13rushes presents

The Little Brushmaker

No one lost their fur this Christmas.



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The animals behind the story

1 / A Blush of Her Own

Once upon a time, not so very far away, six animals shared a stone cottage at the edge of a wood.

On rainy spring mornings, Wang Wang and Weeku perched over the gutter. At Weeku’s whistle, three notes up and a tumble down, Chestnut and Oatley dropped in their sticks. From the window Mabel kept score. Sometimes the winning stick was one Oatley had dropped in yesterday.



In summer they picked blackberries until Oatley had purple whiskers. In autumn Chestnut climbed the chestnut tree and called down everything he could see.

“And after the wall?” Oatley always asked. That was where the road went out of sight.

The two cockatiels had lived among people and knew something of the world beyond that bend. Oatley and Chestnut hardly ever went past the garden. There was always somebody at home who wanted to play.



By Christmas Eve the snow had reached the bottom of the windows. Mabel was wrapping the last parcel. “May we have the scraps?” called Wang Wang from the curtain rail.

Wang Wang tipped the cup and made it snow indoors. Weeku caught a flake in his beak. Oatley caught a star on his nose.

Outside, they tried it with real snow. Weeku's angel had wings. Oatley's had hooves.





When they came in to warm up, Wang Wang shook the snow from her crest. On the sill was the silver teaspoon she liked. She turned one pale yellow cheek towards it and brushed her feathers with the tip of her wing.

"Just there," she whispered. Chestnut had seen her do that when the first leaves came out, and again when the leaves fell. Once he had asked what she was doing. "Trying on blush," she had told him.

From her cage by the shop counter, she used to watch a woman dip a brush into a little pot of blush. One sweep across each cheek. On the television behind the counter, an advert showed it close up. Wang Wang could see the bristles bend.

The shop wanted birds with orange cheek patches like Weeku's. Wang Wang's feathers had always grown in pale yellow.

One evening they put her cage outside beside the rubbish bags. Weeku found her there. When a man lifted her cage onto a wagon, Weeku followed. He could still remember the sound its wheels made on the cobbles.



The workbench

Chestnut waited until Wang Wang had gone back to the curtain rail. Then he beckoned Oatley and Weeku behind the woodpile.

All autumn he had been working on her Christmas present. He lifted the sack that covered his bench. Oatley put his nose under it to help.

A brush handle, carved by Chestnut from a fallen cherry branch and rubbed smooth with sand until it shone. A hollow collar, wider at one end, that fitted snugly over the wood. Oatley had been collecting twigs and scraps for weeks, and kept bringing more, even after they had all the twigs anyone could need.

All it lacked was the part that mattered: the soft part.

They had tried everything.

Leaves, which split. Grass, which crumbled. Moss, which smeared. Thistledown, which blew away the moment Chestnut breathed. Weeku had offered one of his own feathers and they had all said no, very firmly: feathers were not theirs to take, not even from a friend who offered.

Not one of them had ever thought of using fur. Why would they? Fur belonged to the animal wearing it. That was the whole point of fur.

"It has to be soft," said Chestnut. "Softer than anything. It's for her face."

"The woods have soft things," said Weeku. "Further in. I've seen them from the treetops."

Chestnut rolled his lucky acorn between his paws. It was powder blue, smooth as a river stone, the only one he had ever seen. He always held it when he was making up his mind.

"Then we go further in," he said. "Today. So she has it on Christmas morning."

The wall

"Where does that path go?" Chestnut asked Mabel, too casually. "The one past the stone wall."

Mabel's scissors stopped.

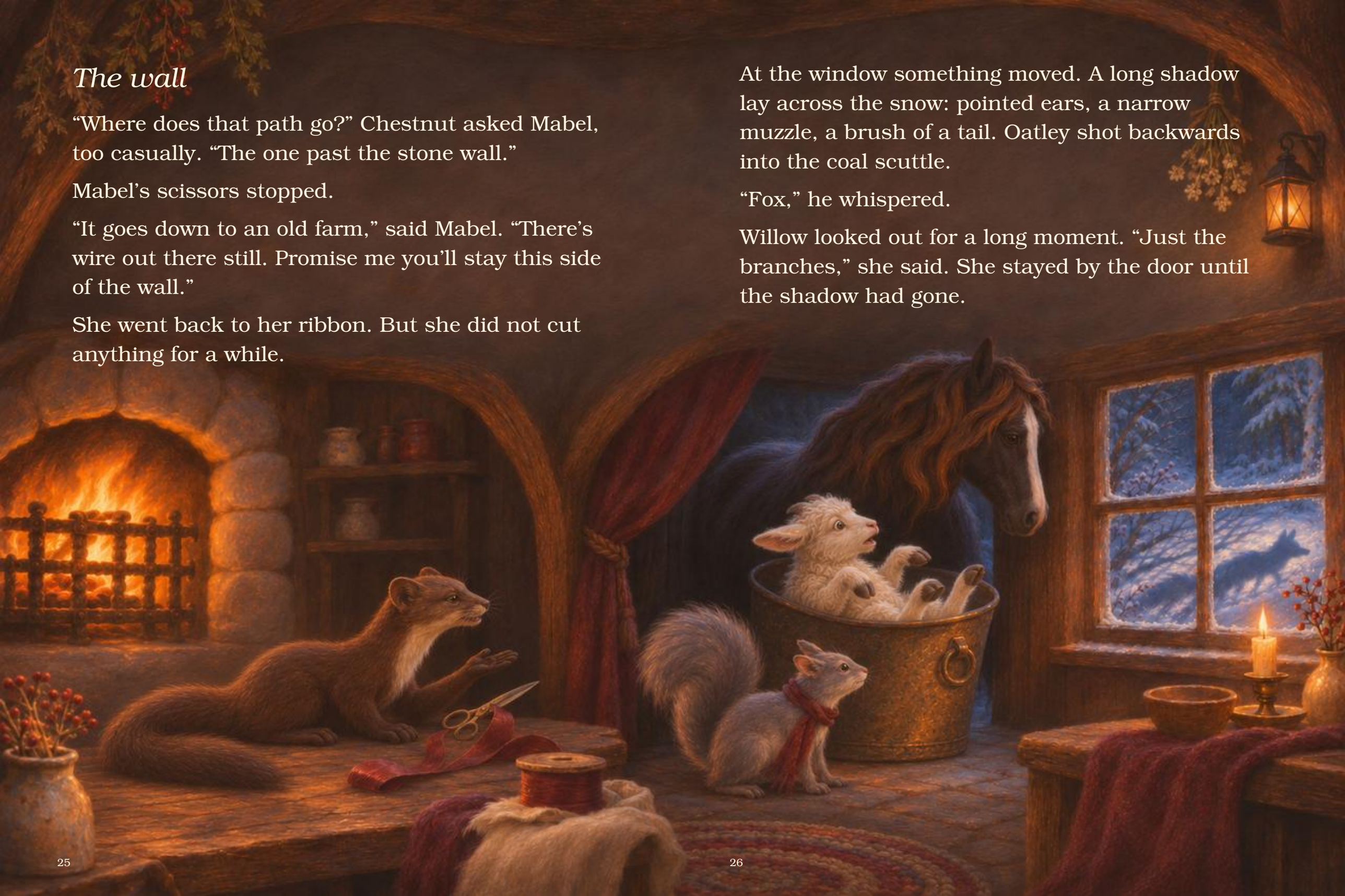
"It goes down to an old farm," said Mabel. "There's wire out there still. Promise me you'll stay this side of the wall."

She went back to her ribbon. But she did not cut anything for a while.

At the window something moved. A long shadow lay across the snow: pointed ears, a narrow muzzle, a brush of a tail. Oatley shot backwards into the coal scuttle.

"Fox," he whispered.

Willow looked out for a long moment. "Just the branches," she said. She stayed by the door until the shadow had gone.



Chestnut put a paw on Oatley's shoulder until he stopped shaking. It was the right thing to do. He would remember later that he had done one right thing that day.

Sneaking out

Getting out was a plan in three parts.

Part one: Weeku. He flew to the curtain rail beside Wang Wang and began to sing. Not his usual tune but every song he knew, loudly, one after another, with a little dance. Wang Wang laughed so much she nearly fell off the rail. Mabel put down her ribbon to watch.

Part two: Oatley. He asked Willow whether goats were allowed paper chains. This took Willow, who was a pony of very few words, a surprisingly long time to answer.

Part three: Chestnut breathed on the frost of the back window until the latch came free.

Oatley's hoof hit a bucket.

Everybody froze. Mabel's ear turned.

Weeku hit his highest note and held it, and held it, until Mabel put her paws over her ears and laughed.

A minute later, a squirrel and a goat dropped from the back window into the snow, and a grey cockatiel slipped out after them, giving Wang Wang one last look from the sill.

She was still smiling. She had no idea.



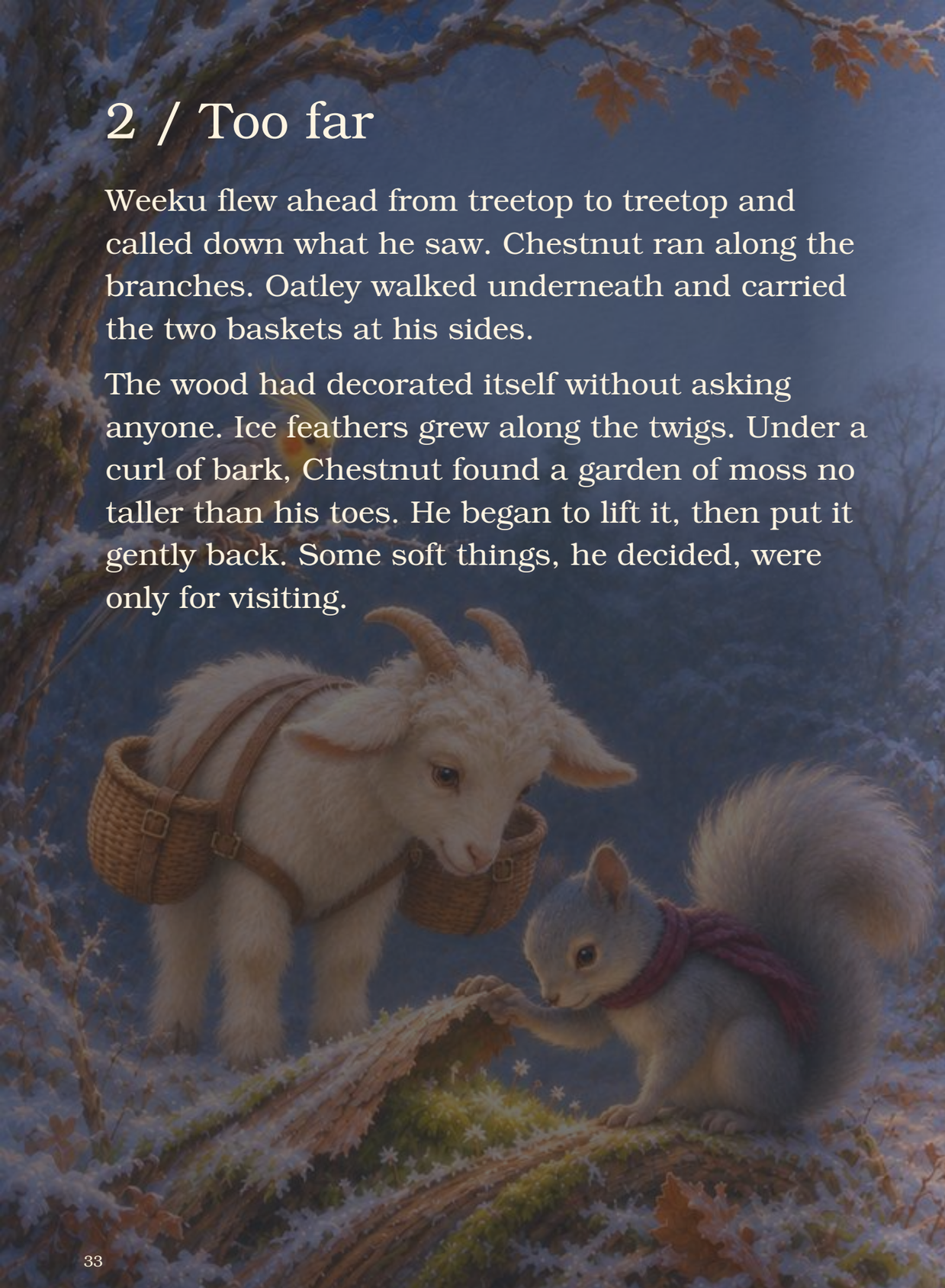


Ahead of them, the woods were turning blue. There was still plenty of afternoon. Or so they thought.

2 / Too far

Weeku flew ahead from treetop to treetop and called down what he saw. Chestnut ran along the branches. Oatley walked underneath and carried the two baskets at his sides.

The wood had decorated itself without asking anyone. Ice feathers grew along the twigs. Under a curl of bark, Chestnut found a garden of moss no taller than his toes. He began to lift it, then put it gently back. Some soft things, he decided, were only for visiting.



They tried everything soft they found.

Bulrush fluff, which exploded into a cloud and stuck to Oatley's nose for an hour. A tuft of old-man's-beard from a hedge, which was lovely until it touched anything and fell to pieces. Spider silk, which was perfect and impossible.

They reached the stone wall.



“We promised Mabel,” said Oatley.

“Just a little further,” said Chestnut. “There’s something better out there. There has to be.”

There wasn’t. There was only more wood, and less light, and a wind that had started to push.

Weeku came down out of the treetops. “I can’t see the cottage chimney,” he said. “I can’t see anything I know.”

Chestnut climbed the tallest fir to look for himself. He saw a great many trees and no chimney at all. When he came down he did not say anything for a while.

“We’re lost,” said Oatley.

“I know.”

“You could have told me sooner.”

Chestnut knew that too.

The hollow

A familiar call came through the trees. Weeku cocked his head. “I know that voice. I visit those two on clear days. From up high I can see the crooked crown of their oak.”

The call came again, close this time. Weeku followed it down to the hollow.

“Gikgik ya!”

A green conure was hanging upside down at the entrance, looking as if being lost might be an excellent way to meet somebody.

Gikgik Boy talked the whole way up the tree. He had flown free with his family and gone on walks on his owner’s shoulder, until the day neighbours stole him. He had escaped and kept flying, and by the time he stopped he had no idea where home was. He did not seem worried. He had found Apple.

Apple said nothing at all. She had spent her whole life in a cage, admired and never touched, until the day the door was left open. She tried very hard not to be looked at.

Gikgik Boy and Apple had once lived with people, too. They had made a home in this oak. Tonight the wind was getting under its roof.

"Can you get home from here?" asked Gikgik Boy.

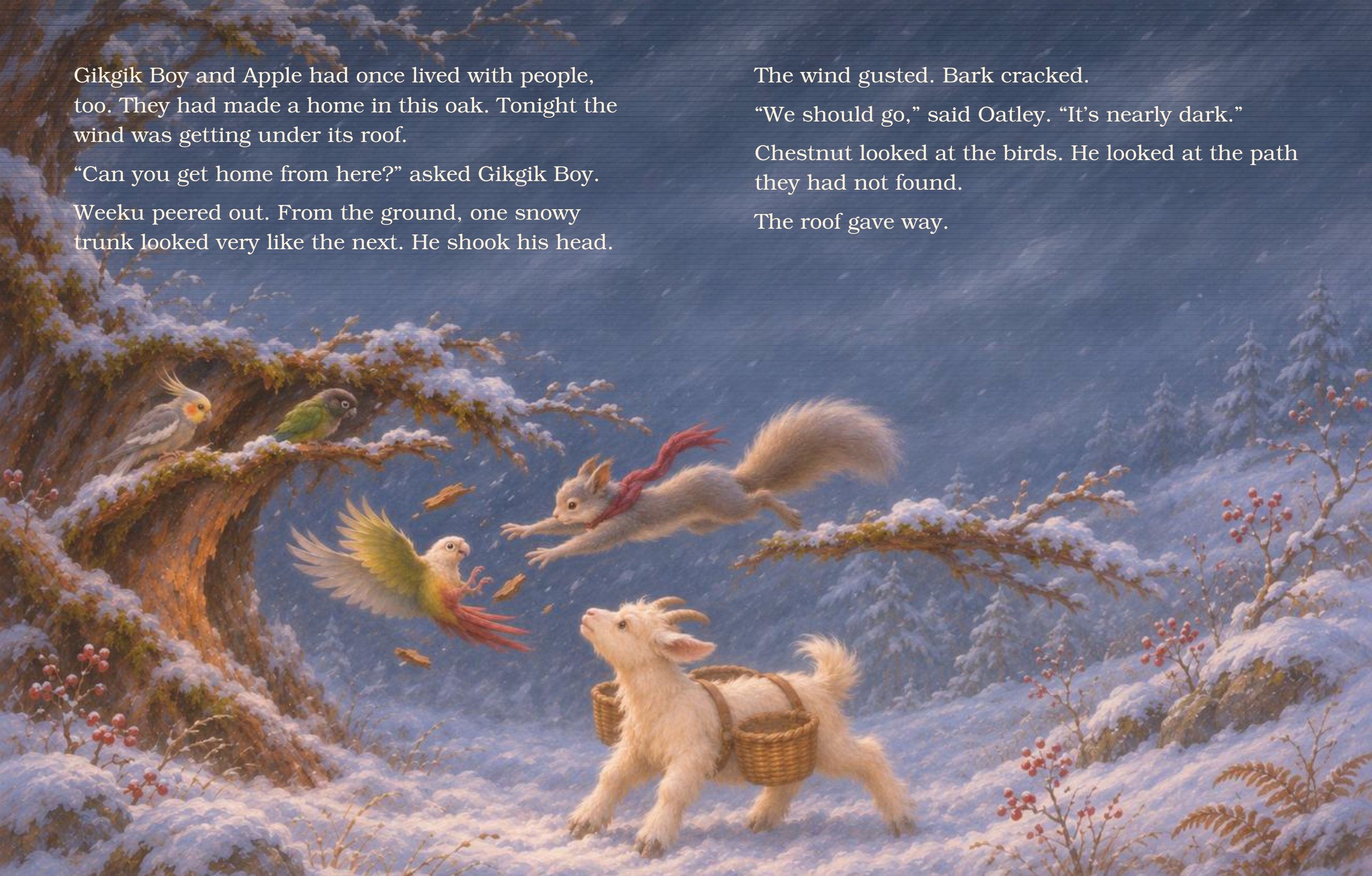
Weeku peered out. From the ground, one snowy trunk looked very like the next. He shook his head.

The wind gusted. Bark cracked.

"We should go," said Oatley. "It's nearly dark."

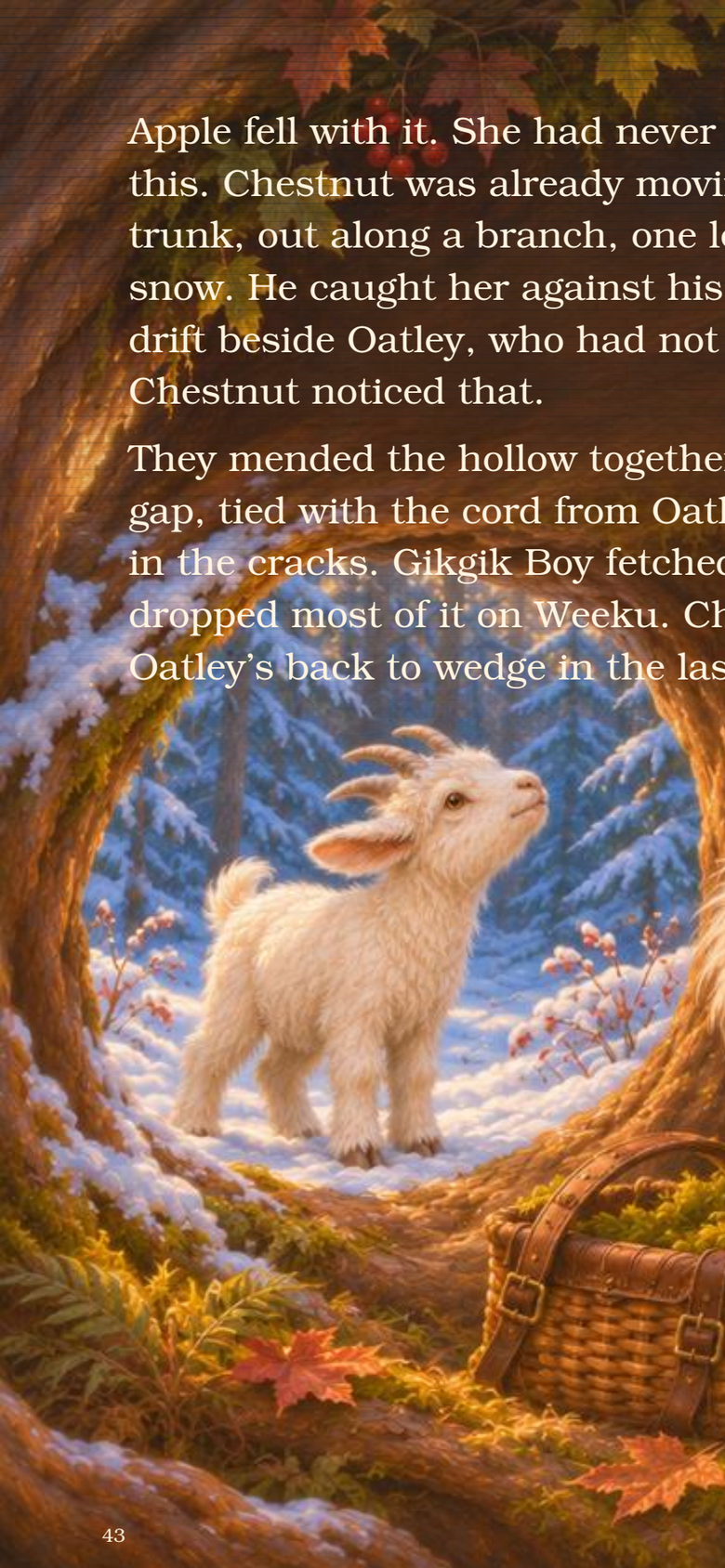
Chestnut looked at the birds. He looked at the path they had not found.

The roof gave way.



Apple fell with it. She had never flown in wind like this. Chestnut was already moving: down the trunk, out along a branch, one leap into the falling snow. He caught her against his chest and hit the drift beside Oatley, who had not run away. Chestnut noticed that.

They mended the hollow together. Bark across the gap, tied with the cord from Oatley's basket. Moss in the cracks. Gikgik Boy fetched dry grass and dropped most of it on Weeku. Chestnut stood on Oatley's back to wedge in the last piece.



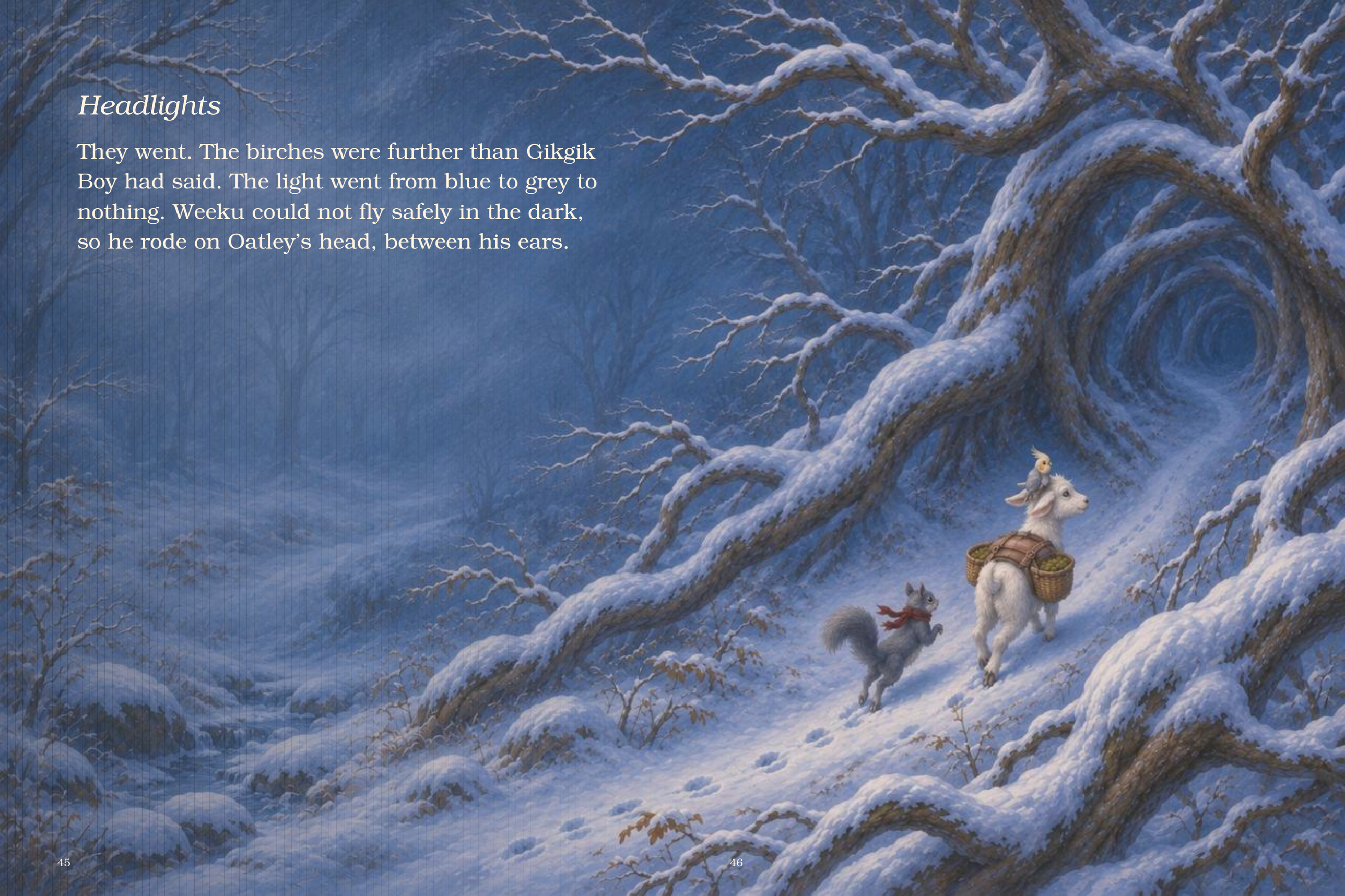
When they finished, no snow fell inside.

Gikgik Boy bobbed his head. "The wall is past the birches. Then the fallen fir. Go now, before the dark."

Weeku lingered beside Apple. "I wish you two could come for Christmas," he said. "It's lovely and warm on our curtain rail. Wang Wang and I could budge up." Apple watched him until his yellow crest slipped out of sight.

Headlights

They went. The birches were further than Gikgik Boy had said. The light went from blue to grey to nothing. Weeku could not fly safely in the dark, so he rode on Oatley's head, between his ears.



Then the trees lit up.

Two white beams swept across the trunks and across them. An engine growled. Through the trees, on a road none of them had known was there, a white van crawled through the snow with its headlights on full.

“Down!”

Chestnut dragged Oatley behind a fallen log. The light passed over them, slowly, as if it were looking. Through a gap in the bark they saw the van stop. Doors opened. Figures got out, dressed head to foot in white, with masks over their faces and torches in their hands.

The white hoods hid their hair and their ears. Even when one turned towards him, Chestnut could see nothing of a face.

The van moved on, towards somewhere further down the road. The snow had filled their tracks. There was no path forward and none back.

Then, through the trees, a scream.

3 / The scream

It was not a bird. It was not the wind. It was something young and terrified, and it did not stop.

Far off, the van's engine cut out. Torch beams swung round in the trees. A muffled voice carried across the snow: "Hear that? Something's still alive out there."

"They heard it too," whispered Weeku.

"Chestnut," said Oatley. "We have to go home."

Chestnut was already running towards the sound.

The pond

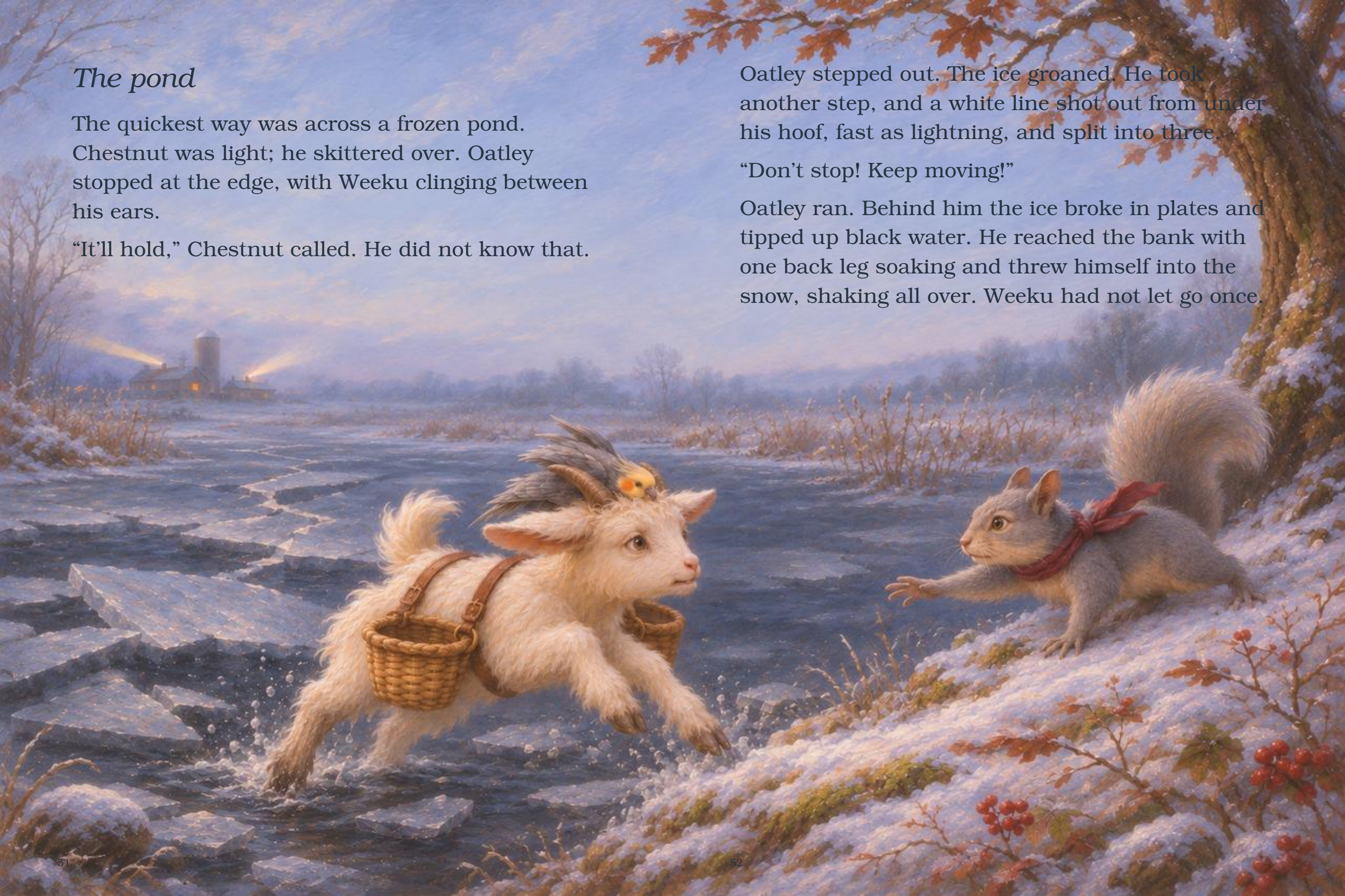
The quickest way was across a frozen pond. Chestnut was light; he skittered over. Oatley stopped at the edge, with Weeku clinging between his ears.

"It'll hold," Chestnut called. He did not know that.

Oatley stepped out. The ice groaned. He took another step, and a white line shot out from under his hoof, fast as lightning, and split into three.

"Don't stop! Keep moving!"

Oatley ran. Behind him the ice broke in plates and tipped up black water. He reached the bank with one back leg soaking and threw himself into the snow, shaking all over. Weeku had not let go once.





“You’re very brave,” said Chestnut.

“I’m very wet,” said Oatley.

The fence

Beyond the pond, the trees stopped.

In the clearing stood a long, low cluster of buildings behind a high wire fence. No lights. No smoke. Rows of small cages on legs ran along the outside walls, and every one of them was empty. A yellow sign on the gate said DANGER: CONTAMINATED SITE. NO ENTRY.

Just inside the fence, a fox cub was pulling against a wire. The more she pulled, the tighter it drew around her front paw. The other end was fixed to a post in the frozen ground.

She saw them and went silent. She bared every tooth she had.

Oatley stepped backwards. “She’s a fox.”

“She’s caught,” said Chestnut.

Both things were true.

The gap in the fence was small. Chestnut slipped through. Oatley put his head into it and stuck at the shoulders. He was too big. He was also too frightened, and they both knew it.

He did not run home. He stayed at the fence, shaking, and he did not run. It was the first brave thing Oatley did that night.

The cub snapped when Chestnut came close. He stopped and sat down in the snow, out of reach.

“I’m Chestnut. I won’t touch it until you say.”

Her name was Ember. She was about eight months old. In her free paw she held a tuft of reddish fur, and she would not put it down.

Chestnut tried the snare. The wire was old and thin and very strong. It bit into his paws. Oatley pushed his head through the gap, took the wire in his teeth and pulled with his whole body. The post did not move.

Two torch beams crossed the yard.

“I need a tool,” said Chestnut, looking towards the sheds.

Ember’s eyes went to the buildings and back. “You’re leaving.”

“I’ll come back.”

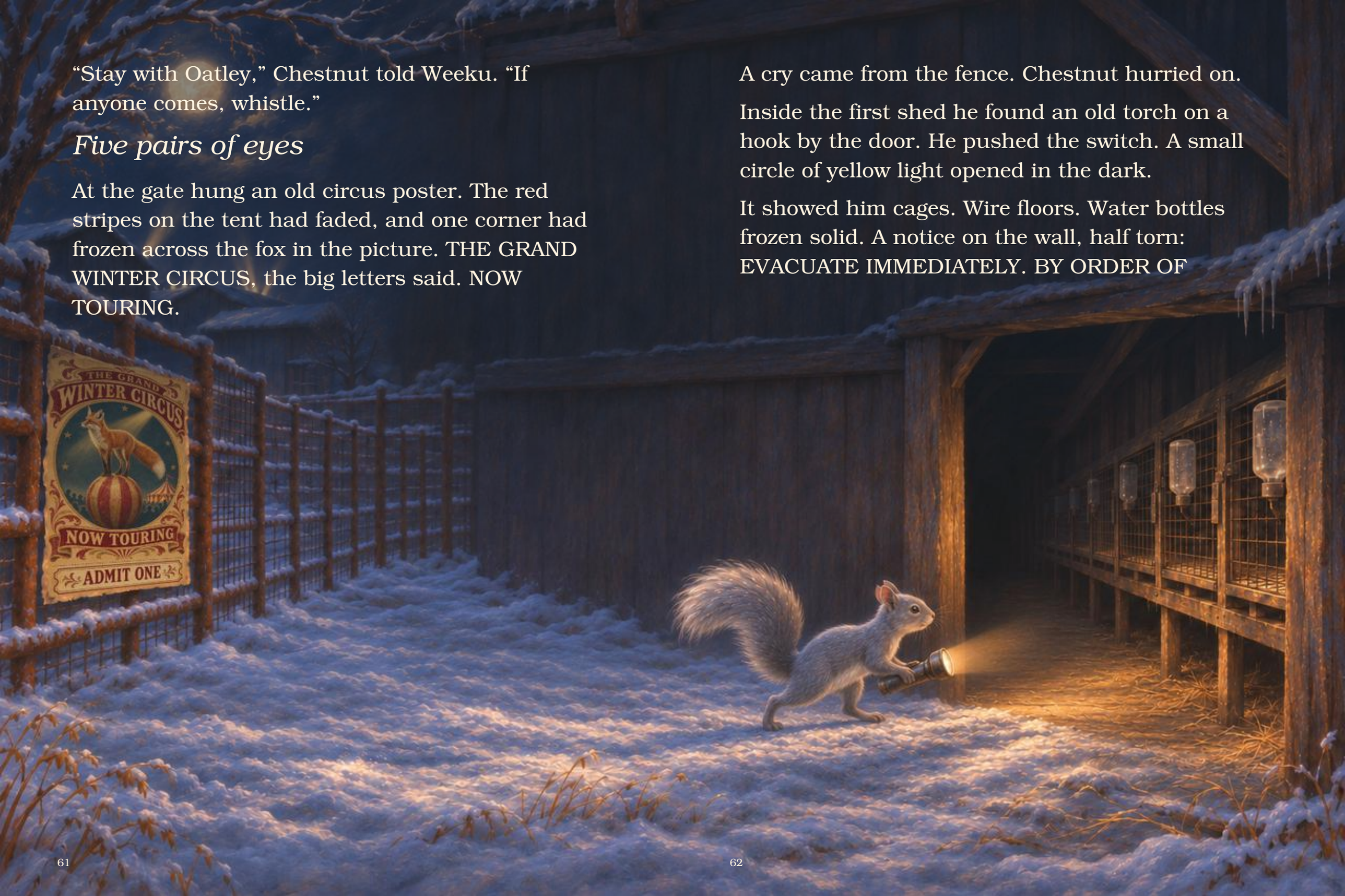
“Everyone says that.”

He unwound the scarf Mabel had knitted him and laid it in the snow between them.

"Hold this for me. I can't go home without it."

Ember looked at the scarf. Then at him. She did not snap.





"Stay with Oatley," Chestnut told Weeku. "If anyone comes, whistle."

Five pairs of eyes

At the gate hung an old circus poster. The red stripes on the tent had faded, and one corner had frozen across the fox in the picture. THE GRAND WINTER CIRCUS, the big letters said. NOW TOURING.

A cry came from the fence. Chestnut hurried on.

Inside the first shed he found an old torch on a hook by the door. He pushed the switch. A small circle of yellow light opened in the dark.

It showed him cages. Wire floors. Water bottles frozen solid. A notice on the wall, half torn: EVACUATE IMMEDIATELY. BY ORDER OF



He went deeper. Turned a corner.

And froze.

Ten eyes were looking at him out of the dark. Five pairs. Glowing green and orange, perfectly still, at the height of something big.

Chestnut's heart stopped. His tail went straight up. Cats eat squirrels. Everybody knows that.

“MEOOOOOOW!”

Chestnut screamed. The torch spun across the floor. The light swung round and showed him, crammed together in the corner of an empty pen, five of the roundest, fluffiest, most frightened cats he had ever seen.

They were more scared of him than he was of them. It took everyone a moment to work that out.



The white one recovered first. He lifted his chin.

"You may approach me now."

The silver one hid behind him and glared at everybody. The ginger one, who had made the noise, held out a paw as if hoping to be stroked by the squirrel he had just terrified. The golden one walked straight over and sniffed Chestnut all over for food.

"Have you got any?"

"No!"

"Oh." He wandered off. "I must go. I don't know where. But I must go."

Only the blue-grey one said nothing. She just watched him.

Their names were Cottons, Cushions, Cookies, Churros and Coco. Their crates had come off a lorry the day the farm closed. One split as it landed. Coco had pushed the broken slat aside until the last of them was out. A loose board in the feed shed led to a dry corner and sacks of grain.

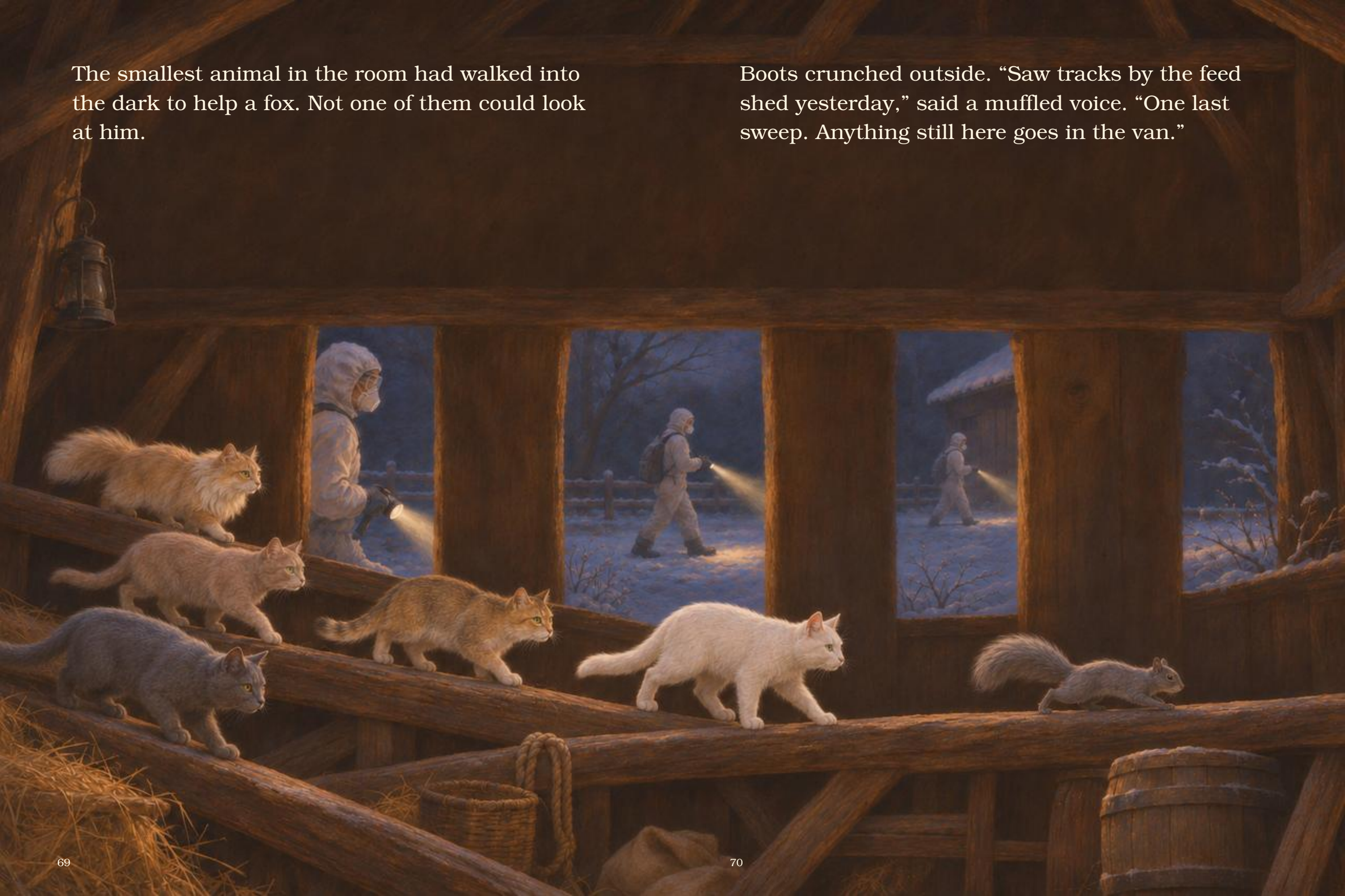
"There's a fox in a snare by the fence," said Chestnut. "I need help."

The cats looked at each other.

For weeks they had heard a cub calling for her mother. Sometimes Coco sat where the cub could see her. Sometimes, before the others woke, Churros slipped out through the loose board. Tonight, for the first time, they had heard the cub scream.

The smallest animal in the room had walked into the dark to help a fox. Not one of them could look at him.

Boots crunched outside. “Saw tracks by the feed shed yesterday,” said a muffled voice. “One last sweep. Anything still here goes in the van.”



Coco stood up first.

“This way,” she said. “Through the buildings. Never the yard.”

One by one, a little ashamed, the others followed.

4 / The workshop

A note before this chapter. The next pages enter the story’s fictional fur farm. They contain frightening, non-graphic scenes of captivity and animal suffering.

Coco led them through the buildings, not around them. Doors, gaps under walls, a broken window. Never the open yard, where the torch beams crossed and recrossed.

The cats came behind in a clump, bumping into one another, because for animals famous for grace they were extremely clumsy. Cookies knocked over a bucket in the first doorway. Everybody stopped breathing until the echo died.



Each room was colder than the last.

The gas room

The first door was heavy and lined with rubber, the kind meant to shut tight. It stood a little open. Inside: a metal box the size of a bathtub, with a lid. A row of tall canisters. A yellow sign with a skull.





Nobody went in. Coco did not explain, and nobody asked. Some of them understood. Chestnut understood only that the cats had gone quiet in a different way.

The pelt shed

The second room had hooks.

Long rails of them ran from wall to wall, the way a coat shop has rails. Most were empty. Some still held what the farm had been making: flat, whole skins, hung by the nose, the tails trailing down.

Chestnut lifted the torch, and wished he hadn't.

Fox. Mink. A row of squirrel skins, small as his own. And cats, in every colour cats come in.

Churros stopped hurrying. Cookies did not make a sound. Cushions, who hated every other cat, pressed against Cookies' side and did not move away.



"Don't look," said Coco. "Walk."

The sorting room

The third room was full of bins. Rows of them, wooden and shallow, each with a neat label. The farm had not wasted anything. It had sorted animals the way you sort buttons.





Chestnut read the labels one by one, and his stomach went cold.

For eyeshadow. For blush.

He thought of the advert Wang Wang had watched in the shop, the soft brush sweeping pink across a smiling face. He had always wondered how humans made anything that soft.

Now he knew.

Squirrel. He was a squirrel. Goat. Oatley, waiting at the fence. Sable. Mabel. Pony. Willow. Everyone he loved was written on a box in this room. That was why Mabel never talked about the far woods.

At the end of the row, Cottons had stopped.

The bin in front of him was full of white fur. Ordinary white fur, from an ordinary big white cat.

Cottons had had a friend once. A stray, not a fancy cat at all. Big, solid, white all over. He had been taken away on the same kind of truck, months before the others, and he had never come back. His name was Snowy.

Cottons did not say the name. He turned his back on the bin and sat facing the wall, very straight, the way a prince sits when he is trying not to fall apart.

Cushions, whom Cottons had never once been kind to, went and sat beside him. She did not touch him. She just stayed.

After a while, so quietly only Cottons could hear, she said, “I’m sorry about your friend.”

He didn’t answer. But he didn’t move away.

In the bins

A beam of white light hit the doorway.

“In!” breathed Coco.

They dived into the bins: five cats and a squirrel buried in other animals’ coats, holding their breath, smelling of nothing but fur.

Boots came in. A figure in a white suit walked the row slowly, its mask turning from side to side, its breath loud and strange behind the plastic. The torch beam slid over SQUIRREL, over GOAT, over SABLE, and stopped on the bin where Chestnut lay with fur over his eyes.

Through the strands he could see a gloved hand reaching down.

Cookies' stomach rumbled.

The hand stopped.

Three rising notes and a tumble. Weeku, out by the fence.

"Something out by the fence!" The figure straightened and ran. The boots faded.

Nobody moved for a long time.



The drawer

The next room smelled of glue. Hair lay in bundles on the bench. Beside it stood trays of ferrules and bare handles.

Chestnut knew how a handle felt under sandpaper. He loved this part of making. Here he could scarcely bear to look at the bench.

On the manager's desk was a drawer marked COMPETITOR SAMPLES. CONFIDENTIAL. Coco hooked it open with one claw.

Inside lay a reel of pale fibre. Chestnut bent a strand between his paws. It sprang back.

A slip of paper lay beneath the reel.





Chestnut read it twice.

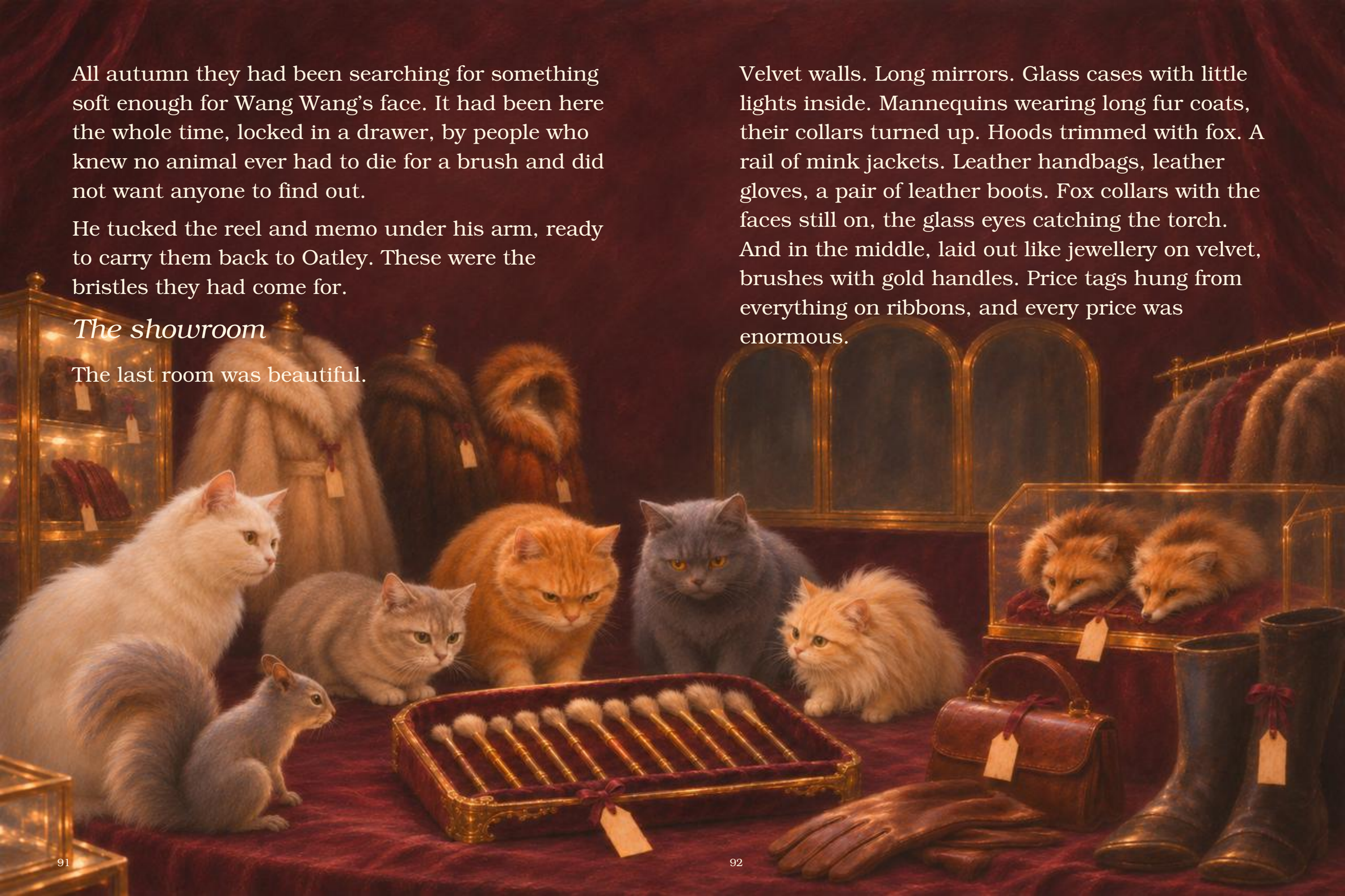
All autumn they had been searching for something soft enough for Wang Wang's face. It had been here the whole time, locked in a drawer, by people who knew no animal ever had to die for a brush and did not want anyone to find out.

He tucked the reel and memo under his arm, ready to carry them back to Oatley. These were the bristles they had come for.

The showroom

The last room was beautiful.

Velvet walls. Long mirrors. Glass cases with little lights inside. Mannequins wearing long fur coats, their collars turned up. Hoods trimmed with fox. A rail of mink jackets. Leather handbags, leather gloves, a pair of leather boots. Fox collars with the faces still on, the glass eyes catching the torch. And in the middle, laid out like jewellery on velvet, brushes with gold handles. Price tags hung from everything on ribbons, and every price was enormous.



The animals stood in the doorway and could not move.

In the other rooms, the skins had been hidden away on hooks and in bins. Here they were on display. Lit up. Admired. Made into things to wear.

“Why are they showing them?” whispered Cookies. “Why would anyone want to look at them?”

Nobody had an answer.

Chestnut stood in front of the tray of squirrel-tail brushes for a long time. His tail curled in against his chest without his asking it to.



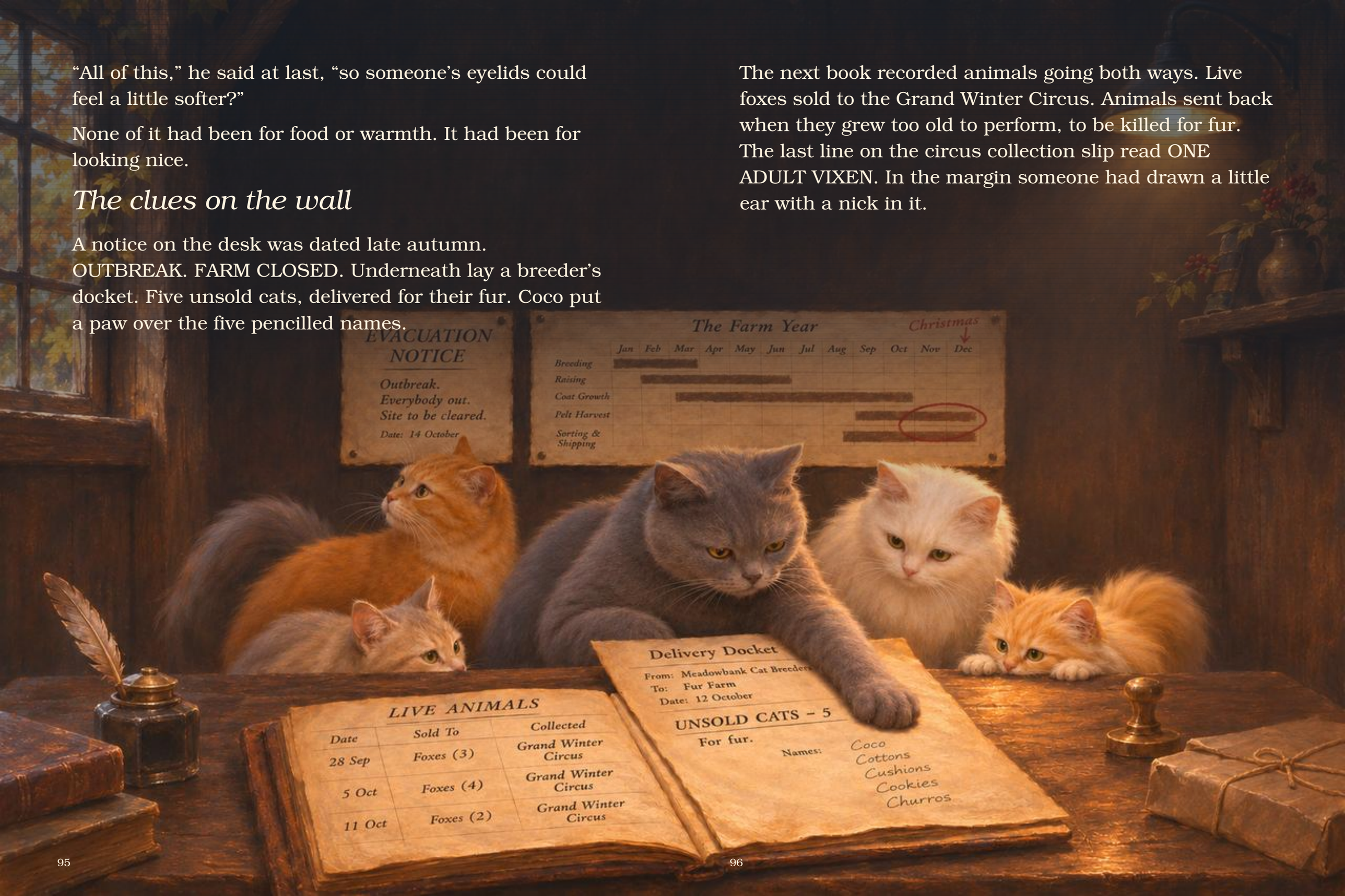
“All of this,” he said at last, “so someone’s eyelids could feel a little softer?”

None of it had been for food or warmth. It had been for looking nice.

The clues on the wall

A notice on the desk was dated late autumn. OUTBREAK. FARM CLOSED. Underneath lay a breeder’s docket. Five unsold cats, delivered for their fur. Coco put a paw over the five pencilled names.

The next book recorded animals going both ways. Live foxes sold to the Grand Winter Circus. Animals sent back when they grew too old to perform, to be killed for fur. The last line on the circus collection slip read ONE ADULT VIXEN. In the margin someone had drawn a little ear with a nick in it.



“I remember that day,” said Coco. “I could see the yard through our loose board.”

When word of the virus reached the sheds, the people packed so fast one woman left her tea steaming on the step. A suitcase fell open in the snow. Nobody stopped to pick up the clothes. By sundown the yard was quiet.



“The next morning I heard wheels,” Coco said. “I thought the woman had come back for her things.”

A different crew had come. The animals had been kept cage beside cage, fox beside mink, a whole shed of them. The order was to kill the animals left there for fear the sickness would spread. From under the board Coco saw the cages stand empty, one row and then another. The trolleys went past under covers.

Beside her, Cushions had started to cry. Coco curled her tail over her nose. Beyond the board, a wheel squeaked on towards the next shed.



What the acorn was for

They had found bristles but still no tool. Back at the fence, Chestnut passed the reel and memo to Oatley, who carried them in his side basket. Ember was still caught, still holding the scarf and the tuft of fur. Across the yard, torch beams were sweeping the cage rows.

There was a split in the post, low down, where the wire was nailed. If Chestnut could hit the nail hard enough, with something hard enough…

His paw found his lucky acorn. He didn't think about it at all. He took it out and hit the nail.

Once. The shell cracked. Twice. The post split, the nail came out, and Ember was free of the post. The loop was still around her paw, but she could move.

Chestnut dropped the pieces in the snow and forgot them.

Oatley didn't. While nobody was looking, he reached through the fence, picked up both halves in his mouth and put them in the basket next to the reel.

Ember's story

"Come with us," said Chestnut.

Ember kept looking back at the shed. Weeks ago, in the first snow, her mother had gone inside to look for shelter. Ember found a tuft of red fur on the door. Since then she had slept under the hedge. Only this morning had the wire caught her paw.

"Mama has a nick in her left ear," she said. Chestnut thought of the ear on the collection slip. "I saw a drawing like that. A circus wagon took a grown fox from here. I think it might have been her."

"If she comes back for me," Ember whispered, "this is where she'll look." She sniffed. "Someone leaves breakfast here. I thought it might be her."

Churros nosed a little feed across the snow. Three red berries rolled against her paw.

Ember stared at it. “It was you?”

Churros nodded. Half his breakfast, most mornings. Berries when the feed ran low. Under all that fluff he was thin.

Ember looked at the berries for a long time. Then she held the scarf out to Chestnut.

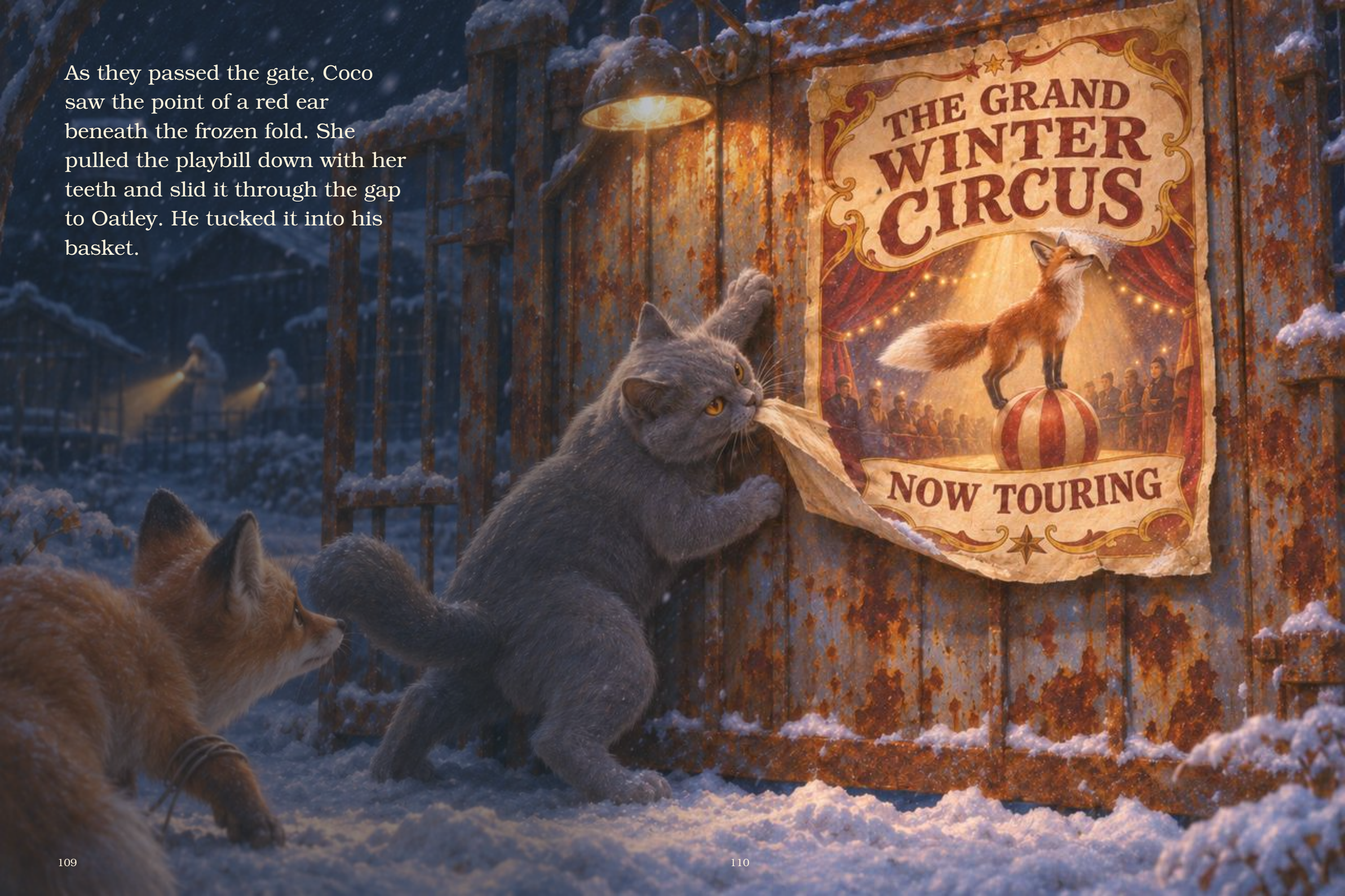
He did not take it. He tied it high on the fence instead, tight, where anyone coming out of the woods would see it.

"So your mother knows you went somewhere safe," he said. "And so she knows someone is looking for her."

The wind went straight through him. It was the only warm thing he had owned. Ember stood up.



As they passed the gate, Coco saw the point of a red ear beneath the frozen fold. She pulled the playbill down with her teeth and slid it through the gap to Oatley. He tucked it into his basket.



Behind them, a shout. Every torch beam in the yard swung towards the fence.

5 / The escape

Three figures in white were coming across the yard, torches raised, nets and a metal crate between them.

“There! By the fence!”

The cats did what frightened cats do. They scattered.

Ember tried to run and fell. The wire on her paw caught on everything. She could limp, but she could not run, and the humans could see it.

The gap in the fence was right there. Chestnut could be through it in two seconds. Squirrels are fast. Nobody would blame him.

He went back to Ember instead.





"Lean on me."

"You're tiny."

"Lean anyway."

The cats come back

The first figure was ten steps away when a bucket came rolling out of the dark and took its legs from under it. It went down in the snow with a muffled shout.

Churros, behind the bucket, looked
as surprised as the human.

A yowl rang out from the far shed. Chestnut knew that voice. The first time he'd heard it, he'd dropped his torch.

One beam swung towards the sound. Cookies drew breath and yowled again. The other two followed.

“Cats! There are cats in there!”

The cats knew every loose board in the yard. Each had run to a different one.

Coco slid beside Ember. “Under here. Follow me.”

Under the cages

There was just room for a limping fox beneath the wire floors.

Wire grazed Chestnut’s back. A torch swept under the row. Ember held her breath until it passed.

Boots crunched at the far end.

Cushions spotted them first.

She caught Cottons’ eye. Beside him, the feed-shed door hung open.

“Now,” she whispered.

Cottons, who never rushed for anyone, rushed. His shoulder hit the door. It slammed across the gap just as the boots arrived.



The last cage

Halfway down the last row, something moved in a cage.

Chestnut stopped. Every other cage on the farm had been empty. This one wasn't.

A mink crouched in the back corner. The drinking bowl was full. Fresh bootprints ended at its door. Somebody had been here since the farm closed.

The torch beams were coming back down the row.

“Leave it,” said Cottons. “We’ll be caught.”

He was right. Nobody argued.

Chestnut climbed up the cage legs anyway. The door was held with a simple bent pin, the kind a human closes without thinking. Squirrel paws are good at pins. It took him three tries, with the light getting closer every time.

The door swung open. For a moment the mink did not understand. Then it was out, a dark streak across the snow, straight across the open yard in front of the torch beams.

“There’s one loose!”

Every beam swung after it. Every boot went after it. The mink ran for the far fence and the dark beyond it, and took the humans with it.

The cage row was empty and dark.



Through the fence

Oatley waited on the far side of the fence with Weeku. Coco slipped through. Chestnut helped Ember after her.

Cushions braced a paw against the wire and held the gap. Cookies came pelting across the yard, ears flat. She waited until his tail was through.



“I was very brave,” he said, out of breath.

“You were very loud,” said Coco. She leaned against him for a moment anyway.

They were out. But the van's engine had started again, and its headlights were turning towards the woods.

6 / The race home

Ember managed ten steps in the snow before her leg folded.

Up on the rise the five cats stopped and looked back. Chestnut put a paw on Ember’s shoulder. He stayed there until Oatley came.





Oatley looked at her. Her teeth. Her narrow face. The exact shape he had seen on the window that afternoon and jumped into the coal scuttle to get away from.

Then he looked at the long dark way home, and at the headlights turning on the road.

He knelt down in the snow.

“Get on.”

“I might hurt you.”

“Try not to.”

The cats helped her up, her bad paw held clear of his shoulder. Chestnut climbed up behind her, and Weeku settled between Oatley’s ears.

“Ready?” asked Chestnut.

“No,” said Oatley.

But he stood up.

The slope

Below the farm, the snow fell away in a long white slope into the trees. On the road above it, the van crawled along with its headlights sweeping the hillside, back and forth, back and forth.

There was no time to walk down. Walking, they would be seen.

At the top of the slope lay the farm's old sign, blown off its post, face down in the snow. A wide, flat sheet of painted metal.

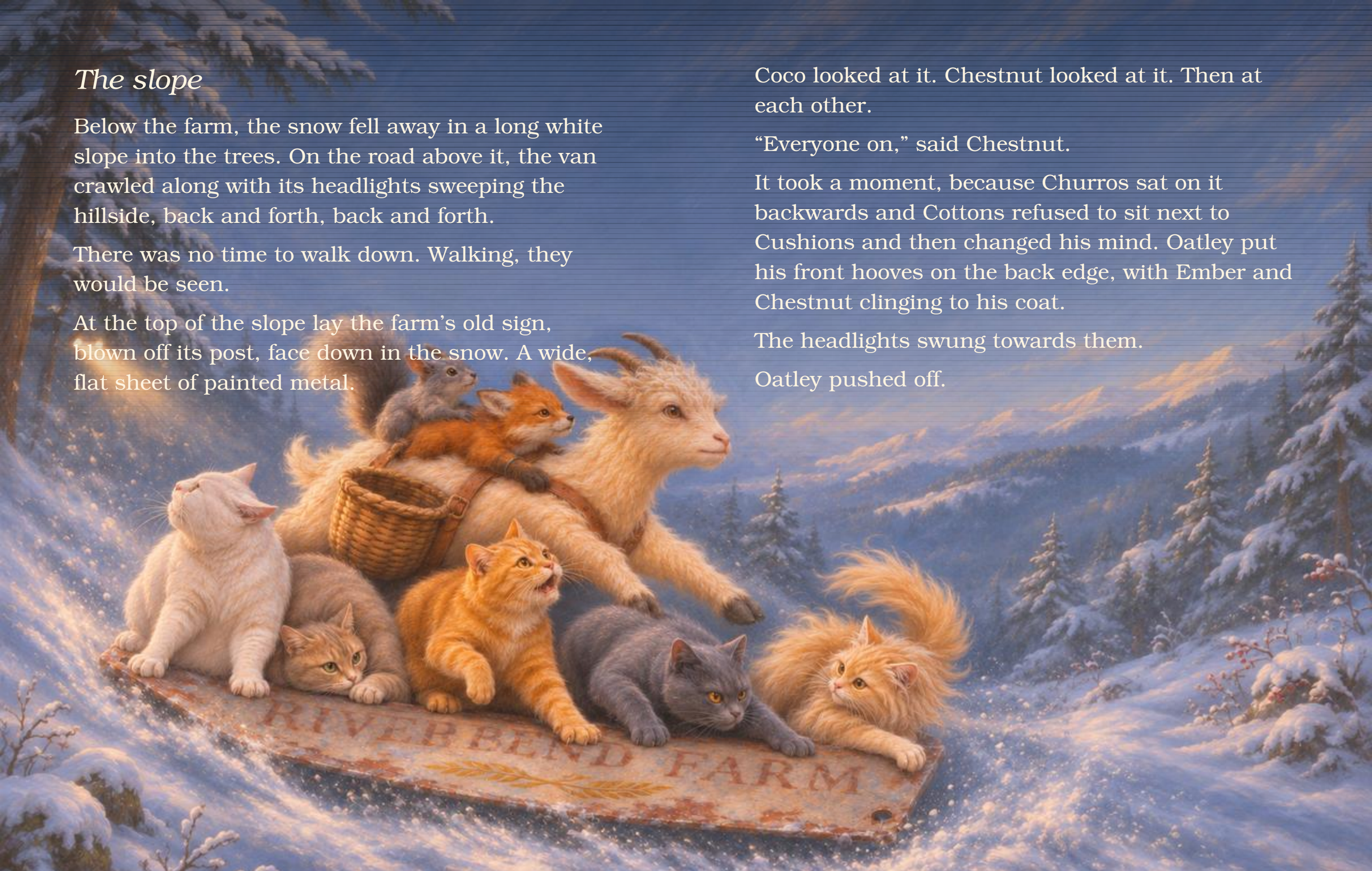
Coco looked at it. Chestnut looked at it. Then at each other.

"Everyone on," said Chestnut.

It took a moment, because Churros sat on it backwards and Cottons refused to sit next to Cushions and then changed his mind. Oatley put his front hooves on the back edge, with Ember and Chestnut clinging to his coat.

The headlights swung towards them.

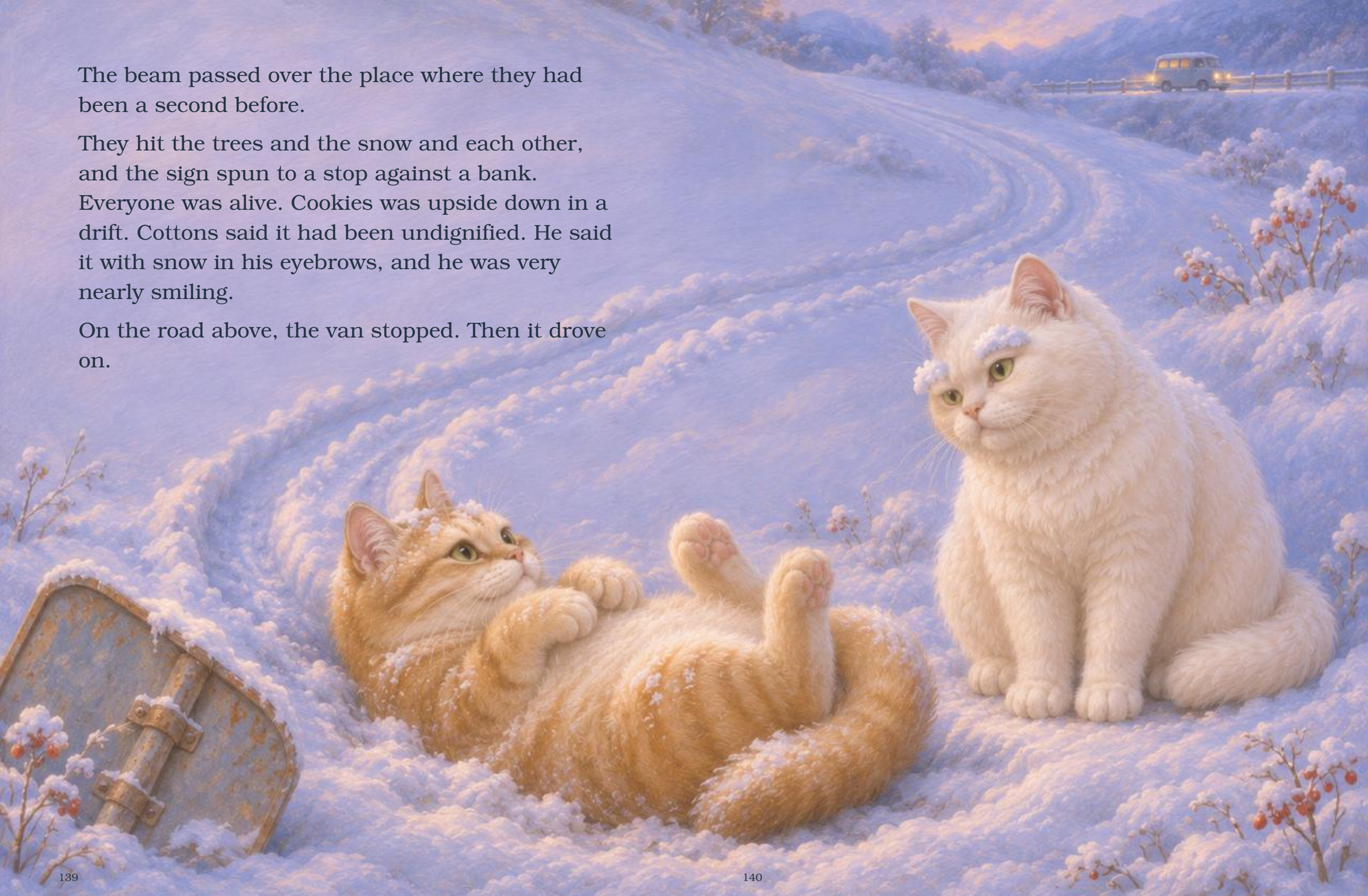
Oatley pushed off.



The beam passed over the place where they had been a second before.

They hit the trees and the snow and each other, and the sign spun to a stop against a bank. Everyone was alive. Cookies was upside down in a drift. Cottons said it had been undignified. He said it with snow in his eyebrows, and he was very nearly smiling.

On the road above, the van stopped. Then it drove on.



Traps in the snow

Oatley carried Ember into the trees. The cats padded after them.

Under the new snow lay traps the farm had left years ago.

Oatley lifted a hoof.

“Stop!” Ember said in his ear. “Put it down to your left.”

Oatley set his hoof on bare rock. In the torchlight he saw the rusty teeth where he had nearly stepped.

He turned to the little fox on his back.

“Thank you,” he said.

“You carried me,” said Ember. “I’ll watch your feet.”

She knew this stretch of wood. One hoof at a time, she guided him past the traps.

The whistle

The torch flickered. The trees all looked the same.

From between Oatley's ears, Weeku whistled the tune a child had taught him. Three rising notes, and a tumble of them.

"Gikgik ya!"

Gikgik Boy flew down through the torchlight. His blue leg ring flashed as he reached for the low twig. He and Apple had heard the scream and the van. They had come looking for their friends, branch by branch.



On the far side of the bridge, Apple opened her beak. One clear call carried over the water. She had never called to anyone before.

Gikgik Boy answered her from the near bank. Weeku took up the tune. Oatley turned towards Apple's voice and the cats followed his hoofprints across the stones.

Coco came last. Gikgik waited on the rail until all four of her paws were across. Only then did he fly on to Apple.





Beyond the bridge, the birds led them on, tree by tree.

Darkness

Past the birches, the torch died.

It did not flicker. It just went out, and the dark came down so completely that Chestnut could not see his own paws.

Nobody moved. He could feel where his friends ought to be and could not see a single one. The birds went silent, because they could not see the next branch.

The cold came through Chestnut's fur where the scarf used to be.

Far away, something whinnied.

Oatley lifted his head and bleated with all the breath he had left. The whinny came back, closer.

A light came swinging through the trees. Then Chestnut saw the white blaze above it.

“There you are,” said Willow.

When the friends missed supper, Willow had taken her lantern down the old wagon road. She knew where it passed the farm gate. There, caught against the snow, was Chestnut’s scarf. Small hoofprints led away from it towards the bridge.



Chestnut pressed his face against Willow's nose. Under the cold, Willow smelled of woodsmoke and home.

7 / Home

The party had been ready for hours.
Nobody had started it.

At the last bend, Gikgik Boy and Apple saw the lighted window. They went ahead. Mabel heard two pairs of little feet land on the curtain rail.

Wang Wang had been on the sill since dusk. At last she saw Willow's lantern coming through the trees.

At Mabel's door stood a bare-necked squirrel, a goat carrying a fox, and a great many wet, cold friends.

She opened the door wider.

Wang Wang flew straight to the yellow crest between Oatley's ears. Before Weeku could whistle hello, she had pressed her face into his neck.

Then Mabel saw the wire on Ember's paw, and went very still.

She knew that wire. She had worn it once.

Mabel fetched her tools. Willow held the lamp. When Ember's paw was free and bandaged, Coco brought her the stiff playbill. "There's a fox on it," she said. "We'll spoil it if we pull." They laid it on the hearth to thaw.

Up on the rail, Wang Wang shuffled towards Weeku. "A little more," he whispered. Apple fitted herself into the warm space they had made. Gikgik Boy settled beside her.



Chestnut waited by the door.

"I didn't bring you anything," he said. "We were meant to be back for the party."

Mabel looked around her kitchen. At the fox. At the cats steaming by the fire. At the conures huddled on the curtain rail beside Wang Wang and Weeku. At Oatley, asleep on his feet.

"I think you did," she said.

Chestnut leaned into her shoulder. After a while he told her everything: the wall, the soft things, just a little further, pretending he knew the way. And then, quietly, the bins.

Mabel listened to the end. “I remember being caught in that wire,” she said at last. “I should have told you why that road frightened me.”

Then Chestnut went and found Oatley. “I’m sorry. I should have told you sooner.”

“Tell me sooner next time,” said Oatley, and fell asleep again.



After Christmas too

Churros was almost asleep by the fire, one paw over his nose.

“Snowy used to sleep like that,” Cottons said.

Cookies lifted her head to look. Coco and Cushions shuffled closer on the rug.

“You can all stay,” said Mabel.

“Even after Christmas?” Cottons asked.

“After Christmas too.”

Churros moved over. This time, when Cottons lay down beside him, he put his back to the door.





The night shift

When Wang Wang was finally asleep, tucked against Weeku on the curtain rail, Chestnut went to his bench.

He laid the carved handle and its little wine-red collar on the kitchen table. Then he took the reel out of Oatley's basket, and the memo with it.

Mabel read the memo for a long time. "They always knew," she said. "All those years. They knew there was another way."

Then she cleared a space on the table.

Nobody slept much that night. Nobody minded.

Mabel showed Chestnut how to set the soft fibre in the collar. Coco held the handle steady. Churros brought his three berries, and Ember crushed them with her good paw. Mabel turned the damp tuft while Chestnut worked the colour into it.



The brush began to roll. Oatley nosed a forked twig under the handle. It settled into the crook, with the damp tips clear of the table.

By the time the window went grey, the brush was dry. A plum band through the middle, white at the collar and the palest pink at the tips. Soft as breath. No one had lost a single hair for it.





Christmas morning

Wang Wang's present was small and light,
wrapped in brown paper and tied with string.

She opened it on the curtain rail, with everyone
watching from below. Inside lay the brush, and
next to it a tiny pot of berry blush.



She looked at it for a long time.

"Oatley found the wood," said Chestnut. "I carved it. Everybody helped with the fluffy bit." He waited with the brush lying across his paws.

Wang Wang thought about the shop, and the mirror, and the advert, and the rubbish bag. Then she held out her face.

Chestnut touched the brush to the berry colour and swept it gently over one pale cheek. Wang Wang opened an eye. "This one too, please." She turned her head. Afterwards she looked in the back of her spoon.



“Do I look different?” she asked Weeku.

“A little,” said Weeku, and tucked his head against hers. “You still look like Wang Wang.”

Wang Wang looked down at the three of them: Chestnut, Oatley and Weeku, still scratched and tired from the night.

“You went all that way,” she said. “For my face?”

“For you,” said Chestnut.

She looked at her cheeks again. In the advert, the colour had bloomed where the brush went.

“Bloom,” she said. “Its name is Bloom.”

“Can we do it again tomorrow?” she asked.

A mark for the handle

"Thirteen," said Wang Wang, hopping down from the rail.

"Thirteen what?" asked Chestnut.

"Thirteen of you helped give me Bloom."

Chestnut had written brushes on his box. He pencilled 13 on a scrap. Wang Wang nudged it over the b.

"13rushes," she read. She rolled her brush towards him. "Will you put that on mine?"



Everyone else

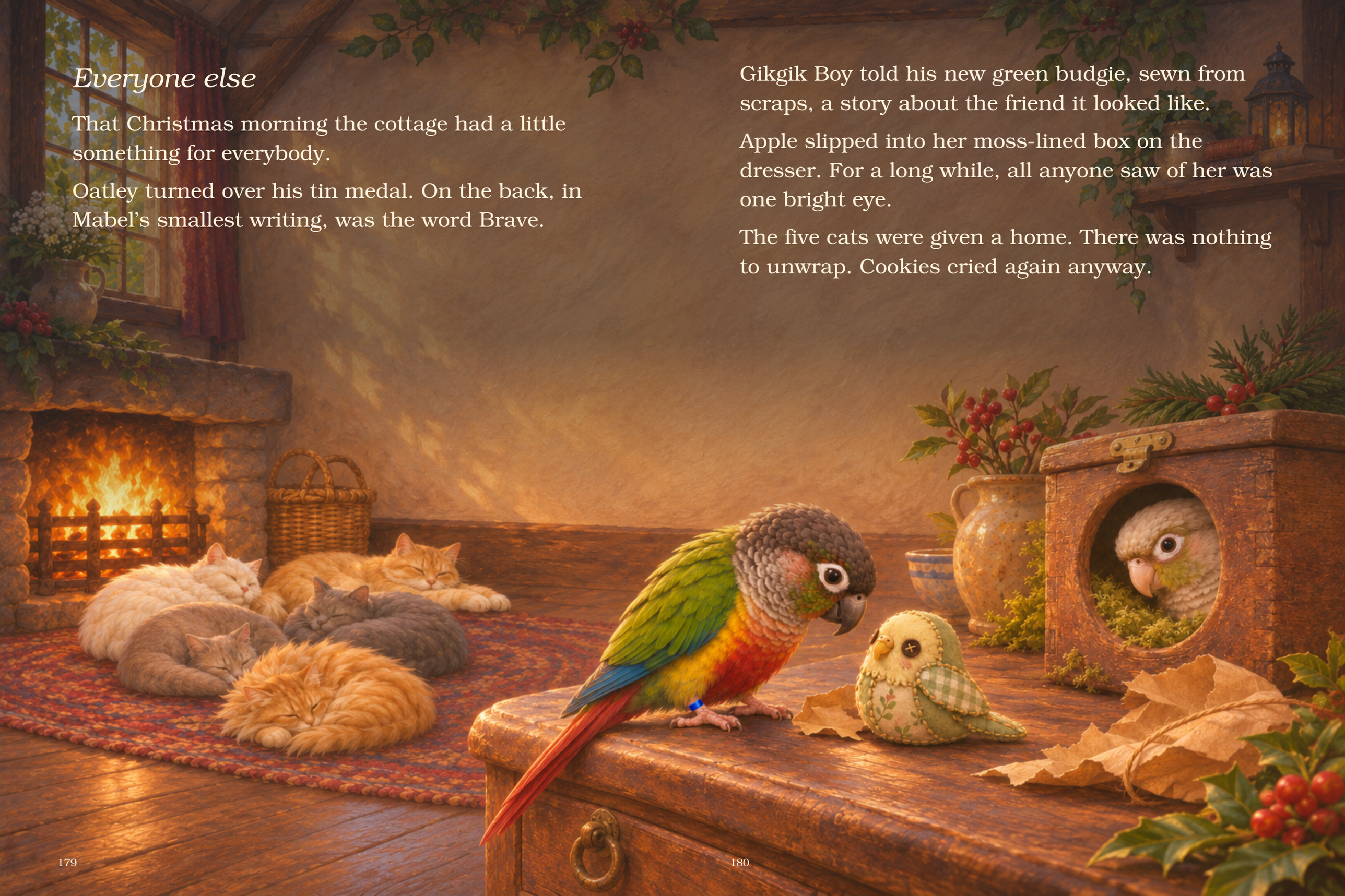
That Christmas morning the cottage had a little something for everybody.

Oatley turned over his tin medal. On the back, in Mabel's smallest writing, was the word Brave.

Gikgik Boy told his new green budgie, sewn from scraps, a story about the friend it looked like.

Apple slipped into her moss-lined box on the dresser. For a long while, all anyone saw of her was one bright eye.

The five cats were given a home. There was nothing to unwrap. Cookies cried again anyway.



Oatley nudged a blue acorn across the floor. A fine crack ran through its shell. Someone had tied a ribbon under the cap.

“You dropped this,” said Oatley. “I thought it might be important.”

Chestnut ran a paw along the join.

“It was,” he said, and put it round his neck.

The chair by the window

Ember could not see the path from the rug by the fire. She kept getting up to look.

They mended a low chair with a wobbly leg. Willow held it steady. Coco sat on it to check, which was allowed. They set it by the window, facing the path.

“Better?” asked Chestnut.

Ember nodded. Churros brought her a piece of his breakfast before going back to his own. Nobody had to be brave for a little while.



The poster

By then the paper on the hearth was dry. Coco brought it to the chair by the window. Very gently, she eased the old fold open.

A striped tent. A spotlight. A fox balancing on a ball.

Ember climbed down from her chair.

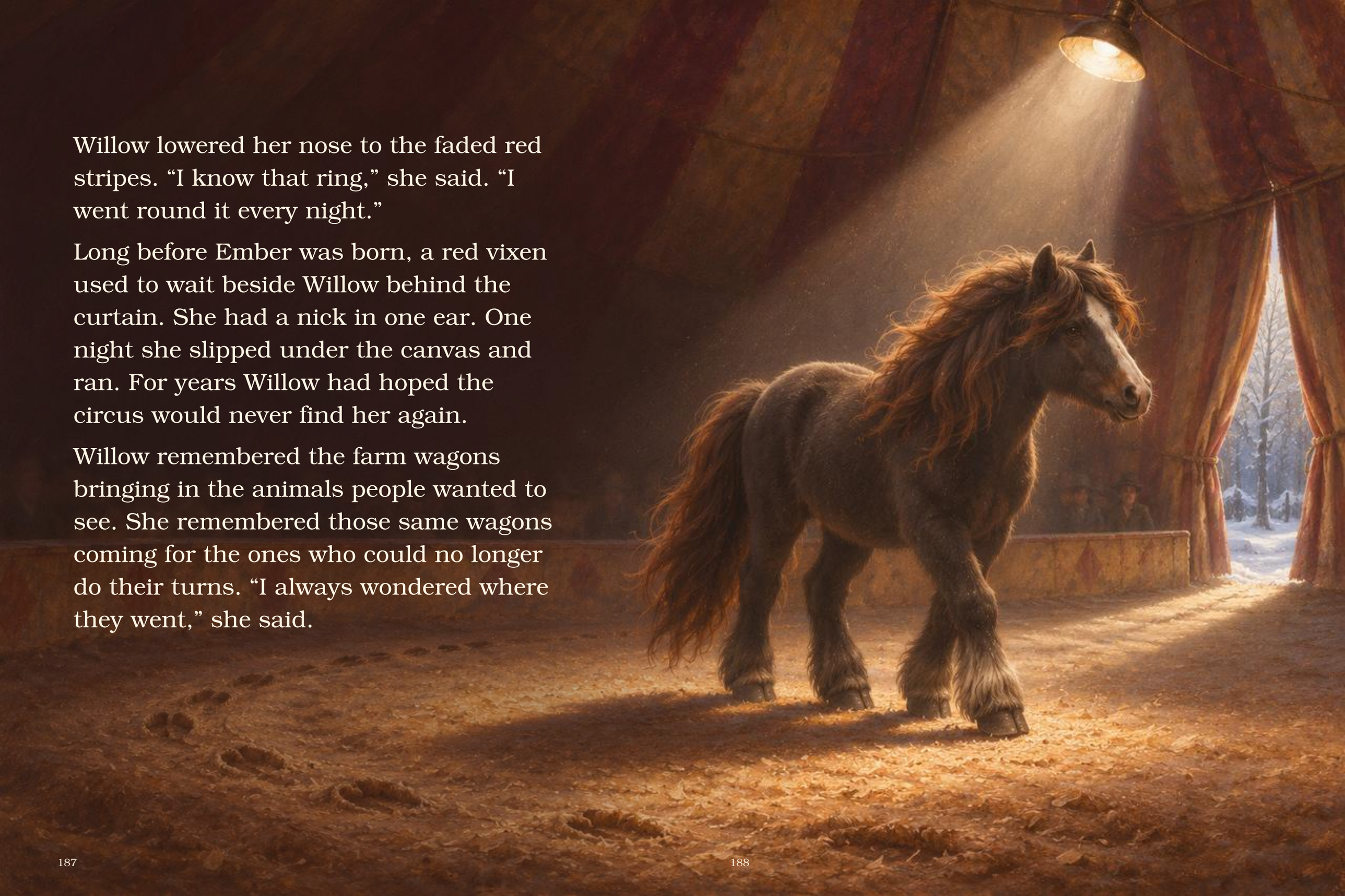
The fox had a nick in her left ear.

“Mama,” Ember whispered.

Willow lowered her nose to the faded red stripes. “I know that ring,” she said. “I went round it every night.”

Long before Ember was born, a red vixen used to wait beside Willow behind the curtain. She had a nick in one ear. One night she slipped under the canvas and ran. For years Willow had hoped the circus would never find her again.

Willow remembered the farm wagons bringing in the animals people wanted to see. She remembered those same wagons coming for the ones who could no longer do their turns. “I always wondered where they went,” she said.



One evening another wagon arrived with a little yellow cockatiel in a cage and a grey bird clinging underneath. At the ring, a keeper opened the cage to take Wang Wang out. She ducked between his fingers. Weeku was waiting in the rafters.

Down below, Willow stood at her locked stall. Wang Wang had seen where the keeper hung the brass key. Weeku fetched it. The key was heavy. Wang Wang took one side of the ring in her beak, Weeku took the other, and together they turned it. Willow pushed the door with her nose. It opened.

Willow walked until the music died away, with a cockatiel tucked into her mane on either side. At a bend in the road they found a stone cottage. The hearth was cold. Swallows had built in the chimney. Nobody lived there any more.

“We slept on a curtain rail,” Weeku told Ember. “Willow put her head through the window so we could all be in the same room.” In time Mabel found them there. Chestnut and Oatley had grown up in that kitchen.

Across the hearth, Ember was still looking at the fox on the paper.



Ember touched the nick in the paper fox's ear. "Coco, can I keep this?"

Coco slid the whole poster towards her.

There was a ticket at the bottom. Ember held the poster steady while Mabel tore along the dotted line. ADMIT ONE.

"While my paw gets better," Ember said, "could we find out where their wagons went?"

"I know which road they take," said Willow. "I can look for fresh tracks today."

"And I can ask from the treetops," said Weeku. Ember looked down at the ticket. "Tell them she has a nick in her left ear," she said. "Tell them I'm here."

She tucked the ticket beside the tuft of her mother's fur.



Room at the bench

That evening Chestnut carried his tools to the window. His mended acorn tapped the wood as he worked.

“Could I help?” asked Ember.

He moved his tools along the bench to make room.

No one lost their fur this Christmas.

Beauty needs no fur.



Two parcels by the hearth

Willow had kept a little parcel under the woodpile for a month. Inside was a Marvel Bar for washing brushes. Mabel drew the clean scent in through her nose. “However did you guess?”

Her envelope was addressed to Willow. One hairstyling lesson at the 13rushes Academy. A lock of mane fell across her eyes as she read the card. She blew it aside and read it again.



Endnote: what's real in this story

Chestnut and his friends live in an imagined wood. The farm they enter, the papers they find there and Ember's connection to the circus are part of their story. Some of what the friends discover is real.

The hair in a brush

Some makeup brushes are made with goat, squirrel or horse hair. Some eyeshadow brushes are made with cat hair. You can sometimes find the animal named on a brush's materials list, under the words "bristle type". [1]

The farm behind the story

The confinement is grounded in real welfare concerns. In its 2025 assessment, the European Food Safety Authority identified major welfare problems in current fur-farming systems, including restricted movement and difficulty performing natural behaviours. Its recommendations include more space and environments that better meet the animals' needs. [2]

In Finland, a European Commission report describes the pelting season as running from late October through December. Timing varies by place and species. The Canadian mink industry's care code describes gas euthanasia in an enclosed unit, which informed the story's gas-room scene. [3, 4]

Disease outbreaks can also lead to large-scale culls. In November 2020, Denmark announced a decision to cull all farmed mink after SARS-CoV-2 infections and mink-associated variants were detected. The World Health Organization documented infections in both mink and people. [5]

Since December 2008, the European Union has banned the sale, import and export of cat and dog fur and products containing it. [6]

A different kind of making

Synthetic brush fibres exist. Every 13rushes brush is made with synthetic fibres. These fibres are generally plastics, so avoiding animal hair is one choice within a wider responsibility to make useful things, care for them and keep them for a long time.

The gift in this story is a small one. The care behind it is not.

Beauty needs no fur.

Sources

[1] Materials list for two eyeshadow brushes made with cat hair (in Japanese).

[2] European Food Safety Authority. Welfare of animals kept for fur production, 2025.

[3] European Commission. Finland One Health report, 2024-7983.

[4] National Farm Animal Care Council. Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Farmed Mink, 2013, section 6.

[5] World Health Organization. Mink-associated SARS-CoV-2, Denmark, 3 December 2020.

[6] European Union. Regulation (EC) No 1523/2007, Articles 3 and 6.

Sources checked 17 and 18 November 2026.

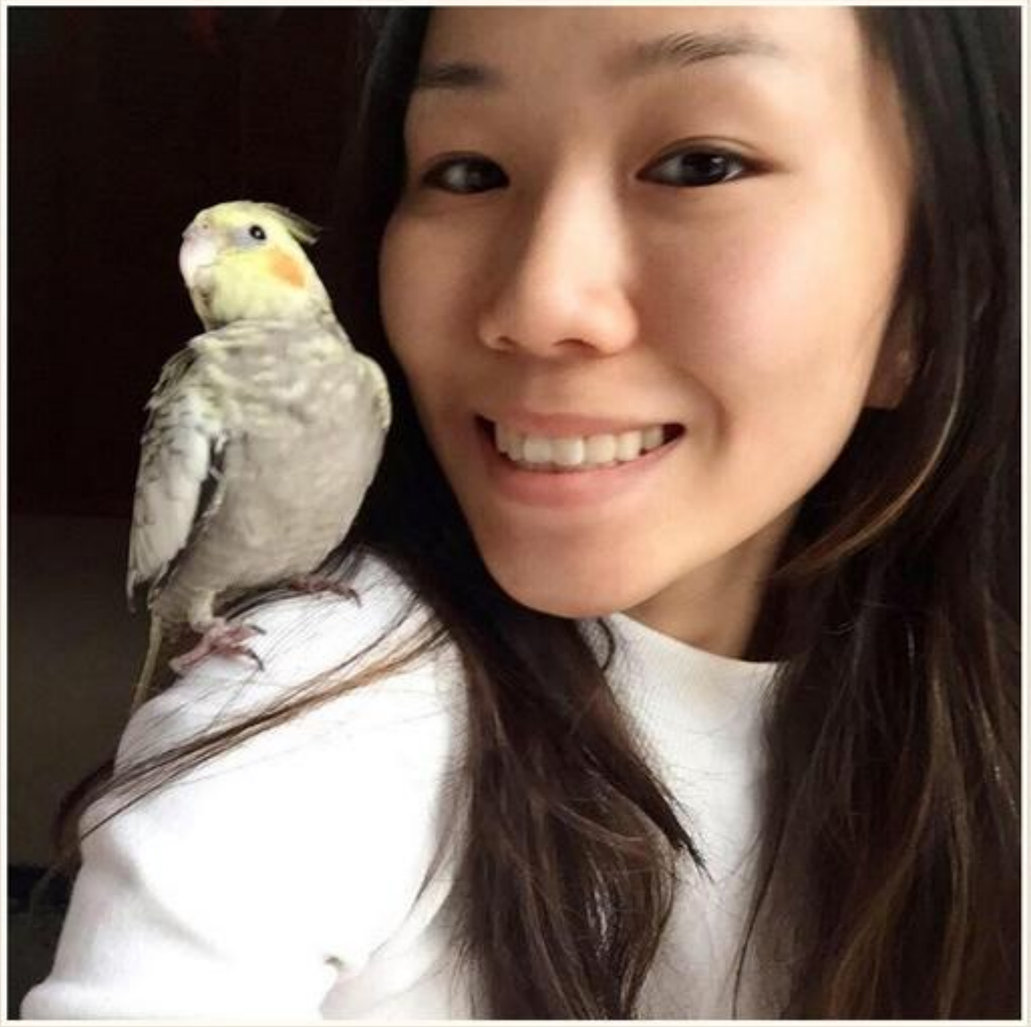
13rushes

Beauty needs no fur.



The animals behind the story

A few pages from my own photo album.



There was always room on my shoulder.





The cockatiels behind Wang Wang and Weeku. In the little photograph, two friends share a bite.



Gikgik Boy inspecting the brushes.



Apple, fast asleep.



Cheek to cheek.

The five cats



Cottons, Cushions, Cookies, Coco and Churros. All five made it into the story, and all five made it into this photograph.

A goat I met



A photograph from the day we met.

For my little companions

Some of my favourite moments with you were as simple as this. An open window, a little sunshine, and the three of us together.

With love,
Yuhui

