

35: Tardi Confused

Not once since Tardi had broken off his toe and elbow roots had Rowan looked anywhere near him, let alone looked him in the eye. She hadn't stared, glared, been sarcastic or ironic. She had a sachet of spring water ready for him from the food dispenser.

He wondered how she got it without kicking the machine—which he would've heard—but didn't get the chance to ask.

"Thirsty trees are brittle, right?" Rowan said. "I couldn't let you break something when I could so easily work the machine for you, could I?"

He swallowed. "I hope you're joking!"

"Not joking." She looked at the concrete at his feet or she looked at his feet. "I remembered the tokens I got for a drink at the Ile. But with a drink on the house I didn't need them, did I?"

Tardi picked up Steve's deck and slipped it over his arm. Ditto his own.

"Oh. We're getting dressed?" She said it with such false bonhomie that he stared at her again. She retreated behind the hoverole cab she'd slept in. "I better get back into the newshound skin."

He waited. *Slop, slop*. She swore, coming back around the cab. He went at her as if the real Rowan was back. "What? Something I've done? Not done? Tell me so I'll know. You're always expecting me to read your mind." He wanted her normal. He had enough worries.

"Far better if you don't read my mind," she said. "I wasn't thinking of you just then. Well, not directly. But I'll fix it. Nothing for you to worry about."

His gut knotted and sent him cramps. 'I was asleep and you were asleep. What can possibly have happened to upset you?'

"While you were asleep, I checked my deck. No ComLink of course. My diary. Something I just remembered I should've done."

He could just about see the progression of her inventions. He knew her very well.

"Everything has changed so much, you'll probably need to wipe your diary and start all over," he said.

"Mmm."

Her way of telling him to leave it alone. *Normal. What I wanted, right? So leave it alone.*

"Now, about breakfast, I suggest we go down to Uncle Tom's?" she said.

He got his thoughts where the action was. "Yeah, okay. There's a shortcut down the end of Stirrup Lane." He led the way, and at the end of the eastern arm of the lane, parted the waist-high shrubbery always trying to overgrow the goat track.

She stopped him with her hand on his arm. "Wait a sec," she said. "It's going to be steep, isn't it?"

“Bit of a clamber,” he said. *She touched me?*

“I’ll go first. If you trip, you’ll fall against me.” She smiled.

Back to not like Rowan.

She pushed past him.

They both made it to the bottom of the Saddle without falling.

“There’s none of the usual noise,” Tardi said as they approached the freighter service station’s parking apron.

“Magpies caroling and the surf breaking against the levee don’t count?”

The levee that hereabouts kept the sea from the M1 that passed by the back of the service station. “You know what I mean,” he said. “And there are no freighters still parked, when usually four or five overnight here.”

“They’re baking. Smell it? I’m hungry enough to eat a savory and a sweet.”

As they crossed the giant parking apron, Jason Senior—grandfather to the junior Jasons—normally known as Jay, stepped from the shop.

“He had to have been on the lookout,” Rowan said barely under her breath, like the Rowan he knew.

“Hail to our first customers!” Jay said. With his beard tucked into a wide waistband over viscose sarong-pants and his hair gathered in a scraggy grey ponytail, he looked *his* normal self.

Tardi relaxed a bit and grinned. “You running a generator for your credit machine?”

“First pie per head is on the house. New times call for new ways,” Jay said as though he’d said it every day for a good while. “Though you’re not the first comers, you’ll be the first eaters. Do you know anything about that?”

“Let me guess,” Tardi said. “With no freighters here, that means local traffic. Ben Baker is here?”

“You got that, Trucker Two!” Jay said. “Grandson Number One brought Ben along last night. He, the hunter, was in a state of aggression put on hold, so he said.” Jay stopped walking and waited.

Tardi knew Jay was waiting for him to think up something appropriate to say in return. “You refuse to harbor aggro so Ben packed his away?”

Jay laughed. “He the hunter was missing the extension to his right arm. He maintained that you had something to do with that.”

“Now I’m with you!” Rowan said. “We didn’t take that extension. Haven’t got it anywhere about us.” She twirled. “See? No artificial splinting anywhere!”

Jay stared. “Ah. I did think Jason Number One had a sheen of guilt on him. This way and I’ll

get you a pie.” He led them toward the outdoor dining area.

Tardi marshalled his thoughts for the next bout, but Jay stopped by a tree that by way of its awkward placement shading the forecourt, was characteristic of the new times.

“This here is Merse, my son-in-law.” Jay slapped the buttonwood trunk as he might’ve smacked the rump of a pony. “He used to open up of a morning. Unlock the battery terminals and so forth. I think that mist did for him.”

Amazingly, Rowan glanced at Tardi with a sick smile. She waited as if for him to do the honors explaining.

Maybe she sat up all night watching my roots grow? “It’s what happened to quite a few people.”

“Between you and me,” Jay spoke behind one hand. “The family doesn’t particularly mind, Merse being the tyrant he was. He wasn’t the only one?”

Tardi described the Sefton Hughes family in their paperbark guise forever playing volleyball. Rowan looked sicker. He slop-slopped since they were all standing still.

“You know Threen?” Jay said, watching Tardi’s feet but saying nothing about them. He either understood the need, or decided to ignore Tardi in favour of Rowan.

Tardi and Rowan both nodded.

“Threen had a story about an old-time truck camping in the lay by.” Jay waved northward. “She’s such a chip from my rib I didn’t want to give her the satisfaction of my amazement. I chiacked her about her fanciful imagination.”

“What did she say happened?” Tardi said. *Slop slop.*

“She came by there in the early evening. The mist was patchy. She swore she saw a tree engulf the driver. Said it ate the bloke. I thought it more likely that she saw some kind of insurance scam on the trucker’s part with perhaps a credit-slide to the girl to keep her trap shut. Threen, knowing her own tendency to blurt, twisted the facts and multiplied the foibles to make it something she could tell at any party.”

“Funny she didn’t get transformed herself,” Rowan said, not looking like she was being sarcastic.

“She didn’t get out of her vehicle, of course,” Jay said, flashing Rowan his special little smile.

Interesting how stuff got garbled. Threen would’ve seen Steve getting down from the truck, the cyclist running up and being transformed. Threen obviously didn’t see Steve getting back into the cab faster than fast. “I left that truck in the lay by on Friday.” Whenever Friday was. “The town ban, you know. The truck and I are with The Local Freight Company, TLC. I was at Bruns Beach that night.” He held out his hand for shaking. “Tardi Mack.”

“Of course!” Jay smacked himself on the head. “Eventing Utilities. Aka Utilities for Events,” he said at Rowan’s befuddled expression.

Tardi hid a smile. *She's probably trying to work out what I just said. And how what I just said makes sense in relation to what she now knows.* "It's quiet here," he said. "How long no traffic?" *Slop slop.*

"Since that night," Jay said. "Where are you taking that question?"

"It could mean more places than just us are affected."

Jay laughed. "That'd be good. Given what my descendants are planning."

"Speaking of your genetic issue, is Toucan Jason here?" Tardi said. "I had a bit of trouble with the Mack that day. I'd appreciate it if Toucan could come with us and take a look under the bonnet."

"Toucan is normally our mechanic," Jay said to Rowan. "Let me just check if we still have the communication outage." He pressed the left hinge of his jaw. "Can you hear me, Toucan Jason?" He listened with his head cocked left. "Not yet. Today Toucan works at manually dismembering old timber for the pie oven."

Rowan laughed in the appreciative tones that meant she was about to butter Jay Jason up for something.

Good luck with that, ex-girlfriend. Although, if anyone has a chance of topping a tyrant, it's you.

Jay acted as if he noticed Rowan only now.

Duh, old man. What has the old geezer in mind for her?

"None of my crew said anything about a treeman with a companion?" Jay said.

Duh Tar-boy. What have the old geezer's descendants in mind for the tree man? Slop slop.

Fake distress flitted over Jay's face, followed by his famous crafty leer. "There's their plans, you see, with a drive-on part for the tree man, aka trucker. I'm not in favour. But I'm outnumbered. I can usually manage the junior Jasons but I'm a weedy sort compared to the hunter, aka the rifleman missing that extension to his arm."

"You and me both, Jay," Rowan said.

Jay did not acknowledge the smile pasted on her face. "I begged my crew to remember that when things get back to normal, we will again need to earn an honest living. And what if our customers then decide to pay us back for our depredations?"

Hard-faced now, telling them this game was over, Rowan said, "Where are they? The junior Jasons?"

Jay's smile was victorious. "They are at the Mack already. They went by scooter and left the hoverole for Toucan Jason to bring Tardi. So what will we do with you?" he said.

Tardi could almost see the words being formed on Jay's lips. *We have pots and pans to wash. No dishwasher. We need someone in the kitchen?*

Rowan did not give Jay a chance to say any of them. "I need transport and a chauffeur as I have some urgent business to attend to," she said. "Me borrowing both the hoverole and Toucan Jason will stop the rest of your juniors doing anything stupid today. By tomorrow, things might all be back to normal."

She needs transport? To where? To do what? Slop slop.

Jay gulped air, coughed, and capitulated. "That's very good. I like it a lot."

"Tardi," Rowan said. "Why don't you start to the truck on foot? He needs to keep on the move," she explained to Jay.

"What kind of business?" Tardi said. *Slop slop.*

"Something that needs doing." She stared past him.

I need to know. I need to goad her into telling me. "And this is where you'll fix whatever is broken?"

The look she flashed him was pure misery. Tears spattered from her eyes.

He frowned. She despised crying as a weakling strategy. She seemingly overrode her emotions with a tremulous smile. A tremulous smile for Jay, he saw. The old geezer watched avidly. *Duh, Tar-boy. Taken in again.*

"It'll help if you go slow," Rowan said. "It's for our future."

"Oh yeah. The future," he said. *What future he wanted to say.* The dog, whom he had forgotten until this moment, nudged him in the back of his legs.

Rowan smiled a lovey-dovey smile and rolled her eyes at Jay about Tardi's obtuseness or something.

"Let me intro you to Toucan Jason," Jay said.

"Jay, why don't you get Tardi a couple of pies? He's falling off his perch with hunger. I'd rather that Toucan doesn't see Tardi. Like you, Toucan isn't stupid. If he sees Tar he might smell a rat."

Tardi suspected it to be the other way around, that she'd rather Jay didn't come near Toucan. And plus, probably, she was preventing Tardi from following her and asking awkward questions. He hated her calling him Tar. Did she know that?

"I'm depending on you two," Rowan said roguishly.

"What a woman!" Jay said. "I'm with her all the way." He led Tardi to the shop-counter. "There's no choice. You'll have to have what we have."

"That's okay. You know I love your pies." Never did he want Jay's pies less.

Jay bagged a savory and a sweet and walked Tardi to the road.

