

'The Price Of Worship'  
By R C Stankewitz

*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 Chevarez, 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, Nicholas, Thomas and Anna Sands, Wilhelmine Andersdatter, Axel Torvaldson, Gytha Torvaldsdatter, Dana Torvaldsdatter , John Parks, Candace Ewing Parks, Frode Gunnarson, Steven Nanomantube, Coffee-2-Go and Computer Shack are the property of Ray Stankewitz and may not be used without permission*

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## Chapter 1

### “Prelude”

“I still remember the afternoon that I first formally met Aslaug face to face.” Torvald said to his mate. “Within five minutes she had threatened to destroy Steven's bar with my 'broken, lifeless body', I think is what she said.” He smiled as he remembered that day. “I'm glad she didn't. That would have hurt a lot when I didn't die on her.”

The tigress was sitting on the couch with her husband, watching football highlights on the television with him and their son, Conrad. She could see in her mind's eye the filly swinging her stallion around, cartoon style by the hooves. “Yeah, that would have been interesting, to say the least.” she commented as she picked up another paw-full of popcorn and munched on it. “She would have been quite surprised when you didn't croak off.” She smiled as she thought of the filly's eyes popping out of her head in amazement over an indestructible stallion.

“I would really like to have her around more often.” the stallion mused. “Maybe it would help her to not be so dark and moody.” As he sat there and remembered his first years on this planet he made a comment to his mate. “I was dark and moody just like her in the beginning because I couldn't fit in. Once I had been here for a number of years and learned the speech and customs that all went away but somehow I sense Aslaug will never get over it.”

“I think it's her new job duties.” the tigress interjected. “She may get over it or she may not. That's up to her and her alone.”

The highlights show was on a commercial and Conrad had gone to get another soda from the refrigerator when a familiar perky femme voice sounded out in the room:

*Torvald and Victoria ...uh...Svensen?, is it?  
Is that right?  
Uh...It is time! Prepare Yourself!*

“I would guess that Peter is on vacation this week.” the tigress said as they tried to keep from giggling at the voice.

*I heard that, guys! I am doing the best I can!*

“Oh, OK. We're getting ready.” the berserker said as he helped the tigress up off the couch. “Conrad? We have to leave on business.” he shouted out as the young tiger came around the corner and waved at them as they shimmered out.

###

The pair realized after a few moments that they were in the white room where they would wait for the proper time to be 'inserted' into their mission. “How big do you

think this room is?" the tigress asked as they stood around and waited. Sounds seemed to echo forever in this room that in a way was somewhat disorienting.

"I'm not sure but one of the assistant angels said it takes hours to walk from one side to the other." he replied. "I'm not in a hurry to find out for myself, if you want to know."

After a few more moments, a table and two chairs appeared nearby. They knew what this meant; some fur had miscued their 'insertion time' and they would have to wait for quite some time for another point in time to be inserted.

As they sat down at the table, a nice Italian spaghetti and salad meal appeared for them. "It's a long wait this time." the berserker stated as he tasted the sauce. "Hhmm, I would guess Luigi Taggionne cooked this meal for us," he commented as they started to enjoy the meal. "He always uses too much garlic in his sauces."

### *Luigi heard that!*

The voice said to them as they chuckled at the mental image of Luigi throwing a tantrum in his kitchen. "You shouldn't pick on him like that. He was a great 17<sup>th</sup> century chef, you know." the tigress said as she checked out the salad dressing. "Mmm, this dressing smells delicious." she commented as she put some on her salad.

"I don't see why we couldn't just go home to wait," the equine stated as he devoured his pasta. "What's the difference where we are, anyway? We can go at anytime if we know about it in advance." He seemed slightly irritated by the wait as he tasted the salad dressing himself.

Eventually, their meal was consumed and the dishes were taken away. They got up from the table and a couch and some foot stools appeared as the table and chairs vanished. "Oh No! Another delay!" they both said at the same time. This didn't bode well for them at all. Some of the hardest missions were the ones preceded by multiple delays.

### *Sorry, Guys! We are working real hard on the problem!*

The voice said as some soft classical music started to play for them. "At least we won't be standing." the huge fur said as they sat down and made themselves comfortable. A low table materialized in front of them with some glasses of water on it. "Now that was a nice touch," he said as he took a sip of water and smiled. "Good stuff." he commented as his mate sipped hers and agreed.

"I'm not sure if I will ever get used to this waiting," Victoria said as they waited for their mission to start or be called off. "It's nerve-wracking if you ask me." she added as she made herself more comfortable. She was trying to play it off but the end of her tail twitching gave her away. It was apparent that she was becoming restless as the hours ticked on. After an interminable wait, the voice sounded out once more.

*OK guys, get ready to go! We have your insertion point set!*

The immortal couple stood and the white room became even whiter, if that was possible.

###

As the whiteness changed back into scenery, they looked to see that they were in a rural area of a country that looked like the American mid-west. They were standing by a buckboard wagon that was loaded with furniture and hitched to a pair of horses. There was a third horse that was saddled, tied to the rear of the wagon.

If there was one small saving grace, these four-legged equines that were provided for their missions were quite intelligent. They could understand a bit of English so they knew not to run off or do some other silly thing.

“So what's your name?” Torvald asked as he walked up to the saddled red chestnut horse. The equine turned his head to show the huge fur a folded piece of paper stuck under his halter. Torvald took the paper and unfolded it. “Hhmm, This guy's name is 'Star', the black friesian is 'Jeff' and the Appaloosa is 'Milly'. It's nice to meet you three.” Jeff looked at the berserker like he was sizing him up while Milly just whinnied at him.

“Here's our clothes.” the tigress said as she unpackaged them and began to unfold their new duds. She discovered to her dismay that she would have to wear a dress, of all things. “I'm not liking this already,” she said in a low tone. “I do not like wearing a dress at all! How am I supposed to fight in a dress?” Her ears were flat against her skull as she looked up at the sky and said calmly, “You owe me one, Christopher!”

“What do I have for clothes?” the huge berserker asked as he came around the back of the wagon. His tigress was sorting out his clothes for him, holding up some cotton cloth stitched drawers with a smirk on her face.

“There's no elastic in the waist,” she said as she handed him the underwear. “You're going to hate that. I doubt that they'll stay up!” She separated out her things and then pulled out the instruction sheet provided. Victoria was shaking her head as she noted that what appeared to be a house dress was part of her undergarments. “Why do I always get the hard parts?” she asked no fur in particular. At least some fur had been thoughtful enough to set up a tent for them to change in.

Torvald took his clothes and began to strip right out in the open. “I can see for miles in any direction so you use the tent while I dress out here.” The tigress went into the tent and began to try to figure out the problem but the instructions just weren't that clear.

“How about a little help here?” she said loudly as she pondered which part to put on first. A smallish femme skunk appeared in the tent with her, dressed in 1890's attire.

“Hello,” the femme said as she picked up the parts for the tigress to put on first. “I'm Denise Berger, your mission clothing assistant.” the femme could see that the tigress was startled by her entrance. “I'm sorry, the supervisors heard you ask for help and it fell into the 'can do' category.” She then turned and yelled out to the huge fur outside,

“That undershirt is on backwards!” The two femmes both smiled at that piece of information.

The berserker was just finishing getting dressed when his mate came out of the tent in a conservative dark blue dress. She had her long ebony black hair up in a bun and a cute little hat pinned to her hair-do. “This getup is pretty but it weighs a ton, I have to tell you.” she commented as Denise collected up their modern clothing and put them in a bag.

“I have to be leaving now.” she said and shimmered out of sight with the modern clothing in paw. The immortal pair took the tent down and stowed it in the wagon. The few other props that had been set up were easy to put away because they hadn't been used.

As they finally got ready to go, Torvald made a discovery. The saddle on Star was a lady's sidesaddle! “Looks like I'm driving the wagon,” he commented as he helped the tigress up onto her mount. “I hope you're comfortable.” he stated as he untied the lead rope. “We don't have a regular saddle for you.”

“Christopher, you owe me big time!” she said as she looked upwards. “OK Star, take it easy on me. I've never ridden sidesaddle before.” she stated as she spread her skirt out over Star's haunches in a proper manner. The equine looked back at her and nodded his head at her request. Victoria swore she saw him smile just a little too. With little fanfare, the pair were off towards their destination.

###

Sheriff Tom Huxley was sitting at his desk in the jail house, cleaning his Colt 45 single action revolver. It had been a long ride from Muncie and he felt like his entire body and all of his gear had been coated with dust. The townsmen had elected the amicable collie sheriff for a third term this year and he had been happy with that. It was his job that bothered him sometimes, especially when it seemed like justice wasn't being served.

As he swabbed the barrel of his firearm, he thought about that leopard he had just delivered back to Muncie for trial. The fur had been accused of murder and it was his duty to detain him when the hotel clerk had recognized the fur in question. The fur didn't seem that dangerous, giving up without a fight when he arrested him. It just didn't seem to make any sense. The poor feline had a look of impending doom, as if he knew he was a dead fur already. It just didn't make any sense at all.

He looked in the bottom drawer of his desk to see that his bottle of whiskey was empty again so he got up and went to the stove in the corner of his office. He put a few pieces of wood into it and closed the door. With a wave of his paw, a nice, hot fire ensued inside. He poured some water into the coffee pot and put a paw-full of grounds inside. It would be ready in a few minutes at best; he could already hear it starting to boil. At least the coffee would taste right to him. Every time he tried to make whiskey appear, it always tasted like rubbing alcohol.

Back when he had perfected his craft as a mage, this would have been a cheap parlor trick at best. Now it just proved to be an annoyance at times. He had been such a proper mage, doing multitudes of good things for his community. Then he had fallen to the

darkness that was evil just once. That was enough to get him almost killed by his mage master. Now he was a sheriff in a two-bit town that had no clue exactly what he was. Maybe that sentence was for the best. There was no reason to use his craft except for cheap parlor tricks now.

“Good afternoon,” the femme mongoose said as she came through the front door with his dinner. “Theodore said you were back and to bring your meal to you.” she added as she sat the tray on his desk. Corrine Merriweather was a very beautiful femme and probably one of the most desirable, status-wise. She was the only child of the town's mayor. Why she worked for the hotel was beyond any reasoning. She had more money available to her than most townsfurs would ever make.

“How was your trip?” she asked as she sat down next to his desk and straightened her dress front. He was thinking that she obviously liked him because she practically made up excuses to hang out around the fallen mage.

“Same as usual,” he commented as he poured some coffee for the two of them. “Dusty old trail, dusty old towns, dusty old sheriff.” he stated as he sat down and looked at his meal. She had brought him a steak, some potatoes and a salad for his dinner. “You always know what to bring me for dinner.” he said as he tasted the meat. It was done to perfection as always.

As the sheriff began to consume his meal, his somewhat bumbling deputy stumbled in the door with a very pissed-off badger in his custody. “Howdy do ma'am,” he said to Corrine as he roughly pushed the prisoner into a cell and slammed the door. “Found this one snooping around the old Guthrey place,” the cougar commented as he took the shackles from the badger through the bars. “Wouldn't give me a name so I ran him in.”

“His name is Lawrence Cerruti.” the collie stated, not even bothering to look up from his meal. “His old man owns the old Guthrey place now. Let Mr. Cerruti go before I put you in that cell with him.” The badger smiled an evil smile as he flexed his fingers in anticipation.

The cougar looked at his boss kind of funny, then turned and looked at the badger in the cell. “I thought he looked kinda familiar,” he commented as he opened the cell back up. “I guess you kin go now.” he added as he stepped aside for the cell door to swing open.

“Thanks, Sheriff.” Lawrence said as he rubbed his wrists. “I'll let my father know how you helped out.”

“You're welcome.” the collie replied as he stood and shook the badger's paw. “Tell your father I'll be by this week to visit with him.”

The young badger then looked at the deputy as he said, “I hope you can find a job elsewhere after the town counsel gets through with you.” He then turned and left the office.

“What did he mean by that, I wonder?” the cougar said as he poured a cup of coffee for himself. He took off his gun belt and hung it over the back of his chair before he sat down.

“Mitch Bolton, are you that dense?” the collie commented. “He's looking to get you fired, you idiot!” He looked up to see the lights were on but nobody was home. “Mitch, he's going to tell his father what happened, who will no doubt ask for your badge next week.”

“Now hold on there! He wouldn't tell me who he was!” the deputy stated in his defense. “He wouldn't give me his name so I had every right to run him in!”

“I suppose you have no clue that a badger in this town is either a Cerruti or related to a Cerruti?” the sheriff asked. Corrine rolled her eyes at the thought. This information was common knowledge to almost all furs in town.

“Well, how was I supposed to know?” Mitch asked as he stared at his boss. “I don't know everyone in this town!” The deputy put his boots up on his desk as he sipped his coffee. “I think y'all got it out fer me, that's what.”

“No, we don't.” Tom replied. “You just need to use a little more caution from now on.”

###

The immortal pair had been traveling along the road for some time now and it was getting quite late. “I don't want to camp out tonight,” the tigress stated. “I had enough of that when we were on that planet with Kellan and Jim.”

“It doesn't bother me at all,” the huge berserker commented. “I will agree with you that a bed would be better than the hard ground.” He tried his best to get more comfortable on his seat atop the buckboard. “Maybe that's a town up ahead.” He could see a glow over the top of the ridge ahead of them.

“Yeah, there's something up there,” she agreed, trying to see further ahead of them. “There seems to be a lot of smoke, though.” This didn't look so good to her. “I hope it's not another burned out town.”

“I hope not too.” Torvald said as he shook his head. He remembered that first village from the last emergency mission they were on. Even though he had pillaged as a 10<sup>th</sup> century berserker, these images had upset him greatly. There had been bodies that were burnt so badly you couldn't possibly tell what species they had been. That was the day that the couple had decided to see if they could become something other than immortal 'agents' for the gods.

As they topped the rise, it became clear that it was two buildings that were burning. Out in front of the bigger building, a male and a femme leopard stood there, watching the fire consume the structure. It was obvious that the male was consoling what must have been his mate. He was also dressed in a preacher's garb. Once they had arrived at the scene of the conflagration, Torvald helped Victoria off of her mount. The immortal pair walked over towards the furs standing there.

“Is there anything we can do to help?” the huge fur asked the pastor.

The feline turned and regarded Torvald and his mate standing there. “No, I think it's past saving. I'm just making sure it doesn't spread to the fields.” The leopard wiped a tear from his eye as he said, “I was waiting to see how long it would take before this happened.”

“Before what happened?” the tigress asked. It wasn't clear what the male feline was talking about.

“My church being burned down,” he answered. “The Lutheran church burned last week. It seemed like it was just a matter of time.” He wiped another tear from his eye as he said, “I'm sorry, I haven't introduced myself. I'm Pastor John Aranow and this is my wife Lisa. We're of the Pentecostal faith.”

The berserker looked at the fire and then back at the leopard couple. “I'm Torvald Svensen and this is my wife, Victoria. I wish we would have met under better circumstances.” He extended his paw which the leopard shook firmly. He thought it would be better to say they weren't affiliated with any church so he proffered up, “Victoria and I are worshipers but we don't belong to a church yet.”

“Maybe it's better you don't.” the leopardess said to them. “It looks like God has forsaken us.” As she stood there and tried not to cry, the pastor asked a favor of the immortal pair.

“If you would,” the leopard asked, “After this fire burns itself down enough so it won't spread, would you take us into town? That smaller fire over there was our parsonage. We don't have a place to stay tonight.”

The immortal pair agreed to help them so they stood and waited until the fire had burned down sufficiently before leaving for town.

On the trip into town, the immortal couple had learned that the pastor and his wife had come from New Rochelle, New York to take over the church from an aging couple that were ready to retire. They had been in the Anderson, Indiana area for several years and had hoped to some day build themselves a home of their own. Now it looked like those plans were no longer viable for them. Pastor Aranow told them that they would be leaving for New York in the morning since there was nothing left for them here.

Sparked by the pastor's talking about their plans, Victoria thought back to the day when she had agreed to be a holy warrior for the gods. At first she had been hesitant but she had finally accepted when her hubby pointed out that this would give them more time together. She then recalled that emergency mission in the 14th century and the dragon incinerating the poor furs. The tigress began to question whether she wanted to continue her role for the greater good or call it quits before they were destroyed by some dark force.

Victoria loved her stallion and she knew she wouldn't be able to go on if something happened to him. What if she wasn't there to help keep her equine lover alive because she knew he acted sometimes out of pure rage? She knew in her heart that they were doing good but was it really worth it to her? Only she could answer those questions. Victoria looked over at her husband as a tear slipped from her eye when the thought of something tragic happening to him crossed her mind.