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KATE HEARTFIELD



THE

VALKYRIE



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Dedication

For my brother

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CHAPTER ONE

Brynhild Falls

Like all stories, I have more than one beginning.

Three hundred and twenty-seven years ago, I was born, in the days when Hadrian ruled the Empire that crumbles around us now. Eight years after that, my father gave me in tribute to his god: the one he called Wotan, the one I learned to call by many names. Seven years after that, I finished my training, took flight for the first time as a Valkyrie, learned to gather the slain.

The only beginning that matters came centuries later. My beginning was in you, Gudrun.

But you already know that story. You want to know what came before, what I was before you melted and reforged me. I'll go back one beginning, then, to my exile and my fall. It seemed like an ending, then. My last sight of Valhalla, a shard of daylight that closed in a moment, as the weight of my mail and helmet pulled me down.

I was a long time falling.

Somehow, in that void between worlds, there was light enough to see. I thought I saw other women, though who can say which worlds they were falling from, or to. A pale, wry face framed by short red hair, and a hand searching the hilt. The golden hair of a girl, streaming as she floated, hands covering her face, her shoes kicking at nothing. We tumbled at different speeds, and sometimes they flickered out of existence while I watched. Perhaps I imagined them.

They were not Valkyries; I am the only Valkyrie Odin ever exiled.
The fall gave me time to think.

I imagined what would happen at the bottom. Perhaps I'd land on a pile of corpses, or skeletons; perhaps I'd add one more to the pile. All these fallen women must land somewhere.

But when I hit the ground, I was alone. Alive. Breathless, coughing, bruised. My cheek stung where it slammed into the edge of my helmet. When I pulled my helmet off and wiped my watering eyes, the back of my hand came away bloody from the cut. I wiped my hand on my green wool cloak, another brown stain for its collection.

I staggered to my feet and looked out at Midgard. My birthplace.

I barely remember my family now, and I did not remember them any better then. My father was something like a king, or so I recall him, but I do not think he is in any of your stories, Gudrun, at least none of the ones I heard in your hall. Kings gave their daughters to the gods, sometimes, where I was born. But where was that? Three centuries had passed since I left them, as a child, my small hand in the rough hand of the Allfather.

Valkyries age during the hours or days they spend on Midgard, but nobody ages in Valhalla. By the time I was exiled, I was a woman grown, but my body was much younger than all my centuries.

I stood on a cliff, looking out over brown land under a pale sky. A thin, dark river wound like an adder, far off. Kites circled and screamed over my head, chastising me for existing where I had not existed a moment before. Though I lifted my arms to be among them, the wind did not take me. I could fly no longer; I was a woman. That was my punishment; the very worst thing Odin could imagine.

It was spring, and the leaves were new-green. I walked, stiffly, helmet in hand, seeking shelter.

Down in lower places, I found that the water of the skinny river was clear as weak mead, with little brown trout darting in it, and a pink-skinned pine twisting overhead. I sat knapping a flint to the finest edge. Then I snapped the pine branch that leaned westward. *Westward wood for harming, eastward for healing.* And with my flint I sharpened the point.

Odin had taken my powers of flight. I had to assume (and I would be proven right soon enough) that he had also taken the other powers he had bestowed on me when he made me a Valkyrie. I would not be able to walk unseen among the humans of Midgard, now. I would not be able to perceive

their secrets or prophesy their destinies. Very well. But I still had the skills I had learned, and I made a list of them in my mind. I remembered the runelore, and how to work spells for healing, strength, protection, and other things. I knew how to hunt and how to fight. When I landed and the kites screamed at me, I understood their speech, still. The language of birds was something I'd learned, and the things I had learned were still mine.

My flint bit the bark, and I carved the rune I needed.

The Tyr-rune is for victory with honour, as Tyr kept faith with Odin in the war of the gods. Just as Tyr did Odin's bidding, so your weapon will do yours.

Odin once spoke those words to me as though they were written by someone else, as though the name 'Odin' were not among his own. I was not yet grown to full height. He told me that day that a weapon pushes fear away but doesn't banish it, that the fear will still be lurking at the tip of your sword unless you speak to it and call its secret names. He said he had learned this himself at great cost.

'Who could the Gallows' Burden possibly fear?' I asked him. I had adopted the practice of always speaking one of his names, of never saying *you* to my teacher.

'There is always someone waiting to challenge the Allfather for rule over the nine worlds. I cannot sleep,' Odin said, switching to the personal and looking off into the distance. 'I have seen a vision.'

That was not long before Odin took a rune for himself, the god-rune. Why should Tyr have a rune all his own, and even Freyja, Odin's former enemy, and not the Allfather? Why should warriors and healers not be able to call upon the source of all knowledge, the fountainhead?

I was a disciple down to my toenails. My comrades, especially the younger ones, came to me whenever they needed to dispel their doubts. Black-haired Hrist thought my faith must have been founded on certainty, and she wanted me to explain the things none of us could understand.

'But how can Odin be the source of the runes,' she asked me as we scrubbed our shields, 'if Freyja came to Asgard knowing them already? Wasn't that why the gods went to war in the first place, because Odin mistrusted Freyja's magic?'

'I don't know what stories the skalds tell in your father's court,' I spat. 'They had it wrong, or you misunderstood. Odin found the runes first, of course. Freyja must have stolen them from him.'

‘Oh,’ said Hrist.

‘You have to be patient with Hrist,’ Kara said, and as always, no one could tell whether Kara was serious. ‘Her mother is a Persian, you know. With so many different stories in her house, how could she know that some stories are truer than others?’

My faith burned as bright as my sword, which is why I came to ride at the head of Odin’s Valkyrie host.

But that sword stayed in Midgard when Odin banished me.

Cold and hungry, I made myself a spear. The soft tree-finger took the rune from my knife but I would not risk more than one invocation of Tyr; even two could splinter that weak wood.

My spear found a trout and I regarded it for a moment in my hands. Odin had thrown me out with what I wore but not what I carried, and he judged my tinder bag to be in the second category. But I would need fire eventually. I might as well start now.

So I cut the poplar hearth stick and carved the runes. As I worked the dry-reed spindle with raw hands, I found myself wondering whether Odin had taken the things I carried so that I would be forced into action. So that I would have something to do other than wander and grieve. In those days I was still accustomed to thanking Odin.

That first trout cooked on my small fire tasted rich, sucked off my fingers. I washed my hands and my bloody cheek with river water. There were markings of mortals on the land: hoofmarks in the dried earth, the sharp stump of a felled tree, a small pile of whitening dog dung.

It was the custom among the Valkyries to carve runes into our hands, give ourselves scars in remembrance of our fallen comrades. Valkyries did die in battle, more often than any song records. *We* recorded them. That’s why I bore two dozen uneven runes on my hands, some stretched and red and some long faded to thin white, each one of them in remembrance of a warrior. I wondered what they would do about me: would they consider me a fallen comrade? Would they carve a rune for Brynhild on their hands?

I wasn’t sure which I preferred; I thought I would like them to remember me as alive.

On that cold ground, I dreamt of Valhalla.

—*Get up, Rota, wake up, lazy Gondul. I see you’re awake, Hrist. Clear the mead-cups off the benches and strew the rushes on the floor. We have a new guest coming this morning.*

—Who is coming, Brynhild?

—A king.

—Is it one of our fathers?

—Why do you care, Hrist? Why should we care? We have not seen our fathers, none of us, since they traded us away to Odin.

—Yes, but I would like to see my father. I remember him, you know.

—You only think you remember him.

—What's the difference?