

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, 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 3

"Identity"

The gray wolf had spent the better part of the morning stocking the shelves of his general store. It was hard for him to do this, considering his severely injured left hip and leg. Why he didn't just let the robbers leave with some merchandise and let it go at that he didn't know. He was fairly positive however that he had recognized one of the robber's voices as being a regular customer. Now he was reminded of that day every time he would get up on his step stool or climb the stairs to his store room upstairs. Looking at the cans of tomatoes that needed to be priced and shelved, he pulled out his marking stamp and set the price on it. As he stood there absentmindedly marking the cans, a couple walked through the door and began to make their way towards him.

"Mr. Johnsen, are you here?" the male voice asked with a detectable accent, possibly Scandinavian. The wolf could see the top of the head belonging to a very tall blond stallion walking in the next aisle from him.

"Next aisle over" the wolf bid as he put his marking device into its holster next to his Colt Navy revolver in .36 caliber. "Come around the end by the apples" he directed as he wiped his paws on his apron.

"Mr. Johnsen?" the huge fur asked as the immortal couple turned the corner to face the wolf.

"It seems you have found me" he replied as he put out a paw for the huge fur. "I'm Ivar Johnsen, proprietor of the Anderson township general store. Are you Torvald and Victoria Svensen?"

"You are correct" the stallion replied as he shook the gray wolf's paw. "We got into town late last night." Torvald had to force himself not to smile as the wolf was the

doppelgänger for his old mage. He knew by his senses however that this wolf wasn't a mage.

The shopkeeper sized them up for a moment before he said to them “The terms are as I outlined in my letter. You can use the cottage out back to live in and there is a small barn that will hold a couple of horses if you have them behind that.”

“When do you want us to start?” the tigress asked their new employer. She was itching to do something this morning regardless of task.

“Torvald can start right here” he replied as he handed the huge fur the marking device. “You can put those cans up on the shelf right there” he said as he indicated where they went. “And you, Mrs. Svensen can follow me and I will show you the books.”

###

With their first day of work out of the way, Torvald and Victoria found their way back to the small cottage that was behind the general store. Torvald had borrowed an oil lamp from their employer and they were now standing in the middle of their very small parlor, looking at the condition of the dwelling.

“This doesn't look very good to me” he noted as they observed the wallpaper coming loose from the wall. “It will need some work before we move in.” They continued their walk through the cottage to see that it had no indoor bathroom.

“I am -not- happy with this mess” the tigress said as they made more -interesting- discoveries. “Christopher is slowly making his way to the top of my list” she stated in a low tone. “He said we would really like our next mission. I haven't found a thing to like about this.”

“We will make it home” the huge fur stated as he knocked the cobwebs down in the kitchen. “You do have an indoor well pump” he noted as he gave it a pump only to have dust fly out of the spout. “It just needs priming” he commented as he worked the handle slowly and listened to the pump.

“I'm glad you're optimistic” the tigress said as she checked out the stove. “It looks like this antique only burns wood” she commented as she looked into the oven. The interior looked like small animals had been living in there.

“Well, we can't start moving in just yet” the huge fur stated. “We will start as soon as we get this mess cleaned up.”

The couple went out to the barn to check its condition. From what they could see, it was in much better repair than the cottage.

“It would be easier to move in here” Victoria said as she looked around. “There's stalls for four, I think. We could just put our bed in one of the stalls.” Her mate was snickering at her suggestion.

“Yeah, I'll get the horses moved over here tomorrow” the huge fur said as they left for the restaurant and some dinner.

###

Algernon was walking up Main street in town, trying to keep his thoughts trained. His new employer had taught him to scan with his mind and he was currently trying to sense the 'agents' that he was to find and identify. He was trying to sense a new direction to walk when he strolled past the jail house. What he felt suddenly caused the fur on the back of his neck to crawl.

“What the hell is that?” he muttered as he turned back and forth to get the direction of the feeling. It was getting stronger as he stood there but the direction couldn't be sensed.

“Good evening, Mr. Forrest” the collie said as he walked up behind the black wolf. Algernon spun around to see the town sheriff smiling at him. “Is everything OK? You looked kinda odd, standing there like that” Sheriff Huxley commented.

“I am just fine, thank you” the wolf replied as his heart rate slowed back down. “I was just out for a stroll, that's all.”

“Well, if you're all right, I will be bidding you good night” the sheriff said as he went into his office. Once inside, the collie removed his gun belt and sat down at his desk. He opened the bottom drawer and removed the fresh bottle of whiskey he had purchased this afternoon, pouring himself a full glass of the rot-gut from the bottle.

“There is something afoot with that one” he thought as he could still see the wolf's face in his mind. “That one is trouble.” He picked up the glass and drained it in one swallow.

“I've gotta learn to turn my senses off” he mused as he looked at the empty glass in his paw. “I'm not a mage anymore so I don't need my extra senses.” He picked up the bottle once more and poured another glass of booze to dull his mind from the outside thoughts he could hear constantly in his head. Tom thought back to the day when the two furs had come to his parent's house to talk with them. One was a male bull dog and the other was a Siamese femme feline. They had somehow convinced his parents to send him to school where he was trained from an early age to be a mage.

Now all his powers were good for were parlor tricks.

###

“I'm really tired” the tigress said as she sat with her mate at their dining table, picking at the dregs of their meal. “Those books are a mess!” She was shaking her head at what she had dealt with just today. “I'm not sure if I can figure them out. His pawwriting is as bad as yours.”

“My pawwriting is not that bad” the stallion retorted. “I can read it just fine.”

“You want to know what I think?” Victoria asked her husband quietly as she put her paw on the back of her husband's. “I think you still have that reading ability that

Christopher gave you when you were working with that Native American text.” She was looking to see if she had gotten her point across to the huge fur.

“That is possible” he commented as he gave that idea some thought. “The next time I get a chance to test it, I will.”

Well, I'm full” the tigress stated as she sat her napkin on the table. “I”m ready for the bed now” she added as she yawned a wide yawn that showed off all of her sharp teeth.

“Let's go to bed, then” the berserker said as he got up and pulled out her chair for her.

###

The black wolf was strolling down Main street, still in hopes that he could locate the agents that he was after. As he went by the restaurant, he felt a strange feeling coming from inside. Looking through the window, all he could observe was the usual town locals along with the new managers of the general store.

He had met the stallion earlier when he had purchased some ammunition for his rifle. The huge fur seemed like a nice enough equine so this had to be a false reading. As he stood there by the front door, the equine and tigress walked by him. As the couple went into the hotel, that strange feeling went away.

“This isn't right” he noted to himself. “They don't seem like agents to me. I better keep looking just to be sure.” the wolf turned and continued to scan the rest of the town.

###

“Did you feel something strange just now?” the tigress asked her mate as they went through the front door of the hotel. “Right when we walked by that wolf out there.”

“I did feel something that made my fur crawl” he replied. “Maybe we better keep an eye on him. He might be our mission.”

As they climbed the stairs to the second floor of the hotel, the equine made a comment. “I was noticing that a lot of furs were purchasing just small amounts of goods today.”

“What do you mean, small amounts?” his wife asked with a confused look on her muzzle.

“Not the usual amounts that you would normally purchase” he replied. “I've worked in retail before, remember? They were acting like they didn't have enough money to buy what they wanted.”

“That's odd” she commented as Torvald opened the door to their room. “Are you sure about this?” Victoria was still mulling this idea over in her mind.

“I'm pretty sure” he stated. “The only fur that bought a big bill of goods was Pastor Marchese.” Even the huge fur was confused by this. Usually a pastor had the least amount of income in a community.

"I'll look at the books tomorrow" the tigress said as they began to get ready for bed. "At least I found my night gown in my bags" she added. "Now I won't freeze tonight."

"Aw, you take the fun out of our missions" the berserker stated as he put on his night shirt. "I love to keep you warm at night."

"I'll bet you do" she retorted to her husband. "That's not all you like to do in bed" she added, giving him a seductive look that was conflicting badly with her heavy flannel night gown.

The berserker just smiled as he pulled back the covers for his wife.

###

Algernon was sitting in his parlor, mulling over the day's activities. He had walked basically the entire town's business district and some of its residential area. The only readings he felt were near the sheriff's office and the restaurant. This just didn't make sense to him.

The sheriff was a quiet canid that usually hung out around Main street. He was always armed but seemed like he didn't want to use his weapon to take care of business. The new managers of the General store didn't seem like agents either. They were your typical married couple, that's all. The huge stallion had a strange accent that the wolf couldn't put a finger on. The tigress' speech patterns also sounded strange to him. It definitely wasn't an east coast accent or a southern accent.

"Oh Well" he thought to himself. "I'll just have to look a little harder tomorrow." His new employer would be expecting results soon.

"I still don't know why I got involved with Zagam" he mused as he remembered the first meeting with the strange apparition. He had been thrown from his horse and the shadow figure offered to heal his wounds in return for his time. What had seemed like a good deal in the beginning was turning out to be a bad one.

"We actively burn churches" he thought out loud as he consumed his dinner of beans and cornbread. "I know they are -not- holy houses according to Zagam but do we have to burn them?"

"You must burn them so the furs cannot return to their houses of inequity" the malevolent voice replied from the shadows. A dark figure, more of a fur-shaped back cloud moved into the meager light from Algernon's oil lamp. "The furs then will attend -my- church as it will be the only righteous church in town."

"Zagam, Master. I did not see you enter" the wolf said as he bowed his head to the dark entity.

"Of course you did not see me enter as I did not wish you to see it" the dark form replied to him. "You have not found the agents as I instructed" he added. "Find them for me tomorrow or you will have to accept the consequences." The dark figure then quietly disappeared from sight to leave Algernon alone with his dinner. The wolf just shook his head as he realized he might be headed for disaster.

###

Victoria was trying her best to sleep in and ignore the knocking at their hotel room door. "Victoria? Torvald? Are you in there?" the familiar femme voice beckoned from the other side of the locked door.

The tigress looked over to see that there was just one shadow under the door so she got up and went to confirm who it was that dared disturb her sleep. "Who's there?" she asked before she unlocked the door just to be sure.

"Denise Berger" the femme voice replied. "I brought you some more clothing" she added as the femme skunk waited for the tigress to open the door.

"Come in" Victoria said as she opened the door and let the femme mustelid laden with clothing into the room. "I hope you brought me some riding pants" she mused as the femme started to lay out their clothes on the table and chairs in the corner.

"Sorry, it's just not 'correct' for a femme to wear pants to ride a horse in this day and age" Denise said as she gave the tigress a lesson on what to wear at what times. "You still need to wear at least skirts and blouses." About that time, the huge fur that was until this point sleeping began to stir.

"You femmes have woke me up" he said sleepily as he stretched out his arms. "What is so important this early in the morning?"

"I brought you more clothing" Miss Berger stated as she clued the tigress in on what her husband should wear. "You didn't have enough of the right kinds of clothes for your mission's job."

"How about some modern soap and deodorant?" he asked as he rolled over to face the two femmes.

"Once again, I'm sorry. No can do for you at this time" she replied. "You will have to deal with it in proper period fashion. Besides, you've done this all before."

"You really know how to take the fun out of missions" the huge fur said as he sat up on the edge of the bed, covering his lap with the bed clothes.

"Well, I'm done here" the skunk said as she stepped a few steps away from the tigress. "We have fixed the interior of the cottage but the roof was out in the open. You need to fix that yourself" she stated as she looked at the berserker. "We left you some tools, shingles and nails on the back porch. Your employer has a ladder you can borrow." As she began to shimmer, she said "It was nice seeing you two again."

"One day I would like to do a mission in modern times" the equine said as he got out of bed. "That way I would have decent deodorant."

###

Algernon stirred from his fitful sleep to see that he had gotten wrapped up in his bed clothes again. This fur hadn't slept well since that day he was recruited by Zagam. Getting up, he cleaned up a little before he began to dress.

“A leisurely breakfast would be good” he thought as she put on his shirt and pants. “Maybe I will have more luck today in finding the agents.”

The wolf finally finished dressing and went to the restaurant to order his morning meal. He could feel something very wrong in the vicinity as he waited to order his breakfast. Some evil or darkness was nearby but the direction couldn't be ascertained. He could see that the stallion and the tigress were sitting at a corner table and the sheriff was sitting in his favorite seat by the wall.

Corrine was helping out this morning by waiting the tables. He thought this was odd, that such a powerful femme would work for another fur. The wolf thought this was just totally out of place. She was both wealthy and powerful as far as that went. He even thought of asking for her paw in marriage once. He knew in his heart he could scratch that idea now. He probably wouldn't see tomorrow -if- he didn't locate the agents soon.

Algernon noticed a stranger coming into the restaurant and taking a seat by the front door. He could feel some very odd vibrations from this fur. He was obviously canid in origin but other than that, he didn't know where this one may have hailed from. His markings were very distinct but the pattern was throwing him off. He knew of no canids that looked like this. “I will have to find out who this is” he thought to himself as Corrine sat his plate of sausage and eggs in front of him.

###

Corrine had tended to all of the patrons except one this morning. She went over to take their order when she noticed the canid's appearance. “May I help you Sir?” she queried as she stood there at his table.

“Yes, I would like some of your flap jacks with a side of bacon” the stranger replied in a strange South African accent. “I am new in town and I will be staying for just a few days to take care of some pressing business for my employer.”

“Have you a place to stay Mr. ...uh, I'm sorry, I don't know your name” the mongoose said in a sheepish way.

“The name is Lycaon. Asbeel Wildehond Lycaon” he replied to the femme. “I will be staying next door at the hotel.”

“Very well then, I will have your breakfast ready for you in a few minutes” Corrine stated as she left the stranger to wait for his meal.

Mr. Lycaon scanned the room with his mind to note that he felt four points of energy. One was that bumbling wolf that Zagam had employed. The second came from the sheriff's direction and the third and fourth came from the couple seated in the corner. One of these would most likely be his target once their identity had been determined. Then he would kill the agent and the wolf. He was quickly distracted by a commotion in the kitchen that seemed destined to spill out into the eating hall.

“Alright, who ordered the @*%# flap jacks!?!” the black femme feline spat out with her paws on her hips, one holding a rather large meat cleaver. “Every -@#%#&- fur in this town knows I don't make @\$%&* flap jacks this late in the morning! Where are you?!?” The cook noticed a stranger by the front door so she headed that direction.

“Did you order some @#%&* flap jacks?” she hissed at Mr. Lycaon, pointing at him with the cleaver. “#@%*&! The griddle has to be \$%^&*@ spotless to make you some ^%\$\$#^ flap jacks!” Everyone was giving the femme their full attention because of this outburst. The sheriff was watching on, shaking his head at the sight of the black feline screaming at the customer.

“If it a problem, I will have scrambled eggs instead” the odd-looking canid replied to the cook. “I'm sorry to have caused a commotion this morning.” Mr. Lycaon was eyeing that meat cleaver in the femme's paw with much caution. He could feel the anger coming from this being and it was strong.

“That's more \$%#^& like it” the femme said as she went back to the kitchen to fix his breakfast. As the femme returned to the kitchen, she was confronted by one of the owners of the restaurant and hotel.

“Catarina, what did tell you about bullying and swearing at the customers?” Theodore Chevez asked of his cook.

“@#&^%\$ you. That @^%\$&* canid ordered flapjacks!” was her reply as she walked around the donkey to start breaking eggs in a pan for the canid.

“Miss Dunkel, I will not tolerate your attitude at all” the donkey said calmly as he turned to continue disciplining her. “Even though you are probably the best cook in all of Indiana, you will not swear at the customers or me.”

Catarina looked a hole through the small equine as she spat out “#%#^&*Ω∞ Esee!” in her native German tongue. “You couldn't find some other @#^%&* fur to \$%^&*@ replace me! Now Go Away!” she added angrily as she turned her back to the donkey.

“I give up” was all that Theodore could say as he went back next door to the hotel.