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KIRBY AND THE MOUSE

by Ray Granade

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Like all Yorkies, Kirby carried himself with an air of importance. The small body and short legs common to all toy terriers in no way detracted from his sense of self-importance or his erect stance and ears. A true earth dog, Kirby lived out the urges of a great hunter whose ancestors had been bred to catch small mammals like rats and foxes, often by following them into their earthen dens. His small eyes always snapped with excitement and nothing in his life quite matched the sport of a chase.

Kirby's first hunting forays were limited by his pack. He had been adopted by a human pack that consisted of a woman, two children (a boy and his older sister) and sometimes a man. They were all much larger than he, but their size made them slow and clumsy. None was his equal when a chase ensued; it always took more than one to corner him. The trick was to get them to play, for they seemed not to share his delight in a chase.

Before long, Kirby found a way to ensure their participation in a chase. He discovered to his great delight that if he could ferret out something small enough to snatch up and run with, they were sure to follow. Usually that meant one of the cloths they put next to their hairless skins, before they pulled on the strangely colorful but hairless pelts that they wore when they went abroad. Occasionally it meant something that they had carelessly put on the floor or perhaps on some elevated piece of wood that was still close enough to the floor for him to reach.

The pack rarely ventured with him beyond their den, so most of his games were confined to that venue. He would snatch up whatever he could find, taunt them with it, then run for their den's far reaches. He found that when the smaller humans responded, they always called She to come and help. Though the smaller ones were closer to Kirby's size, that did not make them quicker or more agile. Usually it was She who managed both to start and end things, and so he concluded that She was the pack's leader. That only meant that She was the one he had to challenge for dominance in the pack. While She was much too large and strong to take on directly, Kirby always tested wills at every opportunity.

He was certain that he could out-think She and bend She to his will. Next to hunting, after all, that's what terriers do best.

While the chases were fun, they weren't much as hunting went. There was no challenge for a scent discriminator to spot things carelessly left in reach of his mouth. True, their scents were different, but none really got his juices flowing. Kirby wasn't sure where the problem lay; he only knew that his instincts indicated some deprivation, some lack in the sport.

As the dog days of summer gave way to the first coolness of fall, Kirby got a hint of what might be missing. He paused one day in his usual rounds of his den, arrested by a strange odor. Only a whiff came his way, wafted along some unseen air current from some unknown place. It was not enough to follow, only enough to arouse. His pulse quickened. The juices flowed. He didn't know how, and he didn't know where, and he didn't know why, but he did know that something alien had entered the den. He also knew in his heart of hearts that he was no longer a puppy. He was now a dog, a mighty hunter facing his first prey.

For the next few days, Kirby patrolled his den more carefully and more alertly. His reactions were heightened to a new sense of readiness. He honed his skills against imaginary threats, lunging and snapping at inanimate objects in preparation for his first confrontation with the enemy.

As luck would have it, She aided him in the hunt. He had observed She often performing a ritual that seemed odd to him. Sometimes a ringing would precede the ritual, sometimes not. But the ritual was always the same. She would pick up an object tied to a flat piece of wood by a string and bark unintelligibly at it. He assumed that humans had some way of communicating, but he could not fix any meaning to the strange sounds they used. She barked at the thing too long for play, and he could discern no pattern to what happened after these strange sessions. Since it didn't seem alive, he couldn't fathom why she would bark at it so long or so often. He just marked it down to a peculiarity of the pack's leader; the other humans would occasionally bark at the object as well, but never so often or so long as She.

After one particular session with the object, She went to a part of den to which She always tried to deny him access. Kirby didn't like the floor as well as that in the rest of his den, for it was slippery and cold. But since

She tried to keep him out, it obviously was a place he needed to go. He followed to the edge of the forbidden territory and watched her open part of the wall. While he had seen She do this before, something was different this time.

Actually, two somethings were different this time. First, She put something on the floor. It looked like a small slab of wood, but She pulled part of it up with a ripping sound before putting it on the floor. Second, the strange odor emanating from the wood-like thing mixed with a strong whiff of prey-scent, stronger than Kirby had smelled before. Now he knew where the prey stayed. All he had to do was get into the forbidden territory while that part of the wall was open and She was not there, so that he could investigate.

Several days passed before Kirby got his chance to investigate. One night, after She had returned to the den with the little hairless ones, She went to the forbidden territory carrying big brown things. She put the brown things on the table and went to change from her outside pelts to the ones She wore at night. Then he watched as She put her paw into the brown things, pulled out other things, and carried them to various places in the wall which She opened. Among those places was the one from which the prey-scent came.

She was just about through when the ritual object made a sound and summoned her. She began barking at the object just like always. She barked and barked. Kirby saw his chance. He eased into the forbidden territory and over to the hole in the wall. She just kept barking. He got closer to the hole. The prey-scent got stronger. He peered intently into the gloomy hole. He saw the thing that looked like a wood slab. He saw a clutter of other objects. Then he stopped, motionless, just outside the hole.

Through the gloom of the hole, Kirby saw something else, something out of place, on the hole's floor. It was small, and brown, and furry. He could smell it. It was the prey!

Kirby's instincts took over. In he dashed! Snap went his jaws! He seized the prey, engulfing it in his mouth! Prey-scent filled his mouth and tickled his nose. He was enraptured! He was the hunter! He had captured his prey and held it firmly in his mouth! His mouth was too

small for the whole prey; its tail hung out just under his nose. But he had it nonetheless!

As the first thrill of success passed, Kirby felt a little let down. He had thought that surely such a great hunt as this would lead to a chase! Instead, the prey lay limp in his mouth. Then he thought of another possibility. Perhaps he could tease She with the prey. Perhaps he could entice She into a chase!

Kirby backed out of the hole. She still barked at the object. So he pranced out to where She stood and lifted his nose so that She could see the prey's tail. Then he raced to a far part of the den. His ploy was rewarded. She ceased barking at the object, put it down, and turned to chase him.

The chase was all too brief before She cornered him. Kirby knew what to expect. She would make him drop the prey. Sure enough, She approached to do just that. But the prey was his, not hers! He was not about to let She have the prey! And so, at the last minute, he simply swallowed. Gulp! Down went prey, tail and all!

She reacted differently than he had expected. She let out a shriek, then ran to the ritual object and barked at it. Then She went away for a moment and returned with a glass container and shiny utensil. She grabbed him, poured a liquid into the utensil, then tilted the utensil into his mouth. The vile-tasting liquid ran down his mouth. Kirby thought he would be able to wait and spit it out, but as She stroked his throat, he swallowed. Then She put down the glass container and utensil and took him into the back yard.

Though it was dark, and though She only took Kirby out back when She wanted him to fertilize the flowers or yard, She did not do as usual. Usually She wore her outside-wear pelts for this routine. Tonight, She merely carried him outside, then sat down on the stoop in her inside pelts and watched.

This was fine with Kirby. He frisked around the yard, sniffing the various scents enhanced by the night's cool dampness. He investigated all the odors and did the things that She always wanted him to do outdoors. He felt great! This was such a break from the routine. He didn't know what he had done, but he'd have to figure it out and do it again!

Then, Kirby began not to feel so well. He felt queasy and a rumbling began in his stomach. Suddenly he wondered if She had poisoned him with the vile-tasting liquid. How could She do that to him? It had all been a game! Why was She such a poor sport? He had felt the sensation before, when he had eaten grass. But he'd eaten no grass that night. What was about to happen?

Kirby staggered a little; he stepped as if he was having trouble picking up his feet, or was being careful about where he put them. He hung his head. Then he vomited. Plop! Out came the prey, all bleached and white as it had been when it had been born. It was whole, lying there on the ground almost as it had been lying on the floor of the hole. Kirby looked at it, sniffed it, then walked away.

She had jumped up as he began to look sickly. Now She rushed over and picked Kirby up. She grabbed a long stick with a metal end, scooped up the prey, and deposited it in a container that stayed in the back yard. Although Kirby felt deprived by his loss of the prey, after vomiting it back up he didn't feel as deprived as otherwise he might. He'd had enough of the prey for one night.

She took Kirby back inside and put him on the floor. Then She barked at him for a while. He was tired after his big hunt and its aftermath. All he wanted was to go to bed. He eased away from She's barking and went for a drink of water. Finally She relented and put him to bed. Tomorrow would be another day.