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## A Big Tree House: The World They Lived In

For all their warlike reputation, most of the Norse people really spent most of their time in peaceful pursuits, farming, hunting, fishing, and making up stories to pass the long winter nights. Their myths reflect the hardship of living in the far north — gods must travel vast distances from one house to another over rugged terrain, plagued by snowstorms and hunger. See Figure 13-3 for a map of where these cold-weather folks lived.

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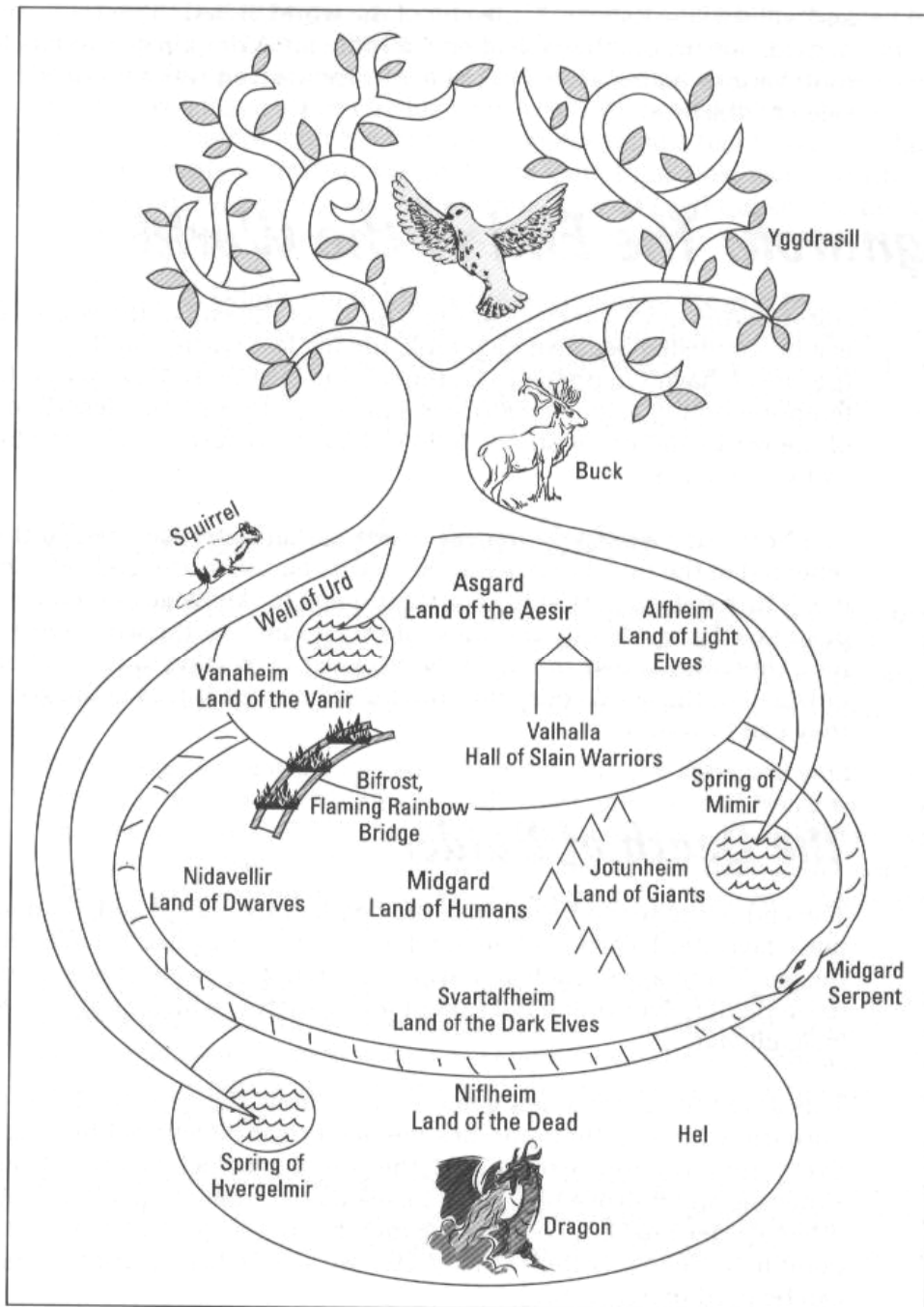
**Figure 13-3:**  
Northern  
Europe and  
the north  
Atlantic.

The Scandinavians, like most people, came up with a view of the universe that seemed to fit the way they lived. In the Norse cosmology, everyone had their own home; humans knew exactly where they fit in between the gods and the dead and on the same level as the giants.

The Norse visualized the universe in three main parts, joined by a magic tree named Yggdrasil. On top of everything was Asgard, home of the gods and goddesses; the deities each had their own houses within the wall of a citadel. *Vanaheim* was up here, too; that's where the Vanir (the old fertility gods) lived until they merged with the Aesir. *Alfheim*, home of the light elves, was also up there.

In the middle was Midgard, home of humans. It was surrounded by an ocean with a giant snake encircling it: Jormungand, the Midgard Serpent. Jotunheim, home of the giants, was either on this level or across the ocean. The dwarves lived in *Nidavellir*, and the dark elves lived in *Svartalfheim*. Asgard and Midgard were connected by a flaming rainbow bridge called Bifrost.

On the lower level was Niflheim, home of the dead, a place of bitter cold and unending night. Hel, goddess of the dead, had her house here; it was also called Hel. Figure 13-4 shows how it all fits together.



**Figure 13-4:** Yggdrasill, the tree of life, and the nine worlds of the Norse cosmology.

All these places were comprised the “nine worlds” of the Norse cosmos. At the axis of them was Yggdrasill, a timeless ash tree. Yggdrasill had no beginning

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and will survive Ragnarok, the end of the world. It had three roots, one in Asgard, one in Jotunheim, and one in Niflheim. A dragon gnawed its lowest root. Various animals lived in or near it, and its fruit was supposed to ensure safe childbirth.

### *Ragnarok: The End of the World*

Norse myths have a very clear description of the end of the world. The story is a bit confusing because Ragnarok, the big last battle and the destruction of the world, hasn't happened yet, though the events leading up to it have. That temporal oddity aside, the story is similar to other myths describing the end of the world and its creatures, followed by the resurrection of the human race by two survivors.

The Norse had a deep awareness of fate and life's transience and this is reflected in the tale. Long before Ragnarok happens, the god Odin knows how it will turn out; as part of his constant quest for knowledge he once asked the dead how he would die, and they informed him that the wolf Fenrir would eat him. Odin also knows that Loki the trickster is plotting to bring about the downfall of the good gods, and that he will succeed. This is the gods' fate; they can't avoid it.

### *The Death of Balder*

The end of the world began with the death of the nicest god, Balder, everyone's favorite. To protect him, Balder's mother Frigg had traveled throughout the world and asked each and every substance to swear that it would not harm Balder; everything did except for mistletoe, which Frigg considered too insignificant.

This gave the deities a new game — they threw things at Balder and laughed uproariously when their missiles bounced right off without hurting him. Everyone was happy except Loki, the god of mischief; he loved trouble and suffering, and it drove him crazy to see Balder immune to attack. (Although in other stories Loki is a cooperative member of the gods of Asgard, at this point he is definitely their enemy. Like we said in his description earlier, Loki can be hard to figure out.)

Loki got some mistletoe and shaped it into a dart. He gave the dart to Balder's blind brother Hod, who was feeling left out of the game, and helped him throw it. It hit Balder and he dropped dead. The brave god Hermod rode to Hel, the goddess of the dead, to ask her to return Balder, but she refused.

Everyone wanted to get back at Loki. The gods caught him, dragged him into a cave and tied him to a rock. The goddess Skadi carried a live snake into the cave and hung it up above Loki so its venom would drip on to his face. Loki's faithful wife Sigyn stayed by his side, holding a bowl over his head to catch the venom before it hit his face. But sometimes she had to take the bowl away to empty it, and the venom hit its mark then. Loki would writhe in pain during those moments, and his writhing caused earthquakes. So he lay, and so he would remain until Ragnarok (see the following section).

The death of Odin's son Balder is the beginning of the end because it forces the gods to see that Loki is their enemy and that their power is limited — the lines of battle are drawn and it's easy to see who is on which side. The gods imprison Loki, but they now know that he and his three evil children (Fenrir, Hel, and the Midgard Serpent) will fight against them.

## *Ragnarok — the big finish*

This is the way the world will end. First, Midgard will have wars for three winters. The family will break down: fathers will kill sons, brothers will kill brothers, mothers will seduce their sons, and brothers will seduce their sisters. Next will come three fierce winters with no summers between them.

Two wolves will eat the sun and the moon and the stars will vanish from the sky. The trees and mountains will fall down and the wolf *Fenrir* will run free. The sea will rise as the *Midgard Serpent* writhes around, working his way to dry land. The giants will set sail in a boat made from dead men's nails. Loki will take to the water, too, in a boat full of the dead from Hel (the land of the dead, headed by Loki's daughter by the same name).

Fenrir and the Midgard Serpent (Loki's sons) will advance side by side; Fenrir's lower jaw will scrape the ground as his upper teeth brush the sky, and the Midgard Serpent will spew venom everywhere, poisoning all the earth. All the giants and the dead and all other members of the evil team will assemble together.

Meanwhile, the gods will arm themselves and assemble all their warriors from Valhalla. They will march to meet the enemy, Odin and Thor at their head. Yggdrasil, the tree of life, will wave its limbs and shiver as two humans hide inside it.

Odin will immediately attack the wolf Fenrir; after a long fight, Fenrir will swallow Odin and that will be the end of the Allfather. The Midgard Serpent will go for Thor; they will kill each other. The fire giant Surt will kill Freyr. Tyr and a fierce hound will kill one another, as will longtime enemies Loki and

Heimdall. Odin's son Vidar will grab Fenrir's jaws and rip the wolf apart, avenging his father.

The fire giant Surt will fling fire in every direction, and everything in the nine worlds will burn up. Everyone and everything will perish and the earth will sink into the sea.

Everyone will die, that is, but the two humans who hid in Yggdrasill (and a few gods who rise again, including Balder): a man and a woman called Líf and Lífthrasir. The earth will rise out of the sea again, lush and green, and the birds and fish will return. The two humans will have children, who will have children, and life will begin again.