

"Is that everyone today?" Kyrie asked as he looked at Peter.

"Yes, M'Lord." The young man said.

"Good." Kyrie stood and said "Thank you everyone." as he stepped away from the table.

He thought it was best to have a routine. He had kept the same predictable routine for over two years now. Starting with the morning audience in the great room, followed by practice with his guard and the scouts. Once finished he bathed because he needed it by then. The early part of his afternoons were spent touring the Keep and grounds, listening to more questions and suggestions. He liked being able to keep in contact with everyone.

Even though a mage he'd also been an adventurer most of his life, until defeating the Wraith Queen and King. Due to circumstances brought about by an unwary campaign member he and several others had found themselves in half animal bodies, and only inches tall. They'd managed to break part of the curse, but were left altered. While he had managed to secure property and a title he was seen by his titled peers as eccentric in mind as much as displayed by his body. It was now well known that he felt those that served him should be treated with the respect they proved to have earned. As eccentric as it may have seemed he was comfortable going about without a personal guard.

Satisfied that everyone had come to him in the more informal situation of his wanderings he climbed the Keep's lone tower to his chambers. Carrol was with their son. He sat next to her and watched as the young vulpine hybrid fed. Kyrie stroked his son's head feeling the soft fur under his paw pads. Sitting back with a smile he looked at his wife.

She shared his gaze for a few seconds before looking at their son. He knew her well enough that her silence was a good sign. She'd have spoken if she wanted to. She simply didn't waste words.

Once Carrol finished with their son she stood and handed the young fox hybrid to Kyrie. He hadn't previously paid attention to how fast human children grew but his son seemed to be thriving beyond anyone's expectations. Already twice the size of human children his same age he was beginning to walk, on two legs. More pleasing to his mother was his ability to learn proper toilet manners, another much more rapid development than in humans. His rapid advancement had not been lost on his father.

Standing when his wife was ready to take charge of their son once again Kyrie gave her an affectionate kiss and departed to his study rooms. As with this routine he would spend the rest of the day in the rooms he'd taken for his magical studies. Descending to the lower levels of the dungeons below the Keep, Kyrie reached the third level and stopped at a new door blocking entry to the entire bottom level.

He'd cast a special locking spell on it after it had been installed. With a quick gesture and to him simple spell the door opened and closed behind him. Inside his two apprentice were already inside and hours deep into their studies. They both greeted him and stood from their study tables.

Kyrie stepped to the front of Garson's table first. Looking over his work he asked "Any questions?"

"No, Master." The young man replied. He was average height for a human, putting him at a few inches shy of six feet. Thin and somewhat dark skinned he kept his brown hair cropped close to his scalp. Brown eyes stared back at Kyrie as he continued looking over the young man's work. He was copying a spell found in the Keep's secret library for his own growing collection.

"Your handwriting is improving very nicely." Kyrie observed.

"Thank you, Sir."

"Continue." He said as he turned to his other apprentice.

She watched as he looked over her work. At only five feet Kyrie literally towered over her. Despite that she had the character to confidently stand up to his examination. He glanced at her a moment before nodding at her work. Light brown hair that fell halfway down her back and a body with good proportions, had Kyrie not already been in love with his wife she'd be a tempting female.

Kyrie pointed and observed "Trying this without material component. This deviation your own idea?"

"Yes, sir. I was thinking that I could access my own potential energy to compensate."

Looking at Max's hazel eyes staring back at his Kyrie said "That greatly increases the difficulty."

"I understand, sir." she replied.

Kyrie kept the smile from his face as he said "Continue." His own apprenticeship had been much like he was giving them. Very little praise and hours of study and transcribing to his own books. He did however give his apprentices freedom to choose their own areas of study. While Garson had ability it was Maxine that had imagination and an intuitive sense of magic that gave her the potential to be a great mage.

Sitting at his own table he looked over his own recent work but his mind lingered on his two apprentice for a few moments longer. They'd both shown up over the last year. Hearing rumors of The Fox Lord that was also a mage they'd both sought him out and asked to be taken on as his apprentices. Max had been studying under him for only ten months and, for Kyrie, her rapid improvement was pleasing to watch. Getting his thoughts back on his own study Kyrie focused on his nearly complete self imposed task.

He'd first thought the curse that had altered him and his campaign companions to be a fairly simple one. Instead he'd spent the good part of the last two years researching it. It had taken that long unraveling the theory and application problems that had to have been solved in order to create the curse that had changed him. Actually he reminded himself that he should stop thinking of it as a curse. It could more properly called an alteration spell, an incredibly complex and powerful one at that.

His son was simple proof of that. Kyrie was now a fox human hybrid. His son had bred true and been born a healthy fox hybrid. Normally magical hybrids were either sterile or only produced something deformed and stillborn. The birth of his healthy son was the key to the spell Kyrie had been seeking. He and his son would sire fox hybrids, so too would their male offspring. Male hybrid would breed dominant according to what he'd learned of the spell. Females would be recessive to hybrid but dominant to human pairings. His wife, should she have children with a human would have hybrid raccoon offspring.

For whatever reason, the Wraith Queen and King had sought to create a new race of animal hybrids. His research was discovering even more about what this new race were intended to be capable of. Just a few months ago Kyrie had learned he actually had control over just how much of his intended fox heritage he could exhibit. He and possibly his companions were the first in a new race of shapeshifters. He could change himself to a four legged stance that looked, to him almost like a feral version although he was a much larger size than a feral fox. He would soon learn more about his new race.

The discovery explained his greater size and strength and his ability to heal so much faster than humans. At the time of the curse being cast over them he had been holding the staff of the Wraith Queen. He had first thought the staff had altered the spell on all of them and on Kyrie to greater benefit because of that physical contact. Instead, he now knew he'd been researching the spell that had been imprinted into the staff, but that wasn't the same as the curse. Placed on the Wraith Queen's crown the

curse had been a derivative of that spell. The spell imprinted in the staff would not leave those changed to hybrid only six inches tall.

Discovering that he had lead to another aspect of his new form. They were also intended as a new race to be much, much larger. Through the course of his study of the spell Kyrie speculated they were intended to be more than twice the size of humans. Hybrids were intended to be larger than humans by as much as the related curse had made its victims smaller. That also explained the tremendous size of his male hood.

He had secretly cast a divining spell on his son a week ago. His son was going to grow to his full true size. Only an educated guess at this point Kyrie thought Lazlo was going to stand over fourteen feet, maybe as great as fifteen feet tall. He'd be a giant among the humans. And he would bred true, copying the stamp of his father, if he could find any compatible females.

Kyrie himself could stand that tall even now, should he wish. Once he'd figured out how to release the full potential of his hybrid form he'd sought privacy in the woods and seen for himself. At his actual natural size as a hybrid he stood more than fifteen feet tall, by his rough measurements he was just shy of sixteen feet. His true hybrid body was huge and far stronger in comparison to even his current size.

He sat back in his chair and thought back on his experiment. He smiled to himself at the memory. Thick powerful muscle had swelled across his entire frame, about double the comparative muscle mass he now sported. He had noticed too that his hybrid form was far tougher than humans, or even his half form. He'd tested his strength by snapping a tree brach off from its trunk. The splinters from the shattered bough had flown everywhere but none had even so much as scratched him. His member was better proportioned but still magnificent in its huge size. At his true hybrid size he would never sit a horse, but he would be able to lift one effortlessly.

Yes, he thought back on that night. He just needed to convince his wife into seeing her true size. He needed to see if the others in the campaign were affected by spell or curse. Kyrie's heart hoped she was the result of the spell, but his mind advised caution. It was more likely she was under the remains of the curse, but that could be changed.

The wraith Queen and King had finished the spell, and had been ready to use it but for some reason had delayed. Kyrie remembered that the campaign had been commissioned in response to a rising number of kobold attacks in the region. He now thought they had been in the process of gathering their forces to cast the spell on a vast number of kobold simultaneously, turning them into an unstoppable army of hybrid. To think that they'd simply waited too long gave Kyrie pause.

His imagination was good enough to give him nightmares. In a very common one he and the campaign arrived at the Keep only after the transformation spell had been cast on thousands of kobold. They had rode into the meadow outside the Keep to see it filled with a thousand strong army of sixteen foot tall hybrid. He and the party faced giant animal hybrids that stood twice as tall as they were while in the saddle. Each hybrid a mass of muscle, more than strong enough to crush a puny human to pulp and tear a horse limb from limb. In his nightmares he witnessed just how powerful a hybrid was when compared to humans. The party of the campaign had been crushed in minutes, but by the end of the nightmare battle Kyrie stood among the hybrid. More recently, he occasionally commanded the army of hybrid. He was more unnerved that this new version of the dream was seeming less and less a nightmare.

But instead of that alternative outcome Kyrie and the campaign had shown up and thwarted their plans. Kyrie had little doubt they would have cast the spell on the kobold in their service. There had already been hundreds of them at the time. They had been close to raising an army of hybrids that nothing could stand against. That same spell capable of raising an army of hybrid was imprinted in the

staff and could be cast as many times as the holder wished it. Should he wish, Kyrie could raise that army. He could fulfill his place in the dream of him heading a vast army of mighty giant hybrid.

As a full sized hybrid he reveled in his strength and power, just as he had in his test. Every time he had that dream he woke with his cock at its maximum size laying atop his chest and stretching up past his ears and even forcing his muzzle to the side. His huge monstrous member just a hint of the sheer power his full hybrid size promised. The power and strength his full hybrid size possessed was compelling, the idea lured him on. Almost daily now he imagined what it would be like to walk among humans, displaying his true size and strength. Kobold, changed from the small creatures they now were to massive powerful hybrids would have been driven mad with that much power. They'd be an unstoppable hateful force much as his nightmare warned him. Kyrie knew he had the discipline to keep from overstepping the limits of his own power. Still he refrained, mostly due to how seductive the call to that power was.

He vividly remembered his battle with the Wraith Queen. He'd been amazed and completely outclassed by her prowess. She'd been able to cast spells in a fraction of the time it had taken him, and her power. His then apprentice had taken the brunt of one of her spells unprepared and unprotected. The scorched outline that was the only evidence he'd ever existed could still be detected on the wall after years of attempts to scrub the evidence away. He was now down to trying to divine if his brand of hybrid was meant to be natural magic users or even magical creatures. It was proving difficult, for now.

At the end of the portion of the day he set aside for his studies, Kyrie stood and without a word to his apprentices departed. He didn't bother putting his work away. He'd cast a spell that forbade anyone from trespassing on his half of what used to be the lower throne room. His apprentice couldn't even pass the barrier he'd set. He knew this because neither had claimed the reward he'd set for that feat, yet.

No, his staff still leaned in a corner on his side of the room. He hardly needed it anymore. Should either of them prove capable of crossing his magical barrier they could study the staff as much as they wished. His own use and study of that powerful tool had increased his own skill and potential tremendously. He guessed he was now powerful enough to be considered an arch mage. The spells that had once taken him great effort were now as simple as a thought and snap of his fingers.

Kyrie smiled as he climbed the stairs. While he hadn't found the breakthrough he sought he knew he was close. He now understood almost the entire spell that had created his hybrid body. The final piece was just a matter of understanding the magical syntax properly. He wanted to be certain before he decided anything. He felt he was perhaps days away from that full understanding.

It was in the syntax within the makeup of the spell that made it a curse or a boon. He now understood how the staff had acted in that moment. The curse had been waiting within the queen's crown. When triggered it had changed everyone present to a six inch tall hybrid. The difference in the results was a small thing in the casting. An element in the syntax as simple as a plus or minus sign in a mathematical equation. With Kyrie holding the staff that had just accepted him it had altered the curse on him directly. It was now his hope that as a consequence it had also altered the curse on the others in a lesser extent.

Ironically had he not grasped the staff until after the curse had been triggered they would all have returned to human when it had broken. Still, he'd not have things any other way. There were even more benefits to becoming a hybrid that no one else yet knew.

Back in the main hall his thoughts turned back to Carrol and his son. He stopped just inside the door to see his wife had again taken her high seat and presided over dinner.

Carrol might or might not be able to reach full hybrid size. His son would grow to full size, and perhaps be able to control his own size as his father could. Lazlo would in just a few years grow to be far

too large not to raise eyebrows. He could solve the spell in a week to a month at most. Once done he'd have to come to a decision on what to do with it from there. That was a worry for later.

Tonight, he had time. He'd enjoy the life he had.

On his way to the end of the table Kyrie saw the knight he'd hired as game warden stand from the table at his approach. He greeted the knight "Sir Orvan, good to see you once again."

"My apologies for not reporting sooner, my lord. I arrived in the afternoon and was told you had already retired to your studies."

"Indeed, and again I appreciate your forbearance. Are you to ride out again tomorrow?"

"No, sir. I intend to give the horse and their riders a bit of rest. We'll depart again in one day." Orvan said with some humor.

Kyrie grinned back. "Good, sir. We'll discuss this further in the morning?"

"Yes, my lord." He replied and moved to the side.

"Good. Enjoy the night then." The fox said and clapped the knight on the shoulder as he stepped past him. Orvan had been dismissed from the service of his previous lord upon his return from campaign with a broken arm. That lord had been unwilling to wait for the knight's recovery or spend the necessary coin for a simple healing spell. When Kyrie had heard he had sent word that he would hire him on. Sir Orvan had come to him and pledged himself weeks later.

Now the game warden of the Keep he was riding three days out of five. Kyrie had split the hired men under his command. Half trained under captain Gale and the other trained under Orvan. Even then he saw to it that no man stayed under either command for too long. He wanted no separate loyalties, and it also saw to it that each man was equally trained. He thought it better to have more than one training master for his men. The arrangement had worked well in the months since.

Sitting at last at his own chair Kyrie looked to his wife with a smile.

"Welcome back from your dungeon my lord." Carrol said with a smirk.

Kyrie chuckled at the look. His wife had a playful streak as wide as her back. "Did I miss anything important?"

A shake of her head answered. "Other than Sir Orvan, who you've already seen, nothing of note."

"Thank you." He said as he watched a server set a plate of food before him. There were many nights when he stayed at his studies late. This too was another part of his routine everyone knew. As the server left he turned to Carrol. "And thank you too."

"You are most welcome, love."

As Kyrie ate he chatted with his wife, and a few of those seated nearby. The evening passed pleasantly and soon people were making their way from the hall. He and Carrol stood and thanking everyone said their goodnights and departed as well. Kyrie was certain there would be no boisterous parties in their absence. He was fairly informal but also kept a strong sense of discipline. As a former campaigner he understood how necessary that could be when the need arose.

Once in their bedchamber they both looked in on their son for a few minutes. The little fox was sleeping, curled up with his tail covering his muzzle. In their own room Carrol pulled off her clothing while staring at him. For his part Kyrie pulled his robe over his head and was left before his wife in nothing but fur.

Stepping close to him Carrol put a paw on his sheath and looking up said "I have a craving for some deep penetration tonight."

"You remember our caution word, my dear?" Kyrie replied.

"Of course, love." she answered grinning.

A moment later Kyrie cast the now simple spell that would allow them to experience each other without her coming to harm. Once done she proceeded to stroke his sheath while watching his progress.

He watched too. It was still amazing even after two years. He grew up out of his sheath rather quickly, growing to more than foot long in just a few seconds. His shaft lengthened far more than it widened. The effect, while stimulating beyond belief seemed to also border on the comical. His cock should have seemed reed thin due to the outlandishly longer proportions than he'd been as a human. Instead, now at three inches thick while just more than a foot and a half long his growing shaft exuded an impression of sexual power. And they both knew he was at the very beginning of his magnificent growth.

As Carrol shifted her paw to stroke his thick shaft he grew a bit more, soon rising to the middle of his chest. He already stretched above her head, and their fun was just beginning. Carrol took him in a two handed grip and using his huge cock as a tiller pulled him toward their bed, he followed without protest. Sitting on the edge she used her grip on him to position him so that his feet were planted just outside of hers. She let go of him and climbed backwards onto the bed.

He knew he was expected to follow her. He did not disappoint. The feel of his massive shaft as it struggled to support its own weight caused his cock to react with more growth. His knot started to strain against the sheath that still contained it, stretching his skin that covered it ever tighter. He carefully positioned his tip at her entrance and looked to meet her eyes.

With a nod from his wife Kyrie thrust. His entry was quick and profound in its affect. Groaning his pleasure he watched amazed at his progress. His male hood was still growing, expanding rapidly now. He could see the outline of his cock as it burrowed inside his wife even as he thrust again. The inches thick thick bulge in her belly that was his cock traveled up, up to reach her midsection and beyond at every thrust of his hips as he climbed up her prone body.

Her hands were all over the sliding, thrusting bulging outline of his cock plunging inside her. Again he could feel her stroking him through her own flesh, it caused even more growth in response. A few more thrusts and the bulge that indicated his progress spread her breasts apart. With a glance he confirmed what he already knew, only half his length was inside her. Crawling up closer to her, his thrust pushed him that much higher into her magically pliable body. It was then he finally felt his knot press up against her entry.

"Ready?" He asked smirking at the sight of his cock stretching and warping the pelt from her chest up past her chin.

"Oh, yes." Carrol said between pants. Her muzzle was forced to the side a bit to accommodate his pistoling shaft.

Shifting his hands to her sides Kyrie reared back and thrust as hard as he could. It wasn't enough. His knot had already grown to more than eight inches across, stressing the power of even his spell. With another rear back of his hips and a thrust he again failed to push his massive knot into his wife. Growling with the effort he thrust again and finally met with success. Looking he saw that her crotch had swelled deliriously wide with him inside her, making her look as though pregnant once again, and still he could see how his knot was growing ever thicker.

Pumping rapidly now he looked at his deformed wife. The spell they used for this made her flesh resilient enough to stretch and accommodate his otherwise impossible size. She now looked more like a furry overfilled wineskin with the incredible length of his cock pushing out above her head with each of his thrusts. She was stroking as much of him she could cover. The feeling was incredible, he was almost as stimulated as he could get, only now close to reaching his full size. The feeling of his now impossible sized cock plowing deep into his wife was so intense it sent stars through his vision.

She too shared in the absolute pleasure. That was the true power of his spell. He would have it no other way.

With his cock spearing into her whole body the level of stimulation she was receiving was likely far beyond that which he felt. Her hands thrust back at him through her flesh. Stroking over him in counterpoint to his thrusts they rose toward climax. Minutes went by as the pleasure and pressure built to a crescendo. He watched again as he came inside her. Of nearly normal volume he could see nothing of an increase at his tip but his knot just inside Carrol grew to its full width.

Collapsing together and panting from the mutual effort they lay side by side, locked was one. Kyrie pushed himself up to stare down at his wife from his extended arms. His paws rested on either side of her head and the fur covered outline of his massive shaft. His cock could now be measured in feet rather than inches. He grinned at her effort to look at the thick bulging shaft that stretched up alongside her head. Her hands were still slowly stroking his mighty length.

"I keep warning you not to do that." He said as she continued craning her neck and sliding her hands over the bulge of his cock still within her.

"I know." she said. As playful and mischievous as ever she continued stimulating him.

"Fine." He said as he arched his back to lean down to where they were joined. He started lapping at her exposed clit. It was an amazing sight to behold. His massive knot spread her flesh from within to the point where her clitoris was pushed out to great prominence. Kyrie started licking and taunting his wife even as she slid her hands over his wife-skin covered cock. He gave a couple uncontrolled thrusts at the pleasure she was giving him. The sight of his knot flexing larger back to its full size caused him to snort.

"You're just keeping us locked together for longer every time you do this." He said as he sat up and thrust into her once more.

She looked at him. "I know." she replied and grinned her pleasure.

He continued to occasionally thrust up into her and sometimes played with her clit. Still, he was amazed every time they pleased each other at the size of his own endowment and the capacity his spell gave his wife. He stood more than a foot taller than Carrol, and his cock reached well up past his own ear tips. Seeing the easily visible outline of his cock inside his wife and stretch out from her chest and a foot past his head only added to the stimulation she was giving him.

Taking a break from his own play Kyrie again examined himself. His knot was down to a foot wide and buried in his wife pushing the flesh of her belly out to an amazing huge rounded globe. His shaft reached up between her breasts splitting the valley of those magnificent orbs and continuing on up well

past her head. Her hands roved over the one foot or more thick pole of female raccoon flesh skin and fur that stretched out above her. She could only just reach the end of his cock with her arms extended all the way.

Still she played with his member kneading her skin to fondle his cock within her. He fought back by nibbling at her clit. It was a playful war of sexual one-upsmanship that took hours to finish. They both came again several times through the amazing ordeal.

After Kyrie's knot finally faded some time was spent with tender chat and a bit of stroking. They both fell asleep with his shaft still plunged deep within her.

The next morning was yet another day, both started their routines as always. It was at weapons practice that Kyrie mentioned the possibility of him riding with his warden and the men he chose to ride with him for that excursion. Sir Orvan smiled and nodded acceptance. Kyrie doubted he wouldn't hesitate to deny him any request should he feel it necessary. The man now respected him well enough to speak truthfully to him, even so far as to speak up against Kyrie's wishes when he felt it necessary.

With that settled he continued his day and continued study without finding the key to making a breakthrough. It was mostly due to his inability to find what he sought that encouraged his distraction of riding with Sir Orvan for a few days. Even then, with the arrangements made Kyrie's mind wandered to the ride the following day. It came as a bit of a surprise when a knock sounded on the door to his dungeon study room.

He sat and watched as Garson stood and made his way to the door. Unlocking it and pulling it open he stepped aside to allow Kyrie to see who had disturbed them.

Peter said "My Lord, a rider has arrived from Castle Riverveiw."

"I'll be along shortly." Kyrie said to him and watched as he bowed and turned to climb back upstairs.

Kyrie stood and buckled the sword belt at his waist before following his aide. In the main hall he saw his wife entertaining a man that had clearly ridden all day. He was sitting at the table eating. They typically fed any guest or messenger arriving during the day. From the way the hall looked it was about an hour before the evening meal.

The man turned at the sight of Kyrie entering the hall and stood from the table. "My Lord Kyrie, I have been sent with word from Castle Riverview."

"I see. Sit, finish your meal, sir." Kyrie said.

With an awkward bow the young man sat and resumed his meal. Kyrie looked him over. He was dressed poorly for a messenger. Nor did he look like the typical fighter or man at arms sometimes tapped for the task of messenger. He was also young enough that his beard was little more than hopeful beginnings. He also stuffed his face as if he hadn't eaten in days. Kyrie wondered at the happenings at the duke's castle that would have them send a messenger of his like.

As the messenger ate Kyrie got himself a cup of wine. He usually didn't drink until the evening meal, but since they were close to serving hour he felt justified in starting early.

Minutes later the messenger finished and sat back to look at Kyrie and Carrol. "Thank you my lord, lady."

"What is your name, sir?" Kyrie asked.



"Jevon, sir." He answered before wiping his mouth with a sleeve. "I have been sent with word from castle Riverview."

"Yes, what is your message." Kyrie asked becoming a little irritated. This young man was clearly not trained to be a messenger. That they would send one such as he was yet another slight he had to endure. His hybrid nature tended to make people think lesser of him.

"The Old Duke is dead. You are requested to attend the coronation of the new duke in two days."

Kyrie blinked and sat back. "In two days?" He asked. The Keep was only one hard days ride from Riverview. He understood that under the circumstances they had scraped the bottom of the barrel for messengers. There were a large number of forts and other keeps and castles that were beholden to the old duke. As close as he was to Riverview and yet he rated only a young man that from the looks of him was likely grabbed from the stables.

"We'll ride to Riverview tomorrow."

"Aye sir." He young man said and looked uncomfortable.

It was clear he did not know what to say or do next. "We'll put you up in lodgings for the night." Kyrie said as he looked around.

He saw Isladore standing a few yards from them, waiting. She was one of Carrol's favorites. Beckoning her over he instructed the young woman to find a place for Jevon. As she led him away Carrol snorted.

Looking at his wife he raised his eyebrows in question.

"He's young." Was all she said. Her tone said volumes.

"Yes. Let me know what your spy gets from him."

His wife laughed. "I will, love." She answered as she stood and caressed his cheek in passing. Kyrie watched as she made her way to the kitchens. She had come to like being a lady, owning land and title. Carrol was the one that ran and oversaw most of the daily activities of the keep. He knew he was lucky to have her at his side.

During the course of the evening meal Kyrie let Sir Orvan and Gale know of the change of plans. They would both ride with him along with two others of their choosing. His night with Carrol was one of the best and most satisfying they had experienced in months. The next morning Kyrie and his small entourage rode out.

Sir Orvan had picked a man named Finnigan to ride with him. He was new to the Keep having joined them with Orvan. Kyrie trusted the man, he had been the one that had stood back to back with him in the pitched fight now known as the battle of Oxbow Rise. Gale had chosen a young man by the name Aaron. He'd been at the Keep for more than a year and among the best Gale had trained from scratch. Aaron had advanced far quicker than Kyrie had.

Carrol had passed on everything Isladore had learned from Jevon. It wasn't necessary for Kyrie to pass that along to anybody else. Jevon talked for most of the ride. They were all amazed that the kid barely paused to breathe. It was a very informative ride.

First in importance was that Lord Adam's health had never improved. He was still alive but even a year after the battle that should have killed him he had yet to regain consciousness. His son, Francis was

to take his grandfather's title. Kyrie wondered at that silently. It was a bit presumptuous to take his grandfather's title without the consent of the king the Old duke had served. If the new duke asked Kyrie to renew his oath it would put them in a tricky spot.

Jevon also informed them all of the raids that continued. Kyrie had not been called to participate again but the western third of the Dukedom was now under constant threat. Kyrie had thought his area of the Duke's border would have been the area to see such incursions. The Keep was only two days ride from the barrier between worlds. The region was notorious for being the source of such incursions in the past.

The constant sorties to counter the raids were noticeably draining the resources of the Dukedom. Over a third of the duke's knights had fallen in battle over the past two years. Having asked specifically about Orvan's former lord they were told that he too had fallen in battle. It was clear that the strength of the enemy forces were not only increasing but using tactics never seen from kobold or lizardman before. Kyrie wondered if it had anything to do with his theory about the wraith King and Queen sending out the call for a prospective army.

The rest of Jevon's talk was a combination of rumors and gossip. The latest court intrigue. The hardships of city life with all the raids going on. The latest hangings, and why they'd been punished. Kyrie filtered most of that out. He didn't want to get involved.

They reached Riverview well before sunset. The city was a mass of chaos with so many riders coming in at the same time. Kyrie and his men found that a room couldn't be had at any price. He was also to learn that his status had fallen to where lodgings in the castle had not been reserved for him. He slept with his men outside the city.

Waking before the sun was up they found a bit of food before making an effort to gain entry to the castle. It turned out only Kyrie was admitted entry. With a nod of acceptance to the guard he directed his men to wait for him where they'd spent the night.

Kyrie was able to report his arrival after having to stand in the courtyard waiting for more than an hour. He was informed the coronation would take place the next day two hours before noon. Until then he was not needed. Satisfied that he could escape the overcrowded and filthy castle he rejoined his men. They idled the day in a little practice but mostly spent the day relaxing.

Getting back into the city the next morning was more of a challenge than Kyrie expected. Even the obvious nature his appearance displayed to all who he was he was forced to surrender his sword at the city gate. Finally inside he found the streets filled with bustling people, carts, horse, and even the occasional snake oil salesman. It took him nearly an hour to get to the castle. Finally inside the castle itself Kyrie was shown into the audience chamber and left standing behind the rail with the rest of those summoned to attend. He slowly made his way to the back of the crowd, considering his height he had an unobstructed view of the center of the chamber and the high chair.

Kyrie waited surrounded by unfamiliar humans until the ceremony began. He found the wait tedious and boring. From the way those around him were acting, he wasn't the only one. Finally, with the thump of the majordomo's ceremonial staff everyone fell silent. The old majordomo must have died. The man that now held the majordomo's staff of office was a young man with light hair. He also filled out his clothes much better than his reed thin predecessor. Moments later the Duke's successor entered and slowly walked the length of the great hall until he turned and stood just before the high chair.

Kyrie had expected a priest to perform the naming ceremony, but the man that stood at Lord Francis' side was dressed more like one of the knights of the old duke. Kyrie found he was interested in the ceremony despite his aversion to politics and court intrigue. Having not seen a titling ceremony other

than his own he listened to the oath intently. It almost stirred in Kyrie a sense of loyalty to the new Duke, almost.

Once Lord Francis was declared the new Duke the knight performing the ceremony took a knee. Everyone followed suit. The Duke of Riverview castle didn't have or rate a crown. He simply sat in the high chair and looked straight ahead of himself. Three stamps of the majordomo's staff rang out and he called for three cheers for the new duke.

Once silence returned to the chamber the majordomo named the lord that still stood beside the Duke's chair. He came to his feet and sidestepped to kneel before the duke. Lord Kress gave his oath of loyalty to the duke as everyone watched.

The majordomo for Duke Francis then began calling forth each lord by name. They were then also asked to renew their oaths to the new duke. Kyrie watched as lord after lord renewed his or her oath. As time spun out Kyrie became nervous knowing when his name was called he'd have to make a decision. He was taken by surprise when the duke rose and after a brief speech of thanks left the audience chamber.

Left stunned Kyrie stood still as everyone started moving for the doors. He slowly made his way to an exit, he carefully stayed behind the shuffle toward the doors. He was wondering what the duke had intended by excluding him. He was stunned and angry, but in all honestly he also felt a bit of relief. Now however he and his wife would likely lose the Keep, and all the work he had put into refurbishing it. He was already making plans to ride back and start packing up all the magical tomes and books he'd found in the hidden library. He would leave behind the fourteen chests full of gold coin and other spoils of the campaign over his dead body.

He'd known people like this new duke. Any quick exit right after being excluded would be noticed. He'd have to at least make an appearance at the banquet. In Kyrie's experience there were several reasons for this, least of all was causing the duke to believe he still sought his validation. With thoughts of inspiring a false sense of security in the duke and his courtiers Kyrie followed the last of the crowd into the castle's banquet hall.

Food was already being served. The noise was easily enough to drown out what appeared to be a small group of musicians. There were less than half the needed seats for the huge assembly. He slowly wandered the hall and at the first opportunity grabbed a fairly large leg of what smelled like duck. With a slight grin he tore into the piece of meat. If he was going to be snubbed due to his hybrid nature he'd play the part.

He amused himself by eating from the bone as he wandered the duke's great hall and watching the reactions around him. Most looked on him as if they were thinking someone had let a wild animal inside. There were a few, a very small minority that smiled or grinned at the humor of the situation. Kyrie guessed they too felt the celebratory atmosphere and saw him as playing on expectations. He had to admit, they were actually partly right. Kyrie still remembered that it was the new duke that had supported him when his grandfather had titled him. He had to admit he wasn't as disappointed as he'd thought that he was now on the outs with the duke.

He discarded the now empty leg bone on a passing empty serving tray that was on its way back to the kitchens. With nothing left to amuse himself with and having a full belly he stood at the back of the great hall and watched the celebration for a time. He hadn't noticed Duke Francis was also wandering the hall until the man was just a few yards from him. Kyrie watched as the small entourage approached his position. He was enjoying the show while not taking part until a few people unexpectedly moved aside allowing the duke to step close to him.

"Lord Kyrie, good to see you again." Duke Francis greeted him. Despite the welcoming speech it was clear by the tone of the man's voice he was less than happy.

With an appropriate bow Kyrie replied. "Thank you, my duke. My condolences regarding your grandfather, and congratulations on today's grand event."

"Appreciated, Lord Kyrie." He replied and with the slightest of bows moved on.

Kyrie watched him greet a few others. Each time it was with a great deal more pleasantness. Feeling he'd done enough he lingered for a few more minutes as he wandered toward a side door and made an exit. He found he'd picked a door to one of the kitchens. As tempting as it was to copy his performance in the great hall Kyrie simply made his way to the far door and slipped out. He was able to find his way out of the castle without incident and headed for the city gate.

On his way he stopped at a number of carts selling foodstuffs. With the rare event of a titling ceremony happening there were plenty of farmers taking advantage of making a quick bit of coin in the city. Considering the treatment he'd received on entering the city he doubted any of his men would have been able to gain entry. It was close to sundown by the time he escaped Riverview. He had his arms full of the foods he'd bought.

A few minutes later he reached his men's encampment. To his surprise they had been able to find food and had more leftover than what he had brought. "I see the local farmers are plying their trade outside the walls as well." Kyrie said as he walked up to the small camp.

Chuckles greeted him.

Sir Orvan waited until the men were finished expressing their humor. "What of the duke's succession?"

"It went well enough. The celebration continues." Kyrie replied.

Orvan narrowed his eyes at his reply but remained silent as several men asked for details of the ceremony. An hour went by with eating and Kyrie telling them how the Duke's titling ceremony and celebration went.

Captain Gale finally asked "Do we ride out tomorrow?"

"Yes. There's no reason to stay, unless you wish to stay under these conditions another day?"

Gale smiled at the chortles and laughter of the men. "I'd rather not, my lord." He answered with a smile.

It was only minutes later that they turned in, there was little need to set a watch when surrounded by so many people. They hadn't brought anything they would need to worry about being stolen either. The next morning they gathered the horses from a makeshift stable erected for the occasion and rode out. An hour from Riverview sir Orvan called a halt where they ate from the provisions Kyrie had bought the night before.

Once they had resumed the ride home Sir Orvan asked more than stated "Lord, I noticed last night that you omitted where you gave the new duke an oath of loyalty."

"That's because I didn't." Kyrie admitted.

His men pulled their horses up. Kyrie stopped with them. Sir Gale said "You refused the duke?"

"No. I was not asked."

Kyrie watched the four men he most trusted with his life. They were looking to each other with an air of shock and disappointment. "Sirs, what is your intention?"

Sir Orvan spoke first. "My Lord, I gave my oath to you, and I will not break my word."

Kyrie nodded. "I acknowledge your oath and welcome your loyalty, but things have now changed. I no longer have the favor of the current duke and may be forced from the Keep. Under the circumstances I feel compelled to offer to free each of you from your oath, should you wish."

Captain Gale was the first to shake his head. "No my Lord, I choose to remain under oath to you and Lady Carrol."

Each of the three remaining men echoed Sir Gale.

Kyrie faced each of them as he stated. "I appreciate your loyalty, you honor me with your continued service." After a few moments of silence Kyrie spurred his horse to a walk.

"So," Captain Gale began the discussion "if the duke decides to replace you as Lord of the Keep, what then?"

"I intend to prepare for that eventuality when we return. As it is," Kyrie paused to look at the four men riding with him. "you know we found a library within the third level far greater than such a simple Keep should have possessed."

At the nods Kyrie said "Some of those histories are of expeditions into and past the barrier between worlds. More of those expeditions have come back than anyone knows."

He'd watched his men carefully. It was generally accepted that crossing the barrier was madness. It had become rumored that once crossed one found themselves in another land, a strange and terrifying land with little chance of returning. Kyrie began to speak of what he'd learned from the histories.

He began with their own world. The ancient map he'd found, drawn ages ago suggested Ereighland spanned more than ten thousand miles in any direction. Areas of the land were cut with various barriers to other worlds that could occasionally be crossed. The nearest barrier was only a few days ride from the Keep. The land to their east and on the other side of the barrier had been known as Freyland. It was told by the long ago adventurers that the land on the other side was much like their own.

Aaron interrupted with a question. "You mean to travel through the barrier, my lord?"

Kyrie shook his head and smiled. "No, what I have in mind is searching for one of the long abandoned watchtowers of that time. It's my understanding they are built much like the Keep was."

As his men relaxed he continued his explanation. The watchtowers had been spaced at intervals originally intended to defend against invasion. Well known at the time but now the exact locations lost due only to the lack of actually making note of what had then been common knowledge. It was one of these watchtowers that Kyrie wished to find and have as a place to go to if he were to be forced from the Keep.

Sir Orvan nodded as he said. "Aye, my lord. It is a good strategy to have a place to fall back to should the hordes that snipe at the duke's forces come against us unexpectedly."

"There is that too." Kyrie replied.

"Sir, do you wish to head straight for the Keep?" Captain Gale asked with a slight expectant smile on his face.

Kyrie looked at the four men with him and combed the fur under his chin with his claws. "We're not expected for a few days, but I hadn't intended on making this a prolonged scouting mission."

In looking at the men at his side they were all eager to continue the excursion. He smiled at their attitude. "We could stop at the Keep and pick up a few supplies, and a few more men. I also need to get some preparations started." He said, mostly thinking aloud.

Sir Orvan said "We wouldn't need to stop for more than an hour, maybe two to change horses and pack supplies."

Kyrie grinned at the suggestion. He had intended to ride with Orvan's next patrol. "It's still early enough to reach the Keep well before sundown with a hard ride."

Finnigan finally spoke up. "And time might be of the essence."

They all looked at the normally silent warrior for a moment. Kyrie, with a shout and digging his heels into the sides of his horse set off at a fast pace. The others sped up to keep with him. Soon they were riding near the horses top speed, tearing across the countryside. Riding without stop they made the now narrow meadow around the Keep with three hours to spare before sunset. The horses were exhausted and covered in sweat and lather when they stopped.

The manner of their arrival caused a bit of consternation but only for a few minutes. Sir Orvan and Captain Gale began the preparation for a speedy departure while Kyrie started issuing his own orders. His apprentice were to begin cataloging everything they had access to in preparation of moving it to another location. Carrol would oversee preparing the rest of the Keep. It came as no surprise to her that they might be forced to move on. She was a little disappointed that he was leaving again so soon, but more so that he was once again off on an adventure without her.

Kyrie came back to the Keep's courtyard to find that the expedition was ready to go. It had been less than an hour. Gale and Orvan had added only two men to the party. Taylor, an experienced tracker and one of the best Kyrie had ever seen. The man could see at a glance and instantly know the significance of what he was seeing that would take most others detailed examination and minutes of thought. Thomas was an aspiring ranger. Kyrie knew only one thing of note about the man other than the typical desire to always be in the field, much like any ranger he'd ever known. Thomas was a prodigy when it came to the sword. In the eight months he'd been training with the other men at the Keep he was quickly the equal of all but the Captain and the Warden.

Kyrie bore the looks of the men. He had changed to a simple black leather vest to hold the few items he thought he might need and a pair of knee length deep blue pants. The sword belt now bore Devon's sword on his left hip and his favorite long dirk on his right. His choice of clothing was not the most unusual thing about his appearance during the summer months. This had been the first time in a year he had bothered taking his staff from its place in the dungeon. As soon as he was astride his horse they were off. With fresh horse they set a fast pace and were leagues from the Keep before the sun dipped toward the horizon.

They only stopped for the night once the orb had dropped out of sight. A quick meal was taken before a watch was set and everyone bedded down. Kyrie was asleep in minutes.

He was nudged awake to the sight of a brightening sky and the rest of the party already awake. He stood looking around seeing his fellow party members smiling and in good humor. Kyrie took a moment to reign in his anger before stating "Considering I'm likely to be replaced as Lord of the Keep I expect to be treated as an equal on this campaign. That includes taking my share of watch duties."

The faces around him lost all sense of humor to be replaced with apologetic nods and downcast eyes. Kyrie shook his head. "I appreciate the desire to show your respect, but I, I still feel as though my real home is on campaign. I doubt I'll ever be comfortable as a lord."

Several moments went by in silence. His men were looking to each other in an effort to see who would speak first. It was Sir Orvan who broke the silence. "It's never about being comfortable in your position. You're a Lord, and respected. Each and every one of the men you command would follow you anywhere, sir."

Kyrie let the subject drop. The morning routine was completed rapidly and they were back to traveling. The pace was a much more moderate one, they needed to keep the horses capable of a faster pace should the need arise. As they rode they came across few of signs of activity and nothing that bespoke of a threat to the Keep or the lands beyond. It was the morning of the third full day of riding that Kyrie knew they were close to what they were looking for.

They had mounted a small rise and stopped at the sight of a faint shimmering in the air ahead. At a guess the curtain would intersect the ground ten to twelve miles away. It appeared to be a transparent wall and rose to a number of miles tall.

Sir Gale turned to Kyrie and said "You said that thing had disappeared years ago."

Kyrie nodded. "The histories said it had disappeared. They also say that there are periods where it fades just to come back. It was speculated that it comes and goes in an unguessable cycle." He looked at his companions and said with some irony. "It appears to be back."

Sir Orvan asked "So, we're likely to see the incursions of old start back up?"

"Possibly." Kyrie answered. "It's never been certain whether the same worlds reappear or not."

"Are you certain you wish to move to within a few hours ride of that thing?" Gale asked.

"Well, perhaps." Kyrie admitted and he spurred his horse forward. As the others followed he continued. "It's been a hundred and fifty years since the last recorded incursion that was considered a threat. According to the histories at the Keep that thing would have cycled back into existence a number of times since. It could just be that the world on the other side of that barrier has been more peaceful than it has been ages ago."

"Then again, they could be more warlike this time around." Sir Orvan commented.

Kyrie answered "If so it would be best to know sooner rather than later."

No one replied to the statement. As they approached the curtain Kyrie examined the landscape. Over the past day the trees had become scarce enough that it could hardly be considered forest anymore. Half a mile from the barrier it all turned to sparse grassland. Had they been able to continue in their own world they would eventually reach the edge of a seemingly endless desert.

They rode to where they could see the edge of the curtain meet the ground. Standing before the ephemeral border they stared at the strange sight. With the sun at their back they could also see another

sun on the other side of the curtain. From the angle it appeared the second world's sun was eight hours behind their own. The land on either side of the curtain looked completely different.

Just yards from the barrier a forest grew. While not thick enough to impede their travel it was full of the familiar variety of trees and brush.

Sir Orvan was leaning forward in his saddle and without looking to Kyrie asked "Is it magical?"

Kyrie glanced at him a moment. "If it is, it's a purely natural magic. I can get no sense of any spell from the thing." He dismounted and led his horse right to the edge of the curtain. Standing within feet of the barrier he could see no movement within the diffuse shimmer that gave the only indication of a barrier. As he stood examining the barrier movement made him look above himself.

A small sparrow glided through the glimmering wall without meeting any resistance. The others of the party stepped up next to him as he watched a few more birds cross back and forth through the shimmering curtain. They had followed a small compacted game trail to the point they now stood at. The trail looked the same on the other side. From their side the barrier appeared to not have any thickness. Other than the fact that it was a vertical wall it could have been akin to a reflection off of water.

"What now?" Gale asked.

Kyrie said nothing for a moment. With a glance to either side of himself to the men with him he started leading his horse to the barrier. Three steps and he was on the other side. He turned and looked back. The curtain appeared the same from the other side. His own sun eight hours ahead and his men staring at him wide eyed. He led his horse back across.

Standing with his men again he said "I didn't feel anything."

"Your horse didn't spook either." Thomas remarked.

Sir Orvan said "I suggest we back off a bit and make camp. The sun sets in a few hours."

"Our sun does." Kyrie replied. "I'm interested to see what happens then."

He could feel the men's eyes on him. Looking to confirm the feeling he added "There was a theory that the curtain is only passable while both worlds are comparably aligned. In essence, when both are in daylight or covered in night."

"Ah, I see," Orvan commented. "when our sun sets and that one is still up the barrier becomes impassable?"

"It disappears as if it doesn't exist. That's what was observed previously." Kyrie replied.

Camp was set just short of a mile from the border. Kyrie smiled as the term of 'border' was suited to describe what they were seeing for that's exactly what the shimmering curtain was. They all watched as the sun set. As the direct sunlight faded so too did the curtain. As full dark came on watch was set and most of the men bedded down. Kyrie sat up for a bit longer thinking over their situation.

The fox was stirred from sleep in the middle of the night. Thomas had his hand on his chest to rouse him and was looking to the east. "Yes, I'm awake. What is it?"

"It's back, my lord." Thomas said as he pulled his hand back.



Kyrie stood and picked up his staff. "Stay here." he ordered as he started walking toward the border. He was several dozen yards from camp when he stopped at the call from behind him. Turning he saw Sir Orvan getting to his feet next to Thomas. Even as he watched Thomas went to wake Captain Gale. Sighing at the delay Kyrie waited.

As everyone walked up to where Kyrie had stopped sir Orvan handed him his sword belt. "You didn't think we were going to stay back and just sit on our arse, did you?"

Kyrie buckled his sword belt around his waist looking at the men around him. "I didn't take you as the type to take walks in the moonlight."

"With a whole world to explore I would."

Kyrie snorted at the man's humor and turned. "If you think the horses will be fine, then let's go."

They crossed the gap to the border and stood looking over the even fainter glittering curtain. To Kyrie it looked like the northern lights had reached the ground and created the border. Kyrie stepped forward first. The rest followed and crossed the border with him. A dozen paces in he stopped and turned. The view from the opposite side looked no different.

"I wouldn't even know we're on another world if not for that curtain." Thomas said.

Sir Orvan stepped away from the group and bent down. Kyrie watched as he pulled a dagger and cut a small branch from one of the many bush that lined the game trail. Just before the border to their own world he shoved the end of his dagger into the earth and then worked to push the cut end of the branch into the soil at the edge of the trail. Standing and returning to the group he smiled as he stated "That will be our proof."

Kyrie nodded his understanding. "Right, after this world's sun rises to match our own and we are able to see that we'll know this is still this new world."

They returned back across the border and their camp. With hours before sunrise most went back to sleep. Kyrie was again thinking about what the new world implied. He needed to know more about what was on the other side. He was tempted to put everything aside just to explore the vast lands that were now open before them. Kyrie's mind ran wild with the possibilities and yet he still slowly fell to sleep.

He stirred and opened his eyes to see the sky on their side of the border was beginning to brighten. He sat up to see half the party also awake. Standing he ordered Sir Gale to wake everyone. As he saddled his horse he was joined by the rest one by one.

It was sir Orvan that asked the vital question. "So, we're going across?"

"Yes."