

37: Facing Down Whit Smith

Tardi felt the dog jump to his paws from beside him. They'd slept in the grey-mud borderland between the coastal forest and the tidal mangroves.

Whimpering, the dog pushed his nose under Tardi's arm—without any zapping—as if begging Tardi to hurry to his feet.

“What's wrong, Arge?”

Argie jumped back, barking hysterically.

What, because I'm still lying in the water? Water which was warm and rising. “Didn't pick a very good place to spend the night, did I?” Tardi said, trying to calm the dog with a conversational tone. He climbed creakily to his feet. Then had to snap off hundreds of red root-hairs and dozens of rootlets. The tree in him drank in the warm mud streaming down his back from the sodden backpack.

Argie nosed him again, again without any zapping.

Not good. The tree boundary in Tardi fizzed. He imagined a stream of green champagne coursing through his blood. *Slop, slop. Get moving, Tar-boy.*

The dog stayed close beside him, his light-cable fur continuing a dull, dirty grey. Where was the monster when it was needed?

They reached the top of the bank dividing the estuary from Ocean Islands. Increasingly wet mud slopped over the intersection of Rajah Boatway and the local Main Road running up and over the next hill.

Argie stepped across Tardi's path and stopped him.

He recalled the dog's hysterical moves when they woke. The way Argie wriggled to get to his feet and snapped at the tide. “You don't like mud suddenly?” No time to deal now, with the tide rising. “I'll carry you across. We'll work out a man-dog hold.”

He encouraged Argie onto a low wall in front of the block of units on the corner of Rajah Boatway, then tried every way of grabbing onto him and lifting him without breaking either the dog's back or his own. Finally, they achieved a workable hold with Tardi holding Argie's lower half on his arms and Argie leaning heart-to-heart against Tardi's chest. Argie's front paws and head rested on one of Tardi's shoulders.

Tardi waded across to Main Road. A bit of dry land was his only aim.

The gadget in his left pants pocket crackled. “Come in, Number Three.”

Huh? PP expect the dogs to talk to them?

Two voices took it in turns. “Stop, you dumb mutt. You'll be out of range in a minute. Leave the Target.”

“Number Three! Leave the Target! Make for Flag Hill!”

Argie slumped, suddenly unconscious.

Tardi's knees buckled. *The dog weighs more unconscious than awake?* Argie slid down between Tardi's arms. Keeping the dog's nose and muzzle out of the water was all Tardi could do. He dragged Argie further up the slope, pulling him by a foreleg and a fistful of his neck ruff. Then stood on the dog's downhill-side to stop him rolling back into the water.

Crackle, crackle. "Maybe the monster abandoned him and he's dead," the gadget said.

Tardi checked with a finger on the pulse in the dog's armpit. *Not dead! But PP obviously know that the dogs have the monster's magic in them!* Suspicion flashed through him that Procyon Products had trained the dogs to retrieve incomplete transformations! A spurt of adrenaline pushed at the conclusion. *PP knows all about the disease!* Tardi's heart thudded. *Maybe PP introduced it?*

If so, PP's presence in town suddenly made sense. He'd heard of little towns agreeing to being infected with bugs to help science come up with the answers, but the casual injustice of *this* enraged him. He pulled Steve's wrist deck from his arm, woke it and clicked down into Steve's eavesdropper window to SoHAB. He knocked on the shutter by whispering in Steve's call sign.

Hardly a second went by before the shutter opened and Whit Smith walked into the frame. His gaze wandered as though he searched the scene for the person he expected to see. *Which would be Steve? Ri-ight. He obviously doesn't realize he's looking at the tree hair he's hunting.*

Tardi dragged PP's transmitter from his pocket and stood Steve's wrist deck and the transmitter on their edges on the road surface, facing each other.

"We should go and get him," PP said, apparently thinking that Argie, and so the transmitter, was alone in the landscape. "We'll flay him, layer by layer, until we find the essence."

"Essence?" said a second voice. "What's that when it is at home?"

"It's what the Stormies call the entity managing the monstrous ladies. And for once I think they have got it right," First Voice said.

"Management won't like us referring to the entity as the essence. If it's a Stormy thing," Second Voice again.

Tardi hardly had time to wonder how Stormies were involved with PP when First Voice said: "What I wouldn't do to get hold of his target for the same. That man has got to be carrying everything eluding us. Let's go get them both. I vote we peel them layer by layer."

Click.

The PP mob must have switched Argie's gadget off to be on their way fetching him and Argie. By fly-car or hoverole? Tardi wondered. He had maybe ten minutes. Down by his feet, Whit started talking as if it wasn't an emergency.

"Steve, be a good boy and convince your brother to go to the Procyon Products facility in the Byron Beauty Lab. When they let me know he's arrived, I'll arrange his transfer from there to

our research quarters at Zoo Hall.”

Is this guy for real? Tardi let loose with everything he thought Steve might’ve said under the circumstances. “Didn’t you hear them? They’ll plant and peel him. My brother!” He didn’t have to act like he was afraid. “You stupid high-horsed EMBer. Do you think Tar is the only one?”

He mixed metaphors where he could, because wouldn’t Steve—upset—and only recently able to use them, do the same? “Better you clean out your head before you come helping to blacken the pots down here.”

“Who am I speaking with?” The little voice down by the road demanded.

Tardi tried harder to be Steve but still tell the EMBer what he needed to know. “I bet PP is scamming you right this minute. Asking you for Tar. They want to cut him up to find the monster’s essence. Sell it all over the world. But you know that the monster isn’t in Tar.”

No reaction while the dumb cluck worked it out. Would Steve have been crying by now? Tardi couldn’t fake that, he was too angry. “What if one day soon you need to talk with the virtual part of the monster? If you don’t save Tar, you are sunk!”

He picked up the deck and shouted straight into it. “You are a total stupido if you think a black-over is stopping PP grabbing what they want!”

He and Whit bored holes in each other staring when instead Tardi should’ve been listening.

A road-using vehicle approached. Was it PP? Tardi shut down the deck.

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A vehicle for camping that could ride on land as well as move over water crested the rise. Tardi’s spirits rose. Camper-ducks were not typically PP vehicles.

The duck blared a here-I-come tune as it swayed to a halt not far from him. And who should jump out but Toucan and Jason Jason, running to get hold of him when he wasn’t running anywhere? Tardi laughed. *They’ll be plotting something, but hey, I will definitely appreciate a ride right now.* “Help me with the dog?”

“He’s not silver, Tardi,” Jason Jason said in his most scathing tone. “Why would I bother?”

“It’s the one the Bruns Beachers intended to ransom to the augmentation lab?” Toucan Jason said slightly edgily. As if he slyly crafted himself a way to the top of the heap. “How help you, Tar?”

Now was not the time to remind Toucan Jason about Tardi’s name. “By helping to carry the dog into your vehicle. Seeing as you’re offering us a lift.” He amazed himself that he bothered with the irony. “I’ll take his head and under his forelegs and you grab him in front of the back legs.” He positioned Toucan’s hands. “One! Two! Lift!”

He and Toucan shuffled toward the back of the camper-duck with the dog between them. Jason Jason stood by, slapping his knees with his supposed mirth.

Tardi sensed rather than saw a group of people in the back of the camper. He steered for the

front passenger seat. "Lift him up and over the sill," he directed Toucan. "Shove." He folded Argie into a comfortable sleeping-dog posture. "Brilliant. Thanks." He slid into the duck himself, onto the seat. "Thanks for stopping."

"You're in Toucan's seat," Jason Jason said as he got into the driver's seat.

"Leave him, Jase," Ben Baker said from the back. "Toucan should ride with me, keep our captives under control. The tree man can do the job you picked for Toucan."

Tardi smiled inwardly. *Of course Ben Baker is here too also jostling for the top spot.* "You going as far as Yelgun?" Tardi said. While bargaining over the distance of the ride, he might get a clue as to what they planned.

The central locking system snicked shut. "You lucked out, tree-man," Jason Jason said. "We're on a trading mission." He punched the ignition and the engine caught by sheer good luck. He took his foot off the brake and the vehicle pattered on its way.

"Trading what where?" Tardi said.

Toucan leaned between Tardi and his brother, with one hand on the back of each of their seats, stopping Tardi from seeing who was in the back. Jason Jason came up with an idea," Toucan Jason said respectfully while Tardi knew for a fact that Toucan disliked his year-older brother almost as much as he hated his grandfather Jay Jason. "Both cast in the same mold," Toucan confided not that long ago.

"Tell him the idea, Toucan," Jason Jason said. "I want to watch his face."

Right. Better straighten my face.

"Farmers normally hiring liveminds will surely welcome live workers by now and since we had a couple of spare personnel cluttering up the scene ..." Toucan said.

Jason interrupted. "Talk. Talk," he said about his brother's long-winded preamble. "Listen and learn. Seeing that farm contractors were probably hit by the plague as well. See? All it needs."

Tardi realized that there could be no takeover while Jason Jason continued his domination. "Their live-minds won't be working for anyone else until they are reprogrammed," he said. "And who can afford that?"

"We cleaned out the camp and came up with a spare truck jockey and a spare newsblogger." Jason Jason chortled. "And just now we scored you. Another trucker."

"Accompanied by an augmented dog," Toucan said. "We'll be partying at the top end of town tonight!"

All the gang laughed.

"Unless more stuff happens," Tardi said. *Spare newsblogger, that surely will be Rowan. No other newsbloggers in this scene. Stuff happens, ready or not.*

"Yee-hah!" Jason accelerated like he would deliver them all to the next plane of existence. He swung the steering assembly to and fro, forcing the vehicle into a flubbing passage down

the hill. The duck's cladding squealed from polymer-on-polymer stress.

With his feet awkwardly placed fore and aft of Argie, Tardi concentrated on keeping his balance.

Jason swung them left into the Billinudgel turn-off, just about dragging the passenger-side flotation device edges along the ground.

Tardi couldn't stop himself. "Watch the rims!" Metal squealed along the road as the duck regained its center of gravity.

"I bet there will be a bidding war starting soon for incomplete transformations,' someone in the back shouted.

The captive truck jockey?

"Who's bidding?" Ben said.

Exactly. Who's bidding?

'I believe Biotech are one of the parties, the mugs. And a ComPole security firm. They're saying it's a hacked corruption. There's a prize offered for whoever figures it out. But of course, a live exemplar is needed for comparing responses.'

Rowan snorted. "And poor old Tardi would have us believe he bleeds sap."

Tardi slop slopped with one foot between Argie's front and rear legs, and one foot up against the bulkhead. Rowan *knew* he bled sap. What was she plotting? *Think it through*. Both the trucker and the newsblogger spoke freely. Meaning they weren't gagged. Were they even tied?

"Jase, remember to stop," Ben said.

No kowtowing to Jason Jason by Ben, Tardi noted.

Amid a racket of stressed metal and polymers, Jason Jason halted exactly on the crossroads. "How's that?" he said.

Rowan purred. "Brilliant. We could take them to the Yelgun police station, the tree man and the augmented dog? I'm sure there will be someone there we can hand him over to?"

"In the meantime, could you untie us?" the trucker laughed embarrassedly. "I wouldn't like to be mistaken for loot. And I'm sure neither would the young lady."

Feeling free while you are tied up, wonder how that will work out?

"Tar, you need to get out," Toucan Jason said. "Walk ahead and show us the depths."

The Marshall's Creek valley and road into the hills were underwater twice a day as far up as the Pine Drive intersection. "Why walk when we're in a duck?" Tardi said. "They're meant to cope quite well in water."

"Those rims you worried about?" Toucan said. "Rusted shut. And no depth sensors."

“Go on! Get! Out! Just remember we’ve got your dog.” Jason Jason revved the engine for Tardi to get going.

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As he sloshed through the shin-deep water, Tardi toyed with ideas for mayhem. The white-painted boulders marking the road’s edge were always being shifted by storm-driven currents. Council road maintenance was slow shifting them back. Locals knew that if you didn’t have the use of ComPole sensors marking the edge of the road, it was safer not to proceed.

And who knew whether ComPole sensors were operational just now? Surely, they too would be affected by the continuing black-over? Not too difficult to arrange an accident. Though, with Argie still unconscious on the cab floor and people tied up in the back, losing the duck over the edge of the causeway was not an option.

He took notice of the depths. *Wading shin deep. Wading knee deep. Wading thigh deep.* He lost his footing. Fell headlong. A current streamed over him, then took him along with it. He went head over heels down into a deep hole. Managed to get back to his feet on the other side of the hole with rivers of brown water cascading off him.

Jason Jason signaled his glee. *Perrep-ep-ep!*

A hole as deep as that? Slosh slosh. Watch it, a slope underfoot. *Waist deep? How did holes this deep form in a causeway?*

The duck zig-zagged over the road, snarling through the water, dividing it, and sending a rippling bow wave to both sides.

There’s the answer. The force of the duck’s passage added to the natural current. The more-than-natural current added to the erosion. Over he went again, a misstep. This time he had to swim to the surface before stepping up out of that hole. Continued his sloshing way, also zig-zagging.

The duck tootled behind him in stops and starts.

Then he forgot to watch for the changing colours of the mud, and slipped as if the road deck was lined with wet banana skins. He smashed down onto the gold, sun struck water, displacing nearly as much of it as a speeding boat smashing through waves.

The two Jasons leaned out of the duck, jeering and laughing.

White light zapped through the back of his head and exploded on the inside of his eyelids. He gasped. Breathed in a lungful of water. Choked. Coughed. Spluttered. Got his feet under him and pushed up into the air.

Coughed and coughed to get his breathing back. His eyesight blurred. The light inside him was like the white flaring of burning magnesium. He didn’t get migraines. Was it a stroke? *A brain tumor?*

Tooot! The duck was right behind him. The fool in the driver’s seat stopped and started the engine as if he thought he was nursing it. Tardi waved Jason Jason impatiently to the far right. He stepped back into the hole and showed them its depth by pointing and signing. He

squinted against the weird light.

“What’s up, Jason Jason says,” Toucan said out of the passenger window.

“Migraine probably,” Tardi said. *Looks like that’ll be my favorite excuse.*

“Chop chop,” Jason said from the further position. “Only about another two kilometres.”

While Tardi still stood in the water, his eyesight blotched with a variable shadow that seemed to contain bits of a human. *Not anyone in the duck.* Concentrating, he saw a jeans-clad knee balanced on a concrete rim, a brown-tipped tit hanging from a partly unbuttoned hemp shirt and a brown eye staring intently into his from a distance of ten centimeters. Bits of curly gold-blond hair fluttered onto the surface of his eye.

Toot!

He gestured furiously for the duck to reverse. The bits coalesced, became a person. *Del Lorenzo?* She pushed the opening of a water bottle into his eye. He could feel the way she pressed the bottle down—excruciating pain! And he could feel the fluid, his tears from around his eye, pouring into the narrow opening of the bottle. Then he couldn’t see anything. He closed his eyes.

He heard his tears slopping into the bottle. Then sound was gone too. He felt his way through the water. Warm. Wet. Where the road deck crumbled would be a hole. *Splash.* He went under. Magnesium flared in his brain again. *It’s you still in me, isn’t it? That’s your eye in the well.* He visualized tree branches sheltering the well from the brunt of the sun. The trough-sized eye sank into the red mud of the alien world.

Tardi opened his eyes. Earth’s transparent water over soft brown mud never looked better. *If I’m to go up there to fix your problem I’ll need Argie with me,* he told the monster. *Not a dog-shaped zombie.* While he walked back to the duck, he visualized Argie in his silver glory. He gestured for Toucan Jason to move into the back.

Argie was still the dull white-grey.

“Get in!” Jason said. The limits of the tide lapped the road a few meters further.

I am waiting, Tardi thought at the monster. Argie was level with Tardi standing outside. The dog wagged his tail against the bulkhead. *Whap whap.* Tardi cupped Argie’s muzzle with one hand.

A glint of silver gusted over Argie’s light-fiber fur. *Zap!*

“Good boy.” Tardi smiled. He had an agreement. He swung up into the duck.

“Finally.” Jason gunned the engine.

“I’m surprised you’d trust an incomplete transformation to sit beside you,” said the jockey from the back.

“Really.”

The truck jockey didn’t heed Jason Jason’s tone. “Above true flesh and blood, I mean.”

Jason stamped his foot on the brake and everyone jerked forward. “Ben, why don’t you gag that damn jockey and I’ll tie Tardi to the duck. Before he gets any ideas.”