

## **Ahni SkinGifter, 1: A Dark Fate**

Ahni, behind her mother backing her against the tower's spiral-corridor-wall, held onto AhniMah's arms for comfort. Where her elbows and her bare shoulder blades rubbed against the wall, she felt sand trickling from the old grey stones. They started to edge past OrahSister standing akimbo, trying to stop them, and made for the ladder at the upper end of the corridor.

"Falling from the eyrie is a quick way for children to join the seagoyles," OrahSister said.

"Ahni is no child," said AhniMah.

"Yet you keep her younger than she should be, by now." OrahSister went on with her usual refrain. "You need the time of growing fat and sleek. Of not worrying before you Gift your Skin. You know that."

Ahni listened hard. What was OrahSister talking about with fat and sleek? Everyone in the tower was thin with only their skin over their bones.

"How will I not worry seeing my sweet girl un-mothered?" AhniMah said.

Ahni leaned one ear hard against AhniMah's bare shoulders and pressed her other ear shut. Hearing her mother *say* what threatened brought it that much the nearer.

AhniMah pulled Ahni to her front, and caging her with her AhniMah-arms, pushed her up the ladder.

OrahSister never stopped trying to bring people to her point of view. "I take it you're going up there to beg Lucah to take Ahni as her apprentice?" she said. "Good. That will solve several problems. Leave Ahni with me and I'll get her started on something."

Ahni felt her mother make herself be like fired clay to mask her true feelings.

"I have a lot of mothering to squeeze into a short time so I'd rather have her close," AhniMah said.

"And I'm the Home Leader, only ever trying to do what's best for us all."

AhniMah thumped her fist against the hatch above their heads. "Lucah! Open up. We need to talk."

OrahSister put her hand over AhniMah's hand on the ladder's handrail. "Your grandson has been in training for three years. With him fishing, we could start two more children."

Her mother's grandson was Niko, as-close-to-Ahni-as-a-brother. Ahni often visited him in the pool and had played and swum with him and his friends in the Basin all through her childhood. AhniMah moved her hand, allowing OrahSister's to slide away. "Lucah! Hurry up!"

The steel hatch cover screeched and was shoved and pulled aside in stops and starts.

Ahni crimped her eyes against the flakes of rust showering them. AhniMah pushed her up almost before the opening was big enough. She hardly saw the Eldest, the sky was suddenly so big above her. It rested like the blue clamshell on the horizon all around. The cliffs were like the muscle holding the world together.

"Ahni, sit down. I can't have you falling," AhniMah said. She helped the Eldest lift the hatch cover back into its seating to cover the sight of OrahSister staring upward down in the corridor.

Without greeting AhniMah, or acknowledging Ahni, the Eldest spread her mat over the hatch cover and sat down on it, crooking one leg and stretching the other so that her one thigh rested on the side of her other foot. She dragged her grinding stone to the place in front of

her.

AhniMah sat opposite her, also silently. The Eldest had the right of first speech. AhniMah smoothed her soft leather skirt over her lap.

Of a sudden, Ahni realised that her mother looked more a Sister than the Eldest, with the Ahni-family Sister-lines pricked out in black over her breasts and her back. The Eldest had no need for such lines for she would never have a grandson who'd one day be a Swimmer.

The Eldest shrugged, still without a word, and cupped a hand around one ear making at the same time, with her other hand, the sign for Home Leader – four fingers up by the side of her head. Telling AhniMah that OrahSister would overhear anything they talked about.

AhniMah shook her head. No. She cupped *her* ear and pointed down at the Basin, where the mothers and children foraged for sea foods among the rocks of the seawall, and on the Basin's stony floor, knee deep in the tide. Someone down there screamed. "OrahSister, come quick!"

Ahni rose and would've run to the edge of the platform to see what good thing they'd found to eat, but for AhniMah grabbing her foot. "Lie down, fishling, if you want to see over the edge."

OrahSister's voice went receding down the corridor. "What is it? What is it?"

"DesiMah has found something really big," Ahni said. "Why does she need to tell OrahSister?"

"A diversion?" the Eldest said.

AhniMah laughed. "I asked her to call OrahSister so I could talk with my friend Lucah privately."

Ahni remembered that the Eldest's girl-name was Lucah.

"I know I'm meant to admire your cleverness, AhniMah," the Eldest said. "But I dread my role in your plan."

Ahni's ears popped with shock. Did that mean that the Eldest did not want Ahni as an apprentice? She stared but hardly saw the goings-on in the Basin. OrahSister splashed towards the women gathered beside the rock wall separating the Basin from the whole big bay. OrahSister took OrahMah's hunting stick from her. OrahSister and DesiMah rooted in a rock hollow. The rest of the mothers and all the children surrounded them to stop the prey getting away. She listened very hard to the discussion behind her.

"For years already we have said that we should leave this benighted tower," AhniMah said.

"And I'm always saying, where is there to go?" The Eldest mashed herbs. Her hands on the pestle moved to and fro over the mortar stone. *Slish. Slish.* The herbs were already as soft as baby food, but still the Eldest mashed them.

"OrahSister is after me to start my SkinGifting," AhniMah said. "She's happy I'm asking you to take on Ahni as apprentice."

Everyone in the Basin had gone inside—probably to share out the food-animal and cook it—and Ahni hoped someone would remember they three on the eyrie, as hungry as anyone.

"So this *is* about you," the Eldest said.

"Lucah, you know me better than that," AhniMah said. "No one can save me. All I ask is that on that day you lead the rest away."

"Where to?"

“To the Swamp. I thought we’d agreed it the best place?”

Ahni didn’t move. It didn’t seem wise. She’d never yet been to the Swamp.

“The implant reckons the Swamp will starve us should we use it continuously,” the Eldest said. “And you know that every springtime we’d not be safe.”

“Please think of somewhere else. Please let my sacrifice be the last. I beg you, Lucah.”

Ahni’s eyes prickled with tears at the entreaty in her mother’s voice. How could the Eldest not agree? She stared and stared at the place on the rock wall where the swimmers—the SkinGifted—dived into the Eastern Sea to begin their unimaginable journeys.

“I’m surprised you’re not concerned with saving Niko,” the Eldest said.

“Arno loves his brothers. He will save Niko along with the rest.”

“What is the topic of conversation?” said a high scratchy voice.

Was that the Eldest talking? Ahni had never heard her use such sharp high tones. Ahni peered back at her mother and the Eldest through the gap under her arm.

The Eldest gasped and pressed her left-hand-palm hard with her right-hand-thumb. She plunged back into her normal, contralto voice. “This *is* all about you and yours. Your son. Your grandson. In a minute you’ll tell me that you don’t want the implant for your daughter! That I should put up with its tricks for the rest of my life.” The Eldest’s face glittered with angry tears.

AhniMah slumped. Then she straightened, and Ahni could breathe again. “Lucah, I’m sorry. Selfishly I thought only of me and mine, my fellow wives, the SkinSwimmers and the children. How many lives you and I could save. I am very remiss never asking you your experience.”

“Pretty words,” the Eldest said. Yet she seemed to soften. “OrahSister’s attitude to the implant encourages me to keep silent about my problems with it,” she said.

“Tell me, Lucah.” AhniMah whispered but Ahni heard her plainly.

The Eldest also spoke in an undertone. “I don’t know if I should with the child here. If I’d known before I was implanted ... I might have drowned myself ... when I was chosen.”

Ahni heard, knowing the meaning of every one of the Eldest’s words, and she knew that AhniMah with her hand on Ahni’s ankle, knew that Ahni knew.

AhniMah said, “Speak, Lucah. I’d rather Ahni be strong with foreknowledge, than be raw clay in a Home Leader’s hands.”

“If you think it will help her.” The Eldest looked at Ahni. “Sit up, girl, and learn the first of your prentice lessons.”

Ahni scooted to sit beside AhniMah, her right-side-knee touching AhniMah’s left-knee. She smoothed her skirt over her lap, and tucked her flyaway hair behind her ears.

Then the Eldest began. “I was just a few years older than you are now when I was named Little Eldest, to be healer and storyteller. The Man-then was my full ....” She stopped in mid-sentence and stared. “Is that why?”

“The possibility is there,” AhniMah said. “Already the rest of the swimmers call Arno their Sea Leader.”

Ahni tried to work out the meaning of AhniMah’s comments. What possibility?

The Eldest continued. “The implant is alive in me and always telling its stories. A few I can

retell in the mothering room. A few more only to the Sisters. Most I must keep to myself. To a Home Leader's mind, the implant is only to be a compendium of useful lore that can be consulted in times of need."

The Eldest sounded so like OrahSister, Ahni almost giggled.

"When a mother becomes a Sister that *is* what she is told about the implant," AhniMah said.

The Eldest smiled with the corners of her mouth pulled up only a little. "You are such an anomaly," she said. "You *were* a Sister and you could've been Home Leader. Yet, when your first Ahni died you chose to go back into the mothering room to grow another girl child."

"First there was Niko to mother. Ahnitoo came later." AhniMah hugged Ahni around her shoulders. "People called you baby and girly and I was forever telling them you were an Ahni, too."

"No wonder you are the champion of the mothers," the Eldest said.

"Lucah, you've never been present at a SkinGifting?" AhniMah said as if she wondered why.

"The implant does not, and must not know, to what necessities we have fallen to survive ..."

AhniMah opened her mouth, maybe to gainsay.

Ahni pressed her knee against her mother's to remind her about listening. It seemed to Ahni she must hear every word the Eldest had to say on the subject of the implant.

"... yet if OrahSister knew how often it is free in me, she'd enwall me, and bring on a new host the quicker."

AhniMah gasped. "Free in you, how?"

The Eldest let go the pestle and pressed her left palm. Half turning, she stared at the southern horizon of sea and sky. "Clouds below the horizon," the sharp high voice said. "The ocean is glassy. As the spindle turns, so will we meet the weather. The wind will pick up between dawn and sunrise. Heavy rain to follow."

The Eldest pressed her left palm again. "More often lately the switch doesn't work," she said in her normal voice. "That was the implant talking, using my mouth and my throat. When I think of anything at all while she's switched on, she'll tell me everything she knows about it. When I'm at peace up here on my own, or down in the Basin by myself, she'll range over all her knowledge, constantly telling it to me to keep it fresh, apparently."

Straightaway the high voice took use of the Eldest again. "Keep it fresh in the lettuce crisper ... fundamental issues ... methanol ... orthoclase isobars ... herbal nutrients ... forest re-growth ... altocumulus ... mitochondria are the powerhouses of our cells ... cucumbers and okra ..."

The Eldest folded her lips in between her teeth and locked her jaws shut as she struggled to contain the voice. She pressed her palm again and again. Then, after a long silent moment, she said, "The implant's always-whispering words in me are like dry leaves wind-blown along dry clay ground. In my head it is always winter. I will take on Ahni, if only to get a few years of spring."

"I beg you, Lucah. Not the implant for Ahni." AhniMah bent low and touched the Eldest's feet with her hand and head.

"Don't bother with the performance, AhniMah. The Mother of the Deep holds us cupped in her hand. When she squeezes ..."

AhniMah hummed a long, troubled note. It was a part of the swimmer farewell that they always sang when a swimmer was lost.

Ahni's throat closed with the crying that always followed.

"What about my plan?" AhniMah whispered.

The Eldest was not moved. Her ordinary Eldest voice was snippy. "I'm not the leader it requires and you won't be available." She sniffed the air. "The delightful aroma of frying octopus. Time we went to claim our share." She rolled off her mat and dragging it from the hatch cover.

Silently AhniMah helped her lift the hatch cover.

The Eldest climbed down the ladder, also without words.

They listened to her movements towards the mothering room. The hum of voices briefly when the steel door opened and shut again.

Reaching blindly for Ahni, AhniMah burst into a sobbing wail.

Ahni hugged and hugged AhniMah. Her Ahni-skin goose-bumped at her mother's grief.

AhniMah rubbed Ahni's back even though it was AhniMah herself who hurt. "My sweet, my sweet, my sweet. Possibilities are all I can leave you."

Ahni could say nothing. A big fear animal clawed its way up from her heart.

AhniMah sniffed up her grief. "Go now, fish-fingerling. Let me recover."

Ahni trembled, climbing down. The fear animal inside her grew and grew, almost too big not to come screaming out by her mouth. She must not scream. She made herself as wooden as the ladder.