

• HOW TO BE A • HERO

*For Georgia and Immie,
even though you stole all my pens.*



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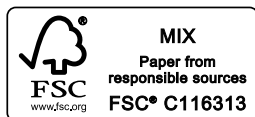
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C A T W E L D O N

Illustrated by Kate Kear

MACMILLAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Chapter One

The Cup of Krud

‘TONIGHT WE FEAST – TOMORROW WE FIGHT!’ The enormous man, big enough to be two normal men but average-sized for one Viking, raised his drinking horn high into the air. Ale slopped out of it and rained down on those sitting around the rough wooden table.

Another man raised his hand. ‘Erm, who are we fighting? Because we’re not *technically* at war with anybody right now.’

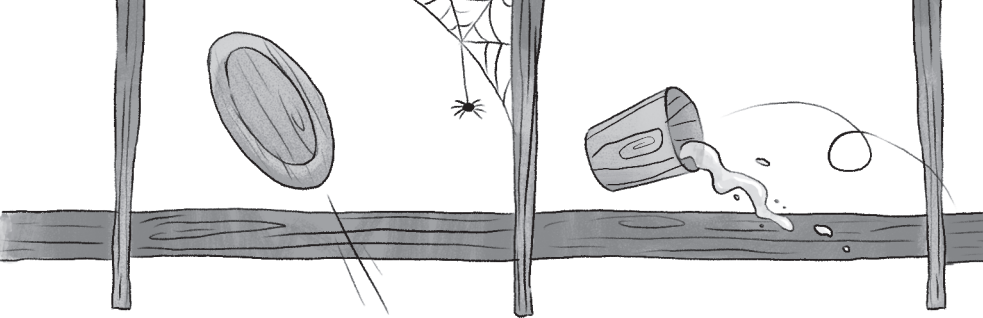
The enormous man paused, his red face screwed up in thought.

‘How about, *Tonight we feast – tomorrow we go on a nice picnic?*’ the other Viking continued, mopping ale off his head with his sleeve. ‘I like picnics.’

‘No – it’s supposed to rain tomorrow,’ replied one with tufty hair tied back in pigtails. ‘What about, *Tonight we feast – tomorrow we pick our toenails?*’

‘Or, *Tonight we feast – tomorrow we press flowers?*’

‘Ha, after eating Ethel’s cooking it should be, *Tonight we feast – tomorrow we have toxic turnip breath,*’ croaked a voice from the back. Several people grumbled in agreement, then



ducked as Ethel threw a ladle across the room.

A Viking with a dark, brushy beard climbed ponderously to his feet and silenced the room with a loud burp. *'Tonight we feast – tomorrow . . . we have an Ultimate Shin-Kicking Contest!'*

This suggestion received an enormous cheer. The air filled with ale foam and half-chewed food as cups and plates were tossed towards the rafters.



Unnoticed by anyone, a pale, scruffy boy put down the tray he carried and ducked out of the door. The boy's name was Whetstone. It wasn't a very good name and he didn't like it much, but it was all he had.

Outside, the cool air tickled his white skin, making the hairs on his arms rise. Whetstone pulled his thin cloak around his shoulders and stepped away from the door. Cutting through the wispy clouds above him hung a bright yellow moon, giving him just enough light to see by.

Behind him in the Great Hall of Krud, the Vikings were still cheering. Whetstone had only been in the village for a couple of days, having managed to blag a job in the kitchens. It hadn't been hard – there wasn't exactly a queue to help clean up after Viking feasts, and trying to get grease stains off the ceiling was a NIGHTMARE. All Vikings were the same – finding any excuse to guzzle and gorge all night until their already pink, blotchy faces grew pinker and blotchier, and they all fell asleep under the table. Whetstone gazed up at the moon and grinned. They wouldn't be celebrating when they found out what his real plans were.

A deathly-white hand dropped on to Whetstone's shoulder and his heart jumped into his mouth as he spun around. 'Oh, Vali! It's you.' He sagged with relief.

The taller boy nodded at him. 'Come on – you know he doesn't like being kept waiting.' He released Whetstone and headed away from the Great Hall, finding his way easily in the darkness.

'I couldn't get out earlier.' Whetstone skipped after him.

‘I’m supposed to be working at the feast. I saw the cup though.’

Vali grabbed hold of Whetstone’s tunic. In his free hand, a knife gleamed. ‘I know Light Finger thinks you’re the one who’s going to take it, but remember – I was here first.’ He gave Whetstone a little shake. ‘You’re a nobody. We felt sorry for you, that was all.’ The boy released Whetstone’s tunic. ‘Once you have the cup, you give it to me. Understand?’

Whetstone brushed himself off. It was impossible to imagine that Vali – this boy with dark, sunken eyes and almost translucent skin – had been the one to convince him to leave home and join the thieves. It seemed unimaginable that he had been nice once.

With a final look behind him, Vali led the way out of the village and moved towards a nearby thicket of trees. A flickering light appeared – it was the thieves’ camp. Whetstone followed Vali towards the firelight, tripping as his too-large boots caught in unseen rabbit holes and clumps of rough grass.

They stepped into the circle of light. A shabby-looking man with overly large front teeth glanced up. The long wooden staff he used to support a damaged leg lay by his side.

‘Did you see it, on the shelf next to the fireplace? Chief Awfulrick always likes to display his treasures during feasts.’ The man spat into the fire, which spluttered green for a moment.

Whetstone nodded slowly, thinking of the golden cup studded with jewels he had seen while collecting plates. ‘Light Finger, are you sure it has to be *me* that steals it?’

‘I’m doing this as a *favour* to you, Whetstone. Don’t you

want Fortune and Glory?’ the ratty-looking man probed. ‘Or would you rather scrub porridge out of pans for the rest of your life?’

Vali dropped on to a nearby tree stump and sniggered. ‘Yeah, you might as well get used to thieving. It’s not as though you’re going to turn out to be a Hero, are you?’

‘Watch out, Vali. If you carry on like that, Whetstone will think you don’t like him.’

Vali gave Whetstone a pained smile, the blade still in his hand, twisting easily through his fingers.

Whetstone shifted awkwardly, his eyes fixed on the knife.

‘It’s not the boy’s fault you failed to get the cup,’ Light Finger snarled. He turned back to Whetstone. ‘You’re not going to fail me, are you, Whetstone? I know this is your first big theft, and it’s natural to feel nervous, but you’ll soon get used to it.’

‘He hasn’t got the guts for it,’ Vali scoffed, picking at his nails with the dagger. ‘Let me have another try. It’s only a cup, after all.’



‘No!’ Light Finger snapped. ‘You had your chance. This is Whetstone’s job now. It’s taken me years to track down that cup, and I’m not leaving Krud without it.’

Vali stabbed the knife into the tree stump and leaned back on his arms, his expression hidden in shadows.

‘It’s only a shame I can’t take it myself. Alas, I am too recognizable, too well known, too—’

‘Slow?’ Vali dodged a blow from Light Finger’s staff.

Whetstone dug his nails into his palms. ‘If I take it, you’re sure I’ll be famous?’

The man nodded. ‘More than your wildest dreams.’

Whetstone sighed. He had some pretty wild dreams. In his heart he knew he didn’t have the skills to be a great warrior – he could hardly lift a sword and preferred running away to fighting. He would never make it as an explorer due to chronic seasickness. But a thief? . . . *That* was a possibility. He was quick and sneaky and no one seemed to notice him much.

When Vali and Light Finger, the Greatest Thief in All the Known World, had arrived in his village, and Vali suggested Whetstone join them, it had seemed too good an opportunity to miss. People loved telling stories of Light Finger’s exploits. If Whetstone could steal great treasures just like Light Finger, then people would know his name and sing stories about his fantastic adventures too. Then he would be *somebody*. And being somebody, even a thief, was better than being nobody. All he had to do was steal Awfulrick’s stupid cup, and then he could be part of the thieves’ gang for good.

‘Mind you, the life of a celebrity isn’t everything it’s

cracked up to be . . .’ Light Finger sighed. ‘All the autograph signing and people trying to kiss you. You’re just a kid – you don’t want to be worried about that.’

Whetstone felt his cheeks burn.

‘You’ll never get a minute’s rest. Everywhere you go it will be, *Whetstone, tell us about the time you . . .* Well, never mind that. You haven’t actually done anything yet, *have you?*’

The boy bit his lip. The thought of returning home to the village of Drott as Whetstone the Sly, or Whetstone the Cunning, anything instead of Whetstone the Nothing, made his head buzz. But at the same time he felt bad about stealing from Awfulrick and the Vikings of Krud. They had been quite kind to him, really. He hadn’t even had too many chicken bones thrown at him during the feast.

Light Finger seemed to sense Whetstone’s doubts. Using his staff to lever himself upright, the crooked man got to his feet. He loomed over Whetstone, who was treated to a lovely view right up his nose. A large, knobbly bogey hung there, glinting in the moonlight. He wrapped his arm around Whetstone’s shoulder.

‘I’ve been keeping an eye on you, Whetstone, whenever I dropped into Drott over the years.’ Light Finger smiled. ‘I knew you were going to be very useful to me one day.’

Vali tossed something into the fire behind them; the flames fizzled.

Whetstone remembered his life in the cold, grey village of Drott and shuddered. He had lived there with his foster mother, Angrboda (or the Angry Bogey, as he secretly called

her), in her rescue home for orphaned wolf cubs, Dunhowlin'. She had taken him in after he turned up suddenly in the middle of the village in a basket. No one knew where he really came from.

'I still think it's a mistake,' Vali said from the shadows. 'The runt will only mess it up.'

Light Finger snarled, his ratty teeth casting odd shadows on his face. 'Be quiet, you.'

He turned back to Whetstone. 'Vali doesn't understand. He's not like us. The cup is the key.'

Light Finger often said that.

'The key to what, though?'

'To you joining us, of course!' he said quickly. 'Don't you want a place to belong?' He gave Whetstone's shoulder another squeeze. 'Remember what I told you: the cup is magical. It can tell us many things. Things that will make us famous.'

'Us?'

'You, of course. *The Saga of Whetstone and the Magic Cup* – I can hear it already.'

Whetstone narrowed his eyes. Light Finger was desperate to get his hands on Awfulrick's cup; it was all he talked about. He claimed it could tell fortunes. 'I still don't understand why you picked me to do this.'

'Call it my Master Thief instincts. That cup will unlock an amazing future for you, but first you have to *hold it in your hands*. I don't take just anyone on as my apprentice, you know. After all, I am—'

'*The Greatest Thief in All the Known World*,' Whetstone

recited. Light Finger squeezed his shoulder again, his grip painfully tight.

‘I know, I know,’ the boy muttered.

‘I have taken the jewelled crown of Queen Helga of the Ironfists,’ Light Finger continued, his eyes bright with past victories. ‘Plundered the famed pearl of the Merpeople, and . . .’

‘. . . and picked the pockets of kings, queens and princes,’ Whetstone finished. He liked hearing these stories, almost as much as Light Finger liked telling them.

‘My thefts are a way of adding a little spice to the boring run of days. What is life without a twist or turn along the way?’

Whetstone’s fingers wound the edge of his cloak into knots. ‘Don’t you ever worry about getting caught?’

Vikings were not kind to thieves. If Awfulrick caught him, Whetstone would probably be marooned on the Barren Islands to be eaten by the wild beasts who lived there. Or maybe Awfulrick would force-feed him mouldy toenails until he choked. Or worst of all, perhaps Whetstone would have to hand-wash the skid marks out of all the Viking underpants in the village. Fame and Fortune were all very well, but you had to be alive to enjoy them.

Light Finger released the boy’s shoulder and moved away. ‘Maybe Vali’s right. Maybe you’re not brave enough.’ He scratched his stubbly chin with the top of his staff. The silvery snakes that decorated it sparkled in the moonlight. ‘I suppose I’ll just have to take you back to Drott.’

‘No way. I’m not going back,’ Whetstone said stoutly. If the price of leaving the Angry Bogey was taking Awfulrick’s cup, well, Awfulrick would just have to get another one. ‘I’ll get the cup – and the glory too.’

‘Excellent!’ Light Finger clapped him on the shoulder. His mouth curved into a cold smile. ‘Like Vali said, it’s only a cup. Then it’s off to the great city of Cloggibum, and minstrels will be—’

‘Singing songs about us before nightfall?’



Watching Whetstone pick his way through the darkness back to the Great Hall, Light Finger turned to the older boy. ‘You should go after him. Keep an eye on our dear little orphan. We can’t afford any mistakes now – not when we’re so close.’

Vali spat into the long grass at his feet.

Light Finger grabbed him by the arm and peered into the boy’s face. ‘Only a few days more. Twelve years of planning just for this moment; soon I’ll have all the power I ever dreamed of. The boy gets us the cup; the cup gets us the riddle—’

‘And when we’ve got the riddle, we won’t need the boy any more.’

Light Finger released Vali and smiled. ‘Something like that.’



The Vikings of Krud were still feasting. Whetstone followed the sound of crashing, smashing and out-of-tune singing towards the Great Hall. Viking feasts were legendary. And very, very messy. They would be eating big lumps of meat, carousing (which is like singing but involves trying to drown the person next to you with your drink), throwing axes, and, if they were very unlucky, there might even be poetry.

Whetstone pushed open the door to the Great Hall. The smell of sweaty men and women poured out – it was like being slapped in the face with a piece of warm ham. Whetstone held his breath and sidled inside. Luckily no one seemed to have noticed he'd disappeared.

A group of large men, each the shape of an upside-down triangle (this was the proper shape for a Viking: massive, wide shoulders, arms like tree trunks, and legs like twigs, with round heads the size of pumpkins), were clustered together singing. In the centre of the group, stuffing a whole sheep's leg in his mouth, stood Awfulrick, Chief of Krud. Whetstone wiped his suddenly sweaty hands on his tunic and scooped up some plates.

*Oh the third day is Odin's day,
God of wisdom, song and war,*

the Vikings warbled,

*On this day we drink and feast
Until our tums get sore!*

Whetstone pulled up his hood to muffle the singing and ducked to avoid a thrown goblet. They might be loud, they might be enthusiastic, but they were not in tune.

Oh the fourth day is Thor's day,

Awfulrick and the Vikings sang on,

God of storms and lightning,

We think he is a really great guy

Who gives the Giants a . . . pounding!

Whetstone winced at the dodgy rhymes and tried to focus on the cup. Pretending to scrape something sticky off one of the plates with a blunt knife, he straightened up and leaned away from the table. Behind Awfulrick was the fireplace. Next to the fireplace was the shelf. On the shelf, reflecting leaping flames, was the golden cup Light Finger wanted so badly. Its coloured jewels sparkled, making rainbows dance along the rough wooden timbers of the hall.

Whetstone stared at it, hypnotized by the bright colours. A chicken bone smacked into his ear, making him drop the plate and knife. He sank to his knees and scuttled under the table after them.

Oh the fifth day is Frigg's day,

Goddess of fam-i-lee!

*She knows the fates of mortal men,
Just like you and meeeee!*

Awfulrick finished in a very squeaky solo, his walrus-skin boots lifting on to tiptoe as he struggled to hit the high notes.

*Asgard! Asgard!
Home of Gods and fun,
Asgard! Asgard!
Until the Frost Giants come.*

As the Vikings chanted the chorus, Whetstone abandoned the dirty plate and knife to crawl closer to Awfulrick and the cup.

*Valhalla! Valhalla!
The place where Heroes go,
Valhalla! Valhalla!
When they're slain by their foe!*

The song reached its table-thumping crescendo. A nearby bench crashed to the floor, bringing a crowd of Vikings tumbling down in a sweaty, tangled heap. The noise made Whetstone jump, banging his head on the underside of a table. Stars danced in front of his eyes. The Vikings cheered and whooped.

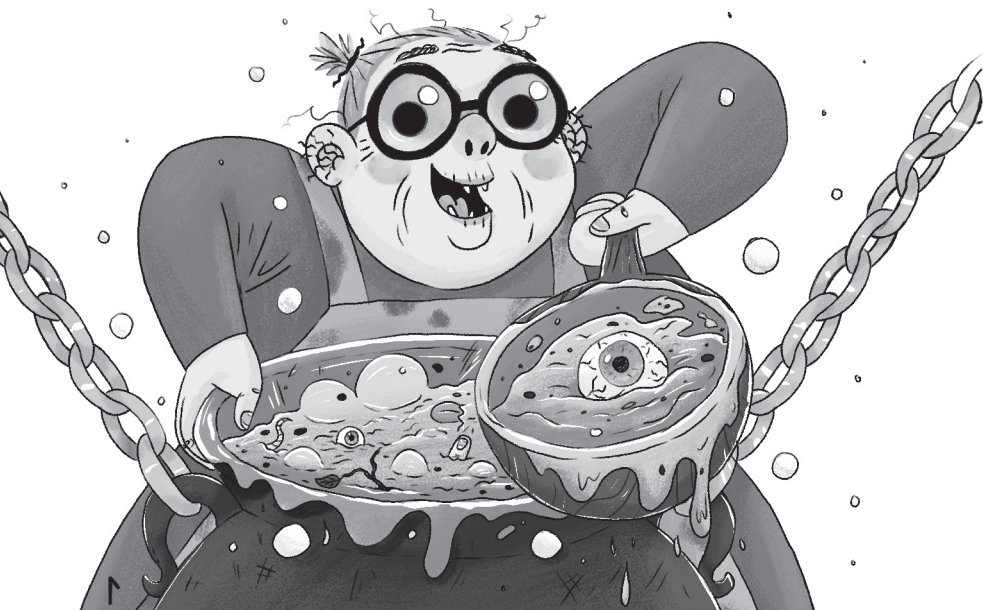
Rubbing his aching head, he climbed out from beneath the table. *Now, while everyone's distracted – it has to be now.*

Hearing a whirring noise, Whetstone ducked. A flying axe

embedded itself into the wall just above his head, showering him in plaster. Gulping, he fixed his eyes on the cup. There it was, glinting in the firelight, just out of reach. His fingers itched at the thought of touching it. *I CAN do this! There is no WAY I'm going back to the Angry Bogey*, he told himself, edging towards the fireplace.

A large cauldron suspended by thin chains hung above the fire. The smell made Whetstone's mouth water. An old lady with an alarming amount of ear hair stood stirring the pot. 'You look like you could use feeding up, lad,' she croaked, pushing a bowl into his hands. The smell hit his nostrils like a hammer, making his stomach clench.

'It's got sheep eyeballs in it.' She held out a ladle. A milky-white eyeball floated to the surface. 'Good for you – helps you see in the dark.' She poured it, eyeball and all, into his bowl. The eyeball stared at him. Whetstone stared back at it and shuddered.



Someone knocked into Whetstone's shoulder. The stew slopped in his bowl, making the eyeball sink down under the filmy water. Whetstone turned to find a handsome youth with a highly polished helmet standing behind him. The youth sniggered and brushed his gleaming red hair out of his face.

'What do you think you're doing, Weasel-from-the-Kitchens?' he asked with a sneer. 'This section is for VIVs only.'

'VIVs?'

'Very Important Vikings.'

'What are you doing here then, Bragi?' called a loud voice. The owner looked like he ate live puffins for breakfast. It was the man with the dark, brushy beard who had suggested the Ultimate Shin-Kicking Contest. Whetstone gulped. Bragi scowled. The bearded man laughed and clapped Bragi on the shoulder, making his helmet slip down over his eyes and come to rest on his large nose. Whetstone tried not to giggle.

'I'm keeping an eye on this cockroach, Oresmiter.' Bragi pushed his helmet back into place. 'Just because Awfulrick gave him a job, it doesn't mean we should trust him.' Bragi looked down his long nose at the scruffy boy. 'He's not from Krud. Maybe I should throw him on to the dunghheap, just in case?'

'Don't be a prat, Bragi. What happened to Viking hospitality? You never know who might be knocking on your door.' Oresmiter scrutinized Whetstone from under thick eyebrows. 'But why *are* you hanging about up here?'

'He's certainly not eating!' called the hag by the cauldron.

‘And I shaved the trotters before I put them in.’

Whetstone felt more and more eyes turn to look at him. His face started to burn. ‘I was—’ he stumbled. ‘I was only—’ With a clang, his bowl dropped to the floor through trembling fingers, the eyeball rolling between Bragi’s feet and staring at him balefully.

Oresmiter rested his hand on the axe that hung from his belt. ‘Yes?’

Whetstone trailed to a stop. Usually he didn’t have any trouble finding the right words, but now he couldn’t think of a single one. A prickle of sweat broke out between his shoulder blades.

‘I was only c-coming to tell you that you forgot the verse about Tyr. In your song, you forgot the God of Justice.’ The lie popped out just in time.

Oresmiter peered into Whetstone’s face, who tried to smile winningly, but his dry lips got stuck to his teeth.

Oresmiter’s face cleared. ‘By Odin’s eyebrows, he’s right!’ he yelled. ‘Oi, Awfulrick – we forgot about Tyr!’

He turned to them, his face red from the heat of the fire. He glowered at a wide-eyed Whetstone, then slapped himself on the forehead, making his helmet ring. ‘GREAT THOR’S TOENAILS, HOW COULD WE FORGET ABOUT TYR? HE’S MY FAVOURITE!’

A large meaty hand reached out and yanked Whetstone into the group of singing Vikings. Whetstone found himself surrounded by a collection of massive hairy men. He thought he could smell bacon.

Awfulrick clamped Whetstone under his armpit. ‘ALL TOGETHER NOW!’ The boy held his breath to avoid the wafts of Awfulrick’s body odour.

Oh the second day is Tyr’s day,

the Viking choir began, swaying in time to the song.

Despite almost being dragged off his feet by the rocking Vikings, the boy felt a jolt of excitement. The cup sat directly behind him.

Lord of rules and law . . .

Trying to only move one arm, Whetstone reached out behind him. The wooden shelf containing the cup appeared under his fingers. He quickly ran his hand along the rough plank.

He had his hand bitten clean off. . .

Whetstone’s arm twisted, his fingers stretching out, desperately hoping to find something that wasn’t made of splinters. He gritted his teeth, his elbow feeling like it was going to pop. But then his fingertips brushed against something smooth and cool. The cup! Whetstone wiggled his fingers, nudging the cup into his palm. He closed his hand around it. With a faint metallic rasp, Whetstone pulled his arm back and the cup disappeared into his cloak pocket.

Which must have made it sore!

The Viking choir exploded into the chorus once more, and Whetstone tried to sing along, his heart hammering in his chest.

Asgard! Asgard!

Home of Gods and fun,

Asgard! Asgard!

Until the Frost Giants come.

Whetstone leaned away as Awfulrick's bearskin waistcoat tickled him under the nose. He had done it. He had stolen the jewelled cup. Now he just had to get away with it.

Chapter Two

This Is Your ULTIMATE PURPOSE

Far above Whetstone and the Vikings of Krud, a girl unfolded a crumpled booklet and flattened it out. Her forehead wrinkled as she read:

A Guide to the Nine Worlds

By Blood-Runs-Cold, Leader of the Valkyries

The Nine Worlds

Imagine the biggest tree you can. No, bigger than that.

BIGGER.

BIGGER.

That's Yggdrasil, and it makes your tree look like a bit of wilted broccoli. Nine whole worlds hang from Yggdrasil, *that's* how big it is.

Asgard: Right at the top, because it's the best. Home of the Gods and ruled over by Odin. In Asgard you can find

Valhalla, Odin's Great Hall, where the greatest warriors come after they've died. There they can fight, feast and drink until *Ragnarok*, the battle at the end of the world. At Ragnarok they will be called upon to fight the Frost Giants for Odin, but until then it's basically party time.

Vanaheim: Home to the Gods who aren't cool enough to be in Asgard. They're mostly interested in growing stuff; inhabitants of Asgard are more interested in fighting.

Alfheim: Home of the Elves. Yes, they have pointy ears. Yes, they giggle a lot. Mostly harmless, but keep them where you can see them.

Jotunheim: Home of the Giants, including our mortal enemies the Frost Giants. They keep trying to break into Asgard; we keep beating them in battle. Lots of mountains; good for skiing.

Midgard: This is where you can find living humans, living their ordinary lives, with ordinary horses, ordinary farms and ordinary families.

Svartalfheim: Home of the Dwarves. A maze of caves and mines. They love tinkering with gold and making magical gadgets.

Muspell: Land of Fire. Ruled over by Sutr, a Fire Giant. Nice saunas.

Helheim: Home of the Queen of the Dead, Hel. Yes, she named the place after herself. Tells you everything you need to know, really.

Niflheim: Land of the Unworthy Dead. The dragon Nidhogg lives here and chews on the roots of the world tree. He likes

poetry, gold and trampling anyone unlucky enough to be sent there.

Who's Who in Asgard

Odin: The Allfather, the Spear Shaker, the Terrifying One-Eyed Chief of the Gods. The boss.

Frigg: Goddess of Family. Odin's wife. Knows the future but won't tell anyone.

Loki: The Trickster. Enjoys a 'joke'. Approach with caution. Technically a Fire Giant, but Odin lets him live in Asgard because they're blood brothers.

Thor: God of Thunder. Do not touch his hammer. Seriously.

Freyja: Goddess of Love and Sorcery. Likes cats.

The Valkyries: Elite female warriors, Valkyries are created by Odin, Chief of the Gods. Their main job is to bring the greatest warriors and Heroes to Valhalla on their flying horses. At Ragnarok, the battle at the end of the world, they will lead the Gods and warriors of Valhalla in the final clash against the Frost Giants.

Travel between Worlds

It is possible to travel between worlds by flying or climbing through Yggdrasil's branches. Not easy, but possible. Only the Gods (and Valkyries) have really got the hang of it. The Giants have managed it a few times, more through luck than anything else.

Valkyries and Odin travel by flying horse, Loki has special shoes, and Freyja uses a magic cloak. The Bifrost Bridge links Asgard and Midgard. When humans on Midgard see it, they call it a rainbow.

Magic

It's simple: magic can only be created by magical creatures—Dwarves, Elves, and to a certain extent, Giants. All other magic comes from magical objects *made* by magical creatures, usually the Dwarves.

Except for Odin: he learned how to do magic by hanging upside down from Yggdrasil for nine days to discover the secrets of the runes. Fancy doing that? No? Then no magic for you.

Lotta folded the much-creased booklet and stuffed it under the leather bands of her wrist guards next to her brown skin. Lotta was a trainee Valkyrie, and today was going to be their first trip to collect fallen warriors from Midgard, so she didn't want to make any mistakes.

'I can do this,' she muttered, jamming a metal helmet on top of her dark curls and dodging through the narrow archway. 'It's easy. Midgard is down. Asgard is up.'

She ducked to avoid a wonky wooden sign. Just readable through arrow holes and sword gouges were the words:

Valkyrie Training School

*Be the best in the battle
against the Frost Giants*



Beyond the archway, a ragtag group of girls prepared their horses for a journey. They might be dressed in identical armour, but that was the only matching thing about them. Valkyries were born out of Viking battles across Midgard, and their appearance depended on where they had been created.

Each of the trainees wore a breastplate of overlapping leather and metal strips, with a linen shirt and heavy, pleated skirt. Thick bands of leather protected their forearms, and heavy boots with metal studs covered their feet. Lotta paused to pull her hairy socks up – they kept slipping down inside her boots and getting stuck under her feet.

A pair of bored-looking looking Class Two Valkyries were supposed to be supervising the trainees. A tall black girl with elbow-length dreadlocks was speaking loudly to her friend, a girl with freckles scattered across her pink-cheeked face. ‘D’you remember when we went on our first trip to Midgard? I got seventy-eight per cent on my Collecting Fallen Warriors score for getting Jarl the Jelly-Jowls back to Valhalla in one piece.’

The pink-cheeked girl rolled her eyes. ‘Whatever, Akrid.’

Lotta pulled her helmet firmly down over her ears. She was nervous enough without the older Valkyries making her feel worse.

She scuttled over to her horse and fastened a bridle around its head. Tight black curls escaped from under her helmet and brushed her neck. Her horse tried to take a bite out of them. Lotta jerked out of the way of his yellow teeth and scowled.

‘Thor’s beard! Are you trying to look scary, Lotta?’ called a sarcastic voice.

Lotta turned to see a girl with long silver plaits and pale skin climbing on to her own horse. It stamped on the flagstones, hooves sending up blue sparks.

‘You look like you’re desperate for a wee!’ the girl, Flay, said with a laugh.

A girl with identical plaits and an identical gleeful look on her face sniggered. This was Flee, Flay’s twin sister.

Lotta carefully avoided looking at the twins and focused instead on swinging herself up into her saddle. Feeling embarrassed was not very Valkyrie-like, but then, neither was Lotta.

There were three classes of Valkyrie. Class Ones were full Valkyries who went out on the most important missions. They swooped low over Viking battlefields, inspiring the fighting with their bloodcurdling cries. Class Twos were Valkyries who had almost finished their training; they were often used to send messages from the Gods to the rest of the Nine Worlds, or to inspire minstrels to write great stories about Heroes and famous battles. Then there were Class Threes: they were the trainees and rarely got to do anything more exciting than practising their axe-throwing or reciting petrifying poetry. Most Valkyries started training when they

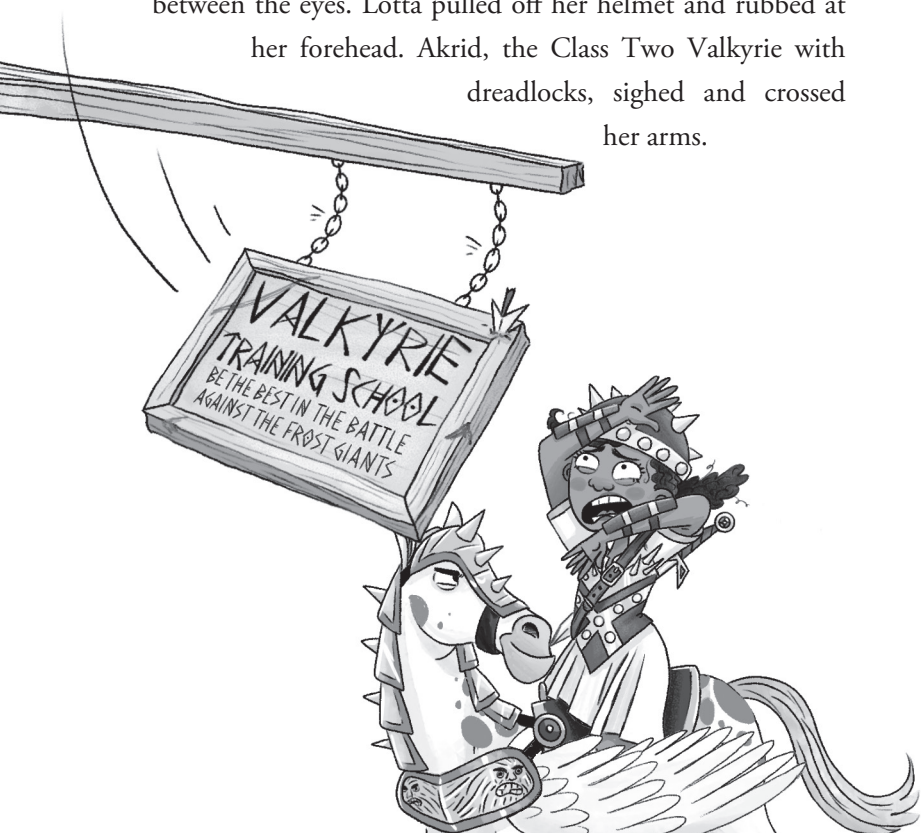
were around eleven years old and would be Class Ones when they reached eighteen. Lotta had already been in the training school for over a year and was not doing well.

Lotta jiggled her horse's reins, intending to move away from the sisters and into the wide courtyard. Her horse had other ideas.

'No, Thighbiter. Stop it.' Lotta hauled on the reins as he twisted around, trying to bite her on the leg. He was always doing that. Thighbiter jerked sideways, clonking Lotta's head on the low-hanging sign.

'Ow!' Lotta tried to grab the sign as it swung back, the words *Valkyrie Training School* looming before smacking her between the eyes. Lotta pulled off her helmet and rubbed at

her forehead. Akrid, the Class Two Valkyrie with dreadlocks, sighed and crossed her arms.



‘You might as well get used to it, barnacle breath,’ Flay called from her horse as they trotted past. ‘You’re going to be stuck as a Class Three Valkyrie for a very loooooong time.’

Lotta shoved the sign away and wedged her helmet back on top of her curls, trying to pull it low over her face. Flay might be saying what everyone else was thinking, but Lotta was determined to prove them wrong. In order to become full Valkyries, the trainees were supposed to show their mastery of six key skills. The current level of Valkyrie-ness of each trainee was shown on the circular shields they carried, which were split into segments – one for each skill. The segments glowed according to how well the trainee was doing in that particular element.

Someone like Flay or Flee had a shield that glowed brightly in most of the segments. Lotta’s shield, on the other hand, wasn’t very bright at all, and several of the segments were almost dark, miles away from the sixty per cent she needed in each section to move up to being a Class Two.

‘Ahem.’

Valkyrie Training School Report

Name: Brings-A-Lot-Of-Scrapes-And-Grazes (Lotta)

Class: Third

Skill

Fighting: 35 %

Axes should be thrown FORWARD, Lotta!

Good at polishing armour though.

Horse Riding: 30 %

Is distrusted by the horses.

Was chunked into a bush last week.

Epic Poetry: 28 %

Let's just not mention your version
of the *Saga of Svenson the Selfish*.

Transforming into Swans: 38 %

Looks more like a duck. Keeps questioning
why it has to be a swan – it just does, Lotta!

Serving Mead in Valhalla: 53 %

Not bad, but it is pretty easy.

Collecting Fallen Warriors: 0 %

First battle visit next week – please don't mess it up.

Overall Hero Score: 31 %

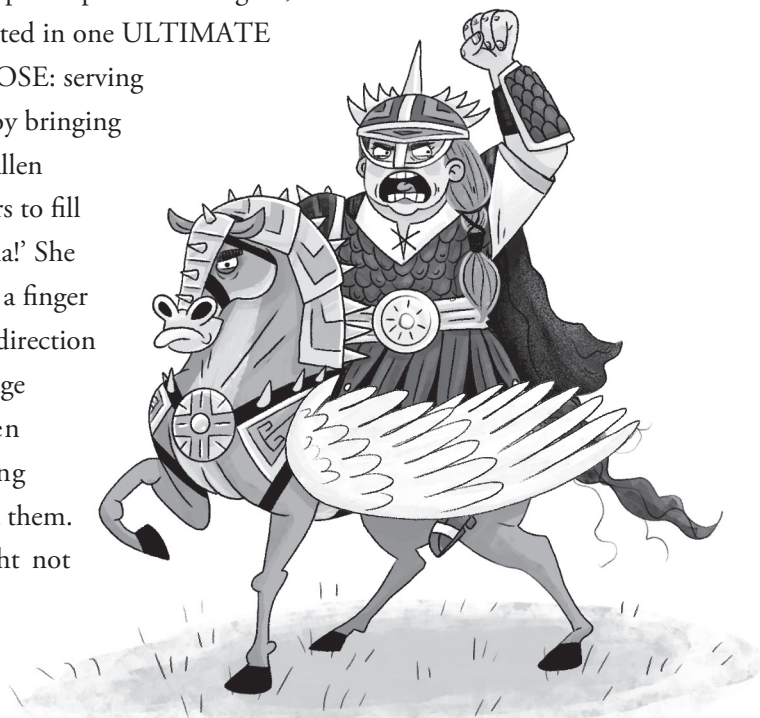
Signed: *Blood-Runs-Cold*, Leader of the Valkyries

The girls spun around in their saddles to see a heavily armoured shadow squinting at them from the stable doorway. Leading her own massive warhorse, Blood-Runs-Cold – or Scold, as she was known to the trainees – stepped into the courtyard. The Class Two Valkyries snapped to attention.

Scold was a statuesque woman with olive skin and powerful lungs. Legend said she once cleared an entire battlefield with one enormous sneeze; among her other jobs she was responsible for training the Class Threes.

Scold swung herself up on to her horse, Thunder Trumper. She turned to the assorted bunch of girl warriors. ‘I’m sure I don’t have to remind you of how important today is,’ Scold roared. ‘Each of you was created from pure battle frenzy, brought to life by the breath of Odin. We may each come from separate places in Midgard, but we are united in one ULTIMATE

PURPOSE: serving
Odin by bringing
back fallen
warriors to fill
Valhalla!’ She
jabbed a finger
in the direction
of a huge
wooden
building
behind them.
It might not



seem much from the outside, but being picked to spend your afterlife in Valhalla was a Viking's idea of paradise.

Being in Valhalla was quite a good set-up, really. The fallen warriors were magically restored by Odin and spent their days on the field beside the hall, practising their biting, kicking, gouging and sword-fighting ready to support Odin when the Frost Giants invaded. Then all evening in the Great Hall, partying.

Scold took a deep breath. 'I have done all I can to prepare you. We have practised flying in formation, we have rehearsed how to get mighty warriors on to your horses without hurting yourselves.'

'Lift with your knees,' Lotta muttered.

'You have been tested on selecting the best warriors out of the bunch. Today is a chance to PROVE YOURSELVES ONCE AND FOR ALL!' Her voice boomed around the empty courtyard, making a pile of abandoned helmets ring metallically.

'I believe some of you are more ready for this responsibility than others,' Scold continued, definitely *not* looking at Lotta. 'Needless to say, if you do well, you could all be on the way to becoming CLASS TWO VALKYRIES!'

A short trainee with an intense expression squeaked with excitement.

Flee raised her hand. 'Please, Scold, what happens if we don't bring a warrior back?'

Flay giggled and looked at Lotta.

Scold scowled as she stuck a spikey helmet on her head.

‘Just bring one back, OK? It’s pretty basic stuff. If you can’t master this, well, then you can’t be a Valkyrie. Not even a Class Three.’

Scold’s eyes lingered on Lotta a moment. The girl puffed up her chest and pushed her shoulders back. Unfortunately, Thighbiter chose that moment to try and bite her on the leg. Again. As she spun in circles, tugging on Thighbiter’s reins, Lotta could hear Flay and Flee sniggering.

Scold turned away, bringing her horse into position at the head of the group. Lotta nudged Thighbiter to follow. He did so, barging Flay and her horse out of the way.

‘Watch where you’re going, snot-face!’ Flay snarled, flicking out one of her long silver plaits.

It slapped Lotta in the face. ‘Ow!’

Flay smirked and went to pull her plait back – unfortunately that’s where it all went wrong. Flay’s hair had become tangled around the spikes of Lotta’s metal breastplate. She was stuck. Flay gave the plait a hard yank and Lotta lurched sideways half out of her saddle, one foot still caught in Thighbiter’s stirrups. The two girls and their horses danced around in tight circles.

‘Get HER off me!’ Flay shrieked at her sister, who – unhelpfully – grabbed Lotta’s arm and tried to pull her away from Flay.

‘Get her off ME!’ Lotta yelled back. She shook off Flee and started pulling at the hair caught in her armour with one hand while gripping on tightly to Thighbiter’s reins with the other. Thighbiter took the opportunity to joyfully try

and bite lumps out of everyone.

Scold thundered her way back towards them. 'What's going on here?'

'It's all her fault!'

'She hit me first!'

'Make her let go!'

'She always ruins everything!'

'Neigh!'

Scold snorted, raised an eyebrow, and they all fell silent. Their teacher pulled a short knife out of her belt. 'There seems to be only one thing to do.'

Lotta's eyes grew wide as Scold approached. Flay tried to flinch away but was trapped. In one swift motion Scold leaned forward in her saddle, slicing through the hair caught in Lotta's armour. The girls were free.

Flay slowly straightened up, lifted the remains of her hair in one hand and gazed at it in horror. She now had one long gleaming plait reaching her waist and one silvery tuft that barely reached her shoulder. Her sister's face went completely white.

Lotta slowly pulled the remains of the plait out of her armour. 'Do you want this?' She held out the hair.

Flay snatched at the plait. She closed her eyes and opened her mouth to scream.

'AAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!'

It was very loud and very high pitched. The horses all around twitched and flattened their ears.

'We're going to get you for this, Lotta,' Flee hissed as she

dragged her shocked sister away. 'Just wait.'

Lotta sighed – nothing new there then. Thighbiter brayed, clearly delighted with himself.

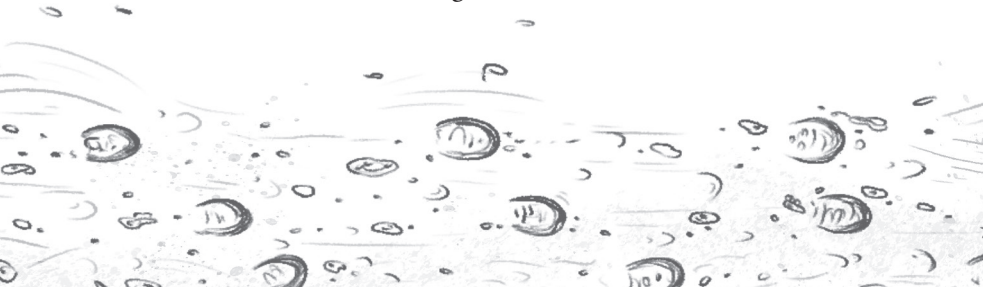
'Flee and Flay, stop sulking – it's only hair,' Scold called to the twins. 'Now, get into line.' Sitting regally astride Thunder Trumper, Scold returned to her position at the head of the group. Flee and Flay grumpily joined them.

'I shall now OPEN THE GATE!' Scold clicked her fingers and Akrid reached for a heavy iron key hanging on the gate post. 'Made by the Dwarves, this key is the only way to open the gates and leave Asgard.' Scold plucked the key out of the girl's fingers. 'NEVER try this without me. You don't want to get lost and end up in the wrong world, do you?'

The Class Two Valkyries giggled as the trainees shook their heads. Although they had all pored over the map of Yggdrasil that hung in Valhalla, picking out the places they had heard of in stories, none of them had ever been allowed to go exploring. Lotta quite fancied a trip to Jotunheim, which was full of snow, or Alfheim, which was made of meadows. But nobody wanted to visit Helheim or Niflheim, the lowest and most miserable of all the Nine Worlds.

'Now,' Scold continued, 'remember to turn your invisibility gauntlets on before we leave.'

'Yeah, we don't want you being spotted and frightening the humans,' called out the girl with deadlocks.



With a wave of relief, Lotta twisted the centre strip of the gauntlet covering her left forearm. Her arm flickered, then vanished, along with the rest of her and Thighbiter. She could do with being invisible for a while, just to stop Flee and Flay giving her the evils. Around her were a series of clicks. Looking towards her fellow trainees, Lotta could hear the sound of gently clinking armour and shifting hooves but could see nothing. With a thump, something struck her helmet, knocking it into her eyes. She thought she heard a muffled snigger.

‘Let’s do the chant!’ Scold bellowed from somewhere in front of her. ‘WHO DO WE WANT?’

‘Heroes and Great Warriors!’

‘WHEN DO WE WANT THEM?’

‘Now!’

‘WHERE WILL WE PUT THEM?’

‘In Valhalla!’

‘WHO WILL THEY FIGHT?’

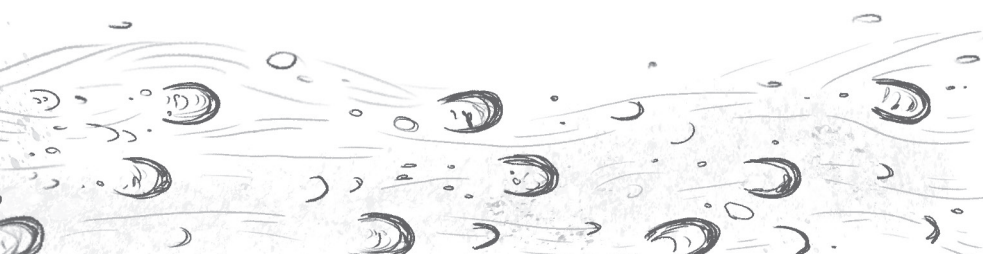
‘The Frost Giants!’

‘WHEN WILL THEY FIGHT THEM?’

‘At Ragnarok!’

‘The battle at the end of the world!’

‘... end of the world!’ Lotta echoed. She hoped they had lots of time before then. The Nine Worlds were in balance, at the moment. But you never knew what the Frost Giants were



planning, and when the Giants finally made it into Asgard, Ragnarok would begin. She sighed. It would be embarrassing to still be a Class Three Valkyrie at Ragnarok; you wouldn't get to fight anyone important.

Hooves clopped across the courtyard towards the gateway, and the enormous iron gates swung open. 'TALLY HOoOoOo!' echoed Scold's voice. Sparkling blue hoof prints appeared in the rutted ground, disappearing through the gateway.

Flay and Flee followed swiftly behind with their joint cry of 'For Odin!', their voices coming together to create a weird harmony, which made the hairs on the back of Lotta's neck stand up.

The other Class Three Valkyries galloped along behind them, joining in with their own battle cries.

'Midgard or Bust!'

'Valhalla Forever!'

'Scream If You Want to Go Faster!'

Lotta encouraged a reluctant Thighbiter into a canter. All she had to do now was find a Hero. How hard could that be?

About the Author

Cat Weldon writes funny books for children and is a little bit obsessed with Vikings. With an MA in Scriptwriting, and a background in children's theatre, Cat has also worked as an English and Drama teacher – and in lots of other jobs where she can talk while waving her hands around wildly.

Cat Weldon now lives in East Anglia with her husband, daughters, and collection of delinquent chickens.

Although she has a favourite cup, it has never once recited poetry to her.

About the Illustrator

Katie Kear is a British illustrator and has been creating artwork for as long as she can remember.

Katie has an illustration degree from the University of Gloucestershire and has worked with publishers including Pan Macmillan, Penguin Australia, Andersen Press and Hachette. She is always on the hunt for brilliant stories to illustrate.

In her spare time she loves drawing, adventures in nature, chocolate, stationery, the smell of cherries and finding new inspirational artists!