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I - Out of the woods

It had been over a year and a half.

In many ways, no time at all. And at the same time, it felt like ages had come and gone. Ages spent in solitude and peace.

No one had bothered her.

No one ... at all.

And Aslaug was grateful for it. She had needed the time. Very badly. After the desperate situation where she had to fake her own death after a motorcycle accident, she had needed the break. In so many ways it wasn't even funny.

No one had heard anything from her in all that time, and that was entirely on purpose. In a way, she felt slightly guilty for not staying in touch with the Amigos. But on the other paw, she knew they of all furs would understand.

Besides, the Amigos were not the team they had been when they recruited her. They had gone their separate ways, really. Aramis was still doing his inter-dimensional hero-thing, and he was, as far as Aslaug could tell, incredibly good at it. The big stripy one still did a mission now and again ... and Joe seemed perfectly happy in his voluntary retirement, taking care of his family.

As always, she found herself understanding the coyote. She had changed her modus operandi as well, before the accident.

Steve Wulf had probably been her single greatest success, and she was relieved at it. There was so much potential in that kid ... but he had been on such a horrible path. One that would lead to all kinds of misery.

She crouched, leaning against her long axe with one paw, using it to keep her balance on the uneven ground, and checking the ground with her fingers on the other paw.

Someone had been here. Someone entirely uninvited.

Sighing, she got back up. She owned this land. At first it had been hard for her to grasp the concept that she was a land-owner, but by now, it wasn't all that hard to fathom, and she valued her privacy. Occasionally a hunter would wander in on her lands, usually without knowing he was on private property, and she would have to show him the door.

Over the last year and a half, only one hunter had turned out to be mentally unstable. It reassured her somewhat, although the fur had actually shot her, point blank, with an assault rifle.

What in the name of the Gods that fur expected to shoot with that thing never really dawned on Aslaug. He shot first ... in her world that justified what she'd done to him.

Not that she enjoyed doing it, of course. She heard in the radio that someone had gone missing while out hunting and after two weeks, he was declared dead, probably killed by a bear.

She'd made sure to send a donation to the fur's family ... anonymously.

That whole mess had been annoying. She hadn't wanted to kill him, but he had shot her so full of holes a Swiss cheese would've been embarrassed, and he'd seen her heal up. Besides, his comment about how "no damned dyke wood-chopper in a flannel shirt was gunna stop him from baggin' a few bears with his new Steyr!" before he shot, kinda told her all she needed to know about him.

So down he'd gone and she'd disposed of the body. The police had come looking. They hadn't found anything. Besides, this *was* bear-country ...

No one even knew she lived there. Not even the cops. She made her home in the woods, away from all kinds of prying eyes. The only furs who knew roughly where to find her was Aramis, Joe and Tigermark.

And they had all left her alone.

But now, it seemed, a hunter had decided to come wandering in again.

Hopefully, it would be someone less bloody-minded and less unwilling to listen to a polite request to leave the area than the fur with the assault rifle.

But every so often, someone would take their chances on one of the bears, despite the ban on shooting any of them. They were an endangered species, after all.

Which meant that even when Aslaug encountered a hunter willing to leave peacefully, she automatically disliked the fur in question. They were, after all, doing something illegal and she'd caught them red-pawed.

Sighing, she got back up. She checked the edge of her franciscas on her belt, and shouldered her long axe, before trudging off in the direction the footprints. She'd better go find this hunter before it was too late anyway.

She'd much rather be at home. She was working on a new drinking horn, these days. She'd gotten her paws on a bison horn ... large one too, and she was carving it, slowly and methodically. It was something to keep her paws busy with, while listening to the radio in the evening.

By now, she had quite a collection of horns, too. Once in a while, she'd leave her woods and go to fairs when she learned from the radio that one was being held. She had dyed her fur to blend in better ... and she'd buy a horn or two. Somehow, she never seemed to be short on money. It quite surprised her too, but she didn't abuse it.

It was probably part of the job. She'd never asked.

But she also knew she had to go back to work soon. She'd been away from the world for long enough and she would be expected to do her duty again soon.

First though, she intended to find out who had wandered into her woods.

The footprints were very clear. Obviously, the fur making them didn't expect to run into anyone in these parts.

It wasn't a big fur, either. Hopefully, Aslaug would be able to convince whoever it was to simply leave peacefully.

She pushed aside some bushes and looked at the ground. It was a perfect place for a trap, but there was none to be found. She pondered that for a moment ... perhaps this visitor was a novice hunter? Or perhaps it was simply someone moving through the area

trying to get somewhere else. If the latter was the case, she had to get them to safety. The bears didn't like visitors romping through their woods.

It took her a while to catch up, too. Whoever was in front of her had a good head start and, more importantly, they moved expertly in the wilds. Most hunters did ... so did most furs trekking through the wilds, for that matter. But still, there was something rattling her slightly. Something that wasn't quite ... right.

She picked up her pace a little and moved down a gorge. She almost never went there. The ground was treacherous and she knew it was part of the hunting grounds for a particularly vicious female bear. Being immortal did not exempt her from feeling pain, and taking down a bear that large would be painful no matter what.

But the visitor had come this way, and so she had to follow.

Grumbling to herself about careless outsiders, pushed aside a fallen log to check for traps again. Still none.

It was probably not a hunter then. That probably meant violence could be avoided at least. That was a relief. Aslaug did not mind violence ... in fact, some who knew her would probably claim she thrived on it and they wouldn't be lying ... but she didn't like violence for its own sake, and she loathed what she referred to as "stupid violence" above all else. Violence committed out of ignorance or as a result of outright stupidity, whether hers or others, could take her weeks to get over.

That was one of the up-sides to living alone in the woods, of course. No one would actually hear her grumble, growl, spit and hiss for weeks on end. No one except the walls and her weapons, and they, obviously, didn't talk back.

"Growl!"

Aslaug raised an eyebrow. The sound had come from behind her.

"Grrr! Growl. Roar growl grrrrrr!"

It was certainly loud enough. It was also quite ridiculous.

She turned around, looking incredulously at the enormous feral bear standing further down along the gorge. "You know ... bears generally don't *say* "growl". They just *do* it. And I'm pretty sure they don't say "roar" either," she pointed out.

The bear canted its head slightly to the side and observed her with beady little eyes. It looked evil. Wild animals could look fierce or threatening ... often both at the same

time. They might even look like they were enjoying themselves, but evil was a concept that required a measure of intelligence a cut above what a wild beast possessed. Aslaug knew already that this creature was no ordinary bear, if it was even a bear at all.

"Grrr?" the bear tried, hopefully.

She rolled her eyes. "No. Not that either. If you want to growl, this is how you do it!" she said and let loose a primal growl to shame a very large, very hungry lion. It was not a sound an equine should be able to make. Being a valkyrie had its perks, though.

The bear actually looked surprised and took a step backwards.

Aha, the valkyrie pondered. So a coward as well.

"Which one are you then?" she asked. "One of Surt's filthy ilk, no doubt. Took you long enough to find me out here. I'm going to send a message to your boss, though ... you, gift-wrapped ... and sent back on fifteen different days, one piece at a time!"

She pulled out her franciscas with a hateful sneer as the bear rose to its hind legs. Throwing them in rapid succession, she was very surprised to see the bear simply batting them aside. She hadn't brought her spear ... although that would clearly have been the best weapon for this sort of thing. It was back at the cabin. She usually didn't bring it, still greatly preferring her axe and besides, there was no danger in leaving it there. Even if someone was to stumble across it, they couldn't steal it. It was impossible to steal a Valkyrie's spear ... it was literally an extension of her will after all.

Still, this was going to be a nasty, brutal fight if she had to get up close to hit this possessed creature with her long-axe.

No choice, though. She charged home, swinging the axe as she did so. To her satisfaction, she felt it strike flesh and bite deeply into the side of the bear. It made no sound ... which sealed it for her. It was possessed. It wouldn't feel any pain because it was, strictly speaking, already dead. She simply had to complete the process and kill the creature's physical body.

That wouldn't be easy though. It swung at her with a massive paw and she only barely managed to escape it ... though she didn't escape it when the other paw came down in a one-two combination. It tore a chunk out of her shoulder and she gasped in pain.

"This is bloody stupid," she hissed through gritted teeth as the bleeding stanchied. "You can't kill me. We already know how this is going to end!"

She swung again, trying to hit the bear's legs but until that shoulder-wound healed, it wasn't really possible to get enough force into the blow. The bear-thing simply moved slightly backwards and Aslaug saw her attack fail miserably.

And the bear-thing was ... laughing? The sound it emitted sounded like laughter or a very dry cough. She wasn't quite sure which of the two it was. She ducked under another attack and rolled sideways to avoid the massive jaws of the bear-thing as it tried to bite her. It was up too close for her to use her long-axe effectively now. So she dropped it and simply punched the creature on the side of the head. Even before her "promotion", she had a punch to shame most heavy-weights, but after, it was a frightening thing indeed. The bear reeled, off balance from its bite-attack. Several of its teeth had been knocked loose under the impact of the valkyrie's punch.

But something felt wrong. Aslaug knew something wasn't the way it was supposed to be. Surt had left her alone for a long time now. She probably wasn't interesting to the Lord of Destruction after her promotion. After all, Valkyries were oathsworn to Odin, and trying to turn one was an utterly futile exercise. Still, she had no doubt the bear was possessed by one of Surt's servants. So why was it here?

She backed up a few steps and crouched, the bear doing the same thing and glaring evilly at her. It had stopped making any kind of noise, except the noises of the undergrowth beneath its paws. It didn't *say* anything.

The bleeding had already stopped on Aslaug's shoulder. It stung something awful, but it would be healed soon enough. Probably adding another thin scar under her fur. Sometimes that happened ... sometimes not. Only the really impressive hits left permanent marks on her, but she was still starting to look like a roadmap without her shirt on.

Then she sprang into action. The bear-thing countered and rose onto its hind legs again as she leapt forward ... up onto a fallen tree. Its massive paw came down again as she jumped off the tree, towards her enemy.

It hit her. Squarely in the face. Tore off fur, skin ... muscle and sinew, laying bare her jaw and cheek. Groaning in pain, she realized instantly that the momentum of the blow would send her flying and she reached out, like a flash of lightning, and grabbed a hold of the beast's fur. It mad her swing around the bear-thing ... onto its back and she immediately clamped her arms around the gigantic monster's neck.

And she hung on. It tried to thrash ... to scrape her off against a tree or a rock. It tried rolling over her. It tried everything imaginable. Bones broke in her chest ... she coughed blood onto its back, but she never let go. And eventually ... it began to waver.

Trying feebly to reach her, it battled at her but couldn't reach. It couldn't tear her arms away, though long claw-gashes went in almost to the bone.

But she still hung on.

Wordlessly choking the life out of this damnable, vile creature.

Finally ... finally after what felt like an age, it stumbled. Made a sickening choking sound and fell. It tried to get back up ... stumbled another few steps, and then went down.

Aslaug wasn't so foolish as to let go. She kept clinging on. And good thing too. Suddenly, as it realized, this attempt at subterfuge wasn't working, it thrashed around wildly one last time, and then collapsed. A familiar rattle left the gigantic beast and Aslaug knew the body of the bear was dead. She fell off, onto the sticks and leaves on the ground, panting for breath.

Blood was positively gushing out of her, too.

"I'm getting too old for this shit," she winced, clenching her eyes shut against the pain. The wounds were already closing.

Aslaug knew it was possible to kill even a so-called immortal. It was just extremely difficult. She wouldn't grow old ... she wouldn't get sick ... but physical violence could kill her. Just not physical violence caused by natural means, and not in Midgaard. Even if the bear had actually "killed" her, she'd have risen the following morning, like the Einherjar ... the eternal warriors of Valhalla.

Which made the bear-thing's attempt to fight her ludicrous. It couldn't have won, no matter what. Had she still been a "mere" Agent, it could have won. Agents were nowhere near as immortal as a Valkyrie or Einherjar. They could actually be killed for real by sufficient amounts of supernaturally inflicted violence.

Groaning, she opened her eyes. She wasn't quite done yet.

Stumbling to her feet, she looked at her arms and tried to feel her face where the claws had ripped pieces of her to shreds. Plus she could feel a wholly uncomfortable cracking sensation as her ribcage was already re-setting itself.

Something black and oily was oozing out of the bear's mouth. She looked at it in disgust until it had all come out and formed into a rather unshapely little black, oily creature with no legs. It looked like a half-melted snowfur.

"Well then," she muttered sourly. "Here we are. I'm bigger and stronger than you, and I'll be damned if I'm letting you get away with this!"

The blobby thing quivered and tried to shy away from her as she walked up to it and scooped up a pawful of the gunk it was made up of.

It squealed pathetically, but she didn't pay that any attention.

"I'm going to dump this half of you in the nearest stream. I'm interested in seeing how long it'll take you to reassemble yourself, you little shit!" she hissed and prodded the quivering black jelly with one finger.

It didn't respond, predictably.

"Surt's slipping. If this is the best he can produce," she bickered, mostly to herself as she carefully dumped the water in her canteen and poured most of the jelly into it instead. Some missed and hit the ground where it immediately rejoined the rest of it ... but most went where it was supposed. She needed to get a new canteen after this, obviously.

"Hello Aslaug. You look like crap, pardon me for saying so!" a familiar voice said behind her, towards the end of the gorge.

Aslaug grinned. It looked quite like a rictus, but she couldn't really help that until her face healed up. She didn't even have to turn around to see who it was. "Hello Victoria," she answered. "That explains the presence of this particular creep."

"What creep?" the tigress asked, confused. "I'm here looking for you, actually. It was quite hard to find you, until you apparently decided to have a wrestling match with a bear! And may I ask why you did that?"

"See that gooey, quivering thing next to the bear's head?"

"Well ... yes? Oil-polution? Out here?"

"That's one of Surt's boys. Or about two thirds of him, at least."

Victoria's eyes went wide and her paw immediately went for a weapon but Aslaug shook the canteen and chuckled. "The last third of him is in here. I'm going to dump it

somewhere far away. I was thinking of a natural water-source but someone might accidentally drink him that way. I'll figure something out."

"Burn him?" Victoria asked, incredulously. "No, wait ... that won't be much good if he's one of Surt's ..."

"Exactly. That was why I was thinking of water, actually. Anyway, why are you here?" Aslaug answered and put her canteen on her belt. The black blob on the ground reached a couple of feeble tentacles towards it, until she planted her hoof on top of it, squelching the remains underneath the iron-shod bottom unceremoniously, while never taking her eyes off Victoria.

"Well ... it's been a long time since anyone heard from you?" the tigress said and shrugged.

"True. I was actually thinking of rejoining the world soon. I can't sit on my paws here much longer. I've got a feeling ... it's hard to describe really ... but there is something I must do."

Victoria nodded. "Any chance you can be more specific?"

"Not really. I don't know yet exactly what it is. I do know part of it has to do with a Valkyrie's primary duties," Aslaug explained. "I have to collect the dead."

"But this world belongs to the Christian God," Victoria said, confused. "The only ones you could really be sent to collect *here*, would be ... would be ..." her eyes went wide as realization hit her.

"An Agent of Valhalla," Aslaug said, completing Victoria's line of thought for her. "I know ..."

"But that means Torvald? Doesn't it?"

"I don't know yet. We don't actually know. It might not even be in this reality."

Victoria shook her head. "I suppose not, but that wouldn't really make sense. Valhalla would send a Valkyrie closer to whoever it was. You're here ... in this world ... Good God, Aslaug ... not Torvald?"

Aslaug sighed. "I know. I hope it isn't him, but if it is, it's not like I have much choice and at least I'll be sent to pick him up to go someplace nice!"

"But we're immortal, Aslaug!?" Victoria said, uncertainly. "We're not supposed to die."

"Not supposed to isn't the same as can't, Victoria. If something suitably nasty comes after you, there are always ways of circumventing "rules" like that. But I think I know something about it at least," Aslaug pondered, wincing again as flesh started to connect on her jaw and cheek. It hurt like a bitch every time ...

Victoria grasped for straws and nodded urgently. "Then please, do tell me?"

"I don't think Mr. Yogi-Bear-Gone-Very-Bad over there was sent to look for *me*. I think he was here for *you*."

Victoria's eyes went wider still and she looked around the still-bleeding equine to look at the massive form of the dead bear. "You're serious. Surt? Sending something like that after me?"

"Pardon me for saying this, Victoria, but you're only fifty percent of a team. And if I were to venture a guess, he did that to get to the other half of that team. Just as you would flip out six ways from Sunday if the big Christian boogeymale sent something after Torvald."

"I ... guess you're right. So what do we do now?" Victoria asked, sighing.

Aslaug shook the canteen on her belt violently and grinned. "You leave this one to me."

"You know Torvald. He won't be happy to know something is after him or me, and then sitting it out!" the tigress protested.

"Then I suppose he doesn't need to know?" Aslaug countered.

Victoria was about to say something, but stopped. Then she put her arms akimbo and sighed. "I don't like lying to my husband."

"I'm not asking you to. I'm asking you to not tell him. If he asks how your trip went, just tell him you found me in good health and that everything is as it should be?"

"Aslaug ... what did I just say about lying?"

"I'm not asking you to. I'm fine, am I not? Breathing, standing on my own two hooves?"

Victoria rolled her eyes and groaned. "You're incorrigible!"

"Yeah, but you like me anyway," Aslaug chuckled. "Now, let's get back to my cabin. Something tells me you're not here solely on a social call."

"You'd be right, of course," Victoria said and shrugged lightly, falling into step easily.

It was quite a long walk, through uneven and sometimes hazardous terrain. But of course, being able to heal a broken ankle in short order made it less of a worry.

"So how did you find me?"

"I had to threaten to do unmentionable things to a certain coyote's vehicle ... it involved a spray-can and some bumper-stickers."

"Dare I ask?" Aslaug ventured, knowing that the coyote in question, Joe Latrans, almost had a romantic thing going with his pickup-truck.

Victoria smiled serenely. "Well, the paint was hot, glow-in-the-dark pink and the bumper stickers were team-stickers for the Edmonton Oilers ..."

Aslaug blinked repeatedly. "Gods preserve us ... I'm pretty sure I would have felt the quake all the way up here in the Canadian woods ..." she said and looked at Victoria with an entirely new level of respect.

"Probably, yes. Anyway, he did end up telling me where to find you. I think ... he knew I wouldn't have wrecked his car ..."

"Of course you wouldn't have. You're not a monster."

Victoria shook her head. "I'm not, but I also think he understood something is afoot. Something important. He seemed to instinctively know you had been away from the world long enough."

Nodding, Aslaug slung her axe over her shoulder. Her face was already healing up and it stung, badly ... but she kept the pain hidden. Not out of any misplaced sense of machismo but because she didn't need Victoria fussing over her. The tigress was there for a specific reason. Even if Aslaug was starting to suspect ... Victoria didn't know that reason herself.

It was in the paws of the Gods. And this time, Loke had nothing to do with it.

"He always seems to know. He and I ... the "Scruffy Squad" as we used to call ourselves, we always seemed to have a special connection of sorts. It goes all the way back to when it all started, too. I remember when they first found me, Victoria. The amigos. When they took me off that battlefield ..." the Valkyrie said, her voice sounding a little distant.

Victoria recognized that particular tone of voice. She had heard it a number of times and she sighed, looking up at Aslaug with sympathy on her face. "Torvald sometimes talks of that. He wasn't at that battle, but he was at so many others. He gets ... moody when he thinks back to those times. It's always after the kids have gone to bed or left or something. Usually on dark nights, too. He'll look out there and see something in the darkness. Something I can't see. At first, I thought it was strange. My night vision is considerably better than his. Feline trait and all that. But then I realized what he saw wasn't physical. It wasn't ... even really there," she said.

Aslaug just nodded, her eyes focused on some point in the distance.

"It was decades ... literally decades ... before I managed to ask him what it was. I know I can ask my husband about *anything*, but frankly, it scared me. Sometimes, he'd be talking to himself. Old Norse. I know a few phrases of it by now but he'd be talking, under his breath, like he was having a conversation with someone I couldn't see," Victoria went on.

"Old friends ... long dead and gone. Remembered only by him ... an undying, eternal warrior," Aslaug said, without her eyes coming back into focus.

Victoria nodded. "Precisely that, yes. It's eerie. But then I did ask him, and he told me why."

"Because he ... like me ... feels that he lost something. That while he gained so much, in you and your children, and his life as it is now, he was meant to die. The Norns had cut his thread of life. All those many years ago."

"Yes."

"Does it anger you?"

"It did at first," Victoria admitted. "At first, I felt betrayed. Like he was wishing himself dead, despite the children. Despite me. Then I understood that it is something different and somehow deeper at work."

Aslaug nodded. "It is his world-view which is constantly being tested. He doesn't want to die now, because he has so much to live for. But at the same time, his beliefs, his faith ... and what is actually happening to him ... doesn't add up. So when he looks out into the darkness, he sees the faces of those he knew back then. He can hear them calling to him. He can see the hearth-fires from the longhouses. He can taste the food and ... hear

the songs. I know, because it's like that for me. On really dark nights, I can hear my parents, Victoria. Those ... those are the hardest nights of all."

They walked for a while, in silence. Victoria had little idea for how far, but the Valkyrie seemed to know exactly where she was and she was moving purposefully in a specific direction. The tigress was used to living rough on missions, and she usually did just fine in woodlands, even heavy woods, but this was different. It was almost like the woods themselves were affected by who lived there, and tried to shunt anyone else out.

It was not exactly a pleasant feeling.

Finally, after a long walk, mostly in silence, they reached Aslaug's hut. She'd been building on it more or less constantly since moving in and Victoria was surprised at how comfortable it was. The electricity was provided by a small generator, but apparently, the valkyrie didn't have it turned on at all times. Most of the light was provided by naked flames ... candles and oil-lamps, for instance, and the tigress realized it would probably be very cold in winter, but Aslaug didn't really have a problem with that anymore, anyway.

She sat down. The equine apparently slept in a hammock, so she couldn't sit down on the edge of the bed. Instead she occupied the only chair in the hut, while Aslaug went about packing her things.

"I guess I'll need to rent myself a flat somewhere again," she said and looked at the tigress. "I'm not going back to California though. I need a change of pace, and besides, getting to where I have to be tends to be taken care of by ... outside forces."

Victoria nodded. "I guess I can see why. What did you have in mind?"

"Not sure. I'm thinking of New York ... Boston ... someplace on the East Coast."

"Well, that'll certainly be a real change. And with the fur-dye, you won't stick out like a sore thumb. Looks good on you, by the way."

Aslaug chuckled and shrugged. "I'm not sure I'll ever get used to it. I've been thinking of dying myself pitch black, actually. You know, for shock value."

"Shock value?" Victoria asked, raising an eyebrow, trying to bend her mind around a black Aslaug.

"Yeah ... every time I get up in the morning, looking myself in the mirror, it'll be "AARGH! WHO ARE YOU?!" ... so yeah, shock value," Aslaug explained.

"A black-furred equine valkyrie, though?"

"Why not? I'm sure there are precedents?"

Victoria nodded. "Probably true. I'm just too used to thinking of you as blond."

"Yeah, but I'm officially supposed to be extinct, and I really don't need to attract any more attention to myself than I already do. I'm just never going to fit in entirely in this world, but I don't need to make it more obvious than it already is."

Victoria nodded, but didn't speak. She just waited for Aslaug to finish packing. It wasn't like the equine owned three truckloads of stuff, but there was still enough of stuff to pack up that it took about an hour to get it all. Finally, a couple of huge sacks stood in the middle of the floor and Aslaug brushed her paws off against one another.

"I hope you have a car ..." she said.

"I do. Shall we go?"

"Well, we probably have to go several times to get all this to your vehicle, so ... let's get started."

"I'm parked almost three hours away, Aslaug. We should try to bring it all in one go, I think."

Aslaug nodded. "Probably a good idea then. Can you haul that one?"

Victoria groaned and rolled her eyes, flicking the bag onto her shoulder without much trouble. "I'm not some wallflower, Aslaug."

Grinning, the Valkyrie picked up the other bag. "I know. I still gave you the lighter bag of the two."

"I ought to kick you.

"Good luck catching me ... these are *my* woods, after all."

Aslaug set off out of the hut. Victoria followed, and immediately, the woods outside gave her that same feeling again.

'Go away'.

'Leave'.

And she was only too keen to oblige.