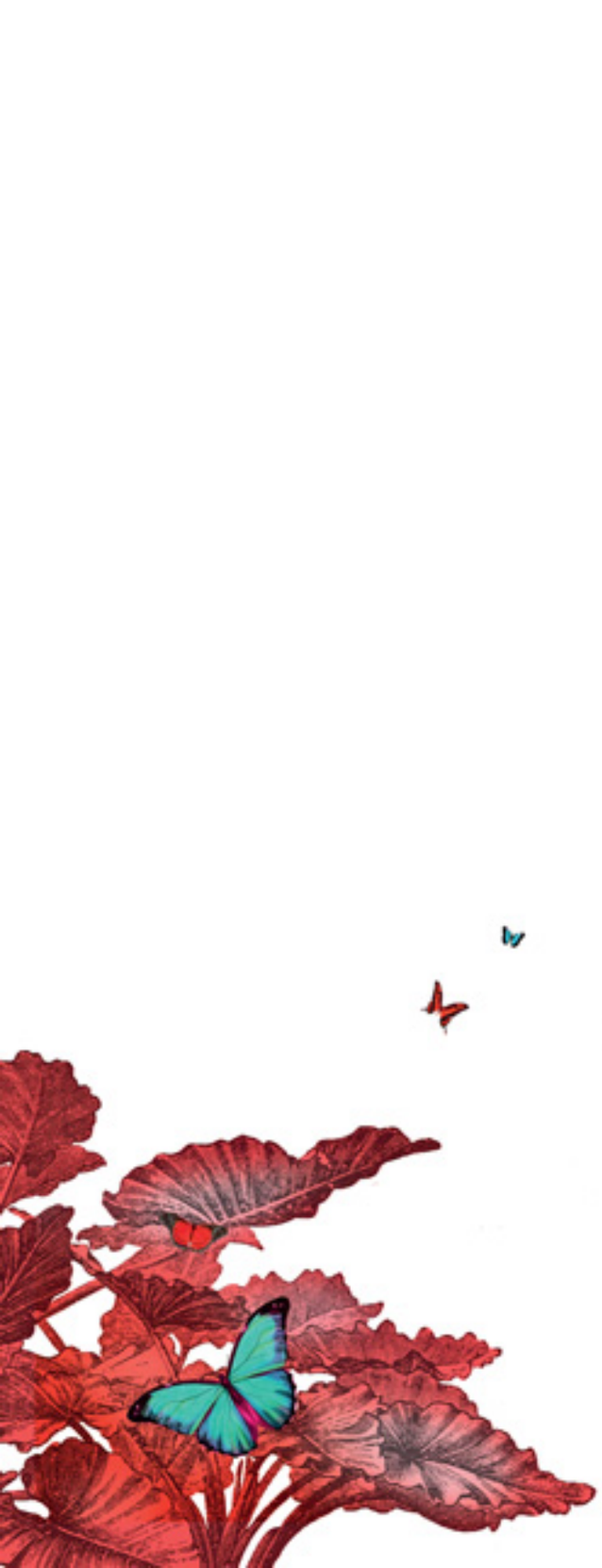


INTO THE JUNGLE

Stories for Mowgli

KATHERINE RUNDELL

ILLUSTRATED BY KRISTJANA S WILLIAMS



MACMILLAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS



To the lemur ball



First published 2018 by Macmillan Children's Books
an imprint of Pan Macmillan
20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-1-5098-2231-7

Text copyright © Katherine Rundell 2018
Illustrations copyright © Kristjana S Williams 2018

The right of Author (and Illustrator) to be identified as the author (and illustrator) of this work has been asserted by her/him/them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Pan Macmillan does not have any control over, or any responsibility for, any author or third-party websites referred to in or on this book.

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed in China

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Contents



Before Mother Wolf Was a Mother, She Was a Fighter 1

Bagheera's Cage 33

Baloo's Courage 89

Kaa's Dance 147

Mowgli 191







Before Mother Wolf Was a Mother, She Was a Fighter



Father Wolf wedged his human child between his paws and began to lick him clean. The child, Mowgli, crouched on all fours and gnawed a buffalo bone. He was not a tidy eater, and marrow juice ran across one cheek and into his ear. Father Wolf licked it off.

'Tell me a story?' Mowgli said.

It was a very wet day in the Seoni hills. The tangle of jungle stretched away below them, its rich green leopard-spotted with red and yellow where the trees had flowered. Mother Wolf was

out hunting, down towards the river, where the bandicoot rats would be hiding. Rain thrummed down outside the cave, churning the forest floor into mud, but inside it was warm and dry. It was weather for story-telling.

'But not the one about the mongoose – I'm sick of that one.'

'Don't be impertinent.' Father Wolf laid one of his teeth against the top of Mowgli's skull and applied the lightest possible pressure. Mowgli was small but tough, with muscles that could catapult him into a tree in a single jump. Even so, it hurt.

'Ow!' Mowgli rubbed his head and glared at Father Wolf. '*Ouch!*'

The wolf said nothing, only batted Mowgli's head to the side so he could run a brisk tongue along the boy's neck.

'Fine. Sorry.' Mowgli tried to look both righteously annoyed and cajoling at once. It involved a lot of eyebrow work. 'Tell me about when you were little.'

Father Wolf shook his head and went on cleaning his son, licking hard at the dirt packed behind Mowgli's left ear.

'Please!' said Mowgli. 'I'm hungry.'

'Then eat something.'

'There's no food. And anyway, I'm hungry for stories.'

'No stories about me. I've no wish to go raking through my own fur,' Father Wolf said.

'Then tell me about when Mama was young.'

'Ah!' Father Wolf's eyes shone yellow in the light. He licked the side of Mowgli's hair in pleasure and let him go. 'Yes. That I *can* do,' he said. 'Your mother is famous from the foot of the Seoni to where the trees reach the ridge on the far side of the mountain.'



Mowgli nodded. He knew that. Everyone knew that. He stretched back luxuriously and began chewing on his toenail.

'They called her Raksha, which means "the Demon"—'

This was news to Mowgli. 'Mama isn't a demon!'

'Well, perhaps less demon than spirit: something wild and untamed. It wasn't really a compliment.'

Mowgli spat out his toenail and sat up, balling his fists. 'Who dared uncompliment Mama? I'll kill them!'

Father Wolf tapped his son gently on the side of the head with his muzzle, and Mowgli fell over, back into his father's paws.

'Mama does not need you to fight anyone for her. She can take care of herself. Stop wriggling. Do you want to hear the story, or would you rather I ask Baloo to come and teach you the hunting call of the Bengal monitor lizards?'



Mowgli shook his head and pinned his lips shut with his teeth. The call of the monitor lizards is notoriously difficult; monitor lizards are not chatty, and it is a struggle to learn the language of an animal who only makes an observation every six months.

'So,' began Father Wolf. 'Raksha was born the only she-wolf in a litter of eight cubs.

'From the day she was born, she was a fighter: all claws and teeth and bite. She chewed bones and rocks and stray feathers; sometimes she chewed her brothers. There was no need, Raksha's mother would tell her, to battle to the death over a half-chewed rabbit.

"You must work on your priorities, little one," she would say.

"Not everything has to be a battle."

The cave they lived in was halfway up the mountain, with a narrow mouth but a wide chamber, warm in the winter, and dry in the rains. It smelt reassuringly of wolf-breath and dry earth, unless the smallest of the wolf cubs, Bhedi, had farted. In the cave, they grew fast, and they grew strong.

Raksha was grey, like her brothers, but unlike her brothers the tips of her ears were black. As you know, we are born with blue eyes that later turn yellow, but one of Raksha's eyes stayed the colour of the sky. It made her easy to identify, easy to remember.

The day came when the Pack Council was held. The Chief of the Pack was, back then, a vast black she-wolf by the name of Nakha – this was when Akela was nothing more than a skinny-ribbed youngster, long before he became the Lone Wolf, the leader of all wolves.

Raksha's mother licked each of the cubs until they shone in the moonlight, and then guided and nudged and carried them as they trekked to the Rock for the Looking Over.

It was a long walk for a small cub. Soon Raksha's paws began



to burn and ache, but she refused, unlike Bhedi, to ride on her mother's back, or in her mouth.

The Law of the Jungle dictates that each new litter of cubs must be brought to the Rock so that the rest of the Pack may identify them, learn their faces, memorize their smell. Then, after the Looking Over, if a grown wolf kills a cub before it is old enough to have slaughtered its first buck, the penalty for that killing must be death.

"Run, little ones," said Raksha's mother. "Show yourself to the Pack." And she rocked her head back and howled so that the wolves would hear. "Look well, O Wolves! See my cubs: remember their faces. Look well!"

A wolf cub is, as a rule, a fragile thing: fur as fluffy as a bear's stomach, and eyes as wide open as a butterfly's wings. But there are exceptions to every rule, and Raksha was an exception. Her fur was fluffy, certainly, and her eyes were wide, but she was not fragile; already she was taller than any of her brothers, and the joints in her four legs sprang faster than the rest. The cubs tore around the Council Rock, biting at one another's necks and tails in

excitement, watched carefully by the adult wolves.

Bhedi ran helter-skelter across the rock. Feverish with excitement, he bit down on the nearest tail; it happened to belong to Nakha, who swiped at him with her paw, not terribly indulgently. The blow sent him flying into Raksha's nose.

"Look where you're going, Bhedi!" said Raksha; she could feel her skin growing hot and angry under her fur. She swung out at him with her claws, but he ducked and skittered away.

Nakha looked at them, unblinking, as she stalked past. "Look well, O Wolves," she called, glaring at Bhedi's scrambling behind.

"It wasn't his fault!" said a strange cub to Raksha. He was plumpish and short-tailed, with ginger patches on his chest and front paws; until that moment, he had been sheltering at his mother's side.

"Who are you? What business is it of yours?" asked Raksha. She sounded slightly ruder than she had meant to, but it was not right, she felt, for a strange cub to be butting into business between her and her brother.

"My name's Adrak," said the strange cub. "At least, it's not my

real proper name – but it means 'ginger', and my real name's the same as my father's, so the other wolves kept getting confused, so . . ."

His voice tailed off at the sight of Raksha, who was doing her best to look bored and impressive at once.

"And?" she said.

"And you're Raksha. You're the one who tried to kill a squirrel before you'd grown any teeth."

"So what if I am?" said Raksha.

"So nothing. I'm just saying."

"And you're an only-cub. You don't have brothers and sisters. That's why you're soft."

Adrak looked down at the black fur on his stomach. "I'm not soft," he said.

"I dare you, then."

"Dare me to do what?" said Adrak. "You can't just say, 'I dare you.' Dares are specific!"

Raksha considered, cleaning the



dirt from under her claws. She tried to think of the bravest, most forbidden thing they could do.

"I dare you to . . . go and bite the ancient white ape's tail! At the top of the mountain!"

Adrak glared at her. "Don't make jokes about that. The ancient ape doesn't exist."

"He does exist! I know he does – Mama said so! He lives at the top of the mountain. He spends all day filing his claws to a point, and envying us down below."

"You're not supposed to talk about him."

"Why do you care, if you don't believe in him?"

"Just don't, all right? Only a stupid newborn wouldn't know we don't speak his name."

"Fine!" Raksha bared her teeth at him to hide her embarrassment. "Then . . . I dare you to steal a bite of meat from Shere Khan's kill. He definitely does exist, because I've seen him!"

Adrak swallowed. "*The* Shere Khan?"

Shere Khan was a young tiger, barely three years old, but fully



grown and fully feared. He had been born lame, but that had not held him back from eating village children, putting whole packs of wolves in danger from the angry humans. He had been known to kill a wolf cub or two.

"You'd have to do it as well," said Adrak.

"Of course!" It had never occurred to Raksha that it might be otherwise.

"But you don't know where Shere Khan hunts!" said Bhedi, popping up from behind a cleft in the rock.

Raksha rounded on her brother. "Go away, Bhedi! This is no business of yours."

"It is! You have to let me come, or I'll tell Mother."

Raksha growled. She rolled her lips back from her teeth and bared every single fang she had at Bhedi. Bhedi began, very elaborately, to clean his whiskers. His tail, though, was quivering.

Raksha turned, so her bottom was in Bhedi's face. "Come on, Adrak. Let's go."

"Where?" asked Adrak. "Which way?"

Raksha realized she did not in fact know. "He'll be at the foot

of the mountain," she said. "That's where all the buffalo are."

"But the mountain's got a really big foot," said Adrak. "Where *exactly*?"

"I know!" said Bhedi. "I heard Mother and Father talking about it."

"Where?"

"I'm not telling you," said Bhedi, "or you'll run off without me." He strutted past Raksha and looked back over his shoulder. "I'll be the leader and show you the way."

"No you won't!" Raksha pounced. She launched herself at Bhedi's throat, far harder than she ever had before. Bhedi squeaked with shock and wriggled under her. "Tell me!"

"No!"

"Tell me, or I'll pull out your whiskers!"

"You wouldn't!" It is the greatest possible insult to pull out a Wolf's whiskers.

"Wouldn't I?" Raksha took one of Bhedi's whiskers in her teeth, and gave a short, sharp tug.

"Ow! Raksha!"

"I'll do it again!"

"No, don't – ow, no! All right! He hunts in the plains where the snake stream meets the elephant pool. And I'll tell Mother what you did to me. So there."

"Good," said Raksha. She dropped her brother and strode off away from the rock, down the dry earth towards the green below them. A hot surge of guilt was beating in her blood, but she set back her ears and refused to let Adrak see it.

Behind them they heard the call: "Look well, O Wolves!" But nobody saw them go.

Adrak stumbled after her, breathing heavily through his snout.

A minute passed, and then a pure-grey shadow slipped away from the rock and followed.

The walk down to the open plains took longer than Raksha had expected. She tried to run, at first, all four paws kicking up dust into Adrak's face behind her, but soon she began to pant and wheeze, and even the satisfaction of covering her new friend in

dust couldn't spur her on.

She stopped, hunkered down close to the ground, and panted.

"Are we nearly there?" gasped Adrak.

"Less than nearly, I think," said Raksha, "but more than not at all."

They were still struggling to catch their breath when they felt, rather than heard, a rumble. It vibrated in the earth under their paws and in Raksha's fur.

"Is that him?" whispered Adrak.

Raksha nodded. She tried to look more confident than she felt. "Come on! We'll find Shere Khan, creep up behind him, take a bite out of his deer or whatever it is he's caught, and then run to where the trees are so thick he can't follow."

"Right," said Adrak, nodding slowly. "The thing is . . ."

"What?"

"That sounds like a much worse plan now that we're down here than it did when we were up there."

Privately, Raksha had been thinking exactly the same thing, but hearing Adrak's doubts somehow made her feel braver.

"Nonsense!" she said, sounding very much like her Grandmother Wolf; and then she turned and ran on, following the sound of the roar, through buffalo-high grasses and away from the protection of the jungle. The little grey shadow ran after her.

The sound led them through the fields, where they caught occasional whiffs of man-smell. Adrak wrinkled his nose.

"I like it," said Raksha defiantly. "It smells delicious."

Soon they came to a watering hole, surrounded on all sides by sun-bleached grass, with a few bare trees growing nearby, and, further to the west, the fringe of the jungle, growing thick with vines and the vast deep-green leaves the wolves called Elephant Ears.

Underneath one of the bare brown trees, lying with one paw reaching out to the watering hole, was a tiger. Raksha froze. Adrak bumped into her, and then tried to freeze too. The small grey shadow, making its way through the grasses, snuffling in the sun, did not freeze.

The tiger was not hunting. It was waiting under the tree; its head turned away from





Raksha and Adrak, towards the village.

A tiger has a very specific smell to a wolf. It smells of metal and heat and spit. It smells of *take-care* and *stay-away*.

"How can we eat his kill," whispered Adrak wetly in Raksha's ear, "if he hasn't killed anything?"

"Shh!" said Raksha. "We'll have to do something else."

"Do what?"

"I don't know – maybe we bite *his* tail?"

"*You* can," said Adrak, "if you want to. I signed on for eating deer, not tiger."

"Shh! Not so loud!" said Raksha.

The tiger turned. Its eyes were bright as gold, and as hard, but the fur around its muzzle was white with age.

"It's not Shere Khan," Raksha whispered. "It's too old."

The tiger's gaze swept the open grass. Raksha felt her stomach drop towards her tail. But the tiger wasn't looking at her. It was looking to the west of her, where the long grass was moving, suddenly swishing from side to side.

Another tiger came padding towards the watering hole. In

its jaws was something Raksha and Adrak couldn't make out: a smudge of grey against the orange of the sun and of the grass and of the tiger's stripes.

The tiger limped on its front paw.

"Shere Khan," whispered Raksha. "The lame hunter."

"Shh!" said Adrak.

"What is this?" roared the older tiger. "Worm-eaten, thin-tailed disgrace to my name!"

"Father, I—" said the second tiger.

"I told you to bring me a buffalo! Or a deer – something large to calm the fury in my gut. And now, you bring me this? What is it? A rabbit? A squirrel? A fur cloak, as the humans wear? Have you brought me a coat to eat, idiot boy? I have told you before and I tell you again, you are barely half a son to me."

"A wolf cub," said Shere Khan. And he spat the shivering grey bundle at the feet of his father.

Every single hair on Raksha's back rose. The bundle gave a squeak and then, as Shere Khan gave it a great kick with his non-lame foot to send it spinning over the dry earth, fell silent.

"Bhedi," she whispered.

Adrak's eyes grew wide. Every inch of Raksha began to shake; her tail swished backwards and forwards, try as she might to still it. It rustled through the grass in which they crouched.

"Raksha!" whispered Adrak, and jerked his head at her tail. "Stop it! They'll see!"

Raksha caught her tail in her mouth and bit down hard on it. "We have to do something," she said, through her mouthful of fur. "We have to snatch him back."

"We can't!" hissed Adrak. "Shere Khan will kill us all."

"*Can't* doesn't matter." Raksha spat out her tail and rolled her lips up from her teeth. "He's my brother," she said. "*You* can do whatever you want, but I haven't got a choice. You can wait here."

She swallowed, tasting the terror in her mouth. She breathed in and crouched, sinking backwards into the earth, preparing her hind legs to spring.

Adrak leaped forward and gripped her by the scruff



of the neck, holding on tight. "Shh! You can't go leaping in there like you're going to fight to the death; you'll get us both killed. You need a plan."

"Let go of me!"

"Shh!" Adrak let go of Raksha.

She lay flat, as close to the ground as she could. Her brain spun and skittered over possible plans; every idea she had seemed more foolish and unlikely than the last.

The roar of the two tigers was growing louder.

"Food is not plentiful, Father," bellowed Shere Khan. "You speak as if it were easy! The buffalo around here are not trusting; they scatter at the merest breath of wind!"

"It *would* be easy, if you were not as lame in your brain as you are in your foot."

Bhedi lay in front of the tigers, wet with tiger spit and quaking, with his paws over his nose, too terrified to raise his head.

"Listen," whispered Raksha. "Listen: this is what we'll do." She bent down, pushed her snout into Adrak's ear, and whispered . . .

"That's a terrible plan!" he hissed. "We don't have time!"