

54. Secrets & Sly Dealings

Ahni, tied to one of the Jovat-Family camels, peered from under the loosened cloth about her head. Rubble lined the path. Broken stones of the hell's outlying homes like the broken bones of the Sea-tower. Overhead the brassy blue afternoon sky. Bits of walls and holes in the ground, dun and dusty, along the path they travelled. She saw an angle of a window frame. A set of steps jutting up from the ground. A scatter of shards of dusty tiles. A cliff of hollows to the far left that stretched on and on.

Her camel missed a step. Looking down, she saw that it stepped over a sliver of *polished* red glass. Like someone had dropped it just then. Nearby a rusted window shutter shadowed a hollow that had two pairs of eyes glinting in there, watching her. She blinked and they were gone.

At a halt, a round place that had its rubble cleared, Jeldie released Ahni's camel's lead and called her brother, Jeb, from the rear. He rode nearer, then came alongside Ahni. "What did the yonker mean with her shouting at you? ... Something you two are plotting?"

Joff slapping about himself with his camel's halter leads was all the warning they had of him arriving. "You!" he barked at his son. "Get back to the tail-end! Where you belong. And I don't want to see *your* staring eyes, either!" He knotted his bandanna over Ahni's eyes.

The blindfold wasn't much of a punishment when Ahni still heard everything that mattered. People forgot that not seeing, she could still hear.

"Joff suspects mutiny?" Now the man called Lariat wedged his camel alongside Jeldie's. "Tell me, cousin, who is behind?"

Jeldie's voice rose up as if she kneeled up on her camel's hump. "Yep. Still only the Marls."

Their voices receded as if they rode on. Fore and aft were other camels, their passage silent apart from the creak and stretch-and-give of strapping, their riders' soft murmurs, and the odd cobble rolling over when it was turned by a camel's wide foot. Aft also, the reluctant feet of the prisoners shuffling along the path.

But several times Ahni heard a clatter of pebbles in the rubble. At the second halt, Jeb was beside her again. "The yonker, what did she mean by *free*? That she can get away on her own?"

"How would she?" Ahni said, exasperated. "By flying? Diving into a crocodile's maw? I saw eyes among the stones, staring at us." Maybe she could distract him and learn something more?

Jeb laughed. "Kinnies. The numbers throw their babies into the arms of the kinnies, to save them. The kiddies grow up, become kinnies themselves, and catch the new crop of babies we bring. When they get too big to feed, they too run into the city. Nothing out here for them with all their people gone."

Arrogant lout. An old-lady phrase she heard in the caves. She had to be as wise as an old lady now. As wise as a Sister anyway.

At the third halt, the Jovat and Lomack men peeled off, Ahni heard, with Jeb at the end herding the prisoners before him. The prisoners whispered and muttered anxiously. She guessed they knew as little of what was to come as she.

“Ahni, sing us the day in when you get free,” came from among them as they passed.

Her heart turned over. She hadn't guessed her own people among the captives. She'd wanted them all safe with Niko, so had never accounted them. She sobbed because with only her ears free there was nothing she might say or sign for their comfort. “Your tears our balm, sweet AhniSister.” The same husky woman's voice.

‘What's the hold up, Jeb?’ someone called. “Marls and Lomacks are about finished.”

“In the City we'll be free, Niko-sister,” one of the Skin-brothers said.

“Orange light the colour of night-smoke is where we are driven, Little Eldest,” said another.

A threnody of only they two and one of the women Ahni knew.

“Hurry it up, Jeb. The action is now!” Joff shouted.

“Hee-yah!” Jeb shouted into a screaming shouting whip-cracking discordance.

Someone jerked on Ahni's camel's leads.

Ahni-mind raced into the chasms, to find Niko, and the rest of the people. She racketed here. There. Among the stony cliffs.

Then she found them. All of them lay a-bundle, tired to their bones, high on the plateau. The little ones in the center of the group to be safe from dreams of falling.

This day we climbed from the cauldron and none fell, Niko-mind thought at Ahni when he sensed her. He scattered her sad thoughts like sea wrack in the bracing tumble of waves on the shore. All night we'll rest with the bright stars above us and in the morning we'll climb down again, and walk into the next northerly-directioned groove.

His words washed over her like a sea-song.

When I saw the land in every direction, the wind flowing over it and the desert's long eon-slow swell, I knew I missed the ocean and I was surprised at myself. But Rollo said that when we moil in the bottom of a chasm, he often bethinks himself diving among the coral stoops, and I am glad of his friendship. He also cajoles the women better than I can.

So then she knew that at least Rollo and Niko were safe. *Who else?* She asked. *What women?* Her words like choppy water.

You heard Sanit and Orion. The woman with them is Rona-Mah. We do not mourn them because their kin tell us they aim to live. That cave-father's pup who'd be your lover, sweet sister-mine, left the cauldron at the same time as we. He limped and his wing was folded. We could not help him as we were separated from him by two grouts at the least. I must sleep now, sweet sister, because of the work to be done tomorrow.

Niko broke off the contact leaving Ahni borne up again against her trials. Her camel

stopped. The leads hung to the ground and all around were the chirrups of riders talking to their pack-camels. “Koosh.” “Sit.” “Be still.” “Stand.” The camels were unloaded with the lumpy thumps of packs hitting the ground. Tentpoles clattering told of the tents being set up.

“Jeldie!”

Joff calling his daughter? Ahni wondered.

Joff and Jeldie met at Ahni’s camel patiently waiting.

“I need the Seagirl made to look like one of us. A different plain dress. Her hair fixed. Her face with a mask.”

Jeldie kooshed Ahni’s mount and Ahni was rocked forward and back. Then Jeldie pulled loose the bandanna and Ahni, blinking her eyes, glanced everywhere.

She saw half a dozen camel yards enclosed by rubble-stacked walls. Camping places, three groups of tents going up. One of the men tending a fire in a large fire-pit in the center. Children carried lighted coals to each of family’s private fire-pit. Toward the east, curved a swale of tussock, in this season and the late light, a pale green.

Jeldie led Ahni to one of the smaller fireplaces. The leaping fire imprinted the masked faces with an incongruous liveliness that contrasted with their lack of expression.

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Kes and Kier crouched in the shed-annex. Hopefully in the firelight they resembled a pair of saddles piled with gear.

Their mother opened the backflap between the main tent and the annex, and beckoned them in, finger upright in front of her lips.

In the big tent, Jenk-Fa fastened up the last of the inner walls everybody used, to prevent cold sneaking through in winter, and for privacy all the year round. Another evidence that should look like that this family intended to stay in camp for a while. A hissing lamp sat on the canvas flooring in the middle of the floor.

All four cross-legged round the lamp—close in—Jenk-Fa nearest the front flap. *To deal with unwanted incomers*, Kes thought, chuckling inwardly. *Uncle Joff being the primary offender in that department.*

Kuri-Ma started her telling—all of it signed—by bringing Jenk up to date and at the same time informing Kier. “The elder son I mentioned earlier,” she signed, “Was my brother Keet, elder son to my stepmother. Kes was present when Moab told us. Better dead than a head, he said.”

Kes nodded. “Did he tell you what he meant?” he signed.

Kuri-Ma shook her head. She gazed at Kier. Pouring love into him, Kyle used to say about that way she looked at Kyle. Kyle then would say that all he ever wanted was for them—Kuri-Ma and Jenk-Fa—to accept who he was. Kes agog that he remembered all that.

Jenk-Fa gripped his knee and brought him back.

Yeah, what was he thinking? *Or not thinking.* He listened for sounds beyond the double-thick tent walls. He hadn't heard or seen any evidence of Ahni being in the camp. He clenched his jaws. She *must* be here somewhere?

Kuri-Ma told Kier the plan, a bare-bones account. The detail, she signed, he could get from Marl by way of Merin along the way? She made it a question, as if he hadn't chosen Merin years ago.

Kier stared fierce as if he really was an eagle. "Giving me another chance to renege?" he signed with choppy hand signals.

Kuri-Ma calmed him with a hand gesture. "Your father will see you to their tent."

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Ahni sat at the fireplace, with Lanie close beside her. Ahni studied the connections everyone had to each other. Lanie liked giving orders for other people to do the work, is what it looked like to Ahni. She didn't know Lanie as well as she knew Ivy, but Ivy was an Io, and Ivy's grandmother had winkled Ivy from the Jovat and Lomack camp, as neat and tidy as a shellfish from its shell. Maybe a grandmother to these people was like a Sister to Ahni's people. Lanie was sister to Lariat. And if she was partnered, Ahni did not know who to.

"The children and I will put up the rest of the Jovat and Lomack tents," Lanie said. "My days of transformering are done."

"Easy for you, sister," Lomack said. "You've had everything done you need. Fine. I need a couple of my procedures still."

Lanie took off her mask. "Lomack, I dare you to allow the sun to kiss your face every day and the moon light to bathe it every night until we come here again. My credits to the one who'll take the Seagirl brain-mapped. It's time we knew her true value."

Ahni frowned inwardly. Lanie must be older than she acted. Nearer Lomack's age than Lariat's?

"How can I resist such a dare?" Lomack said. "We two against the weather." He slid his mask up onto the top of his head. "Though I'll keep my credits against the time I'll need them to fix the sun's damage."

Then Lyris piped up. Lyris who was Lomack's daughter. "I'll share with Lewit and Jeldie if they agree. I'll take the Seagirl in, show her around, take her to meet them at the brain booth. Afterwards they can bring her to me in the trancery."

"That's good Lyris," Jeldie said. "We like that, don't we Lewit?"

Lanie and Lomack stayed by the fire, both of them maskless, both resolutely allowing the heat of the fire to touch their faces. By their silhouettes they appeared to be competing who could get the closest.

All the rest rose, Lyris and Jeldie pulling up Ahni between them.

Lewit turned to see what Ahni stared at. "Look at our Primaries," he said, calling on everyone's attention, He laughed. "They're stealing a march on the rest of us with their striving."

"It's a slow striving. They'll need all the distances till Show Town to work up to a final." Jeldie laughed too. "Think of the excitement when we finally measure the damage."

"I'll wait till I smell Show Town to engage *you* in some striving, Lewit my friend." Jeb leaped onto his camel without requiring it to koosh.

"I'll be ready." Lewit helped Jeldie onto the saddle in front of him.

Lyris pushed Ahni in front of the saddle on *her* camel. “Where I can see you,” she said.

A minx, Ahni thought in Orah-Sister’s voice.

Lyris kicked her beast until it rocked up. She sidled it over to Jeldie’s and Lewit’s animal. Ahni held tight to the saddle behind her.

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When Kier and Jenk had gone out the back way, Kuri-Ma turned to Kes. “Get into the life-suit, Kesson,” she whispered. “Have you got the second suit? Ahni *was* in Joff’s tent but he had Jeldie and Lewit take her into the Party Dome.”

Kes swore like gravel gnattering underfoot. Turned into a ten-thumbed yokel while he hurried into the life-suit right there, just turning his back to his mother.

She passed him a gleaner bag with Ahni’s suit in it and a bunch of stuff he hoped he wouldn’t need.

He thought the words. *Alive to background.*

< We are alive to background. >

It was only when he slung the bag over his head and a shoulder that he discovered the bag was made of life-suit fabric and, though he felt its weight comfortably across his chest, that it became as invisible as the rest of him.

He patted his mother’s head as he flitted past her into the annex and from there, out into the night. *I what? Patted my mother’s head?* He grinned. Chomped down on that before he rounded the back of the camp. *No way will I go through the camp, even invisible.*