

41: The Dog-Meld

Tardi returned to the house to fill a water bottle from the water tank, find a spray bottle and release Silver. He appreciated Del's fury every time he looked at the dog. Though probably he should be appreciating that this dog was obviously more in tune with Procyon Products' agenda than Argie.

Silver stayed beside Tardi with the help of the snacks, which was a plus because the tree had definitely gained in him, and the zapping was ever more necessary. The fingers on his right hand tingled constantly and his left side was numb. He ran flat out for a while to get his human circulation working harder.

At Coopers Lane he picked up the bicycle. He threw himself onto it and was pedaling before hitting the saddle. Silver of course knew their destination—Tardi hadn't expected anything else—and led up the left-hand track where the lane split.

The bicycle, because it had no live mind and Tardi was never a mountain-bike rider, became a hard-slog machine as they climbed toward the ranges. Quite soon he left it by the wayside and jogged for a while. Then walking became the go, as the way was all uphill.

The track became a single-file path hugging the bottom of the cliff, that stone wave forever heeling and threatening to pulverize them.

He rested, standing for a while with his back to the cliff. The mud at the base—a hidden spring?—was a balm to his roots.

Silver slid by without either a doggie smile or even one wag of his tail and nudged Tardi's knees. Like he said, *Wake up out of your tree dream, tree hair.*

Slop, slop. He would need to befriend the dog because the trouble was, he recognized, he hated being with an unfriendly dog. *Might as well be on my lonesome.*

After a second hike at the base of the cliff, a glint pierced through the bush to the left and—for good measure—a white light shafted straight into his brain.

“Aaah! I know! I see it!” He visualized the well right there, only a few meters distant.

The otherworldly searchlight faded and when the after-images were gone from his eyes, he was able to clamber down the rubble zone without falling over his feet.

The clearing seemed smaller than he remembered. Or was it that all three new-trees had moved themselves nearer the diseased well? *To fence it off*, he would suspect, *because they can still think. How is that even possible? That they can still think?*

Breathe. Think about what I am here for. But if I accept that the new trees can still think? He shuddered recalling Pan's arm coming loose in his hands. I should keep them in the picture. Tell them why I came.

He breathed. *Slop, slop.* Then breathed to still his nerves. “The monster has been at me to come and clean up this eye,” he said for the benefit of the new-trees.

The new-trees rustled their leaves. There wasn't any wind.

Silver sat down between the Pan and Stella trees. Tardi knew Pan's tree by the arm-shape of one of the branches.

He shuddered again. *That arm!*

Silver looked at Tardi with his ears pricked up ready to take in any nuance of Tardi's behaviour.

"I don't know either why there's an eye out here in the wild. You've probably noticed these black algae lumping over the surface, and the stuff suppurating from the gap in the rim?" *Am I a fool or what?*

A holo-like image, of a pair of hands collecting non-degradable scraps of a shattered surfboard from the boil before it hit the beach, appeared on the surface of the well.

"Pick out the lumps with my bare hands?" Tardi said. "I don't think so. I'm not too keen to get infected with another alien disease. Two are enough."

The hands on the water faded.

Tardi harvested a bundle of soft grass, twisted and knotted it into a rough brush. Skimmed the algae from the surface of the water and slapped the brush against the outside of the concrete well-collar to shake the stuff off. Ditto the pus. "If the pus doesn't get wet again, it should die. I'm making this your problem, Joe Lorenzo."

A large blob resembling a lump of surf-battered jellyfish bobbed up. "I am waiting, the monster," said into his mind.

"The damned monster is waiting, it says," Tardi said. "Nothing new there. Waiting for what is my question?"

A dark circle grew in the center of the eyeball.

"The missing pupil appears," he said.

As if the monster played to an irony hardly realized, a tiny man-shape resembling Tardi centered in the pupil. *I will not be that pupil.*

But he had to know his status for sure, didn't he? Experimenting, Tardi-in-the-flesh blatted his dreads.

The little man-shape in the eye blatted its dreads.

Tardi stared at the alien eye balefully staring back at him. "So that mannikin is meant to be me?" he said as expressionlessly as he could manage. "No reflection I ever saw." He waited. *Any kind of reaction from the alien will do it for me.*

Nothing. Nada. Not a thing happened..

"I'm getting very confused," he said toward the trees. "First there is the virtual alien life form that seemingly uses me as a virtual glove. That's my brother Steve's reading of the situation. Then there was that whale-like creature that took my friend Poul as its pilot."

The new trees rustled.

“Yeah, okay. Poul *choose* to go with it. Though it will be a miracle if he is still alive, is my thought. And that’s not all. There’s also the conglomerate-being in Zoo Hall, which various people are calling the Huddle. The only creatures in that that I know about personally, are the female ancestor of the dog sitting between Pan and Stella. Plus, the Neanderthal child whom I saw in one of my hallucinations ...”

His voice faded as the tree he had a relationship with—the one which had lent him one of its branches—seemed to be about to step nearer. *To listen better?* Hahaha, the wind in its branches, of course.

He continued. “And, a golden ball being rolled by that child. The ball with eyes all along its equator, is probably also is a *creature*. Rippletime fashions tell me there are also a lavender leg, a great hand, and a white ape.”

He half-turned to talk at the eye in the well. “If all those are you, why do you need me?”

A parchment-colored skin filmed over the great eye.

Tardi laughed. “It’s trying to tell me to forget it all?” He made it a question to let the trees know *he* wouldn’t be forgetting anything.

The well’s pupil turned grey under the parchment-skin.

“There’s some more encouragement to forget,” Tardi said. “But with our human minds we can *seem* to forget, and later trawl the data all back up again.” *Slop, slop.* “That’s what I’ll be doing. *Seeming* to forget. Though I’m not leaving without a sample toward finding a cure, which I am hoping will work for you people as well,” he said toward the new-trees.

He set a hand to support himself on the concrete edge, fingers on the outside, thumb laying along the rim and well away from the break that cost Del her balance. He leaned over the well with the bottle minus its spray attachment in his other hand.

The surface of the water turned blue with no reflections of anything, of him, miniature or normal-sized.

“No reflections? Is that a warning? You know you’re not going to be able to stop me getting this.” Tardi dipped the mouth of the bottle below the surface to begin filling it.

The bottle buoyed up.

He tried again, pressing the end of the bottle down with his little finger.

The bottle skated from his grip and he punched through the blue surface into the jelly resistance below.

The eye rose with moisture pooling in the dent he’d made.

He almost vomited. Sweated pure fear. Breathed himself calm. “I *will* take a sample.” He breathed in. Gentled the bottle down with the tips of his thumb and fingers lightly touching the surface of the eye. The silvery alien-eye-water slurped into the bottle mouth.

He breathed out and set the bottle beside the well. “Don’t touch this, anyone.” Which was a warning to Silver as well as the attentive new-trees.

He loosened his shoulders and stretched. Jogged around the clearing. With arms outstretched, he kited down the road. At the creek he dredged up a handful of sand and scrubbed every place on himself that might have touched the eye and its tears.

Then he gathered palm fronds and dragged them back to the well, to tent them over it.

With that done, he screwed the spray attachment onto the sample bottle and hooked it over his waistband beside the water bottle. “Be good,” he said to the trees. Jogged away with Silver loping after him.

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Frasers Road was the obvious easiest way down from the ranges, especially with the sun setting behind them. Silver pushed past to be in front, his fur crackling along Tardi’s shin reminded Tardi of his plan to be-friend the animal.

He picked up a stick and threw it forward. Silver leaped to the throw, following his clicking jaw-grab with a complete somersault—all four paws off the ground.

Tardi applauded when Silver landed, trotted back, and laid the stick at Tardi’s feet. The dog smiled open-mouthed just like Argie would’ve. Tardi scooped the stick up and threw it in one move.

Silver bounded after it and caught it with a sideways fling of his head. Turned and galloped back.

Tardi grabbed the stick and twisted to Silver’s ferret-quick turn about his leg, the frisson of the electrical charge enlivening his sap so that it sped through his veins. He laughed. How alive he felt! This time he leaped into his throw with a shout.

Silver skimmed between Tardi’s legs and sprang to sail above ground for half-a-dozen metres before tipping the road surface with a back paw for extra take-off. He grabbed the stick while in the air and upon landing, pranced back to Tardi.

Tardi clowned a throw of a *humongous* distance and dropped the stick behind his back.

Not tricked for a second, Silver skittled Tardi in his hurry to get there.

He fell, laughing.

Wagging his hindquarters, Silver licked Tardi’s face, hands, and his face again.

The opportunity he’d been waiting for. He dug his hands into Silver’s neck fur. *Where is the PP gadget?*

The dog sprang away from his hands and growled in an unbroken rumble until Tardi climbed back to his feet.

“Broke the spell, didn’t I?”

In answer, the dog set his teeth into the bottom of Tardi's pant leg and turned him shuffling with baby steps to face south-east. Then seemed to stand there ready to wag his tail, should Tardi decide to start walking in that direction, or so it felt. He tested it by starting back the way they'd come.

The dog clamped his jaws round Tardi's whole leg and growled between its teeth.

"Ahh! I get it! Let go! All right. East I go!"

When they faced east again Silver let go and Tardi inspected his leg. His pant leg saved him and plus it was his woody leg. The skin not broken, his bark only bruised. Probably the dog hadn't bit down as hard as he could.

"I get you," he said again. "You meant it. I hate having to give in. There will be consequences, you hear?" All of this delivered in a monotone. No way did he want *this* dog to read the tone of his voice. He'd have to find a weapon somewhere along the way with which to protect himself, in case it came to that.

They left the road, which further on would join Left Bank Road, and climbed down the lower flanks of the dusky ranges, with Tardi finally appreciating his tree toes for gripping stones and narrow ledges. The dog herded him through steep, weedy paddocks and around shadowy impenetrable clumps of camphor laurel trees, tobacco bush and groundsel twined together with lantana. They headed south-east, always further toward the dark.

The thing that kept Tardi going was that he'd get through it. After the monster was done with, and the disease had been cured, he'd build himself a new, normal life.

The monster, by way of its snorkel, spurted red virtual water up his nose.

Tardi grinned. *I will not factor in the monster. Learning about it all the time has to mean that I'll overcome it in the end.*

Now the way was downhill. Every time he slowed, the dog nudged him in the back of his legs. Or Silver ran forward to be alongside to prevent him veering toward the cliff top to see Steve. *Like you can read my mind.*

Of course he's reading my mind. At least Steve is safe from the monster. As they passed Col Smith's compound, there wasn't even the ticking of gate machinery, and the hoverole still stood on its edge in the ditch.

They jogged along the road circling the top of Montecollum. The crossroads were the next feature in the dark landscape. An eerie light glowed around the bend in the road. Silver stalked forward ahead of Tardi.

Tardi hesitated. He could swerve into the forest while the dog was distracted. *Make my getaway ... That light though, what is that?* He followed Silver.

Another silver dog stood in the center of the crossroads. It glowed so brightly that Tardi could distinguish its every hair. Despite that it was night by now and starlight didn't reach in under leafy dome. *Slop, slop.*

Silver stalked forward and Tardi tensed for a fight.

Coming level with the new dog, Silver walked into it.

Huh? The dogs melded? Tardi recalled Steve's hysteria about seeing the same thing. My sorries, little brother!

The combined dog turned to Tardi. Its head was level with his waist. It wagged its tail as if encouraging him to pat it. But should he? *I still want that hand.*

The dog bounced and barked like a large pup.

He reached out, then hesitated. "Is that you, Argie?" The dog-meld came forward and stopped when Tardi's hand was on its head.

He swallowed. "Argie," he croaked, hugging the dog. "Lilly doesn't need you anymore?" No answer, of course.