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## *IV – Siblings*

She had always hated sejd-machines. Others called them computers, and while Aslaug knew there was nothing magical about them, she really didn't like them. They knew too much. Way too much. And the Internet ... she automatically distrusted a medium where that much information could be shared without any form of control or regulation. It was fine for Ma Wilkins to find a new recipe for apple pie or for Joe the Plumber to figure out how best to repair his run-down, dinky old pickup-truck, but as far as Aslaug was concerned, the Internet was a problem in that it also allowed Tommy the Terrorist to find detailed instructions on how to produce everything from small-calibre firearms to nuclear bombs.

Or worse yet ... for Agents of Surt or others like him to communicate their plans in secret across the globe.

So sejd-machines sucked, if anyone bothered to ask her. Which usually they didn't.

Still, she had to send some kind of message to Victoria and Torvald, just to let them know she was alive and kicking. But on the other paw, she didn't want to tell them exactly what she was up to. All she needed was for them to know she had their back.

The more she thought about this whole affair, the more she knew she was unlikely to succeed. Or at least only succeed at great cost. But so be it. Enough was enough, and she had frankly had it with interdimensional rules and regulations which hadn't been updated or revised for centuries.

Joe was standing behind her, a mug of steaming coffee in his paw. "What are you writing?" he asked.

"Just letting Torvald and Victoria know I'm alive and kicking, really. Can't send them any details obviously, so I'm just sending them a joke I thought of."

"What's the joke?" Joe asked, sipping his coffee, looking pleasantly surprised at the quality.

"What's the difference between a *heðni* raiding party, and the salvation army?"

"Dunno. What's the difference?"

Aslaug smirked. "What the raiding party comes away with is classified as legitimate conquest."

Joe's coffee exited through his nostrils, much to his obvious displeasure and he whined as the hot liquid scalded him. "Ow?" he complained.

"You have to admit it's funny," Aslaug chuckled.

"It is. I just didn't know you disliked the Salvation Army. I mean, they're supposed to be a charity!" Joe said and wiped his muzzle, before sipping the coffee again.

Aslaug smiled and stood up. She'd sent her message. No need to spend more time on the sejd-machine. She *only* sent the joke. No other greeting. She knew that after the Svensens had chuckled at it, they'd wonder why she hadn't sent anything else at all. And then they'd hopefully realize she was trying to tell them something.

About legitimate conquest ... and armies ... and small raiding parties.

About fighting.

It was as vague as that, but she didn't want to make it any more obvious. If she did, she'd be running too great a risk, if someone read it who wasn't meant to read it.

She just needed to give her friends a little hope.

Joe nodded and finished his coffee in a hurry, placing the mug on a table on the way out of the café. "So what now?"

"Remember those little metal pieces I showed you?"

"Yeah, I wonder how those are going to help."

Aslaug stuck her paws in her pockets and strolled down the sidewalk, Joe sauntering along beside her. "I'm not sure yet," she said, "I just know they are important. And I know ... don't ask me how but I just *know* that we have to get to Italy. There's an old convent in a place called Bella Divignano, near the border ... and don't look at me like that, Joe. I honestly have no idea where I have this information from."

Nodding slowly, Joe frowned without saying anything. He just pondered it all for a while. Everything Aslaug said made sense, but it was also extremely strange to hear *her*, of all furs, talk of Christian holy places and convents. Finally, after they had walked another hundred yards or so, he turned his head and looked at her.

"This won't just be a matter of knocking on the door and asking them for any information they can spare, will it?" he asked. "It's going to get messy, won't it?"

Aslaug nodded. "Almost certainly. And I don't even really know why. All I know is that something we need is at the convent in Bella Divignano."

Joe nodded. "I'll find it on the map and get going. The car isn't half as bad as I had feared, I have to admit."

"I'm glad you approve."

"I don't. I just said it isn't half as bad as I feared. Considering how awful I thought it would be, that's not saying much! Dammit, filly, I want a big, American vehicle with room for my legs AND your ego!"

"My ego?" Aslaug mused.

"Only thing about you that's bigger'n your ego is your choice of primary weapon!" Joe grumbled, good-naturedly. "You just can't do "small", can you?"

"I'm six foot nine, as you so often point out," Aslaug said, keeping a perfectly straight face.

Joe groaned and got out his car-keys. "I'll see you in Bella Divignano, filly. Since you'll definitely get there first, I expect YOU to find us something to eat. Fortunately, I like Italian."

The equine made a gesture in the air as if striking a crash cymbal. "Badum tssshh ... " she said and chuckled. "I'll see you there."

###

"Rossana," a willowy figure whispered, insistently. "Rossana, damned you, are you there?"

The voice was male, but desperate *and* frightened. It was addressing a tall, slender shape, standing in deep shadows, holding what looked to be a spade.

Rossana, the figure being addressed, did not show any interest in the male.

In fact, she was indifferent to the point of ignoring him outright.

"This world is weird enough without you giving me the silent treatment, damned it all!" the male sneered. "The locals ..."

"The locals are none of your concern, Turi. Just do as you're *told!*"

The male cringed and withdrew slightly. The female held the shovel out for him to take. "Dig!" she commanded.

"Where?"

"Here. Where I stand."

The male took the shovel reluctantly and got to work.

###

It was late night by the time Joe reached Bella Divignano. It wasn't a large town. In fact, it was barely a town at all. The local church was the only building standing more than two stories tall, and that wasn't even by much. The locals seemed to be over sixty years old on average, and Joe ... hardly in his prime of youth anymore ... still felt like a snot-nosed kid compared to some of the old-timers shuffling past on the sidewalk along the road.

He needed something to eat. In fact, his insides were screaming for food, and he drove around until he found what he assumed was the local restaurant. It had no sign over the door, but Joe was wily enough to know that didn't necessarily mean anything. In a place like this, the locals would *know* this was the place to go for food, and there would be so few tourists coming through that there was no point in spending money on signs or fancy sidewalk fixtures.

Pulling up the Fiat, he got out and took in a deep lungful of fresh air. Then made sure the car door was locked, and he made sure he was *armed*.

Wild Bill Hickock had thought he was in no danger too, when sitting down for a meal and a game of cards. Joe wasn't going to make the same mistake, even without the game of cards. There was bound to be trouble ... Aslaug had admitted as much.

He could hear furs talking from the open door in front of him and he walked inside, pushing aside a curtain of beads. The scent was amazing. Clearly, whoever owned this place knew how to cook, and once he was inside, there was no doubt this *was* in fact a restaurant or sorts. There were only three tables, admittedly, and two of them were for two, but that was fine with him. Aslaug was already there, waiting.

She'd gone through most of a bottle of wine while waiting, it seemed, and the coyote sat down opposite from her. "Long drive. And this place isn't easy to find. Sorry if I kept you waiting."

"No problem. The wine is actually quite good. Local stuff, very heavy," the Valkyrie said and poured Joe a glass.

"I won't be driving anywhere tonight then," he chuckled. "But then again, I didn't think I'd need to. We're here now after all."

"Yep. The convent is within walking distance of the town ... oh and I rented you a room upstairs. Next to my own. I figured we'd get something to eat first, and then head off to the convent later tonight."

"Can you just hear the ominous music playing? I swear there's a gigantic, gothic organ in there somewhere."

Aslaug grinned and sipped her wine. "I ordered something to eat already. I hope that's alright?"

"Just fine," Joe said and tasted the wine. "Yikes, this *is* heavy. You're not kidding."

"Good though."

"Hell yeah!"

The coyote sipped the wine again and grinned. It wasn't long until food was brought to the table, too. A half loaf of dark bread with some cheese and two plates, each with a huge pork chop and lots of fried potatoes ...

Aslaug stabbed the pork chop slightly with her fork, then shrugged and dug in. "I had no idea what I ordered," she admitted and grinned.

Joe once more felt like wagging his tail if he hadn't been sitting down and he started eating without another word. Everything was exactly as fantastic as he had imagined it would be. Succulent meat, deliciously spicy potatoes and excellent wine ... yep, he was definitely content.

And the bread and cheese was amazing as well. He ran a paw through his grey hair and grinned across the table as he finally finished the meal. "You always did have a thing for good food," he chuckled. "Some things just never change."

Aslaug picked up a toothpick and proceeded to remove a piece of pork chop from between her teeth. "Some things don't, that's true. Most things do."

"Yeah ... like the two of us for instance," Joe said and sipped his wine again.

His voice had gone very serious and Aslaug nodded. She knew Joe. She knew the coyote had questions he struggled with ... questions he needed answers to, where answers were less than forthcoming. She knew how he struggled to avoid becoming a bitter old fur, and she knew that deep down, it was a fight he had to win himself. But she'd lend all the support he needed.

"I guess so," she said. "I'm hardly the same fur as the dying shieldmaiden you cradled in your arms while a battlefield faded around you all those years ago."

Joe chuckled and swirled his wine in his glass a few times. "And yet you don't look a day older. Isn't it ironic, how you ... who probably changed the most ... look the same as always?"

"Immortality is nothing to wish for, Joe. It's fun the first hundred or even two hundred years. Then it becomes repetition ... and jadedness ... and loss heaped upon loss."

The coyote nodded. "Trust me, I'm not wishing for immortality. I've seen enough crap in this lifetime to dread how much I could face if I had infinity to look forward to."

"Precisely my point."

"Thank you."

Aslaug raised an eyebrow. "Whatever for?"

Joe sipped his wine again and refilled his glass. The owner peeked out from the kitchen, and the coyote waved the bottle towards him to signal he wanted another one. Then he looked back to Aslaug.

"For not saying "I understand" or "I know what you mean" or some similarly trite phrase," he said, wearily.

Aslaug smiled slightly. "I know you better than most furs, Joe Latrans ... and I could never understand. I haven't lived your life."

"Remember how we used to be back in the day?"

"Young, hotheaded and eager?"

Joe laughed. The owner brought another bottle and Joe gladly poured the equine a glass. Never mind letting this wine rest. It was so fresh that if it rested, one would probably be able to taste each minute of it.

"That too," he said and broke a corner of the bread and popped it into his mouth. He wasn't really hungry but ... it was too good to simply leave there on the table.

Aslaug tapped the rim of her glass and took a while before answering. "After a while, you lose some of your illusions. After another while, the last of them tend to vanish. And then you start to see what we did for what it truly is."

"A job."

"Nothing more, nothing less."

Joe nodded and sighed. "Isn't it strange, though? Working for God ... or in your case, THE Gods ... plural ... is no different than working for anyone else in the end?"

"Why is it strange?" Aslaug asked. "Just because your employer is more powerful doesn't mean the job can't stink at times."

Laughing again, Joe took a solid gulp of wine, letting the liquid swish around in his mouth for a moment before swallowing. "Sometimes, my friend, I go out into the Montaña de Oro ... you know, early in the morning, before the sun comes up? I'll bring a thermos of hot coffee and a good rock to sit on, and just watch the sunrise over the crest of the mountain ... bathing it in gold, like the name suggests ... "

His voice had gone almost dreamy, and Aslaug didn't say a word. This was something Joe needed to get off his chest and she wasn't going to do anything to interrupt his line of thoughts. It would all come out ... if she just let him take his own time about it.

"It's beautiful, filly. You know? It's one of those moments that ... truly makes you understand that something as beautiful and wonderful and unique as this world has to be

there for a reason. That God has to have some kind of paw in it all. I sit there, and I just watch it, with my hot coffee, and I let it astonish me, every time. I love the outdoors, Aslaug. As much as you ... maybe even more, not that it's meant to be a contest or anything. It helps center me. It makes me ..."

He stopped and searched for a word for a long, long time. Then he sighed and just looked at his friend. He had her complete and absolute attention. He saw nothing but friendship and kindness and open-mindedness in her eyes. No false "understanding". No hypocritical claims of inspirational insight. She didn't understand ... because she'd never shared those moments with him, and even if she had, she'd see them differently than he would.

Perception was unique to all furs. But she respected that this was something of tremendous importance to him. Psychological and spiritual importance.

"It makes me look up to the sky and ask ... why this world ... this beautiful, wondrous place that we inhabit, with all its gold-swept mountain sunrises and deep, mysterious gorges ... and with its forests and rivers and oceans and plains ... with its cities, and furs and teeming, *teeming* life of all sorts ... why is it so fucked up? And you know what else?" he said. His voice was hoarse, as if he struggled with heavy emotion.

Aslaug shook her head. "No ... please tell me," she said, quietly.

"I used to *ask* God, y'know? I used to ask Him that very question. Why this world is so messed up, when there is so much beauty to be found? So many good things? And he *never* answered. Not once. Not a *hint*."

"So you got angry with him, didn't you?" Aslaug finally asked. "Resentful ... bitter ... and yes, angry."

Joe hung his head. "Isn't it weird? I have stood in His presence. I know ... I don't even have to *believe* because I *know* He is there. And yet I am disappointed. And ... and yes. I'm angry."

"Maybe that is why?"

"What do you mean?"

Aslaug sighed and put her glass down after taking a long, deep swig from it. This wasn't easy, but she knew Joe had needed to get that off his mind for a long time. Probably even for years.



"For those who believe, there is an element of rational doubt. However fanatical, however blinded by zealotry, belief is precisely *not* knowledge. It is the antithesis of knowledge. The opposite of belief is not lack of belief. The opposite of knowledge is not ignorance. For you to be knowledgeable, you must first understand that there is something *to* know. If you are ignorant, you don't even know that. You don't strive towards knowledge, because you are unaware of its existence. If you knew it was there, you'd know *something* ... and you wouldn't be *ignorant* anymore," Aslaug said and looked her old friend straight in the eye.

It took a long, long time for that to sink in. Joe's eyes betrayed how troubled he was. How much this nagged him and how painful he felt it was to even feel this way. Then finally, he nodded. "And the opposite of faith ..."

"... is not lack of faith. A lack of faith is specifically a belief in the *absence* of something. I am still hoping to be the proverbial fly on the wall when that sinks in with the militant atheists of the world, by the way. The opposite of faith is when you know something ... because that negates faith. I don't believe in this wine we're drinking. I know it is there. I have tasted it. I have a glass of it in front of me, where I can see it and I could lift it to my nose and smell it. That makes it *factual*. And consequently, I don't *believe* it is there. But what I do believe, is that the owner of this quaint little restaurant's got more bottles of the stuff in the kitchen. I can be almost certain of that, Joe. *Almost*. As certain as I can be without going into the kitchen ... which is off limits to me as a guest ... to see for myself," Aslaug interjected, completing Joe's string of thought. He was nodding the entire way, slowly and deliberately.

"And so here I am," Joe said, at last, sounding both old and tired all of a sudden. "The guest in the restaurant who was given a tour of the kitchen. So now I know the bottles are there. They are factual. And that killed my illusions, didn't it? I no longer have the illusion of thinking "Hey, I'm drinking the very last bottle of this awesome stuff ..." and while that *should* make me happy, it just takes the magic out of it, doesn't it?"

Aslaug just nodded, feeling very sorry for her friend, but knowing that this was what he needed. To simply talk this over with someone he trusted ... someone who wouldn't judge him or look at him funny or wonder if he had lost his faith because he asked the hard questions ... the questions most furs of any faith wouldn't dream of asking for fear of pissing off their deity or deities of choice.

But Joe Latrans had never been the type of fur to not ask. He'd never been the type to simply lean back and accept things without questioning them.

To Aslaug, it made him a truer hero than almost anyone else she knew. He didn't settle for the comfortable answer or the easy solution.

He was the lone warrior, standing in the breach, knowing he could be safe if he turned and ran ... but refusing to do so.

She reached out and gave his paw a gentle squeeze. "You are a genuinely good fur, Joe," she said, repeating a compliment she had first paid him decades ago. "But you and I know your God will never answer your question, any more than mine would answer me before I became what I am now. Even these days, I have to be lucky to get an answer. It is not the way of things. It is not fair. The world ... generally isn't. But that is not the work of the Gods. It is the work of furs. Using the finest gift ever bestowed upon them ... free will ... really, really badly. Remember, Joe ... what the Gods want is for furs to choose to do the right thing, because it is the right thing to do. Not because they are scared into it. And when they fail to do so, the world is messed up. But unless the Gods took back the gift of free will, then that is the way it must be. All we can do ... you, Tigermark, Aramis ... even a Valkyrie like me ... is to be good examples for others to follow."

Joe took a moment, before nodding. "And to think ... you used to be about as deep as a preschooler's pool, Aslaug," he said and chuckled.

"Well, as we started out by saying ... we've both changed," Aslaug chuckled and let go of her friend's paw.

Smiling, the coyote nodded. Then his eyes once again seemed to look into the void between worlds and he sighed. "It's a little unsettling, but at the same time comforting. This is why the Scruffy Squad exists, I think. Maybe I'm just an old dog fancying himself into delusion, but I firmly believe that you and I share something I can't even define that Aramis and Tigermark will never know. Something that transcends our physical presence here, something that defines us no matter where, or when. Something we see and respect in each other that perhaps the others, no matter how many others we may encounter, just can't understand."

Aslaug felt a lump catch in her throat. "I ..." she began, blinking. "My gods, what a compliment."

Joe still smiled. "They're my brothers-in-arms, Aslaug. They're fantastic friends ... some of the best furs I know, probably *the* best in fact. I just couldn't have this conversation with either of them. It ... doesn't work that way."

"That's because you're not my brother-in-arms, Joe."

"No?"

Aslaug smiled crookedly. "No. You're just my brother."

Joe looked into his wine.

For a long, long time.

###

Turi felt like he had been digging forever. In fact, it had been hours, but it felt like days. His arms felt like his veins were filled with mercury and even his fingernails ached. He hated this world. The inhabitants were so strange it made him want to hide. Or more precisely, they made him want to go *home*. But Rossana was here for something, and if she said "dig!" all he could do was to ask "how deep?"

And to think she was his own sister.

He was a mess by now. Covered in dirt and worse. Getting out of the hole he had dug wasn't even going to be easy, with his arms being as sore as they were, and he knew his sister well enough to know she'd rather leave him down there to rot away slowly than even reaching down to help him out of there.

He had just about had enough of this, too, when his shovel finally struck rock. And not just some boulder in the ground ... but a carved surface.

Before he had a chance to even say what he had found, Rossana yanked him out of the hole, her black dress swirling around her, creating an almost tangible aura of darkness around her. He was thrown backwards, out of the hole and onto his back, landing heavily.

It hurt ...

A lot.

He saw black spots dancing before his eyes as the air was forced from his lungs and he winced, letting his head fall back on the ground.

Rossana's hellish screech of joy was almost enough to make him want to claw her eyes out of their sockets. He'd worked himself half to death and what did he get for it? Not so much as a word of thanks, and all she could do was howl like a banshee?

“Oh do shut up!” he growled.

Rossana stopped her happy noises immediately, and a second later, he felt her hot, fetid breath on his face.

“Say what ... *brother?*” she snarled.

He could feel a droplet of her spittle hit his face ... she was *that* close.

Clenching his eyes even more tightly closed, he shook his head very slightly from side to side, very quickly. “Nothing, nothing!” he whimpered.

A sharp pain ran through him. He was afraid to open his eyes to see what Rossana had done to him, knowing only too well her propensity for cruelty and her talent for inflicting excruciating pain without doing any real damage to her victims.

Not for the first time, he deeply resented that she had been blessed with so much and he with so little.

Not for the first time, he hated his sister with every fibre of his being.

Finally, the smell of her breath receded and he heard her descend into the hole that he had dug once more.

A crash of lightning broke above him. The ruins where he had spent the day digging would offer absolutely no cover from the rain he knew would fall within moments, but he was so tired he didn't even bother getting up to try to find some place to hide from the water. Instead, he let it hit him ... soak him in a matter of seconds, while Rossana hooted and howled with glee in the hole.

He finally opened his eyes, blinking back his weariness.

Over the edge of the wall, he could see hilltops and even mountains in the distance. Deciduous trees surrounded the ruins on all sides. Further up, on the mountainside, coniferous trees would take over.

Towards the top ... no trees would grow at all.

But the local flora wasn't what caught Turi's eyes.

Instead, his gaze was drawn to a shadow at the crest of the nearest hill.

Lightning crashed across the sky again, and Turi nearly catapulted back on his feet. "SHIT! ROSSANA, WE'VE GOT COMPANY!" he shouted and broke into a dead run.

He wasn't going to stand by while a wolf the size of a warhorse snarled hungrily in his direction.

###

Joe changed direction. The ruins were extensive and he was not exactly young anymore, but he was in good shape and he knew with just as much certainty as Aslaug that the two shapes in the convent were not friendly. And that they could not be allowed to escape.

Aslaug had pointed towards the one running and Joe had immediately known what she meant. He had the guns. If he needed to shoot someone running away, he had a much better chance of hitting with a modern firearm than she did with her choice of weapons. Admittedly, she was an expert with her throwing axes, but she only had two, and while her spear could be thrown, it didn't return to her paw like Odin's spear or Thor's hammer.

She could will it into her paw, but that took a lot longer than firing off an entire magazine from his Heckler & Koch HK 45. By now it was an aging weapon but it had served him pretty damned well in the past and he was quite pleased that he had been able to obtain one for the mission.

He twisted around the next corner and sniffed the air briefly. This whole complex was nothing short of a maze and instincts he hadn't used since his active days as an agent had already kicked into full gear again.

He wasn't simply chasing some fur or other. This bastard was an agent. Which presented certain problems ... since he wasn't an Agent anymore himself. That meant his enemy would have access to certain abilities he didn't have.

No matter, he thought as he resumed his run. The creep would still go down with a bullet in each kneecap ... or one between the eyes if it came to that.

Behind him, he knew Aslaug was already squaring off against the other one. That one hadn't seemed interested in running away.

Pity the fool, Joe chuckled to himself and sniffed the air again.

He was onto his enemy. But there was something incredibly strange about whoever it was. He just didn't smell right at all.

Shaking his head, Joe burst through a broken doorway, levelling his pistol in front of himself, quickly scanning the room.

There were no exits.

Whatever he was chasing ... was still here.

###

Aslaug calmly walked towards her foe. Her leather jacket hung open and she was armed with her spear in one paw and her long-axe in the other. Both weapons required two paws to use effectively, but that didn't bother her too much.

Instead, she walked into the center of the room with the hole dug by one of the walls. Then she upturned her spear and rammed it into the stone floor, feeling the unnatural tip slide through the stone as if it had been soft butter. Then she grasped the axe in both paws and narrowed her eyes.

"I know what you are ... hyu-mahn ..." she growled as the female tried to stay hidden in the shadows. The moon was out, but the ruins provided plenty of shadowy corners. And it was raining ... from a cloudless sky.

Lightning crashed across the heavens, from nowhere to nowhere, but Aslaug had more pressing issues to attend to.

"How can something as hideous as you even *speak*?" the female in the shadows hissed. "Animal! Walking, talking animals, that's all anyone around here is! It's *disgusting*!"

Aslaug grinned crookedly and took a couple of trial swings with her axe. "Come out here and I'll make it swift and painless. Stay where you are, and I assure you, I'm going to make you scream before you die," the Valkyrie said, matter-of-factly.

The female took a step forward, but not to accommodate Aslaug's demand. Her face was pale but, as far as Aslaug was able to judge, based on her limited previous experience with the human race, she was actually quite comely ... if somewhat undernourished. Her eyes were rimmed by black, but most of it was makeup. The look on her features, however, was one of sheer hate and undiluted rage.

Her fingers were very long and her arms were slender. She dressed like something out of a bad horror-movie, and Aslaug remained unimpressed.

"Life takes whatever form it takes," she said. "Last chance. Come over here and kneel. I guarantee you, I'm good with an axe. You won't feel a thing."

The female human narrowed her eyes and Aslaug could see black fire burning in the sockets. Sighing, she hefted the axe and lowered her head for the charge.

"So be it," she said, wearily and attacked.

The human did not try to sidestep her, as Aslaug had anticipated, however. Instead, she uttered a single, unintelligible word and sank into the ground in front of the surprised Valkyrie who proceeded to smash directly and rather inelegantly into the wall.

###

Joe did not see the blow when it came. Out of nowhere, a strange, misshapen fur rushed at him and landed a solid blow to his chin.

The coyote spun around, without losing his balance, bringing up his pistol again immediately, but his enemy had already vanished. He moved his jaw and noted that while it had been painful, nothing was broken. He had long since learned to clench his jaw shut when anticipating violence. A half-open jaw was an accident waiting to happen, and he was in no mood to chew his own tongue off.

The creature came out of the shadows again and slammed into his back, bowling him over, but Joe was an experienced warrior and he immediately rolled with the blow, coming up on one knee, once more bringing the pistol out.

"You can do this all night and not take me down," he hissed. "I, on the other hand, only need to hit you once."

"What in Hell's name ARE you?" a voice came from the shadows. It sounded scared and confused, but Joe wasn't going to let that bother him. Whoever spoke was local ... it had an Italian accent at least.

"I'm not here to answer stupid questions," Joe growled and snapped off a shot in the direction of the voice.

The sound of a bullet hitting stone and ricocheting away was his only reward.

"You can't hit what you can't see, you filthy animal!" the male in the shadows jeered.

Joe narrowed his eyes. Filthy animal? What was this creep talking about anyway? Another blow hit him over the back of the head. This time, his enemy had held on to something ... probably a rock ... and Joe felt the world sailing before his eyes for a moment.

It was hard to focus ... but he was wily enough to know he probably wouldn't hit an opponent standing in deep shadows in a room where the acoustics mea ...

He smiled and rolled forward again.

"What do you mean, filthy animal?" he asked as he came back up. "I'm a coyote. Not the most common fur in Italy, I know but still?"

"I mean you're supposed to walk on all fo ..." the voice began.

It didn't get to finish.

Joe had snapped up his paw, looking towards where he heard the voice coming from but firing blind in the exact opposite direction.

The agonized scream he was greeted with was like music to his ears, and he turned and walked towards his stricken foe.

What he saw was nothing like what he had expected.

"You're asking me what I am? What in God's name are *you*??" he asked, looking down into the human face in front of him.

###

Aslaug was bruised and her opponent had turned out to be an extremely cagey fighter. Not to mention she used sejd ... something Aslaug disapproved wholly of, except in the paws of allies. And even then it was slightly dodgy.

She'd never really come to grips with Aramis using magic, but she accepted that he did because it was his way ... and because he was one of the good guys and her friend.

But in the paws ... hands ... of an enemy?

No way! That was just not acceptable. And now she was getting hurled around by this ... *upstart* female, who wouldn't stand and fight.



She had been thrown into walls, dropped on her head, swirled around and never once would her enemy come into range.

Aslaug knew why, too. It was because of the axe. No one would voluntarily come into range of *that*, unless they had a death-wish. The problem, of course, was that Joe was elsewhere, and he was the only one who could hit the sorceress. Unless of course she could turn away bullets, too.

Maybe she could. Aslaug growled and attacked again, charging towards where the other female was standing ... only to once more find her missing, and only to once again be picked up and hurled backwards some twenty feet through the air.

"Not so tough now, are you?" the human mocked her.

Aslaug was in no mood for this, but she also realized that simply charging her enemy wasn't going to cut it in this case. If Varghöss had been there, he could have flanked the sorceress or if Joe had been there ... but as the situation was, she had to do this on her own.

And that meant guile. Trickery.

Loke would be proud of her, in fact. The very thought made her slightly uncomfortable, but if trickery was called for, then trickery she would use.

She shuffled backwards, making sure not to look too scared, but more feebly enraged in defeat. The sorceress seemed to take the bait. She approached as Aslaug scrambled to her hooves.

"You won't get away with this!" she hissed, inwardly cringing at even using those words.

Laughing again, mockingly, the sorceress approached and Aslaug turned around and broke into a run.

Straight across the center of the ruined room.

And the sorceress ... as the Valkyrie expected ... followed her.

Smiling, Aslaug made sure she didn't run so fast as to outrun her pursuer. She made it look like she was limping on one leg, until she was about twenty feet from her spear. Then she gained speed ... fast.

The sorceress barely kept up.

She had no idea what happened next until it was all over. Aslaug jumped the last six feet, grabbing the spear with both paws and swinging around it. It stood like an iron rod, planted solidly in the ground ... not bending, not breaking ... as the massive bulk of six foot nine worth of equine valkyrie swung around it like a tether-ball that had just received a massive whack.

Her left hoof came out in front.

It impacted solidly ... shattering the sorceress' jaw and teeth, sending blood and bone-splinters flying across the room and collapsing the human in a puddle of her own blood.

Aslaug simply let go and landed, a bit less graciously than she had hoped for, but at least without tumbling head over heels.

Then she walked back and picked up her axe, before calmly turning around and looking at her downed enemy. Only then did she realize Joe was standing opposite from her with another human over his shoulders, looking wide-eyed at her.

"Whoa ... I didn't know you knew moves like that!" he exclaimed as he approached, dumping the other human on top of the female on the ground. "What ARE these things anyway? Some kind of furless primate?"

"I've met them ... long ago on another mission. They call themselves humans."

"Hyuuu ... mahns?" Joe tried. "Not local, whatever they are. Even Italians don't look this weird!"

Laughing, Aslaug shook her head. "No, definitely not local. I suppose we have to get some answers out of the one you caught, because *mine* most definitely won't be talking again."

"I'd say! I doubt she's got any kind of jawbone left, worth mentioning!" Joe said and winced. "Do you think she'll wake up at all?"

"If she's smart ... she'll just die. If she does wake up, I promised to make her scream before I finished her off," Aslaug said, matter-of-factly. "She didn't want to surrender, plus she pissed me off."

Joe shook his head. "Filly ... if she does wake up, I think the screaming will come entirely without your assistance," he said and looked at the crushed face of the female.

Aslaug nodded. "Probably. Well then ... let's see if we can't get some answers out of yours."

Joe looked over his shoulder at the slightly squirming form of his own opponent. He hadn't wounded the cretin seriously, anyway. Nothing fatal, at least. Just ... painful.

"No torturing, Aslaug," he said. "We're supposed to be the goodies, after all."

Aslaug sighed theatrically. "Aww, you never let me have any *fun*!"

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the male human squirming even more. Joe stood with his back mostly turned, but he could clearly hear the movement behind him. Winking to the equine, he smiled very slightly. "Oh alright then. Just a little bit. Nothing too extreme though," he said.

Aslaug rubbed her paws together and grinned widely. "Oh no, nothing extreme. I'll settle for taking off his fingers. Nothing he actually *needs*, you know!"

The squirming had turned into an outright tremble. As the Valkyrie patted her friend on the shoulder and walked towards the captive, he immediately started blubbering.

*"Nopleasedon'tI'lltellyoueverythingyouwanttoknow!"*

Sighing, Aslaug looked back over her shoulder to Joe. "They just don't build them like they used to, do they?"

Joe didn't dare to turn around, or his smirk would've ruined the whole effect.