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## *XVII – The Hunt*

He had shot and killed furs in the course of missions before, but the more Joe thought about it, the more he realized that it had always been difficult. Unpleasant.

A source of nightmares, in fact.

Since "retiring", he had told himself that it hadn't been that hard. That he had withdrawn from active duty because he wanted more time with his family. Sitting on the first floor of the National Media Museum with a cup of coffee in his paws, he was starting to realize ... he had simply been deluding himself.

It was true that he wanted more time with his family. That wasn't a lie. But it wasn't the whole truth either.

The truth was that he had worked so damned hard to be a good fur, and seeing someone die was a horrible thing. Knowing that it was him who had pulled the trigger made it all the worse. There were furs out there who deserved to die, no question about it, but a lot of furs were just misguided. Like those five jerks by City Hall. They were bigoted, foolish, narrow-minded idiots, but they were not necessarily evil. More than likely, they were caught up in events. At least some of them. But if one strong leader amongst them led the others astray ... like the first fur he shot ... didn't the rest deserve a second chance?

They hadn't given him a choice.

Looking at his paws, Joe sighed. He was an expert shot and a very quick draw, but he still couldn't quite come to terms with the fact that he had shot five of them before they had managed to get off a single shot.

Had they hesitated? Could he simply have talked them down?

Not their leader, surely. He was the one who had made violence inescapable, but the other four?

And Joe still didn't understand how the Hell he kept having a full clip in that gun.

He should have brought it. Giving up his weapon went against his better judgement but simply touching that gun made his skin crawl.

A female feline approached him. She wore combat fatigues and carried herself with a clear military authority. Joe looked up and smiled.

"Mr. Latrans, if you would please follow me, I will take you up to the fifth floor."

Joe looked at the rank-slide on the feline's chest and wracked his brain to remember the British army insignia. "As you wish, Lieutenant," he finally said and hoped he'd gotten it right.

Apparently he did. The feline simply turned and started off down the hallway, apparently assuming Joe would catch up.

Putting down his coffee, Joe broke into a slow jog until he was in step behind the officer. Finally he was getting somewhere.

###

Cusco was nothing but rubble and burning ruins. Anane was quite pleased with his handiwork, too. Now everything hinged on whether his agents were capable of carrying out the necessary attacks.

Switching on the television in front of him, he sat down in a ruined armchair and crossed his legs as he got comfortable. There were a couple of dead porcine things in the corner of the room, but they wouldn't start to stink for a day or so. Licking the blood off his fingers, he grinned to himself.

In a way, it was like eating pork-chops or blood-sausage. The locals were, after all, simply animals with souls who, through divine prodding of evolution had figured out that standing upright made life a lot easier.

The reception on the television was awful, but that was to be expected. He had left Cusco. In fact, he was now almost a hundred miles away from the disaster he himself had created, in a small hovel in the mountains, but the inhabitants had owned a TV and an antiquated satellite dish. That was their loss, of course. Anane had needed both and he wasn't in the habit of asking nicely. Flicking through the grainy channels he came across everything from game-shows to Lucha Libre-buffoons, playing macho. Some things were apparently the same in all worlds.

Finally, he located a news-channel.

Smiling, he saw how the destruction of Cusco was already headline news, but to his great satisfaction, it already had to share the headlines with an attack on Russia's parliament, the Duma.

Thirty dead, including four terrorists and sixteen MP's ...

Cusco had ten thousand times as many dead or wounded, but already, the focus was split evenly. Chechen separatists were given the blame for the Moscow attack. Allegedly, one of the terrorists had been identified as a high ranking Chechen rebel.

Anane snickered. He had nothing to do with that particular rebel, but this was typical Russian tactics, regardless of what reality one visited. Use a tragedy to further their own political aims. This way, the illegal assassination of that rebel leader, undoubtedly carried out by the Russian Secret Service, FSB, could be disguised.

It was a nice twist.

Still, hundreds of thousands of dead, wounded and homeless creatures in South America couldn't beat a terrorist attack leaving thirty dead to the headlines.

And these creatures, like humans, wondered why God didn't bother to answer them nowadays.

Of course, Agents would be informed of the truth of the matter. Which was why he had left Cusco behind. He already had his next target in mind. He simply had to wait a day or two. By then, doomsayers and last-days evangelists would be foaming about the mouth, ranting about the Rapture, expecting Angels to come and carry their sinful, hateful, bigoted souls to Heaven.

Wouldn't *they* be in for a surprise or two?

Giggling, the fallen Angel swapped channels. It was the same on every news network out there.

No one seemed to understand *proportions*.

Anane could almost love them for it.

###

"Shiori!"

Hirokichi called out to the tigress, putting on his most indifferent, haughty air. The whole thing was turning his stomach. He wanted to get out of there, as fast as possible, but if Shiori didn't think he had plausible reason, she might come looking and he had no time for that kind of thing. Not with the plans he had for the immediate future.

Shiori turned around and nodded. Hirokichi was relieved to see she seemed calm and collected, which in turn told him she had no idea what he had done to the Oracle yet. By the time she went there to look, he would be long gone. Generally speaking, weeks could pass without anyone approaching the Oracle for answers, and after seeing the wretched creature, Hirokichi understood why.

The mere thought made his stomach do somersaults, but he couldn't let that show or Shiori would suspect something was up.

"I have been chosen for an assignment of some importance," he lied.

Shiori raised an eyebrow. "Oh really? You? Why is that then?"

"Because apparently, I'm deemed expendable, and you're not," Hirokichi said and shrugged. "It's one of the suicide missions we've been told about."

That was the right thing to say, and Hirokichi knew it. He was rubbing the tigress along the hairs by insinuating that she was more important than he was. Nodding, slowly, she folded her arms across her chest.

"Where then?"

"There's a riot on in northern England. I'm supposed to take out Downing Street 10. You know ... Japanese tourist, loads of cameras ... packed with explosives."

"You seem quite calm about dying, Hirokichi. You're not having me on, are you?"

"Are you suggesting I am not prepared to die for the cause?"

Hirokichi made sure to sound not only offended, but downright angry. As if deeply offended by the tigress implying that he was too much of a coward to die.

Shiori shook her head. "No. I suppose not. Well, better you than me," she said and chuckled. "I'll see you in the hereafter, then."

Hirokichi nodded slightly and turned around, leaving the room. He needed transportation to northern England. That in itself wasn't going to be much of a problem. There were flights directly from Yokohama to Manchester, and from there, he could get a car and drive to where he needed to be in less than an hour.

"Not if I get my way," he muttered to himself, under his breath. He had to hope he wasn't too late. It was a very long flight to England.

###

The images on the screen were horrifying and Lee had stopped watching. He couldn't bear it. Miho was still hanging on, but her face was wet from tears. Aslaug had forgotten how to blink.

Her eyeballs felt strangely dry, but if she blinked, she missed a split second of the tragedy, and not bearing witness to as much of it as possible felt wrong in every conceivable way.

On the TV-screen, a droning speaker explained something in Japanese, while images showed a couple of children, stumbling through a destroyed city, dressed in rags ... if anything at all ... bloodied, crying helplessly, while the world as they knew it had come to an end all around them.

Aslaug didn't have the first clue what the speaker was saying, nor did she care. She saw furs of all ages suffering. Truly *suffering*.

Down the street on the screen, a fire-hydrant had burst, and furs were practically trampling one another into the ground to get to the water.

Some were dead on the ground. Others were dying from injuries they had sustained in the throng.

No one cared about anyone but him- or herself. Children were pushed aside, old furs were punched out of the way.

It was absolute pandemonium ...

All for a cup of water.

"Lee," Aslaug said, hoarsely. "Would you please try to find out if there are volcanoes that are expected to erupt or fault-lines that are about to shift anywhere in the world?"

"That's where he'll be, I take it?" Lee asked behind the equine.

"No, that's specifically where he won't be. I want to eliminate the places he won't choose. If someone expects an earthquake, a volcanic eruption, a hurricane or some other natural disaster, they'll evacuate. As many furs as possible. There will be relief workers on standby, fire-departments will be on high alert, as will soldiers. He won't pick such a spot. Too many furs will be saved. He's going to pounce on places where furs would feel safe, but where it can still be hidden as a major natural disaster."

"Or war ..." Miho said, barely audibly. "I'll bet you any amount of money he's behind the massacre in Omdurman too."

"Good point. That too then," Aslaug said and nodded. "He's going to pick a place to strike where he can "hide" in plain sight. Amidst all the chaos and destruction."

"Amaterasu ... I can't watch any more of this," Miho whispered and finally turned away as the camera panned over what was apparently a soccer-stadium. It seemed the dead had been brought there for temporary storage. At first, someone had tried to line them up neatly. Then as the dead kept amassing, they had given up and just ... piled them on top of one another.

The stack was seven or eight furs deep in places, and Aslaug didn't have to understand the Japanese speaker to know it was only one of several such temporary facilities.

There was no way that many furs could be buried decently before they started to rot. Which meant either a lot of restless spirits, or an epidemic of disease.

Meaning more dead.

Cusco's trials were only just beginning, and in two weeks, no one would remember or care anymore. They'd be looking for something else to entertain themselves with. The initial goosebumps would've gone away. The momentary pang of guilt would have passed once most furs had donated a few dollars to some charity or other.

Money that, for the most part, would never reach those who needed it.

"I'm done sitting in Yokohama, healing up," Aslaug finally said. Her voice, always raw and very hoarse, sounded like someone had taken an electric cheese-grater to her vocal cords. "I'm going to find him ... and then I'm going to rip him open. And I'm not going to stop until there's nothing left of him."

Her eyes were narrow slits, barely open at all.

She had healed up sufficiently from her ordeal at the Well of Wisdom. There was no alternative at least.

"Turn it off," Lee begged behind her. "I am not watching but I can hear the newsreader. *Please*, turn it off!"

Aslaug reached out for the remote control and switched the TV off. She didn't get up. Instead, she just sat there and stared at the black screen while Miho sobbed next to her on the couch.

"I'm going to hunt him down ... like the rabid animal he is!" the Valkyrie hissed between her teeth.

###

Being taken up to the fifth floor wasn't the same as getting to talk to someone who could help him and Joe couldn't drink any more coffee unless he wanted to stay awake for the next year or two.

He had taken to questioning why he had chosen to go to Bradford instead of going to some other, regular part of the BBC, but the answer to that was simple. If he was to prove that Aslaug had nothing to do with the attack on that winter-sports event, he had to do some serious editing, but if he simply walked up to a BBC-journalist and said "Hello, I'm American and I can prove that the internationally agreed-upon terrorist from the ski-jump-bombing isn't guilty," they would probably have laughed him out of the room or, worse still, have called the police.

There was no time for that kind of thing.

Finally, the door next to him opened and a female Doberman came out. She was quite pretty, but looked like she could do with a week of sleep. Her paws were shaking, Joe noticed. Either from exhaustion or nerves. Clearly, she wasn't a soldier. Dressed in civilian clothing, she stood out in the building, every bit as much as Joe did.

Tipping the hat he was no longer wearing, Joe smiled politely. "Hello Miss," he said. "I'm sorry for the inconvenience, but I think I've got some important information about something that happened not long ago."

The Doberman extended a shaky paw. "Hello Mr. Latrans. Lieutenant Reese said you were waiting for someone to talk to you."

"That explains how you know my name," Joe said, disarmingly, shaking the offered paw. "It's got nothing to do with the riots, I have to warn you."

"Fair enough. But then why come here? In fact, why come here in the first place. The Lieutenant said you weren't local."

"To be honest with you, I came here because I hoped to use the editing machines. If I took this to the BBC, I feared they'd turn me away. I don't ... honestly think I had given the riot much thought. I was too focused on helping someone innocent who has been wrongly accused of something."

The Doberman nodded, slowly. "I appreciate the honesty. My name is Patricia Van Ort and I'm one of the BBC's journalists covering local Yorkshire news. Guess why *I'm* here of all places," she said, smiling but sounding utterly exhausted.

"I don't envy you," Joe said, truthfully. "I mean, I'm here too but your job must be stressful right now."

"It is. But let's not dwell on that. You said you had proof that someone innocent was being wrongly accused? I can't promise I'll be able to help you much, to be honest. The moment we get something newsworthy in, we have to drop everything we're doing and get to work but ... if it's good and if it's something I can do between hectic flashes of riot-related activity, I'll try. I guess it's only fair if you came through the Bradford Gauntlet to reach us."

"I do. I think I can prove that the equine everyone blames for the terrorist attack isn't guilty. But to do so, I need access to the raw, unedited footage captured of her on that tower."

For a moment, Patricia looked like she was going to shake her head. Joe could hardly blame her, considering the stress she was clearly working under. Then she paused. "I don't want to spend hours on this if it turns out to be wrong, Mr. Latrans. I'm sorry to be so blunt, but I haven't slept more than half an hour consecutively for the last two



days, and probably no more than three or four hours put together. How sure are you of this?"

"I'll stake my good reputation on it, but since that's probably not going to mean a lot to you, Miss Van Ort, I'll just say I'm deadly sure. But I do need the unedited material."

The Doberman looked at Joe for a long, scrutinizing moment. Then she nodded. "Alright then. Come with me," she finally said, shaking her head wearily.

Joe could hear her mumbling "I must be bonkers" to herself.

"Or quite trusting," Joe offered. "I'm very grateful for the help."

"You'd better be, Yank!" the journalist chuckled. "But if you're sure enough of this to come through Bradford in the middle of the worst riots in Britain since the Peterloo Massacre, you've got to have *something*. Or you're barking mad."

"Well, my name *is* Latrans," Joe said, unable to keep a smirk off his face.

"Whu ...? Sorry, my Latin is awful," the femme said.

"It means 'barking', Miss ..." Joe explained and closed the door behind him as Patricia took him into the editing area.

Groaning, she found a place to sit down in front of a workstation. "Alright, let's see if we can't pull this from the central footage database in London, then," she said and began searching.

###

Sitting around waiting was getting a bit dull, but Varghöss hadn't been told what else to do. He'd tried a bit of hunting after he got hungry, but he hadn't caught much. It had made the rumble in his stomach stop, but it hadn't actually sated him.

Now he was just plain bored.

Maybe it was time to show some initiative of his own? He could always go looking for a dark agent or two. Aslaug never complained when he bit those. And they usually got really scared when he suddenly pounced. That was always fun.

He had no idea where to look, though. He'd never been to this place before. The locals spoke strangely, and the landscape looked different than what he was used to.

Although he did rather like some of the trees here. They smelled nice. Rolling in the grass and smelling the falling flowers from trees all day wasn't very productive though, and by now, his claws were itching for something to do.

He just had no idea where to look.

All in all, there was nothing to do but wait for Aslaug to call on him and hope it wouldn't be too long. She didn't want to keep him cooped up in the house in the city at least and that was good. Sleeping indoors on the floor was fine once in a while but he got antsy if he had to do it for more than one night in a row.

He missed the woods by Aslaug's log cabin. There was always something to do there. Haul fallen trees, fight bears, scare the fish in the stream by barking at them.

And lots of territory to mark and patrol, of course.

He wanted to go home, by now. Flopping down under the nearest tree, he made a whining noise and tried to go to sleep. At least that made time go by faster.

###

Joe nodded eagerly. "Yes! That's exactly the piece of footage I'm talking about," he said, excitedly.

"Look ... it's almost thirty seconds longer than what was released for use on TV!" Patricia exclaimed and pulled up a second file. "This is the edited piece."

"Is that normal procedure?" Joe asked, not wanting to jump to conclusions.

Patricia nodded. "Oh yes, absolutely. We usually get raw footage many, many times longer than what we need for a clip. We have to pick the best and sharpest sections and run them through editing to clear up the image if its grainy or the likes."

Joe scratched his cheek. That explanation made perfect sense to him, really. No doubt, news-teams at major events recorded hours and hours of footage, and only a fraction of it would ever be aired. Still, this was a major leap in the right direction. "Okay," he said. "Let's see the whole thing from the start."

Patricia played the clip ... all seventy two seconds of it ... from start to finish. Once it stopped, she looked at the coyote inquisitively. "Okay ... what now?"

Joe was still scratching his chin. The footage was taken with a paw-held camcorder from down in the throng of furs watching the ski-jumping event. If it had been done twenty

years earlier, it would have been doubtful if one could even make out the furs at the top of the tower or if they would have simply been one big blur. Now, one could definitely make out individuals, but it was still grainy.

"Could you enhance the image? You know ... bring in the top of the tower into sharper focus?" he asked.

Patricia nodded. "Sure. How much of the top of the tower?"

Joe watched the other clip ... the one that had been aired on TV for a few seconds to compare. Then he realized where one of the problems might lie. "See that clip? The one they aired. That shows almost the entire ramp, because they wanted to make sure everyone seeing it knew that the jumper had cleared the ramp before the explosions."

Again, Patricia nodded. There were circles of enhancement around the very top of the tower and the bottom of the ramp, to focus on the two parts of the image that were of particular interest. "Indeed. I see what you mean. They never brought either of the two into really close focus. So the top of the ramp is still somewhat grainy. I can certainly make it clearer than the aired version if we cut away everything but the crossbar and say ... three yards above and below it?"

Joe nodded. Patricia got to work. It took some time to do this, but he wasn't forcing the issue. Patricia would get it done in her own time, and if he rushed her, she might make a mistake. Besides, being the techhead he was, he couldn't help but find the process fascinating. Little by little, the image cleared up. The images had been recorded from half a mile away, and not by professionals with state-of-the-art equipment, so there was no way the image could be completely clear, but it was definitely improving. There had been a television crew present, but they had not been sending live, and their equipment, according to the official story at least, had been destroyed in the rampage of furs trying to escape the collapsing tower.

But as the image cleared up, Joe was starting to question the official story.

"That's her. That's definitely her," he finally said. It had taken Patricia almost twenty minutes, but she had produced an image that didn't shake, and which only showed the top of the ramp. Aslaug was right there. Joe would recognize that stance anywhere.

"Clearly an equine, at least," the Doberman said. "Strange. So few of them around. They tend to focus on not dying out. I can't remember having heard of one blowing him- or herself up before."

"I'm sure they are out there," Joe chuckled. "Trust me, in my experience, equines have the same capacity for being complete assholes as everyone else. The one you're looking at? You'd think she'd made it her life's mission to be as in-your-face as possible. But there is no way she'd blow herself up."

He leaned in closer. There was absolutely no doubt whatsoever. He was looking straight at the frozen Image of Aslaug.

"Okay, it's cleared up. Let's try to run the whole thing again then. She appears very suddenly. As if she comes around the corner up those stai ..." Patricia started, playing the recording again. "Heeey ... waitaminute!! This isn't raw footage?! Someone's been fiddling with this! Look, she just pops up, right there in the middle of things!"

Joe nodded, closing his eyes and drawing a sigh of relief. "It looks like I was right, then," he said. "Try running the whole thing one fifth speed. Keep a close look at her paws and keep an eye on her reaction when the explosion happens."

Patricia nodded, slowly ... not sure what to make of it all. "This is very, very irregular. This is supposed to be the raw material from the archives, Mr. Latrans. No one is supposed to have tampered with it.

Joe didn't answer. Instead, he looked closely at the screen. From one frame to the next, Aslaug simply appeared in the image. She seemed to engage the jumper waiting on the crossbar in conversation. She seemed ... confused, for lack of a better word. Of course, Joe couldn't hear what was being said, but her gestures were not threatening. More like someone not sure where she was, and frankly, the coyote couldn't blame her. Of all the places to pop into existence.

Patricia seemed more and more frustrated about what she clearly considered missing seconds of footage. But she still watched, paying attention to what Joe had told her to look for.

"She doesn't really look like she's threatening anyone. And she isn't holding anything, either. How could she have detonated the bomb?"

"My point exactly," Joe said and nodded. "The explosion doesn't happen where she is, but further down the tower at a supporting part of the structure, meaning it wasn't a remote detonated suicide belt, and if she isn't detonating the bombs that did go off ... who did? Whoever did it, it wasn't her. Which means she's been blamed for something she didn't do!"

"But that's ... that's just awful!" Patricia said and swallowed. "Isn't it bad enough she got killed? Alright, I think we've got something for the six o'clock news here, Mr. Latrans. But ... but how do we go about presenting this? She just appears out of nowhere."

"I don't know how to explain that," the coyote said and sighed. It wasn't even a lie. He knew what had happened but how would he ever explain it to someone who wasn't "in the know", so to speak? He really didn't see an easy way around it. "Look, there's the detonation. Look at her reaction!"

"She's surprised! She's just as surprised as everyone else on that tower!! Look," Patricia burst out, freeze-framing the image on the screen. "You can even make out some of the white in her eyes as she opens them wide!"

Joe just nodded. "Yep. There you have it. Evidence she didn't do it."

"She must've been a fan who just climbed the tower to meet one of the jumpers and she ... she got caught up in it," the Doberman offered.

Joe chuckled. "I know who she is. Trust me, that isn't why she'd be up there. It's more likely she staggered up the wrong staircase while drunk as a skunk!"

"You knew her? Who was she?" Patricia asked.

Joe bit his own lip in frustration. He had said too much. Getting out of this wasn't going to be easy.

"Her name is Aslaug," he said and shrugged. "She's Danish ..."

"Mr. Latrans ...?"

"Yes?"

"Why do you keep talking about her in the present tense?"

Joe felt like smacking his head into the table.

###

Aslaug checked the edge of her franciscas. She missed her long-axe. The throwing axes were, at best, a back-up weapon for close combat. She could use her spear, but it just didn't have the same brutal heft as the long-axe, and she was certain that it would have been useful when facing down Anane.

First, though, she had to catch him.

Lee and Miho were talking amongst themselves, checking their firearms and apparently preparing their souls. Aslaug admired their courage. Not many agents would be willing to hunt down a fallen Angel. There was a clear difference in strength, and if either of the two Shinto Agents ever came face to face with Anane, they wouldn't last more than a few minutes. But they had insisted on coming, and Aslaug couldn't deny them that.

But Anane was *her* prey.

There would be plenty to do though, and Aslaug had no doubt that the Agents would be incredibly helpful.

Still, she missed Joe. There was something else about having a trusted, known comrade-in-arms by her side for this, and frankly, his absence made her feel unarmed. She could send Varghöss to look for him, but when she had no idea where to look, that was a pretty futile exercise.

So no axe ... and no Joe Latrans.

Anane was already ahead.

She would just have to catch up then. Preferably with a few good, solid blows to the damned creature's face! Images of corpses and traumatized children from Cusco kept playing over and over in her head. And there was that massacre in Omdurman that Miho and Lee had talked about.

What the fallen Angel was doing was insufferable, and ... consequently ... Aslaug wasn't going to suffer it any longer.

Fallen or not, Anane was an Angel. Another bloody useless bird. But while she would stick to insulting ... and occasionally beating up ... the ones who hadn't fallen, Aslaug wouldn't be quite so merciful to this one. She felt the very tips of her fingers itch and she flexed her paws repeatedly, gritting her teeth as she struggled to keep her temper under control.

Losing control was a bad idea.

Taking a deep breath, and then another, she half turned, looking to her two new allies. "Lee?" she said.

"There were three possibilities. Here ..." he said and gave Aslaug a piece of paper.

The Valkyrie looked at it, then nodded. "Alright then. We start at the top of this list. I'll see you there."

Varghöss appeared in the room, looking more than a little eager to get moving, and moments later, he and Aslaug had vanished.

"I feel sorry for our enemy," Lee said, matter-of-factly.

Miho shrugged. "What about us?"

"I don't believe in feeling sorry for myself. This is a glorious way to die," Lee said, shrugging.

Nodding, Miho smiled crookedly. "It is indeed. It has been an honour to serve with you."

Lee smiled back and put an arm around his comrade's shoulder, giving her a squeeze. "Likewise," he said.

He closed the door behind them as they left, and made sure it was locked. Other agents would need that safe-house in the future, after all. He didn't expect to see it again, himself.