

# *The Town Drunk*

*Presents*

## **Ragnarok Has Been Postponed**

*Margaret Ronald*

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He never called when it was convenient. I suppose convenience is one of those concepts that gods never pick up on.

This time he called while I was meeting several executives from the Hendriksen account. I fell silent in the middle of my presentation, then pinched the bridge of my nose and excused myself over their protests.

I called Helen from the elevator. “I’ll need you to pick up my materials,” I told her. “I’ve got an emergency meeting.”

“Another one?” The office line buzzed, and she shut it off. “I’ll come and get them.”

“Great.” I pulled off my shoes, stuffed them in my briefcase, and made the necessary adjustments. “And get the estimates ready for revision. We just lost a big account.”

“Oh. I’m sorry, Hugh.”

“No fault of yours. See you soon.”

I stashed the briefcase with the front desk, visited the men’s room, and opened a window before changing in a stall. The pigeons on the sill panicked when I flew out, but my cousins only croaked in greeting and went back to dismembering this week’s trash. As one of them flies, the journey I had was a long one. As the raven flies—this particular raven at least—it was a matter of minutes.

Valhalla was dark when I arrived, the main hall cavernous and damp. Spiders were banned here, but age and decay made up for any lack of cobwebs. Axes lay blunted where they’d fallen, and the skeletal remains of shields hung above them, their wooden insides long since rotted.

The lord of the hall, the hanged god and all-father, shield-shaker and staff-bearer, sat with his chin on his fist, giving the impression of thinking very hard even though I wasn’t with him. The

skin of his hollow socket twitched, as if the missing eye tracked my approach, but his true gaze remained on the floor.

I landed, raising a puff of dust higher than my head. “Sir.”

He straightened up, bones groaning like strained metal. “My ravens. Huginn and Muninn.”

“It’s just me, sir.”

Skyfather Odin paid no attention, or perhaps he just didn’t hear. “Thought and Memory, my servants. What news do you have for me?”

“Well, the Nasdaq’s in a slump.” It didn’t matter what I said at this point, or even if I said anything.

“What news do you have,” he continued with a voice like wind through dead leaves, “of Ragnarok?”

I drew a deep breath. “It’s not happening, sir. Loki son of Laufey has not slipped his bonds and gone to lead the giants to war.” Loki wouldn’t be slipping any bonds, from now till the end of time. Which didn’t exist, anymore. “And the world tree Yggdrasil still stands.”

“It still stands.” He patted the ashwood staff at the side of his throne, black with age. The runes he’d carved so diligently were now little more than hummocks. “Good. Thank you, my ravens.”

“It’s just me, sir.” I waited for something, an acknowledgment, a dismissal, anything. But he’d forgotten my presence again, and his gaze shifted away from me. I took off, glad to be out of there.

Technically I should have waited till he sent me away, but I’m Thought—*his* Thought—and it’s not easy to control one’s thoughts. We’re as treacherous as memories, who slip away and disappear when you’re not looking.

None of this would have happened if my brother hadn’t left.

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I arrived back at the office just before five o’clock. Helen was at her desk, playing solitaire.

“Was it a good meeting?”

“Not really.”

“Sorry to hear that.” And she really did look sorry. “I thought maybe since you were back so late, you might have had the chance to get back to the other meeting.”

“Nope. I, uh, made a side trip.” Possibly the most depressing side trip I’d ever taken, not that I

could remember all of them. I'd gone to visit the great ash Yggdrasil, or what was left of it.

Helen nodded, still looking crestfallen. She took her work a lot more seriously than I did. She wasn't the best secretary I'd ever had, but she cared, and that made up for any number of typos.

Not that I'd ever hit on her or anything like that. I was celibate, mostly by choice, though it was more due to the inherent difficulties of shapeshifting than any natural inclination. No matter how carefully one changes shape, there's always some trace of the original form. It was easier for me to stuff raven's feet into extra-wide shoes every morning (or draw a quick illusion over them if I had to go bareclawed) than to try to look human all over and have a potential bedmate wonder why I had feathers sticking out of my ass.

Besides, Helen lived with two men, and I'd never inquired about the details of that particular situation.

I reached for my glasses, realized I'd forgotten to make them the last time I changed, and sighed. "Helen, I have no right to ask this of you, but would you mind running down to the corner store and getting me a beer? I'm going to be working late tonight, and—"

Helen laughed and got to her feet. "Don't worry about it. I was going to stop there anyway."

She walked past me, and I smiled again. That was the other thing I liked about Helen, and the reason I suspected she was glad to have this job. She had a minor body odor problem: no matter how much deodorant she used, she always smelled slightly of rotting meat. Humans find that nauseating, but considering that my natural diet was carrion, it was like having a neighbor who was always baking cookies.

Not that I'd ever tell her that. She'd probably take it the wrong way.

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Helen brought up a six-pack and admonished me not to stay too late, then went home to her basement apartment and her two strapping young roommates. I made some motions toward closing the Hendriksen account, then said the hell with it and just sat back with my talons up.

It wasn't really Muninn's fault. But his absence just made this sort of thing inevitable. The trouble was that our task was done, finished with, over.

This is how it was supposed to go: after the treacherous murder of the shining god Baldr and his brother Hodr, the world tree would wither, and Loki would slip free from his prison beneath the earth. He'd lead the giants against the Aesir, the final battle would take place, the sun would turn black, the land sink into the sea, all the usual apocalyptic stuff.

Only it wasn't going to happen. Odin had never been happy about the prophecies, and he'd spent centuries walking the world, questioning giant and dwarf and king alike, seeking a way to forestall Ragnarok. And he'd found one.

I stretched, trying to flex muscles that weren't there in my human shape, and took a drink of the beer Helen had brought me. It wasn't bad, for mortal brewing.

No final battle, no downfall of the gods, no... whatever came after that. And all of that would be just fine if Odin could just damn well remember that he'd done it. He'd won, already. He didn't need to keep calling me back.

I was doing well enough without him. I had a good little business, enough to keep me afloat in this mortal Midgard, doing what I did best. Of course, they called it "consulting" rather than "thinking," but it was the same thing. The last few years had even been profitable enough that I could afford a secretary.

I needed one. I had trouble remembering things—not the big things, like whether Ragnarok had taken place, but appointments, addresses, who had won the Series, that sort of stuff. No amount of notes helped, and as for PDAs, those worked wonders until the second week, when I inevitably left them in taxis. The secretary before Helen had referred to herself as my external memory. I wish I'd found that funnier.

I scratched one cramped talon. It might not be just me, either. The world tree Yggdrasil had died some years back, devoured from below by the serpent and rotted above by its long-ago wound. It still held up the world, but... well... the world wasn't so hot these days. Valhalla was the most intact structure in Asgard, which wasn't saying much, and recently, it seemed like stuff had started to go wrong down here, too. The world was dying from the top down, like a tree.

I didn't much like that connection.

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"Tell me you didn't stay here all night," Helen said. She carried a bulging grocery bag, and the breeze past her smelled of *eau de dead flesh*.

"I didn't stay here all night," I said dutifully. True enough; I'd gone out for a flit and dozed off under an eave.

"Liar." She grinned and cleared papers off my desk. "Brought you something."

"A new account?"

"Don't you wish." She reached into the sack, theatrical as any stage magician, and flourished a bundle of carrots, dirt still clinging to them. "The guys had extra from their garden."

I blinked at them and at the vineful of tomatoes she produced next. "Wow. Thanks." Helen grinned and set a bundle of basil on top of them. "Wait—I thought you had a basement apartment."

"We do." She examined the rest of the bag's contents, then shrugged and propped it next to my

desk. “The guys are the *de facto* caretakers for the building’s rooftop garden.”

“Ah. So they’re gardeners, then?”

“Sort of.” She smiled, and a little part of me flared bright green with envy. “They’re good at anything they put their hands to—anything they touch, really. They’ve even reformed me a little.”

“Hm.” Right, that was about as much as I wanted to hear. I picked up a tomato. “Are these your handiwork as well?”

“Oh no. No, I’ve got something of a black thumb.” Her smile turned rueful. “You’ll want to eat those soon; they go bad before you know it.”

“I will,” I promised absently. She turned to go, and I looked up. “Hey, Helen. Do you ever get the feeling...” Hell. How could I even express this? “...the feeling that everything’s falling apart? I don’t just mean the business, I mean... everything.” Thought I may be; Eloquence I am not.

Helen looked down at her hands. “All the time.” We stood in silence for a moment, and she raised her head. “Try the strawberries. They’ve only just gotten them to grow.”

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The next time he called was Saturday morning, around four o’clock. Granted, it wasn’t as if I’d actually slept, but there’s a difference between being alert and just staring at the ceiling all night. I cursed, turned on the light, and sat on the edge of the bed with my head in my hands.

But I went. I had to.

A sizable portion of the roof had collapsed in the few days since I’d last been there. Spears stuck out at every angle, the hafts snapped like so much thatch, the heads worn down to metal nubs. I glided in through the gap.

Odin didn’t seem to have moved, even though chaff from the roof dusted his left arm. He shuddered all over when I landed, as if I’d woken him from an unwelcome dream. “My ravens. Huginn and Muninn.”

“It’s just me.” I choked and spat dust. “It’s always just me, sir.”

“Thought and Memory, my servants—”

“There’s only me. Muninn buggered off a long time back. Have you really not noticed?”

The words went right past him. “What news do you have for me?”

He hadn't noticed. He never *would* notice. It was only me, just me, and I'd be stuck in this endless, useless role forever. Unless I did something, told him the truth, knocked some sense into him.

Something snapped in me, and I decided. "It's not happening, sir. You ended it. It's not coming."

He blinked, the lid sliding down over his remaining eye with an audible rasp. "What news do you have," he said, raising his head to actually look at me for the first time in centuries, "of Ragnarok?"

"News? What news?" I kicked at a rotted shield. "Ragnarok isn't coming. There's no Fimbulwinter in the forecast, Fenrir's wolf chewed itself to bits trying to get free of its chain, and the giants have all gone back to the earth." I hopped forward; it's hard to be dignified when you're a bird. "*Ragnarok isn't coming.*"

For a moment Odin was so still I thought he might have died. His empty socket regarded me like an eye of shadow. "Are you sure?"

I flung my wings out, the nearest thing I had to a gesture of exasperation. "Of course I'm sure! I've been your eyes over the last millennium and more, and I'm telling you that nothing's going to happen!" Dust billowed up, and I sneezed. "You want to know why? Loki Laufeyson is dead, sir. Dead with a great gaping hole in his heart." I'd only seen it once, a ragged wound that didn't look like it should kill a giant, but ravens know death and that was it.

I landed on the arm of his throne, close enough that he could have wrung my neck. "You want news? I'll give you news. The world tree's still standing, but it's as dead as Loki." The devouring serpent was a tangle of white bones at its roots, and dry leaves had deserted every branch. Dry, twiggy flowers too, and that's what had gotten to me. It'd been trying to grow, trying to live, but we'd been such crappy caretakers—ignoring it or carving initials in it or, in Odin's case, chopping staves straight out of its heartwood—that it had no chance of recovering. "Yggdrasil's dead, Loki's dead, Ragnarok isn't coming, and I don't give a damn."

Odin closed his eye and sighed. I shifted from foot to foot, waiting for the blow. "I will think on this," he said at last.

"Fine, then. I'll stick around so you can actually think."

His eye opened, yellow and furious. "I don't need *you*." He swatted me from his throne with the back of a gnarled hand.

I landed in an empty helm and lay stunned. By the time I managed to work my way out, he'd risen from his throne, the dull thud of his staff shaking more dust from the ceiling as he retreated into the depths of Valhalla.

I flew home and changed, then went out for a walk. It was a beautiful day, but it didn't do much

to mitigate the feeling that I'd just screwed up very badly.

I made it as far as the end of the block before I heard it. I wasn't the only one—even in Midgard, there are plenty of souls sensitive enough to notice something that big—but I was the only one who knew what it was. A rending shriek split the clear sky like thunder, like the tear of a jet engine, like a knife across reality. It was the sound you might get if you felled a whole forest with one stroke.

It was the sound of Yggdrasil World-Tree falling.

My first thought was *Oh, shit*. My second one was *Helen*. I didn't have many friends in this world, but I didn't want her hurt. And I had no chance of getting across town in time on foot.

There was no real decision involved—just the time it took to pull my shoes off. People screamed behind me as I took off, but I figured they'd have more important things to worry about soon enough. And if Helen wondered why I was coming downstairs through her apartment building, well, I could probably think up a lie.

It was the garden that showed me where she was, a brilliant green canopy in a block of brownstones. I glided in close enough to see a yellow-haired youth straighten a tomato frame while another, like enough to be his brother save for the black hair and sunglasses, piled potting soil in an earthenware tub. Helen read a magazine on an old blanket a few feet back from the garden proper. A second blanket lay beside her in a heap.

I flew to the blanket and changed, remembering at the last minute to turn my feathers into some semblance of clothing. "Helen," I gasped. "Don't ask what I'm doing here. There might not be much time—I don't know what's going to happen, but it won't be good."

If she was fazed by a raven turning into her boss, she didn't show it. "Hugh, calm down. Have a seat."

"I *can't* have a seat. For all I know, the hosts of Jotunheim are about to come storming in." I stepped back, noticing a little too late that I'd forgotten any illusion for my feet. "You need to get out of here. I know a few bolt-holes, and with any luck they'll still be there even after the crash—"

The dark-haired young man turned to face me, and with a spark of something like recognition I realized he was blind.

"You mean the tree?" Helen said. "We heard that, too." She picked up the blanket and held it out to me. "You're not the first visitor we've had."

Baffled, I took the blanket. A huge raven shook itself free, blinking up at me with beady eyes. Its left wing had been carefully splinted and bandaged.

I stared at it. "Muninn?"

My brother squawked, then hopped onto my arm. I cradled him, careful of his wing. “Muninn? What are you doing here? Where have you been?”

He clacked his beak, the same thing he’d always done when annoyed, then darted forward and pecked me hard between the eyes. I blinked as his memories unspooled in my head.

Decades of wandering, never shifting as I had, running from what he’d done long ago... I saw myself, shifting from one claw to another, running away with my ideas as I always did and proposing them for Odin to shoot down. “*It seems to me,*” I had mused, “*that if the spiral into Ragnarok started with treachery, maybe treachery might end it.*”

And Odin, desperate and aging, hadn’t dismissed me as he should have. In his paranoia, he had entrusted the task to us, because we were incapable of disobedience. But he’d gone further and separated us from his mind so that he would not bear the guilt of our deeds.

I saw the two of us flying down through the roots of the world tree, to the cavern beneath it. I saw Muninn landing on Loki’s breast while I distracted his wife with talk of the world above. Muninn’s beak had inflicted the ragged wound I would later see Sigyn washing as she laid out her husband’s corpse.

“No,” I said. “Oh, no.”

Muninn cried *yes*, and together we saw our world stagnating, dying slowly instead of swiftly, bones beneath the world tree and Fenrir’s wolf tearing itself to pieces.

I sank to the roof, put my head on my knees, and sobbed, great heaving breaths that eased nothing. Muninn hopped to my shoulder and crooned with me, and though it was small comfort to have him there, it made all the difference.

The dark-haired brother took me by the hands and helped me up, leaving smears of earth on my hastily-constructed shirtsleeves. “Thank you,” I mumbled, and stopped. With Memory now returned, I recognized him, him and his brother. “Hodr,” I said, reaching out to touch his face. “And Baldr...” The blond youth inclined his head.

Muninn tapped my ear with his beak. *After Ragnarok, the world will rise again, green and new. The prophecies had been clear on that point, even if they’d been vague on others. There old hurts will be forgotten and old wounds healed, and the shining god and his brother will govern in peace.* “But you were both dead,” I said.

“They weren’t supposed to stay that way,” Helen said.

“How did—when—”

“They came to me, to begin with.” Helen ran a hand over her face, the left side of her body slowly turning black. “To the land of Hel Half-Rotted, sister to monsters, who held their souls till the end of the world. But I wasn’t supposed to keep them.” She smiled sadly. “Even if I did

like their company.” Her words were harder to understand now, a little mushier through her crippled mouth. “I’m sorry, Hugh.”

“Don’t be,” I began, but a second crash stopped any further words. The sky grew gray—not cloudy, but gray, as if someone had switched off all color—and spidery lines like black veins crept across the face of the sun. “But we stopped it,” I said. “We stopped Ragnarok.”

“No,” a new voice said, ringing with the bite of steel and fangs. I turned, cringing, though that wouldn’t hide me now. The air shivered aside like a cloak, and Odin stepped forth, staff in hand. The building—hell, the entire block—shook as his feet touched the garden dirt. “I stopped it,” he said, his voice ringing as it once had over battlefields. “My ravens, my Thought and Memory, once more I welcome you both to my side.”

“Helen, get behind me,” I said. “Sir, what have you done?”

“He’s felled the tree,” Hel said behind me. “To sweep away everything he did wrong. And now he’s here to remove the last traces of the old world, the last giant’s daughter.”

“I would sweep you and more aside, if I might start the world anew,” Odin said, and in the back of my head I felt the slight tingle that told me I was part of him again, that he was using me to think. Judging by how Muninn bristled and shrank back, I assumed he felt the same thing.

But Odin’s gaze was no longer on us. His eye and socket narrowed, and I followed his gaze to Baldr. “My poor dead son,” Odin said.

“Sons,” I corrected. Baldr backed against the tomatoes, eyes wide, and Hodr held a handful of earth as if to fling it.

Odin ignored me. “You, too, shall reign with me.”

Baldr shook his head. Hodr opened his mouth, then shut it, turning away. “Why don’t they speak?” I said.

“They can’t,” Hel said. “They’re still dead. *You* let them stay dead.”

Odin raised his staff as if to strike her, and I spread my arms to stop him, realizing a little too late that they weren’t wings. “Don’t. Please.”

His lip curled. “Such is this degraded age, when even my ravens turn against me. Truly, would you defend one of Loki’s traitorous get?”

“I would,” I said, and surprised myself by meaning it. “She’s changed—everyone who spent time with Baldr came away changed for the good. And I’ve changed. And *you’ve* changed.”

But he’d had centuries of practice in ignoring me. “Be you gone, sister to monsters.” Odin brandished the staff that was all that was left of Yggdrasil. “There is no place for you here.”

“Nor for you,” Hel said. “You killed my father before his time, Staff-bearer. Loki was to have been freed, if only for a short time before his death, and you took that from him. I ask justice for my father.”

Odin briefly flinched, and his face creased with a vicious craftiness. “Those who killed him are here.” He waved his staff at us. *And he calls us traitors*, Muninn murmured.

Hel shook her head, smiling with half a mouth. “I did not ask for vengeance. I asked for justice.” She raised her withered hand to the staff. “But I will accept wergilt instead; I claim this as price for my father’s death.”

Odin shouted wordlessly and spun the staff. Hel ducked, but not before the staff smacked her shoulder with a sickeningly soft thump. Below us, the ground buckled a second time, rippling like water.

I leapt between them, and Muninn flew at Odin’s missing eye, clawing and shrieking—but for all his age, the old god still slid away and evaded my flailing blow with equal facility. He knocked me aside and advanced on Helen again.

The air flickered, as if the world were a movie on burnt film. Without even the frail structure of Yggdrasil, the world was too malleable—a battle such as this could deform it. Hel caught Odin’s arm, and somewhere a mountainside of snow crumbled down; Odin wrenched free and spat, and somewhere a city sank further into mud. We didn’t need Ragnarok to destroy the world; a pair of angry gods would do just fine.

I turned to Baldr to beg for help, but his attention was elsewhere. He stood with his face to the sun, holding his hands up, the veins on their backs standing up as if he would clutch the sky. Beside him, Hodr plunged his hands elbow-deep into the tub of soil, and the shuddering earth beneath us quieted.

Not enough, though. Not nearly enough. I grabbed a rake and tried to knock Odin’s feet from under him, but again he dodged, giving no thought to me at all.

No... that wasn’t it. I nodded to Muninn, who dove for the old god’s arm, and again we both felt it: the telltale tickle of our minds being used, of Odin drawing on the bond—

“No.” I put a hand to my head. “No. You don’t need me. You said it yourself. Get out.” Hel stared at me over Odin’s shoulder, eyes widening. Odin, not caring, raised the ashwood staff for a final blow. I caught the end of it, brought the iron spikes of the rake down, felt splinters—

*—felt first my mind and then the world break—*

*—Muninn and I, falling through darkness, into light, and around it, greater than the Midgardserpent had once been, two pairs of hands holding it together—*

I slumped to the burning-black rooftop, one hand outflung into the potting soil and the other

wrenched beneath me, still holding half of the staff. Muninn, too, fell to the ground, squeaking as the splint broke.

Hel stood before Odin, her chest heaving, black blood trickling from her split lip. The Skyfather himself was on his knees, clinging to the shattered end of the staff. His face—it hurt to look at him, remembering what he had been. In place of the wise trickster, all that was left was an imbecilic cunning, only rage left in the absence of thought and memory.

Hel sighed softly, as if a cool breeze had passed over her. “So it passes,” she said, and touched Odin’s forehead. “Rest, Glad-of-war.”

He wavered like smoke on wind, and was gone. I dragged myself to my feet and picked up the remaining half of the staff. “This was ours,” I said.

Hel raised her intact eyebrow.

“Ours. All that was best of him remains, in us.” I drew a deep, shaking breath. “I never realized how much he crippled himself, cutting us off from him... I never realized what we’d become.” I turned both halves of the staff over. “You claimed this as *wergilt*.”

She nodded, but didn’t reach for it. I turned and touched Baldr’s shoulder, noticing for the first time that he was breathing. “But it is theirs, now.”

Hel glanced at me. “Why?”

“Because,” I said, and swallowed, remembering that moment of vertigo, of falling without wings. “While we fought over this world, they preserved it.”

Baldr took the staves, running his fingers over the smoothed runes, then held the ends together. He rolled the break between his palms, and when he was done, the staff was knotted together, like two vines that had grown into each other. Not healed, but whole.

Without a word, he handed it to his brother. Hodr smiled at us, then drove the staff into the soil at his feet. For a moment it stood there, dead wood. Then it quivered, once, and the entire building shook as roots shot through it, fading into the otherworld as they passed through floor and ceiling, taking root far deeper than any of us could go. Ash-leaves, silver below and emerald above, burst into full splendor above us.

Muninn hopped to my feet, the broken splint dragging from his wing, then ducked under the shadow of the leaves and tried both wings.

Baldr and Hodr bowed to Hel, then faded with the tree, becoming larger and farther away at once, like an image cast on fog, until they were everywhere and gone.

“They’re good gardeners,” Hel said, smoothing her face back to its unblemished state. She was beautiful either way, I thought, but then again I *was* still a raven. “They’ll take care of it.”

“Old hurts will be forgotten, old wounds healed,” I recited. “I’m not sure I know how to deal with that.”

“You can learn,” she said. “We have time now.”

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