

21: Orcah's Legacy

In the dawn, when it only rained, Ahni followed OrcahMan and SanaSister to inspect the damage to the tower's foundations.

"Cracked and sprained," OrcahMan's fingers said. "More stones will fall. The incoming tide will likely still be troubled with after-surges. You?" he asked.

He pointed SanaSister's way with his three middle fingers outstretched.

"I worry about the next high tide," SanaSister said. "When the only place we have to sit is that short length of corridor."

Maybe Ahni stood straighter, or raised her eyebrows a little at the ease with which a *Sister* allowed OrcahMan to take the lead in the discussion.

SanaSister held Ahni's gaze with hers. "OrcahMan knows more about the foundations of the tower than anyone. And *you* know that I'm not such a one, that I think that what a *Sister* knows, is always the best knowledge available."

Ahni nodded, wondering that SanaSister thought it important that she-Ahni knew SanaSister's attitude. She nodded again.

SanaSister stood aside for OrcahMan to lead in the walk. And she waited until Ahni took the middle position.

They clambered over and around fallen stones lying helter-skelter over the path circling the base of the tower.

"I see you thinking, Ahni," SanaSister said.

Inviting her to think out loud. "The tower looks like one of those spiralling spines of a shell stuck upright in sand, in a game. When the tide has been over the play pit, such a shell always is left skeltered."

"You must all leave," OrcahMan signed. "Kira Last-Wife awaits me."

Ahni didn't want to know what he meant and took refuge in the obvious things. "A lot of work to be done, food and tools to be collected. Evershilos filled while the rain lasts. Mats repaired."

"We've all journeyed with Lucah-Eldest," SanaSister said. "We all know what's needed." She tweaked the herb wallet Ahni wore bandoleered across her chest and on her left hip. "Your duty is to succour OrcahMan, the way every Eldest since our times began have helped Men to their ends."

Ahni stared at SanaSister. "He ... you know that ... OrcahMan knows so much?" She stuttered from the shock. "How can we ... do without him when ... when ... Lucah-Eldest and OrahSister are also gone?"

SanaSister kissed her face. "We'll be waiting for you at the top of the shaft, Ahni-Eldest."

OrcahMan signed. "Come to the pool, my Sunshine-on-Seagrass."

Ahni followed him clutching the wallet to her chest. Always an Eldest healed, with herb and story, but this?

The infill of two arches had collapsed and the pool's coaming was awash. The pool was joined to the eastern sea. OrcahMan pointed at the rock-slide.

"Sit up there, first-daughter. Keep the wallet above the water."

The currents in the pool went in new ways and were stronger. “It feels just like that time we made a whirlpool in your tub,” Ahni said shyly.

OrcahMan grinned, and nodded. He helped her wade and held the wallet safe while she climbed. He stayed in the water, squatting on a stone fallen from the ceiling. Both of them looked up to the hole it had left. Only the underside of the spiral corridor was still whole. Lower down, through the great gaps in the walls, they could watch the dark blue sea heaving and worrying.

OrcahMan cleared his throat. “I will speak with my voice, daughter,” he said. “Because it is my end time. Start us both with a finger of hemp because I need to tell you the story that will keep our people.”

With her trembling human fingers, Ahni found the right compartment in the wallet, and tore two leafy fingers from one of the hands of hemp. The way hemp was dried left the hemp-hands crisp but not crumbly.

OrcahMan put his into the side of his mouth, to chew on, while he spoke. He smiled with all his strong white teeth showing. “I am happier than a New Man, that no more of us will feed the Mother of the Deep. No people I ever saw, have such hard lives as we do. All my swimming life I dreamed that *I* would be the one to finish our long swimmer bondage.”

He slid from his seat to offer Ahni a sip of water from his shilo. “The summer when I was a new Skin, Sunshine-daughter, my then-brothers and I were swept far to the east of our route by a strong storm swell, and cast onto an uncomfortable shore. There were only the high knees of trees. No beach. We clung to these woody weeds all through the remainder of the storm. Clambering around in the dark, trying for better hold, we discovered good shelter in the lee of the trunks.”

Even though the story was of danger and worry, OrcahMan smiled and smiled his happiness. “The next day we were found by the people living in that place. Forest-Swimmers they name themselves. They showed us safe resting places and fished for us. They had me bathe in their Lodestar’s ichor to ease my pain and my sorrow. They sent a bladder of silver mud from that bath, with us as a gift, first teaching us how to keep it. The Sisters-then gladly received the living silver, and gladly learned how to breed it. We still use it, as you will know.”

He laughed a little, inviting Ahni to laugh with him. “My visions helped me home, as yours will help you guide our people to their new place.” He made a gathering-in sign with his hand and pointed at the cliffs for their people.

“Though the Forest Swimmers were keen for us to stay, they knew us to be men and so also, that somewhere our women and children awaited us. At the entrance to their country, they told us how we—by using the living silver—would be their brothers. They accompanied us far into the ocean to set us on the Lodestar’s way.”

OrcahMan’s voice roughened. “I tell this story to every new Skin to help him through his sea-fears. I tell them The-Forest-in-the-Sea is the place to go if they’re cast ashore.”

“As we-all are now cast ashore?” Ahni felt timid in the face of OrcahMan’s emotions. He nodded with his gaze locked to hers.

“Not all the Sisters are like SanaSister,” she said.

“I hear you, Ahni-daughter. The Sisters will be loath to let go their power. Their rule is very rigid. Amongst the swimmers the Sealeader decides things, after the rest have said what they know.” OrcahMan smiled. “I have a plan,” he said. “The Skins will help you in this.”

He shook his head sorrowfully while he came to take his second finger of hemp. “We swimmers could never do anything for ourselves about the hold the Sisters had over us with the custom of First-Wifing. You are still young for this story, but I give you it with my hope that you’ll discover its truths in your own time. It is the story of my First Cutting ... when I became the new Man.”

Orcah gazed at a spot in the water between them as he entered his memories. “While waiting for my first lover, I wondered how and what we would do. My SkinGift covered every part of me and must not be broached. Any break means a sea-death by stinger. From years of habit I rolled into the water and nervously tested the different parts of the Gift. There was no rent or tear or gauzy scrape, no chink in my armour. I willed myself to relax.” He breathed deep, as if what stood before them needed the banishment of fear.

Ahni breathed deep to be just as free of fear.

“My hands strayed into the baggy pouch-fold over my belly. Before my initiation, every time I studied the appearance of a woman, I wondered how her skin could be made to fit a swimmer. I traced again the careful seams that shaped my SkinGift to allow me the freedom I needed there when everywhere else it fitted tightly. I shivered at the mystery and its impending solution.”

“Yet I was afraid to be afraid. A fearful swimmer always dies. I angered at my helpless dependence on the Sisters, who run everything and everybody according to their own requirements, and who were making me wait so long for my first lover.”

“Then I heard them, the women, with song and bird call. Tears sprang from my eyes. My heart-mind flared hot with the beauty of the moment. My names were in their songs. They sang of me!” He stopped to wipe tears from his face. “How I wished my brothers and I could have shared.”

OrcahMan thoughtfully sipped water. “A Man’s Wives are the sweet prize for a life of fear in the Sea but a bitter trade for the loss of all his Brothers. Yet its promise is how the Sisters have kept us enthralled through all the years of our people. These words are ever a swimmer complaint, Daughter.”

She passed him another finger of hemp.

He continued: “My First Wife was smooth and sure, not shy. She traced the seams of my Skin with gentle hands and feather-soft fingers. But I lay like a fish before filleting.”

“Don’t be afraid,” she crooned. She stroked my face and throat, my chest and sides. Then she vaulted onto the shelf. There was room beside me. But no, she insisted on straddling me. I wanted to throw her off but remembered just in time that a fearful swimmer always dies. Instead, with my arms sinewing like rope, I tied myself to her intent.”

“She put her right hand at my navel and pulled up a fold of the Gift. I saw the glint of the golden knife in her other hand! My life passed before my eyes as I sucked the flesh of my belly from its point. I screamed, even!”

OrcahMan smiled as he took the gold-tinted knife from his waist pocket. It had one long razor edge that ended in a sharp point. Its opposite edge was thick and blunt and its end rounded into a wedge. “The blade made no pain as the First Wife pulled its razor edge through the raised Skin, down to my left hip. Changing hands, she made a similar cut on my right side.”

He passed the golden knife from one hand to the other. “Then she allowed the bloodless knife to shimmer down to the bottom of the tub while she folded down the pouch-flap. She stroked me down there and squeezed me. Oh, painful pleasure! Then she reached for an aromatic fat

she'd brought, in a leather bag. Our fingers together burrowed between my skin and the Gift, loosening them from each other, and working the fat between them."

He looked up and sipped from his evershilo. "I told her I felt bereft, Ahni, bare and skinned like a fish. My lover said, "I want to feel you yourself, your muscles, and your own warm body when I cover you." Her words woke a pride in me for my own strong flesh. After my first ecstatic release, she taught me the secrets of her body and the sweet pleasures we might exchange. In those succulent days with her I forgot my brothers and became the true Man of his Wives." He closed his eyes, the better perhaps to remember his tenure.

Ahni did not interrupt his musings. She watched the activity in the Basin. Probably the stepping-stones had been shifted in the storm. Sisters and mothers, all of them laden with children and chattels, waded and swam to the cliffs.

The remaining SkinGifted, meanwhile, ported over a great mat patched together from scraps, and helped hand everything up over Scree and out of sight. Then they swam back to the tower and soon joined Ahni, and OrcahMan swaying in the water.

Ahni gave them each a finger of hemp. Orion and Rollo crossed their arms for OrcahMan to rest against, while Sanit cupped OrcahMan's heels so that he might lie back.

"A SkinGift does not grow with the swimmer," OrcahMan said. "The Sisters could only ever keep us Skin-sized with the distances, the eternal swimming. Niko was not yet man-sized when he was Gifted. Nor was AhniMah fattened so that her Gift could be lengthened. On that far beach with no work and just a few brothers to share his food, Niko quickly began to grow. When I heard his pain, I dreamed him his meridians, the lines along which he should cut his Skin. Those same lines must be your guide when you three give up your Skins."

Ahni held very still. Though she listened, these moments seemed as if they should be private to the SkinGifted.

"The Skin Gift's meld with your own must then be worked apart, its edges loosened each day a little more. Those flaps should be trimmed away before cutting again, this time the width of a finger from the original meridian's edge, along its whole length. Honey is the best salve."

"Niko has only sea water," Rollo signed with his spare hand.

"Instead of the golden blade he has only his killing knife sharpened on a beach stone," said Sanit.

"And only his own fingers to wedge," Orion added.

"He is a hero, that young swimmer," OrcahMan said. "But with a dream I stopped his swift work because of the danger of infection. I said to him, my Sunshine, that you would bring the people to him." OrcahMan signed to have Ahni, perched on her pile of rocks, included into their circle and the Skins re-arranged OrcahMan and themselves to give her a clear view of all their faces.

"And I said to him that you'd also have the honey and herbs for his succour. And the golden knife." He held it up for Sanit to pass to Ahni. She slipped it into a pocket in the centre of the wallet. "The worst, Ahni-Eldest," the Man explained, "are the places that at first rub raw under the leather."

The Skins nodded their agreements.

"For many days the new Skin swims like a sick turtle while he tries to keep his sore parts still. With every stroke he needs his brothers to watch over him. Finally his own skin meshes with the Skin Gift. Hence this new torture. Still—as I understand it—only a man truly un-

Skinned can live on the land. Growing into his Skin is a young swimmer's agony, cutting himself out of it is a new landman's."

A passing breeze stroked the top of the water and a small turbulence troubled the surface of the pool.

"It's Kira Last-Wife coming to fetch me," OrcahMan said. "You Skins, never forget Arno. He upended your bondage. Niko's heritage is to lead you and his smaller kin, the pups. Orion, I ask you to keep our swimmer signs. Teach them to all. Sanit, please take our swimmer tricks and jokes as your trust. And Rollo, you must for-your-ever tell all our stories for I wouldn't have our swimmer times unremembered. Ahni, first-daughter, lead the people east along the coast after you fetch Niko."

She whispered, reminding him. "Orcah-father, you had a plan."

He smiled. "A new name even at this hour. I thank you, my first-daughter. You swimmers, take my shilo and yours to the Lagoon, by way of the sea-road. Be there with water at each stop along the walking way to help your sisters and their children live through the desert. Each time, escape any say-so except Ahni's."

Ahni felt shy at the swimmers' leaping laughing glances. As if they hoped, and thought their hopes might become real.

OrcahMan shut his eyes. "Give me the eversleep now, Ahni," he said. "Swaddle its bitterness in hemp."

Ahni passed the wallet to Orion to keep it above the water, and slid down from the rock. The swimmers shuttered their joy, as Ahni fed OrcahMan his end, with her grief overflowing over the necessity for his passing.

OrcahMan chewed hard on the wad of hemp and eversleep. "Keep your tears, daughter. Cry them when you come to the Forest by the Sea. Cry them for happiness." He sucked and swallowed the juices. "Give me water?"

Orion squirted water into OrcahMan's mouth and OrcahMan swallowed the fibres convulsively. In a few moments his flesh slackened. He whispered. "Let me sleep now."

Supporting him at his head and feet, Rollo and Sanit sank down and allowed OrcahMan to sink, until only his face and the tips of his toes still showed above the water.

With his cupped hand, Orion hit his chest three times, making a dull clopping. "Ahni, this is our signal that I take the lead for this moment."

Sanit and Rollo signed agreement, each with a quick strong thumb-up.

"You two," Orion said. "Lay Orcah with Kira his Last-Wife, and with Lucah-Eldest. I will take Ahni Little-Eldest to the cliffs. Then we three will start our swim as our Orcah-Brother planned."