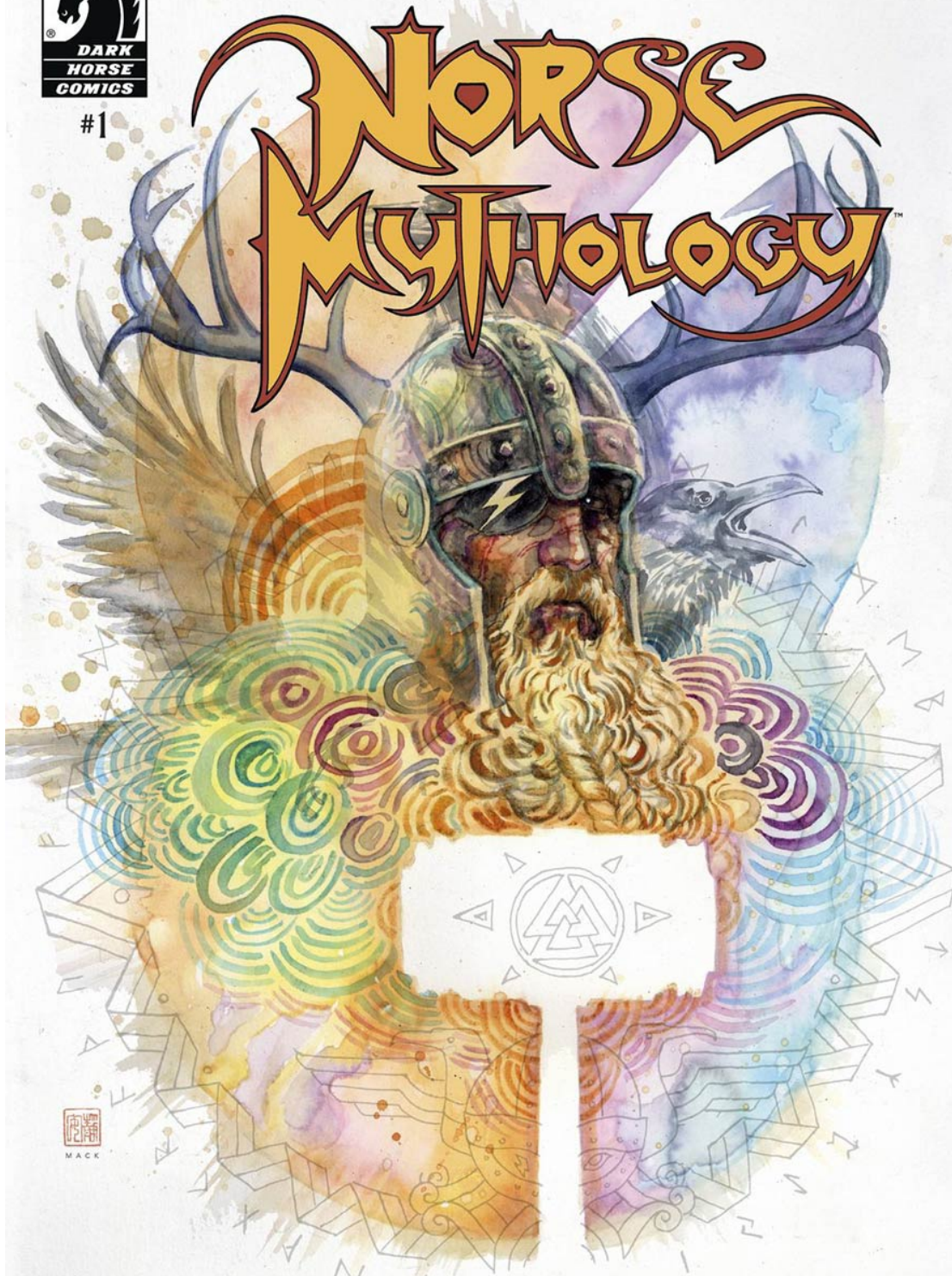




#1

NEIL GAIMAN P. CRAIG RUSSELL

NORSE MYTHOLOGY™



MIKE MIGNOLA JERRY ORDWAY DAVE STEWART
LOVERN KINDZIERSKI GALEN SHOWMAN

THOR'S JOURNEY TO THE LAND OF THE GIANTS

I

Thialfi and his sister, Roskva, lived with their father, Egil, and their mother on a farm at the edge of wild country. Beyond their farm were monsters and giants and wolves, and many times Thialfi walked into trouble and had to outrun it. He could run faster than anyone or anything. Living at the edge of the wild country meant that Thialfi and Roskva were used to miracles and strange things happening in their world.

Nothing as strange, however, as the day that two visitors from Asgard, Loki and Thor, arrived at their farm in a chariot pulled by two huge goats, whom Thor called Snarler and Grinder. The gods expected lodging for the night, and food. The gods were huge and powerful.

"We have no food for the likes of you," said Roskva apologetically. "We have vegetables, but it's been a hard winter, and we don't even have any chickens left."

Thor grunted. Then he took his knife and killed both his goats. He skinned their corpses. He put the goats in the huge stewpot that hung above the fire, while Roskva and her mother cut up their winter stores of vegetables and dropped them into the stewpot.

Loki took Thialfi aside. The boy was intimidated by Loki: his green eyes, his scarred lips, his smile. Loki said, "You know, the marrow of the bones of those goats is the finest thing a young man can eat. Such a shame that Thor always keeps it all for himself. If you want to grow up to be as strong as Thor, you should eat the goat bone-marrow."

When the food was ready, Thor took a whole goat as his portion, leaving the meat of the other goat for the other five people.

He put the goatskins down on the ground, and as he ate, he threw the bones onto his goatskin. "Put your bones on the other goatskin," he told them. "And don't break or chew any of the bones. Just eat the meat."

You think you can eat fast? You should have seen Loki devour his food. One moment it was in front of him, and the next it was gone and he was wiping his lips with the back of his hand.

The rest of them ate more slowly. But Thialfi could not forget what Loki had said to him, and when Thor left the table for a call of nature, Thialfi took his knife and split one of the goat's leg bones and ate some of the marrow from it. He put the broken bone down on the goat skin and covered it with undamaged bones, so nobody would know.

They all slept in the great hall that night.

In the morning, Thor covered the bones with the goatskins. He took his hammer, Mjollnir, and held it up high. He said, "Snarler, be whole." A flash of lightning: Snarler stretched itself, bleated, and began to graze. Thor said, "Grinder, be whole," and Grinder did the same. And then it staggered and limped awkwardly over to Snarler, and it let out a high-pitched bleat as if it were in pain.

"Grinder's hind leg is broken," said Thor. "Bring me wood and cloth."

He made a splint for his goat's leg, and he bandaged it up. And when that was done, he looked at the family, and Thialfi did not think he had ever seen anything quite as scary as Thor's burning red eyes. Thor's fist was wrapped around the shaft of his hammer. "Somebody here broke that bone," he told them, in a voice like thunder. "I gave you people food, I asked only one thing of you, and yet you betrayed me."

"I did it," said Thialfi. "I broke the bone."

Loki was trying to look serious, but even so, he was smiling at the corners of his mouth. It was not a reassuring smile.

Thor hefted his hammer. "I ought to destroy this entire farm," he muttered, and Egil looked scared, and Egil's wife began to weep. Then Thor said, "Tell me why I should not turn this whole place to rubble."

Egil said nothing. Thialfi stood up. He said, "It has nothing to do with my father. He didn't know what I had done. Punish me, not him. Look at me: I'm a really fast runner. I can learn. Let my parents be, and I'll be your bondservant."

His sister, Roskva, stood up. "He is not leaving without me," she said. "Take him, you take both of us."

Thor pondered this for a moment. Then: “Very well. For now, Roskva, you will stay here and tend Snarler and Grinder while Grinder’s leg heals. When I return, I will collect all three of you.” He turned to Thialfi. “And you can come with me and Loki. We are going to Utgard.”

II

The world beyond the farm was wilderness, and Thor and Loki and Thialfi traveled east, toward Jotunheim, home of the giants, and the sea.

It became colder the farther east they went. Freezing winds blew, draining them of any warmth. Shortly before sunset, when there was still enough light to see, they looked for a place to shelter for the night. Thor and Thialfi found nothing. Loki was away the longest. He came back with a puzzled look on his face. “There’s an odd sort of house over that way,” he said.

“How odd?” asked Thor.

“It’s just one huge room. No windows, and the doorway is enormous but it has no door. It’s like a huge cave.”

The cold wind numbed their fingers and stung their cheeks. Thor said, “We shall check it out.”

The main hall went back a long way. “There could be beasts or monsters back there,” said Thor. “Let’s set up by the entrance.”

They did just that. It was as Loki had described—a huge building, one huge hall, with a long room off to one side. They made a fire by the entrance and slept there for an hour or so, until they were woken by a noise.

“What’s that?” said Thialfi.

“An earthquake?” said Thor. The ground was trembling. Something roared. It might have been a volcano, or an avalanche of great rocks, or a hundred furious bears.

“I don’t think so,” said Loki. “Let’s move into the side room. Just to be safe.”

Loki and Thialfi slept in the side room, and the tumbling-roaring noise continued until daybreak. Thor stationed himself at the door to the house all night, holding his hammer. He had been getting more irritable as the night wore on, and wanted only to explore and to

attack whatever was rumbling and shaking the earth. As soon as the sky began to lighten, Thor walked into the forest without waking his companions, looking for the source of the sound.

There were, he realized as he got closer, different sounds, which occurred in sequence. First a rumbling roar, followed by a humming, and then a softer sort of whistling noise, piercing enough to make Thor's head ache and his teeth hurt each time he heard it.

Thor reached the top of a hill and looked at the world beneath him.

Stretched out in the valley below was the biggest person Thor had ever seen. His hair and beard were blacker than charcoal; his skin was as white as a snow field. The giant's eyes were closed, and he was regularly snoring: that was the rumble-hum and whistle that Thor had been listening to. Every time the giant snored the ground shook. That was the shaking they had felt in the night. The giant was so big that by comparison Thor might have been a beetle or an ant.

Thor reached down to his belt of strength, Megingjord, and pulled it tight, doubling his strength to make sure that he was strong enough to battle even the hugest of giants.

As Thor watched, the giant opened his eyes: they were a piercing icy blue. The giant did not seem immediately threatening, though.

"Hello," called Thor.

"Good morning!" called the black-haired giant, in a voice like an avalanche. "They call me Skrymir. It means 'big fellow.' They are sarcastic, my lot, calling a runty little chap like me Big Fellow, but there you are. Now, where's my glove? I had two, you know, last night, but I dropped one." He held up his hands: his right hand had a huge mittenlike leather glove on it. The other was bare. "Oh! There it is."

He reached down to the far side of the hill Thor had climbed, and he picked up something that was obviously another mitten. "Odd. Something's in it," he said, and gave it a shake. Thor recognized their home of the previous night just as Thialfi and Loki came tumbling out of the mouth of the glove and landed in the snow beneath.

Skrymir put his left mitten on and looked happily at his mittened hands. "We can travel together," he said. "If you're willing."

Thor looked at Loki and Loki looked at Thor and both of them looked at young Thialfi, who shrugged. "I can keep up," he said, confident of his speed.

"Very well," shouted Thor.

They ate breakfast with the giant: he pulled whole cows and sheep from his provision bag and crunched them down; the three companions ate more sparingly. After the meal, Skrymir said, "Here. I'll carry your provisions inside my bag. Less for you to carry, and we will all eat together when we camp tonight." He put their food in his bag, did up the laces, and strode off toward the east.

Thor and Loki ran after the giant with the untiring pace of gods. Thialfi ran as fast as any man has ever run, but even he found it hard to keep up as the hours went by, and sometimes it seemed that the giant was just another mountain in the distance, his head lost in the clouds.

They caught up with Skrymir as evening fell. He had found a camp for them beneath a huge old oak tree and had made himself comfortable nearby, his head resting on a great boulder. "I'm not hungry," he told them. "Don't you worry about me. I'm going to get an early night. Your provisions are in my bag, up against the tree. Goodnight."

He began to snore. As the familiar rumble-hum and whistle shook the trees, Thialfi climbed the giant's provision bag. He called down to Thor and Loki, "I cannot undo the laces. They are too tough for me. They might as well be made out of iron."

"I can bend iron," said Thor, and he leapt to the top of the provision bag and began to tug on the laces.

"Well?" asked Loki.

Thor grunted and hauled, hauled and grunted. Then he shrugged. "I don't think we'll be having dinner tonight," he said. "Not unless this damnable giant undoes the laces on his bag for us."

He looked at the giant. He looked at Mjollnir, his hammer. Then he clambered down the bag, and he made his way onto the top of Skrymir's sleeping head. He raised the hammer and slammed it down on Skrymir's forehead.

Skrymir opened one eye sleepily. "I think a leaf just fell on my head and woke me up," he said. "Have you all finished eating? Are you ready for bed? Don't blame you if you are. Long day." And he rolled over, closed his eyes, and began to snore once again.

Loki and Thialfi managed to fall asleep despite the noise, but Thor could not sleep. He was angry, he was hungry, and he did not trust this giant, out in the eastern wilderness. At midnight he was still hungry, and he had had enough of the snoring. He clambered up onto the giant's head once more. He positioned himself between the giant's eyebrows.

Thor spat into his hands. He adjusted his belt of strength. He raised Mjollnir over his head. And with all his might, he swung. He was certain that the hammer head sank into Skrymir's forehead.

It was too dark to see the color of the giant's eyes, but they opened. "Whoa," the big fellow said. "Thor? Are you there? I think an acorn just fell off the tree onto my head. What time is it?"

"It's midnight," said Thor.

"Well, then, see you in the morning." Giant snores shook the ground and made the tops of the trees tremble.

It was dawn but not yet day when Thor, hungrier, angrier, and still sleepless, resolved to strike one final blow that would silence the snoring forever. This time he aimed for the giant's temple, and he hit Skrymir with all his strength. Never was there such a blow. Thor heard it echo from the mountaintops.

"You know," said Skrymir, "I think a bit of bird's nest just dropped on my head. Twigs. I don't know." He yawned and stretched. Then he got to his feet. "Well, I'm done sleeping. Time to be on our way. Are you three headed to Utgard? They will look after you well there. I guarantee you a mighty feast, horns of ale, and afterward wrestling and racing and contests of strength. They like their fun in Utgard. That's due east—just head that way, where the sky is lightening. Me, I'll be off to the north." He gave them a gap-toothed grin, which would have seemed foolish and vacant if his eyes had not been so very blue and so very sharp.

Then he leaned over and put a hand beside his mouth, as if he did not wish to be overheard, an effect slightly lessened by his whisper, which was loud enough to deafen. "I couldn't help overhearing you fellows back then, when you were saying how very big I was. And I suppose you thought you were complimenting me. But if ever you make it to the north,

you'll meet proper giants, the really big fellows. And you'll find out what a shrimp I really am."

Skrymir grinned again, and then he stomped off toward the north, and the ground rumbled beneath his feet.

III

They traveled east through Jotunheim, always traveling toward the sunrise, for some days.

At first they thought they were looking at a normal-sized fortress and that it was relatively close to them; they walked toward it, hurrying their pace, but it did not grow or change or seem closer. As the days passed they realized how big it was and just how far away.

"Is that Utgard?" asked Thialfi.

Loki seemed almost serious as he said, "It is. This is where my family came from."

"Have you ever been here before?"

"I have not."

They strode up to the fortress gate, seeing no one. They could hear what sounded like a party going on inside. The gate was higher than most cathedrals. It had metal bars covering it, of a size that would have kept any unwanted giants at a respectable distance.

Thor shouted, but no one responded to his calls.

"Shall we go in?" he asked Loki and Thialfi.

They ducked and climbed under the bars of the gate. The travelers walked through the courtyard and into the great hall. There were benches as high as treetops, with giants sitting on them. Thor strode in. Thialfi was terrified, but he walked beside Thor, and Loki walked behind them.

They could see the king of the giants, sitting on the highest chair, at the end of the hall. They crossed the hall, and then they bowed deeply.

The king had a narrow, intelligent face and flame-red hair. His eyes were an icy blue. He looked at the travelers, and he raised an eyebrow.

“Good lord,” he said. “It’s an invasion of tiny toddlers. No, my mistake. You must be the famous Thor of the Aesir, which means you must be Loki, Laufey’s son. I knew your mother a little. Hello, small relation. I am Utgardaloki, the Loki of Utgard. And you are?”

“Thialfi,” said Thialfi. “I am Thor’s bondservant.”

“Welcome, all of you, to Utgard,” said Utgardaloki. “The finest place in the world, for those who are remarkable. Anyone here who is, in craft or cunning, beyond everyone else in the world is welcome. Can any of you do anything special? What about you, little relative? What can you do that’s unique?”

“I can eat faster than anybody,” said Loki, without boasting.

“How interesting. I have my servant here. His name is, amusingly enough, Logi. Would you like an eating competition with him?”

Loki shrugged, as if it were all the same to him.

Utgardaloki clapped his hands, and a long wooden trough was brought in, with all manner of roasted animals in it: geese and oxen and sheep, goats and rabbits and deer. When he clapped his hands again, Loki began to eat, starting at the far end of the trough and working his way inward.

He ate hard, he ate single-mindedly, he ate as if he had only one goal in life: to eat all he could as fast as he could. His hands and mouth were a blur.

Logi and Loki met at the middle of the table.

Utgardaloki looked down from his throne. “Well,” he said, “you both ate at the same speed—not bad!—but Logi ate the bones of the animals, and yes, it appears he also ate the wooden trough it was served in. Loki ate all the flesh, it’s true, but he barely touched the bones and he didn’t even make a start on the trough. So this round goes to Logi.”

Utgardaloki looked at Thialfi. “You,” he said. “Boy. What can you do?”

Thialfi shrugged. He was the fastest person he knew. He could outrun startled rabbits, outrun a bird in flight. He said, “I can run.”

“Then,” said Utgardaloki, “you shall run.”

They walked outside, and there, on a level piece of ground, was a track, perfect for running. A number of giants stood and waited by the track, rubbing their hands together and blowing on them for warmth.

“You’re just a boy, Thialfi,” said Utgardaloki. “So I will not have you run against a grown man. Where is our little Hugi?”

A giant-child stepped forward, so thin he might not have been there, not much bigger than Loki or Thor. The child looked at Utgardaloki and said nothing, but he smiled. Thialfi was not certain that the boy had been there before he had been called. But he was there now.

Hugi and Thialfi stood side by side at the starting line, and they waited.

“Go!” called Utgardaloki, in a voice like thunder, and the boys began to run. Thialfi ran as he had never run before, but he watched Hugi pull ahead and reach the finish line when he was barely halfway there.

Utgardaloki called, “Victory goes to Hugi.” Then he crouched down beside Thialfi. “You will need to run faster if you have a hope of beating Hugi,” said the giant. “Still, I’ve not seen any human run like that before. Run faster, Thialfi.”

Thialfi stood beside Hugi at the starting line once more. Thialfi was panting, and his heart was pounding in his ears. He knew how fast he had run, and yet Hugi had run faster, and Hugi seemed completely at ease. He was not even breathing hard. The giant-child looked at Thialfi and smiled again. There was something about Hugi that reminded Thialfi of Utgardaloki, and he wondered if the giant-child was Utgardaloki’s son.

“Go!”

They ran. Thialfi ran as he had never run before, moving so fast that the world seemed to contain only himself and Hugi. And Hugi was still ahead of him the whole way. Hugi reached the finish line when Thialfi was still five, perhaps ten seconds away.

Thialfi knew that he had been close to winning that time, knew that all he had to do was give it all he had.

“Let us run again,” he panted.

“Very well,” said Utgardaloki. “You can run again. You are fast, young man, but I do not believe you can win. Still, we will let the final race decide the outcome.”

Hugi stepped over to the starting line. Thialfi stood next to him. He could not even hear Hugi breathing.

“Good luck,” said Thialfi.

“This time,” said Hugi, in a voice that seemed to sound in Thialfi’s head, “you will see me run.”

“Go!” called Utgardaloki.

Thialfi ran as no man alive had ever run. He ran as a peregrine falcon dives, he ran as a storm wind blows, he ran like Thialfi, and nobody has ever run like Thialfi, not before and not since.

But Hugi ran on ahead easily, moving faster than ever. Before Thialfi was even halfway, Hugi had reached the end of the track and was on the way back.

“Enough!” called Utgardaloki.

They went back into the great hall. The mood among the giants was more relaxed now, more jovial.

“Ah,” said Utgardaloki. “Well, the failure of these two is perhaps understandable. But now, now we shall see something to impress us. Now is the turn of Thor, god of thunder, mightiest of heroes. Thor, whose deeds are sung across the worlds. Gods and mortals tell stories of your feats. Will you show us what you can do?”

Thor stared at him. “For a start, I can drink,” said Thor. “There is no drink I cannot drain.”

Utgardaloki considered this. “Of course,” he said. “Where is my cup-bearer?” The cup-bearer stepped forward. “Bring me my special drinking horn.”

The cup-bearer nodded and walked away, returning in moments with a long horn. It was longer than any drinking horn that Thor had ever seen, but he was not concerned. He was Thor, after all, and there was no drinking horn he could not drain. Runes and patterns were engraved on the side of the horn, and there was silver about the mouthpiece.

“It is the drinking horn of this castle,” said Utgardaloki. “We have all emptied it here, in our time. The strongest and mightiest of us drain it all in one go; some of us, I admit it, take two

attempts to drain it. I am proud to tell you that there is nobody here so weak, so disappointing, that it has taken them three drafts to finish it.”

It was a long horn, but Thor was Thor, and he raised the brimming horn to his lips and began to drink. The mead of the giants was cold and salty, but he drank it down, draining the horn, drinking until his breath gave out and he could drink no longer.

He expected to see the horn emptied, but it was as full as when he had begun to drink, or nearly as full.

“I had been led to believe that you were a better drinker than that,” said Utgardaloki drily. “Still, I know you can finish it at a second draft, as we all do.”

Thor took a deep breath, and he put his lips to the horn, and he drank deeply and drank well. He knew that he had to have emptied the horn this time, and yet when he lowered the horn from his lips, it had gone down by only the length of his thumb.

The giants looked at Thor and they began to jeer, but he glared at them, and they were silent.

“Ah,” said Utgardaloki. “So the tales of the mighty Thor are only tales. Well, even so, we will allow you to drink the horn dry on your third attempt. There cannot be much left in there, after all.”

Thor raised the horn to his lips and he drank, and he drank like a god drinks, drank so long and so deeply that Loki and Thialfi simply stared at him in astonishment.

But when he lowered the horn, the mead had gone down by only another knuckle’s worth. “I am done with this,” said Thor. “And I am not convinced that it is only a little mead.”

Utgardaloki had his cup-bearer take away the horn. “It is time for a test of strength. Can you lift up a cat?” he asked Thor.

“What kind of a question is that? Of course I can pick up a cat.”

“Well,” said Utgardaloki, “we have all seen that you are not as strong as we thought you were. Youngsters here in Utgard practice their strength by picking up my housecat. Now, I should warn you, you are smaller than any of us here, and my cat is a giant’s cat, so I will understand if you cannot pick her up.”

“I will pick up your cat,” said Thor.

“She is probably sleeping by the fire,” said Utgardaloki. “Let us go to her.”

The cat was sleeping, but she roused when they entered and sprang into the middle of the room. She was gray, and she was as big as a man, but Thor was mightier than any man, and he reached around the cat’s belly and lifted her with both hands, intending to raise her high over his head. The cat seemed unimpressed: she arched her back, raising herself, forcing Thor to stretch up as far as he could.

Thor was not going to be defeated in a simple game of lifting a cat. He pushed and he strove, and eventually one of the cat’s feet was lifted above the ground.

From far away, Thor and Thialfi and Loki heard a noise, as if of huge rocks grinding together: the rumbling noise of mountains in pain.

“Enough,” said Utgardaloki. “It’s not your fault that you cannot pick up my housecat, Thor. It is a large cat, and you are a scrawny little fellow at best, compared to any of our giants.” He grinned.

“Scrawny little fellow?” said Thor. “Why, I’ll wrestle any one of you—”

“After what we’ve seen so far,” said Utgardaloki, “I would be a terrible host if I let you wrestle a real giant. You might get hurt. And I am afraid that none of my men would wrestle someone who could not drain my drinking horn, who could not even lift up the family cat. But I will tell you what we could do. If you wish to wrestle, I will let you wrestle my old foster mother.”

“Your foster mother?” Thor was incredulous.

“She is old, yes. But she taught me how to wrestle, long ago, and I doubt she has forgotten. She is shrunken with age, so she will be closer to your height. She is used to playing with children.” And then, seeing the expression on Thor’s face, he said, “Her name is Elli, and I have seen her defeat men who seemed stronger than you when she wrestled them. Do not be overconfident, Thor.”

“I would prefer to wrestle your men,” said Thor. “But I will wrestle your old nurse.”

They sent for the old woman, and she came: so frail, so gray, so wizened and wrinkled that it seemed like a breeze would blow her away. She was a giant, yes, but only a little taller

than Thor. Her hair was wispy and thin on her ancient head. Thor wondered how old this woman was. She seemed older than anyone he had ever encountered. He did not want to hurt her.

They stood together, facing each other. The first to get the other one down onto the ground would win. Thor pushed the old woman and he pulled her, he tried to move her, to trip her, to force her down, but she might as well have been made of rock for all the good it did. She looked at him the whole time with her colorless old eyes and said nothing.

And then the old woman reached out and gently touched Thor on the leg. He felt his leg become less firm where she had touched him, and he pushed back against her, but she threw her arms around him and bore him toward the ground. He pushed as hard as he could, but to no avail, and soon enough he found himself forced onto one knee . . .

“Stop!” said Utgardaloki. “We have seen enough, great Thor. You cannot even defeat my old foster mother. I do not think any of my men will wrestle you now.”

Thor looked at Loki, and they both looked at Thialfi. They sat beside the great fire, and the giants showed them hospitality—the food was good, and the wine was less salty than the mead from the giant’s drinking horn—but each of the three of them said less than he usually would have said during a feast.

The companions were quiet and they were awkward, and humbled by their defeat.

They left the fortress of Utgard at dawn, and King Utgardaloki himself walked beside them as they left.

“Well?” said Utgardaloki. “How did you enjoy your time in my home?”

They looked up at him gloomily.

“Not much,” said Thor. “I’ve always prided myself on being powerful, and right now I feel like a nobody and a nothing.”

“I thought I could run fast,” said Thialfi.

“And I’ve never been beaten at an eating contest,” said Loki.

They passed through the gates that marked the end of Utgardaloki’s stronghold.

"You know," said the giant, "you are not nobodies. And you are not nothing. Honestly, if I knew last night what I know now, I would never have invited you into my home, and I am going to make very certain you are never invited in again. You see, I tricked you, all of you, with illusions."

The travelers looked at the giant, who smiled down at them. "Do you remember Skrymir?" he asked.

"The giant? Of course."

"That was me. I used illusion to make myself so large and to change my appearance. The laces of my provision bags were tied with unbreakable iron wire and could be undone only by magic. When you hit me with your hammer, Thor, while I pretended to sleep, I knew that even the lightest of your blows would have meant my death, so I used my magic to take a mountain and put it invisibly between the hammer and my head. Look over there."

Far away was a mountain in the shape of a saddle, with valleys plunging into it: three square-shaped valleys, the last one going deepest of all.

"That was the mountain I used," said Utgardaloki. "Those valleys are your blows."

Thor said nothing, but his lips grew thin, and his nostrils flared, and his red beard prickled.

Loki said, "Tell me about last night, in the castle. Was that illusion too?"

"Of course it was. Have you ever seen wildfire come down a valley, burning everything in its path? You think you can eat fast? You will never eat as fast as Logi, for Logi is fire incarnate, and he devoured the food and the wooden trough it was in as well by burning it. I have never seen anyone eat as quickly as you."

Loki's green eyes flashed with anger and with admiration, for he loved a good trick as much as he hated being fooled.

Utgardaloki turned to Thialfi. "How fast can you think, boy?" he asked. "Can you think faster than you can run?"

"Of course," said Thialfi. "I can think faster than anything."

“Which is why I had you run against Hugi, who is thought. It does not matter how fast you ran—and none of us have ever seen anyone run like you, Thialfi—even you cannot run faster than thought.”

Thialfi said nothing. He wanted to say something, to protest or to ask more questions, when Thor said, in a low rumble, like thunder echoing on a distant mountaintop, “And me? What did I actually do last night?”

Utgardaloki was no longer smiling. “A miracle,” he said. “You did the impossible. You could not perceive it, but the end of the drinking horn was in the deepest part of the sea. You drank enough to take the ocean level down, to make tides. Because of you, Thor, the seawater will rise and ebb forevermore. I was relieved that you did not take a fourth drink: you might have drunk the ocean dry.

“The cat whom you tried to lift was no cat. That was Jormungundr, the Midgard serpent, the snake who goes around the center of the world. It is impossible to lift the Midgard serpent, and yet you did, and you even loosened a coil of it when you lifted its paw from the ground. Do you remember the noise you heard? That was the sound of the earth moving.”

“And the old woman?” asked Thor. “Your old nurse? What was she?” His voice was very mild, but he had hold of the shaft of his hammer, and he was holding it comfortably.

“That was Elli, old age. No one can beat old age, because in the end she takes each of us, makes us weaker and weaker until she closes our eyes for good. All of us except you, Thor. You wrestled old age, and we marveled that you stayed standing, that even when she took power over you, you fell down only onto one knee. We have never seen anything like last night, Thor. Never.

“And now that we have seen your power, we know how foolish we were to let you reach Utgard. I plan to defend my fortress in the future, and the way that I plan to defend it best to is to ensure that none of you ever find Utgard, or see it again, and to be quite certain that whatever happens in the days to come, none of you will ever return.”

Thor raised his hammer high above his head, but before he could strike, Utgardaloki was gone.

“Look,” said Thialfi.

The fortress was gone. There was no trace of Utgard-aloki's stronghold or the grounds it was in. Now the three travelers were standing on a desolate plain, with no signs of any kind of life whatsoever.

"Let's go home," said Loki. And then he said, "That was well done. Brilliantly deployed illusions. I think we've all learned something today."

"I will tell my sister that I raced thought," said Thialfi. "I will tell Roskva I ran well."

But Thor said nothing. He was thinking about the night before, and wrestling old age, of drinking the sea. He was thinking about the Midgard serpent.