Name: _____ Date: _____

Idun and the Apples

Reading level 10 (6th grade) · 1046 words

The Norse gods kept a wonderful secret. In Asgard, high above the world, lived a goddess named Idun, and she kept a box of golden apples. Whenever the gods began to feel old or tired, they ate an apple from her box, and at once they were young and strong again. No one else in the world had such apples, and without them even a god would grow gray and weak like any other creature.

One day three of the gods, Odin, Loki and Hoenir, went out walking across the mountains to see the world. By evening they were very hungry, and they came upon a herd of oxen in a valley. They dug a pit, made a fire in it and put some ox meat in a pot to boil for supper. But although they waited for a long time, the pot would not cook, however hot the fire got.

"What can be the matter?" said Loki, and he took off the lid and looked. Then a voice spoke from the tree above them. "If you will give me my fill of the ox," it said, "the meat will cook." They looked up and saw a great eagle sitting on a branch. The gods agreed, and at once the pot began to bubble. The eagle swooped down and seized the two biggest pieces of the ox.

Loki was angry that the eagle had taken so much. He snatched up a big pole and swung it at the eagle, but the pole stuck fast to the bird's back, and the other end stuck to Loki's hands. The eagle rose into the air and flew along just over the ground, dragging Loki over rocks and bushes until his arms felt as if they were coming out of their sockets. "Let me go!" Loki begged.

"I will not let you go," said the eagle, "unless you promise to bring Idun out of Asgard, with her apples." The eagle was really a giant named Thjasse, who had put on an eagle's feathers, and he wanted the golden apples for himself. Loki was frightened, and he promised. Then the giant set him free, and Loki limped back to his friends. He said nothing about what he had promised.

When the time they had agreed on came, Loki went to Idun and spoke to her in his friendliest voice. "I have found some apples in the forest," he said, "and they are so beautiful that you will want to see them. Do bring your own apples, so that we can compare." Idun trusted him, as everyone in Asgard trusted him at that time. She picked up her box and went with Loki into the forest.

As soon as they were deep in the trees, Thjasse swooped down in his eagle's feathers, seized Idun and flew far away with her to his home in the cold, snowy mountains of the north. The gods of Asgard did not know where she had gone. Without her, they could not eat their golden apples, and soon something terrible began to happen. The young gods turned gray and stooped, and their eyes grew dim.

Odin, Thor and all the others met together in council. "Who saw Idun last?" asked Odin, and they all looked around. Someone said that she had gone off into the forest with Loki. "Bring Loki here!" cried Odin, and soon Loki was standing in front of them, looking small. "You will bring Idun home," said Odin, "or the gods will never forgive you." Loki was frightened, for he knew that he had done wrong.

"I will do it," said Loki. "Only lend me Freyja's falcon coat, and I will fly to the giant's land and bring Idun back." Freyja, who was a good friend to the gods, brought him the coat of falcon feathers. Loki slipped it on, flapped his wings and rose into the sky. He flew north across the mountains and over the sea, faster than any bird, until he saw the giant's lonely house.

It was a cold, gray house at the edge of the world. Thjasse had rowed out to sea to go fishing, and Idun was alone in the house, with no one to talk to. When she saw Loki she was so glad that she nearly cried. Loki had no time to talk. He cast a spell and turned Idun into a nut, and he took her up in his claws and flew away with all his might.

But when Thjasse came home from the sea and found that Idun was gone, he was furious. He put on his eagle's feathers again and set off in pursuit. An eagle is bigger than a falcon, and he had strong wings. Little by little he began to catch up with Loki, who was flying with a nut in his claws and could not go as fast as he wished. The sound of the giant's wings grew louder behind him.

Meanwhile, the gods in Asgard were watching the sky. When they saw the falcon coming, with the huge eagle beating along behind it, they hurried to the high walls of their city and stood in a long row along the top. They were old and stooped, but all of them stood together. They gathered their bravest voices, and when they saw Loki come near, they shouted to him to fly straight over the wall.

Loki swooped in above the heads of the gods and dropped down gently on the grass inside the wall, with the nut still safe in his claws. The great eagle was close behind. But when Thjasse saw the whole company of the gods standing on the walls of Asgard, waiting for him, he beat his wings and turned. He flew away to the north, over the mountains, and he did not come back.

Then Loki took off the falcon coat, and Idun became herself again. She opened her box of golden apples, and every god in Asgard ate one. The gray hair turned golden, the stooped backs straightened and the dim eyes shone. Everyone laughed and cheered, and Idun smiled at them all. After that, the story says, the gods took better care of Idun, and they never let her go into the forest alone.

Questions

1. What did Idun's golden apples do for the gods?

A. Made them young and strong again
B. Made them invisible
C. Made them sleep

2. How did Loki trick Idun into leaving Asgard?

A. He said he had found apples for her to see
B. He told her the gods needed her
C. He said she had won a prize

3. How did Loki carry Idun home from the giant's house?

A. He turned her into a nut
B. He put her in a boat
C. He rode on the eagle

4. What made the giant turn back at the walls of Asgard?

A. The gods were all waiting there
B. He ran out of strength
C. He forgot why he came

5. The gods grew "stooped." What does stooped mean?

A. Bent over
B. Very loud
C. Brightly colored

Words to know

council: group meeting
pursuit: chase
feathers: bird's covering
stooped: bent over
furious: very angry

Answer key: Idun and the Apples

1. A. Made them young and strong again
2. A. He said he had found apples for her to see
3. A. He turned her into a nut
4. A. The gods were all waiting there
5. A. Bent over