

Kyrie woke to the sound of his wife stirring. The raccoon next to him had been a thief in their previous life. She had once again woken before him, likely from the smell of food that had found its way to their bedchamber, or perhaps it was the growing discomfort he had caused and of which she constantly reminded him.

Sitting up he watched as his wife shifted to the side of the bed before placing her feet on the floor. The simple task had become ever more difficult for her over the past few weeks. Her alarmingly rounded belly now looked enormous. From the sight of her it was obvious their first child should arrive any day. The sight and thought of his wife carrying his child caused Kyrie's nethers to stir. A moment later he could smell his own arousal in the air.

She turned her head to look at him before standing. "Put that thing away, it's done me enough damage."

Kyrie chuckled as the half human half raccoon tottered to her feet. He quickly stood and stepped to her side. She stood to only midway up his chest and as she accepted his help looked at the tip of his male hood. As a sign of how huge as he had become his tip was wavering with his movement at a level just in front of her nose. And even at the size he was displaying, he was only in the early stages of stimulation.

"Perhaps another time, my Lord." she said but then licked the bead of liquid that had appeared at his tip. Always the playful one Carrol taunted him. It had been more than a month since their last time together due to her advanced pregnancy. She still took great pleasure in bringing him to arousal only to deny him his own release.

To Kyrie's constant amazement and utmost pleasure Carrol had accepted the use of magic on herself, but only to a point. It was in a way necessary, his massive cock would never fit inside her otherwise. It was only through his power as a mage could she handle his full size. He'd refined the spells in several ways, and had a half dozen useful alternatives depending on whatever mood they were in. Now and until she gave birth to their first he'd be denied.

To his eyes she had become beautiful, but to the rest of the world she looked half raccoon. The result of a curse, they both had been forced to wear bodies half human and half animal. Fortunately for Kyrie he had been holding a powerful mage's staff at the time. He had since become convinced the staff had in some way altered the curse in his favor, at least for him.

In fact it had altered the curse to his great favor. Now a half fox he stood more than six and a half feet tall. His body was well muscled beyond any human he'd ever seen. Truly, he was larger and far stronger than any human he'd ever known. Every day reminded him just how the staff had altered the curse to his great boon. The over-proportioned size of his male hood was just one example. Currently it stood out as a blatant example of just how favorably the staff had intervened.

His wife stepped away from him and turned her head to the door to half shout, "Sarah."

The door opened an instant later. The human female came into the room carrying Carrol's first meal of the day. She had taken two steps before noticing Kyrie. He stood next to his wife in nothing but his fur and still sporting what for him was a mild erection. She half-turned to her right and apologized "Sorry, my Lord."

"Nonsense. The lady seems to like the ambush still." Kyrie said as he picked his robe up from the floor. Displaying himself in any condition was no longer an issue. As a Lord there were servants everywhere. Many of them had seen everything multiple times over the years. Privacy was for him a thing of the distant past. He had made peace with that fact, but sometimes the servants acted as if it were a

first time. There would never be any retaliation from either Kyrie or his wife for such playfulness. As former campaigners it was all part of the informal atmosphere they both encouraged.

Dressed in the same robe from the day before, Kyrie picked up the sword he used for daily wear and wrapped the belt around the scabbard. He'd have to wait to buckle the sword belt at his waist until his libido allowed. He bid his wife a good day with a quick kiss and departed his bedchamber. Now that he was ready Kyrie began his daily routine. The first person he met outside his chamber was Peter. The young boy that had been a simple message boy at the duke's castle and had shadowed him from the first moment. Originally shy and reserved he had inserted himself as Kyrie's personal aid over the course of those first chaotic months at the Keep.

The kid had grown into the job quite well. He was also growing into a young man. Kyrie had seen the type many times. Likely the bastard son of some knight or some such he had little true prospects as so many others throughout any castle or city. Peter had been clever enough to fend for himself until meeting the fox lord. He'd then latched onto what he likely saw as an opportunity for advancement.

They passed through the kitchen allowing Kyrie to pile a bit of food on a plate and carry it to the audience chamber himself. He sat in his own simple version of the high chair that was set at the head of a long table. After glancing at those standing a distance on the other side of the table he said "Lets begin."

As Peter announced the first petitioner Kyrie started on his meal. Unlike many of the titled and even most lords he'd seen Kyrie preferred to keep things informal. He intended to keep as many reminders of his common origins as he could. First up was the keep's master mason with his weekly report.

Kyrie was pleased with his work. The first underground level had been restored to its original floor plan. With the return of the center hallway the rest of the underground levels had become feasible for use. With a surprising number of functionaries running even a small Keep moved into the rooms below that left much more living space in the Keep itself. Unfortunately he was now dismantling the upper third of the tower as repairs required. Brock once again was suggesting rebuilding the tower to a higher level.

With a sigh Kyrie had to deny the request. "Master Brock, the tower is more than adequate the size it was. Besides, as I've said before, there is much more work needed elsewhere."

"Yes, my Lord." The stone master said before bowing and turning to leave.

It was a routine that Kyrie understood he had to endure. Many of his master-craftsmen came to him with repeated requests to do more for him. They desired to show their respect and loyalty by turning the simple Keep into something grand. Something a true titled person would desire. He thanked them and made it clear he wished to keep the Keep simple but functional.

After several similar denials of requests came a trio of newcomers. The Keep was now attracting several new people almost on a weekly basis. A family of three had arrived overnight. Kyrie welcomed them and after consulting Lossen, who doubled as the census official as well as a few other roles, assigned them to a longhouse.

He had finished his meal well before he had seen every petitioner. With a look to Peter who was still standing at the table a pace to his left he asked "Is that everyone?"

The young man nodded and said "Yes, my Lord."

"Then, if you all will excuse me..." Kyrie stood.

He smiled to himself as Peter pulled his own chair out from the table. The young man had his own routine. He would now allow himself a meal then tend to the few things that had been delegated to him during the audience.

As always everyone that had been seated also stood with him and would stay on their feet until he was out of the room. He'd tried to put a stop to such shows but had given up after failing for months. He at least had been successful in getting everyone to share a meal with him as he gave audience. To him it felt the least he could do if he was going to sit and eat his morning meal while listening to their requests.

Kyrie walked through the back door of the chamber to let everyone get back to their meal. Out of sight he heard the scrape of chairs and conversation start. Walking out into the courtyard pleased him every morning. It was now empty of the tents and temporary housing that had been necessary for the first year. It was now grassed and even sported a few fruit tree saplings.

The gates too had been repaired. As stout as any gate they stood open but could be closed and barred at a moment's notice. They were closed an hour after sunset and reopened an hour before. Kyrie had not initiated the routine. That had been Captain Gale's order.

He met his Captain of The Guard out in the meadow. Kyrie had campaigned with the man before he had been knighted. His captain joined him by falling in step alongside Kyrie as he made his way to the training grounds. Rounding the wall they saw those of the guard who were off duty still setting up for the day's practice. Thanks to Kyrie getting through his audience quickly they could start early.

He was met with the usual round of salutes and "G'morning, Lord." from those gathered. He returned each greeting with the man's name. Kyrie made it a point to know every man on his guard. It was actually easy since Kyrie had insisted on training with them. Having gotten used to having the weight of a sword at his side his thought was that he might as well be able to properly wield it. Captain Gale had at first begrudgingly included him in their training. He smiled again at the memory.

Kyrie could tell his captain had carefully tried to force him to reconsider joining their training. Gale had on the first day personally tested his skill level. Kyrie had done his best. He'd had a little sword training before, just enough that if it had come to be necessary during a campaign he wouldn't end up killing himself. Gale had publicly shown just how inexperienced Kyrie was with a sword. Even with Kyrie's advantage in size, strength and endurance it was obvious that Sir Gale, the newly hired Captain Of The Guard was toying with him. It had been humiliating.

After half an hour Gale held up a hand to call a halt to the spectacle. "My Lord, with respect you're a mage. There's no need for you as a lord to take up a sword again."

Kyrie had looked at the members of the guard that had watched. While they all did their best to hide it they had still been in a highly amused mood. "Ah, but that's where I disagree. I wish to be able able to handle a sword as well as any of those pledged to guard my life. As a former campaigner you know the value of what I mean."

Gale had stroked his beard a moment as he looked at the men under his command. Kyrie could see he was trying to hide a smile. Looking at the men that had watched he saw they too had sobered at his speech. They were all looking to their captain for his decision.

With a nod he had relented with the stipulation that while he took part in their training sessions Kyrie was without rank.

"I would have it no other way."

At the end of that first day's training every man of the guard had surprised him by stepping up and clapping him on the back. From then on he had been treated as an equal while training with them.

Kyrie pitched in to finish the morning's preparation for practice as always. Every day they set up a weapons stand and several practice posts. Once training was over they would break everything down again. As they started in for the day Kyrie was just another member of the guard, still. It was now the only time he enjoyed the feeling of still being considered another member of a campaign, seen and treated was a competent equal. Once they finished for the day he would be The Fox Lord once again.

The Fox Lord was the title the guardsmen had applied to him soon after he'd joined in their daily training. Now everyone called him by that moniker. Kyrie liked it better than any other title he now had. He saw it as a sign of respect and it also seemed just as informal yet respectful as he wished to be.

Now, nearly a year later Kyrie had improved a great deal. He had become nearly as proficient as any of the guardsmen who now numbered eighteen strong. Still, he wished to be better. Something about being called The Fox Lord by his men had sparked a need to lead them as well as their Captain could. He knew without a doubt that he would never stop training with these men, at least as much as his duties allowed.

Two hours into the day's training Peter came running to interrupt the session. He breathlessly announced a rider had arrived from castle Riverview.

Kyrie stood back from the man he had been practicing with holding a hand up to end the session. He was panting from the summer heat. Kyrie had at first found the panting reflex strange and uncomfortable. Having a fur covered body he soon understood the necessity. He still sweat but the fur insulated him far too well, thus he started panting after just a few minutes of exertion. Fortunately, panting didn't slow his reflexes or impact his endurance, and it actually seemed to help keep him from overheating.

Kyrie made his apologies to the captain and his men and followed Peter back toward the gate. Entering the courtyard he could see the rider instantly. He stood by his horse and was dressed in the duke's colors.

Kyrie walked straight to the man and said "Welcome to Battlecreek Keep, Sir."

The man gave a slight bow. "Sir Rossen at your service, my Lord."

"Sir Rossen." Kyrie said and returned the required bow in respect to the man's rank.

With the formalities out of the way the man relaxed his posture a bit and sighed. "I bring a message from The Duke." he said. His eyes made a quick survey of the courtyard registering the interest their meeting had gained. "It's not a personal message, but should you wish to hear it..."

"No, I shall hear it here. The Keep is rather small and I have no doubt word would get to every ear by nightfall regardless."

Sir Rossen coughed into a fist to hide a smile. "As you wish, my Lord. Our duke commands that you and five armed and mounted men report to Castle Riverview by sunrise two days hence. He intended to send a large campaign against a pack of beasts that have seen fit to terrorize those under his protection."

Kyrie had heard campaign orders before. This was standard. It would likely be just another march to subdue some lizardmen or orcs that had become a little too bold for their own good. "Tell our duke that I will obey. I shall arrive as requested with five of my men."

"Aye, my Lord." Rossen replied. After taking a breath he smiled and added "Its probably just another standard campaign."

Kyrie nodded. "I have little doubt that to be so. Would you stay long enough for a meal and a bit of refreshment?"

With a smile the knight replied "Aye, my Lord, I would."

Kyrie ordered Peter to take the knight in to the audience chamber and see that he had everything he wished. As Peter led Sir Rossen away Kyrie turned to begin ordering preparations. It was several minutes before he could return to the training area. Once he had informed Captain Gale of the orders he charged him with selecting the five to ride with him.

Having picked four in a matter of seconds, and already knowing the response he'd get, Kyrie asked "And the fifth?"

"I intend to ride with you M'lord."

"I appreciate that Captain, but I need you here while I'm away."

With a resigned nod Gale said "Eric then."

"Thank you Captain. We ride out tomorrow morning." Kyrie said loud enough to be heard by all gathered.

It was another half hour before he could get back to his own chambers. He knew the delay had been far too long for Carrol not to have already heard the news. As he entered he had his suspicions confirmed. He kneeled at the side of her chair looking into her eyes. "I will return. We've not come this far for us to be separated now. Besides, its just a standard enforcement campaign."

Carrol rolled her eyes. "We both know anything could happen on even the simplest of campaigns. Look what happened to us through no fault of our own."

Kyrie brought his raccoon lover into an embrace.

Carrol muttered into his ear softly "I wish I could take you for myself one more time before you left."

That night she did everything else for Kyrie.

The next morning he rode out with five of his guard. Eric, who had been with him from the beginning was to act as his second in command. The other men were among the best Gale had trained. They rode fast and made good time, arriving at the city Riverveiw well before sundown. Coming into the city Kyrie saw he still drew a great deal of attention. They took rooms at an Inn close to the city gates. Each of the men with him were also experienced adventurers so there was no grumbling about accommodations to deal with.

Kyrie went to the castle to report his arrival. It was no surprise to him that he did not see the duke. Reporting to the majordomo was to be enough. Kyrie was surprised to see the aged majordomo was still alive. He was even more rancid smelling than ever. He gave Kyrie the final orders before the campaign. The company was to assemble outside the gates an hour after sunrise the next day.

Back at the Inn he informed his men. As they nodded he had to shake himself a bit. He was now leading men into a campaign. While he was not the one in overall command it was accepted that in a large campaign as this, individual commands within the whole were acknowledged. To none of their

surprise Kyrie ordered that they be ready for the gates to open an hour before sunrise. Until then they were free to spend the night as they wished.

When the campaign assembled outside the city gate Kyrie was surprised at the size. Easily forty strong Kyrie began to wonder just how much resistance they were to expect. He almost groaned on seeing who was to command the campaign. He remembered the fat man from the informal ceremony the duke had held when naming Kyrie a lord. In the year since it had been confirmed that the man was the Duke's heir and next in line to command the city.

He shared a look with his men. They had all relaxed and looked to be suppressing smirks just as much as Kyrie. This was likely just going to be a show campaign to make Lord Adam look capable of taking the title of Duke upon his father's death. Eric shared eye contact a moment and shrugged his shoulders. Soon Lord Adam began speaking to the campaign. Kyrie had heard it all before. 'Glory of the duke', 'cleans the lands', 'honor', 'valor', and 'loyalty' always were constant themes just before campaigns. Kyrie hoped he never became as self centered as the duke's direct heir.

Once Lord Adam finished his speech they were off. The campaign started badly for Kyrie. An hour into riding one of Adam's own men dropped back to ride beside him just long enough to impart a message from his lord. It was Lord Adam's desire that Lord Kyrie ride beside him for a time. The three hours that Kyrie was obliged to ride next to the fat lord were filled with slights and half hidden insults. He took the abuse in silence.

Once they stopped for midday break Kyrie was allowed to depart to see to his men. He was not 'invited' back. At the end of the day two of his men were selected to stand for part of the watch during the night. It wasn't until next morning that they saw the extent of Adam's laziness. Half the horses had wandered off not having been picketed properly. Kyrie and his men were ready to ride at sunrise. They and a number of other men whom were similarly ready were ordered to collect the stray mounts.

Once the campaign got underway again the pace was much slower. From a distance it looked as though Lord Adam was not doing well in the saddle. He could be seen even from the distance Kyrie and his men rode that the fat man was constantly squirming in his saddle. As if to confirm his observation a halt was called after just an hour of riding.

Kyrie had by then mentally singled out those who could be counted on in a pinch and those who were pretenders. It was no surprise that the pretenders clustered around Lord Adam. The campaign was basically splitting into two factions. Kyrie and each of his men were without a spoken word accepted into the minority of practiced campaigners. They all stayed on the fringes of those resting as if guarding them. Most even remained mounted. It seemed Lord Adam failed to even notice the split forming in his ranks.

The second day of the campaign ended after numerous breaks and less than half the distance covered than the day before. It was also clear that their path had begun to curve to the west. It didn't take a map to understand that Lord Adam intended to return to the city on the first excuse to claim a victory. The third day riding was much the same. Word spread through the party that they were to reach the goal of the campaign the next day, finally.

As with the days before, day four was filled with numerous break. Kyrie didn't need to remind his men to stay alert. They were at another of Lord Adam's numerous halts when Sir Orvan stopped his horse next to Kyrie. After glancing around to see that it was relatively safe to speak the man said "Our lord is making every mistake of campaigning."

"He sets watch at night." was all Kyrie felt safe in replying. Sir Orvan was one that had shown himself to be an experienced adventurer. Despite knowing the man was capable Kyrie felt it best not to speak too freely to someone who had not yet gained his trust.

Sir Orvan looked at Kyrie a moment. "Aye. Best to keep our tongues from wagging too much."

Kyrie watched the man look away and take a deep breath. It seemed as if he'd passed a thinly veiled test. As Orvan looked back to the half fox sitting a mount beside him he nodded before speaking again. "Stay alert."

A second later Orvan rode off. Kyrie knew his intent. They were close to their goal of reaching one of the Duke's holdings. While not classed as a Keep the outpost was still a strategic spot on the border. From talk overheard in the days of riding it had recently come under ever stronger attacks. The source was thought to be from a coalition of lizardmen knolls and kobold. Being a small fort and finding the growing forces that were coming against them to be too much they had beseeched their overlord for help.

Lord Adam had called a halt only a few hours ride from the fort. Any adventurer knew they were well within the range of opposing forces responsible for harassing the fort. Stopping at nothing more than a wide spot in a trail through forest was perhaps the first lesson one learned to avoid. Lord Adam had as always dismounted in an attempt to ease the pain of the saddle he no doubt suffered, they all did to one degree or another. Keeping with their routine many of what had become Adam's inner circle also dismounted.

Kyrie watched the forest around them. Lord Adam had set up the perfect conditions for an ambush at nearly each halt that he called. This time their luck had run out. Kyrie heard the commotion coming from the front of the formation. Scanning the forest before striking toward the alarm Kyrie ordered two of his men to remain where they were.

Even as he arrived at the head of the line their attackers were already withdrawing. He saw mostly kobold supported by a few lizardmen. They were quickly fading into the cover that the forest provided. Sir Orvan arrived seconds later. With one look at the situation Orvan ordered Kyrie and his men to circle back to the rear in expectation of another attack. With a salute Kyrie instantly complied.

It turned out to be the only attempt made on the party. Fortunately no one had been injured worse than a few cuts and bruises. As the campaign reorganized itself from the results of the attack it became clear to Kyrie why. Four horses were killed outright and another five were injured to the point of having to be put down. As luck would have it Lord Adam's horse was one of those put down. Every horse that had been injured had been without a rider. To his surprise Lord Adam 'requested' Kyrie's horse as replacement to finish the journey.

With no other choice Kyrie gave up his mount. Lord Adam even went so far as to requisition other horses for those men he considered loyal to him. In all he left nine experienced campaigners without mounts. When Sir Orvan protested on behalf of the men who were left without their mounts Adam gave him leave to stay behind as the rest forged ahead.

Kyrie refused the offers of his own men to give him their horse in return. It was time for him to show once again he would not take advantage of his men. As the campaign set out once again he was able to keep up while on foot. So too were the others that had been deprived of mounts. Once Lord Adam noticed the efforts of those to keep pace he called for more speed.

On seeing the men running with him increase their speed in an effort to keep up Kyrie considered ordering his men to remain with them. It was quickly apparent that despite their efforts they were being left behind. Before he could give the order his men and several others reformed around the small group on foot. As one those on foot kept the same pace without a spoken word. Kyrie had to admit it was an impressive display.

Less than an hour later they caught up with the campaign. As could have been predicted Lord Adam had once again called a halt. With a word from Kyrie he and the rest that had been forced to continue on foot passed the party and continued on without stopping. Minutes later Orvan and a good number of the other men caught up with them. Together they continued until they reached the small fort.

An hour later Lord Adam's men arrived. Kyrie's horse was returned to him with the comment, passed on from Lord Adam, that it now smelled too much like fox. That evening he watched as the few extra horses the fort had were 'requisitioned' by Lord Adam. His men, having made it to the relative safety of the fort began celebrating. It was well into the night before the last few revelers either fell asleep or more likely passed out.

As those with adventuring experience had coalesced around Sir Orvan's leadership they had begun calling themselves Orvan's contingent. To a man they added their names to the watch roster of the fort. Only a hundred and twenty people manned the place, and only half that were found to be capable of defending the simple fort. Kyrie himself took his place on watch at the end of the night. He took the opportunity to see for himself the strength of the fort's defenses.

Just before sunrise Kyrie came across Sir Orvan looking over the fort for himself. Knowing the knight had far more experience than he ever would, Kyrie began shadowing the man. After a few minutes and a single question from Kyrie the knight began pointing out the strengths and weakness of the fortifications. It was a quick but valuable lesson in field fortifications. It was half an hour after the sun rose that Orvan finished his tour.

Together they watched the fort come alive.

Orvan, his eyes still on the activity around them spoke. "So, what have you learned?"

"Aside from the realization that I know too little to be a knight?" Kyrie paused at the humorous snort from Orvan. "I could use some advice on the Keep I command."

Orvan turned as he saw one of his men walking in their direction. "Perhaps another time." he said. The tone was one of acceptance rather than dismissal.

Kyrie understood that the issue was shelved for another time. With a slight but necessary bow to the knight he said "Good day, Sir."

Orvan bowed in return. "You as well my Lord." was the reply as Kyrie turned to leave.

It came as no surprise when Lord Adam ordered patrols that none of the men in his contingent were assigned, yet each and every man that had sided with Orvan were to be out on patrol by noon. It was with an actual sense of relief that Kyrie rode out of the fort with his men.

They were back just before nightfall having come across no sign of the forces they sought. That night the separation of the two factions of the campaign only intensified. Lord Adam and the men in his contingent had spent the day in constant celebration. They were continuing into the night as well.

The next morning was yet another repetition of the previous day as far as Lord Adam's contingent was concerned. The patrols left before Adam had even woken. Orvan had decided to mix the patrols. Kyrie was to ride with two of his own men and two of Orvan's and one from another knight's command. As the day progressed Kyrie appreciated the change. There were lessons and bits of tracking lore that each man shared with the others in his group. This was a sign of the camaraderie Kyrie had always experienced during a successful campaign.

With all the experience in tracking around him it was Kyrie that caught the first sign of their quarry. He caught the faint scent of kobold and lizardmen just past high noon. Suddenly leading the patrol they soon came across the obvious trail of a large number of their enemy within fifty yards of the wider forest path they had been taking. They followed the trail for two miles before it joined another group.

It was with growing concern that they continued following the trail. Not only was this new group of lizardmen and kobold far larger in number than they could comfortably confront, they were traveling in the direction of the fort. Again Kyrie caught the scent of smoke before anyone else. Soon they could hear the sounds of battle. Breaking into the clearing around the fort Kyrie could only guess at the numbers surrounding the hilltop fort. He found himself to the right and half a horse length behind Jenkins, Orvan's second in command as they raced to the attack.

Easily two hundred kobold, several dozen lizardmen and as many gnoll had taken to attacking the fort. A forty foot section of the stockade's wall were in flames. He could see defenders firing arrows into the mass of kobold close to the wall, but there were far too few bowmen to truly be effective. The lizard and gnoll were throwing mundane fire balls over and at sections of the wall not yet in flames. Kyrie had seen the tactic before. Wooden twigs and small branches woven together and coated with pitch or tar and lighted they were very effective during siege attacks. Against a largely wooden fort it could be deadly.

Seconds after breaking into the clearing Kyrie began preparing a spell as they closed on the outer edge of the attacking forces. He saw what could only have been another patrol had already returned and had engaged the enemy. He adjusted the force of his casting and aimed at an appropriate spot. Deep enough in the ranks of the enemy while far enough from their own forces his spell exploded with unexpected power.

Erupting in a ball of flame Kyrie's mage-fire engulfed anything standing within a radius of ten feet. As he watched Kyrie saw bodies flung high from the surprisingly large and powerful burst of flame. Anyone standing another ten feet outside the explosion were thrown or knocked from their feet from the force of the blast. Following his first blast Kyrie sent a much smaller blast further from where the other patrol still fought the enemy. Attuned to the proper strength his second explosion sent about a dozen more kobold to their vile god.

Too close to engaging the enemy for another casting Kyrie shifted his staff to his left hand and drew Devon's sword. He had to look to his hand to check his grip at the feeling the weapon gave him. In the first second the blade came free it felt as though the sword vibrated with eagerness. His first swing at an enemy with the weapon brought a sense of certainty.

Kyrie felt as if the sword pulled through the swing almost coming free of his hand. With one swing he had parted a lizardman's head from his body. Bringing it back to the ready position as he'd been taught Kyrie found himself with little time to think or consider the sensation the sword was sending him. Staying in formation he was reduced to swinging and hacking his way through the throng just as everyone else in the patrol. He could see Jenkins was leading them toward the other patrol.

His horse, stamping and kicking as they advanced was testing the limits of Kyrie's riding skill. He'd not ridden what was considered a warhorse into battle before. At the time he'd questioned the cost of the mounts Captain Gale had insisted on purchasing for his men. In seeing the effectiveness of his mount's efforts he was finally convinced. The horse was doing almost as much damage to their enemy as Kyrie was with the sword and staff.

In minutes they had met the other patrol and joined forces. In the momentary chaos of joining forces Kyrie found himself in the right flank of the formation. Orvan was at the center and leading the formation. Together they swept through the mass of mostly kobold. Even when confronting a lizardman the men on patrol were no match for any individual of the enemy.

Kyrie's fox body was performing far better than his human body would have. Although he felt some fatigue it was not impairing his performance. Still at full strength every swing had the same power behind it his first had. When the formation broke free into the space between the enemy and the wall of the fort Kyrie was uncharacteristically ready for more. Together the formation swept around the wall to keep their foe from advancing. Orvan commanded they slow their horse to a trot and Kyrie saw that the siege had been broken.

Most of the remaining kobold had already fled and the knoll and lizardmen were following suit. Unfortunately they had managed to set flame to the wall. Kyrie looked and saw that a third of the palisade was burning, and more was likely to follow. From the amount of smoke rising from inside the wall it was likely that several structures were also burning. It was clear even to him that despite their losses the enemy had scored a victory. The fort would have to be abandoned.

Orvan set a third of the men to continuous patrols around the clearing while the rest entered the fort. Along with the third of the palisade three of the buildings were on fire. Without a constant source of water within the wall there was nothing left to do but watch things burn, or so it seemed by the lack of action of those inside. Kyrie couldn't see Lord Adam anywhere.

With no sign of order and no one making any effort to evacuate Kyrie pointed at the nearest human. "You, grab someone to help and get those horse tethered up to those wagons."

Kyrie wheeled his horse around and in a loud voice ordered "Everyone else get everything valuable out of the undamaged buildings, now." It took a few more shouted orders to get most of the people moving.

Turning back to Orvan he said "Sir Orvan, take your men outside. I doubt the kobold will be back but we'll need to keep these people safe as they evacuate."

"Aye, Lord Kyrie." Sir Orvan replied. Repeating the order he led his men from the fort.

Kyrie concentrated on getting everyone out of the burning fort while still allowing them to rescue enough of their belongings that they wouldn't be destitute. Once there was no one left inside removing their belongings he and two of the men set flame to the rest of the buildings.

Coming back outside he found sir Orvan was waiting for him just outside the gate. "We should burn the rest."

"Already done." Kyrie replied. Looking he saw about a hundred and fifty people crowded around the four wagons that had been all the fort could boast. They all looked to be fully loaded with the belongings of those that had called the fort home. He was only a little surprised to see Lord Adam sitting at the front of one of the wagons.

Sir Orvan must have followed his gaze. "Aye, he's a right useless one." He observed in a soft voice.

Kyrie sighed and looked at the knight. "Aye, but careful how often you speak ill of, our betters."

Orvan snorted his humor. "What now?"

"If I recall correctly Castle Hilldale is the closest fortification."

"You remember rightly. It is." the knight said.

"With this many on foot it'll take four days to reach the castle. We'd best get started now."

With a salute Sir Orvan said "Aye, my Lord."

The knight gave orders to start marching. Kyrie watched and listened as he reorganized the patrols into outriders and sentries. It was obvious his questions had been simply to comply with the typical protocol. Kyrie, being a titled lord technically outranked him. Kyrie reflected that he'd rarely seen a more competent knight. In no time at all they were moving. Just after high noon they stopped for a break just after crossing a small river. Orvan ordered those not on active patrol to dismount.

Once the order to dismount had been given Kyrie, along with everyone else took a few moments to check over their mounts. He'd been horseback all morning and his mount had taken him through battle. While the horse was covered in dried blood and gore Kyrie could see no serious wounds on the beast. Coming back to face his horse the fox allowed himself a few extra moments to gently stroke the stallion's face. His horse reciprocated by bringing his head down against Kyrie's chest and gently pushing until he was forced to step back. With one last pat on the beast's deeply muscled neck Kyrie turned to see a number of humans watching him.

Half the men around him had finished checking over their mounts and had taken to watching him. He understood why he was once again the center of attention. Having reminded everyone so forcefully of his mage capabilities and his status of Lord during the evacuation everyone was now looking to him as the co-leader of the wagon train. Seeing Sir Orvan also watching him he nodded to the knight with a smile.

The knight lead his horse over to him and stopped a pace from Kyrie. Kyrie watched as Orvan's men distanced themselves from the two of them without an order or any observable sign from the knight. Once the area around them was clear Sir Orvan said. "We're on dangerous ground. Lord Adam has shown himself to be a disaster in a crisis. Someone with his status and title is a dangerous person to have as an enemy."

"I have sworn an oath to The Old duke. His heir has the right to renew that oath or dismiss me as he pleases." Kyrie replied. He shrugged. "If it comes to that, I can always go back to adventuring."

For the first time Kyrie saw Orvan chuckle. "We may both end up adventurers again fairly soon." He turned to look over the small wagon train. After a moment he started leading his horse to the river. As he unsaddled his mount Sir Orvan said "Until then, it's going to be a long four days."

Pulling the saddle from his own horse Kyrie nodded. "Aye."

Orvan led his mount just a foot deep in the river and started cleaning the signs of battle from her. Kyrie followed suit, wiping the blood, gore and travel dirt from his horse. More than half the men of the campaign joined them in the river. Focusing on cleaning his mount Kyrie had not noticed Orvan had moved to be almost back to back with him. They were alone in the space between their horses when Orvan taking the opportunity said "Should we be compelled to return to adventuring, I would follow your lead, my Lord."

Glancing at the knight Kyrie replied "Nonsense. Knights lead adventures."

Orvan smiled and looked back at Kyrie. "Once a named Lord, always a named Lord, m'lord."

Kyrie looked away. "That's as maybe."

Neither spoke for several minutes. Kyrie lead his horse from the river first. Wiping his mount down to get the excess water from his hair to prevent him from catching a chill Kyrie watched Orvan. The knight was leading his horse to again stand next to Kyrie and his mount. With his mount's needs satisfied Kyrie turned to his own saddle and gear. He occasionally glanced at Orvan but the knight was busy with his

own equipment. Once Kyrie was finished cleaning and checking over his gear he made his way back to the river.

Standing waist deep in the river Kyrie pulled his robe over his head and started scrubbing the fabric as clean as it would come. A third of the men were also standing in the river cleaning themselves or their clothes. He could see the now usual glances his way. Finished with the robe he walked from the stream and hung the garment on a tree branch to dry. Wadding back into the river he stopped with the water halfway up his thighs. Kyrie took a deep breath and dove into the bracing waters.

Breaking back to the surface Kyrie shook the water from his ears and the fur of his head. Looking at the chuckles he smiled, knowing the comments were coming he swum into shallower water. He'd heard it before from his own men. The smile on his face was more from knowing that they had no idea how good it felt to shake the water from his fur.

Feeling the riverbed underfoot he started moving toward the bank smiling at the good natured ribbing he was receiving. Listening to the jokes and ribald humor Kyrie started in on cleaning himself. It took a good deal longer for him to clean the dried blood from his fur than the men around him.

The comments stopped as he started stepping from the river. He had forgotten that most of these men hadn't seen him with wet fur before. With his fur dripping wet and still waterlogged it lay flat against his skin. The men had only thought they knew how well muscled Kyrie was.

There was also his sheath. That magnificent and now clearly visible pocket of male flesh was far larger than any human could boast. Kyrie's sheath was now easily twice the size his erection had been when he had still been human. With his fur wet they could all see that even soft and tucked away in his fox sheath his male hood was far larger than any of the humans that stood staring. He was fortunate that his balls were still somewhat the same size, especially when in the saddle. Kyrie smirked at the looks knowing too that they were thinking of the affect cold water had on human male anatomy.

Besides seeing his outsized male anatomy they all saw in no uncertain terms just how much potential strength there was below the fluffy fur. He dismissed their stares and climbed from the river and shook his whole body.

He was pleased to find his mount had not only stayed close to the river bank but still stood next to his saddle. With his horse dry Kyrie started saddling him back up. By the time he was finished his own fur was half dry as well. His robe was another story. Given a choice between donning the still damp robe and parading around in just his fur Kyrie chose to use his body heat to speed the drying of his robe.

Soon enough they were back in the saddle and on the way again. Kyrie noticed a change in the attitude of the men on patrol with him. He had always felt there was respect behind the mandated titles and gestures. Now, after everyone seeing his previously hidden physical power there was something more. He was enjoying the same amount of respect Sir Orvan had always been given by the men of their contingent.

There was little sign of their enemy for the rest of the day. As the eventful day ended they settled in for the night only to have the routine of campaigning and threat of the enemy spare them from boredom. Kyrie heard comments that they had left the kobold and lizard behind. Kyrie doubted they were clear of them but held his tongue. He could see that it was merely wishful thinking on the part of Sir Adam's men. He and the rest of the men of Orvan's contingent were still watchful and ready for another attack.

The next morning Lord Adam was once again asserting his title. All the men of his contingent were assigned to guard the wagons. It was the men of Kyrie's and Orvan and Sir Foster's commands that would be patrols and scouts. Sir Foster had been the only knight stationed at the fort. Only six of his men

were considered by Sir Orvan capable enough to ride as scouts. It wasn't much of an improvement on their numbers but they'd take anything until they could get to Castle Hilldale.

Throughout the next morning the scouts were constantly harassed by lizardmen and gnoll. To Kyrie it was as if they were heading toward an enemy stronghold. He'd been on campaigns when, as they closed in on their goal, resistance to their advance increased dramatically. He thought that they were perhaps seeing the beginnings of just such an increase. Orvan must have had the same concerns. The knight did not call for a rest stop at mid-day.

It was Lord Adam that an hour after high noon to be the one to call a halt. Caught off guard the patrols had continued advancing and for a few precious minutes left the wagon train behind, unprotected. With only the rearguard with the caravan it was another perfect opportunity for an attack. Luckily the patrols were able to return before any attack came.

Kyrie could see that Sir Orvan was seething with anger at the reckless stop. In order to prevent a confrontation with the lord Kyrie engaged the knight in conversation. The ploy worked long enough for Sir Orvan to calm down.

For all the small skirmishes the patrols had encountered all morning there was nothing once they got moving again. It was as if the resistance had vanished. Adam boasted that they had outrun their enemy but those that had even the slightest experience adventuring knew better. They were on a heightened alert and Sir Orvan even pulled in the scouts. Even when it came time to stop for the evening there had still been no sign of so much as even a single kobold.

They had stopped for the night at a clearing on the high rounded bank of the river they were following. Sir Orvan began ordering that the wagons be used at the narrowest part of the oxbow as barricades to any attack. Lord Adam belayed his orders and disregarding any advice the knight tried to give and instead ordered that the wagons be protected above all else. As the knight stormed off, Kyrie was forced to reassess Lord Adam.

The man was clearly clever enough when it came to his own comfort. Having experienced the attack on the hilltop fort he must have known the wagons would likely have been set fire. He'd then have to ride horseback or walk for several days before reaching the safety of Castle Hilldale.

Sir Orvan set double watches. He also set Kyrie in command of the watches for the first four hours of the night. He would relieve the Fox Lord himself and assume command for the next four hours. Most of Kyrie's watch was uneventful. It wasn't until toward the end of the watch that he caught the scent of the enemy on the breeze. Fortunately they had been forced to come from upwind due to the caravan's placement.

Kyrie was patrolling at the far end of their encampment. He turned back at the first whiff of kobold and in only a few yards came upon one of the guard patrols. He ordered one of the men to go straight to Orvan and wake him. Cassy was to tell Sir Orvan that he'd caught the scent of the enemy approaching and then begin waking everyone.

The man whispered "Yes, M'lord." and made haste back to where Orvan had bedded down.

Kyrie and the other man that had been on patrol started waking everyone nearby. Kyrie had woke twenty some men when he paused to stare into the night. The scent of the approaching enemy had been intensifying by the second. Not only had his sense of smell been improved through the curse but his night vision was far better as a hybrid fox. In one of his occasional glances to the tree line he'd spotted movement.

A half second before Kyrie called out the alarm he heard someone else give the shout. The next few seconds were a scramble of activity. Those that were awake rushed to reenforce the defenses while those still sleeping rushed to gather their weapons. Kyrie found himself taking a position between two of Orvan's men. They had chosen to make their stand at the center of the defensive line.

They faced the rush of kobold and lizardmen together. With the tree line so close he didn't have the proper time to prepare a spell, so he simply activated a spell imbedded in the staff and waited for the enemy to come. Kyrie noticed just before the approaching mass reached them that men continued to fill their ranks. The night became a blur of flashing blades, screams, swinging clubs, shouts and shrill barks of hatred. As always when finding himself in combat Kyrie focused on staying alive first, and backing those that counted on him.

Devon's blade again felt as if it sought contact with the enemy. It was becoming a disturbing feeling that the blade had been imbued with a greater fighting skill than he could display. It seemed to almost threaten to turn in his grip at every swing. It was his staff that gave him the rush of confidence that he desired.

With every contact it made, Kyrie's staff sent his foes reeling back either injured or dead. Sometimes sparks flew from the point of impact. He often saw smoking scotch marks on those kobold that fell from his staff blows. Even their weapons striking his staff only sent his power rebounding back against them. It quickly became his primary weapon.

He lost track of time within minutes of the start of battle, but at some point he heard the cry of warning. Their line had been broken.

"Shit." He heard from his right.

The man on his left asked "Lord?" as if for permission to break ranks.

"Go." Kyrie ordered. He'd seen the focus of the rushing kobold change toward their flank and the wagons. An instant later the man to his left retreated. The warrior to his right stayed, and with a glance turned so that they could fight back to back. It was now a rout. The massive numbers of the enemy had forced them to abandon the defensive line and reform in small clusters. Each small group would be forced to fight in isolated pockets until someone somewhere could gain the upper hand. Kyrie only hoped Sir Orvan had made it to the horses with enough men to make that difference.

Kyrie was amazed at the size of the force that had been brought against them. The numbers had to have been far more than they'd seen at the fort. There was little time to think, every moment he was trading blows and defending himself but one thought filtered through despite the desperateness of the situation. That thought was how any Lord could allow an enemy force this strong to rise up within his fiefdom.

Some time later, it felt like hours, the kobold started running. In a matter of minutes the press of kobold fighters coming at them eased to the point that Kyrie and Finnigan could once again take the occasional moment to scan their surroundings. Lizardmen shouted, and gnoll raged, perhaps at the kobold's betrayal in their craven retreat. Kyrie couldn't understand the exact words but the emotion and rage in their utterance was clear. A moment or two later Kyrie saw a mounted man sweep past.

Somehow, somewhere on the battlefield Orvan had managed to mount enough men to turn the battle to their favor. In a few more minutes the last of the enemy were fading back into the tree line. Kyrie breathed a sigh of relief. He turned at the feel of Finnigan's weight falling against him. Catching the warrior before he fell to the ground Kyrie started looking the man over.

There were small cuts and gashes all over him. The left side of his face was bruised but in his quick check on him Kyrie could find nothing serious. The man was just battered and exhausted. Standing Kyrie guessed this was yet another aspect of his being a fox hybrid. While fatigued and sore he still felt capable of fighting on. Still, he fully respected any man that would fight at his back to the point of exhaustion.

Kyrie waited by the man's side until someone came to see to the fighter. Once Finnigan was being looked after he walked through the encampment. He didn't bother trying to count the number of kobold dead. He did spot dead lizardmen and an ever greater number of gnomes. There was also a distressing number of human dead. Standing in the area where the wagons had stood he saw nothing but debris. The enemy had literally smashed them to pieces during the attack.

He made his way to a cluster of eight men wondering what could interest so many under such circumstances. Stopping at the outer fringe of the circle he was able to look over the shoulders of those gathered. Lord Adam lay on the ground covered in blood. Kyrie walked away. He wanted to be as far as possible from the scene before he weakened and spoke his mind.

He pitched in to start checking the encampment for any human still alive. Those that were able were still at the task as the first hints of dawn brightened the sky. The losses they had suffered during the attack shocked Kyrie. Of the hundred and fifty or so that had escaped from the fort sixteen were left, and three of those were expected to die from wounds by the end of the day. Of the forty men that had started the campaign twelve were left. Sir Orvan had survived, but was left with a broken arm and a long ugly looking gash from the top of his left ear down to his neck.

Kyrie was not without injury. Now that the fight was over his body was feeling the typical drain. Covered in aches and a number of cuts and bruises he still worked on clearing the bodies and searching for human survivors. He was happy to see that three of his own men had survived. A tribute to Captain Gale's training. Unfortunately, Eric had taken a spear through the eye and another named Florin had fallen to an axe in the back. The others had as many wounds as Kyrie, but none that would disable them.

By midday the three expected deaths had occurred. They were left with twenty five survivors. A third of those were unable to move on their own. With only five horses left everyone that could walk. Sir Orvan made the tough decision that they could not spare the time to tend to the dead. Litters were made and an hour after high noon the remains of the campaign set off.

Lord Adam's remaining men, both of them, dragged his litter behind themselves. Adam had suffered greatly. The list of his injuries as shocking as it was impressive. Left leg broken in two places, his right leg broken as well just below the knee. His left hand severed, and right wrist had been crushed to such an extent that it should have been amputated. The swelling was even now threatening to burst the purplish skin like an overcooked sausage. There were several stab wounds to his stomach and chest. The worst however was the back of his skull had been half crushed. It was clear he had been the focus of a vicious attack once their lines had crumbled.

Kyrie marveled that the man was still alive, for a few hours. He was able to get close to Lord Adam when they stopped for the night. He sensed a potent magic about the human. Kyrie guessed the man possessed an amulet or a similar totem that was keeping him from dying. For all the damage his body had suffered, it looked more like a fate worse than death. He'd never seen anyone recover from even half the injuries Lord Adam's body had suffered.

That night and the next day they were unmolested by the enemy. As they walked Kyrie conversed with Sir Orvan. Eventually the knight got around to Lord Adam. His unasked question did not surprise the mage.

"So then, I have to assume by now that some manner of magic is keeping the man alive."

Kyrie nodded. "I suspect he has an amulet of some sort. Any other spell would have failed by now."

"His men will not allow anyone to come near his body."

"It's pointless to interfere, or even argue the point with them. Magic can keep the body alive but I doubt his mind will recover."

Sir Orvan looked at him for a few paces before nodding his understanding. "His blood is being poisoned from that wrist."

Kyrie almost whispered his reply. "He'll be no better than one of the undead by the time we get to Castle Hilldale."

Orvan hissed through his teeth. They said nothing more about the fallen lord the rest of the day.

On foot and burdened with wounded they made poor time. They were however left free from attacks for several more days. Sir Orvan confided to Kyrie that he was half convinced the battle had broken the enemy's ability to field a force strong enough to pursue them. Kyrie certainly hoped so.

He had recovered most of his strength but many of the men around him were still suffering. His rapid recovery was even more proof of his fox hybrid form's superiority over his old human body. He could remember a number of times he'd been forced to travel while wounded. The requirement often took an even greater toll than the initial wounds. Only a few days after the battle Kyrie was almost completely healed from his wounds. He kept silent of that fact, and even hid the evidence from the men struggling to gain safety.

Fate or fortune saw to it they arrived at Castle Hilldale without suffering another attack. They did however lose two more men. Other than the campaign against the Wraith King and Queen, Kyrie had never been involved in a campaign that had suffered such devastating losses. Besides himself Lord Adam and Sir Orvan only one other knight had survived.

Once inside the walls Kyrie watched as the wounded were tended. Most of the men collapsed or sat on the ground where they had stopped just inside the gate. Sir Orvan stood in the middle of the open gate staring out into the wilderness. When he turned to finally walk inside the walls of the castle the look on his face was grim.

Kyrie knew his mind. He too felt that the fight that was now being called The Battle at Oxbow Rise was just the beginning of a war.