

The Truth About the Gotterdammerung

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Since Loki's alibi was airtight, suspicion fell on God.

"That Bum's always had in it for us," grumbled Frey. Thor roared and bellowed, splintering tables with his hammer.

"Justice! Justice!" Valhalla rang with his thunderous basso profundo. As always, the gigantic hall was packed with heroes, who immediately took up the cry.

"JUSTICE! JUSTICE!"

Then:

"Death to the Christian God!"

At these words, the hall fell silent. Men and gods craned to see who had spoken. A huge and extraordinarily inebriated warrior clambered onto a feasting table. Several times, actually, before he finally managed the feat.

Swaying back and forth, spilling great quantities of mead from a tankard, this worthy spoke again.

"Hear me, gods and heroes! I am Hunkred Thorvaldsen, called the Cropped-Head, and I am accounted the fiercest berserk in my district! It was I who slew Gunnar Hairybreeks with one thrust of my spear through his liver after he took his sword and wounded my third cousin Ingmar, called the Reckless, after Ingmar cut off Gunnar's brother Harald's arm at the fjord with his ax after Harald killed my brother's wife's uncle's grandson's dog after the dog pissed on his leg after Harald stole a bone from the dog at the midwinter festival after the dog had seized it fairly from the feasting table after Harald's nephew Bjorn, called the Ungenerous, refused the dog his fair portion."

Great applause resounded throughout Valhalla. Many toasts were drunk to the downfall of miserliness. After falling off the table three more times, Hunkred Thorvaldsen resumed his wobbly stance and continued his speech.

"Therefore do I, Hunkred Thorvaldsen, called the Cropped-Head, call upon the gods and heroes of Valhalla to avenge the murder of our beloved deity"—here the berserk, sobbing tears, pointed to the pallid corpse of the god Loki which was lying face down upon the floor of Valhalla, a knife sticking out of its back—"and seek satisfaction upon the mangy body of God, called the Almighty."

As one man, the heroes of Valhalla leapt to their feet, tankards held high.

"DEATH TO GOD!"

The excitement of the moment was irresistible. Heroes seized their weapons and charged out of the hall, led by the gods Heimdall and Thor. The former blew his great horn, the latter swung his hammer gaily. Taking his place at the head of the entire parade was Odin, riding his eight-legged horse Sleipner. His two great wolves, Freke and Gere, paced by his side.

As the gods and heroes poured out of the great feasting hall, the goddesses and Valkyries hastily donned their breastplates and rushed out to bid them farewell.

Wincing, most of them.

"Breastplates and fond farewells are a lousy match," grumbled Odin's wife Frigga, after the gods and heroes were gone.

"You're telling me?" groused Thor's wife Sif, trying—gingerly—to pry her breastplate loose. "Breastplates are a lousy match with anything civilized. At least your husband isn't a damned weight-lifter."

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As he led the procession across the heavens, Odin's expression was grim and stern, as befitted the Allfather of gods and men. It grew grimmer and sterner at the words of the ravens perched on his shoulder. Hugin and Munin, they were called.

"This is a bad idea," observed Hugin.

"A *really* bad idea," added Munin.

"Shuddup," growled Odin. "What do you know, anyway? You're just a couple of stupid birds."

"They don't call God the Almighty for nothing," pointed out Hugin.

"Omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent," added Munin.

"Not like you, Odin, who's just a—"

Odin's divine temper boiled over. His spear missed the ravens, although a few tail feathers went flying. The birds cawed derisively and flew back toward Valhalla.

"Don't say we didn't warn you!"

"And they call us bird-brains!"

But Odin had no more time for impudent avians. Even now was the mighty host drawing up before the Pearly Gates of Heaven, so rapid is travel through the outer planes of creation.

High atop the Pearly Gates stood the resplendent figures of two angels. The one on the left held a great trumpet. Gabriel, his name. No doubt in the hopes of abashing the lout, Heimdall blew a mighty blast with his horn. But even before the sound of Heimdall's horn faded, Gabriel was improvising upon the tune, developing themes and variations which were not only dazzling in their divinity and awesome in their cunning, but which also—especially the little riff which he added as a coda—exuded musical derision.

"O Heavens!" cried the other angel, Azrael. "We are besieged by a mighty host of flea-bitten barbarians!"

"O, what shall we do?" sobbed Gabriel.

The two angels convulsed with laughter. The assembled heroes of Valhalla bayed with fury. But at a gesture from Odin, they fell silent.

"Stand aside, lackeys!" cried the Allfather. "Open the Pearly Gates! We've business with your Boss!"

Azrael sneered. "God's busy."

"Deciding the fate of the universe," added Gabriel.

"Not that it's really necessary," mused Azrael, "seeing as how He figured it out right from the start when He made the whole thing. But He likes to check His work."

"A real precisionist." Gabriel.

"Not like some deities I could name." Azrael.

"And isn't that a good thing!" cried Gabriel. "Can you imagine the lopsided universe created by a god with only one eye?"

The insult was too much to bear. With a great curse, Odin hurled his spear at Gabriel. Alas, he missed. By quite a large margin, actually.

"Just like you said, Gabriel," giggled Azrael. "No stereoscopic vision."

Odin's curse was now joined by a multitude of others. A hailstorm of spears and axes was hurled at the Pearly Gates. With no noticeable effect, alas, although Thor's hammer did produce an impressive booming sound.

The ensuing comments by Azrael and Gabriel did little to improve the temper of the assembled gods and heroes of Valhalla. They were especially affronted by the angels' offer to find Thor a job ringing the bell in a cathedral, provided he agree to abstain from sin and grow a hunchback.

But their fury was suddenly stilled by the manifestation of an infinite Presence.

"Now you've done it," complained Azrael.

"God's here," added Gabriel. Quite unnecessarily, for the Presence of the Almighty is a unique and unmistakable phenomenon.

WHAT'S UP?

(Quotation marks cannot properly be used to indicate God's Voice. He is, after all, Unlimitable.)

The charges against Him were babbled forth in an unruly and not entirely sober manner.

YOU THINK I STABBED THIS—WHAT'S HIS NAME?—LOKI CHARACTER IN THE BACK?

An overwhelming sense of infinite amusement.

WHAT A BUNCH OF CLOWNS.

The assembled gods and heroes of Valhalla suddenly found themselves attired in the ridiculous costumes of circus clowns. Odin's mount was now an eight-legged elephant wearing a fez. His wolves were poodles, yipping with rage at the absurd cut of their pelts. Thor's hammer was a rubber mallet, with which, seized by an overpowering compulsion, he began hitting himself on the head. Heimdall's great horn was a carnival noisemaker.

Other indignities followed, but there is no need to dwell upon them. Suffice it to say that the assault of the gods and heroes of Valhalla upon Heaven turned out very badly in the end, even as foretold by the ravens.

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On their way back, slouched and miserable, Frey complained to Odin: "When you made yourself the father of the gods, why didn't *you* assume omnipotence?"

"Do I look like an egomaniac?" snarled Odin.

"He's not the only Almighty, you know," came a voice. Turning, Odin and Frey beheld a slender but well-muscled stripling striding alongside.

"Who're you?" demanded Frey.

The stripling swelled his chest. "I am Lothar Halversen, called the Skinny, and I am recognized as the fiercest berserk in my district. It was I who slew Knut Ohtheresen, called the Heavy-Sleeper, after—"

"Forget all that!" roared Odin. "What did you mean—when you said God wasn't the only Almighty?"

The youth grinned gaily. "Oh, there's at least one other. Goes by the name of Allah. I heard about Him when I was raiding in Spain. The Moors are some fighters, you know? Of course, that didn't stop me from slaying twenty-eight of them at—"

"Shut up! I never heard of him. Allah, you say? And He's another omnipotent god?"

"According to the Moors, even more than God. And they say this Allah hates God with a passion."

Odin's grim face grew stern with thought.

"It's worth a try," he muttered.

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And so it was that the host of heroes and gods of Valhalla came to Paradise, and sought an audience with Allah. This they were immediately granted, without obstruction by insolent servants, for Allah runs a strictly One-God show.

Alas, it went badly. No sooner had Allah heard Odin's proposal that He lead a charge on the Pearly Gates than the universe was filled with an overwhelming sense of fury. Allah's voice filled the infinite void.

GOD'S A HERETIC AND AN INFIDEL, BUT AT LEAST HE'S NOT A PAGAN.

And so saying, Allah visited a rain of toads and brimstone upon the heroes and gods of Valhalla, followed by locusts and seven lean years.

On their way back from Paradise, the gods and heroes of Valhalla regained some of their strength by eating the stripling Lothar Halversen, called—unfortunately—the Skinny. Such is the lot of those who give bad advice to ill-tempered gods and heroes.

"Still and all," mused Frey, picking his teeth with one of Lothar's fingerbones, "the kid's general idea wasn't bad. Just picked the wrong Almighty, that's all. But there must be one omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent Deity around who'd be willing to take a crack at the Pearly Gates."

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And so it came to pass that the gods and heroes of Valhalla sought out the various Almighties for aid and assistance in their quest to seek justice for the foul murder of Loki. Finding these Almighties proved simple. True, the Void is infinite and eternal. But, on the other hand, it is in the nature of Almighties to be omnipresent.

Finding them, therefore, proved easy. Obtaining their help, on the other hand, proved otherwise.

The interview with Yahweh went sour right from the start. The gods and heroes of Valhalla offered Yahweh a feast of pork baked in goat's milk, with steamed shellfish on the side, and it was all downhill from there.

"What does that Guy manage to eat, anyway?" grumbled Thor, as they crawled their boil-infested way across the limitless desert into which Yahweh's wrath had cast them.

But it is well said of the northern gods that they are a stubborn lot, and so they persisted in their search. All to no avail.

The Hindu Trinity couldn't seem to agree on anything, and Shiva wouldn't go it alone even though he was all for the idea. The Buddha just babbled nonsense, and Confucius wouldn't stop droning on and on about filial piety.

The time came when the gods and heroes gave up the hopeless quest and made their way back to Valhalla. Imagine their outrage when they finally came home—much the worse for wear—and saw that their great feasting hall had been turned into a Victorian mansion.

Odin stormed through the door, calling for his wife Frigga in a tone which boded ill for domestic tranquility. But he didn't get far before he was confronted by a huge wolf, fangs bared.

"You're ruining the carpet!" snarled the wolf, who was—as all the gods and heroes immediately recognized—none other than the great monster Garm.

"You're supposed to be guarding the Hel-Gate!" roared Thor.

A look of satisfaction came upon Garm's horrid visage. "Got a better gig," he said smugly. Then, eyeing Odin's wolves, who were yipping at him fiercely, Garm announced that he was in the mood for raw poodle. Freke and Gere immediately shrank back, wagging their pom-poms furiously.

"Out of my way!" bellowed Odin, who made to push past the great wolf. But Garm seized his leg in his

maw and brought the Allfather down.

"I said," growled the wolf around Odin's leg, "you're ruining the carpet."

"What carpet?" demanded Odin, vainly trying to pry the great jaws loose. "There's no carpet in Valhalla!"

"There is now!" came a shrill voice. Looking up, Odin beheld his wife Frigga. Her appearance made him goggle. She was wearing an elaborate gown, with high heeled shoes and—and—her hair—

"What'd you do to your *hair*? What happened to the braids? Why are you wearing shoes?" With a particular air of complaint: "*And where are your breastplates?*"

Frigga ignored the questions, gazing down at her husband with a look of immense disfavor.

"I suppose we'll have to go through this unpleasantness," she snapped. Then, making an imperious gesture:

"Oh, let him go, Garm!"

The wolf obeyed. But no sooner had Odin scrambled to his feet, swearing sulphurously and promising great mayhem upon the person of his spouse, than Frigga drew forth a tiny bell and tinkled it vigorously. A moment later, a giant stepped into the foyer. (And that was another thing the gods and heroes were outraged about—who ever heard of a foyer in Valhalla?)

"Thrym!" cried Frey.

"King of the Frost Giants!" exclaimed Heimdall.

"Why are you wearing that ridiculous outfit?" demanded Thor.

Thrym gazed down at his formal suit. "I'm the butler," he replied complacently. "And if you don't mind, I prefer to be called James."

Frigga clapped her hands briskly. "James, see these —*gentlemen*—into the parlor, if you will. But I insist that they remove those muddy boots before they ruin the entire carpet."

The scene which ensued was most undignified, for the gods and heroes of Valhalla objected strenuously to the removal of their boots. After Thor began hammering Thrym (James, rather) with his rubber mallet, the butler felt it necessary to call for assistance. Moments later the foyer was flooded with fire and frost giants who proceeded to forcibly remove the boots of the gods and heroes of Valhalla. Not too gently, either, for the giants were much aggrieved at the damage inflicted upon their nice new footmen's uniforms.

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And so it was that the gods and heroes of Valhalla were ushered into the parlor which was located where the feasting hall used to be. "What's a 'parlor,' anyway?" groused Tyr.

"And will you look at that?" demanded Heimdall. "It's a—what *is* it, anyway?"

"It's called a piano, sir," sniffed James.

Even at that moment the fire giant sitting at the piano brought a dazzling mazurka to a close. The audience, which consisted of goddesses, dwarves and giants dressed in evening wear, burst into applause. An enormous serpent which encircled the entire room hissed its mighty approval.

"Watch it, Odin!" murmured Heimdall. "That's the Midgard Serpent."

But Odin's concern over the presence of the great reptile was immediately overridden by Thor's bellow.

"Surtur, get your filthy paws off my wife!"

The thunder god's fury was understandable, for the pianist—who was actually Surtur, the King of the Fire Giants, although the gods and heroes hadn't immediately recognized him because he was wearing a tuxedo and the flames which formed his hair were shaped into long flowing locks—was stroking the back of the goddess who was leaning over him. She, for her part, was cooing admiration of his musical artistry.

"And why aren't you wearing your breastplates?" roared Thor at his wife.

Sif looked up and glared at him.

"I'm not your wife, you loudmouth! I got a divorce three weeks ago!"

Thor's eyes bugged out. He gabbled incoherently. Sif giggled.

"Look at him!" she exclaimed, She gazed around the room. "Can any *civilized person* blame me?" The murmurs of the assembled giants, dwarves and goddesses indicated their profound agreement with her sentiments. Sif ran her fingers through Surtur's flaming hair, which is the kind of thing goddesses can get away with, but is not recommended for mortals.

"Surtur is so much more genteel," she said. Then, laughing gaily: "And much more passionate! You won't ever find *him* complaining that I'm not wearing those stinking breastplates."

"It's my artist's soul," murmured Surtur.

Thor lost his temper completely at that point and set upon the King of the Fire Giants. But the affair went badly, for Surtur insisted upon a proper duel and before you knew it the two opponents were facing each other across the room, Thor hurling his rubber mallet and Surtur firing one unerring shot after another right between Thor's eyes with his dueling pistol.

No harm came to the thunder god, of course. It's one of the advantages of being immortal. But it certainly made him look foolish.

Then all the gods and heroes felt even more foolish when it occurred to one of them (Rolf Gunuldsen, called the Bigfoot, who was accounted the fiercest berserk of his district because he slew—well, never mind) that since the bullets weren't actually hurting Thor, even though he looked like a jackass, that it was a mystery how a knife in the back had done in Loki who was, after all, also immortal.

No sooner did Rolf utter these words than the gods and heroes of Valhalla heard a snicker behind them. Turning, they beheld Loki himself, entering the parlor with a beautiful giantess on his arm.

"I was wondering when you saps would finally figure it out," sneered the god of discord and strife. He

advanced to the center of the room, scratching his back.

"Still itches," he grumbled.

"Try wearing breastplates!" laughed Frigga. "You want to talk about *itching*?"

Loki smiled sympathetically. Then, with a laugh:

"And will you look at these idiots? They find me with a knife in my back, which isn't the kind of thing which would do any real harm at all to an immortal deity, and the cretins not only jump to the conclusion that I've been murdered but that the culprit was none other than God Almighty Himself."

Loki bestowed a great sneer upon the assembled gods and heroes of Valhalla. "Let me explain something to you, dimwits. When God Almighty decides to do somebody in, He does not—repeat, *not*—stab them in the back with a knife."

I CERTAINLY DON'T, came a voice which filled the universe.

The gods and heroes of Valhalla jumped with surprise.

"Where'd He come from?" demanded Frey.

I'M OMNIPRESENT. ALSO OMNIPOTENT, WHICH IS WHY I DON'T STAB PEOPLE IN THE BACK WITH A KNIFE. MUCH PREFER HEAVENLY CATASTROPHES—COMETS, ASTEROIDS, THE OCCASIONAL SUPERNOVA. BIT INDISCRIMINATE, I ADMIT, BUT I HAVE A REPUTATION TO MAINTAIN.

"Then who stabbed Loki in the back?"

"I did," said Thrym (James, rather). "It was Loki's idea, of course, but we all thought it would be appropriate for me to do the actual deed. After all," he concluded proudly, "I'm the butler."

"But why?" cried Odin.

"To get you out of here!" snapped Loki. "So we'd have some time to set everything right."

"Not to mention some peace and quiet!" exclaimed Frigga. "It's been so heavenly since you left—no more sleepless nights caused by your carousing and brawling."

A furious chorus from the assembled giants, dwarves and goddesses indicated their complete agreement with these sentiments. The goddesses and Valkyries seemed especially aggrieved on the subject of breastplates.

Needless to say, the assembled gods and heroes of Valhalla were not slow to indicate (even more loudly) their own sentiments, which were quite the opposite. Indeed, the whole thing turned into quite a scandal, but when all was said and done the gods and heroes found themselves pitched out of Valhalla with firm instructions not to come back.

The goddesses were adamant on this last point, each of them whipping out a bill of divorce on the spot. They weren't printed on mere paper, either. Each bill of divorce was engraved on a brass placard made from melted-down breastplates.

"You can't divorce me, Frigga!" cried Odin. "No power in the Universe can divorce the Allfather of the Gods from his wife!"

OH, YES I CAN, came the voice of the Almighty.

"That's not what the Pope says," complained one of the heroes. "I know, because when I was raiding in France I tried to force this priest to marry over this hot wench to me but he said he couldn't because she was already married and the Church had forbidden divorce."

A slight tinge of pink embarrassment colored the entire universe, for just a split second.

WELL, THE POPE TENDS TO BE A LITTLE RIGID. AND IT'S A FACT THAT I DON'T GENERALLY APPROVE OF DIVORCE. BUT I MAKE EXCEPTIONS IN EXTREME CIRCUMSTANCES, OF WHICH YOU CERTAINLY FIT THE BILL. I WOULDN'T FORCE A PIG TO STAY MARRIED TO OAFS LIKE YOU. MAKING YOUR WOMEN WEAR BREASTPLATES WAS THE FINAL STRAW! HOW WOULD *YOU* LIKE TO HAUL AROUND TEN POUNDS OF BRASS ON YOUR TITS? A FLAGRANT CASE OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, WHAT IT IS. THESE ARE MODERN TIMES, YOU KNOW.

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And that was that. The gods and heroes of Valhalla eventually got it into their thick skulls that things had changed, and they slouched off into the wilderness.

But they made a comeback, of sorts. Once they calmed down enough to think about it, they realized that the worst thing was the damage to their reputations. It wasn't as if any of them were actually going to miss their wives, after all. Making love and breastplates were a lousy match.

"The old story of Ragnarok was so much more dignified," wailed one of the heroes. "Now we're gonna look like chumps!"

It was Bragi, the god of poetry and song, who came up with the idea that saved the day.

"There's no point in fighting progress," he explained.

* * *

So Bragi went down to Middle-earth and brought back an opera composer named Richard Wagner. After Wagner heard what the gods had to say, he assured them that he could take care of the whole problem.

"For money, of course."

After the gods agreed to his terms, the detailed negotiations began. Wagner was particularly adamant about protecting his artistic reputation.

"It's great for people to think I have divine inspiration, but it can't look crass. So we'll have to figure out a way to launder the money."

And that's why Odin the Allfather caused King Ludwig of Bavaria to go mad and shower Wagner with

patronage and largesse.

Wagner also insisted that the opera had to be in German, which would involve some changes in names.

"Wotan," mused Odin. "Wotan," he said again. "It kind of rolls off the tongue, doesn't it? Okay, I can live with that."

For their part, the gods were deeply concerned that the opera put forth the proper moral lessons.

"The giants and the dwarves have got to be the bad guys," insisted Tyr.

"Piece of cake," said Wagner.

"The women have to come to a bad end," demanded Thor.

"How's being burned alive grab you?" snickered Wagner.

"I get to sing a lot," specified Odin sternly. "After all, I'm the Father of the Gods."

"No sweat," assured Wagner. "I'll call it 'Wotan's Narration.' It'll go on and on and on and on and on and on and on and on and on. Then we'll repeat it. Over and over and over and over and over again."

Finally, after the gods were satisfied that Wagner was their kind of composer, Odin turned to the assembled heroes.

"How about you mortals?" he asked. "Got any requests?"

The heroes of Valhalla talked it over and, after they came to agreement, they appointed one of their number to act as their artistic spokesman. This fellow was muscled like Hercules and had no discernable forehead.

"I am Siegfried Siegmundsen, called the Brainless," he said, "and I am accounted the fiercest berserk in my district. It was I who slew Fafnir the Hutmaker after that lousy snake in the grass demanded payment for—"

"Shut up!" roared Odin. "Get to—"

"No, no, let him talk!" cried Wagner. "I'm getting an idea."

So Siegfried Siegmundsen was allowed to finish his very, very, very long but monosyllabic recitation of his accomplishments. Wagner took copious notes. At the end, Siegfried explained the central concern of the heroes regarding the opera.

"We just want to be sure the hero won't be some kind of pansy," he growled. "No eggheads, fretting over all kind of silly stuff. A stout, simple hero type. That's what we want."

"Absolutely!" exclaimed Wagner. "In fact, I'm going to model the hero after you personally. Uh, how well did your mother know her brother?"

The hero's face turned beet red.

"I knew it!" shrieked Wagner, clapping his hands with glee. "Oh, it's going to be the greatest opera ever written! Very profound. Very uplifting. Worthy of my genius!"

* * *

And that's how the gods and heroes of Valhalla managed to salvage their reputation. They all agreed that Wagner did a magnificent job. In fact, attending the season at Bayreuth has become their favorite pastime. You can always spot them in the audience, if you're in the know. Look for a crowd of beefy middle-aged men obviously uncomfortable in their suits, tugging at their ties. Their breath will smell like a brewery, and they'll be complaining loudly about the avant-garde set design.

That's them. The Aesir.