

40: Del At Her Wits End

Del cried again the next morning. Probably she hadn't stopped. She was so tired. Up every hour all night with Lilly to break her roots and get her moving. At least the dog was outside. Lilly cried with her. Green tears.

If only Del hadn't let that useless truck jockey—what did he know of ploughing besides nothing—and his stupid sidekick, the news-blogger, into the house this morning? Because despite hating Rowan so bad it hurt to be nice, Del had encouraged them to take her vehicle.

Why? She wailed her regrets. Did she really believe that Tardi might like Del better if Rowan was out of the picture? Even worse, the damned dog had slipped in past the jockey and the newsblogger on their way out, and stalked straight to Lilly. He'd taken Lilly's foot between his jaws and started to pull her from her chair.

The jockey and the blogger zoomed away in the hover-ute, leaving Del with a rusted old bicycle and Pan's damned personal harrier jet. She sobbed with rage.

Lilly bawled harder. "Dad! Dad! I want Daddy! Wahhh!"

Mirroring Del exactly, and hadn't she decided at Lilly's birth to raise her daughter into a strong woman? *What happened to that? Crying over a recalcitrant dog, for pity's sake!* She let the heat in her gut build to a Force 10 gale of fury. Grabbed the old stick-broom and jabbed the brush-end into the dog's cheek.

He snarled and stalked stiff-legged around her.

She did it again.

The dog lunged at her, and bit at her arm.

A sharp, grazing pain lanced through her. Not a bad bite, she saw with a glance, but the dog had definitely warned her. *The dog thinks it's in charge?* She screamed her Valkyrie cry. Yanked her elasticized bra up her torso and over her head. She plunged with it onto the dog, winding it round his jaws and pulling them shut. She tied the garment off round his head and neck. "Take that, you useless animal!"

"Good work, Mum! Silver is very naughty, isn't he? I wish Tardi was here."

"I'd fetch him except for this damned animal playing up," Del said. "The stupid newsblogger told us where he is."

"Make Silver lie down, Mum. I'll sit on him until you come back."

Del grappled under the dog's belly for his far front and rear legs and jerked them under and up.

Silver squealed. Thumped down on his side on the floor.

Del felt that good!

Lilly untangled her feet from the stool rungs and draped herself across the dog. Not a whimper out of him now.

Del cried some more breaking off Lilly's new roots. They'd run out of vinegar early last night. The new lot had not brewed yet.

"Go, Mum. Silver is zapping me. He's trying to be good now."

Del remembered to snatch a shirt. Dust and rust spattered while she hauled the bike from the shed, but it would have to do. Her fury kept her legs pumping. At last she saw the stupid camper-duck parked a couple of dozen metres up Coopers Lane. Sugarcane growing two-and-a-half-metres tall on both sides of the lane made it a breathlessly hot tunnel.

"Tardi! Tar!" She threw down the bike and was up the steps at the side of the duck. "Tar! Hurry! Lilly needs that ointment! She's got roots growing out of her toes, her heels and her knees."

She saw him then and what he was doing. He was breaking off roots? She pushed by him, stumbling over his dog which was being invisible and good, and flopped into the passenger seat.

"Rowan took the ointment and she's gone," he said.

"Why are you even amazed?" Del wiped away oncoming tears. 'I convinced them to take my ute. I thought them better out of the picture.'" She swallowed her reason why. "I've been such a fool. I thought Lilly would snap out of it if I distracted her. She's crying *green* tears now."

Tardi slipped into the jockey seat and started the engine.

"I've got the dog tied up. Lilly is sitting on him." She groaned through the forwarding and reversing of a fat camper-duck in a narrow country lane. "Please just hurry!"

At the house, she was out before Tardi had parked. "Lilly!"

Lilly sat back on her stool at the table sipping her breakfast juice. Her finger joints bled tree-sap. Silver lay closed-mouthed on the floor beside her, working at Del's bra with his front paws.

Tardi came in and seemed to take in the scene with a glance. "Make us a couple of bundles of food?" he said.

He was calm, as if he had solutions. Del thought through her problems all night in between getting Lilly up and down and didn't come up with any. She had no energy to ask.

"Make mine with bits that I can toss at a recalcitrant dog," Tar said, calling Del back to the present. He winked at Lilly. "Hey Lilly girl, the tree bug has gone wild in you and me."

Lilly nodded. "Because Silver was a bad dog all night, not here to zap me. He has a little machine stuck to his neck. Sometimes it talks."

"What's it say?" said Tardi.

Lilly drew in her chin to make a low, pretend voice. "Come home, Number Two. Bring the tree people to Flag Hill."

Tardi did an absentminded *slop, slop*.

Del wrung her hands. “How can any of this come out well?”

Tardi broke Lilly’s feet loose from the rungs of the stool. “She’s still an incomplete. How did that happen?”

“Daddy took me swimming in the sea to see his coral,” Lilly said. “He said, don’t touch the coral, Lilly. It’s sharp. Too late because I already cut my finger. See my scar?”

He’s distracting us. Del drained pickled vegetables and tossed them with some cubed bread into two cloths, racking her brains meanwhile over the next step. *Our future with Tar in it!*

“I cut myself on that coral,” Tardi said. He lifted his shirt to show Lilly *his* scars. “Keep moving, Lilly Pilly Loreno.”

Lilly put her spray bottle on the table and curved her arm around it. “I want to be a tree by Dad’s tree.”

“Your dad has Pan and Stella to keep him company,” Tardi said. “Your mum doesn’t have anyone except you.” He picked Lilly up and carried her outside.

Del knotted the bundles and followed. *Our future!*

Tardi slid Lilly into the camper-duck’s passenger seat. Guided one of her feet onto the invisible dog. “And my Argie needs someone to take care of him as well.” He passed Lilly one of the bundles of food and shut the camper-duck door.

Del fell at him as he turned, and sobbed without trying. He hugged her with his arm round her shoulders, walked her round the back of the camper-duck and to the driverside door, which he opened.

“Please come!”

“I’ve got to go and fix the well. It’s an eye in my head, keeping me company wherever I go. It’s a sun burning my thoughts to ashes. My friend Zach makes the ointment. He’ll be more than happy to help you. You’ll need a boat to cross the water at the town end of the road. The Confluence.”

He was so reasonable and sensible that Del had to be reasonable and sensible too. “There’s a self-inflating life raft in the harrier,” she remembered through the sad fog in her head. She climbed onto the harrier and dragged the packed-up raft out over the wing. She let it fall to the ground.

Tardi rolled it to the back of the camper-duck and hefted it into the back. “Paddle it to Laurel Avenue Jetty. Zach’s house has two new trees on the ramp to the front door. One of the trees is wearing an apron. Flowers at their feet.” He grabbed Del in a hug.

She hoped against hope he would see that she wanted him to kiss her and maybe promise her they’d be more than just friends. That have a future!

“I’m sorry, Del.” He only stared into her. He didn’t explain.

She punched him over his heart. “Tell me you’re not still stupid about that newsblogger!”

“Would you have stood by while Joe transformed?” he countered. “I was just trying to save her life.”

Del bit her lip. “Can I hope?”

He gestured at his tree bits. “With me like this? All I can think about is being cured.”

“No hope for me ever?”

He hesitated. He might’ve been going to promise something but she saw that he changed his mind. He pushed her into the camper-duck and thunked shut the door.

She sobbed a gushing river of tears.

“Let’s go, Mum,” Lilly said when Del took a breath. Argie licked Lilly on the leg and began to glow like a firefly.