

## 24: Srese in a Side Plot

Srese stepped out in the Four-Ways, smiling and prepared. But, she looked around, not a groupie in sight? She grinned. *I'm free to feel how, and what I like! How good is that?* Tra la! She dropped to her hands, swung her legs up and over. *Best cartwheel ev-er!* And there was no one here to ooh and aah. And say do it again, Srese. Or tell her not to. She did it again and a couple more times. Now ... do what? Go where first?

The Pit, of course. A place where emotions would be running high and she was never going to get more grist for her acting practice. *Though it won't be very tra-la, gawking at people in their distress.* She gritted her teeth. *Needs must. I need to learn so much more. If I said that out loud would I sound heartless? So be it.* She groaned theatrically. *Finish already with the push-me pull-me doubting!*

She took off running through the plantations surrounding the town—making like she was a young thing of ten or eleven—just because she was older now, no need to forget how to do youth. Passing the end of Wingham Street, nobody down there, she crossed into Parks and Gardens. So far she hadn't seen anyone but *heard* plenty—she realised—and that sounded exactly like the loud buzzing of a disturbed beehive.

Abruptly she cut through a flowerbed. She should be where the buzz was, maybe find out some of the detail, before entering the scene where the event happened. It would help her manage her time. Following the beehive sound, she ran into a lane. There. A crowd surrounding a speaker holding forth.

She walked to the back of the crowd. “Hi,” she said to her neighbours either side.

People checked to see who she was. A couple nodded, then faced forward. The speaker continued without missing a word. “Did you see how high the idiot climbed?”

“Even the ones building it for him, didn't make it out,” someone else said.

She might've at least got a Hi, how's things going with the mermen? But, no. *People are so fickle.*

“I knew it was going to fall.” First Speaker again.

“There are rules about the level of incompetency para-meds are allowed to treat.” Second Speaker spoke importantly, as if they meant to get the attention of all to themselves.

Srese frowned. She'd felt no *frisson*, courtesy of her nano-bots. *It has to be that Gammy is stretched because look at the walls and the ceiling being the no-colour of not very much energy at all. Grey, grey, grey is the order of the day.*

*Well, here's to hoping to keep it that way.* She untacked herself from the crowd and went her *sedate* way. Arrived sedately in the square in front of the Pit. No one around. *The para-meds already finished?* The entrance to the Pit just there and totally unpoliced. *A quick look is all I'll need.*

A man-shape, but tall and metallic, stepped from the entry to the Pit.

*A minion?* She couldn't see past him. And anyway he gripped her by one arm. Lifted her half off her feet before she realised he wasn't going to let go. His unyielding grip wrenched her skin around her arm. She screamed. “You're hurting me! Gammy! Make him let go!”

The minion locked himself into his stance so that Srese hung painfully from her arm. She scabbled to reach the ground with her feet, to take her weight off her arm. It felt as if her arm bone would break. She screamed again. The minion lifted her higher. Her arm bones grated together.

“*Aaaah!*” She screamed louder. The minion shook her until she had no air for screaming. The nearest ceiling speaker spattered sound. A synthesised voice said, “Not her. Not yet.” The minion opened its hand. She fell. Ran on her one hand and her knees into the nearest lane entry. *Like an injured insect that a minion could easily step on.* She rose. Held her injured arm with her other arm. *What will I do?*

Someone came round the curve of the lane. Man-size. “Help me,” she croaked.

“Srese?”

“Greg?” *Greg here?* She was confused. “Have I got turned around? Are we near the kitchens?”

He frowned displeasure, she saw, as he gathered her into his arms.

She sobbed into his chest. “A minion did this!” Like she could hardly believe it.

“Shhh. Shhh. Wait till we get home.” He walked her along, humming at her. Soothing her.

*What? He thinks I’m acting?* “My arm is *bleeding!*”

He changed sides and crushed her sore arm against himself, hiding it under his ... what was he wearing? Not his kitchen gear. “Ahhh! That hurts!”

“Be quiet, Srese. Be yourself. We need to be safe before anything.” He half-carried her across Neilson Street into Second Circle and into his apartment next to the Dining Hall. Shut the door behind them. Palmed the lock. Leaned against it.

“I should be safe from them. I’m the avatar! ...”

“But you’re acting out quite often. Pretending to be all kinds of other people. Even creatures. The minions aren’t smart.” He rubbed her back. Kissed her better.

She hiccupped and started again. “I was thinking that I’d be safe even if Gammy’s attention wasn’t on me. I went to the Pit to get grist for my ... my ... and he grabbed me! One of the overhead speakers said, Not her, not now! She waited for his reaction.

He stepped into his bathroom and filled the basin with warm water. “Let’s get you cleaned up.”

She nodded. Let him wash her arm. Mop the seeping blood. “I’ve got to go get the first aid kit,” he said. “From next door. Be here when I get back!”

She nodded again. She hardly knew him in this mode.

He was back in a minute and relocked the door. Spread out the kit on his bed. Iodined her arm without any hesitations or commiseration. “Wound is a typical minion-inflicted grab-and-grip. You were lucky. Usually they don’t let go until their quarry faints. The iodine will help stop the bleeding. This gauze too.” He wound the bandaging around her arm, splitting the end so he could tie it off. “Comfy? Tell me everything you know.”

She swallowed all the sobbing she had ready. “Crowd in a lane. They said a guy *flew*. That can’t be true.”

“I heard that too. Probably he threw himself into the air, expecting to fly. Gammy forces people to do outrageous things. With the nano-bots and chemicals. I call him The Alchemist. Why were you wandering around?”

“Ferd needing stuff. Youk is there with us too, now. The mermen have quite taken to him.” Another thing that upset her.

“That’s reasonable,” Greg said. He folded the first aid kit back together.

“Why?”

“All that swimming they do, and fishing. All of it in the company of other men, and depending on them.”

“Oh. All right. So maybe I won’t have to do the other thing?”

He patted together the torn bits of her sleeve. “I’m planning to get you away before that happens.”

“You are?”

“Yes. But I’m going to have to get into the scene now, to see how I need to change my plans. Seeing that things obviously have changed.”

“Ferd wants food for himself, and Youk, and the mermen,” Srese said. “You could bring it and maybe...?” She coyly angled her face. For a kiss—as well as, to be honest—him deciding it would be best for both of them, to have her over for the night.

“Perfect.” He kissed her like it was part of the word. He explained. “I’ll have dinner out there with you all. Having to cook for them, I’ll need to study the mermen as much as anybody. What else?”

She frowned about him not picking up on the rest of her desires. “Couple of messages. One was to tell Gammy that Ferd needs living quarters in the performance environments.”

“Tell me and I’ll type,” he said. Ignoring her by-play again. “It’ll be as if I sent the messages from the kitchens. The old alchemist doesn’t know everything that goes on.” He opened a different window on his memin. “Also, we’ll put your DNA into my door-guard app. So you can get in when you need to.”

*Umm, okay. He did pick up on my by-play.* “I like it. Then a message where I need to talk with Zoya.”

“I’ll drop you off on my way to the kitchens,” Greg said with a straight face.

Srese laughed. “On your way to the kitchens right next door? I appreciate it.”

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Srese interrupted her care-mother dreamily flitting about the playroom. Zoya had the contents of both their wardrobes draped and hanging everywhere. She was trying things on, mixing and matching.

“Darling, you’re early. I’ve been ...” Zoya gestured at the display.

Would it be any use still expecting Zoya to notice what went on with her care-daughter? Srese could but try her once more, Srese thought in Sard’s phrasing. “Ferd asks that you come in full time? There’s no journaling happening because of tech problems. He needs constant translating.”

“Oh yes! Oh yes! Just let me get changed.”

No use whatsoever. “You should probably have some of the stink-preventative, too,” Srese said. “The mermen are inside now.”

“Oh. Thank you baby, for the hint. I’ll drop by the medi-lab.”

“They’ll be busy. Ferd said to use his name.”

Zoya kissed her, still not noticing anything. “Darling, could you tidy all this mess before you go?”

Torn sleeve? White bandage underneath? Evidence of tears? Srese shook her head in disgust. After Zoya had gone, she laughed. *No. I'm not tidying all this before I go. I'm going to the dorm. Caro and Relda will be at home with all their scrapes and pains and we'll all commiserate together.*

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No girls at the dorm. She was about to leave when Caro alone arrived, sobbing.

"I waited and waited," she wept. "At the Pit the medics said it was a straight forward break ... Zachie's leg, I mean ... Srese, I'm so glad you're here ... then after we waited all that time in the corridor ... the medics said they had too many to deal with all at once ..."

Srese got Caro inside. Shut the door. Took example from Greg and locked it too.

Caro cried on. "By the time it was Zach's turn, his internals had done for him. That's what the labbies said. Because he'd been bleeding inside. I'd go out and *kill* Phin if he hadn't already done it himself. And Srese, then the labbies said, "So it's bye bye Zach for now. Would you like to be begun again when he's restarted?" She wailed. "Can you believe it?"

In the bathroom, Srese dialled for steam and while Caro poured her tears out in there, she whisked Relda's things from sight in the rest of the dorm. Then, with Relda's bedroom door fully opened and the bed swung round a quarter circle, a couple of colourful throws over the spread and the pillows, Relda's alcove became a pretty lounge-about corner.

"Mmm. I could so do with a cuppa." Caro always towed her hair in preference to using the blower. Though her eyes were red, she'd obviously shored herself up with a trembling resolve.

"What about Relda?" Srese asked.

"Waiting at the bottom. I'd gone to talk elsewhere. The whole tower came thundering down. Phin, Zachie, Relda, Tye and everyone helping to build are all gone. Plus, a couple of people hit by the lumps shattering out. I'm really glad you came back to the dorm."

Caro seemed to assume Srese was back for good. "I'm glad you hadn't moved me out yet," Srese said.

"Rel thought you'd be back and here you are." Caro hugged Srese for a welcome home. "This is good, the way you re-arranged Rel's things. Let's put in for a make-over and get some new paint as well."

"I don't know if I'll be staying."

"Oh. When I saw Zoya ... she called in at the medi lab while I was waiting to hear. Zoya to talk to Ghulia for a minute ... she was all dolled up and such a smile ... Like she had a date. I presumed ... you know ... because it wouldn't be Ferd she dolled up for."

"Why not Ferd?" Srese said, hopeful that it might be Ferd. Zoya and Ferd were working together?

Caro flustered. "Because he never has taken up with anyone after he lost his desert lady. And never will, according to ... to ..."

"Bit before our time, surely," Srese said. Why was she getting het up with no Gammy in the picture?

"My first care-mother tried her level best to hook up with Ferd," Caro said. "When he wouldn't, she had herself reconstructed. That infant with the crush on Sard ... I'm sorry, Srese!" She threw up her hands in despair. "I just don't *know* anymore how it all *works*."

*Mum? Dolling herself up for Arno?* Neither did Srese know anymore how it worked. Because the minion-incident was *before* Zoya went off on her date? Was Youk her competition? Srese recalled the merman's touch. Delicate. Not Youk. What did Mum have that Srese lacked? "I'd like to see. Come with me to the Performance Complex?"

"I've seen it, as I said. You go. Promise to come back?" Caro's voice trembled.

Srese hugged her. "'I'll be back. But I do need to keep track of my status.'"

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She ran to the CAVES through every little lane she could find. Crossed the big streets in a hurry. The scariest, widest place would be the Four-Ways where Simmonds crossed Third Circle, and where the minions had outlined the fallen from the first show.

A couple of privacy tents there glowing in the dusk. Srese slowed. *It's going to be all right.* The Merman Show had its groupies back. As she passed, people popped their heads out to talk to her.

"Srese, good to see you."

"When's the next show?"

She glowed. In the performance environment, though, everything was different. Again. The most glaring thing was the white fixer light trumping the normal, soft light of dusk.

Ferd's new living quarters were ready in CAVE 2. A kitchen, bunkroom, and living space for the rest of the staff in CAVE 1. A peeping gallery was being constructed adjacent to the long cave-side wall of CAVE 3, complete with step-ups, benches, and railings to prevent observers falling.

Srese tried not to see the minions at their work. Some people said there were three sorts. Fixers. Ghosts. Minions. *I've only ever seen the one sort and they are quite enough, thank you.*

Inside CAVE 3 all the visible sensory-felt was gone, up to probably a certain merman's arm's reach. Definitely beyond Ferd's. The fixers had installed spycams camouflaged as stars—above the mermen's work—and in the ceiling. Supposedly invisible peepholes and sound sensors were everywhere, all of it hurried work probably done whenever the mermen languished in their water in the airlock.

Neither were in there now. Srese stepped through on the sills to sneak a look outside. Arno and the boy were directing their own complement of fixer-robots at building a containment wall across the cave entrance and excavating the floor.

The mermen seemed as comfortable with the *fixers* as they were with Ferd and Youk. How was that not a worry? Such a breeze was blowing through the CAVE that people either shivered—like Zoya—or wore a couple more layers than usual—like Ferd. Gammy obviously unable to moderate the temperature.

"Srese, I'm glad you're here," said Ferd. "I need to bring you up to date." He led her into the control room. "You better see the journaling videos. Zoya made a big impression." He shrugged helplessly.

*Thank you, Caro for your insight.* Zoya was obviously very taken with Arno, she touched him delicately exactly in the way he had touched Srese. Srese studied the Zoya-and-Arno interactions. So it might be that Zoya mirrored Arno. Except that she'd taken it to the next level. She touched him on the arm, chest or throat when she wanted to catch his attention. Which was often. And she matched him stare for stare. Or locked her gaze on his lips.

Srese felt very much the voyeur but she had to know. Zoya even angled for a kiss, it looked like. Srese barely didn't blush remembering making that same move an hour ago. Zoya closed her eyes and held her head just so. Not seeing Arno doing the same.

Then Zoya retreated a little, probably to check his progress because nothing was forthcoming. The puzzlement was plain on her face. And Arno was absolutely polishing *his* act. Though she was glad to be off that hook, Srese hated the way Arno was making a fool of Zoya, and that Zoya was allowing it to happen.

Beside her, Ferd worried about a whole other thing. "I wish you and that boy ... It's just that where does this development leave you? Gammy never keeps avatars supernumerary to his requirements. As you'll have worked out. And I have these shamefully archaic loyalties to the flesh and blood of my family. So I worry, Srese, about your fate. Where might I fit *you* in until I wrench things back on track?"

"It's fine, Ferd," Srese said. "I could become Relda. She'd have loved the idea."

Ferd hugged her. "Wonderful! It's a huge load of worries off my back. We'll write a side-plot into the proceedings. But Srese, please don't walk out there on your own."

*More to worry about.* How would Ferd have learned of her run-in with a minion if communications were down? How close did Gammy keep Ferd? Was Ferd safe with a side-plot? What could it be? And, last but not least, who'd take her back to the dorm?

Youk would apparently. He stumbled through the airlock. "Dad says you need my arm?" He put it in front of her like it was the steering assembly of a corridor cleaner bot. "Suits me. I was ready for a break yesterday."

*He* noticed her sleeve and bandage. "What happened to you?"

Youk was definitely not safe with that kind of knowledge though it wouldn't do not to give out some of the truth. "I ran too fast earlier and slammed into a minion. He slung me out of his way by my arm."

"Ouch."

She steered him past the Nest.

"You're keeping Caro company?"

"Yes. See you."

She didn't open the door until he waved and continued up the corridor.