The Shapeshifter's Daughter

Also by Sally Magnusson

Where Memories Go

The Sealwoman's Gift

The Ninth Child

Music in the Dark

The Shapeshifter's Daughter

Sally Magnusson

JOHN MURRAY

First published in Great Britain in 2025 by John Murray (Publishers)

1

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978 1 399 82520 7
Trade Paperback ISBN 978 1 399 82521 4
ebook ISBN 978 1 399 82523 8

Typeset in Sabon MT by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

John Murray policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

www.johnmurraypress.co.uk

John Murray Press, part of Hodder & Stoughton Limited
An Hachette UK company

The authorised representative in the EEA is Hachette Ireland, 8 Castlecourt Centre, Dublin 15, D15 XTP3, Ireland (email: info@hbgi.ie)

For my father and youngest son,
two storytellers called Magnus

Author's Note

The wonderful stories we know as the Norse myths go back to the pre-Christian oral tradition of northern Europe. They were first written down in thirteenth-century Iceland, a country then enjoying an immense flourishing of literary activity that includes the peerless Icelandic sagas. An anonymous author recorded some of the myths in a verse collection known as the *Poetic Edda*. A lost earlier version of these poems was behind a more systematic work by the Icelandic historian, poet and politician Snorri Sturluson. Snorri did his best with the contradictions and obscurities of the original, always with an eye to making Norse beliefs palatable to a medieval Christian readership. His treatise became known as the *Prose Edda*.

The many popularisers of Norse mythology in later centuries have continued to interpret the stories in the context of their times.

In drawing on both Eddas here, I have stayed broadly faithful to the outlines of the exhilarating Norse cosmos and some of its most colourful inhabitants, while embellishing and reframing to suit my own fictional purposes – especially in reimagining the life-journey of the most interesting of them all: Hel of the underworld.

Since the spelling of names is wildly at variance in different tellings, I've proceeded according to personal preference and ease of pronunciation in English.

Midgard

Prologue

A pale moon glow guides him towards the burial mound. It has been a fine winter's night, starlit, although now the moon is being shredded by quickening clouds. He tosses his bicycle on the grass. By the time he is feeling his way along the passage, the light has gone.

He can see nothing inside. It is blacker in this chamber than any blackness he has experienced before, darker than any joy-quenching darkness he has conceived could exist. The sun will come, though. The thought opens and blooms as he makes for the cell in the back wall, arms outstretched, working his fingers along the cold stone, feeling under its tips the marks of the Viking runes. The sun will come today, as it came to warm the polished bones of his Orcadian ancestors. Wait for the sun and then he will know.

Only, his pursuers are also here. He should have known they would come. His pursuers are instantly upon him, pressing around him in the dank air.

With panicky haste he pulls himself into the cell.

All about him the dead are closing in with their accusations. Remember, the shades whisper, how you frightened your child. Remember what you kept from her all those years. Remember what you did to your marriage. Remember that you never created one single thing of worth in all your life that you did not destroy or see curl away in the ashes of failure.

Blindly he fishes in his pocket. Such misery grips him as he holds the unsheathed knife before him; such regret for everything he has failed at; such self-loathing for the way he has treated the

person he loves best; such a longing for the moods to leave him in peace and the pain to be over.

They are reaching for him now with fleshless hands, tugging at his clothes and screaming their reproaches. He shrinks into the stone but there is no escaping his accusers. Raising his knife, he plunges it into them. Again and again he stabs.

Blood ebbs from his wounds. The accusers withdraw. For seconds, whole minutes, peace washes over him – until there rises before him in that chill place an image, clear and bright, of his daughter.

What has he done?

He has to go back.

'It's no use,' observes a new voice. He knows who it is.

He makes an attempt to speak, but his mouth is filling. His breath fights the sensation of falling.

'You're coming with me now,' says the voice. 'You can't go back.'

'It's you,' he mouths.

Sleek grey walls, gleaming a faint blue, are reflecting back his panic. He flings out his arms and feels ice.

Again he tries to speak through the cotton-wool mouth. 'My daughter.' He runs his tongue over lips like sand. 'I need to go to my daughter.'

'Oh, there's no chance of that.' The voice is light, amused, cold as silk. 'You made your choice. You took the coward's path through life – and your last choice, I may say, was the most cowardly of all.'

'I was looking for—'

'Yes?'

'The sun.'

A tinkle of sarcastic laughter. 'Find it, did you?'

'You tell her, then.' His words are slowing. Every syllable feels as if it is labouring through spindrift.

'I tell her?' The note of condescending amusement sharpens. 'Do you know who I am?'

'Tell. Helen.'

His vision is swimming. A face is beginning to form at the edge of it. Such a face. He closes his eyes to shield himself, but still it is there. So is the voice, which this time sounds just a shade irritated. 'Tell her what?'

'That I'm sorry. Tell her I'm sorry.'

'You think I carry messages to the living, foolish man?'

Darkness seeping into him. Ice in every bone.

The voice recovers its silken poise. 'I bring assurances to you alone, Donald Firth, and here they are. Your daughter will never understand what you have done. She will despise you all her days. She will carry the anger and the hurt of it to her own grave. She will be certain of only one thing in all her life: that you destroyed it.'

'Stop,' mouths the man in his torment.

'But this is what I do,' says the smiling voice.

Utgard

I

Imagine, once upon a time, a girl. She lives in a place of wild winds and bald mountains, jagged sea cliffs and pitted lava fields. Its name is Utgard.

With myth's unerring eye for the sensational, the only personal detail that will be recorded about this young woman is her face. This face, as will be agreed by everyone she later encounters, is extraordinary. One side is lustrously, sparklingly, youthfully radiant; the other so discoloured that one day, once the myth-makers have got into their stride, it will be likened to the dark-blue hue of a corpse.

The girl has not seen her face. Nor, in the innocent family times she is enjoying as our own story begins, has her attention been directed to it by anyone else.

The girl lives with her mother and younger brother and sister in the land of the frost giants, which is part of Utgard. She and her siblings are not frost giants themselves. Each is something else entirely, for which state of affairs their father, his antecedents decidedly murky, is not considered blameless. But their mother is a frost giant and proud of it.

Utgard is the outside place, as its Norse name exactly describes. It lies on the periphery of what the wider world (by which is meant Asgard) considers civilisation, although this is one point among many that the girl will have cause to query. Utgard lies beyond and to the east of lofty Asgard, where the gods live, and Midgard, the middle earth, where humans have made their home.

The way these regions connect can be visualised as a world-tree, with its foliage in the heavens, its branches enfolding those

three regions – which in a sense are whole worlds in themselves – and one of its roots extending deep down, deep, deep down, into the icy horrors of Niflheim. The world-tree means little to the girl. The only trees she sees or can imagine are the frail birches of Utgard that spring up here and there on the stony plains, smelling faintly of fruit after a rinsing of rain, shedding their leaves as soon as winter stirs and never within a wind's whisper of reaching the sky.

At the outer edge of Utgard seethes the unruly sea that girdles all the worlds. The girl knows from the old stories that once upon an even further distant time there was no sea. No earth, nor sky, nor stars, nor day, nor night. There existed then only a bottomless abyss, a yawning void called Ginnungagap, in which the beginning of all things was waiting to be. Odin, the Allfather, the Uncreated, the Unseen, dwelled in the depths of this abyss and willed, and what he willed came to be.

First within the void, to the north, arose a cold place of freezing mists and swirling waters. This is Niflheim, home of the dark. Ice gathered in Niflheim, huge blocks of it, thick and blue, rolling over and under each other, screaming and bellowing in the depths.

In the south there came into being Muspell, which is as hot as Niflheim is cold. Muspell is on fire, its flames constantly fanned by whirling winds. At its edge stands Surtur, the Black One, who guards it with his flaming sword until the end of the world itself.

At the place where the ice of Niflheim met the warm winds from Muspell, Ginnungagap began to thaw. And it was there, in the midst of this great, dripping, primordial mildness, that life began. Within the quickening ice a male body formed. He was a vast frost giant, a really, really, unimaginably vast giant, whose name was Ymir.

The particular physiology of Ymir puzzles the girl if she thinks too hard, but she does find it pleasing that the first created

creature in the cosmos should have been a frost giant, one from whom all races of god, giant and human are alike descended. She cannot imagine that the gods are happy about conceding this status to their oldest enemies; but, then, the obscure, mysterious figure of Odin does take the credit for willing it to happen in the first place, so perhaps they don't mind.

Ymir seems to have been quite a fellow, though. As he was slumbering down there in the abyss, he sweated – so much so that from under his left arm there grew a male and a female, while one of his legs succeeded in mating with the other leg and begetting a son. The girl has given up wondering how this happened and accepts what the stories say: that from these astonishingly conceived figures the clan of frost giants came.

The first gods were begotten in a manner no less startling. First a cow was formed. Four rivers of milk ran from her udders to nourish Ymir while she sustained herself by licking salt from the hoar that had formed on the great blocks of ice. As her tongue rasped across one of the blocks, a male figure began to form inside it: first there was hair, then there was a head, and on the third day came the whole man. He was called Buri, this man. He was beautiful, big and strong, and from him are descended the gods.

Buri had a son by the name of Bor, who took as his wife Bestla the giantess. Together they had three sons, Vili, Ve and Odin, the latter son contriving to be born into the world he had personally created and in which he was about to get started on some less savoury activities. The girl is yet to discover her own role in one of these.

Odin and his brothers took it upon themselves to murder the hapless Ymir. They ripped him apart, flesh from bone, blood from vein, head from neck, eye from skull. Which does seem ungrateful of them, the girl has sometimes thought, although no doubt it had to be done, because the sons of Bor went on to shape the whole world out of Ymir's torn body and here she is,

alive to question it. From Ymir's blood and sweat the brothers made the churning sea and the quiet lakes, from his flesh the earth, from his curly hair the trees, from his bones the serrated mountain cliffs and from his teeth millions and millions of gravelly stones. Out of his giant skull they fashioned the sky itself. Then they threw his brain into the air and clapped and cheered as it turned into clouds.

Humans had not yet been conceived, but in readiness for that day the sons of Bor prepared a place for them to live with the one resource from Ymir's body still to hand: his giant eyelashes, long and fair. The three gods seized the eyelashes to form Midgard, and there that land lay, waiting for its people.

One day, walking along the seashore, the sons of Bor happened on two trees that had been stripped by the tides and washed up on the beach. From this knotty and battered driftwood, Odin, Vili and Ve carved human beings. All the day long, as the white waves withdrew and then tumbled back, the gods worked on their creations. They gave them movement; they bestowed intelligence, thought, the ability to see, hear and smell; Odin himself donated to them his very breath.

The gods pondered what they should call these, the first two humans in all the worlds. They chose the names of the two trees from which they had been carved. Both trees produced strong wood capable of enduring much. The woman they called Elm (Embla) and the man Ash (Aska). Together the pair went to live in Midgard.

The girl is curious about Elm and Ash, and about what those who came after them might be like. Humans are never seen in Utgard, and even the gods seem to take little interest in what Odin himself had a hand in creating.

As a home for themselves the gods made Asgard, calling it after their family name, Aesir, and adorning it with what is said to be a pleasant green landscape and many fine halls. In one of these halls Odin sits on his high seat with his wife Frigg by his

side. It is to there that he returns from his famously restless wanderings, which he undertakes on his eight-legged horse Sleipnir in a bid to find out something, anything, that might forestall the doom that prophecies warn will destroy the gods one day.

Odin is clever. Everyone knows this. He sacrificed an eye to know all there is to know, gouging out the jellied ball with his own hand so that he might be permitted to drink at the well of wisdom; although, as the frost giants are apt to mutter among themselves, true wisdom might counsel some humility. Odin is fickle in his moods and loyalties, which makes him dangerous to friend and foe alike and heartily disliked by all. On this latter point, though, the girl's sources are in fairness limited. She mainly hears of the foibles and follies of the Aesir through frost-giant gossip and the barbed tales of her father, Loki, who despises both god and giant alike (for all that he is a bit of both himself) and is delighted to be responsible for as many of their troubles as he can arrange.

Meanwhile, the frost giants of Utgard, pounded by ocean waves at the edge of the world, pursue wars without end with the gods of Asgard, who, conveniently forgetting who instigated the barbarous slaughter of the primordial giant Ymir in the first place, regard these ancient foes as unregenerate forces of chaos and destruction. For their part the frost giants take a modest comfort in reminding themselves that they were created first.

Much of Utgard is volcanic wilderness. The winds blowing across it from the sea have been known to freeze the girl's eyelashes when picking her way across it. This is a land where streams of lava still erupt from the convulsing mountains of Muspell that helped to shape it. Many of these lava flows have been frozen by time into fearful shapes that loom grey and motionless over the rumpled landscape. The girl knows they are really mountain trolls who have wandered too far under cover of

darkness and been turned to stone by the light of Day. What might it take to awaken their clumping malevolence? she wonders sometimes, passing beneath with a shiver.

Far up in the heavens the Sun and Moon are chased by two wolves, while Night and her son Day take turns to ride overhead in their chariots. Day's horse is Skinfaxi (Shining Mane), who lights up all the sky and all the earth, making Utgard's glaciers glisten and the pools of water from which the birches drink shimmer. Night's horse is Hrimfaxi (Frost Mane). Foam from his bit feathers the gaunt rocks of Utgard and leaves traces of white on the cairns that have been built along the hewn pathways, one stone tossed upon another to guide the traveller home through the lava. Sometimes Hrimfaxi's foam can be seen on the skyline, lightly spattered over an infant troll's bald head. That makes the girl laugh.

Compared to trolls, the frost giants of Utgard are not especially big. True, they are larger than the divinely proportioned denizens of Asgard, although the many expeditions of Thor the thunder god into giantland have made it abundantly clear that at least one god has nothing to brag about when it comes to pert dimensions.

Nor does the land itself wholly live up to the frosty epithet. Yes, there are mountains that never lose their snow and glaciers frozen to the core, and in the darker seasons the cold does indeed slice to the very bone. But in the months before Skinfaxi takes his winter rest, this land also revels in long nights of sunshine, when the sky hoards its light and the mountains are washed in orange.

The girl loves the summer sun. Yet when she wakes before dawn to discover that Hrimfaxi has been scumming the puddles and coating the lava rocks with ice hair, she reflects that frost can also be beautiful. The girl has a feeling for beauty.

This is a land where the earth splits without warning and the mountains' weary habit of exploding keeps families constantly on the move, fleeing choking air and the ooze of molten rock.

The women look for shelter elsewhere then, and a fertile place to set up home and tend the beasts, while the male giants sally forth to find new (and in the female view of it, interminably wearying) ways of getting one up on the gods, a perennial favourite being their innumerable attempts to steal Thor's powerful hammer. Life goes on. But in the meantime the girl has begun to discern something else about lava.

She notices that in some places where an older flow has hardened to pitted rock, green moss has colonised it. Aeons this must have taken. Aeons and aeons for stone to grow a cushion. The girl presses her face into the sleep-soft moss, first carelessly on one side and then more gingerly on the other, where the skin feels brittle and dry. She digs her hands deep inside the spongy spores and delights in warm, damp soil. She buries her nose among the trailing fibres and is intoxicated by the aroma of lush earth. Stroking the roots, she marvels that growth can be salvaged from even the hardest rock and the blackest dust.

In this waste of stone, tiny summer flowers have begun pushing into life: purple clots of creeping thyme, the blue ache of a lone forget-me-not, dots of pink campion in the sand. Wandering further, she gathers froths of meadowsweet and stars of bedstraw and handfuls of violet geraniums that have begun to peek through the volcanic gravel. By the coast she collects armfuls of the daisy flower they call *Baldursbrá*, named after a god whose beauty is famed as far as Utgard, although it never occurs to the girl to wonder why a flower with shining white petals and a bright yellow centre should be called after the brow of a son of Odin. She will find out soon.

What interests the girl now is only this: that volcanic sand can yield up flowers; that red lava can generate green moss; that here before her eyes ancient fire is begetting life.

As her brother leaps for salmon in the white river and her sister watches drowsily from between folded lids, the girl experiments. She squeezes stalks and shakes seeds and rubs petals. She

dries and soaks and boils and mixes, producing soggy pastes and dubious-looking potions which her mother, Angrboda, accepts with a smile, agreeing that her cough has eased nicely, thank you, and the cut on this finger has mended with astonishing speed and she has never slept so well in all her life. The girl is not sure whether to believe her mother or not, but her own pleasure in the mutation of stone into bloom, the miraculous mending of harm, is certain enough.

There comes to the girl then, in a jolt of insight, a glimpse of what she, Hel, daughter of Angrboda, the frost giant, and Loki, most disreputable of all the gods of Asgard, might be for.

It is as fleeting as any insight that cannot be nourished and develops no root. Almost as soon as it arrives it will vanish in a flurry of toned muscles and golden curls. Because this is the summer that two gods will come to Utgard to hunt down the children of Loki. This is the summer the girl will learn who, and what, she is really meant to be.