

# COMPLAINTS DEPARTMENT

*Reap what you sow.*

BY THORAIYA DYER

The queue was long again, but Elise couldn't stay at home watching her crop shrink and shrivel while she waited for an electronic reply from the QuickLife complaints department.

Mud and straw were caked onto her boots. She clicked her heels surreptitiously. Some of the mud flaked off. The man in front of her smelled of poultry. He slowly scratched the sunburn on the back of his neck.

At last, she was led into an interview room where a younger woman with a headset and fuchsia lips waved her to a chair.

"You asked to see a supervisor, Miss Green. I am Tanaivin Biss."

"And I am angry," Elise said, the wait not having improved her temper, "at the way QuickLife is attempting to acquire my land."

"Please state your complaint as either a product fault or a customer service delay."

Elise leaned back in her chair. She plonked her boots, one at a time, onto Tanaivin Biss's glass desktop and waited for the shower of mud flakes to settle.

"Let's call it a product fault. The seeds that you sold me leached all the phosphorus from my soil."

They'd set it all up for her. The latest in biotech: accelerated wheat. They told her it was within her budget, that using accelerated wheat would lead to a tenfold increase in production. Nine days from germination to ripe kernels at maximum dry weight. She'd already made two complete harvests, investing the cash in a new truck for more efficient transport.

But this time, there was nothing to harvest. When the sun had come up on the morning of the ninth day, the straggly, mostly immature plants were intermittently laced with the telltale purple tint of phosphorus deficiency. The few heads that had formed were small, the grains shrivelled. Feed quality only.

Biss subvocalized and was answered by her headset.

"Our records indicate your soil tested high for phosphorus."

"Are you telling me QuickLife can't interpret its own results? It may be high but it sure isn't available."

"Wait. Yes. Unfortunately, the full details of your new fertilizer schedule were not provided at the time of your purchase. The computer is telling me that an application of superphosphate between crops would be advantageous."



"Every ten days? I'll tell you what would be advantageous. A free crop-dusting plane and pilot!"

The door opened behind her, but Elise didn't turn around.

"Will there be anything else, Miss Green?" Biss said.

"Do you have any idea how much aerial topdressing with superphosphate costs? I can't afford it unless you increase the limit of my loan."

"Your account with QuickLife's lending branch is already overdrawn."

"I can't believe this. It wasn't even my idea!"

"When you visited the complaints department three weeks ago, you said you were expecting legal action following the germination of a QuickLife product in a neighbouring field."

"Yes. My wheat is GM. Theirs is organic."

"Increased production is only a side effect of acceleration. The main feature of an accelerated strain is that the flowering and fruiting phase occur within such a narrow window that contamination of neighbouring, non-GM crops is negligible to nil."

"My harvest will be negligible to nil if you don't refund my money or extend my overdraft so I can pay for fertilizer."

"I'm sorry, Miss Green. I am unable to assist you."

Elise stared at the vending machine with its bottled spring-water for a full minute before marching outside, detaching the garden bed watering system from the rainwater tank, and slaking her thirst at the tap.

A moment later, she became aware of somebody sitting despondently on the edge of the concrete turning circle. It was the man

who had gone in ahead of her.

"No luck?" she ventured.

"None at all."

She liked the deep, rich roll of his voice. Wiping her wet palms on her overalls, she sat next to him.

"What happened?"

"Fifty thousand accelerated geese ate me out of house and home. Twenty-four hours, they give me. Just one day to remove the bloody birds from my farm what QuickLife just took."

Elise's heart thumped excitedly against her ribs.

"I have fifty thousand acres," she said. "How do geese go on phosphorus-deficient wheat grass?"

"All my geese got micronutrient implants."

Elise stuck out her hand.

"I'm Elise Green."

He shook solemnly. His skin was warm and dry like bread from the oven.

"Peter Cross."

"My house," she said, "has a spare room. And I have a new truck. This way."

He moved into her house, and the haste with which their hearts became entangled might have been unseemly if they hadn't been surrounded by accelerated geese feasting on accelerated wheat and leaving phosphate-rich deposits all over Elise's 50,000 acres at a frighteningly accelerated rate.

Elise soon discovered that although her imagined, strong-and-silent-type ideal was embodied by Peter Cross, cohabitation turned out to be only marginally less lonely than living alone. By the time Peter's geese had been sent to market, allowing him to purchase a small townhouse and take up work at the accelerated goose hatchery, they had already parted ways amicably.

She called him, sometimes. She liked the sound of his voice.

"They have to feed these little buggers while they're still in the egg," Peter marvelled. "They suck the yolks out of half a dozen normal eggs just to get one accelerated egg to hatch."

"It's a little bit boring," Elise confessed, "waiting for normal wheat to ripen."

And she tinkered with her irrigators as she watched the sun go down behind the whispering hills. ■

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