



Tales From Under the Marula Tree

The Crocodiles' Dream



Two little otters stood on the riverbank staring into the deep water. "I'm starving," said Slip and scratched his belly.

"Me too," said Plunge and fiddled with her whiskers.

"Do you think we should?" Slip asked, close to the water's edge.

"I don't know. Shouldn't we wait for Mum and Dad?" asked Plunge and took a step backwards.



“I don’t think old Flat-Face is here today,” said Flip and leaned over.

“Slip, be careful!” begged Plunge. “It is not worth risking your life for a crab. Not even a fresh and crunchy crab!”

“Fresh and crunchy,” said Slip dreamily. He leaned over even more. “Fresh crab. Delicious, crunchy crab.”

“No, Slip, no!” shouted Plunge. She leapt forward and yanked him back.



“What are you doing?” exclaimed Slip, getting to his feet. He brushed his thick fur. “Now, I’m covered in mud, look!”

“I just wanted to ...” Plunge tried to explain, but a deep voice interrupted her.

“Good morning! Isn’t it a beautiful day for swimming? The water is really wonderful today.”

“Mr Flat-Face!” said Slip. He stared at the huge crocodile’s face peeping at them from the water.

“See!” whispered Plunge. “That’s what I was trying to warn you about.”



“Oh, just call me Uncle Flatty!” said Flat-Face and grimaced. They could see all his sharp teeth. “We river dwellers are one big happy family after all. Aren't you coming in today? It really is the perfect day for catching crabs. I must say, I don't think I've ever seen such nice, big, juicy crabs like the ones I've seen this morning. And so tame, you'd think they're asking to be eaten! Not that I'm allowed to eat crab now.



My dear old wife, Aunt Snappy, feels I've picked up too much weight these past few months. I'm not allowed to sink my teeth into anything but impala. Not even a tiny little tender warthog for dessert." Flat-Face sighed. "But, I must admit, the diet is working. I'm already leaner and can swim faster and wrestle better. Hey, jump in and we'll race to the opposite bank. Not that I think I can ever beat one of you lightning-fast little otters, but I would love to show you how well my diet is working."



“I must say, Uncle Fat-Face, you do look leaner than the last time I saw you,” said Flip.

“Oh, thank you, child,” said Flat-Face. “It really warms my crocodile heart to hear you say that.”

“Are you crazy!” Plunge scolded her brother. “Only last week he almost caught you and now you’re making chit-chat with him. What do you think Mum and Dad will say when they hear about this?”



“But you heard him! He’s on an impala diet,” said Slip.

“Sure, and since when can an otter believe a word of what a crocodile says?” asked Plunge.

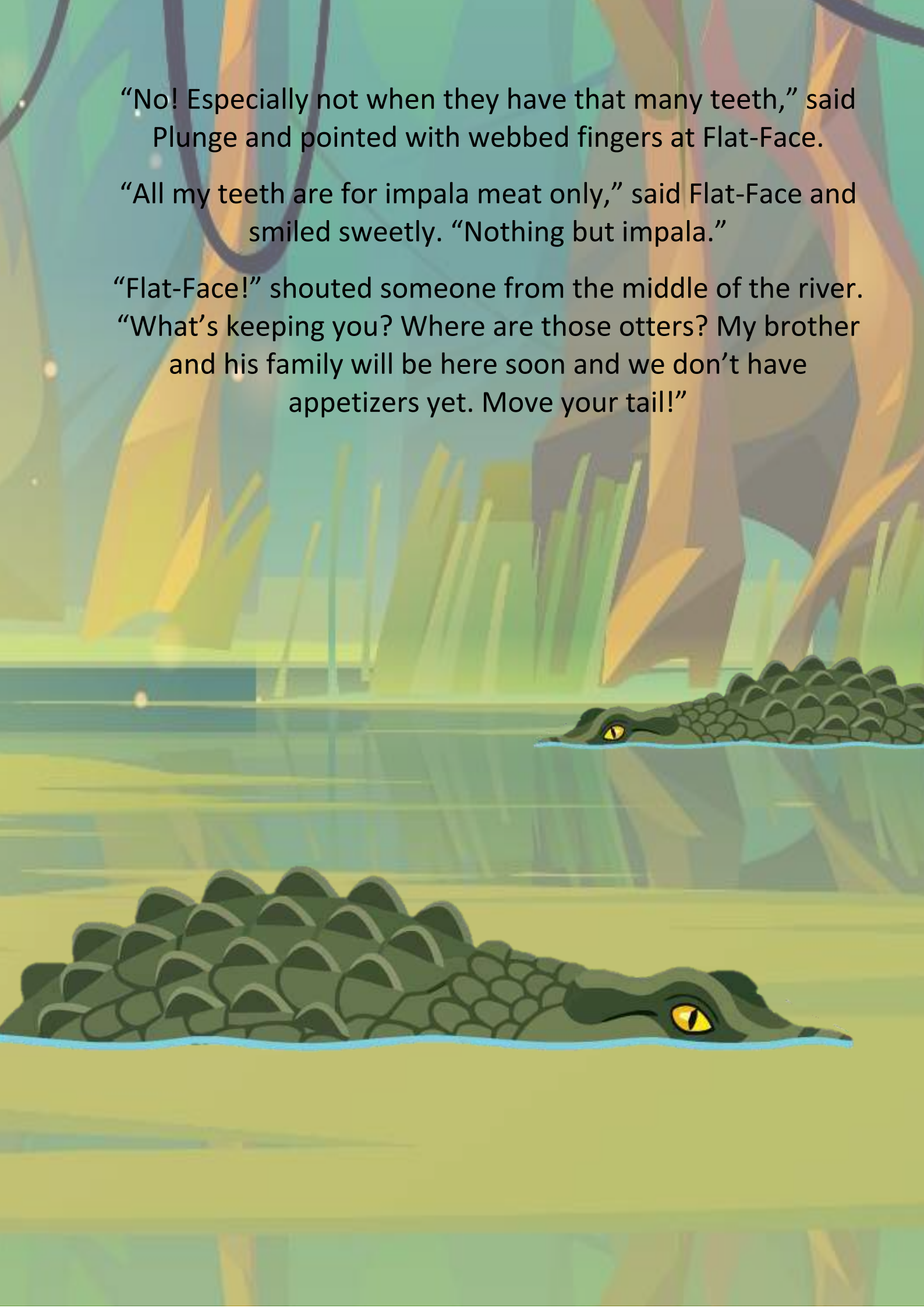
“You never believe anyone,” said Slip.



“No! Especially not when they have that many teeth,” said Plunge and pointed with webbed fingers at Flat-Face.

“All my teeth are for impala meat only,” said Flat-Face and smiled sweetly. “Nothing but impala.”

“Flat-Face!” shouted someone from the middle of the river. “What’s keeping you? Where are those otters? My brother and his family will be here soon and we don’t have appetizers yet. Move your tail!”



“I’m coming, Snappy!” shouted Flat-Face over his shoulder. He turned back to them and said: “Aunt Snappy’s brother and his family are coming to visit. They are such loving, good-hearted crocodiles. Won’t touch anything but grass. They would really like to meet all the river dwellers. How about it, don’t you want to say hello?”



Suddenly, a pebble hit Flat-Face right between the eyes.

“Get away from our kids, you mud-mouth!” shouted Dad.

Another pebble hit the crocodile on the tip of his nose.

“Take a hike, you scaly creature!” shouted Mum.

“Rrrr!” roared Flat-Face with rage. He slapped his tail on the water. Slip and Plunge jumped back when the wave of water hit them.

“I’ll get you, you’ll see,” hissed Flat-Face. “Sooner or later, you’ll have to come into the water. I’ll be waiting for you.”



“Rustling reeds! What were you thinking?” Dad was very upset.

“How could you make small talk with that snapper mouth?” asked Mum. She clutched her heart. “You were very nearly crocodile food.”

“I tried to warn Slip,” said Plunge, “but he wouldn’t listen.”

“Then you catch crabs on the riverbank,” scolded Dad. “Never get into the water when there might be a crocodile lurking around.”



“But there are always crocodiles in the water,” moaned Slip. “When will we ever get a chance to swim? The biggest crabs are on the riverbed. I want to swim and dive and catch crabs. Not skulk around like a skunk on the riverbank”

Mum sighed out loud. “We understand, my child, but you can’t risk your life just for fun. None of us can.”

“Oh, if only the crocodiles weren’t always in the water,” said Plunge. “Imagine how wonderful our lives would be.”



“It’s no use dreaming about a river without crocodiles,” said Dad. “Dreams won’t fill our tummies. Let’s go and find something to eat. There must be a few small crabs somewhere on the riverbank.”



That night, while the otters were looking up at the stars, Slip said: “Look, those stars over there look like a crab.”

“And those stars over there look like a big river full of crabs,” said Plunge and groaned softly. “Fresh, crunchy crabs.”

“All you ever think about is crab,” said Mum.

“We’re still hungry,” said Slip.



“That cloud over there looks just like a hungry crocodile,”
said Dad and gave the little ones a warning look.

“Hmmm, Flat-Face would love that,” said Owl from a tree.
She stared at the stars.

“A crocodile gliding like a cloud ...”

“Good evening, Owl,” greeted the otters.

“Do you think old Flat-Face wishes he was a cloud?” asked
Plunge.



“Not a cloud,” answered Owl. “But a flying crocodile. He told me so himself one night. He said it is every crocodile’s dream. Apparently they are very jealous of the ducks who can swim and fly.”

Slip shook his head. “Can you imagine what a terrible time all the other animals on land would have.”

Mum nodded. “Yes, now we know things could be much worse.”



The next day it was very hard. While the others were looking for crabs on the riverbank, Plunge thought about what Owl had said. If crocodiles could fly, there would be times when there were no crocodiles in the river. Then the otters could dive and catch crabs without anyone bothering them. It would be wonderful.



“Phew, it’s hot,” said Slip. “Just look how the earth is shimmering from the heat.”

“Yes,” said Plunge. “Those trees over there look like they’re hovering in the heat wave.”

“Did you say hover?” asked Slip with a twinkle in his eyes.



“Yes ... are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Plunge asked, smiling. “Let’s go and tell Mum and Dad about our plan.”

The next day, it was cloudy, but the one after that was very hot again. Just the type of day the otters had been waiting for. Just before dawn, Dad slipped across the rocky bank to the other side of the river. There he waited patiently for the right moment. When the day was at its hottest the other three otters were standing on the riverbank. They pretended not to see Flat-Face in the water.



“It’s flying really more fun than swimming, Mummy?” asked Plunge out loud.

“Oh, much more fun,” answered Mum. “But shush, not so loud. We don’t want the crocodiles to find out about it.”

“But isn’t it difficult?” asked Slip.

“Not if you practice enough,” answered Mum. “The secret is to stand in the sun and concentrate very hard. Eventually, you’ll start gliding. Look, Dad just started hovering over there.”



Dad was standing on the opposite bank in the bright sunlight.
He seemed to be hovering in the heat wave.

“Oh, I can’t wait to learn how to glide,” said Plunge excitedly.

“But just remember,” said Mum. “The crocodiles must never find out about this. If they knew how easy it was to glide, they would also want to do it. It must be our little secret.”



Flat-Face was smiling in the river. Just wait until the other crocodiles hear about this, he thought and laughed slyly.

The next day, there was hardly room to move on the rocky bank. The crocodiles had been basking in the sun since dawn. They were concentrating very hard.

“Are you gliding yet, Snappy?” Flat-Face wanted to know from his wife.



“Shut up, Flatty!” she snapped at him. “I’m trying to concentrate.”

By noon the crocodiles were boiling hot. They felt very sleepy and dizzy from the heat.

Suddenly, Mum shouted from the river, “Oh no, look! The crocodiles are starting to glide! Who told them about our secret?”

“It’s true,” shouted Flat-Face, drunk from the heat. “I can feel it. I’m gliding. I’m gliding!”



“Us too!” shouted the others. “We’re
gliding! We’re gliding!”

“Oh, Mummy! Look, all the crocodiles are
gliding so well!” Plunge shouted, nibbling
on a fat crab in the river.



“Those rascals!” shouted Slip. “Now, they’re gliding even better than us!” Then he dived down for another big crunchy crab with a big smile on his face. Ever since that day, the crocodiles love to bask in the sun. All of them still believe they can glide. And the otters are encouraging them, because with the crocodiles lying on the bank, they have the whole river to themselves for hours on end.



“Oh, I hate crocodiles,” says Aunt Jiggle-Jowl and shivers.

“But that’s to be expected, Jiggles,” says Uncle Fiddle-Foot.

“The crocodile nearly ate you that day.”

The older baboons nod. Most of them were there when Aunt Jiggle-Jowl fell out of the tree next to the river – right on top of a huge female crocodile.



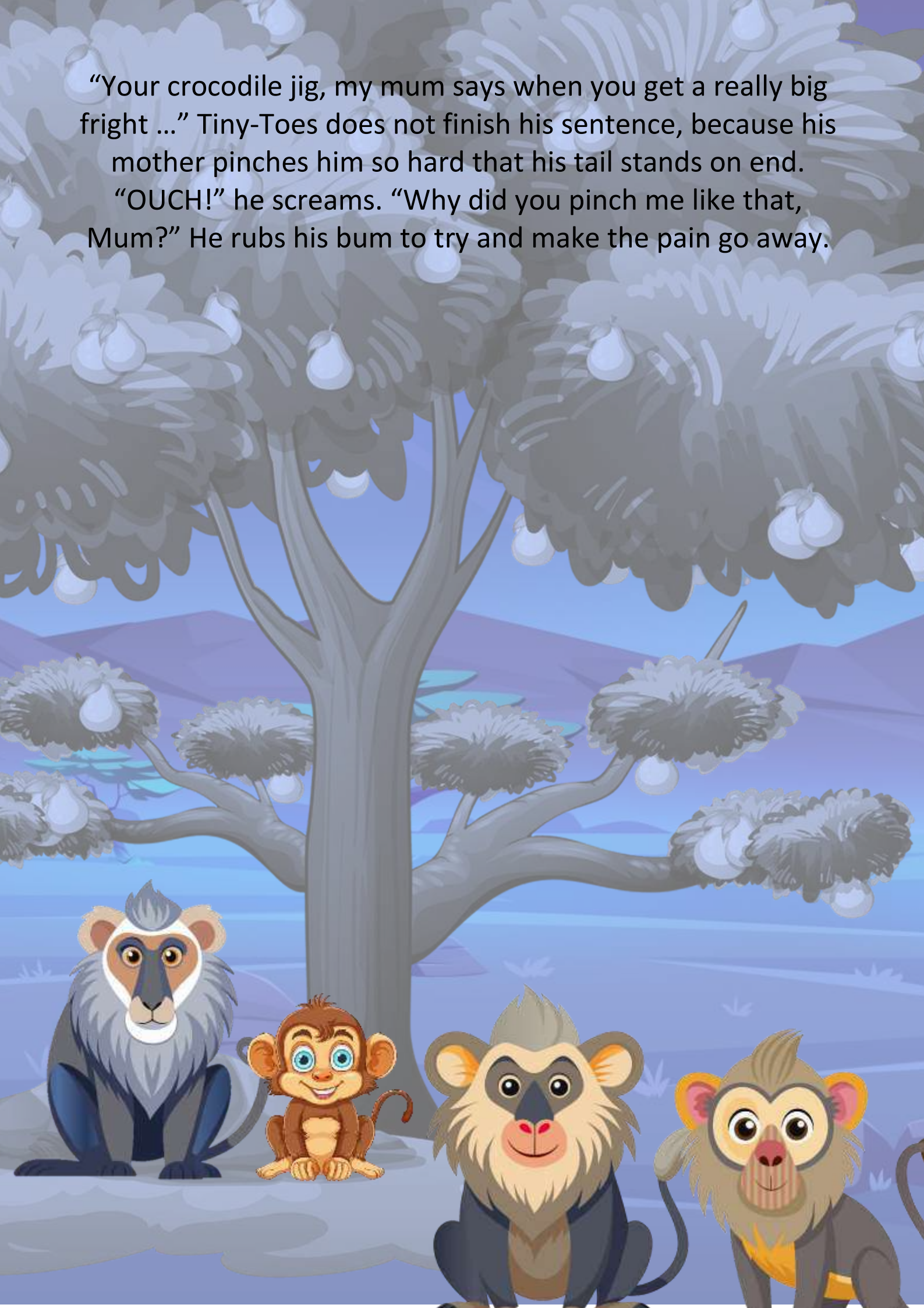
“Was that the time Aunt Jiggle-Jowl learned her funny jig?” asks Tin-Toes.

“Which funny jig?” asks Aunt Jiggle-Jowl. She is obviously annoyed.



“Your crocodile jig, my mum says when you get a really big fright ...” Tiny-Toes does not finish his sentence, because his mother pinches him so hard that his tail stands on end.

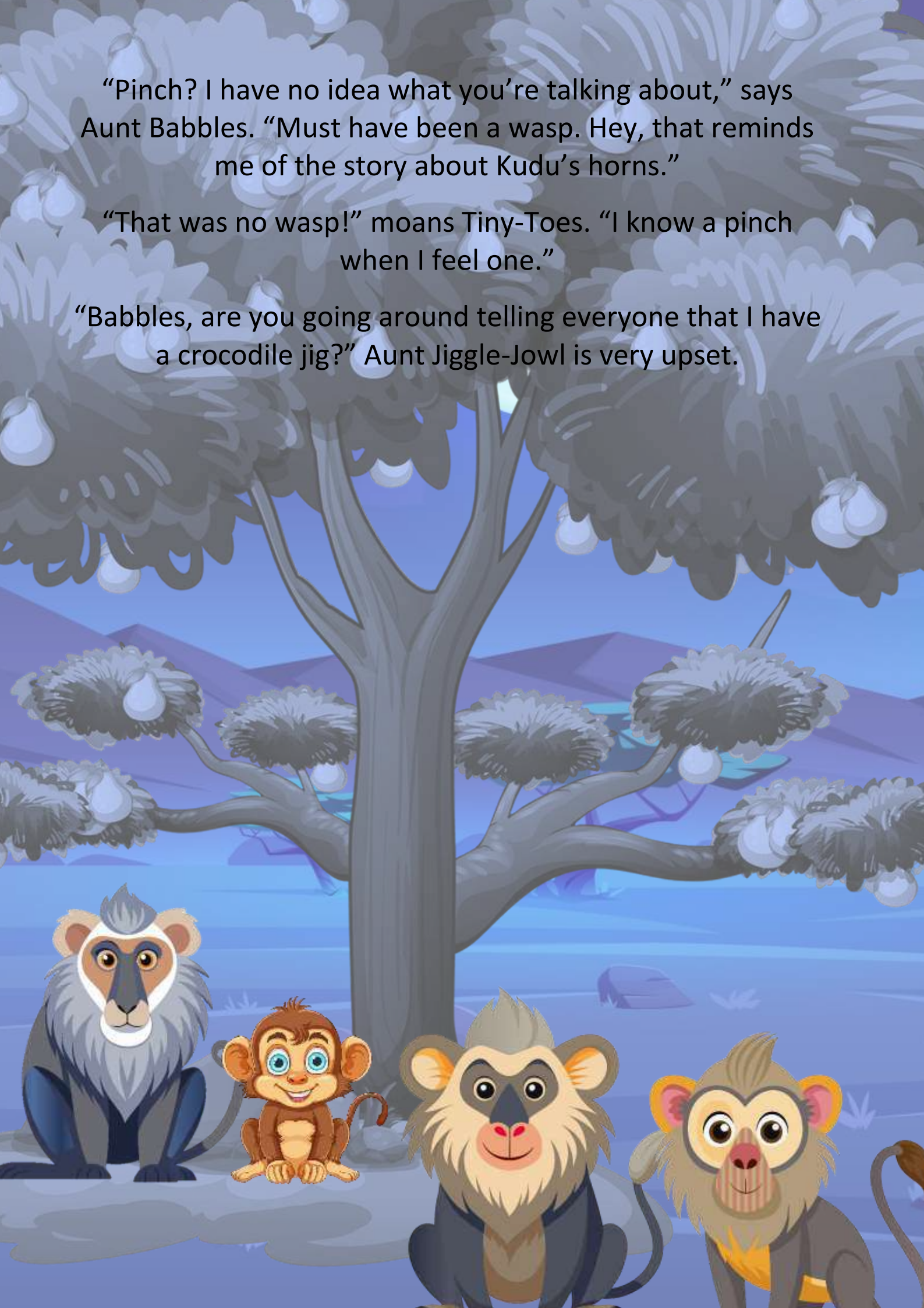
“OUCH!” he screams. “Why did you pinch me like that, Mum?” He rubs his bum to try and make the pain go away.



“Pinch? I have no idea what you’re talking about,” says Aunt Babbles. “Must have been a wasp. Hey, that reminds me of the story about Kudu’s horns.”

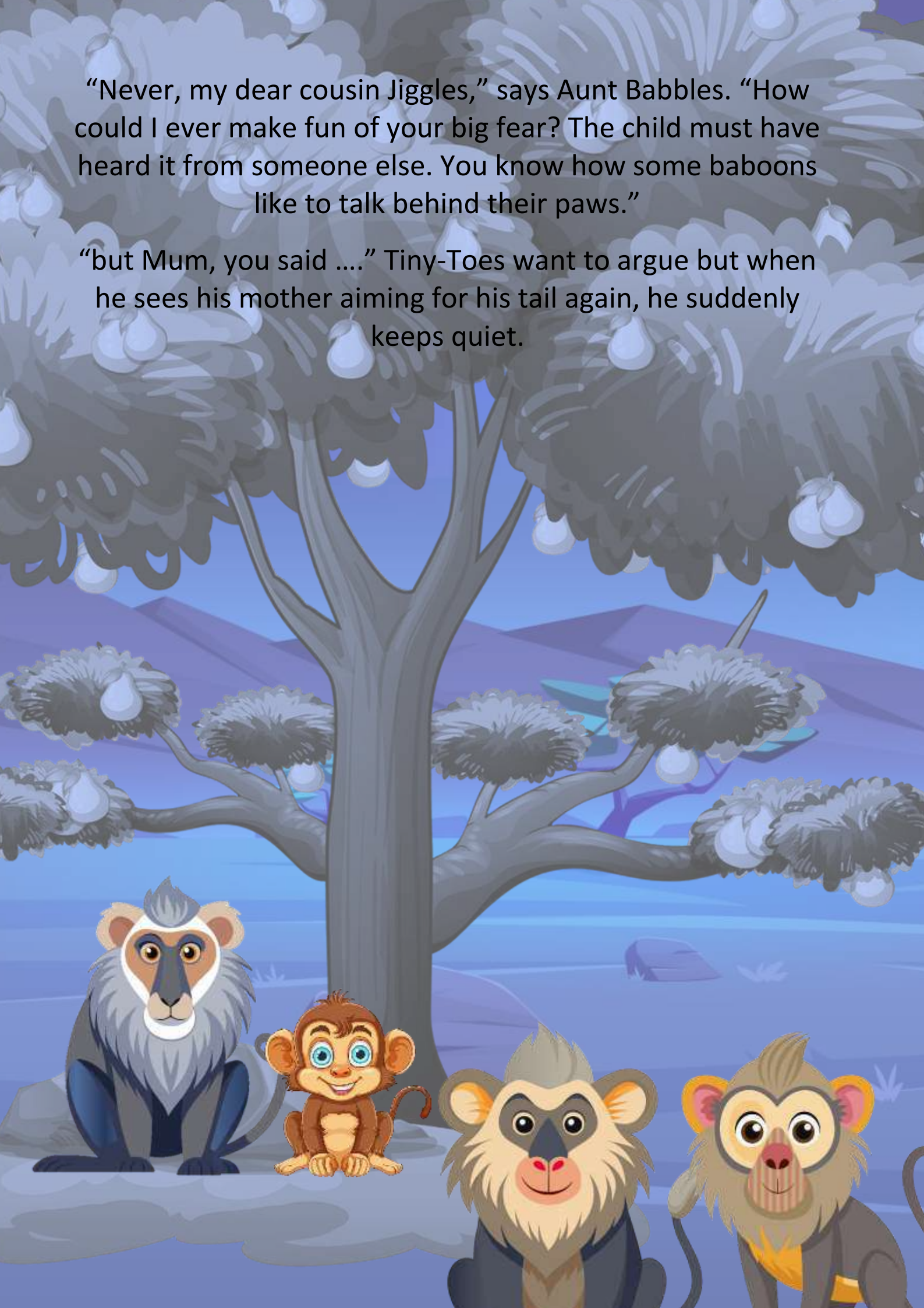
“That was no wasp!” moans Tiny-Toes. “I know a pinch when I feel one.”

“Babbles, are you going around telling everyone that I have a crocodile jig?” Aunt Jiggle-Jowl is very upset.



“Never, my dear cousin Jiggles,” says Aunt Babbles. “How could I ever make fun of your big fear? The child must have heard it from someone else. You know how some baboons like to talk behind their paws.”

“but Mum, you said” Tiny-Toes want to argue but when he sees his mother aiming for his tail again, he suddenly keeps quiet.



“Once upon a time, Kudu didn’t have such twisted horns,”
says Aunt Babbles.

“Kudu’s horns used to be long and straight.”

“Some baboons have no respect for another’s fears,” Aunt
Jiggle-Jowl says, glaring at Aunt Babbles.

“Kudu was very proud of his straight horns,” Aunt Babbles
went on a care in the world.



