

47: Argie

Argie lifted his head.

“You want to come?” Tardi said. “Come on, then.”

They threaded their way by feel between the lomandra grasses growing among loose rocks. Here and there the mother-stone lay crumbled under the gnarling onslaught of tall brushbox tree roots.

The ledge ran west to east. It would need another session of climbing, steeper than the night’s effort, to reach the top of the range. “Find us some water, Arge,” Tardi said. He made a slurping sound.

The dog stepped into the lead.

Behind them, a sudden single snarl tore through the silence. It growled on and on, like thunder.

Tardi’s neck hair rose. His skin prickled. He grabbed Argie and hunkered down behind the tall grasses.

The remaining dogs rose and began to gyrate in a silver and gold melee of heads, flanks and backs. With their eyes coal-red and frenzying, and their lips pulled back in silent snarls, they readied for battle.

Argie whined and clamped hard to Tardi’s side.

The snarling cut off as one of the other dogs jumped the snarler. Two more joined him, starting to tear into whatever dog-flesh they could reach. No dog yelped. None evaded. No weaker dog turned tail to flee. Blood sprayed and bubbled and wept.

Tardi shuddered. He didn’t want to hear the ripping and tearing of flesh. *Where is there to run?*

Slavering jaws flung scraps of flesh outward. The increasingly battered dogs snapped and bit, tore and bit again. The dark-in-the-dawn dog-blood spooled and splayed and spattered. The dogs bled out while biting. They fell still tearing. They died in silence.

Tardi couldn’t look away from the kill-ground, covered randomly with grey and bloody dish-ragged skin, scraps of flesh hanging from bones and dark venous clots of blood.

The monstrosity in me did this. When he rose, he noticed sharply that Argie’s warmth stayed on the other side of a chasm between them, even as Argie too rose to his feet.

“Why?” Tardi shouted. “Why? Why? Why?”

Argie reached across the narrow chasm and clamped his teeth around Tardi’s shin. *Crunch.*

“Aaaaaaaah! Argie! Noooooooo!!!!!!” He fell with his blood pulsing from between the dog’s teeth. “Argiiiiie! It’s me-ee!!!!!!” He crescendoed, begging the dog.

Argie shook Tardi’s lower leg as if to tear it off.

“Aaaahhh! My kneeeee! Argiieeee!” One second the dog’s teeth in him felt heavy, like they plugged a reservoir of blood. The next they scragged and scraped along his leg-nerves.

Argie’s fur rippled and silvered in unnatural waves and shocks. He loosened his jaws only to reposition his grip.

Tardi bled arterial fear. He went into instinct-mode. Grabbed Argie’s head with both hands and pressed Argie’s eyes with his thumbs. The only way to get rid of an attacking shark.

The dog tried to pull back. Threw his body from side to side trying to get loose. Though his jaws didn’t part but bit down harder.

Tardi forced himself to hold on. Tears spurted from his eyes. “You really want me to hate you?” he shouted. He squeezed harder. “Why should I do anything for you?”

The dog went limp. His jaws slackened, slid away. He lay as if emptied.

Blood weeping from the puncture wounds on his leg, Tardi pressed the dog’s carotid artery just under his muzzle.

No pulse.

Dead? He slumped. *I just wanted him to let go! Be his normal self!*

Links between human and canine creatures sap my energies. It is for a waterman to attend to its master.

“Enough. I have had enough,” Tardi muttered. “*This* waterman will shortly end his contract. Good luck finding another one with the Stormies also in the scene.” He tied a tourniquet below his knee. “You stuffed up, stupido,” he said aloud. “The dogs were being their own selves, no control needed. A dog is the best sidekick a human can have in the bush. I’m not leaving Argie like he was unloved. You’re going to have to help by healing up my leg.”

He wrapped the wound with a torn-off pant leg and went limping to collect stones.

He dragged Argie’s body to the sandy sleeping place and gathered as many of the pieces of the other dogs as he could easily find, hardening himself to picking up the remains. Gristle, torn fur, palpable flesh, even an eye.

He spewed into the remains, finally hoiking on empty. Piled the stones over it all and wet the mess well with his weeping.

Turned to the cliff. Climbed. His toe roots, worn down to nubs, were no help at all. Finally, he clambered onto the path on the top of the ridge and almost stepped onto an arrangement of grass stems.

A shed, with one of its bent stems springing loose. *Shad passed by here.* Tardi cried more tears. He regretted he had no time to get to know Shad. *Imagine that, Steve,* he thought at his lost brother, *we have a cousin?*

He blinked to dry his tears. *I’m not ... I can’t shift from my plan.* His mouth parched from fear. If his plan worked, he soon wouldn’t need to slake his thirst. He set off along a well-trodden track. “See this path,” he said aloud at the monster’s surprise in his mind. “It

would've been good to have one of the dogs to tell us whether it's safe."

I am confused.

Tardi followed the path in among a low forest of shrubby, wind-shaped trees.

"No further, Tamer."

"Shad, cousin. I saw your sign." He smiled wide to stop his lips trembling.

Shad hovered on the far side of a leafy overlay in the path. "Cousin. Yes, we're true cousins. Please no further, Tar. Let's get to know each other. It's the snake pit you teeter on."

"I wish I could, Shad. But I don't know how else to control this thing in me. I'm sorry." He stepped onto the leaves. Fell.

Despite that he'd decided to go with his eyes closed, he saw everything. The green and brown leaves that rained down after him. The difficult stony layers of the hole's sides, the poor fellas having to dig this. He smelled the sky's light on one wall, burnt earth.

His feet collapsed, then his knees hip side and shoulder. In that order. *Pain? After my dog near bites my leg off?* He refused the pain. Lay flattened. Air knocked out of him.

Ropy bodies wriggled beneath him.

Then he breathed hard, great gulps. Ribs twanged. His leg, wounded already, throbbed. Probably bled again. Wriggled to release the wrigglers from under him.

Where . . . ?

"I know where *I* am," Tardi said, "I don't need to ask. Told you we needed the dogs." He said all this thinking to lead the critter-in-him up the garden path?

A gout of red water flushed up his nose.

Well, in my mind it flushed up my nose. My actual nose is fine. I'm breathing without drowning. Though he had no spit and his tongue tasted like a doormat.

Light from frantic torches beamed down. Shadows organised themselves to haul him out.

Too late, men. I've decided.

Beside him, a forearm's length between them, Ace's death adder swayed its shovel-shaped head over a short thick trunk. Its tongue flickered in out, in out. It sensed Tardi in its territory.

Tardi swung his arm and offered the snake his hand.

The death adder plunged its fangs into the fold between his thumb and index finger, sharp as knives.

He screamed.

The adder's venom surged along his veins to his heart. The onset of paralysis might take an hour he knew from Steve's research.

The critter-in-his-mind cringed like a snail sprinkled with salt.

The tree's molecules clung to his flesh, muscles, tendons and skin.

Dark.

I see it coming.