

*The characters Torvald Arend 'Tor' Svensen, Victoria Angela 'Vicki D'nan' Connell-Svensen, Conrad & Cathryn 'Cathy' Svensen, Dana Lynn Svensen-Kashnikov, Brett Kashnikov, Gytha Louise Svensen Delancey, Roger Delancey, Roger Jr, & Heather Delancey, Axel Torvald & Madelyn Svensen, Valerie Connell, Joseph & Harriet Connell, Barbara Caine, Wilhelmine Marie Kurzweil-Delancey, Richard Delancey, James William & Nancy Kurzweil, Peter the dispatcher, El Casa Del Burrito<sup>®</sup>, Leonard's Restaurant<sup>®</sup> and Steven Nanomantube are the property of Kellan Meig'h and may not be published or reproduced in any form without express written permission. Any resemblance to any fur or person, either living or dead is purely coincidental.*

*Aslaug "The Angelbreaker" Larsdatter is the copyrighted property of Joan Jacobsen, 2005-2008. Her writings may be found at a wonderful place called "Aslaug's Axe Shed" and the URL is as follows; <http://www.aslaug.eu> Please have a look and enjoy her writings.*

*The characters of Joe and Annie Latrans are copyright The Silver Coyote 2003 - 2008, and are used here with permission.*

*Stories containing Joe and Annie Latrans along with The Silver Coyote's wonderful writings may be found at <http://thesilvercoyote.net/> Tell them Kellan sent ya. ;-)* Note\* This is a shameless plug for Aslaug and The Silver Coyote! What are friends for, anyway?

Copyright© 2008 Kellan Meig'h All Rights Reserved <http://www.kellanmeigh.com>

## **“A Loss Of Rights”**

By Kellan Meig'h

### Chapter 11

“Miss D'nan? Miss D'nan, are you awake? The sun has come up, Ma'am. You should get up and prepare for your morning meal,” the young red-headed male begged of her as he tried to rouse the tigress. She rolled over in her bed, looking at him through slitted eyes.

“Morri, my dear, loyal squire, it had better be past sunup if you have dared wake me,” the striped female retorted, sitting up on the edge of her bed, stretching out her arms and back. She thought there should be a better way to make a bed for her since this simple bed, made of a straw stuffed ticking over a rope webbed framework was just too uncomfortable for her. Maybe if she had been born here, it wouldn't have made such a difference to her. Vicki D'nan couldn't remember where she was from, however and this fact did bother her constantly.

“Miss Vicki, morning meal will be ready soon. You should eat it while it is still hot, Ma'am. You need to keep up your strength to defend the kingdom.” Morri had a point there. It was her duty to defend the kingdom that provided her a roof over her head, a place to stable her horse, weapons, a meager pay and ample food in her belly. Her squire Morri was one of the few that ever called her by her name, if Vicki even was her name. D'nan meant female warrior in their language but she insisted on the 'Miss' title. Why, she didn't really know but King Andath had agreed with her request and made a proclamation to that effect when she had been sworn to an oath of allegiance. Her oath basically said she would give her life without hesitation in defense of the kingdom of Halsteighr.

She got up and went to the crude mirror over her dresser, looking at the reflection of herself in it. Her ruddy orange coloration, the black striping along with the white on her chest, arms and legs was quite unusual here. She had never heard of another felid colored like her in all her travels and she did make it a point to ask whenever she went to a village or town that she had not been to before. Maybe that was the reason the King's sorceress, a skunkette/human hybrid, thought her to be a demon in the beginning. While she was cleaning up a bit, she thought maybe she had come from somewhere very far away from here, transported by some arcane magical means. It was all pointless now anyways; she was here and her job was to protect the castle and its occupants.

Morri held out her leather leggings for her, helping her to put them on by fastening them above her tail for her, then assisting her in tightening the laces along the sides. He always did a double bow on each leg at the hip to fasten them for her so they wouldn't come loose during the day. She picked up her short

waisted cloth tunic and slipped it over her head, her squire helping by getting her long, black hair back in order for her afterwards, tying it at the base of her neck with a leather thong into a ponytail. Her leather vest and sleeves were donned next, the vest made to her specifications so it buttoned off-center to the right to allow two thick layers of moulded boiled hardened leather over her chest. Better safe than sorry when she had to go without her armor.

Her squire assisted her with her boots, made by the village leather cobbler to her design. They came up to her knees with a small fold over cuff at the top. The sole was doubled boiled leather with a slight heel to them made of stacked shellacked rawhide. She had waited a month for them to be made, preferring to go bare footed in the meantime rather than wear the normal soft-soled shoes worn here, wherever here was. All the time the cobbler was working on them, he would do some work then wait until she had given her approval before continuing. He almost blew his cork when she wet them in the horse trough outside his shop to fit them to her feet, though. He did calm down once she explained why she had done this. It wasn't long before others were wearing boots like hers, soaked to fit just like she had done.

Morri assisted her with her armor, custom made steel breast and back plates that used leather straps and brass buckles to hold them to her body. She had spent many a day at the armorer's workshop, letting him fit the armor precisely to her body and leather vest, the fit being as perfect as he could get. She remembered that Queen Morgeth had complained about her armor when she first saw it, stating that it was quite lewd in nature but then decided it was for Vicki's own protection that it fit her like it did. The front plate had her symbol placed upon it, an upside down stylized hammer debossed outwards in the metal. For some reason, she saw that symbol in her dreams constantly and she thought it had some connection to her home, wherever that was. Vicki put on her vambraces, snugged to her forearms just so by her squire. Her gorget gave her protection for her neck against enemies attempting to take her head as a prize for an enemy king.

Her weapons belt came next, holding her swords at the ready. It was a wide affair, made from strong black leather with holders for the sheaths of her weapons. She had a long sword made from folded steel on her left side, thin, bowed slightly by the tempering process, made to her exact specifications. It was very strong, extremely resilient and sharp enough on the convex side to behead an enemy of the kingdom with ease. Vicki was sure it might have been called a Katana where she came from. Her right side found a similar weapon, only smaller in size for use inside a building where there was limited fighting room. She took her short knife from under her pillow, made like the others but with an oblique tip for piercing armor or flesh and tucked it into her belt, patting it lightly. She had other armament, including a pair of fancy flintlock pistols, a long axe and some throwing axes, but she rarely wore them in the castle, only when riding out to do King Andath's business. Picking up her helmet, a simple bowl-shaped affair with a chain maille skirt, she headed downstairs for her morning meal.

\*\*\*

“Good Morning, Miss D'nan,” the tall, dark-haired man said with a deep bow as she approached her seat at the dining table. He reached for her chair to pull it out just as her long sword touched his chest, right over his heart.

“If you pull that chair out, Sir Varn, I *will* run you through,” she stated, giving him a slight smile. “If you wish to become my life-mate, however, I would allow you the pleasure of holding my chair for me.”

“Miss Vicki D'nan, I never know if you are teasing or if you to be serious in this matter,” the warrior retorted, smiling just slightly. He pulled the chair out just an inch or so, making her raise her sword to his neck, laying the side of it just under his ear.

“Twenty gold sovereigns says she runs him through this morning,” the canid seated next to Sir Varn stated out loud, putting his coins in the middle of the table. “Do I have any takers on this wager?”

“Do not waste your time or your sovereigns this morning, Sir Marc,” she retorted, winking at the tall man at the end of her sword. “As much as you would like me to, I would not dare kill off a possible suitor to my hand. You never know, I might someday convince Sir Varn he needs a life-mate to keep him company in bed on a cold night.” this embarrassed the tall warrior greatly, making him blush heavily. Sir Varn smiled at her then turned to the others at the table and gave this short oratory;

“I must speak out for all of you to know, I do have a huge soft spot in my heart for our striped warrior. If I did perchance take a life-mate, it surely would be Miss Vicki D'nan. It is very apparent that she can fight gracefully so as such, she must also love a man gracefully.” Varn let go of her chair, which prompted the tigress to sheath her weapon in return. She then gave her commander a kiss on the cheek, which caused the others at their table to make various noises as a comment to this.

She sat down with the other warriors, the only female in the squadron and now second in command over seventeen of the finest warriors of the realm. Vicki felt very out of place here, even though she had proven her worth to her King time and again. She remembered those first memories of arriving here, how she had woke up lying face-up in a thick bush with little blue colored berries on it, her clothes tattered and smelling heavily of sulfur. She didn't know where she was, how she got here or even her name at first. It seemed the only thing she remembered clearly from her life before here was being in a riparian meadow that was in bloom, the likes not found in this region, conversing with another felid, a buff colored male. What that conversation was about, she couldn't remember. Once she had extricated herself from that bush, she located a very straight dead tree branch that made a makeshift striking weapon about three of her thumb widths across and about three-quarters as long as she was tall.

She had no sooner found that makeshift defensive weapon when she was jumped by six males that she later learned were affiliated with the Northern Archem Raiders, sworn enemies of the kingdom. Five of them were human and the sixth was a burly canid in nature, all armed to the teeth with heavy cutting weapons. It took her no time at all to disarm and kill the first one that was foolish enough to challenge her, exchanging her staff for the dead soldier's longsword afterwards. The next two, including the canid fell swiftly due to her superior speed and considerable skills with a sword. Those two warriors couldn't keep up with her, both of them being dead before they hit the ground.

The fourth warrior attempting to dispatch her made the critical mistake of getting too close, allowing her to rip half of his face from his skull with her long, sharp claws before she nearly beheaded him with a slash to the throat with a sword. The fifth one stepped in too close to her and the dying man that was missing part of his face, calling out what later turned out to be his dying brother's name so she ran him through several times, creating nasty gut wounds that killed him quickly from bleeding out. The last one, the tallest of them and maybe the leader, turned to run for his life but she picked up her staff and ran him down with her superior speed, beating him to death with her staff until his face was totally unrecognizable as ever being human.

Vicki hastily stripped away some of the undamaged clothing that would fit her, all of the food and some weapons from the dead men before rapidly beating a retreat to the south, traveling as fast as possible

without running. It didn't make any sense to expend too much energy, considering the fact that all the food she had on her was from the dead warriors and it wasn't very much. She was terribly confused at the moment; why was she here and more importantly, who was she?

Now that she was away from the scene of the battle and she had a chance to think about it, just exactly who was she? A mercenary, a soldier of fortune, maybe? She had just killed six well armed beings with just what she had on hand. Was she a warrior of some sort? She looked at her hands, the palm and finger pads not showing the calluses of a hard working individual. This was all so confusing to her.

This forest that she traveled through was familiar yet also very unfamiliar to her. The trees seemed like their type was familiar but the area, the look, it stumped her to know where she was. All she knew was she needed to continue to travel south, away from the direction that the warriors had come from. The road seemed maybe the logical choice to follow, since it did seem to be well-traveled. She would just keep on the road for a while, making her way south.

That evening, Vicki had found a path that led off the road to a clearing of sorts. It was obvious that others had been here by the fire pit in the center of the clearing. She sat down on a log, taking in what she had with her. The food that she had taken from the dead warriors was not very palatable but it would have to do. A hard bread of some kind, some dried meat, a bit of something made from grains that was formed into a crude bar shape and some fair-tasting wine in a bladder bag.

While she consumed her nourishment, she scanned the surrounding area, noting a tree with a large opening in the trunk at the base. Walking over to it, the opening in the base of the tree was big enough for her to get inside of, giving her a place out of the elements to sleep.

Hearing somebody coming down the road, she went into the forest and took up a position behind a tree stump to watch them carefully. The being in question didn't stop but just kept traveling onwards. She decided that she would hole up in that tree for the night, maybe finding a friendly civilization in the morning. Backing into the hole in the trunk, she put her 'borrowed' black leather cape in front of her, like a blanket and camouflage of sorts, getting her arms out where she could defend herself if need be. Dagger in hand, she slowly slipped off to sleep.

The next morning brought her a sunny day and a culinary treat. The small animal, that reminded her of a rabbit except for the small antlers, had made the mistake of getting within her grasp. Using a technique that she had learned somewhere, she had used a wood drill and block to start herself a fire, cooking the small animal for her breakfast. It was good to taste fresh cooked meat, as if she had been here a long time before waking up in that bush. Sated, she found a nearby stream to clean up a bit in, cleaning the small spatters of blood from her 'borrowed' clothes while she was at it.

She looked around at this forest, now that her head seemed clearer, and it had a familiarity that bothered her, as if something bad had happened to her in a forest at one time. The trees, for the most part seemed very familiar to her in some way or another. There was one type of tree that she was sure had red edible fruit later in the season, if she remembered right. That was the part that really bothered her. Her memories seemed scrambled, as if remembering one particular thing was not possible without several other things jumbling in on top of that one memory.

As she traveled along the road southward, she kept thinking, 'Who am I?' Last night in her dreams, she had seen this medallion, an upside down hammer of sorts, worn around the neck of a blond-coated being of some kind. She could see the medallion clearly but not the fur's face, regardless of how hard

she tried. This medallion had some significance but what, she didn't know. That being's voice seemed to call out to her, a deep, resonant tenor voice that sounded so friendly to her. What that voice was saying, she couldn't make out.

That evening late, after a long day of traveling alone, she happened upon a minstrel camped off the road a ways. Walking slowly into his camp with her open palms facing forward and low at her sides, she sort of invited herself into his midst, hoping to warm herself by the fire, to break the cold grasp the night had upon her.

The minstrel, a slight man with medium ebony skin and dark, soulful eyes gave her a soup of sorts and some bread to eat, hardly taking his eyes off of her while she sat at his fire. Her stripes seemed to have mesmerized him, almost to the point of being in a trance. Eventually he tried to communicate with her and he got somewhat frustrated by her inability in speaking his language. He then decided to take it upon himself to teach her the language of the Halsteighrs. It was an uphill battle for him and her both, her lessons spanning the entire day, each day as they headed towards his destination some nine days hence, the castle. It was productive, however, the felid female learning enough of the language to communicate but only in simple ideas. He had been gracious enough to allow her to share his mount, a burro, switching off each half day with her.

Once at the castle and summoned in front of King Andath, the minstrel, named Jasem, informed the king of her fighting abilities, having come upon the scene of the carnage shortly after she had left. He confirmed her story that there were no other foot prints leading away from the scene and that she indeed wore the clothes and weapons of the dead soldiers. This impressed the king enough that he set up a mock battle against one of his troops, a certain Sir Varn, the captain of his guard. Wooden practice weapons were brought out to them, allowing them to choose their own. Vicki had chose a long sword, a dagger and her staff, which she had refined on the way to the castle. It had been smoothed, fire hardened and a series of annular grooves cut into the shaft to give her better grip.

She sat down on the floor and pulled off the boots she wore, taken from one of the dead soldiers. These boots fit her fairly close, but not well enough for her to fight in. Her pads on the soles of her feet gave her superior traction anyways on the smooth tile flooring of the reception hall. Once back on her feet, she took up a warriors' stance, getting her grip just right on her staff. The King stated the rules before allowing the match to begin; each strike counted if landed firmly, no low blows and he did include her breasts as off-limits to Sir Varn's striking, lastly stating a draw match would not be called. He then started the contest.

Sir Varn, who she determined to be quite tall for the people of that area, was actually just barely taller than herself but appeared very sturdily built. He pulled out his dagger, passing it back and forth from hand to hand a few times before leaving it in his left hand. She began to circle him, trying to determine if he really was left-handed or just trying to pull a ruse on her. The male warrior kept his eyes on hers, trying to determine when she would strike out at him. Sir Varn made several lunges at her with his dagger just to see how easily she would spook. His misjudgment in this matter found himself shaking his dagger hand that no longer held a weapon. It had landed over by the King's throne, well out of Sir Varn's reach and deemed now out of play by the King.

Pulling out his wooden sword from his belt, Sir Varn began to twirl it a bit, trying to distract her. Sensing his deception, she then began to systematically land blow after blow to her opponent's shoulders and thighs while she circled him with her staff, not in critical pain points but solid enough that the King would count them, which he did. This seemed to unsettle the tall, dark-haired warrior, that

a female could fight as well if not better than he. The male finally stepped in close enough to land his one and only blow, only to quickly find himself with his feet knocked out from under him, face down on the floor, his right hand up in the middle of his back and the tigress' wooden dagger at his throat. The King then called the match in favor of the tigress.

Her musing was cut short by a plate of food being set in front of her, her morning meal. She thanked the serving maid and looked to see what her morning fare would be this day. Some meat, most likely venison, cold from last night, some freshly cut fruit and a generous scoop of hot grains, mostly crushed oats. A tankard of wine was set by her, the castle's common red wine from last year's grapes. Not bad for a morning meal at this time of year but by deep winter, it would be mostly old or dried meat and stewed vegetables, for the most part root stock if the other vegetables and fruit ran out. She enjoyed her meal, just enough to satisfy her needs without feeling stuffed. The serving maid brought them some freshly baked bread, a rough but palatable rye and oat blend. This would change, too. By deep winter, the bread would be made mostly of tubers, a thing she thought might have been called a potato in her native language.

This was going on her eighteenth year in the service of her King and her twenty-fourth year in this land, and as a result she was slowly losing her grip on her native tongue. Vicki used to think only in her native language but that was slowly changing too as she slowly became one with the realm. She now spoke the local language fluently and she also had a good grasp of the major surrounding languages. It still bothered her that she didn't know where she was from originally and if her name really was Vicki. Since she didn't know her last name, D'nan was the surname she chose to use. It did have a unsettling effect on the enemies of the king however, having a surname that meant female warrior. Her reputation preceded her wherever she went and her lightning-fast reflexes and superior hearing helped to keep her out of trouble. How long this would last for her, she wasn't really sure. She did think sometimes, maybe the sorceress was right about her; she might be a demon, after all. Vicki had discovered very early on that she couldn't be killed, that she was an immortal being.

\*\*\*

Torvald and Conrad were standing by the groom's cake, passing out slices of it to the assembled furs that wanted a piece of the devils food cake this day. Conrad and Cathy Hunter had finally gotten married, the last of the Svensen children to do so. Conrad cut several more slices of cake and plated them, then looked up at the huge fur standing beside him.

“Dad, what do you think happened to Mom that caused her not to make it back from Christopher's realm?” He was glad that the occasion would allow him to cry a bit, since he would have wished for his mother to be here, watching her son get married. At least all of the children's events in their lives had been recorded for posterity, should she ever return. It had been agreed by all of them early on, right after that incident with Kellan and Jim, should one or both of them turn up missing, the family was to go forward with their lives.

“Conrad, I really don't know what could have happened to your mother. Nobody knows for sure. It was just one of those usual things but she never reappeared on that parallel world.” Torvald was misty-eyed today too. It hurt him badly when his mate didn't return from her short trip to see Christopher, so much so that he stopped taking missions for the gods. This was his eighth year that he hadn't been off this planet, hoping for his mate's return any day now.

An old friend wandered over, a very somber-looking one-eyed wolf, giving both of them hugs. It was

obvious that he was affected by this loss of one the best warrior couples they had ever had.

“Torvald, Conrad, I can't begin to say just how sorry I am. In a way, I feel responsible for what's happened to our dear Victoria.” the wolf stood there, not knowing what else to say. “We're still looking for her, please believe me. I want her found just as badly as either one of you do.” He took a piece of cake from Conrad and wandered over to stand by Willi Marie and Hrist to eat in silence. This whole reception was more like a wake than a joyous occasion but every fur in attendance knew the reason why, including Victoria's mom and dad, who had come for the wedding.

Torvald could see that the squad was upset too. The trio had stood by the back door to the reception hall, not saying much to anyone. The filly had adamantly refused to attend, citing the fact that it wouldn't feel right to her. Now the huge fur could understand exactly what she had meant by that. This was the worst feeling, most somber occasion that had ever happened since Victoria had went missing eight years ago.

Conrad saw a sharply dressed feline outside the side door, finishing up a smoke. The feline in question stubbed out his smoke in his paw, putting the remains in his pocket. He knew who this was, now. Uriel wandered back inside, giving the females hugs on the way. Once back over by the new groom, he looked at the floor momentarily while he pulled his thoughts together.

“Conrad, we're still sure we will find her someday.” he said to the sad tiger, not even sounding convincing to himself. “She's still out there, somewhere. Myself and Michael are going back out there, continuing our search for her as soon as possible.”

Cathy came over to her new husband, putting her arms around him and giving him a very strong hug. The mountain lioness knew how upset he was but as she had said, unless his mother somehow turned up during the services, the tigress probably would just have to see it on video later. What really hurt her and Conrad both was the fact that all of this time with her family was lost to her, never to be regained in any way, shape or form.

Torvald had wandered over to where the scruffy squad was standing, acknowledging them as best as he could, trying not to break down crying again since his last crying fit had postponed the church services until he could pull himself back together. The two felines had both shook his paw, smiling a bit to try to lighten the mood. They finally went to get some food at his insistence but Joe Latrans hung back. Torvald decided to ask his warrior friend what he thought of the matter.

“Joe, what would you do in this situation? Have I not done my part in finding her?” Torvald was curious if he had overlooked anything at all in his search for her. He spent several months on that last planet looking all over for her. There were missing fur reports out with all the west coast agencies but no luck was to be had.

“I'm not sure what to say amigo, you've done everything you could to find her.” the coyote replied quietly. It was clear he was somewhat stressed out by the situation too. “Annie and I were shocked when we first heard this happened but we were sure Victoria would be found quickly.” He chewed on a toothpick in his mouth, wrinkling his brow as he stuck his paws in his pockets. “If there was just some way to find her quickly ...” He had to stifle a sob before he said, “If I can help you out in any way, please let me know.” He gave Torvald a pat on the shoulder as he said, “Just try to keep a positive attitude. Someone will find her, eventually.”

Once Joe had gone to get a bite to eat at Torvald's insistence, the huge fur went over to stand by one of the sliding glass doors to the parking lot. He was looking out at Victoria's minivan, freshly washed and waxed by him this morning. This mess was all his fault in his estimations. He knew in his heart if it hadn't been for his crazy idea of her being a warrior by his side, she would still be here, enjoying her son's wedding. He slowly knelt down by the door, slumped over against the wall and broke down crying uncontrollably, his heart torn apart with pain for his lost mate, the love of his life.

\*\*\*

It was still early, not quite noon, as she called it. The sunlight was warm on her face while she brushed out her warhorse's mane and tail for him, preparing him for the day. He was a magnificent beast, his honey blond body coat and pale platinum mane and tail practically glowed in the sunlight. He was powerful for a stallion, tall enough that Vicki couldn't see over his withers. She had obtained him when he was 3 years old and not quite broke but in the end, he proved to be an able mount. She had named him Torvald of Arend, but where those names had come from, she didn't know. They meant something to her, she knew, maybe some connection to home for her. She secured his tack for him, making sure his new breastplate was fastened correctly. She smiled at the addition the leathersmith had done to it; a silver crest with her emblem, that stylized upside down hammer attached to the front so all would know who's mount this was.

“Torvald, you rotten stallion! Stand still!” she admonished her mount, forcing him to stay motionless while she finished saddling him to go do some work for the king. A local, known for his acts of pilfering, was caught with some of the king's cattle in his possession. Although the cattle had been retrieved, the local, a black haired older man named Tomas, had slipped away from the local sheriff and took up refuge in the woods. She knew if she could pick up his trail, he was as good as hung in her estimations.

“Miss D'nan, are you ready?” Sir Marc asked from the back of his mount, a smallish dapple gray pony. Although not very big, this little pony was as fast as the wind, far faster than Torvald ever was. The tigress put her firearms across the horn of her saddle, made to her specifications. It was a big, sturdy affair with a high cantle in the back to keep her in the saddle during a mounted battle. She looked up at the stout canid, a variegated dark gray color, and nodded.

“I am ready, Sir Marc.” she replied to him. She smoothly mounted her steed, wheeling him around to face the gate and the two other guards of the kingdom that were coming with them. “Come, let's find this person before he has a chance to get away.” She guided her steed out of the compound, headed eastwards towards their destination with her soldiers following behind.

The group got into their usual formation, Sir Marc riding to her left, holding their banner, Sir Tamal behind her and Sir Jac riding behind Sir Marc. Her squire, Morri brought up the rear on his mount, a huge, stubborn jack mule. It wasn't much of a mount but she had gotten the donkey/horse cross cheaply and it could keep up with Torvald easily, something her squire's original mount, a burro couldn't do.

“We will go to his home first and see if he has returned. After that, we may have to track him,” Vicki stated, looking to see Marc nod in agreement. She smiled a small, wistful smile as they headed east, towards their destination.

\*\*\*



It was late afternoon when they finally arrived at the cottage in question. The female of the house, a lapin-human cross, was in their garden, taking care of selecting vegetables for her evening meal when Vicki and her troops rode up. Miss D'nan dismounted as did Sir Marc, walking up to the gray colored female in question before announcing their reasons for being there.

“I am Miss Vicki D'nan, of the King's Royal Guard. We are in search of Tomas, who has been charged with theft of the King's cattle by the local constabulary.” The female sat her basket down and wiped her hands, looking at the warriors with concern.

“That bastard Tomas is not here nor has he been for several nights now, maybe a week,” she said with a pained look on her face. Her ears wilted as she looked at the striped female. “If you do find him, please do not kill him. He more deserves to rot in a prison for what he's done to me, both to my body and my mind.” There seemed to be more to this than was said to her so she knew she had to be tactful.

“Tamal, please detain her ... gently, by my direction,” Vicki ordered, waiting until her sandy-brown haired trooper had done so. The young man had a gentle hold of the half-lapin's arm, making sure she did not run off until his superior deemed it suitable to release her. “Jac, Marc, please search the surroundings for her life-mate. Do be very thorough, leaving no stone unturned.”

Vicki went into their home, short sword at the ready. It was a small cottage but unusual in that it had two rooms to it. Obviously more than just one family had lived here at one time. The loom in the corner had a work in progress on it, a rough, basic wool cloth being woven most likely by the female being detained. The water in a pot over the fire was boiling, waiting for her to return with some vegetables to stew. Vicki swung the pot away from the fire, preventing it from boiling dry. This could ruin a good piece of cookware.

The second room held two beds, one being used as a place to store things at the moment. She knelt down to look underneath each one, sweeping her sword under each bed. Vicki found nothing out of the ordinary underneath them so she returned to the front of the house and her detainee. She was being a very willing subject, sitting on her knees, keeping her hands in her lap. The striped female knelt in front of the lapin cross, getting her attention.

“It is late and we need accommodations. I ask of you, may we stay here overnight? I am prepared to pay you for your hospitality.” The warrior tigress held out 2 gold sovereigns, a princely sum, offering her payment in return for lodging.

“I am but a subject of the crown. I cannot accept your money to accommodate you.” The lapin cross reached up and closed Vicki's hand around her coins, giving her a smile. “Please stay here as my guests, all of you. If you are here, I will feel safe from that no-good Tomas.” The tigress nodded, offering her a hand up, which she accepted. Jac and Marc returned from their search about that time, letting her know that Tomas was not on the premises.

“Morri, please take care of our mounts, if you would?” she asked her squire, who gave her a warm smile and bow back.

“As you wish, my Liege,” he replied, deferring to her station above him. He took the horses and led them to the barn to unsaddle them and get them some feed.

\*\*\*

Their meal over, Miss D'nan and her troops were enjoying a bit of wine they had brought with them and some of their host's singing. Danae had a simply constructed stringed instrument that she could play adequately and her voice was very soothing to the ears. Once she had finished her song, she bowed to them, as a minstrel would do.

"I do not understand why you are not traveling, making your wages by singing," Sir Marc commented, since she was a very good singer.

"Tomas married me with the promise to travel with me, since he used to be a very good musician. He had an eye for the other women, leaving my bed on the road cold far too often. I quit traveling just to keep him out of other female's beds." She seemed very sad to Vicki; this man had hurt her in ways that had no words to describe the pain.

Vicki thought about the man she had an eye for, Sir Varn. He had made several offers for her hand but she had regrettably turned him down each time. It bothered her that she had no recollection of her life before she had ended up here but the fur on her left hand had shown the fact that she had worn a ring at one time, in her mind signifying her bond to another man. If that were true, there was a man somewhere that was most likely trying to find her and return her to her home.

That evening, after they had been sated with food, wine and song, her troops had turned in on mats placed on the floor in the living area of the cottage. The second bed had been offered to Vicki, which she didn't pass up. Her hostess had turned in, curling up under a few blankets, leaving the tigress to ponder her thoughts by herself. She still felt out of place here, even though everyone around her had accepted her appearance and position of authority.

She had initially earned her keep as a hunter for the court, showing them how to make a cold room underground using ice and straw to keep the meat cool through the summer. Where she had learned this from, she did not know. In her duties of keeping the larder full, she occasionally caught thieves and poachers in the King's forest. This did not escape the King, offering her a position on his Royal Guard many years ago. It was a great yet sad day for her, since she had no family to celebrate this with. The other guards drank and sang the songs with her, but it wasn't the same.

She still worried there was someone out there, somewhere, looking for her. She traveled extensively for the king, taking care of his business that needed a little muscle to accomplish. If she weren't at the castle, how would they find her if they came looking for her? This was a thought that ran through her mind endlessly. She removed a small pendant on a fine silver chain from her tunic, a small version of her emblem. She held it in her hands, turning it to see the runes that were inscribed into it. She had observed this pendant in her dreams so often, she had drawn the runes out for the silversmith that had made this pendant for her.

She had not been very religious since she came to this land but she felt a prayer in her native tongue wouldn't hurt the situation. She needed to know who she had been, not who she had become. Maybe the gods that her king prayed to would hear her prayers too. She clenched the pendant in her hands and held it close to her as she closed her eyes and prayed quietly,

*"I have forgotten how to pray to you properly so I hope you can hear me. I am lost here in a land that tries to claim my soul for its own. I know in my heart I do not belong here and I may have others that are looking for me. Please hear my prayers and send those after me who might find me and return me*

*to my loved ones if indeed I have some. I will pray often in hopes you will hear my pleas and act upon them accordingly.”*

Danae had heard her prayer but she did not stir for fear it might disturb her visitor. Even though it was in a strange language that she did not understand, it was very plain to her that Vicki was hurting inside.

\*\*\*

Axel had his arms wrapped around his father, rocking him in hopes of calming him down from his latest crying fit. This outburst from Torvald had pretty much ended the reception with most of the guests leaving. Conrad was kneeling next to his father, in hopes his company would snap the huge fur back to the present. It was killing him to hear his father babble on about this all being his fault. The tiger knew his mom had agreed freely to be a warrior for the gods, giving up a normal life to be with Torvald. Why couldn't his father see that? She has said many a time that she did this of her own free will to be near her stallion. This was hurting Conrad way too much to see his family torn apart by this. It was a forgone thought, if he were ever asked to get into the business, he would turn them down flat.

Joe was still there, standing by just in case his help would be needed in getting the big one home in this condition. Besides, he knew Torvald better than the other squad members save one, since they had a mutual friend, the Valkyrie, that kept them in contact with one another.

Gabriel and Michael had shown up just recently, feeling safe enough to attend once they heard from Uriel that the Valkyrie wasn't present. Even though they had come to an uneasy agreement with her years ago, neither feline angel actually felt safe in Aslaug's company. There was something about having one's wings torn off that left a bad taste in their mouths.

“Gabriel, Michael,” Joe greeted them, trying to smile just a bit. The coyote was glad that they had arrived in a way, thinking maybe they could somehow comfort the huge one.

“How long had he been like this?” Michael asked, concerned for the huge fur's mental health. It was obvious that he was torn apart by this and he wasn't getting over it very well. The coyote looked at his watch, giving it just a little thought.

“He's been like this about an hour now, I think. He's pretty torn up inside.” Joe was thinking to himself, it was probably about time for him to quit too before Annie found herself a widow some day, an angel telling her that he was dead or lost to the universe. Suddenly, the taller angel seemed distracted by something.

“Gabe, did you hear that?” the taller angel asked his partner, turning to 'see' the source.

“I did ...” the shorter one replied, turning to look in that direction too. This was spooking Joe so he asked to be filled in on what they were so interested in.

“Guys, what is so inter ...” Gabriel pushed him out of the way 'gently' on his way to confront the huge fur. The smaller angel knelt in front to Torvald and tried to get his attention.

“Torvald? Torvald? Listen to me, please?” Gabriel said to get his attention. When this didn't work, he grabbed the huge fur's suit jacket and shirt, picking him up and shoving him back against the wall with his hooves off the floor. “Torvald! Dammit, snap out of it! Victoria is alive!” This stopped the huge

fur's crying instantly.

“Gabriel, don't say that to me just to stop me from crying,” he retorted back, noting the angel, while no taller than Conrad, had him pinned firmly to the wall.

“Torvald!” Another voice rang out, an index finger coming over Gabriel's shoulder, poking him in the nose. “You know we would never lie to you about Victoria! She *is* alive! We both just heard her pray!” Michael was a bit steamed up at him, mad because he thought Torvald didn't believe them. He didn't give Torvald a chance to say another word as he told him, “We're going to go get her, right now!”

The trio shimmered out of sight ...

... and then the trio then shimmered back into existence in the reception hall, discussing the situation amongst themselves.

“We need to think this over better, guys. You two can't go back to that planet because you'll have no powers there,” Torvald pointed out to the angels, who were nodding their heads in agreement. “Besides, if you did go there, how would you explain your wings, if there's a society there like you think there is?”

“You have a point, stallion.” Michael agreed. “Well, now what do we do?” For once, the angels were stumped for an answer to this problem.

“Dad, I'll go with you to go get Mom,” Axel stated, stepping up to the plate for his mother.

“No, look, Torvald, I had better go with you,” Joe retorted, grimacing slightly. “I ... I owe you and Victoria that much.” It was clear the coyote wasn't happy with the situation but it made the most sense. He had the experience in these matters whereas Axel would be a rookie.

“OK, Joe and I will go with you,” Axel said very sternly. “My wife Madelyn supports my going after Mom. She knows I've wanted to do this for a long time now.” Axel's mate, a femme zebra, nodded her agreement in the matter. “I'm sure the rest of the family will support me, too.” Gytha stepped up next to her twin brother, giving her youngest daughter Heather to her grandmother Connell to hold.

“I would go, too if I didn't have a herd of little ones to look after. I'm sure Dana feels the same way.” Her younger sister, who was huge with her first child, nodded her head in agreement. Her husband, Brett Kashnikov, Conrad's best friend from high school, nodded his head in agreement too.

“I think you know how Cathy feels about this, Dad,” Conrad piped up. “You know she forbade me from leaving this planet once we were married.” Torvald smiled a wistful smile at his oldest son, going over to him and giving him a hug.

“I know, son, I know. OK, Joe and Axel will go with me but we'll need to look the part.” Torvald took off his suit coat and prepared to make a list for the mission props department to supply them from. “Joe, I suppose you'll want to go say goodbye to Annie and your kits.”

“Yeah, I'll call you when I'm ready. Have one of the boys come and get me when I call.”