

ODIN PREPARES FOR THE RAGNAROK

Odin began to train his worshippers on Midgard so that when the time came for them to die they could join him in Asgard and swell his big battalions for the final battle. In times of peace, when Odin was sitting among his family and friends, his bearded face was so dignified and beautiful that everyone felt their spirits lifted up by a single glance from him. But in battle he appeared dreadful to his enemies and his glance had quite a different effect: by a mere look he could bring about what men on Midgard called 'the war-fetter'. On the battlefield he could turn his enemies blind and deaf and literally paralyze them with terror.

His own followers, on the other hand, were filled with eagerness to charge into the fight, snarling madly like dogs or wolves, becoming as strong as bears or wild bulls and savagely biting at their shield-rims. Such a fearful spectacle was often enough to make their enemies turn and flee. Their savage, inhuman behavior was called 'running berserk', and they themselves were named 'berserks'.

In time, berserks like these were to be found in the bodyguards of the kings of many of the northern lands. Most northern kings claimed Odin as their ancestor and to be a berserk in their service was regarded as a training for life after death in Asgard when berserks would act as Odin's own henchmen.

As well as training warriors on Midgard, Odin formed an army of women in Asgard, the Valkyries or Odin's Maids. The Valkyries had a special responsibility. Odin used to send these warrior women, splendidly armed and riding spirited flying horses, to battlefields on Midgard. There they chose those who died a valiant death to join Odin in Asgard.

The Valkyries wore shining mailcoats and helmets and carried all kinds of weapons including swords, spears, battle-axes and shields. However, they did not take part in the actual fighting and were not supposed to interfere by influencing who was to win and who was to be killed. They simply carried out Odin's orders.

Valhalla is a huge fortress, shining bright with gold. It has high walls stretching far and wide in that region of Asgard called Gladsheim. The rafters supporting the roofs are mighty spears, the tiles are colossal shields and the benches in the vast hall itself are strewn with war coats. Over the western door is fixed a gigantic wolf's head and an eagle tirelessly wheels above. Perched on Valhalla's highest roof-ridge like a living weathercock stands Gullinkambi, the rooster who will crow just once, to awaken the warriors when the morning of Ragnarok dawns. However many people die in battle, you can be certain that anyone who has earned a place there will find it: there is free entry and a seat at table for them all. Through its doors the host of warriors enter and through them they will race to arms at the last roll call before Ragnarok. For these are the Einheriar, the Chosen Champions of Odin.

Every morning as soon as they are dressed they put on their mailcoats and helmets, file in an orderly fashion, onto the battlefield, fight and kill one another. That is their sport. Sometimes one gets killed, sometimes another. It's impossible to tell from day to day who will win and who will lose and it doesn't matter how much blood flows or how great the slaughter is: as soon as daylight fails the battle stops. Then the real magic is seen. All the blood dries up and disappears; heads, arms and legs which have been chopped off rejoin their bodies; the dead come alive and scramble to their feet as the bugler blows the fall in.

The armies then march back to Valhalla and spend the evening and far into the night eating, drinking and telling tales of the day's fighting. The Valkyries who brought them to Asgard now wait on them in Valhalla, carrying round the drinks, keeping the horns brim full and the tables replenished with food. There can never be so great a multitude in Valhalla that the meat of their enchanted boar will ever once fail to feed them all. Every single day he is butchered, cooked and eaten. And every night he springs to life again ready for the next day's feasting! The cooks stew pot is just as magical as the pig, for it never becomes empty until the last man has been served.

A gigantic she-goat called Sky-Leaper supplies all the drink they need. Now that goat does not give milk, as you might think. She gives a far more potent liquid - mead! Every day she fills an enormous vat: quite big enough, anyway, to make all the Champions roaring drunk after their daily battle.