

Tales from the Prose Edda - I:

The Gods and the Wolf

Folk-Lore And Legends: Scandinavia

Scandinavian

Advanced
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Among the Æsir, or gods, is reckoned one named Loki or Loptur. By many he is called the reviler of the gods, the author of all fraud and mischief, and the shame of gods and men alike. He is the son of the giant Farbauti, his mother being Laufey or Nal, and his brothers Byleist and Helblindi. He is of a goodly appearance and elegant form, but his mood is changeable, and he is inclined to all wickedness. In cunning and perfidy he excels every one, and many a time has he placed the gods in great danger, and often has he saved them again by his cunning. He has a wife named Siguna, and their son is called Nari.

Loki had three children by Angurbodi, a giantess of Jotunheim (the giants' home). The first of these was Fenris, the wolf; the second was Jörmungand, the Midgard serpent; and the third was Hela, death. Very soon did the gods become aware of this evil progeny which was being reared in Jotunheim, and by divination they discovered that they must receive great injury from them. That they had such a mother spoke bad for them, but their coming of such a sire was a still worse presage. All-father therefore despatched certain of the gods to bring the children to him, and when they were brought before him he cast the serpent down into the ocean which surrounds the world. There the monster waxed so large that he wound himself round the whole globe,

and that with such ease that he can with his mouth lay hold of his tail. Hela All-father cast into Nifflheim, where she rules over nine worlds. Into these she distributes all those who are sent to her,—that is to say, all who die through sickness or old age. She has there an abode with very thick walls, and fenced with strong gates. Her hall is Elvidnir; her table is Hunger; her knife, Starvation; her man-servant, Delay; her maid-servant, Sloth; her threshold, Precipice; her bed, Care; and her curtains, Anguish of Soul. The one half of her body is livid, the other half is flesh-colour. She has a terrible look, so that she can be easily known.

As to the wolf, Fenris, the gods let him grow up among themselves, Tyr being the only one of them who dare give him his food. When, however, they perceived how he every day increased prodigiously in size, and that the oracles warned them that he would one day prove fatal to them, they determined to make very strong iron fetters for him which they called Loeding. These they presented to the wolf, and desired him to put them on to show his strength by endeavouring to break them. The wolf saw that it would not be difficult for him to burst them, so he let the gods put the fetters on him, then violently stretching himself he broke the fetters asunder, and set himself free.

Having seen this, the gods went to work, and prepared a second set of fetters, called Dromi, half as strong again as the former, and these they persuaded the wolf to put on, assuring him that if he broke them he would then furnish them with an undeniable proof of his power. The wolf saw well enough that it would not be easy to break this set, but he considered that he had himself increased in strength since he broke the others, and he knew that without running some risk he could never become celebrated. He therefore allowed the gods to place the fetters on him. Then Fenris shook himself, stretched his limbs, rolled on the ground, and at length burst the fetters, which he made fly in all directions. Thus did he free himself the second time from his chains, and from this has arisen the saying, “To get free from Loeding, or to burst from Dromi,” meaning to perform something by strong exertion.

The gods now despaired of ever being able to secure the wolf with any chain of their own making. All-father, however, sent Skirnir, the messenger of the god Frey, into the country of the Black Elves, to the dwarfs, to ask them to make a chain to bind Fenris with. This chain was composed of six things—the noise made by the fall of a cat’s foot, the hair of a woman’s beard, the roots of stones, the nerves of bears, the breath of fish, and the spittle of birds.

The fetters were as smooth and as soft as silk, and yet, as you will presently see, of great strength. The gods were very thankful for them when they were brought to them, and returned many thanks to him who brought them. Then they took the wolf with them on to the island Lyngvi, which is in the lake Amsvartnir, and there they showed him the chain, desiring him to try his strength in breaking it. At the same time they told him that it was a good deal stronger than it looked. They took it in their own hands and pulled at it, attempting in vain to break it, and then they said to Fenris—

“No one else but you, Fenris, can break it.”

“I don’t see,” replied the wolf, “that I shall gain any glory by breaking such a slight string, but if any artifice has been employed in the making of it, you may be sure, though it looks so fragile, it shall never touch foot of mine.”

The gods told him he would easily break so slight a bandage, since he had already broken asunder shackles of iron of the most solid make.

“But,” said they, “if you should not be able to break the chain, you are too feeble to cause us any anxiety, and we shall not hesitate to loose you again.”

“I very much fear,” replied the wolf, “that if you once tie me up so fast that I cannot release myself, you will be in no haste to unloose me. I am, therefore, unwilling to have this cord wound around me; but to show you I am no coward, I will agree to it, but one of you must put his hand in my mouth, as a pledge that you intend me no deceit.”

The gods looked on one another wistfully, for they found themselves in an embarrassing position.

Then Tyr stepped forward and bravely put his right hand in the monster’s mouth. The gods then tied up the wolf, who forcibly stretched himself, as he had formerly done, and exerted all his powers to disengage himself; but the more efforts he made the tighter he drew the chain about him, and then all the gods, except Tyr, who lost his hand, burst out into laughter at the sight. Seeing that he was so fast tied that he would never be able to get loose again, they took one end of the chain, which was called Gelgja, and having drilled a hole for it, drew it through the middle of a large broad rock, which they sank very deep in the earth. Afterwards, to make all still

more secure, they tied the end of the chain, which came through the rock to a great stone called Keviti, which they sank still deeper. The wolf used his utmost power to free himself, and, opening his mouth, tried to bite them. When the gods saw that they took a sword and thrust it into his mouth, so that it entered his under jaw right up to the hilt, and the point reached his palate. He howled in the most terrible manner, and since then the foam has poured from his mouth in such abundance that it forms the river called Von. So the wolf must remain until Ragnarök.

Such a wicked race has Loki begot. The gods would not put the wolf to death because they respected the sanctity of the place, which forbade blood being shed there.

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