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“A Loss Of Rights”

By Kellan Meig'h

Chapter 21

Sunup had arrived and a young warrior was looking across the valley, watching for signs of his fellow warriors returning with their bounty.

“Thom, any signs of them?” the graying warrior asked as he walked up beside the young sentinel. He gave his watch a mug of drink, a brewed concoction made from native plants found in the realm up north.

“No, I'm sorry, Rog, there are no signs. I fear they have been captured by that striped feline.”

“Is she really that powerful, that she could capture ten of my finest raiders?”

“I have heard she is without death, my leader.” the sentinel spoke up.

“That sounds impossible to me,” he pondered, sipping his drink while looking at the lands he knew he could not lay claim to. These lands seemed very hospitable, unlike his, which were a wet boggy land not fit to grow proper crops near the coast and a high desert, not habitable toward the inland. Not much of his lands could actually grow crops, for that matter.

“I heard she killed six of our brethren without weapons more than twenty yeas ago, before I was born.” the young sentinel mused.

“That is an old fable that has no merit,” the elder warrior stated, giving the idea much thought. It was impossible, he knew because she didn't look that old. He had been close to her just a year ago, when she tried to take them into custody during a raid. She looked not much over thirty to him.

“We might have to go find them if they do not show soon.” the young sentinel proffered up.

“I know, Thom. We need to prepare our warriors for battle.”

“Conrad, are you awake?” Cathy asked, looking at the clock on the nightstand. It was after 8 am in the morning and the tiger was still snoring, obviously asleep.

“Sknxxxxx ...” was the sound the tiger made as he rolled over, drool coming from the corner of his mouth.

“Conrad!” she said loudly, shaking him slightly.

“Mmmm OK, I'm awake ...” he said softly, blinking to clear his sight. “Am I late for practice?” he asked, sitting up to see exactly where he was. He then shook his head, embarrassed to think he was totally out of it just now.

“No, you're not late, sweetheart, you're just sleeping in for a change,” Cathy told him, giving him a kiss on the cheek. “Let's get up and have some breakfast with your grandparents and your uncle.”

Conrad stood up and stretched, trying to get the kinks out of his back and legs. Picking up his cell phone, he looked at the display through bleary eyes, searching out Grandpa Connell's number. Dialing what looked to be the right selection, he waited for it to connect.

“This is Richard ...” the apprehensive voice on the other end stated, the connection sounding not too good, very distant in nature. This woke Conrad up, the shock of hearing Richard's voice after Roger found out he might be missing with Willi Marie.

“Hi, Richard ... Erm, where are you right now?” the striped male asked as he rubbed his muzzle to wake up, not exactly sure he was having this conversation or not.

“Well, I'm not sure how to answer that,” the huge gray equine replied, looking over at his wife, still asleep in their bed inside their yurt. “I'm with Wilhelmine and her ... uh, your ... family.” He heard Richard get out of bed and walk a little ways, then talking to somebody followed by a familiar voice coming on the line.

“Conrad, honey, it's me, your mother,” he hear her say, his mother sounding like she was trying her best to keep from crying.

“Mom! Are you all right? Are you all OK? We're all real worried about all of you!” He turned to Cathy and blurted out, “Mom's on the phone!”

“Conrad, We're all OK here and we should be home in a few days! Did you hear me, honey?”

“Yeah, I heard you say you would be home in a few days. Please be careful Mom, for all of us?”

“We have plenty of protection, honey. I have my warriors to keep us safe. Tell everyone back home we love them,” the tigress told her son.

“Mom, I'm losing you,” Conrad said, looking quickly at his phone's display to see he had only 1 bar of signal where he was.

“Honey, I'll be home in a few days. I'll see you ...” she said just as the signal went away.

“Mom? Mom!” Conrad shouted, looking to see he had no signal at all. “Damn, I really hate this cell phone service,” he said, closing the top and gently putting it on the table by the window. Cathy knew he probably wanted to throw it across the parking lot instead. He stopped and shook his head, thinking about the service needed to reach another planet ...

“At least you had a chance to talk with your mom, even if it was just a short conversation,” Cathy proffered up, giving him a hug. “Let's get dressed and go have breakfast.”

“Yeah, you're right. I did have a chance to hear her voice and she did say they would be home in a few days, so maybe I should look upon this as being very lucky to have talked to her at all.”

“Well, let's get dressed and go tell your grandparents their daughter is coming home soon.”

“Yeah, I'll get dressed. Just give me a few minutes, I need to trim my beard, hon. It's getting long again.”

Victoria was giving Richard back his cell phone, desperately trying to keep her composure. She looked up at Torvald, who was giving her a very concerned look.

“I got to talk with Conrad for a few moments,” she proffered up, wiping at the tears that were rolling down her cheeks. “Torvald, sweetheart, if I didn't feel so compelled to tell Sir Varn about us face to face, I would say let's go home right now.”

“I think I know how you feel,” he replied, embracing her, holding her close to him. She was very upset, shaking like a leaf in his arms.

“You probably do know how I feel,” she commented, snuggling into his embrace. “Tor, I don't want to see any of us hurt so maybe we could ride ahead of the rest so I could see Sir Varn. After that, we could go home right away.” Torvald nodded, thinking maybe it was a good idea.

“OK, after we have breakfast, we'll saddle up and head for the castle as fast as possible.”

“We could be there by early afternoon if we travel fast enough.” she noted. Willi Marie came up to them, waiting until they were done cuddling before interrupting them.

“Um, I'm going to fix breakfast for us,” she said, letting them know or maybe warning them that she was going to let loose with her magic again. The palomino-colored femme went into the clearing, making everyone back up a bit before materializing some tables, some benches, eating utensils and finally a very full load of food. The gold bands were doing absolutely nothing to dampen her powers that were growing stronger with each day.

“That still upsets me when she does that,” Sir Marc commented to his superior, the tigress smiling back at him.

“She is a very gentle soul, my warrior. She would never harm you, I can guarantee that.” she replied.

“This all looks so good,” Teric stated, getting a plate and loading it up with food. “I am not much of a

cook so I relish a good hot meal,” he said, a wide smile crossing his muzzle when he tasted the pancakes.

“How is your eyesight this morning?” Willi Marie asked, concerned it might be only temporary in nature.

“I seem to be able to see perfectly, kind sorceress. I did not know just how colorful the world really was until now.” A tear formed in his right eye, slowly rolling down his face, dropping from scale to scale slowly. “I am truly thankful you have given me back my sight.”

“I would hug you again but I'm afraid of what might happen,” Willi said sheepishly, shrugging her shoulders.

“I understand your apprehension, Wilhelmine.” Teric retorted, smiling at her widely. “A kiss on the cheek will do just fine.”

Tasha and Kristy materialized on planet IS-23440, none the worse for wear. The tigress got out her compass, getting her bearings at to where the castle and Whitehall were. She could 'feel' Willi Marie's powers, a very strong surge in the natural magical field of this planet lying in the general direction of Whitehall. She got up into the saddle, getting the reins in her hands.

“Are you ready, Tasha?” the bay mare asked, looking around at the meadow in awe of the unspoiled beauty.

“Yeah, We need to go that way,” indicating a direction off to their left.

“OK, I can do that, Tasha. Just remember it's OK to use the reins if you think you need to,” the mare reminded her, taking off in a canter in the direction the feline indicated.

There was one other being the lioness could feel, a dark being, possibly Beoram himself. When the time would come, she would take great pleasure in destroying him personally. She patted the thermal blaster she had in a shoulder holster, knowing it packed enough energy to possibly destroy Lucifer himself if she ever had that shot. It was more than enough to obliterate the likes of Beoram, preventing his black, evil soul from ever being reconstituted in any form.

Victoria's group had finally finished breakfast and they were now saddled, Richard astride another copy of Jeff. Teric had decided to ride with them, leaving Sir Marc and Sir Jac to bring the prisoners to the castle. After Victoria made sure everyone was ready, they all headed to the castle at a fast pace.

“This land is very pristine and beautiful,” Richard commented on the way, noting there was nothing besides the occasional farm that they rode past.

“I'm sure in a thousand years or so, it might look just like our world,” Torvald retorted. He had overheard someone talking of a steam engine while they were at Whitehall. That would bring with it industrialization and development for certain.

“This land will be very commercial in less time than that,” Michael stated, having studied this planet's timeline closely.

“That's very sad to hear,” Victoria stated, just as something caught her eye off in the distance. She raised her hand, signaling for them to stop.

“I see them, just over that rise,” Torvald stated, riding up beside his mate. “Are they friend or foe?”

“Foe, I'm afraid. They're Archem Raiders, most likely looking for the ones Phillip detained. We need to take cover behind those boulders over there,” she suggested, motioning for them to head that way.

“Aunt Victoria, can I do something to stop them?” Willi Marie asked, thinking she had the ability to put the brakes on the advancing warriors.

“What would you do?” the tigress asked, noting the Archem were now close enough to make out their markings on their shields that were their house emblems.

“Um, how about if I take away their weapons?” Willi Marie suggested.

“Victoria, they're getting real close,” Joe proffered up, getting his Dragoon ready. They were close enough for Joe to make out their facial features. The group was human and canid, all looking like they were spoiling for a fight.

“OK Willi Marie, do your thing,” the tigress told her, motioning towards the Archem.

“Weapons Go Away!” she said loudly, making a banishing gesture with her hands. Suddenly the Archem were totally without weapons in their hands. This made them stop their charge and look at one another strangely. They turned to run for cover but the palomino colored mare said loudly, “Stop Right There!” All of the enemy warriors involuntarily stopped in their tracks, unable to run any further.

“Willi Marie, you make this *waaaay* too easy,” Joe commented as he headed towards the frozen warriors with some rope from his saddle. Torvald, Axel and Mike followed him while Willi conjured up some more rope to use on them. Victoria took a hank of rope from her niece and followed the others, walking up to the leader of the warriors.

“Rog Hendrick, I thought I might never capture you,” she said with a smile as she took his arms and pulled them behind his back, tying his wrists securely. There was a huge bounty on his head, being a sworn enemy of the crown.

“Vicki D'nan, you have used some form of magic to capture me!” he spat back, unable to move except when she would force him to walk over to and stand with the others that were now grouped together, unable to move.

“I remember no rules of engagement that call for no magic,” she said calmly, tying his rope into a marching line with the others.

“I demand fair one-on-one battle for our release!” he said loudly, knowing it was more chivalry than anything else and Victoria did not have to honor that request if she didn't feel like it.

“Would you battle my stallion husband for your release?” she asked as she pointed out her hubby, knowing Torvald would mop the floor with Rog. The graying human looked at the choices in front of him, thinking the honey-blond female equine would be a worthy opponent to beat.

“I choose the female equine to battle!” he said very confidently, smiling afterwards at his compatriots who voiced their agreement. He felt she wouldn't last but a few minutes against himself, leader and patriarch of the Hendrick house.

“Is that your choice?” the tigress asked, giving him a concerned look. She knew he wouldn't last ten seconds against her niece's magic, which was completely out of control as far as Victoria was concerned. She didn't know if Willi Marie could contain her magic long enough to battle fairly against the human male.

“I will battle the warrior,” Teric stated, stepping up and drawing his sword. “I owe Willi Marie a debt of gratitude for my sight and wings so I will battle Rog Hendrick in her behalf!”

“I will not battle you, Drac! I have challenged the female and I will battle the female!”

“I have offered,” Teric said, looking at the palomino colored femme, shrugging his shoulders. “I suggest you go easy on him.”

“What do you mean, go easy on me? I will defeat her easily!” Rog seemed very confident, that was until Willi Marie changed her clothing for battle armor with a gesture of her hands. “She is a sorceress! You did not tell me she was a sorceress!” Rog exclaimed, his jaw was almost on the ground in shock.

“You did not ask me,” Victoria replied as she untied Rog's wrists. Willi Marie gestured at him, allowing him to move under his own volition again. She then materialized two staffs, throwing one to the warrior.

“Is this all you would battle me with?” the male stated, looking at the femme with a sneer.

“Would you prefer I use my favorite weapon, then?” She changed the staff in her possession for her Valkyrie's spear, giving him a hand and a half sword in exchange.

“Rog, you have made a bad choice.” the tigress stated. “She has the honorary powers of a Chooser, the gleaner of dead souls. She will glean your soul from you in a blink of an eye.” This didn't seem to bother the warrior at all. He set his grip, preparing to do battle.

“Sweetheart, be careful please?” Richard asked, giving his wife a kiss on the cheek.

“I am in no danger, honey. Watch as I toy with him.” Will Marie replied, giving her hubby a smile. She had trained with Torvald since she was sixteen and she was more than able to take this warrior on.

Rog decided that the best way to end this deal was make a charge straight at her, blade held high to dispatch her in a single downward blow to her neck. Willi was ready, waiting for him, her feline instincts waiting to pounce on the hapless warrior. He dropped his blade in anticipation of striking her but she sidestepped him, swatting him on the back of the head with her spear as he ran by.

“Rog, concede before she kills you,” one of his group shouted, seeing that this was going to be a very one-sided battle. Rog didn't listen, making another run at the equine, having her sidestep him once again, this time raking him across the back of the neck with her claws to make a point. She didn't want to kill him, just discourage him to the point that he would give up.

“Rog, please! I do not wish to kill you!” she pleaded, hoping he would listen. He didn't. He put his hand on the back of his neck, looking at the blood on it afterwards.

“You will die, sorceress!” he shouted, running at her again. She could see he was not going to let her sidestep him again so she braced herself, bringing the point of her spear to bear. Rog saw this too late, unable to compensate for her weapon brought to battery. The lethal, razor-sharp point made a sickening sound as it tore through his leather and steel laminated plate armor and on through his body.

The collision of the two warrior's bodies knocked the wind from the filly, making her head spin from the impact on the soft ground when she was knocked down. Richard rushed to her side, getting her sitting up so she could shake it off. What she saw next made her sick inside.

Rog was on his side, her spear clear through his chest on the side opposite his heart. It really didn't matter where it had gone through him, the bloody foam coming from his mouth was a sure sign he was doomed.

“Richard, help me get to him, please?” she begged, still unable to stand at the moment. Her hubby helped her to get to the doomed warrior and assisted her in straightening him out a bit.

“Sweetheart, pull the spear from him, quickly before it shocks you badly,” she ordered, getting up on her knees over him to hold his body down. The huge gray equine grabbed the spear, getting the daylights shocked out of him in the process, yanking it free from the warrior's body just as he passed out himself from the contact with her weapon.

“Let me die, sorceress” the warrior asked, trying to push her away from himself. She was not going to put up with this nonsense so she put her hands on his chest, that blinding light building between them. Rog had a very strange look on his face as he felt her powers healing his damaged body.

“You must glean my soul,” Rog complained, trying desperately to push the filly away from himself. She stood her ground, finishing her work to repair the damage her spear had caused.

“I will not glean your soul, Rog Hendrick. You will live to return to your land.” Willi Marie helped him to stand up and then told him, “This was not a fair battle against me. I am a trained warrior, a sorceress and an honorary Valkyrie, a Chooser of dead souls. Your soul is now yours again, to return to your lands with your people and never return here again except under friendly terms.”

“What of my people you have in your custody? Will you release them too?” Willi Marie looked at Victoria, who nodded back at her.

“We will allow your people to return with you to your lands, provided you never return here except to trade fairly with the inhabitants of this land.”

“You have been fair with me, kind Sorceress so I will honor your request and return to my lands. You are far too powerful to fight against. Even though you have healed me and given me back my life, I fear

you might not be so sympathetic if it were to happen again.”

Willi Marie waved her hand, making the knights, the raiders under the knight's control and the Marsden brothers appear in the meadow near them. Sir Jac and Sir Marc stopped their mounts, looking around at the situation at hand in awe.

“Miss D'nan, is everything all right?” the canid warrior called out from his mount, looking for all the world like he was very frightened by what just happened.

“Sir Marc, release the raiders. Willi Marie had given them safe passage back to their lands in exchange for their promise never to raid our lands again.” the tigress commanded.

Willi Marie walked up to Sir Marc with a sheepish look on her muzzle.

“Sir Marc, I'm sorry if I scared you by summoning you here. I wanted to send these warriors home with their kin so I summoned all of you without thinking. I seriously need to learn to control this magic,” she commented, looking down at the ground with an upset look on her muzzle.

While all of this was going on, a lioness on a bay and white mare rode slowly across the meadow in their general direction. She stopped within shouting range, raising her hands to show they were empty.

“My name is Tasha Cumberow and I mean you all no harm!” she shouted, getting the group's attention before she rode closer to them. She closed the distance between them before she dismounted, walking up to Willi Marie with a smile on her muzzle.

“Should I know you?” the equine asked, seeming somewhat bothered by the situation.

“No, you don't know me but I can help you control your magic for starters.” the lioness replied. “I see you wear dampening bracelets that no doubt are doing nothing to control your powers.”

“Douglas gave them to me and they worked at first, but they seem to have quit doing their job.” Willi Marie pointed out.

“Yeah, I know. They can't possibly dampen your powers, sweetie. You're a Master level sorceress by the looks of it.” The lioness motioned for her to remove the bracelets while she rummaged around in a pouch she carried. Removing what looked like six strands of braided metal from her bag, she motioned for Doug to assist her. “Doug, help me with these bands, please.” she directed.

The two of them took a gold, a silver and a copper band apiece, weaving them together as they went around each wrist before connecting them, making a woven band that would help Willi to control her powers.

“What will these bands do?” she asked, looking at the handiwork from the lioness and the jaguar.

“Those bands will force all commands to have to be verbal in nature. Give it a try,” was Tasha's reply.

Willi Marie tried several times to mentally materialize something in her hand with no luck to be had. She then said, “Cold Coke Zero!” which made a can appear in her hand instantly. She opened it, taking a sip that brought a smile to her muzzle. She then looked at the lioness and asked, “How did you know

I needed help?”

“Well, OK, here's the deal. We've been watching this situation because Beoram is after Torvald and Victoria again and he hoped to get a shot at you, too, since you helped derail his last attempt at killing them.” The lioness took a sip of Willi's soda before continuing. “I'm here to make sure he's destroyed permanently with no hope of being reconstituted in any form like the last time his mortal avatar was destroyed. That bastard caused me to serve ten years in a prison the last time we met.”

“So, Jason got you released because he needed heavy power for this one?” Doug asked, putting the old bands into his pack.

“Yeah, my hubby had me bailed out mostly because of Beoram. He knew I wanted another shot at that winged asshole.”

The tigress decided she needed more information about this deal so she spoke up.

“I guess I should ask, how did you know Willi Marie's powers were out of control?” Victoria gave the lioness a crooked smile as she stood there, hand lightly resting on her long sword's pommel.

“We've been monitoring the situation for some time, ever since the Time Continuum authorities caught on to the disrupted timelines when you were taken from Christopher's realm.”

“So, you've known about this for some time?”

“Yeah, we have. It all came to a head when a bounty was put on your head and other members of your family were implicated.”

“Which ones of my family have been implicated?” the tigress asked, an upset look crossing her muzzle.

“Your sister was brought into this by this faked video by Beoram that was used as bait to get you murdered.” Tasha pulled a video frame out and played it, showing her the faked parts. “We have a top notch agent watching Valerie and Barbara right now.”

“Dammit! Why does this happen to my family!?!” the tigress exclaimed, shaking her head in disgust. Tasha took her in her arms, hugging her, trying to reassure her.

“Victoria, we will make sure no more blood is shed except for Beoram's. That bastard took ten years of my physical life from me and I intend to take his in return.” She let go of the tigress and lifted her chin so she could see Victoria clearly. “Now you need to go see Sir Varn and introduce him to Torvald.”

Conrad was half-heartedly looking at the breakfast menu of the local Leonard's Restaurant[®], trying to watch the interaction between his grandparents and his uncle. They had kept things civil but it had mostly been small talk that they had engaged in. It was apparent that his Grandpa was very uneasy about the situation, trying to act casual but not pulling it off very well.

“Wally, what do you do for a living?” Cathy asked, trying to break the ice.

“Well, I’m a licensed electrical contractor in California, Nevada and Arizona. I had just ended a small project in Arizona when Val had her accident.” Grandpa nodded, taking in the information.

“Where did you learn your trade?” Grandma asked, smiling at her son. That made Wally frown momentarily before he answered.

“Um, I ... Gah, this is embarrassing. I learned my trade in prison, if you must know. I’m not proud of it but I did try to make something of myself once I got out.”

“You sound like you’ve done well for yourself,” Grandma stated, putting her paw on the back of his.

“Yeah, I own Tiger Electric, the tiger-striped trucks you’ve probably seen around town. I just wished we hadn’t been at odds with one another, that’s all. You have a daughter-in-law and three grandchildren you’ve never met.” He pulled out his wallet and took the picture section out, showing them photos of his Siberian tigress wife and their three children, all white tigers like their father. This caused Grandma Connell to almost cry.

“I’ve seen these little ones inside the Raley’s[®] grocery store in Ceres from time to time,” she said, pointing out the youngest, the little girl. “I almost thought they looked like they could be family and I was right about that. She looks so much like Victoria and Valerie did and the boys look just like you did when all of you were young.”

“I’ve always stayed away from the places you and dad would shop at, since I didn’t know what would happen. It was just so stupid of me, to take Frank out drinking like that.” Water Jr. seemed so sad at that point, thinking about Frank’s death again.

“What are their names?” Grandpa asked, taking the pictures from his wife.

“My wife’s name is Michelle Annette, the oldest is Walter Lee the Third, the middle one is Joseph Franklin and our little one is Sarah Noel.”

“Valerie kept you up on the family goings-on, then?” Cathy asked, hoping to keep the conversation going.

“Not everything, such as Vicki and Tor’s second job, you know,” he replied, giving her a nervous smile. “I had no idea that anyone would do such as the things they do. It sounded impossible but Val told me herself it was the truth.”

“Well, I think they’re done with that, since this last incident with Mom.” Conrad told his uncle. “We were lucky to find out where she was and then I was real lucky to talk with her this morning, most likely due to something Willi Marie might have had a paw in.”

“You know, Val told me Vicki had gone missing but she didn’t say how. I’m glad they’re going to get her back now.” Walter was clearly bothered by his sister being on another planet, doing who-knows-what.

“I think when they get back, Victoria will be glad to see you again,” Grandma stated, giving her son a smile.

“Yeah, I hope she is,” he retorted, giving his mother a crooked smile. “I really hope so.”

A lone rider rode a gray mare hard across the meadow, headed for a small encampment ahead. Slowing their mount, they cantered into the clearing, stopping their steed. Climbing down from the gray horse, the robed figure made her way to a canopy outside the largest tent. Approaching the figure sitting in what appeared to be a throne, she threw back her hood and kneeled in front of the winged canid.

“The tigress approaches the castle, my Lord,” she informed him, bowing her head.

“Mirelda, are you sure?” the whippet asked, taking a sip of wine afterwards.

“Yes, I am very sure. I will summon you to the castle when she arrives. I will enjoy watching you destroy her and her stallion lover.”

“Go then and prepare for a battle, the likes you have never seen before,” the whippet bid, giving her a dismissing gesture with his hand.

Once the half-skunk sorceress left him, the whippet got up to look across the valley in the direction she rode off in.

“The two of you are dead this time, I assure you. You and your niece are all dead.” the whippet said to no fur in particular. “All of you will die, including King Andath and his wife.”

Sir Tamal watched the lone rider head back to the castle, riding as hard as they dared. He smiled, knowing this was possibly becoming a trap for all concerned that he could defuse. He leaped into the saddle, headed in pursuit of the lone rider. He would find out who this female was and turn her in to Sir Varn as a traitor committing treason against the crown. He would also send a rider to warn Miss Vicki, whom he felt would always be his leader, even after she went home to her family.