



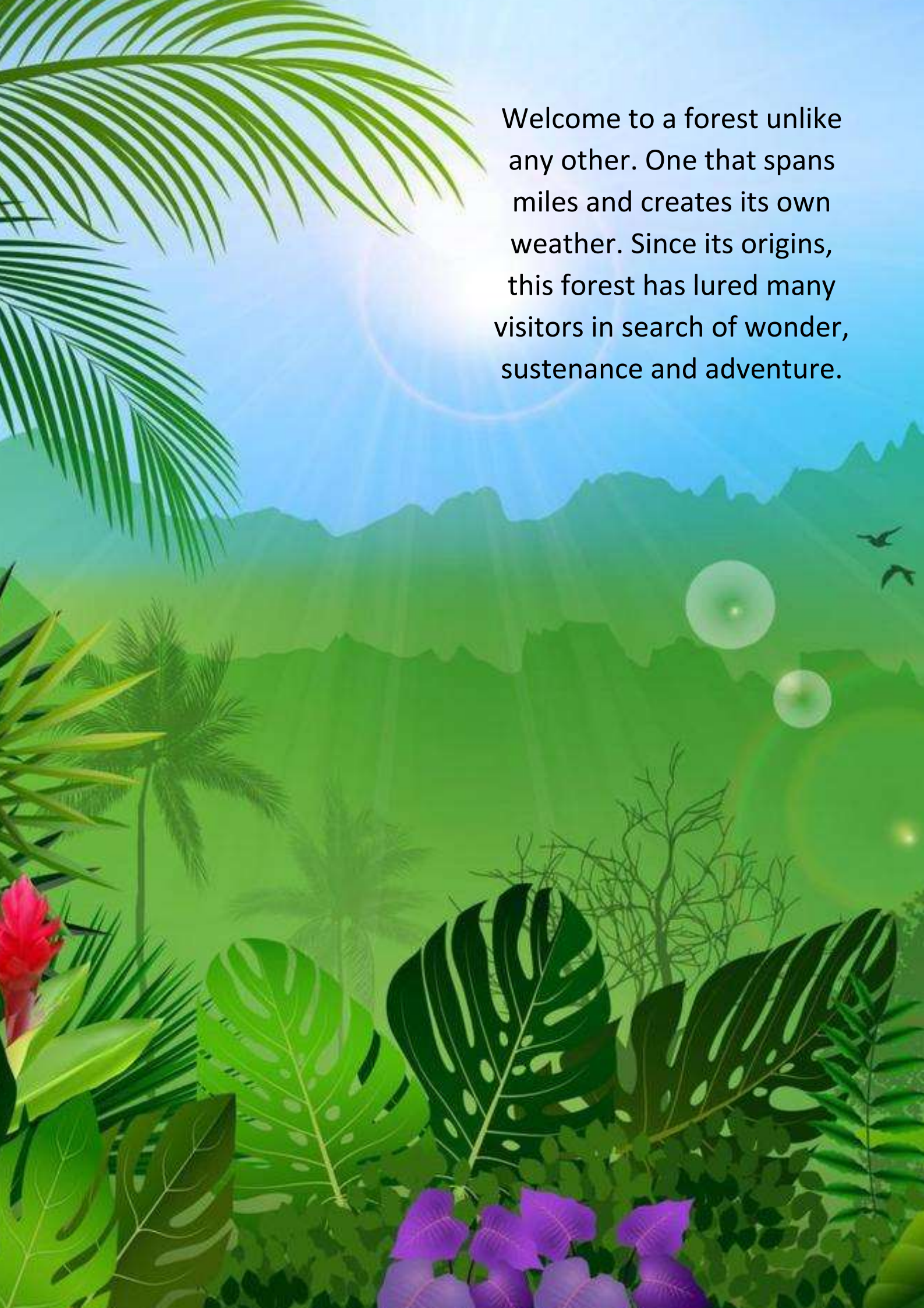
Once Upon Our Planet

By Vitta Murrow

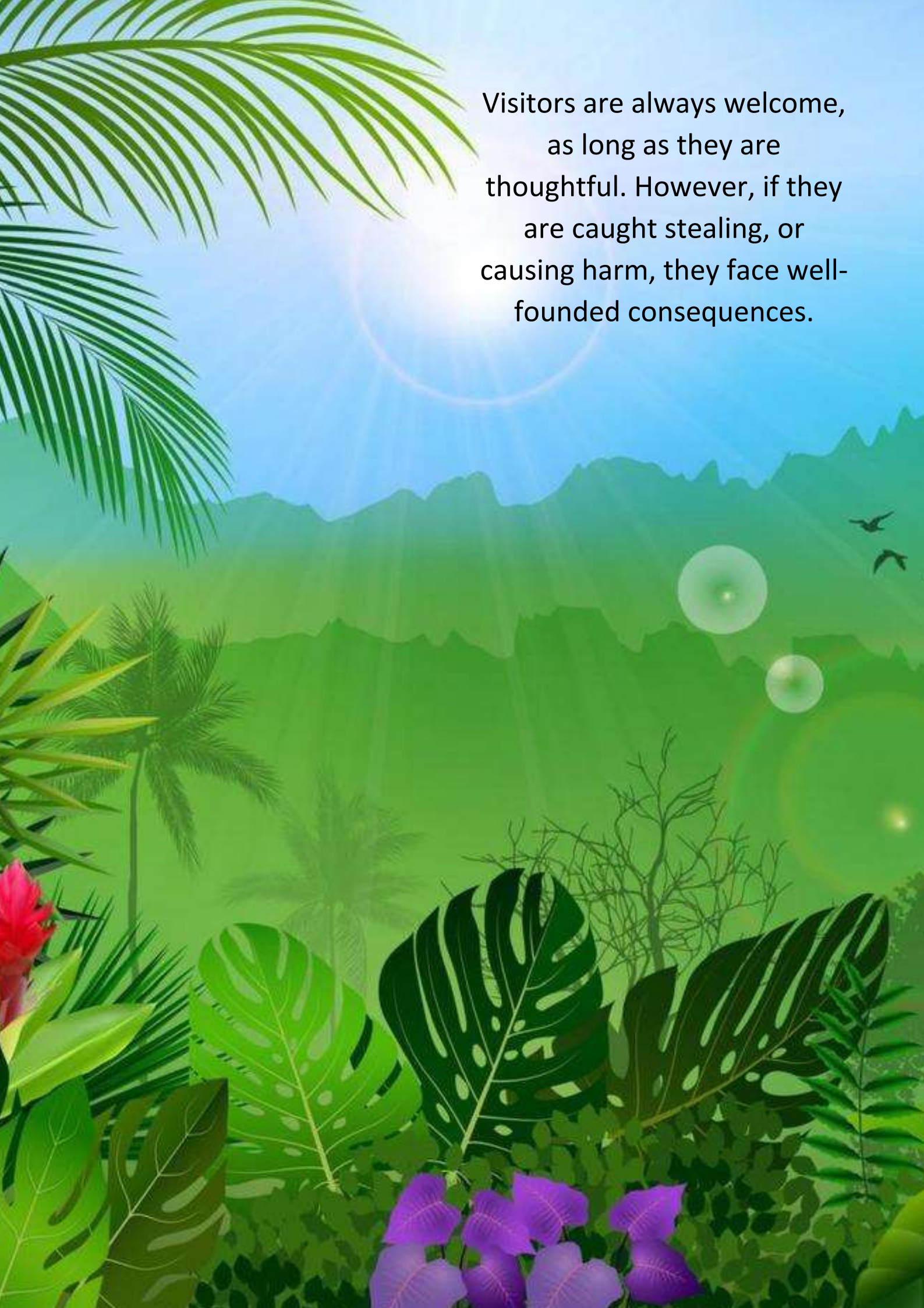
Once Upon a Forest



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Welcome to a forest unlike any other. One that spans miles and creates its own weather. Since its origins, this forest has lured many visitors in search of wonder, sustenance and adventure.



Visitors are always welcome,
as long as they are
thoughtful. However, if they
are caught stealing, or
causing harm, they face well-
founded consequences.

On a moonlit night, you can hear the Potoo Birds, phantoms of the treetops, as they recite the forest's cautionary tale. The Potoo Bird's yellow orb eyes transform into orange moons and their eery voices tell the tale of Captain Whitehead.

It goes like this ...



Captain Whitehead was not always a captain. She was once just known as Monkey. She had a knack for tools and fixing things, and had a special way with plants. She bounded through the forest to offer her services as lookout, guide and helping hand.



Her fluffy black coat made her more cuddly companion than warrior. But the hint of her ultimate calling was the monochrome helmet of hair that capped her square head.



Monkey held a special ability, which came to bear one auspicious day. It began like any other, Monkey was busy collecting rocks and sticks to make the tools she would need for the day. When she worked, Monkey talked to her materials.



“Your silky thread is so sturdy,” she told the leaves as she wove them together. They responded by gliding into place



“Your sooth surface will carve an easy path,” she told the stones. They gave way with ease into points for cutting. You see, Monkey and her materials shared a language.



With her pack and axe upon her back, she perched in the tree canopy and studied the forest in search of small things she could fix and help with. On the day in question, while all looked good, Monkey sensed something was off.



She sniffed the air and found it smelled of grasses, fermented berries, water and sap. She also detected a hint of something unfamiliar.

Monkey listened then to the sounds of the forest. She heard the rustle of birds taking flight, and the patter of ground animals treading out. Yet, something else agitated the air.



She was about to go on her daily trip around the forest when she was approached by Poison Dart Frog.



“The ground is shaking and the leaves are quivering in our home,” the frog stood in her way.

“Are there other places you can reside?” Monkey asked. The frog shook their head, “No.”

“I’ll go and see what I can find,” Monkey comforted her amphibia-friend.



Monkey felt the ground and pressed on trees. Indeed, she too felt tiny vibrations.

Monkey laid down and asked the ground and trees for help.

“Please cease your trembling, do find your balance”, she coaxed. The roots stirred beneath her and the earth softened at her gentle words.



Monkey set off to tell the frog that all was well but was interrupted by Anaconda and Jaguar who slithered and slunk up to her.



“What are you doing out?” Monkey asked. “You’re normally tucked away in a cool and dark place during the day.”

“We can’t sleep; it’s much too bright,” explained Anaconda.

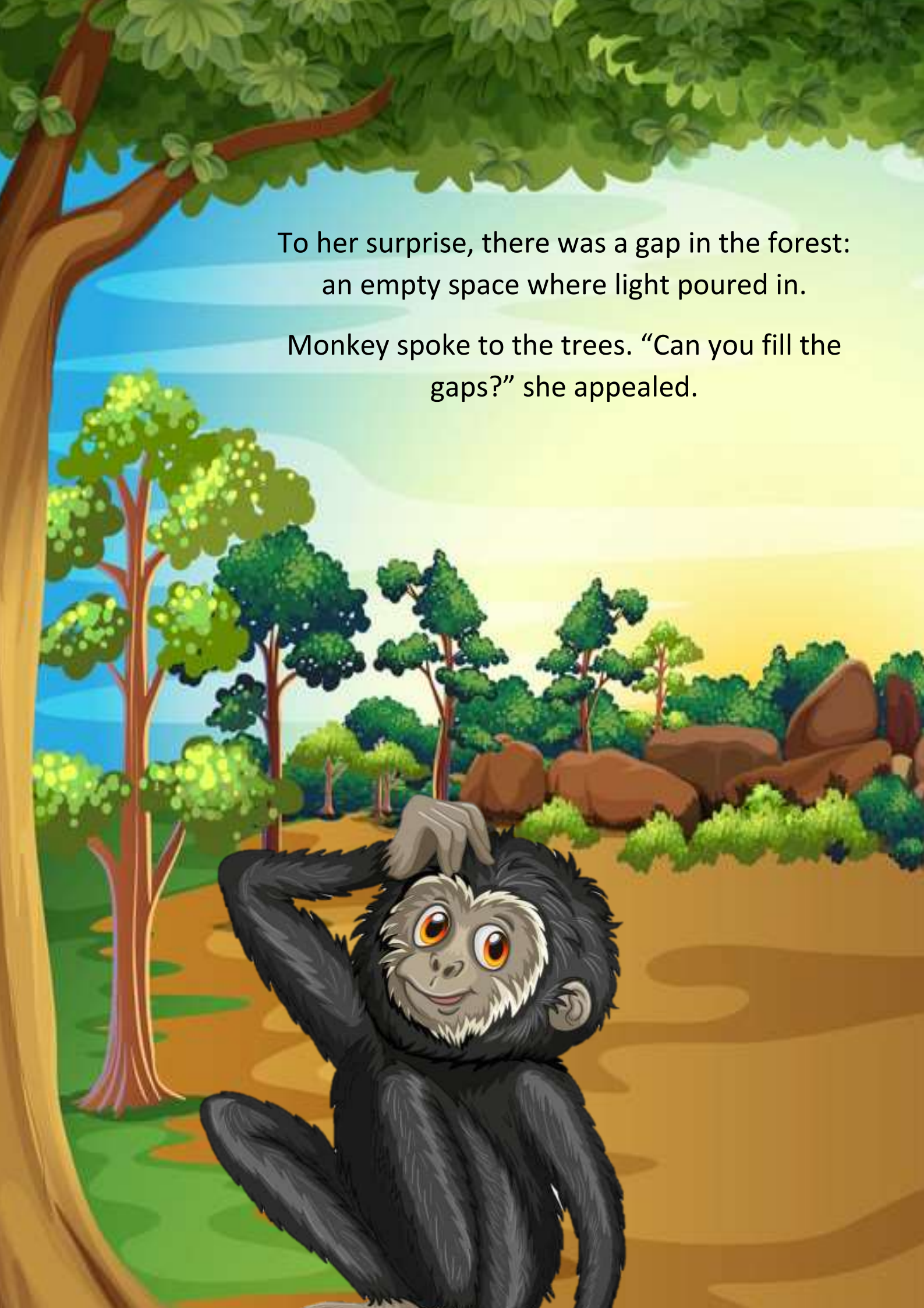
“We are missing the dark shade in our part of the forest,”
Jaguar complained.

“Missing?” Monkey was alarmed.



She sped high into the trees and swung along the tops until she reached the area where Jaguar and Anaconda made their home.

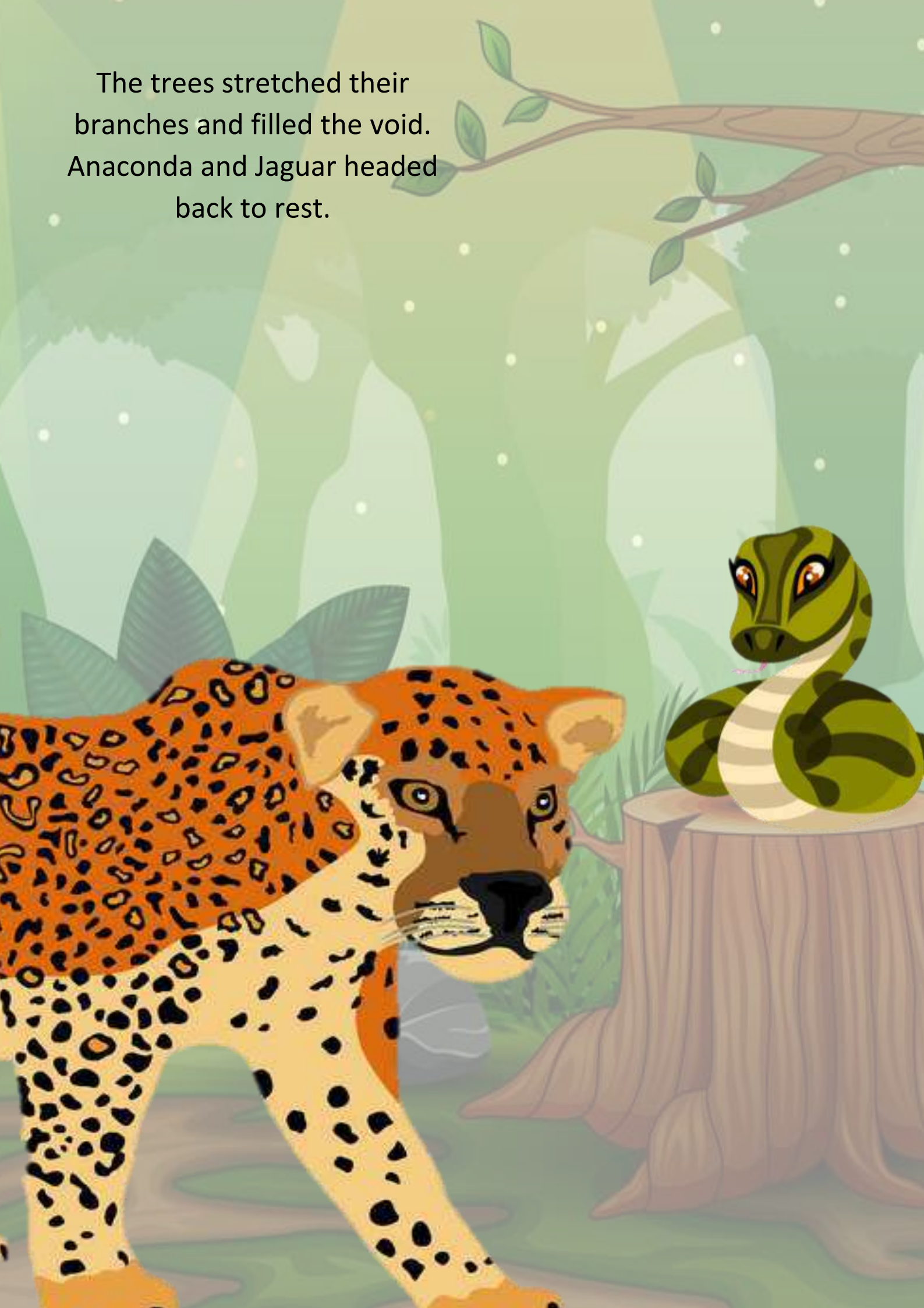




To her surprise, there was a gap in the forest:
an empty space where light poured in.

Monkey spoke to the trees. “Can you fill the
gaps?” she appealed.

The trees stretched their
branches and filled the void.
Anaconda and Jaguar headed
back to rest.



Monkey's morning had been unexpectedly full.
With so much excitement she had nearly
forgotten about the oddity in the air.



Then, on Monday as Monkey rested beneath a majestic old tree. She heard voices above.



“The noise is so loud I can’t hear my own thoughts!” Sloth fretted, his claws scratching in despair.

“The racket is bothering me too,” Tamarind confided to Sloth.



“What noise?” Monkey asked, stopping beneath the pair. The gestured up to their gnarly part of the tree.



Sure enough, as Monkey arrived at their roost, she could hear a sound too. It was a grumbly-rumbly-hungry-stomach sound, the likes of which could only have come from the stomach of something fierce.



Monkey was vexed. She wanted to ease the burden for Sloth and Tamarind, but a sound wasn't something she could correct by asking the natural world for help.

Higher aloft in the tree, Macaw and Toucan were deep in debate. Monkey swung up to see if they could help.



“Friends, are you hearing a sound?” Monkey inquired. “A rumble, a din, that is shaking the ground?”

“Oh, that?” asked Toucan. “It’s coming from the Beast!”

“A Beast?” squawked Macaw.

“I saw it with my own eyes,” insisted Toucan.

“I’ll go investigate,” said Monkey, and off she went.



The image of Frog on the uneasy ground, the thoughts of Anaconda and Jaguar lying awake, the appearance of Sloth and Tamarind – so agitated – and the voices of Macaw and Toucan spurred monkey on.



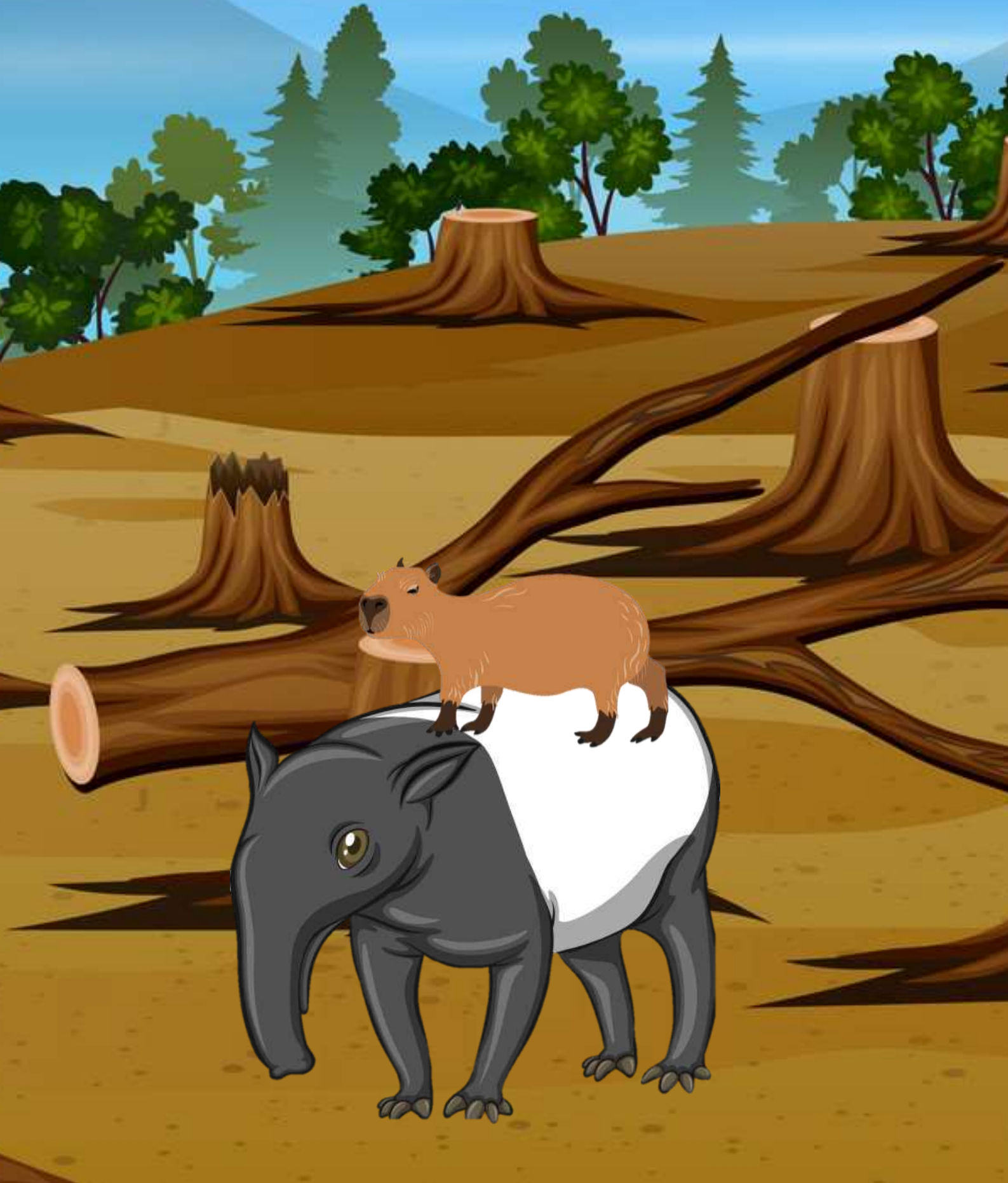
Monkey wound her way to the edge of her territory. It as the threshold of a cliff that dropped to a different section of forest. But when she looks over the cliff, no forest could be seen.



Instead, emptiness lay before her, Monkey was aghast to discover this injury to the forest. A haze of smoke clouded Monkey's vision and the rumble was louder.



As the smoke cleared, two weary-looking animals came into sight – Capybara and Tapir. Tapir was carrying Capybara, who looked unwell.



“Neighbours, what’s befallen you?”
Monkey called down.



“The Beast has eaten our part of the forest,” coughed Capybara.

“Can we come up to yours?” implored Tapir.



“Of course!” called Monkey urgently. But they were too far to reach. She looked around for something to help them climb up, but there was nothing to be found.



She took to the forest floor and summoned her friends, the trees, plants and leaves. With kind and clear instruction, she asked the forest for its help.



At her call, vines crept down the cliffside. Leaves collected in a neat path and long, sturdy branches lowered to help them.

The natural materials formed into a narrow, suspended bridge. It cascaded from Monkey's forested area to the barren patch far below.



Though the bridge was steep and perilous, Tapir and Capybara had no alternative but to trust its strength. Careful not to look back at the destruction behind them, the two animals ascended the woven vines until slowly, gingerly, they had climbed to safety.



Monkey embraced Tapir and helped Capybara down. As she ushered the animals towards the protection of the trees, the ground beneath her gave an unearthly shudder. A roar surged behind her. A looming, glinting behemoth was advancing straight towards the bridge. It was the Beast!



Monkey urged the animals forward, away from danger, but she did not follow them. Instead, she walked towards the object of terror. She squared her small body atop the bridge. She extracted her axe and was ready to defend her territory. Monkey struck the bridge with all her strength. Its vines writhed and twisted as the Beast advanced.



Monkey chopped and hacked, trying to bring it down before the Beast could climb aboard, but the bridge refused to cede. It was impressively strong.



But so was the Beast, it rolled forward and barred its shiny teeth.



In a final move of desperation, Monkey lay down on the vines and focused all her might on the bridge – which she herself had summoned into being to bring safety to her friends – as it now threatened to help her enemy. Monkey took a deep breath and asked the bridge to cut itself loose.



As she knew was inevitable, the Beast boarded the bridge. The monstrosity snarled as it came towards Monkey, threatening not only her own life, but the very existence of her forest.



Had Monkey's plea been heard? A terrible creaking emanated from the bridge; it grew louder with every snarl of the Beast.



Then, suddenly, under its girth, the bridge began to unravel.



As Monkey jumped free, the bridge untangled its vines, let go its leaves, retracted its branches and – with a monstrous screech of colliding metal – discarded the Beast to the barren lands below.



Safe beside the other animals, Monkey watched a cloud of dust rise from the ground. A terrible Boom! Followed, announcing the triumphant defeat of the Beast.



The animals of the forest sent up a cheer. They
lifted Monkey high in the air.

“Our Captain!” the animals announced victoriously.

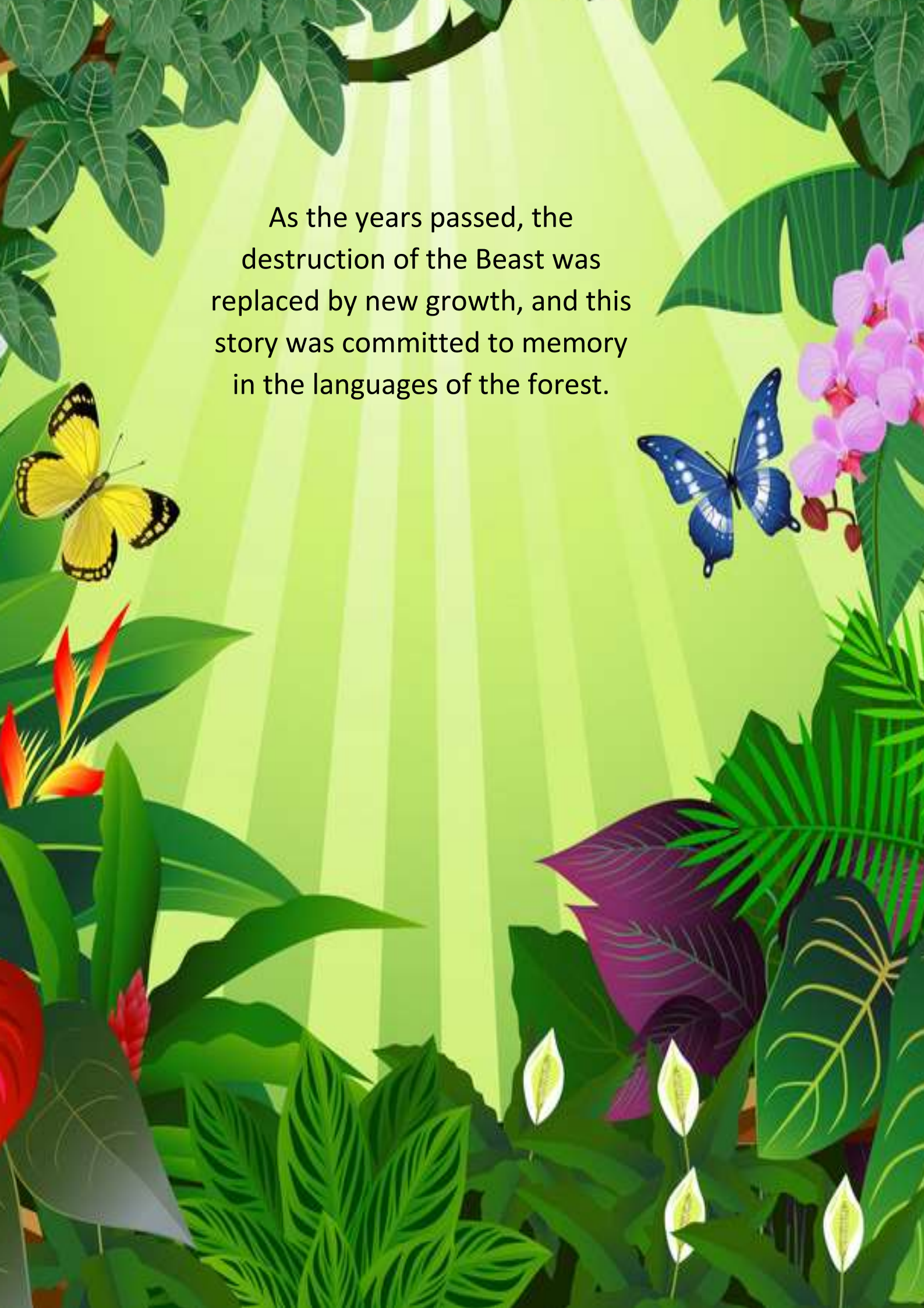


From that day forward, when Monkey made her rounds as helper of the forest she was greeted with, “Good day, Captain Whitehead.”



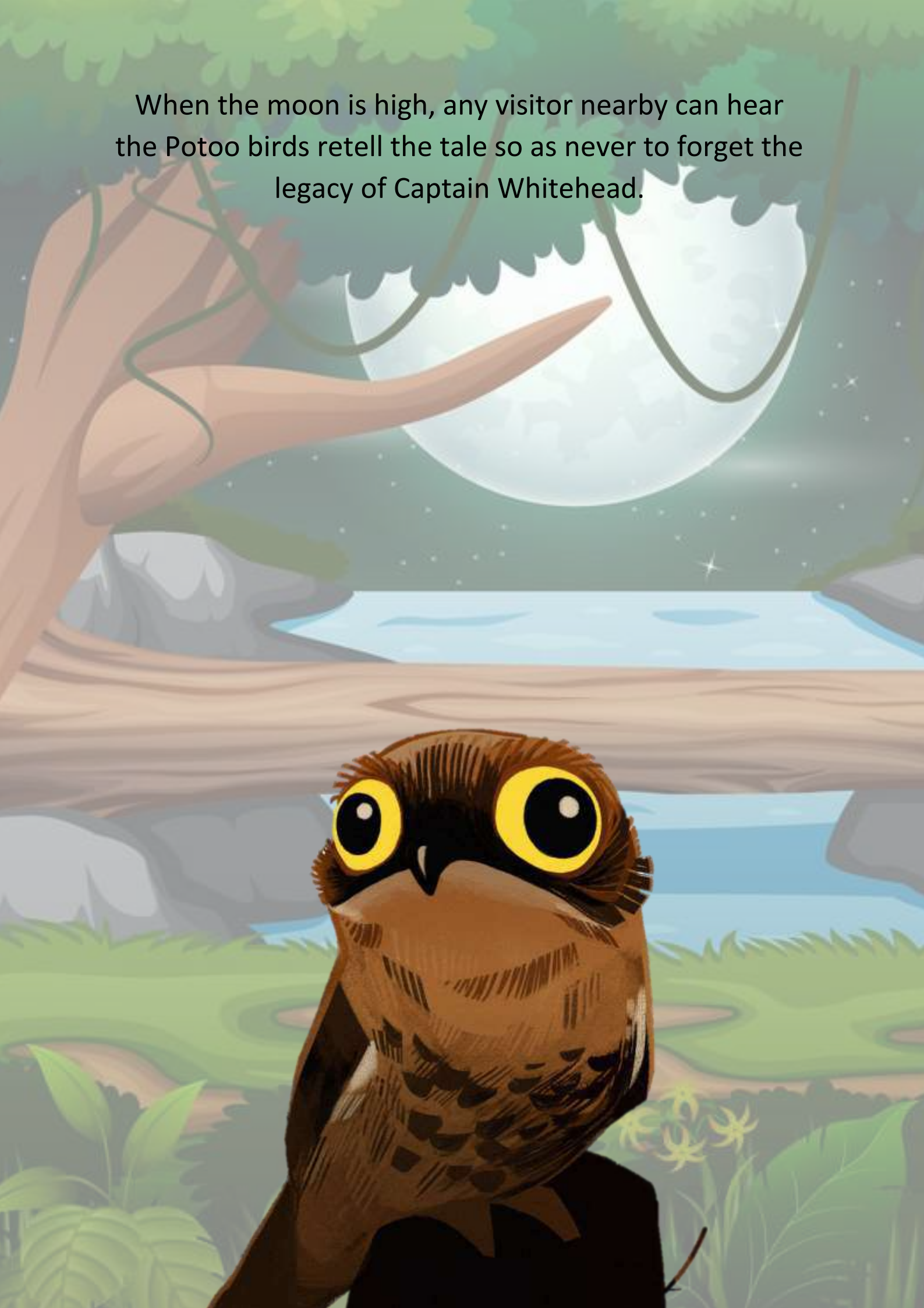
When animals saw her bobbing through the branches, or dancing along the forest floor, they were comforted for they knew their home was protected.



A vibrant jungle scene with sunlight filtering through the canopy. The background is a bright green with vertical light rays. In the foreground, there are various tropical plants, including a yellow butterfly with black markings on the left, a blue butterfly with white spots on the right, and several pink orchids. There are also red and orange flowers, a purple leaf, and white spiky flowers. The overall atmosphere is lush and bright.

As the years passed, the
destruction of the Beast was
replaced by new growth, and this
story was committed to memory
in the languages of the forest.

When the moon is high, any visitor nearby can hear the Potoo birds retell the tale so as never to forget the legacy of Captain Whitehead.





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