



Ice and Flame

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Myths are stories to explain why things are. So it's not surprising that many cultures begin their mythological history with explanations of how the world came to be.

The Norse tell such a tale: a tale of chaos and confusion, ice and fire, and the struggle between superheroes and gods for dominion.

Before time began, there was nothing. Emptiness...a black void, a shuddering chasm swirling with mist and spray, torn by the groans of heaving, cracking ice. On one side, banks of dank mist, cold as corpse-breath. On the other, fire, scorching, ravenous.

Cold and heat, ice and flame, invaded each other...came together...mingled.

From the hissing and blistering of their mingling two Beings were born: Ymir, first of the giants, and Audumla the gentle cow.

The baby giant found the cow's udder, and sucked strength. He grew and grew...limbs like oaks, breath like a wind soaring in the pines. And as he grew, new giants sprang up from the drops of his sweat and the soles of his feet.

Audumla the cow licked the ice-blocks in the void, eager for the salty taste that was in them. Caressed by her rough tongue, the aged ice softened...thawed...trickled away. After one day her licking loosened hairs of a head, frozen in the ice-block. Another day, and the head itself was free. Three days, and the god Buri burst from his prison, stretching his cramped limbs till the last slivers of ice splintered and fell away.

In the black, swirling ice-chasm, Buri, first of the gods, confronted his enemy, the giant Ymir. Each wanted to rule, to be first. And the first step to power, the beginning of time, would come when one killed the other.

On one side Buri: huge, alone, powerful. On the other Ymir and his frost-giants, snapping and cracking white fingers of cold. All round, the



writhing mists of space, billowing and whispering round the silent, panting battleground.

For a hundred centuries, a thousand ages, the battle ebbed and flowed. The noise of it roared and rumbled through space like a hundred thunderstorms together. Neither side could win: giants and god, they were equally matched.

Then at last the god Bor, Buri's son, married a giantess. Their children, god-giants, giant-gods, were Odin and his brothers. They had the power and strength of both giants and gods: they were invincible.

Odin and his brothers fought on the side of the gods. At last they struck down the huge giant Ymir. Blood poured from the ruined caves of his body, a red tidal wave that engulfed and choked the other giants. They floundered in the red death, and drowned. Only two escaped; flopping and splashing in the sticky red sea, they swam with their last strength to the outermost rim of space, and clung gasping on the edge like stranded fish. When their strength returned they built a dark tower, a fortress of stone and iron. Swaggering safe behind its walls, they shook knotted fists at the darkness of space, and vowed vengeance on all the race of gods.

Led by Odin, the victorious gods took Ymir's body and hurled it into the empty void. From it they formed our world. His body became earth, his blood the seven seas; from the dome of his skull they fashioned the curving sky, and his brains made drifting clouds. From his eyebrows they wove a bristling hedge, to protect earth from the simmering anger of the outcast giants.

Bones for mountains, teeth for rocks, hair for vegetation... The work was almost done. Only the maggots crawling in his dead earth-flesh were left. These they changed into elves: bent, evil elves to work with metals underground; shining elves to tend the fair gardens of the world above.

Finally, Odin reached his hand into the glowing, searing furnace on one side of the void of space. He took handfuls of living sparks and flung them upwards, to glow like fireflies in the night sky. Two of the largest became the sun and moon. They would have stayed anchored in their places forever, but in their dark iron fortress, the jealous giants became aware of them, and sent a pack of grey wolves panting across the roof of the world, to hunt the sun and moon and keep them in terrified motion.

For themselves, the gods created a kingdom, Asgard. It was high above the earth, and joined to it by a many-coloured rainbow, a royal road. In Asgard they met in council, drank their mead and took their ease. When they chose, they went strolling in the lower world, and their presence was a thunderclap, an eruption, a sudden shudder of majesty and power.

Below, on middle earth, flowers opened for the first time and the sea whispered and boomed on the empty beaches. But there was no one save elves and gods to savour its splendour and freshness, no one to take delight in the newness of creation.

One day Odin and his two brothers were walking idly by the shore. They found two logs of driftwood, and on an impulse whittled them into godlike shapes: wooden dolls. Each god breathed a gift into the rigid forms: warm life, beauty — and lastly, flowing movement. Before them, tiny on the seashore, stood Ask and Embla, the first man and woman in all the world.