

Thor's Hammer

A Story from the Odin Chronicles

by Joe Nobel

The war hammer lay suspended in a wall of ice. He touched the ice sheet through his fur mitt, then pulled off the mitt and touched it with his bare hand. He looked away, up to the purple evening sky, then back again at the ice wall and the hammer within. The hammer was still there. This was no apparition. The object couldn't have been more than an arm's length away buried in the ice.

“What is it doing there?” he asked himself. Then he cursed himself for not having any way of retrieving it.

The head of the hammer was made of iron. His people knew about iron, that tantalizingly rare substance cast down by the gods but once in a rare while. Thrown down in a streak of fire to crash many hills away. The gods challenged his people. Challenged them to find the impact before another tribe; challenged them to dig out the metal; and challenged them to form it into

something usable. Such as swords and war hammers. This hammer was cast by a master craftsman, no doubt a god. The head was smooth and polished, not a dent was left when hammering it into shape in the forge.

The finely crafted handle was made of wood which ran through a hole in the center of the iron head. A strong leather strap circled both the hammer and handle tying the wood and iron together.

Ongul had set out on his journey early that morning, sent by his wife, Eija-Riita — over his objections. The food stores had gone bad. The autumn cheese had turned rancid, and mice had gotten into two sacks of grain. Stocks were too low to see the village through the winter. Winter began today although it had been unseasonably cold all autumn. Today was the shortest day of the year. Winter solstice. It was supposed to be a happy and joyous time; a time to celebrate the rebirth of the sun; a time to start watching the days grow longer. Yet here he was, on this foolish trek, after all there were still enough provisions for another month or so. Dried fish and beef, the remainder of the grain, and not all the cheese had gone bad. Not to mention apples, there were plenty of apples. He could imagine the whole community enjoying an apple each for the solstice.

His wife had insisted he leave immediately after discovering the losses the night before. “Trade with the mountain folk while they still have something to trade with,” she had said in her dead-right, no-room-for-discussion voice. So he filled his pack with dried fish, something that the mountain specially value, and set out for the hills.

The day was filled with omens. Two ravens followed him all the way up the trail. Then two shooting stars crossed paths, making an X in the sky with their tails. And now he had found a war hammer suspended in ice.

Ongul made a fist and struck the ice wall. His hand made nothing more than a slapping noise. He tried again. He threw his body against it. Nothing. He looked around for a rock to chip away the ice, but that was absurd as the ground was covered deep with snow. He thought of his tinder box. His tiny flint wouldn't go very far cracking the ice before breaking into shards. The low hanging branches of the pines around him were too green and wet to start a fire. He could think of no way to retrieve it. Yet he couldn't leave the hammer, either. It was clearly left by the gods. But, was it left for him to find?

He set up camp at dusk under the ice wall. By the time he finished, he could hardly see to the top of the crevasse. His mind raced about the hammer. Who left it? And for who to find? As he set up his tent in a hole he had dug in the snow, he wondered if he would he be getting a visit from a giant tonight? Or a faerie? Or a god ... ? He had trouble falling asleep. Every sound, every shadow, every gust of wind was suspicious.

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Ongul cursed Eija-Riita between fits of sleep. Why did she have to send him off? It all happened so fast he didn't have a chance to object before he found himself hiking up the valley and waving back to his wife, daughters, and the rest of the village. The villagers had all kept quiet, not daring to question Eija-Riita. And the men-folk all thanked Odin and Thor for not being the one to marry her. She was pretty, strong, tireless, sharp of mind, fierce in courage like the best of the male warriors, yet controlling, ever so controlling. She was ice. Ice as strength. But ice between her legs too, denying her husband at the slightest whim.

She hadn't always been like that, years had taken their toll and her sweet demeanor had turned bitter. The hardest part of it was her beauty. She was still beautiful, but now untouchable. He would catch a glimpse as her breasts danced under her blouse whenever she bent down, and

at those time's he'd reminisce about the magical times they once had together. He'd watch from the corner of his eye as she did a certain move especially while she was naked. Then he could take in the few moments of pleasure and watch those breasts, and best of all, her nipples. Oh, those nipples, sharp, long, and firm, each on a well defined, yet petite pink circlet. He remembered long ago when they were still new to each other and each one exploring the other's body, he would ride his member between those wonderful breasts, she would hold them together for him and squeeze him tight, giving him a warm and happy home as he rode up and down on her chest. Then he would slide down her body, past her navel, down her loins, and his throbbing organ would find its way between her legs.

After bearing three children for him, she'd changed. The toll of raising three daughters drained the years from her. And, the whispers that Ongul's seed was not strong enough for sons wore on her just as much. Ongul didn't mind having all daughters instead of sons; it was a delight to watch them grow. If only Eija-Riita wouldn't constantly curse him for not providing a son to take care of her in her elder years.

He sat up from under his sleeping skins and reached into his backpack. He discovered an apple she'd packed for him. An apple that he too could enjoy on Solstice Night. Perhaps away from the warmth of the village and their celebration, but he could still take a small measure of comfort in this modest pleasure. Perhaps she wasn't so bad after all. Perhaps she still loved him in her own way. Perhaps when he returned to her ...

Still, he felt an emptiness within his soul.

Ongul slept next to the war hammer frozen in a wall of ice outside his tent. He tossed and turned while the frozen air permeated his tent and nipped at his toes. He fell in and out of foreboding, unsettled dreams. Dreams laden with the weight of the world.

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He found himself getting up and crawling out of his tent. He didn't feel the bitter cold, so he assumed he was dreaming. He walked over to the ice wall in his bare feet. The moon was full and directly above him, shining down from between the sides of the crevasse. The ice wall now glowed blue in the dark of the night. The glow came not from the moon but from the hammer itself. Icy wind swirled around him, whipping up his hair and furs. The hammer called his name.

Now he was sure he was dreaming. His thoughts echoed through his head as if it were an empty stone hall. Yes, he was dreaming, this couldn't be real. So with the confidence of that knowledge, he pushed his hand into the wall of ice and plucked out the hammer. It was easy, as if he were taking a stone out of a still mountain pool. He marveled at the weapon in his grip: so cold, so heavy, and so perfectly cast. Yet, it was small for its weight; the head was barely larger than his two fists. He sensed this was a deft and agile weapon, and deadly.

Dread overcame him as he looked at it. The dread turned to panic. Then fear. "Oh dear Odin, father of the gods, what have I done!" he shouted. "What makes me think I am worthy to take a hammer of the gods?"

Perhaps he shouldn't have touched it and let it be where it was. Then he realized he could not let it go. He tried to loosen his fingers, but he was so paralyzed with fear that his muscles would not respond. Was the hammer taking control of his hand? He tried to scream, but his lungs gave nothing but an ineffectual grunt.

He awoke from the dream, heart pounding, gasping for breath and shivering with a cold sweat. As he sat up and saw he was still in his familiar surroundings: under his sheep skins and in his tent. His sweat had soaked into the skins leaving them damp. He took a breath and tried to convince himself that none of it was real. The dream may have contained messages from the

gods, but he certainly hadn't pulled the hammer from the ice wall. A dream, only a dream, he kept telling himself.

That's when he felt the war hammer beside him, under his furs. He cast the blanket aside with a jerk. There it was, that cursed hammer. Though not glowing itself, it made every drop of moisture glow that eerie faint blue from his dream. His breath, his sweat on the sheepskins, the condensed moisture on the roof of the tent, all glowed in cold, blue radiance. He cowered in the corner of his tent. He sat all night in terror and dared not move, not until the dawn sky began to light.

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Enlightenment did not come with the light of day for Ongul. He crawled out of his tent. The ice wall was still there, but now it had a hole the size of a man's arm reaching in to where the hammer once lay.

He quickly packed his tent, and slung his new-found hammer onto his belt. Then he continued on his trek up to the mountain folk. Whatever he was supposed to do with this hammer, he hoped the gods could wait until he'd traded his fish for cheese and grain and bought it all back home. He cursed Eija-Riita again, for this was all her fault. Then he prayed to whichever gods that might be listening that he did not wish for greatness, nor adventure, just to get back home.

He reached the mountain village by mid-afternoon. He surely would have been killed and had his provisions taken (judging by the looks he got) if not for the war hammer he sported on his belt. The trading was tense. The villagers knew the value of what they had compared to what Ongul was offering. And, they were on the short end of Ongul's proposed deal. They didn't have much either, but they certainly had enough to trade. And, their bodies craved the fish Ongul laid

before them.

The deal was done, sealed with a man-to-man handshake with the village elder. His sack of dried fish for three wheels of cheese, dried beef, plus a sack of grain. It could have gone better, Eija-Riita would surely complain, but he felt that he had already pushed the villagers as far as they would go. Angry eyes from his trading opponents and those of the men standing nervously behind his back made him pack his newly gained provisions as fast as possible. He bid a hasty farewell and set off down the trail again. He dared not look back.

As soon as he was out of sight of the village, Ongul fell into a fast hop in the deep snow. It was as fast as he could go and wished he could have run. Down the valley he flew, as fast as the snow would let him. He didn't stop to look back until he was well along the trail, but he saw shadows, he heard twigs breaking. He was being followed. He was out of breath all too soon. He thought more than once that he should throw the hammer away — it was a burden slowing him down — and come back for it in the spring when the snow had melted. But, to do so would risk the ire of the gods. He entertained thoughts of wielding it, should he be cornered by his pursuers. But that was fantasy, never having used a war hammer and not anxious to try one for the first time in mortal combat.

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They cornered Ongul in the same crevasse in which he found the hammer. Two villagers ran along the top of the ridge and cut him off at the other end. Three others approached from behind. Ongul was trapped at his camp sight. There were the marks left by his tent. There was the wall of ice with the hand-sized hole in it. He looked up and down the narrow trail with pursuers both in front and behind him and descending upon him fast. He could not think.

“What are you afraid of?” one of them laughed. “We just think you made too good of a

deal and we want that food back. We'll let you off with your life if you don't put up a fuss. A good bargain, don't you think?"

Ongul didn't trust them. Even if he were to abandon his food, they would still kill him. He wanted to make a bold retort but his lips wouldn't move.

"And, that hammer! What do you want with a hammer like that? You might hurt yourself. Hand it over!" the leader said. He was no more than an overgrown boy with wild red hair, freckled checks, and arrogance. He stood tall, with broad shoulders and mighty muscular arms resting on his hips. He stepped toward with his hand out.

Ongul reached for the war hammer as the man/boy approached and the hammer took control of his arm and hand. He felt his fingers circle the handle in a firm grip. His arm tightened like a coiled snake. In one move, the hammer cracked open his foe's skull. The red-headed warrior fell to the ground: what was left of his face oozed crimson. It was the first life Ongul had ever taken.

He didn't have time to feel sickened. A second villager, enraged at the sight of his fallen comrade, attacked Ongul with a curdling war cry. He descended upon Ongul with a hatchet raised in his right arm and piercing blue eyes fixated on Ongul's throat. Again, the hammer struck, and the man fell next to the first. His blood splattered red on the snow like scattered flower petals.

The hammer slew two others who charged him: one of them fell from an undercut the jaw; the other, on the downward swing cracking his skull open. The speed of the hammer nearly tore Ongul's arm off.

Ongul used all his willpower to hold the hammer back as the last two men stood trembling at the foot of the crevasse. The hammer would have surely taken control of his feet and

made him charge those two if he didn't use all his conscious power to force his legs to hold still. The hammer quivered in his hand as Ongul held it back. He knew the hammer didn't like it, but it obeyed him — for the moment. The hammer had come to an understanding with Ongul, but he knew it was poised to strike again at the slightest provocation.

“Out of my way!” Ongul ordered. He tried to summon a commanding voice, but it came out like a baby's plea. It still had the desired effect. The two men blocking his way stood to one side and let Ongul pass. He continued his trip downward, constantly looking back.

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It soon occurred to Ongul that he must not stop and camp for the night. Those two remaining villagers were still out there, probably following his track. There might even be more if they went back to gather others.

“Why did I have to restrain the hammer?” he cursed to himself. “If I stop for the night, they'll find me and slit my throat while I sleep. I must go on.”

The sun was setting. The sky was blood red in the west, purple and black to the east. He cursed himself again for not killing the rest of them. Then he realized he didn't spare them out of mercy. It was out of revulsion of killing; a revulsion of that sickening, dull, squishing feeling of the hammer splitting a man's head open.

Ongul dared not stop. He felt in his heart that his pursuers were still out there, close behind, perhaps just over the last hill. He kept moving with the last of his energy. Winds whipped through the trees, chilling him to the bone.

The last of the light disappeared. Up until then, he was able to follow the footprints in the snow that he'd left when coming up the mountain. Those footprints became harder and harder to see as darkness fell. When it got too dark to see, he resorted to feeling the ground for his

indentations. Then he got to a place where the wind had completely covered his tracks. That's where he lost his trail completely. From there on, he could only follow the general downward direction toward the fjords of home. Home, to where his wife and children awaited him.

His anger over Eija-Riita had dissipated long ago. All he could think of was being back with the familiar faces of home. She must be brewing something warm for him even now, fondly awaiting his return. He would see her soon — if he survived the night.

Exhaustion hit. Every muscle in his body protested and he started shivering. Nonetheless, he continued, sometimes walking, sometimes crawling. He often tripped, stumbling on roots or rocks buried beneath the snow. Delirium overtook him. He didn't even know for sure if he was crawling around in circles. Then his body came to a point where he could crawl no longer. Even if he wanted to camp, he didn't have the strength to set up his tent. He was cold, tired, lost, and he thought he was going mad when he heard laughter in the wind. He fell into the snow face first. All he wanted to do was sleep and let the gods take him.

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“Oh, don't give up so easily, silly boy,” Ongul heard a soothing voice call to him. He felt two sets of hands around his arms as he was lifted out of the snow. He could barely open his eyes to see his saviors. He saw a blur of a face looking back at him, it was surely a woman or a child, fair in complexion, and smiling. He remembered the smile as he passed out again.

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“Look, he's waking!” Ongul heard that same woman speak. There were other voices buzzing in his ears. They all giggled and whispered to each other as Ongul stirred. “Shh, shh! I always wanted to do this with a mortal man,” the first voice said, the one closest to him.

“You're not really going to, are you?” another voice said with a gasp. “Oh no, you really

are!”

Ongul opened his eyes to see a delightfully fair-skinned woman with blond hair. She smiled down at him and was cradling his head in her arms.

“There, there, my poor baby. We thought you would never wake up. We thought we were too late.”

“Where? Who?” Ongul tried to ask.

“Shhh. You're weak from your ordeal. So, so weak. Here, let me give you nourishment.”

The woman pulled her breast out of her dress and gave him a nipple. He tried to protest, but he was too weak to push her away,. He couldn't say anything but “Mmmmmfffff”, as the nipple and breast filled his mouth. To his surprise, he started suckling. He felt the milk on his tongue, and soon there was enough to swallow.

“Oooh, not so hard,” his mysterious nurse admonished. “Yes that's it. Be gentle. This should be as nice for me as it is for you.” Soon she started moaning and gyrating as she cradled his head. He felt the heat of her loins as they rubbed against his body. Her warmth comforted him and gave him a happy feeling, even though he was still too weary to be aroused.

“Sleep now,” she told him. “There will be time for play later.” As if a spell had been cast, Ongul fell into a deep and peaceful slumber.

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Ongul woke in an earthen cave. Roots from a tree above held the packed earth and rocks of the walls in place. A fireplace in the corner kept this room-cave warm with a crackling fire. Water occasionally dripped from where the chimney stones met the earthen ceiling and the heat of the stones melted the snow above. Several small windows, each no larger than a hands' breadth lined the walls near the ceiling. A modicum of light filtered through the snow covered

openings.

A pig grunted with a mellow voice. A goat bleated in counterpoint. Ongul sat up to the sounds and surveyed his new surroundings. The pig was penned off in one far corner; in another, the goat was tied to a protruding root with a noose around his neck.

It was a grand and glorious cave with candles and oil lamps shaped from gourds lighting the interior; not a dark and somber cave that dwarves and other nefarious creatures of the faerie world might inhabit.

He ran his fingers across the carpet of moss growing on the floor. The walls were decorated with vines of living mistletoe. Holly sprouted from the walls. Ongul wondered what kind of enchantment kept all these plants alive and thriving underground.

Chairs and tables had been crafted from rough branches, yet skillfully assembled by a talented artisan. A marble throne sat against the far wall looking down over this underground hall. Five small marble stools shaped like mushrooms sat around the throne in a half circle. Holding court must be a whimsical affair, he thought.

Ongul noticed the kitchen. A room divided from the hall in which he lay by a rise in the cave wall. Four women were busy skinning and drawing a freshly slaughtered lamb, laughing and giggling amongst themselves. He recognized one voice, the enchanted creature who fed him her milk.

He caught glimpses of their feminine figures as one or another turned his way as they worked their chores. These were not women. They were magical creatures of the netherworld. Each was lithe and thin, the size of a blossoming young maidens but with shapely breasts and the curved hips of grown women. It was a delight to watch as they danced around each other while working busily in the kitchen. Their eyes were large and wide, eyes a man could easily get lost in

if he'd stare into them long enough. Each one's eyebrows curled upward, their cheeks were a rosy red, and their ears ended in dainty points. They wore skirts and jerkins made of woven holly. The one that had nursed him had short platinum blond hair, tousled in a way that made her look all-the-more charming. She was clearly in charge, directing the others in their tasks. A lust ran through his body, he thought he would die of madness if he couldn't have her. A fire in the kitchen reflected off their heads, setting their hair aglow with an unearthly radiance.

"Ahh, our man awakes," his nursemaid spoke. "I see you are faring much better." They dropped what they were doing and ran to him, gathering around Ongul on all sides. They knelt beside him and caressed his legs, arms, and back. Another two ran in from other corners of the cave. Soon he was surrounded by six of these graceful woodland creatures, all with pointed ears and curiously curving eyebrows.

"He's nice," the last one to stumble into the hall said, "can I have him first, oh, Queen Moon?" She had fiery red hair and a hint of mischief in her eyes.

"No, you may not," his nursemaid, Queen Moon replied. "For your impertinence, you may have him last, Fire."

"Oh pooh, I always get them last," the fiery haired one pouted, "they're always, always, always, so worn out by the time I get my turn."

"You don't always get them last," one of the others said. "You get your turn second to Moon just as often as the rest of us."

"Have me?" Ongul gulped. "Have me for what?" He tried to stand up. "Where am I? Who are you? How did I get here?"

"Don't try to move, dear mortal," Queen Moon said. "You're fortunate we found you in time. You must have been awfully scared to panic and get lost like that."

“Those men!” Ongul’s heart raced. “They were after me! I fought them off with a magic hammer. I dared not stop and camp for fear of them finding me in the night.”

“Shush,” Moon said. “Don’t worry about them. Those ruffians will never bother you again. You are safe and warm in our underground home. But, I am forgetting my manners,” she said as she idly caressed his thigh beneath his sheepskin blanket. “We are wood nymphs. I am Moon, the queen of my little tribe. This is Sea.” Moon nodded to a nymph with blue eyes and turquoise-green hair cascading like ocean waves down her neck.

Sea giggled.

“This is Sky,” Moon continued, as she waved her hand at the nymph with light blue hair.

“He’s cute,” Sky said.

“This is Sun.” Moon nodded to the next nymph. She had golden blond hair and freckles that reminded Ongul of sunshine.

“He’s more than cute,” Sun said. “He’s yummy.”

“And finally, this is Twilight and Fire,” Moon said. Twilight had long straight indigo hair that looked like the sky after the sun went down. Fire was the cheeky one who’d wanted Ongul first. She had green eyes and short, fiery red hair that danced like a blaze when she shook her head.

“We don’t get many mortal men here,” Fire said. “I’m so glad we found you in time.”

Ongul looked at each one of them. He imagined spending the rest of his days here in this enchanted cave. Then he remembered his quest.

“The food,” he said. “I must get back to my village. And, that hammer, where is the hammer? The gods have bestowed it upon me for some quest, although I know not what.”

“Shush,” Moon said. “You are far too weak to worry about earthly matters. You will do

your village no good if you go out into the snow to die of exhaustion.”

“But —” he protested.

“And the gods,” Moon said, rolling her eyes. “Whatever quest you think they’ve set you on, it will have to wait until we nurse you back to health. Understand?”

“Yes, Queen Moon,” Ongul answered.

“Let’s have a look at this valiant mortal,” Moon said, as she pulled away his sheepskin blanket revealing his naked body to the six nymphs.

“Wow,” Fire said, giggling.

“Be quiet, dear,” Moon said. “Yes, very impressive.”

Ongul instinctively covered himself with his hands.

“Don’t be bashful,” Twilight said. “We only wish to bring you joy while in our care.”

“Yes,” Moon said. “We will give you pleasures beyond your wildest dreams.” She straddled his chest and started massaging his shoulders. “So firm, so virile. I have high hopes for this one.” The other nymphs planted tender kisses on his arms, forehead, and thighs while soothing his skin with their gentle caresses.

Ongul dropped the last of his defenses and let the sea of bodies sweep him away. He cupped Moon’s breasts and gently played with them. One of the nymphs — he couldn’t see which one — grabbed hold of his member and took it into her mouth.

Moon shooed her away then slid down Ongul’s body onto his cockhead. She moaned a sigh of pleasure as he enter her.

Ongul knew then he was getting a taste of the afterlife. Nothing in his experience with his wife had ever been this sweet.

Moon gently rocked back and forth upon his member. He watched her undulate on him

and how the light of a hundred candles flickered against her neck. She smelled like flowers of the spring. Her scent, mixed with the myriad scents in the hall, put him in a blissful state of euphoria.

Moon increased the tempo of her motions and grabbed his chest hairs. She began bucking furiously, writhing her body in pleasure. He took hold of her hips and tried to slow her to maintain control. He knew he was on the verge of coming and would have liked to hold it off for a little while. But, Moon, so hot and wet, was beyond what Ongul could bear. He felt his orgasm coming on, and there was no way he could stop it.

“No!” Moon cried, when she felt him explode and his member began to soften. She rolled off him and stood pulling her hair in frustration. “Uhhh! I was just beginning to enjoy myself. I expected more from you.”

“But I enjoyed it,” Ongul said.

“You mortals are so infuriating.” Moon paced the hall. “Not only did you leave me dissatisfied, but the rest of the nymphs didn’t even get a turn. Couldn’t you have controlled yourself?”

“Control myself?” Ongul asked. Eija-Riita had never chastised him about his love making. Did she turn cold over the years because he was unsatisfying?

“You were very disappointing,” Moon stated. “And, what’s worse, you are oblivious of your shortcomings. I see now you are hopeless. Girls, we have no use for him. Bring him to my throne where I shall pronounce judgment.”

The nymphs took hold of Ongul by his arms and legs, and with unworldly strength dragged him before Queen Moon’s throne. They made him kneel, then tied his hands behind his back. When Moon took her seat on the throne, the nymphs pushed him forward so his face lay on the floor before Moon’s feet. They took their places on the mushroom-shaped stools around the

throne.

“Kiss your queen’s toes,” Moon commanded.

Ongul was too scared to do anything but comply.

“Adequate,” Moon huffed, when he’d kissed all ten.

“What shall we do with this miserable mortal?” Moon asked.

From his periphery, Ongul watched Moon idly playing with herself. A finger gently circled her still-moistened clit as she sat open-legged before Ongul. She did nothing to hide her sex beneath her skirt of woven holly.

Moon ranted about the sexual inadequacies of mortal males, and of Ongul’s in particular. Ongul didn’t hear a word she said because two of the nymphs, Fire and Twilight, were playing with his cock with their toes as they sat cross-legged next to him.

He felt his member slowly come back as the two surreptitiously fondled him.

“So, what will it be?” Moon asked. He thought she was asking him a question, but quickly realized she was speaking to her tribe when she added, “Goat? Lamb? Or pig?”

“Not a lamb,” Fire said. “We’re having lamb now.”

“I won’t eat him as a goat,” Twilight said. “Yuck.”

“And, he’s not really the pig type,” Fire added. “He’s too well muscled for a pig. Just look at his firm chest and strong arms.” She pulled back on his arms making him stand on his knees. She pushed his back to make his chest stand out. “Why look, he’s stiff again,” Fire said in mock surprise.

“Yes, he certainly has amazing comeback power,” Twilight added.

“Can Twilight and I have him?” Fire asked. “Just once before you turn him into something? You certainly don’t want him any more.”

“So, you want to salvage this mortal, do you?” Moon said. “Don’t think I don’t know what you two are up to.”

“Please,” Fire pleaded. “He’s so cute, like a puppy. I know we can train him to please us.”

“If you want him that badly, you can have him.” Moon huffed. “But he needs to learn humility first. He’s much too presumptuous and doesn’t appreciate his lowly station in life. I won’t turn him into a lamb, goat, or pig. He’ll be a dog, and he’ll stay a dog until he proves himself worthy to return to human form.”

“No!” Ongul cried. “The food for my village! The hammer and the quest for the gods!”

“Those matters are no longer your concern,” Moon said, impatiently. “Bring him!”

The nymphs took hold of Ongul and carried him to the center of the hall. They stood in a circle around him with Moon at the head. One of the nymphs cut the rope tying his wrists behind his back and they bade him to kneel on all fours.

The nymphs began chanting an unworldly song. They held their hands out above Ongul as they sang. Sparks, like miniature bolts of lightning, shot from one hand to another. Soon, a halo of lightning surrounded Ongul. He looked up to see their hairs stand on end and sparks dance from one hand to another, building in intensity from one moment to the next.

A charge shot out from Moon’s fingers that hit Ongul in the back. He winced but dared not move. Then another charge arced from Sun’s hand to his right shoulder. He wanted to get up and run; to push himself through their circle and up and out of this underground lair but he’d become paralyzed. More electricity arced from the nymphs’ hands landing all over his exposed back, rump, and shoulders.

“Stop!” he pleaded in pain.

Blue sparks danced over his body. Every pore on his skin stung, and then he felt his body

change. Something was terribly wrong with his form. His hands turned to paws, he grew a tail, and his jaw turned into a snout. His ears became attuned to the faintest sounds. He smelled scents he hadn't noticed before and could now distinguish each of the nymphs by their scent. Ongul wanted to yell "No more!", but he only barked. He wanted to cry out in pain, but he could only yelp.

Ongul had become a dog.

Fire bound a rope collar and leash around his neck and led him to a corner of the hall where she tied him to a protruding root. The pig and goat looked at him with piercing, angry eyes, each from a different corner of the hall. He looked up at Fire again. She had brought him a half gourd filled with water.

"Don't spill it," she said. "I don't want to have to refill your water all the time."

Ongul whined.

"I'll take you outside twice a day, more if I can. Don't have any accidents because I'm the one who'll have to clean up after you."

Ongul whined again. How could he communicate with her? How could he tell her how unfair this was, or how important his obligations to his family and village were? All he could do was bark.

"Oh, and don't be a nuisance by barking too much," Fire said. "Queen Moon will beat you. She is a harsh mistress. Be a good boy and we'll be friends, okay?" Fire patted him on the head, then went off to join the others.

Ongul watched the nymphs put the lamb on a spit over the hearth. While the lamb roasted, they had an orgy amongst themselves. As far as Ongul could understand, it was in celebration of Moon's clever idea of turning him into a dog.

Ongul had never seen anything like what they were doing. He watched as the nymphs melted into what seemed to be a mass of intertwining arms and legs as they pleased each other in ways he never imagined possible. Then, when the lamb was ready some hours later, the orgy turned into a feast of food and ale. As the nymphs ate and drank, Ongul thought about the meager portions on his villagers' plates. His own stomach growled with hunger.

Ongul got a bowl full of scraps and several bones that he could gnaw on all night. He had to work out a technique to handle the bones. He discovered that if he held a bone between his two front paws he could hold it in a standing position. That way he could work the top where the chewy cartilage lay. He could then crunch the bone down to get to the succulent marrow until there was nothing left.

As he gnawed on the bones, he watched the nymphs clean up the aftermath of their feast under Moon's strict supervision. They were all tired from the sex, bloated from the food, and a bit drunk, but none dared cross Moon. She kept a switch made from a tree branch in hand, and whenever a nymph tarried, usually Fire, she'd get a harsh whack on her bottom.

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Fire led Ongul outside through the back entry way in the kitchen the following morning. There was small patch of ground that had been cleared of snow where he was allowed to do his business. This is where the nymphs piled the discarded flotsam and refuse of the cave. The snow around the clearing was an impenetrable wall to Ongul; it was even two heads taller than Fire. Even she couldn't climb over it. After he relieved himself, Fire led him back downstairs and leashed him to the same root.

"Good boy," she said.

Ongul wanted to say, "I'm not your boy," but being a dog, he had no words. How could

he prove himself worthy and be returned to human form if he'd be confined to a small corner of this cave? He wondered if he'd ever get out. So much for their tender words about pleasures beyond my dreams.

A crack of lightning and a boom of thunder jolted the cave. The quake shook a layer of dirt off the cave ceiling. Ongul covered his head.

"He's here!" Sky cried.

"Thor's coming!" Sea whimpered. "We're cooked!"

"Don't panic," Moon said. "Everyone, get your knitting and take your places. You all know what to do."

The front door to the cave crashed open and the god of thunder barged down the steps. He stopped at the bottom and planted his feet on the cave floor. A thick beard grew on his chiseled face, piercing blue eyes, and wore a helmet with horns on the sides. He looked around the hall.

"Where is he?" he boomed. "Where is the mortal?"

Sky and Sun dropped their knitting and cowered. Twilight started to cry. Queen Moon ran up to Thor and put her hand on his chest. She stood no more than two thirds his height and was thinner than his thigh.

"Thor, dear," Moon said. "Who is it that you're looking for?"

"Do not take me for thy fool." Thor grabbed her by the wrist.

"I, I don't know what you are talking about, my love."

"The mortal," he said locking eyes with her. "Hast thou seen a mortal male? He carries my war hammer, Mjölfnir."

"No." Moon shook her head. "No mortals here. Have any of you seen a mortal?"

The nymphs all shook their heads.

“As you can see, we mostly stay inside during the winter days,” Moon said. “Your imaginary mortal may have wandered by our cave and we wouldn’t have even known. We idle away our time down here knitting. It really is a lonely existence for us pitiful wood nymphs. Master hardly ever visits anymore, and we’re so frustrated.”

“He is not imaginary!” Thor growled. “This mortal hath been chosen to fulfill a quest.”

“Sit with us, oh mighty Thor,” Moon said, slipping out of his grip and taking him by the hand. “Come, have a draught. We miss your masculine company.” She waved for Sky to bring him a flagon of ale.

“Do not distract me, thou cast-out tart.” A bolt of lightning struck outside the cave.

“We are not cast-out,” Moon said. “You know very well that Allfather put us here so he'd have a place to stay while wandering Midgard. But he hardly ever comes around anymore.”

Sky ran up with his flagon for Thor and bowed as she handed it to him.

He sniffed the brew, then drank it in one gulp.

“Bring more for our guest,” Moon ordered. “Surely, dear Thor, you can see we are respectable ladies. Behold, we sit and knit our undergarments all day. Our only wish is that you stop by and relieve our boredom, if only for a short while.”

“If I learn that thou hast befooled me, I shall smote thee! An oath I take before Asgard, I swear that I shall smote thee!”

“There's no smoting inside the cave,” Moon said, pulling him by the sleeve. “You’ll have to go outside to smote. But come, lay with us and rest your weary bones.”

Ongul watched as the nymphs seduced Thor and distracted him from his search. If he'd been astute enough to see that Ongul was the mortal he'd been looking for, he'd surely order the

nymphs to turn him back, but Thor was lost in their charms as they slowly unclasped his armor.

Ongul let out a loud bark, as loud as he could make as a dog.

Thor turned and cast his angry eyes upon Ongul.

“That beast wasn't here last time I came!” He marched over to Ongul and stooped down to take a closer look. Thor growled in displeasure.

Ongul barked and whined. He scratched the floor. He tried whatever he could to show Thor that he wasn't what he appeared to be.

“We found him wandering in the snow and took him in,” Fire said, running over beside Ongul and taking hold of his noose. “Isn't that right, good boy?” She patted Ongul's head. “He'll be very quiet from now on. Won't you, boy?”

Ongul understood the threat and remained quiet. His only hope now was that Thor would put the pieces together and realize his mortal was under his nose. But, alas, Thor was easily distracted by the nymph's gentle caresses and nimble bodies. They undressed for him and donned the undergarments they'd been knitting only to slowly strip out of them. The nymphs danced for Thor, undulating their bodies in rhythm while banging on tambourines. They chanted a hypnotic song that lulled the mighty god of thunder into a stupor. Ongul watched as they led Thor to the bed of animal skins where he himself lay a day ago.

Thor's muscled body shimmered in the candle-light as the nymphs rubbed him with scented oils. Queen Moon took him, as she had taken Ongul before. She rode him as he lay on the furs while the rest of the nymphs massaged his body. She gyrated and bucked as she rode atop of him. Her fury only increased from moment to moment until she was like a wild sea squall. When she screamed, Ongul wasn't sure at first if it was in pleasure or pain. She arched her back and pulled on her hair while she came. She sat frozen like a statue for a moment, cherishing

the pleasure coursing through her body.

It was nothing like Ongul had seen before. When he thought she'd had enough and their act was over, she started her hard riding over again, coming time after time, each orgasm in an ever-rising crescendo. Ongul was amazed that after all this, Thor showed no signs of losing control and coming. How could he ever hope to please Moon if this kind of stamina she expected of him?

Moon collapsed on Thor's chest after her ninth or tenth orgasm. She kissed him, then whispered, "I'll let the others have their turn." She rolled off him and lay beside him, resting her head on his massive shoulder as Sun took her turn and lowered herself on his massive organ.

He sated Sun, too, with what seemed to Ongul like unearthly staying power. Then he took the rest of the nymphs one after the other. The last was Fire. But Thor gave her all the earthly satisfaction she was due. Only when Fire came a dozen times and could take it no more did Thor take his own release. By then, Thor had his fill of nymphs and he rolled over with two of them cradled in his arms. He started to snore.

"Thor, wake up," Moon prodded him.

"Hrumph," he boomed.

"We don't want you to tarry," she said. "You have that important quest thingie you're looking for."

"Umph, yes. My quest," he yawned.

"Besides," Moon added, "Allfather is due for a visit any time. He won't be happy if he catches you in his bed."

The god of thunder staggered to his feet, and the nymphs dressed him in a hurry. They each kissed him and bade him farewell. Ongul let out a whine. He realized Thor was hopeless

and wouldn't rescue him. He feared he would remain at the mercy of these nymphs forever.

“That's the ugliest dog I've ever seen,” Thor said, looking at Ongul one last time. The god barged up the cave steps and out of sight. He left the cave, slamming the door behind him with a thundering boom.

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Ongul settled into his day-to-day life. Fire let him out twice a day. The rest of his time was spent gnawing on bones, sleeping, or watching the nymphs at play. Two, three, or four of the nymphs would leave in the morning to forage. The ones that remained performed the daily chores in the cave. Once they'd finished their tasks, they'd set upon each other with intertwined arms and legs. Queen Moon always assigned a different combination of nymphs to stay in, so Ongul soon learned various dynamics of the den. Sea loved Sky. Sky lusted for Sun. Twilight and Fire couldn't wait to get their arms around each other. And, Moon dominated everyone equally.

Eventually, the nymphs didn't bother to tie Ongul to the protruding root. He would just stay obediently in his corner all day. Out of laziness, the nymphs started letting Ongul out on his own, opening the cave's back door when he'd sit on the step and whine. Running off had never occurred to him. After all, where would he go? What could he do as a dog? He worried sometimes about his family. They must think him dead by now. And, they must be running short on food. Other times he'd just watch the nymphs, mesmerized by their tender bodies as they made love to one another.

The nymphs loved their food and drink. They'd roasted the goat some days ago, and when the leftovers were gone they led the pig into the kitchen. Ongul watched as they prepared to butcher the pig. It wasn't lost on him that he was the last animal left in the den.

Before Moon slit the pig's throat, the pig was granted the ability to speak one last time.

The pig looked through the rise between the kitchen and the hall at Ongul and said, “I hate you, dog. I had the same chance as you. I, too, was put before the throne when their queen wasn’t satisfied with my performance. But unlike you, when they tried to tease my erection back, I brushed them away. We almost had you there in the snow. You were roaming aimlessly. Why did you have to lead us to this witches’ den?”

Ongul realized that all these animals: the goat, the pig, and the lamb before, had all been of the mountain folk pursuing him. The nymphs must have turned them into animals while he slept, recovering from his ordeal in the snow. Their fate could have easily been his, too.

He watched as Moon slit the pig’s throat. He turned away as the pig’s blood poured into a stone jar on the floor. Ongul couldn’t watch as the nymphs dressed the pig: cutting off the shoulders and shank for smoking, and gutting the innards for later use. They set the carcass on a spit. By that time, Ongul was able to look again. When the pig started letting off fat as he roasted over the fire, and delicious pork smells filled the cave, Ongul started drooling. He realized how hungry he’d become again. He didn’t care who this had been; he was a roast pig now.

The next morning, Fire and Twilight were left alone in the cave while the rest went out to forage. Fire seduced Twilight as soon as she heard the cave door slam shut.

“We’ll get to those silly chores later,” Fire murmured as she lay on Twilight, pinning her arms over her head. “It’s been so long since we’ve been alone together.”

Ongul watched the two of them make love. They were insatiable in each other’s arms. Only by mid-afternoon did they realize that they’d squandered the whole day, and the foraging party would be returning soon. The dishes from last night’s feast and orgy lay strewn throughout the hall. Chairs lay thrown around. Table scraps lay scattered across the floor.

“We’re fucked!” Twilight cried.

“Let’s hurry,” Fire said, grabbing a broom. “We can get most of the place cleaned up in time, and Moon will never notice what we’ve missed.”

“Oh yes she will,” Twilight answered, as she wiped grease off a table. “We’re going to get our pussies whipped so hard to night.”

Ongul watched Fire and Twilight run to pick up the plates, flagons, and spoons from the previous night. It occurred to him that he could help, too. He picked up a plate in his mouth and carried it out to the kitchen and dropped it into a simmering caldron along with the other dishes.

“Hey, look at what he’s doing,” Twilight said.

“Good boy,” Fire said. “Ongul, you pick up the rest of the dishes. Twilight will wash them, and I’ll sweep the remains into the fire.”

With Ongul’s help, whose only useful skill was carrying things in his mouth, they cleaned up before the other nymphs returned. Fire and Twilight still got scolded for leaving a dozen other tasks undone. The fireplace hadn’t been cleaned, the holly needed trimming, and the lamps hadn’t been filled with oil.

They got their pussies whipped that night.

First, it was Twilight. Moon had the rest of the nymphs hold her down with her legs forced apart. Moon used her favorite strap: a stiff piece of leather as long as her arm and three fingers wide. Fire watched from the side, knowing it would be her turn soon. Twilight received twenty solid lashes to the pink of her pussy. Fire received thirty.

“Because you’re the naughtiest,” Moon explained, laughing when Fire protested that she was getting more. “And because you’re my favorite.”

Fire twisted and bucked and tried to break free of the nymphs holding her down. Moon ordered two of the nymphs to hold her lips apart for the last five strokes. Fire writhed and

twisted under Moon's ministrations. She begged for mercy. The nymphs had to sit on her to keep her still. Moon played with her between strokes, reveling in her slick warmth.

"You are not to touch yourselves," Moon ordered, when she was through. "And none of the others are to come to you tonight. In fact, Twilight shall sleep with me so I can keep an eye on her. And Fire, you go and sleep with your dog in the corner."

Sky blew out the candles and oil lamps except for one lamp in the corner they used as a nightlight. Then they all settled under their furs for the night. Ongul put his head on Fire's belly as she lay beside him.

"It's okay, boy," she said. "We play like this all the time. I enjoy it mostly, but tonight Moon really pushed my limit. Sometimes it's good to have your limits pushed."

Ongul didn't understand why they called this play.

"We have to ease the boredom in creative ways," Fire went on. "We're not like you mortals. Not at all. Odin Allfather made us so he can have some variety when he tires of his wives, but he hardly ever visits us. So, we sit and wait and make up our own amusement. We can't die. If we could, I would have cut my own throat thousands of years ago. Only the gods can put us out of existence, but they never will. We're too much fun to be with." She sighed. "Don't get me wrong, I love the games we play. I only wish I got to come tonight."

Ongul crawled between her legs as Fire lay under her skins. He pushed her legs apart with his nose.

"What are you doing?" she whispered.

He sniffed her, taking in her briny scent. He touched the nub of her sex with his nose. Fire let out a gentle moan as he did. His tongue darted out, licking her, lapping up her sweet moisture.

She arched her back, lifting her hips to give him ready access. Fire took hold of Ongul by

his head, pushing him unto her. She cried out when she came.

The tribe applauded. They were all watching by then. All except Moon, who pretended not to notice.

“That’s a new low, even for you, Fire,” Moon huffed when it was all over.

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The next morning Ongul was made to service all the nymphs. Moon looked upon the whole affair in disgust. She sat on her throne, brooding, trying to look bored. The nymphs waited their turns for this new thrill that their pet could give them. All of a sudden, he wasn’t just Fire’s pet. The rest of the nymphs claimed to have always been fond of him, too.

“All right,” Moon said, when all the nymphs had their turn and had gone back for seconds, “you’ve gotten me curious. Bring him to me, and let me see if he’s any good.”

Ongul didn’t really mind pleasing the nymphs with his tongue. He’d been seeing the world more and more through a dog’s eyes lately, and it was easy to please his mistresses. But Moon scared him. If he didn’t please her, she could turn him into something much worse than a dog, a spider maybe so that she could squash him. Or he could become the next pig only to be roasted when the nymphs had another orgy. So he approached the queen’s throne with trepidation.

He waited for Moon to part her legs for him. He sniffed her with a tentative caution, then licked her gently. She giggled.

“This is so immature,” Moon said, laughing.

Ongul slowly backed away.

“No,” Moon said quietly. She rubbed his head. “Go ahead, do it. I promise I won’t laugh.”

So Ongul did. He darted his tongue along her sweet opening. She purred and cooed, unable to keep her pleasure to herself. This gave Ongul the courage to be bolder, go deeper, faster.

“Yes,” Moon gasped. “He is good. You were right, Fire. This mortal is worth salvaging.” She rubbed the back of his head as he worked his own magic on her. The other nymphs gathered around and joined in by petting his back.

Although comforting, their hands were a distraction. He tried to concentrate on his task, knowing he had to please Moon if he were ever to see the end of this ordeal. It took a while, for Moon was in no hurry, but he knew she was on the verge when she started shaking and thrusting her pelvis. The nymphs were all around him, their hands on his back and side, sending gentle sparks tingling on his body through their fingertips.

He sucked gently on her clit, taking her nub between his lips and teasing her by pulling gently. He inserted one, then two fingers, and listened as she exploded in orgasm.

She pushed him onto his back, then climbed on him. As she slid on his organ, he held her in his arms. His legs tangled with hers.

He watched her come again, bucking furiously as she rode him.

“Go ahead,” Moon said. “Take your release.”

He rolled the two of them over, pinning her arms above her head as she lay on the floor. He looked down as she smiled up at him. She no longer seemed menacing. He thrust into her, determined to sate his built-up frustrations.

Ongul laid upon her, feeling her soft body under his: the rise and fall of her belly in her heavy breathing, her breast rubbing against his chest, her sex grinding against his loins. She wrapped her legs around his hips, pulling him into her as far as possible. He'd let go of her arms

and she immediately embraced him, holding onto his back, pulling him as close to him she could.

Ongul realized she was about to come again. He was determined to not to find his own release before her. He thought of cabbages and sticks in the mud and shipwrecks and apples with worms in them, anything to postpone the moment. He felt her tighten her inner walls around him, the pleasure was more than he could bear. He exploded in the sweetest orgasm he'd experienced in a long time, and Moon came at the same time.

Ongul realized just then that he had lips, hands, arms, feet. He wasn't a dog anymore. He laughed in delight. As he lay on top of Queen Moon, he wasn't sure if he should pull out and roll off her or just stay and cradle her in his arms.

When she tapped him on the shoulder, and said, "Okay, you can get up," he did. He helped her up. She gave him a peck on the cheek. "Not bad for a mortal," she told him.

"Queen Moon," he said, "I have tarried too long in your enchanted cave. Please give me my leave so I can take the food to my village. My people are short on winter supplies and —"

"Oh, that cheese?" she said, as she turned from him and started for the kitchen. "We ate that ages ago. It wasn't very tasty. You didn't miss anything."

"But —"

"Not another word from you," she said. "When you can satisfy all of my nymphs like that, we'll talk about your release again. Until then, have fun."

"How can I ever ..." he mumbled. "I'm not Thor."

"We'll teach you," Fire said, standing behind him, stroking his face. "We'll show you the art of love, things you've never seen before."

The conflicting feelings returned to Ongul, he stood in the middle of the nymph's den. He

was torn between his duties to his wife, family, and village; the gods; and the charms of these lithe creatures around him.

“But, I’ll need that hammer back, the gods entrusted me with —”

“Shhhh,” Fire said. “That’s for Moon to decide.”

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Ongul’s training in the art of love, as Fire called it, began that day. The nymphs gave him mental exercise to route his thoughts in different directions when he would come too close to orgasm. They’d entice him with their mouths, while he tried to control his urges with his mind, but to no avail, he’d always come just as any mortal under similar circumstances would.

Sun drew a map for him. It was supposed to be a map of his thoughts.

“There,” Sun pointed to where she’d scribbled her lines with a piece of burnt charcoal on the floor. “This is where your mind signals your brain to signal your body that it’s time to take your release. This,” she pointed to another line, “is where you divert your thoughts. Understand?”

“Yeah,” Ongul said. But he didn’t understand. All he saw were squares, circles, and triangles, all connected with straight or squiggly lines. It was supposed to show a part of his mind, but his mind didn’t have any squares, circles, or squiggly lines. He even closed his eyes and tried to see them. All he saw was darkness.

“He doesn't get it,” Sky said. “Then try this.” She told him to touch the roof of his mouth with his tongue and press three of his fingers on the right side of his temple, “there, there, and there.” She directed his fingers to the right spots. “And, on the left side, touch this single point here,” she added. “These pressure points will dim your urge to come.”

The days became a blur as Ongul made love to one nymph after another. Or perhaps it

was not just making love but being trained to please them. A nagging thought bothered him: if he were to succeed and find a way of servicing all these nymphs, all day and all night, why would they want to let him go? Yet, he couldn't escape. They kept too close an eye on him now that he was in human form again.

One day he was lying under his furs, making love to Twilight. Moon was sitting on her throne, scolding Fire, who was kneeling in front of her. Sky and Sea were sweeping up, and Sun was stirring a stew in a cauldron in the kitchen. Suddenly, the candles and oils lamps snuffed out with a huff of wind. Darkness filled the cave.

“What’s happening?” Sky gasped.

“Allfather is here!” Fire cried.

“Don’t move,” Twilight whispered in Ongul's ear as she pulled away from him. She covered him with animal skins as she stood up.

Moon sent a spark from her finger, igniting the nearest oil lamp.

It was light enough to see the silhouette of a cloaked figure in the middle of the hall. He raised his arms — with the cloak, he looked as if he had wings — and there was light. Not light from candles and lamps, but light from everywhere. The cave walls themselves became illuminated, as was the very air itself.

The intruder stood in the middle of the room, a raggedy man with a rugged face that had seen too many battles. He wore a threadbare blue robe that was more brown from mud than blue. He wore an equally faded blue-brimmed hat with a crooked point. He took off his hat and flung it to the corner, then he surveyed the cave with his piercing eyes. He locked eyes with Moon.

“Odin, love,” Moon said, trying not to sound nervous. She sprang from her throne and ran to him. “How wonderful to —”

“Silence!” Odin, the god, commanded. He grabbed Moon by the hair and forced her to her knees. He slapped her across the face, and she fell to the floor. He pulled her back up to her knees and forced his member into her mouth.

“Mmmmf,” she cried a muffled cry of protest.

“That idiot, Thor, told me in passing that you had a dog. I started to wonder how an animal like that could wander to your den in the middle of winter. I knew then that was the mortal I was looking for.”

“Um hmmmm?” Moon said, as Odin rammed himself ever deeper, down her throat.

“Don’t play stupid,” Odin snapped. “Where’s the mortal? Where is the hammer?”

“I un’t know,” Moon tried to say. Odin, losing patience, reached down and grabbed her by the nipples and twisted. She let out a muffled shriek and pointed to her throne.

Odin pulled out and gave her another slap that sent her skidding across the moss-covered floor. He glared at the throne and, with his eyes alone, cracked the marble in half. The two pieces fell to each side, revealing the war hammer underneath.

“So, that’s where it was,” Ongul said to himself.

As if he heard, Odin turned his gaze on Ongul’s animal skins. “You can come out now, Ongul.”

Ongul stood. He covered himself with his hands.

“Approach,” Odin commanded.

Ongul slowly walked up to the god. He was about to kneel, but Odin waved his hand, indicating for him not to.

“I have chosen you for a quest. Yet I find you here fucking my nymphs.” Odin shook his head.

“I was lost in the snow, and they took me in.”

“You couldn’t escape?”

“Not as a dog.”

“After?”

“I was going to.”

“Did you at least search for the hammer?”

“I was going to.” Then he added, “No, I didn’t.”

“I see.” Odin turned. “Get his clothes,” he snapped to the nymphs. “Not those stupid skirts of holly, but the clothes he came in.” He shook his head in disgust. The nymphs ran up with his clothing and tripped over each other dressing Ongul. “You were expected to practice with the hammer. It would have bonded with you so you might work as one. But instead, you have squandered your time.”

“Sorry,” was all Ongul could say.

“By now, that hammer should be one with your arm.”

“Well, sir, um Allfather, I did, that is, it, slew three foes who waylaid me.”

“I suppose you’re going to tell me the hammer went berserk. Well, it’s supposed to do that. And you’re going to tell me it left a field of carnage with all of your attackers fallen.”

“Yes, sir. I mean, no, sir.” Ongul cleared his throat and continued. “I held the hammer back when the last of them stood frozen in fear. I hadn’t the stomach.”

“You held the hammer back?” Odin cocked an eyebrow. “Perhaps there’s hope for you, my lad. Be it as it may, you have been chosen as a champion of Asgard to battle the Frost Giants.”

“I will do as the gods command, but I beg you, Odin Allfather, allow me to return to my

village first. I was on my quest to deliver much needed supplies. My people must be starving by now. And these, these nymphs,” Ongul almost cried, “they ate all the cheese!”

“Stop!” Odin snapped impatiently. “Your battle with the Frost Giants is crucial in saving Earth and postponing the day of Ragnarok. I will soon take you to where you will battle the Frost Giants, and you shall see them in their true form. But I will not have you march into battle with other thoughts distracting you. Moon, approach!” he snapped.

Moon pulled herself off the floor. She hadn't dared to move since his slap sent her spinning. She knelt before him.

“Yes, Allfather?” she spoke meekly.

“Prepare a feast for Ongul's village, and deliver it under the dark of night. Make sure there is enough to feed them all for a fortnight.”

“Yes, Allfather.”

“And deliver another feast for the next fortnight and the next until their stock is full again from their own toil and sweat. Furthermore, should Ongul fall — which is very likely — continue delivering stocks of food for them during the winters until his wife passes from this world and his children are all wed.”

“Yes, Allfather,” Moon said, quivering.

“Now that's done, you should have no worries on your mind as you face your adversary. None, that is, except for the knowledge that the Frost Giants will devour your soul should you be bested.” Odin summoned the hammer with a wave of his fingers. It flew like a sling into his hand, then slapped the handle into Ongul's grip. Odin reached out and put a hand on Ongul's shoulder.

The enchanted den disappeared around him and Ongul found himself alone in a desolate

land. A cold wind blew but there was no snow or ice, only barren rock. When a gust caught him, the sand stung his face.

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To Ongul's right lay a vast and desolate plain, wind-swept, cold, void of life. Off to his left, the land fell away to an angry green ocean in the distance: green like a fetid pond, but with roaring waves of froth assaulting a rocky shore. Ahead and behind him, the land rose to craggy outcrops with strewn boulders on either hillside. Clouds above him were forebodingly dark, as if the sky were about to open. But then again, the land was so parched that it may have never rained here. Where am I? he wondered.

He spotted the body of a green serpent, as thick as his torso. It slithered behind a boulder on the rise in front him. It was as green as the putrid sea bordering this dead land. Ongul approached cautiously, ever mindful of the crunch his footsteps made in the parched ground.

“So, that's what Frost Giants are: serpents,” he said. There was nothing behind the boulder when he jumped out onto a narrow path circling along the steep hillside. He followed the trail, expecting to find the serpent around every corner. Yet, at each turn he saw nothing. His sweaty palm gripped Thor's Hammer. He sensed the hammer and knew it sensed him. He knew the hammer felt his racing heart, the anxiety in his bones, and the knot tightening in his stomach. The wind howled. Ongul looked over the dead plain from his narrow trail.

Suddenly Ongul felt the serpent encircling his wrist. By the time he looked down, a thin snakelike arm, the same hue as the giant serpent he'd spotted before, had wrapped around his hammer hand three times. To his horror, he saw that the snake had sprung from the rock and was trying to pull him through. Ongul almost dropped the hammer in fright, but he had the sense to take it into his free hand and smash it into the serpent.

The serpent shuddered and released Ongul. Before it could disappear back into the wall, it turned black, then crumbled like a burnt stick.

Ongul backed away and slipped down the pebble-covered slope, causing a minor avalanche on his way down. He stumbled to a stop at the foot of the hill only to stand before the vastness of the dead plain. That's when the serpent sprang forth from the dried ground before him, not twenty paces away. It swayed in the air like a banner, towering over Ongul. The monster was either headless, or what he saw was the tail end.

"I prefer the open, too," Ongul spat, as he marched forward.

A second, third, fourth, and fifth headless snake appeared out the ground and writhed above him like giant sickened weeds. Another three appeared: these out of thin air above his head and wriggled toward him, levitating in the air. Each end just tapered off to nothing. He turned to run, but saw a forest of snakes spring from the ground behind, each as thick as he.

The hammer vibrated in his hand and spun Ongul around. Three serpents descended upon him, poised to wrap themselves around him and constrict his throat. The hammer swiped, smashing into each with a resounding thunderbolt. The melee happened so fast that Ongul could barely follow it; the hammer almost tore his arm out of its socket. He turned and the hammer swung again, smashing into another snake ready to swat him from behind.

Under the hammer's bidding he ran into the forest of green, smashing at the serpents. As he struck, they each turned to charred ash and fell to the ground. They tried to grab him, but the hammer swung faster and faster, smashing into each arm as it approached him.

Ongul wondered how long the hammer could keep this up. He wondered how long his arm could keep it up before it would tear from his body. Then he thought back to what Odin had said: the Frost Giants will devour his soul if bested. His wavering thoughts slowed the hammer,

long enough for one of the snakes to encircle his chest, pinning his arms beside his body, and begin constricting him.

Ongul flicked his wrist, sending the hammer upon the constricting serpent. The hammer divined its own momentum and smashed itself into the coil. The snake turned to char and crumbled away. The other serpents shuddered, too, as if feeling the same pain.

He heard the hammer speak to him in his head. “Throw me,” it said. Ongul obeyed the call, sending his hammer flying at the thick of the serpent forest. Fly it did, picking up speed as it spun ahead. It cut down one serpent after another in an arcing circle then returned gently to Ongul’s waiting hand. The remaining serpents disappeared, growing thinner until they were all thin as yarn, then vanished completely.

Ongul spun around, looking in all directions. The plain was as desolate as when he’d first laid eyes upon it. The melee seemed to have lasted forever, but in reality had taken only a few moments. He realized he was shaking. Then, in front of him, in silence, a dozen then two dozen writhing serpents sprang from mid-air. Then a round, green blob of leathery flesh appeared between them and the serpents grew to attach to the blob to become one hideous creature.

“So, you’re all one thing, are you,” Ongul said, poising the hammer to strike. What he’d thought all along to be many serpents was more like the many tentacles of a single squid. A dozen beady round eyes appeared on the blob, then a hideous circular mouth with sharp, dagger-like teeth in multiple rows.

“That’s your head?” Ongul growled. “You’re an obscenity!”

The tentacles descended upon Ongul. Several of them were nothing but stubs, the arms that the hammer had smitten. The hammer swiped at them, keeping them at bay. But there were still more than fifty coming at him. They came from all sides as the massive head grew closer.

Then, the teeth in that circular mouth started spinning, and there were multiple rows of teeth with one row spinning left to right and the one behind it right to left. If he wound up in this maw, there would be more pieces of Ongul than sand on a beach, each of them down the monster's gullet — along with his soul.

He threw the hammer, even though it was staving off attacks from the tentacled arms. “Fly!” Ongul commanded. The hammer struck the Frost Giant in the back of its open mouth.

The monster let out a shriek as it shuddered and fell to the ground. All of its tentacles fell along with it, blackened and crumbling. Ongul recovered the hammer from the middle of the pile of ash that had once been this monster. Suppressing his revulsion, he reached in and felt among the chars until he found the hammer in his fingers.

He remembered that Odin talked about the Frost Giants in plural. This was only one. There must be more. But, how many? And, was it his quest to kill them all? Odin didn't say. Ongul returned to the valley between the two outcroppings where he first found himself in this strange land, not knowing if there were more of these Frost Giants lurking behind the plane of reality. The idea struck fear into his core. He scanned the land around him expecting another tentacle or head with spinning teeth to emerge from beyond the world.

“Ongul!” He heard a cry. He spun around but saw nothing.

“Ongul, help me!” that voice spoke again. It was familiar, but it couldn't be.

He followed the sound up the hill. On top, he came upon a plateau just as dry and windswept as the rest of this land. His wife, Eija-Riita, lay in the dirt with chains around her ankles tied to a stake in the ground.

She looked up. “Ongul?” she asked. “Is that you? What is this strange place?”

He ran to her and cracked the chains with his war hammer.

“I saw something dreadful,” Eija-Riita sobbed. “Many hideous arms, and, and, an awful mouth.”

“I have killed it,” he told her stoically. Yet, he still hugged her when she embraced him. They kissed. “How did you get here?”

“You are my champion,” she said, not heeding his question. “Come, take your reward with me.” She caressed his manhood beneath his clothing then wrapped her legs around his. Eija-Riita cooed as she rode his thigh. “Lie with me,” she said. “Here.”

“Here?” he questioned. “In this place?” But she had already wrestled him to the ground, and straddled his chest. She reached behind her and fished for his manhood under his clothes.

This was not Eija-Riita. Eija-Riita was too practical a woman to even consider making love after being whisked away to a strange land as this.

“Get off of me!” He pushed her away. He scurried to his feet and grabbed the war hammer lying beside him.

“What’s the matter, my love?” she asked, still on the ground.

“Yes, what is the matter, father?” Ongul heard from behind.

His three daughters stood on the plateau in a half circle, not ten paces away from him.

“You slew the Frost Giant, father,” his oldest said. “You should be proud. Let us hold hands and celebrate.”

“Stay away!” he cried. As with his wife, he saw something wrong in his daughters’ movements, their stance, the blank expression on their faces, the words his eldest had chosen. “You are not my blood!” Yet, he wasn’t certain. He wanted to believe that he had reunited with his family after what seemed a lifetime. But still, this couldn’t be them, could it?

As his daughters approached, Ongul took a step back, falling into Eija-Riita's embrace. She circled his chest with one arm and draped the other over his shoulder from behind.

"My love," she said, "it's me. The way you've always wanted me. I've changed for you. I am now the woman you've always wanted."

"No, you're not!" Ongul tried to pull away. His wife's grip was fierce, hard like iron. Ongul spun to face her. He locked eyes with her, they were crisp and blue as they'd always been, but too perfect in appearance. He raised his hammer and smashed Eija-Riita in the skull, sending her falling to the ground, dead. She collapsed to the ground at his feet. Crimson blood pooled on the parched ground, oozing from the crack in her head.

"Father! What have you done!" his daughters wailed in unison. "You have slain mother."

He spun, turning to them. They seemed taller than he as they approached.

"Stand!" he shouted. "Do not approach." But the daughters still came to him. When they moved, they seemed to glide on the ground, not moving their feet much. The sight terrified him, but the hammer knew what to do. It cut each of them down, smashing their skulls as the girls entered striking distance.

"No!" he cried. But then he noticed the blood issuing from the heads was a sickening hue of green. But they did not fall, rather they turned into the green tentacles of a Frost Giant, then turned into black charcoal and crumbled as the hammer infected them. Even Eija-Riita, when he turned to look at her, what he'd seen as red blood was green. Her body, too, turned the green of the monster, then blackened and crumbled like charcoal.

The Frost Giant, with its monstrous head with the round mouth appeared not more than an arms length away from him. Four of its tentacles were missing, the ones he slew disguised as his family. But the rest bore down on him, a moment away from wrapping around him and

pulling him into its jaws. Without time to think, he plunged Thor's hammer into the mouth, past the spiked teeth and smashed it firmly into the roof of the monster's mouth. The Frost Giant shuddered and shrieked. Its tentacles encircled Ongul but quickly turned to blacked dust and crumbled to the ground.

Ongul stood in the middle of the ashes from the fallen Frost Giant and panted. Was it over? he wondered.

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"Very clever," he heard a familiar voice. He turned to see Fire climb up onto the plateau with the rest of the nymphs filing behind her. "The second Frost Giant knew it had to fool you when it saw how easily you slew its comrade, so it created images of your wife and family from your mind. But, it did a terrible job. It didn't fool you for a moment. For what it's worth, your wife is pretty. Or, is that just how you want to see her?"

"Is it over?" he asked. He was speaking mostly to himself.

"It's over," Moon said. "Come, Odin has charged us to bring you back home. This place you see exists on another plane beyond Midgard. You will never get back to your cute little wifey without our help."

"That is," Fire added, "if you really do want to go back to her. You can live with us. We promise never to turn you into any kind of creature, ever. Right, Moon?"

"That's a promise," Moon said. "I still intend to keep my word of giving you pleasures beyond your wildest dreams. We shall dote over you for the rest of your life."

Fire and Moon took Ongul by the hand. Twilight caressed his chest from behind, wrapping her arms around him. Sea and Sun each stooped down on either side of him and caressed his thighs. Twilight kissed the back of his neck.

“I’m a little shaken for this now,” Ongul said. “I need a moment to myself.”

“No,” Fire said. Her tone reflected no emotion. Her grip became iron. She turned into a green tentacle with its tip encircling his wrist. Moon, Sea, and Sun also morphed into tentacles encircling his wrists and ankles. Twilight became the constricting coil around his chest. Sky, who was standing before him, melted into the ugly round head with the dozen beady eyes and round mouth with rotating dagger-teeth.

The Frost Giant lifted Ongul and slowly turned him, head first, toward the gaping maw. “Slowly,” it said. “I will take you in slowly, so I can feed on the delicious taste of your terror in the knowledge that I will devour your soul when you die. You have killed two of my companions and for that I shall make you suffer.”

Ongul bucked and squirmed but he couldn’t break free of its grip. He saw the spinning teeth approach. He smelled the monster’s vial breath. He heard it laughing at him. He felt his essence being torn from him. Even as he lay at the mouth of the beast he knew it was eating away at him.

“This is a taste of your fate, mortal,” the Frost Giant said. “Once I have devoured your flesh I will slowly eat your soul. Feel your essence grow smaller and smaller. Quake in the thought. Soon there will be nothing left but a grain of fear. I shall feed that too.”

Thor’s hammer lay in the ashes where the other monster fell. Even if Ongul could break a hand free, it was out of his reach. His head was almost in the mouth, in moments he’d be chopped to bits and his pieces to be food for the monster, body and soul. There would be no afterlife in Asgard for him. In some ways he didn’t even care. The monster sucking away at the fiber of his being had already taken his will away from him.

“Yes, apathy,” the monster laughed. “That’s the last emotion you’ll be capable of. That,

and the woe you shall feel for yourself.”

He looked upon the hammer, the tip of its handle stood out in the pile of monster ash. He could hardly bother about it. After all it was out of his range.

But, there was one last spark left in him. He called to the hammer, “Come to me!” He held out his fingers to catch it. The hammer vibrated, then shook in the ashes, then flew into Ongul’s grip like a spring released. “Fly!” Ongul shouted, flicking the hammer forward, ahead of him into the monster’s mouth. The Frost Giant shrieked and then exploded with a sound like a thunder bolt. That was the last thing Ongul remembered.

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Ongul stood Bifrost, the bridge connecting the two worlds of Asgard and Midgard. Odin stood beside him.

“Am I dead?” Ongul asked.

“That last beast tore at your soul,” Odin told him, looking ahead over the curve of the bridge. He started walking slowly, towards Asgard. Ongul followed.

“But, am I dead?” Ongul asked again.

“That is not a straight forward question.”

“Can you return me to my village?”

“No,” Odin said.

Ongul cocked his head, wondering.

“You fell in battle, my dear mortal.” Odin elaborated. “Although it is possible to return you to Midgard, I shall not.”

“Why won’t you?”

“Like I said, the Frost Giant ate at your soul. You’d be a lesser man if I’d return you, with

a lesser soul. You wouldn't feel the highs of joy the lows of sorrow. Your existence would be a dull one." They walked on, across the span of the bridge. "You will recover in Asgard. You shall drink and feast and make love; and you shall be a guest in my hall, Valhalla. Or, are you more concerned with the welfare of your wife?"

"I ... yes."

"You had asked before if you can be returned to your village, not to your wife. You don't really want to go back to her, do you? You only say so because of your obligation and duty. The gods admire obligation and duty. Too many men forsake their oaths. That kind of man does not make it to Asgard.

"Dear Mortal, Man does not choose the time or circumstances of his passing. Only the gods have that say. You are lucky in many ways. I have ordered the nymphs to keep your family fed should you fall. That is more than many who have fallen can say."

Ongul looked below them, miles below, to a cold northern ocean. He thought how much he'd left unresolved in his life. Yet it was too late for laments. He knew the god would not bend, no matter how many kind words Odin spoke.

Still, he asked, "Why did you choose me?"

"I could have chosen stronger men than you, the mightiest warrior in your frozen land. But men like that would shrink at the sight of what you have seen. Or, they would be easily seduced by the Frost Giant's trickery. I have learned not to send that kind. The man whose strength lies within, such as yourself, has the best chance of besting the Frost Giants."

Ongul nodded. He'd never thought himself brave, or outstanding in any way. But, Odin must have seen something in him. He must have been right, for he'd slain three of these monsters.

Ahead of them lay Asgard on the top of a steep mountain. Its features grew prominent with every step they took once they'd crested the top of the world bridge. The god and the man walked slowly onward.

The End

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Be well, Joe

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