

The Characters Torvald 'Tor' Svensen, Conrad (Parks) Svensen , Victoria Connell-Svensen (Sands), Valerie Connell, Barbara Caine, Elizabeth Caine-Sands, Luigi Tagglionne, Ivar Johnsen, Denise Berger, Sheriff Tom Huxley, Lawrence Cerruti, Pastor John and Lisa Aranow, Alexander, Maurine and Corrine Merriweather, Mitch Bolton, Theodore, Catherine, Walter and Laura Chevez, Rocky Robbins, Reverend Stan Marchese, Roger Woodall, Melvin Platt, Algernon Forrest, Asbeel Wildehond Lycaon, Catarina Dunkel, Pastor Seamus Maclachlan, Doc James Bischer, Karl Jenson, Robert Sands, Matthew, Jonathan, Anna, Nicholas and Thomas Sands, Wilhelmine Andersdatter, Axel Torvaldson, Gytha Torvaldsdatter, Dana Torvaldsdatter , John Parks, Candace Ewing Parks, Frode Gunnarson, Wilhelmine Marie Kurzweil, James William Kurzweil, Milton Heydeck, Ralph Carapina, Coach Rebecca MacNaughton, Steven Nanomantube, Constable Roley Blair, Geoff Black, Jared Black, Liam Archer, Terrance 'Terry' Williams, Susan Williams, Margaret Finley, Jens Johanson, Deanna Johanson, Duke Marcus Graves, Daniel and John Wolfe, Mordred Reed, Hilda Reed-Sorenson, Coffee-2-Go and Computer Shack are the property of Ray Stankewitz and may not be used without permission

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'The Price Of Worship'

By R C Stankewitz

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Chapter 22

"The Road To Death And Destruction"

The assembled furs were eating their morning meal in silence, most likely due to their trip ahead towards impending disaster. Torvald and Willi Marie had created a breakfast by paw without the use of magic for them this morning, in hopes of brightening their spirits.

"I think we should plan our attack carefully" the Vallhund said as he nibbled at the dregs on his plate. "This Duke is most likely a demon, from what we have been told."

"I would prefer that the femmes hang back at first" Victoria said, looking to see what everyone's reaction would be. "The possibility exists that one or more of us will get killed. I hate to think it, but it is a possibility."

"I think we should send the kids home before we do anything else, if we can" Torvald stated after he drained his goblet of milk. "They shouldn't be in harm's way if we can help it." He kept thinking it was his fault they were here in the first place and he couldn't wait for them to be sent home to safety. His mate stood and motioned for Conrad and James to stand together.

"OK, here goes nothing. I wish Conrad and James were back home" she said loudly only to have them not disappear. "Oh NO!" she exclaimed as she facepawed herself. "OK, what next?" she asked, still shaking her head as she looked over at her mate.

"I will take them home" Mordred said, going over to stand by them. "Conrad, please visualize your home in your mind" he asked as he readied himself. The mage put his paws on the two young feline's shoulders and said "Let's go home NOW" very loudly.

The trio disappeared from sight only to have the young tiger momentarily reappear. Conrad was standing there, wide eyed as he looked at his surroundings.

###

Christopher was sitting in his celestial home with Uriel, examining a very old piece of parchment. It was almost as old as time itself, yellowed and almost crumbling around the edges. Uriel sat the document back on the table as he glanced at the lion with a concerned look.

“You know,” he began, “I really think this marker has already been redeemed once before, during the great flood. I think the demon Rumjal redeemed it, if I remember right.” He picked it back up and examined it again, looking at the signatures on the bottom. The one signature that was missing was the one by Christopher's father, the very one that would signify that it was in fact redeemed.

“I'll have to take it to my father and ask him” the lion stated, picking it up and rolling it back up. “Will you tie that ribbon back around it?” he asked, holding it out for Uriel to help him secure the document. The lion finally stood and shimmered out, taking the document to his father for further clarification.

The archangel was still sitting there, thinking things over in his mind. He knew he would get in trouble for it big time but this was for a pair of furs he felt were his friends. He knew of a certain stallion and a particular tigress that would most likely need his help fairly soon. He reached into his robe pocket and pulled out a pack of Lucky Strike non-filter cigarettes. Putting one in the corner of his mouth and lighting it up, he stood and shimmered out, headed for the 14th century.

###

A winged whippet stood looking into a pool of enchanted water, watching the faces of those that observed the fact that the young tiger reappeared without the wizard and the young lion. He smiled a malevolent smile as he waved a paw over the pool, making the scene change to the Svensen's back yard. He laughed at the look on the mage's muzzle when he discovered Conrad missing and his total inability to return to his starting point to retrieve the young tiger. This game was getting better all the time for the whippet, knowing that in the end the dead stallion's head would grace the wall of his castle while his mate's carcass would be unceremoniously stuffed while she was still alive and put on display nearby.

###

“James! What happened? You were supposed to be home days ago!” Valerie stated as the two femme felines came out to the back yard. “And who is this stallion?” she asked, looking at the wizard with suspicion.

“This is the mage Mordred Reed” he replied to Valerie with a smile. “He is my Great-great-grandfather.” The tall stallion nodded and smiled at the two femmes.

“I am indeed Mordred, at your service my fair maidens” the mage stated as he bowed to them and then said “Conrad should have come with us but he did not for some odd reason. I cannot return to that time and place to retrieve him, either.”

“Well, I will have to call Loke again” the tigress said with a worried look on her muzzle. “That is -if- I can call him.” About that time, a sharply dressed winged hyena made his appearance.

“Where's the young tiger?” were the first words out of his mouth as he looked around at the assembled furs. “I told Torvald and Victoria to send them home post-haste!” He facepawed himself as he asked the mage an important question; “They couldn't send them home, right?”

“You are most correct in your reasoning” the mage replied. Valerie finally had to ask -the- question.

“Uh, just who are you?” she asked the hyena. He turned to look at her and gave her a nod of the head.

“I am the one that some refer to as the Prince of Lies” he said nonchalantly. “You may call me Lou.” He smiled and nodded at Barbara and then polished his nails on his suit coat.

“Lucifer?” the ocelot asked. “Is that your full name?”

“It would take a few minutes to tell you my full and complete name” the devil said with a smile. “I prefer Lou. It's short and professional sounding, don't you think?”

“Just what are you doing, dealing with my sister and brother-in-law?” the tigress asked, getting a mad look on her muzzle.

“A very pathetic demon has called in a marker” the hyena stated as he looked at her. “That demon wants them dead for killing his buddies. I want them to stay quite alive so the balance of power will not change in his sorry demonic favor.”

“Why isn't Christopher helping them out?” Valerie asked, looking totally puzzled by this information.

“The deal brokered when the marker was called in makes them paws-off to Chris and Odin” Lou said as he polished his nails some more. “I'm not part of that deal and Chris has given me his permission to act in his behalf in this matter, as crazy as that sounds. Ask him yourself if you don't believe me.”

“How do I do that?” Valerie asked, totally confused by now. “Do I pray to him or what?” The world around Valerie without warning suddenly went white.

###

“Torvald, this is real bad” the tigress said as she thought about what had just happened. The mage had left with James and he did not return to try to take Conrad home a second time. Torvald and Willi Marie had both taken a turn at sending the young tiger

home with no luck to be had. Terrance had passed on the attempt, stating his reluctance in creating any more trouble for the immortal pair. Merlin had left for his home before breakfast so he was not available to give it a try.

“I guess we are stuck with keeping our son alive until the mission is over” the huge fur commented as he thought out what to do next. “I will just make sure to keep him out of harm's way, then.”

“You know, Dad” the young tiger pointed out, “I can take care of myself. You trained me in combat and I can hold my own against you.”

“Conrad, son, that's not the point” the berserker replied with a concerned look on his muzzle. “We are going up against a demon and he will be slinging some real bad stuff at us. You haven't seen what we've had to deal with on some of these missions.”

“Well, yeah, I guess you're right” the young tiger finally conceded. “I haven't seen the things you two won't talk about.”

“There is nothing grand about war” the Vallhund pointed out to Conrad. “Even the best of soldiers can be struck down by one singular arrow to the heart.”

“I will make sure his armor is as tough as possible” Torvald said, noting that his statement made Victoria smile just a little. “The children will be as safe as I can possibly make them until this is all over with.”

“I suggest we begin our journey as soon as possible” Jens said, getting up from the table. “We have a long day's journey ahead of us.”

###

As the whiteness faded back into scenery, Valerie observed that she was in an alpine meadow, alive with flowers in bloom everywhere. She looked around to observe a casually dressed lion sitting at a table nearby. She began to walk that way and as she grew nearer, the lion spoke to her in a soothing tenor voice.

“Valerie, it is a great honor to meet the sister of my favorite tigress warrior” he said as he stood up to greet her. “Please sit and have some fruit. It is fresh and quite delicious.”

The tigress, however was still in shock over the whole experience. After a few moments, she finally decided to ask her questions. “Who are you and where is this?” she asked, indicating the surroundings with her paw.

“I am the one Torvald had once referred to as WhiteChrist but you may call me Christopher” *The Son* stated, giving her that disarming smile. “You're in my celestial home for a short visit.”

“Uh, OK, ... So is it true that you can't help my family?” she asked, still trying to get her head around the fact of just where she was at the moment.

“I am truly sorry but I cannot help on this one mission” he replied with a sad look on his face. It was obvious that Valerie was not happy with that answer from the lion by the look on her muzzle.

“Did you really let the Devil help out on your behalf?” she asked, waiting for an answer from *The Son*.

“As much as I don't like it, Lou will have to help out in my behalf” he replied. “He was not a party to the deal that was brokered. Odin and I cannot help out but unfortunately he can. I just hope that he doesn't screw all of us over in the end.”

“So...Um...How do I get home from here?” she asked with a very worried look on her face as she looked around at her surroundings. “Don't you have to be dead to be here?” she asked because she was truly worried that she might be staying permanently in this very beautiful place.

“You don't particularly -have- to be dead to visit here and I will personally send you back home, Valerie” *The Son* said with a smile. “Close your eyes just in case you get motion sickness” he added as he waved a paw over her, sending her back to whence she came.

###

The troupe were sitting around on lawn chairs that Terrance had conjured up, enjoying as best as possible a light lunch provided by the mage's chef/butler. All of them were on edge, trying their best to keep the bad thoughts out of their minds.

“Torvald, I'm really wound up” Victoria confessed as she nibbled at her sandwich that she had instructed the cook in manufacturing. “I want this to be over as soon as possible” she added, taking a few deep breaths to clear her head.

“You and me both” the stallion replied. “I want to be home for a while, just me and my recliner.”

“So you want to be a recliner potato, eh?” she queried, giving him a smirk as she thought about his statement. She could see in her mind's eye a huge potato with a mane and tail in Torvald's recliner, snoring away.

“And what is wrong with that idea?” he retorted. “I just want to relax for a bit, if I can.”

“OK, I'll concede on that matter” the tigress said as she finished her sandwich. “I need some rest too.” As they sat and rested, Conrad brought up something important.

“Dad, what are you going to do to our armor to make it stronger?” The young tiger was looking at his armor's breastplate, thinking about what changes would help. He knew a little bit about armoring from his Aunt Valerie's SCA involvement.

“I could make the frontal pieces thicker” the stallion said as he thought of how to make this change to their armor. He conjured up a compound crossbow and some evil-looking steel tipped bolts. He made a breastplate identical to Conrads' appear and

leaned it against a tree. Using the crossbow, he tested the strength of the metal. They were all disappointed to see the arrow zip right through the steel without any problems.

“That was a bust” the tigress commented as she picked up the breastplate and looked through the hole at her mate. “You’ll need to think of something else to try, my stallion mage.” Torvald worked hard at the problem, assisted by Willi Marie and Terrance to no avail. Everything they came up with failed in one way or another with nothing truly having any protection at all. Finally Victoria spoke her mind on the subject.

“The kids will just have to hang back behind us” she stated, looking to see if she was understood correctly. “We will have to somehow shield them from attack while we take on the demon. Torvald, make their armor as thick as it’s reasonably possible without making it too heavy for them.” The huge fur nodded in agreement of his mate’s concerns.

###

The whiteness turned back into scenery and the tigress could see that Christopher had indeed returned her to the spot from where she had come from. She looked around to see that Lucifer was still there, having a staring match with Loke.

“They’ve been like this since right after you left” the ocelot femme stated. “I tried to get between them and they pushed me out of the way, telling me it was none of my business.”

“Alright You Two!” the tigress shouted loudly. “If you want to fight one another, take it to some other world, will you?!?” Valerie was not in a mood to have demons and deities fighting in her sisters’ back yard.

“He must leave” the trickster said sourly, giving the Prince of Lies an evil stare.

“I was here first, trying to help out! Will you tell Loke that for once, I’m telling the truth?” Lou retorted, trying to show some small amount of sincerity. He turned to the tigress and asked her, “Did you see Chris? Please say yes, tigress.”

“Yes, I saw *The Son*. He told me exactly what you told me” she replied. “As much as I don’t like it, he has stuck his neck out and trusted you.”

“He did what????” the trickster asked, looking at Valerie with total disbelief. “I don’t believe it. He is lying, I’m telling you” he blurted out, pointing to the dark one.

“Christopher has entrusted Lucifer in helping out” the tigress stated as she finally sat down in her favorite lawn chair. “I don’t really believe it myself but that’s what he told me.” She put her elbows on her knees and put her head in her paws. She was exhausted from all that had went on today and Valerie wasn’t up to dealing with the two in front of her right now. She finally looked up at them as she said wearily, “Look, either kill one another right now or work together, please! Victoria and Torvald need help and they need it now.” The two furs nodded in agreement with the tigress and shimmered out of sight. Once the pair had left, Barbara came over to her lover and sat down beside her in the grass.

“Do you think for a minute that Lucifer will help them?” she asked, giving thought to what they knew of the situation.

“Barb, I don't know what to think anymore” she replied as she rubbed her eyes. “I'm just real tired of seeing my big sister caught up in all of this.” She looked over at her life partner as she said quietly, “I wish she would give up this warrior business and just be my sister the real estate salesfur again.”

“You know she won't do it” the femme ocelot pointed out. “She's too in love with her stallion to let him out of her sight for very long. You know that's why she became a warrior; to be with Torvald.”

###

“We should camp here for the night” the stallion said as he stopped his mount and looked at the clearing. It had high ground and good visibility to defend themselves if need be.

“If you say so, we'll camp here” Victoria retorted as she dismounted and stretched her legs that were stiff from riding. She walked over to her stallion and gave him a kiss on the muzzle as she hugged him tightly.

“What was that for?” Torvald asked, looking slightly confused by his wife's actions.

“No reason, I just felt like kissing you” she replied as she hugged him again.

“There's more to it than just feeling like it” he pointed out. “You are afraid we will get killed, aren't you?”

“OK, I won't mince words” she stated. “I'm real afraid that none of us will leave this world alive.” She first looked down at their feet and hooves, then turned and looked away from him so he wouldn't see her crying. Sensing something was still upsetting her, he reached out and turned her head back towards him, wiping the tears from her cheeks with the back of his paw.

“We will make it through this just fine” the berserker said quietly as he pulled her to him and held her tightly. “I will not let any of you get injured or killed if I can help it.” Holding her close like this kept her from seeing the tears that were welling up in his eyes as his emotions tried desperately to run away from him.

After their camp was set up, Terrance set about concentrating on something as he sat on a fallen tree trunk at the edge of camp. He cleared his mind and concentrated to 'see' ahead, looking for danger. What he saw in his minds' eye caused him to shake in fear. It was the whippet, looking straight back at him, smiling an evil smile.

###

Hrist was sitting at a work bench, carefully sharpening her spear to a razor sharp edge. This was the fourth spear that she had done so far and there were several more that she intended to take care of after the one she was sharpening was finished. A rather fit lioness Valkyrie joined her and watched for a bit before she said anything.

“You are up to something” the lioness stated as she watched the leopard appaloosa mare carefully sharpen the point. Hrist looked up after a bit and nodded her head before she spoke.

“Elin, do you remember the stallion Torvald that was here recently?” she asked, turning her attention back to the work at paw.

“I remember him. Didn't Gunhildr try to claim him for Freya?” she retorted, now looking at her spear to see if it needed attention.

“Yes, she did” Hrist replied. “He is in trouble and Odin nor WhiteChrist cannot or will not help, I do not know which. He does not deserve to be ignored when he will need much help.”

“What do you plan to do?” the lioness asked. “Will you stand by to claim him when he dies?” The equine mare shot the feline femme a hard stare as she swallowed and told Elin her feelings.

“I will help him to defeat the demon!” she said defiantly as she turned the spear to do the other side of the point.

“Will not Odin be angry if you help without asking first?” Elin asked.

“Let him be angry with me, I do not care” she said in a conspiratorial tone. “I will not stand by and allow an immortal to be destroyed by a mere demon. I will fight with him to our mutual destruction, if need be.”

Elin thought for a moment before she said “I will pray for your safety and stand by if you should need my help.”