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'The Price Of Worship'

By R C Stankewitz

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Chapter 15

“Thar Be Dragons Here!”

The immortal couple were slowly waking up to a new day and their imminent meeting with the dragon. Torvald was still contemplating the last encounter with a wyrm and he wasn't really up to being barbecued again by an oversize lizard.

“Maybe I should just destroy the dragon and get it over with” he commented, stretching his arms over his head to work out the kinks in his muscles.

“No, we should try to reason with the dragon first” his mate stated. “It that doesn't work, then destroy it.”

“Victoria!” the huge fur blurted out as he looked at the tigress with a shocked look on his muzzle. “You're usually the one telling me not to kill every last thing I see!”

“I just don't want to see you get hurt again” she retorted quietly. “I don't want to lose you to some nasty beast, that's all.” He could see that his mate was very serious about that fact.

“I don't think the dragon can do anything to me except burn my fur off” Torvald stated, sitting up in the bed. “You know, I hate when that happens! Especially when it starts to itch when my coat begins growing back!” His mate saw him scowling at the thought of being bald one more time.

“OK, let's just go see what the dragon wants and get it over with” the tigress said as she got out of bed and began to get dressed.

“Yeah, let's get it over with” the huge fur agreed as he began to put on his clothes and armor.

###

“That show 'Feral Factor' is so fake!” Conrad complained as they watched the closing credits roll. “Mom and Dad have been through a lot worse than that!”

“From what you have told me,” the buff-colored feline commented, “They have been through more than our parents ever had to deal with and they were warriors for more than twenty years.”

“You know, I think it's because my parents are immortal that they unfortunately get the messier stuff to deal with” Conrad pointed out. “I wish they could be mortal again but according to the gods, they will have to earn their conversion back to mortality somehow.” He thought back to the other timeline where his mother was mortal. She had been extremely ill more than once and the immortal version of the tigress never suffered anything worse than a minor head cold. “Maybe there are advantages to being immortal” he added. “All I know is I wouldn't want that. Coach Aslaug has told me on more than one occasion that immortality bites.”

“Have you ever tried going on a mission with your parents?” Willi Marie asked.

“No, the gods won't let them bring me along, no matter how mild the mission is” he replied to her question. “They don't want my life risked at all on a mission.”

The tall filly stood up and picked up her basketball. “Not to change the subject, but would you two like to shoot a few hoops?” she asked, giving them a smug smile.

“OK, I'll let you beat me a few games” Conrad replied. “You promise to throw the football so I can practice too?” He was smiling at the pale palomino as he asked.

“OK, I'll throw the football for you so you can practice receiving” she replied, smiling back at him.

###

The immortal couple were riding towards the clearing where they were supposed to meet with the dragon. Victoria was on a very mild mannered liver chestnut mare while Torvald was trying his best to control a unusually fiery Arab/shire cross stallion. He was getting just a little short on patience with the huge beast and he decided that a little one-on-one chat would be in order.

“What is your major malfunction, buddy?” the huge fur asked the steed as he faced him square in the muzzle. He was very surprised when the gray stallion lifted his right front hoof and held it there for the berserker to examine. Torvald was shocked to see a very large rock stuck in the frog of the equine's hoof, apparently causing his mount great discomfort. “Is that better?” he asked after removing the stone and quickly checking the other hooves, just in case. The beast just nodded and nuzzled up against the huge fur, most likely to thank him for the removal of the irritant to his hoof.

“Torvald, it scares me sometimes when I see you communicate with a horse like you do” his mate pointed out. “Maybe you aren't in the right profession” she added as she smiled at him.

“I guess I have an untapped talent” the berserker stated as he got back in the saddle. “Maybe I should quit my job with the police department and run a horse ranch then.”

“Not on your life!” the tigress retorted. “Not until you have your union retirement maxed out, my dear.”

“Here we go again with my pension plan” he stated as he shook his head. “I think they wouldn't take kindly to paying me for two hundred or so years of service.” The tigress was trying her best to keep from busting up laughing at his comment.

Once they had arrived at the designated clearing, the couples' mounts became quite agitated, prancing nervously and becoming recalcitrant to commands. Torvald stopped his horse and signaled for his mate to do the same as he carefully scanned the area. They listened for a while, hearing nothing out of place that would be responsible for spooking their mounts. The huge fur dismounted and helped his mate down from her horse and heeding what the dragon had stipulated, the immortals left -almost- all of their weapons with the four-legged equines.

“Torvald, I don't like this” the tigress stated, keeping her staff with her as she wouldn't approach the dragon at first. “You be careful, please?” she begged, letting him walk into the middle of the clearing as she stood under a tree for shade and cover. He knelt down and examined the ground for signs, observing dragon prints everywhere in the soft earth.

“Dragon! Where are you?” he shouted out as he looked around some more. “Dragon! I don't have all day!” he added as he scanned the skies for some sign of the lizard. He was taken by surprise when the winged lizard swooped in for a landing, knocking fruit from the tops of the trees in the process.

“You summoned me?” the dragon asked in a low, soft voice as she sat down near the huge fur. Mistfeldr folded her wings and moved nearer to the berserker. “Please speak up, stallion” she said as she made herself comfortable on the ground.

Torvald and Victoria could now take in the full sight of this dragon before them. The huge lizard was of a coppery color with purple highlights on her back, wings and tail. The Greater Dragon was over thirty meters in length and over seven meters in height. Her eyes were of a vivid green color with a vertically slit pupil. She also seemed to be smiling at them.

“You asked us to meet you” Torvald replied to the huge lizard. “We are here so tell us what you want.”

“I am under a wizard's control” the dragon stated, turning her head so she could see the stallion better. “He uses me to force others into paying protection to a duke whom I believe to be a demon.”

“How do you know he's a demon?” Victoria asked as she joined them in the middle of the clearing, leaving her staff behind.

“My dear tigress, he seems to be able to control the wizard directly, without using even minor magic” the dragon replied. As the huge lizard eyed the auras around the couple, she made a discovery about her would-be rescuers. “I can see that you are immortals.”

“How did you know that?” the stallion asked, giving Mistfeldr a strange look.

“I am a female Greater dragon” she replied with a smile. “I am the smarter of our kind rather than a male, who is usually dumber than a leather pouch that is full of wooden mallets.” That statement made the two smirk at her. “That dragon you killed in this realm was most likely a male. I suppose that he tried to roast you with his breath, did he not?”

“Yes, he did try that” the huge fur confirmed. “I hate it when a dragon sees me as a barbecue snack to quickly roast and dine on.”

“A female dragon would never do that” she pointed out. “We can see your aura so we know it is useless. We know that you cannot be harmed by our breath.”

“Now that we understand that you won't barbecue us, how do I break this spell?” the berserker asked.

“The wizard channels controlling energy through this amulet” she said as she motioned to the rather large ornate metal amulet hanging around her neck with one of her forelegs. “This forces me to do anything he wishes me to do, even against my minor magic powers.”

“Why don't you just take it off?” Torvald queried as he reached for the necklace to examine it closer. Once in his grasp, there was a huge flash of light and a loud electrical snapping sound as the stallion was sent flying through the air.

###

“Torvald, are you OK?” the tigress asked as the stallion slowly opened his eyes. He could see six versions of his mate and the dragon, all looking down at him with genuine concern on all twelve of their faces.

“Ooooh!” the stallion moaned as he held his banging head with his paws. “What happened to me?” he queried as his mate helped him to sit up. The electrical tingling sensations were still coursing over and through his body as he tried to get the world to come back into focus again.

“Stallion, you touched the amulet” the dragon stated. “I should have had the forethought to have warned you about that. You cannot remove it” she said flatly. “Only the wizard that enchanted the amulet may remove it or if the mage is killed I may remove it myself.”

“Thanks for the warning” the stallion said sourly as he finally stopped seeing six dragons and six tigresses. “That thing has a hell of a kick to it” he added, pointing to

the amulet. A blue-white spark jumped out towards his finger from the amulet, giving him another little shock.

“It had become attuned to your touch” the wyrm stated. “If you were to grasp it firmly now, it would kill you whether you're immortal or not. You will need to stay clear of the amulet from now on or risk death.”

“Yeah, you can bet I'm staying clear of that” he replied. “I have no wish to die on this mission” he added as he stood back up and brushed off his clothing and armor.

“So ... now what do we do?” the tigress asked her husband. He looked at her and just shrugged.

“We have to find this wizard” the huge fur stated. “The dragon will have to lead us there, I guess.”

“My name is Mistfeldr” the huge lizard said in a soft tone. “Please call me by my name, if you would” she asked them and then asked a question of her own. “What names should I call you two by?”

“I am Torvald and this is Victoria, my mate” the berserker replied. “We will call you by your name as you ask.”

“You will find the wizard in the town of Slatershire” the dragon said, drawing a map in the dirt with one of her long, sharp foreclaws. “This town is 3 days ride north along the road that led you here before the junction.” She drew lines to represent the roads that the immortal couple would have to travel. “I will meet you in a clearing by a copse of Yews near a large boulder. This is one half of a day's ride from the village.” She marked the spot for their reunion. “You will not see me much as the wizard will no doubt be using me as his avatar soon. I will return when he has taken rest from controlling me.” With that said, she took to the skies and vanished in the direction that they would be traveling.

“Well, looks like we need to get provisioned and on our way” Torvald stated as they returned to their mounts and headed back into town.

###

Conrad and James were standing outside the second floor bathroom, banging on the door in hopes of getting Willi Marie's attention.

“Willi Marie! Are you done with the shower yet?” James shouted out through the closed door. “We need to shower too! You're using up the hot water!!”

The filly could hear the two males clearly but she waited a few moments before responding. “I am still in the shower! Give me ten more minutes!” she shouted out as if she were still in the shower stall. She was trying hard not to laugh as she brushed out her mane and tail carefully, being extra careful to remove any tangles she found. She then put some conditioner on her body and brushed that in to make her coat shine before she let the males have the bathroom.

“I do not like cold showers” James said flatly as he pushed past his sister and found a place among all of the femme stuff on the counter to put his towel and pajama bottoms. “I will not be happy if my shower is cold -once again-.”

“I have timed you taking a one hour long shower” the filly pointed out. “You didn't leave me any hot water then.”

“OK, let's just call it even” the feline stated. The filly nodded in agreement, crossing her fingers behind her back as she smiled at her brother and Conrad.

###

The wizard paced back and forth across the clearing near his keep, grumbling at the current situation. “Where is that good for nothing dragon?” he asked of no fur in particular as he scanned the skies. It was fast approaching the time for the dragon to make another appearance to scare the local populace once more and the lizard's delay in returning was irritating him.

“You summoned me?” Mistfeldr asked as she landed and sat down facing the mage. “I came as quick as I could” she added as she crept closer to the magician. She did this because she was well aware that her breath offended him greatly. She smirked as he wrinkled his nose in disdain as the stench from her crawl washed over him.

“I have work for you to perform” he stated as he gripped a smaller version of her amulet in his hands and closed his eyes. As an unearthly blue glow washed over his body, he could now see out of her eyes. He could plainly see himself standing in front of her, eyes closed, holding that amulet with a smile on his face. “Now take to the skies!” he commanded in her mind, forcing her to take off and begin to fly northward towards Chestershire and Yorkham. “You and I have a few locals that need reinforcement lessons” he added in an ominous tone as he directed her to bank left slightly to follow the river northwards.

As they flew onwards, Mistfeldr made her thoughts and feelings known to the magician. “I do not like to do your bidding” she said to him in her mind. “You will soon meet your end as my controller” she pointed out as she winged on towards her destination.

“You, my dear dragon, do not possess the means to destroy or even stop me” the wizard replied confidently. “I am a powerful mage and I am invincible against mere minor magic.”

“You will meet your match soon” she stated. “You -will- meet your match.”

###

Torvald and Victoria were waiting for their horses to be outfitted for a journey they hoped would only last for a few days and they would soon be back home in their own bed for a change. These missions found them sleeping on the worst possible bedding found across the known parallel worlds, sometimes nothing more than a hide on the ground to lay on and another hide to cover up with.

“Torvald, when we get home, let's see if we can get a mini-vacation” the tigress said to her mate as they rested in their room at the inn. “I would like to take the kids and go somewhere nice, like Tahoe. Just the five of us, no missions and no phones. Do a little skiing and maybe some tobogganing. You know, some fun things like that.”

“You would like to see me on skis” the berserker commented as he gave his mate a kiss. “I haven't skied since right after World War I. That was a long time ago.” He got that far-off look on his face as he thought about the events leading up to the depression. “If the stock market hadn't crashed, our home world would be a much different place.”

“I know you've seen a world that didn't have a depression” she commented. “You said that world had a great disparity between the upper class and the lower class citizens.”

“Yeah, I wouldn't want to live on that world” he said as he sipped on some wine. “My job with the police department would have put me squarely in the middle of the lower class and there were no middle class citizens. It was not a good place to be.” He took another sip of his wine before he made an observation. “At least the wine here is better than it was in the tenth century.”

###

Later that morning, the couple was roused from a nap by a knock at the door. “It is I, Squire Liam” the gray tabby said loudly and waited at the door. Victoria let her mate answer the door this time while she woke up further.

“Do come in, Liam” the huge fur said as he gestured for the feline to enter the room. “We have been waiting for you to let us know when our equipment would be ready.” Torvald gestured for the tabby to sit with him at the table and enjoy some wine.

“I humbly accept your hospitality, kind Sir” the armorer said and bowed with a flourish. “It is not often that I can sit and enjoy wine with the saviors of our town.”

“we were just doing our job” the tigress pointed out as she sat down with the males. “We were sent here to take care of things for the greater cause. It was all in a day's work.”

“If you say so, M'Lady” Liam stated. “We are still grateful that Sir Torvald killed the dragon and both of you removed that corrupt priest from power. He had all but destroyed our way of life with his unrighteous teachings.”

“Not to change the subject” the tigress said as she looked at their armorer, “Is our equipment ready for our journey?”

“That is why I came to see you” Liam replied. “Your equipment is ready and I will have your mounts saddled and ready within the hour. I need to retrieve a pack horse for the remainder of your things and that will take the most time but you will be ready to travel before mid-day.”

“Good” the huge fur said as he sipped the wine some more. “Please enjoy the wine before you leave, Liam. This is a good vintage.”

###

Mistfeldr had flown over several villages, scaring the tar out of the inhabitants. In one rather graphic display, the wizard had forced her to eat a cow right in front of the villagers. She didn't care for being forced to do such things and had tried her best to refuse. In the end, the wizard had won out.

“I must land and rest” the dragon told the evil mage as they flew on towards another destination. “You must let me land. I cannot fly without letting the meal digest properly. I will become sick from this if you do not let me land right now.”

“Shut up and keep flying northwards, you poor excuse for a dragon” the wizard shot back. “I am well aware of your needs, you overgrown winged reptile. I can feel everything you feel, as much as I dislike that idea.”

“Then you know I am not lying to you” the dragon retorted. “Please let me land.”

“Not yet, dragon” the mage said to her tersely. “See that farm over there? I want you to torch the barn only. Do not harm the cottage. Now do it! Quickly!” Mistfeldr swooped in, flared out and landed rather softly for a nineteen-ton animal. A tear escaped her eye as she sucked in a huge lung-full of air, ignited her throat flame and spewed a gigantic gout of fire into the barn, igniting the entire structure instantaneously.

“I hate you for making me do that” she said sourly, clearly upset by causing a farmer great loss to his livelihood. “I will get even with you for causing me such emotional pain. I am not like a male of my species; I do have emotions and feelings which you obviously don't have. I -will- get even with you.”

“Be quiet, dragon” the wizard said as he caused her to take flight once again. “Just for that, I will make you destroy many things for your outburst!” Mistfeldr could hear his maniacal laughter in her head as she gave thought to the imminent demise of that sorry magician.