

## 42: Flag Hill

Tardi jogged to catch up with the melded dog walking east. The meld seemed to have so much of Argie in it, he could probably stop worrying about Silver being part of it.

The monster pulled the memory of a bunch of playing pups up out of him, then added them silvering in and out of visibility. The glow from the whole litter was a creamy gold.

“Very pretty,” Tardi said though there were no new-trees present. “Those pups were black and white, I thought.” It was difficult just to *think* at the monster. Talking seemed the better option. *Feels like I’ve still got a bit of personal agency, like I’m not totally under the puppeteer’s control?*

The vision faded.

“Are we making for Flag Hill?” Tardi said. The fact that they were making their way east along Coolamon Scenic Drive and the memory grab of the pups put him in mind of the dog kennels in the basement at the Beauty Labs.

*Waiting. Waiting.* He visualized the ComLink pole on Flag Hill. Immediately, he had a view of the pole in the wider landscape in his mind’s eye, a shot from one of his Virtual Surfing tourist promos. Or, in other words, the monster had finessed its communication-with-visual-memories.

They neared Jack Fusel’s property. The same Jack Fusel who was his father’s driver before Tardi got his trucker’s license. How long ago that seemed. “Maybe beg a sandwich and borrow a ride?” he said.

The dog licked his hand apologetically and hurried him past.

This suggested a plague-struck outcome for Jack Fusel. Tardi jogged on. They came to a patch of berry tomatoes growing wild near the top of Lottie Scarab’s Lookout. Tardi grabbed berries left and right and chomped them down. The dog was now visible all the time and lighting their way. *I wonder why Lilly doesn’t need Argie anymore?*

He almost stumbled through not attending to the road—tripping over a cast-iron pot which lay half hidden in the ashes of a cook fire right beside the road. He had the lid off and the damper out in a second.

Some of the trees nearby looked new. He set twigs in the ground against the wind taking them, a 3D approximation of his sign, big T with a little t beside it because he hadn’t got very far yet with the taming.

He and the Argie-Silver combo ate the bread while walking, him pulling it from the loaf with the combo wagging its tail for its share.

Whenever he looked to the horizon, there was the ocean, a rumpled sheet of dark green with the moon’s reflection a silvery blob. Half the time his toes curled trying to grip his surfboard’s waxed surface. The glassy green wall curling over in his mind glimmered with limbs and bodies of fellow surfers ducking and smearing bubbles as they paddled to the break.

Then he realized. “Why no red suddenly?”

The Argie-Silver combo stopped and stared Tardi to a stop.

His heart thudded, because who was training who? *Slop, slop.*

Five dogs appeared holo-style. Each sat ears up in the alert mode, in its own hutch, in a dank dark place reminiscent of the basement beneath the Beauty Labs. The holo held, held, then faded.

The day around him was still gold and blue and friendly. Make that, friendly seeming. Was that the meld growling? He studied the dog smiling back at him. Not the dog growling. But he definitely heard a pulsing growl in the landscape. He dropped to the grassy road surface and crawled to the left edge of the road. Wagging their tail, Argie-Silver was there before him.

Myocum Valley was spread below, a patchwork of mangrove trees and water. The tide was on the rise and in some places the ground never dried out and there—sunlight or moonlight—there were always reflections.

He could still hear that growling. He dropped his gaze to the road on its stilts.

A stream of southbound flashes accompanied the slowly travelling grumble of ... *Ha!* He'd forgotten the sound of trucks so soon?

Laughing felt good. *Free.* He laughed again. It was as if the monster's hold on him slipped when he laughed. As if it had nowhere to tangle. *I should do something with that right now!* He got his feet under him and galumphed down the hill. Or would have, if the tree-in-him had answered to the impulse. His toe roots clamped to the unmoving rocks.

“Aa-aa-ah!” He slammed down on stones and wood-litter hidden under ferns and grass. Funny how he observed all that in slow motion but could do nothing to prevent his arms and legs and ribs bending and bruising. He managed to save his head only by curling his arms over it and that was all. *Could've killed yourself, stupid.*

Argie-Silver licked his face and clamped its teeth kindly around his shoulder.

“Ahh-ah-ah, Argie! Let me go!”

The dog dragged him back up the hill with his legs, butt and back scraping on whatever lay in his path.

*The dog does not listen to you, tree hair. There is no getting away.* The monster showed him the same dogs again, sitting watchfully in their hutches.

“And me do what?” he said.

Imagery again. Not something he particularly remembered, his hands unlocking the Eventing Utility trailer, with a close-up of the padlock.

“Ha-ha-ha! You can't do padlocks?” He climbed to his feet. “In return, I want to be cured, do you hear?” He was down to grasping at straws. Using a memory, he pictured himself normally human. Then Steve and Lilly as normal humans, using his memories of them.

Zach's ladies, and Del and Lilly's people, how he imagined them.

Argie-Silver shoved at him. "Woof." In other words, walk.

He walked. When they reached the T-intersection of Coolamon Scenic Drive with Main Road, the traffic was long gone. Probably it was another of the controlled schedule freight runs.

The sound of a hoverole approaching, whining at speed, was a surprise enough that the dog-meld encouraged Tardi to hide by pushing him with its nose into a stand of feral sugar cane. The meld itself shimmered into invisibility.

The hoverole had barely flurried to a stop when Rowan jumped out in a white-heat fury. "You double-crossing horse rider!" she yelled.

The truck jockey jumped out the other side and put a couple of fingers into his mouth. *Pheet!*

Half-a-dozen figures in white anti-contamination suits swarmed down the dark tussocked face of the hill on the other side of Main Road.

"You bastard!" Rowan shouted. "You were never going to take me south, were you?"

The jockey laughed. "With *that* price on your head? Hasta la vista, baby!" He threw himself back into the vehicle, freed the brake and side-swooped past Rowan on his way south.

A couple of the suits were on the road by now, and Rowan sprinted for the hill, possibly not realizing there were more of the suits there, on their way down. She hadn't a chance but she struggled so valiantly that she almost brought the whole troop of them rolling down.

Tardi laughed silently, green tears spattering. Then sobered. "Hurry up, fools. Get her up the hill so I can scoot across and watch you go to your lair."

When he crested the top of the hill following after them, the whole party was making for a small, flat-roofed glass-walled enclosure that beacons with light in the middle of the hilltop. He zigzagged among the vegetation to stay unseen, crawling when he needed to take himself off the horizon. Not that he saw anyone on sentry duty. Whenever he stopped, the still invisible dog-meld licked him to tell him it was keeping up.

The two suits who had Rowan between them, edged through the doors of the foyer-sized glass house. The rest followed one by one. The scrum in there of people getting changed out of their plastic white coveralls resembled a view through the porthole of an iconic front-loading washer. An elevator took people away in twos and threes.

"All gone," Tardi said.

Argie-Silver nudged him, perhaps telling him to get on with it?

An image of an alarm clock ticking was the answer. He swallowed down a nervous laugh. *The only dial-style clock in my head is Poul's old railway clock in his workshop, ten times the size of this one?*

The monster's clock ticked louder.

“All right! All right!” Still on his knees, he studied the approach, recalling that The Beauty Lab itself was a slab of fancy glass clinging to the steep side of Hayters Hill, out of sight from this direction. The little glass-walled building was The Beauty Lab’s foyer, built especially for the reception of VIPs coming by flycar.

Argie-Silver, now visible, nosed in under Tardi’s arm and stared at a dog door inset in an area of glass beside the human-sized doors.

“You’re too big,” Tardi said.

No answer. *Can it be that this concept is new to the monster?* Clock ticking. He visualized the impossibility of forcing the dog through the flap. Immediately the meld split into its separate dog components. One stepped forward and slurped its tongue over Tardi’s cheek.

“Argie boy!” He hugged the dog, digging through his neck fur to make sure. *No gadget.* “I’m that happy having you back.” His voice broke and for a minute he had to work at squashing down the warm bubbly happiness in his chest. *Don’t go there, Tar-boy.*

Though Argie seemed to go by Tardi’s facial expressions and the tone of his voice, Tardi couldn’t now be sure that Argie was still separate from the monster’s increasingly sophisticated control. *It’d be good if at least some of Tar-boy’s emotions remain unknown to it,* Tardi thought cynically.

He pictured the remaining animal lying down alongside the building in waiting mode and Silver stalked to that place, sat down on his haunches and faded.

Argie became brighter.

*Don’t get too confident, tree hair,* Tardi thought without imagery. *The monster is in attendance.*

Argie pushed at the flap on the dog door with his nose. Looked at Tardi then looked at his pocket.

“Yep, we need the gadget. Though I’m going first, mate.” Shoving Argie aside, Tardi rounded his shoulders and forced himself diagonally through the flap. Arms in one by one. Half in, he could leverage off the dog door’s surrounds with his hands and push and pull the rest of himself through.

When his pocket with the gadget in it came through, a primitive signal light flashed along a LED cable that, starting above the dog entry flap and rising up, continued along the top of the wall and into the rest of the complex.

*Damn.*

Argie muscled in after him.

A stroke of luck was that the white suits hung in the foyer. The staff not being suited up gave Tardi a much better chance of defending himself. He reached back through the flap for the spray bottle. Should he suspect that no one raced to investigate because they were busy with Rowan?

He hurried just the same. Was this little elevator the only way out? A door tucked beside it. Labelled EXIT, had to be a fire escape.

Argie stepped onto the sensory matting and sniffed at the door. Which opened. Tardi chuckled. *Argie's weight on the sensory matting.*

*Not a fire escape.* The door exited into the main corridor which he recognized from when he did freight deliveries here. He hurdled through the doorway to not touch the matting and alert security.

He and Argie entered the main elevator. *Tick-tock, tick-tock,* said the alien's alarm clock. Tardi swiped Argie's gadget past a touch pad at a dog's height.

The elevator went down three stops. Its doors slid aside.

*Ha-ha.* He'd done freight deliveries to this corridor by way of the loading dock at the other end. Storerooms and utilities were on the left, labs and treatment rooms to the right.

Argie made a beeline down the corridor to a wider set of stairs down. According to one of Steve's data dumps, the basement beside the loading dock was where the dogs were kenneled. Tardi followed him, and at the door into the kennel room flashed the transmitter for entry.

The door opened. In the kennel room, the LED signal separated five ways. Two blobs pulsed to the numbers 3 and 2 painted on the front of a pair of open and empty hutches. A third pulse went to number 4, also empty. Two LEDs in steady state glowed over hutches 1 and 5, and both these dogs were at home though on their feet and obviously waiting.

Argie went to stand in front of number 3. Tardi thrust the gadget into his neck ruff. Argie ran in, nosed the back of the crate and the LED above his hutch switched to a steady glow. Tardi stopped the gate sliding shut and Argie backed out.

"Good dog," he said, patting Argie. He grabbed the gadget and repocketed it. Now, to release 1 and 5. He almost laughed out loud. Why padlocks in this day and age? He cast about for keys. They weren't on the workbench fitted along the near wall or on a hook near the stainless-steel dog bath area in the opposite corner. Hopefully they were not hanging from the belt of a dog handler, wherever they were.

*Ah. My lucky day!* A bundle of keys hung from a key in the padlock on number 4's open door, as if that dog was taken out in a hurry. Tardi could now easily release the two dogs still locked in their hutches. *Mmm, except that their lights would then begin to pulse here in the basement, and who knew where else?*

*Nothing for it but to yank loose a couple of wires, handily numbered, from the do-it-yourself power-board. No sooner thought than done.* Tardi led the dogs up six flights of stairs, too risky now to use the elevator. Outside, the melee of dogs greeted each other excitedly, though silently, and with many an excited lick and nip, melded themselves into a three-combo, leaving Argie his normal size.

"Stay," Tardi told the pony-sized Silver-combo. *What size will they be with all five?* He forced himself back through the dog door, this time with Argie in the lead.