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XVIII – A time for answers

Haldana stood tall, her back straight and dressed in her best armour. A heavy, black cloak hung about her shoulders, adding a decidedly sinister air to the vixen's gaunt form. Her chainmail was darkened and the heavy, wide leather belt around her waist was made from pitch black leather. On her left shoulder, a large silver clasp held the cloak in place. The leather belt was closed by a silver buckle, as wide as a grown bovine's fist. Her dark brown breeches and her boots were clean and in good repair.

Everything about her said "warrior". From the sword and long dagger at her hip to the spear in her paw, she was armed and capable.

She held her helmet under her left arm while her right paw clasped the razor-sharp spear. The room was absolutely gigantic, and for her to stand here was, in itself, a cause for awe. Even Valkyries ... Odin's oathsworn battlemaidens ... feared the One-Eyed One. No one in their right mind did not.

And she was alone in here, except for the Allfather. No one else was present. Not an Einherjar, not another Valkyrie, not even a servant. There was no one except her and the King of the Gods.

She walked forwards. Slowly, but without hesitation, she approached the massive throne of Lidskjalv. Odin was staring into the distance with his one eye. The enormous black wolf, grey sprinkles in his fur, literally radiated power even across the gigantic hall, and Haldana felt her knees buckle momentarily.

When seated on Lidskjalv, Odin could behold everything in all the worlds. To disturb him was deepest sacrilege, and she would wait her turn, regardless of how long she would have to bide her time.

When Odin wished to acknowledge her presence, he would acknowledge her. Not before. Until then, she was no more than an insect before the Allfather.

An apex predator as insects went, maybe ...

Something along the lines of a preying mantis.

But still ... an insect.

Finally, a hundred meters from the Allfather, Haldana went down on one knee, bowing her head in deference. Gritting her teeth, she tried to breathe normally. Odin was her undisputed Lord and Master, but she couldn't push the sheer feeling of terror entirely out of her system.

She was about to overstep her boundaries so grossly it beggared the mind.

It took an age before Odin even moved on his throne. When he finally did, his gaze fell on the lone figure in front of the throne.

"Haldana," he intoned. It was a statement, not an invitation.

Repeating her prayers under her breath to calm her nerves, Haldana kept her eyes firmly on the floor in front of her. She would not rise, nor speak, unless expressly instructed to do so.

"Stand, Valkyrie, and speak," came the order, and Haldana obeyed, rising to her feet.

"There is reason for concern," she said. Odin did not mince words, and he never suffered fools or empty flattery. Valkyries were plain spoken and direct as a result.

"I already know this," Odin said. "I am aware of the Council's attempt at infiltration."

"Then command me, Lord, and I will carry out your instruction," the vixen said, feeling her heart rise in her throat.

"The Valkyries must police themselves better, lest I lose patience with them!" Odin growled, furrowing his brow.

Haldana felt like all the disapproval and righteous anger in the world was focused on her in that instance and she had to summon all her considerable courage not to buckle and look away.

"Therein lies the problem, Lord," she said, matter-of-factly. "Hrist is convinced the problem lies with Aslaug. Aslaug, for her part, insists that she acts on your bidding. Astrid very nearly drew a Sister's blood. As for me, I trust Aslaug. She has her ways ... but she is strong. She is fierce and loyal into death! She would not betray the Sisterhood, Lord. And she would never betray you!"

"THEN ACT!" Odin roared, his lips curling back to show his fangs. Gere and Freke ... his feral wolves, slinked around the base of Lidskjälv. Huginn and Munin, his ravens, landed on the backrest, blinking with interest as they observed the stricken Valkyrie down in the hall in front of them.

Haldana felt the blood in her veins turn to ice with fear. Odin's displeasure was terrifying to behold and she swallowed, hard, bowing her head at last in acknowledgment of her order.

"I am the extension of your will, Lord," she wheezed, hoarsely.

Suddenly she found herself in the courtyard again. She hadn't moved. The world had simply realigned itself to fit Odin's will.

Only then did she allow herself to sob with fright.

###

She had landed, and Varghöss had gone into hiding. Aslaug knew ... somehow she just *knew* ... that this would be where she'd face down Anane.

It was sunny and, despite it being winter, it wasn't cold. A pleasant temperature surrounded her.

She could see a city in the distance. She wanted to warn everyone of what was coming, but she couldn't. While her fur had been dyed, she knew someone would figure out she was the same equine from the bombing of the ski-jumping tower.

And more importantly, no one would believe her. Standing on a soap-box and shouting about the end of the world was ... counterproductive to saving anyone.

She needed Joe there, but she had no idea where he was. Lee and Miho were coming, but they couldn't replace her closest ally, however well meaning they were.

The sea was beautiful. She could see a couple of ships in the distance. A couple of seagulls circled in front of the sun. She could see their profiles cl ...

Those birds did not have soaring wings.

They had high-lift wings.

They weren't seagulls at all.

Aslaug smiled. "Unfurl the raven ... and let it fly," she mumbled.

###

"So you're telling me that she can't die. That the old Norse Gods and Goddesses are real, that she's a ... a Valkyrie, and you're working with her?"

To say that Patricia van Ort looked incredulous was an understatement. But Joe simply nodded. "Pretty much, yes. But they're not the only deities out there. The Christian God is there too. So are practically every other deity prayed to in the world. And of course ... the bad guys are there too."

Patricia got up. "You know, you nearly had me there," she just said. She sounded hurt. "I actually wanted to help you and now you turn out to be just some crackpot."

"And yet I told you this. Don't you think I knew you'd react this way. Would you have preferred that I lied?" Joe asked.

"Stop it, Mr. Latrans. Just ... stop it. As if *this* isn't a lie. You're either insane or you're playing me for a fool. Who the bloody hell do you think you are anyway?"

Joe shrugged. "I'm nobody important. But *she* is. And she's being accused of blowing up that tower and killing all those furs, when in fact she's innocent. Whether you believe me or not shouldn't matter. Whether you believe she's dead or not shouldn't even matter. You saw the footage for yourself."

"Just get out," Patricia said and shook her head. "Or I'll have the troops throw you out. I don't have time to waste on this. Furs are dying out there, and you come here with this fairy-tale and expect me to believe you?"

Joe got up and brushed his paws off against one another. "No. I don't expect you to believe me. I expect you to believe the evidence of your own eyes. That footage has been tampered with. You yourself said it. Not I. I'll leave, since you ask me to. All I hope is that you'll take another look at it once you've calmed down. Someone's trying to frame my friend ... whether you think I'm insane or not."

Patricia didn't answer and Joe shrugged, turned around and walked out. He had to leave. He didn't want the soldiers to throw him out face first, after all. But now he was unarmed and in the middle of a rioting city, with no idea how to get to safety. He'd ask the guard outside ... and take his chances.

Should he have tried to think up a lie?

No. Patricia would've seen through it, he knew that. She was too smart to be fooled by a simple lie. He knew he had to take the chance on the truth, but he also knew that meant this would happen. The best he could do now was to leave quietly, not make a scene, and then hope the reporter would calm down enough to actually go back to have another look at the material later.

He left the studio and took the elevator down. Getting out at ground level, he stuck his paws in his pockets and sauntered outside. The guard noticed him but didn't speak.

"Can you tell me the easiest way to get back to city limits?" Joe asked, scratching his chin. "I don't want to outstay my welcome, and I think I already have."

"Go down there to the intersection and follow the signs to the airport. That'll get you out the quickest, but it's not safe out there. You really ought to stay put," the soldier said.

"I have no choice. I need to go," Joe countered, shrugging as he strolled down towards the intersection.

###

There were few things Varghöss liked more than hunting. Even with his size, he was phenomenal at hiding and right now, he was looking forward to the kill more than anything. He had Aslaug's blessing ... in fact, her expressed instructions on what to do, and he was going to bring her back a token of his appreciation once he was done tearing his prey to shreds.

After having dropped her off, he had gone into hiding, and then, once it was safe, he had taken off again, speeding across the world until he saw a rainbow. He had immediately changed directions and gone towards it.

Mortals could never reach a rainbow.

It would always be distant. But not for those who were meant to reach it. The dead and those who belonged in Asgaard.

As he did.

Soon, he felt the familiar sensation of color under his paws, and he raced along Bifrost as fast as his four legs would take him.

Soon, he would feel the sensation of bone crunching between his jaws and taste salty, delicious blood, pouring from Aslaug's enemy.

It made his heart beat faster in his chest.

Howling with joy as he ran, he approached the end of the rainbow ...

The borderlands of Asgaard.

###

Thorvald and Victoria had been her friends since the first time she met them. At first, they had been her friends, while she had not been theirs. It was not something Aslaug was proud of, but upon first meeting them, she was cold towards them and uncertain if they were truly to be trusted. And yet, they had been friends to her. They had *remained* friends to her, in fact. And that made them worth what she was going to do.

She'd go to the ends of all the worlds for those few she considered true friends, and the Svensens were among those few.

To the ends of all the worlds. And that might very well be where she had come to. She had lost her most trusted weapon, and her dearest friend and ally was nowhere to be found. She stood alone against a foe that had nearly killed her once before, and she knew that, in facing him, she would be unable to save those furs caught in the vicinity.

This could be her last act.

Her "Götterdämmerung" ...

Her twilight.

Then so be it. She would not run from it. She tore her shirt off, leaving her standing in just her sleeveless T-shirt and her jeans. She tore the shirt up into strips and began tying them around her paws, flexing her fingers to make sure she could still move them enough to fight. Then she dug her left hoof into the ground and began drawing a circle in the black earth. Completing it, she turned to look towards the sun before stepping into the circle.

"It is closed. Let none break it!" she whispered and fell to her knees on the ground, taking out her knife.

She cut into her shoulders, raising her paws above her head, waiting a long, long moment for enough blood to seep into her fur before lowering her arms again and soaking the rags around her paws in it.

The wounds were closing already. She was strong enough. The wounds she had suffered at the Well of Wisdom were all but healed. And she had the necessary determination to ignore what injuries remained.

"My life is not mine," she whispered. "I am Odin's extended will. I choose amongst the slain, leaving the unworthy behind. But *I* am worthy. And I ask for *nothing*! I call upon the Gods as my witnesses ... SEE ME ... AND LISTEN!" she roared, gritting her teeth and narrowing her eyes as she once more raised her paws to the sky above her. Oaths were powerful things. With the understanding of Sejd she had gained from her ordeal at the well, she knew exactly what she was doing ... and she knew *how* to do it.

By the end of speaking, her voice had grown from a soft whisper to a full blown roar. Almost as if she dared the world to witness that moment. It brought a deep feeling of peace and satisfaction with it. Passionate defiance of the odds ...

In a way, it seemed to be what she always fell back on, in the end.

"I will win or die by my own strength. And I solemnly make this vow ... that should I overcome and endure to defeat this foe, then there will be no more Agents, doing the bidding of ANY GODS ... ANYWHERE ... against their will. NEVER AGAIN! This, I swear, on the blood I spill now and on the blood I will spill in battle," she shouted, not caring who or what might hear her by now. But there was no one around. No one to hear her except those she intended to hear. It was as she wanted it to be.

She took a deep breath and waited while the rest of the blood seeped down her shoulders and dripped off to the ground, where the ground soaked it up.

"HEAR ME!" she roared, invoking the same *Sejd* she had used to call Joe. Her voice becoming that of many. What little vegetation surrounded her was blown over at the force of her voice as she stood up. "HEAR ME! I am Aslaug. I was born to mortals, but I have *ascended!* The Gods know me by that name. My enemies know me as the Angelbreaker. HEAR ME, AND ACKNOWLEDGE MY OATH!"

The circle began to quiver. Moments later, the ground began to bleed. Aslaug narrowed her eyes and bared her teeth. "Never again. I will bring each and every Agent who wants deliverance a way out. Service is by choice. Only thralls and cowards are bound into servitude against their will. Free furs have a choice. That is my oath. *I ... will bring them ... choice.*"

The skies split in a powerful crack of thunder. There wasn't a cloud in the sky ... not a drop of rain was falling. But the rolling, crashing sound came from the sea and rolled up over the city, to the mountainside. Aslaug felt it impact her.

She smiled grimly.

Then ... and only then ... did clouds gather. When the rains came to wash the blood away, she had already left the circle behind.

###

Joe was surprised by how easy it had been to get to the airport. He hadn't seen more than a dozen furs along the way, all in all. Only five or six of them had shot at him. But since he had found himself a car, he had no problem simply escaping. Hotwiring a vehicle was still fairly easy if one knew how to, and as he came up on the airport he began to understand why none of the rioters seemed to want to go that way.

There were armoured vehicles everywhere.

More soldiers. Joe stopped the car and put up his paws, approaching carefully.

A few furs stuck their heads up from behind barricades.

"Right, tha's far enuff," a gruff voice called out. A bulldog's face came up from behind cover. Apparently it belonged to the speaker.

Joe wasn't sure how the canid could even see for wrinkles, but he stopped and wriggled his fingers in the air above his head. "I'm American. And I really would like to get out of this place," he called out.

"Hrumph ... you wouldn't happ'n to be tha' right ruddy git they called us about from the Museum, would you?" the bulldog asked.

"Probably," Joe said and shrugged. "Look I'm unarmed and I'm not really keen on being stuck in a combat zone any longer. I juuuuust want to get out of Bradford and later on, out of England. If it can be fixed at the same time, hey ... I'm all for it!"

"Awright, you can come closer, but we're watchin', Yank!"

"Sure."

Joe walked closer, at a slow pace to let the soldiers see he posed no threat. Once he got close enough, a soldier stepped forward and frisked him.

"Hey! Would you be careful doing that? Otherwise I'll tell my wife you're to blame and trust me you don't want to have to answer to her!" the coyote complained.

The soldier stepped back without answering and Joe, adjusting his jacket, headed into the airport itself. He wasn't sure what he hoped to achieve. There were soldiers everywhere ... easily enough to retake the city if they got orders to do so, but there were only very few civilians.

If he could only get access to a plane. Legally, of course. Then he could get out of England.

And back to the United States. By now, he was losing hope of finding Aslaug again before all this was over. It made him feel bad. It made him feel like he'd let the equine down, even though he knew he had done everything he could.

He'd been *shot*.

Twice.

He had to explain the new scars to Annie when he got home ... something he really didn't know how to do. She'd be furious with him. And with good reason, too.

Sighing, he looked for a place to sit down.

He was just about ready to go home anyway. Unless someone popped up and told him where to find Aslaug, there wasn't much more he could do.

Finally, he located a seat where he wouldn't be surrounded by armed and uniformed furs at all times. It gave him a view of the runways, too. He'd love to get out there ... find a plane and take off. Feel that incomparable sensation of freedom that came with flying.

But there were few planes out there and none of them were preparing to take off. None of them were going through the usual post-landing routine either. No doubt, they'd been out there for days. The facility was probably closed down for the time being.

A couple of soldiers, clearly off duty and trying to relax, came over. They sat down at a nearby table and broke out a deck of cards. For a moment, Joe pondered joining them, but something caught his attention first. It was not clear at first, but then he realized ... way out in the distance, at the farthest runway from the building he was sitting in, a plane was landing.

Joe raised an eyebrow and turned to look at the soldiers. "Hey ... sorry to interrupt, but is the airport still open to regular traffic?" he asked.

The soldiers both looked utterly confused. "Erh. No," one of them said. "Not since the riots broke out. We're just waiting for orders to go in and clean up the whole mess."

"But someone is landing! And it doesn't look like a military plane," Joe said.

The soldiers looked out towards the runways. It took a moment before Joe realized that neither of them seemed to *see* the plane.

Initially confused, he tried to point it out to them, but it didn't make any difference.

"You must be seeing things, Yank," one of the soldiers said and shook his head. "There's no plane out there. Maybe you should get some rest? I mean ... you just came inside the city limits, didn't you?"

Joe nodded. "You might be right," he said and sighed. "Maybe I should get some rest. I haven't slept in ages. Or so it feels like, at least."

"If you head over that way, you should find a place with some blankets," the other soldier offered. "It's not much but it's quiet at least."

Thanking him, Joe headed in that general direction.

Was he seeing things? No, he was sure there was a plane out there, taxiing towards the main building. He stopped by a window and looked again, and yes ... it was right there. A small, black plane. He couldn't distinguish the exact model at this distance.

It was then it struck him.

The soldiers couldn't see it because they weren't meant to. He could see other soldiers, moving around outside and none of them seemed to take any note of the plane.

As if it wasn't there.

"That's taking stealth technology to a whole new level," the coyote muttered to himself. He had to get out there. He had to get to that plane.

There was a door a few yards in front of him. A door ... leading outside to the runways. He looked over his shoulder, but no one was looking at him. If only he had been twenty years younger, making a sprint for it would've been easier. He quickly checked out the window again. There was a car out there. One of the soldiers had just passed it. The engine was running but there was no one in the driver's seat.

It was now or never.

He'd only get this one chance. He had been looking for a sign, and here it was. It wasn't a flaming finger writing the future across the sky for him, but it would have to do. He had been an agent for decades, and he knew to trust his gut feeling, and his gut, in this case, told him he had to get on that black plane at any cost.

Again, he looked left and right. No one was looking and he slipped through the door quietly, finding himself on a ledge with a ladder leading down to the runway. The soldier was going around a corner. He had maybe twenty seconds and he had to make them count.

Taking a deep breath, he jumped onto the ladder and slid down as fast as he could. His feet stung when he hit the ground, but he ignored it and ran to the car as fast as he could, throwing himself behind the wheel, momentarily confused by the fact that everything was reversed. He had never driven an English car before, and sitting on the "wrong" side to drive was confusing. At least the controls were what he was used to ... and he released the paw-break, accelerating away from the building.

It took only twenty seconds before he saw two army vehicles racing after him in the rear-view mirror. Sighing, he simply hunched his shoulders and put the pedal to the

metal. He had maybe a mile to go before reaching the black plane, which had started to turn around.

"STOP THE VEHICLE AND STEP OUT, PLACING YOUR PAWS ON THE BONNET!"

Someone was using a megaphone behind Joe, but he had no time to play those games. The black plane had turned almost completely around and Joe was afraid it would start down the runway in a few seconds to take off again. He couldn't go any faster without losing control of the vehicle, and at least he managed to keep the soldiers behind him.

As he feared, the black plane began taxiing again, but the coyote managed to pull up alongside, waving like a maniac to the pilot to get his attention.

An otter looked back at him. Joe had never seen the fur before, but he was certain he saw recognition on the pilot's face. Yet another mystery. There were so many of them in this mess.

The pilot slowed the plane down just a little, but he didn't stop. Instead, he seemed to lock the controls, before leaving the cockpit. Opening the door, he lowered the ladder and stuck his paw out.

The plane was *still moving*.

It took a moment for Joe to realize that the otter was actually serious. Blinking, he shook his head furiously and rolled down the window. "I'M NOT TWENTY YEARS OLD, DAMMIT! I CAN'T MAKE THE JUMP!"

"YOU HAVE TO! YOU ARE THE ONE I HAVE TO FIND!" the otter shouted back.

There was such certainty in his voice ... but Joe had no idea why. He rolled his eyes. Behind him the two airport cars were closing in and he needed an idea, fast.

There was a turn up ahead. Then the runway. It was his only chance.

"GO GET THE CONTROLS. I'LL JUMP WHEN YOU SLOW DOWN TO TURN!"

The otter nodded and ran back to the cockpit, while Joe changed gears and hunched his shoulders.

"I'm way, way too old for this shit," he whimpered. "Dammit, you'll be paying my bar tab for a YEAR for this, filly!"

The black plane slowed just a little bit to turn the corner and Joe threw open the door of the car. Taking a deep breath while thinking of his wife, he tensed up ... and threw himself towards the stairs. He almost missed. Almost ... and he almost didn't manage to grab a hold either. But he managed.

His bruises would have bruises tomorrow, but for a brief second, Joe couldn't help laughing. He *did* it!

The car continued straight ahead, off the runway and into a ditch where it turned over ... but Joe was already inside the plane, closing the door. "I'M IN!" he called out.

The answer came immediately. Not spoken, but in a sudden and sharp acceleration of the plane.

"Good! Come up here and strap yourself in. I've got a story to tell you!" the otter answered, no longer needing to shout once the door had been closed.

Joe nodded and hurried into the cockpit, closing that door behind him as well before sitting down and buckling himself into the seat.

"Who ... the Hell ... are you?" the coyote finally asked, catching his breath as the plane took off into the skies.

"My name is Hirokichi. And I was told by a black oracle to find you ... and before you start pulling a gun on me, please remember I'm behind the controls. I ask you to hear me out."

"A black oracle??"

Joe was shocked. He had no idea he'd just gotten into an aircraft with someone in the service of the enemy, but it was obviously too late to do something about it now. He had been so sure ... so certain he needed to be on this place. Had his gut feeling let him down for once?

Hirokichi nodded. "A very old, black oracle ... who wanted to die. And I want out of the service of the Malefic Council. *You* are my ticket out. According to the oracle, your equine friend will lose if you are not there to help her. I have to get you to her, and I know where she is!"

Joe narrowed his eyes. "If you've been working for the council, I have no reason to trust you. How can I know you're not taking me directly to my death?"

"I may do that ... the oracle didn't specify whether you survive or not. What I do know is that you are the key to victory for the forces of good. And I don't intend to see the world burn! I've had enough of the Council and their crap!" Hirokichi explained, slowly turning the plane as it kept ascending.

Joe looked at the instrument panel. They were going south by south east. "Where are you taking me then?" he asked.

"To Naples. Do you have a weapon?"

"No. I left the only gun I had in Bradford. I take it the oracle told you where to find me?"

"Indeed. I was told I would ... know when I had found the right fur. I knew from the second I saw the car coming towards me," Hirokichi said and smiled crookedly.

Joe grumbled slightly. "You could've stopped. The soldiers couldn't see you. And how come, by the way? They just didn't seem to register the plane at all."

"I know. But they'd have caught you if you had stopped. Or shot you. Either would've been slightly problematic."

"That doesn't answer how you did it?"

Hirokichi shrugged. "Black magic. In this particular case, it's a means to an end."

"*Maleficium* ..." Joe muttered, remembering the book he had procured in the Vatican archives. "This is wrong on so many levels I don't even know where to begin! You'd BETTER not be double crossing me!"

Hirokichi shook his head. "I told you ... I don't want to see the world burn. I've done a lot of things I'm not particularly proud of, but I'll answer for that in due course. Right now, I've got to get you to your friend."

"In Naples. Why is she in Naples?"

"Because Mount Vesuvius is about to erupt ... completely without warning. It will happen in just under fifteen minutes. The biggest eruption in two thousand years. The biggest since Pompeii and Herculaneum were destroyed."

Joe wasn't that much of a history buff, but like everyone else, he'd seen photos of plaster casts of furs that had been caught in the pyroclastic flow. Adults, trying to shield children. A fur, trying desperately to raise its head and shoulders just as the ash-flood came in. Children, twisted in agony.

He swallowed. In a terrible moment of clarity, he knew. He just knew.

"The Malefic Council was behind that too, weren't they?"

"They were. Or rather, a very disgruntled Hades was. He never played well with the other council-members, mind you. He isn't evil as such. He's just ruthless to a point where even the rest of the Roman Pantheon come across like role models of warmth and kindness."

Hirokichi adjusted course slightly. His face was serious and for some reason, Joe had a feeling that the otter was telling the truth.

"And now some half crazed fallen Angel is trying to complete the job. Great ... just *great!*" the coyote said and shook his head.

"*Half* crazed? To use one of your American expressions, Anane is so far off the deep end that the water closed over his head hours ago! He isn't even acting on the orders of the entire Council. He's aligned himself with Surt, and the Lightbearer is, to put it plainly, pissed off!" Hirokichi said, raising an eyebrow. "Trust me, Anane isn't going to win any popularity contests in Hell for this!"

"Then why doesn't Lucifer stop Anane? If he's that pissed!" Joe complained.

"You're getting this backwards. Lucifer is a control freak. He'd be fine with this if it had been *his* idea. *His* plot."

Joe sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "In the words of my generation ... *fuck!*"

Hirokichi smiled crookedly. "You know, I think that's just about the most eloquent and precise description of the situation I've heard yet. Listen, you're going to need a gun. I brought the most powerful one in my collection. It's in a customized box in the cabin. It's yours if you'll just help your friend put an end to this!"

Joe nodded. "Well, we're heading there aren't we?" he asked. The plane had levelled out so he could get out of his seat.

Going back into the cabin, he quickly found a long, black lacquer box. Opening it, he found a strange looking gun in it. Still, it was not only heavy ... it had a *monstrous* bore!

And a scope on top. This thing could shoot far enough that it needed a *scope*? Despite himself, Joe was impressed.

But it could only hold one bullet at a time ...

Still, he took it into the cockpit. "One shot?" he asked.

Hirokichi grinned crookedly. "I don't think you'll have time to fire more than one shot. Anane is a terrible foe."

"Good point," Joe mumbled and sighed. "Alright, what is this thing called anyway? I've never seen this model before."

"It's an Italian gun. A Tanfoglio Thor Raptor .500," Hirokichi said. "It's the only .500 weapon in my arsenal. I had the loading spring replaced by a stronger one and the firing pin is a bit longer than on the standard model ... I didn't want misfires. But I figured you needed something that would reliably take down a charging rhinoceros at a hundred paces."

Joe nodded. "A Thor Raptor, eh? Somehow, that seems strangely fitting considering who I am going to help. At least it'll pack a punch. I used an old, Swiss SIG P210 before but I left it in Bradford."

"Why?"

"I don't want to talk about it!"

Hirokichi nodded. Joe's words had a ring of absolute finality to them and he wasn't going to risk angering the now-armed coyote. "Fair enough. It just seemed like a strange place to leave one's gun behind, all things considered. In the middle of a riot."

"Strange maybe, but ... necessary. I don't believe in abandoning one's weapons, but I believe even less in abandoning my sense of right and wrong," Joe explained as he got back in his seat in the cockpit, now holding both the gun and several slugs for it. "Still ... it was a bloody strange gun. I could keep shooting it and it'd never run out of bullets."

"Never run out of bullets?" Hirokichi asked. "Where did you get a weapon like that? I mean, it's not the kind of weapon one should leave behind for ordinary furs to find, I think."

"Then someone else can go back and fucking get it!" Joe snapped. "I'm not touching that thing again! I got it from a three hundred year old saint who had lost his faith before his canonization. He wanted to help me out in getting a book."

Hirokichi nodded. "You must be referring to Father Malheiro. He's practically a legend with Dark Agents. The Council considered him a pet project. Lots of new Dark Agents would be told to convert him. It was a test ... not everyone got the same test of course, but he refused to be converted despite all the attempts. In the end, it was almost a joke. New Agents, all cocksure and thinking they were the hottest thing in Hell, would be taken down a few pegs by being told to convert the old priest. It was my test, for one. Fortunately, I too failed."

"You say they considered him a pet project? Past tense. He's dead then?"

"Strictly speaking, Father Malheiro has been dead for centuries. But yes. He's dead. And no one seems to know why. The Council are quite peeved that they have to come up with a new trick to play on new Agents. He isn't there anymore at least."

"How do you know for a fact? You do understand why I have to ask?" Joe said.

Hirokichi shrugged again and adjusted course slightly. "The Dark Agent network is considerably better organized than their enemies. We are in contact with one another constantly. The Internet is a great thing, you know."

"Heh ... Aslaug was right then. Damned *Sejd*-machines, after all," Joe grumbled.

"I guess. Anyway, I had a point to make," Hirokichi said and gestured towards the gun in Joe's paws. "There's a legend in Japan. I don't know how genuine it is or if it's just another tall tale, but knowing my country's propensity for inventing a good story to fit any situation, I'd be surprised if any of this ever happened. Anyway, the story goes that many years ago ... centuries ... there was a Samurai. For some reason it's always a Samurai. You don't hear legends of brave peasants or the glorious heroics of a miller. It's always some bloody Samurai or other."

"Same thing in the west. It's always the brave *knight* saving the damsel in distress. Not the brave baker ... although admittedly, we do have Robin Hood, so at least we have one commoner in the mix," Joe chuckled. "Anyway, do go on."

"Well, if I remember correctly, the story goes that the Samurai, who was a master archer and an honourable fur, had sworn oaths of fealty to a great Daimyo ... a powerful lord. The Daimyo was a harsh fur, and very warlike, and once, while the Samurai was away fighting his master's wars, bandits attacked his home and ran away with most of his possessions and, most importantly, his wife and two beautiful daughters. The Samurai, of course, was distraught when hearing of this, and he returned to his master, asking the

Daimyo for permission to hunt down the bandits to rescue his family," Hirokichi said, switching on the autopilot and turning in his seat to face Joe.

The coyote chuckled. "If that had been me ... I would have just taken off. Nothing is more important than family."

The otter smiled a strange, crooked smile. "Yes ... I see where you are coming from," he said, almost dreamily. "But we are talking feudal Japan here. Family wasn't even close to being at the top of the list. Especially for a Samurai. Honour first. Duty. Self-denial and sacrifice. Then family. However, in the case of our Samurai from the story, the Daimyo was a heartless bastard, and refused the request. "You have no sons. You have only daughters. Females are unimportant. Find a new wife, one who can bear sons!" he said and sent the Samurai off with orders to go back to the war. The Samurai, of course, struggled with himself. If he broke his Daimyo's direct order, he would have forfeited his honour and his life. But if he did not, his family would surely die. The bandits were bloodthirsty fiends, you see ... a violent gang that had plagued the coast for many years. Their leader was even said to be the son of an Oni ... a demon!"

"Sounds to me like the Samurai's lord was the demon in this case. I'd have kicked his ass ... then waited until he woke up and then kicked his ass all over again, and then I'd have gone after my family, orders or no orders. An order given by an honourless fur isn't worth anything in the first place!" Joe said, emphatically. "What did the Samurai do in the end?"

"In the end, he chose Bushido, because without it, he would be nothing. And a husband and father who is nothing, is no husband and father at all. He placed his faith in Amaterasu, praying that she would keep his wife and children safe while he fought a brilliant campaign against the Daimyo's enemies. He crushed the enemy in the field and returned home swiftly ... but not swiftly enough. The bandits had placed stakes outside his now ruined family home. On top of each stake was a member of his household. The last three stakes, right in front of the door ... held his wife and his two daughters," Hirokichi said and looked down. "His daughters had been so beautiful ... just seven and eight years old."

Nodding slowly, Joe bit his lip. By now, the story didn't exactly invite snide comments. "So what happened next?" he asked, after giving Hirokichi a moment or two.

"The Samurai cursed Amaterasu for not protecting his family despite his prayers and pleas. Then, forsaking all oaths of fealty and service, he packed the heads of his family into baskets with salt, and then he rode to the Daimyo. He entered his Lord's house, and

sat at the end of the old fur's bed, quietly, waiting for the Daimyo to wake. In front of himself, he placed his family's heads so that they would be the first things the Daimyo would see when waking up," Hirokichi went on. His voice was quite somber by now. "When he did, the old, cruel fur was stricken mad with fear. Drooling out a plea for his life, he crawled around like an insect on the floor, but the Samurai listened to no pleas and split the Daimyo's thoughts from his deeds with one powerful blow from his family katana. The sword had been in his family for over two hundred and fifty years by then, and it had never before been used to carry out a deed in defiance of Bushido."

"What did you do then?" Joe asked. He put his paws in his lap and looked straight at the otter. Clearly, Hirokichi needed to tell someone about this. And Joe couldn't help a certain morbid curiosity.

The otter shrugged. There was no point in denying it, and besides, he wanted to tell his story to someone who wasn't a Dark Agent or some other servant of the Council. "What I did? I was Ronin. Honourless and without a lord to serve. I had cursed Amaterasu, and forsaken the path of light. I was a wreck, but a wreck hunting bandits nonetheless. Trying to drown my self pity in sake and cheap ale wasn't my way. So I found the bandits, and I fired my arrows at them. One arrow for each bandit, and five for their leader! He wasn't the son of an Oni. He was an Oni himself."

"You killed them," Joe said, nodding. "You avenged the deaths of your wife and your daughters."

"I did. But you know what? Revenge is a terrible diet. It never fills you up. It always leaves you hungry for more. Yes, I killed them. Every last one of them. I killed the Oni too. Or so I thought. He kept coming back. Over the next month, he came to me every night, and every night I slew him. In the end, I understood ..."

"What did you understand?"

Hirokichi wiped his eyes, looking at his tear-stained fingers in surprise. "I haven't wept for four hundred years ..." he said, quietly. "Why now?"

Joe shook his head. "What did you understand? It's important."

"I understood it wasn't the same Oni I kept killing. They just all looked the same. In my madness, I kept killing the same enemy over and over again, when in reality, they were really without number. That was when my mind cracked. When I woke up from my madness, I was surrounded by strange furs, all wearing masks. They nursed me back to health, while subtly reminding me that the Oni had done only what was in its nature.

The blame, they told me, lay with Amaterasu for not saving my family as I had pleaded. And ... weak and honourless as I was ... I believed them."

"You are over four hundred and fifty years old?"

"Near six hundred, actually. Most of those I work with don't know this story. Immortality is a curse I can't recommend to others. I live every day knowing I couldn't save my daughters ... my wife. I live knowing what I've done ever since. The Gods grant immortality to their followers if not on a whim, then casually and haphazardly. For Dark Agents, it is attained at the most dreadful price," Hirokichi said, quietly, wiping more tears away.

"What price, or dare I not ask?" Joe asked.

Hirokichi shook his head. "Their soul. The classic Faustian bargain. Your soul for immortality, and only afterwards do you realize what you have done to yourself. Most Dark Agents never get the offer. Most of them clamour and struggle to get the offer, not knowing that it's the worst deal they'll ever make. The Malefic Council dangle immortality in front of their Agents as if it was candy in front of a child. Like it was a prize, and I'm sure they think it's all a hilarious joke. The Agents, in turn, are usually so afraid of death that they'll do anything to live forever. The Malefic Council don't need to bargain for souls. They get them by the millions every year, in each and every world there is. There's no need to bargain for them. They're nothing to the Council. Nothing. Useless things. But they can use those of particularly strong or powerful and most importantly *willing* servants for ... special things. I don't even know what my soul was used for. Probably some sinister, evil item of power. That's almost always the case. In the end, all I know is I bartered it away for an eternity of suffering."

"And now you want out, only there *is* no way out?" Joe asked.

"I watched my world burn once. Coming home to a ruined house, with the fields and haystacks set ablaze by demon-fire, burning for weeks on end ... seeing everyone I had cared for butchered like *cattle*. I don't want to watch the world burn again. I ... can't," Hirokichi said.

Joe nodded and extended his paw. "Name's Joe Latrans," he said, finally introducing himself.

Hirokichi shook the offered paw, finally looking up. "I'm not asking for pity, Mr. Latrans," he said.

"Good, because you won't get any from me," Joe said, matter-of-factly. "You've probably done things I don't even want to consider over those last six centuries. But I know what it feels like to lose one's faith and to feel abandoned by that which you've spent your life faithfully praying to. It's not an excuse. But it *is* a reason. However, I have to ask you why you told me this story?"

Nodding, slowly, Hirokichi took a deep breath. "Because you said you had a gun that didn't run out of ammunition. When I killed the Oni and his gang, I had to shoot over a hundred furs. And my quiver never ran out of arrows. In the end, I had as many arrows left as when I started, yet there they were ... dead in front of me."

"So you're saying it's black magic?" Joe asked.

Hirokichi shook his head. "No. I'm saying it's rage. There is a particular phrase from western literature I always think of to describe it."

"Which is that?"

"It's from Herman Melville's "Moby Dick", of all things. Where it says "And he piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the rage and hate felt by his whole race ...","

Nodding very slowly, Joe remembered that part. "If his chest had been a cannon, he would have shot his heart upon it," he finished. "You're saying that what Melville described ... what Captain Ahab was experiencing ..."

"If you have been wronged enough ... if you have been let down enough, if you are angry and frustrated enough and you have been touched by the supernatural ... by that which lies beyond the world as most furs know it ... your anger and your frustration fuse to become a powerful weapon in their own right. Captain Ahab could have kept shooting that cannon ... and never run out of harpoons. But he didn't have time to find that out, because his great white whale ... his supernatural, greater-than-life enemy ... claimed him first. You are Ronin, Mr. Latrans. You have no Lord anymore, because like it happened to me ... your Lord let you down. But you are a stronger and better fur than I was."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because you still fight for what is *right*. Because it is the right thing to do. Not because someone tells you to, not because someone tries to frighten you with the consequences of not doing so. You do it because it is the right and just thing to do. Your friend has a powerful ally, Mr. Latrans. Far more powerful than you knew yourself."

Joe's head swam. "But ... I'm not a magician like Aramis. And I'm not some supernatural creature like Aslaug. I can't shoot God's flames from my paws like Tigermark has been known to do when sufficiently pissed off! I'm just Joe Latrans, a regular fur from Orange County, who loves hockey and barbeques, big cars, good whiskey and most importantly my wife! I'm not supposed to be some supernatural warrior!"

"There's nothing supernatural about anger or frustration," Hirokichi said. "You're not supernatural. But I daresay your sense of right and wrong is. You left your only weapon behind in a rioting city, because of that sense of right and wrong. I don't know what happened and I don't need to know. The point is, you knowingly left yourself unarmed and in grave danger, because of your sense of right and wrong. Nine hundred and ninety nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety nine furs out of a million would have clung to that gun like a drowning fur to a snorkel, but you put it down because it was right to do so. And now ... because of your disappointment ..."

"I can't run out of ammo ..." Joe mumbled, trying to bend his head around the concept. "I should've brought an M16 for this! No, screw that! I should've brought a Ma Deuce!!"

"A what?"

"An M2 Browning heavy machine gun."

Hirokichi chuckled. "I didn't have one or I would've."

Joe leaned back in his seat. It made his head spin. So far, he'd been the "Regular Joe" of the group. Aramis had his magic, Aslaug was ... well ... Aslaug was Aslaug, and Tigermark was a conduit for divine fire. What had he had? A bad attitude and a tendency to land in blueberry bushes?

He had to close his eyes.

How the Hell was he going to tell Annie?