

31: Kestrel, The River Miles

Kes and Jeb hunkered at the ashes of last night's gossip fire in the centre of the hard-packed earthen square where in the evening the families came together. Now an hour past dawn, everyone was out and about at their work, the tents seemingly empty. Jeb and Kes sat opposite each other by design, watching each other's back. Not knowing how near anyone might be, they didn't talk by common agreement. "Eat first," Jeb signed with fingers bunched as if he held food to his mouth.

Kes studied the cooking fire in front of his family's tent. He nodded. Jeb rose, making the sign for caffay. Kes too. The staff still between them. They sortied to the Jovat-family's cook-fire in front of their main tent. Jeb organised Kes and him a mug each of caffay and a half loaf of damper for the two of them together. All there was. They carried the goods to the gossip fire.

Then Kes and Jeb to Kes's family's fireplace. The small frying pan lay as usual with the fried stew cooling. Kes hesitated. His father's breakfast that Fa usually ate later in the morning. Two boiled eggs sat nearby on a rock. Waiting for Kier? Kyle? Kuri? He passed one to Jeb, took the other himself. "Salt it with ash," he signed. "They'll be good with the damper."

They ate and drank and studied the camp with new understandings. Who camped where was instructive. The Kuri-family opposite the Lorche-family. The Jovats opposite the Marls. The lesser families filled in the corners formed by, for example, a side of the Kuri-family and a side of the Jovat-family camp. They were family units made up of the widowed—men and women both—and orphans. People un-affiliated to the primary four by living unions.

While Kes and Jeb fed the gossip-fire with scraps and sticks within reach of their free hands, they were discovered. Kes threw a couple of signs up. "Probably the additional smoke." Jeb grinned as they watched Lanie, four-years-old, come skipping to the Lorche-family tent. Told to fetch her father's tobacco pouch from their tent—Kes heard Lorche's instructions clearly—she stopped and stared round-eyed until Lorche called from beyond to remind her of the task. She ran back without the tobacco. Next came Lorche. He frowned seeing Jeb and Kes, but remembered to duck into his tent for his tobacco pouch before going to spread the news.

Then everyone else came for a look-see. Jeb smirked. "Reasons and no-reasons," he said. Lyris and Jeldie came together. Lyris mooned over Jeb. Jeldie grinned at Kes, and fetched an extra waterbag. Lewit grinned, too. He carried a saddle. "Brought the job as soon as I heard you sitting around. First in line, I hope."

"Very clever," Kes said. "Lay it in the Kuri-family entry tent."

Kyle, Moss, Jenk-Fa and Joff all walked into the square and out, all with their masks on. "Just to look-see and gauge what we might be thinking, and or feeling, by how we're carrying ourselves," Kes said. "Is what *that* looks like."

"All separate and not trusting the others," Jeb said. "I'm surprised Marl wasn't with them."

Kuri made straight for the Kuri-family cook-fire. She made an exasperated sound. "I suppose you ate my eggs?" she said. She walked into the tent, came out with a bit of jerky from the store-box, and came to the gossip-fire chewing. She looked them over, with her mask up and off her face. She nodded at the staff between them. "No problems?"

"We managed," Jeb said. He raised his mug in his free hand. The half-eaten heel of bread with the egg in it in his caught hand. "We take turns. Adventures, of course."

They both laughed, remembering their embarrassment on the harvester.

“One and a half hands each makes not even two hands together,” Kes said, thinking over Kuri’s comment. “The order of the day is to invent, adjust, and adapt.”

“Which we did,” Jeb said. “Invent, adjust, adapt.”

Kuri nodded, glimmer-smiled, and walked away.

Finally Marl came. “Kuri-Chief recommends that you be freed. I would’ve let you suffer a week longer, and that under supervision.” He passed a gadget over the two junctions and they sprang loose.

Jeb rubbed his wrist. “We got back, didn’t we?” he said.

“Yeah,” Kes said. “No problemos.”

“That’s my point,” Marl said. “No problems. Neither of you the least bit hurt, not back and blue, nothing to bandage. Too good to be true. There must’ve been cheating.”

“Tell me how you think we cheated?” Kes said. He was disgusted. “How is there to cheat? Make friends with the robots?”

Jeb studied Marl, sipping meanwhile from his empty mug. As if he had a second serve and it was too hot to glug down.

“That’s what I don’t like,” Marl said.

“What?” Kes said.

“You two so friendly. With secrets now and Kes fully in charge.”

“How am I in charge?” Kes said.

“You taking the lead. Jeb deferring to you. I’ll tell you now, it won’t work. We’re not even going to try and let it work.”

Kes defended himself. “I defer to Jeb.”

“You defer to him over little things,. He defers to you over biggies.”

“For want of a nail, a battle was lost. Why wouldn’t I defer to Jeb for little things?”

“And me,” Jeb said. “I defer to Kes because he’s a big picture man. Why wouldn’t I use that talent to give me a leg up in the world?”

“That’s how it works,” Kes said.

“But will you defer to me when I send you out to get killed?” Marl said.

“And you’ll do that?” Kes studied Marl. Something indefinable had changed. Or it was that he and Jeb were ignorant.

“Figure of speech,” Marl said. “You might believe I’m sending you out to get killed. Will you trust my judgement is what I’m wondering.”

“You’re warning me?” Kes said.

Silence on the part of Marl. As though he waited.

“Here I was all set to be the funniest clown in history,” Jeb said.

“That’s what I mean,” Marl said.

“Figure of speech, Marl. I was joking,” Jeb said.

Silence.

Kes said it for Jeb. “Marl’s wanting to say that clowning is a serious business. No jokes allowed.”

“No *jokers* allowed,” Marl said. “Clowns doing their own thing aren’t doing their job.”

“Which is?” Jeb said.

“Deflecting crazies from our fighters. Letting our fighters recover and get back on their feet.”
Marl rose.

Jeb and Kes rose too.

“Jeb. You’re a *fine* instigator needing to relearn teamwork. You bed down with the clowns,”
Marl said. “Kes. Whatever. Herdies. I don’t trust either of you. Separately or together.”

“Well thanks,” Kes said. “I’m supposed to feel it’s Jeb’s fault that I’m back with the herdies?
That he’s done this to me and I should take it out on him? Fortunately for me, you didn’t
think that through. Jeb was here all the time and you just sprung it on us. He hasn’t had the
chance to talk to you separately to convince you of anything. Not that he would’ve. It’s a set-
up.”

“Come on, you,” Marl said at Jeb. He strode out of the square obviously expecting Jeb to
follow.

“Go ahead, cousin,” Kes said toward Marl’s back. “Happen they throw you into the ring to
sink or swim you can tell me how the clowning is supposed to work.”

Jeb laughed. “You got it, cousin.” He followed Marl, as straight-back arrogant as he knew
how.

Kes cross-legged at his one-man-fire near the herdies. They ignored him, whether because
they were told to and so were in on it, or were embarrassed for him.

He did the herdie-work silently. Packing up. Packing down and setting up. He cared for the
Kuri-family animals, what he was good at, vetting them. Treating their bruises, sewing up
their cuts. He made himself a leather wallet for the curved needle, a couple of clamps, and a
swag of disinfected horsehair.

During rest days, Kes ghosted to Egg’s wagon for the on-going work on his tattoos.

Egg was over the moon about the star’s silvering outline and insisted on starting on the infill.
“Besides, we need to talk,” he said.

Kes stuck his hand up for having first go talking. “I’ll have lines, please. Criss-crossing. So it
looks finished sooner. I don’t know how often I can come. You know something about the
hard-edged ambience we have?” He twirled his hand up to signify the unnatural silence in the
camp.

“That’s it,” Egg said. “Don’t go thinking it’s all due to you.”

“What?” Kes squeezed out with his jaws clenched. He might be a seasoned customer but the
needler hurt just as much every time.

“All that,” Egg agreed. “I see politicking happening. The Ms and Ls are sending a message to
the Ks and Js, using the only ammo they have.”

“How?”

“All fighting must happen in the ring. You’re the only one available for a bit of pressure, the
only one not yet with a specific role in the dance.”

“Tell me exactly?” Kes said.

“You’re a loose cannon, in old time war talk. You get squashed, you can do damage here, there, anywhere. That’s what the Ms and Ls are hoping. They’ll banish you, and your parents will go with you. Your brothers probably not, given they both are partnered into the Ms. Some others might. All depends on how you break.”

Egg’s finger poked Kes in the muscle beside his shoulder joint. “A heap of camels will go too. And how good will the pasturing be for the herd following the leaders? Though how good will it be for anyone, is more to the point.”

“What do you mean?”

“Where have you been, doing your camel work? I search out good grass to picket my animals out on. I need to take them far and wide.”

“You’re right,” Kes said after hardly any thought. He’d seen it. *Two and two make four*. “The herd has hard work and slim pickings.” He sat up, pushing aside the needler head. Swung down off the couch. “I’ve got to go and check up on all that.”

Nights when he wasn’t with the herd, he lay in his camp staring at the Lodestar, wondering if Ahni also gazed up at it. He dreamed that she was bathed in silver inside and out. When he woke, her life was still a mystery. He wondered whether she still thought about him.

He saw a skull-dome of silver transplanted from a woman into a girl, them laying head to head and the young woman bathed in silver. Did he once know her? The ship he sailed in high above the waves knew her, it said. The women are recalcitrant survivors, it said. You better hope that that girl never becomes one of them.

He did or said something—afterwards he had no clue no matter how hard he tried to remember it—and the ship threw his kestrel-self out into the wind. He opened his eyes. Pink dawn with a kestrel roosting on Gzelle’s hump. Shook his head. Kestrel gone. A head-hanging day to follow.

Several mornings he woke drenched with sweat despite that he dreamed a terrifying sea storm. Or because of it. He was one of several silver-clad men perching on a mangrove shore all night, waves washing over them, their holds tested with both the forward surge and the back-suck. A man who lost his hold—a whiskered face—sank into the depths. Kestrel despaired with them, their loss as much as his.

In another dusk of steel green cold waves, spume-flecked water mountains—*what do I know of such?*—silver-etched stones groaned as they shifted off their foundations. In the wet grey core of the place the skull-dome girl struggled to retain her place in the universe. Why would she want it, he wondered. A world so grey, and her powerless. Or was she one of the recalcitrant survivors? Did he once know her, he wondered again.

Daytimes he blinked mole-eyed while tailing the herd. Hardly awake with nights no longer the friendly times to fantasize their union, him and Ahni.

“Asleep in the saddle?” His father dropped by. “Too bad Kier put his hand up for Merin and Marl accepted him.”

“Good for him,” Kes said, not specifying which of the two. Whatever. Dull and with no interest.

“The Seatower is broken,” Jenk said. “Last storm. Survivors scattered over the land, that means. We are too near to ShowTown, otherwise we might’ve gone back to mop them up. Is what some people are saying we should do.”

“How do you *know*?” Kes said. After a while of no answer about that, he said, “I suppose the others are saying to hurry forward.”

“It makes sense,” Jenk said. “Ransom a lot of numbers, for gold this time. Then split. Isn’t that what you said we should do?”

“Find somewhere else. A different trade.” Kes said.

Jenk-Fa shrugged. “The Ms and Ls don’t need to, they say. Not having any hot-heads looking to break up what works.”

“Right.” Kes scoffed at their ignorance.

Jenk frowned. “The pastures won’t survive two herds.”

What Egg said. “If some of us take our part of the herd west?” Kes said, studying his father’s disquiet.

“So then I ask myself whether we’ll have what it takes to survive the okapinossus? And I’ll ask what trade we’ll live on out there in the mythical west?” Jenk said. “And so there’ll be no leaving you and your sea-girl lonesome on this island. Not going to happen!” Jenk kicked Bullone and man-and-beast whirled away.

Survive the okapinossus? Kes and Ahni lonesome together? What other island was there? Jenk-fa’s mysteries enough to do his head in.

Another day, another visitor. This time at his little fire. Kuri-Ma, bringing him a short sword. Shining and sharp. “Get you accustomed to its weight, twirling and stabbing,” she said, demonstrating. “And plus, get you used to ignoring the audience, whoever they might be.”

We can’t afford to ignore anyone. By the time the Four Families hit River Camp Two, Kes felt watched whenever he unsheathed the sword and began his practicing. Twirling, he snapped a gaze in every direction, what he’d been taught, to watch for an opponent stepping into the ring. Nobody he knew watched. Not the herdies. Not his brothers. Not Joff.

Seeing animals in the distance, he started, but swung into a full parry to hide his consternation. *Not our camels. None of the families have animals that dark.* Outsiders. He vibrated with attention. Wherefrom? He kept dancing, did a full circle, always twirling outward. The watchers didn’t like him seeming to watch them and kicked their animals to stir up dust. There, and then undercover of it, to recede from the scene. *Onto you now, fellas. Your spycraft is lacking.*

Twice more he practiced in the dusk, in the open. Twice more he scared up a bunch of watchers and had them turning tail when he turned the tables. Nobody else seeing them was the mystery. Unless they were part of the plotting going on. Now he practiced away from the fire, in the dark. Every new turn, he looked over the full outward hemi-quadrant. Near. Middle ground. Far.

Sometimes he saw lantern light. No worries. *The dark beyond a light-fall is darker than the night.* Once, he heard a spur clinking on a buckle. Grinned. *No worries.* He was so quiet that he heard them—whoever they were—arguing. But never the words. When he froze, still as stone, they left. *The dark is my friend.*

“What is it with you, always half asleep these days?” Joff walked his animal beside Kes on Gzelle.

“City spies when I twirl my sword,” Kes said. “So, practicing in the dark.”

Joff scoffed. He twirled his finger by his ear at whoever might be watching, Kes saw out of the corner of his eye.

Next Kyle rode up. "What did Joff want?"

"I thought you were friendly with him?" Kes said.

Kyle did not kick away as Kes expected. He pushed up his mask and waited. "Okay," Kes said. "You're saying you just agreed with him that one time? He asked why I sleep in the saddle?"

"What did you say?"

"You know that Kuri gave me a short sword?" Kes said.

"I told her that it could be useful if Kes knew how to handle a sword?"

Right. My mother colludes with her elder son. "I told him that ShowTown sends spies for when I twirl my sword. So I started practicing in the dark. He scoffed. But I expect you heard that."

"They're here now?" Kyle said.

"Probably shadowing us. They come in closer when we set up camp, I suspect. At dusk I know they are there. The turmoiled dust."

Kyle nodded. "Expect us to be ghosting around too. Moss and me," Kyle said.

Finally, Jeb rode alongside. "You *are* a popular fellow today."

"I see Jenk noticing that too," Kes said. "Probably you should hang more with Kyle and Moss."

"Despite what they did to us?" Jeb said, disbelieving. "I don't think so!"

"Is there a problem?" Jenk said.

"Kyle has it in hand," Kes said. He kicked Gzelle to get her from between Bullone and Jeb's ride, leaving Jeb and Jenk riding side by side, another reason for Joff to get his nose out of joint. *Might be enough to drive Jeb back to Kyle and Moss. Would be helpful.*

Nearing River Camp Three, in his next bit of supposed free time, Kes tied Gzelle to the back of Egg's wagon and with a couple of jogging paces to the front, joined Egg on the wagon seat.

"There you are," Egg said. "I was wondering how to get hold of you."

"Thought I might need some more shading to take my mind off the worrying parts," Kes said.

Egg chuckled. He stood up on the seat and with two fingers in his mouth whistled toward the back of the caravan.

"What are you doing?" Kes said.

"You got crew now. Might as well use them." Egg gestured with his head. "You get inside, lay yourself out for the needling."

Kes sat on the Egg's bunk and sloughed out of his cloak, then his shirt. "Easy," he heard from outside. Kyle. Tying his camel beside Gzelle. Kyle jogging the same paces alongside the wagon. Step up. Thump onto the seat.

Egg sat down and started explaining Lady's and Hamel's habits.

Kyle laughed. "I've known these animals since they were calves." He stuck a finger between the curtains into the living space. Stared. "I could swear. But. I. Have. No. Words."

"So face the front, and drive this wagon," Egg said. "Pretend you know nothing." He turned into the wagon bed. "You, Kestrel. Let me see that silver." Egg pulled over the camel-head of the needling machine. Switched on the light in its gob. Inspected the star on Kes's chest. "Very nice! All of it enlivened just how it should've. You were worrying, you said?"

Kes frowned. Chinned toward where his brother sat outside the curtains whistling a breathy tune. Not so loud that he'd have trouble hearing whatever either Egg or Kes said.

"He's your crew," Egg said. "He should know everything that goes down with this."

"Nobody will believe me," Kes said belligerently.

"Everything-that-goes-down-with-what?" Kyle said from outside. "What did you do to him, Egg-Man?"

"Who did what when?" Joff said from right beside where Kes lay. Joff on the outside of the tarpaulin wagon cover.

"Beeswax," Kyle said. "Nothing to do with you, Uncle." He humped Lady and Hamel, who broke into a sedate trot. Uncomfortable for the rider alongside trying to maintain a parallel path.

"Busy here," Jenk said. "Four Kuri-family camels and you riding herd on them, *brother*?" Jenk on the wagon's other side, jogging sedately. No trouble with the pace. "I'm on it."

Kes rolled his eyes.

"Sure you want the shading now?" Egg said aloud. "The outline is already a real achievement."

"Tsss," Joff said. "That damned tattoo again! All yours, *brother*! Remember what I said about discipline?"

Jenk laughed. "Give him the shading, Egg. Let's see how the boy mans up, this time in the heart of the families?"

Silence.

"I said something wrong, Kyle?" Jenk inquired.

Egg had the machine going and started needling the criss-cross tracking across the star.

"Nope. You'll not stare me away," Jenk said.

"You shouldn't need to be stared away," Egg said conversationally. "Are you a father first or a brother first?"

"Them's words of war, Egg-man!" Jenk said like he might be joking. The wagon tipped as he too stepped on board. He pulled the curtain aside.

Kes closed his eyes.

The wagon bed dipped and shifted. "Egg! What have you done?" Jenk said from beside them.

"Only what I asked!" Kes said boring his stare into his father.

"Did you tell him what might happen?" Jenk-Fa said at Egg.

"It all turning black, you mean?" Kes said. "He told me. It didn't though, did it?"

"Is there more to know?" Egg said.

Jenk hulked in the small space. The wagon bed dipped again. Egg swore while he steadied the needler. Jenk through the curtains and onto the bench. Down onto the step. Gone.

“That means not the place or time for it,” Egg said.

After quite a while just driving Lady and Hamel, Kyle said, “So tell me something I can take back to his support crew?”

“The roadside paddocks are narrower than the maps tell us,” Egg said. “There’s less feed.”

“Damn! Moss was right!” Kyle said. “How much longer?”

“The needling? We’re probably done for the day,” Egg said. He lifted the camel-head from Kes’s chest. “Don’t argue,” he said. “I need first to know what Jenk thinks he knows.”

Kes swore getting onto Gzelle. Monotone, under his breath. The pain was just a background worry now.

Kyle bent low from the back of his beast to catch up Gzelle’s bridle. “Tell me you already know what this mysterious thing is?” he said from between the animals.

Kes sobbed. Nodded into the direction he wished to go.