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## *VI – The blind eye*

St. Peter's Basilica was an impressive building. It had always been an impressive building, in fact. It had even been impressive before it had been built, by virtue of there being a huge church there before the present one. Joe had only seen models of the older church, but some part of him couldn't help but think that God would probably have preferred the older, less gaudy one.

Somewhere along the lines, Christians, and particularly church-organizations, seemed to have forgotten that Christ had been a poor fur without worldly goods. And that in order to ostensibly follow His example, building lavish, obscenely decorated buildings only served one purpose.

Bragging.

That didn't mean such buildings weren't beautiful, and that the artwork wasn't exquisite ... and he had no doubt that the furs who had labored hours, weeks, months ... in some cases even years over the details had done so out of an earnest and genuine belief that it was the right thing to do. And that belief in itself meant that their labors were not wasted. However, Joe was pretty indifferent or even slightly disgusted by those furs who had commissioned such buildings in the first place.

Of course, there was an alternative, but in typical fashion, the furs who went for *that* angle went overboard too. Reformed Christians who would rail and rant against any kind of decoration whatsoever, as if it was sinful and wrong to appreciate beautiful things.

Either side was hopelessly maladjusted as far as the coyote was concerned. One side thought the only way to please God and Christ was to cover everything in 20 carat gold leaf and precious stones, and the other thought the only way to please God and Christ was to be as dull and colorless as possible.

It was yet another example of the "all-or-nothing"-thinking, which Joe found so offensive.

Aslaug had needed a Christian, but that was really the great irony. Joe didn't have any faith left, and not just because he had knowledge instead. He was so disillusioned with organized religion that he had pretty much given up on it. He couldn't see a single reason to waste any more time or effort on furs who quite simply insisted that they had found the proverbial Holy Grail in every-bloody-thing they did. It annoyed him ... and it angered him.

He would live his life as best he could and if that wasn't good enough for the Trinity, then he wasn't too bothered by it anymore.

So there he was, standing in the Piazza san Pietro, feeling highly irreverent and frankly finding it hard not to smirk grimly to himself and wag his tail at the whole concept.

All these ... trappings ... were just that. Trappings. Unimportant. Temporary things. Even the greatest of buildings would pass into memory eventually, after all.

In his pocket, he felt the small, cloth-wrapped item that Aslaug had given him. He was a little confused by it all, he had to admit. The idea that there were other Agents of different faiths, falling in love and even marrying before Torvald and Victoria did not strike him as particularly strange. But Aslaug had thought it was extremely significant, and he trusted her with this.

The Svensens were in trouble. Something was out to get them ... something that didn't want anyone to know they were not the first.

But surely, the Gods, regardless of origin, would know of such an affair.

A cold shiver ran down Joe Latrans' back as he realized the implications.

"What ails you, my son?" a voice asked next to him. "You look terribly vexed."

Joe opened and closed his mouth a few times, without sound coming out. If the Gods knew ... if the Christian and Heathen deities all knew ... maybe other gods of other faiths as well ...

That meant Torvald and Victoria were being ... abandoned.

He turned his head and looked at a young feline in a priest's robe. There was something inherently ludicrous about having someone half his age referring to him as "my son", but at least the feline seemed genuinely concerned, so he let it drop.

"I just ... I'm just thinking about some friends," he said. "In fact, they are the reason I am here. And how did you know to speak English to me?"

The feline smiled warmly. "Americans are usually not that hard to spot. In your case ... it was the hat. This is the Vatican, after all. We have furs from literally all over the world coming to visit every year. Americans are well represented in the statistics."

Joe nodded and realized the hat probably was a dead give-away, but he'd rather stick out a mile than give it up!

"You said you were thinking of friends? Judging from the expression on your face, your friends need the Lord indeed. If you wish, I could try to help?" the young priest suggested.

Joe was half an inch away from telling the youngster off, but he knew he wouldn't get very far without some inside assistance, and at least this one seemed very earnest.

"If I told you what I need, you wouldn't believe me," he finally said and shrugged. "In fact, I have no idea how to get the information I need to help them out."

The priest put a gentle paw on Joe's shoulder. "Then come with me. We can sit down and talk somewhere a little less overwhelming," he said and gestured towards the gigantic, domed Church, before leading Joe in the opposite direction.

The coyote didn't quite know why, but he chose to follow. "Name's Latrans, by the way. Joe Latrans," he said. Somehow, it seemed only manners.

The feline nodded. Joe looked at him again and scratched his hairline under his hat before tugging it firmly into place. The priest was indeed young, probably no more than in his mid to late twenties. He was wearing a plain black suit with the white Clerical collar in front, but nothing that otherwise distinguished him from any other priest around. He was lithely built, with ash-grey fur and green eyes.

He seemed almost *too* young to be ordained.

"I am aware why you are here," the feline said in a low, insistent tone of voice, after they had walked a while. In silence. "You are not safe in Vatican City. But I *can* help you."

Joe stopped dead in his tracks and stared at the priest.

He wasn't armed. Walking around with a gun, even a concealed one, in Vatican City wasn't possible. The place was under the most extreme surveillance imaginable. But at that moment, he was ready to make a run for it.

"Who the Hell *are* you?" he asked.

The priest winced at Joe's language, but at that moment, all the coyote cared for was an answer.

###

The first time she had seen Valhalla, she had just been taken off a battlefield, but she hadn't died, and consequently, the golden halls were barred to her. She had seen it from afar, over the plains, and she had been awed in the most literal sense of the word.

It was a strange place ... not what she had expected, and it still wasn't. She had expected a gigantic fortress with halls decked in gold, like the stories went, and it was ... and yet it wasn't. Valhalla was all things and nothing, and it was not until she had joined the Valkyries that she had understood fully. Valhalla was what one expected of it. Each Einherjar probably saw it differently. And yet, none of them ever seemed to speak of it.

As she walked through the gigantic gates, she felt dwarfed as she always did ... humbled by the grandeur of Odin's fortress.

If she turned around, she could see Bilskirner ... Thor's home, out on the plains. And far into the distance, she could even spot Folkvang.

Freja's halls ...

She took a deep breath and turned around. Several of the guards looked highly surprised at seeing her. Varghöss, walking beside her, growled low in his throat at them but these were no mortal guards and they simply chuckled at the giant wolf's antics.

Aslaug hadn't been here in a very long time.

And while the guards clearly remembered her, they were surprised to see her. As she was to see them. When she first came here, she saw Einherjar dressed for battle in the same kind of kit as she wore. Chain mail, swords, shields, axes, spears ...

Now she saw males wearing combat fatigues, with a strange mixture of archaic and modern weapons. And it wasn't that they had changed. It was because *she* had. What she expected a warrior to be had changed.

"Varghöss, go find something to eat. Have some fun. And if I find that you've found a mate when I get back, I'll be cross!" she said.

The wolf lolled his tongue and ran off into the courtyard. Aslaug for her part stopped and leaned against her spear. The courtyard was beyond vast. It was larger than great cities, and yet she could walk across it in a minute or two. Valhalla could encompass everything and nothing ... as Odin willed it. In one corner, she saw two groups of furs, instinctively knowing one to be made up of Swedes, the other to be made up of Norwegians. They were brawling ... hitting each other over the head with anything that came to paw, from empty fists to wagon-wheels to sharp weapons. They all seemed to be having a good time of it, and besides, it was part of what being Einherjar meant. Fighting all day, partying all night.

For the first time ever, Aslaug found herself wondering how many of them had been furs in life. How many had been ... human. How many had been something else she didn't even know of? They would all be here, and to her eyes, they'd all be familiar.

How many of her sister Valkyries had been human ones? How many of them still were? It wasn't something that ever came up. It just wasn't important.

A voice called out to her across the courtyard and seconds later, a lanky vixen approached her, carrying a sword in each paw and looking like she had been working out. "Aslaug? Or is that you, Loke, trying to play another trick on me? I swear, I'll bring the girls around and we'll ..."

"It's me," Aslaug answered, simply. "It is good to see you, Haldana. It's been too long."

"You can say that again. We were starting to think Odin had to call you home forcibly to get you to come out of those woods. Did you know Hrist went looking for you at least three times?"

"I watched her trying to find me, so yes. I did. If it had been important, she wouldn't have given up."

Haldana chuckled. "I won't tell her you said that. I guess she just worried about you. Are you alright and ... why are you in Valhalla?"

Aslaug shrugged. "I'm fine. Some friends aren't, though. And that's why I'm here."

Haldana nodded. "I guess you'll be looking to see to Odin, then?"

"Amongst others, yes. Him first, though."

"He's on Lidskjalv ... playing *hnefatafl* with Mimir, I think."

Aslaug nodded and thanked the vixen, passing her and heading towards the great hall.

What would this be like to those who were born in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? A great, corporate building with Odin at the top floor or something?

Probably.

One of the guards tried to stop her as she was about to enter, apparently not realizing who or what he was dealing with. Aslaug grabbed him by the collar and literally threw him back over her shoulder and into the courtyard. She was in no mood to argue with an Einherjar about her right to see the Allfather.

Shrugging her jacket into place, she walked up the impossibly long approach to Odin's raised plateau at the end of the hall. The tables were empty. Scullery maids were cleaning them off, but even they had started to look different from when she first arrived. So did the room, for that matter.

But she didn't pay it any real attention. Her eyes were locked on the figure on the towering throne of Lidskjalv at the top of the podium. And the somewhat smaller figure next to him, on a stool.

She could have walked for a week and not reached the podium but she still got there in a few minutes. It took time to get used to it, but ... after a while, one really didn't think about it too much.

Finally, she stood at the base of the podium, looking up. There was no reaction, nor had she expected one. The Allfather could not be expected to drop everything just because a prodigal Valkyrie returned. Besides, he was playing *hnefatafl* with the disembodied head of his advisor, Mimir ... a time when one did well not to disturb him.

She could have stood there for a year. For a lifetime. She could have, and it would have felt like moments ... or she could have waited ten seconds and felt an age pass her by,

depending on Odin's mood and favor. As it was, it didn't feel like she waited for all that long. It was not long until the one-eyed wolf on the throne countered the attack made by Mimir and shut in the king-piece, winning the game.

Then ... and only then ...did he look at Aslaug.

And the Valkyrie, for all her bluster, and for all her usual bravado, understood at that moment, that she was a speck of dust, adrift in a giant cosmos under the gaze of this one, awe-inspiring deity.

Eir she could talk to. Thor she could drink with ... and lose. Freja she loved passionately. But Odin ... Odin was a different kind of deity altogether. Beneath that one-eyed gaze, Aslaug was nothing. Not out of malice or indifference, but because she quite literally *was* as nothing.

There was no fear to be felt. Just realization of what the meaning of power truly was.

And her own shortcomings.

Odin observed ... and Odin knew.

Aslaug didn't even need to speak. The Allfather knew from the moment she set foot in his halls why she was there. He had known before that. He knew ... before she even knew herself.

And understanding this, she lowered her eyes to the floor, and sank down on her right knee, bowing her head in deference to her Lord and Master.

As she knelt there, in her Harley Davidson jacket, her T-shirt and her already well worn jeans and steel shoes, she knew just how utterly, utterly insignificant in the greater scheme of things she really was. This was the greatest of the sons of Bor. The mightiest of all the Gods. Vanquisher, Lord of Death, Lord of Fortune. The great, all-seeing, terrible and magnificent ... Odin.

And there was no need to speak.

###

"It doesn't matter who I am right now. Please, come with me! You don't realize the danger you are in, Joe Latrans," the priest said, urgently.

Joe shrugged. "I've been in mortal danger in so many ways I hope your imagination doesn't stretch far enough to encompass them, priest! Either you answer my question or I'm strolling outta here!" he said, sharply.

The feline looked left and right. "I'm called Father Malheiro, not that it should matter one way or the other. And you are here for information that can only be found in the Vatican archives ... a place I can *guarantee* you, you won't get into unless you have help! You think the Swiss guard are just a group of amusingly clad antiquities? They're made up of some of the premier fighting furs in the world and there are enough weapons under this very street to arm a small, Central American dictatorship! Now would you *please* come with me before someone notices you are here?" he hissed between his teeth. "For the love of Christ, you have no idea what's after you, do you?"

He hadn't expected that kind of urgency or sincerity, and Joe found himself blinking. "Well then, now I have a name to call you at least. So ... lead on. Doesn't it bother you I'm not Catholic?"

"Pfeh ... three fifths of the world's Catholics aren't Catholic. I prefer honesty," the feline mumbled and led Joe hurriedly down a side-alley between two huge buildings and out towards the checkpoint out of the Vatican. "Follow my lead when we get there. As in ... let me do the talking."

"You said something is after me? How do you know? How do you know what I'm here for or who I am for that matter?" Joe half-whispered, trying to keep up.

Father Malheiro didn't answer. Joe was about to ask again when he realized they were close to the checkpoint and he bided his time. The feline waited for him to catch up, before idly launching into a conversation about scripture. Or rather, one half of the conversation. Joe was confused for a few seconds, then remembered to follow the Priest's lead, and he tried to keep up as best he could, straining to remember the correct quotations and passages and what they meant. It almost hurt his head.

A Carabinieri stood on the Italian side of the checkpoint, a Swiss guard in modern uniform on the Vatican side.

"... so naturally," Father Malheiro said, gesticulating with his paws as if to make a point, "I am sure you understand that John 3:3 to 3:15 teaches us in detail that we are all God's children. Ah, guten tag, Franz ... wie ein herrlicher tag, heute."

The Swiss Guard smiled politely and stepped aside. "Guten tag, Vater Malheiro. Bitte, passen Sie auf," he answered and raised the boom to let the feline and Joe pass.



Father Malheiro smiled and held up a paw towards the guard as he passed him. "Quod bonum, felix, faustumque sit," he said before continuing.

Joe waited a minute or so, until they were at a safe distance from the checkpoint, before speaking up again. "I don't recall hearing that blessing before."

"I thought you said you weren't Catholic."

"I'm not. A friend of mine is, however."

"Well, Franz is a good Swiss Guard but his Latin is awful," Father Malheiro said. "That was actually a quote by Cicero."

Joe tried not to smirk too obviously. "Do I want to ask what it meant then?"

"Oh yes. He's a nice fur. I wouldn't insult him. It means "May it be good, fortunate and auspicious", " Father Malheiro said with a wan little smile. "Anyway, it's not a long walk. This way."

Joe followed without protesting by now. For some reason, the feline was already growing on him. Anyone who had the guts to be irreverent in the Vatican scored points with Joe Latrans.

###

When Aslaug looked up, she had all her answers. She just didn't know how to bend her head around them.

"Why?" she croaked. She felt strangely drained and exhausted ...

Odin rose to his feet. It was as if light and darkness followed him. As if the whole world rearranged itself simply to accomodate him. "Because ..." he said, " ... Torvald Svensen is out of place. He has been living there on sufferance, but his actions have necessitated action."

Aslaug hung her head again, trying to make sense of it all. "But he is an Agent. He is nothing if not boundlessly loyal!"

"His loyalty is not in question," Mimir's head spat, phlegmatically, from his stool. A bit of saliva followed his words. It was probably difficult to control such things when you were just a head without a body. "However, he procreates! And his world is controlled by the God of Abraham, so the God of Abraham determines the punishment!"

Aslaug gritted her teeth. "But then why? I have come to see Whitechrist's father in a different light since all this began."

"Meaning?" Odin demanded.

"Meaning that his goals are much the same as every other deity out there, only he has his own way of trying to achieve it, just as the Aesir and Vanir do. Or any other group of deities out there. You kinda get a pluralistic take on things when you do the kind of work I do, Lord!"

The corner of Odin's mouth quirked ever so slightly. "Ever brash ... ever your tongue sharper than the keen blade of your axe, Angelbreaker."

"Bah, I don't have much use for most angels. Bloody useless birds, if you ask me."

"I don't."

Sighing, Aslaug nodded. "I was merely speaking metaphorically, Lord. My point is ... why are the Svensens suffering? Why did I catch one of Surt's oily little pestilences hunting Victoria if this is the God of Abraham's doing? And why would he punish them for loving one another? And even more urgently, why would he punish their children??"

"So many questions," spat Mimir. "You want many answers. What are you prepared to sacrifice for wisdom and insight?"

Aslaug swallowed hard. That was probably the last thing she had expected to hear, particularly from Mimir. Odin had gained insight beyond the scope of even other Gods by giving an eye to the wellspring of wisdom. What could she possibly give? Even if she gave a hundred times as much, it would never equal his sacrifice, because he was already the greatest of the Gods ... but then again, it was not her task to try to rival Odin. Mimir had simply asked her a question.

"To save the Svensens? My left arm!" she said.

"Only your left?" Mimir teased.

Odin rolled his eye and glanced at the head on the stool. "So knowledgeable, and yet with one eye, I see more than you with two. Her left is primary."

Mimir chuffed and grumbled something, drooling on his stool while claiming he knew that.

Odin turned his gaze to Aslaug. "You stay away for over a year, barely visiting Asgaard and never once setting foot in my halls, and then you come marching in, demanding answers like that? I had a good nerve to tell you to find your answers for yourself, Angelbreaker, but you are sincere, and sincerity is a powerful emotion. I believe you would give your left arm. But that is too great a sacrifice to bring. The well will settle for less. But that is where you must go. You must give of yourself ... and receive that which you seek in return."

"I will not fail you, Lord," Aslaug said, solemnly.

Odin quirked that hint of a smile again. "Wiser than you let on, as well, are you," he said, thoughtfully. Then he turned and the great hall ... left him. There was no other way of perceiving it. Odin was no longer there, but as far as Aslaug could tell, it was more a matter of the rest of existence realigning itself to fit that fact, than the Allfather actually walking out.

It was all a bit strange, even for her.

Aslaug stood up and bowed to Mimir. "I thank you for your council, wise one," she said, respectfully ... then left.

###

"So what is this all about? Enough of this whole conspiracy theory-thing," Joe said and sat down in a deep, comfortable chair. The upholstery was red plush and the room generally looked like someone had frozen time around the turn of the century.

The 20th century, not the 21st.

Father Malheiro poured himself a cognac and offered Joe a glass as well but the coyote politely declined. "I'm more a Whiskey-type, myself," he explained.

The truth, of course, was that he could do with a nip, but he had decided not to accept anything from Father Malheiro until he knew exactly what the feline was up to and whether he could be trusted.

"I won't waste your time with lengthy opening explanation and diatribes on religious issues, Mr. Latrans. I'll get straight to the point instead, and simply tell you that you are marked by powerful enemies for ... removal."

"You've more or less said that much already. What enemies? Why am I marked?" Joe asked.

Father Malheiro sipped his cognac and rubbed his face. Some of the youthfulness seeped out of him and he suddenly looked a good deal older. Maybe even as old as forty. Joe couldn't help but feel something strange was happening.

"I was an Agent once. A very long time ago," the priest said. "A lot longer than you might think. And like you, I ... retired. For much the same reasons. I saw how faith could help furs, but how religion ruined everything."

Joe chuckled and gestured towards the feline. "And yet you're a priest."

"Was. It's just that if you wear a collar like this in the Vatican, they don't look twice in your direction. And I know a few furs who can supply me with fake IDs to get me in and out through the checkpoints. I used to be a member of the Society of Jesus, but it's been ... oh ... I guess it's almost three hundred years now since I left it? Not quite but ... we're getting there."

Joe blinked. Three hundred years? How many immortals WERE there anyway??

"I'm not ... what you think," Father Malheiro said, once seeing Joe's facial expression. "I've been ... well ... I've been dead for almost as long."

"*What??*"

"I'm serious. I died rather young, but the main thing is ... I died extremely suddenly and very violently. And then they canonized me. But they didn't realize they canonized someone who had already lost his faith. There was no room for me in Heaven, but the Church, as you no doubt know, used to be infallible. Holy Mother Church, until the beginning of this century, would not admit to mistakes, because the Church was an extension of God's will and *God* didn't make mistakes."

Joe nodded slowly. "I think I know where this is going. You're in Limbo, aren't you?"

"No, I'm in Rome," Father Malheiro chuckled. "Although to be honest, it's much the same thing."

Joe couldn't help a laugh. He knew when someone got him, and he might as well admit it. "Touché. That will teach me not to duel on words with a three hundred year old dead guy," he said and shook his head. "Why are you helping me?"

"Because just like you, I got fed up with the injustice of it all. I couldn't do a thing about it when I was alive, but I can now that I'm dead."

"How?"

Father Malheiro sipped his cognac again and crossed his legs as he leaned back, getting comfortable. "Let me put it this way: I know things. As I said, I know furs. Even furs who are ... let's say ... on the wrong side of this great war between good and evil. They think I'm fallen from grace because I died and didn't go to Heaven. They think it's a humongous joke to befriend a Saint who isn't sitting on a cloud, playing harp somewhere. So they provide me with information. And one thing I know is that there is someone powerful who knows pretty much all there is to know about you and your heathen friends. They don't want to get involved so long as the Valkyrie is in the picture, because frankly she could tear them apart ... but now she's gone. And you are being hunted."

"What's to keep them from coming here then?" Joe asked, suddenly not sure if he could trust Father Malheiro anyway.

Father Malheiro finished his cognac. "Well, for one thing you killed two of their agents a few days ago up near Bella Divignano. They are busy replacing them and that gives you a small amount of time to run on. And I am going to help you get the information you are looking for during that time. Afterwards, you *must* vanish. Go somewhere even their scrying can't find you, or you'll die."

Joe nodded, slowly. "Who are the ones behind this?"

"I don't know. But I suspect your equine friend will find out before she rejoins you. However, what you need is in the archives, and we will go there tonight. I know a way in. And I know what part of the archive you need to go to. Do you read Latin?"

"No."

"Good thing you met me then," Father Malheiro said with a smile.

Joe felt very, very strange about it all. And he missed his guns. But at the moment, he couldn't do much except play along and be ready.

###

Aslaug approached Varghöss with long, swift strides. She had no time to waste, and Varghöss could get her to the well swifter than any other means of transportation she could think of.

"Whoa ... Aslaug, what gives? Why are YOU here of all places?" the voice of Hrist called out.

Aslaug stopped despite being in such a hurry and looked at the other Valkyrie. "I needed to see Odin."

Hrist nodded. "It's about Torvald and Victoria isn't it?"

"It is, but I can't talk about it."

"Come on, for crying out loud ..."

Shaking her head, Aslaug looked her sister Valkyrie straight in the face. "No Hrist. I have to do this myself. I can't let WhiteChrist's father turn a blind eye to this. Or anyone else for that matter. What's happening is wrong, and I am going to stop it, even if I have to change fate itself!"

"It's always like that with you," Hrist said, bitterly. "Always the loner. Always the maverick! We're supposed to be a *team*."

Aslaug shrugged. "I'm sorry to be blunt, but where does it say that? We're oathsworn to Odin. We do his bidding, and his bidding was for me to go somewhere and do something which can only be *done* alone."

Hrist wasn't stupid. She never had been, and she could see the look on Aslaug's face. She swallowed heavily and nodded. "Unfurl the Raven ..." she said and extended a paw.

Aslaug clasped her sister's forearm. "... and let it fly," she said. "Take care of Varghöss if I don't make it. And make sure Joe is safe! They don't come any better than him."

Hrist could do nothing but nod as Varghöss stepped up next to his rider. The saddle and his harness appeared on him and Aslaug swung herself onto his back.

Three bounds later, she was airborne.

Five seconds after that, Hrist couldn't see her anymore.