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“A Loss Of Rights”

By Kellan Meig'h

Chapter 10

Megan shimmered back into the living room of the Immortal couples' real home with a a tired look on her muzzle. She sat down on the hearth of the fireplace, rubbing her eyes with the backs of her paws. “I don't know what to tell all of you,” the spotted skunk stated, looking at them wearily. She sat for a moment, rubbing her muzzle. “I talked at length with the Counsel of Elders about this problem. We all agreed that something has caused the transition to have zero effect but what that 'something' is, we don't know.”

“What does that mean to Gytha, Dana and myself?” Axel asked, concerned for all of his family.

“It means you all still remember everything clearly. I not sure if any of you knew it or not but you three are brother and sisters from Torvald's past.” Megan pointed out. “You're all his first children with his first wife. Pam Benelli knew Torvald had fathered you three so your past lives were the basis for the backstory children. It must have seemed convenient to her to actually have you be who you were in the past or something like that.”

“That means a lot to us” Gytha responded, giving her little sister a hug. She knew they felt quite at ease with one another and this was the reason why.

“The Counsel asked me to find out if this really bothered any of you. If it doesn't, then we won't worry about it.” The femme spotted skunk waited for a moment or two before she said, “Let's sleep on it tonight and talk about it again tomorrow morning.” Megan thought about it some, wondering what was going through all of their minds. She wasn't sure how she would have taken all of this, especially since she had been real close to her siblings in her mortal life. She was in hopes that all of his would work itself out for the best.

“Please tell us this Pamela Benelli is no longer in the backstory department, causing trouble?” Tirrell asked, thinking that particular femme had caused enough trouble already.

“They would not tell me what they did with her but she is no longer with the mission staff.” Megan replied. This had been a long day but any piece of news would be good news for them.

“Well, I think it's time we fixed some lunch.” Barbara suggested. She looked in the refrigerator, looking for an idea of what to cook when the power went out.

“I think we knocked the power out,” Ralph Carapina shouted down to them from upstairs. “We must have cut through a power line in the wall. Don't worry, I'll have my electrician get on it right away.” The badger had been ever so diligent in getting this addition done just as quickly as possible. The problem was his demolition crew was being in too much of a hurry, trying to set a record or something with this work to the Immortal's home. The electrician, a wiry male wombat, came through the family room en-route to the garage and the breaker panel mounted there.

“Sorry, all.” he said, nodding at the tigress and her lover. “We got that one with a cordless reciprocating saw, of all things. You should have seen the spark show it put on for us.” As he went out the sliding glass door, Dana pointed out a common thing about this whole construction crew; construction worker's butt-crack.

“That is just gross, if you ask me.” the blond feline stated, smiling at her aunt. “Who wants to see butt-crack?”

“Yeah, it makes you wonder if they don't get paid enough to afford a belt.” Valerie proffered up.

“What's that about a belt?” Ralph questioned as he came downstairs, smiling as he asked.

“Why does every fur on your on your crew have butt crack showing?” Dana thought that was funny to ask the badger that particular question.

“It's a male fur thing.” he replied. “I'm not sure if it's a rule or not but you have to at least have one fur on a jobsite that's showing butt-crack!”

Torvald had went across town to the Desoto dealership, having to go and sign the papers for his wife's van to be repaired. After a brief go-round with the service writer, they had finally decided to honor his insurance carrier from Wisconsin. He had made his way back home uneventfully, stopping to grab them a light dinner on the way from El Casa Del Burrito[©].

“I still feel bad about what's happened,” the huge fur stated to his mate, setting out the food on the table for their meal. “You're injured, possibly crippled for the rest of your life and I had to lie to my police brethren about that altercation with the goat.”

“What other choice did you have?” his wife asked, unwrapping a meat and bean burrito for herself.

“The only other choice was to tell them we're immortals, the goat shot me first but he couldn't kill me and you killed him out of a rage for injuring me instead. Besides, I kind of felt this was coming. We've had pretty good luck on our missions so far. It was bound to happen sooner or later.”

“Yeah, you do have a point but I still feel bad about your injury. I did find out that the fur I killed was on our list. He was considered to be the number 3 fur in *The Legion*.” Torvald passed Denise a vegetable burrito and grabbed one for himself. “This mission will not be easy to forget.”

“This will be my last mission, I think,” the femme feline said quietly, looking down at her plate. “I don't know what I was thinking, being a warrior for the gods. Now I'm crippled, unable to carry out my part of our mission. What happened to our promise of a mild mission, since we had Willi Marie and James to look after?” Her tears were streaming down her cheeks as she looked at her hubby, her bottom

lip trembling, her emotions beginning to get the best of her. "I don't want to be let down again, with another promise from on high that doesn't come through." She looked up at the ceiling, pushed her chair back and stood up, gritting her teeth and squinting her eyes shut from the pain while she hung onto the table for support. When she opened her eyes, they were glowing incredibly white with her power. She took a deep breath and said loudly,

"I'M THROUGH WITH THIS CRAP!! DO YOU HEAR ME CHRISTOPHER? ODIN?? DO EITHER ONE OF YOU HEAR ME?? I'M DONE WITH BEING AN AGENT THAT GETS SCREWED IN THE END, FOR THE GOOD OF ALL FURKIND! I QUIT!! I'M DONE!! I'M OUT BEFORE I GET INJURED ANY FURTHER!! DO YOU HEAR ME?!?"

"DO EITHER OF YOU HEAR ME, DAMMIT?!?"

Victoria sat back down and put her head down in her paws, trembling all over with rage, anger, pain and sadness. She had never in her life been so upset over something she had absolutely no control over.

Torvald and Denise looked on in shock as the tigress shimmered out of sight.

"Denise! Quick, take me to wherever she has been taken to!" the huge fur shouted out, going around to her side of the table. He took her paw in his while she took more than a few moments to locate Victoria. She tried to shimmer out with Torvald in tow but something was blocking her. Momentarily, a familiar voice rang out around them.

*"Please do not worry, Torvald.
I wish to resolve this with Victoria, just the two of us.
I will return your mate just as soon as we're through talking."*

At least Christopher had been polite, letting them know what was going on. The huge fur sat back down, looking totally confused by this. Never had he been asked not to participate in something as important to his wife as this situation was right now. He shook his head as he pushed his meal away from himself. Somehow the huge fur had suddenly lost his appetite.

Willi Marie was sitting on the back deck, thinking about what had gone on in the last few days of her life. They had been moved to Wisconsin, on a parallel world, finally given memories that were made up by a misguided overachieving mongoose. Even the transition period for the Svensen children had been thrown off, something causing that to go wrong for all concerned. She had thought about this at length, sure that she knew exactly what had thrown the transition off; it was her magic that had done so. Even though she could no longer do large feats of magic, she could still perform some minor magic that didn't involve living subjects. Her favorite trick was the endless can of soda, this trick driving her friends crazy trying to figure out how she never needed a fresh drink.

“Willi Marie, I heard your thoughts,” the huge Leopard Appaloosa mare stated as she shimmered into existence on this planet, sitting down by her honorary Valkyrie sister. “What is troubling you?”

“I think I'm the cause of the transition not taking effect.” she replied. The palomino colored femme was holding her spear, polishing the wood shaft with some furniture wax and a soft cloth.

“It is possible that this may be true. You must not blame yourself, however. You are a unique sentient being that the gods should have taken into account when they did this thing you call a transition.” Hrist gave her a hug, feeling Willi's emotions that were very apparent to the elder Valkyrie. “You must not let this upset you, Willi Marie. Your emotions can and will have an effect on your magic.”

“I'm trying not to be upset but it's hard to do, Hrist. I keep thinking that I'm messing things up for the Svensens all the time.” Willi Marie had to wipe the tears from her eyes as she sat there, hoping that she wouldn't keep making things worse for all concerned.

“Do not blame yourself! You cannot help what has come to be!” Hrist was doing her best to settle the smaller femme's mind. “You must believe that you are just you, my sister. You are not the cause of this mess, as you would put it. If it really is a problem, the gods will have to straighten it out.”

Once the whiteness turned back into scenery, Victoria could see that she was in *The Son's* celestial home. She was looking at the lion in front of her while he was looking back at her with a shocked look on his muzzle.

“Victoria! I'm glad you came to see me but I have to ask; did Denise send you here because I did not transport you.” *The Son* guided her over to a chair by his and helped her to set down.

“No, Denise didn't transport me.” she replied. “Didn't you bring me here?”

“I did not but I was preparing to bring you here when you arrived. I can only think that you were so upset that your White Power gave you the temporary ability to transport yourself.” He was just as puzzled over this as the tigress was.

“I really wanted to talk with you because I think I want out of the business,” she stated, giving the lion a serious look. “I don't want to be injured any further than I am now, Christopher. I might never heal up all the way from this injury so, ... well, ... how can I be a proper warrior if I can't stand and fight by Torvald's side?”

“You are underestimating your ability to heal quickly. That is what immortality is all about, Victoria.” *The Son* reached over and took her paw in his, feeling her life force. “You will be healed completely in just a few days. You're already able to stand and walk with just a little support, which is a vast improvement over not being able to stand right after Eyr worked on you.”

“I was standing and walking almost by myself, wasn't I?” the tigress mused, giving it much thought.

“I know you're very upset right now but you just need to rest and heal up, my warrior. Give it some thought for a few days and then if you still want to quit, call me and we'll talk again.” Christopher helped her to stand, letting her take a few steps unaided. “I will send you back to your mission home,

near your table.” He concentrated, getting her home coordinates in his mind. “Once there, you will just need to hold onto the table until your hubby puts your chair under you again.”

The world around the tigress without warning suddenly went white ...

... then it faded to black ... pitch black ...

Torvald was still sitting at the dining room table, patiently waiting for his mate to return from Christopher's realm. It had been more than an hour since she left here so what could they be talking about? He knew his mate wanted out of the business but it couldn't possibly take this long for them to hash things out. He had to admit, she had a strong case for wanting to quit.

There were times that it looked like neither one of them might return from a mission, having run up against some of the worst deities, demons, dark agents and just plain bad furs. Torvald had given thought to the possibility of quitting himself if she did, asking for them to be made mortal again. That way, the two of them would just grow old together gracefully. Joe and Annie had picked up a few gray hairs since they had first met them and it looked good on them. Victoria had mentioned just recently she needed a few more of her own, just to look the proper age. He had agreed, stating his need for the same thing since some furs at his real job had made comments that he might be dying his coat, mane and tail.

“Denise, could you go see what's taking so long?” Torvald asked their assistant, hoping maybe she could shed a little light on the subject. The skunkette shimmered out, then back in again quickly, grabbing Torvald's paw and taking him with her back to Christopher's realm.

Once back in Christopher's realm, it was obvious that the lion was very upset. He walked over and looked Torvald straight in the eyes as he said very calmly, too calmly in fact,

“I have some bad news, Torvald. Victoria's missing.”

“Can she hear us?” the smaller femme fur asked, looking at her mark, hanging by her arms from the shackles on the wall. That fur was hanging limp, eyes closed, barely breathing. The taller of the two femme furs went over to her and lifted her chin, looking at her closely. This fur had been tortured for a very long time but she showed no outward signs that this abuse had ever happened. Immortals were an interesting lot to her; difficult to torture because they would not die. They could lose their minds and go completely insane but they would not die.

“She has passed out again, just before you arrived. She was shrieking loudly while I emptied her mind,” the taller fur replied to the shorter one. “Still, I am sure she will not remember who she was or where she came from. She is ready for you, just as I promised.” This brought a slight crooked smile to the shorter femme's muzzle.

“It is such a shame to do this to her because she is such a beautiful, powerful femme. I cannot understand why our employer has such a grudge against her. I could have turned her, brought her over to our side. Think of the work she could have done for us.” The shorter femme fur lifted up the tip of

the bound femme's tail, which fell limply when she let go of it. "She is still out, I'm afraid. She will not get to enjoy the ride, I think she would say." The taller femme then made a very pointed remark to her cohort.

"Aren't you afraid of her mate? He is very powerful with many alliances across the realms. I believe he might even be able to get Surt to align with him to find her. If so, Surt might be inclined to destroy you at his request, too. He will recognize your work." This didn't seem to bother the short femme fur.

"It does not matter now; You have done your job well so I may now finish my part and be done with it. I will send her to a barren planet where no life exists. She will not live long like this, no memories to help her survive."

She walked up to the femme that was bound to the wall, shaking her head as she said somberly,

"I feel so sorry for you, tigress. You did not deserve this but this is my job to complete. Even I, Nevaeh Selin, feels this is not the way to do business. This is certainly not worth what I am being paid."

The smaller femme waved her paw at the limp form hanging on the wall, who vanished slowly from sight ...

"Well, Mike, what do you have for me?" The femme okapi asked her trainee. He had been working to identify any connection between this latest shooting and the missing femme zebra. The male Icelandic pony smiled as he looked up from his microscope at his boss. He had found the connection after an extensive study of the evidence.

"The goat was at the Glaser's house. His right hoof protector had a defect in it that was made by the environment. It's a perfect match for for that bloody hoof print we photographed at the huge fur's request. Also, the blood, type O positive, belonged to an equine zebroid but I couldn't get the military to release any information about the female's blood type to match it."

"Good, you seem to be doing just fine. Don't worry too much about the blood match, I think we can guess it was hers but I do have connections in the military to get this cleared up." She smiled just slightly when she said, "Get your equipment together; we have four dead bodies we have to pick up and identify over in Riverbank."

The warehouse in Riverside was an abandoned freight transfer facility that hadn't been used in years since the owners went bankrupt. It was dusty, musty and cobweb laden, proof that it was abandoned. The only signs a fur had been here recently was the tire tracks leading to a door that had the padlock on it cut off by what appeared to be bolt cutters. Behind that door was the focus of the investigation, four dead male bodies.

The investigators went inside, their sinuses suddenly assaulted by the smell of the decomposing corpses lying on a stack of pallets. Two male squirrels, a rather tall ram and a male burro, all appearing to have their necks broken.

“Cathy, I ... I'm having some trouble with the stench in here,” Mike stated, holding a rag over his nose. He was shaking his head, motioning that he was going to go back outside. His boss followed him back out into the fresh air, smiling at him.

“Couldn't take the aroma, eh?” she asked, knowing damned well he couldn't. She had to admit, it was pretty horrendous in there. She motioned for him to follow her, opening the trunk of her car. Cathy reached in and pulled out a charcoal respirator for him, showing him how to put it on. Donning a respirator herself, they went back into the warehouse, taking a methodical approach to the scene.

They started by taking photographs of everything in sight, from the door inward. Too many footprints had negated the evidence outside the door but they took photographs anyway. After fingerprinting every potential surface, it was time to move the bodies to their lab to determine who they were.

After closing the doors on the last coroner's wagon to leave the site, Cathy turned to her assistant and smiled a crooked smile, letting him know what the remainder of the day's agenda was.

“We've still got a long day in front of us. Let's go and get some lunch before we start our autopsies.”

“I just can't believe this happened,” Torvald stated, sitting back down at the kitchen table. Christopher and several of the archangels had done a very tightly focused search for her while Torvald waited, turning up nothing. He had returned to their temporary mission home, in hopes that she had returned here while he was in the boss' realm.

“Here, you need to eat something,” Denise pointed out to him, putting the reheated burritos and a soda in front of the huge fur. “You will not accomplish anything if you're sick from not eating.” She sat down with him, taking a bite of her burrito, then putting some Tabasco sauce on it to punch it up just a bit.

“I need to report her missing here, too but not before 24 hours have gone by,” he stated, looking up at the skunkette. “I ... I'm just not sure ...” He was shaking his head, not sure how to handle this. He felt hollow inside, like something had been ripped out of him. He took a bite of his late lunch, chewing it thoughtfully. This was the thing that he had dreaded the most, that one of them would go missing again. Taking another bite, he decided it was time to quit. This business of doing the bidding for the gods had now cost him his wife, the love of his life.

“Are you OK?” Denise asked, looking for a response. He looked up at her with a pained look on his muzzle and replied to her.

“Tell them I quit. I just want a few weeks here to try to find Victoria, then send me home. I'm done.”

“Torvald, you can't just quit,” she retorted as she sat her fork down, giving him her full attention.

“Watch me. I can and I will quit.” he stated firmly, trying not to cry over his loss.

“You still have to wait until your replacements get here. You told the boss you would do that much.”

She had a point there. His word was golden so he nodded his head in agreement.

"I'll still use my spare time to search for her. He can't stop me from doing that."

"You're right, the boss can't stop you from doing that."

The femme took another bite of her burrito, giving thought to what had been said. She knew that he would wait for his replacements as promised but it was a foregone thought he would not stay on the mission like before. She looked up to see that he had finally begun to break down, his tears flowing freely while he put his face in his paws and cried uncontrollably.

The room where the entity was standing was hot and the smell of sulfur was thick in the air. There were shackles hanging from the wall, one still having the paw and arm from some poor, unfortunate fur in its embrace. A brazier sat off to one side, devices of torture resting in the coals, warming to a nice red glow. A small femme fur of indeterminate origin came into the room quietly and kneeled before the large entity, waiting to be allowed to stand again.

"You may stand only if you have good news for me," the entity stated, the room getting hotter for the small fur when the entity stepped closer to her.

"I have good news," the small fur retorted, smiling just slightly as she stood again. "It is done."

"Nevaeh Selin, are you sure this time?" the large entity asked, seeming to be irritated. "Others have failed miserably before you, this being what is left of the last failure." He indicated the appendage still hanging from the wall, slowly becoming dessicated by the heat in the room.

"Do not worry, the miserable creature you have requested to be banished will never be found. I have seen to it personally," the small femme stated confidently. "You will never hear from her again." This brought a smile to the entity's lips.

"For your own sake, you had better hope you are right. If that fur turns up again to be a thorn in my side once more, I will search you out and kill you slowly, just like the others." The entity then turned and left the room.

The smallish femme thought about what she had just done; the fur in question had been located, stripped of her memories, sent to an unknown realm on a barren, lifeless planet and left to die, unable to fend for herself. It would be just a matter of time now before that fur died a slow death by starvation.

"Torvald, aren't you tired?" his mission assistant asked, trying to keep her eyes open while they drove around the greater Modesto Metro area in search of a lost tigress. He nodded, pulling into a strip mall at the corner of Roselle and Floyd, his eventual destination being the Starbuck's Coffee House at the end of the mall.

"Come on, let's get something to drink," he suggested, shutting off his undercover cruiser and getting out. While Denise got out on her side, he stretched out his arms and neck, stiff from scanning the area for his missing mate. This was something he felt compelled to do; to search for his mate in the hopes

she had been set down in the wrong place by accident.

The skunkette ordered herself a tall hazelnut hot chocolate while he ordered a vente drip without. The huge fur looked over to see a pair of young male okapis giving Denise some hard stares so he casually pushed his windbreaker open to display his badge for them to see. This had the desired effect, the two males leaving in a hurry without finishing their coffee. Their drinks served to them, they took a booth by the window so Torvald could keep an eye out while using Victoria's laptop from home to do a search.

“She's immortal, so it's likely she's still alive,” the femme noted quietly, sipping her drink slowly. Tor nodded, thinking the same thing too.

“You know, I still have to think this has something to do with how we were transported in and out of Surt's realm, when Victoria was made immortal,” he pointed out. The femme gave that some thought herself, very aware of the fact no fur knew who transported them.

“An entity, perhaps?” she suggested, knowing they could be real assholes when they wanted to be.

“You mean like the entity known as hate? Is that what you're suggesting?” the berserker asked, watching her nod in reply. He gave that some cursory thought; they had really pissed him off, leaving him to fend for himself on that planet. It wasn't likely he survived that planet at any rate. He looked at his watch, seeing the time to be almost 11:00 p.m. This had been a long, tedious day, to say the least. Maybe it was time to go back to the house and get some rest.

“It says here the US currency is being devalued again by the NAFTA agreement countries,” he commented as he opened Victoria's Yahoo!® homepage and then checked his department email. “It's now worth 47 cents to the dollar. That's three cents lower than yesterday.”

“This needs to end, you know that,” the striped femme commented softly. “I ... I wish I could take Victoria's place for this mission just so the insanity could end and this country could be restored.”

“You know, I almost gave thought to asking Valerie to stand in for her sister, since they almost look like twins.” He shook his head as he pointed out, “Then the thought that I might get her hurt or killed crossed my mind. That was the stupidest thing I have thought up in a long time.”

“You're stressed out, Tor. Why don't we grab a pizza, go back to your house, eat dinner and then hit the sack? You need to get some rest for that leg of yours.” She was right as usual; he needed to take some pain pills for his leg and get his weight off of it. He had noticed a blood stain on his pants leg earlier, most likely from the gouge being torn open again at some point in the day.

“Round Table or Mountain Mike's?” he asked, running a keyword search in the department database. So far, Victoria hadn't been reported to the department as found or dead, at any rate. Tired, he shut down the computer and put it back in its carry bag.

“How about one of those old style artisan pizza deals from Round Table? Those were real good from the store on your home world. You know, the one around the corner from your place.” He smiled a wistful smile when she mentioned that particular pizza parlor. The family had a lot of good memories from there.

“OK, let me see if I have that number in my cell phone,” he said as he flipped the cover open. Locating it, he called and went through the whole rigmarole to order their pizza and a pair of salads. “OK, let's head over there now because it should be ready by the time we get to the parlor.” She nodded, glad to at least get him headed home for some food and some much-needed rest.

The skunkette and the stallion were sitting in the living room, letting their meal settle some before going to bed. Torvald was exhausted, both physically and mentally. Denise was just plain tired, her energy sapped from doing multiple transports this day.

“Torvald, can I ask a personal question?” she asked, putting her feet up on an ottoman.

“Sure, go ahead Denise,” he replied. He unbuttoned his shirt and unbuckled his belt, giving him some extra room to accommodate the pizza comfortably.

“Tor, you're serious about quitting, aren't you?” She just had to know if he meant what he said earlier.

“Yeah, I think this is my last mission. The family deserves to have me around, you know. It's just a shame that Victoria ...” He had to stifle a sob, the pain in his heart quite evident to the skunkette.

“I'm sorry I brought this up,” she said, looking at the floor in embarrassment. This was not the thing to talk about right now with the heartbroken berserker.

“Well, maybe she will turn up, some day. I have a bad feeling about his, like some demon or whatever has done this for revenge.” Torvald sipped the last of his soda and made his thoughts known. “This is all my fault for suggesting she fight by my side. She didn't deserve this.” He got up and slowly walked down the hall to his bedroom, hoping he would somehow be able to sleep.

The striped femme felt herself falling, the sensation being very unnerving to her. It didn't last long, however before she landed hard on her back, face up in a low bush that cushioned her fall somewhat. She observed a face looking down at her in curiosity, a face that she couldn't put a name to but she knew that femme was very familiar to her. That was right before she blacked out ...

Several months had gone by and Torvald was in his living room, packing the last of the items that they had brought here to make this rental home seem like their home. Gytha and Dana were helping him pack by doing the bedroom, mainly to keep the sight of their mother's clothing from causing their father to lose it again. He had broke down crying earlier when Axel and Conrad had shimmered out with their armor in paw. This was upsetting to him; he had failed his wife and failed with a mission in the same fell swoop.

“Dad, this is the last of it,” Dana told her father, setting the box with the others. Denise would be back in a few minutes to get the last of this stuff for them.

“Thanks, sweetie. I appreciate you both helping me. I hate to leave here but it's for the best ...” He

wiped his tears again, knowing he had failed. It was an epic fail, like Conrad and Axel would say. "Would you like to go with me to turn in my badge, firearms and cruiser?" he asked, hoping she would go so he wouldn't be alone.

"Yeah, I have those caps Denise rounded up for me in my purse so I'll go with you. I think Gytha might be going back home with Denise." He nodded, understanding just how upset his older daughter had been over this. He made sure Denise and Gytha had gotten everything in the last load and then waited while Dana put some claw covers on before going over to the department to sign out.

"Dad, what will we do now?" she asked, watching the streetscape go by on the way over. She was keeping a positive attitude about it, that some day her mother would show up and they could go on like it was before.

"Your mother and I decided after that time we were taken to that planet with Kellan and Jim, we would go ahead with our lives regardless. We'll just video and photograph everything so if she comes back, she can see everything."

Dana knew this was the reasonable thing to do, to record it all for posterity. She also knew this was the worst thing that had ever happened to her father and it was killing him. If there was some way to fix this, some way to put things back the way they were ...

She waited on the bench out front of the main precinct house while her father turned in his badge, shotgun, laptop and the keys to his car and locker. She felt sorry for her father, watching the way the huge fur had walked up the few steps like he was going to his doom. From where she was sitting so she could watch the front doors, the sun was warming her back, making her just a little sleepy from its effects. She wondered what her mother was doing right now; sleeping, eating or hunting ...

"Come on sweetheart, let's go," her father said, snapping her out of her musing. They walked down the street a ways, stopping in a secluded area of a small park.

Torvald looked up and said, "Denise, we're ready," smiling a bittersweet smile at his daughter as they shimmered out of sight.