



Heimdall and Little Hnossa: How All Things Came to Be

Padraic Colum

Nordic

*Intermediate
10 min read*

Hnossa, the child of Freya and the lost Odur, was the youngest of all the Dwellers in Asgard. And because it had been prophesied that the child would bring her father and her mother together, little Hnossa was often taken without the City of the Gods to stand by Bifröst, the Rainbow Bridge, so that she might greet Odur if his steps turned toward Asgard.

In all the palaces of the City of the Gods little Hnossa was made welcome: in Fensalir, the Halls of Mists, where Frigga, the wife of Odin All-Father, sat spinning with golden threads; in Breidablik, where Baldur, the Well Beloved, lived with his fair wife, the young Nanna; in Bilskirnir, the Winding House, where Thor and Sif lived; and in Odin's own palace Valaskjalf, that was all roofed over with silver shields.

The greatest of all the palaces was Gladsheim, that was built by the golden-leaved wood, Glasir. Here the banquets of the Gods were held. Often little Hnossa looked within and saw Odin All-Father seated at the banquet table, with a mantle of blue over him and a shining helmet shaped like an eagle upon his head. Odin would sit there, not eating at all, but drinking the wine of the Gods, and taking the food off the table and giving it to Geri and Freki, the two wolves that crouched beside his seat.

She loved to go outside the great gate and stay beside Heimdall, the Warder of the Rainbow Bridge. There,

when there was no one crossing that she might watch, she would sit beside Heimdall and listen to the wonders that he spoke of.

Heimdall held in his hands the horn that was called the Gialarhorn. He would sound it to let the Dwellers in Asgard know that one was crossing the Rainbow Bridge. And Heimdall told little Hnossa how he had trained himself to hear the grasses grow, and how he could see all around him for a hundred miles. He could see in the night as well as the day. He never slept. He had nine mothers, he told Hnossa, and he fed on the strength of the earth and the cold sea.

As she sat beside him day after day, Heimdall would tell little Hnossa how all things began. He had lived from the beginning of time and he knew all things. "Before Asgard was built," he said, "and before Odin lived, earth and sea and sky were all mixed together: what was then was the Chasm of Chasms. In the North there was Niflheim, the Place of Deadly Cold. In the South there was Muspelheim, the Land of Fire. In Niflheim there was a cauldron called Hveigimer that poured out twelve rivers that flowed into the Chasm of Chasms.

"Ginnungagap, the Chasm of Chasms, filled up with ice, for the waters of the rivers froze as they poured into it. From Muspelheim came clouds of fire that turned the ice into thick mists. The mists fell down again in drops of dew, and from these drops were formed Ymir, the Ancient Giant.

"Ymir, the Ancient Giant, traveled along by the twelve rivers until he came to where another living form was standing in the mists. This was a Giant Cow. Audhumla was the name of that cow. Ymir lay down beside her and drank her milk, and on the milk she gave him he lived. Other beings were formed out of the dew that fell to the ground. They were the Daughters of the Frost, and Ymir, the Ancient Giant, married one, and their children were the Giants.

"One day Ymir saw Audhumla breathe upon a cliff of ice and lick with her tongue the place she breathed on. As her tongue went over and over the place he saw that a figure was being formed. It was not like a Giant's form; it was more shapely and more beautiful. A head appeared in the cliff and golden hair fell over the ice. As Ymir looked upon the being that was being formed he hated him for his beauty.

"Audhumla, the Giant Cow, went on licking the place where she had breathed. At last a man completely formed stepped from the cliff. Ymir, the Ancient Giant, hated him so much that he would have slain him then and there. But he knew that if he did this, Audhumla would feed him no more with her milk.

“Bur was the name of the man who was formed in the ice cliff, Bur, the first of the heroes. He, too, lived on the milk of Audhumla. He married a daughter of the Ancient Giant and he had a son. But Ymir and Ymir’s sons hated Bur, and the time came at last when they were able to kill him.

“And now there was war between Ymir and Ymir’s sons and the son and son’s sons of Bur. Odin was the son of Bur’s son. Odin brought all his brothers together, and they were able to destroy Ymir and all his brood—all except one. So huge was Ymir that when he was slain his blood poured out in such a mighty flood that his sons were all drowned in it, all except Bergelmir, who was in a boat with his wife when the flood came, and who floated away on the flood to the place that we now call Jötunheim, the Realm of the Giants.

“Now Odin and his sons took the body of Ymir—the vastest body that ever was—and they flung it into the Chasm of Chasms, filling up all the hollow places with it. They dug the bones out of the body and they piled them up as the mountains. They took the teeth out and they made them into the rocks. They took the hair of Ymir and they made it into the forests of trees. They took his eyebrows and formed them into the place where Men now dwell, Midgard. And out of Ymir’s hollow skull they made the sky.

“And Odin and his sons and brothers did more than this. They took the sparks and the clouds of flame that blew from Muspelheim, and they made them into the sun and the moon and all the stars that are in the sky. Odin found a dusky Giantess named Night whose son was called Day, and he gave both of them horses to drive across the sky. Night drove a horse that is named Hrimfaxe, Frosty Mane, and Day drove a horse that is named Skinfaxe, Shining Mane. From Hrimfaxe’s bit fall the drops that make the dew upon the earth.

“Then Odin and his sons made a race of men and women and gave them Midgard to live in. Ugly Dwarfs had grown up and had spread themselves over the earth. These Odin made go live in the hollow places beneath the earth. The Elves he let stay on the earth, but he gave them the tasks of tending the streams and the grasses and the flowers. And with the Vanir he made peace after a war had been waged, taking Niörd from them for a hostage.

“Bergelmir, the Giant who escaped drowning in Ymir’s blood, had sons and daughters in Jötunheim. They hated Odin and his sons and strove against them. When Odin lighted up the world with the sun and the moon they were very wroth, and they found two of the fiercest of the mighty wolves of Jötunheim and set them to follow them. And still the sun and the moon, Sol and Mani, are followed by the wolves of Jötunheim.”

Such wonders did Heimdall with the Golden Teeth tell Hnossa, the youngest of the Dwellers in Asgard. Often the child stayed with him by the Rainbow Bridge, and saw the Gods pass to and from Midgard: Thor, with his crown of stars, with the great hammer Miölnir in his hands, with the gloves of iron that he used when he grasped Miölnir; Thor in his chariot drawn by two goats and wearing the belt that doubled his strength; Frigga, with her dress of falcon feathers, flying swiftly as a bird; Odin All-Father himself, riding upon Sleipner, his eight-legged steed, clad all in golden armor, with his golden helmet, shaped like an eagle, upon his head, and with his spear Gungnir in his hand.

Heimdall kept his horn in the branch of a great tree. This tree was called Ygdrassil, he told little Hnossa, and it was a wonder to Gods and Men. “No one knows of a time when Ygdrassil was not growing, and all are afraid to speak of the time when it will be destroyed.

“Ygdrassil has three roots. One goes deep under Midgard, another goes deep under Jötunheim, and the third grows above Asgard. Over Odin’s hall a branch of Ygdrassil grows, and it is called the Peace Bough.

“You see Ygdrassil, little Hnossa, but you do not know all the wonders of it. Far up in its branches four stags graze; they shake from their horns the water that falls as rain upon the earth. On the topmost branch of Ygdrassil, the branch that is so high that the Gods themselves can hardly see it, there is an eagle that knows all things. Upon the beak of this eagle a hawk is perched, a hawk that sees what the eyes of the eagle may not see.

“The root of Ygdrassil that is in Midgard goes deep down to the place of the dead. Here there is an evil dragon named Nidhögg that gnaws constantly at the root, striving to destroy Ygdrassil, the Tree of trees. And Ratatösk, the Squirrel of Mischief—behold him now!—runs up and down Ygdrassil, making trouble between the eagle above and the dragon below. He goes to tell the dragon how the eagle is bent upon tearing him to pieces and he goes back to tell the eagle how the dragon plans to devour him. The stories that he brings to Nidhögg make that evil dragon more fierce to destroy Ygdrassil, the Tree of trees, so that he may come upon the eagle and devour him.

“There are two wells by the roots of Ygdrassil, and one is above and one is below. One is beside the root that grows in Jötunheim. This is a Well of Knowledge, and it is guarded by old Mimir the Wise. Whoever drinks out of this well knows of all the things that will come to be. The other well is by the root that grows above Asgard. No one may drink out of this well. The three sisters that are the holy Norns guard it, and they take the white water from it to water Ygdrassil, that the Tree of Life may keep green and strong. This well, little Hnossa, is

called Urda's Well."

And little Hnossa heard that by Urda's Well there were two beautiful white swans. They made a music that the Dwellers in Asgard often heard. But Hnossa was too young to hear the music that was made by the swans of Urda's Well.

Read more fairy tales on Fairytalez.com