

Campaign

by

Vixxy Fox

As campaigns go, it wasn't very large. In total there was one child, one old Fox, and an ancient Coon Hound; that would be me. Mind; in my day I have seen action hunting Raccoons that would take days stretching into weeks because I was good at it. As it was, old Ralph, he's the Fox, came and got me. Though I tried in the beginning I never did catch him. I suppose that's why we kinda became friends. I'm always quick to tell him it's just that I never really wanted to... just in case he was wondering.

"Fred... Fred... you awake?"

My first wakeful moment was wrapped in the overpowering pain of sunlight glaring all the way to the back of my eyeball as Ralph pried its lid open.

"What in tarnation do you think you're doing?!" I brayed. Needless to say in the flash of that question I was sitting bolt upright and blindly slapping at his paws. For anyone else they would have thought I was attacking and maybe jumped back a foot or two but this was 'the' Fox and he knew me better than anyone.

"I thought maybe you were dead Fred."

"And you was gonna steal my soup bone weren't ya?! I'm not dead; just old! That means I sleep deeper than most. Now leave me alone so I can continue with my nap."

"Soup bone? That does sound inviting but no; I was actually about to check you for a pulse."

I showed him my teeth and growled, "I'll show you a pulse you old hoot."

"We haven't the time," the Fox assured me, pausing to itch a scratch with his hind paw, "We've got us a job to do. There's a lost child out in the woods somewhere and we need to spring into action just like in the old days."

My ears went back a notch at the thought of running around in the woods and coming back all lousy with ticks and fleas. "My spring has sprung," I told him, "Best I can do these days is make it to the back yard to widdle."

"I realized this when I got the word, but then I also remembered you have that wonderful sniffer of yours."

He also had an ulterior motive in this because where my nose is still sharp, his ears are even sharper and he'd been listening to the Master and his Missus talking on the back porch about me the day before. Their conversation had been hushed... something about a one way trip and a needle. He understood it more than I so it did cause him concern for me.

"If you're going to die," the Fox told me, "Then why not die a hero?"

"Die?" I asked him. "What's this nonsense about dying? Only one who's gonna die is you if'n I decides to finally chase you down." I sniffed the air and found a faint scent I wasn't too keen on... it had fear in it. "That ain't you," I muttered, "And it sure isn't a Coon since it's been years since I chased all of them out of these woods."

"It's probably the lost child," Ralph told me. That was when I noticed his ears were back slightly. "That's what I came to tell you about," he says. "The humans are all in a panic and searching the woods best they can but they don't have your nose nor my hearing. I say we help them."

Voicing this he moved around me and began nudging my body to the upright position. Don't get me wrong; I appreciated his paw up and all, but darn it... I really hated being so old and feeble.

"I'm up... I'm up!" I scolded him when I finally was standing. Then I tottered to the back steps from my bed on the porch and sampled the air again. Lord but it'd been far too long since I'd done that and all the scents of the woods came back to slap me in the puss a good one. "Where have I been for the last few years, Ralph?"

That one scent was stronger than I'd thought and instinctively I let go of the old battle cry, once, twice, and three times just to be sure the Master heard me. Then I was off and running for the woods as fast as my old legs would carry me. My nose told me that the searching humans were way off the mark. That's the way humans are... they got no sense and no sniffers. Twigs and dead leaves flew behind me and the brambles scratched my skin like in the old day. I bled a bit more because my skin was a lot thinner than it used to be; but the scent of that child was in my nose so the charge was on. At one point I had to stop and catch my breath so I could again get a good lungful of the scent. Of course Fred was right next to me and panting just as hard. "You... puffpantpuff... hear any... puffpantpuff... thing?" I managed.

I saw the outline of his ears sweep the area. I suppose that was when I realized my eyesight wasn't quite as good as it used to be either.

"I hear... pant pant pant... a police whistle and... pant pant pant... lots of voices calling out. They've no luck yet and... (deep breath)... there is desperation in the voices.

I took my own deep breath and the scent was there again but faint faint faint like the smell of a house burning down a country mile away downwind. I let go my battle cry once more and charged deeper into the woods. It's a good thing I'm built as low to the ground as I am because

the deadwood was thick and where other critters have to go around, I can go under. Pardon my smile but I did tree more than a few Coons in my day by doing exactly that. I'm guessing here, but I'm thinking we went a good number of furlongs before the scent finally slapped me in the nose like a 'bad dog' chastisement. I'd been running so hard it'd evaded me. Of course when it did find me it sent a shock through my body like I'd just been ribbed by the Master's boot. The child was fast stuck under the next dead fall and she wasn't moving any. There was no way any human could have found her.

"Is it breathing?" I managed to ask Ralph.

He was quick to wiggle through the brush getting to her much easier than I could have... which also explained how he was always able to evade me so easily all those years ago. "Yes," he finally replied, but she's close to death."

Wiggling my way through the dead fall I managed to get to her. She was a cute little thing in a pink winter jacket. When I sniffed at her cheeks they were cold... too cold. "I see what you mean," I agreed. Taking a moment I licked her face hoping it would wake her up. "We gotta get help," I finally told him. "She ain't a pup and I'm not her mama so dragging her out ain't gonna work."

"Sing," my old friend told me.

"What's that?" I asked him. I'm thinking for some reason my old brain cells weren't quite working right. Maybe it was the run... maybe it was the cold... maybe whatever; but I finally caught on to what he was saying. "Master understands 'treed' cuz we did a lot of hunting together. Maybe other humans will too."

"Do it!" he tells me and then crawled up on top of her, draping his tail over her face to provide some warmth.

So I did. I howled and howled and howled until there wasn't nothing left. Giving it the last I had, I lay down next to the child feeling a burning in my chest that wasn't right.

"You did good," Ralph tells me. I heard his voice in my ear and felt his snout on my cheek.

"Sleep now... they're almost here. The child is safe and I must be off. We Foxes are not meant to be among the people. Sleep old friend and know you did what was right."

"And that's all there was to it. I fell asleep there, and woke up here." The old Coon Hound blinked and looked again at the Wolf standing before the gates of what looked to be a right fine place to stay a while. "Where exactly is here, anyhow?"

The Wolf smiled in an understandable way. His was the job of greeting those canines who came home, and he'd been doing it for centuries. " 'Here' is a place where you will never have fleas or

disease, you will never go hungry or thirsty, and there is any number of hands available to scratch your tummy.”

“Sounds nice.”

“It is,” the Wolf assured him. “Name a toy you wish and it is given to you. Frisbees, balls, sticks... anything at all.”

“Can I chase Coons?”

“As much as you want... though it’s only a game of tag. You have to let them go.

“What about Foxes?”

“You can chase them too.”

“No, no, no... that’s not what I meant. I get that this is my forever place; I’m old, not stupid. What about Foxes?”

“They are not allowed here. This place is for Dogs.”

“I see... Did the little girl live?”

“Why, yes, she did. You were hailed the hero dog. The nightly news loved you and then you were forgotten. Such has always been the lot of Dogs. Wouldn’t you like to go in now?”

“No. Where do the Foxes go?”

“Why would you ask that?”

“Just curious,” the old Dog replied. “Now tell me... please.”

The Wolf was truly surprised. “They have their own place down the road a piece.”

“Much obliged,” Fred told him and without another word, turned and trotted in the direction indicated.

It seemed he’d walked a very very long way when he heard a familiar voice call out to him. In the distance, another canid rose from its place under a large tree where it had been watching the road. “Is it really you?”

The Coon Hound began to wag his tail and for the first time realized that his body didn’t ache when he did so. “Ralph... is that you?”

There was a heartfelt reunion of these old friends. When their dance was done the Fox asked the Dog, “Why aren’t you with all the other dogs? I’ve been told it’s a very nice place.”

“It’s not so nice,” Fred told him, “They don’t allow Foxes in.”

“Really?” Ralph replied, “It would then seem where I was slated to go seems much the same... they didn’t allow for any Dogs.”

“Wait,” the Coon Hound barked, “I just remembered something... I was the old one and you told me to go out a hero. What happened to you?”

The Fox smiled. “It would appear you were not the only old one to go out a hero. It’s true I lay upon the little girl listening to your song until the song faded and I told you to sleep; only to have The Great Fox whisper that my friend still needed me and so I too should sleep.”

The Dog placed a paw upon the Foxes shoulder. “I am so sorry to hear that Ralph.”

“Don’t be,” his friend responded. “We were both hailed as heroes and the little girl lived to see another day.”

“And so she did” Fred responded with a happy sigh. “Since heaven seems not to be for us, what say we go check up on her?”

“I think that’s a capitol idea.”

Somewhere a nervous parent opens their daughter’s room and looks once again for the dog they’ve heard or the animal that certainly must have snuck into the house for the clicking of nails on the hard wood floor.

Though the sound of coon song coming softly from the woods is only a sweet reminder of what might have been; its ghostly presence is still ghostly none the less, though it tells of the heaven found through an unusual friendship on The Fur Side.