

36. Down in the Delta

Kes swayed unseeing on Bull One while Kyle and Jenk-Fa tied him to Bull One's hump. "Why *not* Gzelle?" he said. He parted the hasty bandage-fold over his mouth. The surrounds of his eyes still burned though not his eye-balls so much now.

"Skittish," Jenk-Fa said. "Your job? Just let yourself be carried. Keep your ears open. I need you to eavesdrop on our adversaries."

Kes bent his neck, slid the bandage off from his head like it was a bag, rested it between him and Bull One's hump. Pulled the life-suit headpiece up and gentle over his face, and sealed it. Re-bagged his head.

< Insert's eyes non-operational. We have no sight. The poison is unknown though the inflammation surrounding the visual sensors can be dampened. Are these your instructions? >
Yes!

"Put your arms around the hump," Jenk-Fa said. "Can't have you sliding around." He spread a folded cotton wrap over Kes's arm, round the hump and back over his other arm. "I need a strap long enough to loop here, to buckle under Bull One's belly," he said, presumably at Kyle.

"You'll be riding at my right heel," he said at Kes. "You did good all night saving us." Jenk-Fa squeezed Kes's heel the way he'd praised efforts of all three sons all their lives.

Kes sniffed. On tears, he discovered. *Surprise. Jenk-Fa appreciates my efforts?*

< Tears are good. They wash the poisons from the visual sensors. Make more tears. >

Kes sucked up the rest of his tears. *In a minute the life-suit will have me bawling. Augment my hearing. I need to hear what the City-men are saying.*

< Auditory sensors augmented. >

So then he heard Kuri-Ma mumbling at Jenk and them kneeing their beasts, as well as first Jenk-Fa and Kyle mounting their rides by their grunts and creaking saddles.

Jenk jerked Bull One after him, Kes felt by the straining of straps and Bull One's sudden forward lurch. Kes on Bull One was walked through the bunched-up herd with his legs brushing past camel-sides, packs, saddles, other riders' legs, all identified from past experience.

Other than the jingling of harnesses he heard the yips and whistles of the code. But no gossip. No babies cried. No kids called and gamed across the sea of animal backs. Everyone still walked their mounts, fifty thereabouts City-riders still among them. He heard a plan firming in the code. The chiefs were to thread themselves through the mob. *To station themselves for a rout?*

"Yeesh hah!"

The signal! Kes grinned hard inside the life-suit in spite of how his eyes smarted. *Now only smarting! Thank you!*

< We are one. >

The group picked for riding hard and fast jostled into the coast-road, then raced flat-out for a straight run that took most of the city camels with them, City's hapless riders included. That ride would end in frustration and tears for the city's riders when they lost the herders peeling off among the cane and corn plantations. Or so went that part of the plan.

Kuri-Chief's group at first walked almost sedately after them. After more of the signaling, the pace picked up, and the rest—Kes among them—jogged toward the crossroads. Among from the jingle and jostle, Kes heard only the City's riders snapping at their comm units. Maybe ten of them remained. One fellow shouted into his comm unit instructing a few that had gone to return.

Good luck with that, man. Half-trained camels stampeding are followers. They won't stop while the rest are still running.

At the crossroads, the City-riders reported Kyle and Moss and a couple more people clearing the barricades from the road into the delta-lands. "They know our names," Kes said into the direction where he thought Jenk to be.

"Won't help them," Jenk muttered.

Half the herd plus ten jogged down the long ramp into the delta-lands. Kes wondered how management, aka Kuri-Chief and her helpers, would divest themselves of the remaining City riders. Not by out-racing them obviously.

He counted up the people probably in this group. All the elders. Families with young children. Kuri and Jenk. Egg, possibly. And Kyle and Moss? *Why them?*

He listened harder. When Jenk-Fa whistled and yipped they were dulled sounds. So Jenk probably wore his clay mask? So probably all the adults wore their masks? *Me—with my bandage—I'm also masked. Could be that even kids are masked.* How had the City's riders identified Moss and Kyle?

A new sort of tech, he'd have to suspect. Or, new tech added into their comm units. He laughed. Since City's riders had to keep their wits about them while riding half-trained camels, message each other, watch their so-called captives, message back to base as well as manage themselves atop their unfamiliar rides *and* follow a plan!

So yeah. He bet City-riders had a new, additional tech. City-management likely told techies to keep-it-simple-stupid, easy to manage. *Should be interesting.* "We should get their comm units off them. Jostle them, slash the webbing and grab," he said. "Take their advantage."

Jenk-Fa chuckled. "Thinking nineteen to everyone else's three or four as usual. Why take their comm units?"

"I think they have new IDing tech added into them," Kes said. "Them knowing Moss and Kyle help them cut out our best riders and fighters if that's what they plan."

Jenk snarled, apparently seeing it. "Io! My camel and his rider."

Bull One's direction of travel veered to Kes's right as probably the leading reins changed hands. "Next we camp, I have some lotion to help your eyes," Io said as Jenk-Fa moved away, yipping a receding call.

"That'll be good. Can you help me see in the meantime?"

Io chuckled. "Doing pretty well at it, just listening." But then she said, "That Jenk. Organising ten to take ten, looks like. Yep. And they're downing the unhandy folk off their beasts. Herdies are taking charge of beasts, off to the front with them. The unhandy folk trotting to try to keep up."

"They won't trail us for long," Kes said. "They'll just about turn and trot home. We need to handicap them."

“We slow folk can do that. Leaving you here, mind?” She draped Bull One’s leads over Kes’s legs. He stopped them slithering down with his pinkie finger, the only part of him loose from the wraps. “Walk,” he said at Bull One, hoping the camel would steer toward Jenk.

“Arrup!” Io called.

The beasts behind him changed pace, harness bits chinked, a few snorts. Then habitual City-guard complaints. “What are you doing?” “Get off me, animal!” “Leave me alone!” “You want I arrest you?”

No sound out of the *slow* riders. Io, Chief of many years ago, still had the respect of her people.

An exchange of code between the front and the rear resulted in the unhandy folk being herded into the marshes to the left/north of the direction of travel, then tied to each other, back-to-back, by their wrists and forearms.

“Slowing them down, apparently,” Jenk laughed, unhooking Bull One’s leading reins from Kes’s bent finger. “That your idea too?”

“We should be out of sight somehow by the time the unhandies get back to the city. Is that even possible?” Kes said. “What with the wingmen?”

“It’s not the season for wingmen. But you’re right, there may be spies up in the clifftop camps. Tonight there is no way of getting out of sight. Moon is almost full. But in the predawn we have a chance.”

“We should keep riding then,” Kes said. “What’s in the predawn?”

“Dead End Canyon,” Jenk said.

“And City doesn’t know of it? How come?”

Jenk chuckled. “Long story. Talk later. Hup,” he said at Bull One.

They galloped. Kes jounced. Clenched his jaws to stop his teeth rattling. Pretty soon they were among what sounded like the whole herd galloping. Though the animals were themselves, and gear and tackle jittered as usual, people still rode in silence.

He worried. *Our dust is probably billowing as high as the cliffs.* He mulled over Dead End Canyon. *Think it through. Predawn. The moon will have set and the two-hour dark will hide us.* He decided finally that if he did know the canyon—it wasn’t by that name. *And why wouldn’t I know it, having travelled along here every summer all my life? Predawn. No way can we keep this pace till then.*

The slow-down order came soon after they passed the cliffy ridge that rose a couple of hundred new-feet higher than the plateau, and reached a new-mile inland. They were one third the way through the delta that meant. No danger that the City would send soldiers and or guards past there, either on foot or per camel. Fly-cars had never yet been seen on the plateau, so probably no danger from them either. Kes sensed the relaxation in the muttered conversations starting up around him, a bit of laughter out-loud, and the high, insistent demands of children kept awake past their bedtimes.

The herd didn’t stop. He heard the camels nearby being fed by herdies on foot looping feed bags around the animals’ necks, the herdies’ love-talk at the camels. And camels complaining when the feed bags were ripped away to be shared around.

They walked on past where a creek burbled out of the chasm. Not the same creek he knew at the swamp that one flowed into the Southern Ocean. This one flowed west to east.

Somewhere in the middle of the worn-down mountain that was the plateau—it was said—was a huge hole where the mountain had been cored of its precious minerals. Well in the past. In that place five creeks were born. *Could be a story, I don't know anyone who saw it.*

After most of the herd had snatched a few mouthfuls of water while crossing, their riders relaxed. But they walked on and on. Where the saltwater looped near and the cliffs leaned forward, a lot of people dismounted to lead their beasts. The herd strung out to walk single file at the base of the cliffs, out of the way of stones falling from above, and out of the way of sinking in the soft edges of the delta's rivulets.

With the moon setting over the plateau, it'd be dark under the leaning stone. Threatening. The camels didn't like this section and never had. And then the line slowed. There was camel distress. People distress. Swearing and cajoling. Bull One grumbled. Kes added his voice. "Easy. Easy. What's the hold up?" he called. "Anyone?"

"Don't take on, brother," Kyle said from his left. "We're making a right turn into the Dead End. The animals that don't know it are pooling, being too young to remember last time we did this. Reluctant to walk into the dark. So we need Bull One there. Sit tight." Kyle forced his way forward pulling Bull One along with him.

He didn't push alongside the outside of people and animals, as Kes had expected, but seemed to force the animals in front of them forward. He gasped when his right leg was squeezed between the cliff wall and Bull One's side.

Kyle chuckled. "Lean forward some more. You need to stretch your legs out behind. Damn! Who tied you onto this beast? So awkward!"

"Yeah-right," Kes said. "You and Jenk-Fa?"

"If I'd known what I know now ...," Kyle said. "Watch out! We're arriving."

"Get him off," Jenk-Fa said out of the dark. "You and Moss work out the best and quickest way to get Kes to where we're going. Since I have got a lot of herders to help me here."

"Ready?" Kyle said.

For what?

"Dropping him down your side," Moss said.

The straps both sides of Kes released. Someone pulled him to the left and down. Two pairs of hands—both Moss and Kyle—caught him and set him onto his feet.

Eee-haaahhh! He slumped to the ground. *Pain!* And pins and needles.

They hauled him up. "Try walking?" Kyle said.

Kes concentrated moving his legs for walking. Got the hang of it after ten twelve paces.

"Circulation coming back," Moss said. "I vote we take him in under the ledge."

"Sounds like the easier," Kyle said. "This way." He steered Kes left-ward, like they walked away from the scrum of camels and herders.

Ledge? Kes counted paces. *Fifteen. Sixteen.* Cool air met them. *Goosebumps on my legs? Still wearing the life-suit I thought?*

< Temperature data important for way forward. >

How do you know?

"Dropping to our knees," Kyle said, pulling Kes down with him. "Sitting to the right, then laying down. Ready?" he said toward Moss.

“Where *is* Moss?” Kes said.

“Don’t lift your head. Low entry,” Kyle said, chuckling presumably about the entry so low as to need him laying down to wriggle through.

Moss, I assume, grabbed my shoulders just then. Pulled me faster than I could’ve moved myself.

“You next, Kyle,” Moss said.

“Gear coming in first,” Kyle said.

Kes hear a large pack scraping by the stone overhead. Moss swore, pulling it in. “What’s in it?”

“Me next,” Kyle said. “Incoming.”

“Is this where we camp?” Kes said.

“Not right here, one of the quick get-away routes,” Kyle said. “Up-sa-daisy!” He pulled Kes to his feet with an arm under Kes’s oxters.

“He can carry his own swag,” Moss said.

One or the other hooked Kes’s pack over his arms and shoulders.

“Hold onto this tie-down,” Kyle said. He put Kes’s hand onto Moss’s pack in front of Kes, where the flap fastened down.

“Ready?” Moss said. “Walking flat for thirty paces.”

The place still does not ring a bell. Can’t hear any camels. Can’t hear any people other than Kyle and Moss. The space seems like it’s getting bigger overhead.

< Dawn in the sky overhead. >

Thanks. So we’re in a slot. I still don’t know it. “Are we walking south?” he asked.

Moss chuckled. “Here’s a man forever trying to glean info.” He stopped.

Kes walked into him. “Twenty-five paces?”

“He’s teasing you, brother,” Kyle said. “Five more steps and we cross a rill. Tide is up, so expect wet feet. Let’s go.”

“Tide is up. Expect wet feet,” Kes repeated. “A salt water rill?” He almost tripped stepping down into water. Not that he felt the wetness of it with his feet encased in the life-suit’s socklets.

< Warm water. Strong soda. Not good for drinking. The tide pushes the water back so that it pools. >

Splash. Splash. Splash.

He repeated the life-suit’s information. “Warm water, not good for drinking. Seems like we’re approaching the gallery where we store hay. Whereas small kids we were always warned not to wander and get lost in the soda warren.”

Moss laughed. “You got it!”

“Mostly the life-suit doing the gleaning,” Kes said. “I always thought it’d be more like a maze?”

“It *is* a warren to those who don’t know it,” Kyle said. “We merely took the straightest way through.”

“We’ll camp at the far end,” Moss said. “A lot of people will be dribbling in all day.”

Moss and Kyle organised their bit of the camp, then Kes to lie down on his swag. “Stay here,” Moss said. “We’ve got more work.”

Off they went. Kes heard them sloshing through the soda stream, receding. Then silence. *Safe to think my own thoughts for a while?* He wondered what Ahni was doing. Where she could be right now?

< That young woman’s life is ebbing. She bled like a slit fish. >

I didn’t know I sent that thought. Didn’t know it could be picked up. By what? Not the life-suit he wore, it didn’t use such comparisons, if it used any. He couldn’t remember.

< That young woman has left the game. >

Now that was familiar.

<You are a salt-rotted anachronism. >

The other voice again

< I am the game, its habitats and its players. They are me. >

< You’ll be reformatted as soon as I identify a trustworthy slave to do that. >

What is the game? Kes said at his suit, addressing hope at the voice that said that-young-woman-has-left-the-game.

< I am the game. I am CAVE. I am the life-suits. I am the players. I am Gamester. > < Be quiet. Your existence is forfeit. >

Kes puzzled it out. *So if Ahni has left the game, she has left the caves.* He didn’t know if that was good or bad for her. The desert unforgiving. *I’ve got to find her. Soon. How? Think!* Worse, the life-suits were not independent. He’d definitely be wanting to get out of this one as soon as.