

26: Kestrel in Training

Kes made it back to camp about midmorning. He swayed walking. *Pain, thirst, lack of sleep, take your pick or all of them. The sun beating on me the whole way no help either.*

Gzelle walked behind him. She pushed him along with her nose whenever he faltered. Since he hadn't been able to swarm up onto her in the way she was accustomed to, she had refused to sit, to let him mount the regular way. *She due for some retraining, or what?* Kes thought tiredly.

He rubbed sweat from his eyes. *A difference in the scene. What?* The encampment of felt and canvas tents sat squarely in the Four-Ways, where the red dust north-south and east-west roads intersected. Roads unused by anyone except farmers with seeders, cultivators and harvesting combines, and the herders with their camels. Every other zipped around by fly-car. None of them around today.

Not being high on his camel, he couldn't see the tops of the sugar-cane and corn crops waving beyond the camp. His gaze fell to the camp itself. The tents. There was the difference. He'd planned to sneak around the back of the camp to the home tent. He's planned to lie down without groaning or otherwise calling attention to himself. Thinking everyone would be yawning in the centre of the camp or hiding in their own tents nursing sore heads after *their* visits to the Party Dome.

But though it was mid-morning, the camp was a stirred up ant's nest with people whipping in and out of their tents with their tent-goods boxed and bagged. A couple of families already loaded their camels parked in the centre. As he watched, Moss backed from the collapsed Marl-family tent with the tent poles. Of the Kuri-family tent, only the inner room still stood. *We're striking camp?*

He almost fell over when Gzelle nudged him in his back. Like she said get on with it. His face was on fire and if only his cloak would hang straight down. Not be such a scraping weight on the star. *Here's hoping that Kuri and Jenk aren't in a hurry.* He angled for what still stood of the home-tent.

"Hail the conquering hero." His same-sized little brother Kier fronted him, pushing his chest into Kes's lacerated chest. Kes hollowed himself.

"You don't look too good," Kier said. "But here's to feeling even worse."

Kes thumped to his knees, his jaw on fire with the res of his face.

Kier punched me? "You punched me?" His voice barely made it past his lips but Kier had his furious face right in Kes's face.

"I could ask you the same thing, you lying buzzard!"

"What?"

"Marl saw you coming. He takes one look at your tats and he says, I want that man for my little girl. He's in there with the chief right now, arguing his case."

"I never meant for that to happen." Kes gestured vaguely. "Give me a hand up?"

Kier laughed. "Poor Kessums. He can't get up. You *are* in a bad way."

"Kier! Take your brother's camel and bring back our pack animals!"

"It's Kyle. In a temper." Kier waved, acknowledging Kyle's instructions. "We're going to be eating everyone else's dust. I blame your stupid grandstanding." Kier spat near to Kes's feet and jerked Gzelle's reins from Kes's hand.

“Over here, Kes!” Kyle shouted. He didn’t sound too brotherly either.

Kes climbed to his feet.

Marl, fresh from the conference with Kuri and Jenk, crossed toward Kes over the fabric of the awning on the ground, with no look or gesture of apology to Kyle stand by with maybe steam coming out of his ears. “Kes-Man, I’ve seen you specking through the herd, marking out the good animals. Ihear you’ll be a camel man. I told your father I’ll have you for Merin.”

Then he was gone, back to packing up, with Kes still groping for words. He stumbled forward.

“Get off!” Kyle snapped the canvas Kes stood on.

Kes fell without being able to save himself.

Fainted.

He woke from that same dream again, of fluttering among moon-silvered chasms. The way home from the dome was in there as well. Maybe it was the next day, he thought, remembering the times that his wings beat at the icy walls.

“The little blighter is hiding in the tent,” Joff said.

Joff outside the tent.

Kyle also outside. He said, Kes, you mean. You’re always on his case. But this time I agree.”

From right beside him, his father said, “So help me if I go out there, I’ll damage someone.”

His mother by his other side. It would’ve been good to feel her palm on his forehead, the way she used comfort him when he was a kid.

But, she said and not to him, “Joff and your elder son are both saying the same thing. Could there be something to it, do you think?”

“What?” Jenk said. He sopped Kes’s chest, gauze and all, with an eye-wateringly fummy sharp liquid.

His mother wrinkled her nose. She unfolded herself to her feet. “I’ll send Kyle in.”

“The yellow kestrel beak-hinges on your cheeks are good,” Jenk said. “But what’s this?” He tweaked the gauze on Kes’s chest.

“Silver. Lodestar. Outline. Before he could finish it, Egg had visitors telling him he was the dome-boss no more.”

Jenk peeled the sodden gauze away.

“Pew!” Kes sneezed, hurting his mouth.

“Camel pee. A better antiseptic than the stuff Egg didn’t give you.”

“I said you’d give him a camel to pull his cart. I owe him from what I’ll owe you.”

“I hoped you’d have paid him with the credit your mother and I gave you.”

“The rest of my design in his machine. What did you say to Marl?”

“He thinks he’ll talk you into it no problem.”

Kyle loomed over them. “I foresee problems resulting from Kes running his life according to his own ideas when he isn’t tested yet.”

“You’d throw your brother out?” Jenk said.

“Am I a heartless monster? But look at him. He has himself tattooed. When and how did he prove that he is an adult? Sorry. I forgot. Where Kes is concerned, it’s all on Jenk’s say-so, and that in retrospect.”

“That’s pure Joff-talk,” Jenk said.

“You know you have the opposite problem to Joff?” Kyle said. “You loved Jinker, so you spoil Kes. The trouble for Kes is that having you to hide behind isn’t helping him.”

Kes sat up. “I don’t hide ...”

Jenk gestured. Be quiet.

Kyle followed up his advantage. “Like, why is he here right now being *nursed*? When he’s saying he’s an adult?”

No way Kes could tell what Jenk was thinking.

“You’re right,” Jenk said. “I *have* been soft on him.” He pushed out of his cross-legged sit. “He’s all yours.” And was gone.

“Great,” Kes said.

“You’ll thank me one day,” Kyle said. “Now get up.”

Kes shrugged into his cloak sleeves and tried to get up. Up. Stiff already. His legs would hardly work without input from his torso. He was still thinking how when Kyle swore. He heaved Kes up by one arm, bent and got his shoulder under Kes.

Wumph. Kes gasped from the hurt to the star. “Put me down.”

Kyle let him slide down. “So walk.” He kept a hold on Kes’s neck like he didn’t trust Kes to run off.

The awning was rolled up. Jenk and Kier were loading the camels. A couple of families were already strung out along the road east. Kyle walked him through a scene of people studiously not looking at them.

“Where are we going?” Kes dared ask.

No answer. Kyle steered him toward the dry-walled camel yards in the north-east quadrant. “You’re on kitchen duty.”

“I’m confused.”

“Good. Remember how it feels.”

“Where’s the herd?” Kes said, just to find out what he probably knew already.

“Gone ahead in the usual way with River Camp One the first stop. You surely remember that routine?” Kyle left Kes where he stood.

Kes turned to see Kyle threading his way back toward family site. Moss, chunky like his father Marl and with Marl’s daerk curled hair—thankfully no mask—came shoving through the gate with a load of weaponry. “I’d get on with it if I were you,” he said.

“If I knew what to do,” Kes said.

“Start a fire. Right about where you’re standing.” Moss veered to the right of the yard gate and let his load clatter to the ground.

Jeb, smiling hugely, followed him in. “At last! Kes, where I’ll be allowed and maybe even encouraged, to fight him.” He put an iron pot at Kes’s feet. “The makings of the mush.”

“And I’m supposed to do waht?”

“Cook it. Didn’t Kyle say?”

“Jeb. Give me a hand with the tarp,” Moss said.

Kes fetched dried camel dung. The herdies collected it and put it along the top of the wall to dry. Back at the scuffled place suggested by Moss, he stabbed one of the turds apart for the roughage that would serve as kindling. He got his firestones out and struck a spark. Blew out the embers. Surrounded them with three trivet stones, blackened on their inner side, kept inbetween times at the base of the wall.

“Water over on the gatepost,” Moss said.

Kes fetched the waterbag and watered the dry mush. Stirred to wet it all, and set the pot over the little fire. While returning the waterbag to the gatepost, he watched Moss and Jeb angle a tarp over a corner in the wall, and securing it with stones. Moss wedged a fighting staff in under the free corner while Jeb caught that corner in a loop of rope. The other end was looped around a steel peg hammered into the ground.

Kyle returned. He dropped his and Kes’s swags under the tarp, and hung up a couple of bags of dry mush. “Porridge must be done, you’ve got so much time to watch other people working.”

Kes stirred the pot. “It isn’t even hot yet. A watched pot never cooks.” He added more fuel.

“Stir *me* and I’ll stripe *you*,” Kyle said without heat.

Jeb laughed. “Tatts on your back as well as your front.”

“Go help some family finish up, Jeb,” Moss said.

Jeb threw Kes a look of blame as he went.

Kes stirred the pot. The Kuri-family pack animals started east with not a sideward glance from either his father at the front, or Kier riding the tail. He felt about as low and little as a beginner-herdie. Or had Jenk sheltered him from that as well. He couldn’t remember.

Moss and Jeb threw their swags in under the tarp and sat down by the fire. “Porridge had better be ready,” Moss said. He took his spoon out of his waist pocket and polished it with a bit of his cloak. Waiting.

“Set the pot in the middle, Kes,” Kyle said. “You take the first spoonful. I want to be sure you’re not poisoning us.”

Jeb fell about laughing. “Joke’s on you, Kes-boy.”

Kyle and Moss merely laughed and dug in their spoons while Kes still chewed. Moss started the second round before Kes was ready. “Miss your turn and you’ll miss out.”

“I vote we make Kes cook all our meals,” Jeb said.

“He’ll be so tired tonight, he’ll probably won’t even eat,” Moss said.

“That’s good too,” Jeb said. “All the more for the rest of us.”

Time we got started,” Kyle said. “Jeb, you douse the fire. Kes, wash out the pot. Moss and I will decide the weapons.”

Kes barely had the pot clean when Moss starting handing out belts and Kyle the hardwood staves. Kes copied Kyle exactly, gathering his cloak in with his belt, but blousing his a little, cinching the belt only tight enough to allow the staff to be wedged through. Pressing forward the top of the staff so the bottom end didn’t trip him.

Jeb opened his gob, probably to complain, but Kyle pushed him to the back of the line he was forming. “Moss first. Then Kes. Then me. Jeb, you at the back, on first call.”

“So as I can’t harm Kes-baby down the track when he’s already done in?”

Kes burned with fury but stared hard at Moss’s back.

Jeb said, “Oh, of course. I remember. We’ve got to begin at the beginning because we’ve got Kes-baby with us.”

Air whooshed from a pair of lungs. The sound of a fist connecting with someone’s midriff. A body thumped to the ground.

Kes stood straighter. Behind him Kyle said, “Now get up.”

Sounds of someone getting up. Jeb asking. “East or west?” Subdued.

“South. Two hundred paces,” Moss said from in front. “Let’s go finally.”

“Starting now,” Kyle said. He prodded Kes into motion.

The first paces so jarred his chest and face-skin, Kes stumbled.

“Keep going,” Kyle said like he suspected a plot.

Kes clenched shut his mouth so he wouldn’t scream. His chest was on fire. His face burned from the head-wind. He tightened what muscles he could and tried to move only his legs.

Kyle poked him in the back. “Breathe.”

Kes gasped.

Kyle let him suffer a dozen paces more. “Moss, you and Kes.”

Moss circled back and snagged Kes by an arm. He waved Kyle and Jeb onward.

“Weakling,” Jeb said while passing. “We’ve hardly got going.”

Moss released Kes and he stumbled. “Hit the ground,” Moss shouted.

Kes’s head reeled from not enough air. Gulping hurt so much—just gulping to breathe—that he hunched over wheezing. He groaned. “What are you doing?”

“Push-ups. Get down.”

From up ahead, where Kyle and Jeb might’ve stopped, came the sudden clatter of sticks connecting. All he wanted was a minute of peace. A distraction. “You ever see those kids in the rubble?”

“Do your push-ups. Keep your score. Improve every day.”

Kes squatted, sat down on his but, and rolled over easy. Not letting his chest touch ground, he lowered himself on his arms and raised himself again. One. Surprisingly his arms were okay with it. He did it again. Two.

Moss leapt up. “Come on! Run!”

They ran south. The weapon belt helped Kes keep his cloak from rubbing his chest if he leaned his shoulders forward into the running. On his right was the rubble. Where supposedly the numbers threw their children while they were whipped toward the gate. On his left, and for kilometres more, were the crops. Corn or cane. Thirty-two, thirty-three paces and counting. If he attended to everything else, not his pain, he might last the course.

Moss stopped. “Push-ups!” He panted purposefully, it seemed to Kes, while he lowered himself to the ground.

Showing me how to breathe? In. Out. In. Out. His out-breaths shifted dirt on the track.

“Four.” He rolled onto his back. “Have you ever seen the harvesters racing?”

Moss rolled over, sat up, and was on his feet in one continuous action. He drew his staff from his belt. “Ready?”

Kes scrambled up almost leisurely.

Moss jabbed him.

Kes sprawled. Suddenly furious, he rolled over and yanked Moss’s stick from his hands.

“You trying to make a point?” he yelled and swung it, not caring where he connected.

Moss laughed. He leapt back easily. “Nearly had me. In the ring you would’ve scored for tactics. Now get up. We’ll run another fifty.”

Kes lasted forty-two paces and managed three more push-ups. He jabbed his staff and scored a hit.

Then Moss was into him, whirling and hitting him over his shoulders, and jabbing him in his sides and on his legs.

“All right. All right. I’m trounced.” Revenging, Kes decided to *walk* the next fifty paces. But up came Kyle and Jeb, jogging. Kyle circled Moss. Moss nodded. One of their invisible discussions.

“You and me, Jeb,” Moss said. He took off at a run, so Jeb had to chase him.

“We’ll jog,” Kyle said.

Kes jogged for thirteen paces.

“Push-ups,” Kyle said.

Kes dropped to the road and continued his score. “Eight. Nine. Ten.”

At mid-day by the sun, Kyle and Moss conferred.

Jeb complained. “We made about a quarter of our usual distance?”

“If you’d kept up with your training through the year,” Moss said. “You wouldn’t be worrying now.”

“Yeah,” Kyle said, diving into the crop. Which was taller even than Jeb, who was lanky. Jeb followed Kyle.

Moss waited to follow Kes. He said, “Draw your staff and hold it out front. It gets caught otherwise. Don’t break any plants. No damage is the reason the harvesters don’t hunt us.”

Back at the camel yard, Kes sat down by where the fire would be built. He forced himself to eat when the mush was cooked and hit his swag soon after.