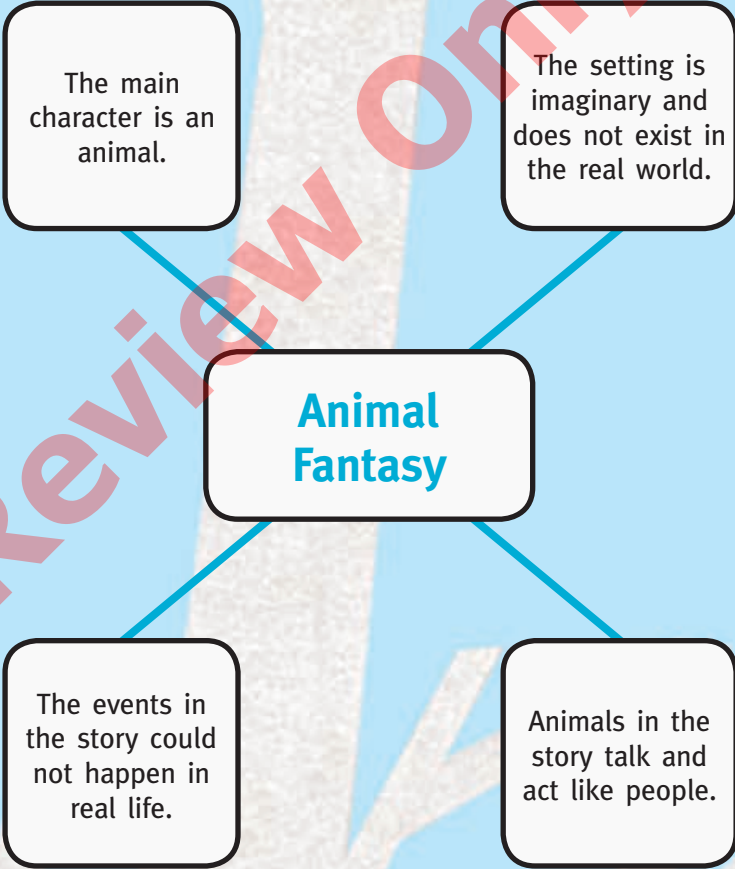


The Forest Friends



Animal Fantasy

Look for the genre features noted below as you read this book. Use the features to help you understand the text.



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Deep in Winter

“Slow down, Maggy!” Lem the mouse shouted.

He was following Maggy the rabbit through the deep, freshly fallen snow. Her large back feet left smooth, wide tracks for him to walk in.

“I’m sorry!” Maggy sighed. “I’m just so worried that Sly the fox might be following us. I forgot to wait for you.”

“Well, if Sly is lurking nearby, you don’t have to worry. You have **camouflage**. He’ll never spot you. For your white winter coat blends with the snow. My brown fur makes me stand out. I might as well have a sign on my back saying, Open for Lunch! So please keep a lookout over your back shoulder.”

Maggy sighed. “Oh, right. I forgot! What would I do without you, Lem?”

“We’re a team, Maggy. You make tracks in the snow, and I keep a lookout,” Lem said. “Let’s go see if Rip is awake from his nap yet. I’m hungry.”

“But you just ate!” said Maggy.

“That was ages ago in mouse time.” Lem replied.

The mouse and rabbit scampered over to a birch tree. Lem nibbled on the bark, while Maggy called out for their squirrel friend.

“Rip!” Maggy called. But her soft-spoken voice didn’t make it to Rip’s nest at the top of the tree.

Lem, on the other hand, was not soft-spoken. He might be the smallest of the friends, but he was the loudest.

“RIIIIP!” shouted Lem so loudly that the bare tree branches shook.

The sleepy squirrel peeked his head out from his nest. “Is it dinnertime already? I was so cold that I dozed off.”

“Too bad the cold won’t keep Sly from stalking us,” Maggy said, her eyes darting left and right. “Would you keep first watch?”





Rip jumped out of his nest and scrambled half way down his tree. “There’s no sign of him, but I’ll stay here until you two finish eating.”

“Thank you,” Maggy said.

“Yeah,” Lem said between bites of some dry bark, “Fhank ’oo!”

Maggy nibbled nervously on evergreen needles. She was scared to be on watch by herself but knew she had to do it.

“I’ll take over now, Rip,” she volunteered.

“Thanks!” said the squirrel as he skittered to the ground. “While I was up there, I caught wind of some acorns I stashed under those bushes. I forgot I buried them there!”

Maggy stood watch while Rip dug up his **cache** of acorns. Lem munched on a twig's bark.

Don't be scared, Maggy thought. You can do this. Just remember to look over your shoulder.

Her ears twitched and so did her nose. Winter sounded different than spring and summer. It was quieter and crisper.

Then she heard it: *SCRITCH, SCRATCH!*

What was that? Maggy swiveled her head back and forth, trying to locate the noise.

"I found them!" Rip held his acorns up in the air triumphantly.

Phew, she thought. It's just—

Suddenly, Sly the fox darted out from behind some bushes.

"Gotcha!" he shouted victoriously, as he grabbed Rip by the tail. "I've been waiting all winter to make a meal out of you."

Rip struggled to get free, squealing and kicking his strong back legs. Sly was too strong.

“Let him go!” Lem shouted.

“Or what?” Sly **taunted**. “You’re just a little mouse. I think I’ll have you for dessert.”

“If Ursula the bear was here, she’d wallop you!” Lem said.

“Well, she’s not,” Sly laughed. “She’s fast asleep in her den and isn’t here to defend you.”

Sly opened his **fearsome** jaw and **gnashed** his sharp teeth.



Maggy froze with fear. Her worst nightmare was coming true. *This is all my fault! she thought. If only I had seen Sly coming, I could have tripped him and stopped his attack.*

But maybe she still could! Maggy quietly backed away. Lem saw what she was doing and created a distraction.

“Hey, tough guy!” Lem shouted as he scurried under the fox’s feet. “Bet you can’t catch me, too!”

“Of course I can!” Sly said, springing after Lem.

Maggy positioned herself a few feet away from where Sly was chasing after Lem. She hunkered down and laid her ears against her back.



The fresh snow hides me perfectly, she thought to herself. But my plan will work only if Lem gets Sly to come this way.

“Is that the best you’ve got?” Lem teased. He ran circles around Sly, drawing him closer to where Maggy was hiding in plain sight.

“You’ll get tired sooner than I will,” Sly barked.

Just come a little bit closer, Maggy thought. That’s it, just a few more steps.

“Yeah,” Lem said, “you want to make a bet?”

