

Chapter 4

The giant stallion was squatting down on his haunches, trying to get some much-needed rest. He had been in this torture room for ... who knew how long. He did know it had been a very long time at any rate. It was extremely hot, humid and the stench in the room was almost unbearable.

The chains that bound his wrist shackles to the wall weren't long enough for him to sit down on the floor properly so he was just making do. At least the waist and wrist bands weren't superheated right now. *That* was a plus in his view. All in all, he wasn't in too bad of a shape currently, just missing his mane and the hair off of his tail dock. His fur was scorched pretty badly but it was regenerating as he was resting. What he really wished for was to be able to wipe his nostrils. They were itching very badly but he couldn't reach them to scratch them right now.

It was relatively quiet in the room at this time. He could hear only the sounds from the brazier across the room heating devices of torture and those accursed furless canids outside the door, eating their meal. The Shieldmaiden was currently sitting across the room in the corner, silent now. She had cursed out WhiteChrist and various other gods for hours over not allowing her to do a thing *except* be an idle onlooker. She had her axe and Franciscas with her, but they would go right through anything the filly would take a swing at. It was quite apparent to them that the canids couldn't see her, only the berserker. This embarrassed the stallion, as he was stripped naked at this time.

Looking down at the floor, the filly spoke. "Torvald, I wish this would stop soon. I'm not sure how much more you can take." She swallowed real hard before she continued. "This is killing me, not being able to do something about this." Aslaug stated, trying not to look straight at him. Her ears were laid back and the scowl on her muzzle said it all. Aslaug *was pissed*.

Tor looked over at the Shieldmaiden as he replied, "I know, filly. I want this to stop ..." The berserker suddenly found himself lying muzzle down on the floor next to his bed, naked. The stench of scorched fur permeated the air all around him, assaulting his nostrils. He reached up to feel the stubble of his mane that was trying to grow back in. As he got up off the floor, his mate woke up with a start.

"Torvald! Are you OK?" Victoria blurted out, trying to wake up further. Finally awake enough to assess the situation, she exclaimed, "Not again! What is this ... the 5th time this has happened?" The tigress got up and retrieved a cold washrag, using it to wipe down her husband's muzzle

and forehead to cool him off. Victoria then guided him to the shower and turned it on full blast cold for him to cool off his body temperature and clean up some. The smell of burnt fur was making her queasy but she needed to see after him.

The feline knew the drill all too well by now. Get Tor into the shower, then go unlock the front door's deadbolt for the Shieldmaiden. Aslaug had been given a key after the second incident but it was pretty much understood by Tor and Victoria that she would knock anyway. Aslaug had said that she didn't feel right about walking into other fur's homes without being invited in. The feline then made a strong pot of tea for everyone.

Shortly, a knock was heard at the front door followed by the doorbell ringing. The tigress went to the door and looked through the peephole to see Aslaug standing there with a cross look on her muzzle. It still amazed the tigress that Aslaug could run the 30 blocks between their houses without being out of breath. She quickly opened the door and let the Shieldmaiden in. The filly looked to be in a rather foul mood as she went to the kitchen and sat down.

“This is ridiculous.” the filly muttered to herself, pouring herself a cup of tea while Victoria checked on her husband. “It was that way when it happened to me and now it's still ridiculous as it happens to Tor.” she commented to no one in particular. She put some sugar in her tea to sweeten it, then tasted it to find it was to her liking.

“I'm sorry, Aslaug. It was a long one this time.” the stallion said as he came into the kitchen in his bath robe. His mane was about half-way grown back and his tail hair was now long enough to be seen below the hem of his robe. He still looked like something the khat had dragged in. The various scorch marks were still visible as they healed, the one across his muzzle made by a brand being very prominent.

The Shieldmaiden looked at him as she said, “I don't understand all of this. Why am I there *just* as an observer? Why does WhiteChrist not let me kill those furless abominations?” She shook her head before she sipped her tea some more. The filly looked very tired.

Tor looked over at the Shieldmaiden as he said to her, “I don't understand this either.” Torvald shook his head and rubbed the brand mark on top of his muzzle. It was still tender from being burnt clear to the bone. “It always stops when I say the word 'stop' without thinking about it. If I just say 'Stop!' deliberately, it won't stop. I don't get it ...” he didn't finish what he wanted to say, being totally exhausted. He then looked at the Shieldmaiden as he said quietly, “I don't think it's *The Son*

stopping you. I think it's ... *him*.” The filly looked at the berserker and just nodded in agreement with that notion.

The trio sat around the table, sipping tea and nibbling at some toast that the tigress had made. After a while, Victoria went to the living room and pulled out the sofa bed, making it up for the filly to stay the night instead of going back home. First Aslaug shuffled off to her bed, then Victoria and Torvald followed suit.

###

Daybreak had come and the Svensen household was slowly coming to life. Tor had wandered out to the driveway to pick up his morning paper, careful not to wake the sleeping form of Aslaug on the sofa bed. He was presently working in the kitchen quietly. The giant was making a pot of coffee to enjoy while he read his paper. He was suddenly startled by a paw being placed on his shoulder.

“Wha...!” he exclaimed, turning around quickly towards the fur behind him. He was holding the coffee scoop as a weapon, a terrified look on his muzzle.

“Honey! It's only me!” Victoria shouted, taking a few steps back. “Boy, are you jumpy this morning!” she commented, looking at the plastic coffee scoop he was holding. “You're not going to do much with that, I can tell you right now.” she added, pointing at the item in his paw.

The berserker facepawed himself at the thought of fighting with a kitchen utensil that lacked a cutting edge. He put the scoop back in the coffee jar and sat down at the table. “This has to end soon.” he commented, hanging his head. “I can't take this any longer and I'm sure Aslaug feels the same.” The berserker looked very haggard as he sat there, rubbing that brand mark on his muzzle again.

“You're right, Berserker. This must end.” the filly said, standing in the doorway to the kitchen. Her mane was all askew and she was rubbing her muzzle in an attempt to wake up further. “Why does this always have to happen at night?” she asked, not really expecting an answer.

“I think it's because Tor's defenses are down only while he's asleep.” the tigress replied, setting some cereal bowls on the table. “If he were awake, he would have his mental defenses up, am I right?” she asked, looking at the two equines.

“You are correct in that assumption, my fair maid.” the voice said from the doorway to the dining room. The trio looked over to see Loke standing

there in baggy pajamas, a smug look on his face. “Well, I thought I might as well try to look the part if I'm having breakfast with my favorite equines.” he added, sitting down across from Aslaug.

The filly just facepawed herself as she muttered something that Victoria couldn't make out. It must have been in the Shieldmaiden's native tongue as Torvald smiled widely and the weasel winced at her.

“Now, now. I have come to help out, if I can.” the weasel said, pulling a jar of jelly out of nowhere. A jar of blueberry jelly. The filly looked at the container and facepawed herself again, shaking her head. “I believe that breakfast is ready.” Loke added as a full table of food appeared. “Please, enjoy! I made this just for my favorite warriors!”

###

Breakfast was over and the group was nibbling at the dregs of the meal. Conrad had joined them early on and he was trying to finish a piece of sausage without his stomach bursting on him. As he sat the sausage back on his plate, he asked Loke a question. “Sir, why do they call you the Trickster?”

The weasel looked at the young tiger and replied, “Please! Don't call me Sir. That sounds too ... formal. I am called the Trickster because I have done a *few* practical jokes around Asgaard. I'm not mean or evil like some would make me out. I did save your stepfather, didn't I?” he asked, taking a bite from some bacon in his paw.

Conrad nodded as he asked, “What kind of practical jokes did you do?” The young tiger reached for his sausage again only to see that the orange in his fur was now a bright lime green. He looked around to see that his stepfather was now a red chestnut color, the filly was now a dapple gray and his mother was colored like a Norwegian Forest khat.

“Loke! Put us back!!” the filly hissed, looking at her arms. Aslaug grabbed up a butter knife and looked threateningly at the trickster. “Do it now!” she spat out, feeling the knife's edge. The filly realized that it was dull as all get-out and finally laid it back down on the table. Everyone around the table was obviously having various reactions to the situation. Tor was laughing at what he was seeing, Victoria was looking at her tail and legs while Conrad was wide-eyed over the whole thing.

“OK, as you wish.” the weasel said, taking another bite of the bacon. The group could now see that Loke had made good on his promise to put them back to the correct colors. “It wasn't permanent, anyway. It would have faded in a few months, I *think*.” he added, smiling a devious smile.

After everyone had settled down, Tor asked Loke an important question. “You said you were here to help. What *kind* of help are you offering?”

The trickster regarded the stallion as he replied. “You are just being toyed with by **him**, Berserker. Destruction will not grant you an audience if you do not desire it. You must want it in here ...” Loke reached over and touched Tor's chest, right over his heart. “You *must* want it or you will fail.”

As everyone was pondering what the weasel had said, Loke stood up. “I have been here too long, I'm afraid. I do thank you for allowing me to eat with all of you.” The weasel then turned and addressed Victoria. “Please, let me clean up the mess, fair maid.” With a shimmer, the plates on the table and the Trickster were gone.

###

“I wish that weasel wouldn't just pop in and out like that.” Victoria commented, wiping the table with a dishrag. “Why can't he use the door like everyone else?” It was obvious that Loke hadn't earned very many brownie points with Victoria. The tigress picked up the jar of blueberry jelly and sampled it. She had to admit that it was quite tasty to her. She just couldn't understand why Aslaug wouldn't take it with her when Tor took her home.

“Mom, he doesn't need to use the door.” Conrad pointed out, sitting on a stool by the breakfast counter. “Besides, wouldn't it be dumb for him to knock? *Hi, I'm Loke ... may I come in?*” The young tiger was smiling at his mother over that last statement.

“Well, I guess you're right.” she replied, hanging the dishrag up. “I think we have all been stressed by the goings on here lately.” she added, sitting down near her son.

“Well, Dad did look pretty rough this morning. I don't remember seeing a scorch mark take that long to heal up.” Tor still had a slight darkened area around the brand mark on his muzzle when he left to take Aslaug home.

As Conrad sat there, he decided to ask his mother a question that had been burning in his mind. “Mom, if Dad doesn't belong to your church, why does he still go with you sometimes?”

Victoria looked at her son with one eyebrow raised. “He does it out of respect for me, son. I don't attempt to convert him from Heathenism and

he doesn't ask me to abandon Mormonism, either. When he goes to church with me on Sundays, the congregation doesn't proselytize to him. He is always being invited to functions like Thanksgiving dinner and the Halloween parties and they always go out of their way to make him feel at home.”

The feline femme looked to make sure that her son was following her thoughts. “I think that my church bishop hopes he will convert someday but they have *never* actively tried to convert him. I do know that he has read all of the Mormon tomes, though.” She thought for a minute before she continued. “If they tried to make him convert, *that* would be the end of it for him. I'm sure he would *never* go with me to church again.”

“I guess you explained it well enough for me, Mom.” the young feline said, seeming lost in thought.

###

A few weeks had gone by and things had been quiet for a change. The giant equine had taken his family on a recreational outing to the foothills. They were currently standing near the corral where some horses were being saddled for them. Tor was busy readjusting his riding helmet for the second time in 10 minutes.

“Dad, if most of the equines were killed off by the black plague, why did the horses survive?” Conrad was looking at his stepfather with a puzzled look. “Aren't you genetically *very* closely related to them?”

“I had wondered that from time to time. I can only guess that what makes me bipedal and sentient made my kind susceptible to the disease.” Tor replied, checking his riding helmet for fit once more. “I should have brought my war helmet ... it fits better than this.” he added, adjusting the chin strap once more.

Conrad had been put on a chestnut gelding named Copper and Victoria had been put astride a paint mare named Dolly. As the giant berserker stood there waiting, the canid horse wrangler finally motioned for Tor to come over and mount his horse. The horse, a huge Belgian draft mare, was calmly standing there and keeping a keen eye on the stallion's movements. She was interestingly enough, just a little bit darker shade of flaxen color than the berserker. “You'll have to be very careful, Sir. She's always skiddish around equines.” the wrangler warned him.

Tor calmly walked over to the horse and let her smell his paw. He petted her muzzle and neck and talked to her in sounds that could only be described as horse-speak. He first made a few low tones at the mare as

he petted her gently. He then 'whinnied' just a little and shook his mane as he snorted. The mare responded by nuzzling him in the face. Tor then calmly put his hoof in the left stirrup and mounted her. The mare never moved an inch as he did this.

“Are you guys gonna waste all day?” the huge equine questioned, looking at his family. They were both currently looking at him in shock over what they had just observed. “Come on, daylight's burning!” he said as he wheeled the mare around and trotted her around the arena, getting the feel for her gait.

###

The Svensens and their guide had stopped at a rest area at the top of the trail, about 1,500 feet in elevation above the ranch below. The trip to the summit had taken them about two and a half hours. They had all dismounted and were stretching their legs while the horses were grazing. All of them except the Belgian who was named Blondie. She was following Tor around like a little kali as he walked off his stiff legs. Victoria was taking pictures with her EOS Rebel digital camera, snapping picture after picture.

“Hold it right there, Sweetheart!” the tigress said, taking a picture of Tor with the big Belgian looking over his shoulder. She showed the results to her husband, who chuckled at the sight. “You'll have to tell me, *what* exactly did you say to that horse?” The tigress asked, reviewing her other pictures. The Belgian mare was still nuzzling against the huge berserker.

“I thought I told her that I was friendly and I wouldn't harm her.” he replied, “But I could be wrong.”

His wife smiled as she said, “You should be glad that I'm not jealous.”

On the ride back down the hill to the ranch, the group had stopped so the tigress could get a few pictures. As she guided Dolly into position to frame her picture with a tree branch, Conrad rode up next to his stepfather.

“Dad, could you tell me about Heathenism some time?” the young tiger asked.

The huge equine looked at his stepson and nodded. “Heathenism is not as complicated as Mormonism, son. When we have time, I will tell you what you want to know.”