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XX – Blood and steel

Haldana had managed to recover. Or at least, she had managed to pull herself sufficiently together that she could focus on the task laid out before her.

Odin had been absolutely unequivocal in his orders for her. She was to act. And now she was beginning to understand the deeper meaning of that. If *she* acted, then Hrist could no longer claim it was Aslaug pulling another solo-stunt. If she acted, she would show the other Valkyries that one could not sit on one's paws and wait passively for instruction. The will of Odin was not passive, and consequently, the Valkyries couldn't be either.

She had taken some time to recover, though. Facing Odin on her own was quite possibly the most frightening thing she had ever endured and she couldn't waver in the slightest when she took action.

Crossing the courtyard of Valhalla could take lifetimes or be done in moments, depending on the situation. Right now, Haldana felt she had been walking for a very, very long time. But finally, she reached the door to the guard room on the opposite side.

She didn't knock. Knocking politely wasn't part of this. She raised her foot and, without a shred of doubt, she kicked the heavy oak door open.

An Einherjar jumped up from his seat, grasping for his sword. From the look on his face, Haldana guessed he thought the Jotunn were invading, but once he realized who had kicked the door down, he just looked absolutely dumbstruck with surprise.

Two more Einherjar came rushing in from the sleeping-quarters behind another door. They were already armed, and wearing nothing more than their skivvies.

Well ... one of them was wearing a helmet too ...

If the vixen hadn't been so serious, she'd have laughed. But there was no time for laughter. Instead, she levelled her sword at the three of them, pointing to each in turn. "Where are my sisters?" she demanded, in a tone of voice that left absolutely no room for rebelliousness.

"W ... which ..." the one in the helmet tried. He never got to finish. Haldana cut him down where he stood. It was hardly a problem ... the Einherjar died regularly. They fought all day long and by nightfall, those who had died would rise and they'd all go and feast all night long. Except of course, there were always those on guard and other duties, but in theory, that was the idea. And even those who hadn't been out fighting would rise by nightfall, if they had somehow died during the day. It was part of the package ...

"Don't ... muck me about," the vixen snarled, baring her teeth. "I want Hrist and Astrid, and I want them right now!"

The two other guards both gulped something down and nodded hurriedly. "Out on the plains," one of them offered, in a squeaky voice.

Haldana nodded and looked at the fallen Einherjar. "Get him off the floor before his blood messes the guard-room up!" she growled, then left.

She didn't stop to see if they obeyed. She assumed they would ... knowing what was best for them.

###

The volcano had come to life. It was an ancient mountain of fire and smoke, responsible for many, many deaths over the course of its existence, but regardless, furs had settled in its shadow.

Mount Vesuvius.

A name to strike terror into any volcanologist in the world.

Aslaug was no such educated fur and volcanoes were unknown where she had come from, and to see a mountain erupt in fire, smoke and so ash was a terrifying thing even

at the best of times. Plumes of smoke and super-heated ash mixed with flaming bits of molten rock rocketed out of the cone-shaped mountain.

It was as if Surt himself had farted.

Aslaug knew that many would die. The eruption had come without warning. The volcano wasn't meant to erupt now. It had only happened because Anane had caused it.

Something like that would require a tremendous amount of his strength. She was starting to understand at last. The fallen Angel had untold aeons of experience on her, and while individual Valkyries could stand up to individual Angels ... fallen or otherwise ... as equals, Anane was no ordinary creature of his kind. He was far more powerful than most. He had experience, madness and power in the most perfect mix to create a truly devastating entity, and Aslaug knew he was not to be underestimated.

But while the bloodbath in Omdurman would have invigorated and even empowered him, what power he had gained would have been spent at Cusco. Even Angels could not make tectonic plates and mountain ranges do their bidding without investing themselves.

That was why he had needed the deaths at Omdurman first. To power the destruction at Cusco. But he had not held another slaughter since.

He was growing overconfident.

And now he had spent himself on causing another major disaster, thereby levelling the playing field and giving her a fighting chance.

Hopefully, most of the furs in Naples and the surrounding countryside would get to safety before the ash-cloud came rolling in. But in truth, Aslaug knew this wasn't to be. She could see the last minutes of practically everyone she saw running or driving past her, ticking away. Most of them would die. Not all ... but most.

Lee and Miho would be arriving soon. She almost wished they wouldn't. They'd be risking their lives but then again ... that was how it worked for Agents.

Not immortal, yet willing to sacrifice themselves.

It made them braver than her, as far as she was concerned, and she knew she didn't lack for courage.

It made them extraordinary creatures. And the world around them never even knew about their heroism. There were no accolades for Agents. No victory parades, no grateful

public, no speeches. No medals. No honours. No happy retirement, bouncing grandchildren on their knees.

For most of them, it was a short, dirty tour of duty, ending miserably and painfully somewhere in a dirty back alley.

They'd be pegged as John or Jane Doe's and given a non-descript burial, often not even corresponding to the faith they had subscribed to in life. Often not even on their own home-world.

And did the Gods intervene?

Aslaug sneered at the thought. The memory souls of two long-dead agents, liberated from their earthly confines in Bella Divignano and allowed at last to roam free across the land, came back to her. She hadn't mentioned them to Joe. He probably wouldn't have known how to cope with the information.

But those two souls had been caught in their coffin for all that time. Most dead furs weren't that unlucky, but their souls were just restless things, slowly fading into oblivion because they weren't collected ... brought home ... allowed to ascend ... whatever!

As she strode against the mass of furs trying to escape the city, Aslaug reiterated her vow to herself. She would bring choice to Agents. She would *give* them choice where none had existed. Even if that choice would sometimes often be between continued servitude or death. She knew that to many of them, death would by far be preferable, but that suicide would be out of the question.

What did that make her, though? A rogue element, or was this also a part of some greater plan? She had to believe it was. She was Odin's will, or an extension thereof. Which meant that this was the will of the Allfather.

It made sense.

The Norse had practiced the concept of the *Ting*. Each free male had a vote. Even kings were elected and confirmed by the *Ting*, and while Odin would never ... and should never ... subject himself to the rules of mere mortals, the idea behind it was still one of freedom for the individual. Freedom to choose one's own fate.

Maybe the Allfather hadn't forsaken Torvald after all.

Aslaug stopped walking as realization began to sink in with her. This was all part of Odin's will.

Torvald was one half of a team. One half, coming from a background of equality and the right of choice. His wife, on the other paw, came from a background of absolutism, dogma and dictates. Religiously speaking, if nothing else.

Torvald was undeniably a brave fur. One of the bravest she knew. But at times, he wasn't the greatest thinker. That was not to say the stallion was stupid. Far from it. He was far more intelligent than many furs she knew, but he sometimes lacked *wisdom*. Wisdom which he needed to apply to what he *knew*.

Living in a world dominated by Christian values and virtues for as long as he had, being married to a practicing Christian and surrounded by Christians on all sides, he had forgotten that he too had the right and indeed the obligation to stand up and say "No!"

That as a free fur ... he ...

Her head spun, and Aslaug almost wanted to sit down for a moment. "I am the will of Odin," she repeated to herself, quietly reiterating her creed to herself.

This was all a test. Not of her, not of Joe, not even of Torvald as a fur. It was a test meant to make him remember the rights of the free fur at *Ting*. It was meant to remind him that he had to raise his head and object. That he had to say no at times. That he had the right to do so, even if it would hurt to say that at times.

It was meant to remind him of Heathen values, in a world where he had precious few ways of remembering. That simply taking orders from the top down wasn't the Heathen way.

She shook her head. How could she have been so blind, all along?

This was about not turning the other cheek! One of her own prime examples of what the difference between being a Heathen and a Christian was!

"If you punch a Christian, his faith tells him to turn the other cheek so you can punch that too! If you punch me, my faith teaches me that you'd better hit hard enough to lay me out or so help me Tyr, I'll punch you back ... *harder!*"

Of course, that was what most Christians did too. But by the tenets of their beliefs, they shouldn't. And Torvald had strayed.

He had forgotten to punch life right back in the kisser!

When the Gods had said "Jump", he'd asked "How high?"

When he should've said "Why?" or even "I jumped yesterday. Have someone else do your jumping today! Maybe I'll jump tomorrow, but not today!"

Had she too forgotten? Had she lived in this world so long that these values were starting to creep under her fur too?

No, she didn't think that was the case. That was, after all, why she was coming to this realization. And this made it all the more important that she find Anane and put an end to his insanity! If what the Gods were doing was serving Torvald a big plate of Reminder with a side dish of Heavy Hints, they could've gone about it in a far less brutal manner, and although Aslaug was beginning to see the point, the end, in this case, did not justify the means.

Shaking her head to clear it, she looked up just in time to see the top hundred and twenty feet of Mount Vesuvius vanish in a bright flash and a fireball.

It took a few seconds before the shockwave slammed into Naples. When it did, cars were knocked sideways on the road. Furs were flung hither and thither.

There were casualties. Even fatalities. The spray of super-heated ash into the air had intensified. It would soon block out the sun itself. Escape from the city would be impossible in a few minutes. Furs would die. Fires would break out. Within the hour, the city would be nothing but a blazing inferno of chaos and death.

And in the distance ... way off towards the burning mountain, Aslaug saw what looked like a huge bird to the untrained eye.

She was probably the only fur in Naples who knew that that particular bird's name was Anane ...

###

Getting over the rainbow bridge could take a few minutes or an ice age, but for Varghöss, it had been nothing but a brief, multicoloured sprint. He was now in Asgaard, and he could see his destination up ahead. It wasn't far from the great house with the shiny roof, either. Not that he was too upset about not having to enter that place. The food was good, but everyone was so busy all the time.

No one had time to play. Or scratch his tummy. Or even better, to fight! No one had time for anything *fun*.

He was running at a dead sprint ... excitement making his fur bristle. He wanted to howl, but that'd leave him out of breath, and Aslaug was counting on him. That meant he had to arrive in full fighting strength.

Knowing where to go was no problem. He had been given a target by Aslaug. He could track it down across the worlds, unerringly. Only very few creatures could hide from him.

And his prey today wasn't one of them!

###

Haldana narrowed her eyes. Before her was a small corner of the battlefield surrounding Valhalla. Where the Einherjar kept their skills honed every day. Occasionally watched by the Valkyries. Occasionally even joined by them.

The vixen was not one of the most powerful ones. She took her duties very seriously, as she always had, and she prided herself on having a flawless record as a chooser of the slain, and on never having been out of line before. Going before Odin on her own was ... monumental for her.

But she had to act. Odin had ordered her to do so. And deep in her heart, she knew it was the right thing to do.

When Hrist and Astrid had come to her, saying Aslaug was out of control and that she needed to be reined in, she hadn't questioned it at first. She had always taken orders well, and Hrist was her superior. Aslaug had always had an attitude problem, ever since she was "just" an Agent. She had a problem with authority, or at least with most authority, but that was not necessarily a bad thing. Demanding that one's leaders prove themselves was a virtue amongst Heathens. To not follow blindly, or simply accept orders that would impugn one's own honour was definitely considered a good thing. But it was also considered a good thing to follow orders that were just, right and legitimate. And Haldana had never before had any reason to question Hrist's orders.

Never.

Doing so now was such a leap for her that it nearly made her knees shake to think of it. But Odin had spoken and she would carry out his will, whatever the consequence.

She saw the two femmes. They were not far away, and they were not fighting anyone. Haldana grabbed her spear out of thin air and approached them, with long, confident strides.

"Hrist!" she called out. "I'm glad to have found you."

The equine half-turned and looked at the vixen, raising an eyebrow. "You've been looking for me? I wasn't aware. We're simply observing the day's fighting out here. It shouldn't have caused you any difficulty to find me."

"It didn't. I haven't been looking for long," Haldana admitted. "Still, I'm here on Odin's orders."

"Odin? Haldana, don't tell me you too have started developing delusions of grandeur!" Hrist groaned, rolling her eyes. "Odin doesn't ..."

"I approached *Lidskjálv* myself, Hrist. It isn't as if he called on me. I'm nowhere near important enough for that. But I needed answers."

Hrist turned her head back towards the vixen, looking her up and down. "To what? And if you went before Odin himself to get them, you must be bloody desperate! Most of us would go to the Well of Wisdom and sacrifice arms and legs before risking annoying the Allfather with trite questions."

Haldana shrugged. "I need my arms and legs. Odin ordered me to act."

"About time," Astrid chimed in. "Then let's go find Aslaug again and put an end to her idiocy!"

The third Valkyrie was sporting a prize-winning black eye, and Haldana could only guess at how bad it had looked earlier in the day. By nightfall, it'd be healed and gone.

Or would it?

It was a punch delivered by another Valkyrie, certainly, but this was Asgaard. There were almost more ways to heal something minor like a black eye than there were grains of sand in Midgaard. But Astrid hadn't gone to the trouble of having it fixed. Why not?

If it was stubbornness it was downright foolish, since it showed to the world that she had been bested in a fistfight.

But Hrist didn't seem to question Astrid's decision.

Deftly inverting her spear to hold it tip down, then resting it casually on her shoulder, Haldana observed the fighting for a brief moment. The Einherjar were as impressive as ever. Nodding, she ran her free paw through her hair and sighed to herself.

Act, Odin had ordered.

"We shouldn't go after Aslaug," she said. "That wasn't what Odin's orders meant."

"And now you're interpreting the will of the Allfather too?" Hrist asked, incredulously. "Haldana, what's gotten into your head?"

"I brought a specific situation to his attention, and was given specific instructions in return," Haldana pointed out, shrugging lightly. She casually swung her spear off her shoulder and, without warning, planted it tip first in the ground in front of Astrid. "As I am sure you got specific instructions from Surt, *traitor!*"

She bristled. Hrist looked so shocked by the sudden turn of events that she couldn't answer, but Astrid's reaction was immediate.

She laughed.

Haughtily.

"*Me?* Betraying the Allfather? You must be *joking!* No Valkyrie has ever fallen. We are extensions of Odin's will. We could no more fall than Odin himself could."

"The Greeks invented a word for that kind of thinking, Astrid," Haldana growled, pulling her sword. "It's called *Hubris*. I'm sure you are familiar with it. What was your price? Power? Wealth? What could the Lord of Destruction possibly offer you that Odin couldn't!"

"NOTHING! And that is why I haven't fallen!" Astrid sneered, pulling her own weapon.

"ENOUGH!" Hrist roared and stepped forward. "Haldana, have you lost your mind *completely?*"

The vixen shook her head. "I invoke trial by combat!" she said, firmly.

"Desist! Stand down, you fool! Don't you see what it is you're doing?" Hrist asked, angrily. "Enough of this nonsense!"

"I invoke trial by combat," Haldana repeated, never taking her eyes off Astrid. "If I fall, she is proven innocent. Odin told me to act. I am doing his will."

Shaking her head in disbelief, Hrist stepped back, summoning her spear. "You are making the biggest mistake of your life, Haldana," she said, starting to mark a large

circle in the ground around the two Valkyries facing off. "So be it then. It's your own blood you're wasting!"

"I'll put you down like I'll put Aslaug down. Swiftly and easily," Astrid growled and stepped back to get some room within the circle.

"Last you tried, she gave you that black eye. Strange that you haven't had that seen to yet, by the way," Haldana answered, in a cold, distanced voice, while swinging her shield onto her free arm, her sword performing a perfect figure-eight in front of her to indicate that she was ready to fight.

Astrid didn't answer. She just began circling the vixen, and all around them, the Einherjar stopped fighting for the time being, to watch.

###

Hirokichi was sitting at the controls, but the autopilot was still taking care of flying the plane. In the seat next to him, Joe had fallen asleep. The coyote had gone through things furs forty years his junior would be exhausted from, and Hirokichi understood the American both needed and deserved his rest.

It wouldn't be more than half an hour before they reached Naples, though, but even a *little* bit of shuteye would no doubt help Joe in the end.

At some level, Hirokichi wanted to talk to someone. He felt strange. In fact, he felt different in ways he couldn't remember ever experiencing before. For hundreds of years, he had functioned on a cocktail of anger, disappointment and selfishness, and now ... for the first time since his family had been taken from him, he was doing something unselfish in service of a greater good. It was a strange feeling indeed.

It was a *nice* feeling.

The fur he had once been, all those centuries ago, had been a good, honourable warrior. And while he could never go back to that, it felt good to at least find a shred of decency in his soul after all that time.

Shiori would have found out about his deception hours ago. No doubt, she was either setting out after him herself, or more likely, she was sending someone to finish him off. He'd fight whoever came after him, and hope to live another day, but if he failed ... if he died ... at least he would have gone out doing something worthwhile.

It would be dark soon. But daylight still held sway, and yet, Hirokichi could see darkness covering the sky in the far distance. Switching his headset to a different station to try to pick up the weather in a language other than Italian, he soon swallowed when he realized what had happened.

Looking sideways at the sleeping coyote, Hirokichi felt ashamed. Here was one fur, willing to risk himself for a friend, knowing he might very easily perish in the attempt, and he, himself, had spent centuries fleeing from death. But fear was a powerful, motivating factor. Most Dark Agents were sad and sorry creatures who had forgone salvation in whatever religion they had originally belonged to. Some out of desperation, some for truly selfish reasons, some out of madness. The reasons were legion, but the end result was the same. They vied for a chance at immortality, so that they wouldn't face either oblivion or an eternity of torture at the paws of the forces of evil.

Hirokichi, by now, would be grateful for oblivion.

Switching the autopilot off, he sighed to himself and adjusted his course, ignoring the persistent pleas in his ears from air traffic controllers telling him not to go nearer the ash-cloud.

###

"Lee?"

"Yes?"

"What're we going to do?"

"I have *no* idea!"

"But how are we even going to find her?"

"If we really want to, I think that'll be the least of our problems! This whole place is ... no, there's no word for it. Amaterasu, protect these furs."

Lee and Shiori were standing next to each other. The Piazza Dante, named for the famous author of "La Divina Commedia", was utterly chaotic. Furs were trampling each other, but no one seemed to know where they were going.

The two Agents included.

The first ashes had started to fall. Furs living in Naples knew only too well that the Inferno that Dante had written about so many centuries earlier was about to be visited

upon them, but in their panic, many had no idea how to escape it. Simply running to the edge of the city wouldn't be enough. The volcano would destroy more than simply what lay neatly within the city limits. Getting out by air wasn't an option either. And cars? The streets were congealed with wrecks and panicking furs already. Getting through wasn't much of an option.

Shiori shook her head in disbelief. She and Lee had flown in and they had landed only a few hours earlier on the last plane to land anywhere *near* Naples. And only because the pilot had no other choice. He was out of fuel and had to land, after circling four different airports trying to get clearance to land, and getting rejected due to the massive aerial traffic-jam that was already building over Italy. Getting a rental-car, the two Agents had broken every conceivable traffic law in the book to get to Naples, but by now, the tigress wasn't sure what to do. They were there but ... what could two Agents accomplish in the midst of such absolute mayhem and chaos?

"There will be thousands ... tens of thousands of dead," Lee whimpered.

"All these furs need to get to safety, but it'll take an act of divine intervention for them to get through the traffic!" Shiori agreed. "What are we going to do?"

"Divine intervention?" Lee said, as if grasping at straws. His eyes began to blaze. "Shiori, is there a safehouse in Naples?"

"There should be. Why?"

"I need you to find out! We have to arm ourselves. This is it. That's why we are here. We have to get femmes and children to safety!"

Shiori didn't want to disagree with her partner but she couldn't see what a couple of guns could accomplish and her facial expression said as much.

"TRUST me on this!" Lee exclaimed, looking left and right. "Hurry. Find out where that safehouse is and then meet me over there by that bus!"

He pointed towards a bus blocking the roadway. Somehow, the driver had managed to move his vehicle so that it blocked both lanes, and he was still in the vehicle, panicking as he tried to get the bus to turn back into the traffic.

Shiori nodded and ran towards the nearest phone-booth. Italy was a modern country. Phone-booths included both telephone and Internet connections these days.

She had no idea what Lee was planning, but as far as she was concerned, it didn't matter, either. It was far better to do something ... to *act* ... than to simply stand around, passively watching disaster unfold. If Lee wanted to make an attempt at saving some innocent lives, she'd give it everything she had!

###

Aslaug rolled her head on her shoulders. The bird on the horizon wasn't coming closer for the time being. Clearly, it was waiting for the disaster to strike Naples properly. Then he would descend, amidst so much fire and brimstone ... in this case in a very literal sense ... to smite the mortals all around him. Only this time, she would be waiting for him, and she would put an end to his lunacy.

Her thoughts went back to the first time she had met Anane. In a village in another world, where she had been a simple Agent. Where she had been in human form. He had all the advantages then, and yet, she had managed to foil his plans by killing his intended target of conversion.

The things she had seen in that village had nearly made her heart break.

Aslaug was well aware of her own image and how she came across to many furs. But she wasn't selfish or egotistical. She cared deeply about those innocent furs that surrounded her every day of her life. She wanted to help those who couldn't help themselves. She wanted to protect those who were unjustly persecuted or targeted, but who couldn't fight for themselves. She wasn't made of stone, even though she knew some furs thought she might be.

Yes, she was hard. She was a creature of the world she originated in. A world where war had been endemic. Where pain and suffering was an everyday occurrence, and where more often than not, there was nothing one could do when it struck. If one wept for every life lost there ... one would go mad.

Her values were different than the furs she now lived amongst. Vastly different in many ways, and she had quickly learned that while a few furs here and there would understand her principles ... many would not. Many would not even respect them. And if they wouldn't respect her principles or values, then she saw no reason to respect theirs.

She had come to change her views on Christianity somewhat, but there were still so many things horribly broken within that particular set of beliefs. Most of them stemmed from Dogma. From that awful concept that once something had been determined to be divinely inspired or influenced, it could not be changed regardless of how much evidence

would later emerge to support a change. The Abrahamic faiths ... all of them as far as Aslaug was concerned ... had tremendous potential to do good for furs. But they also held the potential to cause an unfathomable amount of harm.

She knew so many Christians now ... and so few Heathens, simply because she lived in a world dominated by the Abrahamic God. There were Heathens around, but not many. Most of them worshipped in ways radically different from what she had been used to back where she came from, but that was alright as far as she was concerned. They had their hearts in the right place, and they meant well, and that was what it was really all about in the end. That they *meant* well. It was probably typical of a small, marginalized religion that faced ridicule or lack of understanding from the vast majority. There would be foolish individuals even in small faiths, but the small number of believers meant it was easier for the members to police their own group.

Many Christians meant well too, but many others only *thought* they meant well. Many of them were so uptight about their beliefs that cracking a joke at their God was practically a capital punishment to them. Many of them thought that because they believed in a certain way, everyone else had to believe in the same way as well, and if they didn't, they were somehow inferior.

And that, incidentally, was *not* a problem exclusive to Christianity either, but it did seem to be a *particular* issue amongst followers of the various Abrahamic faiths.

And now she was waiting. Waiting for Anane ... for him to come closer.

She was waiting for the fight of her life.

She would be fighting one of their most potent symbols. An Angel, albeit a fallen one. But none of them would believe it, if they were told of it. Not because they didn't believe in Angels or Demons. Many of them did. But because they didn't believe in *her*.

And yet she would be fighting to save their asses too.

Even if they wouldn't acknowledge her. Even if they wouldn't respect her or even *believe* in her.

She wouldn't do it because she was forced into doing it. She wouldn't do it because of threats of the consequences if she didn't, although she knew they would be dire for her friends.

She did it because it was the right thing to do.

Around her, the first houses began bursting into flame. The roofs were covered in super-heated ashes. It couldn't be avoided any longer.

In minutes, Naples would be reduced to the world's biggest bonfire.

"Come down here, you fucking coward," the valkyrie hissed between her teeth. "Come down here and say hello to my axes!"

Beneath her hooves, the tarmac was starting to grow soft from the heat.

###

They had traded blows, and they had both drawn blood, and blow-for-blow, they were evenly matched, but Haldana was growing weary. The fight hadn't lasted that long, but it had been exceptionally fast paced, and both Valkyries had gotten rid of their shields by now.

The circle around them was lined by Einherjar, many ranks deep, watching the bloodletting going on. They couldn't cross in, even if they wanted to. Hrist's circle was keeping them out. The duel was *Holmgang*. A one-on-one duel. The Gods would anoint the right winner, or so was the idea. No one was really sure what would happen now that two Valkyries ... lesser battle-deities in their own right ... were fighting. But the fighting area was sacred ground nonetheless, and the Einherjar couldn't cross into it.

Astrid attacked low and Haldana parried, but she didn't see the punch that was the real attack before it smashed into her face. Staggering, she shook her head, clearing the cobwebs, ducking sideways and bringing her own sword up. She connected, but not solidly and slashes were ineffective against chain mail to begin with. She drew blood, but the cut was superficial, and didn't add much to her overall chances of defeating Astrid.

What was more worrying was that Astrid didn't seem to be tiring nearly as quickly, and no one else seemed to notice.

Dodging another high swing and jumping to avoid an immediate follow-up sweep of her feet, Haldana knew before she landed that she was in trouble. Almost before she made contact with the ground again, she was bowled over by Astrid physically tackling her and as they rolled around on the ground, Haldana felt a small blade entering her body. A knife or a shiv ... something small and easily hidden.

She didn't have to be a healer to know there was most likely some kind of poison coating the blade. A coward's tactics, but no one would notice one small cut amongst the many she already had.

"It won't kill you," Astrid whispered in the vixen's ear as she rolled the other Valkyrie over on her back. Amidst the din of those watching the fight, no one would hear except Haldana. "I'll have finished you off first!"

Haldana could already see the world going out of focus. Suddenly there were two Astrids sitting astride her chest, raising a sword.

She had to take a chance. Left or right ...

Throwing her last strength into one solid punch, she connected. Astrid groaned and rolled backwards, and Haldana kicked her traitorous sister off. Momentarily dazed by the punch, Astrid staggered to her feet but raised her sword again, ready to strike.

She never got the chance.

A dark gray blur impacted with her, full force, and bowled her over.

There was blood.

There was a *lot* of blood.

Haldana managed to scramble to her feet, not sure what was going on.

Varghöss was snarling at everyone surrounding the circle, one front leg on either side of Astrid's fallen form. The Valkyrie wasn't dead yet. Her throat had been torn open, though, and she was gurgling as she slowly drowned in her own life's blood.

There was fear in her eyes. Undiluted terror.

Valkyries had no need to fear death. They *served* death. But Haldana still saw it. Right there. She stumbled and fell down to one knee. "I ... win ..." she whispered.

Somewhere in the crowd, someone seemed to wake up from the trance induced by the unexpected arrival of Varghöss.

"HEY! How can that be? That isn't right!! No one is supposed to be able to enter the circle!" someone shouted.

"YEAH!" another Einherjar answered. "She didn't win. This is cheating!"

Astrid jerked slightly, and finally lay still. The look on Hrist's face was one of complete and utter horror. But it was a different kind of fear than what Haldana had seen on Astrid's face before she died. Hrist's fear came from realization. From finally seeing things clearly. It looked as if someone had literally lifted a veil from her eyes, and even as

the poison did its work, Haldana realized that Hrist had been put under a spell. That she had acted as she did only because Astrid had used powerful *Sejd* to cloud the senior Valkyrie's judgment.

"GET HER TO EYR!" the equine roared, pointing to Haldana. "She is *not* to die!"

"SHE CHEATED!" one of the Einherjar insisted, but Hrist turned around and punched the unfortunate warrior so hard he sank to the ground, unconscious.

"The circle is sacred ground. Only beasts and children may cross into it, for they know no better!" she growled. "As far as I can see, a beast is exactly what entered the circle. I drew it myself! The only cheating involved came from Astrid! Now do as I say and get Haldana to Eyr while I take this treasonous piece of shit to Odin!"

She gestured towards Astrid to let the Einherjar know what she was talking about.

The last thing Haldana heard before her eyesight gave out was Varghöss' insistent growl as Hrist got closer to him.

"It is ... his kill. Don't ... challenge ..." she whispered.

She felt strong paws lifting her off the ground.

Then she passed out.