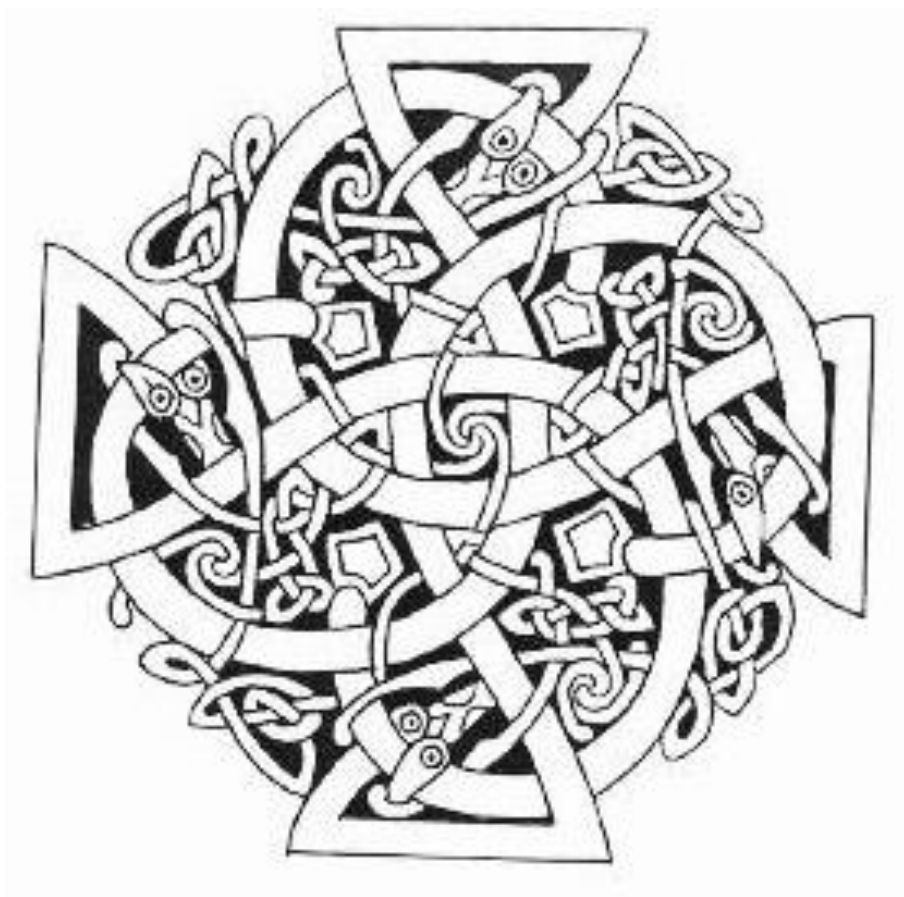


Norse mythology



Odin's Eye

The Norsemen lived long ago, in lands that we now call Scandinavia. The land was either rocky and mountainous or low and boggy. It was very difficult to farm and many people were very poor. Most people, except the kings and jarls, had a constant struggle against the cold, and against hunger and disease. Because they were so poor, many Norsemen sailed away to find riches elsewhere – these were known as the Vikings. They journeyed in long boats looking for somewhere easier, and perhaps warmer, to make a living. Some went to Britain, and to other parts of Europe including Normandy and Sicily, and some went to Greenland and all the way to North America.

The Vikings had several gods, the chief of whom was Odin. There are lots of different stories about him but in every tale, one fact remains the same and that is that he had only one eye. This is because he had sacrificed the other to gain wisdom in order to save the world. This is the story of how that happened.

Odin lived in Asgard, the home of the Norse gods. As well as being god of war, battle, victory and death, he was also the god of magic, poetry, prophecy and wisdom. Like most of the gods, he didn't stay in Asgard all the time. When he came down to earth, which they called Midgard, he wandered about in a long dark blue cloak, with a beautiful silver clasp with letters called runes engraved on it. These runes contained magic spells.

Odin's cloak had a hood, to keep him dry, as umbrellas hadn't been invented yet – and a traveller's stick to help him beat back the bushes and branches back as he walked along, for there were no roads like there are today. Sometimes Odin didn't use his stick, but rode his wonderful magic horse Sleipnir, which had 8 legs and was terribly fast. Whether he was just fast anyway, or whether it was because he had 8 legs, I don't know, though I do know that if I had 8 legs, I would trip up. Anyway, Sleipnir was so fast that Odin just flew along, or perhaps he just flew: after all, Sleipnir was a magic horse.

All the same, Odin sometimes got tired of walking and riding about. One day when he was really fed up with wandering, he had a good idea. "If only I could see everything that is going on," he said to himself, "Then, I could stay at home." And he thought about this for a while. What he needed was True Wisdom. If only he had True Wisdom, he would be able to stay at home and see everything all at the same time.

But to gain True Wisdom, he knew he would have to have a drink from the Well-guarded by Mimir, the wisest man in Midgard.

The next morning, Odin left Asgard.. He took his favourite knapsack, and set off for Mimir's Well. The journey was dangerous. For he had to climb over rocky mountains with blizzards of snow and ice cold winds. The well was near where the giants lived in Jotunheim, and lay under a huge ash

tree. Mimir was not at all hospitable. “He won’t give me a drink for nothing,” said Odin. “The price will be very high”. How right he was.

As Odin tramped along the road to the well, he met a giant riding on the back of a reindeer. He immediately recognised this lofty fellow – he was the wisest of the giants who knew many things – but for all his wisdom, he did not see through Odin’s disguise. Odin had pulled himself up to the height of the giant, and fell into conversation with him. “There’s something I would dearly like to learn from you,” he said.

And the giant replied jovially: “Ho ho. Before you can learn from me, you must answer three riddles. And if you answer any of them wrong, you will lose your head. But if you answer them right, you can ask me three questions on the same terms. Do you agree to my rules?”

This was not the sort of game Odin liked, -and can you blame him? - but as he was so set on his mission, he consented to the giant’s terms.

‘Well,’ said the giant, ‘These are the questions. What is the name of the river that divides Asgard from Jötunheim? What are the names of the horses that Day and Night drive across the sky? And what is the name of the plain on which the last battle will be fought?’

Odin breathed a sigh of relief. thank goodness for that! He knew the answers!

‘Ifling is the deadly cold river that freezes in an instant any living thing that falls into it...

Skinfaxe and Hrimfaxe are the horses that drive Day and Night across the sky.

The field for the Last Battle is Vigard. That’s where you and I are destined to fight at the End of Days.’

‘Hmph’, said the giant. ‘You keep your head’. The giant was disappointed, because he liked taking peoples’ heads off them and boiling them up for dinner. ‘Now it’s your turn’.

Odin asked: “What will be the last words that Odin will whisper into the ear of Baldur, his son?”

‘That’s not a fair question’ said the giant. ‘How could I possibly know that?’

‘Well,” said Odin ‘ Did you worry about being fair to me? No, you did not... But I don’t want your head, just tell me what I’ll have to give Mimir for a drink from the Well of Wisdom?’

‘He will ask for your right eye,’ said the giant.

Odin shuddered. ‘That’s a lot to ask for. Is there no other way.?..’

“There is no other way. Many have asked for the wisdom of the waters, but not one has yet agreed to pay the price.”

Odin nodded. He was glad to leave the wise but fierce giant and walk on. The path was stony, and there was a bitterly cold wind and rain so that his cloak was soon wet through. He fingered the clasp and whispered the rune: his cloak dried, and the weather improved, but the path was still rough, and he had to be very careful where he put his feet. It was depressing, especially when Odin thought about the eye he would have to lose forever. And about the terrible pain. For when the gods were in Midgard, the Land of Men, they had to feel what men feel, and suffer what men and women suffer. But Odin knew he would have to forfeit his eye to gain the Wisdom he needed to save the World.

Odin continued his journey. Eventually, after turning a sharp bend in the road he was able to see the huge Ash Tree bordering Jotunheim, the Giants' Land. It was indeed a wonderful and a beautiful tree, very tall, and very deep-rooted, as ash trees generally are. Its deep roots drew wisdom from the four corners of the earth. And near the tree Mimir stood by his Well.

‘Ho there Odin, I’ve been waiting for you.’ said Mimir, for he had drunk from the Well, and knew everything that would happen, and everyone’s name before they told him. ‘Are you thirsty?’

‘Yes’ said Odin. ‘I have a great thirst for Wisdom, and yes, Mimir, I need to drink from your Well’,

Mimir laughed. ‘Many are thirsty for my waters, but they do not get to drink from them. No one has yet agreed to my price. You must give me your right eye.’

Odin considered one last time if the price was too high. His pale blue eyes were the colour of the sky on a bright winter’s day, when the frost is hard on the ground. His eyes could pick out the tiniest bird miles and miles away across the frozen tundra. If a human, or even a god, looked him in the eyes, they could not but feel a kind of awe. But in the end, he did have two of them.

‘I will pay your price, Mimir.’ And so saying, he tore his right eye from his head. The pain was searing. He gave it to the guardian of the Well. Mimir handed him a horn brimming with the waters of wisdom. Odin took a deep drink.

Immediately he saw everything that had happened and everything that was in the future. Most people don’t want to know the future, as some of it is not good news. But some people do and try to find it out, one way or another. Usually it does them no good, and my advice to you is to keep away from fortune tellers.

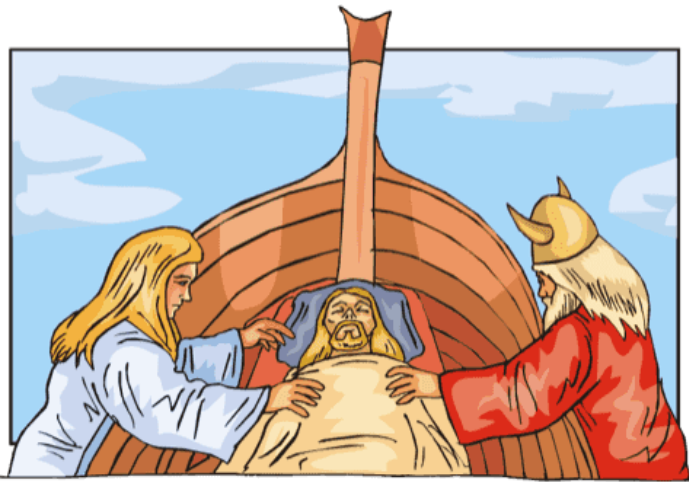
But Odin was not a person, he was a Norse god, and when he saw the joy that would come to him, he laughed with happiness.

But seeing all the sorrows and troubles that would happen to humankind, he also knew what he could do to help. For even though the gods really have no need to trouble themselves about us mortals, and our puny lives and petty sufferings, they do actually care – at least some of the time. After he drank from the Well of True Wisdom, he knew that he must never let evil get the upper hand in the world of humans on a permanent basis. And at least we mortals can be grateful for that small mercy.



Baldur

My name is Frigga, you must have heard of me. Once I had it all. I was wife of Odin, and Queen of Asgard. Our palace was made of gold and had 540 rooms. There was a fair bit of politics and debating that went on there, but we gods spent most of the time feasting and playing games. You might say that I lead a privileged life. But the joy and happiness in my heart did not depend on luxury or advantage. I was a mother and I had two splendid sons: Hodur and Baldur. Both Odin and I counted our boys as our greatest blessings.



They were twins, but they could not have been more different from one another. Baldur was all radiant beauty. He shone with innocent happiness, and was as beautiful as a sunbeam. Everyone who saw him loved him right away for the lightness he brought into their hearts. Hodur, however, was the very opposite. Not only was he dark but he was blind. The poor boy could share none of the delights of light. But you had to admire the way he just quietly got on with life. I loved him all the more for it.

I said that everyone loved Baldur, but there is always an exception. In this case, that was Loki, the god of a different sort of light – fire – and the god of a different sort of pleasure – mischief. He saw how popular Baldur was, and he was filled with envy – though he did not show it. He waited for his opportunity to put out the light of his rival.

I can't say that we were not warned. Baldur started to change. The light in his blue eyes was a touch dimmer than usual. He hung his head and looked weary. I began to worry about the boy and I spoke to Odin.

"Don't fret, it's probably just a phase he's going through," said my husband.

But mothers do fret. And so when I was alone with Baldur, I asked him as tactfully as I could, if anything was the matter.

"Yes, mother," he replied, "There is something the matter." I could see that he wanted to open up his heart. "You see, I have been having dreams. Bad dreams. Dreams of darkness, and the underworld."

This was not the news I wanted to hear. When we gods dream, it is usually prophetic. And so I spoke once again to Odin, and we both became uneasy and started to sleep badly ourselves. Even Odin began to have dark dreams. These kinds of moods and depressions are infectious, you know.

“Odin,” I said, one morning. “Where is your wisdom now? Can you not use it to help our son? What must we do?”

But the all-seeing Odin did not know what to do. When it came to saving his own son, he was struck with indecision, and just fretted and worried.

I had to do something, and so I sent my servants throughout all the earth, with strict instructions. “Ask all organic and inorganic things, all living creatures, animals, the fish and the birds, as well as all the trees, stones and rocks, to swear an oath. They must swear not to harm my Baldur. All creation must swear the oath, and gladly, for do they not love my sunbeamed darling?”

My servants left Asgard, and roamed long on the Earth. At last they returned to me. “Lady,” they said, “all have sworn, excepting only the mistletoe which grew far out of reach. But there is no need to fear the mistletoe, it is not mighty like the oak and we do not see how it could harm Baldur.”

At last, my husband was also spurred to action. He saddled his horse, the eight-legged Sleipnir, and rode in a flash to consult a prophetess in the underworld. This was not the burning hell of Christians, but in the cold, dark place of the dead. To his surprise, Odin saw soft silken couches, surrounding a magnificent feast, as if a guest or new arrival was expected. His heart grew heavier and he summoned the prophetess with his spells.

“You have woken me,” said she, “to find for whom the feast is spread. It is for your own son.”

“Baldur!” cried Odin.

“The same,” said she. “It is his brother who will slay him. And you, Odin, will bear a son to avenge his death. Now let me sleep again.” And the prophetess sank back into her tomb.

Odin rode home to Asgard. His heart was heavy, thinking of the loss of his son, and the light and love of his presence, but Sleipnir galloped home at a tremendous pace on his eight legs.

“My husband,” I said, “Do not despair. All things alive and dead have promised not to harm our dear boy. Therefore we should not worry, but rejoice. Sit down, eat and take this horn of mead.”

In those days, life in Asgard was really fun. The gods were always teasing one another and having fun. Now there was a new game. The word got around that nothing could hurt Baldur, and so everyone decided to try out his invulnerability.

All the young gods – and because we all ate the apples of immortality, we were all young (except for Odin who kept a grey beard for gravitas) – formed a circle, and Baldur went in the middle. Everyone took it in turns to throw things at him, but because all the world had promised not to hurt him, these objects made strange patterns in the air, loops, spirals, simple detours, and never

touched him at all. Of course, Thor did not throw his hammer, for that had its own magic. However hard the gods threw their weapons and things, however carefully they aimed, nothing would touch my Baldur! He chuckled and challenged them to try harder.

I kept my spinning wheel in the corner of the hall. Like all mothers at that time, I had plenty of spinning to do, so I remained behind. I wondered what all the laughter and noise was about. An old woman started to clear the tables. “Do you know,” I asked, “what is going on?” There was a crackle in the fireplace, which was a clue that I should have spotted, but the whirr of my spinning wheel, and my need to keep an even thread, kept it from me.

For the old woman was Loki – ever the master of disguise- creeping about to learn what he could. “It is the gods at play,” said Loki. “They throw all manner of things at Baldur, but nothing will touch him.”

“Ah, that is because everything on the earth has promised me never to hurt him,” I said. Oh woe is me! I should have held my tongue.

“Are you sure?” said the old woman. “Absolutely everything?”

“Well not the mistletoe,” I told him, babbling on like a fool. “It grew too high, and it’s not much of a plant, is it? No branches or anything.”

The old woman said nothing and finished clearing the tables. I saw that she was working quickly.

Loki left the hall and hurried outside. He knew there was an oak with mistletoe by the gate. He managed to pick some, and with his magic spells, first strengthened the mistletoe and then made it into an arrow. A smile played on his lips, and there was evil in his heart. Following the sound of the laughter, Loki walked over and joined the merrymakers.

Hodur stood apart, sadly. “Hodur,” he said, “wouldn’t you like to have a turn?”

“Do not mock me,” said my dear Hodur. “How can I aim when I cannot see?”

“I will be your eyes,” said Loki, and he took the arrow and placed it in Holdur’s hand, drawing it back carefully. “Let it fly.” The arrow whizzed through the air and hit my Baldur!

There was no laughter, only silence before a terrible cry, for my Baldur, the Light, fell dead to the ground, his heart pierced by the fatal mistletoe.

Overwhelmed with dread and anxiety, the gods rushed over to Baldur, but it was clear that he was beyond help, and there was nothing they could do. Loki slipped away, and this they saw, but they were too shocked to prevent him. Instead, they turned on Hodur. “It was not my fault,” he said. “It was Loki who gave me the arrow and held my hand to send it.”

“The blood price, vengeance, the blood price!” came their words... and indeed this was our ancient custom. They would have slain Hodur there and then, were it not that killing was not permitted in Asgard, not that Loki paid any attention to that rule. Oh the mourning, the wailing and keening!

The goddesses came to see what had happened in the hall. I too, and when I saw, I rent my robes... “Oh Baldur, you are no more!” I said, and beseeching the gods, I continued, “Go, go to the underworld and beg for his release, for I and all the gods and all the earth cannot live happily without him.

It was Hermod who was willing to go. The others were afraid. My Odin prepared his own Sleipnir for the journey – and off he galloped.

While he was gone, we prepared a funeral ship for Baldur, as is the Norse custom. We garlanded the boat with flowers, thorns and tapestries, and laid my darling son upon it. Around him we placed all his possessions: his swords, shields, plates, and goblets, the saddle of his horse, and even his golden throne. Odin himself whispered a few words to his dead son, before placing his magic ring Draupnir upon his lifeless chest. It was his favourite treasure.

There were rollers beneath the boat, and we set them alight. The all consuming flames of death began to lick the hull. Thor laid his shoulders into the back of the burning boat, and started to push – but it was so heavy it would not shift.

This was the final agony. My son’s funeral boat would not even launch out to sea, as is the tradition of the Norse people and gods. In my grief I had almost forgotten about Hermod and his mission but Sleipnir the eight-legged horse travels fast, and he was soon back among us: “Great news!” said Hermod, “The Queen of the Underworld will release Baldur back to live so long as each every living thing will weep for him.”

There was no time to lose. Right away I sent my messengers whirling around the world. Each and every living thing began to weep for the loss of the lovely Baldur who brought such joy and light to one and all – but as I said before, there is always one exception. One giantess, Pokk, refused to mourn my son. His fate was sealed.

Now we had to return to the business of pushing him out to sea. Fortunately, not every giant is as hard hearted as Pokk. Another giantess was watching us from a hill top. She came down to the beach, riding on a wolf, with a bridle made of wriggling snakes. UGH! What a horrid sight she was.

But it was she who launched our son’s funeral boat out to sea for us. It blazed as bright as the sun as it sailed into the distance, leaving me, the gods and all the world to grieve in darkness.

Thor's Fishing Trip

The Norsemen were famous for sailing in their longboats, and they were great fishers, As you may know, fishermen may boast about the size of their catch: I leave it to you to decide whether or not the Norse god Thor is telling the truth in this tale.

“I like a good feast, so do all the gods and all mankind. Women lick their fingers, but don’t eat much, maybe a bite of cheese, thinking of their waists... My Sif has a lovely waist, so small I can span it with my hands. Mind you, my hands are a good size, like the rest of me, what? And she has lovely hair... and she has... oh well, enough of Sif, I am trying to tell you about my fishing. We were all feasting with the Sea-God, Aeger and a very fine feast it was, though a bit fishy for me, both gods and men need red meat. A nice bit of reindeer roasted on the spit...served up with sweet red-currant jelly... Too many herrings at Aeger’s, in my view. But we were his guests, the guests of the god of the Sea. He ought to have fresh fish. Anyway, there was plenty to eat.... “Thanks Aeger” I kept saying, “This is a great feast.” We gods liked to keep him in a good mood, for then the seas are calm, we gods and the people of the earth can go sailing and fishing with no worries. When Aeger loses his temper, Odin, how the seas rage! Mind you, it isn’t only Aeger who gets the seas in a froth. There is also the Midgard Serpent. Know about him, do you? No? Well, he’s an offspring of that Loki with some nasty giantess. he’s a slithery, slimy beast, with a flickering tongue and bad breath that smells like the plague. And if you think that sounds nasty enough, he’s a giant too. After he was born, he grew and he grew, and even the gods started to fear him. One day, Odin, our king, picked up the squirmy beast and dropped him in the sea. Silly thing to do,that: he should have killed him when he had the chance. That sea serpent keeps on growing, and growing, and now he encircles the whole world. He’s a monster among monsters. And when he wriggles, oh Odin, the seas go up and down like mountains, and it’s best to take shelter in a nice little port somewhere...

To carry on about the feast, – of course, a good feast needs plenty of mead, and we all drank so much that Aeger ran out. He looked quite crestfallen, embarrassed even. “Don’t upset yourself,” said my gorgeous wife, Thor will help you out, won’t you Thor?”



“Get me a giant cauldron?” said Aeger, looking brighter. “Then we can brew all we need”. There was a great guffaw in the hall. “Invited us to stay for a while, have you Aeger?”

“Of Course I’ll help, I said, but where will I find a cauldron big enough for all of us?” My friend Tyr, a brave young god, though of giant stock, and full of courage

piped up: “We can take my father’s, it must be a mile deep!”

I realised that it would be a big cauldron, because Tyr’s father was a giant who lived in a cold castle. All the giants had castles, for no cottage was big enough. No doubt he liked to heat up water in his cauldron for a nice hot bath to warm himself up.

Aeger clapped me on the back. “Glad to see you here Thor, you know that. I’ll be even more glad if you bring me back that cauldron. What drinking we’ll have!”

I set off with Tyr, disguised as a young man, though nothing could hide my massive shoulders.... I was not sad to leave Aeger’s merry hall, for a feast is all sitting down, and I like to be up and about. Tyr is a good fellow, always ready to help you out, and cheerful with it, just what you want in a travelling companion on an adventure to fetch a giant cauldron!

We had a long way to go. The giants’ land is far away, but eventually we got to Tyr’s home castle.... Tyr banged on the door, it was his family after all. His mother opened the bolts and let us in: she was beautiful, though a giantess – not that I mind large women – and it was from her that Tyr got his looks. Not his father, that’s for sure. “You better hide”, said his mother. “My Giant doesn’t like strangers, and when the fishing’s bad, he can be nasty. Here, under these cauldrons”.

“Mother”, said Tyr. “You’re right, we do need to hide. But my friend Thor is our guest, you should kill an ox for him.”

“It’s a lot of work,” she said, but she went off all the same. Later she came back with bloody hands, and a great ox. “Heat up the fire, my boy, I’ve done what you asked.” Tyr puffed and puffed the bellows till there was a roaring fire, and the giantess threaded the ox onto a huge spit and put it to roast. Soon there was a wonderful smell..and the thud thud thud of a giant’s footsteps coming home. “Quick, under the cauldrons,” she cried. We hid quickly and Tyr’s father came in. He was much bigger than me, – I’m not used to being the smallest and I don’t like it – and with beady eyes, and vast bushy eyebrows glistening with snowflakes. There was a fearful draught, till he slammed the door shut.

“I’ve news,” said the Giantess. “Our son Tyr has come home, with a friend. They’re hiding behind that column.”

Tyr’s father was called Hymer: he looked at the column: so fierce was his gaze that half the roof fell in, and all the cauldrons were smashed except the one hiding me and Tyr. We stepped out.

“Hmph, “ said Hymer who was not at all glad to see me, “Well, as you’re here, you’d better have some dinner”.

“I’ve killed an ox,” said the Giantess. “Actually I killed three, dear, you often eat a whole one yourself, and we’ve got guests”.

“hmpf,” said Hymer. “Lay up, can’t you? I’m hungry.” Tyr and I sat down at table with Hymer while the Giantess set the mead on the table and passed the ox to me. As you can imagine, I helped myself, and there wasn’t much left when I’d finished.

“You’ll have to wait,” said the Giantess to Hymer. “We’ve only got one spit.” and she skewered a second ox on it.

I was quiet. I accept I was a noisy eater and muncher, but I said nothing. No-one did. Hymer watched grumpily as I ate. “If you eat like that, it’ll be fish tomorrow,” he said, “We can’t kill 3 oxen every day for dinner.”” It was a tasty meal, and I felt pleasantly full after eating up the ox. “Phew,” I said, more to strike up conversation than for any other reason, for the hall was not cheerful. “Did you say you are going fishing tomorrow? I’d like to come. Will you take me? I’ve strong arms for the rowing...”

“I row far out to sea,” said Hymer. “A stripling like you might catch your death of cold.”s

My hand twitched on my hammer. Tyr placed his hand on my arm to calm me. With difficulty, I controlled myself. “I like rowing,” I said. “what do you use for bait?”

“Hmph,” said Hymer as he always did. “Find your own.”

The next day, as we were going down to the shore, we passed Hymer’s cattle. I picked out a bull, and killed it. “Makes good bait,” I said. Hymer who was not pleased, but I was his guest, so he couldn’t say anything. We got in the boat. Hymer rowed furiously, and when we were far from land, he shipped the oars. I seized them and rowed on twice as fast. Hymer was a good rower, but he’d never seen anyone row like me.

“Steady on, steady on there,” Hymer began to be frightened, “we don’t want to disturb the Midgard-Serpent.”

I carried on. “You get a bigger catch when the water’s deep,” I said. At last, when I thought we were over the dwelling-place of the Midgard-Serpent, I put a huge hook into the bull, checked my line for strength – it was indeed a good line – and threw it into the sea. Hymer threw in his bait, and it wasn’t long before he had landed two whopping whales. All of a sudden, my line was tugging like mad.

But I, – well, I wondered myself what it was that I had caught.... could it really be the Midgard-Serpent? I summoned my divine strength, pulled and reeled in my line, and the waters began to

heave, yes, I pulled and was pulled, heaved and was heaved, and my heart soared! I, Thor, would slay the dread Midgard-Serpent which all the world and Odin himself had feared....

I yanked the head of the monstrous reptile out of the water, gripped it fiercely. Now it was hissing and shaking and lashing his tale, and the sea was swelling and our boat was bobbing up and down. Still I heaved on the line :

“My hammer!” I shouted. Tyr did not need to be asked twice and put it in my hand. “Death to the Serpent” I cried and was about to strike, but at that very moment, Hymer took fright and cut my line. “You fool,” I cried and thumped him. The serpent swam off at full speed, glad no doubt to have tangled with Thor and lived to tell the tale. How he would boast to the slimy little serpents when he returned to his sea-layer!

“We’ve still got the whales,” said Hymer.

“Whales, what are whales compared to the Midgard-Serpent?” I said. Still there was nothing for it, Hymer the giant was a shaking wreck. Tyr sniffed the sea air as if he was on a cruise, and I rowed us back to land, working off my fury with the exercise.

Once back in the hall, Hymer recovered himself. “Wife,” he thundered, “I promised you fish, and here are two whales. Bring me my cup and some wine!” She did. The goblet, I saw, was beautiful.

“Thor,” said the giant, – for he had guessed who I was – “He who would drink my wine, must first break my goblet!” My good friend Tyr whispered in my ear, “Dash it against his forehead!” I seized the goblet and dashed it to smithereens against Hymer’s head.

“Come Tyr, it’s time to go.” I picked up the giant cauldron, which is what we came for after all, and marched out of the door while Hymer was still dazed.

We went at a good pace, which was just as well, for soon half the giants in Jotunheim were in hot pursuit. “This’ll be fun” I said, and put down the cauldron to get my hammer ready. Bif! Paf! Bang! Soon Tyr and I were standing surrounded by a hillside of dead giants!

So off we went, with Tyr singing to cheer us along. We made our way back to Aegir’s hall, where we were eagerly awaited. The cauldron was put to brewing mead, and the Feast carried merrily on..... While I told the other gods all about our fishing trip and the One that Got Away – What a size that brute was! You’ve never seen anything like him, I tell you!

Fenris the Wolf

It was a time when wolves were common across Northern Europe. The Norsemen had good reason to fear wolves, and this is reflected in the legends about their gods, as you will hear.

Loki looked like a god, he had the gifts of a god and the mind of a god, but his heart was elsewhere: it was with the giants, for was he not a giant at least in part by blood? And did he not have a home in Jotunheim, the cold, desolate and blasted Land of the Giants? I wouldn't have liked to live there, and I don't know anyone who would. As for Loki, although he had in Asgard a lovely wife, Sigyn, who was faithful to him to the end of days, in Jotunheim he had another family altogether. There his wife was a beastly giantess, and his children? Oh, it is better not to think about them. But if you must, there was Hel, who turned people to stone – only the gods were safe from her; the Midgard-Serpent, who was a horrible reptile, worse even than Fafnir the dragon, and who doubled in size every single day; and last, but not least, the cruel Wolf, Fenris, who was always hungry, and whose jaws were immense and whose pointed teeth were as sharp as swords.

Imagine keeping that lot in order at dinner! And these children of Loki's just kept on growing...

One day Odin was looking around the world with his Eye – there was a lot to see – and although Odin was very wise, that was only after he had looked. As I said, Odin was looking around the world, and his Eye fell upon Loki's home in Jotunheim, and he saw Loki's terrible children. He saw how strong and powerful they were getting, and what dreadful trouble they would eventually cause, and he sent Thor and Tyr and some of the other gods to fetch them to Asgard.

I would never have brought them to my home, but perhaps Odin wanted to keep his Eye on them. However, this was not the reason, for Odin cast Hel down into the underworld. (As the people there were dead anyway he thought she couldn't do anymore harm). He flung the Midgard-Serpent into the seas where it stayed growing ever bigger, and it was only the wolf, Fenris, that he kept in Asgard – because if the truth be known, he did not dare take him on directly.

Fenris was a strange and difficult pet – there is no doubt about that. He roamed freely about Asgard, frightening the goddesses. He scared even Odin, for Odin knew that in the Last Battle, it was his destiny to be destroyed by Fenris. One evening, some of the gods were too frightened to come to the Council Chamber as it meant passing Fenris who was snapping his huge jaws in the doorway, Odin decided it was time to act.



He opened up another passage into the chamber. When the gods had all come in, he closed the door. "What a mistake we have made," he bemoaned, "to feed and pamper this wolf, who is already our enemy, so he grows ever stronger? No, we must find a solution. We cannot kill him, for we can have no bloodshed here."

"Chain him up, that's what I'd do," said Thor.

"Yes, but how? How will we find a chain strong enough to hold such a creature?"

"Leave that to me," said Thor, always a god of action. That night Thor worked away with his great hammer, and the other gods helped him. In the morning, all admired the thick chain with its complex links that gleamed in the sunshine.

Odin spread out the chain and put some meat high up on a tree. The gods called Fenris, spread out the chain, and asked him to show his wonderful strength by breaking it. "Then you can have the meat," they promised. Fenris looked at the chain, and sniffed the meat. The wolf knew how strong he was, and that breaking the chain would not be a problem for him, so he agreed to be bound, and his feet were tied together so it looked as if they were to stay like that always. But the gods smiled too soon. The wolf flexed himself, snapped the vast chain, and was free once more. Reluctantly, Odin nodded, and Tyr gave Fenris the meat.

The wolf sloped off. "He has grown terribly strong," said Odin, looking at the chain in pieces on the ground. "You'll have to make a stronger chain."

Again Thor stayed up all night hammering away to make a new and a stronger chain to bind the Wolf. All the gods wished him good luck and prayed for his success, and in the morning they did think that the chain he had made looked stronger. But was it?

Again, Tyr called the wolf over. "You astonished us yesterday, but if you can break this chain, you will win eternal honour and your strength will be known throughout the world and throughout the Heavens."

"Where is the meat?" said Fenris.

"Oh we will give you the meat later," came the furtive reply.

Fenris looked at the gods and saw the fear in their eyes. His evil heart told him they would be even more afraid if he snapped this chain too, and he knew that he could. He agreed to be bound. The gods made sure the chain was fastened tight around him. "Get the meat," said Tyr.

Fenris waited until the meat was near, and then he strained the chain. His struggle lasted longer this time, and for a while it seemed that the chain would hold, but soon enough, it too burst apart with a snap. The gods stared at it in silence, while Fenris gobbled his meat and slinked away.

The gods looked at Odin. Something else must be done to curb this monster among them!

“We will have to ask the dwarves to help us,” said Odin slowly, “to make a chain so strong that Fenris will be unable to break it, and so light in appearance that he will agree to be bound by it. I will send a messenger to tell them of our desperate need. The dwarves have ever been our friends in times of danger.”

A messenger was sent, and soon he was in the underground home of the Dwarves. It was very dark, numerous lanterns lit the caves and the stalactites and stalagmites. In fact, it looked quite pretty. Some Dwarves ran about with yet more lights, some puffed bellows to heat the fires of the great forge, while others worked a different shift and were resting on toadstools chatting. The leaders of the Dwarves conferred together:

“We will make you an enchanted chain,” they said. They were a friendly lot and set to work at once. It took a long time, for there is much work in making a chain and even more in making enchantments. At last the Dwarves proudly handed over their work: “It is magic,” they said. “What is bound with this will remain bound until the End of Days.”

The gods’ messenger bowed low. “The gods will not forget their debt to the Dwarves and will gladly thank you and help you if you are in need,” and he flew back to Asgard.

When they saw it, the gods were not impressed. At first glance, it didn’t seem like a chain at all, just soft and silken string. Then one by one, the gods tried to break it. None could, not even Thor.

Odin smiled for the first time in a long while. “The time has come to ask ask Fenris to try it,” he said, and he called him.

“We know how strong you are,” said Odin, to the wolf. “You have shown us this twice. But now we have a further test for you.” He held out the twisted strand to Fenris, “It is this.”

The wolf looked at the silken string and paused – he was not stupid.

“Why should I?” he asked. “If I succeed, no-one will think anything of it, and if I fail, I remain bound.”

Odin smiled at him. “How could you fail, with your strength?”

“I fear a trick,” said Fenris. “If it is a trick, you will not help me. But you shall not call me coward: you may bind me if one of you will place his right hand in my mouth.”

The gods looked at each other, but they did not smile. There was a silence. Thor moved as if to volunteer, but Odin stayed him. “No,” he said. Thor and his hammer could not be risked. Then Tyr, always brave and courageous, stepped forward. Fenris opened his huge jaws and Tyr put his hand in the wolf’s horrible mouth.

The gods bound the whole length of the silken strand tightly around Fenris, and tied the ends together with the best knots they knew. They had a double worry: that the strand would not hold and that Tyr would lose his hand. Fenris thought this himself, and began his struggle to break free, but the harder he tried, the tighter he was bound.

Fenris jumped, stretched, and strained with all his strength but he could not break the strand. Then filled with fury at the trickery of the gods, he foamed at the mouth and bit off Tyr's hand.

Even Tyr, brave as he was, let out a terrible cry. The goddesses led him away to bind his handless arm.

"Prepare a rock, Thor," said Odin. "Choose a rock deep-rooted in the earth, and on an island. Bore a hole in it. Take Fenris to the island, thread the strand through the hole, and knot it well. Our lives and the lives of men depend on it."

So it was that the wolf, Fenris, was bound and made fast to a rock, his jaws spread far apart, foaming and growling until the End of Days.

Idun and her Golden Apples

Anyone lucky enough to go to Asgard, where the Norse gods live, would see at once that all of them, with the exception of Odin, are young, beautiful and handsome. Odin is the exception as he does have such a long beard, and he would look much younger if he shaved it off. But no-one shaves in Asgard, and now I am thinking about it, this may be because the other male gods look too young to grow a beard... How do they manage this? You might well ask, given that they've been up in Asgard for quite a while. The answer lies in Idun, and her Golden Apples.

One day Odin and Loki left Asgard to see what was going on in Midgard, the Land of Men. You may know that Odin is the father of the Norse gods, Loki is the god of fire and mischief. Anyway, these two gods had been trekking all day in the mountains, and come nightfall, they were definitely hungry. They saw some cows grazing, and they decided to kill one and have a few steaks. Odin jointed the beef, while Loki got the fire going. This was the work of a moment for him as he was the god of fire, even though the wood was wet, it would have taken you or me a lot longer.

Soon the meat was cooking over the fire. But there was a problem: the fire was hot, the meat was there – but for some reason, it would not cook. Try as they would – and the two of them did try – their dinner remained raw.

“Hmph,” said Odin. “There’s trouble about.”

In the light of the fire, they saw a shadow of a huge bird. They looked up and saw an eagle perched on a branch, silhouetted against the night sky. “That’s no eagle,” said Odin. The bird laughed, “No, I am no eagle and your meat will not cook unless you agree to give me whatever I want.” The gods were tired, cold and hungry so they agreed without inquiring as to the demands of the strange creature.

At once the meat began to sizzle. How good it smelled! But just as they were about to help themselves, the creature in the shape of an eagle, swooped down and grabbed the best bit with his beak. He gulped it down – no chewing for him – and took another piece. “No, you don’t,” said Loki, and he shoved a great log at the bird, trying to beat him off. But instead, the eagle grabbed the log and Loki found himself stuck fast on the other end of it. He could not let go! Now the eagle flew low, so that Loki was dragged behind and terribly bashed and bounced about by rocks and branches as they flew over the ground. At last the eagle put him down. “I am the Giant Thjasse,” he said, “and you’re not the only one who can change shape. You will never be free unless you agree to get me Idun’s golden apples. Do you?”

Loki hesitated. Thjasse wasn’t really asking for apples, he was asking for what Asgard prized above all – eternal youth and beauty. What would his punishment be if he stole that? But he was tired of being bruised and dragged about, so he agreed. Thjasse flew off screeching, “Keep your word or

you'll have me to deal with!" and Loki, who didn't want that, brushed himself down thoughtfully. Then he rejoined Odin who was already tucking into his steak, and began to eat himself.

This expedition to Midgard had not been very successful and soon the two gods returned to Asgard. Loki did intend to keep his word, and he began by making friends with Idun, keeper of the Golden Apples. This wasn't hard, as Idun was as sweet and good-natured as her lovely apples! Loki made a good start by telling her about his travels: he had plenty of funny and interesting tales to tell. Every time he went to get his own apple – for all the gods ate them once a week – he took the chance to tell Idun something or make her laugh. One day, he said, "You know, Idun, these are wonderful apples, but they're second best. I have seen better."

"I don't believe you."

"You don't believe me? Come and see for yourself."

"I think I will," said Idun.

"Why don't you bring your own apples?" said the crafty Loki. "Then you could really compare them."

Idun went to fetch her wondrous apples. She kept them in the sort of basket they deserved: it was made of purest gold, just the right size, and the handle was studded with rubies. It was so pretty!



Loki and Idun made for the gates of Asgard. Loki looked up. He saw a huge shadow in the sky – he knew what that meant. All of a sudden, Idun shivered. "I'm not sure I want to go," she said. "I'll come another day."

"A walk outside will do you good," said Loki, and he took her by the arm and they went through the gate.

Idun screamed, and no wonder. The eagle, Thjasse, swooped down for his prize, Idun and her apples. Poor Idun was flying through the air, with Thjasse's huge claws closed tightly around her waist without scratching her. "Careful with those apples," he screeched, and poor Idun screamed again. She was fated to be held prisoner in Thjasse's cold and gloomy castle.

Meanwhile, at first no one in Asgard noticed she had gone. Then things changed: The goddesses complained to each other of one or two grey hairs. Odin, who must have been the oldest if he was the father of the gods, got backache. And one or two little wrinkles, crow's feet, smile lines – that sort of thing, began to appear on the faces of the gods. They were not happy about it: if they were gods, they had to be immortal. Besides who doesn't want to look young and beautiful?

They held an assembly of the gods. The number one suspect in the Case of the Missing Apples was Loki, for suspicion always falls on him when there is mischief afoot. It was an uproarious meeting with all the gods demanding that Loki tell the truth, and all sorts of threats and divine curses were banded about.

“Alright, alright. I did it,” Loki, finally admitted. “I was forced into it.”

Then Thor, the strongest of the gods, seized hold of Loki and shook him terribly so that he was in fear for his life.

“Stop, stop,” cried Loki, “I’ll get the apples back. If you kill me, you will never eat those apples again, and you can all suffer the aches and pains of old age.”

When things had calmed down, the gods helped Loki turn into the shape of a falcon.

He flew and flew until he reached Thjasse’s castle. Idun was walking on the ramparts, with her jewelled basket. Quickly, Loki turned her into a nut, clutched it tight with his claws, and soared high towards Asgard. It was lucky he had a good start, for soon Thjasse came home. How he roared when he saw that Idun and her apples were gone! He guessed what had happened, changed at once into an eagle, and flew off, spurred on by anger and fury. Loki flew as quickly as he could, and falcons fly very fast, but it is the eagle that rules the skies, and little by little Thjasse gained on him.

Everyone in Asgard was watching, fearfully. Would Loki get back in time? The gods rushed off and laid great fires on the walls. Near fainting with exhaustion, the falcon flew over the wall and fell to the ground exhausted. In an instant the flames leapt into the sky, and Thjasse was burned. He fell, and died. Idun and her golden apples were safely back home. Youth and beauty returned to Asgard forevermore!

Sigurd and the Dragon

Sigurd was the son of a King. That's a good start in life, but before he was even born, his father was killed in a war. That was not so good. The night after the dreadful battle, the King's wife, crept over the field where the poor soldiers lay. By the moonlight, she collected the shattered pieces of the king's old sword and she kept them safely. You see, it was a magic sword, and the king had told her that it would belong to their son, and that he would grow up into one of the greatest heroes of all time.

Sigurd's mother went to live with another King, and I think she married him. This new King looked after her, and her son, very well. But life was not easy for young Sigurd. He knew that his mother expected a lot of him. It is one thing to have a go at being a hero, and quite another when everyone is waiting for you to grow up into the greatest hero who ever lived. That's called Pressure.

But he did mature into a fine young man. At least he looked pretty good – all the girls thought he could play the part. He had a special tutor called Regin, whose job it was to see that he knew how to behave as a true Prince. One day he suggested that it was time for Sigurd to go to the King and ask for his own horse. That is what he did, and the King told him to choose any horse he liked from the stables.

On the way across the courtyard, Sigurd met an old man.

"Where are you going?" he said. "Are you about to choose a horse?" In fact, this old fellow was Odin, ruler of the gods, who knew everything. "Would you like my advice?" he asked.

Sigurd looked at him. He didn't seem like the sort of person who knew about horses. But he had known what Sigurd was about to do, and "Maybe," thought Sigurd to himself, "Just maybe I ought to listen to what he has to say."

It was a wise decision: listen to advice and then take it or leave it. The old man told Sigurd to drive all the horses to a river and to choose the one that swam across. It sounded like a good plan, and that is what he did.

The horse that swam across the icy river was a beautiful grey mare, young but not too young, with a tail and mane that flowed with the wind when she galloped. Sigurd stretched out his hand flat with a carrot, and the horse whinnied to a stop and took it.

“That’s my girl,” said Sigurd. He walked the horse back, and saddled it up. “Good choice,” said the old man “This animal is of noble stock: it is descended from Odin’s horse, and will serve you well.” And Sigurd thanked him and went back into the palace.

At dinner he sat next to his old teacher, Regin. “Now you’ve got a horse” said Regin, “Why don’t you go and get some treasure?”

“Well,” said Sigurd “Can it be as easy as that? The only treasure I know about is guarded by the dragon, Fafnir”. As you know, all dragons are terrible, but this one was more terrible than most.

“Are you a coward?” said Regin.

“No,” said the boy. Not for the first time he began to suspect that his tutor was a little bit sly. He narrowed his eyes and asked: “Why are you so keen for me to kill this dragon?”

Regin told Sigurd some of the truth. Fafnir the dragon had once been human and was in fact Regin’s own brother.

There had been three brothers. Regin was the eldest, next was a young man who swam and looked like an Otter, and the youngest was Fafnir. Now, the otter-like, middle brother had been murdered, which angered the father so much that he demanded the blood price, – a lot of gold – and he got it. But the murderer had stolen the gold from a Dwarf who, surprise, surprise, got very angry. “A curse on you,” he said to the murderer. “ A curse on you forever. And what’s more...this gold will bring bad luck to whoever has it.”

So it was that the family was now cursed. Fafnir killed his own father for the gold, and now rich he worried how to protect his newfound wealth and so he became a dragon to guard it.. Regin had loved his father, and also loved gold, and so wanted vengeance. “That’s why” he said to Sigurd “That’s why I want you to kill Fafnir. I’ll help you too. You know me as a tutor, but I was a great smith and have not lost my skills. I will make you a sword to kill the dragon with.”

“Well make me a sword, and I will slay your brother-dragon,” promised Sigurd, who was now rising to the challenge.

Regin made a beautiful sword. It was straight and strong and glinted in the sun. Sigurd tried it out on a stone, and it smashed to pieces.

“I’m afraid that’s no good to me,” he said. And so Regin made him another sword fit for a prince. Sigurd soon broke that one too.



Everyone at court was talking about how Sigurd had broken two swords as if they were twigs of a tree, and soon his mother heard about it too. The time had come to give her son the broken pieces of his father's blade. Regin made these into a shining and great new sword. Sigurd clashed this blade on a lump of iron, and it did not break, but split the iron in two.

A few days later, Sigurd rode out with Regin to the heath where the Dragon had been seen. It was a bleak and blasted spot. Sigurd looked down and saw a ravine – definitely not a green and pleasant valley. Along the bottom, there was a strange white trail which even from that distance looked like slime.

"There," said Regin " See that! It's slime from the dragon like a snail trail....! That's the way he goes to drink, there's a lake at the bottom." Sigurd saw that the trail was very broad, and the weight of the Dragon had made a huge indent in the ground. "The Dragon must be huge" he said. "Yes," said Regin "And see that thing that looks like a caravan, that's the Dragon's dung!"

"Wow" said Sigurd. There was nothing else to say, and he automatically gripped his sword tighter... "When you go down" said Regin, "be careful to stand at the side. If you go in front of Fafnir, you'll be poisoned by his breath, and if you go behind him, he'll knock you over with his tail and then..."

"I know, I know" said Sigurd "He'll eat me"....and he began to clamber down into the valley. His idea was to ambush the Dragon, to dig a pit with his sword, climb in and hide. When the Reptile slithered across the pit, he would drive his sword into the Dragon's heart from underneath. It was a brave plan.

If the Dragon's forelegs fell into the pit, his head would go in and that would be the end of Sigurd. If his hind legs went in, his great feet would claw Sigurd to death or squash him. Either of these things might happen. But Sigurd was brave, and he dug the pit as he thought best, climbed down into it and tried to camouflage over it. He hoped the Dragon would not smell him.

Sigurd had never been so frightened as when he sat in the dark dugout, listening to the dragon getting closer and closer. His heart pounded in his chest and beads of sweat broke out across his forehead. The dragon's wheezing lungs drew nearer and nearer. And then thud! The dragon arrived over the pit. Without a second to lose Sigurd thrust his sword straight up through the camouflage and it cut directly into the dragon's heart. Fafnir lashed with his tail till stones broke and trees crashed about him. Then he croaked and said:

`Whoever you are, my gold will bring you death....'

Sigurd said: "I will die anyway, Fafnir, but now it is you that must die," and he thrust the sword some more... and Fafnir died.

It was very hard for him to climb out of the pit and over the terrible dead dragon, but Sigurd told himself the dragon was more terrible when he was alive.

Regin came down to meet him and asked him to roast Fafnir's heart for him. Sigurd didn't much like the idea, but he always obliged people if he could, so while Regin built a little fire, he cut out Fafnir's heart. He had to touch the disgusting bit of meat, and while he was putting it on to grill, he burnt his finger. So he licked it, now sticky with the residue of the dragon's heart and to his amazement, he was suddenly able to hear what the birds roundabout were saying. One bird said:

"There is Sigurd roasting Fafnir's heart for another, when he should eat it himself and learn all wisdom.'

Another bird said: 'There lies Regin, ready to betray Sigurd, who trusts him.'

A third bird said: 'Let him cut off Regin's head, and keep all the gold to himself.'

When Sigurd heard the birds' truth, and understood that he was about to be betrayed, after all he had done for Regin, in a passionate rage he took out his sword once more and cut off his tutor's head.

Then he heard a fourth bird sing:

"Sigurd kills a dragon,

A hero and a man.

Now he ought to find a bride,

Brynhilde, if he can."

Brynhilde

My story is long but what happened to me is the stuff of legends... and great music! Someone called Richard Wagner put me in a famous opera cycle called The Ring.

Listen well, for what happened to me was my own fault – is it not always so? And also the fault of sorcery and those who practise it.

I was once a beautiful warrior-maiden and a Valkyrie. I had long red-gold hair which fluttered behind me as I flew about in battles wearing a scarlet chainmail corset, with my shield and spear outstretched. As you know, war is about skill, courage, and chance. We Valkyries are that random element. As we ride through the fear, the chaos, and the dust of the battle, we enforce the will of Odin – ensuring who will live, and who will die, who will flee, and who will win the day and emerge the glorious conqueror.

But there was one time when I followed my heart. I saw Agnar, a handsome young warrior about to enter a vicious fray. Although I was a Valkyrie, and it was my job to realise the gods' wishes of who lived and who died, I had a woman's feelings and impulses. Like everyone, I am a prisoner of who I am.

When Odin ruled that Agnar must die, I thought, "No, The other one will fall. I'll see to that," and a moment later, I turned the spear which had been heading towards Agnar's chest towards his opponent, who fell to the ground and died with fearful groans.

Odin was not pleased. "You can't do that, Brynhilde, I told you to kill Agnar. That was my will."

"Well it wasn't mine," I said. "Why should one so young have to die?"

"That's not your business," said Odin. "I shall have to punish you. You will no longer be a Valkyrie, you will be an ordinary human woman, born to live, marry and die... But because you have been a Valkyrie, I will grant your wish that you shall not marry a coward, but a hero, a man without fear. I will place you within a Ring of Flames, and you will sleep until a hero rides through the fire to claim you for his bride."

And so it was. Odin sent me to a castle on the summit of a remote mountain. All around this castle, there burned an eternal ring of flames. Inside I slept, and slept, until such time as my hero would come and rescue me.

Then one day it happened. I heard something in my dream. I opened one eye, and then the next. There was a smell of singed horsehair. I turned my head. A tall, broad-shouldered warrior was standing over me.

I stretched out my hand. He knelt down and took it in his own.

I must say, he was a nice-looking hero; some of them have so many scars it spoils their looks. We held hands fast – for the people of the North, this itself means much – and before long we kissed each other and plighted our troth. As we did this the ring flamed ever higher as our sacred vows reached high into the Heavens. Soon, I thought – and I wanted it to be soon – we would be wed.

His name was Sigurd, and he said that he was the slayer of a dragon called Fafnir. He certainly sounded like a brave enough fellow.

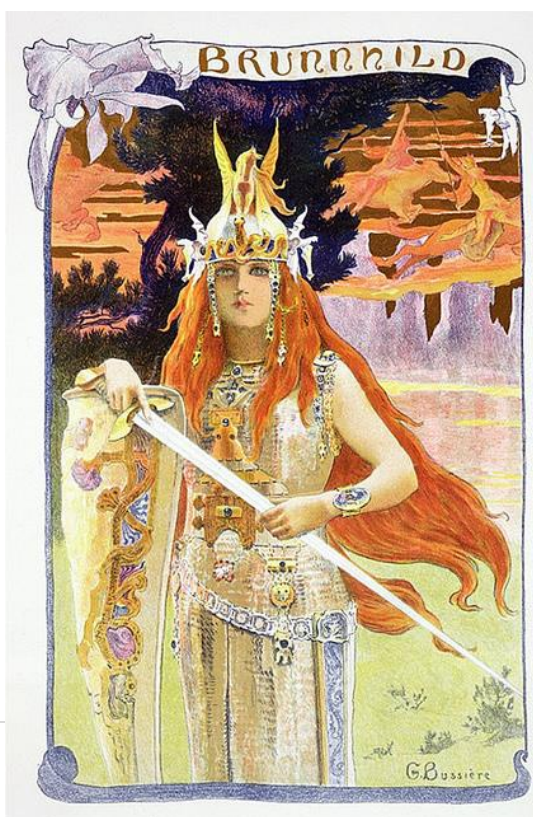
“You know that I am not like other men,” he said. “I rode my horse through the flames as others pass through the heather. But there are yet other tasks I must complete before I can return to claim you as my bride.”

Well you can imagine how I felt. After all those long years of dreams, my hero arrives for the briefest of meetings. One kiss and he was ready to be off.

“Take this,” said Sigurd, softly. “It is a magic ring, named Andvaranaut.”

“I will wear it always,” I whispered. “Now go, if go you must.” Sigurd kissed me one last time, jumped on his horse and gathered his reins before leaping once again through the terrible flames.

I now know that Sigurd left me to join the Burgundy Court. The Queen was Grimhild by name, and she was grim by nature. I will call her Queen Grim. She was a sorceress who wrought spells like herself, grim and evil. She wanted Sigurd to marry her daughter, Gudrun, who was pretty and silly enough, just a foolish girl. One night, at table during the feasting, the Queen herself served the wine. “Honoured guest,” she said to my Sigurd, “your fame and renown reached our court long ago, and I am proud to serve you myself. For you, I shall pour from this pitcher from which only heroes may drink.” Sigurd, who lacked my gift of second sight, took the goblet.



“Drink deep, Sigurd.”

Queen Grim held his eyes with a bold gaze. Sigurd drank the wine and Queen Grim smiled, for she knew that the goblet was bewitched: Sigurd forgot forever all he had held dear; me, his family and friends... and thus it was that my Sigurd was enchanted into losing all recollection of his promise to me. He felt that he was free to marry Princess Gudrun, and he did.

Now the queen also had a son to marry off. His name was Prince Gunnar. One day she told him, “I will find you a bride. A bride worthy of a hero, and a worthy mother of

heroes. Brynhilde is her name. Take your best horse, and spurs, for you will need them, and ride as you have never ridden yet. You must cross a Ring of Flames. There you will find a bride who has flown at the side of Odin... I will tell you where to go.”

Gunnar saddled his best horse, and did as his mother told him. But his horse would not pass through the Ring of Flames, and he had to return empty-handed to court. That night at dinner he had his mother on one side, and Sigurd opposite him. “Where is your bride, oh my son?” said his mother. “My horse was faint-hearted and would not cross the flames,” Gunnar replied.

“Is that all?” said Sigurd. “You are my wife’s brother, practically my blood-brother. Take mine.”

This was a generous offer, for Sigurd loved his horse, and the two brothers-in-law embraced. Gunnar agreed to leave for the Ring of Flames the next day. Queen Grim smiled, “My boy,” she said, “We will feast when you return and I pray it will be your wedding feast.”

The next day Gunnar rode, but the horse was not used to him and was frisky. He lacked Sigurd’s firm hand and sure steady seat in the saddle. Much to Gunnar’s annoyance, the horse would not pass through the flames, and again he had to return without me for his bride.

Back at court, Gunnar was out of temper. “Come brother,” said Sigurd. “Don’t they say third time lucky? Let me try my luck – I will ride for you, with your helmet, chain-mail and shield.”

Thus it was that my Sigurd returned for me, not for himself but for another. A second time he rode through the Ring of Flames. Again, I woke and saw my hero standing over me. “This time,” I thought, “It really is my happy ever after. Now he will take me in his arms, and we shall ride away to our fairytale wedding.” Oh how happy I was! But not for long.

There was no look of love in Sigurd’s eyes. It was as if he had never seen me before. He came over all official..

“I have come to claim you for my brother-in-law, Prince, Gunnar of Burgundy,” he said.

I felt then that I had died. And yet my heart refused to stop beating. I was still breathing. He took his own ring from my finger and replaced it with Gunnar’s. I did not even protest. I was a ghost.

Then he raised me to his saddle, and away we sped through the flames and back to the Burgundy Court. There, I married Gunnar, and became a wife.

I revived, but I was not happy – how could I be happy with Gunnar when every day I saw my Sigurd with that Princess Gudrun? How could I stand to see another in my place? But for the witchery of Queen Grim, he would have been mine. What did that spoiled Princess Gudrun know of battles and the world? Had she flown at Odin’s side and lived the glorious life of a Valkyrie?

She was stupid enough to goad me.

“We two are sisters, now, are we not? But my Sigurd, slayer of Fafnir, is a hero known to all! And it was my husband, not yours, who rode through the flames to fetch you.” She flashed her ring. Imagine what I felt when I saw Andvaranaut, the ring that Sigurd gave to me, on Gudrun’s finger! Could I bear this insult?

I will tell you that I could not bear it. My heart called for revenge!

Enraged, I taunted Gudrun – I told her that Sigurd had loved me before even he had loved her. I told her that she was only with him, because of her wicked sorceress of a mother. Did I not tell her the truth?

Gudrun cried, but what did I care? Her brother, Gunnar, shouted and stormed, he even cried for his mother, milksop that he was. But as Sigurd’s brother-in-law, he could not kill him. That was for another to do. And so for the honour of the family, Gunnar’s younger brother took it upon himself to kill Sigurd. One night, as my beloved warrior slept, the youngest of this shameful family crept into Sigurd’s chamber, and slayed him in his sleep.

Gunnar grieved and wept. But my heart was numb, for I too was grieving, though I did not weep, and I turned away, saying nothing. If Gunnar had lost Sigurd, so too had I. By the day of the funeral, I wanted no part of a life at this accursed court. Standing in front of Sigurd’s funeral pyre, I took a knife and plunged it in my grieving heart. As I felt the life departing from my weak body, I threw myself onto the fire. There we were consumed together in the eternal flames, that lifted our souls up together to the afterlife.

Sif and her Golden Hair

Although Thor was a raucous fellow, he did, underneath it all, have one soft spot – and that was for his beautiful wife, whose name was Sif, and whom he loved tenderly and dearly. She had long, thick wondrous golden hair, which flowed down her back like a field of corn. In fact, it was Sif who made the Norse people's crops grow, and their fields yield long heavy ears of corn that would keep people well fed and happy. She travelled over the Northern world, and wherever there were families, farms and people tilling the land, Sif was sure to be near at hand smoothing their path against the cruel winds, cold and winters of the North.



Of course as every lady knows, beautiful hair does not take care of itself. She was very proud of her hair, and did not allow herself to have a bad hair day. Especially as she knew she was not the only one who was very proud of her hair, Thor her husband was very proud of it too and often boasted of it when he was drinking his mead to anyone who was around to listen. Morning, noon and night, Sif combed her wondrous hair with a jewelled comb, and she often washed in pure sparkling streams, and lay it out in the sun to dry on a rock. As you can imagine, with hair as thick as hers, it took quite a while to dry.

One day, while she was sitting on a bank of the softest moss outside her house in Asgard, where the gods live, drying her golden hair in the sun, Sif went to sleep. It's easy to go to sleep in the sun when you're not doing much. And it's especially easy, if another god puts a spell on you so that nothing can wake you.

It was Loki, the god of fire and mischief, who cast this sleeping spell on Sif. He found her dozing with her gorgeous hair flowing all around her, and his evil mouth smiled at this chance to make trouble in the Thunder-God's household. He knew that Sif's hair of gold was Thor's greatest treasure – and he was determined to take it away from him.

And while she was asleep, Loki took his shears and chopped off Sif's hair, every single lovely lock! One by one they tumbled onto her shoulders and down her dress. Her head was bare, as if she'd had a haircut in the army or become a convict on a prison ship – the poor thing!

A while later, Sif woke up. Her head and neck felt cold and light, – she looked up and saw the sun was still shining. Then she felt for her hair, – there was nothing there! Looking down, she caught sight of the clusters of curls that lay all around her. Horrified, she rushed inside and burst into tears...and rain fell in bucketfuls on all the corn in the north, so the people asked "What in heaven's happened to Sif?" She continued to cry and cry.

That night Thor came home. But when he called to his lovely wife, he did not hear her sweet voice in reply. Thor thought she must be somewhere else, so he put his hammer down, and whistled as he walked over to the homes and palaces of the other gods to look for her. Sif was nowhere to be found. Sadly, Thor came home, he did not like coming back to an empty house. “Sif” he called again and again, “come back to me”.

And then he heard his name, in a whisper. Sif stood in the shadows, so that Thor could only see her outline.

“My husband,” she sobbed, “I am ashamed for you to set your eyes on me. I must leave Asgard, the home of the gods, which is beautiful and perfect, and go to hide elsewhere.”

“Don’t speak like that. What has happened to you my sweet, that you say such terrible things?” asked the Thunder-God tenderly. “Come out so that I can see you.”

“My crowning beauty, my hair has gone. An evil-doer has cut it and taken it from me. I do not want you to see me like this, so I must leave.”

Thor saw that it was true, Sif had lost her hair. Her shaven head was still beautiful, but the dancing joy had gone from her eyes. Instead her face was puffy with sobbing and her distress touched the heart of Thor.

And then the men of the Earth heard the skies roar with agonised Thunder –

“Who was it who did this, Sif?” raged Thor. “I, the strongest of the gods, I will find whoever did this and kill him. I will make the other gods use all their strength, all their magic and all their powers to give you back your wonderful golden hair!”

Thor led Sif in her veil to the Court of the Immortals, where some of the other gods and goddesses were seated on crystal benches sipping mead in Council. None of them could tell Thor who had cut Sif’s hair. Finally Odin, the chief of the gods, and the father of Thor, spoke. “It must have been Loki who did this” he pronounced. He is the god of fire, and we all know that fire can wreak much mischief. Nobody else would do such a thing. Though fire was not the cause of this, a great mischief it was, and Loki has ever loved mischief. But Thor, you must not kill him here. There can be no killings among the gods in Asgard. I will find Loki for you. But do not kill him. Besides, he has many skills, and maybe he will find a way to return Sif’s beauty to her.”

“Hmph” grunted Thor who was red with rage. “I’d like to kill him! ...but that wouldn’t help Sif”. Odin spoke again, “Control your rage, my son. I will call the Call, and all must answer it, even Loki!”

Odin’s Call was terrible to hear, but all the gods and goddesses who were not in the Council chamber, had to leave what they were doing and assemble; even Loki. Loki saw at once that

everyone was against him, so he said “Where is your proof that I am the culprit?” “Come”, said Odin. “Do not lie, do not avoid the truth. You have done Sif and Thor a great wrong, and you must repair it!”

“I cannot grow hair,” joked Loki. “And even if I could, it would not be on her head!” None of the gods laughed. Loki looked at Thor whose temper was legendary, and he looked at Odin who solemnly said again “You must make good the wrong you have done ,” and Loki saw that he would indeed have to find a way to restore Sif’s beauty.

So Loki left Asgard. He did not leave in order to escape from Thor, though that was part of it. He left to try and find a solution. He did not go to the Giants in Jotunheim, even though he had been there before, and had friends there – as far as it is possible to have friends among the Giants – and he did not go to Midgard, the land of the mortals. For he knew that there had never been a man or woman who could do anything that would restore Sif’s hair. No, Loki went under the earth.

This is not something that you or I could do, for the innards of the earth are molten hot and we would not survive. But Loki was the god of fire, and so he was able to go down and down inside the passages of the earth. That is where the Gnomes live. You might think thenomies were ugly, but they didn’t think so, and Loki didn’t mind. Down inside the earth, the Gnomes were master smiths and the rich guardians of metals, minerals and crystals: they had learnt with hammer and tongs to fashion articles of much beauty and magic from them. Loki had seen them make a magic spear that hit whatever it was thrown at, and a boat which could sail anywhere, and which you could fold and put in your pocket.

Loki was crafty, and he always flattered the Gnomes whenever he went to see them. He praised their work to the skies, and promised them the earth although they already had it! Resisting flattery and false promises needs more wisdom than the Gnomes possessed, so they grew to like him. Nobody else had ever been nice to them, not even when they were babies, so their hearts softened. Then he said “Have you gold and skills enough to make a cap of floor-length hair as fine as silk?” The Gnomes set to work at once. They stitched, threaded, weaved and span[for days, [but] until finally the Cap of Golden Hair was ready! Even Loki was impressed. “’Tis true, you are master smiths indeed. None are better. Will you give me this Cap in return for the Heavens and the Earth?”

The Gnomes who were not clever, gave Loki the Cap of Golden Hair, although the Earth was already theirs, and the Heavens were not Loki’s to give. Loki said his farewells, and was glad to return to the fresh air of Midgard with the Cap. Then he ascended to Asgard and the Heavens and went to find Sif. “Take your veil off, Sif” he said “for you will have golden hair again”. And he wrapped the Cap around Sif’s head where it fitted perfectly. Sif was so overjoyed with her new hair that she twirled around, her long locks flowing behind her. Her eyes sparkled once more and as the glow returned to her cheeks, she looked truly beautiful.

The Punishment of Loki



Please allow me to introduce myself. You will have heard already of some of my crimes. I confess that I am proud of them, despite what others say. It was I who cut off the golden hair of Sif, the goddess of corn. And I was the one who stole Freyja's necklace. Idun with her golden apples of immortality was kidnapped by none other than me. And didn't I sting Brok, and do everything I could to spoil Thor's thunder-clapping hammer?

Yes, if you do not recognise my face, as dark as a burnt-out tree, and my eyes which dance like flames, you will know me by my deeds. I am Loki, god of fire, mischief, and all those things that are naughty but fun. Some, I am afraid, say that

I am bad. Look, my life was never easy. I always had a bit of an identity crisis. And I still don't know whether I am the son of Odin or his brother. Am I a god or am I a giant? If I 'm half and half of these two groups bound to war throughout the ages, and where does that leave me? Being the god of fire didn't help either: everyone knows that sometimes fire warms you up, and other times it burns down your house and fields and forest and everything else....OK, I did bad, destructive things, but if Odin was so wonderful, where was his mercy and forgiveness? Or was it because he was so totally lacking in those qualities that our glory faded with time and men turned elsewhere. I mean, who worships the Norse gods these days? Very few!

This story is about one of my disasters. Look, I'm the god of fire, aren't I? So is it my fault I'm hot-tempered? It all happened at Aegir's feast: he was god of the sea, and being god of fire, I am always jumpy in the water. No-one else was happy either, so you can imagine what sort of feast it was, though the tone lightened as the servants passed the great horns of mead round the table, and the gods drunk more and more. But, somehow, they missed me out. "Wonderful servants, Aegir", said one of the gods. "They see to everything and everyone, nothing is left undone".

Hang on a minute... They missed me out! Didn't they? I was so angry I, I tell you. I leapt up and clobbered one of those blasted servants. He fell backwards onto the stone flags, and lay stiff! There was a terrible silence. I remember. Turns out the stones had killed him...Everyone turned and looked at me. "Out, out!" they cried. "Outcast, cast him, out." I got up and left the hall. But not for long. It was too wet for me in the rain. Another servant was outside the hall, and I asked him what they were talking about.

"They're all having a lovely time," said the servant looking at me. "But they've nothing good to say about you."

Incensed, I strode back into the hall and faced the silence. “I am cold and wet. I have a thirst also. Who will give me to drink? Who will pass the horn to me?” No-one spoke. “I have come to take my place. Why are you so quiet? Oh you cast me out? is it? Do you turn me away?”

There was a silence and then at last a voice boomed: “You will never more have a place among the gods. You must leave.” That was Odin, the god who was, probably, my own father.

Well, if that’s how it was, I did have something to say. “A curse upon you. Not a weedy human curse, but a curse from one of your own, a curse from a god to the gods. You find fault with me, but I, Loki, will never forget the faults that are yours. You Odin, are a bit short on mercy and forgiveness, aren’t you? Yours is a hard wisdom, isn’t it? And you Idun, did you not leave Asgard of your own will even if I did sweet talk you all the way out of the gates? You have always been stupid, all you can do is hold a basket...” And so I carried on till I got to Thor, god of thunder and war. “Are you not puffed up with pride? But where would you be without your hammer? And would you have your hammer if I had not cut off the hair of that silly wife of yours?”

I agree, it might have been better to leave Thor out of this, but as I said, I am a bit hot-tempered – impulsive shall we call it? There was a grumble and a rumble, a few thunderbolts which Thor liked to throw for fun, and then a flash of lightning. Thor stood in front of me, towering with rage, and swinging his hammer about. It really was time to go. “Curse the lot of you,” I cried “May you and yours be consumed in the endless Fire both now and at the end of days!”

I will admit that I did take things a bit far with these insults and curses. Anyway, I left and wandered lonely o’er the earth, looking for somewhere safe to hide. The gods were sure to search me out and exact vengeance! I settled in a deep valley with a river hidden in the mountains, and I built a house with windows in every wall so I could always see if anyone was coming...Not that I relied on the windows alone. Don’t forget, I often changed my shape. Because I was afraid of water, I turned myself into a salmon to get used to it. What terrific swims and jumps I had in that mountain river! And I had always liked fish: slippery as a fish, isn’t that what they say?

After a while, I relaxed: my hiding place was safe. No-one came looking. When I was not a salmon, but in my true form, I started weaving. Not cloth, but fishing nets. They were new, because I invented them. But they do take a long time to make. I had plenty of time. One day Odin looked down on the world and saw someone busy making nets....quickly, he called Thor, and Kvasir who was quite a bit sharper than that thick thunder god. and sent them down to the valley where I was hiding. I was so busy making my net, that I forgot to look out of the window. I heard the cracking of branches. They were nearly upon me! I flung the half-woven net onto the fire, and salmon-jumped into the river. The three gods went into my house and looked around. Kvasir found the charred remains of my net. “I know what it is, it’s a fishing net: Loki was always a brilliant fisherman. and I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s turned into a fish and leapt into the river. Let’s finish the net and fish for him!”

It didn't take the three of them long to finish the net. Then they walked softly to the river and dragged it slowly from bank to bank. I sank to the bottom and lay between two rocks, so the net passed over me. Then the gods tied a heavy stone to the net so that it could not miss me: but I jumped over it and rushed headlong down a waterfall. The gods moved downstream and tried once more. I jumped again. Thor was watching and seized me as I jumped: I was slipping out of his grasp but he gripped my tail tight. Oh! oh! I wriggled, but he held me fast.

I could do nothing, and was changed back into my true shape. They dragged me to a cave nearby. They bored holes in three great rocks, and bound me to the stones with iron fetters. My punishment was to stay there for all time. But even that was not enough. They hung a serpent over me, to drop poison on my face.... I cannot tell you how painful this was, no words can describe it. Thank goodness I had a good wife, Sigyn, though I was not a good husband. She heard my screams echoing in the wind and came to help me. She caught the poison in a cup, but when it was full she turned to empty it, and the drops of poison fell on me. I could not escape them, try though I did. I strained the iron on my flesh, and I pulled so hard that the earth trembled and quaked.

So that was that . I, Loki, received my punishment until the end of the world. Then I will become pure fire, consume my chains and fight against the gods with my fire of destruction. Ha ! The last laugh will be mine !