

49. Great Grand

Srese screamed and screamed after Ahni was dragged away. No one took any notice that she could see. She stopped to take stock. Her actually shackled to a real wall on such a golden afternoon was unreal.

As was the fact that no one except the crocs waiting in the channel took any notice. The Clay Faces went on loading their camels, po-faced on account of their masks. Their kids running around partying and the prisoners huddling on the further platform were the only indications that the general mood was *up!*

Except that she was not going to take her fate lying down. She wasn't anywhere near done yet with her screaming repertoire. Her best piercing shrilling, for instance. She could wake the dead with that. "*EEEEeeeh!!!*" She stopped, because uh oh, what she forgot, no dead were kept here.

That hoarse sad call I'm good at, then. She used to augment performances set at dusk on the moors with that. Lonely marshes and ramshackle grave yards would've been playing along the performance space walls. She hooted long and loud over the water. Too bad they hadn't ever heard themselves hooting over water.

The crocs sank and no one else even remarked.

Close your ears. My most ear-splitting shriek is the one where my tongue trembles in the cave of my mouth, like in any olden days cartoon. "Ieeiiiiihhhh!"

She shouted long drawn-out words to make she was a galley slave rowing for her life. No response. She swore, all the words she knew but never dreamt she'd ever need.

Her voice bruised into nothing. *I wish I was doing all this at home. Real-time adventuring doesn't hold a candle to imaginary stuff. And I always got to go home afterwards?* Her very emotions had burnt off by the time Moss arrived.

He keyed off the shackle with a leering glance at the shape of her leg.

She stumbled against him accidentally on purpose. "Sorry. Stiff and clumsy."

"Oh, you want me to carry you?" he said.

"Don't get your hopes up. Where's Kes? I mean you saw how Ahni was ripped out of the scene?"

Moss pulled a sour mouth. "Why would you prefer a whining pup to a man?"

She had no energy for that discussion.

He steered her through the camel throng. A non-masked Kuri-Chief, two women unknown to Srese, and a Clay Face with a rifle waited at the jetty. As soon as Kuri-Chief had Srese in her

hands, she doled out a swag of instructions. “Moss, bring the punt. Wipe the seat, remember the yonker’s flimsy.”

Huh?

The women clustered around Srese. “Arms up,” Kuri-Chief said. One of the others draped a silk flimsy over Srese as the calico thing was whipped from under. *A silk slip?* They smoothed it over her. A silk shawl was draped over her front.

Kuri-Chief stood back apparently to see the total effect. “Style with a sting, I should say. All right, get her into the punt.”

The two women took Srese by an arm each and walked her into the punt between them while they each stepped into the water.

Srese was helped to step over the front seat then encouraged to sit down on it. The cold metal bit through her silk flimsy.

Now the women held the punt steady for Kuri-Chief to step into it. The rifle man handed Kuri-Chief the weapon which she lay across her lap with the muzzle on the side of the punt. “Against the crocs,” she said as if Srese was a stranger in her own scene.

The rifleman pushed them off. Water like glittering jewels dripped from the end of the punt pole as Moss lifted it from the water. The punt stick looked to be made of wood. Which would’ve been grown in the ground somewhere. At home there were only the mulbry trees, more bush than tree. Apart from desert vegetation she’d never seen wild growing things. The punt was bent and dented from long use.

The platform was almost above their heads now and there was the resident flitting from cover to cover towards the other half of the lock. Whenever he was partly in shadows, with just his strong young body showing, he was as good as headless. He wore a skirt of leaves around his middle.

The prisoners cowered at the far end of their island. Not one was being brave. Not even big talk Youk. But why expect more when it was the city he’d wanted. *Well, good luck with that, fair weather friend. The whole scene is ominous. Not just my bit.*

“Great Grand seems keen to get the work over with,” Moss said. “Not that I blame him. The yonker makes a pretty sight.”

“I’d rather that you worked at keeping Great Grand’s trust than be broken or killed at poor Ming’s hands,” Kuri-Chief said.

Ming. That will be the poor sap who donated his body. Put that in your pipe and smoke it, Moss-baby.

The punt grated against a stanchion made of some kind of stone kreet. They had arrived.

A rope ladder descended and Moss invitingly dragged the end toward Srese with a gesture that she precede him.

Like I was born yesterday?

“Up you go,” he said, a tad impatiently and just about slavering despite Kuri-Chief’s warning.

Srese had had experience with lusting men and this one was not in her little love book. Instead of taking Moss’s invitation she busied herself with tying her *dress* closer about her, bringing the corners of the drapey bit forward and knotting them below her breasts, ostensibly to have both hands free.

Kuri-Chief seemed to take the hint. “You first, Moss. Help the yonker up.”

The ladder was interesting. Obviously made of grass with bits sticking out. It was two ropes, kept apart by half a dozen iron bars, held in place with huge knots too thick for her hands. Climbing, she had to hand-over-hand up the rungs.

The clanging and clattering and grinding of little-used machinery told of Great Grand’s activity on the second platform. After a groans, screeches and whatever, the partitions hanging under the upstream half of the structure began to open and reach towards the banks of the channel.

Moss grabbed Srese by her upper arm, hauled, and when she was high enough, he dug his knuckles into her breast.

Pulling away, she stared pointedly at Kuri-Chief impatient in the punt.

Moss dropped his hand. “Through here.” He led her between the folded-in lock-doors of Great Grand’s personal paradise, into a wired-in, tent-sized cage crowded with a capstan and its attendant machinery.

He began to explain the workings.

Srese cut him short. “I know how it works. Just start me off.” She wanted to be rid of his bright-eyed expectations. In a minute the cannibal would arrive and she’d need all her attention for him.

“Right.” Moss stepped past her without touching, in behind the nearest capstan bar and began pushing it clockwise. “Soon ... you should ... be able ... to see ... the doors ... begin to ... swing out!” he puffed.

What she’d thought a solid wall beyond the cage, began to swing out from the downstream end of the platform in tandem with its mate along the other side of the deck, like a pair of slow-motion wings. Hopeful sunlight came into the under-structure.

“That’s it,” Moss said. “I’m out of here.”

She sprang to the capstan as Moss left her to it. Straightaway she knew that pushing at a real capstan bar was nothing like pushing a pretend one. For one thing there had been *four* actors playing at pirates. And their capstan was just two crossed bars going round and round.

The work *then* was their acting, while *now* it was to produce energy to move the lock doors. Which was hard work. Once Moss's momentum was gone, the bar was stiff and incredibly difficult to keep moving. Plus, there was only the one of her. Even the pushing was different to the action her pirate-self used before.

Pushing with just her arms proved pretty well useless. Her whole body had to push her arms. Soon her legs trembled and her heart pounded with the effort.

Suddenly the bar she fought to keep moving, sped forward, and she had to run to keep up. Surely the door-wings hadn't completely unfolded yet? Wild glance. Great Grand's awful face grinned maniacally behind her as he chased her with his hands on the bar behind, round and round. Srese ran and ran. She couldn't think. She had to keep ahead of that leering face.

Dizzier and dizzier. Then she was running through a treacle rising up: to shin height, then her knees and her thighs. She fell. Had enough wit to roll sideways out of reach of both the captain and his capstan. She lay against the wire wall, gasping at the air, her eyes tight closed to put her fate on hold

The whirring clanking shushing machinery stilled. Water dripped and percolated back to the channel. Heavy breathing approached.

Srese opened her eyes.

If she could've ignored the head, she might've been able to believe the body must be coming to pick her up and comfort her. It was so like Phin's, with its stocky ivory build and reddish-gold body hair. But where Phin had been naked when she saw that much of him, this body wore a short skirt of dark leaves, which, due to the wearer's excitement, didn't leave much to the imagination.

The body's hands dragged her to her feet and pressed her against the capstan cage wall. One hand held her there, the other hand hovered over her.

Srese cringed back from the head. Couldn't help herself.

"Not yet," said the head. "Pumping out is first."

The hands changed their grip on her and hustled her out of this cage into the next one. Weirdly, a hillock in the floor. The hands clamped *her* hands to an steel handrail in front. As she moved her feet to get her balance, the *hillock* turned.

The head-and-body stepped into a similar cubicle beside Srese's and grasped a similar handrail. "Our quick-step." The head grinned. "It's for pumping water out of the lock. *Run!*" The body ran with long easy lopes. "We'll make the nosy clay faces go quickly-quickly."

Srese ran against her will, the resistance of the water below made it like running up a steep hill. Not that she'd ever ran up a *real* hill. *And why would I help?* She slowed. On the other platform, the Clay Faces whipped a couple of prisoners onto the same job on the opposite watergate. The fellow on the left? Had to be Youk. She'd know that lazy arrogance anywhere.

“Enough,” said the head. The body reached for Srese. “They can wade,” the head said. “We must attend to the twigs. Come nearer.”

The body pulled Srese close.

The body-and-head’s neck bent forward to get the head closer to her.

Then the *face* was all she could see. A hairless round skull loomed over it all, its skin a seamed sun-baked dark leather. Hairless, saggy eye-lids. Its watery gaze roved over her face. Still panting from its labours, spit threatened to overflow its bottom lip, and teak-coloured neck-skin sagged unevenly over the join between the head and the young ivory body.

With iron intent, Srese controlled the impulse to heave and vomit. She shrank inside the flimsy to prevent the drool touching her where it fell in long silver threads.

“Silk,” the head said. “Take the silk.”

It’s not talking to me. Its eyes stared towards the upper right, as though willing the body to action through a left-brain instruction.

After a long suspenseful moment, the hand descended. It gripped her silk-covered breast and pulled so hard that tears of pain sprang into her eyes.

“The knot, stupid!” the head shouted with a spray of spit.

The hand changed position to grasp the knot, pulled that until it loosened and the silk flimsy slid off.

“He is very literal,” remarked the head. “We don’t share enough connections for niceties. Drop the silk.”

Srese didn’t have it—so yeah—it was talking to the body. The situation too fraught to laugh.

Another long wait until the hand opened to allow the silk to slither to the deck.

Then, as Srese waited to know what was coming by way of the head’s next instruction, the hands returned to Srese’s body—almost as if by an instinctual compulsion that had nothing to do with orders from the head—and fondled her everywhere they could reach.

“Stop.”

After the usual time lag the hands stopped their explorations and propped Srese against the wire.

“Smell.”

The right hand slowly picked up the end of one of Srese’s plaits and brought it to the head’s nose.

“What herb?” the head demanded of Srese by turning slightly and looking at her directly, eye to eye.

“T-t-ti tree.”

“Good. Harvest.”

Harvest? What is he on about?

With one hand the body gathered all the plaits. Yanked.

“Ow!” Srese cried. Camel curls and her own parted company.

“Into the lab with them, and the silk.”

The body turned to begin walking, automatically yearning toward Srese when it passed.

“Don’t move!” the head told Srese before it turned in the direction of the body’s travel.