

1. Tardi

Tardi stopped stock-still as the monster-in-him slapped one of his nightmares into his mind, where Tardi and Shad—one of the Stormies with him—walked into a crossroad in a vast dun landscape and the tree-man rooted himself in the ground. In this version it was *Shad* who wept.

“You okay?” That same Shad sidled past Tardi where he stood in the middle of the pass through the ranges. Home was the valley behind them. Unknown territories ahead. Shad offered Tardi the water-bag.

“Hey thanks.” He half-grinned and took the waterbag with his right hand. Then sorried he hadn’t used his left, human hand. Because Shad flinched when his fingers brushed the thin brown tree-bark on the back of Tardi’s right hand. *Damn. Another missed chance.*

The monster-in-him made like it was a heavy-water balloon bouncing in his gut and his half-digested breakfast rushed up his gullet—he turned aside, leaned one-handed on the rockface, his head on his arm for balance. Vomited acid.

Spat and choked, coughed. Upending the water-bag unhandily—his right arm getting too stiff for this kind of action—he poured water into his mouth. Rinsed. Spat. Then finally he could get a drink. *You’re going to starve me, aren’t you,* he thought at the monster. The monster’s silence grew obdurate or was that his imagination?

Now Trinnet pushed by Tardi. “Come on, mule,” Trinnet said at Shad, pulling him along by a sleeve. “You’re but encouraging the other mule in his revolt.”

“A-promise-made-under-duress-isn’t-binding,” Tardi said the mantra under his breath. These the words that shaped all his actions. *You’ve passed the baton to him. The oldster. Good luck with that.*

The house-sized boulders either side of the gap gave way to a steep slope of basalt rubble stones. Shad and Trinnet leaped down it like a pair of rock-wallabies. Tardi followed sedately. At the bottom, Shad fished his flattened hat from down his shirt. He punched out the crown and clapped it on his head. “Dint want to lose it leaping about,” he said to Tardi arriving.

“Is that that adder’s skin round it?” Tardi remembered the death-adder’s needle teeth spiking into him.

Shad nodded. “Fright you gave us. Have a piece of possum-jerky? Is it that the monstrous critter within you seeks to starve you?”

Tardi narrowed his mind’s eyes. *Shad knows what I thought?* He accepted the jerky. “Thanks. It’ll set me up for a good run.” He started a slow jog down the next slope, maybe surprising both his companions that he still could. *Here’s hoping.*

Well past midday, Trinnet, in the lead, stopped and stepped aside of the trail. “Flat enough for a fire, here.”

Which was him explaining himself for the tree-man’s sake. Shad probably knew without

being told. Tardi pulled the tarp from his pack, partially unrolled it, and cross-legged down. “I wouldn’t mind a brew.”

Shad grinned. He pocketed the cards almost always in hand and took dry sticks from his gleaner bag. He built a fire.

Trinnet took the water-bag Tardi carried. He filled the billy-can *he* carried and set it by Shad. “Be quicker if we heated water in our mugs. Couple of good walks will get us along the road the Great Flicker is planning.”

Trinnet was sent along by Ace. “Keep my nephew honest,” Tardi over-heard back at the Stormy village early one morning. Him still abed and peering between his eyelashes at Ace talking and Trinnet listening. In the here and now, Tardi took example from Shad and didn’t answer Trinnet either. “I’d like us to parse-out the task a bit more,” he said instead. “If parsing-out means analysing a problem?” Stormies had a dialect all their own.

“Close enough,” Trinnet said. “Ace covered all that. I was setting there listening.”

“Good,” Tardi said. “You can explain the bits I don’t understand. Could be I was still woozy due to the snake bite?”

“You should’ve been fine with everyone’s good blood in you watering the venom-gift to your mulish constitution,” Trinnet said.

Save me from Trinnet-speak. Tardi rose and spread his tarp out all the way. Sat down again.

Shad shared tea among the three mugs. “Cold anyone?” he said. At a nod from Tardi, he slopped cold water into both theirs.

Trinnet blew at his uncooled brew. “What don’t you understand?” he said finally.

Into the deep end, Tar-boy. “I’m meant to tame the alien so it can be milked of its very advanced technical knowledge—otherwise known as magic—for that technology to advance Stormy culture?”

“Sums it up,” Trinnet said, sounding like he wanted to say what’s the problem.

Tardi laughed. “What I thought about that? High falutin’ crap! What I think now, after replaying it while we traveled? It’s rubbish. Garbage. I’m sending it to the limbo of stupid ideas.”

Shad laughed too. “Got a way with words.” He set out an array with his cards. Half of a stepped pyramid.

“The mule laughs,” Trinnet said. “Will you be the Tamer’s yes-man, as well as his cousin, *and* his do...”

Shad leapt up and instantly had his knife out ready for throwing. “Stop right there!”

Trinnet scoffed but swallowed the word he'd been going to say. "Huh. Touchy."

Giving Tardi no clue to what threatened just then.

Shad gathered his cards and spat into the fire. "Hi-falutin' is the best word yet for the wonky plan. I'm hearing that the Tamer has no *flicking* idea. An the way he sets it out, neither have I."

He a-sided to Tardi. "Given you're still learning the lingo ... *flicking, flick, flicker* and all such terminology refer to the poor ancient people who were transformed by their AI starship. They suffered eons of flickering before they stabilised and became us. Them words now be used as swears."

Tardi nodded. *More questions to hold in my heart.* "Let me lay out my thoughts for you, Trinnet. I'm apparently meant to steal the alien's support group—his so-called ladies—from Zoo Hall and deliver them somewhere safe to hold them. Right so far?"

Trinnet nodded.

"Why bother with that when in Zoo Hall they are already in a safe facility?" Tardi said. "But say you insist I *do* steal them. Where is there a safe Stormy-owned facility?" He shrugged. "Delivering *that* can't be my job, too?"

Shad grinned. Took a card from the top of his pack. Turned it face up. Glanced. Put the card under.

"Next step in the plan," Tardi said. "Milking the alien of its advanced technical knowledge? Huh? It surely doesn't mean milking it like a snake is milked of its venom? It seems to mean forcing the alien to *tell* us about its magic. That right?"

Trinnet frowned. "Magic is why you're the Tamer."

Tardi forced a chuckle. "I'm the Tamer because I bested a bunch of eels?" Steve's poor eaten-off face hovered in his mind. He cleared the frog of unending grief from his throat. "No magic in that. I used my feet and my fists. And though I'm also said to be good at stopping live-minds, I don't do that by magic either."

Catching an edge of Shad's faster-than-fast frown, he left the rest unsaid. According to Tardi's little brother when he was still alive, Tardi had picked up ruinous programming while having to deal with recalcitrant truck-minds. *Shad frowned when I said 'stopping live-minds'? Why?*

He glanced at Shad sitting there with his face closed. *No answer today that looks like.* "So, I'm meant to harness a thing that isn't a horse or a bullock and I'm meant to advance Stormy culture. Advance it to where? See? It all sounds like Uncle Ace, using his nephew, Tardi Mack, is trying to advance through Stormy politics. Whatever that looks like." He slid a glance over both his listeners.

Trinnet frowned. Grunted. "Pit stop," he said. "All that tea." He stepped into the trees.

Shad rose too, pocketing his cards. He threw water on the fire. Packed their mugs and billycan. "I'm with you for the real thing. Need help to get up?"

Tardi nodded. "Thank you." He lifted his human knee and set his foot on the ground. Reached his arm up.

Shad gripped it and pulled, helping Tardi to get up to standing. "I get that your journey is all about not achieving the Great Flicker's agenda. So let's not achieve my father's desires either?"

"Sounds good," Tardi said. *Just a couple of things to worry about now. Trinnet, and Shad's frown.* Tardi shoved the folded tarp under the flap of his pack.

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They jogged and walked a couple more hours through a region of long grassed slopes with dots of camphor laurel trees. When they reached the hot flat riverlands, sugarcane farms took over. Shad led Tardi and Trinnet into a service road between a pair of sugarcane fields. "Good place for a camp. Cane only half-high, big enough to hide us without losing the breeze."

Trinnet glanced at Tardi setting out his blue tarp. "An you don't trust him you'll never have peace."

Tardi walked a little circle on the tarp flattening it and deciding his next strategy. "Do you trust the monster to know what's best for humans, Trinnet?"

"Humans when Stormies aren't? This is what he can do with the sapient lot," Trinnet said. He gobbled up a wad of saliva and spat.

Tardi's green hair strained wanting to prickle from unease, but too heavy. *The Stormies don't consider themselves human? Why? Why not?*

Shad set Tardi's wok in the flames. Poured water into it. Dropped leaves in, then a couple of cuts of possum meat. Sprinkled a herb. Lay a row of sugarcane bits over for a lid. He nodded at Tardi. "The sooner we get out from under our flicking father-uncle, the better for both of us. The cards tell me that."

First time Shad said anything about the cards always in his hands.

"The Flicker asks me how we will get north other than on foot," Trinnet said. "To a place he knows where we can cut west. On foot we are slow. He has space-time and the tides of the planet to consider."

Tardi wanted to roll around laughing at Trinnet's pomposity. "Don't even dream I won't be asking about Stormy ancestry," he said. "Everything else we're talking about here is social grease and enflummoxment."

Shad laughed.

“Mules. The pair of you.”

Shad lifted the pieces of the sugarcane lid from the wok and stirred the stew. “That’s the third time you’ve called us that. Explain.”

Trinnet laughed. “That’ll be my pleasure, oh up-jumped youth. Always Ace shut my mouth on the subject but what can he do with us out here and him still at home? We’ve got that system of marrying in and out. Not enough women, ever. A woman takes two husbands, we still have a man unrequited. Some requite themselves with each other, being made that way.”

“What about women made that way?” Tardi said.

“How would I know when I’m a man?”

“How would he know being an *unmarried* man,” Shad said. “He does not have the confidence of any woman, no matter how he tries to charm them. The women will have a system.”

Tardi recalled Trinnet in the company of the two little ladies during the storm when Ace rescued Tardi. And how he’d trusted Ace with his life until the minute that Ace had cut them both and forced a blood-share. *What a fuck-up.*

Smiling about some private joke, Trinnet continued. “Some men marry out. Like Ace. His woman outside bore him Shad. Tch-tch. But happy days for Ace because next he fathered a girl, proved himself fit for husbanding. So deemed the women. Hye took him as her third.”

Tardi feared for Shad sitting like a stone beside him. “You’re saying Shad and I are both half-Stormy?”

“Mules. Infertile. Like the young of horses bred with donkeys.” Trinnet smiled broadly. “No issue for either of you.”

Not a problem for me. “I’ve never heard of a second human species living into modern times,” Tardi said.

“Did I say we’re human?” Trinnet said.

“You said you’re not sapient,” Tardi said.

“The women drove *your* mother gone,” Trinnet said. “Never happy with what she had. Why she died in the end, I hear. Lucky for me that it weren’t by my elbow.”

“You’re doing it again, the flummoxing,” Shad said. “Things the Tamer knows already. Letting your poor-me-I’m-hardly-done-by show. Because all the women turn you away. A proper trey we are, a misfit in the company of two mules, and with the Great Flicker a here and there at every discussion.”

“You didn’t know Ace kept you just for this.”

Shad's eyebrows up. "I was raised for this. Why wouldn't I have known?"

"Oh ye-es," Trinnet laboured his irony. "You've got that *skel-sicht!*"

Now both Shad and Trinnet bristled.

Here it is. The thing worrying Shad. Skel-sicht? "Stew is starting to smell challenging," Tardi said. "Here's my mug."

Shad took Tardi's mug and scooped out a good amount. He filled Trinnet's mug, then his own. "Seconds when you're ready."

"What's a trey apart from a three?" Tardi said after he wiped stew from the outside of the mug and licked his thumb.

"You never saw us but singly or in threes," Trinnet said.

"Treys, pents and septs is how Stormies organise themselves," Shad said.

"You never said what you think to do," Trinnet said.

Tardi blew over his stew to cool it. "About what?"

"Controlling. Managing. How you think to tame the Great Flicker," Trinnet said.

Is this guy for real? "I thought I told you the limbo of bad ideas?"

"Didn't tell me nothing," Trinnet said. "Spouted a whole lot of cover. Keeping whatever you were deciding in your purse-net."

"Interesting turn of phrase," Tardi said. "I might start collecting such." He'd have to extemporise, or whatever the terminology was for skating close to the truth. "I was deciding that I don't know enough. That I need advice. I know of a woman, Claire King, at the Reefarium who can maybe help with that. So that's where I thought we'd go first."

Trinnet stared into his mug. Maybe he read the pattern of his leavings in the bottom. "Well. So. We won't need to walk the whole way. You probably know that glass-merchant, the combo as travels north middle of the week? You're a trucker, cadge us a ride with him."