

48: Tamer, Ready or Not

The undersides of green leaves flickered above him, revealing blue sky. There was a small breeze. The flesh between his thumb and forefinger throbbed. His hand had wrappings so thick they looked like a football on the end of his arm. He lifted his head.

Tree trunks planted close around the space made an outdoor room. He winced. He could be lying on a bare tabletop, the mattress was so unyielding. The sun glared between the left-side trunks highlighting a shadowed man-shape next to him on that side.

Tardi made out a skinny form. Bare feet. "Ace?" he said. "Why didn't you let me die?" He panted hard to get his breath. "Let the bastard monster die with me?"

"Remember when I bound you to us?" Ace said.

"Five hundred years ago?" But Tardi recalled Ace cutting him in the ball of his thumb and pressing it to a cut in his own. "Your blood is my blood," he mumbled.

"You were reluctant," Ace said.

"Didn't want to infect you."

"That out-world fish is too big for a man to carry by his lonesome."

"How come I didn't die?" Tardi said.

"The hot-blood cure," Ace said. "All cruisy when you are family and have got the same blood type."

Tardi breathed. "The monster did not like the snake's poison."

"That's good to know," Ace said.

Tardi let himself drift back to sleep.

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He opened his eyes to the same undersides of leaves and the same pieces of sky. *Deja vu*. But the light was in a slightly different place and there were more shadows.

"Get him onto his feet," came Ace's voice.

Ace off stage, Tardi thought. Remember that.

A pair of skinny Stormies stood either side of him, each taking one of his arms. Lifting. The one on the right stepped wide to get around the end of the bed. The one on the left marked time with his stubbled silver-grey jawbone right by Tardi's face. "We got you, Tamer."

Tardi remembered him from the road. "Trinnet."

"Himself," Trinnet said, looking pleased. He gestured with his head, a small move at the man on the right. "Our mate Shad."

"You warned me," Tardi said to Shad.

Shad nodded straight-faced and teary-eyed. He and Trinnet dragged Tardi up until he stood.

“Take him to the lookout,” Ace said.

After a couple of paces Tardi got the hang of walking.

“Don’t dream that I’m letting you loose with you so whimpery on your feet,” Shad said.

Beyond the tree trunk room, the sun shone from its highest point. The eastern horizon was the ocean. Tardi stared and stared, remembering its colours. Sapphire, aquamarine and deep green. “There’s no red in my mind,” he discovered.

Trinnet laughed. “We’ve been keeping the monster that busy,” he said.

Tardi imagined himself on his surfboard. He paddled out through the after-boil. White suds. He turned himself and the board and speared through the incoming wave. With the sun shining down on it, the ocean became a fluid green-blue glass magically cool enough to ride on. Next second it reflected the blue day. He bent into the ride.

“Better move him some, men,” Ace said.

Cranggg! A cracked bell tolled death to his dreams. He shifted his feet with what he now noticed were less-than-supple moves. In his mind he gnarled to his surfboard. Leaves fluttered from among his spray-wet dreads. Green twiglets grew from his knuckles and finger joints. *Slop, slop. You fool, tree hair, when did going backward in time ever work?*

He let Shad and Trinnet walk him back to the tree trunk room. They lined him up with the end of the bed and slid him onto it. Finally, he sat against a tree stump padded with a bundle of clothes.

“Remember when I bound you to us?” Ace said like he said it already fairly recently.

“You sound like you are reminding me,” Tardi said.

“If the shoe fits,” Ace said.

“You cut me. Your blood is my blood.” His future was grey, a flat ocean.

In the far far distance a surfer on a raw wooden plank rode a red bow wave made by a creature so big it ...

Wait? Why would the monster be warning me? Danger to me is danger to the monster’s hold over me, that’s why. Danger to me?

“After I left you, and after the storm on the way back here, I shared blood with some of the rest of us,” Ace said, beside him again.

“You infected them,” Tardi said. *Neutral delivery. Because where is this going?*

“It’s what we do. Share the goods and bads. How was it with the monstrous thing when he suddenly had a lot more souls to try and control?”

Tardi thought back. There had been fewer attempts at influencing him between him trying to get Argie back to normal, and the multiple dog slinging him onto its back at the top of

Montecollum. “You spread him thin for a while?”

“Put the spreading-thin in somewhere, Shad,” Trinnet said.

Tardi looked over at Shad and Trinnet hunkering against the tree trunks. He twitched his shoulder muscles to stop the sea-oak’s rootlets questing for the edge of his couch.

Shad’s lips moved as if he talked into a recording device.

“ComTooth?” Tardi asked.

Ace nodded. “We’re recording everything we discover about the monster.”

Tardi moved his feet and rubbed at root nubbins on his elbows. “Such as?”

“The alien’s mind works a bit like the eye of a fly,” Ace said. “All his dust, any bits and pieces, even those he loses physical control over and are taken up in our nature, are all equally alive.”

Shad butted into Ace’s storying. “And we’re thinking that he doesn’t like to lose mental control over the bits of himself in other mindful critters.”

“When he tries to start a conversation with one of us, we all start talking at him. He gets confused,” Trinnet said.

“I’m confused as well,” Tardi said. “You’re all acting as if what I did was a hiccup?”

“Useful to know,” Ace said again. “He can’t influence plants or trees to do things for him. Even snakes aren’t smart the way we are. It’s us he is interested in, thinking he can influence *us* to do his will. He’s told you what he wants?”

Silence. Them waiting.

“More than a hiccup, Tar. It were Round One to the Tamer,” Shad said.

Tardi grinned toward Shad. “Thanks, Cuz.” He sobered. “He, since you’re all calling him that, picked me for his waterman. To take him—the golden ball I think he means—to his ship, which, it sounds like, might be hidden elsewhere in the Archipelago.”

His eyes drooped. What was that about? He tried his level best to raise his eyelids by contracting his facial muscles.

You will be my waterman.

Tardi swore.

Ace silenced Trinnet and Shad with a look.

“It feels like he’s trying to force me to fall asleep so I don’t tell you the rest,” Tardi said through the fog descending over him. “Or maybe that’s just me being paranoid.”

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Tardi woke. More *deja vu*. Shad and Trinnet hunkered by the wall. Ace was beside him. Still

or again, what did he know? Ace waited to know what more Tardi knew, Tardi realized. “He’ll be in our cells the way you said. Or he’s in the bacteria in our gut. Using our energy. You all getting infected might’ve made him stronger.”

“We’ve got more than death adder venom in our lockers,” Ace said. “Go on.”

“When he’s strong in me again, he’ll try to force me to take him to where he can call his ship.”

That waiting silence again.

He felt rubbery, like he had no spine. He laughed. *A paradox, with all that wood in me as well.*

“Tar,” Shad said. “You’re the big-time Tamer. We’ve known that since the eels. Did they eat *you*? We’ve been getting ready since the coral for taking off with you. For being your road crew.”

“We think that this taming needs a larger place than just the local scene,” Ace said. “And we need a lot more information.”

In fact, both of these statements pointed Tardi toward his future. He wanted to run the what-where-why-and-how sequence by them but as usual there was no-time-now. If he ever got a minute to think it all through, it’d be the longest minute in history. “Some of it will be so totally bizarre you won’t want to believe it,” Tardi said. “You’re hungering for that?”

They nodded. Waited.

No more stalling, tree hair. “The monster’s ship is full of data pods. His people. Sometimes they are swimmers and will live in our oceans. Sometimes they are land animals, a large look-alike to a golden slater unrolled. We humans will be their life-support systems the way that that bunch of poor beings in Zoo Hall are his life-support system.”

He yawned but pressed on. “He’s in them the way he’s in me and now you. When he and his people get a critical mass on Earth, I’m guessing, they’ll reformat the landscape to suit their kind. Do without us then.”

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He opened his eyes. Yawned. The leaves above him were silver and shadowed. “How long did I sleep?”

“Sure you’re awake?” Ace said from beside him.

Ace’s false jocularly made Tardi feel obstreperous. *No one bothers to ask me what I think, but Ace thinks everything Ace wants is a sure thing?* “What do you mean for me to achieve?” Tardi said. “I mean, why the taming?” He slop slopped in his mind, feeling like he needed to trample down illusions that would confuse.

Ace stared like he didn’t know Tardi and that truly was the case. Three meetings in twenty-three years did not add up to knowing a person. Tardi watched Ace constructing an answer. Seemed like he had quite a bit of stuff to sift through.

“I mean for Stormies to have control over the powers of the monstrous entity,” Ace said at last. “There’s a whole lot of good we can do with it.”

Maybe Ace thought he saw doubt on Tardi’s inscrutable tree face or maybe Ace recalled a couple of things about Tardi he didn’t know. He started to explain. “Not by going at the science bullishly, like Procyon Products, but gently, under cover of time and tide. PP wants the essence, as you well know. And look where that has got us so far?” Ace nodded at Tardi’s constant rubbing away of roots.

“We’re after thinning its ... its influence, as I said. That woman up north you mentioned, Claire King, seems to have used the johnny-apple-seed method. We’ll be choosy about the places we’ll apply it. Allow people to pay us for the service. Why shouldn’t Stormies gain from it when we’ll be the ones managing it? This thing will likely live a long, long time.”

Trinnet’s gloating expression added to Tardi’s growing disappointment. It only confirmed his suspicions. “When will you tell me what you know?” He meant to be jokey, encouraging.

“Never,” Ace said. “We need someone who can last through the years at being a trusted interface. The entity must never suspect what we know about it. All I can arrange is that you’ll never be lonely, or alone.”

Ace is just another wannabe user? Tardi felt sick from dismay but struggled up from the bed. *Slop slop.*

Shad shrugged into a backpack. His head shook like he had a tremor. Shad didn’t drink alcohol, Tardi recalled.

Seeing he had Tardi’s attention, Shad pointed to his head. He mouthed words. In. Me. The. Jury. Is. Out. He rolled his eyes for saying falderal-stuff-and-nonsense. Held up Tardi’s spray bottle. Swung his glance toward the track.

“I’d better get on with it then,” Tardi said. “See what I can do.” He followed Shad down the track.

Trinnet fell in behind.