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III – Faces of the enemy

It was a long, long flight. Long enough for thoughts to bubble up from a fur's subconscious. And it wasn't even as if he didn't like flying.

In fact, Joe Latrans loved it. There was something majestic about a huge aircraft in flight. Something about it just ... *defined* power. And the feeling of freedom was above and beyond anything else, as well. He loved the rush of looking out and knowing how many thousands of feet above the ground he was. There was a slight thrill in that, as his mind struggled to grasp the sheer enormity of being thirty thousand feet above the ground.

But this flight was different.

This time, he didn't look out the window. This time, he spent the entire flight from Los Angeles to New York ... and the entire flight from New York to Marseilles ... thinking about the past.

About what he and Aslaug had gone through since first meeting. Blood and danger, time and time again.

But he had the same kind of experiences with both Aramis and Tigermark, too ... and yet, the connection to the female equine was on a different level. The other two males were his *friends*. His brothers in arms. But Aslaug had lived with him and Annie back in the early days. Back when she had just come to this world.

She had come to know him in a different way than the other two males, because she had experienced him when he wasn't on a mission. When he wasn't Joe Latrans, Agent of the Lord.

When he was ... just Joe.

And he had seen her when she wasn't the ever-grumpy, axe-wielding tornado of heathen rage that she tended to be on missions.

He had seen her with children. Seen how much enjoyment she took from working with the school varsity football squad. He had seen how she had formed a friendship with William Berg ... a Christian minister. He'd seen her laugh and relax and enjoy herself.

He had come to know Aslaug, the fur. Not just Aslaug the warrior.

And he liked her.

He knew things about her that probably no one else did. Things she had never said aloud, but which he knew with the same certainty regardless. As if she had sat there, in front of him and told him to his face.

And he had seen the hatred and the rage drain out of her. Most importantly that. Aramis and Tigermark both knew of it. They had seen it on missions ... they had commented on it, when she wasn't around, wondering if something was wrong with the equine. But he had known that nothing was wrong. That everything was, in fact, exactly as it should be. She was every bit as formidable as she had always been. Maybe even more so now, in fact. She had simply come to a place ... with herself and *within* herself ... where rage didn't control her anymore, but rather the other way around, and where her deep seated propensity for hatred had found healthy outlets.

Hatred was, by definition, an unhealthy and dangerous emotion. It could be harnessed, through enormous willpower, to be used as a sort of fuel for a fur under great stress, but such use always came at a price. A fur who used hatred like that would eventually end up an emotional cripple.

Aslaug had seen that just in time. But the change had not been easy.

She met furs based on her values and her beliefs, every bit as much as she always did. She was brusque ... outspoken and direct ... even rude. But she did not judge others on first meeting them anymore, the way she used to. She used to believe all Christians were bad, until proven good. It had taken her tremendous amounts of work to come to change that perception.

Now, she met such furs on a basis of neutrality ... believing that they held potential for good and bad in equal measures, and Joe could not, in good conscience, say he disagreed with that.

And then she had gone away. After years of work and settling in, she had left. She would probably have preferred to do it in a different way, but after she had been struck by car full of drunk teenagers, while driving her motorcycle down to visit Tigermark, she had needed to vanish to avoid impossible questions about her survival.

Joe hadn't seen her for over a year. He hadn't heard from her. Not a word.

And he wasn't upset with her about it. He even understood why she needed the time away.

Annie had commented on it once. Just once ... saying that she was a bit ticked that the equine hadn't even sent them a postcard to tell them she was okay. But he had immediately taken Aslaug's side, and he had asked his wife how she would have felt if she had to go through the life-changes Aslaug had undergone.

Aslaug needed the time away from it all.

And then this call ... this sudden, entirely unexpected call. He didn't even know she had left her lands, and then she called to tell him she needed help.

That told Joe something, right then and there. She needed help. A Valkyrie ... the heathen equivalent of a warrior angel ... had needed help. And she had called *him*. She could have called on any Agent of her faith out there, however few they might be in this world. She could probably even have asked for help from Agents from faiths related to her own, and Joe knew the Boss had a soft spot for that particular, grumpy equine too. Even Christian Agents would have helped her.

But she had called *him*.

Called *on* him, in fact.

That ... that *meant* something.

He was nowhere near as young as he had once been. He had been retired from Agent-work for a long, long time, and he would not have come out of that retirement for anyone but his former comrades in arms. If the Heavenly host itself had materialized on his front porch asking him to come back to work, he'd probably have mumbled something about them ruining his lawn and then closed the door on them.

He'd had enough of that whole thing.

And Tigermark and Aramis, he knew, *would* not ask him to come back to active service. They respected his choice to retire.

So did Aslaug.

And she had still asked.

And for that very reason ... specifically because she had done the unthinkable ... he had not hesitated. Because he knew how badly she must need assistance, and how badly she needed someone she could trust completely.

Him.

Knowing that was how highly she regarded him had made the decision very easy indeed. And Annie had understood, without even asking.

She had just kissed him and told him to come home safe. And sent him off.

So there he was ... standing in an airport in Marseilles, getting his passport checked by an indifferent looking French poodle.

Finally, he got his passport back and headed onwards into the reception area. It was a modern airport ... state of the art in every respect, and finding one's way around was quite easy. All the signs were printed in French, English, German, Arabic and Chinese and there were electronic maps everywhere, showing him where exactly he was and where he was supposed to go.

He needed to pick up his luggage. He hadn't brought much ... just a few changes of clothing, really. And some pocket-money, but that was rarely a problem. Aslaug was ... not without means and since she had called on him, Joe felt absolutely no compunctions about making *her* pay the expenses.

Finally, he made it out of the gates. So this was France? He half expected accordion-music, mimes and someone coming towards him with a tray of croissants, but in reality, it turned out to be much like everywhere else.

Except, of course, that all the cars he could see outside were French. Or almost all of them.

He cast about for his friend. Finding a six foot nine, blond equine was rarely a problem. Aslaug stuck out like a sore thumb wherever she went. At least he didn't expect her to be

in full battle-dress. Chainmail and long axes were socially unacceptable attire for public use, after all.

The front hall was abuzz with furs from every conceivable corner of the world. And the room was completely polyglot. Every language imaginable was spoken ... often loudly ... as furs tried to figure out which exit to use.

But no blond equine came into view.

Joe had brought his cellphone, and if he couldn't find her, he'd have to call. It'd cost the tip of a commercial airliner to make even a short call, this far from the United States, but if Aslaug didn't turn up soon, he'd have little choice.

Suddenly, he felt a paw on his shoulder and he nearly jumped out of his skin with surprise.

"Hello there, Joe. You look kinda lost," Aslaug's voice said behind him.

Joe forced his heart back down his throat and into his chest-cavity where it belonged. "That has to be the world's creepiest trick, filly!" he complained. "It's not right that someone wearing steel shoes can sneak up on me like that! I'm supposed to have outstanding hearing, y'know!"

He turned around and felt like his eyes were going to bulge out of their sockets. It was undeniably Aslaug ... but rather than the expected blond coat he had come to associate with her, she was pitch black. Only her mane remained blond with a black stripe down the middle. She wore a black leather jacket and some dark jeans and all in all, she looked like a 1990's hard-rock reject.

"I sneak up on everybody, and I'm not even trying," she chuckled. "You look like you've seen a ghost. C'mon, let's go get something to eat. Airline food tends to be dreadful."

Joe blinked a few times and nodded. "Sure. Food would be good. Erh ... what's with the new look, though?" he asked.

"I'm being inconspicuous," the equine said. Her tone of voice was absolutely serious.

Which made it all the harder for Joe to keep a straight face. "Aslaug, you're six foot nine! And even if you'd been shorter, last I checked the word "inconspicuous" was not even in your vocabulary."

Aslaug chuckled and shrugged. "You'd be surprised what a year in the Canadian woods can teach a fur," she said and put an arm around her friend's shoulder. "Come on. Food. And explanation. And then we need to go shopping for some equipment."

"Of course. Just ... nothing overly French, okay? I'm pretty sure I'm not into frogs legs," Joe warned.

"Neither am I, although I'm told they taste like chicken. They make good bread in France, though ... and good cheese."

"That's not a bad start. If we can locate a decent sausage or two as well, we've got ourselves the makings of a meal!" Joe said, his tail wagging slightly at the thought.

"Oh, and Joe?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for coming."

"You're welcome, filly. You're welcome."

###

Varghöss was not the happiest creature in creation. He'd been parked outside Marseilles in a wooded area, with strict instructions to stay out of trouble. But he was *bored*. The southern French countryside had little to offer in ways of fun, unless one was a tourist, and while he was pretty sure they'd be tasty if he chewed on them, he wasn't allowed to.

So he had dug half a dozen holes, and hunted a couple of small animals ... and now he was just bored.

He'd gone to sleep. No one would find him here anyway, and if someone did ... well ... the logical thing would be to eat them, but that would make Aslaug angry and that was generally not a good idea.

When he woke up, he had no idea how long he'd slept for. It wasn't dark yet, so probably not that long. But he had slept badly. He had dreamt. He normally did and his dreams were usually fun. About hunting and running across the sky. That kind of dream ...

But this time he'd dreamt of faces. Faces looking at him. And they weren't friendly. He was pretty sure he should know some of them, but now that he was awake, he couldn't remember for sure.

He was terribly thirsty when he woke up, though.

There was a stream nearby and he plodded off towards it to get something to drink.

As he lowered his muzzle to drink, though, he realized that the faces were there. In the water. Looking up at him, as though they were standing behind him.

He turned his head to look, but there was no one there.

But they were still in the water when he looked back to drink. And they were still not friendly.

###

French bread and cheese was indeed good. The sausages left something to be desired, though, but Joe didn't complain. He was sitting on a cliff, overlooking the Mediterranean, with Aslaug sitting right beside him. They had broken pieces off a baguette and carved chunks of cheese off the main piece with the Valkyrie's knife. She hadn't told him anything about why he was here yet, but he could feel the tension as she tried to figure out how to best explain the situation.

He was patient enough to wait, too. The day was warm, with a pleasant wind blowing in from the sea. Out there, on the waves, he could see a couple of yachts and a large transport-ship. And seagulls. Lots of seagulls.

If someone ... anyone ... had come up to him twenty four hours earlier and told him he'd be sitting on a cliff in southern France the next day, he'd have thought that fur was mad. He had been struggling with his car, minding his own business back home in California, and now this?

"I think Torvald's time may be up," Aslaug said at last, turning her head to look at Joe. "And I'm going to be the one who has to go bring him home, if that is the case."

Joe blinked rapidly. "Whu ... but why?" he said, immediately forgetting the piece of sausage he was holding halfway towards his mouth.

"Someone is going to die soon. Someone I have to collect. And as far as I know, Torvald is the only heathen Agent in this world. Well ... him or one of his children," the equine explained. "And I am vexed by this."

Joe nodded and put the sausage away. "I can see why! He's practically the only link you've got to home!"

Aslaug shook her head. "That isn't as much of a problem as it once was, really. This is as much my home now as where I originally came from. The problem is ... I don't know how to best explain this."

"Give it your best shot."

"You know how neither you, Aramis or Tigermark were ever made immortal."

Joe nodded. "I thank God for that regularly!" he exclaimed. "Living forever? No thanks!!"

Nodding, Aslaug picked up a pebble and threw it over the side of the cliff into the water, hundreds of feet below. "Yeah well, the bonus of that is that your children are just that. Your children."

"Okay, now you're getting weird, filly."

"Joe ... he's got kids. Several. Lots, even! And some of THEM are old enough to have children of their own by now. His family is spreading this around and it is out of control! I tried to explain this to him once but I don't think it really sank in with him."

Joe nodded, slowly. "I see what you're saying. If they keep having children, and those children keep inheriting this, then before long, we'll have hundreds or even thousands of immortals running around, uncontrolled."

"Not uncontrolled. That's the other nasty side of this. There is no such thing as the Gods leaving immortals to their own devices like that. Torvald and Victoria's kids don't know this yet but they WILL be working as Agents, or they will have to give up their immortality. Otherwise, over the next couple of hundred years, the number of immortals will grow so large they can't be hidden anymore."

Joe sighed and ran a paw through his hair. "I think I can guess the next part. There isn't room for that many Agents in any given reality, is there?"

"No."

"They'll be spread out over the multiverses then ..."

"Unless they give up that immortality, then yes. They will not be allowed to stay on the same world to just grow in number. And it is also very, very likely that the Gods ... yours and mine and everyone else's ... will strike the *entire* family with infertility if this doesn't stop," Aslaug said and shook her head. "Do the math. Each of Victoria's and Torvald's children have two children. Let's say half of them get the curse. Then the number stays

pretty much constant. But if they get three kids ... four kids ... the number will grow and grow. Two hundred years down the line, Joe ... eight generations of children into the future, try thinking how many there will be then? Dozens ... maybe even a hundred. And what if the curse can jump a generation? Then even those without it could pass it on to their children. Can you imagine the carnage? The Gods *will* stop this, Joe ... and they will stop it *soon*."

"That's ... harsh. The Boss wouldn't ..."

"Joe, your "Boss" blasted Egypt with fire and plagues to punish the wickedness of one fur, and strictly speaking he is the one who came up with the concept of punishing children for what their parents had done wrong. Or grandparents. Or great-great-great-to-infinity-great grandparents had done! Don't be so naïve that you can't see that he's capable of something like this. We're small pieces in a very large game of *hnefatafl*, and there are simply times where the Gods are not fair."

Joe nodded and hung his head. "I know. And that is why you needed me ... and not Aramis or the Tiger, innit?"

"Yes. Because they are both good, wonderful furs, but neither of them are comfortable with the concept that sometimes, your Boss has to do something that seems unreasonable. They just can't cope with it the same way."

"... whereas my life, and my experiences, ensures I already knew that."

"Precisely."

Joe scratched his cheek and looked at the ocean again. Suddenly, it seemed vast and foreboding. And he was starting to understand something else about why Aslaug needed him there. She was trying to stop the worst from happening to her friend and his family. He just didn't know how yet.

"You're not going to sit by and let this happen, I take it."

"I have no choice if it comes to a head. If the Gods do decide, between them, to put a stop to the procreation of immortals, then I have no choice whatsoever. Worst case scenario, Joe, the Gods will send *me* to kill Torvald, but somehow I doubt they'll go that far. However, I'm not going to sit here and just let this happen. Victoria and Torvald are good furs, and I am not in the business of killing good furs or wrecking their lives."

Joe nodded. He was with the equine all the way. "So what is your plan?"

Aslaug tossed another pebble into the water. "I'm going to change fate, Joe."

"*What?*"

"I'm going to, quite literally, change fate."

The coyote looked at his friend, wide-eyed. She had always been particularly reverential towards a specific few of her many deities. Freja first and foremost. But also the Fates ... or Norns as she called them. Hearing Aslaug say she'd change fate was as unnatural as hearing a devout Muslim recite the Lord's Prayer or an equally devout Christian recite the Shema Yisrael.

It just didn't happen!

It was just ... somehow *off*.

"How?" he asked, despite himself. There was a measure of horrified fascination on his face as he asked, too.

"Normally, I'd go to the Norns and ask them, but they are not in charge of fate in this world. Your God is," Aslaug said, matter-of-factly.

"Aslaug, you do realize that this might result in your banishment?"

"I have to try. I can't sit by and let Victoria and Torvald be punished for being good, loving parents to their children."

Nodding slowly, Joe had to admit the Valkyrie had a good point. He just couldn't see how she would succeed.

"Okay then ... talk to me. Tell me how you're going to do this?" he said and sighed.

Aslaug took out the two pieces of metal she had picked up in Petit Vermont. "I'm going to use these. To prove a point. But I'll need more evidence. And then I'm going to do something I never thought I'd do."

"What's that then?" Joe asked, although not sure that he wanted to know the answer ...

Aslaug looked at the metal pieces in her paws. "I'm going to ask your Boss for something."

Joe let himself fall backwards on the cliff. "In five minutes, I'm going to wake up and Annie will scold me for having thrashed around in my sleep. This can't be happening!"

"It is. But it won't be easy getting there," Aslaug said, evenly.

"Tell me then ... what are we up against?" Joe asked, not getting back upright.

Aslaug picked a straw from between two pieces of rock, and put it between her teeth. Chewing it for a while, she finally sighed heavily. "What is the biggest problem of immortals multiplying, apart from the obvious one of eventual overpopulation?" she asked.

"I'm not ... oh ... oh yes. Of course. The more of them there are, the greater the chance that one goes bad! That's what Surt tried to pull on you, back in the day wasn't it?" Joe said and shuddered, remembering some of the problems Aslaug had faced before her "promotion".

She nodded. "Exactly. So you can bet your backside, your life, your car AND your guns that Surt will do everything in his considerable power to stop us from succeeding."

"You're forgetting something," Joe said, ominously.

"What's that?"

"Not all of the Svensen kids are Heathens. Some are Christian."

"Well, that just means double trouble, doesn't it?" Aslaug said with a shrug. "We've still got to do something."

Joe finally got up, brushing himself off. "What are you hoping to achieve?" he asked. "I mean ... what exactly are you hoping to make the Boss agree to?"

"The simplest and most merciful result of all this. Leave Torvald and Victoria as they are. Leave their kids as they are. But no third generation immortals and those who are already there ... well, they simply lose the curse. They are still so young they won't even know it," Aslaug said.

"I agree. That would be the most merciful way of doing it. Why not simply ask for that?"

"Because there are two sets of divine influences at work and they have to agree on it. And because I am not going to leave them vulnerable. What we need to do, most of all, is get Surt and *your* equivalent force of evil off their backs."

Joe grinned widely. "Ahh ... now you're talking. So we're going to send a message?"

Aslaug got up and cracked her knuckles. It sounded like rocks shattering. She nodded and smiled crookedly at her friend. "Why only send *one*?"

"I'm going to need some serious firepower here. And a lot of holy water!"

"I think that can be arranged."

Joe grinned even wider. "Just like old times, eh?"

"Nahh," Aslaug said with a wink and patted her friend's shoulder. "Better."

###

By the time Aslaug returned, Varghöss was one *seriously* disturbed wolf. The faces in the water had followed him around ... he'd seen them in the bark of trees, in holes he'd dug in the ground ... everywhere. They had even been there when he closed his eyes. And by now, he knew for certain they were hostile. Sometimes, they sneered at him. Made faces. One of the tree-bark-faces had even spat at him. That had been a bit weird.

Varghöss had never had a tree *spit* at him before.

And now his rider finally returned, but she was not alone. At first, Varghöss wanted to attack the newcomer, but Aslaug was talking to this scrawny looking wolf-thing that accompanied her. In fact, they seemed to be on very friendly terms.

So he settled for simply growling and snarling, rather than actually attacking. It was another wolf ... however anemic ... and he would make sure the newcomer knew who was the alpha around here!

Aslaug rolled her eyes and looked between the two of them. The newcomer seemed somewhat surprised, even taken aback. But he didn't back down. Nor did he attack.

Growling deep in his throat, the giant wolf raised his hackles.

"Joe, meet Varghöss. Varghöss, stop showing off!" Aslaug said.

The one identified as "Joe" raised an eyebrow and nodded towards the wolf. "Friend of yours?"

"That and more. He's my mount," Aslaug explained. She walked straight up to the huge beast and scratched him behind his ear.

Varghöss growled ... oh damned ... argh ... it wasn't fair. She knew *just* the right spot, too. Dammitdammitdammit ...

He sat down, tongue lolling and leaning his head into the scritchings, hating his own weakness even as he enjoyed the attention.

Joe scratched his neck and smiled. "That's ... an impressive wolf, Aslaug. Must be difficult finding a parking spot for him."

"Not really. You'd be amazed at the places he'll squeeze into," the valkyrie countered, smirking slightly as her wolf rolled over on his back, demanding more scritchings, wriggling from side to side.

"A big softy then, I take it?"

"Only towards me. You try this, and he'll take your arm off ... or worse. He's not tame. He's not tame, Joe. He just allows me to ride him and play with him because he likes me."

"Likes you?"

Aslaug grinned. "Yeah. First I beat the living daylights out of him, then I fed him and then I gave him scritchings. I win."

Joe rolled his eyes and groaned in exasperation. "You're something else! Okay, where are we headed first, and how do I get there? I don't think he'd let me sit behind you."

"We'll get you a car. Something ... inconspicuous ... "

"There's that word again! I'm telling you, I'm not driving around one of those tiny French cars ... they look ridiculous!"

"Don't worry, I wasn't planning on a Renault if that's what you are worried about," Aslaug said and patted Varghöss twice to let him know scritch-time was over.

Joe nodded. "Alright. Okay then ..."

"I was thinking of a Fiat. Since we're headed into Italy," Aslaug said and smiled.

Joe narrowed his eyes, "Ohhh, I'm gonna ...!"

"Well you need something that the Italian police won't pull over constantly. You've got a small fortune worth of firearms in the back and somehow I doubt they'll accept divine inspiration as a permit!"

"Why not? They're the ones who came up with the Crusades," Joe mumbled, sourly. But Aslaug had a point, and he knew it. He just didn't have to *like* it.