



LOKI'S WAGER

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◆ VIKINGVERSE ◆

BOOK TWO

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*To Beatrice and Benjamin,
and all the saviours of Mother Jörð*

*The gods in Ithavoll meet together,
Of the terrible girdler of earth they talk,
And the mighty past they call to mind,
And the ancient runes of the Ruler of Gods.*

Völuspá 60

BOOK ONE: TIME IS

— TRUMBA'S LAMENT —

Ormr inn Langi, Imperial Yacht in orbit above Midgard
1969

How peaceful she looks.”

The Empress stared down on the world below, her face as blank and remorseless as the sun. She rested her head against the hollow and traced her finger around the vacuum seal—the membrane flinched, then recoiled more slowly, adjusting to the momentary change in pressure.

Iðunn Lind watched the woman intently, a mere slip of a girl, her face half hidden by a delicate linen veil, her sing-song voice incongruent in its innocence.

“The first time I saw her, I was amazed. That tiny jewel, wispy and blue, was Mother Jörð. I held out my fingers as if to pluck her from the sky. I thought I’d feel like a god, but I didn’t. I felt very, very small.”

The waif drifted from hollow to hollow, trailing her long, red woolen dress in solemn procession across the prow of the ship.

Iðunn felt sick to the pit of her stomach. She knew this going to be gruesome, but even so, she felt compelled to join the young woman at the viewpoint. She had seen the transmissions, of course. Everyone had. But this was different. This was gazing into the abyss. Perhaps she had ventured all this way to bear witness. *Where were you when the world ended?* It wasn’t a question anyone thought to ask, because it shouldn’t be answerable.

The hollow loomed from floor to ceiling, affording a dizzying view. She had no choice but to look out.

The pea-green pearl was gone. A violent red smog roiled from pole to pole, and beneath it the glaciers had already begun their deadly march. The planet was inside out, wet with guts and bone. The scale of destruction was immense, unimaginable. Iðunn thought she knew grief, but her long years of loss were nothing compared to this.

“Do they understand why this happened?” The question caught in her throat. She struggled to turn her head away, to regain her composure.

Beneath the walls of her skin, her mind echoed with anguish, floundering in the darkest of depressions. Who hadn’t drowned in the madness of it all? she thought, as the tears tumbled down her face. Who was there left to fathom?

Dómhild Trumba didn’t answer. There was no need. Midgard had fallen, her Empire of the Heavens reduced to dust and viscera. Explanations wouldn’t change anything.



Only the poetry of myth and legend could capture the catastrophe, the skalds would say. It was Ægir’s daughters who rose that night, pitching and surging and grasping at the cities of man. Hálogi had burst from the earth, seething with wildfire, a procession of Eldjötnar at his heels.

*Fierce grows the steam and the life-feeding flame,
Till fire leaps high about heaven itself.*

But no lay could truly describe the collapse of Gulrstein Caldera, or the clouds of splintered rock and ash that blanketed the West, choking crops and livestock. No wordsmiths could convey the horror of flash-flooded cities, ripped in two by boiling seas.

If only it had ended there. Mankind had been humbled, Mother Jörð broken, but together they might have fought on, out of desperation or defiance. Across the planet there were survivors, of course: in the forests of Markland, in the mountains of the Rus, in the vain citadels of Aztland. Even in the seas off Furðustrandir, where a hundred thousand vessels struggled against the blood-dimmed tide. The relief efforts were quickly underway, the fleet flitting to and from the Hinterworlds. The rich, the noble, the powerful: they were ferried to safety.

But that was just the beginning.

Those who witnessed the bayonet of light say it outshone the moon. Like the flash of the sun on snow, it was dazzling for an instant—then the bloom faded, leaving a tear in the ash-dark clouds. It wasn’t a solar flare, the seiðrmenn said. They could have predicted that, prepared for it. No, this was something much more powerful.

A collision.

A black hole, a wanderer, a vagrant that decided to settle down in the heart of a distant sun. The immense gravity ripped it to pieces, shredding it to vapor, then announced its presence with twin beams of unstoppable fury. Surtr's sword had cleaved the heavens.

Hours later, the rains came. Scalding, boiling rains, each droplet a deceit, a disguise for the radiation that fell from the cosmos. Across Trankebar, Frederiksnagore, and Ny Danmørk, across the whole of Asaland, people dropped and died where they stood. Hindoo, Norse, or Chitai, it made no difference: a third of the globe cooked, bubbling into a soup of glue and protein.

Götterdämmerung, Ragnarök, the doom of the gods, the *meistari* called it, trying to protect the survivors with dreamlike tales, ringing their fading horizons with forts of the imagination. The destruction was preordained, they cried. In time, the earth would emerge out of the sea, and be green and fair again. The gods would return to their golden tables amid the grass.

But Iðunn Lind no longer traded in fiction. Her job was to speak truth to power. Even after all the horrors of the Jötunn War, she was still a Verðandi, the head of an ancient order of diviners and healers, tied to the warp and the weft of humanity.

She'd heard the Tree scream even before the first bulletins from Midgard. Iðunn had sent her mind thrashing through the greenways in a blind panic, driven by instinct, drawn to the carnage by duty and by desperation. And here she was, in orbit, above a world lying in state, with a Head of State who was considerably more alive than the rumours had suggested.

She knew enough to call it what it was.

Obliteration. The word meant to remove from existence, to purge from memory. That implied orchestration. The crime was immense.

Fuckers, she thought. Someone would have to pay.



The *Ormr inn Langi* hung above the troposphere like a shroud. The crown of the ship was a fly's eye dome, a geodesic bubble with hollows all around, cradling the stars. There was ample room for the two women to stand vigil.

The old warship was riven with fungus. Iðunn could smell the decay, sweet and sickly. She wrinkled her nose. At least the dull hum of the GEM field was reassuring. Very... grounding, she deadpanned. With the world hung, drawn, and quartered, gallows humour was

the only thing she could trust. She felt utterly flat—like a fragmentary tapestry rather than a living, breathing creature.

There was some comfort in holding tight to the ship's bulkhead, in proving she maintained a grip on reality, however tenuous. The symmetry always struck her as beautiful. The Norse believed the first man and woman were born of trees, and that the universe was rooted around the great World Tree, Yggdrasil. Their warriors took to the seas in clinker-built vessels of oak and pine, shattering empires and claiming soil with blood. And when there were no more lands to conquer, the ancient forests delivered still more bounty. Iðunn's own oh-so-illustrious great-grandfather had unlocked the greenways, gateways to the supposed realms of gods—other planets, flung across the heavens. It was inevitable that when the Norse sought out the cosmos, they did so in living, breathing ships, grown from the same stock as Yggdrasil. During her rehabilitation, she'd been proud to play shipwright, merging tradition with technology.

Trees were life.

And death. The *Ormr inn Langi* was a hulk, long since designated as the imperial tomb, preserved just to be blasted off into the Gap. It was easy to imagine the blue sphere of flames engulfing the ship's crown, flickering in the vacuum, a votive offering to a silent void.

She wondered whether the Empress was aware of the irony of having survived an extinction-level event in her own mausoleum.

Odin himself had decreed all dead men should be burned, and their belongings laid with them upon the pile, and for the ashes to be cast into the sea or buried in the earth. Everyone would come to Valhöll with the riches he or she had gathered about them. A woman of consequence like Trumba would have a mound raised to her memory, and for each of her distinguished warriors, a standing stone, a custom older than the Empire itself. Until now, Iðunn reflected. There were so many dead down below, it would take a whole new Stone Age to carve the memorials.

"And the heavens departed as a scroll when it is rolled together. If you look closely, there, do you see? That. That was my Winter Palace."

Iðunn glanced over at Trumba, mouthing her prayers in the dark. She'd seen the Empress on sightbands before, been lectured by her lawspeakers in the Criminal Courts, but she'd never seen her in the flesh. The volcanic glow of the planet played about her face, the contrast of the veil making a harlequin's mask, her quizzically arched eyebrows accentuated by the wrinkled material. The effect was of catlike sensuality and slyness.

“Difficult to tell...” the Empress continued. “Every mountain and island moved out of their places. The Board of Ordnance won’t be amused.”

Iðunn’s own body was shapeless and drab by comparison. Her dress looked funereal in the twilight. It was unadorned, with a heavier veil than that which the Empress wore—a handmaiden’s, no doubt. She’d need a new vehicle, given time. This one was a thin disguise, but it had been the only occipital lobe available to hijack onboard. Iðunn was amazed she had gotten so close, so quickly, but in truth it was a mixed blessing. A servant would only see so much. She’d need to follow a Varangian to circumvent security. Come to think of it, where were the guards?

“I could never stand Miklagard, you know. All those stinking Serkir, effete Grikkir, and greedy Gyðingar,” the Empress said, now focused on the fragments of the Imperial capital. “Still, melting pot never seemed a more apt description...” she cackled. She didn’t really seem to care whether her handmaiden was listening or not. Like a child, she should be seen and not heard.

Iðunn didn’t know what was worse, the cataclysm below or the off-hand callousness the Empress displayed. Trumba had never been popular, either as an entitled heir or a savage and brutal ruler. In fact, her reign had been so imperiled, so fraught with difficulty, people openly referred to her as the Mayfly Queen. The rumours of the assassination—the military coup out on Mímisbrunnr, Trumba deposed just months into her reign—had seemed like wish fulfillment to many of her subjects, Iðunn included. But like it or loathe it, the Verðandi had mouths to feed and the Empress was her meal ticket.

The worlds were still full of robber barons and corrupt jarls—the drengskapr set, drunk on plunder and war-stories. And her children were gone, torn from her, scattered, hiding in sooty fens and rime-jewelled caves—or else on display in macabre mobile zoos, rolled between townships, jeered at by the very fools they had hoped to save. Iðunn knew the punishment never matched the crime. Her revolution had failed.

She knew she’d got off lightly and she knew exactly why. True, she was the head of her order, but that meant little—Trumba had decapitated the Urðr sisterhood twice before. Being directly related to the great Karl Lind, the Leaf King himself, had provided her with some protection.

But most of all, she was free because she held the secret of the Apples. Iðunn could not only create, shape, and restore life. She could

extend it, far beyond a normal mortal span. One sweet, tantalizing bite of her apples was tantamount to immortality. Figuratively, of course. In reality, telomerase was delivered in tablet form, twice daily, but she did at least administer it with Fructone, a synthetic aroma compound with the requisite fruity smell.

Trumba had been all too ready to pardon her crimes, to redeem the Verðandi order, in return for what they knew. It was obvious she had no scruples of any kind. Iðunn stopped feeling sorry for herself, at least long enough check that Trumba was still happily extemporizing.

“The morning dew for meat shall they have, such food shall men then find.... Thence are gendered the generations...” The Empress was getting whimsical. She must have swallowed whole texts from the Ministry of Propagation.

Perhaps this wasn't a good idea. Iðunn imagined she could slip away, unnoticed. Her feet were cold, literally and figuratively—handmaids weren't given regulation footwear, it seemed. To where? she reminded herself, quickly. Dump the follow and return to her own body in Helheim? What was the point? Months had passed since her sentencing. Her new laboratory was always cold, even though buried deep in the glacier. They'd been set to work on the graving docks, little more than chattel, birthing miracles at the behest of Imperial logisticians. The new biohaven, Elvidnir, wasn't so much a place as a state of misery. She'd heard depression described as being like viewing the world through a sheet of plate glass; on Helheim, it would be more accurate to say a sheet of thick, semi-opaque ice. The effects were the same. She was irritable, clumsy, prone to accidents. The work was stultifying, demeaning, and every day was a chore. All the promise of mankind distilled into cheap DNA splices and spiteful tortures.

No wonder her mind wandered. Literally, in the case of a Verðandi.

Following had always been her strong suit, leaping behind the mind of some unwitting stooge, nestling behind their consciousness, watching the world through their eyes. The younger Völur had augmented the spell-songs with technology, visors linked to all-seeing machines. Iðunn had forgotten more about the galdrar than she'd care to admit, but she still didn't need those kinds of crutches. She used the follows to look for her children, scouring the oblasts of Vanaheimr through the eyes of a Gael banjaxer, or swooping through the hoodoos of the Niðavellir Badlands aboard a Langobard air yacht pilot. She couldn't help them, her children, but it was reassuring to know they were out there. Surviving.

“Líf and Lífthrasir, lurking, hidden, in the wood of Hoddmímir; do you think the ancient seeress meant us? Two survivors, high in the boughs,” the Empress asked. It took a moment before Iðunn realized that Trumba was addressing her directly this time. She turned the body to meet her gaze. Trumba was radiant, arraigned gracefully on the adjacent bulkhead, still looking out on Midgard. Iðunn wanted to stare, to drink in that porcelain skin, to bask in the pale fire of her hair, the taut chains of muscle that coiled under her loose woolen dress.

She checked herself. Clever... an aphrodisiac, the Empress toying with her through chemical signals. Trumba was a woman determined to have her way, and clearly had an arsenal of means to do so. The Verðandi realized that the Norse had come a long way during the war. While her Apples might give them longevity, all the other tinkering and shaping had turned even a simple conversation into a battle. Like an ancient holmgang, a duel to the first blood between rival combatants.

“So, Lector, how long have you been watching me?” Trumba purred, still staring down at the broken planet. Iðunn startled. The truth was, she had no idea. Those pheromones really were the best that money could buy.

“Oh, don’t worry, you’re not my type. I frown on necrophilia. It wasn’t just the staring that gave you away. Augmented Majesty has that effect on most people. But a word to the wise—thralls don’t often question their Empress, especially thralls who were recently ritually sacrificed. *Do they understand why this happened?*” the Empress said, mimicking her earlier question. “Please,” she scoffed.

Iðunn cursed, and glanced down at her hands, hoisting her sleeves in the darkness. Severed radial arteries. That would explain the challenges with animating the host—and the sickly aroma clogging the air. It was blood. Her blood. She must follow more carefully in the future, she chided herself. Check for a stronger pulse.

The Empress looked directly into *her*, beyond the vessel.

“I’m touched by your concern. For coming all this way. How long do you plan to have me under surveillance?”

“Until I understand why this all happened,” Iðunn replied tartly. The handmaiden’s body rattled and wheezed with the effort. She flirted momentarily with letting the body slump to the floor. She only needed its eyes and vocal chords—her cover revealed, maintaining good posture for the sake of decorum was a waste of effort.

"This? This was an Act of the Gods." Trumba laughed mirthlessly. "Unless you think I have something to confess? This isn't my handiwork, impressive though it is."

"I don't know what to think. I don't even know if there is a point to thinking. First the Jötunn War, now this."

"You clearly don't think enough to address me appropriately. The correct form is 'Your Majesty,' Iðunn."

"You know who I am then?"

Iðunn stayed motionless, resisting the urge to punch the wall in frustration or flee from the follow. No wonder it had been easy! She kicked herself mentally. She hadn't just arrived on the *Ormr inn Langi*, she'd been diverted, fished from the greenways to flop around on deck like some gullible halibut. Summoned. She hated being summoned. Still, Iðunn refused to bow and scrape. Trumba, despite all her tricks, would never be more than a girl to her. She simply stared back, indignant, until the silence grew suffocating.

Trumba turned back to the hollow, clearly amused. "You plan to play Skirlock Holmr? The Adventure of the Final Problem perhaps? What is the protocol for a death scene investigation on a planetary scale?"

There was no answer to that.

"Tell me, what would you have done down there? If I hadn't fetched you to safety? Inhabited a thrall's cinder instead of a handmaiden's corpse? Fat lot of good that would have done your search for answers. And what you hope to retrieve from the ruins of mankind? The fingerprints of vengeful gods?"

She laughed, bitterly this time, choking back a sob. Perhaps there was feeling in there after all. Her next comment was much softer.

"Will she heal?"

"Who? Mother Jörð?" Iðunn paused. "In time. But I doubt there will be a good harvest for a few hundred years. Ash clouds, nitric acid..."

The insight proved a prelude to more tears, that welled again in protest at the absurdity of it all.

Trumba tutted, clearly irritated. "That long? The islands of Aceh and Samudra, the southeastern oceans—there is an arc of volcanoes that have erupted before. Countless times. I imagined a quicker convalescence. And the stars—I see they can erupt, too?"

"Yggdrasil records it all in her rings. As to the stars, I have no idea, I am no Skuld." Iðunn shrugged.

"The Skuld are gone, most of them anyway. Traitors. Did you know they left me to die?"

“Your Majesty. Rumours of your demise are clearly much exaggerated.” Iðunn hadn’t been part of any conspiracy, hadn’t been asked. She didn’t understand why—to her mind, it would have been the obvious move, to at least try and rekindle her rebellious spirit. Perhaps she carried the stench of failure. Perhaps Helheim was simply too remote. After all, a cleaved head never plots.

“No, not overly exaggerated. Have you ever been poisoned? Circles appear before your eyes: red and orange. A ringing in the ears, it caught my breath. And such sense of fear! Poison is an unmanly weapon, but even so, those rassagr bungled the attempt on my life. And so here I am, watching the mourners become the mourned.”

“They prepared a state funeral?” Iðunn was impressed by the attention to detail. It was the act of meticulous minds.

“Down to the choice of traditional burial dress. I woke up here, in the middle of the end. Ringside seat. Death makes for a good alibi, I trust?” Trumba sighed.

“Then did the Skuld engineer this?” Iðunn pointed to the devastation below. The third order of Vǫlur, all military engineers, trying to bend the universe to their will. If anyone could collapse the Earth’s crust and blow up a star at the same time, it was them. “A mistake maybe? A failed experiment, crashing out of control?”

“No. The Skuld were closely watched. Besides, they rarely left their wedded bliss on Mímisbrunnr. One scant consolation for all this... harrowing.” She gestured to the chaos below. “All those deceitful, conniving, backstabbing—arse-stabbing—mathematicians winked out of existence in an instant.” Trumba looked up slyly. “Along with your Roarer,” she added.

Iðunn’s rebuttal was fierce. “He was never *my* Roarer. We were fighting for freedom, for opportunity. None of the Children would have done this. They wouldn’t be capable of such...” She drifted off. She had wanted to say malice, but the word didn’t do the damage justice.

Mikjáll Hofgard had been her partner in the Jötunn War, a philosopher, a rabble rouser, and a Kristin to boot. He’d been Father to her Mother, siring whole vats of vipers in the Ironwoods of Jötunheim. It had been a marriage of convenience, though, at least at the end. Desire you could synthesize, passion could be mass-produced—but love, love required nurturing. Mikjáll had been too entangled in his work to realize that.

Dead then, on Mímisbrunnr. She felt her mind heave. She wanted to vomit but she had no physical connection to a mouth.

“Nothing is as heady as the wine of possibility.’ One of the last things he said to me. I had him tortured. His mind cracked like an egg, oozing all kinds of nonsense. It sounded like a threat. Was it?” Trumba continued, idly.

“The war was over, our networks broken,” Iðunn described. “And, despite his showmanship, the Roarer was just one man. I don’t see how he could be in two places at once. Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth.”

“Bravo, very droll,” Trumba said, recognizing the quote.

Iðunn was stung into retaliation. “I don’t mean to be funny. This must be traumatic, even for a narcissist like you.”

“Which part? The murder attempts? Or the end of *my* Empire?” Trumba suddenly tore the veil from her dress, her face contorted in murderous rage. The harlequin’s mask turned from farce to tragedy: it was clear that she’d been badly beaten, her face swollen with shades of purple and blue.

Iðunn’s borrowed face remained a mask of impassivity, but underneath she was shocked to the core.

“How dare they?” Trumba screamed. “I see my face and feel nothing but loathing. I am a half-living ghost, imprisoned for days in my own sepulchre. You think you are the only one to have lost? I’ve lost children too!”

In that moment, there was something feral about her. Trumba coiled upwards like a snake, poised to strike. Iðunn wondered at the extent of her enhancements, at what kind of corruptions supreme power would twist into its DNA.

And then the Empress relaxed, a lone tear trickling down her broken cheek. “They even slaughtered my old horse, although it was well past its prime. Poor creature was bled out, until it was as white as a Helhest, then left at my feet. Now, I need a gin. I’ve had nothing but water. I could drink the sea dry.”

She turned back to Iðunn, calmer now, her temper in check.

“Still, that’s one of the benefits of being dressed for Valhöll. Servants entombed with you. It afforded us this opportunity for a nice fireside chat.” The Empress unstopped a clear glass bottle and sluiced its contents into a golden goblet. “Can I count on your loyalty? There are so few of us left.”

“There must be survivors, among our sisters,” Iðunn said, ignoring the request and the distinct lack of hospitality. On the far side of the

planet, no doubt some of the adept had escaped, fleeing through the thinning branches of Yggdrasil and staggering through the storm to one of the Hinterworlds. The millennia-old galdr had been their salvation. Perhaps some of the imprisoned Jötnar had made it too. She'd taught her children well.

"Perhaps, but nothing can be done for them now. I am sure the military have them... contained."

"It can't be coincidence."

"I completely agree. There is no blind chance. Even Blind Höðr's aim was guided by Loki. Our gods don't play dice, they plan moves on a board."

It was Iðunn's turn to laugh. "There are no gods. This can't be laid at their door."

"You've never believed?" Trumba asked incredulously.

"Oh, once. When I was young." Iðunn had always heard the whisper of her ancestors about the family farm and called to the spirits watching from the monolithic trees. But as she grew older and her calling became clear to her, she had almost single-handedly changed the way the Empire understood its heritage. The World Tree, Yggdrasil, was the sentient, harmonious core of existence, not some spiteful reclusive god, lurking in the backs of minds and the depths of forests.

"You've grown out of it?" Trumba smiled, nodding her assent. "Regardless, there is a natural order to mankind. I rule by divine right."

The people get the gods they deserve, Iðunn thought, keeping the sentiment to herself. Man was god to man. Man was wolf to man.

"After the earthquakes and tidal waves, I think my subjects will be docile. More tractable. After all, these *events* have all been written. Long ago. The Völuspá, the prophecy of the seeress. And did Gylfi not return from Asgard, with these warnings? Did Óðinn not tell Vafprúðnir how the world ended?"

Trumba seemed discorporate, glowing in the vespertine light of the hollow.

"And was reborn."

Iðunn started to interrupt but was swept away by the Empress's enthusiasm. "I used to envy the father of our race, dwelling as he did in the new-made fields of Asgard; but no more. People think the end is upon us, a punishment from whatever gods they cry to, but they are wrong. We live in creation's dawn.

*‘The Elfin-beam | shall bear a daughter,
Ere Fenris drags her forth;
That maid shall go, | when the great gods die,
To ride her mother’s road.’*

“What do you mean?” Iðunn asked with a sigh, never one for esoterica or scripture. She didn’t intend to go down a mystical rabbit-hole with Trumba playing Aðaliz, trying to become the Empress of Hearts as well as the Heavens. But she could feel Trumba’s energy; she admired it even. It felt so alive, when she felt so dead. Mentally and physically.

“That depends. The World Tree? Can it be saved? Will your Verðandi help?”

Iðunn shook her head. “The tree is damaged. The greenways have decayed; the connections barely work, if at all.”

She knew Trumba was probing to find out more. The Empress had once optimised her empire using a brilliant machine, MIM. Her supercomputer and Yggdrasil were one and the same, at root.

“But they work?”

Trumba drew herself up to her full height and thrust out her arms, grabbing the hollow at both edges. Perhaps this was what it meant to rule—taking the slenderest of hopes and weaving a future.

She turned and grinned wolfishly. “Iðunn, it is time to rebuild. Forget about why this happened, only relish that it has happened. All the Empire’s problems, eradicated. The Hindoo slums are swept clean, the Skuld ants boiled alive. The faithless jarls must be quaking in their jackboots. It is time to build anew. A golden age. We are the gods now.”