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## *VII – Wells*

The Cloaca Maxima was one of the oldest parts of Rome. It was the world's oldest, still functioning sewer. And it *stank*.

The stench was, in fact, *epic*.

Furs could vanish in the sewers. In more ways than one, really, but primarily in the fetid slush that gurgled past at impossible speeds, trying to keep up with the pressure.

Under-Rome was every bit as alive as the city above ground. But there were no restaurants, museums, street artists or monuments. And only relatively few tourists and a smattering of truly devoted pilgrims, there to see the catacombs.

The Cloaca Maxima was a tourist attraction in name only these days. It simply stank too badly for anyone to want to visit it, and Joe could easily see why. And at the same time, he couldn't deny a certain, morbid fascination with the slush rolling past him as he followed Father Malheiro through the dimly lit corridors.

The slush ...

Someone had once said that anyone could be recognized based on their offal. By looking through a fur's trashcan, it would be possible to tell pretty much anything about that fur. And here, Joe was looking at the refuse of one of the largest cities in Europe.

What did it tell him about the Romans?

He shook his head. The obvious answer was that they stank, but that was probably true about anyone in the world, more or less. At least if one scratched deeper than the perfumed surface. Glittered magazine covers, Coca Cola-cans, bodily wastes and wine bottles floated past him.

So the Romans were interested in the latest gossip, while having a coke, before taking a dump and then sitting down for a nice glass of wine?

He tried not to smirk. Whoever said that about trashcans had clearly not been to the Cloaca Maxima.

He patted his pocket to make sure his latest acquisition was there. Father Malheiro had supplied him with a sidearm, but it was one Joe wasn't familiar with. Still, it had tremendous heft to it and he knew the brand.

A Swiss made semiautomatic pistol. A classic SIG P210 ... it was damned near an antique by now, but it still packed a solid punch with its 9 mm slugs. If it came to a fight, this Swiss made boomstick could content with any Swiss Guard.

The irony wasn't lost on him, either ...

He'd held it and made sure it was loaded and it felt good in his paw. And frankly, he just felt better prepared for what was to come now that he had something to defend himself with other than his extensive vocabulary of American and Spanish obscenities, although where they were headed, those would probably at least have bought him time to escape while the priests were busy crossing themselves in horror.

There it was again. Joe shook his head at his own bitterness and irreverence. Sometimes, he tried to think back to who he had once been, but that was always a painful exercise. The difference between him now and himself thirty years earlier was that then ... he'd just been bitter and angry. Now he had *reason* to be.

If he thought about Tigermark and Aramis, he sometimes envied them their convictions. They seemed so sure ... but then again, he realized, they too probably had their moments of doubt. They just dealt with them differently.

Everyone did.

He was no different in that regard at least. He just ... couldn't lean back and accept things when they were so blatantly *unacceptable*. And that, he realized, was almost certainly one of the most compelling reasons for Aslaug to call on him and not someone else.

Besides, they were the Scruffy Squad.

He smiled at the memory. He rather liked the knowledge that they complemented each other so well. They both had something to bring to the team.

At that moment, he realized that despite how much he had enjoyed his long retirement, and despite how much it meant to him to be able to live a normal, ordinary life with his wife ... there was no kidding himself. He could never lead a normal life, because a normal life meant accepting all the very things he found so distasteful about the world.

The shallowness, the horrible, awful indifference.

All the things that turned his stomach and made him want to release his most feral instincts and *bite* the rest of the world on its big, fat arse!

He had seen things ... come to know things ... that made an "ordinary" life an impossibility.

How many other furs would ever ... *ever* ... find themselves romping through the Cloaca Maxima in an attempt to sneak into the Vatican Archives to find forbidden and secret texts under the nose of the Swiss Guard in order to save a mixed-religion couple ... who just happened to be immortal?

There was something exhilarating about it. It was fun, and it was the right thing to do.

And the fact that it meant presenting a metaphorical mid-digit to the establishment was just a major added bonus as far as Joe was concerned.

He grinned.

"I must be barking mad," he mused to himself. "But then again, with a name like Latrans, how could I be anything else?"

Father Malheiro finally stopped. "We're here. It's beyond these doors. An old well. It's been dried out for centuries, but very few of us know that. When we get to the bottom, we'll follow a very narrow corridor, and then we'll get to the archives. Let me go in first. I'll take down the motion sensors for the areas where we need to go."

"As you wish," Joe said and nodded. "Should we expect trouble?"

"No question. I didn't give you that gun just for show. We can get in and get what you need but we won't have time to get out before they realize we're there."

"I see," Joe mumbled. "Well, this had better be worth it then."

The feline looked strangely peaceful as he answered.

"It will be."

###

Petit Vermont was history. He had seen to that. As he stood there, in the center of the formerly peaceful little town, he realized just how pathetic this place had been. The only reason he hadn't torn the place to shreds much sooner was because of the artefacts in the local priest's care.

Now the artefacts were gone ... and so was the priest for that matter. Or rather, he was still there.

And there.

And there ...

And right over there ...

Or was that the local shopkeeper? He wasn't sure anymore, but it didn't really matter. All the houses were burnt down, their walls crumbled in on themselves. Males, females, young or old ... it made no difference. He had even killed the children with absolute impunity and indifference. After all, it was what he did.

And he had extra reason to be angry this time. There was a familiar stench to Petit Vermont. Not local, either. It was there, because someone familiar had been there recently, and left. Only it was much stronger this time than last he had met it, and it was more invasive. Far more. Stronger.

So ... she had been here.

Anane cracked his knuckles and adjusted his duster. The locals had screamed up a storm when they saw him. Worthless things. There was no reason for him to look like a walking, talking animal when he was just here to kill them anyway. Of course, his lack of eyes might have been the reason for their fear as much as his otherworldly appearance. He didn't really care.

That stench ...

It was like a proverbial red rag in the face of a very irrate bull.

What was the point of this world anyway? Giving animals souls? That was the ultimate disgrace ... a complete slap in the face of all Angels, who had been denied souls by the Almighty. And in this world, even *animals* had been given souls.

Given the chance of salvation and redemption.

Whereas Angels ... Angels such as he ... had none.

In the eyes of God, he was nothing. Less than nothing. He was self-ambulatory flesh, supported by a structure of bones, imbued with intellect but of no intrinsic value. Inherently replaceable.

The rage that boiled in his stomach at the mere thought had made the slaughter of the villagers of Petit Vermont all the sweeter, all the more enjoyable.

He wished he could take this kind of devastation to New York, Moscow or Tokyo one day. But that would attract all the wrong kind of attention. It could not be hidden. Not because God cared more or less but because the citizens of the world did. This would be chalked up to a freak forest fire, engulfing a village and incinerating it utterly. No police investigation would turn up anything except evidence that the locals had died in the fire ... Anane would make certain of that ... and tomorrow, the French news stations would do a brief, horrified report.

Three days from now, no one would remember that Petit Vermont ever even existed.

No one cared about small natural disasters. No one even cared for huge ones for very long. Tsunamis ... major earthquakes, cities burnt to the ground. The four horsemen of the Apocalypse could ride the world until it was raw, and no one would give a damn a week afterwards.

Everyone would feel horrified and rush to donate to help when disaster struck an area, and then two weeks later, they'd be sick and tired of it and switch channels when news reports dealt with the aftermath.

"We gave already. Show us something else!"

It was like buying indulgences during the Middle Ages. Paying to be rid of one's guilty conscience.

Pathetic!

But if he took this kind of mayhem to a large city, the world would still *know*, and he would be in trouble. Even if they disregarded him later, they would know it had happened, and he would be punished for bringing attention to himself.

Which again angered him. Why could the Malefic Council ... regardless of their belief system of origin ... not simply agree to take the world apart? *Any* world. All worlds. Why not send a message?

The Malefic Council. As if there was no better descriptor than that?

At least Surt had the right idea. Burn the world, and bedamned the consequences ... literally.

But the others tended to not take him seriously. He was wild, primal force ... not a rational, thinking entity.

Anane liked the Norse Lord of Destruction considerably better than his own Master, and it was he who had facilitated the ... cooperation that was now underway. It hadn't been difficult. The targets were agents of both faiths, after all.

Agents who were already in a world of trouble because of some rather trumped up charges of "crimes against the universe".

Anane laughed as he stepped on the chest of one of the locals, crushing it beneath his foot as he walked towards the edge of what had until half an hour ago been Petit Vermont. "Crimes against the universe". Only Gods could come up with something that self-righteous, sanctimonious and utterly ambiguous. Why not simply say it as it was?

"You pissed on God's sugarlump, now you pay the price!"

Nooo, it was far more official and grandiose to call it "Crimes against the universe" and put them through some kind of sham trial.

The Gods were supposed to be all knowing and even if they weren't ... something Anane knew for a fact ... might had always made right. What would it look like if the Agents *won* that trial? It would make the Abrahamic God the laughing stock of the multiverses. A major deity ... the single, monotheistic deity of his reality ... beaten in a court of "law" by a couple of lowly ex-mortals. *That* would go down spectacularly well!

Not!

Even though God wasn't officially involved in the trial, and even though he officially had no ties to it whatsoever, the very nature of the charge ... "Crimes against the

*universe* ... made that a sham. The one major, overwhelming, unfathomable blunder God had ever made was to think up Dogma.

It caught Him in His own web ... time and time again.

Such as now. If God was omnipresent, he *was* the universe, or at the very least an integral part of it, meaning that the Agents were accused, indirectly, of crimes against God ... by killing two truly obnoxious and evilminded cretins. But no one seemed to realize that, except those serving the Malefic Council and *they* were certainly in no hurry to divulge this fact to the enemy.

So the trial was pointless, but it was going to happen nonetheless, and Anane mostly wanted to turn up, moon everyone present and tell them to kiss his Angelic arse for having been given such gifts as free will and a soul ... and specifically *not using them!*

The stench caught in his nostril again and he snarled, ferally. It was not a sound any natural larynx should be able to make, regardless of origin.

He wanted to go after that damned shieldmaiden so badly it wasn't even funny. He knew she'd been "promoted". It would only make the fight all that much more challenging this time around. But he couldn't. He was under orders.

But eventually, he'd find her, and then he'd make her *pay*.

His Master had torn out his eyes for his failure from last he met the shieldmaiden. Anane couldn't see ... but he didn't need to. He had all his other senses and they easily compensated. But he would take more than simply her eyes in turn.

He would kill her outright.

###

Joe pulled in his stomach and squeezed through the very narrow passage. He was in good shape but he wasn't twenty years old anymore. But he managed. Finally, he found himself in a small, round room with Father Malheiro, who was busily searching the walls for something. A secret door, probably, Joe thought but reached out and put a paw on the feline's shoulder.

"Before we go in," he said, matter-of-factly. "There are a couple of questions I want answered."

Father Malheiro turned around and looked at him, raising both eyebrows. "Here? Now? But the archives are ..."

"... going to wait another few moments, I'm sure," Joe said, patiently. "What I want to know is why you're doing this, exactly. There's something you're not telling me, apart from "It's the right thing to do". And secondly, I want to know how you knew where to find me. I hadn't told anyone, and Aslaug has a hard time trusting Christians on first meeting them. She probably wouldn't have called on you for that reason."

Father Malheiro sighed and his shoulders slumped. Again, he looked older than when Joe first met him, but by now, the coyote knew about the priest's real age anyway. He leaned back against the wall and took a deep breath, clearly searching for the right words.

"I want to die, Joe Latrans," he said, at long last. "Not this kind of existence ... but real death. I prefer endless oblivion to this. I've been here for three hundred years, life and death combined. It's way too long. Do you have even the vaguest idea how drastically the world has changed in that time? When I was young and alive, God was real. Everyone KNEW God was real. You could be killed for denying it, quite literally. Now look out the window? What do furs worship now? Money? Their latest cell-phone? Their girlfriend's ass or that of their favorite movie-star? I'm not saying we had it right. Far from it. What I am saying is that the change itself is monumental, and I *very* much doubt if furs today have it any more right than we did!"

Joe nodded, gesturing for the priest to continue. He was listening.

"And change isn't slowing down, you know? I'm tired of watching it ... I'm tired of watching the world being pumelled with proverbial wrecking balls, constantly. We were stupid when I was young and alive, you hear me? *Stupid!* Not that we didn't have geniuses in my day, too. We did. But the vast, vast majority of furs were imbeciles. And the true tragedy is that many of those few geniuses we did foster ended up getting persecuted either into silence or more commonly into death. And then the world turned, and intelligence became a prime commodity for all furs. Little girls nowadays are allowed to learn other skills than how to nurse infants and sew buttons onto clothes. Little boys are allowed to learn other things than what the Bible says, and both for boys and girls, it doesn't matter if you're born to the top three percent of the population in terms of wealth and status. They *all* learn."

"Thank goodness for that," Joe added. "But why is it bad that learning and intelligence are now valued?"



"Are they? ARE they valued?" Father Malheiro sighed, sounding utterly exasperated. "Kids treat school as if it is a punishment. You know what I heard a child tell his mother only two days ago, right here in Vatican City?"

"Do tell me."

"I don't need to go to school, Mom. I'm going to be a famous singer and then I'll never need to read again!"

Joe sighed and nodded. He couldn't help it, and Father Malheiro's point was extremely well made. "I see what you mean," he said.

"Do you, Joe Latrans? That kid wasn't five years old. He was at least fifteen! If he'd been a five-year-old I wouldn't have noticed it. It's part of the job-description of being five years old to want to do the impossible and to not understand how the world works. But at fifteen? In my day and age, that boy would have been through his apprenticeship and he'd be expecting his first child! I'm fed up with this. I'm fed up with how all the advances the world has seen over the last centuries are thrown away, like pearls before swine. Stupidity, Joe, is bad enough if it is *willful*. But if it becomes a goal to attain ... something to actively strive for, it becomes *tragedy*. I don't want to have to witness this kind of thing anymore. And if you succeed ... you and your heathen friend ... then there is hope that I might finally be allowed to *rest*, too. I haven't slept for nearly three hundred years. Do you have any conception of how that feels?"

Crosseyed, Joe did try to imagine but failed miserably. "I can't say I do," he said and blinked. "Bloody Hell, I *like* sleeping ..."

Father Malheiro winced at the profanity again, but nodded nonetheless. "As for your second question," he muttered, "You wanted to know how I knew where to find you? The Malefic Council knows where you are at all times. They know where everybody is at all times, for that matter, and more importantly, several of them know where everyone will be at any given time in the future, too."

"The Malefic Council?"

"The bad guys. The boogeymales that mothers have used to scare children with throughout the centuries. Setekh, Lucifer, Kali, Surt ... that kind of nastiness. You think that good guys are the only such entities to cooperate? The Malefic Council came up with the idea! They've always been more innovative ... or at least most of them. Surt isn't exactly a great thinker, but he's extremely effective!"

"I know. I've seen his work," Joe admitted. "It's not pretty."

Father Malheiro chuckled. "You'll hear no argument from me. But my point is ... they have a common agenda, just like the good deities do ... or good'ish. Better than the Malefic Council at least."

"Somehow I find it hard to grasp that Lucifer would be able to cooperate with practically anyone. Or Surt for that matter ..."

"You'd be surprised! Now imagine what it feels like to be an un-ascended saint and *meeting* them?" Father Malheiro sighed. "Or rather ... please don't imagine. You're a nice fur. I wouldn't want that on you. My point is, I know what I know from them because they think I'm a funny toy to prod and play with. They almost certainly know I'm not on their side. They also think I'm too craven to act on my knowledge!"

Joe shook his head. "Craven? Why would they think that of you? You're helping me now, aren't you?"

"Because I've always been that way in the past, Joe," the feline said, his voice thin and pained with memories. "Now please, we've wasted far too much time here. We need to move and *fast*."

Nodding, Joe took the gun from his pocket and clicked the safety off. He checked the clip and the spare rounds he kept in his pocket, then took a deep breath. "Alright. Let's go."

Father Malheiro put his paw against the stone and a moment later, a door opened, sliding aside.

"I'll call. Be ready to come as soon as I tell you to," he said and looked at Joe.

The coyote swallowed heavily as the feline suddenly changed appearance ... from youthful and lively, to that of a decaying corpse.

Then he was gone, leaving Joe to ponder the now undeniable wisdom of not having eaten anything before coming.

###

"You have come for answers, Valkyrie," a voice said.

Aslaug shook her head. "No."

"But of course you have."

"No. I have come for insight. That is something ... more ... than answers."

The voice was all around her. In the air and in the ground beneath her hooves. She was standing at the base of a rocky hill ... even a small mountain. In front of her was a well. It looked ... like any other well. With wattle and daub sides and a wooden construction across it with a rope hanging from it.

Given the moment of clarity she had experienced in the courtyard in Valhalla, she knew that this was "her" well. A 21<sup>st</sup> century fur might see a faucet and kitchen sink, however weird and unglamorous that might be.

"But insight is more costly than mere answers. Are you certain you are prepared to pay the price?" the voice asked.

Aslaug could swear there was a slightly mocking lilt to the words hanging in the air. But she nodded, nonetheless. "I am ready."

"Then make your offering."

Aslaug nodded and put down her weapons next to the well. Or most of her weapons. She drew her knife last. It wasn't really a weapon so much as a tool, but living in the forests had taught her the absolute necessity of always carrying a knife. And an axe, but in her case, that really wasn't a problem.

Holding the blade, she drew it across her wrist. Then before her fingers went numb, she changed the knife into her other paw and repeated the slash on the other arm.

Blood poured out and she leaned against the well. "Take my life's blood. I offered an arm, but I was told it was too much."

"How much blood will you give?" the voice asked.

Aslaug shook her head as small spots danced in front of her eyes. "As much as you want from me."

The voice seemed almost mirthful as it replied. "Oh but Valkyrie ... that ... is a *lot* of blood."

"And I need a *lot* of insight," Aslaug winced and sank down next to the well, leaning against it.

###

Father Malheiro had returned, and Joe had followed him in. According to the not-quite-dead Jesuit, the sensors were heat sensitive. Shedding his disguise as one of the living and walking through the rooms as a cold, long-dead corpse, he set off the motion trackers, but when the heatsensors didn't pick up anything, the system would register simply a massive error. This in turn made the guards switch off the entire primary system to check for errors and then restart it. The secondary system was less high tech ... simply ordinary cameras, swiveling from side to side. They could be avoided, if one was careful.

Although there were many areas where at least one camera would always point towards any given area.

Sadly, the book they needed was in one such area.

Joe realized that Father Malheiro was right about the gun. He would no doubt need it before they got out, but at least that was still a few minutes away. Right now, he was concentrating mainly on getting to the book without being spotted on the way there.

The scent in the room was that of old books, mixed with high tech wiring and metal shelves. Everything was state of the art and ultra-modern, and Joe was a little nervous about it all. Father Malheiro clearly knew the place, but without the feline's presence, the coyote wasn't sure he'd have the stomach to do this. It was extremely dangerous, deeply illegal, and controversial in ways he never even imagined.

He might be irreverent and he might be fed up with the world the way it was, but stealing from the Catholic church was a far cry from anything he'd ever even contemplated before. Suddenly he understood why Aslaug had said Aramis wasn't an option, and Joe wondered how he would *ever* get around to telling his young friend what he'd just done here.

Or rather, what he was about to do. Father Malheiro stopped in front of a series of rolling bookcases. He typed in a combination on the keypad and Joe heard a reassuring clicking sound as the locks were released. The Jesuit then rolled the bookcase aside and quickly located what he was searching for, and holding it out for Joe to take.

"This is it. The original *Codex Maleficium*," he said, holding out a fairly thin, vellum-bound book.

"Maleficium. Waitastinkin'minute!" Joe exclaimed. "I know that word! Black magic! Aramis regularly blows a fuse over this kind of thing! What does black magic have to do with what I'm looking for?"

Father Malheiro glanced left and right, nervously. "We really don't have time for this right now, Joe Latrans," he said, urgently. "Anything and everything that is supernatural and not Christian in origin is automatically listed by Holy Mother Church as Maleficium. *Everything*. Regardless of how good or honest or decent it may be, it is black magic. The many old faiths of Europe all had their magic. Some worked, some didn't, some wasn't magic in any sense you and I would recognize. But by the rules of the Church, it was all black magic, whether it worked or not, and any Catholic getting involved with such things would be doomed to eternal agony in the deepest, blackest pits of Hell. Now do you understand? For God's sake, Joe, the Church burnt the collected wisdom of the Mezoamerican natives calling it Maleficium because it involved religious rituals ... even non-bloody ones! What do you think they'd call Nordic runes or symbols?"

Joe blinked. He remembered the cloth-wrapped item in his pocket. The sunwheel had been used to open the grave in the ruined convent at Bella Divignano, but he still carried the spear-shard.

"*Sejd* ..." he mumbled. "Spirit magic the Norse way ..."

Father Malheiro nodded again and shooed the coyote out of the annex they were in. "We have to go. That book is the one you're looking for! Officially it doesn't even *exist*! The Catholic Church used something called the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* for *centuries*. The list of proscribed books. Works of great wisdom and science, mixed with the insane ravings of furs who thought they were magicians, all mixed up. That damned list was updated as late as 1948 and it wasn't officially taken out of use until 1966, but even *then*, there were some books that were deemed too bloody dangerous!"

Joe nodded. He was starting to get the idea as he dodged around a corner. Father Malheiro was right behind him, but they had a long way to go yet, before they'd be back at the exit. The archives were extremely extensive.

"I see," the coyote huffed as he ran. "Books like this one. Books that prove there are more universes than one. That God is supreme in this world only. That in others, He has to share or He isn't even in the running?"

"*Exactly!*" Father Malheiro answered. "Remember how I said I died suddenly and very violently?"

"Yes?"

"I did because I found that book and *read* it!"

Joe blinked. "So you're telling me the Swiss Guard killed you? But you were canonized nonetheless!"

"Because the circumstances of my Death were kept secret even from subsequent Popes. Do you think Holy Father knows what that book says? That it even exists? He has to be the figurehead for over a billion Catholics around the world! He'd be *nothing* without plausible deniability!"

"HALT!!!"

Joe had been about to answer when three furs came around the corner in front of them. Guards ... Joe knew immediately that this would not end well and he held the book back for Father Malheiro to hold, while he drew his gun.

The Jesuit grabbed the book again and turned around as if to shield it with his body, but Joe had his eyes fixed on the guards ... all armed with heavy pistols of a much more modern make than his own SIG.

Still, he knew he was a damned good shot.

He dropped to one knee and squeezed the trigger. He wanted to just wound these furs. He didn't want to have to kill them but there were three of them, and they were heavily armed. And there was no question that they would shoot to kill.

If he failed to incapacitate even one of them fully, then that guard might shoot him when he ran on. Shooting Father Malheiro obviously wouldn't kill him, as he was already dead, but Joe was not immune to bulletwounds.

He had no choice, and grinding his teeth at the painful realization, he watched as the first guard tumbled to the floor, dead before he even lay still. The one behind him jumped over his fallen comrade and Joe squeezed the trigger again, hitting the fur before he in turn hit the ground. The Swiss Guard opened his mouth in surprise, but no word came out.

Just a short spray of blood as he crumbled on the floor.

The last guard was not so reckless ... and he stood his ground and fired. Joe felt a searing pain bite into his leg and his chest, and he started to fall backwards. He'd been wounded before ... but he had almost forgotten how bad the pain was.

He could see black spots already.

But he still got off two more shots.

The last thing he heard before hitting the ground was Father Malheiro reading from the book in Latin, sounding desperately urgent ... and the sound of the Swiss Guard collapsing by his two comrades.

Then he passed out.

###

Aslaug's field of vision had narrowed considerably and her arms felt like icicles.

But it was working. In the blackened periphery of her vision, she could see shapes, moving about. Violent moves. She knew the visions would eventually become clear as daylight. The trick was to endure the pain long enough ... to not give in and pass out.

This could kill her. She was in Asgaard and she was giving of herself willingly, but she had no choice. She needed answers and this was the only way to get some of them.

She could smell blood. Not her own, though. This had a distinct scent to it. And she could see flashes of white and grey.

War in Heaven.

For all their pompousness and heavy-pawed self-righteousness, few supernatural beings could be as savage as Angels. Some of the scenes that she could see in her delirium was almost enough to make her retch ... and Aslaug had a strong stomach.

But there was one figure she recognized, above all the others. Not one of the seraphs ... she knew some of them ... had even beaten a couple of them with a ripped off wing ... but Anane she would recognize *anywhere*.

She could feel the bile building in her throat until it practically seeped into her mouth from sheer, unadulterated *hatred* of the creature.

But all this did not give her an answer. All it told her was that Anane was involved, but not how to help Torv ...

The scene changed. To a large city, aflame. An old, male ram being crucified, head down ... dying miserably. In great agony.

An old, male ram ... made of stone.

No ... he wasn't made of stone. He was stone but not stone.

Aslaug was confused, but she kept watching, drawing short, shallow breaths as the vision became clearer and less confused. She saw a line from the old ram, to males wearing elaborate robes and a tall hat with three crowns set around it. She'd seen that before ... these furs were popes. She saw churches. Some recognizable, some quite foreign looking. She realized that the popes only had influence in some of these buildings, and that in others, Christians worshipped their deity in different ways. But she also saw similarities. Too great to be coincidental.

And finally, she began to understand.

She understood that there were rules. Definitives ... absolutes ... and she remembered something Frigg had said when she had just arrived in Asgaard. Something she had said to Aramis Dagaz.

"You are a good Christian, Aramis," she had said. "That means you need absolutes. Absolute truths ... absolute falsehoods. And in your faith ... and in your personal world ... that works. Aslaug is Heðni. We don't teach our followers absolutes. We accept that we're fallible."

It felt like a lance of understanding pierced her mind and Aslaug opened her eyes. She knew!

If only Joe could get concrete proof, there just might be something they could do to stop this travesty!

It might not be too late yet.