

48. The Far-Time Vision

The Clay Faces left no guard that Srese saw. She did a quick gaze all about, over her own shoulder and past Ahni sitting opposite her. Obviously no need. To the left she could *hear* the crocs swishing their tails and launching at the wall below them and thumping back into a melee of leathery lizards. Apart from the squeaks and chirrups of a rich insect life, no further sounds were to be heard from the jungle in the middle of the channel.

On the other side of Srese-and-Ahni sitting on the wall, party cheer and chatter accompanied the tents being emptied and packed up.

“Yum,” Srese said ironically. “Lentil stew again. The flavouring is quite good, though.” For a while she and Ahni ate, scooping up stew with folds of flat bread and adding in the pickled vegetables and little salted fish in side dishes. Food was food, and neither of them had had regular or frequent meals lately.

After cleaning various platters with a wet finger, Srese said, “You’re not wearing the life-suit?”

“The Sard-suit talks to the Srese-suit and both of them to the cave-father,” Ahni said. She chose a dried fig from the bowl of dried fruit and nuts.

“Never had that happen to me,” Srese said through a mouthful of raisin and nut mix. *It would be so like implant to make that possible. What an entertainment if everyone at home knows our every move.* “What’s Sard doing now?”

Ahni swung her satchel around to her front.

“That’s the suit?” Srese was agog at its new shape.

Ahni rested her hand in the fold of the breast-plate and stared into the distance. “He rests below the lip of the plateau. In his mind he weeps with pain and disappointment. His ankle is hurt from the landing. He thought he saw smoke. He thought he was gliding down to people. Instead it is the sleeping heart of the mountain-that-was.”

“A mountain?” Srese said. “Never saw that on the plateau.”

“Long ago, before the time of people, there was a volcano there. The earth’s mantle slid away from the fire and is cooling. Now there is only hot mud and steam rising. People carried the mountain away on vehicles to sieve out the minerals.”

“Give me a go?” Srese said.

Ahni took her hand out and held the bag out for Srese.

The life suit/bag immediately sent a garble of signal relating to Srese’s state of being. *What about Sard*, she thought at it. The suit fell silent. Even that was an answer of sorts. “But Ahni, the suit. It’s like I sacrificed myself uselessly so you could escape!”

“The Swamp is wrecked,” Ahni said. “The only way is forward.”

“Ahni, where I am going is like the end for me.” Her voice quavered. A scream waited high in her throat.

Ahni leaned over the emptied dishes. Took Srese’s hand. “I had a dream about you. About us. A far-time vision.”

“How can a dream help me against that mis-made thing in the channel?” Srese said.

“We Skin-people have many stories of visions coming true. This kind of dream takes a hold and pulls you to its path.”

“We Cave people have a saying about dreams.” She closed her eyes reciting. “Like dreaming is to thinking, wishful dreaming is to wishful thinking.” Opened her eyes. “I reckon you dreamed something you’d *like* to happen, and your unconscious self will work towards it to make it happen.”

“Far-time visions are different, with pictures of things I never knew,” Ahni said.

“Such as?”

“I dreamed the beginning of this dream back on the mountain-that-was, after the fever left me. A human firefly, of sapphire, wove a web of light between shining bronze cliffs. Each time the dream came to tell me more, there’s that sapphire sign in a late sky.”

“The life-suits *can* outline themselves with sapphire,” Srese said reluctantly.

“The cliffs grow in the city. This morning I saw them, at sun rise.”

“I doubt if I can hide the suit on me somewhere so it is not found before I have a chance to use it,” Srese said. “There must be hundreds of life-suits in the world. Did your dream say who’s wearing it?”

Ahni shook her head.

“Okay, okay. It’s a thing you never saw before. What else?”

“I’m in the *east*,” Ahni said hesitantly. “Wearing your, this, life-suit. Swimming ... among beings.” She fell silent, seeming to inspect her thoughts. “Beings who spur me on with their eyes. They have no hands. They beg me for something, I don’t know what ...”

“But where are you going with it all?” Srese’s nerves were raw from the suspense of the Clay Faces parceling the tents ready for the animals. Kes just walked by leading the Kuri-Family string, to peg them near to the gate. Moss and Kyle were there with guns, to guard the camels from the crocodiles. Talking was all Srese could do to keep herself from screaming herself into a frenzy. *Five deep breaths*. All right, she got herself steady.

“The path we are on, that the vision showed me, splits here.” Ahni said. “Three ... ways.”

Srese ignored Ahni's obvious distress. *It's me going to the cannibal, nothing can be worse than that.* "Does my bit go further than the island?"

"Yes, Srese." Ahni's tone like she was on surer ground.

But Srese felt like she'd just shifted into a fantastical parallel universe. Funny, because Ahni and Srese still sat on a wall between the crocs and the camp where the Clay Faces were still loading the camels. The cannibal still flitted to and fro among the foliage on his island in the middle of the channel.

"Not an island, Srese."

Srese recoiled as far as the shackle allowed it. "You read my mind!"

"You're staring out there. And we're fearing the same disaster."

Srese tried to swallow down the gob in her throat. "Why are *you* afraid if your vision tells what will happen?"

Ahni sighed deep. "The island is a lock to hold back water from the crossing the Clay Faces have here for the camels. The vision sent a dream, a trail that splits here for you to follow the red gold strand through the rubble and into the city, and for me to stick to the Clay Faces, like a burr ... while they travel east and I don't understand that ... because Kes and his family are going west?" Her voice almost teary.

Again Srese ignored Ahni's doubts about her own path. "But why *me* to the cannibal?"

"The vision showed untold dangers to struggle through at every turn."

"Why any of it, then?"

"To break the hold of Sink City on the land."

Srese slumped. "All by my little self."

"Not alone. After the numbers run the maze, some hide when they get into the streets. After all this time they are many. And there are goyles, and a true lover."

"Oh great! A *true* lover." Srese slayed *him* unseen. "What are goyles?"

"Big. Steely. With flashing knife blades instead of fingers. Some are friends, some not."

Srese looked at the lock. "It's so green. It *is* an island but of green vines and green plants, in the barrenness here. It even has fruit hanging from that rigging. The Clay Face women braid a different plant into every girl's hair. They even keep a list to not repeat themselves. The cannibal obviously has a good collection. I mean, look at the jungle?" She took the end of one of her braids to suck the top.

Ahni gasped. "Srese, no! Don't eat!"

Srese pretended biting the end of the plait off. “One of the women told me it’s ti-tree.” She stared expectantly at Ahni while chewing air.

Ahni swallowed. “The binding of every plait has in it a leaf of eversleep. A Skinpeople herb I found in Ivy’s tent. Don’t breathe it in, or touch it. Hang the end of a braid in the monster’s tea and he’ll sleep like father time. Crumble a couple of the leaves in his stew and he’ll join his ancestors.”

“But crumbling without touching?”

Huskily Ahni recited, “*Furry leaf and tawny stem, eversleep flowers purple as the Deep, pick them with flaggy fingers ere a touch puts you also to sleep.* It’s the rhyme I learned for it.” She blinked away a brightness.

“What do I do when I get to Sink City? Your dream tell you that?”

“Far-time visions are about new things that never happened before.”

“You said.” Srese looked round. Her mood flipped. “Even after all this talk, it isn’t real, is it? Because aren’t visions meant to *foretell*? Like, how things will be regardless? So no worries, Great Grand will let me go because the vision says I’ve got a part in the future?”

“Visions only tell what is possible,” Ahni said again.

Srese was, like, stuck on the rim of a wheel. Going round and round over the same ground. Tripping over the same couple of doubts. “How is your vision any use if I’m going to have to fight off the cannibal anyway?”

“If you didn’t know of the vision you might fight and die because you are thinking that every girl that ever went there died.”

Srese didn’t deny it.

“You’re strong. Knowing you can escape because there is a new pattern, and the pattern said you’d escape, you’ll work towards that,” Ahni said.

“I just don’t see how it’s not wishful thinking. I guess it’s one of the ways we’re different. You believing that sort of thing, me having to see it.”

Ahni slumped. “If *you* don’t make it ... I don’t know if any of the pattern will happen.”

“Gotcha!” Lariat pulled Ahni off the wall into his arms. “Get her leg free, Jeb. Should’ve guessed they’d be plotting.”

“Told you,” Jeb said. “Good that we got this one. You heard my old man. The Skin-girl to anyone who can rid us of Great Grand. We’ll take her now in case my damned father goes back on his word. Because I suspect your yonker is planning a plot?”

Srese screamed. “I can’t do anything by myself, you idiots!”