

# Getting Dressed for Dinner – A Snippet

By Holly Lisle

In spite of steady writing today, I'm standing at a three-thousand word net loss right at the moment – but I managed to do some very good salvage work on the following scene, changing it from something grim and dark and depressing to something that in places borders on the funny. So I figured I'd share. I'm still plugging along, but this has become a nice, solid scene in **Talyn** that moves the story forward well while at the same time providing a good look at the main character and some of her better idiosyncracies.

It's mostly first draft, and probably rife with screw-ups. Please DON'T copyedit – I don't check my weblog for copyedits, and will catch the screw-ups in my one-pass revision anyway. This is posted just for fun.

from Talyn,

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A servant stood over me, staring down at me, her eyes curiously expressionless and her face a smooth mask. I realized that somewhere in my explorations of the Edge and the Hagedwar, I'd fallen asleep after all.

And that I had kicked off my towels and lay naked atop the

Tonk concubine bed.

How awkward. For both of us.

“My name is Haithe. I’ll be your dresser,” she told me. “Master Skirmig has stepped out on business, and bade me have you dressed appropriately for the meal and such guests as he will be bringing with him.”

She wore the dun-brown of the Feegash serving class, but hers was the face and carriage of an aristocrat. And looking at her, I could only think that she seemed almost not even in the same room with me. Did she consider me so far below her? Or, because I was Tonk, was I not worthy of consideration at all.

No matter, I decided. No matter how I might look from her point of view, from my point of view she was not Tonk.

“I’ve been dressing myself since I was a child,” I said. “And I don’t have any other clothes here but those—” I wrapped myself in one of the towels again, and pointed to my little pile of things stacked on the chair.

She pulled the doors of the armoire open as I was talking, effectively silencing me. It was full of clothes. Dresses. Just dresses. The gowns Skirmig had mentioned – nor had he been joking when he called them gowns. They were lavish creations. Baldachin gleaming with gold and silver threads, dark opalescent silk, light watered silk, astrakhan bodices, angora insets, duvetyn, Norchenn crepe, velvet. Every imaginable color, various styles.

I pulled one out and stared at it. “This is never going to fit me,” I told the girl. Haithe. Her name was Haithe. “This dress was made for someone half as big around the middle as I am.”

Haithe didn’t smile. She said, “There are undergarments for that,” and opened the other armoire. She had understated the case. There were, indeed, undergarments, but they had nothing

in common with my cottons or my light breastbinder. These things had hooks and laces and wires and straps. I'd seen yokes and harnesses for plow horses less complicated.

The idea of a dresser to help me into these things suddenly seemed less ludicrous.

But the dresses still wouldn't fit.

"You should be able to wear any of the dresses hung to the far left to start with," she told me.

I pulled one out. The waist on it looked less ridiculously tiny, but still nothing that I could wear.

She handed me tiny pantlets of black silk covered back and front with rows of black lace and red ribbons. I put them on, thinking them ludicrous. But they were clean. And then I stood there, in silly silk pantlets and nothing else, while she eyed me critically. "Mmmph," she said at last, and while I had not much liked her before, I began to truly dislike her with that cold dismissal. She turned back to the armoire that held the underthings. "We'll have to wax you. But not now; there is no time."

Wax me? I didn't know what she was talking about, but I knew I didn't like the sound of it.

"Waister first," Haithe said, and got out a black silk square with half a dozen straps and buckles on it and hooks and eyes, and two little half-moon shelves at the top, and said, "You'll want to lean against the wall for this, with your back to me. It will give us a bit more leverage."

She wrapped the thing around my waist, and the two shelves shoved my breasts up toward my chin. I felt the steady click, click as she worked her way down a row of hooks, and the thing tightened around me. It felt constricting and I didn't like it. Then she said, "Now we have to do the tightener," and

started hooking the little metal rings attached to the straps onto a big, wooden lever, and she said, "Exhale as hard as you can," and like a fool I did as she told me, and the next thing I knew, she was pulling on the lever and the waister was crushing me and I couldn't breathe. "Not enough," she said, and braced her knee on my tailbone and pulled harder. Then I heard three sharp metallic clicks, and she moved away from me and turned me around, shaking her head. "You have a long way to go. That's just barely good enough – but we should at least be able to get you into the green charmeuse."

I leaned my back against the wall, sipping air in tiny gasps, and said, "This thing is ... awful. Get it ... off me."

"You'll get used to it," she said. "Once you've been wearing it for a while we should be able to get your waist down to half the size it is now."

"My waist ... isn't meant to be ... half the size it is," I told her.

"It's going to have to be if you're going to wear the dresses the master acquired for you."

"He should have ... learned my size –" before he had them made, I was going to say, but then I realized that he had. The Feegash woman at my door had been, if not the dressmaker – for these dresses represented hundreds of hours of combined work each – then at least a dressmaker who had also acted as a buyer. She did not need so much to see my size from the waist down, for the dresses before me had full, floor-length skirts, and so long as she could get a general estimation of my hip size and my height, she would be able to adjust their hang. But she had needed some very specific measurements of me above the waist.

Haithe next helped me into silky stockings of the sort I had torn off Skirmig that time in the barn. These clipped to the waister. After that, she helped me into the dress, and

considering the amount of trouble I was having just breathing, I was grateful for the help.

She put my feet into odd boots – these angled sharply forward with the heel raised much higher than the toe, and like the waister, they laced on. I couldn't bend forward far enough to reach my feet. By Ethebet's sword, I couldn't lean forward far enough to see my feet.

With Haithe kneeling before me, lifting my left leg and putting my foot into the boot, tugging and straining, and then doing the same with the right foot, I felt like a horse being shod. And when she was finished, I stood there wobbling, hobbled by the uncomfortable shoes, and by the breath-stopping waister, and she led me in front of a mirror in the room and I saw myself.

"Who dresses like this?" I blurted, staring at myself in disbelief.

"Feegash women of position," Haithe said, studying me with those flat, uncaring eyes.

My waist had been squeezed ridiculously small, and my face was flushed from pain and lack of air. My breasts poked out the top of the neckline so far that I could see pink silvers of my nipples above the cloth, and the breasts themselves had been shoved close to my collarbones. I lifted the skirt and studied my feet, which were no longer shaped like feet, but like sharp pointed things on the ends of my legs.

Feegash women of position, I decided, were insane.

Haithe did not think herself finished with me yet, though, for she said, "We'll have to do something about your hair. That braid just won't do."

"Don't ... touch ... the braid," I growled.

"It doesn't match the style of the dress, and it looks

hideous," she said. "Barbaric."

"It's religious."

"One of your pagan affectations." She shrugged. "We'll leave it. For tonight, anyway. The Master will want us to do something different with it when he sees it, but we can leave it in place for one night, I suppose. He'll know that I tried to get you to let me fix it."

My warrior's braid wasn't going anywhere. If Skirmig thought to change me so much, I would simply leave.

I thought about how much I loved him, about how beautiful he was, about the feel of his hands on me ...

Well, I probably wouldn't leave. But I wouldn't let him change me, either. I was not some child's doll to be dressed and preened and paraded around in foreign garb.

"Get me out of ... this mess and let me get ... back into my own clothes ... before I die," I said through clenched teeth.

"The Master bade me dress you for dinner and guests, and I have done so," she said, and must have seen in my eyes that my next move was going to be to attempt to kill her, even if then I would have had no one to help me get out of the awful clothing.

"I'm not wearing ... this dress ... to dinner," I said. "I won't be able to eat a thing."

"Women of position eat little," Haithe said. "And you're far too thick through the middle already." She shook her head.

She started to leave, and I grabbed her upper arm, hard. "Where are you going?"

"I have other duties to attend to before the Master returns. You may do as you like until the meal. I'll come for you

then.”

I could do as I liked? I would like to be able to breathe. To be able to walk. I could not believe that any woman would permit herself to be squeezed into such uncomfortable, bizarre clothing. I knew I didn't intend to be again. I could go pick up my own clean clothes from my house; they were comfortable and practical and I had one set of very fine traditional clothing suitable for presentation and events of state. Special beads for my braid, embroidered breeches and overtunic, good-quality paints for my forehead, wonderful jewelry of beads and bone that told my rank and my place within my clan. If they weren't made of silk and lace, that matter not even a little to me. But being able to run – that mattered. Being able to fight, to sit down comfortably, to touch my toes ... “Help me out of this damned dress before you go anywhere.”

She slipped free of my grip, and I lost my balance. I staggered and caught myself, but she was already halfway across the room. “The Master told me to help you dress. He did not give me permission to help you undress. He does not look favorably on that sort of ... initiative.” And with that she turned and hurried away, taking my old clothes with her.

The bitch.

I took a few tottering, hobbled steps after her and realized I couldn't even hope to catch her. I considered my situation. Run? Hah. I couldn't even walk. My feet hurt already, but I couldn't reach them to do anything about the pain. I couldn't sit comfortably – the waister cut into my breathing so much worse when I tried to sit that I thought I would die. I tried to imagine myself wearing this fool's suit while sitting at table with a meal spread before me, making conversation and eating, and if I could have breathed, I would have laughed.

I could not undo the dress on my own because it laced and tied

and buttoned all in the back, could not remove the tightly-laced boots until I could get out of the dress, and couldn't breathe normally or move normally until I'd shed the whole ridiculous outfit.

I rummaged through the twin armoires looking for a single reasonable gown to substitute for that dreadful outfit. Every single dress, and there were eleven of them beside the one I wore, were as bad as the current monstrosity, or worse. I studied the waists of the dresses to the far right, and if I touched my thumbs together and encircled the dress waist, my fingers came close to touching in the front.

Feegash women had apparently learned to exist without eating, breathing, or shitting, but I wasn't Feegash. I was Tonk, and Tonk women ride horses and wield swords and fight like wildcats to defend their children and their men and themselves. And they don't do it while wearing brutal dresses or painful shoes.

I could find nothing among the dresses any better than the ridiculous thing I already wore, so I checked the other armoire. It held bizarre lace and silk and leather breastbinders designed not to bind the breasts at all but to make the damned things stick out like spears, and stacks of pantlets of filmy silk and tanned fur and loose-woven lace and a dozen other things, all of them so tiny I could see no purpose in wearing them at all. Nothing. I found not a single useful item.

I gathered up my own day wear, which no one would consider suitable for greeting guests of high rank. I had nothing else, though, so it would have to do. I could barely reach it. I couldn't get to my boots at all – that would require bending over, and I didn't bend anymore.

No matter. The floors in Skirmig's home were warmer than mine ever got this time of year, warmer than the ones in my parents

drafty loft were when all fourteen of us children dragged ourselves out of bed to my mother's call. I would manage shoeless for a bit.

I hobbled out of the room Skirmig had given me, and made my way past Skirmig's servants, and to a one the bastards scuttled out of my way like sand crabs fleeing a stick before I reached them. Perhaps Haithe had told them they were not to help me, or perhaps Skirmig had instructed them to leave me alone. Either way, however, they made it clear I would get no help from them. So I found my workshop. And closed the door.

And then I looked over the very fine selection of tools Skirmig had placed in the room.

I found metal-cutting shears and good knives. I looked at the wonderful material in the dress I wore, and sighed. It wouldn't go to waste; I'd make sure of that. I could rip the seams and turn it into wonderful Tonk dress clothing, and salvage the beadwork and the embroidered bits as well. But it had just lived its last day as a gown.

I started slicing – from the too-low neck downward through all that beautiful silk. When I'd cut the thing off and shed it, I still couldn't breathe, but I felt lighter. I hadn't realized how heavy all that fine silk was. I disposed of the uncomfortable layered underskirts that hung beneath the dress and made the skirt stick out at the sides and back. One quick flick of the knife through the waistband turned that into a puddle of cloth at my waistband, and when it hit the floor I lost an even heavier burden. I hadn't paid much attention to that thing when Haithe tied it around my waist – I was still in shock from having the waister levered onto me.

And then I was down to the waister. I couldn't hack away at it with the shears – it was too tight against my skin. I couldn't slide the edge of the knife under the fabric and cut away from me, either. I didn't like dragging the blade down the front of

the thing with no certainty of how much pressure would take the blade through the waister, and how much extra pressure would go through both the waister and me. But the waister was going. And I was never putting one on again. I ran the knife down the front of the material once, just hard enough that I could see threads on the surface layer popping apart.

On the second pass, a couple of rips opened – oh, sweet sound, the tearing of fabric under pressure. I got a couple of nicks, too, but I didn't care. I was lightheaded from the exertion, but breathing was in sight.

On the third pass, I sawed at the heavy top, where all the fabric had been reinforced and stitched through multiple times. I went slowly, because I was pressing hard and I didn't want to run myself through when the band gave way.

When it snapped, I sliced myself one more time; in spite of everything, it took me by surprise. But when it snapped, it did so with such force that the tear in the material ripped straight down through the rest of the waister and it fell apart like rotten fruit. And I could breathe again.

I stood there gasping for a moment, dizzy and in pain, with blood running down my belly and anger boiling in my heart. But I had my small victory over Haithe and the rest of the cowardly servants.

I sheared through the reinforced bottom, but that wasn't such a chore. It had flared to make room for my hips, and it was no tighter than normal clothing would be. Bent down and untied the vile boots. Stood barefoot on the floor in the middle of a pile of ruined clothes, naked except for the silly silk pantlets, and reveled in the unalloyed pleasures of being able to breathe freely and move freely.

And Haithe walked in. I was going to have to get a lock for that door if I was to work here.

Her hands flew to her face and she her mouth opened wide, but no sound came out.

I yanked on breeches and tunic, and stood staring at her.

Other servants came racing into the workroom as if summoned, and I wondered if she was making some sound that I could not hear.

They all stared at me, and then the rest of the servants froze in place and their eyes unfocused, and their mouths went wide in that same silent scream.

The hair on the back of my neck stood up, and my skin crawled.

“What in Ethebet’s name—” I muttered, but I reached behind me and grabbed the knife I’d been using off the table, and felt around until I came up with one of the metal-working mallets. The servants outnumbered me badly – five or six were in the workroom with me, including several big men. And that count did not include the ones I could hear shuffling about out in the hall. I had no idea what these people were doing, but I was going to be as well-armed for whatever was coming as I could manage.

And then they stopped doing ... whatever it was they were doing.

No. That doesn’t quite convey the awfulness of that simple act. Let me try again. Their mouths all closed at precisely the same instant, as if they were a choir of exceptional talent led by a choirmaster of tremendous skill, and they had received their cue.

Only there was no choirmaster.

I shivered in the warm air. All of them save Haithe turned away without a word, and left. Haithe said, “My name is Haithe. I’ll be your dresser. Master Skirmig has stepped out on business, and bade me have you dressed appropriately for the meal and such guests as he will be bringing with him.”

I stared at her. "Are you mad? I'm not letting you put me into another of those fool's suits when I had to go through so much trouble to get out of the last one."

"The Master will be upset if you are not appropriately dressed for dinner," she said, as if that were a reasonable explanation, and walked across the workroom and put a hand on my arm as if to lead me back to my own room.

I caught her chin in one hand and tipped her face up so that she was looking directly into my eyes, and I said, "If you do not remove every piece of that awful clothing from my room immediately and send it back to wherever it came from, I am going to burn it. I will never put on another piece of that dreadful stuff. Never. Do you understand me?"

A flicker of something showed in her eyes for the first time. She stared up at me and said, "But the Master wants you to wear them," and for the briefest of instants I thought, Well, fine, then, I suppose I can put up with the discomfort for Skirmig, if it will make him happy.

And then I caught myself.

"Get rid of them. Now," I growled, using the same voice I used during fight training in Shields.

She stared past me, and then with a nod, she turned away and hurried off. I looked behind me. No one was there.

I wasn't enjoying Skirmig's house and hospitality very much. He was wonderful. But his servants were weird and frightening. I didn't like them.

Perhaps I ought to reconsider his request that I move in with him. He could come visit me when he wanted me.

Of course, my house was full of dying Eastils and the healer I'd talked into caring for them, and my tiny house wouldn't offer much privacy.

I left the workroom and hurried to the room Skirmig had prepared for me to get my boots.

I could at least go home again until he and I had a chance to talk about this. I sat on the edge of the bed and pulled them on.

And Skirmig walked into the room, and every rational thought I had fled.

"I can't stay here," I told him. "There's something wrong with your servants."

"I hear you got into a fight with a dress," he said, and his eyes were full of laughter.

"I will never believe that women wear such clothes as those," I told him.

"You'll be meeting a dozen of them at next bell; they've come to meet you and see your work. And I had hoped to introduce you as their equal, my beloved, so that they would be kind to you."

Their equal? My eyebrows rose of their own accord and I said, "These women ... can any one of them ride a horse bareback across an enemy-littered field at a gallop? Can a single one of them fight in Shields, or cast your Hagedwar, or wield a sword, or kill a man with a neat twist of arm over neck?"

"Well, no," he admitted.

"Then they aren't my equal, and perhaps they had best dress as I do and hope I will be kind to them."

Skirmig burst out laughing, picked me up, spun me around as if I were a child, and then kissed me in ways that made it clear that I was not. "Good God, I love you, woman," he said. "For all that your are hell on gifts."

“I am? How?” I asked.

And he said, “That dress cost as much as the –“

And he stopped, and his eyes widened just the tiniest bit, and he said, “– the house you live in.” But that was not what he had been intending to say.

And suddenly I was very curious about what he had almost given away.

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