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XI – Showdown

It was dark. And it was chilly. But Joe realized he was still alive and that while his arm bled, the cut on his arm was nothing but a flesh-wound. Aslaug hadn't hurt him in any way that wouldn't heal up just nicely in no time at all.

However, he couldn't see her anywhere. He wondered what kind of damage his shot had done to her. She had been weaker than she liked to let on, after her ordeal. Her bloody bandages were testament to that and her nostrils and lips had been tinged in blue. She had lost a dreadful amount of blood, and while she refused to let it show, he had no doubt that a gunshot wound wasn't going to help any.

He wasn't even sure where he had hit her.

It had all been such a confusing mess.

The pistol was still in his paw and he sighed, sticking it into his belt after clicking the safety catch on, then sitting down. He had no idea where he was, but Aslaug had seemed so utterly sure that this was the right thing to do ... the *only* thing to do. He trusted her, but right now, he needed to as well. He missed Annie. As always when he was away from home, he ended up missing his wife terribly. He put his head in the palm of one paw and sighed deeply, trying to imagine her.

Her image always came easily to him. This ... this was what real love was, he reminded himself.

And that in itself was something he wanted to say to God's face! For reasons of his own.

Suddenly, he could hear movement, and he grabbed for his pistol.

"Do not bother yourself, Jose Latrans," a calm but firm voice said. "You won't be able to do anything with that around here. I trust you realize where you are and why?"

"Who are you, why not, no and no!" Joe replied, sourly.

"I am your defense. You can't use it here because there is no violence in the presence of the Gods, and that should also answer why you are here and where you are."

"It doesn't. Speak plainly. I'm a plain fur."

"Ahh," the voice said, mirthfully. "You are anything *but* plain. You are an Agent, after all."

Rolling his eyes, Joe snorted in laughter. "Haven't been an Agent for decades now. What, didn't you get the memo?"

The voice seemed slightly surprised, but also highly amused. "Haven't been an Agent for decades? Mr. Latrans ... no one *retires* from being an Agent. It simply isn't done. Now, don't be unreasonable abo ..." it said. It never got to finish.

"WHAT??" Joe burst out. "You're telling me that at ANY time since my last mission, the Angelic armies might have busted down my front door to demand that I immediately report for duty in Reality T35.b in order to put down a rebellion of giant, church-eating waffle-monsters??"

"Erh ... in theory, although Reality T35.b is quite stable, under the control of the Hindu pantheon and as far as I'm aware there's never been any church-eating waff ..." the voice tried, suddenly on the defensive.

Joe narrowed his eyes and stood up. "Show yourself! I need to be able to see you before I can punch your face through the nearest wall and dance a fandango on your cojones!"

"I'd really rather not, now that you put it li ..."

"Where's Aslaug?"

The voice seemed feebler and a lot less arrogant in the face of Joe's undiluted rage. "She's ... in a cell of her own? Where else wo ..."

"CELL? WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON??" Joe roared.

The voice practically whimpered. "You've been formally charged with attacking an agent of another divine reality. It's not allowed. Attacking agents of the Malefic Council, for certain, but not other ..." it began, then realizing Joe was about to have another verbal explosion, it quickly whimpered: "She's charged with the same thing. That kind of crime goes before the Gods for trial, don't you know? That's why you're here?"

Joe instantly felt the ire drain out of him. And slowly ... very slowly ... the most insidious grin spread on his face. "The Gods, you say?"

"Well ... yes? The Gods of the two offending parties. Forseti is here, representing the aspect of Justice for the Norse Pantheon. And Christ is here, being the final Judge ... for you?" the voice said, suddenly not sounding *quite* so scared anymore, seeing that Joe was grinning. "I'm ... meant to defend you, you know?"

"Forget it, I'll defend myself," Joe snickered. "But go tell Aslaug that I owe her a beer!"

And then he laughed ... and pumped his fists in the air.

###

Aslaug knew where she was. She was sorry she hadn't told Joe, but there had been no time. Not that time passed in this court, but because if she had explained it all to him, doubt might have taken him and he wouldn't have shot her. Instead, he had shed her blood, such as she had left ... and she had shed his. Now they'd have to defend their actions. Which would be extremely easy. She had bent the rules. If Joe had shot her and she had cut her friend in her own reality ... where she came from originally, this would not have happened. They'd just have a gunshot and a cut respectively to show for their efforts. But in this reality, they were pulled out instantly.

Because of dogma.

Once a divine rule had been set down, the Abrahamic God could not go back on it, because if He did ... he had provably ... indisputably ... been wrong about something, and God could never be wrong. Not according to Christian, Islamic and Jewish dogma.

In her own reality, she'd only have been pulled out if there had been malicious intent behind the wounding of another Agent, and if she had KNOWN the other fur to be an Agent. If it happened by accident, it was just that. An accident.

But nothing happened by accident according to Christian dogma. And this wasn't even Catholic dogma either ... but many Christians believed in something called predestination. That all things were meant to be, because God had pre-planned the universe from before it was even created.

With so many versions of Christianity going around, and so many of them holding to some form of dogmatic thinking or other, it was no wonder that their God constantly came into conflict with himself. But dogma really had become the cornerstone of all Christian faith. To the point where she knew that non-dogmatic beliefs were looked at in bewilderment by church authorities all over the world. Heathens in the old country had been denied recognition at first, specifically on the grounds that "your beliefs are not dogmatic and consequently cannot be termed a religion". The thought nearly made her retch. It was nothing but an attempt at forcing Judeo-Christian ethics and interpretation down the throats of someone outside the faith by different means.

But that was not the issue contested here. Her "attack" on Joe, and vice versa, was.

The point was ... they would have an audience, and in order to explain why she had done what she had done ... and why Joe had done what he had done, they would have to explain why they were there in the first place.

And in doing so, they would bring the entire stinking affair to light.

But Aslaug was starting to feel something in the pit of her stomach that went further and deeper than the business with Torvald and Victoria. They were not the only ones with problems. Not the only Agents or immortals who were caught up in something like this.

"Angelbreaker, I am here to defend you," a gruff voice said nearby.

Aslaug stood up and clutched her axe tighter. "Then you can bugger off. I'll do my own talking."

"You realize what kind of trouble you are in? You will need skilled assistance in defending yourself from these charges," the voice said.

"I *have* skilled assistance. He's called Joe and he's probably in the cell next to mine at the moment. Just leave. I'm not interested in your help. I'm not here to defend myself. I'm here to attack."

The voice went quiet for a while. "There is no violence in this court," it finally said.

"Did I say I'd physically assault someone? I said I'm here to attack. There are many ways of doing that."

"Your record, however ..."

Aslaug narrowed her eyes. "I don't have a record. Never been accused of anything that's gone before court before! Now get off your high horse and leave. I'm going to do my own talking!"

The owner of the voice left. Aslaug closed her eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. It'd be a matter of moments only, now.

###

The scent had taken Varghöss back to the "real world". He was following a trail, but it was difficult to do so when he couldn't let anyone see him. Still, someone smelling as rotten as the fur he was tracking down didn't make for the hardest prey to follow.

He sometimes wondered how ordinary furs couldn't smell such things but their senses were probably not keen enough, he reckoned. In any case, it didn't matter. What did matter was that *he* could smell the foul wretch, and do something about it.

He was coming up on a place he'd seen once before. Aslaug had visited the equine and the tigress here ... just before this whole thing got started. Varghöss remembered because he had snuck up close to the building to take a look at one point, curious what these furs were like. He was pretty sure someone had spotted him but he was also pretty sure he was out of there quickly enough that it didn't pose a problem.

Now he was back, though ... and there was someone else here too. Someone who shouldn't be here. And Varghöss was going to take care of the problem. So he crouched low and snuck around to the back of the building, hiding behind whatever he could. It wasn't easy, being as big as he was, but at least it was dark. If it had been broad daylight, he would've been unable to move, but a dark gray wolf, however big, in the dead of night ... that was a different matter altogether.

The fur he was after was visible in the house too. It was moving around. Apparently ... it was looking for something. Varghöss was pretty sure it was a male of some kind, probably feline ... at least judging from the scent.

Growling low in his throat and baring his fangs, he hid behind a dumpster, from where he could see the house but anyone in the house would be hard pressed to see *him*.

Now it was just a matter of waiting for the right moment.

###

The change happened suddenly. One moment, Joe and Aslaug were in their cells, the next moment they were standing in each their brightly lit circle, in an otherwise dark area. There was no sound, but Joe looked like he couldn't decide whether to crack his knuckles and get ready for a rumble, or whether to laugh himself silly. Aslaug couldn't contain a slight smirk at the sight. Her coyote friend wasn't in his prime of youth, as he so often pointed out himself, but he could lay out just about anyone with a good right hook and from the looks of it, he was in a good mind to use that right hook on the first thing he saw ... divine or not.

"Aslaug, you know why you are here," a grave voice said, echoing around, between walls. "What do you say to the charges brought against you?"

"There was no assault. We mutually agreed to wound one another. I didn't tell Joe why as there was no time to explain it all, but I specifically wanted to force this confrontation."

There was a moment of quiet, before a softer but no less serious voice addressed Joe. "Joe, what is your defense?"

"She asked me to shoot her. Alright she didn't tell me about the flesh-wound to my arm, but I hold no grudge. If that is what it takes to bring the sordid truth to light, then I'd gladly suffer a few more like it!"

"Sordid truth?" the soft word asked. "And what truth is that then?"

Aslaug narrowed her eyes and for a second, she had to fight against baring her teeth in a snarl as a young lion appeared before Joe. She knew who it was and she could see from the look on Joe's face that the coyote wasn't too pleased with the whole thing either.

"Whitechrist," she growled, low in her throat. "We have all the evidence ..."

"I did not speak to you, Valkyrie. You have your own judge to face," the lion said, matter-of-factly.

Joe simply smiled. "Oh, then I'll cede my time on the floor to her."

The lion looked nonplussed for a split second, then shook his head. "This is not the United States senate, Joe. That is not how this works. You must answer for your own crimes and wrongdoings."

"MY crimes and MY wrongdoings?" Joe practically exploded. "If you and your Father ran a doctor's clinic, I'd be suing your pants off for malpractice by now!"

To Aslaug's surprise, the lion looked honestly surprised. As if he hadn't expected that kind of attack out of Joe. But the coyote wasn't about to stop. Gesturing towards Aslaug, he went on:

"Not only do I learn that despite all my unwillingness to leave my family behind to go gallivanting off to the multitudes of realities, doing more or less obnoxious and half-insane missions defying logic, reason and good sense in every imaginable and a good few unimaginable ways, I am still officially an Agent," he spat, "But I am also learning that good furs are about to get punished for loving one another, and worse still, their CHILDREN are about to get punished for the fact that their parents fell in love. BULLSHIT, I say! Dammit, we're supposed to be better than this! Christianity is supposed to be a *cut above* such things, for fucks sake!"

"Profanity won't help you, Joe," the lion said, patiently.

"That wasn't profanity. That was mild annoyance. You can try for profanity if you'd like!" the coyote growled.

A tall and well built bear, dressed like a Norse noble, approached Aslaug out of the darkness and the Valkyrie bowed her head briefly in respect. "Forseti," she said, acknowledging the deity.

The bear nodded. "I'm actually not too concerned by this whole affair, Valkyrie," he said and shrugged. "Give me your word of honor that you have told the truth, and that no hostility exists between you and the coyote over there."

"You have it. My word of honor. Nothing but truth. Joe is my brother," Aslaug replied, looking the bear straight in the face.

"That does it for me then," Forseti said with a shrug, looking towards Christ.

The lion raised an eyebrow, "Blood has been shed! This is ..."

"This happened in your reality," the bear pointed out flatly, "and YOU are the one clinging to Dogma to such an extent that foolish trials like this are required to take

place. She is a Valkyrie. She's given me her word. For me to disregard that would be to disregard the judgment of Odin. She is his tool. His extended will. If she says she speaks the truth, then I have no recourse but to believe her, or I would answer to Odin."

Aslaug could see something happen on Joe's face out of the corner of her eye. The coyote looked like he was about to literally erupt and he made a violently dismissive gesture with both arms. "Oh, will you both GET OVER your own Goddamned selves!" he finally roared. "Odin's *TOOL*? And I'm still an Agent? And Torvald and Victoria are getting punished and now their children are going to either be punished or *press ganged* into active service, whether they want to or not? ENOUGH of this idiocy, already! Let Torvald and Victoria go. Let ME go. Stop using us ... and ordinary mortals ... as if we are nothing but ... but *pieces* in one of those games Aslaug always refers to!"

"*Hnefatafl*," Aslaug said, shrugging.

"That's it! We're not simply playing pieces to be sacrificed and used! We're real, living creatures. We have dreams and hopes, desires, fears, wishes, flaws and shortcomings. We're not divine, but we *try our best*!"

"Are you quite finished?" the lion asked, by now looking slightly annoyed with Joe's outbursts.

"I'm not even getting started," the coyote hissed. "You and your idiotic insistence on dogma. You and your *foolish* notion that you can't make any kind of mistake. It's bloody embarrassing! You want proof of this? You want me to be absolutely bluntly, damned honest about this?"

"Not really. I'd rather you answer the charges brought against you," the lion said, once again simply looking at Joe.

Forseti smiled crookedly. "Well, I would like for him to be, as he put it, "bluntly, damned honest". Do speak."

Aslaug tried not to snicker, looking down once more. Joe nodded to the bear, and then looked back to the lion. "It's really, really bloody simple. You demand, by the very first precept of faith, that I love God with all my heart, all my soul, all my mind and all my strength. Well, I refuse to!"

The lion looked like someone had slapped him across the face. "You *refuse* to?" he asked, clearly not having expected that kind of refutation to happen right to his face.

Joe nodded furiously. "Oh yes, I damned well refuse to. You know why? Because I have a wife I'll love first. And children. THEY come first in my life. Every day. It's not even a *contest*! You, by your damned precept of faith, have laid claim not only to a portion of the love I have to share, but to ALL of it, and I will not do that. I'll love my family. Then I'll love my friends. And then you can have whatever the Hell is left over and you can be happy with it or you can sit and rotate!"

Aslaug actually had to turn her face away and loudly clear her throat, clenching her eyes shut to avoid simply bursting out laughing. An angry Joe Latrans was a thing to behold, but to watch him lay into Whitechrist was something she had never expected. Not like this anyway. But clearly, the coyote had so much frustration and anger built up inside him that it just had to get out or he'd burn out.

"Joe, this kind of anger and vitriol isn't going to help you either," the lion said, regaining his composure easily. "You love God through loving your family. Your family, like all other things in life is, after all, a gift fr ..."

"If you finish that sentence, I'm gonna break your jaw!" Joe bit back. "Do you have any idea whatsoever how tired I am of standardized answers? Of furs opening the bible to look for answers to everything in life from sickness to financial trouble to heartache? How *fed up* I am with furs using faith as a crutch or a replacement fucking backbone instead of something to make them better furs, kinder to those around them, more loving and caring of the world around them? Do you have ANY CONCEPT of how angry it makes me to watch sleazy, selfish, evilminded little PRICKS, invoking you or your Father, taking God's name in vain in the biggest possible way, leading others astray by their rotten examples and you don't even lift a bloody FINGER to stop them?"

"But we do, of course. They will be judged in time."

"And in the meantime, they can lead good furs into all kinds of trouble, ruin lives, destroy hope and fortune, turn life into a living, daily Hell for hundreds ... thousands ... even millions of furs? Because everyone gets their just dessert in the end? Oh yeah, that's very Almighty of you. Let the world go to Hell and lean back and watch it from On High in your almightiness, but to DO something about it? Oh no, inconceivable. Do you have ANY IDEA how many times I have looked to the skies and cried out in desperation for you to give me some kind of sign ... any sign, however small, that you really *care*?" Joe asked, gesticulating left and right.

"Of course I know," the lion answered, looking like this was testing his patience severely. "This is not why we are here, Joe."

Joe threw up an arm and walked towards Aslaug. "You can take your reason for being here and shove it, or you can listen to every damned word I have to say!" he barked. "If you want to punish me for this ... well, fine, go ahead and prove EVERYTHING I've just said to be true. Everything I've thought for years now. I dare you ... prove it all right! Go ahead and prove that you don't care. Punish me. Punish Aslaug. Punish Torvald and Victoria Svensen for loving each other deeply enough to risk everything for it. Or ... let us all go, and put an end to this ridiculous nonsense and start doing what you're supposed to be doing?"

"You dare to presume to tell me what I am supposed to do, Joe Latrans?" the lion asked.

Aslaug had turned back around to look at her friend as he ripped into the lion. Forseti, in turn, had turned around. His shoulders were shaking slightly from barely repressed laughter.

"I dare! And more!" Joe said, baring his incisors. "Hundreds of millions of furs pray to you every single day, and you do nothing to help those who truly try to live good lives. I've had it up to here ... and here ... and right up there where I can't reach even if I'm standing on tiptoes and hopping on the spot ... with furs throwing the bible at me with idiotic, two thousand year old dogma about how the meek shall inherit the Earth and how they shall be rewarded in Heaven. I am TIRED of seeing Evil winning every day of my life. Not because, as the saying goes, that Good doesn't fight back, but because Evil has someone in their corner, and WE DON'T!"

The lion opened and closed his mouth a few times. "I don't think I've ever been spoken to like this before."

"Then it's about high fucking time," Joe snapped. "Aslaug, tell him what we have."

"We have evidence that Victoria and Torvald Svensen are not the first cross-faith Agents to live in your reality, and that those who came before them were allowed to live out their lives in peace. And we contest the justice and righteousness in punishing the Svensen children and grandchildren because of the love their parents share."

The lion shrugged. "That is the way it must be. Torvald Svensen is a guest. A guest who has severely overstayed his welcome and who is creating no end of problems by procreating. He knows full well what the implications of that is."

"Nonetheless," Aslaug started. "He simply fell in love. Which was reciprocated. His wife is a good, decent femme, a solid believer in your tenets, and you are punishing her as

well. They have worked for you, and for us ... and they've always been loyal. And yet, you are punishing them for having children when the obvious solution would be merciful and just, namely to let them go. All of them. They've do ..."

"They are Agents. Agents do not retire," the lion interjected, flatly. "Ever. That too is ..."

"Dogma," Joe burst in, sounding like he was about to be physically sick, "I'm fed up with this. Sick and tired of believing in half-truths and contradictions. Lies and nonsense! If he was truly almighty, your Father would not have made the world such an utterly fucked up place. He most certainly wouldn't have created furs with such a gigantic propensity for evil and wrongdoing. He would have created a perfect world. Instead look at it?"

The lion shrugged. "We can't be held responsible for what furs choose to do with the gift of free will, Joe."

"Oh *spare* me," the coyote growled. "Spare me the indignity of having to listen to empty rhetoric again. If you were almighty, your idea of free will would have been perfect, too. If you were almighty, you wouldn't need Agents running around like maniacs, trying to put things right because everything WOULD be right! AND furs would have free will. That is what perfection means, by definition. That everything would be perfect!"

"Only God is perfect, you know that," the lion interjected.

"And we are created in His image, again by your own foolish dogma! Again you contradict yourself. As always. Again and again, this happens. Reading the bible can give a fur a headache from all the contradictions you come across, and they are never explained. Not *ever*. And the same nonsense goes for the Jews and the Muslims. Their scripture is just as full of that kind of thing. I'm tired of it. You say I have free will? Then watch me use it! I'm telling you this ... right now ... to your damned face, that until you start living up to the promises you and your Father laid out in the big book, and until you start showing that you care, and until you start setting the world to right, I won't bend my knee to you again. I want so very badly to believe in you, but you know what ...? I *don't*. That's the fact of the matter. I know you're here. I'm looking at you. But there is a huge difference between believing you are here, and believing *in* you. As it is, I don't believe in what you stand for. I don't believe in your promises. I don't believe that you care in the slightest, because you have given me absolutely no reason to believe that you *do*! And by the way ... you didn't let Aslaug finish."

Aslaug took out the book she carried. It had been rolled up, thin, vellum-bound thing that it was, and kept in her inside pocket. She held it in her left paw and narrowed her eyes. "I invoke your own rules. Dogma states that if the Abrahamic God does something, it must be perfect. It cannot be tinged with imperfection or wrong, because he is always right, regardless of circumstance and situation. That means that if something has been right once, it will always remain right."

"Not necessarily," the lion said, evenly. "Circumsta ..."

"Circumstances cannot change perfection. Perfection, by nature, is perfect and therefore unchanging," Aslaug retorted.

"Her logic cannot be faulted, Whitechrist," Forseti pointed out. "Perfection cannot be improved upon or altered. To do so would lead to imperfection."

"That means that if God has stated that something is right in one situation, then it will always be right, because whatever circumstance surrounds subsequent situations like it are elements of imperfection to be disregarded. Two Agents ... a Christian and a Heathen ... lived and loved and eventually died in your world a thousand years ago. They were allowed to do so."

"They did not procreate," the lion said, irritably. "This is about the Svensens' insistence of multiplying."

"Circumstance cannot alter perfection," Forseti pointed out.

"Go ye forth and multiply," Joe hissed. "Dogmatic contradictions, yet again!"

"The charges against the Svensens must be dropped by your own Dogmatic law. I suggest an amicable solution, where they return to Earth and the curse of immortality is lifted from them and those of their descendants who desires to be rid of it, and that no punishment is leveled against them," Aslaug pointed out.

Forseti nodded. "I concur. That would be a reasonable solution. The problem would be solved. Any future immortals would be made sterile from the moment they lose their mortality, and all future immortals must be made aware of the consequences of their choice, whatever that choice may be, before they can accept or reject an offer of immortality, thus avoiding this problem ever arising again."

The lion narrowed his eyes. "It is not that simple."

"Nothing ever is," Joe bit back. "This is the right thing to do. You even recognize that by now? The right thing?"

"You are overstepping your limits so grotesquely, Joe Latrans, that words fail to describe it," the lion said, irritably.

"So what? You've spent two thousand years watching furs do *just that* without reacting to it. Damned it, I need a drink!"

Forseti held out a paw and a horn appeared in it. "Mead. Helps a sore throat," he said and shrugged. "Aslaug, do you have anything to add to this?"

"Joe is just as innocent as I am. I asked him to shoot me and I cut him. He simply trusted me to know what I was doing. No one here should be punished. There are foul beings out there that need our attention, Anane first of all. I've seen him, in a vision granted by the Well of Wisdom. Once he's taken care of, I should take it as a kindness if Joe was left in peace. Agent or not ... no more hopping around dimensions or worlds for him."

"Thanks filly. Ooh, this mead-stuff is good!"

"Don't mention it."

Forseti nodded. "Again, you are reasonable. I take it you will hunt this Anane then?"

"He is my enemy. It is my responsibility," Aslaug said, matter-of-factly.

"The Svensens will be held accountable for risking the stability of the entire world, by procreating! It is undoing my Father's will!" the lion finally burst in. By now, the irritability in his voice had turned to anger.

Aslaug sighed and looked down. Joe rolled his eyes and groaned about more contradictions. Forseti shook his head in disbelief.

"Aslaug, you are free to go. And if she is, then Joe Latrans cannot be held responsible for the blood spilled, since she was the one who initiated it. You are both free to go," he said. "And I am disappointed. Not in the two of you, but in what I have witnessed here. There is no justice in this!"

The Valkyrie shook her head and looked back up. "I had hoped it would not come to this," she said, honestly saddened. She pulled her long-axe off her back and removed the cover from the head. "The recreator of this called it Godslayer," she said. Her voice was

changing into a deep, rumbling sound. "I do not intend to use it. But I intend to remind you that you, yourself, doubted!"

She looked straight at the lion and walked towards him, while he, in turn, took a step backwards in revulsion.

"You wouldn't," he began.

"No. I wouldn't. But dogma has failed. You are as fallible as us. The only difference is that you refuse to acknowledge this, and in doing so, you refuse to set right the problems that your fallibility help to create!"

The voice coming from the equine was unlike anything Joe had ever heard before. All encompassing and the coyote felt his jaw go slack. Slowly, he realized, two beings were visible in the space occupied by one. Aslaug ... and a wolf.

Not Varghöss ... but a majestic, black-furred being the likes of which he had never seen, standing upright and dressed in heavily embroidered clothes, covered in runic script.

He wanted to look away. But in the end, he just kept staring as Odin stepped out of Aslaug, still holding her axe in one paw. The Valkyrie fell to her knees, gasping for breath as she fell forward to support herself on her paws. She looked like she was on her last leg.

Odin approached the lion. "You doubted. Even at the very last, you, yourself, doubted," he boomed. The entire room was shaking and even Forseti was slowly moving backwards.

"You are unbidden, One-eye!" the lion growled. "This is about a crime committed in my Father's reality. It does not concern you!"

"It most certainly does! The berserker is *mine*!" Odin stated, flatly. "Whether he committed wrongs or not is for me to decide!"

"He PROCREATED!" the lion roared at last. Aslaug averted her eyes. Whitechrist as the Final Judge was a terrifying thing to behold. Light pulsed from him and there was nothing compassionate or merciful about him. Just raw power.

Joe stood there ... and watched ... tears once more flowing down his cheeks as at last, his final illusions came crashing to the ground, one at a time. Before his eyes was proof that righteousness could be cold ... uncaring and utterly unwilling to listen to reason. All the things he had believed since childhood fell to pieces as he watched.

Odin held out the axe, towards the lion. Who flinched as if struck viciously. The move wasn't even aggressive ... the one-eyed wolf simply held the axe forward, as if pointing at the lion with it, but Whitechrist reeled away from the weapon as if physically attacked.

"Yes, he procreated. But he is one fur, of flesh and blood, and fallible as are we all, Gods or mortals. We all make mistakes. The difference is that when Gods make mistakes, they have consequences on a universal scale. We admit to ours, as do most other pantheons, and we try to fix them by whatever means necessary. What truly sets you apart is that you don't. Your entire dogma is based on the principle of infallibility and anyone with open eyes can disprove it in the blink of an eye ... not that I have more than one to blink in the first place," Odin pointed out. He was patient ... his voice was not angry, but he brooked no contradiction, that much was clear.

And yet, contradiction came. "Divine infallibility has been a cornerstone of Judaism since before I walked the Earth, One-eye, and of Christianity and Islam since they came into being! Without it, all Christian, Jewish and Muslim beliefs would have to be reevaluated. Do you have any idea how much damage that would do? ANY IDEA? No, my Father is infallible, omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient. He is the beginning and the end, the end all and be all, and as a result, He cannot fail!"

"And yet *you* ... who *came* from him ... *still* ... *doubted* ..." Odin repeated. Very slowly, and yet with such force behind every one of those words that it nearly blew Joe off his feet. "Your own actions disprove your claim comprehensively! Let the Svensen's go. Take Aslaug's suggestion, and we will never again have to deal with the result of immortals having children."

Finally, Joe looked away. He couldn't bear it anymore. There was a bright, searing flash of light and then he felt like he was falling.

He had no idea what happened next, but he found himself sitting on a grassy hill. Aslaug was sprawled on her back, nearby.

He felt sorry for her. She had tried to do the right thing ... and she too had simply been used as a tool. By now, Joe was at a complete loss for words. He moved over to her and looked at his friend. She was unconscious. Her lips were blue from blood-loss again and her breath was shallow and haggard. She wasn't conscious.

Taking her head into his lap and cradling her, like he had that time on a heath, many years ago after a battle, he just shook his head and felt his throat constrict. It was all so wrong. And he didn't even know if they had succeeded.

And as he sat there, running his fingers through Aslaug's mane, he realized that at last ... he had no more tears to shed.

###

Anane had beaten the bound and shackled form of Father Malheiro to a bloody pulp. The lump of flesh and bone quivering before him, still adamantly refusing to say where the Codex Maleficium was, bore practically no resemblance to anything that had ever been alive in any way, shape or form.

The entire room was torn to shreds. There was blood *everywhere*.

Scorch-marks on the floor and walls. Even a few on the ceilings.

Scratches in the wall so deep it looked as if someone had taken a circular saw to it, repeatedly.

Books were destroyed, furniture was in splinters.

And he was still at it, kicking the undying remnants of Father Malheiro with reckless abandon, demanding to know where the book was.

Once in a while, a sickly, bubbling, rattling laugh came from the ruined flesh, taunting him, denying him his knowledge and Anane had long since stopped being livid and lost all sense and reason.

Then suddenly ... the lump of flesh stiffened.

Anane, surprised at this turn of event, stopped kicking and punching for a moment.

"What?" he demanded, hoarsely. "What now? You're finally going to stop prevaricating?"

There was no answer. The mangled remains on the floor oozed some unspeakable liquids onto the floor and even onto Anane's shoes and the fallen Angel kicked out in frustration one more time.

"SPEAK!" he roared, shattering the wall opposite him with the force of his voice, collapsing it. But nothing happened.

He bent down and grabbed a hold of Father Malheiro's clothes, or at least what remained of them and lifted him off the floor.

There was something entirely wrong.

The old, dead fur wasn't there anymore. Well, his physical remains were, but his soul had gone. But that was impossible. Heaven wouldn't take him, Hell couldn't, even if Lucifer had wanted to, which he didn't.

His soul was meant to remain here, in the land of Nod ...

Outside the eye of the so-called "all-seeing God".

It was hilarious, really, that so few creatures anywhere understood that. God might not have created Adam and Eve. He had created life in a far more complicated and intricate way, over countless eons, but the bible said that the original couple had been cast out into the Land of Nod where they had procreated and multiplied. The Land of Nod, which was specifically the same as being outside God's vision. And because the Church had sanctioned it, that made it dogma, and because it was dogma, that made it so.

Because God could not make mistakes. So the Land of Nod ... everything outside a no-longer-existing garden called Eden ... held no interest for God whatsoever. He didn't watch. He didn't care, because it was where the lost and the damned wandered, and the ONE TIME since, where He had decided to give His creations a chance, they had killed His son.

And then afterwards, in a fit of after-rationalization, they had decided that when Christ died, that His death had somehow been the vessel of forgiveness for everyone else.

Which still boggled him at times.

"Kill someone and all your sins shall be forgiven. But oh ... thou shalt not kill!"

Another one of hundreds of contradictions which dogma offered no explanation for. The simple fact of the matter was that everyone lived in the Land of Nod, and consequently, God didn't give a damn. Because the bible said he didn't, and that made it dogma, and that made it an absolute, indisputable truth, not up for debate or discussion!

So why was Father Malheiro gone? He couldn't be!!

Throwing the ruined, mangled collections of bones, sinew and meat to the floor, Anane roared in futile rage as the entire house came down around him.

How could this happen?

HOW?

###

Varghöss sniffed the air. It was around midnight now, and it was time for him to make his move at last.

This was no time for subtlety or sneaking about.

Raising all his hackles, he growled. The moonlight caught in his eyes and the long, white fangs he displayed. Bounding from hiding, he bolted across the open space towards the house, where it was obvious that the enemy was aware that he was there.

Aware ... and terrified.

Which only made Varghöss' blood boil a little more. The fear of an enemy was an exhilarating thing. One to be savored and treasured.

He launched himself through the air and hit the door full force. It broke and he skidded to a halt in the kitchen, splinters of wood settling on the furniture and in the sink. There was barely room for him in the kitchen as it was ... being about the size of a warhorse meant he had very little room to move, but that was alright. His enemy was not in this room but in one of the next ones and he immediately started moving again, once he had made sure he was not being flanked by something hidden in the kitchen. Howling at the top of his lungs, he crashed through the louvered doors between the kitchen and the next room, utterly destroying them as he passed through them, sending large splinters of it into a sofa. The same piece of furniture broke Varghöss forward movement as he hit it.

Still growling deep in his throat as he looked up from behind the badly damaged couch, he could see the panther across the room.

And he could see the terror in his enemy's eyes.

Varghöss knew this kind of fur. They would bribe or buy anyone into doing what they wanted. They thought themselves safe, because there was practically no fur out there they couldn't simply bribe, and if they met one, they'd bribe his neighbor into killing the one they couldn't turn.

But Varghöss, for all his intellect, cunning and keen instincts ... was still an animal. He could not be bribed. Smarter than any wolf out there by far, he had no desires save the appreciation of his rider, and his rider had given explicit orders.

"No!" the panther whimpered and backed up towards the door. "No, don't do this!"

It was pathetic. Varghöss approached him slowly and as menacingly as possible. He knew exactly what was going on. He knew the game the panther was trying to play. He could smell the metal of the gun the fur held hidden behind his back.

And as soon as he brought it forward, Varghöss juked sideways and jumped.

He tore the panthers arm off at the elbow and crunched the wrist between his teeth as he landed and turned, looking straight at his now screaming foe.

Aslaug wanted this one dead ... and Varghöss noted with some satisfaction that the panther was *tasty*.

Growling, he approached, dropping the severed arm and baring his now blood-soaked maw in a loud, snarl, lips curled back and eyes alight with rage and bloodlust. The screaming, panicking panther backed up ... trying to scramble out of the way.

The overturned sofa got in the way.

He stumbled.

It was the last thing he ever did.

Varghöss was on him before he had even completed his fall backwards.

Flesh was rent. Blood flowed like rivers. Screams were swiftly silenced. And then ... and only then ... did Varghöss lean his head back and howl again, in triumph. This was his kill, a clean kill. It was all his.

"What the HELL ... ???" a frightened voice shouted from the door behind him.

Varghöss snarled in wild rage and turned to face the new fur. He was looking at a badger, wearing all black. He didn't smell wrong. This one wasn't a free kill. He couldn't attack without angering Aslaug. But he would be DAMNED if he'd give up his kill without a fight. If the badger wanted his food, he'd have to fight for it!

"What in the name of all Gods and Goddesses are you??" the badger asked, his eyes wide as saucers. He wasn't pulling a weapon, though.

Smarter than most, Varghöss realized. If he had pulled a weapon, it would've changed everything, but as it was ... it was a standoff. So instead, the huge wolf turned fully to

face the badger, demonstratively tearing at the dead panther beneath his paws with his teeth.

"Whoa ... whoa there," the badger tried, holding his paws out in front to show he wasn't armed or hostile. "Good boy! Yes. Gooooood boy. Who in the name of holiness would keep a pet like you around?" he mumbled.

Varghöss narrowed his eyes. He was no mere *pet*, and he growled low in his throat at the insinuation. The badger was starting to test his patience.

"Listen, I came here to do the exaaaact same job you did, buddy," the badger tried. "All yours, yes? You get paws dirty, you eat. I'm fine with that. Really. No, seriously. You keep him. I just wanted to make sure the creep was dead, okay? Okay ... and now I'm going to leave before you decide to have dessert. Fair enough?"

Varghöss didn't move. He simply tore the thigh off the dead panther and gulped it down, demonstratively.

"Oh good God, I think I'm going to be sick," the badger mewled and ran out as fast as his legs would take him.

Varghöss let him go. He had waited this long specifically to make sure no one would arrive unbidden while he did what he was supposed to do. That someone decided to arrive like this in the middle of the night was unfortunate, but he couldn't change it now.

All that mattered was that he had done as Aslaug wanted.

The enemy was dead.

And it was *his* kill.

He leaned back his head and howled again. A howl to ring out loud enough for Aslaug to hear it. To let her know he had won. Who knew ... maybe even those living in this house would hear it. Maybe they too would know what he had done!

And outside, Morgan Sleight was still running for his life.

Someone had some serious answering to do!