

45. From the Frying Pan ...

Srese instructed the life-suit on how to fit her out in a colorful but dusty body-suit. The discussion about colours and patterns went on and on. She swore. *It's you*, she said. *The implant! You're running me to milk me for entertainment. Don't bother denying it. Where's Greg in all this is what I want to know? No one wants me here. I should just come back, make everybody's lives miserable?*

< If you come home, you *will* be mol-decked. That machinery is running 24/7 as this place is vastly over-populated. Embedded among the herders you are doing useful work entertaining the remaining population. The only reason I haven't just let you flounder. >

She had just taken in all that, when the implant started in on maybe the second half of its demands. What it seemed like.

< Your boyfriend has mislaid himself. He's not to be found. I have set the so-called *minions* to search all the habitat-complexes. >

Everything Greg told her flashed through her mind. *Don't dwell on anything*. Her wild glancing for a diversion found Youk. She relaxed. Youk squatted by the rock Kier spoke of and scooped porridge from his bowl with two fingers. She wandered toward him, careful to seem without a care. Outwardly at least.

Youk was a mess. His eyes were red. *Sleeplessness and dust*. He'd remodeled his outfit by tearing a hole in one end to fit over his head, this resembling a sleeveless shirt and tying the rest about him sarong-style. His hair was an unruly mop dusted with red now. Nothing left of the gold. He snarled sideways. "Go away."

"Don't be silly. I've got camels tamed, cloaks, and food. I've just got to figure out a way to free you, and fetch Ahni without anyone seeing us. We'll ride like the wind, join her people at the swamp."

"And then what? Hiding and running? No thanks. I've got a *real* future planned. Though this charade is a little different than how I expected to arrive, I want it kept going. With no *intervention* by you, Srese, because as a *number* my passage into Sink City is taken care of by the Clay Faces."

"They don't want *us*."

"They don't want *you*. And *I've* got no use for you now, either."

Srese couldn't help her woundedness.

"I got the step up I needed when as a kiddie-avatar you loved me so."

"What are you talking about?"

"I was *respected* for the fact I didn't take advantage of you. As if I could've loved the *baby* you were. But me allowing you to love me was a pretty way of rising in the ranks. Where I'm going now that scam obviously isn't going to work. So leave me alone."

Guiding her camel around the waiting herd Srese compared Youk's new version of his life to what was her understanding. The *crush* she'd had on him? He thinks he *engineered* that? *Hmph.*

The animals around her didn't like the opening into the chasm and neither did she. Was she the only one who ever saw history-visios of old disasters such as a flash flood racing through narrow defile?

The path they followed clung halfway up the side of the cliff, though it became slippery as soon as the rain began, and scarier than anything when the trickle in the bottom of the chasm became a raging river.

People fore and aft led their camels, walking like on glass, above the crashing stream. Srese slid off her animal, likewise preferring to lead it and be left on the ledge if it floundered. Fortunately, when the path dipped the river did too.

In fact, the water coiled away into a sinkhole with its surface now so smooth it looked like a great steel column disappearing into the rock. Its speed only visible when a stick or a drowned thing flashed by.

She was tempted only for a second to lean over and look down into the whirlpool to see what she could see. She might even have begun the movement, except that the camel she led—her only friend—brought her to her senses by jerking its head from her deadly intent.

Beyond the whirlpool the chasm-path opened out and became slow broad stair of mounded rubble with plenty of places to stand invisibly and take in the vista. Srese shed the cloak and slid off her camel in one move, then prodded the animal to encourage it to follow its mates.

The scene was so busy with important detail that Srese barely had time to notice that the herd separated into two streams. The animals not carrying tents and luggage headed toward a sandy area near the cliffs. The older beasts pushed gladly into the various sheltered nooks as though they'd arrived home.

The laden animals were led to a central, flat area bordered by a stone wall in front. From the outer end of the wall to the end of the cliffs they had just descended, lay a double wall of old-time ships driven up onto the shore. The track from the bottom of the cliffs narrowed toward a gap in the wall and enclosed the triangle that the herders called the Ship Yard Camp.

She did the once over, to get the global aspect. The old ships were red-brown with rust and decay. The sea beyond them sudsed with white storm caps. Grey sky loomed overhead. The black murk beyond the wall had to be water—because look—the gap in the wall at the end of the track, to the right of the camp, had a jetty sticking out into the murk, with a punt tied up to it.

The murk was a channel then. It had two long narrow platforms perched on columns in the middle—end to end—lengthways to the channel. One platform was green and lush like a jungle with a riot of plants. The other platform looked grey all over and was covered with broken industrial structures.

Beyond the channel a wide swathe of bare ground rumbled up to a distant knot of tall structures something like olden days skyscrapers. Which were inimically grey under the grey sky. *Sink City, finally?* At the base of the probable city? A thin line of green. Gardens and plantations? Which she had seen before, even if the sky in the caves was painted on, and the sunlight was artificial. Not that the sun shone today.

I thought that already, about the sun. Just trying to cheer myself up, you know? She concentrated on the details.

A man had gone to loiter near the gap in the wall, where the jetty was, and once the tents were up, the rest of the men took the captives there. At the end, Kier led Youk separately. Meaning, she still had a chance to talk Youk *out* of his plan and into *hers*.

She looked at her hand and could still see through it, so to say. Just checking I'm still a-to-b, alive-to background, which I am. *Thank you.* She started down to the jetty.

< We are alive-to- ...

Raaaaooooorrr!

Srese stumbled. *The fright!*

Every other sound stopped.

Brutish air-indrawing gasps multiplied to an impossibly loud braying. *Raaaaooooorrr! Braaaaaooorr! Braaaaaooorr! Braaaaaooorr!* The roaring bounced all around her, through her, against the cliffs behind. She couldn't tell where it came from. *Animal? Monster? Thing?*

The roaring became fainter. Then stopped.

Ordinary camp noise resumed. She ran down to the crowd gathered at the gap in the wall.

At the edge of the crowd she concentrated on controlling her breathing and movements, to not be discovered. *Eavesdropping is my primary task.*

"Four strings totaling thirty-three numbers. A good haul except for one thing," someone said. Srese knew them by sight but not name. This one, one of the older men.

"No girls," said someone else. She didn't see who said it.

Six of the captives were pushed into the punt and rowed to the grey platform. And they were *whipped* up a rope ladder because the poor people were reluctant.

Working her way round the crowd, Srese went to lean over the wall to get a closer look at the scene. Chest high to her, wide enough to sit on. But why would you want to with that turgid murky water below?

She raised her gaze. A glowing, white, *body* sat in a tree on the end of the green structure, very near to the end of the grey platform where the captives were beginning to gather to get away from their captors, presumably. The body sat on a branch, or was that rigging? *I don't*

see a head? The body *looked* like it watched every move and checked out every captive. Seeing is *not* believing. Its head must be in shadows!

When all the prisoners had been transferred, a couple of feed bags—stores probably—were loaded into the punt. One man rowed while another threatened the prisoners on the platform with a gun. Who had apparently just realized they were being left within reach of a monster and that the punt was their only chance of escape. Srese looked for Youk in that party but couldn't see him.

As the rower pushed off again with an oar, the gunman motioned to the white thing on the end of the green island. He shouted back at the captives. "He's hungry. Like the crocs, he eats flesh!"

The captives moaned.

Srese heard the words as clearly as captives would've. She looked into the water at the long shadows she'd noticed without realizing. Crocodiles! Her next plan fell into pieces as well as any plans that captives might have been making.

Afterwards, the clay faces loitered. One of them said, "You Marls have a girl still."

"My *grand-daughter*? Not while you Lortas have that Skin-girl!"

The first speaker again. "The Skin-girl is worth more than all the numbers in hand."

"Nothing much's come in due to her."

"Where could her people have gone if not to the swamp?"

"It was like they disappeared into thin air."

"She should be kept isolated. She'll put the wind up any new catch."

Then the first speaker said he'd give the Skin-girl to the woman or man who figured a way to rid them of Great-Grand. Several looked guiltily at the greenery, as though afraid they would be overheard.

Great-Grand! Obviously the monster when he's at home. The escape will have to be tonight, just me and Ahni. Srese turned. Looked at the tents. While she had been busy taming camels and such, she hadn't kept track of what happened with Ahni. Ivy was the woman nursing Ahni, she remembered that. And Ivy was married to Lariat, meaning their tent should be in the Lartos quarter?

The tent she recalled as being Ivy's was nearer the Io-Family tents than the Lartos-Family tents. While the clay faces joined their families at the fire, Srese slipped into Ivy's tent. No Ahni. Not a lot of gear either. One pallet.

A pair of boots, a pair of men's pants and a shirt littered the floor. A saddle and strapping were piled in a corner. Srese took a deep breath. The air smelled hot and sweaty. Not like the friendly sick-room she'd imagined. Dim light.

A man swore entering the tent behind her. He released the flap to have it fall closed. Srese flitted to a corner to stay out of reach. The man took off his mask and flung it onto the bed.

Ah. Lariat, Ivy's partner. And in a temper.

Next Lariat shrugged out of his cloak and boots. Then his shirt. Unbroken stream of curses and grief.

He's going to bed? Help, I've got to get going. She edged toward the doorway.

< Are you listening to him? >

Don't need to. He's upset, his wife has left him, taking all her gear as well as the captive, Srese thought pertly.

< How will you find them? >

Shouldn't be too hard, she couldn't resist thinking. No one to talk to for an age is my trouble. Makes me 'thinkative'.

< So describe your actions that they may entertain your fans. >

Huh. Fans? You seek to reprise a past when entertainments were all that anyone lived for? Srese imagined delivering her words in the honeyed medieval style she and Sard invented for their historical performances. *Me thinks that everyone is honed into what you yourself may deliver. Far far more possibilities of change!*

The implant laughed, sounding like a cackling witch. < You better believe it! I am *change!* I am their *nemesis!* I am their *hubris!* >

Whatever. Srese stopped taking notice. *Rave on, just another mind full of itself.* Mindful that tent-entries always faced into the central social square where everyone gathered for their meals, she hovered in the doorway and glanced back at Lariat.

He'd thrown himself onto the pallet and pulled his cloak over himself. He stared upward, into the Universe. *Bet he's planning mayhem to whoever caused his embarrassment. So slip outside while he's busy?* She slipped round the outside of the tent toward the dark beyond.

< Lucky that man stared where he did. Since your shadow would've been very visible. >

Ouch. Forgot that. Got to watch my shadow.