

Lodestar Series: The SkinGifters

2: The Future Begun

Though it was still the dark night, Ahni woke as soon as OrahSister, the Eldest, and the rest of the Sisters entered the mothering room. The draft from the open door made the perpetual candle flicker so that all their shadows walking along the walls were the size of sea-goyles.

Behind her on their shared mat, her mother dreamed and dreamed without waking, even when DesiSister leaned over their bed-place. “Ahni, my sweet Ahnitoo,” AhniMah murmured.

With one hand DesiSister lifted AhniMah’s arm and with the other rolled Ahni out from her mother’s embrace. “Get up, Ahni. Time to get a move on.”

DesiSister signed for Ahni not to speak. She encouraged Ahni to the door with a not-to-be-shaken-off hand under one elbow. Passing OrahSister with Ahni, DesiSister said, “A bit heavy-handed with the sleepeasy, surely?”

The fear-beast squeezed Ahni’s heart. She would’ve run back to AhniMah if it hadn’t been for DesiSister’s hand, and now also OrahSister’s, each gripping one of her arms.

“Be calm, Ahni,” OrahSister said. “Would you wake the little children also travelling?”

“Why would *they* wake? You gave *them* bitter honey drops,” Ahni said. “What did you give AhniMah?”

OrahSister frowned. “She’s observant, DesiSister. Watch that your tongue doesn’t flap.”

They led her down the spiral corridor past OrcahMan snoring behind his leather curtain. Past the prentices surrounding the prentice pool, all of them fast asleep, Ahni saw with a glance through the arched doorway. Maybe *they* all had had to have bitter honey drops as well.

Outside, Ahni noted everything important in a second. The moon was full—what the Sisters called a travelling moon. Four mothers were strung out across the Basin following the Eldest leading them. Three carried their little children on their backs in slings. The fourth little one sat on her mother’s shoulders.

OrahSister stopped Ahni on Flat Rock. “It’s the quarter tide,” she said. “You’ve been obstinate up to now, Ahni! Ignoring the Eldest’s every approach. You will put that behaviour aside and do whatever the Eldest and DesiSister require of you.” With her hands heavy on Ahni’s shoulders, she forced her to step down into the water. “Give me the mats,” she demanded from someone.

Ahni’s hands went up of their own accord to hold the mat-roll OrahSister balanced onto her Ahni-head.

“Go.” OrahSister pushed Ahni to start her wading across the Basin. “Desi, I’m depending on you to get her there.”

“As well as depending on just me for all the other business?” DesiSister said. “When usually we have at least two Sisters along?”

OrahSister dropped her voice and said something nasty. All that Ahni heard next was silence on DesiSister’s part, and her sloshing after Ahni.

When she got near, or far enough from the shore that OrahSister wouldn’t hear, DesiSister said, “And that’s Desi put in her place, right next to Ahni.”

Ahni stumbled over every stone when she knew them as well as she knew the knuckles on the back of her hands. The fright-beast in her head roared of dangers at every hand.

“Don’t get my mat in that roll wet is all I’m asking,” said DesiSister.

Ahni sobbed at DesiSister’s ordinary cheekiness.

“That’s it,” DesiSister said. “Let the fear-beast gallop out and away into the night.”

Then Ahni laughed at the same time that she wept, because DesiSister was still mothering, though she’d been a Sister for more than two years. “Why am I here? Where are we going?”

“You heard OrahSister about my tongue. But you’re a smart girl and I’m sure you’ll work it all out. You’re along to learn the Eldest’s way of doing things, I believe.”

“We’re going to the Swamp?”

“Yes, and I suppose Lucah was too busy cooking up her potions to tell you anything?”

It was too complicated to explain why Ahni felt she must always stay by her mother’s side. That so far, she’d managed to ignore the Eldest’s half-hearted beckonings. Her voice wanted to tremble. “All I know is OrahSister’s announcement in the mothering room the day before yesterday.”

“Well, I better do the Eldest’s job for her. Tell me what OrahSister said. Word perfect, mind you.”

“OrahSister came in and stood in the doorway so no one could go out. She said, “It is the fifth year of a span, and a few days from the exact day between the longest and the shortest days.” When she said ‘span’ she held up her hand, fingers outstretched, to remind the children that a span is five years.” Ahni dropped her voice. “KiraMah, in the bed-place next to ours, hissed. From upset.”

She gazed at KiraMah wading out front, next after the Eldest, with her four-summers-old Kenly-girl on her shoulders. KiraMah was mother of Kira, Ahni’s friend. Kira had been left behind at the tower.

Ahni and DesiSister arrived at the narrow shelf at the foot of the cliffs. Moonlight showed the way by the wet tracks along the bottom of the cliff to the left, to where the last of the mothers clambered up the loose gravelly slope of Scree.

“Tell me what happened next while we hurry to catch up,” DesiSister said.

“OrahSister looked at several of the mothers like she signaled them. That’s them, with one child each. Is that why you’re here?”

“Why do you think that?” DesiSister said.

“No mother of a mother is here.”

DesiSister stopped at the bottom of Scree despite what she’d said about hurrying. She let the roll of mats *she* carried, slide down off her head. “Ahni, you’re lucky it’s me hearing your ideas. You’ve probably heard people talk behind my back, calling me a busybody.”

“My mother says you are a survivor,” Ahni said.

DesiSister dropped what she was doing and put her hands up around Ahni’s face. “I thank you for gifting me with AhniMah’s friend-words, Ahni.” She dropped her hands to find loops on their mat-rolls. “*My* mother was always at me to hide my stares and my questions.”

“I never saw any little children come home with a bunch of women who went to the swamp,” Ahni said, voice trembling.

DesiSister guided Ahni's arms into the loops. "You can't climb Scree with a mat-roll loose on your head." Their faces were close together. Bright tears shone in DesiSister's eyes. "Last span I took my last born. Remember you used to play with him in the Basin?" DesiSister's expression was bereft.

"They're left on their own at the Swamp? Little children?" Ahni's voice quavered high.

"Now shrug forward," DesiSister said. "So the roll comes high on your shoulders. Keep going with the story."

Ahni calmed herself. DesiSister ignoring her outburst must mean that the children were not left on their own. But what then? "After the dinner hour, the Eldest came round with a special treat for all the children. Bitter honey drops. "None for you," she said to me. "*You'll* need to be wide awake."

"Let's climb."

With each step the gravel slid down wanting Ahni's feet to carry her home to AhniMah. DesiSister, coming behind her, pushed Ahni in the back whenever she slowed.

On the other side of Scree the moonlit world was completely strange with no seatower on its rocky tongue.

"Step down and towards the right," DesiSister said. "Along this path of little boulders, made by Sisters long ago."

Moonlight on the top of each rock made them like a stairway. At the bottom the rest of the women were waiting.

DesiSister shrugged out of her roll and undid the belts. Each mother took the mat DesiSister gave her, newly woven with her child's family pattern. The Eldest and DesiSister helped the mothers roll their still-sleeping little ones in their mat and tie the bundle in three places – below their little feet, around their middle and above their heads – as if they would never wake again.

"No! No!" Ahni whisper-screamed.

"Please help me tie my knots, Ahni," KiraMah said. "So that Kenly doesn't slide from the bottom of the mat while we take her up that tunnel in the cliff."

Ahni did not want to touch Kenly. "Why do we take them dead?"

"We keep them *asleep* for this part of the journey, Ahni," KiraMah said. "Because they're too little to reach the ledges and the hand-holds in the chimney."

The Eldest took the herb-wallet and the sweet water shilo-de-people from her shoulders and put them on a flat stone by the doorway in the cliff. She took up the end of the rope tied above Kenly's head and stepped into the darkly shadowed entry hole beside them.

DesiSister tied the rope of the next child's roll to KiraMah's waist. KiraMah took up the Kenly-roll and followed the Eldest into the dark doorway.

"Ready," the Eldest called. Her voice boomed down the hole.

The Kenly mat-roll sometimes slithered, sometimes rasped. Most of the time, the rising tide slapping at the base of the cliff was all that Ahni heard.

"Ready," KiraMah said down the hole.

After two more mothers with their sleeping children, it was the turn of the wallet, the sweet-water-shilo-de-people and the remaining mat roll to be hoisted up.

“Now you,” said DesiSister still at the bottom. “Stand with your feet on mine while I explain. Look where I point.”

Ahni stared up into the moonless dark. “Can’t see anything.” The sea washed to and fro in the bottom of the hole with a smell of sea-rot.

“Look where I point, Ahni. Alongside my arm. Patches of phosphorescence. Two on the left. Three on the right. Handholds. Footholds. Please don’t fall back on me, because my mother didn’t feed me up.”

Ahni laughed with a trembling giggle. She was a head taller than DesiSister.

“I ask you, Ahni, when the children wake in the morning to be playful with them. They are going on a great adventure and should not know our fears.”

The new morning was the first time that Ahni and the four little children woke on the red land. With the sun already standing in the sky, the Eldest allowed everyone a couple of mouthfuls each from the sweet water shilo-de-people while DesiSister doled out a dried fish-side each to chew on.

Ahni led the children forward in hide-and-chase, with Ahni hiding by lying flat behind the littlest hills; and find-and-eat, with Ahni sprinkling around the berries and leaves the mothers harvested from the low desert vegetation as they went, and shouting ‘Near!’ and ‘Far!’ to help the little ones find the treats.

KiraMah carried Ahni’s mat-roll.

All morning Ahni re-invented the games she and Kira played with these same children and the ones still at the tower while ever their mothers foraged in the Basin. Ahni wondered whether Kira was doing the same thing.

By midday they all four were exhausted. The Eldest squeezed them out one mouthful of water each. And everyone napped for a short hour. Then it was walking, with their mothers carrying the smallest.

At dusk, they reached a woman-tall stone, Petra Woman-rock, that Ahni knew from a story.

In a cleared area at the foot of the rock, surrounded by grey bushes, even DesiSister rolled herself into her mat at once and without any jokes. Mothers each lay with their child in the middle of the square, DesiSister and the Eldest took a side each and it was up to Ahni to sleep at the foot of the clearing.

The Eldest woke them at first light.

The land was un-coloured yet by the sun. Ahni shivered. Spider webbing joined all the bushes and even a few peaks of matting.

DesiSister shared out fish snacks. The Eldest shared out the water. The same as the day before.

“Another game would be good,” said the Eldest. “Warm you up. Off you go.”

Today the children were hesitant leaving their mothers. Even Ahni felt too young for the vast grey land stretching in every direction. The narrow red path twisted and curled up on itself like an eel caught by the head.

The Eldest opened the herb wallet she wore bandoleered across one shoulder, and took out a handful of eucalyptus honey drops. “These are the sort you like too, Ahni.”

How could she trust honey drops ever again? “No thank you, Eldest.”

“Give Ahni the mats, KirahMah. The sooner OrahSister separates her from AhniMah, the better for everyone.” The Eldest marched forward at a good pace and the rest followed her the better to leave Ahni be alone at the end, to think over her wrong behaviour.

Ahni stood at the top of a path into the swamp. A shallow sheet of water lay at the bottom, reflecting the blue sky without imperfection. DesiSister was beside her to teach Ahni her part in the water ceremony. The mothers were lined up youngest to oldest on successive steps down the path. Their children at their feet. The Eldest at the bottom, not yet in the water.

Ahni held the almost-emptied sweet water shilo at the ready.

“Lift it up in both your hands, straight above your head. Be ready to squeeze it when the Eldest says ‘rain’,” said DesiSister.

“Mother of the Wind in all its caprices,” the Eldest said. “We give you water to help make clouds and rain for the Swamp.”

Ahni squeezed the pretend-rain through the shilo’s puckered mouth, to sparkle down and fall anywhere.

“Now lower the shilo down to chin-height,” DesiSister said. “And knead it to force a tiny amount of the remaining water forward.”

“Mother of our Land,” the Eldest said towards the desert, “We give you water for your springs to sweeten your ever-weeping tears.”

Ahni pearled a handful of water drops onto the dust at her feet, and with a private addition to the ceremony, leaned her shadow over the moisture so that it might soak into the ground before the sun took more than its share.

“Now shift the shilo down to your heart.”

“Mother of us all, of people everywhere, help us share our children with those unlucky in creation,” the Eldest said. She signed at DesiSister.

“Sprinkle water over the mothers and the children,” DesiSister said.

“Mother of us all, we give water for the herders, that they may one day soon regain their fecundity. That we may then keep our own children for ourselves.”

The mother nearest sobbed.

Ahni sprayed her with a little extra to help her hide her tears.

Now the Eldest stepped down into the creek. The water rippled out from where her feet entered and made the sky down there restless and troubled. Like a portent.

DesiSister touched Ahni’s arm. Saying silently, Be here with us.

“Keep us, Mother of the Deep, your true children. We are without fear and ask no favour. We return our breath to the wind, our flesh to the fish, and we sink our bones to be washed eternally by the sea.”

Ahni sent the last water sparkling into the swamp, water to water.

It was up to each woman to add her own silent words. “I believe,” DesiSister whispered. “Like AhniMah does, that we have no choice but to bring the herders our children.”

Ahni stared at her open-mouthed.

“Shh. Don’t ask now. Or here. Just remember it.”

Where the water deepened and flowed faster, they all took their turn lying down in the creek and drinking. No water Ahni ever tasted was so fresh, so natural to her flesh. She gulped it down, mouthful after mouthful, letting it flow into her open mouth at the waterline.

“That’s surely enough, Ahni?” said the Eldest. “You’ll be no use to anyone with a griping belly.”

DesiSister winked when Ahni passed her on the way to the end of the line. “We’re all out of sorts, Ahni, doing this thing. The Eldest worries over her every move for usually it is the Home Leader leading when we get to the Swamp. The mothers wonder what might be keeping OrahSister at the tower.”

Ahni waited for DesiSister to say what worried *her*, but the air was so friendly she let DesiSister be. Sister-secrets probably.

The Eldest led them straight at the head-high reeds bordering the creek.

When they got close, Ahni saw a broad opening through the reed wall, wide enough for several people to walk through beside one another. Then everyone wore striped shadows-and-light so that they all together looked like a sea snake shimmering through its home weeds. The path ended at a large dry place made of fine sand.

“Ahni, DesiSister,” said the Eldest. “Spread the mats on this half. You mothers, get your children tidied and their hair plaited.”

The mothers stood together in a small knot, children inside it, until KiraMah broke away and took Kenly to the Kira-family mat. They sat down, with Kenly in KiraMah’s lap.

“Ahni! There’s no time for gawping. There’s a smaller island near to this one.” The Eldest’s arm swung in a vague direction. “Where we usually camp. Firewood and a few other stores in a mat-fold. Better still if you fetch some shellfish from the beach. Make a fire. Soup.”

It felt like she was being got out of the way. “Beach?” She couldn’t read the Eldest’s mind. “Are we that close to the coast? Which reeds for food, I’ve already seen three sorts. Make a fire with what?” Only the Sisters have firestones, she added to herself.

The Eldest answered her in kind. “Work it out. You carried the pot here most of the way, wrapped in the mats. There’s a basket in the mat-fold. Desi, give her your fire stones.”

Ahni laughed at DesiSister over the Eldest calling DesiSister by her girl name as if DesiSister *really* was only equal to Ahni.

“Why oh why did I think you’d be a sympatico apprentice?” the Eldest said. “Why didn’t I insist on Kira, who is respectful. Who doesn’t eternally ask. Who doesn’t run and play. You make my head ache with your noise, Ahni. Keep out of my hair lest I let the herders have you too. You’d regret it even if I would not.”

DesiSister gestured with her head at a place in the wall of reeds where a narrow entrance beckoned.

Ahni hardly noticed the reeds touching her both sides along this single-file path. She hugged herself to ward off all the ways the Eldest disliked her. The new clearing was about the same size as the Sister-eyrie but with a patch of fire-blackened ground in the middle instead of a hatch.

The basket was in the mat-fold, in a corner of the camping place. She left DesiSister's fire stones in the pot, never mind about the other things for now. She wanted to get as far away from the Eldest as soon as possible. She wasn't made of iron—like the pot—and she wasn't made of fired clay. *Like my mother at times.* But the ceremony was too important, she knew dully, to be spoiled by the crying of a heart-stung girl. The beach might be the furthest place away.

Blindly, she dived into an opening opposite the path she'd come in by, and walked along it. Between the reeds again. It was easy to be alone here. That was one big difference between her and Kira, her wanting to be alone quite often. She'd never seen Kira hide in the rocks on Seagoyle Point, or come into the mothering room in a sweat from running up and down the spiral corridor.

A drumming started, fast and light. A good beat for dancing. It sounded as if the drummer sat in the place where the rest were gathered. If only she'd thought to hide nearby. Now a yip yodeling joined the beat. She wanted to turn back but she didn't know how not to move the reeds without being seen to get to any hiding places. And she didn't want to be taken accidentally. The path ending made her decision.

She stepped into the creek flowing past. She could follow it to the sea and be safe from the herders, and from the Eldest. While wading, she sang a sea song. *Calm weather, calm waves. The smell of land, and the swimmer safe in the sea's cradle.*