

43. Yonker At Large

The first night Srese ranged all over the wide gully walled both long sides with rock that held the Clay Face camp. Dried camel dung patties and spare camel gear were stored in caves in the rockwall adjacent to the coast. The captives had been marched into the nearest. Which she didn't investigate because of the guard at its entrance. Even with her mask and life-suit in the alive-to-background mode, he would have felt her passing her, the arched doorway that narrow.

She noted how the tents were arranged: four encampments, clusters really, side by side. A communal cook fire between the two middle groups.

The herd grazed at the far end of the gully beyond a smallish fire in the mouth, surrounded with the so-called herdies, both boys and girls, who kept the fire glowing day and night. The herdies chicked each other and told stories as high as the sky. Every so often one of them swarmed up a camel kept just beyond the fire's light and rode off.

< One half an hour has passed. He circles the herd. >

Meaning that the life-suit was telling her that the herdie went to check up on the herd. How do you know, she didn't ask. The big thing for Srese about the herdies was that they didn't wear the masks.

Near to the corner of the rockwall was another fire. This one of only a couple of dung patties. Srese sat down at its inner side, a good place for her to watch for untoward movement from elsewhere in the camp, while the owner of the fire appeared to be hiding in his cloak and groaning and sighing as he scratched around the edges of his mask.

Had to be Kier. He was nowhere else. Finally he said, "Bugger it." He took the clay thing off and rubbed his face thoroughly with both hands.

"My mask gets me that way," Srese said as she had the suit foreground her.

Kier started and slipped *his* back on in almost the same move. "Beezling yonker."

Srese laughed, automatically slipping into her flirting routine. "I'll make mine disappear if you take yours off. I didn't get all that good a look the first time."

Kier resumed fiddling with a memin is what the thing looked like.

"Why all alone, your back to the rest?" she said.

"Because I'm not a herder, and because Joff stole my number, and you're a yonker, and so I'm still not a hunter. I get to sit by myself till we hunt again when maybe I can pass my test then. What do you want?"

"Food. My friends. My freedom," Srese said.

Kier cackled. "You're a yonker, free as a bird, not my responsibility."

“Says who?”

“Kuri-Chief, who is also my mother. She knows every sort of number and their tricks.”

“What’re you doing?” Srese said. It seemed important to keep talking.

“Trying to get this technotic working so my girl Merin and I can still talk sometimes.”

Huh. He has a girl. Why did I even think ... Technotic? “It looks like what we call a memin.”

“How would they even work in all that stone?”

“We couple them to a mainframe.”

“So whoever runs the joint knows everything you do?” He gestured as if to say useless. “We call them cells. They can be traced, a waste of credits. These, the technotics, are coupled one to one.”

I knew that. “What would you’ve traded for Youk?”

“Frippery, because he would’ve been my first number. We use frippery as an excuse to get to know the place.”

“Frippery? Like, celebrate?”

“Frippery like a trance dance, or a genome print-out on my cloak, a brain map if I dare. Next time round comes beauty. Face jobs. A new nose. Hair. Shapely ears.’

How quaint with them wearing the masks all the time.

“Married people save up for IV to get a baby, maybe. People from the great cities have money where we only have trade credits. They buy new arms, legs, face transplants. A different coloured skin, any of the major organs. A new identity. Some want full body transplants. Their wish is rejuvenation.”

She wanted to pick holes in his ideas. How could all that be true?

He went on, seeming to relish telling her the ins-and-outs. “It’s why we love *young* numbers. They are worth their weight in gold. My first number-that-was, we’re all thinking, the way he decked himself out he must have had a bit of foreknowledge.” Kier laughed like Youk’s manner was the funniest thing he’d ever heard.

Srese felt sick.

“Kier.”

Someone coming. The life-suit went alive-to-background.

A couple of men appeared out of the dark, a kettle between them.

Kier had a bowl ready for a dollop of stew, maybe soup.

The men went on to the herdie fire while Kier wiped ashes from a loaf of damper.

Srese couldn't keep her hunger out of her voice. "Dinner *and* breakfast, huh?"

Kier broke off an end and threw it accurately at her invisible self.

"Thanks!"

"Tomorrow we move on. You should go home while you still can," he said, beginning to eat. When she said, see you around, he ignored her.

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At dawn the tents were collapsed and packed onto the backs of some of the camels. By sunup the first of the animals had moved off. The captives, strung out behind the different family's stringers, came last with Kier in attendance to harry them along.

Srese lucky last, with no one except herself to hurry her along. The life-suit mask kept out the dust and the speed was slow and stately. A leisurely stroll.

That night, while she ate some unattended food at the herdy fire, a camel came up to her. Started nosing her in the back of her neck and generally acting like she was one of the camel-caretakers.

Srese gave it a pinch of a damper. The animal nibbled her ear, begging for more. While she fed the big head the rest of the damper, a complete escape plan sprang into her mind. First, she'd need to befriend a couple more of the animals, one for Ahni and one for Youk.

The next day dawned without packing up. The camels were spread far and wide grazing. The vegetation hereabouts certainly looked green and tasty. To camels, anyway. Srese concentrated on making friends with them. But every time she actually climbed up onto one of the animals, to get it used to her, the life-suit grumbled.

< What am I supposed to do about your head? >

I don't know, what's the problem?

The life suit demonstrated with Srese's head swaying bodilessly in the air above the camel, how someone on the ground might see her.

Why do I look like that?

< A head is small. It moves quickly and frequently. It is difficult to guess when and where it will foreground. Against the camel or the land or the sky >

I need a cloak.

Only boys took off their cloaks in the heat of the day. But good thing they did. Srese lay back along *her* camel so that apart from a slightly larger hump, it would look like every other riderless animal in the herd.

All of them pets to someone, the animals freely approached the herders on their mounts at any time to get a treat from the rider, or a friendly kick in the snout to get them out of the way. Other times they'd nuzzle up to the rider's mount.

Socialising camel-style perhaps, Srese thought as she encouraged her mount to sidle towards one of its friends. A cloak swung from a saddle strap. The herder's attention on a story a nearby mate was telling.

Srese gently pulled the cloak down, tucking it off-side between her body and her camel's.

So then she was just another of the herders, with her own clutch of animals to watch, while keeping well away from the others, it went without saying.

All day and all night the herdie took turns circling the herd, edging the animals together, keeping them in a mob.

Srese studied the camp's layout. At this site, each of the primary family's tents had a quarter circle. The Kuri-family next to the Jovats, who were next to the Lartos, who were next to the Marls. Marls had Kuri's as their other neighbours. In the back of each quarter were the *adjunct* families. *Don't know where I heard that but it'll do.* Like, in the Kuri-clan quarter were the healer's clan's tents. *Io-Gran, that's the healer's name.*

She liked it that she knew where everyone was. All the tents faced inwards and shared one central fire. Everyone sat around that fire, each family and adjunct families, in front of their central tents, children by the side of their parents or behind them. The herdie were all together at their fire, barring the one on herd duty. Kier was at his.

Each family's captives were ankle-linked along a common chain, stretched into the four sides of a rectangle. Each corner was held by a staunch old camel, its lead pegged to the ground.

With the lifesuit in full a-to-b mode, Srese shimmied invisibly among the captives. Youk wasn't among them. Nor SannaSister and Niko. These two the Seapeople she'd known the best. If they were still back at the swamp, there was hope for her escape plan. Children weren't chained. Everyone of them in their mothers' arms. She'd definitely need Ahni with her to convince the women to let them go.

The plan zig-zagged through Srese's mind. She couldn't save them all. That was going to be the worst. How to choose.

Breakfast time Srese went back to Kier. "I'll haunt you if you don't give me something to eat." *Never mind if he doesn't. I need an opener, that's all.*

Surprisingly he threw her a chunk of bread.

"What's a yonker?" she said.

“Issue of that rock-eating game master, Yon Kerr. All of you have blond curls, a particular look about you. After the failures, why would the meditechs waste any more of their time on you? It is said that Yon Kerr knew what was being done at the Sink and engineered his avatars so their bodies can’t be re-assigned. Why would we waste food on you? Now get lost. I need to string up the numbers ready for travelling the chasms.”

“Where do you keep Youk?”

“Chained by the latrines, to a rock bigger than he can carry. Kuri-Chief didn’t want him infecting the rest with his big talk.”