

## **Tales of the Valkyries**

### **Hana - Part Three**

By Shadar and Rob

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#### ***Chapter 42***

##### ***December 1, 2013: Dubai, UAE***

Rob had no idea if it was day or night when he was awakened by a painfully full bladder. A glance at the clock said it was just after midnight. He'd slept only a few hours.

*That damn beer,* he realized.

He got up and headed for the toilet, half asleep and seriously jetlagged as he unzipped himself while walking toward the bathroom door. He was through the doorway when he came face to face with a naked woman!

She wasn't Bryn. For instead of a Valkyrie's blonde hair, she had wavy, raven tresses that hung down her back to her waist. And piercing green eyes.

He blinked in the bright light, his jet-lagged daze given way to shocked surprise as he gawked at the unfamiliar woman. She in turn had frozen in the midst of undressing, her arms high over her head. She was an inch taller than his 5'10, and was completely gorgeous, with amazingly eyes that seemed to give of their own light in the dim bathroom. She had large, uplifted breasts that looked so amazingly firm that they had to be GenTeched. A simple diamond solitaire necklace was her only jewelry.



The woman stared back at him, her briefly startled look brightening into a sexy smile as she lowered her eyes. "How nice," she remarked. "I really love this service."

"Huh?" Rob wondered out loud, finding himself staring at her large nipples. He quickly redirected his attention to her face, He noted her downward glance before she looked up to meet his eyes. The sound of her voice could soothe the worst of injuries.

She winked at him in a way that made his heart leap. "The amenities have definitely gotten better here since my last visit. I've barely arrived, and you're already here."

A number of connections suddenly illumined a number of light bulbs in Rob's head, and he backed away from the woman, stammering as he struggled to put himself away. He grimaced in pain as his zipper caught. "Ah, now just hold on a second - Shit! - I'm, uh - OW! Dammit! - I'm not a member - I mean an *employee* - on the, uh, stiff - I mean *staff*."

His eyes grew even larger as he struggled painfully to close his zipper. It wasn't just his finger that had caught.

The woman stood in the middle of the huge room, her stunning figure stretching his limits of imagination regarding feminine beauty. Rob couldn't help but trace his eyes down her body, now that he was far enough away to take it all in, and found she wore a thong of filmy material that was silver in color, and . . . which looked oddly seamless.

He saw no stitching that might fasten the material around an elastic band, nor did he see any binding in the material that would allow for stretch. He also noted the way the garment shined with a brilliance that far exceeded ordinary chrome, the straps of the thong slung high around her hips. It reflected her tanned skin like a mirror even as it formed a perfect arrow pointing straight to the little triangle that cupped her womanhood.

"A pity," he heard her say.

Rob looked back up at her face, truly confused now.

"That you're not a . . . *member* - of the . . . *staff*," she went on to elaborate. "They say no request is to be refused." The woman smiled in a disarming way that immediately put Rob at ease. She came forward, and extended her hand to him, revealing a long, graceful arm.

"I'm Kaahira," she offered to introduce herself. She pronounced it as Kaah'ra with a very soft 'a'.

Rob instantly recognized the ancient name from Odin's table. Kaahira was one of the original sixteen of his offspring. But all Valkyrie's were blonde, weren't they? Lost in his thoughts, he barely had the presence of mind to raise his own hand to meet hers.

Her grip was very firm, her fingers long and feminine.

"And your name?" she asked.

"Uh, York, ma'am. Rob York. Sergeant. US Army."

Kaahira slowed her hand even as Rob kept pumping it nervously. Even dressed as she was, she exuded a sense of masterful confidence that filled the room. "Pleased to meet you, Sergeant York," she granted him.

"Likewise, I'm sure," Rob returned, the usual pleasantries sounding ridiculous here in this bathroom.

Kaahira looked down at their hands. "You've got a good grip for a mortal. I like that."

"Uhm..." said Rob, utterly transfixed by her presence, by her beauty, and the fact that she'd just referred to him as a mortal. He was unaware that he was still gripping her hand with all his strength.

Kaahira suddenly bowed as she gave herself over to good-natured laughter. She pulled her hand from his and raised her legs beneath herself to float backward through the air, proving what he already knew: that she was a Valkyrie.

"You mortals are so cute when you get flustered!" she chortled amiably, returning to her feet. She assumed a wide stance, her fists resting atop her hips.

"You're... Bryn's friend?"

"We refer to each other as sisters."

Rob couldn't help but stare. Kaahira didn't have Bryn's lean, muscular build, or her platinum hair, but she made up for it in sheer beauty. "You don't look like sisters," he blurted out.

"You were expecting that all Valkyrie's look the same?" she asked in a dark tone of playful mockery. "We can look anyway we want to."

Before he could nod, Kaahira proved it. Her entire appearance began to transform as if by magic. Her slender built expanded dramatically - no, incred - aston - her musculature quickly surpassed all believability, her tiny, silver thong spreading upward and downward to cover her rapidly ballooning physique. When the metamorphose was complete, Kaahira looked as if she weighed four hundred pounds, every bit of it - save for her amazingly proportionate breasts - incomparably hard muscle. Her truly unearthly build was clad, from head to toe, in a body suit that was the same brilliant shade of silver that her thong had been. It was sheer enough as to appear almost transparent on her, and molded itself perfectly around every one of her innumerable curves as well as over the thrust of every risen vein.

She was wearing a pair of feminine gloves and silver slippers that wrapped themselves skintight around her sinewy feet, her head encased in a splendidly tooled helmet with a flowing, silver plume, the beaver raised above her eyes.

She appeared, at once, battle ready, and yet, too beautiful for words.

When Kaahira was satisfied with the numbing impression she'd made on him, she bared her teeth, and emitted a rumbling sound that was intensely frightening.

Rob shuddered involuntarily and backed away, remembering where he'd heard that sound before. It was the same rumbling sound Bryn had made back on the quay when she was angry. He quickly reasoned that a Valkyrie's throat must be constructed in such a way as to enable her to realistically emulate the sound of peeling thunder.

"You wouldn't want to meet me face-to-face on a battlefield," Kaahira stated with a confident smirk.

It took a few moments for Rob to shake off the shock of her transformation, not to mention the physical presence of this giantess in his bathroom. The way she looked at him, though, and the way she spoke, put him on a whole new plane of living. Words formed in his mind, as if from a long-forgotten dream.

"If so, I'd be at your side," he said, well aware that she was now six inches taller than he was, "anytime, anywhere, for now, and, yes, forever, but face to face... eh, I doubt it."

With her fists still planted solidly on her hips, the fully formed, and armed, Valkyrie reared back, and positively roared with boisterous, wonderful laughter. When she was sated with her mirthful outburst, Kaahira relaxed from her pose, and approached Rob, ambling her monstrous bulk with an ease learned over eons. Her silver shod feet made a metallic clinking noise as her heels stuck the tile of the floor. Her plume danced lightly with the cadence of her pace.

Kaahira stood directly in front of Rob as she raised her gigantic arms, and placed her gloved hands firmly on his shoulders. Her body was an utterly impenetrable wall of shining, silver colored muscle. Her plumed helmet towered two feet above him.

"I do like you, Rob York," she said. She squeezed him gently, and then gave his body a friendly shake. "But I was about to take a shower." Without another word, she turned, and walked toward the shower entrance. It was a curved, tiled hallway that led to a shower large enough to accommodate half a dozen people.

Rob was staring at her as she changed again. Her astounding musculature diminished - evaporating before his eyes. By the time she'd reached the shower doorway, she was once again a slender, astoundingly beautiful woman. A woman made of polished silver.

She paused there a moment, then looked back at him. "Would you care to join me?"

"You're going to shower?" Rob wondered out loud, "like that?"

Kaahira looked down at herself, seemingly unaware that she was still encased in that strange, silver material. "Hm," she murmured idly. "I suppose you're right. I guess it would be best if I was naked."

At once, the silver left her hands and feet, flowing up her limbs like water. Her helmet, along with its plume, melted into flowing quicksilver, breaching at her crown, and running down both sides of her head. It breached again at either of her shoulders, coursing down her torso in rivulets like caressing fingers. The silver continued to move itself along her body until she appeared to be wearing trunks, then cycling shorts until, at last, she stood before Rob wearing nothing but her tiny, strangely glowing, silver thong. She looked exactly as she had when he first walked into the bathroom. Quite possibly, the most beautiful woman on the planet.

"There," she stated with finality. "Is that better?"

"Whub . . . whab . . . ," Rob stammered, finding he couldn't get his mouth to work after what he'd just seen. "What happened?" finally came out.

Kaahira gave him an indulgent look. "I undressed to take a shower," she informed him academically.

"Yeah, but . . . ," Rob stammered, then, "How'd you do that?"

Kaahira smiled at him graciously. "It's my armor." She could gather by his dumbfounded look that Rob was a little light on 'armor'.

"It's a part of me," she continued, "and every Valkyrie. It's actually a separate, living organism, bonded to me alone. No one else can wear it - not even another Valkyrie. It moves as I move, feels as I feel and it protects me as I need."

Rob found his voice as his sense of shock wore off. "What's it made of?" he asked her.

"It's a living metal," she shrugged, "forged by Odin himself. She walked back across the bathroom toward him. "Here, take a look."

He crouched as Kaahira stood before him, forcing his eyes away from the arresting perfection of her figure, her perfectly tanned skin, trying not to think of the temptation of her groin. He focused instead on the silver material that barely clothed her painfully inviting pelvis. As he'd observed before, there were no seams, or stitching in the garment. It was of a single piece, solid in consistency, possessing neither mesh nor weave. It fit her like a second skin - to the point of appearing to have been spray painted on her.

"Touch it," Kaahira invited him, watching him study her armor as she looked down between her prominent breasts.

Rob put out an exploring hand, trying to find a safe spot to touch her. He finally dared to run his fingers along the tiny strap that ran up over her hip. He'd expected the metal to feel cool, but his touch encountered warmth, as well as the unyielding tensile strength that of polished metal. There was no texture to it. It was as smooth as a piece of glass.

"Smite it," Kaahira told him.

Rob looked up to see her angelic face framed between her breasts. Her skin shown with boundless vitality. Nowhere did he see a trace of sag or downward heaviness.

"Go on."

"Huh?" Rob looked at her face. She was smiling at him.

"Smite it," she urged him.

'*Smite*', he mused to himself, smiling at her use of the archaic, but noble, term.

Rob curled a finger, and tentatively struck a knuckle against the thong's boarder just above her groin. "I'll be goddamned," he murmured. The thing really was a kind of metal.

He rapped the thong again - harder that time. His knuckle gave off a dull, thin sound - like striking tin, but then he judged the metal's thickness to be only a millimeter - if that. He was about to launch his knuckle again when Kaahira suddenly sprang up on her toes. Rob instantly decided that his altered trajectory would be invasive.

"Coward," he heard Kaahira say down to him.

Rob looked up at her. She was smiling impishly, and so he laughed.

"Would you like to scrub my back?" she invited him. "A Valkyrie is strong, but not really double jointed, and I've always had so much trouble reaching my middle back."

She turned and retraced her steps toward the shower with measured slowness. Her perfectly rounded buttocks flexed erotically in time with her slender calves.

Rob knew helpless temptation when he saw it, and he couldn't believe that, with all his lousy luck with women, this goddess could be the slightest bit interested in him. Yet there she was, her hips swaying in such a lovely way, that little thing of metal moving with her, nearly disappeared between her tight buttocks. Her step was so light, like she was floating across the floor, her feet, and legs, merely going through the motions of propelling her glorious body forward.

*Nah*, he chastened himself disconsolately, *she's just playing with me. She could have any man.* He stood up, feeling his back stiffening. *I know she doesn't mean it, but...* "There's a long handled brush in the shower that should scrub your back just fine," he said helpfully.

Kaahira paused to look over her shoulder.

There was something in the way she looked at him. A sense of familiarity, more of a realization, even a feeling, passed between them which Rob couldn't readily identify, yet it filled him with comfortable warmth. He felt a riot of urgent warmth rushing upward from his groin, and a teasing tingle of cold tingles tracing downward between his shoulder blades to meet the warmth.

He felt as if he was feeling what she was feeling.

"What's a girl," Kaahira asked with deceptive softness, "when there's a woman?"

In the consuming flash of a lightning bolt, all was clear to him.

"Hana!" Rob fairly shouted.

He would have collapsed to the floor if Kaahira hadn't rushed forward to catch him. His legs - his whole stinking body just seemed to turn into jelly on him.

"Hana . . .," he breathed, sinking further and further.

He fell, headlong, into a burning pit of grief, and guilt, over how their adventure had ended. He could still see her - bending that fucking tank cannon like it was made out fucking licorice. He was so damned proud of her . . . but now. "Oh!" he cried wretchedly. "God!"

"Come," Kaahira said softly, ministering from her experiences with mortals in shock. "Lie down on the floor. It's alright."

She guided Rob down to sit on the floor, but he wouldn't lie down. The Valkyrie was reduced to kneeling beside him as his crying fit continued - seemingly without end. Rob carried on at length with the most piteous wailing. It pained Kaahira to know that she could heal the injured - even raise the dead, but that she was powerless to mend a

broken heart. She could only wait for his sorrow to ease.

"We were in Iraq - fighting . . . Hana, and me," Rob was finally able to say. "There were people I had to get out - her father was one of them . . . I left her!"

Kaahira listened carefully, but could see that Rob was losing it again.

"I didn't know her *dalvjra* was coming, and I . . . I LEFT HER!"

Confronted with an emotionally devastated mortal, the strong, and powerful Valkyrie could do no more than what any woman would. She gathered the stricken man, and held him to herself - wishing that her healing breasts could stop his tears.

"Is there anything you could have done different from what you did?" she asked him when she could.

"No," Rob shook his head, answering honestly through concluding sighs. "Not really. They were all prisoners - nobody was armed. If I'd turned back, it would've just gotten everyone killed."

She heard him from the vantage point of more than two thousand years of life experience. "Then what you did was right, Rob York," she judged.

He collapsed against her once more. "Oh, Hana!" he cried. "I'm sorry!"

Kaahira held him dearer than she would have expected of herself. "Wherever Hana is," she said quietly, "she's alive, and she'll be alright. That much I can feel."

He nodded, accepting for the moment that there was some kind of connection between Valkyries. He'd sensed something only moments before. A connection to Hana herself.

Kaahira could feel the man surrendering his remorse. "Does her mother know of what you've told me?"

"Yes," Rob replied in a surprisingly even tone. "That's why I'm here."

"Then Bryn has things well in hand," she said, smiling, trying to lighten Rob's mood. "You couldn't have hoped for a better ally."

Rob clutched at Kaahira. "I've got to get her out," he stated weakly, but intensely. "Got to get her back!"

She clutched him back. "Not in your condition you don't," she decreed. "Any warrior must heal a wound before he can fight again." Her fingers touched away his tears. "Physical or emotional. And you have only just stopped your bleeding."

She began to rise, floating on air, lifting him back to his feet. "I'm going to take my shower, and you are not going to do anything silly while I'm gone. Do you understand?"

Rob felt ashamed of his weakness, of losing control of his



emotions, of letting go of his thoughts - his feelings for Hana - even if for an instant, but he realized that Kaahira was right. He could do little to save her on his own.

Kaahira smiled as she saw the realization in his eyes. "I'll use that long handled brush you spoke of to scrub my back," she said.

Rob watched her go, disappearing around the wall of the curving tunnel. Feeling the painful fullness that had brought him to the bathroom in the first place, he went to the enclosure where the toilet was. He unzipped himself, then thought different of it, and dropped his pants, turning and sitting to finish recovering, and relax.

Long after he'd finished, Rob still sat with his elbows on his knees, staring at the tile on the floor. It was a colored tile of three tone waves, and swirls that, with the aide of a certain mental relaxation, could provoke the mind to seeing faces, patterns and, at times, entire pictures. Rob searched in vein for a solution, his emotions veering wildly between despair, and hope. Kaahira was right, he realized; there hadn't been anything he could have done differently in the situation in Iraq, but still . . . He had to find a way to locate Hana - to save her.

*A mortal saving a Valkyrie*, he thought of himself derisively, *yeah, right!*

And then he cursed himself. *That's no fuckin' excuse!*

Kaahira had told him that Bryn was a perfect ally.

*Ol' iron pants*, he snorted. *Heh! Silver pants - whatever. Hie-ho silver!*

He was suddenly surprised, and not the least distraught, to find that he was laughing.

*Get a move on, fella*, he gently coaxed himself. *You're not going to accomplish anything sittin' here.*

He emerged from the closet to see the bathroom lightly filled with steam. *She does like it hot*, he thought, picturing Kaahira in the shower in his mind.

He could vaguely see her muscular figure basking in the spray of multiple water jets behind the clouded glass that was further obscured by vapor. Heavy steam billowed out over the top of the door.

She seemed to sense his presence. "Are you sure you wouldn't like to join me?" she called to him from the interior. "The water's almost as hot as I am," she teased, "and it's such a shame to waste so much steam."

Rob felt the last remnants of his anguish disappear. Kaahira was so beautiful - a Valkyrie. She was so different from either Hana, or her mother. She was a minx, but with a healthy sense of proportion.

Lost in his thoughts, his eyes were drawing to something on the inside of the glass. Two dots had pieced the vapor.

*Oh, for God's sake*, Rob sighed.

From the placement of the dots, he could tell that they were Kaahira's nipples.

*Aw, jeez!* he sighed in amazement.

Rob was just wondering if the glass was shatter proof when Kaahira leaned further forward.

**\*CRACK!\***

A craze of cracks spread outward, and then the safety glass pulverized to fall to the floor.

"Oh, damn," Kaahira droned as she stood in the sudden opening. She was wet, and sleek, her raven hair slicked back over her head. She stood straight and square with a very soapy sponge clutched in her hand. She did not look pleased.

"Now see what you made me do?" she charged. She followed up this accusation by raising the sponge, and hurled it at Rob.

"Hey!" he cried, turning away to cower from the attack. The sponge nailed him full on against the nape of his neck. Rob cringed at the undesired feeling of sudsy wetness splattered over his shoulders, and coursed down his back. The water was very warm. He peeled the sponge from his neck as he turned back to look at Kaahira. She was still standing there, but now she had her fists proudly nested on her hips.

She looked so goddamned satisfied with herself that it made Rob thrill. He wound up his arm and threw the sponge back with all his strength. His aim was perfect, but before the sponge could reach her, Kaahira magically threw up her armor. In what seemed like an instant, her entire body became encased in silver. Except for her helmet, and gloves, she was fully armed by the time the sponge struck harmlessly against her chest-plate.

It fell to the floor between Kaahira's feet. The two of them looked at one another across the steamy distance of the bathroom, each of them wearing a knowing - daring smirk.

"Cheater," Rob charged her.

"Coward," Kaahira retorted, clearly expecting him to join her now.

Instead, Rob smiled proudly as he turned and walked out the bathroom, half expecting to be knocked off his feet by a second sponge throw.

He had passed the test.

Rob was sitting by the aquarium wall sipping a beer when Kaahira joined him after finishing her long shower. Aside from her thong, she wore her hair wrapped in a towel about her head, and busied herself with another towel, rubbing it over her arms, and shoulders.

"You wouldn't wash my back," she said casually, "but would you dry it for me?"

He smiled, and put his beer aside, rising to suspend the towel behind his outstretched arms as Kaahira floated off the floor, turning her back to him as she rubbed back and forth against the towel.

Rob sighed, and shook his head. "Valkyries," he muttered, pressing the towel tightly against her back.

Kaahira squealed with delight as massaged her tight skin as she raised her legs beneath herself. Rob marveled at the sight of her sitting on her heels in the air, and then set to work.

"So," he began as he tentatively worked his strong fingers down her back, "do you know Hana?"

"Of course. We all do. She's Bryn's child, but she really belongs to all of us."

"It must be interesting to have such a family," Rob commented.

"It hasn't been easy for her. She's gone through a lot of conflict, and confusion. She told me that she saved your life."

Rob paused in his task of drying her flawless skin. "She told you that?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," said Kaahira. "A few weeks ago. Hana and I speak of things she'd never tell her mother. She considers me as more like her big sister."

*With only a couple thousand years of age in difference,* Rob thought.

Kaahira wiggled her shoulders to prompt him along. Rob resumed his task, but with less hesitancy.

"Y'know this would go faster if you'd stop squirming," he chided her.

"I don't want it to go faster," Kaahira stated simply. "I like your touch, Rob York. You have a gift for touching. Not many men do."

Rob slowed his movement with the towel. "Does Hana know of this place?" he wondered.

"Yes," Kaahira nodded, her voice fading to become somber. "She's been here often throughout her life . . . that is until she decided that she didn't want to be a Valkyrie - as if she has a choice."

"I didn't mean to upset you," Rob offered. "I'm sorry. I just wonder, if she got out of Iraq, would she come here?"

"I don't know," Kaahira replied, her voice almost too soft to be heard. "Being young, unable to fly and without armor, she would naturally gravitate to a place she knew as home - felt comfortable with . . . safe . . ."

Rob could feel the Valkyrie's growing concern. He lightly held her slender shoulders.

"Why did she go to Iraq?" she asked him.

"Because she had to," he answered with conviction, "and because she's a Valkyrie. Her father was in danger."

"Silly girl," Kaahira noted, "throwing herself into the winds of war - naked - unprepared." She paused for a long moment. "Heritage does win out after all . . . I guess."

Rob held her shoulders more firmly, sensing the steel beneath her silky skin. He closed his eyes, and touched his cheek against the towel around her head. "She'll be alright, Kaahira," he whispered, "just like you said. Wherever she is, she'll be alright."

"Of course she will be," Kaahira stated with a long sigh, realizing the spectacle she was making of herself. She was a strong and powerful Valkyrie after all, and here she was behaving like a mortal. She took up a corner of the towel Rob held at her shoulder, and used it to dry her eyes.

Her gesture made Rob smile. "There, you see. You do know how to use a towel."

Kaahira flashed him a look over her shoulder. He saw hope and gratitude in her eyes as she held the corner of the towel to her nose, and 'tooted' very lady like.

"It's alright," Rob said as he released the towel to her. "Your back is dry now."

"Thanks," Kaahira said as she indulged herself in a Valkyrie sized 'hawronk!'

Rob laughed. "I think the earth just moved!"

Kaahira smiled as she floated away. "We Valkyries normally make it move in other ways," she said coyly, her voice a seductive purr. "If you know what I mean."

She put down the towel, seemingly unconscious of the effect her naked breasts had on Rob's blood pressure. She picked up his beer. "Do you mind?" she asked.

Rob gave her a nod. "Bottoms up."

Without further ado, Kaahira up-ended the can and drained it. Rob marveled at the way tilted her entire body in the air instead of just leaning her head back. When the can was empty, she did the typical 'man thang' by crushing the can - to the size of a pea. She then placed the pea between her teeth, closed her lips, and spat.

Both of them watched the pea fly across the room. It struck the rim of a long necked vase setting on the vanity, then bounced an inch straight up into the air, and dropped directly into the open vase to rattle around inside.

"Don't be too impressed," Kaahira said dryly as she saw the amazed look in Rob's eyes. She floated closer to the aquarium wall. "It took me over thirty five years to learn how to do that."

"It's still pretty impressive." He admired the way Kaahira lowered her beautiful landing gear to walk the last few steps to a chair.

"So what brings you here?" Rob asked, resuming his seat on the bed. "If I may."

Kaahira waved her hand dismissively as she settled lightly into the chair.

"I'm here for my *dalvjra*," she volunteered without concern. "I haven't begun to weaken yet, but I knew my time was approaching when I could feel myself becoming - "

She paused to boldly relieve the buildup of gas in her tummy before continuing.

" - incredibly horny." She took a long moment to study Rob.

He felt like a specimen being examined under the magnifying glare of an electron microscope. He watched her slowly raise an accusing finger, and point it at him. "You," she calmly decreed, "are a bad mortal."

"I'm sorry?" Rob frowned in confusion.

Kaahira let her hand drop to the arm of the chair. She closed her eyes, and laid her head back. "Mortals aren't supposed to be able to resist a Valkyrie's sexual charms. I've tried every means of suggestion short of jumping your bones, and yet I've completely failed to get so much as a rise out of you." She opened her eyes to meet his. "Bad mortal," she said again.

Rob blushed as he looked down at the floor. "I . . . don't know what to say," he admitted helplessly.

The less than pleased Valkyrie held his gaze. "Well," she noted easily with an arched eyebrow, "since I'm still strong, you'd better think of something."

Rob's mind began to race. "I, uh . . . certainly didn't mean to disappoint you," he began. "I mean . . . you *are* - unbelievably gorgeous, and I'm sure that any man would gladly give his life for you . . . "

"Several have," Kaahira noted with a sly smile, "but I revived them."

Rob sincerely wondered if he'd said enough.

"Go on," Kaahira lightly prompted him, her eyes not leaving his.

Rob's mind was racing, searching desperately for the right words. "Uve," he stammered, "I . . . genuinely can't believe that a woman like you could be interested in a man like me. That Hana . . . could possibly entertain any interest in me."

"She thinks well of you, Rob York."

Rob sighed. "She's just a rebellious kid who doesn't know what she wants, and she's the only Valkyrie of her age in the whole wide world."

Kaahira felt his words more than she heard them. Her blue eyes softened. "Who do you feel is unworthy? Hana, or yourself?"

Rob just stared at her, amazed at her perceptiveness.

"Her saving your life established a basic bond of commitment between the two of you," Kaahira went on. "I venture that you know that?"

Rob said nothing. They both knew that he didn't need to.

"Your devotion to Hana could be considered as no more than the working of that bond - a compulsion over which you have, really, no choice," she explained. "But you, somehow, have gone beyond that. You are singular in your devotion, and that is something no bond can effect. It's not unheard of, but it *is* exceedingly rare."

Kaahira sat up straighter in her chair. "You chose a girl when there was a woman." She smiled wisely. "Which is why you are a *bad* mortal."

Rob couldn't help but smile, despite the powerful emotions surging through him.

"You're right, Rob York: Hana is a rebellious kid who doesn't know what she wants, but, somehow, you have changed that. She, and her mother have fought bitterly over her Aerie - Hana doesn't want any part of it, and now she's chosen you to be her *Rógnar*. That means something."

Kaahira paused to dwell within her own reflections briefly. "In fact, it means everything to a girl her age."

She'd taken to unconsciously toying with a strap of her thong. She hooked two fingers under it and pulled. Rob could hear the distinctive ring of a tuning fork sounding as it stretched away from her skin. The ring grew louder as Kaahira pulled the strap further from the surface of her skin. The visible space between the strap, and her skin, didn't look as it should to Rob. He blinked, and - yes - he saw that the space was different. The colors in the normal line of vision were, somehow, elongated - their borders subtly merged, then Rob realized in that moment that what he was seeing was a kind of force field that actually bound the metal to her.

Kaahira suddenly released the strap from the extension she'd imposed on it. It immediately snapped back to her skin, and the ringing stopped. Rob observed how the strap had behaved just as an elastic strap would, but, when it struck her, there was a distinctly metallic *\*ting\**.

*Weird*, he thought.

"Oh, shut up," Kaahira groused lazily at her armor. "By morning I'll be free of you for two days." She lounged back in her chair - her head laid back. She looked as though she were ready to drift off to sleep.

*How in the hell does she go to the bathroom?* Rob wondered, relieved that his emotions were no longer running rampant.

He could tell at the same time that Kaahira's thoughts had become intimately private in nature. He watched her fingers trace along the strap of her armor to the tip of its suggestive arrow. He saw her two middle

fingers slowly disappear between her legs, and her body responded where her fingers pressed. She gave off a deep sigh of frustrated longing as her pelvis bucked lightly against the pressure of her two fingers. She bared her teeth, and Rob could hear the sound of distant thunder.

"You'd better hope to Odin that my husband arrives on time tomorrow," she breathed in his direction, "or Hana may have to find herself another *Rógnar*." She smiled in a way that looked pleasantly tired. She was playing, so he gamely smiled back at her despite his feelings of ill ease.

"Y'know, this, uh . . . *Rógnar* thing," he began. He'd already poured his heart out to her, so what was a little more? "I, uh . . . *know* what that means - I mean . . . I can - *imagine* - what it means, and . . . I know Hana's a nice girl, and all - I mean . . . underneath it all with the . . . cloths, and the wig, an' - I really wish she wouldn't wipe her nose with her finger - y'know the way she does, but I don't mean it to seem disrespectful - that is if - something like that can *be* respectful . . ."

Kaahira heard his cry for help as Rob struggled on with what he was saying. She rose up from the chair and pulled the towel from around her head – and perfectly dry raven hair fell all about her. She reached up to attach a pair of silver earrings.

" - it's not to say that I'm not deeply flattered," Rob went on - trying so hard to go on, "which I am - *honored* really, but . . ." He finally gave up, and looked down at his hands. "I could never do Hana justice."

Rob sat there wallowing in wretchedness until he felt the press of a finger beneath his chin. He yielded to the finger's pressure, and raised his head to see Kaahira sitting on her heels in front of him, just as she had before, only now she was facing him. He hadn't believed it was possible, but her face was even more beautiful than it had been back in the bathroom.



"Do not underestimate yourself, Rob York," she quietly instructed him, and then smiled, "but keep your standards where they are."

"But - "

The finger pressed against his lips before he could say another word. "Mm," the Valkyrie chastened him. "You don't want to meet me on a battlefield," she warned.

Rob was not about to argue with her, but still . . . Kaahira withdrew her gentle finger, then leaned forward to kiss him - full, and warm. He responded to her needs as she desired. When they were finished many minutes later, she withdrew - reluctant - heady with a month of pent up sexual hunger.

The Valkyrie sighed, woozy with lust. "Hana has chosen wisely for a girl so young," she whispered. She took his hands into her own, and rose up into the air. "Come."

Rob rose to his feet to follow as Kaahira rose higher into the air, floating closer to the bed. He turned with her as she floated above the tightly made bed.

"Lie with me," she urged.

Rob backed away, awkwardly wiping his hands down the sides of his pants.



"It's alright," Kaahira said as she slipped her impossibly perfect self under the covers. "I'm still far too strong for a mortal to have sex with," she said, settling in. "But we can still comfort each other."

He watched as she raised an arm beneath her hair. In an instant, the pillow her head lay on was covered by a fan of glistening black hair. "And you," she said to him, "are too strong for a Valkyrie's charms."

She looked on him as one admired. Rob wasn't at all sure if he should go, or stay, but he found himself moving toward the bed as he began unfastening his pants. Kaahira watched him, so he turned his back to her to undress, and then slipped nervously under the covers beside her.

"Would you hold me? Keep me warm?" she asked.

Rob turned to look at Kaahira. She was lying on her side facing him, her two hands held just below her chin. He could see tears in her eyes. Without a thought, he rose up on an elbow and moved toward her. She looked up at him from where she lay. He extended a hand, and his fingers brushed away her tears.

"How could I say 'no' to the woman who'd stopped my bleeding?" he said softly.

Kaahira smiled - happy, sad, thrilled - all at once. That a mortal should affect her so, she thought . . . Hana was most fortunate indeed.

Rob gathered her into his arms, and was fulfilled as she snuggled up against him. Hard and strong as she was, she felt soft and delicate to him now. He felt it safe to lightly kiss her brow, to smell the fresh aroma from her hair, to gently stroke her head. Her eyes closed, and then she was still.

**Chapter 43*****December 1, 2013: Dubai, UAE***

Rob woke with a start, seemingly minutes later, as he heard another man's voice in the room. He visually traced the sound of the voice to see a tall man partially dressed in a fashionable suit in the process of undressing in the dim light of the bedroom. He looked like Kaahira's twin.

Twin brother that is. He had the same flawlessly tanned skin, flowing raven hair - which was long for a man, and a body that was phenomenally fit - tighter than that of a swimmer. Rob was a bit disappointed to note that the male of the Valkyrie species seemed to lack the physique of a bodybuilder, but he did wonder on the male Valkyrie's ability to expand.

Once fully undressed, the man turned around to expunge all doubt there might have been in Rob's mind about another type of expansion. The term 'stallion' suddenly took on whole new dimensions in Rob's suddenly wilted mind.

"Good morning," the man casually greeted Rob as he ambled toward the bed, easily proceeding himself by, at least, an hour. "Mind if I cut in?" he asked with reference to the still sleeping Kaahira.

"Uh . . . ," was all Rob could say to this man who could've occupied two time zones all by himself, and probably the Twilight Zone as well.

"No, he doesn't mind, Jorg," Kaahira said sleepily as she roused, then to Rob she asked with a little pout. "Do you, Rob York?"

"Uh . . . ," said Rob again.

"No, he doesn't mind," Kaahira translated for him for hers, and Jorg's, benefit.

She growled sexily, reaching across Rob to take Jorg by his handle. In an unbelievable move, she physically raised Jorg from the floor, and maneuvered him over Rob to her other side of the bed where she gently placed him on the bed beside her.

Kaahira's and Jorg's little display left Rob wide-eyed, and wide awake.

"'bout time you showed up," Kaahira complained to Jorg, snuggling close to him. "I've stopped one rebellion, and took out a couple of terrorist cells this month," she reported.

"Mm," Jorg said approvingly, drawing the gorgeous woman to him, "you *have* been busy."

"And now *you* get busy," Kaahira playfully ordered him.

"Well," Jorg hesitated, "what about, uh . . . "

Rob saw him glancing his way. Kaahira turned in bed to regard him.

"I thought he might make a nice bed-warmer," she granted Rob - grudgingly, then she turned back to Jorg, "but he's been so frigid that I'd begun to wonder if I was a goddess anymore." She whimpered for effect while surreptitiously thanking Rob for his attention through the night by stroking his leg with a foot beneath the covers.

"Ah, Kaahira," Jorg oozed as he caressed her, "you're every bit as beautiful now as you were two thousand years ago."

Kaahira's sad eyes became alive again with renewed hope. "Am I, really?" she asked.

Jorg merely smiled.

Kaahira took his neck, and pressed her body into his. "Oh, Jorg, you're so sweet," she cooed. "Is it any wonder you're my favorite brother."

She levitated from the bed to straddle Jorg, tugging at her thong. "Now get this damned armor off me!"

Jorg smiled up at her, and raised his assisting hands. His thumbs hooked into either side of the thong's waistband, and peeled it over her hips while caressing the glorious globes of her rump.

"Uh, let's see here," said Rob quickly as he saw a flash of blonde revealed. "Two's company, and three's a crowd, right? Okay, so we got one," he pointed to indicate Jorg, "two," indicating Kaahira, "and . . . I'm outta here."

He swung himself off the edge of the Valkyrie sized bed, dove into his pants, then stabbing enough of his toes into his shoes to shuffle hastily toward the door.

"Chicken!" Kaahira called after him. "Brkaack-bok-bok-bok-bok-bok! You can at least stay and add your encouragement."

Rob gamely added a pair of flapping elbows to his shuffling gait. "ey! That's *funky* chicken to you," he charged. "And I ain't no cheerleader."

"It's okay," a most hospitable Jorg offered, "we don't mind . . . really."

"Thanks for the thought," Rob rejoined at the doorway. "I'll, uh - just be in the next room . . . if you need me."

Jorg laughed good-naturedly. Kaahira grinned, and threw a pillow at him.

Rob closed the door and sagged against the outside of it, struggling to catch his breathe. He'd never imagined such an outrageous display of raw sexual empowerment. Or such physical beauty. His mind rebelled at the thought of their fitness. Supergirl and her Superman?

He looked up a moment later when he heard another door close. Bryn was standing inside the suite's door, wearing a pair of fashionable,

tanned slacks that went well with her hair, which was gathered in a chignon, and a knit top that left enough of her upper body exposed to leave little to the imagination.

"Good morning," she greeted him without sentiment. "I trust you slept well?"

Rob opened his mouth to answer, then closed it again as the sound of intimate laughter came through the door.

"Hm," Bryn commented, "I see Jorg finally arrived. Good. Now *I* don't have to keep Kaahira from bouncing off the walls until her husband gets here."

"Who is that guy?" Rob asked.

"One of the Disir," Bryn shrugged as if it was no matter. "He's a few years older than me."

"He sure doesn't look it," Rob cracked.

Bryn smiled politely.

"I got nowhere with my calls," he reported. "How'd your sojourn go?"

"Hah," Bryn sighed, "let's sit down first. I've been up all night, and I need to get a load off my feet."

With that, she pulled off her knit top to reveal that she wore a tan halter beneath it. She then kicked off her shoes as she undid her slacks, then she rose into the air, and slid them down over her lean, powerful thighs. The cuff of a leg snagged on her heel. The muscles of her leg danced enticingly as she kicked it free. Then, before they could fall to the floor, Bryn caught the waistband of the slacks by her toes. In a gesture that was as beautiful as it was simple, her foot swept up behind herself where she transferred ownership of the slacks from toes back to fingers. She floated into the living room, the slacks suspended from her hands by the cuffs, wearing nothing but her top, and her armor.

*I can't believe it's not incredibly sexy women's underwear*, Rob thought as he noted the scrupulous care Bryn took in straightening the slacks before leaving them carefully draped over the back of a chair at the bar. "Why not just let room service do that?"

"Being an immortal is no reason for being a slob," she said simply, maneuvering herself toward a set of chairs. "Come. We'll talk over here."

Rob admired the many contours of Bryn's floating form as she unfastened her hair. A single twirl accompanied by a flick of her head, and her upper body was draped by a curtain of blonde hair.



*Damn . . .*

She gathered herself to alight on the chair, and then lowered, released, then, finally, relaxed. "Ah . . .," she sighed languidly with her eyes closed, her bare feet sliding along the plush carpet as she extended her equally bare legs. "That's better."

*Mmm, much better,* thought an admiring Rob.

Bryn opened her eyes, and, at once, seemed displeased with what she saw.

"Good heavens, man, snap out of it," she chided. "You act like you've never seen a woman before. Come over here, and sit down."

Rob complied with her request, wondering if the mother was as clueless of her effect on men as was her daughter.

"So," Bryn inquired after he was seated by her, "how did you

sleep?"

"Effectively," Rob effused with wize-ass precision, "and with an efficiency factor as close to optimal as I've ever known - perhaps as high as 97.4 percent, although I may be flattering myself. REM sleep was of an approximately 5.37 minute duration, though the images generated in that period have remained submerged."

*Wha'd'ya think of that, ya tight-assed bitch?*

Bryn attentively held his gaze throughout his telling. When she was sure he'd finished, she blinked once, then looked away. "Good," she approved clinically.

*Jeez . . .*

"You're going to need your energy - "

"**GNAH!**" Kaahira suddenly shrieked from the bedroom.

Bryn paused to shoot a disapproving glance toward the bedroom door.

Rob wondered momentarily on the mechanical problem of a door hinge's integrity under stress from a Valkyrie's sound waves. "Lots, and lots, of energy," he droned suggestively, noting how Bryn's pelvis squirmed.

The Valkyrie glared at him.

"Just getting the conversation back on track," Rob innocently clarified.

Bryn smiled . . . politely again. "Hana's exposing herself to you was an accident," she began, "but Bjork's taking you into our confidence is another matter. Few mortals live to know about us, and, had he doubted you, Bjork would have seen to that himself."

That left little doubt in Rob's mind that the captain would've killed him had he deemed it necessary to maintain the Valkyrie's secrecy - probably without hesitating.

"Since my husband has trusted you, so must I, for Hana's sake." She drew a breath to continue, but Rob held up a pausing finger.

"Before you go on," he said, "I'm not going to thank you for sparing my life, but I will thank you for your trust. I will do my best," he pledged, "and do my utmost not to abuse that trust."

The Valkyrie studied the mortal for a long moment. Rob stared confidently back into her eyes, not caring what she thought.

"The situation dictates that I grant you entry – “

"**AH! ODIN!**" Kaahira screamed even louder.

" - into our world," Bryn went on. "This hotel is equipped with a command center. It's more or less our home away from home. From here, we can monitor world events and governments on a continuous basis."

Rob's eyebrows rose slightly. "Big sister is watching," he opined

significantly.

He immediately regretted the remark when he saw the angry look in Bryn's eyes. "It helps us keep you mortals from destroying yourselves," she stated with felt emotion.

She looked away.

Rob looked down at the floor.

"I'm sorry," he bid her out of shame a moment later.

"The technology we use was left by Odin," Bryn continued. "It's very old, but still far advanced over anything you mortals have." She smiled. "It's quite fascinating, really, how it works," she went on. "It has a unique way of responding to stimulus."

The sound of fervent murmurs issued from the bedroom.

"It scans the globe through a network of sensors, filtering events into a perception module preset to a code of given parameters."

The sounds from the bedroom became more aggressive, and were now augmented by barely stifled grunts, and moans.

"It subjects the events to different value scenarios according to the civilization it's derived from, and punctuates - "

**"GNAH!"**

" - a potentially troubling event."

Rob found he could barely follow Bryn's words, his body surging with passion. He tried to focus, but found himself imagining the scene in the bedroom.

"It's amazing how it handles the continual flow of input," Bryn went on.

**"Oh!"** Jorg uttered in a protracted groan.

"It's a feat of compression."

**"Ah!"** cried Kaahira. **"So hard!"**

"Within a given space."

**"Ah!"** cried Jorg. **"So - TIGHT!"**

"It's purely a matter of proportion."

**"Ah!"** cried Kaahira. **"So . . . BIG!"**

Aw, Rob grumbled internally, *so what!*

He was thinking of . . . proportion.

"It's like a pea rattling around in a boxcar," Rob suddenly burst out.

"WHAT?!" Bryn's eyebrows rose as she observed the mortal glaring at her. She felt her hardening nipples pressing agonizingly against her blouse. "You needn't get that excited about it. It's just fancy

electronics."

"I'm *not* excited!" Rob strove to calm himself. "Look," he suggested, swallowing hard, "could we do this somewhere else?"

"Why?" Bryn wondered with a knowing look of condescension. "Is the mortal distracted for some reason?"

**"OH! Kaahira!"**

**"AH! Jorg!"**

Rob frowned at Bryn. "What were you saying?" he asked.

Bryn frowned at Rob. "I, uh . . . don't recall." She rubbed her cheeks, and then resumed after a long moment. "Anyway, Alex Coughlin is our mortal in command at the center. He's the only one of you versed in the system's operation. He's accessed the American military command computer system in Iraq, and is looking for a trail Bjork might have left. He needs your input as to yours, and Bjork's activities while you were in Iraq."

Rob took a moment to scan his eyes about the room as he listened for further outbursts from the bedroom. There were none. His chin crinkled.

"Seems kind of quiet now," Rob commented pleasantly of the calm.

Bryn smiled at him . . . politely.

That was when Rob felt a trembling beneath his feet. The vibrations quickly transferred through the seat of the chair he was sitting in as the tremor grew more intense. Objects began to dance upon the surfaces they set on, the ones with higher profiles falling. Soon, the whole room was shaking, the furniture moving across the floor. Chandeliers trembled, and wavered. Bottles of expensive liqueur fell from their shelves in the bar. The sharks in the huge aquarium had begun to race around the perimeter, moving as fast as death itself. Water sloshed violently at the top of the small aquarium in the bar.

Rob pushed himself out of his chair, and headed toward the other bedroom as fast as he could, fighting to maintain his sorely compromised balance. After wedging himself in the doorway as best he could, he looked back at Bryn, only to see her calmly sitting in the air twelve inches above her violently gyrating chair.

"Bryn, fer chrissake get in a doorway!" he shouted. "It's an earthquake!"

"No, it's not," Bryn tiredly assured him. She glanced toward the bedroom. "But then, yeah, I guess you're right."

The trembling suddenly grew exponentially more extreme. Bar chairs fell, and lamps hit the floor. Everything in the room seemed to be breaking. Rob wondered if he would live to see Hana again. He apologized to her, and thought a silent prayer of goodbye.

An extraordinary phenomenon then gripped the room. There was



the briefest moment of stillness, and then a wave of life rushed forth. The bedroom door flew from its hinges, and, from floor to ceiling, the entire wall bowed out from an incredible force. Furnishings were compelled away from it, the aquarium burst to spill its two hundred gallons and the levitated Bryn was thrown - literally - into the wall beside Rob.

The crisis passed, and all became still again. The place was ruined with aquarium water quickly seeping its way throughout the carpet. The sharks, once more, glided at rest.

Rob stood braced in the doorway, struggling to regain his senses. The first thing he saw was that the bedroom wall had retained its bowed condition. The second thing he saw belonged to Jorg as the Valkyrie male emerged, and emerged, and emerged from the bedroom.

"Oh, sorry!" an abashed Jorg exclaimed as he saw the terrified look in Rob's eyes. "I hope we didn't disturb you."

"Not really," Rob quipped, surprised his sense of humor had returned so quickly. "We just wanted to see the fish up closer." He hastily grabbed a large snack bowl, and then began the effort to rescue, at least, fifty exotic, gasping fish.

"Brynhildr," Jorg respectfully addressed Bryn with a lowered head. "Welcome, my sister."

"Hello, Jorg," Bryn greeted him brightly as she exhumed herself from the wall, "nice to see you again."

She noted Jorg's bowed head, and went to him. "Oh, come, brother, you needn't defer to me."

Jorg looked up at his Valkyrie sister. "Kaahira, and I, were just - "

"We know!" Rob filled in hastily, going after another fish. "C'mere ya little shit - I'm trying to save your life!"

"I'm surprised," said Bryn, looking about the devastated room, "Kaahira's gotten pretty weak."

"Oh, I'm going easy on her," Jorg hastily assured.

"Jorg!" Kaahira whined from the bedroom, her voice thick with erotic languor, "you are coming back? I want to be on top this time."

*I'm not hearing this*, Rob told himself in an effort to forestall an imminent mental devastation as he continued to gather fish. *I am not hearing any of this.*

"Coming Kaahira," Jorg called.

*I didn't hear that.*

"Looks like you already have," Bryn purred.

"Ow!" Rob said.

Both immortals looked down to see Rob kneeling on the floor, a bowl of flopping fish between his knees. He was clutching the wrist of his right hand, blood dripping from a nasty cut.

"Ah," Bryn sighed, "now I suppose I'll have to heal him."

"I could do that," the ever-gracious Jorg volunteered.

"No-it's okay-really-it's just a flesh wound," Rob protested, *not* wanting to know where Jorg might put his injured hand.

"Jorg . . . !" Kaahira called again.

Bryn gave her brother an indulgent look. "Go on with you," she prompted. "But try to stay airborne this time."

Jorg left to attend Kaahira, and Bryn floated to her knees to attend Rob. "Alright," she said, stripping off her top to free her breasts, "let me see that hand."

Rob suddenly forgot all about his hand. Despite her age, her breasts were as beautiful and firm as Hana's. "Ah, let's get these fish taken care of first," he suggested.

Bryn smiled on him, admiring his concern for life. "We can put them in the tub in the other bedroom," she suggested, gathering some of the fish in her top. "I filled it with water earlier."

Rob saw a furrow of doubt suddenly crease the Valkyrie's brow. "I hope *that* hasn't shattered too," she said . . . wondering. "Jorg doesn't know his own strength."

Rob's eyes widened. *I did not hear that.*

**Chapter 44*****December 1, 2013: Dubai, UAE***

The bathtub in the other bedroom had not shattered as Bryn feared. All the fish survived, and, after recovering from their shock, began swimming normally again.

Once the task of rescuing the fish was completed, Bryn held her hand out to Rob.

He sat down on the floor by the tub, and Bryn sat on her heels beside him - just as Kaahira had, her expectant hand poised in the air between them.

Rob saw that the cut on his hand had stopped bleeding. "It's not that bad," he tried to assure the Valkyrie, "really." As oddly exciting it had felt when Hana healed him, he knew it would feel downright uncomfortable if your mother did the same.

Bryn merely remained with her hand poised.

*'You don't want to meet me on a battlefield'*, Rob recalled Kaahira having told him. There were definite limits to arguing with a Valkyrie, he decided. He surrendered his hand.

Bryn took his hand in hand, examined it briefly, then held it tightly to her breast, the cut directly over her nipple.

At once, Rob could feel the same, incredible living sensation that he'd felt from Hana as her skin began to glow.

"Don't get the wrong idea about this," Bryn advised him as she adjusted the placement of his hand on her breast. "It's just something we do."

"I know."

"What?"

Rob looked up to see Bryn observing him. *Shit*. Hana had promised dire circumstances if her mother knew of their bond.

Bryn resolutely stared at Rob, her eyes questioning. He suddenly felt that she deserved to know - regardless of the consequences to him.

"Hana was electrocuted at the fence we went through," he started relating. "She was lying there, not breathing - I didn't know what to do. I tried cardio-recitation on her, but her chest was so hard, and hotter than blazes. I worked on her - scared - didn't know what else to do."

"And..." Bryn asked slowly.

"She recovered, but my hands were covered with second, and third degree burns. Shock helped me handle the pain for a while, but later I was close to blacking out. Hana . . . healed me."

Rob truly didn't care what happened next. Even with his hand pressed to another woman's breast, all he could think of was Hana. He looked up at Bryn - wondering why she seemed to hesitate from what he

presumed they both knew was inevitable. "I guess this is where you kill me now," he prompted.

The Valkyrie showed no emotion, her face - as always - a mystery. "Why ever would I do that?" she finally asked.

Rob frowned, not sure he'd heard that right.

"Based on what you told me before," Bryn continued, "you were merely helping Hana on her mad scheme. You could just as well have taken her for dead, assuming you were helpless to revive a Valkyrie."

Rob felt Bryn pressing his hand tighter to her breast.

"But you didn't."

He couldn't look at her anymore.

Bryn, also, looked away.

"A Valkyrie must give of herself to heal, or save, a mortal," she said softly. "That is what establishes a bond."

Rob could feel the healing force flowing faster and faster.

"But you, a mortal, gave of yourself to save a Valkyrie. You . . . sacrificed yourself to save my daughter, and she might have surely died had you not been there. How ever could you think that I would kill you for such a thing? Your sacrifice was . . . admirable."

She'd said the final word as though it had been dragged out of her by wild horses, Rob noted. But she had said it all the same.

The sensation in his hand was so suddenly far more intense than he'd felt from Hana. "I, uh . . . think my hand is done," he self-consciously.

As if suddenly remembering what she was doing, Bryn released him.

Rob pulled his hand back, and a cursory glance told him it was whole again. He flexed his fingers. All was well again, yet not well again.

"Thanks," he said to her, thinly - weakly. It was the most that he could manage at the moment.

Bryn rose and walked out the bathroom door without speaking another word.

Rob quickly followed her out the door, only to find the bedroom empty now. Strangely relieved, he quickly got dressed, and then headed down to the Business Center, looking for someone named Alex Coughlin. He was still grappling with what he'd seen of Kaahira's and Jorg's bedroom as he proceeded down the elevator.

He was not grappling well, the images swirling in his head causing severe cognitive dissonance on several fronts; mental, emotional, spiritual and existential being among the top four.

He couldn't believe what he'd seen, and yet he had seen it, *hadn't I?*

The closest comparative image Rob could draw on in his mind of what the room's interior looked like was Dresden after the Allies bombed it in February, 1945. The paint hung in sheets of smoking, discolored rags from where it still clung to the walls, and ceiling, the plaster behind it thoroughly heat stressed, broken and ruined. Every stick of furniture had been destroyed by power that had to have been truly cosmic in its nature. Kaahira, and Jorg, hung weightless in the air above the charred, and blackened, remnants of the bed, their gorgeous bodies bathed in sweet smelling sweat from their exertions. They were facing each other, idly toying with each other's thoroughly matted hair, Kaahira appearing to be fully suspended.

*She was flying while making it with him!* Rob thought desperately. *That's it. She's weak now, but she can still fly - I mean, c'mon - that's the ONLY way they could've . . . could they? No. NO! She was definitely flying. Nobody - I don't care WHO he is - no man is that . . . is he??*

"May I help you?" he heard a pleasant, young, female voice inquire of him.

Rob looked up to note that he wasn't walking anymore. Somehow, unbeknownst to him, he'd arrived at the Business Center and was looking at the lovely face of the desk receptionist.

"Please," Rob tried like hell not to whimper.

He noted how the receptionist seemed taken aback by his tone. In his current mental/emotional/spiritual/existential state, Rob panicked.

*She knows, he thought, certain that, she knows everything! Kaahira must've peaked while I was asleep, and told her what a weeny I am!*

"Sir?" the receptionist asked, her look, and tone, becoming concerned.

*How COULD she!* Rob wondered, gripping the edge of the desk that was between him, and the receptionist, needing it to aid his support.

"Who are you?" he wanted to know of the young woman he was looking at.

The young woman looked at the hotel's military guest. She seemed genuinely perplexed for a moment, then she sallied forth to oblige the guest.

"My name is Cassandra Trator," she politely replied, then she smiled pleasantly, "but everyone calls me Cass Trator."

Rob's legs suddenly felt like liquid. "Brynhildr sent me," he managed to speak, though in a sorely uneven tone.

The receptionist beamed. "Oh, yes," she replied brightly. "Bryn's told me all about you."

*She peeked too?* Rob's overworked imagination wondered. *How COULD she!*

He was gripping the edge of the desk with all his strength by then.

"I'd be happy to lead you on," Cassandra told him, "and then let you go down."

Rob wasn't sure of what to think, or feel anymore . . . spiritually . . . existentially . . .

"It's a special elevator we have to go to," Cass informed him as she emerged from behind the desk. "Come this way."

Somehow, Rob forced his legs to move, and followed along side of Cassandra as she lead the way to the elevator.

"Can I give you some assistance," she asked, noting the hotel's guest's unsteady gait. "You seem weak - like you can't stay up."

"I got no problem staying up!" Rob truculently asserted, mustering all of his will to draw himself up to his full 5'10" height. "I may not be all that young anymore, but I got no problem . . . standing on my own two feet."

"I didn't mean to be forward, sir," Cassandra tactfully sought to explain, "but it is the responsibility of the hotel staff to look after our guest's welfare, and I couldn't help, but notice your limp."

"I am not - !" Rob blurted before he halted himself from going any further - just barely. "I'm sorry, miss," he corrected himself. "Please, lead on."

"This way," Cassandra said with marginal certainty.

She led him to a separate corridor at the end of which was a single pair of elevator doors. She produced a key, and held it poised at the insertion point of a control panel that was to one side of the doors.

After a time of waiting, Rob began to wonder why Miss Trator wasn't putting the key into the hole.

"Is there a - "

"No, it's alright."

Rob was going to ask the receptionist if there was a problem with the key. Cassandra thought twice about her abrupt response.

"I'm sorry," she said politely, looking over her shoulder at Rob. "Did I cut you off?"

*Over my - dead - BODY!* Rob seethed internally. His lips puckered as he fought the tearing urge to check to see if he was still intact.

"The tip of the key is coded," she informed the . . . curiously distressed military guest, holding the key poised at the opening. "There's a recognition cycle it has to go through before access is granted. Until

this little red light over here goes on," she noted, pointing to a light on the control panel, "you can use all your strength to push the key - "

Against his will, Rob's mind focused itself on - strength, and . . . pushing.

" - but your efforts will prove to be most inadequate."

Yes, there was yet something else about himself to be deflated, Rob discovered as his posture drooped even more. He looked at the little red light on the panel.

*Fuck you*, he snarled.

He shifted his focus to the key poised in Cassandra's hand. He stared at the key like his very life depended on it.

At length, the light went on. Cassandra pushed. The key slipped into place. "Ah, there we are," she said. "We're in."

"Thank God," said Rob, relaxing into a more natural posture.

Cassandra blinked at what she'd heard the guest say. She slowly looked over her shoulder at Rob.

"Are you alright, sir?" she hesitantly inquired out of concern.

"Uh, I'm fine," Rob assured her from the deepest register his voice was capable of.

"You seem," Cassandra ventured to observe, "really anxious about something."

"No, it's, uh . . . nothing - really."

Cassandra looked back to the key in the control panel. She turned the key.

"I'm sure it is," she innocently remarked.

It occurred to Rob, at that point, that the key did seem rather small.

"It may take awhile for the elevator to get here," Cassandra stipulated in passing. She sighed. "That is one - long - straight - shaft."

For the first time since he'd left the Valkyrie's suite, Rob smiled.

*You got that right, baby . . .*

The doors of the elevator glided open to reveal an empty car behind them.

"Okay," said the receptionist, "this is where you get off."

Rob snorted involuntarily as he stepped into the car. He turned to face Miss Trator. She was smiling at him.

"Just push the button on the panel at the bottom when you're ready to come back," she instructed.

She turned the key again. The doors began to glide closed.

"I'll be here to get you up."

As the car descended, Rob spent some needed time sorting out his variously battered, and shattered, wits. He was only half recovered when he noticed the length of his descent. He looked up above the doors, and saw that there was no floor indicator.

*Long . . . straight . . . shaft . . .*, he recollected, then, *Oh yeah - shit - she was talking about the elevator!*

He was still laughing quietly to himself when the car came to a stop, and the doors opened again.

He stepped into a dimly lit corridor, the walls of which had been carved from deep, earthen bedrock. At the end of the corridor, some fifty feet from the elevator, there was a nondescript, grey painted, steel door. Rob located the panel necessary for his return trip on the elevator, then walked the corridor, trying to ignore the creepy feeling gnawing at his gut as he went.

He knocked on the door, the dull ring of thick steel filling the corridor. After a short time that seemed too long, he heard what he took to be a heavy lock being worked on the inside of the door. Time passed as the lock continued to be worked. Rob began to wonder if the person working the lock might be having trouble of some kind. Tentatively, he raised his knuckles, and knocked again.

"Alright, just a minute!" shouted the steel muffled voice of what sounded like a very angry man.

As the sound of the lock continuing to be worked continued to sound, Rob cleared his throat lightly, pursed his lips and lowered his hand.

"Fucking, cheat-ass crap!" the voice swore.

The sound of the working lock continued.

"Can I offer you a hand?" Rob asked at length.

"Oh, like you can do anything from where you are," the voice derided grandly. "Smart mouth," it then muttered.

The sound of the lock being worked continued.

"I can tell ya t' go fuck yerself," said Rob in a muted tone.

"I heard that!"

Rob was about to shout 'Good!' when the door suddenly flew open, and there, on the other side of it stood a short, overweight, bespectacled man of youngish age, thinning hair and an alarmingly pale complexion.

"Who're you?" the man demanded once his eyes had focused on Rob.

Rob drew a breath to speak, and noticed that the man also needed a bath.



"Master Sergeant, Robert York, reporting as requested by Brynhildr Nielson," Rob stated for the record. *Asshole.*

The man took a moment to look Rob over through his soda pop bottle glasses, then he grunted.

"Huh!" he said. "Prove it."

Rob got out his military I.D., and showed it to the man. Satisfied, the man grunted again, then moved aside so Rob could enter.

Rob was awed as he stepped into the room's stark white interior. It was a roughly fifty-foot square, windowless enclosure, filled with bays upon bays of floor standing computers, some of which loomed up as high as the fifteen-foot ceiling. The hum of high-powered electrical operation could be heard throughout the room. A ceiling mounted bay of monitors bore an array of indecipherable images. Many of the computers - if, indeed, they could have been called that - possessed a fantastic, alien appearance.

Rob was shaken from his reverie over the room's contents by what was becoming a familiar sound. He turned to see the man at the door struggling to lock it again. He succeeded in his task after a time, then turned, and approached Rob, his corpulent, shapeless body jiggling as he walked.

"You Alex Coughlin?" Rob asked him, raising his hand to offer greeting.

"Yeah," Coughlin affirmed as he brushed past Rob.

Rob turned to regard Coughlin's receding, jiggling back, his hand left hanging in the air.

*Asshole.*

Coughlin made his way to a workstation that was situated to one side of the room. He sat down at the desk, and began working away at the buttons of a console that looked like an unsuccessful cross between a mutant extended computer keyboard, and that of a Steinway concert grand.

"I've checked the Army database for anything Bjork might have in mind regarding Hana," Coughlin related, then he turned to Rob, "both unencrypted, *and* encrypted," he added with pride. "but there's nothing recent on him except the file of his debriefing after he escaped from the insurgents."

"My bet would be that the captain would be trying to set up a mission," Rob offered, approaching Coughlin as far as his sense of smell would allow. "You know, to get the clearance codes, aircraft support and so on that he'd need."

"Been there - done that," Coughlin said dryly. "Still nothing concrete, but I did come up with a mission profile that was created, *and* then deleted."

"Where'd you find it?" asked Rob.

"Just a sec," Coughlin answered.

He pushed a button on the console, and, without warning, Rob, Coughlin and his console were suddenly in an entirely different location. It was a huge office filled with desks, and busy personnel. Rob recognized it as a military office.

"The U.S. Operations Command Center in Baghdad," Coughlin announced.

Rob looked about the new surroundings utterly amazed. Everything in the room could be seen with crystal clarity as army staffers moved about in the course of their business. Even the views outside of windows could be seen as distinct, and clear.

"What the fuck just happened?" he wanted to know.

"You wanted to know where I found that mission profile, didn't you?" said Coughlin simply.

"Yeah," Rob answered.

"Well, here you are," Coughlin replied, again, simply.

Rob looked around the room a second time.

"You gotta be shittin' me," he commented. "Virtual reality?"

Coughlin chuckled lightly. "I call it Odinvision," he related easily. "It's the next best thing to being there. It's like an extremely advanced, realtime hologram. What you're seeing actually *is* the U.S. Operations Command Center in Baghdad as of the moment. It's almost like a living rendering - with texture no less. You can touch the upholstery on one of the chairs, and it really feels like material, but, at the same time, you could walk right through any object if you wanted to - so long as you didn't bump into anything in here."

"And where," Rob didn't quite want to know, "is 'here'?"

Coughlin frowned in mild irritation.

"The control center," he said as though he were stating the obvious. "Where did you think we were - oo, she doesn't look bad," he said, taking a moment to admire a female Command staffer in desert camouflage, ". . . not - at - all . . ."

"What has this got to do with the profile you found?" Rob asked.

Coughlin pointed. "You see that guy over there in the corner at the desk?" he inquired.

Rob located the man Coughlin was referring to.

"Yes," he affirmed.

"The computer he's at is the one an auto-delete folder was created on eighteen hours, and thirty-seven minutes ago," Coughlin related. "It contained a mission profile to a place called Hamadan, Iran, requiring two huees, and a Delta Team."

"The objective?" asked Rob. What he was hearing sounded like the course of action the captain would be taking.

"Stated objective was to get some C.I.A. dude outta there."

"That's sounds like a typical cover for a target," Rob considered. "It's most likely what we're looking for." He smiled. "I didn't know Hana worked for the C.I.A."

Coughlin shared his smile.

"The Valkies have filled a number of roles over time," he told his visitor. "One was even Pope for awhile, but that was back in the early 800's."

He pushed a button on his console. Their location abruptly changed to one Rob had no idea of.

"Where're we now?" he asked.

"Inside that computer's hard drive," Coughlin answered. "It makes it easier for me to find what I need, and, no, the hard drive is not as big as this room - it's just an expanded image, of course."

"Of course," Rob affirmed, not wanting to seem advanced, alien computer naive.

Coughlin touched some controls on his console. Rob saw a dot of brilliant yellow light appear out of nowhere. He watched it begin to move about the atmosphere of the room.

"Hm," Coughlin murmured, "looks like the mission was never executed. The file had an auto-delete effective at midnight, Baghdad time." He turned in his chair to look at Rob. "Could Bjork have used a draft copy of the order to set up the mission?"

"Yes, he could have," Rob answered, "as long as nobody looked to close. The order would have the words, 'Provisional Draft' at the bottom."

Coughlin frowned, then turned back to his console. The yellow light moved about the room as he worked his controls.

"C'mon," he droned irritably, "where are you . . . ?"

As suddenly as it had appeared then, the light vanished.

"Here we are," said Coughlin. "Yeah, you're right. It says 'Provisional Draft'." He turned to face Rob again. "If that is the mission, then they've already been in Iran for six hours."

"Then it looks like Bryn, and I, are on our way to Hamadan," Rob concluded.

"You going with her?" Coughlin asked.

Rob nodded.

"Is there a problem with that?" he wondered.

Coughlin shrugged. "Mortals usually don't last very long around Valkies in action," he noted.

Instinctively, Rob recalled the battle he, and Hana, had been through. He still couldn't get over how she'd flipped that tank, and it warmed him to think of how he'd covered her from fire.

"I can handle myself," he said to Coughlin with an easy, confident shrug.

Coughlin looked back at his console. "'t's your funeral," he murmured.

He touched a control. The computer hard drive image that dominated the room vanished, and they were, once more, in the control center. Rob looked about cautiously to make sure he was where he was.

"What *is* all of this?" he wondered, referring to the array of equipment.

"From pedestrians crossing Euclid and Olympic in Santa Monica, California, to stress conditions of the polar ice caps - it's the world in a nutshell," Coughlin related casually.

He smiled broadly, his bloated cheeks pushing his glasses up slightly. His parted lips revealed a set of endangered teeth in serious need of work.

"Kinda Orwellian, isn't it," he mused happily.

Rob was amazed at the concept as well as that a man could endure such a cloistered existence.

"Y'know," he ventured cautiously, "I know it's none of my business, but . . . it might not be a bad idea if you got out more."

Coughlin smiled, then he reached for a button on his console. "If I want to go out," he said. Suddenly, the two of them, along with Coughlin's console, were in a large, city park. The atmosphere was dark. Rob looked up to see the moon in the distant sky.

"There's nothing like New York City's Central Park at night," Coughlin related fondly.

He lounged back in his chair, his feet loosing contact with the floor of the room that appeared as grassy ground.

"It's soooo peaceful," he said.

He pushed another button. The park atmosphere in the room began to move, creating the impression of walking through the park.

"I like to take long walks," said Coughlin.

He pushed another button. The illusion of walking through the park increased in speed.

"Sometimes I go for a jog," he said, his chubby, dangling legs swinging gently at the knees. "I like to keep in shape y'know."

Rob said nothing as he turned to leave. The man was so far beyond out of shape that it was disgusting.