

## 2. Shad

Shad doled out possum stew into their three mugs. He gave Tardi all the best bits, to make up for what he might still have to do to Tar. Say he couldn't escape their father-uncle's instructions due to Trinnet's presence? Not that Tar knew most of it. Might he suspect? Him being the famed live-mind tamer and what was Shad but a live-mind?

Straightaway Shad thought all the names Tardi had already collected in his life. Trader Malko, which were him in the birth registry. Tardi Mack, in which the first part were what a kid learning to write made of his manky name. The 'Mack' being Tar's father's intentions for him. *Fucking save us from fathers*. Tar, which was what Tardi's brother, Steve, named him and how Shad also thought of him. Tar-boy in the mouth of the man himself.

All of which were just another magic spell that Shad used to keep his Moth-that-was out of his mind. Shad wept silent but kept on with the accounting.

Tar's most recent name were Tree-hair. Tar had got the tree-bug when he was up in the hills where Joe Loreno spread his tree-bug mist to fertilise the creeks. An Tar breathed in the mist. Or he got some on him. Didn't matter which, because however it happened, it were a huge hinder to Shad's secret project. He frowned fierce to keep it all behind his breast-bone. Blinked hard and sucked it up. He spat into the tree-line behind where they camped.

"Where's mine?" Trinnet said. He cross-legged between Shad and Tar. He was the oldster sent along to keep the two mules *honest*, which were Trinnet's avowed intentions. Shad sneered inside at Trinnet's high-falutin. Trinnet drew pay from Ace and were not to be trusted. Shad set Trinnet's dinner near him. Reached round the back of Trinnet to pass Tar his mug, and took up his own.

After he swallowed his chewings, Shad added a few deadwood sticks to the fire. He washed out the mugs. Set the can with stewing tea in the hot ashes for them that wanted afters. He wrapped his blanket round himself, kneeled and lay to the ground.

Of course he was so beside himself he couldn't sleep *an* he had to keep the Moth-that-was out of his thoughts for she couldn't know what they were about. An he couldn't see his cards in the dark. An his spells weren't heavy enough for nights. Nothing for it but to tell his life again.

He frowned. The Moth-that-was hated his low-res mood. *Suck it up, lady*.

He were five year old—a baby—when his Moth-that-was picked him to carry her mind. She ran out of time and nobody put their hand up so it had to be him. What she told him too many times already. He didn't remember the operation and the scar had all but flattened. He traced the smooth track under his hair. Moth didn't do thank yous or sorries but told him that one day he'd appreciate her efforts on his behalf.

His father in the meantime romanced a Stormy woman this time so that when Shad joined them after he were healed, she were pregnant, an with a girl. Shad would be a useful brother, five years the elder, his father said. Good for helping with the child-care. Well, that lasted about one minute coz the little girl were born with a fragility that meant she were packed in

cotton-wool an ruffian boys need not look her way.

His Moth-that-was ruled Shad from his sixth year to his twelfth, every minute of his days, forcing him toward the high-res future she planned for them. She set him studying when he would've rather played an got to know some of the others of his time. When she forced him into the goody-two-shoes group at school did they want to know him? *Don't think so.*

So Moth insisted he spend his spare time learning Stormy food-getting in the bush. *Give you something to do in your spare time*, he thought in how he imagined her voice would've sounded. Snippy. She forced him to clamber up stones and down the cliffs at the back of Snakeville. The same ranges he and Tar and Trinnet just crossed. He got good at all of it but he had no friends. He didn't need low-res outsiders, Moth told him, he had her. *Yes Moth, three bags full.*

So on his twelfth name-day he met Card Reader, a man who travelled round Stormy villages learning Stormies their ancient culture. He grinned into his blanket. *That man gave me my life.* Shad got so good with Card's old pack that had twenty cards missing, that Card Reader had a new pack made for himself—the full sixty—and went away happy that he'd quickened another reader. Becoz boyo, he said, we are getting that thin-sprinkled through the people.

Card Reader knew all about Shad's Moth-that-was and what she did. He taught Shad how to keep her quiescent—he called it—not conscious. She'd had her go at life, he said. Your turn now. Low and hi-res were meaningless applied to people. You're a *sensitive*. *That's the difference between you and everyone else.*

We sensitives read their lives. So as to not fright them into thinking we know their dreams, we call it reading the cards. Or—more careful even—we call it reading their *lay-outs*. And if they are poor sods extra needed by their lives, we give them their story-card to have and to hold next to their hearts. Like you are needed. An needful, even. Never let go of the Farm Woman Earth Mother. She will guide you. When you get confident, have a sixty-pack made. There's card-makers in most towns.

Shad in his swag, camping out with the live-mind Tamer and the misfit what called himself Trinnet, had twenty-three years under his belt, an he still worked with the forty-pack? *Which means that that low-res mug called Shad still weeps at the wrong times of his life.*

Moving on. When Shad were a half-feathered youth of fifteen, the very bad maybe worst thing happened to Tar which was Tar's little brother Steve drowning in the Snakeville water supply. Tar, rescuing Steve, fought the monstrous eels living in there and so got his Stormy monniker, which was Tamer. An Shad, helping to bring blankets and bread and jam and such, fell hard and hot for Tar the same age as him but not a weepy.

At first Shad just lusted after Tar's handsome Stormy looks and the stories swirling round about him. How Tar flaired the waves and bested trucks and rode sea currents. Shad kept it all hid—he thought—forgetting that the live-mind in him wasn't born yesterday. He blushed into his swag about the things that the Moth-that-was learned about him when he dreamed about Tar. His face a flaming peonie just remembering it.

Using Shad's helpless love, the Moth-that-was got up a plan. *She used me.* Even thinking it

felt like he plotted against her. But anyway, when he'd lived only fifteen years he believed that if Moth's plan co-incided with his desires he might as well follow along. He remembered her cackling with laughter—what he hated—when forcing Shad to offer Ace and his cronies the shadowing.

Ace laughed the hardest. “My son flings his heart at a cousin who crawls in my gob. An my own son already aren't any use to me for the Moth and the Card Reader both have got to him first.” Shad still burned, remembering.

His father naturally ignored the years *before* Card Reader, when he himself could easily have turned Shad to his ideology, Shad so hardly done by the Moth. *A missed chance indeed, Ace-father.* Ace complained that the Tamer still lived in his own father's house. Ace sneered at Herm—Tar's father—and called him the man who'd killed his sister, Tar's mother. The son is the image of the father, Ace said. Nor did the Tamer then even remember he were of the Stormy breed.

Shad rolled onto his back, blanket drawn up to his nose, booted feet sticking out. The forest were his bedhead. A nightbreeze susserated through the grasses adjacent. No moon tonight meant the star-field glowed from the eastern horizon up and over. The famed Lode-Star weren't visible above the eastern islands of the Australia Archipelago. He believed that there were far more to the Lode-star than most people knew.

Tar lay not far to his left. That Shad was here at all, in the company of Tar and Trinnet, was due to his father finally finding a use for his errant son. *Thank you, Ace-father. May you never discover how you are helping me realise my heart's desire.*

An but the olds—other than Ace—accepted Shad's offer. He became Tar's shadow. Studied Tar's life, his history, his foibles, his fans. Followed him up hill and down dale. Wept with him about the tree-bug infection. Laughed when Tar laughed. Met with him once or twice to toggle his route and achieve the olds's desired outcomes. All of it without Tar discovering Shad's work.

*Call it perfidy?* Because how else would someone like Tar think of Shad's craft? An Shad only agreed to any of it to get near to Tar. He bit his bottom lip. Thought the bad thought. *What if Tar hates me when he finds out? I need to tell him before he finds out.* He practiced again what he would say. “Please don't hate me. If the olds had got some other for all this, that loyal man would've reported everything. I report only the minumum. An only what is public already.” *Please don't send me away, Tar!*

Still no sleep in the wings of his mind. Whether Ace meant to or not, he had himself and quite a lot of other people infected with the Great Flicker. Which is what Stormies everywhere called the monstrous alien. Not that anyone had ever yet got a look at the Flicker. Didn't need to, he was in their minds, resulting in them giving Ace more grief than he ever had had to cope with, an which resulted in Ace coming up with the plan that set Tar and Shad and Trin on the road.

*An here we are.* Shad lifted his head to check the others kipping. Tar lay wrapped loose-ish in his worn blue tarp. Trin was a polar fleece wrapped log, staring into the dark with sightless sleeping eyes, Trin being one of them that slept open-eyed. The way you could tell he slept

was when he snored. As now.