

MANOWAR
'THUNDER IN THE SKY'

From

'THE ASGARD SAGA'

Booklet Stories by Wolfgang Hohlbein

THUNDER IN THE SKY

If I Had A Name It Has Long Been Forgotten
Was I Ever Born From Who Am I Begotten
I Walk Into A Storm White Fire Burns Me
Death In Every Step
A World Of Pain That Learns Me

His world was white and cold, a cruel, all consuming white, that blinded his eyes and obliterated everything. His hands could no longer function with the cold, even crueler, stabbing at his limbs like pieces of glass, making each step more painful than the last. His lungs were as if a knife cut through every time he tried to breathe. But he had to ignore this.

They were here.

Hoofbeats announced their arrival. The smell of death and devastation, blew in on the icy wind. There were at least five or six riders, if no more. He was alone and on foot, weak from the endless march through the blizzard and blistering cold and the gnawing self-doubt plaguing him.

He did not know who he was, where he came from, why he was here or what fate expected. He did not know who had born him, who was friend or foe.

A thunderclap rolled over the land and a sudden gust of wind whipped at the snow. Dark shapes on enormous steeds tore the dry white snowdrifts apart. The faces were hidden under helmets and their swords were raised in a deadly promise.

It was too late to escape.

He ducked under the first heavy blow, heaved his hammer high in order to block the second, and turned exactly when an enormous warrior roared so loud and furiously that the storm itself seemed to shutter. The eyes of the giant flashed behind the observation slits of his reinforced helmet as he approached him on the stead. He fell in the same moment that an enormous clap of thunder rolled again over the sky. It

was as if heredity tore the earth from beneath his feet. The world shook as if the Gods struck with their hammers in unison.

Hard iron fitted hooves trampled close to his face as he lay in the snow. Suddenly, something long and thin with a deadly point was thrust at him. He cried in agony as a cruel pain exploded in his upper arm. He clasped the spear and yanked at it with such force that the warrior on the other end of it cried out in surprise and fell to the ground. He jumped up and pulled the spear from his arm in one motion. The pain in his shoulder made him stumble. The giant warrior was already on his feet.

There was no time for the armored giant to get to him so he grabbed his hammer and raised it in the air. Then they faced each other, eye to eye. Time stopped, breathing halted, the sky expired, the earth trembled and...

When You See My Eyes
The Ground Is Shaking
Your Bones Are Breaking
When You See My Eyes
There's Thunder In The Sky
And Soon Your Gonna Die

The storm howled louder and more violently. The hammer and sword met one another with devastating force. His hammer cracked harder and harder on the armor and the weapon of the giant warrior. He stumbled back in surprised shock. His hammer blows followed the continual blasts of thunder, as if his strength was drawn from the source behind the horizon. Then with one strong blow to the helmet of his opponent, his skull broke open and the blood flowed profusely. His victory did not last long, not even long enough for a short breath. The others were near, too many and too strong for only one man, even for a man who was half God like him.

And he called the storm...

LET THE GODS DECIDE

Warriors Take The Field
The Battlefield Of Life
You Cannot Run
You Cannot Hide

Hell had opened its gates and spilled burning blood on the city, in order to devour it. Roofs and gables burst while flames tore through iron grey skies. Behind them, humans fled in panic and fear of the warriors, the fire devils that annihilated all that crossed their path.

Thor could have his loyal men stand against them and fight (and perish). There was this quiet, age-old voice in him, telling him that he should do exactly that. That it was his duty, to fight the battle or die trying.

But this was not the moment yet. To bust the stranglehold of their enemies and attack their army from their backs, this was the only chance they had to survive.

If the Gods were with them.

Together with Torben he scurried towards the small rudder boat to carry out a surprise attack. In the port, bits of burning water and glowing pieces of rubble floated. Behind it rose the outline of the monstrous Drakkar, which completed the stranglehold of the Lightbringers from the sea; a bizarre black thing, more monster than ship.

Many of the men who would fight this last battle with him were sailors, not warriors. This turned out to be an advantage now. Almost soundless and seemingly with years of training, Torben's men helped the seven surviving Einherjar into the boat.

The Drakkar emerged before them, the port exit nearly completely blocked.

"And what now? ", Torben asked. "We will never get past the rudders unnoticed!"

"True", Thor sighed. "However, the rudders give me a good idea." And thus he hurled the hammer. In the darkness Mjöllnir's flight was not to be seen, yet what he arranged at the end of the long curve was all the more meaningful. Even Thor was surprised when the rudders splintered one after the other in a bizarre chain reaction. A choir of cries full of pain and terror mixed into the slamming of exploding wood. At least two dark shapes fell overboard and sank in the boiling water, while Mjöllnir continued his swift flight, and, with a lightning bolt, landed in Thor's raised hand.

Thor let the hand with the hammer sink again. The Drakkar vibrated like a wounded animal and the water, under the impact of the burst rudders and splintered wood, showered the screaming bodies.

*Our Ancestors Cheer
From Far Beyond The Grave
One Will Survive
Then Let The Gods Decide*

Seeking a firm stand, Thor aimed at the Drakkar and let Mjöllnir fly for the second time. This time the hammer cut the mast, which fell in a disarray of ropes, torn canvas and dangerous wood splinters on the deck, wounding and killing more men. It continued its swift flight and destroyed the back of the carved masthead, like a wicked child, who wouldn't stop.

The hammer's handle vibrated with energy when it was once again in his hand. Torben's eyes were wide with disbelief. „But that...!“ he screamed. „Was completely in vain if you don't change course, Captain.“ Thor said.

Torben stared at him for another heartbeat, but then he seemed to realise that the rowboat was still tailing towards the larger ship, and he barked a reluctant order. The boat bucked but swung obediently around on a new course, closely passing the trembling Drakkar, into the open sea and towards a place where it would be in the back of their enemies.

*I Am The Keeper Of The Laws
Decided By The Gods*

FATHER

*When I Was Small
You Took Me By The Hand
Father You Should Know
I Finally Understand*

Directly before the toes of his boots, the cliff fell so perpendicularly into the depth, as if a giant would have split the entire mountain with an axe blow. The storm hit more violently than ever before, with inexhaustible strength. It whirled the snow up at the steep wall, tore it apart and formed it again to be wrapped around things which reached for it. It was a thoroughly majestic sight, the greatness of the creation one's eyes. It made one wonder, who was responsible for such pictures.

Odin, he thought. *Are you the one who has created all that is here?*

He did not get an answer. Of course not. The last days and weeks, his memory had returned - or what he regarded as it. Still much remained hidden behind dense fog, made no sense at all...or perhaps one he did not want to understand.

But there was one he remembered: his father.

*You Taught Me Wrong From Right
And How To Live
You Gave The Greatest Gift
That One Could Give*

Heavy steps crunched on the hard frozen snow. Without turning, Thor knew who had managed the long and dangerous ascent that led here to the seat of the Gods.

It was Bjorn, Skalde of Midgard, his ally in the fight against the Lightbringers, which provoked humans and Gods. In innumerable fights and bloody battles he had become almost a friend. It was because of him that Urd and he found refuge in Midgard.

"I do not know, whether you are really a God or only a mortal human surrounded by a large secret," said Bjorn, „But no matter if you are the one or the other, Thor - take a close look. This is perhaps the last place in the world where humans are able to live in freedom, and where the years of life are the only thing they have to bend their heads. All the same, whoever you are and whoever sent you, don't you think this is worth being protected?"

Thor was still much too shaken by what he saw to understand the meaning of what Bjorn said. There was so much more the bearded Skalde did not know and was never allowed to know.

"You do not really believe that I am a God", he said. In vain, he attempted a smile.

"Some of us believe it", answered Bjorn. "Your companion believes it, and her children anyway."

That surprised Thor, but it was not important for the moment. "And you? "

Bjorn hesitated noticeably to answer and when he finally did, he did not look at him, but the white infinity before them. "I don't know, Thor ", he finally said. "And I think I don't even care. If you came here to destroy all this, then we will kill you. Like we killed those who came before you, and those who will follow you. But if you really are a God, isn't it your task then to protect this country and its people? "

Thor stared into the storm. Really a God? Yes, he probably was. He thought of his father. Powerful he was, strong and unshakable. There was nothing he ever feared. And yet...

" There are many who say that Odin is dead ", continued the Skalde, as if he had read his thoughts, "and that Ragnarök awaits us."

Thor stared darkly at the Skalde. Bjorn's beard was stuck to his face from the ice, his skin red and full of splintered veins. One could not see whether he feared Thor's anger, or if it brought him satisfaction to upset a God.

"Odin is not dead, " Thor almost whispered, and yet his voice easily drowned the storm. "Everybody who says so will feel my hammer!"

An icy draft of air let him blink. With a jolt he turned away from the Skalden and stared up into the grey storm-torn sky, where the last peak of the mountain massif merged with almost black clouds.

*You're With Me
In Every Word I Say
In Every Hour
Of Every Single Day
In All I Do
I'm Just A Part Of You*

Yes, he thought. Maybe it was true and Odin was dead. And yet , it could not and would never be. Simply because he was his father, and would eternally live on in his heart...

DIE WITH HONOR

*If I Should Return
With My Body On My Shield
Tell My Son I Chose To Die Than Yield
Though My Life May Soon Be Gone
I Hope You'll Carry On
Remember Me As One Who Would Not Kneel*

From the distance it was not any more than the noise of nervous fingers tapping on a desk top; but then it increased steadily, became louder and louder, the hard hoofbeats of steeds on frozen soil, and finally it brought the earth to quake and the hearts to flutter of those they wanted to protect.

Thor seized his hammer more firmly and looked into the round. Thirty seven they were, without him. Thirty seven Einherjar; riders, hardened by a life in combat training, preparing for Ragnarok. Their faces were hidden behind golden masks, which made them look like mythical creatures, with matching heavy armor and black buckles and leather. Less humans than living myths, from the depths of Hell they had come to bring death and destruction into the world.

Or so it appeared, while the opposite was true. The Einherjar stood between Asgard and the riders, who had come to destroy the last human bastion. They would fight to the death, he grimly thought, to protect the humans who put their faith in Asgard. And Thor would fight with them and achieve the miracle his father had expected of him from the beginning. He would win, or die with them in battle.

*Fight With Blood
Fight With Steel
Die With Honor
Never Yield*

*Fearless Hearts
Filled With Pride
Into Glory We Shall Ride
Into Glory We Shall Ride*

A cloud of dust, snow and ice announced the approach of the riders. The earth shook heavily as if giants were approaching, not humans of flesh and blood. They were hundreds, as he expected, hundreds and hundreds, the largest army ever unleashed to defy the Gods and upset the old order.

Thor cast a glance on the man with the wolf mask beside him. As if by secret command, the horses starting moving together, thirty seven against thousands. Thor saw the charging army covered in blood red light from the rising sun. Like in anticipation of the fire he had come to ignite. So many years had passed since he and Urd found each other. Now he was the father of a son himself, had to make life and death decisions. Whatever he would do now, it would change the world forever.

The group's horses were disciplined, fearless animals, but the further they rode and the closer the enemy approached, the more skittish they became. Thor noticed one of the animals prance, followed by the stumble of another and insecure steps by a third steed. All small indications that not only their masters knew they were riding towards certain death.

Unless he still performed the miracle his father expected of him.

*If I Do Not Return
Bring My Body On My Shield
Tell My Son I Chose To Die
I Chose To Die Than Yield*

THE CROWN AND THE RING

*From A Battle I've Come To A Battle I Ride
Blazing Up To The Sky
Chains Of Fate Hold A Fiery Stride
I'll See You Again When I Die*

Here is where it ended.

It had been long, oh, so infinitely long and hard and it had cost too many lives. From a victorious battle he had come, to ride into the next, which he lost. And further to the next victory and to the defeat, which waited behind it. How many battles, he thought. How many victories and how many defeats? He had long stopped counting, there had been too many. He was tired of killing. And tonight it would end, here and now.

It was over. Blood had flowed at this long forgotten place, lives been extinguished. He felt nothing more than a great weariness and weakness. The earth breathed the pain of so many that had died here and the echoes of past dreams which had never been fulfilled. It was as if creation itself carried a wound that would never heal.

„Odin“, he murmured.

Only this word, hardly more than a whisper, but nevertheless it was as if a loud scream soared to the sky; despair, curse and challenge at the same time. Why had his father sent him on this long strenuous journey? Why had he made him fight against his enemies and betray his friends? Only to be brought here to this cold, somber place at the end of the world; so cold and repellent that even the Gods avoided it.

As if to answer his soundless question the wind refreshed and his horse snorted quietly. Bloody foam dripped from its nostrils and colored the snow red. He felt the pain that his faithful animal suffered. Perhaps this animal was the only friend who remained in his world. Perhaps the only living creature which did not shrink from the sound of his name and did not look upon him with fear.

*High And Mighty Alone We Are Kings
Whirlwinds Of Fire We Ride
Providence Brought Us The Crown And The Ring
Covered With Blood And Our Pride*

Thor detached Mjöllnir from the saddle. The hammer weighed heavy in his hand, more heavily, than he remembered it. Maybe, because he had extinguished too many human lives with it. Instinctively he felt that it was not the weapon that should be brought here, to this last battlefield.

He saw a shape step out of the shadow. A giant in armour, like him, but taller, maybe stronger and definitely more somber, and he heard Mjöllnir soundlessly cry for the blood of his creator.

„Father“, he whispered. "Let us begin.“

*Odin I Await Thee
Your True Son Am I
I Hail You Now As I Die
I Pledge You My Sword And To No Man I Kneel
Ours Is The Kingdom Of Steel*

GOD OR MAN

I Arrive A Stranger In This Land
And Those Who Seek Me
Their Blood Will Wash The Land
They Who Need Me
Now Reach Out Their Hand
And If She Heals Me
Will I Be God Or Man

The battle was over, but the victory had not been a victory, only another kind of defeat for which he paid dearly. The storm had whipped up the bloody snow under his feet and the cries of the dying haunted him on his long way. He stumbled along an endless road, until he finally encountered Urd and her family. Now they sat in quiet despair in the destroyed farmhouse, a tempest around them and an almost certainty that they would be lost if a miracle didn't happen soon. He lived and he had won... but what a victory, that demanded such a price.

Maybe the defeated were the true winners. Maybe it was the dead, eventually overcoming the living, because they had found peace in the end. A peace that he might never be granted.

Urd rose from the fireplace where her husband had just died and approached his improvised camp. With rigid face she raised a jug to his cracked lips and he drank with large, greedy sips. But he could not vanquish the burning thirst in his throat.

"My son called you Thor," Urd said. Her voice was soft, almost a whisper that threatened to break with the next words. „Because he saw the dead bodies. You slayed them all with your hammer.“

It sounded like an accusation and indeed it was one. Thor was a God and if he were Thor, then he could also have prevented the death of Urd's husband.

"I am not... " *a God*, he had wanted to say. But was that really true? How could he be sure of what he wasn't if he did not even know what he *was*?

God or man? Maybe the best of both, but maybe also the worst.

Urd worked with skillful hands on his wound. They talked incessantly, stagnant first, but then with a fervor that startled him. Suddenly he recognized how enticing her hair smelled and how vulnerable and

gentle she was even under the harshness her aloofness and rigor. He put his free hand on her hip and pulled her a little closer until he felt her breath on his cheek. It smelled like *life*.

Their lips drew nearer and touched. At first she rejected it, but not because Urd did not want it or was even afraid of him, but because it was too soon and her husband's blood had not even dried on her hands. But then her lips became soft and gentle, and finally demanding. And suddenly it was her arms that entangled him and pulled him closer; a promise of life and death...

Tell Me
Will I Live Or Die
Then Tell Me Why
Now Tell Me Who I Am
God Or Man

Suddenly she pushed him away so briskly that he sank back with a surprised gasp and a befuddled look . Steps creaked on the crusty earth and Urd was seized by a metal glove and brutally pushed aside. Thor looked up. Before him rose a giant warrior wearing iron enforced boots and a black breast plate. A sword blade gleamed in the light of the chimney fire that suddenly looked pale and shallow, as if something had taken away the inner warmth of its flames.

The warrior could have killed him instantly as he lay helplessly on the ground, but he hesitated. On the contrary, he withdrew and slanted his head to peer at Thor through the narrow observation slits of his visor. Something in eyes behind it was... strange.

"You can come with us, or die."

The giant's voice sounded blurry through the visor. At the same time, he heard a noise and another man stepped into the room and drew his weapon.

"This one choice, brother, and no other," the man said as he came closer. "Or die like your father! "

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