

29: Srese-as-Srese

Srese's friends filed past Greg into CAVE 3, and were directed by him to stand along the stripped-bare wall either side of the entry. All of them with trays in hand. Srese, with her tray, headed for the crowd in the middle of the hall. *Hall, because that's all it is now, with no sensory-felt.*

The ambience was unattractively dark grey and wet. Cold too, with real weather intruding through the archway to the new pool room. She recalled Youk's amazing sea scene, and then how Arno and the Kid reacted. *Is this their reality? Pretty glum if it is.*

Three strides would've got her to where she was going but she idled along to get as much an eye-view as she could. She glanced up. *Still the familiar starry sky with—not to forget—the additional spycams peering down on us all. Can't wait to see the journalling videos.*

Yeah right, Srese. Get with it. She doubted journalling videos were being recorded. *My people are standing along the wall staring, as though their eyes are on stalks. And the visitors are bunched near the airlock, staring just as avidly. She bit back nervous laughter. The visitors so real but so unreal!*

The adult Seapeople were all women and all of them thin to the point of being skeletal. The kids, also thin, looked ready for anything. Three older women, as grey-haired as Ferd, had long lines of stuttering tattoos whorling over their bodies, from their ankles to their wrists. Their breasts were bare and little more than flaps.

All the women wore knee-length skirts. From a distance these looked like they were made of bits and pieces of the same material as Arno's wetsuit. Srese swallowed. *Leftovers from the main job?*

Moving on. She neared Ferd and the Seagirl standing exactly between the two groups. Only a couple of each people were trying to get to know the other crowd.

"I'm not sure I'm getting anywhere," Ferd said as Srese joined him and the Seagirl. "I suspect she is reporting every word that passes between us to an AI. Though I can't for the life of me figure out where she's hiding it. You study that while I try again."

"What are you trying to tell her," Srese asked.

"About the food. How there is a tray for every person." Ferd gestured at Srese and her tray to illustrate, giving Srese the chance to study the Seagirl.

Her hair—brown—hung a bit past her shoulders. It had gold strands coming from a parting over the middle of her head making a sort of gold overlay. *Wonder how she got that effect?* Her eyes had lively irises—green—and her skin was tinted like the lightest honey. Then Srese saw flashes of silver on her. She shuffled round until she could see the girl's whole arm.

Yes. She had the longest scar beginning in her hand, or on her wrist, and going up and around the outside of her elbow, along her shoulder and into her neck. A *new* scar, that was still stitched in places like the outside of her elbow, and that was painted with a silvery ointment.

And the Seagirl cradled her left arm on her right hand as if her arm hurt. How would she even be able to hold her tray? Why hadn't anyone noticed, or thought to tell *them* in the kitchen? Srese glared at the ones responsible. Ferd. Zoya. Youk.

Zoya attended Arno. Youk stared back at Srese as if he planned his next move. *Watch out, Srese. Maybe just ignoring him will work?* Ferd just looked worried. Probably every detail anyone had noticed was the wrong one. If Srese hadn't been holding the tray, she would've shrugged at the sheer ineptness of it all.

“Srese.” She turned to Greg right behind her, mouthing—not vocalising—at her. “Start. Ferd at the end of his tether.”

Ferd stepped backward. “Continue observant,” he said. “Don’t mention my *tether* again.” Biting down on the words. Flashing some meaning at Greg.

A meaning meant to pass her by? *Attention, Srese.* Ferd *acted* like he was at the end of his tether. *Why? Who for?* Not these incredible *real* people, Srese thought, recalling Arno’s antics. She ditched the idiotic routine that they’d worked on all morning. She faced the Seagirl and set the tray on the floor. “I am Srese,” she said, signing her name at the same time.

The Seagirl smile shyly. “I . am . Ahni.”

She replied with known words, Srese wanted to say to someone. I. am. With hardly an accent. Srese almost missed the Seagirl’s name, so similar was it to Arno’s. “Ahni-Arno?” she asked.

“Bro . ther.”

Srese couldn’t help but broadcast this welcome information. “Her name is Ahni. Arno is her brother.” She picked up the tray. *What a relief that the Seagirl can talk.* “Would you like some food?”

Ahni angled her head. *Seems an extreme way of telling me she’s listening.* “I . must . first . taste. This . is . ?” Ahni said.

“Sweet pudding,” Srese said encouragingly.

Ahni picked up the spoon as if she knew all about spoons and dipped it into the bowl. She tasted only that small amount, and thought about it with her head angled the same as before.

Or—make that—Ahni listened to what could only be a voice delivered straight into her ear. Ahni put the spoon down, and signed towards someone among her people, too fast for Srese to follow.

One of the older women came with a little cauldron, and without acknowledging Srese, tipped the contents of the bowl into her witchy-looking pot. Set the bowl back.

“For . later,” Ahni said, looking with Srese at the woman walking back to her people near the airlock. “This . is?” She pointed back at the tray.

“Finger food,” Srese said. “Each portion has a different flavour.”

Again Ahni went through the whole tasting listening thing. “These . are . not . what . we . eat,” she said regretfully.

Questions nearly tripped off Srese’s tongue. Why not? What do you eat? Who just told you? Why not give at least a try? She made do with, “What about the choc-mint shake?”

Ahni made a revolted face. “Green . water . is . bad . water. Uuh!”

“Ahni!” One of the older women called from the airlock. She said a lot of words that Srese didn’t know.

Ahni turned to Srese and mimed like she carried a couple of things hanging from her hands. She touched the area on her belly where probably the Seapeople had their bladders the same as Srese’s people. “Pss. Pss.”

Srese fought to keep from blushing. “They’re asking for buckets to use as waste receptacles?” she said at Greg, who stood so close that he probably had the gist of it already.

Greg nodded. “Osa, please nip back to the Food Lab and grab us our cleaning-up buckets.”

“Only if you’ll pause everything while I’m gone.”

Osa joking? Don’t think so. Does everyone still think it an entertainment you can stop and start at will? Srese nearly rolled her eyes at the head-in-the-sandery of some people.

While they waited, Srese studied Ahni being interested in everything. Differently to Arno and the kid. Everything Ahni looked at, she whispered the thing to herself, and held her head cocked as if listening.

Srese stared at the rest of the Seapeople. They talked among themselves. Couldn’t call it chatting. Every word had stressed overtones. Anyone facing Srese’s people, held a hand in front of their mouths. They’re preventing *us* from reading their lips? *Can’t see any way that Ahni is talking with anyone among them.*

What about Ahni talking with Arno? If they both have an ear comm? Remember how Arno and the Kid seemed to communicate wordlessly? She studied Arno. His face was so *set* that a twitch had started beside his left eye. All the women, including Ahni, totally ignored him.

“*Our* people are dying of boredom, Srese,” Youk said from right beside her. “My turn—methinks—at getting some action. Why don’t you take that tray away?”

Methinks. Ha. Youk being grandiose and weaseling his way into the inner circle. As usual. *If only Sard was still here.*

Ahni’s eyes widened perceptibly seeing Youk’s eyes. Looking towards Srese questioningly, she pointed with her thumb at her own eyes and her pinkie at Youk’s eyes, her other fingers folded down and rocking her hand to and fro.

“Go away, Srese. You owe me,” Youk said.

“Ahni is asking *me* a question I thought,” Srese said. She stayed.

Youk sighed theatrically. “It’s like she is saying my eyes are the same as hers while every other pair of eyes in here is not?”

That was Youk being his usual self. *No one to run to, today. Everyone is here. Tears before breakfast, or in this case, lunch.*

“Well?” Youk said. “How wasn’t I being clear?”

As if Srese should understand from his explanation earlier, that Ahni had decided, that Ahni didn’t need or want Srese around. She re-acted as she knew never-ever to do. “Except that hers are green and yours are gold-glowing-through-tea.”

“I hate it when you do that,” Youk said.

“Do what?” she said.

“Put me down. You’re always putting me down.”

“Huh? How did I?” Re-acting again. Because she was stung that he’d stage one of his disruptions now.

“Gold,” he said. “Glowing. Through tea.” He repeated her words loud enough that everyone along the walls could hear. “What does she make me? Some kind of ...?”

“Leopard chick. Up a tree,” Caro called with a laugh in her voice.

“Yeah. In the forest. Get out of the way, Youk. Us girls can’t see,” Quinella said.

Quinella was there? *Didn’t see her in the kitchen.*

“A leopard? A chick?” Youk repeated. He sounded stunned.

The girls all laughed. Srese allowed herself a smile.

She looked at Youk. He had three fingers up for her transgressing three times. *Yeah right, Youk.* For once she was in the right place. Dozens of people around. *What can he do here?*

Osa breezed in with the buckets.

Youk plucked them from Greg's hands. "I'm nominating me as an observer. The buckets will give me an in." He flicked his head at Ahni. "She's obviously interested in me. A romantic plot finally. Maybe you'll all learn something."

Ahni stopped him with a tinker-bell laugh. "Buckets. Are. Oldest. Girl's. Job."

Wow, this is tip-top important. It sounds so much like Ahni is doing repeat-after-me stuff. Her hair must be hiding the earpiece. The sewn wound was recent. What did that suggest?

Ahni took the buckets from Youk's resisting hands and passed them to a child who surely couldn't be much older than about twelve.

Ahni herself was not counted as a girl? Another thing to wonder about.

Youk stumped away to the boys' line along the wall. Srese didn't hear what he said, but there was cheering. The boys picked up their trays and turned left in unison. Youk counted at the top of his voice. "Three. Two. One. March!"

The boys marched exactly as had been planned. The women around the airlock gave way and the first three or four boys went through the airlock.

After that the slow-time stuff started. Or Srese's brain worked extra fast. The line dominoed backward. Tye re-appeared minus his tray. Green in the face. He pushed blindly through the rest of the boys. Trays fell left and right, and food flew through the air, only to be grabbed and instantly gulped down by the children. A mother carrying her baby in a sling deflected a falling tray from the infant's head. A bowl skidding against the wall splintered.

A shard flew as far as Srese and—with her hand smacked to the stinging wound—she locked stares with Youk. He was coldly furious. For a final indignity, Tye vomited practically on Youk's feet where he stood near the wall. Youk would say all of it her fault. And Sard was nowhere to carry half the brunt.

She dithered. She should get away. Where was Greg? Could Ferd help her? Zoya was no use.