

Let Hel Rise

By Jo Myers

A retelling of the story of the Norse goddess of death, Hel and her banishment to Niflheim and her control over the dead

Snow crunched beneath my feet, winds nipped at my nose and cheeks. At my feet, Garmr trotted, crimson blood dripping from ivory-white teeth. He guarded the gates, ready to attack those unprepared to face me. Shards of ice formed a glistening maze around me. In a large chunk, I caught a glimpse of my reflection. The features were distorted, but one could clearly see the black rot oozing down the right side of my face, a stark contrast against the white hair sprouting from my head. A perfect crown made of thorns and ice sat upon my head.

A servant ran up to me, his outline hazy and his features blurred. Yet another John Doe. Never identified and sent down to me. His life would forever remain meaningless. “A new ship has arrived, Your Majesty.”

With a sigh, I followed the draugr into the shipyard, where souls were waiting anxiously. Huddling together in small clumps, their eyes wide, mouths agape, bodies trembling. The exact same expression I saw every single day. An expression that would linger forever.

Giving the warmest smile I could in the freezing winds, I called into the crowd. “Welcome to Niflheim! I’m Hel. If you need anything, the draugr and I are here to help.” A few mustered up a small smile, but it was soon replaced with the complacent sadness that would soon be welded on.

I returned to the castle, weaving my way through elaborate hallways until I found my office. Bookshelves on one wall, teetering stacks of files on the other. In the middle was my desk, carved out of mahogany by the dwarves. A stack of several dozen files piled high on top. Deaths. I flipped through, reading the stories and lives of each and every one of my new citizens. Hua Yuan, a middle-aged mother from Suzhou, China. She was on the way to her four-year-old daughter's school when she died in a car crash. Patrick Duerr. A doctor developing life-saving vaccines in Berlin. Dead just minutes after a grease fire started in his kitchen. Perhaps worst of all were the children. Riassa Diaz died of cancer. Mohamed Aziz got caught in a bear trap while playing with his little sister. Now their lives meant nothing. Just a frozen prison for years, decades, centuries.

I stared out the window, towards the foggy expanse. On a good day, when the fog lessened, you could catch glimpses of Jotunheim, with its sky-high towers, and colossal trees.

There was a knock at the door and a draugr walked in.

“Ex-ex-excuse me, Your M-Majesty, but there's, there's, um, a, uh, visitor wai-waiting in the- the Great Ha-Hall.” She spoke fast, her nervous words blending together.

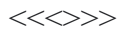
“Who, pray tell, is this visitor?” I expected one of the new souls, or maybe even a Jotunn coming to ask for a favor.

“It's um- and I mean no disrespect Your Majesty- but it's, it's, um, Odin.”

I slammed my hands on the desk, a loud crack echoing through the room. “What!” I yelled. That backstabbing, traitorous Aesir had the gall to come here, the same place he trapped me for eternity. Garmr picked his head up from his spot on the floor, growling at the draugr messenger.

“Um... um... yes. And he... he said it’s v-very urgent,” The draugr shrunk in upon herself. “I should b-be going now.” And she scurried away, as fast as her corpse legs could carry her.

I stood up, wrapping a bear fur mantle around my shoulders. Garmr once again regained his position at my side and we slowly walked towards the Great Hall.



Odin was pacing nervously, a small menagerie of animals by his side. Two ravens, two wolves, and Sleipnir, my half-brother and eight-legged horse.

“What do you want, Odin?”

“Oh my dear, kissa.” The sickening nickname from my childhood oozed off his lying lips like the blood of a desperate, dying man.

I knew his tricks too well. I tossed a silver blade, watching as it sliced just mere inches away from his face, planting itself right in the center of a portrait hanging from the wall.

“Hurry up, Odin. Before I lose my patience. And my aim.”

The kindly uncle persona faded, revealing the stern, callous god beneath. “There are rumors around Asgaard the Ymir and the Jotunn are planning an attack.”

“And?”

“It could start Ragnarok!”

I laughed. Their obsession with Ragnarok was enough to drive any god to insanity. Everything was yet another step to try and prevent the inevitable. Throw Jormungandr in the

ocean. Tie up Fenrir. Chain Loki beneath a snake. Banish an innocent girl to Niflheim. And there was still nothing they could do. We will escape. We will fight. And the gods will die. There's no force in the universe strong enough to stop that.

“Every time you come down here you say that. And yet you seem to be missing one key detail yet again. Don't you remember why you banished me here all those centuries ago?”

“What Hel? What am I missing?”

“You need me to start Ragnarok. So I suggest you tread carefully. Or your death may be premature.”

Odin gave me a one-eyed glare, gaze catching on the thin white scar slicing across my palm. “Remember the blood-oath. You owe me.”

Stupidest deal I ever made.

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“You have to!” I shouted, my voice echoing through the massive palace.

“I don't have to do anything, Hel. Be glad I let you in in the first place.” Odin responded with a hauntingly emotionless voice. He didn't care. And he never would.

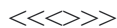
The new soul was standing behind me, her head bowed, staring at the floor. Lily Swanson, her file said. Died when she saw a young girl get attacked and tried to step in. She was only sixteen, a perfect student, on track to get into Harvard in her junior year. She just had the unfortunate mishap of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I glared at him. “You promised to let every soul who died in battle enter Valhalla. She deserves to be there!”

Odin took in a deep breath, his chest rising and falling heavily. “Fine. She can stay. But you owe me.” From his pocket, he produced a small silver blade.

My eyes widened. A blood-oath. Only taken in the most extreme circumstances. My life would be bound to it until I fulfilled my end of the bargain, however many decades or even centuries in the future that was. But what other choice did I have? Let a brave girl rot in Niflheim? If I could, I would send every soul to Valhalla. But Odin said they weren’t good enough.

I held out my hand. The silver sliced across the flesh in a floating motion. Dark red blood trickled out, falling to the floor in thick tears. Odin did the same to his own palm. As he grabbed my hand, the crimson blood mixed. I knew that this deal would spell destruction for someone.



The winds were lessened, though frostbite still danced through the air. Before me, a great castle loomed. Tall spires topped with colorful domes - the only color in this wasteland of fog.

A gave a crisp knock on the massive, mahogany door. Seconds later, it was thrust open by a young Jotunn man.

“Sirtr!” I burst, giving the Jotunn prince a tight hug.

Sirtr chuckled, deeper than a heartbeat, lower than a wolf's growl. "Come on in Hel. It's so great to see you. We're gathering in the mead hall."

The inside of the great palace was gilded in silver. On an iron hook, I placed my cloak, the deep brown fabric flowing down the wall. Sirtr led me to the mead, a path I'd walked on many of my visits. The room was large and intricately painted with Jotunn tales. The thievery of Mjolnir, Utgaard-Loki's trickery of Thor, Mirmir's well.

At the head of the table sat Ymir, king of the Jotunn. He was taller than most, eyes staring thousands of miles away, skin tinged a deep azure.

"Ah, Hel! My greatest friend and best ally!"

I gave a curtsy. Respect was important. To and from all rulers. Even Jotunn.

Sirtr and his father were the only ones who'd ever bothered to pay me a visit. The only ones who ever remembered poor little Hel, trapped in Niflheim with nothing but ice, fog, and misery. The only ones who cared.

As we drank the rich, honey-like mead, Sirtr posed a question. "So Hel, what brings upon this impromptu meeting?"

"Well actually, I was- " I stopped myself before I could reveal Odin's plot. "I was actually just stopping by. Niflheim is so boring."

Ymir saw right through me, as though my words were made of dust.

The conversation continued awkwardly. Every word was calculated. Every sentence had a motive. And still, I found nothing. No hidden ploys. No secret armies. No espionage. Just a king trying to do what's best for his people. But I had to find something.

“So... Ymir,” I said, a sickly sweet tone dripping from my voice, “any idea when Ragnarok’s going to start?”

Sirtr butted in, “Not anytime soon. Why do you ask?”

I glanced around, searching for some excuse in the intricate decoration on the walls and ceiling.

“Well... um... you see...”

Ymir glared at me. “Don’t lie, Hel. It benefits no one.”

“Odin made me.” my voice was soaked in hatred for the man I once thought of as an uncle, a father even. “He’s so focused on keeping his power and kingdom. Only a king on a throne of cards would be that paranoid.”

Sirtr gave a somber smile. He stared out the window, past the fog into an unknown expanse. He pushed his chair out, the screeching of wood against tile echoing in the massive hall. “Come with me. I need to show you something.” A tone like a stalking wolf, beckoning me to chase its words.

I followed him back to the massive doors, gently wrapping my cloak around my shoulders once me.

After a long trek through the powdery snow and mist, I saw dark smoke rising high above the trees, a deep gray plume joining the clouds. I pictured the other Jotunn villages I’d visited. Full of friends, and family. Meat constantly roasting over open fires, and taverns bustling. Children sparring with wooden swords in the cobblestone streets.

As we turned the corner the happy memories drifted out of my mind, falling down a rushing waterfall of despair. The village was gone. Charred remains of homes were all that was left. Fire still blazed on the wooden roofs, the orange sparks dancing in a sickening ballet.

I walked through the streets, my eyes locked on the rubble. Homes, families. Gone in an instant. Before me, laying limply in the middle of the street, a corpse clutched a seared porcelain doll. A child.

I gently placed a hand on her rotting face. A tear slowly slipped down my cheek. Carefully, I wrapped my fur around her tiny body. She was one of mine now, a file I'd missed, yet another face in the crowd.

“Who did this?” I demanded, wiping any remaining wetness from my eyes, watching as two dark spots deepened on my sleeve.

Sirtr knelt next to me, carefully closing the little girl's eyes. “The Aesir.” He spoke with a venom more pungent than that of any snake. Hatred. “They thought we were planning an attack and did... this.”

They feared monsters lurking outside Asgaard. But we weren't the monsters. Not the Jotunn. Not me. Not this child. They were the true monsters, masquerading as heroes.

But, if they want us to be monsters, we will. Now they'll see what poor little Hel is truly capable of. Ragnarok is coming. Watch out Aesir. Vengeance is such a sweet poison. Let fire rain and Hel rise.

THE END

Glossary:

Hel- Daughter of Loki, goddess of the dead and queen of Niflheim.

Aesir- The gods, residents of Asgaard

Odin- The king of the Aesir, granted immense knowledge and power.

Garmr- The wolf that guards the gates of Niflheim.

Draugr- Hel's army of the dead.

Ymir- The king of the Jotunn.

Ragnarok- The Norse apocalypse, when the Aesir die and the world is reborn.

Asgaard- One of the nine realms, home of the Aesir

Jotunn- A race of giant-like creatures native to the land of Jotunnheim.

Jotunnheim - one of the nine realms. A foggy wasteland, home of the Jotunn.

Niflheim- One of the nine realms, home of the unhonorable dead.