

The characters Torvald Arend 'Tor' Svensen, Victoria Angela 'Vicki D'nan' Connell-Svensen, Conrad & Cathryn 'Cathy' Svensen, Dana Lynn Svensen-Kashnikov, Brett Kashnikov, Gytha Louise Svensen Delancey, Roger Delancey, Roger Jr; & Heather Delancey, Axel Torvald & Madelyn Svensen, Valerie Connell, Joseph & Harriet Connell, Barbara Caine, Wilhelmine Marie Kurzweil-Delancey, Richard Delancey, James William & Nancy Kurzweil, Peter the dispatcher, El Casa Del Burrito[®], Leonard's Restaurant[®] and Steven Nanomantube are the property of Kellan Meig'h and may not be published or reproduced in any form without express written permission. Any resemblance to any fur or person, either living or dead is purely coincidental.

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“A Loss Of Rights”

By Kellan Meig'h

Chapter 15

Their morning meal over with, Willi Marie made the table disappear, which seemed to unnerve Sir Marc even further. Victoria walked over to him and put her hand on his shoulder, making him jump in response.

“Sit Marc, why are you so scared of Wilhelmine? She is a kind, friendly sorceress.” she said softly to him, hoping to settle his nerves. “She would never think of harming you, or anyone in this troupe.” He nodded, giving it some thought.

“I will accept your word she will not harm me,” the canid finally told her, giving her a nervous smile afterwards. Willi Marie went over to Torvald to ask him a question about clothing.

“Uncle Torvald, will my ren-faire clothing look OK for here?” she wanted to find out, knowing her sweats were just too out of place for this century and planet.

“I think they would be fine,” he replied after giving it some thought. She closed her eyes and held out her arms, her clothing appearing in her arms in just a few moments.

“This is the clothing I bought from Ravenswood Leather Company[®] a few years back at the Northern California Ren Fest. You know, that Casa De Fruita place by Gilroy,” she told him, going behind a bush to change into them. She came back out looking more the part now, wearing a long, dark green leather archer's dress with a light green cloth skirt and white blouse underneath along with her armor. She held out her arms again to conjure up her leather bracers, her Hoyt Montega Mk. 4 compound bow and a quiver full of razor-sharp hunting broad head arrows. Torvald looked at her strangely so she stated rather firmly to him, “I'm not going unarmed into a strange land.”

“Uh, what about your spear ...” Torvald mentioned, seeming a bit confused.

“I won't forgo my spear but it's just one weapon. This,” she pointed out, tapping her quiver, “This is twenty-four deadly arrows. I will not allow myself to be put in the same situation that we were in before, when we went up against Beoram.”

“Beoram ...” Victoria said cautiously, trying to jog a stifled memory loose. “Torvald, wasn't he a ... whippet, maybe, that we might have battled?” she asked, trying to get that memory to come in clear for

her. It was cloudy, unsure ... but she knew she had some involvement with a battle against a whippet with that name.

“Yes, he was a demon in a mortal shell that we battled,” he confirmed for her, feeling sad about hearing her ask about something like that.

Torvald was just sick to tears inside, knowing his mate would most likely never be the same, even if they lived for thousands of years. Her memories were for the most part gone and the possibility that she could integrate back into mainstream modern America was very slim, to say the least. Wilhelmine's Great-great Grandfather Mordred Reed had been unable to make his mark in the modern world so Odin had stepped in and sent him to an era where he could live out his life on a world where he felt at home. Now Torvald was beginning to see that he would most likely have to stay here with Victoria, in a land where she felt at ease. He didn't want her to feel the pain of trying to reintegrate into modern life so he knew he would have to sit down with her and talk to her about this as soon as possible.

“Well, do I want to try for two horses or a wagon?” the tall filly asked, shrugging her shoulders because she didn't know if she should try for live animals or not. Torvald thought for a moment, then made a suggestion.

“Why don't you try for some horses?” he thought, thinking if they were all on horses, they could travel faster. She closed her eyes and concentrated, momentarily a pair of black friesian horses appeared in front of her.

“Two more Jeffs?” Torvald blurted out, all three horses turning to look at him at the same time when he said their name. He shook his head, not knowing what to think about this situation. The two conjured friesians looked at one another, sniffing at each other, somewhat confused themselves by this predicament. The original Jeff untied his reins from the tree with his teeth, wandering over to the new versions of himself, checking them over carefully. All three equines 'conversed' in whickers, whinnies and neighs with one another then turned and looked at Torvald, as if asking for direction from him. The huge stallion walked over to stand where they could all see him, giving thought to the matter before them.

“This is how we'll take care of this situation for now.” Torvald told them. “You, are Jeff One.” he told the original one. The original Jeff pawed the ground once, nodding that he understood. “You, are Jeff Two,” he told the new version closest to him, that Jeff pawing twice. The last one nudged the huge fur and pawed three times at the ground, letting Torvald know that he understood the deal. Torvald picked up the reins of the original Jeff, holding them in his hand while he looked at the four legged equine with a crooked smile on his face.

“Why did we even bother tying you up to that tree?” he asked, looking at the solid black horse in question. The original Jeff looked up at him, furrowed his brow, opened his mouth momentarily like he was going to say something, then closed his mouth and lowered his head, shaking it just slightly. “Were you going to say something to me?” Torvald asked out of curiosity, kneeling down by his head. He looked around, noting that no one seemed to be paying attention in their direction presently. “Go ahead Jeff, if you want to say something to me, do it softly.”

“We're not supposed to speak when we're on missions,” Jeff replied very quietly, looking at him for a moment, then lowering his head again. “I ... I guess I shouldn't have said anything, then.” He looked up at the huge fur as he said, “I'll just go over there and talk with my copies. Jeff One, Two and Three isn't

going to work out too well. We'll need some new names for the other two.”

Jeff One headed off towards his copies so Torvald wandered over towards the main part of the camp, where Victoria was drawing out a map on the ground for the rest of them. Joe came his way, indicating for him to follow him. Once they had walked down to the creek, the canid warrior asked his question.

“Were you talking to that horse just now?” he asked, giving him his full attention. The elder equine sensed Joe wanted a straight to the point answer by the way he was chewing on his toothpick so he gave it to him.

“Yeah, Jeff can talk but I don't know if the others can. He told me he's not supposed to talk when he's on missions, though.” Torvald seemed uneasy about admitting that to his friend.

“OK, now I know I wasn't hearing things or dreaming. I heard them talking this morning.” Joe kind of pursed his lips and nodded, his mind settled a bit by that information.

“No, that was Victoria and myself talking this morning, when the sky was getting light.” Joe looked at him with a furrowed brow as he told his friend,

“Well, I heard you two talking. It was earlier than that when I heard the horses talking and I thought there were intruders in the camp. After I listened for a few minutes, I made out they were discussing how the plants here tasted funny to all of them.”

“Well, I guess we learn new things all the time,” Torvald said, giving his friend a pat on the shoulder. “Let's go get this show on the road.”

“Yeah, that sounds like a good idea.”

A lone rider, a jaguar dressed mostly in leather clothing, was riding like the wind on a bay stallion. The horse, a powerful steed, was covering the ground in long strides to get his rider back to his encampment. The rider, showing great riding skill, was watching the road and the condition of his mount at the same time.

“Storm, you doing OK?” the rider asked, patting the horse on the neck. The horse turned to look at him momentarily, a bit of unspoken communication between rider and mount. Just a little farther down the road they turned off, headed through the trees to a clearing where a giraffe/equine cross lay up against a tree with a bandage around his head, the part of it over his left temple stained a crimson color. The jaguar slowed his mount, deftly dismounting while the horse walked over to graze by another horse, a large drafter that was dapple gray in color.

“Mike, how are you feeling, partner?” he asked, checking the pulse of the tall one seated against the tree. The cross-breed looked up at him and nodded, patting him on the shoulder.

“I feel like an old fashioned diesel truck hit me, Doug,” he responded, wincing in pain from his head injury. “Next time tell them they have to fly us in, bro. No more of this molecular transport stuff for me.”

“Hey, so what happened to you, anyway?” the felid asked, checking his cohort's head for continued bleeding. For the moment, the bleeding had seemed to stop.

“Feel lucky you missed the miscue by coming here after us, bro. Somebody miscalculated where they were going to set us down. Woodstock was OK but I was too close to this flipping huge tree.” The huge cross pointed up at the tree he was sitting under. “I must have looked like a ball in one of those Japanese Pachinko games, coming down through the branches.” Doug looked up, spotting several large freshly-broken limbs in the aforementioned tree.

“Damn, Mike, that must have been scary,” he noted, giving the situation some thought. “Hey, why don't you activate your bracelet and go home, dude. You're too banged up to continue.”

“Thought of that, bro. It ended up getting broken somehow in the fall.” He held up his bracelet, showing his partner the blank display on it.

“Use mine, then. I'll get home with another bracelet once someone else comes to replace you.” Mike shook his head, gritting his teeth from the pain.

“Thought about that already. Won't work, Doug. I outweigh you by over one hundred pounds. Wouldn't get me home because it's not calibrated for my weight.” The Jaguar nodded, agreeing with his partner's logic. It wouldn't have enough power to get him back home safely if at all. Mike touched his partner's shoulder, getting his attention. “Listen, did you find Willi Marie, Glenda and Hilda?” he asked, taking a sip of water from his canteen.

“Yeah, I almost ran over Hilda and Glenda on the road a ways back and I found Wilhelmine with her aunt and uncle, just where we thought they would be.” He looked down at the ground, fiddling with an acorn laying there.

“You're not telling me something,” Mike stated, staring at his partner with a knowing look.

“Axel Svensen and that coyote, the family friend Jose Ortiz Latrans is with them.” Mike nodded, giving this some thought.

“That canid prefers to be called Joe, by the way. Well, the timeline as it's represented takes all of that into account. We still have to go ahead and make an attempt to locate Hess, at any rate before she gets herself killed.” Doug gave this some thought, then looked at the horses. Giving out a low whistle, the two beasts came over to them, the bay stallion taking a closer look at Mike's head.

“That looks bad, Mike. You sure you didn't break a few ribs on the way down?” he asked, giving the huge cross a serious look. “I saw you holding your side earlier, when we rode in.”

“You know him, he's just too tough to admit he's hurt bad,” Woodstock pointed out.

“Hey guys, hold on a minute. I need to think up an alternate plan here.” the huge equine mix stated, giving them a serious look of his own. “Have both of you had night vision goggle training?” he asked, trying to get more comfortable against the tree.

“I have but Woodstock hasn't.” the bay stated.

“Hold it a minute, buddy, that's not completely true.” the large dapple gray drafter retorted. “I have the theory stuff down but I've never used them on a mission.” The jaguar nodded, giving it some thought.

“I know what you're thinking, Mike,” he said, sitting down by his partner. “You're thinking of resting up a bit, then traveling at night to catch up to them.”

“Hey, you can't blame me for thinking ahead,” Mike said, holding his side from the pain caused by talking and moving about. “You know, Storm, I think you're right. I may have busted a few ribs on the way down.”

“When we catch up to Willi Marie, she might be able to help you out, Mike. She *is* a Class 6 sorceress by birthright, you know.” the bay colored steed pointed out.

“I know, Storm, I know” he replied, taking several pain pills, chewing them which made the jaguar and the horses grimace from thinking about the nasty taste in his mouth. “She doesn't know she's a Class 6 sorceress and I really don't think she knows how to control her magic well enough to heal me. It's not like she's a master healer like Eyr, you know.” Doug thought about it for a moment, then added his two cents worth.

“Well, maybe not now, but later on, someday ...”

The Immortal Couple's group finally got on the road towards Whitehall, riding in a somewhat loose formation. Sir Marc had deferred his position next to Victoria to her hubby, who seemed in very good spirits this morning. Axel was riding behind his father and he was watching his mother, observing how she was controlling her horse. It was obvious that she had rode a horse extensively here, since back home she would have been considered a master horsefur by some. It appeared as if she weren't giving her mount any direction but the huge stallion underneath her was under her complete control nonetheless.

There was one thing that did stand out in his mind about his mother this morning. She seemed to be very contented, riding next to her husband. She had a slight smile on her muzzle and the paw resting on the horn of her saddle was flexing a bit, her claws partially exposed. Axel had noticed whenever his sisters or his brother were content or happy, their claws were partially extended when they made kneading motions with their paws. Conrad always said it was a throwback, an atavistic behavior that was hardwired deep in their brains.

The young equine was happy to have found his mother but the only thing that was in his mind now was getting home. Not that this place wasn't a nice place, mind you, it was just the fact that he missed Madalyn deeply. They had been married for a few years now and they were thinking about having little ones themselves. He knew Conrad and Cathy were planning on having children, but later on, after he got his Master's degree. Joe poking him in the side snapped him back from his musing.

“Axel, something is pacing us in the brush, to the left of you,” the coyote pointed out, getting his Dragoon readied. “Keep an eye out that way, will ya?” he asked, peeling off to go to the rear of the group. The young equine looked back to see Willi Marie was readying her bow, already having an arrow nocked to the string. He drifted to the right a bit, giving themselves a little more working room just as Willi fired an arrow at an animal breaking out of the brush. The beast, a very large kali, dropped

to the ground right in front of Milly, making her have to hop over it to miss it. Axel was sure he heard Milly make a sharp 'Eeep!' as she cleared the dead beast.

“There's another one!” Sir Marc shouted at Joe, motioning to the brush by the road. Joe had gone into the meadow on the other side of the bushes on Star, trying to keep an eye out himself. The kali, spooked by the commotion, turned and ran in Joe's direction so the coyote dropped the beast with a carefully fired round from his pistol.

“Everyone, keep your eyes open for more of them!” Victoria shouted in English, then shook her head and repeated herself in Halst. There was one more in the brush, possibly just trying to get away without being killed.

“I have him!” Sir Tamal shouted, skewering the beast with a carefully placed arrow. The kali, which Torvald recognized as being of the species that were poisonous, staggered into the road and died.

“Quiet!” Torvald said, holding Jeff still. He was listening to see if there were any others out there, following them. Now content that they were no longer in danger, he dismounted and went over to the beast, dragging it out of the road so mounts that rode up onto it wouldn't be spooked by a dead, decaying carcass.

“We don't normally see their species this far south,” the tigress told her hubby. She thought about it some more, a fragment, a vague recollection of something ... “One of those kalis bit you once, didn't it?” she asked, her brow furrowed in thought. There was another recollection, clearer, of him falling to the ground unconscious, frothing at the mouth. She felt like he was out for a while and she had to see over him. He nodded, getting the other one out of the road.

“Yeah, we were brought here a long time ago in this planet's time by an entity. A group of them attacked us and bit me, making me sick for a while.” he related to her. She nodded, not sure that she remembered it exactly right, but he had to be telling her the truth. She just hoped at some time down the road, she would remember her whole life with her husband.

The two femme canids sat down under a tree, near the cool waters of a stream. It was obvious that others had been here by the look of the area around a fire pit. The taller one rubbed her feet, grimacing in pain.

“I have absolutely no power here,” she stated, looking at the water. She found a rock that she could sit on, putting her feet into the cooling creek to sooth them.

“I'm in the same boat, Hess. I cannot even conjure a pair of shoes for my achy feet.” The shorter canid replied. Joining her traveling partner, she put her feet into the water too, sighing in relief from the soothing effects of the water.

“Nevaeh, we are beat, then,” the taller one suggested, giving the shorter one a crooked smile. “I am sorry, I cannot help us out in the least.”

“I fear we will need to get used to living in this land,” Nevaeh stated, shaking her head. “It looks like we may now be part of it with no way to leave.” That made the taller one think for a minute or two.

"I fear you may be right." She thought for a minute before she spoke again. "In any case we need to press on, in hopes of finding civilization."

"You are right. I am getting very hungry." Hess nodded, agreeing with her thoughts.

"Let me soak my feet for a few more moments and then we will move on."

Conrad was rubbing his eyes, tired from looking at the books from the Fresno branch of the Hunter Auto Parts Stores® chain. A few small accounting errors had been found by them so far, but nothing to suggest theft by the employees. It just wasn't adding up right that the stores, once a very successful small chain of nine locations, was now barely out of the red.

"You know, Dad said he was thinking the accountants were stealing from us somehow," Cathy told her husband, rubbing her eyes too. She got up, heading for the hall bathroom. "I have to get some aspirins here, honey. I have an eyestrain headache."

"Would you bring me some, too?" the tiger asked, taking a sip of his coffee. "Cath, this isn't making sense. How can an accountant steal without getting caught?" His mate looked at him, trying to remember what her father had suggested.

"Dad thought the accountants were making up fake invoices for services or materials. That's the next step I have to deal with." She gave him two aspirins, giving him a hug. "We'll have to bite the bullet and hire Gytha. I need another set of eyes to look at this full time besides me."

"She did suggest we put the stores on Quickbooks® Retail Online," Conrad related, looking at one particular entry, then comparing it to another entry from seven days earlier. The same amount was paid out for miscellaneous paint supplies to a local vendor with the same invoice number. He noted the lines in the spreadsheet for Cathy to search for similar entries.

"What does it take to set up Quickbooks?" She asked, sipping her coffee. Conrad looked at her, trying to recall what Gytha had said.

"I think she said we needed a dedicated computer or something like that at each site as a server to log transactions with. She has training in setting up a system right from Intuit®. Mom and Dad paid for her training."

"That sounds expensive to set up," she commented, finding another anomalous entry sequence. "My Mom and Dad would still have to OK an expenditure like that."

"Yeah, but we seem to be losing a ton of money each month from the chain for over a year now. That would pay for the computers many times over." His mate nodded, agreeing with him completely. Conrad was rubbing his forehead, tapping his pencil on his notepad. "What do you think my Mom, Dad and my brother are doing right now? I hope Willi Marie found one or the other of them."

"I don't know, honey. Maybe they're all OK," She hugged him, then got up to get them some more coffee. It looked like it was going to be another long night.

The extended group that were headed to the castle had stopped to eat lunch and allow those that didn't ride all the time to rest their behinds a bit. They were enjoying hamburgers and fries, courtesy of Willi Marie's magic. Sir Marc was trying to enjoy his food but it was clear he was still spooked by the young equine sorceress, having sat down where he could keep an eye on her while he ate.

“Torvald, about our world,” the tigress queried, giving him a serious look. “Is it much different than this one?” she asked, wondering what awaited her on her real homeworld.

“I'm afraid it's different in many ways, sweetheart,” he replied, trying to keep his emotions under control. “I'm worried that you won't fit in on our homeworld once we return.” This seemed to bother the feline femme greatly.

“How much different is it?” she had to ask, wondering what her home was like.

“There are a whole lot of furs there but no humans at all.” Torvald related to his wife. “We don't ride horses there for everyday transportation, instead we use a carriage called a car. It's a mechanized device that needs no horses to move us from one place to the other.” She seemed to think about that for a moment before bringing up something.

“Do you think I would be happy if I went back to our homeworld?” That question did it, causing the huge fur to break down crying. He knew the answer was most likely no.

“Dad, pull yourself together!” Axel begged, getting up and holding his father closely to him, trying to settle his mind. The tigress went over to them, becoming part of a tearful family hug.

“Please my stallion, do not cry.” she told him. “I intend to return home with you regardless. We have a family there that needs us.” He nodded, trying to pull himself together.

“Dad, I know in my heart the whole family will help us to get Mom back up to speed,” Axel pointed out, still trying to keep from crying himself.

“I have feared going back to our home for some time now,” she told her family. “I know if all of my family members are willing to help me, then everything will be OK.” Torvald noted her speech patterns were beginning to sound more normal, so that was a good thing. If he could just be sure his mate would be able to return to the 21st century with no problems.

Hilda was sitting on a stump, looking at her lunch in her hand. The dried meat didn't seem to be doing anything for her at the moment.

“This jerky sucks,” she commented to nobody in particular, looking at the dessicated meat again.. Putting it back in her pouch, she stood, walking across the clearing while she thought about this situation.

“Don't say that, Hil,” Glenda asked, wrinkling her brow. “If you're not going to eat it, give me a small

piece of it.”

“You know that will only make you sick,” her partner pointed out, giving her a crooked smile.

“I won't swallow it, I just want the taste in my mouth, OK?” she commented, walking over to stand by her. “Come on, as long as I don't swallow the meat, it shouldn't hurt me.” Glenda nudged Hilda, sniffing at her food bag. The aroma of normal food was very ... intoxicating to her.

“Oh, OK, here's some of that jerky but don't cry to me if you get an upset stomach.” The female cut a hunk off of her jerky, giving to the horse. That made Glenda smile.

“Mmm, that's good stuff,” she commented, looking up at her partner. “I don't know why you aren't eating this stuff. It's pretty good to me.”

“Listen Glenda, do we want to catch up to them today or do we want to wait until they get to that place, what was it called ... Whiteside? Whitehall?” The horse gave it some thought while she chewed the meat in her mouth.

“Let's stay close, so they will get to Whitehall maybe fifteen minutes before us. That way you can stay in a room close to theirs.” Glenda nodded, sure this plan was a good one in her mind. Hilda thought about it for a few moments, wondering if this was the right move or not.

“OK, Glenda, we'll just hang back a bit, keeping them in range by binoculars.” She thought about it some more, not pleased by a particular thought. “You realize I'll have to stable you with the other horses at Whitehall.”

“I know,” she replied, not happy with it herself. “All the horses there will talk about is either getting laid or who they're going to lay, depending on their sex.” That thought made the female smile.

“So what if a handsome, strong stallion wants to ... you know ...” Glenda gave her a confused look, then smiled when she realized what was meant by that statement.

“Well, if he's a handsome, strong stallion,” the mare began, “I might just let him, if he asks nicely.” She waited just a moment before she added, “If he looks like my stallion husband Jerry back home, that might help.” That made Hilda turn red with embarrassment.

“I hope you don't talk like that around Jerry!” the flame haired woman blurted out.

“Only when I want my husband to make mad, passionate love to me.” Glenda replied. Hilda wandered off shaking her head, trying to get that mental image out of her mind.

The giraffe cross and the jaguar were waking up from a nap, Doug standing up to stretch out his back from the punishment of laying on the hard ground. Mike sat up, still feeling sick at the moment.

“Hey Doug, help me get over there, behind that bush. I need to take care of business here.” He stood shakily while the jaguar came over to help him.

“Mike, I hate to say it but you don't seem like you're in any shape to ride.” he pointed out as they walked over to their makeshift latrine. “I don't care how much you rest up, you're in bad shape.” Mike nodded, knowing his partner knew him pretty well.

“We need to move on tonight, Doug. We can't let them get too far ahead of us.” Doug knew he was right about this. They couldn't let Hilda eliminate one of her targets, no matter what. That would pretty much negate the entire mission here and if they failed, they should just as well stay here afterwards. The jaguar knew he needed to get Mike up to speed, no matter what it took.

“Well, let's get you up and moving around, then. You're going to be in a world of hurt once you're in the saddle.” Mike nodded, agreeing in full with that thought.

Cathy was working in the kitchen, making her husband's breakfast for him. She looked over at the books still spread across the dining room table, her spare laptop still showing the spreadsheet where she had left off last night.

“Morning, Sweetheart,” Conrad said sleepily as he went past his wife, headed for the coffee pot. “What time did you come to bed last night?” he queried while he poured his coffee, failing to remember her even coming to bed at all.

“Well, you were sound asleep when I came to bed at 1:00,” she replied, putting his scrambled eggs on a plate. “Would you like bacon or sausage?”

“Bacon,” he replied, sitting down at the breakfast counter. He rubbed his eyes, still tired from looking at his laptop display all evening. “Did I have you wash my favorite sweatshirt yesterday?”

“Um, no, I didn't know you wanted it washed.” She sat his meal in front of him, sitting down beside him afterwards. “I'll call Gytha this morning and talk to her about hiring her. I'll offer her \$20.00 an hour to start.”

“Can we afford that?” Conrad asked, putting pepper on his eggs. His bride nodded, taking the pepper from him and seasoning her eggs too.

“I called my parents this morning. They said to go ahead with hiring her and set up the Quickbooks[®] thing too.” Conrad nodded, putting some salsa on his eggs.

“I wish there was some way Dad could tell me they were OK on that other planet.”

“That's still bothering you, isn't it?” She could see the concern in his eyes.

“Yeah, It's still bothering me to no end.”

They ate their breakfast in silence, both of them somewhat subdued by the situation. Cathy could see why her husband was so upset about this. It wasn't like he could pick up the phone and call his dad to ask what was up. The only thing they could do at this point was to sit and wait until his parents showed back up again.

The one thing that had been discussed between all of the family members was the need to stay on alert for their return. When Torvald and Victoria did return, the entire family was to come as quickly as possible to welcome home the tigress. Conrad knew it would be a happy, teary time for everyone involved, to have the femme feline home again. Hopefully for good this time.

The femme cougar finished her meal, putting her plates in the sink to be washed later. She then turned to her husband, smiling at him as she asked,

“How would you like a running partner this morning?” Conrad looked up, giving her a smile in return.

“Sure, sweetheart, I would really like that.” After he finished his meal, they both got dressed in their running clothes, Conrad putting his cellphone in his pocket almost as an afterthought. They stepped out the door, headed for the shopping center that was about a mile away, a nice level run on concrete and blacktop for the most part. Two blocks away from the house, his cell phone began to ring so he stopped to answer it. He had a bad feeling about this because it was a number that he didn't recognize.

“Conrad,” he answered, listening to the fur on the other end. After a few moments he spoke again. “Yeah, I'm Conrad Svensen, the football player,” he said in a slightly irritated voice. He then got a very upset look on his face as he said, “I'll be there as quick as I can.” he closed his phone then looked at his wife like he was going to be sick.

“What's wrong?” Cathy asked, getting a dread in the pit of her stomach.

“Aunt Valerie's been in a car wreck.”

The two canid females were standing still, hands raised in the air. The farmer had his flintlock shotgun trained on them, both barrels cocked and ready for business.

“Neither one of you move or I will blow you apart,” he warned, giving them careful scrutiny. “You should learn to knock first before entering a stranger's hovel.”

“Kind Sir, we did knock several times but there was no answer,” Hess said in their defense. “I do not wish to die, kind Sir. Please lower your weapon because all we seek is some food and maybe something to cover our feet with.”

“Sit at the table, both of you where I can see you.” The farmer lowered his shotgun, putting the hammers to half-cock. “I will see what I have to feed you two if you can pay me something for your meal.” Hess took off one of her narrow gold wrist baubles, handing it to the man to look at. He sniffed it, then licked it.

“It seems to be gold but this is far more than I expected,” he stated, looking the band over again. “I will feed you and see if I can find you some foot coverings.”

“Thank you kind Sir, we have been traveling all day without sustenance. We are in need of food at any rate.” Nevaeh was glad to hear this kind gentleman farmer would feed them. That was until his wife came into the room. She was a wolverine and she was pissed.

“Theo! Are these your concubines?!?” she shouted through the house, giving them stares that were scaring the two former minions. “How dare you bring your whores into my house!!” The farmer's wife went to find her hubby, obviously not happy. They heard them arguing loudly, the female not believing his story for one moment. The couple made their reappearance with the farmer asking for corroboration of his story.

“Kind lady, we only seek food and some coverings for our feet. We must make haste to find a feline, a female that is orange with black striping.” That seemed to make the femme wolverine smile.

“You are in search of Vicki D'nan, the demoness.” the female spat out. “She is a witch or a consort of the devil, I do not know which. She cannot die, as the story goes, so she must be supernatural at the least.” this seemed to shock Hess and Nevaeh, to hear a commoner talk like this about the tigress. “I will feed you to make sure you meet your end at the sharp end of her sword.” she said sourly, turning to look at her husband. “Have they paid you, you no good lout?” He nodded, showing her the bauble.

“They have paid for food many times over, my love,” he stated, giving her a pensive smile. His wife snatched the gold trinket from him, examining it thoroughly.

“Aye, I see they have indeed paid many times over.” The female looked them over again, still seeming very upset by their presence. “We will feed you and fix you some foot coverings so you may travel. I do not like this but you have paid us well for our services.” The female wolverine ladled up two bowls of stew from a pot over the fire, putting them on the table. She then retrieved some bread and wine for them. “Eat up while my no-good husband gets some leather.”

Their meal completed, the farmer got out some crudely tanned leather and marked out their foot shapes on it carefully. Using a wooden template, he added short sides and lacing holes before cutting them out to gather them up into a simple ghillie shoe. It did not take much time for him to do this as it seemed he was very adept in working leather. The female in the meantime cut several layers of wool cloth to make innersoles from, once stitched together.

“Do you really wish to go to your doom, if you are truly searching for the demoness?” the female asked Hess while she stitched the innersoles together, just to make small talk.

“If what you say is true, we are going to our doom but it is necessary for us to do this.” Nevaeh replied. “I made a promise to 'someone' and *He* expects me to honor that promise.”

“You have made a foolish promise, then. You will lose your lives if you confront her.” The female shook her head, thinking they were first class fools. “I suggest you turn and go back to where you came from, keeping your life intact.”

“We cannot, I am afraid.” Hess pointed out. “We have nothing to lose as it is.”