

Clouded Memories

Dagher Bjorn rolled himself out from under the Humvee he'd been repairing, listening intently. There it was again, the giant Icelander thought, listening hard. The muted intercom had just spoken his name. "Agent Valhalla, please report to Conference Room 3." Damn. It was all the way across the compound.

Pulling himself up from the cold concrete floor, the blonde giant walked to a washbasin and tried to rinse the worst of the gunk from his hands. "What you see is what you get," he muttered. Meetings weren't the big man's favorite things. People in power were impossible to understand. Give me an engine or a beautiful woman, he thought to himself; I know how to work those.

Conference Room 3 was lit from within by the flickering light of slow-motion camera footage. Within the darkness, three people huddled around the security feed from what looked like an Austrian bank.

"You called for me?" Dagher asked, announcing his presence with a light rap on the open door. Three heads swiveled to face them. He knew them all.

Jenny Rinise gazed up at him lovingly. The slim brunette had been giving him the eye for two weeks, ever since he'd arrived in Vienna. He'd heard through the grapevine that she'd put in for a transfer a few days before he was called here after hearing he would be leaving the DC HQ for a short time. Rumor around the office was that she was gunning for him. Dagher smiled. He loved the chase, but he loved it even more when the women chased him. She was a brilliant tech, from what he'd heard. She could even be more useful than just an idle relationship.

Miles Land, the stocky director of the Vienna field office, looked at him with real venom in his eyes. What did I do now, Valhalla thought to himself, I've hardly even spoken to the guy before. The mechanic made it his business to stay out of politics, and he hadn't been on a mission for quite a while. Where could this animosity be coming from?

The third man stood up, offering his hand. Valhalla took it cautiously. Something about the new Assistant Director put him ill-at-ease. "A.D. Noray, it's a pleasure to see you again," Valhalla lied, "congratulations on your new promotion."

The dark-skinned Haitian leered at him, perfect white teeth visible even in the dim light. "Thank you, Agent. Though it is with some solemnity that I assume the position. My predecessor's untimely demise still saddens me."

"Oh, I heard something about that just before I transferred here," Jenny piped up, eager to impress her superiors, "I heard it was a fairly gruesome way to go. I feel so bad for his family."

Ojimba Noray sighed deeply. "Yes, that level of self-inflicted mutilation is a sure sign of a troubled psyche, Ms. Rinise. Perhaps if we had been more diligent, we'd have seen the signs of his inner struggle and rallied ourselves to help him. We are a family that must look after each other."

Valhalla looked at the man closely as the other two people nodded vigorously. He had sensed the disdain in the man's voice, but Jenny and Miles Land had just eaten it up. Very strange. Noray's eyes bored into his, looking for something and obviously not finding it. At last he looked away.

"Well, down to business. Have a seat, Bjorn." The Icelander did as instructed, pulling up a chair to see what the others had been gawking at. His blood froze. On the screen, big as life, was Abdiel Salinar. The man he'd killed a long time ago. Valhalla sat entranced as he watched the ghost calmly walk up to the bank teller, then get escorted off to the private lockbox area. Minutes later he passed back by the camera, toting a large briefcase. The timestamp on the film read today's date: 1/30/07, 0900 hours.

Son of a bitch.

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"So what did they say?" Jenny asked, pulling him into her private quarters inside the Agency compound. Everyone was either at their posts or at lunch break, leaving the two to themselves for the moment.

"I thought they were going to reprimand me," Dagher said, obviously distracted by her flawless form, "I know Land wanted me to go down for this one. But Noray said I could make amends by taking on this investigation myself. There's something strange about that one..."

Jenny unbuttoned her blouse while kicking off her heels. "Yeah, he creeps me out sometimes. But other times I feel like I'm thinking exactly what he is. I can't wait until he finishes whatever business he has here and returns to the States. I'll sleep better at night."

"As will I," the burly Nordic said, pulling his oil-stained tank top off and throwing it to the floor. His muscles flexed slightly, causing Jenny's eyes to widen perceptibly. Defying gravity, her bra flew off and caught on the slowly spinning blades of the fan above them.

"Enough work talk," she laughed, unbuttoning his pants, "let's get down to --oh my GOD!" The big man smiled. This was his favorite part. Well, almost, he reasoned.

He scooped her up and laid her gently on the bed. "Don't worry," Dagher laughed, his deep voice entrancing her, "I won't hurt you...much." Screams of ecstasy echoed through the deserted halls of the Agency living quarters, rising higher and higher.

2 hours later...

"Oh my God," she drawled sleepily, "I don't think I'll be able to walk right for a week! I'm so late for my shift!" She rested her head on his muscular shoulder, pulling the covers up to her perfect breasts to keep in the warmth.

Dagher caressed her dark hair, tracing the tips of her ears. "I have that affect, sometimes. Jenny, I may need your help on this case."

"I'm the best the Agency's got. Well, second best."

He smiled at her, "And who is the best?" His legs entwined with hers beneath the covers.

"He was a jackass named Brent Styles. I worked with him in the DC field office. He was always bribing me to get him Mountain Dews like I was his secretary. Asshole. I learned a lot, though. Codes, security systems, how to dodge his awkward gropes. You know, the usual in a tech office. I'm light-years ahead of any of the dorks here in Vienna, that I can tell you." She pulled his hand under the covers, showing him what she wanted. "Now shut up and kiss me."

Leaning over, he did as she instructed, probing with his tongue. She moaned slightly, pushing against him hungrily. Tweaking one rosy nipple, he smiled at her before looking into the living room. "Should we try out the structural integrity of that table?" She giggled like a schoolgirl as he got up, throwing her over one massive shoulder as if she weighed nothing.

The trail would be just as warm in an hour from now, he thought.

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Valhalla gunned the engine on his Ford Mustang, the custom rims flashing in the crisp winter air. In his ear, the miniaturized commlink bleeped once to signal an incoming message. "Okay, hacked the bank. Had to update the whole Vienna mainframe, they were still using SkyHack 3.8. Losers. Anyways, I found what you were looking for. There is a login code for the safety deposit box room, only one person accessed it within an hour of the time stamp on the video: Manuel Viroso. He's our guy. I followed that back to the bank mainframe and got an address for you: 314 Leichtensteinstrasse."

"I'm on my way, see if you can patch through to any traffic cams to see what's going on in the area."

"Already did, lover," he could hear her grinning over the commlink, "looks like a few black sedans beyond the wall, two armed guards near as I can tell. Dagher," her voice turned less playful and more serious, "be careful. You're going in alone against an unknown number of bad guys."

"That's when I do my best work. Stay in touch." He turned down an alley close to the mansion, eyeing the sparse mid-afternoon traffic. Perfect. People wouldn't be rushing home from their jobs for another hour or more. Dagher pulled his large frame out of the vehicle, barely noticing as the shocks decompressed without his weight. Popping the trunk, he pulled on his low-profile armor, strapping it down tight. It only had to protect him until he got close enough to strike, which wouldn't take long. Pulling his trenchcoat on, the big man turned back to his tools. His sledgehammer slid into the quick-release sling concealed inside the trenchcoat, and the H&K Mk. 23 silenced pistol dropped into one spacious pocket. Showtime.

Striding up to the front gate between passes of the sentries, Valhalla pulled his sledgehammer out and smashed the top hinge of one side of the gate. The steel pin plate bent alarmingly. One more swing shattered it completely. As voices rose in warning, he calmly walked to the other side of the gate pair and proceeded to smash that top hinge, as well.

One guard raced up, pulling his submachine gun up and screaming in a dialect Valhalla didn't know. Before he had time to fire, the blonde-haired giant whipped around, swinging his mighty hammer into the middle of the gate. Held up only by the lower hinges, it tipped inward slowly, then gathered speed as the pins snapped in a screeching protest of shorn metal.

"Ga --" the man had time to scream, before the massive metal gate bore him to the ground in a writhing pile of broken bones. The other sentry opened fire from ten feet away, going for the easy body shot. Full metal jacket rounds smashed into Valhalla's chest, taking his breath away from the force of the impact. As the soldier sighted in another burst, Valhalla dodged to the right. The man tried to follow him with his sights, but Valhalla covered the ground in a heartbeat, still speeding up.

The poor bastard was lifted up and into the brick surrounding wall by the force of Dagher's shoulder, impacting the immovable surface with a sickening crack. Sliding to the frozen ground, he toppled forward slowly. Valhalla brought the hammer down on the back of the man's skull, though it probably wasn't necessary. Clutching the bloody sledge with both hands, he advanced on the house.

The front door blew off its hinges. Blinking, he listened intently for the telltale sounds of running footsteps, but heard nothing. At last he made out the dim interior, and instantly knew something was wrong. Not a piece of furniture adorned the spacious interior, no electric lights filled rooms to scare away the shadows. He had been set up.

"Dagher!" a voice called in his headset, "something's wrong! Someone cut my link to the street cams! We're being backtraced! I'm shutting down my workst --" Static echoed loudly in the stillness. Pushing the power button, he deactivated the earpiece and pondered what to do. Resolute, he started forward. He had to know if Salinar was still alive.

Pushing open some double doors, he entered the great room. Inlaid mahogany flooring spiraled away in complex patterns, but his were the only footsteps here. Dust lay thick over everything...except there...

In the corner, the dust had been disturbed. A pile of dark clothing lay on the floor, a set of footprints tracking away and out through another door across from him. Reaching the garments, he knew they were from the man in the video. Digging deeper, Dagher found the thin latex mask, and the artificial fingerprints. Damn facemen, they could become anyone they wanted to complete their objectives.

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He kicked open the door that the footprints led to, eager to confront whoever was playing him for a fool. She stood looking out a window at the snowflakes that were just starting to drift down, naked in the shaft of sunlight that peeked through the clouds.

"You...you impersonated Salinar?"

"I'm that good," the dark-haired beauty replied, not turning around. "Hello again, Dagher Bjorn. I've been watching you for a while now."

"And I've been learning about you...Medusa. You troubled me ever since the cabin six months ago. I've been putting some pieces together."

She stiffened; her perfect back arching as she looked over her shoulder at him. "I go by the name of Lash, now, Dagher. Medusa died a long time ago, back when I was your wife."

"What the...?" he cried, just as the prongs of the taser impacted his side, sending a massive electrical charge through his body.

Gasping on the ground, he looked up to see Lash standing above him, perfectly formed feminine body topped off by the cruel smile of a sadist. Walking up next to her, the Cold Zero thug named Slapshot smiled down with his gapped teeth before he pressed the trigger on the taser again. Everything went black.



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Valhalla jumped out of unconsciousness as the shock ran through his body. It took his muddled brain another two seconds to realize he was tied to a chair, with freezing water dripping off of him. Opening his eyes, he saw Slapshot smirking at him, holding an empty, dripping pail. "Yep, he's awake," he called over his shoulder, then leaned close to Valhalla's ear. "You are one lucky bastard, Bjorn. You were married to her? Man, what I wouldn't give for five minutes in a dark room..."

"Must not have been that good," the northerner retorted, "because I can't remember a thing."

"Now, now, darling," Lash smiled seductively, now partially clothed in a red leather corset with matching gloves and skirt, "there's no cause for that kind of talk." She walked up and casually draped an arm over Slapshot's muscular shoulder. "You can go now. Don't come see what we're doing...no matter what you hear coming out of this room."

Slapshot smirked again, obviously already running through his head what sounds he would hear, and wishing he was making them, no doubt. He left, pulling the door closed behind him. Valhalla caught just a glimpse of the concrete wall in the corridor beyond as the latch fell into place and clicked.

He looked at the woman that claimed to be his wife. "You know," he said with a frown, "I thought I recognized you when I came after Salinar the first time. But you're being my wife is a little hard to swallow."

"You used to like it, as I recall," she purred, coming to sit sideways on his lap. One finger traced behind his ear softly as she looked into his eyes.

"Like what?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

"When I swallowed."

He raged; pulling against the restraints attached to the chair. "Get the FUCK off me, bitch!" She smiled again, rising catlike to her feet. He didn't even have time to blink before her fist smashed into his jaw. The big man saw stars, blinking until they finally faded. The spot where she'd hit him burned, itching like crazy.

"You'll learn manners yet, Dagher. When we first met you were the consummate gentleman. You also asked far too many questions for a good, loving husband. Those stopped when I showed you just how pleasurable pain could be, when administered by the right hands."

Valhalla watched as she peeled a thin transparent strip from the knuckles of the hand she'd hit him with. "What did you do to me?" he asked, feeling the itching on his jaw but finding himself powerless to stop it.

"Oh, this?" she tittered, tossing the strip to the floor, "it's one of my own creations. What you feel is a mix of gel and cayenne pepper, as well as an agent to help it absorb into the skin. Does it itch yet? Would you like me to scratch it?" Moving across the room, she turned her back to him and got something out of a black bag. Turning, she let the full length of the whip drape to the floor by her feet. The cat o' nine tails was an evil instrument, and this one was a lot more vicious than any other. The tip of each of the nine heads had a metal spike that gleamed menacingly in the bright light of the interrogation room.

Valhalla felt a memory trigger, one that he had not recalled until now. "You think a little pain will make me talk, Jacqueline Simmons?" he asked, looking for her reaction.

Lash slowly licked the pommel of her whip, eyeing him the entire time. "Your research wasn't good enough, Dagher. I always preferred my married name, Jacqueline Bjorn. And you always called me Becka, after my middle name. But no matter. That was a long time ago, and I've had many conquests since you left my bed. None quite so satisfying, I admit. But what is a girl to do, but try and try again?"

Dagher flinched as the whip came up and snapped toward him. She was a master of her weapon, letting only a single head snap into his bare chest. He looked down to see a bright ribbon of blood trace its way down one pectoral. Instantly the room spun, colors shifting in and out. The whip was drugged!

"Tell me who the girl was at our facility in Mexico City, Dagher," a voice echoed, familiar but strange. Valhalla looked up to see Lash advance towards him, the whip casually flipped over one shoulder. "Tell me," she continued, "and I can make it go away." She spun in a circle and flayed him again, another head sticking into his chest for a few seconds before she casually pulled it away. Instantly the drug was counteracted by another, clearing his vision. Valhalla felt ill, like a kid on a merry-go-round that couldn't jump off.

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"You see? Tell me what I want to know, so I can tell my superiors. Then I can show you what you loved in me in the short year we were married. Perhaps I'd even do it again..." She pondered the thought as he watched; touching one red leather-clad finger to her lips in a seductive pout.

As he looked on, a part of him wanted to tell her everything, just to make her happy. But he knew that wasn't going to happen. Pieces were falling into place. Before the Agency, he'd been kidnapped, drugged, interrogated. Memories were elusive from that time, though small things would break through in his dreams. The warehouse he'd been tied up in, much like now. A voice. Her voice. Another man, crawling inside his skull.

Little snippets of conversation from that fateful day came back to him. "He doesn't know anything, sir. I told you, I have him under control."

"You underestimated him, Medusa. Your carelessness nearly caused a security breach of the worst kind. Find out what he knows, and then destroy his mind. I cannot work my spells on this one. His knowledge of the occult has allowed him to erect barriers in his mind, even subconsciously. He is one of a small group of people that cannot be influenced in the usual ways. Now you will use your wiles. Do not disappoint me."

"Why not just kill him, sir?" the feminine voice called as heavy footsteps retreated.

The footfalls ceased for a moment. "There is always a use for someone with a secret in their skull. Especially one that cannot dig up the truth."

Behind his blindfold, the man that would be known as Valhalla felt the lash for the first time. The first of many times.

Snapping back to the present, Dagher looked her squarely in the eyes. "Becka, you couldn't break me before, even if you did make me bury my memories for a time. It will not work now, and you know it."

"I was hoping you'd say that, Dagher," she laughed, her sultry voice like music to his ears, "I've wanted to break you for a long, long time."

The lash struck him blindingly fast, injecting more venom into his system. Valhalla screamed.

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3 hours later...

"Talk, damn you Dagher!" Lash screamed in futility, hitting him with all nine tails this time. The blonde man's chest was a curtain of blood from a multitude of gouges and slices. His clouded eyes looked up at her as he smiled through the pain. She whipped him again, furious.

"Won't...make me...talk...Becka."

"Give them what they want so I can stop, damn you!" Tears began to streak down her cheeks as she hit him. Again. Again. Still he wouldn't say anything. "Who was the girl in Mexico City, Dagher?! Answer me!"

"Screw --" he spit up some blood, " --you."

The door behind her burst open. Brushing her eyes on her gloves, she turned angrily. "What! I'm very busy right now!"

Slapshot grinned at her, waving a piece of paper. "We've got the information we needed from another source. The girl is a Latina from the Agency. We now have her name and her attending physician. Our source also told us that she's undergone some mutations. We're making plans to grab her and the doctor, very soon. You're needed back in the States for her extraction."

"What about Valhalla?" she asked, turning back to look at her husband from another time. The big man's head lolled on his chest, too far gone past the point of shock to feel much of anything.

"Kill him and get rid of the body."

She stood still for a moment. "Understood." Slapshot heard the pause, looking at her quizzically. Then he stepped from the room. The boss would not be pleased, not at all.

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"Need some help with him?" Slapshot asked her, after unceremoniously dumping Valhalla's unconscious body into the trunk. The rear shocks of the roomy Cadillac sank down, giving the big black car the look of a panther ready to spring.

"I can handle it," Jacqueline spat tersely, slamming the trunk and moving to get behind the wheel. The powerful engine revved to life as the thug stepped back. She slammed the door, harder than necessary.

Stepping forward, Slapshot rapped on the glass. When Lash lowered the window, he leaned close. "The boss is watching you, you know. This is a test of sorts, and I for one don't want you screwing it up. Just get it over with and get back. We need to leave."

"Aww, how cute, Slapshot. Are you worried about me?"

He surveyed the mass of people packing up their temporary HQ, ready to move on to the States. "No one else here is as blasted easy on the eyes as you are, that's all. See you at the rendezvous."

In answer, she slammed down on the accelerator, racing from the building into the dark. Snow whipped along the roadway, dropping her vision to a hundred feet. Pulling into a secluded part of the warehouse district, she pulled into an alley and hit the button to pop the trunk.

Leaving the engine running, Jacqueline got out and dragged him into the snow and ice. He was heavy, too heavy for her, but she managed nonetheless. Had she let anyone help her, the man at her feet would have been killed. As much as she could pretend she didn't care, it was all there when she allowed her mind to visit the one happy year in her life.

Pulling a tarp from the trunk, she threw it on the ground, pinning it with her feet while she slung the big man onto it and wrapped him up. Turning out of the wind, she reached beneath her long woolen coat and pulled the transceiver she'd found on him from her corset. One delicate finger turned it on, then she slid it into her ear.

A moment later, a woman's voice crackled over the line. "Valhalla? Is that you? Dagher?"

"Shut up and listen, girl. Can you track this signal?"

"Who is this --"

Lash raised her voice. "I said SHUT UP!! Can you track this?"

"Yes," a small voice answered her back. Good, the bitch was finally listening.

"Valhalla is safe. He's drugged, but he'll come out of it. You'd better get here quickly, before he dies of exposure. I know you Agency lapdogs are close by." Turning off the earpiece, she dropped it in the snow next to his body and got back in the car.

A moment later, the door opened once again. Becka stepped out, pulled the edge of the tarp up, and placed something in his hand. Then she got back in the car and drove back to the punishment that awaited her.

Clouded Memories

The old DC10 lifted off into the snowy sky, carrying most of the equipment from the Cold Zero temporary base. Lash watched it depart, resigned to and scared of what was to come in the next few moments. Nearby, a Learjet idled as the last of the Cold Zero agents boarded and their flyboy Jetstream finished his systems check. Sighing, she realized it was past the point of running.

Noray waited for her at the foot of the boarding ladder, arms crossed over his chest and legs spread apart. The whipping wind seemed to give him a wide berth, leaving him immune to the cold that made her hurry towards him.

"Little Jacqueline," he remarked, not moving from in front of the ladder, "you disappoint me greatly. However, I am not surprised."

She knew it was worthless to attempt a lie with this, the most dangerous man she had ever met. Under her blowing coat, her bare arms and legs rose in gooseflesh. Lash knew it was from more than just the biting cold. "Yes," she said simply, looking down. He knew she would not be strong enough, but he had sent her alone to kill the man she loved, anyways. Why?

Icy fingers crashed into her mind, prying away the layers and leaving her naked before him. Out of all the men, and women, she had seduced for the Clan, she never felt as used or as worthless as she did at that moment.

"Yes, you still care for him. Yet every night you come to my bed, Jacqueline. I reach into your mind and give you the pleasure you deny yourself with all the men you fuck." He whispered into her mind that she was worthless, and she knew it was true. Words rose from her subconscious, defining her. Slut. Whore. Baseless sinner.

All at once, they evaporated, and a feeling of warmth entered her mind. The goosebumps melted away as he caressed her soul with his own. "I alone could love someone like you, Jacqueline," Noray said quietly, "that is why you can never leave. You would never fit in anywhere, least of all with *him*." The last word was followed by a mental image of Valhalla, sneering at her with disdain. She knew it now, that the man she'd loved hated her for her betrayal of him, and that was not going to change.

Sobbing, she sank to her knees on the frozen tarmac, covering her eyes so she couldn't see the pity on Ojimba's face. Her rescuer. Her only port in a storm. Gently, his soul withdrew as he pulled her to her feet. "You belong with us, even if you could not kill him." Noray looked at her, his features inscrutable. "But now you know what he is. Fail me again, and I will take measures that you would not like at all. I will leave you alone in this world, Lash. No one would have you."

Turning, he boarded the jet without looking at her again. Lash gathered herself and squared her shoulders. The others must not know of her weakness. She marched up the stairs and sealed the hatch behind her. She was a Cold Zero agent, one of the best facemen in the business, and her place was here.

But still, in the deepest recesses of her mind, she locked away a memory of a picnic with a man years ago. "I love you, Becka. Will you marry me?" Despite her nearly-frozen limbs, Becka Bjorn smiled softly as she made her way to the cabin.

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"Dagher, you're alive!" Jenny Rinise yelled, pulling his hand to help him sit up. Another agent pulled him to his feet, accumulated snow whipping down the alley, and threw an oversized coat on him. In a whirlwind of motion, they stowed him in the back of a Suburban and blasted the heat. Jenny cuddled close to him in the back seat, giggling in happiness.

"You --you found me?" he asked, teeth chattering.

"Some woman called on your earpiece! She told me to track the signal. The snow killed it before we got there, but we only had about a half-mile to get to you. We fanned out and searched everywhere."

Dagher could hear radio chatter as the search teams headed back via alternate routes to the Agency base. He didn't talk anymore until they got there.

Miles Land waited for him inside the old hanger they used as a motor pool. "Valhalla! We were worried sick about you! I knew it was a bad idea to send you out alone, but I thought Noray was right. I think..." The director's voice trailed off momentarily, but he shook his head and focused back in on the Iclander. "I'm just glad you're okay. Was it Salinar?"

"No, he's dead. Someone posing as him, to get me out in the open."

"You?" Land asked, frowning, "Why? Who was it?"

"I...don't know," Valhalla lied, shaking his head, "everything's a bit muddled. It seemed like they were on the move, though, back to the States. I have to transfer back."

Land looked incredulously at him. "It took months to get you assigned here, Dagher. Let the boys stateside deal with this. Please."

Jenny gripped his hand. "Stay here, Dagher. You can't leave me!" Land looked at her sharply as she realized she'd said too much.

Dagher stood upright, shrugging out of her grip easily. He kept his eyes on Miles. "This is non-negotiable, Land. I'm sorry, but I've got to go after I get debriefed." The director nodded finally and strode away.

Jenny grabbed his hand, pulling him around to face her. "I've waited all my life for someone like you, Dagher! I'm falling in love with you! Damn you!"

"I'm sorry, Jenny. I have to go back. I'm not good with attachments. Please, I can't deal with this right now. I apologize for this, but I did enjoy our time together." He turned and walked away, hurting inside. It had only been a day, but he had grown a little attached to the young thing.

"You fucker!" she screamed, causing people around her to look up from what they were doing. He kept going, pulling his hand out of his pocket to look at what Becka had left him. The silver ring slid onto his ring finger as if it belonged there. Valhalla walked out without looking back.

End