APPLES OF YOUTH

The treachery of a friend is worse than the treachery of an enemy.

When Loki at last returned to Asgard, he soon found out what had happened to his three children. He smouldered; he shook with rage. And he planned to take revenge as soon as he could.

And yet the trickster was fascinated by the gods – their power and their knowledge. He enjoyed their company, and liked nothing more than to go travelling with Thor, or with Odin and long-legged Honir...

It was June and almost midnight. The Sun drifted then dipped just under the horizon, and Midgard became very still. The land, the lakes and the mountains away to the north were lost in dreams of themselves.

But Odin, Loki and Honir had heard and smelt and seen quite enough for one day – a mountain belching and smoking, a stinking lake, a steaming rock pool where they all swam and a thundering waterfall. Much as they enjoyed discovering places they had never visited before, they were mind-weary and limb-weary, and interested only in their own stomachs, and the smell and taste of roast meat.

"We set out to explore," Loki complained, "not to endure."

"If only Heimdall were here," said Honir, "he'd be able to spy out food and shelter."

But then Loki saw an ox not at all far off, and while he chased and killed it, Odin and Honir collected sticks and lit a fire next to a great oak tree, the only one for miles around. They chopped the beast's shoulders and rump into four huge joints, and as soon as they smelt them roasting, their spirits rose.

For some reason, though, the meat was very slow to cook. Loki kept poking the fire with his staff, and turning the joints over, but they remained bloody and almost raw.

"Just a little longer," Odin said. "It never hurts to wait for what's worthwhile."

The fire crackled; the meat spat. Time passed.

"It must be ready now," Honir said. "Don't you think so? What do you think?"

"What I think," said Loki, "is that never once in my life have I heard you make up your own mind. Keep quiet, Honir!"

Then the trickster raked the branches and again turned the joints of meat over, but they were still uncooked.

Then Allfather whirled his right arm and opened his palm and hurled the two marbles into high heaven.

"Two stars!" he cried. "Skadi, for as long as time lasts, you'll look up and see your father's eyes, and he will look down on you, and on all of us."

Skadi wept when she heard Odin's words, but when Njord asked her to accompany him to his great ship-hall, Noatun, the giantess refused and insisted that Njord should come up to her father's hall in the mountains.

"That's too far from the sea," Njord told her.

"The sea is too far from the mountains," Skadi replied.

Njord rubbed his grey beard. "In that case," he said, "we'd better live for nine nights in one place, and then nine in the other."

"My father's hall first," Skadi declared.

Side by side the god of winds and the sea and the snow-shoe giantess climbed into the desolate mountains where everything was frozen and nothing grew, not even pinpoint flowers or wiry yellow grass.

When they came down from Thiazi's hall after nine days, Njord told the other gods, "I loathed it. And worst of all was the howling of the wolves. How I longed to hear swans whooping and the sweet-and-harsh tongues of the sea."

Skadi disliked Noatun just as much. She complained she couldn't sleep because of the mewing of all the gulls at dawn, and the racket coming from the shipyard next to Njord's hall.

So although they remained husband and wife, Njord and Skadi decided to live apart.

Njord remained at Noatun, but beautiful Skadi went back to her father's fortress, and she lived there alone. From time to time people saw her speeding over the slopes on her skis, hunting elk and reindeer and brown bears.

"Restless, wild winds," Odin observed, "and the welling sea. Freezing snow slopes and fistfuls of ice. How can the two of them ever live together?"

So the dwarfs told Loki to help them build up the fire smouldering in one corner of the cave. Then they put on their leather aprons and laid out all their tools on one end of a trestle-table, and Son One bustled out of the cave and came back with a large lump of gold and a small lump of silver, and set them down next to a block of iron at the other end of the table.

First, the two dwarfs tapped the two lumps as if they were a musical instrument, louder, softer, softer, louder, and as they did so they began to murmur magical words, sounds or words that Loki had never heard before. The trickster watched while the brothers put the gold and silver into large ladles and held them over the fire until they were molten, and then laid them on two anvils and began to tap them, hammer them...

It grew hot in the cave, and Loki felt so weary after his long journey that he couldn't keep his eyes open. First he closed one eye, then the other, then both at the same time. And when he woke, the most beautiful sheaf of golden hair was hanging over the edge of the trestle-table right in front of him.

Son One smiled. Gently he blew at the sheaf, and the hair trembled and lifted and danced. Then Son Two carefully combed it all back into position, each strand of it.

"There's no point wasting this heat," he said. "We might as well make another gift for the gods while we're about it."

"Or two maybe," his brother agreed.

So while Loki dozed, with metal and magic the sons of Ivaldi fashioned two more wonders – a collapsible ship called Skidbladnir and a slender spear called Gungnir, decorated with magic signs all around its point.

"Who are they for?" Loki asked.

"Freyr and Odin," said Son One.

"The ship is silver and it has twenty-six oars," Son Two said.

"This spear," said Son One, "will never miss its mark."

Loki thanked the two dwarfs for their work; he praised them and promised to return with gifts from the gods. Then he draped the sheaf of hair over his right arm and, holding the ship in one hand and the iron spear in the other, he walked out of the cave.

On his way the trickster paused. His orange-and-green eyes gleamed, his thin lips curled, and he turned round and headed down a side passage. At first it was so low that he had to duck, but then it opened into a cool, damp cavern, and just beyond that was the smithy of the dwarf brothers Brokk and Eitri.

The two dwarfs had decorated the lower part of the smithy walls with sheets of gold and silver, and when