

6: Sea of Tears

The women left Woman Rock, the halfway point, at dawn. Kes shrank in Ahni's thoughts every step she took. She knew him to be as much a young one in the control of his people as she was and in the control of hers. The thing that her mother wailed about—the thing with no name—neared. A dark mass with no eyes and no name.

Ahni saw that DesiSister gladly took a corner of the mat. Not to have to face me, she thought. The Sisters know the thing's name. The women never slowed and soon she saw only their bouncing backpacks and their legs shimmering through the dust. KiraMah jostled her along whenever she might stop.

They two reached the place where a hole in the land would drop them down on Scree. No one there. "I guess the rest are home already," KiraMah said. She encouraged Ahni down ahead of her.

Next Ahni stopped on rock shelf at the base of Scree. "Last time we were here it was dark." KiraMah shared out the mats. "Drink? Before we cross the Basin?" They both sipped water from the shilo.

"It's strange here without a tower." Ahni gestured at the rocks and broken water beside them. KiraMah glimmered a smile. "All these distractions aren't helping, fish-fingerling. What would you have wanted to tell your mother about the herder boy?"

Tears started at KiraMah's endearment. *AhniMah, I met a boy at the Swamp.* Her mother might echo KiraMah, *a herder-boy?* But what did KiraMah mean by "Would have wanted to?"

She drew back from that. *KiraMah makes it a mystery. Mah and I are better together than that.* Ahni would say, *Yes Mah, a herder-boy. Not masked. He gifted me . . .* She felt herself go red. She blushed? As if Kes hugged her still. Would her mother be able to help Ahni fit Kes into their lives by the sea?

She pictured him at the tower. Who could he be? How? His camel had to graze on the red land. Could he even swim? *No place here for a herder! No place here for a herder!* She sobbed. "There's no place here for a herder."

KiraMah lay her arm over Ahni's shoulders. Drew her near. It felt like a death-knell.

The silent Basin at their feet knew no solution either. She looked and looked, turning her head, fast from fear and slow from deep-and-slow-knowing. First she saw how they lived here. Why they lived here. And who kept them here.

"The herders, the forest-swimmers and we tower-folk are of the same stock," KiraMah said. "The Lodestar holds us in the hollow of her hands."

Ahni woke to not one mother sitting against the warm tower-base. Usually they sat there, legs out-stretched, sunning themselves while they repaired their mats and watched their little children play. Nor did any Sister stand shin-deep in the brine, teaching little girls how to throw their small-size fishing nets. No boy-prentices splashed and played at their eternal swimming games.

The silence drilled into her new awareness. She all but fell into the water. Shook off KiraMah's hands. Waded fast toward the tower. Ran as soon as the water let her.

Inside, in the archway to the left that led to the boy-prentice pool in the basement, the privacy screening was pulled across. *It must be that the Skins are home. One of them sick, is that why the silence?*

She slowed but went straight on up the spiral corridor. AhniMah would tell her. Half a circle further was OrcahMan's tub-room. He was clad in the remains of his SkinGift and must still keep it wet lest it shrink. Ahni rifled the leather curtain across his doorway. She'd see him later.

Another half circle and there was the mothering room. Ahni entered and the buzz of laughing crying and talking stopped. Re-started hesitantly. Because *she* entered? With a wild stare, she saw no mats at her-and-AhniMah's bed-place.

A really *really* sick person was always taken to the machine room, next along the corridor. Ahni trembled to think AhniMah so ill. She flung herself through the doorway, hurried to the machine room.

DesiSister guarded the entry. "You can't enter, Ahni. You know that." DesiSister's eyes were red from crying. "Ahni, I'm so sorry." She burst into fresh tears and appealed to someone coming up the corridor, "Sana, please tell her."

"That AhniMah joined the sea-goyles?" SanaSister said.

Ahni was so amazed that for a second she forgot her fear. "You believe in sea-goyles?" SanaSister always said things how they were.

"They are not the monsters that people make of them." SanaSister stared at her as if she thought Ahni should know what SanaSister was talking about. As if she waited for Ahni to put together the two halves of a puzzle.

"I don't understand?" Ahni said. She tried to peer past DesiSister.

"I told you, girl. Your mother joined the sea-goyles." SanaSister edged Ahni back. "She jumped off the tower and joined sea-goyles," she said again.

"No! No! No!" she screamed. "Mah would never jump from the tower! Not of her own deciding!"

SanaSister straitjacketed Ahni's flailing arms with her own. She crushed Ahni against her slack Sister-breasts. "Cry quietly so you don't frighten people. Our ways are so that we can live."

Ahni wailed. "I've got so much to ask her!"

OrahSister stepped in the machine-room doorway. "She is much too old for this hullabaloo."

SanaSister hissed. "I thought SkinGifting didn't happen until a woman's children had graduated to their new lives? Your planning drives us further and further out of step." Her hold on Ahni softened.

Ahni tore loose. She'd find Niko. She ran down the corridor. He'd tell her the truth. She slid between the edges of two mats screening the pool from the entry hall.

Only the Skins were in the basement. They lay like a raft supporting a new one in his silvery new SkinGift. They helped him float amid their bodies. Dully she knew that it must be Niko. He'd been the oldest of the boy-prentices for at least two years.

Only in this very moment did she wonder where-from the Sisters got the vast amount of leather needed to protect each Swimmer from the stingers everywhere in the ocean. She'd never seen a suitable fish-skin in the row of stretchers drying on the walls outside. Or enough of them. All the hints and nuances she'd ever overheard to do with SkinGifting flicked through her mind. She sobbed.

Arno Sea Leader stared her away. The sad sad words of a sea-song crept into her thoughts. *A Skin he must be, our small brother. His tears will salt the sea.*

“Ahni! Ahni!” OrcahMan’s Wife-of-the-week put her arm around Ahni’s shoulders. Slack-spirited, Ahni allowed herself to be led to the Man’s room.

How would Niko live in the ocean where the waves were higher than the tower? How would he be his Niko-self, always sleeping in the water with only his head resting on land? Never speaking now, never laughing. Ahni cried for the Niko-that-was.

The rest of the boy-prentices sat on the edges of OrcahMan’s tub. The smallest one flinched away from her.

“I’m so sorry, Dell,” she whispered. “Screaming, frightening you.”

OrcahMan sat shoulder-deep in the opposite corner. He made signs and SanaWife told them. “He says sit here, fishling. On the pool-rim next to the boys.” SanaWife held Ahni close with an arm around her waist.

She couldn’t stop crying. She was imprisoned now—in this life—drowning in the Sea of Tears. “I shouldn’t even be here. I’ll go outside, talk to the sea.”

“Not today, sweet one,” said SanaWife. “Today the sea-goyles walk and there’s to be no one outside to tempt them.”

OrcahMan smacked his own mouth softly and pointed at SanaWife. Then signed they should all look at his hands telling a story. “SanaWife,” he said pointing at her and cupping his hands under the place where her breasts would be. “SanaWife will tell my words for those still learning. This story was given to my father by his father and he by his father. My father gave it to me the way I am giving it to you, my children.”

He made the sign for boy, and the sign for many generations passing, and the sign for a sandy beach. “When I was a boy,” SanaWife said. “My father’s father’s father said, the Basin was a sandy beach. Most times the tide came only as far as the tower. In the season when the sun was hot on the sand, many fat seal-mothers came into the Basin and lay on the sand to birth their pups.”

OrcahMan pretended to be a seal-mother crawling to the sea. “Each morning the seal-mothers went to fetch food,” SanaWife said. “Then the seal-fathers, of which there were eight or ten, watched over their young. When the seal-mothers came back in the evening, the seal-fathers went fishing.”

OrcahMan pointed at some of the prentices to stand in the water and pretend to swim. “At the end of the season,” SanaWife said. “All the strong fat young, and the strong fat seal-mothers and the strong fat seal-fathers left the Basin to continue their lives in the ocean. Each year the weak ones, those too old and the ones unhealed of hurt stayed behind. After their spirits left in the night—to follow their tribe—our people used their flesh and their skins, their bones and all their unneeded parts.”

OrcahMan nodded at SanaWife to tell the remaining words without his signs. She looked into a distance over their heads and recited the rest of the story. “That is how we lived until one stormy winter and a long hungry summer when the Deep made every tide so high it reached all the way to the cliffs. All that year the people lived up in the mothering room and the Sister Eyrie and from that year and never since have any seals come to the Basin.” Her eyes glittered and she pressed her lips together.

Ahni flicked her gaze over the remains of OrcahMan’s SkinGift. They floated around him like a coat of kelp. Then she locked stares with *him*, challenging him to tell the things she wanted to know. “They never came again and yet our swimmers still have Skins?”

Dell hunched over with his hands over his ears. He sobbed and sobbed. OrcahMan surged forward, and lifting him from the tub-rim cradled him close.

Ahni closed her eyes to not see them all staring anywhere but at her.

After the evening soup, her bed-place looked so lonely among everyone else's going-to-bed preparations, Ahni did slip out. The moon was young and near by the restless horizon, but already it sent light enough for it to reflect off the rocks and the sea.

No sea-goyles to be seen anywhere. And anyway, Mah always said goyles weren't real. The tower sat on the last knuckle of a finger of land. Ahni clambered seaward, to the great rock that was the fingernail cutting the ocean into two smooth flows. One stream went into the Basin, and one into the bay from where the swimmers departed for their fishing.

How would Niko swim?

Everywhere she went, there were things to remind her of the two she'd lost and she had too many tears for them to be dried by the wind. She stumbled blindly back into the tower. The mothering room door stood half-open and the perpetual flame guttered in the draught. Ahni picked her shivering way between the Sisters sleeping in the middle of the room to the family places in the curve of the wall.

A warm hand came out of the shadows and grabbed her heel. There was just enough light that Ahni saw KiraMah's arm stretched out between KiraMah's shoulder and her Ahni-foot. Whimpering, she jerked it to get loose. KiraMah pulled the harder. Her eyes glinted. She rolled her head sideways to show Ahni where she might sleep. All in silence.

Ahni gave in and crawled to KiraMah.

KiraMah gathered Ahni into the warm place between herself and Kira.

Ahni wept the silent secret way, adding her salt to the Sea of Tears.