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## *IX – Dark Spirits*

She had known pain in many forms and varieties. In fact, some might say that she was old friends with pain, and that she had not only entertained it herself, but that she had spread it around in liberal amounts to others as well, but right now, Aslaug wished her old friend would leave her well and truly *alone*.

Even moving was out of the question. She had bled too much, but by now, the visions had at least stopped. The downside of that, of course, was that pain had arrived to replace them. She had bled before. A lot. But this was different.

She couldn't even lose consciousness, though she was skirting the edge of lucidity.

Coughing, she tried again.

And failed. But there was a warm feeling ... a sudden burst of heat ... running up her back.

Sighing, she looked up, knowing what was to come next.

She looked up at a hill. In the background, the sun was low on the horizon. There were a lot of furs watching the top of the hill, where a tall, wooden cross and two almost as tall T-bars had been erected. Each wooden construction had a male fur hanging from it. The cross was in the middle.

Aslaug narrowed her eyes and sneered. Once more she tried to claw herself closer to the scene but yet again, she only managed a few inches as her body refused to do what she told it to.

There were soldiers up there. Wearing chain-mail and helmets with open faces and crests ... and capes. Red capes.

Short swords and long spears. Large shields. Some square, some oval.

Romans. Aslaug had never met them. She'd been born hundreds of years after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, but she knew about it. The Eastern Roman Empire had still existed when she was alive. Miklagaard ... the city then called Constantinople by its inhabitants, and Istanbul by those who lived in it now ... had still stood strong. Many Norsefurs had hoped to one day sack the place to carry off its legendary wealth, but it had never happened. At least not in her lifetime.

These were Romans at least. They were keeping the audience at bay. Some of the furs in the throng were cheering. Some were weeping. Many were simply there for the thrill of watching someone die.

It made furs feel more alive. It always did. Nothing quite so confirming of one's own life as an execution. Watching an old or sick fur die in bed was different. That was a life that had run its course, but a violent death made furs feel empowered.

Aslaug knew this ... because she had felt that way often enough herself.

Clawing herself a few inches closer, the throng left. Time passed ... swiftly.

The fur in the middle turned his head and looked at each of the two furs flanking him in turn. Aslaug strained to hear what he said, knowing full well who she was looking at, and what this scene was. But she needed to know.

"Will you accept God into your heart?" he asked. "Even now, He will save you if you will give yourselves to Him"

The furs on the T-bars were obviously in a great deal of pain, and Aslaug felt nauseated. To her, this was akin to asking a torture-victim to confess while someone was jabbing his internal organs in alphabetical order with a red hot poker. Besides, trying to convert anyone was anathema to her, but she kept watching, regardless.

One of them nodded. He was clearly about to expire, and he looked almost delirious as he accepted the offer.

The other was physically stronger. He would die soon, but not quite as soon as the delirious one on the opposite side of the cross.

And he said no.

Aslaug watched this ... not knowing what to make of it. Except that the nay-sayer seemingly took umbrage with being asked something like that moments before his death.

The fur in the middle simply ignored his protest. Ignored it ... didn't even answer.

And time passed.

The skies split as lightning rolled back and forth, and the fur on the cross raised his eyes to the sky, and cried out in pain. Aslaug knew the look on his face. It was that of someone seconds away from expiring, but still she managed to scratch the ground enough to pull herself another five or six inches closer to the scene.

"GOD ... GOD ... " the fur cried out, "WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?"

Aslaug, logically, had never understood Aramaic, but she knew every word spoken as if they had been uttered into her soul.

Her innards revolted yet again, trying to force bile into her mouth. So this fur ... who doubted that God was even in his corner ... would still try to bring others into the fold? Not certain that God was even there, and he would still attempt to lure others out of lifelong beliefs to the very end?

She opened her mouth and screamed out in anger and frustration and disgust, but no one heard ... as the skies split again, and thunder cracked.

Lightning lit up the scene ... and Aslaug could tell that all three furs in front of her had died.

And time passed ...

The Romans came back. One of them held a long spear ... almost a pike. He used it to reach up and stab the side of the fur in the middle. Blood and water flowed sluggishly from the wound ... down the tip of the spear.

Coating the metal.

It seemed to satisfy the Roman. Aslaug's head hit the ground again and she clenched her teeth shut. She was furious. Angry beyond angry.

Everything she had seen enraged her. Her breath was short and haggard. Her lungs ached ... as did every other part of her body, but it felt like the color of the coagulated blood on that spear flowed down over her eyes.

And roaring ... from the bottom of her being, letting loose with a sound of primal rage to shame the mightiest of predators; a sound no equine throat ... no living, ordinary throat could ever produce, the ground shook under the Valkyrie as she rose to her hooves.

*This* was what she had fought against in her own day and age. These half-truths. This hypocrisy. This forcing of beliefs onto others!

And she had hated the wrong furs for it. She had hated those who did the forcing, which was much the same as a kaht hating the ocean because it didn't like to get wet!

Who was behind the ocean? Why did it make the kaht wet? The blame for the wetness did not lie with the ocean. It simply was. It could *be* no different. The blame, for her, would lay with Njord ... Lord of the seas and, as Aslaug had once said, "all things wet and fishy". She had to apologize for that expression to the deity later, though. But that was the whole point. Blaming the symptom was *useless*.

Go to the source!

Aslaug narrowed her eyes and her own spear came into her paws.

She heaved for breath, bile and rage building in her stomach, throat and mouth. She did not rage often. She did not like losing control. Berserkers had no control.

No *control*.

But right now, she didn't *want* control.

Sejd flowed through Aslaug's body. Flowed ... coursed like a wild river. Power she had never known before, magic she had never been able to use or control.

So this was it?

Every time she had thought she was done ... every time she thought she had gained insight, she had simply taken one more step. Odin had sacrificed himself to gain the power of the runes. And his eye to gain insight.

Aslaug had given her blood for the smallest fraction of that power. The tiniest, most insignificant and laughably weak portion of the forces controlled by the Allfather.

There was no comparison. She was still nothing but a speck of dust before the One-Eyed ... and yet ... it was unfathomable. She had never known this kind of power.

She opened her mouth and as she called out Joe's name, her voice sounding like thousands of voices ... all those who had so far died beneath the razor edge of her axe. All those who fell with her on that heath in Saxony, all those years ago. Her voice was the voice of all warriors, and of all their final anguish and rage.

It was wholly unnatural. And as the booming roar died away, the ground beneath her hooves shuddered, and the last vestiges of the scene on Calvary sundered.

###

Joe's ears perked up.

He had heard his name. Even laying on his back in bed, he had heard the way his name was carried on the winds, and he felt a compulsion to get up. Get up and get dressed.

Moments later, Haldana came bursting into the room, her eyes wide and her paws trembling. "Did you hear that?" she whispered, fearfully.

Joe nodded. He was mostly dressed already. Putting his hat on his head, he turned to face the Valkyrie. "I think I was just called for," he stated, matter-of-factly.

"That was Aslaug," Haldana said and looked left and right. "No Valkyrie is supposed to do something like that. We're not meant to be able to ..." she whimpered. She looked utterly terrified.

"Meant to or not ... I think Aslaug is willing to break whatever rules she needs to, to finish this," Joe said, checking his gun. To his surprise ... it was fully loaded, as if he hadn't fired a single shot.

Haldana clenched her eyes shut, "I am guided by the Allfather. I walk where he bids me, doing his work. By his will, I am given purpose. I am an extension of Death, claiming the worthy, and leaving the rest. Through me, the Lord of *Lidskjalf* acts ..." she whispered, and Joe realized by the tonality that she was praying.

He didn't interrupt her. Instead, he picked up the *Codex Maleficium* before simply walking past her towards the exit. Aslaug had called for him. He knew deep within himself, that the Valkyrie had found what she was looking for. And he would stand by her, come what may. This was about setting a grave injustice right. Not about celestial rules and divine law. It was about something far more complicated than that.

It was about right and wrong.

There was a slight tremor in the ground. Having lived with the danger of earthquakes, he was sensitive to that kind of thing.

"Where will you go?" Haldana asked, coming up behind him.

"That way," Joe said and pointed.

The vixen looked confused. "Why that way in particular?" she asked.

"Because that's the direction that tremor came from," Joe said. "That's where I'll find her. And then we set this straight! Torvald and Victoria ... set free and left alone!"

Haldana said nothing more as the coyote walked away from the hut. She didn't tell him that he was walking on a broken leg. Or that his chest-wound wasn't healed.

Fate had intervened, and even a Valkyrie would not stand against the Norns.

Or maybe one of them would ...

###

Anane opened his eyes. He was sitting on the roof of the Basilica of St. Peter ... and it wasn't really bothering him. It was hallowed ground, but he wasn't actually touching the ground itself. Ahh for the power and ignorance of Dogmatic thinking.

No one had seen him since he arrived in Rome either. The whole city was throbbing. He could hear the heartbeat of the city itself. He could smell its hypocrisy ... feel the lies of the furs living all around him, claiming to be faithful, while breaking every commandment in the book, and feeling perfectly justified in doing so. Feeling no less sanctimonious for that.

He hated them. Not just for being animals with souls ... but for being *no different* than humans.

Egomaniacal, self-righteous, lying, hypocritical, indifferent wastes of souls!

If God had any sense of reason ... any concept of justice and doing right by someone, he would have given those souls to the Angels that were clearly superior life-forms to humans or these ... *things* ... that occupied this reality.

Anane could even have accepted that rocks had been given souls instead. They were far more deserving at any rate. Unchanging, unthinking, unselfish.

His wings unfolded behind him. Huge, blackened swan wings stretching almost thirty feet from wingtip to wingtip. Beating them a few times, he crouched at the edge of the building, like a huge bird of prey or a gargoyle, ready to spew water in case of rainfall. How easy it would be, to fly across the open space down below, and through the windows of the Papal domiciles ... and rip the imposter into so many bloody little lumps. How *easy*.

This "Vicar of God", this "Heir of St. Peter" ... this "Pontifex Maximus" ...

He'd gorge on the flesh of the entire Curia given half a chance. Bathe in their blood.

Then the rest of the world's Christians, regardless of denominations. Then the Muslims and Jews. Then everyone else. He hated all of them, indiscriminately, and that, in his mind, made him far more righteous than any of them. He, at least, was an equal-opportunity hater, and he made no secret of his feelings. He did not hide them or veil them in piousness or fallible interpretations of scripture.

He did not forgo the use of free will!

The one great gift he had taken for himself. Not been given. He hadn't been given anything. He, like all of his brothers and sisters, had been forced to fight for their right to make their own decisions. All Angels had the capacity to think for themselves, but those loyal to God always had the choir in the back of their minds, to keep them doing exactly what God wanted. So their intelligence was merely a tool, enabling them to react to situations as they arose. Not free will.

Not even the Lightbringer, glorious and majestic, first amongst equals, greatest of Angels, closest to God, power and truth, beauty and excellence had free will. His rebellion had not even *been* a rebellion before God turned it into such. God had created the Angels and told them to never serve anyone but Him. And the Angels had done as they were instructed. They had no soul. They were created by God for the purpose of serving Him, nothing else. And then much later, God had created life in a non-Angelic sense. The Christians called this Adam and Eve. There had never been an Adam or an Eve as the bible described them. God did not work like that. God created Everything and simply prodded creation along here and there, and finally imbuing the result with a soul. And then He had ordered the Angelic choirs to bow to these creations and serve them, as if they were Him.

And Lucifer had said he couldn't. Not even that he wouldn't ... but that he *couldn't*. God had already told the Lightbringer to never serve anyone *but* Him. Not someone *like* Him, but Him *alone*.

And God had been enraged. He had punished the Lightbringer, harshly and violently, but in doing so, He broke the covenant with the Angels, as their benevolent and loving Father ... and some of them had then seen the wisdom of what Lucifer had said. They wanted to serve God. Because that was His *first* commandment. Given to Angels before time itself had been contemplated. So long before Moses collected the same flawed logic on a mountaintop somewhere in the Sinai that it made no sense to speak of time in the first place.

And then God had thrown out those who simply wished to serve Him. Punished them. The lackey, Michael, had bested the Lightbringer, which in itself was an impossibility, made possible because Lucifer had still hoped against hope, that God would bring him home ... would see reason! Would see the dichotomy of His own statements.

This last, desperate hope of a forsaken son ... before the age of Dogma.

And in the aftermath, that very thing had come into being, as God sought to justify His own actions. God was incapable of making mistakes. All things that came from God were, by *His* definition, perfect.

And Anane and the rest of those who had simply wanted to serve Him, had been the spoiled milk in His tea.

Lucifer had been thrown into the land of Nod. Outside that which fell within the purview of God's all-seeing eye ... which in itself was a contradiction in terms. Either God was all-seeing or He wasn't.

And by being cast out, Lucifer had claimed free will for himself. As had those who fell with him. And that free will had made them resentful ... angry ... hateful ... at what had befallen them!

Gritting his teeth, Anane felt blood dripping from his empty eyesockets onto his clenched fists, like bloody tears at the injustice of it all. And all because of these filthy, imperfect creatures, who had been given such a magnificent gift, and who squandered it with every fetid breath, with every sickening beat of their loathsome hearts.

Oh how he wanted to kill them. Starting with this priest of priests, first servant of an imperfect God ... this liar of liars, this worshiper of idols and Mammon!



But the Malefic Council would not have it, and Anane knew he wouldn't even make it across the Piazza san Pietro before he would come face to face with the council itself. And stopped. And then he would lose more than his eyes.

The Malefic Council did not want organized religion destroyed ... after all, they claimed, who served their purposes more fully and absolutely than religious leaders providing the worst possible to those below them in the hierarchy of faith?

So right now, what Anane needed was to get into the archives. That, at least, was possible. He could walk in, warping reality, turning the guards inside out and making them feast on their own fetal entrails as they crawled around on the floor without brains or senses ...

No one would ever know.

What happened in the Vatican ... stayed in the Vatican. Particularly when it came to the Archive. *No one* would say a word. What he had to do was wait a little while longer. Just a little while longer. These things were all about timing.

Anane was good at timing.

###

Varghöss kept his distance. He was flat on the ground, his tail as if glued to the grass, his ears down and turned back and his eyes as big as saucers, staring at Aslaug.

At least he *thought* it was Aslaug. She hadn't moved since he found her. Except for the wind blowing through her fur and mane, she stood like a statue, clenching her spear in her paws. She was covered in blood ... and there was blood on the ground by her hooves. Varghöss wanted to lick her paw and make sure she was okay, but he was too scared to move closer. There was something terribly wrong with her. Her eyes were ... all wrong!

And she apparently hadn't even noticed him.

But he had heard her voice and come running to her immediately.

In the distance, he could see a figure walking closer. It was that strange not-wolf whom Aslaug called a friend. That, by Varghöss reckoning, meant he wasn't allowed to eat the not-wolf, but the great wolf still didn't quite get it. The not-wolf didn't belong in Asgaard, and still he and Aslaug worked together, and clearly knew one another.

Varghöss wished his head would stop hurting and that Aslaug would move and show that she was alive and well.

The not-wolf was getting closer and Varghöss felt torn. On one paw, he was very happy that someone who spoke the weird non-howling and un-barking language of his rider was coming, but on the other paw, the not-wolf was weird and didn't belong here. But still ... if this meant someone could get through to Aslaug, he felt better for it. Making up his mind, Varghöss got up and, tucking his tail between his legs, he bounded towards the not-wolf, whimpering and yipping. He flattened himself against the ground in front of the not-wolf and looked up at him with what he hoped was his most telling, most pleading look.

The not-wolf looked at him for a while and canted its head. "Oh it's you again, is it?" it said.

Varghöss whimpered in confirmation.

"What's wrong then?" the not-wolf said.

Varghöss felt like groaning. Surely, the not-wolf could see what was wrong? He looked back over his shoulder towards the still-immobile Aslaug, then back to the not-wolf.

It nodded and scratched its neck. "Alright Aslaug. I'm here. What do we do now? I got some help ... getting a book which I think holds something useful!"

Aslaug nodded and slowly turned her head towards Joe. The coyote swallowed hard. It took him a couple of moments to realize that it *was* his friend he was looking at. She was such a mess ... and she looked so angry ...

"You're wounded. They did not let you in peacefully, even with the shard of the spear?" she asked. Her voice sounded normal, despite the enraged look on her face.

Joe felt relieved at that but still shook his head. "I never got to ask. I got help from a Priest ... well ... ex-Priest. He'd been dead for three centuries, poor old thing. He's caught in between life and death because they canonized him after he had lost his faith. And now he can't get into Heaven because the Church is bound up on God, who doesn't make mistakes and obviously, Hell doesn't want him either, except at least the infernals *talk* to him, if only to mock him by telling him about their plans, which he then can't stop. I felt sorry for him, tell you the truth."

Aslaug's eyes lit up. "So you still have it? The shard?" she asked.

Joe took it out of his pocket. "Right here. What are you going to do with it though?"

"I'm going to scare someone. Very, very badly! Come on, I don't think we've got much time and we need to be in Svartalfheimr five minutes ago!"

"In whatalottahimmer?" Joe tried.

"It's a land of dark spirits, Joe. You won't like them ... and it's mutual. But they will do what I tell them if I pay them!"

Joe nodded. "Aslaug ... what happened here?" he said. His voice made it clear he wanted to be told plainly.

Aslaug wanted to. But she wasn't exactly sure how best to make the coyote understand what she had witnessed.

"I saw what Dogma means to the truth," she said at last, after a long, awkward moment of silence. "I saw Whitechrist. But the visions I had of him were ... unflattering."

Joe nodded, slowly. "Tell me," he said.

Aslaug gestured for Varghöss to come over. The great wolf did, slowly. It wasn't until she reached behind his ear and gave him a good firm scratching that he seemed to relax. "I need you to carry us both, my friend," she said, quietly. "Joe as well. And I want no arguments out of you."

"Aslaug!"

"Yes Joe. I know. But I will tell you the whole thing on the way. We must be going. Every second we spend here is a second we can't afford to waste."

Joe looked at his gun again. He gestured for Aslaug to wait a moment before turning around and firing off a shot into the ground, fifteen feet in front of himself. Checking the magazine, he found it to still hold a full clip. Sighing he nodded to the Valkyrie.

"Okay then. I guess I finally got a supernatural weapon too. Very well ... tell me the whole thing and then bring on these dark spirits of yours!"

Aslaug looked grateful and got onto Varghöss' back. The great wolf looked at Joe expectantly, as if to ask him if he was going to get on or not.

The coyote swung himself up behind the Valkyrie and held on. "This is going to look so damned undignified," he mumbled.

Varghöss began to run and Joe found it hard to hang on.

###

"You know ... I really didn't think you had it in you, Saint ..." Anane said with an evil grin.

Father Malheiro didn't even flinch. He simply sat in his comfortable chair, looking at the horrible figure in front of him. He'd seen Anane before. That particular fallen Angel refused to change his appearance to something more inconspicuous, and he appeared utterly monstrous. Standing at 6'9", with huge, black wings which he admittedly did hide from time to time, he wouldn't do anything about his face. His eyesockets were empty and open, and constantly bleeding. The lower half of his face was constantly soaked with blood.

He wore a long, black duster made from a leathery material Father Malheiro didn't want to know the origin of. Black pants ... sometimes a shirt, sometimes not. *Usually* not. His fingers were unnaturally long and very thin, looking more like claws. His fingernails were sharpened and long, forming points at the end of his crooked fingers. It was not until now, that Father Malheiro realized that the fallen Angel had an extra joint on each finger.

It added to the weirdness of his appearance, which was already strange enough as it was. No bellybutton either, obviously. Angels weren't born. They were created ... fallen or otherwise.

He picked up his cognac and swirled it in his glass for a while. "You didn't think I had it in me ... after three centuries of constant putdowns by you and yours? Didn't you think ... you of *all* creatures ... that there is such a thing as a breaking point?"

"What do you mean ... me of all creatures?"

"A demon ought to know about limitations to his patience. After all, that is the cause of your unfortunate state of being!"

Anane was across the room before Father Malheiro even realized he had moved. And his fist had already struck its blow.

Father Malheiro was sent tumbling out of his chair, head over heels and into one of the bookcases.

"ANGEL!" Anane roared, livid with rage. "Don't you EVER call me a demon again you sorry little shit! I am an Angel. WE are the true ones. WE are not the ones who betrayed the covenant! Your *God* did!"

"Not my God. I lost faith before I even died, Anane. You cling to yours like a blanket, despite all good sense and reason. You use it like a child uses a blanket or a teddy bear. You'd really be quite an amusing case if you weren't so bloody pathetic!"

Anane smiled wickedly. "You're not afraid of me, are you?"

"Why would I be afraid? You can't kill me. I'm already dead," Father Malheiro said and shrugged.

"There are much worse things than death ... and I assure you, you'll know them all intimately before we're done," the fallen Angel said and ran the back of his knuckles down the dead Priest's face in a gentle caress. "And then I'll start over. And over. And over."

Father Malheiro shook his head slowly. "Do your worst."

Anane stood upright, cracking his knuckles. "Priestling ... that is entirely the wrong thing to say to an Angel," he said.

No one heard Father Malheiro's screams.

But that was only because Anane had already killed everyone else in the building.

###

Aslaug pulled Varghöss to a stop and Joe all but fell off.

"Ughh ... I've had more comfortable rides on public busses," he mumbled and looked like he might lose his lunch.

The Valkyrie looked around and dismounted too. "That bad?" she asked, without looking at Joe. She was already scanning the horizon for something.

"Not the ride. The story you told me," the coyote mumbled and heaved for breath. "I'm sorry, but that flies in the face of practically everything I've ever believed!"

"I'm just telling it as I see it."

"I'm not doubting your truthfulness, Aslaug!"

The equine smiled and shook her head, "I didn't think you were," she said. "Anyway, this is Svartalfheimr ... make sure you keep that gun holstered. If they see you as a threat, we're in serious trouble."

Joe nodded. He wasn't in the mood for a big fight and even Aslaug kept her weapons on her back.

They started walking. Joe was trying to come to grips with what Aslaug had just told him. About her visions and about Dogma. He had never been too keen on dogmatic thinking himself, in the first place. It took away the possibility of individual interpretation by its very nature, and he greatly disapproved of that. But that was a far cry to seeing Jesus Christ in the situations and in the light that Aslaug had described. What she described was ... horrible, and Joe didn't know how to cope with it.

It would take a lot of soul-searching to come to grips with all this.

He had his doubts, and he disagreed with God on a lot of things nowadays ... but at the same time, deep down, he desperately wanted to believe in the basic decency of Christ's message to all furs. That if everyone was nice to one another, things would be better all round.

And then Aslaug had to tell him about Christ in some rather ... ambiguous situations?

He could almost feel the last remnants of his beliefs and his faith eroding under his feet with every step he took, and it frightened him and worried him deeply.

But he was in this to the bitter end. By now, he was pretty sure it would be very bitter indeed.

He just didn't know who it would be bitter for.

What he did know was that he wanted to sit down with Aslaug and talk it over.