

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El Casa Del Burrito[®], Leonard's Restaurant[®] and Steven Nanomantube are the property of Kellan Meig'h and may not be published or reproduced in any form without express written permission.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.

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“A Loss Of Rights”

By Kellan Meig'h

Chapter 12

Several months later on a new expedition for the crown, Vicki's squad was still seeking another man that had been with Tomas, that person leading them deeper into the forest from the point where the accused had fallen from one of Tamal's carefully placed arrows. She was currently sitting on the ground against a tree, getting out her chew stick as she called it, a piece of hardwood dowel that had been covered in thick leather. She would be needing it shortly while Morri did a bit of impromptu surgery on her to remove a lead ball from her left leg that had been fired at her by Tomas.

“Ma'am, you need to be more careful,” he advised her while he carefully removed her boots. He then unlaced her leggings so he could help her remove them and allow him to get to the injury site on her thigh. Using some water to wash away the blood, he found the spot, now healed for the most part. Carefully touching the injury, he could feel the ball not deep below the skin.

“That's it Morri, you know what to do,” she said, getting the stick into her mouth, squinting her eyes and biting down hard. He used a knife she had made of this purpose, a small pointed blade that she kept razor sharp, to cut down into her leg once she had parted the fur as much as possible for him. He felt the blade hit the slug so he quickly pulled out the knife and used the tweezers that had been made for this job to dig the lead round out of her. He rinsed the incision out with some strong distilled spirits before letting the wound close, watching in amazement as it healed before his eyes. It still shocked him in a way, just as it had done the very first time she had asked him to help dig out a pistol round from her arm many years ago. As far as he knew, he was the only one that knew she was like this.

“You do know, Miss Vicki, I am quite glad you wear your armor diligently.” He said reverently. “I would not enjoy cutting your chest or stomach open in search of a pistol or rifle ball.” She smiled weakly, thanking him as she prepared to put her leggings back on. She stopped, putting her finger through the hole in her clothing with a disgusted look on her face.

“Just another hole to be repaired,” she said sarcastically, finally putting her leggings back on. “I need new leggings made that are not covered in patches and repairs.”

“I will patch them for you tonight, Miss Vicki.” her squire offered, assisting her by lacing her leggings up for her. Putting her boots back on, she looked around for her squad that had still been tracking the fugitive. Spotting them bringing the man back with them she smiled just slightly, pleased with the

abilities of her warriors. He would now be tried and convicted of assault upon the King's Royal Guards. The sentence would be hanging or mock weapon combat against one of them. Should he somehow manage to defeat that guard, he could go free. It had never happened as far as she knew, with the exception of the time she had defeated Sir Varn.

“Sir Tamal, does he carry enough currency to pay for his meals back to the castle, six days hence?” she requested, still limping just slightly as she went to pick up her longsword. It had ended up just a few yards from where she was shot by Tomas, dropped while she was trying to seek cover when he fired his weapon. His lifeless body was still pinned with an arrow to the tree he had passed in front of in his attempt to flee them.

“He has no money upon him, Miss D'nan,” the young soldier replied to her.

“Then he will go hungry until we reach the castle. Once there, he may eat the gruel served in the dungeon.” She didn't like to treat prisoners like this but he had brought this punishment on himself.

“Ma'am, if I could be so bold, Tomas carried our money.” the prisoner pointed out. “Our money is in a pouch around his neck.” Sir Marc checked by her nod, finding a leather pouch with 3 gold sovereigns, 17 silvers and a small amount of brass twos and copper ones.

“Tomas carried a sum that will pay his way, Miss D'nan,” Sir Marc told her, bringing her the pouch after he put the coinage back inside.

Now that he was close enough to her that she could clearly see him, it was apparent he was a human-raccoon cross. He had the classic slightly darker shading to his facial skin in places and the unusual shape of his jaw, nose and brow that gave him away.

“What is your name, prisoner,” she asked, tipping his face up in the light to see it better.

“I am known only as Pellier, Miss D'nan.” he replied, swallowing hard from fright, facing a legend in the flesh. She limped over to a log and sat down, motioning for Tamal to bring him over and make him kneel in front of him.

“Have you no other skills that you were forced to become a thief against the crown?” she asked, curious as to his motives so she could present his case properly to the king.

“In my defense, I did not know Tomas stole the cattle, My Liege. I was only to help herd them to market and share a portion of the sale. My only real skill is a woodsman, Miss D'nan. I can fell a tree quicker than any man.”

If that is so, you may demonstrate for me.” She motioned for Morri to retrieve her long axe, while not a true felling axe, it would have to do. “Please fell that tree there, the one that appears dead. Do not try to run for Tamal will kill you.” Her soldier pulled an arrow from his quiver, nocking it in anticipation of firing at the raccoon cross.

Pellier took the axe offered him, holding it by the shaft just under the head. He looked the tree over, making a few experimental strikes to it, listening to the ring of the axe. Once pleased with his chosen point, he took a proper grip and quickly dropped the tree, chopping part of it into sections that would be suitable for a fire pit. He carried the axe back to Morri, bowing as he handed the weapon over. Miss

D'nan got his attention and made this statement;

“You have proved you have some skill that may save you from the hanging rope. Please help Marc and Tamal to start a fire for we will camp here for the night and head back to the castle in the morn.”

Joe was having Axel hold the stock of his flintlock rifle while he used a pair of pliers to 'fix' the front sights' windage issues. It was still grouping over a foot and a half at 100 yards and this was bothering the coyote to no end. He fired another round, muttering something in Spanish as he indicated for the young equine to do the “Grip and Twist” again, as Joe had dubbed it. He looked over to see the rangemaster was not pleased with them at all, firing massive amounts of black powder to regulate their firearms. One of the other shooters had even offered them a substantial amount of money just to go away for a while.

“Torvald, don't tell me you found these at a second hand store, please?” Joe asked, firing another shot that was still barely in the 5 ring on his target. He looked over to see the huge fur writing something on his pistol butts. Wandering over, he observed the berserker putting an “L” on one and the other had an “R” on it already.

“Sorry Joe, these came from our mission supply specialists. You know how they are about firearms; we might have been better off supplying our own.” He nodded, knowing how the 'Powers That Be' felt about their killing others needlessly in the line of duty.

“You think you might explain the writing to me?” Joe asked, curious now about the designations.

“Well, the “L” pistol needs to be aimed a little left and the “R” pistol needs to be aimed right.” Yeah, that kind made sense to the coyote, as long as you remembered which one was which.

“Mr. Latrans, I heard the patching can make a difference in how a smoothbore shoots.” Axel was pulling the tail of his dress shirt out of his pants, preparing to cut a piece off of it. “This shirt Madelyn despises because it's 100% cotton. She just hates to iron it every time it's washed.” The young equine cut a hunk off of his shirt tail, giving it to Joe.

“OK, let's give it a try. It's a forgone thought we'll be unable to sneak a few Armalite A-10's into our gear,” Joe commented as he loaded the powder, greased the patch and rammed the ball home. Pulling the lock to half-cock, he primed the flash pan, closed the frizzen on top of it and gave Torvald a pensive smile. Aiming at the target, he pulled it to full cock, gently squeezed the trigger and fired the weapon.

“I think it missed the target altogether.” Joe stated as he sat the rifle back on the bench. He looked downrange through his spotting scope and his jaw slowly dropped. After a few moments, a wicked smile slowly crossed his muzzle as he quickly loaded again, firing another round. Satisfied with what he saw, he gave the huge fur the spotting scope. Torvald observed two rounds just a bit left of center, touching one another in Joe's target.

“Axel, you just donated your shirt to our cause!” his father stated, giving the young equine a hug. “Well Joe, you shoot a few more to see if you're satisfied, then let's get back to my place. The rest of our equipment should be there by now.” As soon as he said that, a small round of cheers went up on the range's firing line.

“Torvald, can't I keep my pants, vest and hat? Please?” Joe begged, looking at the clothes provided by the mission team. The look was definitely a 14th century style with leather leggings for all of them.

“Mr. Latrans, I think the leggings will be better in the long run. Sturdier and better protection for your legs.” Axel pointed out. “That will help us look like we belong to that era, Sir.” This made Joe shake his head and do a facepaw before looking over at the huge fur.

“Torvald, your children are polite to a fault, aren't they?” he asked, picking up his leggings again, examining them closer this time. “OK, I'll try these on but I want to keep the hat and vest.” He was scowling as he went to the hall half-bath to change into his gear.

“OK, I'm taking a felt hat of some kind too, Joe. Just make sure your vest has buttons, no snaps. I don't want to look too out of place there.” the huge fur shouted to the canid through the door. He heard Joe grumbling in reply, probably having issues with his leggings. Axel and Torvald used the downstairs guest room to change, the huge fur getting a good laugh when his son couldn't figure out front or back to his leggings. It was apparent to him that the tail-hole was most likely the back, based on his experiences.

Finally dressed, the trio stood in the family room, dressed and ready as possible for this mission. Conrad took a few pictures of them, since it did look kind of funny to the rest of them. He then called for the whole extended family to make a circle and hold paws. Joe tried his best to make himself scarce but Dana and Grandpa Walter Connell, Victoria's father grabbed him, marching him back to the gathered furs. As soon as everyone held paws, Torvald offered this prayer;

“We pray to our higher powers that this mission to find Victoria will be a successful one with no loss of life or limb. Please watch over us, keep us safe and give us the direction we need. We are committed to this and we will not return until our mission finds my mate Victoria alive or we locate her grave. Give us the protection, spiritual strength and comfort we need in these times and watch over those that are left behind, waiting for us.”

Torvald stood, looked at every fur assembled and then went to Grandma Harriet Connell, giving her a hug. “We will find your daughter,” was all he could get out without crying. She nodded in acknowledgment, unable to speak herself from the pain in her heart. Gytha gave Axel her pendant to wear, putting it around his neck for him. Joe and Axel finally got the berserker to stand with them, nodding to Odin to send them on their way. As they shimmered out of sight, the coyote was heard grumbling, gritting his teeth and saying something about an imminent appointment with a blueberry bush.

The rain kept falling hard, threatening at times to reduce their lean-to back to its basic components. Pellier had been very helpful, felling several smaller trees to create their shelter that was keeping them somewhat dry. Vicki looked out at the rainfall, wondering if she was somehow being punished for allowing Tomas to be killed. It seemed to rain a lot when there was a death on her forays for the crown. Putting another piece of wood on the fire, she hunkered back against the embankment they had chose to use as the back wall for their shelter.

The weather this time of year was very unpredictable so getting wet was a foregone conclusion on each trip away from the castle. She sat there, trying to get some rest so they could move once the weather lifted. She kept thinking about what awaited her at the keep; Sir Varn intended to step down as captain of the King's Royal Guard and turn the command over to her. This was somewhat bittersweet for her, since she also had finally accepted his request to be his life-mate. It was intended by them to seal their mating after the swearing in, where all in attendance could revel in their newfound joy.

Sir Varn had also accepted the fact beforehand that there may still be a man looking for her and if that man showed his face, Varn assured her he would gracefully step aside and let her go. She knew if this did happen, her heart would be broken since she felt strongly for her captain. She also knew it would break his heart too.

She looked over at Morri, trying his best to stay dry by the end of their shelter. He had been with her since he was a small boy, not over 10 years old. He was now a young man, 23 years of age. She had taught him all she could about being a guard but the current king wouldn't promote him to the infantry. It was her hope to advance him to the King's Guard after she took over from her future mate. She smiled a wistful smile as she drifted off to a fitful sleep, one heavily peppered with her strange, disjointed dreams.

Unable to sleep well, she kept waking, hearing that deep, resonant voice in her head, occasionally looking around in the darkness to see if there was indeed some person out there in the night. She got up and went over by the fire, warming her hands a bit. Why were her dreams so disjointed, so abstract when it came to this emblem of hers and that blond furred male she kept seeing? Who was he? What was her connection to him? Shaking her head, she went back to her blanket, leaning back against her saddle as she faded off to sleep again, only to resume those same dreams once more.

Vicki suddenly found herself standing in a strange yet familiar home, watching some sort of prayer service in progress by a group of people she was sure she knew. She could hear the huge blond stallion praying in her native tongue and it shook her up when she saw him and the young ruddy orange filly with the long black hair standing next to him both wearing that symbol of hers around their necks. When the male had said the name "Victoria", she knew this was *her* name and he was talking about her.

Talking about rescuing her ...

Looking down, she could feel the soft floor covering of this dwelling under her feet. This all felt so impossible, it had to be a dream so she took a claw and drove it deep into her palm pad, bringing blood and pain.

No, she was *not* dreaming this ...

She *was* awake ...

This was real ...

Impossible but real ...

Realizing she was awake, and brought to wherever this was, she was momentarily frightened by this. Could this really be her home? There were more felids striped just like her present so maybe, just maybe, this was her home. There was a female felid that looked uncannily like her, possibly her sister. Another felid stood nearby, a younger male, that might just be her son. This was so confusing to her as she stood there by a long seating bench of some kind, covered in a soft, smooth leather.

She watched on as they broke the prayer ring, the ruddy orange equine female giving the blond young stallion her pendant. After a few goodbyes were said, the two stallions formed up with that one male canid and shimmered out of the scene by what looked to be the powers of the stately wolf magician with a patch over one eye. Looking around the room, she saw a picture of the huge older stallion and herself over the fireplace, so this must be her family.

That huge stallion must be her mate ...

“Can anybody see me!” she shouted out in her native tongue, not knowing what else to do. The ruddy orange filly, who she suspected was her daughter, looked straight at her, the equine's jaw dropping in shock. Then Morri shook her shoulder, breaking whatever spell was upon her.

Gytha almost fell down when her knees went weak, grabbing at her father's wingback recliner chair for support. She then quickly rushed across the family room, pushing family members aside to get to a spot on the floor by the end of the sofa.

“Mom?!?” she shouted, looking around frantically. She dropped to her knees and felt the floor, then looked behind the sofa and the chair nearby screaming out, “Mom! Mom?!? MOM!!!” She finally collapsed against the sofa, crying.

Her husband, a huge gray Percheron named Roger Delancey, grabbed her in a strong hug, rocking her to sooth her soul. She was extremely distraught and this was hurting him deeply.

“Gytha, Sweetheart, calm down,” he asked, holding her tightly. “You need to pull yourself together for the sake of the others. You were just seeing things from being upset, that's all. Your mom will be home soon.” The huge femme equine turned to look at her mate with fire in her eyes as she told him her thoughts

“I was not hallucinating, Roger! I saw my mom, standing right damned here, wearing a tunic and leggings, sort of 14th century looking, the way Dad was dressed!” the tall equine sobbed out, knowing full well in her heart what she had just observed was real. “I saw her standing right here just as plain as day! She called out to us! I know I heard her call out to us!” she sobbed, trying to break her husband's hold on her.

Conrad slowly walked over to them, trying desperately to clear his head. He knelt next to his sister and got her attention, still sniffing and trying to get it together himself. Once she was looking at him and Conrad had managed to pull himself back together, he shared this with her;

“It *was* real, Sis. I saw her and I heard her call out to us too.”

Vicki was still shaking, sobbing almost uncontrollably from her encounter with what must have been her family. Morri was holding her, trying his best to settle her shot nerves. Sir Marc, out of concern for her retrieved some strong spirits, pouring her a cup of it, finally getting her to drink it down. She sat there under the lean-to, sniffing and slowly pulling herself back together. She looked up to her warriors, not exactly sure if it really happened but she felt compelled to share her experience with them anyway.

“I saw my mate, a huge blond stallion,” she told them, suddenly looking at her mount, standing as close to the lean-to as possible. There was some connection there, somewhere, but she just couldn't put it together. Her thoughts were getting jumbled up again, multiple thoughts making one singular one indistinguishable from the rest.

“Miss Vicki, you were most likely dreaming ...” Sir Marc interjected but she cut him off sharply.

“NO! This was as real as you and I speaking right here and now! My mate, the one that I kept seeing in my dreams, is coming here to find me!” she shouted, then a shocked, followed by an angry look crossed her face just before she went out into the pouring rain. Turning her face skyward, she yelled out at the top of her lungs,

“You are punishing me, aren't you! You knew I had a mate but you let me fall in love with Sir Varn! Damn You!! You're punishing me for killing other beings! I just know it!! Tomas died because I didn't stop Tamal from shooting him with an arrow!! Now you're getting even with me!! Damn You, whoever you are!! DAMN YOU!!!”

“Miss D'nan! Please get out of the rain before you fall sick!” Sir Marc begged, trying to get her to return to the lean-to. She turned to look at him with a very strange look on her face, as if possessed by a demon. She pulled her short dagger from its sheath and plunged it deep into her chest, pointing at him afterwards with fire in her eyes.

“I cannot die, Sir Marc! This is why the god over this world punishes me so greatly! I have taken lives from those who could die but I am an immortal, an evil, wretched beast not worthy of a normal life! I Cannot Die!! He punishes me because I cannot give up my existence but I would willingly take away the souls of others!!” She wrenched the dagger from her chest, staggering momentarily as she recovered from the injury. Finally pulling herself together, she wiped her dagger against the grass, cleaning the blood from it. She looked up to see her troops looking back at her in shock, having never known this secret about her.

“Miss Vicki, I ... uh ...” Tamal was trying to put words together, not sure how to react to this. He had just observed his leader administer a fatal injury to herself, only to remain standing, shouting at the god of their realm in abject defiance. This was very frightening to him, to say the least.

“Do not worry, my troops. I will not die but I have managed to damage my favorite tunic,” she said wistfully as she went back to sit down by the fire, warming herself. “At the very worst I will end up with a head cold. I should not have done that ...” She knew she had screwed up in front of her troops and whatever happened now would be a fitting punishment for her outburst.

“You need dry clothes, my commander,” Sir Marc stated, getting her to start removing her soaked attire, helping her to peel her wet, blood soaked tunic off. Morri retrieved her dry tunic from her saddlebags, helping her on with it after using a blanket to dry her off a bit. Sir Jac put her cloak about

her shoulders, draping his own cloak over her afterwards to help warm her body again. Her squire Morri put some wine in a metal cup for her, warming it by the fire for her to reinforce her constitution. Even though she complained that she didn't need it, the squire finally got her to drink the wine, warming her from the inside. Tamal then got her attention after talking with the others, making sure she was looking at him.

“Miss Vicki, my superior, what just transpired, well, we did not see this happen. You have our word in this matter.”

She looked to see all of her warriors nodding in agreement. This really hurt because she knew she would now be leaving them, her loyal warriors, *if* her mate found her.

The tigress was khat-napping, finally dry and warm this morning for a change. The sun was hitting her back, warming her body through.

“Miss D'nan, we need to be moving again,” Sir Marc told her, slowly, carefully rousing her. “It is morning, Ma'am. Please wake up.” She rolled over, looking at him with a slightly pained look on her face.

“I am quite sore this morning, Sir Marc. Have Morri come help me to dress, please?” she asked, watching him nod and go off to retrieve her squire for her. Sitting up, her chest was in a lot of pain this morning from her emotionally driven outburst last eve. Looking around her, she saw her leggings were hanging over a branch near the fire, hopefully dry enough to put back on. That was a really dumb stunt in her estimations but her troops promised her they were going to keep it quiet. It made her feel good to know her troops would keep this under their helmets for her. Morri came over to her, kneeling next to her as he put his hand on her shoulder to speak with his employer.

“Miss Vicki, please do not take this wrong,” he began, stopping momentarily to form his thoughts. “You are not some wicked beast, Ma'am. I have been with you far too long for you to try to convince me of this. You are a kind, compassionate person that uses violence only as a last resort. You have even made up your mind to try and save Pellier from the hanging rope, Ma'am.” He stopped momentarily, finding his words for his thoughts. “You must in any case tell Sir Varn your mate comes for you. I believe what you told me last eve and my heart breaks for you. You have been put in a bad situation that will leave one man hurt no matter what.” He was trying to temper what he wanted to add to that when she spoke up.

“Morri, I think I have been in this position before, for some reason. My thought processes sometimes let me pick out a single thought but other times it is all jumbled.” Vicki had a fleeting thought of a handsome male cougar holding her in his arms. The name 'Robert' flashed in her mind, connected with that male feline. She looked down at her claws, unsheathing them to their full extent momentarily as she cleared her head. “I know I should be overjoyed my stallion comes for me but I feel pain in my heart instead. Why this is so, I am not sure. Maybe it is because I do not wish to leave here. This land has slowly but surely become my home ...” She began to weep, knowing in her heart things were going to get worse before they got better for her. Her squire thought about what she had said and decided to be very frank with her.

“Vicki, I speak to you now as a friend, not your squire. If you have children and grandchildren like you

informed me last night while I dried your fur, you need to be with them.” Morri knew he was right in this matter, since he had been sold into serfdom by his parents. He was mad at them for it but he still missed them dearly. “If you have a home and a family to go to, you should ride like the wind with your intended mate back to your true dwelling.” This left the tigress nodding, knowing Morri was right. She tried to say 'Thank you' but she couldn't, the tears threatening to flow from her eyes any moment from her emotional state. All she could do was nod, acknowledging his thoughts and his friendship.

Morri had helped her to dress for the day, the tigress finding her body was more resilient than even she thought. Looking at her dagger in the morning light, she noted that she had indeed buried it to the hilt in her chest. This surely meant it was most likely through her heart but she did not die. It still bothered her that she didn't know if she was born this way or she had somehow been made immortal through some form of sorcery. All these little things that she wanted answers to, if looked at one at a time weren't much, but if added together, it made her head hurt at times.

Wandering over to the fire, she poured up another cup of tea, savoring the flavors from the concoction Sir Tamal's mate had put together for them. Thinking of him being home with his mate after this was over made her think about her home, wherever that was. It seemed very bright and airy inside, with plenty of light from an impossibly huge floor to ceiling window in one wall. Would she feel at home there, since she has spent so much time here? This kind of frustrated her, the fact that she had no real sense of where her home was.

The tigress had been far south once, taking care of a land dispute with the neighboring kingdom. That was a four month and then some round trip and no place there seemed like her home and no other striped felids were known to be there. She knew traveling east would bring her past a pair of huge lakes in the mountains and on to a high desert that some thought uncrossable. North took a person to the land of the Archem, a rainy, soggy land inhabited mostly by raiders and pirates on land and the sea. Going west, traveling downstream on the big river would take her to the ocean with a huge bay just inland. She had been there but one time in search of some of the King's relatives that had migrated that way.

Tamal handed her a slice of dried meat, a small snack to hold her over until they caught something to eat this morning. Nibbling at it, she thought about the foods back home. Would she like them after being here so long? She kept thinking there was some kind of a box that kept things cold inside of it. That was just craziness in her mind; it would take powerful magic to make that happen. Sipping her tea some more, maybe this would all work out as Morri had said. Maybe she needed to be with her family. In such case she needed to talk to Sir Varn and tell him the bad news.

And it would be bad news for him.

“Yes!” Joe shouted out, pumping his fist in the air for some odd reason. He did a little shuffle of sorts, looked skyward and said, “Thank You, Odin, Thank You!”

“Um, Joe ... what's so exciting that you're doing a dance over it?” Torvald asked, looking at him with one eyebrow lifted.

“I didn't end up in a blueberry bush! Look! It's right there,” he pointed out, indicating a very lush, low

growing bush nearby covered in little bluish-purple berries. "I didn't end up in it! For once, I'm *not* sticky and stained!" Axel walked over to the bush, looking at the berries with interest. He took a few and started chewing them, then spit them out right away.

"Wow! Those things are like blueberry flavored jalapeño peppers!" he stated, trying to get the taste out of his mouth. Joe tried one, nodding at the flavors.

"Not bad, if you ask me," he commented, smiling a bit as he sampled a few more to confirm the taste. "Well, I guess it's more for me, then, if you won't eat them." He smiled, collecting some in a pouch for later. "You know, the first time I ever met Aslaug on a mission, I was deposited in a blueberry bush about this big by Peter the Dispatcher. I was sticky as all hell until I could wash the juice out of my fur."

"I have to tell you, Joe, Odin has a pretty good aim when it comes to transporting us," Torvald pointed out, straightening his clothing. The huge fur then looked around himself with a worried look on his face. "Um, did anyone see our equipment?" As they looked around them, their equipment bag and three horses appeared nearby.

"Oh good!" the huge fur commented as he went to the horse nearest him, a black Frisian. "Hello Jeff," he said to the horse, the animal nuzzling him afterwards. "Joe, I've worked with this trio before. This is Jeff, that red chestnut gelding near you is Star and the appaloosa mare is Milly." The chestnut went over to Joe, nuzzling against him a bit.

"Well, we now know who Star likes," Torvald said with a smile, checking his mounts rigging. Milly was eyeing Axel very carefully, sizing him up. The young equine held out his paw to her, letting her smell him. She then started to nuzzle around in his vest, following him when he started to back up.

"Son, what's in your pockets that she's so interested in?" his dad asked, smirking at the sight in front of him. Joe was even snickering, watching Milly stay up with the tall young equine as he tried to back away from her. Axel finally stopped, offering the horse a piece of carrot, his snack, from his pocket.

Torvald and Joe had went to the equipment bag, pulling out their gear and checking it over. There was a baldric for each of their long swords and double cross-chest holsters for their firearms. The coyote smiled when he saw the scabbard provided for his rifle, made in a western style. He nodded in approval, adding it securely to his horse's rigging. They had also split up their provisions, basic stock to keep them going along with a modern first aid kit for each of them, disguised in leather carriers. Once they got into the saddle, the huge fur noticed something under Joe's vest.

"Joe, what's that hidden under your clothing, may I ask?" The coyote's ears wilted as he pulled open his vest, a Colt Dragoon in .44 caliber, carried in a shoulder holster, plainly displayed for the huge fur to see.

"I didn't think you would mind too much, Tor. I'm not immortal and neither is your son. I just wanted to have a bit of firepower in case we got jumped." The berserker thought this over for a minute or two, weighing the pros and cons. He finally nodded, looking over at his friend.

"Yeah, you're right, Joe. Just keep it in reserve and don't go waving it around a lot, please?" The canid nodded, making sure it was hidden under his vest as best as possible. Axel reached down to the top of his left ankle wrap, making sure his .44 caliber black powder derringer provided to him by his brother-

in-law Roger was secure in its holster.

“OK, now which way do we go?” Axle asked, looking around at the territory. It was obvious they were in the mountains, maybe the foothills by the looks of it.

“Let's follow this road west, towards that smoke coming up. Maybe it's a lodge or a home.” Torvald suggested. The others nodding in agreement, they headed off that way.

“This is the worst saddle I have ever been on,” Axle commented as the group picked their way along the trail. He stood up in the stirrups, trying to stretch out his legs a bit and get some much needed circulation back in his butt. The road ahead of them began to narrow at the base of a cliff, leaving just enough room for a wagon to get by carefully. “We should be getting closer to the source of that smoke,” he stated, keeping an eye out for hazards that might injure a horse. He was also trying to enjoy the view, looking at the unspoiled scenery around them.

“Kinda makes me wish I had brought a camera with us,” Axel said wistfully, looking at some very pristine forest views that would have made him a nice rainy day slush fund as calendar nature photos.

“Well, you know how that would have went over with the boss,” Torvald interjected. “I wanted to take a camera back to my old home in Denmark but the boss put his foot down. I can't say that I blame him; just think of the ramifications if I had lost it somehow.” Joe and Axel both nodded their heads, understanding where their boss was coming from. As they rounded a bend, an armed wolverine stepped into the road, motioning for them to stop with his broad sword.

“I am Marcelan but you may call me The Bandit. Please hand over your valuables and nobody will get hurt.” the armed male in the road demanded. He was rewarded by the sound of five firearms, four pistols and a rifle being cocked.

“You will throw your weapon to the side or die, highwayman. I will give you but a few moments to comply before killing you.” Torvald retorted in the highwayman's language. The speech spell that Odin put on them worked just like a charm. The wolverine looked at them like he couldn't understand why these unsuspecting travelers were armed to the teeth.

“You heard him as plain as day, bandit! Drop it!” Mr. Latrans said to 'The Bandit' very firmly. The armed fur in the road tossed his sword to the side, holding out his hands for them to see.

“I have done as you ask. Please do not kill me.” he begged, holding his hands up further. “My hands are empty, kind Sirs. Do not shoot.”

“Dad, what's a hand?” the young equine asked quietly, obviously confused by this reference.

“There must be humans on this planet. A paw is the same as a hand.” Axel nodded, keeping his eyes on the highwayman. “They will most likely say female instead of femme and person instead of furson, too.” Joe nodded in agreement, keeping his eyes glued to their antagonist.

“Is there a lodge ahead?” Torvald asked, wanting to know how far they needed to travel.

“There is a lodge not far ahead, kind Sir.” the robber replied. “I will guide you there in exchange for not killing me.”

“OK, you walk ahead of us. If it's a trap, you're the first to die. Do you understand me?” The huge fur seemed pretty serious about that part, waving the barrel of his pistol in the bandit's general direction.

“Thank you for sparing my life, kind Sirs.” the wolverine stated, giving them a deep bow. He then turned and began walking, making sure he was being followed.

Joe relaxed some, putting his rifle away then getting his vest clear of his Dragoon. Axel put one pistol away, keeping the other one in paw.

“I don't like the way this feels, Tor.” the canid stated in English, giving his friend a nod. Torvald nodded back, letting him know he understood.

“Yeah, I'll keep my eyes on him while you and Axel keep an eye peeled for ambushes.”

Sir Marc was riding in his usual formation position, his horse walking slowly to allow Pellier to walk alongside him, a shackle around his wrist attached to a rope around the horn on his saddle. He had been thinking about this all morning; his immediate commander thought herself a demon of some sort. He however knew better than that; she was a very compassionate individual that took care of those around her. He knew Miss Vicki had taken food and clothing to those unfortunate people that lived in the village by the castle when they had none of their own. Back when she was the huntress for the castle, it was well known that she always brought some game back for the people that truly needed it, such as those with small children.

He remembered the year she had purchased Morri's mule for him. He could now keep up with them on the road and her squire's former mount, a sturdy but slow burro, was given to a family that would care for him properly and make good use of him. This was not the work of a demon but it could be more characterized by saying it was the work of an angel.

He knew that she had always had these demons in her head that tortured her, especially in her dreams. He never let on but he was well aware of the times she had woke in the night on their forays, screaming or crying, sometimes both. It was heart breaking to see this happen but he did not interfere by her specific request. Marc hoped she really had a mate looking for her. Maybe this huge equine she spoke of was what she needed in her life. Maybe he could comfort her where no others could do so.

It was late afternoon and the lodge in question finally came into view, a small, inviting oasis in the woods. Torvald stopped their group, getting off of his horse to go and face the highwayman.

“Marcelan, put your hands out in front of you,” he requested, taking a short piece of rope from his saddle to tie the robber's wrists securely in a Japanese style, just as good as handcuffs if done right. “I cannot risk you harming other people in the tavern. You will remain like this until I can turn you over to the proper authorities.” He then reached down and took the thief's dagger from the top of his boot. “I will keep this, too,” he informed the bandit, putting it into his ankle wrap snugly.

“Kind Sir, are you a sheriff or some other form of lawman?” Marcelan asked, seeming quite taken aback by this.

“You could say that,” he replied, noting his companions were almost busting a gut, trying to keep from laughing. He motioned at them to dismount, tying their mounts to the rail out front.

Brushing the dust out of their clothing, they went inside to find themselves greeted by a dark, gloomy interior. A bar ran along one wall for a short ways with an older, balding gentleman standing behind it. This seemed like as good of a place as any to start so Torvald headed that way.

“Good evening, Sir Giant,” the barkeep said, giving the group careful scrutiny. “What is it you might need this evening?” He seemed nice enough to the huge fur, very polite in fact.

“Would it be possible to be served meals for the four of us?” he asked, giving the keep a courteous smile.

“Aye Sir, it will cost you eight silvers for your meals and wine. You may sit at any table you wish.” He indicated the tables behind Torvald but kept his hand out, palm up for his money. Torvald had previously looked to see what kinds of currency he had, which consisted of what might be proper money for this area. Taking a gold coin out, he handed it to the keep, who smiled, pocketed the coin and handed him back two silver coins that were slightly smaller as change.

“What are we having for dinner, Dad?” Axel asked, sitting down next to his father as they took a table. The huge fur had put Marcelan in between Joe and himself to better keep an eye on him.

“Whatever we're served is what we're having, Son,” was the reply given, since this was the usual method of the era. “It's usually meat, vegetables and bread, maybe some local fruit and wine. Just don't ask for water because it would be just like drinking ditch water.” Joe nodded his head, knowing Torvald was very correct in his description. Wine was the safest thing to drink on these primitive worlds.

“You three speak a foreign language that I am not familiar with,” Marcelan commented, giving them his attention. “I know of no others that speak like that. You all must be from far away, in any case.” Torvald nodded, getting a leather tubular pouch from around his waist. He opened it to remove the contents inside, a very carefully disguised document. It was a paper, 21st century stock but made to appear to be aged parchment. It had upon it a very precise, accurate drawing done by Gytha of her mother, done in colored Prismacolor[®] pencils. Going back to the bar, he got the keep's attention once again.

“Would you know of a female, a tigress that looks like this? She is my mate and I have been searching for her for years.” Torvald stated as he unrolled the drawing. The keep looked at it only momentarily and nodded, looking back up at the berserker.

“There is but one in this land that appears like this. Miss D'nan is the second in command of the King's Royal Guard.” was his reply. Torvald's knees went weak momentarily as he shakily rolled up the image.

“Where is the castle she guards so that I might find her?” he asked, carefully committing the directions to memory while the keep told him how to get there. He thanked the keep by tipping him another gold coin and rejoined the group, trying to keep himself together.

“Axel, your mother is two days ahead of us, headed towards a castle. The castle is only four days ride from here.” Torvald told his son. The young equine had to work to stifle his sobbing from this news that his mother was near. “She is now the second in command of the king's guards there. I would venture to say she's healthy, if nothing else.” They all nodded, saying a prayer of thanks just as their meal was served.

their meal finished, they were enjoying the singing and music provided by some traveling minstrels that had come in after them. They were a mixed lot, one white felid male, a brown and white bovine female that might have been his mate by the way they interacted, a quite tall, pale skinned man that was part badger by his features and a slight man with ebony skin and white, curly hair. The smaller man have possibly just joined this troupe because he did not know their songs well, however he tried his best to carry on with them.

The slight man had went to the bar to retrieve refreshments for the singers and after he had returned with drink for his comrades, he wandered over to the huge fur.

“The keep tells me you are in search of Miss D'nan,” he began, pulling a chair from the next table to sit down. “If you see her, please tell her Jasem has sent his greetings to her.”

“You're saying you know her?” Torvald asked, the slight man garnering his undivided attention.

“It has been a long time ago I'm afraid, more than twenty years. I brought her to the court when she was confused as to who she was or where she came from.” Even this seemed to make the minstrel sad.

“Did she look like this drawing?” Axel asked the small man, nudging his father to get out the sketch. Once the man laid eyes on the drawing, his eyes lit up.

“Yes, this is Miss D'nan, the one whom you are seeking.”

The minstrel got up and returned to singing with the others but he had no idea how he had lifted the spirits of those at the table. Torvald even caught himself singing along with one song that had a nice melody to it. He was somewhat 'in the zone' singing to that song, so much so that the man that had walked up to him had to shake him to get his attention.

“May I help you, Sir?” he asked the short, stout man with a badge on his jerkin. The man smiled and motioned to Marcelan.

“It seems you have helped me, kind giant stallion. This is a highwayman that I have pursued for some time. Marcelan is his name if he has not already told you.” The wolverine visibly wilted at the sight of the law.

“I suppose I might turn over custody of him to you, in any case.” Torvald suggested.

“You may do so, kind Sir. I will take him south to the next kingdom so he may be tried for murder.” The sheriff put a small sack of gold coins on the table, nodding to the tall equine. “This is the reward money for his capture, 100 sovereigns of this kingdom. Please accept the coinage with King Melling's

blessings.” The sheriff then bowed and lead the weasel out the door and into the night. Axel opened the pouch, carefully pouring out the contents. He stacked the coins up, feeling the heft of them in his paw.

“Not bald for a day's work, eh?” the huge fur stated, picking one up to look at it. “I think we may stay the night here after all.” He then got up with a few coins in paw to make sleeping arrangements for the night.