

4. Shad, Reading Tardi

The place he and Tar were in had an over-sized rectangular brick-walled bath in the middle. The bath was two thirds filled with mud with a metallic sheen laying on the top. Overhead, a globe pushed out make-believe sunlight.

All around the bath glistened a wet cement path. *Nope*. Make that, the path on the left made two right hand turns, and ended in the far right corner at some partitioning that looked like a shower cubicle. The path on the right went along the short side of the bath straight into the cubicle. Across the front, a plastic curtain barely held up by three curtain rings strung onto a pole above the doorway.

Shad left his cards in his pocket. *Everything* looked wet.

The Moth taught him all his life that the Tamer would be a simple-minded man who'd knuckle down easy to Shad's charms—and hadn't that proved right with Tar requesting Shad to steer their boat?

Shad, when he had full control—the Moth said—would then run the Tamer like he was a biomech. She never called Tar anything other than *biomech* or *Tamer*. *What if I'd rather hook up with him like he was a half-Stormy man*, Shad never said. The Moth that good at picking up errant thoughts, he'd kept thinking about his own wants to minimum. Only since he started using the cards had he been able to carve out a place in his mind for himself.

“Claire stung me with her whip-crack about her witch's cauldron,” Tar said. He walked round the tank. Along the nearer long side, he stopped at a stool that had a steel-frame canteen chair beside it.

“She be glad to be leaving,” Shad said.

“Whip-crack about the sea-doors stung you,” Tar said.

“Not wrong. Go in, clothes and all. Takes you too long to get them off over your tree bits.”

“What if I turn into a frog-prince?” Tar said.

Shad scoffed. “Hmph.” When he took on the steering, jokes were the first thing Shad denied Tar. Jokes deflected what precious little reality they had.

Tar felt around with his foot in the grey mud for a step down into the tank. “Found it. Another stool, same as.” He squatted slowly down into the mud.

Him settling on the stool was what Shad could see. Tar concentrating, the next thing. Then silence.

What is he thinking, Shad thought at the *skel-sicht*, which was how the Moth-that-was preferred him to think of her, and refer to her if he spoke of her to others.

< *You're worth more than this mere shadowing, how many times do I have to tell you? You*

need to get me in contact with him. Lay your hand on his head. >

Shad reached into the tank and lay his hand on Tar's head. Featherlight.

< The Great Flicker is on the retreat and cringes out of him. See the Tamer shuddering? He's remembering what it felt like when the thing made a nest in him. A kinaesthetic delusion, of course. I'm sure I've told you before, we deserve a greater hero. He believes that the mud army's advance causes the Flicker to retreat. How could it? He is deluded. >

"Keep talking," Shad said at Tar. "I want to know everything that happens."

"There are a hundred thousand dull pin-points walking on me," Tar said obediently. "Like they're giving me a finger-tip massage; like they're stippling me. Wherever the mud touches."

Shad watched Tar lift a handful of the mud to face-level and study it. He started to ask for an explanation.

But Tar was already talking. "This mud isn't like any kind of mud I know. Or, for that matter, like sand-in-seawater. For instance, you couldn't dig a moat round a sandcastle in it, or slurry a watch tower. Because ...," he peered closer, "These are minuscule little *ingers* six millimetres tall and two millimetres thick glued together along their lengths with a grey slime."

"The mud is alive?" Shad said, not sure whether Tar joked. It sounded like joking. He withdrew his hand but bent over the edge and peered closer. He saw fingerling bodies glittering as they compressed and lengthened in the grey, nearly-transparent slime.

Some of the mini-fingers *stood up* on Tar's hand, with more and more of them rising to that upright position. Bits of the mud striated by the little mud-fingers that threatened to overflow the sides of Tar's hand, were pulled back by the elasticity of the glop.

"Claire said that the mud learns," Tar said. "I wonder if it will help me to learn you?"

That has to be one of his jokes. Shad watched Tar for glints, quirks, corner of the mouth smiling to confirm his suspicions. He noted how the tree-bug had changed Tar's handsome looks and where it so far hadn't. An that was all he saw, he realised. An it pained him. Things Tar thought, things he minded, his feelings, did not chase over Tar's face.

The mini-fingers standing on the friction pads at the base of Tar's fingers started to rhythmically compress and lengthen. "That pointillist feeling again." Tar said dreamily. The action spread to all the creatures on his hand. "They're definitely alive. Definitely have intention."

He lowered his hand, a giant elevator, for the creatures to join the rest of their kind in the tank. Then he leaned forward to give the creatures access to the part of his back where the bark-ridges on his right shoulder blade were trying to join the ridges on his right flank, is what it looked like.

Shad frowned. *Do I really want to know all this about Tar's disease?* When he first fell for Tar, the tree-disease weren't a thing. *An I still know nothing about it other than what I see on him.* He watched more and more of the mud walking up the roundedness of Tar's flank. "They're tamping on you?" he said.

"Mmm," Tar said. "Feels like they're stamping up and down shredding the bark-ridges."

"Why don't you do a head to toe?" Shad said. He glimmer-smiled. "We don't want none of them old stories coming true. Like that flicker with his heel-bone."

Tar nodded. He slow-motioned forward onto his knees. Sat back on his heels with his face turned up for air. He took a deep breath. Did the head to toe.

Shad stood on the chair and counted out aloud, bent over the tub's side with his face as near to the mud as he dared. "... Ten!" he said.

Tar angled his face up out of the mud. "I can't feel the monster in me anywhere." He sighed. "An my gut isn't griping," he said. "How I miss being able to trust my gut for helping to make decisions. Like my instinct lives in there, you know? Where do you keep yours?"

The way he cocks his head, is that him asking for permission to laugh? "I don't know," Shad said.

Tar shrugged and rose. Slowly, apparently to give the mud creatures time to coalesce, and not fall from great heights. "But where will the monster *go*?" he said conversationally. "Where *can* it go? Apart from into Trinnet? The Stormies back in the valley would surely be a backward step for it? Could it be that it retracted back to Zoo Hall?"

"I don't know," Shad said again. He laughed. "If only you could see yourself now. A proper mud man."

"I should throw in a bunch of black," Tar said. "Because really, I'm a tar-boy. I slather wounded sheep where though lately" He stepped onto the stool. Heaved his tree-leg over the wall with his human hand.

Shad guided Tar's foot to the chair. His grin went lop-sided on the things he could want to say. He tried shaping his mouth on his first thought.

"Wait," Tar said. "It's not safe for me not to concentrate on my one foot in and one out." He grinned. "Wait till I'm all out?" Tar put his hands on the brick side, and shifting his weight, stepped down from the chair.

"Your brother called you Tar," Shad said when Tar stood safely on the floor but dripping. The mud creatures coalesced against the tank.

Tar scooped up the mud critters by hand and lay them back in the tank. "Yeah. Steve. It's like he gave me that person to be. But he's gone. And I'm good with that now. He told me he was ready." He breathed a while.

Remembering, is what that looked like to Shad.

“It’s like the tar-boy part of me is gone too,” Tar said, sounding lonely.

Shad frowned, feeling disagreement bolstering between his eyes.

Tar flicked him a glance. Seemed to decide something. He nodded. “Cuz,” he said. “I can only read *you* between the lines. Things you say. That the oldster flings at you. The way you look at me. The oldster’s derogatory commentary.”

“Read me for what?” Shad said, voice rough.

“It looks to me like you hope for connection,” Tar said. “An I miss that a lot. My ears shrill sometimes when I hear the sound of my ordinary label. It’s that meaningless. An I’d like be a Tar still for someone ... if you ...” Tentative. “Well ...” He shrugged with his hands spread and raised, for what-the-fuck-do-I-know.

Shad smiled so wide his mouth-corners hurt. “Cuz, you dig that tar-boy out from where he’s gone and I’ll name him. I’m that happy. My *aim* was always connection first. What we’ll go with for now an we’ll grow into the future.”

“Okay,” Tardi said. His woody expression softened, like he damped-down a couple of facial muscles. Most of *them* on the left, Shad saw.