

1. SONG

LOKI

1.

At first, Viggo thought he was still dreaming.

And considering his surroundings, he could well have been. His dreams had been confused and strange, featuring natural disasters, fire and wind and storms and tidal waves. And he had been right in the middle of all that chaos. Great.

Most likely the violent thunderstorm that had moved across his home town last night had been responsible for these dreams. Just like it was responsible for the current state of the entire area.

Leaves, twigs, whole branches lay in the street, flattened where cars had already rolled over them. The asphalt gleamed wetly. It must have rained until just before morning. Now the sky was a deep blue and dotted with fast-moving, ragged grey clouds, even though there was hardly any wind on the ground. From a side street, Viggo heard rhythmic thumping and sucking sounds. When he peered across through the school bus window, he saw a Technical Relief Service vehicle pumping water from a flooded basement. A massive jet of water was gushing from the suction pipe and flooding the street. Mud pools had formed around the storm drains at the side of the road. The drains must have overflowed, and when the water had seeped away, it had left the mud behind.

Everyone in the neighbourhood was already up and about, sawing off snapped branches or sweeping fallen leaves from their driveways with big brooms. A tarpaulin hung in a tree, its owner futilely pulling at it. A row of tomato plants that had been standing tall in a vegetable patch a few gardens further down now lay in the wet soil as if they had been mowed down. Viggo looked at the mess, unable to shake the confusing feeling of the dream.

The school bus moved slowly. The air inside was musty and stuffy, the windows fogged over with humidity as if it was winter. The rocking of the vehicle had a lulling effect on Viggo. The bus had to stop further than usual from the school gate, where water from a storm drain had formed a small lake. Students were noisily squeezing past the massive puddle on the footpath, jostling and pushing each other. Viggo listlessly allowed himself to be carried along with them.

He probably wouldn't have noticed the man standing in the street if he had moved with the crowd like the others, even though he stood so close to the edge of the puddle that he couldn't help but stand out. The tips of his shoes seemed to touch the water. He was watching the horde of students with a small smile. Viggo suddenly had the disquieting feeling that he was really just watching him.

In class, Viggo flopped onto his chair and tried to remember what day it was and which subjects they had today. Ah yes – first period: maths. Had he even done his

homework? Viggo took a look at his books. His last homework entry stemmed from the maths class before last. Rats! He must have forgotten somehow. What on Earth was wrong with him?

Viggo looked over at his best buddy Moritz who was sitting next to him. Maybe there was still time to copy their homework. But then the bell sounded, their teacher came in and it was too late.

Viggo's maths teacher had a habit of summoning those students to the blackboard who had forgotten their homework and letting them demonstrate the math problems. He was obviously of the opinion that stuttering embarrassingly in front of the entire class was punishment enough. On his way to the blackboard, Viggo looked out into the schoolyard. To his surprise, the man was still standing there, looking up. He was too far away to say for sure what he was looking at, but Viggo was certain he was staring up at this very classroom.

And now the man lifted a hand and waved! He was waving to Viggo! Viggo stood rooted to the spot, gaping out the window.

"Did you eat a clown for breakfast this morning?" the teacher asked. Viggo flinched. The whole class giggled. He must have been standing there like an idiot, staring out the window with his mouth open. He didn't feel like giggling at all. He turned towards the teacher.

"There's an odd man in the schoolyard," he said. "Some stranger."

But when the teacher stepped to his side, the stranger in the schoolyard had disappeared. As if he had never existed. Instead, the principal stood there, inspecting the school driveway, which was completely under water. It was a perfectly harmless sight. But Viggo suddenly had goosebumps. He had seen the man, he was absolutely sure!

"On to the blackboard you go," the teacher told him.

It was a complete disaster. The longer Viggo struggled up there, the less he could remember. It was as if all the formulas that had ever been in his head had been deleted.

The maths teacher's smile gradually disappeared and turned into a frown. Viggo's classmates started to cast glances at each other. Viggo gritted his teeth when the teacher interrupted him and sent him back to his seat.

"That's a complete fail. This isn't like you! Care to explain what that scrawl on the blackboard is supposed to mean?"

Viggo, who was staring determinedly at his desk at this stage, looked up. In disbelief, he blinked at the characters on the blackboard. He couldn't remember writing them.

[Runes]

Viggo's teacher tried to make a joke of it. "Maybe you've developed a new binomial formula?"

"No," Viggo said. His face was burning, but his heart seemed to be pumping ice through his veins. Had *he* written those foreign characters? Without noticing?

The teacher sighed and scribbled a failing grade into his marking book. Viggo's classmates were staring at him, perplexed. Moritz whispered sympathetically: "Man, what sort of loser are you today?"

Matters took a turn for the worse in art class. Viggo's art teacher liked to keep the class busy with projects spanning a few weeks, setting them tasks they had to accomplish in small teams. Their current task was to design a graffiti of the school's name and draw it on big pieces of cardboard. Unfortunately, the use of spray cans was strictly forbidden.

Mirja was in Viggo's project team. So far, that had made him very happy, but today he wished Mirja were on any other team. What if he acted clumsy somehow and tipped out the dirty water from the brush pot all over ...

Oh no!

There, it had happened.

Rats.

By the time her friends had led Mirja, who was sobbing hysterically, to the girls' bathroom and brought her back again in a semi-cleaned up state, art class was thankfully over. Viggo sat in front of the smudged cardboard – Mirja had actually only caught about half of the water in the brush pot, the rest had landed on their artwork –, unable to look into anyone's eyes. His friend Moritz was half-heartedly dabbing at the mess with a paper towel.

"You're a total super loser today," Moritz said. It no longer sounded quite as sympathetic as it had in maths class.

After that, things got *even worse*.

Viggo and some of the other boys regularly played soccer in the schoolyard. They kicked a ball back and forth between them, aiming to keep it in the air for as long as possible. Sometimes some of the teachers watched, admiring their students' steadily increasing skills.

When Viggo got the ball, he tried to shift it to the player next to him with a knee kick. He threw his knee upwards with some force, and the ball ricocheted and shot off in the wrong direction at top speed.

And found a target.

Rats!

Viggo closed his eyes when he heard the ball hit. Then the clatter as a coffee cup fell to the ground. Then a rather quiet rustling sound as the young student teacher collapsed.

Could this much blood really come from the nose of just one student teacher?

As Viggo made his way back to class from the principal's office, he was accompanied along the hallway by the speaker system and an announcement from the deputy principal that playing soccer during breaks was forbidden, effective immediately, and that the ball had been confiscated for the rest of the school year. The principal had already told Viggo that the parents of all the soccer players would be notified and that it was mere charity that he wasn't going to be issued an official disciplinary letter from the principal himself. Back in class, he flopped onto his chair next to Moritz.

Moritz leaned over and whispered into his ear: "Man, you're being such a shit today!"
Viggo lowered his head.

During lunch break, Viggo sat by himself on the steps leading down to the schoolyard when Oscar Robben from the parallel class spotted him. Oscar was a dickhead.

"Hey, Viggo," he said. "Is it true that you accidentally splashed water all over Mirja?"

"Piss off, Oscar," Viggo said without looking up.

"*Accidentally!*" Oscar said with a lewd grin. "Bet you blew a load, didn't you?"

Viggo struggled to his feet to look for a different spot to sit. Oscar blocked his way.

"I bet," he said, "back in the day, your dad accidentally blew a load, too – that's why your mum and dad didn't want to keep you ..." He sneered.

Viggo had always been open about his fate as a foster child and had never had any negative experiences. That Oscar now alluded to it was rather unusual.

Viggo looked up, speechless and incapable of reply. From the corner of his eye, he saw a suited figure saunter across the schoolyard and for a moment was convinced it was the fellow from this morning. Goosebumps ran up his arms.

But it was only the principal. He looked across disinterestedly and left the schoolyard. Oscar, who had been watching nervously, relaxed. A slow grin stole over his face. "Accidentally blew a load," he repeated with a jeer.

It was Moritz who pulled Viggo off Oscar. By then, Viggo and Oscar had each other in a tight grip and had rolled down the steps into the schoolyard, with Oscar ending up underneath Viggo on every step. Having reached the bottom, Viggo had sat on Oscar's chest and kept slapping the half-stunned boy – left, right, left, forehand and backhand, with a mechanical steadiness that can only be accomplished by someone completely beside himself with rage.

Oscar sobbed, sliding out of Viggo's reach on his butt. His cheeks were bright red. Viggo, held back by Moritz with both arms, offered no resistance. He felt sick. Oscar got to his legs and, still sobbing, staggered off towards the school entrance. His t-shirt was ripped open at the back, grazes visible through the holes.

"Hey, man," Moritz said to Viggo with a dark look, "now that'll net you a disciplinary letter from the principal himself, after everything you've pulled today." Suddenly, his face brightened and he grinned. "But hey, respect! He deserved what he got." Moritz gave him a pat on the back.

Viggo did indeed receive a disciplinary letter from the principal himself. After their conversation, he no longer cared that he missed the last school bus and had to walk all the way home. Viggo was done with this day.

Things couldn't possibly get any worse. Or so he thought.

2.

When Viggo got home, an enormous surprise awaited him. The fellow he had seen in the schoolyard this morning was standing in their combined kitchen and living room. Viggo's parents looked nervous, casting insecure glances at the stranger. Viggo suddenly felt fear creeping up inside him. What was going on here?

"This is Mr Kohl from the Youth Welfare Office," Viggo's father said, indicating their visitor. "He's our new case worker."

"Koil," the visitor corrected him. "With oi."

Viggo held out his hand in greeting. Koil smiled but didn't take it. An awkward silence ensued. Mr Koil kept smiling at Viggo. Viggo felt as if a snake was smiling at a rabbit. He was the rabbit.

"Mr Koil has an ... um ... present for you," Viggo's mother explained, knotting her hands.

"Two presents, actually," Koil said, still smiling incessantly. His eyes sparkled, green as emeralds. "I brought you this."

In his palm lay a small bag made from some light-coloured cloth. Viggo had the strange feeling that it hadn't been there when he had stepped into the kitchen. But maybe he simply hadn't seen it. Just as he was about to reach for the little bag, Mr Koil quickly pulled back his hand and hid it behind his back.

"The second present," Koil said, "is a message."

Viggo exchanged a look with his parents. They shrugged. Viggo realised that they most likely already knew what the message said and that this was the present his mother had mentioned. His parents probably hadn't even noticed the little bag.

Viggo's heart started to thump. Suddenly, excitement began to mingle with the fear the unnerving situation in the kitchen had evoked in him. If their new Youth Welfare Office case worker had come all this way to deliver a message for Viggo, it could really only come from one source.

Viggo's father cleared his throat. "Your birth parents have got in touch." He smiled. Viggo could see it wasn't easy for him.

Viggo's heart beat so hard he could feel it in every part his body. His birth parents had contacted the Youth Welfare Office! For the first time in fourteen years! For the first time in Viggo's life. He knew that the two people he thought of as his parents – and they of him as their son – were really his foster parents. He had been placed with them when he was six months old and had never known any other parents.

At some point, one or two years ago, Viggo had started to wonder in earnest who his birth parents might be. He wanted to meet them one day and find out where he really came from. Over time, his wish had become so strong that Viggo's foster parents had implored the Youth Welfare Office to trace his parents' whereabouts. But how to pick up a trail where there was none? As a newborn, Viggo had been placed into the baby hatch of a hospital without any clothes. A nurse had given him his name. And now the Youth Welfare Office had found his parents despite all that?

"How did you ... find them?" Viggo stammered. His thoughts were racing. Maybe he would really meet his mother and father soon. What would they look like? Like him: tall, blond and athletic? Would they be pleased? Would he feel an immediate connection with them? Or would they be like strangers? Would the sense of somehow being out of place in the world finally diminish now, something he had always felt despite his loving foster parents?

Viggo looked up. He had been so lost in thought that he seemed to have missed Mr Koil's reply. His foster parents were looking at him expectantly. "Excuse me, what?" he stuttered.

"That's fine by us, of course," his father said. He seemed to have said it before and now repeated the corresponding question as well: "Mr Koil was just asking to speak to you in private."

"Uh ... yes," Viggo said, blinking in confusion.

"That's really big news for you," Viggo's mother said. There were tears in her eyes.

"Are you coming?" Mr Koil asked. He was suddenly already on the stairs to the upper floor. Viggo hadn't even noticed how he'd got there. He gave the boy an encouraging nod.

Only as they were standing in front of the door to his room did Viggo realise that Mr Koil had been walking ahead of him. As if he had already known where Viggo's room was.

3.

Viggo dropped his school backpack onto his bed and turned around to face Mr Koil. He was studying Viggo's possessions with a raised eyebrow and Viggo used the opportunity to take a closer look at him.

The man from the Youth Welfare Office was tall and slim, and even close up seemed surprisingly young. He wore his gleaming black hair unfashionably long and closely combed back. There were no rings on his hands and he wasn't wearing a watch – but when he moved his arms, it looked as if a tattoo reaching all the way to his wrists peered out from underneath the cuffs of his long-sleeved shirt. Even though it was summer and warm, he wore an elegant dark suit. Viggo had never met a case worker from the Youth Welfare Office who had worn anything more tasteful than a corduroy jacket with scuffed elbows. Koil moved strangely when he walked, as if there were raw eggs in his shoes. Or as if he were – curious thought! – unused to walking on firm ground.

"You were at my school this morning," Viggo said.

"Me? You must be mistaken." Somehow, there was a challenge in Koil's smile.

"I saw you. And then again in the school yard." Viggo stopped short. Hadn't that been the principal? But the fellow who had stood in front of the massive puddle, that must have been Koil – surely? The suit, the combed-back hair, the elegant appearance ...

"I did see ..." he began and then stopped, confused.

Koil pointed to a small figure on Viggo's shelf. "What's that?"

"A Viking warrior. Playmobil." Viggo cleared his throat in embarrassment. What sort of question was that? "I don't play with it anymore. It's left over from back when I ..."

Koil shook his head with a contemptuous smile. Viggo thought he heard him mutter "Horns on the helmet ...? – And what is this?"

Didn't Koil recognise it? Or was he mocking Viggo?

"A Viking ship. A dragon boat. I built it myself. Could you tell me what ..." Viggo found it difficult to broach the topic again. "... what kind of message it is that you have ...?"

"It's unfinished," Koil interrupted him, pointing at the Viking ship again.

"Um ... yeah ... I was planning to ... "

"Do you have issues finishing things, by any chance?" Koil's emerald eyes seemed to bore into Viggo's soul.

"No!" Viggo said, more forcefully than intended. "Not at all. But I do have other things to do. And the model is stupid. Way too many shields. And the sail is wrong."

"So you do know that?"

"I happen to know that because I looked it up."

"If you looked it up – why did you even buy this stupid model?"

Viggo didn't reply. The truth was that he hadn't looked it up at all. He had come across the model at an internet retailer's while looking for something completely different. It had been cheap and Viggo had suddenly felt like he simply had to have it. His parents had allowed him to buy it. When he had unpacked the components and studied the assembly instructions, he had seen the errors right away. He had started to build the ship, but the magic had faded quickly.

"So you just know?" Koil asked.

Viggo ignored this question, which seemed to suggest that Koil had guessed his thoughts. "And the message you have for me ...?" he started again.

Koil turned towards him. "First, let's talk about this." He took out the little bag again. This time, Viggo could have sworn he had conjured it from thin air.

"Make some room here on the floor, why don't you." Koil pointed vaguely towards Viggo's usual chaos.

After Viggo had shoved trainers, books and a couple of worn socks out of the way, Koil opened the little bag and took out a few small items. He bent down and started laying them out in a circle at great speed. He did this deftly, even though he made it hard from himself by being careful not to step inside the circle.

The items were smaller than stamps. Taking a closer look, Viggo realised they were flat grey stones. Each of them bore a carved character that at first glance looked like a letter from an alphabet Viggo didn't know. There were sixteen stones. Even as Viggo was looking at them, they seemed to blur and change before his eyes. An upright prong suddenly turned into a K. An arrow pointing upwards became a D. A shape like a gate with a smaller side column became a U. Viggo shook his head and the letters became unfamiliar characters once more. He bent down awkwardly to pick up one of the stones.

"Hands off!" Koil said sharply.

Viggo flinched and stood up. He felt dizzy.

"What is that?" he managed.

"A gate," Koil said.

Viggo stared at him.

"A gate that will take you to your parents. Your real parents. That's the message I have for you: Step through the gate. Find your mother and father. And ...," Viggo felt

as if Koil had a hard time holding back and not revealing too much, "... and everything else."

Koil smiled and made an inviting gesture towards the circle. His green eyes sparkled brighter than ever. Light reflexes were dancing in his hair. Or were they actual sparks?

The longer Viggo looked at him, the more clearly he saw it ... "Your feet aren't touching the ground," he said as if in a trance. "And ... you're not casting a shadow."

"Oh," Koil said and seemed almost embarrassed for a moment. He sank down a few centimetres until his feet touched the floor again. "Better?"

"You're still not casting a ..."

"Fine, fine! Do you have any idea how much concentration it takes ...?" A shadow emerged. It was too long and fell in the wrong direction. Koil studied it. "Bah!" he said. The shadow disappeared and didn't come back. "Just get used to it, smarty pants."

"Downstairs in the kitchen you didn't cast one either ..."

"Of course not. But your foster parents didn't notice. Normal people don't notice these things, as long as they don't bite them in the butt."

"Who are you?"

Koil seemed disappointed. "Oh dear," he said. "I've obviously overestimated you."

Viggo stepped towards the door. "I've had enough," he said. The excitement about his birth parents getting in touch had abated. Viggo was confused, and anger was rising up inside him. He swallowed and clenched his fists. "I'm getting my parents."

"What for?"

Astonished, Viggo said: "To kick you out!"

Koil smiled. "I hover above the ground, I only cast a shadow when I want to, I can build a gate from rune stones – and you really think the two mortals down there could throw me out?" The emerald eyes sparkled with amusement. He didn't seem to notice, but he was already floating a handbreadth above the floor of Viggo's room again.

"Mortals?" Viggo uttered sharply. "Rune stones?"

Koil sighed. "Completely overestimated," he muttered.

"Who are you?" Viggo almost shouted it.

Koil lifted a hand and began to draw into the air with his finger. Something like fiery letters appeared. But they weren't letters. They were characters like those on the stones.

[Runes]

Koil pushed the characters into a different order. Now they flickered in the air in a different way. Speechless, Viggo stared at them. He had seen this character sequence before. He himself had written it on the blackboard at school this morning.

[Runes]

"What's that supposed to mean?" Viggo asked, his mouth dry.

"Try harder."

And suddenly, as if nothing were easier, Viggo could read the characters. His jaw dropped.

Koil smiled broadly, indicating a bow. At the same time, his raised eyebrow seemed to imply that it would have been for Viggo to bow, and that it was pure graciousness on Koil's part that he didn't insist.

"Some call me Loptr, others Hvethrungr," he said. "But those names will just get your tongue in a twist. Allow me to introduce myself: Loki of the Aesir."

4.

I'm going crazy, Viggo thought.

Then he thought: No, it's the other way around! Koil is crazy. He's a psychopath!

At the same time, he stared at the flickering runes in the air. Behind them, green eyes sparkling, Koil was hovering a handbreadth above the floor. Could a psychopath levitate and write fiery letters in the air? Viggo felt sick. Then his anger gained the upper hand again.

"Piss off," he said. "Now. I'm getting my parents if you don't leave right now."

The fiery letters flickered out.

"Which parents?" Koil asked, grinning. "Your real ones – or the ones downstairs?"

"They are my real parents!" Viggo shouted. He took a deep breath and yelled: "Mom! Dad!"

A few seconds passed without anyone tearing open the door to Viggo's room and storming in to help. There were no queries from downstairs either.

Viggo took another deep breath before closing his mouth again. "*You're* doing this!" he said, still trembling with rage. "*You're* making sure they can't hear me."

"Really?" Koil said. "Could a mere psychopath do that?"

"Are you reading my thoughts?"

"Your thoughts are written all over your face so clearly even a blind man could read them." Koil studied Viggo. Eventually the smile vanished from his face and he sighed.

"You're not what I expected," he said. Without even bothering to pretend he was walking across the floor, he drifted inside the ring of rune stones. A disgruntled look met Viggo. "You're going to regret that you didn't take this opportunity," Koil's voice whispered, but by then he had already disappeared as if he had never existed.

The rune stones faded and finally became transparent. Viggo bent down towards the little bag, which lay next to the circle on the floor, but it faded just like the stones had. He grasped at nothing. A second later, his room looked as if Koil and the stone circle had never been here, apart from the cleared spot on the floor.

Viggo leaned against the wall. Had this really just happened? He pinched, then slapped himself. But nothing changed. Whatever else, he wasn't in a dream.

Viggo went to the door, instinctively giving the spot where the stone circle had been a wide berth.

Downstairs in the living room, his parents sat next to each other on the sofa and looked at him expectantly.

"And?" Viggo's father asked.

"And what?" Viggo replied.

"Mr Koil told us you would think about it when he left."

"When he ... left?" Viggo repeated, perplexed.

His parents' expressions told him they were worried. "Yeah, when he left," his father said. "Just now. Before you came downstairs."

"But he just disappeared!" Viggo blurted out. "He vanished into thin air in my room."

His parents looked at each other in bewilderment. Then Viggo's mother shook her head. "No, he said goodbye and that you're a fine young man." She was beaming.

"A *warrior*," Viggo's father added. "What a curious choice of words. But these social types all live in their own world anyway."

And write fiery letters in the air, float above the ground and claim their name is Loki of the Aesir, like the Norse god, Viggo thought. His thoughts were going around in circles in his head. It was all he could do to stop himself from uttering them.

Dinner had sailed straight past Viggo. He hoped he hadn't said anything stupid but could barely remember what had been spoken. Most likely the whole evening had revolved around his birth parents and how happy his foster parents were that he had been placed with them as a child. Viggo had to fight back tears, so deep was his love for them; even stronger, however, was the feeling of complete disorientation.

Mr *Koil* from the Youth Welfare Office?

Loki of the Aesir?

Ha! Even the false name was just a tired old trick. The most boring anagram in the world. *Loki* of the Aesir! The god of trickery. The god of deceit. The god none of the other gods trusted, and yet the smartest, craftiest and funniest of all the gods in the Norse sagas.

Gods ... sagas ... what rubbish! Surely Viggo had only imagined that *Koil* had stepped inside the stone circle and vanished along with the rune stones because the news of his birth parents' return had been such a surprise. That was all.

And yet he knew that his encounter with Mr *Koil* had really happened. He knew it like he had known that the model of the dragon boat had been inaccurate. Like he had known even as a small child that there were no horns on the helmet of a Viking warrior.

Back then, he had got on everyone's nerves with his knowledge of the Norse world of the Vikings, their sagas, their voyages of discovery and their fierce character. He had known everything about their realm and their gods and heroes. He had just never known why. He still didn't.

What he knew was: *Loki* or *Loptr* or *Hvethrungr* was the son of a giant. The other gods didn't like him. The humans didn't trust him either – nobody prayed to *Loki* or named their children after him. *Loki* was responsible for the death of the most

popular of all the gods: The sun god Baldur had been killed by one of his many pranks.

At the behest of Baldur's mother, all living things and the entire inanimate nature had sworn that they would never hurt Baldur. Only the mistletoe had failed to swear the oath. One day, the gods were playing a game, firing stones, arrows and spears at Baldur. It was great fun because the oath made him invulnerable. Until Loki came along and placed an arrow carved from mistletoe on the bow of Baldur's blind brother Hodur. Hodur didn't notice, stretched his bow, shot the arrow – and Baldur was done for. Baldur's death brought imbalance to creation – and thus began Ragnarök, the twilight of the gods, the end of the world of both the divine dynasty of the Aesir and the mortal humans. Natural disasters, wars and monsters threatened to destroy creation. The gods fought it in vain, and all of them perished.

The end of the world ... Viggo rolled his eyes. That was certainly taking a long time coming! The Vikings who had feared it had lived over a thousand years ago. And the world still existed, wars and natural disasters notwithstanding. Apparently Loki, who had fled after Baldur's death but had then been captured by the mighty god Thor, had been punished in vain for causing the demise of creation.

The other gods had shackled Loki to a stone in a cave, directly underneath a poisonous snake from whose mouth venom dripped ceaselessly. The venom burnt the unfortunate Loki and caused him terrible pain. Loki was only protected from these agonies while his faithful companion Sigyn sat next to him, catching the snake's venom in a bowl. But Sigyn had to leave every so often to empty the bowl. According to will of the other gods, Loki would remain shackled and suffer in this way until the world ended.

For that reason alone, everything Viggo thought he had experienced this afternoon just had to be complete rubbish! Mr Koil couldn't be Loki because Loki – if Viggo was inclined to assume he actually existed – was tied up somewhere and being drizzled with venom.

Yet deep inside, he felt that the strange visitor was more than just a case worker from the Youth Welfare Office. As absurd as the whole situation was, he knew that the letters of Mr Koil's name, if you put them together the right way, made up the name "Loki", and that he really *was* Loki. Loki was capable of conjuring up illusions. Could it have been just such an illusion when he levitated in the air without casting a shadow? And the fiery letters?

Another illusion.

And the rune stones?

See above.

Which didn't necessarily mean they wouldn't work as a gate.

But a gate to where?

To wherever Viggo's birth parents were.

Viggo stared out the window. Outside, the rain was hammering against the glass. A thunderstorm had started at some point during the evening and had been raging above Viggo's home town ever since. It was even more violent than yesterday's. The

news channels were outdoing each other with reports about the sensational force of this storm that was moving across the region. But Viggo wasn't paying any attention. Was there really a magic gate to somewhere where his parents were waiting for him? And if so – why was it important enough to the god Loki that, despite all his pain, he would send an illusion of himself through time and space and across the borders of probability to deliver a message to Viggo?

Viggo remembered the look Koil-Loki had given him before he had vanished from the stone circle. As if it was personally important to Loki that Viggo used the gate. Yet this was about Viggo's birth parents, and surely being reunited with them couldn't possibly be of importance to anyone except Viggo himself?

Outside, the thunderstorm raged, and gusts of wind shook the house. Viggo was shaking as well, conflicting feelings seething inside him. Again and again, Viggo's room was brightly lit up by flickering lightning strikes.

But then suddenly everything around him shone with an even brighter glow, and Loki's voice said behind his back: "Pretty rude of you to make me set foot out the door in this crappy weather."

5.

"Do you want to meet your parents?" Loki asked. He hovered next to the closed door to Viggo's room, his form shimmering in a brilliant green as if it was lit from inside. The glare was so bright that the rest of the room seemed pitch black by comparison. Loki was still wearing his disguise as Mr Koil from the Youth Welfare Office. "Then step through the gate. I'd like to give you one last chance."

"I don't care about your stupid gate!" Viggo shouted after getting over his shock and surprise about the unexpected visit. "Piss off already!"

Loki suppressed a yawn.

Viggo's anger boiled up quickly and he took a threatening step forward. Then he stopped, aghast. Had he really been planning to attack Koil just now? And what if he had? Would his punch simply have gone through him because he was just an illusion? Loki had watched Viggo's movements with a kind of clinical interest. He looked like a researcher observing a lab rat, thinking: *Look at that, just what I expected*. But all he said was: "Let's make peace. I don't mean you any harm. I only want to help."

Viggo took a deep breath. These fits of rage unnerved him. He had always been able to keep himself in check! What was happening to him? "If you're really Loki," he said, "then the obvious question is: *Who* do you want to help? Loki only ever helps himself."

Loki started to laugh so heartily that his body drifted through the room like a cackling helium balloon in an elegant suit.

"That's good," he gasped. "Really good. I like you much better already. – Look here!"

The god pointed to a spot next to Viggo's bed that suddenly lit up in green as if someone had turned a spotlight towards it. Once more, the rune gate, the circle of stones, was standing there.

Loki turned away and drifted right into its middle. "One sec ..." he said over his shoulder and was suddenly gone.

Only to turn up again a moment later.

No longer as Koil, but as Loki of the Aesir, the god of malice, in all his splendour.

Viggo took a step back. A feeling of awe that came from the depths of his soul made him sink to his knees.

Suddenly, there wasn't even a shadow of doubt that the shimmering man in front of him was an ancient pagan god.