

43: The Girl He Once Loved

The second door on the right slid open when Tardi and Argie approached. It seemed that the dogs had free range through the facility but perhaps no one expected them to be without their handlers. A bunch of people surrounded Rowan backed against a bench by a three-story-high bronze-glass wall. Three were staff at the Beauty Lab. He'd met them delivering their supplies.

Clarice was the head of the Lab, Steve's particular friend. Only four strangers meant there was a whole squad more somewhere else in the complex.

Rowan noticed him right away. Her eyes widened. Probably with a plan.

Fortunately, Argie was behind the lab's benches, still out of sight of them all.

"I tried to tell them!" Rowan yelled at him.

Every head turned, taking the heat off her. He was that cynical about her now. The nearest unknown was a guy of approximately his own age, in uniform shorts, shirt sleeves rolled up, and with a badge of a dog head, on his breast pocket. He stank of raw disinfectant overlaying a kennel smell. He held the end of a lead, which presumably went to the missing dog, also out of sight.

Half hidden behind her compatriot, the furthest individual unknown to Tardi was reflected in the glass wall beside her. She loaded a spider-bite, one of the newer, twice-as-fast double-hypodermics, and was dressed in the white coat, plastic gloves and respiration mask of a scientist working with something particularly nasty.

While stepping forward, Tardi reached back for *his* spray bottle with the alien well water. "Don't!" he said. He estimated her distance. Priming his bottle with a glittering spray into the air above his head, he mimed his actions should she attempt her shot.

Rowan cannoned into the woman, as though she was working with Tardi, and rose triumphant with the spider-bite in her hand. The disinfectant-smelling one started to move, perhaps to help up his boss, but stopped at the growling of a dog.

Argie stepped into view.

"It worked!" he crowed. "It worked! One of the dogs brought back a tree conversion!" He smiled broadly.

"You're jumping to conclusions," Tardi said. He had to get the man's attention from the dogs. He flashed visuals of his throwing sticks game with Silver at the monster with Tardi falling backward over Silver. Flashed Argie standing behind the kennel man. "What's the story so far?" he said.

Rowan didn't miss a beat. "I was telling them how you infected me ..."

"I don't mind who starts so long as it is Clarice," Tardi said.

Rowan shut up with a quizzical expression on her face.

Let her wonder.

“They,” Clarice said with a vicious gesture encompassing all things Procyon Products, “Arrived with a story about a stolen treasure, dust from another star system and its attraction to itself. When I was reluctant—I mean who’d believe such a story—they told me it didn’t matter what I thought, they’d bought the building lock and stock.”

She shrugged. “I had my business to think of. My customers. The next day PP installed the dog door and brought the dogs.”

“You knew about this,” Tardi said to Rowan.

“Only that there were dogs here. Guard dogs, I thought. I told you your problem. Your itchless ticks have fragmented. You’ve been reprogrammed by whoever hacked into the communication network. How does it feel, having a holo-mask superimposed over you 24/7?” she said.

Tardi laughed. “Is that what you think is wrong with yourself? Don’t you wonder how it will feel being reformatted? How much of your previous life will remain? I suppose you’re thinking we could start over with a clean slate?”

Her face brightened.

“Don’t even think it. And I was joking about the reformatting.” He scratched at the green nubbins along his jaw. “My zits are itchy,” he said. “They’re part of the disease. Have you got any yet?”

Rowan blanched. The staff of the Beauty Labs widened the circle, leaving her marooned. “I should sue you for grievous bodily harm,” she said.

“Nothing to do with that tainted water produced at the Reefarium?” Tardi said. “Aka Procyon Product’ seaside facility?”

“Tainted water?” Several people exclaimed with varying emotions.

“Tardi is such a joker,” Rowan said. “I was in the way of some kiddy spraying silver water around here and there. Her mother was using the stuff as fertilizer. Where did you say they got it from, Tar?”

Does she really think I will just fall in line? Of course she does. He always had before. “The kiddy’s daddy brought it. He was a Procyon Products employee, I believe.”

The monster inserted two images into his mind. The two dogs melding; and the dog-meld pressing against the back of the dog handler’s legs.

Tardi risked a real-life corner-of-his-eye glance. *Yep, the dogs are set to go.*

The scientist crowed. “The sample stolen from our labs at the Reefarium. The dogs have had the dust fed to them since birth. This was the perfect opportunity to test a variation of the dust-to-dust attraction.”

“How’s it work when the stuff is sprayed all over the countryside?” Tardi said. Lucky for him

that the PP personnel wanted to explain despite his irony.

“We started with light-fiber-fur augmented pups,” said the dog handler. “We picked them, with that fur I mean, because we already knew some of the things the alien could do. The lighting-up, for instance. Anyway, the pups were fed the alien’s dust, a 500-micron dose every day until we brought them out here for field trials.”

“What about the little transmitters?” Tardi said.

“Stupid, aren’t they?” the dog handler said. “I tell you, I’ve had nothing but trouble with the distance command. Which is why I’m so pleased to see you and the dog.”

“What I don’t understand is how PP knew to come to Byron Shire? Straight to the place where that stolen sample was taken?”

The dog handler blushed.

“And how you knew what, or rather who, the dogs should be bringing back?”

“It was a test,” the guy said. He looked deflated. “To see what they could do.”

“You planned a manhunt,” Tardi said. “It’s rather surprising to see the EMBers still not here. Been bought off, have they?”

The scientist snorted. “The powers that were. We forced a writ through the legal system to allow only Procyon Products to explore what the dust does to the environment. Nowadays, we can move in as soon as the dust is out of the bag, so to speak. We’ll give the EMBers a look-in at the end, when we need to ceramicize the final products. Have you seen yourself? You surely don’t expect to be allowed—”

“Isn’t it about time we put our signatures somewhere?” Rowan stared her most begging beseeching expression at him.

“Didn’t you take in any of what that PP woman just said?”

“Tardi, please. You aren’t yourself.” She wove a please-do-it-for-me pattern with her hands, glancing this way and that getting her press gang ready, including both the dog handler and the scientist in her plan. She’d probably told them that she’d be the better person to trap him. That he trusted her.

He shrugged. “Did they send an antidote along with you in case you were infected?” He addressed this to the scientist.

She laughed. “Don’t bother running. There are barriers going up as we speak. We’ve brought in hundreds of people. Nothing is going to interfere with the most amazing *accidental* human subject trial yet.”

That was enough provocation. Tardi stepped forward and sprayed the group indiscriminately. The dog handler stepped back and fell over the dog combo. A couple of people trying to grab Tardi fell over the dog handler.

Tardi ran for the fire stairs. The Argie-Number Four combo, after a brief skirmish using its

glowing eyes and a toothy snarling grimace to good effect, freed itself and sprang after him.

“Wait!” Rowan shouted, following them. “This massing at the borders thing, I saw that. The jockey took me there first to hand me over and collect the reward.” She was flushed with excitement, running down the stairs, level with him now.

“What stopped him?” Tardi said, having to let her believe for just this half-minute that she’d won and that she still had him in her power.

“I told them he’d been sprayed when I was. Then, of course, they wanted him too. We only got away because he was a brilliant driver.” At ground level, as they ran outside, she grabbed his hand and he marked time.

Argie sprang onto the retaining wall ledge beside the doors.

Rowan started her spiel. “I negotiated the best accommodation, chauffeur-jockeyed transport, and a private chef. Plus, there are all the other goodies. Like travel out of this dump—”

He pulled loose and leaped onto the ledge. “You should get out while you can.” He grabbed the combo’s tail to get a boost up the steep face of the hill and left Rowan behind.