

*Boom! Boom! Boom!* Every mask in the corridor turned toward a dark doorway at the end of the corridor between the scaffolding decorations on a couple of booths, and went to him like bees to a honey pot. Her arms held by Lewit and Jeldie, Ahni must follow them into the throat of the throbbing strobing monster.

Lewit and Jeldie led her forward further into a vast monstrous gut and perhaps they said something—she didn't hear what they said if they did—and slid their hands from her arms and she was alone in the smoky dark and in the silence between drumbeats.

Kestrel's hand hovered on her back and he was gone too. *Boom! Boom! Boom!* Jeldie re-appeared, moved her mouth, and was gone again. Inside the giant mouth Ahni with her eyes wild, saw no sky. There were only blue and pink airs as thick as smoke roiling above all the masks up-turned, smelling like acid biting the inner membranes of her nose. The booming stopped all else.

Th3n she recognised it as a drumming. A monstrous drumming that began without any warming up such as of a Sister-drummer's touch on the ManSkin drum of home, that started with soft taps and ruffles. This one reached a steady, unchanging rhythm with the second smack of its fist on a very great skin.

The drum must be the size of a tower with a hand beating on it that was the size of the limb of a jonah-eater—servant of the Deep--so big he might live only on an ocean floor. *How did he come here*, said a fragment-of-mind from a deep part of Ahni-self.

A voice belched out sound, greater than she-Ahni could grapple, and which ran up and down every scale and tone. She-Ahni hearkened back to the earlier child-of-her-mother, when she was younger and then very young. The great voice made like it sang. In Ahni's baby years one of the Sister's it was said, roared behind the door while the Sister-drummer told a story of the jonah-eater. To her Ahni-ears now this great voice, this bellowing, brawling, roaring cacophony streamed from the mouth of the jonah-eater come up onto the land. Everything throbbed, even the floor under her which-waying feet.

The jonah-eater's braying was louder than the fiercest wind or the tallest waves that ever came at the Seatower. So loud, Ahni's human heart labored to keep to its own rhythm. So heavy, it bent down her Ahni-memories of plainsong and the beat of a Sister-hand on the ManSkin drum. It beat down even the Sister growling behind the door to the mothering room.

But finally and even while she still fought the jonah-eater's frightful advances, she began to notice a straight-upstanding column of bright air roving between the strobes of other light, and resting sometimes on the different ones of the jonah-eater's human prey. Once she saw Jeb in that light, stamping and gyrating without let up, his clothes fanning out like the frills of a jelly fish..

The jonah-eater's stridor was like the tympany of cicadas, never breathing, never stopping as long as the sun lit the world, but so so much louder. Like the cicadas, its pattern never varied. Like the cicadas legs, his hand never tired.

The light tsettled over Jedic-and-Lewit, dancing without their masks and without almost all their clothes. One platinum skinned, the other gold, they wove in and out of the light, their two fierce bodies often almost joined, their sweat-filmed skin glittering each time a strobe flick-flacked out of elsewhere to take the smooth out of their movements while they slowed and sped again straight after it.

Then the light column neared her, so so near.

And she dropped to the dark dusty floor, and grovelled and cringed away from the searing bright. As she spreadeagled, the beam domed and transfigured and burst like a boil from the side of the jonah-eater's belly.

Ahni exulted, almost slid, then desperately held on. To the floor or to the dome, she couldn't tell. She saw the real stars—she thought—at the same time that she felt a splintery wooden floor under her. She couldn't allow it to matter because where the dome had struts but no cladding, she-Ahni looked down into the land of the future, the rhythm of the drumming still in it and its regions still melding, moving closer, pulsing with each monstrous beat until they locked together and were whole.

Red sand and blue sky reflected in water. Green lands, leaves and stems, stone and roofs. The great cities with gardens on every rooftop and rivers instead of streets. She rejoiced in the perfection of each animal in its range. Each being in its home. Each creature in its place. Out of the west curved a great river, deep and strong, it carried blue silt and silky waters to its delta in the south east—the place of the forest-swimmers— given them in the years of their creation.

Sleek grey forest-swimmer shapes sped from pool to pond and rolled and rested in sun-warmed currents among the islands of the delta. On the horizon, where the rivers joined the southern ocean, stood several towers, the habitations of a sea people come home. New children slept in their mothers' arms.

The drumming faltered and the rhythm came and went. The far-time land stretched and tore. She screamed to stop the pieces of the map coalescing into a pollocky spatter of colours. *No! No! No!* In the north east, where cities stood like stones in a tiara, a moil of ruin formed with only a tracery of green holding together the struttery of the dome.

Ahni turned and turned to see all the places, all the compass points, before the vision left her. In the southwest quadrant, red and gold glinted among the ruins there, and the great river became a chain of lakes held behind thick dams. Her own sunshine on seagrass colours joined and jousted with the ochres of the land.

The power of the jonah-eater drum lessened or she-Ahni grew hard of hearing. The vision spindled on but she slid backward, her wrists gripped by a pair of strong hands. The south east, the place she wanted more than any other, was hidden by the chasm-land bluff.

“Ahni! Wake up!” someone whisper-shouted urgently.

*Kes?* She sobbed as he pulled her—sliding on her back—from the dance floor.

At the floor's edge, a warm musty space behind all the dancers, Kes sat her up like she was a doll. "We have to hurry," he said against her face. "Get you into this life-suit. We need to be invisible to get past the door guard. Feet first."

She groped her hands down to her feet. Met his hands, helped him drag up the socklets and then the leggings.

"Can you get up on your knees?" he said. "To pull up the rest? I'll be between you and the crowd."

The crowd stamped its legs and waved its arms. Some of it gyrated its bodies, dark as shadows, its components had eyes only for the scintillating friskilating light darting among them, had only ears for the boom and thrum of the jonah-eater.

Kes rose as Ahni kneeled up. He spread his arms with a brown herder cloak between them over his back, hiding them both. Ahni glimmer-smiled. Kes made himself a kestrel and mantled her with his wings. She drew the head-sock over her head and tucked in her short new hair. Picked up the heart-shaped chest piece. *How?* She studied Kes's chest piece, its snug fit against his chest.

"First the drawstring," he said, circling with his chin near his chest.

She pulled the gathering string tight and spaced the pleats.

He draped the cloak over his head, held it from falling with his teeth, and mimed one-handed. Blushing.

*Oh. Of course.* She placed the lobes of the heart-shape over her breasts. The chest-piece did the rest, sliding a little for a good fit—then *slicked* if that was a sound—and stuck fast to the oval aperture on her chest.

Kes palmed down his face-cover and then hers. "Make her alive-to-background, she hasn't got time to learn it," he said.

*Alive-to-background? What's that mean?* She looked around, who was he talking to?

< My dear, finally we are together again. >

She almost fell. Round-mouthed amazement, then tears of fear and rage fought through her. She almost sank to her knees. *No no no!* She screamed it open-mouthed, sucking in air as if she drowned.

Kes caught her and she could only smell his familiar leather-grease and camel-herder scent. His invisible arms around her could've been anyone's. She sobbed. She couldn't see any part of herself or him.

< The human-female-insert + life-suit three are integrated. Alive-to-background. The human-male-insert + life-suit two are integrated. Alive-to-background. Awaiting further instructions. >

*Different voice. Still just delivered into my head.* She shuddered.

Kes's masked face swam into sight. Through her tears pooling in her eye sockets, caught on the fabric covering her eyes, she realized. He held her face between his hands. "This is just till we get away," he said. "I told the damned implant what it could expect if and when I laid eyes on her. She skedaddled. She knows what she did. Is still doing."

*Clear as a bell in her head.* "That was the implant?" She stuttered getting the words out.

"The first voice, yes," Kes said. "The second is your life-suit's signalling system. Doing its best not to be colonised by the iniquity also called the implant. We need to get out of here. We have about half-an-hour before all these dancers fall down and done. We need to be gone totally by then."

He took her hand and they ran half-bent and scuttling along the edge of the dancefloor, where the dome's curved walls met the floor. The crowd still gyrated to the untiring driving beat. But the dancers tired, Ahni saw, their moves had become careless. They bumped off each other, with hips elbows and knees, and at times jostled the invisible pair hurrying toward the exit.

Where a pair of guards lounged in the center of a wide gate. They had their eyes on their wrist screens.

Kes drew Ahni back. He threw his cloak over his head and pulled up the hood. Passed her another of the herder brown cloaks, that he must've picked up along the way.

She copied him as best as she could.

"We are a pair of herdies," he said into her head. "Make it so."

< The human-female-insert + life-suit three are a female herdie, feminine face, hands and feet. The human-male-insert + life-suit two are a male herdie, smooth masculine face, hands and feet. Awaiting further instructions. >

"That's all we need," Kes mumbled. "A life-suit with a sense of humor." He laid his arm possessively over Ahni's shoulders, mouthed words into her ear. "We don't want to give them any ideas other than the most obvious one. Arm around my waist?"

She could do that. She snaked her arm in between the cloak and his back. Kissed his blushing ear.

They stumbled through the gate. The men guarding it merely glanced. Grunted and laughed

about this pair of ignorant herders.

Once through and out of their reach, Kes pulled Ahni with him to the camels feeding in the parking place.

Her last view of the dome-world were the firesprites. A parting gift from the vision they must be. Their paths thready and silver against the night sky, buzzing high at the corner of the bluff between here and a new home. One in particular, very bright, caught her eye. The sprite burned and flared and fell like a glowing ember spat from a fire.

Then the dome rolled into the desert and faded away. She opened her eyes and she was sitting against a high stone wall, outside, the ancient moon above.

Kes said, "Don't try to move. I'll fetch our ride here."

Still crying, she rested her head on her knees. All of it too difficult to comprehend.

"Koosh."

Kes helped Ahni onto the saddle of his beast. He got on behind her as best as he could. Held her to stop her falling. His strong arms on the front of the saddle kept them both from sliding down the back as the camel lifted its front quarters.

Then it straightened its haunches and Ahni fell forward against Kes's supporting hands, crying now for that sadness.

Several other camels galloped along with them as Kes chirruped at his beast for it to run like the wind.