

THE ARRIVAL OF LOKI AND THE DAWN OF THE GOLDEN AGE

Give a dog a bad name they say, and never was there any dog with a name worse than mine. I am a bad person, I expect. You will begin with your suspicions about me and I don't expect to convince you otherwise. How could it be otherwise? In a long life, I have committed many crimes, some of them very serious indeed. But then, look at my peers. Which of them hasn't? And yet here I am, chained to an eternity of torment while they walk free and continue with their crimes.

The truth is a slippery customer. We all have our secrets; it is our right to have secrets, don't you agree? I have no intention of telling you everything but even so, I think you'll find me worth listening to. I can recall your first breath, your first heartbeat. I can affirm, if you're interested, that without me there would be neither. I have saved the gods, the giants, and even humanity more than once. I may be tempted to do it again, if I feel like it – which I might not. Where there is light, there is also darkness; where there is life, there is also death. That's how it is. I am the movement between the two. I am the act of one thing becoming another. It's the same for you, surely.

We all change. I change more than most. Don't thank me. I can't help it.

Yes, we change, you and I – but not the gods. Like books, they are unable to change their stories. They have their natures and their attributes. Their word is fixed. Change is not an ability that sits well, either among their worshippers or among the immortals themselves. The very idea! All-knowing, indivisible, eternal – you know the way it goes. Well, excuse me for pointing out the obvious, but that which never changes, never learns. True knowledge is not about the knowing itself, but about the ability to learn. Don't you think? If it's true that wisdom is the ability to understand this ever-changing world, then the gods and goddesses are stupid.

Sorry! You wanted wisdom, didn't you? Truth. Certainty. Don't look to divinity for that. They are, as one of them once said, what they are. Nothing can shift them from their natures.

And yet there are exceptions. Exceptions, as you will see, of which I am the first, the main, and the most important. Unlike the others, I adapt. I am not what I was yesterday, and tomorrow I will not be what I am today.

'Oh, ho,' I hear you say. 'This scoundrel, like all the scoundrels who followed him, is going to tell us he has reformed!'

Wrong. I have not reformed. I own it. I own it all – all my deeds and misdeeds, all my mistakes and successes, the lot. Who would I want to convince? Reformation can never lead to rehabilitation in my case. Since my peers cannot change, they can't conceive that I might either. My sentence is long, painful and unjust. There will be no remission for good behaviour, no mercy shown. It is impossible for them to entertain the idea that I might become something other than what I once was. It is beyond them. Those who never change themselves can never understand that lessons can be learned. Having passed my sentence, they are no more capable of changing my future than I am of changing my past.

All that said, I admit I am not entirely to be trusted. I am a bad dog. But even a bad dog has a story, and I know you want to hear mine.

You will know the stories, some of them anyway. How I made the gods age (true). How I killed the sun – a lie! Go out of your house at midday, look to the sky. What do you see? How I stole golden-haired Sif's beauty. That, as you will see, was a mistake that stemmed from

an injustice by her husband, Thor, god of the storm and murder, who then came to me on bended knee, begging me, begging me to make it well again. Which I did, and much more besides.

My aim is not to deny anything. I have my flaws. Unlike the other gods I am aware of them. I embrace them, in fact. They make me what I am. But I have also done a great deal of good in my time – more good than bad, I like to think. I have been your friend from the beginning. I gave you fire, when the gods would keep you in the darkness. They changed my name so that you could not know, but it was me, it was me all the time. I showed you the wheel, the smithy, the plough to name but a few. Believe me when I say that my compatriots have not loved me for any of it.

Listen, that's all I ask. Listen. Then you can judge for yourselves.

Let us start at the beginning – with me. Unlike Odin, or Thor or Frigg or any of the Aesir, or Freya and Frey and Njordr and the Vanir . . . unlike the giants or the elves or men, I am one of those who sprang into being because the world demanded me; it had no choice. They were all bred like cows. I *am*.

MY BIRTH

Picture this: the woods, in the depths of winter. Ice grips the twigs and branches of an ancient forest. In the boughs, the squirrels jump and beneath them the deer lightly browse. Aurochs graze and churn the mud. Under their hooves birds hop and hogs grunt and scratch at the iron-hard earth. In the glades and heaths which the woods encompass, eagles soar, horses whinny, curlews call.

On this night, this wonderful and magical night, the moon, perhaps, is high and full. I like to think so.

So many trees! – but of them all, one stands proud. Highest, widest, most ancient, and yet still in its prime. An ash, of course – it's always an ash. Black buds grace the arching twigs that spring so full of dormant life from its ancient boughs, many of them several dozen metres distant from the great trunk. It is home to millions of other lives – insects, mosses, lichens, birds, mice. A hundred generations have passed since it was a seed. No, two hundred. A thousand! At least a thousand. Maybe more, because in those days of myth, before man, time passed with more grace and lives were longer.

On the distant horizon, a mountain range towers above the sea of frosty trees, and among its remote peaks, a storm is brewing. But

what a storm! An earth-splitting storm, an air-smashing, ground-tossing, rock-crushing devastation of a storm. The very daddy of them all. Rock giants toss their spears high in the air. Thunder roars among the peaks and echoes along the canyons and valleys that run down from the heights.

A flash! A crash! – another! The storm is moving down from its birthplace among the snowy peaks into the valleys, following the path of a great river down to the forest. Pow! The river is lit with fire. It flashes sudden gold in the half-light. Bang! Crash! Flash! Again! And again, and again! As the storm moves down to the warmer, wetter air below, it grows in strength. The dissonance grows, the lightning spreads its forked arms and summons charged ions from the earth. Crash! It tears at the sinews of the ground. The beasts turn and run or shiver in their burrows. No human eye or ear is there to witness its terrible splendour; this is before your time. Such a storm . . . *such* a storm! The earth itself bears witness and stories will be told among lesser beings from the memories of the stones themselves.

Behold, now the storm is over the forest. See the dark clouds swell above the trees, rolling and boiling with their charge, swollen with it, overflowing with it. You understand that in those dark and fatal coils, such a charge is brewing that the storm giants themselves recoil from it. The clouds snap and hiss and hum with it. The rain pours down in a sudden torrent that devastates the earth, floods the plains, overruns the rivers. It strikes boulders out of its path and overwhelms the cliffs. It uproots trees like weeds – but still the clouds withhold their charge. It grows . . . it grows . . . until at last not air nor water nor flesh nor bone nor stone nor clod can withhold it. It bursts forth! A bolt tears down from the dark heavens, crashing towards the fearful earth itself. The giants in their rocky strongholds cower and bend, heads between their legs, hands over their ears. The wood trolls yelp and hide. The gods themselves give thanks that they are not there to suffer such power, so much greater than their own, as heaven and earth conspire together to forge a single destiny, one that creates and destroys in a single blow.

CRASH! The charge strikes. The giant ash that has stood for so many thousands of decades splits down its centre as a fiery spear

penetrates deep inside. The dense core of the huge tree is hollowed out in a fraction of a second by the force of that tongue of fire. Deep in the ground, rocks melt, and within the great trunk, the sap boils and turns to steam. The tree itself explodes into flames along its entire length and height and breadth. Wet with sap though it is, sodden with the deluge though it may be, nothing can resist that heat, which bursts through the buds themselves like flowers blazing into the darkness of the night. Half the tree sheers off and falls roaring to the ground. Around it the forest is aflame, an inferno of fire. Below it, the earth itself is alight. Above, the storm, exhausted by its mighty expulsion, coils and hisses and at last retreats. A softer wind blows; the clouds disperse. Starlight and a bright moon shine softly on a scene of fiery destruction as far as the eye can see.

Were any witness foolish enough to approach the stricken tree, they would see among the yellows and reds of the forest fire a point of superheated, ionised air, a blue-white womb of preternatural heat, burning deep in the remains of the trunk still standing, despite all, two or three hundred metres above the ground. And . . . what is this? See there – in the very heart of the fire, where the heat is at its greatest! A child. A boy, a baby boy. Unharmd by the awful heat, he even seems to revel in it. See! – he stretches out his tiny hands to play with the flames. And see how the flames twist and turn towards him as if they love him – which indeed they do.

A miracle? Perhaps. An act of creation by fire upon the earth, by lightning thrown down from heaven upon the world. A blessed child, he sits and coos, unfrightened, untroubled by the fire and the heat. In the womb of the tree, he grows and thrives as all around him, the fire rages among the stricken trees . . .

Fast forward a month. The forest is gone. Blackened lands stretch on either side, such was the heat and ferocity of that single stroke. Only the stump of the ancient ash still stands. In its heart, fire burns with the same white heat we saw before. And in the hollow of that trunk, burning but unburnt, teasing with the playful flames that flick around him, the child still lives. Unharmd. Loved by the sky and the earth and all growing things. Sacred. Holy. Born of the purity of the elements themselves.

A baby boy. And his name?

Loki. Yes – it is me. Sired by the heavens upon the earth, a god, the only one untouched by Jotun blood – unlike Odin and the rest, who call their larger cousins dreadful names and pretend to look down on them, even though they are all three quarters giant themselves.

Yes. I, Loki. In this fiery womb I came into being. I have used my words to help you bear witness to my birth.

All that winter long I grew in the womb of the hollow ash, which smouldered on with its miraculous heat. A month, nine months, a year passed. Another year, then another. Not nine months but nine full years was my gestation time. The burning heart of the tree was the womb that kept me warm and fed me. I played with the embers and the sparks. And at the end of that time, the trunk split and I rolled out onto the floor of the springtime woodland, among the bluebells and foxgloves and dog's mercury that had grown up when the forest fell.

And so my childhood began.

Gradually the forest regrew. In addition to the badgers and the bears, the foxes and deer, the aurochs and bison and the birds, I had family. Believe me when I say that my family got on better together than those of the other gods, who spent their time fighting, back-biting, quarrelling, bickering and ultimately, in murder. Famacide is an ugly thing. Where the ash tree fell, the roots still lived and in the spring of the very first year after the fire that sired me, grey shoots opened up into the freshest of green leaves. Within a few years, a sacred grove of young ash trees surrounded the mother tree and from their leaves, in my first natal year, my mother stepped, fully formed, in time to pick me up in her arms, cool as the green leaves themselves, to love and nurse and kiss my forehead. I was unhappy at first at being removed from the heat and wailed for a while until my skin grew used to the cool air of our beautiful northern woodlands. It was the beginning of many happy days.

A little later, my brother Helblindi hatched from beneath the earth, from a womb created where, at the moment of the strike, the first great branch fell blazing to the ground. We heard his wailing,

mother and I, and it was I who first parted the leaf mould and found him lying there. Later, in my fourth spring, when the bees first made their nest inside the hollow tree, my youngest brother Byeleist was born. We found him cooing melodiously among the honeycomb, where the bees nursed him and made him strong.

So there you have it. The four of us – I, my mother Laufrey, and my brothers – come into the world in an act of combustion and renewal – in a way, as you plainly see, that the other gods were not. Perhaps they are not as necessary as I. Certainly, they all came about the new-fangled way – dicks and cunts for them, my dears. Whereas I, as you can see, came forth from lightning and leaves.

That is my genesis.