Thor Visits the Land of the Giants

One summer day, Thor, Loki and their two servants set off to visit Utgard, the land of the giants. After a long journey, they arrived at the gates of Utgard to find them locked. Thor thumped and hammered on the gates, calling out for someone to come and let them in, but Loki grinned and slipped through the bars, dragging the others after him. They walked into the great hall of Utgard. In the middle of the hall was a long table around which hundreds of giants were seated on benches, eating and drinking and making the most enormous noise. The giants all began to laugh as Thor marched up to the Giant King who was seated on a chair at the far end of the hall.

“Greetings, Giant King,” said Thor, politely.

The Giant King sat chewing bones and did not even look at Thor. From time to time he tossed a bone over his shoulder and picked up a new one.

Thor spoke again, a little louder:

“Greetings, Gi…”

The Giant King interrupted: “So you’re the great thunder god Thor, are you? Well, you look like a scrawny little piece of work to me. I suppose you’ve come to test your strength?”

Thor was furious at the Giant King’s rudeness, but it did not seem a very good idea to lose his temper when he was surrounded by giants.

“What skill would you like to challenge us with?” continued the Giant King.

Thor looked around him at the giants.

“I doubt if anyone here can drink as much as I can,” Thor replied.

The Giant King signalled to a servant, who brought forward a huge drinking horn.

“This is the horn used by all my followers,” he said. “A good drinker can finish it in one draught, and all here can down it in two at the most. Let us see what they great Thor can do!”

Thor took the horn. It was certainly not the largest he had ever drunk from. He raised it to his mouth and began to swallow. He felt sure he could drink it all, but he ran out of breath before the horn was empty. He looked into the horn and found that it was no less full than before. He drank a second time, and again had to stop for breath. This time the horn was no longer brimming full. He took a third draught, gulping down the liquid until he was sure he must empty the horn, but although the level was lower than before, the horn was by no means empty.

“You don’t seem to be much of a drinker,” said the Giant King. “Why not try your strength? Some of the younger giants like to test themselves by lifting my cat. We don’t think this much of a feat, but perhaps you’d like to try?”

Standing beside the Giant King’s chair was the most enormous cat Thor had ever seen. He braced himself and then put both arms under the cat and heaved. The cat simply arched its back. Thor heaved again and managed to make the cat lift one paw off the ground before he had to admit defeat.

“As I thought,” said the Giant King scornfully. “You may be strong in Asgard and in the realms of men, but your strength is nothing here.”

At this Thor grew angry. “I can match any of your men in a fight. Just let anyone here wrestle with me.”

There was a roar of laughter from all the giants in the hall.
“Everyone here feels that wrestling with you would be too easy,” said the Giant King. “Perhaps you could fight Elli, my foster mother.”

A wrinkled old woman hobbled forward leaning on a stick. Thor thought that the Giant King was making fun of him until Elli threw down her stick and took hold of him. He knew at once that his strength would be sorely tested. They struggled and fought, but eventually Elli threw Thor off balance so that he landed on one knee.

“Enough, enough!” shouted the Giant King. “You have shown us that you have no strength as a wrestler either. As you pose no threat to us, you may eat with us and spend the night here in Utgard.”

Thor and his companions were very hungry and tired after their long journey. When they had eaten, the tables were pushed back, and they spread their bedding in a space on the floor among the giants.

Thor awoke early, before any of the giants, and roused his companions.

“Come, let’s go before the giants wake up,” he whispered.

They tiptoed over the sleeping giants and out of the gates of Utgard. To their surprise, they found the Giant King already outside waiting for them. He walked with them across the plain for a while.

At last he stopped: “This is where I must leave you. Thor, do not feel too badly about your failures last night.”

Thor was puzzled. “But I have never before been so soundly beaten,” he said.

The Giant King replied: “You were not competing in a fair fight. I feared your strength, so I used magic to deceive you. The other end of the horn that you drank from was in the sea. When you reach the shore you will see just how much you have lowered its level. The cat you lifted was really the giant serpent whose body is wrapped around the world. You managed to lift it until its back touched the sky. And as for Elli, it was a wonder you withstood her for so long. You see, Elli is Old Age, which defeats all men in time.”

Thor was furious that he had been tricked. He seized his hammer Mjollnir and swung it around his head, but the Giant King and Utgard had vanished, as if they had never been.

_rettold by Robert Nicholson and Claire Watts_

**Activity**

Perspective is very important in storytelling. This story is not in the first-person, but it is mainly from Thor’s perspective (we don’t know about the tricks that the Giant King has been playing until he reveals them to Thor at the end of the tale).

Today, I’d like you to create a re-telling of this story, from the perspective of the Giant King. You could imagine that the Giant King is sitting around the fire that evening, regaling the other giants with his tale! Or perhaps it is many years later (giants can live a long time!) and reminiscing about his meeting with Thor. Storytelling of this kind (sagas) is really an oral tradition – perhaps you might want to say your story aloud once you’ve written it (and, if you like, even make a recording; I’d love to hear them!)

Happy storytelling! : )