

RICHARD HO • JOCELYN LI LANGRAND

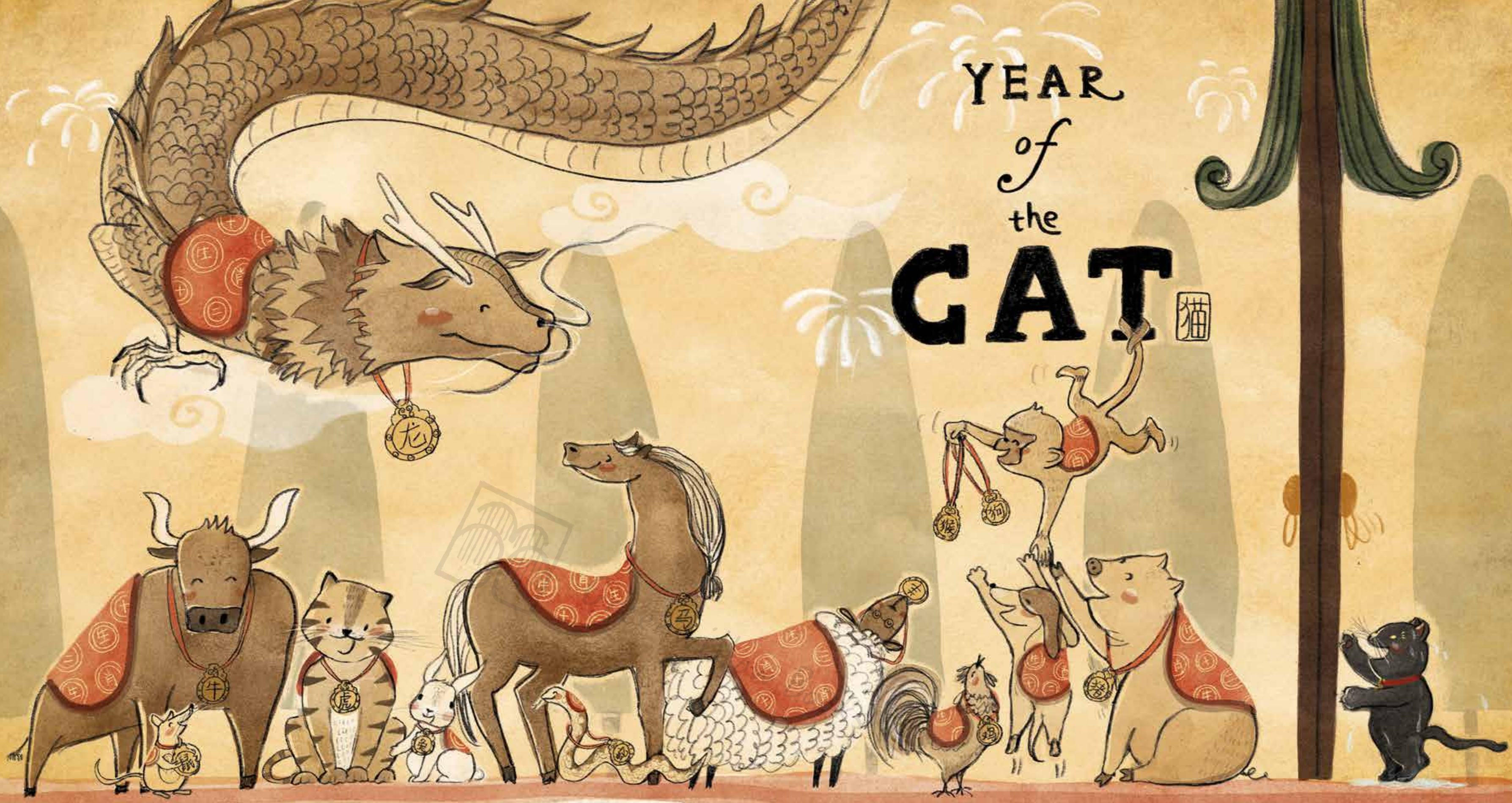


Greenwillow Books



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YEAR
of
the
GAT 猫





Year of the Cat
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*For my mother,
who raised a Snake and a Monkey in perfect harmony—R. H.*

For Lillian, the fiercest Cat I've ever known—J. L. L.

Rat felt guilty.
Not for winning the Great Race
to the Jade Palace.
Not for being the first animal
to claim a year of the calendar.
Not for proving he was
the most cunning of all.
Rat felt guilty . . .



for pushing Cat into the river.



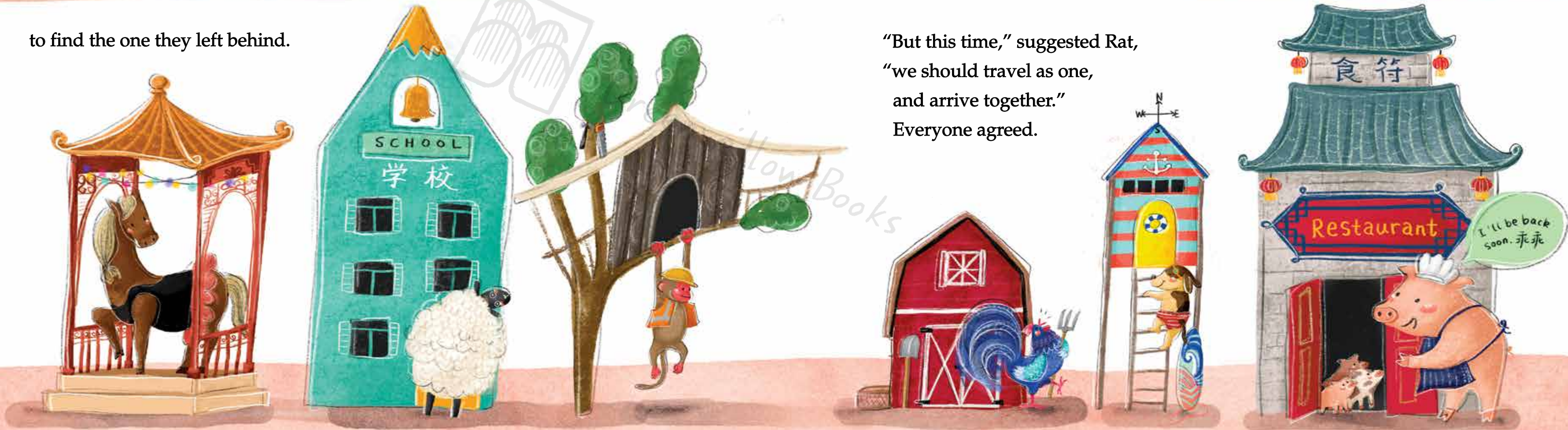
“Perhaps we should apologize to Cat,”
he suggested to the eleven animals
who finished the race after him.
“We?” they all asked in disbelief.
“We did not push Cat into the river,”
said Monkey. “You did.”

“Yes,” Rat admitted. “But did you do anything to help her?”
The group fell silent.

So twelve animals set off on another journey.
Not to win a race.
Not to claim a year.
Not to prove their worth.
They set off . . .



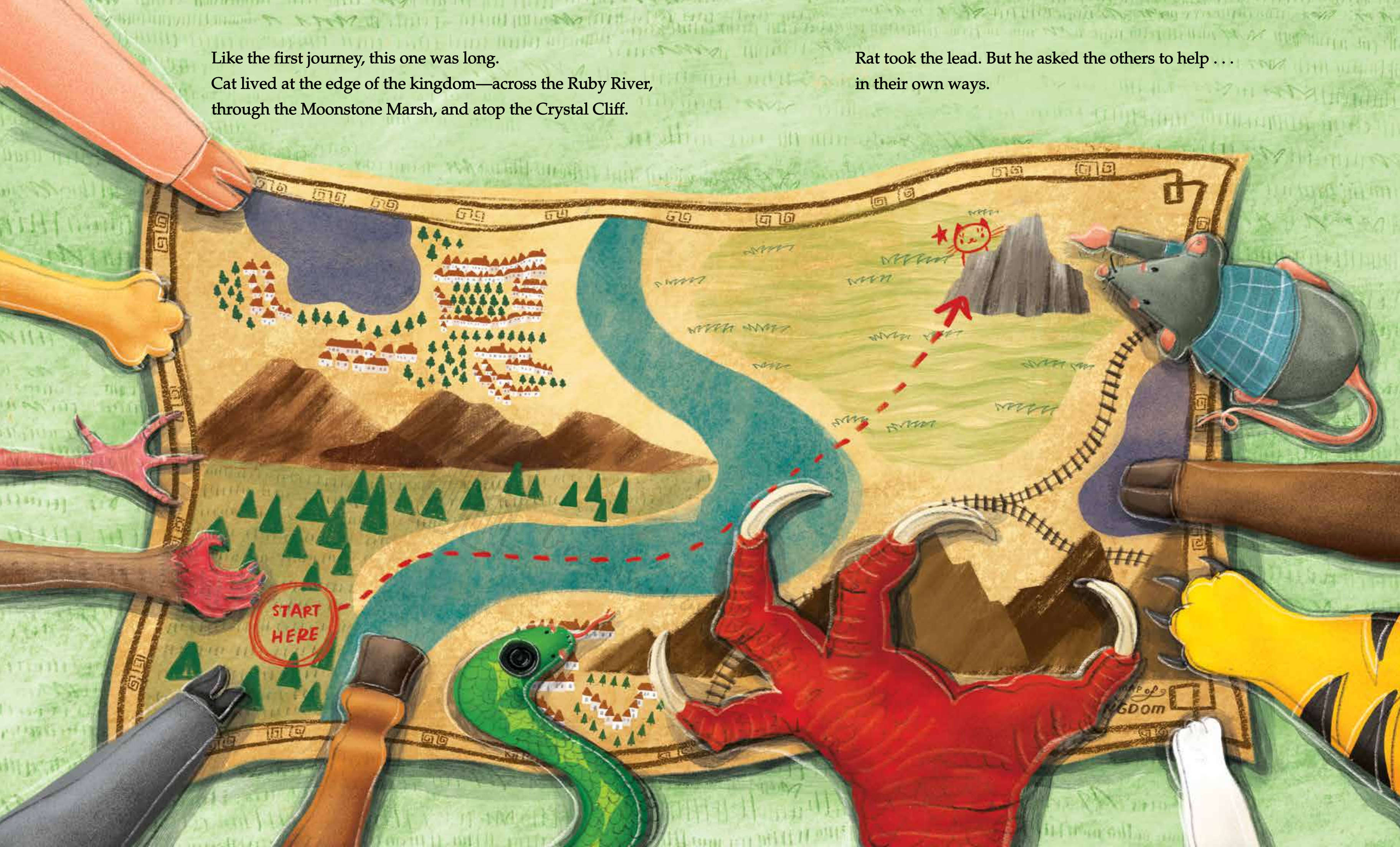
to find the one they left behind.



“But this time,” suggested Rat,
“we should travel as one,
and arrive together.”
Everyone agreed.

Like the first journey, this one was long.
Cat lived at the edge of the kingdom—across the Ruby River,
through the Moonstone Marsh, and atop the Crystal Cliff.

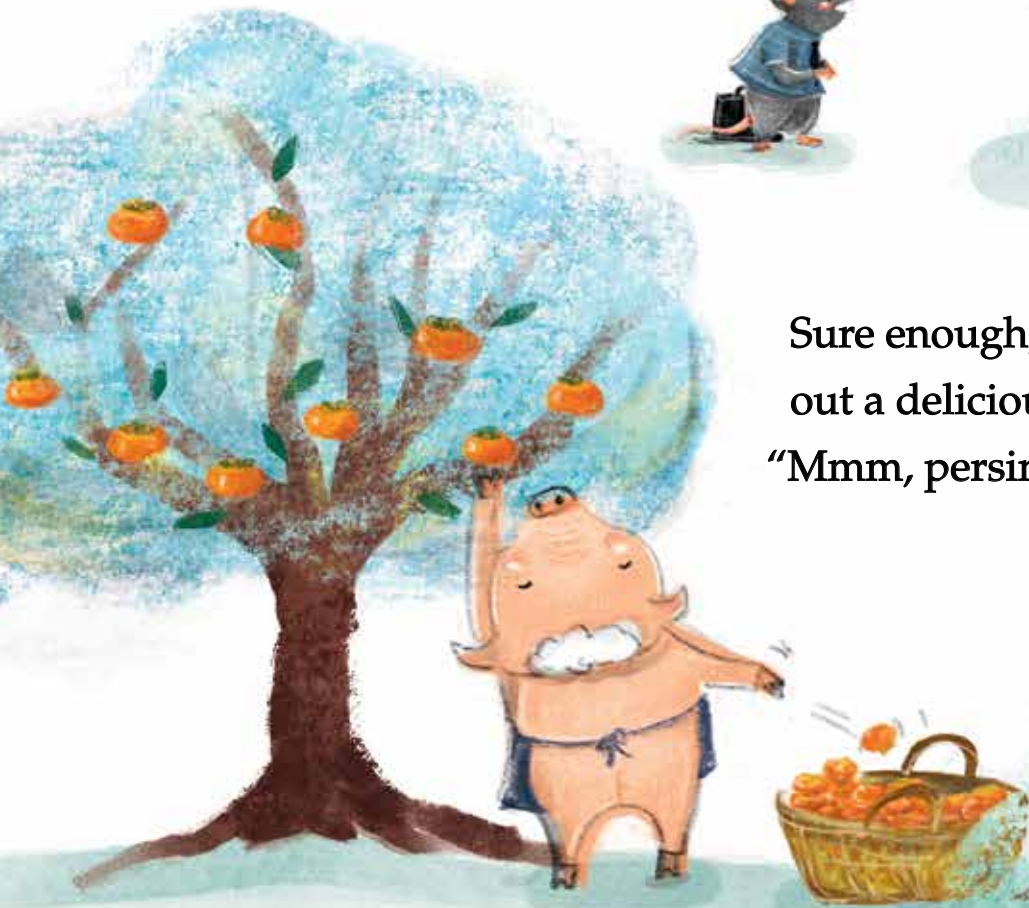
Rat took the lead. But he asked the others to help . . .
in their own ways.



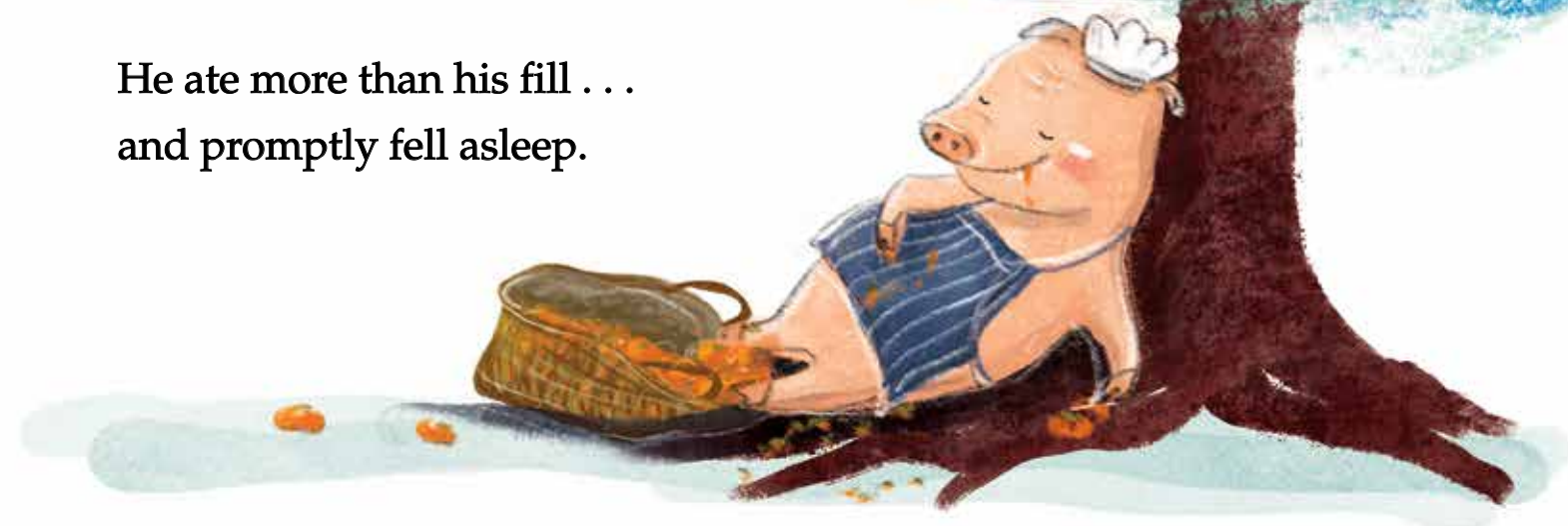
“Pig,” said Rat, “you are skilled at seeking out delicacies. Will you find food for our journey?”



Sure enough, Pig sniffed out a delicious snack. “Mmm, persimmons!”



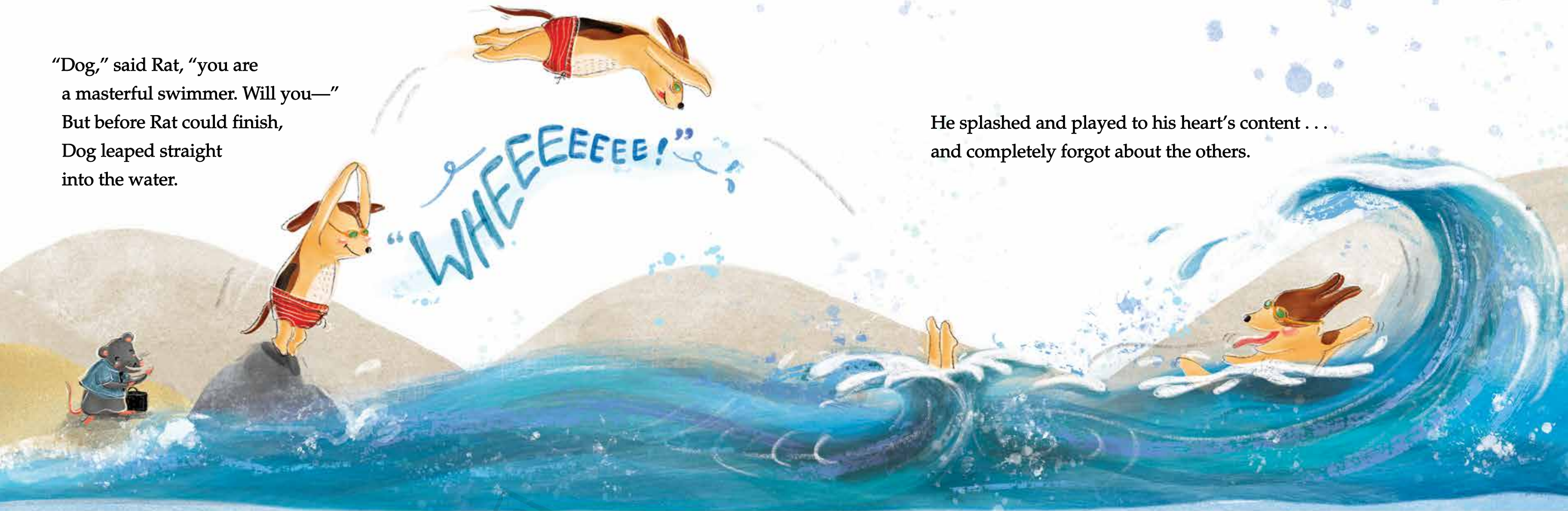
He ate more than his fill . . . and promptly fell asleep.



Eleven animals moved on. They arrived on the sandy shore of the Ruby River.




“Dog,” said Rat, “you are
a masterful swimmer. Will you—”
But before Rat could finish,
Dog leaped straight
into the water.




He splashed and played to his heart's content . . .
and completely forgot about the others.



Ten animals fretted.
The other side of the river seemed very far away.



“Sheep, Monkey, and Rooster,”
said Rat, “you work together
so admirably. Will you build a raft
to get us across?”



Sheep found logs.
Monkey gathered sticks.
Rooster fetched twine.
They built a raft large enough
to carry all the animals.



But they could not agree
on how to move it.

“Poles!”


“Oars!”

“Sails!”

The others climbed aboard . . .
while the builders bickered on land.

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Seven animals huddled on a rickety raft.
They paddled with whatever they had.
Paws.

Claws.

Hooves.

Slowly . . . slowly . . . the raft began
to drift across the river.
Too slowly, for Rat's taste.

“Horse,” said Rat, “your legs are powerful.
But you might paddle faster without Snake
on your hoof.”



Horse looked down. Snake uncoiled.
Horse jumped back in fright.
“Slithering pest!”



Horse tumbled off the raft . . .
taking Snake with her.



as Dragon flew off to bring rain to a distant village.

Five animals paddled on,
even more slowly than before.

“Dragon,” said Rat,
“your breath is like a mighty wind.
Will you give us a push?”
Dragon flew behind the raft,
took a deep breath, and blew.
“Safe travels!” roared Dragon.
The raft hurtled forward . . .

Four animals clung tightly to the speeding raft.
No, three.
Rabbit had fallen off.

“Tiger!” said Rat. “You are swift and courageous.
Will you save Rabbit?”
With a roar, Tiger dove into the water.
“Hold on!” shouted Tiger.

Rabbit hopped onto Tiger’s tail . . .
but the current pushed them downstream.



Two animals remained.
The raft coasted to the other side of the river.
Ox and Rat stepped onto dry land.
Or rather, wet swamp.



“Ox,” said Rat, “you are strong and dependable.
Will you carry me across this soggy bog?”
Ox kindly agreed.



He lumbered across the Moonstone Marsh
with Rat on his back.

The sun set and rose, and set and rose again.
The pair arrived at the base of the Crystal Cliff.

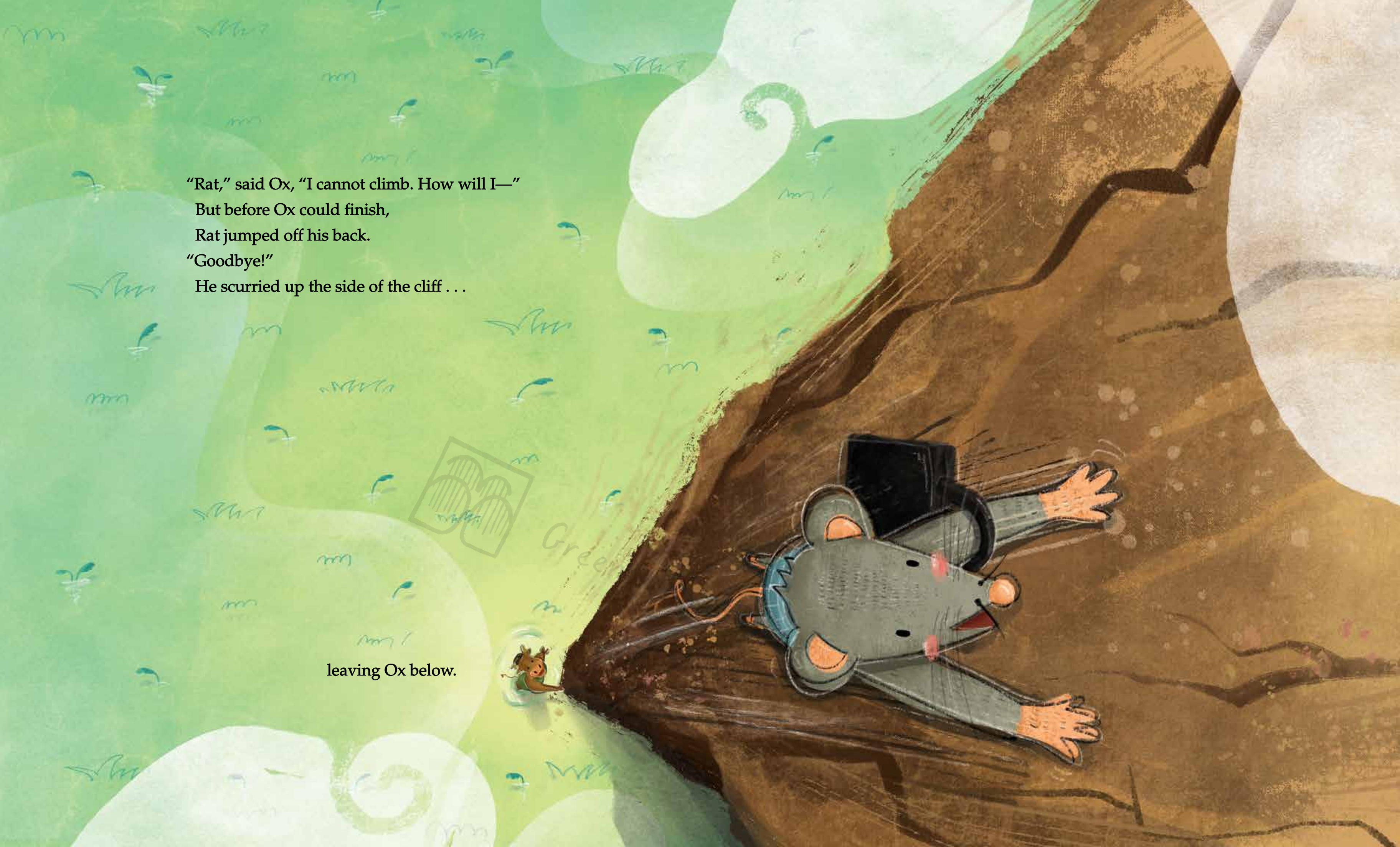
“Rat,” said Ox, “I cannot climb. How will I—”

But before Ox could finish,
Rat jumped off his back.

“Goodbye!”

He scurried up the side of the cliff . . .

leaving Ox below.



Like the first journey,
this one saw Rat finishing first.
He found Cat sunning at the top of the cliff.



And then . . .

Rat fell.



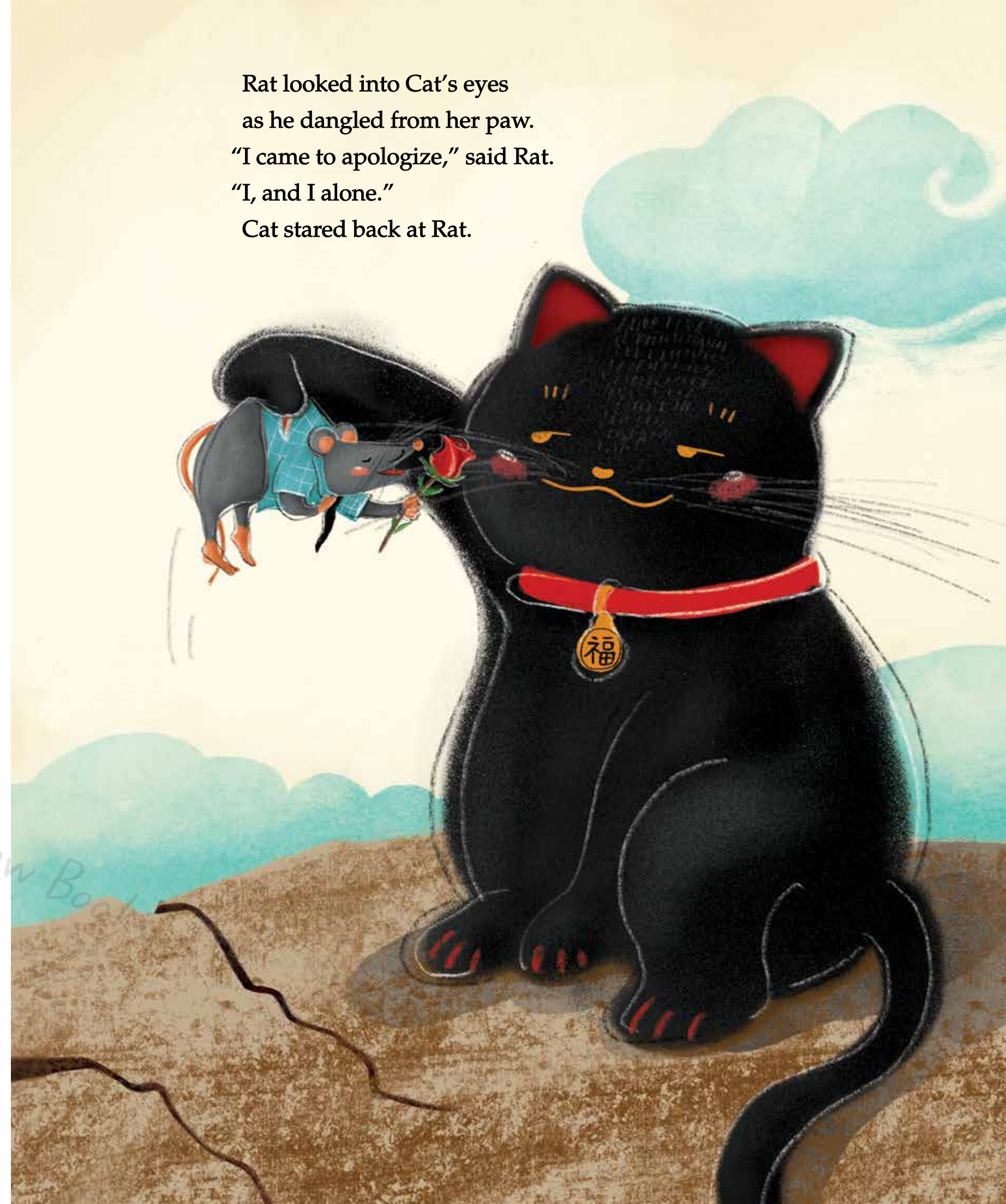
Yellow Books



But not very far.

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Rat looked into Cat's eyes
as he dangled from her paw.
"I came to apologize," said Rat.
"I, and I alone."
Cat stared back at Rat.



“For pushing you
into the river,” Rat added.
Cat yawned.



Cat licked her lips.
She answered . . .

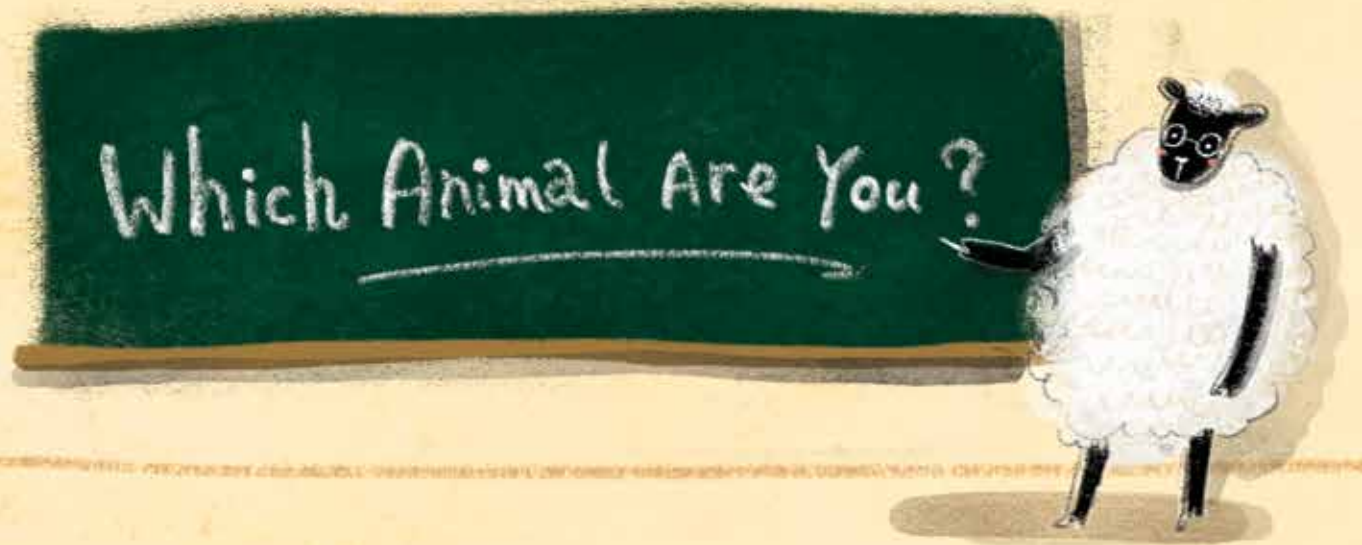
“Are you upset that you did
not receive a year?” asked Rat.
Cat shook her head.
“Why not?” Rat asked.



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"Because every year is
the Year of the Cat."





I was born in the Year of the Monkey. Like many Asian kids, I grew up with a special fondness for the animal of my birth year. The Chinese zodiac is a twelve-year cycle based on the Chinese lunar calendar, and each year is represented by a different animal. According to tradition, each animal has personality traits that are shared by people born in that year. Monkey is playful and curious. Rat, the hero (or villain?) of our story, is cunning and loves to win.

As for Cat? Poor Cat was left out of the Chinese zodiac, thanks to the trickery of Rat. In the ancient tale of the Great Race, the Jade Emperor invited thirteen animals to come to his palace. In an epic journey that showed off their strengths (and weaknesses), the animals finished the race one by one. They were each awarded a year of the calendar, based on their order of arrival at the emperor's court. But just before the end of the race, Rat pushed Cat into a river. By the time Cat arrived at the palace, all the calendar years were gone—and that is why cats chase rats to this day!

This beloved story is one of my childhood favorites. But I always found Cat's fate to be terribly unfair. I wondered if Rat felt bad about betraying Cat and to what lengths he and the rest of the animals would go to try to make things right. And wouldn't it be fun to watch each animal repeat their mistake from the original race? This book is a playful attempt to answer those questions . . . and to give Cat the year she always deserved.

—Richard Ho

