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XXI – Blood eagle

"ANANE!!!"

Aslaug's voice rang out over the din. All around her, furs were trying to survive. There was death everywhere. Just ... raw death. And yet again, it was disguised as a terrible, natural disaster. The fallen Angel had used whatever malefic agents he could count on very well indeed. They had bombed innocents all over the world. Attacked crowds with guns and blades and killed thousands. All in order to remove just a bit of focus from his own machinations. Just long enough that he could satiate his insane lust for killing somewhere else.

"ANANE, SHOW YOURSELF, COWARD!" the Valkyrie roared.

Her shirt was half torn. Her pants were covered in soot and burnt through in several places. But she held her franciscas tightly and the look of hatred on her face was undiluted and unrepentant. When she found Anane, she would chop him into so many little pieces that even the Malefic Council would prefer to dump him into oblivion rather than get to work on the jigsaw puzzle she had left them with.

All these furs dead ... for what?

Because Anane felt offended because Daddy Dearest had given souls to furs instead of Angels?

If Whitechrist's father had been so damned perfect, Aslaug reminded herself, he'd have avoided that problem somehow.

Given Angels souls as well, for instance.

Something, at least. Something to avoid this senseless massacre, because of a willful omission he had made so long ago.

There was no answer to her call. Anane wasn't showing himself, but Aslaug didn't doubt for a second that he was here. Mount Vesuvius had practically *exploded*. It had been at peace for ages, and even when it had last erupted, it had been nowhere near as violent as this. Nor the time before, or the time before that. One had to go back many centuries to find anything remotely similar.

And as a result, these furs were all gone. Incinerated or choked to death by toxic fumes ... but dead nonetheless.

Aslaug strode through the infernal heat, her shoes slowly growing hot enough under her hooves that she could feel the searing heat all the way up to her knees. It was close to unbearable, but she still managed to ignore it.

For all that he had done ... Anane would *pay*.

Buildings were crumbling all around her. It wasn't even possible to watch the devastation from above. If she called on Varghöss and rode over the dying city, she'd see nothing but smoke and flames. She needed to face Anane in single combat.

The changes wrought to the world were extreme enough as it was. The faithful would go where they belonged now ... regardless of faith. Christians from worlds controlled by other deities would be shipped off to Heaven. Buddhists could reach Nirvana, Heathens would be collected and so on.

It reduced the deities to day-to-day administrators to a certain extent, but to the faithful, it was a small measure of justice.

And Aslaug knew what her role in the future of all this would be.

She could see a clear path ahead of her. Leading to Agents. Agents like Lee and Miho. Agents like Joe. Agents of all manner of faiths, all over the world. There would be no unwilling Agents anymore, anywhere ... that much was already clear, and had been since her and Joe's "trial". But there were still old agents who wanted out. Who hadn't been released. She'd help them. And she would take the fight to the Malefic Council directly.

A fur screamed in a building next to her and Aslaug saw flames explode out from the top floor. A fur was caught up there. She narrowed her eyes ... saving everyone wasn't an option, but she couldn't simply ignore the terror in that fur's scream, either. That, in fact, was part of what made her different than Anane, and she changed direction, running inside and up the flight of stairs. Everything was aflame, but they were natural flames. She felt the heat, and it was painful ... but it didn't actually hurt her.

She ducked aside from a falling piece of ceiling and vaulted over a burning beam on the floor. Running up the next flight of stairs, she reached the second floor. This was where she had heard the screaming fur. In fact, she could still hear her.

Behind a door at the end of the hallway.

Kicking open the door, she was surprised to find no fire on the other side ...

Only a second too late, she realized what happened. The room was empty. There was no one there.

Then the oxygen was sucked into the fire ... and the resulting backdraft blew her clean off her hooves and across the hallway.

Out through a window and down onto the street below.

Groaning as she landed, she felt bones snap into place almost instantly and she staggered upright.

"So ... I'm a coward, am I?" Anane's voice said and she looked up to the roof of the building.

The terrible, eyeless form of the fallen Angel stood on the edge of the burning house, wings stretched out.

"Beyond measure, a *coward!*" Aslaug shouted, feeling the last of her bones snap into place. "Killing the innocent and the helpless accomplishes nothing except to underline your own ineptitude! Come down here and face someone worthy in combat, and so help me Tyr, I'll rip your black heart out of your body with my bare paws!"

Anane laughed haughtily and beat his massive wings a couple of times, taking off and flying over the street, looping over the head of the Valkyrie below.

"Why should I lower myself to fighting you, Shieldmaiden?" he laughed. "You're beneath me in every way."

"Except I'm smarter than you and a considerably better warrior."

"Last time we met, I seem to recall I beat you to within an inch of your miserable life without breaking a sweat."

Aslaug smiled grimly, flexing her fingers around the grips of her franciscas. "Except last time we met, Demon ... I was an Agent. Not so anymore."

The roar of rage from above told Aslaug she had struck home. "ANGEL!! You hear me? I AM AN ANGEL!!" Anane shouted, hatefully, as he came to a hover above his foe. "I knew about your promotion, but Odin must be beyond desperate if he's elevated someone as hopeless as you to the ranks of the Valkyries! To me, you'll always be just a lowly *shieldmaiden* ..."

Aslaug just grinned. She didn't answer, letting it sink in for a while. Anane's feeble attempt at offending her was wasted. She knew her own worth well enough.

Slowly, though, Anane landed, further down the street. He flexed his wings a couple of times and folded them in on his back. "Standards are clearly dropping off in Asgaard," he growled and narrowed his eye-sockets, baring his teeth. "No matter. I shall take twice as much pleasure in your demise then, *creature!*"

Then he charged.

###

Hirokichi had landed the plane at an airstrip on the opposite side of Naples from where the Volcano was exploding. How he had managed he couldn't tell. The visibility had been so bad he couldn't even be sure of his height, and since the instrument panel had practically been dead from the interference created by the eruption, he had simply had to take a massive chance. But he'd gotten them down. The plane wouldn't take off again though. Not without a lot of repairs and obviously, there was no time for that. The landing gear was broken, the instruments were wrecked, the engines were clogged up with volcanic ash. All in all, it was not a good day.

There were no one else there. Everyone had fled long ago. Several planes were lined up, as were a group of transport helicopters, including a couple of Blackhawks. Joe, who had woken up as Hirokichi made his last adjustments before landing, had immediately set off towards the helicopters, with the otter following behind him.

"I can't fly us into the city!" the former Dark Agent tried. "I am not a good enough pilot to do that. We'd never made it!"

Joe growled low in his throat. "My friend is in there, and I'm going in there to help her, whether you like it or not!"

Hirokichi shook his head. "Look, its not that I don't want to help!! But I *can't* fly in there! The winds would knock me out of the sky in seconds. Do you have any idea what that kind of heat does to flying conditions?"

"Actually, I do," the coyote answered and pulled his gun. "Either you fly me in there, or I take off on my own."

"Damned it, there's no need to get violent ..." the otter complained and backed off. The gun in the coyote's paw was a highly effective means of persuasion. "I CAN'T fly in those conditions. I told you I don't want to see the world burn, but I wouldn't be helping you by dropping out of the sky like a ton of rock!!"

Nodding, slowly, Joe looked at the fur for a long moment. "Alright, I believe you ..." he said and lowered the gun ... then bolted towards the helicopter.

"JOE, STOP! THERE'S GOT TO BE ANOTHER WAY!" Hirokichi shouted after him, "WE CAN FIND A CAR OR SOMETHING!"

The coyote didn't listen. If this was how it was meant to end, at least he'd go out doing something he loved.

Flying ... and trying to help his friends.

The burning city loomed ahead, but Joe had seen his version of Hell ... and this wasn't it.

As the blades began to move, Joe nodded to the pilot outside. Hirokichi looked at him in confused admiration. Then slowly, he straightened up and nodded in respect.

Taking off, Joe set his jaw. But as he flew closer to the inferno, he was reminded of a classic movie scene.

One involving helicopters and "The Ride of the Valkyries".

It made him laugh.

###

Getting the bus to the central bus-station had been a harrowing experience to put it mildly. The driver had been totally unwilling to go that way, and Miho had ended up

throwing him out. Admittedly, Lee had kept the bus stationary while the driver was dumped, but the tigress still felt weird about it. Throwing the driver off the bus made it unlikely he would survive. However, he had a huge vehicle and he refused to help furs escape with it. As far as she was concerned, that meant her actions were justified.

At the bus-station, the engine had stalled. The ashes in the air had completely blocked the filter and there was no way they would get the engine going again. Fortunately, there were many other vehicles present, but no one to drive them. By now, Lee was fighting like a maniac to get the ignition of a large double-decker bus to obey. He had found the keys after trying at least thirty others from those laying spread around the office. Outside, Miho was trying to keep everyone calm. Furs had seen them drive into the bus-station and within two minutes, a horde of furs had gathered, to try to get a spot on the bus. It was a next to impossible task. They had something like five hundred furs waiting out there, and they were all desperate to get on board and get going. They would need two vehicles for certain. Fortunately, there were several left, including three with two decks.

Even if they were filled to the brim, it wouldn't be enough. Miho wasn't even sure she could drive a vehicle that large, but she would definitely try. Shouting at the top of her lungs to get everyone's attention, she kept asking if there was anyone there who could prove they could drive a bus. So far, no one had come forward.

Finally, the engine came on, and Lee revved the engine to make sure it wasn't a fluke. The gas-meter showed the tank to be just over half full. Easily enough to get to safety.

"GET THE FEMMES AND CHILDREN IN FIRST!" he shouted to Miho, opening the front door.

The tigress nodded. She looked scared to death ... but she still kept her wits about her and started by getting all the children into the bus, then followed by as many femmes as she could. A few males tried to force their way in as well, panicking, but she shoved them out of the way.

Most of them took the hint.

One wouldn't, though. He tried again and the tigress planted a solid left hook on his chin. He staggered but seemed determined in his attempts. Pulling her gun, Miho shook her head and looked straight at him.

"You'll get on the second bus. Don't push your luck."

The male rubbed his chin but seemed too far gone to realize how much trouble he was in. A few others seemed prepared to rush the bus as well. Miho cocked the hammer and shook her head, determination clear on her face. Behind her, the rest of the femmes and children got on board, although the last ones were hard to fit in.

Miho noticed this and called out, without turning her face from the males now advancing on her, "Lee, get moving!"

The wolf swallowed. He hated to leave his friend in a situation like that. He closed the door and looked ahead. "Okay everyone. Hang on! This isn't going to be a joyride!" he shouted as he rolled out of the bus station.

The last thing he saw in the rear view mirror before turning out onto the street was a sharp muzzle-flash from Miho's pawgun.

###

Aslaug had never been in a fight this difficult. Anane was an expert warrior, with untold thousands of years of experience, and all the force of endless, boundless hatred to fuel his blows.

But she was giving as good as she got. Still, she was clearly spending more time defending herself than attacking.

Anane backhanded her and she barely managed to block the blow ... and it still sent her flying backwards through a crumbling wall, into a burning house. The heat was painful, but not as bad as the force of the blow itself and she picked herself off the floor, groaning as her fur began to sear in certain places.

Jumping out of the hole in the wall, the wounds were already healing. But the force of Anane's attack was still with her and she doubled over, trying to catch her breath.

"You're barely worth the effort," the fallen Angel taunted, approaching. "I had hoped you'd be more sport."

In the space of half a heartbeat, Aslaug straightened her back, flicked over one of her franciscas in her paw and launched it with all her might at Anane, without saying a word.

The attack was unexpected. Anane had thought the Valkyrie to be too winded to react for another few seconds and the axe slammed into his chest so hard he was lifted off his feet. He collapsed in a heap, groaning in agony as he pulled the weapon out of his body.

That wound would take a long time to heal ... and it was the first solid hit anyone had landed on him since ... well ... since he had his eyes torn out.

"Damned ..." he groaned and scrambled back to his feet, tossing the weapon aside. It was unbalanced in his hand ... he had no idea how to use it properly.

"Not so easy prey as expected, hmm?" Aslaug asked, smiling grimly. "You know, generally speaking, I'm sent to collect the souls of the worthy dead. But even if you *had* been worthy ... you don't even *have* one, do you?"

Anane roared in anger. He'd rip that damned creature apart, one extremity at a time if he had to. But first and foremost, he'd make sure she paid for her insolence!

Fire shot out of the ground. Sewer-entrances blew their covers, with jets of flaming refuse standing fifty feet into the air. Buildings crumbled ... windows exploded.

Growling angrily, Aslaug demonstratively flipped the Angel off. He might not be able to see it, but it made her feel better anyway as she rolled her head on her shoulders and charged.

###

Flying into the inferno quickly proved to be extremely difficult. Joe was forced to compensate for violent and unpredictable air-currents constantly, and several times, he was grabbed in a way that made him feel like *something* was physically trying to grab hold of the helicopter to bring it down. But he wrested control back from the unseen force every time and he continued into the firestorm.

While locating one fur in a burning city was an impossibility, locating one Aslaug anywhere was considerably easier. What he needed was something to tell him in what general area he needed to be.

Some parts of the city weren't ablaze yet, but Joe, living in Southern California and used to annual forest fires during and after the Santa Ana-season, knew that this was beyond the control of any corps of firefighters. This was a disaster of such a magnitude that all that could realistically be done was to let the fire burn itself out. However long that would take.

Swallowing hard, he tried not to think of all the dead in the burning rubble down below. Occasionally, he saw a single fur or maybe a small group, running hither and thither in the streets below and he wished he could land and save them, but he also knew

that the moment the Blackhawk touched down, he'd be swamped by so many furs needing to be rescued that he'd never be able to take off again.

He had to find his friend and help her.

Switching on the radio, he tried to get some kind of contact out of the firestorm, but it was impossible. Whatever was in the wind disturbed the signal and he got nothing but static.

Still, he put the headset on. While he couldn't receive, there was a small ... a tiny chance that he would be heard by someone.

As calmly as he could, he began reporting where he saw clusters of survivors.

Up ahead, he could see a large, open area. It looked like there was water there as well. Maybe ...

Just maybe ...

He flew lower. Furs came rushing out of basements and alleys, hoping to be rescued, but Joe had no intention of touching down. Instead, he circled them a few times, then flew off towards the open area, hoping those down below would follow him there, thinking that would be where he would land.

He wouldn't. But they'd be comparatively safe there, and it would be far easier for other rescuers to find them.

In the distance, an explosion caught his attention.

Swallowing, he swung the helicopter around, once again fighting off a stray wind, trying to bring him to the ground. Another explosion ... close to the first one, now right in front of his eyes, but miles off.

That had to be it.

Pushing forward on the controls, he started towards it, as fast as he could.

###

The beating she was taking was enough to give even Aslaug pause. In fact, she was losing ...

Badly.

And Anane knew it.

"I told you!" he growled as he struck her face twice and her body once in a quick three-punch combination, "Standards are dropping off in Asgaard if you're all they've got to send against me!"

"Not ... our world," Aslaug coughed. "I just happened to be in the neighborhood."

She staggered backwards, swinging the small axe in a quick figure-eight in front of her to keep Anane at a distance for a few brief moments. She had to come up with some kind of winning strategy, and fast, but Anane ... while not much stronger than her ... simply had far more experience and it was making all the difference here.

It was impossible to tell what was happening anywhere else in the city. The roaring fires deafened any noise to the point where it was nearly impossible to tell what Anane was hissing at her in between his blows, and he was right next to her. Someone could've brought a bomb to explosion two hundred yards away, and she wouldn't have heard it.

All she registered were those horrendous, overpowering blows. Hammering her into submission, one terrible punch at a time.

She'd die before giving up, though, and not for the first time since she called Joe to get his help, Aslaug realized ... she just might.

Joe.

She wondered what had happened to him. Anane circled around her, looking for a momentary opening. She realized he wasn't keen on tangling with her axe again and as long as she kept her defenses up, he couldn't attack her. But that only made for a stalemate. There was no way to break it ...

He was wounded, too. Probably worse than he was letting on. She had landed at least fifty solid blows on the fallen Angel, and at she had clearly split whatever passed for a sternum in an angelic chest with her francisca-throw earlier.

But in theory, they could keep circling each other here for the next fifty years. Slowly, her wounds would heal as would his, but she couldn't get an attack in sideways without lowering her defenses, and his attacks were not strong enough to avoid her axe if he chose to try his luck.

There was movement in the smoke beyond Anane, and Aslaug dearly hoped some innocent wasn't about to stumble in on the scene. The street was covered with blood ... hers as well as Anane's ... long since gone thick and sticky in the heat.

"Damned filly, you're a hard one to find, you know that!?" Joe's voice called out. "This is Anane I take it?"

Aslaug swallowed hard. If she couldn't take down Anane, Joe Latrans, for all his gusto and bravery, would stand no chance. But she nodded nonetheless. "This is the demon in question."

"ANGEL!! DAMNED you, *creature*, ANGEL!" Anane roared.

Aslaug grinned widely. "Actually, I think "demon" fits you better ... demon," she mocked.

Anane narrowed his eyesockets and bared his incisors. "I'll roast your intestines over the burning ruins of this city while you *watch!*" he sneered, then swiftly turned around, apparently to go after Joe.

Aslaug attacked immediately, only to realize a split second too late that Anane had expected her to. A backhanded blow sent her flying onto a pile of rubble, her axe clattering to the ground.

"I'll kill your friend first, though," he said. "Oh what's that you got there? I can smell gun-oil. You're pulling a *gun* on me? How amusing. Yes please, do shoot me. Let's see how useless it is!"

Joe leveled the heavy pistol at the fallen Angel and narrowed his eyes in a defiant, grim look. "You don't have to tell *me* twice," he mumbled and carefully squeezed the trigger.

Anane didn't even have time to look surprised as the bullet sank into his skull. It lifted him clean off his feet and onto his back on the ground, howling in pain. Joe immediately got off a few more shots, but the fallen Angel was thrashing on the ground to get out of the way and all the shots missed.

"HOW? HOW?" he roared as he vaulted to his feet, moving so swiftly Joe had no idea what had happened until he felt his feet lift the ground and a horrible clenching sensation around his throat as Anane lifted him into the air. His gun was clattering along the street, having been batted from his paws like a child's toy. The wound in Anane's face was terrible to say the least. Half his left cheekbone was just ... gone. Blood poured out as

from a faucet. Joe could even see Anane's tongue move in his mouth-cavity with every word. It was nauseating, but at least he knew he had gotten one good shot in. Just one.

That in itself was worth traveling halfway around the world for! It just *felt* good.

"No ... ordinary ... ammo ..." he grinned. Then he stopped clawing at Anane's hand, realizing he was in no way strong enough to get free anyway ... instead raising his right paw until it was level with the fallen Angel's face, presenting him with the world's most recognizable paw-gesture. Right up in his face. Literally pressing his paw against the ruined features of the blinded demon to make sure he got the point!

Anane had tried a lot over the years, but getting flipped off by a mere Agent ... an agent who had the gall to *snicker* while doing so ... was enough to make his blood reach boiling point.

He opened his ruined mouth ... wider and wider ... impossibly wide, intent on literally engulfing the creature's head and crushing it between his jaws. But he smelled no fear from the creature in his hand.

None whatsoever.

"You can't frighten me," Joe said, calmly. "I've been to Hell and back. There's *nothing* you can do to frighten me, demon."

Anane wasn't even going to reply to the insult this time. He was simply going to kill this insolent pest.

"Hey ... let go of my friend," the voice of the Valkyrie said from down on the ground. He half turned his head, mostly out of morbid curiosity. What was she going to do? He had disarmed her, knocked her senseless ...

But if he had disarmed her, why could he smell the scent of metal and ... and his own blood from her?

At the last moment before Aslaug hurled her throwing axe, Anane understood.

He *had* disarmed her. She was simply holding the axe that had already wounded him once, which he had thrown aside. The Valkyrie had landed practically next to it after his last blow had sent her sailing through the air again.

He recoiled in horror as he heard the axe coming at him ... spinning perfectly through the air, swishing with every rapid revolution. He shook his head, his facial features returning to their normal proportions. He didn't know where it was aimed. He couldn't

tell with the smoke in the air obstructing his sense of smell. And even if he had known, the speed of the weapon made it impossible to react in time.

"No ..." he managed to gasp.

Then the axe plowed through his arm, holding the Agent ...

Screaming in pain, he grabbed the stump with his remaining hand, as his arm and his enemy both fell away towards the ground. Blood poured from the wound.

"VARGHÖSS, GET JOE!" the Valkyrie shouted.

Anane had already been following the falling Agent ... but suddenly, a shape blurred through the air. Smelling of fur and anger. In less time than it took to blink, his arm ... his enemy ... were gone.

All that remained on the ground was the Valkyrie.

"And keep the arm. It should make a good snack," she said into the air. Her voice had a cruel tone of triumph to it.

Anane couldn't stop in time. Wounded as he was ... battered as he was ... he simply collided with the street below, finding it next to impossible to get up. He was bleeding profusely already, and the approaching Valkyrie didn't help any when she landed a solid kick to his temple.

It sent him flicking over twice in the air, snapping one of his wings before he came to rest on his back, spread-eagled.

He hadn't been in this much pain since he was thrown out of Heaven.

He had caused more death and more destruction than any Angel since the Fall, and by all accounts, he should be proud of his achievements, but the pain ... the *PAIN!*

Suddenly he realized someone was standing over him. The Valkyrie ...with barely constrained hatred in her voice.

"Remember what I said I would do?" she said, calmly.

Anane managed to shake his head slightly.

"Then I'll remind you," Aslaug growled and knelt, still astride the beaten, wrecked form of her enemy. Apparently, her punches had hurt him more than he had let on. Joe's gunshot, the loss of his arm and the constant loss of blood was doing the rest.

Anane was about to ask what she meant, when he felt the most unbelievable agony in his chest.

The Valkyrie dug in her paws. Both of them. Strong fingers forcing apart the split sternum. "I'll give you an extra set of wings," she hissed as she tore open Anane's chest cavity, laying bare his insides. It was the kind of damage that would instantly have killed any mortal.

But Anane didn't die. He didn't even pass out.

But his voice failed as Aslaug reached into his chest and pulled his lungs loose, flipping them over his wide open, split ribcage.

Still he didn't die, though she was by now covered in gore. Her face ... her chest ... her arms and her paws were all literally drenched in his blood. She looked nothing short of terrifying. More like a natural force, unleashed, than a simple fur. The look of hatred in her eyes would have scared the most egotistical sociopath and the expression on her face was beyond reason or rationality.

"This is called a "blood eagle", Anane," she snarled. "If I had salt, I would've rubbed it into every edge of your wound, then cauterized them with flame. But I don't have any salt, and you won't last that long anyway. You see, I promised to rip your heart from your body with my bare paws! *That* was my promise when this started."

The fallen Angel had no air with which to form words. His shattered body was convulsing weakly, and his empty eyesockets were wide in horror. His lips formed the word "mercy" ...

And then it was over.

Aslaug's left paw closed around his heart and yanked it upwards and outwards in one brutal, furious motion.

With a sickening rattle running up his throat, Anane reached up towards the already stilling organ with his one remaining hand ...

Then he froze.

His arm fell down to the side.

And he lay still.

Aslaug stood astride him, crushing the heart in her paw until pieces of it came out between her fingers. Then she threw the remains into the flames all around her.

It was not until then that she realized that someone nearby was clapping.

Someone was applauding her.

###

He had flown fast before. He'd broken the sound barrier in fast jets, but Joe had never before flown as fast as he did once Varghöss caught him.

It was an amazing feeling. The wind should've peeled the flesh from his bones at this speed, and yet it felt like he was driving down Route 66 in a cabriolet, with the top down on a warm summer's day. It made him want to howl into the wind, in fact.

Coyotes and wolves did not trust one another from nature, but right now, he'd forgotten all about that, and for just a few seconds, he felt like never getting off.

Then Varghöss landed and Joe reluctantly got off. The giant wolf only gave him a cursory glance, but Joe felt some measure of appreciation from the huge beast nonetheless. It was not an unpleasant feeling.

Then he was alone again. Varghöss moved so fast it defied reason and Joe simply shook his head, looking around to figure out where he was.

It wasn't hard to figure out.

He could see the tall shape of an equine down below. Swinging a huge axe, cleaving logs of wood as if they were mere matchsticks.

"Torvald," Joe mumbled to himself and smiled.

Then he started walking.

###

"Most impressive," the gray haired human said and smiled. "I wasn't sure if you deserved your ... *nomme du guerre* before, but I concede the point, Angelbreaker."

Aslaug had never before seen a smile that made her feel that sick to her stomach, but she said nothing. Instead, she backed away from the still form of her fallen enemy, until

she reached one of her axes. Bending at the knees, she picked it up, without ever taking her eyes off the newcomer.

He was average height, but squarely built. His hair was steel gray and his features very sharp. His eyes were strange, though. He had eyeballs, but they were just wrong somehow. It was like looking into an endless, bottomless void.

"Impressive?" Aslaug asked.

Lucifer shrugged and gestured indifferently towards Anane. "That. Quite a display. I really didn't think you had it in you. No wonder Surt was so eager to get you to work for him back in the day."

Aslaug bared her teeth. "Don't *speak* that name around me unless you want one of my axes imbedded in your skull!" she sneered.

Lucifer laughed. It was not an unpleasant sound. "Did you just *threaten* me, Angelbreaker? That's got to be the best joke anyone's cracked around me for over two thousand years!"

"What was the last good joke you heard, then?" Aslaug grumbled, curious despite herself.

Lucifer smiled and ran a hand through his short, gray hair. Anane began to turn to dust behind him. "It happened on a barren hill. I made certain business propositions to God's alleged offspring, and he told me "Get thee behind me, Satan"."

"Seeing as you're talking to a non-Christian, you're going to have to explain the punchline."

"He didn't seem to realize that I was already ahead of him ... and I always will be."

Aslaug rolled her eyes. "Because of dogmatic blindness making him unable to adapt and change as necessary. That joke is so bad only your devotees would laugh at it!" she said, wearily.

"But *how* they laugh," Lucifer said, the smile never leaving his face. "In any case, thank you for returning Anane to me. It'll take a long, long time before he'll leave Hell."

"Oh why don't you just *piss off*, you self-absorbed shit. I didn't do this to help you. And besides, I'm sure I'll meet him again," Aslaug grumbled, looking around for her other axe.

Lucifer just kept smiling as he vanished.

Then ... and only then ... did Aslaug fall to her knees in exhaustion.

She was covered in blood. All around her, the flames of the city reached higher with every passing minute. Letting her head roll back, she clenched her fists in rage, opened her eyes wide and screamed.

###

Torvald looked up from his work and wiped an almost solid sheen of sweat off his brow with the back of his arm. It felt good to be able to do manual labor again. To not have the chest-wound he had recently suffered impede him any further.

A coyote was approaching him. A figure he knew.

"Joe! It's good to see you," the stallion called out, waving his left paw in the air by way of further greeting his guest.

Joe smiled crookedly. He was tired. Very, very tired and he wanted to go home to see his wife and his kids, but nothing happened entirely without a reason, and he had arrived at the Svensen home, not his own.

"Hey Torvald. Are you alright?" he asked as he came closer.

"I'm ... as well as can be expected, I guess would be the right expression."

"I suppose that's all any of us can really ask for isn't it?"

Torvald nodded. "Want to go in? You know ... have a drink or something?"

"Much as I would love a large Jack D on the rocks ... I'd actually appreciate borrowing your shower first. And if you've got a spare T-shirt I could borrow, I'd really appreciate it. I stink. I haven't had a chance of clothes for days."

Nodding again, Torvald smiled. "Of course. I'll be glad to help. Frankly, I think I owe you more than a T-shirt."

"You don't owe me *anything*, and don't you ever forget that!" Joe retorted, eyeballing the equine. "There's no payment for favors amongst friends."

"You are an honorable fur, Joe Latrans."

"So you all tell me."

"Do you want to talk about it? I'm pretty sure you must've gone through Hel," Torvald asked. "Victoria and I are right here if you need someone to unload to."

Shaking his head, Joe managed a smile. "You know ... not Hel with a single L, but with a double L, you'd be surprised at how accurate that statement is," he muttered. "I'll be okay. But this ends here. Aslaug ... Jeez, I've seen her pissed off in the past, Torvald, but I have never seen her as affected by anything as by this whole affair. She wants to end it, you know. The institution of immortality and the use of unwilling Agents who never had the whole deal explained to them before they said yes."

Torvald chuckled and put his axe down. "Her and me both then!"

"I'm not going on any more missions. I'm too old and I've been through too much. But Aslaug is going to need someone who can help her with logistics and suchlike," Joe said and ran a paw through his hair. "She's still wary of computers and she will need someone to locate those agents she's going to try to help. I'll do that from the comfort of my own home. I can make the necessary phone-calls and look stuff up on the Net for her and suchlike."

"If you need another paw or four, let me know. We'd help ... Victoria and I."

"Thanks. I'll definitely need help."

Torvald smiled. "Don't mention it. You know ... now that we have lives to lose again, they become all the more precious. I don't want anyone to have to go through a fraction of what we were put through."

Joe extended a paw. "Then that settles it. She can do all the dimension-hopping from now on. We'll do what's needed around here. Would you be willing and able to provide a place for some of these furs to stay for a while? You know ... like a safehouse?"

Smiling crookedly, Torvald nodded. "Of course. There will be rules ... but we'll do that. And more if needed," he said and shook the offered paw.

Taking a deep breath, Joe nodded. "Then ... I'd love to take that shower before I go back home to Annie."

"Naturally. It's right this way," Torvald said. "Mind the mess. We're re-furnishing. Someone seems to have committed bloody murder in our house while we were gone. Do you know anything about that?"

"I honestly don't. But I'd be willing to venture a guess or two," Joe chuckled and headed inside.

Torvald waited while Joe entered. Then he looked over his shoulder. In the distance, over the fields, he could see a hilltop. The sun was starting to set. The sky was taking on the color of blood. A tear rolled down Torvald's cheek as he realized what was about to happen.

In the distance, a long, somber, sad howl from the throat of a great wolf was heard.

"I'll see you again," the old berserker said, quietly. His throat was constricting. "But I'll miss you until then."

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"Nancy?"

Aslaug straightened her back as she walked closer.

The younger equine nodded. She was sitting with her legs dangling over a cliff's edge, looking at the horizon. The road was at least a mile away. There were woods all around them, and down below the cliff, a river ran past. Across the river, a couple of wild deer were drinking.

"I know why you're here," she said, quietly. "I talked to Grandpa Torvald about this. He ... he wept. He said he understood, but it hurt so badly to have to tell him."

"I know it did," Aslaug said, quietly, sitting down next to the other femme, dangling her hooves over the edge of the cliff too.

"It's weird, isn't it? I mean, you're not even an Angel. Me having been Christian all my life, and now that it's all over, it's not an Angel carrying me to heaven."

"In all honesty, I've seen weirder things happen."

Nancy managed to chuckle. "I know. So have I, for that matter. But I can't do this, Aslaug. I can't ... do this anymore. Working with my dad like this? Running around dimensions and worlds I know nothing of, getting involved in all sorts of horrible things? I may be immortal but the furs I meet generally aren't and all too often, I'll have to fight them. Maybe even kill them. And I'll have to live with that knowledge *forever*!? I never got a choice in the matter, Aslaug. Not ... not really."

The Valkyrie shook her head and looked at the horizon. "You've picked a beautiful spot, Nancy. I'll ... make sure someone finds you, once it's all done and dealt with. I'll move your body to the riverbed on the other side. Everyone will write it off as you having come down here to enjoy the view, and then having fallen off the cliff. It'll be registered as nothing more than a tragic accident. Your family won't be put through any kind of scrutiny."

Sighing in relief, the younger equine nodded. "Thank you for the kindness," she said with a sigh, then looked around at the vista before speaking again. "This place ... this is where Trenton proposed to me. That's why I picked it. Why I wanted you to meet me here, to take care of this."

Aslaug just nodded. This was not her time to talk. Nancy needed to get these things out of her system, and the Valkyrie wasn't going to interrupt her.

"I know I asked you here," Nancy said after a long moment. "I asked for you specifically, because I know you'll make it as easy as it can be. I know this ... so why am I still scared?"

"Because I'm here to give you what you never got in the first place. A choice. And making choices is always scary. You are no coward, Nancy. Death isn't what you fear."

"No. No ... it isn't. But I'm afraid of the pain I'm leaving behind. I don't want anyone to be upset. I don't want my family to be upset. Trenton ... TJ, Chelsea ... I don't want them to be hurt by my passing. I love my family, Aslaug. I cherish them! I don't want them ... to be upset."

"They will be. We both know that. But grief is a good thing," Aslaug said.

"How come?" Nancy asked, turning her head to look at the Valkyrie for the first time since her arrival.

Aslaug shrugged. "Grief is what tells a fur that he or she has lost someone important. Would you prefer if no one grieved for your passing? That no one wept a single tear when you died?"

"I see what you mean," Nancy said and again managed a little smile. "Grief reminds us that we are sorry because the fur who has died was precious to us."

"Exactly. Tears are not wrong. Even the strongest fur should never be so strong that he or she forgets how to weep," Aslaug said and put a gentle arm around Nancy's shoulder.

The younger equine was quiet for a long moment. She looked at the distant sunset, tears rolling down her cheeks. "I'll see them all again, though. I have no reason to weep."

"You will see them all again," Aslaug confirmed.

"Will it hurt?"

"In your case? Yes. A lot. But only very briefly."

Nancy nodded. "Thank you for being honest about it."

Aslaug pulled the other femme's head gently onto her shoulder in a comforting, almost motherly gesture. "Always. I don't lie," she said.

Nancy took another deep breath ... as if she wanted the taste of air to fill her senses for the last time. Then she exhaled heavily. "Then I'm ready," she said. Her voice was barely a whisper.

"When you were offered immortality, those who offered it were not honest with you, Nancy. They never gave you a real choice. But I am here to offer you mortality. I am ... no Angel of Death, but I can at least be mercy in the flesh. Do you wish for your flesh to live forever?"

"No ... just my soul," Nancy answered. Tears were blocking her view by now. Her voice was broken.

Nodding without a word, Aslaug let her arm slip down around Nancy again to hold her steady. She didn't say a word. She didn't even really know how she did it. A faintly glowing sheen surrounded Nancy for a moment. Then it faded.

"You have twelve seconds to live," Aslaug said, now seeing the younger femme's life ebbing away with absolute certainty. "It will be over in a moment. Don't worry. I'm here with you. You're not alone."

"Thank you," Nancy managed to whisper. Her face contorted in anguish as wounds opened up all over her body. Aslaug held her steady, as her spine separated in one ... three ... five places.

Fractures once healed reopened without violence. Wounds bled profusely.

Aslaug reached up with her free paw, carefully closing Nancy's eyes.

There was a momentary rustle behind the Valkyrie and she felt something pointy against her back.

Sniffing the air briefly, she frowned. "Uriel. You are not welcome," she stated. She wasn't angry. She wasn't in the mood for an argument with the Angel behind her. All she wanted was for him to leave and let her finish her task.

"That's why I've come armed this time! She has passed on. You've already created more than enough havoc in the foundation of the cosmos, Valkyrie! I will bring her home. And *you* are dismissed."

For a moment, it felt like the red sheen of rage would descend on her again. Instead, Aslaug spun around and grabbed the blade of the sword Uriel was holding. Blood poured down her paws. Not her own, though.

Anane's blood.

"Today I tore open the chest of an Angel, and crushed his heart between my fingers," she said. There was no sneer. No hatred.

There wasn't even anger. Just a plain, cold, utterly sincere statement of fact.

She let go of the sword. The blade was corroding already from the touch of Anane's blood.

Uriel swallowed. "This ... is *highly* irregular! She's *Christian*! One of *ours*!"

"You are not welcome," Aslaug stated again. "Her soul isn't yours. It's her own. Free will gives her ownership of her own soul. That's what this whole tragedy was about right from the start. *Free will*. The right ...and the ability ... to make our own choices. That is what individuality is. What a soul *really* is. Something you ... soulless, *empty* being that you are ... will never truly understand. I'm going to ask you nicely for a change, but I'll only do so once. Out of respect for Nancy, and for her sake, please leave. *I* will bring her home."

"You will never enter Heaven, *Heathen*!" the Angel sneered as he vanished.

Aslaug shook her head as she reached down and lifted Nancy's sleeping, unharmed soul free from her earthly remains. "No I won't," she said quietly as Varghöss padded up to her out of nowhere.

She sat astride the great wolf's back, holding Nancy's soul in her arms like one would hold a newborn.

"But *she* will."

Varghöss howled.

The world vanished.

Everything turned white.

And for Nancy, all was as it should be.

To Paul

Keep howling at the moon, my friend

I'll be listening, half a world away