

## 45. Doomed?

Tardi relaxed.

I took your brother's pattern as we passed his tree, the monster said. He will make me a fine search engine.

Memories of little Steve, the black cistern, the eels, and then Steve the blond cyborg, reeled through Tardi's mind. "My brother doesn't do pictures," he said. "He'll be useless to you," he wanted to say. His hearing was good enough that he heard his own voice creaking like a tree in a storm.

I will adapt him to my needs.

He'd forgotten whether he knew that the monster could speak its thoughts straight into his awareness without having to back them with his visual memories? And he'd forgotten, or he didn't know, whether the monster could hear his thoughts. He needed to stop the monster yet he couldn't even move his feet?

Finally, he managed to bend his knees a bit. And he could just tilt his pelvis forward and so move his torso. His arms were stretched out straight for him to clench a couple of neighboring tree trunks. He'd forgotten a lot of things. His toes would be growing because he could only *think* slop slop now.

But slumping was giving up. Just as well he couldn't. Slump. Couldn't slump. And continuing to stand around was not helping either. *I have to get loose!*

If I release you, you will be my waterman.

Just in time he remembered his resolve: do not think at it without pictures.

After a long wait, the monster fed him an image of Herm piggybacking Steve across a creek. At the same time such a blood-warmth flooded everywhere through Tardi's body that it was as if the tree-in-him was banished.

*Feels good. But might be nothing more than a carrot?* His toes still grappled the riverbed. He pictured Steve walking out of SoHAB, cured of his drowning.

The monster fell obediently back into that mode of communication, with a memory of Herm telling little Tardi, "No."

Could this be the taming the Stormies talked about?

In the morning the tree will be back.

Tardi recalled his reflection in Mrs Sef's bathroom mirror.

Because you are not Huddle, the monster said with a nightmare of dark hairy flanks, that lavender leg, various ferociously toothy smiles and a lot of feet.

He recalled it as an image straight from one of Zoo Hall's tourist handouts, of the so-called Huddle. Tardi dredged up a bunch of boys huddling around a fight.

You are not of a Huddle, the monster said with a huddle of girls.

Tardi tried to recall when and where he saw that bunch of girls caring for one of themselves within a hedge that they made around her. The warmth of his blood had begun to fade.

You are the first of my new Huddle. The monster showed him a bunch of him and his friends, capering. Pretending to fight.

He didn't remember it. Maybe when he was ten? He should try to hurry the process along. Why a Huddle?

I cannot live here.

This planet, Tardi supposed. He pictured the nightmarish parade of feet, legs and toothy smiles to remind the monster of the Huddle that the damned entity already had?

They are trapped. The monster showed him a bunch of people behind bars, an image Tardi might have extracted from a newscast. I cannot reach my ship. The next image was a news feature about pirates.

He would've grinned if his face not been so stiff, because in a close-up, the faces of the various Procyon Products employees he'd recently met were superimposed on the pirates.

I need a new Huddle to free me, to feed me, and to hide me until we can reformat this planet. We have much water to cross. You will be the first, the waterman.

Frightening how many words and ideas the monster knew. Tardi wanted to shout *no no no* to everything he heard. But he groaned, "I'll be your waterman. I promise."

*A promise made under duress doesn't count, someone in a movie once said.* At the time Tardi jeered. Twelve years old. Too young to appreciate what it meant. *A promise made under duress does not count.* He cricked his neck mightily, trying to turn his head to find the dog. His lungs were so stiff now that he could only manage a quick panting. The damned tree would be his coffin if he didn't get loose.

A three-in-one dog-meld glowed into visibility right in front of him. It rose on its hind legs. Placing its front paws onto Tardi's wooden shoulders, it breathed its doggy breath into his wooden face. The implacable, alien, eyes without pupils stared into him.

Tardi visualized himself as a man wading chest-deep in a monsoon flood, carrying a child on his shoulders. "Set me free." He dared not think the mantra again.

The dog-meld's alien eyes shuttered and it dropped to its four paws. It started a slow pacing around the west-hand tree trunk. Then it wended north between that tree trunk and Tardi, then between Tardi and the east-most tree.

The dog ran around that trunk, between the trunk and Tardi again, and between Tardi and the west-most tree. Ran around that tree and between that and Tardi. Faster and faster. A continuous dog skimmed by him on all sides at the same time and resembled a silver infinity sign. He closed his eyes on the dizzying swirl.

His blood effervesced wherever the dog touched. Its skin dragged his blood along his vessels and into his wooded parts, and forced his human blood to mix with his tree sap.

The clench of the wood loosened.

He could breathe again, properly, and took deep lungfuls of forest air. His hands warmed, and he released their cramping hold on his neighbors, finger by finger. His feet came loose out of the gravelly river ground. Crying ordinary salty tears, he *slop slopped* to a slab of stone.

Taking up a pattern caught in wood is easy compared to snaring you, my waterman.

The imagery was of the memories they had just made.