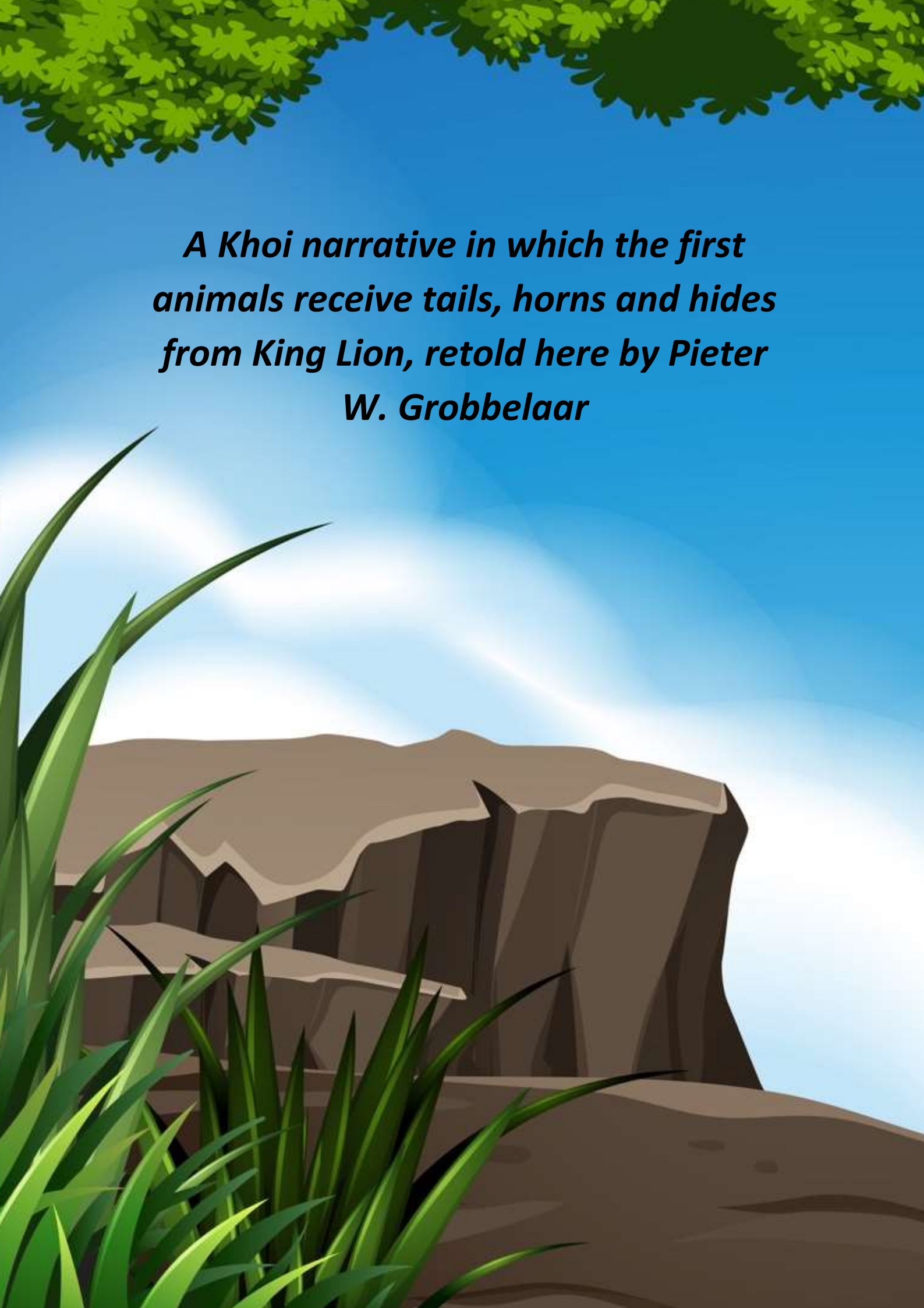




Madiba's Favourite Folktales

King Lion





***A Khoi narrative in which the first
animals receive tails, horns and hides
from King Lion, retold here by Pieter
W. Grobbelaar***

King Lion was hosting a huge party and every single animal had to go, because an invitation from the king was law, and one couldn't refuse it.



Only the female buck dug in their heels. “Oh no,” said Mrs Kudu. “Lion is only too glad to feast on members of our family. How do we know he isn’t going to eat us if we go to his party?”

“Yes, yes, yes!” agreed a whole group of female buck.



“Then I’ll just go alone,” said Kudu. “If I don’t go, there might be trouble.”

“Yes, let’s go,” said the other male buck.



The female buck snorted angrily and didn't move a hoof.



Only the old Nanny Goat couldn't resist an invitation that included food – even if the others might end up eating her!



And so the animals began to arrive. Leopard and Rabbit, and Zebra and Mole, and Elephant and Polecat and Snake.



Baboon was too inquisitive to stay away; Donkey was too stupid. Rock-rabbi and Hippopotamus and Rock-lizard were there too, and Hyena and Jackal. Oh, yes – it was the party to end all parties.



First, they danced a little and Baboon took the lead.
Then they sang a little and Jackal was in fine voice.



After that, they ate honey and drank milk. Even Lion and Leopard and Lynx and Hyena ate with the others, as though they had never tasted blood. But Lion had considered that, at a party, one could hardly serve up the guests' family members.



“Listen now, my animals!” said Lion when he had licked the honey pot clean (because a king eats first and last and quite a lot in between, too – the others just have to take what they can get). “Listen, my animals!” he said again. “I would like to give each one of you a gift to show you what a good king I am.”



“Thank you, thank you, thank you!” cried the animals, and they jockeyed for position, each one afraid that the other would get the best present before he could get to the front.

“Steady on!” roared Lion. “Anyone who grabs will get nothing – and the greedy will get last.”

That settled things down a bit.



“Those of you who would like horns,” said Lion,
“stand to one side!”



“Horns?” Kudu asked his friends. “Don’t you think we would look good with horns?”

“Yes, yes, yes”, cried the buck, and stood to one side.



“Here,” said Lion, and they put the horns on. “But the female buck who stayed away get nothing.”



Elephant saw the buck parading and he threw his hefty weight around to get close to Lion. “I also want horns,” he said and grabbed a pair of pretty white ones with his mouth.

“Greedy-guts!” growled Lion. “Because you were so greedy, the horns will stay stuck in your mouth, and you won’t be able to carry them high on your head, like the buck.”



“Oh my goodness!” gasped Elephant. “Now my nose is too short. I can’t... I can’t... I can’t... breathe!”



“Take that!” said Lion, and he pulled Elephant by his nose till it was almost dragging on the ground. “Is that better?”

“Thank you,” mumbled Elephant, and he shuffled away with his horn teeth and his dangling nose.



But there was already another to-do on the heap of horns. It was Rhinoceros who was poking around.



“Oh, well,” said Lion, “since you want to poke your nose in everywhere, your horns will stick to your nose.”



“Oh, no – I won’t take any of that!” said Rhinoceros, and he promptly tried to attack his king with the horns on his nose. But Lion gave him such a smack that he lost the tip of one of his horns and his eyes were nearly swollen shut. That’s why, to this day, Rhinoceros still sees so badly and has an odd pair of horns.



Lion walked over to the next heap. “Here are beautiful ears!” he said. Well, animals are just like children: they don’t have ears, and they don’t want any either. But Lion was already holding two pairs of long ears, and he refused to put down what he had already picked up, because he was the king. “Oh, take these, then!” he said, and put them on the first two animals within reach. They were Donkey and Rabbit. And they just had to say thank you.



“Those who wants nice clothes!” called Lion.

Now that caused consternation. Lion really had to keep his wits about him, because the animals were quite keen to show off. Each wanted to look better than his neighbour.



Leopard got a spotted suit. Zebra was dressed in a striped jacket.



But Horse and Cow had a long story.

“We work on the farm,” said Horse.

“And we have to dress neatly every day,” said Cow.

“One suit of clothes is not enough,” said Horse.

“We surely don’t want the farmer to laugh at us animals,” said Cow.



“All right, all right,” said Lion, because he liked Horse’s swagger and Cow had such a gentle voice that it turned even a king’s heart soft.

“Come here!”



Horse was first. Oh, but pretty is hardly the word! Horse got suits that were dapple-grey and chestnut, dark brown and snow-white, and black as the dead of night itself. “Thank you very much,” said Horse, and he cantered away.



But after a while he got tired of all the dressing and undressing, and he divided the clothes among his children. And that's why, even today, each horse has only one suit of clothes but every horse looks different.



Cow go a multicoloured dress and a red jacket and black Sunday best. But later she did as Horse had done and gave them to her children.



While Lion was still busy with Cow, a voice from the crowd shrieked, “Hey, what about me? Don’t give all the best to Horse and Cow!” It was Giraffe.

“How rude!” exclaimed Lion. “How dare you shout at your king? Now you will never speak again!” And so it came about that Giraffe lost his voice.



Just to show the animals that he would not be hurried, Lion took a stroll to the heap of horns again and chose a couple for Cow, to match every outfit he had given her.

“Thank you very much,” said Cow, and she walked away with her gifts.





But Giraffe looked so forlorn, even though he couldn't say a word, that Lion felt sorry for him. "Here's a really special suit for you", said the king, "and a pair of horns to go with it."

Giraffe put on his suit and his horns and already he looked better. Lion looked him up and down. "And I will give you a long neck so that you can see your enemies from a long way off," he said. "And long legs so that you can run away quickly." Then Giraffe was delighted, and he trotted away satisfied.

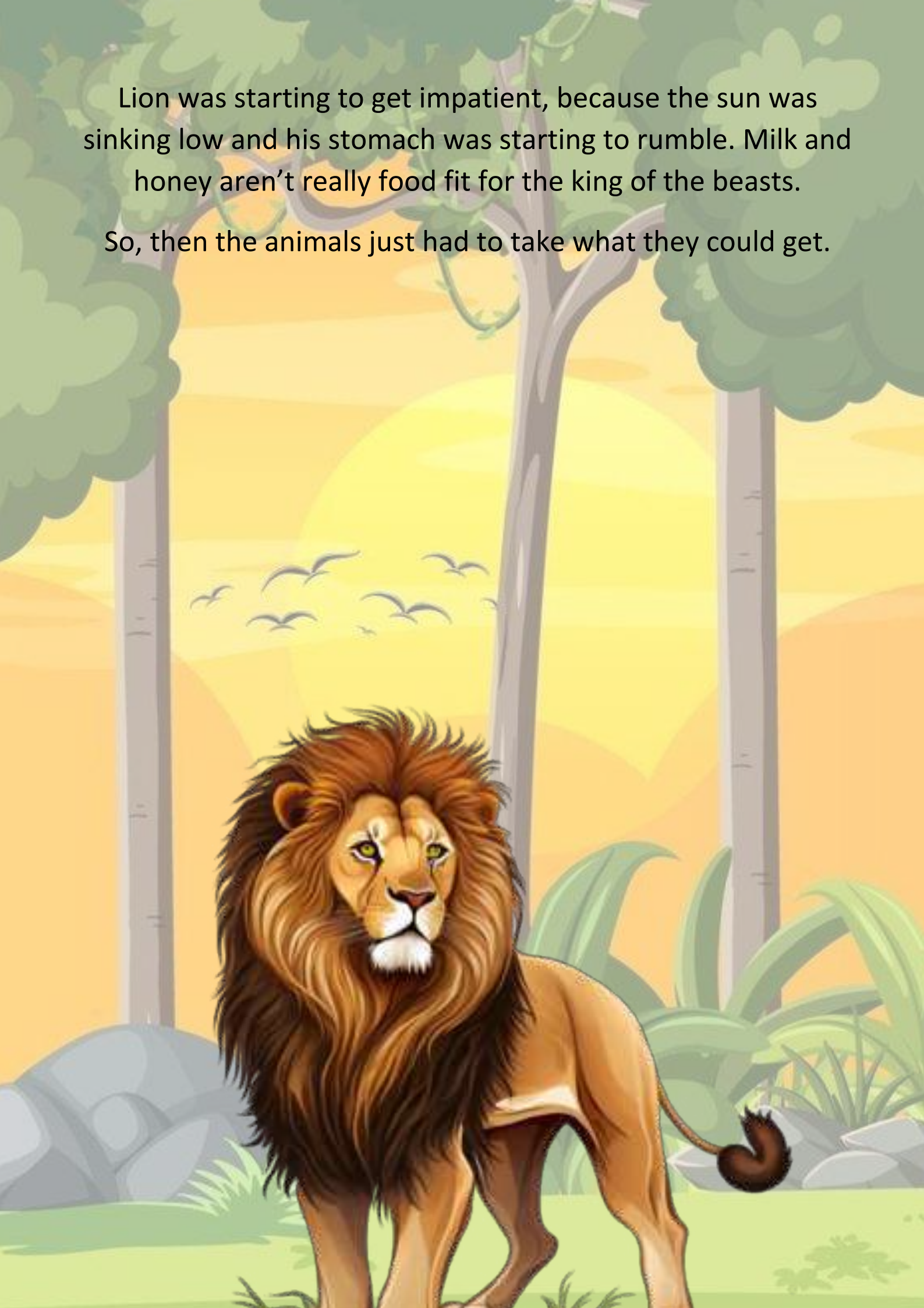


Just as Lion wanted to turn around again, something moved between his paws. “Hey!” he shouted and jumped into the air, and before the culprit could get away, Lion had squashed him underfoot. It was Rock-lizard, who crept out from between Lion’s claws with his head bruised black and blue. “It’s your own fault,” said the king. “Now you will always have a blue head.”



Lion was starting to get impatient, because the sun was sinking low and his stomach was starting to rumble. Milk and honey aren't really food fit for the king of the beasts.

So, then the animals just had to take what they could get.



Baboon got a tail like a sickle. Rock-rabbit and Mole each got a long, thin ones, but they didn't want them and quietly went to bury them.

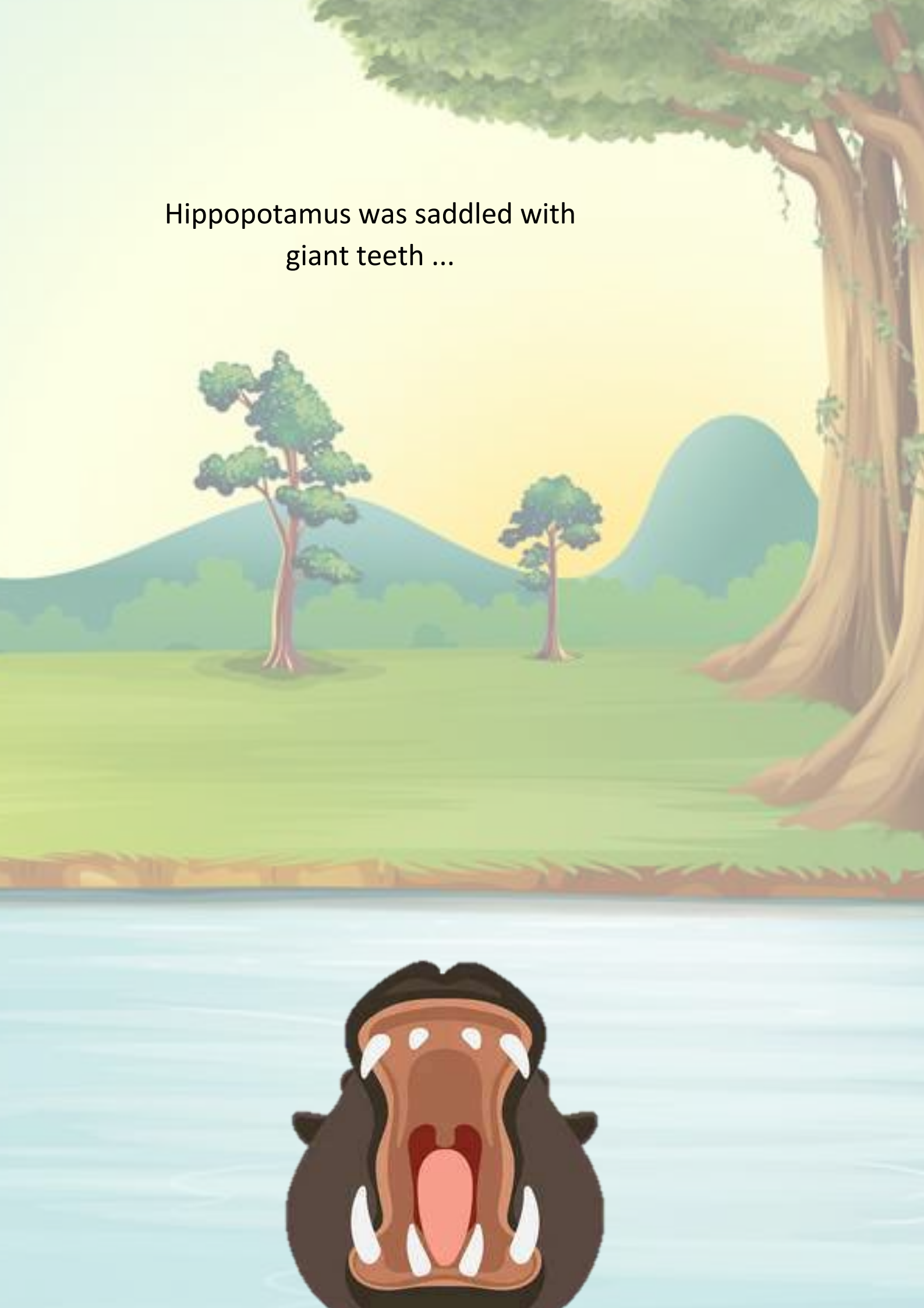
Then they had nothing.



Goats got a beard and before Nanny Goat knew what was happening, she had one too. The animals chuckled to themselves, but King Lion pressed on. "Next! Next!" he called.

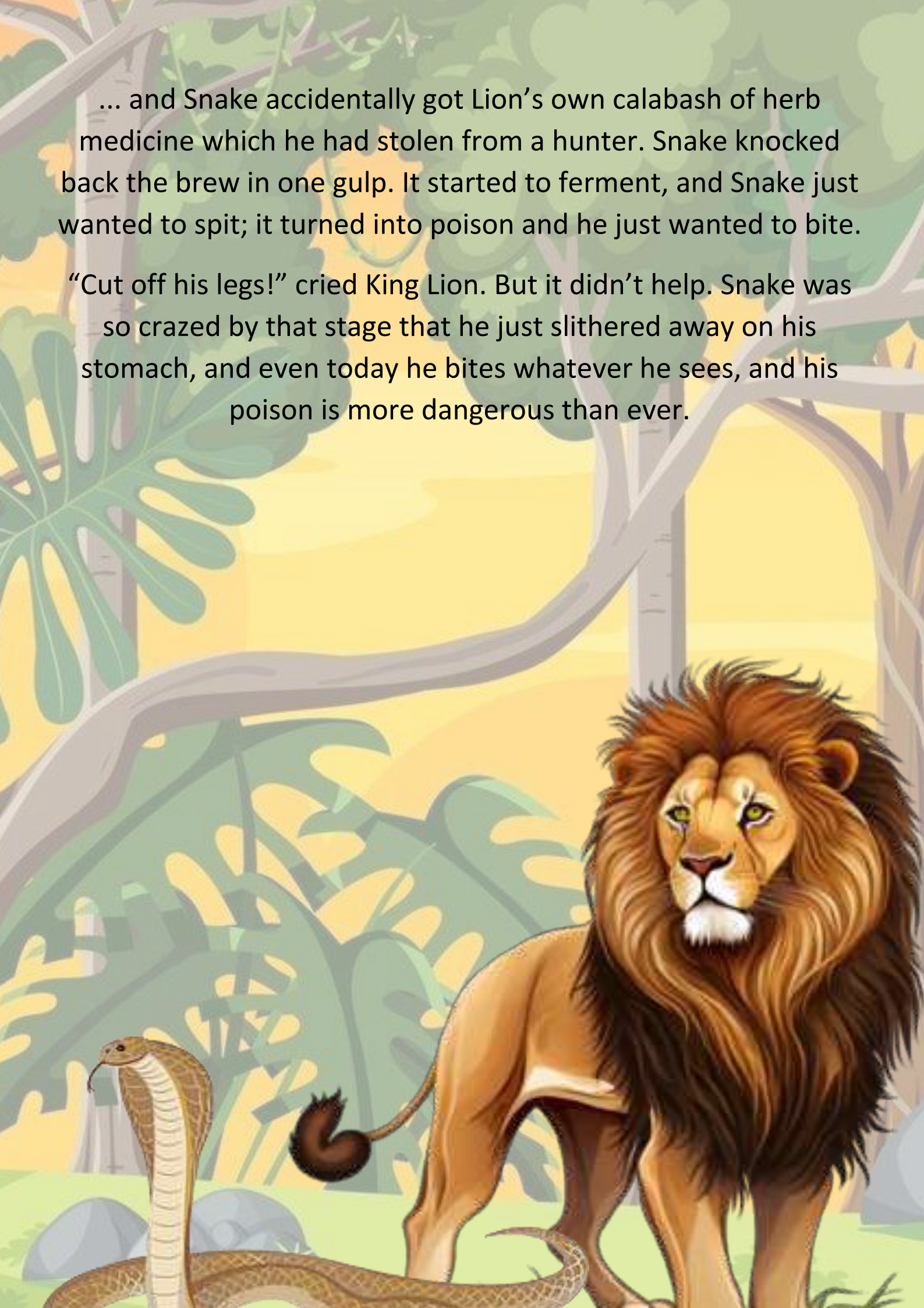


Hippopotamus was saddled with
giant teeth ...



... and Snake accidentally got Lion's own calabash of herb medicine which he had stolen from a hunter. Snake knocked back the brew in one gulp. It started to ferment, and Snake just wanted to spit; it turned into poison and he just wanted to bite.

“Cut off his legs!” cried King Lion. But it didn't help. Snake was so crazed by that stage that he just slithered away on his stomach, and even today he bites whatever he sees, and his poison is more dangerous than ever.



Polecat, on the other hand, got hold of Mrs Lion's little jar of perfume and poured the entire contents all over himself. Gracious, it was quite a smell! The animals held their noses and grabbed whatever they could: horns, hooves and wagging tails. And then they scuttled away.



“What about us?” whined Hyena and Jackal, who still didn’t have anything because they were too fussy.

Tired of all the effort, Lion looked around, but there were only a wail and a laugh left over. “Take what you want,” he said, “and don’t hang around for a minute longer!”

The two had to grab what was there. and that is why, even today, Hyena still has the loudest laugh of all the animals and there is no beast who can out-wail Jackal.



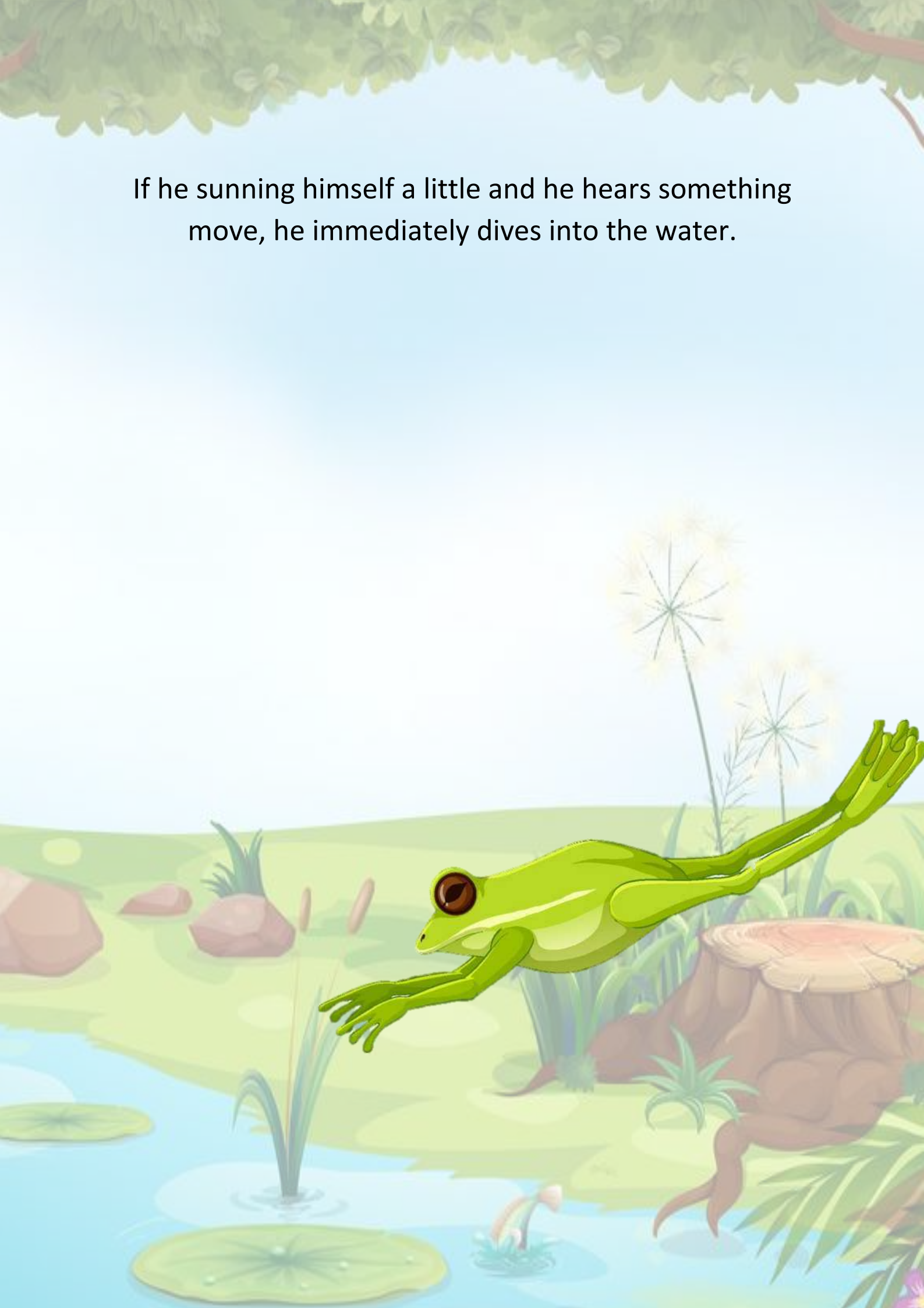
When old Tortoise finally got to the place where the gifts had been handed out, there was not an animal or gift in sight. That is why he still trundles around in the horny shell that Crocodile made for him ...



... and Frog lives naked in the water. All the waiting had made him so hot that he had gone for a quick swim, but someone stole his clothes. Now he is too shy to appear in front of other animals.



If he sunning himself a little and he hears something move, he immediately dives into the water.



But at night, when it is dark, he and his brothers come out and then you can hear them complaining.

“Where? Where? Where?” complains one. “Clothing! Clothing! Clothing!” complain the others.



