

25: Srese-as-Relda

Srese fixed Relda's gold-coin-scarf to her head with a couple of anchor dots, and tweaked her curls. "Curls in or out?" she asked Caro.

"Peeping out," Caro said. She tucked a couple of Srese's curls under the scarf. She wore a kaleidoscopically-coloured skirt with a simple black singlet top. "I'm leaving my hair loose. Shall I do your make-up?"

"We'll be late." Srese groaned about the make-up, though she was as keen as anyone on it when it was for a performance.

"That's so not how Relda would've seen it."

"Yeah. Sorry. I wasn't thinking Relda-style."

"They'll be waiting for us, you'll see." Caro studied Srese's appearance, applied mascara and eye-shadow. "Your lashes don't need anything. Cheek-bones are good, too. Here, lip-gloss yourself."

The very ambience in the dining hall hesitated, Srese thought, as people tried to work out what Caro and Srese intended.

Greg winked, and signed his approval from behind the kitchen hatch with his thumb up. Srese found she didn't mind now that he usually distanced himself from her when she was in her crowd. They were an item, he'd given her the freedom to his apartment. She smiled back happy.

One of Relda's workmates, serving the food today, broke the ice. "Bravo, you two. What a fab way to commemorate Relda."

At once everyone else shouted to have the girls sit at their tables. "Srese, eat with us!" "Over here, Caro!"

Their own usual table had the three shrines, Phin's and Zachie's and Relda's. The mini-mon above each place had been installed for the occasion, and cycled through the high points in each of the recent lives. Flowers and other ephemera were piled on each place.

Caro put a nose-gay at Zachie's place.

Srese had folded one of Relda's scarves to be a bird. Phin's place on the table was empty. "It's tough to be blamed for something you maybe didn't plan," Srese said.

"So go ahead. You put something there," Caro said.

"Would Relda have?"

Caro considered. "Yes. Probably. She's got a lot already, so why don't you move yours across?"

All the talk was about the breakfast feast. Mulberries stewed in their juice, pancakes, muffins, choc-mint shakes. Practically whatever you asked for. "And it's the second breakfast, today," one of the boys boasted.

"Oh. Hi, Tye," Caro said. "I didn't know you made it out?"

Maybe Caro sounded a bit too cool? Srese thought.

Osa thought so too, apparently. She sat opposite Caro and had quite a bit to say. "What? I suppose you're blaming Tye for getting out when Zachie didn't! When we're all surprised you made it. Given you were Zachie's latest and, we thought, cleaved to his side?"

“Osa, you should ask the labbies to reconstitute you,” Caro said. “So *you* can be with Zach next time. *I’m* not going to.”

Tye tweaked one of Srese’s curls out from under the scarf. “Relda’s gear really suits you. Wish I’d thought of it.”

Srese smiled, appreciating that he was trying to get the conversation past the awkwardness. Playing along, she looked him up and down. “Mmm. I’m sure we could find an outfit that would suit you.” She glowed in the laughter that followed.

At last Caro patted her stomach. “I couldn’t eat another morsel.”

“Nor me spout another word,” Srese said. “But it was great. Thanks for having me. I had so much catching up to do.”

They and the rest of their group were starting to get up, stacking their plates and taking them to the kitchen hatch, when the hall doors slammed back into their slots. Quinella strutted into the hall, a-glitter in a celebratory costume. She cried, “The Merpeople have arrived!”

Dressed likewise, Quinella’s friend, Fran, followed. She sang and twirled a streamer on a stick. “The women and children, fetched by the brothers, according to the backstory!”

Tye leapt up onto a chair, miming that he had a town-crier scroll in his hands. “Born from sea and thunder, they come out of the waves,” he declaimed pompously.

Using Fran’s shoulder as a support, Quinella climbed up onto another chair. “Nice idea. Though it was just that Gammy needed a few hours with his database to call them into being.”

People applauded her announcement.

Tye wasn’t squashed so easily. “Are they digitised or lab grown?”

Srese and Caro clapped.

“A lot of people died,” Osa said. “There’d be plenty of stuff to grow a couple of dozen new ones.”

“There are more of them than died, *and* they’re bigger than us,” Quinella said.

“Whatever,” Osa said. “At least now the performances can continue!”

The exit from the food hall was briefly jammed as everybody tried to get out first. The mob surged down First Circle, with Srese in the middle, with more people joining at every doorway.

The viewing gallery seethed. Pushed here and there, Srese regretted her exile from the CAVES. Out here she was fighting even for her breath, let alone a turn at a peephole.

Eventually a queue formed at each peephole. Viewers fed nuggets of information to the crowd behind. The peepholes were open for sixty seconds, then blinked shut for ten. The latter apparently considered enough time for viewer changeover.

“Twelve females of all ages.”

“Couple of babies. Aren’t they cute?”

“The women look just like us when we’re wearing scants and skirts.”

“You mean, human?” This piece of wit from someone hanging out at the rear of the queues.

One good thing about the info being shouted for all to hear, was that by the time it was her turn, Srese could gloss the generalities and straightaway search for particulars.

“Grey but. And taller than Ferd.”

“All of them thin. Look at that poor little boy.”

Quinella came to Gammy’s defence. “They’re just thin. Why would Gammy make so many and make them starving?”

“I’ll eat my shirt if Gammy had anything to do with their making,” Tye said.

“You’re such a crow.”

“You’ve obviously never watched a history video about a famine event.”

“Like I said, a crow.”

“Where’d the men be? And the boys?” Osa said

“In the pool in the cave outside the lens,” Srese said. The peephole blinked and she was pushed out of the way.

“Did you see Zoya doing one of her black looks?” That was Tye commenting, next after Osa.

“She’s crazy if she thinks she can still push us around,” Osa said. “When we’ve only been out of the Nest for about fifteen years.”

“If Zoya can hear us, the Seapeople can too,” Srese said. Zoya *was* her care-mother even if she had unreal expectations of people.

“*Mer-people*,” Quinella said. “Although I do think Gammy is off the mark somewhat.”

“You expected tails and long tresses?” Srese said, loading on the irony.

“Yes! And I expected them to *swim* here.” Quinella didn’t appear to be joking. “So I’m thinking that it must be true,” she continued.

“What must be true?” Srese said.

“That Gammy is struggling to hold it all together.” Quinella clapped her hand over her mouth. “That does sound quite seditious, doesn’t it?”

“I think you’ll find they are real people,” Srese said. When next she made it to the front of her line, she studied Zoya standing next to Arno, with her fingers encircling his wrist like she owned him. Srese wished Zoya could see *herself* the way Srese often looked at Srese. Behind her, the discussion shifted. “Gammy can do bio-bots?”

“Well duh, you fool! He has the fixers.”

“But these look like flesh-and-blood.”

“The bio labs grew us.”

“I’m not a bio-bot!”

“*Brp. Brp.*”

“That’s Tye’s histrionic pager,” Osa said, making a neat pun of Tye’s historic call-sound.

“Greg always calls Tye when he wants the boys of his kitchen crew. I bet the Merpeople are hungry. Bye bye boys!”

Tye talked with Greg in the kitchens. “Too bad, Osa. Everyone’s leave is cancelled. We’re all wanted. You too, *Relda!*” He hooked super-sized apostrophes around her supposed name.

Greg offered Srese Relda’s place. “Though not her actual job, Srese. Because Rel was quite an expert. But I do need all the extra pairs of hands I can get.”

Winking is him being my Greg, the rest of it is him being Relda’s and everybody else’s boss.

Greg doled out trays. “Caro, you’ll present your tray to a mother. Srese, you’ll present yours to the one and only girl about your age. She should be easy to pick out of the crowd.”

The first dance was getting the trays ready. A grip-tite tray mat. A couple of types of finger food laid out prettily on a plate. Serviette. Sweet pudding in a bowl, with spoons—big or little depending on the client's age and size. Mugs with choc-mint (the all-time favourite shake) or coffee, the recipient's age again.

Second, they practised the presentation routines. All afternoon. "What do you want, a ballet?" Caro said.

"What I want is no shame due to a dropped tray because you trip over your own feet," Greg said. He'd be taking a yoke, carrying a pot of soup on one end, and a basket with bowls bread and spoons on the other. Dinner for the staff.

When everyone, even Srese, was dressed in formal Food Lab wear—white aprons over navy pants and shirts and navy caps—they lofted their trays and were on their way.

"No audience in the corridors is a bit of a fizzer," Tye said.

"We're still backstage," Greg called. "But watch yourselves anyway."

The boys were at the head of the line because they'd have to negotiate the airlock and the water in between the two sills to reach the pool room, as they insisted on calling the overhang. Their clients were Arno and the kid, the three brothers and four little boys.

Having carefully studied the ground plan, the boys intended to alternate left and right of the pool, twirl the trays on their left hands, whip the covers off the food with their right hands while sliding the trays neatly on the ground by the poolside. In unison. The amount of water spilled while they practised *that*, had to be seen to be believed.

The girls weren't aiming for gymnastics. For one thing, CAVE 3 had several different areas where the women and children might be. Each attendant planned go up to a woman or a child and hand over the tray, or put it onto the ground nearby, if their customer was sitting down.

"Hey, too bad we didn't organise a fanfare!" Tye shouted. He stepped onto the sensory-mat at the entry and the doors slid apart.

Ferd stood there, facing them. The line stopped successively with, fortunately, no domino-style accidents.

"I need Greg to talk through a change of plan," Ferd said.

"Greg." "Greg's wanted." "Greg, Ferd wants you." The boys passed the message down as if Greg couldn't hear every word that Ferd said.

Greg stepped out of the line and started to make his way to the front crab-wise, still bearing the staff's dinner, with the cauldron of soup swinging in front and the basket of bread out behind.

Everyone laughed at what they seemed to think was his act.

He and Ferd stepped around the corner.

"What are they saying, Tye?" Caro said.

"I can only hear Greg going, Right. Right. Right. All right."

Greg appeared back in the doorway without his load. "First. Everything happening in there is being broadcast uncut and as it happens."

Srese didn't cheer with the others. Greg's announcement gave her butterflies in her gut. It seemed to her that it meant that there was disorganisation happening.

“However,” Greg said. “Our performance is cancelled.”

The crew groaned, as if disappointed. “Meaning we get to eat the goodies ourselves?” someone shouted.

“In exchange for which,” Greg raised his voice. “You get to file in and watch the proceedings from along the wall, men to the right and girls to the left, while I conduct the new plan. Srese, I’ll need you first.”

“Not fair,” Osa said. “She’s hardly even one of us.”

“Don’t make me any grief, Osa,” Greg said. “And I won’t make you any.”

Srese so didn’t want to see Greg lose his cool. She looked for the seagirl.