

44. Ahni's Dream

Ahni woke. Did not open her eyes. The dream ... she must not forget the dream! Bigger than any she'd ever dreamed. Who could she talk to? What did it mean? A lot of things in it she never met, didn't know about, never heard of. *The Eldest-that-was might've told me the meanings.* Even if she'd be angry that she hadn't dreamed such a dream. *I miss her. Miss her stories.*

She wept. *I even miss the snippy first-mother-minds in the implant. What would they have said?* She scrubbed the tears from her face and recalled the three minds, and how they behaved. *Which one should she imagine to be? The bee woman? No. It must be Oriole. The Science-House Caretaker. She might've said ... Tell yourself the dream. Don't forget any little detail.*

Ahni told herself the dream, three times over, with mind-words, and mind-pictures, and whispering. *Remember it. Remember it.* She remembered how the minds argued a case amongst themselves. Making that another way of learning. Ahni argued her way through the plan—for that was, what it was—using the implant's three voices.

She trembled at the need to convince Srese to help Ahni. The plan needed them both and Kestrel Herder as well, to save all their three tribes. Srese's people, Ahni's people and Kestrel's people, those that wanted to be saved. But, said the vision, Srese's future is fraught with figures as fearsome as the goyles. *So don't tell her, Oriole-in-Ahni said. This vision is a course of actions that must happen.*

Ahni shuddered. *Oriole? One of the implant's avatar's? How can she be in me? Can I be so hard and not tell a friend of the dangers?* Knowing of these monsters why would anyone, especially Srese, then offer to help to make the dream real? She argued to and fro. To and fro.

"The Seagirl's been sleeping quite a while," said a mature woman's voice. Not Ivy's.

"Do her good. A healing sleep." That one could be Io-Gran, the old lady. "Go check on her," Io-Gran said. "If she's awake, give her a dose of the new medicine. I left it by the fire."

Ahni heard someone walk away. She relaxed herself as if still asleep. Relaxed her face, her eyes. Breathed measuredly.

While Ivy still approached, the tent wall was bunched aside. Bright sunlight shone through Ahni's eyelids, making an orange-pink wall in front of her. She concentrated on not scrunching her eyes.

Ivy made a sound of disagreement.

"Just checking," said the mature voice. "Checking that she's not shamming. She may look like she's asleep, but I don't trust her."

"Io-Gran asked me to care for her," Ivy said. "You said no when she asked you."

"Your own husband doesn't trust her, or you with her, and I don't either. I'm here to look after his interests."

“Lanie, sister of my husband, go talk with Io-Gran. Tell *her* your concerns. Lariat’s interests are for me to deal with, I would’ve thought. Now step out of this annex.”

“You should tweak her nose. Soon tell you if she was awake listening to all this.”

“Having their nose tweaked will wake anybody,” Ivy said exasperated.

Ahni sighed and rolled toward the annex wall, as if she rolled in sleep.

“Nearly woke her. Go away,” Ivy said.

“She’ll cross us all! Mark my words!”

The tent wall fell closed. The usual sounds of tidying began. This was Ivy stealthing around the walls of the tent, shaking out various textiles of her household-goods, refolding and restacking them. Something Ahni had observed her doing several times.

She’s waiting for me to wake? I don’t want more of the medicine. It makes me sleepy. But will I need to cross her? Because I must find Kes. He is the only herder I trust and the only one I can trust to help.

“Sleep well, Seagirl,” Ivy said. “I’ve left a dress out for you. A beautiful sea-blue worked with wavy seams on the front. Call me if you need anything. I’m right outside.” The tent flap swished again.

Ahni peered between her eyelids. Searched the nooks and crannies of the tent. The dress was spread invitingly over a pile of luggage. All this time she’d worn only a tunic. She folded back the quilt and rolled from the pallet. Rested on her hands and knees on the rug beside the bed for her head to clear.

No one called out. No one came running. She rose and side-stepped to where the dress lay. All the herder women and girls wore dresses. Some wore short dresses over long pants and the rest wore skirts down to their shins. This one looked long enough to be shin-length.

How did they even get into them? *What did Ivy say? Wavy seams on the front.* Ahni ran her fingers along the wavy seams going from the neck halfway down the garment. These, when she crawled into the dress, must end up on the front. She flipped the garment over and lifted up the back edge. Put her head in and through the largest hole, and unhandily *ruched* up the skirt until she reached the armholes. Arms through them. *Let it fall around me like a bride’s garment. I belong with Kes.*

She caught up the skirt’s edge and tied it at her waist. Dropped back to her hands and knees. Then explored the rear of the tent’s bottom edges. None were fastened down yet. She stopped in an angle and tried to recall how the tents were arranged at previous camp grounds. Ivy’s people’s tents always stood between the Chief’s family tents to the right and the Lartos family tents to the left. All the tent openings faced into the communal kitchen fire place in the center.

The longer she stayed here the more confused she'd become. *I'll find him by his voice.* With her good arm she lifted the bottom of the canvas tent wall up and over her head. Crawled out. Waited for an outcry. No sound other than that of normal camp life. She glimmer smiled at the absence of nosy little children. All of them at the fires waiting for their dinners.

She listened hard for sounds Kes might make. Rose to her feet and released the skirt's knot. Ghosted along the tent wall. To the right of it another tent. Whose? *Can I hear him yet?* Shook her head. She followed that tent wall to the tent's rear. It curved round. Clashing of metal implements ahead. Too regular and too loud for it to be someone stirring a pot.

Bang. Clash. Clatter. Clash. A young man's tenor laughed. "You keep that up, brother, and I will have you!"

Then Kes laughed. "You wish!"

Ahni walked blindly into the direction of his voice.

Clatter! The wooden practice swords dropped. "Ahni! What are you doing out here?" His arms around her and she was home.

"Get her inside! Here!" His brother, sounding just as shocked, lifted a tent flap.

Another annex. This one no bigger than the one she'd left but with three pallets and assorted goods.

She sobbed, so relieved. "Kes. Kestrel. I am home with you." She held him tight. "A dream to help us escape. I had to find you."

"All right. Ssshhh. Ssshhh. Tell us." He sank down on one of the pallets with her.

"Let me fetch Moss," the brother said.

"Ivy is kind," Ahni said. "Her husband and his sister suspect me."

"Yeah fuck," the brother said. "No need to make more enemies."

"More enemies?" said another man who walked in through the loose tent flap. He saw Ahni and lifted his eyebrows.

"Moss. Please let's not raise a hue and cry," Kes said. He repeated what Ahni said. The dream. Ivy, her husband and his sister.

"Yeah okay. Let me think," Moss said. "Kyle," he said at Kes's brother. "You go beg Ivy for that recipe we've always hankered after. Her lentil stew."

"You kidding me?" Kyle said. "A damned lentil stew?"

"Hers is the best. Tell her that. Bring her here to demo us the herbs. Since you don't know their names. Do you?"

“You’re right. The herbs escape my memory. I just do the pinch of this pinch of that thing. You’ve never complained before,” he added in an injured tone.

“Kyle! Fuck-it,” Moss ground his teeth. “It’s a ploy! Just do it!”

“I was joking, man!” Kyle laughed. “Lighten up!”

Ahni didn’t like Moss’s expression. Fury. “Ivy needs you both,” she said.

Dead silence.

My words did that? “My dream,” she said. Looked at them both, one after the other and back. Shrugged helplessly.

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Kyle sauntered toward where Ivy chatted with Io-Gran at the fire. Cross-legged down in the place where a young husband might sit, behind them but midway between both the ladies. *Wouldn’t that be something, being husband to a woman? Idle thoughts. Never gonna happen. Probably Lariat’s place. If he ever sits in company with the old lady.*

“What?” Io-Gran said.

“Me?” he said. He blurted out his thoughts, different to how he intended to deliver them. “Moss and Kes and I wondered if Ivy could come to our fire and demo the herb mix she uses for her lentil stew.” Red face by the end of it.

“Come nearer,” Io-Gran said. “Where I can see your demeanor.” She patted the place right there between them.

Ivy grinned. She stirred her lentil stew.

Kyle moved to the place the old lady indicated. “Moss is right. Your stew does always smell the best,” he said.

“Your mother and father are worrying at the problem and sent you to fetch me for my thoughts?” Io-Gran said.

Kyle sat back. *Help! I know nothing. What problem?* She might even have heard him swallow. His damned Adam’s apple clattered like a rock sometimes. He looked around hoping not to see any of a number of people who were problem to him, Moss and Kes. People like Lariat. Lanie. Joff. Or even Jeb, who was on and off. *Coast is still clear.*

“Well, help me up. You too, Ivy.”

Moss, what were you thinking? Kyle put his shoulder where Io-Gran could lean on him. Ivy helped on the old lady’s other side.

With a total journey of twenty new-yards, Lariat was in their faces within ten. “Where are you going, woman?” he said to his wife. He gripped her by the arm, started to pull her away. “I want my dinner!”

Ivy shrugged him off and Lariat danced in front of them, puffing up with a righteous rage.

Kyle almost laughed in his face. Could so imagine Kes breaking the fellow’s wrist.

Io-Gran stopped. Kyle and Ivy with her. “Have you taken leave of your senses, young man?” Io-Gran said. “How long have you been married?” She didn’t let him answer. “Two years, I thought. Plenty of time to learn the looks of your family’s cookware. Go serve yourself your dinner. It’s not a wife’s role to run after a *husband!*”

Deflating the man totally, Kyle saw. *So I’m not the only piece of uselessness where husbanding is concerned. Probably what the old lady is saying is Ivy should’ve been running after a kiddie by now.*

After a minute Io-Gran said, “Gone?”

“Took the stewpot away with him,” Ivy said. “Off to his sister’s probably.”

“And you?” Io-Gran said, shaking Kyle’s arm. “What do you mean by partnering the man who should’ve partnered Ivy?”

Kyle leaned back and tossed a lightning glance—make that glare— at Ivy. *But no, not her doing.* She was as red and embarrassed as him. He said what he felt most days lately. “Can still happen. Her and me, we could share him. He’s a feisty ...” He swallowed down all the ways Moss was because they all counted as swearing, and this was Io-Gran after all. “What I mean is, Moss wants everything. Told me we’ll be snatching a kinnie from the rubble to be a proper family, you know?”

They took another miniscule step.

At this rate the journey will take a year.

“And what did *you* say to that?” Io-Gran said.

“Reminded him that we can’t. That we’re not going that way.” *Oh shit. Foot in my mouth.* He tried to get loose from the old woman’s fierce old grip.

“Is that so?” Io-Gran said. She had them take three little steps, like she thought about it. Stood up straighter. “Fine,” she said. “A fine idea. I’m suddenly much happier.” She shook her granddaughter’s arm. “Do you still have the technotic that Egg gave me?”

“The mobile phone,” Ivy said. “Got it in my pocket.”

Kyle glanced her way again. Ivy with stars in her eyes? Ivy with a laugh on her lips? *I have no fucking idea what’s just gone down.*

Jenk met them. “You three on the perimeter,” he said at Kyle. “Nobody, and I mean nobody, disrupts this.”

“Yes, Fa.” *He has to mean Moss Kes and me. Does he know that Ahni is in the annex?*

Jenk showed Io-Gran and Ivy into the annex. *Why not the family tent? Kes and Moss came out. Moss with a red face. Kes frowned. Ahni still in there, with Kuri-Mah, Jenk, Io-Gran and Ivy?*

Moss, already with his embarrassment—if that’s what it was—hidden again, tossed Kyle and Kes their wooden practice swords. He gestured with his head toward the two places he’d picked for them on the perimeter. Like Jenk-Fa gave him the instructions. Moss picked up his staff.

Right. Not the time and place to start a argument and how often is that the case? Right there is Moss, the commander, ready to do serious damage. Kyle shrugged at Kes watching the play between Moss and Kyle. Make that, the play between the commander and his men. Of which you are one, Kestrel-brother. Our commander will soon let you know.

Huh? His brother winked. What does he know? Why does everybody always know more than me? They split. Took the apexes of a large triangle.

Kyle leaned with both hands on the sword. Plenty to think about. He absolutely saw a big bust-up between him and Moss if Moss didn’t start counting Kyle in his plans. *And plans he has. But what if Ivy can make a difference? Try that first?*

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Ahni watched Kes’s mother, Kuri-Chief, spread three clean wraps over the pallets. Then Kuri-Chief welcomed Io-Gran to sit on one and gestured for Ahni and Ivy to sit on the second before seating herself on the third. Kes’s Jenk-Fa stood outside the door-flap with a long staff.

“You first, Io,” Kuri-Chief said.

Io-Gran cackled. “Age before beauty, you mean?”

“Hardly beauty,” Kuri-Chief said. “Both of us with our tattooed faces. You were my chief before I was yours. I see by your expression that you have several concerns.”

“Two pairs of things. While walking the few yards here,” Io-Gran said. “Your eldest son let slip that you may have solved our primary problems one and two, after my son-in-law, Lariat, badly overstepped his marriage contract. Your son opined that a triad marriage might work for both him and Ivy. My granddaughter did not contradict him.”

Kuri-Chief laughed. “That’s my Kyle. Always sharing the good stuff before it sours. He’ll never brew a violent beer!”

“I’m in favour,” Jenk-Fa said from the door-flap. “That Moss-man needs more ties if we’re to take him with us. He’s a damned wanderer, always looking for a more excitement or a new thing.”

“Take him with you where?” Io-Gran said. She tipped her head sideward to the left. “Take Ivy with you where? Never to see her again?”

Kuri-Chief dropped her chin oh so slightly. “You and Egg are welcome,” she said. “But not knowing the grazing conditions there, you are right that we are vetting people for the first push.”

“Egg stayed on the plateau you may have realized,” Io-Gran said. “Why dismantle his cart and machine when we’d rather stay up there, he said. He and I partnered in a family ceremony a number of weeks ago.”

Kes’s parents murmured the same kind of best-wishes Ahni remembered from long ago. Sisters and Mothers murmuring best-wishes to a new Wife.

Io-Gran went on with her story. “Egg and half the Io-Family are camped in that little side slot. If I can leave Ivy safely in your tent, the rest of us can return to the plateau with our worries at rest.”

“Where will you graze your animals?” Jenk-Fa said from the doorway.

“I thought you and yours might’ve gone to Jinker’s Valley. When you didn’t ...” she trailed off.

“That’s good,” Jenk-Fa said. “I like that good people are going there. You’re not rapacious. I can believe that you’ll care for the plants and animals. Might need to convince Joff when he discovers it?”

Io-Gran chuckled. “That man! He’ll be torn three-ways on what to do. Follow us. Follow you. Or ... Egg encouraged him to apply for Egg’s former position. Dome Boss. I think that will please him best.”

“Two of *our* concerns gone before we even started to brain-storm them,” Kuri-Chief said.

“Staying for the wedding, Io-Gran?” Jenk-Fa said.

“You should hold off on the wedding. Give my girl the chance to court the third partner. He probably should stay ignorant of what’s been decided. Help me up, Kuri-Chief. You too, Jenk.”

Ivy pulled Ahni up by her good hand. “They want to talk secrets,” she whispered. “Let’s go outside.”

“Not to your camp?” Ahni said.

Ivy shook her head. Smiled. “I can smell a stew in trouble. Let’s fix up this dinner.”