

50. Tied Up!

Srese scanned her surroundings. The lock doors had reached the shores, the water between them churned with trapped crocs. A couple of Clay Faces with rifles went balancing along the tops of the stretched-out doors.

Get a grip! The head-and-body went into a doorway on the opposite side of the deck, into what might in the past have been a control room. Windows looking out onto the river. The two walls that she could see of stone kreet. The door stood ajar. She ran there on feather-toes, stopping her rush well before she got there and breathed herself into calm. *Drifted* to the door opening.

The head-and-body hunched in the angle between the windows and the near wall, meaning she could peer to see along the wall. The head crooned while the left hand stroked the braids laying to the left. Reflected in the only window open and angled just-enough, she watched the hands slowly spread a number of little pots of dirt and a few tools over the benchtop. A pair of scissors. A spoon and a similar-sized spatula.

She pinched herself mentally. *Move only your eyes. If I can see the monster reflected, they can see me reflected. But it's an old head. Their eyes can't be that good.* Benches on three sides. Glassware on shelves above. A couple of outlets maybe for water and/or power. Glass windows along the long end, the river beyond them. A nice little laboratory.

“Begin,” said the hairless round skull.

She almost started. *They're not talking to me*, she reminded herself.

The nail-bitten left hand picked up a braid. The manicured right hand pulled at its lower end hanging from the left fist until the braid's binding was between the left hand's index finger and thumb. The ti tree twig stood straight up as a soldier.

The right hand hovered over the scissors apparently lining up its fingers above the scissor grips. Then grappled the fingers into the grips. The hand lifted the implement on the head's encouragement. Spread its fingers and pulled apart the scissor blades.

The left hand placed the twig on the near blade.

The right hand slowly, carefully closed, bringing the scissor blades together.

Snip. The top of the twig fell to the bench.

The head sighed, clamped its lips on the drool threatening to escape.

Srese stepped back, out of sight. Went to stand behind the nearest greenery where a vine climbed the infrastructure and disappeared past the edge of an upper deck. She'd become so completely engrossed in the scene, as in mutely cheering the hands on, and for what? *Out of sympathy for who they'd been and what had happened to them?* She sneered. *They were part of just another Clay Face when they were Ming.*

But interesting that their former handedness might be opposite to what was now required of them. This had to be a right-handed brain running a left-handed body, or vice versa. *Could be important.*

A series of loud bangs startled her enough that the vine's leaves hanging all about her trembled.

Don't stress! It's only the Clay Faces dispatching the wild life! The head-and-body did not come roaring out from his lab. He'd heard the crossing routine before. The twigs are going to take hours to process and luckily—probably—the way things looked—the combo won't find the herb. *And so I'm safe for now.*

She ran silently back to the lab to check on the progress there. In time to see the head patiently instructing the hands in unscrewing a lid from its jar containing a brown stuff, into which the right hand then dipped the bottom end of each twig before poking it into its own little pot. *Seven to go.*

She ran back to the capstan cage. She clambered as near to a clear drop off point as she could. If only a camel came near. She could just drop off onto its back. *If only I'd known to practice that when I had the chance.*

Dead cros were being tidied to the sides of a wide slope of stonework that descended into the divide and ascended out on the rubble-side. A couple of the men spread sand over these ramps, presumably to prevent the camels slipping on algae and/or crocodile guts and gore. *Nobody I know and none of them sympathetic. I need to wait for the people I know.* Out of sheer nerves she clambered back onto the deck proper and went to check on the head-and-body's progress. *Oh no! All the seedlings are planted!*

The combo were trying to fill a spray bottle. The hands totally unhelpful with their left-handed-ness. Out in the channel, she heard young camels braying and complaining as the herdies forced them down the ramps. She hot-footed back to the capstan. Below, the families passed through.

Joff, leading the Jovat-Family, rode up the opposite ramp and out of sight. Srese saw Ahni at the end of the Jovat-string but in front of the rest of the Jovat-prisoners who were on foot. Ahni was like a parcel trussed to her camel with only her eyes free.

Despite the danger, Srese called, "Ahni! Go well!" And blew her a kiss.

Ahni straightened, with her eyes blazing, begging.

Srese mimed her situation with her mouth silently screaming, her body straining to fly. *I'm so scared, Ahni, the head is very terrible.* Entrusting Ahni with the fact Srese had hid from herself.

Ahni closed her eyes and slumped.

Srese saw only that Ahni rejected her. She felt like she'd been wiped away. Made invisible. Negated. She teetered at the edge of the platform, wanting to beg in her turn for ... for ... for what? She didn't know and was too late because Ahni's camel had walked out of sight.

Srese sobbed. If she fell, what did it matter? Without Ahni, or anyone who knew Srese and knew of her courage, what use was it to go on?

“Yonker! Get a grip on yourself!” shouted Kes at the end of the Kuri-Family string. As he passed, he saluted her straight-armed, gun in his fist.

She saw him, but not. She drooped back to the lab. The pots were set into a shallow container. See-through lid. Their own little biosphere. *How can they fail to grow?*

The teak-colored head barely blinked its lash-less eyes and showed no surprise at seeing Srese by the lab door. The hands crushed the trimmings and wiped them over their body. “Astringent but refreshing,” the head said as the hands patted their chest.

The braids still lay on the lab bench. *So don't look there.* But she noted that their wrappings were intact. *So don't expect any sleepiness.*

“We'll go up, now that the nosy parkers are gone,” the head said.

The body hustled close behind Srese, herding her towards the vines next to where a grass-rope ladder disappeared through an overhead hatch. *Huh. Didn't even see that.* “Here?” she said.

The body couldn't resist her apparently, because its hands followed her up, helping and hindering, and invading every part of her. On the upper deck it pressed itself against her and its hands stroked and kneaded her breasts and buttocks.

But it was the head coming closer and closer that dried her throat with fear.

“So, does all this mean sex is the price of my freedom?” she asked to stop the head's forward movement.

The head shouted. “Nooo!”

The body let go of Srese a long moment later.

She fell hard to the deck.

“We need the cuttings with roots before we plant you.”

Which was no explanation, even apart from his mistakes. He must have meant to say ‘them’ ... “before we plant them.” The head-and-body as tired as she was, maybe. Exhaustion was always the time for slips of the tongue and coffee mugs.

“Sleep. we must sleep. Tie her up.”

See? I was right.

“Stay.”

Which she did, because every place she knew here was as good as the next.

The head-and-body came back with a rope, rough and grassy, which the hands fastened around Srese's neck with the knot at the back.

"Sleep," the head ordered her while the body walked away backwards while still straining forwards, and climb reluctantly down the ladder.

Srese relaxed a little. There was a lot to think about but the warmth of the stone kreet soaked sleep into her. She heard the head order the body to the capstan, presumably to restore their kingdom's usual isolation. *A short nap won't hurt. I am so so tired.*

Srese woke about a minute later it felt like, though the light was all wrong for late afternoon. The shadows of the cliffs lay over the platform and the sky was shell pink. Dawn? Then she heard shouting!

"Sleep! We must sleep!"

That was the head shouting? She woke properly, glanced here and there. *Where is he?*

The head-and-body stood on the other side of the next garden bed, the body yearning toward Srese over the distance the head kept them. "Patience, my handsome lover," the head said.

Uuuh. Sick. Referring to your own body that way!

While staring meaningfully at Srese, the head-and-body said, "When the twigs strike we will plant you."

Do they mean that I'll be helping them plant the twigs? All the meaning she could get.

The body pointed to the head's shut eyes before they turned and disappeared among the greenery. Soon after, Srese heard the rhythmic snoring of a man at his well-earned slumbers, leaving her tied up and gasping for water.

Quenching her thirst, therefore, her first consideration. The pole at the head of the garden bed held up a burden of vines and—what do you know—ropes festooned with filled water bottles. Like fruit. *Have to admit it's a good storage system, up off the hot deck and shaded by leaves. How will I get at them?*

The rope around her neck being long enough for her to rise and step up onto the garden bed right beside her, built up from the deck. All she had to do was reach up and loosen a knot for one of the bottles to come tumbling down onto the *bed*. *Luckily with only a small thumpity thump*. She stood still as a stone woman, waiting. Listening. Still the unbroken rhythm of snoring. As she drank, Srese could feel all her thirsty parts taking in the water. *What a cool sensation is that*. And funny how the taste of the water, flat and warm, only mattered once she had quenched her need.

Stop thinking meaningless weasel words. They're OK to stave off the skitters when I can't move a finger to save myself, but not when I need to think things through. Be cool, calm and collected. Getting away has to be done by me. To get info about the scene, I need to be free. Getting free had to be done, by tooth and by claw, by biting through any little stem of grass she could reach with her teeth.

She pulled at the strands to separate them from the main bulk, and chewed and snipped and spat out the ends. Studying everything in the meantime. The bed she was sitting in had stone kreet brockle surrounds, probably salvaged from the deck itself. The soil in the bed was soft with plenty of mulch applied.

Though the farms at home were all inside the caves, she knew the importance of mulch. Impressed upon her both by Phin and Youk. Both of them gardeners by trade. Phin, her first boyfriend. *Youk, the object of her young love and he never cared for me. At all.* She shuddered with grief and fear. *Home is so so far away.*

She blinked away her tears. Thought about the greenery in the bed she sat on. Little grey plants with square stems, long oval leaves. The ones she'd bruised by sitting on had that aroma she associated with Greg's soups and stews. Sage. One of his favorites. Greg, her latest flame. Though she'd hardly had time to do *that* fling justice. Well, that was just about the finish of the rope. Silent feet now as she checked out the place where the snoring was done.

Garden beds marched along the centre of the deck in twos, and where the platform widened, three beds abreast; and were planted with dozens of varieties of every sort of food plant. Red globes of tomatoes; a dozen types of greens; herbs, herbs and herbs; glowing purple eggplants; and vines everywhere with real fruit, most of which she had never seen before. Whatever else he was, the head was also great gardener.

The head-and-body lay on a garden bed with feathery, grey-green plants with pink flowers. A sort of yarrow? *Do not go too close. The "whatever else" is the problem.*

Though none of the Clay Faces said anything concrete in relation to Srese's stay with Great Grand, there had been hints and tricks of speech that could be read in contradictory ways. And the fact that the platform was not wall-to-wall with girls was bound to make anyone suspicious. So yeah, she was extremely suspicious of Great Grand's agenda.

The sun was high now and the shadows of the cliffs had receded. She was starving. The tomatoes were good and fruity but not sustaining. She'd about have to eat the whole crop to kill off the hunger pangs. She needed some real food.

The top deck had only the garden beds with a walkway along the edges, various poles to support the vegetation, and pipes maybe for an irrigation system. The underdeck had the machinery and the lab. Perhaps also a place where the head-and-body hung out during bad weather.

Climbing down the grass ladder, Srese counted up the stuff she had so far learned about Great Grand.

First, the head did not have instant or complete control over the body. There was usually a considerable lag between command and execution. Second, the head had to vocalise

commands. The head himself had explained these problems as an “insufficiency of connections”.

Srese’s experience inclined her to the thought that the Ming-body ran on elemental urges, *freed* from most of the cultural input of a mind, his own or the head’s. *Weird that’s even possible. I’m pretty sure my head/brain/mind has a lot of input into the work of my body.*

Maybe if she gave the body what it wanted, the head would feel so good that she could waltz away? *The lacking connections are a worry. What if the head stays unemotional?* In normal circumstances, she enjoyed fun-and-games as much as anybody if—big if—they were part of a love-thing she had with the boy.

Then there were Great Grand’s confusions, “we must strike the cuttings before we plant *her*” and “when the twigs strike we will plant *you*”. Both times referring to her. Srese desperately wanted to believe they had nothing to do with each other. The first time, Great Grand obviously had meant to say “them”, in reference to the twigs Srese brought him on the ends of her fake braids.

Both Phin and Youk often enough cheered a successful “strike” rate of bits of plants they were interested in. For a twig to “strike” meant it developed roots and leaves and could be “planted on”, meaning on into a larger pot or its eventual permanent position. So that’s what Great Grand was waiting for before he did anything.

The second time he’d looked at her ... like he’d been *sizing her up*. That was it. Srese seized on the words. Sizing her up for what?

Neither Youk and nor Phin had been above a little behind-the-scenes *wrecking* if one of them thought the other was getting up himself. As a result, Srese knew exactly how to slow, and even stop, certain natural processes without evidence of hank-panky.

Stand and listen. Are the head-and-body still snoring?

Down here, it was gloomy and cool despite the advancing day. The folded-in divider doors hung one set on each side along the length of the platform. The gap between them and the under deck probably allowed sun only until about breakfast, and late in the afternoon.

To the right of the ladder were the capstan and pump enclosures. The lab was across the aisle with another room next to it. The door of the lab was a blank slab with a hole at waist height where once there probably was a door knob. A chain ran through, fastening the door to its jamb. The hole still big enough to squizy into the room, and if she rammed her nose flat against the steel, Srese could just see the biodome in the best lit place by the windows.

Oh no! There was already a green haze among the tops of the twigs.

Which have to be the squared-off half leaves magnified by the condensation in the biodome, right? It can’t be that the twigs had struck already? At home that definitely takes longer than one night!

She pushed at the door with her whole left side. *No good.* She pulled the chain and tried to judder the door open. *No good.* She scrambled halfway up the ladder. Listened. *Still safe. For now.* The head still snored.

Don't waste time! Find the plaits! Perhaps that next room? A kitchen. Benches three sides of the room as in the lab, a sink without water dispensers, a cooling shelf with a bowl—she took it down and sniffed—fish and potato salad. *Yum! So hungry!* What else in here? A few jars of condiments, oil and vinegar, a water filter burbling away, powered by she knew not what. A microwave dish cleaner.

No plaits. And none the wiser as to an escape route. Back to the ladder. Three rungs. The young/old geezer still asleep. *So, eat.*

Now what? Have a snooze to be super awake when the head-and-body wake? Where? So-called own garden bed. Because where is there the geezer won't find me in ten seconds?

She lay down. The sage tickled her skin, like insects. Below the profusion of leaves, the actual plants were quite thin on the ground, so she *could* transplant the ones in the middle to the sides. Because it wouldn't do to *anger* anyone with any destructive tendencies. Then dig a couple of comfy hollows with the swing of her shoulders and hips.

Except, underneath were lumps. Srese grinned. *Even in this outlandish place I can be the-princess-and-the-pea. Whatever did the old geezer use to line his garden beds? Old iron? Deck brockle?*

No and no, on both counts.

Bones. The ochrous bowl of a pelvis under her own hips. Birdwing blades under her shoulders. There was even a skull, pushed into an upper angle of the bed, sagey roots growing through its eyeholes. Finger bones like a scatter of white pebbles.

A stillness breathed through Srese's mind though she kept on with her digging. Vertebrae were pulverised among the rubble at the very bottom. The leg bones spreadeagled as though death came when they ...

Srese stood up and gently brushed the dead girl from her skin.

Around her, and the length of the deck, the garden beds glowed with a baroque intensity of colour in the afternoon sun. A burgeoning vine-shaded oasis of lush greens and golds and shadowed purples. When she looked at the whole it shone like a jewel ... But how could she sleep now in any of the beds? How could she even sleep *at all?*

The snoring stopped.

The silence pressed hard until the head snorted.

Time suspended while Srese waited. Her thoughts racketed as frantic as a fly caught between cupped hands.

There, the snores again.

She breathed again, and replanted the bones. She patted down the soil softly between the plants. *Sleep well, girl. I will stop his game, for us all.*