

### 32. Kestrel & the Life-suit

Kes rode Gzelle like he was a sack of stores, most of his attention inward on his continuing nightmare. In front of him meandered the Kuri-family herd at the end of the camel cavalcade, since he wasn't averse to them snatching a mouthful of feed here and there from the verges and even from among the crops. They matched the at-present easy pace of the caravan. Every so often he'd surface to see that Gzelle, who knew the job as well as any herdie, zig-zagged him over the road to push along any beast that threatened to get left behind.

River Camp Three was behind them, as were the southeast and Ahni. Last night's nightmare the worst. And this after Kyle yesterday forced Kes to tell everything so far. Moss, while a silent but interested bystander, stopped anybody else approaching just with his bearing and expression. What Kes particularly noticed. Jeb probably didn't even try.

The whole outpouring was meant to have relieved Kes's mind—what Kyle said numerous times—but just helped Kyle-and-Moss with the knowing of what was going on. *In my humble opinion*. Still, thinking about Kyle-and-Moss and what they were up to, stopped him replaying the bloody event back at CAVE. Who knew that Rockeater Ridge held such secrets? He snorted tears, punched his leg. *And I can't do anything for her*.

He wrenched his thoughts away. The only good outcome for him was Kyle exclaiming over the same thing that stuck in Kes's craw. How did Jenk-Fa know so much about that happened back there? Kes barely noticed when they approached the last of the cliffs.

Here, as a kid, he'd often watched paragliders shot from a device at the top of the cliffs and carried northwest by the winds. The paragliders aimed to descend into the croplands near to the Three Cities, and be merely beaten up by the farmers if they could pay them no toll. So woe betide—the storyteller used to say—the fellows who landed in the delta. These wing-men were never heard of again. Naturally, the stupid Three Cities made out that the *dolphinate* ate the wing-men. City folk were so stupid.

Bed-time stories. Jenk-Fa always knew more fact and more gory detail than any other storytelling father. How? Today there were only a row of black figures lined up along the top of the cliffs. The end-men held fluttering flags on poles. All of them wore glints as if of armour, and fluttering black cloaks. Armour? *Have we ridden into a role playing game?*

“Kesson! Wits about you, boy!”

*Uncle Joff, who else?* Gzelle walked into what looked like the whole herd milling in the cross-roads. The road south—to the right—went along the base of the cliffs toward the delta. East it led into the Cities. North to Show Town. He drew Gzelle back. Their job now was heading off animals intending to escape back up the road.

When they were on the move again, and he went through the cross-roads, he discovered the barricades built across the road leading into the delta. *Huh? Why bother when the crops down there aren't nearly ready for harvesting? Herders and animals both thoroughly spooked.* Half a dozen soldiers in mock-medieval clothes carrying ancient blunderbusses loitered in the road. *More and more like we're riding into a role playing game.*

Kuri-Chief and Lorne waited in the opposite road-mouth, both on beasts trained to stand without twitching. “As you see, my son,” Kuri said. “The Three Cities no longer trust us not to take the road into the delta before coming to Show Town.” She shook a faked-up tentpole, rustling its streamers.

“Just doing what we're told,” the head honcho said. Kes stared at him longer than he needed to. Sometimes he didn't mind the effect the herders had on the city folk. In a minute the guy would be pissing his pants, and he was a guard?

Lorne thumped his tent-pole spear so the the vanes on it hissed like an eastern brown snake. *The event has not yet played through? What should I do?* Kuri-Mah seemed to read Kestrel's expression. Gestured with her head. Telling him to keep going. In a while their shadows fell in behind him. He didn't even have to turn his head, with the sun coming out of the same direction where Ahni still was. Still alive was all he knew.

"Good thing we started early," Kuri-Chief said from behind.

"You're expecting more trouble?" Lorne said.

Kuri-Chief snorted disbelief.

*Glad I didn't ask the same thing.*

A while more ambling along the road to Show Town, Lorne said, "Are we out of earshot of the barrier, do you think?"

"If you don't shout."

*That's her being terse. If Lorne goes on now, he doesn't know his chief nearly well enough.*

"Do you think the Three Cities really think we're so uneducated as not to know the times have moved on?" Lorne said.

Kuri surprised Kes by answering patiently. "Times in the Austral Archipelago were never medieval," she said. "They're doing this to keep our attention from what is really happening. Ride ahead, Lorne. We'll take the left tine when we come to the fork. We'll come to Show Town by the coast road."

"Why not our usual way, shorter by half a day's riding? We should be showing the bastards we're not taken in by their games." Lorne half-kicked his mount so it restlessly.

*Did he just set up a thing where he can blame his camel for taking off without him hearing Kuri's further instructions, and setting the whole parade onto the wrong road? Good trick, Lorne. I don't think.*

"Not our usual road because the Cities obviously think they have our measure," Kuri-Chief said without raising her voice. "Yes to the road through the croplands, to see ahead of the time of *their* choosing what else the Cities have in store for us. And Lorne, tell everybody to string up the loose animals."

"Right. No loose animals. Take the left tine. I hear you, Kuri-Chief." This time Lorne kicked his mount properly and galloped away along the left, the inside, of the Kuri-family pack animals.

"I better start catching ours," Kes said.

"I have a different task for you," Kuri-Ma said. "Take this." She passed him a cloth bag.

Inside it a soft bundle on a shield-shaped firmer thing.

"It's a life-suit," she said. "The shield is the chest-plate. It's from CAVE. Someone took it from a number a long time ago. Whoever wears it can hear whatever signals pass through any of the Three Cities technotics. Wear it under your clothes. I want you to be my ears."

"Put it on right now?" Kes imagined the juggle of it while he sat on Gzelle. Not that he'd ever seen a life-suit.

Kuri-Ma smiled. "I don't doubt that you could do it, but no. Take a message to Egg. Ask him to pull back, drive his wagon about mid-herd. Send Gzelle back. Get changed in the wagon meanwhile."

"I hear you, Kuri-Chief."

“From you I expect a leader’s style, Kestrel-son. And don’t let anybody see you while the suit still misfires.”

The suit mis-firing? He didn’t stop to ask. Kuri joking felt good. But sarcastic with a slow stupido did not. Plus, she punctured his balloons with about four words. Could she read his mind? He chirruped Gzelle to a slow gallop that enabled him to catch up a couple of trailing reins as he went.

“Where are *you* off to?” Kier said. He was on foot with a couple of leading reins in one hand.

“Message for Kuri-Chief.”

“You should be doing this and I should be helping Merin.”

Kes pulled forward the animals he’d snared. “Here, a couple caught already.”

“For what? Doing me out of this job, as well?” Kier pulled the leads from Kes’s fist and pulled the animals in front of Gzelle. Stopped there to begin to string them one to the other.

“Do you mind?” Kes said. “I need to get past.”

Kier shouldered Gzelle in her midriff. “I mind. You going to make something of it? Even being a useless herder, you get the best jobs and the trust. And why when you still and always will be *younger* than me!”

Kes could never stop himself fight the old argument, Kier’s steadfast opinion that he must be older than Kes since he was that much bigger. “I’m two years older than you.”

“I’ve been older that you since I was six!” Kier said.

“Don’t be such a kid. You’ve been *bigger* than me since you were six. Now are you going to let me pass?”

“Not until you give me this!” Kier reached up and grabbed the parcel out of Kes’s hand.

“Where do you have to take it?” He felt the underside of the chest-piece. “Interesting.” He laughed. “You know what this feels like?”

Kes said nothing. His suspicions had to be wrong. The breast shapes on the chest-piece were the reason he’d held the parcel so loosely. He’d been shocked by the idea that his mother required him to wear a woman’s costume.

“Ha! I see you know it exactly,” Kier said. “Why would Kuri give it to you to give to someone? Is she still thinking you are the man for Merin? Is it a gift?”

“She doesn’t, and it has nothing to do with Merin.”

“Tell me where you are taking it!” Kier leapt on his mount, juggling the parcel on one hand like a tray of glasses. “I’ll do that job and you do this one. Well? I’m waiting!”

*And my mother expects me to lead, Kes thought disgustedly. Shall I lead by example? By force? By cunning?* Kes walked Gzelle at Kier on his mount and pushed them back and back.

“What are you doing?” Kier said, stung by his beast’s submission to Gzelle.

“Give me that parcel, or I’ll push you so far back into the herd, it’ll take you all afternoon to untangle.” When Kes stopped Gzelle, she had her neck crossing Kier’s mount’s neck, her acting the alpha in this little altercation. Kier’s mount drooped.

Kier threw the parcel and Kes knew he was supposed to have dropped it. “Just get out of my way?”

Kes shrugged. *Suddenly Kier is my worst enemy?* He kned Gzelle into one of her one-eighty turns, rode onward. Apparently the suit would allow him to hear the talk that passed through

Three Cities technotics. *And the suit mis-fired sometimes. Whatever that means.* But he wasn't to let anyone he knew see the mis-firing. *The anyone? That will be the herder-families.* Did that suggest that while he skulked around listening to the former, he also keep his ears open for talk amongst the latter?

He passed Jenk-Fa at the head of the Kuri-Family mob, in conversation with Uncle Joff at the rear of the Jovat-Family herd. He waved. His father waved back. His uncle too, a two finger salute. He rode along the inside of the Jovat-Family pack animals and came up to Jeb stringing theirs.

"Hey, Kes. See you when we get there?"

Kes grinned agreement but kept going, passing Jeldie at the head of her family's herd, Lewit, keeping her company, at the tail end of his. Kes waved but did not stop. He passed a loose squad of women and children and spied the wagon making faster time than anyone else. If he didn't hurry, Egg would be out front and the Three Cities would see Kes climbing in.

He kicked Gzelle to hurry her through the Marl-Family animals. Merin didn't look up from her work. Her family had more camels than the rest, and neither Moss—her elder brother—nor Kier were here to help her.

The road had widened some. Three camels abreast, or the wagon and one camel. Keeping the knotted opening of the bag between his teeth Kes threw the parcel over his shoulder as he'd need his hands free.

He knotted the reins to the saddle. Rose up teetering on Gzelle and jumped onto the wagon's roof. Probably Egg heard the thump because the wagon slowed considerably. "Gzelle! Go home!" He'd trained her to filter back to the home-herd.

Kes dropped down from the wagon's roof onto the seat, Egg already having shoved over.

"What's up?" Egg said.

Kes told him Kuri-Chief's will. "And Egg, she gave me this to wear. She said you'd know enough about it to advise me. And also, I think she said that I'm not to let anybody know I've got it on."

"Fine by me," Egg said. "I'm about ready for a cup of tea. He stopped Lady and Hamel and tied the reins to the brake. He hopped down with a slab of hay which he fluffed out and dropped in front of the animals.

"That's more than the rest of ours get for standing still," Kes said, laughing a little.

"Taming them to my hand," Egg said with a sideways grin. "Still answering to their previous people." Egg gestured Kes to the bunk. He sat on his chair by his one-man table and pulled his biochar cookstove from its hutch. All it needed was a handful of fuel pellets and a spark applied to it. Egg used an old tech flint-and-steel. He set a billycan over the roaring flame. "Still just sitting there. What's the problem?"

"Umm," Kes said. He upended the bag onto the bed. The body stocking looped with sleeves, leggings and a hood. The front gaped open. "This chest piece is the problem." He passed it to Egg. "Looks's like a woman's to me."

Egg grinned. "I see your worry. But the suit will adapt itself to your shape. Wear it long enough and it won't go back to this shape. It needs to be next to your skin so you're going to have to take everything else off first."

"Right."

Egg turned his back, giving Kes a measure of privacy, and busied himself making a couple of mugs of tea. He left one on the table and took the other with him out to the wagon seat.

Kes slipped the sock parts of the suit over his feet. Then pulled up the leggings, alternating bit by bit, to his knees. He stood up and did the same up his thighs.

The hair on his shins and calves tweaked and twangled as the weave—or whatever the suit was made of—pulled them every way. Should he have shaved his legs? No way. And it didn't bode good for his man-things. Hairy as his head.

He eased the back of the suit over his but. Pulled up the front like a pair of shorts. No problems yet, because not tight yet. Now what?

Egg looked in while Kes studied the upper half. "I'd do the glove parts next."

Kes laughed. "Is there any other way?"

Egg laughed too. "You'd be rolling around laughing seeing what happens when people try to get in hands first.

Kes smoothed and tweaked each suit-finger over his fingers. "The time it's taking me to climb into it, I'm not surprised we hardly use it."

"Your father uses it quite often, I understand. If you let it, the suit will take care of all your processes. If that's what you were worrying about."

Blood flamed to his face—meaning he blushed—because that was his worry.

"You should probably let it have a go," Egg said. "You won't be needing this." He swapped his emptied mug for the full one." Teasing smile on his dial the whole time.

"And if I don't let it?" Kes said.

"You can trick it by eating and drinking," Egg said. "Only don't blame me for the results."

"Great." Egg, in this mood, was no more comforting than Kuri-Mah. Finally he shrugged his shoulders into the suit. The back clung to him already. He left the hood in his neck and fluffed his hair over it.

Egg came back in and straddled his chair, folding his arms on the back. "Turn around and show me the fit?"

Kes turned, head bent forward, even he being too tall for the wagon.

"Now pull on those laces at your collarbones," Egg said. "Ease the gathers so that the front makes the approximate outline of the chest-piece. Pass me the chest-piece again?"

Egg balanced it on his hand, "Probably you'll need to hold it something like this." His forearm lay up the ribs outlined on the silk-smooth substance, his thumb under one of the breasts, the rest of his fingers over the dome of the other breast. "Look where it'll fit against you."

"The longer mid-section along my sternum," Kes said.

"The breastbone, yes."

Egg teasing, of course."

*Smack!*

Someone hit the side of the wagon?

"Hey, Egg! We need you to move!"

Kyle's voice and Kyle jumping onto the seat. The wagon jerked into motion. The camels answering to Kyle's voice like he was their god. "See what you mean," Kes said about Egg's training them while snatching Egg's blanket to wrap around himself. Only place to hide.

"Egg?" Kyle said.

"Yeah, mate. Coming," Egg said. He smiled fierce at Kes. "Sensors everywhere in the chest-piece. Smooth it onto yourself. The suit will start helping once it realises you're a new insert."

*Insert? The suit will help me? Help!* But as soon as Egg had turned his back, and filled the doorway so Kyle couldn't see anything, Kes clamped the chest-piece to his chest. With his right hand squashing the breast formations to his ribs, he tucked under the gathered edges of the body stocking with his other hand.

These edges, which could just as well have slipped free again as soon as his efforts moved on, stayed put as if they had some invisible fastening system. He pressed down the breast hillocks whenever they popped out and after about a dozen reminders they stayed flat.

About halfway round with the tucking under, his mouth had enough moisture that he no longer felt dehydrated. His heart stopped its knocking beat in his throat. He finished the tucking under with both hands, finalising with a bit of pulling and pushing to set the chest-piece symmetrically over his chest. He stepped back into his undershorts. Vest next. Button that. His cloak over it all would surely be too hot?

< I'll manage something >

*What? Words, not thought by me.*

< I'll manage. You're right. These words were not thought by you. >

Kes snapped his jaw shut. *Suit thinking at me? This is what Egg was talking about.* It is a technotic as much as the stuff he was supposed to be listening for.

< I'll search for contact with base. >

"Egg!" Kes squawked.

Silence out front.

< CAVE says you are not of base. >

"I need your help, Egg. The suit contacted CAVE."

Kyle swore. "Give me the reins. What are you *doing* to him?"

Then Egg swore. "What's you damned chief doing to him, you mean?"

Kes cut in. "CAVE told the suit I'm not one of them."

"It transmitted your biologicals." Only Egg shouldered his way between the curtains. "What's it doing now?"

"Nothing."

"At all?"

Quick nod forward. He had to be concentrating. Could the suit kill him?

The right-hand forequarter of the wagon dipped, as if someone else got on.

"Don't worry," Kyle said. "It's Moss."

"It's meant to be a secret," Kes said.

"The canny woman can't grudge you your support team," Egg said. "Did she say why?"

“Eavesdropping on technotics.”

Moss laughed. “Let’s get partnered, Kyle. When it all falls down, I want to be in the family that’ll know when to make its getaway.”

“You talking for real?” Kyle’s voice cracked and the wagon swayed. Some kind of tussle and then sounds of them thumping each other.

“I want Jeb too,” Kes said.

Egg put his thumb up, agreeing.

Kyle sat back onto the left of the bench. Where his voice came from. “Go talk with Jeb, Moss. Don’t bring him here, too obvious.”

“Only after you tell me yes or no,” Moss said. Then he said, “I’m happy.”

Egg rolled his eyes. Moss dropped from the wagon. All this time they’d been trundling along, Kyle with the reins or not. “Where are we anyway?” Kes said.

“Is it still playing dead?” Egg said.

“They do that?” Kes laughed. “Yes. Should I take it off? Probably won’t work for me.”

“Body check,” Egg said. “Are you comfortable?”

Kes stared inward, observing his physical comfort. “You mean not in a sweat?”

“Like everyone else. It’s damned hot away from the water.”

“You better believe it,” Kyle said. “I’m out here showing off all my muscles.”

Egg ignored the opportunity for a joke at Kyle’s expense. “That’ll be a problem. You with all your clothes on with everyone else in tanks and vests.”

Kes shrugged his cloak from his shoulders, to let it drape from his belt.

“Oh hell,” Egg said. “You’re going to need a different sort of vest.”

Kes looked down at his chest. Swallowed. The tattooed star twinkled and spurted sparkling glints off the ends of its arms.

“Does it hurt?” Kyle sat sideways, one boot on the wagon-seat, to discourage anyone else from getting on. He peered in alongside one finger parting the curtains.

It didn’t but Kes had no chance to say so.

“Whoa!” came from up the front.

Kyle’s attention went outside. He let the curtains close. “We’re stopping. Egg, would you say we were halfway between the river and the seashore? A mob of Three Cities guards approaching.”

Egg gripped Kes’s knee. Mimed putting the suit’s hood up.

The hood stretched as he pulled it over his head, probably the suit already knew all about his hair. He hated how the hood confined even his mouth.

“You there yet, Harry?” a voice hissed like a big brown snake, continuing while the fellow spoke.

“About halfway.” More like a rain-on-stone kind of hiss.

“We’re starting to feed them into the cropped area.” Snake hiss.

“There’s a wagon here.” Rain on stone.

“That’ll be the tattoo artist travelling with them. We should make sure that he stays as clueless as the rest.”

“Search the wagon?”

Kes hunted for a place to hide. Knowing already the uselessness of that.

“You! What’s your name?” Rain-on-stone said in his normal voice.

“What’s yours?” Kyle said. “And what’s your ...”

“I’ll handle this,” Kuri-Chief said. That was her scraping alongside the left, the tarp bulging inward.

Kyle stopped Lady and Hamel with a chirrup.

Kuri-chief halted her camel level with Lady. “Gentlemen,” she said. “I give you space and a place to walk your animals through the turn. Of course, done frequently enough and narrowing the circle be-times, is how we train our animals to turn on a coin.”

The men cursing and swearing into their beards, harness jingling, and their camels’ hooves shuffling through the dust were how Kes—in the wagon—heard how the Three Cities guards kicked and knuckled their camels through the turn.

Three or four minutes more, Kuri-Chief’s camel’s tail stopped slapping at the wagon cover, and Kes knew Kuri-Chief to have moved on. Following the Guards, presumably. They said nothing more that he could pick up via the life-suit. “They gone?” he said.

“Oh yeah,” Kyle said. “So smart on their half-trained camels, I don’t think. The Cities have got to be planning something, with all this dressing up in play.”

“It works,” Kes said. “The life-suit works. I heard all their conniving.” He told Egg his danger and what the guards thought about the rest of them. Clueless.

“Your next test should be to mingle with your own,” Egg said. He produced a dark vest.

Kes wasn’t keen at all about showing his nose outside. Or any part covered by the suit. He took the vest reluctantly. “Kuri-Ma said something about the life-suit misfiring.”

“I’ve heard about that,” Egg said. “Sometimes people who don’t have a good grasp how the world operates have that trouble. I’m talking about things like night and day, the sun, the moon, the stars, cold, warm, fog, the colours of a natural landscape, that sort of thing.”

“That’s background stuff,” Kes said. “Who’d have trouble with that?”

“If the suit says, what colour should I be? Someone from CAVE, where these suits were made, might say where are we? The suit will say “On a road.” The kid ...”

“All the ones you’ve seen are kids?” Kes said.

Egg nodded. “Teens. Couple of years younger than you. The kid will say red, because roads on maps are red, and that’s all he’s seen. The suit then tries to make itself the same colour of ‘red’ that that road is.”

“When the road is probably tan sand.” Kes gestured outside.

“Yes, and so the suit sparks, because it can’t make up its mind. Like I said, not your problem.”

“Egg’s right,” Kyle said. “You need to practice at not being self-conscious. Get so comfortable you don’t even notice your wearing it.”