

Kyrie walked ahead of his horse focusing on the ground before him. It was still dark in this other world. The sunrise here was still hours away. With his much better night vision thanks to his half fox nature he was leading the party down a game trail.

They had entered the thin forest that had grown up a mile from the border. He was excited at the prospect of exploring a new land, so much so that he'd had to slow so that he didn't outpace the men with him. He had put their slower speed up to their limited night vision. When they came on a wide clearing he stopped and scanned the tree line. Stepping into the glade Kyrie could see more game trails leading in several directions.

"We should stop here until sunrise." he heard from behind him.

Kyrie turned his head and looked at the speaker. Sir Orvan had stopped a few paces back and had the rest of the men standing with him. Kyrie nodded and after a moment realized they'd not seen his gesture. "Yes, sorry I'd forgotten you can't see as well."

They made a quick camp and settled in. After a short discussion a fire was lit and everyone gathered around it for warmth. The temperature had dropped ten degrees as they'd crossed the barrier.

Kyrie was again kept awake with his thoughts as much as the excitement that exploring a new world filled him with excess energy. After a time he realized he'd misinterpreted the feeling. He felt energetic, but it wasn't from excitement. Kyrie realized what he was feeling was a sense of utter wellbeing. Filled with power and even the subtle knowledge that he was even physically stronger. This world was affecting him. It was as if he belonged here and would thrive in this world like nowhere else.

His understanding of magical theory told that any individual had a capacity, and one could with practice and training actually accumulate magical energy. It was considered to normally be somewhat of a fixed amount inherent for each individual, and some could amass more than others. He'd also learned that one's maximum accumulation could be amplified by study and practice. Kyrie had studied and practiced in abundance. He had noticed after the defeat of the Wraith Queen and King he had grown more powerful, capable of accumulating much more magic into himself. He'd believed at the time and still did it had been due to being changed into a half fox hybrid.

He was beginning to understand this world had a surplus of magic that was even now seeping into him. In the teachings of magic it was assumed that once an individual reached their maximum accumulation it was because with consideration of their talent and skill level they were basically in equilibrium with the world. If true, and if this world did have a greater amount of residual magic, Kyrie's power would come into a new level of equilibrium in time. When it did he suspected he'd be far more powerful than he was. From how he felt that increase just might be much more than when he'd become a hybrid.

The other question was would he be able to maintain that level of power in his own world. That would only be answered when he returned.

Yes, he thought as sleep finally found him, he was going to move to the border. Perhaps even cross it to stay. Another question that would only be answered by doing was if anyone would come with him.

Kyrie woke in darkness and realized he was waiting for the light to come into the world. His internal clock and body was telling him it should have been well past sunrise but the sky was still dark and full of stars. He sat up looking around the campsite. Sir Orvan was on watch but Thomas and Gale were both awake and tending to their equipment. The campfire had been fed recently and was casting enough light for even the humans to see well beyond the camp. There was no sign of the barrier to the west.

Kyrie stood and as those awake looked his way excused himself to take care of morning business. Returning to the camp he sat and started readying for the day, even though it was now still hours away. It was a strange sensation, knowing it was sunrise at his home world but still the middle of the night where they were. With the routine of cleaning his travel equipment to put his hands to work his mind was free to form a plan for when they returned.

After a time Sir Orvan addressed him from across the fire. "Sir, what are your orders?"

Kyrie looked at the men with him. Everyone was now awake and a few still tending to their equipment but everyone had paused and were now watching him. By the intent way they were waiting for his answer Kyrie felt he knew what they expected "Well, I intend to return to the Keep, and there prepare to move either to the border or somewhere in this world."

The reactions had been better than he'd expected. None of the men with him seemed to be against the idea. "Still, this is something that I cannot in good conscious order anyone to follow me. I'd ask for volunteers, with the full knowledge that we may be cut off from returning even if things do not go well for us here."

Kyrie saw a few nods, whether they were of acceptance of his statement or his goal was left for later.

Thomas coughed and said "Sir, there have been rumors that you're able to cast the same spell that made you a half fox. Is that true?"

"What?" Kyrie replied, stunned that anyone had known. "Well, yes I have solved that particular spell." He admitted. He should have known his apprentices would have been keeping up with what he was studying even if they lacked the power or skill to cast the spell themselves. He was only a little disappointed that they had let slip his progress.

Thomas glanced at the rest of the party members and said "Well, speaking just for myself, I'd be interested in seeing what that is like."

"Really?" Kyrie asked, dumbfounded that anyone would want to become a hybrid like him.

"Yes, I mean I've seen how strong and fast you are. We all have. I'd be willing to trade half my humanity for that."

"There's no way back. I haven't the capability to reverse the spell. Whatever you become would be permanent."

Sir Gale asked "Is there a way you could control what animal we would trade with?"

"Um, well the spell was designed to be cast on a large number of people. The kobold really. The results would be random. At least I think it may be random, although it may just be somewhat amenable to whatever affinity you have toward an animal's characteristics. After all, it's only been cast once."

"So far." Thomas said.

"Well," Kyrie said and instead of answering paused. His mind was racing at the suggestion. He'd previously dismissed the idea out of hand thinking that no one would want to become a half animal hybrid. It seemed that his example had slowly changed some minds. "Well, I would have to study the spell a bit more to know for certain whether one could actually choose what animal they would hybrid with."

"Or she." Gale said.

Kyrie looked at the men. "You've discussed this before?"

Several grins greeted him.

Sir Gale said "It's been talked about, but now with the prospect of exploring a new world, we'd like to have an edge." He shrugged. "You're larger and stronger than any of us right now. That's the kind of edge we want."

Kyrie smiled at the compliment. "Still, I would need some time to look into the possibility of directing how the spell selects the animal."

Sir Orvan replied. "Good, that will give us some time to think further on what has been asked here." He glanced at each of the men in turn. To Kyrie it was clear he was the only one that had reservations about becoming a hybrid. He mused that if the rest of the men were so disposed he'd have a strong core to build from. He had considered explaining the other aspects of the spell, but had held back. He would prefer to have a loyal following that wanted to be hybrid, and not for the advantage of overwhelming size and strength that their full forms would have. No, he'd keep that part secret until it came time to cast the spell.

Everyone was silent for a while, each to his own thoughts. They finally broke camp as the sky began to lighten in the east. They headed east, exploring deeper into the new world.

With the sun up the shimmering barrier could once again be seen. Kyrie noticed that each of the men with him would occasionally look back as if making sure the barrier was still there. He was no exception. As they made progress further from the entry point he could see no difference in the flora and fauna of this world and their own. The terrain was slowly changing to hills. They crested a rise that was relatively clear of trees and looked to the east.

They were close to a sea coast. Perhaps forty miles distant the land ended and became either an inland sea or an ocean. With the wind at their back they had been unable to catch the scent of such a large body of water.

"That's interesting." Tylor said. Kyrie followed where he was pointing to see a small settlement.

It was placed at a small river that ran the center of the valley below them. Smoke from small cooking fires was rising from several huts. Kyrie counted more than a dozen small buildings. In looking at the hillside that ran down to the valley floor he could see most of the trees had been felled.

Sir Orvan said "Now we see just how alike the two worlds are."

Kyrie knew what he meant. If the people living in the small community were human this world was even more like their own world. It had often been speculated that the other races had long ago crossed the barriers from other worlds. There was a possibility that the inhabitants would be one of those other races. Kyrie set his mount into motion. There was more than one way to find out but the easiest was to go and take a look.

His men followed him toward the valley floor. They had to be careful of the tree stumps that littered the hillside. With the bare ground open to the elements the soil had begun to erode away. The resulting half exposed root systems could trip a horse far too easily. Progress was necessarily slow but they eventually got to the valley. Still a mile from the small village they rode toward the cluster of buildings at the same slow pace. They watched as men and women stopped whatever they were doing as they approached.

The closer Kyrie and his men came the more obvious it was that though human looking they were much shorter than the inhabitants of their own world. The tallest man Kyrie saw stood perhaps four feet tall. As Kyrie and his men entered the village a few of the men and women moved back out of the way of their horses. He stopped in the middle of the village and slide down from the saddle.

Looking around he asked "Hello, can any of you understand me?"

There were looks shared among many of the short humans. "Yes, we understand." One finally said.

"Good." Kyrie replied. He looked around more, suddenly not sure how to continue.

"We're from the other side of the barrier." Sir Orvan said.

Kyrie saw several glances to the west. No one spoke for several long moments. The looks he was getting were far from friendly and almost hostile. He found it strange to look on humans barely larger than kobold. They even seemed to share the same hostile attitude.

They were all thin, appearing almost starved but from the healthy tone of their skin he could see they were well fed. Their thinness was perhaps a natural thing, a variation on human natural to this world. In Kyrie's estimation they would be hard put to fend off an attack from kobold on an individual basis. Considering that kobold typically attack in numbers larger than the entire village he guessed these would be overrun in moments.

He shrugged and started leading his horse out of the village. He didn't look back but instead swiveled his ears to listen. His men were following him muffling most of the sound of conversations starting. Kyrie could only catch the occasional word. What he did catch made no sense.

They followed the river toward the body of water to the east. A few miles from the village another river joined the one they followed. The combined flow increased the width of the river to twenty feet across. While the flow was swift and the water pure there were also several places where the larger river could be forded. Soon they were close to the beach.

They could hear the surf crashing against rock but saw no evidence of such action. They soon found why. Coming to the edge of the land they stood on a cliff face about a hundred and seventy-five feet high. The river fell in a waterfall to the rocks below. Kyrie had no idea if the tide was out or not, or even if there was a tide but the beach was approximately a quarter mile wide where the river crashed into the rocks. Beyond the area where the waterfall reached the sea there was nothing but the sheer cliff and waves crashing against them. As they sat watching the surf against the rock he could smell the salt in the air.

"This would be an excellent place to rebuild the fortifications." Orvan said.

Kyrie looked to where the knight pointed. He could see low walls rising above the high brush that had overgrown much of the landscape just feet beyond the riverbank. The river in the last twenty feet increased speed to where all sand and soil were swept away exposing rounded river rock and presumably the underlying bedrock. Where the soil still held sway from the river the brush had grown to twenty feet high and had grown with the wind from the ocean so that it was constantly bent to the west. Kyrie could see several places where the ruins of walls rose above the growth indicating there had been a substantial fortification at one time. As far as they could see the land rose well above the beach. Kyrie agreed. It would be an excellent place to build a castle as well as a city. In time, and a little luck it could be a seaport. Kyrie said as much.

There followed a conversation that went on for half an hour. Kyrie was pleased. He could almost visualize the castle and city from the suggestions put forward by everyone but Taylor. He simply listened and occasionally smiled. Kyrie guessed he was more interested in exploring.

Kyrie looked down on the beach for a few moments. There was a rise of land to the north that was still well forested. Stonemasons that were also full sized hybrids could bring many of the rock to the top of the cliff with the proper equipment. They could also carve stairs or other passage down to the shore. There was plenty of farmland behind them. Kyrie stared at the dual suns a moment. This was beyond the reach of any duke, baron or king that he knew. With enough volunteers a hybrid community could do well in this world.

He turned his horse around. Each of the men with him was clearly interested in moving to this new world. He of course wondered if this land was controlled by the local equivalent of a duke or baron. He had little doubt that even a small number of full sized hybrids could carve out a place of their own. As he started heading back to the west his mind was turning over numerous plans for the future.

Having retraced their path to the village they found it had been abandoned. Not a single individual remained. In a quick search it was clear that they had packed up and left soon after Kyrie and his party had passed through. They arrived back at the clearing of the barrier too late to cross back to their own world. They made camp a safe distance from where the barrier would return once the two worlds realigned.

Kyrie stood the first watch but none of the men slept. They chatted and speculated on what it would be like founding a new city, on a new world. They were all excited at the idea. They also watched a weather front close in on them from the west. Kyrie was curious on what would happen when the barrier reappeared. As the hours long wait dragged on and the weather front approached Kyrie focused on the spell that was the centerpiece of his plans.

He could cast the spell easily. He had grown to possess more than enough power and skill. He was certain he understood almost every aspect of the casting. What he was focusing on was how it would react in this new world that seemed to have an abundance of residual magic. The fact was Kyrie doubted the spell would have any negative affects on those he cast it on. He was tempted to offer to cast the spell on the men he had with him there and then. Instead he held back, not wanting to give volunteers the motivation of becoming huge hybrids. He'd rather have those that would follow him and the idea of settling a new world and not after the power the full hybrid form would give them.

No, he'd prefer to wait until those that volunteered had crossed the barrier.

Eventually the barrier reappeared, but not before the rain had begun. The shimmering curtain returned right where it was expected. One moment the evening was gathering dark and rain and the next it was as if a veil had parted and they could see the landscape to the west. Gathering the horses and leading them across they were all pleasantly surprised by clear weather in their own world. They stopped a distance from the barrier and after taking care of the horses made another camp.

Kyrie took the first watch. The men with him had followed him for a day and a half with little sleep and yet he was still far from fatigued. The hours before sunrise in his own world ticked by quickly. With clouds and rain concealing most of the signs of the coming sunrise it was with a little surprise that the barrier disappeared. As soon as the view to the east and the sunrise of their own world was restored the disappearance of the barrier Kyrie woke the others. In a few short minutes they were back on their way to the Keep.

It took over three days to ride back to the Keep. As they rode into the courtyard they were greeted much the same as ever. Kyrie looked at the activity with an eye looking for anyone unfamiliar. There were a few new faces, but not enough to conclude a force of some other titled lord had arrived to take

possession of the Keep. The one thing that did catch his eye was the ten new wagons sitting inside the courtyard. The sight brought a smile to his face. Carrol had been busy while they were away.

He was barely out of the saddle when Peter appeared and started informing him of the events of the Keep since his departure. He listened to the young man as he made his way toward the entry to the interior of the Keep. While he was somewhat surprised another lord hadn't yet shown up with a claim to the Keep, Kyrie was more surprised that he didn't feel relief. He had been looking forward to leaving. He now understood he'd been itching to go on campaign for some time.

He found Carrol standing in the main hall overseeing the preparations. They came together in a hug. Kyrie's wife whispered to him. "We need to hold a council."

"Agreed." he whispered back.

As they released each other Kyrie looked around the room. There was little activity, and still he counted more than a dozen people just loitering in the large space. Peter still stood a pace from him. He ordered the young man to find a number of people. Carrol added a few of her own close advisors. After a moment spent waiting for more names the man ran off to find his quarry.

An hour later the doors to the audience chamber were shut and those inside seated at the table. Kyrie and Carrol sat in their chairs at the head of the table. Sir Gale and Orvan sat at his left. A number of crafts-masters also sat at the table. There were just shy of twenty people present. It was a good representation of everyone that called the Keep home.

"As you may know by now I was not asked to renew my oath to the new duke. I expect to be replaced as lord here eventually. We've begun preparations to depart. It's now time to discuss where."

There was silence for a few seconds before questions were thrown at him. It was some time before he could answer the questions sufficiently that the discussion actually started. Suggestions and alternatives were bandied about but the initial plan changed little. In the end most wanted to follow The Fox Lord to a new settlement. Nothing was said of the possibility of becoming hybrids.

Several more hours passed before everything was settled. As the doors were reopened and the masters set loose to make preparations Kyrie hadn't seen enthusiasm like they were showing since the months after taking the Keep. He doubted they'd be as enthusiastic when they saw the ruins they were heading to.

The hours that followed were filled with preparations to send a large number of people and supplies to the new world. All ten wagons were filled, and Kyrie had to limit the number of people to make the journey the first time. Two thirds of the horse the Keep had was going to make the trip as well. With the number of people volunteering most would have to travel on foot. Kyrie designated more than half the fighters he had to protecting the wagon train. They left first thing the next morning.

Ten wagons, three dozen mounted men and more than a hundred and fifty on foot set out. For many it was to be a commitment to be a one way trip. Kyrie insisted they understand the attempt was either a success or a failure, and should they fail they would likely die there. He still had to leave behind more volunteers than he was taking with him.

The fighters that traveled with them were deployed as any campaign. Scouts ranged wide with orders to look for any sign of previous settlements or structures. It was Kyrie's thought that they might find places at intervals to rest and find water. With so many on foot the trip to the barrier would take eight days, and one to reach their planned destination. They encountered no trouble on the way and reached the border while it was visible.

Kyrie watched with amusement as they crossed into the new world. Many of those on foot reached out to touch the curtain as they walked up to it only to meet with no resistance and pass through. With everyone through they continued on, and made enough noise for three times their number. He didn't bother ordering them to keep quiet, the excitement they were showing would be impossible to repress.

Having transitioned from late afternoon to early morning they made it to their destination by nightfall in the new world. They set camp and made a quick assessment of the immediate area. Most were interesting in looking over the cliff down at the surf below. As the sky darkened Kyrie's men were occupied in getting everyone back inside a defensible perimeter. It was clear the watch needed to be doubled just in order to keep anyone from wandering off.

The next morning dawned grey and threatened rain but the craftsmen went to work with a passion. The tents that had been hastily set up were rearranged. The overgrowth covering most of the ruins was taken on and cleared around the perimeter to give everyone a surprise. The ruins they were working to uncover had been buried in several feet of dirt. Enough time had gone by to fill the structure with almost five feet of soil. By the end of the first day a list of required tools they hadn't brought had grown much longer.

After another day of clearing the overgrowth they could guess at the size of the former castle. Twice the size of the Keep its circular outline was filled with loose stone that had fallen and filled in the inside of the structure. The excavation began. Many of the tumbled stones were deemed to be still fit for reuse. A stack of stones began a few hundred yards from the site.

The carpenters weren't sitting idle. Locations for lodges were mapped out and work begun. The one structure for which they had brought enough building materials was being finished. It housed the kitchen and storage for the food supplies. By the end of the day all the wagons were emptied and ready for the return trip. Kyrie decided to send ten of his men back with the wagons. They were to protect not only the wagons but the few craftsmen that the masters were sending back for more supplies.

They left the next morning before dawn on the new world. As long as they encountered nothing to delay them they would be able to cross into their own world mid afternoon. As the wait for their return started Kyrie watched the people he'd brought struggle to make a new home from nothing but tumbled stone and raw lumber.

Those that had stayed worked through every day, from first light to almost full dark. His warriors did well in hunting enough to keep their food supplies from dwindling. Kyrie's own prowess at tracking the scent of prey was noticed by each of his men. The subject of the spell that had created his hybrid form was not brought up but by the way conversations skirted the issue it had not been forgotten.

More than two weeks later the wagons returned. The fresh supplies and workers boosted the morale of the fatigued settlers. Even Kyrie felt drained by the efforts of the past weeks. He'd never have guessed he'd be rebuilding an entire community after coming so close to finishing the Keep. Twelve wagons this time carried enough supplies to last months. And almost half their treasury, three full chests of coin. Kyrie had them placed in a prepared enclosure and placed a spell on it to prevent any nimble fingers from trying their skill at liberating a bit of extra pay.

Several of his master craftsmen had come to him with an interesting suggestion. As he listened to the initial plan Kyrie became as enthusiastic as his craft masters. Together they spent hours walking the site as they explained the full detail of their idea. It was as unique as the site they had selected. Standing at the edge of the drop to the sea below he could almost see the shared vision of the city the craftsmen proposed.

They wanted to build a large part of the future housing on the side of the cliff. Until that point Kyrie had not noticed that the drop off had a slope that would be suitable as foundations of buildings that

could hug the side of the cliff. They pointed out several possible routes to the sea below, all which would have required hauling anything up the side manually. That too had been addressed. He didn't quite understand the mechanism they described but considered the quality of their work to date enough to have faith that they knew what they spoke of.

The trick was that in building on the side of the cliff would take the stone blocks that were being excavated from the former castle. They continued explaining the future of their plans. Once enough housing had been built the cliff face would fall under chisel and hammer. With a slight smile and shrug his master stone mason admitted that he would require many more men under him.

Kyrie gave his approval to the plan. They only caveat was that the housing of those who came would come first. He also understood it gave him less time to delay on offering to cast the hybrid spell. The dwellings would have to be constructed to a size they would be useful to a full hybrid. Kyrie paused at the thought.

He knew he could change his size from full hybrid to his current size. Should everyone else under the spell also be able to do the same it would make building the proposed city much easier. As they walked back to the main camp Kyrie had almost made up his mind on the matter.

Days later the wagons were sent back with more requests. With the addition to the workforce things began to speed up. Several longhouses were complete only days after the wagons left, enough to house even the new arrivals. A week later everything was going well enough that Kyrie felt comfortable in taking leave to check on things at the Keep. He took only three men with him.

The trip back to the border was somewhat uneventful, but informative. Taylor, the best tracker Kyrie had in his employ was with him and advised that they were being observed. The man told him that for some time they had been under constant observation. Kyrie could see no one but was sure Taylor was not mistaken. In discussing the habit of the denizens of this world in watching them from a distance it was thought that they would eventually make their intentions known.

Crossing back into Ereighland Kyrie felt himself relax for the first time in weeks. He hadn't realized how much the task of creating a new community was affecting him. Part of the change was a noticeable lessening in the influx of magic into his being. In looking ahead he wondered how he would manage in creating a new race. He again put the thought aside for later.

Three miles inside their own world Taylor stopped his horse and stared at the ground to the side of the trail. Kyrie was able to see the trail the beginning back and forth traffic had created, but not much else. Taylor soon explained what he saw.

The natives from Freyland had crossed the border and followed the trail to that point before heading in another direction. Deciding to follow the new trail of the Freylanders they rode for several hours before the track lead over a slight rise. At the top of the rise even Kyrie could see the remains of one of the watchtowers that he had originally been searching for.

Continuing the investigation of what the Freylanders were doing they looked over the watchtower. To Kyrie it would be serviceable as a halfway point in the journey between the Keep and Seaview. It was in the same condition the Keep had been when he'd taken possession. It would take some work, and a bit of coin to get it back into shape but that too would have to be later. He didn't have the manpower to spare. Seaview had to come first.

After roaming around the derelict tower they gathered back together on the north side of the perimeter wall. It too was tumbled down in spots but with a little work could be useful once again. Taylor explained what he'd learned from searching the area. The Freylanders had come and gone several times



in the past few days. He didn't consider their presence a threat, most of the tracks meandered with the only seeming purpose of exploring. Much like what they had done.

Kyrie chuckled at the final conclusion of the tracker. Minutes later they were riding back toward the Keep. They crossed signs of more exploring Freylanders for the rest of the day. The next day the tracks ended giving the sign that they were only ranging so far, for now.

When they finally arrived back at the Keep Kyrie saw that things had changed. There were far fewer people about and a good portion of the longhouses out in the meadow were either empty or occupied by only a few people. He was greeted by Peter in the courtyard. Instead of instantly beginning to inform Kyrie of everything that had happened he simply said that Lady Carrol awaited his arrival in the audience chamber.

With a nod to his men Kyrie left his mount with them and headed for the tower of the Keep. When he stepped into the chamber his wife ordered the doors closed. Kyrie walked to his chair and stood at the side of his wife looking over those gathered. Sir Orvan and Gale were both standing waiting the meeting to begin. So too were several others, many of the seconds of the building masters who were still at Seaview. Ten men in all stood waiting leave to sit and begin the council.

Kyrie nodded to them and turned to his wife. "Since Lady Carrol has called this meeting I leave it to her to lead this counsel."

With a smile she said "Thank you my Lord." Looking to everyone gathered she added "Please sit everyone." Once everyone was comfortable she began.

Carrol simply explained she had placed spies throughout the Duke's castle. Kyrie saw several smirks until she began imparting what her spies had gleaned.

The war the duke was fighting with the gathered foe of lizardmen kobold and gnomes had become a disaster. The latest battle had been twelve days ago, and Duke Francis had lost half his force in the process of being beaten back once again. The details were a bit murky considering the multiple sources, but one thing was clear and common. Many thought Riverview was now at risk of falling to the hordes that had for too long beleaguered the Old Duke and his successor.

Sir Gale spoke first. "Well, that explains why he hasn't sent anyone to replace you, Lord."

"It doesn't explain why he hasn't called for help from us. I would have thought having a mage on hand could turn the tide." Orvan replied.

Sparing a glance at a few of the craftsmen sitting in for their absent masters Kyrie guessed they were too intimidated to give their opinions.

Kyrie wanted to think his next move over but there was one thing he knew for certain. "Riverview can not fall. If the duke does not send for us we should take action anyway."

Orvan and Gale both nodded. Carrol flicked an ear giving indication that she agreed with Kyrie. The rest sat accepting the statement. There was little they would personally risk in any action against the hordes. Sir Orvan and Gale continued to stare at him with expectant expressions on their faces. Kyrie shifted in his seat still furiously thinking the situation over.

He was still covered in dust and grime from riding. He desperately wanted a bath. Kyrie wanted to see his son and was intensely curious to find out how much he'd prospered in the weeks he'd been gone. He also wanted to take his wife up to their chambers and reacquaint with each other. He also had hoped

he would have had more time before publicly disclosing his understanding of the spell that had caused him to be in a half fox body.

"I think it's an inevitability that we'll have to ride against the Duke's enemies. Considering the recent history of that family in battle, I wouldn't be comfortable leading any of us without an extra edge."

Kyrie hid the smile that wanted to show itself as Gale and Orvan sat back in their chairs. "I've mostly solved the spell that changed us to hybrids. I'm not yet comfortable casting it yet, but if the alternative is leading men into battle as human or hybrid I'm prepared to offer the casting of that spell on volunteers as an option."

Sir Gale said "I for one would take up that offer, even if we are not called into action."

"Here here," Sir Orvan also said "I too would be more than willing to accept that offer."

"Considering we're building a settlement, a home on Freyland, why bother pulling Duke Francis's ass out of the fire?" Carrol asked.

Kyrie answered "If they take Riverview and are allowed to consolidate that gain it would be a matter of time before they threaten us here or even in Freyland. Now is the time to end that threat before it grows any stronger."

Sir Orvan said "It won't be long before that becomes a necessity."

"With this new information we now know I'm not as likely to be removed. This will give us more time to get Seaview to a point where it can support itself. The priority now is defeating the hordes." Kyrie said.

"There's one last bit of gossip that I haven't mentioned." Carrol said. As all eyes turned to her she continued. "This was only from one source but it was said that the king has taken notice of the present duke's fumbling efforts to put down the hordes. He's supposedly putting together a large force. From there on the speculations get somewhat scattered."

Sir Orvan chuckled. "King Murphy is not one to put up with incompetence. He'll want to know why Duke Francis has a mage at his disposal and has not seen fit to use him. If he does take to campaigning he's likely to also replace Duke Francis."

Kyrie shook his head. "Whatever happens, for now we proceed as before. We will meet again tomorrow morning after audience."

As everyone stood Kyrie turned to his wife and softly said "I'll join you after I get this travel grime out of my fur."

"Very well, my love." Carrol said with a smile on her face and a mischievous gleam in the eye. She turned and left Kyrie standing in the hall before he could reply. Just watching his wife walk set his heart beating faster. They both knew he appreciated the view, Carrol was such a tease.

Kyrie went to his dungeon study chamber to put the staff and sword back in its usual place before seeking a bath. Once he was presentable again he climbed to his own chamber. On seeing his father Lazlo ran and jumped into his arms. The impact forced a half playful "Oof" from Kyrie. He spent as much time with his family he felt he could spare, but as he left still wished he could stay and spend the rest of the afternoon.

Kyrie instead closed himself off in the lower level of the dungeon. He focused intently on the spell, going over one last time every aspect of its casting and the theory behind it. Either the time spent away

from his study materials or that time turning the spell over in his mind gave him a new enough perspective that by the time he stood from his desk he was ready. Satisfied that the spell would do as he predicted he took his staff with him to the surface.

He was surprised that when he arrived above ground it was the middle of the night. He'd not noticed his two apprentice leaving as he continued his research. Shrugging off the missed time he grabbed a small bite to eat in the kitchens and headed to his chambers. His son was sound asleep but Carrol was still awake.

They both stayed up discussing the spell and planning their further moves. Kyrie carefully explained the spell that had affected them both. In the process Carrol proved one of his theories correct. After a little more explanation she was able to stand in the middle of their chamber and shift to her full hybrid form. Somewhere around fifteen feet tall she had to crouch low and still her back pressed up against the ceiling. It was hard with her so cramped and huddled down in the small chamber to do more than guess her true size.

Kyrie looked into the eyes of the female he loved, and for a few seconds, feared just a bit. Her head was huge. Her raccoon muzzle spread wider than his own head. He stepped closer and rested his chin on the top of her muzzle and stared into her wide eyes. Eyes that were inches away and dangerously playful. With his paws on the underside of her chin Kyrie felt her tilt her head up and lifted him off the floor.

He felt her paw on his back. It spread huge and covered most of his back. He could feel the strength in her limb as she shifted her paw and cupped his entire rear end in one paw. She was able to hold his full weight easily. There wasn't enough room in the chamber for Carrol to do more to display her power. Instead she showed her love of her husband. At her full hybrid size and him a good deal smaller there was no need to use the usual spells to make them physically compatible. It seemed an hour later that the huge raccoon set the satisfied fox back on the floor. A moment later she closed her eyes and concentrated.

Back to her smaller size she smiled at her husband. "Soon, we shall have to experience the full pleasures of that form." The playful gleam was still in her eyes for several minutes as Kyrie settled his robe back and continued his explanation.

Eventually they slept. The next morning they sped through their routines and were soon beginning the planned open council. Everyone that could attend half filled the audience chamber. Kyrie gave a quick explanation of the spell and what it would do. He kept any mention of the potential full size of hybrids out of his speech. His plan was for anyone that submitted to the spell would be part of the effort to beat back the hordes. Anyone volunteering would either ride to defend Riverveiw, defend the Keep or eventually be sent to Freyland to support the effort there. Once he finished all but two volunteered to have the spell cast on them. Both Sir Gale and Orvan were among them. He was encouraged by the number of volunteers.

Kyrie ended the council and called for everyone to assemble in the meadow outside the Keep. It took several minutes to make it understood that he meant everyone in the Keep was to attend. It was rather unheard of for such a thing to be called for outside of an execution or declaration of war so it was no surprise that the interest was intense.

A half hour later the meadow was filled with everyone that was still at the Keep. Kyrie was a little surprised at how many people were under his command. It looked like nearly five hundred men women and children had gathered in the wide meadow that surrounded the walled Keep. He gave a much simpler explanation of the spell, and his offer. He added the stipulation that no children under the age of ten were to be among those under the casting.

Several preplanned questions were called out. Thanks to Carrol's band of operatives asking the needed questions Kyrie was able to ensure there would be no retaliation against anyone that wished to remain human. He made sure that everyone who wished to volunteer understood they would not be able to return to their human body. Once he was satisfied in the explanation he asked anyone willing to become a hybrid to stay in the meadow. Those wishing to remain human were to return to their duties.

Ten minutes later there were still more than seventy people in the meadow. As the last of those returned inside the Keep, Kyrie looked over those gathered. Mostly men, there were also several women. Both of his apprentice stood at the front. Every one of his guardsmen were present. He also recognized many of Carroll's aides in the crowd. In looking them over he saw that each of them had previously volunteered to go to Freyland but for various reasons had been kept at the Keep. He waited one more minute before he lifted his staff and with Carrol at his side he began the spell. Each of the volunteers stood still watching with eager anticipation. In just a few more short seconds the spell was cast.

Kyrie watched as his followers started changing. He thought over the term followers for a moment as the change continued. They were followers now. There was no going back for any of them. He was responsible for them now.

Fur sprouted, gasps and groans sounded and each and every man and woman standing before him slowly became a hybrid.

He watched Orvan. The man was showing signs of becoming a tiger. Muscle grew thicker under the sprouting fur as he lifted an arm and stared at his fingers. Even Kyrie could see him flex his claws out. Long and sharp already they looked deadly. He was also gaining a little height as he changed. Gaining an inch every few seconds the knight was becoming larger and stronger with every passing moment.

Looking at Finnigan and his developing fur pattern Kyrie was pleased to see another fox hybrid in the making. Gale had grown black fur and looked to be changing to a panther. In looking around he saw that about a third of those in the meadow were changing into vulpine, just like him. With just a glance he could see they all were growing far stronger than they had been as humans. Each of them was also gaining height. Kyrie could see two had become bear hybrid and were gaining inches faster than anyone else. Already they both stood taller than him and were still growing larger as he watched.

Muscle grew thick and massive and spread over every male frame. The female hybrid swelled thicker but in a much more pleasing manner. Even then Kyrie had no doubt the women were growing in strength as much as the men. His wife was proof of that. Even the thick fur that had sprouted couldn't conceal the increased strength his followers were being granted by the spell.

The men were clearly changing more than the women. Thick powerful muscle continued to bulge thicker and expand across each and every male frame. Several close to Kyrie were staring at their limbs in amazement, flexing to display and prove to themselves just how much strength they were gaining. Arms that were huge and far thicker than any human could match, legs that could carry them at a much faster pace and far longer. Still they grew stronger and larger, and Kyrie knew they were much tougher as well. They'd now be able to match a human force ten times their numbers and they were growing ever more powerful with each passing second.

There was something else happening. He could sense something of the spell working on him even as his followers changed. Kyrie focused on the feeling for a few vital moments. Understanding came quickly. His people were magically bound to him. This was something that he'd missed. He understood the Wraith Queen would have made sure none of the hybrid would have been able to turn against her or the King. Another seconds thought and he was certain Carrol was included in this insurance.

As surprising as it was he was also secretly pleased. Their loyalty would now be magically enforced. They were all subservient to him and his wife. They would follow any order instantly. They'd also, he

realized, never turn on him no matter how outrageous the order he gave. He truly was the master of the beginning of an army of powerful hybrid that far surpassed the strength and ability of any human. This would have been The Wraith Queen's legacy. A near unstoppable army of hybrids. Now it was his. Then it was over.

He looked over the new hybrids standing before him. A huge massive fox here. A grinning muscle bound wolf hybrid there that stood staring at his massive forearm. A bear, surprisingly massive stared at claws inches long ending with sword sharp points. Kyrie realized that each and every one of his men in the guard that had volunteered for this had become a hybrid of predator species. It actually made sense.

An army should be made of predators.

As he watched every eye turned and focused on him Kyrie saw that each of the new hybrid before him had outgrown the clothing they had been wearing. He smirked at the mistake yet it highlighted just how much they had all grown. Many matched his size and a few were larger, like the lions, tigers and bears in evidence. Many more were shorter, but not by much. There were also hundreds more at Seaview waiting for the same spell to be cast on them. He couldn't stop the smirk from forming at the sight.

They then surprised him. First the tiger that was Sir Orvan took to a knee and bowed his massive head. Gale followed suit then another and another. In seconds seventy nine hybrid knelt before their Lord.

"Stand, all of you." Kyrie ordered. as pleased as he was at the display of loyalty it also sobered him. Their loyalty was magically enforced, but shows like the one Orvan had initiated was honest and surly spontaneous. He would have to watch himself. He didn't wish to take advantage of their enforced loyalty.

Kyrie looked over the new hybrid standing before him. Sir Orvan stood several inches taller than him, and a little more muscular. His body had strained the fabric of his tunic beyond its limits. Large rents in the fabric displayed bulging fur covered muscle of his arms.

The fox that was Finnigan stood perhaps an inch shorter than Kyrie and matched him in muscle. There were a trio of raccoons that while shorter were still larger and stronger than humans. So too were wolves represented, as were a number of cat breeds. There were also a large number of lizard and a couple of armadillo, reminding Kyrie of Posset and Devon. There were weasels to, and ferrets, badgers, and a few other breeds that he didn't recognize. All of them were large and powerful looking.

They were clearly pleased in the results of their transformation. Looking at themselves and each other they mingled for a bit and began mildly testing their strength against each other.

It was also time to explain how much more there was to being a hybrid to his followers. It took hours, but eventually each of them was able to shift to their full size. For many it was a quick lesson but some took more than an hour to learn how to trigger the change. Even before Kyrie was ready to teach the new hybrids more of their abilities Maxine showed just how clever she was. Kyrie turned at the commotion to see a large feral lynx in the midst of the group. A few seconds later the lynx flowed back to Max's hybrid form.

Pleased that his apprentice had figured out how to shift to a feral form on her own Kyrie assigned her to begin teaching others. Soon every hybrid was able to shift to all three forms, if not easily at least with a bit of time and concentration. As the day ended many had returned to their duties, and showed those that were still human just how much of an improvement their new form was.

That evening Kyrie hosted a feast. Several of his guardsmen had gone hunting to test their new bodies, and had brought back more than enough fresh meat for the rest of the week. Kyrie had seen the marks on many of their kills. They had obviously hunted in their full hybrid size. He let them have their

celebration. As he sat watching the celebration a human cautiously approached from the side and stopped ten paces from his chair.

Recognizing the man Kyrie motioned for him to come forward. People often approached him at times they thought he was in a good mood. Despite all his efforts of cultivating an atmosphere where they felt safe in asking him at any time there were still some that fell back to the standard practice of approaching a lord only at the best of times. The human came to within a few paces and once again stopped. This too was normal protocol despite all Kyrie's prompting.

Kyrie remembered the man's name. "Yavin, how are you tonight?"

"Well, my Lord." He replied giving a slight bow.

Smiling Kyrie said "Good." in a way to encourage the man to speak.

"May I ask a favor, my Lord?"

"You may ask without fear, yet I can only grant so much that is in my power." Kyrie replied with a smile.

Yavin looked around. Several people in the vicinity had turned at the encounter and were paying attention. The man took a moment to steel himself and almost blurted his request. "My lord, would you reconsider casting the hybrid spell on our younger family members?"

After a moment Kyrie asked "Did you choose to remain human because of that limitation?"

Yavin's shoulders dropped as if he were relieved of a burden even before speaking. "Yes, my Lord. I didn't wish for my sons to be left as human while I was a hybrid."

"Do your sons wish to be hybrid as you do?"

"Yes Lord, they do but I chose to remain human as they are to keep my family together."

Kyrie thought over the request for a few seconds. There were likely more that had made the same decision. In looking around at those gathered in the hall he saw a number cautiously watching his reaction. Those that were watching the interaction with Yavin held expressions of hope and expectation. It was now obvious that many had watched the demonstrations on the meadow that morning as the newly changed had experimented in shifting to their full form.

He'd also been listening to a number of passing conversations. Those that had been changed to hybrids were boasting of their new strength and feeling of wellbeing. Kyrie had heard comments in the effect that they were the first of a new race. Capable of being larger and stronger than almost any other race that roamed the world. He was pleased that more wanted to join the ranks.

He turned to Yavin.

"I take it you're not the only one who wishes their full family to be included."

"Yes, my Lord. There are many of us."

He stood and waited for everyone to notice and when he had everyone's attention spoke. "I understand there are some that wish to include their entire family in becoming hybrids. For those that wish their children to become hybrid with them I will accede to your request. However, your children should want to become one of us of their own choice."

"Thank you Lord Kyrie." Yavin said at his side.

Kyrie turned to him to see the man smiling with joy. He was surprised at the extent of the man's reaction. While it was true he liked being a half fox and would not have gone back himself, he'd not expected many human to be so eager. He had to conclude that the example of his followers must be very convincing.

He suffered through several cheers in his name, no doubt mostly from the humans wanting to include their families. Soon enough the feast was back to the previous level of boisterousness. He endured another half hour before making his excuses and leaving with his wife.

Finally out of the great hall Kyrie lead his wife up to their bedchamber and a night of discovery of what their own full forms were capable of.