

#### 14: The Herder

The Eldest led Ahni past the place where she and Kes first met, without any time to catch a breath or think. A big sob sat high in her throat. The Eldest dragged her up the sandy bank, and west towards the cliffs, then along their rocky feet. The waist-high shrubs didn't swish at their passing, and their feet were silent in the sand except when Ahni stumbled.

The Eldest bent with Ahni into her fall, then straightened as Ahni rose. "Watch your feet and don't even think of screaming," the Eldest said. "I've got a rock in my hand and I'll put you to sleep before I lose you to the herders."

The Eldest spread the mats somehow among the withy stems, and dragged Ahni with her onto them. The mats hillocked over roots and among the bushes. "Lie down," the Eldest said. "Sleep!"

Ahni lay on her side, staring into the vegetation, her head on her free, crooked arm. The tied one stretched behind her back to the Eldest's tied hand. The Eldest lay on her back, and after a long time breathed evenly, and then to snore a little.

*Laying on her back*, Ahni thought spitefully.

She *saw* Kes coming before she heard him. Or rather, she saw something that she *hoped* was him.

A flash of white light, the size of a thumb-print, jumped here and there among the woody stems of the shrubbery. The the flash-flash came nearer, was accompanied by no sound. She made her eyes wide so they'd shine up at him.

He saw her, and shone the light into his own face that she might know him.

She smiled his name tremulously. Kestrel! She reached with her free arm and gentled his ankle when he arrived, rubbing the hollow beside his heel tendon with her thumb. She stared up at him and stared intent into him, begging him to not waste time.

He shrugged out of his sleeves and let his cloak drape from his belt. He kneeled by silent degrees and then lay down, on his side, facing her.

She cradled his face and he put his mouth in the hollow made by her upturned face and her mat. He mouthed his love words against her cheek. "Ahni! You gifted me with your foot-fall."

She knew what he said. She drew up her knees and clasping his shins between hers she rested her foot-soles against his.

He breathed raggedly into her ear. Barely containing his excitement.

She smiled his name again and again, against his cheek. "Kes. Kestrel. Kestrel-mine."

He kissed her ear. The soft skin beside it. Down her jaw line. He cradled the back of her head with his hand. And lifting himself up on his other elbow, he kissed her eyes.

She fluttered them against his lips.

He kissed her hairline. Her other ear. Jaw. Cheeks. Then her mouth, ardently.

She kissed him back. She dabbed with her tongue against his. She pressed her whole self closer to him and plunged her free hand—because he cradled her head—her free arm down the sleeve-hole of his vest, down his warm smooth back. Down to where his back joined his hip.

He shuddered and straightened and with his arm around her waist drew himself to her.

The Eldest screeched right in Ahni's ear. "Eee-eee-eee!" Then she was up, intending to drag Ahni away.

Ahni screamed. "No! No! No!"

Kes kneeled up, holding her strongly while the Eldest pulled her.

"Gotcha!" A rough voice said.

Kes released her and fell away.

The Eldest dragged Ahni through the bushes and she must use her feet to save herself. Ahni barely noticed the tie's rubbing and the blisters braceleting her wrist. A knife of fierce anger twisted in her belly. Just as the night cold against her wrist cauterized the open blisters, so the cold-beyond-rage made her clear-headed. She let herself fall again.

Each time she was on the ground, she listened for what might be happening behind them. She'd heard a victorious exclamation as whoever it was caught hold of Kes, and wordless shouting, with one of the voices Kes's.

The Eldest laughed.

*Huh?*

"Lucky I woke when I did," the Eldest said. "That OrahSister. She always thinks she knows it all. I'm telling you, we really do not want a repeat of what happened thirty-five years ago."

To Ahni's further surprise, the Eldest made for their original campsite.

"When Joff comes, there's to be no talk by you. At all. Do you understand me?"

*The Eldest knows the herder?*

The Eldest prodded her.

"Yes, Eldest. I understand you."

The Eldest twisted the unbreakable tie in such a way that it fell loose. "By the sound of things, that boy is getting some of the same medicine I should be doling out to you. Uncover the fire. Probably the food will still be edible. I'm keeping the other bit of the tie on my wrist, ready to snap round yours. You hear me?"

"Yes Eldest."

Ahni took up the baler shell from the little store and began to scoop sand from the fire.

"Set them aside," the Eldest said about the packets of roots and fish. "Make the fire again for some tea for our guest."

The herder stepping into the clearing wore a thick brown cloak and a freshly cracked fired-clay mask, with starring from his nose, across both eyeholes, down his mouth and up to his hairline. His grey and black hair stood up and disarranged above the mask. He dragged Kes behind him by leather straps netted around Kes's head and neck.

"Joff," the Eldest said. "Just in time to start the fire."

*The Eldest knows the herder by his name.*

The herder laughed, a hard, muffled sound from behind his cracks, but he bent—almost obediently—to the fire, taking a thing from his waist pocket at the same time. Snapping it in his fingers, an instant flame leapt into the kindling.

Kes winked though he was trammed by the straps about his head and his hands were tied with what looked like the same sort of tie the Eldest had used on Ahni. A staff through the space between his elbows and his back kept the tie tight around his wrists.

The herder and the Eldest were both bent to the fire. Gladly Ahni winked back.

“You have food prepared, LucahMah?” the herder said.

Ahni hardly believed what she heard. *Mah?* How could the Eldest be Mah? She was the last of her line?

“Ahni, go fill the pot and pick a couple of lily leaves,” the Eldest said.

“Just a minute,” the herder said, sticking out his arm to stop Ahni’s passage. “What about an introduction? Though seeing the size of her, too big for a little one and too young to be one of your amazons, I suspect that she’s a tribute child kept back.”

“This is Ahni,” the Eldest said. “She’s with me to learn our herb craft. She’ll be Eldest after me.”

The herder sat down and sent his gaze to the tops of the reeds.

The Eldest settled herself on the other side of the fire, opposite him. “Go, Ahni!”

The nearest pool was along the path, past Kes, who loved her with his eyes as she went alongside. She picked four leaves because they were for serving the food on.

The Eldest fed the fire with fuel wood from their store. She nodded at the pot. “Set it right in the flames, to heat the water quickly.” She took mint-leaves from the herb wallet. “Did I say *four* lily leaves? Only my son and I will eat. You and he,” her head nodded towards Kes, “can think on what you almost did.”

The herder said, “Have her make three serves. I need her strong enough to travel.”

“I told you, Joff. Ahni is to be my successor.”

“She’s not one of your amazons and she wouldn’t be here if she was one of the wives. Like I said, you’ve been forgetting to bring her. You know how desperately we need them.”

“That boy is your son?” the Eldest said.

The herder laughed derisively. “I thank the Grand-Devil daily that he is not.”

“Likewise Uncle,” Kes said. “Likewise.”

The herder rounded to his feet. “I won’t have your back chat!” With one step he was at Kes and tearing Kes’s undershirt from his body. He knotted the torn cloth about Kes’s face.

The Eldest pulled Ahni to sit by her side.

The herder sat back down and continued as if he’d not interrupted himself. “I need a girl for my son. So I’ll take her now and let bygones be. She can make herself useful while we travel.”

“I ask myself what that means,” the Eldest said. “That desperate need, now that you so obviously have your own children. I doubt that that need translates well into love.”

“You expect love as well as protection?”

The Eldest dropped her gaze so that she stared at the fire. Sitting beside her, Ahni saw fear flit through her.

“When I brought you to your father,” the Eldest lifted her head fiercely. “Your father promised to love and protect you the same as all the children we bring you are loved and protected. Those were his very words.”

Joff laughed. “Protected! And so they are. Until they leave us. Yes, we protect them very well. Their worth to us is more than gold.”

“They leave?” The Eldest’s voice trembled.

“First they leave you. Then they leave us. The whole island is poor. If you can’t feed all your kiddies, how do you think we can? I told you we value them.” He pointed his little finger at Ahni. “As she will be valued.”

The Eldest signed for Ahni to prepare the food.

With the herder staring at her every move, Ahni brushed ashes from the eel-in-a-mud-jacket. She broke the parcels open and shared them out equally over the four leaves, adding ash-roasted roots after she brushed them clean too. She picked up the first leaf, and resting it on both her hands, reached it toward the herder.

He gripped her wrist and squeezed it hard. “Didn’t I say *three* portions? You’ll need to work on your obedience, my girl, or I’ll gladly do that work for you.”

Ahni rocked on her knees as the herder pulled at her.

Kes crouched behind the herder like a broken vulture, as if he would jump onto his uncle’s back. No good would come of that and Ahni didn’t want to see it happen. If she pretended to have a vision right now, Kes would sit down again. She knew the future and to join her there, he also must learn it. She shut her eyes.

Dimly, she heard the Eldest warn the herder. “She visions. Your hand on her arm is the impulse. Don’t release her.”

Her free arm sweeping through the flames in front, became her arm parting the waters of the delta warm under the sun, as a vision seamlessly took her within. *When I’d thought to use it*, was all she had time to think. Niko and Rollo swam beside her, over watery meadows of green river grass and gold sand.

In a distance near-at-hand she heard the herder’s unease. “She shams,” he said. “Some trick she’s got up her sleeve.” He laughed. “No use trying to hide tricks up sleeves she hasn’t got, right?”

He let go her arm and the vision took her aloft. Now she soared high above the delta, a landscape of grey-green islands netted by pale-sky-reflecting streams. Grey forest-swimmer-shadows glided along the channel bottom, doubling and tripling the dolphinate swarming along the sunny waterways.

“Kes! Kes!” she called to him where he waited on the shore. “Take the animals to the high ground, against the flood. I will join you after we have set the waters free.”

She blinked back to her un-ordinary reality.

“Am I there? In the boy’s future?” the herder said greedily.

Ahni stared past him, at Kes, willing *him* to believe. He gazed back interested and open, not believing blindly. And that was all right, because she wouldn’t want him not his kestrel-self. “I don’t know,” she said to the herder. “I didn’t see a cracked mask.”

The Eldest’s expression was just as hungry. Not knowing which was ascendant, the Eldest or the implant, Ahni forestalled them both. “I saw a Sister, three mothers, two swimmers, six children, Kes, Ahni-Eldest and many forest swimmers.”

“I’ve never believed in that silver rubbish and I’m not about to start now,” the herder said.

The high ancestral voice said, “I am so looking forward ...” The Eldest pressed her lips together. Tears tracked down her face. Then she breathed deeply and bent her attention back to the herder. “Our food is not to your taste?”

Was it the Eldest who took Ahni's hand in her own, or was it the ancestress? The two old women, one or the other, or them both, rubbed Ahni's wrist with the patience sign.

"What wouldn't I eat at my mother's fire? Or that prepared by her servant?" Then the herder spoke directly at Ahni. "My son would cherish you."

Kes snorted.

"Joff, please. I cannot miss her," the Eldest said.

The herder switched his attention back to the Eldest. "What wouldn't a loving mother sacrifice for her only child?" He sounded just like a wheedling child.

"Only Ahni can free the rest from the tower. You heard her. It's her destiny."

"Free?" The herder made himself sound outraged. "Under our protection you are free now."

"The Deep still rises, Joff. We must leave the tower." The Eldest or the ancestress used beseechment.

"And I suppose that you intend to come here, to the green eye in our pastures? Where out of the kindness of my heart I allow my Seatower mother to collect her herbs."

"Speaking of herbs ..."

The Eldest calmly pulled the wallet onto her lap and rolled hemp into a leaf of smoke weed. She reached the little roll towards her son.

And which he took, as if by right, with a satisfied smirk on his face. As if he'd led the Eldest to it by his words. He put one end of it through the broken mouth slit in his mask, then took an ember from the fire. He lit the outside end of the roll.

Ahni stared.

The herder nodded at her. "Smoking is only one of the things you'll learn when you are with us." He sucked smoke through the roll from the little fire at the end. Fumes trickled from his broken clay nose holes.

The Eldest rolled another of the things, this time adding a stalk of eversleep with a cupped-hand-move that the herder did not notice. "Leave her be, Joff. I beg it. Without her, the rest will not survive."

The herder settled back. The same moves the Eldest made before she began a tale. "That wouldn't be good," he said. "No Seatower survivors. Because now, due to your cheating ways, you are in arrears to us." He reached for the second roll. "I'd like you-and-I to solve that problem. No need yet to take it to the rest of the families."

The Eldest-and-the-implant did not answer and did not answer. Ahni wanted to scream from the suspense. She wanted to run.

The ancestress grasped Ahni's wrist and dug the Eldest's thumbnail sharp into her palm.

The herder maundered on. "Give me the girl and I will say no more about it. I'll leave that poor piece of manhood behind me, in her place. With you supplying, we can still hold our heads up in the market place."

His voice was a mixture of loud and soft. Some of the gist ordinary, and some strange, as if he meant Ahni and the Eldest not to know the meaning of his words, but at the same time making sure they knew their intent.

"Though the families wouldn't thank me if the SkinGifters drowned because I took the visioner away." He stopped talking and just sucked on the roll.

The Eldest-and-ancestress waited with a glittering stare. Which was all that Ahni, sitting beside them, could see of their expression.

Kes wept with silent fury. His hands strained at his bonds. He clenched his jaws.

She'd need to be quick to escape the grasping hands of the herder and the Eldest-and-ancestress. Run for her life to fly with Kes.

The fire hissed falling in on itself and still they waited. Finally the herder's chin dropped to his chest. He began to snore.

"Kes! Joff! Kes!" Far away, but getting nearer, someone called and halloped.

Kes rose haphazardly to his feet, stick akimbo.

Ahni started to rise.

The Eldest grabbed her arm, clipped her tie to the bracelet.

The herder continued to snore.

One-handed the Eldest slung the shilo around her neck, the wallet over her shoulder. She motioned for Ahni to pick up the pot.

Kes groaned.

"Kes! Joff!" The caller now as close as the path.

The Eldest threw herself and Ahni at the reeds. Ahni dropped into the mud, making herself an unmovable weight. Out of the corner of her eye she saw another herder step into the camp.

He was the twin of the Eldest's son, bar that his mask wasn't broken. "There you are," he said at Kes. He cut through Kes's gag and slid the staff from his back. He shook his head at the tie. "Only Joff can release that, my son."

Kes jumped into the mud. Shouldered through the reeds.

The implant said, "If you love her, don't come any nearer."

"Or what?" His voice was rough with emotion. For her, and he was so near.

She screamed for him, but the sound went lost against the Eldest's hard hand pulling her head back as far as it would go. The Eldest sat on her as if she was a raft. The ancient one in the Eldest screeched, "I will push her face down and drown her, like this!"

Mud invaded her mouth, her nose. She struggled. She couldn't breathe.

"Let her up!" Kes shouted. "I'm going!"

The Eldest pulled Ahni's head up. Ahni peered through mud to Kes stepping back and back. Mud slopping. She cried. "Kes! Kestrel! Kes!"

"I'll be back, Ahni. I'll be back!"

Kes-father murmured calm at his son, while he picked up the other man and slung him over his shoulder.

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When there were no more sounds of herders in the Swamp, the ancestress said, "My goodness. You two are a mess. Better go and wash if you don't want to go to bed all muddy."

The Eldest got up off Ahni and released the technotic tie, and held her Ahni-hand softly while they walked to the creek, as if she asked to be forgiven.