

Tales of the Valkyries

Hana - Part Two

By Shadar and Rob

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Previously in Tales of the Valkyries:

Sergeant Rob York, an aging soldier nearing retirement, accepts an unusual assignment: keeping Captain Bjork Nielsen's daughter out of trouble while her father is away at war. He quickly discovers that the job is harder than he'd anticipated, especially for a man who'd raised no children of his own.

Hana Nielsen is a rebellious Goth girl who hangs out with all the wrong kids, and she's got nothing good to say about the Army or any of the other kids in school. She's a street-smart seventeen and has been living mostly on her own (her father in combat, her mother deserting her). A loner with a smart mouth, Rob is convinced she's headed for trouble.

He tries to give her something useful to do after he finds that she needs money, and hires her as a painter. He's restoring some retired Armored Personnel Carriers, called Bradleys, and he can use all the help he can get.

He winds up getting a far different kind of help than he'd planned, as Hana saves his life, and in so doing, reveals that she's a member of an race of demigods that the Norse called Valkyries.

It's a family legacy that she wants nothing to do with. Instead of embracing her uniqueness, even after she proved how useful her abilities could be by saving Rob's life, she walks away from her job and school to fall deeper into a group of misfits and dropouts and druggies that live on the fringes of an American Army base in Okinawa.

That all changes when she learns that insurgents in Iraq have captured her father. She swallows her pride, and approaches Rob, the only adult she trusts and the only person on Okinawa who knows her secret, to help her go to Iraq and attempt a rescue of her father.

A wild journey begins, culminating in some heavy-duty battles, with Hana living up to her Valkyrie birthright by charging into battle, defeating both armor and men until she finally meets her match and is captured by the insurgents. A capture that could only happen because of the unfortunate timing of the monthly weakening that is the curse of all Valkyries.

The hostages she freed have made their way back to Baghdad, minus their blonde protector, as this story continues...

Chapter 26

November 26, 2013: Baghdad, US Army Headquarters

The former hostages were ferried by helicopter to the sprawling Army base outside Baghdad, and then bused to the sprawling Headquarters building. There the newshounds descended on them again.

Sergeant Rob York did his best to stay in the back of the crowd, but as the senior officer of the group, Bjork was paraded before the bright lights. He did a credible job of describing their ordeal and rescue, stating only that ‘intelligence assets’ had intercepted the Iranian convoy before it reached the border and had freed them.

It was a story he knew wouldn’t hold water during the debrief, but it provided a popular fiction for the news media to report. The Army was desperately in need of some good PR in Iraq, although they had no idea how the rescue had been orchestrated. The CIA brass were also more than happy to smile for the cameras. Bjork’s only hope was that he could rescue Hana before the Army and CIA started comparing notes.

Then the real work began. The men were passed, one at a time, through a gauntlet of military analysts, psychologists and medical personnel who would analyze both mind and body, looking for either injury or intelligence opportunity. All of which successfully foiled any chance Captain Bjork Nielsen had of quietly slipping away to search for his daughter, Hana.

Rob looked desperately for a way out as the line in front of him gradually shrunk. Soon they’d be debriefing him, and once that started, the truth would come out -- that he wasn’t even stationed in Iraq. There would be hell to pay then.

Bjork saw his worried look as he returned to the sequestering room after his initial debrief. He met Rob’s eyes and nodded toward the hallway that led to the restroom. Both men drifted that way over a period of five minutes, finally meeting in the crowded and smelly toilet enclosure.

Bjork handed Rob a red Security keycard. “The dumb-looking MP near the front entrance won’t miss it for a bit.”

Rob palmed the card to his pant’s pocket. “Appreciate it, sir. Once I’m out, I’ll get some of the guys together and we’ll go looking for Hana as fast as we...”

Bjork leaned closer to him, cutting Rob off. “You won’t do anything of the sort, sergeant. You need to get your ass out of this theater before anyone else knows you were even here!”

“But surely not before we get Han...”

“We don’t have to DO shit, Sarge. I do. If they find your ass here in Iraq, there’s going to be a hell of a stink. You’ll be in the stockade, and an investigation started. It won’t take them long to begin interviewing everyone you had contact with back in Okinawa. My daughter will be on the short list, and she’ll turn up missing too.”

“So what the hell am I supposed to do, Captain?” Rob asked angrily. “Just walk the hell away and leave her?”

“No, you’ll go and get help, but not from your Army buddies.”

Rob looked at him blankly.

“There’s a recall procedure that I can use in an emergency to locate my wife, Bryn,” Bjork explained. “When activated, we meet at the old quay at Talkan Point. You need to go back to Okinawa, apply for emergency leave, and meet with Bryn to bring her up to speed.”

“And your wife is like... Hana?” Rob asked awkwardly.

“My daughter obviously didn’t get those genes from me.”

“Right,” Rob nodded, wondering, but not daring to ask, who her father was.

The Captain continued. “Tell Bryn to get staged with some of her people in Dubai while I figure out where they’ve taken Hana. They have a place you can operate out of in Dubai, along with a small support staff.”

“Does she even know I’ve been taking care of Hana?” Rob asked.

Bjork shook his head. “I set that deal up with you after she left. I was desperate.”

“Great,” Rob said, unhappy that he’d been the Captain’s last resort to keep an eye on Hana. Even more, he remembered what Hana had said about her mother’s displeasure if she found out the ‘adventures’ they’d shared. Tearing him limb from limb were more or less the words she’d used. “So what’s this about ‘her people’, Captain?”

Bjork saw the worried look on Rob’s face. “Valkyries as a group can be a bit intense, and Bryn’s more focused than most. But she’ll understand the situation once you explain it. After that, just follow her lead.” He paused to write down a sequence of numbers and codes in his notebook, and then tore the page out and handed it to Rob. “Use a phone here in Iraq just before you catch your flight back, preferably one off-base. She’ll probably beat you back to Okinawa, but not by much, depending on how hard it is for her to extricate herself from her business.”

“This really sucks, Captain.” Rob shared, feeling all hollow inside. “Are you sure you don’t have a more direct way to bring her here instead of me going all the way back to the Pacific?”

Bjork shook his head. “We kept the contact protocol simple.” He glanced anxiously at his watch. “Look, we can talk more after this is all over, Sergeant. Right now, I’ve got a second debrief to start, and you need to get your ass out of here. Check with a Lieutenant Jeb Smith over at Flight Ops. I’ve arranged some orders for you.”

Rob shook the Captain’s hand, and then turned and headed toward a maintenance exit in the back of the building. The keycard worked, and he exited into the blinding desert sunlight. He walked from the alley and

caught a bus to the main gate. There would be a phone at the Iraqi post office just outside the base. Unfortunately, he found that the base gate was temporarily closed due to a car bombing a few blocks away. Rob jumped back on the same bus and rode it over to the PX, where he used a public phone to signal the Captain's wife.

He heard a lot of alien-sounding tones and strange clicks as he entered the codes, and then the phone went dead. He prayed he'd done it right as he hung up the handset and grabbed another bus to the flight line.

An hour later, he had transportation orders and a seat on a Medivac C17 heading east.

Nobody was asking questions.

He sat in the uncomfortable web seats and tried to sleep in the noisy transport, but only managed to catch a few hours of fitful sleep. Whenever he dozed off, his dreams were filled with images and sounds of the last twenty-four hours. It seemed impossible, but his entire adventure with Hana had barely lasted a day, starting in Okinawa and ending in that godforsaken desert. It felt like a lifetime.

When he was awake, his thoughts raced forward to this meeting with her mother. He wished he knew more about what Hana's relationship with her mother was, but other than a couple of comments that suggested they weren't close, she'd given him no insights. Even worse, he was still confused about what Hana thought of him. She ran hot and cold. One moment she was inviting him to the intimacy of her Aèrie, and the next moment she was cold and distant. She'd healed him, but he wasn't sure how that was all tied up in his feelings. Even less, in Hana's.

He couldn't escape the reality that Hana was less than half his age. A scandalous difference, especially given that she was a high-flying pilot's daughter and he was a lowly maintenance grunt. He kept going back to Hana's earlier comments about the natural affinity between Valkyries and hot-shot military pilots. They both shared a lust for battle, and they lived their lives on the edge, punctuated by hard drinking and a lot of sex. Aerial warriors.

Not that Hana was into the latter at her age, nor could she fly yet. More than that, she was enough of a contrarian to disavow any desire to associate with the brash and arrogant pilots. She was working hard on her: *"I'm trying to just be an ordinary girl"* thing. Hanging out with grunts would be just the kind of message she'd want to send to her parents, or so Rob worried. It was something she could walk away from even more easily.

He'd heard mixed rumors about her mother. On one hand, she was reputedly arrogant and elitist, looking down on the younger pilots, and often embarrassing anyone brash enough to hit on her. Which probably happened with depressing regularity in the Officer's Club, especially when Bjork was away or some time. Pilots were naturally competitive, and marriage, theirs or another's, was rarely a deterrent to such high

flyers. On the other hand, she was known for deflating egos, not stoking them. She wasn't a player.

And why should she be? Bryn and her sisters had been worshipped by the followers of Asatru as minor goddesses for two millennia, and that would go to anyone's head. And at her apparent age, early thirties, and at her height, six feet, she stood out among the crowd of dewy-eyed pretty young things who were overly impressed with a uniform and a pair of wings. If any of the pilots had known her true age, over two millennia, they would have shown her far more respect.

Chapter 27

November 26, 2013: Hamadan, Iran

Fire.

Pain.

Darkness.

Of the three, Hana feared the darkness the most. It was thick, cloying, almost a thing alive, reaching out with bony fingers to pull her downward into the black depths. A darkness that was filled with soft, compelling voices that told her to give up, to stop fighting, that she was only making it harder.

Hana screamed back at the voices from inside her dream, flailing even harder, knowing that the voices were those of Death. She fought with every ounce of her willpower, swimming frantically, her hands clawing at the seemingly viscous black threads that pulled her downward.

Then, far above, she saw the beginnings of a shimmering glow, like the surface of a tropical sea at mid-day. She recognized it as the beautiful promise of life.

She focused all her being on reaching that beauty, her lungs seemingly bursting as she began to rise so slowly, and then faster and faster until she broke the surface like a porpoise, finally soaring into the warm air beyond.

Hana's eyes snapped open, but instead of the tropical waterscape of her dream, she found herself lying on a filthy, cold stone floor inside a dimly lit room. She tried to sit up, only to find that she was spread-eagled on her back, naked beneath a thin, white sheet. Her arms were spread wide and fastened to the floor with iron chains.

She struggled to break free of the chains, only to be blinded when a powerful floodlight illuminated her. Tears welled up in her eyes as she tried desperately to sit up, seemingly pulling hard enough against the iron chains to snap them.

Yet they held her fast.

She struggled harder; pitting what should have been superhuman strength against the rings, her proud muscles straining uselessly.

Yet nothing happened.

The despair of not being able to break her bonds engulfed her in a wave of panic now. She frantically bent and twisted herself, the sheet slipping from her body as she used her youthful flexibility to gather her legs under her, adding their strength to her arms as she strained upward.

Even then, the heavy iron chains held her fast.

She struggled again and again, her chest heaving, until she finally collapsed back to the floor in exhaustion. Her eyes were open wide as she realized with horrible certainty that her *dalvjra* was fully upon her.

The two days of her monthly weakness had started!

She closed her eyes and tried to slow her breathing, taking deep breaths as she struggled to push back the growing panic. She had to remember how she'd gotten here.

She remembered charging the Iranians in her captured T98, hoping to buy time for her father and Rob along with the other hostages to escape. She remembered struggling mightily to drive the huge tank while operating the main gun to trade rounds with two other tanks. Thankfully, Rob had told her how to use the targeting system.

She saw several tanks explode as she fired at them, and then a tremendous blow shook her tank, the interior filled with heat and sparks and fire as she screamed from the horrible, lancing pain. After that, only the blackness she'd struggled so hard to escape.

It wasn't hard to reconstruct the missing events, for she'd felt the first traces of the tingling weakness of *dalvjra* while she was still fighting, which explained why she'd been knocked out. One of the other T98's had gotten a good shot in, finding a way past her tank's depleted reactive armor, and the blast had knocked her out.

The Iranians must have subsequently captured her while she was unconscious and brought her to this room.

The question now was, how long had she been out? Her *dalvjra* lasted only two days, after which her strength quickly returned.

She twisted her head in every direction, searching for a clock or a calendar. She found only a single window located twenty feet above the floor. It revealed stars painted against a black sky. The rest of the room looked like a Middle Age dungeon, what with the stone floor and walls, and the heavy iron door that was set into one end. Yet the air was far too dry for a European dungeon, which said she must still be in the desert.

She counted to sixty a dozen times to get a measure of time, trying to set up a rough internal clock, and wondered when someone would come to see her. Finally, after a few more counts to sixty, the heavy iron door scraped open. She lifted her head to see a robed Arabic man entering the room. Behind him was a startlingly handsome man in his forties, standing tall and blonde, his eyes glowing an arctic blue.

The guards closed the door and locked it behind them, and the man in the robe sat down in a chair. The blonde man walked over to cover Hana with the sheet again. She smiled her thanks, but he didn't respond, walking instead over to stand beside the Arab man.

"My name is Mustafa Al-Sa'ud," the Arab started to say as he stared at her, "and you are my prisoner. Tell me your name."

"Go to hell," Hana spit back at him.

Mustafa continued patiently. "You are only a girl, yet you destroyed some of my tanks, and killed many men today. You survived the violent destruction of the tank you captured, your body trapped in the flames and

melting armor for half an hour. Yet the fire did not burn you. How is this possible?”

Hana turned her head back to stare up at the light, saying nothing.

“Herr Fruehauf,” the Arab asked of the blonde man. “What do you think?”

The blonde man walked closer. He bent down and lifted the sheet, this time folding it neatly beside Hana’s shoulder.

She cringed as he began to examine her with the practiced eyes and touch of a physician. The Arab man was staring at her as well, his eyes anything but professional. She wanted to look away - close her eyes - block out the sight - spare herself the shame of the Arab looking at her like that! But something inside her told her not to do this. It would be giving in - submitting, and she must not submit.

Heeding the call of ancient instincts, Hana forced her body to relax, and stared back into the Arab’s eyes, even finding the strength to smile at him. The man looked away, only to have his eyes skulk back to her body, tracing down her nakedness. She slowly closed and opened her eyes, then blinked them, recapturing the Arab’s rapt attention, holding him fast with her clear, blue eyes.

It wasn't long before the look on the man’s face began to twist, the haunted look in his eyes telegraphing the burning shame he felt over her bold gaze. He wanted to look away - to close his eyes, but he couldn't!

Hana had read about the power of an Arab woman’s veiled gaze. How such women could seduce a man with little more than her eyes. She knew that no respectable Arab woman other than a man’s wife would dare to look so boldly at him. To stare so shamelessly.

Mustafa’s dancing eyes said that he was intoxicated on a mixture of anticipation and fear, on the impossibility of her very existence. As he’d stated, he’d seen her destroy so many of his tanks, and killed so many of his men. Her mother had told her of such men. Evil and ambitious men who had to possess such power, hoping to turn it loose on their enemies. Some weak-willed Valkyries had fallen under the spell of ambitious men over the centuries, and the other sisters had intervened to put an end to such men.

In that moment, Hana knew all that, and she swore she’d never permit it!

The blonde man interrupted Hana’s challenge by kneeling behind her head, and grabbing her hair to force her to stare instead into the instrument he held. She tried to twist her head side to side, but he held her skull rigidly between his knees as he examined her eyes with this Ophthalmoscope.

Quickly completing that examination, he released her and began to tap on her chest and abdomen. He palpated her breasts, gently at first, then probing deeply inside them. Seemingly satisfied by what he found, he moved his examination down to her abdomen.

Hana tightened her abs to try to stop his examination, but he pressed even harder, leaning most of his weight on his outstretched fingers. She was proud that her abdominal muscles were strong enough despite her period to ward off that examination.

He changed tactics to place a small device on her forehead and attached sensors to three other places along the base of her skull, and then stepped back. The forehead device gave off a POP as it sent a sharp shockwave through her skull.

The blonde man picked up the strip of paper that came out of a printer, studying it for a long minute. His hands were shaking slightly as he picked up the white sheet and covered her with it again, then walked back across the dungeon to sit across the polished metal table from the Arab.

“So, Klaus, can you explain her abilities now?” Mustafa asked impatiently. “Is she a demon-spawn from those genetics laboratories in America?”

The blonde man shook his head as he took a long drink of water, seemingly trying to calm himself. “No, something far more wonderful than that,” he said softly.

“Wonderful?” Mustafa shouted angrily. “That heathen killed my men.”

“You must understand, Mustafa, that there have been legends of gods and goddesses among my people for thousands of years.” His German accent grew thicker. “Tales of the ancient daughters of Odin, protectors of the Vikings, abandoned here on Earth. Goddesses living among men even today, yet hidden from our eyes.”

Mustafa scoffed. “I have heard no such thing. Only tales and myths of dead gods.”

Klaus continued, a vein along his temple throbbing as he tried to keep his voice clinical. “The legends tell of one group, Valkyries, who were supposedly virginal warriors who selected the fallen from the battlefield and took them to heaven.”

Mustafa frowned, shaking his head. “Every culture has legends of the afterlife. Yet only those who proclaim Allah as God know the truth.”

“Yes, of course,” Klaus nodded, speaking with the care learned men must adopt when dealing with religious zealots. “But in this case, I believe that at least one of those legends, certainly not of a true afterlife but perhaps a death ritual, might have some credence.”

“I don’t understand,” Mustafa said, shaking his head, his limited imagination not allowing him to leap to the obvious.

Klaus continued. “The Valkyries I mentioned reputedly looked as this girl does, and are supposed to be invincible in battle. Their roles and presence in human history vary, depending on who passed down on the legend. The Icelanders tell a tale of them influencing battles and selecting heroes who were then saved from death. The Germanic

interpretation is that the Valkyries take the fallen to Valhalla as a reward for a heroic life lost in battle. Other Scandinavians have interpretations in between.”

“More myths,” Mustafa shrugged. “I guess one’s mileage varies,” he said, borrowing a bit of antiquated American slang in a vain attempt to show his sophistication.

Klaus just stared at Hana, his voice softening as if he was speaking from within a dream. “I have long made a study of this subject myself, and have found various interpretations to Valkyrie history. The most common interpretation is that the chief of the Valkyries was the goddess Freyja. She was the Norse goddess of love, fertility, and beauty, sometimes also identified as the goddess of battle and death. Blonde, blue-eyed, and beautiful beyond the dreams of men, Freyja traveled on a golden-bristled boar or in a chariot drawn by cats. She resided in the celestial realm of Folkvang, where she received half of those slain in battle. Since women go first in the Norse culture, she was allowed first choice of the men, ahead of even Odin. Freyja also possessed a magical armor that enabled shape-shifting abilities and gave her Valkyries the power of flight.”

Mustafa frowned as the German droned on, talking in riddles. He had taken a big risk in having the German physician delivered from the nuclear power development site at Bushehr. Klaus Fruehauf was part of a contingent of German scientists who were working with the Russians to build a next generation reactor. He had assumed the girl might be more comfortable speaking with a man of her own race when she awoke. And if injured, the physician could also tend to her.

Klaus continued, his eyes still dreamily focused on Hana. “The Icelanders believe the Valkyries carry out the will of Odin in determining the victors of battle, and eventually the course of war. Their primary duty is to scout the battleground in search of mortals worthy of protection, fighting beside them if needed. If their heroes are injured, even mortally, the Valkyries carry them to Valhalla, and once there, they exchange their armor for pure white robes, and heal the warriors they have chosen, serving them forever.”

He paused for a moment, blinking as he gathered his thoughts.

“It is further said that the Valkyries are Odin's messengers and when they ride forth on their errands; their armor causes the strange flickering light that is called the "Aurora Borealis".

“Lastly, any maiden who becomes a Valkyrie will remain immortal and invulnerable as long as they obey the gods and remain virginal.” Klaus finally paused, his eyes refocusing as he turned to look at Mustafa. “I believe, based on my examination and what you have told me, that this girl is a Valkyrie.”

Mustafa leaped to his feet, his face twisting in anger. “You dare tell me that this heathen is one of your pagan gods still walking the Earth? Even more, that her virginity is the source of her power?” Somehow, the last bothered him the most. Only the believers in Allah reserved virginity

for its true purpose: to greet martyrs with perfection when they made the journey to heaven. How could these heathens carry the same belief?

Klaus looked carefully away, knowing he couldn't challenge Mustafa. Not directly. He'd dealt enough with Arabic Muslims to understand the need for delicacy in his next words. "Of course, I am providing only one possibility, Mustafa. But I have listened to the incredible tales of your men, which I immediately discounted as either the confusion of combat or the rationalizations of defeated men. I have also heard your story, which I do not discount. But until I examined her, I had thought there must be other explanations."

"But no longer?" Mustafa demanded, his professional curiosity returning. Whatever the girl was, she was clearly more than merely human.

Klaus shook his head. "My examination of her eyes reveals an astounding clarity of her cornea and lens, and a retinal structure that is many times denser than a human's. I can't make precise measurements, but I would surmise she can see with greater clarity than a hawk."

"Ridiculous," Mustafa shouted again as he paced back and forth. If not for the incredible things he'd seen this girl do with his own eyes, he'd kill the infidels right now.

"Even more," Klaus continued, very aware how thin a thread his life hung by. "My echo study of her skull revealed that her bone structure is vastly more rigid than any human's."

Mustafa sat back down hard in his chair. "She's not human?" Everything he'd been raised to believe said this had to be false. Allah would never allow such an abomination to arise among the infidels. But still, he'd seen what he'd seen. "What about her strength," he finally asked. "I saw her do things a hundred men could not do. Yet now, she is weak."

Klaus rose to pace back and forth as well. "I read a legend once that talked about Valkyries becoming vulnerable, but only for brief periods. It was a tale of how one of them died during a very long battle, her invincibility fading. However, no other legends or rumors exist to support that."

"Can we keep her from regaining that horrible strength?" Mustafa asked hopefully.

Klaus nodded slowly. "If the legends are correct. Yes." He turned to face Mustafa. "You could remove her virginity." He paused as he saw Mustafa's eyes light up. "But that would be a terrible waste of such a unique weapon."

"Weakening and then killing our enemies is never a waste."

"Mustafa, you must know that my experience and studies are not solely that of nuclear medicine. I spent some years working on a, shall I say, less conventional assignment. One that was led by some aging Russian scientists who had perfected the ability change one's thoughts and allegiances."

“Brainwashing?” Mustafa asked.

“A crude term for a very sophisticated science, one that has only been perfected in the last twenty years, what with the new psycho-active drugs and sophisticated adaptive programming. We can now use feedback from a subject’s own brain to control the process. It’s called mind-washing.”

“I have not heard of this,” Mustafa said stubbornly.

“Yet your people have used weaker versions of such drugs to encourage your warriors.” He wanted to say “suicidal terrorists”.

“Those drugs could work on this girl? Changing her allegiance to ours?”

“I have no idea,” Klaus replied honestly. “But I can try.”

Mustafa’s eyes sparkled again, but with a faraway light this time. “Imagine turning such a warrior loose against the imperialists! What joy we would find in watching her destroy her own masters.”

“I cannot guarantee that level of reprogramming. After all, she is far more than human.”

Mustafa’s moment of enthusiasm passed, and his eyes turned cold and heartless again. “Tell me what you need and it will be delivered. But know this, Klaus. If you fail, I will kill you both.”

With that deadly threat hanging in the air, Mustafa turned and stalked from the room, the guards locking the iron door behind him.

Chapter 28

November 26, 2013: Hamadan, Iran

“So, your ass is hanging out, too,” Hana said after the door to the dungeon closed. She lifted her head to meet Klaus’ eyes. “Get me out of these restraints and I promise I’ll get both of us out of here alive.”

Klaus walked back and forth just beyond the reach of Hana’s feet, flaunting the fact that he was free to move, and that she was not. His smile was cold, his eyes blue ice. “I have waited my entire life for this moment,” he said, his German accent giving his words an ominous sound. “The moment when all my theories are confirmed.”

“Fuck you,” Hana said as she sagged back to the floor, a sliver of fear turning her stomach cold. He was just another fanatic. Maybe even a worse one than the Arab. “What are you, one of those wannabe Nazis with their Aryan supremacy shit?”

Klaus straightened his back proudly. “Aryan supremacy is a scientific fact. We descended from the gods, just as you did, although we followed different paths. You of all people should understand this, as your body is the ultimate testament to Aryan superiority. Once we combine your Norse legacy with our Aryan heritage, our children will become as such as you.”

“You mean, captives in some dungeon?” she said sarcastically.

Klaus grimaced. “You have wandered from the true path. But now we will rediscover that truth, you and I.”

“Which one is that? The truth where you’re some kind of whack job? Or the one where you’re dangerously insane?”

Klaus’ eyes gleamed brightly as he ignored her attempts to provoke him. He saw only visions of a golden future. “You will enable us to rule this planet. Perhaps someday, even the galaxy itself.” He droned on, talking as if from inside a dream.

Hana listened to him rant, her blood running cold as she realized how fanatical he was. Anything she could say was likely to encourage him further.

“Our people have been searching in the wrong places for you,” he finished.

“Searching?”

“Searching for the still living goddesses of our past. The fruit of whose bodies will form the future of our race.”

“Fuck. You are one sick puppy,” Hana spit at him.

Klaus continued, seemingly unhearing. “We seek an Aryan future, with our children born of our finest men and the powers of a living goddess.”

Hana’s blood ran colder yet as Klaus knelt beside her, resting his cold hand on her thigh. “But do not fear an invasion of your womanhood

just yet. I would not trade your strength for any treasure. We have much work to do before then.”

He lifted his hand to her breast, closing his eyes, gently tracing his fingers over her softness as if it was an object of religious worship.

Hana quickly twisted her body upward to deliver a kick to his head, sending Klaus flying. He landed hard, his neck twisted. She prayed he was dead.

Instead, he picked himself up, turning his head back and forth until his neck crunched back into place. He took out a white handkerchief and wiped away the tiny rivulet of blood that ran from his nose, and smiled at her. “That was my mistake, coming within your striking range. I should have expected no less from a warrior goddess.”

“Don’t fucking touch me, you slime,” Hana spit at him.

Klaus ignored her as he returned to his black bag to fill a hypodermic. He lifted the syringe full of pale yellow liquid up to the light as he called out to the guards. They came in to sit on her legs.

Hana struggled to push them away, but they gripped her too tightly.

“This will quiet you down enough for me to do my work.” He tapped the syringe as he forced the air bubbles out of it. “It’s just a temporary paralysis agent.” He wrapped a rubber band around her upper arm and tightened it.

Hana tensed her muscles, making her arm too hard for the latex band to depress, but Klaus only laughed. “That works just as well to raise the veins.”

He stabbed the needle against her skin, only to have it bend and snap off. He carefully picked up the broken needle and studied it before walking slowly back to his bag.

Hana turned her head to glare at him again. “Here’s a news flash, whacko. Needles don’t fucking work on me.”

Despite her bravado, she felt the fear growing inside her. She’d always hated doctors and their machines, their needles and their drugs. Her stomach was filled with a sinking feeling as she realized that what was left of her invulnerability would depart by the middle of her *dalvjra*, making her an ordinary woman until her period passed.

Klaus called for two more guards and commanded them to hold her head stationary. He then returned with a hardwood dowel, which he pressed against her lips.

Hana clenched her teeth, but he expertly probed her jaw, working his fingers past her tight muscles until he found just the right nerves. He then leaned most of his weight against his fingers again, sending a wave of numbness radiating across her jaw.

Klaus used the momentary weakness to force her mouth open far enough to jam the dowel in. Once it was jammed into the back of her mouth like a horse’s bit, he taped it to both cheeks to keep it in place.

Hana bit down hard as the numbness in her jaw faded, but the wood didn't yield. Her eyes grew even wilder with fear when the German returned with his hypodermic, this time without a needle.

"The medicine will taste far worse and take longer to take effect this way," he said, "but sublingual absorption will work just as well" He worked the end of the syringe under her tongue and began to squirt the bitter fluid into her mouth.

Hana coughed and gagged as she tried to spit it out, but the syringe stayed in place. After a few seconds, she felt a wave of weakness filling her body, her mind drifting away, her eyes growing too heavy to keep open.

She felt as if she was falling back into that dark water, this time landing without a splash.

Chapter 29

November 27, 2013: Baghdad, Iraq, Army Headquarters

The debriefing process at the Headquarters lasted twelve hours, mainly due to the sudden fascination the Intel geeks had with the stories about a blonde girl who'd appeared in the middle of the desert. Fortunately, no one had actually seen Hana do anything unusual. That is, other than her scandalous state of undress and her miraculous appearance.

They asked Bjork about the codeword *Hana* that he'd given the chopper pilot. He replied that it was his daughter's name, and he'd used it as a signal that the hostages were in jeopardy. That said, Bjork claimed he'd never heard the call on the radio, and the girl who was traveling with him had disappeared just before he reached the Zone, running faster than anyone human should have been able to. A GenTeched CIA agent for sure, or so he opined.

GenTech or not, it was clear to everyone that the girl was the only one who could have stopped the trucks. One of the interviewers had sufficient security clearance to know that the CIA employed such operatives, most of them as young as this woman was described, mainly due to the recent nature of the program and the need to do any significant enhancements on muscles, bones and major organs prior to puberty. Still, that alone didn't explain why one of them had been out there in the desert.

CIA Ops in Langley naturally claimed ignorance when the Army contacted them, but that didn't mean anything. Compartmentalization of field ops information was the norm.

The debriefers finally released Bjork and his men once they'd learned everything they could.

Bjork immediately started working every angle he could to rescue Hana without giving away his daughter's secrets. He buried himself in satellite photos at the CP, supposedly analyzing recent Iranian tank maneuvers, but in reality, searching for clues to his daughter's fate.

He eventually found a wide-angle satellite view of Hana's desperate battle, captured in a sequence of photos taken ten seconds apart. He played them fast enough to turn them into a jerky fast-motion video, and watched proudly as his daughter maneuvered her tank deftly, taking out at least three tanks before a T98 targeted hers. The violent explosion of her tank made his heart freeze, but he scanned forward until a vehicle approached and stopped beside the wreckage. The smoke obscured most of the scene until the flames suddenly died down. He then saw the men digging around in the tank wreckage, two of them grabbing what looked like a body to carry it toward the vehicle. The vehicle then departed at a high rate of speed, heading for the Iranian border.

He tracked the truck until it intersected a major road in Iran three hours later. It joined a stream of traffic heading directly east, and outdistanced the Iraqi satellite coverage.

Bjork quickly punched up a map of Iran, and found that the first major city on that road was Hamadan. The Intel for that area wasn't encouraging. Lots of anti-aircraft emplacements, most of it the latest French stuff, and a full division of troops. If they'd taken Hana to there, it was going to be hell to get her back.

That is, assuming she didn't escape on her own after her *dalvjra* was over.

Bjork clutched the side of his chair hard enough make his fingers ache as he thought of that. Given her human weakness during *dalvjra* and the Arab propensity to use rape as a technique of torture, he had no time to waste.

He had to give the Iranians in Hamadan something else to worry about until her *dalvjra* passed.

Chapter 30

November 28, 2013: Okinawa

Rob's eyes were bloodshot and his nerves jangling as he walked down the ramp of the C17 just before sunrise in Okinawa. He kept to the shadows and faded into the darkness before anyone recognized him. He worked his way through the hundreds of pallets of military equipment until he was able to slip off the flight line and walk into the deserted front lobby of the base Dispensary. There he dialed the second group of numbers Bjork had written down, and was greeted with a synthesized voice that said '*accepted*'.

The line clicked dead.

He looked at the dead receiver for a moment before hanging it up. Presumably, that single word confirmed that Bryn had received his earlier message.

He walked back outside to trundle tiredly down the darkened side streets toward his quarters, avoiding the crowded base shuttle bus. The base always woke up long before the sun. He'd been traveling for sixteen hours since he punched those first codes in, and hadn't slept much since then. And barely at all the day before.

Once back in his quarters, he stripped off his uniform and took a quick shower, then pulled on a flowered Hawaiian shirt and then a pair of khaki shorts and sneakers. His deliberately 'civilian' outfit highlighted the fact that he was a soldier as much as any uniform could.

Unconscious of that, he grabbed a bike helmet and gloves and exited into the parking lot behind his quarters. His restored Harley-Davidson was waiting for him. The meticulously maintained bike, an old flat-head from the 1950's, fired up on the first kick, and he roared off toward the deserted side of the base.

He was soon cruising down the entrance road toward the old quay that the Captain had said was the meeting place. The eastern horizon was glowing as a soft breeze off the water brought the clean smell of salt water, the familiar scent chasing away his tiredness. There were times like this when Okinawa reminded him of paradise. Mostly just before the sun rose to reveal the truth of the military and civilian sprawl that was eating the island away like a cancer.

He stopped to take off his helmet, and then resumed riding without it, letting the wind blow through his hair. Despite being what Hana called a Lifer, a career soldier, he didn't always follow the rules as rigorously as she assumed. Besides, it wasn't likely that there would be any MP's around this deserted harbor at this time of morning.

When he reached the end of the cracked and pot-holed road, he parked his Harley and continued on foot, traveling along an overgrown pathway that bordered the abandoned quay. He'd traveled barely three hundred meters when he spotted a woman sitting on top of one of the old ship anchoring posts. She was facing out to sea, her pale hair glowing red as it reflected the first rays of morning sunlight. She wore a pair of black

yoga pants and a halter of stretchy Lycra that was tied between her breasts, her arms covered. Her abs were glorious revealed, as were her feet and most of her back. She was performing a series of stretching exercises.

The style of her movements looked Asian, but Rob could see that the woman was working her body far too hard for that discipline. She pressed her fingers to the sides of her head, and, at once, her slender upper body transformed into an intricate maze of muscle. Rob knew at that moment, beyond a shadow of any doubt, that he was looking at Hana's mother; Brynlikdr Nielsen. A woman who'd been worshipped as a goddess by the ancient Vikings more than a century before Christ had been born.

His heart raced as he ducking down below the overgrown shrubs to walk closer, peering out from the tall weeds that had grown up along the path. He watched as she completed her stretching. She certainly didn't look ancient. Instead, she looked phenomenally beautiful and fit, and not afraid to show a little muscle.

In her case, a lot of muscle.

He scanned nervously around the small harbor as the sky grew lighter. Fortunately, they seemed to be alone.

When he looked back, Bryn was kneeling on the quay, facing away from him now, and gripping a foot-thick steel pillar between her thighs. She slowly bent backwards, her legs anchored by the pillar, stretching her arms high over her head. The large breasts that stretched her halter-top looked as firm as her muscles.

Seemingly whether 17 or 2117, a Valkyrie's body looked much the same. Only Bryn's face looked different than Hana's... and even then, she merely bore the leanness of maturity, looking perhaps early thirties, but without a trace of age.

He started to feel like a voyeur as he studied the way she pressed her back to the concrete, and slipped her fingers into a deep crack over her head, still gripping the pillar with her knees, her feet trapped beneath her buttocks. She started to lift her legs, an array of hard curves shaping her tight body. She took a deep breath and strained, only to have the old steel pillar give off a muted squeal. Chips of weathered paint began to fly as the pillar deformed, the concrete quay shuddering as her knees closed, crushing the foot-thick steel with what had to be many tons of raw power!

Stunned, Rob remembered Hana saying that her mother was stronger than she herself was, a fact that suddenly seemed believable as Bryn's thighs crushed deep depressions in the steel pillar. She put her abs to full use now, that array of tight muscles forming a perfect six-pack as her back touched the quay and she started an astounding sit-up. Her abs were a study in muscular definition as the egg-shaped pillar began to scrape upward in its hole. Chips of weathered concrete flew in all directions as Bryn brute-forced the pillar upward a half-meter, the waistband of her yoga pants slipping downward to reveal a hint of silver

metal beneath. The scraping movement was shaking the immense quay enough for Rob to feel fifty feet away.

The contest of strength continued for several seconds, and then ancient concrete gave up its hold on the pillar, and Bryn floated slowly upward to pause five meters above the ground, the a multi-ton, steel piling hanging from her grip.

Flying!

Jesus Christ!

Rob was transfixed as he watched her toss the piling to catch it at its center in the palm of one hand. Then, with a motion almost too fast to follow with his eyes, she cocked her right arm and hurled it like a javelin. Astonishingly, pillar soared completely over a small boat in the harbor to splash down a hundred meters beyond it. His mouth was hanging open as he turned back to see the Valkyrie still suspended in air, her eyes closed as she luxuriated in the sensation of the warm, morning breeze blowing through her long hair.

He'd seen Hana's feats of strength, but he'd also seen the amount of effort she'd had to expend. What her mother had just done - and with apparently little effort - made his knees go soft.

She opened her eyes to scan the road leading to the quay, and Rob realized that she hadn't performed this demonstration for his benefit. She was expecting her husband. Selfishly wanting to study her further, he tried to back away and duck further down in the tall weeds, but his foot caught on a root. He struggled to pull it free, only to lose his balance and sit down hard. The dry brush crunched loudly beneath him.

Cursing under his breath as he heard his heart pounding in his ears, he looked up – and found himself staring into the coldest and bluest set of eyes he'd ever seen.



Eyes that were but a meter's distance from his own!

Bryn was floating on air in front of him; one thumb hooked under the band of her yoga pants to reveal a hint of silver beneath. Her face as beautiful as it was mysterious. "Ah," she sighed sadly. "Poor mortal."

Rob opened his mouth to speak, only to see her hand flash out, her strong fingers encircling his neck. The next thing he knew, he was dangling from Bryn's outstretched arm. Her fingers – their force refined by more than two thousand years of experience – closed like steel bands around his neck, easily restricting his air, but not his circulation. He desperately grabbed her wrist with both hands, and struggled desperately to relieve enough pressure so he could speak, but her sinewy hand felt as hard as a steel vise.

"You won't feel pain," she said, her tone of voice strangely reassuring.

Rob felt his eyes bulging from their sockets as he stared wide-eyed at her, only to see her lift her other hand into view. She reached out to the wall next to him and dug her long fingers into the ancient concrete, her fingers closing as the muscles of her arm began to expand. She was summoning her strength - just as he'd seen Hana do. The concrete gave off a loud crunch, and shattered into a thousand fragments as her fingers closed, crushing it to dust.

He jerked his eyes back to hers, terrified by her demonstration of awful strength. Yet instead of anger, he saw a melding of sadness, resignation and resolve shaping her expression. He realized in that moment that she was truly going to kill him!

Knowing that his only hope for survival lay in explaining himself, he struggled even more frantically to get his voice to work, his fingers still tearing at hers.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, her eyes growing moist. Her fingers slowly tightened, threatening to cut off his circulation now. "But it's necessary."

Rob twisted his neck with the last vestiges of his strength, and managed to buy the briefest moment of freedom. "*Bjork...*" he rasped out.

The Valkyrie's eyes opened wide and her grip relaxing slightly as she heard her husband's name. "What did you say?"

"Bork... your husband" he gasped out, his heart racing like that of a captured bird. He was terrified by her fantastic strength.

Bryn's eyes narrowed and her grip tightened again as she drew him closer to her, shaking him slightly. "What about my husband?" Her voice had dropped several tones to become a deep, resonant purr filled with dire warning.

Rob knew his life depended on his next words. He worked his throat, only to feel her grip loosen marginally again. "Called to Iraq... after... you left," he gasped, struggling to fill his lungs. "Sent me... Hana."

Bryn's left eyebrow rose and her grip loosened further. "My Hana? What about Hana?"

Rob struggled to nod as Bryn brought him closer, his nose barely an inch from hers.

"You will speak, mortal," she growled as she shook him.

"Shit lady..." Rob choked out, surprised to feel a flash of anger surging through him, pushing back his fears. She was asking questions, but wouldn't let him speak. "Back... back off... second... okay?"

The Valkyrie's hand opened and Rob fell to the ground, his legs so rubbery they couldn't support him. He struggled desperately to recover his breath, massaging his spasming neck. Bryn floated a few feet further away, the shocked look in her eyes telling him that she was stunned that a mortal had used his last breath to address her in such a fashion.

When he'd gotten enough of his breath, and wits, back, Rob looked up at her. The first thing he noticed was that Bryn's lethal arms had returned to their previous slender size.

"Are you in the habit of killing total strangers?" he choked out between residual coughs and gasps.

The Valkyrie glared at him. "Yes. And you, stranger, have exactly ten seconds to tell me why you know about my husband and daughter, or else..." She paused as she saw the way he was staring at the way the upper swells of her breasts rose beneath the flow of her blonde hair. Her eyes narrowed as the first direct ray of sunlight caught them to give off a dazzling sparkle of blue. "I gave you permission to speak, not to stare at me," she continued through clenched teeth.

Rob defiantly met her eyes, watching as she brushing her fingers through her hair like any other woman, the reddish glow of sunrise fading to platinum. He now understood where Hana got her many moods. "Captain Nielson directed me to meet you here," he finally offered.

"I asked about Hana," she replied a hint of worry clear in her voice.

"Your daughter's in very big trouble," Rob quickly blurted out, his mind racing to bring some kind of order to what he knew. He remained seated on the ground where he'd landed.

Bryn knelt down to grip his chin, tilting his face upward to look into hers. "What kind of trouble?"

"It started in Iraq," Rob went on. "Your husband was taken prisoner by insurgents. Hana and I went in after him, and..."

"Bjork?" Bryn interrupted, eyes wide. "Taken captive? And Hana went there?"

Rob pressed on. "Your daughter was beside herself with worry when she heard about her father's capture. You weren't around, and she didn't know how to reach you. So she determined to get him out herself. She came to me for help. I helped her stow away on a military transport to Iraq. We both did. We went after your husband, and Hana freed him. She was amazing."

His words had the same effect on the Valkyrie as Kryptonite did on Superman. Bryn's powerful figure wilted in front of his eyes. Her eyes took on a haunted look as she stared deeply into his.

Rob was shocked by the change in her appearance. Where was the proud Valkyrie now? Where was the proud parent? The Captain had just about busted his buttons over what his daughter had done - *after* he'd almost busted his jaw. Rob could still feel the ache. But here was her mother - a Valkyrie, and, from the look of it, she was mortified by her daughter's accomplishment. Saddened even.

Without thinking, Rob moved closer, reaching out to rest his hand on a shoulder that felt as if it had been carved from solid steel. "Mrs. Nielson," he counseled as gently as he could under the circumstances,

hoping his voice would sooth her. "You have no reason to be ashamed of what your daughter did."

Whether it was the softness of his words, or his gentle touch, it was enough to send a flash of anger racing through the Valkyrie. She gave off a sound like an ominous roll of distant thunder and exploded from his hesitant grasp, reappearing ten feet over his head.

"You dare speak to me of shame!" she roared down at him, hastily wiping the tears from her face with the heels of her hands. "What do you know of such things?"

The Valkyrie was furious – and beside herself with rage. Looking up at her, Rob could swear he saw the heavens breach.

"What do you know of responsibility - of absence - of loss!" she spat at him bitterly. "Do you have a child who has rejected you?"

Rob bravely rose and took a step toward her, very aware that he knew nothing about parenting. "All I know is that your daughter is a Valkyrie," he said confidently, "as are you. I also know that your daughter needs you now, perhaps more than she ever has."

Again, the compelling goddess seemed to melt back into a helpless waif. She floated down to land lightly on the quay. "She needs me?" Bryn asked, her voice that of a woman again, not a goddess. "How? Why?" she asked him softly. "Tell me, Sergeant York."

Rob was surprised that she knew his name, as he'd not offered it. Perhaps the Captain had spoken of him after their near death in the Iraqi desert two years ago.

"Because she was captured by the enemy."

Bryn gasped. "That's impossible. No human could contain such power as hers."

"She was weakening," Rob said as gently as he could. "That time of the month."

"Oh, god," Bryn breathed, closing her eyes while clenching her fists, steel tendons shaping them. "Not that."

Rob just stared at her for a long moment as her body shook, worry for her daughter struggling against a surge of motherly anger. A long minute passed before she regained enough control over her emotions to open her eyes and speak.

"Tell me. All of it."

Rob took a deep breath and started his story from the beginning, beginning with the moment when Captain Nielson had asked him to look after Hana.

Bryn took it all in with what amounted to amazing calm. She settled on another piling with her chin resting on the knee of a gathered leg, her other leg swinging idly at the mid morning breeze.

"You speak of my daughter with glowing words," she observed after his telling. She pressed her chin against her knee, taking her time to mull over what she'd heard. She finally looked back at the mortal who'd become her messenger. "She really did all that you said she did?"

"Yes, ma'am," Rob stated forthrightly. "She did."

The mother looked away, and rubbed her nose against her upraised knee. "A naked child," she mused, marveling at the thought, "going into battle without her armor. Untrained, unprepared. Unheard of."

"You should be proud of her, Mrs. Nielson."

The Valkyrie's head turned in his direction. "You think I don't know that?" she answered in a tone of irritable peak. She swung herself off the piling. "I *am* her mother, after all. I was the one who should have taken her to combat the first time." She floated down until her bare feet landed lightly on the weathered concrete.

Rob raised his hands in a conciliatory gesture. "Hana told me what she knew about your mission. It sounded important."

Bryn smirked. "Apparently more important than raising my child." She took a deep breath, and slowly let it out as she turned to meet his eyes. She slowly lifted her hand to shake his. "I suppose that since my family has trusted you, Rob York, so must I."

Rob suddenly felt hopeful as he gripped her hand back, thrilling this time to the same lethal strength that had nearly ended his life.

"Are you ready to tempt the charity of the gods again? To enter combat on my arm this time?"

Rob felt as if he was falling into a dream. He'd read Tolkein; also everything printed about Norse mythology. Now he suddenly found himself thrust into the middle of a world that had been mere fantasy until a few weeks ago. His pride swelled as he realized that he was being asked to go on a quest to save a young goddess. He remembered Bilbo's warning from the *Rings* too late: "*It's a dangerous thing to step out your door. For step upon the road, and if you aren't careful, it will sweep you away.*"

Despite the warning that echoed in his thoughts, words tumbled unbidden from his mouth, his heart giving voice to them. He gripped Bryn's sinewy hand back as hard as he could. "If it's a mission to save Hana, then yes, I'll go anywhere to save her."

"Even to the gates of hell itself?" Bryn asked, tossing her hair over her shoulder as the warm sun of the tropics turned her hair to platinum.

"Even there," he answered proudly, a freshening breeze flowing down from the mountains of Okinawa now, seemingly carrying the sound of distant horns.

"Then that's exactly where we're headed."

Chapter 31

November 28, 2013: Hamadan, Iran

The morning prayers had just completed and the sun was rising when Mustafa returned to Hana's cell in the basement of the military complex. The German's equipment had been delivered from Bushehr overnight.

He found the blonde girl bound hand and foot now, with a very sophisticated optical device fastened around her head. Clamps held her eyelids open. The device was attached via an optical downlink cable to a notebook computer, and was beaming laser beams into her eyes. The reflections from her pupils flickered like a video display.

Klaus sat at the metal table, typing into a second notebook computer.

"What are you doing?" Mustafa demanded, trying not to stare at the girl.

"Changing her short-term memories. I've given her drugs that suppress the synapses that connect to her long-term memories, and I've made her short-term memory hyperactive. I'm using the lasers to fill her mind with images." He looked up at Mustafa. "Basically, I'm overwriting her memories with new ones."

"Short, long... what does that mean?"

"The memories of her last few days will be suppressed, although the fundamentals will be refreshed from her longer-term memories eventually."

Mustafa kept glancing at the girl, admiring the way her pale, glowing hair was spread across the stone floor. She truly was a goddess, he knew that with certainty now. He could sense it in the very atmosphere of the room. He forced himself to face Klaus. "Which means her memory will return?" He clenched his fists and said a little prayer for strength.

Klaus nodded, seemingly unaffected by the atmosphere. "Most of it. Her mind is too resilient for me to change permanently. But we might get a week of usefulness from her before we have to repeat the process."

"You can wash a person's mind this way many times?"

Klaus shook his head. "Normally, no, not without inducing permanent brain damage. But this girl's mind is more resilient. I've had to give her ten times the usual dosage of the medicines to have any effect."

"And when will you know if it works?"

"We'll have a first indicator by tonight. The full course of short-term cognitive reprogramming is approximately two days."

Mustafa nodded, despite understanding nothing. He focused instead on his simpler desires, revenge, as always, being the strongest. He had

dedicated his life to striking out at the infidels who had dared set foot on his soil. They came first to Iraq, then to his country of Iran. All under the deception of searching for weapons of mass destruction.

Of limiting nuclear proliferation.

A balance had not been established until his leaders followed North Korea's example and threatened to use their small arsenal. Since then, the war had been mostly fought in the Iraqi battlefield, insurgents against regular troops. That unfortunate country had known war for most of its many years of existence.

He pushed those familiar thoughts away, only to find new passions growing just beneath the; m. The strongest was desire for the girl. Simple, primal and undeniable. His body was hard beneath his robes as the vaporous fingers of desire seductively drew him toward the girl. She mesmerized him.

Klaus looked up at the Arab, and saw the half crazed look in his eyes as he stared at the Valkyrie. Mustafa was dangerous and unpredictable, and Klaus knew that if he spent much time around the Valkyrie, he'd weaken and ruin everything. That knowledge was sharpened by a misplaced wave of jealousy run through his body. The Valkyrie was his!

It took all the force of his will to remain outwardly calm as he said: "One thing, Mustafa. She must not awaken here, or the sight of you and this place will force her to remember her past faster. She must be far from here, in an environment that supports the memories I have implanted. Where the only things she sees are images from those memories."

Mustafa jerked his head back around, his mind clearing slightly as he sensed danger. "And that place is?"

"My home in Germany. Unfortunately, I had only images of my family home to program her memories with."

"That's impossible," Mustafa shouted. "I will not allow her to leave my control."

"Then take my coworkers as hostages, Mustafa. My wife Heidi too. Take all of those at the nuclear station. Use them to ensure I deliver your weapon, and that I focus her on your targets only."

Mustafa paced around the room, the hunger so clear in his eyes. "My weapon you say?"

"Yes, once she is conditioned, the girl will be yours to target as you wish." He paused, letting Mustafa's thoughts race, then amplifying them with: "To do with as you wish in all ways."

Mustafa's eyes sparkled even brighter, his ego expanding without bounds as he considered the wild possibilities of using the girl to help fight his battle. And between battles, Thoughts and desires that were even stronger than his growing passion. Yet even caught between those forces, the self-preservation and wariness of a warrior returned. He could

never trust anyone who wasn't of his tribe. "No. The risk is unacceptable."

"Mustafa," Klaus said patiently as he rose from his chair, "I have clearly failed to communicate the true potential of this girl. If we gain control over her thoughts and emotions, we could shape her into an assassin that no one can stop. An assassin who can successfully target any person on this planet. Anyone!"

Mustafa's heart leaped as his mind ticked off a half dozen leaders of the Western world that he'd like to assassinate, starting with the US president.

Klaus sensed his thoughts. "Yes. Even the US president, if that is how you wish to direct her. His Secret Service will not be able to stop this girl. And she will survive and escape so that we can use her again."

Mustafa's hands began to shake as his imagination started to catch up with the potential that Klaus was describing. None of his assassins could ever hope to penetrate such security.

Klaus reached out his hand as he sensed Mustafa's reluctance, realizing it was now founded more in disbelief of the girl's power than lack of imagination. "Give me your weapon and I will show you."

Mustafa hesitated for a moment, and then handed Klaus his prized Glock 9mm.

"The girl is weakened now," Klaus said as he cycled the action to load a round into the chamber. "Yet watch what she is still capable of." He walked over to lift the sheet that covered Hana's body, and pointed the gun down at her mid-riff. He pulled the trigger to send the powerful bullet slamming into the tight expanse of her upper abs. The girl gasped and arched her back as the bullet rebounded, softly pinging off the ceiling to clunk to the stone floor, the clink of the spent cartridge landing beside her head.

Klaus carefully picked up the hot, flattened bullet, juggling it as he quickly placed it in a small, clear box and handed it to Mustafa. "Isn't any risk worth it to gain such an indestructible weapon?"

Mustafa stared at the spent bullet, and then at the forbidden nudity of the girl's body, the small red dot on her skin fading back to tanned perfection as he watched. "Allah be praised. She **is** a goddess!" He desperately wanted to try his own test, a far more intimate one, but knew it was forbidden for him to even be looking at this girl the way he was. Still, ancient passions and new hungers tore ravenously at his self-control, sending his emotions racing. He lusted to keep the girl here, under his control forever. There were so many things he wanted to do to her. Things he could not do with anyone else around.

He struggled with his emotions for long moments, but in the end, his forbidden passions proved weaker than his lifelong desire to bring death to the enemies of Allah. He needed the German and the girl for that. He slowly nodded; his eyes wide and his hands shaking, as he said

in a shaking voice, "I agree. Your wife and coworkers as hostages. Make her into a holy warrior worthy of Allah's praise."

Klaus exhaled slowly as he nodded. The Arab had passed the test, but only barely.

"I will give you a list of targets whenever you tell me she is ready," Mustafa continued, his voice growing stronger as he recovered his composure. "Yet she must not be connected to me, and she must not return to Iran." He was a man who knew the limits of his own temptations.

"Agreed, my friend," Klaus said warmly, barely able to contain his own excitement now.

Mustafa sensed that, and his eyes narrowed. He was himself again. "But know this now, Klaus Fruehauf," his English pronunciation very clear and precise now. "If she fails to destroy a target, or if either of you prove to be disloyal to me in any way, then I will put your wife's head on a stake just like the Americans."

Once Mustafa left, Klaus knelt beside Hana, placing one hand on her forehead, the other along her temples. He opened his mind, and began using the techniques his mother had taught him to view a person's surface memories. He saw a kaleidoscope of images chasing each other through her thoughts, but they were mostly ones that he was injecting through the optics. He tried to delve deeper into her memories, but her mind was over-stimulated from the drugs and the injected images.

It was going to be hard to look past that noise.

Yet he tried. It was hours later when Klaus finally rose and returned to the table to flop heavily in his chair, the weariness of nearly two days without sleep catching up with him. His head was aching from the effort of reading her thoughts.

He comforted himself by letting his normally disciplined thoughts drift for a moment, and dared to dream of the glory that would be his. He would use this living goddess to awaken the slumbering giants in the West, and with them, they would cleanse the world in the fires of Ragnarök ("Doom of the Gods"), also called *Götterdämmerung*. It had been defined as the end of the cosmos in Norse mythology.

He had another interpretation of Ragnarök, one that had been handed down from generation to generation among his people, the Diaboli, the so-called *Advocates of the Devil* as the secret scholars of the Vatican had called them. Like the Vatican, he knew his people's unique abilities had not evolved on Earth, but had been a gift from the same gods who had imbued the Valkyries with their powers. His mother had called them the Elders, and he and his people were among the handful of people who knew those 'gods' were truly ancient spacefarers who had visited Earth thousands of years ago.

The Vatican believed they were agents of Satan himself.

They'd further called his people the Devil's Advocate because they were capable of inspiring thoughts and actions in ordinary people that were later interpreted as being messages from the devil. The result as that the Vatican had been sending their warriors to destroy the Diaboli for more than a thousand years.

They'd not succeeded.

And now his people had the Valkyrie.

Klaus now intended to use all his powers, technological and supernatural, along with the support from his order's superior, an even more powerful Diaboli named Haljik, to restore the balance. He would use the girl to ignite the righteous fires that would erase the lesser races which infected the Earth. And at the same time, he would end the Vatican's power forever.

His superior, Haljik, was the leader of a powerful Domina, a uniquely Diaboli organization that had existed since before the time of Christ. Haljik's Domina, one of many on Earth, had inserted itself at the core of the neo-Nazi movement in Germany. His members were all committed believers in Aryan supremacy, with the Domina elevating that belief to the level of a religion. He dreamed of uniting the other Dominas under the same banner.

Klaus blinked his eyes open as his brief daydream faded, finding as always that his bright vision of the future had refreshed him. His mother had taught him how to do that as well.

He opened his notebook computer and resumed modifying the last portion of the girl's programming. He selected additional images from his own family videos and some stock video from the Net, creating a fiction of her daily life in Bavaria. He knew he couldn't create seamless memories this quickly, for programming wasn't his expertise, but he understood the basics. After he'd used the drugs and technology to implant these basic images, he would use his own power of persuasion to fill in any gaps and turn them into memories.

The reward was that if he was successful, this young Valkyrie would awaken believing her name was both Sváva, a name straight out of the legends, while she lived undercover as his niece, Olga.

Sváva had been one of the Valkyries which legends said had served Odin directly. She had been one of the first of the Disir demigods.

Chapter 32***November 28, 2013: Baghdad***

Bjork managed to look over the shoulder of a higher-ranking officer in the CP to steal his password, and then used that password to log into the Command system. Once in, he created a mission profile. It called for a single Blackhawk with a Delta team to be escorted by an Apache to extract a CIA operative from Hamadan, Iran. He designated the mission as a Provisional Draft and classified it Top Secret, which meant that only the name of the mission would show up in the daily Ops summary. The details of the draft mission would be automatically deleted at midnight if he didn't finalize it.

In the meantime, he could use the provisional orders to get manpower and equipment.

The men he gathered were all volunteers, along with the pilot of the Apache, Captain Sarah Brightwell, who was an old friend of his and one of the handful of gutsy women who flew Apaches.

He joined them inside one of the hangars near the edge of the air base that the CIA used. Inside, he found a late model Blackhawk helicopter was parked next to an AH64F Apache Longbow II, the same kind of tank-busting gunship that he flew for a living.

Only the best for the CIA.

He gathered them together in the middle of the hangar and started to brief them. "The agent were pulling out is a GenTeched CIA agent. A blonde girl of seventeen years, or so she appears."

The men just looked at each other, but it was Sarah who spoke up. "A teenage mutant? Infiltrating into that nest of ragheads? Even Langley wouldn't stoop so low."

Klaus shrugged. "All I know is that they did a lot of radical GenTech on her. Military grade stuff. Strength, toughness, the whole deal."

"Whatever 'the whole deal' means," Sarah added. "We haven't been cleared for mil-grade GenTech intel before."

"We still aren't. Suffice it to say that she could kick your butts in a fight. But all you really need to know is her description." He glanced back at his briefing sheet, pretending to read off the details. "180cm tall, that's 5'11" for the metric impaired, long blonde hair, blue eyes."

One of the Delta team members spoke up. "Shit, I heard some scuttlebutt about someone who looked like that who got you guys out of the hands of those ragheads. A real looker, walking around half nude most of the time."

Klaus closed his folder and walked closer to the men, lowering his voice. "That's confidential, soldier. But off the record, yeah, it's the same girl. Now that she saved our asses, it's time to return the favor. We're going to bring her out."

“And she’s in Iran?” Sarah asked cautiously. “Crossing their border is a big deal.”

Bjork nodded. “Yes, she’s inside Iran, people, but we’re cleared for covert entry. Intel thinks an Iranian named Mustafa Al-Sa’ud has her. He’s been connected with Al Qaeda elements, and is Commander of a Special Ops unit of the Iranian military. He’s into kidnapping, ransom, assassination, you name it. He’s almost certainly the man who held us hostage as well.”

He paused to let that sink in before continuing.

“He’s also the man who personally executed the CNN reporter, Sarah Jacobson. I saw him chop her head off with a fucking machete.”

The men started to mumble, fists clenching. Killing soldiers was one thing. Civilians were another thing. Especially such a beautiful woman. An American woman.

Bjork smiled grimly as he saw their angry expressions. He had them now. Their anger and adrenaline would feed into simple hatred. They would fight. They would kill. They wouldn't ask questions. Most importantly, they'd go into hell itself to get the girl back. To save her from such a fate.

He prayed he'd bring them all back this time.

Bjork's provisional orders allowed the men to pull and stage weapons and ammo, along with enough C4 to blow up half of Hamadan. Nobody was reading the Provisional logo on the bottom of the orders when Bjork ordered them into the air two hours later. They flew off into the gathering darkness in the east.

The two choppers dropped down to fifty feet off the deck when they reached the Zone, and then twisted and turned their way along the bottom of the lowest terrain, trying to stay below the Iranian radar.

They were successful in that, however, unknown to them, they were still picked up on surveillance as they crossed the border into Iran. The Iranians had reverted to augmenting their vulnerable electronic systems with the same spotting and tracking system the British had used in WWII before the days of radar. Ground observers using directional audio and visual stations plotted their path.

Their formation of two helicopters was picked up five times before they got 120 kilometers into Iran. Air Intercept in Tehran analyzed the track and predicated they were going to Hamadan. An Iranian F-14 was quickly dispatched, and anti-aircraft batteries were put on alert.

“Eighteen klicks to go,” Bjork radioed to Captain Sarah Brightwell in the Apache. “Stay tight. Major AA sites ahead of us.”

“Going to be rough if they're awake, Bjork.”

“There hasn’t been any fighting in this part of Iran for three years, so I’m betting they’ll be slow in getting orders to fire. Lots of confusion.”

“Here’s hoping,” Sarah radioed back on the narrow-band transmitter.

“I need you to go ahead and stir things up, Sarah. Take out any site that tries to fire.”

“Roger,” Sarah said in a clipped voice. Her AH64 tilted forward and accelerated, quickly pulling ahead of the lumbering Blackhawk.

The screen in front of Sarah’s gunner, Sergeant Mike Mace, began to light up with the last known locations of the AA. Sarah turned and flew directly toward the closest site, rising just enough for her threat receivers to pick up the area search radars. Once spotted, the sites would start scrambling, possibly even turning on their own fire control radars. If they did, she’d have them.

It was a good plan, but one that didn’t take into account a threat from above.

Twenty thousand feet above them, weapons officer Mohammed Khalfir saw a target pop up on the scope of his F-14. “Target ahead, 40 miles. Slow mover, very low. Probably a chopper.”

The pilot, Captain Harod Klif, replied, “Ours or theirs?”

“IFF codes don’t match. Assume hostile.”

The Khalfir zoomed in with the powerful infrared telescope that was fitted to his plane. He saw a shimmering image that was instantly recognizable. His heart leaped. “It’s an American AH64!”

“Roger,” Captain Klif replied coolly, his heart leaping. “They don’t fly alone, my brother. Keep looking for others.”

“Roger.”

“I’m going to max burner. When we’re close enough, let’s set up for a Mystral shot.”

He shoved both throttles forward, and the F100 engines behind him howled as the F-14 leaped forward, the wings sweeping back as he went supersonic.

Meanwhile, thirty-nine miles further east, Captain Sarah Brightwell was very busy. Two of the AA sites had come up, and unexpectedly, one of them had instantly fired on her. Heavy 40mm stuff mostly. She ducked and dodged the shells the way only an Apache driver can, and then launched a Hellfire missile at the site, taking their radar out. She fired again on a second site, and then a third site came up and began tracking her. At that same moment, her air-to-air threat warning began warbling.

“Shit! We got a fast mover coming in from the rear, Mike,” she said urgently. “You got ten seconds max to launch on the rest of the sites before I go evasive.”

Sergeant Mike Mace centered his crosshairs on the muzzle flashes from the third AA site, and hit the Launch button. An AGM114L Hellfire fire-and-forget missile flashed off the right pylon. He swung his sights left, leaving the automatic targeting system to direct the radar-guided missile, and squeezed another Hellfire off the left pylon at a fourth site, programming to track on the fire-control radar. “O.K. Get us out of here, Captain.”

Sarah slammed her cyclic left and shoved the collective toward the floor. The Apache dropped like a rock while spinning left. Even then, she was almost too late. She looked up to see an air-to-air missile was coming straight at her. Desperately dropping lower yet, she tried to duck behind a small hill.

“These motherfuckers are wide away,” Mace breathed into the intercom. “They knew we were coming!”

The streak of pure death flashed over them and then began to turn back. It was one of the French Mystral Mod 17's based on the way it was reversing course to reacquire. Designed to be an advanced heat-seeker, it was sniffing out the heat signature of her turbines, and it would keep searching for a target until its rocket motor burned out.

“Bjork, I got a Mystral locked up with me,” Sarah radioed, her voice calm despite the stress she was feeling. “Iranian F-14 overhead. Keep your heads down. These guys are wide awake.” She quickly thumbed the intercom, “Mike, can you take that goddamn thing out with the chain gun? We're too low to use flares.”

Mike stared out the canopy at the blaze of the Mystral's rocket motor. He slaved his sights to the 30mm chain gun in the nose of his Apache, and it began tracking his eyeballs via laser sensors in his helmet. He pulled the trigger on his controller, and the cannon began firing at ten rounds a second. He kept firing constantly, sending lightning-like streaks of cannon shells flying toward the oncoming missile. He struggled to focus his eyes just ahead of the exhaust plume as Sarah jinked around the hill, flying backwards as she skillfully kept the Apache's nose facing the incoming missile.

Five seconds later, Mike still hadn't gotten a hit. The flare of the rocket motor was blindingly bright when he finally adjusted his vision to stare further ahead of the plume, and one of his shells connected. The Mystral blew up a hundred meters away, sending shrapnel raking across the armored canopy of the Apache.

Unfortunately, the overpressure wave from the blast pushed them just that much closer to the hill, and a blade tip caught the side of a boulder, unbalancing the rotor.

The Apache started shaking wildly as Sarah struggled to keep it aloft, gritting her teeth as the cyclic buzzed so powerfully that it started to turn her arm numb.

“She’s gonna shake apart if we try to keep flying, Mike. Gotta set her down.”

Sarah circled left toward a flat spot between the hills as she punched the radio button again, her voice still unnaturally calm. “We’re going down in sector November 10 Foxtrot 234, Bjork. Be nice and pick us up on the way back out.”

She touched down hard before she heard Bjork’s reply, and the Apache bounced and then spun to the left before tilting over, rotor blades exploding, the tail breaking off to spin away like a windmill in a tornado. The vibrating roar and whine of engines was suddenly replaced by silence.

Sarah started to undo her harness, only to have the silence shattered by the sonic boom of the F-14 passing just over them, the shock wave slamming the Apache further to the side.

She moved faster. “Gotta get out of here before he makes the turn, Mike. He’ll use his gun on the next pass.”

Mike stared after the F-14, still wearing his image enhancement goggles. "Looks like he's going after the Blackhawk, Captain."

Sarah punched her mike, shouting this time. "Bjork, get down. The F-14 is on your tail!"

Bjork heard Sarah’s shout about the F-14 at the same time as his threat warning receiver began warbling, telling him that a missile was on his tail. He punched the button to drop flairs and turned hard to the right. The Mystral tracked into one of the flares and exploded.

Looking up, he saw a twin-engine fighter turning hard in front of him, flames belching from its afterburners. It was the last legacy of US support for the deposed Shah of Iran: a still deadly Grumman F-14A Tomcat, now in the hands of the Revolutionary Guards.

It was no contest between a fast mover like the Tomcat and a Blackhawk. The Tomcat had radar and infrared missiles, not to mention a 20mm cannon. The Blackhawk had only a pair of 7.62 machine guns in the doors. Even worse, the terrain was too flat to provide cover.

Bjork did the only thing he could to save his crew. He dumped the pitch and landed hard and fast, skidding down a rough dirt road.

“Out, everybody out,” he shouted before the chopper stopped moving. “Some major hurt coming our way. Take everything you need with you. Move it!”

It took but ten seconds for the highly-trained Delta Team to exit with their weapons and ammo. They ran in two directions, only to be thrown off their feet when the F-14 strafed their downed helicopter with

its cannon, firing a hundred rounds a second. The Blackhawk blew up in a flash of sparks and flame.

After the F-14 roared overhead, empty shell casing raining down all around them, Captain Bjork Nielsen raised his head and took stock of the situation. He was lost in enemy territory for the second time in as many days.

Yet this time, nobody knew they were even here.

His mission draft profile had just expired, and been erased from the Command Post computers.

Chapter 33***November 29, 2013: Okinawa on the way to Dubai, UAE***

Rob's emergency application for leave was quickly by his commander by in Okinawa. He'd claimed a family emergency involving his parents, and by late afternoon he was preparing to head for Naha Airport, Okinawa's international point of departure.

Bryn had decided they would fly first to Seoul, presumably the first stop enroute to his aging parents' home in Tennessee. For all the Army knew, this would be his first trip off the rock in eight months.

She picked him up at his quarters in an old, rusted out Toyota, and raced off toward the airport, weaving through the mixture of bicycle, motorbike and truck traffic as if every other vehicle was a stationary object on an obstacle course. "You might want to wear that seat belt," she said as she skidded sideways around a truck, passing on the wrong side of the line in the middle of a corner. "I can walk away from a head-on. You can't."

Rob struggled to pull the half-rotted shoulder harness out and snap it in, but the car was careening back and forth too violently for him to let go of his handholds.

Amazingly, the Toyota was still in one piece when Bryn skidded into the parking lot at Naha airport and jumped out. Rob just sat in the seat and gasped for air, his heart palpitating. Bryn busied herself by dragging both their bags out of the trunk and headed toward the terminal to get a luggage cart.

Rob just stared at her through the windshield, admiring the way her trim hips swayed beneath the short skirt of her fashionable orange and black outfit. Her long legs that were as lean and beautiful as her teenage daughter's, causing him to wonder if Valkyries grew more beautiful as well as stronger with age. If so, then Bryn had two thousand years of refinement behind her.

She returned with the cart, and he got out of the car to struggle to lift her bag onto it. It took all this strength to budge it. "What do you carry in this thing?" he gasped. "Barbells?"

"Mortals!" she sighed, rolling her eyes.

"In this bag?" he replied with a smirk. "No wonder it's so heavy."

She just glared at him as she started to reach for her bag, refusing to acknowledge his attempt at being witty.

"I got it," Rob said as his hand reached the bag first. He threw every ounce of strength he had into the effort, and managed to barely get her bag onto the cart. He straightened up and reached for the cart handle.

"No. We're in a hurry."

"I said, I got it," Rob insisted.

They stood glaring at each other, shoulder to shoulder, both of them gripping the cart's handle.

A moment passed before Bryn sighed. "Mortal males and their completely unnecessary shows of gallantry."

She released the handle, only to reveal that she'd been gripping it so strongly that she'd left faint impressions from her fingers in the tubular stainless steel of the handle. "Shit," she chastised herself, realizing she was emotionally wrought over Hana's disappearance.

Without another word, Bryn turned and headed toward the entrance.

"Talk about not leaving a trail," Rob muttered as he fitted his fingers into the depressions as he tried to push the cart.

It didn't budge. He pushed harder, and it rolled an inch forward.

"Are you coming?" Bryn called back over her shoulder.

Rob looked up to glare at her, a moment of mutually hostile eye contact passing before Bryn turned on her heel and disappeared through the Departures entrance.

He threw all his strength into pushing the cart, and it finally started to roll.

"Yes – *dear*," he snarled back.

Bryn of course bought the tickets, with a platinum American Express card no less. Rob didn't realize until it was time to board that she'd given him the cheapest ticket on the plane, jammed up against the lavatories in the back of Coach, while she was sipping Champagne up in First Class.

He ate stale peanuts and counted people going to the slightly smelly lavatories until the plane landed in Seoul four hours later.

Once in Seoul, she bought two more tickets at the Korean Air counter. The agent was about to issue the tickets when Rob slapped his tired MasterCard on the counter, and upgraded his Coach ticket to First Class. His card almost melted down.

Bryn just looked at him for a long moment, and then stalked away.

The male ticket agent stared longingly at her legs until she disappeared into the crowd, her blonde head still visible as she walked among the shorter Koreans. He finally refocused his attention on Rob. "Business trip with your boss, right?" he asked in a thick Korean accent.

Rob started to shake his head, and then nodded. "Just make sure I'm not sitting next to her."

The agent punched a few keys on his terminal, and then handed Rob the boarding passes as he winked conspiratorially, then leaned forward to whisper: "Good luck with the dragon lady. I'm told that Nordic women are dangerous but amazing in bed."

Rob looked strangely at the agent as he walked away from the counter, wondering what had happened to the usual Asian discretion. Apparently, Bryn had an unsettling effect on everyone she met.

They avoided the long boarding line to use the exclusive door that entered the First Class cabin. Rob sat down two rows behind Bryn and on the other side of the plane. Bryn looked back at him as he settled in, clearly not happy that he refused to sit with her.

He merely grinned back at her.

Their seating arrangement was made all the worse when the doors closed. The two of them were the only occupants of that privileged section, and the two flight attendants offered to seat them together as they began lavishing their attention on Bryn. Rob felt totally out of place.

Bryn passed the time by chatting with the attendants in fluent Korean, the two pretty young things bringing cheese and the best wines to her. They fulfilled their minimum duties in caring for Rob as well, only to rush back to lavish even more attention on Bryn.

Watching the Valkyrie, Rob decided that she was into some kind of sisterhood thing. Every woman seemed to adore her, while every man was intimidated by her appearance. Intimidated, but wildly attracted. An unsettling pair of emotions.

For the first time, he also began to appreciate why Norse women had always been judged as equals to their men, able to speak their mind and own property and raise children, even to wear armor and fight. He'd always thought it was because their men were away so much, or possibly because Norse women were as tall and strong as the men from some other cultures, but now he realized it might have been due to goddesses like Bryn who walked among mortal women, empowering them.

Lost in his speculation, Rob struggled to push away his own sense of growing awe, and focused instead on Bryn's humanity. He'd gotten to know Hana well enough to know that mortals and immortals started life thinking the same thoughts. Presumably that was still true after a couple of millennia. She was more human than she wanted to admit.

He waited until the attendants were called back to help with the jam-packed Business Class, watching as Bryn took out a small notebook to study topographical maps of Iran and Iraq. His interest piqued now, and his point about his independence made, he rose to walk forward and sit next to her.

"I've been meaning to ask this," he asked after a bit, "but how come you fly in airplanes when you can obviously fly on your own?"

Bryn scrolled through another couple of pages before closing her notebook. She continued looking down at her lap, her legs opening slightly as she relaxed.

Rob tried not to follow her gaze, given the expanse of wondrously tanned skin that her short skirt revealed. "It's the luggage. Tends to disintegrate at high speed."

He looked up at her. "Bullshit."

For the first time, he saw a trace of a smile. "Actually," she said, "it's because I can't fly as fast as a jet. Levitation is mostly good for impressing mortals."

"More bullshit," Rob smiled. "But very good bullshit."

She smiled genuinely in return now. "Actually, my levitation allows me to counterbalance things. Extreme strength isn't much good if I always have to be standing under the center of gravity, dancing around like mad trying to keep my balance."

"Hana did pretty good at that," Rob added. "She flipped a Soviet-made main battle tank on its back. And she can't fly yet."

"Did she really?" Bryn asked interestedly. "You didn't tell me about that before."

She reclined her seat and crossed her legs, revealing one gorgeously muscled thigh. She was sipping delicately on her double Jack Daniels as she turned to look at him, her expression softening.

"We've got some time, Sergeant. Why don't you tell me more about what my obstinate little daughter has been up to lately?"

Chapter 34***November 29, 2013: The desert near Hamadan, Iran.***

While Bryn and Rob sipped champagne and talked on the plane, Captain Bjork Nielsen was using a small flashlight to study his own map of Iran. While most other officers would have immediately started evade and escape activities to get out of Iran, he instead pulled his men together and gave them a vote. Head for the border or try to finish the mission?

They were all professionals, and their thoughts were still focused on a young American girl in the hands of the Arabs. Their righteous anger drove them to vote unanimously to continue the mission.

Bjork nodded his agreement, and quickly sent two of the Delta team members ahead to capture a truck. He sent two others back to find Captain Sarah Brightwell and her downed Apache.

He soon climbed into the captured truck the men returned with, and headed toward Hamadan. His plan was to get within sight of the city and then go the rest of the way in on foot, hoping to find hiding places in the city before the sun rose.

Unfortunately, their captured truck rounded a corner in the darkness fifteen minutes later, and a blaze of lights blinked on from ahead and both sides. A heavy machine gun opened up and the truck's engine exploded, the hood flying open to blind Bjork and the Delta team driver.

The driver braked and swerved to avoid the gunfire, and the truck skidded off the road to crash to a stop in a deep ditch. Bjork frantically grabbed his rifle and opened the door to make a run for it, only to find himself facing a dozen men with raised rifles. The truck was surrounded.

He cursed bitterly as he saw the uniforms of Iranian regulars. He dropped his rifle and raised his hands.

Chapter 35***November 29, 2013: Hamadan***

The desert sun was just rising when a small executive jet roared over the Iranian truck carrying Bjork and his men to the military prison in Hamadan. Craning his neck to look out the tiny window, Bjork saw a sleek jet painted with an unusual midnight blue scheme. The underside of the fuselage and wings resembled a giant white bird, complete with feathers.

One of the Iranian soldiers saw Bjork craning his neck, and rose to land a brutal blow against the back of his head with his rifle butt. Bjork staggered and fell to his side, a sea of bright spots filling his eyes.

He barely felt the pain, for his thoughts were racing. He knew he'd seen the symbol on that plane before! Somewhere. He'd seen it... where... in his wife's papers? Yes, he remembered now. It had been on an envelope that a courier had delivered. He'd assumed at the time that it was a symbol for the Valkyries.

If so, what the hell was a Valkyrie jet doing in Hamadan?

The jet and its connection to his wife were still foremost on his mind when he was thrown into an interrogation room a half hour later, his hands and feet bound with plastic straps. A robed man was waiting for him.

Bjork looked up, and his eyes opened wide in recognition.

"Captain Nielsen," Mustafa Al-Sa'ud said with a cruel smile. "So good of you to return to us. I had assumed after the Valkyrie freed you that you would have had the good sense to not violate my country's borders again."

Bjork's heart leaped at the word Valkyrie. Did Mustafa know about Hana? "What are you talking about?"

Mustafa settled into a chair across from Bjork. "I'm talking about the young woman who rescued you, after killing some of my men I might add. Surely you don't believe she is a GenTech as your Intel people say."

Bjork closed his eyes, hoping to hide his surprise from the Arab man. The Iranian's knowledge of their debriefing back in Baghdad was worrisome, almost as much as Mustafa's assumption that Hana was a Valkyrie. Did the Iranians have agents in the US military command?

It was all he could do to appear surprised and incredulous when he opened his eyes. He forced himself to laugh. "Valkyrie you said? Like the ghosts from some foggy, old Norse legend?"

"You instead claim she was CIA like your people believe? One of your new uber-children? Mutants."

Bjork said nothing. Even if it had been true, Mustafa knew he'd never volunteer information about a CIA agent. He thought back to the private jet, and a cold stab of fear lanced through him. If Mustafa knew

what Hana was, then he would presumably also know how to take advantage of her during her weakness to rob her of her power!

Forever.

He gritted his teeth and pulled frantically against the plastic ties, realizing that there was a silver lining to his capture. If Hana was still here, then she must be nearby, probably confined in this very same facility. And if she was, and they hadn't defiled her, she'd be regaining her powers soon. No restraints or prison bars could hold her then.

But how could he get word to her that he was here?

"The look in your eyes tells me you knew also of the girl's uniqueness," Mustafa chortled, more convinced than ever that the Valkyrie was going to be the great weapon Klaus had predicted. "That is why you are here, isn't it? Has your so-called Bastion of Freedom taken to sending your children onto the battlefield to kill us? Children of your heathen 'gods' even?"

Rob said nothing. Staring at his feet, he tried to keep his face expressionless.

Mustafa grinned victoriously as he saw Bjork struggling with his emotions. "Well, if you came for the girl, then like your countrymen, you threw away your lives for a futile cause. You will all be executed after prayers this afternoon."

Chapter 36***November 29, 2013: Enroute to Germany***

The Falcon 2000EX executive jet was cruising forty-two thousand feet over Turkey as Mustafa proclaimed his sentence on Bjork and his men. Klaus sat beside the girl he'd initially named Sváva as he ensured she remained sleeping, holding her close enough to wrap his aura around hers, preventing any connection between her short and long-term memories. He'd dressed her in a long dress and sweater, the style more Iranian than western.

He used the flight phone as they flew, coordinating with Domina members in Munich as they prepared facilities for her.

He also thought to have his maid freshen his bedroom at his house on Lake Starnbeg. He'd decided that Sváva would sleep in his bed, beside him and inside the reach of his aura, until he was convinced she was ready to function on her own. Brushing the warm, silky hair from her face, he opened one eyelid to confirm that her eye was still fluttering in REM sleep. Satisfied by his hold on her mind, he let her continue sleeping.

After all, it was only during REM stage sleep that her mind was fully susceptible to his influence. That was the time when the barriers between conscious and unconscious memories were at their lowest.

He took advantage of that vulnerability to created additional small remembrances of everyday events, and implanting them in her mind. The kinds of meaningless memories and images that clutter up everyone's head. The details that most people used to distinguish dreams from reality.

In such a way did he bring the future of his race home to his beloved Fatherland.

Chapter 37***November 30, 2013: Shores of Lake Starnbeg, Bavaria, Germany***

Klaus awoke early the next morning, and rose to pace back and forth in front of his bedroom window. Sváva still slept behind him, buried under a down comforter and pillows.

Despite the beautiful mountain scenery outside, his mood was dark. Mustafa had awoken him after midnight with a mission: target the girl immediately on the US President, who was visiting Europe.

Standing in the safety and beauty of Bavaria as he held the phone, Klaus had felt a chasm opening between he and his fellow scientists, realizing that he'd already rationalized their deaths as casualties of a greater battle. He'd refused to target the President, claiming the girl wasn't ready.

Mustafa had cruelly reciprocated by killing five of the German scientists, and then sending pictures of their severed heads to Klaus' email along with the same orders.

Four hours later, Mustafa tried again. Klaus still refused, claiming only the truth. The girl wasn't properly conditioned yet. Mustafa would have to wait.

Sensing he was losing control of the situation, Mustafa had given Klaus an ultimatum: turn the Valkyrie loose on the President that very morning, or he'd kill his wife.

Drunk with the possibilities of controlling Sváva, of using her to provide completion to his long-fought cause, Klaus had begged for time. Mustafa granted him none, and beheaded his wife in a fit of rage.

Klaus stared now into the promise of sunrise, struggling to leave behind the horror of the long night. He rationalized his wife's death by envisioning how he was going to use Sváva to change the world. To win a war that had been at a standstill for two millennia.

He boldly walked over to the bed and gently woke the future of his race.

Sváva jerked awake, her thoughts suddenly filled with a sense of panic. She was terribly disoriented.

Klaus searched her thoughts, and found to his shock that her mental conditioning had faded almost as fast as he'd established it. The drugs had clearly stopped working on her, forcing him to reach deep inside the Valkyrie's mind and use his Diaboli powers to force her back to sleep.

He searched the thoughts just below the surface of her consciousness, finding the myriad of rough edges that had been missed by his earlier reprogramming. He also found a great deal of her native memories seeping back into her consciousness. The connection between her long and short-term memories was clearly stronger than any human's.

He forced her back to sleep, and settled down to spend his morning smoothing those rough edges away and reintegrating her implanted memories. He struggled to suppress or transform her other memories. He resorted to implanting video images of his niece, Olga, hoping the Valkyrie would pattern herself after her.

By noontime, he collapsed in exhaustion, his head aching terribly from fighting her strong mind. Her willpower was almost as strong as her body.

When he allowed Sváva to wake a second time that evening, she thought she was his niece. Yet her emotions were still a jumbled mess, what with the aftereffects of her combat in Iraq tangling with the emotions that came from her new memories. She worried that she'd fallen seriously ill, feeling as if she'd forgotten something important.

His superior, Haljik, arrived and after a discussion, they decided to make Sváva think that Olga was just a false identity that she'd been asked to assume. That she was in reality an intelligence operative for the Domina. Haljik combined that strategy with his greater power to exert mastery over the *faciculu retroflexus*, a concentration of nerve fibers located above the thalamus that controlled emotional control, sexual arousal and REM sleep. He forced her back to sleep, and then worked for many more hours to erase her sensations of amnesia, further cementing her new memories of pretending to be Olga at the same time.

As he worked, both men were astonished to see the girl's face slowly changing. Klaus began to photograph her every half hour, capturing the various looks she displayed. He was shocked to see her taking on the physical form of his niece, Olga. Searching the room, he found a picture of Olga and himself on the wall, taken three summers ago when Olga had just turned sixteen.

For the first time since Sváva had arrived, even Haljik was truly impressed. He agreed to continue to work on her mind as Klaus returned to study his volumes of Norse lore, searching for a way to use this amazing shapechanging ability to their benefit.

Safely ensconced in his library, Klaus dug through the old legends until he found an account that confirmed that Frejya had given the Valkyrie her own ability to change shape. Up to this moment, he'd considered that a frivolous part of the legend which was beyond modern believability. A trick played on the unsuspecting.

He worked all night in his library, scanning the ancient tales, looking for more information on the limits of a Valkyrie's shapechanging.

He finally fell asleep in his chair, his dreams filled with visions of shapeshifting Valkyries.

Chapter 38*November 30, 2013: Dubai, UAE*

Bryn was acting decidedly friendlier by the time their Korean Air 747 landed at the Dubai airport, at least as compared to their chilly departure back in Okinawa. Most of that was due to Rob having spent the last hours describing everything he could remember about her day-to-day life, starting with Hana's so-called friends and ending with her work in his shop. Bryn seemed pleased that he'd found a positive way to channel Hana energies, even as he could see that she was uncomfortable finding that Rob knew more about her daughter's life than she did.

Once off the plane, the white-clad porters from the Burj Al Arab hotel struggled with Bryn's heavy bag before the two of them were whisked away in a Rolls. Rob felt as if his adventure into fantasyland was accelerating as they arrived at the only 7-Star hotel in the world, and the General Manager came out and personally welcomed Bryn back to his hotel, treating her like a long lost friend.

"You're a regular, I guess," Rob said as they were led toward their room, proclaiming the obvious as they were ushered into a huge suite that was located four levels below ground level.

The suite was easily 4000 square feet, with a huge aquarium forming one entire wall, the surface of the water forty feet above them. He tried to peer through the water, and saw a vague outline of other huge suites bordering the same aquarium. The tank had to hold tens of thousands of gallons of seawater. Maybe a hundred thousand.

Turning, he walked into the main room of the suite. It was formed from arches of concrete that suggested an underwater cave. He peaked into the equally large bedrooms. Amazingly, each of the similarly styled bedrooms was larger than his entire apartment back on Okinawa.



“I purchased this suite when the Burj Al Arab was still under construction,” Bryn volunteered.

“Not bad on a Captain’s salary. I’d guess... maybe ten million?”

She smiled. “Far more than that. But we have resources. And what we don’t have, we can access.”

“Communal property?”

Bryn nodded. “All of the sisters are welcome here.”

“And their husbands?”

“Of course.”

Rob walked around one of the bedrooms, noting that the bed was at least three times as large as the king-sized bed that he’d shared with his ex-wife. “I think you could sleep the entire immortal population of Earth in here.”

“Which we do sometimes,” Bryn said as she glanced down at her watch. “Look, I’ve got this appointment soon; part of the mission I was on before you called, and my contact might have some information we can use to locate Hana.” She paused to see him looking at the bed. “I might not be back until dawn, so get some sleep. You’re going to need it.”

“Hot date?”

“Don’t make light of things you don’t understand, Sergeant. You’re only here because you can help me find Hana.”

“Then why are we standing here, doing nothing?”

“We aren’t. I need you to contact anyone you can in Iraq and try to find clues as to Bjork or Hana’s whereabouts. I’ll have my contacts do the same.”

She turned on her heel and walked into the other bedroom, closing the door behind her.

Rob’s stomach started grumbling as he paged through the desktop book, looking for overseas dialing instructions. He flipped instead to the room service menu, only to find a dazzling variety of dishes listed, all of them at staggering prices. Fortunately, he wasn’t paying. He ordered a good steak and some beers, and the bill came to over a hundred dollars.

While he was waiting, he started the first of a dozen calls. He sat by the glass wall of the aquarium, watching a couple of large sharks making a meal of a fifty-pound grouper. He had less luck on his calls than the sharks did with the grouper.

His own meal came quickly, delivered by a stunningly attractive Spanish woman who refused his five-dollar tip. He wasn’t sure if she’d looked down her nose at it because it was paltry, or because the hotel, like those in Japan, didn’t allow tipping.

He dug into his steak and baked potato while the sharks killed and ate several of the grouper, a mere inch of glass and a few meters of water

separating them. It was best steak of his life. He turned toward the glass and showed his teeth to the closest shark, finding that its unblinking black eye was focused on him.

“This is my steak, not yours, buddy,” he said to the shark.

The shark seemed to hear him as it moved closer, mouth opening and closing, revealing rows of glistening teeth. The cold look in its eyes made it clear that it wasn't his steak he was hungry for. Rob rapped on the heavy glass and waved his arms, and the shark moved a few meters further away, still watching him.

By the time Rob finished his first beer, he was starting to feel guilty. Here he was, living in the lap of luxury, eating the best steak of his life while Hana was probably lying bound in some prison cell. He'd come to Dubai fully expecting to race directly back into the Iraq/Iran border area.

Fortunately, his regret didn't stop the second Hoegarten from going down well enough. So did the third one. He knew he couldn't go anywhere until Bryn returned.

He went to work instead, making his calls, but they took him nowhere. He finally dug out the base phone directory he'd grabbed while in Iraq, and called every department on the Baghdad base, trying to reach the other hostages. Nobody claimed to know where they'd been taken. Either that, or they'd been told to keep their mouths shut.

He finally called a fellow sergeant who was stationed at the Maintenance Group's HQ, and he told Rob that a bunch of brass were flying in, but he didn't know much more than that.

That worried Rob as he hung up the phone. It was likely they were going to extract more public relations airtime by flying home with the hostages, and that would take Bjork out of the action. The political situation in the US was difficult these days, what with the never ending war and all the protests. They'd milk this hostage rescue for all it was worth.

The food and beer relaxed him enough for the bone-tiredness to creep back in. He made one more call, this time to a clerk he knew in Public Relations, but she wasn't at her desk. Frustrated, he rose to walk around the curving aquarium glass, looking for his shark. He couldn't find him.

He entered the bedroom to continue his search, as the three hundred foot circumference of the aquarium formed the inside wall of the bedrooms too. Still no shark. Instead, he laid down on one of the massive beds, strangely finding that it made him feel like a Lilliputian.

He closed his eyes, just for a moment, but despite his worries and frustration, the lack of sleep of the last two days quickly caught up with him. Seconds later, he was asleep.

Chapter 39***December 1, 2013: Shores of Lake Starnbeg, Bavaria, Germany***

Back in Bavaria, Klaus awoke with a start as a beam of morning sunshine found him sleeping in his library chair. He rose stiffly to walk down the hall toward the bedroom. Haljik was standing outside the door smoking a cigarette. He looked exhausted.

He looked up as Klaus approached. “She’s a real handful, Klaus. But I think I’ve achieved consistency. She truly thinks like Olga now. Even as she knows that’s just a disguise. That her real name is Sváva.”

Klaus looked startled. “How would she know how Olga thinks? She’s only seen her picture.”

“I overlaid the Valkyrie’s native personality with an equally dominant one. And since she’d taken Olga’s form, it was only natural that I use...”

“You implanted Olga’s personality?” Klaus interrupted angrily. “Why didn’t consult with me before you...” His niece had always been a difficult girl to deal with.

Haljik stiffened despite his tiredness. “You have no right to question me, Klaus. I lead this Domina.”

“But the Valkyrie is my resource.”

“No, Klaus. She belongs to us all now. Our perfect weapon. Our Holy Warrior.”

Klaus brushed past his superior to enter the bedroom. If he didn’t know better, he would have sworn that Olga standing in the middle of the bedroom, still sixteen. She was dressed in a pair of jeans and a pink Adidas t-shirt that matched that age. She’d even braided her blonde hair into two waist-length ponytails the way Olga always did, and her eyes were just as large and blue. Impressively, Sváva’s previous voluptuousness had been reduced to Olga’s teenage slenderness.

Klaus paused in the midst of that thought. Had the earlier look even been the ‘real’ Valkyrie, Klaus wondered? What did *real* mean to a shapechanger anyway?

“So, you finally found a way to get me into your bed, you dirty old man,” Olga greeted him in an alto voice that matched Olga’s perfectly.



Klaus blinked in astonishment as the implications of her accusation sunk in. What the hell kind of memories had Haljik planted in her head? “You... you were sick, Olga. You needed to place to sleep. That’s all.”

Her eyes narrowed.

“I slept in the library,” he added, suddenly feeling defensive.

“Right,” she laughed. “So can I assume that Heidi is just down the hall in the kitchen? That your wife was helping me as well.”

“No, she’s...” Klaus was going to say dead, but he wasn’t sure how much of the Valkyrie’s memories had been integrated with Olga’s personality. “She’s still in Iran.”

Olga smiled wryly. “Surprise, surprise. She’s half a world away and I wake up in your bed. Naked by the way. What’s wrong with this picture?”

“Don’t you know why you’re here?” Klaus said sternly, trying to regain control of the discussion.

“You tell me. You’re the one who’s been ogling me since I was fourteen. The man who has a picture of me on his bedroom wall.”

“*God damn you, Haljik,*” Klaus cursed under his breath. As always, Haljik knew secrets he should not. Secrets that had lived only in Klaus’ fantasies. Clearly, he’d passed some of those insights on to Olga.

He felt his face flush as she began stretching, unable to conceal his shock as tight muscles briefly appeared across Olga’s slender arms, her body transforming from cute to tightly muscular. His eyes were still tracing the myriad curves of tight muscle and tendons when her stretch faded into a long yawn, and the hard curves faded as quickly as they’d appeared.

“I feel as if I’ve been sleeping forever,” she said, smothering a huge yawn with one hand.

“You needed your rest,” Klaus replied, forcing his brain back into gear. He smiled, trying to draw out the portion of her memories he’d personally implanted. His heart was racing with excitement now, as her profound display of muscularity had left him wondering what her true abilities were. He had only Mustafa’s outrageous claims to go by. Along with the Norse legends about invincibility in battle. “You just completed a very difficult mission in Iran.”

“Mission?” she asked, her look puzzled.

Klaus was opening his mouth to explain when he saw her look up, the look in her eyes telling him that she was searching her memories. It had been Haljik’s idea to blend the real and unreal together, making it impossible for her to know the boundaries of wakeful experience from her dreams. Sváva would think she lived undercover as Olga, but that she was in reality a Valkyrie from birth.

“You eliminated that terrorist group in Iran which was threatening Europe,” he prompted.

She nodded slowly, eyes still soft. “Of course. Yes... now... now I remember.” Her eyes snapped down to meet Klaus’. “I had to fight my way through many layers of their defenses.”

“Which you utterly destroyed,” Klaus said, feeling like he was an actor practicing his lines. “But you were exhausted when you returned, which is why you’ve been sleeping so long.”

“Oh, damn!” she said suddenly. “What about my classes?” At sixteen, Olga had been a student the local Gymnasium.

Klaus forced himself to laugh. “You are a sleepy head, aren’t you? We fixed that a long time ago. Private tutoring.”

Sváva slowly nodded as she discovered Haljik’s implanted memories. She remembered Klaus’ plea, asking her to take some time off to work with him. She remembered the training, the way she’d assumed the identity of Olga. She remembered the field deployments, righting

against the enemies of the Domina. She smiled with a strange mixture of satisfaction and sadness as she remembered how she'd infiltrated her victim's inner sanctums. Some men still fantasized over taking a beautiful teenage girl to their beds. And when that didn't work, she'd taken on an older look, a far shapelier one, and had found that a beautiful and sexually aggressive woman could take powerful and arrogant men down the most twisted of paths.

She tossed her youthful braids over her shoulders to stare arrogantly back into Klaus' eyes, strangely remembering what it had felt like to be a grown woman on her last mission. To be the object of some very experienced men's passion. Not to mention Klaus'. "So, did you enjoy trying to fuck me while I slept?"

Klaus blinked and his jaw fell open, shocked by such a crude question coming from such a young girl. He had to remind himself that this wasn't really his niece, but at the same time, he wondered again what kind of relationship Haljik had created in Sváva's implanted memories. What kind of memories. For she was a complete stranger to him. He didn't even know the Valkryie's real name, any more than she did now, for his reprogramming had erased that part of her short-term memory before he could probe it. He knew only that she was American and that she'd been both precocious and arrogant back in Hamadan.

Sváva rose to stand by the window when he didn't answer her, looking outside. The long, grassy slopes stretched away down to the shore of Lake Starnbeg. The sky-blue water of the lake was dotted with sailboats and windsurfers. Beyond it were the Bavarian Alps. Given the global warming of the last decade, it was still amazingly warm this late in the season, the grass still green, the winter's snow yet to come to the lowlands.

"Doesn't matter anyway," she answered for him. "Unless you wear a pair of tights with an 'S' beneath your clothes, it just can't happen, can it? No man would have the... fortitude." They both knew it wasn't the right word, but it would do.

Klaus held his breath as he admired a different kind of scenery. Sváva's pert breasts sat remarkably high and firm on her chest, her jeans revealing a remarkably tight derrière. Olga had always been the most desirable young woman he'd ever laid eyes on, and Sváva had all her beauty and then some.

He forced those forbidden thoughts away as he instead focused his mind on eavesdropping along the fringes of her thoughts, knowing that this moment was the most pivotal interface between her implanted memories and reality. The scenery had to look familiar to her or all this programming could collapse.

She finally turned back to flop on the bed; looking up at him with her big, blue eyes. "So, did you at least amuse yourself as I slept?"

"I would never..." Klaus suddenly felt himself starting to sweat as his heart pounded. He indulged himself for a brief moment by studying the inviting way her rump curved upward, and suddenly felt himself

rising. He was well aware that he could use his Diaboli powers to compel her to anything. He'd done as much with the most attractive of his classmates while back in the University. Until he met the woman he married. Heidi. A woman born with enough Diaboli traits to challenge him.

He closed his eyes and quickly reminded himself that intercourse with Olga was naturally out, for several very good reasons, not the least her reference to Supergirl, but he teased himself with the realization that she'd probably give him the best blowjob on the planet.

She interrupted his very private thoughts with a laugh. "I wonder what Oprah would say about this one? A dirty old man and Supergirl."

Her words crashed against the analytical side of his mind, his thoughts rebelling. "Never!" he blurted out loud, for his own benefit as much as hers. He had no clear idea where the definition and boundaries of Valkyrie virginity lay, but he wasn't going to risk crossing that line for a moment's pleasure. He struggled to rein in his racing thoughts, finally stating unnecessarily: "I'd never rob you of your strength and invulnerability."

She sighed. "So that's all I am to you? A weapon?"

"You're my niece. So of course you're more than that. You're family."

Sváva laughed, the sound like that of an older woman. "A nice fiction, but we both know what I truly am."

Klaus took a deep breath, and then slowly emptied his lungs in a long sigh. Despite the strange twists of her thoughts, her expressions were sincere, her voice relaxed and confident. She was completely convinced that she'd looked upon this scene many times before, and her emotions were tracking her implanted memories. The one thing he didn't like was this exaggerated version of Olga's already difficult personality. Despite his secret animal attraction, the two of them had never gotten along.

He closed his eyes and pushed the vestiges of his wife's image away. Heidi was dead. Nothing he could do about that now. She was a casualty of a greater battle.

Olga suddenly sat up in the bed, her mannerisms reverting to those of a mid-teen. "So, can we like eat breakfast or something? I'm starving."

Klaus smiled, retreating back to the tenuous trapping of normality as he led her toward the kitchen. He was further surprised to find that he wasn't really mourning his wife's untimely demise. How could he? Sváva was here, sleeping in his bedroom, and she was a younger, stronger and more perfect version of Aryan perfection than his wife had ever been.

He had his maid set breakfast out on the table in his grassy backyard, the view overlooking the lake. He watched happily as Olga consumed a gigantic breakfast. He found it inconceivable that a single human being, let alone a girl, could consume such a mountain of food and not show it. Her stomach was still flat as a board when she tore through her third helping of everything.

His maid was exhausted from dashing back and forth to the kitchen by the time Olga finally put her fork down. She drained the rest of a large pot of coffee, and then leaned back in her chair to meet Klaus' eyes. "So, do did I neutralize the objective?"

"Like always, Olga my dear. Nothing on Earth can stop you."

"I'm to be just Olga now, huh?"

"We'll be meeting other members of the Domina today. They will learn of your abilities, but I wish to keep your Valkyrie origins a secret for the time being."

"So they'll think I'm what instead?" She smirked at him. "A comic book refugee?"

"I'll tell them that I rescued you from an American GenTech lab. Military grade enhancements. Super soldiers."

She shrugged. "Might work for a bit, at least if we don't try to explore my limits. GenTech won't hold water then. Kryptonian might, though."

"Tell me more about the mission," Klaus asked, dismissing her worries.

She sighed and closed her eyes, remembering. It felt like a dream now. "It was fucking rough, let me tell you. Heavy weapons. Some of them hurt me." She didn't say that she still saw the faces of the soldiers she'd been forced to kill, their blood spilled, their bodies torn. Instead, she took Klaus through the horrific events of that day, consoling herself at the same time with the satisfaction that she'd at least completed the mission.

Still, a strange sensation kept teasing the edge of her thoughts. A vague memory of a man who'd fought with her. Frustratingly, she couldn't recall his name or remember his face. She shrugged, pushing that dreamlike memory away. He was probably dead anyway. Klaus had made it clear that they were fighting a war, and he'd said that casualties were part of war.

Klaus watched her expressions closely as he reached out to sense her unspoken thoughts. He found that Sváva's gestures and speech, not to mention her table manners, evaporated any lingering façade of her being Aryan-raised. Sváva, whatever her real name was, often talked with her mouth full, and her English was flavored with a casual American accent, and her sentences were too often sprinkled with profanity.

His niece Olga had always been impertinent and arrogant, not to mention sexually promiscuous enough with her schoolmates to be a constant worry for her parents, but she was well educated and keenly intelligent. She thought the world was her oyster, and given the Diaboli talents she'd inherited, she felt she could do most anything she wanted without repercussions. She spoke German with pure, Aryan precision, just as his wife and sister had. Neither woman would ever have stooped low enough to use either slang or the crass words imported from lesser languages.

Fortunately, none of the men of his Domina had met the real Olga, so Sváva was likely to pull off the masquerade of pretending to be her, at least for a while.

Chapter 40***December 1, 2013: Shores of Lake Starnbeg, Bavaria, Germany***

Glancing at his watch as they finished their breakfast, Klaus excused himself and made a call to Gunter Helman, his assistant. Gunter had been leading a construction team that had been working around the clock for the last few days to prepare a rented warehouse for Sváva's awakening.

Gunter assured him that all was ready for his niece's appearance.

Klaus closed his phone and smiled at the girl he called Olga. "They say everything's ready my dear."

"What's ready?"

"Your new gym."

A brief look of confusion crossed her face, and then she seemed to remember. "Oh, right. Has Heinz arrived yet?"

"The whole team is there. Everyone's waiting for you." He'd inserted a recent memory of introducing her to a personal trainer, Heinz Frallist. Klaus had emphasized that Heinz was an expert in finding ways to explore the limits of military-grade GenTech strength.

Olga brought a final piece of toast with her as she followed Klaus to his BMW 9-series. She looked impressed as she sat down in the passenger seat, and ran her hands over the hand-tooled leather of the huge car. "Now this is a nice ride."

"Bavarian cars are the best in the world."

She smiled. "As good as the beer?"

"What do you know about beer?"

She winked at him and changed the subject. "I'm still surprised that my mother agreed to my working with you. She can be so arrogant and full of herself. And she worries so much about... older men."

The real Olga had briefly been involved with one of her teachers at school, and it had taken all of her mother's Diaboli talents to extricate her without anything damaging going on her permanent record. The teacher was now a patient in an asylum for the insane, and no one believed his ravings about women who could reshape a man's thoughts. Clearly Haljik had implanted a few of those memories in Sváva's mind.

"Surely she knows I'll protect you," Klaus offered.

"She is naïve that way, isn't she," Olga laughed. "I mean, we both know what you want to do during my next period."

Klaus' eyes opened wider as a flash of inspiration struck as she mentioned her period. A Valkyrie's period truly was a period of weakness, not of bleeding? That explained her capture in Iraq.

Sváva prattled happily on as more questions filled Klaus' mind. "This workout is going to be fun. I'm feeling so strong after that great breakfast."

Klaus kept her talking as he drove. Most of their talk was about some fictional incidents that supposedly had happened over the last few weeks -- all of them from his mental implants. Fortunately, Sváva accepted that those memories were real. Her conditioning was holding nicely.

They parked a few minutes later in front of a very modern, prefab warehouse, and Klaus led Olga through the door and into the darkened interior. A dozen men in work clothes and several others in gym attire were waiting for them.

The men stared curiously as Klaus introduced her as his niece. He started with the project lead. "Olga, this is my longtime associate, Gunter Helman. Gunter, my niece, Olga."

Gunter frowned as he studied her. She was far younger than he'd anticipated. He started to reach out to shake her hand, only to have Olga choose that moment to break into a huge grin and step around him, leaving him standing awkwardly with his hand extended.

She beamed instead at a mid-twenties athletic man who was walking toward them. "So, my personal torturer has returned."

"How could I stay away from my most famous client," her supposed trainer, Heinz, smiled back as he opened his arms to hug her. Haljik had prepared him well, planting a few memories to stimulate his emotions. "It's not everyday I get to train a true goddess."

"Goddess?" she winked as she held him tightly. "Keep saying that and I might believe it someday."

Heinz Frallist, like all the other men present, were members of Haljik's Domina, but none of them had been fortunate enough to have been born Diaboli. Only Klaus and Haljik and his sister had the true gift, the real Olga to a far lesser degree, and they used their mind-bending powers to convince the others that they were serving an important cause. Klaus' job had been to recruit members from various white supremacy groups. It hadn't taken much persuasion to convince neo-Nazis to join a secret and powerful organization dedicated to Aryan power.

"Can I change here?" Olga asked Heinz.

"Of course," Heinz replied, nodding toward the locker room.

Olga winked at him as she unsnapped her jeans and peeled them off. She wore a skintight pair of biker shorts beneath. She pulled off her pink t-shirt as well, revealing a black sports bra made of Lycra. The skintight garments emphasized her trim hips and fabulously tight derrière, along with long legs that were slender yet very lean, her ankles and knees looking almost delicate. Her breasts were phenomenally pert, her nipples prominently on display.

All eyes followed her as she walked down the row of exercise stations that sat widely spaced on the concrete floor. The huge machines had been welded together using 12" thick I-beams, with anchors sunk deeply into the concrete floor. A series of large hydraulic cylinders were connected to high-tensile steel handles using 3" braided steel ship's hawsers. The hawsers ran over pulleys made from modified railroad wheels. Yet despite their gargantuan size, the stations were designed to function much the same as the Nautilus machines in a normal gym.

Turning back to Heinz, Olga giggled girlishly. "Those things look as if they've been made for the Incredible Hulk."

"Incredible is something we can agree on," Heinz winked as he watched her studying the equipment. "But they were designed solely for you."

"But I'm just a girl, she said playfully.

"Yeah. As in Supergirl."

"I don't have a cape."

"I noticed that," he winked, acknowledging her skimpy outfit. She looked so adorably sexy standing there in her second skin.

"What's with all the blast protection over there?" Olga pointed to a narrow corridor made of sandbags and lined with Kevlar. It led fifty feet along one wall to end at the doorway of a steel-reinforced room. The walls of the room looked as thick as a bank vault.

"Beats me," Heinz said, feigning ignorance. "Looks like some kind of explosive test chamber."

"One of Klaus' little tortures I presume," she smiled at Heinz, "although probably not as much fun as yours." She looked around again, clearly impressed by the expanse of equipment. "How much did you guys spend to build this place, anyway?"

"Money is not a problem for us, Olga," Klaus said as he walked up behind her. "We have many believers in our cause."

She turned back to face him.

Heinz tried to keep his face neutral as he found himself standing behind her, his eyes studying the most attractive legs he'd ever laid eyes on. Slender, lean and muscular and very long. He quickly forced himself to look back up. Supposedly, he'd been her personal trainer for some time, so he could hardly gawk at her now.

Olga smiled to herself as she saw him looking at her in the wall-sized mirrors. She liked the way he studied her when she wasn't looking. Like she was a woman. She made a point of wiggling her behind more than she needed to as she padded barefoot over to the first set of cables. Mounted on floor pulleys, the cables and heavy handles of the station were designed for doing curls.

Heinz followed her to push a button on a console next to the machine. A series of massive pumps started running outside at the back

of the warehouse. Despite their distance, the floor of the warehouse began to tremble slightly.

Olga tossed her braids behind her shoulders and positioned her feet as she reached down to grip the high-tensile handles. The hydraulics hissed slightly as she straightened her back, lifting the handles powerfully to position her hands to just below waist-height. Looking around, she saw everyone watching with baited breath. Amused by that, she held the handles steady as the hydraulics came up to full pressure.

The pair of gauges in front of her soon said '5'. She assumed by the resistance she felt in the cables that the gauge was calibrated in tons. Smiling, she realized they were badly underestimating her strength. She proudly tried to make it look effortless as she slowly and smoothly curled her arms upward, the hydraulics hissing loudly. She held perfect form, her slender arms flexing powerfully to reveal tight clefts of muscle and strong tendons. Her biceps formed two small balls of muscle, each of them so defined that that the split down the middle of the muscle was visible. Each of them resisting five tons of force!

The hydraulics gave off a symphony of sizzling hisses, the I-beams popping and groaning slightly as she quickly cranked out 15 reps. She was really just warming up, her muscles stretching long and then balling back up each time, the tendons of her arms looking like steel cables.

Looking up as she finished that set, she smiled as Heinz dabbed a single drop of sweat from her forehead. A glance around at the astonished faces drew a chuckle from her. "You guys haven't seen me work out before, have you?"

They shook their heads as one. Everyone but Klaus and Heinz.

"Except for you guys. How come you set the starting weight so low?"

"It's the new equipment," Heinz quickly replied, quickly inventing a plausible excuse for miscalculating her strength. "I figured I'd let you warm up a bit while the mechanics checked out the hydraulics."

"Okay, I'm warmed up now. Give me full weight on each arm, and let's try this again."

Heinz stared at her for a moment before walking over to adjust the hydraulic controls. He had no idea what resistance to set, so he doubled the resistance.

When Olga lifted the handles again, the cables and I-beams gave off a louder groan and the hydraulic pumps began to pound. Her biceps grew even more peaked than before, secondary muscles flexing smoothly beneath her tight skin as she slowly curled and then relaxed her arms, each one working against a ten-ton load.

Heinz daringly stepped closer and began to encourage her in the way of a personal trainer, trying to treat her as he would any other client despite the massive equipment and weight she was using.

Olga was gasping for air by the time she finished twenty reps with the heavier weight.

“Keep going, babe,” Heinz encouraged. “Two more. Come on, you can do it.”

Olga gritted her teeth and strained even harder yet, forcing her tiring arms through another five reps.

The next three hours went much the same way. Olga would run out of strength, and Heinz would push her a little further. He kept adjusting the hydraulics as he discovered her abilities, struggling to exhaust her, preparing each station ahead of her finishing the previous one. Like any other client, he quickly learned to anticipate the point where her strength would fail. Unfortunately, that point was very close to the maximum capability of the hydraulics.

Seated at the leg extension station now, she was preparing to work her quads. Drenched in sweat, her nipples were enticingly engorged, the wet Lycra clinging to them. A dozen empty water bottles filled the bin by the office.

She squirmed her way deeper into the mass of steel girders that formed the last station, her knees bending upward to nearly touch her chest. Heinz adjusted the hydraulics to load each leg with forty tons, and then walked back to rest his hand on her knee, encouraging her.

“Just two more reps and you’re done, Olga.” He twisted the resistance dial to the max. “This one’s maximum effort.”

Olga bit her lip and nodded as she began to strain against the weight. Her quads quickly stood out, deep clefts shaping them as if they’d been sculpted from a solid block of steel, her calves tensing into a perfect diamond shape as steel tendons shaped her ankles and feet.

Heinz looked nervously back at the engineering crew as the hydraulic hoses began to vibrate wildly, the pumps thundering louder than ever, the hiss of actuator cylinders gradually becoming a scream now. The heavy steel hawsers began to vibrate so loudly that some men covered their ears.

Slowly, ever so slowly, she extended her immensely powerful legs, her normally slender thighs coming alive with steely curves. She clenched her teeth and groaned, and Heinz pressed as hard as he could on her knee, his mere pounds of force multiplied hundreds of times over as she struggled against the full force of the hydraulics.

Slowly, ever so slowly, she managed to extend her legs. Then, just as her knees began to lock, she gave off a tiny cry of triumph. Her victory cry was promptly interrupted by a loud KER-BANG as the hydraulic hose attached to the left actuator ruptured, sending high-pressure hydraulic oil spraying against the far wall.

The man closest to the sign marked Emergency Shutoff stabbed the button and the pumps fell silent, but the oil kept coming from the

accumulator, the needle-thin spray cutting a deep gash in the sheetrock wall.

Olga leaped from her station to throw herself in front of the spray, blocking the piercing stream with her invulnerable body before it could scald the mechanics. The mechanics scattered, most of them diving for the floor.

“Olga, are you okay?” Heinz shouted as he picked himself off the floor.

She looked down at herself as she dripped oil all over the floor. Her halter had been torn away by the force of the oil, but the dark oil covered her. She looked up and quipped to Heinz: “I didn’t realize that hot oil was part of the treatment.” The oil was running down her legs as she started to walk unsteadily toward the locker room, her bare feet slipping on the concrete, leaving oily footprints behind.

“New equipment,” one of the astounded mechanics offered. “What can I say?”

“Maybe something like, *I’m sorry*,” she answered as she angrily pushed the door of the locker room open and disappeared inside.

Chapter 41

It took all the shampoo and shower gel in the locker room to clean the oil off her. Olga finally stepped out of the hot shower to blow-dry her hair, the luxuriantly blonde strands blowing like silk in the hot air. The color of the strands varied from darkly golden to nearly white, the overall effect of the highlights making her look as if she was standing outside in winter sunshine. She tied them off in two crude ponytails, not taking the time to braid them this time.

Rummaging around in the lockers for something to wear, she finally resorted to pulling her same jeans back on. She left her pink t-shirt lying on the counter as a strange thought came over her. She was a goddess and she was still too hot to get dressed. Besides, why did she have to hide herself?

She caught herself in the midst of that strange thought – there was still an uncomfortable feeling lurking in the background of her mind. An impulse to hide herself. She shrugged, clinging instead to a sense of relief at escaping her mother’s strict control. She was finally able to act the way a goddess should.

She turned and walked boldly out the door of the locker room.

All activity in the gym came to an abrupt stop as she reappeared, standing bare-breasted and wearing only her jeans. She looked disturbingly young. Glancing around, she saw the worried look on Heinz’s face, also on Klaus’, the two of them sharing... something. Their looks brought back that confusing feeling of wanting to hide herself. There was also that sense of having forgotten something important.

Klaus walked across the gym to stand close to her. “This is not appropriate, Olga. Exhibiting yourself like this. We’ve got the most critical test to complete yet.”

Heinz appeared at her other side, holding out a blue warm-up jacket.

She ignored the offered jacket as she glared at Klaus, her hands on her hips. “Hey, wait just a damn minute. I thought we were done for the day?”

“Just another half hour. Is that too much to ask?”

“Yeah. It is. I’m sore and I’m tired and I’m hot.”

Klaus stepped closer, projecting his aura as much as his voice, planting a vision in her head of her wearing the warm-up jacket. “This is really important, Olga. You have a mission coming up.”

“Why didn’t you say so,” she pouted, quickly taking the jacket from Heinz and slipping it on, zipping it all the way up. “Just wish I knew what was going on around here.”

“You’ll learn soon enough. To start with, I’d like you to walk down that hallway and stand inside the blast room at the far end.”

She held her ground as she gestured toward the soldiers. “What are they here for? And that blast room, what’s that supposed to prove?”

Klaus resisted jamming another thought into her mind, but instead tried to explain. He wasn't going to be able to stay within range of her aura during the test. She had to believe in what she was doing. "Haljik says the next Op requires an explosive. We'd like you to start training with it."

Olga's eyes opened wide. "Explosives?" She remembered the battle in the desert, and could still feel the frightening power of those explosions.

Klaus said a little prayer before he answered her; hoping his implanted memories of her being a field operative and assassin were going to stick. "We're going to use you to get to some men who are otherwise too well protected for anyone to reach."

Olga looked at him blankly for a moment, and then her face brightened. "Okay. That makes sense. So, this time, I carry explosives in, right?"

Klaus nodded.

She acknowledged his gesture by turning on her heel to march proudly down the corridor of sandbags, leaving Heinz once again to stare at the wonder of her tight derriere flexing. Beneath that, her long legs looked simultaneously slender and strong, long muscles flexing lithely with every step. Her tight jeans made her legs look even sexier than when she'd been nude.

Klaus was similarly lost in thought, although on a far different subject, He was praying he wasn't making a terrible mistake with this next test.

The more senior of the soldiers watched Olga approach, and then turned to look at Klaus, finally down at the explosive he'd brought with him. "This is suicidal, sir. Do you have any idea how powerful and unstable this explosive is?"

"Of course I do," Klaus said flatly. "That's why I asked you to bring it here."

"You don't understand, sir. A mere quarter ounce of PBX will open a Mercedes limo up like a cherry bomb in a tin can. You said you wanted to use a full ounce? In that blast room. With her?"

"I want my niece to try to contain the force of the explosion. At least long enough to build up an overpressure."

The sergeant stared at Klaus as if he was deranged. "This is the fastest burning explosive available, sir, and the most lethal because of that. Anyone within 20 meters is going to disinteg..."

Klaus shook his head. "Nobody is going to get hurt."

The sergeant shook his head doggedly. "No one could possibly survive standing within twenty meters of such a detonation. Let alone while holding it!"

Klaus waved his hand Olga's way. "Trust me; there is nothing you can do to injure my niece. She's GenTeched."

The sergeant looked at Olga for a long moment, and then shook his head. Most of what he knew about GenTech had to do with surgical enhancements. Elective surgery. "I'm... I'm afraid I'm going to need some proof of that, sir. She's just a very pretty girl, at least as far as I can see."

Klaus angrily debated reaching out and just tweaking the sergeant's mind, but he was depending on the soldier to think clearly. He remembered that the soldiers had arrived after Olga's workout, so they had no idea of her special abilities. He swallowed his frustration and instead held out his hand. "Give me your sidearm, sergeant."

The soldier hesitated.

"Do you want proof or not? Give me your weapon."

The sergeant reluctantly pulled his 10mm service automatic from its holster and handed it to Klaus.

Klaus ejected the clip, discovering that it contained steel-jacketed rounds designed for penetrating light armor. German Army standard for the 2010's. The less powerful 9mm slugs he'd tested on Sváva back in Iran had been made of copper-jacketed lead. He suspected it wouldn't make a difference. Conversely, if this weapon could injure Olga, then she would be of no value to him anyway.

Olga stood impatiently in the darkened doorway, her hands on her hips. Behind her, the interior walls were a metallic blue.



“My dear, these men want some assurance they’re not going to injure you.”

“This is really dumb!” Olga said insolently, her eyes narrowing slightly. “I just want to go home, Klaus.”

“Humor me for just a few minutes more, my dear.”

She sighed loudly, her eyes moving from one man’s eyes to the next, her blue irises glowing luminously inside the darkened chamber. “Shit! Just get it over with. Okay?”

Klaus heard the soldiers holding their breath as he expertly replaced the clip and cycled the action to load a round into the chamber. He raised the gun and aimed it, the slight shake of his hand the only thing that betrayed his inner thoughts. He reminded himself that if this bullet injured Olga, then all was lost.

Instead of worrying about her, he focused his memories on the evil he'd seen in Mustafa's face, his thoughts filling with the dark revenge that this Valkyrie would bring him. And in that thought, he found the courage to slowly pull the trigger.

The heavy handgun barked loudly, the report followed by an echoing THOK as the bullet hit high on Olga's drum-tight chest. A puff of blue fleece exploded outward to leave a ragged hole just above her collarbone. The tinkle of spent brass hitting the floor completed the symphony of sounds.

Her eyes registered a hint of pain as the impact rocked her slightly backward, twisting her shoulder to the side. She quickly straightened herself to look proudly back at him.

Despite his studied calm, Klaus' heart was racing wildly as he stared at the small patch of unblemished, tanned skin now revealed in the bullet hole. He was suddenly struck by the ridiculous irony of an ancient Norse goddess wearing these modern clothes instead of animal skins. Even more, that she was submitting herself to such a crude test of modern weapons as opposed to the blows of a sword, or the pierce of an arrow. He felt the strangeness of Earth's ancient past colliding with the future.

Smiling as tears of promise moistened his eyes, he held tighter to his vision of a new humanity. This Valkyrie would indeed be the mother of a new race of supermen. And he would be the father.

Olga watched curiously as expressions of fear, desire and incredulity chased each other across the men's faces. A strangely proud feeling came over her as she saw Klaus' hand shaking. She suddenly suspected that he was afraid of her. Of her strength? Clearly. Of her invulnerability? Perhaps. Of her youth? Maybe. She smiled. What he really feared was her sexuality. A power greater than any mortal man could satisfy.

Feeling both empowered and strangely diminished at the same time by that last thought, she failed utterly to comprehend the true horror of Klaus' fantastical dreams. For instead of fleeing as she should, she smiled confidently back at him, her thoughts proudly filled with the promise of her own powers.

"No clothing needs protect me," she boasted with a teenager's confidence, flaunting the men's fascination with her youth and sexuality by slowly unzipping her jacket. "For no matter how much you try to hurt me, you cannot."

She tossed her ponytails over her shoulders and lifted her arms over her head, her jacket falling open to invite their stares.

Klaus' eyes grew wide in wonder as he traced his gaze across her chest, noting the way her breasts sat so high and firm, almost as if the forces of gravity had been suspended just for her. He took a deep, shuddering breath as he stared at such youthful confidence, finding that her innocent beauty contrasted wildly with the lethal violence he held in

his hand. His hand shook from excitement as he raised the automatic, his thoughts filled with the glory of his destiny.

Exhaling slowly, he aimed safely for the center of her stomach, seeing Olga tensing those fabulous muscles as he jerked the trigger. A sharper THOK sent a riot of sparks flying as the bullet hit just above her navel. A faintly glowing spot faded from her skin as fast as it had appeared.

Klaus held his breath as he began to fire steadily now, finding his aiming point was wandering across her upper body as the recoil jerked the gun around. Some bullets gave off a dull THUD as they dimpled softer flesh, other rounds exploding with a sharp ZINGING sound and a blaze of sparks as they hit bone, most of them giving off that resonant THOK as they hit dense muscle. Shockingly, despite his best efforts to avoid them, a few rounds dimpled her breasts, the spent bullets plunking soundlessly to the floor in front of her, even as the brass casings tinkled noisily around his feet. One neat hole disturbingly decorated the lower part of the snaps of her jeans.

Klaus' hand was as numb as his thoughts as he handed the automatic back to the sergeant ten shots later. He looked into the sergeant's eyes, his mouth dry. "Just so you don't think I'm faking this somehow, you need to fire a couple of shots yourself."

The sergeant held the smoking hot automatic as if it was some kind of serpent. He raised it slightly, only to quickly lower it back to his side without firing, clicking the safety back on. "I can't do it. She's just a girl."

"I can," the younger soldier said. He glanced at Klaus and at his sergeant, and then down the range at Olga. His eyes narrowed, giving him the glazed look of a youth who'd been too long in a shooting arcade. Before either man could reply, he snapped his automatic rifle up and fired a long burst on full automatic, holding the trigger down until his magazine emptied.

The higher-powered rifle bullets crashed into Olga's body almost simultaneously, the tremendous force lifting her off her feet to slam her back against the wall. The impact of thirty bullets filled the air with shreds of blue fleece. She lost her footing and slumped down so sit against the back wall, quickly covering her stinging breasts with one arm. Her innocent look had disappeared, to be replaced by a grimace of pain.

Klaus took a few quick steps her way, looking both angry and worried, only to have Olga scramble back to her feet. She brushed the lead from her body, pausing to gently massage her bruised breasts, which send the men's blood pressures soaring even higher. A flash of white light from beneath her hands dazzled the men, only to fade as quickly as it came.

Klaus turned to glare at the young soldier, jerking the smoking rifle from his hands. "Are you fucking satisfied now?" he shouted to the sergeant, his bravado returning as he saw Olga walking around the inside

of the blast chamber, her fleece jacket in tatters. "I told you, my niece is anything but an ordinary girl."

"That's... that's not possible. No GenTech could..." the sergeant started to say, his eyes as big as saucers.

"Are you in the habit of both ignoring your own eyes and the orders of your superiors?" Klaus asked him sharply.

The sergeant took a deep breath as he gingerly picked up a small container of explosive. He said nothing in return as he began to prepare it.

Meanwhile, the younger soldier walked slowly down the sandbagged corridor, pausing to kneel worshipfully in the doorway. "Christ Almighty," he asked in frank disbelief. "What... who are you? Supergirl?"

Olga didn't attempt to answer his silly question, but instead finished brushing the stubborn lead from her skin. She finally looked up to see the sergeant handling a small ball of gray putty as if it was going to explode any moment.

"So what's that for?" she asked.

"The real test," Klaus replied from beside her, his voice smooth and compelling, his aura reaching out to steady her thoughts. "As you know, all explosives are far more powerful when contained. When extreme overpressure is allowed to build inside a containment vessel, the resulting explosion has a shocking, shattering effect."

"I don't like the sound of that," she said sourly. She was tired, her chest hurt now and she just wanted to go home. Yet that familiar voice spoke from inside her head again, telling her that this was important. That she had to stay.

Klaus continued, speaking aloud now. "I want you to try to contain the force of this blast as best you can, Olga. Force the pressure to rise very high. That will let us know how to proceed to the next test."

Olga looked at him as if he was insane, an uncomfortable sense of *deja'vu* tugging at the edges of her memories. "Now that's completely whacko."

Klaus shook his head. "Trust me. I've done the math. If bullets can't hurt you, this can't either."

He was lying about the math, for he had no real idea how to calculate her abilities. Yet during her sleep, he'd experimented, discovering that her soft skin seemed to grow resilient in direct proportion to the force being applied against it. Feeling as soft as silk one moment, her skin could become harder than sintered iron when required to prevent penetration. It was as if some invisible, adaptive force field surrounded her.

He'd tried to measure the response function of that field as he attacked her skin with needles and instruments, but he'd found no limit to its power. It was now his belief that her skin would become as hard as

it needed to be to survive any attack. The only remaining question was whether the field could adjust fast enough to blunt an explosion.

“By Odin’s breath...” Olga started muttering in exasperation, only to have Klaus expertly massage that thought away. She instead tilted her hips and impatiently held out her hand.

The sergeant gently handed the gray explosive to the young soldier, who in turn taped it to her open palm. It was about the size of a walnut. “Don’t put any pressure on it until you are ready to detonate it,” he told her, “and then shove your palms together and hold them as tightly as you can.”

“Lace your fingers and cup your palms to try to contain the explosion,” Klaus added. “And give us a signal three seconds before you detonate it so we can spin up the cameras.”

Klaus left Olga alone as he and the soldiers retreated to sit on the floor outside the sand bags at the far end of the corridor. They screwed earplugs into their ears and then covered them with their hands.

Klaus noted the way the sergeant’s eyes looked hollow now, almost as if he was lost in some nightmare. He would have to deal with him after this was done. He was a risk.

Inside the blast chamber, Olga stared at the gray ball in her hand. She had half a mind to just set the explosive down and walk out of there. Either that, or tear it off and throw it against the wall. She just sighed instead. No, Klaus would just insist she return to try it again.

Screwing up her courage, she gently interlaced her fingers and slowly closed her hands, gently molding the plastic explosive to fit between her palms. She took a deep breath and shouted: “**Now.**”

The high-speed cameras spun up with a loud whine as she kneeled down to bury her hands between her legs. She closed her eyes and squeezed her thighs together as hard as she could.

Her world disappeared in a flash of light as an indescribably powerful ball of pure plasma expanded with steel-shattering violence. Forces that would have ripped the foundations from under a building were instead contained between her thighs. Unfortunately, the now focused blast traveled upward to slam into what should have been her most delicate place, the force picking her up to slam her against the upper rear wall of the chamber hard enough to dent the four-inch thick armor.

A brilliant flash and deafening BOOM filled the rest of the warehouse, the shockwave compressing the concrete floor beneath the blast chamber. That shockwave raced across the floor like an ocean wave, shattering the concrete for ten meters in every direction as it bounced the men high into the air, their earplugs and covering hands barely reducing the sound level enough to save their hearing.

Fortunately, the upward path of the explosion combined with the meter-wide pop-off valve on the top of the blast chamber to vent most the force through the roof, but enough of it escaped through the doorway

to tear the sandbags apart over the men's heads, raining sand down on them.

Klaus was the first to leap back to his feet, only to trip over a wide crack in the floor. He stumbled and fell painfully to his knees. He rose again, only to stumble twice more as he tried to walk down the smoke-filled corridor, slipping on the sand that was pouring over him. He finally arrived at the door of the blast room to find the air entirely filled with floating pieces of blue fabric, most of them burning. Denim and fleece. Disturbingly, he knew it came from Olga's clothing.

He swatted the smoking fireflies away to see an outline of Olga's body in the steel wall. But no Olga. He held his breath while wading deeper into the smoke and flaming remnants, and finally spotted a brilliant glow to his right. Olga was lying there, crumpled into a fetal position on the floor, her hands, stomach and inner thighs glowing white hot, her hair disheveled and wild. She was naked and unconscious.

Afraid to approach her at first because of the blast furnace-like heat she was radiating, Klaus took a couple of hesitant steps closer, holding his hands in front of his face to block some of the heat. Astoundingly, he saw little jets of steam exiting her ears and nose, along with one tantalizing curl of steam that rose from between her legs. Her skin was cooling visibly, the sides of her hips along with her chest and lower legs transitioning from bluish-white to cherry-red.

He turned and called to the soldiers to bring one of the CO² extinguishers. When it arrived, he pulled the safety pin and began to blast the icy vapor her way. Her body was still glowing faintly when the canister ran dry. The floor and walls around her were coated with ice crystals.

He dropped the canister and walked forward to kneel beside her. "Are you okay, Olga?"

She didn't respond.

The younger soldier arrived with a second CO² extinguisher. Klaus stood back up and blasted her again, focusing this time on the center of her body. By the time the canister was emptied, her skin had returned to its normal tan, although her eyebrows and hair were now covered in frost.

She blinked her eyes and tilted her head back as she slowly woke up. Her eyes suddenly opened wide to stare up at him, both of them slightly crossed and unfocused, yet glowing so blue that they appeared to be lit from inside. She opened and closed her hands a few times, flexing her fingers, then rubbed one still glowing hand along her thigh, finally clenching her fist tightly between her thighs. She opened her mouth as if to talk, but her tongue was too dry.

Klaus opened a bottle of water, holding it for her so the plastic wouldn't melt in her hands. She drank it thirstily in a single long gulp, then belched up a cloud of steam in a very unladylike way. Her blue eyes

continued to sparkle behind the arctic white of her hair. Astonishingly, there didn't appear to be a mark or blemish on her anywhere.

Klaus sat down hard as he finally understood the enormity of her power, the empty CO² canister clattering across the floor as a dizzy wave of emotions raced through him. Despite all his intellectual preparation, he hadn't been emotionally prepared for the way he'd feel as he watched Olga shrug off both the assault and the explosion.

She would prove to be an even better weapon than he'd dare dream.

Lost in that flush of exuberant thoughts, he failed to notice the way Olga was looking around the chamber, a blank look in her eyes. She finally focused her eyes directly on him, yet her expression was devoid of recognition.

"What is it, Olga?" he finally asked her.

"Olga? Who's Olga? My name is Hana. And who the hell are you?"