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“Redemption”

By Kellan Meig'h

Chapter 16 – “Space For Rent”

Earlier in the evening just before dark, Cami had been alerted to movement above Rancho Svensen when first one, then several more of her motion detectors had went off. She had told the others present to stay inside while the area was reconnoitered for intruders. Arming up with her favorite AR-pattern rifle chambered in .338 Federal, she slipped out of the coach quietly and headed towards her objective.

Working her way carefully up the property, the femme wolverine chimera eventually made it to the point of first intrusion. Looking about with her night vision binoculars, Cami spotted the source of the alert. Down below her, situated behind a rocky outcropping, was a canid perhaps, making him or herself comfy. That individual was setting out their own night vision goggles, a sniper rifle of some type and what looked to be a light repast.

The femme wolverine chimera used her communications implant to send a text to Valerie's phone, silently letting her know what was going on. Cami informed Victoria's sister that she intended to say up here on the hill, for as long as it took to figure this one out.

This unknown fur didn't fit the profile of a paid assassin, since they were being rather sloppy about it. Her motion sensors on the hillside weren't that small, so they would have been noticed by a professional. The intruder's night vision goggles were not as sophisticated as hers, either. She could see the walls of the Svensen's damaged house below them being 'painted' by the intruder's infra-red goggles' emissions device when they scanned about, in search of something or someone. Cami's IR binoculars were passive, requiring no additional light to function. She could see the antagonist, but they had no idea she was on the hillside behind them.

Receiving a return text from the tigress, Valerie wanted to know where this furson was on the hillside. The tigress was apparently concerned for the safety of those down the hill in the fifth wheel coach. Once the femme feline was informed of the intruder's location, Cami observed a window curtain part, the

window and screen open, then the barrel of a rifle emerge, aiming in the intruder's general direction. Moments later, another rifle barrel emerged from behind the coach, under the hitch pin area. An additional text let Cami know that Val had the furson in her sights and Barbara Caine was backing her up. An additional text asked for a plan of action.

“Hold your fire while I make my way down to the intruder,” was Cami's reply, noting a return text acknowledged her message. There was a relatively clear path down to the unknown fur so the former femme soldier began to carefully make her way down the hill, keeping her rifle in a ready state in case of trouble.

Several times, the femme wolverine was sure that the fur in question was going to turn far enough to see her but her luck held out. Coming up behind the unknown being, Cami could make out it was a femme gray wolf. Alerting Valerie that she was going to take action and receiving a reply, the femme combat chimera eased forward until she could put her rifle barrel to the femme intruder's neck.

“Drop your weapons before I blow your head off.” Cami stated calmly.

The canid dropped her night-vision glasses on the ground and lifted her paws. “Please don't shoot?” she asked in a frightened voice.

“Stand up, turn to face me and keep your paws up. I have my battle rifle on 'Auto', for your information.” the wolverine stated, keeping her senses on full alert. She backed up and stood up herself, noting the femme wolf was young and not very tall.

“Please don't shoot me,” the femme asked again, biting her lip out of fright.

“Who are you and what are you doing here?” Cami asked firmly.

“My . . . my name's Renee Thorp.” was the hesitant partial answer.

“Okay, Renee Thorp. Who do you work for?”

“Um, erm . . . I can't say.” She looked up at her captor apologetically while she continued her reasoning. “I'm sorry. If I tell you who, I'll be killed for it.”

Cami sent a text to Valerie, asking for backup on the hill. “Kneel right there, cross your ankles and lace your fingers together behind your head.” she ordered while she awaited the tigress.

The wolfess complied with the request, then she looked up at Cami, obviously scared. “Listen, I'm okay with being thrown in prison, if you'll protect me. I don't want to be murdered like my parents.”

“Murdered?”

“Yeah.” Renee looked away for a moment, then looked Cami in the eyes. “My boss murdered them because they wouldn't kill for money.”

“Renee, I suspect you're kind of young so tell me, how old are you?” the wolverine asked, since she could see that the canid was not that on in years.

“I'm sixteen.” she answered. “Please, Ma'am, you could just let me go. I won't tell if you do. I wasn't supposed to kill Rumjal, just report back to my boss as to what he was doing here.”

“Why this, then? Why were you armed?” Cami questioned, picking up the wolfess' firearm. It was a rather natty World War One vintage Vintovka Mosina caliber 7.62 X 54mm rimmed, otherwise known as the Mosin-Nagant. The wolverine racked the bolt open, popped the rounds out of the internal magazine and set the rifle aside.

“I . . . erm . . . I heard you were a soldier, a mercenary. I was afraid you might try to shoot me.” the frightened femme replied. “I've been shot at by mercs in the past.”

“Well, this is the first time I've been called a mercenary.” the wolverine mused. “If you knew I was such a bad-ass, shouldn't you have brought a little bit better piece of artillery to the firefight?”

“Yeah, I know that old beater isn't much of a battle rifle.” Renee agreed. “I didn't have the money for a good rifle so they gave me that one. It was a freebie.” She hesitated, shrugged her shoulders then looked at the ground as she continued. “I think the rounds are over a hundred years old, too. What do you expect for free?”

“It could have been worse,” Cami thought out loud as she inspected the rifle further. “It could have been an Italian M91 Carcano.”

“Or a WW2 vintage Arisaka Type 99 training rifle.” the femme candidly offered up. “Those were for training with blanks exclusively so they were made out of mild steel. No hardening operations were carried out on them. Ball ammunition would blow them up in your face.”

“You seem to know your weapons.” Cami stated.

“My parents were gunsmiths and they were training me to take over the family business.” Renee offered up. “That Nagant has a pristine bore, probably armory re-barreled at some point in time. I fixed the bolt on it so it would lock up properly to the action. It had a bent lug, of all things. Imagine that.”

“You said it yourself that it was a freebie.” the femme mustilid pointed out.

“I think they dug it up out of a scrap bin somewhere. I'm sure they meant for me to not survive a firefight with it.”

“I'm coming up!” Valerie shouted from beyond the darkness. “Hold your fire!”

“I have the situation under control!” Cami replied. Within a few moments, the tigress joined the others.

“So, who did you find?” the femme feline asked once her eyes adjusted to the dark.

“Renee Thorp is her name.” Cami replied. “Says she has no intentions of harming anyone, but she did come armed.”

“With this?” Val asked. “Um, not much of a rifle, if you ask me.”

Renee spoke up. “If the rounds were any good, I'm sure I'm good to go out to two hundred yards.”

“She's right,” the wolverine offered. “She's a bit of a gunsmith so she knows her weapons.” She then looked at her charge. “Okay, stand up and get your other gear. Let's go down the hill to the temporary

coach slowly, you in front. Remember, my rifle is set on 'Rock and Roll', just in case you forgot.”

Once they started down the hill, Valerie texted a silent question to the femme soldier.

“What will we do with her?”

Cami thought about it, then replied.

“I'm not sure. She's probably a Dark Agent, but surely unwilling. Let's let your sister and her husband sort it out.”

Valerie just nodded in return.

###

Victoria had been awake for a span of a few moments, finally feeling rested after their journey to Sacramento and the subsequent visit at the hospital with the counterfeit Conrad. As she awakened further, the femme feline wondered if the heat in their motel room had given out during the night, since she thought she could see her breath in the weak morning light. Well, her sleep was over with and it was time for her to get up anyway. She nudged her stallion to get his attention.

“Tor? Are you awake?” she asked, nudging him in the shoulder for good measure. When he stirred, she continued. “What time is it, Honey? I can't see the clock from my side of the bed.” she requested of her hubby.

“Dunno, Sweetheart. It's early, though.” he replied sleepily, before yawning widely.

“Well, look at your watch, then.” she directed.

“Won't do any good.” the stallion countered as he rolled over to face his wife. “You know the batteries died in it about fifteen years ago.”

Victoria thought about that statement for a few moments. She had personally replaced the batteries in his Seiko just a few days after they had returned from her rescue on that parallel world. It was a birthday gift from her and her hubby had put it away for safekeeping when she had went missing. Once she was found, Torvald wanted to begin wearing it again. Opening her eyes and looking up at the ceiling, the tigress observed heavy, rough-hewn wood beams overhead.

“What in the hell?!?” she blurted out as she quickly sat up and took in the surroundings. “Oh My God, Where in the hell are we???”

Well, that was a rhetorical question, since she recognized the room in question. It was her room in Castle Griffin, King Andath's home.

“Victoria? Are you all right?” her hubby queried, sitting up in bed next to her.

The femme tiger shook her head, then answered. “Um, I'm having a really bad dream. I must still be asleep.”

“I think you're awake.” the stallion countered. He watched on as she pinched her arm hard with her thumb and index claws, firm enough that it brought blood.

“Oh No . . .” she said carefully as she looked around at her surroundings. “I am not here. I am not at Castle Griffin. I am in a motel in Sacramento. This is *just* a bad dream.” she stated in a somewhat frightened tone.

“Not again . . .” Tor said under his breath. He took her head in his paws, gently, and made her look up at him. “Victoria, Sweetheart, you are still in the castle. You're having another one of your memory loss episodes.”

“What?!?” she countered, looking very frightened. “NO, we were in a hotel room in Sacramento with Aslaug and Donnie Azevada, a Dark Agent that wanted out! We were going to fly back south this morning to our home in the Portola Hills! It should be almost ready for us to move back in!!”

The stallion took his bride in his arms. “Look, you've done this . . . well, this is the fourth time. We did not leave with the others after Beoram was destroyed. We cannot leave. We, meaning you, me, Willi Marie and her husband Richard, we are all tied body and soul to this world. We cannot be removed from it. We are part of it now.”

“No, No, No . . .” The femme warrior was quickly losing it. “NO!! We are not here, dammit!! I'm still asleep and this is just a very frightening nightmare!!!”

“Victoria, please. I used to think that we might have made our way home, then we were brought back here for whatever unknown reason. I'm now pretty sure we never left in the first place and that fragmented memory was planted in our minds by a Dark Agent, just to screw with us.”

“Torvald Arend Svensen, we are *not* stuck here! Denise Berger or Aslaug can take us home!” she retorted.

“Denise was most likely destroyed by trying to take us home some sixteen years ago.” the stallion countered. Before he could continue, a young, buff-colored femme feline dressed in period clothing made her appearance in their room.

“Mom? Are you . . .” the young one started to speak out. She stopped for a moment when she observed the sheer terror in Victoria's eyes. “Dad, is Mom having another episode? I heard her panicked shouting from out in the hall.”

“Yeah, she's having another one, Valerie.” Tor confirmed. “You had better go find Willi Marie and Hess. I fear we might have to sedate your mother again.”

Once the young femme had left, Victoria looked at the empty doorway for a moment, then back at her hubby, confused by this turn of events. “Who was that femme that just called us Mom and Dad?”

“That was our daughter, Valerie Lynn Svensen. You don't remember her?”

“No, I don't,” the tigress replied, taking refuge in her hubby's arms and burying her face in his chest. “And I really don't remember being stuck here, either.” she added between stifled sobs. The noise of her chamber door being pushed open further caused Victoria to look up at the doorway. Momentarily, a young male tiger followed by a slightly taller, young buff-colored male equine came into the room, both seeming very concerned. The equine male that resembled Torvald in a big way spoke up.

“Dad, Willi Marie is on her way to the castle and Valerie went to Whitehall to retrieve Hess.”

“Thank you, TJ.” the stallion offered in return.

“Mom, think carefully. Do you remember us?” the tiger asked, sounding very concerned.

“I, uh . . .” She concentrated, then took what she felt to be an educated guess. “You’re my kits, Torvald Arend Junior and Walter Conrad.” How she knew that bit of information, the tigress didn’t know.

“Dad, do you want us to bring up some breakfast? I mean, maybe Mom wouldn’t want to come down for morning meal right now.” the little equine offered up.

“No, I’ll come down for breakfast, just as soon as I dress.” the femme feline retorted.

The two young Svensen males left their parents alone by their father’s direction so Victoria began to put on her clothing, finding them right where she thought they should be. What did bother her was the Captain’s Insignias attached to her cape closures. Once she was dressed sufficiently to be presentable and in something that somewhat passed for a uniform, she got her husband’s attention.

“Tor, I’m almost afraid to ask. Are our kits immortal?”

He smiled back at her. “No, all three are mortal. Since we can’t leave here, I made Eyr take away their immortality at birth. They will never know our curse.”

“Thank God,” Victoria blurted out, wiping at her tears of joy.

“No, thank Eyr.” the stallion corrected. “She went against direct orders from Odin just to help us out.”

###

Torvald led his mate downstairs to the smaller of the two informal dining halls off of the kitchen, where they were met by Willi Marie, Richard and a young femme equine that resembled the sorceress in a big way. Wilhelmine intercepted the tigress before she could sit down and gripped her shoulders, getting her attention.

“Victoria, how are you feeling? Do you know where you are?” the femme equine asked.

“I’m at Castle Griffin and I have to admit, I’m feeling very confused right now.” the femme feline replied hesitantly.

“Well, that’s a good sign.” Willi put forth. “The last three episodes you suffered through, you didn’t know your own name for weeks.”

“Really?” That surprised the striped one.

“Thankfully, Hess sorted that one out.” Wilhelmine offered up. “It was a planted trigger that caused you to be unable to remember your name. Hess removed the trigger and put a defense ward in your mind, a very powerful suggestion that seems to have worked this time. She just can’t seem to do anything about the episodes in general, though.”

The young equine femme who resembled a young Wilhelmine, walked up to Victoria and hugged her like she knew the femme warrior. "Do you remember me and my brother?" she asked. Her English was heavily accented, like she had grown up in Halstlund.

"Give me a minute." the tigress replied. Sure of her answer after a moment of thought, she replied, "You're Brianna Marie and your brother is Richard Tisdale Junior."

"That's good to hear. It was months before you could remember our names the last time." Brianna put forth. "Maybe this will be a mild episode this time."

Victoria noticed something about the young femme. "Brianna, why are you wearing . . ." She looked at the young one's mother, then back at her. "You are a sorceress. That explains the bands."

"Yeah, my powers came on early." she admitted. "Mom made these dampening bands for me so I could learn to control my magic safely but you should have known that."

"So, who is training you?" the tigress asked out of concern.

"Mala and Bethany come each week for a day of classroom. Mom, Dad, Richard and I all school under them."

"Your father, too?" That was a shock to Victoria.

"He's a minor mage, a level two." Brianna admitted. "Mom and I did a piece of coordinated magic while touching him and it jump-started his powers."

The tigress noted the gray stallion was wearing copper bands on his wrists and he was nodding, acknowledging that he, too packed some abilities. Victoria was going to comment further when Queen Morgeth came into the room, headed straight for the femme feline. She was followed by a young equine stallion that was huge, sporting a buckskin coloration. He also resembled Wilhelmine's husband Richard Delancey in the muzzle and his uniform indicated that he was a member of the Royal Guard.

Victoria knelt at the sight of royalty, knowing the rules regarding these things. She was surprised by a gentle paw around her upper arm, beckoning her to stand up. Once the tigress was standing, the Queen spoke up.

"Victoria, I heard from your daughter just as she ran out of the castle foyer, that you have suffered another episode. How are you feeling, my Captain?"

"I . . . I don't know my Queen." the tigress replied, being quite honest about it. "I feel fine but my mind seems to be in disarray. I'm missing what my husband thinks to be sixteen years of my life."

"But you know who I am, I pray?"

"You are Queen Morgeth Anne Keane, the Seventeenth Matriarch of Halstlund and the Southern Moorlands, wife to King Andath Moran Keane the Third."

"Well said!" the queen said with a smile, right before she hugged the femme warrior warmly. "I was so afraid that you had suffered an episode that had rendered you a stranger to us."

Victoria was still bothered by her mental health. “From what has been said, I must have been a mess during my past episodes.”

The Queen was truly concerned for the tigress. “Listen, my Captain. You are to take a few days off and collect your thoughts. Sir Marc will fill in for you and young Sir Richard will fill out the core guard.”

The tall stallion spoke up. “I will keep your guards in check, Aunt Victoria.” the young equine male put forth with a slight smile. “After all, you were kind enough to recommend me. It is the least I can do to repay your kindness.”

###

The femme feline warrior spent the rest of the day just being lazy, reflecting on the events of the last few days while she strolled the grounds. Her memory had come back to her quite rapidly and she had sadly realized that she and her stallion had been stuck in this reality for over sixteen years. The time was actually over forty for her. Victoria remembered the last time the sorceresses had been to school the stranded Delancey family and the surprise they had brought with them. Her sister Valerie and her brother Walter had come with them for a short visit. Valerie brought pictures and her laptop, making sure she had several spare batteries so they could watch videos of the family. That was a bitter-sweet moment for her.

Sitting in the informal garden, watching the sun sink beyond the treeline, she wondered who had done this and why. Whoever had done this would have known they wanted out of the business. The tigress remembered that conversation with her stallion all those years ago when Torvald had first arrived to attempt a rescue. They were in their room at Whitehall, discussing things in general. The two of them had decided that they would get out of the business and run a half-way house for troubled teens. That conversation seemed so long ago.

What Victoria really wondered was, what would have happened if they were to have left here and started that half-way house. Would it have been successful? Would they have been able to save furs from a life of crime? Standing up, she brushed off her clothing and headed to her room. She knew that she would find Torvald there, either reading or typing on an old Underwood manual typewriter that Willi had provided to him.

Taking a shortcut through the main reception hall, Victoria stopped to look around. It had been forty years since her first meetings with the King and Queen, what seemed like a lifetime ago to her. It wouldn't be long before Prince Jon Andrew Keane would take the throne from his father. He would have to be married before he could ascend to the Crown and the tigress knew what that would mean. That was the very reason she and Torvald had been granted a small corner of the Monarchy and bestowed the titles of Duke and Duchess of West River. Prince Jon Andrew intended to marry their daughter Valerie Marie.

She leaned against a column and remembered that first meeting with Sir Varn Kerlew, then Captain of the Royal Guard. He was very surprised when the tigress had managed to disarm him, take him down and put him in a submissive hold. It was a known fact that no one before or since had done such a thing. While she gathered wool, a robed figure stepped out of the shadows.

“Captain Svensen, are you all right?” the chamberlain asked. The young coyote smiled at her as he approached. “If you require something, may I be of assistance?”

“Thank you no, I was headed to my room.” she replied. “I was just musing about my first time in this

hall. I really embarrassed Sir Varn.”

“I wish I could have been old enough to remember it clearly. As the story goes, you gave him a severe thrashing with your staff before you ended the engagement.” Chamberlain Edes mused.

“I didn't really hurt him, I hit him just hard enough that King Andath counted my blows.” the tigress countered. “I only hit his shoulders, hips and thighs. Not really meaning to incapacitate, just irritate. He eventually lost his focus, allowing me to win.” she added. “Well, I think he allowed me to win.”

“He may very well had allowed you to win.” the young canid put forth. “It was not long after that day, Sir Varn had come to seek my Uncle's advice. He wanted to know if it was proper for a Knight of the Crown to court a commoner. That is why he persisted with King Andath to grant you Knighthood and make you a Royal Guard.”

“I suspected as much.” Victoria said in a conspiratorial tone. “At least he finally settled down with Theresa. They seem to compliment each other nicely.”

“It was kind of your friend Tasha Cummerow to stay on for a while and train Theresa to be a proper sorceress.” Chamberlain Edes brought up.

“Yes, it was.” the tigress agreed, right before she yawned widely. “If you would excuse me, I will be retiring to my room.” she added.

The coyote nodded, then slipped quietly back into the shadows. Victoria smiled, then headed off to her bed.

###

Victoria had read her Bible for a bit, then she dressed for bed in one of her heavy flannel nightgowns. The tigress folded her clothes, sat the ones that needed washing on a low table by the door and put her weapons on her dresser, in their usual places. Once that had been completed, she sat on the edge of the bed, feeling like something was still left to be accomplished. What that was, she couldn't remember. Her hubby speaking snapped her out of her musing.

“Are you ready?” he asked, looking at her while he held a wooden box in his paws.

“Ready for what?” she asked.

“Your safeguards.” he replied. “Hmm, you probably don't remember just yet. You designed them.”

“Um, safeguards for what?” she queried, still not remembering what her husband was talking about.

Tor sat down on the edge of the bed with her. “The first time you had one of these episodes, you had woke in the middle of the night, shouting almost incoherently. Some of what I could catch seemed to indicate that you thought I was whipping you or I had whipped you. You then turned on me and tried your best to tear my throat out.” He showed her the faint scars on the side of his neck, ones that were made by feline dentition.

“If I had not been immortal, you would have killed me. As it was, having no choice, I punched you in the side of the head, knocking you out. I then held the side of my neck with a towel until it healed enough to

stop bleeding. I did not like having to hurt you but it was either that or you would have done a serious amount of damage to me. You seemed to have been Hel-bent on killing me.”

“I seem to remember something like that.” she offered up. The tigress took the box from her hubby and opened it, just to confirm her suspicions.

The box contained three items. The first two were a set of gloves, made from thick yet soft deerhide. They laced up the back, almost to her elbows with rawhide laces. The gloves fit very snugly but there was a reason for that. The tips of the fingers had metal caps in them, preventing her from using her claws. She sat still while Torvald laced them up and tied them in a pretty double bow for her.

The last piece in the box bothered her but she knew why it was necessary. The last safeguard was a muzzle that would keep her from biting her mate. It was made from leather covered welded steel wire, covering her muzzle completely and wrapping around the sides of her head to stabilize it. The tigress picked it up, slipped the device over her muzzle and held it while Tor buckled the straps for her and buttoned the flap over the buckle. She could sip liquids through a straw but it certainly prevented her from opening her mouth far enough to do any damage.

“This is just for a few days, until we're sure you're over your episode.” the stallion offered up after he kissed her on the forehead.

Victoria slipped under the covers and watched on while her hubby extinguished the candles and added some wood to the fireplace. He then slipped under the covers beside her and took her in his arms, comforting her. She felt safe in his arms but there was something that was not right with the situation. What it was, she wasn't sure.

####

Aslaug woke with a start, momentarily disoriented by her surroundings. Looking around, she finally realized that she was in the motel room where the Immortal Couple offered to house the Angelbreaker and what they thought would be the first of many unwilling Agents.

Standing up from her bed in a recliner, the filly realized it was freezing in their room, even though the heater was still running. This was confirmed by the wolf, who was curled up under his covers on the couch in an attempt to stay warm.

She thought that Tor and Vicki might have went out to get a bite to eat, up until she observed the state of the bed. The covers were rumpled and the Immortal Couple's clothes were laying in it, as if the wearers had been transported out from inside of them. That's when she noticed the icy tracks on the carpet in the shape of a dragon's footprints.