

# ONE

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# MATT

## “WELCOME TO HEL”

If there was one thing worse than seeing a giant’s head rise from the ground, it was seeing *two* giant heads. Belching fire. Still, if they killed Matt, his soul wouldn’t have far to travel...considering he was already in the afterlife.

“At least it’s only *one* giant,” Matt said as they crouched behind a rock.

Fen gave him a look.

“What? It’s true. A single two-headed giant is better than two one-headed giants.”

And this, Matt realized, was what their world had come to. A week ago, his biggest worry was failing his science fair

project. Now he was taking comfort in the thought that he faced only *one* fifty-foot-tall, fire-breathing giant.

It was a Jotunn from Norse mythology. The most famous were the frost giants, but *they* lived in a world of ice, and there was no ice in this smoke-shrouded wasteland, just rock and more rock, as far as the eye could see.

The Jotunn looked like a two-headed WWE wrestler on nuclear-powered steroids, insanely muscle-bound, with reddish-orange skin that gleamed as if it were on fire. The giant stood in a crevasse up to its thighs, but even so, Matt still had to crane his neck to look up at the heads.

Matt touched the amulet on his chest. It was vibrating, warning him that something dangerous was near, just in case he couldn't, you know, *see* a fifty-foot flaming giant. The amulet was Thor's Hammer, worn by all the Thorsens of Blackwell, South Dakota, because they really were "Thor's sons"—distant descendants of the Norse god...which is what got Matt into this predicament in the first place.

Matt dimly heard Laurie say that they would have to pass the Jotunn—answering something Fen had said. He looked over at Fen and Laurie—the Brekke cousins, also from Blackwell, descendants of the trickster god Loki. Matt was about to speak when a distant roar made him jump.

"It's okay," Laurie whispered. "The gian is still talking to itself. That was something else."

Of course it was. He laughed a little at how calmly she

had said it. She was right, though. The Jotunn hadn't noticed them yet.

"It's distracted," he murmured. "Good." Matt pointed at a line of jagged rocks to their left. "Get over there. Behind the rocks. Fast!"

"Shouldn't we—?" Fen began, but Matt waved him forward, and Laurie nudged him along.

As they raced for the rocks, Matt kept his gaze fixed on the giant. He herded the cousins behind the biggest boulders and motioned for them to hunker down. He did the same. Then he took another look.

"Shouldn't we have run that way?" Fen pointed in the other direction. "We could have ducked behind those rocks."

Matt shook his head. "That would lead us right to the giant."

"Um, yeah. Kinda the idea, Thorsen. How are we going to get the jump on it from over here? These rocks lead *away* from the freaking fire monster."

"Yes, because that's where we're going. Away from it."

"But Baldwin is that way," Laurie said, pointing past the giant.

They'd discovered that one of Laurie's powers was the ability to locate other descendants of the gods of the North. In this case, she was homing in on their friend Baldwin, who was stuck in the afterlife.

"Laurie's right," Fen said. "This is no short detour, and

we don't know what we'll find along it. Maybe more giants. We should just fight this one."

"Do you see how big that thing is?" Matt said. "It could swallow a troll."

"But we fought *three* trolls."

"And barely escaped with our lives," Laurie said. "Matt's right. We should try to avoid this guy."

"Great. Side with Thorsen *again*," Fen muttered.

Matt could tell Fen thought he was wimping out. A few days ago, that would have stung enough to make Matt reconsider. But he'd learned a few things since then. Sometimes being a leader *meant* wimping out of a fight. They weren't playing around here. They could die. Their friend Baldwin *had* died, and that's why they were trekking through the underworld, to bring him back to the land of the living. Even then, there was no guarantee they could.

Fen agreed to the long route. There wasn't much else he could do, being outnumbered, but he kept grumbling that they'd probably run into *two* fire giants now. Finally, Matt had to ask him, nicely, to pipe down before the giant overheard. Fen didn't like that, either.

Matt adjusted his shield over his shoulder and led the way along the row of jagged rocks. Sometimes they could walk upright. Sometimes they had to creep along bent over. Now and then they needed to dart between rocks. The closer they got to the Jotunn, the worse the smell got. Sulfur. Matt

recognized it now, from chemistry. Soon, he couldn't just smell the fire—he could hear it crackling, deep in the canyon, and he could feel it, waves that made sweat roll down his face. The air shimmered with the heat, and he had to keep blinking to focus.

Laurie glanced over, but Matt waved for her to keep going. They were alongside the Jotunn now, the stink and the heat unbearable. Still, the giant was busy talking to...well, talking to itself apparently, its two heads deep in conversation. Matt could hear the voices, crackling and snapping and roaring, the words indecipherable, the sound like fire itself.

*It doesn't matter what they're saying. They're too busy to notice—*

One of the heads stopped talking. And turned their way...just as Matt was stepping from behind a rock. He stumbled back, arms shooting out to keep the others from doing the same.

"One's looking," he whispered.

Behind him, Laurie crept to the other side of the rock to peek out that way. Matt resisted the urge to pull her back. He could barely see from his direction—the angle was wrong. It seemed as if the heads were both turned toward them. One said something to the other, and the giant shrugged. As the heads talked, Laurie snuck back to him.

"I think they're trying to figure out what to do," she whispered. "If we want to make a run for it, now's the time."

Matt nodded. The heads did seem to be debating their next move. The left one obviously wanted to check out whatever it had seen. The right head wasn't interested. Then the massive left arm grabbed the edge of the canyon as if to pull the giant out. The right head shook and sputtered something, but the left half started pulling itself out of the canyon in a weird, lopsided climb. Finally, the right head gave in, hissing smoke, and the other huge, muscled arm reached up...

"*Now* can we run?" Laurie said.

Matt hunched over and ushered them to the next rock and then the next. When the ground shook, Matt thought it was just his amulet quivering. Then Fen swore under his breath, and Matt knew he felt it, too. He prairie-dogged up and saw—

A fire giant. Which was, of course, what he knew he'd see, but there was a difference between watching it from a couple hundred feet away and seeing it right there. Okay, maybe not "right there," but close enough. *More* than close enough. It was no more than twenty feet away, so near that Matt could smell fire.

When one head spoke to the other, wisps of smoke wafted out. Sparks flew as the other head replied. Matt could see flames inside their mouths. Did they *spit* fire? That wasn't anything he'd read in the myths, but they were learning not everything was the way it was in the old stories.

"A sword?" Fen whispered. "Seriously? It needs a sword, too?"



Matt's gaze dropped to the monster's belt. "No, it needs two swords, apparently. Flaming swords."

"Of course," Fen muttered.

"You still want to fight it?" Matt said. "'Cause now's your chance."

Fen scowled.

"Hey, you might distract it," Matt said, grinning. "Take one for the team."

"I thought that was *your* job, Thorsen."

"Stop it," Laurie whispered. When they did, she said, "Do you think we should run?"

Matt peeked over the rock again and then shook his head. "It doesn't know where we are. It's still just looking around. Follow me."

He set out, hunched over behind the rocks. When he dared peer out, the Jotunn was still moving, but slowly, looking from side to side. They reached a spot where the rocks were little more than boulders, and they had to almost crawl then, creeping along as they tried not to inhale dust and sand from the rocky ground. That wasn't easy, especially for Matt, with an ancient Viking shield on his back. He had to stay far enough from the rocks to keep from scraping the shield against them. His amulet wasn't helping, either. Now it was vibrating so hard that Matt swore he could hear it.

When they saw a row of taller rocks, Matt let out a sigh



of relief...until he drew close enough to notice the ten-foot gap between their row and that one.

"It's not too bad," Laurie whispered. "We just need to time it."

Matt nodded. "I'll watch the giant. You get in front of me. When I tap your back, run. Fen—"

"Follow. Yeah, I get it." Did he look annoyed? Matt couldn't tell, and this wasn't the time to worry about it.

Laurie inched forward and got into position, crouched as low as she could get, ready to run on his signal. Matt peeked over the rocks. The Jotunn had stopped. Each head looked a different way—neither their way. Matt tapped Laurie. She sprinted, with Fen right behind her.

Matt let them get halfway across the gap, then took one step out, his gaze fixed on the fire giant. A second step. A third...

Blue light flashed. That's all he saw, a flash so bright it was like a stun grenade. He staggered back. Laurie let out half a yelp before stifling it.

Both Laurie and Fen were staring at him. At his chest. He looked down to see his amulet sparking a brilliant blue. His hands flew to cover it. A roar boomed through the air—a crackling, unearthly roar. Matt swung around and saw the Jotunn coming straight for them. No, coming straight for *him*.

He glanced at the cousins. "Run!"

As Matt turned to the Jotunn and raced toward it, Fen

shouted, “Wrong direction! I really wish you’d stop running *toward* danger, Thorsen!”

As Matt ran, the amulet vibrated, but there was none of the usual heat. It was almost cold. The burn of ice. The amulet glowed so bright now that it cut through the swirling smoke and lit the dim wastelands like the midday sun.

The Jotunn had stopped running. It stood there, both heads tilted, looking at him in confusion. Matt pulled the shield from his shoulder and slung it over his arm. All four eyes of the Jotunn widened.

“*Vingthor*,” one of the heads rumbled.

*Vingthor. Battle Thor.*

Not exactly...but Matt still smiled. Adrenaline tore through him, sparking and sizzling like the amulet, and when his hand shot out, it wasn’t even a conscious action. He just did it, as naturally as breathing. There was a deafening crack as ice shot from his fingertips. Yes, ice. A blast of white that froze into a shard of solid ice as it flew. It hit the Jotunn in the stomach and sent the giant crashing to the ground so hard the vibration nearly knocked Matt onto *his* butt.

Matt stood there, grinning.

*I can do this. I can really do...*

The Jotunn sprang up. It didn’t struggle up, dazed, like the trolls had—it leaped to its feet like a gymnast and barreled toward Matt. His hand shot out to launch another ice bolt. And it worked—the ice flew from his fingers and

whipped straight at the Jotunn. But the giant's massive fist swung, hit the ice bolt, and shattered it into a thousand harmless slivers.

"Matt! Come *on*!" Laurie shouted.

Matt turned and ran. Ran as fast as he could, the ground shaking under his feet. The Jotunn roared, and the heat of its roar scorched Matt's back.

"Run!" he yelled to Fen and Laurie. "Go!"

They took off behind the row of rocks. Matt veered to the left before he reached them. He was heading for another row of rocks, farther down, to keep the Jotunn away from the cousins. Then he saw the fissure—a crack in the rocks, maybe three feet across. If he could get down in there, the Jotunn couldn't reach him. He ran over and raced alongside the crack getting a look down. It tapered off past the opening. The lowest point he could see was maybe ten feet down. Too far to jump. He should—

The Jotunn roared with a gust of heat that made Matt gasp. Sparks blasted him, burning his skin, singeing holes in his shirt. He spun, and the giant was right there, a flaming sword in each hand. One blade headed straight for him. Matt swung his shield up, but even as he did, he realized his mistake. Flaming sword. Wooden shield.

His amulet flared again, and cold ice shot down his arm and into his hand. There was a blast of white as snow whipped up and swirled around his shield arm. The flaming

sword struck the wood with a thunderous *clang*. The blow knocked Matt clear off his feet. He fell backward, and as he did, he remembered where he'd been standing. On the edge of a chasm.

There was no time to grab anything. No time to even right himself. He fell backward into the fissure, his head hitting the rock side with an explosion of pain so intense he blacked out. He came to and found himself wedged as far down as he could get in the crevasse. He lay there, looking up, not daring to move, certain he'd broken something, probably broken *everything*. Then the Jotunn's two heads appeared over the edge of the chasm. One mouth opened. Fire blasted. Matt got his shield up just in time. A layer of ice snapped over the wood, and the fire bounced off.

The other mouth opened. Smoke billowed, and Matt thought, *That's it? Really?* Then the smoke hit him, so thick he choked and sputtered, eyes watering as he gasped for breath.

Matt yanked his shirt up over his nose and mouth. Then he flipped over and began to awkwardly crawl with his shield slung over his shoulder, protecting his back. Not easy to do when there wasn't a flat bottom. His feet kept sliding farther down into the fissure, and he almost got his shoe stuck more than once.

It felt like he had indeed broken everything, but he kept moving as fast as he could. The fissure dipped, getting

deeper, and soon he couldn't feel the heat against his back. He glanced over his shoulder to see the Jotunn reaching into the chasm, but he was too far down.

"Hey!" a voice shouted. "Hey, you! Fire creep!"

Fen's voice echoed through the wasteland. When Matt looked up, he saw the Jotunn's two heads looking every which way, as if they couldn't find the source of the voice. Matt crawled faster. Fen kept shouting. Finally, with a grunt, the giant took off, ground shaking as it ran.

Matt grabbed the side of the fissure and began crawling up. When he popped his head out, the Jotunn was a few hundred feet away, looking around wildly.

"Matt!" It was Laurie, whispering loudly.

A hand appeared from behind a rock. Matt took one last look at the Jotunn, then heaved himself out of the fissure and ran for the cover of the rocks, where Laurie waited. When he reached her, he checked for Fen, to be sure he was safe. He seemed to be. He was keeping his distance from the giant and had gone silent now that Matt had escaped.

The Jotunn kept looking around, heads muttering to each other after each scan of the rocky plain. It checked the crevasse a few times, as if Matt might suddenly appear there. Finally, the giant lumbered back toward the chasm where it had first appeared. As it climbed down into it, Fen came along, jogging silently behind the rocks. Matt waited until he caught up, then the three of them set out again.



“You need to rest,” Laurie whispered as they made their way across the rocky plain. The landscape had flattened out and the smoke had dispersed, but the ruined city was still a distant smudge against the endless twilight. The home of Helen, ruler of the afterlife. That’s where they’d been headed, presuming that’s where they’d find Baldwin.

“You can barely walk,” she continued. “We’ve been up all night and hiking all day.”

Matt shook his head. “We have a long way—”

“Fine.” She raised her voice so Fen could hear. “I’m sorry, guys, but I really need a break.”

Matt knew she didn’t. He also knew that if he dared say so, Fen would snap and snarl at him for pushing his cousin too hard.

They settled on the rocky ground, because there was no place else to settle, not even a rise to perch on or a dip to hide in. They could only lower themselves to the flat ground in a circle, keeping a lookout for anything coming up behind the others. It felt good to stop, Matt’s aching muscles sighing in relief. After falling into the chasm, he did need a rest, but considering their mission, he hadn’t felt right saying so.

Their mission: to stop Ragnarök, the Norse end of days. In the old stories, the gods all died at Ragnarök. Except they were already dead. Odin, Balder, Loki . . . all gone. So Matt

and the others needed to take their places, presumably without the dying part. If they failed? Then the world would be plunged into endless winter.

Matt rubbed his arms. Speaking of winter, there was a chill here he hadn't noticed when they had been moving. A damp chill. It seemed to settle over them, numbing Matt to his bones. He was going to say something, but Laurie was whispering to Fen, and Matt left them alone, falling back into his thoughts.

When his grandfather announced that Ragnarök was coming and Matt would be "Thor's champion"—to take Thor's place in battle—Matt had been... well, he'd like to say *honored*, but *terrified* was a better word. He knew everyone was counting on him, though, so he'd accepted his role and had been ready, to train, to fight, to win. Then he'd overheard his grandfather and the other elders saying they didn't expect Matt to defeat the Midgard Serpent. They actually *wanted* him to lose. Because if he lost, Fimbulwinter would come, and the world would be reborn, fresh and new... after nearly everyone on it died.

Matt still couldn't imagine how his grandfather could want such a thing. But he sure wasn't going to help it happen. So when he'd been sent to find the other descendants of the North, he'd taken Laurie and Fen and headed out.

"*Brrr,*" Laurie said, shivering. "Does anyone else feel that?"

“Yeah,” Fen said, looking at her worriedly. “We should get going soon.”

He glanced toward the city, and Matt knew he was thinking about Baldwin. Their friend was the descendant of Balder, the most popular of the gods. According to the myths, after Balder’s death, the gods went to Hel but failed to get him back, and that was the start of Ragnarök. That’s why they were here. To change the myth. To get Baldwin back. To stop Ragnarök.

Matt looked at the distant ruined city. Yes, as Thor’s champion, stopping Ragnarök was his priority. But as Matt Thorsen, he just kept thinking about Baldwin.

“We should go,” he said.

“In a few minutes.” Laurie rubbed her arms again and shivered. “You know what we need? A campfire.”

“Those fire giants gave off plenty of heat,” Matt teased. “We could go back and play with them for a while.”

Laurie shuddered. “No thank you. I just wish my powers included fire-starting.”

“I bet the twins could do it,” Matt said quietly, staring into the middle of the circle.

Fen snorted. “I doubt it. They were useless. We’ll find better replacements.”

Laurie glanced at Matt, her expression saying she knew Fen was wrong. Even Fen knew he was wrong—Matt could tell by his blustery tone, as Fen tried to convince himself they



were better off without Ray and Reyna, the descendants of Frey and Freya. Fen hadn't liked the twins much, but their magic had been useful, and they'd finally seemed to be making an effort to fit in with the group. Then Baldwin died, and the twins decided they weren't all that interested in saving the world after all. Not if it meant traveling to the afterlife. And certainly not if it could mean dying themselves.

"Okay," Matt said. "We really do need to get moving. Are you up to it, Laurie?"

She nodded, and they set out.



They walked for what seemed like hours until finally the city began to take form, and soon they could see the massive gates blocking their path.

"The gates to Hel," Matt murmured. "They say that once you pass through, you can never come out."

"So are we going to stand at the gates and yell for Helen instead?" Fen asked, sounding halfway serious.

Matt managed a wry smile. "I wish."

As they approached, they had to pick their way through ruined buildings. They ducked through doorways and climbed over rubble, and they were just about to crawl *under* rubble when Fen lifted his head and inhaled sharply.

"Smell something?" Matt said.

Fen's Loki-power was the ability to shape-shift into

a wolf, and he had a better sense of smell even in human form.

“Nah, just thought I—”

Laurie cut him off with a cry. “Matt! Watch—!”

Something grabbed Matt by the seat of his pants. He flew into the air, all four limbs working madly. Then, whatever had him let go, and he sailed onto a pile of rocks. Fresh pain exploded from every inch of his body.

Matt flipped over and looked up into a pair of eyes. Two pairs, actually, one right over the other—four red eyes glowing from matted black fur. Then the creature’s jaws parted and white fangs flashed as it roared—the same roar Matt had heard when he was over by the Jotunn, now inches from his ears, making his head ring as his eyes squeezed shut. When he opened them again, he could see what was over him. A dog. A giant black dog with four red glowing eyes.

“Matt!” Laurie said. “Use your Hammer!”

Matt hesitated. He could easily work up enough fear and anger to invoke his power, but...well, his amulet wasn’t vibrating, which gave him pause. It *always* vibrated for monsters. Unless this wasn’t the same kind of monster as the trolls and the giants were...

Giant dog. Guarding the gates of Hel.

“Garm,” he murmured as he looked into the beast’s eyes. It snarled, drool dripping from its jaws, but it made no move to use those jaws on his throat. “It’s Garm.”

“I don’t care what it’s called,” Fen said. “It’s a big dog that wants to eat you for dinner, Thorsen. Now use your Hammer. Or do I have to rescue you again?”

“My amulet’s not reacting,” Matt said. “That means he isn’t a threat.”

“Right. He doesn’t seem threatening at *all*,” Fen said sarcastically as he raised his voice to be heard over Garm’s roar.

Garm lowered his muzzle to Matt’s face. Saliva dripped. Matt closed his mouth fast.

“Matt!” Laurie said. “Do something!”

Matt cleared his throat. “My name is Matt Thorsen. I’m a descendant of Thor, and I need to speak to—”

“Seriously, Thorsen?” Fen cut in. “You’re trying to talk to him?”

“I need to speak to Helen,” Matt continued. “I don’t mean her any harm. If you could take me to her—”

Garm cut him off with a deafening roar.