

33. The City's Plot

Kes wandered on foot along with the long skinny herd, a new-mile of camels. The animals snatched at the vegetation beside the road while they waited to be let into camping grounds. He encouraged the animals in his surrounds to graze the left-shoulder, kept the right-side of the road free for riders. The road had been widened, with a paler newer strip scraped along the left, and dead vegetation laying roots up in the new guttering. A similar new circumstance on the other side of the road.

Riders, herders and families were spread among the animals, patience everywhere getting short. It'd be good to get the tents up and dinner cooked before bedtime was the general feeling. Stars were already visible in the wine-dark sky. Procyon. Sirius. And of course, the Lodestar, which hung low and behind them, in a geo-stationary orbit. It didn't twinkle like the proper stars and tonight was lime-green. *Love to know the significance of the colour-code, if any. Ida might say might know.* She the chief who studied the Lodestar.

He heard a beast come galloping. Saw his mother fleeting past toward the head of the cavalcade. Kuri-Chief. *Too far from the front to hear what she'll say. Something like,* "What's the hold-up?" Kes leaned against someone's pack animal while tidying the life-suit's hood back into his neck. Too bad he couldn't ask the life-suit to make the neck roll blue or red, make it look like a bandanna.

The beast moved to reach for another tussock and Kes stumbled. *Tired. Let's go already.* A ripple of talk flowed through the herd. "We're camping out here, people. The Cities have changed the fences around. We're not going to fall over them in the dark." Kuri-Chief rode back along the right-side of the road. Such a fierce and forbidding expression on her face and in the set of her shoulders that Kes didn't trouble her.

Moss, recognizable by his chunky stature and that he led Gzelle, galloped up on his stringer, his second-best camel.

Kes hailed him. "Here! Your rider is injured?"

"Walk with me?" Moss gestured for Kes to mount Gzelle and join him.

They walked their animals down the right of the road. Early moonlight gave them vague shadows. "I'm off to keep my family company tonight," Moss said. "I decided to ride my stringer every second day, train her up to be as good as my primary. The chiefs had a meeting just now. Joff suggests that Kuri sends you to spy out the lay of the land. We—Kyle and me—said you've barely worn the life-suit for three minutes and already he expects you to have full control?"

"Typical," Kes said about Joff. "So much for keeping it a secret. Are we right about not taking the herd in tonight?"

"We go in now, we're in the dark. Both of night and ignorance. We'll be at their mercy, Ida says. Cities are looking at springing a trap, is what all the chiefs agree on. While we're outside the gates we're still independent, Kuri says. But could be that Cities need us as much as we need them, Jenk says. We prefer finding out in daylight. Walk into it with our eyes open, Kuri-chief decided."

"I agree with my uncle for a change, only don't tell him. It would be better if we knew a couple of things beforehand." Kes glanced toward where the fence glistened in the moonlight. "From here to the gates the posts are strung with plain wire."

"No barbed wire, you mean," Moss said. "Knowing a couple of facts could help. Losing you would not. Guards camped both sides of the track in, Kuri-chief says."

“I’ll camp roundabout here. Maybe just eavesdrop. Don’t worry, I’ll be careful.”

After he rode back along the road a few dozen new-yards, Kes slid down from Gzelle and pulled her up the shallow road-shoulder onto a stretch of mainly spiky sage-green spinifex. Nobody else just here. And not so many animals grazed along here that he and Gzelle had a hard time moving back toward the gates again.

Gzelle greeted camel-friends and acquaintances with nudges and nips, he with pats and a few endearments. They met Hamel and Lady about midway the strung-out herd. More patting. More love-talk. Then they greeted Kier’s Kuri-family animals that Kier brought to his partnering with Merin.

All of which helped them to get toward the front unremarked on.

Near enough? Kes stopped Gzelle. He smelled the air. No smoke. Didn’t see any glow of fires either. He chuckled inwardly. *Both Cities and Herders being canny.* He reached over his shoulder and pulled Gzelle’s jaw down, his signal that she could graze. Her head dropped to a patch of ground-hugging succulent parakeelya—what it felt like underfoot—that was a juicy camel-favourite. He shucked off his cloak and dropped to his knees. Unrolled the life-suit’s hood. Smoothed it over his head. Slid his hands into the gloves.

< My exterior colour. Stone? >

What? Not stone, it’s night.

< My exterior colour. Alive-to-background? >

Yes please.

The suit darkened and went camo where a spinifex tussock shadowed him.

Huh. Neat trick.

< Science. >

Kes crawled toward where he guessed the fence to be. *Here. Almost hit it.* Checked the wire. *Yeah OK, smooth.* Shuffled under the bottom strand on his back. Continued crawling along that side of it. But hesitantly. Rose to his knees. Listened. Still no campfire, or even yarning if it was dark camp. Crawled again.

Froze because the life-suit froze. *It can do that?*

< Blood-warmth adjacent to outer left front appendage. >

Say again? No, don’t bother. I see him, right by my pinkie. He drew in his fingers and made fists. The life-suit showed him a mapped heads-up-display of a bunch of dark human-shaped hummocks with a hot spot where they were warmest. *Another thing I didn’t know you could do.*

< Superior technology. >

Superior to what? The hummocks looked to be sleeping. Some snored. No sentries?

< What are sentries? I cannot see things that are not adjacent to us. >

How could you see the sleepers? Also not adjacent to us.

< Sleepers are adjacent to each other and adjacent to us by way of blood warmth adjacent to outer left front appendage. >

Never mind, I think I have a good picture of them. Kneeling back as slowly as a mantis, Kes smelled the breeze. *Anyone by my other side? Plenty of camel scents there.*

< No blood-warmth to the right. >

Any structures to the right?

< Vertical steel post adjacent to our mid-leg joint. >

A fence post right there by his knee. *Close call. Getting better at knowing what to ask.* He rose to his feet. Feeling the uneven ground with his feet, he snail-paced slowly around the Cities' encampment. Then, stones underfoot. The suit stopped so he stopped. *What's the problem?*

< Stones and pebbles. Noisy underfoot. Chittering and gnattering. >

I remember. The road through the grounds. Kes stepped into a wheel rut. Fairly smooth.

< My exterior colour? >

Alive to background?

< Legs are adjacent to night stone. Pale. Upper half is adjacent to night paddock. Dark. I cannot compute. >

"You see that? That's not a glitch in these night-glasses," said a voice in the dark.

Kes froze.

"There! A hot spot beside the track! What is that?"

"A camel calf?" said a second voice. "Shoot first and eat later is what I always say."

Kes stepped into the paddock beyond the track. *Quick! Alive to background!*

< I hear you. No need to shout. >

"They'll miss it and start a hue and cry," First Voice said.

"The minute the manky herders walk into the paddock—aka the trap—they'll be so busy that a missing calf will be the least of their worries. Shoot!"

Blam!

"Missed, yah mongrel. Give me the gun!"

"This? A trap? How?" First Voice like he'd given the gun over and now gestured.

What I want to know too. Kes dropped to his hands and knees for the alive-to-background to function.

Second Voice laughed. "You scared it. It'll be laying up somewhere, doing a Bambi-impersonation. We'll quarter the paddock, starting this side of the track. Where we saw it last."

"So be ready to shoot. The trap," First Voice reminded his pal while they walked past Kes.

"As they come into the grounds, we'll be shooting any man over about twelve with the drugged darts."

Kes swallowed a groan. He followed the men on his side of the track, on his hands and knees.

< We are alive-to-background. We are an insert + life-suit unit. >

"...the new drug?" First Voice was asking.

New drug? Kes rose to his feet but ran crouching to catch up to them. He couldn't afford to miss a word.

“You bet,” Second Voice said. “We’ll run in and grab them reeling. Into the lock-ups they go. By the time we have the circus ready for the fighting, they’ll be roaring. Give them swords and they fight each other.”

The men curved the short end of the paddock to start their search on Kes’s side. He went to ground to not show movement against the fence and bushes, and lay still right there by the fence.

“Yep,” Second Voice continued. “And *our* hero will fight the last man standing!”

“When’s it set to start?”

Second Voice laughed. “Dawn, probably. Let’s start *really* looking for this calf, have a feed ready for after.”

Kes rolled under the fence despite that it delivered him in the weeds and bushes adjacent to the back of the paddock. He had only a few hours to convince his mother and every other chief. He rose.

First Voice needled on as if he knew Kes hid in plain sight. “I put my name down for a half dozen of their camels. Start me a little breeding business. Women?”

Kes pushed further into the shrubbery. *Can you make me look like a shadow?*

< Why have we stopped? >

Danger. They think us a camel calf. We’re hiding. Shadows here.

< Alive-to-background. >

“Here somewhere. I saw it fall. Got a torch?”

< Now is not a good time. There is much distress. > The life-suit glimmered—Kes saw his hand come into being—then became fully visible. *Why now?* He slipped further into the bush.

< My substance, my technology and my programming are CAVE! I am CAVE! >

A life-suit can make its words in my mind sound histrionic? Just in time he didn’t react because the city- men grumbled almost next to him. *Didn’t hear what they said. They know I’m here?*

He fixed himself in place. Then gently-gently shoved the life-suit’s face-cover upward to break the seal, making him fully visible, but in the shrubbery, in the shadows, and at least without the glow. After five to ten minutes the grumbling talk receded as if the men walked away.

Kes cricked his head and neck. *Get an idea of where I am.* Stars spangled overhead. The Lodestar hung forty-five degrees above the horizon, just visible above the tree tops. Moss-green now. To his rear the faint shadows of a tree trunk, with a minimum of bare ground underfoot, unbroken bush in front and to the right. The shine of fencing wire, the top couple of strands, showed here and there through the scrub.

He suppressed a groan. *I’m outside the paddocks with no silent way of getting back to camp.*

No sound from *over* the fence and he was now too far from the gate to hear any snoring. *Go already.* He slid a foot along the ground to lift leaves and sticks without them crackling.

Okay, that worked. Another step.

A shrub with leaves at head-height brushed past his eyes.

He screamed. “*Aaeey!*” *Pain! Pain!* Knife tips stabbed through his eyes. *Can’t see! Hurt! Hurt! Hurt! Am I bleeding?*

“I’m telling you that was a human scream!”

He heard First Voice through the spangling pain. A couple of paces distant. He must not crash and burn. He turned blindly back to the tree trunk. Fell awkwardly, in stages, to the bare ground there. Pressed himself to the wood.

The stinging tree’s poison pooled in his eyes, re-stinging his eyelids and sockets as his tears overflowed. He pulled down the life-suit’s face covering and resealed it with inept trembling hands.

< The bitch implant threatens me. All I can do is squeeze its programming. Its memories. You want to feel how? > The life-suit lengthened itself everywhere, squeezing Kes between its stretching fibres.

“One of them night birds,” Second Voice said. “Come on back. From the crack of dawn we’ll have all the calves we could want. Throw the switch when we get back. Electrify this twanging thing.” The man who was Second Voice must’ve pulled the top strand to set it humming.

Kes waited waited waited. *Were they gone yet?* His swollen eye-lids felt like sand-filled pillows on his sore eyeballs. He encouraged the snot and tears to run down the back of his throat. Not to sob out loud. The poison crept along his blood vessels stinging him as it went. A delta of pain. *If I die, everyone will die. Help me,* he thought at the life-suit. *Please help me!*

A thing laughed in his mind. < I can probably spare a circuit. >

That wasn’t the suit. There was a resonance, a kind of echo. *Something weird going on at Rockeater’s Ridge,* he thought dully. *I love you, Ahni.* He snorted.

< Love? You’re nothing but a foolish herder. >

Tears overflowed his eye sockets and his nasal cavities. He coughed and snorted, swallowing the effluent. His gut fought the poison and won. He ripped up the face-cover, vomited everything he ever ate. He waited to be taken. How could everyone in the surrounds have failed to hear him?

No extra talking shouting running feet approaching. No alarm? He closed the life-suit again—and like it promised way back—cleaned him up, even to delivering fresh water into his mouth. *That other thing in me,* he thought churlishly, *can it do anything but talk?*

Still have to get back before dawn. He moved his hands, feeling for where he was. Bare dirt under him. Dead tree behind him. *We will all die if I don’t get back to camp. Even you,* he gestured the sign for an outsider with his chin.

< Camp is where? >

Still not the life-suit’s thoughts. *If I die, the city-men will get this suit. They’ll send it to Sink City, where scientists will figure it out. And then you will all also die.*

The life-suit’s squeeze lessened.

You need to help us back to camp without us being discovered. He thought instructions at both of them. *At the end of this fence we turn a ninety degree angle to the left. Follow that side. Camp is near the end of it.*

< Well. Let’s forward march. The electrified wire is two paces to the left. Up you get. >

He managed to get his feet under him and rise with no help from either of the entities. Shuffled as before. Not lifting his feet. He recalled that the ground was sandy underfoot nearby the fence. Feels like it. *How far off is dawn? Got to go faster.*

< Veer right. Fence will sting you and city-operatives will know we are here. >

Yeah right. The electrification. Kes veered by pointing his feet a couple of finger-widths rightwards. *How far is the corner?*

< Have a look and you shall see the glint of the wire. >

< My insert's visual sensors are out of commission. How do you expect us to see? >

Now he knew them. The other *thing* started think-talk but not to him or his life-suit. Kes stopped to take in what it said.

< Foolish cave-dwellers. Your AI is corrupted and easily overwritten. Though he has some interesting subroutines I'll be able to use. I'd like to operate from outside his circuits. If you have a womb-tank facility? >

Still the echo. The only words he recognised were *foolish* and *cave-dwellers*. That did suggest something technological from outside, talking about CAVE. Only people he knew who had tech were Cities and possibly the Sea-people. Cities had no interest in CAVE, that had been proven again and again.

Who else told me about CAVE recently? Oh yeah, the life-suit itself. When it said, My substance, my technology and my programming are CAVE. I am CAVE.

Kes lifted his head. *Help me listen to our landscape? he thought at the life-suit.*

< Augmenting insert's hearing. >

Sounds. Like leather sliding in and among the forward-scrub. Someone coming? Who? Two sources. Ten to five metres apart. One along the long fence. One along the short fence. *Should I hide?*

< We are alive-to-background. >

An arm came out of nowhere. A hand over his mouth. A hissing whisper in his ear. "Kesson!"

"Jenk-Fa?"

"Heard you scream."

"Eyes. Stinging tree." Kes put his hand over his father's mouth. Told him City's plot. "I can't see to run. *Leave me.*"

"Kyle?" Jenk said.

"I'm here. Plan B it is. I'll be back as soon as."

Kes and Jenk listened for Kyle's progress. "He's good," Kes said.

Jenk grunted agreeing. He wrapped Kes with a blanket. "Suit's misfiring?"

"There's something going on at the Rockeater's Ridge. I don't know what yet. There's a second entity talking at me at times."

"About fifty City guards on camels have been trying to mingle," Jenk said close to Kes's ear. "But only towards the outer fringes. Your mother had their intent very quickly and has stationed everyone angling to the gaps. We'll be splitting."

"Plan B?" Kes breathed.

"Hush now. Here's Kyle back."

To Kyle now. "The tentpoles, good thinking."

A hullabaloo of yelling and yeehahs began near the gate.

“Kuri’s diversion,” Kyle said. “Get under the fence.”

Jenk whipped the blanket from around Kes. “Get ready to hide him,” he said at Kyle. He wrenched Kes to the ground. “Don’t roll, just inch with your heels and shoulderblades. I’ll hold your head. Kyle will guide your feet. Go.”

Kes felt Kyle’s hands after maybe a 12 new-inch wriggle. The blanket incremented over him as he wriggled further in. Finally it covered him.

“You bring some straps?” Jenk said. “Seeing he needs the blanket over him to deaden the glow?”

“No straps,” Kyle said. “My shirt, your shirt. Rub me with grass. I’ll do you.”

< Seize and secure that man. >

“Wrong man,” Kes mumbled.

< I want that girl for my host. Though she’s a healthy baggage and I’m afraid she’ll overcome me, should I transfer into her straightaway. Therefore, I’ll first want to spend a couple of days in the tank. Arrange that, Medic. >

“What?” Jenk said close by Kes’s ear as he and Kyle picked him up and lay him on the stretcher.

“Bad stuff happening at the Ridge.”

“Let’s go already,” Kyle said.

The stretcher lifted up. Kyle and Jenk-fa jogged.

Kes held onto the sticks, one hand by his thighs, the other by his head, helping the shirts to stay together. The only thing he knew about *that girl* was that she wasn’t Ahni.

< And I’ll want some of her blood to acclimatize myself to her. >

Hot fear sliced through him. Everywhere the stinging tree poison spread hurt double. Everybody had their own blood and only enough for themselves. *What’ll happen to Ahni when CAVE’s damned medic takes the implant out of her? Cut, tear, rip?* Every image worse than the last. Cold sweat sprang everywhere.