

Chapter 3

It was a sunny So Cal afternoon and Aslaug was coaching Tor in the fine art of throwing a Francisca. A few weeks earlier, the pair had traveled to the San Francisco bay area to meet with a blacksmith that would create a pair of axes the proper size for the stallion. The weapons had arrived just a few days ago via parcel post and Tor had been anxious to try them out.

The filly was currently shaking her head, trying to think of some way to get this lesson across to the stallion. One axe was embedded in the fence and the other was lying on the ground by a tree, several feet from the target.

“Tor, don't watch the axe. Look where you want it to go and throw it.” she suggested, picking up the axe on the ground. The berserker had failed multiple times to hit the 3 foot circular wood target set out across the yard from the deck.

As Tor removed the axe from the fence, a familiar voice came from the other side. “What in hell are you doing over there, you crazy stallion?” The owner of the voice came into view, an older badger. “What keeps hitting the fence, anyway?” the badger asked, looking somewhat perturbed. He was using a stepladder to see over the top of the fence and he was presently hanging onto the top rail of the fence for some balance.

“Oh, sorry Bob. We didn't mean to hit the fence. I'm just throwing some axes over here.” Tor said, holding the Francisca up for his neighbor to see. The badger looked shocked at the sight of the lethal-looking throwing weapon. The badger then noticed the Shieldmaiden, inspecting the cutting edge of the other axe.

“Who's your friend?” Bob asked, motioning in the direction of the filly.

“That's Coach Aslaug Larsdatter. She's teaching me to throw these.” The stallion waved at the coach to come over to the fence. Once the filly had arrived, Tor introduced her.

“Aslaug, this is Bob Bruj, my neighbor. Bob, this Coach Aslaug.”

“Nice to meet you.” the badger said, extending his paw. The filly hesitated, then shook his paw as she replied, “Nice to meet you too.”

Aslaug then turned and gave the Francisca in her other paw a gentle flip, making it land over by the deck with the head embedded in the grass.

She then took the second one from Tor and did the same with it. The second one landed about 6 inches from the first, blade buried in the turf.

“Wow!” was all the badger could say. After a moment he brought up something of importance to him. “I hope you two are being careful with those things. Make sure you don't send one over the fence, please?” He was looking to see if the two equines had understood his request.

“OK, Bob. We'll be careful.” Tor replied, looking kind of sheepish.

“Thanks, guys. Well, gotta go now.” Bob said as he got off of the stepladder and disappeared from the two warrior's view.

As the two walked back over by the deck, Aslaug tried to give the berserker some direction. “You draw back like this.” she said, pulling her arm back as if to throw an imaginary axe. “Throw the axe, giving it a snap at the end. Don't watch the axe, look where you want it to go.” she stated, throwing the imaginary axe slowly and emphasizing the flip at the end.

“Watch me one more time.” the filly said as she picked up her own Franciscas. The Shieldmaiden took the axes and easily put both of them side by side in the center of the target. “That is the way it is done.” she said, brushing her paws together.

After Aslaug had retrieved her weapons, it was the stallion's turn again. Tor stood there for a moment, eyes closed. He shook his massive shoulders and rolled his head to limber up. He was visualizing the target, his Franciscas embedded into it. He could feel the weight of the weapons in his paws as he adjusted his grip on the one in his left paw. He took a deep breath and opened his eyes. Pulling back he let the first one fly, striking the target slightly off center to the right. He then quickly let the second one fly to strike the target, just slightly to the left of the center.

“That is much better.” the filly stated as she walked past the berserker, standing there with his jaw hanging open. Aslaug retrieved his axes and began to walk back when she stopped at the sight of the giant fur. He was looking at his paws as if he couldn't believe what he had done.

Presently he looked up at the Shieldmaiden and said, “I did it. I really did it.” The huge equine looked shocked that he had actually struck the target with both Franciscas.

“Do it again.” the filly suggested, passing Tor's Franciscas back to him. The huge stallion made ready, then let the first one fly, then the second. When he went to retrieve them, Tor couldn't put his paw between the two

axes. They were embedded deeply in the target, almost perfectly centered. The stallion had to struggle a bit to remove them, they were *that* deep in the wood.

Tor walked back to where Aslaug was sitting, polishing her axes. "Thank you, Shieldmaiden. I have learned much from you." the berserker said, sitting down beside her. Before the filly could reply, he finished his train of thought. "You have helped me to begin to find myself."

The filly just looked at him and nodded, a smile beginning to creep across her muzzle.

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"I heard from Aslaug that you mastered those throwing axes." Victoria said to her husband as she was setting the dinner table. The stallion tore himself away from his reading and looked over at his mate.

"Yeah, I did. The filly was being really patient with me. I'm supposed to tell you that I'm a lousy student according to her." the giant replied, turning back to his reading.

Tor was currently trying to translate a photocopy of a Native American text. It had been written by somebody that had some very bad penmanship. The fact that it was a bad photocopy was forcing him to use his reading glasses to see it better. He knew that it was a religious text of some kind but the translation was not coming to him easy. The reference guide to the Choctaw language wasn't helping him much, either. The guide was being very ambiguous about certain aspects of noun and verb usage.

He was standing by the sliding patio door, trying to get some extra light on the subject. "I wish I could just translate this." he muttered as he adjusted his reading glasses.

"I could translate that text for you but I think you already know what it says." the voice stated.

The stallion looked around him to see that he was not in his home anymore. He was currently standing in a beautiful alpine meadow, still holding the text in question. Turning to see where the voice had come from, he spied a lion sitting at a small circular table with an umbrella over it.

"Torvald, come over here and sit down." the feline said, motioning to an extra chair at the table. The berserker could now see that the table had

some plates of fruit on it along with 2 glasses of what might be wine, judging by its color.

As he approached the table, it was becoming obvious that this might be a god sitting there. A very casually dressed god. The lion was wearing a loudly colored Hawaiian shirt, some camping shorts and a pair of water sandals. The feline had a very disarming smile, too.

“Please sit down, Torvald. I hope you like the fruit, it's fresh.” the lion said, motioning to the plates on the table. The stallion sat down, laying the text on the table and looking around at the scenery. He had never in his life seen such riparian beauty. He finally looked at his host and asked 2 simple questions.

“Uh ... Err ... Who are you and where am I?” the stallion queried, still somewhat stunned by the events that were unfolding.

“I am the one you once referred to as 'WhiteChrist' but you can call me Christopher.” the lion said, picking up an apricot and examining it. The feline smelled the fruit and half closed his eyes as he smiled, obviously pleased by the smell of the fruit.

“Christopher ...” the giant said quietly, still in shock. The poor stallion was very confused and didn't know what to say to the god sitting across from him.

“This place has been called many things throughout the ages, but it is my home.” Christopher added, offering Tor a glass of refreshment. The equine took the glass offered to him and sipped it, finding the contents to be a fine vintage of wine.

“It's a 1972 vintage Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon. It's one of my preferred vintages.” the feline confessed, giving it a sip and savoring the flavors. The big cat looked over at the stallion and smiled.

“I could translate that text for you but I think I'll let you do that.” he said, touching the stallion on the arm. Torvald felt a little jolt of electricity go through him as the lion touched him. “Pick it up, you can do it.” he coached, giving Torvald a big smile.

The stallion picked up his text and began to read it, the words making sense now. As he read on, he realized what the text meant. It was like a light bulb being turned on for him. Torvald was nodding his head as he read through the almost 30 pages of text, understanding exactly what it said. The stallion looked at Christopher with a stunned look on his face. He had just read a religious tenet that mirrored his own beliefs.

“The Native American furs are some of my favorites.” the lion began. “They practiced a pure religion, not one all twisted and mangled by time and intervention. It wasn't muddied by mortal additions or subtractions. They were a lot that worshiped the gods as it was intended.” Tor was beginning to see the bigger picture now. “The *Hedni* are some of my favorites too.” Christopher looked Tor in the eyes as he said, “They are Odin's favorites, for certain. They are *your* furs, Torvald Svensen. And they worshiped the gods in the much the same way as the Native Americans.”

As Torvald took this all in, the lion brought up a point. “By some of the modern religious doctrines, I shouldn't even talk with you. Because you don't actively worship my father, you are destined for hell according to them. If that wasn't some crazy thinking ...” the lion didn't finish his statement, shaking his head in obvious disgust.

The stallion sat the text down and picked up a piece of cantaloupe. He took a bite only to discover the most flavorful melon that he had ever had the pleasure of sampling.

The lion took a bite of the apricot he was holding and chewed it, savoring the fresh fruit. “Just as the Native American tribes such as the Choctaw, the Shoshone, the Mandan, the Ojibwa, the Sioux and all of the others needed different levels of religion, all furs everywhere needed different levels of religion. You are now understanding why this is so, Torvald.”

The stallion was nodding as he took all of this in. It was all falling together for him now. The big cat smiled and began to speak to him again.

“We are pleased with your work so far. You have helped others to be better furs. You are becoming very strong in certain ways, stallion. We still have other things that we wish for you to do, but you must become stronger still. There is *one thing* that you still fear and you must first conquer that fear.”

Tor was nodding, the pieces all falling together for him. This is why he was pulled from that battlefield so long ago. This is what he was meant to do.

Christopher cleared his throat and said, “Once you have conquered that fear, you will be ready to continue.” With that, the stallion found himself standing by his patio door, text in one paw and a piece of cantaloupe in the other.

Victoria came into the family room in a flat-out run to confront her mate. “Torvald! I looked up and you were there, then you were gone, then a split-second later you were back! What's going on here ...” Her voice trailed off as she observed the piece of fruit still in his paw. “And where did that come from?” she asked with a confused look on her face. She took the slice of melon from her mate's paw and sampled it, finding it's taste beyond comparison. “Well, where's the rest of that delectable cantaloupe?” She asked Tor, crossing her arms and giving him a questioning look.

The stallion looked at her and said in a quiet voice, “Victoria, trust me. You wouldn't believe me if I told you.”

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Later that evening, the pair were getting ready for bed. “So you're trying to convince me that you were in the Lord's celestial home, talking with *The Son*?” Victoria was sitting in her easy chair by the bed, giving her mate the evil eye. “I'm not buying that story for even one minute.” she said, shaking her head. “There are people in my church that would give up everything for just 30 seconds with *The Son* and you're telling me that *you* were having a casual wine and fruit lunch with *him*?!”

The stallion was sitting on the end of the bed opposite his mate, having a hard time making the tigress understand the gravity of the situation. “Victoria, sweetheart ... have I *ever* lied to you?” he asked, rubbing his forehead. The last few hours spent trying to convince his mate about where he had been was giving him a massive headache that was threatening to blow the top off of his skull any second.

“You have a point, sweetheart ... you've never lied to me, *ever*. Besides, that story is just too outlandish to have been made up. A loud Hawaiian shirt ...” She was looking at her mate, showing just a hint of a smile. “OK, I guess that I have to believe you then.”

She began to get up from her chair when she noticed a plate of sliced cantaloupe sitting on the table next to her that wasn't there before. Picking up a folded note that was sitting next to the plate, she opened and read it. Victoria pondered the note for a moment before she sampled the fruit on the plate to find it was every bit as delicious as the piece that she had tasted earlier. She then passed the note to her husband to read. Tor opened it, read it and smiled. In an elegant paw written script, the note said “Thanks for believing in Torvald. He will soon need all of your strength. Please enjoy the cantaloupe, compliments of the house.” The note was signed 'Christopher'.

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It was the next Saturday and Tor was throwing passes for Conrad to catch. It was a good thing that the young tiger had some stamina as his stepfather was running him back and forth across the field. The Shieldmaiden was standing next to the stallion, watching Conrad's form.

“Conrad! Trap the ball or the opposing player will knock it out of your grip!” the filly yelled as the stallion sent another ball flying down field. “That's better!” she yelled as the tiger trapped the ball in mid-air only to land gracefully and run a few more steps. Conrad then spiked the ball and did a mock end-zone strut, much to the adult's dismay. “I didn't see that!” the huge stallion said, facepawing himself.

As Torvald let another ball fly, Aslaug made an observation. “You throw that ball with a perfect spiral every time. Where did you learn that?” the filly asked as she picked up another ball and gave it to him.

“I played ball at UCLA back in the 40's, after WW2.” he replied, casually throwing another perfect spiral *waaay* down field. “I was scouted by the Rams when they were in Los Angeles in '48 but I turned their offer down to stay out of the public eye.” After a few more balls, Tor made his own observation. “I think this practice is over. Conrad looks too tired to run anymore.” The young tiger was presently lying in the grass, panting hard with exhaustion. “I think you are right, berserker.” the filly concurred.

The two equines helped Conrad off the field and had deposited him on the first step of the bleachers to rest. They were sitting on the next row up with Victoria, enjoying some sports drinks and sandwiches.

“I heard that you have seen WhiteChrist and he told you something.” Aslaug said, sipping her drink. She looked over to see that the stallion seemed lost in thought. He slowly looked over at her and just nodded.

“Is that all you're going to do? Nod?” his mate asked, giving him a poke in the ribs. That action snapped him out of wherever he was at the moment.

“Oh ... Uh ... yeah. He told me that I was almost ready to do other things for the gods. All I needed to do was to face my one fear.” the stallion said. He looked at the filly with a serious look on his muzzle and said only one thing. “*Him*.”

The Shieldmaiden almost dropped her drink when the giant fur said what he had said. “You cannot face destruction and win. You will only be

consumed by his evil!" The filly said reverently. Aslaug had an upset look about her as she added, "No ... you cannot ..." Her voice trailed off as she sat her drink and sandwich down.

"I'm sorry, Aslaug, I *must* face *him*." The stallion said, staring off into the distance.