

46. Caught!

Srese stood invisibly by the back corner of the tent. She noted the three young men standing guard. Kes, Kes's brother Kyle, and Moss.

< They are in perimetering mode. >

What or who are they perimetering? Srese glanced over this part of the encampment. The guards seemed to be forming a triangle round one of the smaller tents.

< So could be where they're keeping a couple of captives? >

Thoughts and plans ran through Srese's mind. *Is that what they think of Ahni? Good! That'll mean she'll want to escape. Let's get out of here!*

Moss turned and looked at one of the others. Srese flitted to her target tent. *Don't like Moss. Always acting like he knows everything best.* She dropped to her hands and knees, then lay on the ground at the base of a tent wall. *I'm on the ground, alive to background please.*

< Get into the tent as quick as you can. Alive-to-background is difficult to maintain in a border area, the ground versus the tent-wall. >

Srese waited impatiently for Moss to turn his head the other way to check on Kes's brother. *Hand under the tent-wall, feeling for gear stashed alongside the wall? Yes, unfortunately.* She crawled round the corner. The man on watch this side? Kes, directly in front. *Which tells me Ahni is right there, other side of tent-wall.*

< Now, while Kes explains himself to Moss. >

Srese lifted the tent wall and rolled under. A wick light glowed on a chest. Ahni was alone in the tent, Srese saw with a wild glance. Asleep on the pallet? Or just resting with her eyes closed? *Wonder where they stashed Ivy? Should I worry?*

< We don't need Ivy. >

No need to get terse. I'm doing the best I can. I need to be visible.

As soon as she was visible, Srese cleared her throat. *Talk about a clichéd entrance.*

Ahni sat up. "Srese! I'm so happy to see you! You came when I wished for you without let up." Her eyes glittered strangely. "A dream came, for you and me to break the bindings on all this world."

Ahni didn't sound well. Srese hardened her resolve. *I'm about to take off the life-suit. Get ready for a new host.*

< What is your plan? >

I really don't enjoy being around a technical entity with attitude.

The implant in the life-suit cackled.

Srese peeled the life-suit's breastplate from her chest. "Ahni listen, we have got to be gone before daylight. I've got camels tamed, cloaks, food." She shouldered out of the life-suit's sleeves and rolled it down her torso. "You'll need to wear this. It knows to be alive-to-background once you've got it on."

"Escape where to, Srese? There is no one at the swamp," Ahni said as though she knew Srese's mind.

"Sit up and I'll help you. Did you hear that awful roaring? They've got something very bad in mind for you. We'll get away then decide where to go."

In answer Ahni took Srese's face between her hands. "Thank you for your love, sister-Srese." She kissed Srese on the head, cheeks and with a chaste friend-kiss, on the lips.

Nice, but no help at all. Srese dropped the leotard-part of the suit at the foot-end of the pallet. She held the breastplate near Ahni, allowing the life-suit to read her figures and shape itself accordingly.

"Yonker?" A fingernail scratched on the outside of the tent-wall beside them.

Srese froze, half dozen thoughts colliding in her mind. *Not now. I'm not ready. Who is that? What can he want?*

"Srese, it's how the dream began," Ahni said. "You must go."

"Dream or not, I'll need to get whoever it is away before we take off," Srese said. "Have you got a spare wrap? Or pants?" She chuckled as if she was calm and collected. "Though naked does feel good."

Ahni passed her a pair of pants and a wrap. She mimed for Srese to wrap it round her breasts.

"Right. A bikini top. Wait here." Srese rolled under the tent wall. It was Kes out there.

"Where's your life suit?" he said.

"Yeah, I took it off." She would have to distract him. "What was all that carry-on last night?"

"That roaring? GreatGrand reminding us of her expectations. Let's go."

"Go where?"

He didn't answer but she followed him away from the tent. He mustn't discover her plan for Ahni.

They arrived at the wall bordering the moat. Intermittent moonlight glinted on the channel. "What expectations?" she said, staring out at the dark islands. Flames leapt from a central point where the captives must be.

“Her usual payment for allowing us, the camels, the numbers, the whole caboodle, to cross the channel.”

“Why is a man with a fine *young* body called *her*?”

Kes blushed. “She went too far having herself transformed.”

As if that makes any sense. Srese took a step leftward.

Relief flitted over Kes’s face like he’d hoped she’d go that way. A surprising suspicion but one which she would have to ignore for now. “Where are we going?” she said again.

“Fetch our stores for tomorrow.”

That’ll be useful, him showing me where to fill up the gaps in my supplies. Would be good if she and Ahni had at least a week’s worth. “Okay, let’s go.”

They strode towards the back of the Kuri-Family tent.

“A shortcut,” Kes said as he politely directed her to walk next to the tent wall, for ducking comfortably under the tent ropes.

The tent wall flapping was all the warning she had of Kes’s perfidy before he pushed her inside. Hands snaked out of the dark and she was caught!

Since struggling was useless, she tried to shrivel them with her tongue.

They—Kes, Kyle and Moss—had her cuffed and hobbled in moments. Kyle gagged her.

“You beauty, Kes,” Kyle said. “This means we’ll cross tomorrow.”