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XII – Aftermath

Darkness had long since fallen. It was a beautiful night. Warm and comfortable, with only the barest breeze. Insects could be heard chirping and mice and other small rodents scurried through the grass to find food or to get home before some predator spotted them.

Joe didn't notice any of it. He was sitting by a fire he had managed to build, watching as a couple of quails slowly roasted. He had shot them not far from the campsite, and not surprisingly, he had realized he still had a full clip afterwards. Of course, shooting a quail with a large pawgun meant significant damage to the bird, but Joe was a good shot. One of them lacked a leg, the other he had managed to hit straight in the neck, blowing its head clean off.

Aslaug was still unconscious, but she was stirring at last, much to Joe's relief.

The coyote prodded the meat with Aslaug's long knife and nodded to himself. It'd be done soon.

What would he say when she woke up?

How did he even feel? He wasn't sure, except he felt empty. Drained and yet angry. He had seen things ... heard things ... that no ordinary fur would ever experience. Christians would be horrified if they knew what he had said and under what circumstances, but what could he do? He had all this frustration stored inside and he had finally had a chance to let it out.

He didn't regret doing so.

But if Tigermark knew of it ... or Aramis ... or over half of his local community?

His wife?

Resting his forehead on the back of his arm, he pulled his knees up in front of himself and sighed. Aslaug had spoken up for him. Tried to get him out of his damnable "Agent-contract", but if it had worked or not, he didn't know. He didn't *feel* any different.

Hell could freeze over, for all he cared, and he wasn't going back on active duty like that again. He'd help his friends, but he had a *choice*. That, in essence, was what free will was all about after all.

What he really wondered about, though, was what would happen now. Normally, after a mission had ended, he'd be sent home somehow, but this time, he wasn't sure if that would happen automatically. Aslaug could take him home, of course, but he wasn't going home if she wasn't done. He'd promised to help her, and he would see this through.

"Hey Joe ..." the Valkyrie said, opening her eyes at last. She sounded groggy. "Did it ... work out?"

"I have no idea. I don't even know where we are," the coyote answered. "And welcome back to reality. I hope you're doing better."

"I'm alright," Aslaug answered and tried to sit up. "It is not exactly pleasant to act as host to a deity ... I had no idea Odin did that until he ... you know ..."

"I think it might be why you were able to hold the axe at all. Incidentally, you lost that. I can't find it at least."

Aslaug sighed and looked down as she sat up. "I can get a new one made."

"It's not the same, is it?" Joe asked. "That axe was part of you in a way."

"It was the last ... real link I had to home, I guess," Aslaug said, quietly.

Joe nodded. He couldn't begin to understand how that might feel. "And you can't go back there."

"It's complicated," the Valkyrie pointed out. Originally, when she had been taken off the battlefield and turned immortal, to become an Agent, the proviso had been that if she

ever returned to her own world, she'd die. It was the one place where she wouldn't be immortal, and she'd simply ... die of her wounds.

Now she wasn't an agent anymore. She hadn't retired, like Joe had tried, but she had been promoted. It was not unheard of. Other female warriors had become Valkyries ... but it also meant she had to gather the worthy dead.

She had never given this much thought, but she could conceivably go home now, to gather the dead, but Odin had never intended for her to do that. Her duties were ... different. She had always been meant to be the one gathering the worthy dead in *other* worlds. *Other* realities. Agents or those few souls that belonged to the Norse Gods, even if they lived in a reality controlled by other pantheons. This was the way of things, and Aslaug didn't mind it. She had brought souls to Asgaard or even to Valhalla, and it didn't bother her. It was not a bad job at all. Many of those souls were very excited about where they were going ... honored that they were considered "worthy".

But going back to the reality where she had been born and where she had lived meant going to a place where she wasn't supposed to be. A place where her sisters did The Duty, and where so much time had passed, that she would be just as much out of place there as she had been when first setting hoof in Joe Latrans' home.

What could she do? Get a new axe?

She lifted one of her Franciscas. It was just wood and metal, really. Getting a new one would be totally doable ... and while it was an old-fashioned weapon, by all accounts less effective than a modern firearm, that was not really true in her case. After all, she was an expert with the long-axe ...

It was a traditional weapon ... the kind of thing most furs would expect to find in Valhalla.

But what was Valhalla? What was Asgaard? It was what she expected of the place. It had even changed, as she had changed. Or at least, the way she saw it had changed. No more chain-mail and round shields ... instead, she saw furs in modern combat fatigues when going there ... though many of them still wielded archaic weapons.

She ran a paw through her hair. "We've got to find Anane and stop him," she said, quietly. "I saw him in the vision. If he's involved in this, it means real trouble."

"Who is this Anane-character anyway?" Joe asked, turning his head to look at his friend. "And what can we do to stop him?"

"Anane is what happens when Angels go bad. When they stop being useless birds and start thinking that they might not have to do what they're told."

"A demon, then."

Aslaug smiled. "He doesn't like it when you call him that," she explained. "I learned that the first time I met him."

Joe nodded. He prodded the quails again and, satisfied that they were done, he took one of them off the make-shift spit and gave the other one to the equine. "I know you don't eat much meat, but it's what I could find."

Aslaug took the offered meal and broke a leg off the bird. "No problem. I like meat," she said and took a bite.

"Tell me about Anane, then?" Joe asked.

A mouse peeked out of the darkness around the fireplace, wondering what the giant creatures were doing. Joe noticed it and smiled at it, tossing a small piece of fried quail off to the side for the tiny creature to take.

The mouse was pleased with the food, but it didn't understand what Aslaug said when she told the story of her first meeting with the fallen Angel Anane.

It didn't take long for Joe to envy the rodent.

###

The failed saint was gone, and Anane was not in a good mood. He was not such a pervert that he found some kind of pleasure in pummeling a decaying corpse, and he had disposed of the remains. He was still unsure of why the saint's soul had left his body like that. The only explanation that made sense ... didn't really make sense after all. That for some reason, Heaven had decided to let Father Malheiro in after all these years. But the old priest had lost his faith before dying, and being cursed to walk the world for centuries had not exactly endeared God and all His non-fallen Angels to him. Frankly, Anane couldn't say he blamed the old-timer for his disgust ... even though he found it hard to empathize with a walking, talking animal.

So now he was thinking of what to do next. The shieldmaiden had beaten him to the information he had needed, and he couldn't go back to the Malefic Council without something to show for his efforts. He wasn't in the mood to lose any of his extremities.

He had left Rome. What point was there in staying in the city, when what he was looking for was elsewhere? He needed a quiet place to wait. A place where the eyes of the world didn't turn.

So he had taken up residence in Omdurman, Sudan. Temporarily, of course, but no one in the Western World gave a damn about the place. If he erased it from the map tomorrow, it would turn up in the News at Five and everyone would behave as if they were truly horrified ... some charity concerts would take place, a few dozen musicians would write some terribly emotional piece of drivel and record it, a few hundred million dollars would be collected world wide and then everyone would go back to not caring.

That idea alone made him want to test the waters.

A wicked, evil smile spread across his features as he crouched on top of the minaret of the mosque. It was a large building ... apparently because someone of great local importance, whom no one outside Sudan had ever heard of, was buried in the tomb next to it. This was not a Sudanese or even African trait, either ... it was like that everywhere. Famous individuals would get buried in great pomp and opulence, but no one would know who they were if you went across the nearest border.

They were *dead*.

Anane just didn't get it. Nor did he want to, and he certainly didn't try to understand. It seemed creatures in every reality and on every world he had seen placed tremendous importance on death. More than on life in many cases. Certain Muslim groups practically taught that it was better to be dead than alive, and that it was even better if you could make a lot of OTHERS dead too, when you went.

Some Christians apparently wanted everyone but themselves dead, believing this was good and Godly, and that they'd be rewarded for their inane hatred and pathetic selfishness in the next life.

And Jews ... at least in Israel ... were so keen on being allowed to live as they wanted that they'd happily make anyone dead who got in the way, including those ten to fifteen innocent bystanders over there, and those sixty or seventy school-children hiding in that clearly marked Red Cross building half a mile away.

The way Anane saw it, everyone was in the wrong, and no one wanted to admit to it. Christians and Muslims hated one another. Jews and Muslims hated one another. Jews and Christians pretended to like one another while secretly growling and grumbling about one another's false beliefs behind closed doors.

He'd even caught a human being once in Israel, who claimed to be Christian. He was there, he said, to help bring forth the Rapture. He was there to help Israel, he said, so that Christ would come and take all faithful Christians to Heaven.

Which would leave everyone else, of course, to suffer through the End of Days and judgment day.

Some help *that* was, trying to ensure the people all around him suffered endless torment, Anane had thought ... after removing the man's intestines one at a time, before feeding them to him forcibly.

He'd made it past the kidneys and the liver and he was on the lower intestines when the human expired.

And while that had been a human being, with all their flaws and frailties, he found that he hated the creatures indigenous to this world as much as he hated humanity ... for their flaws, their selfishness, their inability to grasp the essence of God. He ... Anane ... was far more faithful than *any* of them, and he *loathed* God for what He had done.

It was nighttime in Omdurman. Down below, he could smell fires from open fireplaces. He could hear furs chatting. He could smell gun-oil and poorly maintained vehicles as well as unwashed furs and nervous camels and horses.

Sudan was at war.

Sudan had been at war with itself for decades, and as far as Anane was concerned, the more that died, the better.

Perhaps no one would notice if he flattened the city?

But of course they would. Someone would always noti ...

He blinked. His bleeding eye-sockets notwithstanding, he still blinked. That was it, wasn't it? That was precisely *it*.

If he flattened Omdurman, or at least a significant part of it, someone would notice. Then, if he went somewhere else entirely and did the same there, then they would notice that as well. And so on.

If he made sure that each place looked like a terrible accident had happened, then the mortals wouldn't be any wiser, but Agents and other servants of the Supernatural would quickly begin to understand that what happened wasn't a matter of natural disasters and freak accidents.

Maybe he could force a confrontation, then.

With the Shieldmaiden.

Cracking his knuckles, he grinned again and spread his wings wide. Down below, someone apparently saw him against the backdrop of the clear night sky. He could smell their terror all the way up to where he was perched. He could hear their horrified screams.

Fire and brimstone was all well and good, but it was hard to disguise a sudden rain of super-heated rock. Instead, he took off from the minaret ... landing heavily on the ground below.

The slaughter began.

Sudan *had* been at war with itself for decades, after all. A hundred thousand dead in the streets would serve his purpose quite nicely.

In the background, maybe a quarter of a mile away, the Nile ran past. Across the river, Khartoum sat at the intersection of the Blue Nile and the White Nile ... where the waters joined and began traveling north.

Soon, it was neither blue, nor white ... but crimson.

###

Varghöss had eaten the panther ... or at least most of him ... and dragged the rest off to get rid of the evidence. Now he was back to watching the house where he had done the deed. It was dark again and he was crouched low on the ground once more. If someone found him, he'd chew on them a bit and if they were still able to run away, then he'd let them go.

A bit like that badger, except the wolf hadn't chewed on him.

Now he was looking at furs arriving at the building. They had suddenly been there, too, as if appearing out of nowhere.

A few cogwheels clicked into place in Varghöss' lupine brain and he panted slightly in satisfaction. So the equine and the tigress were back home.

The panting stopped after a few seconds when a veritable verbal explosion reached his ears. He whined and flattened himself further on the ground, while the inhabitants of the house took turns shouting about the unholy mess in the living room and kitchen, wondering loudly where the blood had come from and who was responsible.

Okay, so maybe he could have been a *little* less messy when eating.

Right now he was glad he wasn't in there with the equine and the tigress. It would probably be a painful experience.

He was content to watch for a while. Until ...

Something tugged at him. Not physically, but it was there nonetheless.

He had to be somewhere else. Right now. Far, far away from here. He got up and padded away from his hiding place. Then, with a loud, mighty howl, he launched himself into the air and vanished.

###

Aslaug had fallen asleep again and Joe wasn't keen on waking her up. She needed to rest and recover her strength. It was the dead of night, but ... he wasn't tired. In fact, he wasn't even remotely sleepy.

Instead, he simply sat there, prodding the fireplace with a stick, trying to figure out why the fire was still going even though he hadn't put any more firewood on it for quite a while. It seemed ... as if nothing truly died or ended here. Apart from the quails, but then again, he had shot them with a gun that wasn't entirely natural anymore, either.

He had to admit he was thirsty though. In fact, he was parched, but there was no stream nearby. At least he hadn't found one.

He got up and moved around a bit. Not because he was cold, but out of boredom. He turned his back to the fire for a moment to look out into the night, but of course, having spent ages staring into open fire, he had absolutely no night-vision whatsoever.

Turning back around to sit down, he was shocked to find that the fireplace was gone. But it had been there an instant before! He had heard the crackling of the fire, while his back was turned. He had felt the heat. He had seen the light from the fire shine past him.

Now it was gone.

He stood alone in darkness.

And now he was cold. In fact, he was freezing. Clattering his teeth, he tried to rub a bit of warmth into his arms as he tried in vain to figure out where he was.

But there was no way for him to tell. He couldn't smell the fireplace, either.

Damned it all ... he had even lost his hat!!

It was by the fireplace. He'd taken it off for just a moment and left it by his side as he got up and now it was gone!

He felt naked without his hat, and he immediately checked his belt, only to be relieved to find that his gun was still there. Not that it was his first solution to everything but right now, he really needed the reassurance that he could defend himself. Given the story Aslaug had told him about Anane, he was double sure he didn't want to go anywhere without packing a piece.

The ground felt strange under his feet.

On the horizon, a sliver of sunlight could be seen as the sun began to rise. Revealing a desolate, ruined landscape. Made up of ash-dunes and broken rock formations, reaching feebly for the sky with jagged, splintered fingers.

"Where am I?" he asked aloud, though there were no one there to listen.

A slight wind rose around him and he felt it brush across his face, but it was not a pleasant sensation. Rather, it felt like hundreds of pin-pricks and Joe winced in discomfort, shaking his head and looking down as he tried to brush ash out of his facial fur.

On the ground before him, three letters had been drawn into the ash.

N ... O ... D

Blinking in confusion, Joe nodded, shrugging and looking around. "Alright, I'm nodding. What's going on here?" he asked aloud. "I asked where I am, not if my neck still worked."

The letters vanished. A new unpleasant breeze blew past and left behind new letters in the ash.

T ... H ... I ... S ... I ... S ... N ... O ... D ...

"Ah," the coyote mumbled. "Fair enough. Well, up yours to the universe for that, then!"

His mood was already fouled up good and proper. He wanted to go back to Aslaug and the fireplace. He wanted his hat. He wanted to go home, or at least to finish this whole cross-dimensional caper and THEN go home!

The letters vanished and Joe shook his head, standing arms akimbo.

"So what am I supposed to do now? Being outside the eye of God is supposed to scare me? Considering what I just saw, I'm not easily scared!" he growled and began to walk.

It was a long walk.

Joe didn't care.

###

Aslaug woke up.

Joe was gone, and she sat up. She felt a lot better than she had last night and she tried to get to her hooves.

It worked.

Where had Joe gone off to, though?

A chilling sensation ran down her spine and she bent down to pick up the coyote's hat. He'd *never* leave that behind, voluntarily. Even back in the day, he'd bitch and complain endlessly if he had to go on a mission without his much-beloved hat, and here it was, next to the fireplace.

But there were no signs of a struggle.

So now she had to find her friend. She also had to stop Anane. And while she was able to stand, she had lost her axe and she was still anemic, to put it mildly. Normally, she'd be fine the next day after getting wounded, but this was different. Even Odin couldn't simply heal the loss of his eye to the Well of Wisdom, and if the Allfather couldn't do something like that, then she ... a lowly Valkyrie ... certainly couldn't.

She had no idea where she was. It wasn't Asgaard. She would have been able to tell. It wasn't Midgaard either. If it had been, she would've felt the souls of every living thing around, as they slowly neared the end of the line.

Literally.

She brushed herself off and ran a paw through her mane, trying hard to gather her thoughts. First of all, she had to get to familiar ground. She concentrated and closed her eyes, and felt the familiar sensation of the world shifting around her.

It was another example of how she was just a lesser player in the greater scheme of things. She could shunt herself sideways through realities ... a necessary ability for someone charged with gathering the souls of worthy dead ... but in the case of Odin, for instance ... he didn't move as such. Even though it looked as if he would walk, in reality what happened was that the rest of reality realigned itself to fit where he wanted to be. Such as when she had gone to see him in Valhalla.

He hadn't left the great hall. The great hall had vacated the premises because Odin wanted to be elsewhere. And so elsewhere had come to him.

The Valkyrie opened her eyes and nodded. She was standing on a high, artificial hill. For a moment, she was slightly confused, but then she realized that a fur wearing a strange, tight-fitting outfit and a crash helmet was staring at her. He wore skis and he was seated on a boom across the artificial hill.

Or tower.

Or something.

Aslaug looked down and realized that thousands of furs had gathered at the foot of the tower-structure, surrounding a great, open area directly in front of a steep drop at the end of the tower.

She tried to remember where she had seen something like this before and finally it came to her.

"Skijumping?" she asked, blinking. "Of all the places ..."

What in Freja's blessed name was going on?

The fur in the helmet cleared his throat. "Miss ... I have no idea how you got up here, but you're not supposed to be here," he said.

Aslaug was about to say she was looking for a way down when she realized something. A feeling. She looked at the jumper on the boom. His life would go on for many years yet, but everyone else ... literally *everyone* she could see on the tower ... had only a few minutes of life left. She sighed and nodded. "Yes I am," she said, quietly, understanding what was going on. She took a step to the side to let the fur in the helmet go past. A few

armed furs were coming towards her ... apparently security guards, but she simply ascended to the top of the tower. As the fur in the helmet raced downwards towards the steep drop, a sudden explosion rocked the entire structure.

The jumper barely managed to keep his balance, and he cleared the tower flying very unevenly. No doubt the landing would be painful, but at least he had escaped the explosion.

Then Aslaug felt another one.

She nodded, quietly and looked around. Furs were panicking. A few were already falling out of windows.

She was the only one who wasn't falling over.

Someone had detonated two bombs. She didn't need a degree in military science to tell, and a lot of furs were going to die. A *lot* of furs.

Everything was pandemonium. But Aslaug was calm. This was what Valkyries did, after all. She could feel the lives of every fur in the tower and she could feel how every last one of them would be dead in under two minutes.

Many were praying as they panicked. Some were falling over their own feet and as the tower began to tilt, they tried desperately to hold on to something to avoid falling to their deaths.

It was in vain. Aslaug knew she couldn't save them and even if she could, she wasn't meant to or allowed to. Their lives were at an end ... it was the way of things, and she was not meant to fight it.

Finally, she came face to face with a young male. He wore a tight fitting skijumper's suit like the fur who had jumped when Aslaug arrived, except that while the fur who had jumped had worn orange, this one wore red. He had a white piece of cloth across his stomach, pinned to his jump-suit, with a number on it, embossed over a red flag with a white and blue cross in the middle. Aslaug recognized it. It was one of the first flags she learned how to recognize after coming to live with the Latrans family, apart from the Stars and Stripes.

"Norsk?" she asked. "Du er norsk?"

The fur nodded, feverishly as ten or twelve furs finally lost their grips and were swept out of the broken windows. The tower creaked. It wouldn't last much longer.

"Og du er hedning?" Aslaug asked. Speaking the languages of those she was sent to pick up was a necessary skill, and one all Valkyries possessed. Communicating with grunts and gesticulation was not very dignified. It wasn't that she actually spoke Norwegian.

She spoke the language of *this particular fur*. If she needed to speak Norwegian tomorrow, she wouldn't know how to.

Again, the young fur nodded in panic. Clearly, his voice had failed him. It was not until then that he realized that the equine in front of him was standing firmly on a floor now leaning over fifty percent, and that she wasn't holding on to anything.

"Takk ... " was all he said as peace spread on his features.

Aslaug held out a paw to the young Norwegian. Finally, he let go. His body tumbled past the Valkyrie and out the window ... but his soul grasped her paw and clung on to her.

He was worthy ...

Aslaug nodded. "Vi må dra. Tårnet kollapser om bare et minutt," she said softly.

The soul of the skijumper nodded. "Hvor drar vi til?"

"Til Asgård, selvfølgelig," Aslaug answered.

It took a while for the soul of the skijumper to fully grasp this. Then he looked utterly relieved. "Jeg er verdig, da?"

Aslaug smiled and nodded. "Absolutt."

The soul smiled peacefully and closed his eyes. Aslaug put a paw on his ghostly forehead ... and he vanished.

Sighing, she looked around and shook her head. She had no idea who was behind the attack or why. But she had to gather a soul here, and so this was where she had arrived. It was just such a senseless waste. *More ... senseless waste.* Calling out in her mind for Varghöss, she turned and ran towards the window, throwing herself out as far and as fast as she could.

The tower collapsed ... crumbled sideways, crushing hundreds of furs beneath it. More were killed as they were trampled by the throng below, trying to escape the devastation.

Far above, Aslaug was hidden in the cloud of dust. She patted Varghöss' neck and shook her head again. She already knew that with the jumper escaping down the ramp, she would be blamed for this. She needed to dye her fur yet again. That would do it, though. He hadn't had time to get a good look at her apart from that. She needed new clothes and a new fur-color, but then she'd be in the clear. Frankly, all these disguises were getting tiresome.

"Come on, my friend. We've got work to do," she whispered. And Varghöss growled low in his throat, speeding off into the clouds above.

As they escaped, however, Aslaug found herself wondering what was going on.

The skijumper had been heathen, but there were heathens in every world, and she wouldn't be picking up their souls except if they were Agents. Or if there were *highly* unusual circumstances. And while someone terror-bombing a winter-sports event was unusual, it wasn't enough. This world wasn't under the control of the Norse Gods ...

Something had changed.

Something important.

And she was going to find out what.

###

Joe glared at the rocks in front of him. The sun hadn't risen more than a sliver, and he'd been walking for hours. At least it felt like hours.

A serious dust-storm had risen, though, and he had only barely made it into a cave. The rocks sheltered him, but he had no idea where to go once he came out of this place, or where he'd find something to drink. His throat was absolutely parched and it was starting to hurt.

So he stared at the rocks, willing them to spring with fresh water ... just out of sheer spite and annoyance. It was irreverent, even blasphemous but given everything he'd been through, Joe Latrans was well and truly beyond caring.

He couldn't even sleep. He still wasn't tired, and that didn't make any sense either.

Every time he asked a question, the wind would spell out the answer in the ash he walked on, but it hurt every time the wind whipped around him so he had stopped asking.

Still, he couldn't help but be angry and eventually, with the storm raging outside, he leaned back his head and howled in rage.

"WHAT IS THE DAMNED POINT?"

A stray wind whipped through the cave, but this time there were no words in the ash. Instead, it chipped away at the wall of the cave in front of Joe, forming what could be the beginning of letters.

"What? Is this some stupid test? Am I being tested here?" Joe sneered. "Just get me back to Aslaug so we can finish this nonsense. I want to go home and hug my wife and tell her I love her! I want to see my kids live good, happy, normal lives! And right now, I want to eat a big, messy barbeque dinner, have a cold beer, work on my car and then I want to go on to live a normal goddamned life! IS THAT TOO MUCH TO ASK??"

Here he was, asking questions of the wind but the way he saw it, at least the wind gave answers. That was more than God had done every time he'd asked the Big Guy a question over the years.

Again, the wind whipped through the cave, making the letters a little clearer on the wall opposite from him.

Sighing, Joe hung his head, his rage spent for the moment. He put his face in his paws and tried not to despair, but frankly, that wasn't easy. Despair seemed rather inviting right then and there.

"Why me?" he asked, shaking his head. It wasn't self pity. It was honest confusion. What made him so special that he would be chosen for this kind of work? "I've had it up to here with the hypocrisy and the hollow holiness. The meek shall inherit the Earth, my *ass*! I'm not particularly meek and I'll be damned if I'll inherit the Earth until someone fixes all the problems! All I honestly want is a normal life. I think by now I'm getting the point that I'll NEVER have a normal life, but I don't want the Kingdom of God either. I just want a little justice and a little decency and for furs to be nice to each other? ARE YOU EVEN LISTENING TO ME?"

He raised his voice and shouted in frustration again at the end. God wasn't listening any more than He ever did, he knew that. But Joe would shout down the gates of Heaven if that was what it took. Just for someone to bloody listen to him. Aslaug listened and that made him feel better, but Aslaug wasn't Christian, and consequently, for all her good intentions, she didn't have that last little bit of what he was looking for. She couldn't understand because she didn't grasp the basics of the faith to begin with.

And he needed answers so very, very badly.

The wind whipped up again, chipping the stone again, polishing and flatening. Joe almost didn't bother looking. But when he did, he realized he could finally read what it said. Outside, the wind sounded like it was finally dying down, and he walked across the cave to read the letters on the wall. They were barely visible in the poor light, but at least he had good dark-vision now that his eyes had gotten used to the cave.

There were a lot of letters. Quite archaic too.

Joe narrowed his eyes and focused to read it:

"The Kingdom of God is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that it is you who are the sons of the living Father. But if you will not know yourselves, you dwell in poverty, and it is you who are that poverty."

He read them several times.

He couldn't remember where in the Bible they came from. In fact, he was pretty sure those words were nowhere to be found in the bible. But they still had that strange ring of scripture to them.

He didn't want the Kingdom of God, he had said. And here on the wall, it said that that very Kingdom was both inside him and outside him.

It was everywhere. Everything. In all, around all, part of all.

Did he know himself, though?

Wasn't that part of the problem? That the very things he had held as truths all these years had turned out not to be truths after all? Did he even know himself, when he couldn't trust the things he had based his sense of self on for so many years?

Finally he nodded. That was it.

It was about knowing himself. That was more or less what Aslaug had told him, although not in so many words.

But it was not until now, looking at the cave wall in front of him, as the letters began to disintegrate and fall apart that he understood the last half of what he was meant to do.

He was meant to come to terms with it all. With himself. With his past. With his choices, his beliefs, his doubts and ... and everything.

In the end he might even stop blaming himself for it.

And then ... fate permitting ... he might even grow to like himself.