

Winter Solstice  
Winter

A Viking Blood Saga

Book I

E. J. Squires



This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Second edition April, 2015.

Copyright © 2013 E. J. Squires

All rights reserved.

ISBN: 1493596543

ISBN-13: 9781493596546

For my husband, Aaron  
For my mother, Unni  
For my father, Thor  
For my children Sophie, Joseph and Thomas  
And finally for my Viking ancestors.



**Also By E. J. Squires**

Summer Solstice Summer

A Viking Blood Saga

Book II

(Now available)

Fall of the Nine Realms

A Viking Blood Saga

Book III

(Coming soon)

Wraithsong

The Desirable Creatures Series

Book I

(Now available)

Blufire

The Desirable Creatures Series

Book II  
(Now available)

Áfablót  
The Desirable Creatures Series  
Book III  
(Coming soon)

Savage Run I  
A Young Adult Dystopian novella  
(Now available)

Savage Run II  
A Young Adult Dystopian novella  
(Now available)

Savage Run III  
A Young Adult Dystopian novella  
(Now available)

## Prologue

*‘Long live the forgiving summer, and stay the deadly winter.’*

Amber rays from the setting sun kissed the majestic Bergendal Mountains, as the deep sapphire waters from the old sage ocean veined through them, like they had for millennia.

Townspesple were industriously working to increase their food storage and insulate their humble homes in preparation for the winter that was just around the autumn bend. Bergendalers were well-familiar with the preparations they needed to do before the first snowfall, for generations had gone before them, from season to season, in the same manner. Life for the northerners had been the same year after year, generation after generation, with only small variances sprinkled through the monotonously repetitive days and nights.

*‘Long live the forgiving summer, and stay the deadly winter’* the northerner’s had pleaded their Norse gods for century after century, but no such plea was ever granted, for the balance in Midgard needed to be kept.

The deceptively pure white winter was as ruthless as one’s nemesis, and though many might be granted a merciful death by her this year, many more would live to tell the tales of her

prowling, silent assassinations. Winter changed boys' hearts into men and girls' innocence into wisdom – *if* one dared to stare winter in the face and stand up to the fears she forced into each mortal's delicate heart. But winter was not here yet, only a looming promise soon to arrive.

The Northlandic Castle stood on top of a soft sloping hill in the center of the valley. A soaring square shaped impenetrable outer-wall with circular watchtowers at each corner protected the castle from possible attacks from Vik people.

From each of the watchtowers hung blue, red and gold Bergendal crest ensigns. Rectangular shaped banners displayed a red serpent dragon holding a golden torch of light in one hand and a diamond sword in the other. *Freedom, Balance* and *Light* were King Olav's mottos for his reign. Around the beast was one blue square, signifying Midgard's four protecting Sentinors and one brown square signifying the four corners of Midgard. Above the dragon hovered a circle half-shaded navy, half-shaded light yellow, representing the crucial balance between day and night, light and darkness, progress and rest.

Both the inside castle and the outer wall had been built out of a rare grey marble that carried a sheen and sparkled when it came in contact with sunlight, making it look lighter than it really was. Seven round, dark-grey steeples towered the skies on the inside keep, where the Sun Queen had resided for centuries.

*'Long live the deadly summer, and stay the deadly winter.'* But this coming winter would not be like other winters before. For this winter would be an eternal one, instigated by a dark being whom no one knew existed, and whose power was so consuming, that not even the gods of Midgard themselves could destroy.

# 1

## **The Northlandic Kingdom Year 1007 The Escorts**

*I do not want to do this*, Lucia thought as she led the snaking burial procession down the dark, fog-filled streets of autumnal Bergendal. Many who grieved the death of her mother, Queen Maud, reverently followed her in the midnight light parade, their hushed voices sounding like ghost whispers behind her. Others showed their respect by lining up on the sides of the streets, watching as she passed with her torch held high. Her blond hair

gleamed in the light of the flames and unmercifully lit up her tear-streaked face.

*Why did my mother have to die?*

She felt utterly alone.

Lucia's father, King Olav, had forced her to lead the town's people through the city's filthy, narrow streets, and now Lucia was doing her best to ignore the looks—unadulterated glances of pity—whenever her eyes met one of her subordinates. All she really wanted was to be left alone, not have everyone see her in this state of raw mourning.

She shivered as the biting wind gusted against her all too thin, white silk tunic. It was not the traditional dress usually worn during such a procession, but since her mother had converted to Christianity, where white symbolized purity, Lucia wanted to honor her in this way. Lucia's father had forbidden her to wear the dress, just like he had forbidden her to wear the wreath on her head. But evergreens represented everlasting life in Christianity, and even though Lucia did not share her mother's beliefs in this new, white god, or in his glorious heaven, she did believe her mother would forever live in Valhalla with the Norse deities.

Wearing this outfit also sent a strong message to her father, and the message was this: I am the only living being with sacred Aesira blood running through my veins, and when I am crowned queen on my eighteenth birthday come December, I will bow to no one's rules.

As Lucia climbed the long road toward the castle, citizens whispered sorrowfully about the tragic news they had heard earlier that day from the town crier's lips. "The Queen of The Northlandic Kingdom is dead!" he had said, weeping as he had broadcast the tragedy from farm to farm, house to house, door to door. "The Sun Queen is dead!"

Finally, at the top of the hill, Lucia stopped in the castle courtyard in front of the unlit kindling and log pyramid structure. Lifting her gaze, she saw her father standing in the southern tower's window, looking down on her. He nodded once.

She squeezed her torch in through one of the openings between the stacked wood, causing it to catch fire. Watching as it came to life, the flames crackling wild and free, the heat felt like a blanket of fire on her freezing skin. She wanted to lose herself in the blaze, let it burn away all the pain on the inside. And maybe that was the solution: throwing herself into it. Ending her life. If she died, too, she would be with her mother again and all the hurt would instantly go away. All the sorrow would be swallowed up in joy.

Without really thinking, she reached her arm out to touch the flames. The blaze soon turned hot against her palm and she winced. Suddenly, she felt a hand on her shoulder, pulling her back.

"Let us retire," Nora, her mother's old handmaiden, said with a curtsy, her kind eyes lowering to the ground. Nora had been Queen Maud's handmaiden since before Lucia was born, and Lucia could not imagine a life without her. Nora was like a nurturing grandmother, always caring, always loving Lucia, even when she deserved it least. Her nearly silver hair was usually kept in a loose braid, and the deep grooves in her face stood as proof of all the happy and sad moments she had experienced in her lifetime.

The pull of the fire vanished, and Lucia nodded. Taking Nora's arm in hers, she pressed back the tears that were threatening to well up again, and headed inside.

The next morning, news came that one family's longhouse had set fire by a torch from the light procession. The flames had passed too close to the straw thatch roof, lighting it and mercilessly burning their humble home to the ground.

"The Queen is cursed," the ill-fated family had declared, spreading the rumor like a raging inferno. Neighbor to neighbor it was whispered that Queen Maud's spirit had been rejected from Valhalla, because she had been sympathetic to the new, Christian faith. In her anger, they said, she had burned the family's house down and would continue to haunt Bergendal until a proper Norse burial had been performed. She needed an escort to usher her to Valhalla, and until that happened, no one was safe.

"Did you hear what they are saying, Lucia? Did you?" Olav barged into her room red-faced with the guard who had delivered the gossip. "They say your mother is cursed. Cursed! How dare they?" His hands flailed as he spoke. "*No one* grieves the loss of Maud more than I, and *no one* will be allowed to tarnish her memory!" He clenched his large hands into tight fists like he always did when he was angry.

"What about me? I grieve her," Lucia said.

He slowly swiveled toward her, his hazel eyes alight with rage. "What did you say to me?"

"You said no one grieves the loss of Mother more than you. I grieve her, too," she said, glaring at him. She was done being the obedient daughter, constantly yielding to her father's whims.

His eyes flared, and then he picked up a vase and flung it against the wall, causing it to shatter into a thousand pieces. Her heart leapt into her throat, and she shrunk where she sat on her bed.

But he did not stop there. Next, he grabbed the goblets on the longtable and cast them to the floor, followed by another vase and anything else he could get hold of. She cupped her hands over her ears, the crashing sounds so loud it frightened her. *Has he gone mad?*

Olav had never been a loving father, and had even broken her arm in a fit of rage when she was just eight. She had hated him ever since and now with her mother gone, who would be there to protect her from his rage? She thought about Soren, her betrothed, and although she did not know him well and felt somewhat uncomfortable in his presence, she was looking forward to marrying him. Anything would be better than this.

“Father, stop...please...” she said.

Olav stormed toward her and slapped her across the cheek. His angry hand stung, and she wanted to scream at him for hurting her, but she knew better than to stand up for herself or to let emotion show on her face. It would only infuriate him more.

“The problem with you is that you think you are so important. As the future queen of the Northlandic Kingdom, you need to set your own needs aside and set the needs of your people first. Stop feeling sorry for yourself!” He ran his long fingers through his salt and pepper hair.

Lucia’s tears fell onto her silk bed sheets. “I...I am sorry, Father.” But as the words fell out of her lips, they tasted like dust and mold. Was she truly sorry? No. She had only said it because she felt guilty and because everyone, her included, would surrender his or her will to the king’s. However, now that she would be queen, she would no longer need to submit anything to him.

And she would not be silenced anymore.

“I am queen now! Get out of my chamber!” she yelled, slamming her delicate fist into the bed, puffing out her chest.

Olav stood speechless for a while, probably wondering how his daughter had the audacity to command him, the king. But then as they glared at each other, Lucia witnessed as her father's shocked and livid expression melted into a pensive one. Had he, in his grief-stricken state, not until this moment, realized he was to become her inferior? Surely, he must have remembered, although his blank stare suggested otherwise. Queen Maud had Aesira blood—the blood of the gods—running through her veins. Lucia shared that same blood, but King Olav did not. It was her fate to be queen, a fate the Norse gods had spun for her, a fate not even her father with all his might could usurp.

“You are an enigma, Lucia. One moment you are as sweet and innocent as a bird, and the next, you are like a vicious dragon, spewing fire. You need to work on your temperament before you become Queen.” He stormed out of her chamber.

*When I am queen, I will keep the temperament I prefer.*

\* \* \*

Olav summoned Lucia to the throne room later that afternoon. Even though she did not want to go, she forced herself out of bed, knowing the consequences would be severe if she rebelled against her father's commands. She was not queen yet, and so it would be wise to try and keep the peace—at least until her coronation day.

Swollen-eyed and with a numb chest, she dressed in a black linen dress and went to meet her father.

Arriving in the throne room, passing by the guards, she saw her father speaking with her Aunt Vilda and an elderly woman.

They were standing at the bottom of the throne stairwell. It was the very place her mother had fallen.

*Do not think about Mother. Do not think about Mother.*

Beams of dust-filled light shone in through the stained-glass windows, illuminating three murals on the opposite wall. She knew the murals well, but studied them anyway in hopes it would distract her.

The first mural depicted the universe as a giant ash tree, Yggdrasil, and its nine realms: Asgard, Alvheim, Vanaheim, Midgard, Muspelheim, Svartalvheim, Nivlheim, Jotunheim, and Helheim. Its branches extended high into the heavens and stood on three roots that extended into Urd's well, Mime's well and into the spring, Kverg. Three giantess Norns from Jotunheim sat spinning the threads of fate of humans and gods in front of the well of fate, Urd.

The fierce dragon, Dreadbiter, slinked below the tree and fed off dead mortals that fell his way. Sol and Mani graced the sky, one pulling the sun, one the moon, across the heavens in their chariots. The rainbow bridge Bifrost connected Asgard to Midgard, allowing the gods to access the land of the humans when they desired.

"It *must* be a Norse burial, with a *human* sacrifice, or Allfather Odin will release his wrath on Midgard," she heard the elderly woman say. "Queen Maud needs help finding her way to Valhalla."

*Mother! Mother!* Tears welled up in her eyes at the mention of her name.

The second mural depicted Ragnarok, Midgard's final battle, when most men, darkelves, dwarves, and gods would be consumed by the gulf of non-existence. The sweltering red, fiery orange and charcoal black battle scene appeared to burn on the wall. Pained faces of nameless warriors battled the armies of the

Empress of Darkness, Eiess. The three-year winter had beckoned in the wolf Skoll, who had devoured the sun, and his brother Hati, who had devoured the moon. In the corner a cock crowed, signaling that the final battle of Ragnarok had arrived.

“Maud wanted a Christian burial,” Olav said. “But I agree, Odin and Thor will not be pleased if we worship this crucified god of hers. Her dying wish, though, was to be buried outside the Bergedal Stave Church, and that wish, I will honor.”

“Olav, you must realize Maud is *dead* now, and you must be strong for her,” Vilda said, her fat-laden arms jiggling as she moved them. “She was wrong in thinking this new, feeble religion is true. You know that. I know that. All of Midgard knows that!”

Lucia wiped the tears from her face, carefully studying the third mural, hoping that would magically make her forget her mother was no more.

*She is dead. She is dead. She is dead.*

The mural depicted the new world as it would appear after Ragnarok. Only a few living beings remained and stood by a waterfall, drinking from a fresh, flowing spring. One of them, her father had said, was the Great Sentinor.

On several occasions, Olav had told Lucia that she was the Great Sentinor fated to lead the battle of Ragnarok. *I am not her*, she had always thought, every time he had mentioned it, and she certainly did not believe it now.

“In case you have not noticed, the new faith is gaining many followers, Olav,” the elderly woman said. “I have even heard the Christian Bishop claim we are *children* of this God. The curse of Odin will fall on all of Midgard if you let these blasphemers continue, and if you bury Maud in Christian soil, you will be sending a very strong message that this type of worship is condoned by you as their King!”

## Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

