

46. The Dogs

Tardi stumbled along the creek bed. “You’re not even giving me any dog-light?” he said visualizing Silver lighting up the crossroads. The dark continued absolute. *Clack. Clatter.* His gnarly feet shifted stones. He stared wide-eyed for a glimmer of light. The ranges hid the new young moon and starlight didn’t reach the bottom of the gully.

But uh oh, a light in my mind. He saw shadows of pillars connecting walls in a large octagonal hall. An octagonal dome. *A light in Zoo Hall that looks like.*

He stopped. The monster fed him a series of images, some of them new. He saw a pair of little girls—one all but naked and *inside* a stoutly barred cage—the other with leaves in her dark curls *outside* the barrier that kept the public at a safe distance. The children played a game showing each other their hands and feet and funny faces.

Then he saw Del with her blond curls flanked by Zach with his wispy white hair. They stood behind the barrier, behind ... “That’s Lilly!” He started forward.

Tripped. Fell onto his hands and knees, still staring inward. Lilly ducked under the spectator barrier and slipped between the bars of the Moogerah Monster’s cage in Zoo Hall at SoHAB. Monstrous shadows hovered behind the child welcoming her.

“What are you going to do to her?”

The scene in his mind winked out, leaving the black-dark again. He shook his head, swinging it to and fro. He missed the dogs and not only because communication with the monster was so haphazard without them.

He rose. Stood. Didn’t breathe. His lips stung from something in the air. “Is that your fog?” *Why am I even asking?* Microscopic particles lit up as he glanced this way and that, confirming what he suspected.

Normal fog gathers in the bottoms of cool gullies. And so why wouldn’t the stuff with the exudate in it? He as good as saw it filling the lowest places. He threw himself at the black-shadowed hillside that he knew was there only by the way his voice echoed. *Climb!*

The vegetation was tussocks, with waist-high spikes. He dropped to his hands and knees to miss the worst of the prickles. It worked. He hurried as much as he could, crawling upward.

Loosened stones thudded down the hill and crashed into the creek bed. Rotten wood cracked under his weight. He didn’t mind scaring away spiky night creatures. He crawled over a stony bulging brow to lay flat on stone, gasping for breath. “I’m getting very unfit, bro,” he told Steve. *If that confuses the entity, good!*

Warmth brushed across his out-flung hand and left a wet place after it passed. He laughed, because what wild animal would lick a loud smelly intruder? “You’re up here! Not stupid, are you?” He spoke generally. Would all five of the dogs be here?

His mood lifted. Argie was the only one with the licking habit. He explored and found a sandy, warmed place which seemed too wide to have been made by just one dog’s body heat, even a dog as big as a horse. “Mind if I join you?”

The separated dogs flopped down around him, touching him on all sides, being the monster's conduit. *Show me more about Lilly*, he thought. He pictured a four-year-old human child with leaves and flowers in her dark curls.

The Huddle has her.

The monster's images of the Huddle included an arm the size of a small tree on a misshapen little body that was held up by straining, bowed legs. A small faun-like shape swaying on a pair of lavender, deer-like legs. A barrel-shaped female manikin. A fe-manikin?

They were the ones he knew about, augmented with detail he didn't. But first things first. "I thought *you* ruled?" he said.

The conglomerate of strange shapes that the monster called the Huddle, pushed and tweaked at a bulging, fleshy, grey-pink balloon squashed into a room-sized cage.

Lavender-legs lay on her back and pushed the swollen thing from underneath with her feet. A large-handed imp prodded at the bag with her fingers, now here and now there, while the bag filled itself with so much air that it bulged between the black bars of the cage front.

Tardi translated for himself. *The Huddle will bar the monster's escape*. He tried not to exult. *Get to know a bit more about the Huddle?* He gloated over having a plan. "What do they want with Lilly?" He concentrated on not feeling fear for her.

The Huddle must not know you.

Right. They must not know me. "But what about Lilly? And Del, the child's mother?"

The show continued regardless of his interjections. The other little girl retreated. She held up a grooved golden ball with eyes glittering in its segments. The ball rolled toward Lilly. Before it reached her, it reversed. Chasing the ball, Lilly ran around a curve in the wall and out of sight.

"What's that ball?" Tardi said.

I cannot be unfolded in gravity.

Tardi's lungs constricted, squeezing the air out. Refused to slacken no matter how hard he gulped.

I need you to carry me over the water to my ship.

"I need to breathe," he said with a faint image of him breathing.

The monster made him wait, then loosened its grip, suddenly.

I made it feel ... threatened? However I did that. And it threatened me back. He breathed deep for a while, stocking up on oxygen.

I cannot be unfolded in gravity.

"I get that," Tardi said quickly to forestall a repeat of the next thing. "You are the ball?" He had to work hard to keep his laughing amazement out of his voice.

You will take me to my ship. I will release my people, their data eggs, to unfold here on this water planet.

I get it even better now. "You were unfolded when you took Poul?" Tree sap fizzed through his arteries like champagne. He sweated clammily. How many more impossible diseases will they spread? A promise made under duress doesn't count. His thoughts stuttered with wanting to refuse the monster its will. You didn't evolve here. You can't have Earth. Why should we be extinguished so you can live?

He blinked. The sky had lightened. He moved delicately out of the dog scrum, without distancing himself from Argie. He raked his hands through Argie's light-cable fur. Knots slid down and out. Insects such as fleas seemed not to want anything to do with the silver dog fur. Not that Argie was silvered now. *I don't believe it. The monster is suddenly absent?*

Work with it. The Stormy village is not far. Could he see yet how far the ledge they were on continued along the escarpment?