB the same way Steve is.”

He took off, walking fast, but only across the road and back and across again. Argie walked with him. *For the EMBers to have that pic of me, Rowan would’ve had to use Steve’s deck to snap it*. “And she did.” He smacked himself in the head. “Steve told me that SoHAB was keeping tabs on his output. They probably even had him on Auto-send.”

“And then...” He recalled how Rowan had been. Guilt all over. “That EMBer probably threatened her. So she’s gone to Procyon Products, hasn’t she?”

Neither Argie nor the monster denied his logic.

Rowan’s style as newsblogger was to pit B against A if A was reluctant to give her the information she wanted. And in this case...? *I doubt she’ll have any trouble convincing PP to take me in*. He stopped and urgently patted himself down. *Yes, I still have the transmitter. Good thing I forgot to empty my pockets last night*.

Tardi semi-circled the Gulgan Road Rest Stop, staying behind the trees edging the clearing, sometimes marching soundlessly along a bare cattle path, sometimes weaving through the privet and lantana understory.

The Mack was still parked on the eastern side of Gulgan Road. A couple of air scooters leaned against nearby shrubbery. Ben and Threen Jason were being a pair of foraging emus searching the ground for something while Jason Jason supervised.

Finally, from a long way off, the sound of a hoverole approached. The gang, hearing it too, straightened from their task. Toucan’s hoverole swirled into the clearing with its skirts partially lifted and blowing grit and leaves into their faces. They were still rubbing their eyes when Rowan descended.

Descended regally were the words Tardi would use. From the way she carried herself and the way she smiled, Tardi knew that she was herself again and that she’d been victorious in whatever she’d planned. *Watch out, Tar-boy*.

Rowan surveyed the clearing, her eyes lingering on the places where he might be hiding. “You can come out now, Tardi.”

He had the slight satisfaction of surprising even Rowan by walking into the clearing from behind them. “So. What did PP have to say for themselves?”

Only Toucan Jason laughed as they all turned.

Rowan took a deep breath. “PP will welcome us with open arms. As it happens, they have a cure. Though it needs testing. They’re as keen as we are that we help them.”

Tardi sneezed as the monster splashed red water up the inside of his nose. “Naturally they’re keen,” he said. “But I’m not. Not for their cure.” He might as well have saved his breath.

“They’re preparing us a hideaway as we speak,” Rowan said. She gestured prettily at Toucan, asking for more of his help. “They don’t have any transport to fetch you, Tar, so I assured them our friends would be happy to help and bring us in?”

“Hmph. Our friends!” Threen Jason said, leaving nothing to anyone’s imagination how friendly she thought Rowan.

“Let me get this straight,” Jason Jason said. “You—” He seemed to scrabble for words to take back the upper hand. He rounded on Toucan. “You took Rowan to Procyon Products?”

““Why?” Threen said. She wasn’t talking to Toucan.

“Yes! Why?” Jason said not having given Toucan a chance to explain. He stared at Rowan.

Rowan lost some of her pizzazz. “Because the EMBers are—will be after Tardi soon,” she said. “What could be safer than PP hiding him from them? They have some hotel-class accommodation in their basement.”

“I never saw a world-class bunkroom in the basement when I did deliveries at the Beauty Labs,” Tardi said. “Last I heard, they moved in a bunch of dog kennels.” He still felt he’d have a better chance of being cured, and living to tell the tale, at SoHAB. He pictured SoHAB’s corridors and white-coated medical staff.

His stomach fluttered. *Huh?* He felt fear? While Steve was there, he’d learned to feel very comfortable around SoHAB and its staff. Now he actually felt sick. He tried another, allied thought. The EMBers work their ceramic processing out of SoHAB. Nausea rolled over him. He could barely stop himself from retching.

It’s you! he thought at the monster. *You don’t want me at SoHAB because you’re wanting to escape!*

The nausea faded abruptly and he was left with his own, a queasiness at the confirmation that the whole recent interaction was purely a thought-exercise.

“And plus,” Rowan raised her voice. “PP told me that the Game Consortium has gone broke. It’s to be investigated the minute the black-over is lifted. Which will be tomorrow, they assured me. PP thinks that with a mass of investigators in the building, it will be quite easy to hoodwink the EMBers.”

“I don’t care about saving Tardi,” Ben said. “I want to do that hijack before it’s too late. For something crazy to look back on.”

“Same here,” Toucan said.

Jason’s slit-eyed displeasure changed to a wide grin. Very probably Ben and Toucan staved off a Jason-tantrum.

“I vote we make Rowan do the diversion,” Threen said. “Last in, best undressed.”

“Good. Yes, very good,” Jason Jason said. “Rowan does the diversion and Threen is with us. Should be no problem fitting you in as well, you’re such a skinny.” Jason looked at Tardi. “We’ve been looking for the ignition key to the Mack? After Toucan informed me how vintage trucks are locked up?”

“Why the keys? Why you?” Tardi said.

Ben interrupted. “You should’ve stopped the boat, Tardi boy.”

“I’ve seen you in action and it wasn’t pretty,” Tardi said.

“The keys, tree man,” Jason said. “We haven’t got all day.”

“My gun, Tardi. Where’s my gun?” Ben leaned in close.

“I’m guessing your gun is back at the Gondola,” Tardi said, bland and poker-faced. “Jason didn’t want to leave it with you asleep and for me to be tempted. He maybe gave it to your father for safekeeping? Bet you rushed out without asking?”

Displeasure flitted over Jason’s face. He went into repair mode. “Don’t fret, Ben. We’ll sort your gun later, I promise. Just take it that I need that key, tree man. Anyway you’re in no position to argue.”

“Oh. Right. So I’m your prisoner?” Tardi said.

Jason’s eyes lit up. “That’ll work! Men!”

Ben and Toucan gripped Tardi’s arms. Toucan explained. “Tar, when the saltwater recharger gets below ten percent power, the old man agonizes. The emergency recharger was supposed to have come on Saturday. We decided to heist a general goods transport, recharge our emergency power pack from it, and sell off its supplies. Sorting two problems with one solution.”

“Didn’t I just say business as usual by tomorrow?” Rowan said.

Jason continued Toucan’s fantasy without a nod at Rowan’s. “We’ll need the Mack. We’ll plant the front bit under the overpass.”

For someone living at a freighter service station, Jason seemed quite ill-informed about freighters and their parts. He continued his instructions. “Get the diversion happening. The live-minds stick together so one of them will stop to investigate. Just remember the moves we practiced earlier.”

Tardi didn’t give the Mack another thought. He’d rather cry about Steve, or the tree disease. But no way would he step out of the conversation. “There’s no traffic. Be better if you left the rig in one piece.”

“Be better if you remembered where you left the key, or I will have Toucan break in with a screwdriver,” Jason said. “Threen went to Yelgun yesterday and eavesdropped. National Freight Co. will run through a couple of dozen freighters today, with recharged battery units

and general freight.”

“Okay,” Tardi said.

Rowan laughed derisively. “That’s all the arguing you can press out?”

Tardi shrugged. “It’s what I thought would happen fairly soon.”

“So can you lay your hands on the key?” Toucan said.

“Sure.” After a nod from Jason allowing him to be released, Tardi walked to the Mack’s front end driver’s side with everyone following him. He reached up to the spare key slot under the cabin step, two metres above where anyone except a trucker would think to look. “Funny nobody saw it while you did your clambering,” he said, tossing the keys at Toucan as the most trustworthy driver. He might have wished the truck goodbye, but that didn’t mean he thought just anybody should drive it.

Standing around to keep off all their radars, to not be tied up or some such notion, he glimpsed something metallic glinting in the shrubbery when a stray sunbeam hit it. Hadn’t the cyclists camped there? He still had his backpack on, and SoHAB still beckoned. “I need to keep on the move to stop my toes growing. Okay if I look around?”

Jason waved a hand, permitting Tardi’s freedom.

The bicycle felt him coming like it was a heat-sensitive lamp. “Oh, please! Please help! I desperately need charging up!”

A fricking live-mind! Tardi glanced at his captors. *Nobody watching.* He pulled free the wire between the bicycle’s central processing unit and its dynamo-charged battery. He mounted and cycled sedately in and out of new and old trees. He needed Ben’s suspicions at rest, him having the longest legs with which to give chase. *Wonder how live-minds will survive the plague?* Due to the personalized programming, transfers were difficult even in ordinary times.

RRR-OOOOAAAA-AAARRR!

Trucks! He pedaled like a crazy toward the overpass. Argie sprang from the bushes and streaked by. Several live-minded petrol-powered trucks gunned their engines speeding down the straights out of the north. Could this be the resumption of traffic?

Then a couple of battery rechargers flashed by underneath him. Large cubes mounted on flatbeds, these were saltwater-technology batteries powerful enough to recharge ordinary household and transport batteries. These were hardly out of hearing when a pair of ordinary freighters passed, followed a minute later by another set. All presumably from the Yelgun freight stop. Tardi counted twelve pairs.

The silence afterward was greater than before. The time was now. He cycled toward the Bruns-side roundabout.

“Oy! The tree man is getting away!”

That was Ben.

“Oy! You on the bike!”

That was someone Bruns-side, a woman.

Tardi stopped, feet on the road. A clamor of alarms and blame behind him, as Rowan and the Jason gang saw a uniformed woman standing on the hilled roundabout in front of Tardi, peering their way through a rifle scope.

Tardi dropped to the ground—himself and the bike—as the riflewoman pulled the trigger.

BLAM!

The shot whizzed way over him, as well over as his captors on the other side of the overpass.

Ha-ha. A warning shot. But, probably just as well that Ben’s gun wasn’t with Ben.

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A man, whom Tardi recalled from his former life, stepped from behind the shrubbery nearby. *John Taylor? Has my luck changed finally?*

“Our relief will be here in a minute, Linda,” Taylor said. “Care to hold the fort while I run the tree man to Rivermouth?”

“Leave the bike,” Linda said. “It’s a live-mind. We’ll ransom it.”

Good luck with that. Tardi gave the bike into Linda’s keeping, then followed Taylor to his electric runabout. They trundled north along the eastern shoulder of the highway with Argie loping alongside.

“You got yourself in a pickle and no mistake,” John said. “Where’s your brother?”

“Up on Montecollum. A tree. Like Mel.”

Taylor started. “But you’re not! Is there something I can feed Mel?”

“Working at my surfing job out in the bay, I was flung against some coral. I think now that the poison in it part-vaccinated me.”

“No hope for Mel, you’re saying?” Taylor said.

“I don’t know. I’m on my way north, to SoHAB.” He ignored the monster squeezing his gut. “By the time I get there, maybe you and a few others will be campaigning for a cure. I’ll put myself up as a test subject. Hurry things along that way.”

“Right. Right. Campaign for a cure. I’ll start as soon as I get home.” Taylor crossed the highway and drove down the access road. “Trouble is, we’ll still need to go to the Stormy village. Need to get a boat.”

“Didn’t know Stormies live here?” Tardi said. Well, he knew no Stormies lived at Rivermouth. And he knew why. For one thing, the village was too close to trucker haunts. Second, anyone looking down from the highway would look right down into it. No privacy.

“They don’t,” Taylor said. “It’s camouflage. It’s the local lock-up and regional police haunts.”

Tardi burned for his Stormy family. He studied sandpaper figs looping down from battered tin roofs and strangling the houses, holding them together with aerial roots. Dishes and antennas sprouted from among the greenery. “Let’s not go in amongst the trees,” he said.

“Because?”

“Stop,” Tardi said. “See where those mangrove trees have shaped themselves hands for catching hold of things in the mud?”

John Taylor studied the mud at street level. Natural mangroves had aerial roots so they could live above the twice daily inundation. “Natural mangroves have always been kept out of the village,” he said in hushed tones. “Plenty of them north and south.”

The mangroves now lining the village streets, as well as roots going into the mud, had shortened arm-resembling projections with hand-shaped ends.

“It looks like they’re planning something?” John Taylor said, still hushed.

“I don’t know. There’s a new tree up by the ranges that lent me ...” Tardi hesitated. He’d been going to say arm. “... a branch to beat down the Baskervilles.”

“I don’t like what I’m seeing or hearing, tree man,” John Taylor said. He motioned Tardi from the runabout. “You’re saying that Mel will know what happened to her.” He led Tardi to an old fishing shack on tall concrete pilings. “And don’t tell me you don’t know,” he added on a spurt of anger. “More idea than the rest of us.”

“Only what I can imagine, just like the rest of you,” Tardi said.

Taylor hauled a light rowing punt from under the shack. “And you think I’ll believe that?”

Help. I need a deflection. “Truckers jockeying nights see stuff the rest of the population has nightmares about,” he said.

“Not wrong there. Leave the boat hid under the bridgeworks at Devine’s Island. You should get going.”

Tardi dragged the punt behind him by its rope as he hurried back along the way they came. Crossing the river under the road bridges seemed the safest. “Right. I’m going. Thanks for everything.”

Argent, a bright shining ornament among all the greys, showed him the way.

He hadn’t quite shoved the oars in the rowlocks, as the water would be too deep for poling, when Taylor stepped into the boat. “Move over. Two of us rowing will be quicker.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

Taylor pointed at his deck glowing on his arm. “My partner at home with Marty tells me Procyon Products are in town handing out credits for information on you. She is seeing plenty of takers.”

They started strongly with long strokes. In the middle, where the tide's inflow was the fastest, Taylor stopped his oar. "Why SoHAB?" he said.

Tardi rowed harder to keep station. Drifting would take them into the tidal mangroves to be sitting ducks there for PP's hunters. "What are you on about?" he said.

"Why go to SoHAB?" Taylor said again. "The EMBers are there. We all know what they stand for. Procyon Products are offering to house you in luxury quarters in Byron."

Tardi swore. "In the basement at the Beauty Labs?"

"So?"

"A dog kennel last I heard. What else?"

"A team standing by to do whatever needed to find out what's causing this."

"No talk of a cure, is there? No mention of my survival. When I was sick with coral poisoning, they approached my father for my body when I died. They don't care what they destroy chasing their fames and their fortunes. Coral, the ocean, nature, grieving families."

Taylor still just stared and Tardi saw he'd have to continue. "You met my brother Steve. Did you hear that he drowned? He was brought back to life at SoHAB."

The monster breathed fog into his mind. He forced his thoughts through. Taylor was only the first person he'd have to convince. "There are healers there, people who care that the patient and their family survive. I'd trust them with my life when I wouldn't trust PP with my name."

The fog wall advanced.

Taylor started to scull, straightening the aim of the punt toward the bridge stanchions. "So should I dig out Mel and bring her along?" he said.

Tardi resumed rowing. "I don't know." In his mind he raged: *PP isn't your best bet! They'll cut me up to find you! Bit by bit!*

The fog lifted. Argie's glow faded. The wind veered from the south to the east. Rain slashed in under the twin bridges.

Taylor shouted over the sudden fury of it. "I'll just fence her in. Dangerous where she is, near the road. Drop you off. Crab pots on the way back for my excuse being out here. If anybody asks, we got to eat!"

The punt grated over the gravel at the base of the landside bridge support. Argent leaped out. Tardi scrambled after him and pushed the boat back out. "Thanks, for everything!" he shouted in his turn. He waved with finality to encourage the man to row harder.