

## Lodestar Series: Kestrel out of Jenk-Father

### 1. The Tribute Gathering

Kes rode along the near-long side of the tongue of land where the camels grazed, on his way to his hide-out. He kept his mount, Gzelle, a dozen yards from the edge of the ridge, not to be seen by anyone in the main camp below too often. Hooded and cloaked against the early morning cold, and with bare feet in the stirrups, he'd pass as the night-herder to all except those knowing the roster.

Not a cloud in the sky meant an ironically beautiful day for the Tribute Ceremony, one of the worst things his people did, in his lone opinion. He meant not to attend. He allowed Gzelle a mouthful of the tussock grass while they ambled toward the place he'd had picked to hide. Ambling was the pace of the herd. If he forced Gzelle into a run, he'd be noticed instantly. One of the hollows covered with bushes at the end of the tongue was his destination. He'd unsaddle and let Gzelle join the herd.

"I don't remember you on the roster."

Dammit, one of the girls. He turned. "Merin, hi." He smiled as winningly as he knew how though she probably wouldn't be swayed. "You thought I was Kier?" Now he was teasing. He was two years older than Kier, a head shorter and a curly dark where Kier was a blond. Even in their look-alike cloaks, no one would mistake them for each other. "The man was still asleep when I snuck out."

She glowered at him with her dark eyes from under her dark hair. Her father should be looking at Kier to marry her, instead of trawling uselessly for Kes. All the young set knew there was no getting between Merin and Kier. And apart from that, Kes just didn't have whatever it was that girls went for.

Now Merin paid him back for him slighting Kier's honour by suggesting that Kier slept through Kes's escape. "There's Kier now. He looks in a temper seeing you here with me."

"Us riding together will you get you in good with your father for showing an interest in me," Kes said out of mischief.

"Very funny, I don't think."

Kier made furious moves with his arm to encourage Kes to hurry back to the main camp. *Yes well.* Merin kicked her mount into a gallop to meet her lover and that was that little problem solved. But they'd sprung him. There'd be no getting away from the day. He turned Gzelle back towards main camp.

Half-glad he had, because Jenk-father came to meet him astride his riding bull. Half-angry, that Jenk came to chase him up when Jenk knew Kes's problems with the Tribute thing. And his father wore his fire-hardened clay mask. Kes curled his lips into a sneer. In case Jenk was seen by the SkinGifters? The Tribute children? His and Jenk's biggest fight so far was about Kes refusing a mask. He'd been black and blue for days. Jenk was one of the five he allowed to beat him without fighting back.

Jenk hissed. “Where’s your pride?” With his dark blonde hair atop the red clay and his light-blue far-seeing eyes peering through the eyeholes, Jenk could’ve been either Kier or Kyle. But Kier wasn’t old enough for a mask and Kyle had picked to be a fighter. All three were a head taller than Kes.

“For giving you the reins without a struggle?” he said innocently as Jenk grabbed them from Kes’s hand.

“And everything else.” Jenk led Gzelle around the edge of the camp, past the back of their tents and those of the Innis-and-Io family. Kes concentrated on riding easy to show off his I-don’t-care attitude. Past the back of the Jovat, Lortas and Hardin tents parallel to the ridge.

“I let you alone last Tribute Day because you were only thirteen. You’re near a man now and it’s time you started taking part in the work, so I signed you up for the go-man job,” Jenk said. “You’ll attend to whatever is required, and cheerfully, as is desired by your mother and chief, and by me.” They angled to the left onto the track along the edge of the drop into the Swamp. Jenk had more to say. “You seem often to forget that the honour of a family depends on its members behaving honourably.”

*Yes fa, no fa.* He’d expected something like this. It was because he hadn’t been able to decide which job was worse. One was hunting humans and sending them to their doom, and one was killing Three Cities fighters by sword and staff. No choice at all. No one in sight along the track ahead meant everyone involved was already in the Swamp. “I hear you. You think honour and glory will keep us fed?” He was pretty sure they wouldn’t, but how come it was only him who could see that?

Jenk’s expression behind the mask was inscrutable. “And I can hear you thinking,” Kes said to really rile him. “Like, it’s a good thing they didn’t trust Kes to be the betweener.” Maybe they’d stop for Jenk to discipline Kes. Finish up the day before it began.

“Only an experienced adult can be a betweener,” Jenk said. “Your mother this time. No one will ever trust you because you cried.”

“I was a little kid feeling sorry for another little kid! Why the fuck’s sake do we need to take the SkinGifters’ kids other than to make the SkinGifters’ afraid of us? Why do we need them afraid?”

“Dammit,” Jenk said. “If you acted less like Jinker ...”

*Blaaahhh!*

The horn was to let everyone know that the SkinGifters neared the stepped-path into the Swamp. Jenk, on his bull, jostled Kes on Gzelle, forcing her into a gallop.

“Stop,” Kes said. “I’ll climb down here. Remember how your father died before I was born? How can I be aping him?”

They stopped. Kes slid down from Gzelle. Hiding and silent behind his expressionless mask, his father pulled her away with him.

Kes hauled his cloak over his head and bundling it roughly, dropped it over the edge. He slung himself over, legs questing for a foothold in the branches of the tree growing next to the cliff. He slid and clambered to the valley floor. No laughter down there meant no one witnessed him in his vest and undershorts. He drew his cloak on again and crossed to the wide rock flood-path of the creek burbling down the middle of the valley. This he followed until he reached the sheet of water where the creek widened around the islands grown over with green reeds eight and ten feet tall.

He met no one until he came to the big island, big as in ten camels side by side. Someone must have cleared the island of reeds, yesterday probably, when clearing them today would've been better. Reed plants started to regrow straightaway, and the island was already studded with dozens of hand-high stalks. A couple of reps from each of the families—he noticed Lariat and Jeb—were present at the near-end trying to find a comfortable sit on their mats among the stubble.

The middle was vacant. Gathering the picnic, building the fire and making the tea were probably part of his job, go-man, given its stupid name. He glanced toward the further end of the island. The SkinGifter women stood clumped together on the bumpy sand. Three young mothers with a child each, one older mother with a child. One grey-haired old woman, and one grey-haired not-so-old older woman. This last one a Sister by his reckoning, since she was tattooed. All were skinnier than sticks and all wore the leather skirts.

He attempted to not stare at their sagging flopping breasts. Heat in his face. One of the young women had sturdy mounds with soft sucky nipples. Her child stole a sip even now. Wasn't there a rule about bringing unweaned children? Trouble for the family who scored him.

The tattooed lines gapping over that one Sister, a semaphore-like code, said she had a grandson. If Kes had known the code he might've discovered the boy's age, name, her name, their whole history. His Uncle Joff rose from where he sat with Jeb, his son. Wasn't Jeb training to be a fighter? Probably Joff would expect his son to be good at everything.

But then Joff stepped back and laid his arm over Kes's shoulders. With his mask close to Kes's face, he said, "Aren't you sorry now that you never took an interest when any of the SkinTorn joined?"

Kes shrugged both Joff's arm and his mask away. He looked all around. "No Skin-Torn here."

Joff talked over the top of him. "A mistake if you mean to be a hunter. And you seem to be saying that." He waited for any reply that Kes might think up. The rest of them gossiped, pondering future takings based on which of the women was present, their ages and their physical conditions.

Kes shuddered. *We hunt people*. He struggled to breathe normally. If it seemed to Joff that Kes was saying he'd be a hunter, no surprise that Kier was in such a temper with him because Kier, next-youngest, couldn't get started till Kes was launched. "Talking about humans as if they are camels."

The rest of them all ears, apparently. Skinny, bug-eyed Lariat sucked his teeth behind his mask. He still nursed his hand. "I wouldn't like to be forced to ride one of the women across the

desert.” He was brave in a crowd but he wouldn’t catch Kes’s eye. He wasn’t on his list of five. The rest laughed, their masks jiggling. *They laugh because they don’t know me. When will I do something about that?*

His Uncle Joff claimed one of the little girls. “We keep her for six or seven years and she’ll be a beauty. The old Grand Devil will eat her up.”

Kes managed to make his face expressionless before Joff glanced at him to check him for a reaction. Paying the Grand Devil her toll was another of the things that they should stop, as he had said in all companies.

Now Marl laughed. Marl was tall and broad. A muscled tub with freckles behind his mask and dark flashing eyes in the eye-hollows. He was here to play one of the drums. “I bet you’ll sell her in ShowTown when you need credit for your boy’s tattoos,” he said. He glanced Kes-wards while he laughed toward Joff.

Kes shrank in his clothes from embarrassment. Why would his intending father-in-law tackle Joff on behalf of his prospective son-in-law? What could Marl see in Kes that Jenk-Father could not?

Everyone laughed again, this time at Joff’s expense. Even Kuri, between Chief as well as Kes-mother, laughed briefly. Her masked glance was the hardest to bear. Hers promised a deep questioning he wouldn’t be able to hold out against.

He felt saved by the circumstances until she whipped up her mask and quirked her eyebrows at him. Then seemed to dismiss him. “Before there’s the selling, there’s the business at hand,” she said. “The trouble brewing today is that there aren’t the usual Sisters, the ones who know the routines.”

Everyone, not just him, studied the SkinGifters. “Mere girls, the younger mothers,” Kuri-chief said.

“They don’t look old enough to have more children waiting at home,” Grandma Io said.

“Have we ever seen that Sister?” Jade said, taking all their attentions from the unfortunate mothers. Jade had that same Jinker look as Jenk. Tall and blond with far-seeing blue eyes. She was a Valkyrie trying to raise the Lortas family from their ignominy. She and Lyle shared the Head-of-the-Family leadership. Yet Lariat was here too. How were they making that work?

“I recall her as a mother. So she’s new at this too,” Grandfa Hardin said. “We’ve got three new ones ourselves, standing around hardly knowing how to act.”

He meant Lariat, Jeb and Kes. “Listening to my elders. How else to learn?” Jeb said. Kes almost laughed at Jeb sounding so pert. Joff thumped Jeb a solid one on the leg. Jeb glared at Kes staring.

“Formerly, that old one was always kept in the background. Now it seems she is in charge,” Marl said.

Joff laughed about his nephews and son. “They’re listening but not hearing.”

“And you, in your situation, would solve that with more of the same,” Marl said.

“I hardly think the Head-of-a-Family of three has anything better to say than the Head-of-a-Family of four,” Joff said, rising. Maybe thump Marl.

“What a laugh that will be, Joff taking on Marl,” Kes said. “Too bad the betweener’s task isn’t also about keeping the peace among the hunters.”

Blessed silence while they all worked out whom he’d spited, and whether to take revenge, or appreciate his gall. Though why expect supporters? He stared at the SkinGifters. The older mother took the lead. She spread a mat. She took her child onto her lap and started to plait the little girl’s hair. That mother the only one who knew anything?

“Kestrel.” Kuri-mother-chief beckoned him.

He picked his way through the musicians warming up, drums and panpipes. Light music to lighten the mood.

“No time to stare, son.”

He hated the way she called him *son* when she was being the chief.

“See to the fire, the food, and the kettle,” Kuri said. She looked up and gauged the time by the sun’s path across the sky. “Have the fosterers here by midday.”

*Great, I don’t think. A couple of hours, if that.* On his way back, he made sure to tread on his Joff’s hand that was purposely laid out to grab Kes’s foot, if he knew Joff. Yes, the bastard frowned a promised threat. Kes shrugged. *First the firewood.*

He plunged into the creek and waded towards its middle to follow it to the coast. His younger brother Kier, his Uncle Joff and his cousin Jeb were always looking for reasons to beat on him. They resented who he was. The middle brother. Kuri-chief’s son. His father’s favourite. As if. They resented him having opinions that didn’t match theirs. His idea of honour. The way he fought. Didn’t fight. Herded their camels. Didn’t herd their camels. He could think of a dozen more reasons they grieved over him. No wonder his father was at his wits end with him.

---

He breathed deep of the water-scent of rotting and growing vegetation. Clean. Peaceful. He could look around, not having to be constantly on watch for fists and feet tripping him. See how the reeds stopped well clear of the shore, and the creek rilled toward the sea over sand?

Dry driftwood lay about above the tideline and he stacked himself an armful. The beach and the shallow continental waters adjacent were contained by two hard-stone cliff ends. If he’d been a kestrel in truth, he might’ve flown high enough to see the Swamp as the Eye, as it was told of by Grandfa Keet. Not only the storyteller of Kes’s childhood years, Grandfa Keet loved him and appreciated everything Kes said and thought. The only one. Kes grieved over Keet’s passing.

He stopped. In the corner of his eye-sight one of the SkinGifter women twirled and bent in the ebb, hair flying. She looked no older than Jeldie who was fifteen. Her long smoke-dark hair was parted through the middle and overlaid by a few silvery strands teased out by the wind.

She collected pippies and put them in a net tied in front like an apron. She turned, maybe intending to leave the beach. Her sparkling green eyes went wide and frightened.

Of him? Because he was a herder. His heart seemed to gather blood into itself and stormed it down to his core. His breathing went ragged.

She trembled.

He glanced around for more driftwood, not to be staring so helplessly. A chunk to the left. He fumbled it and dropped the rest of the wood trying to keep his gaze on her. He shouldn't move because if he scared her more, she'd run. He didn't want her to go.

A wave reached further up the beach than the previous. He dipped the front of his cloak wet trying to pick up his wood still gazing at her, and before the water got to the wood. "Dammit."

She glimmered a tiny smile at his problems, seeming to teeter between running and staying. What if she disappeared before he had the chance to see her again? Her breasts, he couldn't help his gaze going there, were bare and chaste, her nipples pink and upstanding. His blood heated. He strained against everything he was. He swallowed and swallowed trying to think of a way to extend their meeting. A way to approach her. To touch her without her fleeing.

She raised her head and stared toward the island as one of the drummers beat a double. "It's a signal," he managed. Dully he realised he still had to lay the fire, fetch water, fetch food, and fetch the fostering slaves. "I've got to go," he said though he wanted to stay. "They'd turn the place upside down if I hid," he said apologetically.

---

A breeze kirtled through the reeds to where he was trying to get the fire going. People complained because smoke went into their eyes. He had no patience for stuffing around. He gathered the kindling on his outspread hands, the tinder smouldering on top, and shifted the whole caboodle to the other side of the island. He shrugged off whoever pulled at his cloak. Hardly heard the complaints about embers and sparks raining down among them.

He laughed, secretly. They'd be thinking that he could never do anything right while he just met a secret girl that the SkinGifters obviously kept behind all these years. She had the green eyes and twelve years ago she might have been about four years old. The damned hunters wouldn't hear about her from him.

"The boy has a secret," Joff said, grabbing him in a head-lock. "That smile is a dead give-away. What love can he have met between then and now?"

Kes struggled to get loose. "Fuck off." They wouldn't hear about her from him.

Joff grinned into Kes's face.

Kes stamped hard on Joff's instep.

Joff swallowed a gasp. He hissed. "This is war, Runt!"

Kes jerked loose. "What's new? I never fought back before, that's all."

Everyone was up by now to hide the skirmish from the SkinGifter women. "Devil's sake! Leave the boy alone," Grandma Io said. "Smiling isn't a crime."

"This boy never smiles. Is it any wonder I'm suspicious?" Joff said.

"Don't let me have to take a sword to you," Kuri-chief said.

Kes smirking at Joff's discomfort earned him a wild but restrained threat. He smirked harder. Breaking his own rule finally felt so sweet.