

Chapter 6

Torvald was standing in his back yard, sweating profusely from the morning's activities. Across from him, his training partner Conrad was kneeling down on one knee, busy trying to catch his breath. "OK Dad, I need a break here! You've run me ragged!"

The stallion was smiling, happy with his stepson's progress with the wooden training sword. They had began working out together when Conrad had been told about his stepfather's *condition*.

"Sweetheart, give him a breather. Maybe Valerie or Barbara would like to work out with you." Victoria suggested, a smile creeping across her face. She looked over to see the two lovers' eyes getting wide.

"Uh ... well ... maybe for a little while. I'm still trying to get over the workout that Aslaug gave me." Barbara said, getting up and heading for the yard. The ocelot was getting her shield set just right before facing the berserker.

The two combatants went at one another for close to 20 minutes until it was clear that the ocelot was running out of steam. Barbara no longer had the speed to keep out of striking range of the stallion. The stallion was relishing the chance to practice his craft and he was taking full advantage of the situation. Barbara was slowly being forced into a defensive mode, using her shield to fend off the heavy blows from the huge stallion.

The berserker had just landed several forceful blows to the ocelot's shield, causing her to stumble and fall. He then brought the point of his practice sword down to her chest.

"You are done." he said, smiling widely. He then reached down and helped the feline to her feet effortlessly. Barbara, however was panting hard, trying to catch her breath as she went back to her lawn chair.

"Torvald, I don't understand how you can keep right on fighting without running out of breath!" the ocelot said, wiping the sheen off of her fur.

"You spent way too much time trying to avoid me." the stallion replied, toweling the sweat off of his muzzle. "I just waited for you to come within range before striking. I tried to waste as little movement as possible." He took a sip of some fresh lemonade before he continued. "You have only so much energy reserves. You need to be frugal with your energy or risk what happened to you just now."

"If you're still up for it, I need to practice some." Valerie said her brother-in-law. "I haven't had a good battle in a while." She stood up and took up her arms, settling her shield and sword.

Tor smiled as he did a few windmills with his sword, showing off now. "I would be glad to oblige you, Valerie" He replied, taking a fighting stance.

The tigress faced off against the huge warrior and gave it her best shot. Although she had superior speed, Tor's fighting wits kept him well out of reach of her sword. The stallion however, was able to land numerous blows to her shield and body, keeping her moving and using up her energy reserves.

It was becoming obvious that Valerie was going to come out on the short end of this confrontation. She finally stopped and dropped her armament to the grass. "I concede" she said, finally dropping to her knees and rolling over onto her side. The tigress was panting hard with exhaustion.

"Come on, let's get you to some shade." the stallion said, helping her to get up. After Valerie had been settled in her chair, he took the time to retrieve his towel. "I hope I didn't fight too rough." he added, wiping more sweat off of his body and muzzle.

"You lasted longer than Barbara." Victoria chimed in, looking at her watch. "I'm sure you went about 22 minutes with Tor." she added, smiling at her sister. Barbara was still panting hard as she wiped the sweat from her fur.

"Mom, why don't you go a round with me." Conrad suggested, smiling at his mother. The tigress sat her lemonade down and looked at her son with a smirk.

"OK, but I get to use *my* weapon of choice. It's the one that Torvald trained me with." she replied to her son. The young tiger looked confused by that statement. He waited patiently while his mother went into the garage for her weapon. Eventually, she returned with an ash wood longstaff.

"OK, I'm ready" Victoria said to her son as she took up a fighting stance. She was watching her son's every move as he prepared himself for battle. Her ears were laid back slightly and her pupils had widened substantially. Her whiskers began to twitch in anticipation of the battle.

Conrad nodded as he began to try and circle his mother, doing windmills with his weapon to hold her back. Victoria spotted this gambit of her

son's and countered him, cutting him off. Just as the young tiger began to try to charge her, his mother brought her weapon to bear on him.

The tigress used her lightning-fast reflexes to strike him numerous times about the body and shoulders before he could retreat. "Mom! That hurt!" he exclaimed, rubbing his right shoulder. She took this opportunity to sweep his feet out from under him, dropping him unceremoniously to the turf.

Victoria put the end of her staff on his chest and smiled. "Want a rematch?" she offered, reaching out to help her son up. Conrad was just looking at his mother in surprise.

"Well, maybe not right now ..." he said, picking up his shield. The young tiger went over to his chair and sat down, still rubbing his shoulder.

The feline femme lovers were both wide-eyed at what had just transpired. "Victoria! I had no idea ..." her sister said, still trying to take this all in. "I know who I'm not pissing off anymore!" she added, smiling at her sibling.

"What have I missed?" a familiar voice said from the patio door. Aslaug was standing there, holding up her key to the front door. "I hope I am not too late to practice some." she said, stepping out onto the deck and closing the patio door behind her.

"I just gave my son a lesson." the tigress said, smiling at her offspring. Conrad was looking slightly embarrassed by having his behind handed to him by his mother.

"Would you mind going a round with me?" the Shieldmaiden asked, pulling off her sweatshirt to reveal a tank top underneath. The filly took a moment to remove a few items from the pockets of her Olive Drab BDU pants and place them on a table nearby. Not wishing to search for it again, she removed her pendant and placed it on top of her things.

"You'll probably hand me my breakfast but sure, I'll go a round or two with you." Victoria replied, leaning on her longstaff as she waited.

Aslaug stretched just a little before taking up her armament. She stepped down to the lawn and settled her grip on her practice sword. Nodding at the feline, they began to battle.

Victoria moved with a grace reserved only for those who knew war intimately. She countered the filly's moves easily, keeping the warrior at bay. Every move that Aslaug made against the feline, Victoria was able to fend off. The longstaff was working to Victoria's advantage, keeping the

filly out of striking range. The feline even managed to land a number of blows to the Shieldmaiden, surprising the filly.

After about 15 minutes, the filly took a few steps back and lowered her weapon. "You are a worthy fighter. I would have to wear you down before I could finish you." Aslaug said, smiling. It was obvious that the filly had found a worthy opponent.

"Thank you, Aslaug. I am honored that you feel my efforts worthy." the feline responded, bowing to the filly. The tigress wasn't winded *yet* but she knew that the filly would have gotten her in the end.

As the two warriors sat down, Valerie made a comment. "I didn't think anyone could stay with the filly but I was very wrong! You said Torvald trained you?"

"He trained me with the staff when I told him I didn't like firearms." Victoria replied to her sister's query. "He taught me to fight like my life depended on it. This is the only way to *not* be a battlefield statistic according to him. If you walk through the house, you'll find a staff in every room."

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The stallion was sitting on the couch in the family room, trying to get some work done. The rest of his family had gone to bed, leaving him the last one awake. He was currently scanning his reports, looking for any possible problems. The lab reports for Don Watkins showed that he was taking his medication and his musk had lost almost all of its potency. He was organizing that folder when the doorbell began to ring. Looking that way, he begrudgingly got up to answer it.

Looking through the peephole, he wasn't sure if he was seeing what was on the other side of the door. Tor opened the door to confirm what he saw. Loke was standing there, trying to balance a tray with bowls and mugs on it.

"This is quite awkward, if you ask me." the weasel said, stepping inside. "I'm trying to do as your fair maid asks." he added, giving the berserker a slight smile.

The berserker took the tray from Loke and asked him to follow him to the family room. The weasel sat in the wing back chair while Tor settled back down on the couch.

“What brings you here?” Torvald asked, taking a sip of the liquid in the bowl. It was a fine mead, fit for a king. It had been a while since he had tasted mead this good.

“I have come to visit, that's all.” the weasel replied, sipping the ale he had brought. “I have come to tell you that you are being talked about in Asgaard, my friend. They say you are brave for facing Destruction.”

“I have not faced *him* yet,” the stallion stated, sipping the mead some more. “It has been almost 2 months since I last tried to face *him*.” The berserker looked up to see that Loke was looking at him oddly.

“Your problem is that you're not ready. You cannot even say Destruction's true name”. Loke said, sipping his mead. “*He* will continue to toy with you until you are ready. When you can say Destruction's true name, you are ready.”

“I noticed that you can't say *his* true name either.” Torvald commented, setting his mug down. He was looking at how uncomfortable the weasel was at this moment.

“He is still mad at me,” Loke replied. “At least I gave him back his brass doors after a few days.” The weasel finally stood and said, “I must go now.” He began to shimmer but quickly rematerialized. “I'm sorry. I almost forgot.” he said, motioning in the direction of the front door.

The stallion walked with him to the front door and opened it for him. Loke nodded his head as he walked out the door. He then stopped and looked at Tor. “I still think it's awkward.” the weasel said with a sigh and then resumed walking towards the street, slowly fading from view.

Torvald went back to the family room and cleaned up his mess that he had made with his paperwork. He finished his mead and ale before putting the vessels in the sink. Thinking about what he had to do, it was apparent that he still needed to prepare himself. He finally joined his mate, falling off to a fitful sleep.

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Torvald looked around himself. He was walking across a springtime heath in what he guessed was early morning. The sun hadn't risen yet and he could see his breath in the air. He looked down to see that he was wearing a simple tunic and leggings. He had on his chainmaille and he was carrying his axe and shield. His battle helmet was on his head. He was slightly confused about how he had gotten here. He also wasn't sure about where he was going, either.

The berserker wasn't sure if he was dreaming this or not. He kneeled down to touch the ground, feeling the earth's texture below him. Even though everything looked OK, he still felt something was wrong. Very wrong. This wasn't Saxony, where he had last lived. The trees around him looked different, yet familiar at the same time. The berserker felt he knew this place but he wasn't sure. Was this the Danish Jutland Peninsula, the place of his birth?

He walked on for what seemed like forever before he noticed signs that others had traveled here. More encouraging were hoof prints that were near in size to his own. As he walked on, he spied a plume of smoke from a fire up ahead. For some reason he felt drawn to that direction so he continued on.

As he topped a low ridge between himself and the fire, he could see that it was a small encampment that appeared to be of *Hedni* origin. He walked down the slight incline to within shouting distance.

"I am Torvald Svensen. I mean no fur harm." he called out in his native tongue. An equine sitting by the fire motioned for him to come closer. As Tor approached the fire, the equine got up and came towards him. *"I am Sven Mikkelsen. Come and warm yourself, son of Sven."* The older stallion said, motioning towards a seat by the fire.

Torvald froze in his tracks when he heard what the older fur had said. Looking closer, he was trying to decide if this could be his father. This was impossible or was it? He began to walk towards the stallion to see that it was without a doubt his father, who had died in battle when Torvald was just a colt.

"Father, it is good to see you again. I have much to ask ..." Sven cut off his son as he said, "We do not have much time. I have come here to talk with you about the things that you must do."

Torvald sat down at the fire and laid his axe across his lap. Looking at his father, it was obvious who he resembled. His father was built very heavily, just like his son. He did notice though, that he was nearly a foot taller than his father. It was said that his father's father was tall like himself so maybe that's where he got his unusual height from.

"Torvald, I tried to teach you all that I knew about being a fearless warrior. I died before I could finish with my duties" the old warrior said, a sad look on his face. "You have been chosen to do things for the gods, my son. The one obstacle that is in front of you, you must face soon. You

must use your mind's eye to see that obstacle. You must see it dead, destroyed. This is the only way you can face your fears and win.”

Another equine came to the fire and sat down, warming his paws by the fire. Torvald recognized him as being Lars, a fur from his birth village. He was much older now, having been just a colt when Torvald married. He looked up at the berserker and said, “You know my daughter, Berserker. Tell my little Aslaug that her father still loves her and misses her.”

Before Torvald could reply to Lars, his father stopped him once more. “You must go now and return from whence you came. When the time comes, Victoria will lend you great strength. She is stronger than you could ever realize. Now go, son. Go and prepare yourself.” He reached out and they gripped each other's arm in a Norse pawshake. The world around him suddenly went white.

Tor suddenly sat bolt upright in the bed, screaming out his father's name. It took a moment before he realized that he *was* back at home, in his bed. He had the covers wound up around himself and he was soaking wet with sweat. Getting out of bed, he covered his wife up again. He was glad that she hadn't woke up at that point.

After he dried the sweat off from his body, the berserker sat in his easy chair in the nook until he had wound down. Had he dreamed all of this? The giant stallion wasn't sure of anything at this point. He decided that what he needed more than anything else right now was some rest. Going back to bed, he pulled up the covers and drifted back to sleep.