

38: Why Save Her?

They passed a road sign, Skyline Road, on the right. The Wall of China ridge, rose steeply beyond the road entrance.

Phew, Jason Jason didn't notice Tardi's startle. *Ace and Shad live up there!* His eyesight pulsed. *Ahhh! My head! Bastard! You've got my promise. I'll get onto it as soon as I can.* "Open the door," he croaked. "I'm going to puke." He knew exactly what ailed him—a migraine courtesy of the monster. Or the monster was blaming him for what Ace was doing to him. Something.

Jason slowed the camper-duck and Tardi barfed out the door while they flubbered through a creek, then did not increase speed for the run uphill on the other side.

Tardi wiped his mouth as he studied the bush thereabouts. *A preordained plan? Wits about you, Tarboy!*

Beyond the trees and close to the driver's side edge of the road, Del hoed between rows of vegetables while Lilly sprayed the plants with a child-size backpack sprayer. Silver snapped and pranced wherever she turned.

Jason parked the duck by that side of the road and stepped down with his hand stretched out, "Del Loreno, isn't it? I'm Jason Jason. I heard you might be after farm labor. I've got a couple of possibles in the back. Want to take a look?"

"Great!" Del dropped her hoe and walked with Jason Jason to the back of the camper. "Anyone putting their hands up for a bit of honest hands-in-the-dirt work, I'll welcome with open arms."

Tardi regretted that Del left her hoe in the field. Then he saw Lilly's twiggy head as she walked round the front of the cab. He thumped the inside of the door with his knee.

Lilly clambered up onto the duck's extended rims, spray-pistol grip at the ready. Grimacing like a little gargoyle, she peered into the cab. She smiled and planted a kiss on the glass beside Tardi's head. Next, he heard her at the back.

"Mum! Mum! Come on, Mum."

"Just a minute, darling. Jason, what were you thinking, tying them up? I'll only take willing workers." She addressed Rowan and the jockey. "You won't mind pulling a plough? I always hired farm-bots before. But with the owners out of the picture, none of the tractors will leave their home land."

"Ploughing is fine," the jockey said.

"I can only do board and meals in return for your work," Del said.

Jason blustered. "I'm not leaving him here unless I get at least half a ton of produce." He began to push the jockey back into the camper. "I'll take him to the village. Bad luck to you."

"Get real," Del said. "No one around here has that much to spare. What is it, Lilly?"

“In the front, Mum.”

Del peered toward the passenger seat. “Tardi, is it? If he can’t be bothered to come out to say hello, he’ll keep.”

“Hands tied, Mum.”

Del stormed to the cab and jerked the passenger hatch up.

Jason Jason appeared beside her, waving his knife.

“Have you gone out of your mind?” Del said.

“He’s valuable merchandise.”

“I doubt that!” Del slid her pocket knife out of its holder on her belt and swiped it over Tardi’s bonds.

“Now you’re in trouble.” Jason advanced his blade to Del’s throat.

Lilly turned her sprayer on him. “Take that! Magic water to make you grow up.”

Jason dropped the knife and wiped his face.

Pumping the spray pack, Lilly thrust the sprayer nozzle into his midriff. A wet patch grew on his t-shirt.

Jason ran for the back of the duck, Lilly after him and Tardi following. Jason, intending to dive in, met Rowan climbing down.

Lilly sent a storm of spray into the tangle. “Bad, bad man! Turn into a camphor laurel tree, you!”

Toucan and the truck jockey, still in the back of the duck, playfully raised their hands as Lilly sprayed Jason and Rowan indiscriminately.

Jason screeched and tried to run with his feet already taking hold on the road. He reached his hands to the sky. His mouth rounded to a hole.

The overspray soaked into Rowan’s, Toucan’s and the truck jockey’s clothes. They still watched, oblivious to the danger.

“Rowan! Get to the creek!” Tardi pulled her with him down the slope.

Rowan wrenched to get loose.

At Tardi’s shouting, Toucan and the jockey finally moved. In the middle of the field the jockey wrenched loose from Toucan who already had leaves and twigs sprouting through his clothes.

Rowan kicked and bit and scratched Tardi as he dunked her.

Red blood spurted from his nose. “It’s your human life you’re fighting for, Rowan.”

“Let me go!” She spat into his face as a wooden coolth ran up and down her skin and ridged it. “No! No!” she screamed. “Help me!”

Tardi sprang at her and started kneading her skin. It cracked and bled red blood. He ruthlessly pinched off knobs of leaves and roots.

She closed her eyes.

He rolled her over and over in the water, pinching roots from her back, her thighs and her calves. He talked without let-up. “Doing well, Ro. Fight, fight the bastardy tree germ! It’s strong but you’re stronger.”

Her hair came out in swags, in advance of the fine olive needles sprouting from her scalp. “Not my hair! This is all your fault!” She struck his hands away. “You’re hurting me!”

Tardi laughed. “Hurting is good news. It means you’ll make it.” He sat back, exhausted.

Lilly waited on the bank, dancing from foot to foot. “I’m sorry, Tardi. I’m sorry I sprayed your girlfriend. Look at my new trick, Tardi!” She sprayed with the nozzle pointing upward. A shower of water-pearls fountained down onto her. In a few seconds she was covered with creamy lilly pilly blossoms.

Tardi stared open-mouthed with shock. Then he noticed Silver *stilting*, rather than prancing, upright around Lilly, and pawing at her, growling and snapping whenever he was on four paws.

Lilly retreated a little each time, then ducked under his front paws, and it all started again.

Tardi shut his mouth. Lilly wouldn’t know any better about the spray and the dog’s behaviour would have to keep. He sprang up the bank. Shouted at Del. “I saw you get more of that stuff!”

“Well, it works! Look at my crop!”

“But look at your Lilly!”

“It’s my chance to get ahead. One good crop will get her the best treatment,” Del yelled.

“The world is broken and you worry about money?” Tardi whirled back to Lilly, and Rowan. “Move your feet, Lilly. You too, Rowan.” He demonstrated. *Slop, slop. Slop, slop.* “I’ve got some ointment to put on your feet, Lilly, to stop your toes growing.”

Del screamed. “You leave her alone! In fact, get lost! I’ve got my worker, so take that disgusting newsblogger away with you!”

Rowan reddened.

Del rounded on her. “You may well blush after that spectacle. I don’t know how come the stupid tree bothers with you! He makes me sick, he’s such an idiot.” She burst into tears.

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Tardi drove the camper distractedly along Main Arm Road, looking for a place to stop for the

night. *Del thought that I love Rowan still, when I'd only wanted to save Rowan's life? I couldn't have just stood by, could I?*

He glanced at Rowan. She was the only one he'd managed to save. Both the Jasons stood with their feet in the ground and had their arms raised to support leafy canopies. Ben had disappeared. Run off into the forest in horror, perhaps. The jockey was alive and well, staying with Del. Threen had stayed home, presumably because Rowan had come.

“Any further, and we'll be back in town with the tide to worry about,” Rowan said.

Tardi turned the camper duck into the next lane.