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## “Redemption”

By Kellan Meig'h

### Epilogue 2 - “Why?”

by The Silver Coyote

Somewhere **On High**, in a riparian meadow in full bloom, two beings faced one another. The shorter one sighed, then spoke to the felid in front of him.

“Why him?”

“He's good at what he does.”

“Because he was built that way. But *why*? We have only used him to correct our own mistakes . . .”

The huge, ageless lion fixed a steel gaze upon the ram asking the questions.

“I know, I know . . .” the ovid said with a faint trace of sarcasm, staring back into those golden eyes that had seen it all. “It's all according to the *Great Plan*.”

The lion sighed quietly, subjugating the urge to flash to wrathful indignation. Trips down that path in the past had cost the lives of billions as worlds were destroyed, or as whole civilizations thereupon had been decimated for calling his wisdom into question. His righteous indignation would not be denied, once it was fired off. But to subject his only son to that . . . He was thankful that he seemed to be mellowing with age. Or so he thought.

The truth of the matter was that things got beyond him sometimes. So many worlds, so many creations. Galaxies to trilobites, he and his peers had tried so many different combinations and permutations, sometimes in harmony, sometimes on their own. Some of those constructs were his darlings, upon which he lavished much of his attentions and resources. Others were kind of in the backwaters of the All, that which encompassed all space, all time, and everything within those dimensions. Those experiments that no

longer interested him were found in those dim corners, populated by races left up to their own devices. He tried to keep tabs on *all* of them, but it was a huge undertaking, especially on those worlds where he had been part of a consortium of creation. It seemed like the more company he had in making things, the worse things got, the less control he had, the less respect and love he received.

“It's true,” the lion rumbled in what passed for a quiet tone of voice.

And maybe he was to blame for that. Whether by design, or inattention, or through a subconscious desire to upset plans carefully laid by peers, evil had appeared and erupted before the first planets had cooled enough to bring forth the higher forms. By the time the first inter-planetary race had taken to the stars he and his kind had made for them, they were already decimating the ranks of their fellows in his name, or that of some other. The beings he had carefully and patiently designed and created for his deification, for his glory, had instead committed wholesale slaughter upon themselves, their worlds, and anything else that caught their destructive fancy.

He and the ram had watched it happen time and again.

Some were a conundrum. While lifting their spirits to him and the stars that beckoned, preaching high ideals, they simultaneously engaged in the lowest forms of depravity and decadence, injuring or destroying bodies and spirits beyond even his counting.

Instead of pausing and stepping back to evaluate the cause of these deviations from the desired path (“backing up” was something a deity never did, right? To do so would invite the assault on a deities' perceived infallibility ...), the creators assembled armies of “Agents” to deal with their “adversaries.” The fact that these “adversaries” were of their own collective design, and that the deities were themselves promoting the conflict, the evil, sort of seemed to escape the attention of most of them.

Likewise it seemed to bother none of the creators that these “Agents” were brought forth into their lives in what passed for the normal manner on their worlds, only to be plucked sometimes rudely from the lives that they attempted to make for themselves in order to be placed into the service desired. “Agents to the Gods” became a catch-phrase amongst these sometimes unfortunate souls, employed with a roll of the eyes or a muttered epithet by some.

Occasionally a creator might design some training or indoctrination into the life of the subject agent, the better to make the transition to the “holy cause” once the agent was made aware of that higher calling. And that worked ... *some* times. Others ...

“He's good at what he does,” the lion repeated.

“But he despises the work, and perhaps we who ask it of him.”

“I have noted a significant crisis of attitude within him as he ages, yes. But he is of the right mindset for what we need of him.”

“He will self-destruct, father.”

The lion sighed again, barely noticed by the ram.

“I will prevent that, of course.”

“How?” It was toned just below an impertinent demand, and the ram worked to soften his voice and approach. “After his mission that led to the destruction of Ni'i Vekk'on he spent over a month with us. If Freja hadn't figured out how to unscramble his mind we'd have decommissioned him then and there. Even with all of her good and diligent work, he's never been the same.”

The lion nodded, thinking of the decimated agent. The destruction of an entire world at his paws had indeed been a permanent, psychic injury to him. Still, he had survived to return to the fox he adored, even if he had not quite been the coyote that left her. Oddly enough, she had been and *always* had been the best thing for him, and she had nowhere been in the “*Grand Plan*” for him. That had been entirely unplanned ... good fortune for those who supposedly made their fortune. And while not privy to the celestial powers that *made* fate, José had nonetheless always understood that Annie was and always would be his rock.

And nothing, *no one*, could break that. So it was that the lion considered his options.

“His friends. The felines and that warhorse. We will save him from himself through them. He will do what we ask of him because he retains that sense of honor and duty he was born to, to them, and they will be the instruments we employ to prevent him from destroying himself and everything around him.”

“What of the Valkyrie? He is closest to her . . .”

The lion considered, his optimism fading as he stared into the ram's blue eyes. The Angelbreaker was not of his design and therefore not within his bailiwick. He could effect no direct influence over her.

“I do so wish Odin had not been a player on this particular world.”

“But he is, and his instruments are here with ours. We must learn to play nicely together.”

“I love him as a brother . . .” the lion protested.

“Yet you two have practically come to blows over this particular chunk of dust and the souls that inhabit it. You both participated in it's construction, along with several others, and when you choose to pay attention to it, you marvel at what they have accomplished in spite of your sporadic participation in their lives.”

The lion rumbled threateningly, but the ram persisted. He was as much to blame as anyone, after all, even if he was only the son. But in spite of his own lack of vigilance where this particular world was concerned, he felt close to its inhabitants. He *liked* the coyote, was somehow captivated by a being that could caress his wife tenderly and raise pups lovingly with the same paws he employed to effect such wanton death and destruction when simply asked to do so. A mercenary of the best order, he had gone astray mentally as he grew older, a victim of his missions and the lack of care paid to him as they progressed, and now he openly challenged the creators that had given him everything, questioning their motives, their ethics, their very love for all they had made.

Maybe he was correct to do so, for all the ram knew about things. And he supposedly knew *all*. But like the coyote, he wondered sometimes if he knew anything about what was really going on around him.

“Come now,” the ram persisted dangerously, “you have to admit, father, that you haven't spent a lot of time with this world, not since the hairless ones failed and you brought forth the furry ones to replace them. You've pretty much left the furs up to their own devices, and they have progressed in a grand manner, all things considered.”

An ominous growl came to the lion's voice, a low and rumbling sound from the chest that would terrify lesser beings. "What are you saying? That I have *failed* in my care for these beings?"

"*You* said that. All *I* said was that you could have paid more attention to them in their formative epoch. Now we have to deal with what some of them have become. Here and elsewhere, we have to clean up after our neglect."

"You take great liberties . . . *son*."

The iron gaze of the lion would have destroyed armies, the chest rumble would have shaken foundations. But the lamb simply smiled patiently.

"All I'm saying, *father*, is that we have work to do and an obligation to these beings we employ. We cannot simply use them up and cast them aside when we are through with them, as we have done elsewhere. When you call this coyote out of his hard-won retirement, take a good look at the tool you employ. He is not infallible, not indestructible, no matter what safeguards you put in place. He is scarred and battle damaged, and his worst injuries are in places most cannot see. Yet his mind is his own. We cannot protect him from his missions and himself, not while preserving the free will you value so highly."

The lion considered this at some length, and the ram took this opportunity to take a deep breath or two himself. The very atmosphere about them cooled a bit, and when he spoke again the lion was calm.

"That Valkyrie, she's something, eh?" A softer rumbling came from that same massive chest, a chuckle.

The ram nodded. "You saw it even when they were young. The *Scruffy Squad*, you called those two. He has always loved his two feline companions as brothers, but what he feels for her is . . . something else."

"Yes, Tigermark . . ." the lion said slowly. "One of my very strongest, very best soldiers. He has the wisdom of many and a capacity to find the good in everything. And the other one, the one with the eye thing ..."

"Aramis," the ram said helpfully. "I like *him* the best. Always listening, but never takes anything at face value. Always questioning, even unto himself. Well versed in every faith of every creator, and yet he chooses to stay with us."

The lion nodded, a small smile on his muzzle. "And that warhorse . . . he and José are the most alike when it comes to temperament. Two brawlers . . . two warriors. Damaged, to be sure, but ready to stand when summoned, even while they grumble. Like two paw grenades in a bunker, it doesn't matter which one goes off first, everybody is gonna get it."

"It is well they work with us, and the Valkyrie for Odin," the ram said cheerfully by way of making a joke. "Were the three of them to share *duty* as well as their passion for the persecuted and their own righteous fury, if they were *all on the same team*, they would be uncontrollable."

The lion's skin blanched beneath his fur, and the smile disappeared from his muzzle even as the ram's countenance shifted from joviality to concern witnessing it.

"Yes," the lion mumbled. "That *would* be a problem, wouldn't it?"

###

The berserker sat quietly next to his companion, an empty beer mug on the small end table to his left. The sound of a slow exhalation of breath to his right told him that the recipient of his news had understood, with predictable results.

“Son of a bitch,” Joe Latrans muttered to himself.

“I’m sorry, Joe,” Torvald Svensen replied in a low voice.

“She is sure of her information?”

The stallion nodded. He would have looked rather comical, his seven foot tall frame somewhat overflowing the patio chair he sat astride, had not his blond fur and casual clothing been scant covering for the well-muscled war machine barely concealed beneath his skin.

“Jennifer told Victoria about it the day before yesterday. It sort of slipped out during the conversation. Victoria made a couple of discrete inquiries yesterday, and ... well, it is what it is.”

The coyote seated to the stallions right nodded slowly, working a toothpick in his mouth as he stared blankly at an empty shot glass in his right paw. He suddenly inhaled sharply, the leading edge of a huge sigh.

A screen door behind them slid open noisily, and a forest green Yukon kali preceded a blond-haired vixen into the collective field of view of the two warriors. As the kali headed for the lawn and certain khat-chasing adventures in the large back yard, the red fox greeted her guest with a smile and a question, holding a dark bottle out towards him.

“Another Negra Modelo, Tor? Sorry we don't have any *real* ale, I hope you found our alternative to your liking?”

The stallion smiled and looked up into the blue eyes that looked into his own.

“It's fine, Annie, thank you.” He took the offered bottle and easily removed a cap that wasn't of the twist-off variety with a paw. “This is actually quite good,” he said as he refilled his glass.

The fox had turned to her husband and had picked up the bottle that had been on the table behind the two seated furs. As she refilled the coyotes shot glass her smile faded.

“What's wrong, Joe?” And before he could even open his muzzle to reply she added “And give it to me straight. I can see in your eyes that something *is* wrong.”

The coyote stared at her without blinking and was silent for several moments.

“Tor thinks I may be going back to work.”

The fox took a short breath and exhaled slowly. “You said that would probably happen, that they wouldn't really recognize any 'retirement'.”

“And that would seem to be the case,” the stallion said from behind her.

“Oh Joe . . .” The fox placed the bottle back on the table and took her husband's left paw in both of her own. “We'll be OK, my love. We'll get through whatever it is.”

At the touch of her paws, the sound of her voice, the countenance of the coyote manifested a paradigm shift. His eyes brightened and an amusing if slightly unnerving expression, half grin, half feral snarl, came to his muzzle.

“Damn right we'll be OK. 'Cause this time we're gonna play by *my* rules. *My* tools. *My* crew.” Joe tossed off the contents of the shot glass and swallowed.

Turning to look past the hip and bushy auburn tail of his wife, Joe looked his stallion counterpart in the eyes.

“You in?”

The berserker smiled thinly. His friend was sometimes known for snap decisions, few of which turned out to be wrong. Dangerous, yes. Reckless, sometimes, but they hadn't lost a fight yet. Not in the literal, “I'm dead” sense anyway.

“Don't you think you might want to find out what the mission is first?”

“Doesn't matter,” Joe said as he indicated for Annie to take a seat opposite the two of them. She filled his shot glass again, placed the bottle of whiskey back on the table, and pulled a chair around for herself. Joe continued as she seated herself to his right facing the stallion, staring again into her blue eyes.

“Angel, you know I love you, and always will. You know that shepherds have that deep-seated, inbred loyalty and call to duty as part of our genetic makeup, we can't deny a call to arms to defend that which matters to us.”

“You're only one quarter German Shepherd, Joe,” Annie said quietly with a twinkle in her eyes.

“Which means that the other three quarters of me will goddam well adapt to whatever it is that comes my way, will allow me to survive and thrive, to kick ass, take names, and come home to you.”

Torvald Svensen sipped his beer quietly as his coyote friend spoke to his wife. These emotions were well known to him, if for perhaps slightly different reasons.

“I know,” Annie said slowly, her eyes smoky with memories. “I remember that time you came to Debbie's defense. We survived that, and the IPF, and all the celestial missions you endured.”

“And with Tor's help we'll get by this one too, whatever it is. You know we've been expecting this. We've talked about what a bunch of crap it was, this “retirement” thing. It was all a smoke screen to throw us off the scent, them hoping that we'd let our guard down. But we didn't. We knew this was coming.”

“And now I know better,” Joe said, looking up to his friend. “No more blind faith. No more *yes sir* without thinking first. I'll go, but only *after* someone explains to me what the objective is, and no more rules of engagement. To Hell with that stuff.”

“Someone?” Torvald grinned.

“I'll take it up with Jess. He'll give me the straight dope.”

“What was that about tools and crew?” Annie wanted to know.

Joe sipped at his whiskey before answering.

“Simple. First, no rules of engagement. Tell me what you want done, grant me my autonomy, and then *get out of my way*. I'll bring you your desired result. Second, whatever the mission, whatever the epoch, whatever the world, whatever the inhabitants, *my gear*. My AK, my SBE, my ammo, and whatever other equipment I need. I get it, or we've got nothing to talk about. No tools, no mission.”

Joe paused to sip again, uncomfortable in feeling like he was making a speech, but certain that he would make all and sundry understand these things even if he couldn't, or wouldn't, explain his motivations.

“And the crew?” Torvald prompted.

Joe sat back in his chair, a genuine smile on his muzzle. “That's easy. You. Me. The Filly. Tigermark. Aramis. Anyone opts out, the deal's off. We go as a team or not at all.”

“What if somefur does opt out?”

“I fight with my crew, or not at all. Let those fuckers . . .” and here Joe gestured at the patio cover above their heads, “. . . get somefur else to do their dirty work. Hell Tor, you've been as abused as any of us, drawing assignments with furs you've never met and know nothing about. You've been bit pretty good by that at least a couple of times! Your mission is half-compromised before you even start! Not me, not anymore. I go in with my amigos, or not at all. End of discussion.”

“Seems reasonable,” the stallion replied with a small smile of his own. “I'm in.”

“Don't you want to talk to Victoria first?”

“Don't need to. She's in too. Although she may be put out if she can't come along.”

“That's up to you and Jess.”

“She's welcome to spend the duration with TL and I,” Annie said brightly. “I'm sure we'll find some way to occupy ourselves while you males are off being males.”

“I smell money being spent,” Torvald mused with a grin.

“Yeah,” Joe agreed. “We'll have to remember to ask for a pay raise for this one.”

“You're undefeated,” Torvald said. “Should be easy to persuade your boss to accept a higher wage.”

“He's seventy eight and one,” Annie said into the sudden silence.

The stallion was caught off guard, but a quick check of the facial expressions before him allowed him to take a breath.

“She knows . . .” the stallion ventured.

“All of it,” Joe agreed, nodding. “How could I keep that from her after all we've been through? She loves me anyway.”

The red fox suddenly grasped the paw of her husband. “I do, José. I support you one hundred percent. You've never failed me, and I will never fail you. All that old history doesn't matter.”

Torvald suddenly felt he was intruding on a very private moment as Joe replied to his wife in a low voice.

“These fuckers *owe* us, Annie. Me for what they've asked Tor and the amigos and I to do, and you for them taking me away from you and the pups all those times. All I ask in exchange for all that is to spend eternity with you. I don't even care where, as long as we're together.”

Her glassy eyes spoke volumes even as her muzzle was motionless. She stared into the eyes of her husband and smiled, nodding slowly.

The stallion thought of his tigress and wondered how it was that this coyote could be such a wordsmith, such a slinger of the bovine obfuscation on par with his gun-slinging abilities. But deep down Tor knew that he felt exactly the same way about his pretty tigress, and woe be to any being who tried to come between them ever again.

###

“Before you get started, let's get a couple of things straight, shall we?”

The husky-wolf hybrid before him smiled warmly. “I already know about your conditions, Joe.”

The coyote smiled as well. “Eavesdropping, Jess? How . . . earthy.”

“We'll have to work on that, won't we?”

“What do you mean?”

“Tigermark, Aramis, even your filly friend from Odin's stable.” The canine winked a yellow eye. “You haven't been in touch with them for quite some time, you don't know what they're up to.”

“I hear from Aslaug now and then,” Joe began guiltily, “but you're right. I haven't been the friend I ought to be.” His expression became earnest. “But that doesn't mean I don't love them, don't value them for the friends and fellow warriors I know them to be.”

Even as the coyote glanced about the room, the wolf read his mind. “You don't need a drink, Joe. Just say what you mean to me.”

The coyote reached for a pocket beneath his leather vest, retrieving a toothpick. A challenge was in his eyes as he placed it in his mouth and continued speaking.

“How I choose to cope with my inner demons is none of your concern, Jess. I'm a tool to you. As long as I perform your assignments successfully, what do you care what I do in my own time?”

“I love you, Joe.”

“Yeah, yeah . . .” the coyote retorted in a not altogether friendly manner. “Tell it to the unwashed. But the deal is the deal. T and Ari, Tor and me, Victoria if she wants in, and lastly the Angelbreaker. Line us up or knock it down, I don't care which. If you think you need me then you're needing a mechanized, tech-head gun-dog. No more of this swingin' swords stuff for me.” Joe grinned. “You 'live by the sword' types just annoy the shit out of us ballistic and energy weapon types, y'know?”

“I get it, Joe. You'll have free reign over your equipment lists, you and your amigos. All of you, if they are interested in joining you.”

“And none of this noise about matching the technology of the target, right? I don't care if they're feral cave dwellers fighting wars with dinosaur leg bones and rocks. We go in with our armaments of choice, be they my guns, Ari's magic, or Aslaug's steel. We call those shots.”

“I get it, Joe.”

“The tiger is our point fur, our leader, OK? I know better than to take on that task. He's a great leader, I'm a decent killer. You work through him to tell the rest of us who needs killin' and who don't, and we'll git 'er done. Right?”

The wolf nodded, an annoying grin on his muzzle.

“What?” the coyote demanded.

“You don't even know what the mission is.”

“I don't give a shit, Jess. You give me that fox I love when it's all done, I don't give a flying fuck what you feel it's necessary to put us through in the meantime. You just keep it on the up and up, OK? No more of this crafty political bullshit, words meaning two different things, that kind of stuff. Tell us what needs doing and get out of our way. And your father help you both if you cross me with Annie. I will hunt down destroy *anyfur* or *anything* that comes between us, and that, my friend, includes *you*.”

The wolf considered the canine before him, watching the fire in his gray eyes.

“You've changed, José.”

“I've seen too much and done too much, and it's your fault.”

“*My* fault?”

“Collectively, yes.”

“You sound like a fur who's having a crisis of faith!”

“You gotta have faith to have that crisis, Jess.”

The wolf became genuinely angry now. “You dare to have this conversation with me and claim to be a non-believer?”

The coyote leaned forward in his chair, the better to meet the angry gaze with a dispassionate one of his own. "I didn't say I don't *believe*, Jess. *You* said that. *I* said I don't have any *faith*. Figure it out, and don't forget it. If you're gonna throw a hissy fit now I'm gonna go home to Annie. If we're gonna talk about this mission, then put your hurt feelings away and get your cards on the table. Otherwise, shut the fuck up."

The wolf stared at him, his eyes and face suddenly expressionless.

"Very well, Joseph."

"The name is *José*," the coyote growled, still holding the deity's gaze. "José Ortiz Latrans. Don't forget *that* either."