

#### 44: The Get Away

Pulled by the Argie-meld, Tardi took five giant steps to the top of Hayters Hill.

“Hey, the tree conversion is fading!” one of his pursuers yelled.

Tardi felt queasy watching himself disappear. His hands, even the one not hanging onto the Argie-meld’s tail, went first. His blue pant legs went slower than his grey sleeves. The process looked like it should prickle but he felt nothing. Where the slope eased, he let go of Argie’s tail and began to shimmer back into visibility.

“Up there! He’s up your way!” Lucky for him, people shouted instead of communicating by their implants.

A mob of Procyon Product’s white suits roiled from the foyer. “Uh oh, Argie-boy. Give’s a hold.”

His two-dog-meld was tall enough that he could walk with his fist buried in their shoulder ruff. Between stumbling from hillock to hole on the top of the hill—he couldn’t see where to put his invisible feet—he laughed at the appearance of the other dog-meld, containing the remaining three dogs, and approximately the size of a lion among the white-clad troops.

They scattered and fell back. While their attention was on *that* dog-meld’s snarling attack, Tardi following Argie-and-Number 4 slipped by them invisible and unnoticed.

Falling and clambering down the hill, they reached the clump of wild sugar cane on the other side of the crossroad from where he’d watched Rowan get captured. He stopped to look back. As if PP’s operatives finally realized the uselessness of the exercise, the white suits gave up the search and trooped out of sight. Not long after, the whine of fly-cars started up.

In the new stillness of the shire, he could easily hear where each of them went. “They’re off to the depot, the Slummery and the beach,” he said to Argie. “I suppose Rowan is telling them where I live and hang out.”

The need for a decision loomed over him. Where to go? What to do? If only he could feel that any decision that he made would be his own to act upon. His brain hurt. Being on the move might help with his thinking, plus he still had the tree roots to try and wear away.

He jogged back along Coolamon Scenic Drive. Both the dog-melds split into their components, and a troop of silver dogs gamboled around him.

Vapor-edged clouds, unusual for winter, bulked and slid by each other overhead. Misty rain fell so slowly that the drops seemed to be held in suspension in the last rays of the sun. The rain gave him something to concentrate on other than the intractable knot of his life. The droplets collected on his invisible self and finally slid off him. It was like he was made of glass so clean as to be one hundred percent transparent. Like his place in the world was emptied out.

He pulled away sharply from whichever of the dogs ran by his legs, and his rain-etched outline filled with his substance. That was the shimmer, a swift but random refilling of pieces of colour. The nearest dog’s expression was reproachful.

Tardi patted the animal like they were an ordinary man-and-his-dog pair. "It's okay, boy. Friends?"

That dog stayed visible. Which meant, if he went on experience, that the monster was attending. The dog shimmered. Was the monster's attention on the dog now suddenly gone? Or, had the monster tricked him? Or, was it playing hard to get? A bit like Rowan sometimes when she wanted to be in charge.

He twisted his lips to make his laughter a sneer. Because damn, how often when she needed him, had he given Rowan exactly what she wanted? *Not an option in this case.* What did Ace say? To tame, he'd first need to tame himself? *Still don't really know what that means.*

He ran again, faster. Clouds meant a moonless darkness even along the top of the ridge. Already it was as if he ran along an unending jetty between two fogbound lakes. The dogs re-melded. The whole five-in-one was bigger than any horse he'd ever seen and glowed like a fairytale unicorn. *Watch out, Tar-boy.*

They approached the Montecollum intersection. He pictured the scenic route to Blindmouth.

The five-in-one fell back until it breathed down his neck. It grabbed his pack and shoulder between its jaws, twisted its neck and slung him onto its back where he slipped and slid until managing to straddle the creature's shoulders and grab a couple of bunches of light-cable fur to wrap around his hands.

The dog-meld took a run up and hurtled itself into the air. It ran, and even without wings, made good progress down the hill then up the valley.

The coastline air was busy with wasp-like search-and-capture drones and flycars. Pattern flying was what it looked like, them working their way up the catchment.

The ComLink must still be down because if he'd been visible to Pole-Watchers jacked with phone links, he'd have been caught in the first three minutes.

The dog-meld made short work of the journey to the Loreno farm, a destination the monster would've picked out of his memories as the place he knew at Blindmouth, meaning it didn't yet know his real destination.

As they arrived in Del's front yard, he rolled from the great dog's back. *Slop, slop. Pure habit.* Plus, he was finding that it helped him to think without visualizing.

Zach's hoverole sat beside Pan's harrier. Why would Rowan's Uncle Zach be *here*? "Halloo?" He went into the house despite no one answering.

A hand-written note under a rock lay on the table:

*Tar, dinner in the fridge, love from Del. We've gone to look for a cure, Zach. XoX, Lilly.*

He found a round of sweet potato frittata in the fridge. He sat down in Del's solid old office chair for a minute, chomping on the frittata. There was something strange about Del's display board above her desk. Finally, he saw the damp tea bags hanging from a nail in the corner of the board.

“What the heck,” he said to Argie, the only dog in the house with him. “It’s a strange place to drain a couple of tea bags. Do you think it’s a sign?” One of the bags looked quite thick.  
*Something in it? Ah. A data cube.*

He slotted the cube into Del’s geriatric standalone. It was a recording of Del, probably recorded by Zach, with a fast telling of the facts as she thought of them, mostly out of sequence. “Tar, you are a wanted tree and Rowan knows this place too,” Del said. “None of Zach’s ointment recipes work for longer than a couple of hours.”

He tensed as Argie sat down by his leg. Paused the telling. Would the monster, using the dog as a conduit, hijack his memories of Del, Zach and Lilly? He cleared dread from his throat.  
*Just do not visualize.*

Gingerly he hugged the dog for a touch of a warm, live friend.

No reaction from the entity in him.

He hit the Resume button. “We took the rest of the fuel from the harrier against accidents,” Del said.

*Bye bye birdie. Find another way, tree man.*

“Rowan is in a fury because PP aren’t going ahead with her contract if they can’t have you. Zach had to leave home because she was so insistent that he help her find you.”

Argie whined a warning.

Tardi heard the buzz of a mob of aerial transports approaching. He lurched up and sprang out the back door, crossing half the vegetable garden in one giant stride. He stumbled diagonally across the sweet potato field, tripping and nearly falling over every ridge hidden in the creeper foliage, slid down the bank into the creek, and finally slithered down a waterfall.

Argie leaped over his head and into invisibility.

Feeling broken, Tardi scrambled to hide among the casuarina trees growing in the gravelly, semi-dry creek bed—in plain view—to try and be a tree among his tree cousins.

Search-and-capture drones whined overhead, their nets partially deployed. The drones, though dreadfully near, seemed not to see him among the casuarina tree trunks. They began a zigzag search pattern.

He concentrated on standing as still as a tree. *More irony.*

After a while, the drones closed formation and rose up the waterfall. The sounds of the various fly-cars in attendance faded away as well.