

In Lord of Light fabulous technology makes gods of mortal men. In Michael Stackpole's ironic tale, forgotten gods employ modern media for their own ends.

ASGARD UNLIMITED

MICHAEL A. STACKPOLE

ASIDE FROM THE RAVEN-SHIT ON HIS SHOULDERS, ODIN looked pretty good in the Armani suit. The matching blue pin-striping on the eyepatch was a nice touch. Odin had never been a slouch, but even I was impressed at how quickly he was picking up on the ways of this new age.

He looked down on me from a composite video screen taller than he had ever been in life. He wore a smile that I knew was for the benefit of his audience, but the specta-tors in Valhalla assumed the smile was for them. If it pleased them to think so, I saw no reason to disabuse them of this notion. I was feeling too good to indulge myself.

I stood in the Grand Foyer of Valhalla and smiled at what I had wrought. Massive steel spears were bound to-gether to form pillars and rafters, giving the grand hall the retro-martial look all the architectural journals had raved about. In the old Valhalla the roof had been made of shields, but I had them cast in lexan so they let light in during the day and allowed people permitted into the upper reaches to see the stars at night. Carefully crafted sword-shaped sconces hid halogen lights that provided the lower levels with a constant, timeless glow.

The old, tired wooden benches, moth-eaten tapestries and well-worn animal skins had been replaced with more modern Scandinavian furnishings. Shields, swords, spears, and armor all still figured into the motifs, but that's be-cause they were familiar to people. One of the special aspects of the new Valhalla allowed everyone to see some decorations as those things with which they were most familiar—the Christers spoke in tongues, we provided Icons-for-all,

Valhalla was a beautiful place no one would mind dwelling in for eternity. The Valkyries were certainly strik-ing and one of our better attractions. It took me a while to convince Odin that bringing in men to wear similarly brief outfits would be a good way to offer something to the female market. He finally succumbed after I convinced him that he thought up the

name by which the beefcake would be known. "Valiants" were now one of our more popular features.

Then again, Odin had not been the reactionary element among the Aesir. At the very first briefing I gave the others just over a year ago, Odin had already begun to adapt to the changed circumstances. The Perry Ellis en-semble he wore had been a season out of date, but of a conservative enough cut to enhance the patriarchal nobility that had long been his trademark.

The others were a bit slower to adjust, but that was how it always had been. Thor, wearing some urban commando fatigues, began to do a wonderful imitation of a beached fish gasping for oxygen the moment I walked into the room. Tyr noticed my entrance, but returned to studying the biomechanical prosthesis replacing his right hand. He opened and closed the fist in rough time with the opening and closing of Thor's mouth.

And Heimdall, well, that venomous glare took me back centuries.

Thor slammed a fist onto the conference room table, pulverizing formica and particle board. "What is *he* doing here?" Wood dust rose up in a great cloud and lodged firmly in Thor's red beard. "It's his trickery that has woven these illusions that mask Asgard's true nature."

Odin slowly shook his snow-maned head. "No, Loki is the reason we are all here, hence his place with us."

Little lightning-bolts trickled from Thor's eyes as he glanced at me. "It is a trick, Odin Val-father. This is the one who had Baldur slain. It was he who caused the Ragnarok, in which we were slain. ..."

"Is that so, Thunderer?" I smiled and seated myself in the chair at the opposite end of the lozenge table from Odin. "I triggered Ragnarok?"

"Don't seek to deny it." Thor folded his arms over his chest, his bulging muscles sorely testing the resiliency of his jacket's synthetic fibers. "We know this is true. The serpent and I slew each other. Odin died in Fenris's maw and Tyr slew the hell-hound Garm, but was slain by him. Heimdall killed you and you him. This we know."

I allowed myself a little laugh and had Odin not smiled and nodded in my direction, any of my brethren would have gladly torn me apart. "How do you know this, Thor? Do you recall smiting the serpent with Mjolnir? And you, Tyr, do you recall Garm's bite?" My smile died a bit as I regarded

Heimdall. “And you, do you recall the twisting agony of my sword in your guts?”

Heimdall’s smile revealed a glittering mouthful of golden teeth. “No more than my hands remember twisting your head off.”

I shot the cuffs of my shirt to cover the momentary difficulty I had swallowing. “None of us have memories of the events of Ragnarok actually happening. We knew what *would* happen, how the world would end, because of Odin’s wisdom and the various oracles that predicted the twilight of the gods, but we did not live through that predicted end.”

Tyr’s hand snapped shut. “Do not try to tell me Baldur did not die. I feel the pain of his loss still in my heart.”

“You are absolutely right, Tyr, he did die, but the events his death presaged did not come to pass. There was no Ragnarok.”

“Impossible!” Thor started to pound the table again, but a rare bit of restraint left his fist poised to strike. “Ragnarok must have happened. There has been so much nothing—I must have been dead. I will not believe there was no twilight of the gods.”

I gave him my most disarming smile and his fist began to slowly drift down. “There was a twilight, but not the one we expected.”

Thor’s red eyebrows collided with confusion. “Was there or was there not a Ragnarok?”

“*Our* Ragnarok, no.” Odin laid his left hand on Thor’s arm. “Allow Loki to explain.”

Thor grumbled and glowered at me. “Speak on, Deceiver.”

“For forever and a day we have known of other gods and their realms. We have also known that we draw life from the belief of our worshipers in us. Their prayers and invocations, sacrifices and vows sustain us.” I opened my hands. “We use the power they give us to grant boons to our favorites, inspiring others to greater belief and sacrifice in the hopes we will favor them, too.”

My fellow gods squirmed a bit in their chairs. Though they knew nothing of B. F. Skinner, they had intuitively grasped the fact that random interval reinforcement was truly the most powerful inducement to create and

maintain a behavior pattern. Often, in fact, we received credit for things we did not do. If a tree fell on a longhouse during a storm, the enemies of the person so afflicted would offer thanks to me or another god for our smiting of then-enemy.

There may be no such thing as a free lunch, but people are much more protective about their food than they are their devotion.

“Well to the south of our Midgard holdings, in the desert crossroads, Jehovah decided to retire.”

Heimdall’s treasure-trove smile broadened. “Had I cre-ated the world in six days, I would have chosen more than one day’s rest, too.”

We all laughed. While it was true most of us could not remember where we had come from, and therefore made up rather elaborate stories about our antecedents, only Jehovah had come up with the tale of his being the end-all and be-all of existence. While claiming to have killed your own parents wasn’t necessarily the most attractive story we could have come up with, it was easier for humans to relate to than a tale of willing oneself into full-blown, egotistical existence,

“I’m certain that had something to do with it, Heimdall. In any event, to facilitate his retirement, he had a fling with a human and she gave birth to a son, Joshua—though he is now more commonly known as Jesus and the Christ. He performed some miracles, gave his people the benefit of his wisdom, then hung from a tree until dead.”

Thor frowned. “How long was he on the tree?”

“An afternoon.”

The god of thunder snickered. “An afternoon? That’s nothing compared to Odin’s nine days, and he was stuck on his own spear at the time.”

“Josh may well have heard of the tale, or his followers did, because there was a spear-sticking involved in the whole incident, too. His disciples bundled him off to a tomb, and after a day and a half, Josh came back to life.” I shrugged my shoulders. “Again, a substandard perfor-mance, but one that was convincing for his people.”

Tyr swept golden locks away from his blue eyes. “I recall hearing of the Christ when some of his followers were slain for spreading his story

among my people.”

My eyes narrowed. “Would that we had realized the danger of his cult. The Christ demanded two things of his followers. The first he borrowed from his father: they were to have no gods but him before them. This demand of exclusivity is fine when you are a lonely godling ruling over nomads in featureless wastes—there were no other gods who wanted those people.”

Odin frowned. “When Jehovah’s people were captive in Thothheim and Baalheim, they were no threat to the indigenous gods.”

“No, but the Christ’s second demand of his believers is what made them malignant.” I put an edge into my voice so even Thor could understand what I was saying was important. “The Christ demanded they share their religion with others, who would then become exclusively his and spread the faith further.”

Thor shook his head. “I don’t believe you. I would remember such a thing.”

“You don’t remember because the Christ movement took hold in our realm almost overnight. As we concerned ourselves with the coming of Ragnarok, the Christers stole into our lands. Our believers dwindled, then abandoned us. We fell into the sleep of the forgotten.”

Heimdall cocked an eyebrow at me. “If this is true, if we all became forgotten, how is it you know this story?”

I pressed my hands together, fingertip to fingertip. “In their zeal to spread Christism, they linked me with Lucifer, the ancient enemy Jehovah spawned and who tormented Joshua. There are those humans who always go against the prevailing sentiment of society, and worshiping me became a viable alternative for them.”

Tyr reached up with his mechanical hand and tried to pluck a fly out of the air. “If these Christers hold sway, how are we here, now?”

My smile broadened. “Christism did become quite widespread and certainly become the dominant religion in the world, but “it is based on tolerance and pacifism. As a result, some evils in the world go unchecked. I believe it was the slaughter of Jehovah’s core constituency in central Europe that first alarmed Jehovah. He took a look at what ~ the Christ had done with the family firm and initiated a hostile takeover of the enterprise.

He forced Joshua out and returned things to the way they had been. Joshua immediately struck out on his own, but his people had become fragmented and his doctrine muddled. At the same time Christism became seen by any number of people as theological imperialism, so they rejected it and returned to the old ways.

“Our ways.”

“I cannot believe it.” Thor frowned mightily. “You say this Christ was a pacifist who preached tolerance.”

“Exactly.”

“No fighting? No warrior tradition?”

“No, he was a pacifist. He completely eschewed violence.”

Thor’s lower lip quivered for a moment. “If he was a pacifist, how were we defeated?”

I smiled. “He offered people something they wanted. He promised them life after death.”

“So did we.”

Odin pressed his hands to the tabletop. “This brings us to the point of this meeting. The return of people to the old faiths has given us another chance at life, but these people are not the people we knew of old. Things are different, now, and we must avail ourselves of the means we have today to guarantee we do not go away again.”

Thor shook his head. “I don’t understand. We are the gods. We do not change. People worship us for what we are, what we offer them.”

“And there is the problem.” I frowned. “Quite frankly, the Aesir are a public relations nightmare. All of us here have our warrior aspects, but war just isn’t in vogue any more.”

Thor’s eyes blazed. “War is the most noble and lofty pursuit to which a man can aspire. This is why the boldest and most brave warriors are plucked by the Valkyries from the fields of the dead and brought to Valhalla. Odin himself ordered warriors to be buried with their arms and armor so they would be prepared to join us in the last days, fighting against our foes at Ragnarok!”

I sighed. “Look, we really need to rethink this Rag-narok thing. The Christers pretty much own the idea of a grand battle to usher in the end of the world, so our Rag-narok just comes across as a pale imitation of their Arma-geddon. And this warriors-only thing, that’s got to go, too.”

The god of thunder’s voice boomed. “What? You want to admit other than warriors to Valhalla?”

“Thor, what you would recognize as warriors in this era carry weapons that can kill a man at over a mile. Most of the wars now are called police actions, which means people far away use weapons that hit with the force of Mjolnir to shatter their enemy’s cities. The heroic nature of combat you recall so fondly is no more.”

Thor’s florid face drained of color. “There are no more humans who bravely venture out, risking life and limb, to defeat their enemies and reap riches for themselves?”

“There are, but they battle away in commercial wars.”

“Merchants?”

“Think of them as captains of industry.”

“You want to admit *merchants* to Valhalla?” Thor shook his head. “Next you will want to allow women into that hallowed hall.”

I winced. “Actually, I *did* want to bring women in, but several of the mother-goddess cults have combined with feminism to really block our inroads there. Face it, while all of your wives were wonderful, they’re not as inspiring as the Mediterranean goddesses. Still, focusing on men gives us a potential market of roughly half the world’s population, and that half controls the majority of the wealth in the world.”

“Wealth?” Tyr frowned. “I agree with Thor. We want nobility and courage.”

“No, we want *believers*. To attract them, we have to give them something the Christers won’t.” I smiled. “One of the Christ’s pronouncements is that it will be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than it will for a rich man to enter Paradise. We’ve got a long-standing tradition of having a person buried with his material possessions so he can have them in the afterlife. We’ll build on that

tradition and have people flocking in.”

I leaned forward. “Welcome to Asgard Unlimited. We’re in the religion business. Our slogan is this: Asgard Unlimited—you *can* take it with you.”

Heimdall’s visage darkened. “The people you speak of attracting sound less like worshipers than pillagers and scavengers, coming to us to see what we can give them.”

“You have to understand, all of you, that the human of today is less a worshiper than a fan. They don’t so much believe in anyone or thing as much as they believe in and worship the myth surrounding a phenomenon. Being gods is certainly impressive, but we need to become more, something that allows everyone to participate in our mystique.”

I nodded toward the head of the table. “The three of you will form a trinity—the Christers made that popular and we can use the pattern. Odin will be the head of things and preside over Valhalla. His job will be to dispense wisdom and help our people prosper in their endeavors.

“We’ll remake Valhalla into something new and sophisticated. As we have in the past, we’ll thin the line between the living and the dead, bringing in dead celebrities to meet and greet folks. This will provide our claims of the afterlife—something the Christers never do. We also want Valhalla to be a fun place—with family entertainment as well as more adult pursuits.”

“Adult pursuits?”

I looked at Tyr. “You’ve not forgotten Odin’s taste for hot and cold running Valkyries, have you? One part of Valhalla will be Hooters of the Gods. Another section will be devoted to weekend warriors—people who always wanted to fight but never had the chance. Add in a casino, an amusement park, a ‘Warfare of the Ages’ exhibit area and we have pretty much everything covered. Since Val-halla has five hundred and forty doors, we’ll franchise them out to the major population centers of the world, meaning the site stays centralized, but people can get to-gether instantly. That will greatly boost our commercial bookings—conventions everywhere will be coming to us.”

I pointed at Tyr. “Your role is going to be that of the divine Princeling. Royalty has gotten a bad name of late, but Tyr, you’re the one who can bring nobility back to it. Tragically wounded while saving the rest of the gods, you’re already a heroic figure. You’re also favored by sportsmen, and sports is big business. You’re a natural for skiing and other winter sports at

the more exclusive hide-aways in the world. If you can pick up golf, cricket, and yachting, you'll be pitching straight to our core market."

Tyr slowly smiled. "All I have to do is spend my time involved in sport, associating with the rich and beautiful?"

"That's it."

"I'm willing to listen—more."

I turned to Heimdall. "Though I ridiculed you in the past for the job of being the Aesir's watchman, now is a time we need your keen eyes and ears to safeguard our enterprise. Before you listened for enemies approaching Bifrost on their way to Asgard. Now we will have many more bridges, and each of them will bear watching."

The smile that had begun to blossom on Heimdall's face with my initial remarks froze. "I may be a god, but I cannot monitor the whole world without help."

"And help you shall have." From my pocket I fished a remote control and pointed it at the wall to my right. Hitting a button I brought a dancing picture to life. "This is television. In our Valhalla you will be able to watch hundreds of such monitors, seeing what they see, hearing the sounds they hear. There is no corner of Midgard that you will not be able to see immediately. When you see danger, you get on the horn—ah, the telephone, not Gjallarhorn—and warn us what is going on.

"It is a grave responsibility," I said, handing him the remote, "but no one else can handle it."

Heimdall brandished the plastic box as if it were Hofud, his sword. "I shall be ever vigilant."

Thor thrust his lower lip out in a pout. "You say war is revered no more. There is nothing for me in your As-gard Unlimited."

"Ah, but there is—a very special role indeed." I gave him a genuine smile. "Among humans there is a need for idols. Many of them come out of sports, and Tyr will cover them, but others come from the entertainment industry. James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, Bruce Lee, Elvis—each of them has attained a near divinity because of how they entertained people."

"But I am a warrior! There is no entertainment for which I am suited."

“You’re so wrong, my friend. There is a form of entertainment here that was made for you.” I rubbed my hands together. “It’s called professional wrestling.”

* * * *

Gunnar, my aide, cleared his throat and brought me back to the present. “If you have a moment, Divinity.”

“Always.” I reached back and rubbed at the sore spot on my spine. “What do you have?”

“We got our shipment of the new summer-color eye-patches in and they’re set to go on sale in our boutiques this afternoon. This includes the ones that allow you to tan beneath them.”

“Good. What about the Odin jackets?”

Gunnar frowned. “The supplier says the subcontractor they’ve got making the ravens has really done a poor job. They’re able to join the ravens to the jacket’s shoulders and they stand up, but they lose feathers and the eyes fall out.”

“You tell them more than their eyes will fall out if they don’t fix the problem.” I glanced at the video screen behind me and then at my watch. “When is Odin due back?”

“Not for a couple of hours. He’s just begun speaking in Tokyo and won’t come through from our doorway there for at least another three hours.” Gunnar smiled. “By the way, we got the fax this morning: *The One-eyed God’s Business Wisdom* is going to start at number one on the Times list. It’s bumping Jesus’ *Business Beatitudes: Char-ity Before Profit* from the top spot. Herakles’ *Twelve La-bors’ Lessons* will be out in two weeks, but pre-orders are soft, so we’ll remain at number one for a while. We’ll be selling a lot of books. And Letterman wants Odin in to help host a segment of ‘stupid demigod tricks.’ “

“Tell Letterman’s people it’s a deal, but questions about CBS are off-limits.” Struck by the symbology of the net-work’s logo, Odin bought it and didn’t take well to criti-cism from his employees. I sighed, anticipating another long lecture from the Val-father about my making book-ings for him. In the end I knew he’d see reason, but endur-ing the discussion would be

torture.

Still, it was all in service to a worthy cause.

“Anything else?”

“Yes, Divinity.” He looked down at the personal digital assistant he carried, then grinned. “Ticket sales are way up for the Great Battles of History Symposium series. The Rommel/Patton debate really got people juiced to hear more.”

“Who is up next?”

“Hannibal and the two Scipios, Elder and Younger. Nike is going to underwrite part of the cost.”

“Right, they have those Air Hannibal hiking boots.” I nodded. “Very good. Make sure we have plenty of them stocked in our gift shops before and after that debate. I take it Tyr’s still in court?”

Gunnar nodded. “Case should go to the jury in two weeks. We anticipate a victory. The other side has good lawyers, but ours are devilishly clever and even the most stone-hearted troll would side with Tyr against a tabloid.”

“Good. Keep on top of these things and keep me in-formed.” I gave Gunnar a pat on the shoulder. “I’m going to see my daughter, but I should be back in an hour or so.”

I felt the shudder ran through him, but I ignored it and wended my way through the crowd waiting in line to get into the Thor memorial. I was tempted to shift my shape into that of my lost comrade, just to give them a thrill, but the chances of starting a riot weren’t worth it. I passed through them unnoticed, smiling as every third or fourth person remarked on what a pity his death had been.

I thought it was more tragic—grandly tragic at that. Thor had taken to professional wrestling like a fly to car-ri- on. He knew there was no one who could best him in a fight, and the audience knew that as well. Every night, every bout, was a morality play. It was a reenactment of the classic solar hero struggle to overcome the forces of evil and return to a new day and dawn. The bouts would start even, then Thor’s foe would use some underhanded trick to gain a temporary advantage. Thor would take a beating and while his foe danced around the arena, exultant and triumphant,

Thor would crawl to his corner and pull on his belt of might and gloves of iron.

I used to thrill to it. His enemy—some steroided mutant man or odd demigod from pantheons best left to their obscurity—would remain innocently unaware of his danger. The crowd would begin to pound their feet in a thunderous cadence and Thor would draw power from it. Their desire to see him win, their belief in his invincibility fueled him. He would slam his gloves together, letting their peal spread through the crowd, then he would turn and vanquish his foe.

The end came when he fought Louis the Serpent. Louis was yet another in a line of forgettable foes to face Thor, but we'd arranged for a worldwide satellite hook-up. Thor's fame and popularity were peaking—ninety-five per-cent of the people on the planet could identify him. This bout would solidify his place in the minds of all humanity. Thor had known from the first moment of sentience that he was meant to fight a great serpent, and Louis became it.

And Louis killed him.

After three rounds of battering each other silly, Louis picked him up in a big bear hug and snapped his spine. He cast Thor aside and laughed at his fallen foe. Then he laughed at Thor's fans, called them weak and stupid. He said they were pathetic for having believed in him and that they were losers because their god was dead.

Thor's death was a crushing blow for us, but not for long. Little by little stories began to filter in about Thor having been seen here and there. There was no mistaking him, of course. He helped people out of difficult situations, averted disasters, and made the impossible happen for them. To each and every one of his worshipers these stories were proof that he lived and that their faith was anything but false.

In death Thor became bigger than he ever was in life. Caps, shirts, the Craftsman line of Mjolnir tools, the comics, videos, and action figures all went through the roof in sales. While Odin was doing very well with his books and motivational speaking engagements, and Tyr added a layer of respectability to Asgard Unlimited, Thor was the back-bone of its popularity.

Past the memorial I stepped up to a door few could see and fewer could open. I could and did, passing through and petting Garm as I did so. The hell-hound would have gladly taken my hand off at the shoulder, but he feared my son Fenris, so I was safe. Past him I headed down the spiral

stairs that took me to Niflhel, my daughter Hel's domain. I tossed a quick salute to Baldur—making as if I was going to flick my mistletoe boutonniere at him. He flinched and I laughed.

Compared to Valhalla, the mist-shrouded depths of Niflhel were cold and claustrophobic, but I found it bracing and cozy at the same time. The vaporous veils softened the light and dulled sound, though I was certain my laughter had penetrated into the depths.

Confirmation of that fact came from the rising and incoherent growl on my left. Through the mists a huge shadowed form lunged at me. Its eyes blazed and its teeth flashed, then the length of chain binding it to the heart of the underworld ran out of slack. It tightened, jerking the collar and creature back. It landed with a heavy thud, shaking the ground, then lay there with sobs wracking its chest.

I squatted down at the very edge of its range. "Will you never learn, Thor?"

"This chain *will* break."

I shook my head. "I think not. If you will recall, the chain forged to restrain Fenris resisted the efforts of any of the gods to break it, yourself included. That chain was made from the meow of a cat, the beard of a woman, the roots of a mountain, the tendons of a bear, the breath of a fish, and the spittle of a bird. For you I alloyed in yet other things, both tangible and intangible. There's Nixon's belief in his own innocence, the true identity of the man on the grassy knoll, and not a little bit of kevlar. The same goes for the collar. You are here until I decide you are to be released."

Thor pulled himself up into a sitting position. "I know how you did it. You invited me in for a celebratory drink before my match and drugged me, then took my shape and were killed by the serpent."

"Very good—you've been using your head for something more than a helm-filler."

"You won't get away with it. Heimdall has to have seen what you did, and what you have been doing. He knows you have been masquerading as me. He will expose you."

"Ha!" I stood and looked down upon him. "Heimdall spends every hour of every day watching the programming on over five hundred television stations. Even a god cannot escape transformation into a

drooling idiot when subjected to that much television. He's so mesmerized he couldn't blow his nose, much less blow his horn."

"Why?"

"Why what? Why fake your death?" I shook my head. "How often do I have to go over this with you? Every human idol must pass through the mystery of death. Death absolves you of guilt and hides your blemishes. You're more perfect in death than you ever were in life, just like Elvis and Marilyn, Bruce Lee and Kurt Cobain. From the start I knew I needed someone to die, and you were it. Odin had already done it and hadn't had very good results, and death is just too inelegant for Tyr. That left you—Mr. Big, Dumb, and Vulnerable."

"*That* I understand." Electricity sparked in Thor's eyes. "I want to know why the deceptions? Why do I appear everywhere? Why build up my army of believers?"

"Because they aren't *your* believers." I snorted derisively at him. "If all those people who worship Thor were worshiping you, this chain would be like a spiderweb to you. You could tear it and me apart. You can't because they don't worship you. They worship the *image* of you—the romanticized image of you that *I* project."

I smiled. "My friend Louis and I, after having been so long linked and vilified by the Christers, realized we could never be transformed into the noble and hunky sort of god that people would accept. Lucifer had a constituency—hedonists, anarchists, selfish, venal people, and impotent people who wanted a shortcut to power. As Louis the Serpent he fed all those 'get it now and easy' fantasies. In showing contempt for your believers, he earned the respect of those who hated your image, and he earned quite a bit of hatred from your people. That was his payoff."

I pressed my hands to my chest. "And I became the Thor I helped create through the media. What you sowed, I reap."

Thor hung his head. "When you said we needed to rethink Ragnarok ..."

"I wanted it rethought because the way it was scripted before, I *lost*. No more. Odin is distracted by his writing and speaking and running his network. Tyr has his diver-sions—and I do like that Diana; she looks very good on the arm of a god. He spends most of his time suing tab-loids for

stories they print about him, attending parties, and running that football team he bought. Neither of them is a threat to me. Odin's star will fade soon enough—seldom does a business guru survive more than a dozen years before being completely eclipsed, and there's nothing more boring than yesterday's financial genius. As for Tyr, a sportsman gigolo who bumps indolently from one resort to another becomes pitiful rather quickly. He'll get a talk show, it will be canceled, then he can join George Hamilton on the beach."

"And you win."

"At least the preliminary round."

Thor raised his head. "Why keep me around? Is it pity or contempt you have for me?"

"Neither, my friend." I squatted again and tugged at the fringe of his beard. "I only have the utmost of respect for you. You, I need."

"What?"

"As I said, I win the preliminary round, which means I'm going up against other gods. The Meso-Americans appear to be consolidating their pantheons. I expect the war between the Buddhists and Maoists in China will soon be resolved. Jehovah is holding his own and appears to be usurping Allah's position. The Christ is still strong. And then there's the serpent of Eden."

I saw the lightning again spark in Thor's eyes. "Yes, Thor, war might not be in vogue in this world right now, but I think the gods will change that. There's going to be a new Ragnarok, a bigger, nastier one, and in it, my friend, you will get your crack at a serpent."

His hunger was such that I could taste its bitterness. "Promise?"

"You have my solemn oath on it." I smiled, then stood and let the mist hide him from me. "The *true* Twilight of the gods fast approaches and this time, I mean to survive to the dawn."

* * * *

AFTERWORD

There is something Messianic about Roger Zelazny—and part of it is the

fact that he'd reject that idea out of hand, while still being entertained by it. I feel that incipient Zelazny cultus whenever those who knew Roger get together and talk about him, or tell others about him. The man's impact on us was such that it must be shared.

I met Roger only three years before his death, but I get the impression that knowing him for an hour was knowing him for a lifetime—at least as much as any of us could know him. His genius was palpable, likewise his keen interest in anything and everything. And that included us. I can't recall a phone conversation with him, no matter how brief, that didn't include him asking me what I was working on and how it was going. He seemed less inter-ested in the nature of the work than he was in how I felt about it as a writer.

This sense of the Messianic is not the reason I wrote this particular story, however. I have no doubt that in the world of Asgard Unlimited there is a Church of Roger duking it out with the First Assembly of Elvis or showing the Church of Scientology what kind of religion you can get out of a *real* writer. I wrote this story because I felt it was the kind of story Roger *could have* written—and I would have loved to see what he would have done with the concept.

The other reason I wrote it was because I think it was the kind of story Roger would have enjoyed reading. Try-ing to produce a story that lives up to that kind of billing is very tough. I remember fighting that battle when I wrote my portion of *Forever After*, pushing myself to come up with something that would do justice to the assignment Roger had given me. As difficult a task as that was, it's one that really pushed me as a writer, and *that* is some-thing I know would have made Roger very pleased.

Barring the establishment of a Church of Roger (I keep seeing Robert Schuler's Crystal Cathedral and wondering what it would look like in amber), I guess writing stories that would have entertained the man is the only way to pay homage to him. Too little, perhaps, and way too late, but it works, and for now that will have to be enough.