

They had each picked up a discarded weapon on their way back. There was plenty to choose from. The battle that had raged just a day ago had left broken and unbroken weapons scattered everywhere. Kyrie had found a dagger he'd liked, and also a small sword.

Still having no clothes he carried the dagger left-handed and the sword in his right. Even though a mage he'd been trained with weapons, just to keep from being a burden to any campaign he joined. Even though he'd never successfully welded two weapons at once it felt right to him now. His human body had been strongly right handed. Having been changed into a half fox body it was time to experiment and find the limits of his new form. He already knew he was much stronger, even from less than an hour ago when the curse was broken.

As the curse that had been laid upon them had partially failed his half fox body had improved beyond human even more. Even though still half fox he was already enjoying the difference. Even better, once they all had finished growing back Kyrie had gained close to an extra foot in height. He guessed he was now about six and a half feet tall, perhaps a bit more. With his extra muscle he could now pass for an accomplished fighter.

Posset too had gained from the experience. Although she hadn't gained as much height her body was now covered in thick armadillo-like scales. As a Priestess the added natural armor was a definite plus. She too was trying out a two handed weapons carry, although still with blunted weapons.

Carrol was taking to her new form well, although she was less happy with the change. No thief liked to advertise their profession and the permanent bandit mask on her face was going to be a humorous dead giveaway. The half raccoon would now be somewhat hampered in disguising most of her intentions. She was perhaps less happy with not gaining height but instead losing a few inches.

They had reached the second level with little problem. It seemed that the failing torches posed no problem for any of them. Kyrie now possessed a night vision equal to the faint light provided. Judging by their comments so too did his companions. There had been no sign of Ross or the five kobold that had either captured or killed him. Kyrie had already explained the last he saw of the druid had been the curse completing its work. He'd become a full wolf, and at the time been surrounded by five kobold. He, like the remainder of the party at the time had been only inches tall.

They were halfway down to the third level when they stopped at the sight before them. Devon, still six inches tall was struggling to climb the stairs. The paladin looked half beat to death. The last they'd seen of him was with Sir Newell and surrounded by a horde of rats each bigger than they were. Kyrie stood watching as the two females crouched over him.

Kyrie listened as the tiny half lizard answered their queries. He and Newell had beaten the rats back, not once but twice. The third time the rats had rushed the two fighters Newell had gone down from injuries. To Devon it was a glorious ending. To Kyrie it was a foolish waste. Devon would no doubt want to keep his sword.

Carrol volunteered to take the paladin to the surface, and sunlight to break the curse on him. They'd return once he was freed of the curse. Kyrie silently wondered if the paladin would accept being half human.

As he and Posset continued down he kept his own council on the matter. Even knowing the paladin for a matter of days he didn't strike Kyrie as the type to accept being seen as cursed. Should he remain half lizard he just might decide to wander off on his own as some kind of self imposed penance for failing his order. He'd have to await that verdict until Carol returned, either with or without the half lizard.

They reached the subterranean throne room of the vanquished Wraith Queen and King without running into anything. The party had done well in clearing the keep of their minions. Posset went to her belongings first, as did Kyrie. Holding the staff once again he felt that peculiar warmth flow through him again. It truly accepted him, even as a half fox. Just holding his new staff he felt even stronger, more capable than ever. With the staff in the crook of his elbow he reached down and picked up his clothes.

Holding them up in front of himself it was clear he'd no longer fit in his old clothes, the robe however. Taking the time to slip it over himself Kyrie smirked. The collar opening was now too snug against his thickly muscled vulpine neck. Padding himself down along his body he found that the items in the pockets had remained undisturbed. Reaching to the collar with both paws he tugged lightly to expand the opening. It tore easily giving him some much desired comfort and a hint of his new strength.

Paws. He'd just thought of his hands as paws. Another adjustment, he thought with an inward shrug.

Experimenting with his limbs he smiled at the freedom of movement the altered robe left him. It was still tight across his chest and shoulders but he'd put up with that for the moment. Going through the rest of his clothes he relocated his belongings to the robe. Tossing the last of his clothes to the side he looked at Posset. She too had been reduced to wearing only her outer garments. She had moved on to gathering sir Newell's belongings. He joined her and helped.

It took some doing to stuff the armor into the sacks they'd brought from above. Soon they were finished with the task. The armadillo looked at him. "Should we take this up now, or wait for them to return?"

"We should go up, I'm thinking they should have returned by now."

He received a nod of acceptance in reply.

The trip back was as uneventful as their reentry. In the courtyard they both heard Carrol pleading with the paladin. They were both still outside the walls of the keep. Walking out to join them Kyrie felt vindicated in his prediction. Devon was wanting to abandon everything to go on what he claim a cleansing quest. As he explained the details to the priestess Kyrie found it difficult to keep from laughing.

His intent was to go into the surrounding woods just as he was, covered by nothing but the deep brown scales of his new form. He would wander without aim until his human form was returned to him. It would be up to the gods as to how many deeds that required. He was prepared to begin as soon as the remaining members of his present quest released him from his commitment. The release had to be voluntary, and with the understanding they might never see him again. After that it would all be up to his god.

As Devon and Posset debated the wisdom of his intended action Kyrie examined the paladin. His wounds had healed in the process of the curse unraveling. That was the extent of the benefits to the paladin. The muscle he'd gained in the first transformation had diminished. In fact, Devon was thinner than ever. He had also been left the same height as Carrol. The paladin only stood to halfway up the fox mage's chest. Kyrie fought yet another smirk at the role reversal.

Posset turned from the paladin with a disgusted growl. There was no talking the newly minted lizardman from his quest. Kyrie had to admit, he could easily pass for one of the notoriously wicked creatures. All Kyrie's humor of the situation left at the thought. "You do realize you'll be mistaken for a lizardman as you are now."

"I do, and am prepared to meet My Lord."

"No, I mean, you'll be forced to defend yourself." Kyrie said. He would prefer Devon leave, he really wanted to take up his sword. He also wanted to prevent the half lizard from acting without thought to the consequences yet again. "Knowing you, you'll fight to the fullest. Even without weapons I have no doubt you'll best almost anyone you come across. Or do you intend to allow some nameless peasant to take your life, like a sheep?"

"I, no, yes, I must defend myself." Devon replied. He was clearly confused at the prospect.

Posset saw where Kyrie was going and returned to the debate ground. "What good would a quest to cleanse your soul of what the curse has done to you, if it's only going to result in the deaths of innocents?"

"Its, this is the proscribed quest. You of all people know I have no choice."

The armadillo nodded. "I understand. As a priestess of another god I cannot alter the proscriptions of your order. However, you find yourself in an unusual situation. I suggest you seek one of your god's priests before taking on your quest."

The half lizard brought his hand up to stroke a nonexistent beard as if to think on the request. He stared at his clawed hand a moment and shook his head. "No, I must go, now, any delay only deepens the stain on my soul."

Posset turned away again shaking her armored head. Kyrie too shook his head. He could see the end result of Devon's proposed quest coming. All the same, he'd refuse to take part in any campaign to bring Devon to justice. That thought surprised him.

It was Carol who broke the long silence first. "I release you from the campaign. Fare well, Devon."

The lizard bowed to the thief, and turned to Kyrie.

Kyrie could see Posset shaking her head at him even as he looked at the half lizard. The sword wasn't this important, but he could see no way to talk the paladin from his foolish quest. Looking Devon in the eyes he noticed they were still the same eyes he'd had as a human. "Knowing what you are capable of I am troubled at the prospect of this quest. I can release you with the condition you avoid contact with anyone to your utmost."

Posset began nodding and stepped over to stand next to the fox. "I too will impose that condition. I also charge you to seek out a priest of your god for advice and counsel, at least as well as Kyrie's condition allows."

"I accept both conditions." Devon said with a smile.

Kyrie realized the added hindrance was just what the paladin wanted. He looked to Posset a moment before speaking. "I release you from our campaign to follow your quest with the conditions we've already stated."

Devon bowed to the fox and turned to the armadillo. He bowed to her she released him from the campaign. With a smile he said, "Fare well my friends." and turned to the forest.

They watched as he walked to the trees and disappeared from sight. The last rays of the sun were on those same trees turning the treetops a deep, almost blood red. Kyrie shivered causing Posset to glance at him.

"I didn't take you for the devout type."

"I'm not," he replied.

"Let's get to work, or did you two forget we have a Keep full of swag and also infested with kobold on our hands?" Carrol said.

Kyrie snorted at the humor. They'd been active for two full days and yet thanks mostly to breaking the curse he felt fully rested. Perhaps it was more to do with having been granted brand new bodies. It would be interesting to discover the limits of endurance they now possessed.

Before they returned to the lower levels they built a fire inside the courtyard just a few yards from the entrance. None of them wanted to leave the entry open for animals or other things to pick at the corpses. It also doubled as a signal to any of the duke's men that might be watching for a sign.

Back in the throne room Carrol did her best to find any traps and hidden entrances. Kyrie and Posset worked to delve for any further curses.

There had been a similar curse on The Wraith King's crown. They'd discovered and removed it easily. So too several other curses spread throughout the third level. Kyrie was finding that even when not holding his staff his abilities and power had increased. Hours later everything was bagged up and ready for transport to the surface. It took a number of trips to transfer everything above ground. It was well past the middle of the night when they finished clearing what they could from the third level.

Having finished for the day there was finally time to really look at what they each had claimed for themselves. Kyrie started with Devon's sword. Pulling the blade free of the scabbard Kyrie looked at the polished metal. Still holding a dangerously sharp edge even after days of battle the blade looked freshly forged. Beautifully crafted the longsword all but dripped magical enchantment. Kyrie had felt the hint of it on first meeting Devon. Now that he was out on his endless quest there was no one else to lay claim to the weapon.

Kyrie took a deep breath and focused his talent on the blade. Unlike with his staff he felt no sense of warmth, or any other sensation from the weapon. Rather than the feeling of instant acceptance from the staff this blade, while acknowledging him did not accept him as a master. Sliding the blade back in its scabbard Kyrie thought about the experience.

He knew from sensing the blade it was a powerful, mighty weapon. Disappointing as it was he also knew it was truly not for him to wield to its full potential. It was also not quite as powerful as his new staff, that was for certain. There would come a time when someone came for the blade, or as he thought more likely the blade would recognize someone worthy of its power.

However, Kyrie was beyond pleased with his new staff. The power it held was expanding his own talent tremendously.

Carrol fed the fire in the courtyard before settling in for a rest. "All this activity probably scared the kobold away."

Kyrie turned from once again staring at the heaped bags of the spoils from the third level to the raccoon. "They're around. However, I doubt they've ever encountered anything like what he are now. That'll give them plenty of pause before attacking."

"That and we vanquished their masters." Posset muttered.

Kyrie saw that she was close to sleep. Carrol looked just as tired. "I'll take first watch. Get some rest." He announced.

As the two females made themselves comfortable Kyrie stood and moved to have the fire at his back while able to see the courtyard. They'd managed to find enough heavy debris to block the door to the dungeon below. With one eye on his surroundings and his inner eye examining his staff was how Kyrie spent the hours of his watch. It was perhaps three hours before Carrol stirred.

The raccoon took the watch after taking a break out of the bright circle around the fire. Kyrie too spent a few minutes out of the light. He still found the once mundane process interesting, it was also far easier as a half fox. Coming back to the fire he saw the raccoon eyeing him strangely. After he settled in but before he closed his eyes he saw she was still staring at him.

"What?"

"Just wondering," she asked with a grin "how much bigger is it?"

Kyrie smiled. "Much." he replied and closed his eyes. The smile stayed on his face well after he found sleep. He was nudged awake by Posset just before sunrise the next day. His much more sensitive nose gave a hint of a strange but familiar scent in the air. He dismissed it out of a sense of privacy. He did however find himself eyeing his female companions just a bit differently.

After the morning routines were completed it was mutually agreed that they would take the time to sweep the other two levels. None of them wanted to leave behind the possibility of a surprise find without a complete search.

It was Carrol, as usual, that discovered the hidden vault. As the secret door opened she verbally approved of the craftsmanship. Even Kyrie could see what she meant. Two feet of what looked like solid stone wall pivoted back to reveal the room behind it. Before the moving section had been swiveled back he couldn't see any seam in the brick to give the door away. Waiting for the thief to give the all clear regarding traps Posset and Kyrie entered.

Surprisingly large it was obvious even at first glance that the vault had been forgotten for ages. The wooden shelves had all collapsed leaving numerous bags of coin spilled all over the floor. Though it was large for a hidden room the three of them were all pressed in tight. Kyrie stepped out for a moment letting the priestess and thief take a first look and watched from just outside. Posset shuffled a foot through the spilled coins and over a few minutes of digging found several daggers and small swords. As each weapon was handed out to him Kyrie set them on the floor to be fully examined later.

In all fifteen weapons came out of the vault, all very fine workmanship. Most had at least one gem encrusting the pommel. Kyrie had no idea how much coinage was now all over the floor. Carrol guessed it was close to what their promised payment would be. They had just found a bonus that would double each of their take for the campaign.

Kyrie too, was smiling. It was Posset who took the opportunity to suggest a new plan. Or more accurately their plan. On returning to complete the mission and receive payment she suggested they return and take ownership of the Keep. Each of them of course were entitled to their share of the horde of coin, she would not dispute any claim on that point. She did however claim an almost divine call to see the place returned to an active Keep once again.

Having spoken of her intent Posset shrugged and added "Trouble is, I'm not the landowner type. I'm more the servant class. After all, what self respecting Priest have you ever heard of becoming a Lord or Lady?"

Carrol laughed. "I'd be willing to stick around for a bit, just to see where things go from here." she said. Looking at Kyrie with a grin she continued. "Thing is, thieves don't go legit, at least not for long. If I were to pretend to be some high class Lady I'd just end up shitting in my own backyard."

Looking between the two females he shook his head. "You suggest I take this place over?"

Posset uncharacteristically grinned. "You have the right to claim it, spoils of battle and all. The Duke can do little to prevent that."

Kyrie had to admit he'd been considering the possibility, however distant that possibility had previously been. At the outset, they had all figured one of the knights would have been left to make the claim. He'd seen something of the like many times before at the end of a successful campaign. The fighters would all get together to contest against each other to decide who would lay claim to the ruins and land associated with it. No thought had ever been spared to the idea anyone other than a knight being fit to take ownership of the land.

"I'll think about it." Kyrie said. From the expression on both of their faces they interpreted the tone in his voice correctly. He was more than half convinced to make a go of it already. They spent a few minutes examining the small weapons cache. Kyrie took two small daggers and another blade that would more properly be called a dirk. Carrol took two small daggers for herself. Posset declined taking any of the weapons. It was decided to stash the remaining weapons back in the vault. Resealing the vault the raccoon was all smiles as she explained the catch mechanism.

The rest of the morning was spent checking over the rest of the underground levels. Nothing more of note was found. They left the discard weapons where they lay. Back above ground they took the opportunity of the remaining daylight to explore that portion of castle that was aboveground. Oddly enough they found that the remains still seemed in decent shape. It would take work to bring the tower and other areas back to the Keep's former glory, but much of it looked to still be livable, as long as one didn't mind cohabiting with vermin for a time. Then there was the kobold infestation to consider.

By the time they were ready to set out it was close to sunset. Looking out at the meadow from the gates Kyrie thought over the priestess' idea. He, or they would have more than enough coin to pay for the repairs. There would also be enough to hire servants. Combing the fur under his chin with his claws he thought over the possibilities.

He had little doubt that once word got out there would be plenty of young, brash adventure seekers that would come looking for a place to call home. He could also take on another apprentice. Staring at his furred hands he also had to consider the reaction to their new forms. It was making more sense the more he thought of it.

Returning to the fire he felt both sets of eyes watching him. He knew they were waiting for an answer. He'd wait to make the final decision until the next morning. Carrol volunteered to take the first watch. Kyrie made himself comfortable but had trouble finding sleep. The idea of becoming a landowner wouldn't leave his mind. As the scent of female arousal came to him he slowly shifted his head.

His vulpine sense of smell was far more acute than it had been when he was a human. He watched Carrol as the raccoon seemed to be slowly pleasuring herself. The sight was really nothing new for an adventurer. His eyelids were closed to slits feigning sleep when she glanced back at him. Seemingly reassured he was not watching she openly stared at him. Realizing the position he had taken would show her just how well proportioned he had become he felt his own reaction begin at her renewed activities.

Carrol slowed and stopped, clearly watching the new development. Once he felt his bare skin slide out and rub against the inside of his robe there was no stopping things. Heart pumping fast Kyrie could do little to stop it from happening. He lay still except for his growing cock while keeping just a sliver of eyelid

open. He had taken a previous private opportunity to check out his new equipment but this was another first. As he slide up against his own belly the feel of his own soft fur against the only naked skin he had left was amazing. Even more thrilling was the reach of his new equipment. He could feel the inherent strength of the arch in his new shaft as it forced his cock head back to push against his body. Inch after inch the tip of his head slid up his belly until it finally stopped just below his sternum. Once he was fully extended Carrol stared at his sizable display as she resumed the ministrations on herself.

He was nudged awake by Carrol hours later. As he settled himself for his watch he saw the raccoon make ready for sleep and was watching him in return. She fell asleep with a pleased grin on her face.

It was Posset that made the first move.

Kyrie had woken Posset for her watch and had settled in to sleep. Even though he'd had little sleep his body seemed to lack the need for more, at least immediately. He watched through slitted eyes as the priestess sat in front of Kyrie with her back to the large fox. After a few minutes of the female raccoon lightly snoring she turned her head to see he was still awake.

"Fuck it." He heard her say as she got to her feet.

She made her way to stand over the fox and stared down at him. "I can tell you're still awake. The firelights reflecting from your eyes."

Kyrie opened his eyes and smirked up at the priestess. He could see her eyes on that portion of him that had changed the most. His cock, no longer the meager male hood it had been as a human stretched out grand and prominent before her. Even the thick fabric of his robe could do little to conceal his size.

He possessed a fox hood much like a feral, slung upward and tight against his lower belly. Kyrie's new and much improved cock traveled the length from his ballsack to just shy of where his bellybutton used to reside. He guessed in the placid state he measured at least ten inches long and a plump three or more inches across at his widest down next to his balls. The fluffy fur that covered the skin of his sheath made him look even larger.

The priestess met his eyes a moment before crouching down to sit straddling his legs. He watched with an eager smile as she reached out to gently stroke his lengthy sheath. Kyrie knew her god did not require abstinence from her followers. He pulled at his robe and exposed himself to the night air and the priestess. The feel of her hand sliding along his furred flesh triggered an instant response. His cock literally burst out of the furry confines to expose inch after inch of his member.

Kyrie's erection was so rapid that it was almost orgasmic in and of itself. In seconds he was fully hard with more than a full foot long beyond the opening of his sheath. Posset's hand curled under his shaft to grip him from the underside and lift. His head fell back with a groan at the intense feeling.

In pulling his meaty shaft away from his body Posset had levered his cock up until the skin and fur of his sheath retreated down his shaft. Another eight inches of his shaft was now exposed to the warm dry air of the night, and Posset's hungry eyes. He could even now feel the skin of the tight opening of his sheath strain against the large rounded and much thicker base of his cock.

Lifting his head up and looking back at what the priestess was doing to him Kyrie saw the true amazing size his cock for the first time. Posset stared at him amazed as well.

"By the gods." she muttered.

His straining sheath still wrapped the rounded base of his sizable cock. Even then it looked as though a ball where inflating within his sheath, and growing wider by the second. The deep red flesh of his cock

rose up next. Three inches wide at the point where he came out of his sheath and a full ten inches of length exposed before that point where Posset gripped him. Her hand covered a few inches of him and yet there was still another six inches above her fist. The tip of his massive fox cock easily reached the armadillo's cleavage. Only magic could endow a male with something the size Kyrie had become, and he was eager to find just how magical having a such a huge cock really was.

As he watched Posset begin stroking his vast length he saw he was still thickening. Pulling him against her body he felt and saw his shaft grow longer and burry itself between the orbs of her breasts. At more than two feet long his shaft swelled to four inches wide under Posset's care. The bulb still in his sheath was far ahead of the rest of his shaft. Easily eight inches wide and straining the skin and the small tight muscle of his sheath opening Kyrie felt about to burst from the pleasure he was receiving.

To his fascination Posset stopped stroking him and stood. She stood leaning over him with his cock in paw and looking down on him. "Ready?"

"Yes." He answered. He was laying on his back with her over him and still his shaft reached inches above her opening. He watched as she backed up and pulled at him to follow her. She levered his meaty cock back more and aimed his great length at her crotch. As she did he felt the strain on the stretched skin of his sheath as it finally pulled back across his massive knot in an almost orgasmic rush. The true size of his knot was revealed. They both stared.

Eight or nine inches thick his massive bulb of cock could be seen to pulse just a bit larger with every thundering beat of his heart. The furred skin of his sheath was now gathered under the thick knot of his cock. Pressed within the confines between his massive knot and his crotch, the skin of his sheath only added to the display of his massive proportions. With the mass of fur and skin of his sheath now trapped under his knot it only pushed him that much higher, as if to add even more inches to his already oversized proportions. Posset had to back away almost as far as his knees. With Kyrie's massive length finally positioned she walked herself onto his mighty spear.

His hands went to caress her thighs. Her muscles tight and firm under her armored scales. He felt her thigh muscles bunch and rise under his hands as she lowered herself just a bit. She eyed him as she levered him up just a bit more as she walked herself onto him, accepting inches of him into her. With both her hands on him just inches behind where he entered she lowered herself slowly, watching him for reaction.

He grit his teeth and hissed out a breath as he felt his cock spread Posset's sex wide. She lowered herself more, dropping her weight on his shaft and taking inches more of him into her depths in the process. His so much thicker shaft made the armadillo feel tighter than any other female he'd ever had. Posset stopped with less than a foot of his length inside her. Lifting slightly and dropping once again she started driving herself in a cycle of raising and lowering herself on the end of his giant shaft.

He was dazed when Posset all but stopped. She was moving herself on his thick shaft by only an inch at a time and almost panting. Kyrie could see liquid glittering in the moonlight and feel it as it trickled down his shaft. He knew then he'd given the priestess an orgasm in only seconds. She'd taken less than half his exposed length and still it was enough to bring the female to completion far too quickly. Kyrie smiled at the thought. He brought his hands to his own shaft and started stroking himself. It was time to finish things.

He was amazed at the feel of his own cock under his paws. Seeing was one thing but feeling his thick hard length and finding just how massive he had become was shocking even him. His erect male hood rivaled those he'd seen on stallions. There was also the massive bulb at his base that equines lacked. That massively thick part of his endowment was as long as it was thick. It brought his full length to well over two and a half feet long. In just a few more seconds he was cumming into the priestess.



Sighing his own completion Kyrie met Posset's gaze. The priestess rose off his cock and released his meaty shaft. With a resounding slap his cock landed on his belly and chest. The sheer bulk of his own cock falling on him caused Kyrie to flinch at the force of contact. Looking at himself he saw his tip lay an inch from his chin. The pungent smell of his own spunk mixed with that of Posset's fluids reeked, causing him to wrinkle his muzzle even though it stimulated the fox in him that much further. Looking back to Posset he whined his need. "I'm still hard."

She chortled as she swung her right leg back to stand at his side looking down. "I've seen dogs knotted together for up to an hour."

Sitting up and wrestling his own member into a comfortable position Kyrie said "You don't mean to leave me like this." Looking at himself he was shocked to see he extended well past his knee. His cock had grown even larger when he'd orgasmed. He couldn't bring his legs together from the mass of his knot nestled in his crotch. It too had expanded even larger as he'd found release, it was now well over ten inches across. Lifting his glistening mighty length he saw that having sat up his tip now rose above the level of his ear tips. The power of the staff and its interference with the curse had truly given him a massive endowment. Only magic of a very powerful nature could do what he was witnessing.

Still smiling at the situation Posset replied, "You have so much canine heritage now that I can't compete."

As the priestess predicted it was almost an hour before Kyrie felt relief from the exquisite agony as his cock finally started softening. As day approached Kyrie was much relieved to see his cock return to what for him were more normal proportions.

That morning they set out for the duke's castle. Crossing the meadow they took to following the trail the troops had left when they departed. It had taken a full day's hard ride to reach the small Keep. Walking would take two or three days. At the pace set by Posset it would likely be only two. Kyrie again noticed a huge difference in his new body's performance.

Loaded as they were with their spoils he noted that none of them were slowing. As the day wore on they took few breaks and were back on their feet relatively quickly. It wasn't as though the journey were effortless. For his own part Kyrie felt the exertion was the same, there was just much more reserve strength to his fox body yet to be tapped than when he'd been human. Even as the end of the day neared there was still much more endurance left in his body.

They were on the lookout for a place to stop for the night when the Duke's troops came upon them. Thirty some riders came up from behind them. Kyrie thought they must have spotted their trail and given pursuit. Arriving at a gallop they encircled the three and quickly surrounded them. Kyrie recognized their leader immediately. Sergeant Barclay was a fat man. With a grizzled beard that was mostly grey he stood out from the rest of his much younger troops.

As the three half animal adventurers stood within the circle of men staring down at them from atop their mounts Kyrie assessed their mood. This was the moment he'd been dreading. Every one of Sergeant Barclay's men openly stared at them. Amazement and confusion dominated the faces. He could fortunately see no sign of anger or worse, the hint of disgust at their appearance.

Barclay spoke first. "What nature of beast be you?"

Kyrie spared a glance to the priestess in response to her snort of derision. "We are the last of the campaign to retake the Keep. What you see is the result of a curse brought down upon us by the Wraith Queen herself before her death." He felt safe in elaborating a bit. He needed it to be clear that they were responsible for completing the campaign. Looking at the men on horseback the message had been received. There was a palatable sense of tension leaving the situation.

"I see. Just you three?"

"There was one other, he has embarked upon a quest to rid himself of the curse in his own way." Kyrie answered. He'd rather not get into the fate of Ross. He also had no intention of showing his irritation at them for failing to stay in the vicinity of the castle as they were ordered by the Duke. That discussion could be brought up before their lord later.

The three of them were far outnumbered and in a very vulnerable situation. Should things go wrong it would be easy for Barclay to tell a believable story of coming upon three half animal monsters found roaming the wilds. The failures of Barclay's troops could best be brought up when Kyrie and his party weren't so at their mercy.

From the look on her face Posset was ready to give challenge. Carrol however saw the coming conflict as well and spoke to the sergeant. "We thank you for coming to our aid as you have. As it is late we were about to make camp."

Kyrie, overhearing several of the men's comments understood what he was facing. Mostly uneducated fighters made up the bulk of any army, the duke's was no different. The sergeant for all his rank sounded just as illiterate as the rest. Kyrie watched warily all the same as the order to dismount was given. Soon orders started flying from the sergeant and his men jumped to comply.

Even as the men plodded through the ritual of making camp Kyrie was given further proof of the benefits of his changed body. He was now taller than any of the men. Only two were within inches of his height, and neither could boast the musculature his half fox body displayed. Even Posset had previously shown that her armadillo body now possessed more strength than he was witnessing in many of the men.

As the three adventurers made themselves comfortable it was Carrol that whispered advice. "We should take our own watch. I don't trust these."

"Agreed." Kyrie muttered. Posset simply nodded.

As troubled as they were about the men surrounding them that night would be the first hot meal they had in days. Sergeant Barclay's men had spent the day hunting with much success. Kyrie saw a few more stares as he licked his chops to clean the grease and juice from the fur of his muzzle, just as a true fox would. Kyrie was actually finding the habit far easier than wiping his now furred and long muzzle with a sleeve. He was being forced into understanding he and the others would be the focus of attention in any group of humans. The realization only strengthen the resolve he had about taking the Keep. Only then, as a landholder, could he see to it that he was not viewed as less than he was, even though he could no longer claim to be human.

The night was far from uneventful although they did not come under attack. Kyrie was kept awake by the rowdy group around them. He now knew why they had left the vicinity of the Keep. As undisciplined as they were the opportunity to ride and hunt for the three days they were to watch the campaign's back had been irresistible. That night in camp was seen as the continuation of an extended party.

It wasn't until well after dark that many finally turned in to sleep. He had taken first watch among the three adventurers. In turn he was more than a little disgusted with the two men on watch. Both could be seen nodding off from his position within the camp. Carrol relieved him hours later and was to see the same lack of reliability in the rest of the watch rotation.

Fortunately nothing dared challenge such a large group of armed men. The next morning it took until hours after sunrise for the group to be ready to ride once again. The three half animal adventurers were impatient to get moving while the troops around them lazily prepared to ride back to the city.

Once they started out the pace seemed slow even to Kyrie. Kyrie found it frustrating but considering that they now had mounts as well, the delay wasn't likely to end in another day of travel. Were he still on foot he might have had cause to quicken their pace. The horses were allowed to move at a slow walk that was easy but still ate up ground.

Even with the delays and lack of initiative they were within sight of the city an hour before nightfall. As they were escorted through the city Kyrie saw plenty of stares. The three of them having gotten a small taste of the attention their appearance drew they were now plunged into a sea of curious stares deep enough to swim in. It didn't help that the sergeant and a few more of his men loudly announced the successful return of the campaign.

They were the center of attention all the way to the gate of the duke's castle. Situated at the center of the city that had grown around it they passed within the gate and finally stopped in the inner courtyard. Far larger than the Keep they had been charged with attacking, Castle Riverveiw was a huge monstrosity.

Centuries old the castle that now stood had been expanded and added to over the last four generations or more of the duke's family. Each time seemed to have been without any idea of ecstasies or feasibility. The courtyard itself sprawled for twenty acres. Kyrie, on first stepping foot inside had thought the waste of city space the height of arrogance for a family that could only claim the title of duke.

As he watched the sergeant order his troops to dismount he looked around to once again take note that none of the litter and trash had yet been cleaned. If it were not for all the human activity and added size he could almost mistake the duke's castle for the now abandoned Keep. It took several minutes for the sergeant to organize his troops. Finally the man was able to look to the three adventurers.

Sergeant Barclay ordered several of his men to take the bags that Kyrie and his two companions still carried. They would be stored until after they saw the duke. Having anticipated the eventual removal of their spoils Kyrie and the others had taken to wearing everything they would miss. Only fools trusted strangers to safely store valuables and return them. Kyrie had even taken the unusual step for a mage of wearing Devon's sword at his waist. It was becoming a familiar weight at his side.

With one last look at himself Kyrie felt ready. He was covered in dirt and dust from travel and his robe was bloodstained from the battle but he looked the part of a warrior-mage. It was the obvious half fox of his new nature that made him truly stand out.

Posset too looked ready for an audience with the lord of Castle Riverview. Covered in her priestess robes the scaled nature of her face and arms set her even further apart. With her articles of office dangling about her and equally traveled and disheveled appearance she looked the part of priestess to a campaign.

Carrol, their thief, while previously made every effort to remain unnoticed and unremarkable as her profession demanded now had thrown that image off with abandon. She had so little clothing that far more of her raccoon fur showed than was covered. She had taken to a few simple bands of cloth to cover her breasts and crotch. The bag she still carried and wide pocketed leather belt that held her possessions completed the new almost barbaric image. Kyrie felt his eyes lingering on her obvious curves. The female was certainly enticing due to her exotic nature. He shared a smile with her as she met his eyes.

Barclay took them, with an escort of four of his men, to the captain of the guard. The captain in turn escorted the group to the majordomo of the castle. The majordomo in turn escorted the growing group to the audience chamber of the duke.

As luck or ceremony would have it the duke was elsewhere in his expansive castle. At each step of the way they had been forced to wait. It had been hours since their arrival. There was no reason Kyrie could think of that the duke would not have been informed. The wait they were being forced to endure was strictly a show of power.

As they stood in the center of the audience chamber awaiting the presence of the duke they continued to be stared at. The large chamber was slowly filling with people. They were the objects of examination and speculation even to the point that comments made were no longer made in hushed whispers. All conversation died at the pounding of a ceremonial staff.

The majordomo had rapped the but of a large ornate staff on the floor to gather everyone's attention. As soon as he had everyone's eyes on him he announced The Duke. A full three seconds later the man strode into the chamber. Kyrie and his companions copied the bows of everyone in attendance.

Kyrie had not met the duke. Others had been responsible for the commissioning of the campaign. He'd seen the man from a distance prior to the campaign's departure for the Keep. Now as the man finally walked into his audience chamber Kyrie saw him up close. Grey of hair and thin, he moved faster than Kyrie would have thought for one of his apparent age. Taking the seat at the center of the single level dais he looked around at everyone gathered with a barely hidden smirk.

"It seems the return of the campaign has received a great deal of attention." The duke commented. His eyes lingered on several members in the crowd lining the hall. "Now, if you would pay your taxes with such enthusiasm..." His eyes scanned the room with one quick sweep.

"Adam." The duke barked.

Confused at the name Kyrie looked around a moment.

"Where the fuck is Adam? Where is that useless spawn?" He repeated ending his speech while staring at his majordomo.

"My Lord, he is not in the castle." was the reply.

The duke muttered under his breath a moment. His eyes finally settled on the three half animals before him. "So, only three return, and it would seem under a powerful curse."

"Yes, my Lord." Kyrie had been watching the man. While his eyes seemed sharp and focused he suspected that the aged mind behind them tended to wander. He would rather whatever this show turned out to be ended shortly.

"No doubt you expect the payment promised." The duke said. His tone was conciliatory, almost soft. Lifting his head he added in a stronger tone, "What proof do you present to prove your commission fulfilled?"

They were expecting the question. Kyrie looked at Carrol and nodded. The raccoon shifted the small bag from her shoulder and after holding it out at full arms length a second, dropped it on the floor in front of herself.

Everyone in the room seemed to stare at the small bag for a moment. The duke made an irritated hand motion at his majordomo. The man walked quickly to take up the bag. Opening it he gasped and

after a moment turned it upside down. Out spilled the heads of the Wraith King and Queen. The gasp of the majordomo was copied by most in the room.

The duke stared at the heads a second before lifting his eyes to the three half humans. His eyes moved from them to scan the room once again. "Sergeant Barclay." He ordered.

The man came forward from somewhere behind the crowd to their left. "Yes, my Lord?"

"You can confirm these three fulfilled their commission?"

"Yes, my Lord." Barclay said while bowing. Kyrie would have smirked at the obvious ploy of the man to keep from looking at the duke while he lied to him. He kept his composure knowing everything had depended on the sergeant's confirmation.

Kyrie saw the duke lean back in his chair. His eyes darted from one person in the crowd to another. He suspected there was more going on than seemed. He was beginning to doubt the clearly irritated duke had any intention of paying them. As the silent seconds stretched on he saw several of the watchers in the crowded room begin shuffling about as if suddenly restless.

"Well then," The duke began. "one hundred thousand gold, on completion to be divided amongst those of the party left to present themselves to me with proof." His eyes scanned the crowd again. There was a sneer on his lips as he slowly looked about the chamber. The duke's eyes once again settled on Kyrie.

"You shall have it." With that he looked at his majordomo and nodded.

Kyrie jumped slightly at the thump of the man's staff hitting the floor. The duke rose from his chair and walked from the chamber without another word. The majordomo approached them to stand in front of Kyrie. As the crowd started mingling about and talking loudly amongst themselves he was forced to lean closer to be heard.

"I will arrange for your payment. You understand it will take until tomorrow to remove so much from the treasury."

"We understand. We also require lodgings." Carrol said in a loud voice.

"Certainly." Was the majordomo's reply.

As close as he was to the man Kyrie could see every flabby wrinkle on the man's face and neck. He looked as old as the Duke but considerably worse for wear. To Kyrie's improved sense of smell the man smelled of sickness, especially his breath. As the majordomo turned from them Kyrie shared a glance at his companions. It seemed they too had caught the scent of ill health from the man.

It was nearly another hour before Kyrie was shown to a room. It looked as though someone had been hustled out so that he could occupy the room. There were several personal items left laying out as if forgotten. He laid on the bed not caring that he was still in his filthy robe. The only concession he made was unbuckling the belt of the sword that had hung at his side all day.

He started awake some time in the night. Sitting up he looked about himself puzzled for just a moment before recent memory came back. He could hear distant sounds throughout the castle but nothing seemed to come from inside the room. His internal clock hinted that it was well past the middle of the night. Trouble was, having a new body he still distrusted the sensation. He lay back but sleep would not come to him again.

Hours later a servant came for him. With the sword belt strapped around his waist again he followed the young boy. The human couldn't have been more than ten years of age. The boy led him to a lower level of the castle and stopped at a large wooden door. Kyrie waited for him to speak but the youth simply stood with eyes downcast as if waiting.

"What's your name, boy?"

The youth looked at Kyrie without lifting his head. "Peter, sir." He answered and resumed staring at the floor.

Shrugging at the display Kyrie left the nervous youth to his own thoughts.

Soon enough Posset arrived with her own young page. A minute later Carrol and a third page joined them. Kyrie said "Since we're all here..." as he turned to the door and prepared to pound a fist on the obviously thick wood.

"There's no one in there, sir." said the page that had accompanied Posset.

She turned to the boy and asked "Then why are we here?"

With eyes on the floor he answered "Waiting for the Exchequer, lady."

It was more than half an hour before that person arrived. He turned out to be a short man. He barely topped the oldest of the pages. His gruff attitude seemed to be an exaggerated effort to compensate for his physical lack of stature. Each of the pages distanced themselves from him. Kyrie watched as he produced a ring of keys and selecting one he inserted it into the lock inset in the door.

As he turned the key he said "We were all night transferring the payment." With a push the door opened. He stepped aside and with a gesture indicated they should enter.

The room turned out to be much smaller than Kyrie expected. Expecting to see the inside of the castle's treasury room this was only ten feet deep and five wide. Realizing it was nothing more than a storage room he looked over the nine chests lining the walls. None of the chests were locked. Stepping to the first he opened it. Filled to the brim with gold coins everyone stared.

"Your commission will be held safe here. That is until you either spend the last of it or have arranged for its transport elsewhere." The small exchequer said.

Kyrie looked at him to see he was holding out the set of keys to him. There were three keys dangling from the ring. He took the keys and looked at his companions. Both were smiling back at him. When he looked he saw that the exchequer had turned and was leaving. The three pages had stayed and were peeking around the edge of the doorway to see inside.

Posset and Carrol joined him in the storage room and started opening the chests. Each were loaded full of gold coins. With all the chests open they stood in the center of the room just looking at their riches for minutes. The three pages stood at the doorway looking as well. Kyrie guessed it was as much money any of them had ever seen. Finally having enough of the sight he started closing the chests. Before closing the last chest Kyrie counted out fifty coins and stuffed them in his purse.

Posset and Carrol took some as well. Closing and locking the door they stood in the hallway a moment.

"So," Kyrie said looking at the page that had escorted him to their treasure trove. "do you have other duties or are you assigned to me for the day?"

The youth looked at his fellow pages before saying "I can be available for the day, sir."

Kyrie saw the other two pages were nodding at his companions. "Well, first thing is an Inn with baths."

The Inn they were led to called itself Rivertown Tavern. A bold statement to use the name of the city for its title, Kyrie hoped it could live up to such bravado. It turned out to be a large building with much to offer. The first of its amenities Kyrie indulged in was a long cleansing bath while the page he'd commandeered was out purchasing a new robe for when he was finished. The Inn's servants had to change the water within a minute. His first dunking had turned the bathwater grey from dirt and travel dust.

Standing in nothing but wet fur it was more apparent than ever just how well muscled he now was. He sported a smirk as he stood in the communal baths. His companions and the humans refilling the tub all stole glances at him. A good deal of their interest was centered on his crotch. His wet fur made it obvious that Kyrie sported a long plump sheath and set of balls that was twice the size any human male would be proud of. After his second bath the page had returned with a robe made of blue fabric that was soft and supple but thick enough for travel.

Stepping into the adjoining tavern he took a meal. It became obvious that word had spread. He was treated as if he were next in line to succeed the duke. Halfway through his meal Posset joined him at his table. Soon after that Carrol arrived. As they finished their meal they quietly discussed their plans.

The three pages had waited at a distance watching as they ate a bit of bread for a meal. With their first meal finished they split up to make the first of their arrangements. Kyrie, with the aid of his page, found and commissioned a willing master carpenter to make some much needed repairs to the Keep. He also gave the carpenter leave to hire two apprentices.

Through the rest of the day he also hired a master stone mason, and a blacksmith. Each master was to arrange for however much supplies they felt necessary. Word indeed traveled fast through the city. An hour past the noon Kyrie was approached by a human almost as tall as he was.

The man was obviously a fighter. He introduced himself as Eric. The man didn't claim any family name but went simply as Eric. He stated that he'd heard that Kyrie and his two companions were gathering help to reoccupy the Keep. Kyrie listened as he gave a brief history of his exploits. When Kyrie asked what he expected for salary Eric replied with five gold a month.

Shaking his head and walking away Kyrie replied "The going rate for an unranked man at arms is one gold a month, take it or leave it." A few paces later he looked at his side to see Eric matching him stride for stride.

With a nod and sheepish grin Eric said "One."

"Very well." Kyrie said.

Eric accompanied him for the rest of the day. When he returned to the Inn he found that Posset had also taken on a fighter of her own. As soon as Carrol returned they excused the two fighters to a separate table while they discussed the progress they each had made. Plans were made for the next day's errands. For the funds they had withdrawn from their horde they had twelve gold left. It was more than enough to pay for eight meals and a round of drinks for the house.

The tavern was still celebrating the free drinks when Kyrie noticed Sergeant Barclay walking toward their table. He stopped at Kyrie's side and spoke loudly enough for the surrounding tables to hear as well. "The Duke wishes to speak to you."

Looking to Posset and Carrol he rose to his feet.

As the two females rose with him Barclay said "Just the battle-mage."

With a look to his two companions he nodded. The sergeant escorted him from the tavern. Outside Kyrie was surprised that there were six of the sergeant's men waiting. He tensed at the sight even though he doubted anyone would be foolish to take on someone they also called a battle mage. He still had Devon's sword at his side and had carried his staff through the city all day. He wondered if doing so had caused some offense to the duke.

Kyrie looked at Barclay and gestured for him to lead the way. Together they made their way back to the castle. Once inside the castle gate the extra escort were dismissed. Kyrie was led to the duke's audience chamber. The chamber was empty, save for three other men that also seemed to be waiting. Unlike his previous trip to the audience chamber Kyrie had become more relaxed every step of the way. He was doubting he'd done anything to give offense considering the treatment he was receiving.

It was nearly half an hour before The Duke shuffled in. Kyrie was shocked at the change. A moment later he mentally kicked himself for being taken in by the previous night's performance. The duke was now showing his age. He was aided to the High Chair and all but dropped his slight weight into it. Leaning to one side and resting on the arm of the chair he looked at Kyrie.

"I hear you have plans to occupy the Keep. Is this true?"

"Yes, Lord."

The duke looked at the three others that had also been forced to wait on his arrival.

"Only lords are allowed to own land." said one of the men. Kyrie looked at the man. He was of average height but fat enough for his clothes to strain tight across his ample frame.

Another said "The occupancy of The Keep is for the Duke to decide." This one looked like a young version of the duke. He could have been related in some way but if appearances were to be believed, and after the overnight change in the duke he would have to have been a grandson.

Kyrie looked at the fat man again. He could pass for a fat slightly younger version of the duke.

Looking back to the high chair and the man sitting it, Kyrie said nothing but waited.

The duke stared back at him for several long moments. "Nothing to say for your claim?"

"The only claim I have is by right of spoils after a successful campaign." Kyrie replied.

Nodding he finally ordered "Come forward."

As Kyrie stepped closer he glanced at the aid still standing next to the duke's chair. At a slight hand signal from the supposed aid Kyrie stopped three paces from The Duke. The duke raised a hand and gestured for Kyrie to kneel.

Realizing what was happening he took to a knee and bowed his head.



"I name thee Kyrie, Lord of Battlecreek Keep." The Duke pronounced.

"I stand as witness." Said the duke's possible grandson.

After a moment and a glare from the duke the fat man said "I witness."

"Rise, Lord Kyrie."

Kyrie stood and bowed again. Even as informal as the ceremony seemed he hoped he had at least come close to the required signs of respect. "Thank you, Duke Francis"

"You will of corse be required to pay taxes to your Duke."

"I understand." Kyrie thought the stash in the hidden trove within the Keep would be enough for several decades worth of taxes. His Keep, he thought to himself while suppressing a smile.

"Knowing your need, and as one final gesture of gratitude for completing the campaign, I shall wave this year's taxes. I will hover expect full payment next year."

"I understand, my lord."

"Very well. If there is nothing else..." He said and looked at each person present. "Then you are dismissed Lord Kyrie."

Kyrie bowed and stepped back a few paces before turning. Outside the chamber he found Sergeant Barclay waiting. He escorted Kyrie back to the tavern. Barclay didn't enter but simply turned and started walking back to wherever he'd come from. As Kyrie sat back down at his table everyone looked at him expectantly.

Looking around at all the curious faces he said "You see before you the new Lord of Battlecreek Keep."

There were a few cheers from the table around them led by the fighters Eric and Caine. Posset and Carrol simply smiled.

They had hoped to be ready to return to the Keep within days. It took a week to get everything ready. In all they filled six wagons with supplies, tools and materials they needed to bring on the first trip. They also brought two of the chests from the storage vault. Both chests were but a third full after paying for everything. They also arrived with an entourage of thirty five humans. The construction masters set to work at once on surveying the condition of the Keep.

It took several days to clean out the debris from the lower levels below the Keep. It wasn't ideal as lodgings but it was out of the weather. With all the weapons collected from the meadow the courtyard and the dungeon levels they had a fully stocked armory. Considering the number of broken arms also collected the blacksmith would not want for metal to work with for a number of years. Kyrie listened to the advice of the master craftsmen he'd hired but in the end as long as their suggestions made sense he let them run their own show. It would be weeks before repairs could actually be started on the Keep.

Kyrie was disappointed to find that areas of the structure had to be torn down to make it safe to occupy once again. With that in mind he ordered wooden longhouses built before anything else began. The courtyard was already filled with tents by those that desired to live above ground.

Carrol had occupied most of her time with a far more thorough search of the dungeon levels. On the eighth day she came to find Kyrie. She brought him to the former throne room and with a smile showed

him her find. Another exceptionally well crafted hidden door opened to a room behind the throne room. On entering it the first thing to hit Kyrie was the smell of old manuscripts. Her find was full of scrolls.

Carefully taking one from a shelf Kyrie opened it and read just a bit. It appeared to be a journal of events written nearly two centuries ago. Putting it back he looked and judged by the size of the room there was enough there to contain enough reading for years. Looking closer he saw the shelves were labeled. He slowly paced the extent of the small secret library. An entire wall contained scrolls devoted to the study of magic.

Looking at the raccoon Kyrie said "This is an incredible find. How can I repay you?"

"Love me."

Even though they both felt it was bound to happen eventually, that night they lay together for the first time.