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'The Price Of Worship'

By R C Stankewitz

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Chapter 5

"Investigation"

The immortal couple had finally slept in a decent bed for a change and the morning sun coming through the drapes was beginning to light up the room. Victoria was already awake and she thinking that a home-cooked breakfast would be a nice way to start out this morning. "Sweetheart? Are you awake?" the tigress asked of her stallion. She nudged him in the back of the shoulder a little, just in case he really was asleep.

"I am awake" he mumbled followed by a yawn. "Is the mission over? Are we home?" he added, totally unaware of his surroundings. He pulled the covers up under his chin as he began to snore again.

"Torvald, wake up" she said quietly as she nudged him again. "You need to stoke the stove so I can cook breakfast."

"My alarm hasn't gone off" he mumbled and then rolled over to face his mate. "Ten more minutes, please?" he asked and then started to snore once again, drool beginning to run out of the corner of his mouth.

"We don't have an alarm clock, silly" she stated. "If you want a hot breakfast, I need heat in the stove!"

"I will have cold cereal, then" he retorted as he faded back to slumber-land.

"Quit goofing around!" she said loudly and pulled the covers off of him. "We need a fire in the stove for breakfast!"

"I am up" he blurted out as he sat up and began to shiver just a little. "I will have a fire going for you in no time."

###

The strange-looking canid had already consumed his breakfast and he was sitting around in his hotel room to let it settle some. He was sharpening his broadsword with that stone he had procured from the stallion, using some olive oil as a lubricant. The stone made an evil hissing sound on each stroke, sparks and smoke rolling off of the blade. This was due to the blade having been blessed with a dark power by a disciple of the Devil. As he was sharpening the sword, Asbeel was thinking about the possibility that he was on a collision course with his own destiny.

The store manager and his tigress wife kept coming to mind. "I wonder if they are the agents" he thought to himself. "There is something...different about them that I can't put my finger on." He had never felt the kind of power that he felt when the stallion and the tigress were together. "This could be very dangerous for me. I will tell Zagam I need more than what he is offering for this job" he said out loud as he turned the sword to sharpen the other side.

"I will not pay you more souls for your time" the shadow figure said as it materialized in the dark corner of the room. "You are being paid well for this work." The shadow moved closer to the canid as it asked "Are you getting cold feet? Are you afraid of the immortals should they prove to be the targets?"

"They are very powerful" the canid retorted. He squirmed in his chair as he thought of the immortals destroying him instead. "This is a dangerous mission. I need more compensation."

"The wolf and the immortals if they are the targets must be dealt with" the shadow said in an ominous tone. "You will see to it that my bidding is done with no extra compensation." The dark figure then faded out of sight.

"This does not bode well for me" he thought. "This may be my last job on earth ever."

###

Torvald was looking at his breakfast, trying to decide where to start. His mate had done her best to fix a presentable meal only to fail from a lack of modern conveniences. Victoria was not used to cooking over a wood-burning stove so things had gotten a little out of paw.

"I think my eggs are overcooked" he commented as he picked up an entire egg by poking his fork into the yolk and lifting it up. "I don't remember them fixed like this at home."

"Very funny" his mate retorted as she tasted the bacon that was just a little too crisp. "You give it a try. It's either all or nothing for heat!"

"Is it possible for Denise to give lessons on cooking?" the huge fur thought out loud as he tried his bacon. It was not how he usually liked it cooked but it was salty as hell. "Did you cut the outer rind off of the bacon before you sliced it?" he asked as he took another bite.

“I didn't know that you needed to do that” the tigress replied. “Is that why it's so salty?”

“This is as salty as the restaurant cook's mouth” the berserker retorted as he finished what he could of his breakfast. “Try my suggestion next time for the bacon.”

###

The dark wolf was standing in his parlor, summoning Zagam. He was sure that the immortal couple were the intended target so he was getting ready to tell his master this piece of information.

“Algernon, how good to hear from you” the dark cloud figure said as it came out of a dark corner of the room to stop within feet of the wolf. “I had hoped for you to finish your scan earlier but this will have to do.”

“Zagam, master. I have found no others” Mr. Forrest stated. “It must be the blond stallion and his tigress wife.”

“Good. Very Good” the dark cloud form said in a cheerful tone. “You will get your reward soon.” With that said, the cloud just dissipated, leaving the wolf alone in his parlor.

###

Asbeel was still sitting in the same spot that he had been in for the last 2 hours. The thoughts that kept going through his mind were not pleasant for him and they would not go away. His mind's eye could see himself dead in a variety of ways and none of them looked particularly swift and painless to the canid.

He had been told to eliminate the wolf and the couple by Zagam. The dark master had insisted that the agent of darkness make their deaths look like accidents to the other furs. This was going to be hard to do, considering he was going to use a broadsword to do the work. As the strange looking canid gave thought to how to pull this off, he noticed some movement off to one side in the room. As he turned his head, he saw something that shook his very foundation. It was a very familiar Archangel.

“Asbeel, old buddy. Good to see you again” the winged feline leaning against the wall said as he packed down his pack of smokes and opened them. “Long time, no see. How many centuries has it been now?” The angel went over and sat down in a chair next to the canid.

“I see you have found me, Uriel” the canid stated as he made himself a little less uncomfortable in his chair. “What brings you here? I am sure you did not come just to talk with me.”

“I felt your presence on this planet” the archangel stated as he pulled out a cigarette and lit it up. “I hope you're just visiting here and not doing business” he added as he took a hit on his smoke and blew a smoke ring in the air.

“What if I told you I do not like what I am doing any longer, old friend?” the canid asked as he watched the angel intently.

“I would have to say you have a conscience but that is not possible” Uriel replied. “You are a fallen angel, a corrupter of holy furs and a destroyer of mortal and immortal furs. You do not have those types of feelings in you. You live to destroy others and that is all.”

“I somehow do not wish to complete this mission” the canid stated. “It feels like I am going to die rather than be victorious.”

“You know we all miss you up there” the winged feline said as he took another long hit of his smoke. “You had such promise until you followed Lucifer out of our home.”

“I can no longer be a white angel. You know that as well as any” the canid said with a hint of regret to his voice. “I gave all that up the day I left the celestial home.”

“Well, you haven't read the boss's new policies” Uriel said casually. “If you do something that is extremely virtuous, you might get back into the father's good graces.”

“I cannot imagine Zagam will let me do that” he said in a dejected tone, wiping tears from his eyes. “See, I am crying. You try and tell me that I do not have regret and remorse. I sometimes wish to die rather than take lives. It has been like this for some time now.” The canid had to find his pawkerchief to wipe his eyes with. “Go ahead, tell me it's not so.”

The angel nodded as he said “There is one other way for you to return home but it is not pleasant.” Uriel looked over to see that the canid was interested by this information.

“You can possibly return to the fold” the feline said to Asbeel. “If you are killed by an agent. You will have to be ready to give up your existence willingly. Then our father will let you back in if he feels you are sincere enough in your wish to return.”

“I see you have your sword with you” Asbeel said to the feline. “I am ready, Uriel. Strike me dead.” The canid stood and held his arms out to the sides and closed his eyes as he waited to be struck down by Uriel's weapon.

“Sorry, old buddy” the feline said to the canid. “As much as I would really like to help you out, I can't.” The feline stubbed out his smoke and lit another one. “I'm technically not an 'agent' so it wouldn't count. The boss would pitch you right out on your ear.”

“Then who can help me?” the dark angel asked of his old friend. “Is there any fur here that can do this for me?”

“Torvald and Victoria are agents, in case you have forgotten” the winged feline pointed out. “They have the power and the strength to assist you with returning home. You will have to get them to run your heart through with your own sword.”

“I don't think that would be possible” Asbeel said sadly. “I am sure they wouldn't help me as soon as they hear that I am a dark angel.”

“This you do not know” Uriel replied to his fallen friend. “If you are sincere in your desire to return, I am sure you will at least give it a try. I have told you all that I can. It is now up to you to decide your fate.”

“Maybe I will try to return home” the canid replied as he watched his friend disappear from view. Asbeel sat there and pondered what he had just been told. Uriel was his mentor when he was in the celestial home and he had even tried to talk him out of leaving when Lucifer was thrown out for his views. Now it seemed like he might have a chance after all to return. It all hinged on getting the immortal couple to just kill him. That sounded simple. He shook his head at the thought. This will not be simple.

###

The berserker stood in the corner of the office, talking with his wife about his current state of health. “I need something for this stomach ache” the huge fur complained to his mate. “I have been belching up breakfast all morning.” It was obvious that Torvald was not feeling well; the huge fur even looked quite pale this morning. As he stood there, Ivar Johnsen came into the office to see both of his employees looking a little under the weather.

“Ar you two not feeling well?” he asked as he touched Torvald and Victoria's foreheads. “You two seem to be cool but you don't look well. Maybe you two should see old Doc Bischer.” He was looking quite concerned about their health.

The gray wolf pointed them across the street and a few doors down to the doctor's office which also displayed a sign stating that he performed dentistry too. The small sign on the front door said to just come in if it was not locked so they followed the directions given.

The inside of his office looked like any that they had seen in pictures from this era. The one glaring addition was the barber chair, most likely used to perform crude dental procedures.

“Is anyone here?” the tigress called out, hoping to garner the doctor's attention. There was sound of someone stirring in the back beyond the curtained doorway followed by a deep voice calling out.

“I'll be right with you” the voice announced followed by more stirring sounds. Shortly, a very broad-shouldered brown bear came through the curtains that he had parted with his huge paws.

“Good morning” the bear said as he sat down at his desk in the lobby. “I'm James Bischer, the town doctor.” He offered up his paw which the huge stallion accepted.

“We're Victoria and Torvald Svensen” the tigress proffered up. “Both of us are under the weather, probably from my cooking” she added in a sheepish tone.

“Well, let's give you two a quick examination to see what's wrong” the doctor said as he motioned towards the back. “A femme's cooking can't have that much effect on a fur” he added with a smile.

“Well, I'm not used to the stove in our cottage” the immortal femme stated as she sat in a chair while the stallion got up on the examining table. “I had a hard time with the eggs and the bacon.”

“You can take off your shirt for me” the doctor requested of the huge equine. He retrieved his stethoscope and listened to Torvald's lungs, heart and most importantly, his stomach. “That gut of yours sounds very unhappy this morning” he noted as he turned to the tigress. “It's your turn now.”

Victoria removed her blouse for the physician but left her camisole on. Once she had sat down on the examining table, the kind doctor checked her over too.

“Well, I would have to say that you are both suffering from a touch of food poisoning if my guess is right” Doc Bischer stated. “I'm going to fix something for you to take that's a local Native American remedy.” He went to the corner of the room and began to prepare something that looked like he was making tea in a bowl.

“This was obtained from the local healer” he said as he left the room, returning with a pot of boiling hot water. “I have no idea what's in it, I just know it works.” He then poured the water over the materials in the bowl. The trio were rewarded by the most noxious smell imaginable when it started to steep. “And this stuff stinks to high heaven, too” the doctor commented as he stood there and watched his pocket watch.

After it had steeped for a few minutes, the doctor poured some into two cups and handed them to the immortal couple. “Drink up fast. It tastes like nothing you have ever tried.”

Torvald downed the concoction but Victoria had to struggle with it, sipping it instead. “This is nasty!” she commented between sips. She looked to see her husband smiling at her. “So, you think this is funny, eh?” she asked, giving Torvald the evil eye. “Maybe the doctor will give you a double dose, then!”

“You should be feeling better now” the doctor commented as he wrote some notes in his ledger. “I will send enough with you to make another dose if you need it.” He thought for a minute or two before he continued.

“You're the new managers that Ivar sent for, aren't you?” the doctor asked the immortal couple.

“Yes, that is us” the huge equine replied. “We are running the store for Mr. Johnsen while he takes it easy on that bad leg of his.”

“About that leg” the physician said quietly. “If someone tries to rob you, give them what they want and let them go. I don't want to have to pick buckshot out of another fur's hide again.” He made sure that they had understood his request by picking up the glass bottle that held the buckshot from Ivar's leg and shaking it.

“Trust me, you won't have to do that with us” the tigress stated. She remembered that 1880's parallel world American West mission where the filly had deliberately cut open her thigh to remove a bullet. Victoria thought it was crazy to do so until she had to do the same thing to herself the very next day.

“Since you two run the place, maybe you can tell me something” the doctor asked. “Do the furs of this town seem like they're all having money problems?”

“It seems that way to me” the berserker replied as the doctor pondered his response.

“You know, some of the furs that work out at the natural gas plant make good wages” Doc Bischer stated. “I had to accept payments from one of them for my services the other day.” He thought a moment before he added “It all began just about the time that Bible Reform Church came to town.”

“Now that -is- odd” the tigress commented as she looked to see that her stallion had caught that too. “I wouldn't think that there would be a connection there” she said as the thought that there was a connection went through her head.

The couple paid for the doctor's services, bid him good bye and returned to work. As they walked into the store, the tigress made a comment. “I feel better already. That stuff really works.”

“I feel better too” the huger berserker stated. “Except it's nasty tasting to burp back up.” He looked to see his mate smirking at him.

“You're paid back for that look you gave me earlier” she said, smiling at her mate.

###

Tom Huxley was sitting in front of the jail, watching the furs moving about the town. He was deeply concerned because he couldn't shake that feeling that something in town was extremely wrong. That strange-looking canid that had come to town recently had left a lasting impression on the collie. He could feel the evil in that one but he wasn't sure how to handle the problem. Should he just tell the canid to move along or confront him and tell him he knew something was not kosher.

As he thought the matter over, he observed Melvin and Roger coming up the street, carrying two 5 gallon cans of kerosene apiece. This just didn't look right so he decided to investigate. Getting up off of his chair, he followed the pair down to the Bible Reform Church. He waited until they had went inside before he followed them in.

He went inside to see that there were several more cans of kerosene by the side door, a total of 35 gallons. This was way too much for just the church's needs so he followed the sound of voices until he reached the office. He hesitated just a second before opening the door and walking inside unannounced.

“Good afternoon” he said as he looked around at the gathered furs. Pastor Marchese, Melvin and Roger were present along with that dark wolf Algernon. They all seemed surprised by his entrance.

“Is there something we can do for you?” the pastor asked. It was clear that the buck was nervous about something.

“Yes, there is now that you mention it” the collie replied. “You mind telling me what you're doing with 35 gallons of kerosene?” All four furs looked very uncomfortable from that request. “I ask this because 2 churches have burned down and I'm sure there was something we call 'accelerant' of some kind used to make sure they burned.”

“We were just stocking up for the winter months” the buck blurted out quickly. “No fur wants to worship in a house with no lights, now do they?”

“I guess not” the sheriff replied. “Sorry to have bothered you” he added as he turned and left the church.

The collie had been gone a few minutes before Algernon finally broke the silence. “He has derailed our plans” the wolf stated as he looked at the door the sheriff had left through. “We will have to find another way to run off the Mennonites.”

###

Asbeel walked into the General store in search of the immortal pair. He had thought this out and he hoped that they would agree to help him out with his problem. He found the stallion near the front of the store, stacking tins of lard on the shelf.

“Excuse me” the canid said to get Torvald's attention. “I think I really need to talk with you and your wife.” He could see that the huge fur was somewhat baffled by his request as the huge fur turned to face him.

“I do not understand” the berserker said to the canid. “I am not sure what we would have to talk about.” Torvald was trying to think of what they would need to communicate over, especially since he could feel the darkness in the canid's soul.

“You -do- know Uriel, don't you?” the strange looking fur asked. He could see the lights of recognition coming on in the stallion's eyes.

“I know him” the berserker said before he momentarily added “Let's talk in the office. It will be quiet in there.” Torvald went to the front door and hung a sign on it that said 'Be back in 10 minutes'.