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'The Price Of Worship'

By R C Stankewitz

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Chapter 18

"Recognitions"

Torvald had made camp for them late in the evening, trying to stay on schedule with the directions given by Mistfeldr. The warriors and the teens had enjoyed their meal of some strange food the huge fur had told the Vallhund that it was called pizza. Jens had consumed almost a whole combination pizza by himself, continually raving about this unusual and delicious food. They were just finishing their meal when Jens heard an approaching rider.

"Everyone, take arms" he said quietly, picking up his broadsword and readying himself. Within moments, a hooded rider appeared out of the darkness and slowed their mount to a walk, then stopped. The rider removed their hood and announced their intentions.

"I am Deanna" the femme voice loudly stated. "I mean no fur harm." The rider was sitting forward in her saddle, trying to shield her eyes from the light of the fire so she could see the furs before her better.

"Deanna my love, is that you?" Jens called out as he cautiously approached the strange femme. "I cannot see your face clearly. You know that I will not harm you if you are who you claim to be." As the femme dismounted, she dropped her hooded cape and walked into the firelight. She smiled at Jens as her collie appearance shimmered and changed to that of a lynx.

"I am who I say I am" she said as she walked up the the Vallhund and gave him a big hug and a kiss. "I used my shielding magic to disguise myself. The mage thinks me to to be a canid in nature."

“I should have known” the canid replied to his mate as he held her closely. “That is why he believed you to be a shapeshifter. I had been afraid that the mage had killed you to get to your powers.”

“That mage is not what he appears to be” she said as she returned his affections. “He is from some other world. He does not look like us at all as he has no fur and no muzzle to speak of.”

“Please come to the fire and warm yourself” the Vallhund beckoned to his mate. “We have a wizard of sorts in our midsts. He intends to stop the rogue mage from using the dragon Mistfeldr as a weapon.”

As the assembled group huddled around the fire to discuss their plans, a pair of wolves watched patiently from the shadows of the dark. The shorter one turned to his brother and said in a whisper “We will wait until the stallion and tigress go to bed and then we will capture them.”

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The group had sat around the fire and went over every step of the plans to at least stop the magician from using the dragon as his avatar. Deanna had been invaluable to them in describing the layout of the keep in great detail. She covered all of the potential traps and the potential weak spots. After another round of ale for the adults and soda pop for the teens, they all went off to their respective sleeping accommodations.

“Torvald, are you ready for tomorrow?” his mate asked as they prepared for bed. She had been thinking over their plans and the thought of some of them getting hurt really bothered her. “There -has- to be a way to take out the mage without loss of life or limb.”

“I am as ready as I will ever be for tomorrow” he replied. “This feels just like the last time I fought the Germans before I went to Valhalla for the first time. I would be telling an untruth to you if I said I wasn't nervous.”

“I sensed you were upset” she said as she gave him a neck rub. The tension in his shoulders made the muscles in his neck feel like steel cables. “You're very tense, my stallion. Just try to relax.” He smiled as she worked the kinks out of his neck and shoulders for him with her paws and an occasional firm elbow in the tight spots.

“Thank you for the neck rub” he said as he finished undressing for bed. “I'm tired from riding. Let's try to get some rest before tomorrow.” He helped his mate get under the covers and they both drifted off to sleep quickly in each other's arms.

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“Valerie? Barbara?” the weasel said loudly as he walked through the house in search of the femmes in question. He finally found them in the back yard, picking up the weapons that were scattered about. “I have seen the children. They are with Torvald and Victoria.”

“What are they doing with them?” the tigress asked no fur in particular. “They weren't supposed to be going on any missions!”

“Apparently Torvald wished them there” the weasel stated as he sat down on a lawn chair. “The tigress said that she would wish them home tomorrow evening.”

“Well at least we know where they are” Barbara commented. “It will be quiet around here for a little bit” she stated as she gave her lover a devious smile.

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The smaller wolf motioned for his bigger brother to be quiet as they crept up on the immortal couple's tent. They had patiently waited for them to go to bed before they made their moves. Daniel, the older one had carefully brought the immortals' horses to a spot away from the others while John, his younger brother had listened for any disturbances.

John carefully cut the back of the tent open to find themselves almost on top of the intended victims who were sleeping soundly in a large bed. He pulled out a pair of rags and dampened them with a liquid that the mage had given them. The pair held the rags over the mouths and noses of the stallion and the tigress until they stopped weakly struggling with their captors. Soon Torvald and Victoria were tied securely across their mounts and on their way to the mage.

“That was easy enough” Daniel stated as they rode along their way to the keep. “The mage will pay us handsomely for this pair.”

“How much will we get for them?” John asked as they forded a small stream. He had to take it easy because his mount was skittish of water in general.

“We have not actually talked prices” was the reply.

“Then how do you know we will be rewarded at all?” John pointed out.

“He has never failed to pay handsomely for his requests.”

“Very well, then. I will take your word for it but do not disappoint me, Daniel.”

###

“Mom? Dad? Are you awake? It's getting late in the morning” the young tiger called out towards the tent in question. The rest of the group had risen and dressed, even putting on their armor while they waited. Deanna had went to check on the horses only to make a discovery; the immortal couple's mounts were missing.

“Torvald and Victoria's horses are not here” she announced as she came back into the area in front of the tents. “They seem to have left before us.”

“I think that they have not left under their own power” James said as he came from behind the tent. The rest of the group went to see that the back of the tent was cut open

and there were signs of a struggle. Deanna picked up one of the rags and sniffed it, dropping it promptly.

“The mage has taken them” she said sourly. “We must try to retrieve them before that bastard can hurt them.” The others all agreed so they broke camp quickly and got on their way towards the keep.

As they rode northward, Jens took the time to take stock of the band of possible warriors that he would lead in saving the immortals. “Have any of you children had training in the art of war?” he asked.

“Torvald has trained all of us” James replied. “I am fair with a sword or staff but Conrad is the master among us. He is keen with a sword or Francisca.”

“I am not a master” the tiger replied. “I can hold my own, if need be. Wilhelmine is the staff master here. She can take on my father with no problems.” The tall filly blushed when Conrad had said that compliment.

“I can take care of myself” the filly said to Jens. “I have been trained by the best.”

“Not to change the subject” Conrad stated, “but isn't that the rock we were looking for?” the group was looking at a very tall boulder near a outcropping of yew trees.

“The dragon was to meet us here” Jens said as they came to a stop in the road. “We will stay here until the dragon comes. We will need the help of any creature we can muster.”

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Torvald opened his eyes to see that he was no longer in his tent but he was in a room somewhere. He quickly felt around to find that his mate was lying on the bed beside him, possibly sleeping. He began to sit up and assess the situation when he felt something heavy around his neck. He reached up towards it but stopped, remembering the amulet around Mistfeldr's neck and the shock it had given him.

Spying a mirror across the room, he stood shakily and made his way over to it and peered into it. Once he had gotten his eyes to focus, he observed that he had some type of gold colored collar around his neck that had some precious gems inlaid into it. He went back over to the bed to see that his mate had a similar collar around her neck too. Victoria's collar seemed to be substantially more ornate than his, with gems hanging down from the front of it.

“Victoria, are you awake?” he asked, giving her a little nudge to rouse her. “Victoria, we have been captured! Wake up!” he shouted, hoping for a response from her. When she didn't respond immediately, he picked her up in his arms and began walking toward the open doorway. As he grew closer to the opening, the collar around his neck began to mildly shock him.

“Torvald, what's going on?” the tigress asked as she began to rouse from her heavily medicated sleep. “Why the hell am I being shocked?” The huge fur began to back away from the opening and the tingling ceased as they got further away from the doorway.

“We are captive in a room and these collars seem to be keeping us here” he stated as he put her back on the bed. “Are you all right?” he asked as he kneeled by the bed to check her over for any possible injuries.

“I feel like some fur slipped me a mickey” she replied as she tried to sit up. It was then that she noticed the collar around Torvald's neck. “What in the world is this thing around your neck?” she asked as she touched the collar. Nothing happened as she examined the golden device at length.

“You have a collar on too” he pointed out as he touched her neck wear. “These collars were beginning to shock us as we got closer to that door.” It was then that he finally noticed something important. “We do not have any clothes on.”

“Why doesn't this surprise me?” she said sourly as she gave her hubby a crooked smile. “Almost every mission involves my being naked at some point or another. Why can't we have just one mission where we're clothed all the way through?”

As they sat there on the bed and pondered their clothing situation, a figure came into the room. “I am the mage Terrance” the person said as he walked over towards the immortal couple and stood there facing them. “If you will come with me” he said and waved his hand at them, “We will take care of that problem of nakedness if we can.” The couple couldn't move an inch as the magician attached a thin silver chain about three feet long to each of their collars, the chain glowing momentarily once attached. “Now come with me, if you would” he said, leading them by the chains.

Torvald and Victoria followed the mage quite involuntarily through the keep to another room one level down. There were strange contraptions lying about that chamber that neither could determine what their uses were at all. “What you tell me now will determine what happens next” the mage said, taking the chains from their collars after forcing them to stand quite still again.

“Think back about ten years, I'm guessing” he began as he sat on a stool nearby. “The Flamingo Hotel and Casino in Vegas. You were at a late show for a magician that brought you up on stage and performed magic while you stood there and watched him up close and personal. Does that sound familiar to you at all?”

The Magnificent Terry Williams” the tigress said cautiously. “We were at the jaguar's last show before he disappeared, never to be found.”

“Well, you're looking at him” the mage said sourly. “What's left of him, anyway.”

“But you're a human” the berserker pointed out.

“I know that” the wizard stated. “I was a jaguar until I spoke an incantation to be like the great wizard Merlin so I could return home” he said as he pulled a sheet off of a uncanny likeness of the human superwizard. “The incantation was just a little too liberal, I'm afraid.”

“What does that have to do with us?” the tigress asked. “I don't see how we can help you.”

“I know you're immortals because I have seen you attacked by a dragon that was completely unable to kill you with it's breath” he replied. “I know for a fact that you can move between worlds and I wish for you to take me back to our home world.”

“We do not move between worlds by ourselves” the berserker stated. “We have no control over how that will happen or when.”

“So you're saying you're not going to help me?” he asked the couple.

“No, we saying we cannot comply with your request. The gods move us around not of our choice but as they need us. You cannot just go with us” the tigress responded.

“That is unfortunate” the mage said wistfully. “I will just have to go to plan B.” He went over to an area of the floor and used his magic to remove a heavy iron cover over a six foot diameter hole in the floor. “I'll let that stuff breathe while you're being prepared.” He then removed the collars from the immortal couple's necks and sat the devices down on a table nearby.

The wizard sat down in a comfortable chair to watch while two small femme squirrels came into the room and began to wipe down the immortal couple with a translucent yellow liquid that they had brought into the room in deep bowls. They took great care in rubbing the concoction into the feline's fur and the equines' coat from the chin down, slicking down Victoria's fur along with Torvald's mane and tail in the process.

“Do not worry, that stuff is actually edible. It is made from a fruit that grows everywhere but it's bad for your digestion, I've been told” he stated as he watched on from his perch. Torvald and Victoria both could not move anything except their eyes to watch as the two femmes completed their diligent work on them.

“Now for a quick dip into the encasement” Terrance said as he made Torvald walk over to the pit. There was a platform with a screened floor that was suspended over the hole from underneath which the mage made the stallion stand on. Terrance grabbed a handle on a chain hanging nearby that was an arrow pointing down. He tugged the chain gently and the platform began to slowly descend, stallion and all. “Don't worry, I will not drown you, stallion” he commented as he tugged on a handle shaped like an X as the liquid reached Torvald's chin. After a few moments, he then tugged a handle shaped like an arrow facing up, causing the platform to raise, revealing the stallion coated from his chin down in a very thick layer of white goo.

“Now it is your turn, my dear Lady Victoria” he said as he gave her the same treatment in turn. Once she was coated thickly in the goo, he forced them to step up on a pedestal. “Now you, Lord Torvald, I will have you stand right here” he said as he made the equine take a certain position on the platform. “And I will have you stand right there, M'Lady” he said to her as he made her stand facing her hubby. “No, maybe just a little closer would look better and be a little more modest for both of you” he said, forcing her to snug up right against the huge fur. “That's much better” he commented as he arranged their arms and tails to make them look like they were lovers embracing one another. He then took a bowl of the liquid goo from a table and reached into it, pulling out two gold chains. He put one around each one of their necks, making sure that the

chains were embedded deeply in the goo. He then waved his hand over them, allowing them to speak if they wished.

“This stuff is made from the distilled sap of a tree not found on our world” he said as he walked around them, examining his handiwork. “It is organic, non-toxic and it will cure from your body heat, getting thinner, transparent and quite rigid as it cures. As it sets, it will give off a stasis gas of sorts that will make you sleepy. These femmes that make it for me are immune to its effects but you two furs aren't.” He got up close to them as said quite softly “The gases will actually make you feel better when you awake. That potion used to render you unconscious most likely left you with a headache. The gases will cure that.”

“I do have a bad headache” the stallion said breathily as he was getting woozy from the gases. “Why are you doing this to us? Did we do something to offend you?” he asked, not receiving an answer in return. Victoria couldn't hardly keep her eyes open due to the effects of the fumes while she was fighting off falling asleep.

“Torvald, tell your mate to sleep” the mage suggested as the small femmes began to smooth the surface of the rapidly setting goo with paw tools. “I will talk at length with you when you awake.” After the magician had left the room, Torvald watched the squirrels continue to trowel the rapidly hardening goo around as if they were working concrete. While his mate had been rendered unconscious rather quickly, it took some time for the huge fur to pass out. Before he finally went lights out, he said a prayer to his gods for help.

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Conrad had checked his sword and staff once more, trying his best to keep his composure. He was practicing to get used to the weight of the armor he wore and the changes to his center of gravity as a result. His parents being missing was bothering him greatly and he didn't know what to do except practice to keep his mind off of the problem. As they waited patiently, the dragon Mistfeldr finally made her appearance.

“What has happened to the stallion and the tigress?” she asked as she folded her wings and scanned around the area for them.

“They have been captured by the mage Terrance” the lynx offered up as she approached the huge beast. “They were taken last night.”

“It was my doings that got them into this predicament” the dragon stated. “I must now rescue them somehow.” While the dragon pondered the next moves to make, the tall filly came up to her and began to examine the amulet at length, holding it in both paws.

“This is a pretty necklace” she commented as she held the giant charm in her paws. “Where did you get it?” This shook up the dragon when she finally realized that the filly had a firm hold on the amulet without being shocked.

“You must be a sorceress” she said cautiously as she regarded the palomino colored equine at length. “That is the only way you could touch it without being shocked or killed.”

“My great-grandmother Hilda was said to be a sorceress by some of our family” she replied as she looked at the gems embedded into the necklace. “My mother told us that she never believed in magic and always told us to ignore our great-grandmother's ramblings about casting spells” she added as she stood there examining the huge winged lizard in detail.

“Would you try to remove the amulet from my neck?” Mistfeldr asked cautiously. The filly just reached up and slid the amulet off of her neck and over her head, passing it back to the dragon who took it in one of her forepaws.

“You are indeed a sorceress even if you do not know it” the dragon stated as she looked at the amulet, thinking it was good to be free of the wizard's control. “Only a true sorceress could overcome the mage's magic. If you were a constructed wizardess, you would have been killed without a doubt.”

Deanna came over to them and stared at the filly for a minute before she spoke, thinking about the implications of the powers held by the tall femme. “If you are a sorceress, try to do something with your magic.”

“What should I try to do?” she asked with a confused look on her muzzle.

“Well, try to move something” Mistfeldr suggested. Wilhelmine thought for a second and then smiled as she held out her paws like a Saturday morning cartoon wizard and made the dragon begin to levitate several feet off of the ground. The huge lizard got a confused look on her face and then said softly “Please set me down slowly, if you would.” The tall filly smiled as she slowly let the dragon touch the ground again.

“You did that with no effort at all!” the lynx commented, giving thought to the fact that the filly could be a powerful weapon to storm the keep with. “You could be a very powerful sorceress if you put your mind to it. I think you should practice your magic this evening to learn a few simple things before we try to retrieve the stallion and his mate.”