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'The Price Of Worship'

By R C Stankewitz

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Chapter 21

"Family Reunion"

"what did you find that's so important?" Victoria asked as they followed her through the keep to a section that was not used very much. The dust on the floors was proof that not many furs came this way.

"There is something that Merlin may be interested in" she replied as she went into a large room. In one corner stood what at first appeared to be a statue but upon closer examination proved to be a very tall stallion encased on a pedestal.

"I can hear him inside his prison" she said as she grew nearer to the encased equine. "He is calling out for release from his confinement." She turned to look at the imprisoned stallion for a moment and her jaw dropped as she gasped. "He says he's the Wizard Mordred Reed and I am his relative by blood."

"Are you sure that's what he said to you?" Merlin asked as he examined the fur on the pedestal. This stallion had been confined in his prison for a very long time indeed. The plaque on the base said he was encased over 100 years ago.

"I am sure of it-he wants out of there" she replied as she stood back and waved her paws at the fur, making the encasement vanish. The stallion dropped to his knees and began to collapse towards the berserker, who deftly reached out and caught him.

"I am weak" the male palomino said as he tried to open his eyes and focus them. "I have been immobile for over 100 years. I do not know exactly how long as I quit counting many years ago."

Torvald, put him on that couch over there” the tigress instructed her stallion. “I’ll get some water for him.”

“Do not worry, I will bring some water” Merlin said as he caused a bucket of water, a dipper and a cup to appear on a table nearby. With a wave of his paw, a pillow and a blanket appeared on the couch to comfort the weakened stallion. The berserker gently laid Mordred on the couch and covered him up, noting that he was shivering just a bit from being released.

“Hilda, where are you?” he called out weakly. “I felt your presence here. Hilda, come to me, please.” Victoria was thinking that the poor equine might be delirious from his confinement.

“Merlin, what can we do for him?” she asked, kneeling next to the stallion and checking his vitals as best as she could. Willi Marie joined her, reaching out and holding his paw in hers to comfort him.

“Hilda, is that you, my daughter?” he asked as he tried to focus on the tall femme's visage. “Please tell me that is you” he pleaded, trying to sit up to see her better.

Sensing the mage was mistaking her for some other femme, the filly spoke up. “I am Wilhelmine Marie Kurzweil” she said softly to him. “I released you from your prison.” She helped the stallion drink some water and then helped him to lay back down. After a few moments, he looked up at the filly, studying her appearance at length.

“You look just like my daughter, Hilda Reed” he said as he worked to stifle a coughing fit. “She left here with a mage when she was but 19 summers old.”

“I was told that I looked like my Great-grandmother Hilda when she was younger” the filly said as she looked at the mage. It seemed crazy to her but she could see a family resemblance. “Is it possible that you are my Great-great-grandfather?”

###

Christopher was standing in a clearing in a dark forest, arms folded across his chest. He looked rather perturbed by having to be here at all, considering whom he was to meet. The lion did not care for nether regions and this one seemed rather malevolent to him. Momentarily, a sharply dressed winged hyena wandered into the clearing.

“Hello Chris. How's things been?” the hyena asked, giving *The Son* a small smile. He walked up to him and extended his paw, waiting for a moment before taking it back when the lion didn't accept his greeting. Christopher just scowled at him instead.

“Listen, Lou. I'm not happy with this deal” he said flatly, giving the hyena his full attention. “Who is this fur that has called in a marker?” he asked, obviously not happy with things in general.

“The demon king Beoram has called in an old marker from the beginning of existence, around the time of Adam” he replied as he examined his claws nonchalantly. “He wants the immortal couple dead for killing Thammuz and Zagam. They were part of his

army to take over the mortal world” he added, looking up to see the anger evident on the lion's face.

“Nobody said a word about killing Torvald and Victoria when The Counsel negotiated this deal!” *The Son* blurted out in surprise. “I thought the agreement was for Odin and myself to not provide elemental help to them on this one mission, not kill them!”

“Look, I'm not happy with the deal either because it shifts the balance of power too far in Beoram's favor” the Prince of Lies stated, looking somewhat irritated by the circumstances. “I know you don't like dealing with me but you'll have to. I want to stop Beoram as much as you do.”

“Well, you have any ideas about what we should do?” Christopher asked, trying to suppress his personal feelings about the master dark one.

“Beoram is using a mortal avatar in that world to draw in the immortals” Lucifer stated. “Wilhelmine can see right through that avatar because she is a virgin sorceress. Hopefully she can tip them off to the danger before he can kill them.”

“You know the rules of this completely ridiculous agreement” the lion pointed out. “I cannot warn them of the danger. They're 'paws off' to Odin and myself until they defeat the demon.”

“Don't worry, Chris” the devil said with a smile on his muzzle. “Those rules don't apply to me. I will warn Torvald and Victoria of the dangers.” With a nod of the lion's head to acknowledge his agreement in the matter, the two figures shimmered out of sight.

###

The male palomino stallion was finally resting comfortably after Merlin administered several healing spells to help him recover. Torvald had convinced the rest of them that they needed to eat something to keep their strength up for their upcoming meeting with the duke. They were all picking at the dregs of their meal when they received a 'special' visitor.

“Hello all” the winged hyena said cheerily as he walked into the dining hall and sat down with them. “I have come to help all of you out, if I can” he added as he poured a goblet of wine for himself.

“Lucifer! You Bastard from the Underworld!” the berserker shouted out, getting up from the table quickly. “I will destroy you with my bare paws if I have to!” he added as he made a huge broadsword appear in his paw and headed towards the Prince of Lies, eyes glowing like white beacons.

“Now hold on just a minute, stallion” the hyena said as he waved a paw at Torvald, making him move very, very slowly. “I did not come here to destroy anybody. I have some information for you that you need to hear.” Beelzebub straightened his tie before he continued with his thoughts. “Please don't strike me down until after I have spoken. If you don't like what I have said, strike down my avatar with -this- sword” he finished, making Torvald's conjured sword substantially bigger. Torvald stopped trying to reach the evil one and stood there looking totally confused by this information.

“You expect us to believe anything you say?” the tigress questioned, looking skeptical of the hyena's reasons for being there. He was the Prince of Lies, after all.

“Christopher cannot tell you what you need to know about this mission” he said in a noncommittal way. “I, however am not part of the bargaining group so I -can- tell you some important information. Do not send Willi Marie back, whatever you do. You will need her talents when you meet the Duke.”

“But we were told to have a mage send her back” the stallion said as he tried to slowly sit down, still under the movement speed restriction spell of Lucifer.

“That's what Beoram wants you to do” he pointed out to Torvald as he tasted the treats on the table. “Do send the young males back right now without hesitation for their own safety but keep the sorceress filly with you closely. She will save your hides when you most need it. I don't wish to see the balance of power shifted and neither does Christopher or Odin.”

The hyena smiled and nodded at the tigress before he suddenly disappeared with a loud POOF! Once the devil had left, the spell was broken on the stallion, causing him to sit down real hard. This ended up causing him to break the chair and land hard on the floor.

“That is not right!” the berserker shouted as he got back up to his hooves. “You could at least have let me sit down without breaking the chair!” he added as he looked around at the others who were trying desperately to keep from laughing at him.

The hyena popped back into the room, right in front of the huge stallion. “I'm sorry” he said as he smiled at Torvald. “I guess I should have been more courteous.” He snapped his fingers, making the chair slowly reassemble itself. He then nodded and disappeared with another loud POOF!

###

“So what do we do, now that it sorta looks like we're on our own?” the tigress asked of her stallion, mulling over what the various sources had told them. She gave it a little more thought before she stood, looked up and said loudly “Loke! Get your behind down here right now!” Within moments, the weasel appeared before the immortals.

“Torvald! Victoria! How nice to see you again!” he said with a forced smile. “Well, got to be going!” he added and tried to shimmer out. The stallion reached out his paw, getting a hold of the trickster's life essence through magic and holding him to the spot.

“We need to talk to you” the stallion said tersely, walking over to stand directly in front of the weasel. “You will tell us exactly what is going on. Now!” he stated, crossing his arms across his massive chest and staring a hole through Loke.

“I will tell you” the weasel said calmly, “When you release your hold on me.” The huge fur just continued to stare at him as a sneer began creeping across his muzzle.

“Tell us! Now!!” was all the reply that Loke got for his effort. “Do not mess with me, weasel” the huge fur added, stepping just a little closer and cracking his knuckles with an evil smile. For a moment, Torvald could see the fear in Loke's eyes as the weasel gave it some thought.

“I will tell you what is going on” the trickster said calmly as he swallowed real hard. “You two are paws off until you either destroy or defeat Beoram” he stated. “You will receive no help from either Odin or WhiteChrist for this mission.” He swallowed very hard again as he said “That is all I feel safe to tell you.”

“So we're on our own?” he asked quietly to the trickster.

“No angels, no Valkyries, no help from even me, as much as I dislike that idea” Loke replied. “You are on your own for once. Do not take it hard but there wasn't a thing they could do. It was an old marker.”

“I see...” the tigress said as she went to stand in front of the immobile weasel. “This has something to do with Zagam, doesn't it?” she asked, sure of her suspicions now.

“I cannot tell you” he replied, nodding his head in the affirmative. Torvald caught on right away to his deception.

“And it doesn't have a thing to do with Thammuz, does it?” the stallion asked, smiling when Loke gave an inverse answer again.

“It has nothing to do with Thammuz” he replied, giving them a wink.

“Well, that tells us nothing” the stallion said loudly as he released his grip on the trickster. He was still looking quite worried by the news they had received from various sources and now confirmed by Loke.

Loke then said “I will not be able to help at all, even if you call me” he said loudly with a nod of his head. He then said very quietly “I will help you out all I can” as he shimmered out of sight.

###

“Lou, you're really going out on a limb this time” Hel said to the winged hyena. “You are really stirring things up, considering Beoram wants the immortals dead.”

“You know me” he replied to Loke's daughter. “I enjoy a challenge. No fur tells me to keep out of something that will ultimately affect my realm.” He smiled as he asked “If I broker the deal, will you loan out a Dauger legion to help them out?”

“I will loan them ten legions if they need them without question” the femme wolf replied. “What is in this for me?” she asked as she rubbed her paws together. “There must be something we can share in.”

“I am sure there will be some souls for you to claim” the devil pointed out. “I intend to take as many souls as I can and Surt will take the rest of them that you do not.”

“I will wait to see what there may be for my taking” she responded, giving Lucifer an evil smile. “I’m sure there will be -something- that I might desire.”

###

Wilhelmine was sitting by the window in Mordred's room, looking at the lush valley before her. The lushness reminded her of the countryside around her original hometown of Munster, Germany. The filly had taken it upon herself to see after Mordred while the tall stallion recovered. It was still amazing to her that she could see the definite family resemblance in his face.

“Hilda, are you here?” Mordred asked as he stirred in his bed. “I can feel your presence nearby” he added as he looked around to see the filly sitting in the window seat. Wilhelmine went to see about him and she could observe that he was doing substantially better now that he had rested a while.

“I am not your Hilda” she said softly as she sat down beside his bed. “I am Wilhelmine Kurzweil” she added as she wiped his forehead with a damp cloth.

“You must be related” he retorted as he laid back down in his bed and closed his eyes. “your essence feels so familiar to me. I could swear I feel her presence here.” He thought for a moment and then reached out and held her paw for a while. He then slowly turned his head and looked at her as he said “You are a natural sorceress and not a construct like the stallion Torvald.”

“What is a construct?” the filly asked because this reference confused her.

“A construct is a mage that has been given the powers to control magic” he replied. “You have these powers naturally. You are a true sorceress, my dear.”

“You know” the filly began, “My mother always told up to disregard our Great-grandmother Hilda's ramblings about magic.” She looked at the mage with a wistful smile as she continued her line of thought. “I also caught my mom 'fixing' burnt food on several occasions. Not trying to cover the taste but making something that should have been charcoal look and taste perfect.”

“Some furs are ashamed of magic” Mordred pointed out as he made himself more comfortable in his bed. He made another blanket appear over himself as he smiled at the filly. “She no doubt was a sorceress and she tried to hide it from you. She is the source that you received your powers from, not from your father. All sorceresses pass their powers from mother to daughter.”

“I miss my parents dearly” she said wistfully as she made a small lap quilt appear in her paws and covered her legs with it. “My father was a lion from South Africa. He was so kind and gentle and he helped me to come to grips with being of mixed ancestry.”

“Then I am sure of this” the stallion said to her. “You are of my lineage without a doubt. Hilda was my daughter and your Great-grandmother.”

###

Deanna and Jens were sitting on the steps to the keep, watching the moon rise over the forest's jagged tree line. The air was crisp and clear this evening and the lovers were snuggled up against each other for warmth as they enjoyed the view.

“Will you go northward with the warriors?” she asked her mate, looking to see his response. She secretly hoped that he would say 'no' and stay here with her or return with her to their home.

“I must travel onward” he replied as he turned to look at his mate. “Although these kind furs are capable warriors, the Duke will be a formidable opponent. I cannot refuse my services to them.”

“Then I will go with you, my love” she said quietly as she laid her head on his shoulder.

“I would prefer you return home” he said as he tried not to let her see his face, tears streaming down his cheeks. “I do not wish you to be killed because of my poor judgment in this matter.”

“I will go so that if you die, I will be there to bring your body home” she interjected. “You know I would rather die in battle next to you than to die alone.”

“I beg of you please ...” he began and had to choke back his sobbing. “Please return home to your family. They will see after you if you return to them.” The Vallhund began to sob heavily as he knew in his heart that this may be his last battle. “Do not follow me because you may be following a foolish old fur to your death” he begged, trying to make his feelings known.

“As I said before” she said real softly, “I would rather die by your side than die alone.”

“Deanna, you are so stubborn” he said, trying unsuccessfully to choke back his tears.

“I know, Jens. You have told me that many times before.”

###

“Torvald, how would you feel about retiring in Asgaard?” the tigress asked as they lay in bed, trying to go to sleep. Both of them were wound tighter than a clock spring and they were not able to sleep so far.

“Asgaard is very pretty, from what I have seen of it” the stallion replied. “I think I would like it very much. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, no real reason” she said softly. “I guess I'm thinking that it's possible we may not survive our meeting with Duke Graves. I get the feeling that there's something more in store for us than what we know so far.”

“What makes you think we won't survive?” the stallion asked. He was scratching his nose that was itching again. “We have survived much worse than just a mere demon.”

“He's called in a marker, if I have my guess right” Victoria replied. “That means he's going to be packing some bad mojo to lay on us, if you get my drift.”

“You are probably right” the stallion stated. Torvald knew in his heart that someday, they would both come out on the short end of the stick and this seemed like the time for it to happen. It really hurt him, knowing that he talked his loving mate into being a warrior for the gods and now that would ultimately be her undoing.

“What are you thinking?” the tigress asked her stallion. Her hubby was being way too quiet for her right now.

“I was thinking about how I got you into this mess” he replied, trying not to let his emotions come through in his voice.

“You know in your heart that it was my choice to do this” she said softly. “Now I will have to live or die by that choice.” The stallion couldn't see the tears streaming down her cheeks as she thought about possibly dying. “It was all my choice” she thought as she wiped at her tears and tried to go to sleep.