

*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, Daria Kroft, 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 23

#### "End Of The Trail"

Morning had come and the troupe tried to eat some breakfast before meeting with the demon ahead. Torvald had consumed one half of a piece of bacon, probably the most that any of them had partaken. Jens and Deanna had sat off to the side, praying to their chosen god for their safety. Conrad and Willi Marie just sat there, staring at their food while trying not to look nervous. Victoria was pacing around the camp, trying her best not to lose it this morning. They could all feel death in the air.

"I think we should eat, even if we aren't hungry" the huge fur suggested, trying to coax everyone into consuming some sustenance to boost their energy.

"I'm not hungry" the young tiger stated, giving his father a cross look. "I just don't feel like eating."

"I am not hungry either" the tall filly chimed in, pushing her plate away from her.

"Can I second that?" Terrance asked, giving Torvald a weak smile. "Or is that a third?"

"It's safe to say we're all scared out of our wits" the tigress commented. "We should just go get this over with and skip trying to eat."

"Maybe you are right; let's get ready and go face this Duke or demon, whatever he is" Torvald said as he began to put on his armor. While he was adjusting his greaves, Willi Marie walked up to him and put her paw on his shoulder.

“I just wanted you to know I have enjoyed my time with you” she said quietly as she wiped a tear from her eye. “I know we may not survive this so I wanted you to know that.”

“We will make it just fine” the huge fur said back to her. “I will keep you safe at all costs.” He hugged her, not knowing what else to do. He knew in his heart the possibility existed that they would most likely all die today, not surviving their meeting with Beoram.

###

“Are the legions ready?” the whippet asked of his commanding officer, a black bear. He could see the soldiers massing in the clearing in front of his castle, preparing for their battle with the immortals. He looked to see his second in command smiling an evil smile.

“Will you display the stallion's head right there?” the bear asked, motioning towards the wall behind him.

“No, I think his head will be displayed in the reception hall” he replied. “His mate will be on display right underneath him, stuffed alive.” The whippet grinned at the thought of the immortal stallion's possible death at his legion's paws. “See to it that his head isn't harmed. I wish it to be in perfect condition. His mate is to be taken alive at all costs.”

“As you wish, My Liege” the bear said and quietly left the room. The whippet went to the window and watched the troops mill about for a while.

“You and your mate are not long for this world” he said to no fur in particular as he watched his commander form up the ranks and begin to march towards the impending clash with the immortals. He turned to his squire and said quietly “Have my horse readied. I will watch the battle from a very close vantage point. I would not miss this for the world.”

###

“It is time” Lou said to Loke's daughter, rubbing his paws together in anticipation. “They are getting close to the point of battle, Hel.” The femme wolf, young and beautiful on one side and old and decaying on the other, gave Lucifer a wide smile.

“My Daugr legion is on their way to meet up with the stallion” she stated. “You will need to tell Torvald that he and only he has the control over them.”

“I will relish telling him the good news” the devil retorted as he headed for the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

###

Uriel sat under the shade of an oak tree, enjoying a smoke and a dark ale. This seemed like the point most likely for the confrontation to happen, based on his observations. War was not one of his favorite things despite the fact he was the angel of death. It was

just one of those things he seemed to get involved with. He took a deep drag and blew a few smoke rings, smiling at the results.

###

the warriors were riding along at a decent pace, trying to keep a positive attitude about this impending meeting. As they rounded a bend in the road, a gray fox vixen stepped out in front of them and bid them to stop.

“I am Daria Kroft” she said loudly to the riders. “I have come from the castle to warn you of danger ahead and beg you not to continue your course” she continued as they stopped their mounts mere feet away from her.

“Why do you ask us this?” the berserker queried, totally confused by the femmes' actions.

“You are headed towards your deaths” she replied. “I have been instructed that I am to stuff and mount the two of you for the Duke once he has you in his custody.” Torvald slowly dismounted and walked straight up to her with a cross look on his muzzle, putting the tip of his broadsword lightly against her throat.

“Why shouldn't I kill you right here and now?” he asked angrily, the fire clearly showing in his eyes. “You would not be able to harm us if you are dead” he added as he put just a little more pressure against the skin of her throat.

“I do not wish you harm as I could not bring myself to do it. I would rather die first before harming you” she replied. “Please, I beg you to turn around and leave.”

“We cannot leave until the Duke is defeated” Conrad pointed out. “That is the only way the Gods will send us home afterwards.”

“Then I wish all of you God Speed and good luck” she said softly as she quickly stepped back away from Torvald, drew a dagger and committed suicide right in front of them, plunging the blade deep into her heart.

The filly jumped down from her mount and tried her best to restore the vixen's life to her but the dagger proved to be coated in a powerful poison. Willi Marie got up to her hooves, staggered over to a tree and used it for balance as she vomited, very upset by the whole thing. Conrad and Terrance went to help her stay standing while Jens held his mate tightly, consoling her. Torvald, however was still standing there in shock and his mate was quickly dismounting her horse to see about him.

“Torvald, honey ...” the tigress said as she reached him then fell silent as the whole thing finally sank in. “She really meant it, didn't she?” Victoria asked of no fur in particular, realizing that the vixen had said she would rather die than hurt them. She turned her stallion away from the dead body and tried to snap him out of his shock.

“I didn't mean for her to do that ...” he stated as he sat down at his mate's urgings. He looked up at his wife with tears in his eyes as he said “This is all my fault. I should have never gotten any of you involved.”

###

Uriel was still waiting for the impending clash and he was becoming quite impatient with the whole deal in general. As he lit up another Lucky Strike, he felt a soul that was in need of his services. Smiling, he stood up, took another long drag off of his smoke and shimmered out of sight.

As he shimmered back into the spot he was heading to, he observed a gray fox vixen's spirit standing over her lifeless body. She was looking at the situation at paw with much confusion in her eyes as if she didn't know what to do next. He then observed the bloodied dagger lying nearby.

"I have come to take your spirit home" he said softly, taking her paws in his. "It is time for you to leave this earth now that your mortal coil no longer lives." About that time Torvald heard Uriel's voice and observed him standing nearby.

"Uriel, who are you talking to?" he asked, seeing only the winged feline standing there, holding something in his paws that the stallion could not see.

"I have come for Daria's spirit" he replied with a wistful look on his muzzle. The berserker concentrated real hard and he could finally make out the faint outline of her spirit force standing by the Archangel.

"Please tell her that I did not mean for her to take her life" he requested, still quite sad over the whole thing. Uriel listened for a moment before he responded to the huge fur.

"She said she would rather take her chances with our boss than harm another sentient being" he related to Torvald, seeming sad too. As they were standing there, Lou popped onto the scene.

"I overheard what happened" the hyena said as he looked the situation over. "This is very unfortunate if you ask me" he commented, lighting up a cigar and taking a puff from it.

"You better not be here just to screw with us!" the huge fur said rather crossly to the Prince of Lies.

"I was just about to say that I could restore her life to her, since Uriel hasn't taken her soul for judgment yet" he pointed out, flicking the ash from his stogie.

"You always want something in return" Uriel stated as he thought about drawing his broadsword. "She owes you nothing right now and I wish to keep it that way."

"Chris will owe me for this one" he said as he walked over by her. "Would you like your life back, fair maid Daria?"

"Not if I have to kill and stuff them!" she said loudly as she pointed towards the immortal couple. Torvald was the only living fur that could see and hear her so the others were still waiting to hear the outcome from him.

“I was thinking you might want to fight on their side” Lucifer stated as he smiled at her. “I happen to know you were a very fierce warrior at one time.”

“I could never be that fur again but I would fight by their side” she said quietly. “I wanted to be a wife and mother but that will never be, since I am dead now.”

“Well? I'm still waiting for an answer ...” Lou asked, still waiting for her response. The vixen nodded to him as she reluctantly let go of Uriel's paws. She then got a surprised look on her face as her spirit slowly faded from view. Her mortal body then convulsed and coughed as she regained her existence.

“She owes you nothing for this!” the archangel said pointedly to the devil as he went to see about the gray vixen.

“You are right, Uriel. She owes me nothing at all for the return of her life, none of you do” Lou replied with a smile. “My former brother in Heaven Chris now owes me a -very small- favor for this one.” He then walked over to the berserker and said quietly to him “Hel sent you a Daugr legion to help defend you. Only you can control them, however.” He nodded his head and vanished with a loud POOF!

The vixen was sitting up now, looking at her chest with great confusion in her eyes due to the lack of a wound site. “I know I was dead!” she said excitedly. “How did I get back into my body?”

“If you do not remember what happened, then you don't really want to know” the archangel said as he made his wings vanish before Daria noticed them. This confused the huge fur so he reached over and touched one of Uriel's wings, noting that they were still there, just not visible. The feline smiled back at him, nodding that he understood why Torvald had done that.

Meanwhile, Conrad was scanning about, keeping an eye out for possible antagonists when he spotted riders and soldiers coming from the north. “Mom! Dad! We have company coming!” he shouted, pointing towards their possible assailants.

“Everybody get ready” Torvald said to the massed forces as he checked his armor for the last time. “We have business to attend to.”

###

Valerie was still shaking her head at the stallion Mordred, looking for all the world like an extremely over-aged surfer. He had on a pair of loudly colored jams, a tank top and a pair of Ray-Ban Daddy-O sunglasses.

“I do not see what could be wrong with my attire” Mordred stated, indicating his clothing choices. “Your mate Barbara has told me I will be in style when we go to the beach, as she calls it.”

“I'll have to have a talk with my dear, sweet Barb about her choice of clothing for you” the tigress said with a smirk on her muzzle. “This is SO not appropriate for a 800 year old stallion. I'll take you to Sears® myself and get you some clothing more suited to your status and age.”

“This Sears<sup>®</sup> you speak of” the palomino colored equine inquired, “Do they perchance have merchandise from my era?”

“No, they don't” the tigress replied, trying her best to keep a straight face. “They do have such things as lace-on and glue-on hoof protection, for example.” She motioned to Mordred's hooves as she continued with her line of thought. “Modern equines for the most part do not wear nailed-on steel shoes. It hasn't been done that way for a long time now.”

“So that is why the gentefur at the convenience market became quite irritated with me” the very old stallion mused. “I must have been scarring up his flooring by accident.” Valerie just facepawed herself over that bit of information. Mordred then added “I must not have been the first to do this. He made reference to a blond filly, too.” The tigress had to struggle to keep from laughing because she knew who the blond filly was.

“What's wrong with the way I dressed him?” Barbara asked as she came into the kitchen where the tigress and the mage were standing. “I overheard your comments from the laundry room and he doesn't look much over 50, if you ask me.”

“Well ... you're right, he does look about that age” Valerie replied. “Still, he needs to fit in around here and this,” she said, indicating the mages' clothes, “This is not fitting in! We don't live on the ocean!”

“You're right” the ocelot agreed. “At least he has proper clothes for when we go camping at the lake.”

“If he stays here with us” Valerie added. “Now, let's take him to get some real clothes.”

###

Torvald had rallied the Dauger army that Hel had lent them, spreading them out in a V shape to protect the mortals in the fray. All of them had knelt in prayer to their chosen higher power, asking for a quick and bloodless end to their impending battle.

“You two stay back here” Victoria directed the teens for their own safety. “Do not get anywhere near the front line no matter what, do you understand me?” She was worried for the safety of her son and their charge so she hoped that keeping them in the background would keep them safe.

“Victoria, they look like they are advancing” the huge stallion said to his mate. He was still thinking that he was the reason that they were in this mess so he was still somewhat worried about the outcome. Momentarily, a winged whippet rode to the front and announced his intentions.

“I will let the others go if you and your mate surrender to me” he shouted with a voice that sounded like it had a slight New York Bronx accent. “Torvald, I know you can hear me. Spare your family and friends their lives and surrender now.”

The stallion looked at his mate and said quietly "I will give up to create a diversion. All of you ride out in the other direction when I do this."

"We will do no such of a thing!" the tigress retorted as she gave him a look of surprise. "We will all live or die together! I for one will not desert the love of my life!" Torvald could tell by the look on her face that she was not budging on this issue.

"All right then" he said as he nodded his head in agreement. "I will give him a proper reply." He took a spear and threw it real hard, making it land right at the hooves of the 4-legged equine the whippet was riding, startling his mount.

"We will not give up!" the huge fur shouted back to the demon. "We will either destroy you or die trying!" he pointed out as they all prepared for the worst. The commander of the opposing forces waited until the whippet had nodded his head at him, motioning for his troops to advance. Torvald looked at his meager army and said loudly,

**"Everybody, let's Rock and Roll the place!"**

The opposing army waded into the midst of the Daugr legion, finding them to be a very determined soul-less force to reckon with. There were many of the demon's forces that lost their lives in the first few moments of the engagement, much to Beoram's surprise. Torvald was lobbing Francisca after Francisca at the enemy lines, making headway in evening up the odds for them. Mistfeldr and her brother Jarrod were making passes at Beoram's troops, leaving many of them burnt to a crisp. The rest of his troupe were currently firing arrows into the demon's forces, causing much damage in the process. That was until the demon's archers began firing back with cross bows.

"Make sure they keep firing at them! Do not let them stop until I say so!" the whippet told his commander. The bear smiled malevolently as he went to give his archers the demon's orders. As he turned to bark his commands at the left flank of archers, he noticed a glint from Torvald's back line. That was the last thing the bear saw as his head exploded from a .50 caliber BMG round from Conrad's MacMillan TAC-50 sniper rifle. Conrad racked the bolt, putting a fresh round into the chamber and carefully targeted the whippet. The next round from his barrel grazed deeply into the side of the demon's head, putting a substantial hole in his ear and knocking him off of his mount.

The young tiger observed a stoat firing his crossbow directly at the tall filly so he decided to do something about it. He kneeled where the stoat could see him, drawing his fire. Once the enemy fur had cocked his weapon and placed a bolt in it, Conrad readied himself. He was intently watching through his 36X power scope at the enemy, waiting for him to prepare to fire. Sensing the time to be right, Conrad slowly squeezed the trigger, watching the crossbow explode in the archer's paws followed by the stoat falling over with a huge hole in his chest.

Willi Marie had just taken another crossbow bolt in the leg, making that the third bolt strike she had suffered today. From her vantage point, she could make out that all of the holy warriors were wounded in some way or another and she was thinking of some way to stop this war quickly before one of them died. Concentrating all of her magical energy between her paws, she imagined in her mind a huge blade and made a horizontal slashing motion with her paws, cutting almost all of the opposing forces in

half with a lethal virtual blade. This was right as she took multiple crossbow bolts to the chest, slowly collapsing to the ground in tremendous pain.

Torvald was preoccupied by trying to remove an arrow from his shoulder when all of this happened. He looked around to see the opposing forces had been pretty much decimated and the demon's mount was off to the side, grazing in the green grass near some bushes. "I wish that demon was right in front of me!" he shouted angrily, drawing his broadsword from its sheath. He smiled a smile of total satisfaction when Beoram shimmered into sight, conveniently within sword range.

"What the hell?!?" the whippet exclaimed as he quickly dropped and rolled out of the way of the berserker's blade as it whizzed by his head, leaving a huge gash in his armor. "How did you do that?!?" he shouted as he scrambled hurriedly to his feet, making a sword appear in his paw. The two furs began to fight one another at close quarters, the clash of blades almost deafening.

Torvald managed to disarm the canid and put a huge gash in the demon's unarmored left forearm in the process. This seemed to have an effect on the whippet's demeanor as it appeared to worry him that the berserker could injure him like that. Beoram scrambled backwards to gain some room and quickly materialized another sword to fight with. It was fortunate for him that he had done this as Torvald's sword struck it almost immediately, the whippet almost losing his grip on his weapon.

Uriel in the meantime went to the aid of the fallen filly, holding her in his arms as he checked her over, oblivious to his own substantial injuries. He could see that her injuries were most likely to become fatal for her and the bad part was the glaring fact that there would be no help from on high until the demon was either dead or defeated.

"Go help my Dad, please?" Conrad asked of Uriel as he dragged himself over to the angel and the filly. He had suffered multiple arrow strikes to the body and legs and he wasn't in much better shape himself. "Make sure that demon dies" he said solemnly as he took the filly from the angel and held her, stroking her mane as he quietly sobbed in anguish. It was obvious to the young tiger that Wilhelmine was not long for this world, her life forces slipping away rapidly.

Victoria was having to deal with a problem of her own; besides all of her other injuries, she had a crossbow bolt through her thigh that was pinning her to the tree stump that she was standing in front of. Even though she knew she would survive the injury and it would hurt like hell just to pull her leg away from it, she just couldn't bring herself to do it.

While she stood there trying to get up the nerve to pull away from the bolt in her leg and free herself, Victoria could see that Deanna was still trying to get an arrow out of her arm so she could see about her fallen mate. Across the clearing, she observed Terrance was lying across the vixen, both of them riddled with arrows, not moving. The two dragons were both down, possibly dead or dying from what the tigress could make out. Uriel was preoccupied with working on his right wing as he made his way towards the huge stallion, trying to get a crossbow bolt out of it. This day was not what she had envisioned; it had become her worst fears and nightmares brought to fruition.

Torvald had disarmed the whippet for the second time, forcing the canid to have to materialize another sword in his paws. The huge fur advanced on the demon once more, slashing a huge gash in the canid's armor but he stumbled over a rock in the process and fell down hard, leaving himself wide open for attack. The canid smiled a wicked smile as he drove his blade deeply into the stallion's chest, leaving it stuck deep into the berserker's body. "You are now destined to be my damned wall decoration, you son of a bitch!" the whippet spat out as he made a huge executioner's axe appear in his paws.

When Torvald had fell, he knew from the pain that he had broken his left cannon bone in the fall. Realizing that he could momentarily no longer stand and fight the demon until his leg healed and these were most likely his last minutes on earth, he closed his eyes, saying a prayer to Odin for a quick and painless death. As he finished his prayers, he heard the whippet grunt loudly in pain and stagger away from him, dropping his axe to the ground.

He looked up to see a spear was somehow protruding from the canid's chest while the demon looked at it with complete surprise. It was rapidly joined by a second, then a third spear. A fourth spear struck the demon's right leg while a fifth one impaled deeply into his groin. A sixth one struck him deeply into his chest, most likely piercing his heart. The whippet was not going to give up yet, reaching for a dagger in his belt to make a last attempt at dispatching Torvald. He was trying to say something to the huge fur, the only thing coming from his mouth was dark blood. An extremely loud rifle report was heard followed by the canid's right arm that was holding the dagger dropping to the ground when his entire shoulder area literally vaporized from the projectile strike. The canid then convulsed, his eyes rolled back into his head and he fell to the ground dead.

The stallion was totally confused by this turn of events because his family, friends and troops were either injured, dead or dying so who could have done this? He turned his head to observe Hrist, Elin, Gunhildr and a very familiar coyote wielding Conrad's rifle standing in front of a group of armed Valkyries. Joe Latrans' wicked grin notwithstanding, the Valkyries all looked ready to do business.

"We have come here to help, now that the demon is finally dead" Hrist said with a wistful smile on her muzzle, still holding a spear at the ready in her right paw. She came over to the huge fur, knelt beside him and said quietly "We came to help you out if need be. I brought reinforcements with me because this was not right. You could have lost everything today, including your lives." He looked over to see the Valkyrie's sisters were taking his warriors with them, most likely to Valhalla.

The huge spotted filly got up quickly to dispatch a dying enemy fur that was wielding a crossbow in their direction, leaving Torvald wishing that Hrist had removed the weapon embedded in his body before had she left. Momentarily Joe walked up to the huge fur and held out his paw, giving him a Norse paw shake. The coyote then knelt and indicated the sword in Torvald's chest, nodding to him.

"Tor, Do you need some help with this?" the canid asked, examining the blade embedded in Torvald's upper body.

“Yeah Joe, please get this thing out of me. It's not gonna kill me but it really hurts when I breathe” the berserker asked of his friend. Mr. Latrans obliged him, putting his foot on Torvald's armor for leverage and 'carefully' removing the sword from the equines' body. Torvald smiled from relief as he let out the breath that he held while Joe removed the weapon, laying back on his elbows to rest. He looked over at the canid as he said quietly, “Thanks, Joe. That's much better.”

The coyote laid the sword aside as he knelt there by his warrior friend, loosening Torvald's breastplate armor so he could look behind it, checking for any continued bleeding. He then reached into his jacket pocket and passed the huge fur a frosty bottle of Samuel Smith's Oatmeal Stout. “We were having a barbecue at my place when Hrist came to see us. Aslaug brought this with her for our meal but don't ask me why I brought it here with me; I really don't know. It was one of those 'hurry up and leave for the 14<sup>th</sup> century' kind of things.”

“Thanks, Joe. Tell Aslaug this really hit the spot” the stallion requested, taking another long draw on that frosty bottle of goodness. He then looked at his friend strangely as he asked “Why didn't Aslaug come with you?”

“She said that she would pass on the 14th century this time; she said she's done with that kind of thing for now” was his reply, giving the huge fur a crooked smile.

“I can see her point” Torvald commented as he looked off in the distance, remembering what life was like for him and his tigress before they became holy warriors. Life had been so much simpler back then. The only major worries were Conrad's grades and whether or not the garbage disposal would jam up again.

“Uh, Torvald...could I ask you a question?” the canid asked to get his attention.

“Sure Joe. What is it?” the huge fur replied as he looked back over at the coyote.

“Could I keep this rifle? She's a real nice piece” he queried, patting the rifle in question. “It would be a shame just to leave it here to rust away” he added, giving the huge fur a knowing smile.

“Sure, Joe. Anything for my fellow warrior” the berserker stated, giving his friend a smile. The coyote nodded and patted him on the shoulder as he got up, walked over to meet with the tall red-headed mare and they both shimmered out of sight. There was no doubt that Gunhildr was taking Joe back to his home, rifle in paw. He wished he could be there when Joe would be trying to explain to his mate Annie just where the huge rifle had come from. The look on her muzzle would be priceless when Joe would tell her the how and where.

Hrist finally came back over to Torvald, removing the bottle of ale from his paw and taking a sip of it herself, giving him a nod and a smile. She closed her eyes as she enjoyed the full and robust flavors of a decent worldly brew, smiling as she stood there. The giant filly then knelt down next to him and got his attention so she could point out an important fact to him in their native tongue; “*You and your family are in need of a healer's care, my friend.*” With that said, they all shimmered out of sight.