

The Dragon's Hoard

from The Saga of the Volsungs



Loki, the Viking god of mischief, often caused trouble deliberately. But one morning he caused trouble entirely by accident.

He was walking by the river when a glossy otter scrambled out of the water, dragging a plump salmon. Loki wanted the salmon for his breakfast and knew the otter's fur would be valuable.

So he crept up and killed the otter, with one swift blow to the head.

Before he could roast the fish or skin the otter, a group of men ran towards the river from a nearby cave. "That's our brother! You've killed our brother!"

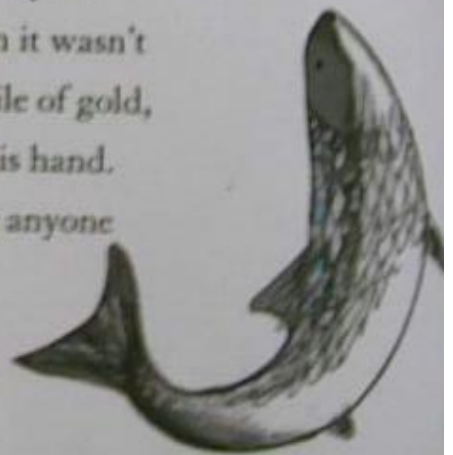
"This isn't a man," said Loki, "this is an otter."

"Our brother was a shape-shifter, so when he wanted to fish, he became an otter. You've killed our brother and you must pay!"

Loki agreed he must pay. In the Viking world, if you paid compensation for a death, even a deliberate killing, then it wasn't murder. So Loki gave the brothers a generously huge pile of gold, then walked away with a grin, the fish dangling from his hand.

But the glittering gold Loki left behind didn't bring anyone good fortune.

One of the brothers, Fafnir, loved the gold.



Fafnir piled the gold in his corner of the cave. He ran his fingers through it. He sat on it. He lay on it. He rolled in it. He curled up round it to sleep. He growled at his own brothers, if they came near the gold.

Soon Fafnir began to turn into a dragon, to guard the gold.

He grew bigger and heavier, he grew claws and fangs and rock-hard scales on his back. But he still had a soft skin-covered belly, so he could feel the gold when he slept on it.

Eventually the dragon drove his brothers from their home. Fafnir lived alone in his dragon's cave, lying on his dragon's hoard.

Fafnir guarded the gold with his claws, his fangs and his poisonous breath. His toxic breath burnt the leaves off trees and killed any person it touched. When the dragon left his cave to drink at the river, he breathed on anyone who stood in his way, then ate them.

The story of the dragon and his golden hoard was told at feasts and in marketplaces, and the story was heard by a young hero called Sigurd....

Though Sigurd wasn't really a hero. His father had been a hero, but Sigurd hadn't done anything heroic yet. Sigurd decided the perfect way to start his hero's career was to kill a dragon and take its gold.

He visited the blacksmith's forge and asked for a sword. The blacksmith offered him the standard hero sword and Sigurd tested the blade by swinging it at the smith's huge black anvil.

The sword shattered.

"I'll need a better sword than that, to defeat a dragon. Can you make me your best-ever sword?"

The smith laboured over the perfect blade.

When it was finished, Sigurd swung it against the anvil.

The sword shattered.

The smith shrugged. "I can't make a stronger sword than that."

Sigurd went home and found his father's sword, which had been given to his father by the god, Odin and had broken against Odin's spear on the day his father died. Sigurd took the broken blade to the forge and the smith joined the halves together. Sigurd swung it at the anvil, and the sword sliced right through the black metal.

"This sword is fit for a hero facing a dragon!"

But the hero couldn't face the dragon, Sigurd realised, as he sat on the hill above the cave, and watched the dragon stomp down to the river for a drink. He couldn't attack the dragon from the front, because he would be burnt by that poisonous breath. He couldn't ambush the dragon from the back or sides either, because those scales were too hard even for his sword.

Sigurd came up with a plan.

He visited the blacksmith one more time and asked for a spade. Sigurd returned to the dragon's lair, waited until the dragon was asleep on the gold, and then dug a pit in the path between the cave and the river. Then he crouched at the bottom of the pit, with his sword on his right and his spade on his left.

After hours of crouching in the cold damp pit, Sigurd felt the ground shake. He heard the thump of heavy clawed feet. He heard the dragon's mutters and growls. He saw the dragon's spiky head pass above him. Then the pit turned completely black, as the massive bulk of the dragon's body blocked out the sky.

Sigurd grasped his sword and thrust it upwards, through the dragon's soft belly, into the dragon's heart.

The dragon roared! The dragon's blood flowed into the pit. Sigurd rolled out of the way, but three drops of blood landed on his lips. As soon as the dragon's

blood touched his lips, Sigurd could understand words in the roars of pain above him.

"I am dying!" roared Fafnir. "I'm dying and it's all the fault of that gold. Loki's gold drove away my family, and now it's cost me my life. I hope it brings the same fortune to my killer."

The dragon gasped a final breath and fell heavily to the ground, right on top of the pit. The dragon's body covered the pit entirely, like a lid on a pot.

Now Sigurd was trapped in a hole by the dragon he'd just slain!

But he still had his spade. So he dug a tunnel out of the pit. Then he wiped the blood and mud from his hands and entered the cave.

Despite the dragon's final words, Sigurd claimed all the gold. "How else," he said, "can I prove I'm the hero who killed the dreaded Fafnir?"

As he left the cave with the gold, he realised the dragon's blood had given him the power to understand the speech of birds, as well as the speech of dragons. Birds, he discovered, mainly talk about worms and seeds and the weather. Though they do sometimes hear useful gossip.

The dragon's gold brought Sigurd a hero's fame, but it didn't bring him good fortune. Because of that gold, the blacksmith plotted to kill him, he fell in love with a woman sleeping behind an inconvenient ring of flames, and he drank a witch's potion that made him forget everything important.

In his fairly short life (heroes don't live long), Sigurd gained more good fortune from the words of birds than he ever did from the dragon's hoard of gold. Perhaps gold given by the god of mischief is always more trouble than it's worth.