

9: The Basin

Ahni dreamed that Kes rode his camel and she sat behind him, or in front. Her mouth was by his ear. She breathed her love into him. In the dream she flew to the Swamp and built an arbour of reeds. "Ahni!" In her mind his kestrel-voice trilled to her from above. She woke just in time to not call him aloud.

"It's time to go," said the Eldest, a dark shadow with the light behind her.

Ahni's heart skipped. *Last time we left in the night, we went to the Swamp.*

"Bring you mat," the Eldest said. She lit their way down the corridor with wick, keeping the draft from it with one hand.

Ahni kept her eyes downcast so the Eldest wouldn't see the flaring flame of her hopes.

The Eldest hustled her past OrcahMan's room where Kira now lived, and past the basement where the boy-prentices slept by the pool. The SkinGifted were away, swimming the mighty ocean. Arno sent her images of Niko, sometimes, still like a sick turtle, the others righting him when he foundered.

The Eldest doused the wick. Seemed to slide it into her satchel. "Come sit with me on Flat Rock." She gripped Ahni's wrist to tell her where, the night too dark for seeing.

"No moon," Ahni said.

"You need to learn how to cross the Basin in the dark, at high water." The Eldest's mistrust leaked around her words.

Yet at the Swamp Ahni could hide, until the Eldest went home by herself and wait in peace and quiet until Kes came. To get there, she must become someone the Eldest would trust. She could pretend she was a child again. "What about the stingers?"

"Are there ever stingers in the Basin? Night water is no different from the day's tide."

It worked, because the Eldest talked to her as if she was irritated by Ahni's little-girl fears. Next she said, "I can't see where to go."

"Neither can I see in the dark," the Eldest said tartly. "But my feet know the way, as yours must learn it without the distraction of sight. Are you ready for the words?"

The Eldest would not see her nodding. "I am ready, Eldest."

The Eldest sang: *"Touchstone. Cliffswimmer, Stone Pup, Girl'n Mother, Scree. One Foot, Little Cliff, Twice Blessed. Soul Child, Middle Sister, Three Feet and Gulls' Nest. Waterworn, and Wind-shorn is Land's Edge."*

"Those are the cliffs' names!" She could exclaim honestly, because she hadn't known the stones in the Basin had their own names. Just that when you picked them up, you had to put them back down in their self-same places.

The Eldest took Ahni's hand in hers and as she repeated each stone's name, she pointed with Ahni's arm in the direction that that stone lay. She slid into the dark water. "Stand here beside me on Touchstone." She pulled Ahni toward her.

"Touchstone is like the palm of a hand, each finger with one or two stones lying unevenly along it, pointing at a cliff."

Ahni giggled at the idea of standing in the palm of a sea-goyle's weedy hand waiting to be squeezed ... as the Eldest was squeezing her hand to get her attention: "Cliffswimmer, Stone Pup, Girl'n Mother, Scree. Now I'll step them. Listen to where I go."

The Eldest's passage through chest-high water made hardly any sound, but her disembodied voice told Ahni the directions: "Forward left, forward right, forward right, forward right." Ahni followed the Eldest with her ears wide.

"The stone I am on now is the one that the boy-pretices call the *island*, when they play here."

Big enough for two people.

"Girl'n Mother is the little one near it. Now you."

Ahni sang the stones and stepped them.

"Listen again." The Eldest's voice zig-zagging over the surface of the Basin was how Ahni could visualise the way. One Foot was a little step forward, Little Cliff a big step, Twice Blessed a huge step, all going east.

"This stone isn't big enough for two, so I'm going to turn towards the Blessed's cave-mouths and step forward onto Soul Child, so that you can join me there."

Ahni muttered the stones' names as she stepped them. "Scree... One Foot... Little Cliff..." A king wave surged into the Basin. The mat bundle on her head wanted to surf to the shore, her with it.

A spume-flecked mountain of obsidian water berserked through her mind. She swept from a depth to a crest hanging grimly onto a raft of sea kelp that had Niko woven into it, among the criss crossing stems. *Torn but not abandoned*, Niko said. *Our Sea Leader truly loves his brothers.*

She knew all their hands alongside hers on the raft. Slowly the press of the waves grew lower and lessened. The five of them, Ahni and the rest of the SkinGifted, pushed the kelp mass towards a beach where in the storm-wash the raft broke into kelp-ropes, and Niko surfed with them to the shore.

Arno helping Ahni up the strand became the Eldest strongly grasping Ahni tangled in the mat-roll. The Eldest guided Ahni's feet to Twice Blessed's stone while she herself stood up on Soul Child. Ahni coughed and spluttered.

"What a shock!" The Eldest slapped Ahni on the back to help her cough up the water.

"You're all right?"

"Yes, Eldest."

"Attention now. Concentrate your mind on these stones and tell me those we have stepped so far."

Ahni wept. "How can I, with Niko SkinTorn? Far away." Seawater dripping down her face joined her tears.

The Eldest sighed. "I want to know, Ahni, do you have the stones in your memory also?"

She must make another effort. She and Kes, when they were together, would fetch Niko. "Touchstone, Cliffswimmer, Stone Pup, Girl'n Mother... Scree, One Foot, big step Little Cliff, big, big step Twice Blessed ..."

"Better than I hoped," the Eldest said. "Now the third quarter. Soul Child, Middle Sister, Three Feet, Gulls' Nest. Big step between the last two, Ahni."

From Soul Child the Eldest's voice went into the northwest. As before, she waited for Ahni on the first stone of the next line in the song. "Waterworn, and Wind Shorn is Land's Edge."

Waterworn was only a small step right forward, and Wind Shorn was a little slope of gravel leading onto Land's Edge, where with the help of first light Ahni saw her feet glimmering like tea-stained sea-bones.

"You did well. Sing me the way again, from Flat Rock to the cliffs."

When Ahni's tongue was glib with perfect recall, the Eldest said: "Now face the way back. Think now that you are laden with reeds and herbs, and the tide is high again. Tell me the way back as we return to the tower."

Ahni slipped her wet hand from the Eldest's wet hand. "I'm not going home," she cried. She turned to flee. OrahSister was an unmoving obstruction barring her way. "My apologies, Lucah. That I did not believe you."

"I knew it. I knew I couldn't trust her. She's sly. She tricked me with her little-girl talk."

Ahni struggled to stop OrahSister forcing her jaws apart but the Eldest managed to slip in a dose of bitter herbs. She gagged and coughed with OrahSister now pinching her nose shut until she swallowed the herbs.

I will not cry. All my own fault.

OrahSister dragged Ahni back to the tower by her hair. But carried her up the sloping corridor, as if an accident had happened and Ahni must now be healed. In the machine room she tied a bandage over Ahni's eyes. "We'll talk about this in the morning," she said.

Ahni felt herself slipping into sleep.