Name: _____ Date: _____

Kaa's Hunting

Reading level 12 (8th grade) · 1723 words

This happened before Mowgli was turned out of the wolf pack, in the days when Baloo, the old brown bear, was teaching him the Law of the Jungle. Baloo was a patient teacher and a very stern one. He taught the man-cub how to tell a rotten branch from a sound one, how to speak politely to the wild bees before climbing up to their hive, and what to say to the water snakes before splashing into a pool. Mowgli grew extremely tired of reciting the same lessons a hundred times over. One afternoon, when Baloo cuffed him for forgetting a word, he ran away in a temper with his head ringing like a bee tree.

In the trees above his path the gray monkeys, whom the jungle called the Bandar-log, had been watching him for some time, and now they came swinging down and made a tremendous fuss over him. They gave him nuts and sweet fruit, and they told him that he was their brother, except for his missing tail, and that someday he would be their leader. Mowgli had been scolded all morning, and it seemed to him the kindest thing anyone had ever said. By the time Baloo and Bagheera, the black panther, discovered him, he was boasting that he would have a tribe of his own and throw branches at old Baloo.

Baloo became very still, and then he spoke in a grave voice. "Thou hast been with the Monkey People. They have no law, no leader, and no memory; they borrow whatever words they overhear, and by nightfall they have forgotten them. They declare that they are about to do great things, but a falling nut makes them laugh, and the great things are forgotten. That is why the Jungle People never speak of them." As he finished, a shower of twigs and nuts rattled down through the branches above, for the monkeys were listening, and nothing delighted them more than being noticed.

That afternoon, ashamed of himself, Mowgli fell asleep between the bear and the panther, and he woke to the grip of small, strong hands. The monkeys had caught him. They swung him up into the treetops and carried him away, twenty feet at a bound, along high roads that no creature except a monkey could possibly have traveled. Branches lashed his face, and the ground flickered far below him. He was afraid of being dropped, then furiously angry, and then he began to think. High in the blue sky he saw Rann the Kite circling, so he whistled the kite's call and shouted, "Mark my trail! Tell Baloo and Bagheera!"

On the ground below, nobody could possibly keep pace with the monkeys. Bagheera clawed his way up a tree and slid back down with his claws full of bark, while Baloo ran in miserable circles, groaning that he was the worst teacher in the entire jungle. "Sit still and think," said Bagheera sharply, "for if we chase them too closely they may drop him." After a long silence Baloo remembered the one creature that the monkeys truly feared. "Kaa," he said slowly.

"Kaa, the great rock python. He climbs as well as they do, and the mere whisper of his name makes their tails go cold.

They found Kaa stretched out on a warm ledge in the afternoon sun, admiring the splendid new skin he had just grown. He was thirty feet long, mottled brown and yellow, and although he was not poisonous, once he had wrapped his coils around a creature there was nothing more to be said, and he was also vain and extremely hungry. Bagheera knew exactly how to win his interest. "The monkeys call thee a footless yellow earthworm," he remarked sweetly, "and they say that thou hast lost all thy teeth." The great muscles in Kaa's throat rippled. "The Bandar-log have shifted their ground," he said quietly. "Where have they taken the man-cub?"

Rann the Kite swept down with the answer. The monkeys had carried Mowgli across the river to the Cold Lairs, a ruined city lost in the jungle, about half a night's journey away. Bagheera and Kaa started at once, while old Baloo tried to keep up and soon had to sit down, panting, so they left him to follow as quickly as he could. Kaa seemed to pour himself along the ground like water, and even the swift panther could not outrun him. "I am hungry," he explained, "and besides, they called me a speckled frog."

The Cold Lairs had once been a king's city, but now trees grew through its walls and creepers hung from the windows of a roofless palace. The monkeys called the place their own, although they never understood what the buildings were for. They sat in rows in the old council hall, scratching and pretending to be men, and they shook the rose trees to watch the petals fall and forgot, a moment later, what they had done. Mowgli was hungry. The monkeys promised him dinner, quarreled with one another on the way to fetch it, and forgot. "All that Baloo told me is true," he thought.

As the moon rose, hundreds of monkeys crowded onto a terrace and took turns telling Mowgli how great and wise and gentle they were, and after every speech they shouted together, "This is true; we all say so!" Mowgli nodded and blinked and wished that he could sleep. He did not know that two friends were already waiting in the ditch below the wall. Bagheera would climb in by the terrace, and Kaa would come over the western wall, which was the hardest to climb, and therefore he would arrive a little late.

When a cloud covered the moon, Bagheera burst onto the terrace, striking right and left, and a hundred monkeys piled onto him at once. While he fought, others dragged Mowgli to a ruined summer-house and dropped him through a hole in its broken roof. He landed on his feet, exactly as Baloo had taught him to fall, and in the darkness around him something rustled and hissed. Mowgli gave the Snake's Call, "We be of one blood, ye and I," and the cobras that lived in the ruin answered softly, "Stand still, little brother, for thy feet may do us harm."

Bagheera was fighting for his life when he heard Mowgli shout, "To the water tank! Roll and plunge!" and he struggled toward it inch by inch, until he sank into the deep water where the monkeys could not reach him, although they stood three deep on the steps, waiting. Then

Baloo's war shout rang from the wall. The old bear scrambled up the terrace and vanished beneath a wave of monkeys, but without a pause he sat back on his haunches and began to beat them off in every direction, bat, bat, bat, like the paddles of a steamboat.

That was the moment when Kaa came over the wall. To be struck by Kaa, the jungle said, was like being hit by a hammer weighing half a ton, with a cool, quiet mind living inside the handle. His first blow landed in the crowd around Baloo and needed no second. "Kaa! It is Kaa! Run!" The monkeys scattered to the walls and the roofs, and those who were still hurrying to help stopped dead in the trees, cowering until the branches bent beneath them. Then Kaa found the weak place in the marble screen of the summer-house, struck it again and again, and Mowgli leaped out between his two friends with an arm around each neck.

"Thank him according to our custom," said Bagheera. Mowgli looked up at the great head swaying above his own. "We be of one blood, thou and I," he said. "I take my life from thee tonight, and my kill shall be thy kill, if ever thou art hungry." "And what may so small a hunter kill?" asked Kaa, his eyes twinkling. "Nothing yet," admitted Mowgli, "but I can drive goats toward those who can use them, and if ever thou art caught in a trap, I may pay the debt." "A brave heart and a courteous tongue," said Kaa, "will carry thee far, manling. Now go quickly, for the moon is setting, and what comes next is not for thee to see."

As the moon sank, Kaa glided to the middle of the terrace and began the Dance of the Hunger of Kaa. He wove slow loops and figures of eight, humming low, never hurrying and never stopping, and presently he asked the silent crowd whether they could stir foot or hand without his order. "We cannot, O Kaa," the monkeys whispered. Baloo and Bagheera, standing at the edge, took a stiff step forward with them as though they were walking in a dream, but Mowgli laid a hand on each of them and pulled. "It is only old Kaa making circles in the dust," he said, and he led them out through a gap in the wall.

Under the quiet trees, Baloo shook himself from head to foot. "Never again will I make an ally of Kaa," he said. "He knows more than we do," answered Bagheera, who was still trembling. "Had I stayed another minute, I should have walked straight down his throat." Then the panther turned to Mowgli, for his own ears and sides were bitten, and Baloo was sore from nose to tail. "All this came of thy playing with the Bandar-log," he said. "It is true," said Mowgli sadly. "I did wrong." Bagheera gave him a few light cuffs, which for a panther were hardly anything and for a boy of seven were quite enough.

Mowgli sneezed, picked himself up, and said nothing whatever, and then Bagheera spoke again. "Now," said Bagheera, "jump on my back, little brother, and we will go home." One of the best things about the Law of the Jungle is that punishment settles every score, and nobody nags afterward. Mowgli laid his head on the panther's shoulder, and the jungle swayed past under the stars. He slept so deeply that he never woke when they set him down in the cave, with the wolf cubs breathing softly in the dark and the first gray light of morning

beginning to creep in at the door.

Questions

1. Why did Mowgli run off into the trees?

A. He wanted to play a trick on Baloo
B. He was tired of lessons and cross at being cuffed
C. He was chasing a bee tree

2. Why did Baloo and Bagheera go to Kaa for help?

A. Kaa was the only one the monkeys feared
B. Kaa was Mowgli's teacher
C. Kaa knew every word of the Law

3. How did Mowgli escape from the summer-house?

A. He climbed out through the hole in the roof
B. The cobras carried him out
C. Kaa broke the marble wall

4. The monkeys shouted "This is true; we all say so!" What does that tell you about them?

A. They believed things just because they said them loudly
B. They were very honest animals
C. They were afraid of Mowgli

5. What does the story suggest about the Law of the Jungle?

A. Rules are there to keep you safe, even when they feel hard
B. Only strong animals need rules
C. Monkeys are the wisest of the jungle people

6. When the monkeys were "cowering" in the trees, what were they doing?

A. Singing loudly
B. Shrinking back, afraid
C. Racing each other

Words to know

cuffed: hit lightly
python: huge snake
haunches: back legs, sitting
cowering: shrinking in fear
courteous: polite and kind

Answer key: Kaa's Hunting

1. B. He was tired of lessons and cross at being cuffed
2. A. Kaa was the only one the monkeys feared
3. C. Kaa broke the marble wall
4. A. They believed things just because they said them loudly
5. A. Rules are there to keep you safe, even when they feel hard
6. B. Shrinking back, afraid