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## *X – Reforged*

"Mooooore ..."

The voice was so chilling that Joe felt like someone was forcing every strand of his fur to stand on end. It sounded like it was coming from beyond the grave, and the net result was like holding onto a Tesla-ball in High School physics. He probably looked fluffy, he reckoned.

But that was nothing compared to the look of the fiend in front of him. He wasn't showing fear, but he couldn't deny feeling it and he wondered if Aslaug felt the same way. She seemed calm enough.

"I'm paying you a King's ransom already," Aslaug protested. "*Two* Kings, if their realms aren't that big ..."

"And I waaaant ... moooooore ... " the creature wheezed.

Joe found it hard to focus on the being. It wasn't exactly transparent, but it had features that simply wouldn't settle in his brain. As if it rebelled against what it saw. What he did know was that it was extremely ugly ...

And stunningly beautiful.

And male ...

Possibly female ...

His brain felt like it was trying to emigrate through his nostrils and he simply ended up looking away.

Aslaug sighed and shook her head next to him, launching herself into another round of, for her, uncommonly diplomatic negotiations. Joe didn't listen. He wasn't quite sure what was going on or why they were here. All he knew was that Aslaug had asked for the spear-shard and he'd given it to her. And then this being ... this dark spirit ... had turned up. Strictly speaking, he and Aslaug had walked into a village belonging to these ... svart-somethings ... but there had been none to see at first. It wasn't until Aslaug held up a bag of "goodies" that they had come out.

Goodies as in valuables. She didn't exactly carry gold around, but Varghöss' saddle appeared and disappeared as it was needed, and Aslaug seemingly kept some things ... like a bedroll, a spare knife and a small fortune in gold and amber ... hanging from the giant wolf's harness. Then again, Joe thought ... it was probably safer there than in the vaults of Fort Knox.

This was a desolate place. It had been dusk since they arrived, and that was hours ago. The plants ... those that were there ... either seemed on the verge of expiring, or downright hostile. Rocks with sharp edges and stalagmite-like rocky spears sticking out of the ground made it a foreboding, sinister looking place overall. The village no less so. The huts were ramshackle-looking ... some barely more than lean-tos against whatever larger building was next to them. From all doorways and from all windows ... such as they were ... strange faces were peering out at him and Aslaug.

Some were clearly frightened of them. Others were curious. A few seemed angry and hostile.

Finally, Aslaug seemed to reach a deal with the spirit and Joe turned around to look at her to see what she was up to. But her expression was almost inscrutable ... perhaps slightly uncomfortable. He felt much the same way, given their location and didn't think any more of it for the moment.

"Now we wait," she said.

Joe nodded. "Alright. What for?"

"For Luðra to finish working in the smithy."

"I take it that's the name of our ... host?"

Aslaug nodded. "Notice his gait?"

"He moves like he's got a hunched back, but I don't see any deformities. Then again, I have trouble making out any of his features. In fact, I wasn't even sure he was a he until you said it just now," Joe answered, narrowing his eyes to try to see the creature moving away more clearly.

"It means "to stoop". His name, that is," Aslaug explained. "Many of them have names that somehow reflect their nature."

Joe nodded. "He's a blacksmith then?"

"You could say that. He's a re-creator, more like it."

"So he could put the Beast back together again, and make it work, is that what you're saying?"

Aslaug grinned crookedly. "I think that's beyond even his considerable skills."

"Damned. I *was* hoping."

Aslaug sat down on the ground and leaned back against a stalagmite. "It shouldn't be long," she said, suddenly sounding like her mind was drifting off somewhere. "He's very good ..."

Joe sat down next to his friend without speaking. The look in her eyes told him she wouldn't actually pick it up if he did speak. She was somewhere else in her mind already.

###

Anane stepped across the corpse on the floor. The walls were smeared with blood and innards. Books and scrolls, documents and artifacts were spread around, thrown left and right on the floor ... torn open, ripped to shreds.

Like the creatures on the floor. Clerks ... guards ... even a priest or two.

No one of any consequence whatsoever.

He felt a slight thrill at the notion of their deaths, but there had been absolutely no struggle in it. They weren't worthy of his elation.

The most they had done was damage his coat, which now had a few bullet-holes.

Some had tried to pray when they realized they were going to die. He still held the tongue of one of them in his hand. It would probably soak nicely in a good, red wine. The filthy creature it had belonged to might serve some kind of use after all then.

Two guards came around a corner. Their terror was practically emanating from them, even as they lowered their guns and fired. Anane felt the slugs impact him. Seven ... ten ... sixteen bullets in all. At least these guards were better shots, but then again, he hadn't taken *them* by surprise. Instead, he simply stood there ... letting all the bullets hit him. He even made sure to stumble slightly, adding a bit of theatrical flair.

Finally, as the gunfire died down, he looked up and smiled. The coldest, most horrible smile in creation ...

"Ow?" he said ... and burped lightly.

Before spitting one ... two ... six ... eight ... thirteen ... sixteen bullets into his open hand, and then dropping them onto the floor.

The guards didn't scream when they died.

They didn't have time to.

And Anane was already on his way past them as they hit the floor. They were of utterly no consequence. None whatsoever. Let God take what He would in terms of souls. These creatures were not why he was here. Information was. Knowledge was. He knew there would be Angels soon, but he would be long gone by then. *Long* gone.

He could torch the entire place, but why bother? He'd be burning as much misinformation that Holy Mother Church used as fact, as he would be destroying actual, valuable information.

All he wanted to know was that the *Codex Maleficium* was where it was meant to be. If it was, he would gladly take it and simply leave, and then settle for some relaxing massacres and recreational butchery in some other reality.

If not ... if his torture of Father Malheiro had proven to grant false information ... he would go back to the failed saint and tear him a few new ones!

The door was closed. That at least was a good sign, although it didn't stay closed for long. He simply tore it off its hinges ...

And snarled.

He didn't even have to enter the room to know it wasn't there. He could *feel* it missing.

Father Malheiro had claimed that the female didn't get it. But the book wasn't *here*. And if it wasn't, then the shieldmaiden was sure to have it!

It wasn't that he wanted the book to stay in the Vatican. He wanted it in *his* possession. No doubt, the shieldmaiden would use it to prove much the same thing *he* would, but he could do so much more with it than her. She would do it for some unselfish cause no doubt ... waste it like the damned fool she was!

Turning around ... he looked straight into the face of a guard, holding a large pistol.

Anane could feel the cold metal against his forehead. He even felt it as it turned hot and melted in a blink of an eye, running down over his face in red hot, liquid form, scorching his skin and flesh.

He saw how the fire spread to the magazine, and how the bullets exploded in the hand ... paw ... *whatever* ... of the creature holding the weapon. How it literally vaporized the appendage. And how the fire spread further up the now screaming creature's arm, to his shoulder, his torso, his neck.

His head.

As Anane stepped over the smoldering remains of the Swiss Guard, he heard the Halomethane fire extinguishing system kick in.

Anything living inside the Archive would suffocate in mere seconds as all oxygen would be forced out of every cell in their bodies.

Hardly a problem for an Angel.

As he strode through the shattered remains of the Vatican Archives, his face already healing the damage done by the melting metal, he swore he would make Father Malheiro sorry for his lie!

###

"What exactly are you planning on doing next?" Joe asked. He could really do with a nip of good, single malt Whiskey right then and there. The location certainly lent itself to getting tipsy, before the gloom seeped into his very soul.

Aslaug finally appeared to snap out of her private stream of thoughts, and she turned her head to look at the coyote. "I'm planning on visiting Heaven."

Joe couldn't contain a smirk. "Oh, I'm sure Gabriel will be thrilled to have you drop by," he commented, idly remembering the many clashes Aslaug had had with various Seraphim. Somehow, Angels just seemed to rub her the wrong way by their very nature, and arch-angels really got under her skin in the worst of ways.

"Couldn't care less, to be honest," the equine mumbled and picked up a pebble, turning it over in her fingers. "I'm going to talk to Whitechrist ... seeing as I doubt his dad's going to be available to listen."

"You'd go and talk to God? *The* God? Our version?"

"I'd tell him what a ruddy idiot he is, right to his face if he even has one!"

Joe snickered and nodded. "You would too, wouldn't you?" he said and shook his head in disbelief. By now, he wasn't too upset by the idea of giving God a serious telling-to. He was fed up with the whole thing.

Every day for thirty years, when he opened his newspapers he would read about religious intolerance between religions who nominally shared the same deity. Christian sects bickering internally, Muslims and Jews fighting over Palestine, Christians claiming Jews were just imperfect Christians in the first place, Christians and Muslims fighting ...

Probably more than thirty years. Probably his entire life, but it wasn't until thirty years ago or so that he started realizing it.

He was fed up with it. It was idiotic on such a basic level that a pre-schooler would be able to see through it!

"I'm more right than you are so that means you're completely wrong!" was never a good argument to begin with. When backed up by a complete and total lack of empirical evidence, it became willful stupidity ...

In other words, a tragedy.

But not only that. That adult furs argued and bickered was nothing new and if he searched his soul for more than a few seconds, he knew fully well that religion was simply an excuse to fight for those furs. It was really all about something far more primal and far more basic ... namely general intolerance, which was quite simply something indescribably vile to him. The point was that if Christians, Jews and Muslims didn't have religion to bicker about, they'd simply have to invent it in order to have a "socially acceptable excuse" to wage war against one another.

More political correctness ... just twisted beyond all recognition. It was better, according to these furs, to base their mutual loathing on the word of a deity whom they all worshiped, but who hadn't shown up without using messengers since kicking Adam and Eve out of the garden they never lived in, in the first place!

Normally, by this stage of his contemplations, he'd be getting a headache and then getting a stiff drink, but not this time. This time he *had* no drink, and he was sufficiently annoyed to want to let this bubble a while longer.

Good furs dying of debilitating, crippling diseases, while wicked furs lived to ripe old age, growing fat on the suffering of others. Or religious figures abusing their authority. Some to get rich ... some to get worldly power ... some in other ways too unspeakable to even think of without getting nauseous. The world was grotesquely unfair. Life did not reward the just, the kind or the righteous. At least not nearly as often as it rewarded those who were wicked and awful and terrible.

He knew what Aslaug would say. She'd told him not long ago, in fact, that it was all about free will and how furs used it. But while Joe agreed with that assessment, there was more to it than that.

If God was all powerful *and* benign, He would not have created the world to be so miserable and awful to so many furs who didn't deserve it. He would have made it *better*.

But of course, preachers of all denominations would tell him, God *had* in fact made it better. He had created Eden ... a place of perfect happiness and harmony, which was only spoiled when wickedness slithered in, in the shape of a serpent.

That was nothing short of epic bullshit, as far as Joe was concerned. First of all, if God was *all powerful*, wickedness could not have entered Eden without His permission, however serpentine and inconspicuous. Which in turn logically meant that God wasn't necessarily benign. But if he was benign, then he couldn't be all powerful; the state of the world disproved that notion.

So either he could have an all powerful but uncaring and selfish God, or he could have a benign and kind God without the power to control his own social experiment!

Either way, organized religion would refute the argument and stubbornly claim that God was both at the same time, despite all the overwhelming evidence to the contrary. And they'd usually follow up their blind rants with something as useless as "God works in mysterious ways!"

No He didn't.

God worked through agents, angels and religious institutions, all of which meant He wasn't all powerful to begin with. If He was, he wouldn't need someone like Aramis, Tigermark or even himself to run around creation in all its splendor, in sixty or more different realities. He would just fix things immediately. Unless, of course, he didn't actually care, in which case the work the Amigos did was largely irrelevant anyway. Not a comforting thought, and not one Joe was prepared to accept. He'd done too much good for too many furs to simply brush it off as "irrelevant". Maybe in a cosmic scheme of things ...

Which of course was the scale on which deities worked in the first place.

Meaning that one life was insignificant. And that therefore, it didn't matter to God whether good furs succumbed to horrible illness, wasting away in both mind and body. It didn't matter whether evil furs killed good ones. Because in the end ... they were nothing but specks of dust.

No more important than individual ants in an ant-farm, left to fend for itself on the shelf after the initial novelty wore off.

He sighed and leaned his head back against the stalagmite. This was unpleasant, but he needed to think these things without getting interrupted.

He was angry. Hell yes, he was angry!

Why else would he sometimes look to the empty skies and shout at them, wanting answers and never getting them? It wasn't as if he was asking for universal truths or great, all-purpose answers. He simply wanted a few things made clear, and if that was too much to ask, then that was just proof of something else he found abhorrent.

Namely that God preferred blind faith. A kind of faith where no questions were asked, and no answers were given. That was one area where he found himself completely in line with Aslaug. Blind faith was, by its very nature, worthless. It was simply another word for servility, which by extension meant voluntarily forgoing the use of free will, which again was the one trait which made him different from the vegetables on his dinner plate whenever he sat down to eat!

The short version was that God had screwed up creation something fiercely, and Joe Latrans, fur amongst billions of furs, was living with the consequences of that mess,

every day of his life. As were everyone else on Planet Earth. He was fed up with it. Sick to his back teeth with the hypocrisy and half-truths and empty, trite phrases.

"It doesn't matter if you believe in God, for He believes in you!"

"God works in mysterious ways!"

"We must suffer on this earth to receive our eternal reward in Heaven!"

Bullshit, the lot of it, that was how Joe saw it by now. How could he believe in a God who so blatantly didn't care about the world around him? And if God worked in mysterious ways, Joe reserved the right to demand divine transparency and a Freedom of Godly Information Act on a celestial scale. And if the world was created to be a miserable place to be in, then God was definitely not benign and kindly ... case in point!

Swallowing deeply ... Joe finally came to the conclusion that he had struggled to come to terms with for so many years. Right there, sitting against a stalagmite in some hope-forsaken place between worlds, waiting for some horrible spirit to finish some kind of recreation, he realized that he was not having a crisis of faith.

It wasn't that he didn't believe in God. He did. It would be foolish not to with what he had seen and done.

But he didn't want to worship Him anymore. He saw no reciprocity in the deal. Not that he expected God to worship furs ... the thought was ludicrous in the same way booger-flavored pudding might be ... but he would expect answers. That faith and worship was answered in some way. Responded to.

It was not a crisis of faith.

It was a realization that he didn't like what he had spent a lifetime worshipping, anymore.

Free will versus dogma. That was what it all came down to in the end, and Joe would choose free will any day of the week. It was simply an unexpected result of this choice, that he had, at long last, reached a point where he would stand on his own two legs ...

Without the support of worship.

"Joe?"

Aslaug's voice was extremely concerned. Joe blinked a few times to snap out of his contemplations.

"Yes?"

"Are you alright?" the equine asked.

Nodding, Joe was a little confused. "I'm fine. Why do you ask?"

"Because you're crying," Aslaug pointed out.

Bringing up his paws to feel his cheek-fur, Joe sighed as he realized his friend was right.

"I'm fine," he repeated, wearily, sniffing a bit and nodding as if to underline his point. "Just thinking, is all."

Aslaug nodded. "It won't be long now. You'll feel better when we meet Whitechrist, I'm sure," she said.

Joe wanted to say something. He wanted to tell her how he felt, but the honesty of her voice made him stop. She really did think he would feel better coming face to face with Christ, but the truth was ... he wouldn't. Not anymore. Instead he just closed his eyes and sniffed a few more times, clearing his throat.

So this was what it felt like?

But what was "it"?

He didn't even know.

###

The equine and the tigress were alright, as far as Varghöss was concerned. He hadn't actually met either of them but they were clearly dear to Aslaug and that, by extension, made them okay with him. Besides, the equine was clearly heathen too. He was pretty sure the tigress wasn't, though.

That confused him. That probably meant she wouldn't believe in him if they met. Did that mean he'd vanish or that she just wouldn't see him?

It was a bit weird, but he was there to keep watch over them. Aslaug had sent him there as soon as they dismounted, which was entirely okay with Varghöss anyway. Biting spirits left a decidedly empty sensation in his stomach. It was a bit like chewing on fouled air.

Very unsatisfactory!

But this was different. The equine and the tigress were unaware that Varghöss was there ... and so were everyone else, for that matter, but Varghöss was aware that there was someone there whom the couple had come to trust ... and who was not their friend.

Someone who was masking his stench to them. And he was pretty sure he knew why they hadn't noticed. They were used to enemies giving them a certain feeling, but they had never come across this mix before. A mix of Surt and something else ... just as vile ... which Varghöss wasn't familiar with. He didn't need to be, though. He'd find this creature and bite it. And he would bite it until it stopped squirming. And then he'd eat it.

Aslaug had said he could! She had sent him to look after the two immortals and to protect them if he could, and she had explicitly told him he was allowed to bite and kill anyone who threatened them or who was a danger to them, but ONLY those. No innocents were to be harmed. But at least he was allowed to get violent at long last.

The thought made him want to roll on the ground and wag his tail ... he was finally allowed to bite someone.

Finally!

###

Aslaug stood up. "Luðra is done," she said and offered Joe a paw up.

The coyote hadn't heard anyone say anything, and he was slightly surprised at the certainty his friend displayed. "You are sure?" he said.

"Oh yes. Quite sure. Let's go. It's right over there," Aslaug assured him and set out across the village square.

Joe shrugged. He trusted Aslaug to know what she was doing because at the moment, he had no idea what was going on.

But he *could* hear something, by the time they reached the door to the hut. It was extremely unnerving, but at the same time, it made him want to smile in that slightly manic way, furs smiled before rushing headlong into a doomed fight.

He could hear music. Unlike any music he had ever heard before. It was grandiose ... and very faint. Very distant. It was indescribable, but very powerful. He could even hear a choir. Again, very faintly. It made him want to close his eyes and let the music fill him up. He wanted to know how the end was. It was not a feeling he could ever remember

having before, either. This deep desire to pull out the largest blade he could lay his paws on and charge the enemy.

Any enemy.

The realization made him snap his eyes open again and he put his paws over his ears. "Aslaug, what the Hell is that music?" he grumbled. "I don't like what it's doing to me."

Aslaug looked at him. "Music?" she asked, sounding surprised. "I can't he ... wait ..."

There was a change in her facial expression and Joe realized she was could hear it too. "That music," the coyote muttered. "It makes me want to do something extremely foolish!"

"Drums ... horns ... rhythms ..." Aslaug said and shook her head slowly. "This sounds like the Einherjar marching to war!"

"I don't hear any drums. I do hear a choir though," Joe replied. "In any case, it needs to stop. It's ... gahh, I can feel it sapping my willpower even as we *speak*, filly!"

Aslaug nodded and pushed open the door to the hut and stepped in.

Luðra was there, crouched over a workbench. On it was a long-axe and Aslaug went over to pick it up. It was unlike her own weapon ... and yet, Joe knew immediately that this *was* her weapon.

Reforged.

Recreated more like it.

"Behooooold," Luðra wheezed, "Godslayer!"

Aslaug raised an eyebrow. "Cut back on the cheese and let me decide what to call my weapons," she said, tersely. "And give me a cover for the axehead."

The dark spirit mumbled something incoherent about no one having any sense of drama and that no one else valued an epic moment anymore as he found a cover for the head of the axe. Aslaug pointedly ignored him and Joe was finding it terribly hard not to laugh. There was Luðra, trying to be epic and grandiose, and Aslaug unceremoniously flattened him by telling him to cut back on the cheese.

He left the hut and waited for Aslaug outside. The equine was there a moment later, and she was rolling her eyes already.

"Cheese, eh?" Joe chuckled. "With a name like "Godslayer" you'd think ..."

"In theory it could, Joe. The blood of Whitechrist is *in* this weapon. That shard is from the spear they used to pierce his body with when he hung on the Cross. I saw it all! Literally, I saw it. The Well of Wisdom showed it to me. Part of him is imbued in this damned weapon, and I'm telling you, it's painful to hold, already. The trick, of course, is that no weapon as simple as an axe would ever hit any part of the Christian trinity. *Ever*. That's not why I got it," Aslaug said.

The gravity of her tone of voice slammed into Joe like a level 5 hurricane and he was lost for words for a while. "You're *serious*???" he asked.

"Deadly."

"I can't let you do that, Filly. I may be fed up with God and all his various Churches, with all their omissions, half-truths and outright lies but *not this!!*"

Aslaug shook her head and smiled softly. "See? This is why I needed you to come with me. But I promise you ... I give you my word of honor, Joe ... I'm not even going to try. My *word of honor*. I've never broken that. Even if I *were* to try, I'm just a Valkyrie. I would be erased from existence before I even got near the gates of Heaven. You know that, but that's not going to be a problem, because that's not what I'm planning on doing."

Joe nodded, slowly. "Alright then," he said, quietly. "What *are* you planning on doing?"

"I'm planning on making a certain someone feel a fraction of the discomfort Torvald and Victoria are going through, and then I'm going to throw the book at him!"

"The book? You mean ...?"

"Yeah, the one you brought from Rome."

Joe nodded again and thought it over. It made sense. In an absolutely, utterly twisted way, it made perfect sense.

This was about free will and dogma, after all. This whole rotten affair. There was just one giant snag.

"You'll never get into Heaven carrying that thing though," he said. "They're not going to let you in!"

Aslaug grinned. "Since when have I let a lack of an invitation stop me? I think getting in is entirely possible, you know."

"You're not ... Oh good grief ... you and what army?"

"I'm most bloody certainly am! Me and my ego!"

Joe nodded furiously. "Yeah, okay, that qualifies as an army! The point I'm trying to make, Aslaug, is that you can't! You're probably the toughest creature I know ... and even you would fail if you tried that! See sense, femme!"

"Sense? Look at this weapon, Joe! It's got Whitechrist's blood in the metal! I could split the walls and crush the gates if I wanted to! I could ..."

"FILLY! *LISTEN TO YOURSELF!!*"

Aslaug deflated as Joe's raised voice and desperation got through to her. She shook her head to clear the cobwebs from her mind and she looked deeply worried. "You're probably right. Damned ... this thing is getting to me already," she said and looked in bewildered disgust at the axe in her paws. "For a split second, I actually thought I could batter down the gates of Heaven. Thanks for talking some sense to me ... good grief, I would have tried that if you hadn't been here, I think! But this doesn't change the fact that we need to talk to Whitechrist ... face to face!"

Joe hung his head. "You're right, of course. You do realize that if God is angry enough, you'll be banished from this reality ... or worse, don't you?"

"I know," Aslaug said and shrugged. "It's worth the risk."

"I agree."

"I ..."

Joe raised an eyebrow. "What's wrong?"

Again, Aslaug seemed far away. Like she was looking at a point beyond reality, so far into the distance that no eye could possibly see it. Joe was sure he saw her almost faint for just the briefest of a split second, as if something behind her eyes had shut off and come back on, and he worried if she was okay. But she steadied swiftly.

"There's only one way then," she said, after a moment. "Joe, I need you to trust me ... I mean completely, alright?"

"Why don't I like the sound of this?" the coyote whined and shook his head. "I'm *definitely* too old for this shit by now! Alright, do what you gotta!"

"No. I need *you* to do something."

"What's that then?"

"Shoot me."

"WHAT?"

"TRUST me, Joe!" Aslaug exclaimed.

Joe pulled his gun from his holster and shook his head in absolute disbelief. "I have got to be dreaming this," he mumbled. His paws were trembling. "This can't possibly be right. This can't be happening."

Aslaug slung her axe onto her back and pulled her two Franciscas. "Do it!"

As Joe tightened his finger around the trigger, the equine's paw shot forward and he felt a deep cut on his upper arm from the axe. It wasn't a chop ... just a cut, but it stung nonetheless. He had no idea what was going on, but he trusted his friend.

And fired.