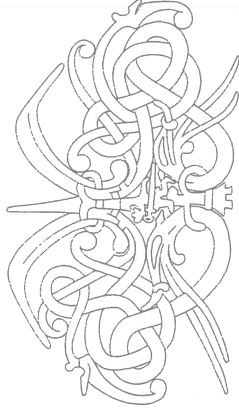


Weil Gaiman

Norse Mythology

RAGNAROK:  
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, 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.

