



Saga of Survivors III

Nidhoggur

by Emil Hjörvar Petersen

Contact

emilhpetersen@gmail.com

www.emilhpetersen.com

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MÍÐSTÖÐ ÍSLENSKRA BÓKMENNTA
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(Flashback #1)

A BEGINNING

In the Gaping Abyss, magma and ice converged. Frost from the north and conflagration from the south met in broiling, perpetual conflict. In the frosty and fiery steam, the singing giant Ýmir was born, as was Audhumla, the primordial cow who nourished him. The cow licked the frosty rocks, and with her tongue carved out the giant Búri, progenitor of the Aesir.

This was described to us by his son, our father, before he stepped outside the void and followed the summons that came for him from the headwaters. We, three brothers and one mother, stay behind, because she tells us that we brothers are destined for a truly momentous role: We are to create the entire world and beings in our image.

My brothers ask few questions, but I have often wondered aloud: What came before the existence of Aesir and giants? Where did our father go? What lies beyond the enveloping abyss that we are soon to fill up? Where are the headwaters of these rivers of fire and ice?

I receive little in the way of answers. We should carry out our role, not ask questions. But whence comes that directive?

I command, among other things, logic and structured thought, which I will soon impart to the first mortal creatures. It follows, then, that I wish to gather as much knowledge as I can before taking any action, but I am impeded in this by my brother's overbearing nature. His own ambition, however, makes it clear that he himself will soon want answers to these questions.

He has assumed command.

We enlarge our bodies many times over, and start creating.

Patiently, we stand over Ýmir and listen to his last song in the first language, a five-note melody denoting one center and four primary directions. He looks into our eyes, wishing to finish his song. We allow it.

The basic shape of the world is three-cornered; from this form all others are derived. The three of us surrender a part of our creative powers, merge them to form the trinity, the first triangle, perfect and symmetrical, and animate it with the primal powers of the icy magma. Then we gather our materials.

We build the world with blood.

Ýmir's flesh becomes flat earth, the bones become mountains, teeth and molars transform into rocks and cliffs; the blood becomes every manner of running water, salty or fresh. We forge the dome of his head into the sky, his brain into clouds. The sky forms one dome over the flat earth, and the foundations beneath another. Under each corner of the earth, we create a diminutive being to hold up each primary direction. With one dome above the surface and another below, the sum effect is a sphere. This is in accordance with the instructions inherited from our parents, but we do not know why it must be so.

Still, when my brother Odin says that he wishes to create light and darkness in the world, all by himself, I suspect that he knows more than he lets on. Did our father tell him more than the rest of us? Does Odin know where the instructions come from? Does he know the underlying reason for our task?

We name the earth Midgard, Middle Ground, because we plan on adding to the world later.

The three of us walk along a beach, enjoying what we have wrought from the remains of the first living creature. Two logs dance in the surf, smooth and soft from the sea's ministrations. We drag them ashore and sculpt them into man and woman. Odin gives them the breath of life, I

grant them spirit – logic and thought – along with bodily motion, and the third brother, Vé, imparts to them senses and a visage. We clothe them and name them: Askur and Embla are the first humans in Midgard.

We name our own home Ásgard and build it above the earth's center. The world has begun. Odin seats himself on the throne and assumes the role of All-Father. He also takes a wife, but begets a tempestuous son with another, Fjörgyn, a she-creature named after the earth itself.

“Is there no All-Mother?” I ask, but am ignored.

After the creation, the role of us two remaining brothers is unclear. We are defined only by Odin. He has two names for each of us: As a brother, I am Vilji; as a fellow traveler, I am Haenir. Under the latter name, I am known as the fleet-footed Aesir, for I command not only the intellectual powers of living things, but their bodily motions as well. I make good use of this when we brothers roam the world.

Despite my role and participation in the creation, I am unable to escape the All-Father's shadow. I am beset by countless questions, and when decisions are being made, I often wish to discuss the alternatives. But my ideas seldom prevail.

What am I meant to do?

I realize, now, that the path before me is uncharted.

CHAPTER ONE

After the Fall

7th of Ember in the year 2310 SCE

Near New Byzantium

The crew of Ringhorn

The piteous wail rose over the city ruins, bringing the battle to a momentary halt. The balloons of the airships moved in the growing breeze.

Hanging from a rope on *Ringhorn's* balloon, Haenir watched his father plummet into the grayness.

The headhunters froze in formidable poses, also watching the fall, and when they noticed that their leader, the sorceress Heidur, seemed surprised by it, and perhaps even a bit shaken, they realized that the death of Hödur would have dire consequences.

Only the man with the veiled face was unaffected by all this. His only concern was to bring the briefcase that he held in a death grip to shelter, as he sprinted towards the bridge of the enemy airship.

The creaking of the airships and the labored breath of both camps remained once the wail subsided.

The bard Homer crawled onto the deck, covered in blood. “They have the Golden Tablet!” He gestured at the trail of blood leading to the gunwale, and then lost consciousness.

Teary-eyed, Haenir followed the blood trail until he met the gaze of Váli, who leaned over the gunwale innocuously. But he couldn't deceive anyone anymore, the betrayal was too obvious. When he saw the furious faces of the crew, Váli's face contorted into a mad grin, and

he made a running jump from the port side of *Ringhorn* to the starboard of the headhunter's vessel.

There was nothing Haenir could do but stow his sorrow away, for now. He pulled his goggles down from his forehead and over his eyes, and prepared to leap.

The battle resumed. The headhunters kept falling back, as they now held the Golden Tablet, and tried to make their way to their own airship and man its stations. The ropes rafting the two vessels together were cut.

Ringhorn's crew, in their turn, did their best to shake off the shock of Hödur's fall. What mattered now was recovering the tablet.

In a rage, Módi lashed with his club at the knees and napes of wild-elves, who tried as best they could to escape overboard. Once no living foe remained on *Ringhorn*, he prepared to jump between the gunwales himself, but then found himself face to face with the cyclops.

The creature's furled brow made it clear that it wasn't about to allow anyone onboard. Still, few can stand in the way of a rampaging son of Thor. Módi swung at the cyclops, who blocked the blow with a hefty sledgehammer and retaliated. Módi dodged the blow by a hair's breadth and struck again. The blows of both, though powerful, were too slow to find their mark before the two airships separated. While the cyclops was in mid-lunge, Módi jumped him, and they rolled around the deck, punching and bellowing.

The valkyrie Sigurdrífa and the sorceress Heidur stopped fencing when the latter suddenly fell back. Intent on getting away, the sorceress reached into one of the pouches at her belt, pulled out a handful of blue dust, blew it out in front of herself, and then jumped after it. Swirling around her, the dust carried her all the way up onto the envelope of the headhunters' airship. Just then, she met Haenir's grief-stricken and rapidly approaching face – one crazed golden eye behind goggles, sweaty dark hair, and a goatee as sharp as the knife he brandished. She managed to draw her rapier just before they collided, and before he could put his knife to her throat.

Shifting her attention to the veiled man and Váli, Sigurdrífa strode onto the enemy deck, and made for the bridge, to which the man had retreated along with Váli. She barely made it halfway across. Two harpies snatched her up by her hair and clothes, and flung her into a group of headhunters. She dodged their attacks by rolling until she managed to get to her feet, but was forced to retreat up onto the gunwale when two small but frenzied gnomes beset her, scimitars aloft. Evading their attacks and lashing back with her feet, she ultimately lost her balance and fell overboard. Sigurdrífa flailed out wildly, and barely managed to grab hold of the severed rope-end that had connected the airships. She swung to and fro, her feet narrowly avoiding the churning propeller.

Once she managed to stabilize herself, she began the climb back up. With a firm two-handed grasp on the rope above her head, she looked down and shifted the soles of her feet, but then spotted Baldur, her old master, crouching over his fallen brother among the ruins on the ground. Shadows were closing in on them from the neighboring streets. She called out, but he didn't hear.

She watched as Baldur ran to what looked like the remains of a car, squeezed halfway into it, then swiftly backed out, hoisted the blind Aesir onto his back and carried him into the nearby ruins. The shadows pursued him.

The wind gusts became sharper, and the airships started drifting apart. Time was running out. Sigurdrífa shimmied up the rope. Baldur would have to manage. The Golden Tablet must not fall into Váli's hands.

CHAPTER TWO

Short of Hands, Short of Fuel

6th of Ember in the year 2310 SCE

In Takram

The leaders of Bifröst

“Trolls are just and worth one’s trust,” the saying went.

Nevertheless, because of the circumstances in Takram, they couldn’t quite hold up their end of the bargain. As agreed, Skadi and her party received an airship in order to get to Lund, but it was a small and rusty affair, with a balloon liable to rupture at any moment. To add insult to injury, the Icelandic troll tribe provided neither fuel nor manpower. By decree, all citizens of Takram were to remain within the city walls, arming and training themselves, sharpening weapons, fortifying walls and setting traps. These preparations weren’t only a response to the growing friction with neighboring fiefdoms, but also to the fact that a siege was most likely imminent. After Magni and his men broke into Takram and were repelled, Nidhoggur declared that the city could either hand its reins over peaceably, or have them wrested away by force. Shell-Naddur had other ideas. The trolls would not submit, the city would defend itself. If Nidhoggur attempted to rush the walls, the citizens of Takram must be prepared to push back.

After a tempestuous but futile meeting at the Tower, Skadi and Farrah waited for the mayor outside.

Flying an airship across The Empty Lands without sufficient fuel or a full crew was a fool’s errand. Skadi might be able to pilot the craft herself, but she also had her duties as team leader to

attend to, including making sure they were always ready for an attack. Farrah and Rostam agreed with this, as did Vidar.

In addition to the three generals and the silent Aesir, the crew now included three Icení warriors, two Amaar-djinn, five Einherjar, and two Terracotta soldiers from the regiment stowed in the container at Hoddmímisholt. All were fit for war, but not for piloting, machine work or maintenance. Skadi had hoped that Shell-Naddur would at least provide a pilot.

The fuel shortage was a bigger problem still. A moratorium had been placed on all fuel sales in Takram, as the trolls were intent on buying up every last drop in the city.

The mayor strode out of the Tower with his son. Gravely, they made their way down to the city plaza, where the war preparations were to be formally announced.

Skadi and Farrah pursued them, reiterating their request.

“You operate the most successful workshop in Takram,” Shell-Naddur said. He licked a finger and rubbed at a mud stain on his fine clothing, then rearranged his clump of hair and the trinkets on his drooping ears. “Where’s all the copper? The profit?”

“Yah, where it at, the money?” Skin Weaver spat.

“The chief mechanic took most all of the copper with him to New Byzantium,” Skadi said testily. “He said that he needed vast sums, and left next to nothing behind. Yet his voyage is no more important than the one that awaits us.” This was an embellishment of the truth: she knew that assignments involving the Golden Tablet always took priority.

“All I care about is that you raise your army,” said Shell-Naddur. “You have three months to manage this, or else be banished from my city. Until then, your workshop is under our protection. This was my deal with the invulnerable one, only this and nothing more. In addition,

we have granted you free use of an entire airship. Under the circumstances, I think that's quite generous."

Farrah's patience ran out. "Without our forces, Nidhoggur will flatten Takram."

The mayor curled his lips, making the incisors of his lower jaw jut even more upwards. He slowed his pace.

With tiny eyes, Skin Weaver peered at the two women, then leaned towards them and growled. The stench of his fur coats washed over them. "Nah, don't let'em talk pish-posh, Dad. Don't giv'em an inch."

"Shut it, boy, and watch. Business is being conducted." Shell-Naddur paused in thought. "I can't do anything about your shortage of hands, but if you wish, you may trade with the alchemists of Fordaeda before my men buy up their fuel reserves. You'll have to pay them somehow, I suppose – but that's your concern. In return, the city will claim ten percent of your workshop's income for three months after it opens again. That's all I can do for you, since I can't be sure that you'll return. One never bets against the Empty Lands."

He picked up his pace sharply. With the flag of Takram in one hand, a shotgun in the other and his troll son in tow, he set course for a high platform in the plaza, the site of executions and public announcements.

Skadi and Farrah stayed behind.

"Agreed?" he shouted without turning his head.

Help from the Icelandic troll tribe was never a given, but they had managed to squeeze a bit more out of it, even if just a pittance.

"Agreed!" the hunting goddess called back.

The mayor's speech rose above the city clamor.

“Now what?” Farrah said. “How will we pay Fordaeda? Every minute counts. We’ll need to move swiftly.” She enjoyed the experience of working as an agent of Hoddmímisholt, and the excitement that came with it, but her most fervent wish was to be once again united with her Icení battalion, and allow the spirit of Boudica to reach its full potential.

“Relax, dear,” Skadi said. “Three months should be plenty of time to travel to Idavollur and back. If all goes according to plan, that is. We can afford a few delays here and there, as long as there are no major catastrophes. We’ll make the best of things, stay focussed and solve our problems as they arise. Before this meeting, I suggested that we meet up with Rostam and Vidar at the tavern. We’ll get our bearings there.”

“If all goes according to plan, yes.” Farrah made no secret of her doubts. She knew, as the hunting goddess herself did, that many things could go wrong in the Empty Lands, whether flying or on foot.

CHAPTER THREE

Hemmed In

Close to New Byzantium

Baldur

Breath sounds undulated around the house. Faint voices echoed against the weathered walls. Shadows flitted across the doorway. The blood of the blind Aesir ran down Baldur's trench coat and dripped onto the floor.

He carried Hödur's corpse into what once had been a kitchen, and set it carefully down. There was only one entrance, aside from a tiny window that few monstrosities would be able to pass through. Still, he heard rutting and scratching outside.

All things considered, Baldur deemed the kitchen the best place to defend the corpse from greedy jaws. A screwdriver wasn't much of a weapon, but serviceable for gouging out eyes and piercing Querk flesh. He thought he might also be able to rummage through drawers and cupboards without losing sight of the entrance. If he found a knife or some other sharp kitchen utensil, he'd stand more of a chance.

But he found nothing. All drawers and cupboards had been emptied.

The eerie sounds drifted off the streets and into the derelict house. They were no longer echoes, but defined and close. Elongated shadows drew foreboding lines on the floor.

What could Baldur do? Less than a month ago, he had been in a similar situation: Surrounded by horrendous Querks, and that time around, he had proved unable to stand against them.

He glanced at Hödur's paper-white face and gray hair. The blind Aesir would not have buckled. He would have taken a stand and fought. But although Baldur had received occasional training, fighting was not in his blood, unlike that of his many brothers and cousins.

Baldur regarded the crossbow bolt in Hödur's side. Without taking his eyes off the shadows that gathered with ever-increasing speed, he bent down. The sounds of breathing drew nearer.

He took hold of the bolt.

"Why did you fall?" he said aloud. "Why now? Now, when we are finally brothers again?"

Hödur's eyes were half-open. Baldur closed the eyelids with his fingers, and then placed his hand on the blind Aesir's forehead as he ripped the bolt from his side. Blood welled from the wound.

Baldur took up a position by the kitchen entrance, now armed with crossbow bolt and screwdriver. He listened for any approaching help, but heard only the distant clamor of the airship battle.

The shadows fully coalesced.