

19: Learning the Implant

Ahni sat cross-legged between SanaSister and DesiSister in the Sister circle on the eyrie. They sang of Kira while they wove her a shroud mat. SanaSister started a new verse. “Sleep well, gentle Kira. Always caring.” The circle echoed SanaSister’s words in plainsong.

DesiSister sang next, smoothly passing over Ahni as if she thought Ahni too sad still to remember Kira-as-she-was. “Sleep well, gentle Kira. Steadfast and trusted.”

But it was the implant that kept Ahni from thinking outward. It demanded all her attention.

< And why would I not? I have served a long time. Finally it is my turn to be served. >

How strong you are today, Ahni thought. Perhaps if she admired it, the thing would boast and give her its name.

< Thinking such words will only put me on my guard. Fact is you slept. I fed. You dreamed. I learned. Soon I will know you so well that your body will be mine. Though I will not need your mind, I’ll keep it to >

It sounded so sure. *I won’t let you range free*, Ahni thought angrily.

< Catch me if you can. >

“OrahSister is suspicious,” DesiSister said in a break in the singing. “Her target seems to be the Man’s room.”

The hatch cover lay beside the hatch hole. The sounds and words of an altercation funnelled up the corridor. OrcahMan growled. “Don’t you dare growl at me,” OrahSister said. “I’m your true-sister. Let me in.” OrcahMan growled again. “You need your sleep just like anyone one else. I’ll get in then. See if I don’t.”

RonaSister laughed. “So that’s why OrcahMan has been asking for coffee berries.”

< Find out what is going on that I’m not meant to know about. >

“The implant asks what is going on,” Ahni said. She stared down at the Kira-family-line pattern of the mat, allowing the Sisters to communicate together over her head.

“Stupid girl,” the implant said, using Ahni’s voice. Pain seared through Ahni’s jaw and lodged in a healthy tooth. She groaned.

“What’s it doing to you?” DesiSister said.

“Tooth pain.”

“Have a sprig of bone-mend.” DesiSister passed Ahni the wallet.

Ahni bunched three leaves with some spit and rubbed it over the bad tooth.

The ancestress laughed and the pain increased.

Ahni stuffed the herb under her tongue on that side—it had to do some good—and tried blinking the pain away. She shuffled backward on her sit-bones, out of the circle, and gazed past DesiSister into the Basin.

KiraMah, the only grey-haired mother since AhniMah’s passing, was down there. She had a parcel in her arms, the size of a mat rolled-up small. She walked up to OrahMah and passed her the parcel. OrahMah, a nursing mother, held the parcel—that must be Kira’s baby—to her breast.

Fear-sweat for KiraMah and the babe prickled under Ahni’s arms. She looked away from the drama in the Basin back into the Sister-circle. If only she could think of a way to contain the old mind.

< You haven't the slightest idea of my needs. Even as a bodiless mind I need to exercise my intellectual expertise. I've been so long with only crumbs of new information. I've been tricked back into hibernation too many times. I simply can't bear the thought of another long imprisonment. >

RonaSister asked Ahni the matter by only lifting her eyebrows.

Ahni held her sore arm the way a mother might cradle a baby, the only way she could think of saying what she saw without thinking it in words.

RonaSister nodded.

DesiSister said, "Sing up, girls." She hugged Ahni. "You're a good girl, Ahni. I wish you AhniMah's strength in your trial."

With both RonaSister and DesiSister knowing what Ahni said with gestures, Ahni felt a feather stroke of hope.

OrahSister climbed up through the hatch hole. "Stop that caterwauling. KiraMah has Kira's baby. Them that have milk are nursing it. We cannot miss KiraMah, or I would send her to the Deep along with the child."

"I'll not support you in that project," SanaSister said.

OrahSister's expression became crafty. "Ahni, if I had a headache what would you give me?"

"Powdered chilli to mix with your spit, OrahSister. To rub on the hurting side of your head."

"A fretful child?"

"A spoon of dill water of seeds simmered in water and sieved."

"Why not fennel?"

"The Eldest said dill is better for babies, milder. The rest of us may chew fennel seed to stave off hunger."

"How do you tell them apart?"

"The dill herb has hollow stems."

"Tell me the rhyme for eversleep."

Ahni sang the rhyme. "With furry leaf and tawny stem, eversleep flowers are as purple as the Deep. Pick them with flaggy fingers ere a touch puts you also to sleep."

None of it distracted the implant. "A baby," it said, using Ahni's voice the way she used it herself. "Why would you take a baby from its mother?"

OrahSister thought it was just Ahni she was talking to. "Think! You should know by now that the only way we can live here is by letting many pass on. Newborns are easy to let go, they don't know the difference."

Tears spurted from Ahni's eyes. "But Kiral! Please not Kira's baby!" she cried.

"Who would mother him? I need KiraMah among the Sisters."

"Me! It should have been *Kira* and me. I want to be his mother," Ahni sobbed.

"Host and herbalist, you have enough to do."

Ahni knelt in front of OrahSister and bent her head to the eyrie floor. "Please, OrahSister."

OrahSister drew herself up. "By all means abase yourself to the Will of the Deep. Pray to the Mother for our lives. But give me the wallet before you start."

Ahni scurried to the platform's edge and hung the wallet down the side of the tower. "*I won't support you in that project, either!*"

OrahSister laughed. "You're such a child still." She strode through the circle. One, two long paces.

Ahni dropped the wallet.

"Foolish girl. It is low tide." OrahSister threw words over her shoulder. "Go fetch it, one of you." She grasped Ahni cruelly by her left fore-arm and twisted it in her grip.

Ahni screamed. "My sore arm! Please not my arm, OrahSister!" She could barely sob before the implant took her voice. "I've often admired you for the things you get done," the implant said. "I'm sure you are my descendant. A woman of my line."

OrahSister froze.

The implant continued. "A weather crisis approaches. All personnel should consider themselves on standby. Now is the time for a superlative effort. Information updates follow."

"That isn't Wisa-mind," OrahSister said.

"Well spotted," the implant said. "My Wisa-avatar is not available."

OrahSister shook Ahni. "Why is *she* telling us of the weather?"

Ahni wilted from pain and from OrahSister's staring hate.

"Oriole is loose in your mind?"

"Just as well, don't you think?" the implant said. "The fabric of the tower, its machinery and its people were always my business."

Now OrahSister shook Ahni the way she shook a mat. "The thing will tell you any garbage to keep its freedom!" She pushed Ahni, whimpering from pain, back and back until she hung half over the edge of the platform. "*You'll not survive if I drop you! Look at the sky!*" she shouted. "As blue as a sunny day!"

Ahni screamed. "Every tenth wave is a surge! Down from a twelfth or thirteenth! The gulls have left the cliffs! The sentinels chatter of a great underwater current! If I don't need the stupid implant to tell me the weather, why do you?"

"Lucah was right about you. If only I listened to her," OrahSister said.

SanaSister reached past OrahSister and pulled Ahni back from the edge. "Orah, all the stories say it usually takes a week or more for the new host to learn to control the mind, and Ahni has had it for only a few days yet."

"She's a wilful, bad girl-child." OrahSister pulled Ahni from SanaSister's hands and dragged her to the hatch-hole. "Tell KiraMah I'll be wanting Kira after all."

The rest of the Sisters froze at OrahSister's words. She was so convincing that for a moment Ahni forgot Kira's passing.

"Standing there with mouths hanging open like a school of fish," the implant shouted.

"Where is your common sense? Thunder clouds already at the horizon. Such a storm requires all personnel."

"You hear that?" OrahSister said to the Sisters. "It's the ancestress. Loose in her mind. She must be en-walled until we have time to transplant the thing into Kira."

Ahni scrambled down the ladder, ahead of OrahSister, not wanting to fall by being pushed. OrahSister marched her to the maintenance locker opposite OrcahMan's tub-room. She

pushed Ahni in and wedged shut the rusted steel door. Then she went calling down the corridor, and outside. “Kira! KiraMah!”

Ahni stopped crying to listen. Not much of the clamour in the Basin penetrated the walls. The upset that OrahSister caused, sounded like gulls quarrelling on the cliffs. When the gulls had already left the cliffs. A warm moist wind, such as comes before a storm, crept through the gap under the door and played over Ahni before it dissipated. *At least I was right about the storm coming.*

< How so? When I used it as a diversion? >

Ahni felt strengthened by SanaSister’s reminder that the transplant-operation had been only a few days ago and that it always took a host more than that to pack away the mind. She braced herself for more argument. *Why a diversion?*

< Babies are always better off with their mothers. >

Ahni sobbed. *This is your fault. I was so trammelled by your tricks I could not save his mother.*

< Then who is the woman whose life is forfeit? >

The baby’s grandmother, the same one OrahSister went calling for just now. Expecting to transplant you into her dead daughter.

< I am confused. It’s good we came here. It was always my favourite place to think. >

Ahni’s heart lifted. She would make the idea of the maintenance locker the mind’s home.

< I need explanations. We’ll begin at the beginning. This is the maintenance locker, am I not right? >

Yes, it’s opposite OrcahMan’s tub-room.

< Who is OrcahMan? What is the tub-room? >

OrcahMan is the Man.

< The. Man. In my days we had half a dozen men. How were they lost? >

Ahni gulped. One explanation would lead to another and therefore she could explain nothing. Yet, she couldn’t ignore the implant’s thoughts. How else would she know how to forestall it?

< I cannot recommend actions if I am not clear about the situation. >

Ahni imagined the portents of weather that she saw, listing their images one after the other, never putting them in words. The ancestress did not react. She shrugged for the complex idea of how-will-I-know-what -she-thinks? *Need to test her. How?* Shorthand cryptic thoughts.

Experimentally she stretched out on the locker floor. Reaching out straight-armed past her head, she could touch the ledge where the buckets were stored. Reaching out with her pointed toes, she touched the corner where the whalebone yoke stood. The locker was that length. Sideways the locker was narrow, from her stretched-out-left-elbow to her stretched-out-right-elbow.

< Please explain what you are doing. It is dark in here. I can’t extrapolate meaning from movement by itself. >

Yes! I was right. Ahni groped her way to the ledge where she picked up the buckets.

Transferred them to the other end of the locker and stacked them beside the whalebone yoke. Smiling she perched on the stone ledge and put her ear near a gap there between the stones in the wall. This wall adjacent to the corridor.

< Did I not say that you need to tell me what is happening? >

“I’m putting my ear to the interior wall to try and hear what’s happening.” Telling the implant ordinary stuff, word-pictures of day-to-day happenings, might engross the thing enough to where it didn’t notice the unordinary. “Everyone is coming inside. They’re walking past the locker chattering about the clouds. Bulging black clouds. They are wondering how bad the storm might be. Most of them are going into the mothering room.”

< Very good. I like plenty of detail. >

What Ahni noticed happening now, was that the implant thought into her Ahni-mind, and Ahni replied out loud. *Not sure yet why*. “I can hear the clatter and bang of the shutters being put in the window holes. The Eldest used to tell stories during a storm. A cold draft plays around my ankles.”

< Finally you understand my needs. Continue. >

Ahni pressed herself against the door to feel if there already was wind. “That is a draft thrumming over the old steel of the door.”

A picture of the Eyrie hatch still open fled past her mind’s eye. SanaSister would be so worried about OrahSister’s sickness, that she’d forget to close and fasten the hatch? What if waves topped the tower? Could she close it herself?

She crouched and felt along the bottom edge of the door. There was the chock. Too tightly wedged in to press it out with her thumb or toe. What could she use instead?

< Tell me what we are doing. >

“I am fetching the yoke and setting one of its ends against the wedge. I am pressing down on it to try and loosen the wedge holding the door closed. But the bone bends and I am afraid to break it.”

She set it away again. Who could she ask when the implant was no use at all? If only Niko and Arno were home with the rest of the swimmers.

Straightaway Niko’s voice cried out over black dark storm waves. *When will you come, Ahni?* He sent a picture of him and Arno safe in a cave.

< Who thought that? > The implant’s demand went lost in someone else’s thought.

Tell me, first-daughter.

“It’s OrcahMan,” she said to herself and to the implant. She sent OrcahMan the picture in her mind of the hatch open to wind and water. The implant’s avatar pulled back—that was the feeling in her-Ahni head—as if the avatar crouched in a cave-mouth and calculated through her knowledges to discover who said what.

OrcahMan punched the bottom of the door. The chock slid away. Opening the door for Ahni to step out, he re-wedged it shut—it might slam, was the picture he sent her—before he and Ahni would run up the corridor.

The hatch screeched as if with pain, and tore away. *Boom!*

Seawater sheeted through the hatch and swirled down the corridor. The whole height of the tower shuddered from the impact of a wave. The wall stones shifted and groaned against one another.

OrcahMan grabbed the machinery room door locking-bar but Ahni lost her footing. She slammed through the water onto the stone corridor floor, gulping gulping for air.

< A body-less guest should be lodged in comfort.>

OrcahMan bent and grabbed Ahni's good arm. Pulled her up beside him and shielded her from the next deluge with his head and back.

The basement is flooded? She exclaimed. "The boy-prentices will be swept away!"

Safe with the swimmers, OrcahMan thought. *We can't stay here. Rope?*

"On the back of this door!"

OrcahMan pressed the locking-bar down and pushed hard. The door moved with difficulty. *Machine room awash,* he thought at her. He grabbed the bundle of rope hanging on the inside of the door. Tied one end to a bench leg inside the machine room. Paid out the rope for them to hold onto, against wind and water.

The wind pulled the mothering-room door out of someone's hands and smashed it back into the room.

OrahSister staggered through and was caught up on the rope between Ahni and OrcahMan. "My tower! My tower! Mother-of-the-Deep, save my tower." She prayed and screamed, staring through them. She was lost to the present.

In the mothering room the perpetual candle stuttered, though a child guarded it with her back to the wind, and with her hands cupping the little flame. Beyond her, the Sisters fought to keep their shutters in their window holes. Mothers domed themselves over their children as wind-driven water slashed through the gaps between old steel and worn stones.

OrcahMan beckoned anyone sparing him a glance. *Come. Into the corridor. The central curve. Away from the waves.*

He handed children into the corridor where the swimmers who had come home—Rollo, Orion and Sanit—slowed the force of the water channeling down the corridor slope.

Mothers, and finally also the Sisters, linked together and pushed into the corridor where there was only that one rope, and only the curve of the wall, to cling to while wind and water did their best to tear them loose, and toss them into the flood in the basement.