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'The Price Of Worship'

By R C Stankewitz

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Chapter 16

“On The Road To Morocco”

“Is your saddle chafing you?” the tigress asked of her mate. She was trying to get settled into her saddle as they journeyed northward but to no avail. Not only was the seat uncomfortable, the cantle had been rubbing her tail due to a cutout that didn't match her physiology at all. The slot was too narrow and it was too high up on the cantle to give any real relief.

“Yeah, my butt is getting quite sore” the huge fur replied to his mate as he stood briefly in the stirrups to reposition himself. “I'm afraid that there's not much we can do for it that's not messy and nasty-smelling.”

“Like what, for instance?” she asked, curious as to a cure for her ailment.

“We could use some lard to grease up your underwear” he said, trying to suppress a smile. “That would let your butt slide without chafing.” He looked over to see the response to that suggestion.

“Not on your life!” she shot back as she gave him a scowl. “That sounds waaay too icky for me! I wish I had some fur glide for this problem” she added, causing a large stick of Fur Glide™ Extra Protection to appear out of thin air and fall into her lap.

“Didn't you say something to me about using those two words together just recently?” the berserker said as he tried to stifle a laughing fit. “Well, now that you have it, you just as well use it!” he added, giving his mate a smile. The tigress gave him a dirty look as they stopped for her to dismount and apply some Fur Glide™ strategically to her derriere and tail for some much-needed chafing relief.

###

Mistfeldr was sitting on top of a flattened cottage, looking about at the carnage the wizard had forced her to create. The former occupants of the farm were now nothing more than two charred spots on the ground where they had fled away from her fiery breath. The cattle were all either dead or dying from the injuries inflicted by her sharp talons and the barn was in ruins, the smoldering remains before her.

“What's the matter, dragon?” the voice in her head taunted. “I have seen your kind do far worse than this” he spat out to her, knowing it would upset her even further.

“You're a bastard!” she shouted back so loud that the remains of the barn collapsed inward. “I will kill you myself if I get the chance! We are not evil creatures! Dragons were meant to help furkind. You have corrupted us with your magic spells to the point that we have become hated by all.”

“Furkind never really liked your ilk, dragon” the mage retorted. “Your kind is no longer needed by them so they persecute you. It is best if your kind vanishes from the earth entirely. They exist no longer on my home world and the quicker your kind is exterminated on this world, the better.”

The dragon sat there, feeling defeated in her quest. She hoped that the wizard would not be able to stand up to the immortal couple's attack or all was lost.

###

Valerie was sitting on the sofa in the living room, looking to all the world like she was physically spent. Her lover was still in the kitchen, busy helping Wilhelmine to clean up the dishes from the overnight party involving the girl's sophomore basketball team.

“Val, are you still in the living room?” Barbara shouted through the house. “If you are, please check around for any errant dishes. I think we may have missed a few bowls.”

“OK Barb, I'll check” she replied as she got back up and began scouting for dishes left about. The tigress found an almost-empty popcorn bowl and another bowl with something quite unrecognizable in it. Taking the bowls to the kitchen, she dumped the contents of the bowls into the trash and put them in the sink. “You femmes made a mess last night” she pointed out as she helped to put the dishes in the dishwasher. “We never made that much of a mess, ever!”

“If you think this was a mess down here” James commented, “You should have seen the bathroom upstairs after a dozen femmes took showers! I had to scrub the stall twice to get the gunk off of the tile!” He was smiling while he said that bit so he wasn't really mad about it. “The filters for the full body fur dryer were almost completely plugged! I was sure it wouldn't work like that but it surprised me!”

“Come on, James” the ocelot said as she smiled at him. “It wasn't that bad, was it?”

“It was a mess!” he replied. “It was worse than our locker room after a hard workout!” The buff colored feline was having trouble saying all of that with a straight face. His sister was smirking at her brother, making faces at him when the two femme felines

couldn't see her. James finally broke down laughing, sliding down the wall while holding his sides.

"I don't know, Val" the ocelot said as she watched the male feline lose it. "These kids are a real paw full. Are you sure you want to adopt two or three of them later on?"

"I dunno" the tigress retorted. "If they're anything like these characters, it might not be so bad after all." She leaned over and gave Barbara a kiss as she added "It might be nice to share a house with some kids."

"You mean share a -home-, don't you?" Barbara asked with a smile as she returned the kiss.

"Yeah, share a home."

###

Mistfeldr was searching along the banks of the river in hopes of locating a certain plant that would settle her two stomachs. That cow that the wizard had forced her to consume was still bothering her greatly and she knew that only that particular plant would give her any relief. She had been crying in pain almost non-stop once the mage had released his hold on her thus allowing her to land, rest and seek the herbal medication.

Finding the plant that she sought, she carefully pulled the small fruit from the stems with her talons and thoroughly chewed them to release the juices that would settle her digestive tract. It wouldn't be long before the essential enzymes and proteins would help her system to stabilize and calm down.

It was easy to see where the dragon had been along the river bank by the green patches where her tears had fertilized the soil, causing all manner of plants to spring forth. The inhabitants of this land used to welcome the dragons to bring forth growth in their fields but no longer were the dragons welcome. It was the sorcerers that were the downfall of the dragons. She knew of one mage that she would personally assist in being destroyed for his actions. It was the wizard Terrance.

Mistfeldr heard some hunters walking in her general direction so the huge creature hunkered down and sent out a mental message that she wasn't there. She watched as a wolf and a badger came within inches of her nose and never noticed her presence. "At least I have my minor magic to help me" she thought as she watched them walk right on by without paying her any attention. Once the hunters had vacated the area, she found a cave that she could fit into so she could rest and heal.

###

"That's -your- sleeping bag from our house, isn't it?" the tigress commented as they prepared to spend their first night under the stars on this mission. Torvald had made the wish mistake once more when he observed what had been sent with them for their sleeping arrangements.

“Yes, it is mine” the huge fur stated. “I didn't want us to be cold tonight. I'm sorry, sweetheart. I'll get rid of it.” He began to roll it back up when she stopped him.

“Don't get rid of it” she said in a conspiratorial tone as she gave her hubby a wicked grin. “I wish I had my sleeping bag and the air mattress.” The two items quickly materialized on the ground right in front of them. “There, we'll sleep better tonight” she added as she started to unroll her bag, preparing to zip them together.

“I like your thinking” he stated as he unzipped his bag. “Now I just have to pump up the mattress and we're ready for bed.”

“Uh, how about a lean-to or a cover over us of some type?” she asked as she zipped the bags together.

“OK, I think we have a tarp of sorts I can put up” he replied as he began to pump up the mattress with the built in foot pump. “Give me a bit to get this mattress pumped up and I'll make us a lean-to.”

Once their sleeping accommodations were taken care of, Torvald gathered some wood and tinder to start a fire with. Victoria had scouted out some rocks to make a fire pit and between the two of them, they eventually had a nice fire burning.

“How do you want your hardtack?” the tigress asked her mate. “Hard or hard?” The berserker just started laughing at that statement.

“Do I have a choice?” he asked, trying not to start laughing again.

“No, you don't” was her short reply.

“OK, I will have the hardtack stuff and some wine, I guess” he stated, putting some more wood on the fire. While they enjoyed the warmth of the fire and tried to enjoy their meal, a very stoutly built armored canid came within the perimeter of their encampment.

“I am Jens Johanson” he called out in a definite Scandinavian accent as he stepped into the light of the fire. “I mean no fur harm” he added as he showed his open paws to them. “I am a weary traveler and I wish to share your fire, if I may.”

“I am Torvald Svensen and this is my mate Victoria” the huge fur replied to the canid. “Please come share our fire and warm yourself.” He got up and shook paws with the new fur Norse-style and then helped Jens to pull up a log to sit on.

The immortal couple could now see that the canid was a Swedish Vallhund of about six feet tall. It was apparent that he was probably in his forty's or fifty's as he had an abundant amount of gray in his fur. He had the appearance of a soldier that was past his prime but not over the hill just yet. He still had the look of a warrior in his eyes and that spoke volumes about him.

“What brings you on this road, Jens?” the tigress asked as she offered him some hot beverage to drink. Geoff had put this concoction together for the immortal couple to bring with them on the trip so even though it wasn't coffee, it was palatable.

“I am looking for the wizard named Terrance” he replied as he sipped on his drink. “That bastard mage thought my mate to be a changeling and took her to try and steal her powers away from her.” The canid shook his head as he stated “I don't understand why he thought she was a changeling because she is not. I have heard that the mage is ... not from this world.”

“We are seeking this same wizard” Torvald pointed out. “He controls the dragon Mistfeldr for his own gain. He does the bidding of a possible demon, from what we have been told.”

“Did the dragon tell you that?” Jens asked, giving the huge fur his full attention.

“Yes, we have talked with the dragon and I have had the snot shocked out of me by that magic amulet she is enchanted by” he replied.

“Then you are Lord Torvald and your mate is Lady Victoria” the canid commented as he thought about this. “I have heard ... rumors ... that you are both immortals. A dragon's breath cannot kill you, as the rumor goes.”

“You know how rumors start” the tigress said with a forced smile. “Some fur gets bored so they start a rumor to have a little fun, that's all.” She looked over at her mate as she said “We are just two ordinary furs that like to battle dragons and wizards.”

“Maybe so, fair lady but you are ... different from the others of this land” the canid pointed out. “You were not born here as I have never observed another feline that was colored and marked like you.”

“My family came from the middle east, from a land that is known by some as India” the tigress replied. “I met my stallion while shopping in a bazaar for my fruits and vegetables.” Torvald was having trouble trying to keep a straight face while his mate told a story that while it was not the truth, it was as close to it as she could come.

“She stole my heart so it was necessary to beg her to agree to become my mate” the huge fur chimed in as he gave her paw a squeeze. “Her beauty is so exotic, I cannot keep my eyes off of her, not even for a moment. I know that I could not live without her so I had to make her mine.”

“If I had a fair maid such as yours” the canid said quietly in a conspiratorial tone, “I am not sure I would let others see her as they might try to steal her away.” The canid got down in front of her on one knee and began an oratory to her.

“Fair maid, what dost thou see in yon stallion that I cannot offer? Although it is true that I may be past my best years as a warrior, I can still provide thusly for you.” He switched knees because it looked like he might have been kneeling on a rock or other uncomfortable object. “Alas, fair maid, come with me to London town and I will show you love as you have never seen before. I will most surely perish should you rebuff my advances. Do not break this old warrior's heart and say that you will come with me forthwith to see London town and be my one true love.”

By this time, all three were struggling to keep a straight face. Finally Jens bowed and stood up, taking another deep bow with a flourish. "I had performed on the stage as a young fur before I was conscripted against my will into Her Majesty's army." He smiled at the tigress as he added "I am serious, though. Your beauty is beyond any that I have laid eyes on." He then turned and gave Torvald his attention. "Stallion, I have not seen many of your kind before. Where do you hail from?"

"I am from Denmark" he replied. "I have traveled extensively but the place that I now call home is a long journey away." Now it was Victoria's turn to try and hide her smirk as Torvald told his story as close to the truth as possible.

"How is it you are so big? Are all of your kind so tall?" Jens asked as he put another piece of wood on the fire.

"My father was no taller than you" he replied. "On the other paw, my father's father was very tall, like I am. I do not know why this would be."

"Hhmmm ... That is very interesting, to say the least" the canid stated. "You seem to favor a very large axe" he added, nodding towards the immortals' weapons stash. "That would make you an imposing figure on the battle field."

"A Dane axe has its advantages and disadvantages" Torvald pointed out to the Vallhund as they enjoyed one another's company. "You have to keep enough distance between you and your opponent to swing it. If you get too close, you are essentially disarmed. That's why I now carry these" he said as he pulled a Francisca out of his belt holster. "I can use one of these up close."

"That seems a wise choice" Jens stated as he sipped on his beverage some more. "Do you have a plan for defeating the wizard?" he asked.

"That is what my mate and I were going to talk about tonight" Torvald replied. "I am not sure how to defeat a mage without magic." He sat there and thought for a moment before he added "It's just crazy, going after a mage. I wish I had magic of my own to defeat him with." The huge fur felt a tingling sensation suddenly course throughout his entire body.

"Torvald!" the tigress said loudly. "What did I tell you about using those two words?"

"Yeah, I know" he replied sheepishly. "I wasn't supposed to use them together in the same sentence again." He then realized what he had just said. The berserker stood and said loudly "Sword" while holding out his paw. A broadsword suddenly appeared in it. He got a evil grin on his mug as he looked at Victoria, who was staring slack-jawed in disbelief. "We have a plan now!"

###

The evening light that was streaming through the window of the study was slowly fading as the sun set into the horizon. The mage was pacing back and forth, trying to keep from losing his patience. The text that he was attempting to decode was eluding him at the moment, slowly blurring into a pile of gibberish on the page. He sat the text down and looked at the femme sitting across from him at the table.

“If you will just tell me how to shape-shift” the mage stated, “I will let you return to your home, no questions asked.”

“I am not a shape shifter!” the collie spat back. “I can no more change my shape than you can grow a tail, you hideous monster!” She looked away from him as she said in an ominous tone, “When my mate gets here, you will die by his paws.” The mage sat down across from her as he rubbed his forehead with his hand, thinking about what had gotten him into this mess in the first place.

“I used to be like you” he said softly as she turned her head to look at him again. “The magician that brought me here didn’t warn me about the various spells in his books. I spoke a shapeshifter spell once and this is how I look now. You must help me.”

“I don’t have to do anything for you!” she shouted out as she stood up quickly and faced him down. “You took me from my mate and I still don’t know if he is alive or not. If he still lives, you are doomed.”

“I have powerful magic!” the mage spat back. “I can ...” She cut him off in mid-sentence.

“You have magic you cannot control” she pointed out. “I have seen you stumble with simple spells that a child could do.” The collie smirked at him as she said “I could be a better mage than you simply because you cannot read and interpret the languages. I am learned in the ways of many languages whereas you are not.”

“Look, Missy!” he said rather sharply. “I could just make you into a decoration for my study if I damned well felt like it. Now help me to return to my correct form or else!”

“The only way I can help you” she said quietly, “Is to study the same book you used to shift and determine how to reverse the spell. That is the -only- way. Once again, I am telling you that I am NOT a shapeshifter and my name is Deanna Johanson for your information.”

“Your name doesn’t matter to me” he retorted. “If I cannot return to my original form, then you will never leave here alive.” He stood and walked out of the room with his text, leaving her to herself.

She stood up and wandered over to the mirror, gazing at her reflection. The collie could see the golden collar around her neck that prevented her from leaving the keep alive. Deanna had already gotten shocked quite severely by it the day she was fitted with the accursed device. The mage had warned her but it didn’t seem like it could pack any power, being designed so slim and petite. She had been proven very wrong on that count. The mage found her the next morning lying just inside the front door, still unconscious. She vowed that if worse came to worse, she would make a run at a window or door and suffer the consequences, even if it included death.

###

The mage stood in front of his dresser, removing his robes and hanging them up. It was cold in the keep this night, being quite unusual weather for this time of year. He pulled

out a sweater that a local peasant had knitted for him in return for healing her son and put it on, straightening it out afterwards. All he had done was to instruct her in the ways of proper sanitation of a deep wound but she had kept up her end of the bargain. He pulled on some warm leggings and prepared for his dinner to be served.

His image in the mirror still repulsed him even though it was an image of himself. The distinct lack of fur, no real muzzle and the ears so low on the sides of the head meant that this must be what a so-called human looked like. He thought about that day he spoke those words and what a huge mistake that had been. When the wizard Delmore had rebuked him for trying to steal his incantations, he had struck down the mage in a fit of anger. Now he had to serve the Duke for all eternity, according to what he had been told. What a mistake.

“Your dinner, Sir” the raccoon announced as he came into the room. “Please eat while it is still hot” he added as he sat the platter on the table.

“Thank you” the mage said as he sat and removed the cover from the food. “That will be all for tonight” he said as he handed the cover to his hired help. As usual, the meat was mostly tasteless and tough despite being marinated in wine. The vegetables were palatable and the bread warm and fresh.

All in all, it was tough to live in the 14th century for a modern fur. Well, he wasn't a fur anymore except in his heart. Some day he would stumble upon the proper method to return to his original feline form and his home in Las Vegas. He knew all he needed was enough time and he would eventually return home.

Terrance finished his meal and sat down in a comfortable chair that he had commissioned for himself. It was shaped not unlike a Barcalounger from his home world. He lit another candle to add some more light to read by and opened the text in question. He carefully read the incantation silently to avoid any possible complications. It seemed like an ordinary spell with all the usual trappings but the obvious way to reverse the spell didn't work.

He laid the text on his lap and thought back to that day. He had just stepped off the stage after his last performance of the night at the Flamingo Hotel and Casino when a small canid of indeterminate origin approached him with an offer on paper. He said he wasn't interested and handed the paper back to the canid only to pass out promptly. When he awoke, he had been brought here because the Duke's minions had heard that he was 'The Greatest Mage in the World.' Did they ever have that wrong. He was just another two bit magician out to make a buck before his paws and reflexes gave out on him.

He looked back at the book laying in his lap, it's ornate gilding shining in the candle light. He studied the exterior that was covered in a fine leather that was bound ever so carefully. The workmanship had been exquisite for such a book of its age, considering it was at least 1,400 years old. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to let Deanna look at the text as she had said she was learned in languages. Maybe she could make heads and tails out of the gibberish on the pages.