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V – Precedent

Pain was familiar to her, but Rossana could not remember ever having suffered this much of it at the same time. She was kept standing by a mostly ruined, ancient stone pillar behind which her arms were tied. It had once been part of the church room and that in itself accounted for part of her discomfort. She was literally standing on sanctified ground and it constantly felt like someone was driving sharp, hot blades up through the soles of her feet.

Mostly, though, the pain came from her head, or more precisely, her face. She couldn't see the damage, but she knew her tongue was ruined ... that she'd lost most of her teeth, that her jaw was broken into so many pieces she doubted it would grow back together properly without some serious magical healing ...

Nonetheless, all this damage *could* be repaired, if only she could get her hands free to work her magic. But whoever had restrained her had known how to tie good knots. And he or she had used strong rope.

All in all, Rossana knew she'd been beaten and she hated that knowledge. She'd never been beaten before, but that ... *horse* ... had somehow gotten the best of her.

Not good. At all. Her boss did not appreciate failure or agents losing, whatever the circumstances.

She could hear her brother nearby. He was clearly in a lot of pain, whatever the useless little creep had to complain about. Her injuries were far more serious. If she cut her little

finger, and he in comparison was bleeding to death, her injuries would be more serious and more important, simply by virtue of her being more important in the first place!

It was simple logic.

She was more important than he, because she was smarter and had been blessed more. It was the law of nature. Something which society was increasingly geared towards following around the world. At least around *her* world. The rich would get preferential treatment, because they were seen as more important individuals than the poor. People would try to attain fame and status by any means necessary, because without it, they were considered worthless. It was no longer enough to live good lives and fulfill a part in a greater scheme. Unless you were a person of repute, status, fame and wealth, you were useless.

Expendable.

Worthless.

It was a daily source of joy to see politicians do everything in their power to bring this about. World leaders, the media, personal idols and icons ... all telling whoever would listen, that only the young, beautiful, rich and famous were of any importance. If you were over the age of 30 ... or at least 40 ... physically unattractive or even ugly, fat, poor and by extension almost logically unknown, you were not only a waste of breath ... it was alright to mock you, belittle you, crack jokes at your misfortune.

Even if you were the best and the brightest in your field, you'd be seen as utterly worthless by society as a whole. Perhaps not by your immediate peers, but in the greater scheme of things, certainly.

It was a state of affairs Rossana would do anything to support and enhance. It was a form of selfishness and egocentrism that served the same ultimate goal as she did perfectly.

Coupled with the endemic, societal dread of "them" that permeated most of the world, it was a perfect recipe for world wide superficiality.

"We" are good.

"They" are bad.

It was almost too good to be true, that something so simple could be so utterly destructive. The way people wanted easy answers was nothing new, but in an age of

Information Technology that the ancients could not even have conceived of, it was possible to actively breed and foster superficiality, indifference and egotism in people by using this, the simplest of human struggles to create the impression of enemies where there *were* none.

The idea that "we" are always right. Absolutely, unquestioningly *right*, was a source of much amusement to her. Anyone with a snifter of a brain would know that black-or-white, all-or-nothing scenarios were pathetic, useless constructs, made simply to foster fear and hatred. Certain groups ... typically on the Right ... would embrace these policies as their own and rant and scream up a storm about how everyone apart from them were evil in the flesh. How they alone held the key to salvation from whatever calamity was coming on and how everything everyone else said was automatically not only wrong ... but *evil*.

And the Left would react ... so amusingly ... by first trying to be conciliatory, and when that failed against the bulwarks of human egotism, they would brew up their own brand of "us". The "holier-than-thou"-brand. The "you-must-be-deliberately-evil-to-feel-that-way"-variety.

And their "us" would be just as vile as that of their opponent. Just as uncompromising. And just as inherently flawed.

And the Bible would tell them the folly of this, for those who were apt to read it, but even they would be too busy thumping that very book and claiming moral righteousness to read Matthew 12:25, "Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand".

Rossana would have grinned at the thought if she could. They were overlooking one of the most fundamental truths of the Bible, specifically in order to divide themselves into "us" and "them", and feeling not only perfectly justified, but *righteous* in doing so. The irony ... and the stupidity ... screamed to the Heavens ... and the Heavens were *silent*.

And her employer was reaping all the benefits.

Again, Turi gasped in pain nearby, and Rossana was snapped out of her half-fevered, pain-induced musings.

Maybe the Heavens were not quite so silent as she had first thought. The walking horse and the dog-thing that had attacked her and Turi were clearly Agents as well. Agents ... or worse.

She swallowed ... and immediately gagged on blood and small pieces of her own flesh getting stuck in her throat, and she found herself half retching, half spitting but still tied as securely as before, even as her strength drained out of her, minute by minute.

###

Varghöss was having fun! Sneering and growling at the furless thing in front of it, scaring it to the point of wetting itself was absolutely hilarious. If he could just bite the it ... just once ... not somewhere important either, but just enough to make it understand how dangerous he was, then everything would be perfect but so far, Aslaug hadn't allowed him to bite. Just to growl and slobber and salivate all over it.

It smelled nice.

Edible.

The fresh scent of blood was almost intoxicating, too.

Now Aslaug and her canid friend were talking over by the wall. They had left the creature in Varghöss "care" and the wolf was determined to have the most fun possible with it.

He mock growled and opened his jaw, testing whether he could bite over the annoying thing's head. It was no problem at all, and the whimpers and horrified little squeals it made were most pleasing.

He grazed his teeth against the skull of the pathetic thing ... not enough to hurt, but enough for the creature to be absolutely certain just how big Varghöss-teeth really were.

The subtle change in scent surrounding the creature told Varghöss that it had just relieved itself in the seat of its pants.

Ew. Filthy food.

He growled loudly without removing his teeth and the being vanished out from between his jaws.

For a brief moment, Varghöss was confused. Had it poofed into another world? Sometimes, he and Aslaug could do that, such as when they went to Asgard. But then he realized the smell of thing-poo was still there and he stepped back.

Oh, it had passed out. Sometimes, food would do that. It happened from time to time when he hunted, too.

Varghöss sat down and observed his stricken almost-meal with an air of annoyance. It didn't smell nice anymore and he wasn't allowed to eat it anyway.

Hopefully, Aslaug would let him bite something soon.

###

"What are we going to do about them now that we're done with them?" Joe asked and scratched his neck.

Aslaug shrugged. "Kill them."

It had been years ... many years ... since Joe had been an active Agent and the casual way in which the Valkyrie condemned two living beings was not only slightly shocking, but it didn't sit too well with him.

"Why? Is there no alternative?"

"Would you release two creatures who don't even belong in this world onto the streets of Italy? They failed their mission. They're not going to be "brought home" by their master. They're just tainted goods now. All they're good for is creating panic and havoc if their existence became known here."

Joe nodded. He didn't like it, but Aslaug's logic was flawless. Still ... they were helpless prisoners and he did not enjoy the thought of it. "Painlessly, Aslaug. Swiftly and painlessly."

"Fair enough."

"This is another reason why I retired, you know. I don't ... like taking lives."

"Thank goodness for that, my friend. Once you start *liking* the business of killing, it's usually a really bad sign. That sort of thing would go over really well where I come from, but in a 21st century setting? No way," Aslaug said and picked up her long-axe. "I'll make it quick. And I'll wait until you've gone outside if you want."

Joe shook his head. "Since when have I been squeamish? I don't mind blood, Aslaug. You know that. I just don't want *needless* killing or suffering is all."

"I know."

"I'll go take a look in the hole they dug. See if I can't figure out what is in there."

The male prisoner had been only too willing to talk, but he had no idea what was in the hole. He had dug it, but the female, his sister, had pulled him out just as he had found something. He didn't know what was there.

Aslaug sighed and felt the weight of her axe in her paws. She couldn't blame Joe for his reluctance in causing the deaths of others. That was another one of her myriad reasons for wanting to bring him into this mission. If it was really going to get as ugly as she feared it would be, she'd need someone to ground her. Hot-headed as she was, she'd need a disembodied conscience ... someone who could tell her when she was about to go too far.

Joe could do that probably better than any other fur in the world.

The two humans, while wily and definitely more powerful than ordinary human beings, were no serious threat to her, or to someone as experienced as Joe Latrans. But they were not the real enemy. They were nothing but sacrificial lambs, sent to collect something and possibly to slow her and Joe down a little.

Or more likely ... to test them.

Which meant one thing could be established already. This wasn't Surt's work alone. The Lord of Destruction already knew what she was capable of ... and what her friends could do. He would have no reason to test her like that. But then again, she didn't doubt that he was somehow involved. After all, something small, oily and entirely disgusting had been sent after Victoria back in the woods, and that thing had Surt's stench all over it.

But Surt was not subtle. He was raw, primal destruction for its own sake. Which meant that the oily blob that had taken up residence in the grizzly-bear that she had strangled might be one of Surt's minions, but it would not be acting on its own.

Which had led her to the conclusion that Surt was not the only enemy in this case. Maybe not even the main one.

Which again meant she was up against one or more unknown factors.

And the male human had not said who they were working for. She had asked ... but it quickly became clear to her that she wouldn't get an answer. He was a coward and he was deathly afraid of her, but nowhere near as afraid as he seemed to be of his employer, making any inquiries ... however persistent and forceful ... utterly pointless.

Unless she turned interrogation into interRoRgation, she was pretty sure she'd get nothing out of him, and she knew only too well that information gained through torture was utterly worthless. Someone subjected to torture would say or do anything to make the pain stop, so all she could do was talk to the captives ... or at least the male one, seeing as he was the only one able to talk ... and question him very pointedly.

There would be others. More dangerous ones. Worse ones.

Varghöss looked at her expectantly and lolled his tongue as if to ask if the fun was about to start. He was a noble creature, but Aslaug also knew he was quite bloodthirsty and she was in no mood to indulge his fancies right now. As Joe had said ... it had to be quick and painless.

The male was on the ground, passed out from fear. A stench surrounded him that Aslaug knew only too well and she shook her head in disbelief. She hadn't expected him to be that much of a coward, but then again, Varghöss could be a terrifying guard if he had to. She didn't wake the human male. It would be senselessly cruel to do so, only to have him be awake when she killed him. Instead, she removed his head with one, well placed overhead chop.

Varghöss looked at the spectacle with interest. He knew he still had a part to play ... removing the corpses. Not by eating them ... although he didn't really want to anymore, now that one of the strange creatures had soiled itself ... but by carrying them and dropping them somewhere where they would be destroyed completely.

He'd probably just dump them in an active volcano. That would destroy them utterly, at least.

Aslaug seemed grimmer than usual, though, and Varghöss felt what passed for a lupine sense of anxiety about it. Even though his rider had won this fight, she wasn't at ease, and that usually meant there was more trouble coming.

Aslaug ran a paw through her hair and headed off to find the female, but Varghöss stayed put until he was told differently.

###

Joe had heard the tell-tale sound of an axe-blade passing through meat and bone and to his own surprise, he had felt his stomach turn. He had been out of the game for so long that that kind of killing affected him far more strongly than he would have suspected.

So he put his head down and dug. Not that there was much digging that remained to be done. The hole was already very deep, and he was standing on what he guessed was the stone lid of some kind of container. Given that this was an old convent, his guess was a grave.

Kneeling down, he brushed the last of the dirt away to reveal a large marble slab. Clearly, whoever was buried here could afford the best of the best and Joe traced the inscriptions on the lid with his fingertips.

He didn't expect to understand a word of it, and he was right. The text of most Christian graves, if they were that old, was written in Latin, and he didn't speak the language, let alone read it. Still, he could at least write whatever it said down, and try to get it translated as soon as possible. There were symbols on the lid as well. Very well preserved, too. It was relatively easy to make out what the symbols were.

Which made him stop.

He re-traced the symbol again and again.

"ASLAUG?" he called out.

The Valkyrie came up to the side of the hole, her bloody axe in her paws. For a moment, Joe couldn't help but realize just how frightening she looked. Equines were universally tall, though usually not as huge as pure-blooded wolves, but Aslaug could look most of them squarely in the eye. And she had a bearing to her that just ... well ...

She looked like Death, out for trouble.

Which in a very twisted, very bizarre sort of way, she *was*.

He moved aside in the hole and gestured to the stone tablet. "I think you were right that those metal pieces were important. Look at that!"

Aslaug knelt at the edge of the hole and took a closer look. "Very clever. Very clever indeed!" she said, sounding somewhat amused.

"What is?" Joe asked and looked from the small symbol on the stone to his friend and back again.

Aslaug took out the wrapped bundle from her pocket and looked at the contents. "Sunwheels look suspiciously like a halos. You don't honestly think that the furs in this convent would have gone along with a heathen burial, do you?" she asked, smiling crookedly.

Joe felt like someone had turned a light on behind his eyes and he nodded, slowly. "You're right. That *is* clever. But are you absolutely certain that this symbol IS a sunwheel and not a halo then?"

"I'm certain, but I think we'll get final proof when we open this grave."

"Open it???"

Aslaug nodded. "We're going to have to."

"I feel like a ghoul already," Joe grumbled but nodded. Aslaug had been right so far, after all. "What about the corpses? Are we putting them in here instead?"

"No. While the chance of them ever getting found would be minute, we can't run that risk. Even if there would be nothing but skeletal remains left, they'd look like no fur from this world. I don't want to think of the problems that would cause. I've sent Varghöss off with the corpses."

"Do I want to know what he's going to do with them?" Joe asked, uncertainly.

Aslaug grinned and shrugged. "I don't usually let him eat sentients, Joe, but if I do, I'd let him eat enemy Agents. The point is, we can't risk their bones being found. I told him to make sure they were completely and utterly destroyed. He's smart enough to figure out what to do ... I assume he'll run over the opening of an active volcano and drop them in or something along those lines. Fire is the most effective way of getting rid of them at least."

Joe did look somewhat relieved. "Alright then. But you're still going to have to help me. This is going to involve some heavy lifting!"

"Here ... take this and put it in the grooves cut for it," the valkyrie said and held out the sunwheel she had found by the priest in Petit Vermont.

Joe took it, not certain what it would accomplish but he still put it down on the marble slab, where the sunwheel had been cut into the stone.

It was a perfect fit.

Aslaug held out a paw for her friend to take and helped haul him out of the just as the lid began to rise.

"Magic," Joe mumbled. "I'm sure Aramis would've liked to see this."

"This is not his kind of magic ... this is *Sejd*," Aslaug said.

"You never explained the difference to me, filly. I've known you for ... how long?? And you never actually explained what *Sejd* really is, as opposed to what Aramis does."

Aslaug raised an eyebrow and looked somewhat surprised. "I didn't? I'm sorry, I should have. *Sejd* is ... complicated. The soul functions outside the body as well as within it. *Sejd* can influence this. You can use it to gain information ... usually by divining the future. But you can affect the spirit in many other ways too. To heal or to curse, for instance. Normally, males can't do it. A few can, but they are usually seen as overstepping their bounds. Odin is the greatest of all *Sejd*-makers, so males are not forbidden to do it, but it is a natural force, and males can't give life. Meaning those males who do *Sejd* tend to focus on the cursing-aspect."

"That female hyu-mahn creature ... was she a *Sejd*-maker then?" Joe asked, taking in the information.

Shaking her head, Aslaug waited until the stone lid had opened completely before continuing. "Not really. What she did was more like Aramis' form of magic. *Sejd* takes time, but it can grant enormous insight and wisdom, and it can do incredible damage if the fur using it is powerful enough. What Aramis does is a fast, brutalizing way of forcing the world around us to accept that he is doing things that are not naturally possible, such as sprouting magical fire from his palms. A *Sejd*-maker wouldn't do that. They'd reach the same result by cursing their foe instead, and two days later, that enemy would trip over his own feet and fall onto an electrical, high-voltage fence and burn to a crisp."

"Ah, so Aramis' version is more for the "here and now"-kind of situation. But it is a violation of the natural laws of the universe, whereas *Sejd* isn't, but it takes a lot longer for the effects to take hold?"

"Exactly."

"So why do you still call computers "*Sejd*-machines"?" Joe asked.

Aslaug nodded. "They take time to use, but can grant enormous insight. Sadly, even the feeblest of furs can use them to grant that insight. Even insight those furs were never meant to have. That's why I don't like computers. Besides, most of them were invented by males."

Joe smiled and scratched his neck. "In a weird kind of way ... that makes perfect sense," he chuckled. Finally, he looked into the hole again.

Aslaug hadn't taken her eyes off it. And Joe immediately understood why. His eyes went wide. "My God ..." he mumbled.

"And all of mine," Aslaug added, as an afterthought.

In the grave in front of their eyes, they could see two skeletons. Laying as if they were holding each other tenderly in death.

"Who ... ?" Joe began.

Aslaug shook her head. "I have no idea who they were. But I'll bet you anything that if we take a closer look at their jewelry or whatever else is down there, one of them was Heathen and the other was Christian."

Pieces began to fall into place in Joe's head. "Agents," he said. It wasn't a question ... it was a statement of fact.

Aslaug simply nodded and sat down on the edge of the hole, her paws in her lap.

Joe's head swam with the meaning of this. "That means Victoria and Torvald ..."

"Were not the first ones ..." Aslaug finished.

His eyes growing wider and wider, Joe looked closer, hoping to see if he could see some kind of definitive proof. "We have *got* to find out who they were, filly."

Aslaug nodded. "Yep. And I think the only one who will be able to will be you, Joe."

"Why?"

"Because the only place where the information is likely to be found is a place I can't go."

Joe raised an eyebrow. "Can't go? I didn't know there were places that were off-limits to you?"

"Not as such. But I am a guest in this world, however much I have made it my home, and frankly, I don't think your God would like me to trample through the Vatican, reading ancient, sacred and very *secret* manuscripts!"

It felt like someone had taken a two-by-four to Joe's face. He blinked rapidly and sat down on his backside. "The *Vatican*? Are you *serious*??"

Aslaug took out the other piece of metal and nodded. "And now I think I know what this is for," she said, sighing.

"What then? *Please* do enlighten me?" Joe burst out, not finding the prospect of having to go through the secret libraries of the Vatican particularly reassuring.

"This ... is what will get you in," Aslaug said and turned the small, broken blade around in her paw. "Because I recognize this at last."

She got up and headed back towards her spear, still planted solidly in the ground and pulled it out. Turning it the right side up, she walked back and sat down next to Joe again, holding the spear-tip and the small, blackened metal-shard next to one another.

Joe's jaw went slack for a moment and he just stared at the comparison.

They were not identical. But there was no question that the ancient piece of metal had been a part of a spear-tip, a long time ago.

"Well then," he said, trying to sound light-hearted. "I guess I'd better get my tail to Rome, then. What are you going to do in the meantime?"

Aslaug gave him the metal shard, packed up once more in its cloth wrapper. "Make sure you place it into the paws of the *right* kind of fur, though," she said. "As for what I'll do ... I'm going to go talk to the Boss. *My Boss*, that is. I'm going to find out exactly who we are up against. Then I'll catch up to you in Rome."

Joe nodded and got to his feet. "I'll leave first thing in the morning."

Aslaug nodded. "Sleep with the lights on and keep your gun within reach."

Joe nodded.

It seemed like sound advice to him.