

Illustrated Tales of Little Sister Fox
Stories About a Clever Fox from Russian Fairytales

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Abstract

This thesis examines the interaction of pictures and words in children's storybooks. The illustrations placed alongside the text of the book are just as important to understanding the story as are the words. "Illustrated Tales of Little Sister Fox" combines elements of several traditional Russian folktales into a single story. Illustrations are hand sketched and digitally painted.

Illustrated Tales of Little Sister Fox

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Introduction

Illustrative Theory

Children's picture book literature utilizes both text and illustrations to tell a story. In this genre, words and images work together to create a deeper, richer story than either tells in isolation (Kiefer, 1991). While many adults regard picture books as simple stories that are easy for underdeveloped minds to understand, children themselves are much more demanding in their choice of reading material than many adults expect (Amiri, Hayati, & Hashemy, 2011). Successful picture book authors and illustrators must carefully consider their audience to determine how to appeal and communicate to them. This means writing in a way that children will understand but not find boring, utilizing illustrations to enhance the story they wish to tell, and choosing a story that will interest children.

To some extent, the way children are told stories influences the way they tell stories. In a creative environment like reading a picture book, children never repeat everything exactly as it is told to them (Stavans, & Goldzweig, 2008). The narratives of picture books often rely heavily on the illustrations to help tell the story. Some authors suggest that picture books' dependence on illustrations to support the story hurts cohesion. They claim that pictures are used as a crutch for weak writing (Corrigan & Surber, 2010). Other authors, however, argue that the illustrations of children's picture books are as equally and inextricably important as the text. Children invited to discuss and make inferences about stories based on their illustrations can find connections not

found directly in the text. Children might appreciate picture books most when they are given time and adult encouragement to examine them critically and respond to them in creative ways (Kiefer, 1991).

The illustrations of a children's picture book have an equally important role as the text in telling the story (Kiefer, 1991). They help draw in and capture a reader's attention. Appealing illustrations, use of color, and cover design are some of the most important factors to ensure a child enjoys a picture book (Maniam, 2011; Rudisill, 1952).

Illustrations also help determine how readers perceive the story. They can provide a setting for the story, allowing the reader to feel closer to the characters (Manolessou, & Salisbury, 2011). Images can reinforce the text, add meaning to it, or even contradict it in subtle ways that lead readers to search for deeper meaning (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2000). They can also add personality to a story, changing its tone slightly depending on the illustrator's drawing style—cartoony, realistic, soft or hard edged, etc. Illustrators choose their styles carefully to create and maintain a certain atmosphere.

Technique

Writing. Conventional wisdom is that children, at least in Western culture, prefer straightforward, easy-to-understand stories (Gorman, Fiestas, Peña, & Clark, 2011). Supposedly, children who read picture books need the pictures to understand the stories and cannot comprehend complex narrative structures (Nodelman, 1981). Adults also prefer to tell them stories with clear morals, in which the protagonist is rewarded for being altruistic (Palmer, et al., 2006). This approach to storytelling can be effective and, for very young children, is probably best (Moya Guijarro & Pinar Sanz, 2008). However, most elementary school aged children are able to understand and appreciate stories with

unconventional structures and formats, multiple interpretations, and told from different perspectives. Children's books do not need to have oversimplified, uninteresting story structures (Pantaleo, 2004).

There are some aspects of storytelling style that must be tailored to communicate with a child audience. Children generally prefer stories written in clear but interesting language (Maniam, 2011). It is important to engage readers in the story. This might be done through direct dialogue, which can make the story more immediately accessible to children (Ulatowska, Olness, Samson, Keebler & Goins, 2004).

Illustrating. Sometimes, illustrations can shut out readers' interpretation and stifle creativity. For example, nearly all readers identify the popular nursery rhyme "Humpty Dumpty" as referring to an egg based on illustrations they associated with the poem. However, the rhyme's historical context and ambiguous nature suggested several other possible logical interpretations and, when viewed without illustration, readers can also suggest a wide range of possible objects the rhyme could refer to rather than an egg. While conventional images are not inherently bad, they can inhibit examination and unique viewpoints of familiar subject matter by miring viewers in the stereotypical (Erekson, 2009). Ideally, picture books should enable readers to form their own creative view of the story. Mental images and illustrations together greatly improve story recall (Gambrell, & Jawitz, 1993). Illustrators can inspire readers' imaginations while maintaining their own artistic vision by allowing themselves to be creative in their illustrations rather than precisely following the text.

Pictures and text should work together to tell the story. For instance, Antony Browne used illustrations to engage the reader's attention and emotions in his book

Gorilla. The book's writing and illustrations enhance one another in such a way that both are needed to indicate character relationships and fully understand the story (Moya Guijarro, 2011). Some other authors use the illustrations in their books to create humorous or thought-provoking dissonance with the text, to add depth to the story (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2000).

Strategy

Fairy tales are one of the most popular subjects for use in children's media, largely because they are well known (Erekson, 2009). They are also popular because many include morals that adults tend to want to share with children (Palmer, et al., 2006). Recent trends in children's literature have included unconventional retellings of classic fairy tales like *The Three Little Pigs*. These retellings utilize readers' familiarity with the subject matter to subvert expectations and inspire critical thought about characterization and story elements they take for granted (Pantaleo, 2004).

Russian folk and fairy tales are not overused in children's literature and have unusual endings not typically found in modernized Western fairy tales. Many of the stories are also well suited to an indirect method of illustration that reveals information and character interpretation not given in the text through pictures slightly or significantly different from the words they accompany. For instance, the fox character in many stories is mischievous without any reason (Afanasev, 1975). The fox's status as a stock trickster character is familiar to a Western audience, but the specific clichés for it found in Russian folktales are not.

For these reasons, I wrote and illustrated a children's picture book based on characters and stories found in Russian fairy tales. Specifically, I focused on two stories

about foxes: “Little Sister Fox and the Wolf” and “The Fox as Midwife” (Afanasev, 1975). In my story, the foxes and wolves from these stories become the same characters. The character of the fox is also informed by other stories from the same collection.

Style

Within the final work, illustrations make up as much or more of the page count than text. The illustrations are initially sketched by hand and then turned into digital paintings in Adobe Photoshop. The style used is cartoony and stylized but informed by realism. Colors are kept earthy and generally muted. Edges of important forms are sharp and clean, but backgrounds often fade gradually into whitespace.

The writing is kept simple and brief and is of secondary importance to the illustrations. It is intended to be easily read. However, the written story is sometimes tongue-in-cheek and in some places needs to be read in conjunction with the illustrations in order to be understood.

Target Audience

The target audience is a 1st-3rd grade age range because they are young enough to enjoy picture books and old enough, according to Pantaleo, to understand certain unconventional methods of storytelling (2004). An early elementary audience will likely still enjoy fairytales and stories about animals. At the same time, they are old enough to demand a narrative that makes logical sense and to subconsciously expect the clichés of the fairytale genre. This age range is most likely to be interested in an illustrated folktale about a fox and a wolf that does not fit into a typical Western fairytale formula.

Book Summary

Little Sister Fox, an amalgamation of various fox characters from Russian fairy tales, is mischievous and often gets into trouble. At first, she plays dead to get access to a cart full of fish. She tricks a wolf into freezing his tail in an ice-covered river as part of her fishing technique. She again tricks the injured wolf into carrying her on his back. The wolf and the fox become friends, but that does not stop the fox from playing tricks on him. When they find a pot of honey, the fox pretends to be a midwife as an excuse to sneak out and eat all of it. She pins the blame on the wolf by convincing him he sweats out the honey when he gets hot. The fox swindles a succession of country families into compensating her for “missing” property after she spends the night in their houses. She finally goes too far and is tricked into taking a dog as payment. The fox is terrified of dogs and runs back to her friend the wolf for protection. But before she gets to him, she performs one more disappearing act, this time with a chicken.

Book Text

One winter day when the fields were covered in snow, a farmer decided to go fishing. He caught enough fish to fill his whole wagon. Little Sister Fox spotted him as he rode back home. Fox decided, “Here is a way for me to eat well all winter without having to hunt.” She flopped over stiffly on the side of the road and waited for the farmer to pass by.

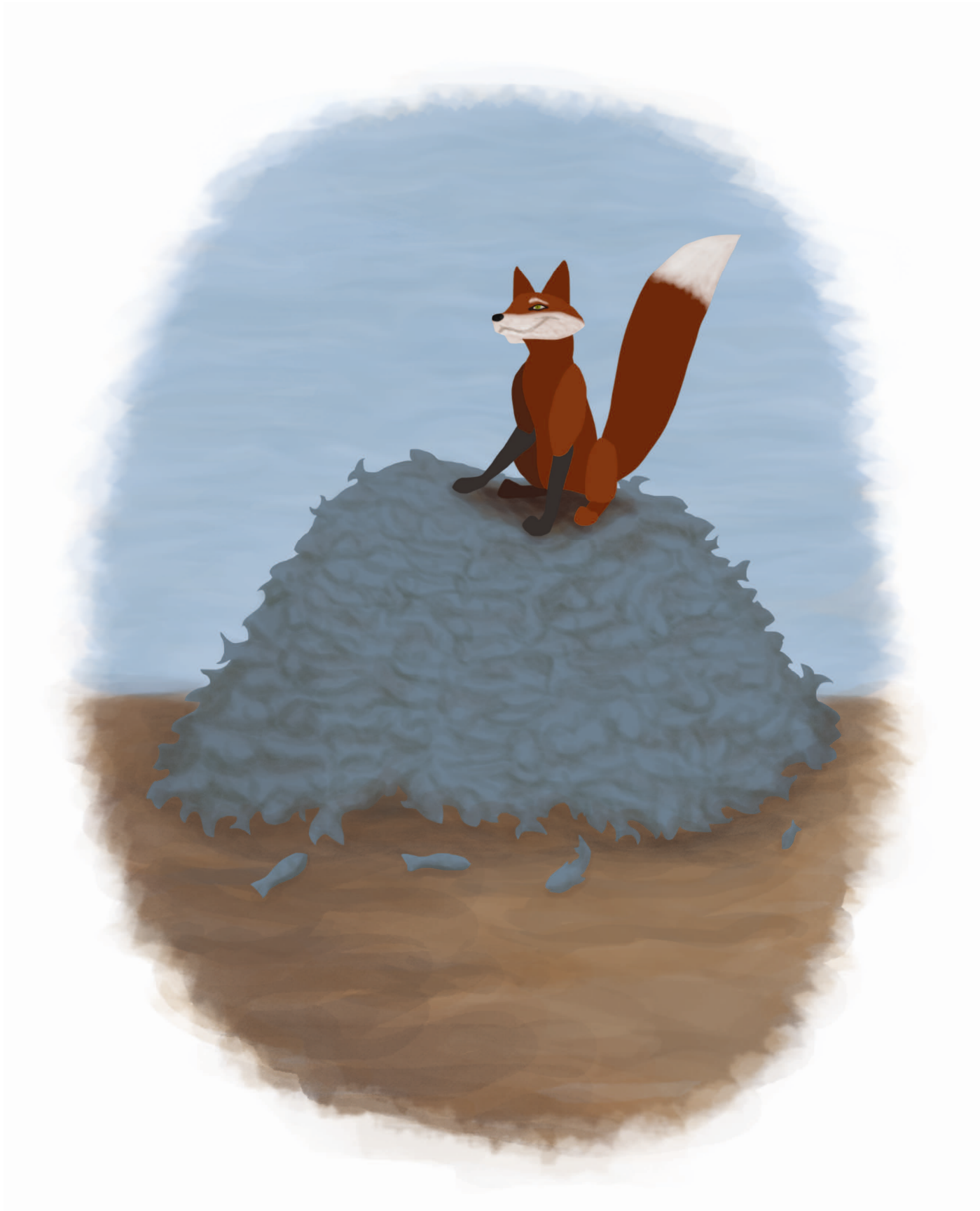
The farmer stopped his cart when he saw the dead fox.

“My wife would love to have a scarf made of fox fur,” he thought. He placed Little Sister Fox in his cart next to the fish.

As the cart bounced along, Fox threw the fish out into the road. When the cart was empty, Fox leapt out as well. She walked down the road gathering the fish into a pile. Fox sat down to admire her handiwork and have a snack.

Soon Fox's neighbor, Wolf, walked by. Wolf was amazed by the huge pile of fish. He asked, "How did you catch so many fish?"

"I have a secret way of fishing no one else knows about!" Fox declared. "But because you are my friend, I will share my special fishing trick with you. Go to the river and cut a hole in the ice. Put your tail through the hole and fish will bite onto it. You won't have to use a fishing pole or bait. Make sure you keep your tail in the water all night. That way you can catch as many fish as I did."



Wolf knew that Little Sister Fox was very clever. To him, this way of fishing sounded like a very smart idea that only Fox could think of.

“Thank you, neighbor,” Wolf said. He went to the river to try Fox’s special fishing trick.

Night grew deeper and the temperature dropped. Wolf became very cold. The water became cold as well, and froze around Wolf’s tail. In the morning, Wolf tried to pull his tail out of the river, but it was stuck.

“I waited too long!” Wolf thought. “There are so many fish biting onto my tail that it is too heavy to pull out.”

Wolf tried and tried to pull his tail out, but it was trapped tightly in the ice. It hurt when he pulled. Shivering and miserable, Wolf waited for someone to come along to help.

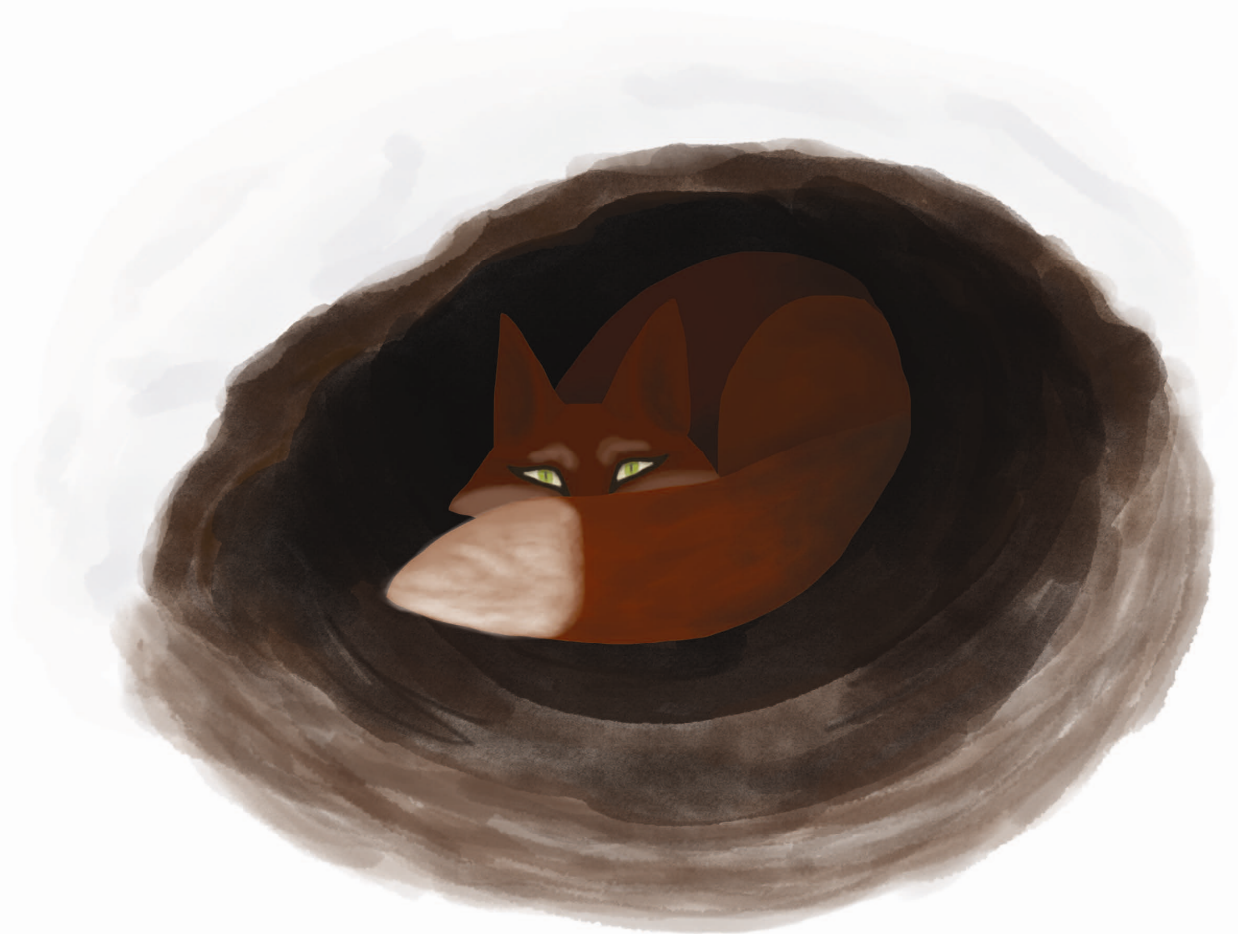
Above the trees, he could see smoke from the chimneys of nearby houses.



Meanwhile, Little Sister Fox was causing more trouble.

While Wolf was fishing, Fox brought her fish back to her den. She buried them in the snow to keep them fresh. Then she curled up to sleep in her warm bed while Wolf spent the night on the frozen river. As she slept, she dreamed up recipes for cooking fish: *fish stew, fish pie, fried fish, sushi...*

When Little Sister Fox woke up, she knew she needed cooking supplies. She trotted to the village near the river. Almost immediately, Fox smelled something wonderful! She followed her nose to an open kitchen window. Peering inside, Fox saw that there was no one in the kitchen, but someone had left baking supplies sitting on the counter. Fox climbed over the windowsill and into the small room. She explored cupboards and cabinets for anything interesting.



Little Sister Fox found a rolling pin she liked. It was heavy and sturdy. “I will need it when I make fish cookies,” she thought. As she climbed back through the window with it, she spotted a bowl of pancake dough. Fox loved pancakes even more than she loved fish. She even loved eating the raw dough. Fox shoved her face into the bowl and licked up as much pancake batter as she could. When she finally took her face out of the bowl, Little Sister Fox had gloppy dough stuck all over her head. It clung to her cheeks and ears in places she couldn’t reach to clean.

“I’ll go to the river to wash,” thought Fox. “The women from the village wash their clothes in the river. I will wash up after they break through the ice for me.”

As she neared the river, Fox slowed down and listened. She heard women shouting but could not tell what they were saying. Fox was very cautious and did not want the villagers to catch her stealing the rolling pin. Yet, Fox was also very curious. She crept quietly through the trees to the river. What she saw almost made her burst out laughing.



The women from the village had come to the river to wash their clothes. Sitting on the ice, they found a huge, fearsome wolf. The wolf did not run away when they shouted or threw pebbles at it. The women were frightened. They finally gathered up their courage and attacked the wolf. They began beating it with sticks and buckets and whatever they could find.

Wolf tried to run away from the angry villagers, but his tail was trapped too well. He pulled and twisted and struggled, trying to escape the flailing sticks and buckets.

“They’re going to beat me to death!” Wolf panicked. With enormous effort, Wolf ripped out of the ice and ran into the forest. Half his tail was still trapped in the ice behind him.

Wolf ran right into Fox. Fox had just been thinking: “Neither the women nor Wolf will be happy to see me.” She realized she was in serious trouble.



“YOU!” snarled Wolf. “Look what you got me into with your advice! Why would you trick me with no reason? As soon as I’m feeling better I’ll pay you back for this!”

“Ah, wait!” Fox exclaimed. She thought quickly. “At least you only had your body bruised and bloodied. I’ve had my head battered, which is much more serious. I can’t even stumble in a straight line.”

Wolf looked carefully at Fox. He saw the dough stuck to her head and how her fur stuck off in messy spikes. To Wolf, it looked like Fox’s brains were leaking out, Wolf suddenly felt very bad for his neighbor.

“You’re right, I’m sorry. Climb onto my back and I’ll carry you to your house. You should lie down.”

“Thank you, neighbor,” Fox said. “It is very kind of you to care for someone who may be dying even though you are injured too.”

“Wolf is so easy to fool,” thought Little Sister Fox. “Maybe I should keep him around to entertain me during the winter.”



“Neighbor wolf, we should build two houses right next to each other. We can take care of each other through the cold winter. If I die, you can have my fish. We will make your house out of snow and mine out of wood.” Fox smiled and thought: “That way I can get rid of him easily when summer comes.”

“That is not a bad idea Little Sister,” Wolf responded. “I would be happy to have someone to put medicine on the cuts I cannot reach. But instead of building houses, why don’t we move into the cabin that the hunter’s family abandoned last year?”

Little Sister Fox was astonished! She had never heard of an abandoned cabin. How did Wolf know about something she didn’t? Fox knew the opportunity to live in a cabin was rare. She sadly abandoned her trick.

“That is a wonderful idea, Wolf. But please, I’m still a little weak, could you carry me there?”



Wolf and Fox explored the cabin. They decided that it was a pretty comfortable place. It had a wood stove that kept the place warm. Fox could finally cook her fish. Most exciting, in a small shed in the yard they found a barrel full of honey.

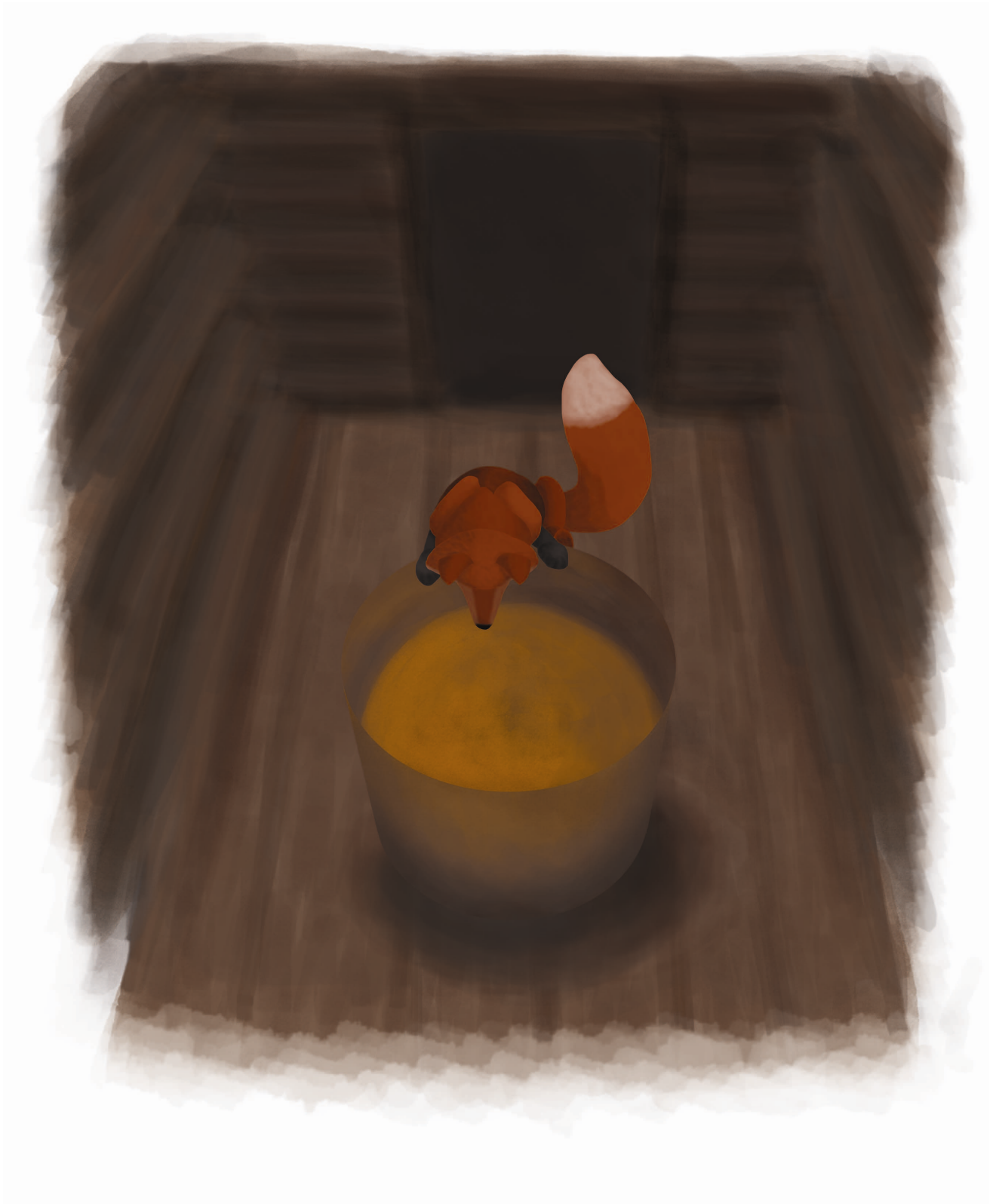
“We’ll share it evenly, since the house belongs to both of us,” said Wolf.

“Of course,” Fox agreed.

That winter, Little Sister Fox and her friend Wolf lived happily in their new home. The heat from the stove kept them warm. They ate fish all winter and were never hungry. By spring, Fox was tired of eating fish.

“I want to eat something sweet instead,” she thought.

That night, she and Wolf lay near the fire to sleep. Fox turned so wolf could not see her and thumped her tail against the floor. Wolf thought someone was knocking at the door.



“At his time of night, it must be something serious,” said Wolf.

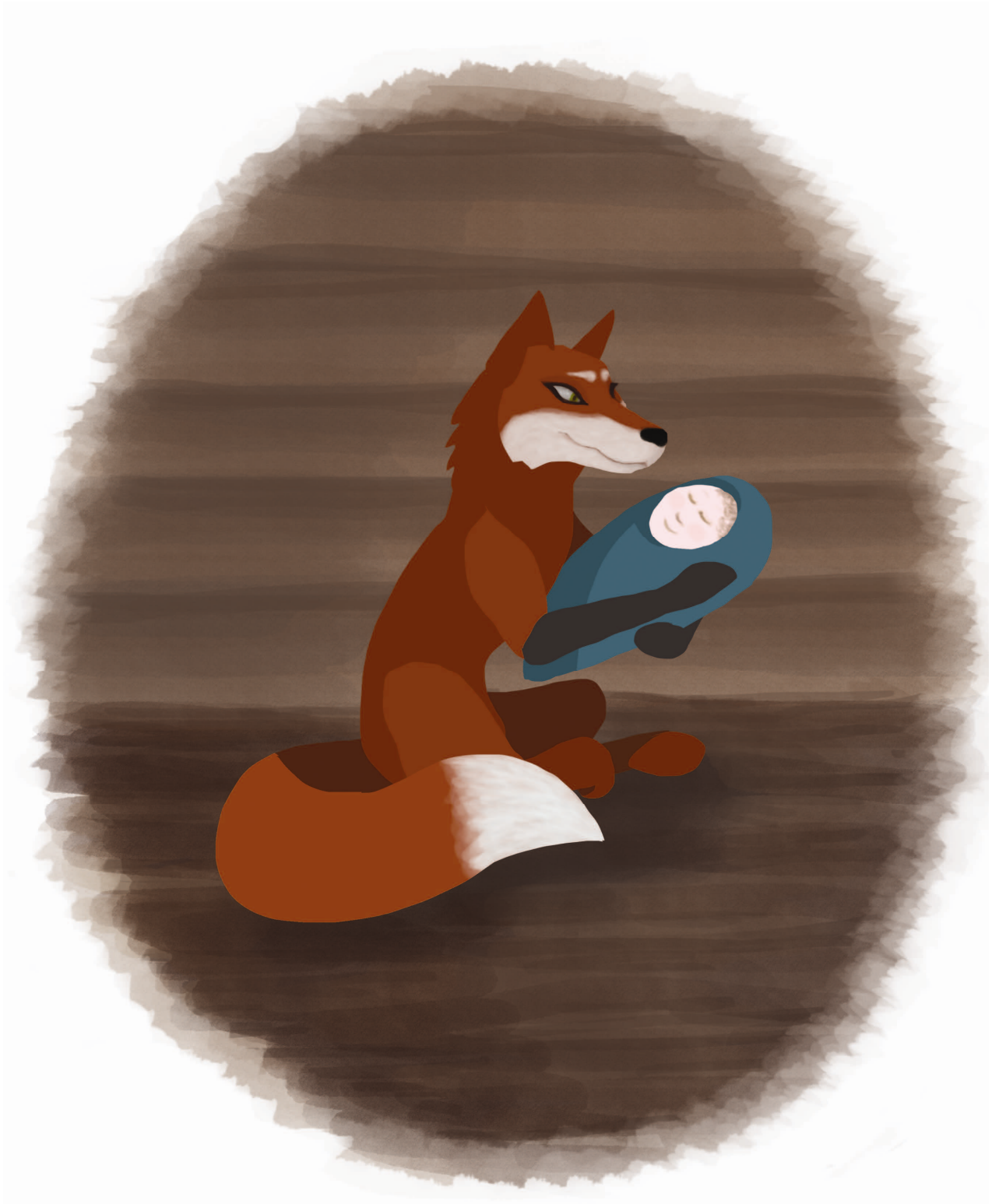
“They must need me to help deliver a baby,” said Fox. “I’m clever, so many people ask for my help.”

“Oh! You should go quickly then!”

“It may be a long night, don’t wait up for me.” Fox left the cabin and went straight to the shed. She opened the barrel of honey. Fox ate as much as she could without getting sick. “Much better now,” Fox said. She patted her belly and licked her lips and went back to the house. Wolf woke up and yawned.

“Was the baby healthy?” he asked.

“A healthy first child,” Fox answered with a smile.



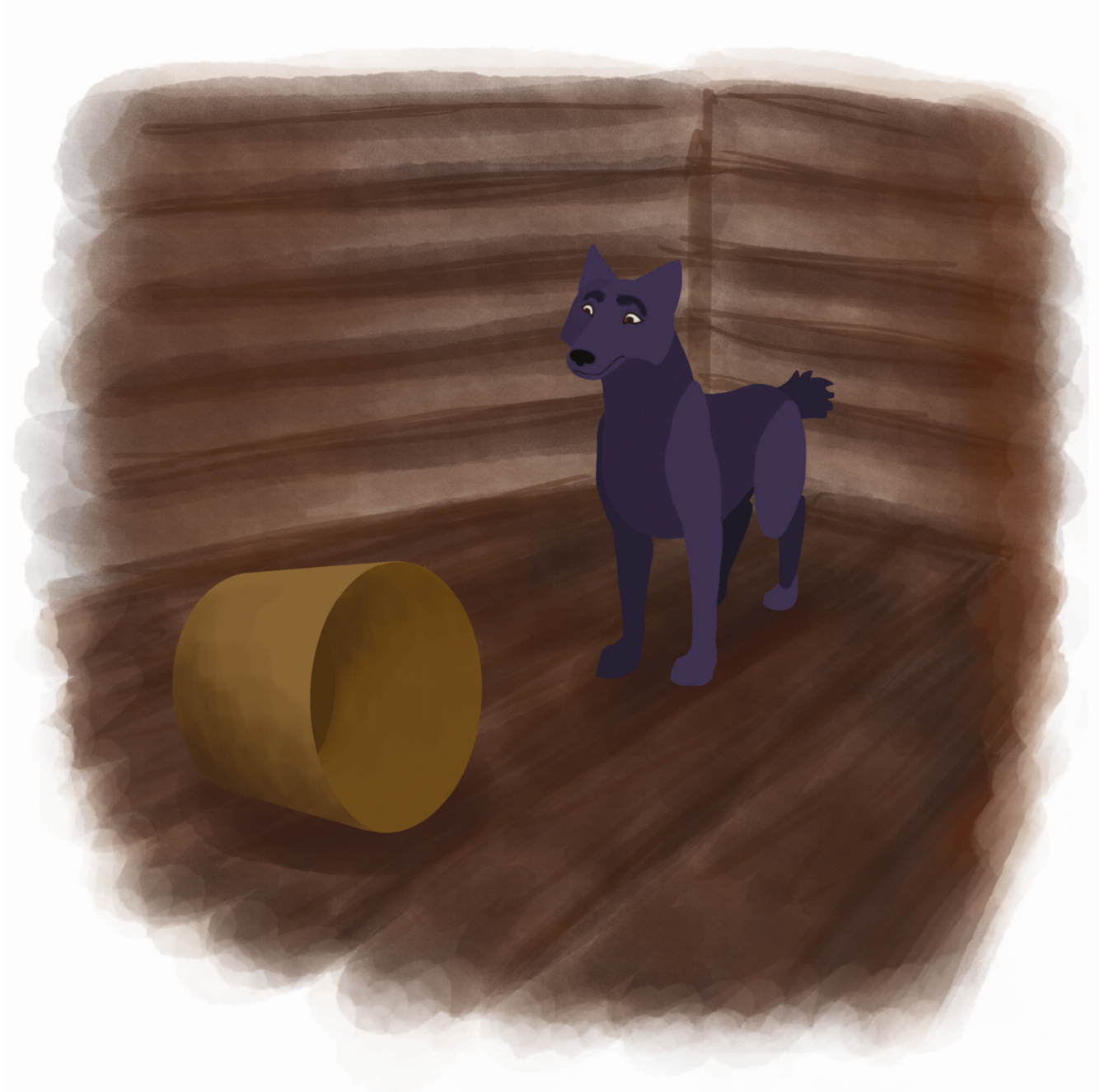
Fox used this trick two more times during the spring. One day, all the honey was gone. Fox was afraid that Wolf would be angry when he found the honey missing. She made a plan. Fox pretended that her old injuries were making her sick. Wolf took care of her and tried to make her comfortable.

“Is there anything I can get for you to make you feel better?”

“Ah, could you bring me some of the honey? I would like something sweet.”

Wolf went out to the shed. He ran back inside a moment later.

“Friend, the honey is all gone! Some thief must have come eaten it!” Wolf exclaimed.



“What are you talking about?” Fox demanded. “How can a thief have eaten it? No one knows about the honey but the two of us! You ate it all didn’t you? Now you are trying to hide it from me!”

“It wasn’t me,” said Wolf. “I would never do something so underhanded. I promise it wasn’t me.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t believe you so easily,” Fox sighed. She tilted her head and tapped her chin. Then she said, “I have a plan. We will take a nap in the hot sun so that we will sweat a lot. If one of us ate the honey, then it will come out in our sweat. That is how we will know whether a thief stole the honey.”

“All right,” Wolf agreed.



Wolf walked outside with Fox. He flopped down and immediately started snoring. Fox went to their neighbor's house and borrowed a bit of honey. She dripped tiny beads of it all over the sleeping wolf. It looked like he was sweating honey. Then, Fox lay down and nudged wolf. She acted as if she had just woken up from a nap.

“Look at yourself, friend,” she called to Wolf. “You obviously ate all the honey.”

Wolf was very confused but had to admit that there was no other way he could be sweating honey.

“I must have eaten it in my sleep! I'm sorry, Fox,” Wolf apologized.

Fox scolded him, but life returned to normal soon enough.



Wolf and Little Sister Fox spent the spring, summer, and autumn dozing about. When it began to snow, they realized that they had no food stored up for winter.

“I have a plan to keep us from starving,” announced Fox. “We have to split up. You will travel through the woods and hunt. You should also steal whatever you find caught in hunters’ traps. Bring as much food as you can back to the cabin. Bury it in the snow so it won’t go bad.”

“What will you do?” asked Wolf. “You’d better not be planning to sit here and make me feed you. I’m not that nice.”

Fox smiled and twirled her rolling pin. “I will make my fortune baking in the village. Like you, I’ll bring as much as I can back here to share.”

“Agreed,” said Wolf. The two parted ways.



“I can finally get away from Wolf,” thought Little Sister Fox. “He was getting boring. He barely ever falls for my tricks any more.”

Fox followed a narrow path through the woods until she came to a house on the edge of a village. Here she stopped, tucked her rolling pin under her arm, and knocked on the door. A man opened it. Fox could see many other people in the house behind him.

“Please let me stay the night,” Fox begged. “I will freeze to death on your doorstep if you don’t!”

“We’re crowded enough as it is. There’s nowhere for you to sleep.”

“I’ll sleep under a bench! I’ll tuck my rolling pin under the stove! You won’t even notice I’m there,” promised Fox.



The man let her in. She immediately tucked herself away. In the morning, before the family or even the sun had risen, Little Sister Fox woke up. She stuck her rolling pin into the fire and burned it to ash. When everyone else woke up, Little Sister Fox demanded:

“Where is my rolling pin? It is my only possession! It is my favorite thing in the world! What have you done with it? Not even a goose would be a fair trade for losing it!”

The family wanted to avoid trouble. The man who let Fox stay the night was forced to give her a goose. He put it in a bag so Fox could carry it easily. Little Sister Fox left the house with her prize. Instead of heading back to the cabin, she continued on down the narrow path. She was in a good mood because of her success so she sang to herself as she trotted along.



Near evening, Fox spotted another house and decided to repeat her trick. Again she spent the night under a bench. Again she woke up before everyone else. Little Sister Fox plucked and ate her goose. When the family woke up, she demanded to know what had happened to the goose.

“Where is it? What did you do with it? That bird was my only possession! My only food! Without it I will starve! Not even a turkey would be a fair trade for losing my goose!” she exclaimed.

The family gave Little Sister Fox a turkey to stop her from crying and shouting. Fox left their house singing to herself. She strolled happily down the road all that day. At dusk she approached a third house. Here she pulled the same trick yet again. In the morning, she ate her turkey. Little Sister Fox wondered how far this family would go to stop her crying and whining. She decided to request something ridiculous.



“That turkey was my life! It was all I had in the world! What have you done with it? If you don’t return my turkey I will call the police! Not even a girl with a lovely singing voice would be a fair trade for losing my turkey!” she wailed loudly.

The family could not take her noisiness. They gave one of their daughters to Little Sister Fox to take with her in her bag. Fox wasn’t sure what to do with a human girl, but thought she was sure to come in handy. Little Sister Fox continued down the road singing to herself as usual, and as usual stopped at a house for the night. While Fox slept, the family who owned the house got up. Their neighbors had asked them to rescue their daughter from the troublesome fox. The family quietly let the girl out of Fox’s bag. They put one of their dogs into the bag instead. For once, Little Sister Fox slept the whole night and woke after dawn. As she walked down the road, Fox decided she wanted to hear a song.



“Human girl, sing a song for me,” said Fox.

Instead of singing in a pretty voice, the bag let out a howl. Little Sister Fox’s blood turned to ice at the sound of a dog. She bolted away from the bag, back down the road and past the houses of the families she’d swindled. Fox was much quicker without a bag weighing her down. She ran until her legs gave out and she collapsed. Only then did Little Sister Fox turn around and realize that nothing was following her.

“Someone finally managed to trick me. Maybe I’m getting rusty,” she groaned. Her heart hammered and her legs shook. She continued back on the path toward her cabin.

“Dogs are scared of wolves,” she said to herself. “Perhaps I should return to the cabin. I suppose that dimwitted Wolf has one good quality... But it’s been so many days. I’ll look foolish if I come back with no food.”

Little Sister Fox spotted a rooster sitting on a nearby fence.

“Oh, that’s promising,” she said to herself. “Hey, Rooster! Come down here and tell me your troubles! I’m told I’m a good listener and give good advice!”



Conclusion

“Illustrated Tales of Little Sister Fox” takes cues from modern children’s literature trends. It is an adapted fairytale, a genre which is very familiar and popular with children. It is written in easy to understand language with direct dialogue to help engage readers. However, it is also adapted from fairytales that are not common knowledge among Western audiences. The story has the familiarity of a fairytale atmosphere without being entirely predictable. This will help establish an audience for the book. To market the book, excerpts and art will be posted on art websites online.

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