

29: The Emergency

Tardi burst into the clearing, Silver a flash beside him. Half-a-dozen large black hounds bayed and snarled at a woman holding them off. Her tied-back blond hair swung wildly as she scrambled to stop the animals advancing.

Del? Del Loreno, here?

A twin of Tardi's Silver came into being beside her. Tardi glanced aside at Silver disappearing. *Right*. The monster's attention could only be on one or the other.

The twin patrolled between Del, and Lilly in the shadows between two young tree trunks. Del screamed as one of the hounds snapped at her feet. "You black devil!" She swung a fire-blackened club trailing smoke and smashed it onto the hound's head. "And you!" She whacked another on its shoulder with her back swing.

Tardi snatched a couple of sticks from the scatter of a fireplace. The grey dawn-light showed him hounds wearing steel-spiked collars. Their pulsing ruby eyes indicated bio-engineering. The child's high piping birdlike crying seemed to aggravate the beasts.

The silver dog near Del faded and Silver was back, leaping on the nearest hound after bounding forward over tense backs and snarling heads. Tardi waded in, walloping where he could reach their noses, left and right, swinging at unprotected underbellies. Arriving beside Del, he twisted round to face the pack with her.

She panted. "Welcome, stranger." She jumped toward Lilly to comfort her or ensure her safety. Their dog reappeared as Silver faded.

Tardi walloped a beefy shoulder in front of him and the club splintered. He grabbed the tree behind him for leverage, and with his remaining stick swiped the nearest hound's legs from under it. He thumped its head. *Crack!* And that stick was useless too.

The baskerville shook its head dazedly and retreated into the pack. One or another of the rest fainted forward, growling and slavering without let-up.

He turned to the tree behind him and set his hands on a solid branch. The polished wood felt as warm as human skin. He pushed it downward to break it free, and muscles rippled under the bark!

Hu-hu-hu! He shuddered and let go fast. *A new tree?*

The tree limb snapped free and dropped to the ground, its end fisted in a club! *Was it like that before?* Tardi staggered at the sheer, astonishing impossibility that the branch had reshaped its—

"Here they come again!" Del shouted.

Tardi picked up the wooden arm and thumped the leading animal.

The baskerville rocked on its feet and shook its head. Another slunk between Tardi and Del to his left. Tardi swung the fist-on-a-club sideways. *Thwack!*

The hound fell back. Once beyond Tardi's and Del's reach, it yapped. The remainder of the

hounds retreated with their tails curling under their bellies.

“Woof! Woof! Woof!” One of the silver dogs harried the hounds toward the bush behind the cattle trough.

“Looks like we got the alpha,” Tardi said.

Del gasped. “I fight them off for what seemed like hours. A tree man and a dog come on the scene and the bastards take notice?”

One of the hounds turned aside, perhaps intending to lap from the trough.

“Woof! Woof! Woof!” Now both the silver dogs ran at them, increasing dawn-light helping one becoming opaquely visible while the other faded.

The hounds yammered and turned tail.

“Typical,” Tardi said. “Their boss at home must just be up, and realizing his animals are up to something nefarious by the increase in their energy output, and he’s decreased their input. All they are now is your normal fawning-dog models?”

“You’re a walking talking tree now?” Del said. She mimed by touching her hair then pointing at his.

“Pleased to meet you too,” Tardi said. He’d been ecstatic that he could still function as a human. Then Del had put her unknowing finger right on his sensitivities. He felt the tree working at his edges again, fizzing and converting his substance.

When the tree-bug in him was finished with him would he be like the one that gave him its arm? He placed the fisted club at the new tree’s base and stilled his inadvertent trembling.

Lilly sprang from between the mysterious trees with a glad cry. “Mum, Silver fetched his doggie brother and our friend Tardi!”

“Tardi? Huh. So it is. Dreads last time I saw you.” Del scowled. “We came here yesterday for a picnic in hell. Fighting off a pack of ravening ferals was only another thing.”

“They had the spiked collars and the pulsing red eyes,” Tardi said. He forced himself to be mild. “They are that mob of hellhounds bred to guard some rich sod’s secret premises a couple of dozen kilometres to the west. I wonder what made them come here? Or even whether they were sent purposely? Too bad the ComLink is still down or we could’ve put in a complaint. I am still Tardi Mack.” He put his hand out. “Pleased to meet you *again*.”

Del’s laughter had a scathing tone. “You’ve certainly got his looks. But in that case, you’re a game Target too and I can’t forgive you that!”

“Why not?” *Still mild-mannered. Never mind the complications.*

“You really need three jobs?” she said. “That game killed my business. Home stays. Everybody now uses their carbon credits for touring to search for Targets.”

Tardi’s heart sank. Elements of his recent former life pushed into his awareness. Steve, Herm, Ace, the nightmare, Steve-as-a-tree, Rowan.

“Would you believe I’m meant to obstruct you while you galivant around being a Target? I thought you’d be above joining that outfit,” she said.

“What? I don’t even get a thank you for this?” *Playing the affronted rescuer. Playing for time.*

“It wasn’t as if you knew anything about what was going on up here,” Del said with a hard expression. “The silver dog brought you.”

He would’ve preferred her to say that she had had hopes for her and him. *He* had. He shrugged. *Trying to explain will only make it worse.*

“I’m Lilly,” the child said brightly.

He turned to her with relief. “You could be Lilly Pilly.”

“But I *am* Lilly Loreno. Why Pilly?”

“Hair of buds and leaves. Like mine ...” Tardi said.

Del screamed. “No! Shut up! I don’t want her encouraged!”

Tardi waved his hands to calm the troubles. “Okay, okay.”

“Did you bring any food, Tardi?” Lilly said. “I’m really, really hungry.”

Tardi took the now bent and flattened breakfast snacks out of his pocket. “These do you for now?”

“Give them here.” Del snatched the packets from her daughter. Turned them over and over. “Still sealed. Okay. They should be okay.” She passed them back to Lilly. She turned back to Tardi. “Your hair wasn’t green on Wednesday.”

“Wednesday?” Tardi said. “I’m confused.”

“Wednesday. Thursday. Whatever. The day I was emailed your mugshot and details by the mob running the obstructing show.”

Mugshot. Directions. The obstructing show? Tardi frowned. “Remind me of what you’re talking about?”

“Huh,” she said. “Forgetful, are we?”

“This happened.” He lifted a few of his casuarina dreads to indicate the event.

She stepped back. “Forget it. It’s not important. And don’t worry about your hair. I was joking, however unlikely.” She continued trying not to stare, but flicked her gaze here and there over his features and his clothes as if to divine the rest of his physiology.

He felt as if she stripped him. But he let her, because how else to help her accept Lilly’s malady? He looked everywhere their gazes wouldn’t cross.

Early morning sunbeams speared into the clearing through the surrounding trees. The water in the trough reflected light so bright that Tardi couldn’t look. One of the silver dogs chased Lilly and zapped her whenever she stopped to laugh. The same as his Silver had done to him.

The dogs were another mystery.

“What happened here?” he said, lifting his feet to check them, angling them this side, then that side. He winkled roots from a couple of places. Then he walked on the spot for a bit to get his human circulation up to speed, to prevent the tree’s circulation grabbing more ground.

Slop, slop. Slop slop. Slop slop. Not that his feet made a slopping sound on the grassy leaf-strewn ground. The slopping was in his thoughts. Him recalling the sound his feet made when he raised them out of the wet sand at the sea’s margin. Such as when he’d been standing there sinking a while to study the waves. *If only.*

Del dithered for a heartbeat or five. “I don’t know and I don’t want to find out.” But she focused on him clearing the sides of his feet. She ran toward Lilly.

“I’ll just go and fetch my pack, okay?” Tardi said. With the tarp under him he would be able to relax a bit. When he set out the tarp and had crosslegged stiffly down, Lilly hunkered beside him. “Mum broke off my roots too. Why does it hurt only sometimes?”

Del’s shadow fell over them. “What did you say to her?”

“Nothing yet.”

“Don’t even start. This is the biggest not-funny joke ever played on me. I want to wake up from it, you hear!”

He shrugged. What was there to say to that? “It must be about breakfast time?”

“Oh yes, Tardi,” Lilly said. “Have you got toast?”

Del stopped her marching. She sat down opposite and resumed studying him. “How did you get like that?”

Tardi untied the wok from the front of the pack. He searched through the stuff inside it and took out flour and fat, egg powder and sugar. Bless the fellow who’d owned it, he’d packed the fixings of a pretty good breakfast. “We’ll make some wok cakes,” he said.

“Will we need a fire?” Lilly asked. “Can I help, Mum?”

“Go and find some kindling,” Del said, not dropping her stare.

“I ran into a sort of opaque mist to try and stop a bunch of people in it whom I thought were obstructing,” Tardi said.

Del bristled.

“Stop!” he said. “Don’t say anything else for a minute.” He straightened his thoughts.

“Before all this started, we began a ... well, a hook up? I didn’t know you were still with Joe Lorenzo?”

“I’m not. Can’t stop him coming home to see Lilly, can I?” She hissed. “You signed up to be a Target!”

“Not guilty,” Tardi said. “My ex-girlfriend signed me up. But all that, Targets and Obstructers

dressed in holo-bushes are nothing to do with what is really happening. Are they?"

He thought she might cry. He arranged the sticks Lilly brought and absently taking the fire starter Del passed him, thrust the flame into a little bunch of dry leaves and twigs. He blew gently into the centre to encourage the flame to take to the fuel.

"Now some this thick, Lilly." With her finger and thumb Del made a circle with the diameter of a broomstick.

"I'm still confused," Tardi said. "The Thursday just gone, my brother Steve and I were still ordinary players. At Level One." He built a pyramid of finger-length twigs over the little flames.

"Now a couple of rocks, Lilly, to sit the wok on," Del said.

"Rocks, right." He took the little boulders from Lilly. He arranged thicker branches over the flames. He measured flour and sugar and egg mix into the wok, stirring each time to mix the powders. He felt hugely warm inside—happy—remembering the sequence of it, seeing in his mind his father's hands slopping in water from the old plastic jug and stirring until everything had amalgamated. A happier time all round. "I'll need something to store the batter in while I cook each pancake."

"Lilly, the cups," Del said.

Lilly fetched cups from everywhere they'd been thrown. "Here's Mum's. Dad's. Stella's. Uncle Pan's. Mine."

"Thank you, Lilly Pilly Loreno." He concentrated on dividing the batter into the cups.

"Can my cup be for my Silver," Lilly said. "And Stella's cup be for your Silver?"

"Good idea," he said. He washed the wok minimally to not have to get up and break the treading-on-eggshells mood. He dried the wok over the fire, dabbed it with what smelled of fry fat and swirled it every way. Poured in the batter from the first cup. Swirled it again to spread the batter wide to cook it quicker.

"Those trees I sat up all night watching?" he said. "They only moved when the wind was in their branches."

"New trees," Del said. "Yet, one of mine gave you his arm to use."

Tardi shuddered. The feel of that tree branch rippling its muscles!

"I'm with you shuddering about it," she said. "Pan's arm. They—Pan and Stella—they've been looking after us. Providing us with berries. Sheltering Lilly during ... you saw that."

Tardi badly wanted to stampede back to see if Steve was still in that strangler, and to see if Steve could still move. But it'd be no good. He had no way of reversing the process. He needed to learn more. "Got a plate, Lilly Pilly? The pancake will be too hot to have in your hands."

The child scurried to find the picnic plates.

“How did it get Lilly? The fog, too?”

“No fog here. We had our picnic. After the champagne toast I went for a walk. When I came back, she ...”

Tardi took a plate from Lilly and slid the wok cake onto it. “You get it cool, Del.” He dabbed the pan with more fat, and poured in another cup of batter. ‘Tell me a story, Lilly Loreno. Of leaves and flowers in your hair.’

Lilly looked to her mother.

Del frowned pressing her lips together. Then nodded.

“Dad put the bottle with the special water into the well to keep it cool. He didn’t say, Don’t touch, Lilly. After our cake and drink, Mum went for a walk.’

“Joe and Pan and Stella come for their precious anniversary,” Del said. “This little bit of land, just the bulldozer scoop, is all that remains of their family farm. They come here every year to swear getting the rest back from the bank.”

Tardi flipped the second wok cake.

“Joe works at the Reefarium,” Del said. “He brought some kind of quickgrow water. He wanted to try it out up here, to see if the trees would grow faster.” She gnawed at her bottom lip.

“When I filled up my sprayer,” Lilly said. “Dad’s magic water accidentally spilled into the well. Nice and swirly and silver. I sprayed Stella and she helped me spray her dad and my dad all silver. Mum doesn’t like spray games.”

Del gave her the plate with the cooled wok cake. “Eat up, sweet girl.”

Tardi slid his second creation from the pan, then did it all again. “When does your dog get into the story, Lilly?”

She laughed. “His name is Silver, silly. He was crying with a sore paw, so Mum got the splinter out and I kissed him better. Only all the other dogs in the whole world are scary.”

The visible Silver sat between Lilly and Del. He licked the side of Lilly’s face and she giggled.

“I called my dog Silver, too,” Tardi said.

“Where is he?” Lilly said.

“I think he’s sleeping here beside me. See how the tarp bends down under him?”

Del snorted.

“Tardi isn’t fibbing, Mum. See my other hand on his Silver?” Lilly’s hand smoothing Tardi’s Silver’s fur seemed to sway in midair.

“The dogs seem important. Have you noticed how they earth us?” Tardi said. “When Silver

touches me, there's a noise—"

"Zzztt," Lilly said. "Then I feel good."

"If I knew a different silvery name, I'd call mine that," he said.

"Argent means silver," Del said.

"Yours can be Argie, Tardi!" Lilly kissed the invisible dog beside Tardi. "Good boy, Argie!"

"How come you didn't go home?" Tardi said.

"The ute put itself into hibernation. The reason for our troubles with the supposed ferals."

"I can help you with that."

"And I loved you already."

He glanced up. *Does she mean that? Or is she joking?* His tree juices spritzed through his veins. She'd surely change her tune if they got so far that she saw him naked.

Apparently not noticing his silence, she said, "Pan took out the ignition unit to prevent little fingers. I've looked at least three times behind every stick and tree root and stump."

He cut the last large cake in half and dished them out onto two plates. "Now, Lilly, you take these plates and the dogs to where there's a bit more elbow room. Mind you put the plates down at exactly the same time!" He pushed at the invisible Argie, "Go on, you. You have got to be hungry."

While Lilly was busy with the dogs, he said, "I'll show you what the disease did to me?"

Del nodded. She pressed her lips together as if to stop their trembling.

Tardi unzipped the sweatshirt. He lifted his left arm and traced the band of bark-like skin to his left shoulder. "This goes up along the back of my arm and down into the back edge of my hand and the last two fingers."

He stepped around the fire to show her his ring finger and pinkie going brown and twiggy. "Have to massage them more. Get my blood flowing a bit faster. Massage everything. It's the only way I know how to stop it." He turned and lifted his dreads. "This lot going up has taken my hair follicles."

"What about down below?" she said, sounding pinched.

Tardi looked over his shoulder to gauge her mood. Guilt? "Clothes rubbing over the bark help to stop its growth."

They both looked at Lilly wearing long pants under her short little dress as she fed the dogs, both of which were silvering in and out of visibility.

Del laughed and cried at the same time. "Her gardening clothes. Show me the rest of you."

He dropped his pants, showing her the ridged skin creeping down to the left side of his back

and splitting just above his left butt cheek. "Half of it goes all the way down to my left foot." He shook his left leg in the wrinkles of his left pant leg.

"The other is more trouble; how it wants to go along the inside of my right butt cheek before it goes down my other leg? But see how contact with air and or light starts the rootlets growing straightaway?" He stroked down the coruscating tree skin on his legs, wiping away the instantaneous growth.

"But your front is okay?"

Now she sounded concerned just for him. He turned after pulling up his pants. "Much good that'll be with the rest of me so weird. First thing people will see is my hair up here!" He shook his head making his casuarina dreads blat around his ears. Then the green stubble!" He stuck out his nubbling jaw.

"That news blogger, Rowan Ingle. She's a great researcher. Get with her and ... What?"

As soon as Del said the name, a parade of imagery started in his mind's eye. A pair of lips bent in a sorrowing little smile. About something I did, he recalled. A pair of shapely hands rejected something he said. Rowan withdrawing from his embrace and shaking her golden curls with finality. He grunted. "My ex-girlfriend."

"Then any little thing you remember will be out of context," Del said.

"You think so?"

"Oh, I know so. I've done a lot of second guessing in my time, hanging a whole story of grief from a smile that didn't come my way."

"Oh for normal times and normal griefs," he said. "We broke up. The way I am, I'm ninety percent sure she'll never want to see me again."

"Don't sweat on it. You know where I live."

"Um. Okay. Thanks." Was it embarrassment that made her so flippant? "My feet!" He raised his left foot. His toes and heels were already a thumb's length longer than they should be. "Look at the bastard going wild at a bit of dirt under my feet. I've always got to be doing slop slop." He demonstrated.

Lilly came running up. "What are you doing, Tardi?"

"Moving my feet while I'm standing still. *Slop, slop*. To stop the roots growing."

She stood beside him. Did it with him. *Slop, slop. Slop, slop.*

"Keep it up, Lilly Pilly," Del said. "Three times every time you think of it. You'll be just like Tardi."

"We should do the ute," he said, feeling red. "Getting that open will be my brother's trick." He got Steve's and his own decks from his arm. "When he was a kid just starting in IT, he collected macros, every kind of little program." He searched Steve's archives. "And lucky for

us he stayed a hoarder. There. Steve's collection of hibernation locks."

Del gathered the cups, plates and cutlery. "You fetch the picnic cloth, Lilly."

The dog Tardi now thought of as Argie bounded along beside him, zapping him half-a-dozen times. "That feels good, Arge."

Tardi and Del kneeled down on the canvas in the road beside the hoverute driver's hatch. Tardi scrolled through the designs on Steve's deck while he and Del compared the virtual patterns to the real one in front of them.

"This one," Del said about the eleventh one.

"Mmm. I think you're right." Tardi adjusted the settings on his own deck to take a copy of the design. It looked like Chinese lettering. He pressed the two decks face to face, hit copy and inspected the result. "Yep. It took."

He niggled the three corners of his deck's screen loose from the base and lined the floppy transparency up against the lock. "Now Del," he said. "See the colored dots on the design?"

"They're the contacts and I should press them?"

"You got it," he said.

Del thought for all of about six seconds. "Lilly, get me a couple of the cake forks?" Del bent eight times into the required alignment and delicately lined up the forks between Tardi's two hands stretching the screen.

"Lilly, can you wriggle in here between us?" Tardi said. "I need you to hold the deck up so the screen doesn't tear lose from the base."

Del lifted the forks until Lilly was in place. "You did this with just two pairs of hands?" She shook for a minute, laughing. "You and your brother?"

"My father, me and little Steve. Same configuration. Only we had to perch Steve on a barrel so he could reach."

"Your father?"

My father when he still loved me. "One time overnighing at a truck stop. Same problem. I don't recall how come but after that there was no stopping Steve. I think he's got a copy of every hibernation lock ever made. Okay, Del."

Del pressed the forks into place and Tardi eased the deck screen inward to get good contact.

Shlickkk!

The bar locks in the ute slid aside. "Hooray!" Lilly shouted. "We can go home!"

Del's face fell. "But we still don't have ignition."

Tardi grinned. "Easy! Due to the fact that I'm a trucker, I keep a spare universal ignition

cube.” He lifted it from the purpose-made slot in the side of his deck.

“Amazing.”

Her tone stung. *She has a problem saying thank you?* “Okay, so I was bragging,” he said.

“It’s just that it feels amazingly good to remember my life. You think your average roadside-assistance types don’t have a few of these in their kit?”

“Okay, so I’m overdosed on amazement. I want to go home and sleep some of it off.”

“You can’t,” he said. “Not sleeping nonstop. I’m guessing Lilly will need to move every hour or so.”

“Put the cube in for me and we’ll be on our way. I’ll set my alarm.”

Obviously more talk wasn’t the go. Tardi climbed into the hoverole and lay himself down in front of the front seats. He reached in under the dash and found the service computer by feel, where it piggybacked the main frame—for servicers to recode the vehicle’s settings without accidentally deleting everything. The idea was that they’d upload the changes once they were complete. He slotted in the cube.

The engine began to purr.