

27: Kestrel, Lord-and-Master Attitude

Kes opened his eyes. Blue tarp, broad daylight. He turned his head. The others were gone. He relaxed. But man alive, his body felt as rickety as a bunch of sticks tied by string. No give anywhere without pain.

The yard gate squeaked. Egg—on foot—came into the camel yard. He started to make himself at home by fetching dried dung for a fire. He picked up the pot too, and laid a crusted quarter-portion of dried cooked mush on the wall. “Cup of tea, boy?”

“Yeah. Thanks. That’ll be good.” Kes breathed properly despite the pain. He relished taking a break from pretending that he suddenly was a full-grown man. He climbed to his feet and fetched the water-bag.

“You’re on your lonesome?” Egg said.

“Kyle and Moss and Jeb are around somewhere, training.” He gestured into the distances. “Running. Push-ups. Sparring.”

Egg nodded. “Your face is healing up well. Those my camels?”

“I reckon. Hamel and Lady. Never apart.”

“Eat you breakfast.” Egg nodded at the wedge of dried mush on the wall. The water for the tea boiling in the pot.

The boys could come back for Kes any minute. How could he make his holiday last? “I could run back with you? Teach the animals to walk in the traces?”

“That would be excellent,” Egg said. “I had to leave the wagon by the dome, of course.”

Kes saddled Lady for Egg to ride, and tied Hamel’s leading reins to her bridle.

Egg mounted and harrumphed to get Lady going. Hamel followed at Lady’s left shoulder. Kes jogged along to her right.

Egg said, “I reckon I’ll throw my lot in with you folks. Set up a tent in sideshow alley at ShowTown. Mark up heroes and champions.”

“You might even meet them along the river somewhere.” Kes stopped and dropped for a set of push-ups.

Egg pulled up Lady for a stop. “Are you all right?”

“Push-ups are kind of restful, because of using different muscles.”

“If it works for you. While you’re on your own-some—even just with me—run bare-chested. Wounds heal faster to the sun and air.”

“I’ll try that.” Kes rose, pried his neck-knot undone, and shrugged out of his cloak-sleeves.

“Only don’t go ripping off half your new skin along with your undershirt,” Egg said.

“Moosh,” he said to Lady to force her to her knees. He dismounted. And laughed, sniffing the air not too near Kes. “The camel-piss cure, eh? But it’s healing up nicely. I’ll finish the infill sometime when you’re not in training.”

While Egg inspected him, Kes stared out over the blue emptiness. Not a kestrel in it, or any other bird. Was it any wonder he was lost?

“Let’s get going,” Egg said. “I don’t want to be on the roads by dusk. In case they start the harvesting.”

Kes scoffed. “People keep saying that. Has anyone ever seen anything?”

“So stay around till harvesting. Then tell me you don’t believe me.”

Kes took his spoon from his waist pocket and sat down in the empty place by the fire.

“You donated the extra camel?” Kyle said between mouthfuls.

“I wasn’t meant to?”

“We usually keep one for emergencies.”

“Oops. So you three better not get sick all at the same time.”

Moss raised his eyebrows.

“Probably take me all day to get help,” Kess said.

Jeb groused. He didn’t—or wouldn’t—get the joke. “He should have to go and fetch it back. The old man can’t have got too far yet.”

Jeb talked so long, so aggrieved, that the rest of them did two rounds with their spoons, and Kes felt vindicated. “His name is Egg,” he said. “You would’ve met him if you’d come back along Second East-West.”

“It turned out some of us aren’t as fit as we thought,” Kyle said. “So we had to cut through the field again.”

“Because we did all that sparring,” Jeb said.

“How many push-ups, Kes?” Kyle said.

“Twenty-three.”

“I’ll bet,” Jeb said. “I did forty-five.”

“Moss?” Kyle said.

“Ninety. You?”

“Seventy-seven. I’ll have to lift my game.”

By five days, Kes’s chest was healed. But his kestrel-self was still lost in the ice-mountains and Ahni was still out of reach beyond them. Jeb carped and complained about everything Kes did. That was getting to be the hardest thing to put up with. Kess couldn’t now let any of Jeb’s comments pass. It was like if he did, Jeb would trample him into the dust.

But still, he overtook Jeb in push-ups, and there was no need anymore for them to forge through the croplands to make it back to camp before dark. Harvesting still hadn’t started. They ran south, then east, and hit River Camp One that day.

Moss bent to feel the ground of the swept-bare fireplace. “Still warm, you’ll catch them easy.”

There’d been a lot of secret talk already this morning. Cryptic glances and secret signs between Kyle and Moss every time Kes or Jeb said or did anything. Moss drew Kyle away some and Jeb started to follow them. Kyle pointed him back.

Jeb turned to Kes. “This is all due to your damned greediness wanting to be a man when you’re so obviously still a little kid! I’ve been slowed down by you all this time and I’m sick of it!” He lashed out, kicking.

Kes was ready and caught Jeb’s foot. He was on fire with rage, and twisted Jeb’s foot, like he would twist Jeb’s whole leg out of its socket.

Jeb rolled with it and swung his other leg at Kes's head.

Missing completely, because Kes threw himself backward, keeping a hold of Jeb's foot.

Jeb yelled. Pain, as well as fury.

Wouldn't it be good if I dislocated Jeb's legbone?

Kyle arrived in a hurry, kicking both them without holding back. Kes rolled away with his arms protecting his head. Jeb crawled after him but now Moss was in it too. He wrenched Jeb up by his clothes, and drew Jeb's wooden practice sword, what they'd been learning that day. "You want a taste of this?"

"No, Moss! No!" Jeb fell to his knees. "It's that kid. He's such a two-faced crawler. You don't know half of what he's doing to me."

Moss dropped Jeb. "What's your story?" Moss said to Kes.

"I've had enough of being chipped at. Every move I make."

"You're right, Kyle," Moss said. "But it should be you."

Kyle didn't ask or say. He just took off, jogging in the tracks of Egg's wagon overlaying the caravan's multiple camel prints.

Moss looked at them like they were both the problem.

"You should tell us what you're thinking," Jeb said. "That's another of my hang-ups. Not knowing what's to happen."

"It's how you were trained last year," Moss said mildly.

"I'm a year older. A man. A fighter this year."

He even puffed out his chest, the fool. Kes watched them both, but Moss more.

"I should be in the team to train the rest," Jeb said. "And where are they? The rest of the clowns?" He indicated Kes as one of them.

"Really?" Moss said.

Was that Moss commenting? Could he be encouraged? "I've been wondering that too," Kes said. "Shouldn't Jeldie and Lewit and Moab have been here?" If they had, there would've been three beginners to take the heat.

"That's not for me to say," Moss said. "But don't worry. Kyle has gone to fetch."

"Fetch who?" Jeb said. "The Kyle-and-Kes father? How will I get a fair go?"

Moss stopped Kes's lunge toward Jeb with one of his arms. "We'll go back to camp, wait there. Kes, you're running on the left side of me. Jeb on the right."

Jeb smirked. "On your right hand. I'll take that as a promotion then."

Kes could hardly wait for whoever it would be, to turn up and solve their problems.

Moss drew his masher from his belt and started twirling it, doing all his practice figures, while continuing to walk. "Mashers out," he said. "Fifty paces jogging. Fifty walking. Practicing the forward swing left and right all the while."

They didn't stop until they came to the camp and Moss not then either. "Kes. Into the north-west corner with you. Practice your footwork. I want to see you move. Jeb ..."

"Yeah yeah. Into the south-east corner, practicing my footwork."

Moss fetched a steel sword and leaped and pranced and twirled it going through his fight moves.

Jeb shadowed Moss's every move. Kes clenched his jaws. How was Jeb not crawling? Jeb's accusations made him furious.

"Kes," Moss said. "Go fetch your swag."

Good. That solves the problem of having to sleep cheek-by-jowl with my arch enemy.

"Jeb. Fetch yours," Moss said.

Jeb detoured into the middle of the yards.

Moss stopped his slicing practice.

"Look. I'm sorry I let the little bastard get to me," Jeb said. "Will it affect my promotion?"

"Just fetch your fucking swag!" Moss said.

First time that Kes saw Moss lose his temper. Felt good though, knowing that Moss was human. And that he had a flashpoint. And what that flashpoint looked like. Kes stored Moss's info alongside what he knew about Kyle.

Kes woke late again. He glanced everywhere with half-open eyes. Jeb too was still in his swag. Moss might never have slept at all. He and Kyle and Marl palavered at the gate. A trio of camels stood by batting their tails against the flies.

On a word from Marl—Kes was too far away to hear what he said—Kyle and Moss sprang at the tarp and had the tent dismantled in about thirty seconds.

Kes's brother approached the weaponry just a few paces from Kes's corner. "What's happening, Kyle?"

Kyle shrugged. His masked face didn't give anything away. he scooped the whole pile of weapons up and dropped them into the tarp for Moss to roll up and tie with the guy ropes.

Marl sat down at the fireplace. He took out his knife and a couple of technotic ties for some work on one end of a staff he'd brought.

Kes checked back to Moss and Kyle hefting the bundle of weapons to the side of the second camel's saddle, and tying it there. Ditto their swags to the third camel.

"Ra-a-ah! Ra-ah!" Marl shouted. He levered himself up from the ground on the stick like he was an ancient. He'd fastened the ties to the ends for whatever reason.

Kes checked back to Kyle and Moss. Gone. Marl's play-acting obviously a diversion.

Marl said, "Jeb. You first."

Jeb swaggered to the fireplace. "They gave you a good report on me?"

"Moderately good on recovery of stamina and strength," Marl said. No opinions showing on his mask of course. "Good as can be expected on weapon-handling."

"Yes!" Jeb punched the air above his head. "I said it, didn't I?"

Marl continued. "Footwork so-so and how you expect to work with the rest of the clowns is anybody's guess."

Kes almost laughed out loud at Jeb's crest-fallen expression. "I was a clown last year."

"We still have four fighters."

"So we can have five this year. I'm up for it."

"We need at least one clown per fighter and then some."

“And that’s your mind made up?”

“Not just mine,” Marl said.

“I guess I won’t do anything in the ring this year,” Jeb said.

Marl laughed. He flung Jeb to the ground. Jeb lay there stunned as a mullet hit on the head with a mallet. Marl rolled him onto his front and pulled back one of his arms. Jeb groaned, but Marl braceleted his left wrist with one of the technotic ties hanging from the staff, and Kes knew his fate.

Marl pulled Jeb to his feet and shoved him back to his corner. The staff dragged after Jeb, its free end clattering over the trivet stones.

“Kes. You,” Marl said.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “For everything.” He gestured open-handed.

Marl’s face inscrutable behind his mask. His stance ... poised. Like snake. Not good. Kes held out his right arm for the tie.

“Loser,” Jeb called.

“Good weapon handling,” Marl said. “Good stamina. How you expect to work with the rest of the clowns with that lord-and-master attitude is anybody’s guess.”

Jeb laughed and punched the air with his free hand. “At last. Somebody who sees it.”

Kes reeled. Did everyone think that about him? His brothers? His father? Moss? He wanted to curl up and hide from embarrassment. He wasn’t like that. Imagine if Ahni thought that? Did his mother?

Marl seized his wrist and dragged him over to where Jeb chortled. Fastened him to the other end of the staff. “Your last chance to cook yourselves up a different way to be. Though I don’t want to see a pair clones when I see you again. And don’t sleep on the roads. The crops smell done. The harvesters will be out soon. The roads are their nighttime race-tracks.

Marl draped a blanket over each of them and hung their mushbags around their necks. He clipped a water-bag to the staff. “That’s it I think.”

“No knives?” Jeb said.

“So you can carve yourselves loose?” Marl said.

Kes added his disquiet. “What if we meet a croc?”

Marl laughed. “I had Kyle put aside a couple of mashers. You just need to find them,” he said over his shoulder. He slung a bundle with the rest of their gear behind his saddle and rode away.