



Chapter 1

A Story in Flames

THE OLD MAN HELD UP A SILVER COIN, and the children watched wide-eyed in wonder as the red firelight danced upon it. Flaming logs filled a shallow pit in the middle of the long-hall, and the old man stood in front of it, while the children sat on woolen blankets on the wooden floor. Outside the long-hall, rain filled the Northern night, falling on the surrounding hills and fields, and stirring up the waters in the harbor. But inside the long-hall, the fire was warm and there was a story to be told.

“This is a coin of Asgard,” the old man said in a clear, strong voice that carried up to the shadowy rafters. “Asgard, the home of the Aesir—the home of the gods. On this side is Odin, the All-Father; in his right hand he holds his spear, Gungnir; on his shoulder are his ravens Hugin and Munin who bring him news from here on Midgard, the Earth—”

A girl’s voice piped up. “Are they watching us now??”

The old man paused, still holding the coin above his head. “Do you see any ravens in here?”

Everyone looked around. There were no ravens to be seen. Or, for that matter, heard.

“It’s just us,” the old man assured them with a friendly wink. “Now, as I was saying...Odin’s left hand rests on the shoulder of his eldest son, Thor, who raises high Mjolnir, the enchanted hammer he hurls against the giants and trolls of Jotunheim. On the other side of the coin is Bifrost, the rainbow bridge that links Midgard with Asgard, and around the edge are the golden apples of the goddess Idunna, the apples that the Aesir eat to keep young and strong. Who wants to have a closer look?”

All the children raised their hands; and as the old man watched and smiled, they passed the silver coin from one to another. Each boy and girl was careful not to drop it, careful to wipe it on his or her woolen sleeve before passing it on.

The old man’s companions sat on a bench behind him. They were men and women as old as he was, wearing the same simple clothes. They had come to the long-hall seeking shelter from the rain, and in exchange for food and drink, they had agreed to entertain the children—who had been rambunctious all day, because the storm had kept them from going out and playing.

One boy looked down at the bearded face on the coin and then up at the old man. “Are you—Odin?” he asked.

All the children held their breaths and waited for the answer. They had heard their parents say that sometimes Odin and the other Aesir walked upon Midgard disguised as simple travelers.

But the old man smiled and said, “No, I am not Odin.”

“Him, Odin?” the oldest woman said, amused, “Not him! Ha!”

A boy asked, “Did Odin give you that coin?”

The old man said, “Some men are very secretive about where they got their money. I am one of those men. Does anyone else have a question?”

A girl raised her hand. “Thor is the son of Odin, but does Thor have a son?”

One of the older girls waved her hand. “He’s got *three* sons! There’s Magni, and Modi, and Ull!”

“Don’t forget about Thor’s daughters,” the old man reminded everyone. “But many of the Aesir have children, not just Thor; and many of their children are the same ages as many of you here.”

“What are all their names?” a boy asked.

“Tell us about their adventures!” said another.

“Do they have magic weapons?” asked a girl.

The old man said, “What a lot of questions! Do you really want to hear stories of the children of the Aesir?”

There was a loud chorus of “*Yes! Yes! Yes!*”

“Very well. I warn you, some of the stories are funny, but some are sad...”

A little boy spoke up. “Is there one with giants?”

“Giants? Oh, yes, there’s a story with giants,” the old man said, and he sat down on a wooden stool in front of the fire. “Imagine a land—just a moment, who has my coin?”

A girl of six held it up.

“All right, you keep that safe until I’m through.” He cleared his throat as his companions listened along with the children. Strangely, his companions didn’t listen with amazement; it was as if they knew what would happen next. “Now, imagine a land on the other side of the clouds. Imagine a place where perils are laughed at; where danger is like peace. That place is Asgard.”

As he spoke, the fire seemed to move and sway as though mimicking his words; two flames seemed to form into the shapes of two boys.

“Now,” the old man said, “imagine a blue sky and a green field and hills all around. Imagine two boys, about so high. The adventure begins with these boys. Listen, as one of the boys suddenly shouts...”



Chapter 2

The Frost Giant's Treasure

“CATCH!” SHOUTED MAGNI, THE eight-and-a-half-year-old son of Thor, as he hurled the three-thousand-pound boulder into the air. He brushed away the blonde bangs that had fallen across his forehead and watched the big chunk of volcanic rock fly up, flip over and hurtle down at his brother Modi.

For a second, Modi, standing on the other side of the grassy hill just outside the gold-and-silver gates of Asgard, acted as though he wasn't even going to try to catch the boulder. Modi simply stood there, whistling a slow little tune, as the shadow of the rock grew larger around him.

Then Modi took a quick breath, braced his feet against the ground, reached up with his fingers spread, and caught the rock, exhaling quickly and bending his knees slightly to help absorb the impact.

No child of all the Aesir was as strong as Magni; but Modi was certainly strong enough to catch a boulder.

Magni and Modi had a great deal in common besides strength; they both loved adventure and they were both determined to have as much fun as possible before school started again. But there were differences. Even though they were twins, they weren't identical twins. Magni, who was almost a minute older, had blonde hair and light blue eyes; Modi had light brown hair and dark blue eyes. They weren't exactly alike in personality, either. Modi was more interested in schoolwork and writing poetry than Magni was, and Magni was more interested in becoming a great warrior.

"Toss it back!" Magni called to his brother. He clapped his hands together eagerly. "Toss the boulder back!"

Modi smiled—and did. The boulder made an easy arc through the air and Magni caught it, saying, "Let's keep doing this until one of us misses!"

Thrud, Magni and Modi's older sister, sighed loudly. She was lying under a nearby tree, reading a book about horses, and all this boulder tossing was distracting her. She looked up. "The *two* of you!" she said. "Can't you play somewhere else? I'm *trying* to read!"

Magni laughed and hurled the boulder right at her.

Thrud frowned. Throwing a boulder! How childish! Good aim, though; it was heading right for her head.

She jumped up from the grass and pulled her broadsword smoothly from the sheath that was hanging from a tree branch. Planting her right foot in front of her and leaning forward a little, just as her uncle Tyr, the god of war, had taught her, Thrud held her sword behind her back, both hands grasping the hilt. She took a quick, deep breath. As the boulder whistled down through the air, Thrud brought the blade forward with all her strength and shouted, "AaaaaaasGAAAAAARRRRRRD!"

The hard keen edge of Thrud's sword, well-forged by the dwarves, struck the boulder and split it in two. As Thrud followed through, bending low till her blade and arms and face almost touched the ground, the halves of the boulder whistled over her head and hit the ground behind her.

Thrud stood up. The eldest daughter of Thor was tall for her age, and looked taller when she stood with her shoulders back the way her mother had taught her. Thrud's mother, Sif, was an Asynjer, an Aesir goddess, whose gold hair flowed down to the small of her back, and because it wasn't just gold-colored hair but actual living gold, it was heavy; so proper posture was very important to her, and she had trained Thrud to stand up straight and hold her head high. Thrud, who wore her own ash-blonde hair in two pigtails that hung down past her shoulders, was pleased with how well she'd done against the boulder, and as she sheathed her sword, she struggled to maintain her frown of annoyance against her brothers. Just then, though, they were applauding the way she'd sliced the boulder in half.

"AXE-cellent!" Magni cried. That was a word he and Modi had come up with together to describe something that was as excellent as a sharp battle-axe. They thought "AXE-cellent" was hilarious; Thrud thought it was extremely annoying.

"Axe-cellent indeed, sister," Modi agreed, but joked, "yet what will we play with now? You broke our boulder!"

"Why don't you each take half and hit yourselves over the head?"

Magni and Modi both laughed. Then Magni looked at the boulder pieces and said, "Should we?" to Modi.

"Don't you dare," Thrud warned him. Then she saw something in the sky and forgot about her brothers.

Magni and Modi followed her gaze and looked up, to the East. Storm clouds were gathering in blue-black bunches, and through the clouds and over them rode a host of women on charging horses that flew without wings, their hooves pushing off from the clouds and kicking against the wind. The women wore shining chain mail, and flowing cloaks of swan feathers. Each had an iron helmet with iron wings, and each bore a shield on her left arm and held a spear in her right hand.

"The Valkyries!" Thrud exclaimed.

Under the command of Odin—Lord of the Aesir, all-wise, all-powerful All-Father of Asgard and the

grandfather of Thrud, Modi and Magni—the Valkyries were riding to some distant battlefield on Midgard, the Earth. There they would choose the bravest warriors and bring them to Asgard. It was Thrud's deepest desire to ride the skies as one of Odin's shield-maidens—to be a Valkyrie. But she had not yet mustered within herself the courage to ask her grandfather for permission.

Still, as she saw the women ride their steeds through the clouds, she said, softly, "Someday."

Then there was a voice behind her. An adult voice filled with sarcasm and bitter experience. "Dost thou ever wonder *why* the All-Father hath commanded so many valiant fighters to be brought unto Asgard?"

It was Loki. Loki, the clever and cunning, using the High Speech of the Aesir. The High Speech was used to show respect to others, or to make the speaker sound impressive. Loki always insisted on using it.

As for how Loki was always able to show up without anyone hearing or seeing him coming, that was something that none of the children of Thor had ever figured out.

"Hello, Uncle Loki," Thrud said, sounding a little uncertain. Loki, the normal-sized son of a frost giant of Jotunheim, had been adopted in ages past by Odin, so he had a privileged position and was considered part of the royal family. The grandchildren of Odin called him "Uncle," but that didn't seem to make Loki very happy. Sometimes Thrud and her siblings felt as though Loki didn't like them very much, although they didn't know why. It wasn't just that he was often impatient with them because (like most of the other Aesir) they weren't as quick or as clever as he was; sometimes they got the impression that their uncle would be happier if his nieces and nephews didn't exist. But you could never quite tell with Loki. He almost always spoke so smoothly that it was very hard to tell if he really meant something dangerous, or if he was just being mean or enjoying a private joke.

Loki looked at the split boulder and said to Thrud, "Art thou chopping rocks? Dost thou intend to make a beach up here in the hills? If so, thou hast far to go."

“’Twas a game of catch, Uncle Loki,” Magni said. If someone began speaking the High Speech, it was considered polite to do the same. “Wouldst thou care to try catching a boulder?”

Modi said, “Thrud made it smaller, so it will be less effort for thee!”

Loki looked as though he’d bitten into something sour. “Pah!” he said; that was one of his favorite things to say when he wanted to dismiss something. “Thou hast too much faith in thy strength, nephews. Thou art like thy father in that way.”

“Say nothing against Father, Uncle,” Modi said, and there was a tone of warning in his voice. He and Magni had been taught to always be polite to their elders, but they would stand no ill words against their parents—even from their uncle.

Loki smiled, but his eyes were cold. “Strength is good,” he said. “The ox needs strength to plow. But the ox is guided by the wise farmer.” He looked back at Thrud. “I asked if thou knewest why the All-Father brings warriors to Asgard, to be feasted in the great hall of Valhalla?”