

15: Ahni Eclipsed

Ahni did everything the way the Eldest wanted, to not wake the ancestress, while she planned her escape.

The Eldest said, "It's time we did some of the work that we came for." They walked upstream to the herb gardens where the sun still shone and they pulled handfuls of mint from a bank raising one of the garden beds above the mud. "*Mint tea for coddled belly and for gas; but rub a leaf on aches, pains and a rash,*" the Eldest sang.

The fresh odour filled the spaces in Ahni's head with energy as she repeated the words. They waded and pulled, waded and pulled. The Eldest never stopped instructing Ahni. "*Rest-easy is finely fingered, each digit with its own portent. Eat and be stilled of your troubles, let its green blood work as is meant. Later I will teach you how to turn the stems into the rope with which we will tie the reeds for the way home.*"

Carefully then the Eldest showed Ahni the eversleep bush. Each time, with a new leaf of sweet-flag between her fingers so as not to touch the eversleep directly, the Eldest pinched out several growing tips of young leaves-and-a-bud, which she handed to Ahni sweet-flag and all, for Ahni to fold as they had previously practiced. "*Furry leaf and tawny stem, eversleep flowers purple as the Deep, pick them with flaggy fingers ere a touch puts you also to sleep.*"

They fetched their sleeping mats from the little clearing between the cliffs and the fast flowing creek. A silvery thing rolled to Ahni's feet as she shook the sand from her mat. *Kes's light stick?* She shuffled her feet to cover it. Picked it up when she kneeled on the mat roll while the Eldest tied that.

"What's wrong with your feet?" the Eldest said.

"Just a little stick between my toes. See?" For a wonder Ahni found a tiny twig on the ground to show the Eldest. She hid the light stick in her hand and dropped it in her waist pocket when the Eldest turned to pick up the bundles of herbs, leaving the mats for Ahni to carry.

She had a light to show her the way now. Her plan was like it was meant to be.

In the late, late afternoon they crossed the wide shallow water of the water-woman. Neither the Eldest nor Ahni referred to it. Ahni wondered whether the ancestress was ascendant again. She attended even closer to everything she did. She could give no offence. At all. This would be her very last chance.

Halfway up the cliff path grew a clump of bamboo. With the Eldest pointing, Ahni bent to the base of the clump. "Here. This one," the Eldest said in her normal voice. She pointed with her foot at a dried brown stem with a narrowed neck.

"This is what I usually use that tie for. On the way out of the valley, I'll tie it round a likely stalk. The following time, as now, it will be ready to drop easily. Like this." The Eldest straightened, and grasping the stem at chest height, she kicked the browned area a short sharp swing of her foot.

Snap. She had the stem loose in her hand. Back at the camp, Ahni sawed the stem into short lengths—each with a stem-knuckle at its bottom—to make honey jars.

"If you'll be all right for a minute on your own, Ahni," the Eldest said, "I'll go and fetch some flax plumes for smoke flags."

Ahni berated herself—the Eldest was trying to be so nice—even as she-Ahni sprang to where the shilo lay in its bed of sand. She practiced picking it up so that the water didn't slop and gurgle. She needed water to travel the desert, and without the shilo, the Eldest could not fetch her back. She planned to be in Kes's arms by the time OrahSister sent someone from the tower to discover why Ahni and the Eldest hadn't returned.

Armed with a smoking flax plume and the iron pot, the Eldest led Ahni to the beehives in the herb gardens. "We do it this time of the day always, Ahni. Because the cold air of early evening stops the smoke dissipating. Watch how I move slowly and without hesitations. Pull the frame up and scrape the honey-filled comb into the pot."

Bees flew around them, dazed by the late coolness and the smoke. Only a few stung. Bergamot grew around the hives. The Eldest sang the bergamot lines, and Ahni said them after her. *Bergamot is bee balm, rubbed on to fright off six-legged fliers, and rubbed in to calm bee-stung criers.* She rubbed herself with a few of the leaves.

The Eldest talked Ahni through the harvesting of the second hive. And still the day wasn't finished. "Build up the fire and put the pot on, dear. All we can do tonight is feed the fire. The heat will force the melted wax to the top of the honey."

"How long will that take, Eldest?"

"Why?"

"I was thinking to make some tea. To calm us." She had the herb quantities in the forefront of her mind.

"It takes all night sometimes." The Eldest's natural gaze—as now—was watchful. When the ancestress had the use of the Eldest's eyes, they glittered, and flitted from side to side.

"Take this root left over from that disastrous meal ..." the Eldest hesitated as she remembered it.

Fearing the ancestress would jump into the gap in the Eldest's mind, Ahni cleared her throat.

But it was still the Eldest speaking. "Make up a dry sleeping draught with a scoop of honey to bind them." She passed Ahni the wallet. "Some for me and some for you."

Unknowingly she mirrored Ahni's concerns. "I fear to relax enough to allow sleep to come of itself. That's often when the old one takes over. Then next morning, when I wake, she's rampant. And I'd rather you slept when I sleep. For safety's sake."

"Yes Eldest."

A fist-sized beach-pebble on a flat mortar stone lay near the store mat. Ahni ground valerian into sleep-well and added a nail-sized bit of rest-easy for sweet dreams. Perhaps the old mind could be beguiled into letting the Eldest sleep longer.

The Eldest would not eat the honey balls until the wax in the pot was a smooth transparent layer above the smooth golden honey. "In the morning we'll take off the hardened wax and reheat the honey for pouring. Then reheat the wax for sealing the jars. I've often asked OrahSister for a second pot to speed the process. We'll have the honey balls now, please Ahni."

The fire and its smoke between them made it easy for Ahni to seem to eat her share of the honey balls.

"Goodnight, dear."

“Good night, Eldest.” Ahni rolled herself up in her mat. Kes’s scent still in the mat gave her the strength to wait.

Ahni left no tracks and made no sounds as she slide-footed ankle-deep through the water-woman’s water. She filled the shilo at the little runnel at the bottom of the cliff path, where the mother-rock curved into the ground. She clambered up the cliff path, using little glints from Kes’s light stick to help her find places for her feet, past the stand of bamboo, and up onto the red land.

Because she might be very visible against the moon-grey sky, she bent inland, away from the edge, yet stayed near enough to be guided by the thin black rim of the swamp’s far cliffs. A short blue shadow ran to the right side of her because the little quarter moon was just past its zenith. Clumps of spiky desert grass, made bigger by their moon-shadows, often stood in her way. She heard nothing but the roaring in her ears.

I am leaving fear behind. I’m leaving the implant behind. The Eldest. OrahSister. I love Kes and he loves me. He is up ahead where I’m going.

The roaring dimmed and finally she heard the desert’s little animals squeaking and hunting night insects. Little stones gnashed and nattered under her feet no matter how quietly she tried to walk. The cliffy rim guiding her ended where the valley’s left and right cliffs joined.

Now she angled into the moon’s westering path. Her shadow lengthened and wavered out behind her like the shadow of a flame. She pressed away the image of the perpetual candle in the mothering room calling her.

She turned her attention to the ground, pulsing Kes’s light stick, to get a picture of the little ridges she could feel with her feet. The ground was written up with all kinds of tracks. Of the herders, she guessed, and their animals. Her spirits lifted and she walked on, following a wide path of the tracks.

The moon went down, she thought in herder talk, and the night darkened. *Her* people said the Earth turned on a great spindle and that the horizon came up to cover the moon. She walked exactly in the middle of the trampled space between two low cliffs.

When the moon was almost out of sight below the horizon, and the shadows from the western wall reached for her feet, a dark round place on the ground made it suddenly too dark to know where to walk. She would wait here for dawn. She sat down and sipping the shilo’s water, thanked it.

The sun in her eyes woke her and she stretched luxuriously in the warmth. She smiled. She’d fallen asleep and toppled to the ground without waking.

The barren ground was imprinted with hundreds of camel-hoof tracks made—perhaps—last time it rained here. The dark place on the ground was an old fireplace swept bare. These cliffs had tall, dark mouths. She forced herself to walk to the left wall and peer into one of the openings.

A sickly smell wafted from inside. Blowflies buzzed and bounced past her on their way in. *An animal might’ve crawled away in there to die.* Now it was being helped to join the Earth by the flies and their maggots.

The sunlight outside contrasted too much with the dark to see anything much, and she didn’t want to waste any of the light stick’s power. She shouldn’t even be here anymore, she needed to catch up to the herd.

As the morning wore on, the camel road narrowed to the tracks of two or three animals. *Good. They've strung out. It'll be easier to catch up to the tail end.* The dirt underfoot was loose now and pocked with dozens of camel-pad-sized hollows. In places, where there was only a thin layer of sand over a rock, the going-north tracks overlay the coming-south tracks.

That was the only conclusion she could come to, crouching over the patch, and studying it carefully. The very disappointing thing was that there never were any herder footprints or even some of Kes himself, he had that K-shaped scar on his sole, that she could've take encouragement from.

Sometimes she walked backwards, to see her shadow and to know the time of day. At home she'd never dreamed the sun would get so hot. It burned her everywhere her skin was bare. When she turned face forward again, the heat haze trembled and she saw the reflections of camel legs walking not so very far ahead.

She hurried so fast that the shilo bounced on her shoulders.

She had to stop. A stitch under her ribs.

The camel legs marked time.

With her heart sinking, she knew them for the cruel mirage in one of the Eldest's stories. The people in that story had turned back and saved their lives.

She must continue. What had she to go back for? Her future was ahead.

The sun overhead now stung her face and blistered her lips. The swamp lay so far in the past, she'd not be able to reach it with the water she still had. The front of her thighs were rubbed raw by the edge of her skirt. She'd be saving herself by not going back.

The camel road dipped down into a gully. A thin sheet of water glittered in the bottom. "Water!" Her voice was barely more than a croak. And she was *so* tired. She'd never in her life walked so far, or so fast. She stumbled down the incline, into the water, dropped to her knees and then flat onto her belly.

But, though she stretched out herself to get as wet as possible, the pool was hardly larger than her sleeping mat and such a shallow water that most of her was still above the waterline. And even with her face to the side, the mud, for that's what it was, did not reach her mouth.

The water from the shilo was as warm as the mud in the soak and just as nauseating. And she was so hungry. She salivated at the thought of the honey balls she'd dug into the sand at her bed-place back in the swamp. *Think of something else, Ahni,* she thought in OrahSister's snippy voice.

Surely the herders had got down from their animals to lead them to drink? There *had* to be some human tracks. She studied the pool and its surrounds carefully for any sign – even a toe print would be enough to know she was on the right road.

Only her own tracks.

The water in the soak would evaporate, today or tomorrow. How would she continue? How could she go back? Somewhere above the plain a kestrel trilled. Kes was a desert bird but she was wingless. Soon she would be sun-wracked, desiccating in the dried mud. He'd flown where she couldn't follow.

In the glistening mud at the edge of the soak lay sun shards as bright as the way Arno's stare dazzled her before she knew him as her brother.

But it was Niko's thoughts that slid into her mind. Was she dreaming? Niko sat splitting kelp fronds with the help of his teeth. *Making nets for the whiting and shellfish that Orion and*

Rollo and Sanit will bring home. He sat in the vision-lagoon, with his back to the beach. *Where is Arno?* Ahni thought at him.

She didn't know the words that Niko signed. She saw him understand her confusion. He dipped himself wet and walked up the beach—she saw him walking? *It's a vision?*—to a cave where Arno sat within the shadows beyond its arched entrance. Arno's edge-scales glimmered. The rest of him invisible. In the cave's depths glowed a silvery girl-shape. Arno's gaze remained on the shimmer and blocked Ahni-mind with his steadfast inattention.

How am I seeing this?

Please fetch me, Ahni, Niko said into her mind. *Arno said you might. Last year Rollo saw Desil chained among the enslaved of the herders. Please fetch me, Ahni, before they come this way again.*

Ahni-mind retreated, skeltered as much by the visioning—if that was what it was—and her own situation. Both Arno's abdication and her death would let the Sisters continue. Niko wouldn't stand a chance either. And nor would she ever meet Kes again.

How can I still be thinking of him?

She slumped. They all three were in the future she'd thought to hurry toward, to forestall the other. She'd have to go back.

She lifted the shilo from her shoulders. Spreading its drinking tubes over the surface of the mud, she lay the bag down and massaged it and kneaded it, forcing it to take in the slurry that was all the water there was. Then she rubbed mud all over herself, against the sun.

At dusk she started back to the herder camp. The stars shone bright, the moon was no more than a fingernail. She hardly heard the kestrel whistling his goodnight song, the fear-beast roared so.

Think. Of. Something. Else.

She was so hungry that she wouldn't be too proud to share a meal with maggots. She'd make a fire and cook whatever it was that the blowflies found yesterday. If she first burned the maggots from the meat, she might be all right.

The shilo slapped flaccidly on her shoulders. The slurry pooled in its lower back so that its little hands clasping its little feet made a knot that dragged at her Ahni-throat, as if the shilo would strangle her. Blaming her that more shilos would be made.

She lifted it from her shoulders, and carried it the way a mother might carry her newborn, the little body on her forearm and its little legs on either side of her elbow. A baby would have its head cradled on its mother's hand.

Three paces in, the cave was as dark as she remembered. The light stick, she recalled, had an ON switch as well as the pulse setting that she had used up to now. So much light sprang out that she almost dropped the little stick.

Swinging it here and there, it showed her bare cave walls and a smooth ceiling with another tall opening in the shadows at the edge of the light's reach. Misformed pocks and hollows hillocked the sandy floor. "We go against the tide," she croaked, describing the tracks to herself in the Eldest's teaching voice. "See how each hollow has a short steep end where a heel thrust down? The slope opposite is where the ball and toes of that foot rocked forward. After the foot's passage, gravity worked on the displaced sand. Many feet walked out."

The fetid smell of flesh-rot also eddied out and she breathed through her mouth. The passage widened. Here, the cave walls were covered with a crazed scritch of alphabet letters and other signs. Leaving the mysterious names behind, Ahni pointed the light straight ahead.

In the next chamber, steel links hung from the walls at narrow intervals. The sand below each place was stirred and fouled as though people might have been kept there without slop buckets. The air was astringent with old ammonia. She pressed on though she wished she need not.

The third space was low and wide. She could easily touch the ceiling. Bright-eyed crows worried at something in the centre. The links of a steel chain clinked as the birds jostled at their work. They didn't fly off until she stabbed the light-beam at their eyes.

A skull grinned up, happy to see her. It lay among a bunch of half-articulated bones. Some were the length of her own, her upper and lower legs and arms. A scrap of GiftedSkin tattooed with the Desi- family-line hung from a shoulder blade. *Desil SkinTorn! Could only be him, in these last two years!*

She was too dry inside to cry. Fear for Niko concussed her. She *had* to make the Sisters fetch him from that beach. She'd need to take the bones to convince them. How to carry them?

She stabbed the light everywhere ... There! A crumpled sleeping mat! She gentled Desil's bones onto the mat and folded three corners inward. Taking the parcel outside, she added in the shilo. *Never again will I willingly wear a shilo.* She folded the fourth corner over and tucked it between the second and third.

Stumbling finally along the herder path above the swamp, where anyone might see her, she wondered why no smoke from the campsite? Why did the Eldest not call out to her? She stared a while at the two bundles of reeds waiting for the third, at the top of the path. Then stared down the path, knowing she'd fall the first step she took. Light-headed. Too hungry. Her gut cramped.

"Ahni!" SanaSister dropped the third reed bundle and came leaping up with her hands ready to catch her.

Then Ahni was in SanaSister's arms, still with no water in her for crying.

"Where's the shilo?" SanaSister said.

Ahni tweaked ineffectually at the parcel. Her tongue wouldn't make words.

SanaSister reverently laid the parcel onto the ground. "DesiSister went ahead with the Eldest. The mad old thing in Lucah is distraught at your abandonment. The thing made me angrier than a fire ant. Drink, sweet one." She put the hard edge of a bamboo cylinder to Ahni's mouth. "A bit more. Easy does it. Your poor feet, I must think."

"Desil," Ahni said as SanaSister lay her down.

SanaSister unwrapped the parcel and exclaimed over the bones. "It *is* Desil. And the shilo."

"Rest my feet in the mud," Ahni said. "Bury Desil in the swamp."

"Sounds good. There is a big unexplainable hole in the reeds, left by the herders. We'll put him in that. Best not talk about him, Ahni, when we get back. He was mourned when he was SkinTorn. I'll backpack you down."

SanaSister helped Ahni stand, and then crouched in front of her for Ahni to drape herself over SanaSister's back.

After they sunk Desil's bones down with stones, and Ahni had rested her feet in the swamp's mud, SanaSister, often carrying her, led her home.

"Niko is SkinTorn," Ahni said one time.

“You must forget him, Ahni. There is no place amongst us for the SkinTorn.”

“Arno thinks him worth saving.”

“Who could fetch him? How would we feed him? We have enough foragers.”

SanaSister meant that there was hardly enough food for the foragers they had.