

A Voice From The Past

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Chapter 1

The football team practice had gone just perfectly and the filly had no doubts that she had crafted another winning squad for the coming school year. Coach Aslaug Larsdatter had lost several key players last spring to senior graduation but she felt sure of the replacements she had chosen. She still had a small grin on her muzzle as she strolled down the sidewalk, letting the afternoon breeze play through her long blond mane. She loved her job coaching football; it gave her a sense of ... belonging.

Not far ahead was her destination, a pub that sold over 40 types of ales on tap. The American beers seemed like a sick joke to her. Why anybody would drink such sorry, watered down stuff was beyond her comprehension. Aslaug preferred ale that would reach up and slap you if you weren't careful. That kind of ale was hard to find but she had heard that this pub had some good European brews.

She walked into the pub, taking a moment for her eyes to adjust to the low light level inside. A quick scan of the interior told her that this was an inviting place. The sounds of the pub were friendly and pleasing to her ears, reminding her of the sounds of her home world. Walking over to the bar, she sat down and waited for the bartender to arrive. The filly had closed her eyes and was thinking about the practice again when she was jarred back to the matter at hand by the barkeep.

"What can I get for you, coach?" the bartender asked.

Aslaug looked up to see a rather slender Siberian husky standing there, wiping a glass with a bar towel. She recognized him as Steven Nanomantube, the parent of one of her cornerbacks. The filly told the barkeep what she wanted.

"Steven, I would like an ale, the darkest, thickest you have."

The husky smiled and nodded as he turned and began to pour a mug of ale that would meet the filly's expectations. He set the mug in front of Aslaug and took the money she proffered him, heading off to get her change for her. Picking up the mug and examining it, this ale was so dark she couldn't see through it. This was a good sign that made a smile begin to spread across her muzzle. The aroma from the mug was almost intoxicating, reminding her of home. The filly sipped the concoction, savoring its intricate flavors. For just a moment she thought she could hear the voices in the longhouse and the smell of food being cooked over open fires. This was good ale. She thought that she should find out if this came in bottles, it was that good.

"Not many furs order that ale." the barkeep commented, setting her change on the bar and beginning to wipe out a glass pitcher by now.

The filly was about to say something about the quality of the ale she was sipping when the husky continued his line of thought. "The only other fur that orders that stuff regularly is the gentlefur at the end of the bar." He motioned in the general direction of the fur he had just mentioned.

Aslaug leaned forward to see who the barkeep was talking about when she was completely stunned by what she saw. Her jaw dropped and the filly sat her mug back on the counter.

Aslaug couldn't believe her eyes. At the end of the bar, watching the television on the wall was a very tall, blond furred stallion. He had a very long blond mane, quite out of character for a fur of this modern time. The filly got up and headed towards the stallion, taking her mug with her. As she drew nearer, it was obvious that his fur wasn't dyed. There were numerous natural variations in the flaxen tones of his fur and mane. Sitting down on a stool next to him, she sat her mug back on the bar and literally stared at the sight in front of her.

The tall stallion turned and regarded her, saying, "Hello, coach."

His deep voice and accent resonated through her very soul, making her swallow hard. It didn't happen often but Aslaug was feeling very strange at this particular moment. She felt her heart racing and she was breathing rapidly. The filly looked down to see that her paws were shaking, too.

"Are you OK?" the huge stallion asked her, a concerned look on his muzzle.

The filly was still stunned and the only thing she could think to say was, "You're extinct, you know."

The stallion sat his mug back on the bar and turned to face her. As he turned, a hammer pendant fell into view from inside his open black leather vest. The stallion then smiled at her as he replied, "And so are you, Shieldmaiden."

###

It took a moment or two for the filly to compose herself before she reached up and grabbed the stallion's mane and pulled him down close to her.

"What did you call me?" Aslaug asked quietly, almost a whisper. Her eyes were wide as she looked around to see who might have overheard them.

"I called you 'Shieldmaiden'. Do you deny who you are?" the huge stallion replied in a hushed tone, his smile slowly vanishing.

The filly regarded the stallion with a hard stare as she asked, "How did you know I was a Shieldmaiden?"

She could see that the stallion was quite uncomfortable by now, gently putting his paw on the wrist of hers that currently held a large pawful of his fur.

He looked at her as he said, "First things first. Could you please let go of my mane?"

As she released his mane, he thanked her and took a sip of his ale.

"We could talk over there, in that booth." The stallion indicated which way to go and stood up, helping the still somewhat shaken filly up by her elbow.

Aslaug could now see that this fur was probably around 7' tall as her head barely made his shoulders.

"This way." he said, guiding her over to the booth and waiting for her to sit down before he joined her.

As she sat there, she felt like she was looking at a window into the past. This fur could have easily been from her village but she quickly dismissed that thought. The filly's attention was drawn to his pendant, the light reflecting off of its polished surfaces.

"This pendant you wear," she said, reaching out and touching it with her index and middle fingers. "Where did you get this?"

The stallion took another sip of his ale before he answered, "I received mine the same way you did. From my parents."

The filly was more than confused by now. "How did you know that I had a pendant like this?" she asked, looking around to see if they were being watched. She looked back to observe that the stallion was smiling at her again.

"If I told you that I was a berserker from your century, would you believe me?" the stallion asked, staring at the filly with a more serious look now.

She sat there and looked him over before she spoke up. "Are you a *Sejdmager*?" Aslaug asked, looking around again. She was thinking that this might even be Loke, come to mess with her again.

The giant stallion laughed quietly as he said, "No, but there is *sejd* involved. I'm Tor Svensen. Or that is one of the names I have used since 1891." As the filly took in this information, Tor gave her one more snippet about himself. "I am of your people."

Aslaug took in this new piece of information and mulled it around her brain. A few seasons ago she would have dismissed this fur as being a stark raving lunatic, trying to tell her that he had crossed time from a different world.

She knew better now, having seen things that would warp the brains of most mortals. Well, there were a few mortals that would understand. She regarded the huge fur again, giving him the benefit of doubt. This whole chance meeting was beginning to bother the Shieldmaiden to no end and her warrior instincts were kicking in on her.

Not wishing to hurt Mr. Svensen, she had made a decision. "I must leave now." she said, getting up to part company with this huge fur.

"Wait." Tor beckoned, grabbing her wrist to stop her from leaving.

This proved to be a big mistake on the stallion's part. The filly used her considerable strength to wrench Mr. Svensen from the booth, causing him to land on his backside on the floor but he *still* didn't relinquish his grip on her.

"Let go of me!" the filly hissed through clenched teeth, looking down at the stallion with fire in her eyes. "If you don't, I swear I will destroy this bar with your broken, lifeless body!"

Tor began to laugh as he relinquished his grip on the filly's wrist. This caused Aslaug to stop and look at the huge stallion with curiosity. She had just threatened death and destruction and this fur just laughed?

Finally Tor looked up at her as he said, "I believe you could do that, Shieldmaiden. I believe you could."

"Is everything OK?" the barkeep asked with a look of concern on his face. Tor quickly stood up and replied, "Everything's fine, Steven. The coach and I were just ... uh ... arm wrestling, that's all."

The filly turned and said to the stallion quietly so no one else could hear, "Don't tell him that! We were *not* arm wrestling!" She crossed her arms across her chest and scowled at him.

There was a round of snickers and giggles that went through the bar and one fur voiced his opinion. "Geez, Tor! Looks like the coach won!"

"OK you two, Keep it friendly, please?" the barkeep asked as he smiled and went to serve another fur at the other end of the bar. The stallion looked at her as he practically begged, "Would you sit down, please? I just want to talk to you, that's all."

Aslaug sat back down again, still unsure about her decision to stay and listen. She had lived among these modern furs for many seasons but sometimes her warrior instincts would take over and it was hard for her to not act out of place.

The stallion finished his ale before he spoke again. "It would seem that we have a mutual friend, Shieldmaiden."

The filly looked at him with a puzzled look on her muzzle.

“I am speaking of William Berg, with whom you are acquainted.” Tor said, rubbing his lower back. It was obvious that his landing on the floor had not been a soft one.

Aslaug looked up at him and nodded. “Yes, I know him.” she said quietly. William had been the one person that she had told her story to and he promised to keep it to himself. Tor hesitated for a moment before he finished his line of thought.

“William told me that I needed to talk with you and possibly you needed to talk with me.”

###

The filly was sitting at home in her easy chair, finishing off a bottle of brew referred to as an oatmeal stout. It didn't seem so stout to her but it was pleasing to her palate none the less. On the table by her chair sat the piece of paper with Tor's phone number on it. The stallion had given her his number and asked her to at least give it some thought about talking to him so she had promised to do so. Tor had said that he was of her people so she felt she owed him *something*. When William's name had been brought up however, she felt very apprehensive about the whole thing. Aslaug felt that she needed to talk with the Christian about this before she went any further.

As the filly was retrieving another bottle of refreshment, there came a knock on the door. She opened it to see William Berg standing there.

“William, please come inside.” Aslaug said, stepping aside for him to enter.

The cougar took off his coat and hung it up on the coat rack by the door. “I came over as you asked.” he said as he waited for the filly to respond. It was obvious that the Shieldmaiden didn't know where to start exactly.

After some hesitation that was making William nervous, she spoke up. “I met Tor Svensen today.” she said quietly, sitting down at the kitchen table.

The big cat's whiskers quivered as he waited for her to continue. William felt that something was really wrong by the filly's marked silence. “Is something bothering you?” he asked, sitting near the Shieldmaiden.

“I don't know what's wrong, William. I feel ... strange.” the filly replied, staring at the table top. The filly finally looked up at him, more staring off into the distance than anything else.

“*How* do you feel strange, Aslaug?” he asked, whiskers still twitching. He could see a far-off look in her eyes, one that crossed time itself. The filly finally

spoke again.

“I know it’s not possible but I feel like I know him.”

The pastor was as confused as the Shieldmaiden by this. “I don’t know what to tell you, Aslaug. I haven’t known him that long, either. I suspected that Tor was from the same general era as you but I wasn’t sure.”

Now it was William’s turn to feel strange. He looked up at the filly and for a moment he could see around them furs milling about an obviously Nordic village, a great hall standing prominent in the background. The air around him was cold and crisp to his nostrils. He could see his own breath in the air even though the filly’s kitchen had been a comfortable temperature. The cougar could detect delicious smelling food being cooked over an open fire. There were sounds of laughter and children playing nearby.

As he blinked his eyes, the filly’s kitchen came back into view. Momentarily Aslaug snapped back to the present, looked at William and said, “I *need* to go see Tor.”

###

William had called Tor on his little *sejd* device he called a cell phone. The cougar had set up a meeting for Aslaug and agreed to drive her out to Tor’s home. The trip didn’t take very long as Tor lived in the same community as the filly. She was presently standing on the sidewalk leading up to the stallion’s home. Aslaug felt like she had been standing there for what seemed like an eternity. It was a standard tract home that was carefully landscaped and felt inviting. What by the gods could she be afraid of? She was a Shieldmaiden, after all. Besides, she was immortal; she couldn’t be killed by mere furs. It still took a moment before she put on her hoof coverings and rang the doorbell. She could hear stirring inside followed by the door opening. It was Tor.

The huge stallion smiled as he said, “Thank you for visiting the home of this old berserker. I am honored by your presence.” He bowed slightly at the waist, stood aside and beckoned the Shieldmaiden inside.

As the filly entered, the things that she saw on display brought back a multitude of memories. Tor had furnished his home with numerous artifacts or good reproductions of items from his era. Aslaug felt that Tor was right; he was of her people. No other furs used the style and designs of articles that she saw scattered about his dwelling. She turned to see Tor smiling, arms crossed across his massive chest. He was wearing a leather headband and leather armbands that were decorated in a style that she knew came from only one place: home.

“Please, Shieldmaiden, have a seat.” he said to her, motioning to an easy chair. Aslaug sat down, getting comfortable against the cool leather of the

chair. As she looked around further, she saw what was undoubtedly Tor's armor and shield. A huge long sword and a gigantic battle axe hung prominently on the wall behind.

Tor had taken a seat on the couch nearest her by now. He offered the filly a tall glass of a dark liquid and a bowl of amber colored liquid. "Ale and mead to honor your presence." he said, bowing his head to her.

Aslaug thanked him and sampled the ale, finding it very good. She gave the mead a small taste to find it was made to perfection. "These refreshments are good, Tor. Thank you." she said, taking a sip of mead and following it with some ale.

"Hello Coach." said a familiar voice from behind the filly. The owner of the voice came into view, carrying a platter of fresh fruit. "I hope you like the snacks. I picked them out for you myself." the young tiger said, smiling from ear to ear as he sat the platter near the filly.

"This is how I know who you are." Tor said, smiling hugely by now. "I'm sure you know my stepson, Conrad Svensen." Conrad was one of Aslaug's fullbacks on the squad. "Conrad, could you let your father speak to the coach in private?" Tor asked of his son. Conrad nodded, smiled and returned to the kitchen.

Aslaug sipped the ale some more before she looked at Tor and asked, "You know I am Coach Aslaug. What makes you think I am a Shieldmaiden?"

Tor mulled over how he wanted to word his response to her question. The stallion finally cleared his throat and said, "I watched a few of my stepson's practice sessions in the last year since we moved here. I've seen your speed on the turf and I've seen you hit those boys like a freight train and I know you're holding back." The huge equine was sure about what he was going to say next. "I have only seen one kind of femme that had those abilities. Those femmes were Shieldmaidens."

###

The two equines had snacked on the fresh fruit and sipped ale and mead for a while, making small talk. Tor wiped his paws on a napkin and looked at the filly. She had not said much except to comment on the quality and freshness of the fruits.

"Aslaug, I needed to talk to you because I suspect you came here the same way that I did." The filly gave him a questioning look. "And how do you think I came here?" she said, sipping her ale and picking up another piece of cantaloupe.

Tor looked at the floor, then back at the Shieldmaiden. "I came here after

being killed on the battlefield.”

The filly dropped the piece of fruit and nearly choked on her ale. As she got her composure back, she looked at Tor who was obviously lost in thought. “Tor?” she said, getting ready to get up to see about him. The stallion slowly came back to this plane of existence and looked back at her with haunted eyes and spoke quietly.

“I was in a battle on the heath near our village. The invaders from the south were charging our settlement and we were attacking them to drive them off. I remember killing many of their ranks before the archers began firing at us.”

The Shieldmaiden could see the battle now, the berserkers leading the charge towards the enemy. She knew this place: this was Saxony. Towards the middle of the charging horde was Tor, axe cleaving enemy furs in half with one blow. The air was cold and crisp and the afternoon sun was warm on the side of her muzzle. The Shieldmaiden sensed the reassuring heft of her armor and felt the shaft of her axe in her paws. This was how all battles were; she could smell the sweat, blood and *death* around her.

Tor spoke again, in a reverent tone. “We were turning them back but the archers fired volley after volley in our direction, taking down many of my brethren.”

The filly could see a number of furs fall from the arrows and Tor himself took a number of the pointed projectiles to the body. She was momentarily shocked when he broke them off and continued his frenzied charge, a look of insanity on his muzzle. Tor was a true berserker, she knew now. Aslaug saw some of the enemy turn and flee just from seeing the form of the huge berserker stallion running in their direction, axe held high.

Tor began to speak again in a hushed tone. “The enemy soldiers guarding their commander had run off, leaving their commander standing all alone so I ran towards him to finish him off. My axe dropped on him and he fell dead on the spot. Then I was killed in battle.”

The filly saw the giant blood covered stallion cleave the enemy’s leader in half from shoulder to groin only to have an enemy sword driven through him from back to front. She watched on as Tor took a few steps, blood beginning to froth around his muzzle. It was dark blood, the kind that meant it’s a warrior’s last battle. The stricken berserker took a moment to kick half of the dead enemy leader out of his way, wiping the blood off of his chin with his forearm. He then dropped his axe and shield to the heath, spitting out a mouthful of blood. Tor took a few more halting steps and fell to his knees, touching the sword still sticking through him. He was looking at the blade as if he didn’t understand why it was there. The giant berserker coughed and spit out some more dark blood before he fell onto his side. She heard him whisper a prayer

for his soul in Odin's name as the life left his body. Two warriors dressed all in white appeared, picked up Tor's lifeless body and walked off the battlefield. As they walked away, they faded out of view.

"Dad? Coach? What the hell did I just see?!?"

Hearing Conrad's voice, Aslaug turned her attention away from the battle still in progress to see the stallion's stepson standing near her position on the heath, frozen in his tracks with fear. Conrad was so shaken by the sight of his father's demise right in front of him that he dropped to his knees in the cool, damp grass and let forth a sound of pure anguish.

That sound snapped the two equines back into the present to see Conrad kneeling by them, shaking like a leaf. He was looking at the two equines as if he had been struck by lightning.

"Dad, you were killed! The coach was there standing off to the side, wearing armor and holding an axe like yours!" The tiger had a scared look on his face and his pupils were as wide as they could go.

Tor quickly got up off the couch and scooped Conrad up in his arms. The giant stallion picked his stepson up, the feline's feet dangling off the floor. "Son, I'm sorry you saw that." Tor practically whispered, hugging his stepson fiercely. "That was a secret that I hoped someday to take back to Valhalla."

The Shieldmaiden had gotten up to leave but the stallion put his hand on her shoulder. "Don't leave, Aslaug. I have much to talk about."

Tor sat his stepson back down and made him sit down on the couch. The stallion then turned back to the filly. "You *must* listen to what I have to say. Please sit down, I beg of you."

###

After Tor saw that Conrad had settled down and the filly was sitting again, he continued with his story.

"I was taken to Valhalla where my numerous wounds were tended to. I was fed and given ample time to rest and heal up. After some time, Frigg came to see me." The filly's eyes lit up at the mention of her name. "I was told by Frigg that my work wasn't done yet and there was much that I needed to learn. A gray wolf mage named Ivar Johnsen was given the task by Frigg to watch over me on this world. The next thing I knew we were in Seattle, Washington in the year 1891."

Aslaug was nodding her head as she took this in and mulled it over. Conrad was looking at his stepfather in disbelief, blinking his eyes as if to clear them. The Shieldmaiden looked at the stallion and got a very serious look on her muzzle as she spoke.

“Tor Svensen, there’s only one way you’re going to convince me.” A solemn look crossed the stallion’s muzzle as he nodded his head and said, “I know.”

The stallion reached for his belt and pulled out a folding Buck knife from its holster. Opening it, he quickly pulled it across the palm of his paw, laying it open. Conrad made a sharp sound at the sight of his father’s blood dripping onto the glass top of the coffee table in front of the stallion. Tor casually took a napkin and wiped his paw, showing the palm to the Shieldmaiden. The cut had closed, turning pink as it healed before their eyes. The stallion then wiped the blade of his knife as he handed it to the Shieldmaiden. Aslaug tested the edge, finding it surgically sharp.

Handing the knife back to the stallion, she smiled. “Tor Svensen, you have convinced me.”

“Dad, how did you do that?” Conrad blurted out. The feline was still visibly shaken by the events of the day. “Son, your Mom and I decided that we would wait until your 18th birthday before we told you about all of this.” Tor replied, putting his knife away.

Conrad touched the palm of his dad’s paw, the one that the stallion had cut. It now appeared as if nothing had happened to it. The blood however was still on the coffee table, beginning to coagulate by now. Conrad touched his finger to the blood and tasted it, determining that it was very real and not a stage trick.

“Your mate,” Aslaug asked; “She knows all of this?” The filly had a feeling of uncertainty about this. Would the berserker really confide that he was immortal and was actually a Norsefur from the 10th century?

Tor nodded as he replied to her. “Rest assured that my wife Victoria knows all this and more.”

“Tor, we probably have much to talk about,” the Shieldmaiden began; “But I think that young Conrad needs to rest right now. If you would drive me home, I will return another day and continue our talk.”

The berserker looked at his stepson to see that the young tiger was appearing pretty rough by now. “I believe you are right, Aslaug. I will do as you ask.”

###

Aslaug was sitting at home now, looking at her hooves. Tor had insisted that they detour by a shoe store for a few things. The stallion had explained to her that modern equines hadn’t worn metal shoes for more than 50 years. The

filly had tried shoes made from that *sejd* metal A-loom-in-um. They were light in weight but they wore out too quickly. The stallion had requested that the salesman *carefully* remove her nailed on shoes and give her hooves a trim and polish. The salesfur had shown a strange look on his face as he regarded the nails in her hooves. He was no doubt thinking to himself ‘who would do such an old fashioned thing?’ Tor had noticed that the sales associate, a portly Border collie almost said something about them before changing his mind. The filly scowling at him was probably the deciding factor. Tor then selected a pair of yoo-ree-thane sole protectors with an aggressive tread pattern for the coach, based on her job on the playing field. Tor said that she would have improved traction but the filly wasn’t sure just yet. The salesfur used some smelly glue to attach the coverings to the bottom of her hooves and made her wait a little bit for the glue to set. Once the Shieldmaiden was allowed to stand, she could tell a difference right off. A stop on the way home at the park had proved the case. Aslaug made several sprint starts and ran some patterns to see that her traction was much better now. A side benefit was the fact that she didn’t need to use hoof coverings indoors. She was thankful that Tor was helping her fit in.

The image of the huge flaxen-haired fur kept coming to the front of the filly’s mind. How could she possibly help Tor? Aslaug was unsure of much about the stallion right now. He was immortal and he prayed to the same deities as she did. How *could* she help? This was really turning into a mystery to the Shieldmaiden by now. She was a warrior, not a counselor. Her skill set was death and destruction on the battlefield. She shrugged as she began to fix her evening meal. There would be plenty of time to think later.

###

The stallion was standing in his kitchen, preparing dinner for his family. He was humming a nondescript tune as he stirred the vegetable stew.

“I’ve done it again. It’s just perfect.” he muttered as he tasted it, adding just a pinch more pepper to it. The stallion had made this recipe to perfection once again for his family. Conrad had set the table for his stepfather and made a pitcher of ice water. He placed a trivet on the table for the pitcher to sit on and placed the water vessel on top of it. The young tiger walked over to the sink, hanging the towel he had been using on the towel rack.

The young tiger looked at his stepfather and asked quietly, “Dad, will you tell me what’s going on?” The feline could see that his father winced at that request.

“Conrad, this will take a while.” the stallion said, checking to see that the French bread was toasting properly. He turned down the fire under the pot of stew and motioned to the table. “You had better sit down. We may be here for some time.”

The young tiger had gotten comfortable and his father was pulling the

bread from the oven by now.

“Your mother knows everything that I’m going to tell you. I promised myself that I wouldn’t keep my former life a secret from my mate.” the former berserker said as he sat the bread on the counter. “As I had said, I died in battle. Unfortunately, you had to see that happen. I was sent back here to continue my work, whatever it was supposed to be.” The stallion thought for a moment how to word what he wanted to say.

“I lived with my mage in his rented cottage. He ran a general store and I was his delivery fur. Ivar had used a universal language spell on me so I sounded like an American to the other furs. He had me reading religious texts and comparing them to one another. I have to tell you that I was just a little confused about where all of this training was going to.” Tor was trying to get a little more comfortable in the kitchen chair that he was sitting on. “We were eating lunch one afternoon when it happened. One minute I was in Ivar’s kitchen eating my meal and the next minute, *he* had me chained to a dungeon wall letting some cloaked canid torture me.”

“Who had you? The mage?” the tiger asked.

“The *one* whom your father won’t say his name.” his mother replied. The stallion’s tigress mate had entered the room, taking off her red real estate salesfur’s jacket and hanging it up. Victoria began to put dinner on the table as her husband continued his tale.

“My mage tried his best to rescue me only to be killed by an energy bolt from the torturer. The fur that was torturing me at first had absolutely no idea that I was immortal.”

The stallion’s wrists suddenly began to smoke, the smell of burnt fur wafting through the air.

“Oh Hell!” the stallion exclaimed, looking at his wrists as he got up and walked over to the sink. As he doused his smoldering fur under the faucet, he sheepishly said, “It happens every time. All I have to do is think about that episode and it happens.”

He sat back down and looked at his stepson, a very serious look on his face by now. “Once they discovered I couldn’t die, the game was on. They gave up torturing my body and went for my mind. I still have no clue what they were after. I remember one furless canid telling the other one that I wasn’t the one they wanted. I held them off until I guess I went insane. They dumped me back into the kitchen where it started, a near-raving lunatic.”

Conrad was beginning to show signs of stress from listening to his father’s story. He looked like he was getting just a little queasy by this time. “Son, do you want your father to continue?” Victoria asked. The young tiger

looked at both of them before weakly nodding his head.

“Alright, then ... It took several days for me to pull myself together enough to go outside and get some firewood. It was late fall and I was trying to keep from freezing to death. Our landlady found me shivering outside and took care of me for a while. She thought that I may have hit my head because I could no longer speak English, the spell broken when my mage died.” Tor drank some water before he continued. “Our landlady could speak some limited Danish so I wasn’t totally lost. She taught me to speak English and got me going again. That was 1893.”

###

Tor forced a break in the story by suggesting they eat while the food was hot. The stallion was thinking about his former life, another world away. The stallion on this planet had most likely died in battle, his bones never to be found. Tor was pretty sure however that he knew how to find the battlefield. In his previous role he had pledged his life by the gods to protect his people from whatever may try to harm them. He was a berserker, the most dangerous form of warrior to be found. They would charge the enemy with wild abandon to bring death to those who would get in their way. His height, coupled with his great strength and the weight of his axe made him an *almost* unstoppable tool of destruction. In a way he missed that part of his life and sometimes he even longed to relive it.

His new life here had been a tedious one to say the least. To escape being found out to be immortal, he needed to keep moving. It had been a lot easier for him in the early years to pick up and move on, starting anew somewhere else. Now he had an identity, a loving wife and a stepson. How could he move on now? How would it be possible for him to leave the ones that he loved behind and set out for parts unknown once again? This left him feeling very sad inside, to lose those that he loved so fiercely. Besides, he enjoyed his job as a counselor. The pay was good and the job very rewarding. It made the stallion feel good inside if he could help a fur turn their life around.

Looking at his wife and stepson, the stallion knew he didn’t want to leave, but some day he would *have* to. He would still look very young while Victoria became old and gray. He shuddered at the thought; he had married once before but kept his secrets to himself. Eventually he buried that wife, then both of his children by her. Being immortal wasn’t what he had wanted. The berserker had died an honorable death on the battlefield and it was his right to be taken to Valhalla, to drink ale and be with his comrades. All that Tor got for his troubles was a mere glimpse of his final home with a promise to return there some day after his work was done. What was his work, anyway? The giant stallion felt like he had been forgotten by the gods to wander this earth with no direction. He just wanted to return to Valhalla to put things right. Was *this* the reason that he had entrusted his story to the Shieldmaiden? He

decided to let it go for now and enjoy some time with his family and the delicious food.

###

Their dinner was over with and they were sitting in the family room now, letting their dinner settle some. Victoria had picked up a spice cake at a bakery near their home and it was calling all of their names right now.

The young tiger looked at his stepfather and asked, "Will you tell me more?"

The stallion nodded as he continued his story. "This is the short version, Conrad. I found work here and there doing mostly odd jobs. I was still learning about the modern world so I would make mistakes all the time. I tried to enlist during World War 1 but they didn't have uniforms to fit me." Tor sipped his after dinner tea and continued. "I worked as a cook in Columbus, Ohio during the First World War. Many furs thought that I wasn't doing my duty for my country so I had to explain the situation too many times." Tor sat up and put his teacup on the table before he resumed his tale.

"The depression was a bad time for this country so I migrated to the east coast. I lived in Schuyler, Virginia, working for a family that ran a small lumber mill. They kept calling me 'their personal Paul Bunyan' because of how fast I could fell a tree!" The trio laughed for a few moments before Tor continued. "I tried to enlist during WW2 but it was the same story. 'Sorry, you're too big' was their response. I did serve with the Civilian Conservation Corps, though. It was hard work for \$1 a day pay but it kept me busy. That lasted until 1943 then I came back out west. All of this time, I kept having to change my name to keep from getting noticed.

I even dyed my mane and tail black for a while, trying to pass as a Mustang."

"I worked at a steel mill in Union City, California for a while in the 50's as a forklift driver and crane operator. I lived in a small town called Niles at that time. It was a nice place to live and the times were good but it wouldn't last." Tor got a far-off look on his muzzle for a moment and then looked at his stepson. "By the time that Vietnam came along, I *could* serve my country. I was a decorated hero only because I was the ultimate soldier; a Berserker. I used the name of my old mage, Ivar Johnsen at that time."

Tor had gotten up and left the room for a while, returning with a glass covered display case. He passed it to his stepson and sat back down next to his mate.

"Those are my medals from the Vietnam war. I keep them to remind me that I did try to make a difference, once. What I didn't know at the time was

that we shouldn't have been there in the first place. I felt betrayed by my own government." Conrad looked at the display case in his lap and studied the various medals. There were 19 in all on display along with the rank insignia and kali tags that his stepfather had worn. Three of the medals were Bronze Stars.

"Let's eat some cake." Tor suggested, trying to put a break to the story again. "That sounds good, sweetheart. I'll get us some plates while you cut the cake." Victoria said as they went into the kitchen. Conrad sat the case carefully on the coffee table in the family room and followed his parents out of the room.

###

A few weeks had gone by and it was a nice So Cal afternoon. There was a light breeze blowing and the sky was clear. The stallion had mowed and raked the lawn in his backyard in anticipation of the day's events.

Aslaug was standing in Tor's back yard, her coat glossy with sweat. Tor was currently facing her, sweat dripping from his muzzle. The filly was catching her breath, using a break in the action to readjust her grip on her wooden practice sword. The two equines were 'requested' by Victoria to use replica arms after the pair had decided to have a 'live steel' practice to stay in shape. It wasn't likely that they could be killed by such a practice but when they had walked into the house afterwards, bloody from mane to hoof and tracking bloody hoof prints into the house, the equines had been 'asked' to use the wooden arms.

The huge stallion checked his grip on his shield once more and then made another charge at the Shieldmaiden. He brought up his sword to deliver a crushing downward blow to the Shieldmaiden just as the filly sidestepped him. The berserker's body weight and momentum played against him this time, making it impossible for him to stop his forward motion. Aslaug made a slashing blow to his abdomen then spun around to catch him on the side of his torso under his arm. As he passed by the filly, she landed another blow to the side of his neck and swept the hooves out from under the stallion, causing him to crash to the ground.

"I'll have to learn not to do that." Tor said as he rolled over onto his back and sat up, smiling. "You're just too fast for me, filly." he said as he got back to his hooves and rubbed his neck.

"You would have been dead, Berserker from any of those wounds." Aslaug said as she smiled back, wiping her muzzle and neck with a towel. "Especially that neck blow. You would have lost your head for sure."

Tor picked up his towel and wiped his chest and arms. It felt real good to actually practice his old craft. "Good thing I'm not keeping score." the stallion

said as he sat down on the steps to his redwood deck.

“23 to 0, favor of the filly.” the Shieldmaiden said with a smile, sitting down in a lawn chair. The stallion facepawed himself and muttered, “Only you would keep score.”

There were 2 furs that had watched this whole hour and a half practice and those femmes were currently quite speechless. Victoria’s sister Valerie Connell and her serious love interest Barbara Caine, an ocelot had created the wooden practice swords that the equines were using.

“Val, did you see that? Those two went at one another wide open for over an hour!” the ocelot exclaimed, turning to see her friend. Valerie was currently moving her lower jaw up and down, no sound coming out of her mouth. Barbara reached out and shook Valerie’s arm to get her attention.

The tigress looked at her lover and nodded, finally saying, “Our LARP friends wouldn’t stand a chance against those two!” The ocelot nodded in reply as she added, “Those live steel guys wouldn’t stand a chance either.”

“Barbara, would you like a turn against Aslaug?” the stallion asked as his mate gave his neck some much needed attention. Victoria was sitting on the steps above the stallion, massaging his neck and shoulders. The filly was getting back up and stretching out her legs by this time.

“Yes I would but aren’t you tired, Aslaug?” the ocelot asked as she got up and retrieved her sword and shield.

“No, I could do this all day.” the Shieldmaiden replied as she picked up her sword and rolled her head on her shoulders. A hint of a smile crossed the Shieldmaiden’s muzzle.

“OK, here goes nothing.” the ocelot said as she got into a fighting stance. The filly and the feline went at it for about 15 minutes until the cat was beginning to pant heavily. It had been a somewhat one-sided battle as the filly had matched every move that the cat had made. Although the spotted feline had superior speed, her swordwork was obviously not good enough. The Shieldmaiden had landed far too many blows to the feline that would have been fatal in an actual battle.

“I surrender.” the feline said as she dropped to her knees, panting pretty hard by now. She dropped her shield and sword to the grass, too tired to hold them any longer.

“You are *not* in fighting condition. You would be the first casualty in a battle.” the filly bluntly commented as she walked over and picked up her towel again, wiping the sweat from her muzzle, neck and arms.

“You’re right.” was all that Barbara could wheeze out as she lay out on

her back in the grass, breathing heavily. The ocelot made a move to get up and changed her mind, lying back down on the turf.

“Valerie, if you would like a turn, I’m not tired yet.” the Shieldmaiden said as she rolled her head again. The filly looked up to see that Valerie was helping her lover from the grass.

“No, I think I’ll pass on that.” the tigress replied as she helped Barbara back to her chair. The ocelot was still breathing hard, trying to catch her breath. “Come on, Val. I gave it a try. Why don’t you see if you could do better?” the spotted feline suggested, still wheezing some.

“Hey everybody, the food’s ready.” Victoria called out as she was putting the hamburgers and hot kali links on the picnic table. Tor’s mate then placed some steamed mixed vegetables and sliced fruit on the table for the two equines.

As they sat down to eat, Barbara made a comment. “I don’t see how you two could fight like that! I was tired after a few minutes and the two of you went for over an hour!”

The stallion looked over at the filly with a smile as he replied, “If you only knew.”