

## 51. The Yarrow Girl

The deck was blanketed with singing heat. Even the wind lay somnolent. Srese patrolled Great Grand's domain restlessly. There *had* to be a way she could escape. The hot yellow silence of the day oppressed her. It was like the garden *was* Great Grand, every leaf evil.

Only knowing about the dead girls kept her from gibbering. She apologized to the nearest girl as she plucked a couple of leaves from that bed to nibble and to calm her stomach by giving it something to do. She moved to the next patch and the next, browsing among the herbs like a rabbit or a padymelon. Her memory sped through various entertainments she'd been in, even performances from her infant days, for solutions.

*Snap out of it! I should go and get a clear-eyed picture of my enemy before he wakes.* Because if he was awake, he'd have come looking for me. *Following the snores ... no more snoring? What does that mean?* She crouched, walking. *Silent feet. Make for where you heard him last,* she told herself.

*There!* Saw him through the drying stems of sunflowers, their flowerheads nodding at the top. She studied the monster. They slept on their side—that must be the reason for no more snoring—they just turned on their side. *And look!* The plaits hung from one of their fists!

Srese circled the garden bed on cat feet, deciding what she must do. Lucky for her the head-and-body lay on their right side, towards one of the long edges of the garden bed. Unlucky for her, their left fist resting on the left hip clenched the plaits. How would she get the head-and-body to release the hair extensions?

*Make them go into deeper sleep, relax more? Not practical. I don't know what music turns him on.* Or wake them so suddenly, bucket of cold water over them, that they instantly released the plaits ...? *I have nowhere to run.*

*Can I distract them?* She felt a flush rise to her face. She'd tried that on Greg and he hadn't appreciated her attentions, at all. He'd been trying to sleep with her presence beside him, he'd said raggedly. And he needed to rise early to get early breakfast going. And, and, and all his other ifs and buts. She'd run.

"Both parties need to be consenting," he shouted after her retreating back. And, "It's unfair to take advantage of my biology." She'd slammed out of his quarters. Here and now, that very same strategy was her *only* strategy. She eased herself slowly, excruciatingly carefully, onto the plants behind the body, intending to allow her warmth, the merest touch of her, to excite.

The body's fist opened and closed convulsively, leaving the plaits hanging across his thigh.

*It worked.* But Srese swore silently. *The plaits left hanging in almost the worst place.* She reached across slowly.

The body began to subside onto its back, into Srese.

Awkwardly she raised herself on her right arm, and scooping up the plaits, hurriedly bundled herself off the garden bed. She crouched beside it, willing the head-and-body combo not to open their eyes. Not to wonder where the plaits went. *Stay asleep. Stay asleep.*

The body restless with its hands questing for his dream.

She turned. She had to be quick. Down the grass ladder and into the kitchen. The herb was quickly found if you knew where to look. It crumbled no different to tarragon, even with just the stiffly bound end of a plait onto the bench—because she mustn't touch—the results swept straight into the bowl with the remaining salad. A good stir.

She dropped the evidence, spoon and plaits, one weighting the others, into the channel beside the lab. Air bubbles gathered among the hair. *Come on, come on. Sink, dammit.* Just when she reached out with her foot to help the bundle sink, the water swirled and the evidence was gone.

She jumped back. *Don't forget the wild life, she warned herself, when the head-and-body are deep into their dying and I have time to think properly of escape. Don't look too far ahead.* She climbed up and went to rest on the hot deck beside Sage Girl's bed.

Woke when the body's hand tweaked her toes. She scrambled back, away from them.

"There's too much to do before the twigs strike for me to spend time now squiring you around," Great Grand said. "Follow me."

The *body* wouldn't think that way. Couldn't think at all. But look at it, questing like a blind snake among its leafy skirt. They headed down the grass ladder toward the under-deck.

Where Great Grand had the body hustle Srese into the pump cage and lock the door. "You might as well earn your keep," the head said. Well after the head's words, the body gestured at the horizontal drum beside her.

*She queried by pulling up her eyebrows. Like, what am I meant to be doing?*

"The drum treads are there to stop your feet slipping backward," the head explained. "Get onto it, start walking."

She got on. Started walking. As the drum turned under her it pumped water from the desalination works gushing into the fresh-water barrel. *Clack, clack, clack.*

"More water needed than a lazy wind can raise," the head said. "Two of us drinking as well as all of the girls needing their rations."

Her suspicions confirmed.

The body was still and or tumescent again, its hands lingering there until the head said, "Got to open the water-cock."

Immediately the tiger in the body's crotch strained up.

*The thing is very literal,* Srese thought.

The head calmed it with stroking and promises. “The twigs are looking good. The roots have started. Soon we’ll plant.”

*Ignore that. He’ll have to eat soon. Sooner, I hope.*

The pump changed its rhythm. *Clackety clack*. The hot, sweet, treated water had been siphoned off, and new water from the channel was drawn into the system through all the coils and twisty pipes to have its salt, and not to forget its gore, steamed out the following day. *Sweet water for all his sweet maidens*. Srese rolled her mind’s eye.

“Now.” Great Grand opened the cage door.

She froze.

But Great Grand indicated a stiff breeze overhead. He reached into the cage for Srese’s hand, and handed her out of the cage.

*Ha ha*, she thought like a hollow woman, *just like a perfect gentleman*. She prepped herself to resist him. Clenched her arm muscles. Her hands. Got her legs ready for running.

But he dropped her hand and merely stepped past her and into the cage. He reached overhead at the same time for a handle hooked into the wire wall. This he fitted onto the outer flywheel’s axle-end—one of the wheels mounted beside the drum—and turned the flywheel until its speed equaled that of the wind wheel in the middle.

With a practiced move, he slid the handle off the axle and engaged a gear to mesh the flywheel to the wind wheel, without interrupting either of their turns. The handle he hung tidily back in its keeping place.

Srese did deep breathing.

Great Grand stepped out of the cage, caught up her hand, and led her to where the beams and balks above their heads were marked with notes made with a hot steel, burnt in. “The tides and moon phases and winds of all the years I’ve stewarded the platform,” he said proudly. “And see here, this is how I show the storms we’ve had, the damage to expect, and the best way to repair.”

When she rested her neck by looking downward or around, he raised her head with a firm and inexorable hand under her chin, to re-direct her eyes to where he was pointing. With a shock she realized he’d begun his “squirring” of her, his enticement. She could think only of the girls who’d gone before her.

For her own good she had to distract the monster from his usual schedule. *What? How? The only way she knew, again*. Following him up the rope ladder, she swayed close and brushed her bare breast along his bare buttock. The body yearned into the hollow of her belly before the head knew it.

“I told you not yet,” the head shouted raggedly, almost throwing Srese from the ladder. At once he sorrowed and had the body help Srese to the deck. Where it stood close to her, its warmth between them.

A crafty expression flitted over the head's face. It was as if Srese's proximity and the body's urges confabulated in his mind. "No time to build a whole new bed," he wheedled. They led her to the bed they'd slept in. "This one looks about your size. Lie down."

Srese was like forest-wood, unbendable.

The body smacked her in the back of the knees with the edge of one of its hands.

She buckled into its arms.

They flung her onto the bed, her back and the side of her head rasping painfully over the brockle surrounds. "You see, not a bad fit at all," the head said.

Srese lay frozen, like a dead girl already, not wanting to feel the girl under her.

"You're hurt!" the head said. A minute later, the body solicitously wiped at the blood on her face with a swag of hair it picked up from beside Srese's head.

She gagged. Sprang from the garden bed and set it between her and the head-and-body.

"Yarrow is old enough to share," Great Grand said. "She has loving arms. Warm leaves. You," he said to Srese. "Take her plants and put them among her sisters. Like this." Great Grand thrust his fingers into the moist soil and cupped various uncrushed plantlets out before raking the center of the bed flat with his fingers. "We will eat now," he added. "We need to be strong when the moon rises."

When she was alone Srese vomited up the horror of the dead girl's hair ripped from her half-buried skull and swiped across Srese's face. She scrubbed her hands and every part of her touched by Yarrow's remains hard with the astringent leaves from a low hanging vine. *Some other poor girl. But long gone.*

Srese lay down on the open deck, away from the gardens, away from the hatch, to warm her cold bones and her shivering heart. *What if the drug in Great Grand's salad doesn't work instantly? And he'll probably fight dropping off because they've just rested the whole day.*

From now until he did fall asleep, the hours had to be stretched with something to do—other than what the body most wanted. Because due to all her suspicions in relation to *sex*, there was now no chance she'd willingly commit herself to an activity which here appeared always to end in a terrifying ... finality. She hardly dared think even those words.

Great Grand licked his fingers of the vestiges of his meal. "Fishing. It is time for the fishing," he said.

"Why now?" Every time she got him to explain whatever it was, seconds more would pass. Seconds added together made minutes. Time used up, as required.

"The tide is out, the water low. Only fish can swim around the stanchions and take the bait." He led her to the inner end of the deck where he had three reels, short steel bars wound with silken lines.

“And I must have a store of ready food for the time of planting. Too much to do then to worry about fishing and cooking. Tomorrow morning, I think, they will be ready,” he explained as he showed Srese how to unreel and send the hook into the water where a float held it from the bottom. Then he sprinkled bait.

Srese said, “That bed won’t be big enough for the twigs to grow into their full potential. For *trees*, you’ll need tubs or something.” Would he fall for her strategy?

“I did wonder that the camel-wives sent me tree twigs.”

“Very useful stuff, I heard.”

“Still, they know my situation.”

“They’ve got a list of all the plants they’ve ever sent you.”

“Don’t talk. Coax a fish onto your line.” He hauled on one of his, hand over hand, and a fish came flapping out of the water.

*Crack! Crack! Crack!*

The shots were so unexpected, so *unbelievable*, Srese was at first barely surprised. Someone shooting nearby.

The next volley sniped at the water in front, echoes multiplying it four-fold.

Great Grand shouted and reeled his lines up, fast.

Rubble-side of the channel, a cloaked and masked figure stood easy, shooting at the crocodile-logs on the camp-side ramp sunning themselves in the last warmth. As the fusillade of echoes faded, blood drained into the channel and glibbed through the water.

At once the water erupted with flailing snouts and tails as the still-living beasts found the scent.

“You clay-bedizened delinquent!” Great Grand shouted, spitting saliva. “I know who you are! Never again will you cross the channel! Make no mistake, my memory will follow you around the circle!”

Kes laughed. He saluted Srese and walked away along the channel.

Srese watched the feast until the channel was all but empty. The next such tide was at dawn. Was she to consider this all a demonstration of what Kes would do in the morning so his yonker could make her getaway?

Great Grand returned from taking the fish to the kitchen. “No more fishing today. Come with me, we’ll keep Yarrow company.”

*Morning is still too far away.*