

### 39: Rowan, in Survival Mode

First things first. “Don’t even dream that you are ever, ever touching me again,” Rowan said.

Tardi snorted. “I wouldn’t have, even with a punting pole, except that I knew you’d end up with your feet in the ground sprouting roots, and your arms supporting a bunch of leaves if I didn’t save you.”

She stared bitterly at the sugar cane growing beyond the windscreen. Her world was so upside down and back to front that she couldn’t think of anything to say? “If you hadn’t so stupidly brushed against that coral, none of this would’ve happened.”

He laughed. Longer than he needed to have, to make his point. Whatever that was. *And now he’s crying?* She tried to get some legroom and his dog growled from by her feet. “Get that animal away from me.”

“Neither Argie nor I can move until you swing your seat round and make your way into the back,” Tardi said. When she still didn’t move, he reached across her lap—without touching her it must be said—to search for and find tissues in the glovebox.

He blew his nose and dried his eyes. “It’ll be dusk soon. That’s when the air cools and the mist gathers. The cane growing higher in this part of the field tells me we’re in a bit of a dip. Meaning water collects here, and very likely that exudate-laden mist too. I won’t be going outside.”

“Fine,” Rowan said. “I’ll sleep on the back seats. You and the dog should consider the floor your space. Only don’t get in my way.”

“Or?” he said.

She clenched her jaws. “Or I’ll probably lash out. I’m in that mood.”

“The dog comes with teeth,” Tardi said. “And he’s not a clockwork toy, so I can’t promise he’ll not turn on you.”

She challenged him with one of her looks.

But he mirrored her staring as long as she stared at him. “And why *did* I bother to save you?” he said. “Mmm, well ... probably because we had a good thing going once upon a time?”

Tears sprang unbidden into her eyes—desperately she made them about her hair—all her beautiful hair was gone and she had casuarina needles sprouting from her head! A finer grade than Tardi’s, but still needles. She lay down on the seats and turned her back on him. A pine resin scent alerted her to what she had forgotten. She turned back over. “I’ll need some of that ointment too.”

He rubbed the stuff into his elbows, hands, knees and feet. Then didn’t hand her the jar because of course he wasn’t her friend anymore. Instead, he scooped out a dollop to put onto her hand. “We need to make this last. Your uncle cooks this up and he’s in town.”

“You should’ve said,” she snapped.

He shrugged when he knew she hated being shrugged at. He screwed down the lid and set the

jar by the little kitchen sink. The dog showed her its teeth until she closed her eyes.

She heard it laying itself down by Tardi's feet. She opened her eyes. Stared into the dog's unwavering gaze. *I am equal to unwavering gazes, buster.*

The dog growled and lifted its top lip at her. To show off its teeth, no doubt.

*Maybe just stare at the structure of its eyes?* This dog had blue irises. *Huh?* That sparkled with silver pinpoints? Glance and glare. More like silver glitter. Like in a snow dome. Unsettling.

She closed her eyes, waited for a few minutes. Opened them. There seemed to be more glitter now. Less blue. *Wake Tardi and tell him? For what? It's not like we're friends.* Glance and glare.

*Yes.* Glitter now filled both the dog's whole irises. *Dog still staring at me? Umm. Not really. Because?*

Its black pupils had shrunk to pinpoints. *Because he's crazy? Drug-addled? A dog? No. The dog looked blinded. I should move right now.*

When she stepped around it, it moved only its head, as if keeping her in sight with its hearing. *Ignore it.*

She set her feet between Tardi and the kitchen side of the camper-duck and between Tardi and the driver's seat. She slipped the jar of ointment into her pocket as she passed, as—with what she was planning—she'd have no opportunity to go see Uncle Zachie any time soon.

This jar should see her safe because she had every intention signing up both Tardi and herself for the cure. She tiptoed to the door behind the passenger seat marked as the exit. She left the doorlatch extruded to prevent the lock catching and *clicking* shut.

Out in the fog-free lane she could use her wrist deck. *Give me light, she instructed her deck.* With light she could see where to walk without tripping. *Give me a map.* The map showed her the nearest farm buildings. *Mmm. Del Lorenzo lives right there across the road?* She, Rowan, would call that natural justice.

Down the lane, across Main Arm Road, and walk to the end of the track opposite. Rowan studied the personal harrier parked in the front yard. *Not my style, and anyway it will probably need a pin, a password, iris scanning and or all the rest of the security keys. Doubt that it is Del's.*

Rowan walked deeper into the property. The house lay silent on her right. A bunkhouse-style second dwelling squatted on the left. Rowan recalled that Del did homestays. A hover-ute sat under the carport attached to the bunkhouse. She glanced inside it. Country people often left their transport ready to go. But not Del. Neither keys nor an ignition device in this one.

*Uh oh.* Another silver dog came to meet her; its eyes as silvery as its mate's, and this one's eyes even blinder with its pinpoint pupils not to be seen among the glitter.

She stepped up onto the deck fronting the bunk-house and knocked on the door oh so lightly.

The truck jockey opened it a sliver, then wider when he saw it was her. “Yes?”

Rowan pushed past him. “Shut the door. I was thinking we could team up. Any food in the fridge?”

The jockey leered. “Midnight feast?”

Not the sort of smile she normally liked.

He gestured fridge-ward. “Bread, bean-loaf and home-made yoghurt. The only thing is...,” he grinned more widely. “Do you still eat?” He gestured at her casuarina-needle hair.

“Do you?” she said. She looked him over for patches of bark, green whiskers and errant roots that needed striking off.

He pulled down his sleeve cuffs self-consciously.

“As I said, we should team up,” Rowan said. “Procyon Products is offering a life-long income to the people who can bring in the tree man and his augmented dog, who are both asleep in a camper-duck in a lane not far from here.”

“I had a look at the transport available just like you did, sister,” he said. “So, I drive to the lane and trick the treeman and the dog into the hover-ute. What do I need you for?”

“No ignition unit,” Rowan said. “I seem to recall that Jason Jason took your wrist deck and any spare universal cubes you might have had?”

“Great. An armchair trucker.”

“Newsblogger. Research is half the goods.” Never mind that Tardi was always telling her stuff despite her telling him of her zero interest. “What I suggest is that we talk our way into the house. One of us distracts the householder, while the other searches for the ignition unit.”

“We can’t fake that until dawn, when we’re up for an early start with the ploughing,” the jockey said.

“Fine. Maybe I will have some food.” She sat down at the table. The only other option looked to be laying down with a sleazy trucker.