



Tales From Under the Marula Tree

By Leon de Villiers



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The Hares' Tricks



One day the hares were bored. “Let’s do something interesting,” said Skip. Something funny.

“Like what?” asked Hope and rubbed her nose. “Please, not bullying dung beetles again! It’s so boring!”

“Is not! I thought it was very funny,” said Jump. It had been his idea to put stones in the way of the beetles rolling their balls of dung.



“What is so funny about working yourself to death by carrying stones around?” asked Dodge.

“But the dung beetles couldn’t roll their dung balls!”
laughed Jump.

“Jump, you were the only one who thought it was funny,”
agreed Skip. “This time, let’s do something a lot funnier,
something we can all laugh at.”

“Like what?” Hope asked again. “Nothing is ever funny in
the veld. All the animals are so serious.”



“You know what would be funny?” said Dodge. “If we can get the guinea fowl to swim like fish. Now that would be funny. Think about it: the water hole full of spots – soaking wet spots.”

“No,” said Hop. “It would be even funnier if we could get Cobra to stand on his head.”

“What?” cried Jump. “Are you crazy? I’m not going anywhere near that poison mouth. One day, my Aunt Sniffle accidentally stepped on Cobra’s tail and he spat poison into her eyes. She went blind and her children had to lead her by the paw.



No, thank you, if you want to mess with snakes, I'm going back to the burrow!"

"Me too," said Dodge. "But I must say, it would be very funny if we could get Cobra to stand on his head."

"What about getting another animal to stand on his head?" asked Skip. "Like Elephant for example."

The hares had a good laugh.



“Or Giraffe!” Dodge roared with laughter. “I can already see his long legs sticking out above the trees.”

“Yes! Yes!” laughed the others.

“No, wait,” said Hop. “Let’s not waste time on the big animals. They won’t listen to us.”

“Yes,” said Skip. “And besides, they know us too well. They know we love tricking animals.”



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“What about those new animals who recently came to the veld?” asked Jump.

“Those flying mice. They don’t know us at all.”

“The flying mice?” asked Hop and shook her ears. “Who on earth are the flying mice?”

Dodge started giggling. “She means the winged mice!”



“You’re both wrong,” said Skip. “They’re called bats. I know because one family moved into a hollow in the wild orange tree. There are probably twenty of them living in that one hollow. I have no idea how they can sleep so crammed up.”

“Okay, bats then, Mr Know-It-All,” said Jump.

“Jump is right,” said Dodge. “They are new in the veld so they don’t know us yet. Let’s get them to do something funny. Let’s get them to stand on their heads.”



“Not just stand, we’ll get them to sleep on their heads as well,” laughed Hop.

“It’s going to be very funny, but how are we going to do it?” asked Skip and scratched his head.

For a while the hares sat there thinking quietly. Suddenly Dodge started laughing out loud.

“What?” the others wanted to know.

“I know exactly what to do!” she giggled. “Listen.”



With their long ears pressed closely together, the others listened to Dodge's plan.

"It could really work," Hop said excitedly. "But we'd have to work together and everyone must play their part."

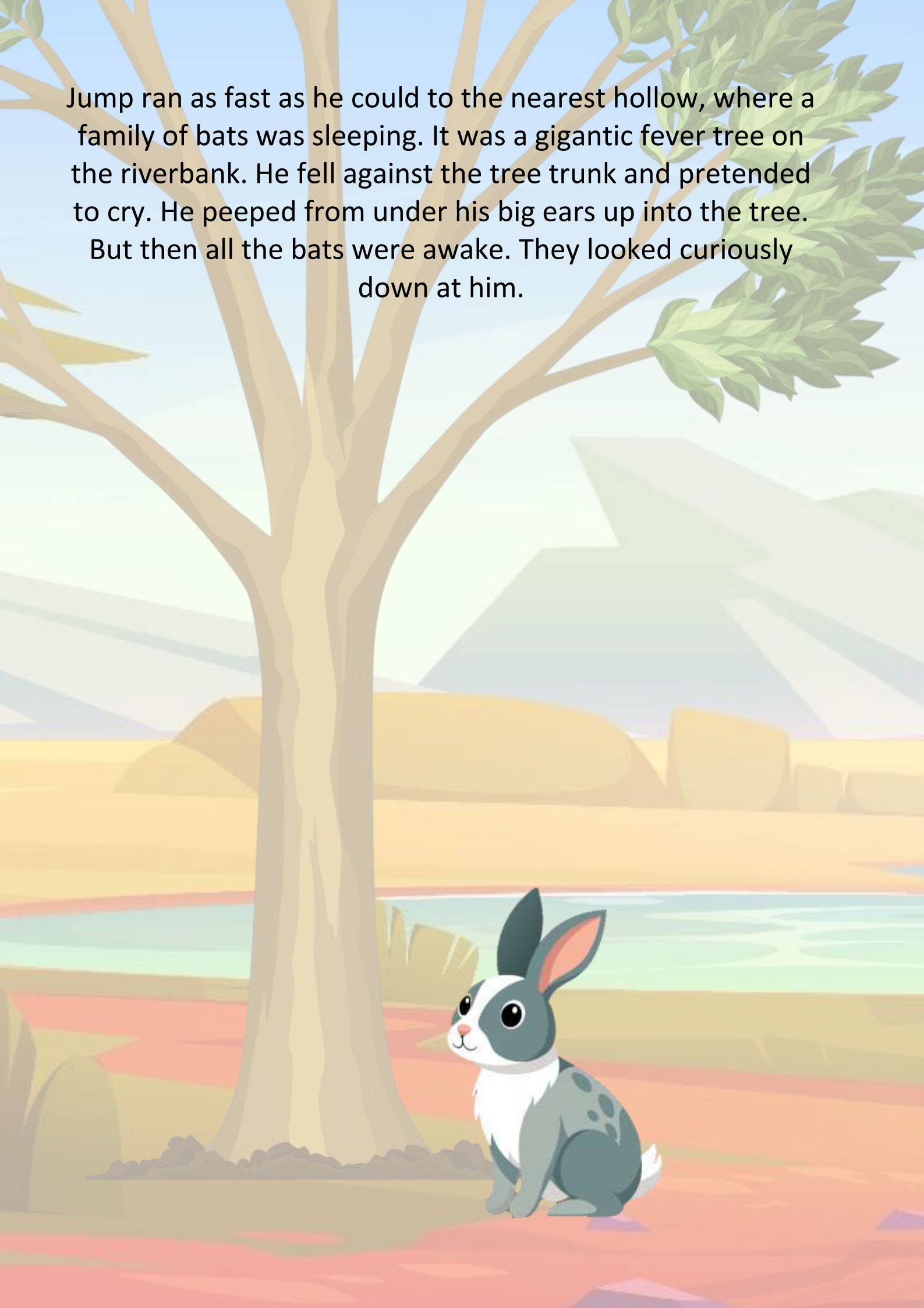
Everyone nodded.

"It's going to be such fun," said Skip. "Let's get started right away. Jump, you go first."

"Alright," said Jump. "Here I go!"



Jump ran as fast as he could to the nearest hollow, where a family of bats was sleeping. It was a gigantic fever tree on the riverbank. He fell against the tree trunk and pretended to cry. He peeped from under his big ears up into the tree. But then all the bats were awake. They looked curiously down at him.



“It’s so unfair,” he sobbed. “Now, I’m an orphan. Why did the cruel mole have to choose my family?” Jump cried and cried, but every now and then he looked at the bats from the corner of his eye. Just as he thought: they were listening wide-eyed to him.

“Jump!” someone called. Then Hop came hopping along. “Oh, there you are! You poor thing! Thank goodness you managed to escape Mole’s cruelty. It must have been terrible. Your whole family of twenty ripped apart in one bite!”



“Why must there be an animal as cruel as Mole?”
sobbed Jump.

“I don’t know,” sighed Hope. “All I know is that no one
is safe anymore. No one!”

“Excuse me,” said a little voice from the tree. “We
didn’t mean to, but we couldn't help but overhear.”

The two hares pretended to look up in surprise.

“Oh, we didn’t even see you there,” Hop lied. “Sorry we
woke you.”



“It’s nothing, really,” said the bats. “We’re so sorry to hear about your family. How terrible!”

“Thank you,” sobbed Jump. “Yes, it is terrible. You’d think we’d be used to Mole’s cruelty by now, but how can any animal ever get used to something like that?”

“But isn’t Mole that little animal who lives underground and makes molehills?” asked one of the bats. “We thought he was harmless?”



Hop clutched her heart. “Little animal? Harmless? Yes, that’s exactly what Mole wants everyone to believe. But have you ever seen Mole? His eyes flashing like lightning? Or his long, razor-sharp teeth sharpened on the skulls of his victims?”

“And those terrible claws!” sobbed Jump.

“No,” said the bats nervously and looked at each other.

“We’ve never seen him.”

“Well, you probably don’t have to worry about Mole,” said Jump. “You’re safe up there in the trees.”

The bats sighed with relief.



Suddenly, they heard twigs breaking and Skip and Dodge appeared. They pretended to be out of breath. “Have you heard?” Skip panted. “Mole has struck again! This time he devoured a whole family of vervet monkeys in broad daylight!”

“It’s terrible,” moaned Dodge. “And the poor monkeys thought they were safe up high in the trees.”



“It seems Mole can climb trees after all!” gasped Skip. “And now the monster is telling everyone how he craves bat meat. The poor little creatures!” then he looked up and saw the shocked bat family looking down at them. “Oh, sorry, I didn’t see you there. I’m so sorry – I didn’t mean to scare you.”



Dodge looked up. “But if I were you, I would always be looking down from now on!” she warned. “If Mole makes a threat, it’s not long before he strikes.”

“You’re lucky,” sobbed Jump. “If only someone had warned my family like that, I wouldn’t be an orphan today.”



“Let’s get out of here,” said Hop. “I don’t want to be around when Mole starts climbing trees.”

“Goodbye,” said the hares. “And remember, always look down! It’s the only way!” And then they disappeared into the long grass.

The story about Mole spread like wildfire among the bats. “Mole has a craving for bat meat!” they said. “Everyone must always look down. No height is safe anymore! Remember, always look down!”



And so, it came to be that the bats started sleeping upside-down. Always looking down. Always on the lookout for the terrible Mole.

When the young hares saw the bats sleeping upside-down, they rolled on the ground with laughter. It was the funniest thing that had happened in the veld in years. They laughed and laughed until they couldn't laugh anymore.



The next day, however, the hares had already forgotten about the bats. They were already plotting new tricks. But the poor bats have never ever forgotten about the terrible Mole. To this day, they sleep upside-down, always looking down in case Mole comes. And poor Mole knows nothing about it. He just carries on digging innocently in the dark, still looking for bulbs and roots to eat.

“Now, that’s a true story if ever I heard one,” says Aunt Moanie.



“I agree,” says Uncle Bent-Bum. “Not many animals can lie through their teeth like the hares. Only yesterday they tried to convince me that two of them ate a python. Can you imagine? A hare catching and eating a python.”

The little baboons roar with laughter while Uncle Bent-Bum pretends to be a hare trying to grab and bite a python.



“BOHOM!” Bigmouth shouts a loud ‘Look down’ warning. Immediately, everyone keeps quiet. They stare wide-eyed at the ground.

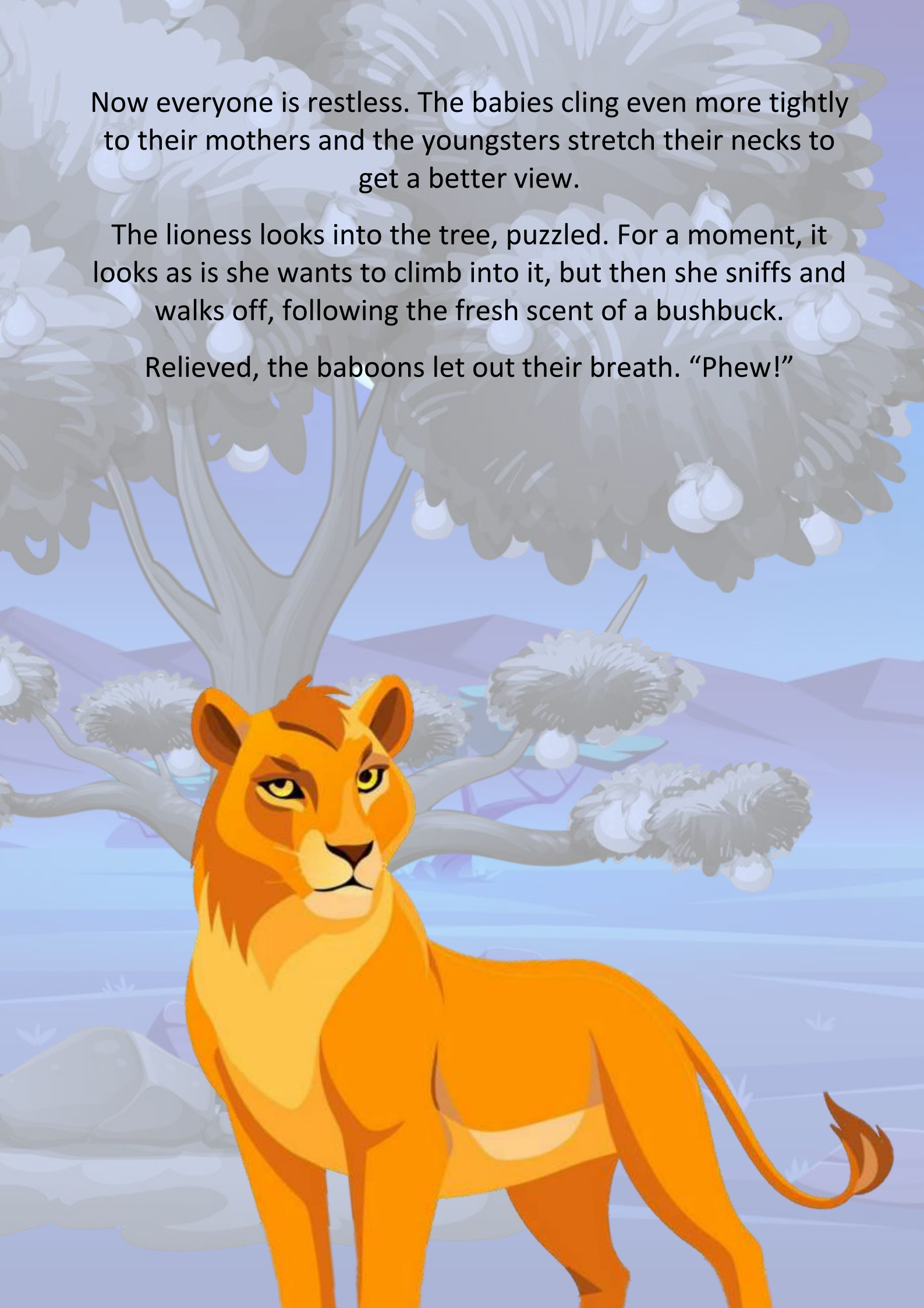
“What’s the matter, Bigmouth?” Uncle Wart whispers. “A lioness! There behind the big rock.” Bigmouth points at the rock.



Now everyone is restless. The babies cling even more tightly to their mothers and the youngsters stretch their necks to get a better view.

The lioness looks into the tree, puzzled. For a moment, it looks as if she wants to climb into it, but then she sniffs and walks off, following the fresh scent of a bushbuck.

Relieved, the baboons let out their breath. “Phew!”



“Well, now the little ones are completely awake,” says Aunt Itchy. “Tonight an old baboon won’t get any shut-eye.”

“Hey, that reminds me of the story about the crocodile who wouldn’t give the otters a turn to swim,” Uncle Knobs says and sits up straight.

“Well, well,” laughs Aunt Mangy. “Old Knobby is awake for a change. Come on, Knobby, do tell the story before you fall asleep again.”



“How could you be telling stories at such a dangerous time?” moans Aunt Moanie.

“Don’t listen to her, Knobby,” says Uncle Non-Stop. “We’re all awake now. The little ones might as well hear a story. Maybe some of them will stop chewing their tails so nervously.”

“Ah, Uncle Non-Stop,” Stump says annoyed and lets go of his tail.

“Alright,” says Uncle Knobs. “I’m not as good as a story teller as Uncle Non-Stop, but this is one of my favourites.”





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