

## Day of the Bear

The sexy female customs official peered out of her bulletproof cube and into the car in the gate lane. The chrome alloy wheels sparkled in the mid-afternoon sunlight, complementing the classy deep blue metallic paint job of the classic Ford Mustang. She whistled in appreciation and glanced over the passport again, not really paying attention. The tall, powerful looking hunk crammed into the driver's seat smiled at her in a way she had never been stared at before. Shaking her head, the petite brunette brought herself back into focus. "Well, Mr. Jansen, let's have you pull over to the side here so we can take a look in the trunk," she smiled back, "it's just routine, of course."

The bronzed god did as she instructed, pulling over and shutting off the engine. Sheila clicked the button to turn on the big red X over her station, diverting traffic to the other lanes while simultaneously letting her leave her cube to "inspect" the man trying to get through the border crossing into Michigan. Absently, she smoothed back her hair and straightened her skirt.

Striding over, she handed the passport back to the man and leaned in his window. "Sir, may I ask you what your business is in America?"

"I live here, actually," the man said in heavily accented English, "like it says on my passport." The man shifted in the seat, his muscles rippling with the small effort beneath his tight grey turtleneck.

Sheila blushed, embarrassed by her mistake. "Just checking your story," she muttered, then asked "Can I see what's in the trunk, please?"

Mr. Jansen got out, his blonde hair flowing in the breeze. Geez, Sheila thought, is that a cucumber down his pants? With his good looks, he doesn't need to do that to get attention...

Meanwhile, Jansen had passed by her and unlocked the trunk. Inside was a small suitcase, a box of random tools, a Canadian road map, some road flares...and a massive sledgehammer.

She turned to him. "Sir, what's the sledgehammer for? That's an odd thing to be carrying around with you. Tell me the purpose behind it."

The massive man stretched his arms over his head, working out the sore areas from hours of driving. "You caught me, beautiful lady," he said, looking deep into her eyes, "my grandfather lives outside of Toronto. People have been illegally logging on his land. I drive spikes into the trees, to...how do you say it, put a monkey in the gears?"

"Monkey wrench, actually," Sheila corrected absently, her eyes traveling up and down his well-muscled body. "I'm afraid you're going to have to come with me for a follow-up on this matter. Right this way, please."

Mr. Jansen closed the trunk and locked up his car, then walked with Sheila towards a small interrogation shack behind the line of customs booths. Her friend Janice caught her eye, gave her the thumbs up. The two of them entered the shack, and Sheila closed the door. She turned around in the close confines--right into the Nordic-looking man's arms. He tilted her head up and kissed her deeply on the mouth. She relaxed into his embrace. "I'm not usually like this," she admitted between kisses, "I don't even know you. I just knew I had to have you." Her hand slipped between them hungrily, then she gasped. "That's not a cucumber."

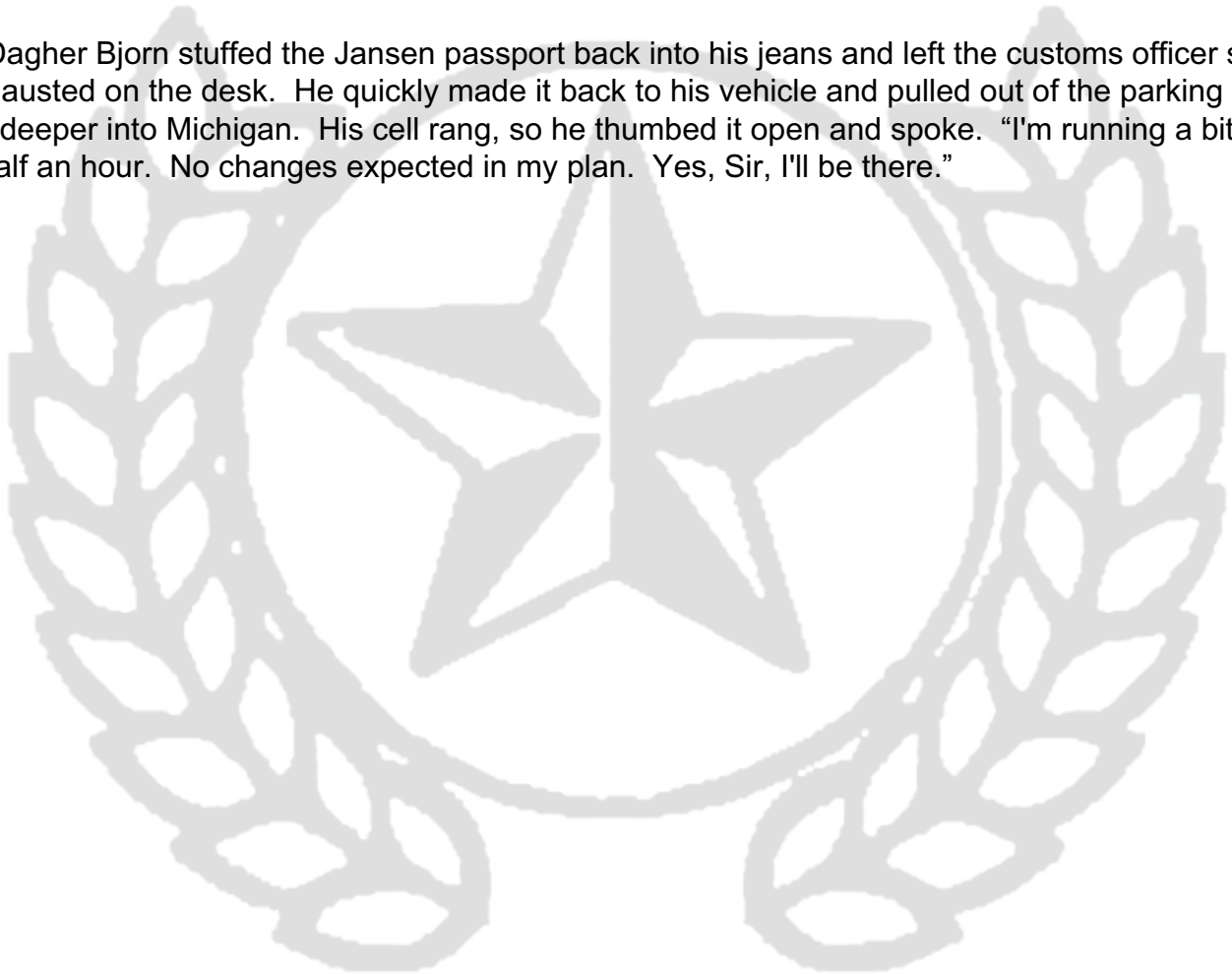
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The man looked at her, silent, then scooped everything off the small desk with one arm and laid her down on it. The savage didn't even bother taking off her skirt, the bastard. She didn't complain, of course.

*30 minutes later...*

Dagher Bjorn stuffed the Jansen passport back into his jeans and left the customs officer spent and exhausted on the desk. He quickly made it back to his vehicle and pulled out of the parking lane, moving deeper into Michigan. His cell rang, so he thumbed it open and spoke. "I'm running a bit late, about half an hour. No changes expected in my plan. Yes, Sir, I'll be there."



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### *Northern Wisconsin*

A wispy curl of smoke rose out of the chimney of the secluded cabin where Abdiel Salinar was hiding. The arms dealer was on the run after an Agency-led coup of his operations in South America. The only logical place to run to was his son's home in Minnesota. But surveillance at the son's home showed no sign of the criminal. That was when an agent slipped through the tight security at the residence and managed to steal away with some paperwork showing a cabin bought and paid for under another name. The mission called for silent recon followed by brute force damage. It was a picture perfect scenario for Dagher Bjorn, aka Agent Valhalla.

The agent in question parked his Mustang in a grove of trees a few miles up the road and got his trusty sledgehammer out of the trunk. It slipped neatly into the specially modified holder in his trench coat. Next his H&K silenced pistol slipped into one pocket, and three spare clips into the other. He didn't need much more than that. The blonde giant set off through the trees at an easy walk, his senses alert. Salinar never went anywhere without a few guards.

The trees thinned out closer to the house, so Valhalla settled into the underbrush and pulled a specialized set of goggles from one pocket. As night settled in, the burly northerner switched to night vision. One guard patrolled the perimeter of the clearing around the cabin with an M4 rifle with a combat sling across his body. Another patrolled the second floor of the cabin, his movements seen at regular intervals through the night vision goggles. The main floor had drapes drawn all around, with no way to tell how many victims were waiting for him there.

Valhalla considered his options. The two guards he had seen so far didn't seem to be in regular radio contact. Stupid. They must be new to this game, he mused. The plan began to fall into place. Timing was everything. As the upstairs sentry moved away on his patrol, the outside one moved into Valhalla's sight, alone for the moment.

Bracing himself, the big man slid his sledgehammer out of its hanging sheath and attacked. The sentry barely had time to register the crunching of pine needles before he turned into Valhalla's first swing. The sledgehammer swung up and back, then pistoned forward with the immense force of the Iclander's bunched muscles. The massive weighted head of the hammer slammed into the sentry's chest, knocking the wind out of him and shattering his ribs back into his lungs.

The sentry's eyes looked up at him in terror, his hands clutching at his ruined torso. Valhalla, taking pity on him, soundly tapped the man's head with the sledgehammer to put him out of his misery. Dying while gasping for breath through blood-soaked lungs was no way for a warrior to die. The big man hauled the body back into the trees. The scavengers would see to destroying the evidence before long. Nature was cruel, but efficient, as well.

Valhalla pulled his mane of hair back out of his face and made for the front door. He wouldn't be able to learn anything else from out here. He pulled the H&K out of his pocket, then swung the enormous hammer 1-handed, blowing the front door off of its hinges. One guard, stationed inside in front of it, cried out as the heavy slab of oak crushed him to the carpeted floor.

The burly agent strode in, taking out two more guards as they scrambled for their weapons. It took a few shots, he was more of an up close and personal fighter. The clip clicked on empty as Salinar lunged to his feet, pulling up his pants. The arms dealer raced for the stairs. Valhalla let him go, scanning the first floor. There was another face he hadn't seen yet...

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The woman on the couch covered herself with a blanket, watching him with wide-open blue eyes. She didn't move a muscle, perhaps sensing the predator in him and knowing that if she bolted he would give chase.

The upstairs sentry picked that instant to make his presence known with a flash bang grenade. The tumbling globe bounced down the stairs, ricocheting off the wall to roll under a nearby recliner. Valhalla was already ducking behind the sofa when it went off. Even with the partial cover, his eyesight faded to a blurry afterimage. The explosion numbed his hearing, as well. Most other men would have been caught in the open, and dead shortly thereafter.

Through a hazy film over his vision, Valhalla sensed movement where he estimated the stairs would be. His H&K swung up as he dropped into a shooter's stance. He emptied the remainder of the clip with rapid-fire pulls of the trigger. Return fire peppered the low-profile armor under his trench coat, knocking the wind out of him. Whatever the sentry was firing, it had some punch behind it. The woman on the couch screamed in panic, ducking into the fetal position. Lead death flew on either side of her, blowing stuffing and wood chunks across the room. The sentry's gun clicked on empty, finally.

The giant northerner shoved the couch to one side with his gun arm, his hammer readied in the other, and charged. The blurry outline of a man in front of him looked up, his assault rifle not quite reloaded. He should have been quicker. The hammer swung around...and missed. The soldier felt the breeze of the heavy steel hammer passing only inches from his face. The burly man facing him should have had him dead to rights; obviously he was an amateur, whoever he was.

Valhalla smiled in satisfaction as he completed his 360 degree swing, spinning his hammer once past the man's face with a perfect feint, and continuing to up the speed of the hammer as he came around full circle with his real strike. The poor bastard never saw it coming. The hammer connected solidly with his head, sending the eight-pound ball of bone and flesh spinning across the room. It crashed through a vase on an end table before imbedding itself in the plaster wall. One dead eye looked out into the room, already glassing over. The other hung from the optical nerve, penduluming back and forth before slowly rolling to a rest on the cheekbone.

Dagher Bjorn sensed the movement behind him, but was a fraction of a second too late. A huge body smashed into him, sending his empty pistol flying. The hammer he managed to hang onto, but his assailant didn't give him the chance to use it. The massive Iclander was propelled through the living room wall into the office. Coughing, he picked himself up out of the plaster destruction around him and pulled a two-foot sliver of wood out of his left arm. Stitches later, if he lived.

The black-armored mountain of a man peering in at him through the hole in the wall smiled from under his half-face tinted helmet. Bruiser. The face he'd been looking for. Agent Famine had told him there were traces of Cold Zero Clan involvement when he snuck into Salinar's son's home.

This was going to get ugly...



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Bruiser charged, knocking aside fragments of drywall and wood. Valhalla braced himself, then lunged directly at the other big man. Big mistake. Almost 400 pounds of sheer muscle smashed into the warrior like a windshield into a bug. Valhalla saw stars, trying to correct the skewed view from where he found himself. He realized he was crumpled up against the stout log wall of the cabin, and there was a dull ache in his kidney region. A black blur moved in front of him.

Bruiser, favored thug of the Cold Zero Clan, picked him up by the throat and choke-slammed him to the floor. Valhalla's favorite sledgehammer skittered away into the corner. He fought off passing out for as long as possible.

A giant foot loomed over him, then descended swiftly. Just in time, Valhalla's brain spoke to his muscles, and his muscles spoke back. Just as the thug's foot streaked for his face, the warrior's hands sped up and intercepted the size 22 foot and stopped it an inch from his face.

"Not..." Valhalla twisted the giant off-balance, "in..." his corded muscles bulged in his arms, tensing for the release, "...the FACE!!!" The black-armored enforcer was flung through what remained of the interior wall. Studs and drywall exploded out into the living room along with the black-clad human missile. The whole structure groaned alarmingly as the bearing wall stood only by a couple of studs on either end.

Valhalla reached his hammer, felt the heft of it. The heavy wood handle was undamaged. He turned and swung at the nearest stud, causing the upper floor to sag. Just one more... The follow-through on his swing centered him on the door he'd knocked down. Digging in his toes, the Nordic fighter launched past the Cold Zero henchman, scooped up the terrified woman on the couch, and lunged out the door just as the entire structure collapsed in on itself. Live through that, asshole, he thought to himself.

Movement in the woods caught his eye. Salinar must have jumped from the second story. He disappeared between the trunks in the direction of the main road. Valhalla set the woman on her feet in a smooth motion. "I'm sorry I don't have time to make your acquaintance properly," he said, looking her up and down appraisingly, "perhaps another time." Then he was off after his quarry to leave her standing on shaky legs.

Diane Mathis' legs stopped shuddering as soon as the northerner was out of sight. She stared at the spot where he had vanished after her recent lover. "Oh, we've met, Dagher. You'll remember when next we meet."

A rending crash echoed from behind her lithe form as Bruiser crushed his way out of the rubble. He walked over to her in silence, glancing over her naked form with idle interest. She ignored him, used to the stares of men. Some spies were strong, others were sneaky. She was a different creature altogether.

Agent Lash turned to her companion. "Our work here is done. Contact Cypher for a pickup."

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Valhalla reached the road just in time to see Salinar thunder out of a thicket of trees in a Cadillac. Sprinting, the hammer-wielding wheelman reached his Mustang a few seconds after and fired up the powerful V8 engine. With smoking tires, he took off after the drug dealer, ready to take extreme measures. His mission was execution, not apprehension. His favorite kind of job, especially with scum like Salinar. He began closing ground.

Back at the cabin a black chopper swung into sight, dropping down into the field that made up the spacious back yard. Jetstream, the Cold Zero Clan's top pilot, waved to the two agents as they crossed to where he was setting down. Fumbling around in his flight bag, he tossed a spare, oversized flight suit to Lash and averted his eyes as she climbed aboard and hurriedly dressed.

Sure, she was hot, but she enjoyed tangling people up in her little intrigues a bit too much. The flyboy was all about the one-night stand, where complications with working together the next day never came up. The chopper settled slightly as Bruiser climbed on board. Waving up front, the thug let the pilot know he was clear to lift off.

Lash pulled herself forward and took the copilot seat, placing the crash helmet on her head and adjusting the microphone. She pushed the transmit button. "It's set, sir, he took the bait. Ready to take him out when you give the word."

Cypher, second in command of the Cold Zero Clan, answered her back, "Wait until he disposes of Salinar. That man knows too much. Then take him out. Today we strike at the Agency in a way they will never forget. Our inside man must be rewarded for his diligence. Lash, see to it...personally." The connection clicked off as the helicopter rose above the trees and raced eastward after the two vehicles.

Valhalla's muscle car was having trouble catching up to the Caddy in front of him. Must be something special under the hood, he thought to himself. But the cornering eventually caught up to the drug dealer. Salinar lost ground after every twist, the Mustang behind him cutting the corners a little closer, with a little more speed.

The blonde-haired warrior reached maximum range and pressed the concealed button on his steering wheel. The GE minigun moved forward with a clunk, pushing down a part of the grill to peep out its ugly head. The cylinder began spinning up. Salinar didn't know what was going to take his vehicle apart. Valhalla grinned and held in the firing stud.

The full belt of ammunition screamed out of the multiple muzzles of the minigun, chewing through the back bumper, the trunk, the back seat, into the front seat. Metal and glass showered into the road in a cascade of glistening chunks as the Cadillac gave up the ghost. Valhalla watched with satisfaction as a splotch of red ejaculated onto the front windshield moments before it was blown out of the car into the road ahead. The Caddy swerved sharply, careening into the trees to explode in a massive fireball. Mission accomplished.

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Valhalla began pulling over to the side of the remote forested road to enjoy his kill when he felt the horsepower in the beast slacken. He immediately knew something was wrong. He barely had time to hit the button for the ejection seat before the explosion rocked him from beneath, sending his seat flying skyward as the roof blew up and backwards. Fire roared all around him, following him on his vertical trajectory. He heard a pop as the parachute tried to deploy, but the explosion must have roasted it. The big man saw the ground recede, stop moving, then reverse to rush up to meet him. After that was only darkness.



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A hand shook Valhalla awake. "Dagher, wake up, man. Time to wake up." He opened his eyes, the sunlight searing into his pupils. Colors swirled and mixed together, finally coming to rest as his brain put reality back in its place. He was on the side of the road, his ejection seat crushed beneath him. It all came rushing back.

Famine forcibly restrained the big man as he tried to sit up. "Easy there, Valhalla, just take it easy. You're lucky to be alive, but we're in no danger now." The Icелander settled back, feeling the pain from his burns and injuries for the first time.

Suddenly it all clicked, and he looked at the thief in surprise. "What are you doing here? You were supposed to head to D.C. and report on what you found."

Jasper Collins, or Agent Famine as he was known, looked guilty. "I was told to keep an eye on you. I never doubted you, but we got late intel that we couldn't get to you in time. There was a new player on the scene. She was the woman you rescued from the house. She's Cold Zero, man. Control didn't believe you could...well...keep it in your pants and be objective about her."

Valhalla scratched his head weakly. "Guess they were right. If Salinar hadn't gotten away, I'd probably have shacked up with her."

"One more thing, amigo," Famine said after a moment, "Bruiser lived. That big bastard punched his way out of the demolition you guys caused, didn't even look too shaken up. He is one tough hombre."

The Icелander struggled to his feet with the intruder's help. "I'm ready to get the hell out of here, little man," he said, pissed at himself. His mother always told him his crotch would one day get him into trouble. "You know, Famine, that woman looked kind of familiar, but I can't place from where. Troubling. You know I have a pretty rock-solid memory."

The sneak thief thought for a moment, then replied, "Well, there's always that interrogation you were subjected to. You can't remember everything from that. You were drugged, after all. Who was the faction that captured you again?"

Valhalla picked up the pieces of his shattered sledgehammer amidst the burning debris on the road. "Medusa was the only thing I heard. You may be right. I wasn't even in the Agency yet, I'd just been approached by Foster."

At the sound of their handler's name, Famine grimaced. "He is such an ass. One day he's going to get me killed, I can feel it. C'mon, let's get the hell out of here before someone happens along." The agent pulled his custom motorcycle out of some trees further down the road and signaled for his fellow Agency operative to get on.

Valhalla looked at the sport bike dubiously. "Are you sure this thing's safe?" he asked. Famine flipped him the bird, so he grudgingly got on the bitch seat, strapping the spare helmet into place. The shocks sank visibly with his weight, but the bike still took off with surprising acceleration, almost throwing him off the back. Not bad, the wheelman thought.

Mission accomplished, but he didn't like leaving loose ends. Time for some homework on his mystery woman. He knew someone that could help, if Famine put in a good word for him. That skinny computer geek he had seen around the Agency was the best, or so they said. As for Bruiser and his masters, payback was going to be a bitch.