

THE BINDING OF FENRIR

“Tyr and Fenrir” by John Bauer (1911)



The Norse pseudo-god Loki, who is by turns the friend and the enemy of the other gods, had three fearfully hideous and strong children with the giantess Angrboda (“She Who Bodes Anguish”). The first was the serpent Jormungand, and the second was the death-goddess Hel. The third was the wolf Fenrir.

The gods had terrible forebodings concerning the fate of these three beings. And they were absolutely correct. Jormungand would later kill the god Thor during Ragnarök, the downfall of the cosmos, an event which would be largely brought about by Hel’s refusal to release the radiant god Baldur from the underworld. During these cataclysmic events, Fenrir would devour Odin, the chief of the gods.

In order to keep these monsters at bay, they threw Jormungand into the ocean, where he encircled Midgard, the world of humankind. Hel they relegated to the underworld. Fenrir, however, inspired too much fear in them for them to let him out from under their watchful eyes, so they reared the pup themselves in their stronghold, Asgard. Only Tyr, the indefatigable upholder of law and honor, dared to approach Fenrir to feed him.

Fenrir grew at an alarming rate, however, and soon the gods decided that his stay in Asgard had to be temporary. Knowing well how much devastation he would cause if he were allowed to roam free, the gods attempted to bind him with various chains. They were able to gain the wolf’s consent by telling him that these fetters were tests of his strength, and clapping and cheering when, with each new chain they presented him, he broke free.

At last, the gods sent a messenger down to Svartalfheim, the realm of the dwarves. The dwarves, being the most skilled craftspeople in the cosmos, were able to forge a chain whose strength couldn't be equaled; it was wrought from the sound of a cat's footsteps, the beard of a woman, the roots of mountains, the breath of a fish, and the spittle of a bird – in other words, things which don't exist, and against which it's therefore futile to struggle. Gleipnir ("Open") was its name.

When the gods presented Fenrir with the curiously light and supple Gleipnir, the wolf suspected trickery and refused to be bound with it unless one of the gods would lay his or her hand in his jaws as a pledge of good faith. None of the gods agreed, knowing that this would mean the loss of a hand and the breaking of an oath. At last, the brave Tyr, for the good of all life, volunteered to fulfill the wolf's demand. And, sure enough, when Fenrir discovered that he was unable to escape from Gleipnir, he chomped off and swallowed Tyr's hand.

The fettered beast was then transported to some suitably lonely and desolate place. The chain was tied to a boulder and a sword was placed in the wolf's jaws to hold them open. As he howled wildly and ceaselessly, a foamy river called "Expectation" (Old Norse Ván) flowed from his drooling mouth. And there, in that sordid state, he remained – until Ragnarok.