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## *XIV – The next step*

Neville Buxomly generally considered himself a happy fur. He and his family had a good life in Langton-by-Wragby, and he made a real, daily effort to be a good vicar for the furs living there. Although ... many furs didn't believe in God these days. The "Shopping Mall of Religions", as some sociologists called it, meant that everyone could not only freely believe in what they wanted, but they had access to enough information about the many faiths out there, to actually know something about what they ended up with. Even in the case of those who didn't believe in anything at all.

He was all in favour of that. He'd much rather have furs who actually believed in God than furs who said they did ... or thought they did ... without actually knowing the first thing about what being a Christian meant. He knew it was probably a slightly unorthodox view, but he was content to see any religion out there, including Christianity, shrink in influence, if it just meant that those who then did end up believing knew what they believed *in*. In the days of his great grandfather, not going to Church every Sunday practically made a fur a pariah in society. Even though the recusant laws of the Stuart and Tudor years had been history for centuries, furs had still been punished indirectly for not being what everyone else considered "good Christians". They'd have trouble finding a job, they would have difficulty interacting with anyone in the local community, they might be charged higher prices by business-owners for services rendered, or even refused service altogether. All in order to make it clear to the fur in question, that until he or she returned to the fold and behaved like a proper Christian, he or she would be treated as second class.

That kind of coercion made faith absolutely useless, as far as Neville was concerned. How could anyone think that *forcing* someone to believe in a certain set of religious beliefs made for good, faithful converts?

It wasn't that he didn't want furs to be Christians. Far from it. He'd love for everyone to be, but he knew that wasn't the way the world spun, and he also knew it wasn't enough to simply say "you have to believe or you'll go to Hell". That didn't convince anyone anymore. Hell was much too abstract a thing for furs to understand, and the idea of a great, fiery chasm where one burnt for all eternity frankly seemed rather ludicrous to him. He believed Hell was ... different. Simply being without God's love would be Hell, in fact.

It was the day after meeting Joe Latrans at the beach. The coyote had come with him and George to the vicarage at Langton-by-Wragby, explaining what he remembered on the way there. It hadn't been much ... and Neville had a feeling the coyote knew a bit more than he was letting on, or maybe he didn't know how to explain something properly. Once home, Mr. Latrans had been introduced to Neville's wife, Beatrice, and he had been fed and sent off to bed.

There was really no other way of putting it. Beatrice always had a way of mothering anyone, even furs older than herself like Mr. Latrans. So, after a very hearty meal of Fish 'n Chips, all home-made, and apple crumble for dessert, the coyote had kindly but firmly been ushered into the guest room and put to bed. Not surprisingly, he was asleep practically before his head hit the pillow.

Today, Mr. Latrans no doubt wanted to make a few phonecalls, and then they'd go to the constabulary at Langton, to see what help they could offer. Mr. Latrans had been a very polite guest too, and George had clearly had a thousand questions about California, once he found out that was where the coyote was from.

Mr. Latrans had mentioned an equine several times. A friend ... the very friend, in fact, whom he said he had lost.

But something was wrong about all this. Neville was up before anyone else, puttering around the kitchen in his pyjamas, making himself a cup of tea, trying to make sense of it all. He considered himself an outstanding judge of character. In fact, he couldn't recall having been wrong about first impressions, and the coyote in the guest room struck him as an absolutely decent fur. But there was something wrong, nonetheless.

He just ... couldn't put a finger to it. Of course, there was the obvious thing that Mr. Latrans was in England without knowing where he was, and the fact that he had somehow *lost* a friend, apparently in a very literal sense. But that wasn't it.

Those were things that could no doubt be rectified. Stress could make furs forget things, and Mr. Latrans was obviously very badly stressed out.

It was something else.

On the way home in the car, Neville had asked the coyote what his lost friend was like. Both out of curiosity, and because they would need to explain this to the constables in Langton. But the description Mr. Latrans had given was of a black furred, female equine with a short cropped, white mane with a dark stripe down the centre. Last he had seen her, she'd been wearing biker leathers.

Turning on the television, Neville decided on watching the morning news to take his mind off the conundrum for the time being. He sat down with his tea, sipping from the large mug with a thoughtful expression on his face as news played over the television. Domestic news told of riots in Bradford for the fourth straight day, and Neville sighed. The death-toll was up to over a hundred by now, and the government was paralysed. The public was calling for the army to be deployed, but so far, nothing was happening on that front. Smaller riots had broken out in Manchester, Hull and Leeds as well. There were rumblings in Birmingham.

No one seemed to know what had sparked it, either. It was all very strange.

Foreign news dealt with the recent massacre in the Sudan. No one had taken responsibility for the mass slaughter in Omdurman yet, and international leaders were pledging relief efforts, while all three Sudanese governments rejected all offers of help, refusing that there was a problem to begin with.

Neville shook his head. The world was a mad, mad place, but he had long since realized that furs throughout history had always seen the world they lived in as mad and out of control.

The difference, of course, was the mechanized capacity of modern furs to inflict death and destruction on one another.

Medieval peasants at least didn't have to worry about automatic weapons in the paws of their children, or high explosives made from cattle dung.

"You look worried, deary," Beatrice said behind him. He hadn't heard her entering the room.

"I am. The news are as bad as ever. A hundred dead in the riots by now and no one wants to take responsibility for all the Sudanese dead, including their own governments." Neville answered.

He felt his wife's paws on his shoulders, kneading gently. He looked up and saw his wife with a very sad expression on her face.

"I try to get by without watching the news these days as you know. It just depresses me. It's all death and suffering these days. It almost makes me wonder if God is really watching sometimes," she said.

Neville smiled and patted his wife's paw on his right shoulder. "I believe He does, Bea. Do you want me to ..." he said, then his eyes were drawn to the screen again.

The story had changed to the recent bombing of a winter-sports event. On screen was a computer generated image of a female equine and the newsreader was explaining that this was the prime suspect in the bombing, but that she was believed to have been pulverized by the explosion.

Equines were rare enough as it was, and the image now moving on the television screen was unmistakable.

"Dear Lord ..." Neville mumbled. "That's Mr. Latrans' lost friend ..."

###

Yokohama was an alien city. All the street-signs were in Japanese, obviously ... all the billboards, all the old neon-signs. Everything was strange and otherworldly. Aslaug would've fit right in, in any small, Canadian town, or in any similar town in the northern United States, but here, she stuck out a mile. For one thing, she hadn't seen a single equine apart from herself, and secondly, she was starting to realize that she would probably have blended in better if she had stuck to the clothes that Varghöss had found for her.

She suddenly understood why he had brought those back. It was probably the most common type of outfit in any clothing store anywhere.

Wearing jeans, metal shoes and a black tank-top would've made her about as average as any six foot nine equine would ever be anywhere, but here, it singled her out from a whole block away. The flannel shirt didn't help either.

It made her wonder where in Yokohama Miho had managed to dig up such clothes.

Of course, the biggest problem was her height. She stood fully two heads above most of the furs in the street and she was attracting an unbelievable amount of attention. Most furs were enormously polite about it though, and she was still not quite sure how to respond when someone bowed to her. She *was* getting slightly fed up with schoolgirls giggling when they saw her, though.

Miho and Lee had gone to visit a temple. Aslaug had, out of respect, chosen not to come along. It would simply feel like an unnecessary intrusion at a time when they were about to have a significant spiritual experience. They had instructed her to get into a taxi and go to the Kannai. They had specifically chosen that spot, since it seemed most likely Aslaug wouldn't mispronounce the name. It was the old port area. Once there, she was to wait at the start of the Osanbashi pier, where Miho and Lee would find her once they had news to share.

Aslaug had been just fine with that. It gave her time to sightsee, but that was until she realized how ridiculously out of place she was. Soon, she had looked for a taxi and had jumped in, after confirming that the chauffeur accepted US dollars.

By now, she was waiting at the Osanbashi pier as instructed.

It was a miserable place. Clearly, this had once been a thriving area, with large ships arriving at quay, but now, it was all but deserted. A few smaller vessels were tied up along the pier, but most of them hadn't been given an overhaul since they came out of the shipyard, and in some cases, that was at least forty years ago. Aslaug was saddened to see this, but she understood why Miho had suggested this place. It was out of the way. Few furs would come here or take much notice of them talking. Lee had seemed apprehensive about it, saying it wasn't exactly the safest part of Yokohama, but he had shrugged it off after a moment.

Construction sites surrounded Aslaug. In the distance, she could see the towering cityscape of Yokohama city, but around here, it seemed like everything had simply ... stopped. A couple of huge bulldozers had been left there to simply rust away. By now, they were almost unrecognisable. It had been a very long time since anyone had done any kind of work here at all.

Japan's economy had collapsed not long after the great recession of 2009 to 2010, and while the international community had been very swift to step in and help, mostly because everyone had too many interests tied up in Japan, it had meant a lot of projects had to be shelved.

Apparently, the Kannai had been hit hard.

Very hard.

A group of males came around a corner and blocked the exit. Aslaug sighed ... she knew immediately what this was about and she knew it wouldn't end well.

They moved well. Some of them no doubt knew how to fight. Others were armed with clubs and chains. There were twelve of them in all.

Approaching slowly, they had that swagger to them of males knowing just how damned good they were. And how damned dangerous.

Just not ... how damned.

"Tourist, eh?" the front fur said. He was a bulky looking tiger with a good few facial scars. Under normal circumstances, Aslaug thought, this fur would be someone to fear. He knew his own worth and he was clearly a skilled fighter.

Many tigers were.

Memories of a tall, powerful ally sprang to mind. But this fur was nothing like Tigermark. Her American friend had a bearing about him that this fur couldn't even dream of.

Shrugging, she looked directly at the tiger. "Yeah, I am. What of it?" she said.

"Not American. Not with that accent," the tiger said.

Aslaug noticed the entire gang was made up of felines of some kind or another. Probably not by accident. She scratched her cheek and shrugged again.

"I repeat ... what of it?" she asked.

The tiger bared his fangs. "You'd better show respect!" he hissed and pulled a long sword from behind his back. Aslaug had seen the type before, but this was no ordinary katana. It had a longer grip and a much longer blade, and it was far better made than most of the weapons she had seen in America.

It was also old. Very ... very old.

"You dishonour your ancestors," she said, matter-of-factly. "The males who carried that sword before you. Would they approve of the way you use it?"

"Couldn't care less," the tiger said and shrugged. "They're dead. I'm not. It's my blade now, and I'll wash it with your blood soon enough if you don't start behaving appropriately."

Aslaug shook her head, slowly, sighing deeply. "I'm going to give you just one chance," she said, patiently. "All of you. Just one single chance to walk away from here peacefully. I'm not obligated to give you a chance in the first place, but if you don't, I'll ..." she said and looked at the group.

Then she stopped. It was clear ... right before her eyes. It became clear even as she spoke.

The tiger had only about a minute left to live, and Aslaug knew how this was going to go.

"Why bother?" she asked. "You'll attack anyway."

The tiger walked up to her, sword in paw. "Or you'll do *what*, exactly?"

Aslaug looked into his eyes for a moment. Just to see if there was anything redeemable to be found in him. But there wasn't. Besides, she could see his last seconds fading away. Whether he was redeemable or not was unimportant. Death had become inevitable for him.

"This," she said at last, raising her knee sharply into the groin of her opponent. As he groaned and started to buckle, she could already see his friends advancing on her, but she still reached up and locked her paws around the back of the tiger's head and his jaw, twisting swiftly and sharply ...

The snap of his neck was unmistakable and he collapsed on the ground. His sword flicked from his paw ...

Aslaug caught it.

It wasn't hers. This was a weapon with a soul. Using it was ... wrong, somehow.

Besides, she wasn't that good with swords. She had always preferred axes. Or spears.

Her opponents were on her and she kicked at the first one, watching him collapse as her iron shod hoof connected with his midsection. The others behind him didn't even stop as he crumbled.

It didn't matter.

These were only mortals ...

But they wouldn't back off.

###

"This is not what we expected," a female tiger said. She held a pair of binoculars in her paws and she was looking at something through them.

"No," a male otter said, simply. He looked through a pair of binoculars of his own.

"I had expected them to take her down, or at least for her to have a hard fight on her paws," the tigress said, sourly. "This bodes ill."

The male otter simply nodded. The scene played out before his eyes through the binoculars was highly unsettling.

"You do realize what this means?" the tigress asked.

"Yes."

"Stop giving me the monosyllabic treatment, Hirokichi! It is highly annoying."

"Sorry."

The tigress rolled her eyes and removed the binoculars. "That was not even funny," she growled. "This isn't simply some foolish agent or other. We have a real problem on our paws here! We've got to talk to the oracle again!"

"Indeed," the otter replied, never lowering the binoculars. "Remarkable."

The tigress huffed and looked again. "So you *can* speak in more than one or two syllables. What's so remarkable now then?"

"Twelve attackers, only one dead and she isn't even bloodied. And she never used the sword," the otter said.

"Why not? It's a good weapon, I'd think."



"I have no idea why. But she did not use it. She held it in a basic Yuk Gum Hyung-stance throughout the entire fight."

The tigress groaned again. "I'm close to throwing you off the building, Hirokichi!"

"Inverted sword grip. They developed a whole style for it in Korea in ages past," the otter said, sounding slightly annoyed at the threat. "It's not my fault you think everything non-Japanese is so inferior it's not worth learning about."

"It's not something I *think*. It's how it *is*."

"Yet that particular non-Japanese just ran twelve of your best trained goons into the ground, killing their leader. Alright, he was stupid and overconfident to walk up to an unknown enemy like that but did you see the SPEED she moved with?"

The tigress narrowed her eyes. "I did. I'm not blind. Ah ... there. Finally my sister arrives. Foolish creature that she is."

The otter grinned and nodded. "Did she really think we were unaware of her spying on us?" he asked, lowering his binoculars at last.

"My sister is not exactly known for her intelligence," the tigress said and turned, walking across the roof to a ladder, going down it.

The otter waited until he was sure the tigress was well and truly gone, before looking back through the binoculars. "And neither are you, Shiori."

He smiled, still watching the exchange at Osanbashi pier.

###

"What ... happened here?" Miho asked, confused and shocked at the sight meeting her.

Twelve males of various sizes, all felines of some kind, were sprawled on the ground. Many were hog-tied with old rope, looking like it had been picked up off the ground at the nearby abandoned construction site. Others would clearly not run anywhere with their legs bent in awkward positions.

One ... and only one ... was unmistakably *dead*.

The rest were all unconscious.

Lee shuddered. "I'd like to know too if it's alright to ask?" he said. "I don't mind violence but this place looks like a battlefield."

Aslaug pushed off the rock she had been sitting on. She had the long sword in its scabbard in one paw and she shrugged. "They seemed to think I could be robbed easily. I taught them a lesson."

"Particularly that tiger over there," Lee muttered. "Heads really aren't supposed to twist that far back."

"He had a minute to live when he came at me," Aslaug said, matter-of-factly. "It was inevitable."

Miho looked like she would protest. Then she simply nodded after taking a deep breath. "I'm not going to argue with you about it but I do suggest we move away from here. As soon as someone sees this, they'll ... they'll inform the police."

"Probably true," Aslaug agreed. "The tiger carried this weapon. It has a soul. And it isn't mine to use," she said and held the sword out towards the two Agents.

Lee carefully took it. "Well, it's clearly a daikatana," he said, taking his time in observing the details of the metalwork on the scabbard, parrying guard and grip. "And it's very old. Look at the tsuba, Miho. Here ... see?" he said and indicated something on the guard.

Miho took a cursory look. "I'm not half as good at this as you are. It's embarrassing really. You live the first many years of your life in Applethwaite and you're better at the metallurgy of swordmaking than I am," she complained.

Lee ignored her and kept looking. "This really is fascinating stuff. He carried it, you said? This is a family weapon but it's highly unusual for it to be a daikatana. It's not as ... as noble a weapon, you might say. But it *is* a weapon that takes a great deal of skill and practice to use well."

"A family weapon," Aslaug asked. She was familiar with such weapons from her own culture but she wasn't sure if it meant quite the same this far away.

Lee nodded. "The family honour is bound to the sword. It is inherited through generations, and each user must uphold the family honour and traditions. Not to do so is to dishonour the ancestors."

"What happens specifically if a fur doesn't do that?" Aslaug asked and took a couple of steps backwards. Miho followed the equine's line of sight and swallowed, backing up as well.

Lee, for his part, was too busy with the weapon to notice. "Well, let's just say I'd really hate to be in his shoes or for that matter in the shoes of anyone who had helped use this weapon for dishonourable deeds when they died. At least that would be the case if this was one of *our* worlds, as opposed to ... a ... Christian ... hey, where are you two going?"

"Move over here, reeeeeally slowly and don't look around," Miho said gesturing for Lee to follow.

The wolf did so ... realizing suddenly it had gotten cold and damp behind him, and he felt a distinctly unpleasant feeling coming from behind him. "Kuso ... kuso kuso *kuso!!!*" he whimpered and moved very slowly towards Miho who suddenly grabbed him and pulled him to safety before turning around so she wouldn't have to look.

Aslaug kept looking. In fact, she didn't even blink. But the frown on her forehead and the downward turn of her mouth would have told anyone watching what she felt.

"And I thought we had innovative after-life punishments for *niðinge* in Asgaard," she finally said in a hoarse voice.

Neither Miho nor Lee said anything. They didn't even turn around to look.

Aslaug was slightly shaken. She generally considered herself a jaded creature, having seen an ungodly amount of carnage in her time. She'd seen furs disembowelled, tortured and maimed. She'd seen children and adults alike, slaughtered in terrible, painful ways, both in her own lifetime and after her elevation to Agent, and yet later as a Valkyrie. In fact, she'd seen things no fur should ever have to see, and by now, it really took a lot to affect her. Death was nothing out of the ordinary as far as she was concerned.

Even brutal deaths.

But what she was looking at right now turned her stomach.

Finally, Aslaug reached out to the side and nudged her Japanese allies to come along as she walked away from the twelve corpses behind her. She had absolutely no desire to look at any of them again.

Not after what had just been done to them.

###

When he woke up, Joe felt considerably better than he had since before joining Aslaug for her mission. He had slept incredibly well in a good bed after a great, home-cooked meal and as he lay there, he pondered if Langton-by-Wragby shouldn't be his next vacation-spot with his wife.

Then he had turned over in bed and realized that someone had removed his clothes and he felt an icy chill run down his spine. His clothes were there, but they had been washed and cleaned.

Which meant there was no way the Buxomly's couldn't have noticed the gun.

He got up. As quietly as he could.

Getting his clothes and putting them on, he wasn't surprised to find that the gun was missing. For all he knew, the police would now be waiting for him when he opened the door.

He knocked ... before opening it. Just to let anyone waiting on the other side know he was coming out. He even kept his paws out to the side, fingers spread, so that no one would take a shot at him for being armed and dangerous.

But there was no one outside the door. No police-furs ... no angry mob with pitchforks.

No Buxomly-family either, though.

Joe sighed deeply and ran his right paw through his hair. looking at his feet while wondering what to do next.

The logical thing, of course, was to run. But where to? He was a United States citizen in England, with no friends, very little money and no means of transportation. And besides, a fur who ran was considered guilty. What he'd be considered guilty of, he didn't know, but something, certainly.

Finally, he headed to the kitchen. He could sit down there and wait for the cops to pick him up peacefully. There would be no way of getting himself bailed out of this. He would have to face up to the fact that he was carrying a gun without a legal permit. In America, it would've been no problem. He *had* a permit there, but obviously, that wasn't valid in Great Britain. He'd simply have to play "dumb American gun-lover" and hope it'd help.

Telling the truth, in this case, would earn him a one way ticket to a psychiatric ward, after all.

As he opened the kitchen door, he was surprised to see Neville Buxomly already seated, facing the door. There was a teapot and two mugs on the table ... and so was Joe's gun and a remote control.

The vicar looked concerned, but unafraid and Joe felt a moment of admiration for the fur. If he had been the one to take in a stranger, only to find that particular fur was packing a large pawgun, he would probably not have reacted that well. He found himself wishing he had known how to tell Neville about the gun the day before, but at the time, the right angle had just eluded him.

He sat down opposite the feline without saying a word, waiting for the vicar to make the opening move. He wasn't going to insult his host by starting a slew of poor excuses.

Neville reached over and took the teapot, pouring the liquid into both mugs. Then he pushed one of them towards Joe, before picking the other one up and taking a sip.

"Glad you finally came around, Joe. As you can see, my wife made a discovery when she washed your clothes," he said.

Joe nodded. "Yep. She clearly did."

"And I've got something else I think you need to see. Before we even speak further on this, I need you to see this."

"As you wish."

There was no fear in Neville's voice. Nor was there any condemnation. He picked up the remote control and turned on the television.

"I caught this on the news. Fortunately, we can rewind and record even live television. Mind you, we couldn't until a couple of years ago. We used to have a television set suitable for the National Media Museum up in Bradford. If it's even still standing with the riots going on up there. Anyway, take a look at this."

Joe nodded, calmly, paying close attention to the television set. He kept his paws in front of him on the table, only moving them to grab the mug to occasionally drink from it. Otherwise, he wanted his host to be able to see that he wasn't hostile in any way and that he wasn't going to make any move to grab the gun, even though it was well within his reach.

The television showed a dreadful scene. A tall concrete tower, collapsing. Apparently it was from some winter-sports resort. Furs were falling off the structure. Off it and out of it, in fact. He winced ... this brought back memories of an early September morning, many years ago. It was terrible to watch and Joe felt his eyes get misty as he wondered ... as he so often did ... why such things happened to innocent furs, and why God let it happen.

The camera zoomed in to watch one particular figure, falling from the top of the structure, arms flailing helplessly and the coyote felt the first tear run down his right cheek.

"I hadn't even heard of this happening," he said, hoarsely. "When did it take place? Yesterday?"

Neville paused the replay for a moment to answer. "A few days hence, actually. The investigation is still ongoing, obviously. They seem to think the attacker was killed in the bomb-blast or in the later collapse."

"Good!! At least the sorry shit got what he deserved then!" Joe exclaimed, fiercely. "It's like watching a miniature nine-eleven all over again. How ... how many died?"

"Over two hundred furs. Most were in the crowd below. They got crushed by falling debris before they could get away. A dozen or so were trampled to death in the stampede. Many died in the tower itself, of course."

"Why are you showing me this?" Joe asked, confused but unable to look away from the screen where the frozen image of a cloud of rising dust was burning itself into his memory. "Why does God let these things happen?" he asked, barely whispering.

"Joe, there's more for you to see," Neville said. His voice was not unsympathetic. Clearly, the coyote found this terribly distressing, and that in itself told him a lot about his visitor.

The Computer Generated Image came on and Joe's eyes went wide instantly. "No ... NO! It can't be. It can't!!"

Neville sighed. "I recognized her from your description in the car. The police are almost certain she's to blame. The one survivor from the tower was a jumper who was on his way down the ramp when the bombs went off. He said she seemed to appear out of nowhere. No one had seen her enter either. No one had even noticed her in the area before the

bombs that moment. The theory says she had been hiding in there for at least two days, then came out to detonate the bombs."

"That is impossible!" Joe exclaimed. "I was with her just before ... just ..." he began, stopping himself before going any further into unexplainable territory. "Look, the one time I showed her plastique, she said it smelled like marzipan and tried eating it before I stopped her!!"

"You work with plastic explosives, Joe?" Neville asked. "I'm sorry to have to ask you all this. Beatrice and George are out of the house, but they're not contacting the police for now. But please ... can you understand how this looks? You're armed, and you seem to be friends with the prime suspect to the worst terrorist attack against a civilian target in years."

Joe shook his head slowly. "This is Anane's work ..." he said, quietly. He had never met the fallen Angel, but Aslaug had explained her original meeting with Anane to him. It was all painfully clear now. "It's got to be Anane's work. He's after her. He's after Aslaug. But why isn't God stopping this? Why ... are the Angels not stopping this?"

Neville looked confused. Joe was speaking as if he literally expected God to come down from On High to stop evil from happening, or at least an army of Angels to do so. And who was this "Anane"-character? The word itself sent a chill down his spine for some weird reason.

Joe was staring at the television where the image had frozen at the Computer Generated Image of someone who bore an undeniable likeness to Aslaug with her black dye-job.

Which meant ... there had to be television images of her. One fur's description would not make an image that detailed. It was all there, save for her scars.

"I think I know how to prove she didn't detonate any bombs," he finally said. He'd forgotten how to blink, staring at the screen.

"Then I'd really like to hear it, because frankly, I'd like to believe you're a decent fur. In fact, I do. I took a huge chance here, Joe, you know that, don't you?"

"In what way?"

"I've got your gun right here. It's loaded. You could've grabbed it and shot me. But you know why I didn't think you would?"

"Please tell me?"

Neville smiled and shrugged. "You had that gun when you met my son and I at the beach yesterday. You could've shot us then. There wasn't a fur anywhere in sight. You could've killed us and taken the car and been in London or Manchester before anyone knew we were missing. Instead, you asked us for help and trusted two complete strangers. I don't think you're an evil fur, and your reaction when you saw that was genuine. I'm a very good judge of character, Joe. It makes my job a lot easier. But I still sent my wife and son away, just in case I was wrong, and I can tell you, Beatrice wasn't happy about it."

"If you wish, I'll leave now and you'll never hear from me again," Joe said, quietly. "I should have told you about the gun, but ... I didn't know how to bring it up. "Hey, can you help me, oh and by the way I'm packin'!" seemed a really bad angle at the time."

Neville actually laughed. "I think that would've pretty much guaranteed our reluctant cooperation though," he said. "But I can see your point. Anyway, you say you have an idea for how to prove your friend's innocence?"

"You mentioned a museum."

"The National Media Museum?"

"That's the one. It's like a TV and Radio-museum, I take it?" Joe asked.

"It is. It's up in Bradford though ... that's ..." Neville started, but he didn't get to finish. Joe was suddenly very excited.

"They've got to have what I need, then. Going to a regular television channel would just make journalists interested in me and if *they* get interested, then the police will find out I know Aslaug, and then I won't have a chance to prove she didn't do this before they will want to have a little chat with me ... you know, in a private room, nine feet by twelve feet, one table, two chairs, bright light ... that kind of thing," the coyote interjected.

"Look, clearly that whole ski-jump-event-thing was televised. That means there's got to be footage of everything that happened from the moment that jumper who cleared the tower and survived came out to sit on the boom before his jump. We can prove Aslaug didn't do this if we can just get televised images of her!"

Neville nodded. "I believe you may be right. But there are two issues you're not taking into account."

"What are those?" Joe asked. Neville had sounded very despondent.



The vicar scratched his cheek, still observing Joe's face intensely. "Firstly, she's still dead, regardless. I understand, however, that clearing her name is very important if she's innocent."

"She is!" the coyote said, emphatically. He didn't think Aslaug was dead, but saying that would require some explanation that he didn't think Neville was ready to believe.

Neville nodded. "I'm not saying she isn't. In fact, that's why it is important. But there's another issue. Bradford is rioting. The whole city is a Fifth of November-reenactment waiting to happen."

"What does that mean?" Joe asked, confused.

"I think the American colloquialism would be ... "It's a powderkeg up there". And someone's already lit the fuse, in this case. Bradford is routinely haunted by immigration-riots. It's been like that for decades. Once in a while, someone just won't be calm and rational about it. It usually costs lives but this time it's worse than ever," Neville explained and sighed. "I don't think it's even possible to get to the museum."

Joe slowly reached out to the gun, looking straight at Neville as he did so. "I'll get there," he said. "One more armed fur in a riot won't get anyone's attention."

Neville nodded. He didn't object when Joe took the gun back. "I admire your faith in your friend," he said. "Everyone else seems to think she's responsible."

"I wish I could tell you the half of it," Joe said, quietly. "I'll leave quietly. All I need is for you to tell me how to get to Bradford."

"I'll take you to the train-station. It'll take you up north. It won't go to Bradford itself, under these circumstances, but you will get pretty close."

"Thank you. You don't have to do this, and yet you help me. You're a rare species of fur, indeed."

Neville smiled crookedly. "Not really. I'm just your average, Christian feline."

Joe couldn't help a sad smile. "If you had seen what I have seen, you'd know how you're anything but average."

Neville just smiled and finished his tea.