

12. Kes, Doubling Back

While they were still on the plateau and with the herd to be worked over for animals needing to be tagged and such, the trainee fighters like Kes, Kier, Lewit and Jeldie were to work on their roping. Kes wondered over the presence of all of them. Jeldie? A fighter? Lewit was a known peace-nik. Kier, he could understand, though his brother was so brash still.

Marl, the lariat champion, met them at the side of the herd. He carried a sack of grain feed that he patted and shaped to encourage it to stay upright. Merin followed her father, carrying a rolled-up carpet on her head, that she also stood upright. This time with the help of all of them, shoving dirt in toward it.

They each had had to bring their own lariat and Marl set them to roping the sack, roping the carpet, and finally Marl himself, who made it easy or hard for them according to their skill.

Kes shone when they turned to the camels. His hands and feet knew exactly what was required. The poor animals didn't know what was coming for a bunch of herdies stood ready at the side to collar them and tie them ready for branding.

Marl purred. "Numbers behave only a little different from the beasts," he said. "Tomorrow we gather on the race course." He pointed out the place.

The race course was only the hard mud where kids sometimes raced the calves in training. Kes walked back to his job thinking, while the rest of them jostled and chieaked each other. He ignored Marl's skite about the numbers. The fact that Marl purred though? What was that about?

Next day, Marl came to the practice grounds towing a number behind him by a rope around the man's waist. When he got the man in place, Marl dropped the rope and came to stand with his students.

"Fa says the beasts start to work out little tricks after their first couple of times being roped," Jeldie said. "But that the numbers are smarter first off, because usually they are running for their lives."

"The numbers will always be smarter. Camels can only be cunning," Lewit said.

Merin and Kier had eyes only for each other.

Marl kept his patience. "Kes, you got an idea?"

"I'm not roping a number."

"Come on! Have a go. You're the best with the animals. A number is a smaller target, but not so fast."

"He's afraid he'll get sea sick from all the ducking and weaving," Kier said.

The number stood poised to run. The man's gaze flicked along them all, face-to-hands-to-body. Face-to-hands-to-body. Taking in their body tone to foresee their actions. Who'd be making the first move. His skin was blotched with grey and his hair was twisted in dreads, making him a delta-born. Obviously Marl hadn't told him the details of the outing. Kes waited to be caught in the man's glancing. He dropped the lariat he'd had ready.

Understanding flowed through the man's stance.

Good. But how blind I've been. It's like I'm standing at the same divide again. If I stay this side, I'll be living this life.

Marl, he saw, readied himself to talk Kes into chasing the number and roping him.

"I quit," he said. He walked away.

The silence behind him was deafening.

Incredibly it was his father raving and ranting. “Quit? What do you know about roping in a sandstorm? Roping down into a chasm with a flood coming? Roping makes no difference whether it is a camel or manbeast!”

Kes shook his head at everything Jenk said. Wanting him not to spread his fury beyond the tent walls but probably making him angrier. He stepped back from his father’s spittle spray.

Next, Kuri strode into the inner tent slipping off her mask and throwing it onto the pile of rolled-up bedding. She went to stand alongside Jenk but with one foot ahead of his.

Reminding Jenk of her position perhaps.

Whatever, but it was enough to deflate his father. She said, “Kes, my son, you’ll either school yourself or I turn you out with only your clothes on your back.”

“Fine. I’ll go,” Kes said. He was amazed that she’d go that far and delighted at the same time at the possibilities. He had on the new sword-belt, his knife and a flat-pack for water folded over the back of the belt. He’d follow the cliffs back to the tower. There’d be rainwater standing in hollows in the rocks, and seafood wherever he could climb down. He’d live in the surrounds until Ahni could come to him.

“No! You will not go,” Jenk said. He clenched his fists and turned to Kuri. “While I’m alive, no son of mine will be banished!”

“You’re taking over my chieftainship now?” said Kuri. “Fighting me for it?”

Kes would’ve laughed except for the deep silence outside. Like every beast and body listened in. Typical.

“I’m taking my right as father, if not partner,” Jenk said.

After a long pause of his mother and his father staring into each other’s eyes, Kuri nodded.

Kes was saved again, he didn’t think. In his imagination he had already galloped to his victorious survival which now had to be put on hold. Again.

Someone in the annex cleared his throat.

“What?” Jenk said at the sinner interrupting a family quarrel.

“It’s me. Your brother.”

“What do you want?” Jenk said, hardly more polite.

Joff entered as if he’d been invited. He started on something totally other, as if he hadn’t stood under the tentflap waiting for an opportune moment to step in.

“It’s stupid to think we can feed the herd at the Shipyard for more than a couple of days. And the training will be better off with Kes gone for a bit. So why don’t I take most of the herd back along the rain trail, him with me to help?”

When Joff and Kes could barely be civil to one another? His uncle was gone in the head.

Jenk asked about the herd. “Take them back where?”

“Where the rain fell,” Joff said in his patient brothering mode. “Good for the trainees not to have a doubter among them while they work with the numbers. Good for the doubter ...” Joff pointed by rolling his fist thumb out-sticking at Kes. “It’ll give me the chance to strap him into shape.”

“You wish!” Kes started.

Kuri over-rode him. “Good idea for the herd. I’d volunteer Kes only if I thought you could remember to keep your disciplining for your own young.”

Kes was exultant. He was going back to the Swamp. He’d see Ahni the sooner. If he handled it right they might even escape. He’d pick the fastest camels, Joff’s own even. Take Ahni to Jinker’s camp in the chasms, then on to the delta. Release the personal camels to be found whenever.

“I’ll be coming too,” Jenk said. “A three-man team will work better.” He sent Kes a lightning glance as reminder.

Oh yeah, the flee-and-tag promise. Kes dampened down his excitement, but kept it alive. With one man asleep and the other with the herd, he’d have plenty of time in the Swamp.

“I’ve got my swag ready,” Joff said. “I’ll start separating the herd.”

Meaning he’d sit on his ride and direct the herd-crew to do the work.

“Go get ready, Kes,” Jenk said.

“I’m not done,” Kuri said softly. She gripped Kes’s gaze with hers, like she was being a king brown snake hypnotizing a desert rat. “If you wish to return it will be as one of us.”

He stared too, to see who could be the fiercest snake. “I told Fa I’ll not hunt and I mean it.” Then he said real softly, like her, to stump the eavesdroppers but like it was a challenge, “How is there a future in hunting? Marl’s number that he trotted out for roping, is delta-born with scars on him like whip burn. Who is going to want *his* arms and legs? Seems to me the Sink wants more when there are fewer to catch.”

“How is it that you suddenly know more about the trade than your elders?” Kuri said. “The Sink’s governors are also smarter than you think.”

“I’ve heard that. That they’re searching for a way to grow what they need in laboratories. What happens to us when they know how to do that?”

“Kes, what don’t you understand about our lives?” Jenk said while he packed his saddlebags from the boxes and baskets along the tent walls. “It has to do until something better turns up.”

Still Kes was curious how far he could take the conversation. Though his father was obviously champing to go. And also he didn’t mind to keep Joff waiting where possible. “How will you know the better thing if you just keep on keeping the old ways?”

His mother made a chopping motion with her sword hand. “Enough. You’ll return and you’ll fight.”

They waited, together, for his acknowledgement.

The ultimatum so was like an anticlimax. He just didn’t intend being here. “Yeah, sure. I’ll be the best fighter you ever had.” He was suddenly so over all the manipulating, he didn’t even do his usual double meanings. But oh man, he was going to hate himself for what he’d do to his father.

13: Ahni, The Swamp Gardens

Always now Ahni-in-her-mind imagined herself sitting behind Kes on his camel, riding through the dawn, to an unimaginable place beyond the horizon.

But Ahni-being-good did nothing that might allow OrahSister or the Eldest to suspect her thoughts. Instead, today, she ground herbs and seeds.

“Repeat after me,” the Eldest said. “Oft times there grow many, never too few, there’s a thyme to worm and a thyme to strew.”

Ahni repeated the couplet to learn it. “Oft times there grow many...”

OrahSister climbed up through the hatch and started talking to the Eldest as though Ahni didn’t exist. “Trouble, trouble. Nothing but trouble. I tell you, it doesn’t pay to relax.”

“You, here, sharing the emergency with me,” the Eldest said. “Probably means you’re about to ask me to go to the Swamp to fetch food.”

Ahni left Kes where he was and attended to the present.

“You read my thoughts, Lucah.”

“Then it’s probably that the SkinGifted are held up somewhere?”

“A pod of orca patrols the shore they’ve taken refuge on. Take her. A strong young back,” she added in the Sister-shorthand.

“Another Sister along?” the Eldest said.

“All fishing in the bay. The herders well away, if that’s your worry.”

So only Ahni and the Eldest climbed the hole to the red land.

The Eldest stretched herself and breathed deep of the spicy desert air.

Ahni only glanced back at the tower. Now that she dared think she might never see it again, the tower seemed squat and diminished on its finger of rock surrounded by the whole wide ocean.

The Eldest sat down in her usual posture with one leg straight out, one leg drawn up under her opposite thigh. She motioned Ahni down opposite her. “Before we start, I want us to talk. You and I began all wrong. My job is to listen to the ancestress and mediate its words for our people. I became confused listening to your mother’s desires. Leaving you, meanwhile, to flounder. I’m sorry for my inattention, Ahni. Please join me in beginning your apprenticeship again, properly.”

Ahni dared not mention Kes or the visions that always waited almost within sight since she’d been salved with the delta cure. It was as though the Eldest wanted to believe that if they two started again, neither of these things had happened?

And yet it was only by thinking of Kes that Ahni could withstand the visions. Kes was real. Her skin remembered his fingers stroking her.

“What do you think?” the Eldest said.

“I will learn what you teach,” Ahni said.

“Now you’re being stand-offish,” the Eldest said. “I will need your whole self and the ancestress will need your whole mind. Your life will be the longer as a result, I can promise you that.”

The Eldest would think her rude and ungrateful should Ahni say anything of her own wishes. With Kes she needn’t press her lips together for fear of shouting disrespectful truths.

“Well then,” the Eldest said before the silence became too long, “We’d better start my-teaching-and-you-learning. Come along.”

The Eldest carried the sweet-water shilo-de-people around her neck and the herb wallet bandoleered over one shoulder.

Ahni balanced their two sleeping mats wrapped around an iron cooking pot on her head.

The Eldest seemed to delight in going slow. “Orah is right. I should’ve started you on the learning weeks ago. I would’ve got my peace all the sooner. Look here, Ahni. Pod potato. A dozen fruit. Good to eat when roasted. We’ll harvest them on the way back.”

The Eldest veered off the path. “Ruby saltbush. You can snack on the fruit, while harvesting the stems and leaves.”

“Shouldn’t we just walk if we’re to reach Petra Woman-rock before dark?” Ahni said.

“Well, probably. Just have a look at this one. Nitre bush. No fruit on it now, but worth looking for.”

Ahni remembered she needed to show an interest. She said the easiest thing. “What colour are the berries?”

“You should try to remember the shape of the bush, Ahni. The berries range between red and yellow.”

The second part of the day the Eldest tested Ahni. “What is this one?”

“Was it a boobialla?”

“Not with these fleshy leaves. Try again.”

“It’s getting dark.”

“Nitre bush. One of the first we saw.” The Eldest frowned. “I really thought a girl of the Ahni-family-line would learn it all very easily. It’s important that you try harder, Ahni. We’ll have only this one trip together.”

Ahni hung her head. Her eyes stung with salt. She yearned to be learning Kes.

A long lone cloud slid in front of the early moon.

“Tch.” Though the Eldest sounded annoyed, Ahni’s spirits lifted. That tongue-behind-the-teeth click was so much part of life in the tower. All the mothers and Sisters did it. “Very well,” the Eldest said. “Since I’d rather not walk off the edge of the land, we’ll stop. Spread the mats, please.”

The next day was the same. They traveled slowly so that Ahni might learn the plants growing along the way. Because they were always stopping and looking at the near-ground, the mat-roll constantly slid forward. By the time they reached Petra, at midday, Ahni’s arms were like stony weights, so heavy and tired from holding the mats on her head.

“Give me the pot,” the Eldest said.

Ahni tipped her head forward, this time letting her load slide forward all the way into her arms – if only she was the roll tipping into the circle of Kes’s arms – and lay it on the ground at the foot of Petra. Unknotted the belts.

The Eldest reached impatiently for the pot. Her left hand connected awkwardly with its rim. Straightaway the high squeaky implant voice said, “Midday is when the sun is overhead.”

Puzzled, Ahni asked, “Why would that be different here than at home?”

“Don’t even try to answer. The ancestress intends to drive me mad. She wishes to be transplanted the sooner. Perhaps she divines your inattention.”

“She can’t know what I think.”

“If I suspect your inattention, how would she not know it?”

“Midday is when the sun is overhead,” the implant said again. “Midday is when the sun is overhead. Midday is when the sun is ...”

“Help ... me ... stop!” The Eldest dropped on her hands and knees. She screamed. “I want peace! I want my freedom! She can have you!” She fell onto her side and fought her left hand with her right hand. “Help me! Remember? A stone!”

Ahni ran to where the Eldest pointed, scrambled down the path. At the bottom, she quickly fitted a couple of pebbles into her palm. Put them into her waist pocket. Climbed back up the cliff.

“Midday is when the ...” The ancestral voice squeaked over the Eldest’s vocal chords while the Eldest flailed and beat her left hand on the ground. She filled the gaps between the implant’s words with her own. “I need ... my peace. I need my ... promised peace.”

Ahni slapped the roundest stone into the Eldest’s hand.

The ancient voice cut off in mid-word.

Using one of the ties from the mats, Ahni bound the stone against the Eldest’s palm. “Why do we even have the ancestral mind?”

“It was made for us by the first to sacrifice themselves.” With the singsong voice she always used when she taught the children, the Eldest said, “In this form because they knew the vulnerability of fragile objects separate from their keepers. It is always for an Eldest to host the implant.”

Ahni realized she knew why. An Eldest did not bear children and was therefore not expected to SkinGift. An Eldest, as the Eldest herself said, lived longer than anyone. “Where is it in you?”

“Kneel behind me and put your hands on my head.” The Eldest trembled. “Here and here. Gently gently. What do you feel?”

Finger-tip touching, Ahni felt the rim, as of a bowl, under the Eldest’s head-skin. The raised area followed the shape of the Eldest’s skull. Feeling the Eldest’s slight flinch, Ahni finally understood her always-refusal of hairdressing. Small girls liked to while away an indoor afternoon doing someone’s hair. None, in Ahni’s memory, had ever talked the Eldest into a new hairstyle.

“And through my neck and then down my arm. It ends here.” The Eldest guided Ahni’s finger down the silver scar-track to her left hand. “When I press that spot...,” she mimed pressing the scar, now covered with the stone, with her left hand resting on the fingers of her right hand and pressing the left hand palm with her right thumb, “... so ... that should turn it off.”

Ahni made herself sound like the younger child the Eldest seemed to be addressing. “But why must we keep it? It seems very angry.”

“The Sisters are loath to do without its knowledge. They don’t trust the way you are learning the plants in the Swamp, for instance, by repeating over and over what I tell you. Yet it is the same way I learned them from my Eldest. All my life the Sisters have wanted me to check

that knowledge against what this old machine-mind can tell us. What they forget is how our people's lives have changed while the ancestress's knowledge remains the same."

"I saw you once helping SanaSister fix the wind pump?"

"Yes, I have to be fair. The implant knows the insides of our wind-pump and our storm-talkers and our fresh-water machine as well as I know the plants in the Swamp. Time was, I think, that our machines could repair themselves. The ancestress says we cannot now live without its guidance. This the Sisters also believe." The Eldest frowned. "Ahni, mark my words well, there are many things about our lives that the ancestress does not, and must not know." She gripped Ahni's arm and didn't let go and didn't let go.

Waiting for her acknowledgement? "I hear you, Eldest."

The Eldest relaxed, almost slumping to the ground. "Oh! You do finally understand!"

Ahni was confused. Was the Eldest being sarcastic?

"I'm so glad," The Eldest mumbled. "I'm so very very glad. I've been looking forward so much to my peace."

All the time while the Eldest napped, Ahni puzzled over her reaction. How had she-Ahni said she understood the task? How had she-Ahni said she accepted it? Because that was how the Eldest seemed to be taking Ahni's words.

In the whole long afternoon, Ahni learned five kinds of grass seeds that could be eaten, all the different sorts of saltbush and how their leaves should be prepared, and the tubers and berries that could be harvested were they but ripe.

The Eldest grew more cheerful and talkative the nearer they came to the swamp. She said, with her arms outstretched to all the horizons, "We could live very well here, were we to move to the swamp and forage out on the red land."

Ahni bit the inside of her cheek not to burst out with all the words that passed between her mother and the Eldest that last meeting between them. The Eldest seemed a whole other person.

"Aren't we meant to be afraid of the herders?" Ahni said to remind the Eldest of OrahSister's fears. It seemed to her that Kes was separate from what OrahSister called *the herder problem*.

"Now you're being paranoid, the same as all the other Sisters. We could make ourselves at home, perhaps building a shelter, while the herders are away on their travels. If she dared it, OrahSister would then discover, when the herders returned, that I am not just an Eldest to a bunch of SkinGifters."

If even OrahSister did not know it, Ahni shouldn't hear it either. What else was there to talk about? "What is it to be an Eldest, apart from hosting the ancestress?"

The Eldest stopped. "You're being a child again. Purposely, it seems to me."

"I know about the healing," Ahni quickly said. "And I'm glad to be learning it."

"What then?"

"What about the stories you tell? Where do you find out the new things?"

"I'm surprised you even notice them."

"I always notice when you change things."

The Eldest crossed nervously to the left of Ahni, back to the right, and left again. *Eyes down! What is the Eldest seeing on the path?*

Tracks! Ahni looked ahead of the Eldest scuffing them. One, maybe two, pad prints per beast were pressed in the dust, their passage meandering across the path.

Her heart lurched from joy. She might accidentally have grinned.

The Eldest stopped. "We need to re-arrange our loads. Keep the mats. Yes, on your head. Hold the wallet for a minute?" *Snap!* The Eldest closed a bracelet around Ahni's wrist. A smooth twine looped to a similar bracelet around her own, left-hand wrist.

Ahni jerked her arm, dropped the wallet. "What *is* this?"

The Eldest laughed. "A technotic tie. Once upon a time I was you and I ran to *my* herder. So why would I trust you?"

"Why did you came back?" Ahni didn't care how what she sounded like.

"The AhniSister-then was Home Leader. She fetched me back. All the Sisters-now were children, they know nothing of my early life. Your mother knew. One reason why I never liked her as much as she seemed to like me."

With the technotic tie connecting Ahni to the Eldest every action, except thinking, was more difficult. The Eldest picked up the wallet and Ahni had to bend with her. Of course the mats slid forward and she had somehow to balance them again with just her left hand.

"The water ceremony was a travesty," the Eldest said. "Because I can't trust you."

Ahni could drink only as much as the Eldest drank, because the Eldest pulled her up as soon as she herself had had her fill.

"First we'll dump the mats and fetch the digging sticks. Then we'll get some raw clay."

No need to ask. They would do everything together.

The Eldest, with her right arm behind her, to Ahni's arm ahead, preceded Ahni along the single-file paths. She talked non-stop explaining the particulars of the Swamp.

Ahni left Kes her foot tracks in the sand at the side of the creek. A white-clay-print on a dark rock. A sandy print in a shallow alga-floored pond.

The Eldest didn't notice. "We're going to what's called the morning water, the name because it's warm of a morning, a shallow over rock. We're taking the paths because too many times of cutting through the reeds would destroy the reed beds when they will be one of our most important foods when we come to live here. Stop."

The Eldest stepped down into the reed bed beside the path and dug with the end of her fishing spear. "We'll get us a couple of roots while we're here. Show you."

She washed the bulbs clean. Passed them back for Ahni to keep in her waist pocket.

"Halt," the Eldest said again. As if Ahni wouldn't be stopping when the Eldest did. "How will you remember this place?"

Ahni looked around. "I'd imagine a water-woman lying down in this water, her right arm outstretched and lined by reeds, her whole right side outlined by reeds. Her arm is the path to the big island. The rill for drinking comes out of her left ear. In the water ceremony the youngest woman stands in her left hand at the top of the path home. The oldest woman stands on her left elbow at the bottom of the path."

The Eldest was silent.

Ahni thought because she hadn't finished. "We're perched on her right knee."

"I thank you, Ahni," the Eldest said faintly. Then she said it strongly. "I thank you, Ahni, for your gift of words to the Swamp." The Eldest still did not say the next thing to do. "I have such regrets." Instead of explaining what she regretted, she said, "When I die, I want to be that water-woman."

Then Ahni regretted *her* words. Just because she wanted to join Kes, didn't mean she wanted the Eldest dead. What if, forever after, she knew the water-woman was the Eldest? She'd never be able to come here again. She concentrated fiercely on making swirling patterns in the water with her foot.

"A very good way of remembering. I approve," said the implant with the high squeaky voice.

The implant was aware? Ahni checked for the stone in the Eldest's hand. "That stone is gone!"

"Don't stress. The ancestress knows I'm teaching you. I think she'll be on her best behaviour out here." The Eldest's tone was blithe. But how would Ahni not worry?

The Eldest squatted, so Ahni squatted. "Down here, beside the outside of the Swamp-woman's knee is the clay that we use for baking," she said. "We'll hold the basket with our tied hands and fill it with our free hands. A few good-sized dollops should do it."

They dumped clay into the basket. "Do you see why I lined the basket with the water lily leaves?"

"Yes, Eldest." They rose with the basket in their four hands.

"On your head with it," the Eldest said. "We'd tear the handles off it, carrying it by them now." She was full of cheer.

After they brought the basket to the campsite, they fished for eel, right there beside the isle. Despite what the Eldest said earlier about not moving through the reed beds too often. They walked knee-deep in the mud, feeling their way among the reed roots with their feet. And feeling with their feet for the flutter of a tail or a body, or only a movement of water where an eel tried to escape its fate.

Then, for once without speaking or telling, the Eldest jabbed down with her spear. Again and again. Finally she hurt the fish so much, it rose to the surface to try and escape. The Eldest grabbed it and wrenched its head around on its neck. She thrust the slimy body at Ahni. "For you to strip it and clean. Never mind keeping the skin this time."

After they clambered back onto the isle, Ahni tackled the eel with both her hands.

The Eldest built the fire one-handed. "These firestones will be yours when you come again," she said.

Ahni wondered that the Eldest did not release her. What if she asked? But what if the Eldest's good mood flipped back to bad again? *Not worth it.* Leaving her foot-prints everywhere for Kes to find, she'd done all she could, to help their future along.

She doubled her wishes-like-fishes darting all through the doings of the day. But night was night, and coming. How would Kes find her if he couldn't *see* her carefully printed tracks?

The Eldest broke into her thoughts. "Now divide the fish in two pieces. Wrap them in the lily leaves and then in the clay. Bury them under the fire."

They'd been so busy, and Ahni had had so much to think about, that dusk was now. "We'll go for another drink," the Eldest said. Down at the water, the Eldest could only talk about the water-woman that she would be. "We'll teach the others about her as soon as they arrive."

Ahni didn't believe anyone else was coming. Hadn't OrahSister said she couldn't spare anyone? She rinsed her hair. She wanted the Eldest to be her normal self.

Braa-ah-ah-aw! A camel's roar, on the land above the Swamp!

The Eldest leapt from shock and into silence. She slung the shilo roughly about her neck and the wallet over her shoulder. Wild-eyed, she dragged Ahni with her toward the camping island where she scooped dirt onto the fire. "Help me roll the mats," she hissed.

Ahni fumbled the mats together. She must, must escape. How?

The Eldest pulled her along the path to the creek.