

20: The Maintenance Locker

The violence eased until most of the water streaming down the corridor was rain-water, though the wind still whistled through the gaps in the walls.

< What's happening? >

Ahni thought words at it the implant. *People are shivering from the cold. Their teeth are chattering.*

< I have a useful story of swimming birds. To protect their eggs, the men of their kind stand in great crowds through storm and wind on the ice of their country all their long winter. >

As Ahni began to tell the story, the Man and the SkinGifted showed their interest with quick alive glances. "At regular intervals, or when the penguins at the windward edge of a crowd get cold, they walk to the leeward edge so that eventually a penguin cold at the edge is a penguin huggy warm in the middle of the crowd."

OrcahMan signed for the boy-prentice at the bottom of the corridor where he sat mostly in water to slither to the top.

A game began that got the sitting-down-and-out-of-the-way ones warm through the time of wind-driven rain while OrcahMan, the Sisters and the mothers, with cries and shouts and ready with their strength, sprang from among them to deflect the falling stones.

< Why the shouting? >

"The stones are falling," Ahni said. The corridor stopped beside the door to the mothering room and all else was gone.

< My tower is breached? You must gather the strongest women and men and the tools from the maintenance locker. Have them meet on the apron straightaway. >

"The wind is dropping," DesiSister said.

"It is but the eye of the storm passing over," the implant said using Ahni's voice. "The calm centre of the swirling air mass."

"Come along everyone," SanaSister said. "There may be some foraging. It sounds to me, Ahni, that you are beginning to learn the trick of managing the thing."

The implant laughed but only *thought* her sarcasm. < How surprised that woman will be when she finds out the truth. >

The Basin was wild with white water that boomed against the cliffs. Only the adults could stand and only in the arch, knee-deep in the backwash, and right by the tower's Basin-side wall. Mothers dazedly fed their children with scraps of sea-death—too freshly killed to have bred illness—caught on stones fallen from the tower.

The wind, when it returned, scoured them with red grit. OrcahMan herded the younger children into his room. And also the SkinGifted, to keep abrasions from their SkinGifts. Gathering the boy-prentices in front of him, OrcahMan and everyone remaining pressed themselves against the remains of the wall and into the angle of the corridor floor.

The wind helps the tower keep us, OrcahMan said into all the minds receptive to his thoughts. It sweeps over the cliffs and down and past the tower and tackles each wave head-on before that water wall smashes into the tower.

Ahni tried to appreciate the wind, but she only felt how it buffeted them and stripped them of their last warmth. Night quickly overcame the thin wet light of the blustering rain.

< Where do the women and children shelter? >

“In the tub-room opposite the maintenance locker,” Ahni said into her hand, trying to warm it with her breath.

< You mean the *cloak* room. >

If it is the same place we think of.

< More respect will go a long way. If everyone accepts my rule without quibbling, we’ll be able to get on. Did I not say I need everyone out on the apron? Fetch the tools ... >

Ahni slid out from between her neighbours fore and aft. She faced upward. Crawled. The gusting wind flattened her to the stones. Water sped over her. Broke against her face. Filled her mouth. She could only breathe in the crook of her arm. All the time she held the words in the forefront of her mind. *Maintenance locker. Maintenance locker.*

The implant prattled on. < Once a Manager always a manager. I am the one with whom the buck stops. I am strong enough for trouble of any kind, the plumbing included. I can’t be half invited, half denied. All, not nothing, was always my motto. ...>

At the end of the corridor, where the machine-room once was, Ahni grasped the broken stones that were the doorstep. Physically, she could go no further. Above her, clouds and storm. The wind jerking and tearing at her.

< I have to have control over my domain. >

Nor mentally. “You are a machine-mind!” she shouted into the wind. “The maintenance locker is where you must live between times! Maintenance locker! Maintenance locker! Maintenance locker!” Wind blew her mouth agape. She wished it could blow the mind right through her.

Something cold ... banded ... her ankle.

Fear sizzled to her heart. She looked back. Nothing that could be seen. Only the dark.

The thing grasping slid its grip to her lower leg. Pulled on her with a smooth waxy hold. Ahni held tighter to the broken-off edge of the corridor. The wet cold hand—she was sure now it was a hand—moved up her leg by stops and starts.

Her fear eased. The hand used Ahni to pull a body up alongside her. It measured out breathing times. Still nothing to see. The hand dragged to her belt, then to her shoulder. Who was it?

SanaSister would’ve talked while she tried pulling Ahni back from the brink. OrcahMan would’ve sent her pictures in her mind. It couldn’t be a storm-goyle.

The someone now lay alongside her. Hands gripped the stony edge beside her hands. Trembling, Ahni reached to the place where she judged the person’s head to be. Under her fingers, she felt short hair plastered to the person’s head. OrahSister.

OrahSister hooked her inner hand through Ahni’s inner arm. She hitched them both nearer the edge.

Ahni shuddered. How would she save herself?

< Where is everybody? I can’t do this all by myself, no matter what kind of manager I am. >

In a fell, swift move Ahni pulled her arm loose from OrahSister’s hold, and pressing her face close to OrahSister’s, she fenced them both in with both her hands. She teetered almost, with one elbow over the edge. “Please help me, OrahSister.”

“Ahni-pearl,” OrahSister said.

“Please help me with the implant mind.”

“The tower is gone.”

“But not the people, Orah,” Ahni said.

“Everything we know is here. How can we walk away?”

< Would that I was imprisoned in this world with at least a stonemason. And if I’d had the choice, we’d have had a couple more men and fewer giggling girlies. >

“Please, OrahSister.”

“On the land we’ll be the breath of scaum, quickly scattered in the heat of the sun. I would rather we walked amongst our sea-goyles, our wild-haired women. Flayed and flensed, their bones twist and turn and twirl down to the Deep.”

Ahni screamed. “What about your children and your grandchildren? And if I am lost, they are too. Unknowing, they’ll walk into the hands of the herders.”

Under her hands, OrahSister rallied. Even her breath was skeptical. “But *you* know what they are?”

“I found Desil’s bones in their temple. SanaSister and I buried him in the swamp.”

OrahSister made herself be stone.

Ahni almost cringed from what she was sure was OrahSister’s sternest glare.

OrahSister struck aside her hands. She clenched Ahni’s head between her own cold hard hands.

Ahni still could not see anything.

OrahSister said, “I see you, Oriole, first mother of the Orah line. I thank you for our lives. Orcah-Man and I are your direct descendants. OrahMah is my daughter and your daughter. Orion is my son and your son. Orny and Orah are my grandchildren and your grandchildren. If they live.”

“Oriole, Science House Caretaker,” the implant said using Ahni’s vocal chords, and mouth and tongue and lips. “I am surprised you made it. I’m told the roads have deteriorated quite considerably. Will you be staying long? There are only dorm beds available, I’m afraid. I’ll be tidying the first floor maintenance locker if you need me.”

Then the ancestress was gone from Ahni’s mind.

She slumped and slept, barely registering that OrahSister pushed herself to her knees, and then to her feet.

OrahSister took a step and then she too was gone.