

Surt Show

"I hate you..."

Three little words. Just three little words that come so easily. Under different circumstances, the speaker might have found it amusing how easy those came, considering how hard it would've been if one exchanged the word 'hate' for 'love'. Even though the message would be infinitely nicer.

The speaker wasn't in any mood to be nice, however. She was chained to a wall and in considerable amounts of pain.

"Now, now...let's be nice to one another. There's no need to be uncivilized about this. I am just doing my duty," came the answer from somewhere in front of her.

The room was very dark. The only light came from smoldering coals in a brazier. A brazier holding several iron rods, getting heated.

"I wouldn't sully my mouth by saying what I think of your 'duty'," the chained femme sneered, tearing at her bonds. To no avail. They were well made. Sturdy and strong.

The voice in the darkness laughed, mirthlessly. It was cold and unpleasant...much like the room itself. A room that stank of rot and decay, just to add to the coziness of it all. The bound female would probably have found time to comment on it if she wasn't busy getting tortured.

So far she hadn't screamed, though admittedly, it had come close more than once. The fur in the darkness was terribly good at his job and she had a distinct feeling that she'd start screaming any moment he really wanted her to. No matter how strong willed she was.

"If you would just behave and cooperate, you could be out of here in moments, Aslaug..." the cold voice said.

The shieldmaiden shook her head and spat on the floor. There was no way she would cooperate with this fur. The way she saw it, the only thing she really had going for her was the fact that she would certainly outlast him. Physically at least. She didn't know how long it'd be before her mind cracked. What made it all worse was that her torturer probably didn't know that she couldn't die. He was holding back to avoid doing too much damage to her. If he accidentally slipped and hurt her seriously, she'd heal up fast and he would probably put two and two together. Then the pain would really start in earnest. As if it wasn't bad enough as it was.

Thinking back on what had gone before this ordeal, she wanted to scream for entirely different reasons.

###

Tigermark let go of his binoculars and they fell to his chest. He was in arguably the foulest mood he could remember being for many years. Something was going seriously wrong with this mission and he didn't even know where he was. Someone or something was out there, sabotaging their efforts. To make matters worse, Aslaug had vanished more than two days ago and they had no idea where to look for the filly.

This place was not to his liking either. Everything stank. It was as if rot grew out of the very ground under his feet and the smell made him want to retch. The scent of rotting meat hung in the air whenever a wind blew past.

Why The Boss had decided to send the amigos-plus-one to this place was beyond him. Behind him, Joe Latrans was sleeping, leaned up against a rock. The coyote could sleep anywhere. It was a talent the feline greatly envied at times like this.

Cursing under his breath, he turned around and looked for the last member of the group.

"Aramis?" he asked aloud.

"I'm back here...and I'd appreciate a paw if you can spare one. I think the ground is trying to eat my feet," an annoyed voice responded.

Tigermark raised an eyebrow and headed towards the voice. True enough. When he found the tabby feline, Aramis was indeed stuck in the ground up to just under his knee. He seemed irritated rather than afraid.

"How did that happen?" the tiger asked and tried pulling Aramis out of the ground.

It didn't feel like quicksand or swampy ground. It was literally as if Aramis was slowly being eaten by something without teeth. At least he could be dug out.

"No idea! I went back here to check the horizon in this direction but truth be told...there's nothing here except wasteland. And no sign of the filly either. I wonder where she's gone off to! Anyway, I was just standing here and when I tried to move back to you and Joe, this had happened. It doesn't hurt but it's a nuisance!"

"I believe you..."

Tigermark looked around for his gear. There was a folding shovel there...army issue. He could use that to get Aramis out of the ground. Before he got to it though, the shorter feline had whispered a few words. The ground around his feet turned into mud.

"Give me a paw out of this gunk, will ya?" he asked and held out a paw for Tigermark to grab.

"Sure," Tigermark answered, and grabbed a hold of his friend, pulling him out. "You need to wash your feet, but considering that all the water we've seen so far has been rotten..."

"Don't remind me. I was just about to forget the smell..." Aramis muttered, sourly.

"Do like me, then..." Joe's voice said, sleepily. "Stuff something into your nostrils and get used to breathing through your mouth.

"Joe...feline respiration doesn't work that way. We'd get short of breath in a matter of minutes," Tigermark answered.

"Tough luck for the felines," the coyote chuckled and winked. "Any sign of everyone's favorite axe-wielding one-femme army?"

"You mean Aslaug? No...none, and I'm very worried by now. Something must've taken her..." Tigermark said, scratching his neck.

Joe squinted. "Be serious, Tiger...can you really imagine ANYTHING making off with Aslaug without her putting up such an infernal racket that she'd start Armageddon prematurely by waking the dead??"

"Joe...what have I told you about sacrilege?" the tiger said, reproachfully.

Joe looked absolutely innocent and made a gesture of non-comprehension. "No comprende, señor pussycat."

Aramis shook his head and tried hard not to laugh at the expression on Tigermarks face. The taller feline was clearly searching for a snappy reply and for once coming up short. Joe's eyes were twinkling merrily.

"You've hung around that filly too long, Joe..." Tigermark grumbled. "She's rubbing off on you."

"Shh...don't tell Annie that," Aramis chimed in and winked.

Joe laughed and shook his head. "Well...we do need to look for her. Obviously, she isn't coming back on her own, and that does mean she's likely in some kind of trouble..."

"That's what I'm talking about," Tigermark mumbled. His tail was twitching behind him. If anyone but Joe had called him 'Señor Pussycat', that fur would've quickly been looking for his teeth all over the surrounding two square miles.

"Tiger...relax. 'Trouble', when speaking of Aslaug, can mean anything from her running into a large, hostile army which it will take her a few days to carve her way through, or her finding a computerized vending machine and trying to figure out how to buy some chewing gum..."

Aramis nodded. "He's got a point, Tiger...she still gets ticks whenever someone mentions computers. She really doesn't get the idea..."

Tigermark couldn't help chuckling. The others did have a point.

"I just wish we knew where we were, that's all," he said and looked around. "This place gives me the creeps. Somehow, I think this is the closest we've come to seeing Hell, so far..."

"Now who's being sacrilegious?" Joe asked and patted his friend's shoulder. "Come on, we'd better start looking for that filly."

###

The torturer was in doubt. The femme he had been told to work on wasn't buckling. Many furs would have started talking at the mere threat of what he was doing to her, and she wasn't even screaming in pain. At least he felt sure that was only a matter of time. He could see the strain on her face whenever he applied some of the crueller devices.

Perhaps it was time to throw caution to the wind?

He would need to ask his master first, of course. Breaking the shieldmaiden beyond repair might not be a good idea without getting

permission first. On the other paw, breaking things beyond repair was something he was allowed to do routinely. He was pretty sure he'd get permission.

He pushed open a pair of large, brass doors and entered a massive room. He always felt dwarfed in there. Of course, the presence in the room was enough to dwarf anyone.

"Master," he grovelled and fell to his knees, bowing his head.

A voice replied. It wasn't spoken, nor was it really felt. It simply *was*. Pure malice seemed to ooze out of the stonework in the room...bubbling up from underneath the floor and seeping out of the walls. The torturer felt a mixture of exhilaration and blind dread. It always happened in here. He'd never get used to it though.

"She..." he began, but his throat constricted. The fear was too much to bear.

The temperature in the room rose somewhat. It was already hot in there. The rise simply made it very uncomfortable.

"SHE WHAT?"

"N...not t...t...talking...Ma...Master," the torturer whimpered and put his arms over his head as if it would shield him from the terror in the room.

The presence fell silent for a moment. It seemed either ponderous or slightly surprised. The temperature fluctuated a little, but never stopped being uncomfortably hot. Then...the presence started moving around. The torturer couldn't see. It was hard enough to look at his Master whenever he was...

No...

His Master was never in a good mood. There was 'foul' and 'absolutely murderous'...and anything in between the two. 'Good' didn't factor into

it. In fact, it was a word one couldn't associate with the presence in the room in any way.

"IS IT POSSIBLE THAT I NEED TO LOOK FOR ANOTHER TORTURER? HAVE YOU LOST YOUR TOUCH?" the voice asked.

The torturer honestly wished his Master would at least have sounded angry. Anger he could deal with. Disappointment was a lot more dangerous.

"I've been...been..." he began but the terror stopped him dead in his tracks again. If only he had some way of concentrating.

The voice was close to his ear now. The torturer could feel his fur singe from the heat and he whimpered in pain.

"YOU'VE BEEN WHAR"

"H...h..."

The presence sneered and the torturer gasped in pain as he felt the fur on his back curl and burn. He cried out in agony and curled up. "HOLDING BACK, MASTER!" he screamed.

"I DID NOT TELL YOU TO..."

The torturer knew better than to argue. He hadn't been told to hold back but he hadn't been told otherwise either, and normally he had to seek permission to take the velvet gloves off, so to speak.

"Forgive me, Master...forgive me," he whimpered, shivering in pain and fear.

The presence seemed slightly mollified and returned to its original position in the room. It didn't speak for a while. It seemed to be observing the fur on the floor.

"IMBECILE," it said at last. "THE SHIELDMAIDEN CANNOT DIE. WHY DO YOU THINK I WANT HER CONVINCED IN THE FIRST PLACE?"

The torturer kept his forehead against the floor. His back hurt worse than he could remember ever having experienced before. "I wouldn't dream of second-guessing you, Master...you're so great and I'm so small..."

"AT LEAST YOU HAVEN'T FORGOTTEN YOUR PLACE. GO BACK THERE...AND START WORKING. I EXPECT RESULTS!" the voice snarled.

The torturer whimpered in the affirmative and scuttled out of the room on all fours.

###

Aslaug wasn't expecting the momentary pause in the torture to last very long. Soon her tormentor would be back, and she wasn't sure how much longer she could keep from screaming. If he came back with new and bright ideas, she felt fairly sure it wouldn't be long at all. She wasn't sure if her mind would heal the same way her body did, either. If the pain got bad enough and she lost her sanity, she wasn't certain she'd recover.

At least the pain had gone by now and her body had healed up while the torturer was gone. She wasn't even sure what kind of fur he was. She hadn't really bothered to look. There were more important things to consider. Such as the expert way he handled red hot pokers and thumbscrews.

She wasn't even sure where she was. Aramis, Tigermark and Joe were no doubt looking for her by now, but she wasn't certain they could find her. This entire mission had gone bad from the word go. She reminded herself to file a complaint with the Christian God when she got out of this...

...if she got out of it, that was.

She was starting to feel seriously sick and tired of getting bumped around various worlds and realities without more than a cryptic message

along the lines of 'GO YE FORTH AND DO MY
BIDDINGE'

...or somesuch. She had never actually talked to the Christian God. The three males used a variety of other words, like 'The Big Guy' or 'The Boss'. The latter one had been a cause of problems, since she had overheard a song called 'Born in the USA' on the radio at the Latrans home at one time. She liked the voice of the singer and asked Joe who was singing. He had answered 'The Boss' before realizing what he had said. It had taken some convincing before she had believed that she could listen to Bruce Springsteen music without converting to Christianity after that.

The memory made her chuckle. Nowadays she had a much better grasp of metaphor and the strange ways that Americans used their language. She still didn't *like* it. She preferred to be plain spoken and forthright, and Americans generally seemed to like to pack everything within a metaphor within a figure of speech within garbled, badly pronounced English.

She liked Americans as individual furs.

She just didn't like the culture much. Admittedly, it did have some good points. She liked Football, even though feet really were underutilized in that game. She liked her job as a varsity coach too. She had even started looking into getting an apartment of her own, when this mission was called.

Of course, she did like other parts of American culture as well. Apple Pie for instance. That was a piece of American culture she certainly planned on introducing in Asgaard whenever she went there, permanently.

She didn't like American beer though. It tasted like something an incontinent sheepdog could be held responsible for. It looked like it too.

There was nothing for it. She'd have to start brewing her own ale again, when she got out of here.

If she got out of here...

Sighing, she hung her head and slumped against the wall. The bastards had even left her axe across the room to taunt her. Just outside reach her reach. If she could just lay her paws on that, she would carve her way through anything outside the cell and get back to the others.

There was nothing for it. Whenever she got out of here...she really had to file a complaint with the Christian God about the lack of mission briefings.

If she got out of here...that was.

###

"Where in God's name ARE we anyway??" Joe growled.

He was standing on top of something he really hoped was a small dirtmound. For all he knew, it could be ashes. The stench of rotting meat had stopped. Everything here stank of sulphur and burning...something. Probably burning meat. For all the coyote knew, he could be standing on top of a few hundred dead furs.

Aramis didn't look happy about the situation. "You don't suppose He really DID send us to Hell, do you?" he asked, looking at Tigermark.

The larger feline grumbled something but shook his head. He didn't have the imagination to see how that was possible.

"Do you see anything from up there?" he called out, looking up at Joe.

"Yeah," Joe replied. "More burning stuff. And look, over there is another pile of burning whatever. Oh and I see something burning over that way, too."

"I get the picture," Tigermark sighed. "For all we know, we could be heading in the wrong direction..."

Aramis was about to answer but was cut off by a hissing voice by his feet. He had never heard a voice like that. It sputtered and crackled with every word. The tabby couldn't help thinking that if fire could speak, that was how it'd sound. He looked down...

...on a small, burning figure. It even looked like it's hair was made from fire.

"In thisss place...everywhere issss the wrong direction..." it said.

"And what the HELL are you?" Aramis asked, almost jumping back out of the way.

The firey figure grinned widely, showing lots of burning teeth. "Interessssting way of asssking that quesssstion, feline. Thisss issssn't Hell...although we have an exchange program with them..."

Tigermark looked crosseyed. "An exchange program...with Hell??"

"Sssssure, why wasssste expertisssse when we can mix it sssso beautifully?" the fire-creature said and shrugged. At least Tigermark presumed it was a shrug.

Joe came down from the mound and looked at the small, burning shape. "Oh look, it's Lue..."

"How do you know my name??" the small creature asked, momentarily confused.

Joe shrugged. "Aslaug told me the story about Thor's challenges. Lucky guess, really..."

"That wasssn't me. That was my coussssin Lue..." the fire-creature said, reproachfully.

Tigermark sighed. "Let me guess...you're all called Lue?"

"How did you know?" Lue asked, starting to look suspicious.

"Another lucky guess."

Lue narrowed what was probably his eyes and glared at the tall feline. He decided against arguing though, and turned towards Joe.

"You're not ssssuppossessed to be here!"

"Tell me about it," Joe muttered. "I don't even know WHY we are here."

Aramis shook his head and looked around again. "Let's start with the basics," he said, looking down at Lue. "Where *is* 'here' exactly?"

"Nuh uh...no assking qeusstionssss without paying the price," Lue said, wagging something that passed for a flaming finger.

Tigermark felt his patience evaporating rapidly. It wasn't merely the heat. The idea of doing a deal with Lue made his stomach turn. "I'm not making deals with demons. Get out of here!" he growled.

"Sssuit yourssselvessss," Lue grinned. "You can wander around Musspelheim until you...oh *bugger!*"

Aramis smiled widely. "Okay, so now we have a location. Any of you know what Muspelheim is? Or where it is?" he asked, looking at Joe and Tigermark.

Joe swallowed...and nodded.

"I know..." he muttered. "Aslaug told me..."

###

"This is getting tedious..." the torturer said, sighing. "You don't seem to grasp the idea here, Aslaug. You just need to cooperate and this will all end. No more pain. No more need to scream your lungs out."

Aslaug was sweating, badly. She was still chained to the wall, but the metal bands around her wrists and waist were heated now. Glowing red hot, in fact and she was constantly scorched. Her face contorted in agony and she whimpered in pain...yet she shook her head.

"Forget it!"

The torturer sighed. "I don't like doing this, you know..."

"Horseshit! You love your job, you sick excuse for a fur..." the equine growled, before the metal heated up a little further. She tried to bite back the need to scream but a hard shiver ran down her back and she had to release the agony somehow.

Again, the torturer sighed. "Guilty as charged," he mumbled and picked up a long, thin metal contraption. It had a glowing, bulbous head. "I trust you can guess what I'm going to do with this?" he asked, smiling.

Sweat dripped down Aslaug's forehead and she swallowed, once again gritting her teeth. "Yeah...you're about to take a bite out of it!" she hissed. Her fur was matted against her skin and her mane was all but burnt off by now.

The torturer simply sighed and moved closer.

###

Lue was reluctant to leave the taller creatures alone. Much to Tigermark's disgust. He had threatened to empty his canteen over the fire-demon twice, but both times he'd been reminded by his friends that every drop of water was worth solid gold in this place.

The heat was starting to get to everyone though. Tigermark had to admit it was probably a big part of the reason for his irritable mood. He was normally very levelheaded...in fact the most levelheaded member of the group, by far. Yet this place...Muspelheim...was starting to crawl

under his fur. Joe...normally a fur with a rather volatile temper...was acting like a cocky teenager. And Aramis had started developing self confidence. It was like the world was turned upside down.

The feline could only imagine what it was doing to Aslaug, where ever she was.

"GO AWAY!" he roared and kicked towards the small fire-creature.

Lue laughed and danced sideways. "Are you ssssure you don't want to make a deal?" he asked for the tenth time in as many minutes.

"What deal are you offering anyway?" Joe asked, grinning lopsidedly.

"Don't! Don't even get him *started*, Joe!" Tigermark growled and rubbed his face. If he could only get that constant feeling of lurking anger out of his system...

"Just be careful, Joe. Don't agree to anything," Aramis said, matter-of-factly, scanning the horizon again. There was still nothing to see.

Lue shrugged. "I can take you to where sssshe iss...for a price. I know who you are looking for, you ssssee."

Joe raised an eyebrow. "Then what is your price?"

"A little of thissss, a little of that...nothing you can't ssssspare..." Lue said with a big grin.

Joe winked. "I'm an old canid, bendejo. You need more practice."

Lue snapped his fingers and grumbled. "I need my money back. That mail-order coursse in sssssoul-bartering issssn't working..."

Tigermark felt like his eardrums were going to melt. "You WHAT???"

Aramis started laughing. He couldn't help himself. Everything fell into place in his mind. He put his paws on his knees and bent forward, laughing so hard he nearly fell over. Tigermark sent him a sour glance.

"What's so funny, kitten..."

Unable to answer from fits of laughter, Aramis just shook his head.

He'd have to catch his breath before answering.

###

Aslaug screeched in pain again. She was close to losing consciousness from the horror of what was being done to her. The torturer had retreated with the bulbous pole after she had planted a hoof in his midsection. He'd recovered fast though...and instead he'd used the damned thing to poke and prod at all exposed parts of her fur from a distance. The metal around her wrists and waist warmed up another few degrees.

"Stop this idiocy, Aslaug. You could be the greatest destructive force Midgaard has ever known..." the torturer growled. "Why do you keep resisting? My Master only wants to give you a chance to unleash your potential..."

The shieldmaiden slumped back against the stone wall again and swallowed, hard. She couldn't die. She healed so fast that while her paws should be burning off, she just felt the constant sear of the superheated metal. It was more than one fur could possibly bear. Any ordinary fur would've passed out instantly, or at least lost their sanity to the pain. She wasn't a normal fur anymore, though. If indeed she had ever been.

It was becoming more than even she could stand though. She opened her eyes and moved a little despite the horrific, searing sensation that came with every move of a muscle.

"You've forgotten something..." she wheezed.

The torturer's eyes glowed red. He seemed confused. "What's that?"

Getting to her hooves, Aslaug summoned the last of her strength. Looking directly at the red dots in the darkness, she smiled bitterly. "You've forgotten something about heat..."

"Don't be ridiculous..."

"You've forgotten that metal can be expanded...when it's hot enough..."

Snarling, Aslaug launched herself across the cell. She felt her numbing fingers close around the bar of her axe. Swinging around, she severed the chains from the wall and turned to face the red dots in the darkness. They seemed to be mocking her.

"How will you escape this place, shieldmaiden? You don't even know where you are. You don't know who my Master is!"

Aslaug swung her axe again and felt it bite deeply. Stepping over the remains of the torturer, she noticed for the first time that he was some kind of furless canid. It didn't matter.

"I don't need to know," she growled and kicked down the door to the cell.

###

"WHAT'S SO DAMNED FUNNY, ARAMIS?!?" Tigermark roared. He immediately regretted it and again ended up clutching his temples. It was like there was something else inside his head by now, making him angry despite him wanting to stay calm.

Judging from the look on Joe's face, he had a similar sensation. He was still grinning lopsidedly, but his eyes were concerned and worried.

Aramis wiped his eyes and shook his head. "I know who Lue is..." he said, choking on his words. He was still smiling.

"Yeah, he's a demon. Someone who buys mail-order courses from Hell," Tigermark snapped, before biting his own tongue. He hadn't even wanted to say that.

Lue snapped his fingers and sighed. "Aww shucks. Curses, foiled again, eh?" he said and looked at Aramis. "What gave me away?"

"Aslaug's ramblings about your tendency to practical jokes, if you want to know the truth..." the young feline answered and smiled. "Let's have a look, Loke. What do you really look like?"

Lue vanished in a puff of smoke, only to be replaced by a lean weasel with a glint in his eyes. He was dressed in darkened chain-mail and baggy pants. A long, dark cape hung around his shoulders.

"I can't remember," Loke replied. "I suppose this appearance is as good as any. I take it you want Aslaug back?"

"I want this damned voice out of my head, before I kill someone," Tigermark snarled and looked around. His claws extended.

Loke nodded. "Can't say I blame you...but I didn't put it there. It's what Muspelheim does to furs. If you want to find Aslaug, I suggest you search that way..." he said and pointed.

Joe was about to get going before he remembered something and turned, looking at the weasel. "One moment...what are YOU doing here?"

The weasel smiled disarmingly. "I'm Loke..." he said and shrugged. "I come and go...it's what I do..."

Then he vanished.

Joe turned and started running...

###

Aslaug was about to start tearing down the walls when she saw the brass doors. A voice at the back of her mind told her that going through them would be the biggest mistake of her life. But her gut feeling told her she had to. Aslaug had learned to trust her gut feelings over voices in her head.

Part of her was relishing this. She lived for moments like these. She was covered in blood from mane to hoof. She hadn't counted how many furless...things...she had hacked her way through since escaping her cell. A lot, at least.

Let Tigermark do the thinking. Let Aramis do his *Sejd*. Let Joe have his guns. *She* was born for carnage and she wouldn't have it any other way. Hefting her axe in her scorched paws, she growled deep in her throat as she advanced on the doors.

Kicking them open, she immediately felt the presence beyond slam into her. It took her entire force of will to remain on her feet. For a moment, all her rage seeped out of her.

"(COME IN, SHIELDMAIDEN...I WOULD LIKE TO SEE MY PREY CLEARLY..."

The voice was there. Everywhere. In her blood. In the air. In the stone and in the smoke. Most of all, it was inside her head. It was invasive...like a mental rape. It made the equine want to crawl out of her fur.

She had never felt anything quite so malicious and evil before...

"Who are you?" she asked and stepped into the room, still holding her axe in both paws.

The presence chuckled.

###

"This is pointless. We're walking in circles. We're getting nowhere!" Joe sighed. "Look...there's that dirtmound again."

Tigermark nodded. Loke was long gone and none of them had the slightest idea what was going on. Despite himself, he was starting to feel panicky. This wasn't right. Someone was playing with them...toying with them.

Aramis stopped. "Guys...what was that?" he asked. His voice betrayed how worried the young feline was.

Joe stopped. He could feel it too. Like a slight tremor. He swallowed and looked at his feline friends. The tremor started again. It lasted longer this time.

"Is this one of those ironic situations where I'm going to look up behind me and see some enormous, towering, slavering monster?" he asked and swallowed.

"Nahh, we left the Bowtie beast behind this time..." Tigermark chuckled. Then he stopped. He could feel it too. "Or did we...?"

Aramis was about to answer when the ground exploded around him.

###

Aslaug looked up. And up. And up...

The looming, towering presence above her seemed to mock and jeer her. She swallowed. There was fire everywhere. It wasn't visible but she could feel it and smell it. It roared in her ears...flared at the corner of her eyes. She couldn't turn her head to look though. She couldn't get herself to do so...

"DO YOU STILL WONDER...WHO I AM?"

Aslaug shook her head. "No," she said...fear creeping into her voice.

###

Annie Latrans sat up in bed, wincing. She wasn't sure exactly what had happened, but for some reason, Joe had flailed around in his sleep and managed to hit her. It was an accident, of course...if she had ever doubted it, then the fact that Joe had literally fallen out of the bed and was now fighting to liberate himself from the constraints of the bedlinen told her so.

The coyote got to his feet, looking around, nervously. Annie blinked. She hadn't seen her husband with his tail stuck to his legs like that for years. Whatever nightmare he had suffered from was clearly very bad. He snapped back and forth as if expecting something dangerous to pop out of the air behind him.

"Joe!"

Annie's voice made him come back to reality. He turned and looked at her, and relaxed a little. His tail started moving again.

"Yes?" he asked.

"Did you have a nightmare?"

Joe was about to answer when the bedroom door opened. Joe turned to look. Aslaug leaned against the frame, wearing a sleeveless T-shirt and a pair of baggy training pants that she used for sleeping. She looked haggard.

"No," she said, quietly. "He didn't."

Joe was about to protest. Of course it was just a dream. He was just about to open his mouth and contradict the filly, but she broke him off.

"They tortured me, Joe...put red hot irons around my wrists and waist," she said, bitterly. Then she held out her arms towards him.

There was no fur around her wrists. A slight stench of burnt flesh clung to her.

Joe opened his eyes wide. "What was that...?" he asked, barely whispering.

"Surt..." the filly answered, then turned and left.

Joe turned back to Annie with, to her surprise, a fearful expression on his face.

"Joe, what is it? What's, what did she call it, shirt? I don't understand." She had drawn the cover that Joe hadn't bailed off the bed in up to her chin, and now sat with her arms around her knees.

Joe smiled a bit despite the shock of what Aslaug had said. "No Hon, not shirt. *Surt*. Something from her world. A totally malevolent force, whose only goal is destruction. I'm not sure what all this means yet, but I —"

Just then the phone rang. Both Joe and Annie nearly jumped out of their fur. By the second ring, Joe had checked the caller ID and had snatched the pawset up so fast he nearly hit himself with it.

"Hello Tiger, fancy you calling at this hour."

"Joe! Is Aslaug all right? I just had the worst nightmare, and it seemed so vivid I just had to call. Sorry if I woke you or interrupted anything."

Joe took a deep breath and scratched his neck absently, trying to frame what he'd seen. "Nah, I just did my usual fall-out-of-bed-in-a-panic routine. Tiger, that was no nightmare. I think what we saw is real, and that something from Aslaug's world just gave us one honkin' big calling card. I expect we'll hear from Aramis soon. Aslaug came into our room shortly after I fell out of bed and woke up. She, she said they tortured her, and the fur was gone from her wrists. She smelled like burnt fur and flesh. I'm not awake enough right now to make much sense of it, but she said it was Surt."

There was silence for a moment, and then Tigermark just quietly said, “I’m on my way.”

“How soon can you be here?”

“Be there in a few hours. I’ll fly out in Stripes One. Joe, I have a very bad feeling about this. I’ll talk to The Boss and see if he can send us any answers.”

“Okay Tiger. Be careful.”

“Yep. See ya soon.” **click**

Joe hung up the phone and looked at Annie. She stood and silently came to him, wrapping him in an embrace. After several seconds, she released him and turned toward the door. “I don’t think there will be any more sleeping on our part tonight. If Aslaug hasn’t gone to the kitchen and started coffee, I will. Maybe some sandwiches, too.”

Joe nodded, grabbing a tee-shirt to put on along with the pajama bottoms he was wearing. “Sounds good. My bet is if Aramis doesn’t call in the next few minutes, then we should expect him on the doorstep in a few hours, as well.”

They both looked at the phone as if expecting it to ring, but after a few seconds of silence, they both shrugged and headed for the kitchen. They found Aslaug there, sitting with her head in her paws. She had indeed started coffee. Joe noticed the fur on her wrists had already grown back, but the very faint odor of burnt filly was still there, attesting to the severity of what she’d just experienced. Rather than start bombarding her with questions, Joe simply sat down and placed a paw on her shoulder. She flinched, startled and unsure for a moment who, or what, had touched her. She relaxed as she realized it was Joe, but she still remained silent.

“Tiger’s on his way,” Joe said softly. “He experienced this, too. Wouldn’t be surprised if Aramis showed up by morning, as well.”

Aslaug simply nodded, still trying to get a grip on what had just happened. Shortly Annie set three steaming mugs on the table and pulled a chair up on Aslaug’s other side. She laid an arm across the filly’s back,

and together the three sat, taking comfort in each other's presence as they awaited the dawn and their friends.

#

“Niner Sierra Tango copy, cleared for landing on Runway One Left, Thanks John Wayne Tower.” Tigermark eased the throttles back a little farther on Stripes One, the modified T-38B he flew when he was in a hurry on a mission. After he'd spent some time in prayer, the phone had roused him from waiting for an answer. It had been a friend who gave him use of a small corporate jet when the Boss called on them to travel around quickly without shifting to another world, dimension, or time. The fur had simply said, “The Citation will be at John Wayne when you need her.”

Tigermark took that as his answer for the moment. He'd packed a few things, checked his gear and weapons, kissed TL goodbye, and was airborne for Joe's home in California within an hour of getting the call from the Citation owner.

He now worked the rudder slightly to stay lined up on the runway centerline as he crossed the end threshold and pulled the nose up to kiss the main wheels on the asphalt. He rolled out the full length of the runway before turning off and taxiing back to the transient aircraft parking ramp. The ramp furs directed him to a spot right beside the Citation he recognized as belonging to his friend.

“Thanks Boss, and you too, Bill,” the tiger said to himself as he shut down the aircraft and prepared to unstrap and get out. The ramp furs worked efficiently, chocking the wheels and wheeling a set of metal stairs up to the side of the cockpit. Tigermark stepped out onto them and took a second to stretch out the kinks flying over halfway across the country in a few hours had caused. He backed down the steep set of steps and retrieved his bags from the pod under the jet's belly. He'd just turned back toward the building when he saw Joe come out the door. He managed a smile as the coyote and he met in the middle of the ramp.

“Bout time you got here.” Joe grinned mirthlessly as he and Tigermark shook paws.

“Yeah, traffic was murder. Aramis show up yet?”

“Not when I left, but I expect him soon. The Boss say anything?”

Tiger nodded over his shoulder. “Yeah, he arranged transportation.”

Joe arched an eyebrow as he looked at the corporate jet beside Stripes One. “Where are we going?”

Tigermark sighed and shook his head. “Away.”

“Away? What does that mean? What the hell am I gonna tell Annie?”

“Easy Joe. Think about it. Something has managed to invade all our minds as we slept, and to physically manifest itself on Aslaug. Do you really want to be in close proximity with family while we sort this out?”

Joe thought a few seconds, more and more concern showing on his face with each second. “No, I guess not. Too much chance they might get hurt. I see you didn’t bring the family, either.”

“No, I didn’t want to disturb the tinxes, and I also didn’t want our families all in one spot, just in case.”

“So, for the safety of our families, we’re going . . .”

“Away,” Tigermark said with finality as he carried his bags out and he and Joe got in the modern world equivalent of the Bowtie Beast. Joe started the engine and eased the large vehicle out of the parking lot.

“And it’s not just for our families. From what you told me about Aslaug, and what we both experienced, I think it would be safer for the world as we know it to try and keep this out and away from civilization. Some place where innocent bystanders will be mostly non-existent.”

Joe shrugged. “Agreed, but I don’t have to like it.”

“Same ol’ Joe. How’s Aslaug?”

Joe drove on in silence as he thought and framed a reply. “Quiet. Outside of that first bit of info, she hasn’t said a thing, just sat there with her head in her paws. Y’know how this Surt is the only thing we’ve ever seen her show any fear of, so this must have really shook her.”

Tigermark nodded slightly in agreement as Joe pulled into his driveway. They both saw Aramis' small car parked on the street. Joe parked the truck and they got out and headed inside. Once there, they could sense that, although it was quiet, there was a very tense feeling in the air. The tiger and the coyote looked at each other, and hurried on into the kitchen. They found Aslaug sitting at the kitchen table much as she had been when Joe left to pick up Tigermark. Across the room, Aramis was sitting on a kitchen chair, with Annie standing over him, an ice bag in her paw applied to the side of his head.

“What happened?” Tigermark said softly, so as not to startle anyone. He saw Aslaug fix one eye on him for a few seconds, and then sink back into her previous withdrawn pose. Annie looked around sharply, but relaxed when she saw who it was that'd spoken. Aramis made as if to rise, but she placed a firm paw in the middle of his chest.

“Oh no you don't. You sit still for at least another ten minutes. I want to make sure there's no concussion.”

Joe quickly found his voice. “Concussion? Annie, what happened? Did the kitten here fall on the steps or something?” he was trying to lighten the tense mood, but the attempt failed miserably.

“No,” Aramis interjected before Annie could answer. “I'll be fine. I startled Aslaug when I came in, and she, er, well, she hit me.”

Both Joe and Tigermark looked impressed. One that the filly had connected with the speedy feline, and two that he'd survived the impact. Still, it was unlike the equine to react so harshly to simply being startled. They'd try to get some answers when Aslaug finally decided to talk to them again. For now, Tigermark stepped up and gave Annie a friendly side-armed hug. She grinned and teased him a bit.

“Tiger! And right in front of my husband! You're incorrigible.”

Tigermark released the hug and took on a look so innocent that it started Joe laughing too hard to comment on his wife's remark. Annie and Aramis, and then Tigermark, too, joined in the laughter. The lighter mood was shattered when Aslaug suddenly stood up and slammed both paws down onto the table, nearly breaking it. There was a wild, murderous look in her eyes, and she seemed ready to charge around, or

even through the table at them. Her jaw worked silently. Then the anger was gone, replaced by a near pleading look.

Just then, they heard the front door open and close. Annie looked at Joe and Tigermark.

“Did you leave the door unlocked?”

Joe shook his head negatively as he and Tiger drew weapons and took up a defensive stance on either side of the doorway into the kitchen. Aramis started to stand to join them, but a quick look and gesture from Annie kept him in his seat. Aslaug looked apprehensively at the doorway, seemingly unable to move.

A slim fox vixen came strolling in the door, carrying an air of both indifference and mischief with her. The femme was fairly modest in her attire, but anyone could see a trim, athletic, and rather buxom for her size figure. She was not quite as tall as Aramis, but her attitude and bearing left no doubt she commanded much greater strength than her appearance would indicate. Annie’s eyes narrowed slightly. Aslaug was looking at the newcomer with curiosity. Joe, Tiger, and Aramis all relaxed at once.

“Tani,” Tigermark said in relief as he holstered his pistol.

The femme bowed and grinned at him. Aslaug noticed the vixen’s most unusual attribute. She had three perfectly formed and functional tails.

“Hello all, How is everyone? Annie, how’s trix?” the vixen said with a slight chuckle in Annie’s direction.

Aslaug finally found her voice. “Joe, who is this, and why is Annie mad at her. Do you want me to hit her? Ack! That didn’t come out right!”

Tani answered. “No it didn’t, but that’s all right, Aslaug. You wouldn’t be the first to want to hit me. Annie’s still a bit miffed about my last visit.”

“A little miffed? You came into our bedroom out of nowhere, snatched Joe away while we were, well, busy. Gave some story about a secret mission, and didn’t bring him home for three days! And then I find out

she did it as a joke! She plopped Joe down stark naked at some meeting. The others in their line of work had a good laugh, but I was terrified for three days!”

“Annie, I said I was sorry,” Tani said in a not-sorry-at-all tone as her three tails waved in mischievous merriment.

“Humph,” Annie replied. “I think we need another pot of coffee.” She walked over to the counter, turning her back to the vixen.

“Now I’m confused. Just who are you and how could you do that to Joe? Ah, what a headache! I can’t think straight! I-I...” Aslaug sat back down, putting her head back in her paws. Still, the others could tell she was more there with them than she had been. Tigermark took on the task of introductions.

“Aslaug, this is Tani. She’s what’s called a *kitsune*. The word is Japanese, and basically they are a kind of trickster fox spirit. Tani is sometimes dispatched by the Lord to give us information or instructions about our missions, but she’s not above doing it in her own certain way. Don’t be alarmed, her little tricks are not usually harmful, and you have to admit materializing Joe in the buff in a meeting hall full of Christian warriors was pretty funny.”

“Ha ha. Not from my end it wasn’t. It took almost five minutes for someone to stop laughing long enough to give me a cloak.” Joe’s rueful grin told everyone that he’d gotten over it.

Aslaug eyed the vixen. “Just what I need, another Loki. Say your piece and begone.”

“Aww, now don’t be that way,” Tani said in a voice that would melt butter. “I came to help. Or at least to tell you what’s happening.”

Aslaug snarled and jumped to her hooves again. “I bloody well KNOW what’s happening. *Surt!* He has found me here and I’ll have no rest until I either give in to him or go insane! I can’t even die to escape him!”

“All true, I’m afraid, but the wild card here that he didn’t count on was how closely you and these ruffians are now linked. When he grabbed

you, they went along for the ride, at least as far as Muspelheim. The one in her world.”

There was a moment of silence, and then Tigermark spoke up. “Okay, all we know about this Surt character is what little Aslaug has told us. He seems like very bad news, but what exactly is he?”

Aslaug just shuddered and held her head. Tani answered when the filly didn’t speak up.

“According to the pantheon and prophecy of her world, which pretty much matches the legends in this one, Surt is what’s called a fire giant. He’s a totally destructive, malevolent force, and at the time of Ragnarok, or the Fate of the Gods, he will burn the world down. Ragnarok is somewhat close to what we call Armageddon. A final battle between order and chaos. Existence and destruction. He’s very powerful on her world, and not to be trifled with. Guys, the gloves are off on this one.”

There was a short but heavy silence as everyone in the room recognized the full weight of Tani’s words. Aramis broke the silence first.

“Crap,” he said soberly.

“You said it, Ari,” Tigermark concurred. He turned back to the kitsune. “Tani, I hope you’re here to tell us how we can get out of this mess. We’ve handled a lot of things so far, from legions of zombies to hydras to even not-so-minor demons, but what amounts to the ultimate evil of the Nordic culture? If just half of what little Aslaug has told us is true, then in all honesty we’re in over our heads.”

“Don’t worry, Tiger, The Boss has this one all planned out,” Tani replied. “He knows what your limits are and understands that this is something that you four are not ready to handle.”

“Peachy,” Joe muttered. “At least we’ll have actual instructions this time.”

“So what’s the plan, Tani?” Aramis said as he slowly leaned forward.

“At this point, getting you guys to a safe place. We can discuss this more once we’re no longer putting innocents in danger.”

"That bad, huh?" Tigermark said.

Tani glanced over to Aslaug and studied her for a moment. She turned back to the tiger. "Yes, very."

"When do we leave?" Joe asked. Though his voice was even and controlled, one of his paws nervously sought out Annie's and held it tightly.

"Now. Preferably while we still have daylight," Tani replied. "We don't know when the Enemy will act again, so we need to prepare as much as we can before then."

Joe opened his mouth to protest, but Tani cut him off. "Joe, The Boss doesn't like this any more than you do, but rest assured that He will make sure that your family is taken care of during this crisis like He always has. We even have a few agents standing by should anything happen here."

Joe sighed and his ears and tail drooped sadly. He looked over at Annie; he could see the worry in her eyes. This was the part of the job he hated, getting whisked off to some unknown destination while his wife was left behind, not knowing what was going to happen to him or for how long he was going to be gone. Hearing that some monstrously evil entity might be after him certainly did not help matters, either. Silently Joe prayed that whatever mess they were in now resolved itself quickly.

"I guess I'd better go get packed," he said somberly. He gave Annie's paw a final squeeze before they both headed upstairs.

###

The Citation practically leapt into the air as Tigermark gently pulled back on the aircraft's controls. In the seat next to him, Tani had the map spread over her lap, quietly calculating their next move. The others were in the passenger compartment, Joe and Aslaug both unnervingly silent for different reasons. Aramis was also quiet as he carefully studied one of the many tomes he had picked up during his adventures, though Tigermark noted that he was probably the only one of the three whose morale wasn't hitting rock bottom at this point. Still, the silence was wearing on his

nerves a little. This was not a good start to possibly the most dangerous threat they've faced yet.

"Where to, Tani?" he asked the vixen as the plane continued to climb into the sky.

"Take the closest corridor due west," she replied, not looking up from the map.

"West?" Tigermark asked. "That's out over the Pacific. This plane doesn't have the range for that kind of voyage."

"I know. Just head west," the kitsune said.

"Okay," Tigermark said uncertainly and radioed the control tower for clearance. He glanced over at the map as he steered the aircraft towards the coast. Whatever she was doing didn't appear to be navigation as far as he could tell. Instead, she was using a pencil and straightedge to make some sort of marking on the map, murmuring something under her breath. He had seen Aramis do something similar, so he felt it would be best not to bother her. He overheard Aramis telling Joe "The Tale of the Interrupted Spellcaster" once, and he could clearly remember some of the more graphic details without trying hard.

Below them Los Angeles continued to creep away to the east as the Cessna climbed further above the arcology of concrete, steel, furs, and dusty earth. Thousands of bathers, tourists, sun-worshippers, and wave-riders played along the boundary of two worlds in blissful ignorance that above their heads, five warriors were preparing to fight for one soul upon which hundreds, even thousands of lives hung in the balance. In silence they flew on, alone in the vast reaches of the sea above and the ocean below, though Tigermark knew that according to the Cessna's mechanical eyes and ears the skies were far from empty. He glanced down at the fuel gauge. They've only been flying for a little over an hour thus far, so fuel wasn't yet an issue, but he hoped that they wouldn't reach a point where it was. Flying aimlessly over the biggest ocean on the planet wasn't helping his worries at all.

“Uh, Tani?” he asked carefully, hoping he wasn’t disturbing her in the middle of casting a huge spell. “I don’t mean to pry, but could you at least tell us where we’re going? I don’t find the idea of ditching in the ocean to be a fun prospect.”

“Are there any clouds nearby?” she asked tersely as though she didn’t hear him.

Tigermark was a bit bewildered by her response, but he quickly scanned the sky ahead of them. “There’s a cloud bank not too far from our position, but why—?”

“Can it hide the Cessna?” she said, cutting him off.

“Uh, yes, while we’re still in it,” Tigermark replied uncertainly.

“Fly into it,” the kitsune commanded.

Tigermark sighed in exasperation. “Yes, ma’am!” he replied as he navigated the plane towards the clouds. The thin wisps of water vapor and dust grew thicker as the craft was blanketed in the light grey mist.

“You might want to put it on autopilot and hold onto something,” Tani said casually. “This may get a bit rough.”

Tigermark was about to ask her to explain, but one look at her and he knew that he should keep his mouth shut and do what he was told. Tani’s paws were placed on the edges of the intricate arcane circle she had drawn on the map and she spoke words under her breath, so quietly that even Tigermark’s ears had trouble hearing them. As she continued to speak, he started to not exactly hear, but *sense* syllables being uttered into existence just beneath his range of hearing. The syllables grew in intensity to where they were buzzing inside his mind instead of his ears. His whiskers began to twitch and he could feel the fur on his tail and the back of his neck rise. He quickly engaged the autopilot and leaned back into his seat, his paws clenching the sides of his chair tightly as though he was about to be ejected out of the cockpit.

The buzzing suddenly stopped, the voice silenced. Nothing had changed as far as he could tell. The plane was still airborne in accordance

with Bernoulli, the uniform grey of concentrated water vapor could still be seen on the other side of the windshield. Several moments passed where it seemed that Tigermark's entire world just sat there blinking in bewilderment.

Finally he snapped back into reality and turned towards Tani. "What in the world just happened?" he started to ask, but he stopped short when he saw her slumped in her seat, wheezing heavily as though she had just set a world record in a marathon.

"Tani? Tani!" Tigermark shouted, suddenly filled with worry. His paw involuntarily shot out and grasped her shoulder. It took a force of will to refrain from shaking her, not certain how much harm that might do. Her skin was alarmingly pale under her fur, her breathing slow and labored. On an instinctive level, Tigermark felt that she was in no mortal danger, but she was cutting to close for comfort.

"Tiger!" Joe was immediately in the cockpit doorway, dread etched into his face. "What's going on? What's happened to Tani?"

"I'm not sure," Tigermark replied. "I think she was casting a spell of some sort, then *something* happened and the next moment she's like this."

"Hey! Let me through!" Aramis said from behind Joe as he squeezed his way past the coyote. As soon as he was inside, he took one look at Tani and his face fell. "Aw crap," he declared unceremoniously.

"What?" Joe snapped. "What happened here?"

"She was seriously pushing her damn limits, that's what happened," the tabby replied irritably. "I'm not sure what exactly she did, but it involved a *lot* of magical power."

"How much power are we talking about?" Tigermark asked cautiously.

"Think Los Alamos and you have a conservative guess," Aramis replied.

"Wha—?" Joe sputtered. "You mean we had a magical A-bomb on this plane?"

"If she screwed up whatever she was doing, yes."

Joe was dumbfounded. Tigermark silently thanked God that he wisely decided to keep his mouth shut during the critical moment.

"Anyway," the tiger said, getting everyone's attention, "apparently whatever she did worked, but what about Tani? Is she going to be all right?"

Aramis shrugged helplessly. "I'm a mage, not a doctor. We might want to check her over, though. Working with energies that powerful can cause some very bad jujū, even if she did successfully cast her spell."

"Define 'bad jujū'," Joe said.

"She could be unconscious for a few hours at best to suffering a stroke at worst, maybe even getting her heart stopped," Aramis replied.

"Say no more." Tigermark immediately unbuckled his safety belt and reached over to free Tani from her restraints. "Joe, help me move Tani to the back. Aramis, stay here and watch the cockpit, make sure we don't run into something." The tone in Tigermark's voice had an immediate effect on his companions. Joe carefully placed his paws under the kitsune's arms and lifted her out of her chair as Tigermark took her legs.

Just as they were about to exit the cockpit, Tani groaned and stirred. "Easy, Tani," Tigermark said. "You gave quiet a scare. Just relax for now."

She weakly shook her head and limply pointed back towards the controls. "...land...the plane..." she wheezed.

"In a moment, we have to tend to you first," Tigermark insisted.

Behind him, the clouds parted as the Cessna once again soared through open sky. "Whoa!" Aramis cried out in surprise.

Tigermark and Joe turned to look out the windshield and were frozen in astonishment. Outside was the largest tree they had ever seen in their lives. It rose up from the endless expanse of ocean, easily towering twenty stories over the surface of the water. A huge dome of vibrant green leaves

growing from the top of the magnificent living monolith rippled in the wind like waves on the sea below. Numerous crags and crevasses scarred the ancient bark, giving the tree an appearance of a living building constructed by sentient paws. Even more unusual was the huge, flat root that extended a couple thousand feet away from the massive trunk along the surface of the water.

"Guys," Aramis said numbly, "I don't think we're in California anymore."

###

Landing was less a problem than Tigermark had thought it would be. He had never landed on a wooden landing strip before, but he kept reminding himself that it was just a flat, steady surface like any other. They seemed to be the only plane in the sky, and whenever he tried hailing the tree on the radio, he got nothing but static. Besides, trying to contact a tree via radio made Tigermark's head hurt. It wasn't normal.

Smiling to himself, he realized that quite a lot of things that he and his friends did couldn't be considered normal by any definition of the word.

Tani still seemed to be shaken. While Tigermark had wanted to take care of the kitsune first, flying on autopilot around a gigantic tree didn't seem like his idea of safety. Reluctantly, he had taken the controls again, but now that they were down, he once again turned his attention to their guide.

"Come on, we need to find someone to help you," he said and offered to help the woozy femme to her feet.

Tani nodded, looking dazed, and accepted the tiger's paw to get up. She was a little unsteady but managed to walk out of the cockpit on her own, followed by a worried Tigermark.

The cabin was already empty. Joe had opened the door and extended the small ladder, to let everyone exit the plane safely. Tigermark steadied

Tani with a paw on either shoulder, still quite worried. The idea of having flown next to the equivalent of a few magical megaton worth of TNT was causing him a bit of distress.

"I don't think we're in Kansas, either..." Joe said, looking at the others as they assembled outside.

They all took in the surroundings. The landing strip was quite large. Big enough to take a commercial jet in an emergency, if the pilot knew what he was doing.

"I am pretty sure trees like this don't exist in any state, Joe," Tigermark said, looking upwards. "This thing makes Giant Redwood look like toothpicks."

"Where are we?" Aramis asked, slightly awestruck. "Aslaug...you wouldn't happen to know this place, would you? Isn't there something about a really big tree and your Gods...?" he asked.

"Do you see any golden roofs anywhere?" the filly replied, absently.

"Eh...not really, but we only just arrived," Aramis answered.

"Then it's not Yggdrasil. It's within sight of Valhalla. You've been to Asgaard, kittycat...when you originally picked me up. Yggdrasil makes this thing look like...well...a toothpick," Aslaug said, irritably, shrugging.

Aramis tried to protest that he couldn't remember seeing a tree that big. Then he blinked. "Whaaat...you mean that oddly colored mountain, in the distance? The one so tall I didn't bother looking for the top...was a TREE?"

Aslaug didn't answer. She rubbed her face and grumbled something in an annoyed tone of voice, looking towards the trunk of the tree. Several furs were coming towards them. They looked peaceful enough. They were dressed in a strange mixture of period-clothing though. One looked like something out of one of Aslaug's longhouses, another looked 'modern', for lack of a better word. There were three more furs there,

dressed in something Aslaug realized was 'old fashioned' clothes, but she had no idea just how old. The male in the strange, curly shoes looked like he tried to look as feminine as possible without being female. It was quite confusing.

"Where are we?" she asked and felt like slapping herself. It was probably the dumbest question one could ask.

Judging from the looks on the faces of her friends, though, it was a question they all wanted to know the answer to. Tani still looked like she mostly needed to lay down and rest. At least she wasn't supplying any answers.

One of the furs approaching smiled. He was a tall, black canid wearing coveralls. Aslaug tried to remember where she'd seen similar clothing, until she remembered some of the pictures she had seen on the com-pu-ter in Joe's and Annie's home.

This fur was a pilot, too.

Good, the filly thought. At least he and Tigermark would probably get along.

"You're at 'Haven'..." the canid said.

Aslaug didn't really hear the rest of what he said. She looked at the fur in the familiar kind of clothing. He was a squat, heavy-set badger with a number of scars on his face and paws.

"Hissa stá hafn?" she asked. "Kvá?"

To everyone else, it looked as if the badger lit up like a small sun. Moments later, he and Aslaug were babbling back and forth. No one else understood a word. Joe scratched an ear and smiled. The filly looked happy to meet someone who could understand her own language. He rarely saw her really happy.

Somehow, she seemed to long for something. The terrible thing was...that Joe wasn't sure he wanted to know what she longed for. As they were led towards the tree itself, the coyote sent a glance towards the shieldmaiden. She was smiling...almost radiantly so. He hadn't seen her that happy before.

Whatever the reason, that was good.

###

"WHERE IS SHE?" Surt growled.

A cowering group of three of scarred and furless creatures shuddered under the painful gaze of their lord and master. None of them looked up.

"Sh...she escaped, Master," one of them whimpered. "She was gone by the time we got to her home."

"HOW DISAPPOINTING." Surt grumbled. Screaming and thrashing, the fur who had answered disappeared in a conflagration of blue and purple fire. "I DON'T LIKE DISAPPOINTMENTS. WHERE HAS SHE GONE...AND MAKE YOUR ANSWER VERY GOOD!"

One of the remaining furless things shivered in dread. "She was warned by someone, Master. She escaped the dream..."

"I KNOW SHE ESCAPED THE DREAM, YOU IMBECILE. SHE FACED ME JUST BEFORE SHE WOKE UP. WHAT I WANT TO KNOW IS WHERE SHE IS NOW."

"She's...vanished...along with her friends. That...that group of warriors, Master. We can't locate her. She's nowhere to be found..."

Again, screams of horrified pain rang through the giant hall. The last scarred and furless creature seemed to relax.

"Master, there could be an answer..."

Surt's presence seemed to cool down a few degrees. It was barely noticeable, but it was there. "THEN PRESENT ME WITH IT. IT MIGHT SAVE YOUR MISERABLE LIFE."

"Loke," the agent said, swallowing. "He was in Muspelheim when the shieldmaiden's friends escaped."

Surt snarled and the last agent scuttled backwards out of the room, without ever getting up from all fours. The room was getting unbearably hot, very rapidly.

"IF THAT IS THE WAY THEY WANT IT, THEN BY ALL THINGS SCORCHING, THAT IS EXACTLY WHAT I WILL GIVE THEM," Surt roared. "BEFORE ME NOW!!!"

Three flaming creatures seeped out of the floor. One seemed female. Elegant and almost lazy in its movement, it seemed to creep irresistibly across the floor towards the gigantic presence. The second was almost overeager. Sparks jumped left and right from its form, which seemed to change shape constantly. The last one was the only one with a recognizable shape, standing almost eight feet in height. It looked male. Around its form, roaring fire danced, like the flames of a bonfire.

"We sssserve!" they hissed, as if they were of one mind.

"SHE LIVES IN WHAT THE MORTALS CALL SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA. THERE ARE A GREAT DEAL OF FORESTS IN THAT AREA. SHE'S HIDING...AND IT'S YOUR TASK TO GET HER OUT OF HIDING. ALONG WITH THOSE INSUFFERABLE FRIENDS OF HERS. I WANT HER BROUGHT HERE...ALIVE...BUT YOU WOULDN'T BE ABLE TO KILL HER ANYWAY. AND I WANT HER FRIENDS DEAD. PREFERABLY BEFORE HER EYES. BURN EVERYTHING. SCORCH THE LAND. SET CALIFORNIA ABLAZE...UNTIL SHE DECIDES TO MAKE AN APPEARANCE."

"Assss you wissssh, Lord Sssurt...!"

The three flaming creatures left the room and Surt cooled down some.

###

By evening, Joe was starting to worry about his equine friend again. Aramis had taken to 'The Haven' almost immediately. There were other furs there with magical knowledge...much of it still unknown to the young feline. By now, he was sitting in a large, comfortable chair with a bowl of snacks within reach, leafing through a huge, dusty looking book. The excited twitching of his whiskers and the almost gleeful grin on his face told everyone around him that Aramis Dagaz was in a state of bliss. Occasionally, mutterings such as "Remarkable" or "How interesting" or even "I *knew* it!" rose from the armchair, but generally speaking, Aramis was in another world entirely.

Tigermark had gone with Tani to get her to a doctor...or whatever passed for a doctor around these parts. He still hadn't returned, but somehow, Joe instinctively trusted the locals...which struck him as weird since he normally didn't trust that easily. Then again, Tani had brought them here, because it was a safe place, and while the Kitsune was a notorious trickster, she would not bring them to a 'safe place', only to put them in danger.

Still, Joe wished Tigermark would come back.

Somehow, the erstwhile leader of the little group of friends always seemed to have a ready answer at paw, for how to deal with strange situations. And seeing Aslaug, sitting by herself with a filled mug of ale constituted 'strange'. Not that she was sitting to herself. She often did that. No, the way Joe knew something was seriously wrong was that the filly had only sipped her ale, and it had been almost half an hour since she sat down. Normally, she'd be on her third or even fourth pint by then.

This time, it barely looked as if she'd started on the first one.

For the tenth time in as many minutes, he contemplated getting up and going over there to talk to her. Just to find out what was wrong. For

the tenth time in as many minutes, he sat down again before he really got up. What was he going to say? "Hey Filly, what's shakin'?" didn't seem very appropriate. The problem really was that Joe didn't know a thing about this whole Surt business. Somehow, the idea of evil destroying the world wasn't alien to him, but there was a method to the destruction in his own beliefs. The Devil fought God for a number of *reasons*. All of them bad, of course. All of them wrong. But the struggle was there for a reason. God fought envy and hate with grace and love. In Aslaug's world, things were a lot darker. There, Surt represented an evil so primal that it didn't need a reason to destroy. It simply did.

Joe had honestly tried to understand the concept. But how could one understand a destructive evil so foul that it'd even destroy itself in the end, if it would just mean more destruction?

He put his head in his paws and groaned. "I'm getting the mother and father of all headaches from this," he muttered.

"Can't say I blame you," Tigermark's voice said behind him.

Joe had long since stopped getting the jitters when his friend crept up on him like that. Tigers moved without a sound, he knew that. He was used to it by now. Instead of jumping six feet into the air, he just shrugged.

"What's wrong with her? I haven't seen her like this before," the coyote asked.

Tigermark sat down next to his friend. "Well, imagine that the Evil One came knocking on your front door and said 'your time's up, you're coming with me!', my friend. What would you do?"

"Punch him in the face!" was the immediate response.

The tiger laughed heartily and nodded. "You know, I believe you would. Still, I think this is the one thing our otherwise fearless filly fears."

Joe chuckled. "Imagine only being afraid of one thing. I fear a lot of things."

"We all do. It comes with having a family, amongst other things..." Tigermark said and shrugged. "We worry for our loved ones."

Joe shook his head. "That doesn't go for her. She cares deeply for the three of us. She's a part of my family by now, after living with us for so long. You've seen her around your kids. You should see her coaching the high-school football team. She's got a lot of furs that she cares for a great, great deal. But she isn't afraid of losing them."

Tigermark put his head to the side and observed the filly. "Hmm...I wonder why," he said, quietly.

"I know why. She trusts her own strength to protect them, and she accepts that if her strength is insufficient, then there is no way she could've protected them anyway. She told me once why she doesn't fear death..."

The tiger nodded. "Then by all means...enlighten me. You and I know with a good deal of certainty that we're going to Heaven when we die...and it's still natural to be at least a little worried about dying. We'd rather that it happened peacefully, surrounded by those we love, if nothing else?"

"She told me once...that by her creed, it's all about some string that represents her life. When there's no more string, she said...there's no more string. Whether you're sitting in your office cubicle or hacking your way through a throng of enemies...you'll live for as long as there is more of this string left. The longer it is, the longer your life."

"Predestination, you mean?"

"To the Nth degree I think."

Tigermark nodded. "She still fears this Surt-creature, though. I wonder what he will do next."

"I have no idea, Tiger...but I have a really bad feeling about it. I mean monumentally bad. If Surt is even a third as bad as she makes him out to be, he's not going to simply let her get away like this," Joe said. "I wish I could at least help her relax. I'm sure if she could get a good night's sleep, she'd feel better."

It looked like someone turned on a light behind Tigermark's eyes. "Then let's take her down to the local healer. I'm certain that she knows a trick or two that could help Aslaug calm down."

"Good idea!" Joe exclaimed and got to his feet. "Hey, Aslaug...stop spitting in your ale already, and come with us. There's someone you should meet!"

The filly looked up. For a moment, she looked like she would answer. Then she simply pushed the ale away and followed the two males.

###

"Acupuncture!" Valaina said brightly, with a good-natured twitch of the nose. Aslaug stared at the hedgehog, an expression on her face that a stranger might have interpreted as fear. "Acu-what? And what the hell is THAT?" she asked, the hint of a quiver in her voice.

Valaina flashed a pointy-toothed grin and patted Aslaug reassuringly on the knee, much to the filly's astonishment. "Scared of needles?" Valaina asked, regarding the shieldmaiden with concern in her small, black eyes. "NO!" exclaimed Aslaug, leaping up, her entire body radiating an indignant denial.

Valaina tsk-tsked, patting the filly's shoulder a few times before gently guiding her back to the chair she'd been sitting in. "It's an ancient technique from some place or other, and there'll be no blood. It really is the best thing for getting rid of stress related anxiety, you know!"

Aslaug leant forward in the chair, fixing Valaina with a steady gaze, only to find Valaina doing the same thing back to her. The hedgehog held the gaze without blinking, humming and murmuring under her breath, her nose twitching inquisitively as she studied the filly at point-blank range.

“Oh!” she said suddenly “You didn’t tell me you were dead! Hmm, this will be a bit more tricky...” Her voice trailed off and she broke the gaze, tapping her paws together in thought, appearing to have forgotten that Aslaug was still sitting there.

“Wait a minute!” Aslaug exclaimed, rising from the chair again “How did you know... I mean, who ARE you?” Valaina smiled, tsk-tsking again “Getting overheated about silly things is only going to make your stress levels worse, dear. It’s enough to know that you and I were meant to meet, isn’t it?” The filly sank back into the chair, staring at Valaina open-mouthed. She closed her mouth, opened it as if to speak, then closed it again, nodding with acceptance.

“So, acupuncture, then” Aslaug stated flatly. The hedgehog nodded and reached up to pull a few greying spines from her head. “Old ones, they’ll grow back, and I like them better than the shoddy metal ones” she explained, turning to place the spines in a small trayful of liquid. “Now normally I’d place them into a fur’s paws for this kind of thing, but you have hooves, of course, so I’ll have to place them behind your ears instead” The filly nodded, ducking her head so the shorter femme could reach the correct meridian points.

“No no, you’ll need to lie down for a while. They need to stay in place for at least twenty to thirty minutes!” Valaina said, pointing towards what appeared to be a mattress on the floor in one corner of the room. Aslaug shrugged and made her way across to the mattress, laying on her stomach and settling down for her treatment.

“Now, this should relax you” Valaina murmured, as a soft fragrance and softer music began filling the room, along with a subtle, silvery light. Aslaug sighed, closing her eyes as the hedgehog walked over to her, spines clacking gently together, tray in hand. “You won’t feel a thing. I promise”, Valaina whispered, looking upwards before whispering “Thank you” towards the ceiling with a soft smile.

###

Tigermark and Joe sat outside the shrub-covered healer’s hut, watching the locals go about their respective duties with the idle gaze of furs on vacation. “Funny” Joe commented, “The longer we sit out here waiting, the more I feel like sitting here some more.” He yawned, curling his tongue, and leaned back on his elbows, relaxing. “What do you mean?” Tigermark asked, beetling his brow as he

turned to face the coyote. “Oh, just this place” said Joe “there’s something about it that makes me not want to leave, is all”

“Oh, you’ll want to leave” came a voice from the doorway behind them, “The compulsion won’t come until you’re prepared to go, however”. Both males turned towards the doorway, where Valaina stood, holding Aslaug by the paw and leading her carefully back outside her domain. “Haven won’t keep you for a moment longer than you need to remain,” she continued, releasing the filly’s paw after a reassuring squeeze.

Aslaug stood, blinking in the sunshine like a newly-hatched chick, scratching her head with a bemused expression. She looked like someone had taken her to pieces, slackened various tendons slightly, and put her back together again. “What did you DO to her?” a baffled Joe said, eyeing Aslaug up and down with suspicion. “She needed relaxing, not knocking seven ways sideways!”

“Oh, she’ll be fine in a few minutes, worry not” Valaina chirruped, her nose twitching. “She just needed a little extra boost to my usual methods, because of her...hmm.... Condition.” The hedgehog looked between the three friends, appearing at first thoughtful, then concerned, and finally puzzled.

“Well you don’t fit, Filly!” she finally exclaimed, paws on hips “For starters, you’re married!” Both males heads swung round sharply, and they stared at the hedgehog with matching stunned expressions. Finally, Tigermark managed to splutter out “Married?!” his eyes wide and one paw hovering uselessly in front of him. “Well of COURSE she’s married! She’s a shieldmaiden!” Valaina giggled, flashing her pointy-toothed grin. “Didn’t you two cubs realise?”

“Actually, yes” Joe drawled with a small smile of his own. “Question is, how do – you- know?” Valaina shrugged, her spines rattling together with the movement. “I was meant to meet Aslaug here. I’ve been waiting for her a very long time, in actual fact. Didn’t figure on you three tagging along the first time, but then I’m not –that-good at interpreting my own dreams just yet. I’m learning, though!” Another bright, toothy smile, and the hedgehog turned towards the hut, closing the door before turning back to the trio.

“Shall we get moving to wherever it is your other friend has got to, hmm?” She asked, her eyes glittering with anticipation. “I’m supposed to meet him, too, after all, and I must say, I’m intrigued to find out whether he fits or not!” The three friends looked at Valaina in puzzlement for a moment, before Tigermark cleared his

throat and silently turned to head back up the trail, closely followed by a flummoxed filly, a confused coyote.... And a happy hedgehog, bringing up the rear.

###

Aramis looked up from yet another dusty tome, opening and closing his mouth wordlessly. "Go on, spit it out, then", Tigermark said with an amused expression, crossing his arms over his chest. "How the... why the... but?" said Aramis, a series of confused expressions overlapping on his face, making the group chuckle at his puzzlement.

"I think we all want to know that one" Joe said, turning to Valaina "What did you mean when you said Aramis fits?" The others nodded in agreement, turning to the hedgehog, who gazed around the group, her black eyes twinkling with mirth. "I keep forgetting you boys are Christians... alright then, I'll explain." She said. "Where I'm from, my religion has a story about the three faces of woman. Now, you're all boys... but the principle is still the same. It's Aslaug here who doesn't fit"

The amigos looked at one another, confused. Aslaug, on the other hand, looked as though someone had turned a light on over her head. She grinned at the hedgehog suddenly, and the two pointed at each of the amigos in turn, saying "Maiden.... Mother....Crone," to Aramis, Tigermark and Joe respectively. All three glared at the hedgehog indignantly, Tigermark being the first to find his voice "But...Mother?! Wait.... Where -are- you from?" he spluttered to the nods of the other two amigos.

"England" Valaina said simply, her nose twitching with good humour. "I'm a hedge witch, appropriately enough". She giggled, turning to Aslaug and patting her on the arm. "Feeling better, dear?" she asked, tilting her head to one side. Aslaug nodded, watching the three males struggle through their separate emergency ego patching rituals with a crooked smile. "I think you made their heads into scrambled egg, Valaina" she remarked to the hedgehog, who nodded and smiled in agreement.

"I generally manage that with most males, for some reason," she commented quietly. "Oh, and call me Vala, most do!" She whirled around, and headed for the door, wafting a paw over one shoulder in farewell. Aslaug smiled, watching her leave, then turned back to the befuddled amigos.

“What she meant, is that you three fit together. You are all faces that make up a whole. Tiger, you’re the leader, and the one who watches out after the others, both physically and spiritually. You ‘mother’ them. Aramis, you’re the young, virginal one. Pure, young, curious. You bring the enthusiasm and innocence of youth. This is a common idea in my faith.”

Aramis grinned. “And Joe here is the old crone. Cranky, tough, hardheaded.”

Joe looked cross and grumbled, “I’m not that cranky. And a crone? Why not a mature lady, er, male? Or the wise advisor?”

“No, definitely a crone.” Aramis was enjoying being on the giving end of the teasing for a change.

“Watch it, little pup.”

“Enough you two,” Tigermark chided good-naturedly. It was good to have the stress off for a bit.

Both Aramis and Joe looked at him and said in unison, “Mo-om!”

Tigermark and Aslaug both began to laugh. It felt good after the dark mood they’d been in for so long. After a moment, the other two joined in. It took several minutes for the laughter to subside. Finally Tigermark shook his head.

“Okay, let’s go see if we can find out who’s in charge here, and see if Tani’s doing better, too.”

The four friends left the library they’d found Aramis in and started up the trail. Aslaug felt relaxed, and much better that when she’d arrived. It was starting to creep into her mind though. Valaina’s comment. She didn’t fit. There was no warrior face, nor destroyer in the facets of a woman. Where did she fit? With Surt? The filly gave a snort. No, she’d endure a thousand painful deaths before she’d do that. She’d need to talk a lot with both her friends and with Freja when she got the chance. Tigermark, trying to make sense of what had been said, started quietly talking, as though reasoning with himself as much as the others.

“So, three faces, or different aspects of a team or person or concept, or three phases of life. For males I suppose it would be youth, father, and what, old fart? And of course the Christian idea of a triune God. God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Kinda makes sense. Doesn't the Bible say 'A cord of three strands is not easily broken?'”

Aslaug was about to give her current thoughts on the Christian God when Joe suddenly stopped. The others turned to see a concerned look on his face.

“I just had a bad feeling come over me. I wonder what's going on at home?”

Tigermark's brow furrowed for a second, and then he turned to go on up the trail, a sense of urgency settling on him.

“We need to go check on Tani,” was all he said.

####

“The fursss battle valiantly,” the living fire in the strong male form commented.

“Not valiantly enough,” the female form hissed languidly as she slid up a ridge, preparing to jump a fire line the crews had set along its top. The wild, sparking chaotic fire being that rounded out the trio laughed maniacally as it rode the strong firestorm wind over both the fire line and the valley beyond to the base of the next hill. The other two followed his lead, pushing inexorably toward the suburbs of Los Angeles. That was where the friends of their quarry lived. That was where they would carry out part of their master's instructions

A large, four-engine aircraft rumbled in towards them, its orange and white skin close to blistering in the heat. The big Orion tanker's crewfurs could not see the beings, as they mixed with and were a part of the flames of the worst wildfire Southern California had seen in a long time. Since the fire demons had arrived and started their fiery march, several such attacks had come. It had slowed their progress, and this time the chaos fire demon wasn't in the mood to slow down.

“Watch thissssss!” it hissed as the tanker angled in over the ridge toward them. Suddenly a huge, spiralling jet of flame swirled upward, too close for the Orion to avoid. It instantly became a fireball in its own right, rolling over and plunging earthward into the flames. The concussion as it hit and exploded rocked the valley.

The other two fire demons turned to look at their counterpart. They shrugged, and went back to advancing the firestorm. “Impressssive, but a wassste of time. Better to usse your ssspiral of fire to advancsse toward our prey,” the female hissed diffidently. The chaos fire demon just laughed again and leaped toward the next ridge.

###

“Tammy, I’m not sure what to do. This fire is way beyond our normal SoCal wildfires. Our pups left a couple of hours ago for family around the Gulf coast. I’m getting worried, too.”

TL listened to the concern in Annie Latrans’s voice. She’d seen the news coverage of the firestorm now heading for the Los Angeles area. Just then the tone came across that she had another call.

“Hang on a minute Annie, got another call.”

“Okay.”

TL clicked over to the new call and answered. “M’rega residence.”

“Tammy, it’s Bill. I’m out in California right now, and I’m going to fly Stripes One out of here before Mark comes back to roast bird. Something told me to check with you. Maybe you have a passenger for me?”

TL didn’t hesitate. “I believe I do. Joe’s wife lives in Orange County, Her name is Annie Latrans. Can you fly her over here if she comes to the airport?”

“Sure. Tell her to come to John Wayne, and hurry. Bye.”

“Bye Bill, thanks.” TL clicked back to Annie.

“Annie, get a few things together and go over to John Wayne airport. Our friend Bill is going to fly Stripes One out of there and he’ll bring you

over here to Kentucky. That'll get you out of harm's way, and we can worry over the guys together."

"Ah, okay. I'll do that. Let me call the family and let them know where I'll be."

"Uh, Annie, I'm not sure that's a good idea. Mark said things could get bad on this one. The fewer folks who know where we are the better. Plus, knowing might put them in danger, too. If that fire isn't a natural fire, then we're dealing with something a whole lot more powerful than the occasional thug we've had to encounter before."

Annie sighed. What the lynx said was true. "Alright, no calls. Listen, I'd better go. I can see the glow on the far horizon, reflecting off the smoke. See you soon."

She hung up and went to the bedroom, grabbing the emergency bag Joe had told her to keep ready when he was gone. She threw in a few more clothes, and then walked out of the house, locking the door behind her.

"Lotta good that'll do when the fire gets here," she mused. She got in her car and headed for John Wayne airport. Unknown to her, a shadowy, almost furless figure cloaked in the twilight caused by the thick smoke covering the sky watched her leave. When she arrived she parked and grabbed her bag. After walking through the building to the parking ramp, she had no trouble finding the tiger-stripped jet. A lanky Boston terrier was waiting by the aircraft as she walked up.

"Annie?" he asked, a friendly smile on his muzzle.

"Yes," she replied simply. He reached out and shook paws, and took her bag to stow in the small cargo pod under the jet's belly. He helped her don a parachute and gave her a helmet. "

"Okay, up the ladder and into the rear cockpit, please. Step down into it and ease under the canopy." Bill followed her up and helped her get settled, connecting the various communication and O2 lines for her after she'd donned the helmet. He then stepped into the forward cockpit and went through the start-up procedure for the aircraft. After some work with the ground crew, they were ready to go. In a few short minutes, the

canopies were lowered and then Stripes One streaked into the sky. Annie could see the fire pressing ever closer to her home.

###

The nearly furless canid pulled his cloak a little closer. As hot as the residents of this world would find the day, especially with the encroaching fire, he found it quite a bit cooler than his usual surroundings. The air was still too clear of smoke, and was almost pristine compared to the air of Muspelhiem. He hurried after the vehicle, using the rooftops to rapidly move along. Once the automobile left the residential streets, he hitched along on top of a truck to keep up. Soon they arrived at a place where aerial vehicles were kept, and he watched the vixen leave her vehicle and go into a building. He leaped to the roof and concealed himself on the far side, overlooking an area set aside for the aerial vehicles to be parked. There was one in particular that the furs seemed to be readying for flight. In a moment, the vixen walked out and over to that vehicle. One of the furs there assisted her into it, and then entered the front seat of it himself. After a short delay, flame leapt to life within the vehicle and it began to move. The canid on the roof had a bad feeling about what was happening. He leapt away, moving swiftly back toward the place where his fellow servants of Surt were making the area feel much more like home.

Approaching the fire, he stopped at the edge of the fire line and called out.

“Servants of Surt, I bring news of the quarry.”

In a few moments, a part of the flames separated itself and hissed at him.

“Ssspeak.”

“Only one belonging to the friends of our Master’s prey was at their home. She left a short while ago, and will be leaving our grasp in an aerial vehicle. You will know it by the black stripes on its white flanks. It will rise into the air from down that way.” The canid pointed to the south.

At that moment, a slim, black and white dart, riding a column of jet exhaust, rose into the distant sky and, to the glee of the beings standing there, turned in their direction. As it came closer, the chaotic fire demon again caused a spiralling tornado of flame to spring upward toward the little jet. As the aircraft angled upward, it passed closer to the main body of the fire. The spiral of flame seemed to swell and spiral up at it, but the little jet was too fast. It suddenly accelerated and streaked by the fire and was gone, still climbing and heading east. In a few seconds the aircraft was out of sight, riding twin afterburner flames into the distance.

Below, three fiery demons howled in frustration. The nearly furless canid took that opportunity to slip back away from them. He had no idea where the vixen was going, and even as fast as he could travel, he knew he couldn't keep up with the air vehicle. He knew if he stayed with the demons, or went back to Surt without making amends, an agonizing death awaited him. He would bide his time, and watch the house. The male demon turned on the chaotic one.

"Our quarry wasss in that little thing! How could you misssss, Chaosss?"

"It rode fire! It flew upon fire! It wasss too fassst. What are we to tell SSurt?"

The two looked uncomfortable, letting the firestorm wane for the moment. Then the femalesque fire being called simply Flame whispered, "Why tell him anything right now? There are many lovely treesssss to the north and eassst, and a fair wind blowing that way. Let usss eat our fill, and perhapsss we ssshall find the real quarry, and not merely the relative. That would assssuage Surt's anger."

The tall, warriorlike fire demon called Conflagration nodded. Unless Surt told them, they had no way of knowing where the minor prey had gone. Much better to find the main quarry.

"Let usss move that way, to ressst and eat, then," Conflagration said as he moved back over the scorched ground, turning away from the line of fire trucks they'd been approaching. By way of a parting statement, he set fire to the line of houses just behind the firefighters, and then moved on.

#

So far, the amigos plus one had seen just about every type of being they'd encountered in their travels. There weren't many, only a very few of any particular type, but Haven seemed to have some of every kind in residence. Whenever they'd ask anyone who was in charge, that one would simply point on along the way they were going and say "Aie."

They went along the tree, finding trails that led along the branches, which were so thick as to make it look like one was walking along the ridge of a large hill. They finally came to a place where the branches wrapped around to make a gazebo-like structure. Inside there sat two figures. As the group approached, they could make out that both were lions. One looked aged, and radiated wisdom, and an almost fatherly benevolence. The other had large wings, and radiated strength, his sharp eyes having a warrior's hard cast. The two were engaged in conversation. The foursome halted, unsure if this was who they were looking for, and having no intention of interrupting two such being. The older looking lion looked their way, and gave a gentle smile.

"Ah, our guests have found us. Welcome, Tigermark M'rega, Joe Latrans, Aramis Dagaz, and Aslaug Larsdatter. You are safe, and welcome here in Haven until such time as you are to leave. Come in, come in. seat yourselves. Would you like refreshments?" He waved a paw at them beckoningly.

Tigermark stepped forward. Somehow the fact that this lion knew all their names didn't surprise or disturb him. "Thank you, you are most kind. No, we require no refreshments right now. We are looking for the leader of Haven."

"Found him, I'd say," the other lion said, his wings flexing restlessly. Tigermark looked closely at him. Joe had sidled up beside the tiger.

"Tiger, is that who I think it is? We only saw him that one time."

Tigermark slowly nodded, and spoke to the fierce-looking feline. "Michael, long time no see. What brings you here?"

The lion seemed to nod to himself. Tigermark got the impression that they'd just passed some sort of test. The winged lion turned to the other one.

“These are the real ones. Only Tigermark or Joe would be so cavalier about being in the presence of an archangel. Tigermark, Joe, I am here on God’s business, of course. Surt will not be allowed to destroy in our realm as indiscriminately as he does in Aslaug’s world.”

Tigermark looked relieved, but Joe squinted his eyes and looked the angel over. “That sounds like there’s a big ‘BUT’ waiting to be said.”

Now the other lion spoke up. “The ‘crone’ as Vala called him is very perceptive. Yes Joe Latrans, there is. Surt is in his world, but is interfering in yours in order to try to recruit the sheildmaiden here. God, as part of an agreement between Himself and the Gods of the other realms, has said He would not interfere with those other realms. Oh, by the way, I am, as Michael stated, the leader of Haven. I am called Aie. Now, what do you want to know? I can see you are all full of questions.”

The four friends nodded their greeting, and entered the bower. They sat down on branches that seemed to form seats before their eyes. Tigermark then spoke up.

“Well, first of all, where are we? Tani just about killed herself getting us here.”

Aie answered, “You are at Haven. It is a place that exists outside of all the realms you all have visited, or dreamed of. It is a nexus, if you will. A place that joins all other places. Somewhere that all the planes, as you call them, intersect. Tani is resting comfortably, by the way. She risked much to bring you here as she did.”

Aramis looked as though he would explode from curiosity. “So we are outside the regular universes, a place outside of time and space? That explains the disparity I’ve seen in clothing and speech between the various beings we’ve met. So, we’re safe from Surt here?”

“For the time being. He has no knowledge that this place exists, and so has no agents here. That may change as his search for Aslaug expands. So

far his agents have burned up a large section of what you call Southern California in an attempt to flush her out of hiding.”

Joe looked very alarmed, and would have managed to make the shift back to his home world unaided if Michael hadn't immediately spoken.

“Joe, your Annie is safe, or as safe as possible, even though Surt's fire demons are attempting to burn Southern California down. She's well on her way to Tigermark's home. For now, Surt's agents do not know where she is, or where Tigermark or Aramis' families are, either. This situation will not last, and when you are ready, you must all go and face this menace.”

The four friends looked at each other for a moment, and then all nodded. “So be it,” Tigermark said.

“Ah, excuse me, but I have to ask, sir. Erm, Archangel Michael, er, shesh, how do address an archangel?” Aramis looked uncomfortable, and finally just blurted out, “What are you doing here?”

For the first time since they'd seen him, the angel gave a slight smile. “Young Aramis, I am Michael, Archangel and leader of God's warriors. I led the charge that vanquished Lucifer and his rebellion. I serve God's will.”

After a few seconds, the slight smile became a bit wider.

“I'm your backup.”

Joe couldn't help but grin a little when he saw the astonished look on Aramis's face. Even though they had seen many fantastic creatures in their travels together, the young feline had never met an angel face-to-face before, let alone an archangel. His face settled back into a serious expression as he turned his attention back to the winged lion before him.

“I hope you have a plan on how we're going to beat this Surt hot-head,” he said. “I for one am a bit uneasy about fighting against the ultimate bad guy of Viking mythology.”

“And if all goes well, God willing, we won't have to,” Michael coolly replied. “Avoiding a confrontation with Surt remains a priority in this

endeavour, as our chances for success are very doubtful if we are forced to fight him directly. Besides, even if we could destroy Surt, it would affect the Norse pantheon with disastrous results, as I'm sure Aslaug has already told you."

The four warriors nodded soberly in understanding as the archangel continued. "Therefore, we are instead going to force Surt to play his hand prematurely and hit him hard when he least expects it."

"A trap, then," Tigermark said.

Michael nodded. "Correct. Not to ensnare, but to injure, hopefully buying us more time to put the next phase of our plan into motion."

"Sounds easy enough," Joe remarked humorlessly. "Okay then, Michael, what do you need us to do?"

###

The sky was aglow with the light of the raging wildfires reflecting off of the massive plumes of smoke as the sun began to set. It both frightened and calmed the scorched canid as he huddled near the small fire he had built to ward off the sudden chill of the Californian evening. As much as the fires only a few leagues away reminded him of Surt and his terrible wrath, it also was a familiar and not unwelcome sight in this cold, alien world. The temperature cooled too quickly here, the air was too crisp and humid. Even as desolate as the deserts of southern California were, it was still much too green for him to feel at ease. He had feared fire all of his life, but it was all he knew. He had sometimes wondered what it would be like to live in a world that hadn't been consumed by flame, but now that he was in one he couldn't stay away from the seductive dance of even a lit candle.

The furless canid inhaled deeply, letting the familiar scent of smoke from both his campfire and the inferno nearby calm him as he wracked his brain to figure out how he was going to find the shieldmaiden, her allies, or their close friends and family. All of them had disappeared, gone into hiding in some unknown place. Despair began to creep back into his soul; from what little he learned of this land, he knew that it was vast, and that

the aerial vehicle the vixen had escaped in could cover hundreds of leagues in a blink of an eye. There was no way he could even hope to find her. She was his only lead, and now she was gone.

His heart pounded as the realization that he had failed gripped him. Surt would surely kill him when he found out, burning him alive just slowly enough for him to feel unimaginable pain. He couldn't run and hide, either. Fire was everywhere, and where fire was, Surt was there. His terrible lord would hunt him down without mercy, and the result would be the same. There was no way out, only pain and death.

The canid moaned in despair and clutched his knees to his chest tightly, trying to fight through his hopelessness and think of something, but to no avail. He was a dead fur. It was only a matter of time.

Somehow, that realization soothed his dread. As frightened as he was over losing all control of his fate, he also felt as if a weight had been taken off of his shoulders. He was doomed to die, and there was nothing he could do about it. All he had to do now was wait. He felt some solace in that knowledge, knowing that soon it will all end.

Somewhat consoled, the canid stared into the flames. They were no longer a source of fear and dread, but a refuge from his sorrow, his salvation. Yes, it will hurt greatly, but afterwards there will be no more pain, no more suffering, just peace. He watched the fire flicker and dance before him, a hypnotic picture that was constantly in motion, constantly changing. It is said that when fire is unfettered and free to burn and consume without hindrance, Surt is there, watching, listening, completely aware of what is going on in and around the conflagration. The canid idly recalled that Surt could also communicate through such fires, a subtle language of snaps and hisses. Practically everyone who watched a fire could hear him, but only a few could understand. Such furs often became the Fire Lord's servants, doing his bidding and spreading the flames everywhere. Those who refused usually went mad, unable to escape his constant call. Remembering this only served to remind the canid of the hopelessness of his situation. Sighing in resignation, he lay down beside the fire and closed his eyes, letting the sounds of the blaze lull him into a fitful sleep.

He had only just drifted off into unconsciousness when a strange, unworldly sound roused him from his rest. The canid awoke instantly, instincts honed by years of paranoia immediately taking in his surroundings before he allowed his tense body to relax a little. Even though he had not detected any immediate danger, he was confused as to what woke him. He had always been a light sleeper, awakening at the softest sound, but this time he knew he heard *something*, something alien to this world.

A chill rushed up his spine as he heard it again. It was a voice, as though someone was speaking quietly from a great distance, in words that he could not understand. He strained his ears, trying to make sense of the words or discern where they were coming from, but to no avail.

His paw slowly reached into his robes and pulled out a dagger stained black by soot as his survival instincts overrode his despondency. "W-who's there?" he asked softly into the quiet desert.

The voice answered him, the words clearer this time. They were in a language he did not understand, but deep within his being he knew what was being said. His eyes ceased roving around his campsite and slowly, fearfully, settled on the fire. The cadence of the disembodied voice seemed to match the crackling of the flames. The canid felt his blood go cold.

"M-m-my lord...?" he squeaked pitifully. He expected the fire giant to leap bodily out of the blaze, incinerating him before he had time to react, but instead the voice spoke again, its tone calm and soothing. There were no admonishments, no cries of rage, no promises of torment and death. There were only instructions.

The canid listened breathlessly, hanging on to every word spoken. With each command, he felt hope surge within his chest. Surt was not angry with him, nor would he kill him! So great was his joy that he wept and prostrated himself before the fire. "Yes, yes my lord!" he practically shouted. "I hear and obey!"

The voice ceased, leaving only the snap and hiss of the campfire, a small but potent reminder of the greatness of Surt. The canid immediately began carrying out his lord's commands, placing the blade of

his dagger in the fire. When the metal glowed a bright red, he withdrew it from the flames and clutched the hilt tightly in his paws, the heat singeing his skin through the handle. His heart pounded, but he forced himself to focus on his task.

Taking a deep breath, he plunged the blade into his left eye.

The pain was overwhelming. A scream escaped his lips, his body falling into the dirt and convulsing, but he somehow managed to find the willpower to keep the searing dagger in his eye. As he felt that he was going to pass out, a series of images flashed before him. He saw a fur throw a shovelful of leaves at him. Then a family sitting on the floor appeared, watching him intently with expressions of tranquillity and curiosity. The face of a fur with a large, maniacal grin leered at him. A team of furs clad in silver robes held a long tube that sprayed water at him. A fur cowered from him, arms covering his face as his flesh burned away.

Finally, he couldn't take it anymore. He yanked the dagger out of his eye, the pain still remaining constant as flesh continued to burn. The canid doubled over and retched, heaving mightily long after his stomach emptied itself. He continued to cough and gasp as he recovered, but his face, contorted with pain, started to settle into a grin, then a low chuckle, finally culminating in a terrible laugh. He howled his ecstasy to the scorched, smoke-choked heavens as he understood the full powers of his new gift. "Thank you, my lord! Thank you!" he cried into the gathering dusk. "I shall not fail you! All glory to Surt, he who consumes all!"

Without bothering to clean his blade, he held the dagger in the fire again. He was greatly blessed, but he still had much to do. When he finished, he would not only have the power to see through all fire, but to hear and even speak through it as well.

###

Joe groaned and facepawed. "The strongest warrior in all of Heaven and we get a 'charge the enemy and kill him' strategy."

"Well, at least the briefing was short," Aramis remarked, earning a glare from the coyote.

"I'm afraid I agree with Joe on this one," Tigermark said. "Fighting three fire demons in the middle of a forest fire doesn't sound like a good idea to me."

Michael looked unperturbed. "I didn't finish," he said. "I'm well aware of your limitations, so I've made arrangements to shift the battle in our favor." He gestured at the map he had conjured, and a small airplane materialized over the scorched battlefield. "We have a few warriors standing by in an airfield near the Los Angeles area with an airplane carrying some special equipment. They will distract the enemy and extinguish a portion of the inferno where we will plane-jump into the insertion point. We will *then* attack the enemy and destroy them, thereby eliminating the main source of the fire and giving the regular firefighters a chance to contain it with no further complications."

"What kind of special equipment?" Aramis asked.

"An enchanted ruby to make the plane fire-resistant and a heck of a lot of water," Aie replied. "My compliments."

"Just water?" Joe asked, looking at the size of the inferno on the map and then back at the elderly lion. "There's no way a single plane is going to be able to carry enough water to even make much of a difference."

Aie chuckled. "Then how about a river? Would that be enough?"

Aramis blinked. "Wait, you mean you've managed to get an entire river's worth of water on board a plane?" he asked.

The old lion raised a questioning eyebrow at the tabby. "Surely one as well versed in the many mysteries of the multiverse such as yourself wouldn't doubt that such a thing could be done," he gently chided.

"I know it can be done, I'm just wondering how..." Aramis replied.

Tigermark cleared his throat as he attempted to steer the conversation back to the battle plan. "Okay, we have air support. That's good. Do we have any special equipment for us to combat these fire beings?"

Michael nodded. "You will be outfitted with appropriate armor and ammunition before we leave, yes."

"When do we leave?" Tigermark asked.

"As soon as you're ready," the archangel answered, "though I doubt I need to remind you that time is of the essence."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Joe said as he stood up. "Let's get moving!"

"Agreed," Aramis said, getting to his feet as well. "The sooner we end this, the better."

"Then let's go," Tigermark echoed as he joined his friends. He looked over at the shieldmaiden. "Aslaug?"

The equine warrior did not respond immediately. She continued to sit in silence as she had throughout the briefing, quietly staring at the illusory map of the charred Californian landscape. Though she would never admit it to anyone, she was scared. The idea of battling the servants of the very entity that tried to break her so soon after he nearly succeeded terrified her. She breathed in deeply, gathering her courage to join her comrades in battle, but the archangel interrupted her before she could speak.

"Aslaug will not be joining you this time."

Aslaug felt like she had been hit in the face with a maul. For a moment, she did not feel anything, only disbelief. It had been so long since anyone dared to forbid her from fighting in a battle, especially one as important as this one. The last time that happened, she promptly convinced the naysayer with her fists. She felt a terrible rage explode inside her, driving all traces of fear from her mind. She bolted to her hooves, startling her companions; it was only because of their influence through the past year that she did not immediately resort to fisticuffs to express her outrage.

“What do you mean that I won’t be fighting?!” she roared. “I can defeat these demons, and I will not let anyone, especially some high-and-mighty pigeon-winged fligavættir tell me that I cannot! This is my fight as much as yours!”

The two lions did not so much as bat an eyelash during the shieldmaiden’s outburst. “Aslaug,” Michael calmly said, “listen to me —”

“No! You listen to me!” the equine continued, taking a menacing step towards the archangel. “Surt thinks he can break me. He thinks he can get to me by harming furs who have nothing to do with this. Such is a coward’s way, and I will not let him do this! I will not cower and let him control me!”

Aie responded with a sharp laugh. Joe took one look at Aslaug’s face and thought that she was going to slug the old lion. He gave a quick nod to Tigermark and they both began positioning themselves at the shieldmaiden’s sides so they could restrain her if her fearsome temper got the better of her, a risky plan at best.

Aie didn’t notice the disquieting shade of Aslaug’s face. “Who said that you would be doing nothing?” he asked, which had the immediate effect of transforming much of the warrior’s anger into confusion. He tsk’ed and shook his head. “Young’uns these days.”

“Aslaug, think about the situation we are dealing with,” Michael tried again. “Your courage and devotion to your friends and your goddess are not in question. Your vulnerability is.”

“But I cannot die,” Aslaug protested, considerably calmer but still greatly upset. “What could they possibly do to me?”

“Their objective is not to kill you, but to capture you,” Michael replied. “You being directly involved in the battle is a risk that we cannot afford to take. If you are somehow captured, the consequences will be dire for both our worlds.”

Tigermark edged closer to the shieldmaiden and gently whispered into her ear. “I’m afraid he’s right. I know you don’t like it, and we’d rather

have you at our side, but please, understand why we cannot take you with us this time." Joe did not speak, instead placing his paw upon her shoulder.

Aslaug sighed and let her shoulders drop a little. "I understand," she said softly, though it pained her to accept it. To forbid a warrior from fighting alongside the hird in her world was an affront to their courage, loyalty, and skill, but the archangel was right: there was much more at stake than her pride.

"Don't worry, child," Aie said, "your opportunity will come. Until then, you will still have your role to play. It just might not be quite what you expect." He chuckled, as though laughing at some cosmic joke that only he was privy to.

"Now that we are all in agreement," Michael declared as he rose to his feet, "then we prepare for battle. Tigermark, Joe, Aramis, follow me." He marched gracefully out of the gazebo. The three companions gave Aslaug a few parting words of encouragement before following the archangel to the armory.

###

"Where are they going?"

"I don't know. Probably back to Midgaard. You OUGHT to be able to see them, you know...sitting where you are sitting."

The figure in the shadows nodded. A single, shining eye looked at the second speaker. No one said a word for a long time, before a gray paw with long, thin, strong fingers reached out to the side. A piece was moved on a board, looking not unlike a chess-board, but with more squares.

"HAH!" a third voice exclaimed. "Shtupid move...SHTUPID! I have you now, you one-eyed git! You there...yes...yes you, third from the left. Move up and block his escape...yes, that way!"

It was a wet voice. The kind of voice that made anyone listening thing of spittle and lolling tongues. It was also sharp as a razor. Whomever it belonged to was clearly rather clever.

A white game piece on the board...the third from the left moved forward, coming up against a black piece.

"You have never once defeated me at hnefatafl, Mimer. Not once. You still think you'll win?" the one-eyed figure asked. It was draped in darkness, but the voice was unfathomable. It was young...and old. Patient beyond patience, yet tired...and humerous all the same. It was a gentle, lilting tenor and a deep, booming bass.

Above all else, it was wise.

"I can see them. I am not asking where they are now. I am asking where you believe they will go next. But I agree, they will be heading back to Midgaard. Her friends will. They are leaving her in Haven. Go then...reassure her," the one-eyed one said, making a dismissive, paw-gesture.

The first speaker nodded and turned. He gestured for a group standing nearby to follow him.

"She will not stay in Haven...you know that."

"Of course I know that. I didn't give my eye to be resorting to second-guessing. Why do you think I'm sending *you*?"

The first speaker seemed to consider that for a while and, finding the answer to his satisfaction, he marched out.

###

Tani was recovering at least. Aramis had made sure to check on her before they left Haven. As one magic-user to another, he felt a strange kind of kinship with the Kitsune. The Citation was gliding back towards reality as he knew it, Tigermark comfortably seated behind the controls.

Somehow, Aramis wasn't completely comfortable though. Across the table from him, Michael was checking out his paw.

"Hah...full house in aces and kings, Aramis. Don't think you can top that."

Aramis glanced at his own cards in a dejected fashion. A pair of three's looked back at him, paired with a couple of fives. Why had he let himself be sweet-talked into playing poker with an arch-angel in the first place?

It was safe to say Michael was winning...paws down. So far, he'd won every paw dealt. Aramis felt fairly certain he wouldn't win one.

"When was the last time you lost a paw?" he asked.

"Who said I ever did?" Michael chuckled and put down the cards. "This is simply another form of struggle. No one in heaven does that better than me, except God, and He doesn't play poker, believe me."

"Pride is a sin, Michael," Aramis mumbled. He felt thoroughly suckered.

"I'm not being prideful, I'm stating facts," the angel replied. "Anyway, I am simply teasing you. And passing time."

Aramis could at least deal with that. "I thought angels flew," he said at last. "I've seen it enough times to know it's not just a fancy story. Why don't you simply fly back to Earth?"

Michael shrugged. "Because I'm going to fight, and there's no point in wearing myself out before it starts. Besides, this is a comfortable plane."

"True...it is," Aramis conceded. "What are we going to do when we get down there?" he asked. The idea of fighting demons was a bit daunting. At least the idea of fighting demons from another reality. He kinda knew what to expect from Hell. For one thing, their denizens seemed to

look like any other fur most of the time. The whole fire-and-brimstone thing wasn't really the way they worked these days.

Michael shrugged. "You, Tigermark and Joe are going to try to organize the firefighting operations. Or help with it."

"Three furs against a burning state, Michael...we're not miracle-workers..." Aramis pointed out and immediately bit his tongue. That hadn't been the right expression in the present company.

Michael didn't seem to take it badly though. He just smiled. "I beg to differ. Why do all miracles have to be about turning water into wine, or wine into blood, Aramis? Can't you accept the premise that miracles can take far more conventional forms? Such as putting out fires all over California?"

"Because I'm just an ordinary fur..." the feline tried.

"...who slings fireballs at his enemies and travels across time and space on a regular basis?"

"I hate it when you do that..."

Again, Michael smiled. "Hate is an ugly emotion, Aramis. Love thine enemy."

"Yeah, but you're not my enemy," Aramis countered.

"So you can hate me?"

"Gahhh...why do you bait me into these situations??"

Michael seemed about to answer when the door to the cockpit opened and Joe entered the cabin. "Give him a break, Michael," he muttered. He looked like he was in a rather grave mood.

The lion nodded. "Of course. We'll be there soon, anyway."

Joe sat down with the other two and rubbed his face. He sent Michael a Look. Even without a word spoken, it was capitalized. They were armed and dangerous, and somehow it didn't reassure the coyote. He had bullets in his Beretta that would knock down a raging elephant at six hundred paces, but would it knock down a demon? Blessed bullets.

Holy weapons.

The idea offended him. War wasn't supposed to be holy. If you fought, you fought out of necessity and because there was no alternative left...and then you fought with everything you had.

"That's a sacrilegious line of thought, Joe," Michael said with a wan smile. "Holy war is a fact."

"Get out of my head, birdboy!" Joe Latrans, Angel-growler extraordinaire, responded. "And no it isn't. You yourself fought with all you had after Lucifer wouldn't listen. But only after all other options had been exhausted. War isn't holy. Thou shalt not kill, Michael. "War is Hell" - William T. Sherman."

Michael's face fell immediately. "Low blow," he said and sighed. "That whole story with the light-bringer is something I would prefer if we didn't talk about. And you misquoted Sherman, in any case."

"Sue me!" Joe snapped. "California is my home. My HOME, Michael. The whole damned state is on fire, and you're sitting here cracking cheap jokes on Aramis' expense. Don't think I didn't hear."

For a moment, Michael seemed to sway between getting angry and apologizing. To Joe's quiet relief, he settled for the meek approach. "You're right. I'm sorry. I'm not normally like this. There isn't much left for me to do in Heaven..."

"So you feel underutilized and now that you have a chance to loosen up your muscles, you liven up," Aramis said. "Look, Joe has a point. God only knows how many furs are dying down there because of this. I

am starting to understand why Aslaug was so upset at being left behind. I *know* her, Michael...and you *don't*. To her, this looks like it's all her fault. She wants to make some kind of difference and the only way she knows is by strength of arms. She's not a diplomat. Not by a longshot."

Michael's face scrunched up, but he nodded. "I get your point..."

Joe rubbed his face and kept it hidden in his palms, resting his elbows on his knees. "I wonder how many of my friends will lose everything? How many of them will die? How many homes will be gone? How much property destroyed. How many cities left in ashes? How much pain and suffering will be endured. How many lives will be utterly ruined..." he said, quietly. "And I wonder...more than anything...how in God's name I, one simple fur with a cowboy hat, a Beretta and a bad attitude, am going to make any difference."

Across the table, Michael's features softened and he reached out, putting a paw on Joe's head. "By saving even a single life, Joe...and I know you will. I know you will save many."

It seemed to work. Joe relaxed a little. Not much...but anything was an improvement.

###

Dodger's Stadium.

Normally, it would be resounding to the tune of 'Take me down to the ball game' and the cheers of thousands of eager fans, cheering on the teams running the diamond down below. Now it was a vastly different place. On the horizon, the red glow of the fires seemed to creep steadily closer. Inside, many thousand furs had gathered. Ragged, harried, sooty and stinking of smoke, most of them had nothing left in the world but the clothes on their backs and the air in their lungs.

Red Cross furs were working so hard most of them looked on the verge of a breakdown. Yet they still kept smiling. Doctors went from fur

to fur, treating burns and minor smoke poisoning as best they could. There was little medicine left. The desperate situation and the greatly increased need had already drained most hospitals of their stores. More was due to be flown in, but...rumor was going around that every time a plane tried to pass over the fire, the flames seemed to...to...no, no one really believed that.

The flames seemed to attack. Several planes had been severely damaged. Others had been unable to find a way through. Some...no one seemed to want to talk about how many...had gone down in flames.

The mood was awful in the stadium. Crying children and catatonic adults mixed between each other. Outside, the world had been sent into pandemonium. Furs were looting stores, as if material goods mattered anymore. The police had no chance of stopping it all, but they still did their best. California had been declared in a state of martial law, and the National Guard had been deployed.

What could they do? Stop the fire with their bare paws?

The refugees huddled closer together. Fearful and without much hope for the morning, they tried to get by.

And still, doctors moved quietly amongst them, in their white coats, looking like ghosts, touching the lives of the unfortunates.

Nobody saw the little flash of light above the stadium as the Citation appeared. Nobody, except a little girl who pointed skywards and told her father she'd seen an angel. Her father started crying. There was no mother. Not anymore.

The little girl bit her lip and looked up at the sky, but the angel was no longer in sight. She knew she'd seen it though. It was there. Maybe now things would be okay again.

Just maybe.

###

Some twenty five million furs live in the greater Los Angeles basin, and a million more join them every year.

And those that have been here for more than a year or two are no stranger to fire. Vehicles overheat on freeways and burst into flame, stuck in traffic jams whose duration is measured in hours and whose size is measured in miles. Homes that are twice as old as their occupants blaze away in the middle of the night, victim to a faulty igniter or ancient electrical wiring, or too perhaps victim to the nefarious industry of their inhabitants. Businesses smudge the skyline with their soot, either from controlled burns as part of their internal processes, or perhaps from unintended blazes or explosions brought about by the inattention of workers or the intent of those less than righteous as most. These things go on every day, largely ignored by the population as a whole. It's all part of the lifestyle, you see.

The headlines belong to the wildfires. Huge fire storms that obscure the sky with their smoke and destroy land, property, homes, and lives with devastating efficiency and complete indifference. The Los Angeles basin never seems to be able to go through a year without some wildfire activity, and can never seem to go through a decade without at least one truly monstrous conflagration, typically driven on by the spirit of Santa Ana himself.

Southern California is a desert. In the southwestern corner of this desert lies a coastal basin that is surrounded by mountains on three sides, and bordered by the Pacific Ocean on the fourth. Some of the mountains around this basin are almost two miles high. The backbone of these mountains, created by the infamous San Andreas earthquake fault zone, runs northwest – southeast, forming a natural barrier between the coastal basin and the inland desert. Divided by their creating fault into three major sections, these mountains are known as the San Gabriels, the San Bernardinos, and the San Jacintos. The first two ranges meet at Cajon Pass, one of only six access routes into and out of the Los Angeles basin. Interstate Fifteen passes though the mountains here, as do the rails of the Union Pacific and the Burlington Northern Santa Fe railroads. Cajon is one of only two major access route for all of Los Angeles to the east. It is also a natural funnel for wind, the open mouth facing the inland desert, the narrow channel pointing like the barrel of a gun towards the metropolitan areas to the south.

Farther south along this backbone the San Jacinto mountains jut skyward like a rock wall, blocking access to the southeastern deserts except through narrow Banning Pass, once again the creation of the earthquake fault. Interstate Ten passes through Banning Pass, paralleled by the rails of the Southern Pacific railroad. This is the only other way out to the east, and like its brother the Cajon, Banning Pass forms a natural funnel whose narrowest point aims squarely at the Inland Empire, just east of Los Angeles.

Furs drive up and down Interstate Five, the only other major ingress / egress route, which parallels this mountain spine on the west side, in the basin. To the north, over Tejon Pass, lay the rich and verdant (when the water flows) San Joaquin and Central Valleys of California, the central part of the state. To the south down I-5, past the Camp Pendleton Marine Corps base, lies the city of San Diego, home to a few more million furs.

In the middle of all this, dividing the coastal basin into those areas known as the greater Los Angeles area and the Inland Empire, snuggled up against the eastern edge of Orange County, lay the Santa Ana mountains.

In the early part of the twentieth century the relative paucity of furs then living in the Los Angeles area realized that the only way they could grow was to find more water. Being a desert, there just wasn't much water to be found locally. The Los Angeles River was intermittent at best, and wells were already being drawn down at an alarming rate. Four hundred miles to the north, however, lay the magnificent snowpack of the mighty Sierra Nevada mountains. Each spring uncountable billions of gallons of melted snow roared down canyons into the interior deserts to be soaked up by the parched soil there. And three hundred miles to the east, along the border with Arizona, was the equally mighty Colorado River, draining the watershed of virtually the entire southwestern United States and running it almost under the noses of the thirsty inhabitants of California.

So governors commanded, legislatures legislated, and thousands of furs picked up tools and hauled primitive machines, and the work began. And within a couple of decades the aqueducts were built, mammoth undertakings that included the construction of some of the largest dams, longest canals and pipelines, and the deepest tunnels then known. And for some seventy years following their completion the Los Angeles basin grew and thrived and prospered as an oasis for

millions, surrounded and protected by its mountains. But then the population became too large, the industry too demanding, and the water rights more restrictive, and water became precious once again.

Fire seemed to understand this. As the population of the basin increased and pushed out from the inner cities, overrunning what had once been orchards and groves and farmland, the propensity of the mountains to burst into flame seemed to increase with each passing year. Summers got hotter and longer, winters got drier, and nobody seemed to notice. The furs kept coming.

Too, the spirit of a particularly ruthless general of the Mexican army played into fire's paws. Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna is well remembered by the descendants of the Republic of Texas, and also well remembered by the descendants of the war of the Mexican revolution. It is said that his spirit lives to this day in the howling hot winds that cascade through Cajon and Banning passes, most often during the late summer and early fall. Driven by a particular combination of weather conditions that occur with frequency and predictability, these winds would raise air temperatures well above one hundred degrees while at the same time driving virtually all moisture from it, leaving the residents of the Los Angeles basin very hot and very dry.

After a few days of the Santa Ana winds, everything west of the mountains would be tinder dry. If the winds continued, conditions became critically favorable for the monster wildfires, as any spark could be the ignition source for the conflagration that would destroy dozens, even hundreds of square miles of whatever was in its way. Such was the case with fire in many times past, and such was the case now.

It was hot in Lancaster, ninety four degrees at twenty three hundred hours. A gentle breeze blew out of the northeast, crossing the hot concrete runway of William J. Fox field, burbling across the various aircraft parked on the equally hot concrete ramp, and finally arriving to ruffle the hair and fur of the coyote who stood at the fence line in front of the terminal building.

Fox field had long been a base for air operations for the various agencies that fought wildfires in and around southern California. During what passed for the wet season in late winter and early spring there were a pawful of Grumman S-2s and Lockheed P-3s standing down here, the majority of the activity in those days was made up of

small general aviation aircraft and an occasional regional airliner. During normal fire seasons the activity would ramp up, with additional aircraft from around the state or the southwest staging here to fight fires in southern California. In those times there might be two or three hundred furs on the airfield; mechanics, air crew, ground crew, and fire department personnel, all engaged in keeping their various propeller- and turbine-driven water and retardant bombers airworthy and airborne in their duties. For a few months Fox field might resemble a forward air base in a small regional war. Joe Latrans doubted whether the residents of Lancaster had seen Fox field as busy as it was tonight since the Second World War.

He tore his gaze away from what had been occupying it and looked across the runway. North of Fox field was flat, open desert. Several miles out there was the small town of Rosamond and its small airport. Normally the area between Fox field and Rosamond would be a black, uninhabited void at this hour, but now Joe saw lights, thousands of them, glittering like strewn jewels across the velvety blackness of the desert night. He knew these to be the refugees, hunkering down here in the safety of the desert while Los Angeles burned. He couldn't see the thousands of cars and trucks, RVs and busses scattered around out there, only the light from the small electric lamps they had, or maybe the occasional set of headlights as another vehicle pulled in. Campfires were forbidden. The nearest available fire fighting crews not engaged in the fight to save Los Angeles were at least three hundred miles away.

He knew without turning for confirmation that if he looked over his shoulder towards the north face of the San Gabriel mountains he would see them, thousands more, like a silvery, pulsating snake as their vehicles inched down state highway Fourteen into Palmdale. He knew without looking that the horizon in that direction would be glowing red, that even from fifty kilometers away he would see the flames rising above the mountains. He knew without looking that the terminal building behind him was stuffed past capacity with furs, mostly air and ground crew for the hundreds of aircraft on the flight line, trying to get some rest before the air war against the firestorm resumed tomorrow. He knew the first bombers would be lifting off about thirty minutes before dawn.

He glanced at the stars in the clear sky overhead, little glittering chunks of bluish ice against a deep purple-black background. There were millions of them. The air here was incredibly clear. The hot

breeze that brought the sweet smells of sage and juniper and good, clean dirt to his nose had started hundreds of miles away over the Great Basin in central Nevada, powered by a huge dome of high pressure that had stalled there several days ago. Sweeping over nothing but open desert on its way here, the breeze was channeled between the east side of the Sierra, backbone of California, and the White and Inyo mountains, rushing with ever increasing speed across the Mojave and through the passes in the mountains ringing the Los Angeles basin, arriving there at speeds topping seventy miles per hour. He pondered the stark contrast of the scene here to the destruction to the west, or the pall of smoke even farther west out in the ocean, reducing visibilities on Catalina Island to a few hundred feet at best.

Joe had lived in southern California all his life. He'd seen some of the biggest urban / wildland interface wildfires nature had felt fit to unleash against furkind and helped subjugate them. He'd lived through some of the largest earthquakes in the recorded history of southern California and told his pups stories about them around the campfires of their vacations. He'd seen rains and flooding and repaired his home after both. He'd made it through two mass riots, and had helped in the aftermath of those as well. Yet nothing...

The coyote sighed, staring at the stars. Nothing was like this. Perhaps the most elderly residents of Tokyo, or Hamburg or Dresden, might be able to relate in some small way to what was going on in his homeland, but he had certainly never seen anything like it. The fire was alive, like he had never seen fire live before. Walls of flame a quarter mile high were streaming out of the mountains, propelled by that damnable northeast wind. Already many cities lay in charred ruin, the devastation total. Van Nuys, Burbank, Pasadena, Azusa, Ontario, Anaheim, Santa Ana, Santa Monica... gone or might as well be. Infrastructure stretched so thin that burned corpses lay in the streets for want of somefur to come and collect them. Whole blocks of cities were a raging inferno, and the water demands were so high that reservoir elevations were visibly dropping as the watermasters watched, and the aqueducts were being sucked dry. The air was so hot that paint would blister off the fire trucks before they could get close enough to the mountains of fire to throw their feeble trickles of water on them.

And everywhere furs choked the streets, highways, and rail lines. Millions of them, running for their lives. Offshore in the Pacific thousands of boats, from the smallest dinghys to the mammoth cruise

liners, stood off while their crews fished furs out of an ocean that was already becoming choked with the debris running off into it. And everywhere the stench of combustion, whether of brush, wood, chemicals, or flesh.

Joe Latrans clenched his fists as his eyes returned to the flight line. The answer must lay in the air war. Technology would save them, if anything of their devising could. And this was the machine to do it.

There on the concrete ramp, under garish white light from generator-powered portable lighting that was everywhere, an armada of aircraft from all points on the compass rested for the moment. Fire bombers from as far away as the Yukon Territory and the Yucatan peninsula congregated in a jumble of wings and engines and fuel trucks while ground crews labored ceaselessly to prepare them for the coming battles. Joe knew them all. Orion, Hercules, Privateer, the DC-6, the DC-7, and many of their smaller propeller-driven brethren commingled with their rotor-wing cousins known as the Super Sea Stallion, Chinook, Aircrane, and of course one of Joe's oldest friends, the ubiquitous Huey. Over at the east end of the ramp, far away from the rest, the USAF had even sent in two Starlifters with their hastily installed MAFFS, Mobile Airborne Firefighting Systems.

But directly in front of the terminal, gleaming white and towering above them all, was the beast of the moment, the Evergreen Supertanker. She had started life as a Boeing 747-200, but after extensive modification and refitting could now carry a 24,000 gallon load of retardant or water and drop it from altitudes as low as eight hundred feet above the ground at speeds as low as 140 knots. In one drop this marvelous machine could dispense the equivalent of seven drops from the next biggest thing flying, the Lockheed P3 Orion. Crammed full of on-board computers, GPS receivers, and the latest defense technology, she could be directed to pinpoint drops by either ground crew or a forward air controller in a spotter aircraft utilizing visual, radio, or laser guidance systems. As airborne firefighting equipment went, this was state of the art.

A small smile tugged at the corner of the coyote's muzzle. Of all the amigos, he supposed, he was the least likely to trust completely in his Lord without having some sort of backup in his mind. Like the angle-lion had implied back in that wild tree-island place, it was good to have a backup. Joe glanced up to the flight deck windows of the 747 before him. Even though it was half a football field away he still needed to tilt

his head back a bit to do so. This is the best damn ace in the hole a fur could have to play on a night like this, he thought.

A paw gently touched his right shoulder. The coyote turned slowly to look into the ice-blue eyes of his long time friend.

"How are you doing, compadre?"

"Hey Tiger. Any word?"

The white tiger's expression was blank. "I've got good news, and bad news. What do you want first?"

"Gimmie the bad first. Might as well get it over with," Joe replied sourly.

Tigermark drew a breath. "The Pasadena fire has burned through to the east side of downtown Los Angeles. County USC Medical Center is gone. So is Dodger Stadium."

"What happened to the refugees at Dodger Stadium?" Joe interrupted.

The tiger paused. "Some of them were able to evacuate down the Los Angeles River channel to the south, towards the coast."

"Some?"

"A few hundred, maybe a couple thousand, before the hills were overrun." The tiger's gaze was steady.

Joe swore quietly. "There were thirty five thousand furs there," he muttered. "Lord help us all." He looked up, his eyes hard and gray. "What else?"

"The fire is creating its own winds now. The Van Nuys and Santa Monica fires have joined above Beverly Hills. All of the northern end of the San Fernando Valley is done for, but furs are still able to evacuate through Hollywood and West LA towards LAX and the coast."

"LAX is still operational?"

A nod in reply. "One more thing, Joe."

The coyote nodded uncertainly.

"The Santa Anas are done. Completely overrun. Those fires have burned into the cities to the west. Orange, Tustin, and Irvine are getting the worst of it so far, but the east end of Anaheim Hills is gone as well."

Joe's eyes grew wide, the implication was clear. He stopped breathing as a quiet rushing sound filled his head. "Modjeska Canyon?" His voice sounded dry and raspy in his ears.

The tiger shook his head in the negative. "I'm sorry, Joe."

My home, Joe thought sadly. Poof! Just like that. He looked past his friend, towards the horizon. The flickering hues of red and orange danced in his eyes as the tiger watched him. The coyote stared at the horizon for long moments, and then took a ragged breath. "Holy shit," he said aloud, looking at the ground.

"Ready for some good news?" Tigermark asked.

"I could use some," Joe replied, still looking at the concrete walkway between them.

Again Tigermark laid a paw on his friend's shoulder. "You know we can't compromise our families by trying to communicate with them."

Joe nodded.

"I had some words with the Boss," Tigermark said slowly, a smile creeping across his muzzle. "The Boss assures us that Annie and Tammy are safe in hiding. Neither Surt nor his minions will find them."

"That is good news," Joe said, looking up. "What about your tinx and my pups?"

"My tinx are with Annie and TL in hiding. Your pups are still in the Gulf Coast with Annie's family. The Boss has some of our brothers watching over them. He assures me that they are safe."

Joe visibly relaxed at that. "Thanks, Tiger. That helped."

The tiger's grip tightened briefly before the paw dropped from Joe's shoulder.

"I've just finished the briefing with the chiefs. We're going to hitch a ride down to Long Beach airport soon, probably with the National Guard. The coastal cities are still functional and in reasonably good

shape. The southern end of Orange and Los Angeles counties are still viable. The next stage of the fight will be spearheaded from there."

"What's the Boss' plan for us?"

"Come with me," the tiger replied, turning slowly towards the terminal building. "Let's get some iced tea and I'll fill you in."

The two soldiers walked side by side through the open doors into the terminal building, stepping carefully over and around gearbags, piles of survival equipment, and the multitude of silent furs who slept everywhere there was room to throw a bedroll on the floor.

#

"You cannot fight him, dear. It is your death at the end of a bloody battle that is one of the enemy's primary objectives." The hedgehog smiled.

"He can have that any time he wants, Vala." the filly replied, unconsciously rubbing her wrists.

"Not so, dear." Vala laid a paw gently on the filly's wrist to comfort her. "Yes, he can torture you in your dreams, he can threaten you and terrorize you, brutalize you and disgrace you, but he cannot take you. You can always return from your altered states of mind that sleep induces. He can fill your dreams, but not follow you from them." Her smile faded. "Yet."

"I can kill him," the filly said with as much certainty as she could muster. It sounded questionable in her own ears.

"Can you? Hmmm..."

"No. I can't."

Valaina nodded, smiling a little. "That's more like it. Admit your own shortcomings, deary. A good warrior knows what he...or in this case she...can't do."

"Thor once said that the best warrior knows when *not* to pull his sword," Aslaug said, lowly. "It'd be easier if I used swords, I guess."

Laughing, Valaina poured a cup of tea for the both of them. "Maybe so. But do you really want to give him what he wants? He wants you to fight so he can kill you."

Again, Aslaug shook her head. "If only it was that simple, Vala...but I'm not a threat to him. I can't kill him. Nor can he kill me...I'm already dead, you pointed that out yourself. But he could make my life miserable for all eternity by torturing me. I am no match for him...and that is hard for me to say about anyone, believe me."

Valaina nodded and sat down, sipping her tea. The equine in front of her was obviously torn. The hedgehog had never been a warrior herself. At least not in the way Aslaug was. She was a healer...she saved lives, rather than taking them. There was a struggle in that too, of course. But she could imagine that for someone in Aslaug's situation, having to admit she couldn't win a battle was extremely difficult.

"Then maybe...if it's not your task to kill him...you just have to defeat him?" she said at last.

Aslaug blinked, looking like that made no sense to her at all. "Erhh...explanation please?" she said, dryly.

"You can win a fight without killing your opponent, Aslaug. You can win a fight...without ever striking a single blow."

"Pull the other one, it's got bells on it!"

Valaina smiled. "Oh dear. I thought you'd lived in America, not in England."

"I do *read*, you know," Aslaug muttered. "I don't even know what the expression means."

Grinning, Valaina sipped her tea again. "I'll just have to teach you then, won't I?"

###

Michael cracked his knuckles and looked around himself. The land was scorched but he was thriving. He was covered in soot, he had cut and nicks, and he felt like his heart was pumping faster than it had for a very long time. Almost for as long as he could remember.

He was finally doing God's work again.

So far, he had only found spawn of the demons and they had barely been worthy of his mettle. Something told him, though, that when he found the originals, he'd be in for a real fight. He wasn't worried. God was with him and he was fighting a righteous battle. The demons would be made to pay for their acts.

He summersaulted over an incinerated tree and landed easily on his feet, breaking into a run. It didn't look like he was running all that fast, but if anyone had been there to see him...

Well...

They wouldn't have. He'd be gone before they noticed and they'd only have a sudden, unexpected rush of wind strike the side of their face. They'd be left wondering what it was and where it came from. That was how angels moved amongst ordinary furs. That was why no one ever saw them. That was the origin and nature of such sudden, unexpected puffs of wind.

That was also why Michael was seriously surprised when something stuck out a foot and tripped him. He tumbled, head over heels and landed elegantly, his sword appearing in his paw and a snarl coming onto his face.

"Who dares..." he began.

"I do, angel," a growling, rough voice responded. Out from behind a tree stepped a tall, armored bull. He was weather beaten and not in his first youth, but he looked extremely fit. He was heavily muscled, with

thick fur, as if he was used to cold climates. His chain mail shone and the helmet with the goggle-like visor was extremely intricate with silver and gold inlays. It even had room for his long, jet black horns to protrude. Michael couldn't help wonder if that particular helmet was responsible for the misconception that vikings used horns in their helmets in general. Yet...it avoided becoming gaudy...and it certainly looked sturdy and solid. A long sword hung at the bull's right hip, showing that he'd use his left paw to wield it.

He didn't have much choice.

There was no right paw to wield it *with*.

"Tyr...what are *you* doing here?" the angel asked, narrowing his eyes.

Behind the bull, a group of five female warriors appeared. Michael wasn't quite certain where they had come from, but suddenly they were there. All heavily armed and armored in the Norse style.

"And I see you brought your girlfriends," he sneered. "This isn't your world. Go back to where you belong!"

Narrowing his eyes, the bull stepped forward a few steps. Michael wasn't used to anyone towering over him but Tyr did. Not that it frightened him in any way.

"I am here to bring back Surt's minions," he said, coldly. "Or kill them if they won't come voluntarily."

"Do you honestly think they will?" Michael asked, almost amused.

Tyr looked around the burnt-down landscape. "Will you come voluntarily?" he asked, in a normal tone of voice. He waited...maybe five or six seconds before shrugging and looking at the femmes behind him. "Kill them when you see them. I asked politely," he said.

There were five smiles and five nods in response. Michael didn't approve. It was not the way to do it. It wasn't honourable in his opinion.

Tyr seemed to read his mind and rolled his eyes. "They piss fire on honour, angel. If you fight them honourably, you lose. Badly. Now where is the shieldmaiden?"

"Ahh, I knew you'd ask. She's been left in Haven and she'll STAY in Haven!" Michael responded.

Slowly, Tyr held out his bitten-off arm and extended the stump upwards, while looking straight at Michael. It took a moment before the angel realized what the bull was doing. Then he blanched and bared his fangs. No one gave him the finger...whether there was a finger to give or not!

"She will come...and fight...on her terms," Tyr said, calmly. "No patronization, angel. Your God has a *nasty* tendency to treat anyone who doesn't worship him as second rate. Aslaug is the best you will find. She would've joined the Valkyries if she had died on that battlefield. But no one listened to my recommendations, and Odin has his reasons. Odin *always* has his reasons."

"How is the old one-eyed codger anyway?"

"Old, one-eyed and codgery!"

Michael nodded. "The usual, then..."

"Just about," Tyr responded. "As for Aslaug, both you and I know that no matter how good she is, she can't kill Surt. Nor is she supposed to, but Surt doesn't want her dead. He wants her on his team. Do you really think these stinking Muspelheimers will stop and fight you? Why should they fight someone where they stand a chance of losing? They won't come to us until we give them some bait."

"You mean bring Aslaug to this world?"

"I mean bring Aslaug to this world!"

"You're mad!"

"No, I'm a tactician, angel. Play hnefatafl. It helps you develop that skill. You're brute force and heavy-handedness, and anyone who's ever heard anything about you knows that. I try to outmanoeuvre my opponents."

Michael glared at the bull. He didn't like where this conversation had suddenly gone. "So what do you suggest?" he asked, sourly.

Tyr shrugged and removed his helmet at last. "I suggest I put my own distaste for you aside, and that you forget your high-and-mighty ethos for a little while, and that we work together. I do the strategy...you get the privilege of killing the demons."

Nodding slowly, Michael felt a smile spread on his face. "You're devious. If I lose, you can still attack the weakened enemy. The thing is, Tyr...I'm not going to lose."

"Cocky as ever. I count on you to win," Tyr said, indifferently. "Aslaug isn't ready to be brought here yet. I will know when she is ready, and we will bring her. She has her own battles to fight first, although I have this strange feeling that she's got a new friend to help her fight them. What I suggest you do, is use some of those angelic powers of yours to save innocent lives, instead of hunting down three flaming demons who have no intention of fighting you, and who can move faster even than you as long as there is fire around them."

Then he turned and walked away. Michael sheathed his sword. He wanted to punch the bull in the face but it wasn't going to get anything accomplished. He looked towards the sky and sighed.

"You could've warned me about this, Father..." he said.

He already knew why he hadn't been warned. Aramis had pointed it out in the Citation. He was growing prideful. Arrogant. This had taught him a lesson in humility. Even angels needed them from time to time.

"Thy will be done," he muttered, smiled crookedly and looked in the direction where Tyr and the Valkyries had left. "AND MY NAME IS MICHAEL, NOT 'ANGEL!'" he shouted.

There was still time to make a real difference.

#

The nearly furless canid sat huddling next to the waning fire. The threesome of fire entities from Surt had been past this way long ago, and nearly all the available fuel had been spent. There had been just enough heat, just enough fire left to accomplish his goals. He was curled down upon himself, a small whimper occasionally escaping him as he nursed the pains he'd inflicted upon himself. He was so close to the fire that the flames had scorched him. That was all right. He was used to being scorched. At one time, he'd had as much fur as any other canid, but the long time he'd spent in service to Surt, and in Muspelheim, had burnt most of it off.

The searing pains in his eye and ear, and the point where he'd pierced his tongue with his dagger, had slowly decreased to an incessant throbbing. Burned and mutilated, he sat in physical misery, though his mind was elated. He had seen and heard things in the fire. Things that told him his quarry had gone to ground well off to the east. She was even now in the company of more furs who Surt might want to bring in. He was certain that the three fire demons would easily dispatch their main target's friends. If he could capture the friend's mates and cubs, to be brought before Surt, so that the equine warrior could see them burn, it would repay his master for the gifts he'd bestowed.

Settled on his course of action, the canid let his thoughts wander as he rested. He had served Surt for a long time, but he could still remember the first time he'd heard the siren call of his master in the fire. He'd had a name, then. So long ago, he couldn't begin to recall it now. Surt didn't concern himself with such unimportant things. The canid had simply been called agent or servant. When Surt did decide to use a name for him, other than idiot or imbecile, it was an offpaw one. Udskud. Trash. Something to be used up and thrown away.

“But not quite yet,” he said grimly to himself. “I still serve, and now I’m even more useful. It cost me an eye and an ear, and the piercing of my tongue with glorious flame, but my master was willing to bestow such gifts. I shall not fail him.”

The dawn was rising by now. Uds kud rose and shook off the chill he was feeling in the dying embers. He began to run eastward until he came across a road, now filled with refugees from the fire. Taking to the vehicle tops, he ran lightly across them until he came to thinner traffic as the bottleneck eased. Choosing a likely-looking semi, he leapt atop the trailer and settled down to ride, ever onward, ever eastward.

#

“Annie, can you get that big bowl out of the bottom cabinet?”

“Sure, just let me . . . ugh! There it comes. Here you go.”

The red-furred vixen gave a large bowl to the tawny-furred lynx, who was at work on a batch of cookies on the kitchen counter. Two small hybrid cubs ran back and forth, helping more than getting in the way. At their preteen ages, they were already becoming adept at helping out their parents, whether it be kitchen work with their mother, or pawing wrenches to their father as he worked on a vehicle.

“While the cookies bake we’ll boil some hot kalies. Sorry, best we have on short notice,” Tammy said as she worked the chocolate chips into the cookie dough.

“No complaints here. Right now I’m happy anywhere there’s not smoke covering the sky,” Annie replied. Her escape from California had been a close thing. Even as they’d flown out of the airport, she felt as though the flames were reaching out for her. They’d heard on the news that almost a dozen aircraft, either fire fighting or delivering relief supplies, had mysteriously gone down when the fire suddenly engulfed them. That had caused her to realize just how close her escape had been.

Tammy walked over to the cabinet and brought out a large pot. She went to the sink and ran water into it.

“Rachel, you and Annie go ahead and start putting the cookies on the baking sheet. Bri, light the right rear burner on the stove and turn it about halfway up, would you please?”

Rachel, the M'Rega's oldest daughter at age ten, nodded. Tall, willowy, with long blonde hair and an all white coat, many mistook her for a domestic Persian. Only a very close look revealed the spots, barely a shade darker than her base coat, that mirrored her mother's pattern. Brianna at age eight had her father's stripes, and a very light brownish cast to her base fur color. It was mostly lost beside her dark brown hair and snappy brown eyes.

The younger tinx turned on the burner and verified that it had lit after the snapping pop of the electric igniter had ceased. She adjusted the control and turned to tell her mother it was ready when a sudden whoosh made everyone look at the flame. It had roared up to almost half the distance to the ceiling, going from its normal pale blue to an angry yellow and white. The flare up only lasted a second, and then it had subsided to normal. The four femmes looked at each other.

“I didn't do anything to it, Mom,” Brianna said doubtfully.

“Uh, I know Sweetie. It's seems okay now. Ah, help me put the hot kalies in the water.” Tammy was shaken. It had looked for all the world like there had been a face within the flare-up. She looked at Annie, who also looked visibly shaken.

Rachel looked between the three dubiously, and then her eyes narrowed. “I saw it too. What was that, Mom?”

“I, I'm not sure.”

“Does it have anything to do with why Dad left so quickly?” The young tinx had a fearful, yet determined set to her jaw.

“Uh, yes, I think it probably does,” Tammy answered.

Rachel was silent for several seconds. She then nodded.

“We need to pray extra hard for him, then. For Mister Joe and Aramis and Miss Aslaug, too.”

Annie, recovered somewhat, jumped in to give Tammy a paw. “Yes we do. Now, let’s get these hot kalies and cookies going. I’m starved.”

That got everyone moving, and seemed to break the dread that had come over them. As they went back to work, Tammy and Annie looked at each other. Both realized it at the same time. They had just been compromised. The question now was, what to do about it.

#

Joe eased around the wall of a burned-out building. The “armour” they’d been given in Haven looked to the outside observer to be a regular fire-fighter’s heavy coat and pants, boots, and helmets. The accoutrements were so much more, capable of withstanding any flame, plus stop about any projectile, be it a bullet or fragments from a tree or building exploding in flame. He carried his Beretta out in his paw, as its “enhanced” ammo had already been needed to dispatch what Michael had called “Some of the demon’s spawn.” Miniature versions of the beings that had started, and fuelled, the fire that had destroyed a major portion to Southern California. The area they were moving through had been totally burnt out by the conflagration. Their reason for being there was to be a ground-based forward fire control team. That is, to help guide in the air support that now worked the edges of the fire. After the loss of an Orion, A Sea Stallion helicopter, a Herc, and one of the Air Force Starlifters, they were very cautious about flying too close to the fire’s main body. The special ruby Aie had given them sat safely ensconced in the 747 tanker, awaiting their call.

Looking around the corner, Joe motioned his two friends forward. “C’mon up. The way ahead is clear of fire.”

Tigermark and Aramis, both soot covered and in similar armour, eased up beside them. Tigermark carried a 12 gauge riot shotgun with a military pistol grip. Its wide shot pattern had proved useful against the elusive fire beings they were battling. Each fur also carried a shovel, which had been useful against the “normal” flames. Aramis had been making liberal use of a wand Aie had presented him with that made a stream of water.

So far their way had been mostly clear, as all the fuel in the area had long been expended. The furs here had evacuated in time, or so it seemed, as there hadn't been any bodies along the way. Mostly, no one spoke. The fire might be way from them, but the air was still thick with smoke and the stench of burned . . . everything.

They eased around another corner, and then all three broke into a run. Halfway up the block, a vehicle stood in the street, burned almost beyond recognition. When they reached it, Joe was the first to speak.

"Looks like an engine company small pumper truck. Usually has around five furs crewing it."

Tigermark solemnly nodded. "I didn't see anything as we came up. Hope they made it out okay."

Joe was nodding when Aramis, who'd walked around to the other side, suddenly called out.

"Uh, guys, I . . . don't think that's the case."

Tigermark and Joe immediately ran around to join the young feline. There, just out from the truck, were the charred forms of five furs. The fire had been so intense, and had come upon them so fast, they'd died where they were. Their coats and helmets were burnt and cracked, with blank, empty eyesockets staring out from under the brims. The jaws were open in a final, silent scream. The fire hose they'd been using had been melted to the pavement. The three warriors looked on in silent grief and respect. Tigermark finally spoke.

"No greater love hath any fur than this, to give up his life for his brothers. Rest in peace, guys."

Joe and Aramis nodded. There was nothing else to say, and the time they'd been back had seen them almost numbed by the sheer number of casualties the fires had caused.

"It looks like the fire got around behind them or something, see? The pumper was between them and the fire," Joe stated after a few moments.

"Yep. Looks like maybe they were covering for some evacuees. Otherwise they wouldn't be out in the middle of the street like this,"

Tigermark said as he turned to move on. He hadn't gone ten feet when he came to an abrupt halt. A low growl escaped him, threatening to become a screaming snarl. Joe and Aramis ran up to him to see what was wrong.

There in the street, the full tragedy of the whole thing hit home for the three amigos. Facing them, as she had faced the fire, the form of a young femme lay. The body had fallen over, but they could see what had happened. She had either tripped, or had simply run out of breath and dropped to her knees. Her paws were out in front of her, palms forward as if to ward off the flames. The flames had thankfully seared any recognizable features from her face, leaving mostly a charred lump. Curled in a fetal position just behind her back lay the body of a child. Any feature that might tell them species was long gone. They were witness to a young mother's final, futile attempt to protect her child.

Aramis and Joe each put a paw on Tigermark's shoulders. He stood, mute now, looking at the scene. They looked into his face. His eyes were narrowed, glowing a feral, brilliant green. His jaw was set, lips pulled back in a terrible snarl. Tears had washed clear lines in the soot on his face. The low, guttural sound that came from the tiger next caused chills to run up his companion's spines.

"By the God I serve. By all that is holy, the ones who did this will be stopped."

###

"Where are we going to?" Annie asked as she helped Tammy put travel bags in their vehicle.

Tammy glanced over at the vixen. "Mark and I have relatives in Ohio and West Virginia. We'll head over that way. I don't want to risk giving away where before we even leave."

Annie nodded as the two tinxes brought the last of the luggage out. The family's pet kahts had already been moved over to friend's houses, and as soon as they finished loading, they were leaving.

The younger felines gave their burdens to their mother to stow. As the two turned back toward the house, Rachel glanced upward and gasped, followed by a short scream. The other three followed her shocked gaze. There on the peak of the roof, a figure in a dark cloak crouched. The male had no fur, and only one eye. A terrible, raw scar took the place of the other.

“Greetingth. I have come to take you to your mates. Gather closthe and I’ll make arrangemenths for your tranthportation.”

The thick lisp in the fur’s voice almost made Annie laugh, until she realized it was most likely caused by some birth defect or mutilation of the canid’s tongue. She glanced at Tammy. She was looking very suspiciously at the fur. The tinxes, looking quite apprehensive, had begun edging toward their mother.

“Who are you, and who sent you?” Annie asked, turning her attention back to the fur on the roof.

Udskud froze for a second. What was it he’d heard the furs here call their god? Realizing the longer he hesitated the more likely he wouldn’t be believed, he snapped off an answer:

“My name ith not important. The one I therve requires your prethsenthe.”

“I thought you said you were going to take us to our mates,” Tammy said evenly, moving slightly to stand partly behind the back of the SUV.

“Indeed. Your mateths will be waiting for us there.”

Again, Annie and Tammy exchanged glances, speaking volumes to each other as only femmes seem to be able to do. Again, Annie faced the canid.

“You, sir, are so full of bullshit it must have contaminated your brain. Everyone in the vehicle, we’re leaving.”

The strange canid snarled and stood up.

“Do not try to run ladieth. I will find you. You would do best to submit.”

The nearly furless canid leapt down from the roof, landing surprisingly lightly between the females and the house. Even though greatly surprised, the group of femmes sprang into action. Annie pulled a pistol from the pawbag she had on her shoulder. The tinxes retreated to behind their mother as Tammy stepped out to face the intruder.

Instinctively, Udskud knew that what the small thing in the vixen's paw was a weapon. He sidestepped toward the mother and her cubs, thinking that if he could get hold of one of them, the others would surrender. He edged closer, having the feeling the femme with the weapon wouldn't use it unless he moved suddenly. He was just an arm's reach from the mother, his eyes on the vixen, when a loud ringing crash, followed by severe pain, assailed him. He found himself on the ground, shaking his head to try to clear it. He stood back up and waved a paw. In a second Annie let out a yelp and dropped the pistol. It had become red hot. So much so that she feared the ammo would cook off.

Udskud turned his attention to the mother and her cubs, just in time to receive another blow across his face. This time the ringing pain was accompanied by searing heat. It struck him across the side of his head with the ruined eye, and in that brief contact he could see the metal frying pan the lynx was using as a weapon had some sort of heat-resistant handle. As he recovered, he intensified his concentration on the object. Tammy gasped and flung the pan away from her as the thermoplastic handle began to melt. The pan made the grass begin to curl and brown from the heat where it landed. Udskud made to aim the core of his heat attack toward the vixen when he was struck hard by something across his back. The ball of heat went wide, but managed to ignite the front of the house. He turned to see one of the cubs with a wooden staff in her paws. He turned his attention her way and she flung the thing at him just as it burst into flames. He was gathering his will to turn the young femme into a writhing picture of agony.

Then, the next moment, he found himself looking up at the sky. Sitting up, he saw he was on a rooftop. Where, he couldn't possibly say.

Back where Tammy, Annie and the tinxes were, Annie was gingerly checking her pistol. It had cooled, and seemed unharmed by its trip through the heat. Putting the pistol back in her purse, she looked over at her friends. Tammy and the tinxes were examining the large dent in the

even larger frying pan the lynx had held to fight the intruder. She'd surreptitiously extracted it from a box in the back of their SUV while the strange fur's eyes were on Annie. They were looking around, puzzled at his sudden disappearance. Annie made to pull out her cell phone to call for the fire department to extinguish the front of the house. To their amazement, it seemed to have gone out, with only a few pieces of vinyl trim melted. It was just then that they notices the tall, kind-faced canid with wings standing in their midst.

"Who are you?" Tammy asked, raising the frying pan defensively. Annie had a paw back in her bag, ready to pull the pistol back out if needed.

"Be at peace, the threat is gone for now. I am Gabriel, Herald of the Most High God. He has sent me to watch over you, and to take you to a place of safety. Please get in your vehicle, and we'll be on our way."

"How do we know you're who you say you are?" Annie asked. Neither femme had moved to let their guard down.

Gabriel smiled. His charges were wary. From what he'd been told, that was good in the current situation.

"Annie Latrans, I was told to say to you, 'Joe's friend Jess sent me.' Does that suffice?"

Annie relaxed. Almost no one knew of Joe's name for, or conversations with 'Jess,' his name for Jesus. Tammy, seeing Annie's reaction, relaxed also. Rachel and Brianna came around and looked curiously at the being in front of them. Brianna stepped closer still, and then reached out and gently tugged on one of Gabriel's wing tips.

"Yes, little one?" Gabriel said with a smile.

"Are you an angel?"

"Yes. As I said, my name is Gabriel. I am the one who spoke to the prophets of old, and told Mary of her coming great joy and sorrow."

The young tinx eyed the angel for a few seconds, and then grinned.

"Cool!"

That broke the tension and the group, including the angel, laughed heartily.

“My, you are your father’s daughter. And possibly have been influenced by a certain old coyote, as well. Come, gather in your vehicle, and we’ll be on our way.” Gabriel made a sweeping motion toward the SUV. They all made their way to the vehicle and got seated, fastening their seatbelts out of habit. The angel sat in the back seat between to tinxes, who squirmed as the wingfeathers tickled them.

“Er, where to then?” Tammy asked as she made to start the engine.

“Oh, no need of that. Just hold on, here we go.” Gabriel seemed to take in a deep breath, and then let it out. A bright, suffused light glowed in through the windows. To anyone watching, it would have seemed that the SUV just suddenly wasn’t there. In a few seconds the glow began to weaken and dissipate. Everyone blinked in surprise as the outside world came back into focus.

“Now where are—,” Annie began, but Tammy excitedly cut her off.

“I know this place! This is Mark’s homeworld! It hasn’t been very long ago that he brought me here for the first time. Boy that was some weekend, I didn’t think I’d . . . walk . . . straight, uh, nevermind.”

Tammy’s cheekfur was fluffed out in a furious blush. Her cubs couldn’t see from the back seat, partly due to a pair of angel wings in front of their faces. Annie was grinning and desperately suppressing a fit of giggles. Tammy could see Gabriel’s face in the rearview mirror. The angel was looking innocently around, and she almost expected him to start whistling any moment.

Finally he said, “Shall we get out? I believe you all have enough packed to be comfortable here. The tent is where it was left, and the time of year is temperate. God Himself watches closely over this world, and I have been assigned to stay with you until this is all resolved. The enemy that attacks your homes cannot find you here, even through fire.