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'The Price Of Worship'

By R C Stankewitz

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Chapter 9

“Information Please”

Torvald was sitting with Karl and Frode in the long house, sipping on some mead and ale. He had finally decided to tell his friends his strange story before it was gone from his mind for good. He was concerned that he might forget some key pieces of information so he wrote them down on a small piece of flattened tree bark for reference.

“I have seen things that would cause your minds to spin” he began, trying to read his paw writing. Torvald noted that he could barely read his own scribbings, a sign that the power of translation that had been given to him by Christopher was now gone.

He carefully told his compatriots what had happened in the span of time from the moment he disappeared off of the heath until he had reappeared. He told of being tended to in Asgaard, his mage Ivar Johnsen and his life during the depression. He spoke of his service in the Vietnam war, his tigress and finally their meetings with WhiteChrist, Surt and the tigress being made immortal by the gods to save her. As he finished his story, he waited for his friends to react to the information presented.

“That sounds like powerful *sejd* to me” Frode Gunnarson said cautiously. “You should pray for guidance from the gods” he added, stroking his chin in thought as he talked to the blond stallion.

“I will agree with Frode on this matter” the wolf chimed in, nodding his head in agreement with the black equine.

“I did not make all of this up” the former berserker said in his defense. “This is the truth and I swear by the gates of Asgaard that I am not lying.”

“I did not say that I did not believe you” his equine friend stated. “I merely said that you need guidance from the gods. It sounds like you need to return to the place where you belong with your tigress.”

###

Victoria was still looking at the coyote wide-eyed as he acknowledged knowing her and the equine named Torvald. What really blew her mind was the fact that the stallion was her -husband- of all things, according to Joe.

“No, he can't be my husband!” she said excitedly. “I'm married to Robert Sands, a cougar that I met 15 years ago!” She quickly reached into her purse and pulled out her wallet that had several pictures of the tigress with a very slender, athletically built cougar.

“Victoria, something is really wrong” Joe stated as he rubbed his muzzle. “You -are- married to Torvald and you both work for the gods doing their bidding besides doing your day jobs.” He reached over and took a picture off of the end table and handed it to her. The picture was of Joe, the vixen, Victoria and the huge stallion. The huge fur in the photo was holding her like he knew her and she was obviously happy with him holding her too. There was a target in the background with two small axes embedded in it. That back yard seemed awfully familiar to her but she couldn't put her finger on where it was.

“I supposed you don't remember Torvald trying to teach me to throw the Franciscas at your house, do you?” The coyote was visibly upset by this turn of events. “I need to contact our boss about this.”

Joe quickly stalked off to the master bedroom to try and contact the one he knew as 'Jess' so that left the two femmes in the living room. There was a moment of uneasy silence before Annie decided to say something.

“We have known you and your stallion for several years now” she stated as she gave Victoria a serious look. “Torvald talked you into serving the gods once you became immortal so the two of you could be together more often.” She looked somewhat sad as she said “I don't get to go on many missions with Joe and I miss him when he's gone.”

“I'm having a real hard time with all of this” the tigress stated as she sat there with Annie. “Doing the gods' bidding? On special missions? Why would we do that?” It was clear that the tigress was totally confused by all of this. About that time, Joe returned to the living room.

“Our Boss 'Jess' wants to talk with you” he told the tigress while he helped her up from the couch. “He says he needs to see you right now.”

“I don't understand...Our Boss? Jess?” Victoria said cautiously. “Where do I go to see...” She suddenly felt a very strange sensation, like the air around her was filling up with static electricity as Joe took a few steps back from her, smiled and spoke to her again.

“We'll see you back here in a little bit” the coyote said as the room around the tigress without warning suddenly went white.

###

Torvald was kneeling down on his one good knee, praying to Odin, Frigg and Freya. He was following the advice that Frode had given him about praying for guidance. As he finished his prayer, he heard a femme voice say "You are smart for following good advice." He turned to see Freya standing beside him, a slight smile on her muzzle.

"Odin sent me here to see about you" the vixen stated as she looked him over. "You have been affected by great *sejd*, stallion. We will have to track down the source of it so we can put this all back to right again." She touched him to feel his life force, taking it in and examining it. "You are no longer immortal. This is bad because it takes much *sejd* to remove that immortality."

"Freya, please settle my mind" the stallion begged. "Victoria -is- real, isn't she? I didn't dream her up while I was with fever, did I?"

"Your intended mate Victoria is -very- real and I must go see her quickly" the robed vixen replied to Torvald. "You will be back with her as soon as possible." As she smiled at him, she shimmered out of sight.

"Please hurry" the stallion pleaded as the last traces of the vixen disappeared.

###

After the whiteness turned back into scenery, the tigress found herself standing in the middle of an alpine meadow, flowers in bloom everywhere. As she looked around at her surroundings, she had the nagging feeling that she -had- been here before. She turned as she heard a voice call out "Victoria, please come and sit with me." She was looking at what must be *The Son* sitting at a table with some fresh fruit on it.

Walking over to the table, she looked the lion over carefully. He seemed real enough to her but he wasn't dressed like she thought he should be. He was wearing a loud camp shirt, some hiking shorts and tennis shoes. He smiled that disarming smile of his as he asked her "Do I need to change into some robes and sandals for you?"

"That's OK, you don't need to change clothing just for me" she replied as she sat down at the table. As she looked at the fruit that was prepared just for her, an overwhelming urge suddenly came over her to pick up a piece of cantaloupe and nibble it. She couldn't resist that urge, even though she absolutely hated the melon. As she bit into a slice and chewed it, it caused another one of those *déjà vu* feelings to wash over her as the flavors tickled her tongue.

"I'm sorry if I scared you by bringing you here" the lion stated to her. "I needed to see if what Joe was telling me about you was true." He closed his eyes as he sat his paw on the back of hers and concentrated for a moment or two. "You are no longer immortal!" he blurted out as he pulled his paw away from hers in surprise. "There is a great power at work here to cause that to happen" he commented as he thought about what to do next.

He took a sip of his wine before he continued. "I sense that you have two sets of memories in your mind. One is of your life with Torvald and another one is your life

with Robert.” He thought for a minute before he asked “You do not remember any small part of your life together with the stallion?”

“I’m sorry but I don’t” she replied. “I have dreamed of him being in a cottage that seems turn-of-the-century. Something is happening and he is reaching out for me, yelling my name out loud. His eyes are shining white with some kind of an energy and I’m screaming out his name as a huge flash of light explodes between us.”

“I think I know of that cottage” the lion said cautiously as he tapped some search words into a PDA that he took out of his shirt pocket. “Yeah...1897 Anderson, Indiana. You and he were on an extended mission there. That cottage was your temporary home on that mission.”

“A mission?” she asked *The Son*. “What were we doing there?” She was still in total confusion over the events of her other life that were being told to her.

“I cannot tell you the mission's nature but I see here that the mission did not come to completion” he commented as he tapped at the PDA some more. “I now know where to send the angels to find the problem” he added as he put the device away.

The tigress was still nibbling at the cantaloupe, wondering why she had ever hated it in the first place. This was a real treat to her taste buds and it brought back a memory of that huge blond stallion standing with a manuscript in one paw and a piece of melon in the other. He was standing by the sliding glass door of that house that she had drawn from her dreams.

“It is time for me to return you to Joe's home” the lion said as he stood to help Victoria to her feet. “Please do not be frightened when I send you back. It is perfectly safe for me to send you this way. We will get this straightened out for both of you as quickly as possible.” He stepped back and nodded, letting her know it would happen. Now that she was ready for it, the feeling wasn't so bad as the scenery around her quickly turned to white.

###

The former berserker was lying in bed with his wife Wilhelmine, snuggled up against one another to thwart the night's cold. The blond mare was somewhat restless as she tried to get closer to her stallion husband for warmth.

“Torvald, would you leave us if you could go back to that other world?” she asked, still thinking about the story she had been told earlier by the huge fur. She knew it had to be the absolute truth because Torvald had never lied to her, *ever*.

“I am torn between two loves” he responded to her question. “I love you dearly because you're my first true love.” He was thankful that she couldn't see the tears welling up in his eyes and flowing down the sides of his muzzle at that moment. “I also love my tigress dearly but in a different way.” He thought for a moment before he said “I don't know which one of you I should choose because it would hurt the other one regardless of choice.”

“If it were just my choice, you would stay with me and the children” she commented. “If it for the good of furkind, then you must return to her and do the Gods' bidding.” Wilhelmine turned her head to look at the huge fur as she said “I will no doubt find another mate after you leave. You will always be first in my heart and I will do my best to remember you always.” She then reached up and wiped the tears from his eyes, giving him a loving kiss on the muzzle.

Torvald's heart was breaking to hear the hurt that was in his mate's voice as she spoke to him so candidly. He knew that if he left her, she might not take another mate. It would have been fine by their customs for her not to remarry but that wasn't the point. He didn't want her to lose her stallion like this. He didn't want to leave and have her thinking that he didn't love her.

She must have sensed what was going through his mind as she said “You will always be first in my heart and no other male will ever take that place from you. I know you love me but for all furkind, you must leave if you have a chance to.” Wilhelmine then snuggled up closer to her stallion and added “Let me enjoy your presence while I can until the time comes that you might leave.”

The blond mare eventually drifted off to asleep but the huge stallion was still awake. He was thinking about his other life, many centuries and another world away. He had been unhappy in the beginning when he was sent to live with the wolf mage because he didn't fit in. He fit in here because he had been born a *hedni* and raised in the ways of his furs.

He now saw the reason for Aslaug's darkness and bitterness. He had been that way in the other world because he just didn't fit into the modern world's scheme of things. It took many years and a few thoughts of taking his own life before he finally learned to just fit in and go with the flow. Could he do that again if he went back to his tigress or would he just long to return here to his original home? Only he could really answer these questions and he wasn't ready to try to answer them just now. He finally rolled over and snuggled up against Wilhelmine, soon to drift off to sleep.

###

The whiteness faded to reveal the tigress had been sent back to the relative quiet of Joe Latrans' living room. The coyote and his vixen were sitting on the couch, silently awaiting her return.

“Well?” the coyote questioned, giving her a raised eyebrow.

“I don't know” Victoria replied as the tingling sensations in her body subsided. “I was there, I think and 'Jess', as you call him said that I was no longer immortal.” That information caused the pair on the couch to drop their jaws in complete disbelief.

“You're mortal again?” Joe exclaimed, getting up off the couch and slowly walking over to face her. “Don't you know what that means to you?” He was completely flabbergasted at this fact.

“It means I can die?” she responded carefully with a crooked smile on her muzzle.

“You, Torvald and Aslaug have all wanted to be mortal again!” he retorted. “You now have what you have been wanting all along except that everything is -not- right!” He was muttering some something in Spanish again as he went to look out the front window. “I hope the gods get this mess straightened out soon. This just isn't right at all.”

###

The tigress was sitting in her living room, thinking of the previous day's events. She had gone to see the coyote only to leave his home totally confused. This information that she was a holy warrior with the stallion had shaken her badly. The reason for that was she hadn't attended church very often since marrying Robert and that really didn't sound like she was much of a holy warrior at all.

On the way home from Joe and Annie's house, she had followed her instincts across town and finally ended up on a street that felt all too familiar. It had led her to a home that was a standard tract home that was in desperate need of landscaping. It was -that- home from her dreams. She was getting more confused about things by the minute as these little tidbits of recollection kept coming to the surface of her mind.

Snapping back to the present from her musing, she looked over at her son, who was sitting on the couch smoking. “Conrad, I was told by Joe that you were a football player who was coached by that blond filly who's team beat your old high school's team here recently.”

“I have had dreams of playing football” he replied. “I think it's because I could never play football that I have those dreams.” He patted his prosthetic left leg for emphasis. “Maybe if I hadn't been in that wreck with Dad in his big rig, I might have played.” He took a drag on his cigarette before he continued. “This may sound weird, but I have dreamed of fighting with the huge equine with swords” he said, stubbing his smoke out. “We were not mad at one another but it seemed like he might have been training me.”

“This all makes no sense at all to me” the tigress stated. “Why would we dream of such crazy things when we know they didn't happen?”

“Those events -did- happen” the femme voice said from the kitchen doorway. “I for one can vouch for everything that has been told to you.” The tigress looked over to see that there was a red fox vixen in a blue silk robe, standing in the doorway.

“Who are you?” the tigress questioned, then stopped to think for a second. “I thought for a brief moment that I knew your name but that thought is gone now.”

“Freya” the young tiger said quietly as he looked at her. “I don't know why I know this but your name is Freya. You are the goddess of love and war.”

“There had been a powerful use of *sejd* somewhere that has undone many events in the stallion's life and your inability to remember him is one such side effect from that.” The red vixen sat down on the couch by the young tiger and continued her thoughts.

“Torvald was chosen by Odin and the one known as WhiteChrist to be a holy warrior for the Gods” she said as she looked at the tigress to make sure she understood the gravity of the situation. “You became a warrior to be with your mate and fight by his side. You and he are powerful agents that we are sorely in need of. We must put things back as they were so things may once again be right.”

Freya stood and reached out into thin air to retrieve a wooden longstaff. She threw it at Victoria who quickly stood and caught it, going into a warrior's stance immediately. “Some things are not forgotten” the vixen stated as she did the same for the young tiger, tossing him a broadsword. Conrad caught the sword thrown by the goddess deftly, stood up and twirled it very quickly before getting it into a fighting grip. “I see that you have not forgotten the berserker's lessons either” she commented as she smiled at both of them. Both mother and son were somewhat puzzled by the things they just did right now strictly out of instinct.

She looked at the tigress, then the young tiger. “Both of you need to go with me for a few moments. There is a stallion that you need to see” she stated as she waved her paws at them. “A change of clothes so you will fit in” she said as the pair observed their clothing was now of an ancient style of tunics and leggings. The room around them suddenly began to spin, blur and shift, the interior of Victoria's home slowly becoming the outdoors.

The tigress looked around herself to see that they were now in an open area with a village not far away. “Follow me” Freya said as she motioned for them to start walking with her. Conrad noticed that he now had two good legs, his left leg whole and strong like the other.

“Your leg has been temporarily restored to you so you will not appear out of place” the vixen told the young tiger. “You will be as before when you return but your leg will be whole again once the timeline has been restored.”

They had began to walk with Freya and after a few moments, they had arrived at the village where a gathering of furs had occurred. They had no doubt seen them approaching from a distance.

“Karl Jenson, please go and tell Torvald that Freya has brought two special visitors with her” she said to the muscular wolf that was standing near the front of the massed group of furs. The wolf nodded to the vixen and took off running across the compound. Momentarily, the huge blond fur limped into view, stopping for just a moment before beginning to run as fast as possible on his bad leg towards the tigress with tears running down his muzzle.

“Victoria!” he shouted out as he picked her up in a strong hug. He began to kiss her and then sobbed heavily onto her shoulder while he held her tightly. When the huge fur had touched her, the memories of their life together began to flood back to the tigress, every last detail as clear as day.

“Torvald! I missed you!” she sobbed out as she returned his hug, not caring that her feet weren't on the ground because she was being lifted up by her mate. She knew now that she had truly been married to him and that she really was a warrior for the Gods. “Don't ever let me go!” she said between sobs, still holding on to the huge equine

tightly. When she opened her eyes again, they were shining white with the power that they shared together. Torvald turned his head to look at her again and his eyes were shining too.

“I know now I have to return to be with you” he said to the tigress as he sat her back on the ground again. He motioned for the young tiger to come to him as he held out his paw. When Conrad gripped his stepfather's forearm in a Norse pawshake, his memories flooded back too.

“I can remember you now!” the young tiger said as he stood there, slack jawed. “It's amazing! I can remember everything!” Conrad began to cry as he stood there with his family, the knowledge of the years coming back with crystal clarity.

Torvald looked at his 21st century mate and said solemnly, “I have someone that I wish for you to meet.”

###

Victoria was sitting next to Wilhelmine, trying to finish her meal of meat and vegetables that Gytha had brought her. Conrad, Axel and Torvald had been shooed out of the home so the femmes could talk openly amongst themselves. The tigress looked around to see many things in this home that were similar to the artifacts and reproductions the berserker had furnished their 21st century home with.

“I am honored to meet you” the blond mare stated as they sat and talked. “Torvald has told me much about you. I observed and felt the power that you two share between yourselves. The *sejd* is powerful between you two.” Wilhelmine handed her an apple as she continued her train of thought. “I would not wish for Torvald to stay here when he should be doing work for the Gods. He must somehow return with you.”

“I cannot take him with us just yet” the red fox vixen pointed out. “We must fix this problem before he can leave here.”

“If those are the facts at paw, then I wish for you to spend time with him” the mare said to the tigress. “I have been with him for 15 seasons and I know he will always love me. Go be with your mate and comfort his heart.”

“Please don't make it sound like I am taking him away from you” Victoria said quietly. “I do love him dearly but if it were his choice, I would let him stay here with you.”

“No, he -must- go with you” Wilhelmine retorted. “It is not his choice to stay or go. He has been chosen by the Gods and he must do the Gods' work for the good of all furkind.” The blond mare sipped her refreshment before she continued with her thoughts. “I was steeled against losing him the day we were married. I knew that a berserker would not live very long and that one day, some opposing warrior would kill him in battle. If he goes to be with you, he will live a -very- long life and I know he will always remember me.”

The tigress could hear the calmness in Wilhelmine's voice that told her the mare had indeed steeled herself against the loss of her mate. Victoria knew she could never be that way as the loss of Torvald would most definitely break her heart. “I will go to him

as you have asked me to do” she told the blond femme equine. “I will make sure that he never forgets you for the rest of his life and after.”

The tigress went outside to find her mate and her son talking in English to one another. It was then that she realized she had been conversing with Wilhelmine in perfect ancient Danish for some time.

“I have been talking with your first mate” she told the huge fur. “She is very sure she wants you to be with me and do the Gods bidding.” She sat down beside the berserker and hugged him, laying her head on his massive arm.

“She has told me that too” Torvald replied to his tigress. “I have made up my mind about this. I know I must return with you. It is our destiny to do the gods' bidding.” He then leaned down and gave the tigress a kiss on the cheek.

Freya walked up to them about that time and said “I am sorry that there isn't more time to visit but Victoria and Conrad must return with me. You will all be back together very soon.” Once they had all stood up, the trio shimmered out of sight.

Wilhelmine walked up to her mate and gave him a hug around the waist. “When the time comes, I will miss you and I will always remember you.”

“And I will both miss you and remember you dearly for all times too” he replied as they turned to go back inside their home.