

A woman with long, straight brown hair, wearing a dark, sleeveless dress with a thin white belt, stands in profile on the left side of the frame. She is looking out over a calm lake towards a sunset. The sun is low on the horizon, between two mountain ranges, and its golden light reflects brightly on the water's surface. The sky is filled with soft, golden clouds. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

The TEARS *of*
MARDOLL

Clive
Tolley

OK, it's not an academic work, but a novel based on Norse myths and legends. Let's see if I can get away with advertising it here!

THE TEARS OF MARDQLL

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OF MARDQLL

A SAGA OF ANCIENT DAYS

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Word & Page

First published in England in 2019

by

Word and Page

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ISBN 978-1-9161314-0-8

Cover design by Clive Tolley

Typeset by Word & Page, Chester, UK

Freyja er tignvz mð f̄s h̄ giptisk þ̄ ū
er óðr heit' dottur þ̄ra h̄ hnos h̄o er
s̄ fægr at af h̄nar nafne eru hnos'
kallað þ̄ er fagrt er ⁊ gersum likt
Óðr fór íbravt lanḡ leið en Freyja
grætyr ept' en t̄ h̄ar er gull ravtt
Freyja a marg nafn en s̄v er fæk
til þes at h̄ gaf s̄ ymis heiti er h̄
fór mð okunv̄ þiöðv̄ at leita óðs
h̄ h̄ mardavll ⁊ hoxn gefn h̄r.
freyja attu b̄siga men

Freyja (Lady) is honoured alongside Frigg (Óðinn's wife). She is married to a man called Óðr (Spirit, Verse); their daughter is Hnos (Treasure); she is so beautiful that treasures are called after her, everything that is beautiful and jewel-like. Óðr went away on long journeys, and Freyja weeps, longing for him, and her tears are red gold. Freyja has many names, and the reason for this is that she gave herself various nicknames when she travelled among unknown peoples in search of Óðr; she is called Mardoll (Sea-bright) and Hoxn (Flaxen), Gefn (Giver), Sýr (Sow). Freyja owned the necklace of the Brisingar.

Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*



A NOTE

This story spells the Norse names in an authentic way. In particular, remember that þ and ð (capitals: Þ and Ð) are like English th. There is some more information on spelling, and runes, and the names that come into the story at the back of the book; also a list of strange words, which are marked in the text with °.

THE SUMMONS

THE DRAGON'S BREATH

Running, running. Careering down slippery slopes, no care for the mud splattering her new white socks, dodging the looming trees, feet not keeping up with straining body, lurching forward, hands grasping at branches for support, she almost topples over, as brambles claw at flesh, and scornful roots poke from the ground, like an ancient earth giant's knobbled knees, lifted up on purpose to trip up anyone trying to escape. Is all nature in league with him, plotting to imprison whatever prey chances to come this way, gripping it like the threads of a spider's web, holding its victim fast? Run! Run! He has seen her, she is sure, from that huge red eye she had glimpsed, hidden in the undergrowth, glaring out maliciously from its scaly socket. Fear drives her on, but the forest seems to hold her in its grasp. Where is the way out? He is coming, he is coming! One whiff of his breath, one lick of his tongue will mean the end! Don't let me perish, like all those farmers hereabouts and their cattle and crops! Oh, where does this wood finish? On she runs, frantic, puffing, gasping, just to get free. There, down there! There is the sunlight shining on a field of corn, and safety. She plunges out of the dimness of the wood into the daylight – but just as the comforting warmth of the sun's rays swathes her face, from behind she feels tongues of hot flame: like the blast from a fiery furnace when its dark door suddenly swings open, the dragon's breath licks at her, searing up her legs, up her back, up her neck, scorching her hair, then curling round in front of her. Panting, breathless, how can she help but taste the bitter fumes? She falls, face forward.

“**B**ELLA, WHAT'S THE MATTER?” Her father was sitting on the edge of her bed, leaning over her, his concerned face trying to peer into her worries. “You've been tossing and turning and groaning. You woke us up! Are you all right?”

"It's fine. Just a bad dream."

"You were crying out, you know. And you're all in a sweat, like you were running away from something."

"It's silly. I was being chased by a dragon. Ugh! horrid, beady eyes! He was burning me up from behind, and caught me with his fiery breath just as I was about to get free. Then I woke up. Don't worry, it's just a silly dream."

"Ah, it'll be the trip we did today: that story about the dragon and Sir Peter up at Loschy Hill – remember?"

"Oh, yes."

"Nothing to worry about, then! Now, back to sleep with you!"

THE DREAD KING

A great hall, higher than eye could see, mighty doors swung open on all sides to welcome in troupes of warriors, slain in battle – a hundred abreast in each rank, to add to the throng inside. All its walls are decked out with shields, and weapons lie ready: choice dwelling of the lord of war. The din of his feasting followers, drunk on endless mead milked from Heiðrún, the ever-bounteous goat, echoes to the unseen rafters: yet a pall of anxiety hangs over everything. Is it enough, all this preparation? He can brook no mistakes, nothing that threatens his mastery, that dread lord, as ragna rok° draws near. Grey-cloaked he sits upon his high seat; his countenance, savage from the strife of ages, half shows from behind a wide-brimmed hat: it shades over where his eye should be, the one he pledged away, questing after wisdom. His ample red beard bristles from his chin, bursting with his bloody wrath. On his shoulders sit the servants of his thought, his two ravens, always ready to seek news of battle, always a heartache to him, lest they should not return. In silent judgement he sits, fixing in his one-eyed gaze a girl – a princess, too, to judge by her fine silk dress and jewels. And here she stands before him: she dare not move, dare hardly breathe, as she stares towards him, her eyes cast down. She knows she has done wrong, in his view at least – she, his trusted shield-maiden, his favourite. Fear now has stilled her agile frame: she waits to hear her fate, knowing there is but one punishment he ever metes out for betrayal.

"Brynhildr, my daughter, what have you done? How could you betray me, you, my dearest child, my ever-faithful servant? You have sent me Helmr, a useless warrior, in our time of need, and kept alive

the sturdy young Agnarr for yourself, when we crave his strength in our host of warriors. What do you have to say?"

"Father, it was just for love of Agnarr, who has hardly seen life, that I did not slay him, not to spite you. Have mercy, I beg you."

"You know the punishment!" He grasps his mighty spear, Gungnir. She knows it never fails to find its target. He lifts it, is about to hurl it towards her, when she calls out.

"Father! Remember Baldr! A son you have lost, despite all your efforts, and his fate is dragging you too down to Hel: will you lose your daughter too, and by your own hand? It may be that my hands will hold the talisman° of your own survival."

"What talisman? What do you know?" he demands, his sharpness betraying his anxiety.

"Only time can tell."

He stares at her for a moment. Pangs of doubt play on his mind, and trepidation hovers over his heart.

"Very well, let time tell. But still you will be punished. I curse you to an endless sleep – endless, at least, until that time comes of which you speak. And then you will awake, pass through the wall of fire, and yield your promised help at the last battle. Now, daughter, sleep!" And with that he leaps suddenly from his throne and strikes her in the arm with a sleep thorn before she can move out of the way. Drowsiness falls upon her, and she collapses into an aeon of oblivion on a stony couch. He casts the thorn aside, and, in a kaleidoscope of ages, from it springs a briar thicket, swathing the hall and the treasure within, until the time should come, when tongues of fire, leaping into bloom, dance lightly over thorns: her phoenix day.

"Bella, you're in a tangle again!" said her father. "Another bad dream? Was it the dragon again?"

"No, no dragons." Bella was calmer than the last time, more stunned than outright frightened. "It was weird, so ancient and strange. No running away this time. Just a great hall, covered in shields. And a horrid old one-eyed king who wanted to kill me. And he was my father too, in the dream!" He looked rather worried. "Not like you, daddy," she added. "He stabbed me with a thorn and I fell asleep on a hard bed. What does it all mean?"

"It's just dreams, Bella. You're probably worrying about something underneath. Are things all right with your friends? Are you worried about school?"

"It's all fine. I'm not worried about anything, really. But this dream, I felt like it was really happening to me, but a long, long time ago."

"Well, we'd all better get back to sleep, I think."

Bella stayed awake for a while, thinking, after her father had gone. Was she worried about something, after all, as he had suggested? Then she heard her parents talking. Her door was only just ajar, and so she could hardly catch what they were saying, except, from her mother, "Isn't it about time we told her?" and "These dreams are probably connected to it". But what she meant, only time would tell.

THE RAVENS

Clear sky, two specks circling, circling: searching, ever searching. Flying in wide arcs, scanning earth and sky, slowly descending, two forms take shape, a black and a white, a mighty god's thoughts, and his longing for rest – birds of battle, gathering news, ever yearning for the answer: how to withstand the wolf, how to dry up the dragon's venom – how to live on. Come no closer, carrion-keen spies, messengers of doom: what can the Dread Lord want with a mere girl? "We seek to know: Why does High's daughter suffer ill dreams? Does it portend the end of ages?"

A soft thud was what woke Bella from her dream this time: a fluffy, white Persian cat had jumped on her bed.

"Pangur Bán!" she said, "You're naughty, sneaking in here!"

Pangur couldn't take her mind off the dream entirely, however. These ravens knew she was having nightmares – and somehow it was all linked to the end of the world. What on earth was going on? It was almost like she was being summoned into this other world. That would be some adventure, she thought, but then dismissed the idea. "That's just silly," she said out loud to herself, and decided to go back to sleep and forget about it.

She had no more dreams, for the time being.

