

28. Kestrel Rising

Kes slumped morosely against the sun-warmed stones of the dry-wall camel enclosure. Why wouldn't he resent Jeb for their predicament? Look at him, lounging at the other end of the staff, heedless of the daylight passing. It was already mid-day and the wall's shadows were non-existent. "We should get going." He twitched his left hand so that the fighting stick tied between them jerked a little. He meant it as an encouragement to Jeb to consider stirring himself.

Jeb jerked the staff rather harder. "We should be trying to get loose."

"Your father tied me with a technotic tie just like this one back at the swamp," Kes said. "I've still got scars from trying to break it."

"You're such a weakling behind your kestrel beak-hinge tattoos. Don't even think of trying to stop me."

"Try until the shadow of the wall gets to here," Kes said. He marked a place in the dust with a foot.

Jeb sneered. "Always trying to lord it over your betters."

"Just trying to help."

"Help me get a couple of rocks."

Kes shuffled into the required direction. Then his arm and the staff jerked and jittered while Jeb hammered with one stone on the other, the tie between.

Finally Jeb stopped. "This isn't working. How I hate having to *agree* with you. Plus, you're a damned unhelpful log on the end of this stick."

"How am I supposed to be?"

"Helping me help yourself?" Jeb said on a note rising to sarcasm.

"Oh I get it. *You're* in charge!"

"Naturally. I'm a year the older. That's how it works. First it was Kyle, now it's me."

Kes marked the problem. Him fighting Jeb for his rights was plainly a stupid waste of time. Though he'd never trusted Jeb's instincts. So no way would he put his life in Jeb's hands. He changed the subject. "I think I've located our mashers."

Jeb snorted but got up and pulled for Kes to come along. "Where?"

Kes led to where the firestones lay along the base of the wall, stored there for next time. Their practice swords barely hidden behind them.

Jeb twirled his sword. "They're short but they're hardwood. We should be able to take out a croc with them."

Kes stowed his into his belt—left side—where he usually kept his weapons. They had a long way to go before they met any crocs. He hesitated, wondering how to phrase his next suggestion.

"You're always thinking," Jeb said like it was a weakness.

"I was thinking we'd look a sight, a bunch of starved bones, by the time the families made the next Circle. All because we can't agree."

"Your problem. Always refusing to agree with me."

“Garbage,” Kes said, allowing himself a little heat. “When you’re on target, I’m with you without a murmur.”

“I’m always on target.”

“Like now, I suppose. Fantasising what you’ll do to a croc when we’re still in the camel pen. A day’s walking ahead of us in only about four hours of daylight.”

Jeb started walking as Kes pointed this out.

Wordlessly they negotiated their way out the gate, Kes letting Jeb take the lead. Jeb taking it, but holding back the gate until Kes could reach for it. Wordlessly they started east. Two metres apart and swinging the staff in time with their arms. Jeb’s end forward, then back. Kes’s end back, then forward.

The crop to Kes’s right was corn, a vast pathless acreage, with dried straw-coloured flowerheads. Fat cobs filled every leaf axil.

To Jeb’s left, sugar-cane. In wide strips, set off by bare paths for the harvest machinery to travel along. The cane smelled like the molasses-and-salt lick the herdies sometimes prepared for the camels. The cane was cooked and ready for harvesting.

Kes was careful not to get ahead. Let Jeb set the pace.

“What do you think this stick is made of?” Jeb said. He swung the staff to and fro out of step so that Kes’s arm scrambled his pace too.

“It looks like timber,” Kes said.

“Rock bounced off when I tried smashing the eye-hole.”

“This is not one of the staves we practiced with?”

“Duh, Kes-boy! A staff with eyelets at its ends?”

They’d slowed, letting themselves get distracted. Kes imagined the next bit of the dialogue. He would say, You know what else that means, don’t you? Jeb would say, As if you’re not going to tell me. He would say, It’s a regular test. It’s got to be. Jeb would say, Never did it last year. He’d put his foot into it and say, Maybe you finally grew up enough. Better not, if he didn’t want an enemy for life. “We could try jogging.” Kes made like he’d start if Jeb started.

“Save your energy,” Jeb said. “I want to see the things everyone is so scared of.”

Kes gulped.

Jeb laughed. “Kes the great! Scared by a story told to stop kids wandering off!”

“I said that to Egg.”

Jeb smiled derisively. “And he hurried to be through the croplands before dark. *I* want to get near enough to get proof we saw them.”

Their shadows had lengthened again. One hour down, three to go. “We could compare notes while we walk, figure out what we know.”

“Sure.”

Kes walked faster.

Jeb walked slower. “I told you what we’d be doing.” He laughed kindly. “Why don’t you start the figuring?”

All I want right now is to vomit over his superiority. “The crops are about ready. The harvesters are expected nightly.”

“That’s the easy bit,” Jeb said.

“So what do *you* know?”

“Moss said to stay off the roads at night because the harvesters use them as racetracks,” Jeb said. “Making like harvesters would skittle us without a thought. I reckon he was telling a tall one.”

“You don’t know what he’s seen. It’s his fourth time training. If I stood in the middle of a road and a camel came running toward me, even an untamed animal, even a mob of them, they would swerve around me.”

“And? You’re saying?”

“These harvesters, could they be robots?” Kes said.

“Of course they are. We see them every year, nearer ShowTown. Those machines trundling through the croplands, big as a couple of tents pitched right next to one another, leaving stubble enough for our herd to graze on.”

Kes ignored Jeb telling him what he already knew. “I’ve never seen them not stopping for human traffic.”

“True.” Jeb frowned. “Is that a drone I hear?”

“Quick! Into the cane!” Kes angled across Jeb’s way and plunged into the cane.

Jeb hissed. “Why don’t you just run over me next time?”

A small fly-car zoomed out of the west and into the east, leaving a clear picture in Kes’s mind of the model and what it was doing. “No humans in it.”

“I told you. It’s a drone, checking the crop. Doubt it saw us. Going back to your robots ... when I helped whip the numbers through the rubble ...” He stopped.

“What?”

“Just waiting for your upset. You know, over me whipping *numbers* through the rubble?”

“Just tell me what you saw.”

The same flier engine sound approached from the east. The machine passed them again, this time down the middle of the field.

“You’re probably right about it being a drone,” Kes said. He stepped into the nearest cleared path through the crop.

“So let’s go back to the road.”

“Let’s just go to the end of the field and walk in the track where the harvesters reverse. That way we can nip back into the crop when and if necessary.”

But Jeb pulled Kes over the reversing track and forced him to clamber up and over the road shoulder and onto the road. He went on with his story as if Kes wasn’t seething. “The city wall near there is made of one- and two-storey buildings cabled together. There were these weird metallic things peering over the top of the wall?”

Kes wondered how many more times he’d have to swallow what he knew was right. “How do you know they weren’t little things running around on top of the buildings?”

“They were huge. Snouts and the ears bobbing up and down as the bodies walked around behind the wall.”

“What did anybody else say?”

“What they do in Hell City is what keeps us in the job,” Jeb parroted.

All the adults said that when questioned about their livelihoods. So probably Jeb didn’t ask. “You agree that so far we agree that the harvester robots will be out tonight?”

Jeb laughed. “Can’t fault your recall.”

Kes’s heart sank at Jeb’s tone. Like they were back at square one. “Years back I overheard a story that Science City were planning to build huge robots to take into space, to work at making some other ball of rock more like this one.”

“I listen for that kind of stuff all the time. How come you heard and I didn’t?”

“I was six years old, in my swag, in the inner tent. My parents were politicking out under the awning. The visitor, I think he was from Science City, said that the new robots would be like kids having to learn everything from scratch.”

“Learn what?”

“Walking. Talking. Their manners. How to do stuff.”

“I suppose you being a chief’s brat is what makes you such a know-it-all.”

Kes laughed. “I suppose you being the brat of a one-time chief is what makes you such a misery.” He didn’t say *failed* chief. He thought he’d miscalculated, Jeb was silent for so long. He walked straighter, shoulders pulled back. *So what? It’s my turn.*

Then Jeb laughed too. “Fair’s fair, I guess.”

A kestrel swooped from nowhere and hovered briefly above them. Kes’s heart thrilled as he hungrily watched it out of sight. But his tattoo said nothing. A sign telling him that Kes and Jeb could still be friends?

He went on carefully. “So? What with the harvesting going on at the same time, and the herders out of the picture due to some scary rumours, could be a good time to bring out these robots for some practice?”

“Practicing what?” Jeb said.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. We should jog a while.”

“There’s nothing coming.”

“You still got your chip in you?” Kes said.

Jeb jogged alongside now, wanting to hear. “Had it taken out when I got my face done.” Jeb out of Joff out of Jinker was of the camel clan. Jeb’s chin was marked up with a set of camel teeth, with the fiercely burbling camel lips to come, to be earned in time.

“Egg wouldn’t take mine out,” Kes said. “Because I didn’t have Jenk with me to say he could.”

Jeb laughed. “So you *don’t* get it all your own way?”

“As a result, that drone probably knew we were there. Or at least, that I was.”

“You should’ve said.” Jeb took off running at speed, dragging Kes with him. “Hang on to the damned stick!”

Kes dropped to his knees, slid a couple of metres. “It’s better to *know* whether something is coming.”

Jeb dropped and lay with his ear on the road bed. “There’s a rumbling in the distance. I told you. Harvesters.”

Kes lay down at his end. “What’s the thudding?”

Jeb rose. Sniffed back the way they’d come. “Not camels. But something that’s running and getting here quite fast. Dark soon. Let’s get back into the crop.” He led the way into one of the metre-wide paths. “Hurry slowly. Don’t move the crop. No noise.”

They jogged, Kes after Jeb, both holding the staff like they passed an extra-sized baton eternally. “Stop,” Jeb said. “Now we side-step into the cane, stand back-to-back, making like we are one. They’ll be looking for two if the drone told them about us.”

They jostled each other finding the position, the staff upright. Jeb stretching up with his hand near the top. Kes standing hunched, his hand pulled uncomfortably low.

“Now what?” Kes said.

“Don’t tell me you haven’t got a plan to roll out?”

A far away clanging and banging told of a machine on its way. Hopefully a cane harvester trundling down into their field. The plan, rolling itself out. Kes strained his eyes into the dark. The harvesters at ShowTown had headlights. “You watch the front,” he said at Jeb. “Make sure we don’t get caught. I’ll watch out for our ride.”

Jeb couldn’t keep his gob shut he was so nervous. He whispered a running commentary. “An open fly-car skimming above the road. Two white coats from Science City in it. A pack of weird steel men following them, but with dog-muzzles, twice the height of the corn. Starlight reflecting off their parts. Damn but I’m glad to see the white coats in charge. But how, when there are so many ...”

“How many?” Kes said.

“About a dozen. Milling around. Our ride here yet?”

“What are they doing?” *Who am I kidding, distracting Jeb? Wish I could see out the back of my head.*

“The fly-car is all lit up, like a beacon. The boss-man is sending them into the corn to pick cobs, it looks like. They’re like little kids, bringing them back by ones and twos.”

The cane harvester began to be a light moving along behind and between the cane stems, coming and going. “Couple more rows. Then we move,” he said.

“Some of them steely heads are starting to be too interested in us. There’s one for each of us starting down from the road now. Can we go yet?”

“Which side of us are they coming, left or right?”

“My right.”

Kes glanced back from his gnome-high position. “Like they’re going to try to cut us off from the harvester. Start now, running faster than them.” He darted into the path the machine should be coming along. Jeb ran close behind, with the staff as near to vertical as he could hold it that still allowed him to run.

The harvester’s spot lit a hundred degree arc, taking in the two paths that it travelled along. Kes dived through the intervening cane and they ran alongside it, toward its rear.

The two robots began to catch up.

Pheep! Came a whistle from the open fly-car.

Kes glanced at the steel figures still striding for them. Dog-like heads. Ears upstanding. “Quick! Around the back of the harvester!”

The harvester slowed. Either because of the robots running around it, or them—the size of rabbits in comparison. Kes draped himself over one of the caterpillar treads and grabbed hold of one of the tread-vanes as far up as the stick let him.

Jeb crowded him impatiently.

The tread moved forward and pulled Kes up onto it. When his feet had lifted off the ground, he stepped up the curve of track like a short stair. He marked-time waiting for Jeb to come up beside him. “Let’s go! Up this grating!”

Jeb went first, his arm being raised already, reaching for a hold on the side of the cage enclosing the cutting mechanism. Three huge screws ceaselessly spiralled their sharpened flanges up their shafts. “Don’t look at these whirly things,” Jeb said. “Blinding.”

He scooted up the wire wall, turned and pulled Kes up by the staff, hand over hand. Kes helped as much as he could with his free hand and his feet scrabbling up the wire wall.

The tip of a curved finger-blade reached for him.

Smartly pulling up his legs, Kes went into a teetering crouch on the side of the cage, felt the hook tear the hem of his cloak.

Then they were sprawling atop the machinery cage. “Man alive! A near thing,” Jeb said.

Beside the idling harvester, the steel man looked like a insect questing with his feelers, waving his arms about until he brushed the wire cage. Quick as a shooting bean tendril it curled a jointed finger around the wire. Tested its hold.

Pheep! The whistle from the fly-car called it.

The finger let go. The robot stared up at Kes and Jeb as if to commit them to memory.

The whistle insisted. *Pheep!*

The robot turned and loped back to the road and the open fly-car.

Kes breathed again. Jeb, too.

The harvester geared up and trundled toward the end of its row. Entirely too close to the scene on the road for Kes’s comfort.

In fact, the men on the fly-car stared intently at them, checking out Kes and Jeb interestedly—it seemed like—before busying themselves again with the robots milling about the back of the car.

“How weird is it to have to teach a bunch of big steel guys just to pick corn cobs,” he said as the screws beneath them reversed. Kes saw Jeb listening but not hearing by his raised eyebrows. The grinding growling squealing of the screws drawing in stalks of cane and mashing it between the rollers stopped all communication.

They’d have to get away from it. Not because of the communication problem. Kes started crawl-scrambling up onto the bridging above the great central bin into which the rollers fed the fragmented cane. Jeb after him, perforce. Kes pulled himself over a metal bulge in the metal bridging.

Shuddering as if to shake them off, the harvester ground to a halt.

Kes spread his hands either side to hold onto the sides of the bridging. His gut was a good fit over the dome, helping him stay aboard. He closed his eyes against the cane dust gusting up from the load. Jeb, with the stuff diagonally over Kes, grabbed onto the sides in the same way.

The machine juddered. They held on and concentrated on not falling.

“Hey! *Pheep!*”

That whistle. Kes blinked open his eyes. He stared. The fly-car hovered right in front. Expecting a crowd of robots too he started to glance beyond.

“You damned herders are even dumber than a bunch of learner cyborgs,” one of the white coats shouted. “You’re lying on the sensors. The harvester can’t see where it’s going.”

Kes slid a quarter-turn off the sensor dome.

The harvester shuddered back into action.

The fly-car pheeped at them and swung back to the road.

“Not that that couldn’t have been me,” Jeb said. “Or that it will have to be either one of us at least once more.”

“Why?”

Jeb grinned. “Because we’ve got it between us now.”

Kes scoffed. “Huh. Right. And thanks.”

“For not telling you that you were probably redder than when you came home in your underwear?”

“Something like that. Shall we get off at the end of this row? I don’t think it wise to re appear back there?”

“Better not,” Jeb agreed. “So tell me *when* for me over the sensor dome.”

In the dawn they crossed a road and studied the next corn crop.

“Safe for a shortcut?” Kes asked.

“With not even any cobs yet?”

They angled northeast through the corn and arrived somewhere along River Road maybe an hour later. The lodestar stood south of east in the golden blaze that was the sun reaching over the edge of the plateau. The camp nestled in good way-grass beside the river.

“Let’s just go and sit by the gossip fire,” Jeb said.

“Be understated?” Kes said. “You got it!”