



Tales From Under the Marula Tree

By Leon de Villiers



THINK

DIGITAL ACADEMY

The Elephant Nests



One morning, after a very cold and windy night, a herd of moody elephants were basking in the weak winter sun. It had been a very difficult night, especially for little Spout. She was freezing. She screwed up her eyes and looked at the sun. She tried to understand why the sun could not shine at night as well as during the day. Was he just being lazy, or what?



Suddenly, She saw the sparrows tumbling cheerfully out of their nests, and it made her think.

“Mum,” She tugged lightly on her mother’s tail. “Why do we have to sleep out in the cold during winter while the sparrows have warm nests?”

“That’s the way it is,” said Flap, still sleepy. “Our ancestors also slept that way.”

“So are sparrows smarter than elephants?” asked Spout.



Flap shook her long trunk. “No! Of course not everyone knows elephants are the smartest animals in the veld.”

That did not satisfy Spout. So, if we are smart, why are we the ones sleeping out in the cold and not the sparrows?”

“Sparrows are fragile little creatures that die easily,” said Flap. “We are strong and grow very old. We can handle the cold.”

Spout was still cross. She bumped against a dead tree trunk.

“I don’t want to be cold every night. I think elephants are just too stupid to build nests.”



Flap looked sternly at her youngest, “don’t talk rubbish, Spout! We are not too stupid to build nests. We just don’t want to, that’s all.”

Spout could not believe her ears. She looked at her mother and asked, ‘We don’t want to? Why not?’

All the other elephants stopped gazing and looked at Flap. Yes, when did they decide they didn’t want to?”

Flap stripped some leaves from a branch and pretended not to have heard.



“I want a warm nest,” said Spout. “I do, I do, I do!”

“Don’t you go shaking your little trunk at me!” Flap scolded and gave Spout a smack on the bum with her trunk.

“Elephants don’t build nests and that’s the end of it!” on the bum with her trunk. “Elephants don’t build nests and that’s the end of it!”

After that, Spout quickly sulking. Annoying Flap more would have been dangerous.



By late afternoon, it was warm and everyone had forgotten about their argument earlier that morning; even little Spout. But then night came – a freezing windless night. The next morning the elephants were numb with cold.

“Brrrr,” agreed all the other elephants and looked up into the trees. That morning it seemed as if they saw warm, cosy birds’ nests wherever they looked.



“I don’t even want to hear about nests!” trumpeted Flap.
She was in a terrible mood because of the cold night.

The elephants looked longingly at the nests in the trees and
sighed. But, Flap was the leader of the herd and her word
was final.

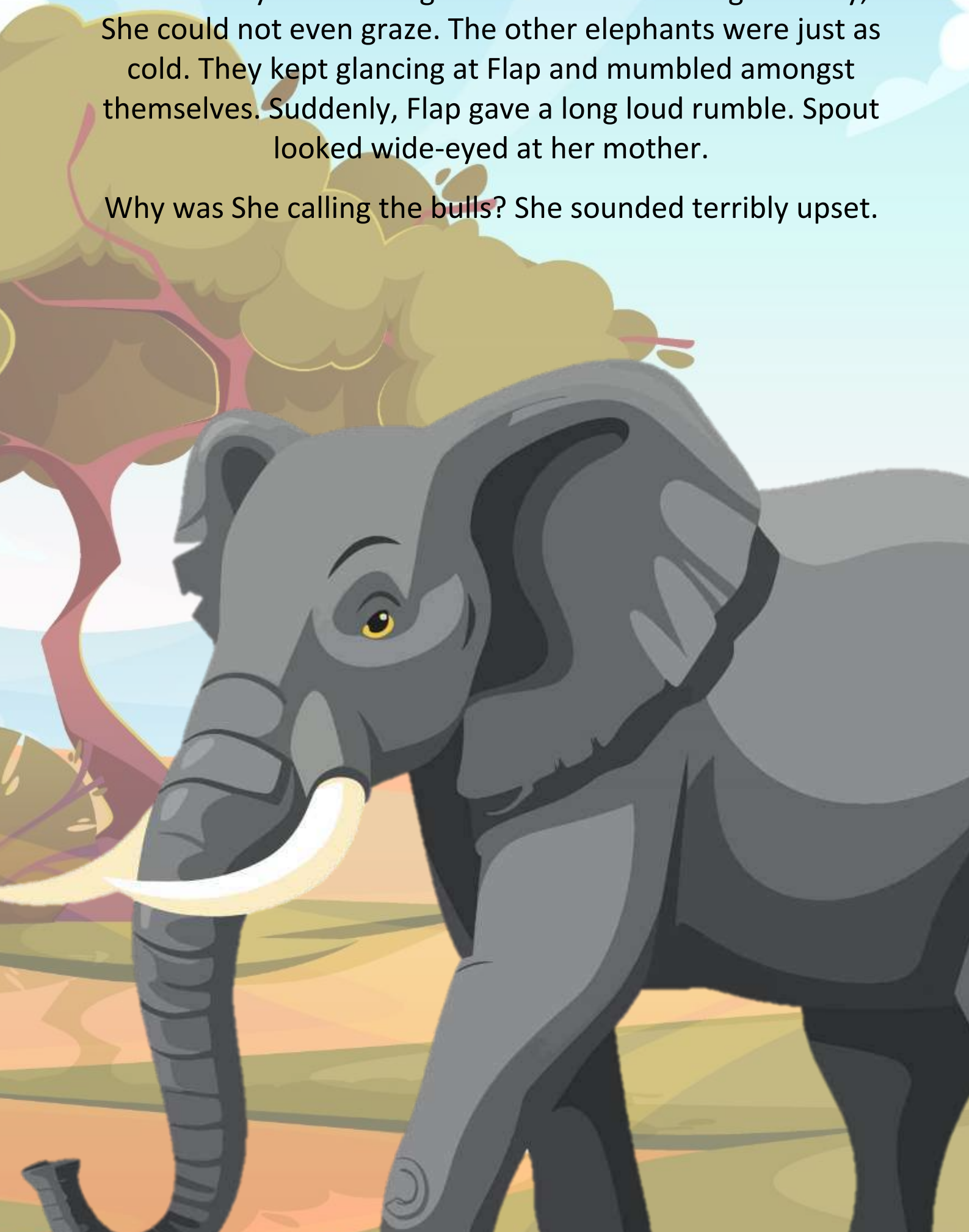


That night was even colder than the last. At dawn, Spout felt as if her trunk had dropped off from the cold. But She did not say a word about nests, even though She badly wanted to. She could tell when her mother was in a bad mood. And that morning, Flap was really very grumpy. Every now and again She rumbled impatiently and glared at the nests in the trees.



The next night was even colder still. At sunrise, Spout's whole body was shaking. Her trunk was shaking so badly, She could not even graze. The other elephants were just as cold. They kept glancing at Flap and mumbled amongst themselves. Suddenly, Flap gave a long loud rumble. Spout looked wide-eyed at her mother.

Why was She calling the bulls? She sounded terribly upset.



One after the other, the bulls came wandering in from the veld. Tusker, little Spout's father, was walking in front.

"What's the matter, Flap?" asked Tusker. "Why did you call us?"

"I'm sick and tired of us elephants having to sleep out in the cold," said Flap.

"We're going to build nests. Today, Elephant nests! And you're going to help. If the sparrows can sleep in warm nests at night, so can the elephants."

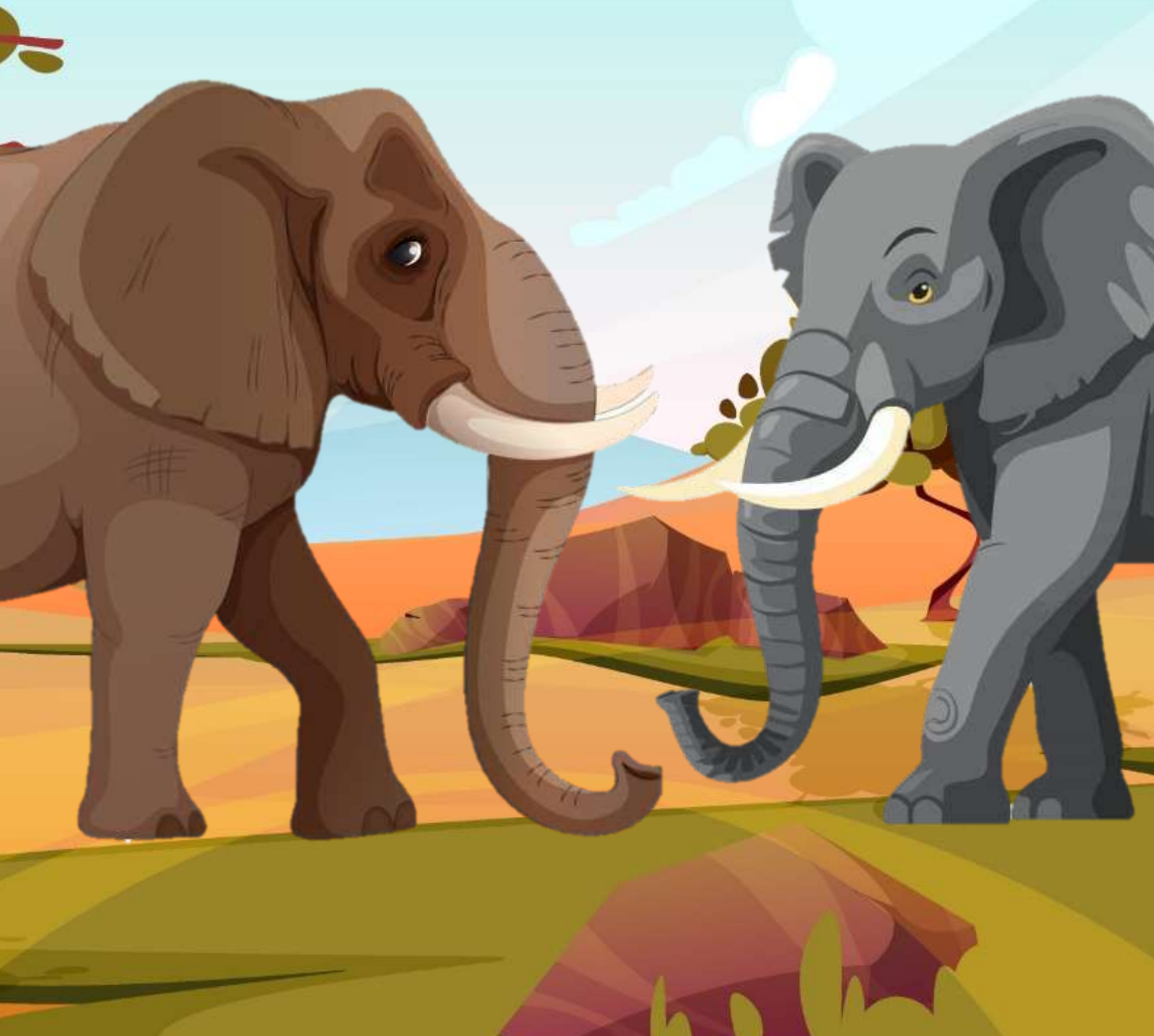


“Elephant nests?” oh no, now I’ve heard it all!” grumbled Tusker. He and the other bulls started making their way back to the veld again.

But Flap stopped them. “You’re not going anywhere, Tusker! You will do your duty today. We want elephant nests and we shall have elephant nests!”

Spout looked at her father. Would he obey?

“Elephant nests?” groaned Tusker and stared at the nests in the trees. It was hopeless.



“Alright then, if it will make you feel better ... But first we’ll have to find the right trees for the job. Let’s spread out through the veld and look for the strongest tree.”

The veld creaked and crunched as the elephants shook the trees to test them. Spout walked with her mother. She was very excited about building the nest. Tonight She was going to sleep as snug as a bug. Ooh! Now they just had to find the right tree.



“Mum, what about that one?” called Spout and pointed to a gigantic baobab.

Flap flapped her ears in agreement. “Well spotted, Spout! That’s the perfect nest-building tree.”

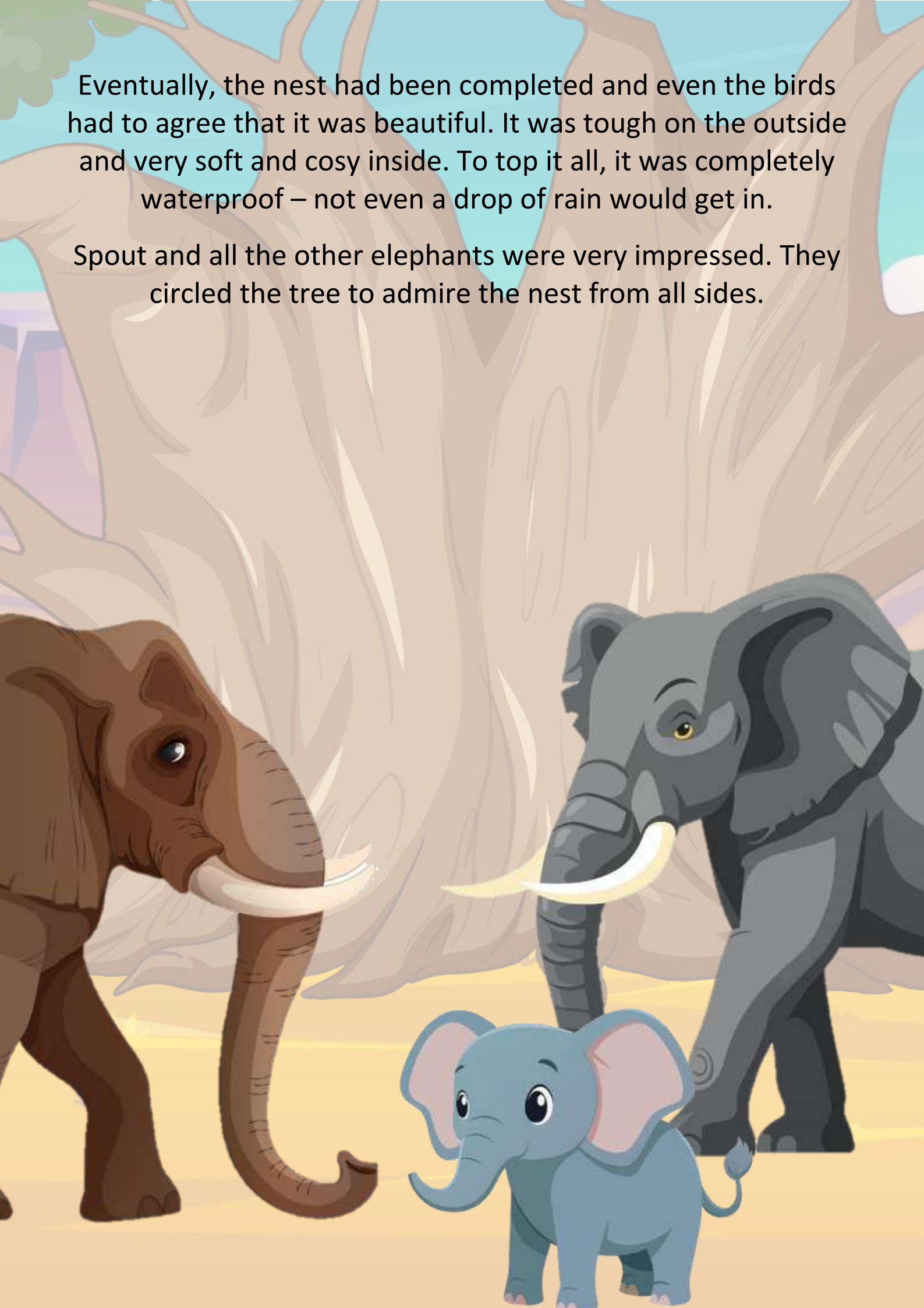
The rest of the herd agreed. The massive tree was perfect for the very first elephant nest ever.

But the nest-building was not all fun and games – even if you did have a handy trunk like the elephants. Everyone had to help carry branches and grass, even little Spout.



Eventually, the nest had been completed and even the birds had to agree that it was beautiful. It was tough on the outside and very soft and cosy inside. To top it all, it was completely waterproof – not even a drop of rain would get in.

Spout and all the other elephants were very impressed. They circled the tree to admire the nest from all sides.

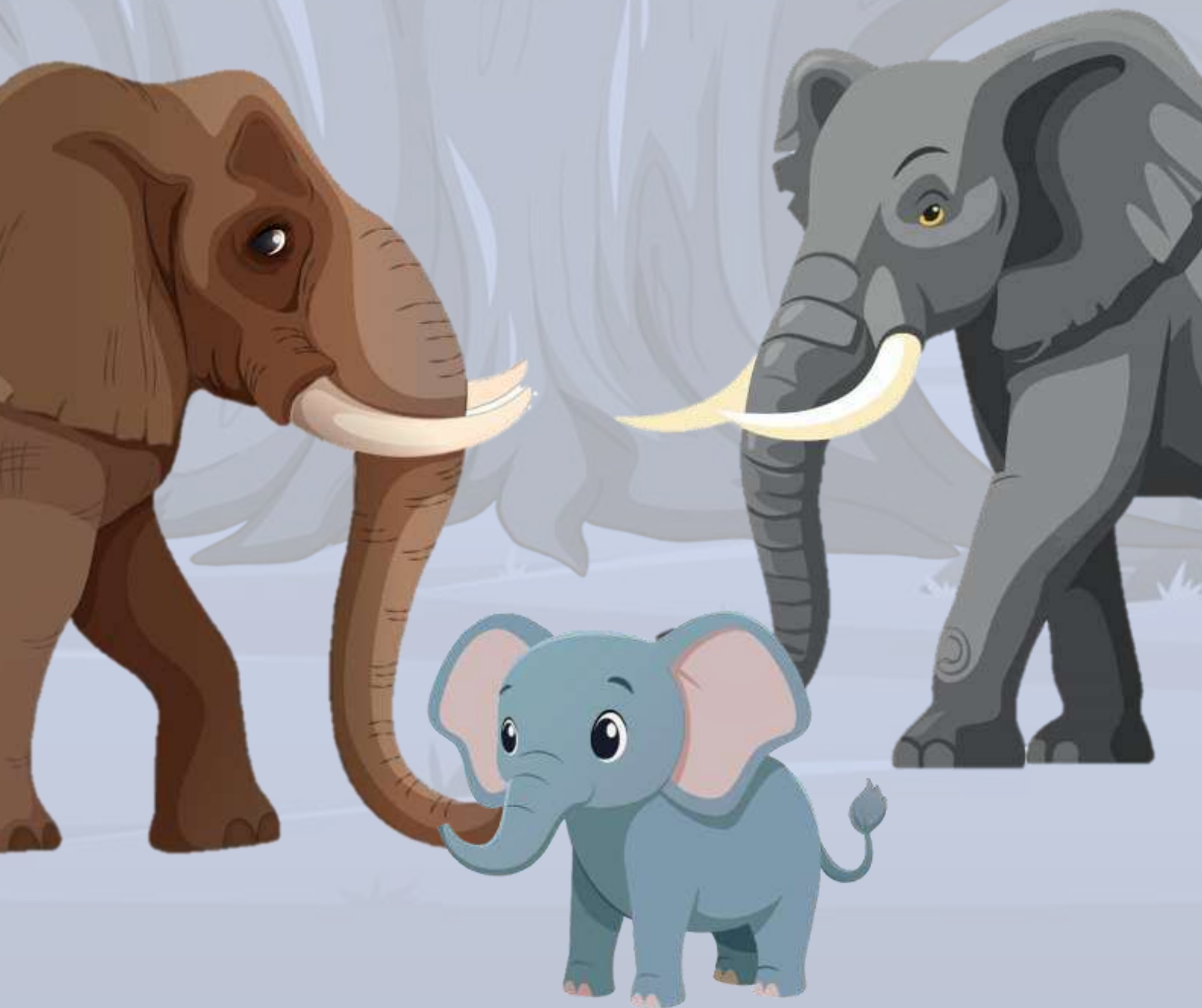


“The nest is only big enough for two elephants. We’ll have to take turns sleeping in it,” said Tusker.

“Well, I’m the leader of the herd,” said Flap. “And it was Spout’s idea. So it’s only fair that we get the first turn.”

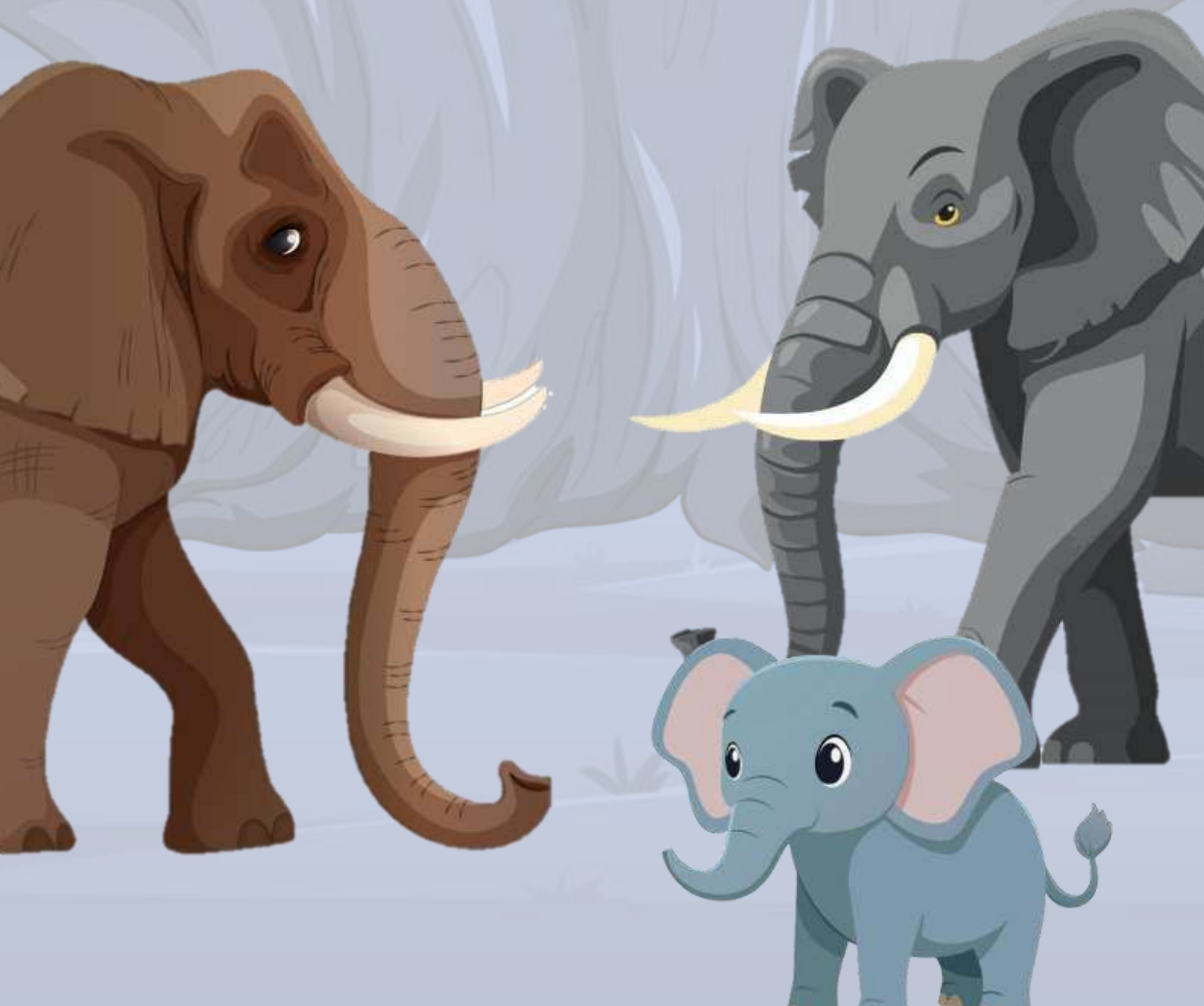
“Hurray!” Spout was very excited.

“Come, Spout, say goodnight so we can get into the nest,” said Flap.



“Goodnight, everyone!” said Spout. “See you in the morning!” Then She and Flap struggled up into the nest.

While Spout and her mother made themselves comfortable, they heard the other elephants moaning under the tree. Let them rumble, She thought, tonight She was going to sleep in a warm nest and it was going to be wonderful.



And it was wonderful, for a little while. But then a terrible hunger woke her up. She struggled out of the tree to graze. When her tummy was full, She climbed back in. Again She made herself comfortable and fell asleep. No sooner had She fallen asleep than She woke up from a terrible noise. It was her mother climbing out of the tree to graze, moaning and groaning all the way.

Later She climbed back, making just as much as noise.



In the middle of the night Spout woke up from a trunk slapping her cheeks.

“What are you doing?” trumpeted Flap.

Spout looked around her. Oh dear! She had started eating the grass lining of the nest in her sleep.

“Sorry, Mum,” She pleaded.

“Don’t let it happen again!” scolded Flap.

Spout felt so guilty She could not sleep. When She finally nodded off again, She woke up with a start from a loud crackling and crunching. This time her mother was tripping the branches in the nest in her sleep.



“Huh?” rumbled Flap and stumbled backwards. Too far backwards, and with a terrible noise of breaking branches She fell out of the nest.

THUMP! It thundered through the veld when She hit the ground.

“Mum!” said Spout, very upset. “Are you hurt? Wait, let me help you get up!”

But of course Spout was too small to help her mother get up. Instead She was pulled down as well.

“Ouch, ouch!” they moaned and groaned.

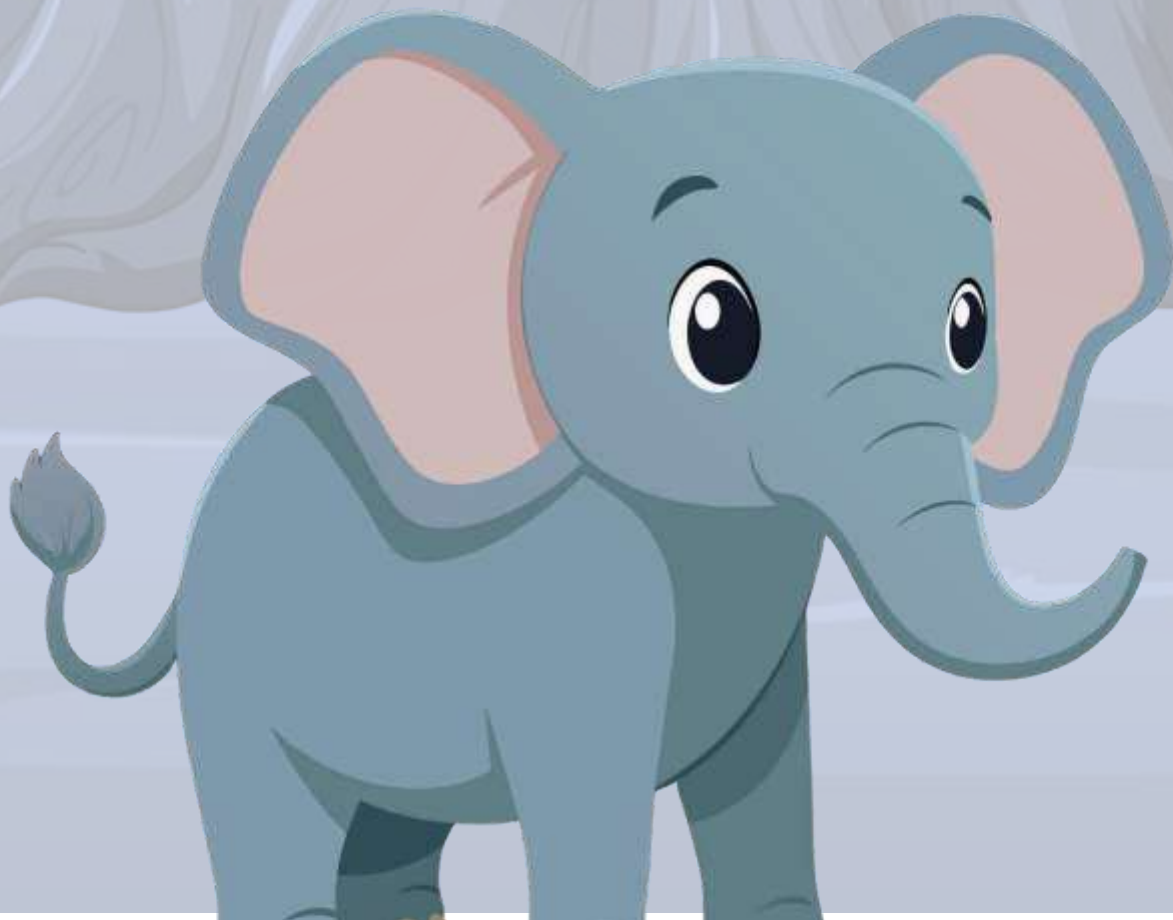


“What’s going on there?” rumbled Tusker from somewhere in the dark.

“Nothing!” answered Flap, then She quickly prodded Spout back into the nest.

But by then Spout was hurting too much even to think about sleeping. Besides, She was hungry again. So She got down carefully yet again, grazed and struggled back up again.

At sunrise, Spout felt worse than She had ever felt before, tired and stiff and sore.



“So, did the two of you sleep well?” Was it nice and warm?”
asked Tusker innocently.

Spout touched the bruise on her knee with her trunk and grumbled something, but She did not feel half as bad as her mother. Flap’s bottom was bruised, her left ear was chafed and She had even chipped one of her teeth. After staring at

Tusker for a long time, She suddenly trumpeted: “I HATE nests!” She charged the baobab and started pushing against it. “I hate NESTS!” She trumpeted over and over. Then She knocked over the tree, nest and all.



Since that day, an elephant will knock over a tree on purpose, just because a bird has built a nest in it. And nobody dares to mention elephant nests again – especially not when Flap or Spout is around.



“That’s elephants for you!” The baboons roar with laughter.

“They take themselves too seriously,” chuckles Tiny-Toes. The previous day an elephant cow had been terribly upset after he threw a dung pat at her.

“If I ever find an empty elephant nest, I will sleep in it every night,” Knuckles says dreamily. “It will be so warm and



“Ha-ha!” Stump is making fun of me!” moans Knuckles.

“Stump, leave your cousin alone!” shouts Aunt Mangy.

“You’re never too old for a good hiding!”

“Some animals just don’t belong in trees or in the air,” says
Aunt Jiggle-Jowl.

“Take the bears for example ...”



“Bears?” Tiny-Toes sounds confused. “I’ve never heard of bears before.”

“Bears! Ha! There are no such animals!” shouts Uncle Fiddle Foot. “Nowhere!”

“But there really were bears in the veld,” says Aunt Mangy. “My great-grandmother Tinker-Tail told me so herself.”



“Snail's trails” says Uncle Fiddle-Foot.

Aunt Mangy is so offended She nearly falls off her rock. “Do you want to tell me my great-grandmother Tinker-Tail was talking snail’s trails you moth-eaten marula!” She shouts angrily.

“Shush!” says Bigmouth the sentry. “Do you want to wake the whole veld?”

For a while the baboons are silent, but then Stump cannot contain himself any longer. “Please tell us about the bears?” he asks very nicely.



“Yes, pretty please!” the other little ones plead as well.

“Humph!” grunts Uncle Fiddle-Foot.

Aunt Mangy pretends not to have heard him. “It is a very old story,” She says. “I don’t know if I can still remember all of it, but I’ll do my best.”

