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## 'The Price Of Worship'

By R C Stankewitz

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### Chapter 19

“Confrontation”

Morning had come to the magician's keep and he was walking towards his study to check on his latest guests. He heard their voices as he walked down the hall and approached the door to his favorite room. As he entered the chamber, he noticed that they had not paid him any attention as they -conversed- with one another.

“Torvald, why in the world did I -ever- let you talk me into being a holy warrior for the gods?” the tigress asked her mate, obviously unhappy with the situation at paw.

“I though that you wanted to spend more time with me. That's why I suggested it” the stallion replied, trying to make his mate cheer up. “We will get out of this mess in due time” he added quietly.

“Well, I'm not sure how we'll get out of this” she said, nodding towards their bodies that were encased in a clear, form fitting prison. “It sure looks to me like we're just some insane magician's room decoration!”

“I think we may be able to reason with him” the stallion retorted. “He seems reasonable to me.”

“This isn't being reasonable to me!” she shouted at her mate who had laid his ears back and squinted his eyes due to her voice's volume level. “I want out of this mess now!!” Her eyes were beginning to glow white with power and at the same time their golden necklaces began to glow, trying to absorb and dampen the immortal couple's power.

“Victoria, Sweetheart ...” The tigress quickly cut her mate off with more shouting.

“Don't you dare 'Sweetheart' me!” she shouted, her eyes glowing like white beacons. “You were the one that talked me into this! Get me out of this mess right now!!!”

“I don't know where to start ...” The stallion was cut off once again.

“Dammit Torvald!!” she screamed at him as the tears began to roll down her cheeks. “I'm scared that we will never get home again, I'm afraid for the safety of the kids and I want out of this damned stuff right damned now!!! Not being able to move is driving me totally crazy!! You had better figure out how to get us out of this mess RIGHT NOW!!!” The tigress began to cry in earnest, tears flowing down her muzzle freely.

“Excuse me” the mage said loud enough for the immortals to hear him, “I overheard you say you were warriors for the gods. Is this really true?” He was looking quite interested in his guests and the possibilities at paw.

“We are just two furs that like to carry forth a good battle for our celestial boss” the huge fur quickly interjected. “Victoria is worried you won't let us out of this mess.”

“I'm not some insane mage as you might think” he said to them as he drew nearer to them and then stepped up onto the pedestal on which they were imprisoned upon to view them better. “I figured that after a few days of immobilization, you would give in and help me out. I am so sorry that you are upset, Lady Victoria but I wish to be home too.” He reached up and dabbed at her tears with a pawkerchief that he made appear out of thin air.

We cannot just take you home with us” the tigress said to the mage between sobs. “The gods move us around as they need us. We have no powers at all to do this.”

“Loke! Hey Loke! We need help!!” the stallion called out loudly. Within moments, the weasel made his appearance in the keep's study. Startled by the trickster's arrival, the mage threw an energy orb at him which Loke caught and examined for moment before he spoke.

“This is the poor product of a construct mage” he said casually, taking a bite out of it like it were a piece of fruit. “It packs no real power at all to hurt an immortal” he commented, taking another bite of it and dropping the remainder on the floor. Seeing this happen, Terrance hastily retreated to a safe corner of the room.

“Loke, get us out of this stuff!” the tigress shouted, struggling in vain against her imprisonment. The weasel tried several times quite unsuccessfully to release them while the necklaces glowed brightly during each attempt.

“I am very sorry” the weasel said in a dejected tone as he walked over to the stallion and tigress. “Those necklaces you wear are the products of true arcane magic. I am prevented from manipulating this material that holds you because of them.” The mage threw another energy orb at Loke from his safe location only to watch it impact him in the back with no effect of any kind.

“Go away” the trickster said loudly, waving his hand at the mage and causing him to slide backwards rapidly on his feet out the door. “I will try to get some help for you” he

said quietly as he assessed the situation. He tapped the clear shell that sounded like glass and studied it for a moment or two. "This is curious stuff to say the least. I don't know how to defeat it with those necklaces in place." He checked to see that the golden strands were deeply embedded within the encasement, a very bad thing to observe.

"Find the children and make sure they're safe, will you please?" the tigress asked. "They are supposed to be in a copse of yew trees near a large boulder one-half day's ride from here."

"I will find them and check on them as you ask" he said as he shimmered out of sight.

"Where is that weasel?!?" the mage shouted angrily as he returned to the room and his unwilling guests. "I want to challenge him to a battle! He gave me no chance to unleash my good stuff on him!"

"You are seriously out-gunned" the stallion pointed out. "He is the one known as the trickster and he would destroy you if given the chance."

"You think so, eh?" the mage asked somewhat sarcastically.

"No, I know so. He is a powerful deity that you should not mess with" the stallion replied with a smile. "He will now bring the Gods to bear on you for messing with their warriors." the mage lost all color in his face as he stared at the stallion wide eyed and slack jawed.

"You're talking about the Gods, as in the ones we pray to?" Terrance asked as he slowly sat down.

"You know it" the tigress said with an evil grin. "You're toast now, Bubba!"

###

The warriors were still waiting for Mistfeldr to return from her reconnaissance flight over their intended target. Willi Marie had conjured up a simple meal for their breakfast and while they waited she had used her magic to fix the pinching of her armor at her waist.

"Wilhelmine, are you sure you're ready for this, my dear child?" the canid asked her as he checked his armor again. "He is a powerful mage and you are a mere beginning sorceress. You could be hurt by his magic." He checked his belt for his sword again, making sure it was fastened tightly.

"I will not be afraid!" she said in a defiant tone. "He has taken my Aunt Victoria and my Uncle Torvald! He must pay for this!" She had a look of death on her muzzle as she pulled her broadsword from its sheath. "If I have to I will kill him myself!"

"Willi Marie is scaring me" James said to Conrad as they waited for the dragon. "She looks like she did when we were told our parents were dead."

"Is that good or bad?" the young tiger asked.

“That is very bad” James replied. “She almost wrecked the house in a fit of rage and she tried to beat up the two angels that came to tell us the bad news.”

“Oh NO!” Conrad exclaimed. “Not another 'One Filly Wrecking Machine' ... That mage is doomed!”

“I would not want to be in his shoes when she gets her paws on him” the buff colored feline said solemnly. “He may not survive her attack.”

###

Terrance was sitting on a stool near the immortal couple, sweating heavily. He had been trying for the past few hours to unsuccessfully release the warriors from their clear, form fitting prisons. The golden necklaces not only prevented the couple from using their white power that they shared, it was preventing the mage from using his magic too.

“That was a stupid move” he commented as he tried to use a knife to break through the shell and get to the necklaces that lay a mere 1/8” below the surface. “I can't even scratch this stuff! It seems to have been made stronger by the insertion of the energy dampening necklaces! Please believe me Victoria, I didn't mean for this to happen!”

“You're sure nothing breaks this stuff down?” the stallion asked, wishing he could scratch his nose right now because it was itching terribly from his allergies.

“As far as I know, nothing is the solvent for this” the mage replied. “If I had only tried this beforehand ...” He shook his head as he commented “This is a bigger screw-up than my making that wizard shape shifting incantation.”

“While you're thinking of some way to get us out of this” the tigress said calmly, “I need a drink of water. My mouth is really dry.”

While the mage was giving her sips of water, he suddenly stood up straight and took on a blank look to his face. The larger amulet around his neck suddenly began to glow red as he dropped the cup to the floor.

“Yes, Duke. I will have the dragon fly over your church. Is that all?” he asked to no fur in the room. He turned and left the room quickly, ignoring the calls from the immortal couple.

“What do you think that was all about?” the tigress asked as she looked up at her mate.

“I do not know” the stallion replied. “I was hoping he would wipe my nose before he left. It itches like crazy.”

“Did you see that one amulet begin to glow?” the tigress asked. “It started glowing when he dropped the cup of water.”

“Do you think he's under the Duke's control?” the huge currently immobile fur asked.

“That is a big possibility” she replied. “Maybe he's not our mark on this mission.”

###

The mage stood in the clearing near his keep, somewhat impatiently waiting for the dragon he was currently summoning. It had been more than an hour since he first called Mistfeldr and she still had not arrived. This was beginning to piss off the mage as she had been later and later in her arrivals.

He had turned to walk back to the keep when he heard her wings beating to flare out for a landing. He looked back to observe a tall, armored femme equine rider on her back throw a huge energy orb at him, knocking him to the ground. The only reason it did not kill him was the distance the orb had to travel. If the rider had been any closer, the mage knew he would have been dead. He quickly got back up to his feet and ran towards the safety of his dwelling, wasting no effort to get there in a hurry. Another energy orb flew past his head, impacting heavily on the keep wall. Shards of the stone making up his dwelling hit him in the face, embedding painfully into his cheek.

Once inside the doorway, he slammed the heavy solid wood door closed and barred it against entry. He had just sat down on a nearby bench to catch his breath when the door literally exploded from the impact of another of the armored rider's energy orbs. "Crap! I need to get to safety before that equine mage kills me!" he exclaimed as he beat feet through his domicile to the safety of his study and its heavy stone and wood door.

###

Outside the keep, the tall filly had dismounted the dragon and removed her helmet so she could converse with Mistfeldr. She knew that she was alone right now, the others still hours away by horseback. "Mistfeldr, I need your help" she said to the huge lizard, trying to be brave. "We need to go get my family out of there."

"I cannot fit inside the keep" the dragon stated, trying to make her point. "You will have to go alone, my child. I cannot enter with you." Mistfeldr got a look of surprise on her face when the filly lifted her paws and caused her to become a bipedal dragon only 8' tall.

"Now you'll fit inside" she said in a conspiratorial tone. "Let's go get my family."

###

"This is quite odd" the dragon commented as they slowly made their way through the dwelling. "I have never seen the insides of an intact dwelling before. It is quite pretty to me" Mistfeldr stated. She felt the energy in the walls as they made their way along, pointing towards the directions that the mage had taken.

Once outside the study door, Wilhelmine put her helmet back on and prepared herself. "I will target the mage" she said quietly. "You try to get my family out if they are in there with him." She then turned, put her helmets' visor down and used a paw gesture to open the door.

"I give up!" Terrance shouted out from his cover behind a very heavy overturned table when he heard the door being opened. "Do not harm me! Please!" He received his reply

to his request instantly as the table exploded around him, sending him flying across the room.

“Show yourself, you bastard!” the filly shouted as she strode into the room holding another energy orb. “Come out before I destroy this overgrown shed with you in it!!” She then observed her family off to the side, encased in a clear prison from the neck down. Willi Marie started to head that way when an energy orb knocked her down to her knees with its force.

“Give up now, sorceress” the mage shouted, sending another orb her way. She stood quickly and caught it, making it larger and more powerful in her paws by combining it with her energy orb.

“Take some of your own medicine” she said sourly as she threw the orb back with great force, knocking him down and slamming him into a wall with its power. “You are toast for furnapping my family!” she screamed as she used a paw gesture to lift the mage and throw him against the opposite wall. “Don't make me kill you!” she screamed out as she lifted him up with a paw gesture again, intent on throwing him through the wall if need be to make her point.

“I give up!!” he shouted, looking to all the world like he was scared out of his mind. “I will not hurt you!! Do not throw me again, please!?! I don't wish to die today!!!”

“If you even try to hurt any one of us” she said with a wicked sneer after she brought him to her through the air and stared him in the face. “I will kill you and feed you to the dragons myself!”

“I will behave” he said softly, trying to keep from crying from fright. He had never faced down a magician or sorceress with this kind of power. The filly sat him back down somewhat roughly and went to see about the immortal couple.

Mistfeldr had already went to the immortal pair's side, trying to see how to get them out of the encasement. “What have you done to them?” the filly demanded of the mage, trying to pry the material open by the neck of the tigress to no avail.

“It is the necklaces that are embedded within” the mage said sheepishly. “I wanted them to be irremovable and it seems like I have done that quite well.”

“What do the necklaces do, exactly?” the dragon asked as she tried to scratch the surface with one of her extremely sharp talons only to fail miserably.

“The necklaces absorb magical energy” the mage replied as he sat down on a stool and took inventory of his multiple injuries inflicted by the filly.

“Wilhelmine, how in the world are you doing magic?” the huge fur asked as he took in his charges' furhandling of the mage with no visible effort at all.

“Apparently I am a sorceress like my maternal great-grandmother Hilda Reed-Sorenson” she stated as she tried to use her magic to transport the pair out of their imprisonment. All that happened was the necklaces beginning to glow brightly with her attempt. She tried again for a longer duration, causing the necklaces to finally burn

out with a flash like a flash bulb going off. Willi Marie then tried once more to remove them from their prison, only to fail again.

“Is that human wizard still alive?” the filly asked as she looked at the immobilized form of the wizard Merlin on display nearby. She had heard him calling out to her for help in her mind ever since she had arrived at the compound.

“Yes, the wizard is still certainly alive in his encasement but I could not release him” the mage replied and watched in total amazement as the filly went over to the encased form, held up her palms of her paws and with a flourish made the encasement disappear.

“Who has released me from my prison?” the wizard asked as he stepped down from his pedestal and stretched his entire body. “I have been immobile for far too long and I wish to thank them.”

“I set you free” the filly replied, smiling widely at him.

“I thank you, kind sorceress” he said with a deep bow. “I am indebted to you for your kindness.”

“I could use your help” she proffered up. “My family is in some of that stuff and I can't get them out the way I removed you from your prison.” The wizard walked over to the stallion and the tigress, assessing the situation.

“Can you get us out of this?” the tigress asked with just a hint of fear in her voice. “I'm going crazy not being able to move!”

“Yes, please get us out of this mess” the berserker chimed in. “My nose itches badly and I can't reach it to scratch it.”

###

Loke had finally found the rest of the troupe, still making their way to the keep. He was riding on Willi Marie's black mare who was none too happy with the weasel being astride her.

“I'm sorry for taking so long in finding you” he said sheepishly. “I had to hide from Thor for a bit. He knows that I hidden his favorite war hammer.” The weasel was clearly annoyed that the thunder god was on to his game so quickly.

“Why don't you shimmer out and go back to the mage's keep again?” Conrad asked the trickster.

“I must not do that right now” Loke replied. “Every time I do that, Thor can locate me. Besides, it has been a while since I have ridden such a noble beast like this.” the horse looked back at him like he had lost his mind.

“We should be there soon” Deanna said to the group. “I recognize several landmarks that I have seen in the past few moments.

“Good” was Conrad's short reply.

###

The three mages and the dragon were currently sitting around, resting after trying in vain for over an hour to remove the immortal pair from their encasement prison. All of them had tried their best but the material had thwarted their every attempt at removal.

“Are we stuck in this stuff forever?” the tigress asked as she had a tear slip out of her eye. “I want out of this stuff right now before I go postal!”

“What is this 'going postal' all about?” Merlin asked, obviously unfamiliar with the term.

“It means she will go totally crazy and start killing things” the stallion replied. “I can't say I blame her. I'm ready to do the same.”

“I can get them out” Mistfeldr said quietly. “The problem is we have to get them outside to do it.”

“How are you going to get us out of this stuff that you need to do it outside?” the tigress asked out of curiosity.

Mistfeldr said only one word. “Fire.”

###

The troupe had finally arrived at the keep and it took all of them to carry the tigress and stallion outside to the courtyard due to the considerable weight of the pedestal that was made of wood and steel. Once out in the courtyard, the mages and the dragon formulated the steps that it would take to remove the immortals from their prison.

“I have seen the wood nymphs remove food that they preserved with encasement by momentarily heating the object in the fire and then quenching it in water, causing the encasement to crystallize and crumble away” Mistfeldr said as she examined the encasement to find the thickest portion. “I will use my breath to heat the encasement up and all of you will splash them with water on my command.”

“Now hold on just a minute!” the berserker said loudly. “I don't want to be scorched bald again!”

“Well, we could finish the encasement to protect your heads” Merlin said hesitantly. “I have been encased that way and it wasn't too bad for the first 50 years or so.”

“Hey! Nobody asked me how I feel!” the tigress interjected. “What about my feelings in this matter? I've had just about all of this stuff I can handle! You're not putting that gunk on my head! No Way, Jose!” Victoria had a somewhat panicked tone to her voice as she told them her feelings.

“Sweetheart, would you rather be bald for a little while?” Torvald asked his mate, making sure she understood what he had said to her.



“Well, just how bald would I be?” she retorted in a wavering voice. It was clear that she was being scared by the talk of this procedure being carried out.

“You would most likely suffer complete fur loss from the chin up” Mistfeldr stated as she checked the encasement again. “I need to heat all of it up or you wouldn't be fully freed from your prison.” She was pointing to the encasement just under the feline's chin as she said “Even under here has to be heated. I must heat all of it up evenly to get you out.”

“You know, you're not leaving me much of a choice here” the tigress commented. “The thought of being fully covered in this stuff scares me, if you know what I mean.”

“I understand your concerns, M'Lady” Terrance said softly. “I am so sorry I did this to you. I wish now that I had thought this out better so you wouldn't have to endure this.”

“Hindsight is 20/20, ya jerk” Conrad said sourly to the misfit mage as he stood by with a bucket in paw. “You really screwed up when you did this to my mom and dad.”

“M'Lady, what if I gave you something to calm you down?” Merlin asked Victoria. “If you were relaxed, would that help?” He could see that she was certainly mulling that idea over in her head.

“That might help” she finally replied. “How long would I have that stuff on me?” she asked as she thought about it some more. “I really don't want to be bald.”

“You would be in that stuff, as you call it for no more than one half of one of your hours” Merlin said as he thought about it. “The encasement has to cure clear before it can be heated and crystallized. Out here in the sun, I would say no more than one half hour.”

“How hot does it have to get?” the berserker chimed in. “Will we be able to withstand the heat?”

“I am guessing not too hot” the dragon said cautiously. “I have observed the wood nymphs handle the heated objects. That shouldn't be too hot for the two of you.”

###

The immortal couple had talked it over for a few minutes between themselves before finally agreeing to the procedure. It was either that or be stuck in the encasement for eternity so they decided to just go for broke on the deal. The two femme squirrels had wiped down the immortals' heads carefully with the yellow liquid, being careful to get the tigress' hair, her fur and the rest of the stallion's mane slicked down completely. Merlin had found some soft fibrous material to fill their ear canals with to keep their ears from getting too full of the goo. He also had some handy for Torvald's nose, to serve the same purpose there. Terrance had found some glass tubes in his laboratory that were supposed to make up a wind chime but would serve just fine as breathing tubes for Victoria and Torvald.

“Here, take another sip” Merlin said as he fed a mild sedative to the tigress. “This will make you relax some so we can get started. We will start with your mate first so you may watch and relax further. I do not wish for you to panic at the wrong moment.”

“OK, I'm feeling relaxed now” she said as her eyelids drooped just a little. “That was enough, thank you” she said to the supermage, giving him a little smile as she looked at him.

“One last thing” the Uberwizard said to them. “I will rap twice on your encasement once it is ready to heat. You will then take a deep breath and hold it while I take out the tubes and plug the hole for your lungs' safety. That is when the dragon will heat up the encasement. Do not try to breathe again until the encasement crystallizes away from you. Do you both understand?” The immortal pair both nodded 'yes' to the mage.

“How long will we have to hold our breath?” Victoria asked of the magician.

“Maybe no more than one of your minutes” he replied as he prepared the stallion for coating by stuffing the fibrous material in his ears.

Victoria watched on intently as the femme squirrels began to pour the goo over her mate's head, making sure that every part of his head and muzzle was coated. Merlin put the breathing tube in place and stuffed the stallion's nostrils as the femmes poured the goo over the last of the uncovered coat at the tip of her mate's muzzle. As she watched, she could see the goo quickly becoming translucent, showing off the outline of her hubby's head underneath. The femmes were careful to make sure the joint between his head and body was sealed tightly for his ultimate protection from the fire.

“Are you all right in there?” Merlin said loudly to the stallion who made a grunting sound through the tube in reply. The mage then looked at the tigress and said “I regret to tell you it has become your turn.”

“I would be lying if I said I wasn't scared” the tigress stated, giving them a weak smile. “Do it” she said as the mage and Conrad put the stuffing into her ears. “It's too late to back out now. Just please get it over with quickly” she added, giving her son a small smile. It was quite obvious that she was scared but she was still willing to go ahead with the procedure to release them from their bondage. She closed her eyes as the two small femmes began to coat her head and face, being careful to get an even coat deposited all over. Merlin put her breathing tube in place and held it momentarily just as the femmes put the final load of encasement on her muzzle and began to trowel it around. Victoria made a few small mewling sounds as the white goo covered her head completely, sealing her inside.

###

Once the tigress felt the goo cover her nose and spread over her mouth, she knew that she was fully encased at that point. She felt maybe she had been through worse before as this wasn't as bad as she thought it would be. The troweling sounds could clearly be heard, the sound and pitch changing as the material quickly hardened up from the sun and her body heat.

As it cured, she noticed that she could perceive more and more light through her eyelids as time went by. She could breathe just fine through the tube so it wasn't as scary as she thought it would be in the beginning. For whatever unknown reason, she opened her eyes just a crack to see that the encasement was almost clear at this point in the procedure. She observed Conrad pointing at her eyes and saying something to the supermage that she couldn't make out due to the packing material in her ears blocking out most of the sound. She decided to just close her eyes and rest, waiting patiently for the mage to rap on her to let her know the time was nigh.

###

Torvald had closed his eyes when the femmes had poured the first of several bowls full of the white compound over his head and ears. He felt them troweling the glop around, making the coating as even as possible. He felt Merlin put the packing in his nostrils and then the tube being put in his mouth. He held the tube firmly with his lips as the last load was dumped on his muzzle, completely covering his head and sealing him into his encapsulation.

The wizard had shouted at him, asking him if he was OK so all he could do is grunt back in reply. As the compound set up and hardened, the noises from the squirrels' troweling actions changed pitch. He was hoping this would work out for them as the alternative did not look very good for either one of them.