

### 30: The Trojan Seahorse

Blood trickled down Srese's face.

"You-are-hurt." Ahni shoved the tray from between them with her foot. "I-am-first-aid," she said.

*Ahni can speak without doing the listening thing? And what is she doing now? Ahni kissed the bloody place on Srese's cheek. No. That's her tongue in and around the cut. She's licking the blood from my face?*

Srese watched Ahni digging into the bag she wore diagonally over her shoulder, wet a leaf of something in her mouth and put that, and a pinch of a flock-like substance on Srese's cut. "With-your-fingers. Hold-it," she said, reaching for Srese's left hand and placing her fingers just so.

"I-help-who-else-is-hurt," she said turning toward the airlock, and froze in mid-step.

Srese stared everywhere to see what shocked Ahni.

"Didn't I tell you to hold onto her?" a raspy voice said. Ahni's people sagged away from Ahni as if they're horrified. Ahni—it seemed like—melted bonelessly to her hands and knees. "Back, I said," said the voice. Ahni rose to her feet. "Turn around." Ahni turned.

Her face was the colour of pale clay, her eyes wide and staring. She stepped back to Srese. As if she fought herself doing it, as if she was a piece of hesitant clockwork, she took Srese's free hand and a fistful of Srese's shirt collar. "That's not holding her," the no-longer-so mysterious voice said. It emanated from Ahni herself. Her lips moved while tears rolled down her face. She tightened her grip.

"You're hurting me," Srese said. She pulled down Ahni's stranglehold.

Ahni sobbed. "I-give-you-many-sorries, Srese. The-implant-rules-me."

What she said was preposterous. Yet wasn't it what Ferd suspected?

"Be quiet!" the thing said.

Srese was certain then. The thing admonished Ahni at the same time as Ahni's lips moved. "You're burdened with an Artificial Intelligence," Srese said. She glanced about wildly. Where was everyone?

Greg sorted the scrum near the airlock. He pushed and wrenched at boys carrying roughly re-assembled trays back through the airlock. When they came out—after the shortest time—Greg forced them, and the girls, back into the access corridor.

Seeing Ahni looking wherever Srese looked, with the AI staring out of Ahni's eyes, Srese forced herself to stop. It couldn't be a good idea for the AI to know too much. *But where is the rest of my support team?* She peered about from the corners of her eyes.

A quivering mess called Ferd sat on a nearby rock. Zoya hung onto Arno like she was drowning and he the only one who could save her. *I wish I had someone to hang onto.*

One of the Seapeople strode toward her-and-Ahni. She brandished a knife. Srese's fragile calm deserted her. "Ghulia! Help!" she shouted at Sard's care-mother just then stepping through the airlock, medi-bag in hand. The woman with the knife sprang at Ahni. Srese screamed but Ahni only strained away.

The woman slipped her blade flat between Ahni's shoulder and the bag-strap, upturned the edge of the blade and cut through the strap with a one-two sawing motion. She caught the bag and tacked herself onto the end of the rest of the group climbing through the airlock.

Ahni wailed. “They-leave-me! They-leave-me!” Srese cried sympathetic tears. “Ghulia, please, cut us apart!”

Ghulia didn’t come running to help Srese. She walked toward Ferd. “You were right, Ferd,” she said. “It’s probably an AI gone feral.”

Ferd’s eyes lit up. “Gammy will know what to do. I’ll go and explain. Youk, you’ll be comfortable presiding here?”

“You bet,” Youk said.

The AI in Ahni laughed scathingly. Ahni sobbed.

Srese hugged her with her free hand. “Shh. Shh. We were friends already before this started.” She was furious with Ghulia. And with Ferd. Leaving Youk in charge? How was that going to help? And speaking of the devil ...

Youk inserted himself into the scenario—as he so obviously thought of it—by placing one arm along Ahni’s shoulders and the other along Srese’s. He hugged them both close to him.

Ahni flinched from pain.

“Yes,” Youk said. “Let’s have a look at this arm. She’s got something sewn into her that I suspect was done quite recently. Hydraulics, maybe. She’s probably some kind of robot. We should call this entertainment The Trojan Seahorse.”

“I-am-so-sorry-Srese-friend,” Ahni said. “The-implant-wants-to-be-transferred-into-you.”

Youk laughed. “Hey, that’ll be good!” He shook Ahni, causing her more pain. “I think you and I have the same sense of drama. I will love seeing Srese turned into a better bot than she already is.”

“Youk, please,” Ghulia said. “It’s hardly a joke and not a game at all.”

“Wrong, care-mother of the failed avatar. Ferd left *me* in charge and I say it *is* a game,” Youk said.

Srese yelled for help. “Greg! Greg!”

“Dear me,” Youk said half into Ahni’s ear. “Stick around and you’ll discover that Srese can’t hardly take a joke at all. Dad!” he said at Ferd returning with a bowl in his hand. “They’re like a pair of conjoined twins. Let’s cut them apart.” He released them and scratched a swift cut-line across their arms. “Just about here!”

Ahni panted. Her eyes rolled from side to side. She looked for escape, maybe. Srese knew exactly how she felt. “Ahni. Ahni. Ahni,” she murmured. “Be calm. It’s safer.”

“Move over, son.” Ferd was back in the picture. “Or feed Srese her soup?”

“I’m not hungry.” Srese stared her most baleful glare at Youk.

Which he ignored, of course. “I’m sure she’d like that. It’s quite like old times. Look at her staring, loving me from an impossible position.” He took the bowl and raising it, upended it over her head.

The only good thing was that the soup was only luke-warm. Srese licked her lips. “Not enough salt.” She’d say anything to distract Youk.

It didn’t work. Youk still just did his bird-of-prey thing, staring unblinkingly at his real victim, Ahni. He drank in everything she did, despite that just now she gazed into a distance where she couldn’t be reached and had her lips shut tight. Perhaps hoping to contain the AI.

“Think of the excitement you missed out on,” Youk threw at Ferd. “People love seeing food bandied about in an entertainment. I really don’t understand today’s disorganised so-called ambience? I was just trying to liven things up?”

Ferd gestured ineffectually. “Son!” he said like it was a heart-cry. “You’re gambling with your life!”

Hooding his eyes, Youk stepped away from Ferd’s distress, and from Ahni and Srese.

Ghulia sidled into his place with a handful of flock towelettes. She began to mop soup from Srese and Ahni. “Do you think Ferd, that Youk might not have realised that Gammy is no longer streaming out these events?” She spoke not looking at anyone, and in the third person, the way they’d all learned to around Youk when he was in a spate.

Youk glared. “Why *not* streaming them out now? This was going to be my chance to out-star the avatars.”

Srese giggled. *Oh no! Sheer nerves.*

Youk turned on her. Gathered spit. Made like he stopped himself just in time. He kissed Ahni smack on her horrified mouth. “Thank you!” Then he kissed Srese. “Wouldn’t want you to feel left out. I’ve been planning a really good end for you, Srese. You deserve it. I’ll see about putting it into gear now.”

An unearthly singing began out in the overhang. Ahni sobbed just once. “It-is-the-swimmer-farewell. Sana-Sister-sings-my-Eldest-words.”

Sana-Sister was strong lone voice weaving together all the others, Srese thought.

“They-sing-me-farewell, all-my-names, their-tears-thick-and-unshed. No-time-now-for-crying. I-am-lost-to-them, like-a-SkinTorn-swimmer.” Dry-eyed and stark, as if this was too awful to merely cry about, Ahni collapsed. She hung from Srese as if she begged for mercy, her hands still strong.

“Greg!” Srese yelled.

“KiraMah,” Ahni begged her.

“Kee-ra-mah!” Srese shouted to reach through the airlock.

But Youk was there before any of them. Or he’d been there the whole time. So much was happening, Srese couldn’t keep tabs. Youk hauled Ahni upright. “Up-sa-daisy.” Then, with an evil grin, he released her.

She fell again and this time dragged Srese down with her. “Youk be gone. Youk be gone. Youk be gone,” Srese murmured, intoning a childhood spell.

One of the older women, the one carrying the smallest baby, stepped over the airlock sill. She passed the baby to Arno and came to Ahni.

Youk smiled kindly. “I told you before,” he said to Srese. “Your magic can’t touch me because I’m *real*.”

“Do you always speak with mischief in your mind?” the thing in Ahni said.

Probably Youk didn’t realise it wasn’t Ahni. “Why wouldn’t I?” he said. “Liven the place up. I can’t wait to get with some *real* people.”

Ahni’s friend said, “We-are-real-people.”

Ahni sobbed. “KiraMah.”

The thing in Ahni said, “When I am in charge here, that young man will be the first to be reprocessed.”

Youk laughed but he was the only one.

“Don’t worry, son,” Ferd said. “That’s not going to happen.”

“Hell, I’d like to see it have a go,” Youk said, full of bravado. “I think it will find me no pushover. Even Gammy doesn’t tangle with me. But it’s given me an idea I can work with.” He *ran* the few paces to the crowd at the entry doors.

Srese heaved a sigh of relief, and probably everyone around her too.

“Stand back all,” Royland said, pushing into the group. “Let me see the situation.”

When had he arrived? Minions hovered, if that was possible, at the back of the group. They came with Royland?

Royland prodded Ahni and then turned to his kit.

KiraMah signed at Ghulia.

“What is she saying,” Srese said. “Ahni’s, umm, friend?”

“She asks what is happening and I am telling her,” Ghulia said.

Royland held a hypodermic gadget against Ahni’s hip. “One minute for it to work,” he said.

Youk, over by the entrance, orchestrated the crowd still hanging around. “One. Two. Three. ...”

Ahni’s grip slackened and her hands slid from Srese long before the sixty seconds were counted.

Srese sighed relief and rubbed her hand back to life.

“ ... Fifty-eight. Fifty-nine. Sixty!” Youk and his crowd cheered raucously.

The implant laughed.

*How is that even possible? Ahni is unconscious?*

“Foolish cave-dwellers,” the implant said. “Your AI is corrupted and easily overwritten. Though he has some interesting subroutines I’ll be able to use. I’d like to operate from outside his circuits. If you have a womb-tank facility?”

Royland smiled. “Yes to the womb-tank,” he said. “Yes to the operating theatre. Being set up as we speak.”

Srese narrowed her mind’s eye. It sounded like Royland and Gammy had been getting ready for the same thing that the implant was now demanding. She doubted it was an instance of great-minds-think-alike and so must suspect Ferd’s input, as well.

Greg slid in between the others and pulled at her arm. “Come on, Srese. Time to get you out of here.”

The implant screeched. “Seize and secure that man.”

A *minion* stepped forward and grasped Greg two-handed by Greg’s upper arms.

“I want that girl for my host,” the implant said and Srese forgot to be frightened for Greg.

“Though she’s a healthy baggage,” the implant continued, “And I’m afraid she’ll overcome me, should I transfer into her straightaway. Therefore, I’ll first want to spend a couple of days in the tank. Arrange that, Medic.”

“Yes, my lady.” Royland just about groveled.

“And, I’ll want some of her blood to acclimatize myself to her.”

“Consider it done.” Royland turned to the minion holding Greg. “Let him loose, Six One.”

The minion released Greg, who stepped away smartly, rubbing his arms.

“Out of here, Greg. If you want to live another day.” Royland said.

Greg mouthed things at Srese. See-you-later, was all she caught. He turned his back and left.

*What?* Greg abandoned her without any real protest? Too shocked, she let herself be picked up and laid on a stretcher. She let them strap her down. *Where is Gammy in all this? He wouldn’t allow any of this. It must be part of the entertainment. It don’t believe it’s real. I’ll wake up in my own bed.*

Two more steely grey men strapped Ahni to the second stretcher.

“A shot of calmer, Srese. Coming in.” Royland grinned above her face with all his teeth showing.

“You’ll be the second to be reprocessed,” she said though the feel of the warm fluid travelling through her veins was more welcome than she’d imagined. *My own bed. My own bed.*

Srese’s stretcher-bearers cleared the way by their sheer fearsomeness. Not just Greg faded from their presence. People she had known all her life stepped back as if they didn’t know her.

Youk and his cronies, masked with every Caliban in the dress-up cupboard, waited in the Four Ways. They chanted. “Here she is! Greg loves her to-bits! Get her bits! Skin-skin-skin. Hair-nose-lips.” They plucked at the parts of her while they shouted.

*How I hate Youk. He’s too weird to know. The rest of them’re only his pawns.* But they hurt her, tweaking her nose and her lips. Pulling at her hair. She screamed.

The minions lifted the stretcher towards the ceiling, out of reach of the mob. Sudden thumps, screams of pain not her own, and the crack of bones breaking, told her of the minions kicking into the crowd. *Did I mean for that to happen when I screamed?*

An eye-stinging red smoke filled the corridor.

She didn’t fight the oblivion.