

History Lessons

By TAROT BARNES

On one of the high hills above his village, Aurgelmir Hrimthurs rested his weary body on a fallen log and gazed over the deep valley that protected his home.

The shadow of night had long since swallowed the world, yet the ground was far from dim. The base of the valley glowed in the hearth light of a hundred huts and around him the grass shone silver beneath a galaxy of stars. Here and there the pristine sky was broken by fragments of grey cloud.

Aurgelmir knew he should not be there. The few predators that existed in the forests had long since learned to avoid humans but wolves were not the only animals that hunted. The times were not safe, to the south Hákan had been growing ever more aggressive. Allied villages had announced small parties of dark men between the trees. There had even been raids on isolated homesteads... yet he was not worried. Whatever might be happening, the human world would be suspended tonight.

It would happen tonight. The signs had been building for weeks, there was an unnatural stillness about the village, few people talked for fear of their last words being ones of jest.

Tonight the Gods would make themselves apparent in the world of men. Their Judgement would define the land for the next few generations, as it had before.

Aurgelmir was an old man, four decades of life having wearied his flesh and left deep marks upon his bones, but even he had not witnessed the last Judgement.

The Gods being the Gods, no one could explain, much less understand, the motives behind their movements. No one knew why they selected some villages and spared others. No one knew why some of those they returned were better, some were the same or why some never returned. One thing was certain, the Judgement was a sight to behold.

For a moment, Aurgelmir thought he felt a vibration in the ground and then, as if it had always been there, something existed in the sky.

The legends spoke of a great spear that hovered over the world, flinging balls of flame at those villages the Gods had selected for destruction and pouring the water of life

on those they had blessed, but what Aurgelmir saw in the sky was no spear. It had the shape of a spear, but one only a giant could wield; it was easily the length of the entire valley and detailed with pits and gorges. Parts of the Spear were illuminated as if the sun shone on them, others as if they themselves were the sun... or perhaps merely coloured stars. Nothing appeared to hold the spear in place yet it hung immobile. Even the clouds avoided it.

Despite his weariness, Aurgelmir stood in awe of the vision before him. The spear seemed to hover directly above him, above his whole village. Such was its size that despite its distance it seemed as if he could make out every detail on its surface.

Then, as suddenly as the appearance of the spear itself, a white hot stream of fire burst from its flank to illuminate some distant part of the land. From his elevation, Aurgelmir could see the spot where the light touched and felt sorrow. This was surely the fire the legends spoke of and he knew intimately what it was torching; Ari was a friend to his village and the people kin. He took some comfort in the knowledge that they would not suffer long; he had been to places where the Gods had Judged and even multiple generations later, the God's fire had burned so hot that the land still yielded no life.

The stream lasted for an instant longer then shut off as suddenly as it had begun, only to be replaced by a second stream on the opposite side of the spear. This time Aurgelmir grunted in satisfaction when he saw which village had been destroyed; Hákan would no longer be a threat to anyone.

This time the Gods did not wait for their fire to extinguish itself before unleashing another lance, then another. For long minutes the sky was ablaze with white hot streams, each as precise in their placement as a needle.

Then the Gods Judged once more. Aurgelmir saw his village blaze briefly in the light of the fire and then disappear... he had a brief moment to wonder why he saw no flames in the destruction, and then the God's fire grew brighter.

It was almost impossible to see past the inferno yet Aurgelmir saw enough to realise that the fire was not growing brighter it was coming closer, racing up the valley faster than a man could run.

There was nowhere to go. Even had Aurgelmir been a young man the stream was half as wide as the valley and it was accelerating, crossing the distance before him in mere moments and searing a dark strip in the green turf.

Aurgelmir was flung down beneath the lance. Immolation was far from instant, it was agonising. For long moments he could actually feel his flesh wasting away, his bones decaying beneath the flame, yet there was no sound of burning, just a curious silence.

The last thought that passed through his mind before his skeleton crumbled into nothingness was shame that he had not been with his wife when the Gods chose his village.

There was no time in the life after, Aurgelmir had come to realise, or at least none he and his kin could perceive. To people as accustomed to the regular progression of day into night as their own breathing, the unnatural stillness of the chamber was unsettling, almost more so than the circumstances that caused them to be there.

Prior to the Judgement, Aurgelmir's people had had little notion of what happened after death. They knew that something had to happen, but none in their most perverse nightmare had thought it would be what they experienced.

The chamber was large enough to be a Long House, if a Long House could be as tall as it was long, and as wide as it was tall, and constructed from a white material that resembled bronze in hardness, but was warm and as smooth as the inside of a duck's egg. The entire village had been taken in the Judgement and all agreed with Aurgelmir's interpretation; where else could they be but the life after? The place was utterly alien. Beyond its strange material and abnormal size, the chamber had other inconsistencies. There were no lines anywhere, when the floor met the wall it merely melded in to it like a water droplet. Nor were there any shadows. The noonday sun was the closest approximation in Aurgelmir's mind, but he knew it was a distant one; the sun always left darkness, even if it was under his feet yet in this unworldly chamber he could not find it even by cupping his hands together and peering inside.

Yet even this was not the strangest change. It had taken Aurgelmir bare minutes to find his wife amongst the other villagers once he awoke, but it took many more for him to accept that it was actually she. If they had condemned them to an eternity in this room, the Gods had at least given them their youth again to endure it.

In fact they had done more than merely restore their youth. Aurgelmir had few memories of his early years but he knew he had never been as vital as he was now, in body or mind. It was not yet clear, but Aurgelmir was beginning to suspect his intellect had been likewise cleansed. Thoughts were coming to him faster and easier than he could remember, so much so in fact that he was starting to suspect that the Judgement had not been an extermination as they'd first thought. The Gods returned as many as they killed,

and some of those they returned were... better, somehow. No one would comment on exactly how they were 'better' because none had been returned, in any condition, in his region for many centuries. That was the practical reason, the other was that no one felt comfortable discussing the deeds of the gods. So often they brought destruction that merely mentioning their deeds was likened to summoning a Judgement.

But, Aurgelmir was beginning to think, he and his kin had obviously not been destroyed... or at least not permanently. He still could not think about the awful sight of his flesh disintegrating on his bones. And obviously they had not been left as they were.

Were they Better? Aurgelmir did not have time to contemplate this for he was suddenly aware that he was being watched. Sitting up from where he had been lying against a wall, he looked around for the inquisitive person yet found no one. The villagers, believing in the safety of three solid barriers, had colonised one of the chamber's corners but none were looking in his direction. Yet Aurgelmir's hunting instincts, re-sharpened along with his body, knew when he was the subject of inquiry.

Slowly, he allowed his eyes to traverse the crowded forms again. Most of the villages were huddled together in small groups, their eyes cast low so as to avoid the disconcertingly shadowless walls.

Annoyed, Aurgelmir looked away and fruitlessly scanned the chamber, but other than his people, it was as empty as when he first awoke. Yet the fixation did not go away, if anything it increased with his activity. The more Aurgelmir concentrated on it, the more interested it became.

It was not human curiosity, the old hunter realised. It was the curiosity of something intensely unknowable, an alien mind. Yet Aurgelmir was familiar with the sensation it was generating, it was the sense of being prey... but even that was wrong. Aurgelmir could... 'feel' other thought behind the interest, innumerable incomprehensible deliberations that lashed around him like lightning through a storm. Whatever it was, wherever it was, the mind was observing him like a child might inspect an interesting pebble, and with as much respect.

Then, crashing through the monstrous array came something new. Surprise! The shock of finding so human an emotion in so alien an intellect was almost as shocking to Aurgelmir as it was for the intellect to find it had been discovered.

Then it was gone. Not like a thief stealing from a room, but as a rich man might depart from a pauper, its interests elsewhere, leaving Aurgelmir alone once again.

“Husband?” A soft hand on his shoulder brought his attention back to the present. Even now, after... how many ‘days’ he was still slightly shocked at his wife’s regenerated features and it took a moment to realise it was in fact Eydís at his side. “Husband?” She repeated, concern knitting her fresh features, “Are you hurt?”

“No?” He shook his head, not quite clearing it, “No, of course not. Why do you ask?”

“Because you just cried out.” She murmured, looking meaningfully back at their friends. “People are looking... are you sure you are fine? What happened?”

Aurgelmir looked at her with not quite seeing eyes and a faint smile on his lips. “I felt the mind of God.”

The Return, as it became known, was different to the Judgement only in that the villagers knew to fear it less. After a number of ageless ‘days’ a great searing beam poured without warning from the far ceiling and began to swiftly traverse the chamber, immolating all that it encountered.

Several villagers, out of piety or resignation, did not wait for its methodical progress but flung themselves into the roaring heat leaving the more circumspect to watch in muted horror as their bodies were flamelessly incinerated. Aurgelmir was one of the last to be taken. Not because he especially wished to avoid what was to come, but because whatever the Gods now planned, he would face it with Eydís.

He took her hand moments before they were obliterated for the second time.

They were still holding each other when the Gods deposited them back in what had been their village. Once there had been a few dozen huts arranged around the Long Houses, now there was nothing but a deep scar. It was as if the gods had simply reached down and peeled back the ground, leaving a deep scratch from where the village had been to where Aurgelmir had been sitting.

It was immediately obvious that they had been gone for a long time. The valley’s grass, which the villagers had always kept low, now reached their waists and the trees were obviously taller.

Seeing this, Eydís grasped her husband harder and whispered, “What has happened, husband? How long were we gone?”

Aurgelmir had no immediate answer. Instead he looked at the trees and remembered the legends about those who the Gods had returned. "At least twenty years, wife." He eventually pronounced. "Perhaps longer."

"How much longer?" Her hand grasped his arm harder.

"No more than one hundred years." Aurgelmir said with confidence. "The trees would be different if we had been gone longer." This news caused Eydís and others who heard to gasp, but further talk was forestalled by the sound of hooves.

Everyone turned to see four horsemen galloping towards them. Aurgelmir's eyes narrowed as he took in their apparel. It was armoured, but like none he had seen before. Instead of thick cloth woven around wooden plates, someone had beaten bronze into thin sheets and hung it over their chests and backs. The lead rider also had metal strips on his shins and forearms. Aurgelmir automatically took a step forward, protecting his wife. Men who would wear such things could not have peaceful intentions.

The horsemen reared up sharply next to the villagers and the lead man cast his gaze imperiously over them. "Who are you?" He demanded. "What business have you here?"

Aurgelmir surprised himself by being the first to speak. "We were chosen by the Gods." He looked upwards at The Spear, which as before was bleaching the land white with its cast fire. "Obviously we have been returned."

The man observed him carefully, as did, Aurgelmir could not help but notice, the rest of his village. His people did not speak likely of the God's actions, and as such his claims of being such special interest to them had brought him no small measure of respect. "You are from Ásdís?" The rider asked.

"We are." Aurgelmir nodded.

"Know then that Hákan claimed your lands following our return. Should you wish to rebuild yourselves, you will be required to pay a tithe. Riders will be here in the morning to receive it."

Aurgelmir considered this, then shook his head. "This is our land, we will not pay to live here." Behind him, he heard several villagers grunt in agreement.

"Then you will die." The rider shrugged. "You will not be the first village to do so."

Aurgelmir looked up at the Spear. "You ride on a night of Judgement?"

The rider followed his gaze. "The Gods made us what we are now. Why should we fear them?"

“Be grateful that they do not hear you say such things.” Aurgelmir replied. “Or else you would be the ones to die.”

The rider just shrugged again, one of his companions laughed. “You will not submit. That is your final answer?”

“Of course.”

“Then make your peace with the Gods while they are so close. Come morning, you will not have another chance.”

Then he and his companions rode off, no doubt in search of other returnees whom they could intimidate.

“What now?” Eydís asked once again. “Hákan has always been aggressive. Now they have been established with the God’s blessing, and ride about with bronze armour?”

“Armour is the least of it.” Another said. “Did you see their weapons? Like metal clubs with edges. How will we stand against such things?”

“They are not the only ones who have been touched by the Gods.” Aurgelmir reminded them. “They must have been returned earlier, this is true, but that is all.”

“You mean, aside from their bronze weapons!” Yet another cried. “Who would have imagined such things? You have condemned us to death!”



“I have condemned us to action.” Aurgelmir corrected.

“You have an idea for combating bronze!” The dissenter spat. “When the God’s touched you, they must have weakened your mind.”

“Bronze bends.” Aurgelmir merely shrugged. “But this is wasteful. We have until morning at least. We should look to our defences; the trees will help us there.”

The battle, when it came, was brief, bloody and one sided. The warriors of Hákan may have had a number of years to establish themselves, but they had not been touched by the Gods as Aurgelmir’s people had. For one, though their regiment consisted of both mature and young combatants, it did not have young men with the experience of elderly fighters. Moreover they did not seem to be able to think as Aurgelmir’s people did now; they rushed the hastily prepared defences without heed of their flanks, and as such were surprised by the flights of spears that erupted from the trees. In less than an hour the Hákan invaders were either dead or captured. None escaped the field.

Among the Ásdís, the casualties were light. The only person of importance to be slain was Hallbjörn, the village Chieftain. His position was not long unfilled however, by



almost unanimous decision Aurgelmir was elevated to ruling elder. Not only did he have the years, if not the body, to qualify, but it had been his plan that had brought them victory. More importantly, although others had reported similar contact with the Gods, none had been so clear as his own.

However, he quickly discovered that responsibility was a mixed blessing.

“They will come again.” Eydís told him as he sat before the victory fire. “This party was not expecting us to be so well prepared. When they do not return, they will simply send more warriors until we are destroyed.”

“Then we must be more prepared.” Aurgelmir pronounced, poking the fire so that it flared brightly. “This land is ours by right, we will defend it.”