

## 7: First Steps

Only a few days later, the Eldest picked her way into the mothering room in the grey dawn. Ahni peered from under her eyelids at the Eldest seeming to startle at the Ahni-family's empty bed-place. Ahni's heart went from warm to cold.

Then the Eldest came to stand by the Kira-family bed-place. "I thought, KiraMah, to ask you for Kira's help."

KiraMah nodded and Kira winked at Ahni as she rose to join the Eldest.

"We'll get up too," KiraMah said when the Eldest and Kira had gone from the mothering room. "We'll empty the slop buckets. With two of us we'll do it in one trip." KiraMah stopped at the locker in the tower wall opposite OrcahMan's doorway. "There's only the one yoke, but I guess you can carry the smaller buckets without its help?"

KiraMah, balancing two full, heavy buckets of waste on the ends of the yoke over one shoulder, led Ahni carrying a smaller bucket in each hand to the tower's sea-hole. KiraMah set down her buckets and the yoke and lifted the rusty round cover from the hole.

Ahni wrinkled her nose and tried not to breathe. "It's very stinky."

KiraMah chuckled, then tied a scarf over her mouth. She tipped wastes into the hole. "Makes it a good place to talk privately," she said muffled, between buckets. "Kira was here with me yesterday. We talked about *her* life journey and yours."

She stepped away from the hole. "Now we wait for the tide to clean the water below. The Eldest seems to be trying to convince everyone that she cannot work with you."

"My mother begged her, not-the-implant-for-Ahni."

KiraMah hooked a bucket onto the end of the rinse-rope, and dropped it. Pulled up, and dropped it several times. "Yet, if we stay in the tower, what AhniMah wanted cannot be. You cannot be Wife to OrcahMan because he is your father, and you cannot be Wife to Arno because he is your brother."

Ahni put the withy handle of the next bucket into KiraMah's hand. Out of desperation she said, "I can't be an Eldest. There is Kes."

"That boy with you at the Swamp?"

Ahni stared to the cliffs where Kes wandered the desert with his people. "He is in my heart," she breathed.

KiraMah whispered too. "In *your* heart and in *my* hopes, Ahni. If you want ever to see him again, you must keep him a secret. Being apprenticed to the Eldest means you'll go to the Swamp to learn its herbs and plants."

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A few weeks after, KiraMah was called to work among the Sisters.

Ahni and Kira were left in the bed-place together along with the responsibilities of the slop buckets every day, and the caring of babies and toddlers while their mothers foraged. The Eldest fetched Kira often for some work-in-between. Ahni tagged along. She began to learn how the herbs and medicines were prepared that the Eldest doled out.

Before-going-to sleep became the only opportunity Ahni had when she could dream of Kes. She smiled love at him into her sleeping mat with a bight of it tenting her the way Kes might tent them with his cloak.

Night times she was haunted by dreams of AhniMah. Something her mother wanted. Something Ahni must do. Desperately she lifted her head. Everyone else was asleep. Except for Kira, right beside her. She was silvered by moonlight shining through one of the tall narrow window holes, and her eyes glinted. Her ghostly hand rose and swung across to sway lightly above Ahni's nose.

Ahni's heart thrilled with delicious fear.

Kira's hand descended and touched Ahni's nose.

They exploded into a hysteria of held-in giggles and jostled for the door and down the corridor. Outside, on Flat Rock, they laughed and kicked at the dark water, faster and faster. Kira sprang up. "Look at the moon-path to the cliffs."

Ahni sprang up too and made as if to run along it. "Get ready, get steady ..."

Hiccupping with laughter, Kira grabbed Ahni around the waist to stop her.

Ahni put a foot into the water, and words slid into her mind. *Sky was kind with moon-bright light, when the edge of a cloud came creeping, creeping to cover life's light.*

Ahni clutched at Kira. "Did you hear that song?"

"Of course. It's the tide chewing at the cliffs. The waves make a song when they hit the caves."

"No! It was words." She repeated them slowly. "Sky was kind with moon-bright light, when the edge of a cloud came creeping, creeping to cover life's light." They sound like the words of a swimmer song. Did you think them at me?"

"No Ahni, I can't. I'm only your friend. I can only *say* things to you. And I say now, there's that cloud. Let's go in."

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Before they were ready for it one morning, before they were even properly awake, one of the mothers came for Kira.

"It's time," RonahMah sang. "Only Kira," she whispered when Ahni made a move to come too.

"The day," chanted the rest of the mothers from their bed-places.

"Time to learn the Wife Ways," Ronahmah sang while taking Kira by the hand to the next bed-place.

The mother there rose and, while smoothing Kira's hair, sang "Her hair is fine and glossy, she is ready."

The other women echoed "She is ready," and Kira was led to the next bed place so that that mother could say something more about Kira's hair.

Ahni remembered how it went, this was only the first of eight days of praising. She stared and stared, remembering how Kes praised her. Her hair. Her hands. Her salt. Hot blood rushed to her face. Pulling her sleeping mat over herself was all she could do to hide her tears of love-and-appreciation of Kes's gift words. If only she'd gone with him when she had the chance.

Someone nudged her in the back.

Ahni rubbed her love-tears into her hair.

The same someone grumbled and lifted the mat. “Ahni, come.” It was the Eldest, hoarsely whispering. She gestured with her head for good measure.

Numbly Ahni followed the Eldest into the corridor.

“Seems I made a mistake,” the Eldest said. “I should’ve been spending my energies on you all along. Carry these.”

Ahni could barely get out the appropriate blessing. “I appreciate your words, Eldest.”

“Likely you won’t when what-will-be is done. In the meantime, I don’t know how I’ll go, trusting you.”

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As she stood knee-deep in the ebbing tide, bending to pick up the stones that the Eldest pointed out, she suddenly saw a memory picture of the Eldest herself—knee-deep and bent and always scrubbing and scraping stones—the iron-pot-in-its-float bobbing around her. Ahni straightened to remember better.

“Grab the pot, girl.”

Ahni felt herself make the move she had seen the Eldest make a thousand times. It seemed now that on all the calm weather days of her life, she’d seen the Eldest working at her stones, somewhere in this basin, while the children learned to know its creatures and the mothers foraged. “Eldest, why are we doing this?”

The Eldest made the sign for *think* with her index finger to her temple, while she pointed at the next place.

Ahni tipped up the stone she found there. Held it over the pot, and scraped off shells and weeds. Set the stone back in its self-same place. She looked back to where they’d begun, at Flat Rock, and along the Eldest’s gaze to the cliffs. “Stepping stones to the cliffs, for when the tide is high?”

The Eldest grinned morosely. “The stones are laid in that way by requirement by the implant. A pattern she wants us to remember. I don’t know why. Many a time people have suggested we lay the path straight. She always learns of it, and punishes her host. I haven’t bothered trying.”

Ahni’s heart lifted despite the Eldest’s reluctance to praise her.

The next two days were assigned to the basement pool. The Swimmers were away at their work. As their SkinGifts must not be scratched or torn, so the pool had frequently to be scrubbed free from limpet and barnacle young.

On the first day Ahni scraped the walls of the pool and on the second she scraped the bottom by diving between big breaths.

Meanwhile, the Eldest joked and yarned with the boy-prentices, telling them stories from their pup times. Like the day small Sanka, out foraging with his mum, slid his hand through a narrow gap between two rocks to grab something there. How he screamed blue-havoc when he couldn’t get his fist out. Not even several mothers could convince him to un-fist his hand. He would not let go his prize. The tide was on the up as well. What a to-do by the time someone called the Eldest.

“Do you remember, Sanka? I got this feather from my hair and tickled you into letting go.”

OrcahMan’s tub also needed refreshing. Ahni fetched the bone yoke and the two withy-and-leather waste buckets. Ahni scooped the fouled water from the tub and carried it to the sea-

hole. She rinsed the buckets while the Eldest wiped the tub and helped fill it again with many, many loads of fresh water from the ocean stream.

Then they rested. Ahni stroked the old smooth bones of the yoke.

“They are the bones of the Last Seal,” said the Eldest. She trimmed tatters from the remains of the Man’s SkinGift, to make him beautiful for his new bride.

OrcahMan smiled with his mouth closed and the corners down while patting the air near his cheeks and chin as though he felt long whiskers, a sign for a whiskery seal face.

“There’s a story that the implant tells that would explain why the sea flows changed the spring after the seals left that last time,” said the Eldest.

OrcahMan perked up with lively interest. Ahni perked up too. A new story, and also she might find out more about the implant. Who or what it was.

“It’s difficult to know how to begin,” the Eldest said. “The implant uses words we normally don’t.”

“The Last Seal was a big old man of his people,” OrcahMan signed, beginning the story. The Eldest translated his words into speech though Ahni knew most of the signs.

The Man lay his hands, fingers gentling upward as though receiving a gift.

The Eldest glimmer-smiled and continued without his signs. “The summer following the Old Seal’s gifting, the southern ocean river changed its course. Always before, it brought the seals to this coast to the west of here. The seals then fished their way east until they reached here, their winter home. That beach is now the Basin, its sand carried away by the tides. Here they stayed all the sunny days of winter, birthing their pups, and teaching them to fish in these kind waters. Between winter and spring they began their journey south to their summer home.”

“All good so far,” OrcahMan signed.

“The implant says that...” the Eldest said. She continued hesitant. “At the time that our ancestor-mothers-and-fathers ... came to live here in the tower ... their *government* ... planned to flood the interior of their land to save the most populated parts from the effects of a very long, very severe drought.”

“Fish do not like warm water,” OrcahMan signed.

“While the seals hunted near the Seatower, they were not yet very bothered. Plenty of fish lived near the rocks and in the weed beds to the east. And nor did the seal-mothers-and-fathers expect to eat while still near the coast they had emptied of food during their stay. All night they swam, and into the second day.”

“Even as the Skins rarely find fish in the bay,” OrcahMan signed.

The Eldest’s expression became grim. “There began to be disturbances in the water, sheets of foam, whorls and maelstroms, waves clashing against each other as though two currents each sought dominion. The pups grew tired from the sea-battle. The seal-mothers took turns swimming at the rear of the little group, to chivvy the young ones along. They could only do what they knew.”

OrcahMan gripped his knees.

“By the fourth day,” the Eldest said. “Many of the pups had descended into the arms of the Deep. Several mothers too. Bone weary, the rest allowed themselves to be swept along in the new current. West, along new curves of land. A new sea-bottom. They ate the fish that were

also swept along by the new waters. They lived, though they never found their way home to the Basin.”

“And they live still?” OrcahMan’s hands asked.

“In that new place they still live, the implant says.”

“I am happy,” OrcahMan said. OrcahMan’s eyes glittered with joy.

The Eldest clipped his beard and hair. She turned to Ahni. “Tomorrow is Kira’s feast day, have you thought what gift you’ll make her?”

Ahni started. Poor Kira. Not once in the past days had she thought of her best friend. Mutely she led the Eldest to Flat Rock’s weather-end where for ages past children kept their treasures in wind-carved hollows stoppered with little boulders.

Once, while Ahni swam at the edge of the Basin to be rid of the frightened cries of the mothers, she’d dived into a weed grove growing there. The skeletal rim of a helmet shell was the treasure she’d found under her hand when—for a dare—she had touched the bottom. That shell would make Kira a pretty hair clasp with her dark hair woven through its shining white whorls.

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At the end of Kira’s feast, all the mothers together trooped down the corridor to bring OrcahMan his new Wife. They cheered and sang and whistled bird-calls along the way. Little children were allowed as far as the leather curtain and only ever heard the wallowing and splashing of water on the stone floor.

Kira looked skin-smooth and beautiful. Her hair was drawn back and woven through Ahni’s gift shell and flowed about her shoulders like smoke. Her face ...

Ahni ran on needing an alone place, to think of herself with Kes. The swimmers were in the bay, the basement ...? Arno alone swam in the basement, restlessly churning from end to end. Ahni teetered at the edge of the pool until with a sudden swirl, he stopped and she fell. Underwater he was there, looking words at her. *Ahni, little sister, I’ve been waiting a long time to speak with you.*

Coughing, she found her feet. “I’m not a Sister. How could you be waiting? I didn’t know I was coming.”

He pulled down the Skin from his mouth and he smiled. But he did not speak aloud or even move his lips. *I’m not talking big Sister. I said little sister. You are my mother’s second daughter, my sister. You and I are mind-linked. All your life I’ve sent you songs. I know you heard me because I’ve heard you singing them. For a long time I wondered why you’d never think a thought at me when you came to see us here.*

She was shocked at the ease with which he told her his thoughts. She knew him as the stern Sea Leader, often in the background when she came to talk with Niko. And all her thoughts ... did he know all her thoughts?

*I didn’t know you were coming just then. OrcahMan sent me sign that he will be the last of his kind. I said he’s gone soft. How will I not be Man after him—like day follows night—when he does nothing to stop the design of the Sisters? He said he’ll be the last and only AhniMah’s children are strong enough to make new beginnings. That’s Niko, you, and me. Should we live so long.*

He stepped towards her. *Look at my hands.* His SkinGifted gloves were cracked and patched. Fine fissures lay alongside lines of careful sewing, together covering the leather with a web of wear. Ahni looked with puzzled attention before shyly shrugging her ignorance.

He flipped, dived and turned at the end of the pool, then stopped nearby again. *I wonder that you even knew you had a brother.*

“You were always the Sea Leader, speaking through Niko. But then there was a cloud song.”

*We swimmers were far from home. A month after the shortest day in the summer-half, when the forest swimmer lodestar guides us home, for our tower then lies beneath its path across the night sky.”* Arno stared into a far distance.

The same star Kes told her. When she hugged herself, she could almost feel him hugging her.

*A great cloud rose from the seaward edge of the world and it was as if all life would be taken. We sheltered among the stones of a rocky cape nearby. Afterwards, swimming home along the cliffs, we saw the herders riding their long-legged land animals along the edge of the land. They waved. We too. They are the children of our people, our brothers.*

He swam again, slowly, a few strokes away and back again. *How I wished myself among them. You’ll be Eldest.*

She wanted to deny it, but remembered just in time that Kes still had to be a secret.