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**CHAPTER 1**

**WHEN HAMMERS FALL**

**IN LIGHTNING HALL**

THRUD, DAUGHTER OF THOR AND SIF, grand-daughter of Odin and Frigga, defender of Asgard and Valkyrie-in-Training, shouted. Each word was louder than the one before it: “Where…*is*…*MY*…***SPEAR???”***

The long halls and most of the five hundred and forty rooms of her home, the palace of Bilskirnir, echoed with Thrud’s fury. Below-stairs in the kitchen, Roskva winced, let go of the pot she was polishing, and pressed her hands over her ears.

When she was in Asgard, the girl from Midgard only had to brush her hair back from her ears to hear the wool growing on sheep, or flowers opening their petals in distant fields; but whenever Thrud got in one of *those* moods, Roskva missed having the normal hearing she had back on her parents’ farm.

With a *whoosh* of air, Roskva’s brother Tjalfi raced up beside her in a blur and skidded to a halt. He had a kitchen pan in each hand. He had been using his Asgardian gift, the ability to run faster than an arrow, to wind-dry them. And even though he only had the hearing of an ordinary mortal, he too had heard Thrud shouting.

He put the pans on the kitchen table and said, “She’s in one of *those* moods.”

“I know,” said Roskva. “Wait—be quiet.” She carefully uncovered one ear. “I hear something else now.”

“What?” Tjalfi couldn’t hear anything special.

Roskva listened to make sure of what she was hearing, then sighed.

“Giggling,” she said.

“Uh-oh,” Tjalfi said, rolling his eyes. He and Roskva both knew what giggling meant.

Upstairs, so did Thrud. She heard the giggles echo from one of the Eastern corridors. In an instant, she bolted out of her room—where her spear had *not* been above her *bed* where she’d *put* it—and shouted:

*“The two of you!!”*

“Run!” Magni said as he tossed the spear to his twin brother Modi, and the eight-and-a-half-year-olds took off down the hall.

They couldn’t run as fast as Tjalfi—nobody could—but they didn’t have to be faster than their father’s servant; they just had to be faster than their big sister. Of course, Thrud had longer legs; but Magni and Modi thought they could escape her because they weren’t running away in a straight line. Bilskirnir—since it was the palace of the god of thunder—was laid out like a series of lightning bolts. There were more than a hundred big halls and jagged corridors that connected at every possible angle, then branched off and re-connected again. Magni and Modi knew every turn and corner of their enormous home, so they were sure they could keep the chase going for a long time. As they ran, they tossed their sister’s spear back and forth between them, to make things more fun. Then, just as Magni caught the spear for the third time—

“Look!” he gasped, and pointed ahead.

Thrud, face flushed, blonde braids flying, eyes set in the *I’m-going-to-get-you* look, was running at them.

From in *front*.

The boys really shouldn’t have been surprised. Thrud had been exploring Bilskirnir since before they’d been born, and she knew the halls, corridors and passageways even better than they did. And this wasn’t exactly the first time she’d chased her younger brothers through the palace. Even so, Magni and Modi were impressed that she’d been able to catch up with them so quickly this time.

But they weren’t going to let the chase end just yet. “This way!” Modi shouted, sprinting through an open door. Magni followed, still clutching the spear.

They dashed through another door and down one long corridor, then another. Magni tossed the spear. Modi caught it, but as he looked back over his shoulder, he saw Thrud gaining on them.

As usual, the boys had neglected to plan for what might happen if Thrud caught them. So the only idea was to keep running.

Thrud kept running, too. Even when she lost sight of her brothers, she knew where they were. They might disappear around a corner for a second, but she could still hear the sound of their running feet, and their laughter.

Now they were in the very long Main Hall. It was decorated with scarlet rugs that had intricate gold patterns zig-zagging back and forth, in and out, like the chase Magni and Modi had been leading Thrud on. Each rug was two hundred feet long, and between each rug was a ten-foot stretch of stone tiles. The right side of Thrud’s mouth curled into a smile.

As Magni and Modi ran onto one of the rugs, still tossing the spear back and forth, Thrud halted on one of the bare sections of stone. She knelt at the edge of the rug in front of her—the rug her brothers were running on—and grasped it in her powerful hands.

She lifted up the rug and *snapped* it down.

What happened next was an example of something their schoolteacher Mimir had taught them. The force of snapping the rug created a wave in the fabric; it rose seven feet high and ran along the length of the rug. The fleeing Magni and Modi heard a rumbling behind them, and when they looked, they saw a small mountain of rug bearing down on them. Their laughter caught in their throats.

The wave bowled them off their feet. The spear flew from Modi’s hand, tumbling up, then down, over and over.

Magni and Modi landed on their backs and Modi opened his eyes just in time to see the spear plunging down at him. The point buried itself in the rug, quivering inches away from Modi’s right cheek. He let out a breath he didn’t know he’d been holding and gulped hard. Thrud ran forward and leaped. She executed a perfect forward flip in mid-air, and at the top of her flip she reached out, grabbed her spear and pulled it out of the rug. She landed on the balls of her feet and aimed the point of the spear down at her little brothers who looked up in open-mouthed shock. She gave them the *I’ve-got-you-now* look.

Magni pointed at Modi and said, “It was his idea.”

Modi looked insulted. “Was not!”

“Was.”

“Oh, that’s right. It was.” Modi shrugged at Magni and smiled up at their big sister with huge doe-eyes. “You wouldn’t spear us while we’re just lying here helplessly…would you?”

Magni said, “Don’t give her ideas!”

“Speaking of ideas,” Thrud said, “what was the idea of stealing my spear in the first place?”

“We were just trying to help you,” Modi said. “Really.”

“That’s right,” Magni agreed.

“Help me?”

“Yes!” Magni said. “Because you can’t take weapons to camp.”

“Those are the rules,” Modi added.

“Those are the rules,” Magni repeated.

“Those *are* the rules,” their mother said. Sif, the goddess with hair of living gold, stood at one of the doorways.

Reluctantly, Thrud lowered her spear. Sif smiled patiently at the three children and glided forward, touching her daughter’s spear-arm gently but firmly. “Come, Thrud,” she said, “I will help you pack.”

“We aren’t leaving for two days…” Thrud said.

“Never leave things for the last minute. And as for you two—stop rolling around on the floor and start packing yourselves.”

“Yes, Mother,” the twins said as they got up and brushed themselves off.

“And apologize to your sister.”

The boys sighed.

In the kitchen, Roskva told Tjalfi, “It’s all over. They’re saying they’re sorry.” She let her hair tumble back over her ears and went back to polishing the pot.

Tjalfi got his broom and started sweeping. “I hope they have a good time at camp,” he said.

Roskva nodded but didn’t say anything. She and Tjalfi wanted to go to camp during the upcoming school break, too. Especially because for the first time ever, the children of Asgard were going to camp in another World: Vanaheim, the mysterious home of the Vanir gods, or, as the Aesir sometimes called them, the *other* gods.

But camp was for godlings, not mortals; anyway, there was work to do, cooking and cleaning and sewing, and all that was more important than going to camp. Even so, there was *always* work, and this camp was special…

But because it was special, it wasn’t for her or her brother, who were lucky enough to live in Asgard at all.

So it was better not to think about it.

At least not too much…

Tjalfi saw that Roskva looked a little sad and distracted, but there was nothing to do about it. Servants, especially mortal servants, had to stay home. He tried to lighten the mood. “We’ll probably have lots of adventures while they’re gone. You never know when Thor might need our help with a giant or some monster.”

Roskva just nodded.

Tjalfi thought of something else to say to get his sister’s mind off camp. “You know what else? Remember when you said Magni and Modi were sorry and it was over?” Roskva looked up. Tjalfi grinned. “They may be sorry, but I’ll bet it isn’t over.”

Roskva smiled and her eyes sparkled. “I’ll bet you’re right!” she said.

Upstairs, Sif walked Thrud back to her bedroom. “Put the spear back on the wall. Your brothers were right about not taking weapons to camp.”

But Thrud said, “It’s not a weapon.”

“It is a spear.”

“It’s not a *magic* weapon,” Thrud argued. “It’s not like it shoots lightning.” That gave her an idea. “Mother, do you think I could have—?”

“No, and stand up straight,” Sif said gently. “Now sit down straight.”

They sat on the edge of the bed, both of them with excellent posture. Sif’s shining hair flowed down her back and across the mattress. Thrud held her spear in one hand. Sif said, “Daughter, going to camp in Vanaheim is a privilege for a child of Asgard.”

Thrud sighed. “I know.”

“And do you know why?”

“Because Vanaheim and Asgard don’t really trust each other.”

“Yes. Ever since the War of the Gods, long before you were born, there has only been an uneasy peace between Aesir and Vanir. Even though Freya and her brother Frey and their father Njord came from Vanaheim to live with us as part of the truce, and even though, in exchange, your great-uncle Hoenir had to leave Asgard and go to Vanaheim to rule, there has been suspicion. We saw that when Freya was kidnapped by Loki.”

Sif rarely mentioned the god of mischief to her children, and if she did, she usually called him just “Loki,” not “your uncle Loki.” It wasn’t only that the god of mischief was a jotun by birth, and had been adopted into Odin’s family and so wasn’t *really* their uncle; it was that Sif, who was kind to everyone else, had no kindly feelings towards Loki. “He stoked the fire of the Vanir’s mistrust, and kept them from helping us when he tried to bring about Ragnarok before its destined time.”

Thrud nodded. She knew all this. She and her family and friends had helped defeat Loki and his scheme, so of course she knew this. She knew her mother knew she knew this.

“I know you know this,” Sif said.

“I know.”

“And all the Nine Worlds know how, when all of Asgard’s friends and allies turned their backs, it was you and your siblings and friends who saved us,” Sif said, her voice now soft and warm with pride. “And your father and I will never forget how you rescued us and all the Aesir from the mystic prison created by Loki and the Vanir witch Gullveig.”

Thrud smiled for the first time.

“Thou art a hero,” Sif said, speaking quietly but using the High Speech, “and thou art a hero because of what is in thy heart—not what is in thy hand.”

Thrud saw the love in her mother’s eyes. She stood up and carefully cradled her spear in the two iron hooks above her bed. Sif stood and hugged her daughter.

“The Vanir will let no Aesir bring a weapon of Asgard to their realm. If that rule is broken, so is the peace. So we will obey that rule.”

Thrud didn’t think the peace treaty was so great if it could be broken because of something so small. The Vanir were obviously much too sensitive about things. She didn’t say that to her mother, but she did ask, “But what if there’s danger and we don’t have any weapons?” It wasn’t an argument; it was a real question.

Sif touched her daughter’s right arm. “In thine arm there is strength.” She stroked her daughter’s hair. “And in thy head there is judgment.”

“Dost thou truly think so?”

“I know so. But remember, if thy grandfather Odin thought there would be danger he would not let thee go.”

Thrud nodded. “And Great-Uncle Hoenir?”

“And Great-Uncle Hoenir, too, of course.” Sif smiled a little, and so did Thrud. She had never met Great-Uncle Hoenir, but while the grown-up gods always spoke of him with kindness, no one thought he was as wise or intelligent as his older brother Odin.

“Maybe there won’t be any *danger*,” Thrud said, “but I hope there will be some *adventure*.”

As she said this, there was a sound from elsewhere in the palace. Something like *THWUH-BWAAAMMMM!* The floor vibrated slightly and the spear on the wall jiggled in its hooks.

“What was *that*?” Sif exclaimed, although she guessed at the answer. So did Thrud.

Down in the kitchen, Tjalfi dropped his broom. “What was that??” Even without his sister’s hearing, he had to cover his ears.

Roskva clapped her hands over her ears, too. “You were right,” she said. “It isn’t over.”

There was another *THWUH-BWAAAAMMMM!*

Tjalfi said, “I guess I wish I’d been wrong!”

Up in the vast Main Hall, Magni and Modi had set up what they thought was a brilliant new game. From opposite ends of hall, they took up their iron-and-diamond hammers (forged by the dwarf Smalin and enchanted by Odin); then they threw them at each other. Both boys had perfect aim, and the magic mallets collided in mid-air, with a ringing noise and a shockwave that visibly distorted the air around it.

Two little girls stood facing each other on either side of the point of impact: the four-and-a-half-year-old girl clad in fur, with boots and mittens, was Skade, the goddess of skiing; the girl in the grey dress was Hela, daughter of Loki, formerly the goddess of death, now the goddess of life, after the events of the almost-Ragnarok.

As the shockwave struck, it knocked both little goddesses off their feet. They fell on the soft rug and laughed.

The enchanted hammers flew back through the air. Magni and Modi leaped up and caught the handles with both hands. They smiled widely at each other across the Main Hall and shouted, at the same time, “AXE-cellent!”

“Do it again!” Skade shouted, rolling over and getting onto her feet with Hela’s help.

Hela’s eyes (the right one black and the left one white) twinkled with happiness, and she smiled. Her smile wasn’t as shy as it had been when she’d first come to live with Uncle Thor and Aunt Sif. When Hela had come to Asgard, after seven years of growing up in a cave in Jotunheim, she had no friends and couldn’t look anybody in the face; now she had a comfortable home and a real bed, she’d made friends, and she was learning about all kinds of fun things—like this hammer game. She ran a pale grey hand through her hair (black on the left side and white on the right), got back in position across from Skade and said, “Yes. Do it again.”

“So be it!” Modi declared—just as Sif came into the hall.

“So it shall not be,” their mother informed them. “It is far too dangerous to throw enchanted hammers indoors.”

“But,” Modi protested.

“We were only,” Magni explained.

“Please?” Skade requested.

“Just one more time?” Hela asked.

Sif shook her head.

The boys put their hammers back in their belts.

Sif said, “You will not be allowed to take those to camp, either.”

“*What?”* Magni and Modi exclaimed together.

“But they’re not weapons!” Magni argued. “They’re *hammers!”*

“It isn’t like they shoot lightning, like Father’s,” Modi added. That gave them an idea. “Do you think we could get ones that—?” both boys began.

But Sif raised a silencing finger. Magni and Modi looked down at the floor. You didn’t argue with the finger.

Thrud appeared behind Sif, her arms folded in front of her. “Listen to Mother and do as you were told,” she instructed. She didn’t even give them the *This-discussion-is-over* look. She just turned around and went back to her room to pack. Her own disappointments were easier to bear when she could share them with her brothers.

“Who wants to go to Vanaheim anyway?” Magni muttered.

“You do and you know it,” Sif reminded him, leaving the younger children alone.

Skade kicked the floor grumpily. “The two of you are lucky,” she told Modi. “You’re old enough for camp.”

“You wouldn’t like camp,” Modi said. “Everyone says it’s always spring in Vanaheim, so you’d have to take those furs off for once. You’d be too hot.”

“I would *not* be too hot!” Skade huffed, and made sure her mittens were on good and tight.

Hela tiptoed up to them. “I’ll miss you,” she said, and then she hugged them both. They let her.

Modi said, “We’ll only be gone for a week.”

“And you have lots of friends here,” Magni said. “There’s Noss and Skade, and a lot of Sturmunnur’s kids.” Sturmunnur, the master of the Asgardian stables, had sixteen children and only ten were old enough to go to camp. The rest could play with Hela, even if some of them were little more than babies.

“Well…” Hela muttered.

Skade put a mittened hand on Hela’s shoulder. “I’ll make you feel better,” she said. “While they’re gone, we’ll go to the mountains and I’ll teach you how to ski! We’ll have lots more fun than them!”

“That’s a good plan,” Magni said. “Just don’t get into any trouble.”

“*You* always get into trouble,” Skade said.

“Do not,” Magni said.

“Well…we kind of do,” Modi said.

“Oh, you’re right,” Magni said. “Do you think there’ll be trouble at camp?”

Modi didn’t answer that.