

## 5. Kes Negging a Hunt

Kes walked for the place along the ridge overlooking main-camp where he often climbed down, to sneak home unseen having scored enough of the ribaldry about still being in his underwear to last him. The herdies as scathing as everyone else.

The ridge was a good height to check the camel lines at the back of the family tents. He noted that both Hosey's mount and Lariat's were gone from their family lines. Then he saw that Joff's favourite ride was also missing. He could kick himself for his stupidity not thinking they'd try to take Ahni while the SkinGifter women made for the Seatower. He whistled peremptorily for a camel from the herd. Any beast would do.

A beast in the distance but coming at a gallop, answered his demand with an equally peremptory braying. He'd have laughed if he had time. His father's main breeding bull, Bullone. There probably wasn't a spare saddle at the herdie camp but the size of the bull meant Kes could ride bare back, or rather, bare neck. He swarmed up onto the tall beast and galloped back to the camp.

There he rummaged for a blanket and a waterbag, a set of reins, and a lanyard to keep his feet from sliding around. He hoped his father's retired riding camel still had the spunk for a hard ride. He slid a blanket from Kier's swag. Watch out, kes. His brother likely cranky, tail-end of a night watch. And here, a half-filled water-bag. He upended it over his mouth, swallowed.

*Splat.* The bag flew out of his hands and glugged the rest of its water onto the ground. "Hey! Sorry, Runt," Kier said, grinning widely. "Didn't see you under there."

Kes swung his left fist, from out of nowhere it would feel like to his little brother, and thumped Kier on his chin.

Kier fell, on his back, amazed for a couple of seconds. "What's with you?" He bounded back to his feet and danced fists up around Kes. He laughed. "You want an actual fight?"

Kes circled as Kier threw half a dozen shadow-boxing punches that didn't reach before finally driving a punch all the way.

Kes side-stepped. "You meant to break my jaw?" He drove his fist into Kier's ribs. *Aah! My hand!*

Kier folded. "Oof."

Merin slid yelling from her camel and to her knees beside Kier. "You hurt him!"

"One punch to the ribs?" His fist had to hurt more than Kier's ribs but then he'd already used it twice. "Don't make me laugh."

Kier climbed to his feet with Merin's help, she whispering at him.

"Having trouble figuring out your next move, *little* brother?" Kes said.

Kier ran at him in a fury, flurrying a rain of punches at Kes.

Kes ducked under most of them and shouldered into the rest. One. Two. One. Two.

Kier fell back, panting.

"Get you killed, getting into a pattern like that," Kes said through the pain. His shoulders burned. "Where's your endurance?"

Lewit and Jeldie rode into the camp. Lewit grinned. "At it, men. May the best brother win." They turned their camels and started the day's riding.

Kier flicked a glance at Merin, presumably for support for his next tactic, and sprang at Kes, with his hands ready to grapple Kes.

Kes bent a knee to the ground. "You thought I was distracted?"

Kier fell over him and rolled badly. Too angry now to consider his moves, he kicked for Kes's knee.

Kes stepped away and waited. Then, as Kier drew his work-blade from his wrist holster, kicked his arm hard and fast. *Crack!*

Kier screamed. He fell to his knees, crying and cradling his arm. End of fight.

Merin yelled. "You broke his arm?!" She hid Kier behind her back as Kes went to pick up the blanket and the knife.

He laughed, drove the tip of the knife into the middle of the blanket. Ripped himself a head hole and threw the blanket over his head. "A make-do cloak. What else have you got that I can use?" he said, teasing. "So so sick of being the punching bag." He strode to *her* camel and sawed off *her* fancy, all-of-a-piece reins. Used them to belt his make-do cloak around his waist. He lifted the filled water-bag from around her camel's neck and tied it round Bullone's neck.

He vaulted onto Bullone and rode away at a gallop, swinging a wide loop around the main camp, before riding for the northeast. A couple of miles along the cliffs they crossed a flurry of tracks not yet wind-blown. He slowed Bullone and hung down his side to study the particulars. Three beasts. Joff, Hosey and Lariat who should have known better. Probably he felt safe with Joff.

Kes kicked Bullone into a faster pace that the camel seemed to relish. How far could a bunch of women on foot have got? If they started as soon as the herders left the Swamp, say? Which could've been about dawn because the hunters liked to stay on the island all night to smoke and yarn?

Dawn then. Walking fast, the women might make five miles an hour and it was now breakfast time. His gut rumbled despite the bread he'd stuffed down earlier. Kier had held him up about half an hour, he guessed. He patted the camel, "Good boy." Bullone was taller than Gzelle with a correspondingly longer stride.

Would his uncle bail up the women and steal Ahni from their midst? *Dammit!* He'd lost the trail. He slowed Bullone down to a walk, slid down, and led him by the reins. He ran with his gaze glued to the ground.

Too dry here to take impressions. He crossed to the track where SkinGifter women had traveled for all the hundreds of years they'd been sharing the Swamp with Kes's people. The path was deep with trodden sand. Soft underfoot. He walked in it to feel how it might feel to Ahni.

After a while of walking in the track, he understood from the patch of stirred-up sand every fifty metres or so, that the women walked, ran, walked, ran. He didn't know how much ground they might've covered. Stepping from the SkinGifter trail, he stopped Bullone and mounted. Heeled the camel in his ribs to make him gallop.

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Half an hour hard riding maybe, and Bullone snorted. Kes had him stop. "Couple of your camel-girls about?" he said softly. "Smart camel-man." Both Joff and Hosey rode Jinker-line animals.

Bullone swung his head and sniffed in large draughts of air.

Kes walked Bullone forward, midway between the SkinGifter trail, and the low shrubs cladding the slightly falling-away ground on the left. Good place for an ambush. He stopped Bullone with a touch, climbed up on his hump. Bullone swayed sideways and back. "Easy," Kes said not louder than the sea-wind scouring over the salt-bush. There they were, the women, on the hard clay side of their track.

Ahni lifted the old woman by her shoulders and helped her drink from one of their cruel water-bags. The rest shared another among them, with each taking a few little sips only. While each one drank, the rest watched different parts of the shrubbery.

Kes turned his feet millimetrically on Bullone's hump while keeping his body in a straight line above them to not fall. Lariat and Hosey, he saw, crept nearer commando-style. They had a net between them. Joff faced Hosey and Lariat and signed for them to go and, with continual quick glances toward the SkinGifter women, when to stop.

As if it made any difference when the women always had at least three pairs of eyes on watch. No wonder his little brother thought he'd have no trouble out-scoring at least half the hunters, and was out of patience with Kes still not starting ... in what? The hunting as well? *Don't think so, brother. Fighting in the ring? Nearly as stupid.* How could he make a living with just herding, though?

He dropped down and walked Bullone into sight. The Sister and the three mothers picked up the mat with the old woman on it, a corner each. The older mother pushed Ahni to the off-side, while she took position nearest Kes and the hunters. She hefted a driftwood cudgel the way he would hold a fighting staff, and it looked like she knew how to use it.

It hurt that they were afraid of him when he came to help them. *They never had anything but grief from us.*

He stopped Bullone near the hunters, him grinning. Wearing their masks, they still hadn't seen him. Hosey and Lariat were both black haired. According to Lariat's mother when she was still sane, Lariat was a thin baby who'd become a thin man. The reason for his name. Joff's hair sticking up above the mask was a dusty blond. Bullone snorted and their heads lifted in unison. Joff swore.

The women slowed, he saw with a covert glance. Ahni walked backward. She appeared to want to stop but the older mother held her on track. He would count Ahni's actions as a tiny step in their courtship dance. His heart ballooned in his chest.

"I told you. Lovesick," Joff said.

A thin wailing carried back to him on the breeze. Could only be the old woman. He hated her suddenly. Due to both her and his stupid stupid relatives, there wasn't anything he could do other than stop the stupidos, and let the women take Ahni back to their sea-tower home.

He whistled the herder come-to-me command toward where he saw twitching and swaying shrubbery. Three camels stepped obediently toward Bullone's rear. Joff would've jumped for his mount except that Kes walked Bullone near enough, that he all but trod on the edges of Joff's cloak. "Stay where you are, Uncle." He made it a threat though he doubted Bullone would stand on anyone known.

"You've stopped us," Hosey said. "What more can you want?"

Joff over-rode him. "You've got the camels. You can leave us to come home at our own pace."

Kes grinned. Going on past history, his Uncle Joff thought Kes the stupido.

Hosey grinned too. "You wouldn't be wanting us to walk back, would you?"

Lariat brushed leaves and twigs from his clothes. "Because it's a dammed long way back."

He himself grinning was a mistake. He had only the one weapon, his ride. They, on the other hand, could easily surround Bullone, and pull Kes from his height. He made his face go still, his expression distant. He stared over their heads, requiring only a flick of his eyes to direct his gaze back at them.

Lariat fidgeted. He might be remembering that previous time Kes held the upper ground.

Hosey shrugged at Joff trying to catch Kes's eye. He started off in the direction of home. After a pace, Lariat followed him. Joff stayed put, and so therefore, so did Kes. "Pass me down a sip from your water-bag, nephew?"

Kes hardened himself against his uncle's requests.

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Late in the afternoon Jenk came riding out of the setting sun. He lined Gzelle up parallel to Bullone and slid to the ground in the narrow space between them. He gripped Kes's lower leg. "Your mount, my son. String up Hosey's and Lariat's mounts. Stay back a pace riding." He angled his mask, his left ear ready to hear Kes's acknowledgement.

"I hear you, Fa," Kes said with the informal term.

Jenk straightened his head. Angling it up a couple of millimetres, he laughed behind his mask. He mounted Bullone and faced Joff. "Brother. Get in your saddle and let's ride."

Joff swore. "Half-brother. Took you long enough. The SkinGifters will have reached their dammed WomanRock by now, and be out of reach in the sea-caves."

"What makes you think I'd help catch your mother as if she is any old number?" Jenk said with some heat.

*Joff a half-brother? Joff's mother?* Listening hard, Kes stared at the back of Gzelle's head. Wouldn't do to catch anyone's glance just now.

"The old grey-hair isn't my mother," Joff said.

"Your birth mother," Jenk said.

"Jinker's little SkinGifter," Joff sneered. "I heard Jinker's old man organised him a partner forthwith."

"What's with the half-brothering?" Jenk said. Kes thought his father tried to distract Joff. Didn't work.

"I know what it's like to grow up a half-brother and you're not doing anything to stop this," Joff said.

"You didn't grow up a half-brother," Jenk said. "When Jinker's SkinGifter girl proudly brought you to your father, Innis-ma accepted you without a demur. She adopted you as her own and made us twins."

"I figured it was up to me to stop the Runt making another like me," Joff said.

Furious, Kes dropped the lead of the two-camel-string. Dug his heels into Gzelle for enough speed get past Jenk and speak for himself.

Jenk put out his arm. *Stop.*

Kes stopped. Retrieved the lead when the first camel came alongside. Watched his father's back.

Bullone stopped. Jenk trained his mounts with secret touches.

Joff noticed after a minute and rode back. "What?"

"Wrong son. Yours is Jeb. He's the one you should be fathering," Jenk said.

Joff ignored the warning in Jenk's posture. "You're soft on your runt. He's head-strong. Just like Jinker was." He addressed Kes. "You want to be Jinker?"

"Stop," Jenk said.

Kes remembered some consequences when Jenk said it like that. Jenk beating on Kyle, Kyle the age of Kes now, crying. He dug his heels in Gzelle. "I'm gone," he told his father passing him.

"Look what Jinker did to his family," Joff shouted after him.

*Crash!*

Could only be a mask thrown down hard. It meant one or the other called for a duel. About him. Kes felt sick but didn't stop. The string ran after him faster now because of the sound of a bull camel galloping after them. His father, grimacing, maskless and wild-eyed, passed him. Then Joff, racing after Jenk, *his* face still masked.

Kes slowed Gzelle to a walk. It seemed wiser to get home a long time after. Or not at all. He traveled the loop around the main camp. Made himself a solitary fire. The heads-of-the-families would probably decide on bread and water for him, for the foreseeable future. What would they call it, what he did?

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Night times he rode the herd. Daytimes he slept by his fire with Gzelle watching over him. Nobody came near him apart from someone bringing him his food. Usually a share of lentil stew from the herdie camp, with maybe a couple of rounds of bread for the following day. He sent Gzelle, water-bag tied around her neck, when Lewit and Jeldie and Merin came by with the herd to take them to drink. Both Lewit and Jeldie proved sympathetic though Kier was still off the roster due to his injuries.

One dusk, Kyle came to bring him a meal.

"What's with Merin?" Kes asked. "She's glummer every time I see her."

"Marl is insisting on you for her," Kyle said. "Despite you negging a hunt."

*It was a hunt?* "I'm not available," Kes said.

"I'll be interested to see how you make that understood," Kyle said in a polite, non-scathing tone.

He was gone before Kes, nonplussed, could think up the next thing to say. Kyle looked haunted, Kes realised. Surely Marl wasn't asking for Kyle if he couldn't have Kes? Who could possibly want Kyle for a girl, when he spent every possible moment of the day, and night, with Moss?