

17: Ahni, After the Transplant

Ahni dreamed a babble that might be words. “Fundamental issues ... methanol ... sonic echo ... ice-crystals ... orthoclase isobars.” She didn’t know them. She dreamed that the ancestress filled her with foreign words, that it tried to overwrite her own Ahni-mind. “Lettuce crisper ... cytoplasm ... blue-fin steaks ... validation approach.” She dreamed that the implant sipped her blood and learned her. She dreamed she was its new host.

She woke when the sewn edges of the wounds woke also. Or she woke in response to their nerve-cut screaming scrawning pain.

“Ahni, wake up, sweet fingerling.”

She woke maybe then, or maybe later. Someone lay beside her, and them both on a bed-shelf. So, they were in the machinery room. Hands fluttered over her, she didn’t know whose, tweaking her. Bandages, she thought. Bitter honey squeezed into her mouth. She slept again.

Bees flying in the sun stitched a gold silk afternoon. An old woman voice murmured. “Coastal mangroves ... enclosing membrane ... intermittent flux ... hidden seams.” Wherever Ahni dreamed, the voice followed.

A kestrel called. He fluttered lost in the darkness. She was as trammelled as he and could not help him. She tightened her hand around the other hand. Not hers.

The one next to her on the bed-shelf called out husky-voiced. “Orah!”

She remembered how bare feet on the stone floor sounded. Dried seaweed, skittering.

“Lucah. Ahni. Both awake far too soon,” said the person.

“Orah. No more of the sleeping mixture for Ahni. She sleeps too long, too deeply. The mind grows in the meantime. She must be awake to tame it.”

The one next to her on the shelf was the Eldest. The other one’s hands changed the dressings on all the sore places and re-banded them. Ahni went back into sleep. The kestrel fluttered hopelessly among the sharp mountain peaks of an alien planet. The sky there was as pale as sea-spray. A sun silvered the mountains. If she’d known the way, she’d have gone there to be with him.

“Wake up, girl.” The speaker pinched Ahni’s nose shut and Ahni gasped finally for a breath. “Sana, bring the water,” the Eldest said from beside her. “Ahni, you *must* fight the implant while I can still help you.”

“Take a mouthful of water, Ahni,” SanaSister said. “Swirl it round and spit it out. Here’s the dish. Now drink.”

Ahni felt fretful. “The old one is around the corner waiting for me.”

“Don’t think about her,” the Eldest said. “You must be strong every minute, every second of your day. Stronger than I was at the end.”

Ahni felt her lips start to move and her voice make words. “Systemic data gathering ... proven benchmarks ... digital artefacts ... molecular filters.”

“Listen to yourself! She’s taking you already and you are AhniMah’s daughter! Fight her! You cannot let her have her way!”

The kestrel’s cry faded out of her reach. She would need a different distraction. She visualised the Eldest’s left-hand-palm. Silver scar tissue covered the broken on-and-off switch and then ran as a seam to the Eldest’s inner elbow, up to her armpit, along her collarbone, up the column of her neck and in under her hair.

Ahni aimed her right index finger at her own bandaged left-hand palm. Searing pain scalded her hand and frizzled up her arm. She panted fast and shallowly to bear the hurt without crying out. Then, with a trembling, barely touching finger, she traced that path on herself.

Her fingers seemed to feel the twisted cords furrow-laid up her arm, like extra ligaments, through her armpit, up and along her shoulder and around into the back of her neck, making a long, long, flat-sewn track. Beneath the curving seam encircling her head was the edge of the titanium bowl—the implant. Its curves followed the contours of her skull.

“Additional dialects ... faith love hope and charity ... speech annotations ... while storms intensify ... sustained chaos ...” The old thing nattered on and on.

Ahni stopped breathing to stop its words. She counted. How long could she hold it off?

“Hold my hand as tightly as you need to,” the Eldest said.

Just when it seemed she slept again, the Eldest squeezed Ahni’s good hand. “Are you listening?”

“Yes.” Ahni gasped. “Yes, Eldest.”

“With each new host the old mind has to fight the same battle again. Her name is Oriole and she is the implant. She’ll try to hide from you, send you her avatars to deal with.”

The Eldest sucked her shilo’s little fingers for more of the honey-food. “They are Wisa Weatherwoman and Zoe. You’ll know them when you see them. Don’t let them distract you. Talk only *with* Oriole. I mean that, Ahni. Ignore her when she talks *at* you.”

“What I’ve been trying to do.”

“I know. Don’t give up. It gets easier the more you do it.” She squeezed Ahni’s hand again, telling Ahni not to distract her from the work. “When you’ve got a discussion going with her, allow her her talk until you see a gap. Put yourself into it with something I taught you. She’ll stop to listen and there’s your chance to put her away in her own room in your mind.”

The Eldest sipped again. “She’ll try to control you with her avatars. Don’t let on that you know they are all the same entity, but do the same with them. She, or they, shouldn’t be invited out until they’re needed.”

“The way I call up from my mind anything I want to know again?”

“A little like that.” The Eldest made a tired, sucking mouth towards the evershilo.

Ahni helped by lifting the shilo’s hand to the Eldest’s mouth.

“Evolutionary precursor ... blood pressure ... faith and tolerance,” her voice whispered without her will.

The Eldest woke and went on. “The Sisters will want Wisa’s weather forecasts and Zoe’s medical knowledge. The machinery is Oriole’s territory. Dangerous. Allow her to instruct you only with OrahSister present. Oriole will always try to trick you, to force you to tell her things she must not know. Don’t allow her to beguile you. Tell her that we no longer need her stories.”

“Why *not* her stories?” Ahni said.

The Eldest’s grip on Ahni’s hand tightened. “Oriole’s stories are of a time when the world was different. The danger is in the questions that you’d ask to explain the way things were, or her questions of you. If she learned how we live now, she’d try to force you to kill yourself, to ensure the rest die too. If you want to live, you’ll guard yourself against her.”

Ahni lifted herself on her good elbow and stared down at the Eldest. “What about the switch?”

“I’d been a host for a long time by the time the switch broke. I learned how to seem normal.”

“Did you tell the Sisters about it? Did they fix it?”

The Eldest frowned. “I don’t know if the switch was repaired. For both our sakes I couldn’t ask. Do you understand why?”

Ahni dithered. Yes or no. Did she understand?

The Eldest didn’t notice her doubts. With a trembling little smile she said, “I’m glad now that you are my successor. You’re strong. You’ll do well even with a broken switch. Be silent now, there’s more to know.”

The Eldest took a long sip of food, swallowed with difficulty and then breathed deep.

Ahni calmed. The Eldest always breathed deep before starting a tale.

“Once, among the people living together in this tower, there were several strong women. At that time of our people’s beginnings, this tower was used as a place to stay while people came here from elsewhere to learn things about their world.”

“What I was meant to do at the Swamp,” Ahni said.

“Yes. But all of these first-people had homes and families in other places that they would return to at the end of their work.”

Ahni thought she knew the story. “Together they studied the sea and its tides and storms.”

The Eldest’s voice made a small smile but she continued without comment. “On a fine blue-gold day, a sudden chaos consumed the communication machinery of the world. The tower was left as if alone. At first our ancestors refused to believe their situation. Journeys that but wasted their resources were made to try and contact the outside world. No rescuers ever came and only a few of the travelers returned, most often with tales of death and mishap.”

The Eldest stopped to catch her breath.

“In the meantime, at the tower, the women I mentioned had taken charge. Each of them had a store of knowledge about the thing she studied but also about such things as the birthing of babies, the treatment of many ills, the repair of machinery, the preparation of food and the elimination of salt from seawater to make it fit for drinking. They decided that for the small group they were becoming, such knowledge was too precious to lose with a keeper’s passing.”

When she continued again her voice was less.

“The one who was learned in machines recorded their skills and memories and, using one woman’s sights and sounds and feelings, constructed a mesh so that we their descendants can ask it questions and get answers as if from a living person. The thing to carry these recordings, they thought, should be indivisible from its host to prevent our people from forgetting their origins and become un-accepting of such knowledge.”

The Eldest’s voice was so hoarse, so unlike her own, Ahni asked a question just to not hear the labouring breathing. “If it just tells stories of its olden days, how can it harm?”

But the Eldest seemed so used up she could squeeze Ahni’s hand only lightly. “Goodbye, soul daughter,” she whispered.

Her little left-corner-of-the-mouth smile trembled away. Her wrinkles smoothed. The light of the dawn in her sun-struck old eyes receded until there was just her body snoring blank-eyed beside Ahni on the bed-shelf.

Straightaway, the wall to Ahni's left leaned over so far it might squeeze her against the bed-shelf. The Eldest's body on her right crawled with phosphorescent blue maggots.

Ahni tried impossibly to pull away from both, before she realised they must be the implant's plottings.

The implant began one of its litanies, "Terrorist mayhem ... competitive advantage ... brain banking."

Dimly Ahni remembered someone telling her she must contain it. She felt herself too weak, too alone. She let the mind have its way with her voice, "Risk to coastal property ... deep freeze ... whole-of-life costing ..." She let herself drift in the sea of the implant's thoughts.

She woke in a patch of spearmint. She was weeding. The reed beds sang in the sun. Bees stitched the world together. She was surprised that she still knew the place very well. "We're in the Swamp."

A man-sized lizard on his hind feet stumbled towards her and faded before she said or did anything. Again it came, re appearing in the same place. Stumbling towards her. Reaching. Fading. But coming nearer each time.

Ahni laughed and the dream lizard dropped to all fours and became the real, little lizard the Eldest had showed her, a creature no larger than her hand.

A real, warm hand settled on her good shoulder.

"Ahni," said SanaSister. "Be stiff and steady while we lift you."

A whole crowd of bare feet shuffled closer and at least eight hands wedged under her, and scooped her up without intention to hurt, and lay her back down. The Eldest lay suddenly on her left.

"Give me the delta salve someone?" SanaSister said. "It's still the best thing we have for the healing."

She smoothed it over Ahni's wounds.

"Hurry it up, Sana," OrahSister said. "We need to get to Lucah."

SanaSister pulled Ahni's legs across the shelf until they hung over its side. She lifted Ahni upright and slung Ahni's good arm around her shoulders.

"Open your eyes, Ahni. Watch what we're doing."

The floor rushed up to meet Ahni's feet and her soles tingled when they took her weight.

"Try walking," SanaSister said. Her left hand pressed Ahni's hip so hard against her own that Ahni's feet barely touched the floor as they swayed down the slope of the corridor and out into the sun.

"Can I sit on Flat Rock?" Ahni said.

"Certainly can." SanaSister let Ahni sag down bit by bit. To her knees. To her sit-bones.

When she let go, Ahni almost toppled over.

SanaSister grabbed her just in time and helped Ahni lie down and arrange her sewn arm along the edge of the rock.

“Dabble your hand, Little Eldest. The day is sweet.”

Ahni attended to the feel of the rock. Warm and dry. She slid her hand over the side, questing for the water. Low tide. The breeze was so faint that she felt it only below her eyes and along her cheekbones. The sun glowed gold through her eyelids.

A crocodilian maw opened beside her.

She curled her lip at the idiocy of the monster floating beside her, its jaws a-gape, its teeth glistening ... Her hurting hand rested on the warm rock, too sore to press to try to switch off the implant. She dared a short cut. “Am I talking with Zoe?”

The implant laughed as if it had bested her. “Zoe is but a version of me. Her knowledge is only part of what I know. You should take notice. These animals may still be met anywhere in the ...” Ahni pressed her lips together to stop the implant’s use of her.

It continued in her mind. Johnson’s ... Estuarine ... Limpopo ... Komodo ... Ganges ... Nilotic ...

“If any of such still live in this world, I haven’t seen them,” Ahni said. “The Eldest said that there are no such monsters living nearby here.”

I like it that you keep your mind open, the implant thought into her thoughts. My previous host would hear only the knowledge that supported the Sister-story. Here you are, thinking for yourself and already diverging from the party line.

How did I when I told you what the Eldest said? But she felt warm with pleasure for having her good thinking appreciated. Then she felt cold. It meant that the old mind was beguiling her. How easily she’d fallen into the very trap the Eldest had warned her about.

Three women centred in her mind’s eye. The middle one was tall and thin like the Eldest, with bees basting long golden stitches around her head.

The left-most was grey clothed and had grey eyes in a face like weathered rock. Her hair eddied around her like a cloud of soft rain. Like Kira’s hair.

The third woman was sharp featured with a coal-eyed stare and wild long black hair tied back from her face. Like OrahSister except OrahSister kept her hair short, and this one’s mouth was redder than blood unleashed. “Which of my avatars would you like to meet first?” the OrahSister-like woman said.

SanaSister’s voice interrupted the implant’s voice and her shape mingled with Wisa Weatherwoman’s. She crooned to the person she was bringing.

“Here is Kira, Ahni. Needing love and sistering.”

SanaSister helped Kira lie beside Ahni. Tears flooded down Kira’s face. Though they were bound, her breasts leaked milk. Ahni guided Kira’s head and neck to cuddle on her healthy Ahni-arm.

The Weatherwoman slid between Ahni and SanaSister. She made SanaSister seem greyed and distant. She began to recite a list of cloud types. “High clouds consist mainly of ice crystals, and are of three types: Cirrus, Cirrostratus and Cirrocumulus. Watch for these in the southern sky as a warning of a change in weather.”

“Ahni, I looked for you after my Kiral was born,” Kira cried. “We two would have been mother enough for him, one of us always there for him. I told OrahSister you’d want it as much as I did.”

Ahni's lips shaped cloud words. "Alto cumulus and Altostratus are the two middle level clouds. The former consists of white shading into grey ..." The listing went on and on until its accompanying images coalesced to become a picture of the weather woman.

"My Wisa-avatar," said the implant. "You are wise choosing her first."

As the weather woman faded from Ahni's consciousness, a quadrant of her mind seemed to tear from its moorings.

Ahni clutched at Kira not to be sucked backward into the hole.

Kira screamed. "My baby. My baby. Ahni, they took him because he was my first. My perfect little pup. His head is so fine, so round, fitting perfectly under my hand ..."

She cupped her hand above her breasts where her baby would've been put after his birth, to rest and to feel his mother's loving heart. "And then, Ahni, she took Kiral from my arms and he held me so fiercely for a just-born. But still she tore him from me. I let her, I let her have him, because I wouldn't, I couldn't let him be hurt."

"We need to talk," the ancestress said.

Kira needs me, Ahni thought at it.

"There's a cyclone coming."

Kira still sobbed. "No mother is ever allowed to keep her first baby. It's a rule they only tell you when it is your time. RonaMah says that there's always a new shilo to love soon after a first baby. I can't bear it, Ahni. I can't bear it. He's so lovely, so alive."

What is that girl beside you saying? the implant thought at Ahni. About first babies?

She must instantly distract it, Ahni knew. I want to talk to Wisa.

The mind cackled victoriously. "Not Zoe?"

Wisa.

The grey avatar came at Ahni through the Basin, through the water, without getting wet.

Ahni clutched Kira close and addressed the avatar. "I want that bit of my memory back that you took."

The ancestress laughed.

Ahni twitched and clutched. In her imagination she jumped onto the virtual woman and crumpled her into one of the honey-pots she'd made at the swamp. It would serve the avatar right if it became moiled with honey. At the end she prodded her down with a stick. Though Wisa barely had any substance, there was a lot of her. Ahni clapped on the stopper.

Straightaway Zoe was in her fore-mind, laughing the old one's laughter.

Ahni grappled Zoe and pressed her into the second imaginary honey-pot. Zoe was a wispy, skinny entity that didn't take very long at all to fold into her new home.

The ancestress complained. "Why not the avatars?"

Your name or nothing, Ahni thought.

"I am the ancient. The implant. You are merely my newest host. You will fall. I will rule you."

She could not best it yet. She turned her thoughts away and ignored it, which worked some of the time. The afternoon tide had topped the Rock. She almost floated. Her Ahni-arm felt light. "Kira? Kira?"

The implant laughed. As I understand it, there has been an extinguishment of mammalian life in your immediate surroundings.

Ahni screamed. "Kira! Kira!"

The gulls flew up from the cliffs, screeching and calling with her.

Ahni floundered into the upcoming tide. "Sana! Sana!" She searched the water unhandily. "Kira, where are you?" Her foot touched a lifeless something in the water. She lost herself in a screaming wailing outcry.

Someone plunged into the water beside her. *Ahni, first daughter, I have her, my Kira.*

Ahni felt herself lifted in someone's arms and carried to the tower. The leather curtain to OrcahMan's room swished past her head. SanaSister lay her down on the Wife's sleeping platform. She covered Ahni's hot skin with cool damp seaweed.

All through the night, OrcahMan's unpractised voice kept her company. With his wordless lament he offered Ahni a link with reality and helped her be strong against the ancestral mind.

Kira lay cold and still on the tub-wall. Ahni stroked her cheek with the back of her Ahni-fingers.

OrcahMan sat in the tub on Kira's other side. He held out a fish-rib comb. He signed, "Make her beautiful."

Ahni wept while she combed Kira's hair. "I was so trammed I did nothing."

"She awaits me in the waves, sister-friend of my Kira."

"She gave herself to the Deep and I did nothing to stop her."

Talk to me, the implant thought at her.

OrcahMan hummed a swimmer song. "Soon I will join my Kira and she and I will walk together for the rest of time."

Ahni stopped her crying. She and OrcahMan talked alongside one another, he of his loss, she of her guilt. She squeezed the mind gone.

When Kira lay in her full glory, Ahni climbed back onto the Wife's sleeping shelf and buried herself again in the seaweed.

She imagined herself in a story with Kes. She rode behind him and held on tight with her arms around his waist against the rocking lolloping gait of the camel. The ground beneath their animal's feet was rust-red and the domed clumps of spinifex were tipped with green. Insects sang of their partnerings.

The implant laughed.

Ahni kicked the camel's sides so that it stopped. She slid down and let Kes ride away. She wanted him real, not a dream organised by the implant.