

Hel Study guide:



Hel Goddess of the Dead, daughter of Loki, is much more than a mysterious name and looming, shadowy presence. She is a deity of immense complexity, but one that is worth learning from, if indeed she calls to you from beneath the roots of Yggdrasil.

Hel or Hela is considered a Goddess of Death and she is the eldest daughter of the giant Angrboda and the Trickster God, Loki. Sister of Fenrir and Jörmungandr (the serpent who holds the world), she is seen by many people as a divinity indifferent to the concerns of the living and of the dead. Her myth says that that she is the one who judges all the souls that pass through Helheim (Kingdom of Hel), the Norse underworld where the Goddess dwells. The place is seen as a beautiful but dark land with lots of ice.

Her nature is much debated and she is seen by many as “wicked”, lacking of feelings. Hel is neither good nor bad, she has a role to play, and she does it with great care and justice.

Helheim vs. Hell

First, let's address any confusion that might come up or already be present when talking about Hel and her realm of the dead. You might have noticed her name *Hel* sounds exactly like the Christian concept of Satan's realm *Hell*. There is some speculation (and I'm a believer) that the Christian concept of Hell is derived fully from the Norse belief in the goddess Hel and Helheim. In fact, it was likely a way to deter the un-converted pagans from their Heathen beliefs. Scaring folks into believing that Hel and Helheim were actually Satan's fiery realm of torture is an easy way to convert and control. And because the Norse were so strong in their belief system, it would take fear in order to change their minds and traditions.

So, is Hel and Helheim the same place as Satan's Hell? No. It is not the same place. First, the belief in Helheim existed before the Christian concept of Hell. Second, Helheim is the realm of the ancestors...a place where people who die of old age or natural causes are welcome to rest after life. Interestingly, Helheim is often described or portrayed as being a cold place, NOT fiery and hot like Hell. And no one is being tortured in Helheim, in opposition to the misery of the Christian Hell-scape. Many modern pagans actually believe that Helheim is a temporary place where we can rent a room and party with our ancestors before being reincarnated or going elsewhere in the afterlife.



HELHEIM/HEL/ NIFLHEIM: THE UNDERWORLD

Hel ruled over the realm of Niflheim, also often called Helheim in reference to the goddess of the underworld.

This was the place where the Norse dead that did not die on the battlefield found themselves. Warriors that died in battle were taken either to Valhalla, the hall of Odin, or Folkvangr, the hall of Frigg.

All other dead would find themselves in Helheim, under the jurisdiction of the goddess of the underworld, who would decide their fate. So, unlike the Christian concept of Hell, it was not a place of torment for the wicked and cruel.

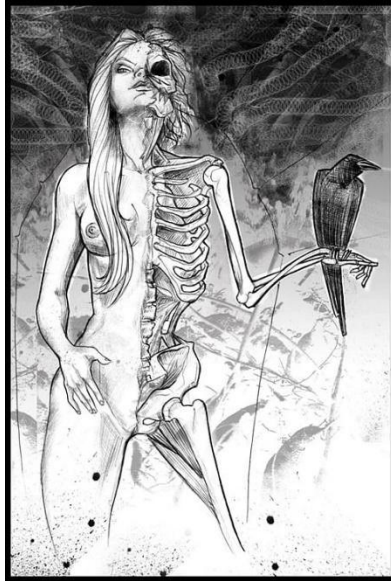
The 13th century Icelandic historian Snorri Sturluson described the realm of the goddess of death in terms that resemble Christian ideas of Hell.

He describes halls where the goddess of death eats from a dish called “hunger”, with a knife called “famine”, suggesting that no amount of eating can fill the empty stomachs of the dead.

He also refers to a bed that is called “sick bed”, again suggesting that no amount of sleep can ease the weariness of the dead. But Snorri was writing in Christian times and was highly influenced by Christian ideas.

Earlier sources describe Helheim as located beneath one of the three roots of Yggdrasil, the world tree, with the other two roots leading to Jotunheim, the realm of the giants, and Midgard, the world of men.

The goddess of the underworld guarded the realm of the dead, and the goddess of death is described in some stories as appearing to those destined to die, telling them that they would soon join her in her realm.



The Land of Hel

The location of Hel was to the north and reached by a road that led downward, across a bridge over a river of spears, through a gate in a tall fence guarded by the wolf Garm. The realm of Hel was reserved primarily for those who died of old age or sickness (though there were exceptions including, it seems, for accidents) instead of gloriously in battle or from other causes.

The souls of warriors went to Odin's Hall of Valhalla, those who drowned were taken by the goddess Ran, wife of the sea god Aegir, and those of common folk went to Fólkvangr ("field of the people") presided over by the goddess Freyja. Precisely who, besides the infirm or aged, wound up in Hel is unclear, but it was not a realm of punishment or torment. Souls were treated well in Hel, as is clear from the story of the god Baldr's arrival there when the floor was covered in gold and the benches with fresh straw to welcome him. Simek notes that "Hel is not a place of punishment, not a hell, it is simply the residence of the dead" (136), but it is far from a pleasant place overall.

Once the dead have arrived, they can never leave, and their world is damp, dark, cold, and misty. Simek comments on the aspects of Hel's palace:

Her hall is called *Eljudnir* 'the damp place', her plate and her knife 'hunger', her servant *Ganglati* 'the slow one', the serving maid *Ganglot* 'the lazy one', the threshold *Fallandaforad* 'stumbling block', the bed *Kor* 'illness', the bed curtains *Blikjanda-bolr* 'bleak misfortune'. (137)

Based on its mention in various tales, it seems any soul not of a warrior who died in battle could end up in Hel, but there is no reason given for a soul to find itself in Hel rather than Fólkvangr other than dying of disease or old age. At the same time, it seems there are quite a few souls in Hel that did not die from either of those causes, and the two most famous are the god Baldr and his wife Nanna.

Key Points

- It was one of several Norse realms of the dead, including Valhalla and Folkvangr and the underwater abode of giantess ran
- Myths describe perilous journeys heroes took to access Helheim
- Within its halls, the dead were thought to continue their earthly activities
- No one, not even the gods, could escape once admitted to Helheim
- Helheim was not a place of punishment like Hell, but reflected mundane life
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Great article that describes the norse worlds of afterlife:

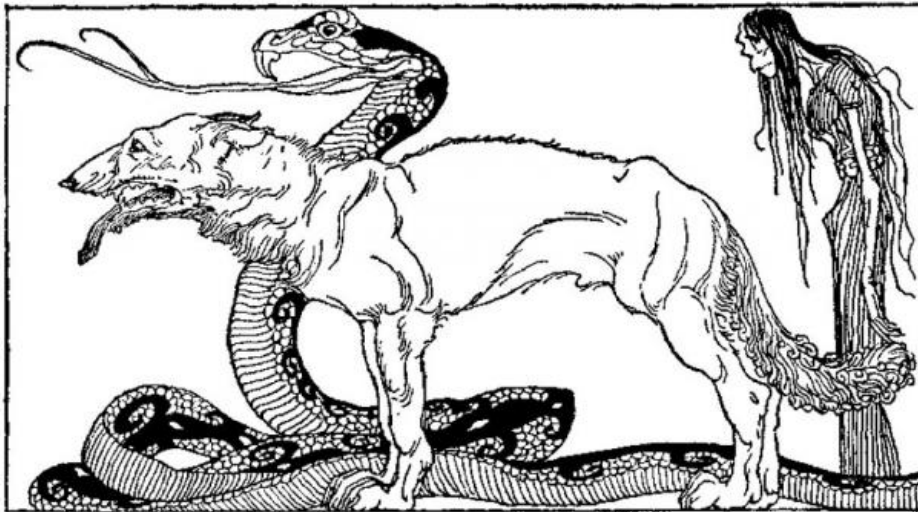
<https://thewarriorlodge.com/blogs/news/helheim-the-realm-of-hel>



Hel, Goddess in Norse Mythology

In Norse mythology, death is seen as something natural and not scary. It is part of the natural cycle of life. Hel is responsible for receiving and judging the spirits of all who have not perished in battle, and according to their deeds in life, she guides them to one of the nine levels of Helheim, which can be some kind of paradise or a torment.

The name of the Goddess Hel means “hidden” in Old Norse, and that name refers to her appearance. She is described as having half body as a beautiful woman with long hair, and the other half being a skeleton. She is sometimes described as being half alive and half dead. Due to her appearance and a possible prophecy having to do with her, she was sent to rule Helheim. The other Gods claimed discomfort as they looked at her.



Hel, also called Hella and Hela, is the daughter of the trickster god Loki and the witch-giantess Angrboda in Norse mythology. Along with her brothers, the wolf Fenrir and the snake Jörmungandr, she was raised by her mother in a place called Járnsviðr, the Iron Wood. This is a forest east of Midgard (earth, where humans dwell), which makes it a liminal space that is parallel to our own. And, as witches love to live in liminal places, this makes sense why Hel's mother resided there for some time

The Aesir gods feared these three children due to their monstrous parentage, and prophecies of the chaos that they would wreak on the Norse cosmos.

In order to contain the problem, Odin sent each of the children to the place where they could do the least harm. In the case of Hel, he sent her to Niflheim, one of the Norse lands of the dead, and gave her jurisdiction over the realm.

As the goddess of the underworld, she had responsibility for hosting the souls that found themselves there. This authority is limited, it seems, to the souls of the dead who will pass down Helveg, the road of the dead, to her realm under Niflheim known as either Niflhel or Hel or helheim. Hel sits as Queen of the Dead in her dark realm which she cannot leave any more than her subjects can.

The small serpent Jormungandr was thrown into the waters surrounding Midgard, where he grew to such a great size that he could encircle the entire world and hold his own tail in his mouth. Fenrir was tricked into being chained up on a deserted island by magical ribbon made by the dwarves.



Hel in the edas:

The Norse goddess of death Hel is mentioned in the *Prose Edda*, an Old Norse text that would have been written or compiled, at least to some extent, by the Icelandic historian Snorri Sturluson.

In this book, it is told that the gods, afraid of the evil that could come from Loki's children, would have sent Hel to the Underworld, of which she would have been put in charge.

Unfortunately, we don't have many Norse myths that feature Hel, and the ones that do don't feature her as a main character. Or put much emphasis on her qualities or origin story.

One of the few surviving legends where the Goddess plays a major role is the death of Baldr (or Baldur), the Norse God of Light and son of the Goddess Frigga. The legend says that Loki, Hel's father, tricked to blind God Hodr, Baldr's brother, and had Baldr killed by an arrow (or a spear in some versions) made of mistletoe, Baldr's only weakness. His spirit went to Helheim. Hermodr (messenger of the Gods) volunteered to go talk to the Hel in the underworld and bring Baldr back. Odin lent him his eight-legged horse, Sleipnir, and the God rode towards the gates of Helheim.

When he met Hel, he begged her to return Baldr's life. The Goddess agreed to do so, but for this all living creatures should mourn his death. Baldr went out into the cosmos to lament the death of his brother, but a giantess named Thokk did not mourn, preventing Baldr from being resurrected. Thokk is suspected to be Loki.

"If, therefore," she added, "all things in the world, both living and lifeless, weep for him, then shall he return to life; but if any one thing speak against him or refuse to weep, he shall be kept in Hel."

Prose Edda, The Death of Baldur, by Snorri Sturluson



Ragnarök

Ragnarök was the Twilight of the Gods when the present cycle of the Nine Realms ended in a cataclysmic battle between the forces of order and those of chaos. Ragnarök was decreed by the Norns – the Fates – and could not be stopped nor was there any reason given for it to happen but the gods, by their actions (and especially Odin's), contributed to its inevitability by the way they treated Loki's children.

After the death of Baldr, Loki was bound below the earth with a serpent above him that dripped burning venom on his head. At the same time, his son Fenrir was bound on the island, Jörmungandr was confined to the sea, and Hel was unable to leave her dark realm. In the Iron Wood, Loki's former mate Angrboda was raising his grandchildren (Fenrir's sons) the wolves Sköll and Hati since their father was imprisoned. Although Loki himself was justly punished for the death of Baldr, Odin and the other gods of Asgard were directly responsible for confining Loki's children who were innocent of any wrongdoing and had been living peacefully with their mother in Jotunheim until they were kidnapped and abused.

At a given time, an army of the dead would rise as Fenrir broke his fetters and howled at the gates of Hel. Human relationships would fall apart, and traditions

would be forgotten while, at the same time, the weather would drastically change, bringing three severe winters with no summers while Loki writhed under the earth as the venom struck him, causing earthquakes until he finally broke free.

The earthquakes would continue as the ship Naglfar, built from the fingernails of the dead, rose from the waves steered by the giant Hrym while Hel assisted Loki by providing him a second ship that brought Surtr and his fellow Fire Giants to the battlefield. Jörmungandr broke from the sea, sending tidal waves across the realms, as the forces of chaos met the gods and the heroes of Valhalla in battle. Almost all the gods are killed, including Odin, Thor, and Loki, and the Nine Realms sink in fiery destruction, but chaos is defeated and order maintained, giving birth to a new cycle of life and a whole new world of realms.



Hel does not feature prominently in the tale of Ragnarök but is understood to have helped assemble the army of the dead for the final event and to have supported Loki's efforts. It is unclear whether she survives Ragnarök, but it seems unlikely as both Baldr and Nanna are released from the realm, suggesting that she who held the dead in place no longer had that power. She is probably destroyed in the World Fire unleashed by the Fire Giant Surtr that brings down all of the Nine Realms.

Her supporting role at Ragnarök is in keeping not only with her nature but how she appears throughout the Norse tales. Her name, as noted, means "hidden" and she is always a player operating behind the scenes. Even in the story of the death of Baldr, she makes the briefest appearance of any of the characters.

This was most likely purposeful in that Hel represented death which rarely announces or calls attention to itself until it makes its appearance and takes someone away. This is suggested by her depiction as a young, healthy, beautiful woman when seen from one side and a blue corpse from the other. Death can change one's life in the turn of a head or the blink of an eye, and finally, this is what Hel would have represented, possibly then encouraging the living to make the most of their time before that time was up.

HEL, MARVEL AND RAGNARÖK

Marvel took a lot of liberties in their portrayal of the goddess of the underworld in order to create their Ragnarök story.

In the first instance, Marvel's Hel is the daughter of Odin, rather than Loki. Marvel also suggests that Odin cast Hel out and made her the goddess of the underworld due to fear of her ambition as they conquered the universe together.

But in the original Norse myths, Odin sent Hel to the underworld due to fear of her parentage and prophecies of the role that she would play in future destruction.

Also, in the Marvel universe, the goddess of death is the main antagonist in Ragnarök, the Norse apocalypse. In Norse mythology, Hel played a much smaller role in this final battle than her brothers Fenrir, who slays Odin, and Jormungandr, who slays Thor. But the goddess of death did have a role to play in the end of the world.

According to the prophecy, Loki will break his own chains (he was imprisoned for his role in the death of Balder) and will sail on a ship made from the fingernails and toenails of the dead to Asgard. He will be accompanied on board by his daughter Hel, and an army of the dishonourable dead. Her final fate in the battle is not recorded.

Does Hel's participation in the final battle against the Aesir gods represent a bloodthirsty character determined to bring death to the Norse cosmos in order to bring everyone under her sway? Or is she a woman participating in a battle to get vengeance for the way that Aesir gods treated her and her family, banishing them to the corners of the universe out of fear and prejudice?

What does Hel look like?

Hel, Goddess of the Dead, appears as a woman who is half-dead and half-alive. Her face is halved, vertically down the middle, with one side being a beautiful woman and the other side a decomposing corpse. Sometimes she has a white and dark side, while other times she's said to be a deathly blue color. She always has a sad, forlorn and serious look on her face. In some depictions, she wears a crown to represent her rulership over Helheim and the dead. In other depictions, she wears horns. Though I believe the horns are a relatively modern addition and may be attributed to the Marvel franchise.



Hel's Spiritual Powers

Being that Hel is the Goddess of the Dead and an afterlife realm, wouldn't that mean she is also a psychopomp or a type of Grim Reaper? Not according to the Norse mythos. It seems that she stays in her realm, on her throne, and sometimes appears to people in dreams warning them of their impending death.

Hel's spiritual powers include death (physical and metaphorical), the afterlife, protection, transformation, omens, wisdom, mystery and ancestral connection.

And while we don't know a lot about Hel's persona in the myths, we can deduce that she also has domain over rune-casting and sorcery. Why? Because her name is Hel or Hella, which is a word that was used to label a witch or seeress in ancient times – a helle-rune. I suspect much of the knowledge we had of Hel was lost post-Christianization of the Northern European peoples. And some of what we do have was distorted by Sturluson or prior to his recordings.

Hel is in a privileged position as a guardian and housekeeper of all spirits who did not fall into battle.

Because of her role, it is not uncommon for practitioners of shamanism or other magic practices to ask for her help in contacting the spirits of the dead through dreams or astral projection.



Reaping and the Return of the Dead

Mostly the dead were believed to travel to Hel, but it was said that at times the goddess Hel herself liked to go reap the dead while riding on her three-legged white steed. Similarly, in other European myths the Grim Reaper is said to travel from one place to another on a white horse. Even in Christian mythology, Death rides a pale horse as one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

During periods of famine or pestilence, when the inhabitants of a certain place died in large numbers, but some survived, legends say that Hel used a rake to reap the dead, while in cases when entire villages were depopulated, the underworld goddess supposedly reaped them using a broom.

Correspondences:



HONORING HEL
A CORRESPONDANCE INFO SHEET

Manifestation:
Hel is simultaneously half-dead and half-alive. Half of her body is that of a fair, beautiful woman; the other half is necrotized flesh.

Offerings:
Black bread, black cloth, wine, black/white candles, skull symbols, bones, yew, black onyx, etc. (Some people include pictures of their beloved deceased). She is usually celebrated and honored around Samhain and Yule.

Origin: Norse

Rune: Hagalaz

Colors: Black, white

Mount: Black mare

Places: Mount Hekla, an active volcano in southern Iceland, was allegedly among the entrances to Hel's realm.

Animals: She has a pack of dogs, the original Hel Hounds, as well as horses and wolves.

How to Know Hel Goddess of the Dead is Calling You

- You hear/see her name on the TV, radio, online, in books, etc.

- You recently had a family member pass away
- You're currently working on healing from religious trauma, specifically fears of death and Hell
- The Death card continually pops up in a reading
- Hagalaz rune is calling to you and showing up everywhere
- Hel's animals are coming to you as a sign: dog, wolf, horse
- Reports say that if she is willing to help, she will appear in a dream or in a vision and she will extend her skeleton hand to be kissed. This is a test to judge those who are worthy of assistance, once accepting the deformities of others is a synonym of friendship and respect.



When Hel calls, it might be alarming at first. But don't fear her. Here's why...

If Hel is calling you, does that mean you're about to die? No, not necessarily. I liken this spiritual experience to the Death card in the Tarot. If you receive the Death card in a reading, does that automatically mean physical death? No! It

typically means death in a spiritual or metaphorical sense – an end to a phase in your life, to a relationship, or habit of some kind. Often this card, and Hel's presence in one's life, indicates a need for abrupt change. For transformation. And, while we fear change, often it is just what we need to create a better life for ourselves.

There are many pagans and witches who work with Hel the goddess of the dead in order to understand death and the afterlife better. She may come around when one of your loved one's is about to die or has just passed. Her presence may be a reminder that there is life after death and that your loved one has a place to go afterward. Remember, the Norse concept of Helheim is not the same as the Christian concept of Hell that most of us have come to know. There are also death doulas and midwives who look to Hel as their matron goddess.





Hel

Country of Origin: Scandinavia

Areas of Influence: Compassion, Healing, Transformation, Judgement, Guardian of the dead, especially children

Symbols: Rake, Broom, Hellhound, Black Horse

Colors: Black, White

Animals: Dogs, Horses, Wolves

Herbs, Plants, Trees: Holly, Yew, Elder

Food: Meat Stew, Bread

Stones/Crystals: Black Obsidian, Onyx, Smoky Quartz, Jet

Holidays/Sacred Days: Day of Hel (July 10), Samhain

Hel's Symbols

Hel has quite a few attributes and symbols. The broom is one of her tools, so to speak. During the plague, if an entire village was wiped out, it was said that Hel had used her broom to sweep away the souls. If there were survivors, she had used her rake...another of Hel's attributes. Her servants are personified concepts named Delay (male) and Slowness (female). I suspect this has something to do with the fact that the dead that enter her realm have died of older age and natural causes rather than the death of a warrior or viking. Obviously, if you live to an older age, your death has been delayed.





Ways to Work with the Goddess Hel

i've said it before. i'll say it again. Your connection and relationship with deity will be unique and personal. How I connect to Hel might be completely different from how you do. But here are a few ways you might try to work with the goddess Hel in your pagan practice:

1. Study and Record

The first thing I recommend in working with Hel is to study the myths and lore in which she's featured. There aren't many, but the Eddas and Sagas will give you at least a good understanding of our Norse ancestors' belief system overall. And you'll run into a few stanzas talking about Hel and/or her realm Helheim. Record what you learn in your grimoire. Dedicate a section or an entire book to working with her.

2. Create Sacred Space

Build an altar for Hel, or carve out a section of your ancestral altar for her. I don't recommend placing her on the same altar as Odin, or most of the Aesir for that matter, but she can be kept comfortably on an ancestral altar. She could also be placed on an altar with Loki, Skadi, Angrboda, and other Jotunn. Add items in her colors: black, white, and blue. Figurines representing her animals would go nicely as well including dogs, wolves, and black horses.

3. Provide Offerings to Hel

Like other deities, Hel accepts and enjoys offerings from her devotees. Consider giving Hel offerings of wine, tea, beer, mead, and water. She also accepts ancestral meals on feast-days like Alfablót, Disablót, and the Solstices. Incense, dried flowers, and artwork are appreciated. Acts of service in the realm of passage, aiding people during transitions such as birth and death. This could be as simple as providing relief to a caregiver of a dying family member for a few hours. Or sending gifts for a newborn baby. All these are offerings in Hel's name.

4. Explore Your Beliefs Around Death and the Afterlife

Many of us come from backgrounds of religious trauma and come to the pagan path in need of healing.. If you have fears or confusion around death and the afterlife, Hel will sometimes smack you upside the head and push you to face those fears. Truly, it took me a long time to heal these shadows, but once I did...I felt so free!

5. Ancestral Work

Because Hel is the ruler of Helheim and watches over the dead, she can also provide you with a channel of ancestral communication. If you've never worked with your ancestors, now is a good time with Hel's help. Odd that her name can be found in the word *help*, which means "to serve".

6. Study and Practice with Hel's Symbols

Start working with the runes, in particular the *Hagalaz* rune, which symbolizes Hail, abrupt change, and death to old ways of life. In addition, spirals seem to be another of Hel's symbols that you can work with in your practice. Draw them,

meditate on them, trace them in the air, and carve them into candles. Let Hel's symbols become a part of your consciousness in order to connect with her.

*Hel can be interpreted as a **Triple Goddess**, being the Crone, Devouring or Black face of the Goddess Freyja (Maiden) and the Goddess Frigga (Mother).*

A Prayer To Hela

Mother of Bones and Barren Flesh.
Mistress of the Land of Death.
Great Lady of endless Transformations,
Protectress of the lost, the weary, the hungry,
Mighty Guardian, Shelter of the Dead,
Humbly I ask for grace.
Teach me to honor You well.
Teach me to live
In a way that honors my death.
Teach me to die
In a way that celebrates my life.
Let my actions be my prayer.
May I remember the living, the dead,
And the passages marking the way between
them.
Hail Hela, Lady Death and Mother of Bones.

Summoning hel:

Hel is the Goddess who judges the souls of the dead and chooses the fate of each one. Working with the energy of this Goddess is quite dense yet rewarding.

You can call her to judge your attitudes towards some situation or person. Hence, be prepared to face the judgment of the Goddess.

Here is one option and way to summon her;

Do this ritual during the New Moon.

Items needed:

- *Clove or rosemary incense*
- *Glass with very cold water*
- *Notebook and pen to write down dreams*

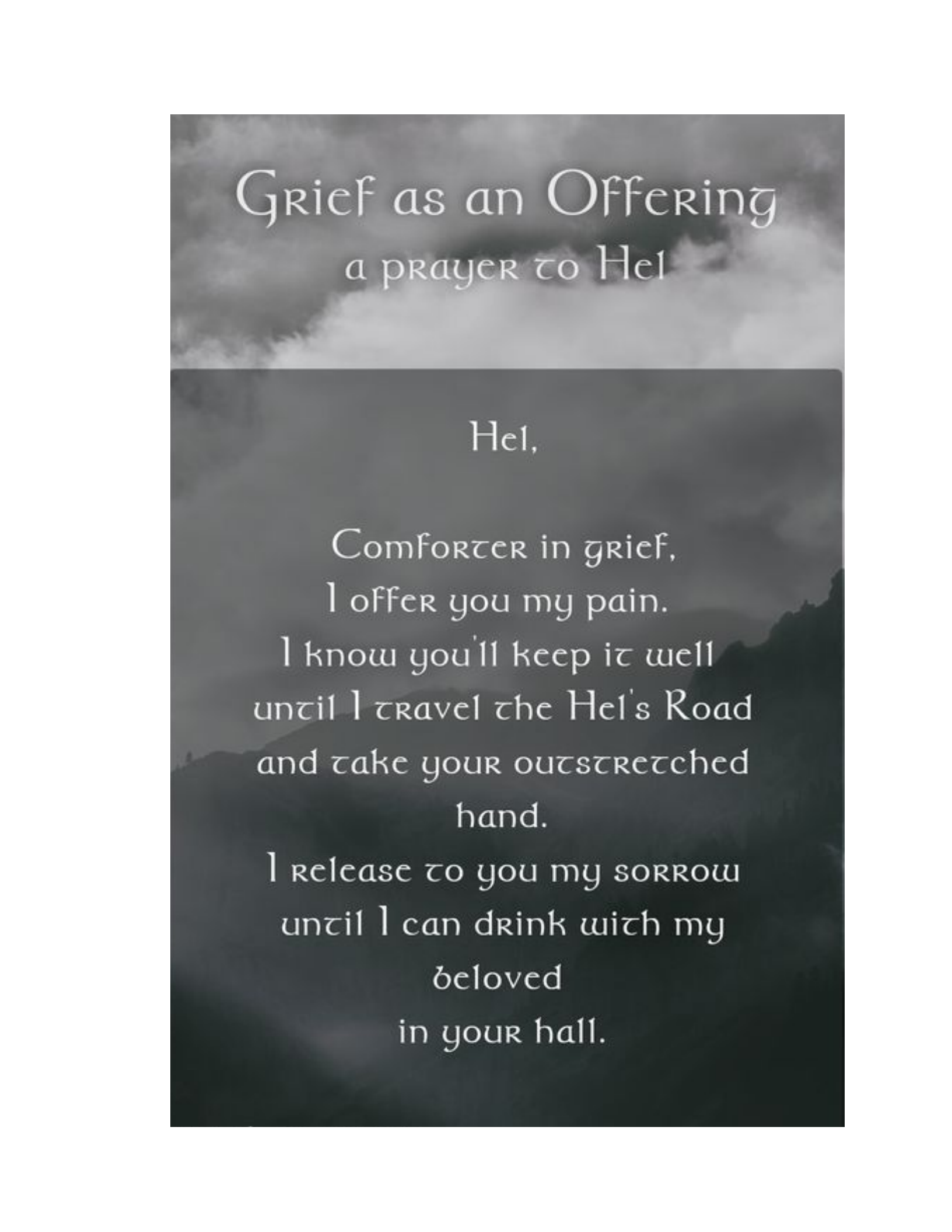
Before sleeping or meditating, light an incense of clove or rosemary. Put a glass of **ice cold** water on the side of the bed (if you have a bedside table, put it on top of it). Or on the floor or table next to you if meditating

Lie down and preferably do not cover yourself. Or sit in a comfortable position if meditating. Focus on the Goddess and say that you are prepared to be judged by her, as well as ready to put into practice whatever is necessary to change the situation.

Pay close attention to the dreams (lucid or not) that you'll have. Or any thoughts, visions, messages or symbols that come to you while meditating. Try to note down the maximum details of each of them.

When you wake up, or stop meditating pour the water somewhere in nature. The ideal place is into some river or lake, but as we do not all have access to them, we can pour it into some plant or garden.

In the next night, read the dream or meditation notes and try to decipher them, for some (or all) will be messages sent by Goddess Hel. Accept them.



Grief as an Offering

a prayer to Hel

Hel,

Comforter in grief,
I offer you my pain.

I know you'll keep it well
until I travel the Hel's Road
and take your outstretched
hand.

I release to you my sorrow
until I can drink with my
beloved
in your hall.

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