

Storm Hound

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Chapter 1

He was Storm of Odin, last-born hound of the Wild Hunt that runs across the plains of the sky on stormy nights. He was barely four months old, but almost as tall as the crimson-tailed horses that raced before him. His coat was the black of the deepest midnight, his eyes shone golden-bright, alive with excitement.

He was Storm of Odin and this was his first hunt. He opened his mouth and howled, his voice joining the cries of the pack around him. The scream of hunting horns echoed between the wide horizons, and moonlight glanced off the hunters' helmets and the tips of their spears. Sky and earth trembled together.

He was Storm of Odin, and . . .

. . . he was having a little trouble keeping up.

He ran as fast as ever – faster, in fact, because he was straining now, his muscles beginning to ache, and the wild joy of the hunt was being overtaken by an uneasy feeling that all was not well. He dropped his head and his howls became a series of pants and grunts as he struggled to keep his legs moving forward. The crimson horse-tails were no longer in his face but flickered in the darkness ahead.

The stormhound slowed, and his paws began to sink through the cloud beneath him. He howled again, his voice less like thunder across cloud-topped mountains and more a cry of 'Hey, wait for me!'

No one heard. No one waited.

The Wild Hunt rushed on.

Far behind them all, Storm of Odin uttered a final yelp and fell from the sky.

Morning came and brought a headache with it. The sunlight made everything bright and sharp-edged – much bigger than he'd expected. The sky, no longer thunder-filled, was a clear, light grey, speckled with white wisps that didn't deserve the name of clouds.

Mountains rose in indistinct humps all around while, closer by, trees towered over him, their branches hung with faded green leaves. Grass pricked at his paws as he took his first step.

Where was he?

The only creatures in sight were a huddle of sheep staring at him from a field on the other side of a grey stripe on the ground. A road – he'd heard the huntsmen speak of them. Humans built them because they didn't have wild horses to carry them. Instead, they crawled along these grey paths in armoured shells like snails.

The stormhound stepped on to the road to look about. The surface was rough, surprisingly hard, and smelled of warm stones and tar. A large sign stood opposite.

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These shapes meant nothing to him. And why weren't the sheep fleeing from him in terror, or falling at his feet in awe? Were they so stupid they didn't know who he was?

Hey! Sheep! the stormhound shouted.

The sheep gazed blankly at him, chewing grass. Eventually, one of them wandered closer. *You talking to us?*

Who else I would I be talking to? A growl rose in Storm of Odin's throat as he prowled forward. *I am Storm of Odin of the Wild Hunt. Did you not hear us pass by last night?*

The sheep looked at one another and back at him. *If you're a stormhound*, said the one who'd spoken before, *I'm Aries. The Ram – get it?*

And I'm Rameses of Egypt, another one baaed. The whole flock fell about laughing.

Storm of Odin growled again in annoyance. *You're not even rams, you stupid sheep.*

The sheep only laughed harder.

Caaaaaaar! one of them shouted.

The stormhound shook his head. *Don't you mean 'baaaaa'?*

The ground trembled. Storm of Odin leaped backwards just in time. A rush of air, a noise like thunder and something metal roared by on the road. It was vast – the size of a chariot, and almost as loud as the Wild Hunt.

A moment later it was gone.

The stormhound rolled over and came up coughing. The air tasted of smoke and oil.

Car, the sheep said smugly. The rest of the flock chewed grass frantically, looking as if they were trying not to laugh.

Another of the metal things rushed into sight and shot by, faster and noisier than anything the stormhound had seen in his short life.

What do you get if you cross a stormhound and a sheep? one of the sheep asked. *A very baaaaaaad dog. Go back to the sky, storm puppy. It's not safe here.*

Storm puppy? Storm of Odin growled at the insult. He put a paw on the road, intending to cross over and teach the sheep a lesson, but he felt another rumble begin to build and stepped back. Odin would smite the sheep for their insolence when the Hunt returned. He turned his back on the sheep with as much dignity as he could muster and began to walk.

He was much slower than last night. The thorny weeds at the side of the road stung his paws and every time a metal car came past, the wind buffeted him and he had to flatten himself to the ground. After a while, rain began to fall and he plodded on through puddles.

He wanted to sit down and rest but forced himself on. This grey road must lead somewhere – why else would the humans rush along it in such a hurry?

Then, unexpectedly, a car swerved to the side of the road and stopped. A door opened in the side and a man stepped out.

Storm of Odin began to growl and stopped in surprise. The man was huge; so tall, his face was a faraway blur. The stormhound scuttled backwards on his bottom. This was far worse than he'd thought. He hadn't fallen into the world of men, after all, but a land of giants!

The giant squatted and stretched out a hand, palm down. 'It's all right.'

No, it wasn't all right. It was very *not* all right. The human world was not supposed to be this big.

Unless . . .

Oh no.

The thought had been knocking quietly for his attention for some time, but Storm of Odin hadn't wanted to let it in. Now, it overwhelmed him. He looked down at the earth, at his two front paws, glossy black and quite small in the grass. He felt one of his ears flop sideways and though he growled with effort, he couldn't make it stand up again.

The man was not a giant. Storm of Odin was small. This world had shrunk him. He let out a whimper of despair.

The man lifted him out of the grass with hands that smelled of mint and soap. Storm of Odin bared his teeth.

'You're a fierce little thing, aren't you?' the man said, and ruffled the stormhound's black ears.

This was worse humiliation than anything so far. When the great Lord Odin got to hear about this he would smite this man and his tin shell from the face of the earth.

‘What kind of person would abandon a puppy?’ the man asked.

The Wild Hunt, that’s who. But it wasn’t their fault I got left behind, and they’ll be back soon, so if you will kindly release me and be on your way I will consider asking Odin not to blast your home and family with thundery vengeance.

The man clearly didn’t understand a word. Instead of putting Storm of Odin down on the ground, he carried him to the metal shell and placed him gently on the back seat. Then he produced a blanket and proceeded to dry the stormhound’s wet coat.

A fluffy blanket. Pink, printed all over with kittens and smelling of cat.

This was too much. Storm of Odin shook himself free and stood up, ready to enact his own thundery vengeance here and now, but the man had already let him go and was climbing into the front seat of the metal shell.

‘Hold tight, little guy,’ he said.

Little guy? Eat lightning, human!

The metal shell rumbled and lurched. The stormhound’s stomach lurched with it. On second thoughts, he’d just lie here and chew the man’s blanket for a while. That’d teach him.

