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THE PLAYERS

Many gods and goddesses are named in Norse mythology. You will meet quite a few of them in these pages. Most of the stories we have, however, concern two gods, Odin and his son Thor, and Odin's blood brother, a giant's son called Loki, who lives with the Aesir in Asgard.

Odin

The highest and the oldest of all the gods is Odin.

Odin knows many secrets. He gave an eye for wisdom. More than that, for knowledge of runes, and for power, he sacrificed himself to himself.

He hung from the world-tree, Yggdrasil, hung there for nine nights. His side was pierced by the point of a spear, which wounded him gravely. The winds clutched at him, buffeted his body as it hung. Nothing did he eat for nine days or nine nights, nothing did he drink. He was alone there, in pain, the light of his life slowly going out.

He was cold, in agony, and on the point of death when his sacrifice bore dark fruit: in the ecstasy of his agony he looked down, and the runes were revealed to him. He knew them, and understood them and their power. The rope broke then, and he fell, screaming, from the tree.

Now he understood magic. Now the world was his to control.

Odin has many names. He is the all-father, the lord of the slain, the gallows god. He is the god of cargoes and of prisoners. He is called Grimnir and Thrid. He has different names in every country (for he is worshipped in different forms and in many tongues, but it is always Odin they worship).

He travels from place to place in disguise, to see the world as people see it. When he walks among us, he does so as a tall man, wearing a cloak and hat.

He has two ravens, whom he calls Huginn and Muninn, which mean "thought" and "memory." These birds fly back and forth across the world, seeking news and bringing Odin all the knowledge of things. They perch on his shoulders and whisper into his ears.

When he sits on his high throne at Hlidskjalf, he observes all things, wherever they may be. Nothing can be hidden from him.

He brought war into the world: battles are begun by throwing a spear at the hostile army, dedicating the battle and its deaths to Odin. If you survive in battle, it is with Odin's grace, and if you fall it is because he has betrayed you.

If you fall bravely in war the Valkyries, beautiful battle-maidens who collect the souls of the noble dead, will take you and bring you to the hall known as Valhalla. He will be waiting for you in Valhalla, and there you will drink and fight and feast and battle, with Odin as your leader.

Thor

Thor, Odin's son, is the thunderer. He is straightforward where his father Odin is cunning, good-natured where his father is devious.

Huge he is, and red-bearded, and strong, by far the strongest of all the gods. His might is increased by his belt of strength, Megingjord: when he wears it, his strength is doubled.

Thor's weapon is Mjollnir, a remarkable hammer, forged for him by dwarfs. Its story you will learn. Trolls and frost giants and mountain giants all tremble when they see Mjollnir, for it has killed so many of their brothers and friends. Thor wears iron gloves, which help him to grip the hammer's shaft.

Thor's mother was Jord, the earth goddess. Thor's sons are Modi, the angry, and Magni, the strong. Thor's daughter is Thrud, the powerful.

His wife is Sif, of the golden hair. She had a son, Ullr, before she married Thor, and Thor is Ullr's stepfather. Ullr is a god who hunts with bow and with arrows, and he is the god with skis.

Thor is the defender of Asgard and of Midgard.

There are many stories about Thor and his adventures. You will encounter some of them here.

Loki

Loki is very handsome. He is plausible, convincing, likable, and far and away the most wily, subtle, and shrewd of all the inhabitants of Asgard. It is a pity, then, that there is so much darkness inside him: so much anger, so much envy, so much lust.

Loki is the son of Laufey, who was also known as Nal, or needle, because she was slim and beautiful and sharp. His father was said to be Farbauti, a

giant; his name means “he who strikes dangerous blows,” and Farbauti was as dangerous as his name.

Loki walks in the sky with shoes that fly, and he can transform his shape so he looks like other people, or change into animal form, but his real weapon is his mind. He is more cunning, subtler, trickier than any god or giant. Not even Odin is as cunning as Loki.

Loki is Odin’s blood brother. The other gods do not know when Loki came to Asgard, or how. He is Thor’s friend and Thor’s betrayer. He is tolerated by the gods, perhaps because his stratagems and

plans save them as often as they get them into trouble.

Loki makes the world more interesting but less safe. He is the father of monsters, the author of woes, the sly god.

Loki drinks too much, and he cannot guard his words or his thoughts or his deeds when he drinks. Loki and his children will be there for Ragnarok, the end of everything, and it will not be on the side of the gods of Asgard that they will fight.

BEFORE THE BEGINNING, AND AFTER

I

Before the beginning there was nothing—no earth, no heavens, no stars, no sky: only the mist world, formless and shapeless, and the fire world, always burning.

To the north was Niflheim, the dark world. Here eleven poisonous rivers cut through the mist, each springing from the same well at the center of it all, the roaring maelstrom called Hvergelmir. Niflheim was colder than cold, and the murky mist that cloaked everything hung heavily. The skies were hidden by mist and the ground was clouded by the chilly fog.

To the south was Muspell. Muspell was fire. Everything there glowed and burned. Muspell was light where Niflheim was gray, molten lava where the mist world was frozen. The land was aflame with the roaring heat of a blacksmith’s fire; there was no solid earth, no sky. Nothing but sparks and spurting heat, molten rocks and burning embers.

In Muspell, at the edge of the flame, where the mist burns into light, where the land ends, stood Surtr, who existed before the gods. He stands there now. He holds a flaming sword, and the bubbling lava and the freezing mist are as one to him.

It is said that at Ragnarok, which is the end of the world, and only then, Surtr will leave his station. He will go forth from Muspell with his flaming sword and burn the world with fire, and one by one the gods will fall before him.

II

Between Muspell and Niflheim was a void, an empty place of nothingness, without form. The rivers of the mist world flowed into the void, which

was called Ginnungagap, the “yawning gap.” Over time beyond measure, these poisoned rivers, in the region between fire and mist, slowly solidified into huge glaciers. The ice in the north of the void was covered in frozen fog and pellets of hail, but to the south, where the glaciers reached the land of fire, the embers and the sparks from Muspell met the ice, and warm winds from the flame lands made the air above the ice as gentle and as comfortable as a spring day.

Where the ice and the fire met the ice melted, and in the melting waters life appeared: the likeness of a person bigger than worlds, huger than any giant there will be or has ever been. This was neither male, nor was it female, but was both at the same time.

This creature was the ancestor of all the giants, and it called itself Ymir.

Ymir was not the only living thing to be formed by the melting of the ice: there was also a hornless cow, more enormous than the mind could hold. She licked the salty blocks of ice for food and for drink, and the milk that ran from her four udders flowed like rivers. It was this milk that nourished Ymir.

The giant drank the milk, and grew.

Ymir called the cow Audhumla.

The cow’s pink tongue licked people from the blocks of ice: the first day only a man’s hair, the second his head, and the third day the shape of a whole man was revealed.

This was Buri, the ancestor of the gods.

Ymir slept, and while it slept, it gave birth: a male and a female giant were born from beneath Ymir’s

left arm, a six-headed giant born from its legs. From these, Ymir's children, all giants are descended.

Buri took a wife from among these giants, and they had a son, whom they called Bor. Bor married Bestla, daughter of a giant, and together they had three sons: Odin, Vili, and Ve.

Odin and Vili and Ve, the three sons of Bor, grew into manhood. They saw as they grew, far off, the flames of Muspell and the darkness of Niflheim, but they knew that each place would be death to them. The brothers were trapped forever in Ginnungagap, the vast gap between the fire and the mist. They might as well have been nowhere.

There was no sea and no sand, no grass nor rocks, no soil, no trees, no sky, no stars. There was no world, no heaven and no earth, at that time. The gap was nowhere: only an empty place waiting to be filled with life and with existence.

It was time for the creation of everything. Ve and Vili and Odin looked at each other and spoke of what was needful to do, there in the void of Ginnungagap. They spoke of the universe, and of life, and of the future.

Odin and Vili and Ve killed the giant Ymir. It had to be done. There was no other way to make the worlds. This was the beginning of all things, the death that made all life possible.

They stabbed the great giant. Blood gushed out from Ymir's corpse in unimaginable quantities; fountains of blood as salt as the sea and gray as the oceans gushed out in a flood so sudden, so powerful, and so deep that it swept away and drowned all the giants. (Only one giant, Bergelmir, Ymir's grandson, and his wife survived, by clambering onto a wooden box, which bore them like a boat. All the giants we see and we fear today are descended from them.)

Odin and his brothers made the soil from Ymir's flesh. Ymir's bones they piled up into mountains and cliffs.

Our rocks and pebbles, the sand and gravel you see: these were Ymir's teeth, and the fragments of bones that were broken and crushed by Odin and Vili and Ve in their battle with Ymir.

The seas that girdle the worlds: these were Ymir's blood and his sweat.

Look up into the sky: you are looking at the inside of Ymir's skull. The stars you see at night, the planets, all the comets and the shooting stars, these are the sparks that flew from the fires of Muspell. And the clouds you see by day? These were once Ymir's brains, and who knows what thoughts they are thinking, even now.

III

The world is a flat disk, and the sea encircles the perimeter. Giants live at the edges of the world, beside the deepest seas.

To keep the giants at bay, Odin and Vili and Ve made a wall from Ymir's eyelashes and set it around the middle of the world. They called the place within the wall Midgard.

Midgard was empty. The lands were beautiful, but nobody walked the meadows or fished in the clear waters, nobody explored the rocky mountains or stared up at the clouds.

Odin and Vili and Ve knew that a world is not a world until it is inhabited. They wandered high and low, looking for people, and they found nothing. At last, on the rocky shingle at the edge of the sea, they found two logs, sea-tossed, that had floated there on the tides and been cast ashore.

The first log was a log of ash wood. The ash tree is resilient and handsome and its roots go deep. Its wood carves well and will not split or crack. Ash wood makes a good tool handle, or the shaft of a spear.

The second log they found, beside the first on the beach, so close to the first log they were almost touching, was a log of elm wood. The elm tree is graceful, but its wood is hard enough to be made into the toughest planks and beams; you can build a fine home or a hall from elm wood.

The gods took the two logs. They set the logs so they were upright on the sand, the height of people. Odin held them, and one by one he breathed life into them. No longer were they dead logs on a beach: now they were alive.

Vili gave them will; he gave them intelligence and drive. Now they could move, and they could want.

Ve carved the logs. He gave them the shape of people. He carved their ears, that they might hear, and their eyes, that they might see, and lips, that they might speak.

The two logs stood on the beach, two naked people. Ve had carved one with male genitals, the other he had carved female.

The three brothers made clothes for the woman and the man, to cover themselves and to keep them warm, in the chilly sea-spray on the beach at the edge of the world.

Last of all they gave the two people they had made names: the man they called Ask, or Ash Tree; the woman they called Embla, or Elm.

Ask and Embla were the father and the mother of all of us: every human being owes its life to its parents and their parents and their parents before them. Go

far enough back, and the ancestors of each of us were Ask and Embla.

Embla and Ask stayed in Midgard, safe behind the wall the gods had made from Ymir's eyelashes. In Midgard they would make their homes, protected from giants and monsters and all the dangers that wait in the wastes. In Midgard they could raise their children in peace.

That is why Odin is called the all-father. Because he was the father of the gods, and because he breathed the breath of life into our grandparents' grandparents' grandparents. Whether we are gods or mortals, Odin is the father of us all.

YGGDRASIL AND THE NINE WORLDS

The ash tree Yggdrasil is a mighty ash tree, the most perfect and beautiful of all trees: also the largest. It grows between the nine worlds and joins them, each to each. It is the biggest of all the trees there are, and the finest. The tops of its branches are above the sky.

It is so large that the roots of the ash are in three worlds, and it is fed by three wells.

The first root, and the deepest, goes into the underworld, to Niflheim, the place that existed before other places. In the center of the dark world is the ever-churning spring, Hvergelmir, so loud it sounds like a roaring kettle. The dragon Nidhogg lives in these waters, and it is always gnawing at the root from below.

The second root goes to the realm of the frost giants, to the well that belongs to Mimir.

There is an eagle who waits at the highest branches of the world-tree and who knows many things, and a hawk, who perches between the eagle's eyes.

A squirrel, Ratatosk, lives in the branches of the world-tree. It takes gossip and messages from Nidhogg, the dread corpse-eater, to the eagle and back again. The squirrel tells lies to both of them, and takes joy in provoking anger.

There are four stags who graze on the huge branches of the world-tree, devouring the foliage and the bark. There are uncountable snakes at the base of the tree, biting at the roots.

The world-tree can be climbed. It is from this tree that Odin hanged himself in sacrifice, making the world-tree a gallows and himself the gallows god.

The gods do not climb the world-tree. They travel between the worlds using Bifrost, the rainbow bridge. Only the gods can travel on the rainbow; it would burn the feet of any frost giants or trolls who attempted to clamber up it to reach Asgard.

These are the nine worlds:

Asgard, the home of the Aesir. This is where Odin makes his home.

Alfheim, where the light elves live. The light elves are as beautiful as the sun or the stars.

Nidavellir, which is sometimes called Svartalfheim, where the dwarfs (who are also known as dark elves) live beneath the mountains and build their remarkable creations.

Midgard, which is the world of women and men, the world in which we make our home.

Jotunheim, where the frost giants and the mountain giants wander and live and have their halls.

Vanaheim, where the Vanir live. The Aesir and the Vanir are gods, united by peace treaties, and many Vanir gods live in Asgard, with the Aesir.

Niflheim, the dark mist world.

Muspell, the world of flame, where Surtr waits.

And there is the place named after its ruler: Hel, where the dead go who did not die bravely in battle.

The last root of the world-tree goes to a spring in the home of the gods, to Asgard, where the Aesir make their home. Each day the gods hold their council here, and it is here they will gather in the last days of the world, before they set out for the final battle of Ragnarok. It is called the well of Urd.

There are three sisters, the norns, who are wise maidens. They tend the well, and make sure that the roots of Yggdrasil are covered with mud and cared for. The well belongs to Urd; she is fate, and destiny. She is your past. With her are Verdandi—her name means “becoming”—and hers is the present, and Skuld, whose name means “that which is intended,” and her domain is the future.

RAGNARÖK: THE FINAL DESTINY OF THE GODS

I

Until now I have told you of things that have happened in the past—things that happened a long time ago.

Now I shall tell you of the days to come.

I shall tell you how it will end, and then how it will begin once more. These are dark days I will tell you of, dark days and hidden things, concerning the ends of the earth and the death of the gods. Listen, and you will learn.

This is how we will know that the end times are upon us. It will be far from the age of the gods, in the time of men. It will happen when the gods all sleep, every god but all-seeing Heimdall. He will watch everything as it begins, although he will be powerless to prevent what he sees from happening. It will begin with the winter.

This will not be a normal winter. The winter will begin, and it will continue, winter following winter. There will be no spring, no warmth. People will be hungry and they will be cold and they will be angry. Great battles will take place, all across the world.

Brothers will fight brothers, fathers will kill sons. Mothers and daughters will be set against each other. Sisters will fall in battle with sisters, and will watch their children murder each other in their turn.

This will be the age of cruel winds, the age of people who become as wolves, who prey upon each other, who are no better than wild beasts. Twilight will come to the world, and the places where the humans live will fall into ruins, flaming briefly, then crashing down and crumbling into ash and devastation.

Then, when the few remaining people are living like animals, the sun in the sky will vanish, as if eaten by a wolf, and the moon will be taken from us too,

The norns will decide what happens in your life. There are other norns, not just those three. Giant norns and elf norns, dwarf norns and Vanir norns, good norns and bad, and what your fate will be is decided by them. Some norns give people good lives, and others give us hard lives, or short lives, or twisted lives.

They will shape your fate, there at Urd’s well.

and no one will be able to see the stars any longer. Darkness will fill the air, like ashes, like mist.

This will be the time of the terrible winter that will not end, the Fimbulwinter.

There will be snow driving in from all directions, fierce winds, and cold colder than you have ever imagined cold could be, an icy cold so cold your lungs will ache when you breathe, so cold that the tears in your eyes will freeze. There will be no spring to relieve it, no summer, no autumn. Only winter, followed by winter, followed by winter.

After that there will come the time of the great earthquakes. The mountains will shake and crumble. Trees will fall, and any remaining places where people live will be destroyed.

The earthquakes will be so great that all bonds and shackles and fetters will be destroyed.

All of them.

Fenrir, the great wolf, will free himself from his shackles. His mouth will gape: his upper jaw will reach the heavens, the lower jaw will touch the earth. There is nothing he cannot eat, nothing he will not destroy. Flames come from his eyes and his nostrils.

Where Fenris Wolf walks, flaming destruction follows.

There will be flooding too, as the seas rise and surge onto the land. Jormungundr, the Midgard serpent, huge and dangerous, will writhe in its fury, closer and closer to the land. The venom from its fangs will spill into the water, poisoning all the sea life. It will spatter its black poison into the air in a fine spray, killing all the seabirds that breathe it.

There will be no more life in the oceans, where the Midgard serpent writhes. The rotted corpses of fish and of whales, of seals and sea monsters, will wash in the waves.

All who see the brothers Fenrir the wolf and the Midgard serpent, the children of Loki, will know death.

That is the beginning of the end.

The misty sky will split apart, with the sound of children screaming, and the sons of Muspell will ride down from the heavens, led by Surtr, the fire giant, holding high his sword, which burns so brightly no mortal can look upon it. They will ride across the rainbow bridge, across Bifrost, and the rainbow will crumble as they ride, its once-bright colors becoming shades of charcoal and of ash.

There will never be another rainbow.

Cliffs will crumble into the sea.

Loki, who will have escaped from his bonds beneath the earth, will be the helmsman of the ship called Naglfar. This is the biggest ship there will ever have been: it is built of the fingernails of the dead. Naglfar floats upon the flooded seas. The crew looks out and sees only dead things, floating and rotting on the surface of the ocean.

Loki steers the ship, but its captain will be Hrym, leader of the frost giants. The surviving frost giants all follow Hrym, huge and inimical to humanity. They are Hrym's soldiers in the final battle.

Loki's troops are the legions of Hel. They are the uneasy dead, the ones who died shameful deaths, who will return to the earth to fight once more as walking corpses, determined to destroy anything that still loves and lives above the earth.

All of them, giants and the dead and the burning sons of Muspell, will travel to the battle plain called Vigrid. Vigrid is huge: three hundred miles across. Fenris Wolf pads his way there also, and the Midgard serpent will navigate the flooded seas until it too is close to Vigrid, then it will writhe up onto the sand and force itself ashore—only its head and the first mile or so of its body. Most of it will remain in the sea.

They will form themselves into battle order: Surtr and the sons of Muspell will be there in flames; the warriors of Hel and Loki will be there from beneath the earth; the frost giants will be there, Hrym's troops, the mud freezing where they stand. Fenrir will be with them, and the Midgard serpent. The worst enemies that the mind can imagine will be there that day.

Heimdall will have seen all this as it occurs. He sees everything, after all: he is the watchman of the gods. Now, and only now, he acts.

Heimdall will blow the Gjallerhorn, the horn that once was Mimir's, and he will blow it with all his strength. Asgard shakes with its noise, and it is then that the sleeping gods will wake, and they will reach for their weapons and assemble beneath Yggdrasil, at Urd's well, to receive the blessing and the counsel of the norns.

Odin will ride the horse Sleipnir to Mimir's well to ask the head of Mimir for counsel, for himself and for the gods. Mimir's head will whisper its knowledge of the future to Odin, just as I am telling it to you now.

What Mimir whispers to Odin will give the all-father hope, even when all looks dark.

The great ash tree Yggdrasil, the world-tree, will shake like a leaf in the wind, and the Aesir and with them the Einherjar, all the warriors who died good deaths in battle, will dress for war, and together they will ride out to Vigrid, the final battlefield.

Odin will ride at the head of their company. His armor gleams, and he wears a golden helmet. Thor will ride beside him, Mjollnir in his hand.

They reach the field of battle, and the final battle will begin.

Odin makes straight for Fenrir, the wolf, now grown so huge as to be beyond imagining. The all-father grips Gungnir, his spear, in his fist.

Thor will see that Odin is heading for the great wolf, and Thor will smile, and whip his goats to greater speed, and he will head straight for the Midgard serpent, his hammer in his iron gauntlet.

Frey makes for Surtr, flaming and monstrous. Surtr's flaming sword is huge and it burns even when it misses. Frey fights hard and well, but he will be the first of the Aesir to fall: his sword and his armor are no match for Surtr's burning sword. Frey will die missing and regretting the loss of the sword he gave to Skirnir so long ago, for love of Gerd. That sword would have saved him.

The noise of battle will be furious; the Einherjar, Odin's noble warriors, are locked in pitched battle with the evil dead, Loki's troops.

The hellhound Garm will growl. He is smaller than Fenrir, but he is still the mightiest and most

dangerous of all dogs. He has also escaped his shackles beneath the earth and has returned to rip the throats of the warriors on the earth.

Tyr will stop him, Tyr the one-handed, and they will fight, man and nightmare dog. Tyr fights bravely, but the battle will be the death of both of them. Garm dies with its teeth locked in Tyr's throat.

Thor will finally kill the Midgard serpent, as he has wanted to do for so long.

Thor smashes the great serpent's brains in with his hammer. He will leap back as the sea snake's head tumbles onto the battlefield.

Thor is a good nine feet away from it when its head crashes to the ground, but that is not far enough. Even as it dies, the serpent will empty its venom sacs over the thunder god, in a thick black spray.

Thor grunts in pain and then falls lifeless to the earth, poisoned by the creature he slew.

Odin will battle Fenrir bravely, but the wolf is more vast and more dangerous than anything could possibly be. It is bigger than the sun, bigger than the moon. Odin thrusts into its mouth with his spear, but one snap of Fenrir's jaws, and the spear is gone. Another bite and a crunch and a swallow and Odin, the all-father, greatest and wisest of all the gods, is gone as well, never to be seen again.

Odin's son Vidar, the silent god, the reliable god, will watch his father die. Vidar will stride forward, as Fenrir gloats over Odin's death, and thrust his foot into the wolf's lower jaw.

Vidar's two feet are different. One of them has a normal shoe on it. The other wears a shoe that has been constructed since the dawn of time. It is assembled from all the bits of leather that people cut from the toes and the heels when they make shoes for themselves, and throw away.

(If you want to help the Aesir in the final battle, you should throw away your leather scraps. All thrown-out scraps and trimmings from shoes will become part of Vidar's shoe.)

This shoe will hold the great wolf's lower jaw down, so it cannot move. Then with one hand Vidar will reach up and grasp the wolf's upper jaw and rip its mouth apart. In this way Fenrir will die, and so Vidar will avenge his father.

On the battlefield called Vigrid, the gods will fall in battle with the frost giants, and the frost giants will fall in battle with the gods. The undead troops from Hel will litter the ground in their final deaths, and the noble Einherjar will lie beside them on the frozen ground, all of them dead for the last time, beneath the lifeless misty sky, never to rise again, never to wake and fight.

Of Loki's legions, only Loki himself will still be standing, bloodied and wild-eyed, with a satisfied smile on his scarred lips.

Heimdall, the watcher on the bridge, the gatekeeper of the gods, will also not have fallen. He will stand on the battlefield, his sword, Hofud, wet and bloody in his hand.

They walk toward each other across Vigrid, treading on corpses, wading through blood and flames to reach each other.

"Ah," Loki will say. "The muddy-backed watchman of the gods. You woke the gods too late, Heimdall. Was it not delightful to watch them die, one by one?"

Loki will watch Heimdall's face, looking for weakness, looking for emotion, but Heimdall will remain impassive.

"Nothing to say, Heimdall of the nine mothers? When I was bound beneath the ground, with the serpent's poison dripping into my face, with poor Sigyn standing beside me trying to catch what venom she could in her bowl, bound in the darkness in the intestines of my son, all that kept me from madness was thinking of this moment, rehearsing it in my mind, imagining the days when my beautiful children and I would end the time of the gods and end the world."

Heimdall will still say nothing, but he will strike, and strike hard, his sword crashing against Loki's armor, and Loki will counter, and Loki will attack with fierceness and intelligence and glee.

As they fight, they will remember a time they battled long ago, when the world was simpler. They had fought in animal form, transformed into seals, competing to obtain the necklace of the Brisings: Loki had stolen it from Freya at Odin's request, and Heimdall had retrieved it.

Loki never forgets an insult.

They will fight, and slash and stab and hack at each other.

They will fight, and they will fall, Heimdall and Loki, fall beside each other, each mortally wounded.

“It is done,” whispers Loki, dying on the battlefield. “I won.”

But Heimdall will grin then, in death, grin through golden teeth flecked with spittle and with blood. “I can see further than you,” Heimdall will tell Loki. “Odin’s son Vidar killed your son Fenris Wolf, and Vidar survives, and so does Odin’s son Vali, his brother. Thor is dead, but his children Magni and Modi still live. They took Mjollnir from their father’s cold hand. They are strong enough and noble enough to wield it.”

“None of this matters. The world is burning,” says Loki. “The mortals are dead. Midgard is destroyed. I have won.”

“I can see further than you can, Loki. I can see all the way to the world-tree,” Heimdall will tell him with his last breath. “Surtr’s fire cannot touch the world-tree, and two people have hidden themselves safely in the trunk of Yggdrasil. The woman is called Life, the man is called Life’s Yearning. Their descendants will populate the earth. It is not the end. There is no end. It is simply the end of the old times, Loki, and the beginning of the new times. Rebirth always follows death. You have failed.”

Loki would say something, something cutting and clever and hurtful, but his life will have gone, and all his brilliance, and all his cruelty, and he will say nothing, not ever again. He will lie still and cold beside Heimdall on the frozen battlefield.

Now Surtr, the burning giant, who was there before the beginning of all things, looks out at the vast plain of death and raises his bright sword to the heavens. There will be a sound like a thousand forests turning to flame, and the air itself will begin to burn.

The world will be cremated in Surtr’s flames. The flooding oceans steam. The last fires rage and flicker and then are extinguished. Black ash will fall from the sky like snow.

In the twilight, where Loki and Heimdall’s bodies once lay beside each other, nothing can be seen but two heaps of gray ash on the blackened earth, the

smoke mingling with the mist of the morning. Nothing will remain of the armies of the living and of the dead, of the dreams of the gods and the bravery of their warriors, nothing but ash.

Soon after, the swollen ocean will swallow the ashes as it washes across all the land, and everything living will be forgotten under the sunless sky.

That is how the worlds will end, in ash and flood, in darkness and in ice. That is the final destiny of the gods.

II

That is the end. But there is also what will come after the end.

From the gray waters of the ocean, the green earth will arise once more.

The sun will have been eaten, but the sun’s daughter will shine in the place of her mother, and the new sun will shine even more brightly than the old, shine with young light and new.

The woman and the man, Life and Life’s Yearning, will come out from inside the ash tree that holds the worlds together. They will feed upon the dew on the green earth, and they will make love, and from their love will spring mankind.

Asgard will be gone, but Idavoll will stand where Asgard once stood, splendid and continual.

Odin’s sons Vidar and Vali will arrive in Idavoll. Next will come Thor’s sons, Modi and Magni. They will bring Mjollnir between them, because now that Thor is gone it will take two of them to carry it. Balder and Hod will return from the underworld, and the six of them will sit in the light of the new sun and talk among themselves, remembering mysteries and discussing what could have been done differently and whether the outcome of the game was inevitable.

They will talk of Fenrir, the wolf that ate the world, and of the Midgard serpent, and they will remember Loki, who was of the gods yet not of them, who saved the gods and who would have destroyed them.

And then Balder will say, “Hey. Hey, what’s that?”

“What?” asks Magni.

“There. Glittering in the long grass. Do you see it? And there. Look, it’s another of them.”

They go down on their knees then in the long grass, the gods like children.

Magni, Thor's son, is the first to find one of the things in the long grass, and once he finds it, he knows what it is. It is a golden chess piece, the kind the gods played with when the gods still lived. It is a tiny golden carving of Odin, the all-father, on his high throne: the king.

They find more of them. Here is Thor, holding his hammer. There is Heimdall, his horn at his lips. Frigg, Odin's wife, is the queen.

Balder holds up a little golden statue. "That one looks like you," Modi tells him.

"It is me," says Balder. "It is me long ago, before I died, when I was of the Aesir."

They will find other pieces in the grass, some beautiful, some less so. Here, half buried in the black soil, are Loki and his monstrous children. There is a frost giant. Here is Sutr, his face all aflame.

Soon they will find they have all the pieces they could ever need to make a full chess set. They arrange the pieces into a chess game: on the tabletop chessboard the gods of Asgard face their eternal enemies. The new-minted sunlight glints from the golden chessmen on this perfect afternoon.

Balder will smile, like the sun coming out, and reach down, and he will move his first piece.

And the game begins anew.

Appendix

- Aegir:** Greatest of the sea giants. Husband of Ran, father of nine daughters, who are the waves of the ocean.
- Aesir:** A race or tribe or branch of the gods. They live in Asgard.
- Alfheim:** One of the nine worlds, inhabited by the light elves.
- Angrboda:** A giantess, mother of Loki's three monstrous children.
- Asgard:** Home of the Aesir. The realm of the gods.
- Ask:** The first man, made from an ash tree.
- Audhumla:** The first cow, whose tongue shaped the ancestor of the gods, and from whose teats ran rivers of milk.
- Aurboda:** A mountain giantess, mother of Gerd.
- Balder:** Known as "the beautiful." Odin's second son, loved by all but Loki.
- Barri, isle of:** An island on which Frey and Gerd get married.
- Baugi:** A giant, the brother of Suttung.
- Beli:** A giant. Frey kills him with a stag's antler.
- Bergelmir:** Ymir's grandson. Bergelmir and his wife were the only giants to survive the flood.
- Bestla:** Mother of Odin, Vili, and Ve, and wife of Bor. Daughter of a giant called Bolthorn. Sister of Mimir.
- Bifrost:** The rainbow bridge that joins Asgard to Midgard.
- Bodn:** One of two mead vats made to hold the mead of poetry. The other is Son.
- Bolverkr:** One of the names Odin calls himself when in disguise.
- Bor:** A god. Buri's son, married to Bestla. Father of Odin, Vili, and Ve.
- Bragi:** God of poetry.
- Breidablik:** Balder's home, a place of joy and music and knowledge.
- Brisings, necklace of the:** A shining necklace belonging to Freya.
- Brokk:** A dwarf capable of making great treasures. Brother of Eitri.
- Buri:** The ancestor of the gods, father to Bor, grandfather of Odin.
- Draupnir:** Odin's golden arm-ring which, every nine nights, produces eight arm-rings of equal beauty and value.
- Egil:** A farmer, the father of Thialfi and Roskva.
- Einherjar:** The noble dead who died bravely in battle, and who now feast and battle in Valhalla.
- Eitri:** A dwarf who forges great treasures, including Thor's hammer. Brother of Brokk.
- Elli:** An old nurse who is, in fact, old age.
- Embla:** The first woman, made from an elm tree.
- Farbauti:** Loki's father, a giant. "He who strikes dangerous blows."
- Fenrir or Fenris Wolf:** A wolf. Loki's son with Angrboda.
- Fimbulwinter:** The winter before Ragnarok, which does not end.
- Fjalar:** The brother of Galar and murderer of Kvasir.
- Fjolnir:** Son of Frey and Gerd and first king of Sweden.
- Franang's Falls:** High waterfall where Loki hid himself in the guise of salmon.
- Frey:** A god of the Vanir, who lives with the Aesir. Freya's brother.
- Freya:** A goddess of the Vanir, who lives with the Aesir. Frey's sister.
- Frigg:** Odin's wife, the queen of the gods. Mother of Balder.
- Fulla:** A goddess, Frigg's handmaiden.
- Galar:** One of the dark elves. Brother of Fjalar and murderer of Kvasir.
- Garm:** A monstrous hound, who kills and is killed by Tyr at Ragnarok.
- Gerd:** A radiantly beautiful giantess, loved by Frey.

Gilling: A giant, killed by Fjalar and Galar, and father of Suttung and Baugi.

Ginnungagap: A yawning gap between Muspell (the fire world) and Niflheim (the mist world) at the beginning of creation.

Gjallerhorn: Heimdall's horn, kept by Mimir's well.

Gleipnir: Magical chain forged by dwarfs and used by the gods to bind Fenrir.

Grimnir: "The hooded one." A name for Odin.

Grinder: Tannngjóstr, or "teeth-grinder." One of the two goats who pull Thor's chariot.

Gullenbursti: The golden boar made for Frey by the dwarfs.

Gungnir: Odin's spear. It never misses its mark, and oaths made on Gungnir are unbreakable.

Gunnlod: A giantess, the daughter of Suttung, set to guard the mead of poetry.

Gymir: An earth giant, Gerd's father.

Heidrun: A goat that gives mead instead of milk. She feeds the dead in Valhalla.

Heimdall: The watchman of the gods, far-seeing.

Hel: Loki's daughter with Angrboda. She rules Hel, the realm of the shameful dead, who did not die nobly in battle.

Hermod the Nimble: A son of Odin. He rides Sleipnir to beg Hel to release Balder.

Hlidskjalf: Odin's throne, from which he can see the nine worlds.

Hod: Balder's brother, a blind god.

Hoenir: An old god, who gave humans the gift of reason. One of the Aesir, sent to the Vanir to be their king.

Hrym: The leader of the frost giants at Ragnarok.

Hugi: A young giant, able to run faster than anything. In reality, thought itself.

Huginn: One of Odin's two ravens. Its name means "thought."

Hvergelmir: A spring in Niflheim, beneath Yggdrasil, that is the origin of many other rivers and streams.

Hymir: A king of the giants.

Hyrrokkin: A giantess, even stronger than Thor.

Idavoll: The "splendid plain," on which Asgard was built, and to which the surviving gods will return after Ragnarok.

Idunn: A goddess of the Aesir. She is the keeper of the apples of immortality, which give the gods eternal youth.

Ivaldi: One of the dark elves. The sons of Ivaldi crafted *Skidbladnir*, Frey's remarkable ship, Gungnir, Odin's spear, and new, beautiful golden hair for Sif, Thor's wife.

Jord: Thor's mother, a giantess, who was also a goddess of the earth.

Jormungundr: The Midgard serpent. One of Loki's children and Thor's nemesis.

Jotunheim: Jotun means giant, and Jotunheim is the realm of the giants.

Kvasir: A god formed from the mixture of the spittle of the Aesir and the Vanir, he became a god of wisdom. Kvasir was murdered by dwarfs, who made the mead of poetry from his blood. Later, he came back to life.

Laufey: The mother of Loki. Also called Nal, or needle, because she was so thin.

Lerad: A tree, probably part of Yggdrasil, which fed Heidrun, the goat that gives her mead to the warriors of Valhalla.

Lit: An unfortunate dwarf.

Loki: Odin's blood brother, the son of Farbauti and of Laufey. The shrewdest,

most cunning of all the inhabitants of Asgard. He is a shapeshifter, and his lips are scarred. He has shoes that allow him to walk in the sky.

Magni: Thor's son, "the strong."

Megingjord: Thor's belt of might. Wearing it doubles his strength.

Midgard: "Middle yard." Our world. The realm of humans.

Midgard serpent: Jormungandr.

Mimir: Odin's uncle and keeper of the spring of wisdom in Jotunheim. A giant, perhaps also one of the Aesir. He was decapitated by the Vanir, and his head still gives wisdom and watches over the spring.

Mimir's well: A spring or well at the roots of the world-tree. Odin traded an eye to take a sip of its water, scooped up in Heimdall's Gjallerhorn.

Mjollnir: Thor's remarkable hammer and most prized possession, made for him by Eitri. (Brokk worked the bellows.)

Modgud: "Furious Battler." She was the guardian of the bridge that leads to the land of the dead.

Modi: Thor's son, "the brave."

Muninn: One of Odin's ravens. Its name means "memory."

Muspell: The fiery world that exists at the beginning of creation. One of the nine worlds.

Naglfar: A ship, built from the untrimmed finger- and toenails of the dead. The giants and the dead from Hel who will battle the gods and the Einherjar at Ragnarok will travel on this ship.

Nal: "Needle." Another name for Laufey, Loki's mother.

Narfi: Loki and Sigyn's son, Vali's brother.

Nidavellir, also called Svartalfheim:

Where the dwarfs (also known as dark elves) live beneath the mountains.

Nidhogg: A dragon who devours corpses and chews on the roots of Yggdrasil.

Niflheim: A cold, misty place, there at the start of everything.

Njord: A god of the Vanir, father of Frey and Freya.

Norns: The three sisters, Urd, Verdandi, and Skuld, who tend the well of Urd, or fate, and water the roots of Yggdrasil, the world-tree. They, along with other norns, decide what will happen in your life.

Odin: The highest and oldest of the gods. He wears a cloak and a hat and only has one eye, having traded the other for wisdom. He has many other names including all-father, Grimnir, and the gallows god.

Odrerir: A kettle for brewing the mead of poetry. "Ecstasy-giver."

Ran: Wife of Aegir the sea giant, goddess of those who drown at sea, mother of the nine waves.

Ratatosk: A squirrel who lives in the branches of Yggdrasil and takes messages from Nidhogg the corpse-devourer at the roots to an eagle who lives in the upper branches.

Rati: The auger or drill of the gods.

Roskva: Sister of Thialfi, Thor's human servant.

Sif: Thor's wife. She had golden hair.

Sigyn: Loki's wife, mother of Vali and Narfi. After Loki's imprisonment, she stays with him beneath the ground, holding a bowl with which she protects Loki's face from the venom of the serpent.

Skadi: A giant, daughter of the giant Thiazi. She marries Njord.

Skidbladnir: A magical ship, made for Frey by the sons of Ivaldi. It folds up like a scarf.

Skirnir: A light elf, Frey's servant.

Skrymir: "Big fellow." A particularly big giant, encountered by Loki, Thor, and Thialfi on the way to Utgard.

Skuld: One of the norns. Her name means "that which is intended," and her domain is the future.

Sleipnir: Odin's horse. The fastest of horses, eight-legged, the offspring of Loki and Svadilfari.

Snarler: Tanngrisnir, which means tooth-barer or snarler. One of the two goats who pull Thor's chariot.

Son: A vat for mead.

Surtr: A huge fiery giant who wields a flaming sword. Surtr existed before the gods. Guardian of Muspell, the fire region.

Suttung: A giant, the son of Gilling. He takes vengeance on his parents' killers.

Svadilfari: A horse belonging to the master builder who built Asgard's wall. Father of Sleipnir.

Thiazi: A giant who disguises himself as an eagle to kidnap Idunn. Father to Skadi.

Thokk: Old woman, whose name means "gratitude" but is the single living creature who won't mourn the death of Balder.

Thor: Odin's red-bearded son, Aesir god of thunder. The strongest of the gods.

Thrud: Thor's daughter, "the powerful."

Thrym: Lord of the ogres, who wanted Freya for his bride.

Tyr: The one-handed god of war, a son of Odin; the stepson of Hymir the giant.

Ullr: Thor's stepson. A god who hunts with bow and arrow and who skis.

Urd: "Fate." One of the three norns. She determines our past.

Urd's well: The well in Asgard tended by the norns.

Utgard: The "outyard." A wild region of giants, with a castle at its center, also called Utgard.

Utgardaloki: The king of the giants of Utgard.

Valhalla: Odin's hall, where the noble dead who die bravely in battle feast.

Vali: There are two gods named Vali. One is a son of Loki and Sigyn, who becomes a wolf and kills his brother, Narfi. The other is a son of Odin and Rind, conceived to avenge Balder's death.

Valkyries: "Choosers of the slain." Odin's handmaidens, who collect the souls of the dead who die bravely on the battlefield and bring them to Valhalla.

Vanaheim: The realm of the Vanir.

Var: Goddess of marriage.

Ve: Odin's brother, a son of Bor and Bestla.

Verdandi: One of the norns. Her name means "becoming," and she determines our present.

Vidar: Odin's son. The silent and reliable god. One of his shoes is made from all the cast-off scrap leather of all the shoes that have been made.

Vigrid: The plain where the great battle of Ragnarok will take place.

Vili: Odin's brother, a son of Bor and Bestla.

Yggdrasil: The world-tree.

Ymir: The first being, a giant bigger than worlds, the ancestor of all giants. Ymir was nourished by the first cow, Audhumla.