

Chapter 2

“Perceptions”

The trip to town didn't take very long so the evening desk clerk was still at the counter when the foursome arrived. “Good evening,” the donkey behind the counter bid as they walked up to the desk. “Pastor, what are you and your wife doing here?” he asked when he could see the soot covering their clothes. “Has there been some trouble?”

“Someone burned down the church and our parsonage,” he replied wearily. “We need to stay the night here before we leave for my sister's home in New York.” The pastor was trying not to break down but it was obvious he would do so at some point this evening.

“Don't worry, Pastor John. I'll put you up myself.” the small equine stated as he reached for a key. As he turned to pass it to the pastor, the leopard held up his paw to stop him.

“I do not ask for charity from you,” he stated firmly. “You of all furs should know that. I do have enough money to pay for at least one night.” he pointed out as he pulled his wallet out. The donkey looked insulted by the pastor's statements.

“You are -my- guests tonight,” he said firmly as he put the key on the counter and pushed it towards the pastor. “Please leave your clothing out for my wife Laura and she'll wash them for you.” He could see that they weren't very happy with the situation so he added, “My elder brother and business partner Theodore will just have to understand.”

“If you insist, Brother Walter.” the pastor said as he took the key begrudgingly. “Please tell your elder brother we are very thankful.” The two felines quietly headed upstairs to find their room.

The equine then turned to the immortal couple and asked them, “Is there something I can do for you?” with an inquiring look on his muzzle.

“Yes, we need a room for the night.” the huge fur told the smaller equine. “We have been traveling all day and I for one need some rest.” As he stood there, he remembered about the horses. “Is there a stable nearby? I have three horses that need to be put up for the night.”

“The stable's at the end of Main street.” the donkey replied as he got out the register and opened it for the berserker to sign in. “I think that there's some fur still on duty there. You might want to check down there after you sign in.”

“I will do that.” Torvald said as he signed in the register. He then retrieved from his pocket the required 2 dollars for the night and took the key that was proffered. As the huge fur reached for his bags to carry them up to their room, Walter noticed the names he had written down.

“Are you two the Svensens that Mr. Johnsen sent for?” the donkey asked with a look of confusion on his face. “I heard that Ivar was going to let you use the cottage behind the

store.” He looked back down at the page just to make sure. “You -are- the new managers for the general store, aren't you?”

“Uh, that would be us,” the huge fur replied to the donkey's query. “I didn't know how to find him this late at night so I thought I would wait and see him in the morning.” This was how many missions started. They would find out their roles from interacting with others.

“Well, you might find him right across the street. He lives in the house next door to the store,” the donkey stated. “I think he might still be awake. It's not that late for him.”

“It's late so I think I will just wait until morning to see him.” Torvald stated as he turned towards the staircase. “Where can we find breakfast in the morning?”

“We have breakfast, lunch and dinner next door at the restaurant,” Walter replied. “We open up at 6 am.” Torvald thanked him for the information and carried their bags upstairs.

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The berserker had found the stables without any trouble and went inside to find the stable fur in charge. “Hello? Is anyone here?” he asked in a loud voice. A short, stocky bighorn ram came out of the side office to see what the commotion was all about. He was still rubbing his eyes, apparently having just been woken up from a nap.

“What's goin' on out here?” he said as he rubbed his eyes some more. As he blinked his eyes to clear them, he almost walked into Torvald. “Good Gawd, yer a big'un, aren't ya?” the sheep blurted out as he took in the sight in front of him. He was craning his head upwards to take in the full view of the huge berserker. “Kin I do something fer ya?”

I need to stable my three horses tonight, at least,” he replied. “I may be staying in town for a while so I may need long term accommodations.”

“That'd be 50¢ a night per horse, fed and cared for,” the ram replied. “If'n you need to keep 'em longer, I have good rates. By the way, I'm Rocky Robbins.” he added as he took the money proffered by the huge fur. “I'll give ya a hand with th' horses.”

AS they unhitched the horses, Rocky noticed how Jeff was watching him closely. “You seem pretty smart.” he commented and petted the black equine on the neck. The Friesian looked the ram in the muzzle and smiled at him. “Did you see what that horse did? He smiled at me!” Rocky blurted out.

“He is a smart horse, for sure,” the equine stated. “His name is Jeff, the Appaloosa is Milly and the chestnut is named Star. Please take good care of them for me.”

“I'll take real good care of 'em for ya.” the male sheep stated as the berserker walked off towards the hotel.

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Once back at their room at the hotel, Torvald found his tigress sitting up in a chair, snoozing. She was still fully clothed, which seemed odd to him. "Are you feeling OK?" he asked as he roused her from her nap.

"I'm fine." she replied as she stretched her arms and yawned a wide feline yawn, showing all of her long, dangerous-looking teeth and curling her tongue. "I need you to help me undress. I can't possibly reach the buttons on the back of my dress." She turned around to show him the problem at paw.

"I'll get them for you." he offered as he began to fumble with the buttons. "These big paws don't work these buttons very well." he added as he finally got her dress unbuttoned.

"I think they make a hook to help button them," the tigress stated, "But I don't think they have something to unbutton them with." As she finally got her clothes off, she realized just how cold the room really was.

"Let's get in bed," she said as she pulled back the covers and jumped into the bed. "It's freezing in this room." she noted as she waited to warm up next to her husband.

"It's not -that- cold," the huge fur said as he slid into bed beside his mate. "If it were about 0° outside, then I would say it's cold." He pulled up the covers and snuggled up next to his wife, wrapping his arms around her.

"Mmmm, you're better than an electric blanket," she commented as the equine's body heat warmed her up. "I'm going to sleep good tonight." As she lay there getting drowsy, she asked her husband to give her his take on what they had seen and heard.

"So, why is the name Ivar Johnsen so familiar?" she asked and then yawned again. "Isn't that your old mage?" she added as the thought went through her mind.

"That was his name," he replied to his loving mate. "Now this world's Ivar, he's probably a gray wolf with a slight limp but he may not be a mage." He remembered that day so long ago that he first met the soon to be expired sejdmanager. "I hope this one is as nice a fur as the other one was."

"Mmmm...g'nite." was all that Victoria said in reply as she snuggled up closer to her mate. The huge equine reached over and turned down the kerosene lamp by the bed.

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A Mule deer buck stood at the front of the circled group, holding a large paraffin candle that was lit. He was quietly praying in a very strictly paced voice. The others amassed in the darkened room were silently praying along with him, each holding a crucifix in their paws.

After the prayer was complete, the kerosene lamps in the room were turned up so everyone could see what was going on.

The buck walked over to the dais and opened up his bible. "Brethren, you have been deceived by the demons that have called themselves holy furs," he said as two other

furs, a skunk and a small dapple gray equine began to pass around the collection plates. “The good book says that money is the root of all evil,” he spouted out to the small congregation. “If you give your money to the church, it will be used to do God's work.”

The congregation gave a round of “Amen’s” to the pastor as a substantial amount of money was placed in the trays. “God will reward your generosity,” the preacher said as the last fur put their hard-earned wages in the collection plate. Once the last hymn had been sung and the last prayer said, the small congregation made their way out of the meeting house doors.

The pastor closed the doors behind them and made his way back to the office off to one side of the meeting hall. His two elders were waiting for him with evil smiles.

“That was a good haul,” the skunk said to the pastor as he closed the doors behind him. The buck looked at his elders and smiled. “We are doing very good with...” He was cut off by another voice in the shadows.

“Put that cross away!” the rough voice said from the dark corner of the room. A form, clad all in black stepped into the light. “You know the stipulations. This room is to have no crosses in it.”

“I’m sorry, Teacher. I forgot.” the male deer replied as he tucked the cross into his shirt. “You have shown us the true meanings of the bible.”

“You are progressing quite well.” the black wolf said as he smiled a crooked smile. “I will be expecting much more from your congregation.” The malevolent figure sat in a chair and pulled out a cigar from his coat pocket. He pulled out a match and struck it on his boot sole, using it to light his stogie.

“Your congregation will grow by a few more furs now that the Pentecostal church has been destroyed,” he said calmly. “Their house was -not- a house of worship.” As he sat there, the small equine divided the cash into three piles. The pile that was the largest was put in front of the wolf, which he pocketed without counting. The second, which was smaller was handed to the pastor. The last pile, the smallest, was put into the desk for the church.

“I will expect that there be a larger attendance of the 'Inner Circle' now that your congregation will be growing,” the dark clad figure said as he blew a smoke ring in the air. “We must have a great portion of the town involved for our plans to move ahead.” As he got up to leave, he turned and smiled a very evil smile. “You are doing well, Reverend Marchese. We are pleased.” The black wolf then turned and left so quietly it was as if he weren't there at all.

“The Teacher still gives me the creeps,” the skunk said as he sat down in a chair and unbuttoned his vest. “I don't know what it is about him. He just scares me, that's all.”

The small equine retrieved some whiskey in a decorative decanter along with three glasses. “You're just easy to scare, Roger,” he stated as he poured some in each glass for them. “He seems like a good fur to me.”

“I am -not- easy to scare, Melvin,” the mustelid said as he sipped his drink. “I fought in the Indian wars out west. I’m real hard to scare, I’ll have you know.”

“Alright you two, this is not a time or place to argue this,” the reverend stated as he sipped his drink. “We need to do something about that Mennonite church on the north end of town. That’s what Teacher has directed us to do.”

“How will we handle it this time, Stan?” the mustelid asked of the reverend. “Ask them to leave or just burn them out?” It was clear that the skunk was not happy with his job as an elder because he was scowling at the thought of burning another church.

“They are pacifists,” the equine pointed out to his brethren. “We will not have to burn them out. They will leave when we threaten to burn their church.” Melvin was pretty sure about this fact. He himself had been a Mennonite in Ohio until he was recruited by Stan Marchese to start this branch of the Bible Reform Church.

“Well, we have to take care of this soon,” the buck pointed out as he finished the liquor in his glass. “Teacher will be expecting it.”

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“Zagam? Are you here?” the black wolf called out as he stood in the darkness outside of town. “It is your servant Algernon calling you.” The wolf looked around to see that he was still standing alone in the countryside. “Zagam, it is your servant, come to obtain further direction.”

“Do not shout my name like that, you fool,” the dark shape said in a low, menacing voice. “I have new instructions for you. There are 'agents' that are present to thwart my plans. You are to find and identify them for me.”

“Do you wish me to kill them in your name?” the wolf asked.

“You cannot kill these 'agents', you idiot.” the dark malevolent shape pointed out to the wolf. “I said find and identify them -only-. They are immortal and must be struck down by a fallen angel's broadsword. They cannot die otherwise.”

“I will find them for you,” the wolf said as he kept his head bowed to the dark shape. “They will be no trouble for me to locate.”

“See to it that you waste no time and find them quickly,” the dark shape told Algernon. “I will need to have a fallen angel -take care- of them once I have their identities. I will not waste my time with them when a minion can do this -task- for me.”

“Yes Master, I will do as you ask.” the wolf said as the dark shape faded out of sight. Algernon walked back over to his horse and climbed back into the saddle. “He sometimes confuses me.” the fur said to nobody in particular as he wheeled his dark gelding around and headed back towards town.

###

Morning had come and the tigress had slipped down the hall to use the restroom and wash up a bit. She was very hesitant at first but then finally decided to take a cold bath. This had proven to be a major mistake on her part as she was currently trying to warm up against the still-sleeping form of the berserker after taking what was undoubtedly the quickest bath she had ever taken.

“Huh? What the...?” the huge fur mumbled as his back became cold from the wet fur being pressed against it. “Victoria? Why are you wet?” he asked as he rolled over to face his mate. It became obvious to him what had transpired this morning by his shivering wife looking at him with a need to get warm again.

“Torvald, I'm freezing!” she stated as she tried to get as close as possible to her husband. “How do you take a bath in cold water?” she asked as she pulled the covers up further under her chin. She was shivering just a little as her husband put his arms around her to warm her up.

“Sweetheart, you needed to have some fur bring you a few gallons of hot water.” he instructed as she finally quit shivering. “It's just too cold for a bath without hot water. Even I would not try it this morning, even though it would be nice to bathe.”

“You do need a bath,” she said as she snuggled up closer to him. “That ride into town has made you somewhat smelly and you still have a sooty aroma to your coat.”

“Once you're warm, I'll go clean up some.” he said as he nuzzled her cheek. “I probably do smell to a degree and that's bad because there's no decent deodorant available.” He was smiling in contentment to hold his mate close to him like this.

“No decent deodorant?” she queried. “How do I keep from smelling rank?”

“Perfumes, mostly.” he replied. “There's probably a tin of Mum deodorant in your travel case if the technicians packed it right. If not, we will have to get you some.” He smiled when he remembered the time their kits were packed with some items over 100 years too new for a 1723 Jamestown, Virginia mission. “I used that stuff when I was first put on our own planet in Seattle.”

“Isn't Mum a femme's deodorant?” she asked as she finally began to warm up next to her hubby.

“It was, as far as I know.” he said as he got up and put on a robe. “I really reeked and my mage told me to use deodorant. I thought it was ridiculous when he said that.” He looked through his bag to find his toiletries. “I'll be back in a few minutes.” The huge fur said to his mate as he finally left the room to go clean up.

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The immortal couple had cleaned up, gotten dressed and went next door to get some breakfast. They were sitting at a table when a femme mongoose came to take their order.

“Good morning. What would you like for breakfast?” she asked as she stood there.

"I'll have bacon and eggs with some coffee," the berserker said to their waitress. "My mate will have the same but milk instead of coffee."

"OK, that will be just a few minutes." she said as she went to see the cook with their order.

"Why didn't you let me order my own breakfast?" Victoria asked quietly as she sat there and tried not to stare a hole through her husband.

"I noticed no menus lying about," he replied quietly. "You may have ordered something that wasn't found here. Bacon and eggs are fairly universal, I have found. Aslaug gave me that bit of information from being on missions with the squad."

"Well, I'll let it go this time," she commented. "Let me order my own next time, OK?"

"OK, I will." he said as he smiled at his loving mate.

As they sat there waiting, the tigress could see out the window of the restaurant, the various furs moving about the town were holding her attention. Just as she went to take a sip of some water that the waitress had brought, she observed a filly walk by on the other side of the street. A familiar looking blond filly.

"I think I just saw Aslaug walk by." the tigress said to her mate, whose eyes shot open at this information.

"Are you sure?" he asked as he turned to see the fur that his mate had observed. "We would have been told if she was coming to work with us. It's not likely though, considering her new duties."

"She is gone now," the tigress said as she looked to see better. "I'll swear it was her." As she sat there and thought about it, she commented on the situation. "You're probably right. It may not have been her at all." About that time, their breakfast was set before them.

"We will be here for a while." the huge fur commented. "There's plenty of time for her to find us if she's here." Victoria nodded in agreement as she buttered her toast.