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VIII – Truth

Joe woke up. Frankly, he hadn't expected to.

His memories were rather fuzzy, and he was in a lot of pain, but he was awake.

He was also covered in blood. Probably his own, too. In his paw he could feel the grip of a pistol, and that at least made him feel a little bit better. Not by much, admittedly.

He opened his eyes. Having woken up didn't automatically involve eye-opening for someone in as much pain as he was, but he finally got around to it, rather dreading what sight would meet him.

Even with his apprehension, he wasn't prepared for the horrible sight of Varghöss, looking down at him with a hungry and rather curious expression on his face.

"I'm not dead," Joe grumbled. "Shoo! No eaty coyote!"

Varghöss looked a bit dissatisfied with his dinner having woken up. Apparently, Joe realized, that disqualified him as a meal. He'd have a word with Aslaug about her mount and his eating habits, but for the time being, Joe realized, he had to heal up. And he ... had to find out where he was.

Something was coming back to him. Gunshots. A room with metal shelves. Guards.

Swiss Guards!!

His eyes flew wide open as it all came back to him.

"Father Malheiro?" he wheezed. Even two words made his chest ache in the most unbelievable way.

There was no answer. Joe turned his head left and right to take a look at the surroundings. Looking straight up at the sky and an absolutely gigantic feral wolf didn't tell him much about where he was, after all. But the surroundings didn't say much either. He could see a low mountain range in the distance. In the other directions, wide plains stretched out before his eyes.

He tried to sit up, but the agony in his chest made him cry out and he fell back on his elbows. Now his right leg felt like it was on fire from the knee down as well.

"Where am I?" he mumbled, mostly to himself but out loud, almost testing if he really *was* awake.

Again, there was no answer. Still, Joe knew he couldn't lay about all day. He managed to get up to a sitting position, immediately realizing he was wounded. Badly wounded. He had a bleeding chest-wound, and his right shin looked shattered. A bone-splinter was sticking out through his pants.

But he was awake ... his mind was clear, and once the initial fear had vanished, Joe wondered what was keeping him from bleeding to death. Briefly, he wondered if he too had been immortalized and it almost made him panic, but then he remembered Father Malheiro, reading from that ... that book.

The *Codex Maleficium*.

That book was extremely important and Joe looked left and right, afraid that the thin, vellum-bound book wouldn't be there. But to his great relief, it was ... only a few feet away.

He wished he knew how he'd come to this place ... or even what "this place" was.

Slowly and in great, great pain, he dragged himself over to the book and, after wiping his paws off very thoroughly, he picked it up. "You'd better be worth this!" he wheezed and clenched his eyes shut against the pain. "I'm getting too old for this shit!"

Varghöss lolled his tongue at the expression and bounded around like an overgrown puppy.

"What?" Joe began. "You think I'm too old too?"

Varghöss answered by rolling over on his back and wriggling around like he was in the best of moods. Joe raised an eyebrow at the sight and found it all very bizarre.

"Okay, so I am wounded ... possibly dying, I have a book I can't read, a wolf I can't ride and I'm decidedly filly-less!" he complained and looked towards the sky. "YOU HEAR ME? THIS IS NOT THE WAY IT'S SUPPOSED TO BE!"

Shouting wasn't a good idea and he nearly crumbled in on himself, but if the last thing he did was shout to the sky about the injustice of the world, then at least he'd feel a bit better.

"C'mon Aslaug ... the tables are turned. I need your help," he groaned. He couldn't stand up. Not with his shin being in the condition it was.

It was difficult to even stay awake. Shouting hadn't helped, either. He groaned and felt his eyelids flutter, and he really wanted to lie down and go to sleep. But he couldn't. If he did, he might never wake up. And Aslaug needed the book. Victoria and Torvald needed him to get that damned book to Aslaug.

"Don't suppose you're inclined to let me hitch a ride, are you?" he asked and looked towards Varghöss.

The giant wolf canted his head and looked at Joe like he had just asked how green smelled or what the texture of sound was. Total nonsense.

"Didn't think so," the coyote mumbled. "Bloody silly wolf! Why must wolves dislike coyotes from nature? Right now I need a damned ride!"

He was about to pass out when he heard hoofbeats. He flopped down on his back again, unable to keep himself upright any longer.

"Damned it ..." a female voice said as Joe's vision faded due to pain and bloodloss. "You don't look so good, Mr. Latrans."

"Who are you?" the coyote mumbled, drowsily. "'n how d'you know my name?"

"Name's Hrist," the voice said. "I'm Aslaug's sister."

"Didn't even know she had a family," Joe muttered, unable to focus long enough to figure out what Hrist meant. "Funny though ... one letter away from Christ."

Hrist sighed. Another set of hoofbeats ... then another ... and another ... could be heard. More furs dismounted from the sound of things, but Joe had reached a point where he just wanted them to be quiet about it so he could sleep.

The last thing he felt before passing out again was getting lifted into the air.

###

Standing in the ruins of the convent of Bella Divignano, Anane could smell the blood still fresh on the stone and the ground.

This felt like a waste of his time. Following in the tracks of a retired agent and a Valkyrie, cleaning up after them. Trying to learn their plans. The easiest way to do that would be to confront them and beat the information out of them, but he was under orders ... and in no hurry to lose any more body-parts.

His ever-bleeding eyesockets were a constant reminder of his one, great failure ... or at least a reminder of what his Master considered a failure. Anane did not agree. He had seen to it that a young Angel fell and while it was not an optimal situation, he had at least created a situation that led to the death of that very Angel. Plus he had caused death and destruction aplenty.

He would have won if it hadn't been for a then-Agent of the most obnoxious kind.

Growling, he ran his palm down the wall. It was still soaked in blood. It hadn't dried yet ...

It would take weeks for this particular blood to dry, anyway. It belonged to the sorceress Rossana. Or as it was, the *ex*-sorceress.

The grave was empty. He didn't have to be able to see it to know that. Oh, sure, the ancient corpses were still there, and even though the Valkyrie and the retired agent had covered the grave again, they were now utterly decomposed after being exposed to air. But matters of the flesh were irrelevant to Anane. The souls of the dead had been locked in their coffin with them, for all this time, and now they were free. The Valkyrie was not particularly skilled at her religion's branch of spirit magic, although she'd recognize it anywhere. But that short-coming meant she hadn't noticed the ancient souls, and now they were gone.

It was ridiculous really, that a Valkyrie could overlook two souls. She was meant to see such things, but ... maybe she had seen them anyway, and simply let them run?

Anane already wanted to tear her a new one, but this didn't help. She'd let something that valuable escape, out of sheer ignorance of their value.

Rossana would have gathered the souls in a suitable vessel ... her brother ... and brought them to the Malefic Council. It would have been a potent weapon, perhaps even *the* weapon to be used in this world.

Proof perfect that God made mistakes. Solid evidence that the centuries old, dogmatic nonsense of God's perfection was nothing but empty rhetoric and a false, if well executed, marketing ploy. And now, they could be anywhere.

Which made them useless to the Valkyrie as much as to Anane. He was finally starting to understand what his enemy was trying to do.

But how could she prove her point without those souls?

There was no way of ...

Unless ...

Anane stood upright. Around him, the walls of the ancient convent of Bella Divignano crumbled to dust. Trees withered and died half a mile away from where he was standing.

"Let the Malefic Council explain *this!*" he sneered and stepped over a dust-heap that had, until a few seconds before, been a retaining wall.

He was going to Rome.

###

Aslaug knew what hypothermia felt like, and this was much the same. She staggered along, trying to find Varghöss but for some reason, he wasn't where he had left her. She could only barely stand. Her whole body ached and she could only lift her arms through a massive exertion of will.

She'd bled terribly. More than she was meant to. Now her wounds were bandaged, but not healed, and she knew the rules as well as anyone else in Asgaard. She had to heal this naturally. She was allowed to use medicine, but no *sejd*.

Varghöss was gone. She had no idea why, but she expected something bad had happened. Not to her wolf ... she would have felt that ... but something had pulled him away, and she was too woozy to call him back. She had bled too much to collect her thoughts.

But she had understood. She had been too narrow in her definition of faith and she had not understood the true meaning of Dogma until now. It nearly frightened her to think of. How careless ... how foolish it really was.

Staggering on another few steps, she found it hard to keep her balance. But she had to. She had to keep going. Joe would find the evidence, she would have the insight, granted by the Well of Wisdom, and she would couple it all together and they could save Torvald and Victoria.

Court of justice *indeed*. Crimes against the universe. It was nothing but a sham, just as she had thought. This wasn't about whether they had killed a fur or two, although they no doubt believed that to be the reason, themselves. This was not about whether they had urinated on the Abrahamic God's proverbial sugarlump at all.

This was about abandonment. About getting rid of a stink under one's nostril. Each universe under the control of one set of deities only.

It was about divine entities, trying to assert themselves.

This was what Odin had meant when he said she had more wisdom than she let on.

Blinking to keep exhaustion at bay, she stumbled onwards. She had no idea how far she'd come or how far she still had to go. She just had to keep moving ...

###

Warmth surrounded Joe on all sides. He was wrapped in nice, warm furs and he was only half awake. The scent in the room was very nice indeed. Smoked meat, an open fireplace, thyme and wild parsley. He smiled and squirmed a bit under the furs, getting snug and comfortable.

There was no pain. Just a dull ache, but that was a huge upgrade compared to a last time he was conscious. He could feel a bandage around his chest ... probably to take care of the gunshot wound he remembered receiving.

Once again, the *Codex Maleficium* popped up in his mind and he turned his head.

The book was still there. Right next to the bed.

The room was not very well lit, but he could see the book nonetheless. On top of it was the cloth-wrapped spear-fragment. On a bench by the wall, he could make out his clothes.

Well, most of them anyway. He'd been allowed to stay in his boxer-shorts at least.

Blinking away his sleepiness, he tried to get an impression of the room in which he was resting. It was about the size of his own bedroom at home. The walls were half-timbered and it was nice and warm, but only a couple of oil-lamps on the walls gave any light at all. The bed was warm and made from sturdy, carved oak planks. Norse style carvings. Joe wasn't an expert by any stretch of the imagination, but one did not hang out around Aslaug for long before one learned to appreciate the elegance of interlaced animal figures and fantastical creatures.

He grinned slightly. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt this relaxed and comfy. In a strange room, in a strange bed, covered in warm furs ...

If only Annie had been there, he thought ... making his grin a little wider.

There was a knock on the door and he was snapped out of thinking about his wife.

"Yeah, I'm awake," he said, surprised at how clear his voice was.

The door was pushed open and a tall, rather lanky vixen came in, carrying a bowl of something steaming. "Good. You've slept for over two days," she said.

"Whu ... who are you?" Joe asked, not altogether certain that being alone in this strange, comfortable place in the company of a young vixen, wearing nothing but boxer-shorts and a cover of sleeping-furs was a good idea.

The vixen came up to the side of the bed and put the bowl down next to the codex and the spear-fragment. "I hope you're strong enough to eat by yourself. I'd hate having to feed you!" she said. Not unkindly but there was something in her voice that made it clear that she'd rather be somewhere else.

Joe tried to sit up. He found that it ached rather badly if he did, but he wasn't going to bed fed like a baby if he could hold a bowl and eat on his own. "I'll ... be okay," he grumbled. "Still haven't told me who you are though."

"I'm called Haldana. I'm one of ..."

"... Aslaug's sisters."

The vixen nodded. "Indeed."

Joe took the bowl and looked into what he assumed to be buckwheat porridge with berries.

No blueberries, at least. Not this time. He had a taste and it was rather nice, if a little bland. Clearly, Haldana was waiting for him to let her know what he thought of her cooking, and the coyote nodded and took another spoonful.

"Thank you. This is good. I'm starving!" he said and enjoyed every spoonful. He realized the vixen had mixed in a little honey to make it sweeter, and it took the blandness out of the food. He'd just been unlucky on the first bite.

Haldana looked relieved. "I'm not much of a cook," she admitted. "The others are out looking for Aslaug. It shouldn't be hard to find her ... we know where she went."

"Some kind of mystical Valkyrie-thing, is it?" Joe chuckled. "You always know where the others are?"

"Generally speaking, but usually it's because we tell each other," Haldana said, blank-faced.

Joe groaned. "Score one for you then," he mumbled and took another large spoonful of porridge. "Where are we?"

"You're in Asgaard. This is one of Ull's hunting lodges. He doesn't use it this time of year."

"Ull?"

"God of the hunt ... amongst other things. He's exiled from Valhalla."

"What did he hunt to earn him *that*?"

Haldana chuckled and shrugged. "Nothing, actually. The Gods elected him King once, after Odin had been gone on one of his ... journeys ... for so long that everyone thought he wasn't coming back. Well, almost everyone, that is."

"So he tried to usurp the throne?" Joe asked, blinking. He hadn't exactly come to know the Norse gods as particularly forgiving, and that Odin had let a usurper live was a surprise to him.

"Not as such. I said the Gods elected him. I never said he ran for office. He wasn't happy with it ... in fact, I think he was the one who was most relieved when Odin *did* return."

"Ahh, so the one-eyed one let him live, but still exiled him. I see," Joe said and finished his food. "You know, I thought I was done with the whole dimension-hopping-thing. I'm not sure I ever really got used to it."

Haldana smiled. "Dimension-hopping?"

"Well, if I'm in Asgaard ...?"

The Valkyrie laughed. "The way mortals look at the worlds is so narrow sometimes," she said. "Did you ever consider that your Heaven lies within yourself, and in all things you see? Isn't your God supposed to be in all things, at least in your world?"

Joe put the bowl aside and scratched the top of his head. "Well ... I suppose. I'm not on the most fantastic of terms with God at the moment," he mumbled, sourly.

Haldana raised an eyebrow. "But you were one of his agents once?"

Joe shrugged. "Look, it's like calling Verizon ..."

"Verizon?" Haldana asked, having never heard the word before.

"Cell phone company. You keep asking and asking, but you never get an answer. You just get put on hold indefinitely. Or you get sent to another department, who in turn send you on to another department, who send you on to a switchboard where you'll be sent to a the next department, who finally sends you back to where you started," Joe explained. "Anyway, where did Aslaug go? You said you knew where to find her."

"She went to the Well of Wisdom. Where Odin sacrificed his eye to gain the greatest insight of all," the vixen said. "She wanted answers. That is the place to get it."

Joe blinked repeatedly and looked at the Valkyrie. "You're saying she's going to give up an eye to try to rival Odin???"

Haldana laughed so hard she nearly fell off the stool where she was sitting. "Gods preserve me, that's the best joke I've heard all year," she said and wiped her eyes. "Each fur going to the well brings a different sacrifice. Something important to them. It is not always lasting damage either. Odin gave a lot, but he had enormous wisdom and insight to begin with. The well only enhances that which is already there. Aslaug is a wiser fur than most think but she's hot-tempered and headstrong too. She'll find her answers, Norns willing ... but the equal of Odin? Good grief, no one and nothing is the equal of the Allfather."

Despite her mirth, she spoke reverentially about the one-eyed King of the Gods, and it wasn't lost on Joe.

He let silence settle on the room for a while after Haldana finished talking. Finally, he looked at her and smiled. "There was a time when ... when I sounded like that when speaking of God," he said.

Haldana raised an eyebrow. She was probably many times the age of the coyote in the bed, but she still managed to feel like the greenhorn as he spoke. His voice was old. Older than his years by far. Finally, she nodded in acknowledgment.

"What do you believe in now, Joe Latrans?" she asked. Her voice had a gentle and comforting quality to it.

"The love of my wife. The strength of my paws. That my car is temperamental and my guns are well oiled. The decency of a cause I choose to be a part of myself. Most of all ... I believe in myself."

Haldana smiled a crooked smile, her facial expression clearly showing her approval. "I can see why Aslaug likes you," she said, thoughtfully.

"I sometimes wonder why anyone likes me," Joe admitted, looking straight ahead. "I don't understand my wife. I believe in her love, but I don't understand why she feels that way. What she sees in me is often ... beyond me. Or my children. Or my friends. I don't understand why the world doesn't chew me up and spit me back out, most of the time."

Reaching out to take the bowl and the spoon, Haldana turned the objects in her paws for a moment before answering. "I think I might have an idea why."

"Then please, do tell me!" Joe chuckled. "Because frankly, that's the great mystery of my life. I am not a good Christian ... insofar as the term even applies to me anymore. I'm not always sure. I'm not there for my wife or my kids half as much as I'd like to, though I do try. I've got a mean streak, I'm temperamental ... what's there to like?"

"You try."

"Excuse me?"

Haldana shrugged, still turning the bowl in her paws. "You try. You're conscious of the fact that you can always do better. You blame yourself for imaginary slights, Joe ... you think you have to be perfect ... or at least vastly better than you are. But what are you using as a basis of comparison? Who is this perfect fur you must be?"

"Erhh ..." Joe managed, squinting, trying to imagine. "I don't really think ..."

"Yes you do. Even if you don't want to admit it to yourself, that's exactly what is going on. You're trying to be something unattainable ... and because you're not complacent, because you're not simply willing to lean back now that you've got the things that so many only dream of, such as a family, a job and good friends, you end up being a genuinely nice fur," Haldana said. She finally got up and headed towards the door, still holding the bowl.

Joe shook his head. "I'm not always sure I'm so nice. I think ill of furs sometimes. I don't always want the best for everyone around me ..."

"Judeo-Christian ethics my red arse," Haldana groaned and rolled her eyes. "You're being a perfectly ordinary fur. You think others don't think or feel that way? Everyone does. Every-bloody-one, Joe Latrans. It's part of having a soul. It's part of being intelligent enough to breathe or eat a banana ..."

Joe coughed back a laugh. "I think this is why I get along so well with Valkyries. You're refreshingly *direct!*" he grinned.

The vixen turned around and leaned on the doorframe, all thoughts of leaving forgotten for the time being. "Maybe so," she began, "but that doesn't make what I'm saying any less true. You think that because you want to punch someone in the face for being an obstinate jerk, it makes you a bad fur. It doesn't. It makes you just like everyone else. And the fact that you don't act on your instincts to punch those jerks without provocation even means you've got more self control than some."

"Heh, I like how you didn't say it made me better than some."

"That concept of "better", yet again, stems from Judeo-Christian ethics. You know what the ultimate result of that kind of thinking is?"

Joe shook his head. He had no idea but he couldn't help an amused interest. "Tell me."

"Political correctness!" Haldana groaned and rolled her eyes again. "An entire concept of mutual interaction based on being so nice to one another that honesty becomes an impossibility. Thou shalt not lie, but thou *certainly* shalt not tell your wife that yes, her butt DOES look big in that dress! Give me a break."

"Oi, my wife's got a perfectly nice backside, not that it's any concern of yours!" Joe protested.

"I was speaking metaphorically. Try thinking about it. Political correctness is a means to be so unfailingly polite to one another that hypocrisy is certain to follow, thereby necessitating more political correctness ... *and ... so ... on!*"

"The bureaucracy shall expand to meet the needs of the expanding bureaucracy," Joe mumbled and shook his head.

"Same thing, exactly. You are your own greatest critic, Joe, and while that no doubt makes you strive to be a better fur, every day ... it does not make you a bad fur. I mean, listen to yourself."

"About what, exactly?" Joe asked.

Haldana shrugged. "I'll just use one example here. One of the things you pointed out yourself is that, by your own definition, you're not a good Christian. Look, I'm not saying you are or you aren't ... that's hardly for me to decide. But you said it as if that in itself detracts from you. Do you not know furs who are not Christian who are both good and worthy regardless of their lack of Christian faith?"

"Well, yes of course! Aslaug for a start. And ..." Joe began, starting to protest. Then he fell silent. And then ... very slowly, he slapped a paw against his face and groaned, deep in his chest. "I feel a number of expletives coming on, but none of them quite seem to *cover* this."

Haldana grinned and pushed herself off the doorframe. "I think you understand, then."

"You just be glad I'm in bed, wounded, or I'd come after you to kick you for that," Joe mumbled, but he couldn't quite help a smile.

With a swish of her tail and a chuckle, Haldana finally left the room with the bowl and Joe laid back down to get snug and let healing take its course.

###

Aslaug had stopped walking. She had no idea where she was, anymore, or even where she was headed. In the end, she had only kept walking in order to stay conscious. By now, her hooves felt like lead, and her eyelids were even worse. Her arms were a complete mess. Blood soaked the bandages and the fur on her paws was matted with blood. Her legs were streaked where her arms had dangled against her thighs, and consequently, blood was slowly seeping down her pants too.

She had passed through tired and come out into exhaustion ... then passed through that as well and come out on the other side where everything was pain.

Breathing. Staying awake. Going to sleep. Walking, standing still, sitting ...

It all hurt.

Tears were quietly flowing down her face as she tried to stagger another step or two, but her legs wouldn't obey her and she fell, first to one knee, then flat on her face.

That hurt too.

She wasn't even sure why she was walking anymore. She'd seen the connection ... she'd witnessed it. She'd gotten her insight ...

But she had still walked away from the well.

Varghöss was gone. Who knew if Joe had succeeded?

Her weapons were tied together on her back. Falling on her face made them bounce on her back somewhat. One of her Franciscas came loose at the force of her fall and bounced back upwards. It came down on her thigh ... blade first.

It was razor sharp and made a long, painful gash. But it didn't feel like she bled much. There wasn't much left to bleed *from* anyway.

She tried to get back up, but her arms were numb, and her legs were leaden. She couldn't even crawl.

Helpless as a newborn, she lay there.

Drawing breath through her mouth in shallow gasps, she tried to stay awake ... to stave off the darkness that crept in on her from all sides.

The darkness that held Ananes face, leering at her with empty, bleeding eye-sockets.

The darkness that held the howling of wolves.

"Unfurl the Raven ..." she wheezed and blinked. It was so hard for her eyes to open again. "And let it fly ..."

Raven wings ... beating in her ears.

There was someone there, in front of her. A group of furs. Nine ... ten ... twelve.

Thirteen.

They were dressed oddly. They were poor, maybe even undernourished from the look of things. They were disagreeing on something. Twelve males and a female. She couldn't even see who they were or even what species most of them were. The female was arguing with a male ram. Arguing ... hard.

Aslaug blinked again and forced her eyes to open once more. This time, she saw a huge hall. Classical lines, with tall pillars. She could hear ... chanting. Like that of Christian monks. There was a heavy scent in the air, too. Incense. And so many furs, dressed in gold and scarlet. Rich, rich furs. What did they have in common with the thirteen?

Gasping for breath, she tried to crawl closer, but she barely managed to move a few inches ... her fingers clawing feebly at the ground and her hooves refusing to push off against something.

So tired.

So utterly tired.

It would be easy to sleep. Sleep and not wake up. Her eyes fell shut and she couldn't muster the strength to open them again.

She could wake up in Hel. She could hear the Goddess of the dead calling her name.

Not all is bad in Hel.

Not all ...

She opened her eyes again, not sure how she found the strength to do so. Her mouth was half filled with grass and dirt.

There was a child in front of her. A young child, dressed strangely. Not ... poorly, like the thirteen. But he wasn't rich, either.

Playing with clay birds. And the birds were given life by his touch, and they flew away. An adult scolded the child. An unseen adult, but the child grew obstinate and angry, but he stopped making birds. And then he went off.

He went to play with another child. They played on a roof of a hut. A flat roof. They disagreed on something and ... and scuffled. The other child fell off.

Pushed off by the boy with the clay birds, in a fit of anger.

The boy with the birds stood on the edge of the roof and watched his friend, laying on the ground. Dead with a broken neck. He did not seem to care. He wasn't exultant, either. He simply didn't care. The look on his face was one of a grown fur looking at a dead worm. Something unimportant and insignificant.

Adults called to them, and he suddenly seemed fearful of being discovered, so he crawled down and touched his dead friend, who came to life, his neck righting itself.

There was a small puddle of blood on the ground where it had seeped from his mouth.

Two adults ... two females ... came into view.

"What is this? Why is there blood? Jesus, did you do this?" she asked, angrily.

And the little boy with the birds shook his head. "I did not," he answered.

The other female looked incredulous and turned to the boy who had died and come back. The boy who had bled from the mouth, and who still had blood in his fur. "Tell me, my son! Did he hurt you?"

"No," the boy who was brought back replied. "No Mother, Jesus did not hurt me. I just fell. I'm fine now."

The adults left, seemingly accepting that the boy had simply fallen. The two boys were left alone. The one who had died looked at the one called Jesus and fell to his knees, prostrating himself before this child who had both killed him and brought him back.

The one called Jesus seemed to contemplate this, then simply walked away without a word.

Leaving the Valkyrie to look into the utterly terrified eyes of the boy who had died ... and been brought back.