

Shero to the Rescue

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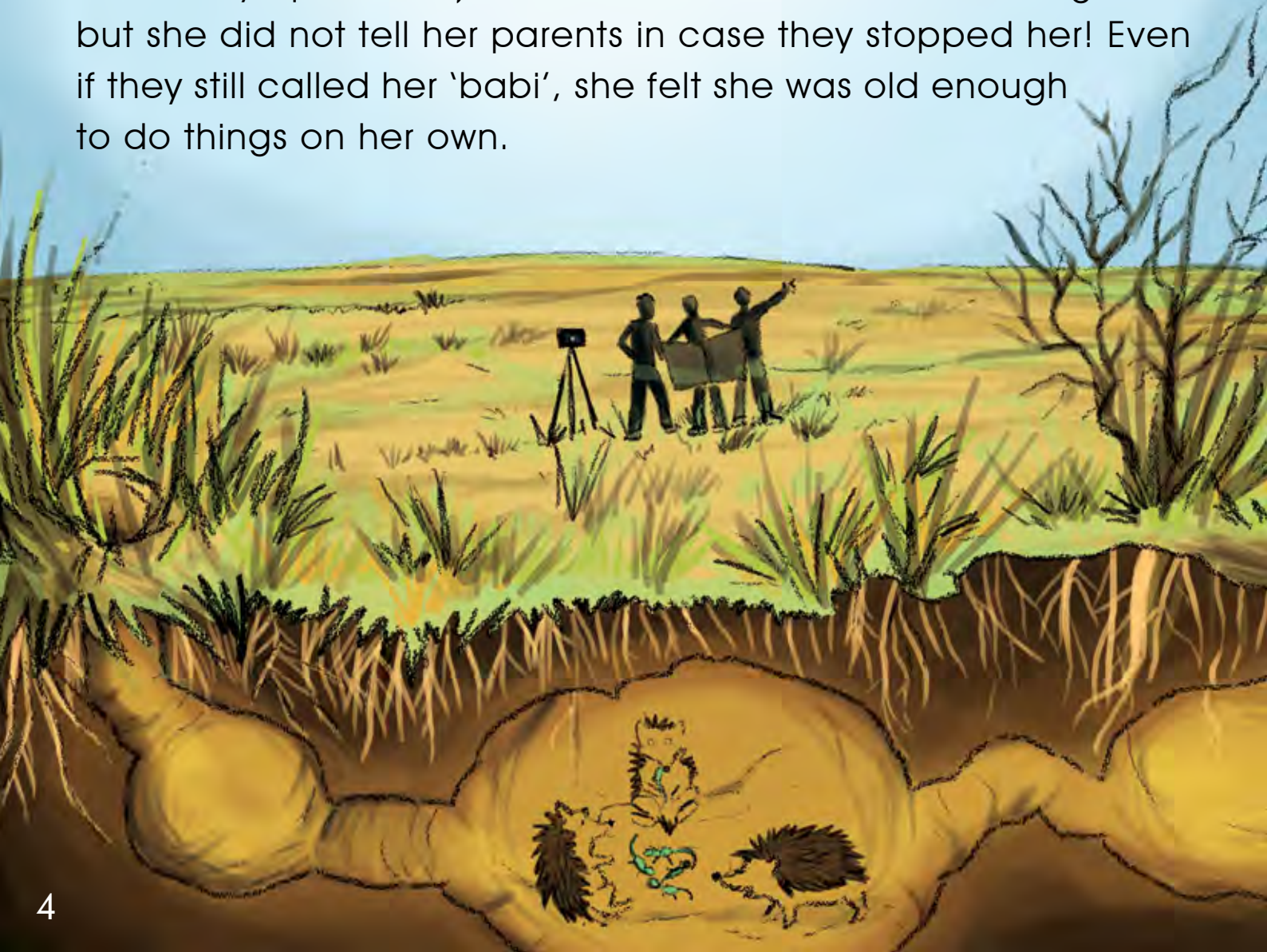
in memory of Bindia Thapar, brilliant illustrator and caring sis-in-law

“What’s the matter, Sherobabi?” Mama Hedgehog had been watching Hedgehog Junior nibble at her dinner, rather than attack it with her usual enthusiasm... Strange, given that today she had brought in some specially tasty lizards for the whole family to eat. They had all gathered in the biggest chamber of their underground burrow.



Shero looked up. "Mama, I was out playing with my friends in the field today, and I saw some people I've never seen before. They had some strange thing with them, and they walked over the whole field looking through it."

Papa Hedgehog said, "Don't worry, Junior, probably just some visitors." But this did not satisfy Shero. She was the inquisitive kind (her parents complained sometimes that she asked too many questions!). She decided she would investigate... but she did not tell her parents in case they stopped her! Even if they still called her 'babi', she felt she was old enough to do things on her own.



The next day, Shero slipped out of the burrow after her parents had fallen asleep. She headed straight to Gho Uncle's. A desert monitor lizard, Gho was known to roam around all over the grassland that Shero's family lived under... and also the nearby desert. Maybe he knew who these people were.



Gho was busy finishing a breakfast of beetles and some eggs Shero could not recognize. When she came up, Gho offered Shero some of these titbits, but Shero was so restless, she ignored them and asked, "Gho Uncle, did you notice those strange men on our grounds yesterday?" Smiling to himself, for Shero was never known to refuse a tasty snack, Gho said "Yes, I too was wondering what they were up to. But I don't know... shall we go ask our friend Saslu?"



On getting an excited nod, Gho quickly licked his lips for remaining crumbs. Shero noticed that Gho's tongue was forked, like that of a snake, and decided to ask him one day why that was so. For the moment, she was content to scamper after Gho as he trotted off in the direction of the hideout of Saslu, also (somewhat grandly) known as the Indian hare.



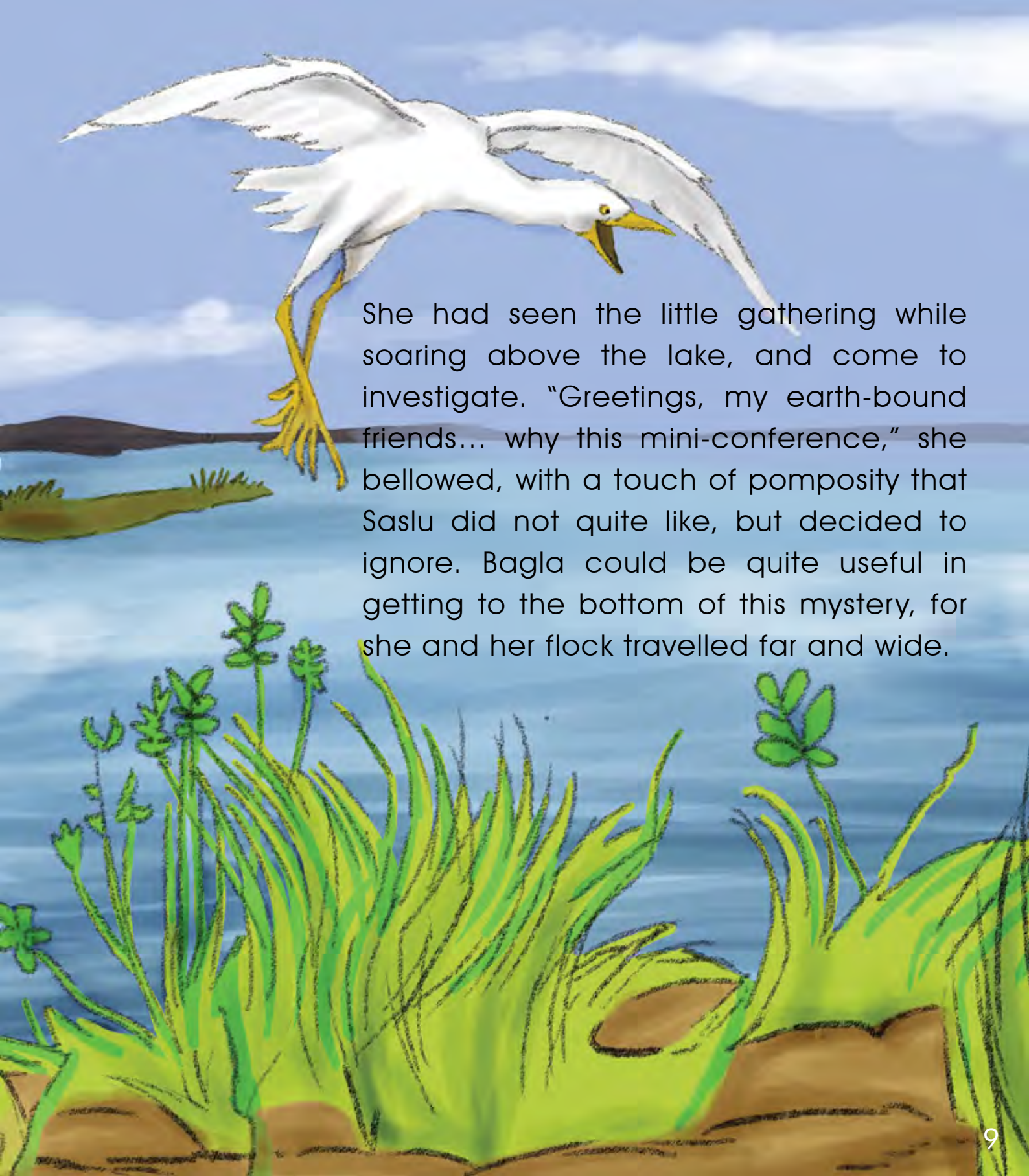
Saslu was at home, just readying himself to go out. But if Gho had not known where to look and what to look for, he would have easily missed him, so well did Saslu's earth-coloured body blend into the background. Gho and Shero knew to look out for a couple of large leaf-shaped objects sticking out of the ground, which were Saslu's rather large ears. In fact these ears were what Gho knew could help them solve the mystery, for Saslu often used them as powerful recorders that could hear the faintest of sounds at great distance.



Saslu had certainly heard something. The men had said something about setting up 'the building' here, and 'the parking lot' at the far end of the field. And also something about a pipe leading off into a nearby lake. But he had not heard any more details, said Saslu rather sadly (for he loved telling long stories).

They were just beginning to discuss how they could find out more, when a shadow fell over them. Shero, Gho and Saslu looked up in alarm, then relaxed... it was only Bagla the cattle egret coming in to land near them.





She had seen the little gathering while soaring above the lake, and come to investigate. "Greetings, my earth-bound friends... why this mini-conference," she bellowed, with a touch of pomposity that Saslu did not quite like, but decided to ignore. Bagla could be quite useful in getting to the bottom of this mystery, for she and her flock travelled far and wide.

Indeed, Bagla had kept her eyes and ears open. She had noticed not just strange men, but other even stranger creatures. Apparently, there were huge four-legged beings with massive jaws, with men riding them, moving towards their field. She had wondered what this was all about, but not given it much more thought as the creatures were not going towards her lake. But when she was told what Saslu had heard about the pipe going into the lake, she too got worried.



The four animals decided they needed to consult the only creatures that may have the full picture: humans. No, not the strangers they had seen, but people who had shared their fields and homes more or less forever (judging by what their grandparents had told them): the Maldharis.

They were a little scared to go straight to the Maldharis, though, for however friendly they may be, humans could be unpredictable. So they did the next best thing, they went to Kalo Pado, the big black buffalo whose enormous size was matched only by his gentleness. Bagla was good friends with Pado, often sitting on his back to pick off ticks and insects from his body.



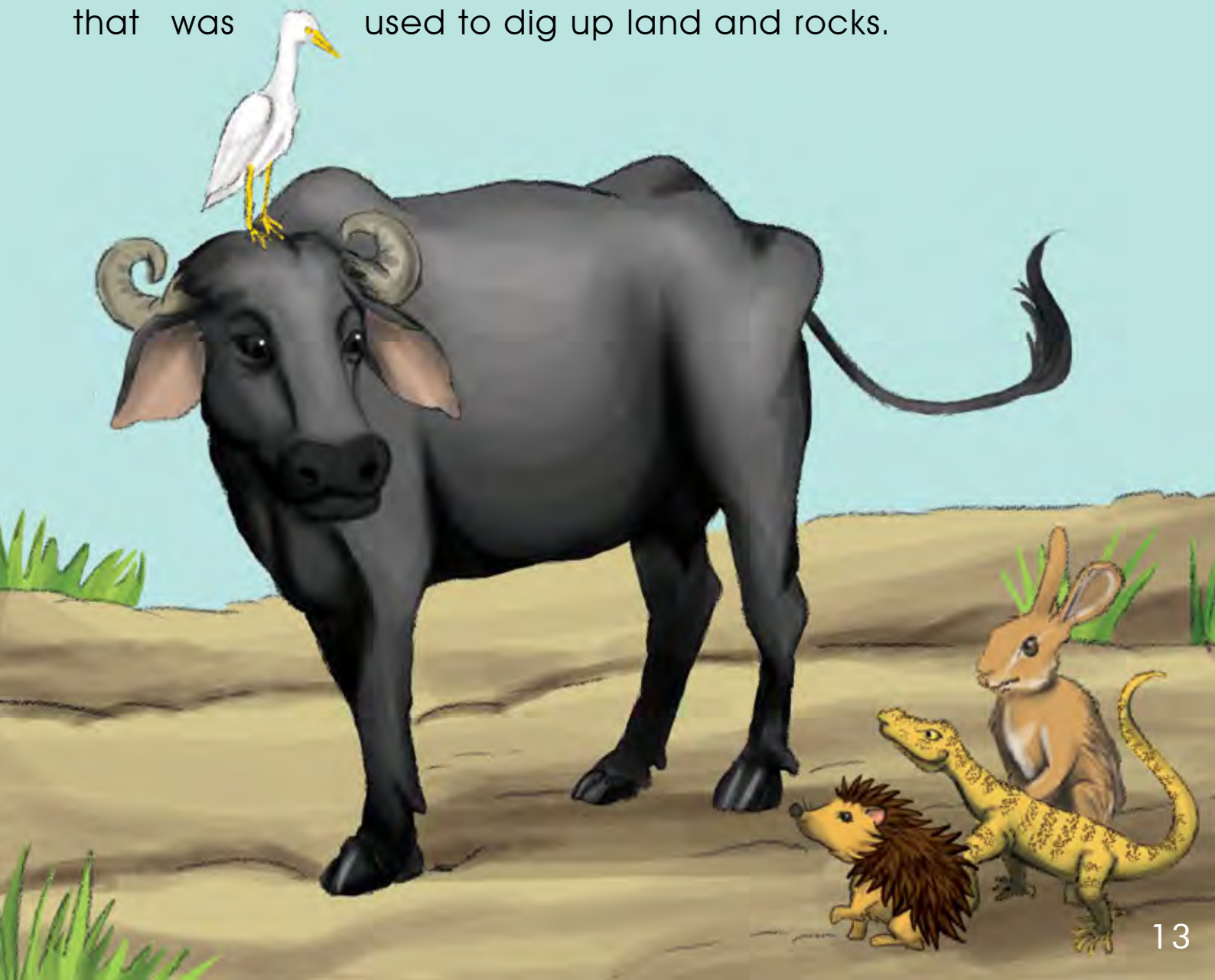
The foursome found Pado peacefully grazing in a patch of grass that had grown fresh after last week's rain. When he heard their story, he immediately took them to Sulemankaka, his owner.

"Arrey, why are you back so early? Normally you graze outside till I have to pull you back by your ears!" Sulemankaka exclaimed good-naturedly to Pado. This evoked giggles from Shero and Bagla, but Pado ignored them and quickly told Sulemankaka what they had told him.



Sulemankaka grew serious. "Only yesterday I heard that there is a proposal to build a factory on this land, and throw the waste into the lake. They even want to do mining in the desert to get salt and stones. They've already set up an office on the other side of the grassland. We will all be thrown out if this happens! We have all used these areas for centuries with no harm to anyone, they can't just do whatever they want here! We must do something... but what?"

Shero and her friends were stunned to hear this. They glanced at each other, and a silent understanding passed amongst them: they would think of something to do! But they did not mention this to Sulemankaka, as they did not really know what they would do. They only asked him if he knew what that four-legged creature with a huge jaw was; he laughed and told them it was no animal, but rather a human-made machine that was used to dig up land and rocks.



That evening, there was an emergency conference. Shero, Gho, Bagla, Saslu and Pado were present, with Pado grumbling that he was missing his daily wallow in the pond. They were joined by Oondardo the desert gerbil, a mouse-like creature who, like Shero, lived under the grassland. Also in attendance was Shahudi the Indian porcupine, her sharp quills combed down carefully so they did not accidentally poke someone. Arriving a little late was Oont the camel, whose excuse was that he was held up by the traffic; apparently the cow, buffalo and camel herds were on their annual migration, and this had choked up the normal grassland paths.



Shero, a bit nervously (most of the animals were older than her!), addressed the conference “Gho Uncle, Saslubhai, Padoji, Oontkaka, Shahudiben, and Oondardo, you know how important the grassland is for you! And Baglaben, what will happen if they pollute your lake... and think of the fish, they will all die! How will we welcome our migratory bird friends who spend winter here? And our friends in the desert, they too will lose their home if their sand is mined. If the acacia and other trees and the *ber* bushes are cut, our bird friends will have nowhere to perch on, nothing to eat. Surely we have to do something!”



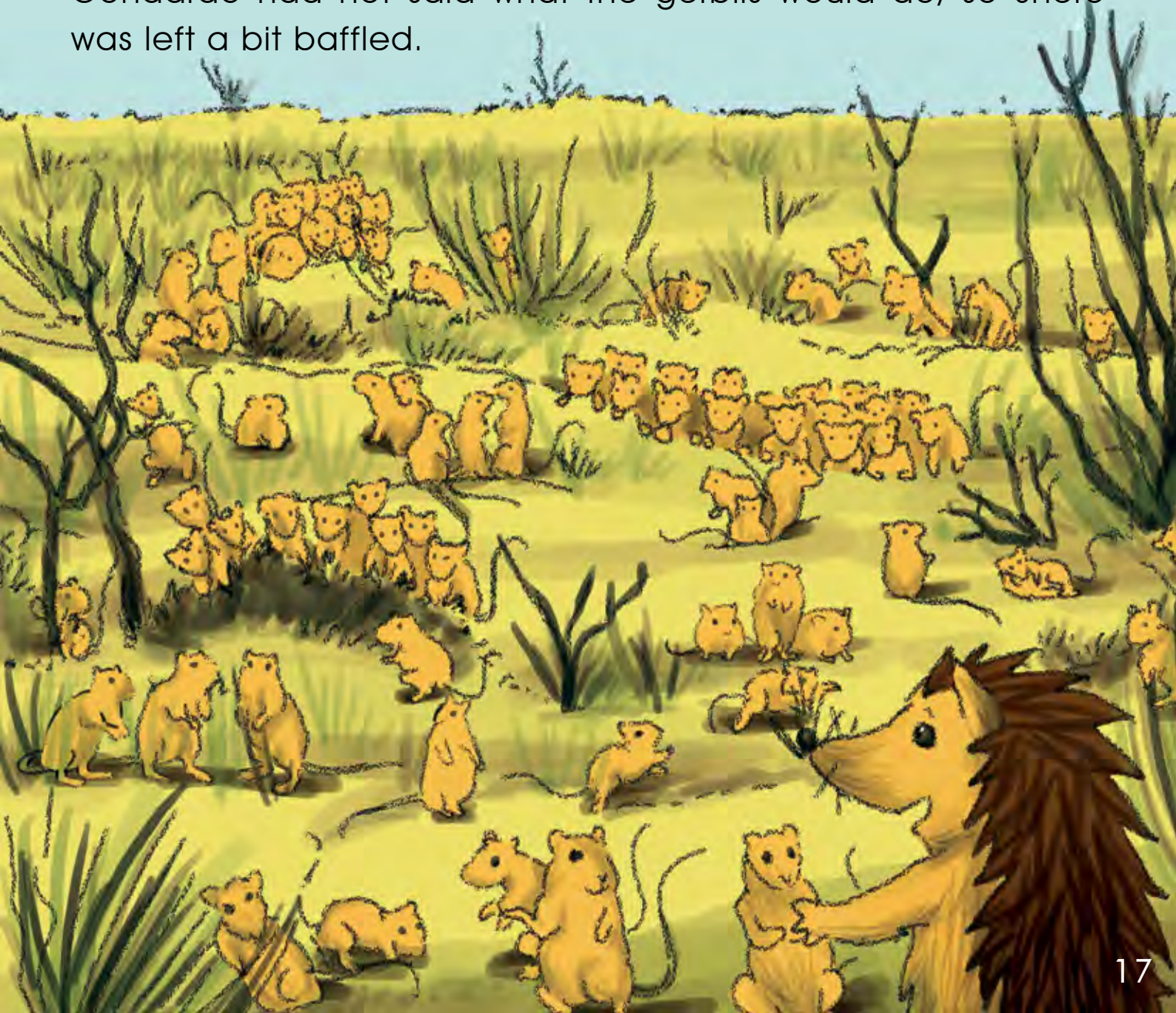


On one side of all the older animals, a small group of youngsters had also made a circle. While the older animals were agitatedly discussing what Shero had told them, she went up to her young friends. Another mini-speech followed (she was quite getting into the mood now!) "Friends, if the factory comes, there will be no playgrounds left for us, we will lose our homes! And maybe some nasty humans will catch us and take us away... away from our homes and our parents!" A collective gasp escaped from all the young animals. Varubaba, a young wolf, had tears in his eyes, but bravely said, "I'm going to tell my mama and papa about this, they will protect us!"

The meeting went on till late evening, and would have gone on longer had Mama hedgehog not come and shouted at all the animals for keeping Sherobabi awake all day. They reluctantly dispersed, but by then a plan had been hatched.



The next morning, Shero slipped out of her burrow again. She scampered out and over to the gerbil colony, and was amazed to find that Oondardo had gathered a hundred gerbils! They squeaked their hello to Shero, said bye, and disappeared before Shero could even respond! Oondardo had not said what the gerbils would do, so Shero was left a bit baffled.



She did not have much time to be baffled, though. A few minutes later, Shahudi the porcupine hobbled up, arched her back, and dropped a dozen sharp quills so close to Shero she jumped back in fright! "Thanks, Shahudi," said Shero, "these are going to be very useful, even if you nearly quilled, sorry killed me just now!" Shahudi, a rather shy creature who much preferred to come out at night rather than the day, mumbled, "Glad to be of help," and trundled back to her den to sleep. She, like Shero, was nocturnal.





At the same time as all this was happening in the fields, down at the lake Bagla was carrying out her own part of the plan. She called out to Maggar the crocodile on the other side of the lake (she would much rather not go too close to him!), and told him about the waste that might ruin their home. Maggar was most alarmed, and asked what could be done. Several fish and turtles, hearing this loud exchange, also bobbed their heads up and joined the conversation. As did a few butterflies and dragonflies that were flitting about in search of food. Together they decided on a course of action.



Gho, meanwhile, had trotted as fast as his short legs could take him, to the vast salt desert bordering their grassland home. On the way he had visited the den of Varu, the Indian wolf, to tell her of the impending danger. But Varu already knew, as her pup had been at the previous day's emergency meeting. At the desert's edge, Gho met up with a herd of Indian wild ass. Ghudkhar, the leader, was known to be a little haughty, perhaps because he had been told that the wild ass was unique, found only in this part of the world. But he forgot all his haughtiness when he was told about the possibility of mining starting in his home, and quickly agreed to the plan Gho described to him.



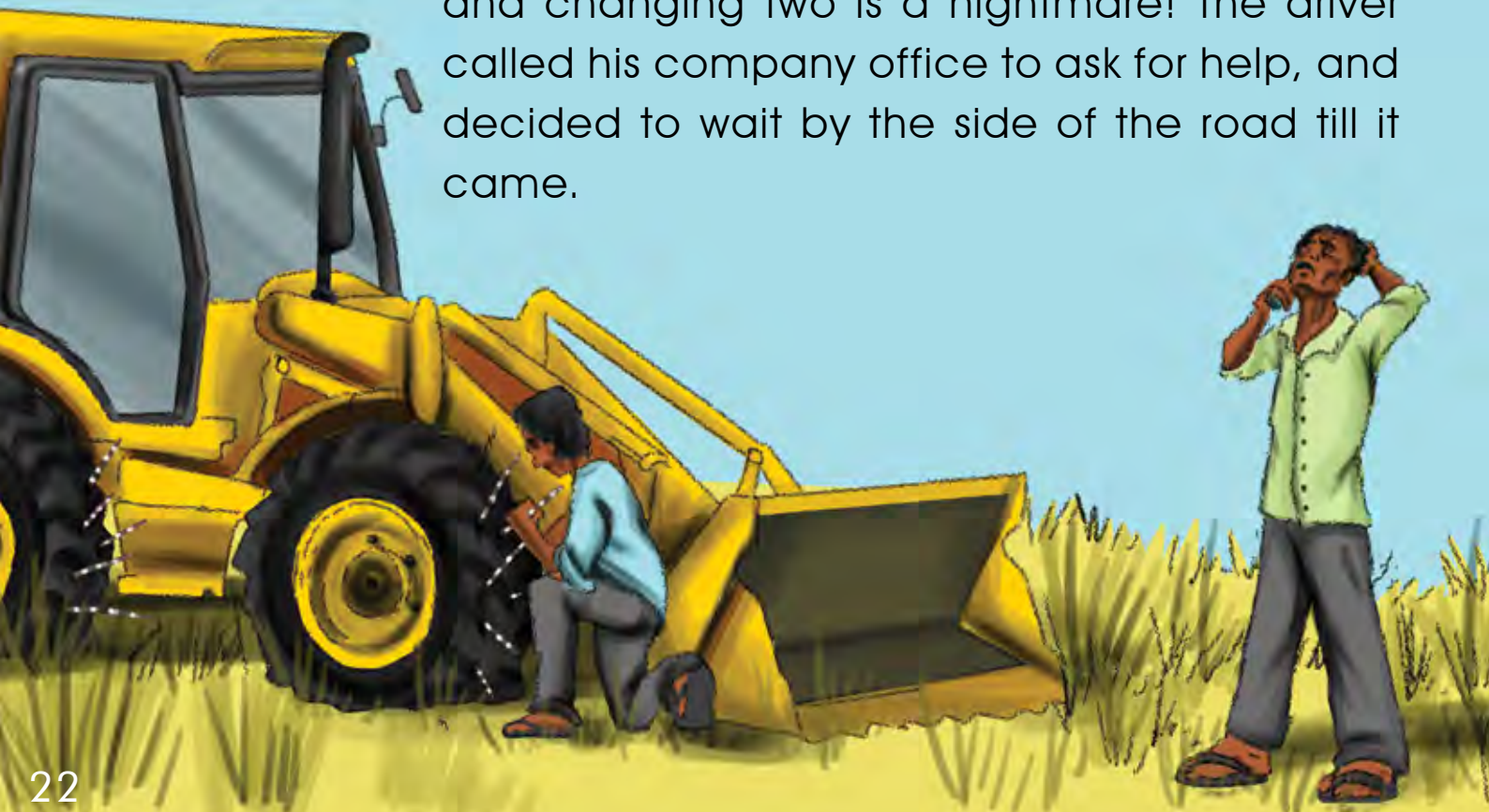


That night, Shero's parents were out looking for food. But she tried to sleep as she knew she had to be up the whole day tomorrow. Her friends were out there, carrying out their parts of the plan. Maggar and Varu had walked off in one direction, Shahudi in another. And the hundred gerbils were already somewhere, but could not be seen.



The next day dawned bright and clear, and the men driving the vehicle with the big jaws revved up its engine. Today they were to get to the grassland to start digging. They left early, hoping to do as much work before the mid-day sun made it hot. They were roaring along in a good mood, one of them even singing, when suddenly they heard two loud bangs and the vehicle jerked and swayed. Cursing now instead of singing, the driver and his assistant got off, and discovered to their horror that two tyres had burst. On closer inspection they found that there were several porcupine quills stuck in each tyre!!!

Now, you have to understand that changing a tyre on these huge vehicles is quite a task, and changing two is a nightmare! The driver called his company office to ask for help, and decided to wait by the side of the road till it came.





This is when they got their second shock. The vehicle had started sinking into the ground! They could not believe their eyes – a perfectly solid road had suddenly started caving in. They could only watch helplessly as the earth ate up half the vehicle, so to speak... very soon only the top part and the huge jaws were sticking out!



This is when the men got their third shock (in India, you know, things always happen in threes). Out of the ground emerged hordes of little mice (well, that's what the men thought, actually they were gerbils) squeaking and dancing in obvious delight! "I don't believe it," said the driver to his assistant, "These stupid mice seem to have dug up the ground under our vehicle!" They did not notice that in one corner there was also Shahudi the porcupine, grinning proudly (if a bit sleepily) because she had placed her quills at the perfect spot.



A few kilometres away in the office of Reldani Industries Ltd, the manager had received the driver's call. But he and his deputy could not move. When they had opened the door of their office to go help the stuck vehicle, they'd found a crocodile, mouth wide open showing his wicked teeth, and a wolf, grinning as devilishly, sitting just outside.

In desperation, they called their head office in Bhuj, where the owner of Reldani Industries, Mr. Jagdamba Nidani, got quite angry hearing all that had happened. He decided to head to the factory site with a big team of people. "I'll teach those animals a lesson," he thought to himself, and instructed the truck driver to drive as fast as he could.



Halfway to their destination, the truck had to come to a screeching halt. Ahead of them was a thick fog, except that it was twinkling and moving and seemed to be made of dozens of colours. Mr. Nidani and his colleagues were astounded, they'd never seen anything like this. Only when they peered closely did they realize it was a swarm of thousands and thousands of butterflies and dragonflies and damselflies, all hovering and flying just above the road, completely blocking the view.

When finally the swarm cleared, the next sight the men saw was even more astonishing.

There in front of them, on the road and on both sides, was a procession advancing towards them. Not of people, but of animals! It was as though a storybook of A to Z animals had come alive, with creatures from every page joining in. Ghudkhar and other wild asses, several of Oont's herd friends, and a dozen buffaloes led by Pado, were in front, possibly as protection for the smaller creatures. A few turtles could be seen on their backs, with Bagla and her egret and stork and crane friends dripping water on them from above so they did not dry up outside their pond homes. Sharing space on the buffaloes' backs (you know there is plenty of space there!) were many of the young animals that had gathered the day before to hear Shero's speech.





After these big animals were Varu's wolf friends (Varu was still keeping vigil at the company office), desert foxes and jackals, some of them showing off their scary teeth just in case anyone tried stopping the procession. Saslu and many other hares, their ears on alert, were the next in line... though they were keeping a wary distance from the wolves in front, just in case one of them suddenly felt hungry and decided to make a meal of a hare! The smaller creatures, including Gho and other monitor lizards, Shahudi and her porcupine family, hedgehogs other than Shero, made up the tail of the procession. There were even a few grasshoppers leaping from one animal back to the other, and several snakes slithering along on the road.

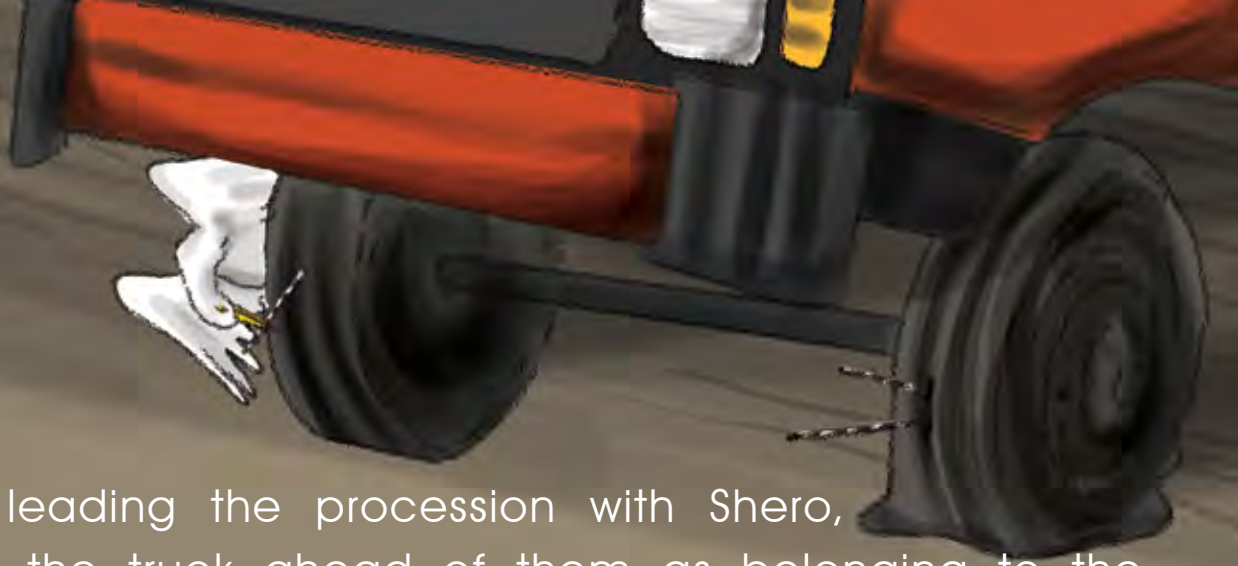




Far up in the sky, eagles and harriers were scanning the horizon for any sign of danger that the animals may face; one or two of them were also greedily eyeing the gerbils and snakes, but the rest of the birds told them sternly to forget their taste buds for the moment.

And where was Shero? She had been given pride of place right at the front with Ghudkhar and the other big animals, in recognition of her having sounded the alert in the first place. Shero's Mama and Papa were also there, sleepy and a little worried for their little one, but also proud of her!

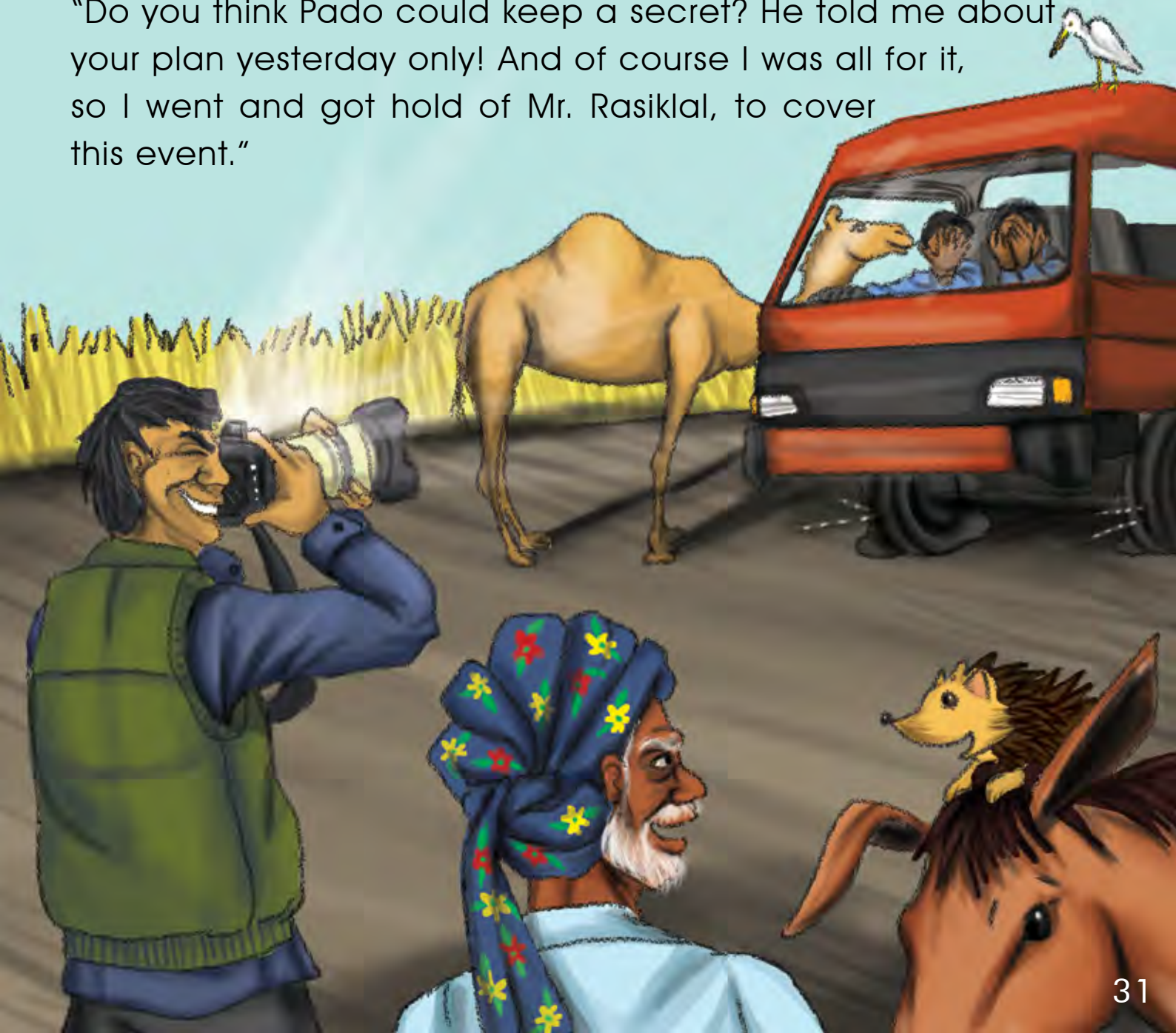




Ghudkhar, leading the procession with Shero, recognized the truck ahead of them as belonging to the company that was going to destroy their home. "Hey Shero", he called out to the hedgehog, "do you still have those quills that Shahudi had donated?" Shero did not need to be told anything further, he signalled to Bagla who was carrying the quills delicately in her beak. Promptly, two of the truck's tyres received the same treatment that the jaw-faced vehicle's tyres had, and the bangs were as loud. Passing the window of the truck, Oont the camel (the only one tall enough to see inside) gave a crooked grin to the men inside, and politely asked, "Would you like to join our procession... anyway now you'll have to walk home!"



Much to Mr. Nidani's embarrassment, that was the precise moment a reporter from Kachchh Times had landed up, and he caught the moment on his camera! "How," Shero asked him, "did you get to know we were coming?" But the reporter did not need to answer... just behind him was Sulemankaka. "Do you think Pado could keep a secret? He told me about your plan yesterday only! And of course I was all for it, so I went and got hold of Mr. Rasiklal, to cover this event."



And so, a merry band of several hundred animals (and two humans) made their way to Bhuj, the capital of Kachchh. By then word had spread rapidly of this strange procession, and all of Bhuj's human residents had lined the streets to watch it. "Mummy," said one young girl, "this is so much better than those boring Republic Day parades!" "Shhh," admonished her mother, afraid someone might overhear and think her daughter was unpatriotic, but secretly she agreed with her!



By the time the procession was half-way through Bhuj, it had greatly increased in size. Several animals that lived in the city had joined in: there were the mongooses, the bandicoots, a flock of ducks and geese, and several skinks and snakes that were otherwise rarely seen outside. For the first time, the people of Bhuj realized how much wildlife was living amidst them!

Looking up, they got the message clearly on a banner that a flock of birds was carrying, with the words “Kachchh is not just for humans!”



Slowly, the procession wound its way to the office of the District Collector of Kachchh. All the animals had been told that the DC was the king of the area, and responsible for giving permission to factories and roads and other such nasty things that humans built. There, outside the DC's office, a second pleasant surprise (Mr. Rasiklal the reporter was the first!) awaited them... there were many humans with banners and placards in support of the animals.



There were Maldharis of various communities, there were the salt-worker Agariyas, and there were members of various local organisations that were part of the Kachchh Navnirman Abhiyan. There were even some schoolchildren who wanted to clap for the young baby animals that were in the rally. They all cheered as Ghudkhar, Shero, Gho, Bagla, and Shahudi walked, hopped, or crept up the steps to the DC's room. Sulemankaka also joined them.



This was when the animals got the third pleasant surprise (we told you, things happen in threes here!). The DC not only greeted them warmly, he announced before they could even make their demands to him, “we know of your complaint, and we are already reconsidering our decision to put the factory there. In fact this matter has gone all the way to Ahmedabad and Delhi.”

“How?” the surprised animals exclaimed in chorus. Sulemankaka spoke up, “when I heard your story, I contacted some newspapers. I explained that the grassland and lake and desert were important to you and us. I told them that any development activities here should be only if you and we both agree. And a factory like this is not development!”

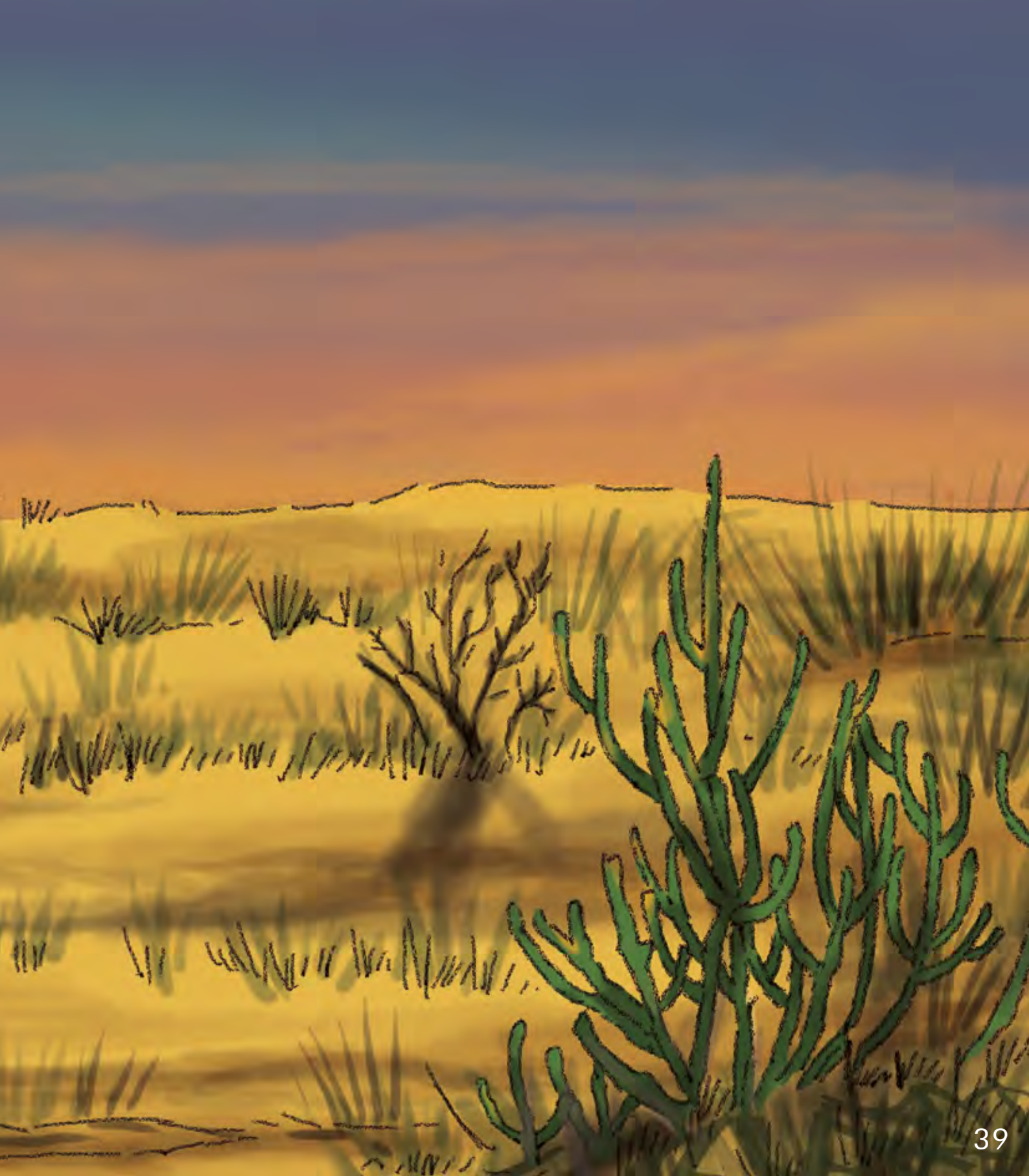


Ghudkhar was a little miffed, as he had prepared a lengthy speech to convince the DC. Shero too had one of her speeches ready! Now there was no need for it. But Ghudkhar and Shero immediately forgot their disappointment, for all around them a mighty cheer had gone up. It was a strange medley of sounds the likes of which Bhuj had never heard: squeaks, squawks, croaks, trumpets, brays, hoots, hisses, and the sounds of fluttering, hoof-pounding, drumming (this one was Bagla tapping on a turtle's back), and much else!



On the way back home, Shero realized she had still not asked Gho about his forked tongue. She trundled up to Ghudkhar, on whom Gho was taking a ride (he had got really tired walking all the way to Bhuj). But she found Gho draped lazily on both sides of Ghudkhar's back, fast asleep, a tiny bit of his tongue sticking out of his mouth. Shero did not have the heart to wake him up and realized she would have to wait till the next big adventure to find out the secret of the forked tongue!





Young Shero lives in Kachchh, a beautiful place in Gujarat, in the West of India. One day she sees some strange people near her home. What are they doing there? When she discovers their plans, she panics. She rallies together many other animals living in the grasslands, wetlands and desert of Kachchh. What can they do to save their land, their homes? Read on to discover...



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