

Prologue

Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Every life comes to an end. And although that was common knowledge, most people still lived as if they were immortal. As if they weren't facing the end. After all that time they should have known better, though.

Humans...

Virginia, called simply Vi by her few friends, snuffled quietly and guided the porcelain cup to her lips. At least the coffee was good.

On this sunny afternoon she was on the terrace of the café, surrounded by lots of people. Mothers with strollers sitting together exchanging tales about their everyday lives. Students busily hammering away at their laptops. Businessmen and women with notebooks, tablets and cell phones, as well as tourists with backpacks and cameras with which they wanted to explore the most incredible sights. In her skin-tight ripped jeans, brown leather jacket and high heels, Virginia didn't attract attention.

An unobtrusive melody could be heard above the conversations, coming from inside the café and blending with the noises in the intersection just outside it. Cars driving by. Honking. People on bikes racing by at the speed of light. Pedestrians deep in conversation or with headphones on their ears.

None of them knew when their end was approaching. None of them had a clue that it could come to that at any moment – and maybe it was better that way. Maybe it was more pleasant to live life in blissful ignorance, not to know the moment when Death would come claim your soul. Or a Valkyrie would do it.

Virginia had sensed the impending death of this hero soul for two days now. This sensation had led her to Amsterdam. And now... now she just had to wait until it happened. Until fate ran its course.

The honking grew louder, angrier. Streetlights changed. A driver tried to race through the intersection on yellow and didn't see the truck coming. A crash. Glass splintered and metal bent, groaning.

Screams. The people at the next table jumped up. Some frantically searched for their phones to call for help, while others were chained to their seats in a state of shock.

Vi finished her coffee in complete calmness and set the cup down on its saucer. The nice waitress, stunned, had frozen in her tracks with the tray in her hand and stared at the scene that was just a few meters away from them.

From a distance the first sirens wailed. Other drivers braked with squealing tires, got out of their cars, and rushed to the site of the accident to give first aid.

Vi simply had a quick look at the delicate golden watch on her wrist and stood up. She lay a few bills on the table and left the terrace without being noticed by a single person. They were all far too occupied with what was happening on the street. No one noticed her. And she, too, had eyes for only one particular person: for a young doctor who immediately rushed over from the other side of the street to help the wounded.

Even from a distance, Vi could sense that his soul was pure. That he was a hero. Selfless. Brave. Eager to help. And in a few seconds, dead.

Again, she looked at the watch on her wrist. The approach of another vehicle could be heard. The humming of the motor grew louder from moment to moment, then the car curved around the corner – and tore the first responder away with it.

Again, screams rang out and tires squealed. The sirens came closer and closer, and the people standing around broke out in panic.

Vi crossed the street without attracting attention in the chaos. After several steps she stood next to the bleeding young man, who looked up at her with fear in his gray eyes.

“Everything is okay,” she whispered. And although she didn’t bend directly over him, she knew that he could hear her words as clearly as if her lips were pressed right up against his ears. “You are a true hero, August. A great honor is being bestowed on you. Come with me and you will be allowed to spend eternity in Valhalla, together with all the warriors who have come before you.”

His chest rose and fell with difficulty. The gleam in his eyes continued to fade as the life left his body. But she still noticed the small gesture, the tiny twitch of his fingers in her direction. And as he drew his last breath, his soul detached from his mortal body and appeared as a translucent figure directly next to her.

For the first time that day, a smile brightened Virginia’s face, and she held out a hand to August’s likeness. “You’ve made the right decision.”

He seemed confused, but held her gaze firmly and after a brief hesitation placed his hand in hers, while the paramedics tried to revive his lifeless shell right next to them. But it was too late for that. August’s time had come. Nothing and no one could change that.

Vi felt the power rising within her that only a Valkyrie possesses. The power that made it possible for her to generate a portal in the form of the northern lights, which would bring her back to Valhalla from anywhere in the world. The sky above them changed and colors appeared that only the two of them could see on that sunny afternoon. It was the way home.

“Not so fast.”

She froze, as did the hero by her side. The lights in the sky disappeared abruptly.

Slowly, Vi turned around. “You...,” she sputtered.

There was very little that could still surprise her. She had already seen too much in the past centuries, experienced too much. But the appearance of this person surprised her.

The deep, almost brittle voice belonged to a being that had spent just as long in this world as she had, maybe even longer. Cyrus might appear to be human, and with his short black hair, equally dark eyes and a long scar on his cheek was even attractive in a certain way, but Vi knew better. He was no human, even if the same blood flew through his veins. He was a monster, a servant of the most destructive power in all the worlds: Chaos. And he had no business being here.

“You’re wasting your time,” she hissed. “August has decided. He will enter Valhalla as a hero.”

The corners of Cyrus’s mouth turned upwards, which turned his scarred face into a grimace. “Oh, really?” He thrust out a hand towards August and slowly bent his fingers until they formed a fist.

At that moment, August collapsed next to Vi. His pleading gaze landed on her, but before she could interfere, his soul dissipated before her very eyes.

“He belongs to me now.” Cyrus’s smile grew deeper, and more diabolical.

Vi stared at him with an open mouth and shook her head. “That can’t be. You don’t have the power...”

“Oh, yes I do.” At that instant he stood in front of her, only a few meters away, while his long coat flapped around his legs; the next second she felt him behind her. Then a hot pain seared through her middle. “And I also have the power to kill you, little Valkyrie.”

That wasn’t possible. That couldn’t be. No one could kill a Valkyrie. They were the descendants of the most powerful Nordic deities. They had always existed. Nine Valkyries, who passed on their abilities to their daughters and their daughters’ daughters, to their nieces and great nieces, and to all the women who came after them. Never before had one of them fallen. Never had one of them been murdered.

And yet Virginia felt the life gradually seeping from her body, as she had observed with August a few minutes ago. Her limbs became heavier and heavier, and her knees threatened to give way

underneath her. Her heart hammered wildly in her chest, as if it wanted to fight the inevitable. But it was too late. The battle was already lost.

How strange, thought Vi as she collapsed to the ground and fell hard onto the asphalt. All the humans who knew that they would die one day lived as if they were immortal. And she, the Valkyrie, who had thought she was immortal, hadn't genuinely lived for even a single day.

A shadow fell over her and she registered the knife with her blood clinging to it.

"No worries, little Valkyrie," Cyrus whispered, kneeling down next to her. "Your companions will follow you. One after the other, until none of you are left. And then this world will belong to us."

She wanted to protest, scream and hurl the wildest maledictions at him. She wanted to curse him and promise him that her sisters' revenge would be gruesome, but not a single word passed Vi's lips. In that moment the darkness engulfed her consciousness, and her body gave up the fight to survive once and for all.

Chapter One

Blair

Two months later

Near Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, Canada

Maybe it wasn't the cleverest idea I've ever had to climb on the roof in deep winter – but I didn't regret it for a second. At least not once I had finally gotten to the top, brushed away some snow, rolled out the folded up thermal blanket on that spot and sat down on it. I pulled the zipper of my jacket up to my chin, shoved my hands in the pockets, and leaned my head all the way back.

It was a clear, starry night and the moon shone so brightly that it reflected off the frozen lake behind the house and made the snow gleam. It was the third freezing cold winter in a row, and each year the frosty days seemed to get even colder and the summers shorter. On this November evening, every breath I exhaled released a little white cloud into the darkness to be carried away by the wind. A cold, almost frigid breeze blew my dark brown hair in my face and made it impossible to feel my cheeks after just a few minutes. It probably would have been better to go back inside where it was warm, but I wasn't ready to yet.

My entire body was keyed up with excitement. So far the sky was dark, but I hoped I would have the good fortune to see the spectacle tonight.

The wind abated and a beautiful stillness spread out. We were several miles from the closest town and almost completely alone out here. Our nearest neighbors were almost the same distance away. Still, I had to smile when I heard the humming of a motor close by. That sound died out almost immediately and was replaced by the crunching of snow as someone stomped their way towards the house.

My mother and my sister were in the middle of their nightly training session and wouldn't hear the doorbell or a knock. Fortunately, that wasn't necessary, because the door wasn't locked anyway. Inwardly I counted the steps necessary to get inside the house and to take the stairs from the hallway up to the second floor. My heart hammered a little faster with every passing second. When I heard the familiar scraping of the window behind me, I couldn't help but smile a little more.

The steps drew closer, then a deep and familiar voice spoke: "Why am I not surprised?"

My smile turned into a little grin. He was probably as little surprised to find me up here as I was that he had driven here. Ryan had always come and gone at this house as if it were his own, just like I did

at his place. Our mothers had been friends for many years, and anytime Mom was underway – which she officially passed off as business trips or family visits – Ryan’s mother had taken care of Fenja and me. Ever since Ryan and I had gotten our drivers licenses, we had frequently been sent back and forth to deliver freshly baked muffins or drop off some lasagna, return a borrowed book, or to share a few of the new seedlings in spring. The bond between our two families was not just friendship, we were a tight-knit alliance.

“What are you doing out here, Blair?” Ryan asked, and came to stand next to me. He was noticeably taller than me, but now he practically towered over me.

Instead of answering, I pointed up to the sky. Then I scooted to one side of the blanket to make space for him.

With a groan he joined me on the roof, and in spite of the cold lay down and stretch out full length. His breath formed little clouds when he spoke, too. “Are you waiting for shooting stars? Or the northern lights?”

I turned my head over my shoulder and smiled at him. “Do you really expect me to answer that?” After all, we had known each other since our first day of school, and he knew perfectly well how much I loved the aurora borealis and took advantage of every opportunity to see them. Even if that meant spending winter nights sitting on the roof or getting up in the wee hours of the morning, long before sunrise. There was something magical about the natural spectacle – and not only because unlike most people, I knew who and what was responsible for it.

Knowing these things didn’t make it any less fascinating. I could spend hours watching the play of colors in the heavens. Sometimes the northern lights were bright green, then more turquoise, other nights purple or even green. And sometimes, when you were especially lucky, they were all those colors. Like a rainbow in the deepest darkness.

“You’re going to catch your death out here,” Ryan grumbled, but didn’t make a move to make me stand up.

“You, too,” I countered, glancing at him again.

His golden-brown hair was tousled, and unlike me he didn’t wear a hat to protect himself from the cold. Despite his verbal protest, there was an excited twinkle in his gray-blue eyes. The same twinkle that he almost certainly saw in my eyes, too. He was just as thrilled about the natural spectacle as I was.

“I brought something.” Without further explanation, he sat up, so close that our shoulders were touching, and held up a thermos bottle with two cups, which I hadn’t noticed before. Then he poured us both some of the steaming liquid.

“And that’s why we’re best friends.” I closed my fingers around the cup, carefully sipping the strong green tea, and tried to ignore how close he sat next to me.

“No, we’re best friends because you can text me all about constellations and northern lights any time, and in exchange you listen to my babbling about apps and software. And because I know you better than anyone else,” he concluded and winked at me, which caused an unusual fluttering around my stomach.

“True.” I cleared my throat. “Because you’re sitting out here in the cold with me, instead of doing something else, something much more exciting. Like working on your app. You know, the one for the college scholarship?”

He didn’t reply to that, but I just caught a glimpse of his smile before it disappeared behind his cup. And that smile had the same effect on me as his wink a moment ago. The fluttering intensified, just like the strong beating of my pulse. I was just glad we were sitting out here in the cold, because the heat that flushed my cheeks wasn’t so conspicuous. And if it was, I could blame it on the negative temperatures instead of the boy next to me.

It had taken a while before I could admit it even to myself, but by now I knew what these physical reactions and unfamiliar sensations meant. Sometime in the past few weeks I had fallen in love

with Ryan, without even noticing it. But I knew just as well that I would never be more to him than his best friend, the younger sister he never had, since his parents had divorced when he was still little. Ryan did have a half-brother named Hector, who belonged to his father's new family and Ryan barely knew, but that was all. And I... I had been kind of a substitute sister for him from the first day we met.

It would be far too easy to be angry or bitter about it, but I was just grateful to have him be part of my life.

Ryan had always been by my side. On the first day of school, when the other kids had made fun of my clothes, which were much too big for me because they were hand-me-downs from my big sister Fenja. When I failed my first test and fought valiantly not to break out in tears in front of the entire class. On all my birthdays and all the holidays. On a nighttime walk with our mothers and Fenja – one of my most precious memories, because that was the very first time I saw the northern lights. Ryan had also stayed by my side when I came down with the flu of the century. For hours and hours, he watched movies with me and reminded me to drink something and take my medicine. Of course he also caught the flu from me, and then I took care of him just as he had done for me. And when a boy broke my heart for the first time – Brian Pemberton from the ice hockey team – it was Ryan who had comforted me. And who gave Brian a piece of his mind.

The truth was, I couldn't imagine my life without this guy. And I wouldn't risk our friendship just because of some ridiculous feelings, no matter how much it hurt that he would never see me the way I saw him, and that I'd always be invisible to him in that way. Because in his eyes, I was still the little girl I had been back then. Even if that girl was eighteen now and would go to the University of Toronto next year, just like him.

The stillness around us was interrupted for a moment by the hammering bass coming from the house. More precisely, from the training room in the basement. I made a face, even as it got quiet again as the door below fell shut again.

Ryan threw me a surprised sideways look. "Your mom and sister are still training?"

I shrugged, which you could probably hardly see under my thick coat. "You know them," I muttered into my cup and drank a big gulp of the tea. It warmed me from the inside out and would hopefully make it possible to hold out here until the northern lights made their appearance without freezing into icicles.

Ryan didn't say anything, but I felt his eyes on me for a much-too-long moment, before he also looked up into the sky again.

For him it might seem strange that Mom and Fenja pursued their hobby so intensively, or that my big sister continued to live at home after finishing high school and let Mom train her in various martial arts, instead of going to college or moving to the next town to find a job and build a life for herself there. But I knew the real reasons for it.

My mother was a Valkyrie. One of the legendary nine who have dwelled on earth since the beginning of time and gather the souls of fallen heroes in order to prepare them for the final battle, Ragnarök. But now she was ready to give up that responsibility and all her powers, to her oldest daughter, to Fenja. Things that were merely stories for me would soon become reality for her. That's why Mom had been training her so hard for the past nine years, while I only joined in once in a while. And that's why she would drive to Edmonton in a few days, get in a train there, and make the long journey to Vancouver, where Fenja would be accepted into the circle of the Valkyries in a secret ceremony. And while she would remain in Valhalla for a while, my mother would return home. Not as a Valkyrie anymore, but as a mortal woman. A perfectly normal person, like I was.

But I couldn't tell Ryan that. Mom had driven home from the time I was a young girl never to talk about it, and I kept my word. Besides, it wasn't like that was the only secret I was keeping from my best friend. I could only hope he would never find out the truth, neither about my family nor about my feelings for him, because that might mean the end of our friendship.

The Last Goddess, Band 1: A Fate Darker Than Love

The Last Goddess (Vol. 1): A Fate Darker than Love

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“There!” Ryan pointed to the sky. “Blair, it’s starting.”

Instantly, I shared the excitement in his voice. I squinted my eyes and stared at the place he had indicated, and then I saw it, too. The sky brightened. As if by a magical hand, the northern lights appeared and drove away the darkness with their green glow.

My heart began to pound, and not only because I was aware that at that moment one of the Valkyries was using the power of the northern lights to move from one place in the world to another; to find a hero and gather his soul.

Because even though I knew better, I couldn’t help but wish that she would take me along, too. That she would take me there, to the place I had always longed for before I even knew about it. To the place I would never see with my own eyes, because I wasn’t a Valkyrie.

Valhalla.