

16: Kes, Crossing the Shipyard

Like nothing had changed, Kes was back in solitary. Apparently, half the four families counselled that Kes be whipped for his impunity. Them whipped up by Joff, of course. Likely his uncle still smarted about the laughter over his cracked mask. His mother said any whipping will be by my hand, he heard via Lewit. His father said no whipping.

But neither visited his one-man camp. Nor his brothers, though why expect Kier? Who was back on herding. Kyle? Make that Kyle-and-Moss? Then he wondered what Jenk-Fa told Kuri-Chief of their middle calf's *adventures*. He curled his lip. *If they only knew*. Truth was, Jenk encouraged him back in solitary, for the foreseeable outcomes. He'd accepted, though everything had changed. His plan most of all.

A masked shadow arrived and sat down on other side of his camel turd fire. *Speak of the devil!* He forbore chuckling, Kyle was worse at taking Kes's chiaking than Kier. If his new plan was to succeed, he'd need to get in with Kyle and Moss, sooner than later.

"How did you do it?" Kyle said. "I'm asking this for Moss."

"How did *you*?" Kes said. "Silent as a ghost camel." Both his brothers were large and blond, like Jenk-Fa. "Taking after Jenk-Fa with the ghosting, as well?"

"That part is the training. Necessary for *where* we train. You'll get to it," Kyle said. "How *did* you do it?"

"Do what? I've done a lot lately and am being accused of a whole lot more." Kes looked at Kyle and saw Kyle-and-Moss. "You paired-up people are so predictable."

Kyle started. "What?" He waited.

"So this is you frowning?" Kes said. Kyle didn't do mere *waiting*. He'd be thinking through what Kes said, discovering an insult maybe. "A mask is damned hard to see through though I get that we wear them to make it harder for the damned ShowTown-fighters to see what we're thinking."

"Yes. I am frowning," Kyle said. But he laid his mask aside. "How did you beat Kier?" he said, skipping over the possible insult.

"I should be rolling around laughing," Kes said. "That was a lifetime ago when I was still a kid."

"My turn to roll around laughing," Kyle said. "You are still a kid. Still riling me." He rose.

Kes rose too. He needed both Kyle, and Kyle-and-Moss. "You're letting yourself get riled." He smoothed the troubles between them with his hands.

"Look at you. Who wouldn't?" Kyle said. "Uppity, as always. Tell me."

"There's no secrets between you and Moss, right? Kier checked with Merin before every punch until I made him attend to me."

Disquiet in Kyle's expression.

"You're checking how you and Moss are predictable? Good," Kes said to rub it in a bit. "We were a push-over at ShowTown last Circle, because of our predictabilities. I'm short. It's easy to get under Kier's guard and he's no fighter."

"Says you after the first time you ever beat him," Kyle said.

Good again, Kes thought. *He has his ire up. I'm upsetting his understanding of the world.* "This was the first time I ever fought him, him being my *little* brother."

“I don’t believe it,” Kyle said automatically. Apparently hearing the thoughtlessness of it himself. “Make that, I don’t believe you can handle all the grief Kier doles you, without you breaking more often.”

“Might be I handle it better than you,” Kes said.

“Tss.”

“Look at you with your fist ready to lay into me,” Kes said.

Kyle relaxed his hand by force. “Is this some kind of strategy?”

“It worked, didn’t it? I might’ve made you so angry, you couldn’t see straight enough to hit, making it easier for me to duck and weave.”

“All I see is everyman walloping Kes,” Kyle said.

“Wrong. I only let four people beat on me, and that was to not make trouble in the family,” Kes said. He saw Kyle thinking who they were. “You never beat on me, except for a couple of fair-play swipes, so you’re not one of them. Except just then, and I would’ve definitely had a go at you after I made you rage.”

Kyle swiped him a flat-hander to the top of his head.

Kes ducked, grinning. He waited. Kyle always went straight for the crux.

“*Was?*” Kyle said.

“Yeah. Because I decided to be a different person.”

“Watch out, World,” Kyle said. “Like, you’re in good with Kuri-mother now?”

“You think?” Kes said. He shrugged. “I have no idea what she’s thinking. You?”

“Since you came back from the swamp?” Kyle said. He laughed. “Lordy. Lordy. The grief over a cracked mask. That Kuri-calf ramapaging out of control. Who do those Kuri-people think they are? We ought to choose a new chief.” He summed up. “She’s far too busy with the fall-out, to be thinking about you.”

Then he smirked. “Moss is convinced Jenk-Fa wears his mask so often now is so he can laugh any time he likes. Who *have* you fought, other than Kier?”

“Lariat.”

“You fought Lariat and I never heard about it?” Kyle shook his head. “I’m supposed to believe that?”

“Because I shamed him. He’s older than Moss and not even part of the young set.”

“Who can I ask?”

Kes shrugged. “No one else there. I jumped him. Back at the Rock-eater’s Ridge Camp. I guess I wanted to save him being shamed publicly. Because we still have to be around each other. Ask Moss how to ask him how he broke his hand back then.”

Kyle spluttered. “Ask Moss?”

“You’re a spear, you go for the weak spot every time. Moss is good at subtle and devious.”

Kyle frowned. “And this is you winning friends?”

Yes, ouch. A telling comment. He should soften his approach. “Well, that’s how you two won your rounds at ShowTown last Circle,” Kes said.

Kyle shook his head. “You’re laying it on too thick. I’m not Kier or Joff to be taken in by mealy-mouthed praise. I’ll talk with Moss. Probably he’ll say, let’s see how long this new person lasts.”

Night times he rode the herd. Daytimes he slept in his camp with Gzelle watching over him. Nobody came near him apart from someone bringing him his food. Lentil stew from the herdie camp. Bread to last the next twenty-four hours. He sent Gzelle with the 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 sympathetic.

Kyle came again, wearing his mask on his belt. Sat down, smirking, before Kes noticed. “Lariat,” he said. “How did you do him?”

“You and Moss have a bet going?”

“I will lay into you if it becomes necessary,” Kyle said.

“Now that you know what I can do? So why would I tell you my best moves?”

“You wanna be on our team, or what?” Kyle said.

“What? What are you talking about?” Kyle’s staring bored into him. “You mean, do I want to be on your ShowTown fighting team? Oh man! Yes!” He didn’t even have to act. *The plan. Finally, something positive happening towards it!*

“I’m going,” Kyle said. He rose.

This was Kyle doing devious? Giving Kes a way back from teary appreciation? “Yes,” Kes said. “Go. I’ve got a lot of work in hand.” He picked up his latest project.

“The old man’s got you doing repairs,” Kyle said. “Do us another couple of practice belts?”

“Bring me some decent leather and I will,” Kes shouted after him. The fool ran beside his camel, with it keeping up with an easy gallop.

Kyle came with the leather at last.

“What’s with Merin?” Kes said. “She’s glummer every time I see her.”

“Marl is insisting on you for her.”

“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 had the chance to think up the next thing to say. His brother looked haunted. Who could possibly want Kyle for a girl when he spent every possible moment of the day and night with Moss? Surely Marl wasn’t asking for Kyle if he couldn’t have Kes?

Kes rode into the chasm stringing a dozen of the herd behind him. The walls on the right hand were close by, and sheer, and beside the path left-side was a drop deep enough that any animal mis-stepping would likely have to be shot, its injuries unforgiving. Merin followed with the second string and Jeldie with the third.

Getting the herd down through the chasm-ways to the Shipyard Camp, was dead easy when the animals weren’t loaded with side-panniers and baggage. Gzelle stopped where the chasm-walls widened out forcing Kier to step from hiding.

“Hey brother I was going to say as you fell backward from your perch,” Kier said. “But your ride! She is too good for me.” He slapped Gzelle on her neck.

“She probably scented you way back,” Kes said. *My little brother can joke again? That’s an up.* “You want to ride in front of me?” Kes said, joking too.

Kier grinned. “Being the *littlest* brother is not why I’m here.”

“Why are you?”

“Waiting to stop you riding into the handover.”

“Joff and Fa made good time?” Kes said.

“Two days. Fa set the pace, he said, to escape Joff mouthing off about you. Couldn’t get away from him though. Due to the clump of reeds.”

“Good idea to hammock it between them,” Kes said. “So I’m meant to start the animals down the river?”

“Not until the shooters go in. The rest of the herd are waiting for you—packed and loaded—at the bottom of the ramp, where you’ll see them if you look.”

Kes made like he stretched his neck for a look-see. “Did the Grand-Devil notice that only half the herd was in camp?”

“Mighty oath,” Kier said. “She was going to refuse to let any of us across. Fa divided the reeds into two clumps right in front of her. He’ll give her the one half to close the doors, and the other half, by way of the last person crossing. Lyris has just gone to say you’ve arrived.”

“I could’ve taken our mob over the dam.”

“Don’t do it, Kes. I wouldn’t put it past the Grand-Devil to then stop anyone crossing until we find a girl as well.”

“If we loaded the animals narrow ways, not with the panniers, we wouldn’t need to be crossing here at all.”

Kier ignored his complaint. An old one everyone voiced one or another time. “I hear you had a good time. Joff is totalled by your defection, as he tells it. But it’s all good by me. If you court out, I’ll have a chance with Merin.”

Kes slid to the ground and smoothed fraying animal tempers with here a pat and there a couple of plain song words. What with singing and talking, he had no time to agonise over the numbers being shackled and lined up in preparation for the last and shortest lap of their journey.

“There’s the pump starting,” Kier said. “Clickety-clack. The Devil has descended down to his treadmill.” Kier grinned saying *his*, there being no adult handy to swipe his head and force him to rephrase, the Grand-Devil being a *she* from way back.

The treadmill operated the pump that sucked the water from between the two sets of river-doors now extended out across the river, a matter of ten or so metres apart. The stonekreet ramps, one this side going down in the riverbed and one up out of it on the other bank, came into view as the water in the lock was pumped out.

“I swear the old one must feed the crocs,” Kier said. “Why else would there be a new mob every cicle, the biggest we ever saw? Funny the old geezer hasn’t got any of his girls helping him today.”

“Funny the old geezer’s island isn’t standing room only with women,” Kes said. “When he gets another girl just about every year?”

“Maybe they throw themselves to the crocs to get away from him.”

Kes sweated and not just from the heat. He'd sworn last time was the last time he'd cross the river here. He hated going back on his words, even just to himself.

“They've gone in, back to back,” Kier said. “Sounds like serious bloodshed from up here.”

“Yeah. Impressive. The echoing. Who's doing the shooting this year?”

“Moss and Kyle. Why don't you start the animals on down? I'll get a lift with Merin.”

At the crossing, Kes hung back. He preferred not to watch them that enjoyed it, whipping the numbers to the city gates. By the time he passed the turn-off, it would hopefully be done.

“Kesson. Still here. Good.” Jenk-Fa came riding toward him leading Hamel, one of his string, with half a bundle of reeds on his back. “Need someone to drop off the second half of the toll.” He nodded at Kes, and passed him Hamel's leading reins. He rode back to his station at the front of the pack animals.

Gzelle picked her way down the ramp, keeping to the dry sand sprinkled down that helped prevent animals slipping on the algae and crocodile blood, guts and poop. Croc carcasses twitched in the grey mud alongside the ramps.

Kes ignored the lock doors either side leaking trickles of rotten water as though their keeper had chocked them badly. He nudged Gzelle to steer her the left, to where a punt lay beached against the central stanchions holding up the island, with the first half of the reeds already in there.

The wrinkled old grey she-head perched in the rigging of her ship-wrecked island grinned maniacally when his stare accidentally caught her eye. The naked boy-body that she'd bought, to live that much longer again, was rampant as always. Every Circle, the families rued the old Grand Devil's continuing existence. Every Circle, the Grand Devil's family-of-origin plotted to murder her.

Kes shortened the leading reins and drew Hamel nearer the punt. He'd rather get wet with mud from the Swamp than with this slimy river silt, so slipped from Gzelle onto the punt, drawing Hamel alongside.

Gzelle coughed to warn him.

The rope ladder hanging between two of the stanchions shook. Someone climbing down it, and it probably wasn't one of the Grand Devil's girls.

“Don't come any closer or I'll toss your booty in the mud,” Kes said.

The old Devil laughed like a hyena and leaped to the treadmill under the main deck.

Hurry up, Kes! He pulled loose the strap holding the root-ball on Hamel's back, caught the ball, swivelled and dropped it in the foot-well of the boat. “Go, Zelle!” he shouted as he swarmed back into the saddle.

The Devil un-chocked the treadmill ratchet and the water gushed into the lock.

Hamel beat Gzelle galloping up the ramp.

The old Grand Devil screeched like a banshee.