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To be or not to be...extinct

Aslaug had been working as a football coach at the local high-school for a few months. At first, she'd been laughed at by many. Many of those laughing had been parents. Those had very quickly stopped their derisive remarks, when they saw what she was capable of. The others were mainly coaches from other teams. They usually didn't stop laughing until their defensive lines started crumbling somewhere during the first quarter.

So far, the team had played four games. It had resulted in three wins and a close run loss against last year's state champions.

They had to play that team again. Next time, at home. Aslaug felt fairly sure they'd win it the next time around. The team was younger on average than most of the opponent teams, but they were better motivated.

The shieldmaiden found that she greatly enjoyed the games and the camaraderie between the players made her remember how she had felt in the company of other warriors, back home.

She was standing on the sideline right now. It was dark, but the floodlights were on. The game was nearly at an end. The score was tied at 31-31, and Aslaug felt like planting a hoof in a soft and squishy spot belonging to the defensive line-coach. Her offense made lots of points but as long as the defense let as many points into their own end zone, it was hard to win football-games. Time was running out and it was third and nine on the fifty yard line.

"Greg, get your ass over here," she said, without taking her eyes off the field.

A young Maine Coon came running up to her and took his helmet off. He looked rather nervous. Greg was fast, Aslaug knew that...but he didn't like getting hit. He was constantly afraid he'd get flattened by someone much bigger than himself. It meant he spent most games on the sideline, while his brother, Peter, played almost the entire game. Aslaug realized it was making Gregory feel bad, but unless he proved he could take a hit, she couldn't let him play much without hurting the team as a whole.

She put a paw on his shoulder, still not looking off the field. "Listen close now. I'm going to give you a chance, and you'd better be a smart kitty and grab it with both paws, y'hear?"

Greg nodded, eyes going wide. "Sure, Coach. What do you want me to do?"

"It's third and nine and Reuben's arm is getting reeeeeeally tired in there. He's not going to be able to make much of a pass on this. The other team no doubt noticed so they'll be expecting a run. Yep...see..." she said and gestured to the field. The gain hadn't been more than two yards.

"Fourth and seven...Coach Collins is going to want to punt, then," Greg said, his shoulders slumping.

Aslaug nodded. "I know, and I don't agree. We'll go into overtime then and the team is exhausted. We have to win this in regular time, and that's where you come into it."

Greg looked confused.

The filly signaled she wanted to use a time-out. There was less than two minutes left on the clock. The whole team huddled up around her and she crouched in the middle, beckoning everyone to stand really close.

"Alright," she began and rubbed her paws together. "Reuben, you're looking like your arm is made of that Italian stuff you boil and eat..."

"Spaghetti, Coach...Spaghetti..."

"That's it. Can't blame you, you played a good game so far. You sit this one out. We'll do a punt fake, and since they haven't seen Greg on the field yet, they won't know how fast he is."

Most of the team looked at Greg in disbelief. A few of them looked like they'd protest, but Aslaug raised a paw sharply, to cut them off.

Greg put on his helmet and set his jaw. "I'll do my best."

Aslaug nodded. "That's all I ask."

###

Joe Latrans hung up his jacket and called out to Annie to let her know he was home. She responded from the living room and Joe smiled to himself. He scratched his neck and headed into the house, stopping by the kitchen to get started on a pot of coffee.

"Aww, don't do that," Annie called out, the moment she realized what her husband was doing. "You won't sleep until two AM that way."

Joe grinned. "I don't think I will anyway. Not with this much adrenalin rushing around my body," he said and entered the living room with a big smile on his face.

"You look happy. I guess we won."

"Yup. That last play was something else. Never seen that Coon-kid play before but daaaamned he's fast."

Annie smiled and nodded. Football was one of Joe's passions and while she didn't dislike the game, she couldn't quite get into it to the same level as he did. Suddenly, she realized something.

"Hey, where's the filly?" she asked.

Joe waggled his eyebrows and smiled even wider. "Oh, she won't be home tonight."

Annie shook her head and tried in vain to avoid giggling. "Good thing you're sitting down or your tail would be knocking over the furniture, Joe."

The coyote leaned back and looked content. "I've got a beautiful wife...you can't blame me," he pointed out.

"So where is she?"

"She had a big argument after the match with the defensive coach. That is to say, she told him very bluntly what she thought of his work, then he argued and she shrugged and told him what she thought of males who can't take criticism."

Annie winced. "Ouch. Y'know, it's not like she's world champion at taking criticism herself..."

Joe shrugged. "That's different. Aslaug can take criticism if you can prove she's wrong, and if you can't...well, she'll give you a piece of her mind..."

"...I rest my case, Joe..."

"Heh...yeah, I know what you mean. Anyway, she went off somewhere to spend a little time with herself and her hammer-pendant."

Annie nodded. That did mean they'd have the house themselves all evening and all night. Aslaug would probably not be back until sometime tomorrow.

###

"So I exist..." the filly muttered to herself. She was sitting on a park bench, holding her pendant between her paws. She had a couple of beers next to her. She was still debating whether to drink it or use it in a ritual. Strictly speaking, the latter sounded more appealing. American beer was...well, it wasn't what she considered beer, at least.

"Stop being so...critical of everything you come across, Aslaug," she muttered to herself and shook her head. "Why're you so angry all the time?"

The worst part was...she didn't know the answer. At least, not the whole answer. Part of it was because she came from a harsher world than this, and one had to be brusque to be taken seriously. But this wasn't her world. She saw it every day...she experienced it constantly. Yet she found it hard to shake her old ways.

Did she really want to?

"No you don't, and that's not entirely a bad thing. Nor is it entirely a good one," a voice said next to her. A pleasant, if slightly teasing voice.

Aslaug didn't even look up. She'd recognize it anywhere.

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't bend you backwards, tie you into a knot and use you for a punching bag to get rid of some of all this aggression, Loke?" she asked, sourly.

The weasel next to her leaned back on the bench and grinned widely. "So glad you remember me, shieldmaiden. Anyway, I'll tell you why. Because powerful as you are, I'd be the one to bend you over backwards, etcetera, etcetera..."

"I'd happily die trying," Aslaug muttered and replaced the hammer around her neck.

Loke grinned slightly. "Ahh yes...death. That's really what this is all about, isn't it? You're still pissed off that you were cheated out of your place at the long table, and you think it's all my doing, correct?"

"I died in battle! But I wasn't allowed to pass on. I died nobly. I had lived honorably and my time was up. No more string under Yggdrasil, Loke. No more weaving of fate for the Norns on my account. I died...and yet, here I sit. Daugr. Who would play such a cruel joke on me, if not you?"

Loke shook his head. "Contrary to popular belief, Aslaug, I don't play cruel jokes for their own sake. There's got to be a reason, and while there is a lot of reason for your condition, I assure you...I'm not responsible for it. Besides, you're not...daugr. Undead they'd call it around here. You have to admire these furs. Such imagination, put into things they don't even believe. It's a big joke, really. Did you know many of them play games where they pretend to be heroes and great warriors, and in those games, we exist...in slightly altered forms?"

"You exist in games?"

"We exist anywhere...although in this world, we're just shadows, observing and watching. We leave the Christian God to do his work in this realm. You're part of that work too, you know."

Aslaug snorted. "As if I want to be a part of Whitechrist's work."

"He's not too bad, though. He doesn't party well...he almost never drinks, and he's got a horrible singing voice, but he's a nice enough fellow. Caring and generous and gentle...and quite frankly he's sick and tired of those who abuse his teachings. Why do you think he hasn't made an in-the-flesh appearance for two thousand years? Come on, give him a chance, Aslaug," Loke grinned.

"You're an inch away from a major facial rearrangement, I assure you!" the shieldmaiden hissed. "I'm heðni. And while I don't deny his existence..."

"...that'd be pretty foolish, considering what you've seen..."

Aslaug ignored the interruption and continued. "I don't deny he's there. But Odin is there as well. And you are. And Freja and Thor and all the others. The Christian belief system leaves me cold! Apart from the occasional good fur like Joe, Tigermark or Aramis, there is too much hypocrisy and too many blatant lies. Too much false sense of saintliness and piety, which all serves to cover a rot so deep Hel herself would drool!"

"Oy! Be nice when you talk about my daughter, Aslaug or I might have to slap you around a bit until you remember your manners!" Loke said, sternly.

Aslaug raised an eyebrow and looked at the weasel. "Your daughter rules the realm of those who died ignobly and with shameful, wasted lives behind them. She feeds her tenants from a plate called 'Hunger', using a knife called 'Starvation' to carve the food...and you want me to give her credit?"

"Point taken," Loke admitted, scratching his neck.

"Apart from Sleipnir, you've got a bad litter, Loke, and even you have to admit it."

"Well, I admit Jormundgandr is a bit of an embarrassment, but Thor really does exaggerate his fishing stories, okay? Just leave her down there at the bottom of the ocean and she'll be a happy serpent, bothering no one. Really! Honestly. I mean, look at me Aslaug, is this the face of a liar?"

Aslaug actually found herself smiling crookedly. "Yes! But this is what this visit is all about, isn't it? Cheering me up?"

Loke looked like innocence incarnated. "What? Me? Cheering anyone up? Now now, Aslaug, don't you start putting honorable and noble intentions into my portfolio."

"Bullshit. You're necessary, annoying as you are. Without you, they'd all start having delusions of grandeur in Asgaard," the filly chuckled and picked up a few pebbles from the ground in front of her. She tossed one of them away, lazily.

Loke smiled contently. "Ahh, I am good at my job, you have to admit that."

"Never contested it. So...apart from cheering me up, why are you here?"

"To have a beer?"

Aslaug groaned and rolled her eyes. "I wasn't about to make a Loke-blót, you know."

"Yep, I know. So I'll help myself!" the weasel grinned and took one of the beers, popping it open and taking a long swig. "ACK! They call this...this beer???" he whimpered and looked at the bottle in disbelief.

"It's Miller Time," Aslaug said, dryly.

"No wonder they can't make decent beer when Whitechrist doesn't even drink," Loke muttered and stared at the bottle again, before drinking some more. "Ah, that's more like it."

"Sejd really helps, eh?"

"Well, if Whitechrist can turn water into wine, I can turn this piss into good ale if I want!"

Aslaug actually found herself smiling by now. "Would you mind doing that to the other bottle as well?" she asked.

Loke picked it up and gave it to the shieldmaiden. "Way ahead of you, filly. Enjoy. It's a little taste of home."

Drinking, Aslaug had to agree with the weasel next to her on the bench. It really was a little taste of home. She could almost hear Tormod's roaring laughter. Ulf's raw voice as he told stories to the little ones across the fire on cold winters evenings. She could see the wind catch in Queen Tyra's hair as she commanded the hird to march to the redoubts at the German border, to stem the onslaught.

She'd seen it. She'd been there, herself. She had been one of those who marched the long way from Jelling to Dannevirke, to halt the German troops.

For a moment, she could smell that peculiar scent that would quickly envelop a battlefield.

Blood...

Sweat...

Rage...

She hung her head and closed her eyes. Even so, the tears were trying to force their way past her eyelids and down her muzzle. Treacherous, blasted tears.

A paw came to rest on her back and shoulder. "It's okay, Aslaug. It's alright to cry. There's nothing cowardly in weeping for what you have lost," Loke said, comfortingly. His voice was uncommonly honest. "I don't envy you the part you have been given, but...we are all grateful. Every one of us. They don't talk much about you but when you're mentioned...there's a sense of gratitude and relief there."

"Gratitude...for what?" Aslaug asked, forcing her voice to remain steady.

Loke took a moment to contemplate his answer. "Y'know...I actually think Freja said it better than anyone. She said that for all your skills with weapons and no matter how many wounds you made back in your own time and world...you heal wounds that have festered for almost a thousand years, with every day's work."

"What wounds?"

"The kind that doesn't bleed, Aslaug. The kind that just stings, festers and remains painful for all time, until someone comes along and actively tries to mend the damage."

The shieldmaiden nodded, wiping her eyes with the back of a paw. "I see what you mean."

"When you train those kids, and when you lead them, do you think for a moment that eight out of ten go to church every Sunday?"

"Of course not."

Loke smiled. "Would you think differently of them, if you did consider it?"

Aslaug shook her head. "Not really. They're allowed to believe as they do."

"Then you really do see what I mean. When you first saw your comrades in arms, on that heath...you nearly cut them down where they stood, simply for being Christian. Now you make friends with them. And just as importantly...they make friends with you. War is ugly business, Aslaug. You of all furs should know that. Glorious...but ugly."

"Especially when it's the kind of war that doesn't kill furs. Hidden wars...inglorious ones without battlefields, but with back-talking, cowardliness and rumormongering. Those are the worst ones."

"The word 'Heathen' has a bad ring to it in this world, Shieldmaiden. You can't change that. It'd take thousands...tens of thousands...like you to change that, by good examples.

But like me...you can be a pebble in the pond, and maybe the ripples will reach a few other furs, who will understand. Then they will be pebbles too. It'll take a lot of time..."

"...as long as I'm immortal, Loke...I've got nothing BUT time..."

The weasel smiled and got up. "Enjoy your ale, Aslaug Larsdatter. Oh...and do stick around a while. Who knows who else will come and sit with you?"

Aslaug didn't argue. She sipped the ale again as the weasel walked away, turning more and more transparent with every step. Finally, he was completely gone. The park was dark by now. A few streetlights nearby gave a little illumination. The park lamps were behind her, but they too added a dim light. It wasn't really cold. A bit chilly, perhaps, but she didn't mind too much. She pulled her jacket a little closer around herself and sighed.

So she was doing something good, by being the fur she was. That was reassuring. The gods never placed demands or expectations on their followers. They'd let her make up her own mind about what to do and then evaluate the worthiness of it afterwards. At least it felt good to know that she'd been weighed and found heavy enough, for the time being.

The ale in the bottle was half gone. She didn't want to finish it. Every sip brought memories, but they were fleeting and she wanted them to last.

She missed home. Terribly.

And she could never go back. If she did, she'd die. That in itself wasn't too bad. She wouldn't mind dying. In fact, she had suffered a good death as she had told Loke. Facing that would be very easy indeed. But she wouldn't be allowed to go back. At least not for a very, very long time.

Another sip of ale went down, and with it came fond memories of the first time she had known her purpose in life. When her father had not returned from battle.

Old Rane Shieldbiter...the toughest, meanest, most growling and foul-smelling berserker in the history of the village had come back with her father's axe and broken spear. She had been the one who received them. Her mother had been out tending the livestock.

Rane had wept, bitterly. Told stories of how the battle had gone poorly and how Lars had been one of those who had fallen.

Aslaug had taken the axe...and the broken spear...pale but calm and collected. She had offered Rane mead and ale and a place to sit by a warm fireplace for a while. He had politely refused and gone on his way.

She had never seen him again after that day.

Instead, she had sat down and meticulously cleaned the metal. The axe had been dented and she had sharpened it, until it could cut flesh by merely placing a fingertip against its edge. She had slowly removed the broken wood from the spear. Then, very slowly, she had reached behind her neck and braided her hair and mane.

Like a married mare would wear it.

It gave her a sense of peace. A way to control her anger.

There was no more ale in the bottle...and the memory faded. Aslaug sighed and hung her head.

"You look a bit worse for wear, Coach," a new voice said next to her.

This one she didn't immediately recognize, and she looked up. Next to her sat an elderly cougar. He was nicely dressed and around his neck hung a prominent crucifix. Aslaug had seen him before.

He was a preacher...or whatever it was called...at one of the churches in town. She wasn't sure which one. The idea that Christians all venerated the same God but would argue bitterly...even to the point of hostility and enmity...about which way was the right way to do so, always seemed downright idiotic to her.

The cougar smiled politely. His whiskers twitched. Obviously, he wasn't quite sure if he was unwanted company or not. His voice had been concerned, though.

..."You heal wounds that have festered for almost a thousand years, with every day's work."

Those had been Loke's words. Or Freja's...repeated by Loke. Smiling a little, Aslaug put the empty bottle aside and shrugged. "I just had an argument with the other coaches after the game, that's all. I needed some time to think."

"I see. Well, I watched the game and I also happened to see the argument you mentioned. After you left, Coach Collins backed you up completely," the cougar explained with a little smile.

"He did? He didn't say anything while I was there, though," Aslaug said, quite surprised.

Chuckling, the cougar nodded. "That'd be Coach Collins for you. He's one of my flock, you see. I know him quite well. But as I happen to know you belong to a different

faith...now, no reason to look so defensive, it's your choice to make entirely...I think I had better introduce myself."

Aslaug shook the offered paw and nodded, slowly. "Thank you. I'm Aslaug," she said, quietly.

"Oh, I already know your name, but thank you nonetheless. I'm William Berg, and I'm the minister of the Lutheran church over on the west side of town. The thing is...I'm puzzled by you, Coach," the cougar said with a smile.

Aslaug let go of the paw and sat back on the bench. "Puzzled? I tend to think of myself as a very simple fur, Mr. Berg."

William couldn't help a chuckle. "William, please. Mr. Berg makes me feel like a lawyer. In any case, from what I hear...'simple' is probably the last thing you are. For one thing...you're extinct, didn't you know?"

Blinking a few times, Aslaug tried to make sense of that statement. It wasn't a threat, she could see that clearly enough. No, clearly the feline was trying to make a point of some kind to her.

"Extinct? I'm sitting right here, so...clearly I can't be?"

William smiled. "Obviously, that would be the logical conclusion and I am not quite sure how this has come to pass either. But I am not stupid, Coach. Moreover, I am observant, and I listen to what those around me have to say. All that I've come to understand about you, by what furs have had to say about you, tells me that you're something out of the ordinary," he said, slowly and ponderously. Like he was trying to find the best words to explain all this with.

"Please go on. I'd like to hear more about why I'm extinct..." Aslaug said, not without a certain humor to her voice.

"Well, you see...during the middle ages..." William began.

Aslaug nodded. "You mean when furs turn around 45 or so?" she asked.

William didn't know how to respond at first. He looked at the equine next to her and thought long and hard again. He'd heard the stories about how she would make the strangest mistakes. How she seemed unaware of things that were common knowledge. How no one seemed to know where she came from and how the school board had needed to jump through hoops to get her some paperwork to identify her with. The rumors were

plentiful, although he did his best to stop them at church. It was not good Christian behavior to whisper about someone when they weren't there to speak up for themselves. Unfortunately, it happened in his church just as much as it happened anywhere else in the world.

"I meant about seven hundred years ago, actually..." he explained "...there was a great and terrible plague called 'the black death' because it gave those who suffered from it black buboes all over their bodies. It killed millions of furs..."

"Millions," Aslaug said, quietly as if trying to bend her head around such a large number. "That's...terrible. But what does it have to do with me?"

William smiled again, mostly to himself. Everything the equine said made him more and more certain that she was something strange and...out of place. Like she was in the wrong place and...maybe even the wrong time. Normally, he would put her ignorance down to lack of education or even downright stupidity, but the football coach sitting next to him certainly wasn't stupid. She wasn't booklearned either...but he knew stupidity and the filly next to him was smarter than many. Just in a very different way.

"Almost every single type of equine in Europe was wiped out. Same all over the world, really. I don't know why, but...somehow, you must've been more susceptible to the plague than others. That was the tragedy, really. It struck down even the strongest furs. It was terrible," he explained. "Many thought it was God's punishment for how wicked furs had become around the world."

"Some God you have...striking down the innocent to punish the wicked," Aslaug said, flatly. "Killing off entire cities, because he wants to demonstrate a point to someone who's upset him. Wrecking nations because the kings are wicked? I don't like that kind of God."

Nodding, slowly, William didn't reel. He'd been prepared for something like that. "You're speaking of the old testament God. He was...angry then, yes. But he too changed, and when Christ died on the cross, he absolved us of all our sins."

"So by dying, he gave all furs everywhere a legitimate excuse to act like real bastards to each other for all eternity. Not to mention that your big, perfect God wasn't so perfect to begin with that he couldn't change and improve his mannerism? Sorry, Sir...you can believe in him if you want. I don't deny that he's there...but I'll never worship him," Aslaug said. Somehow she couldn't help worrying that she was upsetting the cougar next to her. He was being nice but...she always got defensive when it came to Christians and faith.

Old habits that just wouldn't die.

Like herself.

She hung her head and sighed. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to sound so harsh," she said, quietly.

"It's alright," William chuckled. "You're right though. Those are good, valid points and I don't really have an answer to them. I believe that God works in mysterious ways, and me, humble, mortal fur that I am, cannot understand Him fully. I'm sure he's got a plan for you as well, though, Coach."

"Oh I know he does," Aslaug said, bitterly.

William squinted. Again there was this feeling that something wasn't quite as it should be. The equine had said that with absolute clarity and certainty. Moreso than even the most devout believers he'd met. Generally, strong faith came in two varieties as far as he was concerned. The blind version which was stupid and often anything but Christian in it's ideals, and the doubting kind which led the believer to ask questions constantly...without ever losing faith, because the answers received were satisfactory. He counted himself as one of the second group.

Yet he'd never actually seen an angel...or God himself in all His glory.

The way the filly had said those five words, however, almost made him think that she had.

"The point remains, though...why are you here, Coach? I for one am happy that you are. And I'm glad you gave young Gregory a chance in tonight's match. He's been feeling very bad about not getting to play and he's blamed himself for being a coward. You let him win that game for the team, and it'll work wonders for his self esteem. I'm happy that you're here. You seem like a good, decent type...but why? Pardon me for saying this...but you don't seem to really belong here. I would like to help you fit in if you feel you need it?"

"He was the right fur for that play, Sir...he's even faster than his brother and I needed someone so swift that he'd be at the 25 yard line before the other team realized what was going on and fifteen yards from the end zone before they could react," Aslaug said, managing to avoid the second half of the minister's statement.

William nodded, thoughtfully. "That still doesn't answer why you're here. Why you had no identity. I know it's probably very private information and you're welcome to tell me to simply stop asking. I will respect that. But...my guess is you need someone to talk to."

Aslaug was about to tell the minister to mind his own business, but something told her to stop. He was right, after all. She did need someone to talk to. Someone...apart from Joe and Annie. Or Tigermark or Aramis. Someone who wasn't involved in the whole...divine mess. Romping around the known and unknown universes doing Godly work.

How had it come to that? She was a simple fur with simple ideas who had just wanted to live a simple, meaningful life...

"I need some help, Sir..." she said at long last, after some contemplation. "Don't ask me why...but somehow I think I can trust you. And coming from me...to a Christian, you should know that is exceptionally high praise. It's just a feeling, though..."

"Thank you, I appreciate that. What do you need help with?"

"A place to live. I have a job now...which seems to be what I need to have to prove I exist. Now I need a place to live, so I don't overstay my welcome more than I already have, at Joe's and Annie's place. Help me find a place to live and maybe I'll get around to telling you my story. You wouldn't believe me, if I did tell you, mind you. Most of the time, I don't believe it myself."

William smiled. "I'm sure I can ask around. As for believing...well, you know, it's what I do for a living."

Aslaug nodded and looked at the empty bottle again. "Thank you. I live at..."

"The Latrans residence. Yes...I know. The whole town knows, actually," William chuckled. "What'll you do from here?"

The filly got to her feet and shrugged.

"Get drunk."

She started walking down the path towards the park exit. She'd probably go home and sleep it off sometime in the wee hours of the morning. For now, all she wanted was to forget for a few hours.