

10. Kes, His Father's Ploys

Jenk-Fa wasn't such a hunter that he crept through the herd on foot to surprise his troublesome middle child. The moon-bright night allowed Kes to watch his father arrive at the camp-side edge of the herd, there to whistle for one of his rides. Jenk had a bundle over one shoulder and his riding saddle on the other.

The moonlight probably also allowed Jenk to see where Kes had Gzelle ambling along, and ride straight through the herd. Arriving, Jenk greeted Kes formally, "Kesson."

"Fa," Kes said.

Bullone sidled in beside Gzelle. "Your mother is troubled and therefore I am troubled," Jenk-Fa said.

This is my father. Out here with me before dawn despite me beating into Kier. "Something I said?" Kes sparred like he was on his backfoot already.

"Your mother worries that you, a camel-man by intent, sit with your back to the herd."

Kes frowned trying to work out where his mother wanted his father to go with that. "My ears are always open to the herd," he said carefully.

"And your eyes?"

"My eyes are on my lodestar."

"In the south of east? You're mouthing mysteries."

Respecting his father, he'd stupidly expected him to understand poetics. He blushed. "Just talking."

"Like your mother talks just talking. Other than that you remind me of your grandfather Jinker."

"And here I was worrying I'd have to go against everything to be a camel-man."

"Here's his spare cloak. Put it on." Jenk passed over the long bundle.

Kes gratefully pulled it on over his head. "Thanks!"

"Jinker went feral," Jenk said.

Damn. What he'd been planning for himself and Ahni. *Maybe the cloak didn't show me slump?*

Jenk answered the questions he maybe thought Kes should've asked. "Left his partner—my mother—and me and Joff behind. But took all his animals. By the time we came across him, years later at his camp off Rockeater's Ridge, he was dead and desiccated."

Kes's ears burned.

Jenk went on like he had no clue how it all affected his son. "His herd was in excellent shape. It's still the place where we go to look when any of the Jinker-bred go missing. They make for it like homing pigeons."

The camp at Rockeater's Ridge was where he'd thought to run to. He hadn't planned beyond that.

"I'll not lose a son the same way I lost my father."

Listen up! Jenk-fa not done.

"So mark me, Kesson of Jenk, you flee and Jenk will tag wherever you go. Or I pass the tag on if I can't trail you myself."

Kes scabbled for something hard-mouthed. “I flee and you’ll tag. Does Kuri know, or did you think it up by yourself?”

Jenk swiped him over his head, but not like in a true disciplining. “Go stir up the teen-camp. Where are they? The sun is just about up. While you sleep, think on what I said.”

Kes wasn’t there to hear it himself, but Marl head of the Marin family, argued for more time at the Shipyard Camp to start training up the fighters. And since the camel feed locally was thin from lack of rain, the families decided to travel the sooner.

Under cover of the new family edict of more-work-for-Kes, Kes started training a couple of the jinker-line animals to his voice. Since Rock-Eaters Ridge was out, he planned to explore further into the canyons. Had to be a grass in there somewhere. He planned to take one or two animals from each family. He’d make it up to them with good calves after he found his way with the breeding.

In a moment of clarity, he jeered at himself. *I am such a dreamer*. Probably the hot heads would compete to find him, to be the first to dole out his just-desserts.

If only he could get a look at the old maps his mother had among her clan-history things. Could he get back into her good graces? His mother-the-chief? *The jury is out on that. Need to go slow to go fast.*

Kes now sat with the rest of the herdie cohort for his meals, but kept his solitary camp as the place where he slept and worked at harness repairs. The closer they got to the Shipyard, the more sword belts came out of storage to be repaired. In between, he joined pieces he scoured from anywhere – new or too old to repair and sometimes because he wasn’t proud— scavenged from the rubbish piles behind people’s tents. He planned to have all his own gear when he took off, including his own mark on every bit of leatherwork.

When they were halfway to the Shipyard, the outriders reported rain back in the south. They watched the weather by the state of the streams in the chasms.

That night Jenk came for a sword belt. He brought a strip of tanned hide, and a steel buckle.

“That’s new leather,” Kes said.

“From Lomack’s beast that he lost last year. It’s been curing in the Swamp the whole year and it is good.”

“For Kier?”

“Just a sword belt, Kes. You heard there’ll be training this year before we hit Show Town?”

“Good,” Kes said. “I’ve always hated how our fighters have to go in untrained because they’re meant to be the fall guys.”

“We thought if we trained, we’d be able to keep the fights going longer. Resulting in more excitement resulting in more days of grazing for us, and giving the audience more incentive to dole out credits.”

“I’d like to give those city types hot chili sometimes for them expecting to knock us over like bales of straw.”

“Glad to hear it.”

Kes looked at his father’s face for irony and or sarcasm. But, though Jenk rarely wore his mask around his family, he was good enough with his real face not to reveal everything he thought.

“Make it a belt you’d be proud to wear yourself,” Jenk said.

It was a good thing Kes could still do for Jenk, to make up for the bad things he’d be doing later.

A few days further on, Jenk came to fetch it. “What’s this?” He pointed at the star under the upended U on the tip of the belt’s tongue.

“Kestrel mantling his lodestar,” Kes said, tired of keeping his father distant.

Jenk turned the brand this way and that. “It wants a head and the beak.”

“I don’t have any tools that can make small enough grooves. You should’ve told me who it’s for.”

“It’s good. Be proud to wear it. Your mother and I mean you to train for the fighting.”

“Oh.”

“That’s all you can say? The calf with his mother’s mouth?”

“I’m surprised,” Kes said. “I’m amazed that you even believe I’ll be any good at all that martial stuff.”

“I asked around. You’ve got a good attitude. You start with talk and you refuse to fight anyone smaller than yourself. That’s a good start for the fighting. So load me up, I’ve come to fetch you back to our tent.”

His mind was in turmoil. His parents had certainly got the better of him this round. He apologized to Ahni. *I will meet you. We will escape.* He gave Jenk his swag to carry. The bag with the leather jobs, and the tackle he’d made for his get-away, he carried himself. Lest Jenk comment on its weight.

11: Ahni, Visioning

Ahni knew it was morning by the sounds.

The mothering room door, down the corridor, was opened and tethered back to the wall. Mothers and children chattered their way down to the Basin for the breakfast foraging. Whoever slept on the machine room floor alongside Ahni on the bed-shelf, got up and moved around. Her feet on the stone floor sounded like dried seaweed skittering.

Ahni pressed the blindfold to her eyes to soak up the tears that came whenever she thought of her stupidity. She bitterly bitterly regretted her outburst. Would she ever see Kes again?

“Yes, I’d be lying there all sad and slumped too, if I’d been so stupid!”

SanaSister.

“I think I said no talking, Sana?”

OrahSister.

“Get her up the ladder,” OrahSister said. “She may as well hear what we decide.”

“Not with the blindfold,” SanaSister said.

“Fine. I’ll do it myself.” OrahSister’s hard hands pulled Ahni from the shelf and pushed her ahead of herself towards the ladder to the eyrie.

When Ahni leaned against the ladder, and with her foot felt for the first rung, someone, probably OrahSister, wrenched the blindfold away over her head. Pushed her up the ladder. The hatch cover was already shoved aside.

There was no escape except by looking up into the turned-over bowl of sky joined to the turned-up one holding the ocean. The morning fog from the land poured over the lip of the cliffs and into the sea like fat foamy water. Columns of dust and smoke rose from the land behind the cliffs where Kes might be.

“Set her in the middle, I’ll not have her walking off the eyrie to solve her problems,” OrahSister said as she climbed through the hatch-hole.

All the Sisters together wedged Ahni in the middle of them, each with one foot, so she was like the heart of a sea-star.

“The meeting is open,” OrahSister said. “You first, Lucah.”

The Eldest’s eyes were swollen and red. “How can I teach her anything? And why would I bother if the minute my back is turned, she runs to her murdering lover?”

Mutiny rose in Ahni as the Eldest talked. She burst out. “Why wouldn’t I? You hated me before we began.”

OrahSister was on her knees in a flash, holding Ahni with one hand and smacking her head a half-a-dozen with the other. “Silence! Be quiet! This meeting is *about* you, you recalcitrant piece of wrack!”

Every slap was a victory. She’d been able to say more than she’d expected, and she had showed up OrahSister for the vengeful creature she was.

“She’ll be tethered to one or the other of us for the rest of her life if necessary,” OrahSister said as she sat back.

“What about you taking the implant, Orah?” SanaSister said. “By the time your grandson is of age, your SkinGift will likely be too old.”

“I’ve contemplated it since Orny’s birth but my knowledge of you-know-what is the problem.”

“That’s true,” RonaSister said. “If only we could make Ahni a swimmer. Make her work the harder and forget that young killer.”

“He’s not a killer!” Ahni said.

OrahSister reared up with her hand raised.

Ahni smiled in the fiercest way she knew.

“The trouble is that apart from the tribute, she knows nothing,” SanaSister said. “I vote we take her to the Swamp and show her. I’ll do that. Get these thoughts out of her and us back to normal. Things are difficult enough without constantly having to worry that a mob of herders will come to snatch her.”

“Lucah should go too,” RulahSister said. “To teach Ahni the healing song in the meanwhile. Give her something real to think about.”

“I vote we silver her,” said RonaSister. “It’ll focus her mind somewhere else entirely and making her biddable as well. Isn’t that why you forced it on me, to encourage me to accept my fate?”

OrahSister stared RonaSister a knife-blade look. “We should ask the ancestress about that. Lucah?” OrahSister said.

The Eldest pressed her left-hand palm with her right-hand thumb. She stared outward but appeared to be attending an inward process. “Silvering the host-to-be, what effect?” She flinched a little as the implant started to speak using her lips and throat. “Using the silver

delta-mud as a massaging agent? I have no idea of the effect. We are not the dolphinate kind. Should be an interesting experiment.”

Ahni shuddered. The more she learned about the implant the less she wanted to be its host.

“Get the salve, Sana,” said OrahSister.

After the Sisters rubbed the delta salve into every part of her Ahni-skin, they left her alone, still tethered to the hatch by one foot.

“Sweet dreams,” RonaSister said.

Ahni lay full-length looking out over the edge of the eyrie. Whenever she lifted her gaze, nausea overcame her and she vomited on the eyrie-floor beside her. Never down the wall where the wind might catch it. The mothers and children below were not to blame for her mistake.

Her whole body was clotted with silver. She hardly knew the difference between her insides and outsides. She raked her fingernails over her arms and thighs, scraping the stuff away from knees to her hip, five stripes on each leg and she was a great striped lazy-swimming fish in the deep blue sea.

Nearby, at the edge of the continent, the sentinels chattered, the whole long line of them. They were set there by human-kind, ancestors who lived on only in the SkinGifters’ genetic heritage.

Hearing them, she felt as if she’d known the sentinel codes all her life. The sea-currents flowed faster. They told that the weather would change.

At the base of the tower there was laughing and mothers springing to rescue their small children as a king wave surged into the Basin. In the ocean, the water was darker than night until suddenly Ahni SkinGifter stroked slowly above a gold green sea-bottom covered with waving sea-grasses.

Alongside swam a Skinling—Niko it felt like—who guided her through the turns and ways to their destination. In front and behind them swam the others of their people mixed with their friends the dolphinate kind.

Kes watched from the shore. He waited with the camels. In the dream, he hugged her when she returned, and in their camp that night, he washed the silver delta mud from her lest she sink into the dolphinate dreaming.

As Niko touched her arm to show Ahni the next turn, he became KiraMah. “Come Ahni,” she said. “I will wash you.”

Ahni blinked at KiraMah still down there in the Basin. Which was the real one? Desperately she slid her glance away. If she fixed her eyes on the cliffs and told herself their stories, she might hold the visioning at bay.

At the far left was Cliffswimmer, the rock that breasted the waves in all weathers. Cliffswimmer and Seagoyle Point together broke the force of incoming storm tides and allowed the Seatower to survive the Deep’s rising.

The almost-dream of the tower broken came too close for comfort. Quickly Ahni moved her attention along. The rocky head of the Seal Pup bravely swimming in the Cliffswimmer’s wake became a turbulence at high water.

“Ahni,” KiraMah in the Basin called her. “Ahni, come be with us.”

Ahni crawled to the hatch hole and slipped the loop of the tether from over the hatch. The knots came loose easily in her hands, or maybe they were someone else's ten half-moon fingernails of silver.

She slid bonelessly down the ladder and wading down the spiralling corridor through air like cold sweat became wading into the sea. She lost her footing and slammed down hard on stone. Did not feel floor or walls. The dark water roiled as she fought to the uncertain boundary between sea and sky. Around her the swimmers fought for their lives too. The fist of the Deep ran with blood and broken limbs and strong, strong fear.

One of the swimmers sank away. The air from his lungs bubbled up unstrung, like a broken necklace. Ahni's eyes stung with spray and tears. Then that vision released her. She crawled through the archway with blood springing from her skin-scrapes and her heart and head as heavy as stone.

The women cradled her as KiraMah washed her hurts with the soft sea's healing salts. And KiraMah stopped the questions with whispering and glances and crooned sleep words. The silver mud sank sparkling to the Basin floor, where it joined the glitter in the ocean of all the years of the Dolphinate, and all the years of the SkinGifted travelling its waters.

Ahni dreamed that the lodestar-being wept as its silver spread farther and farther, thinner and thinner. As it bled, its star became depleted. It lived thinly while the lodestar's light still glimmered.

She slowly came back into her senses. Slit-opening her eyes, she saw the mothering room glow gold as it did with the night time wick light. Had she slept all day?

The sound of water sluicing between shutters and window holes woke her to the reality of the wind warring with the sea. As usual during such violence, Sisters stood by to restrain the old steel window covers and mop up between times.

Just another day beset by storm.

An unending plainsong wandered in and out of the sounds of the roaring gusting wind, the rattle of the shutters and the sluicing of water. Sometimes a medley of Sisters, using their strong singing to harness their vigour accompanied the Eldest's reedy voice, while at other times a mother braced her fortitude by joining in with words of courage.

A lull in the storm noise and a mother's weeping supplication caught Ahni's attention. Her eyes snapped wide open.

KiraMah said, "Don't be afraid, Ahni. You are safe in the mothering room."

Ahni hitched herself up to sitting.

"Long ago our tower stood on a rock beyond the reach of the sea," said the Eldest.

Her words slid into Ahni's mind like old friends.

But then the Eldest changed the telling. "At that time all the world's living places were full to overflowing."

Mothers and children sat up straighter, interested by the change in the beginning of the story, or they shuffled nearer.

The Eldest did not tell the next, usual, words either. Ahni always noticed how the Eldest enjoyed tricking her listeners by changing words and sometimes telling different details.

“Beneath the desert, are caves where people lived. In some places, pans of rock funnel rain and dew together, and there also people lived. But mostly people collected in the great cities beyond the desert.”

OrahSister’s hard look glinted like a sinking knife but the Eldest continued without remarking on OrahSister’s silent resistance to the renewed story. Ahni closed her eyes to not see the things passing between the two women. She wanted to be distracted.

“As many people as a school of fish?” asked little Desi.

“A school so large that the Basin’s water would be like a thick soup.”

The mothers looked disbelieving. “Never in my days.” “I wish that once in our lives we had that many fish.”

“Just as if the Basin was so tight-packed with fish, that the water would both be warmed and fouled, so the air surrounding the world was warmed and fouled.”

This was so impossible to believe that everyone was silenced. So did the Eldest get their attention back to the story. “Wind and weather began to change. This tower, this house, was once set on a rocky hill rising out of a small friendly valley backed by cliffs. In front, lay the beach where many seals gathered every winter to bear their pups, and to sleep through the time of dense cold in their southern home.

“Women of all ages and always a few men came to live in this house to study these animals, how many came, and why; and some came to study the life of the sea, its tides and its storms.”

When the Eldest got to the words describing the ancient people of the tower, the denial faded from OrahSister’s face.

“The people who lived here then, stayed a few weeks or a month at the time. They had wood or metal or plastic boats to travel along the water, and machine-crafted skins for swimming, and metal tanks filled with air to breathe underwater.”

Ahni opened her eyes a little to see the pictures of these wonders the Eldest made with gestures.

“All along the edge of the Deep where the end of the land was in those days, they hung the sentinels that would tell them of coming storms. As even now those same sentinels still warn us.”

Ahni dared a question. “How do they work?”

The Eldest’s expression tightened, probably because it was Ahni asking, though the Eldest had no trouble weaving the explanation into the fabric of her tale.

“They are machines, each the size of a toddling pup, with openings with which to taste the ocean’s currents and feel cool and warmth in the water. When the water is driven faster over their skin, sentinels know a storm is coming. Then they send messages to tell us. For all the years from then until now, they have told us of the ocean’s weathers.”

“If they fore-told this storm why aren’t the swimmers home?” Ahni said. The vision swam closer on the thought of the Skinlings battling high waves in the open ocean.

The Eldest flinched.

OrahSister hissed. “Tsss.”

Because she sorrowed thinking that the SkinGifted could have been home, or because of Ahni’s rude words? Was OrahSister angry with Ahni, or angry with the Eldest? Perhaps the

sentinels made a mistake. They are so much older than the Eldest. *Arno, did you know of the storm?*

It wasn't even a properly sent thought. More a prayer, or a hope that he'd been prepared for it and could save himself and his brothers.

He sent her pictures of them surfing a thunderous wave. Walking onto a rain wet beach. Sleeping in the lagoon behind it.

Ahni laughed with relief. "The Skinlings are safe. There's a water separate from the ocean, a lagoon. They're resting there."

"But the lost one?" one of the mothers dared to say.

"I couldn't see his face. I don't know who." Now that she'd said it, the vision left her. The swimmer-shape sank one more time, blackly to the Deep, his final ragged breath bubbling from a strange face. "Not a swimmer face," she explained, making whiskers, the sign for a seal.

The wind had dropped. Her words were like a signal. Mothers and children went back to their sleeping-places and began to set them right.

The Sisters unrolled their own mats in the centre of the room.