Name: _____ Date: _____

Ra and the Great Snake

Reading level 8 (4th grade) · 584 words

In Egypt, the sun is bright and the desert is hot. People there watched the sun every day, and they wondered about it. Long ago, they told a story about how the sun could rise each morning after it sank out of sight.

In the story, the sun was a golden boat, and Ra was its captain. In the daytime, he sailed it across the sky, which was like a river. Down below, farmers worked in the fields, and fishers cast their nets into the Nile.

Late in the day, the sky grew red and the air grew cool. Ra steered his boat down toward the western hills. The farmers put away their tools, because they knew the boat was about to slip out of sight, and that night would come.

Behind the hills lay the Duat, a land of darkness deep under the earth. A river ran through it, and the golden boat sailed in at dusk. The Egyptians said the boat had twelve hours of night to cross. Then it could come out the other side.

The river of the Duat had no wind and no tide. So helpers on the bank took up a long rope and towed the boat along. Its golden light shone on the cave walls. The sleepers in the dark woke up to see it pass.

Ra spoke kindly to each of the sleepers as the boat went by. Then the boat moved on, and the dark closed in behind it. For hour after hour, the sailors kept to their work. The boat crept steadily on through the night.

But in the very deepest part of the Duat, an enemy was waiting. It was Apep, a snake so long that he seemed as long as the river. He did not like light, and he coiled himself across the water so that the boat could not move forward.

Apep opened his huge mouth and hissed. "If I stop you," he said, "the sun will never rise." The boat stood still. The helpers dropped the rope, and the golden glow grew dim, like a sun behind thick cloud. All was quiet in the Duat.

Then a wise helper named Isis stepped up. She knew the old words of power, and she spoke them out loud in a clear voice. They rang through the cave like bells, and Apep flinched. Everyone on the boat looked up with new hope.

Ra stood up tall in the front of the boat, and his light blazed out. The words of Isis and the glare of the sun were too much for the snake. He pulled back, uncoiled and slid away into the shadows. He was driven off, and he was unhurt.

The Egyptians said that Apep always came back, and that this was why there were storms

and dark clouds. But each night, the boat sailed on, and each night, the snake was driven off again. The helpers picked up the rope once more.

At the twelfth hour, a gate swung open, and a thin silver light shone ahead. The helpers set down their rope for the last time. The boat slid up out of the dark, at the eastern edge of the world. The sky turned pink.

Up came the sun, round and gold, over the river and the desert. Birds began to sing, and the farmers lifted their faces to the light. Ra had come through the night once more. A new day had begun, and it was full of light.

Questions

1. What was the sun in the story?

A. A fire on a hill
B. A lamp in a house
C. A golden boat sailed by Ra

2. How did the helpers move the boat in the Duat?

A. They towed it with a rope
B. They rowed with oars
C. They sailed with the wind

3. What did Isis do to help?

A. She hid the boat
B. She spoke the old words of power
C. She fought with a spear

4. Why did the Egyptians say there were storms and dark clouds?

A. Because Ra was angry
B. Because the Nile flooded
C. Because Apep always came back

5. Apep "flinched." What does flinched mean?

A. Pulled back suddenly
B. Laughed out loud
C. Fell asleep

Words to know

Duat: the land of night
towed: pulled by a rope
flinched: pulled back
steadily: without stopping

Answer key: Ra and the Great Snake

1. C. A golden boat sailed by Ra
2. A. They towed it with a rope
3. B. She spoke the old words of power
4. C. Because Apep always came back
5. A. Pulled back suddenly