

LONDST



DEL ELLE

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Also by Del Elle

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DELARTELLE

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This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

Intro

This story was inspired by a combination of pieces in a Myriorama or an Endless Landscape and an idea regarding trees that didn't seem to go away...

1.

Hergewick swabbed a handkerchief over his brow. A handkerchief that could have been used as a bandanna to go under his hat before he left the Marzipanne at whatever O'clock it had been this morning. But then the morning had displayed not a whisper of the drums the sun was going to pound barely two hours into the afternoon. A set of drums that included the stretch of road between Darnsket and Mistannicci that Hergewick 'happened' to be on, and a fair bit upon either side.

Indeed, the parallel course formed by the Darn was acting as a mirror of the Noon Star's belligerence, making Hergewick's right eye twitter. Lina knew what it was doing to the plough man and yoke of oxen in the intermediate field, or the person beyond who was repositioning a bow-less fishing rod. But then they were getting the first impact of the edge-cutting breeze coming from the confluence. That or whatever was depriving Cresten Isle of its usual lower-slope haze. Although the edge had begun to make a comeback by the time it reached Hergewick, merely adding another bead to his be speckled brow.

"They should make siestas mandatory in weather like this," a voice coughed. Hergewick's staff clattered on the paves as he brought both hands across his eyes. A child-sized lemon with the luminosity of the sun was up ahead, getting larger as it approached him.

"Are you alright?" the voice inquired.

"Slightly dazed, that's all," said Hergewick keeping one hand over his face

whilst dropping to the ground and groping for his staff with the other. “D-don’t come any closer.”

He opened his eyes properly, then, for the ‘glare’ had decreased by fifty degrees; safe enough for him to lower the other hand. Within his eye line he could see a pair of dust-coated or sand-frosted knee-length obsidian boots - almost like the pair he wore when he had to be in the saddle. Above them ‘shone’ the reason he was on his knees near the side of the road in the first place; the most garish yellow trousers that he had ever seen. Even a lemon, or brimstone butterfly wasn’t that alarming and with the complementary sky-blue coat Hergewick could almost feel the drums picking up pace again.

“I’m not going to take your walking stick if that’s what you’re worried about,” the chap said, stopping as Hergewick got hold of his staff and ‘struggled’ to his feet. “Just expressing a note of ‘traveller’s concern’.”

“It is appreciated, Mr-”

“Pipcastle,” the lemon trousered fellow replied with a face barely the safe side of a tomato. “Earnest Pipcastle.”

“Fontarius Hergewick,” Hergewick said with a less than steady bow, and stopping short of the trousers.

The other man stepped back and looked at him as if he dropped off the face of the moon. “Not the Fontarius Hergewick who spent one afternoon remaking the Kildonsair Knot.”

Hergewick nodded.

“The Fontarius who tracked the Porcelain Stealers back to their Guard House hide-out then with lavender fumes knocked them all out.”

“The same.”

“And when not riddle-unravelling or sending crooks to Neyeshayes Prison, spends his spare time looking for the more ‘uncommon’ forms of wildlife?”

“Got it in one, Mr Pipcastle,” Hergewick said as he adjusted his hat.

“Lins-lavenders,” Pipcastle continued, taking off his own, felted hat and fanning himself with it. “I don’t think I can take another surprise.”

“Believe me, Mr Pipcastle, from where I’m standing, that is but a gentle awakening...”

“Please, call me Earnest,” the chap added. “Only that bunch in the cottages yonder call me Mr Pipcastle and most of the time it’s not even with the ‘Mr’.”

“Fontarius then if we’re on that road,” Fontarius answered, wiping another set of beads from his brow. “I’ve heard of a Pipcastle — or rather a city with the same name — a good way across the ocean.”

“Well, I hope it’s not getting this afternoon heat,” Earnest replied. “It was so hot in the living room that I came out here for some ‘air’. I might go into the Darn if this carries on.”

“It might recede as unexpectedly as it turned up,” said Fontarius. “At least I would like to hope that it does somewhere between here and Darnskett.”

Earnest returned his hat to its residence upon his head. “Are you... on a case...?” he whispered.

“Not this side of tea,” said Fontarius. “But don’t tell me; you’ve got one that I *might* be interested in.”

“Oh, I’m sure Mrs Pipcastle and the Cottage Circle have one or two instances for you to look at. Mine was more over your interest in the uncommon...”

Fontarius had to stop himself from sighing. If he wasn’t being tested then he was being measured for what he knew about animals that were all around them if they would *just look*. “Go on...”

Earnest pointed towards a shape the colour of slate high up in the sky. “That bird. I’ve never seen it before.”

“Nor I,” Fontarius almost yawned, then stared, “Although it does look a little like a kite.”

“I can’t see any string.”

“Well it’s not a ‘buzzard’,” Fontarius continued. “The forked tail gives it away. And hawks are usually ‘passing through’ in this type of country. I have heard of Black Kites away south who turn up for the summer, but the ones in this

realm of Mistanizzle are usually of the red variety.”

“I’ve heard of the Kite Duels up in Larnsdaisyn,” said Earnest, “but no one’s flying that thing.”

Fontarius let the groan escape. “How long has it been here for?”

“Little Merchisé saw it yesterday afternoon, and Mrs Pipcastle saw it looking down at her this morning.”

“From your roof?”

“From that tree.”

Fontarius followed Earnest’s gaze across the road to a grand tree with the appearance of a mineral green dome. “Really?”

“I can show you,” said Earnest, striding across the road. Fontarius followed, not taking his eyes from the heavy, half-sphere canopied grandee, standing unbowed in the beating of the solar drum and putting its canopy to good use. Although despite being able to give a sigh of relief in the refreshing shade, he had to follow Earnest’s arm pointing up one of those lance-straight main branches.

“Don’t ask me why the Missus was so close,” said Earnest. “Probably talking to one of her friends coming up from Mistannicci. But as she lifted her head to laugh, she spied a pair of purple eyes looking back at her, plus a squawk; or was it a quack...?”

“Purple-?” Fontarius nearly choked.

Earnest nodded. “I’d say amethyst if birds flew about with jewels for eyes. It hasn’t been back to the tree for as long as I’ve been outside, but it’s never strayed very far from a circle with here and Cresten forming the two points of the diameter. Do you know what it is, apart from the fact it looks like a Kite.”

“I have to say, this is a fine specimen of an Acer,” Fontarius continued, putting a hand on the shaggy pink-grey trunk, “tall, grand and spherically handsome.”

Earnest frowned, “Acer?”

“Sycamore.”

“Oh, this isn’t the biggest one around here,” said Earnest, glancing at an approaching man with three pack mules then walking in the opposite direction. “If you care for a glass of cellar cordiale I can show it to you from my house.”

“Why thank you,” said Fontarius, also looking at the approaching triple mule-driver, then following after Earnest. Half an hour out of the sun wouldn’t do any harm, and another acer of the present one’s magnitude would be a sight not to be missed. Although he could not escape the slight sensation that if the sycamore was such a grand dome, why did two points of blue in its upper reaches, fail to look like the firmament above.

2.

“Humph!”

Haymarlen closed her mouth. That hadn't escaped from her. She hadn't released a breath beyond one from her nose. But the timing was more than coincidence.

“Not to missed,” the voice, and thankfully not her own continued. “Is that what they call a tree-hugger now?”

Haymarlen looked across to the frosted-magenta-eyed maiden, cross arm-sprawled on the next one. “At least he's gone, Flora. For a moment I thought that he could see me.”

Flora humphed again.

“He might be a ‘crime-fighter’, but he knows fiddle twigs about trees. Calling this one of those red-stalked, dull-leaved over-dominant aphid-attractors. What's he going to call the ‘greater magnitude’ one? A Juniper?”

“I did the same thing the first time I saw one,” Haymarlen answered. “It takes long enough for us, and we're only scratching the surface. How much more difficult is it for them?”

“It's a Plane, Haymarlen,” said Flora, “A plane. Flaky bark, long trunk. I know which one I'd rather be perched in.”

As if in answer, the upper branches of the tree rustled, letting speckles of sunlight dance over the lounging pair, and making the gems in their circlets

twinkle.

“See, even Moonbole isn’t impressed at Mr Hergewick's misnomer,” said Flora. “You probably want to march right up to Yellow Breech’s front door and give that would-be naturalist a piece of your mind; don’t you.”

The sunlight danced for a second time over the pair, momentarily illuminating the frost pastel highlights in Haymarlen’s crimson lake hair.

“Only we do not possess the power to unlock you from your shackles,” Flora sighed placing a palm against the branch she was lying upon.

“Thank goodness...” Haymarlen exhaled, but quietly enough that neither her companion, nor Moonbole overheard. The last thing she needed was a disturbance caused by a personage taking exception to the miss-identification made by the Bustlers, and bringing unnecessary attention from around about. Especially from the cottages yonder.

“But I can do this,” Flora added, slipping off the branch and gliding toward the bottom. Haymarlen opened her mouth but was met by the feather-impact of Flora’s feet connecting with the road; causing a mule to bray in alarm.

“Flora, you can’t-”

“Can, Haye,” came the reply, accompanied by Flora’s form marching past the two other mules to Haymarlen dreaded where. Groaning she slipped off her branch, but kept her arms outstretched, attaching to then rotating on a limb lower down, that sent her soaring out of the tree and into the lamp-bright sunlight. For a moment Haymarlen had to put a hand against her eyebrows. But even in mid-flight she could spot the jumpy mules; the driver trying to calm them down; the furrowed field she would prefer not to land in, and the long-striding, spectrum-blue dressed form of Flora ahead, underneath, then behind as she alighted onto the road.

“Don’t try and stop me Haye,” Flora warned, as she strode past.

“We’re not supposed to be attracting attention Flor.”

“Don’t call me Flor.”

“Is it worth blowing our cover?”

“I’m not the one who’s just jumped right out of a tree and landed halfway down the road without breaking a sweat,” Flora added, rolling up one of her sil-embroidered sleeves. “Why didn’t you just land on the roof and be done with it.”

Haymarlen glanced across the field. Sure enough, the oxen-team had come to a halt, and the straw-hatted driver was staring at them as if an entire carnival was parading up the road. Although his attention was soon taken by a lone mule careering across the stretch the oxen had just multi-furrowed.

“I didn’t give the donkeys a fright,” Haymarlen replied, pointing at the bounding form.

“It’s a mule,” said Flora. “A mule. Don’t you start getting confused, I’ve already got one miss-identifier to deal with, and you’re not going to talk me out of it.”

“But it’s still not too late for you to step away from this,” Haymarlen continued. “Be the bigger...”

Flora stopped and looked at Haymarlen.

“...Bigger...” Haymarlen added.

“...What...” Flora almost purred. “And don’t say man, because we’re not males, or anything remotely linked to this bunch of non-descriptives.”

“Person,” said Haymarlen. “Be the bigger person.”

“One problem,” Flora smiled, flew past Haymarlen and thundered three knocks on the front door of the first cottage. “I’m that already.”

Haymarlen groaned and spun away from the door, whilst Flora rolled up the other sleeve. The tap-tap of approaching footsteps came from the further side of the door, along with a more distant voice.

“If that’s you Blankétown, I’ll douse you in the Darn. Why do you think there’s a knocker out there for? Decora...tio...”

The door opened and the near-strawberry hued face of the fellow named Mr Pipcastle looked back, then turned to a contorted gape. “...You’re not Blankétown...” he managed to whisper.

“I’m much worse,” Flora whispered, clenching a fist. “If you don’t go back

inside and get the ‘legendary’ Mr Hergewick out here in under half a minute.”

“But you’re a lady,” Mr Pipcastle continued. “Ladies don’t try to smash down front doors.”

“Bet they don’t do this either-” Flora began, seizing Mr Pipcastle, by his waist coat, and launching him over the nearby boundary fence.

Haymarlen opened her mouth, but before any words could leap out, Flora had disappeared into the house. A moment later, a voice other than Flora’s came from beyond the door, followed by a scream, and upon the next, Flora leapt back outside, dragging the person who could only be Fontarius Hergewick by the back of the collar, and without the wide-brimmed hat that he had been wearing in the first place. His eyes on the other hand, momentarily fixed on Haymarlen, before he became the sail to the long-striding mast formed by Flora.

“Please Miss Whatever-your-name-is,” he began. “I am sure that we can take a slower pace than this-”

“Not this side of the ‘Acer’,” Flora replied without looking back.

“But I’m not as ground-covering as your striding — yaaahhh!”

Flora did stop, but Hergewick continued; not walking but in the manner of a ball travelling through an open space.

The yell increased as Hergewick came to terms with his destination; the grand acer that crowned the roadside; whose oncoming truck now developed the presence of an unforgiving pillar.

“–Aaah–” he continued, closing his eyes for the inevitable impact. Instead, his legs and torso continued toward the tree, whilst the rest of him, collar included, remained in the one spot, and jerked his eyes open: to be met by the pillar-boled tree, but his feet flapping a stretch away from it. The next moment, the road came up to meet him in a less-than-dignified fashion; along with the bray of a not-too distant mule or donkey. Although no donkey had ever had a set of hooves that were the hue of the rich, dark blue paint used to decorate the porcelain pieces made up in Mirrihans. Nor did donkeys wear a snow-embroidered teal blue dress with a waist girdle and sashes that matched the

boots, but also possessed pale blue, silver and white embroidery; or a mane the hue of frosted cranberries...

“What’s got in to you Haye,” Flora said, sweeping past Haymarlen, seizing Hergewick and whisking him into an upright position. “He’s mine. Use lemon trousers for your bit of charity.”

“And he would really be able to apologize to you if he’s out-cold from a connection with Moonbole,” said Haymarlen.

“I’d let Moonbole spank him if it made him feel better,” said Flora, dragging Hergewick up to the tree. “Tell me, Fontarius, what did you identify this tree as being not long ago?”

“A—an acer, Madame,” Fontarius began, looking at the tree, then at Flora.

“...A what...?” Flora whispered.

“An Acer,” Fontarius gulped. “And a fine one too.”

“What species.”

“P—p—pseudoplatanus, Madame. The Sycamore.”

Haymarlen groaned, whilst Flora continued to gaze at Fontarius. “How did your crime-fighting deducements come to that conclusion?”

“Why the leaves, Madame,” Fontarius answered, frowning slightly. “Five radiating veins with a matching set of lobes. Almost like a hand, and similar to an astrantia.”

“But an astrantia is a flower,” Flora continued.

“Very true, Madame,” said Fontarius. “It and the Maples share this ‘palmate’ leaf shape.”

“Which also means that it is possible that not every tree with *palmate* leaves is an acer?”

“...possibly...”

“Just agree with her!” Haymarlen grated.

“Let him mull it over, Haye,” said Flora releasing Fontarius. “Look at the leaves, Fontarius, and the bark. Then make your answer. And let it be the right

one for your sake.”

Two, no three droplets trickled down the side of Fontarius’s head, despite being out of the afternoon sun. He continued to look at the tree, but in his mind’s eye were the two ladies behind him; one of whom had thrown him like a tennis ball, and the other had stopped his flight as if she had been catching a running child.

“I’m waiting,” Flora hummed.

“I—I can’t think of any,” Fontarius said, turning around. “But I do agree with your hypothesis.”

“Does that satisfy you, Flor,” said Haymarlen. “He’s open to new ideas.”

“...Don’t call me Flor...” Flora grated. “And I can’t believe a ‘naturalist’ such as ‘Fontarius Hergewick doesn’t know of any other trees who might have the palmate shape.”

“I’m more taken by beeches to be truthful,” Fontarius added. “Plus, limes, the odd oak, and more recently ashes.”

“But no conifers,” Flora continued.

“In the winter.”

“When you haven’t got any choice; otherwise they might as well be on the moon. I suppose I should let you off in acknowledgement of the fact that you’re not so scholarly on tree species as you lead Mr Pipcastle to believe.”

“Who still hasn’t got up from the spot where you threw him, Flor,” Haymarlen noted.

“That’s three times now, Haya.”

“Just tell, reprimand then send him on his way, Flor,” said Haymarlen, “and that one’s a bonus.”

Flora closed her eyes and adjusted the circlet on her head. “Well, you were heading in a good direction when you said pseudoplatanus, Mr Hergewick. For the fine specimen in front of you also has Platanus in its name. Only in its case it’s the first one.”

“...Platanus...?” Hergewick mullied.

“A Plane!” Flora exploded, seizing Hergewick and almost launching him into a nearby hedge. “A Platanus x hispunica: A Londinium Plane!”

Hergewick began to quiver; whether from the twin burning magenta pools that were Flora’s eyes or the fact that his feet were not in contact with the ground.

“Lyralees,” said Haymarlen. “It’s gone beyond reasonable now.”

“He’s going to apologize, Haya,” Flora continued.

“I-I’m sorry for my i-ignorance,” Hergewick began, “and for inadvertently leading others into a mistaken belief.”

“Not me, her you idiot,” said Flora, about-turning Fontarius towards the Plane tree.

“But I can’t see her-” Fontarius began.

“The Tree!” Flora thundered, pressing Fontarius against it until his cheek was a fraction away from the flaky bark. “Apologize!”

“I’m sorry-I’m sorry-Mr-”

“Mrs!”

“Mrs Plane!” Fontarius yelled. “Please forgive my terrible misdemeanour!”

“There, he’s said it. Now can we go, Flor,” said Haymarlen.

Flora glared at Haymarlen and brought Fontarius round with her. “He has to tell his new fan.”

Haymarlen gaped. “His fan? He’s out like a snuffed candle!”

“I-I’ll apologize to the oxen if you want,” Fontarius continued. “Just don’t-”

Flora looked at Fontarius. “Do you think I’m crazy telling you to apologize to a tree?”

Fontarius’s face had an evacuation of blood.

“Am I crazy?” Flora repeated.

Fontarius, began to shake.

“Don’t you start shaking!” Flora began. “I’ll do the shaking. Do you think I’m crazy?”

“Not crazy, but down-right disobedient!” another voice coursed.

Haymarlen spun round and Flora also turned, coupled with Fontarius. In front of them stood another lady; dressed in dark violet with a brocade of snow silver.

“M-mistress...” Haymarlen curtsied whilst Flora let Fontarius collapse onto the ground. “We didn’t see you.”

“You’re not likely to when you’re so engrossed terrifying the locals,” the lady replied, sweeping over and kneeling in front of Fontarius. “Can you stand, Mr-?”

“Hergewick,” Fontarius managed to breathe, looking across and almost staring at the new woman with tresses as dark as Flora’s were fair. “I haven’t come across a plane before...”

“Platanus...” Flora began.

“Drop it...” the purple-gowned lady concluded, helping Fontarius to get to his feet. “Please accept this as an apology, Mr Hergewick,” she added, putting a small, clinking bag into the fellow’s hand. “And two verbal forms from Misses Evarné and Eucranté over there.”

“But I tried to dissuade her Miss Eulimene,” Haymarlen begun.

“Two.”

“I’m... sorry for not trying harder to stop my friend, Mr Hergewick,” Haymarlen said, stepping forward, then noting how Fontarius kept looking up at Mistress Eulimene.

“You tried,” Fontarius said at last, nodding at Haymarlen, then glancing at the pouch. “That’s more than anyone can ask.”

“And what does Miss Evarné have to say for herself?” Mistress Eulimene coursed.

Flora’s hands momentarily curled into fists, then hands once more as she dropped into a curtsy. “Sorry for letting my emotions take control...” she added. “And for disturbing your refreshments.”

Miss Eulimene continued to look at Flora whilst Fontarius rubbed the back

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