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“Redemption”

By Kellan Meig'h

Chapter 23 – “The Hunters And The Prey”

Victoria sat the phone back on the charging cradle and just stood there, wondering how this whole thing could get messed up any further. Her oldest son had just informed her that he was now in the hospital, taking Quillam's place, broken bones and all. This was the straw that broke the feral camel's back, as far as she was concerned.

Remaining as calm as possible, Victoria retrieved her cellphone and called Jenna. If there was any fur that could explain this, it would be her. The phone rang twice, then the otteress answered the call.

“I'm right behind you.” the femme sorceress stated, closing her cellphone and putting it away in a pocket while she finished materializing. “I just had a conversation with Bruce and I have to tell you, I am pissed.”

“So, you know?” the tigress asked as she turned to see the femme otter.

“Yeah, I made a quick pass through a few bars and found out who ordered this done to Conrad. It was our buddy, Zagam.”

“Well, we're going to be paying him a visit and it's not going to be a cordial one.” the striped femme put forth in a low tone.

“I was thinking,” Jenna began, “I could run point-fur for you. Dumb Ass wouldn't suspect me, since he's sure that I still work for him.”

Victoria nodded. “We already have a point fur. His name is Alexi Saiga.”

“I understand.” Jenna looked at the floor, then back at the tigress. “Still, I think I could get you in and out without loss of life or limb.”

“Well, you'll need to take that up with Canton Hill.” the femme feline put on the table. “He's the one that's ramrodding the search and destroy mission.”

“Yeah, I'll do . . . that . . .” The sorceress stopped talking when another voice was heard in the hall, one that sounded too familiar to her and not possible at the same time.

“Hey, Victoria?” the other femme voice called out loudly. “How about I make some tamales, John Parks style?” the voice questioned. “I think we have the fixings, unless I'm remembering wrong.” Virginia came out of the bathroom off the hall, straightening her clothes. “Oh, Hi, Jenna. I didn't know you were here. Would you like to stay for dinner?”

“Oh . . . Shit!!” the sorceress blurted out, noting that besides their coloration, the two femme felines were identical. “Listen, I didn't have anything to do with this!” she added, clearly upset by the situation. “If you want, I can take you to a mage that might be able to put the two of you back together . . .” The white tigress quickly derailed her train of thought.

“No, we know how this happened and trust us, we're okay with being two furs.” she explained.

“If you both say so.” Jenna offered up.

“We both say so.” the two tigresses blurted out at the same time, creating a weird stereo sound effect.

“Well, okay, then.” Jenna said softly. “I would like to stay for dinner but I have to get back home to cook for my clan. I will, however talk to Canton Hill about this.” She nodded, then disappeared from sight.

“Hmmpf,” Victoria huffed out, sitting down at the breakfast bar.

“Out with it, Sis.”

The ruddy femme looked up at her twin. “Conrad is now back in his correct form, but he's in the hospital where Quillam was. Apparently Conrad and Cathy both changed places with the golems.”

“No, you're joking.” the white tigress put forth.

“I wish I were.” Victoria retorted. “He sounded a bit loopy on the phone, like he was in no pain at all.”

“I need to call him,” Virginia stated, picking up the paw-set. She started to dial the hospital in Sacramento, only to stop and end the call. “Gah, I should know by the tone of your voice, he's okay.”

“He will be fine.” Victoria put forth. “You know he will begin to heal up soon and he will back on his feet in no time.”

“Well, I'm going to make dinner.” the pale femme stated, beginning to look through the cabinets. She then stopped and turned to look at her twin. “You know, I think we need a battle plan of our own. Are we both going to go hunting the Grand Ass-Hat himself?”

“I was thinking, we might not want to go to the underworld. I mean, what if Lucifer were to capture one or both of us?” Victoria replied.

“I wouldn't do a dumb stunt like that.” the well-dressed hyena said as he sat down next to Victoria, startling both femme felines. “Look, I'm staying out of this one because it looks like a war has been declared on Zagam. And by the way, I had nothing to do with you becoming two femmes.” he added.

“We know you didn't,” Virginia stated, shaking her head. Every fur seemed to think that the two felines blamed them for becoming twins. “So, you're staying out of our hunt?” the white tigress asked.

“You got it. Have my popcorn buttered in a bowl and a lawn chair at the ready.” the Prince Of Lies replied. “I told that idiot Zagam to leave you and your family alone but noooo, he he had to prove something, for what reason I don't know. Just don't be surprised if he leads you to another demonic idiot in the process.”

“Another demon?” Victoria queried.

“Well, you how it goes.” Lucifer began with a shrug of his shoulders, “You do me a favor, I'll do you a favor in kind. These idiots think they're doing one another a good turn, only to be thrown under the bus by that very same demon they've done a favor for if they're not careful. Zagam is being very careless right now. I predict tire tracks adorning his backside in the immediate future.”

“You're suggesting to us, that some other demon is is throwing Zagam under the bus?” the white tigress asked.

“Not in so many words.” the Master Of Deception replied. “Just sayin', ya know.”

Victoria shook her head. “Now I don't know what to say.”

The fallen one smiled widely. “How about, Hey Lou, why don't you stay and have dinner with us?” Lucifer put forth.

Victoria looked shocked. “You're serious?” she asked.

“Yes, I am very serious.” he replied. “I need to get to know the femme that will take Zagam's place at the table.”

“You sound just a bit too confident.” Virginia put forth.

“And why shouldn't I be?” The hyena smiled widely as he continued. “Zagam doesn't know what he's up against. First off, the Hill family will be able to hold a magical energy barrier against anything he might throw at them. Secondly, their point-fur is just possibly the perfect mercenary. Not a fur I would want stalking me. Thirdly, and the wild card, is one Monty Hill. He packs that damned huge rifle that will punch through anything and anyone in Zagam's compound. No place to hide and it's useless to run, considering what the Hill family will be bringing to the fight.”

Virginia scowled. “You make it sound like a walk in the park.” she commented.

“No, it won't be easy.” the male retorted. “That's why I came here in the first place. I want you two to stay here while the excrement impacts every last fan in Zagam's house. It's just too dangerous in the underworld for the two of you to go with them. The same goes for Torvald, too.”

“You're looking out for our well-being?” Victoria questioned, looking at him with one eyebrow raised.

“How can you sit on the Malefic Council is you're dead?” he retorted. “Just looking out for a future council member, her hubby and her new twin sister, that's all.”

“Oh, this is rich.” Virginia blurted out. “The Prince Of Lies is concerned for our well-being. Tell me, why would you even want us on the Malefic Council? It makes no sense to us.”

“One of you would be the voice of sanity to those jokers.” Beelzebub explained. “Sometimes, I wonder how they manage to keep their hides. As it was once said by a very brilliant person, 'Stupid is as stupid does', or something to that effect.”

Victoria gave the male a crooked smile. “Okay, let's say for the sake of argument that I take a seat on the Malefic Council. You know I won't vote on things that would bring harm to a mortal. How does that help you out?”

“There are things you could possibly vote on, since you would profit from them.” Lucifer put on the table. “You know, investments, acquisitions, takeovers of large firms. Some that I think you would like to see taken down.”

“I don't know,” the ruddy femme replied, looking to her sister for support. “I'll have to think about this.”

“Take your time,” he replied, smiling at the two femmes. “You know, I think I'll take a rain check on that dinner. I just realized I have a few souls to collect. Their contracts have expired, you know.” he added. With a wink of his right eye, he was gone.

“I hate when he drops in, just to yank my chain.” Victoria mused.

“So do I,” the white tigress agreed as she began to pull together the ingredients for their dinner.

Victoria shrugged her shoulders. “Now I don't know what we should do.” she offered up. Lucifer made a convincing argument for staying out of the round-up. It could get messy, that was for sure. It was one of those nagging questions; to go, or not to go.

“Okay, say we stay here.” Virginia put forth. “If something goes sideways and we're not there to help, we will just blame ourselves for not going.”

“You're right.” the ruddy femme agreed. “If we do go and one or both of us gets killed, we only have ourselves to blame, right?”

Her twin was right about this, the white tigress agreed. “We go. No more discussions, right?”

“No more discussion.” the younger femme retorted. “Now, let's get dinner ready before Torvald, Maryanne, Nancy and Trenton get back from their little clothes shopping trip.”

###

Brett and Dana's neighbor Andy Cummins, that lived across the street from them was mowing his lawn, enjoying the sun, the nice breeze and the aroma of fresh-cut grass. Finding a small clump of Kentucky Bluegrass growing errant near the front picket fence, he pulled a paw-full of blades and nibbled on them. The black equine really enjoyed a good, fresh grass from time to time, despite what his canid femme mate

said about grass only being good for an upset stomach.

He watched the tiger drive up to his home, most likely to fix lunch for the femme feline and himself. He did this during the week, taking a hot meal back to the shop to enjoy with his mate. He waved at Brett, then returned to mowing his lawn. As Andy turned to start back across the yard on another pass, he observed three armed furs in black tactical clothing and body armor, hop the side fence to the Kashnikov residence.

Quickly dialing Brett's cell phone, he silently urged the tiger to pick up.

“Brett.” the feline answered.

“Be careful, buddy. Three armed furs are in your back yard and they're acting like it isn't a social call.” Andy blurted out.

“Where?”

“North side, and it looked like they were headed around back.” The equine then heard breaking glass. “Brett? You okay?” he asked.

“They're in the house.” the tiger whispered back. “Listen, I can't get out, I'm stuck in the kitchen. Come around back and don't let them leave.” he requested.

“I've got your six.” Andy replied. “I'm wearing a yellow and black plaid shirt.” he added, just so the tiger could identify him. He then went to his gun stash in the garage and pulled out his Izhmash-12 shotgun, slammed a ten round magazine of double-ought buckshot home, racked the action, grabbed a few spares and headed out.

###

The terrier nodded towards the living room, setting up an ambush for Brett. He knew the feline would be home in about fifteen minutes to fix lunch for his mate and himself. He was positive that the fur he was hunting would be armed so they took no chances. All three were equipped with XM177E2 carbines loaded with armor-piercing full metal jacket rounds. Once to their intended location, the canid put them in position.

“Al, you get behind the couch, Nick, you hide behind the door. I'll get behind this side table and we'll wait for him to get here.”

The badger, who was Al, nodded. “I have a good line of sight from here.” he commented as he settled into his hiding place.

Nick, the gray poodle, smiled. “I get first dibs,” he stated, making sure his weapon was charged.

“Go ahead,” Bill, the terrier replied. “We're all firing on him by Zagam's request. Our boss wants him so chopped up, they can't have an open casket funeral.”

They were all in position, ready to kill the feline when he arrived home. The Dark Agents had rounds that would defeat common body armor but they were wearing level five threat armor, just to protect themselves from friendly fire. The armor would stop most rounds but there was an issue; they were not

protected from a razor-sharp chef's knife.

Brett had grabbed Bill's armored jacket at the collar and pulled him back into the dining room while at the same time driving Dana's favorite cutting implement through the terrier's heart. The advantage was the fact that the deceased canid made a very good armored shield to fire from behind.

"You're gonna die just like your friend, here! You're not walking away today!!" the tiger shouted, right before he fired a few rounds out of his Desert Eagle .44 Magnum. "Throw your weapons away!" he ordered. They replied by returning fire.

The tiger felt the rounds impacting the dead canid's body, saving him from injury. Well, not completely. He felt a round slice through his right thigh, forcing him into deeper cover while dragging the assailant's body along to use as a shield.

"Brett!! I'm behind you!! I called the cops on the way!!" Andy shouted from the vicinity of the broken sliding glass door. He then let loose with his shotgun, emptying a magazine and tearing the couch apart, along with the unfortunate badger hiding behind it.

"Give up or die!" Brett shouted, crawling over to the wall that separated the dining room from the living room. Using the reflection in a remaining portion of the glass door to a curio cabinet, he observed the general location of the poodle. He then returned to the kitchen and guesstimated the approximate location of the canid. He cringed, then shot through the wall with his pistol. Knowing this was it, he ran into the living room, only to find Nick on the floor, holding his shoulder.

"Go ahead, shoot me. I'm dying." the canid begged.

"It's just a flesh wound." Brett replied, kicking the carbine rifle away from his assailant. "You're not gonna die, but you will be going to jail." he added.

"No, no jail. Kill me." Nick begged. "If I live and you're not dead, Zagam knows we screwed up and he will come looking for me. If you kill me, it will be a while before he realizes what's up."

"Watch him," Brett told his neighbor. The tiger then limped over to the hall closet and pulled out his military-style first aid kit. He then came back to the canid and began to cut open the wounded antagonist's shirt to gain access to the wound.

"No, don't do that." the canid begged. "Let me die."

"Bullshit!" the striped male spat back. "You said Zagam's name. That means my family would love to get their paws on you. They're gonna go hunt that Ass-hat and I think you might be able to give them some valuable intel."

"I . . . I can't." the poodle shot back. "He'll kill me."

"Not if my family gets to him first." Brett said in a low tone. He made his point by splashing some mil-spec disinfectant on the injury before he put some clotting agent on the sites, causing the Dark Agent to cringe in pain.

"No, don't ask me to do that." Nick begged.

“You have two choices: either go to jail or help my family.” the tiger growled. “I think it's a no-brainer, dude. What is it? Jail or help out my family?”

“You're right, it is a no-brainer. I'll help.”

“Good choice,” Brett commented as he dialed Willi Marie's cell number. They had about three or four minutes, tops before the police would arrive and that was enough time for the mare to come retrieve the injured Agent. While they waited, Andy cut open Brett's pants so they could do some minor first aid on the tiger. So much for fixing lunch.

###

The Dark Agent was still reeling from being slapped around by the huge gray stallion and admittedly, he was surprised that he was still living. The one referred to as 'Monty' had made a good case for helping them, since it was either that or get slowly pummeled to death. It didn't help that the equine wasn't even breathing hard while he 'grilled' the unfortunate Agent for information.

The palomino-colored mare that had come to retrieve him at the tiger's home had been rough with him, too but in the end, she had healed his injury. Nick suspected that it was only to make sure he didn't bleed out while they made their way to his boss' home. Monty had informed him that they were keeping him close, just in case. Nick just hoped it wasn't for use as convenient cannon fodder.

###

Canton looked over the transcripts from the 'session' with Nick, pleased with the outcome. They were now aware of more than a few traps that were set to capture anyone trying to find an easy way in. As the leader of their group, he had to make the decision to move on Zagam. This seemed like as good a time as any. He walked over to the assembled furs and got their attention.

“Well, no use in putting this off any longer.” he began, “I don't look forward to this. We will be putting ourselves in harm's way, so if anyone of you feels like you don't want to participate, step aside and I will not judge you for doing so.” The middle Hill male waited for a moment, then continued with his rally speech. “We will not be welcome in The Underworld. In fact, once there, we are fair game. Keep low, be vigilant of your ammunition and if a squad member runs out, replenish them. Use our paw signals and keep radio chatter to the minimum.”

Aslaug and Rumjal materialized in the Hill back yard along with Varghöss, who seemed upset. The huge wolf was sort of hiding behind the filly, seeming to be a bit unnerved by the gray fallen Angel's presence. They were joined shortly by Constantine. The avian smiled while he listened to their conversation.

“Rumjal, let's get this straight. You are to protect Victoria, her sister and her husband, got it? No harm comes to them.” the Valkyrie stated in a low tone. “I am not happy with them going to the Underworld. Not happy at all.” Everyone could see the tension in the femme equine deity's face. This was a war, after all between good and evil. A war that could have some dire consequences. She tried to put them out of her mind while she found her battle face.

“I will keep them safe.” the pachyderm agreed. “I don't want them to do this either. You know, we could have done something to draw Zagam out of hiding, then grabbed him.”

Constantine put his two cents in. “Word has it that Zagam will not leave his compound for any reason.

We will have to take this fight to him, whether we want to or not. My brother, there is a lot riding on this mission so anything we can do to make it a success is worth the effort.”

“Keep the Svensens safe and you'll have done your part.” the filly directed at the gray one. “Don't make me 'punish' you for failing to do so.” That statement made Rumjal cringe.

“I'll do my best and then some.” the fallen deity replied, knowing if he failed, the Angelbreaker would have a new throw rug in her home, gray in color.

The feathered one spoke up. “And I will be helping you to keep them safe.” Constantine was beginning to warm up to the idea of Rumjal protecting some of the Amendment Foundation members. He wondered if the pachyderm would be interested in joining forces with them. Well, it was a thought, anyway.

Every fur then made a circle at Canton's request, while Hilda, as the eldest member present, said a prayer for them.

“We gather this eve to ask our gods to watch over us. We will not ask for sanction, since it is our intent to end a demon's existence. We do ask and pray that if one of our group dies, you will take their soul to their reward. Please understand that we are only declaring war because an open series of acts of aggression have been wrought upon our families. Keep us safe, guide us and watch over us. These things we pray, Amen.”

Once the prayer was ended, the warriors checked their gear one last time. Alexi went from fur to fur, doing his own check of their equipment. He seemed very critical and tense, commenting about every little thing he found. Jenna guided Nick, who was in pawcuffs, to a point in Canton's back yard, motioning for everyone to join her.

The stallions, Canton, Troy and Monty, stood behind her while Rafael, Max and Willi Marie stood in front, facing her. Torvald, Victoria and Virginia filled in the empty spaces. With a snap of the fingers on her free paw, they disappeared from sight. Aslaug, Varghöss, Constantine and Rumjal followed close behind.

Anna turned to Amanda and nodded. “You said that you know of an empty warehouse nearby?”

“I do.” the calico femme replied.

Anna, Iva, Hilda, Julianna and Amber formed up with the femme feline and she transported them to the place where hopefully, a demon would be arriving shortly. They had a lot of work to do in the meantime.

###

Alexi motioned for them all to get down once they materialized in the demon's realm. The stag looked about with his binoculars and made sure it was clear before he turned back to the group to speak.

“I am telling you all, this is bad idea.” he put forth in his thick Russian accent. “We need to stop this demon, but we need to follow game plan. Jenna will lead until we reach compound. Once we arrive, I take point. I will use poodle as shield until I see it is safe. We then take his home. Understood?” They all nodded affirmative, with the exception of Nick for some reason, so they headed out.

The area around Zagam's compound was a light forest with just enough bushes and shrubs to hide behind as they approached. Nick, in a move of preservation, quickly pointed out the various trip wires and

pit-traps that had been put in place. Most of them were fairly new in nature, suggesting that the bovine demon was aware of their plans. Jenna then got Alexi's attention so she could suggest something.

“Let me go in,” she said softly, motioning to the demon enclave. “He still thinks I work for him so I can go look and see what's going on.”

“Is good idea. Da, I like.” the stag put forth. “We will remain here until you return.”

###

The femme otter materialized just off the main access road into Zagam's enclave, behind some shrubs that obscured her arrival. Straightening her clothing, she walked up to a lupine 'hired thug' leaning against a wall.

“Is Zagam home?” she asked very matter of factly.

“Yeah, he's here. You got some business with him?” the timber wolf asked.

“As a matter of fact, I do.” She then discreetly froze the canid.

Jenna walked through the compound, taking careful note of anything that looked like a trap. There were a few mechanics working on a vehicle of some sort in the garage and a gardener was tending the rose bushes in front of the main house. She knew the fur at the door, Lefty, so she walked right up to the mustelid and greeted him.

“Hey Lefty!” She said jovially. “Say, is Zagam here?” she questioned.

“Yeah, he's here.” the skunk replied somewhat tersely. “You lookin' fer some work? Cuz iffin' you are, the boss sent some lackeys on a mission an' they haven't returned yet. I think he's wantin' some fur ta go look fer 'em.” Lefty then pulled out an apple, sliced off a portion with his knife and popped it in his mouth.

“So, this a paying job?” she asked.

Lefty nodded, then motioned for her to go inside. She did so, but froze Lefty as an afterthought. That would teach him to be rude with her.

Once inside, she walked through the main foyer to an area off to one side. Creeping up to the door, she could hear voices inside. Zagam was having a conversation with some fur, like he was making a long deal of some sort. She knew his location, so the femme sorceress popped out and returned to the awaiting squad of hunters.

###

Jenna rematerialized near her cohorts, smiling widely. “Zagam is there, in his study. We'll have to go in by foot, since he would notice our entire retinue materializing in his home.”

Alexi nodded. “Mister Nick, here says we avoid area between warehouse and garage. He says it is pinch-point. We go to right of garage, use steel barrels to hide behind. We then go to side door. Hallway to his study is there. I lead all of you, watch my signals. Monty, you stay at barrels with Nick and Rafael. Any sound from me that mission is going sideways, give us suppression fire.”

“I will do,” the huge stallion agreed. “Any peep from you, I’ll open up.”

“Will do.” the maned wolf put forth.

The cervine then looked at the Svensen crew. “Torvald, Victoria, Virginia. You stay here, be backup. If I say come, you do it, rifles blazing. Understood?”

“We’re the backup plan.” the blond stallion agreed.

Alexi then turned to Jenna and Wilhelmine. “You two come with me, stay at rear of line. Watch our backs and get us out of there if I say so.”

“We agree.” the femme otter replied.

The antelope then looked at Rumjal, Constantine and Aslaug. “You three are 'shit hits fan' plan. If shit hits fan, I call. You do what you have to do to get us out safe.”

“I’m good with that.” the avian confirmed. “You call out and we’re on it.”

Aslaug then turned and looked at the pachyderm. “Rumjal, you watch out for my friends. If they get called in, you’re going in with them. You fuck up and I’ll make you regret it. Understood?”

“Absolutely.” the fallen deity agreed. “If I go in, you might have to do something for me, depending on what happens after that.”

The Valkyrie looked at the gray one oddly. “Do something for you?”

Rumjal nodded. “If it gets back to the Malefic Council that I helped out with Zagam’s demise, I might need you to help me 'disappear', if you catch my drift.”

“Well . . .” The filly was torn by this. Help a fallen deity fall off the radar? It might not be much different than decommissioning a Dark Agent. Maybe it could be done. “Okay, we can give it a try. Constantine and I can’t make any guarantees, though.”

“Good enough for me.” the elephant agreed. Before the filly could move, he quickly gave her a hug. “It’s the thought that counts.” he whispered in her ear before he let go of her.

“Hey! Watch it!!” the Valkyrie blurted out, pulling one of her franciscas from its holster. “Try that one more time and I won’t wait for you to screw up!!”

“Sorry, it’s just that . . .” Rumjal turned his head away from her and shook it.

“It’s just what?” Aslaug needed to know.

The pachyderm replied quietly. “It’s been a long time since some fur was sincere about doing something for me.”

The filly was preparing a proper retort concerning sincerity when they were interrupted by the stag.

“All right! We go!” their point-fur said firmly, crouching down and moving silently to cover behind the barrels. He waited until his squad had moved into position, then the antelope took point again, moving to the side door. The shrubbery by the portal was thick enough to give them cover but only for a few furs. He used a lock pick to defeat the side door, opening it silently, taking a quick look around before he entered. One by one the remaining five warriors followed suit.

“He's in the last door on the left.” the otteress offered up, taking her position in line as they moved down the hall. Just about the time they reached the point where they would have to cross the main foyer, alarms began to sound.

Alexi turned to his squad, rolled his eyes and stated in his thick Russian accent; “Shit has hit fan big time!!”