



The Adventures of Thumbelina and Yoshi

In the middle of the field, where the earth dipped into a shallow valley tangled with thorn and low creeping bushes, there lived a hedgehog—neither large nor small, but of that modest size that seldom draws the eye. Beside him, never far, moved a tortoise named Thumbelina, the two were inseparable friends.

Together they passed their days in quiet slumber beneath the sheltering green, hidden from the burning gaze of the sun. Yet when evening came, and the last light slipped behind the far-off mountain peaks, the two friends would rouse themselves and wander out into the gathering dusk in search of their food.

Thumbelina delighted in the delicate crunch of small white snails and the soft sweetness of fruit half returned to the earth. Yoshi, nimble and bold, hunted forest mice and swift lizards, and shared with her the late grapes he found glistening in the twilight. But in secret he cherished above all the taste of frog-meat, and the mere scent of it set his small dark eyes gleaming like stars in the gloom.

In the cool hush of evening, when the first shadows began to gather beneath the boughs and the air grew still as if in waiting, he would wake up first. Blinking sleep from his eyes and stirring the quiet with a faint rustle, he would turn to Thumbelina and say: “Come, rise, it is time to eat,” called his companion, eager as the sun was setting over the hills.

The turtle stirred with a groan, her limbs heavy with sleep and slowness, “Oh, you rush as though the world might vanish before your meal!”

Together they trudged from the little valley, their feet crunching the fallen leaves of early autumn. From the twisted branches of wild pear trees above, the magpies chattered and laughed, their voices sharp as broken bells, echoing across the hollow.

“The swift-walkers are passing, beware!” they cried in their hoarse, wind-worn voices.

“Make way! Make way!” called the quails from the tawny fields nearby, scattering like little brown leaves before a coming storm. And in the shadowed hollows of the ravine the blackbirds—black as devils—sat hidden among briar and thorn, and their laughter tinkled there, thin and uncanny, as though the darkness itself had found a voice and was amused.

Yoshi and Thumbelina pretended not to hear the mockery, and hurried with all their might to pass by their playful neighbors.

They wandered all night through the nearby vineyards, searching the fields or gardens near the village. At dawn, wet from the dew, but full and satisfied, they returned to the valley and fell asleep sweetly, warmed by the morning sun. Their life was peaceful and comfortable. And perhaps their lazy fellows would have lived like this for many more years if one day the villagers had not plowed the valley and uprooted the thorns from it. Since then, Thumbelina and Yoshi were haunted by various sufferings and troubles, which are told in the pages that follow.

Viciousella

They came at length to a lone hill, rising steep from the tangled lands about it, its crown overrun with tall, withering grasses the color of old gold left too long in the sun. Little did they know—for the day was warm and the wind gentle—that this height was no common mound, but the dwelling place of an ancient serpent of the elder wilderness: a great ash-grey reptile whom the wanderers of forgotten years had named Viciousella. For though her scales were pale as weathered stone, the cavern of her jaws glowed with a deep brick-red hue, like embers smoldering behind iron.

Unaware of this grim keeper of the hill, they trod upward, the whispering grass parting before them as though reluctant to reveal what lay hidden beneath its shivering blades. And the stillness that lay upon that place was heavy—too heavy for any hill untaken by shadow—yet they passed on, knowing nothing of the silent coils waiting below.

When at last they strayed into the grasslands, the dawn was but newly kindled, and the dew still clung in silver beads to every bending blade. Thumbelina and Yoshi, wearied by their long wanderings beneath the stars, sank down in the very heart of the slough and were swiftly lost to sleep. The place welcomed them kindly, for the reeds grew tall there, soft as down and swaying like slow green banners in the hush of early morning; and they hid the pair from the sharp wandering eyes of bird and beast alike.

Yet as they settled into that quiet refuge, a wonder came upon them—for never had they crossed so gentle a hollow without finding a quick-eared hare leaping from its nest, nor a sly weasel glinting from the shadows with mischief in its mind. But no whisker stirred, nor did any soft paw rustle the grasses round about.

Little did they know of Viciousella, the cunning huntress of that place. She slept now in her narrow earthy den beyond the farthest fringe of the slough, curled in the dimness with her red muzzle tucked beneath her tail, dreaming whatever dreams come to such creatures at sunrise. And so Thumbelina and Yoshi, unwitting of her presence, lay in peace for a while under the pale gold of the morning.

She cared little for the lean grey hours before dawn, and less still for the cold touch of morning’s dew. Such things were not for her. She preferred to show herself only when the pale mists lifted and the first gold of the sun stole across the earth. Then, and only then, would she emerge—slowly, with a measured grace befitting an old and hidden lady of the wild.

Out she would come, unhurried as the opening of a long-shuttered door, and curl herself into a small round shape, as though gathering all the warmth of the sun into her narrow frame. For hers was a body made for shadowed places, where colder blood ran its quiet course and time itself seemed to move at a gentler pace. And so she rested in the new light of day, a cold-blooded and a vicious creature welcoming the warmth as though it were an old friend returned at last.

After the day had ripened and the warmth lay heavy upon the earth, Viciousella would take again to the long slogging path, her hide glinting ruddy in the sun as though some faint fire smoldered beneath it. Hunger ever walked with her, a silent companion.

More often than not she wandered toward the neighboring millet-field, a humble place of whispering stalks and wind-bent gold. There, a thicket of low bushes clung to the field’s edge, as though guarding some small secret of the land. Upon these bent branches the eagle-sparrows would gather—stern little watchers with bright, keen eyes. They perched in patient ranks, their feathers stirred by whatever breeze had managed to slip down into that quiet corner of the world.

And Viciousella, slithering softly beneath them, felt herself observed by a hundred glimmering points of light.

Soft as the passing of a shadow at dusk, the serpent glided beneath the tangled bramble, her scales whispering faintly against the fallen leaves. There she lay in patient stillness, hidden from all but the keenest eye, awaiting the moment when the small brown sparrows would flit down from the boughs to rest.

Then, with a slowness born of ancient instinct, she raised her head. Her eyes—glassy, cold, and sharp as chips of dark crystal—fixed unblinking upon the nearest of the little birds. No breeze stirred the thicket, no sound broke the hush beneath the leaves, save for the faint quiver of the serpent’s steady gaze, as she watched, and waited, and willed the unsuspecting creature nearer.

At first the sparrow would bristle, as though some ancient and half-forgotten fire had stirred within its slight breast, and it would spread its wings in a bold display. Yet in a little while, overcome by that strange mingling of giddy hunger and weakness that comes upon small creatures in wild places, it would tumble from the briar-bush. Then Viciousella, having taken him wholly into her gullet, swift as a darting shadow and caring nothing for the frightened chirruping of its kin, would seize its fallen prey and swallow it whole. Sated for a time, she would curl her narrow body beneath the sheltering leaves and lie there in deep, dreamless slumber for many hours.

But with the first clatter of the cows returning to the meadow, and the sharp, echoing cries of the cowherd driving them home, Viciousella’s eyes would flash open. More than once the lad had pursued her; more than once his heavy whip had whistled through the air after the creature. But Viciousella knew well how to run swift as a loosed arrow, and the hiss that slipped from her lips was as perilous as the whisper of something wild in darkened woods. Once, in a sudden fury, she flung herself upon the cowherd; and so great was her onrush that the poor fellow swayed where he stood, near fainting, as if Death herself had leapt at him from the shadows.

Indeed, on a certain grey morning, when mist still clung to the hollows and the trees muttered in their sleep, Viciousella turned at last upon her tormentor. With a sudden leap she sprang toward him, and the cowherd, beholding those fierce, glinting eyes and that scarlet—almost firelit—mouth, felt his courage melt away like frost at sunrise. He stumbled back in terror and might well have fainted outright, had not the creature, satisfied with its show of defiance, vanished again into the tangle of brush and shadows as swiftly as it had come.

That morning the serpent was in a foul temper, for hunger gnawed at her belly like a cold stone. Yet, she crept from her den to bask in the young sun, letting the warm gold seep into her scales before sliding soundlessly along the narrow woodland path.

In the grass beside the way a small snail without shell or shelter glistened pale as moonlit dew, inching forward with slow and patient courage. Vicious-ella, for so the serpent was named among the creatures of that place, marked the little wanderer with a flicker of her tongue and a glint in her wicked eye; and in that moment she desired nothing more than to coil and strike and swallow.

But scarcely had she slipped upon the path, her body weaving like dark water, when she found her way barred. Yoshi and Thumbelina stood there—strange companions they were, one quick as a startled hare, the other lumbering and broad as an old tree-root. They had come single-file beneath the leaning boughs, where the branches had long grown together overhead, forming a dim archway as though guarding some ancient secret.

Viciousella halted, for the air under the trees was heavy and still, and even the fierce of heart felt some shadow of unrest in that place. The light behind them dwindled to a small bright hole, and the forest around seemed to lean close and listen.

The two companions slept on, carefree and deep, as though some gentle spell of the woods had fallen over their weary limbs. Yet all was not so peaceful beneath the tangled boughs.

For there, gliding in the half-light with scarcely a whisper, a serpent of the darker sort had marked their coming. Startled by these unbidden wanderers, she let forth a low, angry hiss, and her tongue—thin and forked like a sliver of malice—flickered in and out as though tasting their very presence. Slowly she raised her narrow head, her eyes cold and gleaming, and fixed her baleful gaze upon the little hedgehog.

Then the creature’s coils tightened; its long body gathered itself as a bow bent with perilous intent. In the next heartbeat it shot forward, swift as a grey arrow loosed in shadow.

The nimble hedgehog sprang aside, but not swiftly enough to escape the serpent’s furious strike. A dreadful blow caught him, sending him tumbling. He cried out—a thin, sharp sound, swallowed quickly by the dim undergrowth—and rolled over, spines bristling in fear and pain.

Stunned by the blow, the poor hedgehog knew not at first what manner of foe had assailed him. Yet when the thin, sibilant whisper of the serpent reached his ears, and he felt the cruel prick of needle-teeth upon his tender snout, an older wisdom woke within him. Yoshi as though he curled himself into a tight brown ball, and out bristled his little spears like a fortress roused for war.

Then the serpent—Viciousella she was called in those shadowed places—drew herself long and straight as a spear of malice, seeking by her very tauness to guard her flesh from the hedgehog’s stout armour. So began a grim struggle for life beneath the whispering grass. The tall stalks shuddered and swayed with their wrestling; and from that green maze there rose now the thin, desperate squeal of Yoshi, now the harsh and venomous hiss of Viciousella, as fate weighed the small lives contending there beneath the heedless sky.

Woken at last by the clamor, Thumbelina stuck her head out of the shelter of her heavy, time-worn shell. Long she blinked in the half-light, for her eyes were slow to rouse and slower still to comprehend the troubles of Yoshi. Yet as the moments passed, understanding—dim and ponderous—crept upon her like dawn through a deep wood.

Before her, Yoshi struggled in the coils of the great serpent, its scales glimmering with a dull and perilous sheen, and the very air about them seemed to quiver with its hunger. Then Thumbelina, rousing all the strength stored in her broad, crooked limbs, heaved herself upright. A rumble like distant thunder escaped her as she began to move.

Though her gait was heavy and her pace unhurried by nature, now she pressed forward with uncommon haste. Leaves shuddered under her tread, and the ground itself seemed to brace for her coming. With a determination seldom seen in her kind, Thumbelina lumbered toward the snake, intent on breaking her deadly grasp—slow, perhaps, but unstoppable as the roots of the earth.

The unexpected stroke came swift as a falling branch in a storm, and Viciousella recoiled in sudden wrath. She loosed the poor hedgehog from her coils and swung her gaze toward the slow-shelled turtle. Yet Thumbelina, wiser than she seemed, had already drawn herself deep into the shadowed hollow of her trough, as though earth itself had swallowed her.

Foiled once more, the deceived serpent turned back with a hiss like steam from hidden fissures. But Yoshi was no longer sprawled helpless upon the ground. Bristling with thorns that glimmered like tiny spearheads in the dim light, he had regained his feet. Behind that prickly bulwark, he advanced with a courage born of desperation.

Vainly did Viciousella snap and strike, seeking some chink through which her fangs might find a vulnerable spot. Every blow met only the sharp forest of spines that guarded the small warrior. She saw then the gleam in his dark eyes—red with fury, but steady as embers in a hearti long untended.

Back and forth she darted, as a shadow chased by her own fear, and each time her body brushed the shield of thorns she recoiled with a hiss more filled with malice than before. She leapt this way and that, coiling, uncoiling, her lithe form striking at air and bramble alike, while Yoshi stood firm, a stubborn sentinel in the dim and tangled clearing.

Suddenly the little hedgehog sprang forth, swift as a prickly-backed dart. And when she, startled by his boldness, stepped back to guard herself, he caught fast at her tail with a fierce and desperate grip. Then the creature’s red mouth rose up like a spear-tip, and a thin hiss of pain escaped her, sharp as the whisper of steel in the dark places of the forest.

With the last bits of her strength she wrenched herself free. Her slender body, light and lithe, snapped through the air like a whip lashed by an unseen hand, and for a heartbeat she glimmered in the sun, bright as a silver stream breaking through the canopy. The hedgehog could not keep his hold. He was flung aside, rolling into the fallen leaves and tangled roots, where he lay among the shadows, muttering and bristling in wounded astonishment.

As soon as her limbs were loosed and the weight of peril fell from her, Viciousella darted away. With a few lithe windings of her long, sinuous body she sped across the leaf-strewn earth, and reaching the shadowed lip of her burrow, she slipped within, vanishing like a flicker of flame swallowed by the dark earth.



The Ant’s Help

Heated by the struggle, and stung by his failure to slay the serpent, Yoshi sprang to and fro about Viciousella’s dark den, seeking some cunning way by which he might draw the creature out. Long he laboured, tearing at the earth with restless paws; but the soil was hard as sun-baked clay, and the snake had burrowed deep, far beyond the reach of his grasp.

For a while he dragged himself to and fro as the snake within shifted and coiled, yet this served him no better. At last he halted, breathless and begrimed, and knew that this toil was in vain. The ground yielded nothing, the shadowed hole no hint of movement. So he cast aside that fruitless labour, and stood pondering in the stillness, while the red-rimmed mouth of the burrow seemed to watch him in silent mockery.

“I must get her out of there!” he shouted, bristling and terrifying with his thorns.

“I will let her know how to attack sleepers and strike from shadow! I will tear her to pieces, till no trace of her remains to plague the gentle sparrows. I shall unmake her utterly, if only for the sake of the small folk who tremble at her passing. But how?”

“How am I to draw her from the dark hollow where she lurks?”

He paced beneath the boughs, and the dim green glimmer of the wood trembled over him as though listening. A queer stillness lay upon the air, as if even the leaves held their breath at his fury. Yet all his bold words faltered before the simple truth: she was hidden, and her hiding-place was deep and secret, older than the oldest ivy and twice as cunning.

“How?” he whispered again, and the whisper seemed to sink into the moss at his feet. “How shall I smoke her out from the shadows?”

Suddenly he halted, as if some hidden thought had smitten him, and struck his brow with the flat of his hand.

“Hurry—to the ants!” he cried to Thumbelina.

And before she could so much as wonder what aid these tiny folk of the earth might lend, Yoshi had already darted away toward an old anthill that lay nestled at the gnarled roots of a pear tree long past its prime.

Thumbelina followed after him, bewildered and breathless, for the place was overgrown and hushed, as though the tree itself were holding its ancient breath. The mound writhed with countless small lives, glinting darkly in the muted light; and yet Yoshi knelt before it with a strange and sudden purpose, as though he had come upon an old ally in the wild.

At that time the ants were exceedingly busy with their labours. All along the winding paths of their little realm they toiled unceasingly, gathering the fruits of field and furrow against the creeping cold of winter. Grains gleaming pale as river-pebbles, withered straws light as old memories, and seeds of every humble kind they dragged in long patient lines toward the dark mouths of their hill-home.

Before the chief entrance of that earthy dwelling there stood a great red ant, taller and broader than the rest, set firm upon his many-jointed legs like a sentinel carved from amber. His long quivering feelers curved outward like mustachios upon the stern countenance of a soldier long used to watching the borders of his land. Silent he stood, keeping ward over the bustling folk.

“What do you seek here?” he said, and his voice was stern as a cold wind over withered heather.

“We come as friends,” answered the hedgehog, bowing his small bristled head. “We have no intention to steal your food nor trouble your colony.”

“What do you seek?” repeated the guard, no less unyielding than before.

“We need your aid,” said Yoshi, stepping forward. “A great serpent lies upon the path behind us. We have just now fought with her, she attacked us in the small hours when we slept within that slog.”

“A serpent, you say?” cried the little ant, quivering so that his tiny shadow trembled upon the root he stood upon.

“Then it could be none other than Viciousella herself! Long ago she stole that very slog from our kind.”

“Yes,” answered the hedgehog gravely, his spines rustling like dry reeds in a night-wind.

“She lies wounded now, deep in the gloom of her burrow. It is for this cause we have come beneath your boughs: to beg for your aid, that together we may see her wickedness ended at last.”

“With great pleasure,” said the guard; and turning aside he bent low to a tiny ant that toiled beneath a grain of millet. Then in a voice soft as wind in the grass he bade it hasten and bear the tidings to the deep chambers of the anthill, where many small folk dwelt and laboured unceasingly. And the little creature, though burdened, lifted its feelers bravely, as if the message were a charge of great honour, and scurried away into the dim cracks of the earth.



After a few minutes, the battle ranks of the ants emerged, like a dark river flowing from beneath the roots of the ancient tree. Scouts, small and swift, crept ahead, their tiny antennae quivering as they sought to discern the hiding place of the serpent. Behind the last of the ants, Yoshi and Thumbelina trod with careful deliberation, their steps slow and measured, so as not to affront the martial dignity of the insect host. The forest seemed to hold its breath as the little army advanced, besides the gnarled roots and knotted branches.

The scouts returned at last, and reported in low, urgent whispers that Viciousella had been struck and now lay wounded within her lair. Then the first ranks of the ants rushed forward into the snake’s dwelling.

Yoshi lingered at the edge of shadow, and prepared to meet his enemy. He positioned himself so that Viciousella might not perceive his presence before the moment came to strike. The world seemed to hold its breath, and the faint rustle of leaves above and the scuttle of tiny legs below marked the slow, inevitable approach of what was to come.

Beneath the earth, in a hollow dark and secret, the snake lay coiled in weary stillness. Her lair was a sunless chamber, hewn deep in the soil where the roots of ancient trees twisted like old, gnarled fingers. Her scales were dulled with dust and streaked with the marks of the battle; her body curved tightly, a circle of pain. From the tip of her tail, a thin line of crimson oozed, staining the earth beneath.

Weakened and unheeding, she did not hear as the quiet footsteps of tiny intruders approached, their numbers countless in the dimness. Only when the first sharp teeth sank into her wounds did the snake awaken to the peril surrounding her. A cold dread crawled over her spine as the relentless army of ants pressed closer, their jaws clicking in a rhythm as old as the forest, and the snake understood that in the dark, deep places of the world, even the smallest creatures might hold the power of doom.

With a vicious hiss, the serpent darted from her burrow, yet along the narrow tunnel came a tide of ants, swarming and relentless. They clung to her crimson maw, and the creature writhed, pulling back in agony. Her flat head emerged at last, and Yoshi crouched low in the grass, eyes sharp, heart steady, waiting for the whole serpentine body to emerge. Then, with a sudden spring, he struck. The red-mouthed horror was no match—the hedgehog’s spines found their mark, breaking her spine, and in moments the body was darkened and crawling with ants. Slowly, inevitably, the serpent ceased her struggle, and the quiet of the grassland reclaimed the scene.

Ungrateful Neighbors

Word of the snake’s passing spread swiftly through the fields, carried on the wings of restless magpies. Their raucous chatter wove through the air, tumbling over hedgerows and winding along the riverbanks, until it reached the farthest corners of the glade. From that distant stillness came a sudden stir—a kestral, sharp-eyed and silent as a shadow, descended without warning. With talons outstretched, he lifted the long, scarlet-streaked body of Viciousella, and bore it away into the brightening sky, leaving behind only the rustle of grass and the faint echo of wings.

And so the hedgehog, small though stout of heart, turned to his companion beneath the dimming light of eventide and spoke hopefully:

“I hope that from now on we will be at peace,” said the Yoshi to his companion. *“No one will challenge our right to live in the slog.”*

Yet barely had two days slipped quietly by when, and a flock of partridges, brown-feathered and brisk, descended upon the tall grasses and made their camp as though it were theirs by ancient claim.

Then Yoshi, being among the baster and more spirited folk of the slog, strode forth to reason with them. But the birds only laughed—a bright, trilling laughter that stung more sharply than any thorn—and they ruffled their wings in mild amusement.

“The slog does not belong to anyone,” declared the eldest of the partridges, his voice like the rustle of dry reeds — *“There is room for all of us. We will not hinder you in any way, nor shall we meddle in your doings.”*

“It’s not a question of who owns the slog,” objected Yoshi.

“The question is that wherever you settle, you bring some danger. I don’t want to deal with hunting dogs, nor with that robber, the fox, nor with various outlaws, like the hawks. There are so many of you, and the place way is too small. For your own good, I advise you to leave the slog and get away as soon as possible“.

But the partridges had no intention to abandon their snug little nook, not while the sun was warm upon the heather and the briars hung heavy with berries. And on the next day there came also the hare, soft-footed and mild-eyed, who made himself quite at home beneath a thorn-tree whose crooked arms spread a pleasant shade about him.

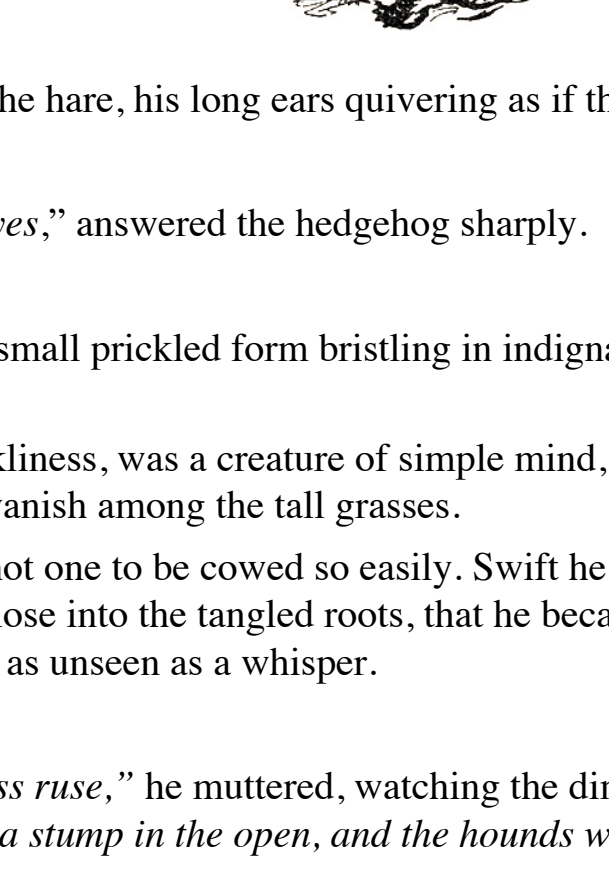
The partridges, being sociable folk, welcomed him at once with many a courteous cluck and bob of the head. But Yoshi the hedgehog did not like him at all, and he set himself to all manner of tricks and scurrying mischief to drive the newcomer away. Yet for all his cunning no plan availed, and the hare, untroubled and rather drowsy in the cool shade, remained.

At last Yoshi decided upon a bolder ruse. He waited until the hare slept, long ears fallen like pale leaves upon his shoulders. Then suddenly, with all the speed that his prickled little form could muster, he darted past the slumberer so swiftly that the grass trembled behind him.

Up sprang the hare as if struck by an unseen arrow, limbs quivering and ears turning this way and that like twin watchtowers searching for danger.

“What happened, good fellow?” he asked, patting himself down anxiously while his ears swept the air in widening circles.

“Do you not hear?” whispered Yoshi, his voice grave with feigned dread. *“Hunters are coming.”*



“Hunters? Where are they?” cried the hare, his long ears quivering as if they would catch some whisper in the wind.

“I have no time to lead your blind eyes,” answered the hedgehog sharply.

And with that he turned about, his small prickled form bristling in indignation, and trotted away beneath the briar-shadow as though all the matter were finished.

Now the hedgehog, for all his prickliness, was a creature of simple mind, and he believed that the hare—fast of foot yet timid of heart—would take to his heels and vanish among the tall grasses.

For the hare, though startled, was not one to be cowed so easily. Swift he slipped back beneath the thorny archway. There he crouched low, pressing himself so close into the tangled roots, that he became a shadow. And in that stillness, with only the soft murmur of leaves above, he became as unseen as a whisper.

“He will be snared by his own witless ruse,” he muttered, watching the dim edge of the clearing. *“Rather than slip silently into the deep woods, he will linger here like a stump in the open, and the hounds will nose him out soon enough, baying to their masters.”*

And so the days passed. Creatures of prey—wolf, hawk, and other, darker shapes—began to drift in, drawn by the swelling abundance of game that haunted the glades. It seemed as though the whole slog had grown restless, waiting for something unseen to break its silence.

High above the quiet fields a falcon wheeled, biding its time until the shy partridges dared step into the open. And the hawks, bold and hungry, swept so low that the brush of their wings whispered against the tall grass. Through the dusk wandered the white-tailed deer, soft-footed and watchful, while a weasel—quick as a dart and cruel by nature—sprang upon a hapless hare in full daylight, leaving a grievous wound upon his neck. In but two days’ turn, three partridges were gone as if the shadows themselves had swallowed them.

Yet Yoshi and Thumbelina did not abandon their troubled neighbors, they tried with all their might to help their neighbors in trouble. As soon as they heard the voice of the old partridge, they would run and chase away the attacker.

Without the timely aid of Yoshi, the hare would surely have met his end; yet instead of offering thanks, he carried on with the same proud tilt of head, as though no life-debt lay upon him.

“Scatter across the field, I beg you,” Yoshi urged his neighbors day after day. *“The longer you linger here in this narrow patch, the more the prowling beasts will come upon you. I am weary of saying it!”*

“Then why do you not wander off with your precious walking bowl?” the partridges replied, their feathers ruffled with offense.

The hare called out to him, bristling with pride.

“You have already shown us your merits to us,” the rabbit said. *“I declare to you that I do not need your help. I have the strength to deal with my enemies myself.”*

But Yoshi, swift in temper as in foot, cried back, *“Foolish creature! Do you not see that these hawks and falcons circle above not for my sake, but for yours?”*

“That is far from certain,” murmured the partridges, ruffling their feathers in doubt.

When no words could bend their stubborn minds, the hedgehog’s patience failed. Anger flared in him, and he drove them from the nest with fierce chidings. And so it was that the hawks descended like shadows loosed from the clouds, striking hard upon the bewildered birds.

“Stop! Leave them be!” pleaded Thumbelina, whose heart was ever soft toward the helpless. *“Do you not see you cast them into sure death?”*

Yoshi only shook his head, weary and grim. *“There is no peace left for us here,”* he said. *“We must seek another place beneath the sun.”*

After several days had passed, the two companions decided to leave the village and make their way to an untilled stretch of earth, where tall, stubborn weeds rose like a dark host. Yet on the very morning of their departure, an event most strange befell them—an occurrence that turned the course of their days and laid upon them a burden of new suffering, heavier and more dreadful than any they had yet endured.

Unexpected Air Journey

Behind the mountain, which in the far-off haze was turning a deep and misty blue, there dwelt a mighty golden eagle. His vast eyrie clung to a sheer and towering cliff, where no careless climber would dare to tread. Each morning the great bird rose into the brightening heavens, wheeling in smooth and stately circles. Thus did he keep watch over all the lands below, surveying the wide world with keen and ancient eyes.

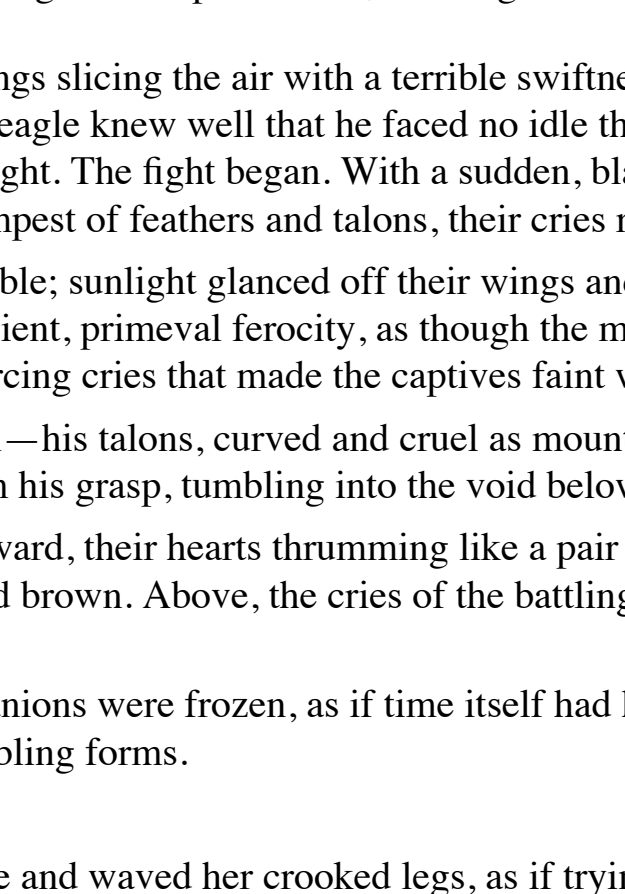
One morning, he spied the hare returning from the fields, his ears flicking nervously as he sought refuge beneath the thorn. Yet he did not stir, for hunger did not yet gnaw him sharply. As for the partridges, small and fleet, they drew no interest from his keen eyes—they were trifles unworthy of pursuit.

He turned, about to climb the rugged path toward the mountain, when something caught his gaze: a dark shape, mottled and glinting where the sun and rain had left their mark. It was Thumbelina, lying in the sodden earth, quiet as a stone yet thrumming with hidden life. Beside her, where the tortoise slept, curled in patient slumber, was Yoshi.

The eagle’s mind lingered upon his young eaglet, who had never known the delight of a turtle’s gift. With a deliberate sweep of his mighty wings, he seized the turtle in his talons, intending to break her shell upon a rock before presenting her to the fledgling.

Far above the land of Thumbelina, he hovered, his keen eyes measuring the distance with unerring precision. Then, folding his wings like dark banners, he plummeted toward the earth, a shadow gliding over the syllabic hills below.

Thumbelina stirred in her dreams, yet before she could discern the source of the swift motion, a great shadow blotted out the morning light. The eagle’s wings, broad and black-brown, beat with dreadful power, and his claws, curved as scimitars, descended with a terrible inevitability, seizing the sleeping figure in a grip that was both sudden and absolute.



Yoshi clutched the turtle tightly and tried to pull her from the eagle’s claws, but in an instant he found himself lifted high above the slog, dangling like a leaf caught in a storm. The eagle’s mighty wings, carrying him aloft, light as smoke.

“Help! Help!” he cried, his voice tiny beneath the vast sky.

For a moment, the thought of letting go and plunging to the earth below flitted through his mind—but the eagle, with eyes bright and unwavering, soared even higher. Far beneath, the slog lay stretched like a narrow ribbon of yellow, gleaming faintly in the sunlight, and the fields around it became a distant, patchwork quilt.

The wind whipped around him, tugging at his body and hairs, and Yoshi clung with all his strength, the turtle’s shell warm against his chest, as if some unseen magic held them together in balance between sky and earth.

Twirling with a heart both anxious and eager, Yoshi shut his eyes and clutched the turtle with all the courage he could muster. High above, the eagle’s wings beat with a quiet strength, steady and unerring. From the eagle’s steady and smooth flight, the two realized that they had risen high enough and that the bird was now heading for its nest.

The hedgehog dared at last, and his small eyes flickered open, gazing downward. The wide field he had left behind seemed to stretch endlessly, dotted faintly with the tiny thatched roofs of the village, nearly swallowed by willows whose branches bent like whispers over the river. That river gleamed under the sun, a shining twisting thread of silver. The eagle was already above the mountain, and below him, as if in an abyss, the curly peaks of the forest and the bluish troughs of the ravines were patches of green.

After a few minutes they soared above the highest ridge of the mountains, where the wind sang sharply against the eagle’s wings. Beyond, jagged peaks of another range thrust skyward, crowned with snow and mist. Nestled upon one such pinnacle, the eagle’s home clung to the stone like a crown of feathers and rock.

Between the two ranges stretched a narrow, winding plain, traversed by a river that glimmered silver in the sunlight. In the midst of this plain, the unknown swamp lay murky and green, shifting faintly as if hiding secrets in their stillness. From afar, the land seemed both inviting and perilous, a place where shadow and light danced together over marsh and meadow, whispering of adventures yet to come.

When the eagle at last swept down to the shadowed swamp, a second great bird appeared, poised across the gilded sky, where the sun poured its quiet light. Yoshi and Thumbelina discerned the broad, graceful wings of another eagle, yet this one was unlike their captor. His feathers carried the pale gray of dawn, and beneath its beak hung a tuft of downy plumage, like a little beard of some woodland spirit. His wings stretched longer and tapered finer, as though made for distant journeys over mountains and rivers far from the eyes of men.

Their captor quickened his flight, wings slicing the air with a terrible swiftness. The dark brown feathers along his neck bristled like sharpened spears, and the golden eagle knew well that he faced no idle threat. The wind lifted him upward, yet the prey beneath denied him the heights he sought. The fight began. With a sudden, blazing speed, the bearded eagle fell upon him like a falling star. The two birds met in a tempest of feathers and talons, their cries ringing through the sky with such piercing fury.

The air around them seemed to tremble; sunlight glanced off their wings and glinted from their eyes like fire in the shadow. Each strike and dive carried a weight of ancient, primeval ferocity, as though the mountain itself had held its breath, watching this battle unfold. The two opponents uttered piercing cries that made the captives faint with fear.

The golden eagle’s strongest weapon—his talons, curved and cruel as mountain scythes—were engaged. To defend himself successfully, he released his prey from his grasp, tumbling into the void below.

Yoshi and Thumbelina plunged earthward, their hearts thrumming like a pair of wild drums. The wind roared in their ears, and the world blurred into streaks of green and brown. Above, the cries of the battling eagles rent the sky, a terrible symphony of talons and feathers.

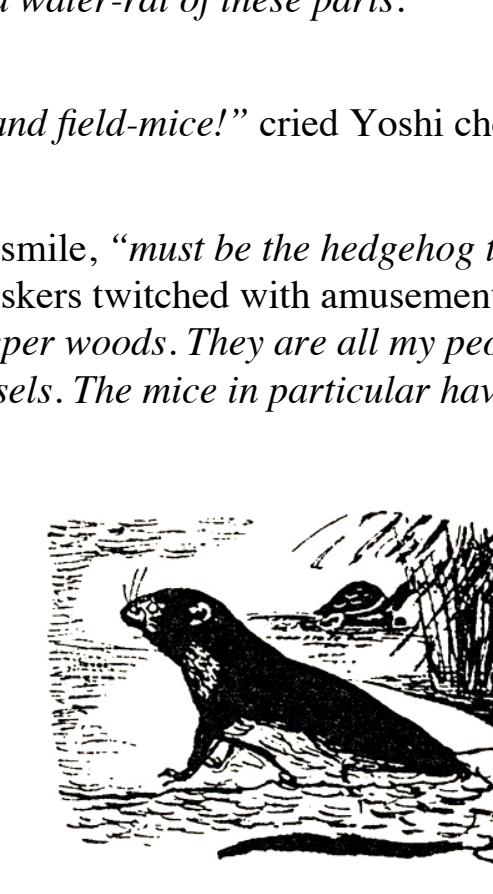
Clinging to each other, the two companions were frozen, as if time itself had halted. Words forsook them, and only the primal pulse of fear spoke through their trembling forms.

“Oooh, oh, oh!” — screamed the turtle and waved her crooked legs, as if trying to catch hold of something.

“Aaah, ah, ah!” — moaned the hedgehog, tightly hugging onto her shell.

With terrible speed they were carried down, where something large and smooth was shining... Suddenly a deafening splash rang out beside them. Darkness and cold enveloped them from all sides...

They had fallen into the waters of the swamp...



The Mysterious Aunt

Thumbelina, being the heavier of the two, sank deep into the swampy water. Dizzy from the sudden strike, she lay for a few moments amid the mud and reeds, the coldness biting at her limbs and bringing her to her senses. The turtle, steadfast and patient, folded its broad legs beneath it like shovels and, with a slow heave, rose to the water’s surface.

Yoshi, unaccustomed to swimming, struggled feebly, he had barely managed to show himself above the water. Frightened and muddy, he was drowning in the middle of the swamp.

Thumbelina came swiftly to his aid. He pressed his foot upon her back, and she drew him to a mound of earth that rose like a lonely island amid the swamp’s expanse. There they paused, hearts thumping, gazing upon the still, green-tinged waters. The swamp stretched wide, dotted with reeds and towering, verdant weeds. The air was thick with the pungent scent of decay and strange grasses. Across the waters, willows bent low, their roots sunk deep into the muddy banks. At first glance, it seemed as though no living thing dared dwell in that murky realm.

Yoshi and Thumbelina dared not pause or glance around. Above them, the eagles still clashed in the sky, their fierce cries echoing across the peaks. The two huddled closer to the shadow of the rocks, hearts pounding, fearful that the great birds might notice them and sweep them away once more. At last, with a great cry that carried far into the mountains, the eagles turned and soared away, wings glinting in the sun, toward the jagged ridges beyond.

“What are we to do now? How shall we escape this treacherous water?” — groaned the hedgehog, his little paws trembling as he peered into the dark, sucking mud of the swamp. He had never seen such a place, where the air hung thick and heavy with mist. *“Climb upon my back, and we shall make our way to firmer ground”* — replied Thumbelina, her voice calm, though the reeds whispered around them like restless spirits.

“But where are we going? Who shall guide us from this lonely fen? There is no sign of life here, only the whisper of the wind in dead reeds.”

“Look ”, — said the turtle, her eyes narrow beneath the rim of her shell, — *“ there seems to be something swimming. See it flicker in the gloom, as if the water itself were alive?”*

The hedgehog shivered. The swamp stretched on before them, vast and shadowed, yet a faint glimmer of hope lay in the turtle’s words, and both of them clung to it as travelers clutching a faint star in a night without moon.

Indeed, some creature was gliding through the water toward them. Its form was shadowy beneath the ripples, and at first it seemed no larger than a common mouse. Yet as it drew near, a sharp, pointed snout broke the surface, and its cunning, glittering eyes marked it as no ordinary rodent. Yoshi felt a shiver run through him, a sudden, involuntary fear of this strange denizen of the swamp. Whatever it was, it carried the quiet menace of things best left unseen, and it approached the lump with an intent that made the hairs on his neck rise.

“Hd!” — the little creature started, ears flicking, its dark eyes glinting at the sight of our companions. The hedgehog’s sharp spines made it retreat a step, uncertain of these strange visitors.

In turn, the unknown beast seemed surprised to encounter beings so unlike any it had known. It twitched its nose, blinked with keen, cunning eyes, and in a sudden burst of courage approached Thumbelina. Shaking the water from its fur with a brisk, and cheerful motion, it revealed a coat soft and gleaming, short and well-kept, like the fur of some gentle forest spirit.

“Are you not in some way kin to my friend Yellow-Shelly?” he asked.

The turtle regarded him in wide-eyed wonder, as though the words were strange to her ears.

“You too are known to me,” the strange creature said at last to the hedgehog.

“We came here quite by chance,” replied Yoshi. *“How is it you know us? My name is Yoshi, and we have only just slipped away from the eagle’s cruel claws...”*

“From the eagle, you say?” The animal’s whiskers twitched in something like a smile. *“Hard it is to believe, yet let it stand. Permit me, then, to name myself — Sly, a water-rat of these parts.”*

“Ah! So you are of the kindred of voles and field-mice!” cried Yoshi cheerily. *“I know that folk well enough.”*

“And you,” answered the rat with a thin smile, *“must be the hedgehog that keeps to the open fields. I have heard no small number of unflattering tales about you.”* His whiskers twitched with amusement. *“I have many kin in those parts—voles, common mice, shrews, and even the squirrels of the deeper woods. They are all my people, some nearer to me, some more distant. All of them rodents, all with front teeth sharp as chisels. The mice in particular have shared rather unpleasant stories of your doings,”* added Sly with a glint in his dark eyes.

“Well...yes,” Yoshi admitted at last, though reluctance clung to his voice like damp leaves.

“I heard you were eating their meat,” said the water-rat, his whiskers twitching thoughtfully.

“They...they are great mischief-makers,” Yoshi attempted, as if justification might shield him.

“There is no need to apologize,” Sly cut in, smooth and swift. *“And so you have not heard that your Aunt Yellow-Shelly dwells here?”* he added, turning his bright eyes upon the turtle.

“My aunt? As far as I know, I have no such aunt.”

“A pity—and a wonder—that you know so little of your own kin,” murmured the rat, with a hint of reproach softened by curiosity.

From the reeds ahead—standing like a tall, yellowing wall—there came a clamour of voices:

“Phew, phew, shish, shish, shish!”

Yoshi and Thumbelina exchanged a startled glance.

“Only wild ducks,” said Sly, as though calming fretful children. *“They’ve been quarreling since dawn.”*

“Do ducks live here?” the hedgehog asked in wonder.

“As many as you could wish, and of every sort,” answered the water-rat, his whiskers twitching with pride. *“Some are great heavy birds, not unlike the farmyard kind; we call them March ducks, for they fly up from the southern lands when winter loosens its grip. And there are little ones too, no larger than pigeons—nimble fellows called stilts. But mark this: they are all sly folk and masters at hiding their eggs.”*

“Only this morning I went searching for a nest on the far bank,” he continued, lowering his voice with a hint of guilt. *“Found not a single egg. Still, I won’t pretend to be holier than the river itself. I dearly love eggs—fresh ones most of all.”*

The rat gave a small, unabashed shrug, as though confessing a fault shared by the whole wide world.

Suddenly there came a soft, far-varying whistle, clear and strangely musical. A pale shadow glided over the still, dark water. At once the rat splashed down in fright, vanishing beneath the surface as though swallowed by the swamp itself.

Then a great bird of grey-brown plumage wheeled above the marsh, circling with a mournful cry, as if lamenting some hidden sorrow. The moment its keen eyes caught sight of the two companions, it swept lower in a slow, deliberate arc, studying them from above.

Having satisfied its curiosity, it drifted toward the shore and, with long awkward strides, began to hurry into the sheltering reeds,

rustling among them like a traveler pushed on by some secret purpose.

“*Nothing good awaits us,*” said Yoshi, his voice heavy with sorrow. “*Our suffering will not end soon.*”

The two stood motionless upon the lonely islet, uncertain what path—if any—remained open to them. The sinking sun cast long, wavering rays across the mire, and they knew that evening would find them still stranded amid the dark waters of the swamp. What new perils the coming night might bear, neither dared imagine.

They listened anxiously to the many murmurs rising from the surrounding reeds. Wild ducks swept overhead, their wings whispering like fleeting shadows. A moment later came other birds, stranger still—long-legged creatures with narrow beaks—gliding through the dimming sky as though borne on some secret errand.

“*Lets try swim to the shore,*” said Thumbelina at last, for she had no fear of the deep water and its hidden things. But Yoshi wavered, glancing uneasily across the quiet surface. “*Wait a little longer,*” he murmured. “*Sly may yet return.*”

Even as he spoke, the water before them quivered as though stirred by an unseen breath. A narrow, gleaming head rose slowly from the depths—a serpent’s shape—and behind it slid forth the broad, yellow-spotted shell of a large turtle. Thumbelina stared in dread, beholding in that strange creature a dim and twisted likeness of herself. Yoshi stepped back, wonder and alarm written plainly on his face.

And in that same moment, from just beside the unexpected visitor, Sly’s own head broke the surface, blinking at them through the ripples.

“*Your aunt,*” he said cheerfully.

“*Indeed, I have never laid eyes on you,*” replied the aunt, her voice drawn out and honeyed, “*yet I have heard tales enough, and often have I wished to see my sister’s daughter.*”

Thumbelina felt a warm flush of embarrassment.

“*My mother has spoken nothing of you,*” she murmured. “*It seems she forgot to tell me I had an aunt at all.*”

“*Ah, we turtles live long years,*” said the aunt with a soft smile, “*and with such years our memories grow mossy and short.*”

Slowly she came nearer, her shell whispering against the earth. The two turtles touched their snouts, as though sharing a gentle kiss beneath the quiet air.

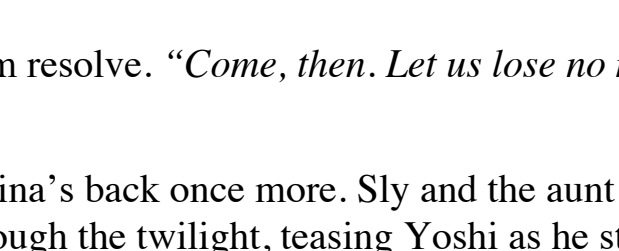
“*But who walks beside you?*” asked Yellow-Shelly, casting a wary glance at the hedgehog. “*What an unpleasant little creature!*”

Yoshi—never one to inspire much awe even on a good day—was now spattered with mud from snout to tail, and looked quite a sorry thing. Thumbelina, introduced her companion to her aunt. There was a small pause, as though the forest itself held its breath, waiting to see what would come of such an unlikely meeting.

“*I have no fixed abode in the swamp,*” said the water turtle, her voice bubbling softly, “*for the water is my home and the reeds my roof. Yet, you shall be my guests all the same.*”

Yoshi scowled, shifting uneasily on the muddy bank. “*It would serve us better if you showed the path that leads from this place,*” he said, with a sharpness that did not hide his distrust of the aunt.

The turtle’s eyes glimmered like wet stones in the dim light of the marsh. “*Patience, little walker,*” he murmured, “*for the way out is winding, and the water has many secrets.*”



“*It is far too late to journey onward,*” said Sly. “*In mere hours darkness will claim the sky. You must stay with us through the night, and tomorrow we shall guide your way.*”

“*Very well,*” replied the aunt with calm resolve. “*Come, then. Let us lose no more time.*”

Yoshi swung himself upon Thumbelina’s back once more. Sly and the aunt glided beside them in the river, their laughter ringing clear and bright, like bells tinkling through the twilight, teasing Yoshi as he struggled to keep himself in place.

The water turtle guided them gently to a stretch of land where the grass swayed in quiet waves beneath the fading light. There, she indicated a dry hollow, sheltered and soft, where they might rest until dawn.

“*I have nothing to offer for supper,*” she said, her voice calm and steady, “*for my meals lie beneath the water. Sly will see to your hunger.*”

Nearby, the rat emerged from a hidden burrow, his little paws clutching supplies carefully hoarded against the coming winter. He scurried forward, carrying food with a diligence born of many seasons’ practice, and set it before the travelers as though performing a small and noble ceremony.

The guests settled, their murmurs fading into the evening hush, and prepared to spend the night in uneasy calm. Before this, Yoshi crept softly to the water’s edge, hoping to snatch a frog from the dark ripples.

The hour was ripe for hunting, and Sly and Yellow-Shelly slipped from the group, diving silently into the green-tinged waters. Darkness thickened over the swamp, and the stars began to scatter their pale light upon the trembling surface, as though the heavens themselves were peering down to watch.

From the reeds came cries that cut the air—some shrill and pleading, others harsh and grating, and still others with a curiously tender note. Yoshi’s needles gleamed faintly in the starlight; he stood alert, ready for any mischief that might stir in the gloom.

Then a roar erupted from the reeds, so deep and terrible that it seemed to shake the very marsh. A shrill, laughing cry answered it, as though the swamp had taken on a voice of its own, mocking all who dared to listen.

The two comrades huddled close, hearts drumming in the night, listening to the strange chorus of voices that drifted across the water, haunting and unearthly, until the swamp itself seemed alive with whispering shadows.

Sly

At the first pale light of dawn, Yoshi and Thumbelina readied themselves for the day’s journey. Before setting out, they turned to their aunt and asked of the strange cries that had stirred them in the night.

“*Through the reeds you must go,*” she said softly, “*and there you shall meet these creatures. Fear not—they are not as fearsome as they sound.*”

Just then, the kind and knowing Sly appeared, offering his guidance. He was an old friend of the swamp and knew its winding waters as one knows a favorite path through the forest.

Thumbelina was mounted once more by the hedgehog, and together they slipped into the cool, dark waters, gliding straight toward the reeds, where shadow and secret waited.

“*Beware of the buzzard,*” warned Sly, his voice low and tense. “*He is my bitterest foe, always circling and waiting.*”

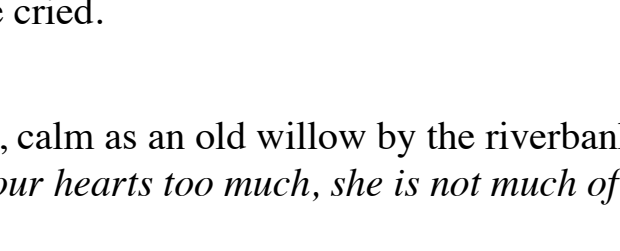
“*There he is!*” cried Yellow-Shelly, pointing upward. “*Above us!*”

Yoshi and Thumbelina lifted their eyes to see the same gray-brown bird that had startled the water rat the day before. It traced slow, patient circles over the swamp, wings steady, eyes watchful.

“*If I vanish suddenly, do not take offense,*” said Sly, with a shadow of worry in his gaze.

But the buzzard, with a flapping of broad wings, drifted away into the pale sky, and the rat, sensing the change, grew quiet and still.

“*Your life is not an easy one,*” observed Yoshi, turning his gaze to the water turtle, who glided alongside its niece with slow, measured strokes. The sunlight shimmered faintly upon the rippling surface, and for a moment all was hushed, as if the world itself held its breath in the serene company of river and creature alike.



“*Yes, ever must you keep your wits about you,*” she said at last, a faint smile in her voice. “*But you have seen nothing yet. Wait until we venture into the reeds.*”

Then, without warning, the water-rat gave a sharp cry:

“*Beware! The pike is prowling beneath us!*”

They glimpsed all at once at the great hunting fish sliding into the shadowed depths. Its long, narrow snout was set with grim, glinting teeth—such as no small bird or wandering fish could hope to escape—and the dark water closed over it as if eager to hide such a peril.

“*She is cunning!*” shouted Sly. “*The danger is not yet over. The cursed creature circles about us, lurking in the deep. After me—faster!*” And the water-rat struck out with furious strokes.

“*To the shallows! To the shallows!*” he cried.

“*Do not worry so much,*” said the aunt, calm as an old willow by the riverbank. “*Sly has reason to fear the fish—yes, he knows its ways—but we turtles need not trouble our hearts too much, she is not much of a danger to us.*”

“*Once she caught me, mind you, and tried to swallow me whole,*” said the aunt, shaking her head. “*But I slipped into my trough and near choked her for her trouble. When she found she could not gulp me down, she was forced to let me go. But poor Sly has no such hollow to hide in, and if the pike so much as brushes him, she will tear him apart.*”

They looked again toward the dim water, where the fish flashed like a grey shadow beneath the ripples. She sped toward a small dark speck drifting near the reeds. There, moving slowly upon the glassy surface, was a wild duck, and behind her trailed her downy ducklings, bobbing gently as they followed their mother into the quiet shallows.

Sly at once perceived the pike’s intent, as clearly as if a shadow had passed over the bright water.

“*She wants to grab the duck—watch out!*” he cried.

“*The poor creature! Call out to her, tell her to run! My voice is so feeble she’ll never hear it,*” lamented Thumbelina.

“*And mine is also not that better,*” added the aunt with a weary shake of her head.

All eyes then turned to the water-rat, for it was he who should have sent warning across the pond. Yet he remained still and silent, as though some hush of the deep reeds had stolen over him, and no sound came from his whiskered mouth.

“*Why do you not cry out to her?*” asked Yoshi, his voice tight with worry. “*The hour has come to spare the poor bird from its doom.*”

“*She won’t believe me,*” Sly answered, and his tone was as chill as winter water. “*Let her meet her fate as she may. I hold no love for her kind... They spare no thought for my life, and some would as soon see me perish.*”

A silence fell upon them then, deep and heavy, as each creature stared at the rat in quiet wonder, for none had expected such hard cruelty from one so small.

Yoshi tried to warn the bird by uttering low, troubled grunts upon the breeze. Yet its counsel came too late. The pike had glided unseen beneath its prey, and all who watched beheld the duck beat its wings in sudden terror before it was drawn beneath the dark water.

“*It is over,*” said the rat in a grave voice.

“*How heartless you are!*” the turtle reproached him, lifting her head slow with indignation.

“*I can’t be anyone else in this swamp,*” replied Sly. “*Here each fends for his own skin, and none will lift a feather for another. Yet it might be otherwise, were the gentle birds to stand together. Then the greedy pike, and the hawks and falcons, would not tear so many of our kin to pieces with each passing day. In such a place as this, you must grow hard of heart if you mean to survive.*”

Everyone fell silent, for the heartless and curlish words of Sly had struck them like a sudden chill wind. A shadow of distaste settled upon the company, and he grew unpleasant in their eyes. Yellow-Shelly, who was quick to notice such things, leaned close to Thumbelina and whispered that the rat’s guidance was still their safest hope of crossing the treacherous swamp; therefore, they must swallow their pride and keep in his good favor.

When they reached the first whispering stands of reeds, Sly lifted a paw and told them to swim as quietly as they could.

“*The danger of open attack is less here,*” he murmured, “*yet the birds that dwell among these reeds are easily angered. Should they spy us, they’ll raise such a clamor that the whole brood of marsh-buzzards may come wheeling down upon us before we’ve taken ten strokes.*”

The reeds shivered faintly, though no wind stirred them, and the water ahead lay dark and still as if listening.

Who Is Hiding In The Reeds

Before they reached the reeds, our friends noticed wide, succulent leaves rising green and glossy above the still water that covered much of the swamp. They grew so thick that they spread out like a great mantle across the surface. Here and there, pale and delicate white blossoms lifted their faces to the dim sky.

“*These are water lilies,*” said Sly, answering the hedgehog’s curious question. “*On this green carpet the green-footed moorhens take their hiding places. If our luck holds, we shall soon glimpse one.*”

And indeed, our travelers soon marked a small bird with long, spindle-leaving legs running deftly across the broad leaves of the water lilies. It passed over them as lightly as if it trod a sunlit meadow, leaving scarcely a tremble in its wake. Its olive-green plumage blended so well with the mats of floating leaves—whose roots swayed in the dim water below—that for a moment it seemed a fleeting shadow rather than a creature of flesh. Upon its little head the water hen bore an orange crest, bright as a young rooster’s comb.

Thumbelina called out to the bird; but at the sound it started, and with a frightened chirr fled into the sheltering reeds, springing from leaf to leaf as though the very water had lent it wings.

“*She fears me,*” said Sly in a low, gravelled voice. “*And yet, she is reclusive, shunning the company of others. Her sister, the Black Coot, shows more courage, though I find both lacking in sense.*”

The closer they drew to the reeds, the more restless the plants seemed, swaying and whispering as if alive. From the dense green, a black head would emerge now and then, and strange, discordant voices echoed through the stalks, disappearing as quickly as they had appeared. The air itself seemed thick with murmurs and shadow, and the adventurers could not help but feel the reeds watching, almost as if the forest had a will of its own.

“*The guards have noticed us,*” Sly said sharply, lifting his head and narrowing his eyes at the two birds circling above.

“*Ah, you traitors!*” he hissed, voice quivering with anger.

The birds twisted and tumbled through the air in peculiar, almost comical patterns, rolling from one side to the other. Their anxious cries seemed to question the world itself:

“*Who are you? Who are you?*”

Their wings gleamed black as night, their bellies shining white like moonlit snow. Upon their heads, delicate hoods curled with elegant precision, like tiny crowns in the morning light.

“*Fear not, my dears,*” Yellow-Shelly called softly to them. “*We mean no harm.*” The birds paused mid-flight, as if considering her words, their feathers ruffling in the still air.

But still they waited their anxious cries, shrill and persistent, echoing faintly through the marsh. “*It is of no use to soothe them,*” said Sly. “*They are scouts of the fen, and their cries will surely summon some gluttonous buzzard. Yet, fear not; I shall have my revenge when I hold their precious eggs in my claws.*”



“*What are their names?*” asked Yoshi, his voice tinged with wonder at the sudden flight of the birds.

“*Northern Lapwing,*” replied Sly. “*I call them black traitors. They are watchers of the swamp: at the faintest stir of danger, they cry out and alert all the creatures of the fen. The ducks and gentle folk hold them in regard, yet I... I cannot bear them.*”

A sharp movement caught his eye. “*Here comes a rascal,*” he muttered, eyes narrowing as the bird swooped low, its wings cutting the air like dark banners over the marsh.

A bird of prey, golden-breasted and edged with black, sailed overhead like a shadow cast by the sun itself. Its wings spread wide, slicing through the air with a faint whisper, and the travelers below felt a shiver of unease.

“*My friend, the marsh harrier,*” the rat murmured with a sniff of disdain, vanishing at once into the thick reeds.

The harrier dived, a streak of color and claws, almost seizing Yoshi in his talons. With a startled grunt, the hedgehog leapt into the dark water from the back of Thumbelina, the current tugging at him like invisible fingers. He clawed his way back, breath ragged, heart hammering, only to be flung once more into the rippling stream as the bird circled and swooped again.

A squawk rang out, merry and teasing, echoing across the waters, while the hedgehog grunted indignantly. The reeds rustled in the wind as if laughing in chorus, and the travelers could only watch, uneasy, as the harrier danced in the sky above them.

To escape the impudent assaults of the harrier, all hurried into the reeds. There their swimming became laborious, for the stalks of the reeds clutched at them, hindering free passage. The water-rat, alarmed by the harrier’s boldness, broke away from them, leaving the others uncertain whether to linger for his return or to press onward without him. Deeper they waded into the golden forest of reeds, and with each step the shadows seemed to thicken, weaving doubt and unease into their hearts, until even the sun above felt far away and the journey stretched endless before them.

It soon became clear that the aunt knew nothing of the winding way that led down to the distant shore, and so they were forced to await Sly’s return. The three of them searched about for some dry patch of earth where they might rest their weary feet. As they wandered, the reeds opened into a quiet hollow filled with birds of every kind, and from all sides there rose soft calls and murmurs, as if the place itself whispered.

Between the tall stems many watchful eyes glimmered—some curious, others unfriendly, all intent upon the strangers in their midst.

“*Quack, quack!*” cried a duck, sharp and clear.

“*Bzzzz, bzzzz!*” sounded the drake in reply. It seemed the pair were giving warning, bidding their little ducklings keep close and beware the wandering folk who had strayed into their hidden marsh.

Almost at once the voice of another mother drifted across the water, soft yet urgent. Then the old ducks began to draw nearer and nearer to the travelers. Only now did the three companions understand how many birds had been hiding in this quiet place.

There were great ducks, broad and heavy-bodied, much like the homely barnyard birds of men, their heads gleaming green and circled with white bands like little collars. There were smaller ones as well, bright and curious, their red-rusted crowns catching what little light filtered through the reeds. And lastly there were those whose tails were long and sharp, tapering behind them like narrow blades glinting in the sun.

She greeted them with a friendly nod of her head, and the aunt—long known to them—called each by name.

“*They are afraid of Yoshi,*” murmured the water-turtle. “*Trustful and cautious they have grown, for their enemies have long plagued them.*”

“*Ho there, Lighththead! Come closer—come and look upon me,*” the aunt called to a duck whose eyes were circled with a bright yellow patch like sunlight caught in feathers. “*I will tell you where the fattest snails lie hidden at the bottom of our swamp.*”

“*I do not believe you,*” the duck answered sharply. “*And what sort of creature is this that walks beside you?*” She meant the hedgehog.

“A friend,” said the aunt.

“You speak falsehoods!” cried the duck. “You would lure us into some trick. I cannot trust your words, as your friends are all cut from the same cloth as the water-rat.”

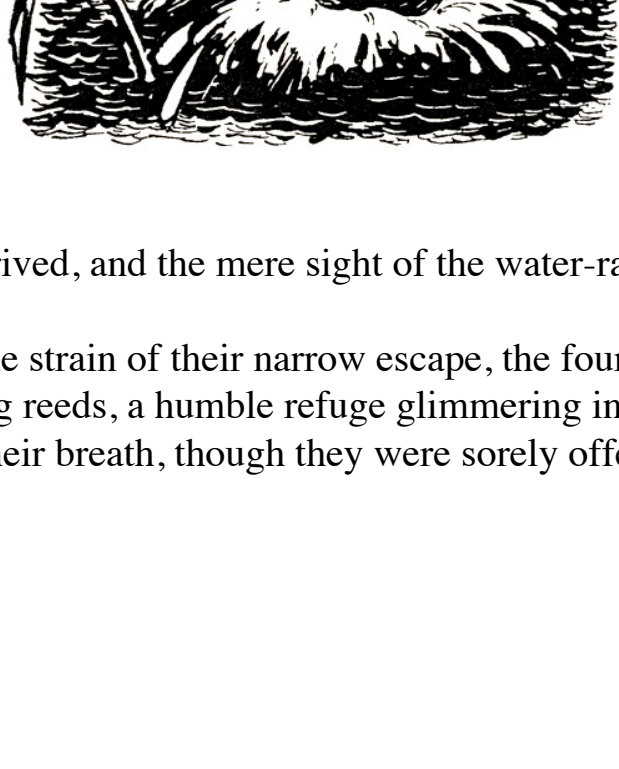
“That’s right,” quacked the other ducks, though a shadow of fear passed among them. “But we shall drown him!”

“Come, friends!” cried one of their boldest, and at once the wild ducks surged forward in a flurry of wings, smiting the water until it leapt and shivered like a storm-tossed pond.

By now the two turtles had wandered into a bare stretch of shallows where no reeds rose to hide them. Yellow-Shelly, sharp-eyed and wary, understood at once what the ducks intended. She called out to her young niece—upon whose broad shell Yoshi still perched—to turn back and seek the sheltering reeds. But the call came a heartbeat too late, for the open water lay around them, wide and unguarded, and the ducks were already upon their swift approach.

The water boiled and churned beneath the furious beating of the ducks’ wings, until real waves rose and spray fell upon the hedgehog like sudden rain. In a breath he found himself adrift upon a small and treacherous sea, far wilder than any he had expected. Though she was a stout swimmer, Thumbelina rocked perilously, tilting so sharply that it nearly flung her pickled rider into the foaming water.

The ducks’ angry quacking swelled, echoing like a storm gathering its voice. From every side new birds came hustling in, their wings flashing, their webbed feet slapping the water. The matter was no joke now. The turtles, sturdy and untroubled, were in no real danger; but the poor hedgehog—small and weary as he was—would surely be lost beneath the waves if this tempest of feathers did not soon abate.



At that very moment Sly suddenly arrived, and the mere sight of the water-rat sent the ducks scattering in a flurry of wings and indignant quacks.

Wary from all the commotion and the strain of their narrow escape, the four of them swam toward a great mound of sticks and packed mud that rose near the sheltering reeds, a humble refuge glimmering in the shallow light. There they settled, seeking a little peace to steady their hearts and catch their breath, though they were sorely offended by the ducks, who had greeted them with such poor manners and open disdain.

The Unpleasant Acquaintance

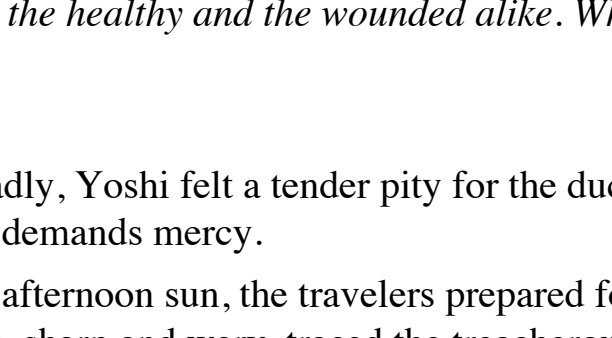
When at last they settled upon the great mound, they discovered that it was hollow within. Small round windows followed one another along its sides, though each was covered up with straw and broad reeds. At the back of this curious dwelling a tightly fitted lid had been hewn, serving plainly as a door.

The turtles clambered with much effort up the curved walls, their shells slipping now and then on the wet growth, until Sly and the hedgehog, being nimbler, soon found themselves upon the crown of the mound. There they shook the water from their backs and let it fall in shining droplets, and sat themselves down to dry in the warm, unclouded blaze of the midday sun.

“This hut was built by people for our friends, the wild ducks,” said Sly with a mocking curl in his voice. “From here the hunters trouble them all winter long, most cruelly at night.”

He rose on his rear legs, licking his smooth fur—still ruffled by water—and shook off clinging mud before continuing: “The hunters crouch inside and peer through these small windows. To fool the wild ducks, they tether their tame sisters just outside—poor, simple creatures. At the first sight of their wild kin, they call to them gladly, never guessing the part they play. And their wild sisters, trusting that welcome, fly down only to fall victim to such treachery. Then the hunters fire their rifles.”

“But why do they never understand they are being deceived? Why do they still trust such scoundrels?” asked the hedgehog.



“They are all short-minded,” snapped the rat. “Even I, who care nothing for keeping them, have often tried to show them the depth of their own foolishness. But they put no trust in me at all. They are angered that I feast upon their eggs.”

“Do they sacrifice many?” asked Yoshi.

“Hundreds, if not thousands. Witless folk!”

“These are not witless,” the aunt protested softly. “The people are very cunning—none can match them in craft or cleverness. Yet how they suffer, the poor creatures, how they suffer!” She shook her head sadly. “When the shooting begins, whole flocks of hawks gather over the marsh. They fall upon the healthy and the wounded alike. Wherever you cast your gaze, feathers lie in heaps—grim tokens of ducks devoured.”

Although they had treated him so badly, Yoshi felt a tender pity for the ducks and forgave their wary distrust. They had suffered greatly, and suffering, he knew, often demands mercy.

After resting and basking in the weak afternoon sun, the travelers prepared for the next stage of their journey. The swamp’s far shore lay not so distant, yet Sly’s eyes, sharp and wary, traced the treacherous paths that twisted ahead.

“Beware,” he said, with stern voice. “Beyond this shallow expanse, the waters grow dark and deep. There dwell a tribe most dangerous, and cunning in the ways of swamp and shadow. We must tread with care, for any misstep may summon trouble we cannot yet see.”

The air was thick with the scent of damp earth and reeds, and the occasional ripple of water carried the echo of unseen movement. Each step forward was measured, each pause deliberate, as they pressed onward into the deepening marsh, where the light dimmed and the shadows gathered like watchers on the path.



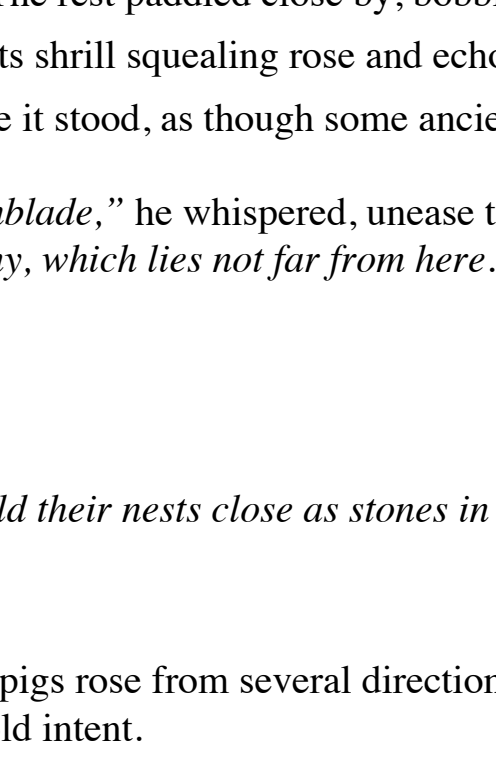
A Bad Tribe

Indeed, when they came closer, their eyes fell upon birds quite like ducks, yet stranger than any they had seen before. The creatures fished with astonishing skill, diving one by one into the rippling waters and gliding beneath the surface with wings spread wide, so swift and silent that Thumbelina and Yoshi stood agape at their artful dexterity.

Drawing closer, they discerned two kinds among them. Some were black and rugged, with eyes like polished emeralds and beaks curved at the tip; others, smaller and almost as grim, clung to the shallows with an unsettling quiet.

“These,” said Sly, “are the black devils also known as great cormorant, the finest fishermen in all the lands. Cunning and bold, they spare nobody. But here, look upon their companions perched upon the willow, silent and watchful.”

The willow bent under their weight, leaves trembling as if whispering secrets to the forest. A silence fell over the reeds, broken only by the splash of a bird diving once more, and the distant rustle of unseen wings. It was a place alive with shadows and glimmering hints of life, a place where even the wind seemed wary of disturbing its inhabitants.



Not far away, where a low and crooked willow drooped toward the riverbank, a dozen or so imps had perched, their throats swollen with the fish they had caught.

“Hey, Sly!” a voice called, sharp and mischievous. “Where have you carried off these friends of ours?”

The water-rat turned, and from the misty ripple of the stream rose a bird, its black-and-green head crowned with feathers long and wild, like a boy who had just tumbled out of a tree. “Be calm, Shaggy,” said the rat, voice soft yet firm. “We won’t eat your fish. We are only passing though.”

The bird tilted its head, eyeing him suspiciously, and the reeds whispered in the wind, as though even the river was listening.

“It is not the fish that matter,” replied Shaggy, his voice low as if the reeds themselves might be listening. “Here lie our nests, and you are fond of eggs. Tread carefully — for we do not forgive.”

“What creature is that?” asked Yoshi, squinting ahead. “It seems to bear thorns upon its brow.”

“A dipper,” the aunt answered, as though naming a familiar wanderer of the riverbanks.

“He means no harm,” said Sly. “It is the herons I fear. I should have warned you to keep your eyes wide, for they are creatures of ill habit.”

“And where these might herons can be found?” asked Thumbelina, glancing toward the dim marshes as though expecting tall shadows to rise at once.

Sly did not answer. His gaze had been snared by another head rising from the dark water. Two tufts of black feathers jutted from its sides like bristling horns, and its cheeks puffed out in whiskered ridges that made the creature seem almost serpent-like. A cry burst from it—harsh and high, like the squeal of a frightened pig. The long red beak, and above it the red eyes burning with a queer inner fire, lent the bird a strange and sinister cast.

All stood silent, watching. Their wonder deepened when the creature’s back heaved up through the water, and upon it stood two of its young, steady as if on a small raft. The rest paddled close by, bobbing on the ripples.

The sight of Yoshi roused the bird’s ire. Its shrill squealing rose and echoed beneath the reeds.

The water-rat grew uneasy, shifting where it stood, as though some ancient instinct stirred inside him.

“This is the female of the old grebe, Hornblade,” he whispered, unease tightening his voice. “And mark my words—they are not alone. They have strayed from their colony, which lies not far from here. We must encircle them.”

“What colony?” asked Yoshi.

“To shield themselves from foes, they build their nests close as stones in a wall. They dwell in tight-knit settlements—a grim folk, and ill-tempered.”

Even as he spoke, the thin squealing of pigs rose from several directions, echoing strangely across the water. One by one, terrible heads broke the surface, glaring with a cold intent.

“If this continues, we shall have to cut our way through,” murmured Sly. “These water-devils will not grant us peaceful passage through their shadowed settlement.”

“But if they sought a quarrel, then a quarrel they would have.”

“My teeth are sharpened,” growled the water-rat, baring his mouth to show the slim, cruel weapons within. His small eyes glinted cold as winter water.

“Can we not make some understanding with them?” murmured Thumbelina, ever the one to keep the peace if peace could be kept.

“We shall try,” said the rat, though a faint tremor of impatience ran through his whiskers.

Raising his voice he called out, “Listen, Hornblade!”—for that was the name of one of the birds circling above.

“Know this: we have not come to bring you harm. We wish only to pass from this place to the shore. So calm yourselves, stop that shrill clamoring, and let reason guide you rather than fear!”

But the bird did not so much as glance at him. It only loosed its harsh and jangling cries, as if to warn all the sky of some ill-omened intrusion. Plain it was that it held no trust in our travelers. At its call more and more divers swept in, wheeling down upon them, their keen eyes glinting with open hostility.

Sly at once set his mind to the business of battle. If victory was to favor them, he thought, they must strike first and swiftly. He did not fear for the turtles; the divers knew well enough that those ancient, patient creatures would never stir themselves to harm. But the flock would surely fall upon him and Yoshi without hesitation.

And Yoshi—poor fellow—was no master of the water. A hedgehog’s spines and stout courage availed little against foes who darted through the depths like shadowy submarines, rising from below with sudden, treacherous speed. It would be no easy thing for him to fend them off.

He ordered Yoshi not to plunge into the water under any circumstances, but to cling to the turtle’s broad back as though it were the last safe rock in a stormy sea. The aunt, too, offered the same counsel, and sought to soothe poor Thumbelina, assuring her that no true peril threatened them yet.

“Whatever comes, don’t forget that we must press onward,” said Sly, with his voice firm as an oaken beam.

“Our chief purpose is to win through this devilish settlement. Should we try to skirt it, we would lay ourselves open to the pikes—fierce hunters, a hundredfold more perilous than the sharp beaks of these devils. Come now, forward with bold hearts!” he cried. “Let us go on before all divers are gathered.”

And so the four pressed straight toward the birds, cutting through the water with quiet resolve, as though some unseen hand urged them on into the shadowed way ahead.

As soon as they saw that the intruders were steering toward their nests, the grebes drew themselves into a tight line, one beside the other, forming a living barrier across the water. They waited, tense and still, as though some ancient instinct had roused them to battle.

“Spare them no pity,” warned Sly. “Whomever your teeth find, hold fast by the neck—and mind their beaks, sharp as thorns in spring!”

With a cry that rang like a challenge across the reeds, the water-rat hurled himself straight into the heart of the chain. There before him stood an old grebe, grey of feather and grim of eye.

Beaten by the sudden onslaught, he faltered; and, seeking only to spare himself from Sly’s snapping teeth, he made to dive beneath the darkling water. Yet in that same heartbeat the rat sprang upon his back, swift as a shadow loosed from its tether, and sank his teeth into the long curve of his neck. Then, with a vicious leap, the creature hurled itself toward the nearest diver—but that one vanished beneath the surface like an arrow shot into a deep pool, rising beneath Sly and driving upward in a bold surprise.

This cunning play was quickly taken up by all the divers. One after another they slipped beneath the water, gliding silently through the gloom, then striking from below with sudden, bright ferocity. Sly wheeled wildly about, circling in frantic loops as he sought to seize even one of his tormentors. But they were swift—damnable swift—and the water itself seemed to lend them speed, while he thrashed and snapped in growing fury, unable to catch even a single shadow of his foes.

Yoshi, keen of heart, grasped at once the poor rat’s peril, and cried out for him to leap upon Yellow-Shelly’s broad back. It was a simple tactic, yet it proved their salvation. For the turtle bore her shell like ancient armor, untroubled by spear or stone; and no sooner had Sly scrambled upon her than the divers lost all sight of him. Long they searched, peering through the troubled water and beneath its dim surface.

But after a minute’s wandering they found their foe again, and with a wordless howl they rushed together, striking at the hedgehog and the weary water-rat.

Yoshi discovered, much to his dismay, that all his spines, long cherished as shields against foes, were utterly powerless against the sharp beaks of the angry birds. So he defended himself, nimble and wary, without striking a single blow. Meanwhile, Sly avenged the divers with swift and daring attacks, his movements bold as the wind over a mountain ridge. From Yellow-Shelly’s broad back, he would spring upon an adversary, sink his teeth deep, and retreat to his floating island, leaving the startled foe to ponder the swiftness of his coming and going. The air itself seemed to tremble as they danced this strange, dangerous ballet of survival.

The two turtles pressed onward, swimming with stubborn resolve, heedless of the squabbles above. They had already reached the grebe settlements, where delicate nests lay scattered upon the water, and within them gleamed the large, white eggs, pale as moonlight. At last, the four companions left the settlement behind. Only when they perceived that no feathered warrior was guarding their treasures did the warlike birds drift away, though their cries lingered, echoing over wounded comrades huddled together.

“We have saved our skins,” said Sly with a cheerful note. “But before we venture past the heron nests—twice as fierce as these wasps—let us rest awhile.”

They paused at a mound of dried mud, strewn with straw and the brittle stalks of reeds, a modest vantage from which the swamp’s distant shore glimmered.

The Herons

The sun had sunk low, and shadows stretched long across the worn path as they pressed onward. Sly, his skin darkened with streaks of mud, tried to staunch the bleeding of his wounds. Ever restless and belligerent, he readied himself for yet another skirmish, his gaze darting about with a mischievous glimmer, as though some secret jest or cunning trick were already forming in his mind. The forest around them whispered in the twilight, and the distant rustle of unseen creatures seemed to watch their passage with silent curiosity.

Everyone trembled at the thought of the meeting with the herons. The rat had whispered of their lives, cunning and cruel, with beaks sharp as needles, with which they sought to blind any who dared to oppose them. Shadows seemed to linger longer around the swamp as Yoshi and Thumbelina shivered with both fear and longing for escape.

Step by step, the murky water dragged at their feet, and the twisted roots reached up as though to hold them back. They were weary of torment and sorrow, aching to feel the firm earth beneath their paws once more. The air was thick with the musk of reeds and mud, and the distant cries of the herons made their hearts pound like the drums of some unseen host. Every bend of the swamp seemed endless, yet the thought of solid ground ahead spurred them onward, though the dread of the cunning birds never left their minds.

“Swim to the thickest reeds!” commanded Sly, his voice firm and carrying across the water.

The turtles slipped into the swaying yellow reeds, when suddenly the water-rat’s voice came rushing through the rustling stalks.

“Are you asleep, old man? Forgive our intrusion.”

From the reeds stirred a great bird, its feathers rusty-gray, flecked with dark brown spots, and its gaze as sharp as a winter wind.

“Address me with the respect befitting my honor!” — rumbled a thick, and resonant voice. — What is this “old man”? A fool’s jest, perhaps?”

“Forgive me, oh mighty chief of all herons”, — Sly replied with careful courtesy. — “I thought you were deep in slumber and would not hear me. And you, as it seemed, were lost in contemplation of your magnificent beard”.

“I contemplate the stars, not my beard,” said the bass, his tone grave and resonant. *“I am a stargazer.”*

“But how do you see the stars in the broad daylight?”

“My sight is not as yours,” the bass replied with quiet pride. *“Though the sun reigns above, I imagine the world beneath night’s cloak, and behold every glimmer in the sky. But tell me—where are you going?”*

At that moment, the two turtles, seized by curiosity yet wary of the heron leader’s deep voice, crept forward. Their shells gleamed dully in the shifting light, and they moved as if each step carried both awe and fear. The bass’s gaze lingered upon them, serene yet piercing, as though he could read the secret wishes of their hearts.

They saw before them a terrible bird. Its long, sharp beak jutted proudly skyward, and beneath it fell a cascade of white feathers, long and unkempt, as if a beard had been steeped in dark coffee. Its yellow eyes, curled against the massive body that seemed to possess no neck, remained closed in imperious disdain. The bird stood upon a small tuft amid the thickest reeds, like a sentinel of some forgotten marsh.

The water-rat raised a paw in caution, signaling the turtles to halt. Then, with a voice both respectful and trembling, he addressed the heron chieftain: *“Great stargazer, we humbly beg to leave us pass through your kingdom.”*

“We?” the chieftain’s voice cracked like dry timber. *“Why do you speak as if I were part of this ‘we’?”*

“I speak ‘we’ because I am not alone,” said Sly, his gaze steady and calm. *“I have companions.”*

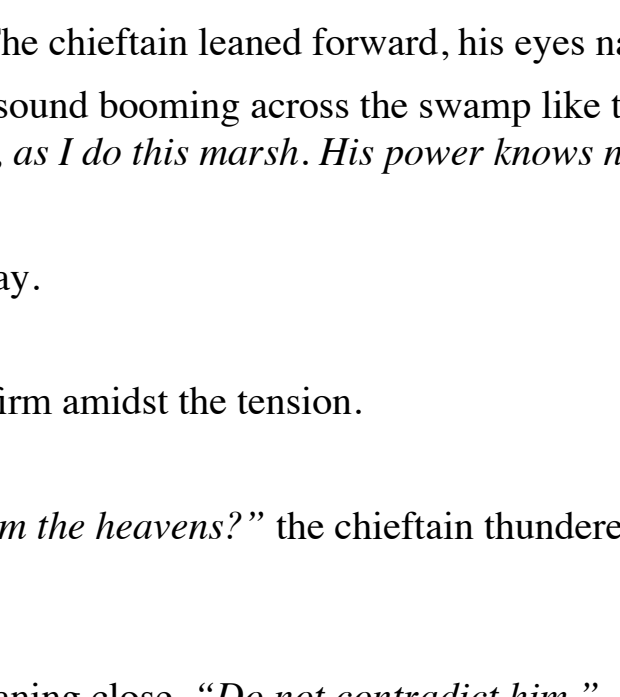
“Companions? And where, pray tell, are these companions? Are they thieves and cutthroats?” the chieftain’s eyes narrowed.

“No, they are not thieves. There are the turtles, but they are not my kin. And there is also Yoshi, a hedgehog, who travels with me.”

The chieftain leaned forward, suspicion etched into every line of his face. *“A hedgehog, you say? Speak plainly, and let this… creature make himself known.”*

Yoshi shuffled forth, bristles trembling in the dim light, and bent low before the chieftain. The air fell into a tense silence, broken only by the sound of the wind.

“And where do you come from?” the chieftain asked at last, his voice rough with a mixture of curiosity and unease. His eyes lingered on the small, prickly form, as if the very texture of its body were a riddle he must unravel.



Yoshi told him the tale of the eagle. The chieftain leaned forward, his eyes narrowing as he listened. *“I don’t believe you!”* he bellowed, the sound booming across the swamp like the roar of some ancient beast. *“You lie! None have ever bested the eagle. He rules the skies, as I do this marsh. His power knows no bounds!”*

Yoshi shifted uneasily, unsure what to say.

“Believe him,” said the aunt, her voice firm amidst the tension.

“Is there any soul who saw them fall from the heavens?” the chieftain thundered. *“Speak the truth, or be branded as thieves in my sight!”*

“Hold your tongues,” whispered Sly, leaning close. *“Do not contradict him.”*

He bowed his head with the utmost humility, waiting as though the very air held its breath for the stargazer’s wrath to subside, and spoke in a voice measured and cautious: *“My lord, we seek passage through your lands, humbly and without offence. And, if it pleases you, we bring you news of a fortunate sort.”*

“What news?” — growled the stargazer, his eyes like coals smoldering in shadow.

“On our journey we have discovered the settlement of grebes, whose nests are filled with fish and eggs, and some have already hatched small chicks, which, as we know well, are most delectable.”

“Are you speaking the truth?” — thundered the chieftain, his voice cutting the still air like a sword through silk.

As soon as he heard these words, he rose with a sudden swiftness, and in an instant was changed. His body immediately became long and thin, his neck, which no one suspected existed, stretched forward like a snake. The proud, imperious countenance vanished, and in its place stood an old man, his eyes glimmering with avarice, hunched over with a greedy hunger. No trace remained of the terrible chieftain who had once commanded respect.

“I speak the truth,” said Sly, with steady voice. *“My companions would bear witness as well.”*

The star-counting bird scrutinized them sharply, his gaze like the sharp edge of a knife. *“Where are their nests hidden?”* he demanded, with voice low but stern.

Sly answered willingly, tracing with careful words the path they had taken, describing the hidden settlement with exactitude. Yet of the skirmish he spoke not a word, and of the fish he told only lies.

The old chieftain nodded, in a slow and satisfied movement, as if the truth had been enough to appease the weight of his hunger.

“And yet,” he said, *“though you have shared such weighty news, I cannot grant you passage through my realm. You may, however, take the long road around it.”*

And with that, he resumed his lofty and unyielding posture, as if the wind itself bowed before him. Yoshi opened his mouth to protest, but the water rat raised a paw, a silent injunction to hold his tongue.

Then the chief of the herons, great among his kind, hurried to summon the tribes together. He lifted his head and released a cry so piercing and terrible that Thumbelina and Yoshi quailed to their very bones. It was a sound they had heard before, in the dead of night, and it brought with it the echo of old, and nameless fears.

His roar had not yet faded into the stillness, when a chorus of voices arose from every direction—some shrill and piercing, others deep and hoarse, like the wind whispering through hollow reeds. One by one, the herons lifted themselves from the tangled marshes, wings glinting in the soft sunlight, and circled their leader. Among them were the grand gray-blue herons, stately and solemn; snow-white ones, with eyes like molten gold and delicate feathers trailing gracefully down their necks; and restless, fiery-red ones, darting about with a nervous energy that made the reeds tremble. Their cries, full of joy and excitement, carried far and wide, soon spreading to the hidden settlements nestled among the willows.

The Turtles and Yoshi looked on, puzzled, unable to fathom why Sly had forsaken the grebes’ nests. Perhaps he sought the favor of the heron-chief, or perhaps there was some wisdom in his strange betrayal that only the winds and the waters could know.

When enough herons had gathered, their leader lifted into the sky, and with a terrible roar, the horde followed. They swept over the grebe settlement, darkening the waters with their wings. Soon, the cries of the grebes rose above the tumult, sharp and frantic, as they fought to guard their young. Yet our friends pressed onward, hearts quickened but steps steady. Only then did the cunning of Sly reveal itself: by showing the herons the hidden nests of the grebes, he had done two things at once—forced the greedy birds to abandon their haunts, and taken his quiet revenge on those who had long tormented him. The swamp seemed to hold its breath, as if the reeds themselves had paused to witness the strange justice unfolding in the marshes below.

The travelers moved quietly among the heron settlements, following the marshy shore as the sun began to dip toward the horizon. Across the drooping willows, they saw great nests of twigs and sedge, crooked and woven with patient care. These were the abodes of a peculiar heron, known in whisper and tale as the night heron. From within, ungainly and ugly chicks stretched their long necks and opened their beaks in eager, plaintive cries, their eyes gleaming faintly in the twilight.

More Acquaintances

“I will leave you here,” said Sly, with voice soft yet firm, bidding farewell. — *“Without the water and the reeds in which I can hide, I am lost. Travel well, and forget me not,”* he added, with a glance that lingered longer than words.

Thumbelina and Yoshi exchanged uneasy looks, a shadow of fear creeping over them. The thought of wandering alone through the unknown swamps weighed upon their hearts like a heavy cloak. How could they reach their way without a guide? How would they track their distant homeland, lying somewhere beyond the mountains, whose peaks shimmered blue and faint against the horizon?

The swamp was a strange and silent place, the reeds whispering secrets in the wind, and the water reflecting a sky both near and impossibly far. Each step they took seemed to echo in the gloom, and each rustle of leaves set their hearts racing. Yet, as the faint glow of the distant peaks called them onward, a subtle courage stirred within, for the journey had begun, and they must walk it alone.

That is why, when the news came that Yellow-Shelly would journey with them through the swamp, their hearts leapt with joy. The companion from the water-rat had weighed heavily upon them. Sly, cruel and hard-hearted though he was, had grown into a parting both steadfast and invaluable. He had guided them through the treacherous marshes, keeping death at bay with his cunning and strength. Without him, they would have surely been swallowed by the murky waters and the grasping reeds.

When the rat had vanished among the swaying willows by the water’s edge, the three companions set forth toward the distant mountain. The swamp’s shallow waters yielded to their careful steps, and here and there, they found small fruits and roots to sustain them. Turtles, slow and deliberate, trailed along, observed by diminutive birds whose long, curved beaks tapped at the reeds. From time to time, the birds let loose bursts of cheerful, tinkling calls, as if laughter itself had taken flight. Their dark, gleaming eyes peered curiously from rounded heads, and their pale greenish legs carried their compact forms with a strange grace, like creatures of some quiet, hidden glen.

“These are snipe,” said the aunt, her voice tinged with warning. *“They are jesters of the air. They mock Yoshi, for never have they set eyes upon a hedgehog such as him.”*

The snipe’s laughter rang through the glade, light and sharp as sun on dew. Some fanned their short tails, revealing a rich tapestry of red-brown feathers.

“What a fleet-footed companions!” they cried, and chuckled quietly.

The offended hedgehog could not help but run after them. Yet the snipe, ever nimble, danced through the air with a grace that might have shamed even the swallows. Yoshi’s tiny feet pattered in vain upon the soft earth below, while the mocking birds soared just beyond reach, weaving through the branches like whispers of wind through the trees.

“Kiz-kiz-kiz!” The laughter rose and danced across the swamp like dry leaves in a restless wind.

“There is no use chasing them. You’d only weary yourselves,” the aunt warned, her voice carrying the calm authority of one who knows the ways of the wild.

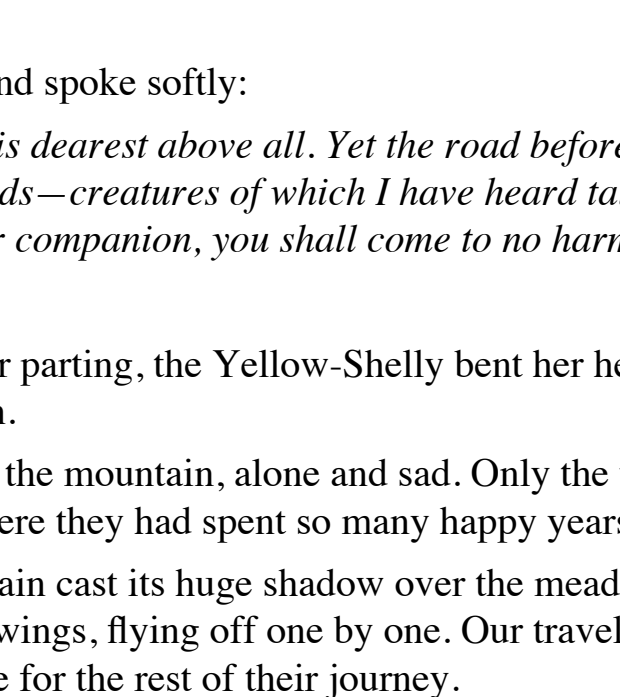
The three companions pressed onward, feet sinking slightly into the soft muck, until other birds appeared. They resembled snipes, yet each bore a different hue upon its feathers, so that even in the dim light one could tell them apart. Only the smallest, gray-brown with black specks, seemed twins, standing quietly to the side, watching their larger kin struggle and tussle.

The swamp held its breath as the comrades paused, eyes tracing the fluttering shapes, the subtle shifts of feathered bodies, the delicate balance between flight and fight in the muted greens and browns around them.

“These are warblers,” said Yellow-Shelly. *“They quarrel from dawn till dusk. Those who linger at the edges and merely behold the fray are the females.”*

Thumbelina and Yoshi paused to watch the little warriors.

They battled in pairs, much like barnyard roosters, yet with a strange and spirited grace. Their long, narrow beaks were set like spears, darting and clattering as each sought the other’s weakness. Around their necks rose a kind of feathered shield, flaring with every blow, and on their backs shimmered two proud clusters of many-colored plumes that rustled like tiny banners shaken in the wind.



“Why are they fighting?” asked Yoshi, peering ahead.

“Because each fancies himself as a great hero,” — murmured the turtle.

The three passed by the battlements, who paid them no attention. Thumbelina and Yoshi longed to linger and behold the struggle, yet the aunt would have none of it.

“We shall cross paths with many more of their kin before this journey’s end,” she told them. *“Their folk are countless in these parts.”*

And so it proved. As they made their way through the sodden mire, they glimpsed all manner of small birds flitting through reed and rush, warbler-like in form. Each bore a slender beak and narrow, stilt-like legs with which they picked their cautious steps through the shallows.

“Here is the Black-tailed Snipe,” said Yellow-Shelly at last, lowering her voice a little. *“A most notable fellow, in his own fashion.”*

Thumbelina and Yoshi noticed a rather large bird ahead of them — rusty-red of feather, with long spindly legs and an orange beak that curved ever so slightly upward. The moment it caught sight of the travelers, it let out a sharp, whistling cry that pierced the quiet of the marsh.

“Do not be startled, Black-tailed Godwit!” her aunt called gently, as one might speak to a shy woodland creature.

She turned to the little hedgehog beside her and added, in a low reassuring voice, *“Pay no attention to her. Her nest must be close, and she only keeps watch.”*

At her words, the Black-tailed Godwit withdrew into the tall grass, vanishing as though the marsh itself had swallowed her. After a few more minutes of trudging along the damp and winding path, our companions stepped free of the swamp. The sun was sinking behind the distant hills, and its slanting rays cast a golden sheen across the broad meadows that stretched to the very foot of the mountain. The grass gleamed as if freshly washed in light. Here and there, like scattered white flecks upon a green sea, storks stood quietly among the reeds.

“It is time for our paths to part,” said the aunt softly.

She halted, her gaze lingering on Thumbelina with a sorrow that seemed to deepen the quiet around them. *“I may guide you only so far, child. Beyond that, you must walk alone. My heart grieves to let you go. And who can tell whether our roads shall cross again?”* she murmured to her niece. *“Yet know this—your companion has grown dear to me as well.”*

Then Thumbelina and her aunt kissed, and the farewell between them was long and tender.

“Ask a stork to show you the way,” Yellow-Shelly told them, with voice quiet as wind over reeds. *“So far as I know, their nests lie in the fields beyond the mountain. Each day they pass over its stony crown and know its secret paths better than any creature of the village. They could show you where the crossing is easiest.”*

“If you want my advice, I would advise you to settle somewhere at the foot of the mountain, instead of returning to your native field. That way it will be better for me and for you, because we could see each other every autumn, when the waters of the swamp spill out wide.”

She turned her gaze upon Yoshi and spoke softly: *“I know well that your homeland is dearest above all. Yet the road before you is hard and full of peril. In the mountains you shall meet beasts and birds of many kinds—creatures of which I have heard tales both strange and fearsome. But if you keep your wits about you and let courage be your companion, you shall come to no harm. I wish you a safe journey!”*

And then, moved deeply by their parting, the Yellow-Shelly bent her head down into her bright, painted trough, hiding her face so that her tears would not be seen.

The two friends set off towards the mountain, alone and sad. Only the thought of their native land kept them from losing their courage. They had to return to where they had spent so many happy years.

When the sun set and the mountain cast its huge shadow over the meadows, Yoshi and Thumbelina were halfway there. Overhead the storks rose on long wings, flying off one by one. Our travelers hastened as best they could, hoping to catch one before it departed, to beg guidance for the rest of their journey.

At last they drew near to a lone and lingering stork, solemnly pacing through the tall grasses, searching for some unlucky grasshopper upon which to feast.

“Could you show us the way through the mountain?” asked Yoshi, turning his bright eyes up toward the tall bird.

Startled by the unexpected voice of a hedgehog, the stork gave a sharp flinch; but when he beheld our little company, he settled himself at once. Drawing up to his full height, he assumed an air of great importance, as though the wind itself ought to bow before him.

“The way through the mountain?” he repeated. *“And you mean to tread such a path? Hmph! Those stones were not shaped for your small feet.”* His glance swept over them with thinly veiled disdain.

“We wish to reach the field that lies beyond it,” the hedgehog explained quietly.

“To the far field? And from there to the warm countries, perhaps?” the stork cackled, his long red beak opening in a laughter he scarcely bothered to hide.

“My aunt, the water-turtle, sends us to you,” Thumbelina put in hopefully, thinking that her words might lend weight to their request.

But the stork did not so much as flick an eye toward her. His indifference hung in the air like a cold draft from the mountainside.

“It is not within your power to cross the mountain,” he said sternly, and his voice fell like a stone in a still pool. *“Even if we were to pretend you could, no aid of mine shall you have.”*

“Take us upon your wings,” begged Thumbelina, her voice thin with hope. *“We will repay you—my aunt, who dwells in the swamp—”*

“I am not an airplane, and I am no mere carrier of passengers,” he cut her off, stiff with dignity. With a grave turning of his back, he paced away, smooth and solemn as if each step were part of some ancient rite.

For a time he stood apart, thinking. Then, stretching his long neck toward the darkling sky, he launched himself from the meadow and rose into the air. Thumbelina and Yoshi watched him go with heavy eyes, until his shape vanished behind the bluish shoulder of the mountain.

“What are we to do now?” Yoshi murmured, in a broken voice.

“We shall go on foot,” replied the turtle, calm though wearied. *“Somewhere along the way, we will meet a soul who knows the path.”*

So the two set out toward the looming height. Long—far longer than their eyes had promised—it took to reach its foot. The mountain deceived them, as distant peaks will: seeming close enough to touch, yet proving leagues away when one must walk. At last they came to its roots and began to climb the shadowed slope, slowly and steadily. They had decided to travel through the night, and so onward they went, step after small step, beneath the silent stars.

How Thumbelina Got Lost

It was drawing toward dusk when they found themselves wandering into a low yet strangely dense forest. Under the darkening boughs the ground lay deep with fallen leaves and brittle twigs, so that every step cracked softly or sharply beneath their feet.

Yoshi strove to set his paws down lightly, for he feared that in such a place they might cross paths with wolf or fox. Yet for poor Thumbelina such stealth was but a hopeless wish—heavy of gait and clumsy besides, she could not have slipped silently through

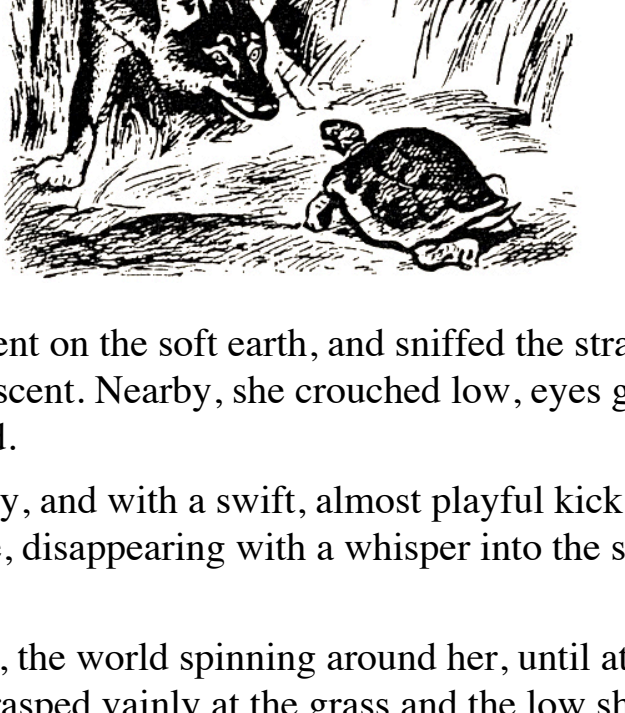
the forest if her life depended on it.

So the two of them agreed at last to take shelter beneath a sprawling bush and pass the night there, though hunger gnawed at them fiercely. Yoshi urged his companion to lie still and wait for the coming of dawn and his hopes of finding food; but the ever-hungry Thumbelina would not hear of settling down on an empty stomach. And when the little hedgehog at last drifted into sleep amid the cold leaves, she rose up and set off alone into the deep, damp darkness of the forest.

Yoshi heard her, yet murmured to himself: *“Her foes are but few, and the old trough shall shield her well enough. Let her look for food.”* With that small comfort he folded his limbs beneath him and drifted once more into slumber.

Long did she drag herself beneath the dim boughs of the forest, until at last she came to a clearing—steep, barren, and strangely still. Far below, somewhere in the deepening dark, the splash of falling water rose to her, mingled with the steady thunder of a hidden waterfall.

There the tortoise found two snails and made a meal of them; and spying a pale mushroom just lifting its white cap from the earth, she lunged upon it with delight. She was about to eat it when suddenly two greenish eyes glimmered in the gloom, and soft, stealthy steps rustled close at hand. At once she shrank back into the shelter of her trough, from which she glimpsed the sweep of a fox’s thick, and ruddy tail.



The fox crept forward, her paws silent on the soft earth, and sniffed the strange Thumbelina with a cautious curiosity. A sudden sneeze betrayed her displeasure at her scent. Nearby, she crouched low, eyes glinting with mischief, and cast a sly glance toward the tortoise, a joke forming in her mind.

Without warning, she twisted her body, and with a swift, almost playful kick, sent Thumbelina tumbling. The turtle rolled like a small, unyielding stone down the slope, disappearing with a whisper into the shadowed roar of the waterfall below, where the water sang its endless, echoing song.

Thumbelina tumbled faster and faster, the world spinning around her, until at last she bounded across the meadow as though carried by some unseen current. She grasped vainly at the grass and the low shrubs, her legs flailing in helpless panic, but the speed made her head whirl and her senses reel. With a shuddering sigh, she relinquished all hope of control and surrendered herself to the merciless motion.

Then, without warning, she plunged into a yawning abyss. A deafening roar thundered in her ears, and for a moment the world itself seemed to vanish.

When her senses returned, she found herself immersed in a shadowed mountain pool, the waters of a great waterfall tumbling with a foaming, dizzying roar into the basin below. Jagged rocks and rounded stones crowded the depths and jutted above the seething surface. Had she struck even one of them, her fate would have been sealed. And yet, for all the terror of the fall, she floated, trembling but alive, held by the strange mercy of the rushing waters.

Thumbelina swam with difficulty to the shore of the pond, from the water’s edge, she heaved herself upon a stone, shivering and soaked. The pond lay still behind her, as though holding its breath, while her limbs trembled and her mind crawled slowly toward understanding the full weight of her plight. How formidable it would be to leave this place—this shadowed nook of reeds and water. Her thoughts turned, unbidden, to Yoshi. A deep sorrow settled in her heart, a foreboding that she might never see him again. She recalled his careful advice: to wait until the light of morning for sustenance, to avoid venturing alone into the forest before dawn. Each memory pressed upon her, heavy as the cold that seeped through her drenched body, in the darkness of the early night.

Tears welled in her eyes, and she huddled deep within her trough, wishing for the morning to come swiftly. The night stretched long and merciless above her, the shadows pressing close as though eager to swallow her whole. At last, the pale fingers of dawn crept over the land, revealing the true harshness of her predicament. The banks of the stream rose steep and barren on either side, and the path downstream promised little relief.

With a resolute breath, she slipped into the rushing waters, letting the current carry her between jagged stones and tumbling rapids. The roar of the water was deafening, yet she pressed on, swimming with desperate strength. At last, she emerged from the narrow, cruel trough into the open, gasping, dripping, and alive.

The Little Divers

As she waited for the bright disk of the sun to lift itself above the jagged rocks, a shadow brushed past her—a gray-black bird, swift and silent. She swept over the stone where Thumbelina lay and, without pause or flutter of doubt, plunged straight toward the falling veil of the waterfall. Thumbelina thought the poor creature must be blind, for surely she could not see the heavy, thundering sheets of water that would drown her and dash her down into the churning pool below.

Yet the bird did not falter. Like an arrow loosed from an unseen bow, she drove into the shimmering cascade, cleaving the water—clear as glass in the newborn light—and vanished beyond the curtain, as though swallowed by some hidden world behind the falls.

Thumbelina cried out in fear, her voice trembling like a leaf caught in a sudden wind. She kept staring toward the place where the bird had vanished, her eyes roaming every corner of the misty falls, but she could not glimpse even a feather.

“She must have drowned,” the turtle murmured, and her heart sank as though a stone had been tied to it. Yet just as she had resigned herself to loss, the waters stirred—and from behind the rushing veil of the waterfall the bird burst forth, as if she had slipped through some hidden cleft in the rock itself.

“Hey!” Thumbelina gasped. *“Didn’t she drown?”*

The bird heard her call and landed upon a smooth stone near the pond’s edge. Her breast was white as river foam, her body clad in dark grey feathers thick and shining. She was restless still, bright-eyed and quick in her movements, as merry and mischievous as a sunbeam dancing on a water.

“What are you saying?” she asked, and a tremor passed through her slender body as she stood upon the cold stone.

“I feared you had been swept away,” said the turtle, *“and my heart was sorely troubled.”*

The bird uttered a soft, melodious chirrup, like the merry gurgling of the waters beside them.

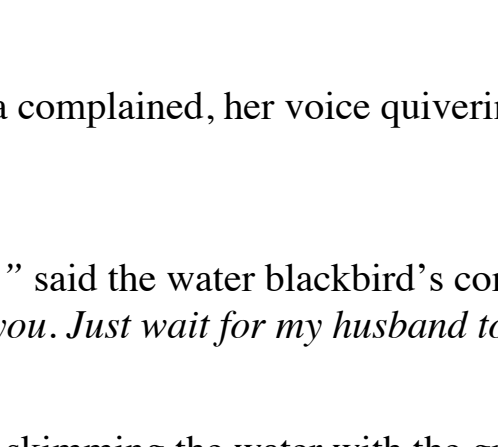
“Behind the waterfall lies my hidden nest,” she said. *“I built it there, so no one may find it. My little ones rest safely in its shadows.”*

“And what is your name?” asked Thumbelina.

“Do you not know me?” replied the bird. *“I am a companion of the water-blackbird, whom everyone calls Snooze. He flew down the stream and may return at any moment now. But tell me—how did you end up here?”*

So Thumbelina recounted to the bird the tale of her wandering and all the strange peril that had befallen her.

“I know the fox all too well,” said Snooze’s companion. *“Only a few days past she came slinking down to this place. She carried a rag in her jaws—Who knows where she found it. At first I took it for some small bird she had caught, but when I stepped nearer I saw it was but the torn sleeve of a peasant’s garb. Without so much as a glance our way, she slipped into the pond, the bit of cloth still clutched fast between her teeth, as though obeying some secret purpose of her own.”*



“The water began to rise around her, cool and silent as dusk in an old forest pool. First it reached at her belly, and the fox, wary and deliberate, lowered herself step by step. In a little while she crouched so that only the upper half of her russet body stood above the shimmering surface. Then, with a patience that seemed almost cunning, she sank further still, until at last nothing remained but the very tip of her muzzle—clenched around the rag like a banner held in stubborn defiance. Suddenly she released it. With a swift bound she jumped out onto the bank. There she shook herself mightily, casting droplets like tiny sparks into the air, muttered some small grumbling fox-words, and darted off into the forest’s shadowed undergrowth.”

“Curiosity tugged at me, as gentle and irresistible as a breeze through a half-open door. I stepped to the water’s edge and lifted the rag from where it floated. What met my eye upon her sleeve made me start: it was swarming with fleas—scores of them, clinging together like a small, panicked army.”

“What a wily creature she is! She had found a clever trick indeed: driving the tormenting little fugitives down her sleeve into the water, yet keeping them from drowning by offering the rag as their only refuge—only to abandon it once she herself was free.”

“A cunning fox, through and through.”

“She treated me very cruelly,” Thumbelina complained, her voice quivering like leaves in a restless wind. *“Now I don’t know how I am to escape this place.”*

“The important thing is to find your friend,” said the water blackbird’s companion, with a calm voice as a stream over smooth stones. *“As for the path itself, I can guide you. Just wait for my husband to come.”*

It was not long before Snooze appeared, skimming the water with the grace of a slender arrow. In his beak he carried a large black beetle, glinting faintly like a jewel in the shadowed light.

“He caught a stag beetle,” chirped the companion, alighting upon a stone with a bounce of bright joy.

Snooze shot past them, cutting through the waterfall’s mist like silver lightning, and went to the nest to feed his young. In only a few minutes he returned to his companion, restless and impatient, wings trembling in the air as if the river itself had caught in them.

“The boar is coming here with his whole family,” he said. *“They have muddied the entire stream. Though the sun is not yet fierce and the air remains cool, they seem bent on wallowing. I landed on the old man’s back, but he flew into a fury. Now they dig up snails by the water with their long snouts, as though the earth itself were theirs to unmake.”*

“We have a guest,” his wife interjected, nodding toward Thumbelina.

“Good morning!” Snooze bowed. *“I did not notice you—pray forgive my inattention. What brings you to our damp and winding den?”*

The turtle recounted her misadventure, and for a while, the woodland stillness seemed to listen, as if the shadows themselves held their breath.

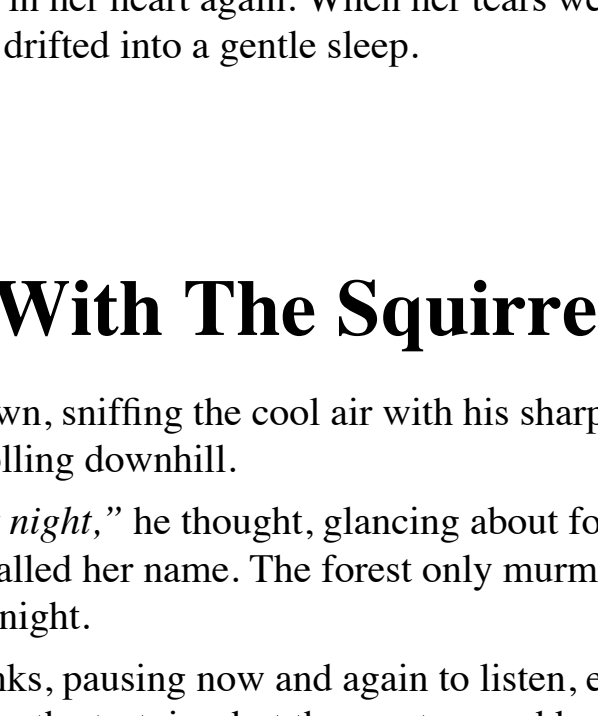
“You must hide somewhere, so that the wild boars will not find you,” said Snooze. *“They will kick you with their snouts, and maybe even tear you to pieces.”*

“She had lost a friend somewhere in the forest during the night, and he was still out there, somewhere beyond sight.”

“It is a pity, we have no friends here,” said Snooze. *“But we shall help you get out. Wait until the wild boars have passed.”*

The boars moved off with their family, and Thumbelina, heeding Snooze’s counsel, slipped beneath a great stone. From this hidden vantage, she could watch the creatures at their work. They dug at the banks with their snouts, snapping and trampling roots and snails in a clamor of teeth and mud.

The largest boar was a fearsome sight: bristles darkened by mud, curved tusks like yellowed sabers, and eyes small yet gleaming with a kind of cruel and schizophrenic intelligence. Beside him, a long black-and-brown boar led six striped piglets, who jostled and tumbled over one another, each competing to taste whatever morsel their mother had uncovered. The forest around her seemed to lean closer in silence, listening to the scrape of claws and the thump of bristled bodies through the undergrowth.



The wild boars came as far as the waterfall before their courage failed them, and they turned back into the thickets. When at last the peril drifted away like a shadow at sundown, the turtle crept out from beneath her sheltering stone. The Snoozers gathered around her at once.

Together the three set off downstream. The turtle was obliged to swim, drawn along by the current, while the two birds glided above the running water—until suddenly they folded their wings and plunged into it. To her astonishment, the turtle beheld them walking beneath the surface along the pebbled bed of the stream, moving as lightly as if treading a sunlit meadow. There they found small worms and bright water-insects on which they eagerly fed. Ever and again they would spring from the water, flutter a short way in the open air, and dive once more into some glimmering pool, like seasoned divers at play.

At last, when they had come out from the narrow gorge of the stream and the banks had grown gentler, Snooze showed the tortoise the winding path that would lead her back to the same meadow where the fox had once met her. He and his companion wished Thumbelina a safe journey, and there they parted.

Left alone, the turtle lingered awhile, listening to the silence of the place before she gathered her resolve and began the slow climb upward. She walked, paused to rest, and went on again. The sun beat down upon her trough until it seemed heavier than ever upon her back. Weariness and heat wrapped around her like a spell, and drowsiness crept over her. Thumbelina sighed deeply, thinking of Yoshi, and sorrow welled up in her heart again. When her tears were spent, she sought the cool shadow beneath a low-branched bush, settled herself there, and drifted into a gentle sleep.

With The Squirrels

Yoshi woke at the first pale hint of dawn, sniffing the cool air with his sharp snout as he blinked his small, black eyes. Hunger stirred in his stomach like a tiny stone rolling downhill.

“Surely Thumbelina had a fine meal last night,” he thought, glancing about for her familiar shape. But when he saw no sign of her shell among the roots and shadows, he called her name. The forest only murmured back. It was still half-dark beneath the trees, their branches holding the last shreds of night.

A hare hopped lightly between the trunks, pausing now and again to listen, ears quivering like little banners in the dimness. Yoshi nearly called out to him to ask after the tortoise, but the creature suddenly startled at some unseen sound and darted away into the deeper gloom.

Then Yoshi felt a chill of realization steal over him, quiet but certain as the fading starlight.

Thumbelina was lost.

“Where am I to seek her now?” he wondered, and the thought stung him with equal parts worry and wrath.

He pressed on through the forest until he came again to the clearing where the fox had once met the tortoise. The place lay bare and silent, and its emptiness unsettled him. A tremor of fear passed through him, for it seemed the sort of spot where unseen creatures might spring forth from the shadows. So he skirted the edge rather than cross its open heart, and soon was swallowed once more by the deeper wood.

Here the trees grew taller, older. Great oaks rose like an ancient wardens, their roots thrust into the earth like the gnarled hands of giants. Broad-crowned beeches stood among them, pale-trunked and smooth, catching what little light filtered through the canopy.

After a short while, Yoshi startled a mouse asleep among the roots of an oak. He caught it swiftly, ate, and moved on. As he went, a thought crept into his mind: Thumbelina could not have travelled far. She was slow of foot and fond of rest. Likely she had feasted and then curled up to sleep not long after.

With this hope stirring in him, Yoshi turned back toward the ancient forest.

Suddenly there came a faint rustle beside him. Someone—or something—was hurrying through the underwood. A red squirrel leapt into view between the trees, her great and bushy tail streaming behind her like a banner of autumn flame. A hazelnut was clutched firmly in her little mouth. When she reached the spot where the hedgehog lay hidden, the creature settled back upon its hind legs and set to work upon its prize. Swift and deft were her teeth, and in a heartbeat the shell was broken cleanly, the pale kernel slipping out whole as though by some small woodland craft.

Yoshi knew well enough the ways of squirrels, yet he held the forest and lay still. For these nimble folk were notorious chatterers, and he feared that one sharp cry might rouse the forest and summon unfriendly ears toward his secret refuge.

But alas, the very moment the squirrel swallowed the hazelnut, she darted straight at him.

“Ouch!” she squealed in sudden fright, and in the blink of an eye she scrambled up the nearest tree, her sharp cries echoing through the branches without a pause.

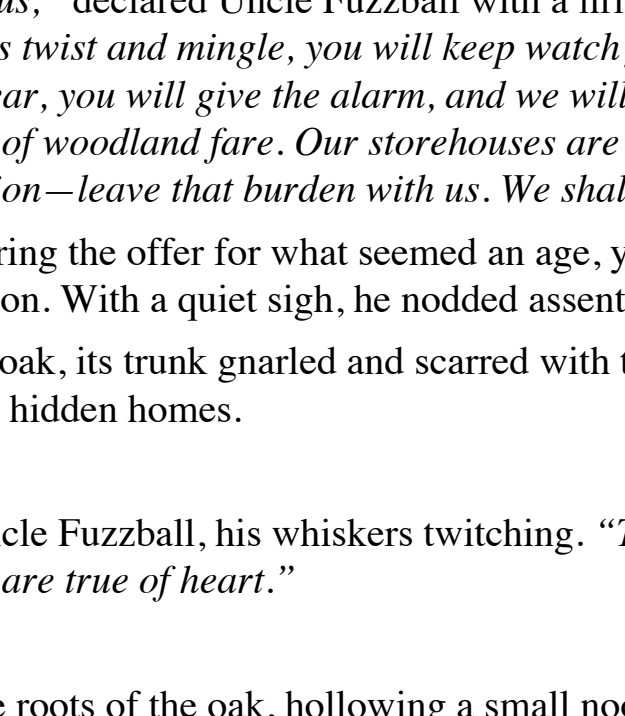
Yoshi gazed after her, bewildered.

“You know that I am no foe of yours, do you not? Why all this clamour?” he asked gently.

“Because you are so ugly. Oh—oh, how terribly ugly!” the squirrel wailed. *“I shall call my kin, and we will chase you from this place at once. This forest is ours. You will steal our hazelnuts, the ones we have stored for the winter!”*

“I do not eat hazelnuts,” the hedgehog said, trying to soothe her fears.

“And can you climb trees?” she demanded from her high perch, peering down with bright, suspicious eyes.



“And that I cannot do,” said Yoshi, shaking his head. *“As for this forest, it is no home of mine. I came into it unwillingly, and by no choice of my own.”*

“I still don’t believe a word of it, and I must fetch my folk,” said the squirrel, springing from branch to branch with quick, and rustling leaps.

In a little while Yoshi found himself hemmed in by a dozen squirrels. They perched upon the surrounding boughs, bright-eyed and bristling, and showered him with questions as softly as falling leaves.

So he told them—told the whole tale from beginning to end: how the great eagle had carried them off into the high and empty sky, and how he and Thumbelina had wandered astray thereafter, lost beneath the long shadows of the wood.

The squirrels were at once curious and wary, peering down with bright, restless eyes. At length, however, they seemed satisfied, and an old squirrel—one with great tufted ears like little tassels stirred by the wind—climbed nimbly down the trunk. He addressed Yoshi with solemn courtesy and said that his household wished to aid him, offering to guide him to the deep roots of the ancient oak where they made their dwelling.

“It is near enough,” said the elder squirrel. *“I live there with my sons, grandchildren, and even my great-grandchildren. My name is Uncle Fuzzball, and this black-furred lass who first caught sight of you is my daughter, Squeaky-Hazel. Mind yourself around her, for she is a notorious mischief-maker.”*

“For now my only task is to find my friend,” the hedgehog replied anxiously.

“You shall stay with us—and guard us,” declared Uncle Fuzzball with a firmness that allowed no easy refusal. *“Hidden among the roots of the oak, where our chambers twist and mingle, you will keep watch for those thieving neighbors who steal our food. And should any strange creature draw near, you will give the alarm, and we will see to the rest. In return, we shall feed you well with nuts and fruits, eggs and all manner of woodland fare. Our storehouses are piled high with wild pears and apples, walnuts and acorns. As for your missing companion—leave that burden with us. We shall lend our help in finding her.”*

Yoshi lingered in hesitation, pondering the offer for what seemed an age, yet the hope that the squirrels might guide him to Thumbelina at last swayed his decision. With a quiet sigh, he nodded assent.

The squirrel led him to a venerable oak, its trunk gnarled and scarred with the passage of countless seasons. Round holes pocked the bark—doorsways to the squirrels’ hidden homes.

“Eight families dwell here,” said Uncle Fuzzball, his whiskers twitching. *“They quarrel and chatter, as young folk are wont to do, but they may pay them no mind... all are true of heart.”*

Yoshi made his resting-place at the roots of the oak, hollowing a small nook for himself. He pondered the many ways to seek Thumbelina, while the squirrels, mischievous and restless, came to him without a pause. They brought apples, or, with playful naughtiness, flung twigs snapped from the boughs. Uncle Fuzzball scolded them gently, but the younglings paid little heed, their eyes alight with impish delight.

As darkness fell, the old squirrel approached Yoshi, his eyes bright in the fading light. *“Be wary,”* he whispered, his voice trembling like dry leaves. *“Keep watch and raise the alarm should any beast draw near. Tonight, it may be the beech marten who comes, or perhaps the owl—our grim adversary—may pass close by. Mark him well, for he is a murderer. Yet fear not entirely, for I shall speak with my brother across the forest. He is a steadfast friend to the Nightingale, the night swallow that knows every secret of these woods. Through him, we shall find your companion.”*

Bandits in the Night

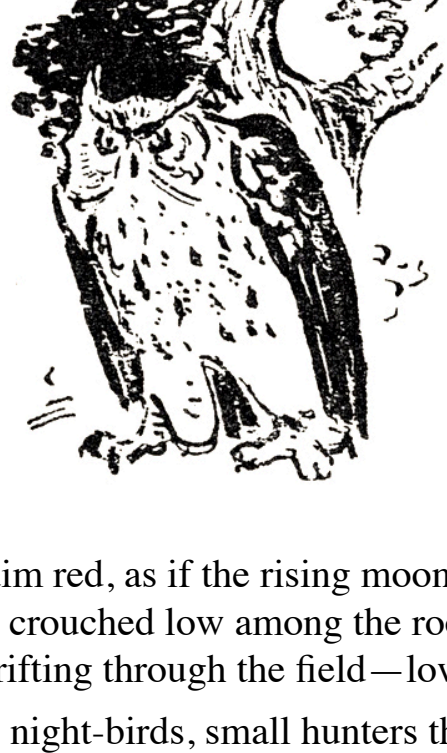
Before the stroke of midnight, the forest stirred with voices of the night. First came the owl, perched in the hollow of an old linden, where she had slept through the sunlit hours. She shook awake from some gentle, whimsical dream and let out a soft, and merry giggle that rippled through the branches.

Then, from the shadowed depths, the screech owl raised his mournful cry, a voice soaked in timeless sorrow.

“Choo-o-h, ch-oo-h!” — it whispered, unseen, a phantom among the leaves.

A round-headed owl muttered to herself, while a smaller, lonely bird at the forest’s edge called in a melancholy refrain: *“Hooh, hooh!”* — as if the night itself had pressed a gentle ache upon her heart.

At last, from the darkest reaches of the woods, came the deep, resonant voice of the great eagle owl, low and solemn, carrying through the stillness like the toll of some ancient, unseen bell. The night held its breath, and the trees leaned closer, as though to listen.



At that hour, the forest-tops glowed with a dim red, as if the rising moon had set fire to their crowns, and the shadows of the trees lay thick and ponderous upon the earth. Yoshi crouched low among the roots of the ancient oak, a strange unease stirring within him. Never before had he heard such voices drifting through the field—low, whispering, yet somehow sharp with menace.

He did not fear the owls, nor the screeching night-birds, small hunters themselves, busy with mice and heedless of him. Yet their cries pressed upon his heart, and their glowing eyes pierced him with an alien chill. Yoshi was not afraid of them, he knew that they were small birds and would not dare to attack him. He even hated them because they interfered with his hunting of mice, since they themselves ate them too. But he was afraid of the great eagle owl, that was no joke.

That was why, when he glimpsed his broad and silent shadow stretching over the forest, a chill ran down his spine, and fear held his tongue from warning the squirrels. The eagle owl, in its quiet wisdom, passed on, unnoticed.

After a little while, Yoshi discerned two bluish-green flames flickering in the shadow of a gnarled tree. Instantly he knew them for the eyes of the marten. He had glimpsed that cunning creature at night, slinking through the fields near scattered villages. Sharp-toothed and sinuous, it was a predator of great danger, and the hapless squirrels were perilously exposed. Yet by the way the eerie flames slid through the undergrowth, it seemed the marten had no mind to come this way. It prowled the bushes, a silent hunter, seeking other quarry in the forest's dim and watchful heart.

At one moment, Yoshi glimpsed her springing lightly onto a nearby tree and, without hesitation quickly climbed it. Yet, try as he might, he could not discern where she had vanished among the branches. A thought rose in him to sound the alarm, but the tree seemed too distant, and the shadow of the marten lingered in his mind; he chose instead to wait. For if he raised a cry, it might draw the creature's keen attention to the oak where young squirrels tumbled and played.

He craned his short neck skyward, straining toward the leafy heights, yet could not pierce the thick canopy above. Then he listened, ears twitching, hoping for the whisper of her soft leaps—but no hint of movement reached him. He told himself that the marten had passed by and felt a small surge of relief.

Unseen in the dense green, she lingered above, watching the oak from her perch. Then, with the silent cunning of one born to the trees, she slipped from branch to branch, unseen, until she reached the very oak where the young squirrels gambolled, not once touching the ground.

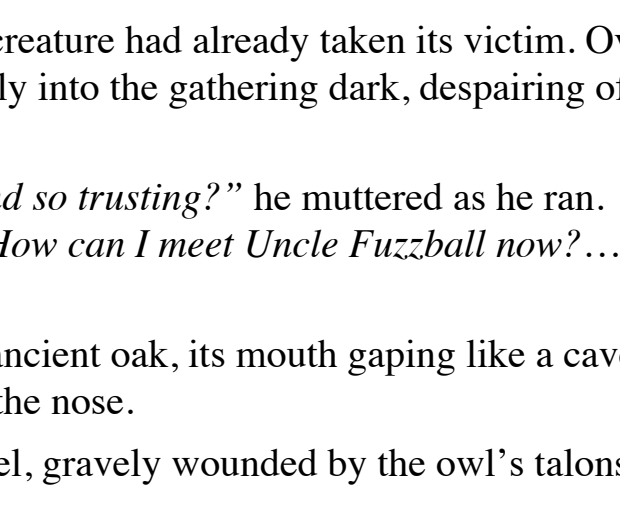
A pitiful, high-pitched scream shattered the quiet of the forest. From the gnarled branches of the ancient oak above, a terrible commotion arose. Squirrels, black as the shadows beneath the trees, leapt in fright, vanishing swiftly into the dim, twisting undergrowth. Yoshi grunted and stamped with all his might, hoping the noise would send the small beast scurrying, yet the dark tangle of branches above hid the truth from his eyes.

Then came the cry of Uncle Fuzzball, sharp and frantic, echoing through the leafy gloom. The sound struck Yoshi's heart with icy dread—he had ignored the old squirrel's warning. Now, tangled in misfortune of his own making, he realized that the forest itself seemed to whisper of his folly, the trees bending closer as if to witness his shame.

He trembled, poised between flight and despair, as shadows thickened around him. Yet before his eyes could sweep the gloom, a vast and dreadful shape loomed—an owl, immense and silent, its fiery eyes glinting with a light not of this world. With a sudden, hoarse cry it vanished upward, settling upon the highest bough of the ancient oak. Another shrill scream echoed, carrying a weight of dread.

Something landed near the tree's gnarled roots. Heart hammering, he leapt forward and glimpsed the eyes of the squirrel, glowing like twin lanterns in the dark. A shiver ran through him; he recoiled, bristling, as the creature melted into the forest like a wraith.

For a heartbeat all was still, save for the hushed rustle of leaves. Then came a distant, eerie chorus—a squirrel's cry, and a whisper of wings—drifting deeper into the shadowed woods, as if the forest itself had sighed and swallowed them whole.



Yoshi realized—too late—that the creature had already taken its victim. Overcome with a bitter pang of remorse, he slipped from the roots of the old oak and fled blindly into the gathering dark, despairing of himself and deeply ashamed of his cowardice and folly.

“How long will I remain so simple and so trusting?” he muttered as he ran. *“And how long will the whole forest laugh at me? How shall I face the good squirrels now? How can I meet Uncle Fuzzball now?... Better to cast myself into a stream and be done with it...”*

Before him loomed a hollow in an ancient oak, its mouth gaping like a cave. He ran inside. A hoarse cry rose from the shadows, and something struck him hard upon the nose.

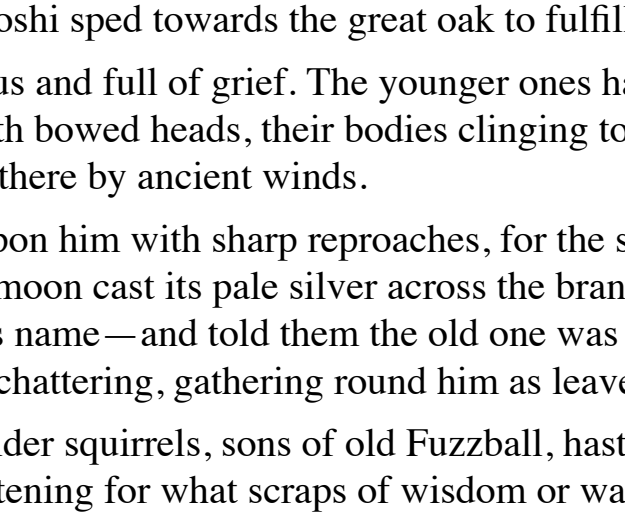
It was Uncle Fuzzball. The old squirrel, gravely wounded by the owl's talons, had dragged himself here to hide.

The Death of Uncle Fuzzball

When the marten sprang upon the ancient oak, where young squirrels tumbled and chattered among its branches, Uncle Fuzzball set himself to a secret task. He burrowed in the mossy earth beneath the roots, planning a storehouse for the long winter ahead. For the old squirrel, who had seen many seasons come and go, knew that the frost might linger and the snow lay deep. That summer, the forest was generous: hazelnuts lay thick upon the ground, beech acorns carpeted the woodland floor, and even the distant walnut trees offered their bounty to those who could reach them. Each nut gathered, each cache hidden beneath the roots, was a small triumph against the coming cold, a promise of warmth and plenty when the wind whistled through the bare branches.

Uncle Fuzzball had chosen a secret nook for his storehouse, hidden beneath the roots of a fallen ancient beech. A broad slab of gnarled wood marked the entrance, worn smooth by time and weather. The squirrel had visited the place a week past and found it well suited for his needs. It was dry, and the food he stored there would keep through the seasons. Close by, the sturdy oak stood sentinel, and the remnant of the beech trunk shielded the hollow from winter's snow, making it simple to retrieve whatever lay within. Sunlight rarely reached this hollow, yet the gloom was gentle, suffused with the quiet hush of leaves and earth, a place where secrets and stores might rest undisturbed.

Believing that Yoshi would watch over the young ones with care, Uncle Fuzzball set to work, digging a shallow hollow beneath the slab. A sudden cry of the little squirrel startled him, and he sprang forth, leaping through the underbrush toward the ancient oak. There, in the shadowed thicket, he hurled himself upon the marten, teeth bared. Yet the marten, swift and cruel, was stronger still. She abandoned the frightened youngling, turning upon the old squirrel with a savage snarl, sinking her sharp fangs deep into his neck. Staggering from the tree, wounded, Uncle Fuzzball dragged himself with trembling strength into the hollow of the gnarled oak, the forest around him silent but for the soft rustle of leaves.



The owl's sudden appearance sent the marten fleeing into the shadows; yet the poor squirrel she had struck lay helpless, and soon was carried away in the terrible bird's talons, vanishing into the deeper forest.

Uncle Fuzzball knew nothing of what followed after he had been wounded. When at last he recognized Yoshi beside him, he grew calmer. Blood covered him, and what had already flowed had left him faint and wavering. He understood that his end was near; but in those dim moments his thoughts turned not to himself, but to the young squirrels.

“Go, call them to me,” he murmured to Yoshi. *“Bring Squeaky-Hazel and the eldest ones. Before I depart, I must leave them a few words of counsel.”*

Quivering with pity and sorrow, Yoshi sped towards the great oak to fulfill Uncle Fuzzball's bidding.

There he found the squirrels anxious and full of grief. The younger ones had fled upward into the highest branches, while the older stood pressed close to the trunk with bowed heads, their bodies clinging to the bark as though rooted to it. In that stillness they seemed like clusters of moss hung there by ancient winds.

Yoshi expected them to spring upon him with sharp reproaches, for the squirrels were seldom gentle when crossed. Yet they paid him no heed at all, though the full moon cast its pale silver across the branches and showed him plainly beneath their perch. But the moment he spoke Uncle Fuzzball's name—and told them the old one was wounded and calling for them—they leapt down from the tree in a flurry of tails and soft chattering, gathering round him as leaves gather in an autumn gust.

Squeaky-Hazel and three other elder squirrels, sons of old Fuzzball, hastened at once toward the hollow where he lay. There they bowed their heads close to him, listening for what scraps of wisdom or warning he still had strength to give. Yoshi remained humbly at the entrance of the hollow, standing as still as a young sapling in the night wind.

Before his passing, Uncle Fuzzball charged them to keep faithful to his labors in the old warehouse, and to gather what supplies they could against the coming winter.

“It will be a hard season, and a long one,” he murmured, as though speaking half to them and half to the dim rafters above. *“The spiders have warned me. This autumn they will tear down their webs far earlier than their usual time, and creep into the hidden cracks of the trees. I have spoken also with the crows—grim prophets whose words have never yet proven false. Even our foe, the owl, is aware of it, for he has been calling often in the dark hours of the forest.”*

“Keep peace among yourselves, and look well after one another. And tomorrow, when the jays wake chattering in the bright branches, tell them what befell in the night. They will bear this news to all the quiet folk of the forest, and the owl will face his due. For then the gentle birds will be joined by the hunters of the daylight—falcons, hawks, and the like—for the owl is despised by all who walk or fly beneath the sun...”

Uncle Fuzzball barely had the strength to finish his instructions. His black eyes fluttered shut, a final shudder passed through him, and his spirit slipped away.

The squirrels scattered at once, their cries thin and forlorn as they vanished into the deeper reach of the wood. Yoshi was left standing in the silence that followed, unnoticed—as though the very world had forgotten he existed. Saddened by the passing of the old squirrel, the hedgehog wandered on through the forest, aimless and heavy-hearted. The trees, ancient and bowed with age, seemed to lean inward as he passed, as if listening to the silence he carried with him...

The Owl's Punishment

Word of Uncle Fuzzball's passing drifted through the forest with the first pale glimmer of dawn, carried swiftly on the wings of the ever-talkative jays. Just as he had bidden his sons and daughters before the end, Squeaky-Hazzel stepped out beneath the waking boughs and shared the night's sorrow.

She soon crossed paths with old Gossipjay, a matronly jay known to all the woodland for her sharp tongue and sharper hearing. To her Squeaky-Hazzel told the tale in full—of Uncle Fuzzball's quiet death, and of the young squirrel stolen away under the cover of darkness.

But Gossipjay could scarcely bear to hear the tale to its end. Her feathers bristled like wind-stirred brush; she gave a piercing cry that echoed among the trunks, and off she shot beneath the great limbs of the forest, eager—almost burning—to scatter the news to every nest and hollow.



Squeaky-Hazzel heard the cry echoing out of the forest, sharp as a jay's warning: *“Shame! Shame!”* And in but a few minutes more, the whole wood seemed to murmur with the tale of that night's mishap.

Blacky the raven and Silver-Top—chief of the wandering crow-folk who roosted in the deep places of the forest and had suffered more than once beneath the owl's fierce swoop—gathered their flocks in a dark whirling storm of wings and raised the alarm. The blackbirds, for their part, carried the word swiftly among the small and peaceful folk of the branches. They whispered it to the tits, tapped it out to the woodpeckers, and even passed it along to the tiny kinglets, the smallest and most flutter-light of all who dwelt beneath the green canopy.

All through the forest they sought the owl. In a shadowed grove the crows had gathered with their dark-plumed cousins, the ravens, for a grave and murmuring council. Jays flitted to and fro in restless companies, searching every bramble and bough. Curious and bright-eyed, the tits and woodpeckers crept along the trunks, peering into hollows as though each might hold a secret. Before they set about hollowing the softer trees, the woodpeckers paused to listen, and the nutcrackers—kin to the jays—let loose their shrill, startling cries that rang through the dim paths of the wood.

At last Gossipjay came upon the owl. Well fed and heavy with sleep, he had dozed off outside his own hollow, perched on the low branches of an old linden that rose in the thickest and most shadowed heart of the forest.

The moment she caught sight of him, Gossipjay let out a piercing cry, her feathers bristling as though at some ancient wrong.

“Murderer! Murderer! Here he is! Here he is!” she shrieked, swooping down to alight boldly above his head.

The owl stirred, opening his great yellow-red eyes with slow displeasure. He regarded her with something like scorn, then gave himself a lazy shake, as if brushing off a troublesome thought.

“Here he is! Here he is! Hold him!” screamed the jay from the branches, her voice sharp enough to rattle the hush of the grove.

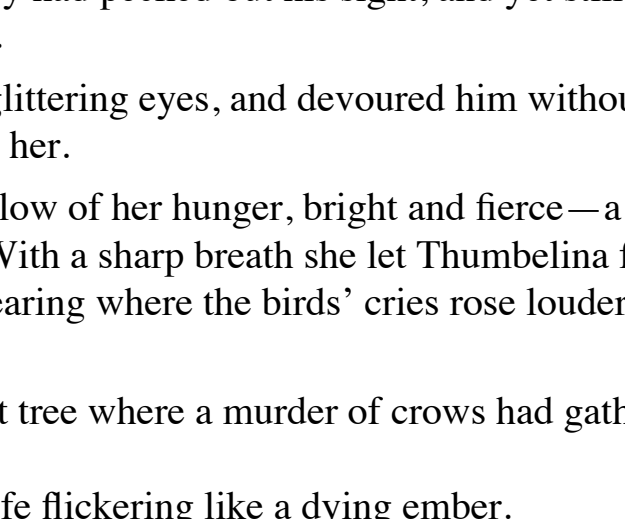
Her cry rang out so sharply that every bird of field and forest heard it. Blackbirds stirred uneasily upon the ground; nuthatches darted swiftly toward the place where the owl brooded in its shadow. Magpies chattered in fretful bursts, then one by one lifted into the air and sped over the darkening wood. Then Blacky gave his deep, and brazen call—a sound like a battle-horn—and after him, sweeping together like a single storm-wrought cloud, came the ravens and the crows.

The ancient linden groaned under the sudden weight of jays, magpies, and ravens crowding its branches. Tiny titmouses, kinglets, and finches hid trembling in the nearby leaves, their hearts fluttering like trapped moths. Woodpeckers struck the dead limbs with fierce precision, their beaks tapping so quickly and so many times that the forest seemed to thrum with the beat of distant drums.

With a harsh, wrathful caw, Blacky hurled himself upon the owl, and the crows wheeled in to aid him. Every bird pressed forward in haste, each eager to land its blow upon the bristling killer of the night.

The owl reeled upon the linden, blinded by the harsh light of the day, his fiery eyes squinting against the sun's cruelty. Wings half-unfurled, feathers bristling like brambles, he perched in menace, talons gripping the branch as if it were the last hold in all the world. A strange fire burned behind his gaze, and the soft, downy plumage of his legs seemed like socked limbs made for some ancient, secret purpose. Twice he tried to rise, to take the air, but the forest's smaller denizens would not let him.

Crows and magpies assailed him without pause. A cunning old crow darted, intent to peck out his eyes, while a bold magpie clambered across his back, pecking himself with relentless mischief. The forest echoed with their clamor, a ceaseless chorus of beaks and wings, while the owl defended himself with all the wrath of a creature unaccustomed to such insolence. Above them, the linden swayed, the sunlight breaking through the leaves in scattered, trembling beams, and in those fleeting shafts, the owl's hellish eyes glimmered like embers in the dark. A magpie, black as a shadow in twilight, settled upon his back, pecking insistently at the crown of his head, while his startled eyes darted beneath the tangled feathers.



“Chase him to the edge of the forest!” Blacky commanded, his voice sharp and urgent. *“Do not let him vanish into the deep shadows. Drive him forth into the open, into the light!”*

The owl tried in vain to escape, yet the birds pursued relentlessly. From branch to branch he was driven, until the dark green gloom gave way to a bare clearing. Blacky's orders were obeyed with unyielding persistence.

Soon the cries of hawks and the keen swoop of a falcon joined the hunt, drawn by the clamorous turmoil, for the killer of darkness was loathed by every winged denizen of the forest.

When he tried to alight upon a beech, the hawks struck with swift, unrelenting talons, and he was cast down. His great round head was torn and streaked with blood, the dark stains glinting in the muted forest light. Blow after blow came upon him, fierce and pitiless. Already and bedraggled, the owl lay upon the forest floor, its broad wings splayed in hopeless defeat, and waited, as if for some ancient reckoning, for its final hour.

How Mram, The She-Wolf Ate Him

Mram the she-wolf ran through the forest in the full glare of day, her flanks heaving as she searched for what might still the hunger gnawing at her belly. She was mother to five wolf-cubs, small and starved, waiting in their den for food that had not come. For two days she had caught nothing of worth—only a few frogs and a feeble rabbit, scarcely enough even for herself. Her milk had dried up, and the cubs, desperate and unknowing, bit at her empty teats, trampling her with their small paws and nipping her with sharp young teeth.

Driven half-mad by pain and hunger, Mram pressed on. Her red tongue lolled in the heat; spittle trailed from her half-open jaws, and before her weary eyes flickered strange blotches of yellow and green, dancing like will-o'-the-wisps in the shimmering air. Still she ran, for she must, if her little ones were to see another dawn.

At one point, Mram snatched up a startled hare and chased it. Yet hunger had hollowed her strength, and her legs—once swift as wind—now carried her fruitless in a weary lode. Soon the hare pulled down and vanished into the shadowed tangles of the forest.

Parched from the fruitless pursuit, the she-wolf made her way down to the river's edge.

There, by the quiet murmur of water over stone, she came upon Thumbelina.

The turtle lay dozing in the heavy heat, nestled among sun-baked stones and sparse thornbushes. Since losing her way, Thumbelina had done little to seek Yoshi. Hope had thinned within her, and she drifted into a kind of weary surrender. Most days she slept beneath the hard light of the sun; and when memory stirred her heart, she would burst into tears for her missing friend. Food was plentiful here, and when she had eaten her fill she would sink at once into slumber. She grew so indolent that even lifting her heavy trough became a burden, and she could scarcely drag herself from one patch of shade to the next.

As soon as she caught sight of her, the she-wolf thrust out her tongue—broad and red as a strip of cloth—snapped her jaws, and sought to swallow her whole. But Thumbelina was a great burden, larger than any prey Mram had taken in many seasons. She could not gulp her down. So the wolf clamped her teeth and tried to crack the trough that shielded the creature. It groaned under the might of her jaws, yet would not yield.

Irritated and impatient, Mram set upon it again, gnawing as she would at the thick leg-bones of elk in the deep winter months, following all the old rules of tooth and sinew. Still the stubborn thing held fast.

At last, with a low growl rumbling in her throat, Mram resolved to drag her prize to the cave—there, in the shadowed hollow beneath the stones, five hungry cubs waited for their mother's return.

She left the turtle upon the stones, went down to the stream, and drank long and greedily. Then, with a shake of her ragged fur, she returned, took Thumbelina more between her jaws, and padded toward her cave.

In the dark hollow of the she-wolf's mouth, Thumbelina's breath fluttered faintly, like a guttering ember.

Mram ran with all the strength left in her gaunt limbs, weaving through the forest's shadowed pillars. Suddenly she halted, stiff as a struck stone, and lifted her ears.

From the deeper wood came the sharp clamour of magpies and the harsh caw of jays. Their voices rang like warning bells under the great boughs. Something was astir beneath the trees.

She heard then the cries of Blacky and the rasping croak of his horde echoing through the undergrowth.

“Either they have stumbled upon worthy prey...or some peril prowls there,” Mram thought, a low growl rising in her throat.

She stood listening. The furious croaking left little doubt: the horde was upon someone, and they were attacking with feral delight.

Mram remembered such a day long ago, when the forest crows had raised just such a ruckus—harsh cawing that rolled through the trees like the clatter of black iron. She had gone then, quick-footed and lean from hunger, to see what fate had stirred their unrest. There, beneath a crooked oak, she had found a hare, wounded and staggering, while the crows leapt and flapped about him, their beaks already red with triumph. They had pecked out his sight, and yet still they shrieked, as if the poor creature's suffering were not enough for their wicked delight.

Mram had seized him in front of their glittering eyes, and devoured him without shame or haste, though the crows spat their dire curses and hurled threats like stones after her.

That memory now flared within the hollow of her hunger, bright and fierce—a wild, driving hope that once more a soundly aware awaited her beneath the forest's gloom. With a sharp breath she let Thumbelina fall from her jaws, the turtle thudding a softly against the earth, and she bounded toward the clearing where the birds' cries rose louder and louder, echoing like a summons through the darkened wood.

There, beneath the boughs of an ancient tree where a murder of crows had gathered, the she-wolf beheld a shape large and brown sprawled upon the earth.

It was the owl, fallen and half spent, its life flickering like a dying ember.

Though its flesh was sour and lean, Mram wasted no moment: with a swift tightening of her jaws she stilled it forever, and soon its feathers flew in little whirls about her.

For a short while the crows croaked their rough approval, but their voices soon turned sharp and bitter, as though old grudges had stirred again. Clearly they had not forgotten the rabbit, and forgiveness was not yet in their dark hearts. Mram only flicked an ear at their scolding and cared nothing for their spite.

When the meal was done, she wandered deeper into the forest's shadowed reaches, her muzzle hanging low, burdened with clinging tufts of down from the torn bird.

Long did the crows pursue her, railing from branch to branch, until at last they left the task to the jays. But even these, chattering though they were, soon understood the futility of chasing one who heeded no voice but her own hunger and the call of the wild ways.



Meeting with the Nightjar

The murder of the owl set the whole forest astir, and whispers ran like wind through branch and bramble. Yoshi, who had heard the wild clamor of wings, guessed well enough what doom had befallen the old night-watcher. A sharp curiosity tugged at him—an urge to creep near and witness how the owl would be punished.

Yet prudence, ever his truer companion, held him fast. The tumult of so many birds gathering filled him with unease, and at length he slipped back into the deeper shadows of the wood. There he sought a thicket to hide himself, for he feared that when the owl's fate was settled, a sharp-eyed jay might spy him lingering nearby—and then he would surely be met with mockery from every perch and branch in the forest.

He walked along a path strewn with small twigs and fallen leaves, yet soon abandoned it, for a foul and creeping odor drifted from the way ahead. It clung to the air like a warning. These were the traces of Mram—the she-wolf had passed not long before. Hurrying on, he came to a fallen branch lying near the wide trunk of a hornbeam, and there he stopped, struck with astonishment and no small measure of dread.

Upon the branch, crouched like a scrap of bark come strangely to life, stood a creature—if creature it was. One could not easily say whether it belonged to a tree, bird, or beast. It was no larger than a pigeon, yet it seemed greater somehow, for its gray-ash coloring melted into the wood beneath it until the two were nearly one, and the eye lost it in that soft dimness.

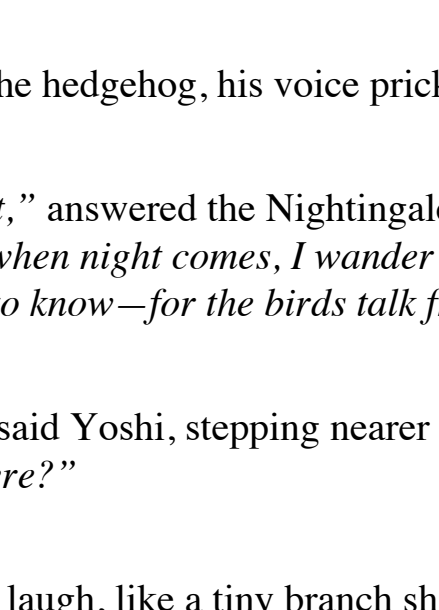
Looking more closely at the strange creature, Yoshi saw that it was, after all, a kind of bird. A single great black eye glimmered like a bead in the dusk, and long silverish whiskers trembled at the edges of its small face. Its feathers were mottled with every shade of twilight gray, as night-birds often are, woven together like shadows stitched upon a cloak. The hedgehog inspected its beak: short, straight, and harmless—certainly not the sort carried by hunters or talon-bearing foes.

While he studied it, the creature held so perfectly still that it might have passed for a fallen twig, forgotten by the tree that dropped it.

“Hallo there,” Yoshi murmured. “*What are you, truly? Living creature—or wandering branch?*”

“*M-r-r-r, m-r-r-r,*” crooned the bird. “*You have noticed me at last? I am the Night Swallow, the Night Swallow. Have you never heard of me?*”

“*Nightingale!—so it is true, then. Word reached me from old Uncle Fuzzball, and he nearly sent his brother running to find you... Ah! You are Nightingale!*” cried Yoshi, his voice ringing out as if a long-standing riddle had just been answered. His face shone with such happiness that it seemed for a moment as though some small fire had been kindled within him.



“*Uncle Fuzzball is already dead, isn't he?*” said the bird, still perched and unmoving upon his place.

“*And the owl was punished by the birds, was he not?*”

“*But how do you know?*” wondered the hedgehog, his voice pricked with astonishment.

“*I know all that happens in this forest,*” answered the Nightingale, in a low, sure tone. “*By day I lie quiet and hidden, whether upon the earth or in the boughs; but when night comes, I wander beneath the leaves from end to end of the wood. And as I lie in silence, I hear more than I ever seek to know—for the birds talk freely, thinking no one listens.*”

“*How glad I am to have found you,*” said Yoshi, stepping nearer to him. “*For I have a great request... I am searching for my friend. Have you not seen her anywhere?*”

The Nightingale let out a soft snoring laugh, like a tiny branch shaken by the wind.

“*I cannot say who your friend may be,*” he replied.

“*The turtle, Thumbelina... Surely you must have seen her?*”

“*I have seen a turtle,*” said the Nightingale calmly. “*But whether she is your friend or not—that I could not tell.*”

“Where is she now?” cried Yoshi, delight brightening his face.

“*Just before dawn, while the last tatters of night still clung to the forest,*” the night-bird replied, “*I left her by the stream. For two or three days she has tarried there, rolling about as if the world held no other duty. Never have I known a creature more clumsy or more content to idle. It seems her wish was to remain there forever.*”

“*Please—take me to her!*” Yoshi said warmly.

“*I do not fly beneath the sun,*” the bird answered, ruffling its feathers. “*Daylight troubles me. Wait until the shadows return, and I shall guide you.*”

During this time the crows were returning to their roosts, settling among the darkening boughs. Their harsh cawing rolled through the forest like scattered pebbles tossed down a well. Two jays flitted past, flying from tree to tree, chattering excitedly about the she-wolf.

“*If I only knew where Mram was hiding, I'd hand her over to the hunters without a second thought,*” said one, his wings flicking restlessly.

“*And how would you manage that?*” asked the other.

“*Oh, simple enough,*” he replied. “*I'd shout right beside her and draw them near.*”

“*The hunters do not always understand our tongue,*” the second jay answered with a wise tilt of the head. “*If I Were you, I'd keep quiet. The she-wolf hauls all manner of beasts and fowl back to her lair. I circle round after her, and there is always a scrap or two left. When she is full, Mram grows generous.*”

“*A crow once told me that she buries whatever she cannot finish,*” whispered the first jay. “*Come—let's find it!*”

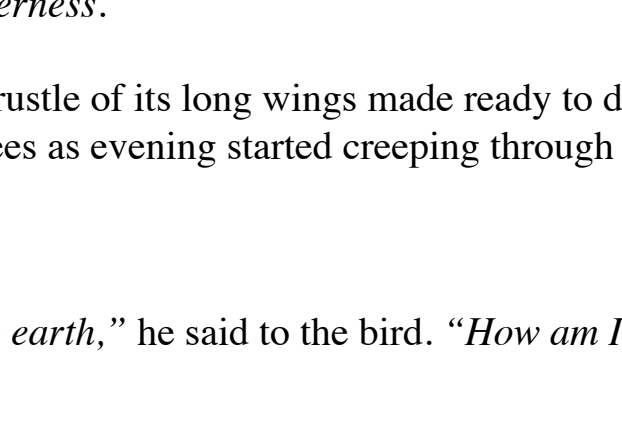
With a flutter of wings they passed on, hopping from branch to branch until the forest swallowed their voices.

After a short while, a fox emerged from the brush, dragging its thick tail behind. The noise in the wood had roused her sooner than she wished, and now she padded forward, ears pricked, to discover what disturbance had broken the forest's usual hush.

“*She is too late,*” said the Nightingale, when the fox's brush vanished between the dark tree-boles. “*A moment sooner, and some crow would have paid the price.*”

“Why so?” asked the Yoshi.

“*Because they hate her more even than the she-wolf,*” the Nightingale replied. “*And she, knowing this well, often lies as if slain, pretending to be dead—stretched long upon the ground, stiff as frost-bitten boughs. Then the crows, foolish in their triumph, begin their revels. Down they sweep, edging nearer and nearer, until boldness carries them to her very head. And then she snaps one up. Did you see how she sniffed the path? Mram just passed by there. Only she went up, and the fox went down, on the opposite track of the she-wolf. The two don't like each other anyway. Mram will see to it if she only catches her,*” murmured the Nightingale.



“*It seems that everyone hates each other,*” said Yoshi.

“*Not everyone,*” replied the Nightingale softly. “*Look at the small and peaceful folk of the forest. The tits, the woodpeckers, the finches, and many others wander in merry companies beneath the boughs. They share what they find, and without even meaning to, they shield one another from the common perils of the wild.*”

“*Think of the jays,*” she went on. “*Restless wanderers they are, yet when they glimpse a creeping foe, they cry out sharply. Then the magpies and the crows, hear their alarm, rise in clamorous ranks, and together they drive the intruder away. So are the gentle folk warned and kept from harm. But the hunters of the high air—those that take their prey—go alone,*” the Nightingale concluded.

“*And why do they hate the owl so bitterly?*” asked the Yoshi.

“*There lies an old feud,*” answered the Nightingale, her voice dropping like dusk through leaves. “*For the owl hunts by night, when the small ones sleep in the trees and cannot flee. In darkness they are helpless. Many crows has fallen to those silent wings, they say. Yet it is the magpies who suffer the most. In the long winter nights the owl sees them easily among the bare branches, and hunts them with a special and dreadful eagerness.*”

The Nightingale fell silent, and with a soft rustle of its long wings made ready to depart. The sun had slipped beyond the horizon, and shadows were gathering beneath the trees as evening started creeping through the forest.

Yoshi stirred uneasily.

“*You fly, and I am but a slow walker on the earth,*” he said to the bird. “*How am I to follow you?*”

“*Fear not,*” replied the Nightingale. “*Go down into the forest's darkening ways, and I shall guide you to your friend.*”

Though he could not guess how a creature of the air might lead one who trod the soil, Yoshi obeyed and turned where the bird had indicated.

The Nightingale lifted herself lightly and vanished into the dimming canopy. It was a master of the wind, gliding between branches as a shadow might slip between lantern beams. In an instant she rose above the treetops, and the last glimmer of her wings was lost.

Yoshi walked on, slowly and with no small measure of caution. A rabbit ran across his path—startled at the mere sight of him—and vanished like a grey shadow into the undergrowth. A little farther on he came upon a mouse-hole tucked neatly between two roots, as though some tiny folk had carved out a dwelling for themselves time long ago.

The forest deepened. Shade gathered beneath the boughs, thick as wool, and the wind muttered in the high branches overhead. Here and there a thin shard of moonlight slipped through the leaves, for the moon had only just lifted her pale face above the horizon. The shifting branches cast long wavering shadows, and it seemed to Yoshi that the whole forest was stirring with a life of its own. An owl, curious about the rustling below, dropped from its perch as silent as falling snow. Yoshi glimpsed its great round eyes shining like lantern-glass before it muttered some gruff complaint and drifted off into the dark.

Yoshi stirred on.

Suddenly, from high above the forest roof, there rang out a long, chilling cry—sharp enough to pierce bone. A black shape swept across the moonlit sky, swift and soundless. Another pursued it, clinging close upon its tail. The scream rose again, keener than before, shivering through the branches like a cold wind.

Yoshi got scared and hid in a bush.

“*Mur, mur,*” came the Nightingale's soft voice beside him—warm with reassurance, though touched with a hint of playful mockery. “*Are you scared? Have no fear. These are the night-kites quarreling above. Come now, creep out from there.*”

“*But why are they fighting?*” asked Yoshi.

“*Ah, you are ever curious,*” the Nightingale replied, alighting upon the leaf-strewn earth. “*Very well, I shall tell you.*”

She folded her wings neatly. “*The red kite, like all hunters of the high air, keeps a realm of her own—wood, field, and wind where she seeks her prey. No rival may trespass. Should another appear, she drives him off; or, if he proves the stronger, she herself must flee. Tonight, fate set two sisters against each other. Both are young still, and neither has yet claimed the hunting-grounds around these hills. So they clash in the dusk.*”

Her voice lowered. “*And before the moon has climbed high, only one will fly again. The other will fall, and her sister—victor and kin alike—will feed upon the body she has slain.*”

“*How terrible this is,*” murmured the hedgehog, with his small voice sounding thoughtful. “*I come from the swamp, and it is much the same there—dim and troubling. Before that I lived in the open field, and things seemed kinder then.*”

“*Who can say?*” replied the Nightingale, her tone carrying a quiet wisdom. “*There are bad creatures in every place. One must work hard, and sometimes even stand and fight.*”

She flicked her wings with an easy grace and added:

“*Keep on as you are going. I shall fly beside you awhile. And so that you do not lose your path, make certain the moon lies always before your face.*”

She rose into the air so lightly and so soundlessly that the hedgehog blinked in wonder, scarcely sensing the moment when the bird left the earth. Then he saw her gliding straight toward the great round moon—gleaming like a burnished shield—as though the Nightingale wished to warm herself in its cold fire.

The hedgehog's steps grew firmer. From time to time he heard the soft purring call of the Nightingale above him, hunting the drifting moths and quick night-flies as swallows do at dusk.

At last he caught the deep-throated roar of the waterfall, and the cool splash of its waters tumbling into the still pond below. Yoshi's heart beat fast within him, for he hoped at last to behold his long-lost companion, of whom he had known nothing for so long.

A little farther on he came to the forest's very brink. From that point downward only low thornbushes clung to the slope, and the earth grew suddenly harsh and stony beneath his feet.

“*Thumbelina has chosen her place well,*” Yoshi thought. “*Ever has she loved such sun-scoured ground where the heat lies heavy as a cloak through the long day.*”

Then the Nightingale's voice came to him, clear and guiding as a silver thread.

“*Look among the bushes,*” the bird advised.

Side by side they searched the steep hillside, but not a mark nor shadow of the turtle could they find.

“*That she had rolled along this way! Then where has she vanished?*” wondered the Nightingale.

Yoshi called out again and again, but the slope gave back no answer. He thrust his nose beneath every thorn and branch, yet Thumbelina was nowhere to be seen.

“*She is not here. I have looked in all places,*” said the Nightingale at last.

Weary and stricken with despair, the hedgehog sank down beside a thorny shrub. The bird fluttered down and alighted softly by his side.

“*Do not despair,*” she said softly, laying a gentle wing upon him. “*This night I shall meet many wanderers of the dark—creatures whose eyes pierce the shadows better than mine. I will ask the owl and the tawny owl, the nightjars, even the bats that flit like whispers between the boughs. Surely one of them has crossed her path.*”

“*As for you, return to the forest. Wait for me where you found me today. When the first pale hint of dawn steals into the sky, I will be there.*”

With that, the small bird lifted herself and passed into the deepening night, until her shape was swallowed by the darkness beneath the trees.

The Masterful Surgeon

When he found himself alone at last, Yoshi stepped quietly into the forest's shadowed ways. Hunger gnawed at him, and he set about searching for whatever small food the stones and briars might offer—for in such places a lizard or a fat grasshopper could often be taken with little trouble.

He came upon an anthill and paused to listen.

From somewhere close by there came the faintest squeak of a mouse. The little hedgehog pressed himself low beside a thorny shrub and waited.

A rustling stirred the neighboring bush, and the sharp, whiskered muzzle of a mouse peered out. It tasted the air, blinked its tiny bead-bright eyes, and vanished again. Yoshi understood at once that he had been seen. He leapt into the thorn, hoping to cut off its escape, but the mouse had already darted away.

Then he heard, behind him, a voice—thin as a needle and sly with laughter:

“*Bad jump, bad jump.*”

Yoshi flinched, and before he could steel himself, he jumped again by sheer instinct.

Two greenish eyes flickered behind him. At first Yoshi took them for the marten's; in an instant his quills bristled like a little thorny barricade. But when he peered more carefully into the moon-washed dark, he saw his alarm had been for nothing.

For the creature was marten-like indeed—slender of body, quick of limb, and clad in a coat of sleek, shining fur that in the silver light seemed almost black. Yet its tail lacked the marten's proud plume, being shorter and far less lively. And so Yoshi understood at last: this was weasel standing before him. He had glimpsed the wanderer from afar on other nights across the fields, never close enough to know his face.

“*Good evening,*” said the weasel, repeating with a sharp little click of amusement, “*Poor jump, poor! Had I been in your paws, I'd not have let that mouse slip away—but no matter. Hardly a hunt worth fretting over.*”

Yoshi stared at him, uncertain, still half-ruffled, unsure what reply such a creature expected.

The weasel trotted nearer and brushed his muzzle clean with one narrow paw.

“*Look here,*” he said, as though he had been acquainted with the young hedgehog for seasons. “*We won't find anything worth chasing in this place. Come down to the water with me. Frogs gather there—plump, slow things. They are easy to hunt.*”

Yoshi wished at first to turn the weasel away, for his heart pulled him back toward the forest and the task the Nightingale had set for him. Yet at the mention of catching a frog, a sharp and gnawing hunger rose inside him, so sudden it near stole his breath.

“*There will be time, he told himself. I can hunt with the weasel and still return before night settles on the trees.*”

So he nodded with agreement, and together they followed the stream.

“*The water runs deep and clear here,*” The weasel remarked, peering into the swift, stony current. “*No place for frogs. They love the soft mud, where they burrow in winter and sleep away the cold. But farther along the bank the ground eases, and small meadows open out. At night I take as many frogs as I please from there... a dozen in a single venture.*”

“*But why gather so many?*” Yoshi asked.

“*For winter stores, of course,*” The weasel replied.

An unpleasant scent drifted on the air, faint yet persistent. Yoshi wrinkled his nose. “*What a foul odor hangs about him,*” the little hedgehog thought, edging a step away. “*It seems he is most terribly unclean.*”

The two of them came upon a meadow, narrow and long, damp with the morning's lingering dew. Each blade of grass shimmered with tiny droplets, like a host of tiny stars scattered across the earth.

“*You go from here, and I will go from down below,*” said the weasel, and silently slipped away.

Yoshi, meanwhile, stumbled upon two frogs entangled in the wet grass. He had been about to call for the weasel when a distant, plaintive croak reached his ears. Following the sound, he came at last to a pool of water.

There, a slender snake held a frog fast between its jaws. The frog's belly bulged where the teeth had pierced, and it lay on its back, croaking in pain. At the sight of the hedgehog, the snake vanished into the dark water with a flick of its tail.

Yoshi returned to seek the weasel, but the companion was gone.

“*He must have gone down,*” he murmured, recalling the Nightingale's command that he must be in the forest by morning. So he left the weasel behind and climbed the meadow, soon reaching a ravine, carved deep by torrents long past. He walked along the dry bed, the steep banks rising on either side, their clay interspersed with protruding bearded roots, scattered rocks, and fallen branches, dragged by the rains.

Towards the middle of the ravine, Yoshi caught again the heavy scent of his chance-met companion and halted, he lifted his nose, to reckon whence it drifted. Glancing along the banks, he spied a narrow burrow, no more than a dark bite in the earth. He passed to its mouth, listening, and tasting the air.

From within came a muffled scrabbling. Earth shifted and crumbled, as though some creature were burrowing with great haste. It was clear that the weasel was inside.

Drawn by curiosity—as strong in him as the pull of running water—Yoshi slipped quietly into the hole.

The weasel did not see him at first. He was digging with his forelegs, earth flying in soft showers behind him. At the bottom of the pit several frogs leapt in panic, their eyes wide and gleaming in the dimness; they bowed into each other and tumbled about in the cramped space.

“*Ho there! What mischief are you up to?*” Yoshi called, bright and cheerful.

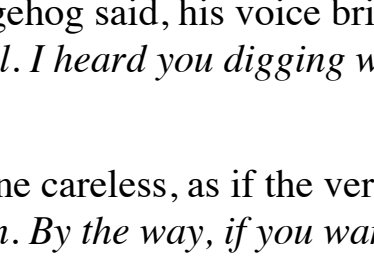
The weasel whirled around, with his small face twisted in anger.

“*Who told you I was here?*” he snapped.

“*No one,*” said Yoshi lightly. “*I stumbled on you by chance.*”

The anger in the weasel’s look faded, though a shadow of mistrust still glimmered in his eyes.

“Listen well,” he muttered. “I’m laying in food for the winter. If you breathe a word of my hiding-place, I’ll sink my teeth in your throat.”



“I am not interested in your lair,” the hedgehog said, his voice bristling like the quills along his back, affronted by the weasel’s rude threat. “Nor will I reveal it to any soul. I heard you digging within, and so I came merely to bid you farewell.”

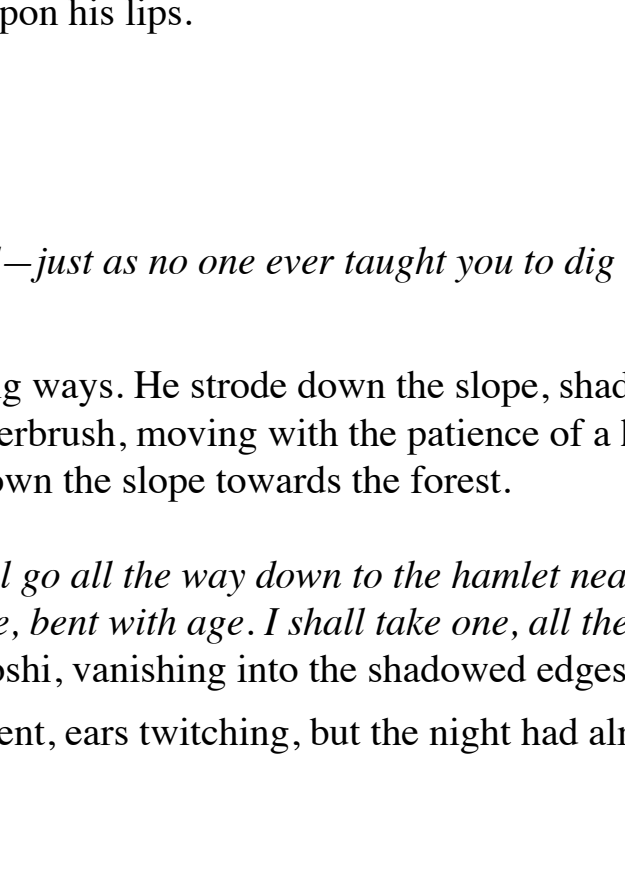
“Yes, that is so,” the weasel replied, his tone careless, as if the very notion of winter sleep had slipped his mind. “I had not realized you slumbered through this season. By the way, if you want to see how I operate on my frogs, wait a moment.”

A shadow of curiosity flickered over the hedgehog’s eyes.

The weasel dug again at the wall of the hole, the soft, grainy soil slipping away under his careful paws. At last he had a small mound before him. One by one, he took the frogs, pressing them gently with his front legs and marking their backs with a bite so light it seemed almost ritual. Each frog stood motionless, as if struck dumb by some subtle enchantment, waiting patiently for the next part of the strange ceremony.

When all the frogs had been so treated, the weasel began to bury them in the soil, turning over the earth with meticulous care.

Yoshi watched in wide-eyed astonishment. He could not fathom what the weasel’s curious ritual might mean, yet he felt a chill at the sight of the frogs, paralyzed and still as stone, lying beneath the dirt. It was as though some quiet, secret power flowed through the weasel’s every movement, unseen but undeniable.



“Why do they become so still and quiet after you bite them?” he asked, as the weasel had finished his delicate work.

“Because I sever the two nerves that lead to their legs,” replied the surgeon. “They lie just above the frog’s waist. With my slender teeth, I perform this with unerring skill. Always precise, always successful. Thanks to that, I always have live frogs in stock.” The weasel added, a sly smile curling upon his lips.

“But who taught you this craft?”

“My mother. Or rather, no one did—just as no one ever taught you to dig a winter den.”

They left the secret hollow, parting ways. He strode down the slope, shadows falling long in the twilight, towards the forest. The weasel melted silently into the underbrush, moving with the patience of a hunter, stalking a flock of rock partridges that slept near the crags. Yoshi walked quickly down the slope towards the forest.

“If I can’t catch a partridge, I shall go all the way down to the hamlet nearby. There are chickens there—old, stooped things that sleep in the boughs of the plum tree, bent with age. I shall take one, all the same.” The weasel muttered before they parted. And with that, he slipped away from Yoshi, vanishing into the shadowed edges of the woods.

The Hedgehog watched for a moment, ears twitching, but the night had already swallowed the weasel whole.

Yoshi finds Thumbelina

At the first pale shimmer of dawn, the hedgehog at last came upon the place the nightingale had appointed for him. Long had he strayed in the deep and tangled forest, losing his way among its restless shadows. The moon, which only moments before had cast a gentle silver upon his path, was now smothered behind heavy clouds swollen with rain. They stretched across the heavens like a great, dark mantle. Though the storm had not yet broken, a distant muttering of thunder rolled somewhere beyond the edge of the world.

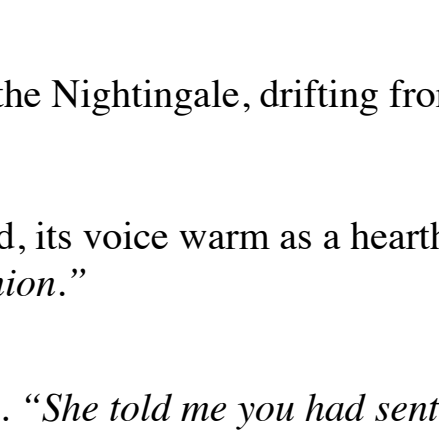
More than once he crossed paths with frightened rabbits, hastening through the underbrush in search of pasture or burrow before the first cold drops should fall.

When at last he reached the old tree where he had spoken with the nightingale the day before, he saw that a small owl stood upon one of his branches. She perched there quite still, blinking her yellow eyes now and again, the pupils narrowing like slits of amber.

“About time! I have waited far too long,” she cried, shaking out her feathers with an irritable rustle. “The Nightingale sent me. Your friend has been found—she needs your help.”

“Then take me to her at once!” Yoshi exclaimed, his voice bright with relief.

“Yes...the hour is upon us,” murmured the owl. “Dawn soon will break, and the rain will not be far behind, and I have yet to return to my hollow. Keep pace if you can.” Without waiting to see whether he indeed could follow, she launched herself into the dim air, gliding ahead as lightly as a drifting shadow.



Yoshi ran as fast as his short legs could carry him, stumbling and tumbling through the dim underbrush—sometimes losing the owl’s trail, and sometimes glimpsing again at those two yellow eyes gleaming from a branch where the creature had paused, as though impatient for him to catch up.

“Hurry, hurry!” urged the bird, its voice sharp as dawnlight. “Do you not see that morning is upon us?”

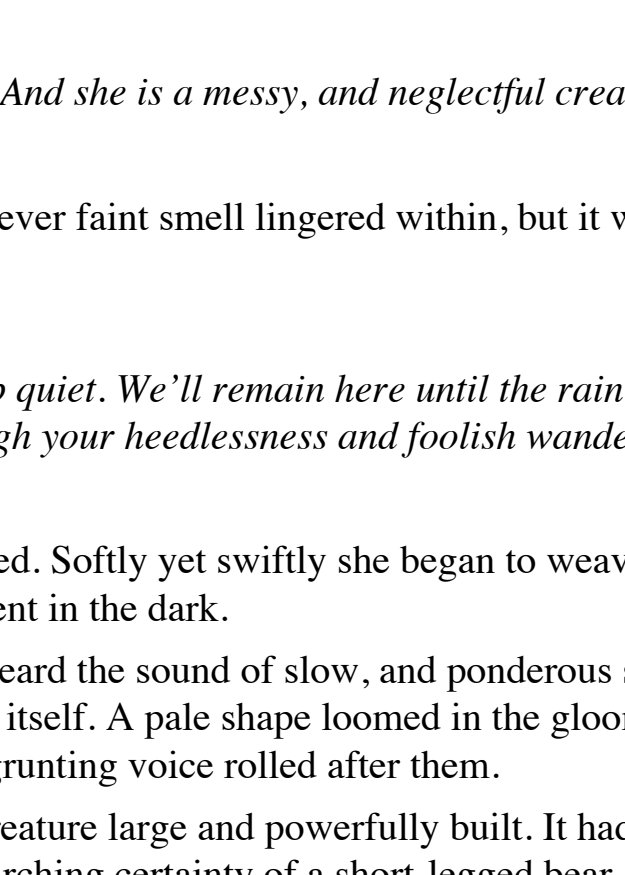
At last Yoshi noticed the owl waiting at the very edge of the forest, perched upon a leaning tree. It bobbed its head once, beckoning him nearer.

Panting, Yoshi finally reached the tree—and there he saw Thumbelina.

The poor turtle had toppled onto her shell and lay flailing helplessly, her legs thrust stiff into the air as she made vain, weary attempts to right herself. Her little feet paddled at nothing, as though she fought some unseen tide.

“Is that you?” she groaned, for even in her weariness she knew the little hedgehog’s shape. “Oh, I’ve been tormented near to madness by that cursed she-wolf. Why are you staring at me? Or would you have me stand like this for another two days?”

At that Yoshi gave her a gentle nudge with his snout, as if urging her back to life, and then leapt upon all fours with such sudden, rough joy that he looked for a moment like a small bear capering in the dusk.



“I didn’t believe I would see you alive, my dear,” he said, joy warming his worn voice. “Into every hollow and thicket I have searched, and what hardships I suffered until I found you again. Yet no matter—what’s done is done, and we are together once more.”

“Oh, the burden I have borne! Yours is but a feather compared to mine,” groaned Thumbelina. “That cursed she-wolf sank her teeth into me and near cracked my trough asunder. And when at last she loosed her grip, over I toppled onto my back, and there I have stood—aye, one whole day and all night long. I cried out, and cried again for help, yet you were nowhere to be found. This is ill indeed, Yoshi, ill indeed.”

“Thank the owl, for she guided me here,” murmured the hedgehog.

“Murm, murm...” came the mocking trill of the Nightingale, drifting from the shadowed branches above like a taunt borne on twilight air.

“Do not forget your friends,” chirped the bird, its voice warm as a hearth-fire. “The owl lent her wisdom, true enough—but without me you would never have found your companion.”

“Forgive me,” said Yoshi, lowering his head. “She told me you had sent her. I am grateful to her, but most of all to you.”

A wind rose then, wandering through the forest like a restless spirit. The leaves whispered together, and the tall boughs swayed as though uneasy.

“Hurry—there is a storm upon us,” warned the Nightingale.

Her words drifted away, swallowed by the gathering howl of the wind.

Yoshi and Thumbelina set off to find shelter as the rain began to fall: great heavy drops striking the leaves with slow, booming splashes, each one louder than the last, until the whole forest seemed to echo with their steady, drumming fall.

The storm kept them from fully rejoicing in their newfound bond, yet each felt a quiet gladness simply to have found the other. They passed the place where the owl had been torn apart, and, skirting the edge of the clearing, slipped once more beneath the shelter of the trees. There, upon a low hump of earth thick with bramble and bush, they came suddenly upon a narrow path.

Driven on by thunder growing behind them and the flicker of pale lightning among the branches, they followed the trail without pause or question. Soon it brought them to an embankment, well-trodden and strangely clean, above which yawned the dark mouth of a rather large hole.

Then the rain came—swift and heavy, as if some unseen hand had overturned a great bucket from the sky. With no time left for doubt or fear, they hastened forward and stepped into the waiting darkness...

The Lonely Dweller

It was clean and warm inside. Not a hair, leaf, nor cobweb clung to the fine, soft soil that lined the entrance, as though some careful hand had swept it only a few moments ago. No trace remained of whatever creature had once called this place home. Clearly, its former master had been a great cleaner and, it seemed, a gracious host as well.

Outside, the rain came down in cold, slanting sheets, drumming upon the forest roof. The wind shook the branches and flung droplets to the earth; yet within the little den it was sheltered, still, and warmly snug.

“Doesn’t the fox dwell here?” whispered Thumbelina, uneasy.

“I know her scent,” replied Yoshi. “And she is a messy, and neglectful creature. Such a tidy hollow could never be hers.”

He raised his muzzle, seeking whatever faint smell lingered within, but it was thin and strange to him, as if the air remembered a guest long gone.

“Come,” he said softly. “Let us keep quiet. We’ll remain here until the rain passes, and then move on at once. And mind you—two whole days we’ve lost already through your heedlessness and foolish wandering.”

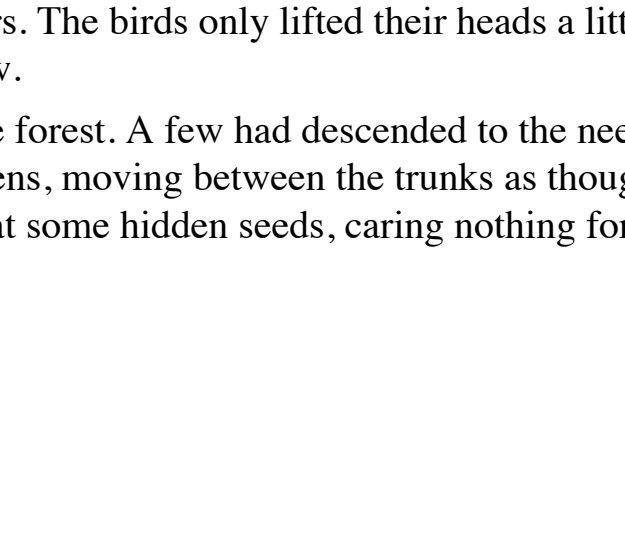
But Thumbelina would not be stilled. Softly yet swiftly she began to weave her tales, and Yoshi found himself drawn along by her words as though by a warm current in the dark.

Then, without warning, they both heard the sound of slow, and ponderous steps—thump...thump....—as if something heavy shouldered its way through the earth itself. A pale shape loomed in the gloom beyond, and two small, burning eyes glimmered like coals smothered in ash. A low, and grunting voice rolled after them.

Out from the hollow lumbered a creature large and powerfully built. It had something of a dog and something of a boar in its bearing, though it walked with the lurching certainty of a short-legged bear. Long black claws clicked against the ground with each step. Its body was thick and heavy, cloaked in coarse grey bristles stiff as old brushwood. Across each cheek ran two white bars, making its squat head look strangely striped and vanished.

Yoshi’s took after his thorns, and Thumbelina vanished into her trough with a rustle.

“Out!” the beast grunted, his voice was like stones grinding together. “Get out, you scoundrels!”



And before they could muster a protest or prayer, the creature gave a rough shove and sent them tumbling out. Down the steep embankment they rolled, until they landed in an undignified heap at its base.

Sodden, sore, and sorely offended, they scrambled toward the sheltering roots of an old linden tree. There they crouched, saying nothing, each too embarrassed to meet the other’s eyes.

From above, among the boughs, came a thin and chiming giggle—mischievous carried on the air.

“Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!” the laughter rang, bright as a small bell.

“Hey! Who mocks us from up there?” cried Yoshi, with his temper rising.

“Koo, koo, koo! The old hermit tossed you out well enough! Ha, ha, ha, ha!”

At that, Thumbelina and Yoshi exchanged a glance—they knew that voice. The Cuckoo.

They had listened to her waking up early in the morning in the field and giggling at her dreams. She had made fun of them more than once before.

“Listen,” the hedgehog called up, striving for patience. “Who is this rude fellow you speak of? What is his name?”

“And that pretty one! Do you not know the badger? Why, he is the strangest creature I have met in all my wanderings. An old badger, doubt as winter stone. He keeps no company, nor seeks any. A somber spirit. Yes, I know his tale from end to end. Ten years have I roamed these woods, and some say I spent my best years beneath that old linden-tree. And well I remember his kin—indeed, the whole line of them. Stout, rough-mannered folk, who would never stoop to jest or idle chatter—self-contained, chill of heart. Let them lie in their burrows and cherish their solitude. I know their ways too well!”

“Then why did he drive us out?” asked Thumbelina. “We stood only at the threshold; we would not have muddled his dwelling.”

“You are foolish, my dear,” interrupted the Cuckoo. “Or perhaps you simply cannot grasp what I tell you. It is a creature of habit, a creature of order. His life runs like a measured rhythm: in at a certain hour, out at another, never a step astray. He spends his days at home, and when the sun is high and fierce, he slips quietly into the bushes by the embankment. There lies a great flat stone, under which he rests, letting the heat of the day pass over him. He remains thus, still as the forest, until the dusk tiptoes upon the earth. Then he rises, cleans his fur, puffs up as if the very bristles were of consequence, and moves along the path with solemn dignity, as though he feared to fracture his own legs. By dawn he returns, sated and content, a soft grunt escaping his throat, and sinks immediately into sleep. God forbid that anyone should trespass upon the threshold of his dwelling.”

“Long ago, his family had lived here, though a cruel illness had thinned their numbers until only he remained. In the twisting labyrinth beneath the dam, he had laid them to rest, sealing many of the entrances with heavy stones. The subterranean passages were vast and winding, a hidden kingdom of darkness and silence, where any stranger who dared enter would soon lose their way. Caverns led to the surface, letting in stray breaths of air; hidden dens waited for the winter, and many more secret chambers were scattered like whispers in the dark.”

“The Fox told me all this,” said the Cuckoo, her voice quick and teasing. “She knows how to play tricks on him and make him furious with rage. In summer and autumn, when he grows fat as a pig, he seldom ventures out. But when winter comes...” Her eyes gleamed. “I go to Egypt in the winter. How warm and bright it is there—a veritable haven! And he? He lies down, deep as the dead, and sleeps.”

“We fall asleep too,” murmured Yoshi, but the Cuckoo barely noticed. She was caught in her own chatter, as heedless as a leaf on the wind, listening only to herself.

“He slumbered so long and so deeply that the first green shoots of spring startled him awake. But there was Slytail, the fox who favored the warmth of summer, slipping quietly into the badger’s burrow as if it were her own.” “When I bring a hen, a rabbit, or whatever fortune allows,” she would say. “I consume it within these walls. I roam the labyrinthine tunnels, silent and watchful, while he lies buried in the earth like a pig. One might think he is dead, stiff as timber. Only when the sun begins to melt the frost does he stir, and then—beware!—he rages, hungry and lean, keeping all intruders at bay. And when he sees his home, he is seized with a real rage.”

“Slytail, whom I respect because she is a cheerful soul and a wanderer like me, doesn’t give a damn about such gloomy creatures as the badger...She, after all, brought all sorts of dirt inside during the winter, looks on from somewhere and chuckle at his wrath. And the badger, grumbling and fussing, would throw out the garbage, sorting, tidying, and scowling—ha!—as if the whole world were a riddle meant to vex him alone.”

The Cuckoo laughed, giving her wings a brisk shake so the droplets flew off like silver beads. Then she went on: “Sometimes,” said Slytail, “he wakes even in winter, if the air turns strangely warm. Then I must tread lightly, little sister, for if he so much as brushes against me inside, I’m bound for a miracle of the worst sort. His teeth are sharp as awls, and his claws might shame a bear. And how could one hope to bite such a creature back? His hide is tough—hard as old oak—only a bullet could pierce it. A cursed beast he is! Yet once he steps beyond his den he’s quite helpless, poor lump, for he cannot run with all that fat weighing him down, and his legs are so short...”

“Much like yours, Yoshi,” the Cuckoo chirped, unable to restrain herself. “Truly, the two of you are cut from the same cloth,” she added with a bubbling giggle. “Your fur’s no prettier than his bristles, your legs are just as stumpy, and your temper—well, that’s the very closest match of all...”

And the Cuckoo, true to her cheerful and careless nature, set about teasing our travelers once more, much as she had done out in the open fields. Yoshi and Thumbelina held their tongues; for they knew well that no one ever won a quarrel with a Cuckoo. She wandered the wide summer woods, going lightly from branch to branch, laying her eggs in the nests of smaller folk, leaving the little songbirds to mind her young. A wild, untroubled life she lived—riotous, swift, and bound for warmer lands once the leaves began to fall. She seemed to know every secret worth knowing, felt shame for nothing at all, and no power in earth or sky could make her hush.

When at last the rain ceased its drumming, Yoshi and Thumbelina crept out from the sheltering roots of the old tree. Then they set their feet upon the mountain path, climbing toward the high ridges where a pale, smoky mist drifted across the peaks like wandering ghosts of cloud.

High in the Mountain

The two walked the whole day long, and the forest rose about them—higher, darker, and ever more solemn. Firs and pines stood like dusky pillars, while aspens and birches whispered with pale leaves in the dimming light. In the black-green boughs of the pines hopped bright birds with curious, curved beaks, bent like the bills of distant parrots. They busied themselves tearing open the cones and pecking at the resin-scented seeds within.

Yoshi asked them which was the right way, but they were too busy to answer. Soon the companions met a troop of squirrels, chattering and friendly as before. These told them that the birds were called crossbills, and that when such creatures died, their flesh hardly decayed at all, for they lived upon seeds steeped in strong pine resin.

“You will meet the wild roosters higher up the slope,” the squirrels added, flicking their tails. “Proud folk they are, and full of themselves. Do not expect them to spare you even a glance.”

And so it was that, upon entering the deepest and most shadowed heart of the pinewood, Thumbelina and Yoshi beheld a strange sight. Great birds of gray-black plumage stood silent and still among the high boughs of the pines and firs, where tatters of dark moss hung like old, forgotten banners. The birds only lifted their heads a little, gazing down with a slow and absent air at the small commotion of our travelers far below.

These were the wild roosters of the forest. A few had descended to the needle-strewn ground, where they wandered with the calm, deliberate steps of farmyard hens, moving between the trunks as though they had long claimed the place for their own. Now and again they pecked thoughtfully at some hidden seeds, caring nothing for the two companions who watched them in quiet wonder.



At the edge of the forest our friends met the deer.

They were a whole family - a father, a mother and two fawns.

The father walked very proudly, with his head held high and listening, moving his ears in all directions. On his head were beautiful pointed horns that stood there like a crown. He looked stern, tense, ready to run away with his family at the slightest danger.

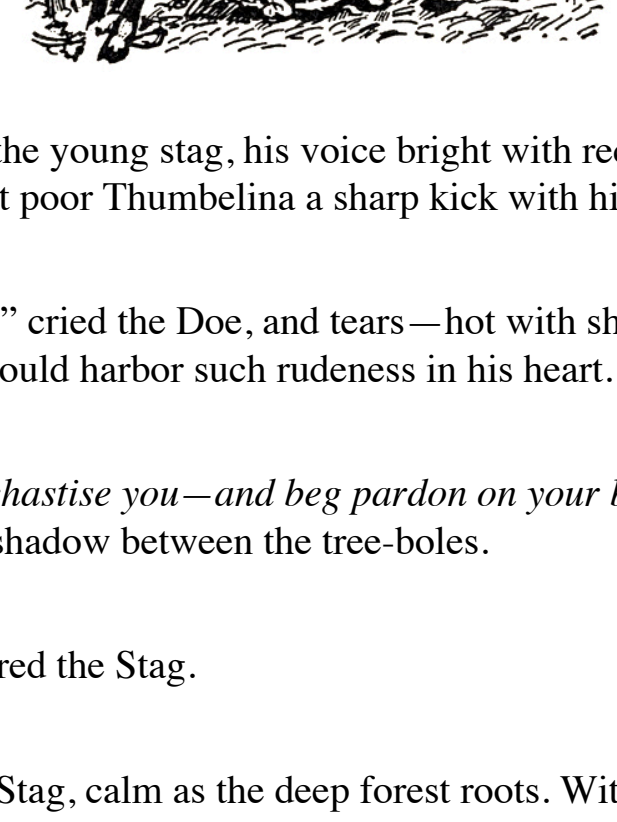
The deer were lying under the overhanging branches of a pine tree. Their beds looked like small holes dug by their hooves. Yoshi and Thumbelina had scared them and made them get up.

The Stag was angry that such insignificant animals had disturbed the peace of his family. He sniffed the turtle with his black nose, snorted angrily and waved his horns in a threatening way. The hedgehog got almost kicked by the deer.

“Where are you going, you little peanuts?” said the Stag.

Yoshi began, haltingly at first, to recount all their perils and small victories upon the lonely paths. Yet of all the forest-folk gathered there, only the Deer listened with true heed. The Stag, their father, stood somewhat apart beneath a leaning pine; now he bent to lick his bruised knee, and now rubbed his broad, many-branched antlers against the bark, so that a low creaking tremor passed through the tree. And near him a young buck, on whose small brow two tender buds had begun to swell, copied each gesture with a solemn pride, as though the promise of his future crown already weighed upon him.

“It is a marvel how you have remained alive,” said the Deer at last, and compassion shone in her great dark eyes—deep and gentle, like pools untroubled by wind. “Did you not cross the path of the Wild Cat? Only yesterday she sprang upon one of my fawns. It was a cruel meeting. But the father was near at hand, and with a single kick of his rear legs he sent her rolling. She hissed like a cinder in the fire, and her threats were as many as the shadows under the pines.”



“That’s how he kicked her,” said the young stag, his voice bright with reckless pride. And before his mother could fathom his intent, he darted forward and dealt poor Thumbelina a sharp kick with his rear feet.

“Alas! Such unmannerly conduct!” cried the Doe, and tears—hot with shame and sorrow—gathered in her gentle eyes. Never had she imagined that her own fawn could harbor such rudeness in his heart.

“Come back this instant! Let me chastise you—and beg pardon on your behalf!” she called after him. But the youngster was already fleeing, swift as a brown shadow between the tree-boles.

“See to him, will you?” she implored the Stag.

“He is a wayward one,” said the Stag, calm as the deep forest roots. With a few mighty bounds he overtook the fleeing fawn, guided him firmly back, and set him before his mother, who bade him offer his apology to Thumbelina until the ill moment was somewhat eased.

When silence returned and tempers cooled, the Stag turned to the hedgehog with a grave and steady gaze.

“Mark me well,” he said. “Take the narrow trail that winds down to the lowest saddle of the mountain ridge. From there you may cross to the other side. Beyond, the slope falls bare and steep; you will find an easy descent to your own field. But beware the Wild Cat that prowls those ways. And should you pass any of our kin—the deer of the high forests—give them our greetings.”

“And how shall we know them?” asked Yoshi, his small voice carrying a tremor of wonder.

“Oh, they are so impressive and so representative that you would feel their presence long before they came into sight,” answered the Deer, her voice low as though she spoke of some ancient and distant kin. “Far greater are they than we. The stags bear upon their brows vast crowns of horn, gnarled and strong, with which they contest the mastery of their glades. And the females are like me, without horns. They are called hinds. That is their company.”

“You speak overmuch of them,” added the Stag after a while, with a shake of his head. “For they are a very proud and keep to their own. They will not know us, nor bend their heads in greeting.”

So Yoshi and Thumbelina bade farewell to the Deer and went on their road. Higher and ever higher they climbed upon the mountainside, where the forest thinned and the trees grew older, standing like forgotten wardens of some elder age. Beneath those towering trunks the two small travellers seemed but faint and fleeting shapes, as if the mountain might swallow them without ever taking note. A chill of helplessness fell upon their hearts.

Yet now and then some little sign of life greeted them—a squirrel running through the boughs like a flicker of shadow, or a jay crying out in shrill indignation as it flung pine cones after them, its voice echoing long among the branches. On a tall beech Yoshi beheld a great wood-pigeon, broad of breast, with a white collar shining like a sliver of moonlight and pale feathers glinting on its wings. It cooed with a deep, throbbing tone that seemed to fill the quiet air.

The hedgehog stated, that he knew the bird. “A Wood Pigeon!” he murmured, for he had crossed paths with it before, gleaning fallen grain together in the stubble fields of seasons past.

Another bird soon drew their wandering eyes—a great black woodpecker, sable as the deep places of the forest, with a crown marked by a single flame-red patch, as though some ember of a dying fire yet smouldered there. It gave a shrill cry that quivered through the stillness, and its broad wings beat the air with a noise like the snapping of dry twigs.

Before long Yoshi and Thumbelina strayed into the midst of a merry wandering host of birds: long-tailed tits no larger than walnuts, bright kinglets flitting like sparks, and many woodpeckers besides. At their head went a pied woodpecker, bold and tireless, and the whole feathered company followed in his wake as though he were some chieftain of their kind.

From tree to ancient tree he passed, driving his beak into rotting trunks with a sound like small hammers in a dark workshop. With deft flicks of his long tongue he drew forth pale worms and creeping maggots from hidden hollows. The little tits and their kin swarmed behind, eager and unashamed, finishing whatever morsels the woodpecker’s haste had left behind. So the forest seemed, for a brief hour, less silent and strange, alive with the soft fluttering of wings and the cheerful chittering of tiny voices beneath the dim canopy.

The Spotted Woodpecker, swelling with no small pride, tapped his beak upon a crooked bough and declared, “That great bird with the crimson crown is of my own kin.” His words came in answer to Yoshi, who had asked after the shrill cry now fading into the misty gulfs of the mountains. “Ours is no meagre house,” he went on. “Beside myself and the solemn Black Woodpecker, there dwells yet another in these woods—a slight fellow, but keen of tongue. They call him Rusty, for his voice hisses like wind through reeds.”

So the feathered company wheeled and danced upon the air, following the Spotted Woodpecker down into a quiet valley. There they parted with many cheerful trills, and once more the two companions were left to their wandering. Evening was drawing its dim cloak over the highlands. The fog thickened, coiling like pale smoke among the trunks. High upon the crags the eagles circled—vast shadows gliding in and out of the tattered heims of the clouds, vanishing at one heartbeat and returning at the next.

Little by little the forest waned. The trees grew stunted and sparse, bowing beneath age and wind. In the open glades, between low fir and thorny juniper, great shoulders of granite jutted forth, blue as old steel in the failing light. The way became harsh, for the briars clutched at fur and skin, and the ground was strewn with hidden roots. Yet even here the wanderers found a welcome bounty: blueberries, deep-blue and glistening like drops of dusk. They gathered them gladly, and ate until the sweet, cool juice eased their weariness and refreshed their spirits.

As soon as she had eaten, Thumbelina felt the weight of sleep upon her, gentle yet irresistible. She snuggled herself among a scatter of stones, slipping into the narrow hollow of her trough as though seeking the embrace of the earth itself. Yoshi lay down beside her.

The night was cold and heavy with damp, and the old mountain murmured in its ancient tongue. From the deep-clad forests came the endless sigh of boughs that had stood for centuries; afar, the streams roared in their stony beds, and high above, the wind ran fleet through the treetops like a wandering spirit seeking forgotten paths.

Before falling asleep, Yoshi cast his thoughts back over the long road they had trod that day, and reckoned with a weary heart that still many miles lay ahead. The mountain loomed over them—dark, immense, and unfriendly—and its shadow seemed to press upon his courage. He drew his limbs close, curling himself into a small, tight ball, and so at last drifted into uneasy slumber, his heart as heavy as the night that wrapped them.

Deers

Towards midnight he felt a gentle but urgent nudge. Stirring from uneasy dreams, he opened his eyes and saw Thumbelina. The old tortoise stood there, her shell trembling faintly, and in her dark gaze lay a shadow of fear.

“What stirs you so?” murmured the hedgehog, still heavy with sleep.

“Listen—oh, listen,” whispered the turtle, scarcely daring to lift her head. “A great peril walks abroad.”

“I hear nothing,” said Yoshi, pricking his ears.

“Wait. He will call.”

Suddenly a dull roar came from the upper edge of the clearing:

“Beeh, bee-ee-eeh! Beeh, bee-ee-eeh!”

It was dull as thunder far beneath the earth, yet deep and weighty, as though the roots of the mountains themselves had found a voice. The echo caught it eagerly, tossing the sound from crag to crag and down through stony ravines, until at last it faded and seemed swallowed by the very bosom of the hills. But soon after came the tread of the roaring creature—slow, deliberate, stamping the earth with a heavy foot. Though the two companions could not glimpse its shape, they heard the harsh labor of its breath, like wind forced through narrow caverns.

Then from afar there burst another cry—no call this time, but a long groaning roar, rising and falling like some ancient horn. The beast in the clearing answered at once, its wrathful voice shaking the dim air. Back and forth their cries rang, each more fierce than the last, and the stamping grew wilder. The nostrils of the hidden creature blew like bellows, and the ground shuddered under the digging of its feet. The distant roaring drew nearer, and nearer still, until the very earth seemed to tremble between the two terrible calls.

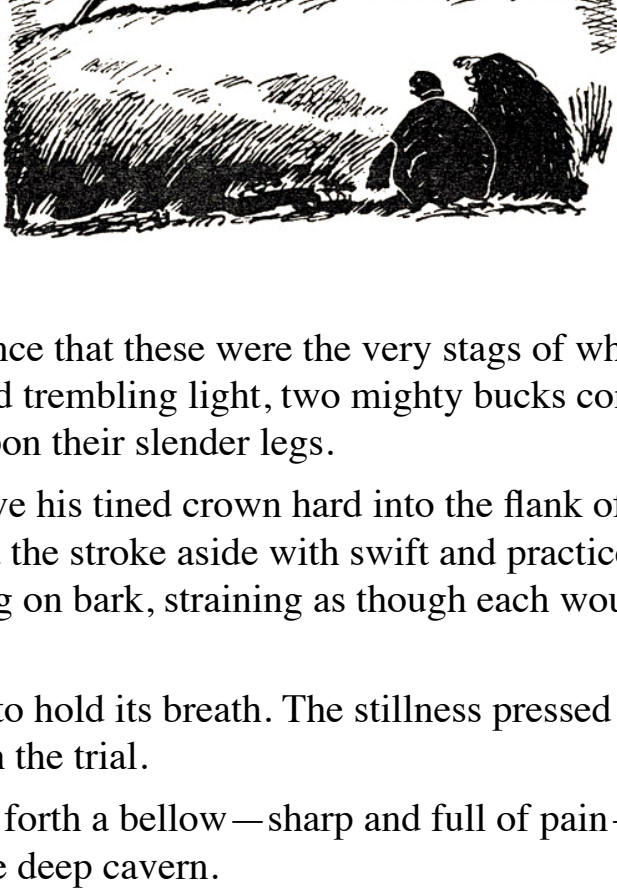
Faint light seeped into the sky; dawn, pale and hesitant, began its slow ascent. Through the hoarseness of unripe morning the low forest rose in ghostly outline. The dueling roars now broke with unbridled fury. And suddenly there came a crash—loud as the snapping of an ancient tree—echoing through the clearing and startling the very air into silence.

The roaring at last fell away, fading into a deep, shuddering groan and heavy thudding that seemed to make even the mist tremble. Yoshi and Thumbelina parted the screen of brambles with cautious fingers and gazed out.

There, in the pale wash of morning—where the newborn light drifted like thin smoke among the trunks—they beheld two great beasts of the wild. Grey-brown they were, broad-shouldered and terrible in their strength, and upon each noble head rose antlers like the branching limbs of winter trees. With a force that made the very air quiver, they hurled themselves together; and when horn met horn it crackled sharp and loud, as though the forest itself might splinter.

Now they charged headlong, now swerved aside with sudden shrewdness, their antlers interlacing in such wild confusion that no eye could tell which bough of bone belonged to one and which to the other. Locked thus, they heaved against each other, straining with a might that tore furrows in the earth. Down they sank upon their fore-knees, tongues lolling, and with each desperate shove their hooves ripped at the sodden ground, casting up clods of moss and soil.

A silence lay over everything else—no bird dared to call, nor leaf to whisper—while the two lords of the woodland contested their ancient quarrel beneath the dim and haunted morning.



Yoshi and Thumbelina deemed at once that these were the very stags of whom the Deer had spoken in hushed warning. For there in a small glade, ringed by shadow and trembling light, two mighty bucks contended fiercely, while the hinds stood in a frightened circle about them, shifting uneasily upon their slender legs.

Each lord of the forest sought to drive his tined crown hard into the flank of the other; yet every time one lowered his head and swung with deadly aim, his foe turned the stroke aside with swift and practiced grace. Then they set their foreheads together and pushed with a sound like bark turning on bark, straining as though each would lift the other bodily upon his branching antlers and cast him down.

For a moment all the forest seemed to hold its breath. The stillness pressed in beneath the great boughs overhead, as if the ancient trees themselves leaned close to watch the trial.

Then, all at once, one of the deer let forth a bellow—sharp and full of pain—that rang through the clearing and died among the darkened trunks like a cry lost in some deep cavern.

Yoshi and Thumbelina beheld the contest as though set upon some ancient stage of the wild. One of the great stags, pressed sorely by the might of its rival, sank at last to its knees; its proud head drooped until its brow lay upon its forelegs. Then there came another roar—deep and raw as though torn from the roots of the forest itself.

The other stag reared high upon its rear legs, towering as a heartbeat like a creature carved of living wood, before crashing down with terrible force. Its antlers struck true, the fallen deer shuddered once and lay still, run through by the conquering horns.

The victor stood over him, and from his throat rose a triumphant cry, echoing under the boughs like the call of some ancient herald. Blood darkened the leaves at his feet. After a moment, he turned and strode away into the dim trees, gathering the hinds and leading them like a king returning to his hall.

Then silence crept back over the glade—deep, watchful, and old—until even the echoes of the struggle faded as though the forest had swallowed them whole.

When at last the clamour of the struggle had ended, and they were assured that no other creature lurked in the clearing except the fallen deer, Yoshi and Thumbelina crept forth from the sheltering bush. Hesitantly they came near to the place of the combat.

The fallen stag was still alive. A harsh, ragged breath stirred its heaving flanks, and from his mouth foamed blood that steamed faintly in the chill air. His great dark eyes, once bright with challenge, had grown dim and sorrowful, as though they beheld a far-off meadow fading from sight.

Much as their hearts longed to help the dying creature, the two were far too small and frail to ease its passing. And a deeper fear pressed upon them: that the tumult of the fight might draw some prowling beast down from the wild places. So, heavy with pity, they turned away and hastened on their road.

They passed through tall, wind-swept clearings where the grass, yellowed and brittle with the year’s first frost, whispered beneath their feet. The land soon rose in broken shoulders of stone, and they found themselves wandering amid vast granite boulders, strewn as though giants had flung them down in ages past. Here no trees grew—only wiry weeds and a few stubborn bushes clung to the cracks. The air sharpened and grew thin, and the path twisted upward, rough and narrow.

Thumbelina laboured sorely now; her trough scraped and jolted between the stones, and from beneath them there rose a strange murmuring—like water whispering secrets under the earth. It followed them as they climbed, a hidden voice beneath a heard of underground water.

Suddenly Yoshi stopped, and his keen gaze was fixed upon the heights before them. Along the steep and stony flank of the opposite peak something grey moved, sure-footed upon the crags. At first it seemed a common goat strayed from some distant herd, yet it came unwavering straight toward them. Its muzzle was pale as hoarfrost, and upon its brow rose two small horns, hooked and sharp as the talons of a mountain hawk. It was near the size of a young stag, though lacking the stag’s noble grace or slender build. Beside it capered two lively kids, leaping from stone to stone like sparks from a fire.

“It must be a goat that has escaped from the herd,” Yoshi murmured to his companion.

The creature came closer, and they saw—large, clear, and watchful eyes—looking carefully around. It paused, studying them as though weighing some unspoken choice.

Then, with a slow and wary tread, it stepped closer. Lowering its head, it sniffed at Thumbelina, its breath warm and strange, as though carrying with it the wind and wildness.

“Why have you wandered so far from the herd? Are you not afraid of the shepherd’s crook?” asked Yoshi, for in his simple mind the creature before him was but a common barnyard goat.

“I do not grasp your meaning,” came the quiet reply.

“Are you a goat who slipped the hedge to taste a little wild freedom?”

“I am the Wild Goat,” said the creature, and there was a glimmer like starlight on stone in her eyes. “And these are my children.” She inclined her horned head toward the two younglings, who stood braced upon trembling legs, and from the grey packs of wolves, dread at the hedgehog before them.

“Do you live in these barren heights?” asked the Yoshi in wonder, for the sun beat harshly upon the stony waste. “What are you grazing upon such naked rock?”

“Ah,” replied the wild goat, and a quiet pride shone in her bright, fearless eyes, “you would marvel at what grows where few dare look. Here the grasses are sweet as any found in the gentlest glades, though they hide in narrow clefts and cling to ledges where only the lightest hoof may tread. The springs run cold and pure from the heart of the mountain, and the wind is clean and untainted, whispering of far lands. All lies open here—broad, solemn, and still. Only the clouds wander low at times, stooping to veil the sun.”

“In this high realm I am as free as the wind itself. I wander along the very lip of the chasms where a pale, bluish mist rests day and night, and I climb to the highest crowns of stone, whence I watch the sun rise like a golden herald and sink again in quiet fire. My eyes are sharp and range far, but my heart—loving freedom above all things—knows no trembling at the yawning deep. No dizziness takes me, even where the cliff falls sheer beneath my step.”

Then the goat regarded the stranger more closely and tilted her horned head.

“But tell me, who are you? Never have I seen a creature so thorned and strange. You seem like some ancient root torn from the earth, its many veins laid bare to the sun.”

Yoshi, the little hedgehog, stood small yet steadfast before the wild goat, and his voice—soft as wind through meadow-thatch—told of his wandering.

“I am the hedgehog Yoshi,” he said, “born in the quiet fields. But the Eagle carried my friend and me far from our home, and so along these strange ways we must travel, if ever we are to return.”

And there, beneath the lean shadows of the rocks, he spoke of all their trials since the great wings had darkened the sky above them.

The wild goat listened in silence, though at times she bowed her wise, ridged head, as though each word awakened an old memory. When at last his tale was told, she answered in a low, troubled voice:

“The Eagle...he is an ancient foe to my kind. Many times he has swept down upon my children, lifting them up before my eyes while I watched, helpless as stone. And very often he attacks me too—most cruelly when I tread near the cliff-edge, where one beat of his mighty wings might cast me into the abyss below.”

Yoshi shivered.

“But are you alone in these high places? Have you no companions to stand beside you?”

The wild goat lifted her head, and in her dark eyes there glimmered a hint of laughter.

“Alone? You have not yet seen them, then?” she said, surprise ringing clear as a mountain bell.

“No,” admitted the hedgehog at last, his small voice carrying a note of reluctant truth.

“Look at those rocks—but, look well,” said the wild goat.

Then Yoshi lifted his gaze to the crags the goat had marked. At first he saw only the grey roughness of stone, but as his eyes grew keen, he beheld a narrow ledge high upon the rocks. There, resting in the pale sun, lay a company of goats—no more than a dozen all told. One among them stood apart: a great goat, broad of shoulder, with horns sweeping like twin crescents of old ivory.

“That is our chieftain,” said the wild goat softly, and a hint of pride stirred in her voice. “He keeps watch for us, even when the winds sleep. Long has he carried the herd from eagle’s shadow. From the cunning of hunters, and from the grey packs of wolves. Most perilous is winter, when the bitter cold and deep snow drive us down from the high places. Then the wolves roam boldly, lean with hunger, and their howls roll through the valleys like the cry of some ancient sorrow.”

“In such times, we run hard for our lives—but the snow betrays us. Its crust breaks beneath our hooves, and we flounder, caught fast by the weight of winter. Yet the wolves do not sink, for they bear no hooves, and the snow holds them up as though it were their own hunting ground.”

The wild goat fell silent, and for a moment the mountain seemed to remember those dread midwinter nights, shuddering faintly in the wind.

Suddenly there came a sharp, keen whistle, clear as a birdcall in the still air. At once the goats that lay scattered upon the stony plateau started up, stamping lightly as if roused from uneasy dreams. The wild goat, more alert than the rest, flinched and lifted her head, her dark eyes turning toward the rugged slope above. There, upon the grey grace of the mountain, a great shape was sliding slowly down, dislodging pebbles that skittered away like frightened insects.

“The bear comes this way,” she murmured, calm as one long acquainted with the wild. “Our guide has seen her, and with a whistle warned us of her passing. She means no harm.”

But at this Yoshi and Thumbelina trembled, for fear had taken hold of them.

“She is a lumbering, gentle creature,” the wild goat said, softening her voice as a mother reassures a child in the deep of night. “Do not fear her tread, though she pass close by. I will go to the herd.”

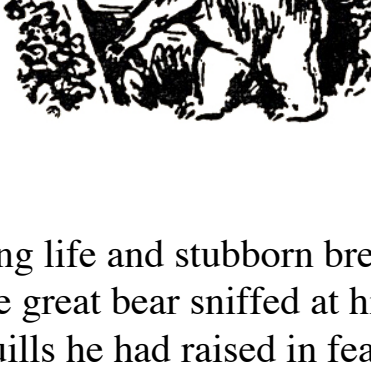
So she turned away, moving slowly and with a quiet dignity, her two young ones pressed to her sides as though the very shadows might reach for them. Their small hooves clicked upon the stone as they walked, glancing back often, wide-eyed.

Yoshi and Thumbelina stayed where they were, rooted as young trees in a sudden gale. The stillness of the mountains seemed to gather around them, and they dared not to stir a limb, fearing that the great creature’s wandering gaze might fall upon them and discover their presence.

The bear passed nearby, a shadow vast and ancient beneath the boughs. Long had she hearkened to the startled cry of the deer, and now she was hurrying toward the place of the struggle, where a hearty feast awaited her. Age had silvered her great head as

with the sheen of grey, and her heavy frame swayed upon limbs made strong by many seasons’ wandering. Yet for all her size her tread fell soft upon the scattered stones, as though she moved with the secret craft of the wild.

Then she perceived the two companions, and muttered in her deep throat some gruff speech of her kind. With a single sweep of her broad paw she struck the turtle that lingered nearby; and Thumbelina slid and spun across the rocks, scraping and clattering as she went.



Yoshi stood as one caught between fading life and stubborn breath, swaying upon the edge of his strength while awaiting whatever doom or mercy might come. The great bear sniffed at him, rumbling deep in her throat; with a ponderous paw she nudged him—only to be pricked sharply by the quills he had raised in fear. Then she gave forth a roar that shook the underbrush, spat with displeasure at him, and lumbered away, muttering like distant thunder as her thick hide vanished down the shadowed glade.

When finally the last whisper of her passing died among the trees, Yoshi gathered himself and went seeking Thumbelina. He found her not far off, reeling where she had fallen into a narrow cleft of stone, from which she had fought long and vainly to climb.

Even as he reached her, there came a rustling as of many light feet upon the slopes, and the wild goats of the highlands drew near in cautious file, their bright eyes glimmering beneath the boughs, as though some ancient instinct had summoned them to witness what fate yet held for the two wanderers.

“There is no point lingering here,” said the goat, casting a wary glance toward the shrouded peaks. *“The rains will soon return, and the mists with them; then the paths will wander like dreams, and hunger will take those who lose their way. This mountain is perilous to strangers. Come—we shall guide you down more swiftly to the lower slopes. From there your green field lies faint as a memory across the valley. Follow us.”*

So the goat went before them, and the herd moved out toward the broadening meadows.

Little kids, light of foot and bright-eyed, pattered close behind their mothers; the elder goats walked with slow, deliberate grace, pausing often to nose a leaf or test a pebble beneath their hooves. Rarely did a stone clatter down the cliffsides, for they trod as those born to crag and ledge, and their passing made scarcely more sound than wind sliding through a withered grass.

Yet Yoshi and Thumbelina continued their journey alone; The forest no longer frightened them as much as the bare mountain peaks. It was warmer and safer here. Under the shelter of bough and leaf they felt safer, as the wood took them under its protection, veiling them from unfriendly eyes and all wandering mischiefs of the wild.

As they descended, familiar sights returned to gladden their road. Squirrels whisked along the limbs above, rabbits darted through the undergrowth, and birds of many bright feathers called to one another in the thinning shadows. The dark ranks of pine and fir grew fewer, until once more they walked beneath a dense and tangled roof of broad green leaves.

Down the steep slope they went—swiftly now, for hope moved in their limbs. And at whiles, where the trunks parted like the pillars of some woodland hall, they glimpsed the wide sunlit field of their earlier days, lying peaceful and fair as a memory made real again. Their hearts leapt at the sight, and they quickened their pace, half running in their eagerness; for it seemed to them that only a little distance remained, and soon they would stand once more upon level ground.

Yet the mountain had its own old cunning, and mocked their haste. A deep valley, hidden until that hour, opened before them and barred the way; and they must needs descend and toil across it before they could climb again. So the day wore on, and the heights behind grew no smaller to their weary eyes.

Night found them at the lower skirts of the slope, where the first outlying trees stood watch like silent wardens. There, beneath their shelter, Yoshi and Thumbelina were forced to stay, and make what comfort they could until morning returned to guide their steps once more.

At The Home Field

For the first time in many weary days, they passed the night peacefully. No beast of claw or fang came prowling to trouble their rest; only a wandering flock of wild pigeons alighted in the high boughs of the ancient beech beneath which they lay. Yoshi and Thumbelina, could hear the soft murmur of the birds, as if they whispered among themselves in the tongue of the woodland folk.

The pigeons, it seemed, had come straying over the stubbled fields and were full of complaint: the wheat-grains had grown too few to find, for the cattle had trampled the harvest-lands to dust. The leaves of the wild pear trees had begun to yellow with the first tidings of autumn, and even the little streams—once merry companions of the birds—had dwindled and sunk into silence.

So the pigeons, restless upon their branches, spoke of taking wing at last: to fly far from these fading places toward lands where the sunflowers still stood unplucked in golden ranks, and where the tall cornfields rustled like green seas in the wind.

In the first pale hush of morning, while Yoshi and Thumbelina were still sleeping, the pigeons stirred with a clatter of wings and rose in a restless whirl, drifting like grey leaves upon the breeze toward the open fields.

Thus the two companions set out once more upon their wandering road. After many slow miles they came at last to the first outlying fields that lay like a golden mantle at the foot of the mountain. The stubble, sun-bleached and yellow as old parchment, delighted their weary hearts; and in their gladness they leapt and capered as children might when returning home after long absence.

Their own field spread before them—baked by many days of summer sun, broad and welcoming in its quiet solitude. Here and there stood wild pear trees, lonely sentinels shaped almost like folk keeping watch; and beyond them rose tall elms along the winding roads. Even the telegraph poles marched in a straight stern line beside the way, like silent wardens of forgotten errands. Far off, the roofs of the villages gleamed a weathered red, and the very hollow where they once battled Viciousella could be seen, no more than a pale streak upon the wide earth.

Delighted and much heartened in their wandering, Thumbelina and Yoshi pressed on, unwilling to wait for nightfall before venturing toward the little valley. There, upon its soft banks, the yellow stubble shone dimly in the slanting light, like old gold left untended. Across the open fields they went, treading lightly, avoiding the flocks and shepherds.

Before the sun sank behind the low hills, they came to the yellowed slough. Once the grass had grown thick and high as a small hedge, but now it lay bruised and trampled by the passing of cattle. Yet even so it offered cover enough, should keen-eyed birds of prey wheel above. Into this fading tangle they slipped, searching with careful eyes.

They looked for the partridges, and they looked for the hare; but the slough lay empty and still, as though holding its breath. Only at the edge of dusk—when the first cool whisper of evening stirred the dry stalks—did they come upon three partridges. Timidly the birds had crept from hiding to peck among the stubble, and in low frightened murmurs they told what tidings they bore: the hare was dead.

Hunters had come in the grey of morning, they said. Long had the hare crouched unseen in the tall slough, trusting to silence and shadow; but the dogs found him at last, crying out to their masters with baying triumph. So his hiding failed him, and his swift feet served him no more.

And when the tale was told, the gloom settled deeper over the slough, as though the land itself remembered.

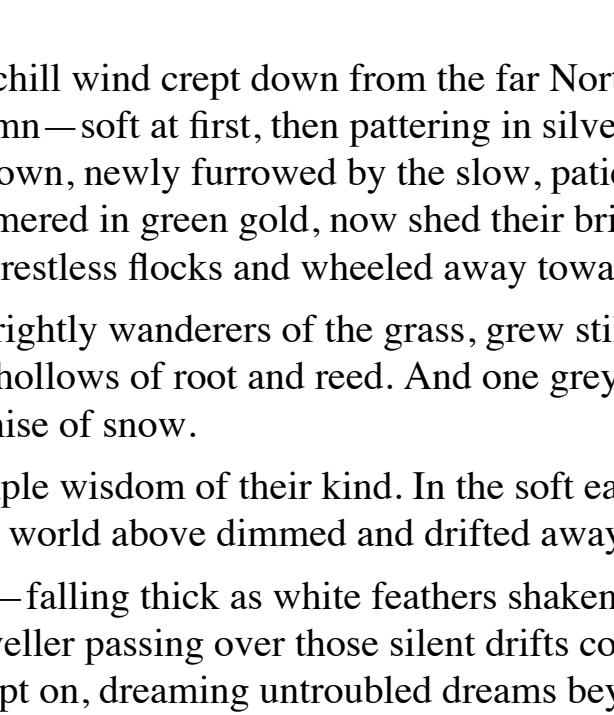
The partridges—who themselves had fled before the hunters’ long shadows across the fields—heard the roll of distant thunder and beheld the hapless hare tumbling through the stubble. Then their pride, once worn like bright feathers, drooped at last. For the coming of Yoshi and Thumbelina struck them with no small wonder, as though two travelers had stepped out of some far and perilous road.

“But how came you out of the eagle’s very claws?” they cried, their voices sharp with awe, their eyes shining like beads in the dusk.

Yoshi and Thumbelina told them a part of their tale: of winds that roared like lions on the heights, of narrow escapes, and of strangeness met beneath wider skies. And when morning washed the field with a pale gold, the two returned to their humble hut. There the partridges gathered once more, but this time with bowed heads and soft steps, beseeching the pair to continue the telling of their wondrous journey.

Even the magpies and the jays, hearing whispers of the wanderers’ return, settled along the rafters of the little hut. They clicked their beaks and rustled their wings, eager as dwarves at a fireside song. Word of Yoshi and Thumbelina’s travels spread like wind through wheat; soon blackbirds, kestrels, and the quiet woodcocks drifted in from hedge and thicket to sit in watchful rows.

So they listened—aye, all of them—as Yoshi and Thumbelina spoke of marvels: of strange birds and beasts met upon forgotten paths, of dangers skirted, and small kindnesses found in unexpected places. And in that dim hut, beneath the whispering eaves, their fame grew like a fire well tended, casting long bright stories into the hearts of all who heard.



After two weeks had passed, a chill wind crept down from the far North, keen as a whisper from some hidden winter realm. It bore with it the first rains of autumn—soft at first, then pattering in silver threads upon field and hedge. Under its touch the wide meadowlands turned a somber brown, newly furrowed by the slow, patient labour of the ploughmen. The leaves upon the trees, which only days before had glimmered in green gold, now shed their bright raiment in hurried drops. Small songbirds, those merry folk of summer branches, rose in restless flocks and wheeled away toward the gentler South.

Yoshi and Thumbelina, once sprightly wanderers of the grass, grew still and sleepy. The creeping cold urged them downward, bidding them seek the sheltering hollows of root and reed. And one grey morning, as the air tasted of frost yet to come, they felt in their quiet hearts the certain promise of snow.

So they set to work with the simple wisdom of their kind. In the soft earth of their slog they delved a small burrow, warm and close, and there they nestled. The world above dimmed and drifted away as sweet, deep slumber folded them in its gentle arms.

When at last the snows arrived—falling thick as white feathers shaken from the wings of winter—the whole field lay hushed beneath a shining mantle. No traveller passing over those silent drifts could have guessed that far below, hidden in the kindly breast of the earth, two small friends slept on, dreaming untroubled dreams beyond the reach of storm or shadow.

Only with the coming of spring would they wake again, when the snows had run to rivulets, and the bright, warm sun—golden as a king’s banner—stirred the frost-chilled soil back to life.

THE END