

22: Ahni, Little-Eldest

Ahni floated behind Orion, her hands resting on his SkinGift-covered shoulders. He waded neck-deep in the sea beside the rock wall and swam a few strokes whenever a swelling wave passed under them. Was this how the swimmers had supported Niko when he'd begun his swimming?

Ahni? Niko said into her mind. *How soon can you come?* Ahni lost hold of Orion's shoulders. She trod in the water to keep the wallet from getting wet. "Niko looks flushed and feverish."

"We'll hurry," Orion signed. "Hang on tighter. I'll swim."

After they'd climbed out of the water at the feet of the cliffs, he signed, "We need a new plan. Give me herbs for Niko's sickness." He mimed storing the herbs between his neck and hood. "Take OrcahMan's shilo for the first part of the journey."

She didn't want to take it.

He didn't notice. "I left mine with Sanit. *We'll* have enough with just our own. You are many." He filled the shilo at a rainwater runnel down the cliff. "We'll leave two more along the way, in cairns of stones." He left her at the bottom of the stone chimney. "I can't help you any further, Ahni Eldest. Fare well"

When Ahni put her hand on the red land to climb out of the chimney hole, something clicked. In her palm. *The switch!* She stopped half out the shaft, jiggled her head. "I know you're aware," she said at the implant. "I don't believe you sleep."

Nothing.

She'd just have to go on without knowing. She lifted herself out of the shaft. A brown kestrel hovered above her on the warmth rising from the desert distances. It called her with a trembling whistle. She sobbed suddenly, but managed not to use *words* for her distress. How could she keep Kes in her heart at the same time as hosting the implant, *and* leading her people?

The kestrel swooping down and out of her sight threatened to take her strength with it. Blinking away her tears, she glanced to the sea where the swimmers arrowed north. He at their head waved. Even as far away as she was, she saw the glistening water cascading down his arm.

She waved back, imagining how he turned half on his back in mid-stroke to lift his arm to greet her. Now the two behind him also waved and she felt strengthened by their trust.

The great mat was made into a large low tent in a swale between two worn-down slopes. Its colours blended with the colours of the desert and so, from a distance, might barely be seen. No one greeted her because no one was on watch. Back when times were normal, they'd only traveled when they knew their enemies far away. Now, with her people out of their traditional habits, there should've been someone on watch, Ahni thought with words.

Still not a niggle from the implant. She couldn't hang around outside any longer. "Tsss," she said to signal her arrival. She ducked under a long edge.

"About time," RonaSister said from one of the corners.

The tent was held up by the three remaining Sisters, and KiraMah, each sitting with a corner of it stretched over their heads, down over their backs and anchored under their sit-bones. The middle of the mat was held up by a pile of gear.

Most of the children slept. Mothers nursed their babies. All wore a sheen of sweat in the close, dark heat of the mat's shelter.

Ahni walked further in, on her knees. Not enough height to stand.

"I've been wanting to wake the older children and take them ahead, to teach them the way to the Swamp," DesiSister said.

"You're alone!" RonaSister made it a demand for an explanation. "Ahni, you are the youngest of Sisters and less experienced than even the youngest mother, but I did expect you to realise we'd be short of water if the SkinGifted didn't come."

"She is not alone!" the implant said with Ahni's voice and making it laugh a little at the end, as if to say how stupid the speaker.

Ahni blushed. "My apologies for my voice, RonaSister."

Everyone sat up, the ones already sitting, sitting up the straighter. "You're all looking at me as if I've suddenly turned into a ..." The implant took her voice before she'd finished. "They are *not* herders," it said. "I think I've said that before? There can be no ignorant journeys made to the Swamp."

DesiSister stopped her surreptitious moves to alert the various children.

"I'm tired of telling them it all again," the implant said. "You tell them." The thought of the dark doings of Kes's people constricted Ahni's throat.

She fell forward. Her knee muscles suddenly stopped working. The implant laughed. "Good trick, huh?"

RonaSister hissed. "You've got the old one loose in your mind!"

"The host is blameless, and well you know it," the implant said. "Why did you and your cronies not repair the switch when you saw it broken? I wonder now what plots *you* thought to help along."

Ahni felt her blood withdraw from her face at the fear of RonaSister quarreling with the implant. RonaSister was the next in line for being the Home Leader. She-Ahni would always be in the middle.

But even though RonaSister reddened, with anger probably, she clamped her lips together.

"It is unsafe to live at the Swamp," Ahni said to start the telling. She nodded at DesiSister and DesiMah. "My sorry that I wake your grief. I found Desil-Skin-Torn sacrificed in a stony temple at the head of the valley, with his flesh racked from his bones. SanaSister and I sank his remains in the reed beds."

DesiSister and DesiMah swept their hair forward to hide their faces.

Ahni raised her voice over DesiMah's keening. "The herders use the children we deliver them for an evil purpose. The one called Joff told us that. You all saw how Lucah-Eldest was ... from the shock."

"They're as un-moral as devils. Nothing more than head hunters," the implant said.

"See, Ahni? Why we were all so down on you about that *herder* boy you took up with?" RonaSister said. As well as besting Ahni, RonaSister apparently intended to alert the implant.

A hot fear roared through Ahni at the thought that she might never be rid of the ancestress.

"Though I believe they are as caught in the weave of the cities, as we," the implant said through Ahni's unshed tears. Making it sound as if *she* spoke, and that she apologized for the herders. The women probably thought it was her talking because she loved Kes.

“Why didn’t I get OrahMah’s shilo?” OrahMah said. “I’m his closest surviving relative,” she said in her most injured tone.

Some people smiled. Perhaps the change of subject. “I’m happy to share,” Ahni said. “After all, I have the implant, and I have the wallet to carry.” She started to lay the shilo down on the ground.

“A shilo should never be laid on the ordinary ground,” RonaSister said. “That’s been the law since shilos began to be used.”

Suppressing a shudder, Ahni held the shilo towards OrahMah, for OrahMah to take it.

“Talking of ancient laws,” SanaSister said. “The lineage laws in this case, how is a *daughter* not closer than a niece?” SanaSister said.

RonaSister shook her head at SanaSister. Meaning SanaSister should not raise that subject.

Ahni smiled a fleeting thank-you at SanaSister.

“We should have been on our way already,” RonaSister said. “Sitting around and sweating uselessly. We could’ve been halfway to the Swamp by now.” She held up her hand to stop any gainsay. “The Swamp is closely grown. Reeds and mazy paths. Forewarned is fore-armed. We can hide when danger threatens.”

“I’d like to hear what the ancestress thinks,” DesiMah said. She did not falter under the new Home Leader’s hard stare.

“The way to handle the implant is to ask it specifics,” RonaSister said. “Ahni, ask Zoe how we’ll fare at the Swamp?”

Ahni in her mind knocked at the door of the maintenance locker as if the tower still stood. As if the ancestress wasn’t already on the loose.

“What?” The implant used the tone of voice Ahni had—up to now—only ever *imagined* using. Pure insolence would’ve been OrahSister’s judgment. She blushed, but pressed on. “Sisters and mothers both would like to know how we’d fare at the swamp?”

“How many are we?”

“Why do you ask Oriole?” RonaSister said. “You know she is always to be kept incognizant. I will hear only Zoe-mind’s words.”

“I am Oriole, Science House Caretaker,” the mind said.

“A sort of Home Leader,” RonaSister said to Ahni. “More than we need with me in the flesh.”

“The sharing of food amongst numbers over time was always my special knowledge. Tell me how many we are,” Oriole said.

Ahni counted them by family lines. “RonaSister, Ronny, Rona. DesiSister, DesiMah, Desi and Dell. SanaSister, Sanit, SanaMah, Sanka and baby Sana. RulaMah, Rollo, Rula-baby. Orion, OrahMah, Orah.”

OrahMah, with Kiral at her breast, sobbed suddenly for Orny.

Ahni continued. “Arno, Niko and Ahni-Eldest. KiraMah and baby Kiral, the last of their line.”

“Twenty-four,” the ancestral mind said.

“Five of them are swimmers,” RonaSister said. “They’ll not eat much from the shore. Three are babies.”

The ancestress stayed silent. Ahni grew hot from worry about its conclusions.

The implant cleared Ahni's throat. "In my day the spear fishers came home and shared—as we—shore-based gatherers, shared our gleanings with *them*. Even so, there are too many."

"But what does Zoe say?" RonaSister said.

The mind made Ahni's voice laugh like a braying herder animal. Ahni hurt to see the little children scramble away from her as if *she* made the sounds.

"I am one implant. One brain. Three faces but only one voice and that not even my own. I have retired Zoe and Wisa. A bit of extra energy won't go amiss. The Gardens were always very suitable for twice yearly harvesting. What will you have our people eat when even the roots have been grubbed out and gone? We should not go to the Swamp."

Straightaway, RonaSister seized on the implant's words. "The implant says 'should not'. That means it is doubtful. And how could it know? I say we *should* go to the Swamp."

"Using what to assuage our thirst?" the implant said.

RonaSister slumped. "I forgot. We have only the three shilos. Two of them half-empty already."

"Where *do* we go?" KiraMah said what they all wanted to know. She smiled with her eyes, fiercely.

KiraMah's smiling, for her alone, made Ahni feel braver. "In the northeast is the place that OrcahMan often spoke of, the delta. Its people are the Forest Swimmers and they will welcome us. Our swimmers will meet us at Lagoon Beach. They've gone to help Niko, as was OrcahMan's last wish. They'll leave an evershilo at two places, built around with rocks."

"Niko is Skin-Torn, is he not?" RonaSister said. "The Skin-Torn have no place amongst us."

Ahni could not allow RonaSister stop her trying to steer them north. "We will travel north to forestall the ... the herder ... plan. By moonlight and wiping our tracks. We will sleep in the daytime."

The mothers started to parcel out the luggage.

Helped by KiraMah, the Sisters swept the great mat from over them, rolled it up, and hefted it to their shoulders.

OrahMah carried Kiral.

Ahni had the wallet still slung about her. "Straight east along the tops of the cliffs," she said. The moon's white light was enough to see by. She even had a shadow, a long wavery trail-blazer of which her Ahni-self was the head. She started her people to the SkinGifted's ever-way-station, Lagoon Beach.

< It is only that that bunch of stupid women need a flesh-and-blood leader that I don't strike you dead. >

Ahni missed a step. The implant wasn't finished with her yet.

< It is only that we are walking away from that evil time, that I don't force you to strike yourself with knives and stones until we both died. >

Ahni walked faster to be a long way in front before she said anything.

< It is only that you rejected that ever-child-of-the-people made over into a water-bladder that I don't strike you dead. >

“It is only that I would deliver the SkinGifted from their bondage, and the innocents to a new home, that I don’t jump off the cliff.” Then Ahni said the rest of her thoughts before the implant marshalled another punishment. “I’d rather fly with my kestrel for the space of three breaths than poison a new place with such a black old thing as you.”

< *I am made of titanium, a metal that will outlast even your teeth by many many ages.* >

Ahni recalled that the implant always *had* to have the last word. She pressed her lips together. She breathed in the burnt-iron smell of the red land on her left and the deep salt of the ocean on her right.

Night crickets played her their love songs. The dark blue sky throbbed with the light of the moon as well as more stars than might be counted. The Forest Swimmer Lodestar was in the south, at her back. She imagined OrcahMan and his brothers swimming home by it.