Name: _____ Date: _____

The Beginning of the Armadillos

Reading level 10 (6th grade) · 1137 words

This, O Best Beloved, is another story of the High and Far-Off Times. In the very middle of those times lived a Stickly-Prickly Hedgehog beside the muddy Amazon, eating shelly snails and things. He had a friend, a Slow-and-Solid Tortoise, who lived beside the same river eating green lettuces and things. And so that was all right, Best Beloved. Do you see? But in those same High and Far-Off Times there was also a Painted Jaguar, and he lived by the muddy Amazon too, and ate everything he could catch.

When he could not catch deer or monkeys, he ate frogs and beetles. And when he could not catch frogs and beetles, he went to his Mother Jaguar, and she told him how to eat hedgehogs and tortoises. She said to him, ever so many times, waving her tail graciously, "My son, when you find a Hedgehog you must drop him into the water, and then he will uncoil. And when you find a Tortoise, you must scoop him out of his shell with your paw."

One night on the banks of the muddy Amazon, Painted Jaguar found Stickly-Prickly and Slow-and-Solid sitting under a fallen tree. They could not run away. So Stickly-Prickly curled himself up into a ball, because he was a Hedgehog. Slow-and-Solid drew in his head and his feet as far as they would go, because he was a Tortoise. "Now attend to me," said Painted Jaguar. "My mother said that when I meet a Hedgehog I must drop him into the water, and when I meet a Tortoise I must scoop him out of his shell.

Which of you is the Hedgehog and which the Tortoise? To save my spots, I cannot tell." "Are you sure of what your mother told you?" said Stickly-Prickly. "Perhaps she said that when you uncoil a Tortoise you must shell him out of the water with a scoop. When you paw a Hedgehog you must drop him on the shell." "Are you quite sure?" said Slow-and-Solid. "Perhaps she said that when you water a Hedgehog you must drop him into your paw." "You are making my spots ache!" said Painted Jaguar.

"I only wanted to know which of you is which," he said. "I shan't tell you," said Stickly-Prickly, "but you may scoop me out of my shell if you like." "Aha!" said Painted Jaguar. "Now I know you are the Tortoise!" And he darted out his paw. But Stickly-Prickly curled up, and Painted Jaguar's paw was full of prickles, and he knocked the Hedgehog far away into the dark bushes. Then Painted Jaguar put his paw into his mouth, and of course the prickles hurt him worse than ever.

"Now I know he was not the Tortoise at all," he said. "But how do I know that this other one is the Tortoise?" "But I am the Tortoise," said Slow-and-Solid. "Your mother was quite right. Begin." "What will happen if I do?" said Painted Jaguar, very cautiously. "I don't know," said the Tortoise, "because I have never been scooped out of my shell before. But if you want to

see me swim away, you have only to drop me into the water."

"I don't believe it," said Painted Jaguar. "You have mixed up everything my mother told me, and I do not know whether I am on my head or on my painted tail. My mother told me to drop one of you into the water, and as you seem so anxious to be dropped, I think you don't want to be. So jump into the river, and be quick about it." "Please don't tell your mother that I did not tell you," said Slow-and-Solid.

Then he quietly dived into the muddy Amazon, swam underwater for a long way, and came out on the bank where Stickly-Prickly was waiting for him. "That was a very narrow escape," said Stickly-Prickly. "What did you tell him that you were?" "I told him truthfully that I was a truthful Tortoise," said Slow-and-Solid, "but he would not believe me." They could hear Painted Jaguar roaring up and down among the trees until his mother came. "Son, son," she said, "what have you been doing that you should not have done?"

"I tried to scoop something out of its shell," said Painted Jaguar, "and my paw is full of prickles." "By the prickles in your paw," said his mother, "that must have been a Hedgehog. You should have dropped him into the water." "I did that to the other one," said Painted Jaguar, "and he said he was a Tortoise, and I did not believe him. And it was quite true, and he has dived under the muddy Amazon, and I have nothing to eat.

I think we had better find new lodgings. They are too clever on the Amazon for poor me!" "Son, son," said his mother, "remember what I say. A Hedgehog curls himself into a ball, with his prickles sticking out every which way. A Tortoise cannot curl up. He only draws his head and legs into his shell. By this you may know them." "I don't like this old lady at all," said Stickly-Prickly under a large leaf. "I wonder what else she knows."

Painted Jaguar sat on the bank and said to himself, "Can't curl, but can swim: Slow-and-Solid, that's him! Curls up, but can't swim: Stickly-Prickly, that's him!" "He will never forget that," said Stickly-Prickly. "Hold up my chin, Slow-and-Solid. I am going to learn to swim. It may be useful." "Excellent!" said Slow-and-Solid, and he held up Stickly-Prickly's chin while he kicked in the water. "Now, if you will unlace my back plates a little, I will see what I can do about curling up. It may be useful."

So they practiced all night long, each helping the other, one learning to swim and the other learning to curl. And a little at a time their shapes began to change. When the sun was high and they had rested and dried themselves, they saw that they were both quite different from what they had been. The Tortoise's plates overlapped, and the Hedgehog's prickles had melted into scales. "I think scales are a great improvement on prickles," said Stickly-Prickly, "to say nothing of being able to swim.

Oh, won't Painted Jaguar be surprised! Let's go and find him." By and by they found Painted Jaguar, still nursing his sore paw. He was so astonished that he fell over his own painted tail three times without stopping. "Good morning!" said Stickly-Prickly. "And how is your dear

gracious Mummy this morning?" "She is quite well, thank you," said Painted Jaguar. "But you must forgive me if I do not recall your name." And that was the beginning of the Armadillos on the banks of the muddy Amazon.

Questions

1. Why was Painted Jaguar confused?

A. He could not tell which was Hedgehog and which was Tortoise
B. He could not swim
C. He had lost his mother

2. What happened when Jaguar tried to scoop up the Hedgehog?

A. The Hedgehog bit him
B. He got a paw full of prickles
C. The Hedgehog ran away

3. Where did the Tortoise go when Jaguar told him to jump in the river?

A. He sank
B. He swam away under the water
C. He hid in the grass

4. "Attend to me" means --

A. Come to dinner with me
B. Look after me
C. Listen to me carefully

5. What did Hedgehog and Tortoise do after Jaguar's mother told him how to know them apart?

A. They practised each other's skills
B. They moved away
C. They hid for a year

6. What does the ending show about the two friends?

A. Helping each other made them stronger and safer
B. They wanted to be Jaguars
C. They stayed the same

Words to know

uncoil: unroll
prickles: sharp points
scoop: lift out
attend: listen closely
lodgings: place to stay

Answer key: The Beginning of the Armadillos

1. A. He could not tell which was Hedgehog and which was Tortoise
2. B. He got a paw full of prickles
3. B. He swam away under the water
4. C. Listen to me carefully
5. A. They practised each other's skills
6. A. Helping each other made them stronger and safer