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“Redemption”

By Kellan Meigh

Chapter 26 – “Maelstroms And Revelations”

Richard finished wrapping his paws with tape, satisfied that his knuckles would ensure the severe physical punishment that he would be dishing out shortly. He did not look forward to this, since he had given up boxing and brawling after his discharge from the military. If there was one thing that he did not care for, that would be his alter ego, one 'Jackhammer' Delancey, semi-professional boxer. That fur was brutal and relentless, someone he didn't want to be. Looking over at his adversary, he shook his head as he strode across the circle to confront Sytry.

“Gimme that tape,” he 'asked' curtly, undoing the small progress that the demon had accomplished on his own. “You don't know the first thing about brawling bare-knuckle.” the stallion put forth. “Here, you wrap your paws like this,” he directed, giving the spotted one and his assistant, the wolf, a lesson on proper support of the paw.

“Why are you doing this?” the winged feline asked out of curiosity while he watched the equine carefully wrap his paws.

“Listen, the Judge says it has to be fair. I'm making it fair.” Richard replied.

Sytry looked the stallion in the eyes. “You don't have to do this.” he implored. Richard stopped his work and gave the spotted demon a stare that would have scared lesser furs.

“I have my morals and my conscience to deal with after this is over with.” the gray one retorted. “Even though I look forward to pounding you into a bloody puddle, it has to be fair.” Richard finished his work, satisfied that his opponent would have a fair chance. Even a demon deserves at least one chance, he thought. They were interrupted by Judge Woodward, clearing his throat.

“Just a minute.” the equine put forth, giving the judge a 'back the hell off' stare. He then turned to the

Underworld figure and stated in a very quiet voice, "Willi Marie told me to inform you, if you will concede the match, she'll strip your powers from you and send you to a nice place to live out the rest of your existence."

"I'll take that on advisement." the feline replied, giving the stallion a curt nod afterward.

"All right, let's get this match going." the raccoon put forth. With a wave of his paw, both contestants were now wearing boxing trunks, white ones for Richard and black ones for Sytry. "Just to review the rules, three minute rounds with two minutes between each round. No use of the legs or feet-slash-hooves and no blows below the belt. If I tell you to go to your corner, you will do so without question."

A gong sounded from out of nowhere, signaling the match was on. Richard took up a loose stance and slowly circled with his quarry, finally getting to within striking range. He caught Sytry off-guard when he stepped right into him and landed a series of heavy uppercuts to the torso followed by a sharp left jab to the chin as he stepped back. That staggered the demon.

The feline shuffled back, flexing his wings once to help him keep his balance. Clearing his vision, he tried to imitate Richard's stance and at the urging of the stallion, he put his paws up a bit higher to protect his face better.

"Come on, show me what you've got, spotty-khat." the equine growled, stepping into the feline again with a series of injury-inducing left-right jabs to the solar plexus followed by a vicious right uppercut that while it didn't stagger Sytry much, it cut his right eyebrow open.

"*I am screwed, glued and tattooed,*" the feline mused to himself, moving back away from Richard to get some room to breathe and wipe at the blood running down his face. He watched the gray one drop his fists a bit so he stepped into Richard and landed a few good blows to the midsection. That made the stallion take a step back so the feline advanced again and landed a solid uppercut to Richard's chin, followed by a left jab in the right armpit.

"Now you're fighting!" the stallion commented as he rubbed his chin and rolled his head on his shoulders. There seemed to be a bit of blood on his lips, too as a sinister smile crossed his mug. "Come on, let's dance," he added as he fell into that boxing trance he was known for in the military. The gray one dropped his head, brought his fists up and laid into his quarry, landing over a dozen devastating blows that ended with a right cross to the head, sending the spotted one down.

Sytry put out a paw to keep from hitting the floor too hard, expecting the stallion to move in and finish him now. Looking up from his kneeling position on the pseudo-ring, he observed three or four Richards returning to their respective corners to wait until the referee said otherwise. He could hear the Judge counting four, no, five now, followed by his opponent speaking up.

"Give him all the time he needs." Mister Delancey put forth.

Nodding that he understood, the leopard rested for what seemed like just a moment, staggered back to his feet, shook his head to clear the cobwebs and prepared to continue their very personal battle, only to see Richard walk up to him and calmly bat his punches away. The stallion looked at the right side of Sytry's face, then called for his corner.

"Some fur patch him up!" Richard demanded. "He's bleeding all over the place, including me." the gray fighter pointed out. Just about that time, the bell rang to signal the end of the round and a two-minute

reprieve for the demon.

####

Aslaug and Virginia were confronting the judge head-on but for somewhat different reasons. Although the white feline femme wanted the match stopped because she felt it wasn't fair to allow such a fight to occur at all, the tigress deferred to the filly, allowing her to voice her complaint first.

“You just leave and let me finish off that winged bastard!” the Valkyrie hissed at the small, gray one while she poked him in the chest to make her point. “His ass is mine, I tell you!”

“This has to be fair!” Mister Woodward retorted, eyeing the weapons hanging from her belt, including that huge Civil War-era LeMat revolver. “Even your employer, Odin, would agree that it has to be fair.”

“I doubt that!” Aslaug stated with a sneer. “Just turn your back for five minutes. That's all I ask.”

“Listen here, Miss Larsdatter, I have to . . .” The look on Aslaug's face caused him to stop speaking because it appeared as if the filly was going to blow a gasket.

“You didn't just call me Miss Larsdatter, did you!?!?” the blond equine femme asked in an even if not a bit stressed tone, trying desperately to keep her cool.

“Well, that is your name, isn't it?” the raccoon questioned.

“Nobody that has a right brain in their head calls me that!!” Aslaug practically shouted. She then laid into the judge, using all of her favorite Old Danish curses, swears and vindictives.

Virginia stood off to the side, grimacing at the words being used by her equine Valkyrie friend on the hapless judge. Aslaug questioned the judge's lineage, whether he knew his father or even if his mother knew who his father was. His ability to sire a family was questioned along with his IQ and common sense. She even suggested that the raccoon had been dropped on his head more than once as a small kit. While the femme equine carried on, the white tigress was joined by her sister.

“What happened?” Victoria asked.

“He called her Miss Larsdatter.” the elder tigress replied, sotto voce.

“Not good.” the ruddy one commented.

“I agree.” Virginia responded. “Think she'll kick his ass?”

“I think so.” Victoria nodded. “Considering the situation, I know she just wants everything to be back to normal for us. She's stressed and the judge looks like he has unwittingly made himself her venting point, the object of her aggression.”

“Should we try to separate them?” the white tigress asked as she looked away from the venting filly to see her sister's reply. Recognizing the look, she just nodded. “Yeah, we stay out of this one.”

Victoria confirmed to her sister that Virginia had read her mind. “Yup, we'll just stand right here. Safer that way. When the filly finally runs down, we'll step in and do what we can for the judge.”

###

The second round had begun and the demon was definitely on the receiving end this time. Richard seemed like he was taking delight in pounding on the feline, landing as few as one or as many as dozens of punches before dancing back out of striking range. Besides wearing Sytry down, those actions seemed to frustrate the demon to no end. Sytry knew now that Richard had been right; he had made a very bad choice. This would be the end for him.

“Come on, spotty-khat! Get up and fight me!” the stallion goaded while he stood in his corner, arms akimbo while the demon got back to his feet again.

“Gimme . . . gimme a minute,” the feline implored, staggering back upright. “You're killing me!” he added, wiping at his right brow that had been cut open again.

“That's the whole idea, dumbshit!” Richard spat back. “Come on! I don't have all day!” he taunted.

Sytry got his fists up and began to approach his opponent with a look on his muzzle that seemed to indicate that he knew his time was up, only to step back quickly. He flinched his head out of the way just as a francisca flew by his cranium, cutting a nick in his left ear. That was followed by the bell for the end of round two being sounded.

“What in Hades!?” the demon blurted out, turning to look at the throwing axe that was deeply imbedded in a wall. All eyes then turned to the owner of that weapon; Aslaug.

“Sorry.” the filly put forth very noncommittally. “I was putting my francisca away after my little discussion with the judge when I tripped on this loose board.” She pointed to the errant flooring and kicked at it, just to prove it was indeed, loose. “Well, falling like that, it slipped from my paw. I guess it had a bit of momentum, huh?” She shrugged her shoulders, as if it weren't such a big deal.

Judge Woodward emerged from the darkness and limped up to the filly, seething. His clothes were a mess and it was possible that he had a fat lip and the beginnings of a black eye, too. “You will not interrupt this match again, do you hear me?” he shouted at the blonde equine femme as he waved his arms around.

“You wanna go back over to the corner and discuss that? Just sayin', ya know.” the filly put forth.

“Dammit, I'm a judge of The Celestial Courts! You must recognize my status!!” the raccoon shouted at Aslaug.

“And?” she questioned back sarcastically. Seeing that the judge was on the verge of having a fit, she continued. “I am a Valkyrie, in service to Odin. I recognize his jurisdiction over me. You, on the other paw, are just an irritation to me, nothing more. You hold no jurisdiction over me or anyone else in this room, for that matter. Go bugger off.”

While Aslaug and Judge Woodward continued with their 'discussion' that seemed to be gravitating back toward a darker corner of the warehouse, the bell sounded to begin round number three. Sytry's corner fur had given him an energy drink and patched him up as well as possible. It was clear that the stallion, while showing some outward damage himself, had put the hurt on his opponent.

Sytry was finally getting the hang of bare-knuckle brawling but it was evident that the knowledge was too

late in coming. For every good punch landed by the feline demon, the equine landed scores. Richard stepped into the spotted one once again and put one arm around Sytry's head to hold him while he hammered the hapless victims' midsection with the other.

“Concede, you idiot! Concede before I get really pissed off and unload on you!!” the gray one growled into his opponent's ear, right before he stepped back and rang the feline's bell solidly with a left cross.

The demon laid there on the mat, wondering how he got there. He was sure he was standing just a moment ago, fighting the stallion. Trying to get back to his feet, he heard the stallion nearby, giving him some sage advice.

“Give up, dammit!! You can't beat me!!” Richard practically shouted.

Sytry waved a paw at him. “No, I . . . I'm going out my way.” he wheezed out after he finally became vertical again.

“I offered.” the minor mage said as he shrugged his shoulders. “Well, s'been nice knowing you.” He then invaded the demon's personal space and began to systematically pound the winged one to pieces.

The blows landed by the feline demon seemed to have no effect on the protagonist while Richard's blows were being directed right into the major pain centers. Sytry had no idea that one could hurt this bad and not die. Somehow his opponent had pummeled his right shoulder so much that he couldn't hardly lift that arm any longer. The stallion was now starting on his left arm.

Sytry stepped back and waved his left appendage weakly at his oppressor. “I concede!! I concede!!” he blurted out while he dropped to his knees.

Richard nodded. “Good choice, spotty-khat. I did not relish pounding . . .” The stallion stopped speaking when Lucifer, in his human form, stepped into the 'ring'.

“Oh my, I seem to be just in time to see the end of Sytry!” the Prince of Lies stated with a hint of glee in his voice. “You know, he wasn't the smarted demon figure I've ever known. Just look at him, all beaten to shit and pummeled to tiny pieces. Nice job, Mister Delancey. Or should I say, Jackhammer Delancey.”

“Jackhammer Delancey was hidden away in my mind a long time ago! This idiot demon brought him back out of me, the part of me I wanted to forget!!” the gray one shouted at the elder human, walking right up to him with fire in his eyes. “You wanna go a few rounds with me, Ass-Hole?? I'll show you what Jackhammer Delancey can do!!” he added, getting right into the Light Bringer's face.

“Not right now.” Luci replied, stepping back from the enraged stallion. “Somehow, I think that you might come out on the losing end, even if you are a minor mage. No, not right now.”

“How about me, cupcake?” a deep bass male voice asked, right before a pair of huge gray paws spun him around and hoisted the Evil One by the front of his clothes to eye level. “I think you know me, Luci. I also think you owe me about three wives that you took from me.” Monty stated maliciously.

The Prince of the Underworld was looking into the ice blue eyes of one very pissed off stallion, eyes that burned brightly with an inner fire that he hadn't observed in a long time. Not since the Light Bringer had been thrown out of the Celestial Home by his Father. Those pale blue eyes burned white-hot with a pure, unadulterated hatred, one driven by a broken heart, the loss of three loved ones. The elder humanoid

demon gulped.

“You are in a world of hurt here, hotdog.” Monty put forth in a low, menacing tone. “You are such a total dumb-fuck at times. You've unknowingly walked right into the middle of our null zone. Your powers do not exist because we control the flow of Mother Nature's energy within this circle. We control it, I can channel Her powers and you can't touch it. Go ahead, try to leave, ass-hole. Go ahead, pop out of my grasp and out of my sight. I double-dhaug dare you. No, I triple-dhaug dare you!”

“No, I'm not that stupid to just walk right into . . .” Lucifer could sense that a grave error on his part had been made. This really was a null zone, one where the energy that made him invincible was missing. “Oh Shit . . .”

“So, what will it be, hopscotch?” Montgomery Hill asked while an evil grin crossed his mug. “Brawling? Knife fight? Aluminum softball bats? Hmm? Pick one, I don't have all day. Just as a reminder, I once went nine rounds with John L. Sullivan.”

“Oh, now you wouldn't . . .”

“I sure would, snackshack.” Monty retorted. “Don't think for a second, that although I can't destroy your evil soul, that won't stop me from pummeling your ugly-ass hoo-man avatar into next week.”

“You wouldn't do that, now wouldn't you?” the Master Demon asked. “I mean, what's to be gained by killing my avatar? What are you looking for, some retribution or satisfaction that you've destroyed my avatar?”

“You betcha, lunchbox. A little old-fashioned payback.” the stallion agreed. “I've been looking forward to this, ever since you took Mara from me. First you took Penny from me, then you took Theresa from me, then you took Mara, my last love and my last hope to settle down and have kits to continue the Hill lineage. I will beat your avatar to death, very, very slowly. As slowly as Mara died. You remember that, don't you?” When Lucifer didn't answer right away, he shook the King Demon violently as the stallion screamed out, “YOU REMEMBER WHAT YOU DID TO HER, DAMMIT!”

“Stop! Stop!!” Luci shouted, finally getting Monty's attention. “I . . . I remember. What do you want of me?” he asked.

“I want you to suffer.” the stallion said malevolently. “I want your avatar to die so slowly that you will never forget what I am about to do to your sorry mortal coil.”

“Monty, we need to work this out peacefully.” the Prince of Lies suggested.

“Nope, can't do that.” the stallion retorted. “I watched Mara die from some exotic disease that the best of the Consortium healers said came straight from the Underworld. No, your avatar must pay the price. You wanted to dance a jig, so you must pay the piper. That piper is me. Payment is due and it had better be paid in full, right now.”

Lucifer could see the fire in the gray stallion's eyes burning brighter than ever and it really looked like there was nothing else that could be said or done to defuse the situation. The Underworld King had lost a few avatars over the ages and it was never an easy thing for him.

“Monty, you're not afraid that I might retaliate against you?”

“No, I'm not.” the huge one replied. “You might know me by a different moniker; maybe Monty Bartell, bodybuilder and actor, M. B. Hill, infamous stock wrangler down in Texas or very possibly by the name of Bartell The Hunter, as in hunter and destroyer of everything evil. I know more about you than you do, butterscotch. Trust me, if you so much as screw with me or my family, I can and will hunt you down, then we'll go find Cerberus and I'll tell that damned three-headed kali that you're kicking him to the curb because you've adopted a dozen khats that are way better company than him.”

“Bartell the Hunter?” the evil one queried. “No, he was just a bogey, a myth used to scare new minions with . . .”

“Myth busted, hotshot.” Monty put forth. “I have just recently come into possession of a copy of the *Libro Tenebris Discipuli*, delivered to me personally by one Father Mario Veritelli. There's a lot of good reading there. Names, locations, code-words, etcetra.”

“No, you don't have that book!” the Devil denied. This was the Book of Dark Disciples, the whose-who of the Underworld, the true followers of Lucifer.

“Your signature is on the first page.” the equine retorted. “Says, 'To Father Mario Veritelli. Do my bidding to discredit the Catholic church. Signed, Lucifer!'.”

“No!”

“Yeah, must be a real bitch to lose possession of that book.” Monty put forth. “Mario gave it to me, just to keep me from tearing another appendage from his body.”

“Now look, you can keep the book, just let me go . . .” Montgomery put his finger to the Evil One's lips to stop him from blathering on.

“You're right, I'm keeping the book, well, just long enough to give it to Aslaug and let her do with it as she sees fit. As for you, I started by pulling Father Veritelli's left foot off, then his right. That's how I think I'll start with you.”

“Monty! You can't just . . .” Lucifer suddenly found himself on the floor, face down with the huge stallion sitting on him, keeping him from leaving the scene of his avatar's imminent demise. He felt the huge equine roughly pull his shoes off, followed by his socks. Two huge paws then gripped his left foot firmly.

“Sorry, this is really gonna hurt.” the giant fur commented to no fur in particular. That was followed by the worst pain that Luci had ever felt in a long time when the stallion began to turn his foot around to rip the ligaments loose and make it easier to relieve the Prince Of Lies of his foot.

Lucifer began to shriek from having his foot removed the hard way but all of the sudden, he stopped making any sound at all. The assembled furs observed the fact that Monty and Lucifer were being held motionless in what appeared to be a time-stasis field, followed by the appearance of an armored winged lion, the Archangel Michael. The threesome then disappeared in a puff of smoke.

###

Renee watched on while Cami broke down her rifle for cleaning. The femme wolverine chimera had been

commenting that it had been a while since she had inspected her firearm so this seemed like an opportune moment, now that things were settling down.

“Cami, would you let me do that?” the wolfess asked, giving her 'guard' a pensive smile. “It's been a while since I've had an AR-pattern rifle to work on.”

Cami looked up from her work. “So, what type of rifle are you most proficient with?” she questioned.

“Kalishnikov actions.”

“Hmm . . .” Cami nodded. “Hold on a minute.” she told the young femme canid. The former soldier went to her room and came back shortly with a rifle in her possession. Setting the weapon and a manual on the folding table in front of Renee, she spoke up. “Here, clean my hunting rifle for me.”

The young gunsmith in training picked up the long arm and examined it closely. It looked like someone had crossed an AK-47 with a Remington 7400 semi-automatic rifle. “What is this?” she asked.

“It's a Vepr Hunter from the Molot factory. On my homeworld, that means it's a product of the United Soviet Socialist Russia, a communist weapon.”

Renee checked the firearm just to ensure that it was not loaded, then she cycled the action by paw a few times, dry-firing the rifle to get a feel for what she was up against.

“Cami, this trigger is terrible!” the wolfess offered up. “If you have some fine stones, I might be able to smooth up the action a bit.”

The femme chimera did a quick search of her gear to locate a few sharpening stones so she gave them to the young gunsmith. While Renee did her thing, Cami gave thought to the situation.

The former soldier really liked the Svensens and she felt a great attraction for the general area of Portola Hills and the surrounding communities. The thought of staying on as a counselor sounded better each day. She was even getting used to the presence of Eddie, the small black-furred minion. The small fur had taken to reading everything he could get his paws on and as a result, his personality began to show. That, and a new level of intelligence.

Cami thought about the conversation between Eddie and Morgan Sleight last eve, one that went the gamut between war, politics, the economy and fine single-malt scotch. The little fur was turning out to be rather pleasant company to all that took up conversation with him. Eddie had surprised her by suggesting that he might want to stay on, too. The small fur thought that there might be a job for him here at the ranch, even if it was just a small role. It was clear that he no longer wished to be a Dark Agent. While Cami gathered wool, her charge touched her paw to get her attention.

“Um, yeah,” Cami began, “Sorry, I was just thinking about a few things.”

“I guess so, Cami.” Renee countered. “You dropped your screwdriver into your lap and you didn't flinch when you did that.”

“I did?” she questioned, shaking her head once she observed the tool in her lap. “Gah, I must have been in the zone.” the femme warrior added.

“Cami, not to change the subject, but I heard you tell Morgan last night that you were going to stay on here.”

“I was thinking about it.” the femme wolverine agreed.

“Well, what if I wanted to stay on?” the femme wolf asked. “Seems to me like they might need an on-site firearms technician.”

The femme chimera thought about that for a moment. “You do know their son-in-law Brett is a gunsmith. You might ask if he needs another technician in the shop.”

Renee nodded. “Yeah, that might work out.” She looked at the disassembled firearm in her possession and continued. “Well, I can't say that I'm impressed by the trigger mechanism. It looks like they developed a transfer bar system to move the trigger back on the receiver, just to allow a better grip geometry for hunting. It's just not what I would have done, looking at all of the stack-up before the sear begins to release. I think I would have re-engineered the bolt and hammer assembly to allow the sear engagement to be better oriented.”

“You seem to know your AK actions.” Cami commented.

Renee smiled. “My parents sent me to as many training seminars as they could afford.” she informed Cami. “I'm certified by Smith and Wesson, Marlin, Ruger, Remington, Magnum Research and the Izhmash Armory in Izhevsk, Russia.”

“Renee, you should ask Brett for a job.” Cami put forth. “That is, if it's safe for you to stay in this reality.”

“I hadn't thought of that.” the femme wolf commented.

“Sorry if I got your hopes up.” the femme warrior offered up.

“No, that's okay.” the young femme countered. “Ever since I took this mission, things have went wrong, right and left. I fracked up and lost my good weapons, then I had to practically overhaul that Nagant with a hammer and a rock. I allowed my inexperience to get me captured and now my only way out seems to be allowing myself to be sent to some alternate reality where I might not blend in.” Renee wiped her eyes and added, “It's not your fault, it's mine. I screwed up so I have to pay the price.”

“Renee, don't think like that.” Cami said in a serious tone. “The Svensens will find a place for you where you can blend in and be happy.”

The young wolf femme went back to her work, giving that idea some thought. Maybe, if she could blend in, any reality they could place her in would be better than working for The Underworld.

###

Lucifer awoke to the sounds of . . . well, nothing. There was not a sound to be heard, apart from his avatar's rhythmic breathing. Blinking his eyes to clear them, he remembered where he had been what seemed like just moments ago.

Sitting up, he was shocked to see where he was. It was no place he had ever been, so that left just one

answer as to his current location; Neutral Ground. This was bad news.

“Ah I see you're awake.” a familiar voice stated. Looking to his left, an armored winged tiger came into view. It was Uriel, the Angel Of Death. “Good thing for you that you're not still asleep. I was really ready to kick your ass to wake you.”

The Prince Of Lies stood up, straightened his clothes and smirked at his former brother. “If you don't mind, I'll be leaving . . .”

“No, you won't.” another voice chimed in. “We were asked to intervene but we made no promises that we wouldn't rough up your sorry-arse avatar.” Michael walked up to the Fallen One and without warning, hit him with a roundhouse right cross, dropping Lucifer like a bad habit.

“What was that all about?” the King Demon asked, rubbing his jaw. It was apparent that the punch was not pulled.

“Well, paybacks are a bitch.” the armored lion replied while his truly-fallen brother stood back up. “By the way, you can't leave until we're done talking to you.”

“Heh, you wouldn't try to kill me, now would you?” Lucifer questioned.

“No, we're not allowed to.” Uriel offered up. “What we want you to understand is this; The Svensens are some very nice furs that you are to leave alone, capishe?” Before the demon could answer, the Angel Of Death continued. “If you don't leave them alone, we will assist Monty in finding you.”

“That's not very fair!” Lucifer blurted out. “I was only . . .”

“Hey! Lucifer!” a very familiar voice said loudly. The Dark One looked over to see the huge gray stallion, sipping a cold bottle of water. “Michael and Uriel both say that if you don't agree, I get to kick that sorry avatar of yours into next week.”

“Okay, I agree.” It was clear that the two Angels had prevailed in this minor issue.

“Alright you get out of here, then.” Michael growled at his former brother. With a gesture of his paw, the Devil was gone.

“How about me?” Monty asked.

“Well, we wanted to talk to you, too.” Michael replied.

The smile on the stallion's muzzle disappeared. “What about?”

Michael cleared his throat. “We want you to retire Bartell The Hunter.”

“Why?” This really confused Monty, since he had done some 'freelance' work for the Angels from time to time.

“You must retire that persona to prepare yourself for the next major phase in your life.” he was informed by Uriel.

The stallion really was confused by these statements. "I'm lost, here." he stated.

"You have trusted our guidance before, right?" Michael asked.

"I have."

Uriel spoke up. "Well, you must trust us now."

With a small gesture of Michael's paw, the gray one disappeared from sight.