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## *XVIII – 13:11 – 13*

Putting his foot in his mouth was nothing new for Joe Latrans. In fact, there were times when he felt he did it almost every time he spoke up. Typically when he and his wife disagreed. Somehow, she had this ... this strange ability so common in femmes, to simply *look* at him in a certain way, and that look would make him feel like a foolish teenager, trying to out-debate a Nobel Prize winner. She could make him feel dumb, even though he knew he wasn't.

But it was rare for him to feel the way he did as he waited for Patricia to come back to the editing table. She had been called away to some riot-related reporting, and once that had been taken care of, she had been so utterly exhausted that she hadn't even been coherent.

She had gone to get some sleep, and Joe was twisting his brain into knots trying to think of a way to explain to Patricia that Aslaug probably wasn't dead. He had decided against trying to lie his way out of this. He wasn't a good liar to begin with, and besides, the reporter was clearly far too intelligent to fall for something like that. She'd see straight through it, and if she did, Joe knew he could forget about getting any more help.

But telling the truth would make him look like a lunatic.

One of the soldiers came up to him and offered him a blanket. He was tired, but he didn't want to sleep just yet. Still, he appreciated the gesture and he wrapped himself up in the blanket. He could doze a bit in the chair at least.

Closing his eyes, he immediately realized he was far more tired than he had thought. With a tongue-curling yawn, he slumped and drifted off to sleep. He felt warm and comfortable, but dreams began to creep up on him immediately. Fragments of visions and fractured images.

He found himself standing in a church. It wasn't American ... but rather a European style building. Gothic and imposing ... and huge.

He was alone. He couldn't feel God, but that didn't really bother him by then. The building was cool, which Joe at least appreciated. For some reason, he knew it was blistering hot outside, but as long as he stayed indoors, he wouldn't be sweltering. The altar was in front of him. It was very old ... centuries, at least, with a large, wooden altarpiece, painted to depict first the betrayal, then the crucifixion and finally resurrection of Christ, going from left to right. The paintings were of good quality, too. Joe had seen some examples that made him cringe over the years, but these were actually quite beautiful.

He stood there for a while, simply looking at the images, trying to figure out what was going on in his head. He observed this object of faith as an object of art. It was ... remarkably well made. The woodcarvings were masterfully done, to the point where Joe wondered if any woodcarver alive today would be able to do work that good. It was not a lost art ... but almost. The paintings themselves were cracked slightly, as old paintings tended to do, but the facial expressions of the figures depicted were clearly visible and decipherable.

There were several ways ... several schools ... of depicting these particular scenes. The betrayal of Christ was sometimes depicted with Christ as utterly calm, accepting the inevitable. At other times, it showed him distraught and saddened. The crucifixion showed him as either utterly calm in the face of Death, despite having suffered dreadful tortures. Some showed him in terrible agony. A few even showed him at the moment just before death, face raised to the sky, mouth open as if shouting his penultimate sentence at the Heavens, for God to hear.

"Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"

"God, God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

Somehow it seemed far more likely than the alternative. That Christ, at the moment of death, should call out to God to forgive a wrongdoing just didn't seem as likely.

Joe stuck his paws in his pockets and canted his head slightly. The images didn't speak to him the way they used to. He was no longer a Good Christian. He was ... more of a Convinced Doubter. Not doubting the existence of God, but absolutely doubting His magnanimity. Still, this particular church was not an unpleasant place to be. Turning his head away for a moment, he sat down on one of the pews, folding his arms across his chest, still looking at the images. Something deep within him told him he was meant to find something here. See something, feel something ...

It just eluded him at the moment. Maybe the paintings were not what he was meant to see. Maybe it was the woodwork? He looked closer, but while he saw a number of Christian symbols, none of them seem to really stand out. None of them said anything in particular.

Sighing, he scratched his chin and tried to figure this out. It was then he realized he was no longer alone.

He turned his head again.

Across the aisle, in the pews on the opposite side, sat a single figure. A feline ... of some kind. It was almost certainly male, but it was next to impossible to determine anything more than that. It was as if he was looking at a lion, a jaguar, a Siamese, a panther ... every conceivable kind of feline, at the same time.

It was confusing to say the least, but Joe had seen that particular angel before.

"Raphael," he said, inclining his head and tipping the hat he didn't wear ... to his increasing annoyance.

"Mr. Latrans," the Angel replied, not looking his way.

Joe looked back to the scenery in front of him. There was a pulpit too. Far more elaborately carved than what one would normally see in an American church. It wasn't a simple speaker's podium, but an actual raised, wooden octagonal box with stairs leading up to it. It even had a little roof above it. This too was covered in imagery. Joe could see the four evangelists, as well as a dove, probably signifying the Holy Ghost. Many other small details were visible, like acanthus leaves and a pelican, pecking its own chest to feed its young of its own blood. And a fish.

All Christian symbols ... some of them very old indeed.

"Why are you here?" Joe finally asked, without looking back to the Angel. "I thought this was *my* dream."

Raphael didn't answer at first, and the coyote didn't push for an answer. Instead, he tried to make sense of all the imagery.

It was all ... quite beautiful but he never felt particularly close to God in churches. For many years, he'd preferred to talk to God outside, surrounded by nature and the wilds. He'd told his wife this. His family. Aslaug. Even Tigermark and Aramis.

It was his way of doing things.

"You are angry, Joe ..." Raphael finally said.

"Tell me something I *don't* know, why dontcha?" the coyote chuckled, bitterly.

"Why are you angry with God?" the Angel asked.

For a moment, Joe felt a snide or even unpleasant retort coming on, but he decided against it. It was too easy to react that way. Too easy by far. But he had made his case quite sufficiently in front of Christ at the trial, and he didn't feel like going over the whole thing again.

Finally, he turned his head to look at Raphael once again. "I'm not angry at God. I'm disappointed. I expected more. I expected *better*. And because of that disappointment, I've *become* angry."

Nodding slowly, Raphael sighed, not meeting Joe's eyes. "But who are you to question God?"

For a split second, Joe felt like someone had set off a small nuclear bomb behind his eyes. In fact, he had the quite irreverent thought that if someone had taken a photograph of him at that moment, he'd be sitting there, right in front of the altarpiece, next to an angel, with a localized mushroom-cloud rising over his head and steam coming out of his ears.

"I'm pretty sure you don't want me to answer that," he finally said.

Raphael actually cracked the tiniest smile. "Why not? God Heals, Joe ... that is what my name *means*. God could even heal your pain, if you would let Him into your heart again. It would be the simplest thing, in fact."

"I've got itchy knuckles and you really don't want to test my readiness to punch your lights out right now!! Asking me a question that stupid really has you first in line for a well executed P.L.A.N.!!"

"P.L.A.N.?"

"Patented Latrans AsswhoopiN!"

Raphael winced. "You spend too much time with that shieldmaiden friend of yours, and your abbreviations need some work."

"Valkyrie."

"What?"

"She's not a shieldmaiden anymore. You know that as well as I do!" Joe grumbled. "Are you done with the stupid questions so I can get back to my philosophising on the artwork or do you have something else to add?"

Raphael sighed again. "I'm just curious. It goes against my nature to see someone in pain. Especially someone who has been such a devout servant of the Lord for so long ..."

Joe practically bolted out of his seat, pointing a finger at Raphael with an angry growl rising in his throat. "Now there you have it, don't you? There you have your own damned answer!"

To his credit, Raphael actually looked shocked and honestly upset at the outburst and Joe's angry reaction. "Please, I did not mean to anger you further," the Seraph said, earnestly. "Please, let me help you."

"Help me with *what*? My anger? You can't heal this by laying on paws. You can't make me feel better by half measures and prayer anymore! It doesn't WORK that way, damn you!"

The Angel looked deeply shaken at the coyote's choice of words. For a moment, Joe could swear he saw tears rise in the Seraph's eyes, too and he almost felt moved to pity.

"I'm sorry. I am taking out all this frustration on the wrong target. I have no reason to doubt your sincerity," he said and shook his head, sitting down again. "Listen, Raphael ... the world is going down the drains. God is either Almighty and indifferent, or not almighty at all, and incapable of fixing it. I could live with the second of the two options, don't you get it? I could accept that. I could deal with that. Come to terms with it, somehow. But indifference is ... it's worse than actively trying to cause harm. Indifference means you don't *care*! And if God doesn't care about us, then we do not owe Him any kind of allegiance. Why should I pray, go to Church and try to live a good, Christian life if God doesn't care either way? Why should *anyone*?"

Raphael didn't answer for a moment. He seemed very, very sad indeed and Joe once again felt moved to a pang of sympathy. As he sat there, he realized Raphael, being the intermediary for God's healing, probably had the most thankless job in Heaven. Especially nowadays. And being the Angel of science and knowledge? It was almost as ludicrous a notion as having a God of Atheism. Modern science had brought its own brand of pseudo-divinity with it, and one did not often hear scientists having just made a major breakthrough give public praise to Raphael for the inspiration.

In fact, Joe realized ... Raphael was probably the loneliest, most misunderstood Seraph in existence.

And he felt pity for the creature.

Being the Angel of Knowledge ... yet not understanding such an important concept. It had to be pure, constant torture.

"You asked me a question," he finally said, calmly and not unkindly. "You asked me who I was to question God."

Raphael nodded eagerly, finally looking at Joe. "I didn't mean it as an insult," he assured.

"No, I think I get that now. You wonder why I question God ... because you wonder why *anyone* would."

Again, the angel nodded, although somewhat more hesitantly. "Yes?"

Joe half turned on the pew, putting his elbows on his knees and leaning forward, trying to figure out the best way of explaining this particular thing to an Angel.

"It's got to do with souls," he finally said. "It's because we have souls, which gives us this ... this deep, deep drive to understand and to fathom. To expand ourselves and our knowledge and the world we live in. I can't answer why everyone else questions God. It's an individual thing, because that's what a soul really *is*, when you get down to it. Individuality. But I can tell you that for me, it's because I've been taught I've been created in God's image. Like everyone else. Which, in a way, is a comforting thought because that means God is all things. Big, small, fat, skinny, male, female, feline, canid, equine, lapine, whatever. God is everything ..."

Raphael didn't nod, but his facial expression told Joe that so far, the coyote wasn't saying anything the Angel couldn't follow. Joe scratched the top of his head and took a

deep breath before looking back up to the altar for a brief moment, then back to the Angel.

"I've also been taught that we are all God's children. That God is a father-figure that we must respect and love ... sometimes even fear. But when a child grows up, Raphael, he or she inevitably realizes that his or her parents are not the perfect creatures they seemed to be ten or twelve years earlier. When I was six ... my dad was a superhero, and my mom could do no wrong! If someone tried to convince me that this wasn't so, I wouldn't believe them. When my parents occasionally argued, my world would crumble, because *as I saw my world*, two perfect authority figures couldn't be in contradiction with one another. Do you understand what I mean?"

"I do, but God is only one authority figure, though. God doesn't argue with Himself," Raphael said, still a bit confused.

Joe chuckled. "That would be amusing though. God having a blazing, cosmic row with himself. I'd pay good money to be a fly on the wall witnessing that, I think. Anyway, that's not the point. The point is found in First Corinthians."

"Chapter thirteen, verse eleven, I take it?" Raphael asked, smiling sadly.

"No. That would be deliberately taking something out of context. That whole passage is about love, and you need three verses to get the whole idea. Verse eleven to thirteen."

Raphael nodded and closed his eyes momentarily. "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I came of age, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then I shall know even as also I am known. And now abideth faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love," he recited in a tender, sombre voice.

Joe nodded. "I've already said, though, that I will not love God with all my heart, soul and mind, because that leaves nothing for those dearest to me. God has no right to demand that I love Him before my family. My children and my wife will always come first. But regardless, scripture still gives the answer to your question. I grew up. I came of age. And as an adult, I must question my parents' infallibility, in order to be me. To become an individual. To fully allow my soul to be that which it is, and not simply a copy ... a poor imitation ... of my parents. I may be God's child, just as everyone else in the world, and as those verses say, I am *known* by God, but even then as a child coming of age, I am *obligated* to question God's actions when I find fault in them. If I do not, I am undeserving of free will. I'm even undeserving of my *soul*."

Raphael nodded, thoughtfully. "And as opposed to many ardent Christians, you *do* find fault ..."

Joe sighed and leaned forward again, once more putting his elbows on his knees and looking straight at the Angel on the pews across the aisle. In more ways than one, they were on each their side of a great divide. "Yes, I do," he said, " Only those of *blind* faith, who refuse to open their eyes to the obvious find no fault in God's actions or ... as it may be ... in God's inaction. It's easier to refuse that God can make mistakes. It's MUCH easier. Accepting that God is infallible means you never have to ask unpleasant questions of yourself or of the world around you. It means going through your entire fucking life with *blinders* on, Raphael, and I refuse to do that like some draft-horse, tied before the Cart of Faith, pulling a Load of Belief. As I said, if God is almighty, He is indifferent. And if he is not almighty, we have been taught lies by His many various churches for as long as Christendom has existed. Do you understand?"

"I ... don't think I am meant to," Raphael said at last. "I have no soul. No concept of what this feeling you have is. I was never a child. I was created ... as I sit here. Unchanging and eternal. I hear the choir at all times, I feel the presence of God in all things. So I cannot understand. Because ... I'm not supposed to understand."

"I feel sorry for you," Joe said, absolutely sincerely. "I do not envy you. But this is my answer. It is as simple ... *and* as complicated as that."

"There are those in Heaven who scoff at you, Joe Latrans. Those who say you've fallen from the path, and that you've abandoned God. But if I understand you correctly, you feel it is God who has abandoned you. Am I right?"

"I feel that God has abandoned all His creation. Not just me."

"I see ..."

Joe looked back to the altarpiece. "Now I see this for what it is. A beautiful work of art. Made by furs who put love and care and attention into their work, because they hoped to please the Lord by their endeavours. They would come here, to this church after they had completed their work, and they would hear preachers relay the Word to them to the best of their ability, and they would look at the altar and the altarpiece ... and at the pulpit, and think "I made that," and hope that because of that work, a perfect, unfailing God would have mercy on them," Joe said and sighed deeply. "And while they were wonderful artisans ... and quite probably good furs in their own right ... you know what that means?"



Raphael nodded, sadly. "Yes. I do."

"It means ... they never understood First Corinthians 13:11-13," Joe said, wearily, closing his eyes.

And woke up.

###

Miho's throat had gone dry. She had just witnessed Aslaug jumping onto the back of her gigantic wolf and speeding off through the air. Radar would mistake her for a large bird or at least a small flock of birds, and anything getting within actual, visual range of her wouldn't be able to see her anyway. She'd be moving too fast. It was a bit like seeing a Kami move. Frightening.

Lee hung up his telephone. "I've booked us a couple of seats, Miho. We need to get a move on," he said. "We've only got an hour before the plane takes off and we've got to get through check-in, and the airport is at least ten minutes away."

Miho nodded and got into the car, and Lee put his foot down heavily to close the distance as swiftly as possible.

"What about visas?"

"It's been taken care of. Don't worry. We'll get there, but not quite as fast as our new friend up there."

"She scares me, Lee," Miho finally admitted. "There's a tangible aura of death clinging to her. I can almost hear the screams of dying warriors just sitting in the same room with her."

It was something she had wanted to say before, but with Aslaug around, it had seemed ... imprudent. Besides, Lee knew more about Heathens than she did, because of his childhood in England, growing up in a village that had been founded by Vikings over a thousand years before. But she still needed to say it.

"She's a Valkyrie. They're ... not meant to be warm and cuddly. But yes, I can hear those screams too. Once, when she turned, I swear I could see an army, charging down a hill. I was right there ... amongst them. I could smell the leather and the metal and the sweat. It didn't last longer than it takes to blink, but ... it felt real," Lee said and bit his lips. "But she serves the same side in this war as we do. As long as she opposes evil, I'll help her. We're bound by duty to do so."

Miho nodded. "I know. And it's not that I don't *like* her. I do. I mean ... I really do. But she's frightening."

"I don't envy her."

"Neither do I."

No more words were shared before they reached the airport.

###

Glorious chaos reigned and Anane hadn't been able to stop himself from coming and having a look for himself. He kept out of sight, of course, since simply walking down the street would attract unwanted attention, seeing as he wasn't some ... filthy animal with a soul. He could change his appearance to look like the locals but why should he? He could sit at a safe distance and see and hear everything he needed. His hirelings were doing good, solid work so far. That much he had to grant them. They were quite eager and far more capable than he had thought they would be.

He was perched on a tall building in Philadelphia, overlooking a wide open area and Independence Hall.

Or what was left of it. It was seriously damaged. But that was just an added bonus. No doubt a few school-classes had perished in the process, but they were irrelevant. What mattered was what he could see across the square from Independence Hall ... at the Liberty Bell exhibit.

Or more precisely, what he couldn't see.

There wasn't much left. It was a thing of beauty, really. A movie was being filmed, about the American war for Independence, and apparently, the opening scene was meant to show the lead actor visiting the Liberty Bell exhibit.

Well, that actor was now spread over the better part of an acre, as was most of the camera-crew and the director. Not to mention a few dozen unpaid extras.

And more importantly, a very important symbol of American history had been practically vaporized.

Snickering, the fallen Angel nodded to himself. What a simple suicide bomber couldn't accomplish by driving a large, semi-armoured vehicle packed with enough explosives to

turn it into a self-ambulatory, 4 tonne bomb into the middle of a movie-set and pushing the detonator.

Boom!

Followed by much howling, gnashing of teeth, wailing in anguish and national shock.

By tomorrow, America would've practically forgotten Cusco. America had barely noticed Omdurman as it was. All because of one famous cretin and a pile of well-shaped but cracked metal.

It was time for him to pick his next target, and he knew *just* where to go.

###

Aslaug pulled Varghöss into a sharp halt. Sighing, she shook her head and trotted him closer, scratching his neck a little to let him know everything would be fine. The gigantic beast bared his teeth nonetheless and growled ominously, realizing only too well that trouble was waiting for him up ahead.

Three female furs were waiting up ahead. Aslaug dismounted and approached them, Varghöss staying behind with all his hackles raised, still growling.

"Hrist ... Haldana ... Astrid," Aslaug said, nodding to each of them in turn.

They each acknowledged her with a nod back. They were all armed and Aslaug noted none of them looked particularly happy.

"There's some concern about your ... agenda ... Aslaug!" Hrist said, folding her arms across her chest.

Aslaug raised an eyebrow. "I've only got one agenda. To serve Odin's will. I am acting on the Allfather's orders. Would you question *him*?"

Haldana shook her head. "No. But we question how you carry out your orders, Sister. You are a loose cannon at best! You go away for years, not showing your face in Valhalla. You refuse to meet Hrist when she goes to simply check up on you to make sure you're alright. Then suddenly, you come marching in and expect everyone to simply be happy?"

"I don't expect anything from any of you, except that you accept the will of the Allfather," Aslaug said, matter-of-factly.

The last of the three Valkyries, a heavily muscled canid with enough scars to rival even Aslaug, narrowed her eyes. "You've got to be the most conceited member of the sisterhood, Aslaug. The will of the Allfather? And that's you??" she growled.

"No. But I am an extension of his will, as are you three. Is that not what we remind ourselves?" Aslaug said, her paws out to the side to show she wasn't preparing for a fight.

Haldana nodded. "That much is true. She has a point, sisters."

"WHOSE SIDE ARE YOU ON?" Astrid roared. "Why her? Why should she be chosen for something like this? The rest of us work our asses off. We've done so for centuries! Millenia in some cases! Hrist is one of the most senior Valkyries in Valhalla and then this *upstart* comes in and rewrites the rules?"

Aslaug shook her head. "I wouldn't dream of rewriting any rules. Odin determines the rules. He and only he can command us, and you should know that as well as anyone, Sister."

Astrid narrowed her eyes and reached for her sword, but Hrist reached out and stopped the younger Valkyrie's move.

"I know you want to fight, but I want to settle this peacefully if possible," the senior Valkyrie said.

Aslaug nodded. "I appreciate the sentiment but I don't know what there is to settle," she said and sighed. "I am under orders. What is it you want? For me to step down and let you take over?"

"That would be a good start," Astrid growled, but she was silenced by a sharp look from Haldana.

Hrist shook her head. "We would settle for you letting us in on this. We are a sisterhood, Aslaug. I've told you this before. You insist on this solo-trip of yours ... you're not a team-player. Now ... be reasonable about this and let us help you."

"Certainly," Aslaug said and shrugged.

"That's more li ..." Hrist began but Aslaug broke her off with a paw-gesture.

"If it is Odin's will that we cooperate on this, that is," she said.

Hrist looked dumbfounded for a moment. "*What?*" she finally asked, pulling back her paw from restraining Astrid.

Aslaug shrugged again. "It's simple. I am a Valkyrie. I am guided by the Allfather. I walk where he bids me, doing his work. By his will, I am given purpose. I am an extension of Death, claiming the worthy, and leaving the rest. Through me, the Lord of *Lidskjálv* acts. Without purpose, I am nothing."

Haldana closed her eyes and hung her head. "She's right, Sisters. She's right, can't you hear it?"

"Pfeh, I can quote the rites and the prayers as well as any of us," Astrid said and spat on the ground. "She's deliberately flaunting the rules, unwritten or not. We are Valkyries. We are a sisterhood, NOT a bunch of egomaniacs, acting on our own whims!"

"I act on Odin's will," Aslaug said, calmly. She already knew what would happen next.

As she expected, Astrid snapped. Drawing her sword and slashing in one fluid motion, Aslaug knew the other Valkyrie's fighting style well enough. She was fast, elegant and extremely deadly with a sword. She also had a nasty tendency to lose her temper.

Sidestepping and ducking backwards, Aslaug managed to avoid the blow while both Hrist and Haldana looked on in disbelief.

Astrid nearly stumbled when her intended target wasn't where she meant it to be anymore. Aslaug snapped back upright and brought down her balled up fist on Astrid's face like a steam-driven hammer.

The canid crashed to the ground, out cold, and Aslaug shook her head and sighed. "Take her back to Valhalla. Get her a big, raw steak to put on her eye ... it's going to swell," she said and ran a paw through her hair. "I am not trying to be an egomaniac. I am doing what Odin told me to do. Ask him, if you doubt me."

"That'd be the day," Hrist said, bitterly. "Mere Valkyries, demanding answers of the Allfather. As if!"

She hauled Astrid off the ground and slung her over her shoulder. Aslaug didn't say anything else while the other equine walked away with the unconscious canid.

Finally, she rubbed her eyes. "Are you going with them, Haldana?" she asked, wearily. She felt a lump in her throat. Fighting her own sisters ... was *this* what it was coming to?

"Ask Odin, you said?" the vixen asked. She didn't sound angry.

"Yes. Go ask Odin. Or Mimir, if Odin isn't available. Mimir was there too," Aslaug said and threw out her arms in exhaustion and irritation.

"I'll do that, Sister. And for what it's worth, I believe you. But if I were you, I'd avoid Hrist for a while. And certainly Astrid."

Aslaug nodded and offered a paw, which Haldana took and shook firmly. Then the equine turned around and headed back to Varghöss. There was no more time to waste.

###

"You look like you've managed to get a little sleep too, Joe?" Patricia said and smiled as she returned to the editing table.

Joe nodded. "I did. It was ... needed."

"Alright. So are you ready to tell me what this is all about?"

Joe opened his mouth to speak. Then he shut it and smiled at the irony of the situation.

"It's a leap of faith, isn't it?" he mumbled to himself.

"Excuse me?" Patricia asked, clearly not hearing the coyote.

Joe nodded and got to his feet. "I am. But I think we'd probably best go somewhere else where we can talk in private without everyone else here hearing everything we say. You'll think I'm insane ... and you probably won't want to help me anymore afterwards. But ... I suppose I've got to take that chance."

Patricia looked cross-eyed for a moment. Then she nodded and gestured for Joe to follow her.

Taking a deep breath, he did.

Faith, hope and love.

And right then and there, the greatest of these ... at least as far as Joe was concerned ... was hope.