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“End Game”

By Kellan Meigh

Chapter 14 – “Prosecution Part Deux”

Nancy woke to the sunlight streaming through the window, hitting her square in the face. Rolling over in her bed, she knew after just a few minutes that she was not going to get back to sleep any time soon.

Getting out of bed, she stretched out, trying to get the kinks out of her body. The bed was passable but it had nothing on her memory foam bed back home.

Thinking about home, she still felt hollow inside. Nancy knew she couldn't continue on this way, even if she somehow decided to continue to work for The Gods, doing their bidding. If molestation was the norm on each mission, she knew in her heart she would have to ask The Gods to end it for her.

Nancy knew that her previous injuries would be enough to kill her once her immortality was removed. That would be the plan, then. Make it through this mission, then ask Grandpa Torvald to have Aslaug come for her.

She washed up a bit, then went out to the main living area only to find her father and the mage preparing breakfast. Sitting down at the table, the blond femme thought that this show would be worth the price of admission. She knew her father was not a very good cook and this mage seemed to be not as talented as her parent. Giving thought to it, she spoke up.

“Wold you prefer I fixed our morning meal?” she asked, smiling when her dad broke yet another egg very poorly, getting eggshell into the pan by accident.

“Maybe you should,” the mage replied. “I think all I'm doing here is burning the strips of bacon.” The pan he was in charge of was smoking rather heavily.

“You two males go sit while I finish up,” Nancy directed, taking command of the food. Within a few minutes, she had breakfast prepared.

“Thank you for bailing us out,” her father told her, giving her smile.

“Don't thank me until you've tasted this,” she retorted, noting she overcooked the eggs just slightly.

“No, it's fine, Nancy.” the mage responded. “I think your father and I have figured out a plan so you can continue your mission.”

The femme equine looked up from her meal. “Do we need a plan? I thought the items we were after were here?” she asked.

“No, I'm afraid the magistrate has the backpack.” Gary replied. “He observed the items after Brad had left here and confiscated them. I could not stop him without bringing undue attention to myself.”

“Okay, so what's your plan?” Nancy sat her fork back on her plate and gave the two males her full attention so Gary spoke up.

“Well, these beings haven't traveled extensively on this planet so there are numerous things they haven't had an opportunity to discover. We thought we would pass you off as an inhabitant of a distant exotic land.”

“I thought you could be a high-ranking official or something like that,” her father suggested. “Gary would whip up a costume of sorts so you wouldn't look like you were from around here.”

“Okay, that sounds workable,” she commented, giving thought to it. “I get to pick out the items for my getup, then.”

“What did you have in mind?” the mage asked.

“How about this,” she began, smiling at the magician. “A leather kilt, front and back torso armor, leather bracers, a helmet, shield and broadsword. That way, I'm dressed up but protected, too.” She thought about something for a moment, then continued. “The terrain here is too rugged for my bare hooves so I'll need to be shod with steel shoes. They're a weapon unto themselves.”

“Nancy, you're sure, Hon? Steel shoes?” her father asked.

“It's not too bad, Dad. I've worn them before when I gave that Aiden Cole, Junior his rewards.” she related to him.

“Nancy, I'm not sure how to attach shoes to your hooves like that,” the mage admitted. “I do know a smith that would do the work for you, to your own specifications. He made this flatware on the table.”

Nancy looked the flatware over carefully this time, noting the utensils were very well made. She nodded her head, thinking this idea would do just fine.

“Okay, let' do it before I change my mind,” she stated, hoping that she was making the right decision.

Nancy took off her late Roman-style helmet and gave it to her father to hold while the smith took care of her hoofwear. The young man, not much over twenty-five, looked at her again, still appearing quite shaken. He had almost passed out from fright when she first came into his workspace with her father and

the mage.

“My Princess Nancy, are you sure you wish me to shoe you? I do not wish to hurt you, Your Highness.” the red-haired man explained to her.

“Smith Harmon, I have seen your work and it is first rate. I trust you will not bring injury to me,” the femme equine replied, smiling at him while she adjusted her armor's breastplate position just slightly and tugged at the waistband of her leather kilt. The mage had produced this armor variant after two others didn't meet her expectations. The breastplate and backplate fit her like a glove, showing off all of her feminine curves. Maybe that's what was bothering the metal master.

“Your Highness, it might be best if I have you lay on a bench, face down so I might work on your hooves properly.” the young man suggested. He brought in a bench from out front, then put a few blankets on it to pad it a bit. He assisted Nancy in getting situated properly, then put another blanket over her back and legs.

Harmon stepped to the end of the bench and took up a rasp in one hand while he picked up her left hoof in the other. Giving her appendage a few swipes of the tool to smooth the sole of it, he nodded. He did the same to the other hoof, then retrieved a T-shaped tool to measure her up with. Once the general size of shoe required was calculated, the smith stepped over to the forge.

“Your hooves are in very good shape,” he offered up while he stoked the forge with his crude but effective bellows. The smith put a generic shoe in the fire, heating it to orange hot, then adjusted the shape of it somewhat on his anvil, using a very heavy hammer. He held it close to her hoof with a pair of tongs, sizing it in his mind, then worked the shoe some more.

“Once I have these shaped, I need to burn them in, Your Highness. I do not know if it will hurt you.” he informed her.

“Please continue,” she replied, knowing exactly what he was going to do. Pain or not, it had to be done.

Harmon put a shoe in the forge, heating it up again until it had a bit of color in it. Using a steel brush, he cleaned the side that would be against her hoof. Taking it in his tongs again, he placed it against her sole, using the heat in the steel to make her hoof conform to the shape of the shoe. There was a sizzling sound a bit of smoke but the procedure was over quickly enough.

“I pray that did not discomfort you,” he asked, gritting his teeth when she didn't reply immediately.

“I felt the heat a bit but it didn't hurt me, kind smith. Please continue.” she replied, smiling a bit when he jumped to get her other shoe prepared.

Once that had been attended to, Harmon rounded up his hammer, pliers, seating tool and nails. He aligned the appropriate shoe with her right hoof and began to drive the nails in, trying to be careful. He drove the nails in and then he used a seating tool to put the nail heads below the level of the shoe's surface. Harmon then set the other shoe for her.

“I think it would be better if you stood for me so I may finish, Princess Nancy.” the smith stated.

Helping her up from the bench, he had her step up on the bench and face him. Using the other end of the tool, he cut shallow grooves just below the nail shanks that protruded from her hoof. He nipped the

nail shanks to a particular length, then rolled them down into the grooves with the first end of the seating tool.

He then had her put her hoofs, one at a time on his knee while he knelt in front of her and rasped off the excess shoe that protruded past the hoof wall. He then rolled the toe of the steel a bit for her.

The smith helped her down from the bench and allowed her to walk around in his shop a bit. He was relieved when she smiled, obviously pleased with his work.

“I need to compensate you for your labors,” she told the young smith, using her best regal tone for emphasis. “Please take this coinage, kind sir. I hope it is enough,” she added, giving him two hundred sovereigns.

“My Lady! This is too much!” Harmon blurted out, looking at the money in his hand with disbelief.

“Please take it,” she retorted, closing his hand around the coins gently. “I am sure my father, the King would be quite pleased to know you have done such exacting work and I'm sure he would agree with the price paid.”

Bradley had to turn his head and clear his throat to keep from laughing at his daughter. After clearing this throat again, he got his daughter's attention.

“Your Highness, may I remind you that we need to be getting along now. We have much ground to cover before the evening falls.” he said in an authoritative tone, as if he were an Aide to 'Her Royal Highness'.

“Yes, squire Svensen, you are so correct. We must be along.” she replied. Turning to the smith, she spoke to him again. “We must be off now but I wish to thank you again for your assistance.”

“You're quite welcome, Your Highness. If I can be of further assistance, please let me know,” he stated, bowing down on one knee to her. She gave him her paw to kiss the fancy signet ring she wore, courtesy of the mage, and allowed him to stand before they left his shop.

Once on their mounts and out of earshot, Brad rode up next to his daughter.

“You laid it on a little thick back there, didn't you?” he suggested.

“Well, this might be my last hurrah.” she retorted. “I just as well try to enjoy it as much as I can.”

Torvald was taken straight from the courtroom over to a local hospital to be checked over and much to his dismay, he had managed to pull a number of stitches loose in his worst injury. While Victoria sat by his head and stroked his cheek, the doctors tended to his wound.

“Mr. Svensen, you really should take it easy until this injury heals,” the white haired onager suggested. “You've pulled almost all of the stitches out of your hide, stallion. I have to say, you must think being immortal gives you the right to ignore taking care of your health.”

Tor seemed a bit upset that he had re-injured himself. “I'm not sure how I opened that wound,” he admitted, actually failing to know exactly when or how it had happened. It had looked just fine this

morning when he got dressed and he sure didn't remember doing anything physical in the meantime.

“He's been careful, as far as I know,” the tigress offered up, leaning down to kiss her hubby's forehead.

“Even if he's been careful, this is a bad place to be injured,” the doctor stated to Victoria while he accomplished his work. He then looked at Torvald and brought something up. “I can suggest you might try wearing a back brace that has stays in it, loosely, just to remind you not to bend forward, backward or sideways and open up the wound again.” The elder stallion looked at his craftsman and commented on a glaring fact; “This is going to leave a very prominent scar, I'm afraid.”

“That just means the other ones will have company,” the blond stallion joked, trying his best to lighten the mood.

“You do have a number of bad ones,” the doctor's assistant, a brown tabby-colored feline femme commented.

Tor gave the assistant a crooked smile. “Yeah, that's what happens when you're immortal. My wife and I both have numerous scars from our work for The Gods.”

“I can't see the allure of working for any omnipotent being,” the onager put forth. “You both seem to be a very nice couple. I would suggest that you both get out of the business before one of you runs across another being that can destroy you. Like Lucifer, or that insane creature Anane.”

“Anane . . . Where have I heard that name before?” Victoria mused.

“He is a fallen angel.” the tabby femme replied. “We hear he's gone berserk, ignoring the Malefic Council's direct orders.”

That information seemed to upset Torvald. “You know, that sounds like the fur that Aslaug tangled with some time back. That's when she was 'promoted' from Shieldmaiden to Valkyrie.”

“You're talking about Aslaug Larsdatter?” the onager asked.

“The one and only.” Tor replied.

The onager stopped his work and looked at the blond stallion with a concerned look on his muzzle.

“Listen, if you can, stop her from tangling with Anane. As tough as she is, she still might lose that battle. Anane has gone around the bend, if you understand what I'm getting at. He will go for broke if he goes up against Miss Larsdatter.”

Tor smiled, then pointed something out. “If she heard you call her 'Miss Larsdatter', it would be your butt she would be presenting to you on a silver platter.”

“I've heard about that, too,” the doctor retorted, going back to his work. “It seems she has a thing about being called either Aslaug, Angelbreaker or Valkyrie.”

“I guess that's like I prefer to be called Victoria. My sister calls me Vicki but she's the only one that does that anymore.” the tigress brought forth. “Although there was a period of time in my life that I was Miss Vicki D'nan, warrior for the King. For some reason, that seems so long ago.”

“Like I said, you both need to get out of this insane business of doing *The Almighty's* dirty work.” the doctor offered up.

While the elder stallion finished his work, Torvald thought about what he had said; it was a foregone fact that they needed to get out of this line of work. They had avoided direct confrontation with a powerful Dark Agent up until this point but how long would their luck last? And now, their 'employers' from '*On High*' had merely sent one fur apiece, as observers? This wasn't looking good at all.

The berserker watched the doctor apply a clear, waterproof dressing to his injury and then he sat up so the medical team could wrap his torso with a bandage to keep pressure on the injury for a while. He then stood while he was fitted for a back brace, just to keep his torso immobile. While that was being done, Cami and Thomas entered the room.

“Torvald, how are you feeling?” he asked, seeming very concerned. “Just to let you know, I won a recess until tomorrow so you could rest a bit.”

Tor nodded, pondering the situation. “I'm in a lot of pain, Thomas. I'm thankful you were able to get a recess for us because I do need the rest.” The huge fur cringed a bit when the doctor tightened the hook and loop fasteners to adjust the fit of the back brace just a little tighter.

“Well, it took a bit of convincing the judge that the Malefic Council had something to do with it.” the jackal explained.

Victoria got his attention, curious about something. “Thomas, what would the sentence be for what's heaped on us right now, in the off-chance you couldn't get us off the hook?”

“Well, let's see,” the lawyer began. “First time offense, failure to obtain sanction being the only thing that could possibly stick, probably five to twenty years probation.”

“Probation?” the tigress mused, looking at their attorney in a questioning way.

“Yeah, probation.” Thomas replied. “While on probation, you wouldn't be allowed to leave the planet or do any work for The Gods. Actually, not a bad sentence, if you ask me.”

“And what if we accidentally broke probation?” Tor asked.

“Well, you would have to serve out your full sentence,” their lawyer stated, looking to see if they were listening. “You might go to prison or be put on a planet where there is no other sentient beings or maybe forced to mete out each other's punishment. It's happened before to this fur that was killing his own kind in a genocidal fit of insanity. He and his top Aides are still punishing each other, I would guess.”

“That sounds a bit harsh,” Victoria suggested.

“It's fitting, though. He killed tens of millions of his own kind, even his own relatives during a war that lasted only two and half of your years.” Thomas admitted. “Listen, let's get you two back to your suite and order you up a nutritious meal. Tomorrow will most likely be a long day.”

They left the medical facilities to find a taxi of sorts waiting for them. The foursome got inside and

settled in for a short ride to the Court complex once Thomas had given the driver direction. Being on a high alert, Cami put the safety on her rifle to “OFF” and got it into a military grip, muzzle down and buttstock up by her chest. Victoria noted that the femme wolverine seemed to be getting into a trance of sorts, in a way that she had observed her hubby doing. Cami was most likely preparing herself for a possible firefight.

While they made their way to their destination, Victoria gave thought to their predicament. Her hubby was injured, the trial had barely gotten underway and they still didn't know what would transpire. That whole business of not having sanction seemed to be the prosecuting attorney's selling point. He really tried to emphasize the fact that they had not requested sanction from the courts for their work.

It was clear to the tigress that the prosecuting attorney was playing for keeps so she really hoped Thomas and Bethany pulled out the stops tomorrow. Victoria still found it impossible to pray to her God, especially after all that had happened. She just hoped that tomorrow they would be victorious.

Morgan Sleight had followed his quarry from the courthouse, down a few streets to a rather ordinary diner. Waiting until the fur in question had sat down to eat, he made his entry. Quietly crossing the room, he sat down opposite Rumjal. The pachyderm looked up from his menu and addressed the badger.

“Good afternoon, Morgan.” the elephant said softly.

“Rumjal,” the badger responded, nodding to him.

“Now why do I feel this isn't a social call?” the minor deity suggested.

“Can it, Rumjal. Why don't you give up? I know you were responsible for what happened in that courtroom today.”

“No, you have the wrong fur,” Rumjal stated, turning the page on his menu to the salads. “You're looking in the wrong places, my dear detective. We only wanted the Svensens as Agents. We had nothing to do with their being charged by the Celestial Courts. Why don't you go ask Odin? I'm sure he would ante up to being the perpetrator.”

“I'm not that stupid, Rumjal.” the badger shot back. “They work for Odin! Why would he do this? Especially that bloody shirt-thing that happened to Torvald.”

“Torvald was injured by Kenji, a Dark Agent.” the elephant pointed out. “That will take a while to heal up. In the meantime, the stallion has to treat the injury as if he were still mortal.”

“Like I don't know that?” Morgan pointed out.

“Oh, that's right,” Rumjal retorted. “You're immortal, too. Ever-lasting life really sucks, doesn't it?”

“Yeah, it does.” Morgan agreed.

“Tell you what, Morgan.” the elephant began, “You're good at what you do, but this time, you're misguided.” Rumjal took a sip of his water, then continued. “We're not involved with that little courtroom drama like you think we are. Lucifer is playing a game here, having a little power struggle with Surt. In the

meantime, no fur is keeping an eye on that idiot Anane. I was hoping to recruit Tor and Vicki, since I'm very sure they could put an end to Anane's shenanigans. With him out of the picture and with their help, my group might be able to take over the Council. If we can, things would be better for all."

"I'm sorry, Rumjal. You lost me on that." the detective admitted.

"Give it some thought." the large gray one suggested. "Maybe if you had a bite to eat, that might help you to figure out what's going on."

Morgan looked down at the menu the pachyderm gave him and shook his head.

The tigress was laying in bed, listening to her hubby snoring and pondering their conversation with Thomas earlier. He had assured her that their 'employers' would have to abide by whatever ruling was passed down to them. If they were lucky enough to draw probation, that would get them out of the business in a way that they would not be called back to duty for at least the period of their sentence.

That notion suited her just fine. On probation, on their homeworld, with time to spend with their family and start their 'At-Risk' teen diversion program. That's what they had bought the ranch for and it was high time it was used for that purpose. Snuggling against her hubby, she closed her eyes and drifted off to a fitful sleep.

Momentarily disoriented, the tigress stumbled over her own feet, not sure of where she was at the present time. Wherever this was, it was dark, incredibly humid and the stench of death permeated the air. Once she could think straight again, Victoria looked up to see her hubby slowly leading her by a leash, through a dark hallway in what looked to be a castle of some sort.

Her hubby looked very out of place, wearing a leather vest and a leather loincloth of sorts. He appeared to have metal bands on his wrists that seemed to be permanently closed by rivets. He also had marks on his shoulders and upper arms that hinted at having been tortured heavily.

Gazing down at her own body, she noted that she wore a dirty sleeveless cotton shift that didn't quite reach her knees. This garment reeked of old, dried blood, body sweat and some other things she had rather not think about.

She had heavy steel manacles on her wrists and ankles, the chain between her leg bands being just long enough to allow her to walk if she were careful. Running was certainly out of the question. The short chain between her wrists allowed very little in the way of usefulness. At least they weren't bound behind her back.

Her stallion stopped at a door, tied off her leash to a convenient ring and searched his keyring for the key to this portal.

"Torvald, where are we?" she asked, feeling dread in the pit of her stomach when he turned to her with an extremely angry look on his face, something very out of place for him. What shocked her were the four parallel scratches on the left side of his face from his cheek to his left nostril, ones that looked like she might have done them herself.

“Who told you that you could make a sound without permission?!” he bellowed, right before he slapped her across the face forcefully.

“Tor! Please don't . . .” He slapped her again, harder, bringing tears to her eyes.

“Be quiet!!” he screamed in her face. “Torvald Svensen no longer exists! You should know that, since it was your choice! You chose this destiny for us!!”

“Torvald, you're hurting m . . .” Her complaint was quickly cut short by the stallion. He slapped her again, so hard it knocked her down, causing her to be choked by her own collar and leash. He reached out, roughly dragging her back to her feet by one arm.

“Don't you *ever* speak that name again!!” he screamed at her. “You destroyed the fur that was Torvald Svensen when you made your choice! All that is left of him is the shell you see before you. The shell that no longer can love and feel compassion for you. The fur that is now your Master.” He turned away from her, shaking his head.

“Tor . . . I mean . . . Master, may I speak?” she asked apprehensively.

The huge stallion slowly looked back at her. “Yes, you may, since you asked properly this time.”

“M . . . Master, what choice did I make?” she queried. That seemed to upset the blond fur.

“You don't remember?”

“No, Master.”

“You chose to ignore the sentence set forth for us by the court.” he offered up. “Now we are both being punished for that little indiscretion of yours.”

“Torv . . . Master, what did I do?” she begged, tears now streaming down her muzzle. She wanted desperately to know what she had done to cause this. He shook his head at her request right before he dragged her into the room that he had opened for them and answered her question.

“You allowed yourself to be consumed with saving a lost cause, a fur you knew we could not save from it's destiny,” he suggested while he chained her wrists to the wall with her facing it. He then chained her collar to the wall with a very short chain. “We were told we could not work for The Gods or interfere in any way with destiny while on probation. Since you broke those very simple rules, I now have to punish you, just like I will do every single day for the rest of eternity. This is my eternal punishment, to have to mete out yours. Remember; this was your choice.” The stallion then reached up and roughly tore the simple garment away from the tigress' body with his bare paws.

While Torvald retrieved his instrument of punishment, a voice spoke into her left ear.

“Well, I guess you now know that wishful thinking can backfire on you,” the voice said calmly, dripping with sarcasm. She turned her head to see a nicely dressed human male with gray hair standing next to her.

“Lucifer! You bastard!!” she screamed, yanking at her bonds so she could get loose and try to kill him. “You caused this!!” she shouted, still trying in vain to get free of her pinions.

“Now, now, tigress. The Malefic Council offered very kindly to bring you and your hubby on board. You should have taken us up on our offer because you now see that there *are* worse things than working for us as our Agents. We would have allowed you to save your beloved family member from their untimely demise, unlike the Celestial Courts. They care nothing for your feelings, my dear tigress.”

She was about to tell the Devil just what she thought about him when the first strike of the whip caught her on the right shoulder, leaving a bright line of pain behind.

Victoria screamed out loudly, still trying in vain to work herself free. The next strike went right down the middle of her back, setting it on fire with pain. It took a moment before she could even breathe, the pain being so intense in nature.

“You will never call me Torvald again, do you hear?!?” her tormenter shouted, laying the whip to her again to emphasize his request. “Speak up!!” he shouted, whipping her again to reinforce this demand. She was preparing to speak when the stallion formerly known as Torvald Svensen threw his full strength into his work, stunning her with the intensity of the searing pain being dished out upon her back.

Her former hubby had stopped whipping her long enough for her to catch her breath but before she could speak out and beg him for mercy, he roughly grabbed her jaw and twisted her head around to look at him, standing next to her.

“Speak, dammit!! Tell me you will never again let my former name slip from your mouth!!” he demanded tersely.

“I . . . I will never sp . . . speak your old name, Master,” she finally blurted out, hoping it would stop the punishment. To her utter dismay, he walked away from her and the whipping continued.

“I still have to punish you,” he said very casually between strikes, letting her know the score. “When enough blood has been let to satisfy the daily demands of our torturers, I will quit for the day. You should know that. It was your choice that caused this whole mess.”

She knew in her heart that she had never made this insane choice, despite what she had just been told. Victoria had been raised to be respectful of the law so this had to be some sort of a misunderstanding. The problem was, the fur that looked to be her hubby was busy ignoring her pleas to stop punishing her. He seemed hell-bent on removing her hide from her body, one whip strike at a time. His only concern at the moment seemed to be just how quickly he could cut her pelt open and finish her punishment.

Knowing she had to do something to save herself, Victoria used all of her resolve to summon up the physical strength she desperately needed to break her bonds. Each whip strike seemed to fuel her need for self-preservation, finally allowing herself the determination to pull one rusted-out anchor free from the wall. Quickly unhooking herself from her other pinion points, she turned to the fur that was still whipping her.

. . . The fur that was no longer her husband . . .

. . . The fur that she knew she would have to kill to escape this madness and save herself . . .

Her new-found freedom seemed to piss off the huge stallion further so he lashed out at her again with his whip, intending to injure her further by aiming for her face. She caught the tip of the whip with her

feline reflexes and even though the palm of her paw screamed in pain as if she were grabbing a live coal from a furnace, she pulled the instrument of torture from his grasp. Knowing she had to do this, to end this madness and try to save herself, she lunged at him with her powerful legs, claws fully unsheathed, mouth open, exposing her long, dangerous teeth. Teeth meant for tearing flesh and killing living things.

The stallion stepped back away from her with fear in his eyes just as she sprang through the air at him but it was not in his cards to avoid her onslaught. Her jaws closed down mercilessly on his throat with a sickening crunch while her body weight and momentum knocked him to the floor and her claws sank deeply into his hide.