

"Traacherous Odin!" called the wolf. "If you had not lied to me, I would have been a friend to the gods. But your fear has betrayed you. I will kill you, Father of the Gods. I will wait until the end of all things, and I will eat the sun and I will eat the moon. But I will take the most pleasure in killing you."

The gods were careful not to get within reach of Fenrir's jaws, but as they were driving the rock deeper, Fenrir twisted and snapped at them. The god nearest him, with presence of mind, thrust his sword into the roof of Fenris Wolf's mouth. The hit of the sword jammed in the wolf's lower jaw, wedging the jaw open and preventing it from ever closing.

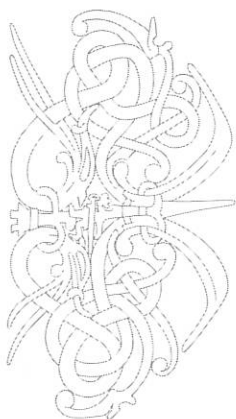
The wolf growled inarticulately, and saliva poured from its mouth, forming a river. If you did not know it was a wolf, you might have thought it a small mountain, with a river flowing from a cave mouth.

The gods left that place where the river of saliva flowed down into the dark lake, and they did not speak, but once they were far enough away they laughed some more, and clapped each other on the back, and smiled the huge smiles of those who believe they have done something very clever indeed.

Tyr did not smile and he did not laugh. He bound the stump of his wrist tightly with a cloth, and he walked beside the gods back to Asgard, and he kept his own counsel.

These, then, were the children of Loki.

## FREYA'S UNUSUAL WEDDING



**T**hor, god of thunder, mightiest of all the Aesir, the strongest, the bravest, the most valiant in battle, was not entirely awake yet, but he had the feeling that something was wrong. He reached out a hand for his hammer, which he always kept within reach while he slept.

He fumbled around with his eyes closed. He groped about, reaching for the comfortable and familiar shaft of his hammer.

No hammer.

Thor opened his eyes. He sat up. He stood up. He walked around the room.

There was no hammer anywhere. His hammer was gone.

Thor's hammer was called Mjollnir. It had been made for Thor by the dwarfs Brokk and Eitri. It was one of the treasures of the gods. If Thor hit anything with it, that thing would be destroyed. If he threw the hammer at something, the hammer would never miss its target, and would always fly back through the air and return to his hand. He could shrink the hammer down and hide it

inside his shirt, and he could make it grow again. It was a perfect hammer in all things except one: it was slightly too short in the handle, which meant that Thor had to swing it one-handed.

The hammer kept the gods of Asgard safe from all the dangers that menaced them and the world. Frost giants and ogres, trolls and monsters of every kind, all were frightened of Thor's hammer.

Thor loved his hammer. And his hammer simply was not there.

There were things Thor did when something went wrong. The first thing he did was ask himself if what had happened was Loki's fault. Thor pondered. He did not believe that even Loki would have dared to steal his hammer. So he did the next thing he did when something went wrong, and he went to ask Loki for advice.

Loki was crafty. Loki would tell him what to do.

"Don't tell anyone," said Thor to Loki, "but the hammer of the gods has been stolen."

"That," said Loki, making a face, "is not good news. Let me see what I can find out."

Loki went to Freya's hall. Freya was the most beautiful of all the gods. Her golden hair tumbled about her shoulders, and it glinted in the morning light. Freya's two cats prowled the room, eager to pull her chariot. Around her neck, as golden and shining as her hair, glittered the necklace of the Brisings, made for Freya by dwarfs far underground.

"I'd like to borrow your feathered cloak," said Loki.

"The one that lets you fly."

"Absolutely not," said Freya. "That cloak is the most valuable thing I possess. It's more valuable than gold. I'm not having you wearing it and going around and making mischief."

"Thor's hammer has been stolen," said Loki. "I need to find it."

"I'll get you the cloak," said Freya.

Loki put on the feathered cloak and he took to the air, in falcon shape. He flew beyond Asgard. He flew deep into the land of the giants, looking for something unusual. Beneath him, Loki saw a huge grave mound, and sitting on it, plaiting a dog collar, was the hugest, ugliest ogre of a giant he had ever seen. When the ogre saw Loki in falcon shape, he grinned a sharp-toothed grin and waved.

"What's up with the Aesir, Loki? What's the news from the elves? And why have you come alone into the land of the giants?"

Loki landed beside the ogre. "There's nothing but bad news from Asgard, and nothing but bad news from the elves."

"Really?" said the ogre, and he chuckled to himself, as if he were extremely pleased with something he had done and thought himself remarkably clever. Loki recognized that sort of chuckle. Sometimes he did it himself.

"Thor's hammer is missing," said Loki. "Would you know anything about that?"

The ogre scratched his armpit, and he chuckled once more. "I might," he admitted. Then he said, "How's Freya? Is she as beautiful as they say?"

"If you like that sort of thing," said Loki.

"Oh, I do," said the ogre. "I do."

There was another uncomfortable silence. The ogre put the dog collar down on a pile of dog collars and began to plait another.

"I have Thor's hammer," the ogre told Loki. "I've hidden it so deep beneath the earth that nobody could ever find it, not even Odin. I am the only one who could bring it up again. And I will return it to Thor if you bring me what I want."

"I can ransom the hammer," said Loki. "I can bring you gold and amber, I can bring you treasures beyond counting—"

"Don't want them," said the ogre. "I want to marry Freya. Bring her here in eight days from now. I'll return the hammer of the gods as a bride-gift on Freya's wedding night."

"Who are you?" asked Loki.

The ogre grinned and showed his crooked teeth. "Why, Loki son of Laufey, I am Thrym, lord of the ogres."

"I have no doubt that we can come to an arrangement, great Thrym," said Loki. He drew Freya's feathered cloak around him, then stretched his arms and took to the skies.

Beneath Loki the world seemed very small: he looked down at the trees and the mountains, tiny as children's

playthings, and the problems of the gods seemed a small thing also.

Thor was waiting for him in the court of the gods, and before Loki had even landed he found himself seized by Thor's huge hands. "Well? You know something. I can see it in your face. Tell me whatever you know, and tell it now. I don't trust you, Loki, and I want to know what you know right this moment, before you've had a chance to plot and to plan."

Loki, who plotted and planned as easily as other folk breathed in and out, smiled at Thor's anger and innocence. "Your hammer has been stolen by Thrym, lord of all the ogres," he said. "I have persuaded him to return it to you, but he demands a price."

"Fair enough," said Thor. "What's the price?"

"Freya's hand in marriage."

"He just wants her hand?" asked Thor hopefully. She had two hands, after all, and might be persuaded to give up one of them without too much of an argument. Tyr had, after all.

"All of her," said Loki. "He wants to marry her."

"Oh," said Thor. "She won't like that. Well, you can tell her the news. You're better at persuading people to do things than I am when I'm not holding my hammer."

They went together to Freya's court once more.

"Here's your feathered cloak," said Loki.

"Thank you," said Freya. "Did you find out who stole Thor's hammer?"

"Thrym, lord of the ogres."

"I've heard of him. A nasty piece of work. What does he want for it?"

"You," said Loki. "He wants to marry you."

Freya nodded.

Thor was pleased that she seemed to have accepted the idea so easily. "Put on your bridal crown, Freya, and pack your things," he said. "You and Loki are going to the land of the giants. We need to get you married off to Thrym before he changes his mind. I want my hammer back."

Freya did not say anything.

Thor noticed that the ground was shaking, as were the walls. Freya's cats mewed and hissed, and they fled beneath a chest of furs and would not come out.

Freya's hands were squeezed into tight fists. The neckline of the Brisings tumbled from her neck to the floor. She did not appear to notice. She was staring at Thor and Loki as if they were the lowest, most unpleasant vermin she had ever seen.

Thor was almost relieved when Freya began to speak.

"What kind of person do you think I am?" she asked very quietly. "Do you think I'm that foolish? That impossible? That I'm someone who would actually marry an ogre just to get you out of trouble? If you two think that I am going to the land of the giants, that I'll put on a bridal crown and veil and submit to the touch and the . . . the *lull* of that ogre . . . that I'd marry him

. . . well . . ." She stopped talking. The walls shuddered once again, and Thor feared the entire building would fall upon them.

"*Get out*," said Freya. "What kind of woman do you think I am?"

"But. My hammer," said Thor.

"Shut up, Thor," said Loki.

Thor shut up. They left.

"She's very beautiful when she's angry," said Thor.

"You can see why that ogre wants to marry her."

"Shut up, Thor," said Loki again.

They called a gathering of all the gods in the great hall. Every god and goddess was there except Freya, who declined to leave her house.

All day they talked, debated, and argued. There was no question that they needed to get Myllnir back, but how? Each god and goddess made a suggestion, and each suggestion was shot down by Loki.

In the end only one god had not spoken: Heimdall, the far-seeing, who watches over the world. Not one thing happens that Heimdall does not see, and sometimes he sees events that have yet to occur in the world.

"Well?" said Loki. "What about you, Heimdall? Do you have any suggestions?"

"I do," said Heimdall. "But you won't like it."

Thor banged his fist down upon the table. "It does not matter whether or not we like it," he said. "We are gods! There is nothing that any of us gathered here would not

do to get back Myllnir, the hammer of the gods. Tell us your idea, and if it is a good idea, we will like it."

"You won't like it," said Heimdall.

"We will like it!" said Thor.

"Well," said Heimdall, "I think we should dress Thor as a bride. Have him put on the necklace of the Brisings. Have him wear a bridal crown. Stuff his dress so he looks like a woman. Veil his face. We'll have him wear keys that jingle, as women do, drape him with jewels—"

"I don't like it!" said Thor. "People will think . . . well, for a start they'll think I dress up in women's clothes. Absolutely out of the question. I don't like it. I am definitely not going to be wearing a bridal veil. None of us like this idea, do we? Terrible, terrible idea. I've got a beard. I can't shave off my beard."

"Shut up, Thor," said Loki son of Laufey. "It's an excellent idea. If you don't want the giants to invade Asgard, you will put on a wedding veil, which will hide your face—and your beard."

Odin the all-highest said, "It is indeed an excellent idea. Well done, Heimdall. We need the hammer back, and this is the best way. Goddesses, prepare Thor for his wedding night."

The goddesses brought him things to wear. Frigg and Fulla, Sif, Idunn and the rest, even Skadi, Freya's step-mother, came and helped to prepare him. They dressed him in the finest clothes, the kind a highborn goddess would wear to her wedding. Frigg went to see Freya and

came back with the necklace of the Brisings, and she hung it about Thor's neck.

Sif, Thor's wife, hung her keys at Thor's side.

Idunn brought all her jewels, which she draped about Thor so that he glittered and gleamed in the candlelight, and she brought a hundred rings, of red gold and white gold, to go on Thor's fingers.

They covered his face with a veil, so that only his eyes could be seen, and Var, the goddess of marriage, placed a shining headdress upon Thor's head: a bridal crown, high and wide and beautiful.

"I'm not sure about the eyes," Var said. "They don't look very feminine."

"I should hope not," muttered Thor.

Var looked at Thor. "If I pull down the headdress, it will hide them, but he still has to be able to see."

"Do your best," said Loki. And then he said, "I'll be your maidservant and go with you to the land of the giants." Loki shifted his shape, and now he was, in voice and in appearance, a beautiful young serving woman.

"There. How do I look?"

Thor muttered something under his breath, but it might have been a good thing that nobody could hear it.

Loki and Thor clambered into Thor's chariot, and the goats who pulled it, Snarler and Grinder, leapt into the skies, eager to be off. Mountains broke in half as they passed, and the earth burst into flame beneath them.

"I have a bad feeling about this," said Thor.

"Don't speak," said Loki in the form of a maiden. "Let me do all the talking. Can you remember that? If you speak, you may ruin everything."

Thor grunted.

They landed in the courtyard. Giant-sized jet-black oxen stood impassively. Each beast was larger than a house; the tips of their horns were capped with gold, and the courtyard stank with the sharp smell of their dung.

A booming voice could be heard from inside the huge high hall: "Move it, you fools! Spread clean straw on the benches! What do you think you're doing? Well, pick it up or cover it with straw, don't just leave it there to rot. This is Freya, the most beautiful creature in existence, Njord's daughter, who comes to us. She won't want to see something like that."

There was a path made of fresh straw through the courtyard, and after leaving their chariot, the disguised Thor and the serving maiden who was Loki walked across the straw, lifting their skirts so they did not drag in the muck.

A giant woman was waiting for them. She introduced herself as Thrym's sister, and she reached down and pinched Loki's pretty cheek between her fingertips, and she prodded Thor with one sharp fingernail. "So this is the most beautiful woman in the world? Doesn't look much to me. And when she picked up her skirts, it seemed to me that her ankles were as thick as small tree trunks." "A trick of the light. She is the most beautiful of all the

gods," said the maiden who was Loki smoothly. "When her veil comes off, I promise you will be struck down by her beauty. Now, where is her groom? Where is the wedding feast? She is so eager for this, I have barely been able to restrain her."

The sun was setting as they were led into the great hall for the wedding feast.

"What if he wants me to sit next to him?" whispered Thor to Loki.

"You have to sit next to him. That's where the bride sits."

"But he might try and put his hand on my leg," Thor whispered urgently.

"I'll sit between you," said Loki. "I'll tell him it's our custom."

Thrym sat at the head of the table, and Loki sat next to him, with Thor at the next seat on the bench.

Thrym clapped his hands and giant serving men came in. They carried five whole roast oxen, enough to feed the giants; they brought in twenty whole baked salmon, each fish the size of a ten-year-old boy; also they carried in dozens of trays of little pastries and fancies intended for the women.

They were followed by five more serving men, each one carrying a whole cask of mead, a barrel huge enough that each giant struggled beneath the weight of it.

"This meal is for the beautiful Freya!" said Thrym, and he might have said something else, but Thor had already started to eat and to drink, and it would have

been rude for Thrym to have talked while the bride-to-be was eating.

A tray of pastries for the womenfolk was placed in front of Loki and Thor. Loki carefully picked out the smallest pastry. Thor just as carefully swept the rest of the pastries up, and they vanished, to the sound of munching, under the veil. The other women, who had been looking at the pastries hungrily, glared, disappointed, at the beautiful Freya.

But the beautiful Freya had not even begun to eat.

Thor ate a whole ox, all by himself. He ate seven entire salmon, leaving nothing but the bones. Each time a tray of pastries was brought to him, he devoured all the fancies and pastries on it, leaving all the other women hungry. Sometimes Loki would kick him under the table, but Thor ignored every kick and just kept eating.

Thrym tapped Loki on the shoulder. "Excuse me," he said. "But the lovely Freya has just polished off her third cask of mead."

"I'm sure she has," said the maiden who was Loki.

"Amazing. I've never seen any woman eat so ravenously. Never seen any woman eat so much, or drink so much mead."

"There is," said Loki, "an obvious explanation." He took a deep breath and watched Thor inhale another whole salmon and pull a salmon skeleton out from under his veil. It was like watching a magic trick. He wondered what the obvious explanation was.

"That makes eight salmon she's eaten," said Thrym.

"Eight days and eight nights!" said Loki suddenly. "She hasn't eaten for eight days and eight nights, she was so keen to come to the land of the giants and make love to her new husband. Now she is in your presence, she is finally eating again." The maiden turned to Thor. "It's so good to see you eating again, my dear!" she said.

Thor glared at Loki from beneath the veil.

"I should kiss her," said Thrym.

"I wouldn't advise it. Not yet," said Loki, but Thrym had already leaned over and was making kissing noises. With one huge hand he reached for Thor's veil. The maiden who was Loki put out her arm to stop him, but it was too late. Thrym had already stopped making kissing noises and had sprung back, shaken.

Thrym tapped the maiden who was Loki on the shoulder. "Can I talk with you?" he said.

"Of course."

They got up and walked across the hall.

"Why are Freya's eyes so . . . so terrifying?" asked Thrym. "It seemed as if there was a fire burning inside them. Those weren't the eyes of a beautiful woman!"

"Of course not," said the maiden who was Loki smoothly. "You wouldn't expect them to be. She hasn't slept for eight days and eight nights, mighty Thrym. She was so consumed by love for you that she dared not sleep, she was so mad to taste your love. She's burning up inside for you! That's what you're seeing in those eyes. Burning passion."



"Oh," said Thrym. "I see." He smiled, and licked his lips with a tongue bigger than a human pillow. "Well, then."

They walked back to the table. Thrym's sister had sat down in Loki's seat, beside Thor, and was tapping her fingernails on Thor's hand. "If you know what's good for you, you'll give me your rings," she was saying. "All your pretty golden rings. You'll be a stranger in this case. You'll need someone looking out for you, otherwise things are going to get pretty nasty, so far from home. You've got so many rings. Give me some as a bridal gift. So pretty they are, all red and gold—"

"Isn't it time for the wedding?" asked Loki.

"It is!" said Thrym. He boomed at the top of his voice, "Bring in the hammer to sanctify the bride! I want to see Mjollnir placed on the beautiful Freya's lap. Let Var, the goddess of pledges between men and women, bless and consecrate our love."

It took four giants to carry Thor's hammer. They brought it in from deep inside the hall. It glinted dully in the firelight. With difficulty, they placed it on Thor's lap.

"Now," said Thrym. "Now, let me hear your beautiful voice, my love, my dove, my sweetness. Tell me that you love me. Tell me that you will be my bride. Tell me that you pledge yourself to me as women have pledged themselves to men, and men to women, since the beginning of time. What do you say?"

Thor held the haft of his hammer with a hand that was

covered with golden rings. He squeezed it reassuringly. It felt familiar and comfortable in his hand. He started laughing then, a deep, booming laugh.

"What I say," said Thor, in a voice like thunder, "is that you should not have taken my hammer."

He hit Thrym with his hammer, only once, but once was all it took. The ogre fell to the straw-covered floor, and did not rise again.

All the giants and ogres fell beneath Thor's hammer: the guests at the wedding that was never to be. Even Thrym's sister, who received a bridal gift she had not been expecting.

And when the hall was silent, Thor called "Loki?"

Loki climbed out from under the table, in his original shape, and surveyed the carnage. "Well," he said, "you appear to have dealt with the problem."

Thor was already taking off his women's skirts, with relief. He stood there wearing nothing but a shirt in a room filled with dead giants.

"There, that wasn't as bad as I had feared," he said cheerfully. "I've got my hammer back. And I had a good dinner. Let's go home."