

THE CREATION, DEATH, AND REBIRTH OF THE UNIVERSE (Norse)

In the days when King Gylfi ruled the land that is now known as Sweden, he transformed himself into an old man called Gangleri and visited the great gods in their hall in Asgard, in order to learn about the nature of the universe. Because Gylfi came in disguise, the gods did not reveal their true selves to him. They called themselves High One, Just-as-High, and Third.

"I am searching for the wisdom of the gods," Gangleri announced. "Is any one among you knowledgeable?"

"Ask of us whatever you will," High One replied, "and you will leave here wiser than when you arrived."

Gangleri asked, "Tell me, if you can, how did all things begin?"

High One explained, "In the beginning, nothing existed but Ginnungagap, which was an open void. In that ancient time, neither the heaven above nor the earth below, neither sand, nor grass, nor the cool, tossing waves of the sea had been fashioned."

Just-as-High added, "The first world to come into existence was Muspelheim (destroyers' home). It is a hot, bright, flaming world in the southern part of Ginnungagap and it sends forth sparks and glowing embers. It is guarded by the giant Surt, who possesses a flaming sword."

Third said, "The second world to come into existence was Niflheim (fog home), in the northern part of Ginnungagap. In the middle of Niflheim is a spring called Hvergelmir (bubbling cauldron), from which eleven fast and fearsome rivers arose and flowed far from their source. The foamy venom from their waves hardened and turned into ice. As it cooled, a drizzling mist arose from the venom and fell upon the firm ice, forming a second layer of heavy ice over the first. All this ice makes Niflheim cold, foggy, and harsh."

Gangleri asked, "Did anyone exist before human beings? Tell me about the giants and the gods."

High One replied, "The Frost Giants lived during the time of endless winters before the earth was formed. Where the soft, warm air from Muspelheim met the ice from Niflheim, the ice thawed. Life first grew from the drops of melted foam venom and developed into the first being, a Frost Giant named Ymir. The venom from which he was created made him wild, fierce, and evil. Then from the thawed ice a cow, Audhumla (nourisher), arose, and Ymir fed upon the four rivers of milk she produced."

Just-as-High added, "While Ymir slept, he sweated. From the moisture in the armpit under his left arm, a man and a woman emerged. Ymir became the father of all the families of Frost Giants. Like their father, they were evil creatures."

Gangleri said, "That is certainly a strange tale! How then did the gods first come to exist?"

High One explained, "Audhumla constantly licked a salty block of ice. By the evening of the first day, a head of hair had appeared. By the second day, the male's entire head had become visible. By the end of the third day, the whole male, called Buri, had emerged from the block of ice. Buri was tall, handsome, and strong, and he became the grandfather of the gods. He had a son called Bor, who married Bestla, the daughter of one of the giants. Bor and Bestla had three sons who became the first Norse gods: Odin, who was the oldest, then Vili, and finally Ve."

"Were the gods and giants friends or enemies?" asked Gangleri.

High One replied, "Odin, Vili, and Ve killed Ymir. So much blood poured from his wounds that, except for Bergelmir and his wife, all of the other Frost Giants drowned in the flood of Ymir's blood. Bergelmir escaped with his wife by quickly climbing into a boat he had made from a hollowed-out tree trunk. Thus, they became the parents of the next race of giants, who were also Frost Giants and evil creatures."

Gangleri asked, "How was the earth fashioned?"

High One replied, "The three gods took the corpse of Ymir, carried it into the middle of Ginnungagap, and made the world from it. From his flesh, they molded the earth. From the blood that poured from his wounds, they made the salt sea and laid it around the earth. From his mighty bones they fashioned the mountains, and from his smaller bones, jaws, and teeth they formed rocks and pebbles. From his hair they created the forests."

Just-as-High added, "They gave the lands along the shores of the salt sea, Jotunheim (giants' home), to the giants and their families. However, they wanted to protect the folk who would live in the inland part of the earth, called Midgard (Middle Earth), from the evil giants. So they used Ymir's eyebrows to build a barrier that separated the two groups of beings."

Third said, "From Ymir's skull, they made the sky and set it in the form of an arch over the earth, with a dwarf holding up each of its four corners. Then they tossed Ymir's brains into the air to create storm clouds."

Gangleri said, "I did not know that dwarfs existed before human beings. How did they come to be?"

High One replied, "Originally, the dwarfs came to life as maggots in Ymir's flesh. The gods gave them the appearance of people and also gave them human understanding. The dwarfs still live in dark places in the earth and in rocky caves in the land called Nidavellir."

Just-as-High added, "The gods fashioned the burning embers and the sparks that blew out of Muspelheim into stars and placed them in fixed locations in the midst of Ginnungagap to give light to heaven above and the earth below."

Third said, "They arranged for the sun and the moon to travel through the sky every day in order to create day and night and the seasons. The sun travels quickly because a wolf is chasing her. When this world comes to an end, at the time of Ragnarok (doom of the gods), he will catch her. Another wolf runs in front of the sun, chasing the moon. In the end, at Ragnarok, the moon too will be caught."

Gangleri asked, "How did human beings come to inhabit Midgard?"

High One replied, "When the three gods were walking along the shore of the salt sea, they found two trees, an ash and an elm. They created the first man, Ask, from the ash tree and the first woman, Embla, from the elm tree, and clothed them to give them dignity. Odin gave them blood and the breath of life. Vili gave them understanding and power of movement. Ve gave them shape and the ability to see, hear, and speak. Ask and Embla became the parents of the race of human beings, like yourself, who live in Midgard."

"What can you tell me about Yggdrasill? Is it not some kind of tree?" Gangleri asked.

High One replied, "The branches of this great ash tree spread throughout the whole world and extend over heaven. Three great roots support the World Ash Tree: one among the Aesir (the gods) in Asgard, a second among the Frost Giants, and the third over icy Niflheim."

Just-as-High added, "The root in Asgard is nourished by the sacred spring of Urd. There live the three Fate Maidens, called Norns. Their names are Urd (Past), Verdandi (Present), and Skuld (Future). They establish the laws that determine the lives of all human beings and seal their fate."

Third said, "There are other Norns as well. Some are the daughters of the elves; others are the daughters of the dwarfs. Those who come from good beings shape good lives—long, wealthy, and famous. Evil Norns confer short, poor, unfortunate lives."

High One added, "The root among the Frost Giants is nourished by the spring of Mimir, which is the source of wisdom and understanding. Like Mimir, who owns the spring, anyone who drinks that water will become wise. However, it is not a simple task. Odin, the All-Father, wished to have just a single drink; he had to sacrifice one of his two eyes before he could take it."

Just-as-High said, "The root over Niflheim is nourished by the spring of Hvergelmir, the source of the world's great rivers."

Gangleri then asked, "What did the gods do after they created human beings?"

High One replied, "Odin, Vili, and Ve built a stronghold for themselves in the middle of the world, called Asgard, where they and their families would live. There Odin sits on his high seat and surveys the entire world, seeing what everyone is doing and understanding everything. Two ravens, Hugin (thought) and Munin (memory), sit upon his shoulders. Each day, Odin sends them out at dawn to fly over the world. When they return, they tell him all that they have seen and heard."

What is the most interesting palace in Asgard?" Gangleri asked.

High One replied, "That is surely Odin's golden-bright Valhalla (hall of the slain). It is roofed with spear shafts and golden shields. Valkyries (choosers of the slain), the valiant daughters of Odin, ride down to Midgard to award victory to certain warriors and

to choose those who are destined to die. They bring the dead warriors up to Valhalla to fight on the side of the gods against the giants when Ragnarok arrives."

Just-as-High added, "Every day the dead warriors entertain themselves by fighting one another, eating an endless supply of boar meat, and drinking endless cups of mead."

Third said, "There are 640 doors built into Valhalla, and when Ragnarok arrives 960 warriors will leave to fight the fearsome wolf Fenrir."

Gangleri asked, "How can one travel between Asgard and earth?"

High One replied, "The gods built the Bifrost (quivering roadway) Bridge, which human beings see as the rainbow."

"In your opinion, what gods should human beings believe in?" asked Gangleri.

High One replied, "There are twelve gods and twelve powerful goddesses. Odin is the oldest and greatest of the gods. He is called the All-Father because he is the father of both gods and humans. He is also called many other names, such as High One and Father of the Slain, since he is worshipped by many different clans in Midgard and has had many adventures."

Just-as-High added, "Thor is the son of Odin and his wife, the earth goddess Frigg. Thor is the strongest god. He drives a chariot drawn by two goats. He owns three precious possessions: his hammer, Mjollnir; his mighty belt, which doubles his strength; and his iron gloves, which he wears when he wields Mjollnir."

Third added, "Another son of Odin's is Balder. He is as beautiful as he is good, and he is the best loved of the gods. He is the most wise and the most kind. Whatever he says can never be changed."

Gangleri asked, "Which other gods are most important?"

High One replied, "Njord is also very important. He was originally from Vanaheim, the home of the Vanir gods, who make the land and sea fertile. He is very important to sailors and fishermen because he controls the wind and the sea. He is wealthy and makes those who worship him prosperous also."

Just-as-High added, "Njord has two important children, Frey (lord) and Freya (lady). Frey is third in importance, after Thor and Odin. Frey decides when the sun will shine and when the rain will pour. Therefore, he is responsible for the fertility of the

earth. Human beings pray to him for peace and prosperity, and for their own fertility as well as that of their fields."

Third said, "Freya is as important a goddess as Frigg. People: ask her for help in matters of love."

High One added, "Of course, there are many other important gods and goddesses. Idun keeps the golden apples that the gods eat in order to remain young. Bragi, her husband, is known for his wisdom and skill in poetry."

Third said, "Heimdall is the watchman of the gods. He can hear the wool growing on the backs of sheep and the grass growing in Midgard. He can see further than three hundred miles, even at night."

Gangleri asked, "Is Loki a god?"

High One: replied, "Loki is the son of a giant, so evil flows in his blood. He is considered a god, but he is a mischief-maker. He is very clever, but he also lies and cheats. Some call him the Father of Lies and the Disgrace of Gods and Men. He often gets the gods into trouble—or out of it. He is the father of three monstrous children: the wolf Fenrir, Hel (goddess of the dead), and the World Serpent. He will be the enemy of the gods when Ragnarok comes upon us."

Just-as-High added, "Hel is a grim creature. Hunger and Famine are her companions. People who die from old age or disease live with her behind high walls in the land of Niflheim."

Gangleri asked, "What can you tell me about Ragnarok? Is there any way to escape it?"

High One replied, "The death of Balder will be the first indication that Ragnarok is approaching. Loki will be instrumental in causing both Balder's death and his confinement with Hel. As punishment, the gods will imprison Loki in a cave until Ragnarok arrives."

Just-as-High added, "Next, for three winters bloody wars will be waged throughout the world. Brother will strike brother with sword and axe, and both will die. Incest and adultery will become common. No mortal will show another mercy. Evil will run wild upon the earth, destroying relationships among family, friends, and clans. Finally the world will lie in ruins."

Third added, "Then three terrible winters, each lasting for an entire year with no summer between them, will bring biting winds, severe frost, and endless snow."

High One continued, "The wolf Hati will finally catch and swallow the sun, and the wolf Skoll will finally catch and swallow the moon. The giant Surt will tear apart the heavens with his scorching flames, causing the blazing stars, bursting with fire, to fall upon the earth. The earth will shake so forcefully that the trees of the forests will become uprooted and the mountains will collapse. This tremendous tumult will release Loki, Fenrir, and the monstrous dragon called the World Serpent, which lies deep in the salt sea that surrounds Midgard. The serpent will thrash about, poisoning the sea and the sky with its spurting venom and causing tidal waves to wash upon Midgard."

Just-as-High added, "Flames will flare forth from Fenrir's eyes and nostrils as he moves toward the plain of Vigrid with his mouth gaping in readiness. There he will meet the gathering of Frost Giants, the World Serpent, and all other creatures of evil. Heimdall will alert the gods to Ragnarok."

Third said, "Odin will fight against Fenrir; Thor will pit himself against the World Serpent; and Frey will battle Surt. The wolf will swallow Odin whole, but Odin's son Vidar, the fiercest of warriors, will tear Fenrir's jaws apart and kill him. Thor will slay the serpent, but its poison will kill him. Heimdall and Loki will kill each other, and Surt will slay Frey. Thus the high ones will be destroyed."

High One concluded, "With the fire from his flaming sword, Surt will set the entire earth ablaze. People will flee their homesteads in fear. With death as their destiny, the doomed and trembling human race will walk the road to join Hel. Finally, the charred and devastated earth will sink into the sea."

Gangleri exclaimed, "How horrible! What will happen after the whole world has been burned, and the gods and human beings are dead?"

High One replied, "The earth will rise out of the sea once again, fresh and green. The eagle will again fly down from mountain crags to capture fish. The daughter of the sun will travel the old paths of her mother and will brighten heaven and earth with her light. Fields will produce grain where seeds were never sown."

Just-as-High added, "After Surt's flames have destroyed the homes of the gods, Odin's sons Vidar and Vali will live where Asgard once was. Odin's grandsons Modi and

Magni will join them and will claim Mjollnir, their father's hammer. Finally, Balder will return from the land of Hel and join the group. Together the gods will remember the knowledge of the high ones, the World Serpent, Fenrir, and Ragnarok. But evil will have left the world."

Third said, "Meanwhile, when the endless winter kills most human beings, one man, Lif (life), and one woman, Lifthrasir (desiring life), will seek safety by hiding among the branches of the great ash tree Yggdrasill. There they will survive by eating and drinking the morning dew. They will escape Surt's flames, and when the earth has revived they will become the parents of the next race of human beings."

High One then announced, "This ends our tale. We have answered all of your questions. Do what you will with all that we have told you."

Suddenly, Gangleri found himself in the midst of a tremendous uproar. When he came to his senses he found that he was alone upon a plain, and Asgard and the hall he had been visiting were nowhere in sight. He assumed his customary shape as King Gylfi and returned to his kingdom. There he told his people what he had learned. And from that day until this, these tales have been passed from one human being to another.