

47. Getting Prepped, for What?

Srese lay where she'd been thrown. With her hands and feet tied, and her yelling mouth gagged, all she could do to get comfortable was to concentrate on getting her breath back.

At the fire outside the tent, the Clay Faces partied for the longest time. With the drumming going on, cheering, probably dancing, what sounded like a competition to see who could shout the most outrageous thing the loudest as well as not being able to let the reason for her capture alone, there was no sleep for Srese.

Around dawn, probably the cursed Kes and Kyle stumbled into the tent. They snored the second they hit their blankets. Loud enough to put paid to any sleep Srese might've been able to sneak in.

Finally, when the sun was high and hitting the tent, someone's grandmother she looked like, came tutting to see Srese. "Dear, dear. What a mix up. I don't know why you needed to be tied so tightly. Look at the grooves in your poor ankles."

Grooves in my ankles? What do I care? "I'm thirsty, you hear?" Her mouth all the way down her gullet felt desert-dry. *I miss the life-suit. Hungry, too.* Though not as much as she was just plain dehydrated. "Water! I need water!"

"Up you get." The old woman stood back, but once Srese had scabbled to her feet, she took Srese's arm. *Like she owns me.* Srese jerked her arm to free herself. The old biddy merely tightened her grip, then forced Srese to walk.

Outside, Srese glanced round fast to get the gist of who-what-where. Near at hand, where she was being steered, a crowd of women round the central fire. Beyond them, the channel sparkled and the green island glowed like a paradise.

Srese blinked with gritty eyelids to adjust her eyes to the light of the day. *The suit used to do that for me.* "Water! I need a drink of water," she groaned.

Everyone at the fire turned and sprang at her. *Like, all-hands-on-deck.* Women cut and snipped at her ties, hanging loose and then gone. At the gag around her neck. At her wrap. *Wait on, you'll have me naked in a sec!*

Then a water-bag approached on a pair of hands held high, and she ignored everything else while she re-hydrated. It was a battle of course. The water-carrier just did not want Srese to guzzle down the whole contents. Srese fought her and finally had the bag in her hands. *Now.* She upended it above her mouth.

The old biddy tore the water-bag from her hands. "Stupid girl! You want to sick up all that good water? You're not wearing your yonker suit now."

Brought her to her senses. *Yeah. True. No. I do not want to sick the whole lot up.* Which put her back into the scene. *Yours truly at the center.* Total chatter, like a bunch of dressmakers back home, measuring and fitting and remarking on her appearance. "Phew, rank is kind." Obviously none of her was up to scratch.

The niceties of home, such as underarm deodorant, had long worn away. And the life suit's twenty-four-hour-a-day protection had confined her body odor rather than stopping it from happening. Her hair was a fall of dull sagging strands. One of the women kept pulling out the curls and seeing how, or how not, they sprang back.

"Forget that," the old woman said. "The yonker has to be cleaned up before we can know her finer points."

A couple of bystanders laughed nervously.

"Looks weren't at the top of my agenda," Srese said tartly.

Not that anyone took any notice. There was a flurrying over by the fire. Stoked up with camel dung patties to heat water, she would never forget the resulting aroma. Or stink, rather.

"Bend over." A woman in an threadbare green frock took a good grip of Srese's hair, and pulled her down before she had the chance to do it herself. Warm water gulped over her head which was followed with a sturdy massage that resulted in a veil of suds. The woman called for the rinse water.

Just then a couple of herdies arrived with their camels scudding to a stop just outside the ring of women. Dust puffed and leapt over everything, resulting in a fiery scolding for the boys, and a dunking for Srese in a bucket of water.

One of the kids was sent scuttling with the camels, Srese saw as her head went into the bucket. When she surfaced and was allowed to kneel up to have her hair toweled, she saw the other handing over a bundle of greenery.

Jeldie—Srese started to see who the women were now—crushed some of the greenery with a mortar and pestle and added the chewed-up mess to another lot of rinse water along with a pack of blond hair extenders. *Hair extenders?*

The rest of the greenery went to someone sitting at the edge of the circle.

"What? Ahni!" Srese seethed with a smother of fury and fear.

Ahni smiled her little smile and made small signs: fingers bunched onto her breastbone, hand scooping words from her mouth, index vaguely in the direction of Srese and spiralling away before rapidly cupping her ear three or four times, like she was pretending to catch a fly. *Talk to you later, Srese. Without all these ears? Could she really have been saying that?*

Srese felt crushed, breathless. *Why didn't Ahni escape? She's wearing a Clay Face party frock? Why not alive-to-background; or why not the life suit at all? And she's just sitting there whatever she's doing. Playing with those sprigs.*

The rinse was ti tree, she smelled. Something they'd never yet used, Srese discovered from the chatter around her. Apparently there was a list. Another detail to the story. She'd have it all soon. In the meantime a pair of women oiled Srese's skin and scraped off the oil-and-dirt once the dirt had softened.

Srese as amazed at the result as anyone.

By then a bath was ready—a hole in the ground, lined with plastic, filled with warm sudsy *well* water—not the stuff the crocs shat in. In spite of her fears and doubts Srese dared to appreciate the luxury. *I mean, how long has it it been that I had a water bath?* While she lounged back, her fingernails and toenails got the going over, one attendant per foot or hand. Each nail was cut, cleaned and filed into shape, oiled and buffed.

“The gold varnish, please.” She acted hoity-toity, like she was playing a role back home.

“No varnish,” said the old biddy, “The Lock Keeper requires the natural look.”

The intake of breath all around should’ve been hardly noticeable. The pregnant silence was immediately filled with clatter and requirements. “Sit still, yonker.” “Don’t make me cut your finger off instead of your nail.” “Your head *so*.”

Except that Srese *had* noticed. She still had excellent hearing. Who was the *Lock Keeper*? Nor was she deaf to silences or so stupid that she didn’t have a few thousand suspicions by now. There had to be a *serious* purpose for all this prettifying. And why *her*? “The rest of the captives would probably appreciate a bath too,” she said. *Pure digging*.

No answer and only the old woman would look her in the eye. “Be a good yonker and hold still when they fix your hair.”

Oh, and Ahni’s green stare bored into Srese.

Ahni has a plan? The intensity of her gaze certainly gives me that impression. Oh for an escape plan from and I don’t know what. A plan, any plan.

“Out.”

Srese stood up in the bath and stepped up out of it.

The women dried her and anointed her with shine and a light dabbing of ti tree scent. A silk cloth was endlessly draped around her form, this way and that, knotted here and pinned there and finally taken away for some woman to stitch.

In the meantime Srese’s nudity was clad with a plain unbleached cloth wrapped sarong-style.

A box was placed behind her. “Sit!”

The women now surrounding her, brought the hair extensions, combs, and pots of paste. They sang, some kind of chant, at the same time as they lengthened and twisted and plaited Srese’s hair—to her elbows at least—with golden curl extensions ending each plait with a twist of the ti-tree Ahni prepared, binding it to the hair with a pinkie’s length of silk thread wrapping.

Srese swung her head from side to side, enjoying the swirling blunted blattle of the ends against one another. “Where’d you get these curls? Very luxurious!”

“Be still, yonker. We don’t want disarrangement,” the old woman said. “These are camel hair extensions.”

A moistened cloth was folded around the plaits. “To keep the sprigs fresh,” the old woman said.

Srese’s stomach grumbled so loudly that Jeldie laughed as she led Srese to a wide part in the stone wall keeping the crocs from the camp. The old woman was there before them, directing someone to cover it with a rug and a couple of cushions.

“All the comforts of home,” Srese said, though she was no longer in the proper repartee mode. The *couch* was directly opposite the green island and quite soon the cannibal was there watching, his pale body headless among the foliage. She was shackled to the wall by one ankle. A second shackle waited below the second cushion.

Now the old woman brought Ahni and shackled her opposite Srese.

Now, finally, the food came. A couple of the women ceremoniously deposited dishes of lentil stew and hot bread between Srese and Ahni.

Too bad I’m not totally starved anymore. “Our own little picnic,” she said. “Are you hungry? What if they’re trying to poison us, Ahni?”

Standing by with her hands folded over her stomach, the old woman’s eyebrows rose. “Why would we wash and dress you, using valuable time, effort and goods, only to kill you?”

“Why indeed,” Srese said, back to her needling work.

“Every bit of work done to make you look beautiful, is a gift. With work and food and silk and oils each family adds its gifts to the main one, which is you. So eat up, yonker.”

“A gift for who?” Srese was the first to look away from that battle of stares. She sure was no match for that old woman. “But still ... I do want to know,” she said to her hands.

As if on cue, the joker in the channel called with indistinguishable words.

Srese’s wild staring did ping pong. *The cannibal. The old woman.*

A haunted expression fled across the old woman’s face.

Srese rocked like she was a returning punching dummy. “Oh right! You’re feeding me up for the cannibal.”

“A bad joke by one of the men delivering food to the numbers,” the old woman said. “The Lock Keeper eats croc flesh and fish, just like everybody else.”

“The kids called him Great Grand, like he is an old Clay Face. Funny I haven’t seen any of the girls he’s already had. If he doesn’t *eat* them, what *does* he do with them?”

“Numbers, not girls. And you are a *yonker*. Not really human. We keep him there, separate from us, because what he did was *also* unnatural.”

Already a prisoner, Srese could laugh and say anything she wanted. Which she did, hysterically. “*And* I overheard the herd-boys saying *Great Grand* had her own head transplanted onto the body of one of her grandsons.”

The women loitering in the background keened.

“Saying I’m not a *girl* like any of yours makes you as unnatural as her and I bet you’re scared he’ll come over on a dark night and take his pick. *That’s* why you make sure to give him any pretty face you can miss.”

The old woman turned to Ahni. “Seagirl, I will see to it personally that you are run through the maze if you upset the *yonker*.”

Srese whinnied with laughter and tears. “Weak as, a threat like that.” She sobered instantly as the women were drawn away by the old woman, and Srese and Ahni were left alone.