

52. Escape How?

Srese looked longingly at the rubble across the channel. A series of large and smaller stone blocks belted the city in the middle distance. Tent-sized and even bigger. *I'll hide among them till I figure out what next.* Between them she could see a field of smaller stones, more a rubble sort, that stretched all the way to the city. Beyond that a wall that wasn't going anywhere, so tied down it was with cables and chains. *Sink City, I presume.* What she'd heard the herdies call their destination.

Got to get there first.

She narrowed her eyes, thinking. That wall, with its cables and chains holding it together was like a city wall, only so derelict, there would have to be places where she could crawl through. It looked a wall of dereliction—as far as she could see—not even any window frames remained, just square holes. Single and double story buildings. Where streets might've ended between buildings, the spaces were webbed with thick cables.

No problemo, I will find a gap.

“Found you!” The head victorious.

Srese trembled at the body's touch as it ran its warm hand up the outside of her arm.

The head wheedled. “We need to join Yarrow.”

The body fanned out its fingers over her shoulder blade with delicious delicacy. Slid its hand down her arm, clasped her hand.

“I'm not tired,” she said. *No way am I going to lie down with Yarrow.*

The body's hand gripping her like a steel vise and pulling her meant she came, willy nilly, along the central path between the garden beds.

Maybe if she acted totally uninterested. *Not an act. Never been less interested.* Would the head still persist, the gentle being it thought it was? *Think. Think. Other stuff.* Close to the horizon, what she could see of it, the sun cast long narrow fingers of shadow toward the platform which was set in the channel on a northeast southwest axis. The tip of every leaf in every bed sparkled with the gold of that sunset. The deck was smooth with pale sand the head-and-body had scooped from the channel and dried ...

The head addressed her reluctance earnestly. “We need ush to be all three together when we wake. The twigs need to be planted in warm earsh.”

That slur. Surely an effect of the drug? Proof it worked. Proof of its strength. Proof he'd taken it. Proof his weird system would be affected. Been waiting for that. Adrenalin rushing through her body and pushed her most immediate, crippling, fears aside. *This is my chance.* She had to slow time. Give the herb time to be taken up into the body. The only possibility she had left was the girls. “Whose bed is that?” She pointed across the deck. “I see two different plants there.”

“Comfresh bed with Shilli alongside.”

“Two girls in one bed?”

“Ashu and Yarrow will share.”

That increase in slurring had to be due to the herb. Eversleep, Ahni had called it.

The body jiggled and hauled Srese towards itself into a hug.

The head pursed its lips at her. “Kish? Kish?”

Srese strained away. She turned her head aside as far as she could stretch her neck.

The body crushed her to its ribs with one arm, cupped her the back of her head and pressed her head forward so that the head’s mumbling lips could reach.

The head’s soft snail-tongue licked her neck as it searched blindly for her mouth. “Turn her faish. I want her faish,” he ordered petulantly.

Srese gasped. “What about that vine up there?” *Any, any grist to my time-wasting mill.* “I doubt you got that from the Clay Faces?”

Dozens of knobby fruit hung below the heart-shaped leaves.

The head looked up. ‘Oh yesh I did,’ he boasted. “Pick one,” he said to the body.

Without letting go its hug—tighter than tight—the body reached up its right hand for a fruit.

“Collected in the greenlandsh and nurshured all the way here.” The head boasted, “My people hold me in high regard.”

He hardly slurred at all.

“Open the fruit,” he ordered the body.

Instead of releasing Srese, the body squeezed the fruit one-handed until its green flesh bulged from the knobbed skin. The fingers scrabbled among the fruit until the skin dropped to the deck. Then they stuffed the green flesh in the gap between the head and Srese, as if forcing them both to eat.

The head spat and gagged into Srese’s face. “Now why did he do that,” the head said. “He knows we don’t like that fruit.”

One fright after another. The idea that the head might’ve licked her clean followed by the body as a sentient entity ... just when she was getting used to thinking of it as an unprogrammed biot.

Speaking of which, the left hand was at it again, gentling up her body. Was it intending to wipe her face? But surprise, because it ran its fingers up through the hair on the back of her head and pushed her face hard towards the head.

Srese's forehead connected hard with Great Grand's nose. "Ow!"

All the normal physical responses on his part. Groans and grimaces of pain while his eyes watered and blood streamed from his nose. "I'll have your tongue for that," the head burbled through blood and spit.

"Hurt me as much as you," Srese said. "It's your stupid *body*."

The body pressed her head down towards its shoulder. *And it had no eyes and ears of its own. Or a brain.*

The head slurped at his bloody mucus. "A fighter! Never had such a one yet."

They reeled in close embrace between the beds, with Yarrow ahead, Srese struggling to push the body off balance while it shifted its hand-hold to Srese's face, apparently to try and rip off her bottom jaw.

Tears of pain blinded her.

The head bent forward, ran his creeping tongue over her grimace-bared teeth.

Biting it would be too disgusting. A change in their center of gravity about all she had left. She slumped.

Yes! Her sudden weight displacement caught the head-and-body off guard. *They* fell forward, Srese backward. Into Yarrow's bed of soft earth.

Srese shifted her head convulsively to the corner opposite to where she thought she'd encountered the hair. She wanted to be sick, spew all over the head, but the pain of her calves scouring over the deck-brockle bed-sides swept everything else away. Ditto any notion that she could beat the head at his game of using the body.

The head lolled and laughed but the body's hold weakened.

Srese twitched an arm, then a leg, to test the its awareness. Nothing now but a heavy weight and flaccid limbs. She pushed them off her.

The head screamed, "Hold her. Hold her." Pink spittle sprayed uselessly.

She rose to her hands and knees.

The body jerked with undirected intention as if it would rise and still be human.

Srese shuddered with disgust. Climbed to her feet.

"Don't leave me," the head screamed. "I need your humus to fertilize my crops."

Srese burst into a clattering laughter. “Was it a vacancy in the little-god department you filled? Who did you plan to use after you’d finished the girls in this part of the world? Your congregation?”

The head laughed too, winningly. “You have such an interesting mind you constantly surprise me. Come lie beside me and we’ll talk. After all, my crops need no work at least until the moon turns.”

Srese stepped out of the bed. “Your brain is addled. The body is nixed. It can’t get up. I am not staying.”

She climbed down the grass ladder. Should she cut it with the knife she hadn’t found yet?
Give it up and go!

Fortunately, the ladder to the water was at the rubble-end of the under-deck and here’s hoping the crocs spent the night in deep water, asleep. There was quite a gap between the water and the end of the ladder. Hanging from the bottom rung, she pointed her toes to cleave the water.

There was only a tiny tiny splash, hopefully reminding a wakeful croc only of a jumping mullet.

The mud below the water was deep and slippery, meaning she had to drag her legs to get to the ramp, though in the channel proper the mud lessened.

But the water was deeper now. *Help.* She couldn’t swim and the inward flow of the water wanted to have her legs out from under her. She had to keep hopping up for breath. A *silent* breath each time, she didn’t want any crocs to come investigating.

Where the underwater ground sloped up and became the ramp, her feet came down on something alive—yuk—that slid out from under her. She fell. Splashed. Chin deep in crocodile remains. *Forget the keeping quiet!*

She flurried up the ramp. Ran into the rubble to where the ground was dry and no crocodile ever went. *All I want is a hollow to hide in.*

The rubble was a blessed no-man’s land made of giant boulders and moon shadows. The head called and called, his voice slurring more and more but all the melancholy entreaties in the world wouldn’t tempt her back. She was tired beyond thinking and the dust in the center of the dip she’d found was as soft as a feather bed. She slept without dreaming.