

3. Tardi

Tardi looked across at Shad lying rolled in his blanket. Glints in his eyes showed him still awake. “Paddling our Stormy-craft,” he said softly. “Is that what your-father-my-uncle sent him along for?” He didn’t say *Trinnet* in case that gentleman woke.

Shad hitched nearer. “There’s steering with paddles the Stormy way,” he said. “An there’s steering with a rudder.”

“Half the effort and it’s in the back of the boat,” Tardi said. “Will you be the rudder in this craft?”

Shad grinned disbelievingly. “You? You need steering?”

“There’s so much trouble to come,” Tardi said. “My attention span for external things gets smaller the more that the monster, the tree and your flicking father pile and have piled on me. So, yeah. Someone to steer me sometimes would be good.” He waited.

“I like it, Cuz,” Shad said. “Go to sleep. I’ll take the first watch.”

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Tardi cadged them a ride with a glass-merchant, who co-incidentally had a part-load for the Reefarium. A good time had by all, he didn’t think, while they were underway. The glass-merchant couldn’t get over Tardi’s new state-of-being and remarked on it every couple of minutes. Luckily the journey took only about an hour as the story would’ve got seriously boring, according to Trinnet. Shad added nothing.

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Tardi laughed the whole way across the channel. He stood on the load, half a dozen pallets of glass stacked in two threes. He balanced very well, unsteady though that was with the jars shifting and crunching in their crates. Mr Boatman, whose name could surely not really be how he introduced himself, chuckled about landlubber Stormies. Trinnet and Shad gripped the gunwales, unbalanced all out of their world, according to Shad.

The Reefarium, what Tardi could see of it, presented as a round dull-grey building topped with a low conical roof. No apertures were visible. “Doors and windows?” he said.

“Mostly covered with storm shutters,” Mr Boatman said. “The rest are non-reflective and argon-filled. From the outside looking no different in texture from the cladding.” And with a private grin that didn’t invite participation, he added, “It’s all about scaring off intruders like storms, I was told.”

Tardi nodded and resumed his inspection. Long jetty out front, its planking weathered grey. An old cane-chuffer—a small locomotive historically used to haul sugarcane—approached. Jockeyed by a chunky teenager, the engine pulled two flat-top wagons rattling over the jetty’s decking.

“There’s your transport,” Mr Boatman said. “Boy’s handle is Callum. Lonely for someone to look up to. You want to treat him right or you’ll have me deal with.” He spat over the side.

“We’ll treat with him,” Shad said. “If we be how he imagines men are.”

The boatman half-smiled. “*You’ll* do.” He lifted his chin toward Tardi. “Stranger critters than him are seen around here.”

The boy met them in the entry hall, having parked the engine and its wagons near an elevator platform. “I’m Callum,” he said. “I love us having visitors.”

“What about unloading?” Shad said.

Tardi hid a jolt of surprise. *Did I just see pearlised teeth in the boy’s flashing smile?*

“Later we can,” Callum offered. He pushed through a set of double doors ahead of them, then stood aside and then—Tardi was vaguely aware—closed the doors behind them with himself on the outside.

Claire King stood in the middle of the room, the same woman Tardi saw in his monster-generated visions back when he still surfed for a living.

She greeted Shad and Trinnet, elaborately getting their names. “Stormy?” she said. “Is that a cult local to where you come from?”

In other words, she was performing a total put-on. Tardi could see even Shad bristling at the falsity in her demeanour. He laughed at her crack about Stormies being a cult.

Claire shifted her gaze to Tardi. Her silence so noticeable that Trinnet stopped his visual inspection of the place. “Where did you get it and what possessed you to take it?” she said.

“What possessed me to take it?” Tardi echoed. “Should’ve said that to your buddy, Joe Loreno. I heard that he worked out of here. Or you could’ve asked him what possessed *him* to take the stuff home? Why he spread it up and down the valley in his brother’s personal harrier jet? I heard that he called it a fertiliser-run?”

She didn’t quite crumple, but he could see that his words had a negative effect.

“Shad, get the coffee on,” Trinnet said. “Woman is in shock. Accusing the tree-man without even knowing him?”

Shad opened and slapped shut cupboard hatches trying to find a source of heat. “Flick’s sake, how do these people cook?”

“Heaven save me from primitives!” Claire said.

They were all cut by that lash. “Steady on,” Trinnet said. “You graciously forgot to give us your name?”

“This is Claire King,” Tardi said. “I learned about her and what she does here from your friend Zachie Cortin.”

“The gent what lost his ladies to the tree bug,” Trinnet said. “Answer the Tamer, woman.”

“That can’t be your name?” she said to Tardi.

“A title that must do for the nonce,” Trinnet said formally. “Help you cognise why we came, crossing the salt and all.”

“Right,” Shad said. “Inventing is the go, a primitive strategy that can’t be bested.”

Claire seemed silenced.

“Gives you a nark of breathing space talking lingo at the sapients,” Trinnet said. “Them having to figure.”

Tardi grinned. “I see that now that I’m not on the receiving end.”

“I smell a fire and pretty soon Shad will have the coffee boiling,” Trinnet said.

Shad had a fire burning in one of the stainless steel sinks. He balanced a coffee percolator on a couple of steel spatulas laid across. What could he be using as fuel? Tardi sniffed. Rosemary was the strongest aroma.

“In here or out there?” Shad waved inside and outside.

“In here,” Tardi said, seating himself at the nearest little round cafe table. “Where the tree-in-me can’t get a grip in the floor.” The deck outside had run-off gaps. He’d be dancing a jig in two minutes.

Shad served the coffee. Trinnet’s mug to Trinnet. Tardi’s mug to Claire. Shad’s mug to Tardi. “Not enough fuel to really heat or stew,” he said.

“None for you?” Tardi said. He sipped. The coffee was bitter, lukewarm and left him with a mouthful of grounds to chew. He chuckled. “I understand why.”

“I’ll be squaring away the glass with the young one,” Shad said.

Claire perched on a chair opposite Trinnet and Tardi, looking like she would run at the slightest provocation.

So I should start on my story. “Me first, I think,” Tardi said. “I was thrown against some silver coral by a shock-wave from a boat, and after the poison from the coral took hold in me, our countryside was sprayed with what Joe Loreno brought home.”

He stopped to sip from Shad’s brew. No input from Claire, Trinnet or the Great Flicker. “Where the resulting mist fell, people transformed into what we’re calling new-trees, for want of a more accurate description of what might have happened to them. They appear still

to have their human minds.”

He short-cut where possible. In a minute the cup-runneth-over syndrome would take hold of Claire. “Some people, like me, were apparently inoculated by an earlier brush with the dust. We became walking talking tree-hairs. Weird that Lorenzo himself wasn’t?”

“He’s a cleanliness freak,” Claire said. “Never let anything touch him that might infect him with something.”

“Didn’t help then that he got in the way of some overspray and since he was not vaccinated ...”

Claire got up. “Have a look around. I’ve got chores.”

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While Trinnet nosed around in the kitchen area, Tardi investigated the hall and started down a ramp. Callum and Shad joined him almost immediately.

“What do you want to see, tree-man,” Callum said. “I know every place here.”

“Can you work a microscope?” Tardi said.

“Not me. See my neanderthal fingers? Gramma will help you with that.”

“Who calls your fingers that?” Shad said.

“Gramma, when she is cross. Lots of things here that I can’t do and she can. Some things I can and she can’t, like plaiting strings. Beardy showed me that. How to colour up the twine, and how to plait it.” He studied Tardi’s waist. “Have to be a long one if you’d like one and want to keep it in *your* belt. And I would need to make a new one, because I just gave Shad my last one for him to keep.”

Shad lifted his shirt to show off his belt, plaited leather, with a tri-colour plaited string threaded through.

“Looks very fine, Callum,” Tardi said.

Callum stopped Tardi. Stared deep into his eyes. “Are any of them coming back? Beardy?”

“Joe Lorenzo isn’t,” Tardi said.

“That’s a no all round then,” Callum said. “No, that isn’t right. Zebe didn’t go with the rest. She might come back.”

They walked on again, Shad and Tardi taking their cue from Callum. They descended a way under the level of the ocean and sweat beaded Shad’s forehead. “Walls are thick, Cuz,” Tardi said. “There be no sea-waves coming in.”

“Gramma is leaving soon,” Callum said. “Off with the swimmers. Her and them that don’t swim will have kayaks to paddle. Will I be going with *you*?”

“Yes,” Shad said. No hesitation. “Not leaving you here on your lonesome. It’ll be good to have a young one to learn the lingo to.”

“Did he say it good?” Callum said.

“He did,” Tardi said. “And you’ll be learning the lingo with me. But, you know, we all three are the younger. We all might have to work on Trinnet some.”

Callum laughed. “Easy. I’m good with old people.”

Shad laughed too. “First off, don’t tell Trinnet he’s old.”

Tardi studied Callum in the between-moments. Callum’s skin, hair, teeth and eyes all carried the silver. Various intensities of it.

Claire joined them from a side corridor. “I see you wondering, tree-man.”

“Gramma, you can stop worrying. Shad and Tardi say I can go with them.”

“I’m happy for you, Callum,” she said. “Why don’t you take Shad to meet Illy and the rest?”

Tardi grinned at Shad’s knowing smirk, knowing Claire’s game as well as his buddy did.

“Why did you come here, tree-man?” Claire said.

“Anything you know about this disease?” He gripped and squished the tree needles in his mangy hair.

“I know *of* it,” she said. “Never knew what it would do to humans if sprayed all over in the way you described.”

“Need a cure. Not just for me.”

He said it all again, in case she hadn’t taken it in. “There are hundreds back home. They’re being called new-trees and they have their human souls still in them. Only a couple of us walk and talk. Partials.”

“An off-world bio-agent brought in by one of the Huddle to help them convert our air into something they can use,” she said.

That was a scrap of info and no use to him at all apart from tickling his interest. No mention of a cure. “What’s the other thing I have in me?” Tardi said. “The one that allows the monster to invade my mind? I caught it from that silver-barbed coral?”

“The Huddle hides me from the Engineer,” she said. “That’s what he once was. They protect me despite the terrible thing I did to them.” She seemed to go into a fugue of whys and wherefores. “Maybe they still expect to revenge themselves on me. Or maybe they are saving me from him to be able to get Ushen returned to them.”

He’d have to try to get her back to his problems via her own. “I don’t understand. The Huddle protects you from the infection that enables the invasion? How does that work?”

“The infection is caused by the silver dust that the Engineer still manufactures. Its first use was to net the different members of the Huddle and to keep them caught,” Claire said. “He apparently does not realise that the Huddle, having invented their muds to ease the dust’s effects, haven’t taken the dust unadulterated for hundreds of years.”

“He became aware of me the minute I was flung against Joe Lorenzo’s coral,” Tardi said. “And he now knows a bunch of Stormies as well, Trinnet among them.”

“It’s my good fortune that he’s not that good at seeing stuff happening right under his nose,” Claire said. “He still trusts the Huddle.”

“That sheen that you and Callum both have all through you?”

“We bathe in the Huddle’s muds. The Engineer, it is to be hoped, will continue to think that we are part of the Huddle.”

“What else do you know?” Tardi said. She was paler now, not so rosy-cheeked, though that could be the basement-cold.

“Whatever he snares, stays snared. Thousands of years,” she said.

“And knowing that, you’ve been spreading it. Joany Appleseed, my informant said. Casting it into the landscape.”

“Here’s the clinic,” she said. “Would you like us to sample some of your cells? To see what we can see?” She fanned out a half dozen swabs.

Useless. The Great Flicker is in me, therefore the silver is in me. “The tree thing then,” Tardi said. “Can I get rid of that?”

“Why would you want to? I used it to enable my new cetacean people to breathe in water, and feed down in the depths. That’s where the fish are these days.”

“I’m a *land* animal,” Tardi said.

She continued along her own track. “The otherworld’s creatures that live in water evolved a vegetative symbiosis to help them make oxygen.”

“Joe Lorenzo stole his sample from here,” Tardi said to get her attention to his problems. “Or maybe it spilled and he mopped up.”

“You can’t blame me for everything,” she said.

“What about that fish that you had here for a while, the size of a mattress. I saw you feeding it, courtesy of the Great Flicker himself which is what the Stormies call him. By the time the mattress got down to Byron Bay, it was a room-sized fish. Must have had a great feed on the way. Sharks, dolphins and Earth-evolved whales would all do, I expect. It has the biggest maw.”

He continued despite that she was now paper-pale. “He doesn’t even have to do the reformatting of Earth himself, you’re doing it for him,” he said.

“I’m spreading the Huddle’s mud to *save* the Earth, to stop things dying. We rediscovered a species of krill the day Joe left.”

“Bet it’s a silver krill,” Tardi said. “And you made a completely new silver sea-mammal as well? Dolphins crossed with humans? Whose idea was that?”

“They’re humans so wanting the peaceful ocean life and so loving their dolphin friends. Yes, I hybridised them.”

The peaceful ocean life? The poor flicking dolphin lookalikes. But careful now. I want her help. I am not her conscience. “The Great Flicker showed me a bunch of eggs containing the genetic material of his kind,” he said. “Data packages that are waiting somewhere nearby, for good times for all on a water planet. He picked me for the first of his new support team, and he’s going to try to make me do things with bad repercussions. I hoped that you might have some suggestions on how to help overcome ... I don’t know ... prevent the worst?”

“The Huddle have controlled him for thousands of years. Get in with them.”

The way she smiled reminded him of Rowan’s tricks.

“I’ll start you on that road if you like,” Claire said.

“Is it irrevocable?” he said.

She laughed. “Look at you, asking that.” She sobered. “The dust is forever the Huddle told me again and again. What keeps them and now you in a hard thrall. Their mud, that they developed themselves, eases some of the dust’s symptoms, as they tell it. Refresh it with your blood and fluids and it will learn you. In the valley, the ladies all had their own individual ponds to lie around in, and for their clones to be born into.”

“Do you? Lie around in it?” Tardi said.

She stopped before a set of fire-containment doors. Unlocked them. “Come on in and see my witch’s cauldron.”

Put like that he didn’t know if he wanted to. He stepped back, into someone right behind him.

“I got your back, Cuz,” Shad said. “The lady is saying the dust is forever. There’s your

irrevocable, she be saying. The mud sounds like a shield.” He nudged Tardi toward the tank Claire indicated. “Big enough for a swim, almost.”

“I’ll leave you gents to figure something. I’ll be opening the sea-doors soon. Flooding all this,” she said with her arms spread. “You left my great-grandson ... where?” she said, looking at Shad.

“Youngster is with Trinnet in the cafe, learning his edibles.”

“Zebe might help you work the mud to your personal bio-specifications, if you ask her nicely,” Claire said.

“Zebe? She’s here?” Tardi said.

“You know her already?”

“Only that she came down to Byron Bay to meet a friend. She is a blonde and she doesn’t answer friendly emails.”

Claire laughed. “You don’t know Zebe. Trust me on that if on nothing else. After I leave, she’ll be the only one who might be interested enough to help you.” She swirled down a corridor opposite.

They heard a second set of doors slamming back to the walls. A few minutes later the smell of the ocean trembled into the room.