

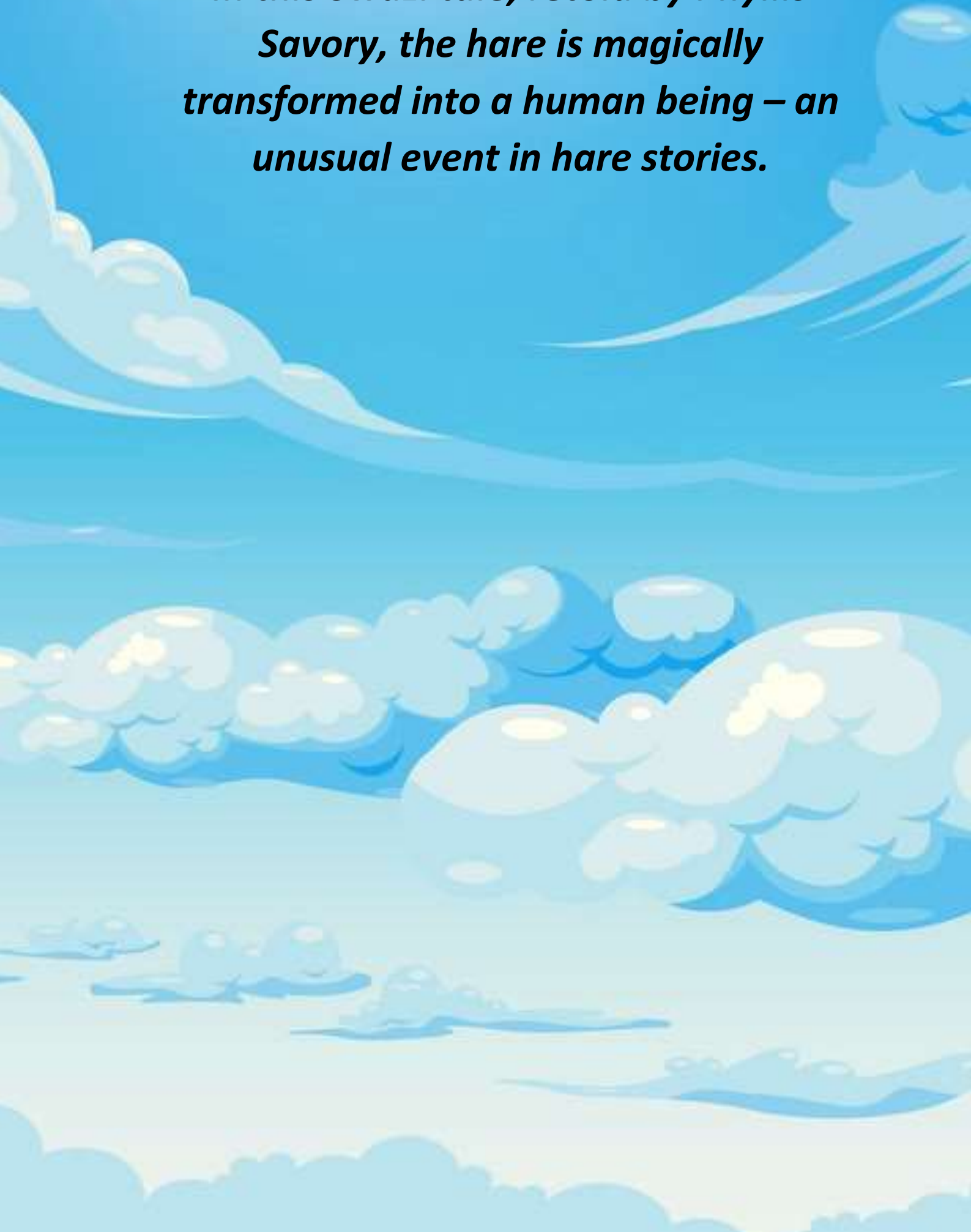


**Madiba's  
Favourite  
Folktales**

**The Cloud  
Princess**



***In this Swazi tale, retold by Phyllis Savory, the hare is magically transformed into a human being – an unusual event in hare stories.***

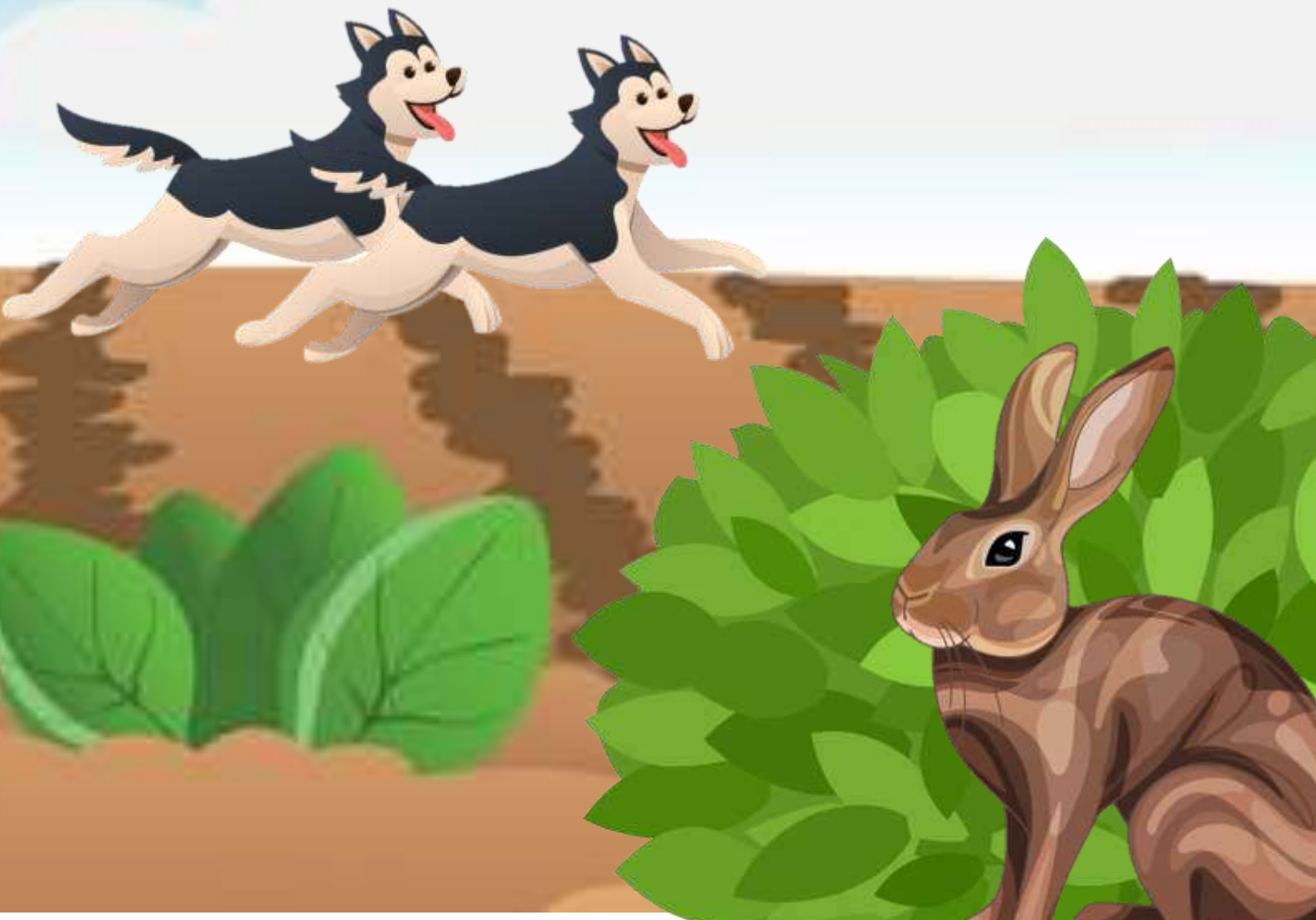



On two occasions that hare had narrowly escaped being killed by the dogs, belonging to the chief who owned the lands he so regularly robbed, and he was afraid that one day they would catch him.





“I must grow my own crops,” he panted to himself as he lay exhausted under a bush, recovering from the latest desperate chase. He had only just managed to outwit the swiftly running dogs by doubling back when they lost sight of him for a moment.

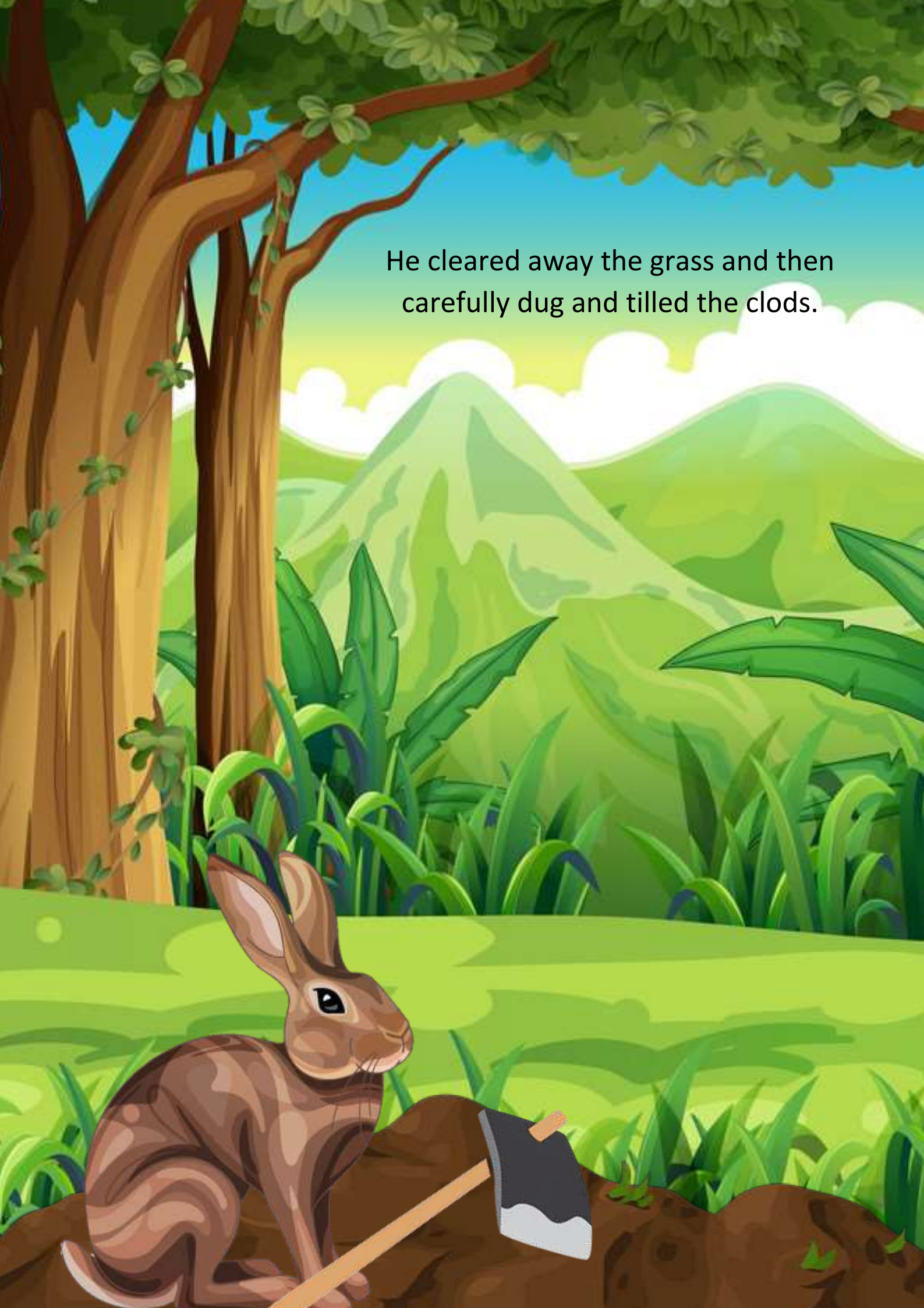




The following morning, he took his hoe  
and walked to the forest, where he chose  
a well-hidden, fertile patch of land.



He cleared away the grass and then  
carefully dug and tilled the clods.





When evening came, he returned to his little hut, worn out but satisfied.


“Tomorrow I shall plant my maize seed and pumpkin pips,” he decided, as he cooked the last remaining maize cobs from his previous theft, “or one of these days those dogs will prove too swift for me.”



That night he slept soundly. The next morning, after he had washed down his breakfast with some home-brewed beer, the hare left for his lands where he duly sowed his crops.








When that was done to his satisfaction,  
he chopped down some brushwood and  
carefully surrounded the plot with a fence  
to keep out the buck.





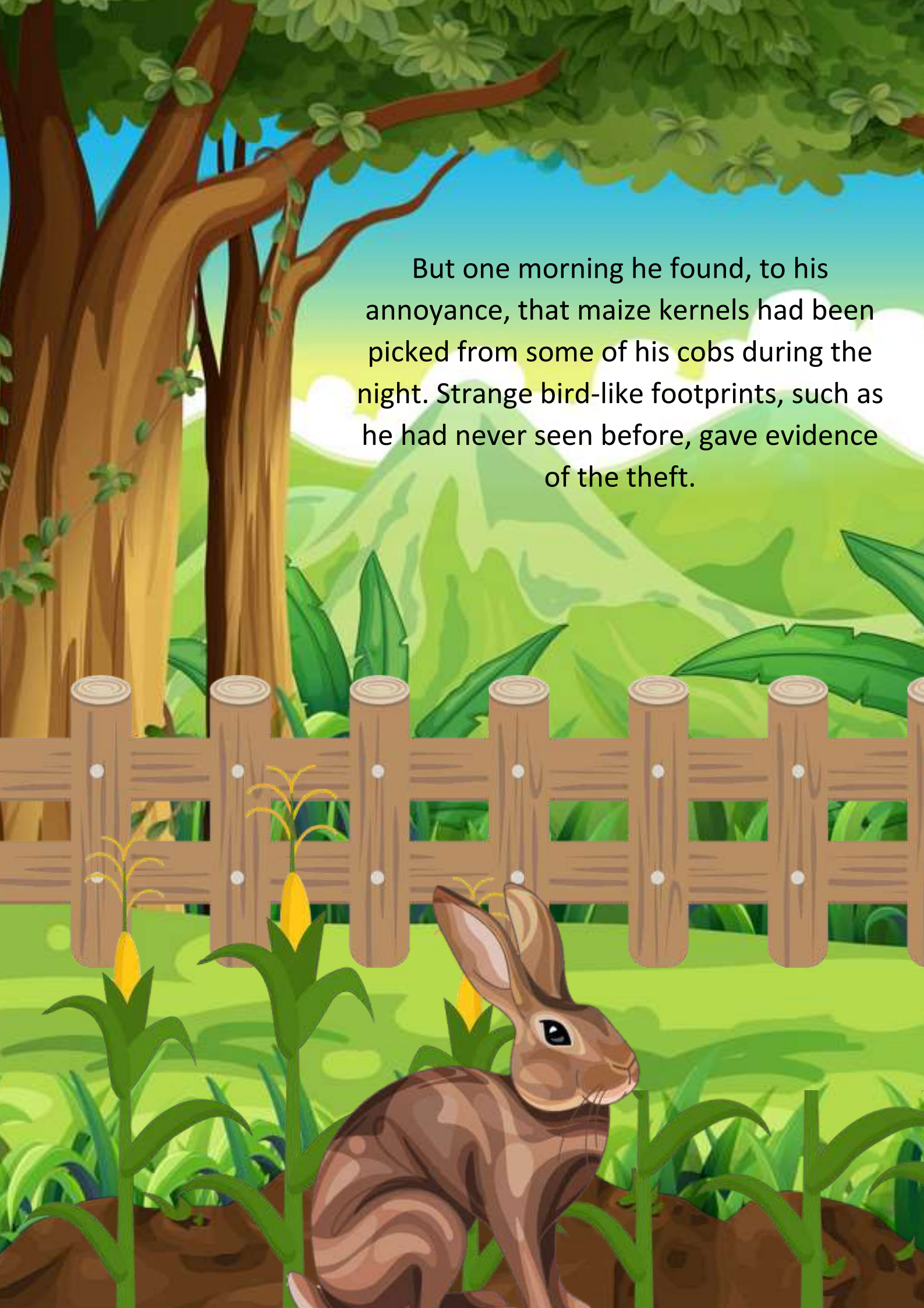
He was fortunate in the weather, and the crops grew and prospered. As harvest time approached, the maize cobs were swelling and the pumpkins rounding favourably.



Eventually he picked the first fruits of his labour. As he sat by the fire roasting the juicy cobs, he thought how foolish he had been to risk his life so often in the chief's maize patch.








But one morning he found, to his annoyance, that maize kernels had been picked from some of his cobs during the night. Strange bird-like footprints, such as he had never seen before, gave evidence of the theft.



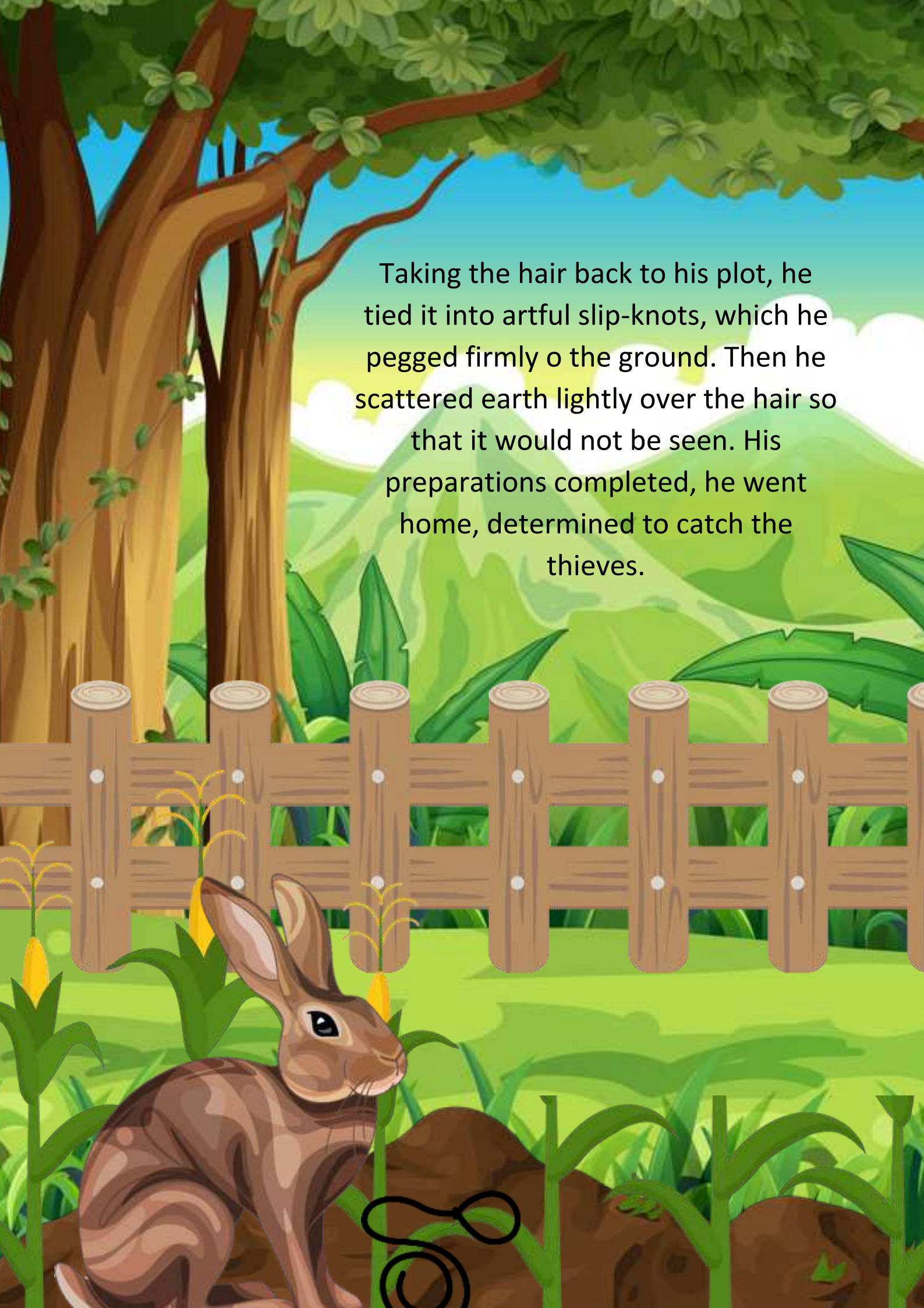
A vibrant, cartoon-style illustration of a rural landscape. In the foreground, a brown rabbit with long ears sits on a patch of dark brown soil, looking towards the right. It is surrounded by green grass and several stalks of corn with yellow cobs. A rustic wooden fence made of vertical posts and horizontal rails runs across the middle ground. Behind the fence, there are large green leaves and a large tree with a thick, textured brown trunk and dense green foliage. In the background, rolling green hills or mountains are visible under a bright blue sky with soft white clouds. The overall scene is bright and cheerful.

“I shall set traps for these bird robbers,”  
he said to himself, “thought it is strange  
that they should come by night.”

He went to the pastures where the chief's cattle grazed and waited until the herd boys were asleep before pulling some long, black hairs from the tail of one of the cows.

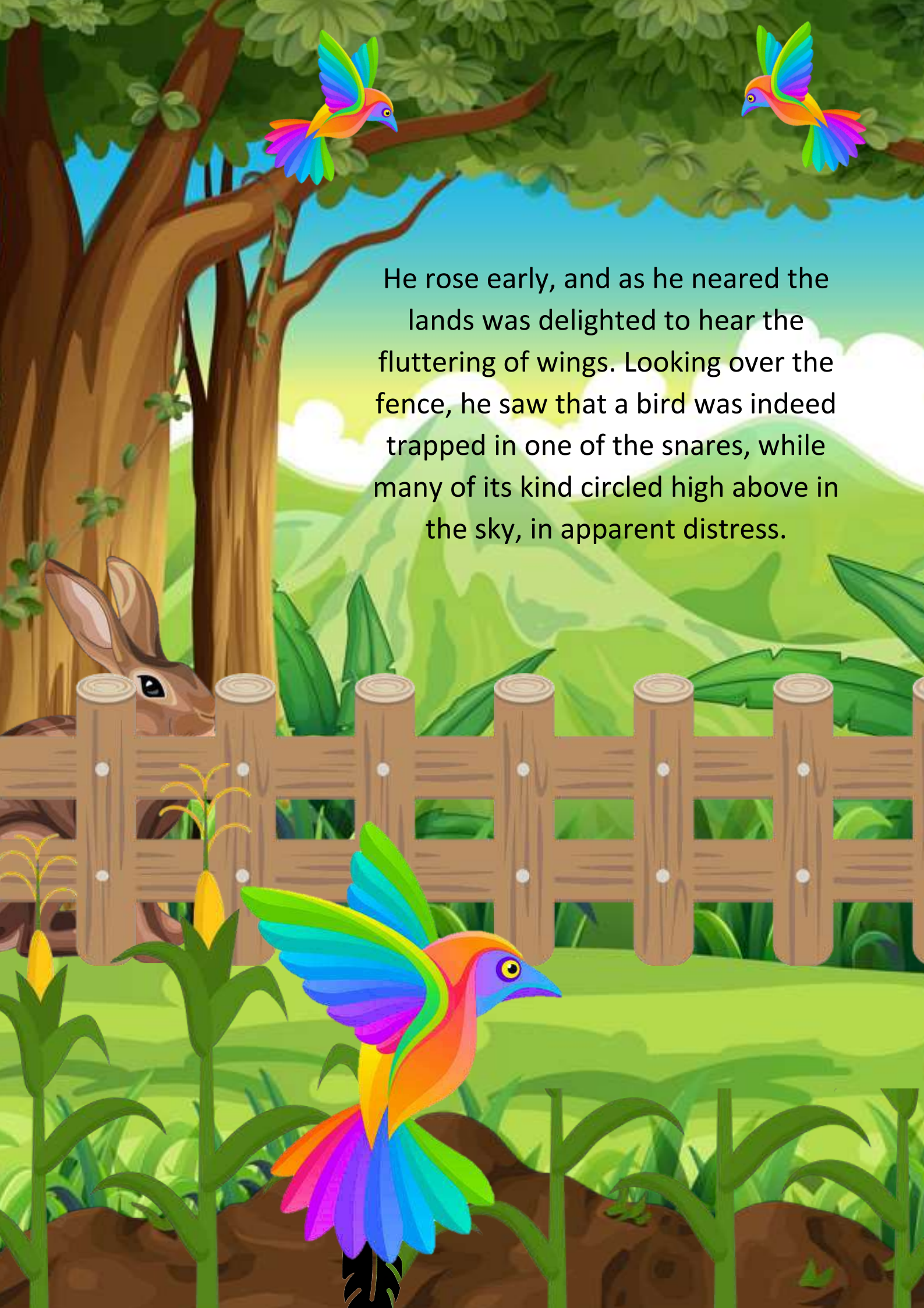






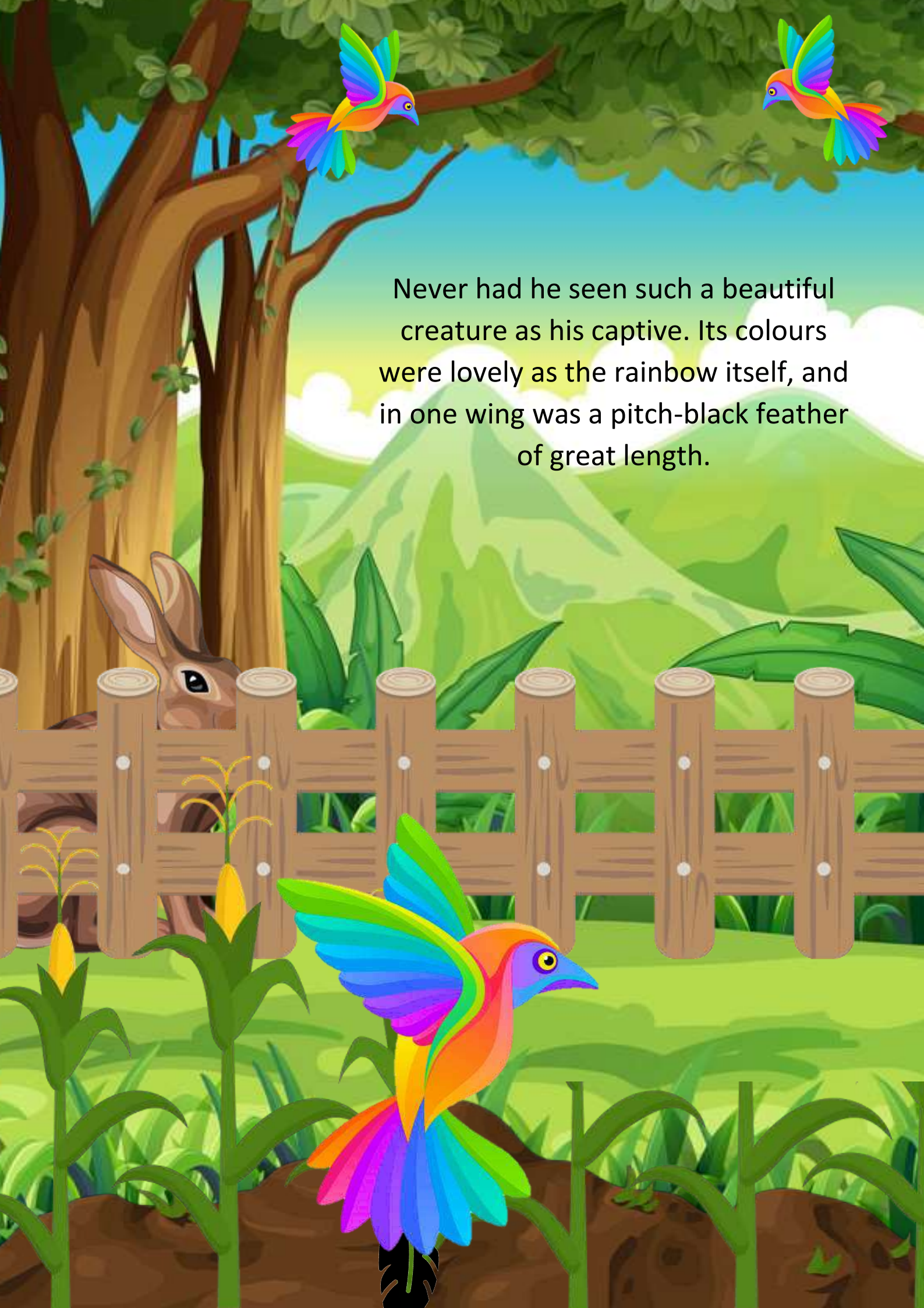
Taking the hair back to his plot, he tied it into artful slip-knots, which he pegged firmly o the ground. Then he scattered earth lightly over the hair so that it would not be seen. His preparations completed, he went home, determined to catch the thieves.





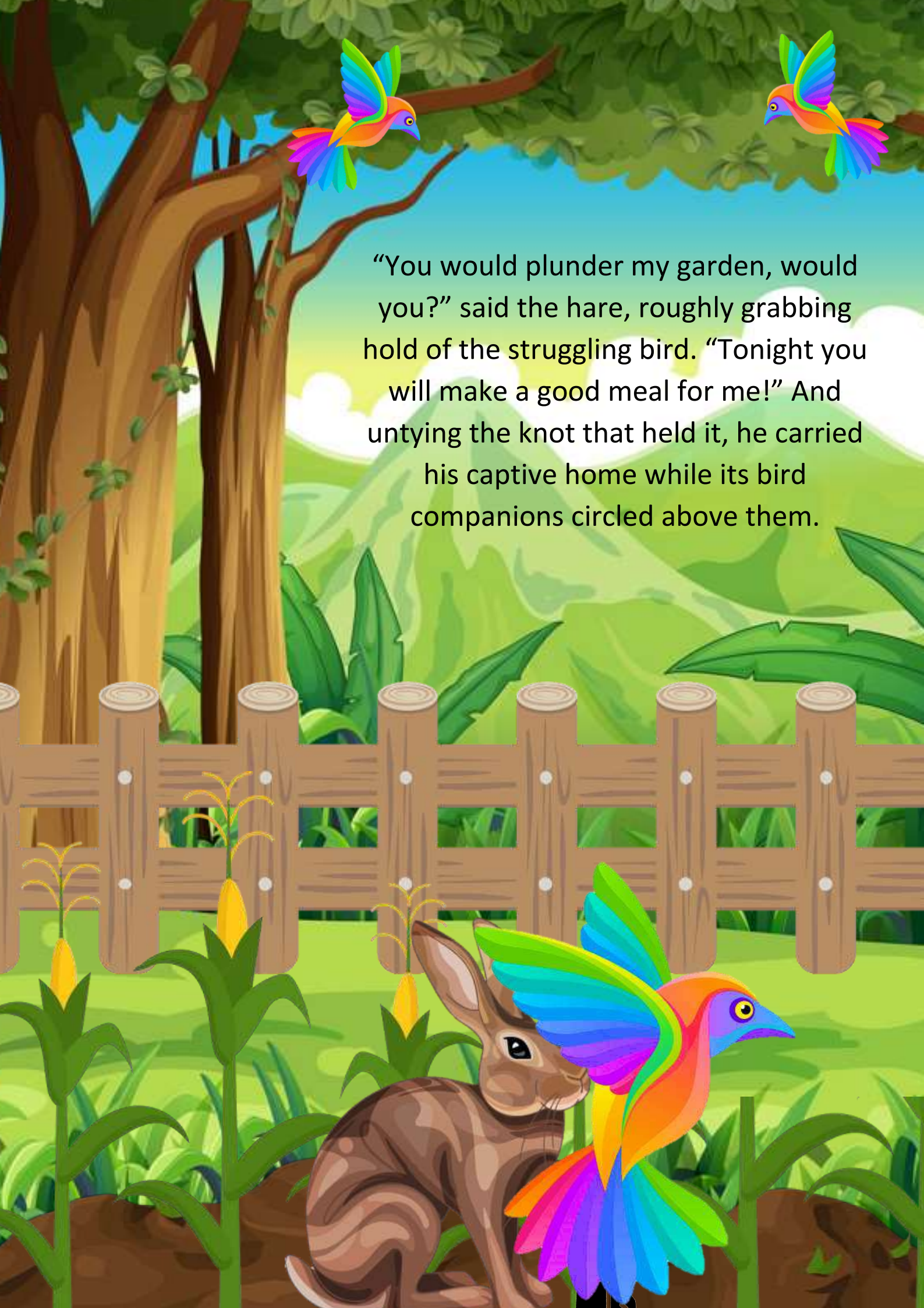
He rose early, and as he neared the lands was delighted to hear the fluttering of wings. Looking over the fence, he saw that a bird was indeed trapped in one of the snares, while many of its kind circled high above in the sky, in apparent distress.





Never had he seen such a beautiful creature as his captive. Its colours were lovely as the rainbow itself, and in one wing was a pitch-black feather of great length.

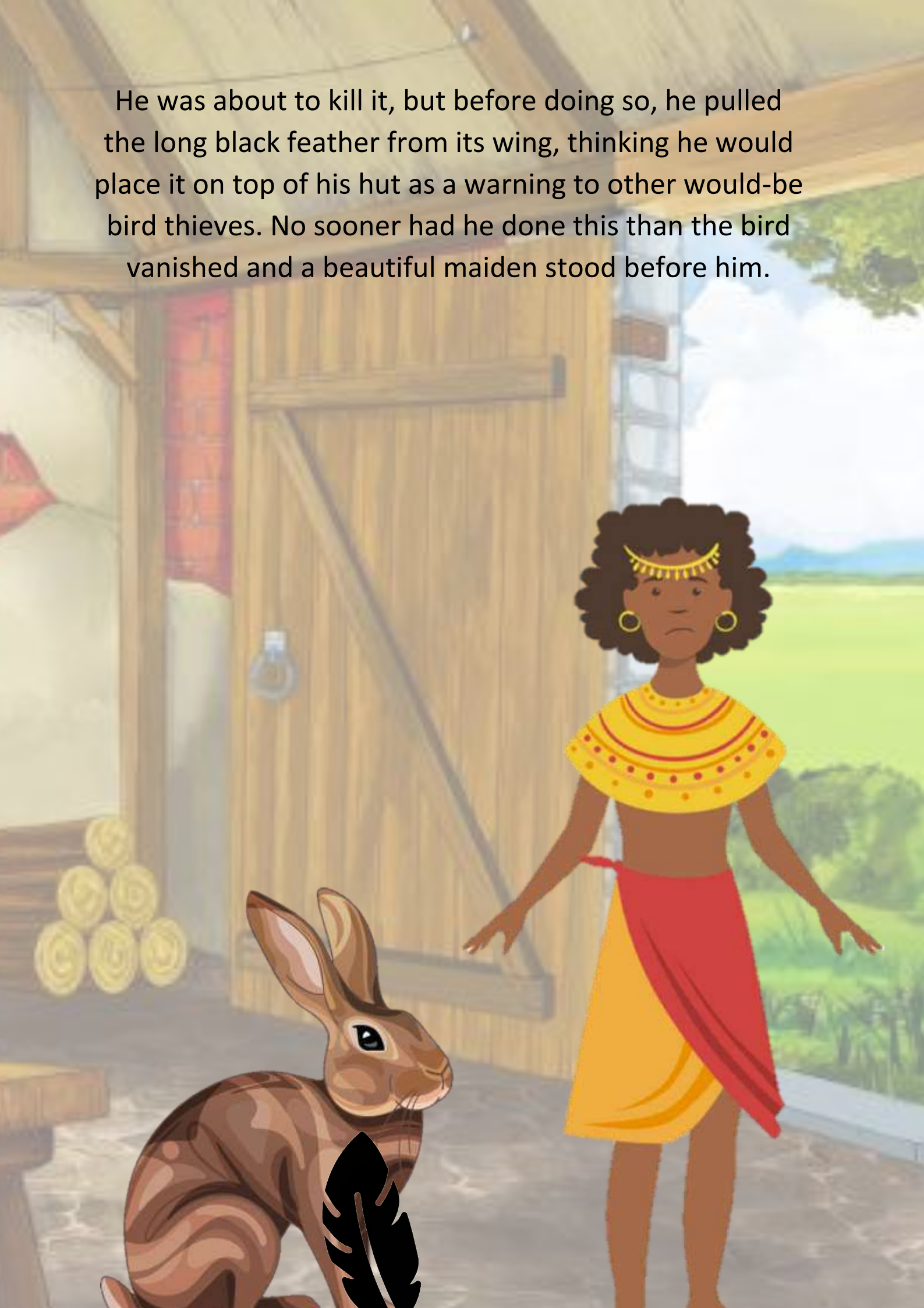




“You would plunder my garden, would you?” said the hare, roughly grabbing hold of the struggling bird. “Tonight you will make a good meal for me!” And untying the knot that held it, he carried his captive home while its bird companions circled above them.



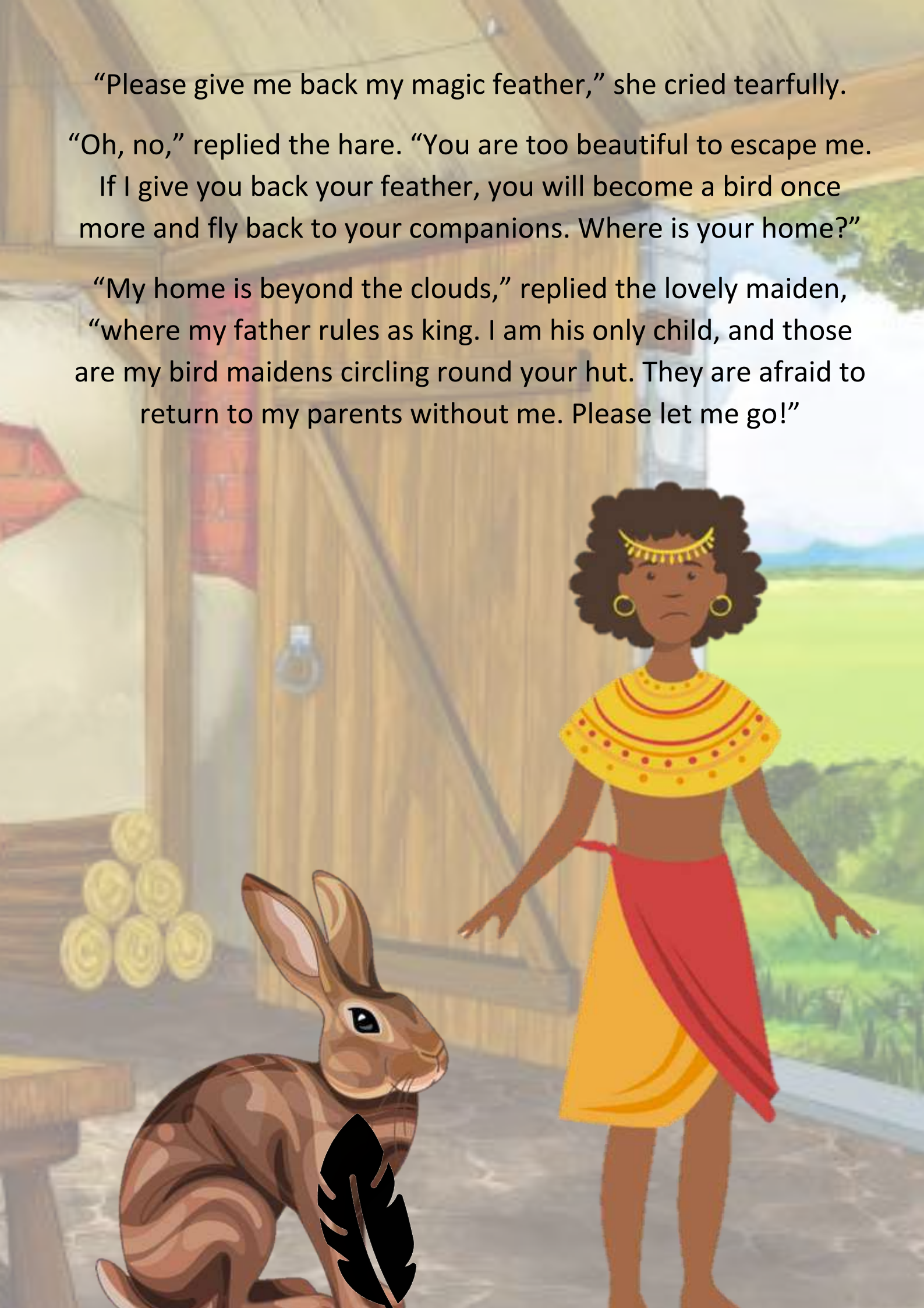
He was about to kill it, but before doing so, he pulled the long black feather from its wing, thinking he would place it on top of his hut as a warning to other would-be bird thieves. No sooner had he done this than the bird vanished and a beautiful maiden stood before him.





“Please give me back my magic feather,” she cried tearfully.  
“Oh, no,” replied the hare. “You are too beautiful to escape me.  
If I give you back your feather, you will become a bird once  
more and fly back to your companions. Where is your home?”

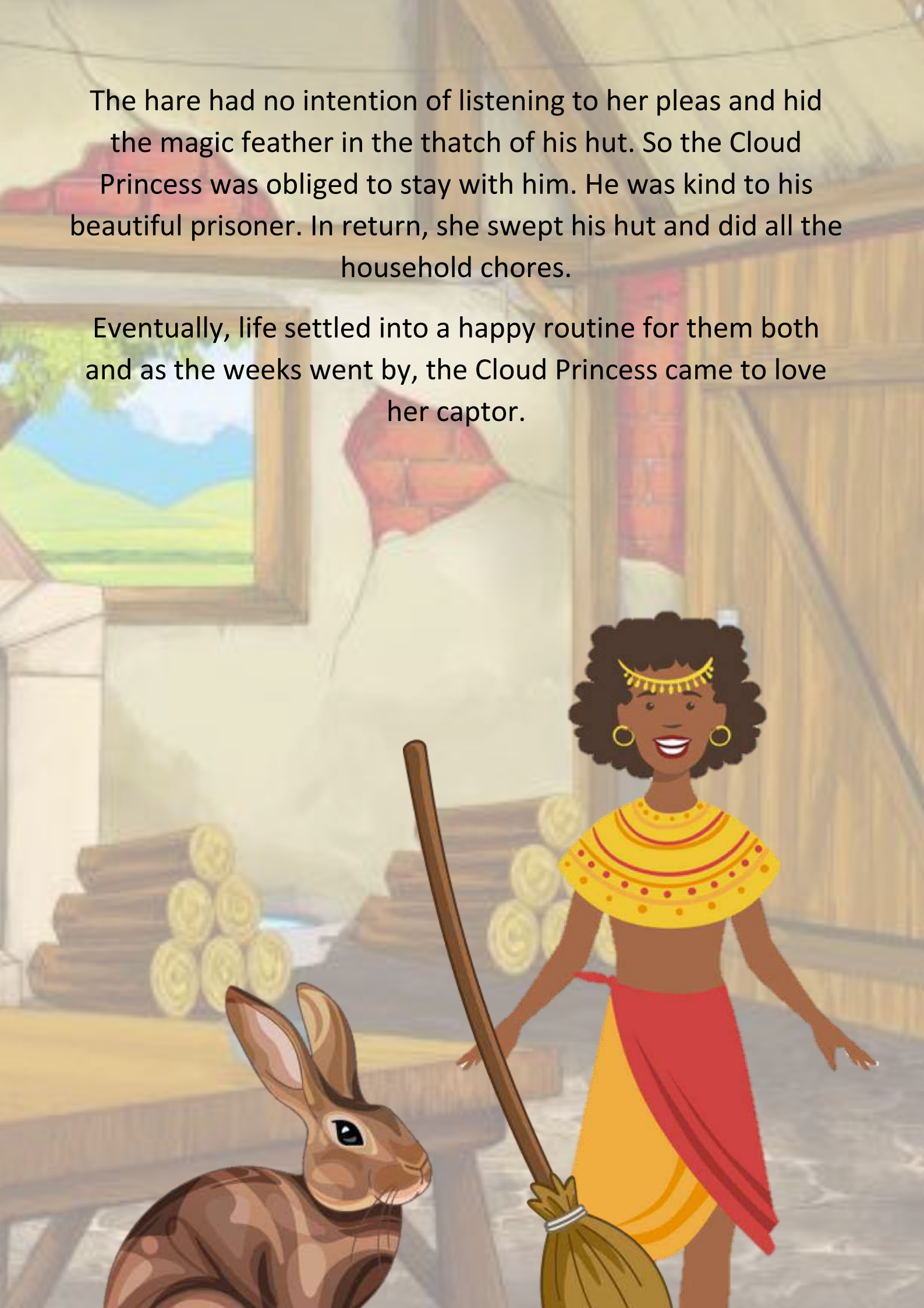
“My home is beyond the clouds,” replied the lovely maiden,  
“where my father rules as king. I am his only child, and those  
are my bird maidens circling round your hut. They are afraid to  
return to my parents without me. Please let me go!”





The hare had no intention of listening to her pleas and hid the magic feather in the thatch of his hut. So the Cloud Princess was obliged to stay with him. He was kind to his beautiful prisoner. In return, she swept his hut and did all the household chores.

Eventually, life settled into a happy routine for them both and as the weeks went by, the Cloud Princess came to love her captor.





One day she told the hare that if he would give her back her magic feather she would change him into a human being like herself. At first, he mistrusted her, thinking that she wished to play a trick on him and would fly away forever.

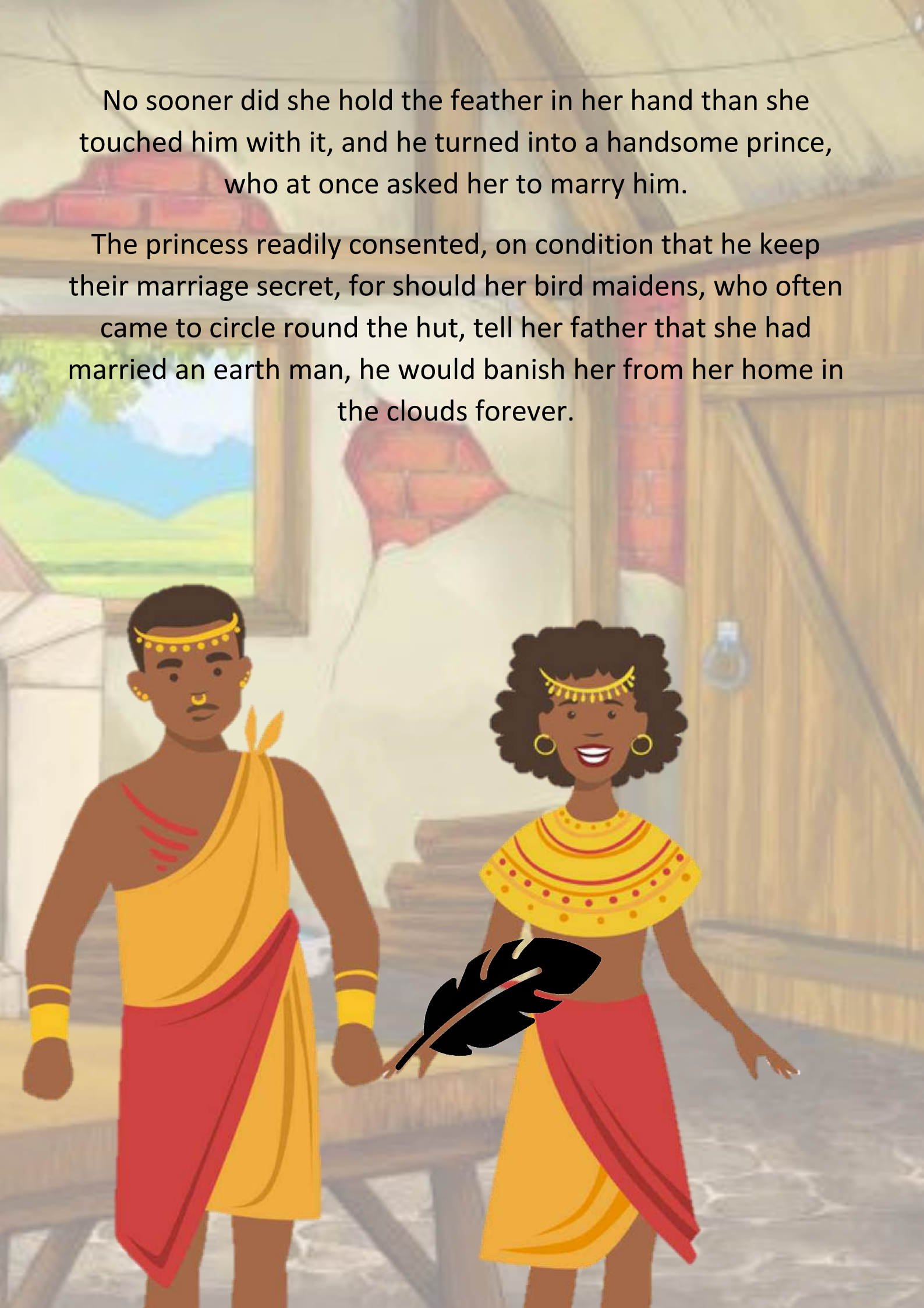
She assured him, however, that she loved him too dearly to wish to return to her home in the clouds without him. At last he returned the feather to her.





No sooner did she hold the feather in her hand than she touched him with it, and he turned into a handsome prince, who at once asked her to marry him.

The princess readily consented, on condition that he keep their marriage secret, for should her bird maidens, who often came to circle round the hut, tell her father that she had married an earth man, he would banish her from her home in the clouds forever.



Thus it was that they became man and wife, living happily together in their little hut.





The Cloud King sent many messages with her bird maidens, beginning his daughter to return to her home. But as she continually refused to do so, he decided to kill the man who had own her heart.



To this end, he told her maidens to make friends with a woodpecker and a mouse on earth. When they had done so, they were to tell the woodpecker to gather poison from the forest, and the mouse, with its ability to enter the hut unseen, to put it in her lover's food.





The two little creatures agreed to the plan and loitered near the hut to gain the confidence of the prince and his lovely wife. Soon, however, they became so fond of the prince and princess that when the time came they refused to carry out the Cloud Kings' bidding.



Although the Cloud Princess was very happy with her beloved husband, she eventually longed to see her people and her home once more.

“Please give me my magic feather,” she begged her husband one day, “that we both may visit my people above the skies. On seeing you, it may be that they will agree to our marriage, and my father may accept you as his son.”





This request her husband could not refuse, for she had been a good wife and he had grown to trust her. So, he took the feather from its hiding place and she planted it in the ground, where it immediately grew upwards until it pierced the clouds above.



Calling to their friends, the woodpecker and the mouse, to accompany them, they began their long climb up into the heavens. First went the prince, followed by his princess, then the woodpecker, and, last in line, the mouse.

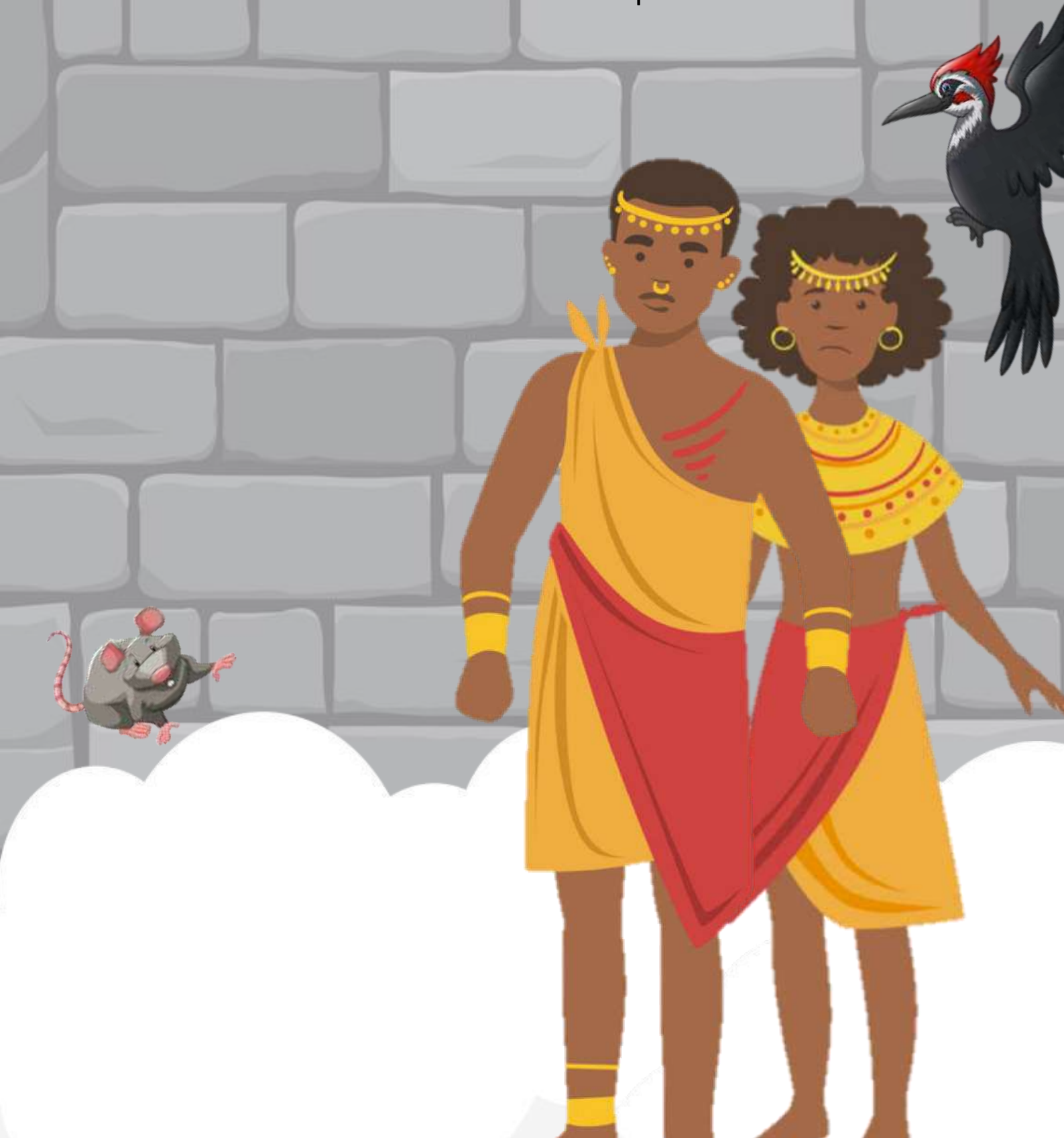




Once they had passed through the clouds, they came to a vast wall. Where the tip of the feather rested was the mouth of a tunnel, but their way was barred by great rocks that fitted together seamlessly. “Now,” said the princess, “our difficulties begin, for only my most trusted maiden knows the secret catch that moves the rock that hides the opening to my father’s kingdom.”

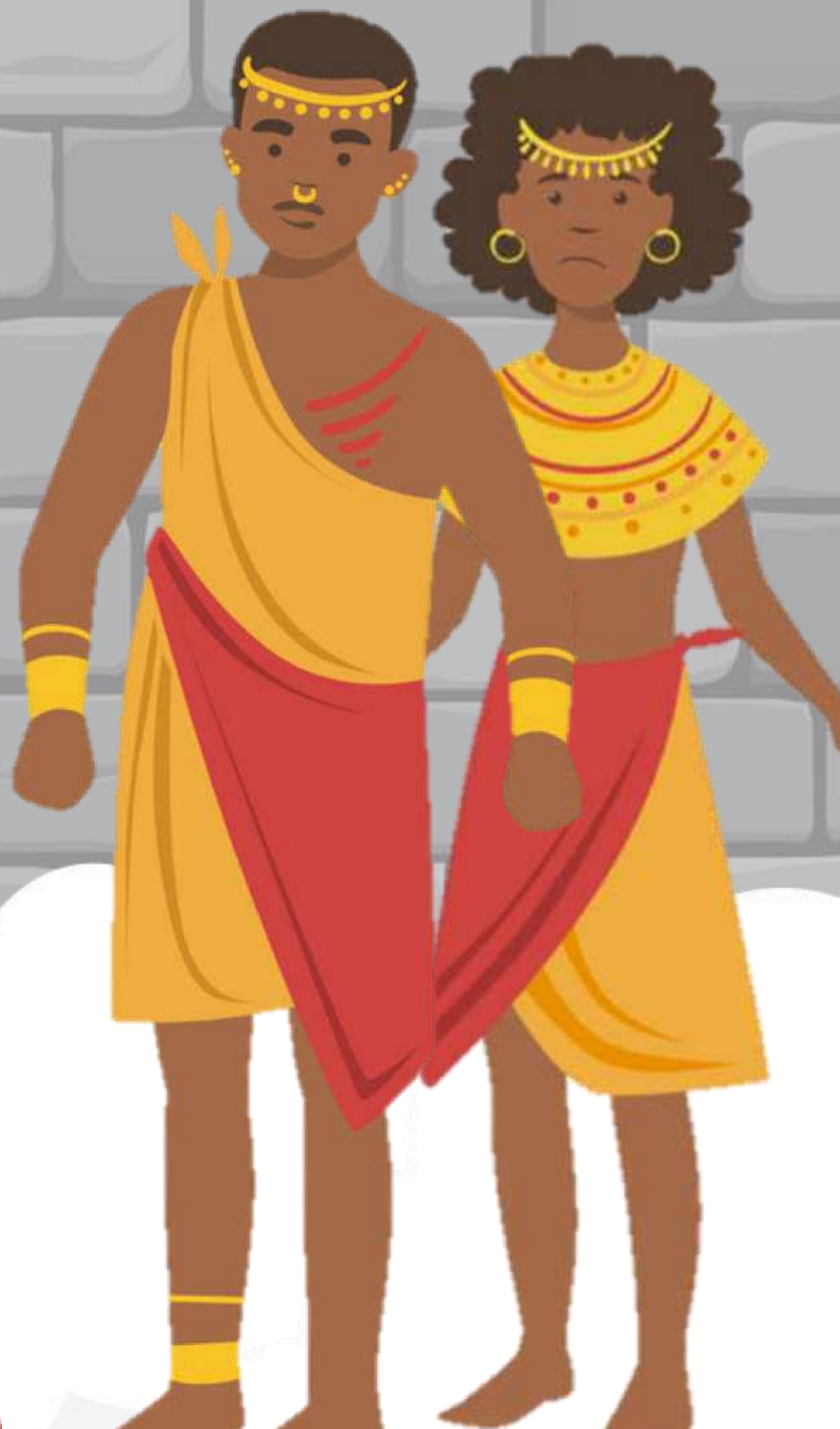


“No crevice is too small for me to find,” said the mouse. “I shall feel my way around the rock until I find it.” Round and round the end of the tunnel he went, trying to find a niche that would reveal the secret. But try as he would, it was such a perfect fit that he could find no place which offered a hold for his sharp little teeth.

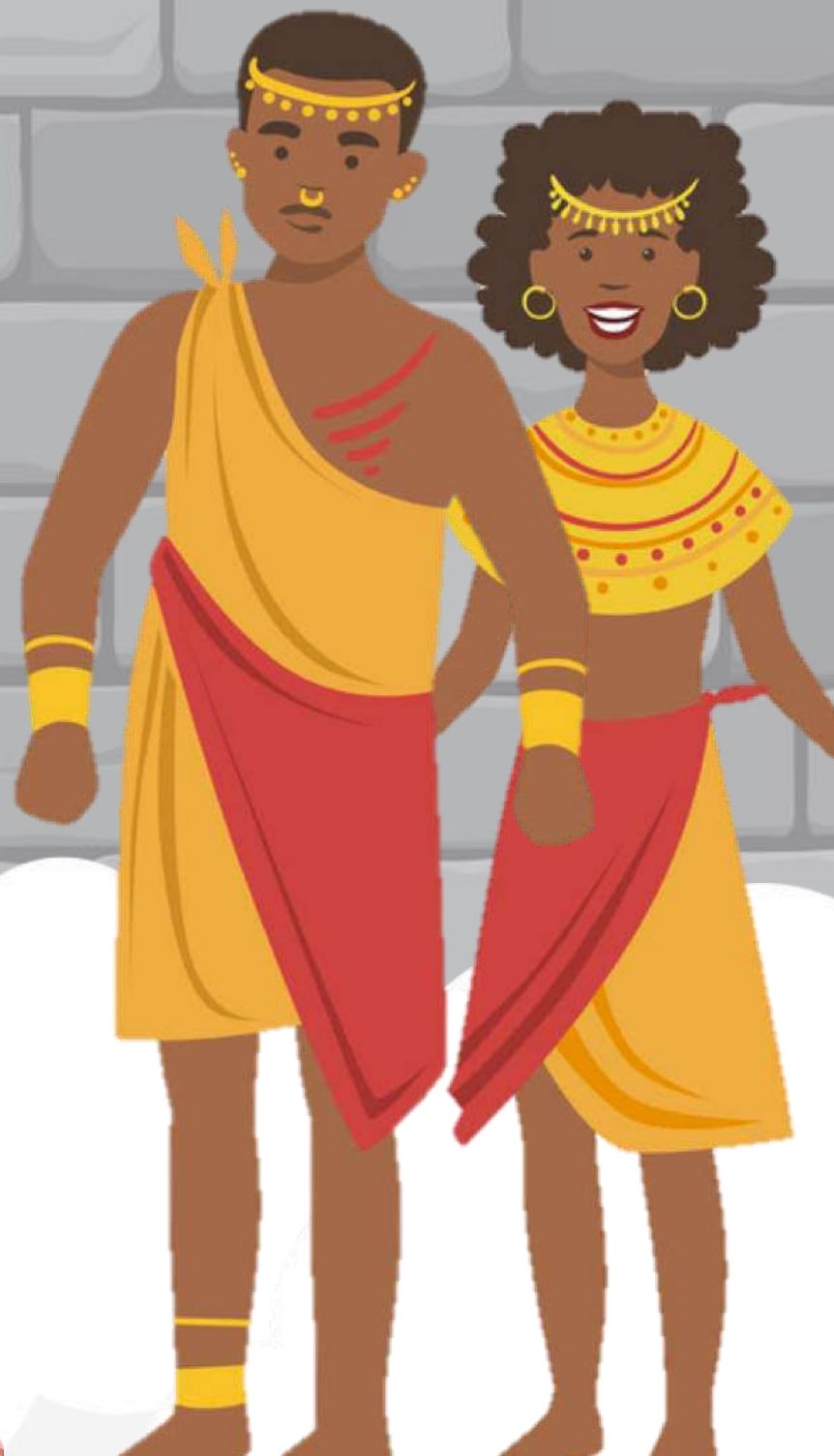




“Let me try,” said the woodpecker, “for my life has depended upon tapping tree trunks with my beak, and my ears will detect the follow where the secret lies.” Tap, tap, tap went the strong little beak as the woodpecker drilled at the rock, leaving not one part of the surface untapped.



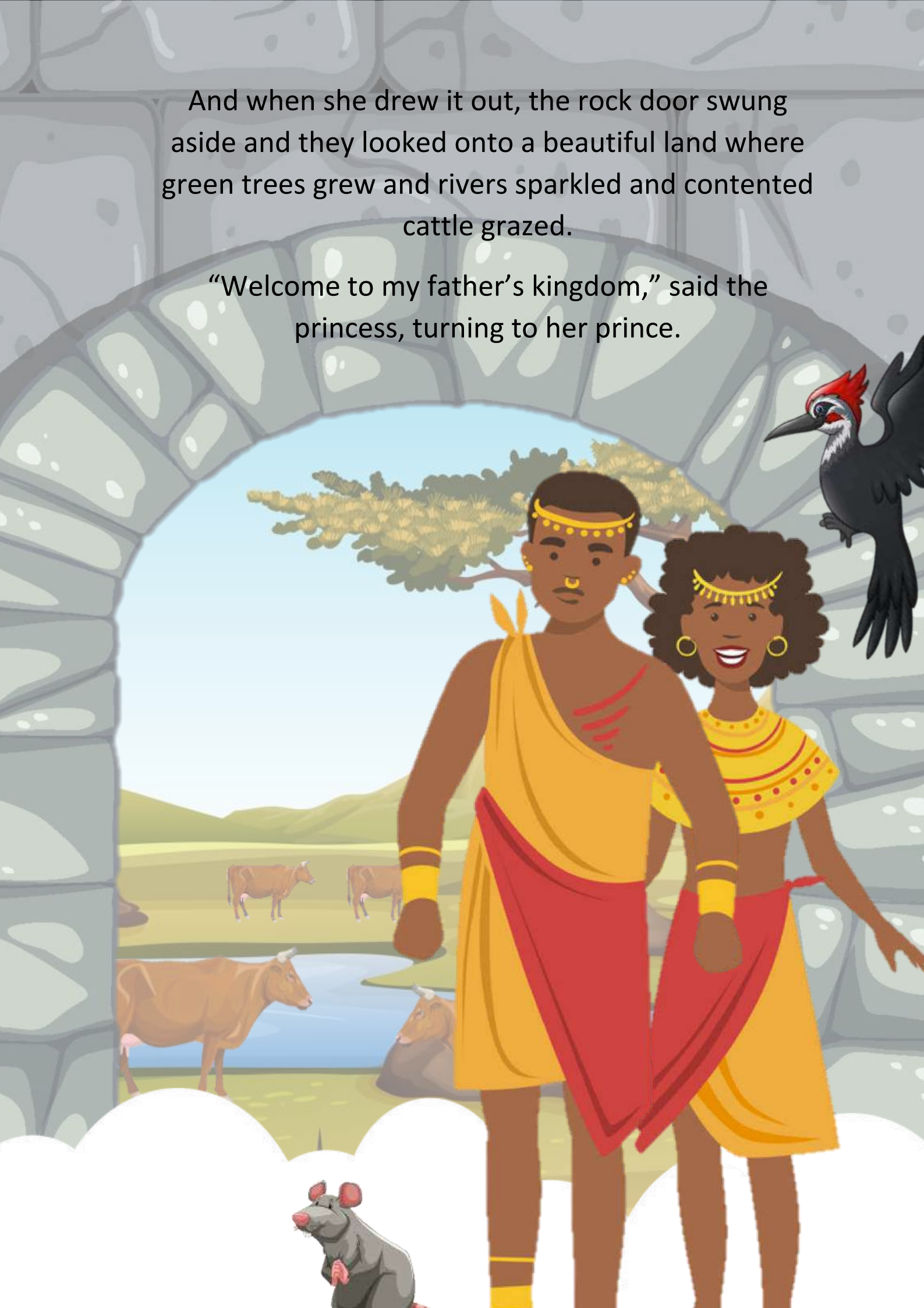
“Ah,” she said at last, “surely it is here, for a hollow echo sounds behind this spot.” Carefully she scraped and probed with her sharp beak, eventually a tiny catch that was of the same grey stone as the wall and invisible to the eye. Carefully she levered and pulled until finally she loosened the catch.





And when she drew it out, the rock door swung  
aside and they looked onto a beautiful land where  
green trees grew and rivers sparkled and contented  
cattle grazed.

“Welcome to my father’s kingdom,” said the  
princess, turning to her prince.



Then she led the way into the lovely land, where they soon reached a large village with well-built huts and cattle pens.

There was much excitement among the Cloud People at the unexpected return of their princess.





“But who is this man you have brought with you?”  
asked her father when the greetings were over.

“He is my earth friend,” replied his daughter,  
“whom I have learned to love, and I wish him to  
become my husband.”



“What nonsense is this?” asked the Cloud King angrily.  
“Cloud People have never married those who live on earth. He must return to his home at once.”

The princess, however, refused to listen to her father’s words, telling him that if he sent her lover away, she too would leave home forever.





“His wisdom is above that of all other men,” she told her father, “and you should welcome him as your son.”

“Well,” said the king, seeing his daughter’s determination, “we shall let him stay for a while.” But he thought that he would hatch a plan to kill the earth man in such a way that it would appear to be an accident. Then he gave orders for a welcoming feast to be prepared.



The mouse was fond of good food and was attracted to the kitchen by the smell of cooking. He crept in unobserved to pick up the dainties that fell to the floor.





But his eyes and ears were sharp, and he heard the chief cook discussing the king's orders to poison the earth man.



He watched carefully, and after all the platters of choice food had been prepared, he saw one being set aside. Then the king's head magician came in to sprinkle a white powder over it.





The mouse lost no time in running to the prince. Climbing onto his shoulder, he whispered, “Your life is in danger! Eat no food today.”

Then he told him all that he had seen and heard in the royal kitchen. Thus the prince was saved.

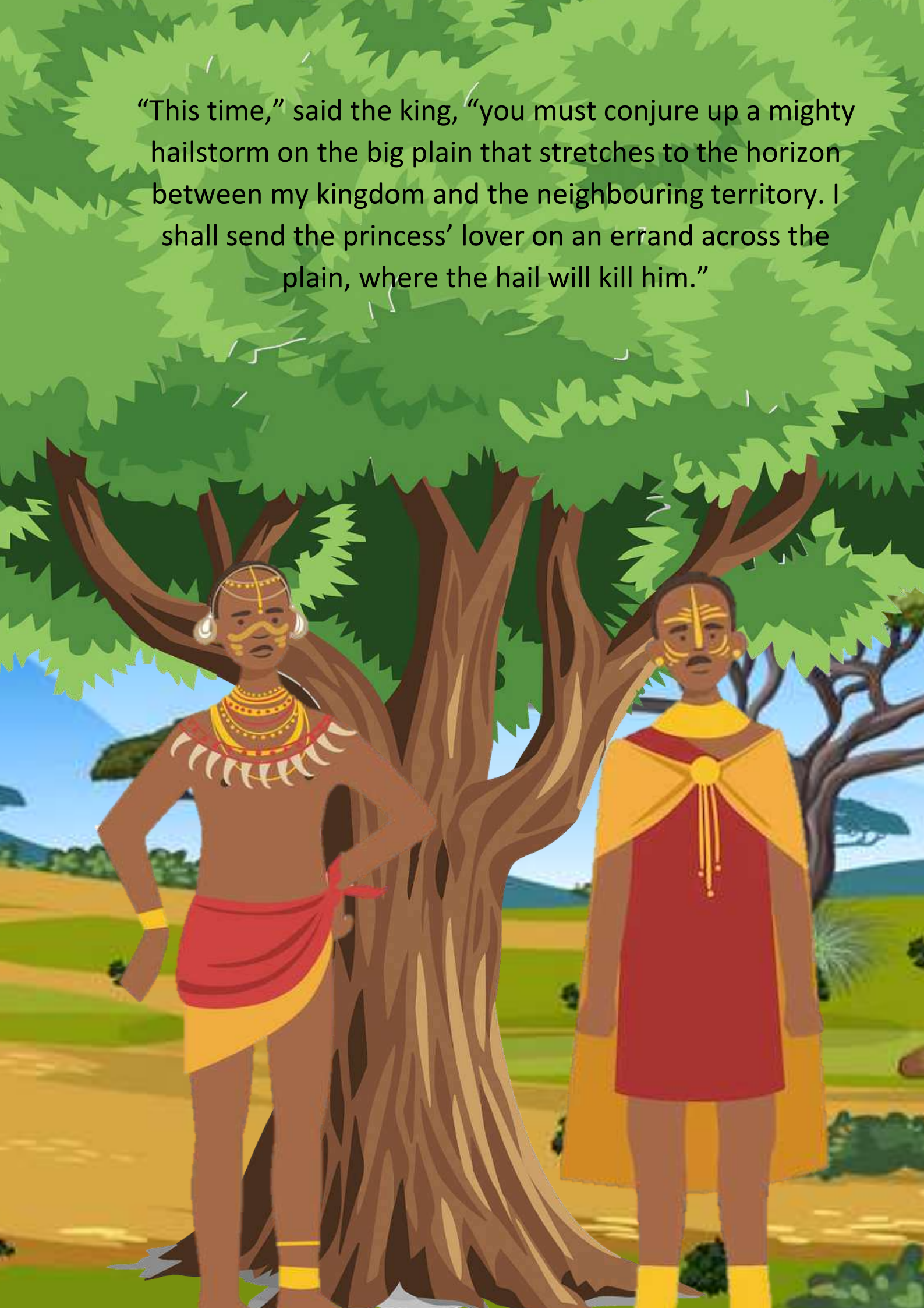


The king was angry that his plan had failed, so he summoned his head magician. To ensure that no one would overhear the wicked plan, the two discussed it under the big council tree.





“This time,” said the king, “you must conjure up a mighty hailstorm on the big plain that stretches to the horizon between my kingdom and the neighbouring territory. I shall send the princess’ lover on an errand across the plain, where the hail will kill him.”



Unbeknown to the king, the woodpecker was sunning herself high in the branches of the tree, and her sharp ears overhead the conversation, so she made some plans of her own.

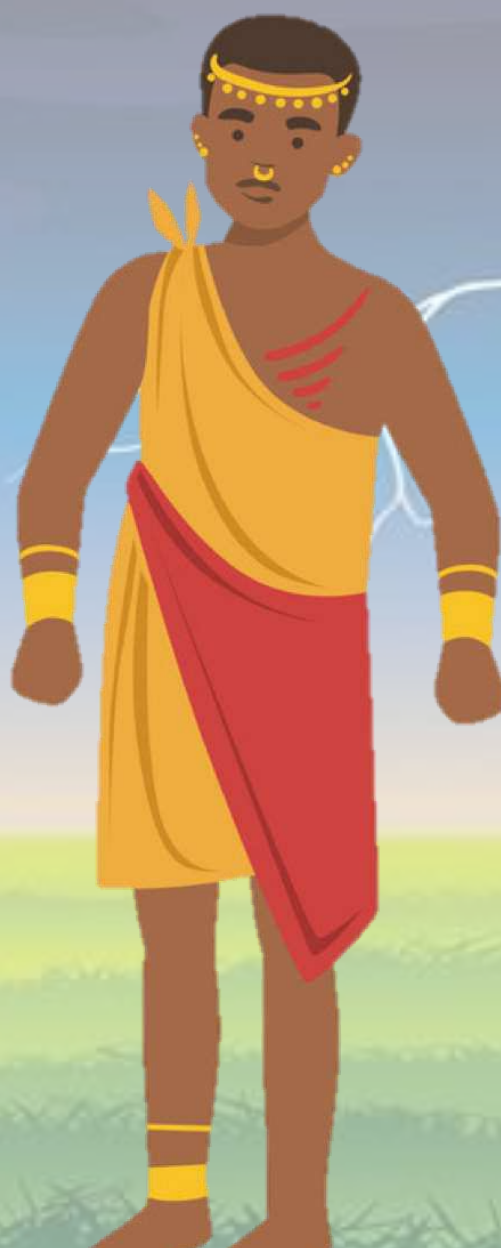




The following morning, the king sent for the prince. “I want you to take a message,” he said, “to my neighbour far across the big plain that separates our kingdoms. If you are to live with us, it is wise for you to know the people around us.”



The next morning the prince left on his journey. But when he was halfway across the plain, far from shelter of any kind, black clouds began to gather in the sky. Fierce lightning flashed and thunder rolled.





“I might be killed,” he thought, and soon the hail fell in huge chunks of jagged ice.





But before it could touch his head, the woodpecker, who had followed him unseen, covered him with her magic wings. Telling him to lie down, she protected him from the danger from above.

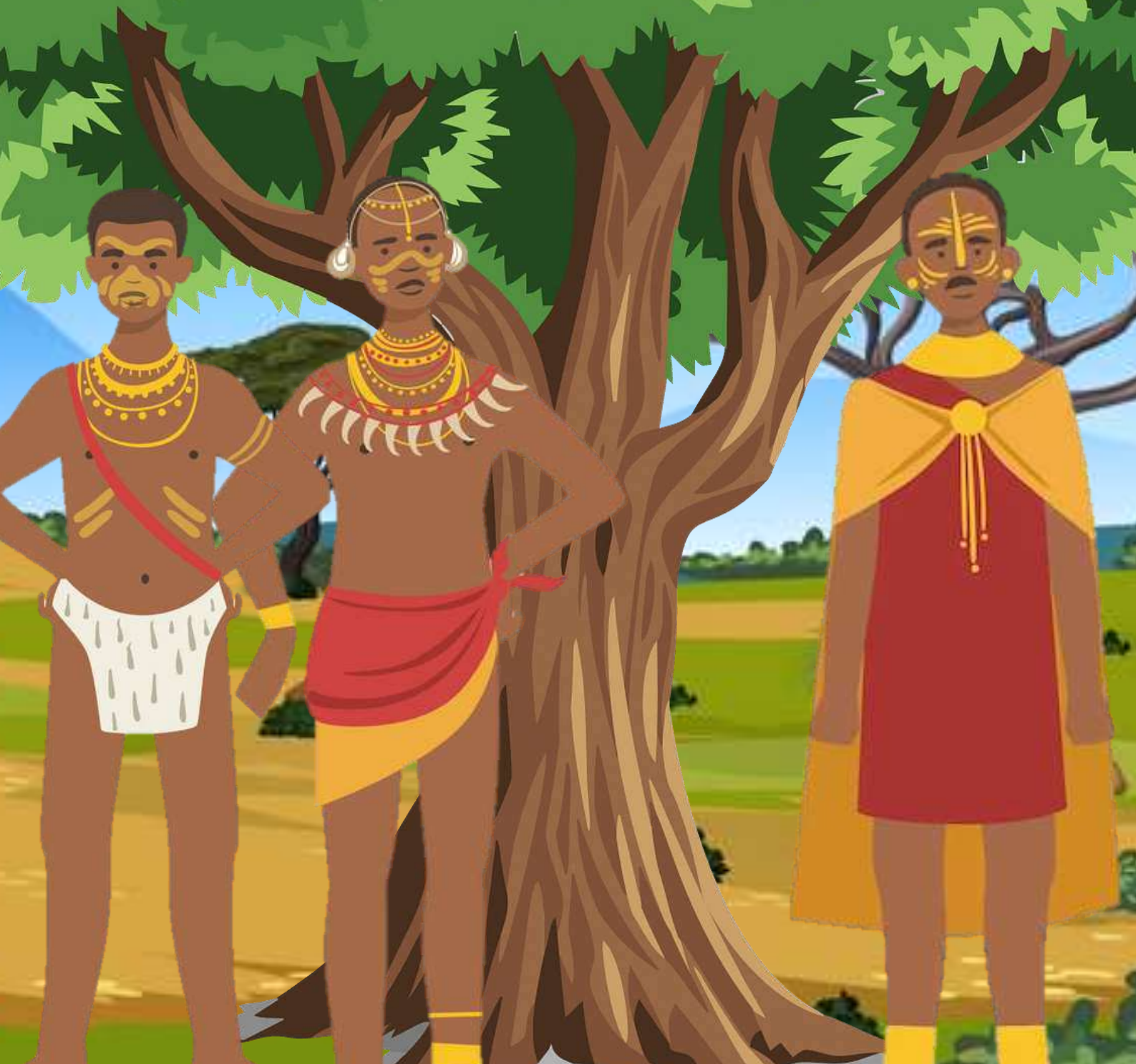




When the storm had passed, he stood up in a daze. There was nothing but desolation as far as the eye could see. But although the hail lay deep upon the ground, no harm had come to the prince.



The king's anger when the prince returned unscathed can be imagined. He called in all his magicians. "We must arrange a hunt in the prince's honour," they finally decided. "There will be many hunters with their bows and arrows, and who will know whose arrow killed him?"





Again, the woodpecker was sitting in the tree top and  
heard the wicked plan



She flew swiftly to the head magician's hut,  
where she prepared a magic charm.





She told the prince to wear it concealed around his neck. This, she assured him, would turn the arrows away from his body.



On the day of the hunt, many of the hunters tried to gain the king's reward by killing the prince. Yet, although their aim was true, their arrows repeatedly fell harmlessly to the ground without having met their mark. Again, the prince returned unharmed.





“My sweet one,” he said to the Cloud Princess that night,  
“your father will not rest until he has killed me. It is time for  
me to return to my home on earth.”

“Life without you, my husband, would be as nothing to me,”  
she told him. “I shall return with you.”



So, in the dead of night, when all were fast asleep, the prince, the princess, the woodpecker and the mouse stole quietly to the door that led from the clouds. As the princess threw the magic feather down to the earth far below, it landed at the door of the prince's little hut.





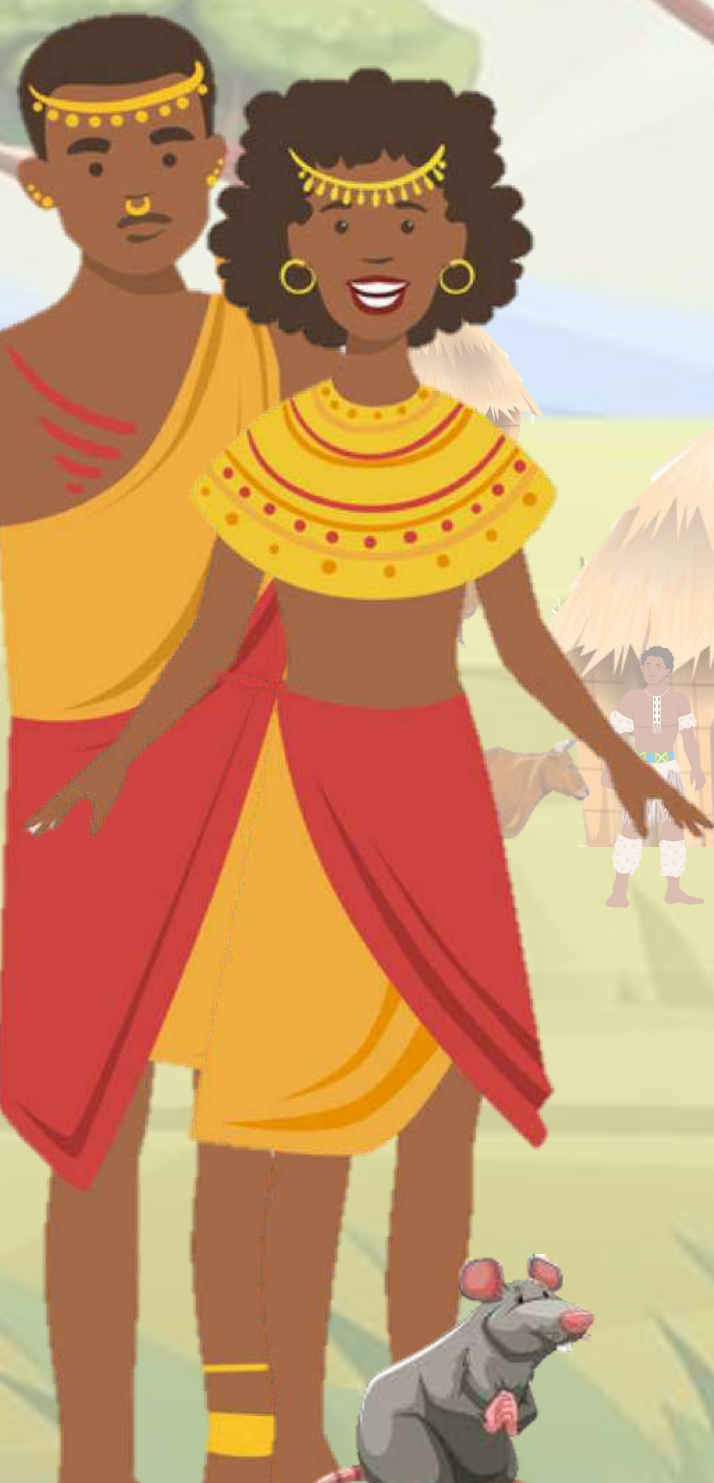
Then they all climbed down to leave the land of the Cloud People forever.

“Wish what you will,” said the woodpecker to the prince,  
“and your magic charm will provide it.”

“My greatest wish of all is for a home befitting my wife.”



At once a beautiful village appeared before them,  
peopled with subjects who saluted him as their king.





Soft-eyed cattle grazed knee-deep in green pastures, and a party of maidens came to guide the princess to her royal hut.



The prince's next wish was for the mouse and the woodpecker to become human beings, which took place in a twinkling. Then a feast was ordered to celebrate the marriage of the prince and his Cloud Princess. The mouse became the chief councillor, and the four friends lived to a ripe and happy old age, ruling their people wisely and well.







THINK

DIGITAL ACADEMY