

Ahni hung in the dark, her face barely above water, barely sucking in air. Her legs hung nearer the Deep than she wanted. She had no strength to draw them up. The slow swell took her up to a crest, over, and down its other side into a trough between black glassy water-mountains.

Her hands restless among the covers as she searched the water nearby for the brothers. She would never swim alone with the sea so deep and dark. Only with other swimmers could she face the distances. Ahni kicked her legs to and fro and pushed through the water with her arms. She had to get to the other side of the crest.

The blankets were as heavy as the mud in the swamp. Then they were the mud. The swamp held all the dear faces of her people hidden amongst its reeds. Dressed in weeds, babies sucked air through hollow stems. Niko was near her Ahni-feet, hidden under the water-lilies. Get down, he signed. The danger is very near. He cupped his ear. Listen. The galloping feet of camels neared.

Ahni slipped down with less splash than the drip from a washed cloth. Her people's hands welcomed her as she slid amongst them. She slept on, sliding beyond to an alone-place where the mud became water and then a blanket.

Hard hands pulled her to the surface. *Not my Kestrel's hands. Where is he?*

Then *old* hands stroked her, and sang to quieten her fever. Slowly she woke.

She opened her eyes. Saw only the four leather walls of a tiny cabin, her on a swag to one side of a humped place in the middle. One wall was rolled up and tied. A young woman busied herself there with a stoppered bottle and a cup. She sidled in on her knees, there could be no standing up in the little hut.

The young woman held the cup against Ahni's lips. "Drink up, Sea-girl. It's a fever-fighting brew made by Io-Gamma's own hands." After Ahni sipped the medicine, the woman said, "I'm Ivy, and this is my camel, Gretel, carrying us." She patted the hump in the middle of the cabin.

Beyond the cup, beyond Ivy's hand holding it to Ahni's lips for a second sip, the moon flapped like a fish on a hook and like a soul tormented and like a phosphorescent wing in the sky. Somebody should catch it. *Good eating once the sheen is gone from it.*

Ivy faced to the front and took up the reins of her camel. She clicked her tongue against her teeth for a signal at the great animal.

Ahni's bed rocked. Side to front to side to back as she frog-kicked over isles of clay between the underwater stems of the reeds. She took a sly breath of air and caught a small girl in her arms. With her fingers pinching the little one's nose shut and the heel of her Ahni-hand covering the little mouth, Ahni turned and twisted to escape the feet of the camels stepping hesitantly through the melee.

Here and there riders bent from their heights with smoking brands, which they touched to the reeds, destroying their Skin-kin's haven as well as their own heritage. Flames crackled and

smoke coiled thickly along the narrow paths while the riders retreated to the cliff-top, to await the fruit of their toxic toil.

To save all their lives, some of her people rose from the stew and ran into their captors' nets. Before the flames died down, and the swamp spindled away from the moon, the riders had trussed their captives and turned from their deed, their departure marred by quarrels over their only moderate harvest.

When all sound had gone from the swamp, Ahni's people lifted their faces from the mud and rested where they lay. Not even for such a disaster did the spindle stop and dawn took the place of night. The Eldest-that-was told Ahni a plant or herb by every stone and dip and hollow. The wallet grew so big that Ahni-Eldest thought to use it as a raft to paddle home. The dreamer in her heart said, "The tower is broken. These few people remaining must walk to the chasm lands."

"What was that?" Ivy said. "What did you say?" She stopped the camel. Took up the fever-medicine. "Have another sip?"

Ahni sipped. Her just-said words reverberated in her. She might easily have said them again.

"You said something about the tower?" Ivy encouraged her.

The tower broken could be seen by anybody. No harm letting slip *those* words. "The tower is broken."

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In the cold and dark of pre-dawn, when the hunters slept, Ahni returned her dreaming thoughts to the swamp. A clumpy handful of young women carrying babies and little children, a few youngsters, one tattooed older woman and one brother picked their way through the wet-ash smell and blackened mud.

Someone waited for them on the edge of the desert. Niko, Ahni's mother's grandson. Ahni remembered how their link worked. Niko and Ahni were of one blood and grew up like a sister and brother. They were mind-linked.

*I am to lead them*, he thought at her.

*Why must you?* In her thoughts she counted off the other possibilities. *Why not Rollo, a man already and perhaps more acceptable? Why not Sanna Sister, even now shouldering the medicine wallet? At the Tower, the Sisters lead in everything.*

*Ahnil, our brother and our Sealeader, gave me this task because I am Niko and of his blood*

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Sanna-Sister shouldered the wallet and Niko led their furtive escape across the path of the camel tracks and to the north. Ahni reached to Ahnil Sea-leader, her mother's first-born. There was no answer. Her link with him was broken.

Ahni watched her people become smaller the further they went. She watched until they were fewer, and then none, as they rounded a bend by a tall rock. She wished she was the wind and could blow away their footprints.

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Ivy drew open the curtains at the foot of Ahni's bed. The little cabin had last night been lifted from Gretel's back. It stood on sturdy bamboo stumps beside Ivy's tent.

"The upland grass is still green," Ivy said. "Today the camels may eat their last untrammelled feed. Tomorrow Kuri-Chief will weigh whether we travel the chasm-way or the cliff path to the newlands."

Ivy talked on and on without making much sense to Ahni. *How did I talk with Kes? Never any problem understanding him.*

"Hope against hope my man and I will have enough numbers in our account for our own true child. Your green-eyed kiddies from the tower are very loving, but not the same as bearing our own. My arms are ready and waiting, ready and waiting."

"No sea anywhere," Ahni said, discovering the pale green distances with camels bobbing in and out of sight.

Ivy laughed. "Only the sea of the desert. Sleep now while I cook the meal."

Ahni swam to the Basin. The sun made bright water pieces of the restlessing surface. The Basin's sea-bottom had rolling sandy hills and rocky hollows. Her legs trailed through the weed fringing the shallows until she could stand and she was home.

She opened her eyes and she was in a room with cloth sides, a space filled with westering light. Outside it a woman's face flashed gold among dark-cloaked shadows.

Then, another, different shadow blocked the light. "Ivy. How is it going?"

That voice! Ahni froze.

"She's in and out of fever, Joff."

"But our last chance to pick up a few more numbers."

"It's too soon. She's weak and she falls easily back into her dreams."

"Were you and Lariat serious about a baby of your own seed, I thought you would've questioned her already."

"We were promised payment from the Lartos string. Frightening her won't help you."

"Big words," the Joff-man, who was Ahni's Kestrel's uncle and hurt Kes when he and Ahni first met, said at Ivy. Then he hunkered beside Ahni's bed. He made his voice warm and glad. "When we saw the tower broken, we looked in the Swamp for our Skin-kin. Too bad the

Sisters didn't think to ask for our help. If you tell me where they are, we can leave this minute to fetch them to safety."

His words were enough to shred the veil Ahni had spun to her people. She floated away in a wordless dreamy searching. "Silver light means a cool calm night," she said as the wind in the Swamp died.

"We find that so," Joff said. "A good night to travel. A good night to fetch the rest of your people."

She smiled at Niko's sending of Sard's silver image plunging and leaping east across the landscape as he fought to bring the kite under his control.

"That's better," Joff said. "A smile or two never goes astray. Was it your brother who sent you his thoughts? If you tell me where he is, I'll bring him here."

Ahni felt Kiral's smooth baby-skin and his baby-kisses covering her face. His eyes shone like sunshine on seagrass. Ahnil sent her the rhythms of the sea, to and fro, the wash and the wave in their eternal partnership. Beaches and rock holes that Ahni never saw. Her heart bounded like dolphins leaping from knowing that her-and-his link was not broken.

She closed her eyes against the Joff-man's false words. She saw Ahnil, the two women and Kiral safe in their world. She didn't hear the Joff-man retreat or the words Ivy threw at him.

Even cocooned within her little tent Ahni felt the weather change. Moisture pressed at the inner surfaces of her nose and ears. Soon storm clouds would come boiling over the horizon. The camels also knew, and were fractious. The daily dance of loading up was a turmoil.

"We go the chasm-way," Ivy said. "At least Kuri-Chief knows the minds of the women. This strap will keep you from landing on my back and then the ground." Ivy fastened a cloth across Ahni's middle, pulling her arms out and over for extra resistance.

"Time we got the Sea-girl up," she said to someone. "Hold tight, girl. Gretel is not her calm self this morning."

The cot creaked as it was lifted and settled over the camel's hump. A following wind, bringing more of the sea air, flapped the cot's curtains. Ahni saw a hundred snatches of animals and their trappings: a lash-fringed camel eye, a red cord bridle, ears at attention, spit drooling from a loose-lipped camel jaw, sapphire fringing on a shining pack cloth, a pale calf close by its mother's side, rings and buckles of silver and polished brass.

The crush of camels slowly lessened as they milled at the entrance to the chasms, waiting for their turn into the narrow defile. Their riders, men and women, wore cloaks of tan and brown and faded reds, and their masks glowed in the sunrise.

Ivy chatted while they waited their turn. "I keep my household goods along the left-side of Gretel's hump, to balance you along the right." She nodded at the rug covering the goods, of contrasting reds and blues. "Your cover is a newland patchwork, I got in payment one day at Showtown. From a Zirconian no less, Zircon being the nearest of the great cities, and its people the most difficult to please." She chuckled bawdily.

Not understanding the reason for Ivy's merriment, Ahni made a questioning sound.

"You'll find out when we get to Showtown, assuming you're with us that long. But why else all this care and attention? Here we go." Ivy chirruped at Gretel who, after a small hesitation, stepped onto the path into the chasm.

The cot sloped down and Ahni felt herself kept from falling by the cloth across her middle. The light of the day became a broad bar shining overhead and sounds stayed close. With her right-hand she brushed aside the curtain.

The camel swayed its load so close to the cliff that Ahni could drag her fingers along the stone. She dreamed her shoulder brushed the wall just so as they—she and her people—walked single file along a channel parallel to this one. Niko was at the head of the line, she at its end following SannaSister carrying the wallet. The rest of the people walked in the middle: Rollo, the mothers, and the children dragging their feet. They'd been on the move for many hours.

"It's close to midday. Near that pool is a good place to camp," Sanna-Sister said.

The older children sagged to the ground. The women sighed their relief and started putting down their toddlers and bundles. Orah-mah sat down to feed her Orny.

Ahni understood that in her worrying, Sanna-Sister had forgotten what she knew about the chasms, and the weather on the plain. But at the same time that she heard a susurration back the way they'd come, Niko found his voice.

"Here is not a good place," he said. He shifted on his feet. Looked to Rollo for help. "The air is clammy."

Rollo hadn't allowed Sanna-fem or Desri-pup down to the ground. "Niko is right," he signed one-handed. "There's rain falling up on the plain. We should climb."

Ahni spotted a high cave with a way up to it. *Niko, that narrow place above is all you have time for.*

His heart cry became "Up there! Hurry!"

The cave was a long horizontal slit between two great slabs. Chest high to a woman, but deep enough to sleep all of them in comfort.

Ahni opened her eyes. She was surprised to find herself dry, in the cot, and still on Gretel's back. The path *they* were on, ran high above the brawling stream in the bottom of the chasm.

"Look out, you'll graze your fingers." Another camel pushed between the wall and the cot. Its rider the one who spoke.

"Lariat! Watch what you're doing!" Ivy exclaimed. "You'll skelter the lot of us!"

"The Skin-girl had her fingers out."

“Fine. She’s recovering her senses. Leave her be.”

“Joff says you held out on him. That she was fine the first day.”

“What Joff says is always something to show himself in the best light. What else did he say? That you and I don’t deserve that number he promised us? Made before the Grands, that agreement will be harder to break than his promises.”

“The Skin-girl was meant to have brought in more numbers than the handful we got. But since she didn’t, he said, we should give *her* to the Grand-Devil. Or we’ll have to sacrifice one of your sisters.”

“Go away, Lariat,” Ivy said. “Joff’s words are addling meddling words. Wise to think them through before you go crying them outside.”

The man called Lariat continued to grumble as he ordered his camel to tail Gretel. Ahni’s thoughts quested Niko. *Which of our people were taken?*

*We sing their names, Ahni, though we hear their cries in our minds.* Ahni murmured the names with him in a chanted whisper-song. For all the remaining distances of the day, she fought the horror of knowing her people on foot, somewhere in this same caravan, and she without the strength to hear them or help them flee. By the time the caravan arrived at the Shipyard Camp, she was delirious.

Ivy blamed Lariat. “You frightened her, telling her of the harvest of her people. All the hours after your harassments she groaned and thrashed and I couldn’t stop to comfort her.”

“Some of us think we’d have got better results with her skeered.”

“Oh, you’re looking to run the show now.”

“Maybe.”

“Grow old quick then, match your wits with the Grands.”

“Let your woman be, Lariat. There’s plenty to do.” The men left. Lariat with them.

Ivy furnished her tent with rugs and bedding and camel packs upended as cupboards. She hung a cloth between the cot and the rest of the tent after helping Ahni sip Grand-*Io*’s potion. Then she went outside.

Ahni dreamed. This dream was greater than all her mind, with mysteries she’d never lived through or heard of. She missed having the Eldest-that-was nearby, who might’ve explained the unknowns with a story. She missed the implant with the three first-mother-minds, who would’ve argued the case amongst themselves, and so familiarize Ahni with the character of the plan.

For that was the thing about the dream that she did recognize. It was a plan of sorts, a course of actions for they-two, Ahni and Srese, the unlikeliest of friends. Ahni trembled at the task

of convincing Srese, whose dangers, said the dream, were fraught with figures as fearsome as the goyles that strode Ahni's people's nightmares.

Then she opened her eyes and she was awake. She must find Kes, he was, was the only one she knew here and the only one who could help.