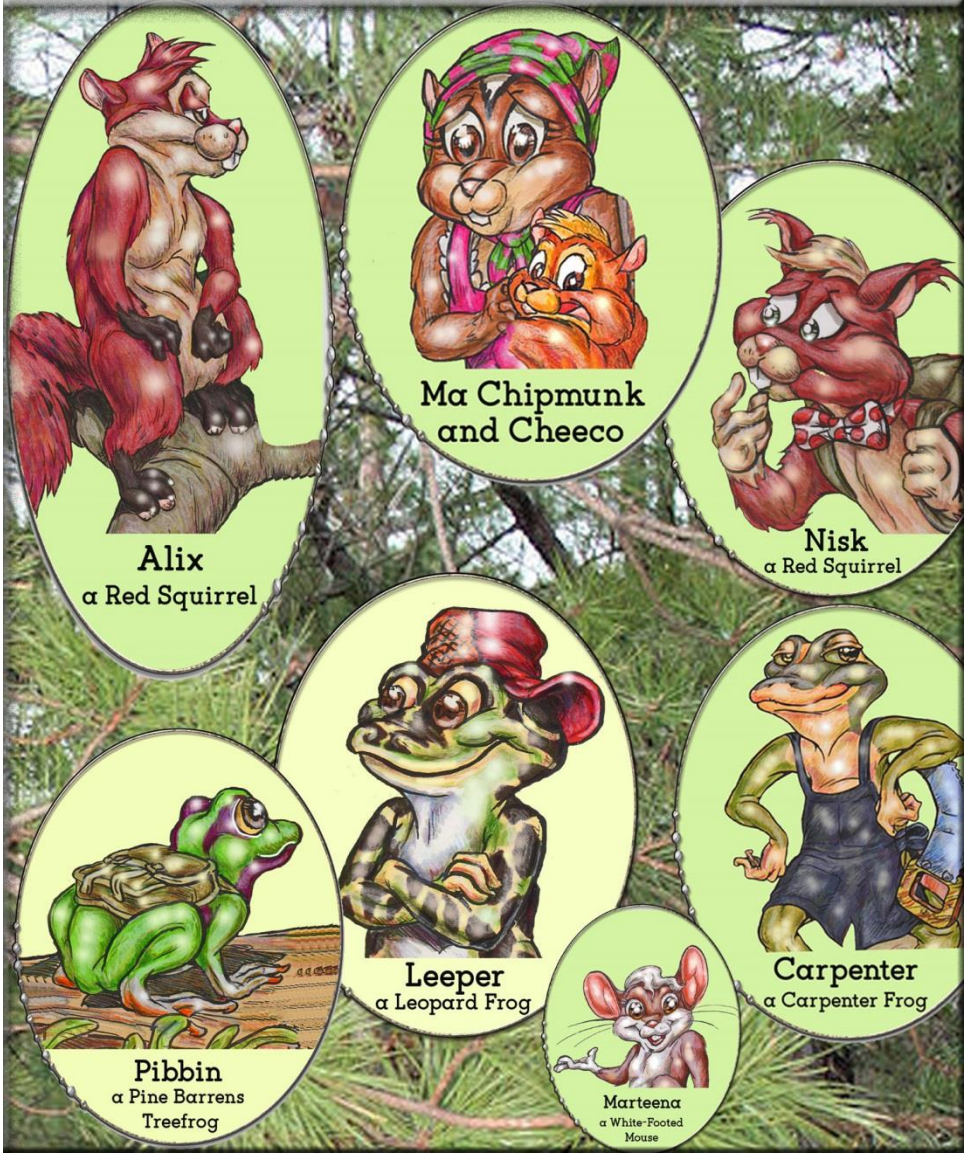
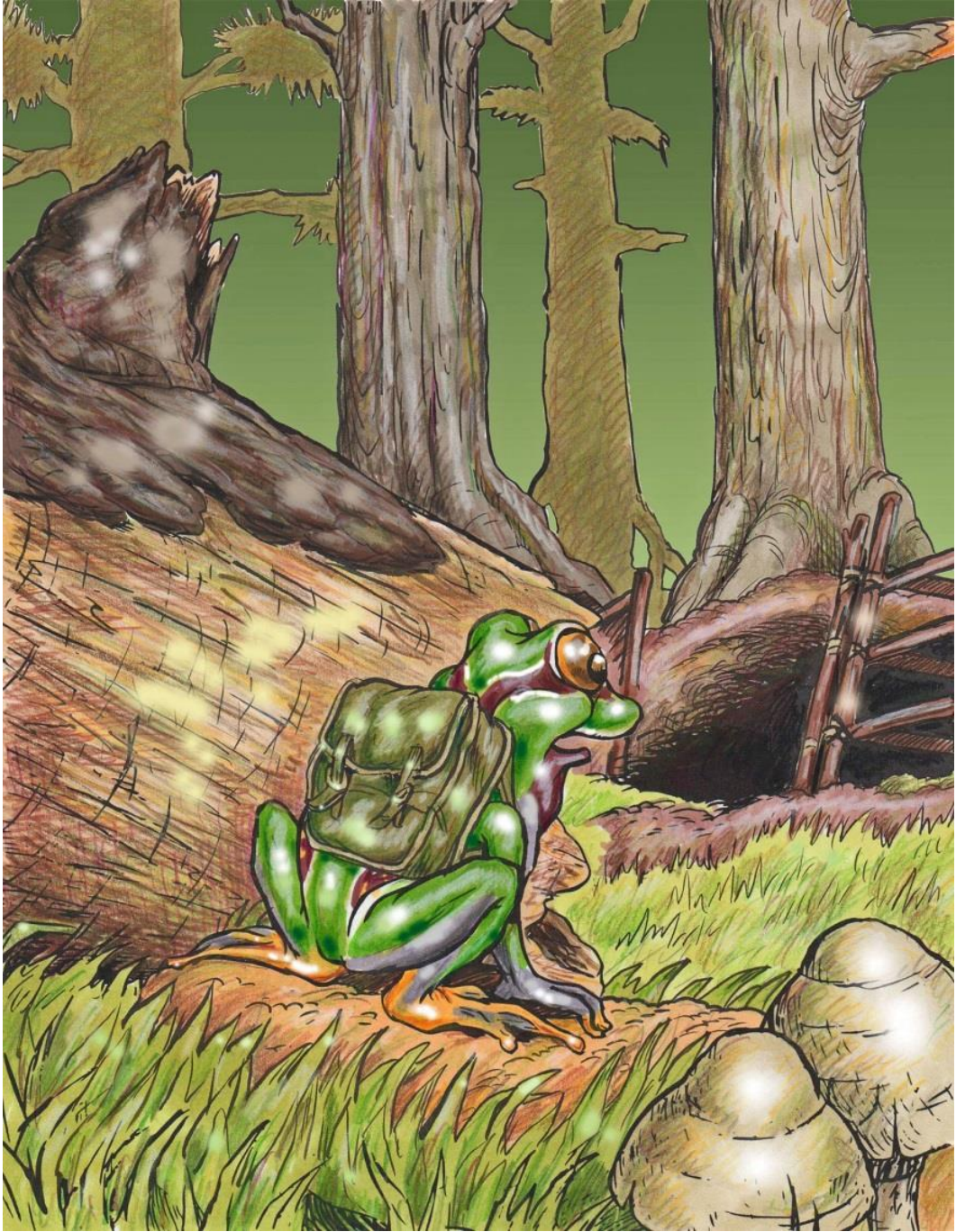


BOOK 3: TRAPPED







Chapter 1

Robber!

Pibbin scooped up a fat black beetle as it scurried under a fallen tree. What a fine snack!

He hopped up over the tree, then down to the other side, and stopped to look at a hole in the ground. Who lived here?

Just inside the hole stood a large gate, and it was open. He crawled past it into a tunnel.

This was the biggest tunnel he'd ever seen. It had a roof that rose high over his head and sides that curved away into the darkness.

Maybe a nice old chipmunk lived here. He could give her one of the Cookie Box chips and tell her why he was handing them out.

The tunnel began to turn, and it grew darker. He didn't mind the dark. Or the damp. Or even the smell, which reminded him of something rotting.

But he'd feel better if he knew where he was going. Big snakes used tunnels like this, and so did skunks and weasels. They'd think he was a tasty bite to eat.

He thought about a long, thin weasel creeping after him, with its quick paws and teeth, and he hopped more slowly.

Should he go back? Would anyone here care about the Cookie Box?

His backpack still felt heavy, but that was okay. He'd handed out nine cookie chips already. Only six chips were left, and then he'd have that star, and he could pin it onto his backpack. Keep going!

A layer of dry, crisp leaves covered the tunnel floor. He could hop through the leaves without making a sound, but if someone big was creeping up on him, he would hear them.

Maybe this would be okay.

He came to an opening. Was it another tunnel? No, it looked like a room.

He hopped closer.

It must be a storeroom because someone had stacked bags of leaves in it. He could hide behind them if he had to.

Now he knew this wasn't a snake's burrow. Snakes didn't pile up bags of stuff.

And here was a rotted stick with black ants crawling all over it. Just right for a snack! He licked up some ants and grinned.

He started off again, hopping fast, until the tunnel began to slant downward.

Why? It should be going up to someone's back door, not down.

He could hear the trickle of water. How much farther did he want to go?

Take it slowly, he told himself. Careful.

He stopped at the edge of a wide crack. It looked deep and wet, and it stretched all the way across the tunnel. On the other side, the tunnel slanted up again, as if it had remembered where it was going.

He crept along the wall to get past the crack. He'd go just a little bit farther.

Steps rose in front of him. He stopped to count.

Five steps. They must have been made for someone big because he had to jump high and hop twice for each one.

He reached the top and took a quick look around. Ahead of him was a flat place covered with leaves, and beyond that, dried vines and roots hung down against a wall of dirt.

Dead end?

But he could see a round hole—like a window—at one side of the vines, and he started toward it.

Whoosh!

Something under his feet lifted up, closed over him, and jerked him into the air.

A net?

A trap!

He kicked and squirmed, but the net pulled tight. It swung around, and he could see the hole that looked like a window.

Who lived here? Would they be a friend?

“Help!” Pibbin shouted.

A tiny face showed in the window, but the net swung away and he lost sight of it.

He had to get out of here.

He poked his leg through a hole.

Too tight.

He pushed his head up through a bigger hole at the top and looked around.

It was a long way down, but he had to try it.



He pulled his leg back, slowly squeezed himself up through the hole, and jumped.

He landed on soft leaves and scrambled as fast as he could toward the steps.

Behind him, a voice yelled, “Thief! Robber! BACK YOU COME!”

He kept going.

Quick! Down the steps.

Past the crack—careful!

Past the storeroom. Hurry!

The tunnel grew lighter and lighter, and finally, here was the gate.

He rushed past the gate and hopped over the fallen tree in one long jump.

He hopped quickly to the edge of Singing Stream, slipped into the water, and swam as fast as he could.

At last he crawled out onto the bank and sat down to rest. He glanced back. That old fallen tree looked like all the others in Fox Woods. Who would ever guess what was on the other side?

But no one had followed him, and he was safe here.

He listened to the cheerful song of the little stream beside him. He watched the foam making fancy white swirls in a dark pool and he felt better.

Now he could breathe. Now he could think about the Cookie Box chips and what to do next.

Footsteps pattered through the woods, somewhere behind him. A hungry weasel? A fox?

He jerked sideways and ducked under the closest leaves. Who was coming?