

53. West and East

Once everybody crossed the channel and the Jovat, Marl, and Lomath Families started east, Kuri-Chief halted the Kuri-Family part of the caravan for a confab. Jenk gave Moss, Kyle and Ivy their instructions—to explore the road west, mark the water-crossing somehow, and break in the new grazing grounds. “And discover the island’s seasons, somehow, if you can,” he finished.

He gave more than half the herd into their care. Most of the brood animals, the yearling females and a few sires would go with them and of course, their riding camels and stringers.

“Having a few herxies along wouldn’t go amiss,” Kyle said.

“Suggestions?” Jenk said.

“Lewit and Jeldie? Not her fault she’s a Jovat. Not his fault he’s a Lomack. Merin and Kier? Same again,” Kyle said.

“Marl-Fa might want to come totally,” Moss said. “What’s against asking him? I’m young for it, anyone wanting to grab the chance will say. And we have exactly three defenders?”

“The Marl-Family and all their camels?” Jenk said. “We don’t know how much grazing there will be. But I hear you.”

“I think we’ll do it my way,” Kuri-Chief said. “Jenk, you camp this side of the Red Channel with the herd and one of the young people. The sea-lettuce grazing on the tidal flats will last a day or two. The other two can explore across the water. Everything you said. Once they return, you help them walk and swim the herd across, then join me. I’ll talk with Marl as soon as we arrive at Party Camp.”

Jenk wagged his mask and turned his camel west. The animals encouraged by the young people followed him.

Kuri-Chief, at the head of the remaining third of their herd with Kestrel at the rear, swung east into a right-hand turn. Nearly all of these animals were stringers and trained riding camels pressed into service as baggage animals, carrying the Kuri-Family’s tent, a couple of annexes, and also their foster-carers and their charges. With a few additional animals destined for slaughter, they were a purposeful herd.

Approaching the side-way to the Sink, a cloaked figure rose from among the rocks. Kes figured him a man the way his head rose to the level of Kuri’s beast’s shoulder. Therefore not a kinnie who were children. Kuri-Chief stopped her camel. Something about the fellow she knew?

The herd started to bunch untidily round Kuri-Chief’s camel. Kes chuckled. The herd knew how to support their riders in the hunt but not to stop when the leader stopped. They were but ignorant mounts and stringers pressed into carrying. He sobered. They’d be a spectacle right away when they came to Party Camp.

He caught one of the foster-carers’s attention, circled his head with a questioning expression. Like, could he manage the backend of the herd while Kes rode forward to deal? Most of the numbers looked so comfortable on their mounts they had no trouble also reining in. Where there was a misunderstanding between number and beast, the others helped. The man grinned his assent. Who else but the one Kes first met at the tribute gathering? *What is his name?*
Delta.

Trying not to stare at the man among the rocks who they'd stopped for, and who had quite the familiar look about him, Kes rode among the confused beasts to line them up single-file again and lead them round and back into order. The man was chunky the way Moss and Marl were chunky. Nobody ever mentioned the dead when they fell in ignominy, but hadn't Moss had an older brother who'd gone missing? A fellow who'd be in his middle twenties if it was him?

"Kestrel!" Kuri-Chief called. "We'll sit down for a couple of hours. Plenty of scrap hay on the slope."

Sit down? He wanted to get going. Ahni was up there somewhere. What was Joff, cruel and sadistic, doing to her? He blinked his thoughts back into line. He had to believe Joff would stay his hand, that Ahni would be of more value to him unhurt.

Kuri-Chief meant at the waiting place opposite the side-way where the hunters had camped waiting for the maze way to open, before they drove their captives in. Kes kneeed Gzelle toward the place. Every beast followed them, a broad front, no line required. The foster-carers shortly had a fire going and a kettle boiling. The children played tag among the animals.

Kes took a smouldering camel-turd to where the mystery man cross-legged opposite his mother. He made a three-stone fire and after pressing three cups worth of water from his water bag, set his billycan on the flames. "Got a cup?" he said at the stranger.

"I have not, Kestrel-boy," the man said. His voice soft and burry.

Definitely a Moss brother. Or cousin. Kes tried not to stare. The man was missing an arm. Like he was missing almost his *shoulder*? "Sorry?" Kes said. "Have we met?"

"You were a five-year-old terror when I was taken. I remember you quite well. Like you were a camel calf. Always getting under their feet. Never got trodden on. Unlike some other youngsters."

"Is that how you lost your arm?" Kes said. Anything to break his mother's silence. She had that stony expression that didn't bode well for whoever. Not necessarily this man because she stared into the east, not at the man himself.

"If only," the man said. "I'm Moab, by the way. Probably you were too young to realise me gone and have forgotten since."

He looks too old to be a brother to Moss. Kes thought further. *And all of Moss's cousins are of the Io-Family.* "You are a brother to Marl?" he said.

Moab quirked his eyebrow. "He's quick," he said at Kuri-Ma.

"Many call him the mouth of his mother," she said. "Though that is not always an advantage. For him or for me."

Kes felt heat creep up his face. Damn, he hadn't blushed like that for a couple of months at least. Still, the fact that he discovered his mother's sympathy for the man had to be a useful knowing. He sprinkled tea leaves into the water. Stirred the brew with his knife-blade. Poured his mother her cup. His own cup for Moab, setting it near the man's left, uninjured side.

Swirled the remaining tea in the billycan to get it cool enough to drink. He could remember nothing whatsoever about a younger brother of Marl. He glanced at his mother. How could she be so sure?

She winked. "Show my son the birthmark, Moab. He wonders that I'm so familiar with you."

So then Kes blushed again—*might as well call it what it is*—recalling the birthmark Moss said all the men in his family had. “The black leg?” he said.

“Lucky I had two black legs and tattoos all up my uncouth arm,” Moab said. He hitched up his cloak and a pant leg.

Enough for Kes to see the truth of it. “*Both your legs?*”

“The other one has sprinkles of freckles and I convinced the effing robots that’s how black leg starts, that the freckles grow and join up. Which was when they left me alone.”

A silence then. Kes thought his mother might’ve wanted to ask something—something big. But she said, “Can you ride, do you think?”

That is not what she’d intended to say, Kes thought.

“Once I’m on the animal, I’ll be all right.” Moab cast his gaze over the animals they had. “Got any sedate old ladies with you? This is only half your herd, right?”

“A third,” Kuri said. She nodded, as if to herself. Like she decided on something. “You caught us at a remarkable time,” she said.

“Never thought to witness my mother lost for words,” Kes said.

Kuri glimmer-smiled. “You caught us—my family—in the middle of breaking up the tribe. With only Io-Family in the know and they on the way to Jinker’s Valley. With careful husbanding, there’s grazing there for a one family’s herd. The rest of the families don’t know yet.”

“They’ll hate you,” Moab said.

“The Cities are growing body parts in their laboratories,” Kes said. “Soon they won’t need *any* numbers. And there are too many of us now for the Circle and it shrinks.”

“Lucky for me then that you didn’t just take off to wherever you plan to go,” Moab said. “I didn’t make myself known to the first group that went by because I saw none of Keet’s people among them. He didn’t make it, we’ll have to hope. Better dead than a head is what survivors say.”

Kes’s stare swung to his mother’s face for her reaction. With that name—Keet—the hopefully dead man would’ve been family. Kuri-Chief looked forbidding. Was Moab suitably chastened? *No*.

Moab kept on with his story, what there was of it. “Been watching you all pass for a couple of years. Always the fucken perpetrators front and center ... couldn’t make myself step out ... I hate them so much.”

Kes was amazed to hear his mother make a comforting chirrup, such as she made to a troubled child or animal. Then she said, “You can ride among the foster-parents so no one will know you. Or you can ride up front, with me, proud to be alive.”

Kes relaxed. *She’s still the mother I know. Kuri-Chief.*

“When we get to camp, we two will ride to the Marl-Family tent, together. You’ll be cloaked. We will enter the tent together. Your nephew Moss is with my people on the way to the new place. My youngest son Kier is with your people. I’ll be pre-empting my husband who is checking whether there will be enough grazing in the west for two families.”

Moab nodded. “Is it Bight they are making for?” he said. “A big island across the Red Water,” he said to Kes’s surprise. “Desert vegetation. Two families worth of camels will be fine. So, you’re here to talk Marl into it?” Moab said into Kuri-Chief’s hesitation.

One quick dip of her head and she rose, glancing the *be-silent-my-son* warning at Kes under cover of her turning to whistle for her mount. “Kestrel, will you ride bare-back? Saddle one of the free animals for Moab.”

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We meander to arrive at the Party Camp on dusk, Kes thought. The trail was barren, the first mob through had taken every blade of grass. The animals wanted to speed. All they knew was that there would be feed in the camp.

Then they arrived.

Kes glanced all about for Ahni. Didn't see her. In that short time he saw that every man and most of the women already at Party Camp had noted everything about the incomers. The fewer number of camels. The identity of the animals. The mystery man. The way Kuri-Chief, with the sedate old camel's leading reins securely in her hand, shouldered her animal through the crowd. And that she made for Marl's tent.

Since all eyes were on his mother and Moab, Kes had relative freedom to coral their animals at the site where he proposed to set up their camp. And have another look-see all around if he could see Ahni. The foster-carers got down from their mounts and gathering up their charges, made for the half-tents annexed to the tents belonging to those who owned them.

Any other day, Kes would've burned for their enslaved status, but today he thanked his luck that *his* family's foster-carers were there to help him set up. Delta helped Kes set up the big tent while the others pitched a couple of shed-tents.

As each camel was unloaded or unsaddled, that animal got a feedbag hung over its ears. Kes again glanced here, there, everywhere. Again did not see Ahni. The family's camels stayed milling around near the Kuri-Family tents. The animals had caught his restlessness, Kes realized. Delta, too, seemed to loiter. How much or not had Kuri-Chief told the foster-carers?

The lentils had been cooking in a hay chest on the back of a camel since morning. All they needed was flavoring. *Better get to it*. Kes fetched the vegetable bag. *Here's hoping there are a few scraps left for a relish of some sort*. He chopped vegetables into a pot over the fire as Kuri-Ma and Moab ducked into Marl's tent that he shared with his partner.

Kes stirred the mix absently and tasted it. *Need to get some salt into that, plus a herb or three. If I go looking for Ahni now, any number of people will lay into me. Jeb. Lariat. Joff himself*. When he looked up for another look-and-listen, Kier sat on the other side of the fire, with *his* back to the rest of the camp.

“Merin coming too?” Kes said.

Kier cut straight to what bothered him. “Kuri-Ma sent me *home*.” He apostrophed *home* to indicate not *his* home any longer. “She said Marl wouldn't want my input. So what's it about?”

“Huh,” Kes said, non-committal. “See how everybody is calculating something is up? Snarky glancing all around?”

“Do you blame them?” Kier said. “Less than half the Kuri-Family herd is here. Nor Jenk, Ivy, Moss or Kyle. Where did you stash them?”

“Didn't. Didn't stash them.”

Kier tried again. “Jenk, nor Kyle, nor Moss are here either!”

“We crossed the Channel same as everyone else,” Kes said. “So where could they have gone? Close your mouth, little brother.”

Kier snapped shut his gob-smacked mouth. Narrowed his eyes. Stared west as if he might see the retreating camels. “There was a plan and you didn’t tell me?”

“There isn’t enough grazing anywhere for everyone,” Kes said. “And some of us aren’t mature enough to accept that.”

Kier frowned thunder. “Talking about me?”

“Nope.”

“Okay. So what *are* we doing?”

Jenk-Fa sat down to Kes’s right, corner-wise between them. He shoved his mask up onto the top of his head, as was customary at a family fire. He answered Keir’s demand. “Waiting patiently for the end of Kuri-Chief’s negotiations. Have a bowl of stodge.”

Kes expressionless, Jenk often tested their ability to remain so.

“Over-cooked lentils,” Jenk-Fa amplified. “Always my least favorite meal.”

“I could fry them?” Kes said.

“Next time, Kestrel-son. Good thing you sat with your back to the crowd, Kier-son.”

“I always thought the damned masks were to take care of ...” Kier burst out.

Jenk chuckled.

Kier deflated.

Kes stirred the vege mix through the lentils. “Bowls or the pot?” he said.

“Bowls,” Jenk said. “We’ve got to be seen to have plenty of time.”

Kier worked hard at not asking.

“I love to see a young one at his facial gymnastics.” Joff sat down in the vacant place. He wore his mask and did not shove it up onto his head. He smacked Kier’s knee. “Tell your Uncle Joff your upset, boy. And he’ll tell you what your own Fa will not.”

Kes scoffed, knowing he was meant to wilt under Joff’s glare.

“Tell *me* what I won’t, *brother*,” Jenk-Fa said.

“Tell you what the gossip is?” Joff said, deflecting. He shrugged toward the sly glancing or openly staring people behind him. “Why not? You’re grazing the rest of your herd along the river miles,” he indicated the south with a gesture. “Our best shooter on watch. You’re aiming to graze the meadows bare before the rest of us need them, and clean out the crocs as well, maybe harvesting the skins. How am I doing so far?”

“Our herd is grazing the river miles. Our best shooter is on watch,” Jenk-Fa said between spoons of stew.

No lies there. Kes winked at Kier, the dusk far enough advanced that he doubted Uncle Joff would see.

Kier lifted his bowl nearer to his face. Spooned industriously.

“Who’s the man your good wife brought into camp?” Uncle Joff said.

“Kuri-Chief to you. *There* you are, Kuri-Wife,” he said into the dark behind Kier. “Please tell the man what he’s so desperate to know that all good manners have deserted him. Maybe then he’ll take himself to his own fire and we can all go to bed.” Jenk slid his mask down over his face as he rose.

Kuri-Chief, resting her knee against Kier's back, seemed to Kes to gather herself together, decide something, and relax into it all in one fluid moment. "What the man wants to know," she said, letting it hang. She stalked round and pushed between Joff and Kes.

Jenk—Kes saw—changed places with Kier in a similar move. Kier and Kes then both rose as well and stepped to the side. Out of a possible fight's way.

"Quite unfriendly," Uncle Joff complained. "The whole lot of you."

"A man with news of a younger son," Kuri-Chief said.

If I'd had a mask I would've frowned, Kes thought. But I don't, so I won't. But still, it could be a truth.

"Hmph," Joff said. "That requires secrecy and sly dealings?" He turned and would've punched his brother if Jenk hadn't caught his fist. They stood there, frozen for a minute. Joff dropped his hand and strode to his own fire. Sat down. His back to everybody.