

NEIL GAIMAN



NORSE  
MYTHOLOGY

Many gods and goddesses are named in Norse mythology. You will meet quite a few of them in these pages. Most of the stories we have, however, concern two gods, Odin and his son Thor, and Odin's blood brother, a giant's son called Loki, who lives with the Aesir in Asgard.

## Odin

The highest and the oldest of all the gods is Odin.

Odin knows many secrets. He gave an eye for wisdom. More than that, for knowledge of runes, and for power, he sacrificed himself to himself.

He hung from the world-tree, Yggdrasil, hung there for nine nights. His side was pierced by the point of a spear, which wounded him gravely. The winds clutched at him, buffeted his body as it hung. Nothing did he eat for nine days or nine nights, nothing did he drink. He was alone there, in pain, the light of his life slowly going out.

He was cold, in agony, and on the point of death when his sacrifice bore dark fruit: in the ecstasy of his agony he looked down, and the runes were revealed to him. He knew them, and understood them and their power. The rope broke then, and he fell, screaming, from the tree.

Now he understood magic. Now the world was his to control.

Odin has many names. He is the all-father, the lord of the slain, the gallows god. He is the god of cargoes and of prisoners. He is called Grimnir and Third. He has different names in every country (for he is worshipped in different forms and in many tongues, but it is always Odin they worship).

He travels from place to place in disguise, to see the world as people see it. When he walks among us, he does so as a tall man, wearing a cloak and hat.

He has two ravens, whom he calls Huginn and Muninn, which mean "thought" and "memory." These birds fly back and forth across the world,



seeking news and bringing Odin all the knowledge of things. They perch on his shoulders and whisper into his ears.

When he sits on his high throne at Hlidskjalf, he observes all things, wherever they may be. Nothing can be hidden from him.

He brought war into the world: battles are begun by throwing a spear at the hostile army, dedicating the battle and its deaths to Odin. If you survive in battle, it is with Odin's grace, and if you fall it is because he has betrayed you.

If you fall bravely in war the Valkyries, beautiful battle-maidens who collect the souls of the noble dead, will take you and bring you to the hall known as Valhalla. He will be waiting for you in Valhalla, and there you will drink and fight and feast and battle, with Odin as your leader.

## **Thor**

Thor, Odin's son, is the thunderer. He is straightforward where his father Odin is cunning, good-natured where his father is devious.

Huge he is, and red-bearded, and strong, by far the strongest of all the gods. His might is increased by his belt of strength, Megingjord: when he wears it, his strength is doubled.

Thor's weapon is Mjollnir, a remarkable hammer, forged for him by dwarfs. Its story you will learn. Trolls and frost giants and mountain giants all tremble when they see Mjollnir, for it has killed so many of their brothers and friends. Thor wears iron gloves, which help him to grip the hammer's shaft.

Thor's mother was Jord, the earth goddess. Thor's sons are Modi, the angry, and Magni, the strong. Thor's daughter is Thrud, the powerful.

His wife is Sif, of the golden hair. She had a son, Ullr, before she married Thor, and Thor is Ullr's stepfather. Ullr is a god who hunts with bow and with arrows, and he is the god with skis.

Thor is the defender of Asgard and of Midgard.

There are many stories about Thor and his adventures. You will encounter some of them here.

## **Loki**

Loki is very handsome. He is plausible, convincing, likable, and far and away the most wily, subtle, and shrewd of all the inhabitants of Asgard. It is a pity, then, that there is so much darkness inside him: so much anger, so much envy, so much lust.

Loki is the son of Laufey, who was also known as Nal, or needle, because she was slim and beautiful and sharp. His father was said to be Farbauti, a giant; his name means “he who strikes dangerous blows,” and Farbauti was as dangerous as his name.

Loki walks in the sky with shoes that fly, and he can transform his shape so he looks like other people, or change into animal form, but his real weapon is his mind. He is more cunning, subtler, trickier than any god or giant. Not even Odin is as cunning as Loki.

Loki is Odin’s blood brother. The other gods do not know when Loki came to Asgard, or how. He is Thor’s friend and Thor’s betrayer. He is tolerated by the gods, perhaps because his stratagems and plans save them as often as they get them into trouble.

Loki makes the world more interesting but less safe. He is the father of monsters, the author of woes, the sly god.

Loki drinks too much, and he cannot guard his words or his thoughts or his deeds when he drinks. Loki and his children will be there for Ragnarok, the end of everything, and it will not be on the side of the gods of Asgard that they will fight.

## I

Thor's wife was the beautiful Sif. She was of the Aesir. Thor loved her for herself, and for her blue eyes and her pale skin, her red lips and her smile, and he loved her long, long hair, the color of a field of barley at the end of summer.

Thor woke, and stared at sleeping Sif. He scratched his beard. Then he tapped his wife with a huge hand. "What happened to you?" he asked.

She opened her eyes, the color of the summer sky. "What are you talking about?" she asked, and then she moved her head and looked puzzled. Her fingers reached up to her bare pink scalp and touched it, exploring it tentatively. She looked at Thor, horrified.

"My hair," was all she said.

Thor nodded. "It's gone," he said. "He has left you bald."

"He?" asked Sif.

Thor said nothing. He strapped on his belt of power, Megingjord, which doubled his enormous strength. "Loki," he said. "Loki has done this."

"Why do you say that?" said Sif, touching her bald head frantically, as if the fluttering touch of her fingers would make her hair return.

"Because," said Thor, "when something goes wrong, the first thing I always think is, it is Loki's fault. It saves a lot of time."

Thor found Loki's door locked, so he pushed through it, leaving it in pieces. He picked Loki up and said only, "Why?"

"Why what?" Loki's face was the picture of perfect innocence.

"Sif's hair. My wife's golden hair. It was so beautiful. Why did you cut it off?"

A hundred expressions chased each other across Loki's face: cunning and shiftiness, truculence and confusion. Thor shook Loki hard. Loki looked

down and did his best to appear ashamed. “It was funny. I was drunk.”

Thor’s brow lowered. “Sif’s hair was her glory. People will think that her head was shaved for punishment. That she did something she should not have done, did it with someone she should not have.”

“Well, yes. There is that,” said Loki. “They *will* probably think that. And unfortunately, given that I took her hair from the roots, she will go through the rest of her life completely bald . . .”

“No, she won’t.” Thor looked up at Loki, whom he was now holding far above his head, with a face like thunder.

“I am afraid she will. But there are always hats and scarves . . .”

“She won’t go through life bald,” said Thor. “Because, Loki Laufey’s son, if you do not put her hair back right now, I am going to break every single bone in your body. Each and every one of them. And if her hair does not grow properly, I will come back and break every bone in your body again. And again. If I do it every day, I’ll soon get really good at it,” he carried on, sounding slightly more cheerful.

“No!” said Loki. “I can’t put her hair back. It doesn’t work like that.”

“Today,” mused Thor, “it will probably take me about an hour to break every bone in your body. But I bet that with practice I could get it down to about fifteen minutes. It will be interesting to find out.” He started to break his first bone.

“*Dwarfs!*” shrieked Loki.

“Pardon?”

“Dwarfs! They can make anything. They could make golden hair for Sif, hair that would bond with her scalp and grow normally, perfect golden hair. They could do it. I swear they could.”

“Then,” said Thor, “you had better go and talk to them.” And he dropped Loki from high above his head onto the floor.

Loki clambered to his feet and hurried away before Thor could break any more bones.

He put on his shoes that let him travel through the sky, and he went to Svartalfheim, where the dwarfs have their workshops. The most ingenious craftsmen of them all, he decided, were the three dwarfs known as the sons of Ivaldi.

Loki went to their underground forge. “Hello, sons of Ivaldi. I have asked around, and people here tell me that Brokk and Eitri, his brother, are the

greatest dwarf craftsmen there are or have ever been,” said Loki.

“No,” said one of the sons of Ivaldi. “It’s us. We are the greatest craftsmen there are.”

“I am assured that Brokk and Eitri can make treasures as good as those you can.”

“Lies!” said the tallest of the sons of Ivaldi. “I wouldn’t trust those fumble-fingered incompetents to shoe a horse.”

The smallest and the wisest of the sons of Ivaldi simply shrugged. “Whatever they make, we could do better.”

“I hear that they’ve challenged you,” said Loki. “Three treasures. The gods of the Aesir will judge who made the best treasure. Oh, and by the way, one of the treasures you make needs to be hair. Ever-growing perfect golden hair.”

“We can do that,” said one of the sons of Ivaldi. Even Loki could barely tell them apart.

Loki went across the mountain to see the dwarf called Brokk, at the workshop he shared with his brother, Eitri. “Ivaldi’s sons are making three treasures as gifts for the gods of Asgard,” said Loki. “The gods are going to judge the treasures. Ivaldi’s sons want me to tell you that they are certain you and your brother Eitri can’t make anything as good as they can. They called you ‘fumble-fingered incompetents.’”

Brokk was no fool. “This smells extremely fishy to me, Loki,” he said. “Are you sure this isn’t your doing? Stirring up trouble between Eitri and me and Ivaldi’s boys seems like the sort of thing you’d do.”

Loki looked as guileless as he could, which was amazingly guileless. “Nothing to do with me,” he said innocently. “I just thought you ought to know.”

“And you have no personal stake in this?” asked Brokk.

“None whatsoever.”

Brokk nodded and looked up at Loki. Brokk’s brother, Eitri, was the great craftsman, but Brokk was the smarter of the two, and the more determined. “Well, then we’ll be happy to take on the sons of Ivaldi in a test of skill, to be judged by the gods. Because I have no doubt that Eitri can forge better and craftier things than Ivaldi’s lot. But let’s make this personal, Loki. Eh?”

“What do you have in mind?” asked Loki.

“Your head,” said Brokk. “If we win this contest, we get your head, Loki.”

There's lots of things going on in that head of yours, and I have no doubt that Eitri could make a wonderful device out of it. A thinking machine, perhaps. Or an inkwell."

Loki kept smiling, but he scowled on the inside. The day had started out so well. Still, he simply had to ensure that Eitri and Brokk lost the contest; the gods would still get six wonderful things from the dwarfs, and Sif would get her golden hair. He could do that. He was Loki.

"Of course," he said. "My head. No problem."

Across the mountain, the sons of Ivaldi were making their treasures. Loki was not worried about them. But he needed to make sure that Brokk and Eitri did not, could not possibly, win.

Brokk and Eitri entered the forge. It was dark in there, lit by the orange glow of burning charcoal. Eitri took a pigskin from a shelf and placed it into the forge. "I've been keeping this pigskin for something like this," he said.

Brokk just nodded.

"Right," said Eitri. "You work the bellows, Brokk. Just keep pumping them. I need this hot, and I need it consistently hot, otherwise it won't work. Pump. Pump."

Brokk began to pump the bellows, sending a stream of oxygen-rich air into the heart of the forge, heating everything up. He had done it many times before. Eitri watched until he was satisfied that it would all be to his liking.

Eitri left to work on his creation outside the forge. As he opened the door to go out, a large black insect flew in. It was not a horsefly and it was not a deerfly; it was bigger than either. It flew in and circled the room in a malicious way.

Brokk could hear the sound of Eitri's hammers outside the forge, and the sounds of filing and twisting, of shaping and banging.

The large black fly—it was the biggest, blackest fly you have ever seen—landed on the back of Brokk's hand.

Both of Brokk's hands were on the bellows. He did not stop pumping to swat at the fly. The fly bit Brokk, hard, on the back of the hand.

Brokk kept pumping.

The door opened, and Eitri came in and carefully pulled the work from the forge. It appeared to be a huge boar, with bristles of gleaming gold.

"Good work," said Eitri. "A fraction of a degree warmer or cooler and the whole thing would have been a waste of our time."



“Good work you too,” said Brokk.

The black fly, up on the corner of the ceiling, seethed with resentment and irritation.

Eitri took a block of gold and placed it on the forge. “Right,” he said. “This next one will impress them. When I call, start pumping the bellows, and whatever happens do not slow down, or speed up, or stop. There’s fiddly work involved.”

“Got it,” said Brokk.

Eitri left the room and began to work. Brokk waited until he heard Eitri’s call, and he started to pump the bellows.

The black fly circled the room thoughtfully, then landed on Brokk’s neck. The insect stepped aside daintily to avoid a rivulet of sweat, for the air was hot and close in the forge. It bit Brokk’s neck as hard as it could. Scarlet blood joined the sweat on Brokk’s neck, but the dwarf did not stop pumping.

Eitri returned. He removed a white-hot arm-ring from the forge. He dropped it into the stone cooling pool in the forge to quench it. There was a cloud of steam as the arm-ring fell into the water. The ring cooled, moving rapidly to orange, to red hot, and then, as it cooled, to gold.

“It’s called Draupnir,” said Eitri.

“The dripper? That’s a funny name for a ring,” said Brokk.

“Not for this one,” said Eitri, and he explained to Brokk what was so very special about the arm-ring.

“Now,” said Eitri, “there’s something I’ve had in mind to make for a very long time now. My masterwork. But it’s even trickier than the other two. So what you have to do is—”

“Pump, and don’t stop pumping?” said Brokk.

“That’s right,” said Eitri. “Even more than before. Do not change your pace, or the whole thing will be ruined.” Eitri picked up an ingot of pig iron, bigger than any ingot that the black fly (who was Loki) had ever seen before, and he hefted it into the forge.

He left the room and called out to Brokk to begin pumping.

Brokk began to pump, and the sound of Eitri’s hammers began as Eitri pulled and shaped and welded and joined.

Loki, in fly shape, decided that there was no more time for subtlety. Eitri’s masterpiece would be something that would impress the gods, and if the gods were impressed enough, then he would lose his head. Loki landed

between Brokk's eyes and started to bite the dwarf's eyelids. The dwarf continued to pump, his eyes stinging. Loki bit deeper, harder, more desperately. Now blood ran from the dwarf's eyelids, into his eyes and down his face, blinding him.

Brokk squinted and shook his head, trying to dislodge the fly. He jerked his head from side to side. He contorted his mouth and tried blowing air up at the fly. It was no good. The fly continued to bite, and the dwarf could see nothing but blood. A sharp pain filled his head.

Brokk counted, and at the bottom of the downstroke he whipped one hand from the bellows and swiped at the fly, with such speed and such strength that Loki barely escaped with his life. Brokk grabbed the bellows once again and continued to pump.

"Enough!" called Eitri.

The black fly flew unsteadily about the room. Eitri opened the door, allowing the fly to escape.

Eitri looked at his brother with disappointment. Brokk's face was a mess of blood and sweat. "I don't know what you were playing at that time," said Eitri. "But you came close to ruining everything. The temperature was all over the place at the end. As it is, it's nowhere near as impressive as I'd hoped. We'll just have to see."

Loki, in Loki shape, strolled in through the open door. "So, all ready for the contest?" he asked.

"Brokk can go to Asgard and present my gifts to the gods and cut off your head," said Eitri. "I like it best here at my forge, making things."

Brokk stared at Loki through swollen eyelids. "I'm looking forward to cutting off your head," said Brokk. "It got personal."

## II

In Asgard, three gods sat on their thrones: one-eyed Odin the all-father, red-bearded Thor of the thunders, and handsome Frey of the summer's harvest. They would be the judges.

Loki stood before them, beside the three almost identical sons of Ivaldi.

Brokk, black-bearded and brooding, was there alone, standing to one side, the things he had brought hidden beneath sheets.

“So,” said Odin. “What are we judging?”

“Treasures,” said Loki. “The sons of Ivaldi have made gifts for you, great Odin, and for Thor, and for Frey, and so have Eitri and Brokk. It is up to you to decide which of the six things is the finest treasure. I myself will show you the gifts made by the sons of Ivaldi.”

He presented Odin with the spear called Gungnir. It was a beautiful spear, carved with intricate runes.

“It will penetrate anything, and when you throw it, it will always find its mark,” said Loki. Odin had but one eye, after all, and sometimes his aim could be less than perfect. “And, just as important, an oath taken on this spear is unbreakable.”

Odin hefted the spear. “It is very fine,” was all he said.

“And here,” said Loki proudly, “is a flowing head of golden hair. Made of real gold. It will attach itself to the head of the person who needs it and grow and behave in every way as if it were real hair. A hundred thousand strands of gold.”

“I will test it,” said Thor. “Sif, come here.”

Sif rose and came to the front, her head covered. She removed her headscarf. The gods gasped when they saw Sif’s naked head, bald and pink, and then she carefully placed the dwarfs’ golden wig on her head and shook her hair. They watched as the base of the wig joined itself to her scalp, and then Sif stood in front of them even more radiant and beautiful than before.

“Impressive,” said Thor. “Good job!”

Sif tossed her golden hair and walked out of the hall into the sunlight, to show her new hair to her friends.

The last of the sons of Ivaldi’s remarkable gifts was small, and folded like cloth. This cloth Loki placed in front of Frey.

“What is it? It looks like a silk scarf,” said Frey, unimpressed.

“It does,” said Loki. “But if you unfold it, you will discover it is a ship, called *Skidbladnir*. It will always have a fair wind, wherever it goes. And although it is huge, the biggest ship you can imagine, it will fold up, as you see, like a cloth, so you can put it into your pouch.”

Frey was impressed, and Loki was relieved. They were three excellent gifts.

Now it was Brokk’s turn. His eyelids were red and swollen, and there was a huge insect bite on the side of his neck. Loki thought Brokk looked entirely

too cocky, especially given the remarkable things Ivaldi's sons had made.

Brokk took the golden arm-ring and placed it in front of Odin on his high throne. "This arm-ring is called Draupnir," said Brokk. "Because every ninth night, eight gold arm-rings of equal beauty will drip from it. You can reward people with them, or store them, and your wealth will increase."

Odin examined the arm-ring, then pushed it onto his arm, up high on his biceps. It gleamed there. "It is very fine," he said.

Loki recalled that Odin had said the same thing about the spear.

Brokk walked over to Frey. He raised a cloth and revealed a huge boar with bristles made of gold.

"This is a boar my brother made for you, to pull your chariot," said Brokk. "It will race across the sky and over the sea, faster than the fastest horse. There will never be a night so dark that its golden bristles will not give light and let you see what you are doing. It will never tire, and will never fail you. It is called Gullenbursti, the golden-bristled one."

Frey looked impressed. Still, thought Loki, the magical ship that folded up like a cloth was every bit as impressive as an unstoppable boar that shone in the dark. Loki's head was quite safe. And the last gift Brokk had to present was the one that Loki knew he had already managed to sabotage.

From beneath the cloth Brokk produced a hammer, and placed it in front of Thor.

Thor looked at it and sniffed.

"The handle is rather short," he said.

Brokk nodded. "Yes," he said. "That's my fault. I was working the bellows. But before you dismiss it, let me tell you about what makes this hammer unique. It's called Mjollnir, the lightning-maker. First of all, it's unbreakable—doesn't matter how hard you hit something with it, the hammer will always be undamaged."

Thor looked interested. He had already broken a great many weapons over the years, normally by hitting things with them.

"If you throw the hammer, it will never miss what you throw it at."

Thor looked even more interested. He had lost a number of otherwise excellent weapons by throwing them at things that irritated him and missing, and he had watched too many weapons he had thrown disappear into the distance, never to be seen again.

"No matter how hard or how far you throw it, it will always return to your

hand.”

Thor was now actually smiling. And the thunder god did not often smile.

“You can change the size of the hammer. It will grow, and it will also shrink down so small that if you wish, you can hide it inside your shirt.”

Thor clapped his hands together in delight, and thunder echoed across Asgard.

“And yet, as you have observed,” concluded Brokk sadly, “the handle of the hammer is indeed too short. This is my fault. I failed to keep the bellows blowing while my brother, Eitri, was forging it.”

“The shortness of the handle is a minor, cosmetic problem,” said Thor. “This hammer will protect us from the frost giants. This is the finest gift I have ever seen.”

“It will protect Asgard. It will protect all of us,” said Odin with approval.

“If I were a giant, I would be very afraid of Thor if he had that hammer,” said Frey.

“Yes. It’s an excellent hammer. But Thor, what about the hair? Sif’s beautiful new golden hair!” asked Loki slightly desperately.

“What? Oh, yes. My wife has very nice hair,” said Thor. “Now. Show me how to make the hammer grow and shrink, Brokk.”

“Thor’s hammer is better even than my wonderful spear and my excellent arm-ring,” said Odin, nodding.

“The hammer is greater and more impressive than my ship and my boar,” admitted Frey. “It will keep the gods of Asgard safe.”

The gods clapped Brokk on the back and told him that he and Eitri had made the finest gift that they had ever been given.

“Good to know,” said Brokk. He turned to Loki. “So,” said Brokk. “I get to cut off your head, Laufey’s son, and take it back with me. Eitri will be so pleased. We can turn it into something useful.”

“I . . . will ransom my head,” said Loki. “I have treasures I can give you.”

“Eitri and I already have all the treasure we need,” said Brokk. “We *make* treasures. No, Loki. I want your head.”

Loki thought for a moment, then said, “Then you can have it. If you can catch me.” And Loki leapt high into the air and ran off, far above their heads. In moments he was gone.

Brokk looked at Thor. “Can you catch him?”

Thor shrugged. “I really shouldn’t,” he said. “But then, I would very



much like to try out the hammer.”

In moments Thor returned, holding Loki tightly. Loki was glaring with impotent fury.

The dwarf Brokk took out his knife. “Come here, Loki,” he said. “I’m going to cut off your head.”

“Of course,” said Loki. “You can, of course, cut off my head. But—and I appeal to mighty Odin here—if you cut off any of my neck, you are violating the terms of our agreement, which promised you my head, and my head only.”

Odin inclined his head. “Loki is right,” he said. “You have no right to cut his neck.”

Brokk was irritated. “But I can’t cut off his head without cutting his neck,” he said.

Loki looked pleased with himself. “You see,” he said, “if people thought through the exactness of their words, they would not dare to take on Loki, the wisest, the cleverest, the trickiest, the most intelligent, the best-looking . . .”

Brokk whispered a suggestion to Odin. “That would be fair,” agreed Odin.

Brokk produced a strip of leather and a knife. He wrapped the leather around Loki’s mouth. Brokk tried to pierce the leather with the tip of the knifeblade.

“It’s not working,” said Brokk. “My knife isn’t cutting you.”

“I might have wisely arranged for protection from knifeblades,” said Loki modestly. “Just in case the whole you-can’t-cut-my-neck ploy did not work. I am afraid no knifeblade can cut me!”

Brokk grunted and produced an awl, a pointed spike used in leatherwork, and he jabbed it through the leather, punching holes through Loki’s lips. Then he took a strong thread and he sewed Loki’s lips together with it.

Brokk walked away, leaving Loki with his mouth sewn up tight, unable to complain.

For Loki, the pain of being unable to talk hurt even more than the pain of having his lips stitched into the leather.

So now you know: that is how the gods got their greatest treasures. It was Loki’s fault. Even Thor’s hammer was Loki’s fault. That was the thing about Loki. You resented him even when you were at your most grateful, and you were grateful to him even when you hated him the most.