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XVI – Gunpowder, treason and plot

A fifth of November-celebration, waiting to happen. That was what Neville had called the riots in Bradford. While he had never participated in such a celebration, Joe had to believe that Bradford was worse. A lot worse. Joe had seen riots before, but this was definitely the ugliest one he had witnessed yet.

He had literally passed three corpses, left in the streets.

Buildings were burning. Many buildings. He didn't think he'd seen a single window on the ground or first floor that hadn't been smashed since entering the city centre.

Getting there hadn't been easy, either. Bradford was a city of some three hundred and fifty thousand furs, but it had been cordoned off very effectively by police and, as far as Joe could tell, some kind of home guard. He'd heard a lot of rumours about the army coming in to put down the riots by force, too. Eventually, though, he had managed to sneak past the barricades. He'd spent most of the night walking, until he finally found a place where two police-officers were on guard in a car at a checkpoint, but they had been fast asleep, and he had simply walked in. He'd slept in an abandoned home ... just for a few hours, as it was, and then he had started towards the city centre. Finding a map of Bradford hadn't been difficult, either, and the National Media Museum was prominently displayed practically alongside Bradford City Hall.

Which of course meant there was a good chance it had been wrecked. City Hall would be the first place rioters would storm.

It had been harder to figure out where on the map he was, until he located a sign saying "Buttershaw" and remembering he had seen that on the map. Looking it up, he nodded and found the street-name as well.

Finally he knew where he was, and where he was going. He found an abandoned car and managed to hotwire it, but it only took him near the city centre before he realized it had been abandoned for a reason. It spluttered and stopped and Joe was a good enough mechanic to know that the sound the engine made was the automobile-equivalent of a prolonged death-rattle.

So he got out. City Centre was still a mile and a half away. He hadn't seen a single fur yet, since entering Bradford and by now, that was really, really eerie. Most of the city had been evacuated, but the rioters, according to the radio in the car, held parts of the city under their control and those areas hadn't been evacuated yet.

According to the femme on the radio, reports were coming in of indiscriminate killings. The death-toll was expected to be many times higher than the first estimates by now, and quite frankly, Joe believed her after seeing dead furs left behind in the streets.

It was like a warzone.

Turning a corner, he could see down a broad street towards an open square. On his left, he had some old masonry ... parts of a medieval city wall, apparently. On his right, a big hole in the ground looking like a construction site that had been abandoned decades ago. And straight ahead, he could see the open square.

That would be where Bradford City Hall was located. Which meant he had to cross to get to the museum.

If anyone was watching that area, he'd be the world's most inviting target.

He had no choice, though. He needed to get to that museum and hope it was still intact. Or at least that the parts he needed were still intact. He checked his map again and nodded to himself. There was a small airfield outside the city. He would make his way there once he was done in Bradford itself.

He moved up as close to the street-corner in front of him as he dared. If he got too close, someone might spot him, after all.

Damned, if he'd only been twenty five years old again, he could sprint across the square in no time flat, but at his age, it'd be a lumbering gait at best. Normally, he had no problem with growing older, but just for once he grumbled about not being as fit as he had been as a youth.

Closing his eyes to focus and taking a couple of deep breaths, he broke into as fast a run as he could.

He didn't even get halfway into the square, before a group of furs came into view ahead of him.

And they were armed.

###

"Honored Oracle, I come before you to once again ask for your insight," Shiori said, bowing deeply.

There was a hissing sound in the darkness. But no answer as such. Shiori did not like the situation and she was unable to hide her discomfort. The stench in the dark, cavernous room was nothing short of epic. Rotting flesh never smelled nice, regardless of whether it came from something intelligent or not, and in the case of the Oracle, Shiori didn't want to know either way.

"My sister and her foolish comrade-in-arms have allied themselves with a powerful Agent ..." she started, but was interrupted by an angry hiss.

"NO!" came a broken voice from the darkness. "Not ... an Agent!"

"Then what? The barbarian equine is a fearsome warrior and we need to be prepared so we can kill her," Shiori said, keeping her voice respectful and her eyes cast down. One did not look at the Oracle ... even if it was hidden in darkness.

"Barbarian? Yes ... yes indeed. A good descriptor, if unintentionally so. You are blind, as always, Shiori. Your arrogance makes you weak, and in your weakness, you think yourself superior. I see the equine, covered in blood. I see a burning city," the strange voice said from the darkness. "I see a lot of death."

Shiori smiled. "Good. Death and destruction is good. And Lord Anane?"

"... will be there, with ... and *for* ... the barbarian."

"Then all is as it should be."

The Oracle was quiet. There was no further answer. Shiori, however, smiled as she left. There was nothing to worry about.

Lord Anane would destroy the equine.

As the door closed behind her, the Oracle hissed in disgust. "Foolish creature," it sneered.

"Yes, but *I* am not," Hirokichi said, stepping out of the shadows and into the slight beam of light. "But of course, you already know this, Oracle. And you know why I am here."

The Oracle fell quiet for a while. "You know my price, traitor," it finally said.

Hirokichi smiled crookedly and pulled out an obscenely oversized pawgun, pointing it into the darkness. "And as opposed to the imbeciles who usually come to you for answers, I am ready to pay it."

Out of the darkness slithered an oozing, wrecked creature. It had three heads, none of which seemed to belong to any recognizable species of fur. It was naked, with patches of matted fur clinging to its body. Open, pus-filled sores oozed unspeakable matter onto the floor, creating a slimy trail for the dark gray, slug-like body to pull itself along on. Hirokichi had never seen the Oracle this clearly before and he had to summon all his considerable willpower to not retch at the sight. A broken and badly reset arm was held out towards him.

"Then what do you wish to know?" the Oracle said, wearily.

"Tell me what I must do to stop Anane," the otter said, narrowing his eyes. "Merciful ancestors, what has been done to you?"

"As opposed to Shiori, Hirokichi ... I know that insight comes at a terrible price. One must always sacrifice something ... to gain it," one head said, turning towards the otter with a slurping sound.

Another head tried to turn but it couldn't bring its neck around far enough. "I was beautiful once. The fairest creature under the rising sun, but I wanted *more*. And I wouldn't heed the warnings. This ... this is the price I paid," it squelched.

The last head looked up, meeting Hirokichi's pitying stare. "You must bring together that which was divided. The barbarian is strong ... but only if you bring her friend to her will Anane be stopped."

"So where do I find this friend?"

"If he survives ... you will find him in Bradford, England. You will know who it is when you see him. But you will miss him if you don't hurry. Now *pay* me!"

Hirokichi nodded. If he pulled the trigger, there would be no going back. But that was acceptable to him. Sometimes, ultimate decisions had to be made ... without compromise.

"Then may you find peace at last, creature," Hirokichi said.

Then he pulled the trigger.

Three times.

Only smoke and the scent of cordite moved behind him as he left.

###

Down below, the streets were breaking apart. Anane was having an excellent time of it, hearing how distant screams drifted towards him. Tiny shapes down there were trying desperately to avoid death, but the fallen Angel obviously couldn't see them. He didn't need to. Even at this distance, he could hear them.

"Señor Soto, is it not glorious?" he asked, smiling widely, "So many deaths. All these filthy, stinking creatures, praying for deliverance, and all they'll get is ... ignored!"

The fur crawling around on all furs next to him drooled something incoherent in his stupor. Anane had killed his entire family over the course of one night, each one progressively more painfully. Señora Soto had gone last ... while her husband watched as she literally screamed until her vocal cords burst and she drowned in her own blood.

It had been quite a spectacle. By the end of it, Señor Soto had been nothing but a quivering, unintelligible ball of flesh, fur and bones, his sanity irretrievably gone.

He was a nobody, of course. Anane had simply picked someone at random from the city down below. Someone whose only flaw had been a deep, unbreakable faith in God. Or perhaps not quite so unbreakable. Anane didn't really care, it had simply been some light entertainment before starting his next killing spree.

So why this city? It had little in common with Omdurman, but that was largely the point. It was still out of the way. It was in a third world country, but from a completely different culture. There was nothing to link the slaughter in Omdurman with what was

happening here. Particularly since he was making sure this appeared to be a massive earthquake.

It had taken considerable amounts of power to do something like this. Old magic.

Señor Soto's family had provided the power. The fact that it was so enjoyable was why he thought of it as "entertainment". He could have had the same power from finding a handful of cultists and butchering them instead. Whose lives were used was irrelevant.

And now, creatures were dying. Tomorrow morning, if an alien species landed in the rubble, they would never be able to guess that the city of Cusco had been there the night before. Oh, many would no doubt survive this disaster, but that was acceptable to Anane. In fact, the majority of the city's population would survive the earthquake. But to what effect? Peru was a poor country. Even with international relief-efforts, hundreds of thousands of lives would have been destroyed, if not snuffed out outright. Tens of thousands might die of hunger or disease directly caused by the devastation and the problems left behind. It would be at least a decade before the area recovered, and Anane hoped the world did not have that long in the first place.

Hopping off the rock he was standing on, he left the drooling shape of his "toy" behind, already forgotten as he made his way towards the city.

###

Joe was sitting on a bench, looking at his paws. Behind him, Bradford City Hall loomed. It was a beautiful building. It almost looked like a castle or at least a large manor-house. But Joe didn't notice. He sat there, staring at his paws and the gun he was holding.

Less than twenty feet away, scattered in a small semi-circle, five furs lay dead.

Joe didn't really know how to get up. He was so utterly shaken that for all he cared, the world could crumble around him and he probably wouldn't notice.

The museum was nearby. He could see it if he raised his head and looked up. It was right up the hill, maybe another two hundred and fifty yards away. He could make it there in a minute or two. But he couldn't ... focus on it.

All he could think of was what had happened. The five, armed furs now dead nearby had approached him. They had demanded to know who he was. He had answered, truthfully ... and they had been angry. Angry that he was there at all. They heard his accent and realized he was American. That he was foreign. It didn't matter where in the world he was

from, so long as he wasn't English. In fact, Joe realized, it hadn't even mattered if he was from Scotland or Ireland. Those five furs would have seen him as no less foreign for that.

So they had threatened him. Called him a cowboy and told him to "get his horse and ride on into the setting sun" or something along those lines.

Then one of them had offered to help him find his sunset.

He had pulled a large pawgun. Joe wasn't about to get into a firefight with five heavily armed furs if he could help it. Good shot or not, he had tempted fate once already against three Swiss guards. And while they were infinitely better trained than this rabble, five guns to one were really bad odds any day of the week. So he hadn't drawn his own weapon, at that point concealed inside his jacket, down the back of his pants.

He had tried to tell the furs he didn't want any kind of trouble and that he simply had to get to the nearby museum. After that, he'd be more than happy to vacate the country.

It hadn't made any kind of difference.

He had held up his paws to show that he didn't want trouble and he wasn't holding a weapon. Anything to seem inoffensive. He'd even pointed out to the furs in front of him that he was old enough to be their father and that he was no threat to them.

It had been the wrong thing to say. The wrong thing entirely.

The fur pointing his gun at Joe hadn't taken too kindly to the idea that he might have a foreign father.

And he had made his displeasure very publicly known. He'd shouted. Loudly. He'd gotten extremely perfidious and finally, he had turned his head towards the other four and said he had made up his mind.

He wasn't going to stomach an American in Bradford any longer.

The pawgun he was carrying was a very heavy revolver and his finger had moved to cock the hammer. By that point, Joe knew there was no arguing with the fur in front of him anymore. It was kill or be killed.

He'd pulled his own gun in one fluid motion and put a bullet straight through the throat of his opponent. The bullet had gone in at a slightly upwards angle and apparently, it had hit the killing T, severing the brain-stem, killing the fur immediately.

The other four were so shocked that at first, they hadn't pulled their weapons. Joe had held his gun at the ready, though, telling them to back off.

They hadn't moved. Too stunned that one of their own was dead, they had stood there, looking at each other with open mouths, then looking at their dead comrade, then at each other again.

They had all been armed with automatic rifles, and Joe had calmly pointed out to them that as he already had his gun trained on them, he could shoot them before they raised their weapons to fire on him. He had told them to run. Turn around and just ... run away.

But they hadn't listened.

And now they were dead.

And Joe's pistol still had a full clip.

He felt completely drained. Empty inside. What kind of world was this?

A world where he had just had to shoot five furs to survive? Five furs he had never met. This wasn't war! It was just a damned riot! Had life become this cheap? This unimportant to furs that they were willing to throw their existence away for something as foolish as this?

Joe knew God didn't listen, and he didn't even bother to shout at the sky anymore. Why shout himself hoarse when there was no answer? He didn't see a point in it anymore. The gun in his paw felt awfully heavy and he shook his head, unable to put the weapon away. Instead, he stared at it. He couldn't take his mind off the fact that he had just ended five lives. It was him or them, he knew that. He had *tried* to talk them down.

Done his best.

It wasn't enough.

So now there were five more corpses in Bradford, to add to all those already littering the streets.

Because furs still didn't understand that life was the single most precious thing in existence. Because society fostered furs who didn't care about others anymore. Immunized to death and incapable to comprehend the discomfort or pain of others.

A whole world, populated by would-be sociopaths and complete egomaniacs.

Finally, Joe put the gun aside. However useful it might be to have a gun that never ran out of ammo, Joe couldn't bring himself to look at the SIG 210 anymore. He had just shot five furs with it. It made him feel dirty.

Life was precious. Invaluable.

Inviolable.

And yet there he was, having been forced into a situation where he had shot five furs.

Their faces mixed with those of the three Swiss guards from the Vatican to stare at him from behind his eyelids every time he blinked. But Joe had killed before, on missions ... many years ago.

The situation had changed since then. Then, he hadn't questioned his beliefs.

No, that wasn't true either, and he knew it. He had questioned everything, even then. But he had at least retained some semblance of core faith in the righteousness of the cause for which he fought.

So *he* had changed. Changed more than the world around him. He wasn't willing to accept that it was all because the world had changed. Certain things had, yes. Certain things. But overall, the change had been within him. A deepening understanding of the fact that perhaps, he didn't understand anything at all.

That frightful, dreadful realization that he had lost his illusions.

The world was simpler when one could ascribe everything that happened to some kind of Divine Will, but it wasn't more *right*.

He got up at last and started walking towards the museum. How was he going to explain all of this to Annie? Or to Aslaug? Or to anyone?

He tried to be a good fur. Tried so very hard to be a good, decent individual, a good father for his children and a good friend to his friends.

Behind him lay five compelling reasons to question that decency.

But he had no *choice*. They hadn't *given* him any choice.

Did he grieve for their deaths? Not as such.

They had threatened him, after all, so that wasn't it. This was about something deeper and more profound than that. Something more serious.

He didn't grieve for their deaths, but he *did* grieve for the loss of innocence he saw in the world around him, every day.

Did that make him a hopeless idealist? Hadn't the world lost its innocence centuries, even millennia ago? Wasn't that, in fact, one of the core principles of Christianity? That innocence had been lost in the Fall, and then lost again on Calvary?

Twenty years before, Joe would have recognized that concept. He would've felt it made sense. But now, he had *changed*. But not so any more. Because the problem with the idea, that innocence had been lost at the Fall and lost again at Calvary was that in both cases, that loss had happened because of a limited number of furs ... but the horrible consequences were applied to *everyone*. Which made God needlessly vengeful.

Which made God *imperfect*.

He couldn't settle for the old, worn out answers anymore. "God has a plan for us all" or "God works in mysterious ways" just didn't do it for him anymore.

"Put your faith in the Lord" nearly made his knuckles itch and his stomach turn by now, in fact. If one put one's faith in God, the implied reasoning was that then the Almighty would make everything okay. He would make sure that good furs got rewarded and bad furs got their comeuppance, if not sooner then at least after death.

But that wasn't good enough for Joe Latrans anymore. Nor did he really believe it.

He had simply come to realize that in a world where God didn't answer prayers and didn't care about even loyal, self-sacrificing followers, life was all the more precious. When God's love was drawn into doubt, the life a fur led on Earth became far more important.

Not to live to please God ...

But just to live *well*.

###

The two Shinto Agents were chattering in Japanese, and Aslaug didn't understand a word of it. Normally, she would've considered it rude to speak a language she didn't understand, while she was standing next to those speaking, but in this case, she understood. First of all, they were talking about complex religious issues that were more easily defined in their own language, and secondly, while they were cooperating with her, they no doubt needed to keep *some* secrets.

She wouldn't tell them everything either. Some things were ... trade secrets. Like *Sejd*, for instance.

Miho and Lee were clearly agitated ... or perhaps excited was a better way of putting it. Aslaug wasn't quite sure which, but she could tell that her new friends were discussing something important, at least.

They were walking back from the docks. They would talk more about what had happened there when they were back at the safehouse.

Finally, after they turned down an empty side-street, Lee turned around and looked at her. "I'm sorry. We do not mean to be rude ..." he began.

"I understand perfectly," Aslaug said, disarmingly. "I don't know how to explain things in English half the time either."

Lee looked grateful. "Thank you. It is simply that ... well, it 's difficult to explain the concept. We believe the spirits of our ancestors guide us. In fact, for Agents like Miho and myself, it is more than belief. It's knowledge. I am sure it is much the same for you."

"It used to be, before my "promotion", yes," the Valkyrie admitted. "More so than you probably think. Ancestors are important to the Norse as well, though they are not venerated in the same way you seem to. But we cherish the memories we have of them, and the faithful sometimes sacrifice in their honor."

Miho looked surprised, but Lee nodded and said a few words in Japanese. Miho blushed and bowed, respectfully.

"I must apologize," the tigress said a moment later. "I always thought ..."

"That we were nothing but barbarians. You'd be surprised how common that is even in the West," Aslaug chuckled. "We built great fortresses, and the best ships in the world until the invention of the caravel, we forged an empire and made beautiful coins, sang beautiful and powerful songs. We had ... and have ... our own magic. We were the first Europeans to set foot or hoof in America, we traded with furs from Kiev and Moscow to Dublin and York, from Kaupang to Baghdad, and we told epic stories of gods and great heroes that are still told to this day. But because we didn't write it down, we were thought of as barbarians, as opposed to the Greeks or Romans. Or the Japanese."

"You were violent conquerors as well, may I add," Lee pointed out with a crooked smile on his lips. "I grew up in one of the hundreds of small villages still found in England

today founded by Vikings. Any place with a name ending in -stedt, -by, -thorpe, or -thwaite ... just to name some."

Aslaug shrugged. "That didn't happen until after I died, but even so ... we were no more violent than everyone else in Europe at the time, Lee. We were just better at it. At least in the North, every free male had a vote on *Ting*, and every free female had genuine legal rights. We did keep slaves, but so did everyone else at the time. No one in their right mind would dream of doing such a thing today, *heðni* or otherwise, but at the time, it was common practice everywhere in the world. And incidentally, as I recall, Japanese culture is not exactly devoid of the slaughter of innocents and aggressive conquest," she said, matter-of-factly.

Lee looked away. "That ... is a contentious issue to this day," he mumbled. "Anyway, we visited a shrine. It was different. Since we were chosen as Agents, we've seen plenty of shrines, and in the realities controlled by the Kami, such places are alive with the spirits of the ancestors. Even those who are not Agents can literally feel their constant presence. Here ... and in other realities that are controlled by other forces ... Shinto shrines and temples are always cold, empty places. The spirits were not there. They are *still* not. But they are *leaving* through the shrines now. For other realities. They are ..."

Miho put a paw on his shoulder. "They are going home. To where they belong," she said, smiling a little.

Aslaug looked relieved. She nodded. "I am glad to hear it," she said, after a long moment. "Now, if only I could find ..."

She stopped and looked at a television screen in the window of a hardware store across the street. They were still alone. No one else seemed to need to go this way, and Aslaug crossed the street without another word.

"I know where he is," she said, staring unblinkingly at the images on the screen. She had no idea what the subtitles were saying.

She didn't need to understand.

The images of a city shattered by earthquake and fire were like a red rag in the face of a raging bull. It had Anane written all over it.

"Then we need to get to ... " Miho said and looked for the city's name on the screen, "Cusco. That's in South America, isn't it?"

"We?" Aslaug asked. "This isn't your fight."

Lee grinned. "Says who? We're just as duty-bound to oppose the Malefic Council as you," he said and stuck his paws in his pockets.

Aslaug nodded slowly. "Then I thank you. But going to Cusco would be the wrong thing to do, I'm afraid," she said.

Miho raised an eyebrow. Lee looked like he'd like an explanation too.

"Anane won't stay there. If he does, he'll draw too much attention to himself, and the Council will not stand for that. We have to be in place to stop him when he arrives at his next intended target."

Nodding slowly, Miho looked at the images on the screen again. "I doubt we could do much good there anyway. Amaterasu protect them," she mumbled.

"Let's get back to the safehouse. And I can't believe I'm saying this, but we're going to need a computer," Aslaug said and made a face.

Lee didn't quite understand the equine's revulsion, but he smirked nonetheless. "You're in Japan, my friend. The only place in the world with more computers per square mile is Silicon Valley."

Aslaug mumbled something about the evils of *Sejd*-machines, and started off down the street.

###

"I need to get in!" Joe said, leaning forward and supporting his paws on his knees.

A British soldier twenty yards ahead of him shook his head emphatically. "I'm afraid not, Sir," he said. "This is a restricted area."

"How come, it's just a bloody museum isn't it?" Joe complained. "Look, I'm an American citizen. I have nothing to do with these riots. It's dangerous out here, unless you haven't heard!"

The soldier shook his head again. "I know. And for the record, I'm not blind, Sir. What happened down by City Hall was clearly visible from up here. You took down five armed enemies! That makes you both a potential danger and bloody capable of taking care of yourself!"

Rolling his eyes, Joe stood upright. "Do I look like some twenty-year old hoodlum, out for trouble?" he asked. "For crying out loud ... okay, who's your commanding officer?"

"That'd be Captain Saunders, but he's not ..."

"THEN GO GET HIM, WILL YA!"

Joe was waving his arms around in a gesture of rage and irritation. He was really not in the mood to stand out here, arguing with a grunt with armed gangs behind him. Especially since he had left his gun on the bench. Simply touching that thing made him feel dirty.

The soldier looked uncertain for a moment. Then he reached up to his ear and clicked his radio transmitter on. "Captain, we've got a yankee out here who wants to get in. Coyote from the looks of it. Yessir ... the one we saw down by City Hall. He says he just wants to get out of danger."

There was a moment's pause, then the soldier nodded to Joe. "The Captain is coming out here. You can make your case to him."

Nodding, Joe looked over his shoulder. "Alright. But can I at least get over there behind the barricades? I'm not armed and I'll keep my paws up but I'd really prefer not to stand here with my back to the city if it's all the same to you."

The soldier took a moment to think it over. "Alright then. I've got a bead on you though," he said and waved Joe closer.

"I'm not looking for a fight," Joe reiterated, but he walked closer, quite happy to get behind some good cover at last. "Why are you guarding this place, anyway, as opposed to so many others?"

"Because the BBC used to transmit from the fifth floor of this building. It hasn't been used for years, but all the gear still works. The only news coming out of Bradford at the moment come from this building," came the answer, but not from the soldier.

Rather, it came from a very tall, very lean weasel in uniform coming out of the doors behind the soldier Joe had been talking to.

"You must be Captain Saunders then," Joe said and stood up straight.

"Correct. And you are?"

"Joe Latrans. I had no idea the building was in use by the military. I was hoping to use some of the equipment."

The weasel raised an eyebrow. Joe thought of himself as a good judge of furs, and the Captain could have been taken out of a textbook on stereotypes of British officers. Calm to the point of absurdity, with a stiff-upper-lip and a decidedly aristocratic air.

He was almost a caricature.

"That is not up to me. You would have to talk to the BBC about that, Mr. Latrans. I am simply here to ensure their safety. We are not here to protect the citizens of Bradford against themselves, however. Which means I am not even certain I should let you in."

"I don't live in Bradford. Like your trooper over there said, I'm an American citizen."

"Sir, permission to speak?" the soldier asked.

Captain Saunders didn't even turn to look at his subordinate. "Granted."

"It would look pretty bad if we turned away a foreign national, Sir, only for him to get killed somewhere out there."

"Thank you for that splendid moment of geopolitical insight, Private Wellesley," the Captain said, and for a brief moment, Joe felt certain he could break icicles off the weasel's vocal cords. "Mr. Latrans, you have placed me in an unpleasant situation. I cannot turn you away, but if I take you in, and the word spreads, every foreign national in Bradford will come running. And unless you didn't know, the reason for the riot is precisely that the city has a disproportionately large group of foreigners within the city limits. I risk my command post being turned into a refugee camp in a matter of hours."

Joe shrugged. "Ah, then I was mistaken. It was my impression after running into that group down by City Hall, that the reason for the riot was that the locals were a bunch of fucking bigots, Sir," Joe said. He didn't like the implication that the Captain was making one bit. Having a first name like "José" meant Joe had faced his share of bigotry throughout his life back in the United States, and as far as he was concerned, there were idiots of all nationalities.

Captain Saunders' face went blank instantly. "You may enter, Mr. Latrans. Stay out of the way of my soldiers, however. We can't have trigger-happy civilians getting in the way of our operations here!"

With that, he turned around and marched back inside. Joe rolled his eyes and followed.