



**Madiba's
Favourite
Folktales**

The Ring of
the King



This free-wheeling tale by the children's book specialist Jay Heale carries with it echoes of mythical African kingdoms such as the magnificent, fabulous Monomotapa.



Once there was a king – a king with a ring. In that ring lay the secret of his power and greatness.



The ring was made of gold brought up the River Nile, inlaid with silver brought up the River Congo, and topped with diamonds brought up the River Zambezi – so the story went, though exactly where it had come from, no one was sure.



The ring was so powerful that whoever wore it was protected from all the mortal danger. That meant that no matter how many people came charging round the corner waving spears and axes or shooting arrows, the king could never get hurt – provided, of course, that he was wearing the ring.



The king wore the magic ring every hour of every day, except when he went for his ceremonial bath. On these occasions, the king was carried to the crystal-clear pool beside the waterfall.



There all his servants and his children and his many wives bowed low to him, and then backed away out of sight.



Once they had left, the king would take off his crown of gold and ivory and peacock feathers, his cloak and silk and precious stones, his sandals of ebony and rhinoceros hide, and his robe of the purest linen.



And then he would take of his ring and hide it in a place so secret and well concealed that neither his servants, nor his children, nor even his many wives could make the slightest guess as to where it was.



And as soon as he had finished his royal bath, the ring was the first thing the king put on again, before he allowed anyone to come anywhere near him. He treasured the ring, because it made him the most powerful king in Africa.



But the day arrived when he stepped, dripping, out of his ceremonial bath into the warm sun, to find that the ring was not there.



At first with amazement and then with fear, the king searched his secret hiding place and all around it. The ring was gone. Somebody – somebody among all his servants and his children and his many wives – must have discovered the hiding place and dared to take the ring.



The king was furious. But he also afraid. If he offered great rewards for finding the ring, then everyone would know that he no longer had it. They would know that he was no longer protected from harm. They would know that he was no longer the most powerful king in Africa.



For days the king sat worried. He paced up and down his private chamber; he sat for hours staring at the ground or at the sky; he couldn't sleep.



All his wives shook their heads in sorrow,
and his children kept well away.



It was his favourite wife who persuaded him to tell her what was wrong. Immediately she went to the house of the wisest of all the diviners, a man called Zafusa.

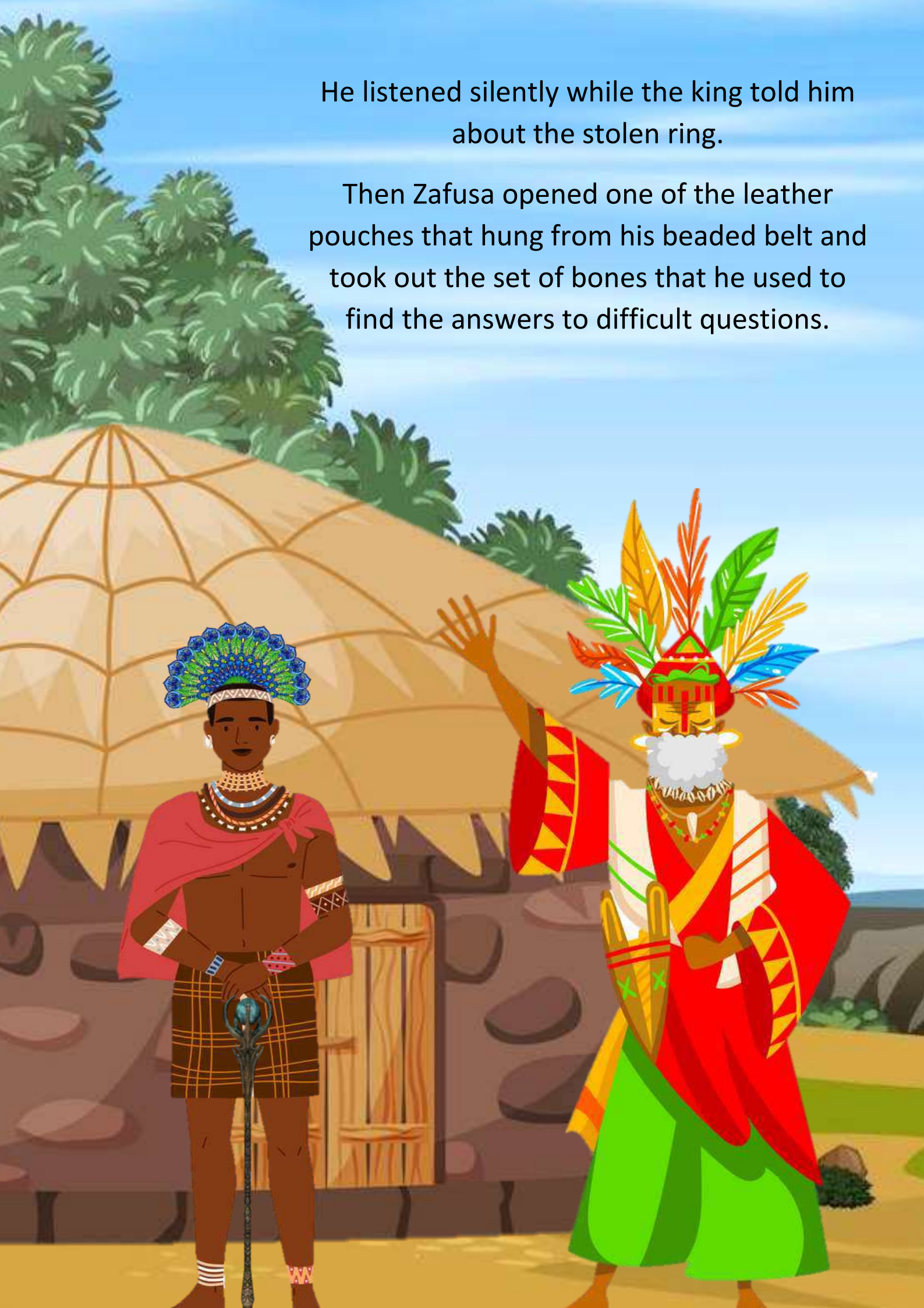


With wild eyes and bracelets jangling on his arms, Zafusa sprang into the courtyard where the king was standing. Plumes of feathers danced and waved in his head-dress.



He listened silently while the king told him about the stolen ring.

Then Zafusa opened one of the leather pouches that hung from his beaded belt and took out the set of bones that he used to find the answers to difficult questions.



Smoothing a patch in the sand, Zafusa held the bones towards the sky, gave a sharp cry and then dropped them. Carefully, he examined the pattern in which they lay.

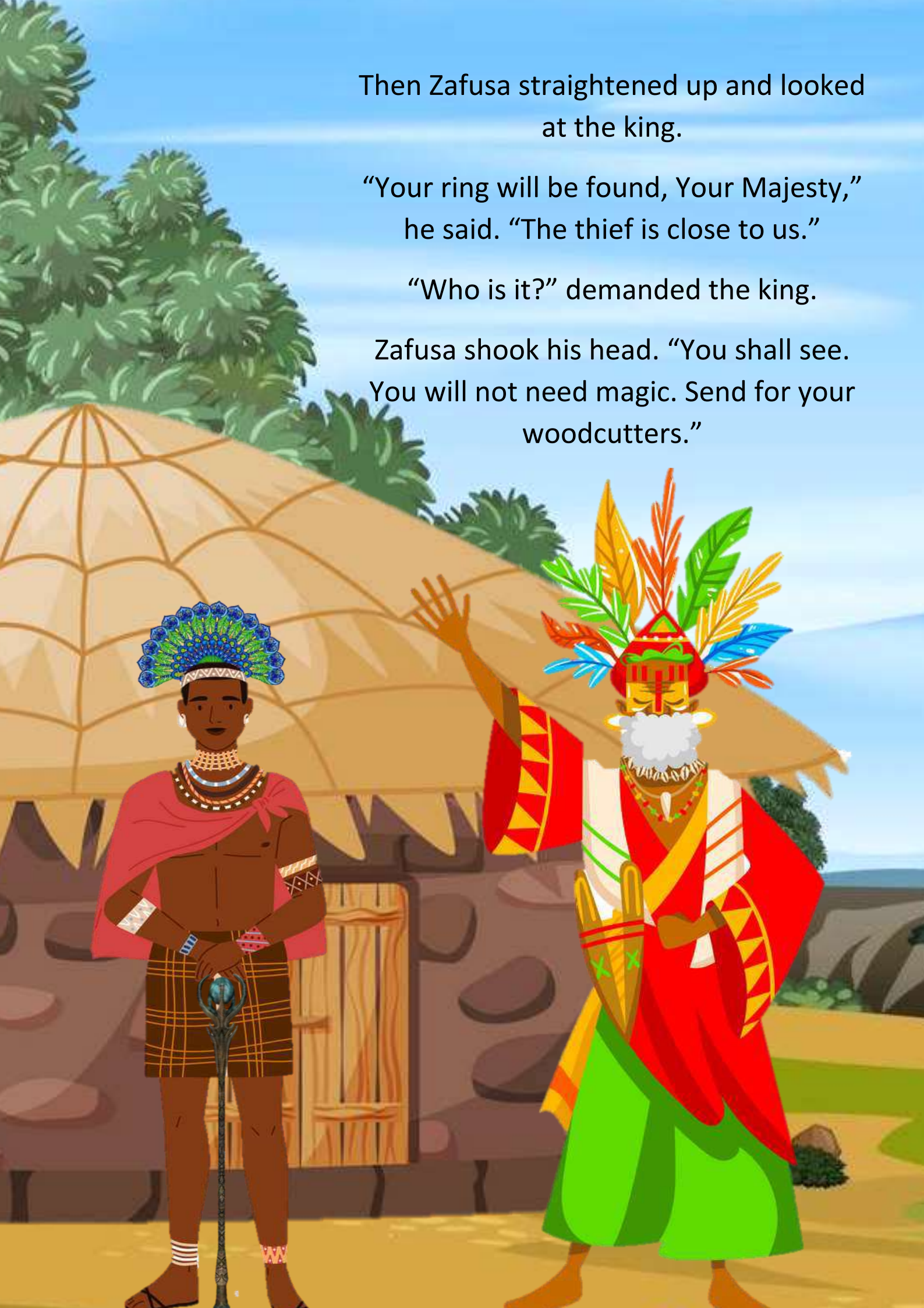


Then Zafusa straightened up and looked at the king.

“Your ring will be found, Your Majesty,” he said. “The thief is close to us.”

“Who is it?” demanded the king.

Zafusa shook his head. “You shall see. You will not need magic. Send for your woodcutters.”



The king did so at once, and Zafusa explained to them what was needed.



At dawn on the next day, all those who could possibly have had the slightest chance to steal the ring were gathered in the great square in front of the village.



The king appeared, staring silently at the bowing people. Then he clapped his hands and soldiers appeared all round the square, ready and armed with sharpened spears so that no one could escape.



Through a small archway appeared Zafusa, with a strange numbers of straight wooden sticks. They heaped the sticks in the centre of the square.



Zafusa danced around the sticks, chanting in a language nobody had heard before, and it was clear to even the smallest child that he was casting a spell on the sticks. Finally, at the king's command, everyone in the square was given one stick.



“Take care!” thundered Zafusa. “These sticks are full of power. Do not lose them. Have them with you all through today. Bring them back here at dawn tomorrow. As the sun rises, we shall see what we shall see.”



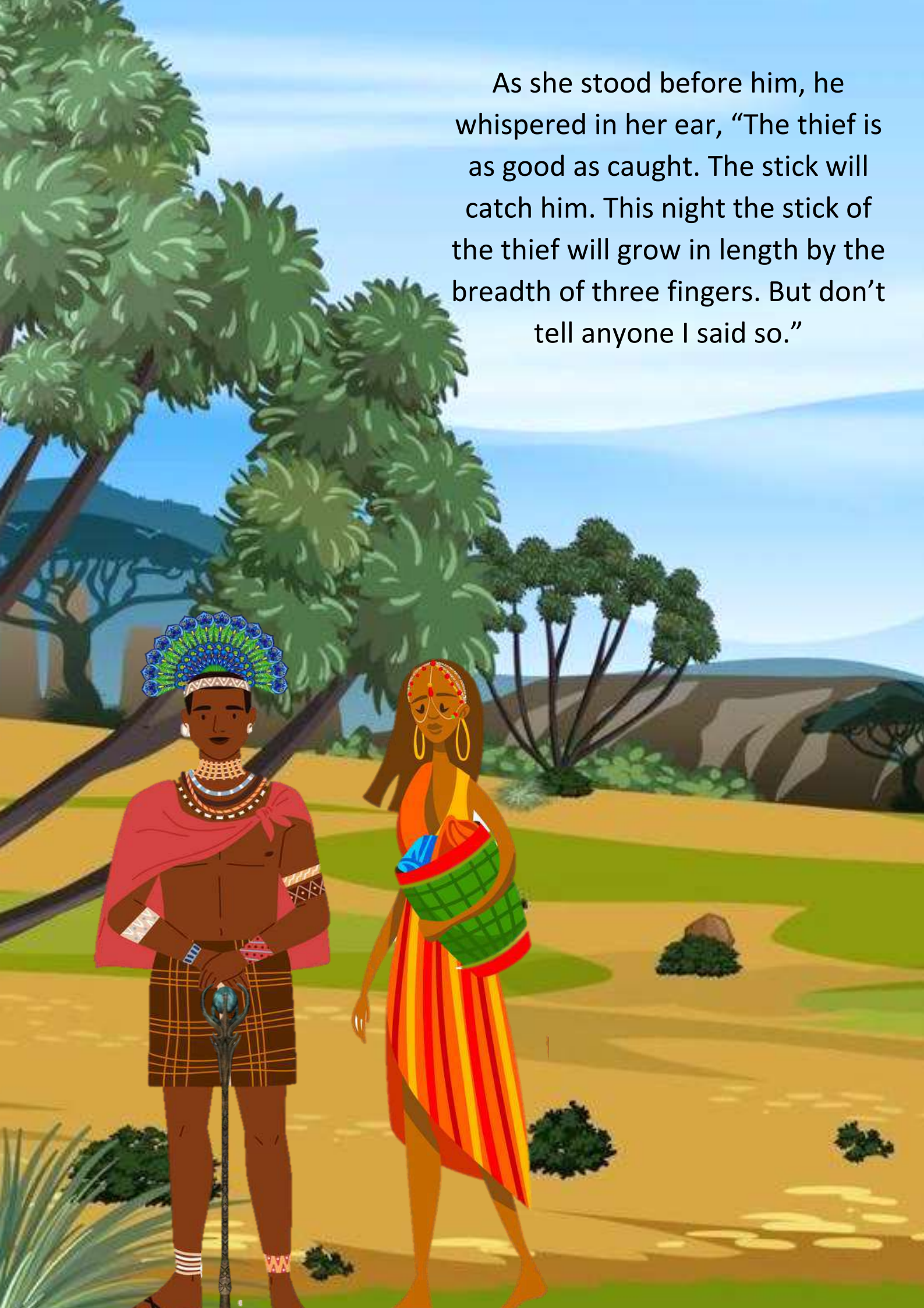
Sticks of power! All the people were amazed – the sticks looked so ordinary. They compared sticks with each other – they all looked just the same. A few were a little thicker or thinner, but they were all the same length. In fact, they were all exactly the same length. How curious!



The guards moved aside, and the servants, children and wives were allowed to leave – shuffling backwards, of course, for no one ever turned back on the king. So, they all saw the king beckoning with a finger to his favourite wife.



As she stood before him, he whispered in her ear, “The thief is as good as caught. The stick will catch him. This night the stick of the thief will grow in length by the breadth of three fingers. But don’t tell anyone I said so.”



As he strode into the carved doorway, all the wives, children and servants crowded round the favourite wife to find out what the king had said. Now, the favourite wife was a very careful woman.



She didn't breathe a word to any of them, except to her own extra-special friend.



That friend was a trustworthy woman too, and she told only her mother and her wise old aunt. But the strange thing was that by the time the sun set that evening, every single person who had been in the square knew that by dawn the thief's stick would have grown in length by the breadth of three fingers.



Night came as swiftly and silently as it always did.



When the first tinges of dawn showed that the night was over, crowd gathered in the square and the all had their sticks.



The sun crept up into the sky, and suddenly, there was Zafusa, a gleaming spear in his hand, glaring at the people.



The king appeared, being carried on his special travelling bed with the ostrich feathers. Beside him walked the chief builder in the kingdom, bearing his measuring rod.



Stick after stick was measured, all the way round the square. Not one of them had grown so much as a finger-nail in length.



But there was one stick, carried by a sweating servant with a shifty look in his eyes, that was exactly the thickness of three fingers shorter than everyone else's.



“There’s the thief!” shrieked Zafusa, leaping high into the air and waving his hands.

“Take him!” yelled the king, ordering the royal guards into action.

“Feed him to the lions!”



The thief promptly forgot that the ring protected him and fell to his knees and cried and pleaded. He took off the ring from the hand he had been hiding and gave it to the king and cried some more and begged for mercy. And the king was so pleased to have his ring back and to be the most powerful king in Africa once more that he allowed the royal lions to go without their breakfast.



The thief was set free – free, that is, apart from a small punishment. He had to run round the city three times, and the children chased him all the way round, all three times, and they found quite a different use for their sticks.



“How did you manage that?” asked the king, as he was recovering in his private chamber, and Zafusa stood watching bag after bag of gold being brought from the king’s treasury. “Your magic must be even stronger than the magic of the ring.”



“Not so,” said Zafusa. “I told you it would not need magic. All it needed was one very guilty man. He knew so well that he was the thief that he really believed his stick had grown three fingers in length during the night. So, he cut off that length and thought no one would notice.”



Zafusa tied up the bags of gold in a spare sheepskin he had had the foresight to bring with him and bowed once to the king.

“Remember, there is more than one kind of magic, Your Majesty!”





THINK

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