

Thor's visit to Jotunheim, the giant's country

[TDM edit]

ONE day the god Thor, with his servant Thialfi, and accompanied by Loki, set out on a journey to the giant's country. Thialfi was of all men the swiftest of foot. He bore Thor's wallet, containing their provisions. When night came on, they found themselves in an immense forest. They searched on all sides for a place where they might pass the night and at last came to a very large hall, with an entrance that took the whole breadth of one end of the building. In here they lay down to sleep, but towards midnight were alarmed by an earthquake which shook the whole edifice. Thor, rising up, called on his companions to seek with him a place of safety. On the right they found an adjoining chamber, into which the others entered, but Thor remained at the entrance with his mallet in his hand, prepared to defend himself, whatever might happen. A terrible groaning was heard during the night, and at dawn of day, Thor went out and found lying nearby a huge giant, who slept and snored in the way that had alarmed them so. It is said that for once Thor was afraid to use his mallet, and as the giant soon awoke, Thor contented himself with simply asking for the giant's name.

"My name is Skrymir.", said the giant, "But I need not ask thy name, for I know that thou art the god Thor. But what has become of my glove?" Thor then perceived that what they had taken overnight for a hall was the giant's glove, and the chamber where his two companions had later sought refuge was the thumb. Skrymir then proposed that they should travel in company, and Thor consenting, they sat down to eat their breakfast, and when they had done, Skrymir packed all the provisions into one wallet, threw it over his shoulder, and strode on before them, taking such tremendous strides that the others were hard put to it to keep up with him. So they travelled the whole day, and at dusk Skrymir chose a place for them to pass the night, under a large oak tree. Skrymir then told them he would lie down to sleep. "But take ye the wallet", he added, "and prepare your supper."

Skrymir soon fell asleep and began to snore strongly. But when Thor tried to open the wallet, he found the giant had tied it up so tight he could not untie a single knot. At last Thor became wroth, and grasping his mallet with both hands, he struck a furious blow on the giant's head. Skrymir, awakening, merely asked whether a leaf had not fallen on his head, and whether they had supped and were ready to go to sleep. Thor answered that they were just going to sleep, and so saying he went and laid himself down under another tree. But sleep came not that night to Thor, and when Skrymir snored again so loud that the forest re-echoed with the noise, he arose, and grasping his mallet launched it with such force at the giant's skull that it made a deep dint in it. Skrymir, awakening, cried out "What's the matter? Are there any birds perched on this tree? I felt some moss from the branches fall on my head. How fares it with thee, Thor?". But Thor went away hastily, saying that he had just then awoke and that as it was only midnight, there was still time for sleep. He, however, resolved that if he had an opportunity of striking a third blow, it should settle all matters between them. A little before daybreak he perceived that Skrymir was again fast asleep, and again grasping his mallet, he dashed it with such violence that it forced its way into the giant's skull up to the handle. But Skrymir sat up, and stroking his cheek, said "An acorn fell on my head. What?! Art thou awake, Thor? Methinks it is time for us to get up and dress ourselves; but you have not now a long way before you to the city called Utgard. I have heard you whispering to one another that I am not a man of small dimensions; but if you go to Utgard, you will see there many men much taller than I. Wherefore I advise you, when you go there, not to make too much of yourselves, for the followers of Utgard-Loki will not brook the boasting of such little fellows as you are. You must take the road that leads eastward; mine lies northward, so we must part here."

Hereupon he threw his wallet over his shoulders and turned away from them into the forest, and Thor had no wish to stop him or to ask for any more of his company.

Thor and his companions proceeded on their way, and towards noon descried a city standing in the middle of a plain. It was so lofty that they were obliged to bend their necks quite back on their shoulders in order to see to the top of it. On arriving, they entered the city, and seeing a large palace before them with the door wide open, they went in and found a number of men of prodigious stature, sitting on benches in the hall. Going further, they came before the king, Utgard-Loki, whom they saluted with great respect. The king, regarding them with a scornful smile, said "If I do not mistake me, that stripling yonder must be the god Thor.". Then addressing himself to Thor, he said "Perhaps thou mayst be more than thou appearest to

be. What are the feats that thou and thy fellows deem yourselves skilled in, for no one is permitted to remain here who does not, in some feat or other, excel all other men?"

"The feat that I know", said Loki, "is to eat quicker than anyone else, and in this I am ready to give a proof against anyone here who may choose to compete with me."

"That will indeed be a feat", said Utgard-Loki, "if thou performest what thou promisest, and it shall be tried forthwith."

He then ordered one of his men who was sitting at the farther end of the bench, and whose name was Logi, to come forward and try his skill with Loki. A trough filled with meat having been set on the hall floor, Loki placed himself at one end and Logi at the other, and each of them began to eat as fast as he could, until they met in the middle of the trough. But it was found that Loki had only eaten the flesh, while his adversary had devoured both flesh and bone, and the trough to boot. All the company therefore adjudged that Loki was vanquished.

Utgard-Loki then asked what feat the young man who accompanied Thor could perform. Thialfi answered that he would run a race with anyone who might be matched against him. The king observed that skill in running was something to boast of, but if the youth would win the match, he must display great agility. The king then arose and went with all who were present to a plain where there was good ground for running on, and calling a young man named Hugi, bade him run a match with Thialfi. In the first course Hugi so much outstripped his competitor that he turned back and met Thialfi not far from the starting place. Then they ran a second and a third time, but Thialfi met with no better success.

Utgard-Loki then asked Thor in what feats he would choose to give proofs of that prowess for which he was so famous. Thor answered that he would try a drinking match with anyone. Utgard-Loki bade his cupbearer bring the large horn which his followers were obliged to empty when they had trespassed in any way against the law of the feast. The cupbearer having presented it to Thor, Utgard-Loki said "Whoever is a good drinker will empty that horn at a single draught, though most men make two of it, but the most puny drinker can do it in three."

Thor looked at the horn, which seemed of no extraordinary size though somewhat long. However, as he was very thirsty, he set it to his lips, and without drawing breath, pulled as long and as deeply as he could, that he might not be obliged to make a second draught of it. But when he set the horn down and looked in, he could scarcely perceive that the liquor was diminished.

After taking breath, Thor went to it again with all his might, but when he took the horn from his mouth, it seemed to him that he had drunk rather less than before, although the horn could now be carried without spilling.

"How now, Thor?", said Utgard-Loki, "Thou must not spare thyself. If thou meanest to drain the horn at the third draught, thou must pull deeply. And I must needs say that thou wilt not be called so mighty a man here as thou art at home, if thou showest no greater prowess in other feats than methinks will be shown in this."

Thor, full of wrath, again set the horn to his lips, and did his best to empty it; but on looking in, Thor found the liquor was only a little lower, so he resolved to make no further attempt but gave back the horn to the cupbearer.

"I now see plainly", said Utgard-Loki, "that thou art not quite so stout as we thought thee. But wilt thou try any other feat, though methinks thou art not likely to bear any prize away with thee hence?"

"What new trial hast thou to propose?", said Thor.

"We have a very trifling game here," answered Utgard-Loki, "in which we exercise none but children. It consists in merely lifting my cat from the ground. Nor should I have dared to mention such a feat to the great Thor, if I had not already observed that thou art by no means what we took thee for."

As he finished speaking, a large grey cat sprang onto the hall floor. Thor put his hand under the cat's belly and did his utmost to raise the cat from the floor; but the cat, bending his back, had, notwithstanding all Thor's efforts, only one of his feet lifted up. Seeing so, Thor made no further attempt.

"This trial has turned out", said Utgard-Loki, "just as I imagined it would. The cat is large, but Thor is little in comparison to our men."

"Little as ye call me", answered Thor, "let me see who among you will come hither now that I am in wrath and wrestle with me."

"I see no one here", said Utgard-Loki, looking at the men sitting on the benches, "who would not think it beneath him to wrestle with thee. Let somebody, however, call hither that old crone, my nurse Elli, and let Thor wrestle with her, if he will. She has thrown to the ground many a man not less strong than this Thor is."

A toothless old woman then entered the hall and was told by Utgard-Loki to take hold of Thor. The tale is shortly told. The more Thor tightened his hold on the crone, the firmer she stood. At length after a very violent struggle, Thor began to lose his footing and was finally brought down upon one knee. Utgard-Loki then told them to desist, adding that Thor had now no occasion to ask anyone else in the hall to wrestle with him and that it was also getting late, so he showed Thor and his companions to their seats, and they passed the night there in good cheer.

The next morning, at break of day, Thor and his companions dressed themselves and prepared for their departure. Utgard-Loki ordered a table to be set for them, on which there was no lack of victuals or drink. After the repast, Utgard-Loki led them to the gate of the city, and on parting, asked Thor how he thought his journey had turned out and whether he had met with any men stronger than himself. Thor told him that he could not deny but that he had brought great shame on himself. "And what grieves me most", he added, "is that ye will call me a person of little worth."

"Nay," said Utgard-Loki, "it behooves me to tell thee the truth, now that thou art out of the city, which so long as I live and have my way thou shalt never enter again. And, by my troth, had I known beforehand that thou hadst so much strength in thee and wouldst have brought me so near to a great mishap, I would not have suffered thee to enter this time. Know then that I have all along deceived thee by my illusions; first in the forest, where I tied up the wallet with iron wire so that thou couldst not untie it. After this, thou gavest me three blows with thy mallet; the first, though the least, would have ended my days had it fallen on me, but I slipped aside and thy blows fell on the mountain, where thou wilt find three glens, one of them remarkably deep. These are the dints made by thy mallet. I have made use of similar illusions in the contests you have had with my followers. In the first, Loki, like hunger itself, devoured all that was set before him, but Logi was in reality nothing else than fire, and therefore consumed not only the meat, but the trough which held it. Hugi, with whom Thialfi contended in running, was thought, and it was impossible for Thialfi to keep pace with that. When thou in thy turn didst attempt to empty the horn, thou didst perform, by my troth, a deed so marvellous that had I not seen it myself, I should never have believed it. For one end of that horn reached the sea, which thou wast not aware of, but when thou comest to the shore thou wilt perceive how much the sea has sunk by thy draughts. Thou didst perform a feat no less wonderful by lifting up the cat, and to tell thee the truth, when we saw that one of his paws was off the floor, we were, all of us, terror-stricken, for what thou tookest for a cat was in reality the Midgard serpent that encompasseth the Earth, and he was so stretched by thee that he was barely long enough to enclose it between his head and tail. Thy wrestling with Elli was also a most astonishing feat, for there was never yet a man nor ever will be, whom old age, for such in fact was Elli, will not sooner or later lay low. But now, as we are going to part, let me tell thee that it will be better for both of us if thou never come near me again, for shouldst thou do so, I shall again defend myself by other illusions, so that thou wilt only lose thy labour and get no fame from the contest with me."

On hearing these words, Thor in a rage laid hold of his mallet and would have launched it at Utgard-Loki, but the giant king had disappeared, and when Thor then returned to the city to destroy it, he found nothing around him but a verdant plain.