Name: _____ Date: _____

Thor in Utgard

Reading level 13 · 1281 words

Thor, the strongest of the gods, had never encountered a problem that could not be solved by hitting it, and he set out one morning for the country of the giants in order to prove that this was true everywhere. He rode in a brass chariot pulled by a pair of goats, and he took with him Loki, the trickster, who had no particular desire to go but was far too curious to stay behind. When evening arrived, they stopped at the cottage of a poverty-stricken farmer, and since the family had nothing left to eat, Thor solved that problem in his usual manner. He killed his own goats, cooked them, and invited everyone to supper, after laying their skins carefully beside the fire.

"Whatever you do," Thor commanded, "do not break the bones." Unfortunately, the farmer's young son Thialfi had been hungry for months, and in the middle of the night he crept to the skins and cracked one of the bones in order to taste the marrow. Loki, who saw everything and approved of mischief, said nothing. At dawn Thor swung his hammer over the skins, and both goats leaped up whole and healthy, except that one of them limped. Thor's face turned the color of a thundercloud, and he lifted his hammer over the terrified family. Then Thialfi began to weep and confessed, and the god, to his own considerable surprise, found that he could not strike a crying boy. "You will serve me," he growled, "until the debt is paid."

The goats were left to rest in a quiet forest while the travelers crossed into the land of the giants, where the three travelers marched all day over a lonely moor. When darkness fell, they found a most peculiar building, with a wide entrance hall and five long, narrow rooms branching off it, and they fell asleep inside, although a sound like moaning forests shook the walls all night. At daybreak they discovered the explanation. The building was a glove, and its owner, an unimaginably large giant named Skrymir, was sitting up on the hillside, yawning. "Ah, there is my glove," he said to the astonished gods. "Shall we travel together? I will carry nothing. You can carry my food bag."

All day the giant took enormous strides, and the gods could barely keep up with him. At noon he sat down beneath an oak, announced that he intended to sleep, and told them to help themselves to dinner from the bag. But the knots were impossible. Thor pulled and Loki picked, and the more they struggled, the tighter the knots became, until Thor lost his temper entirely. He seized his hammer and hit the sleeping giant on the head as hard as he could. "Did a leaf fall on me?" murmured Skrymir. Thor struck again, harder. "An acorn, I think." Thor struck a third time, with the greatest blow of his life, and Skrymir sat up and rubbed his forehead. "A bird must have been pecking at me," he said.

Soon afterward Skrymir left them, with a friendly warning that the people in Utgard, the giants'

city, were considerably bigger than he was, so they might want to be modest. Thor and his companions walked through the gate, and the city was bigger than anything they had imagined, with towers like mountains and shapeless buildings that looked as though they had been poured out of ice. In the throne room the king of the giants smiled thinly and said that he had heard of Thor's strength and was curious to see it. There would be contests, he said, but nothing too difficult; even the boys of the city could beat most visitors. First, let Thialfi, who was said to be the fastest runner in the world, race a young giant named Hugi.

Thialfi ran as he had never run in his life, but Hugi got to the finish line, turned around, and was waiting for him at the beginning when the boy arrived. They raced twice more, and each time Hugi was farther ahead, until in the final race he seemed to be waiting at the finish line before Thialfi had left the start. That evening at supper, the king announced a second contest. Everyone knew, he said, that Loki was a prodigious eater, so perhaps he would like to compete against Logi, the giants' champion. A trough of meat was carried in, and the two began at opposite ends, working toward the middle.

They met in the center at precisely the same moment, and Loki, who was very proud of himself, had eaten every scrap of meat from his side. But Logi had eaten the meat, the bones and the wooden trough as well. The giants shouted with laughter. Thor looked grimly at the floor. The next morning the king brought out a drinking horn and said that most of his men could empty it in one swallow, some in two, and that only the feeblest needed three. Thor, who was a famous drinker, gulped until his face turned crimson. When he lowered the horn, the level had barely moved, and he tried a second time, and a third, and the level fell only the width of a finger.

Thor demanded another challenge, and the king, hiding a smile, suggested something a child could do: lifting the gray cat that was sitting in the corner of the hall. Thor put both arms beneath the animal and heaved with all the strength of his shoulders, and the cat arched its back and rose, and rose, until one paw left the floor and the rest of it stayed exactly where it was. Furious and humiliated, Thor challenged any giant in the city to wrestle him. The king replied that it would be an insult to ask his men to wrestle someone so weak, but if Thor insisted, there was his old nurse, Elli. A bent, toothless woman hobbled forward, and Thor, with a growl of disgust, took hold of her.

The harder he pushed against the old woman, the more firmly she stood, and the harder he pulled, the more she gripped, until at last her strength forced him down upon one knee. The king stopped the match and sent everyone to bed. In the morning he led his guests personally to the gate, treating them as honored visitors, and there he said in a gentle voice that he would like to tell them the truth, now that they were beyond his walls. He was Skrymir, he said. The food bag had been tied with iron wire, and the three blows of Thor's hammer would have flattened a mountain; he had slid the mountain between himself and the hammer each time, and the three great valleys on the hillside were the marks.

"Everything in my city was a trick of magic," said the king. Hugi, the runner, was Thought, and no one can outrun a thought. Logi was wildfire, which eats everything in its path. The far end of the drinking horn had been joined to the ocean, and Thor had drunk so much that the sea had sunk away from the shores, and men would call it the tide. The gray cat was the Midgard Serpent, who circles the whole world, and Thor had lifted one of its paws toward the sky, a feat that frightened every giant who watched. And Elli was old age, who defeats everyone eventually, and Thor had stood up to her longer than anyone. When Thor heard this, he raised his hammer. But the walls and the king had already vanished, and the gods were alone on a quiet green plain.

Questions

1. Why did Thor take Thialfi along with him?

A. Thialfi was a famous warrior
B. Thialfi had broken a bone of one of his goats
C. Loki asked him to

2. Who was Skrymir really?

A. A traveling farmer
B. The king of the giants in disguise
C. Odin

3. What was Thor's wrestling opponent, Elli?

A. A giantess
B. Old age
C. Loki in disguise

4. What does Thor's trip to Utgard show about strength?

A. Strength can be beaten by trickery, but real strength still impresses
B. Giants are always cleverer than gods
C. Hammers are useless

5. What did the king mean when he said the horn was joined to the sea?

A. Thor had been drinking the ocean itself
B. The horn was made of a seashell
C. The horn was full of salt

6. In "a prodigious eater," what does prodigious mean?

A. Tiny
B. Extraordinary
C. Slow

Words to know

moor: open wild land
prodigious: extraordinary
marrow: bone's soft center
humiliated: deeply embarrassed
feat: great deed

Answer key: Thor in Utgard

1. B. Thialfi had broken a bone of one of his goats
2. B. The king of the giants in disguise
3. B. Old age
4. A. Strength can be beaten by trickery, but real strength still impresses
5. A. Thor had been drinking the ocean itself
6. B. Extraordinary