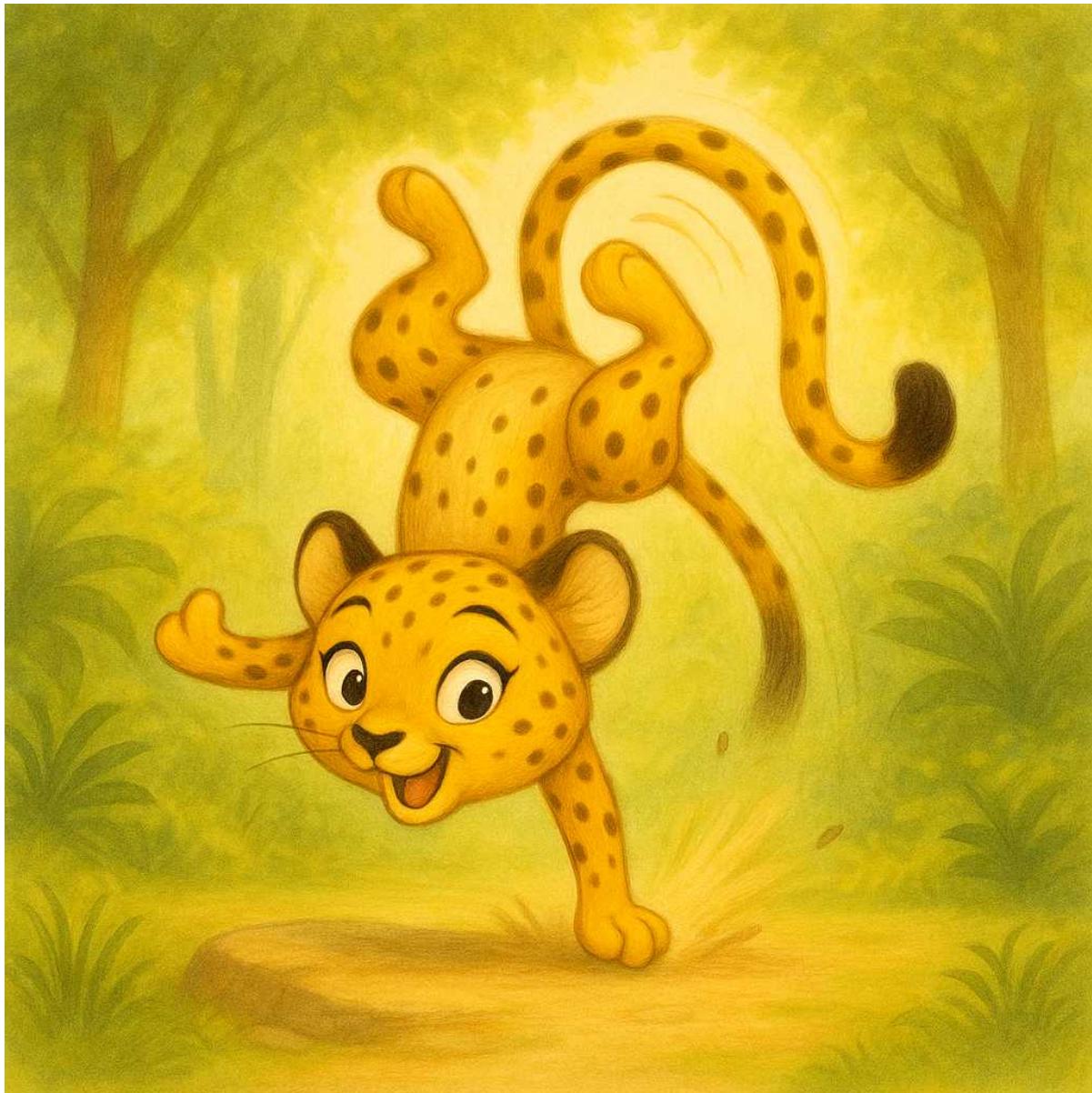


Cheetah Stories #1

by Chris Simoes adapted by EveryReader

Adapted to Lexile Level 400





Anna was the kind of cheetah who never just walked.

She skipped.

She zoomed.

She did flips when she thought no one was watching.



But someone almost always was.
Her best friend, Evie, saw everything.
One sunny morning, the jungle felt extra
alive.



Sunlight fell through the leaves like yellow rain.

Parrots shouted about who was the prettiest.
Monkeys swung by and told new jokes.
They laughed even when no one else did.



Anna, a bright yellow cheetah with dark little spots, bounced from rock to rock by the river.

"Evie, do I look fast if I do this?" she asked. She held one paw out and her tail straight like an exclamation mark.



Evie, a white cheetah with soft silver spots and calm blue eyes, sat on a smooth rock. She watched with a smile.

"Anna," she said kindly, "you look fast when you're asleep. You're a cheetah."



Anna blinked.

"True. But I could look faster. Maybe if I squint?" She narrowed her eyes.



Evie giggled.

"You look like you smelled bad berries."

"I did smell bad berries," Anna said.

"They smelled like socks that took a nap in a swamp."



Evie laughed harder.

"You're impossible."

"I prefer impossibly amazing," Anna said, and she bowed.



They were still laughing when they heard a tiny sound.

It was very small.

It almost got lost in the jungle noise.



"Hic... sniff..."

Anna's ears twitched.

"Did you hear that?"

Evie tilted her head.



"It sounded like someone swallowed a squeak."

They both went quiet and listened.

"Sniff... h-hic..."

"Over there," Evie whispered.

She pointed her chin toward tall ferns at the edge of the trees.



Anna tried to creep.
But even her quiet steps were bouncy.
She pushed the ferns aside with her nose.



A little brown bunny was curled in a ball.
He was shaking.
He had floppy ears and big, wet eyes.
His nose twitched very fast.



"Oh," Evie said softly.

"Hello there."

The bunny squeaked and hid behind his ears.

His ears flopped over his eyes.

He looked like a small, worried hat.



"Don't eat me!" he blurted.

"I'm too young to be a snack! I still can't whistle!"

Anna's eyes went wide.

"We're not going to eat you!"



Evie sat down slowly and made herself small and calm.

"Hi," she said.

"I'm Evie. This is my friend, Anna. We don't eat bunnies. We mostly eat..." She looked at Anna.



"Fun and adventures!" Anna said.

"And sometimes fruit."

The bunny sniffled.

"Fruit is okay, I guess."



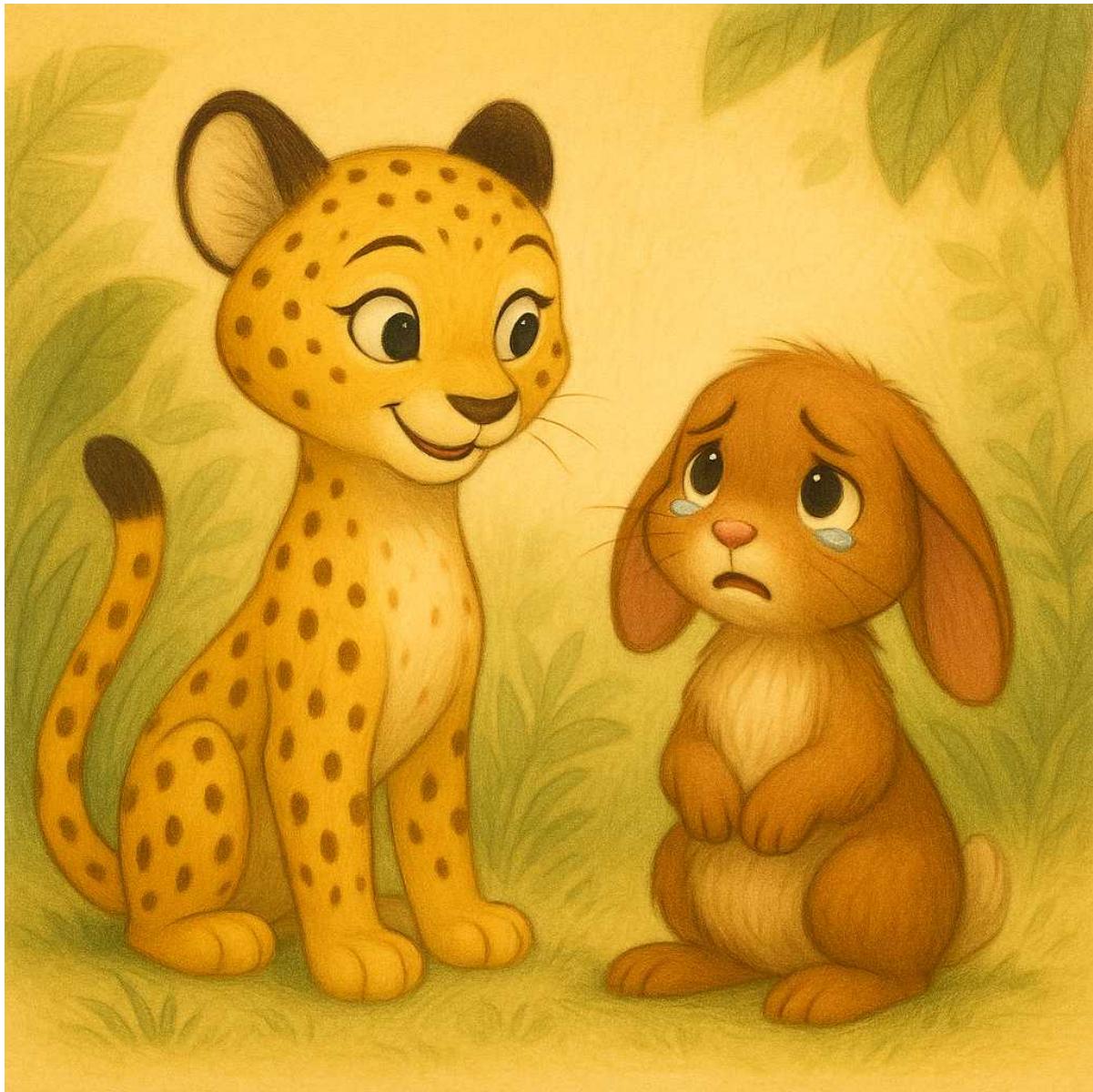
Anna smiled.

"See? Perfect. What's your name?"

The bunny peeked up at them.

"Milo," he said in a tiny voice.

"My name is Milo."



"It's nice to meet you, Milo," Evie said.

"Are you lost?"

Milo's nose wiggled again, and his eyes filled with tears.

"I was playing hide-and-seek with my family," he said.



"I hid in a log because I am very good at hiding. Then I heard a scary noise. I ran and ran, and now I don't know where they are."
His voice shook.

"What if they never find me?"



Anna's heart did a twist.
She bounced closer and sat down fast.
A little puff of dust popped up.
"Then we will find them," she said firmly.
"We are very fast. We can help."



Evie nodded.

"We know the jungle pretty well. Don't we, Anna?"

Anna puffed out her chest.

"We know it like I know my spots! I counted them once."



"All of them?" Evie asked.

"I fell asleep at spot one hundred three,"
Anna said.

"But it felt like all of them."

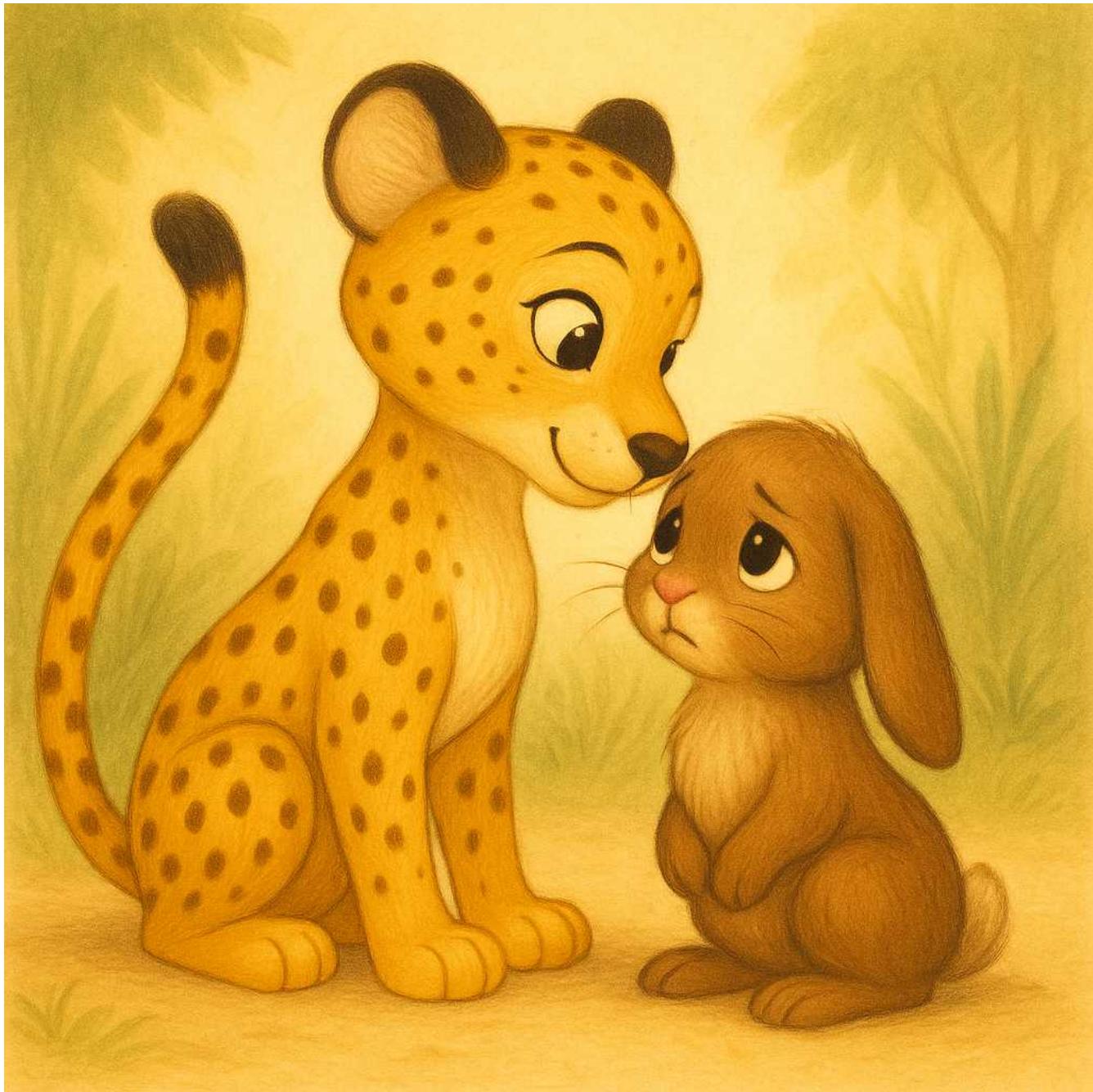


Milo sniffled, but he gave a tiny smile.

"You'll really help me?"

"Of course," Evie said.

"We won't let you stay lost."



Anna touched Milo gently with her nose.
"We will start right now," she said.
"We will bring you home."



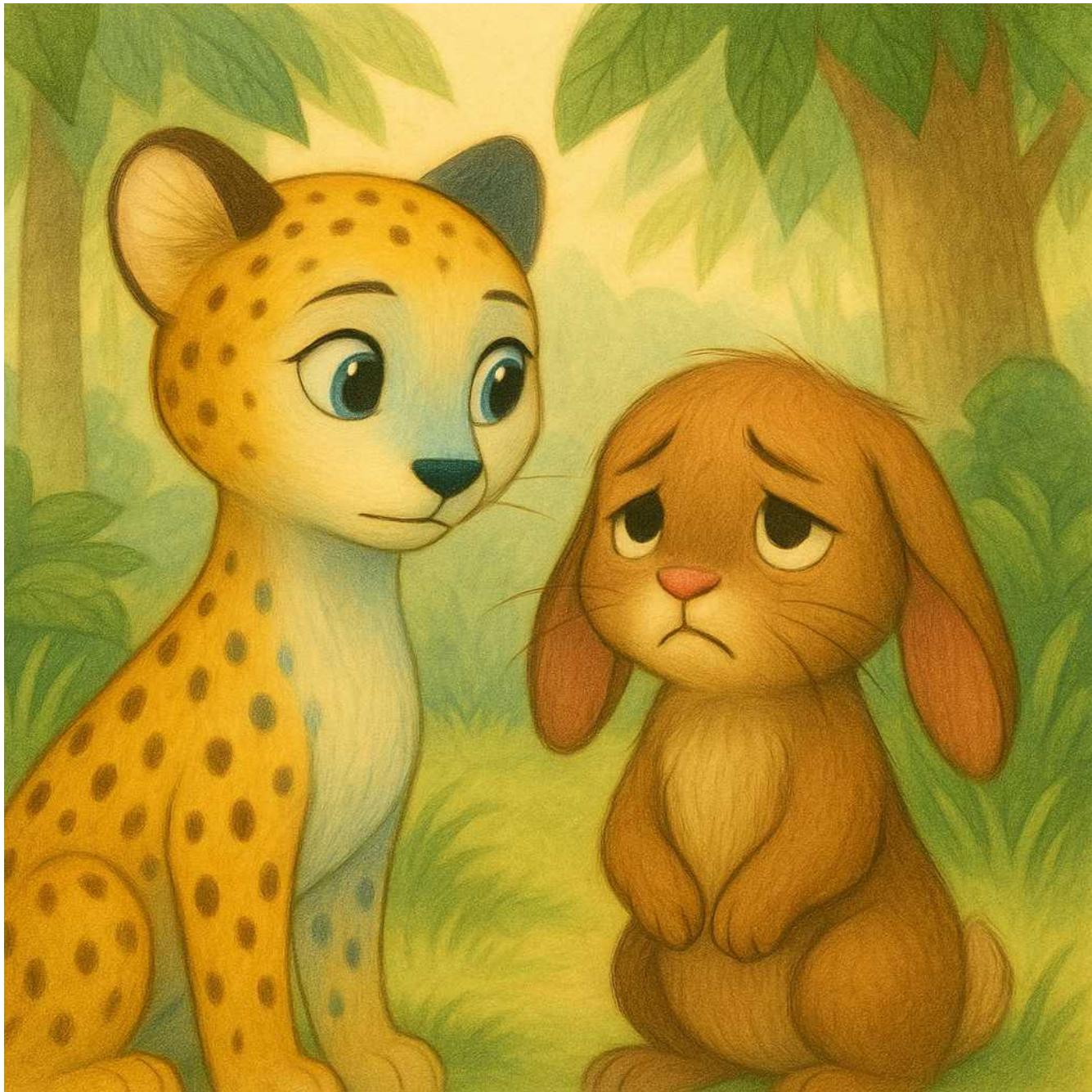
They walked by the river.
They followed the river bank upstream.



The trees were thick.
The bushes were tangled.



Milo hopped between Anna and Evie.
When he felt nervous, he stayed close to
their legs.



"Can you remember where you last saw your parents?" Evie asked.
Milo frowned and thought hard.
His ears drooped.



"Um... trees.
Lots of trees.
And some rocks.



And there was a log with moss.
And grass."
Anna blinked.



"Trees, rocks, moss, and grass," she said.
She waved her paw at the jungle.
"That is everywhere."



Milo's ears drooped lower.

"Sorry," he said.

"It's okay," Evie said.



"We will look for bunny footprints.
Or maybe some fur."



"Or we can ask someone!" Anna said.
She saw two toucans on a branch.
They were arguing.



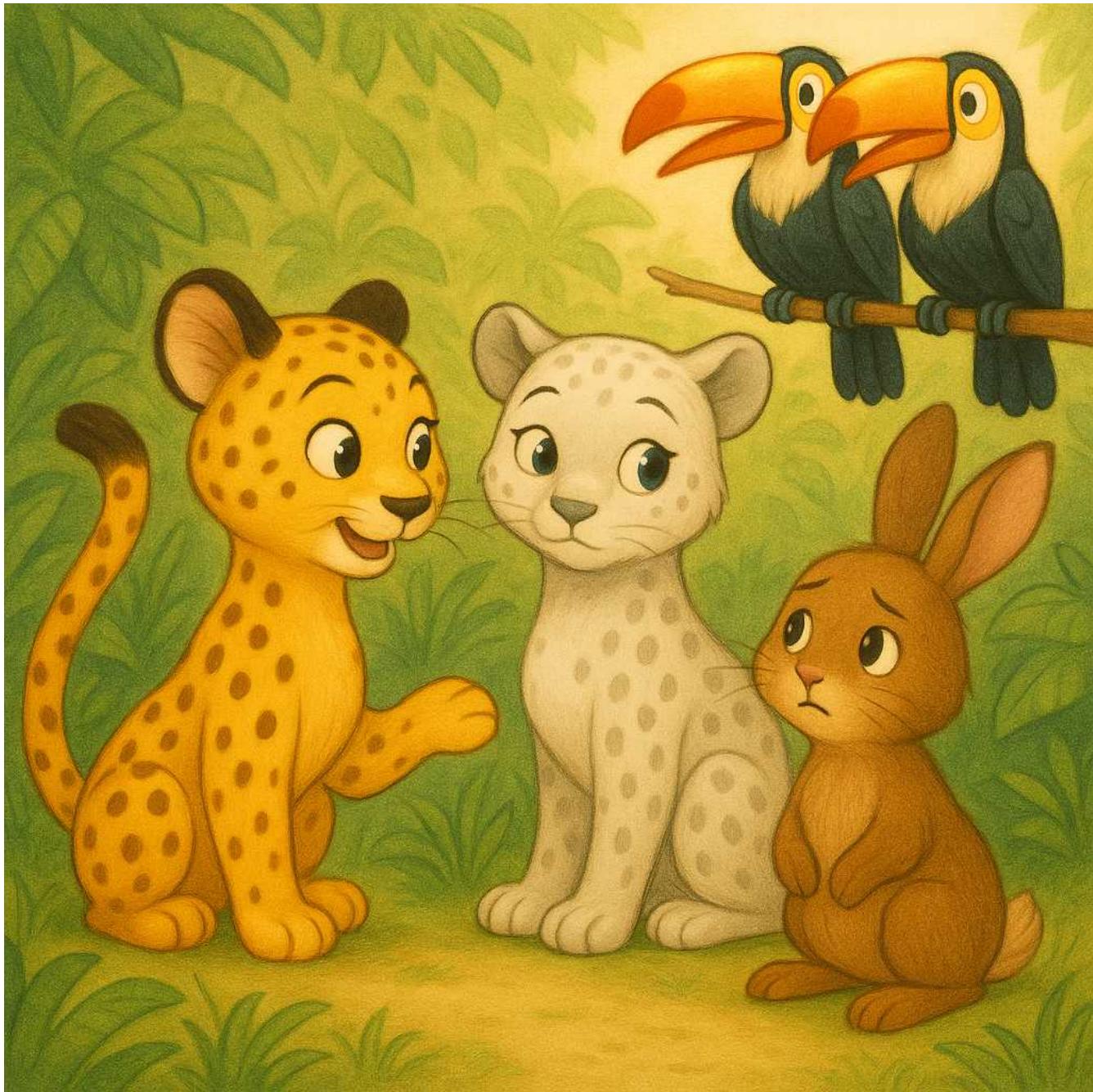
"Excuse me!
Have you seen any bunnies?
About this tall, fuzzy, and very worried?"



The toucans stopped and looked down.
One shook his head.
The other shrugged.



"Many animals live here," he said.
"It is hard to remember.
Try the vines by the old stone hill.



We saw rabbits there yesterday.
Or last week.
Time is soup."



"Time is what?" Anna asked.

"Soup," the toucan said.

"You do not know what is in it until you taste it."



He went back to arguing.
"Thank you!" Evie called.
"See?" Anna told Milo.



"We have a clue!"

"Do I have to eat time soup?" Milo asked.
Evie smiled.



**"No.
We will just walk."**



They walked toward an old stone hill.
Big rocks leaned together.
Green vines hung down like curtains.
The air was cool and wet.



Milo stayed close to Evie.
His nose twitched.
"This place is kind of spooky," he whispered.



"Spooky?" Anna said.

"No way.

It is just very mysterious."



"That is a fancy word for spooky," Evie said.

"Exactly," Anna said.

They ducked under a low branch.



A smooth voice came from the shadows.
"Well, well.
What do we have here?"



All three friends stopped.
From the rocks, a long shape slid out.
It was a snake.



His scales were green and gold.
His eyes were bright yellow.
He smiled a slow smile.



"Good afternoon," Evie said.
Her tail puffed a little.
"We are just passing through."



"And we are looking for someone," Anna said.
"It is important bunny business."



The snake looked at Milo.
"I see," he said.
"My name is Soren.
I know this jungle very well."



He moved closer over the stones.
"Maybe I can help."



Milo gulped.
His whiskers shook.
He stepped closer to Evie.



Evie stood in front of him.
"Thank you," she said.
"We are looking for Milo's parents.
Have you seen other rabbits?"



Soren tasted the air with his tongue.

"Rabbits," he said.

"Maybe.

There are many fluffy animals here."



His eyes shone.

"Let me take the bunny.
I will bring him to them."



"Absolutely not," Anna said at once.
"We are staying with him."



Soren's smile grew thin.
"Are you sure?
I can move faster than you in the thick
plants."



"Ha!" Anna said.
"No one is faster than me.
I am a cheetah.
Also, that sounds suspicious.
Evie, did that sound suspicious?"



"Very suspicious," Evie said.

"I am helping," Soren said.

"The bunny would be safer with me."



"Safer inside your belly, maybe," Anna said.
Milo squeaked.



Evie's eyes went hard.

"We do not need that kind of help," she said.

"Milo is our friend.

We will stay with him."



The snake slid in a slow circle around them.
His scales made a soft whisper on the rocks.
"You care about him a lot," he hissed.
"That can be dangerous."



"You know what is dangerous?" Anna said.
"Messing with two cheetahs on a mission.
And a bunny who hides very well.
Right, Milo?"

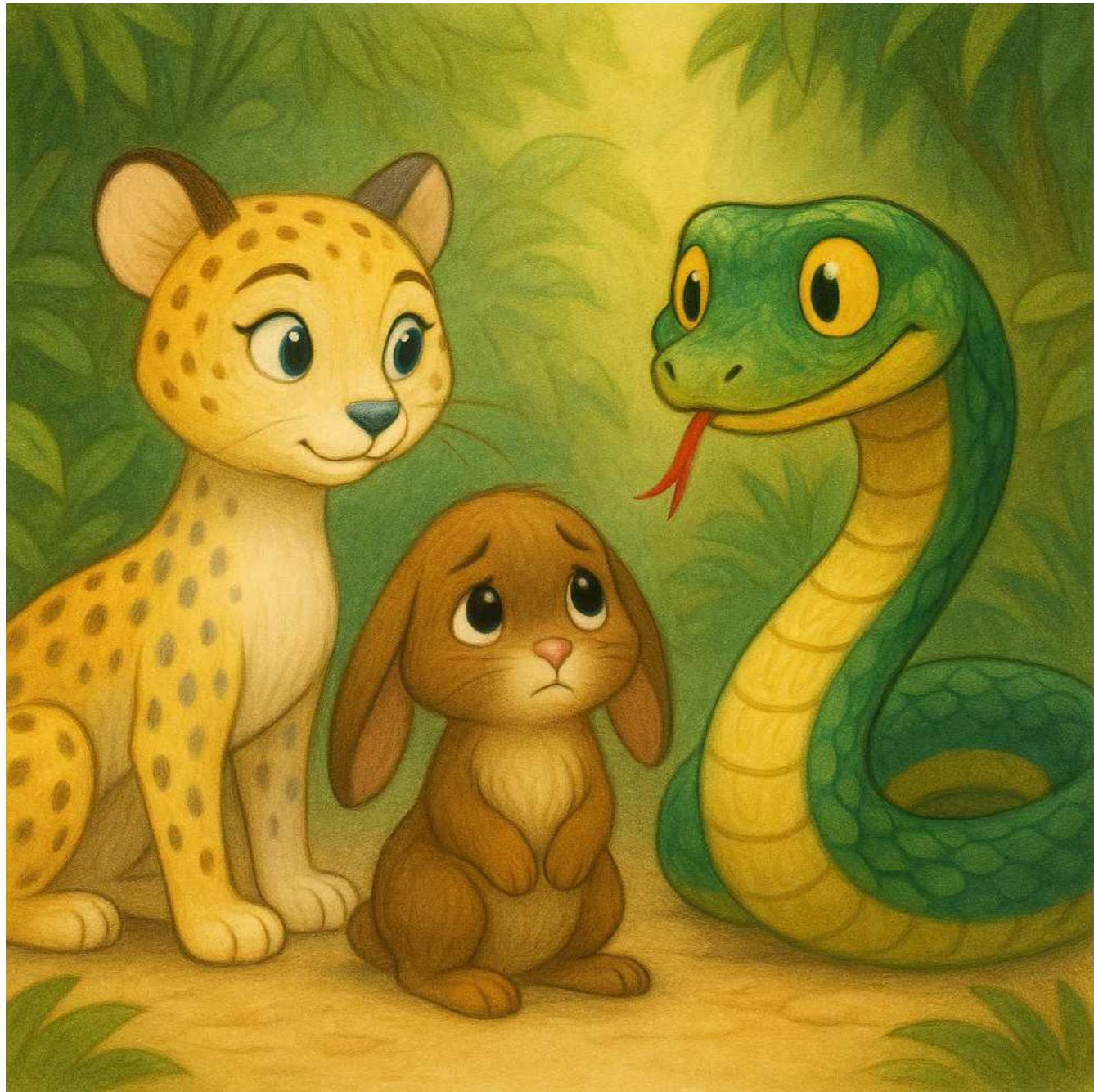


"Um, yes," Milo said.
"I hide very well."



"You do," Evie said.

"And we will help you find your family.
Together."



Soren stared at them for a long moment.
His tongue flicked in and out.
He tasted the air.
He could tell they meant it.



"Very well," he said at last.
"Have it your way.
But the jungle is tricky."



"There are caves and cliffs and shadows.
It is easy to take one wrong turn."



He slid back toward some rocks covered in moss.

"If you will not take my help," he said, "I can point to a good place to look."

"Where?" Evie asked.



Soren pointed his tail at a dark hole in the hill.

Vines hid the opening.

Cool air came out.

An echo came from it.



"I heard voices in there earlier," Soren said.
"Maybe they were rabbits."



Anna looked closely at the cave.
"That looks like a place where adventures go wrong," she said.



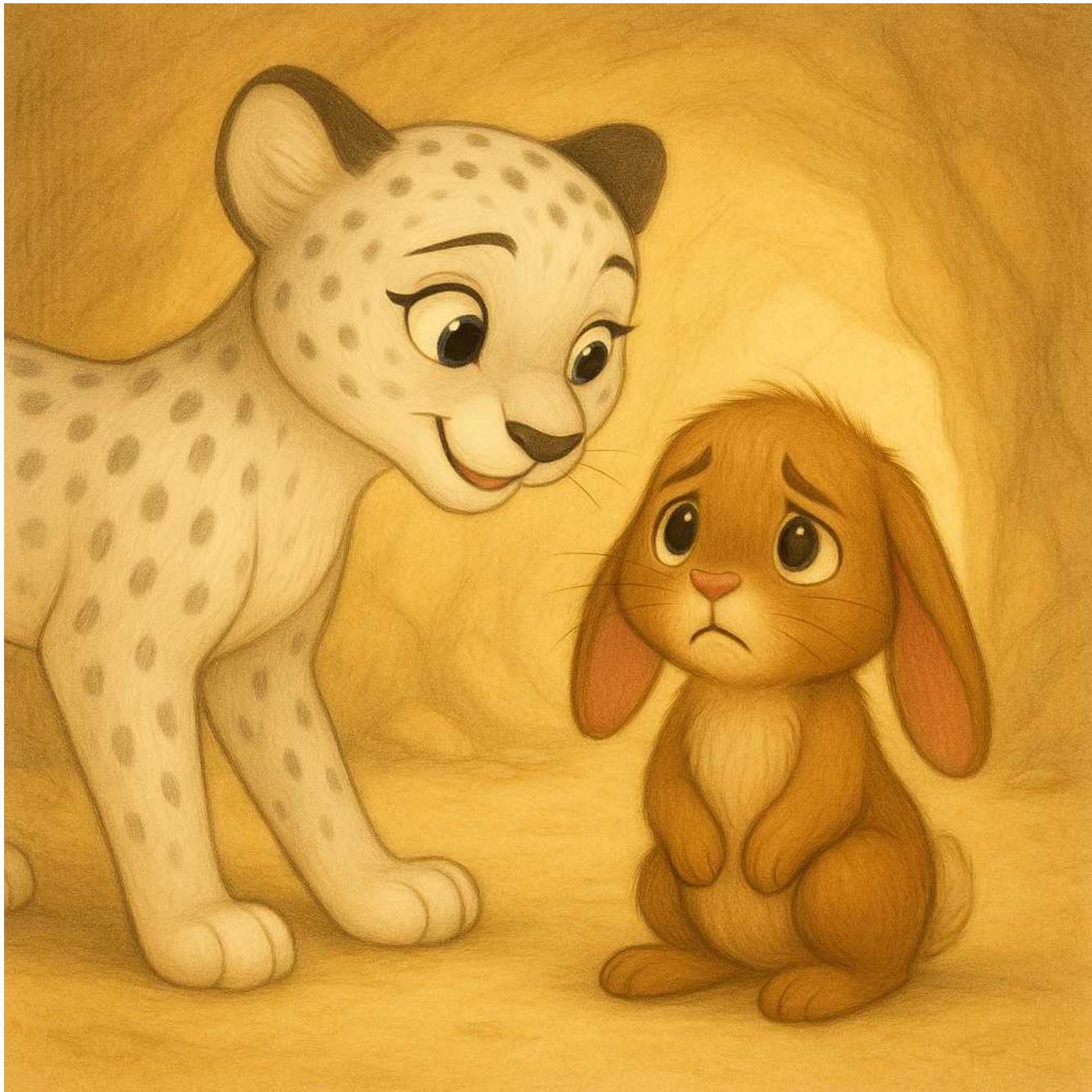
Evie frowned.

"Caves can be dangerous," she said.

"But if Milo's parents are in there..."



Milo stared at the cave.
His eyes were wide.
"I do not like dark places," he whispered.
"They make me feel small."



Evie bent down.

"We will not make you go in," she said softly.

"We can look another way."



Milo held his paws tight.

"If my parents might be there, we should check," he said.

His voice shook, but he stood tall.

"I do not want them to be scared without me."

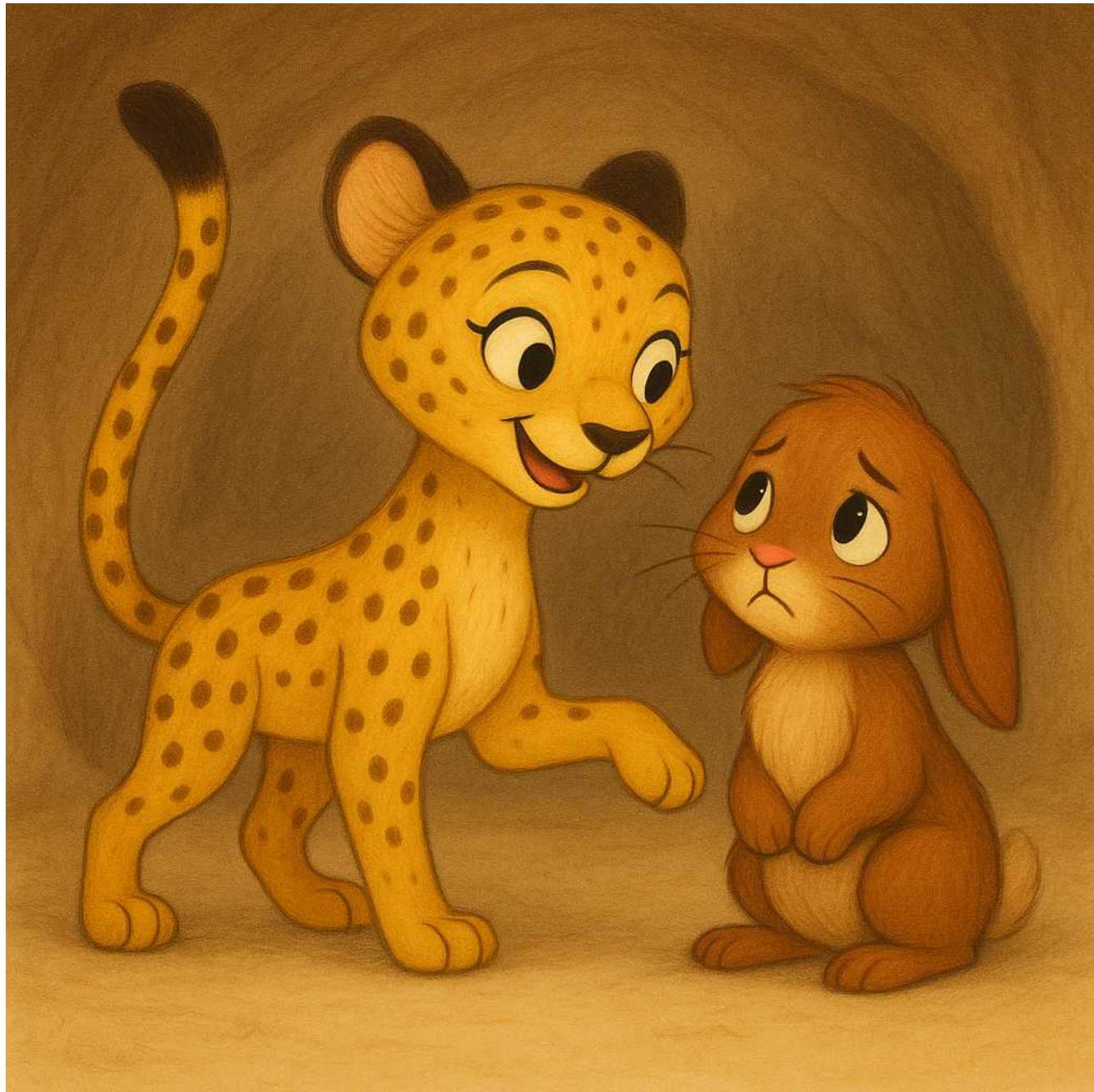


"That is brave," Anna said.

"Okay.

We go together.

We stay together."



"If it is too scary, we come out.
Deal?"



Milo nodded.

Evie looked at Soren.

He still smiled.

Her fur prickled, but she nodded.

"Thank you for the help," she said.



"Any time," Soren said.
"Good luck."



They walked toward the cave.
The air felt cooler with each step.
The vines moved aside, and the light grew
dim.



Milo pressed against Evie.
Anna walked in front with her tail high.
Her paws shook a little, but she kept going.



Behind them, Soren watched until they were gone.
His smile grew wider.



Inside the cave, the jungle sounds went away.
Outside, birds sang.
Leaves rustled.
In here, we heard only drip, drip, drip and
soft paws on stone.



The light faded fast.

It was dark and soft.

The walls had tiny shiny spots, like little stars in rock.

"This is fine," Anna whispered.

"Very cave-y."

"We are okay."



Milo's ears shook.
"I can't see well."
Evie touched his nose.
"Stay close."
"We will move slowly."



They followed the tunnel.
They turned when it turned.
They stepped around cold puddles.
Two times, Anna bumped her head.
"Ow," she said each time.



After a while, something glowed ahead.

"Light!" Anna said.

"See?"

"Easy."

"We're already—"



They stepped into a wide room.
A thin beam of sun came through a crack in
the roof.
It shone on a still pool.
The water looked like a mirror.



Anna walked to the pool and looked in.

"Whoa."

"My spots look extra cool in cave light."

Milo peered over the edge.



He saw three shapes look back: a yellow cheetah, a white cheetah, and a small bunny with messy whiskers.

"Hi," he told his reflection.

"We're going to find them."

Evie smiled.

"Yes, we are."



Three tunnels led out of the room.

Each one went into the dark.

"Okay," Anna said.

"We came in from that one, so we just pick the right one of the other two."

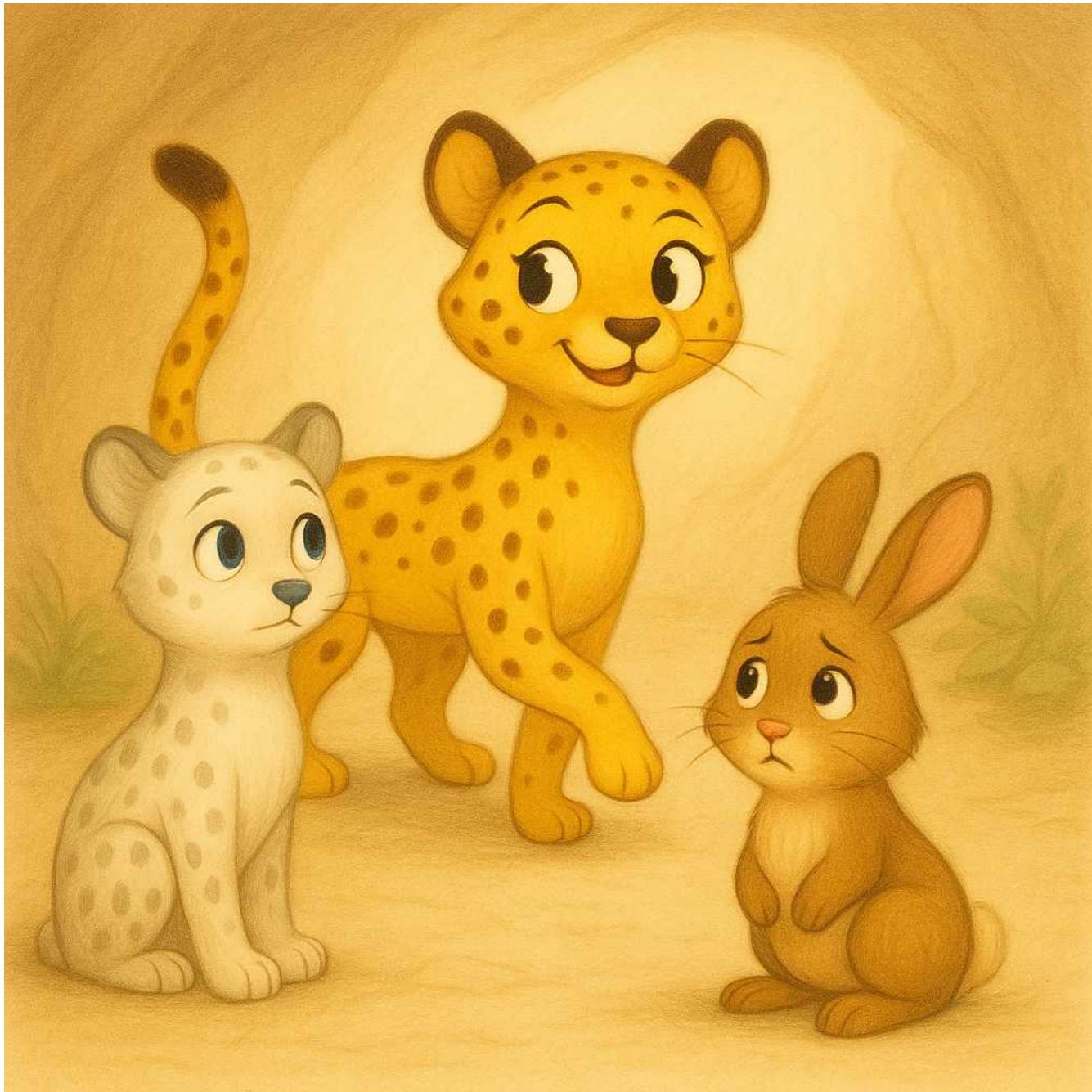


"Hmm," Evie said.

She looked around.

"I think we came from that one."

Anna frowned.



"No, I remember a rock shaped like a potato."

"We passed it."

"It was... um..."

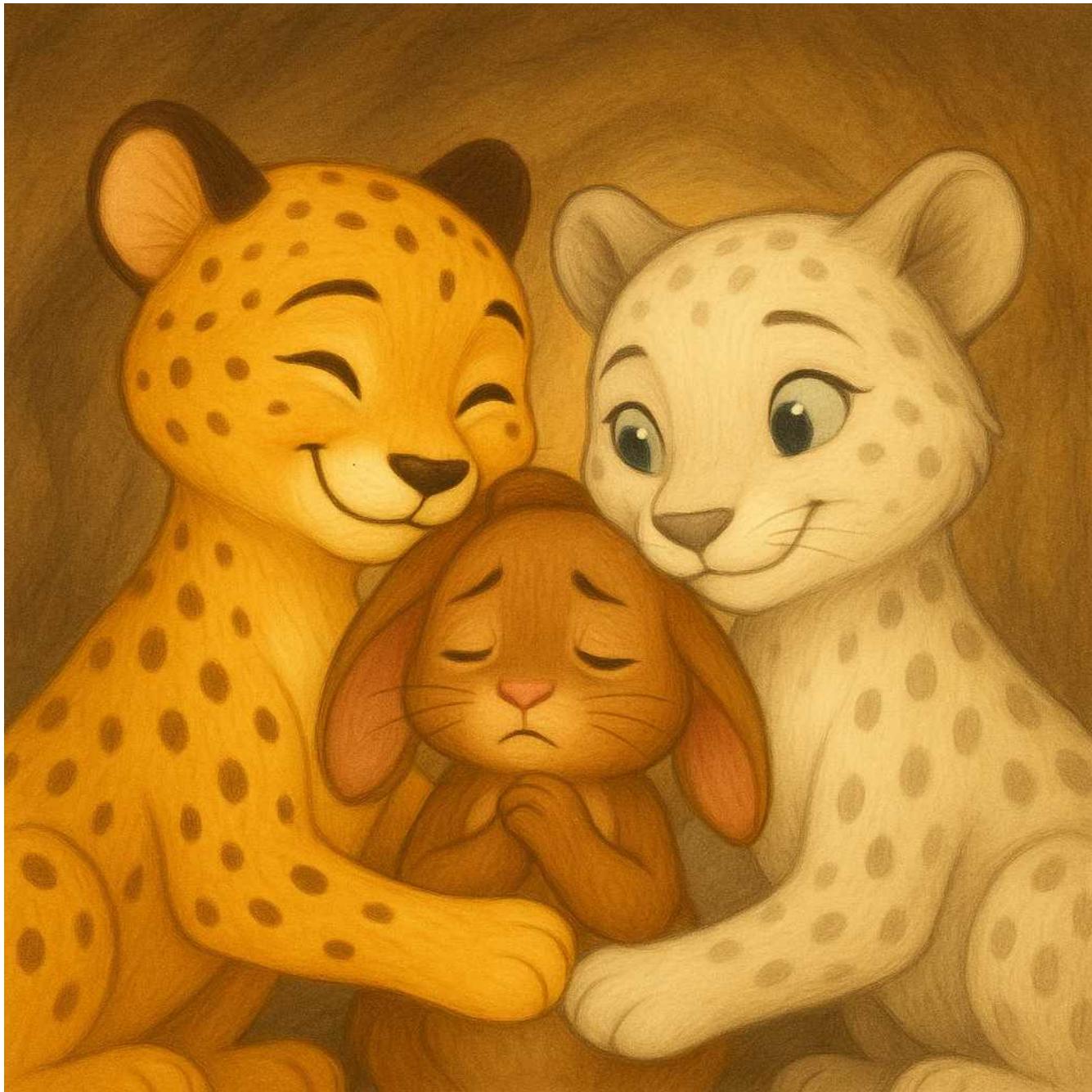
She turned in a slow circle.



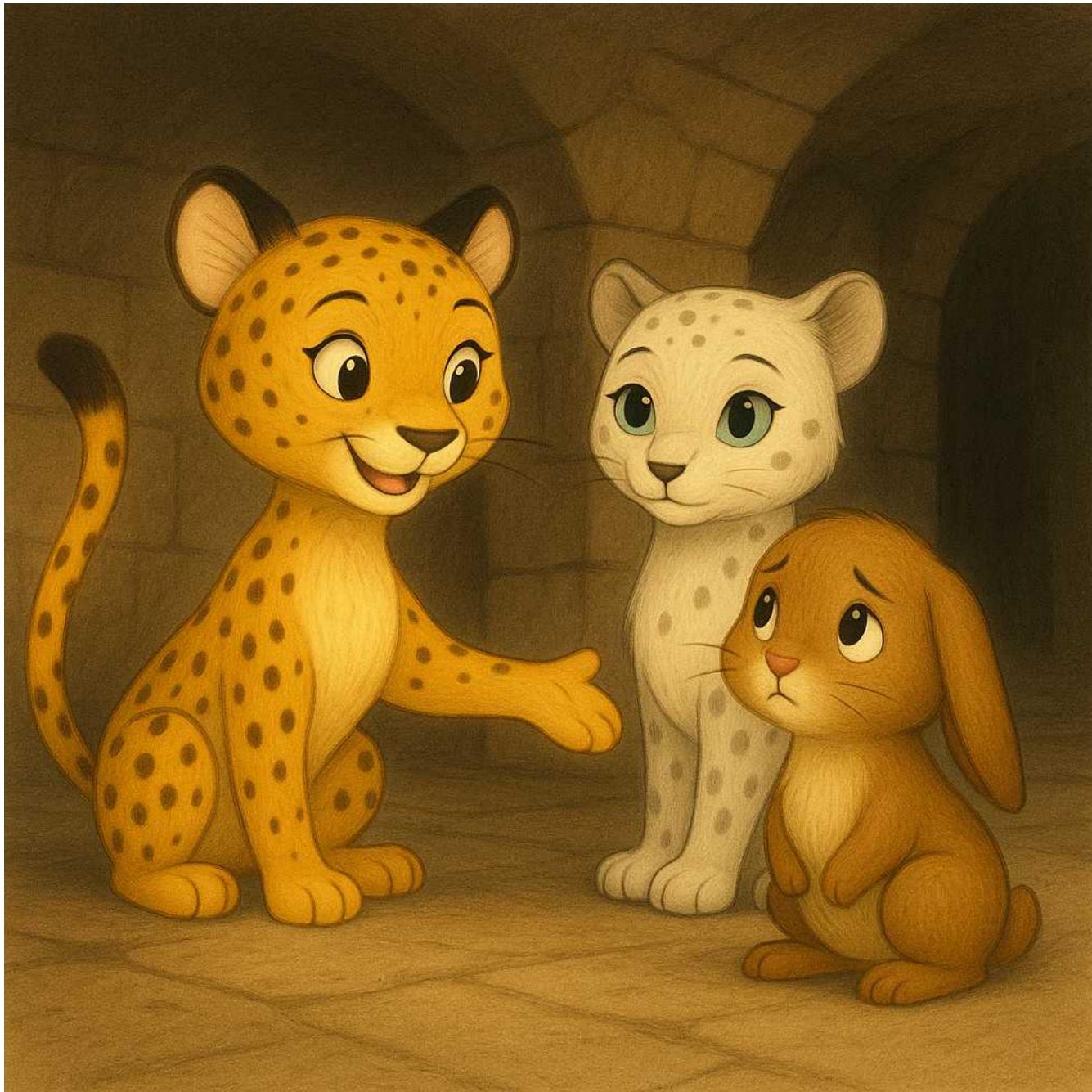
Every side looked the same.
The light did not reach the tunnel mouths.
"Well."
"One way had a potato rock."
"Maybe."



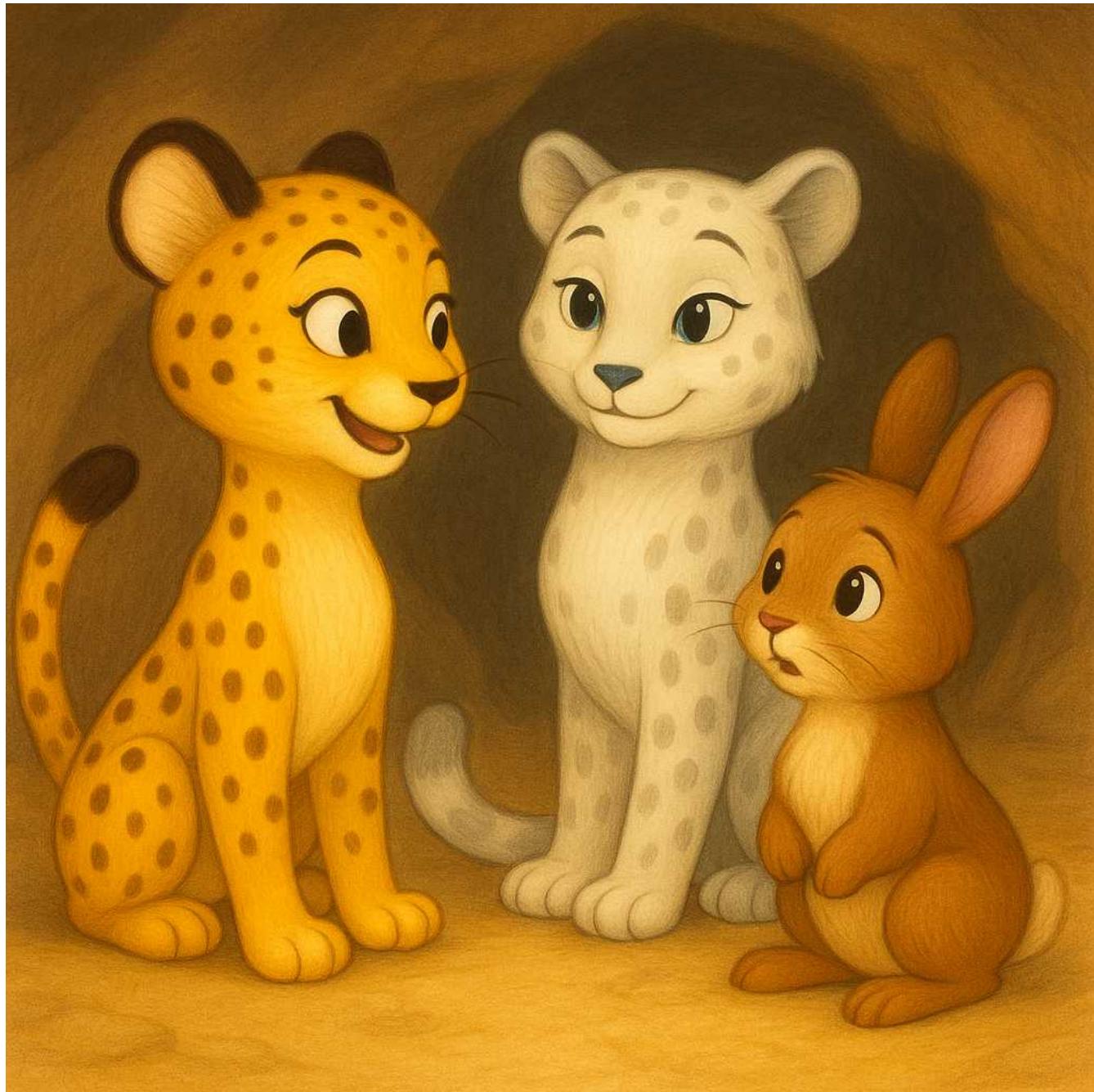
Milo's nose twitched fast.
"You mean... we're lost?"
The word felt heavy in the air.
Evie took a deep breath.



"We might be a little mixed up," she said.
"But we are together."
"That matters most."
Anna's heart thumped.



The sunny jungle felt far away.
Parrots were loud out there.
In here, there was stone and shadow.
"We can fix this," she said quickly.



"We will use our—"

"Smarts," Evie said.

"Exactly!"

"Smarts."



"Brain power."

"Cheetah genius."

"And bunny genius," Evie added to Milo.

"You hide well, right?"



Milo nodded, unsure.

"Yes?"

"That means you notice spaces," Evie said.

"You know where you can fit."

"That is smart."



Milo's ears wobbled.

"I guess."

"Okay," Anna said.

She tried to sound brave.

"Step one: do not panic."



"Too late," Milo squeaked.
"My heart is panicking."
"Mine too," Anna whispered.
"But we can panic quietly."
"Next step: find a way."



Evie studied the tunnels.
"We need clues," she said.
"We came from one path."
"Maybe we left footprints."



"Maybe the drips fell different."

"Maybe the air smells more like outside in one direction."

"That is a lot of clues," Anna said.

"Good thing we have three noses."



She sniffed each tunnel.

"This one smells like rocks."

"This one smells like rocks and water."

"This one smells like rocks, water, and... something weird."

"Is weird good?"



Milo tiptoed to the third tunnel and sniffed.
His nose twitched.
"...Carrots?" he whispered.
Evie sniffed, too.
"It does smell like plants."



"We'll go that way," Anna said.

"If we are lost, we can be lost near carrots."

They followed the carrot-smelling tunnel.

They stayed close.

They moved slowly.



The floor went down, then flat.
The air felt colder.
Soon the carrot smell faded.
A new smell came.
It felt familiar.



Evie's ears lifted.
"Do you smell that?"
Anna breathed in.
"It smells like... outside."
"Yes," Evie said.



"Fresh air."
Milo sniffed.
His whole body shook.
"And—"
His eyes went wide.



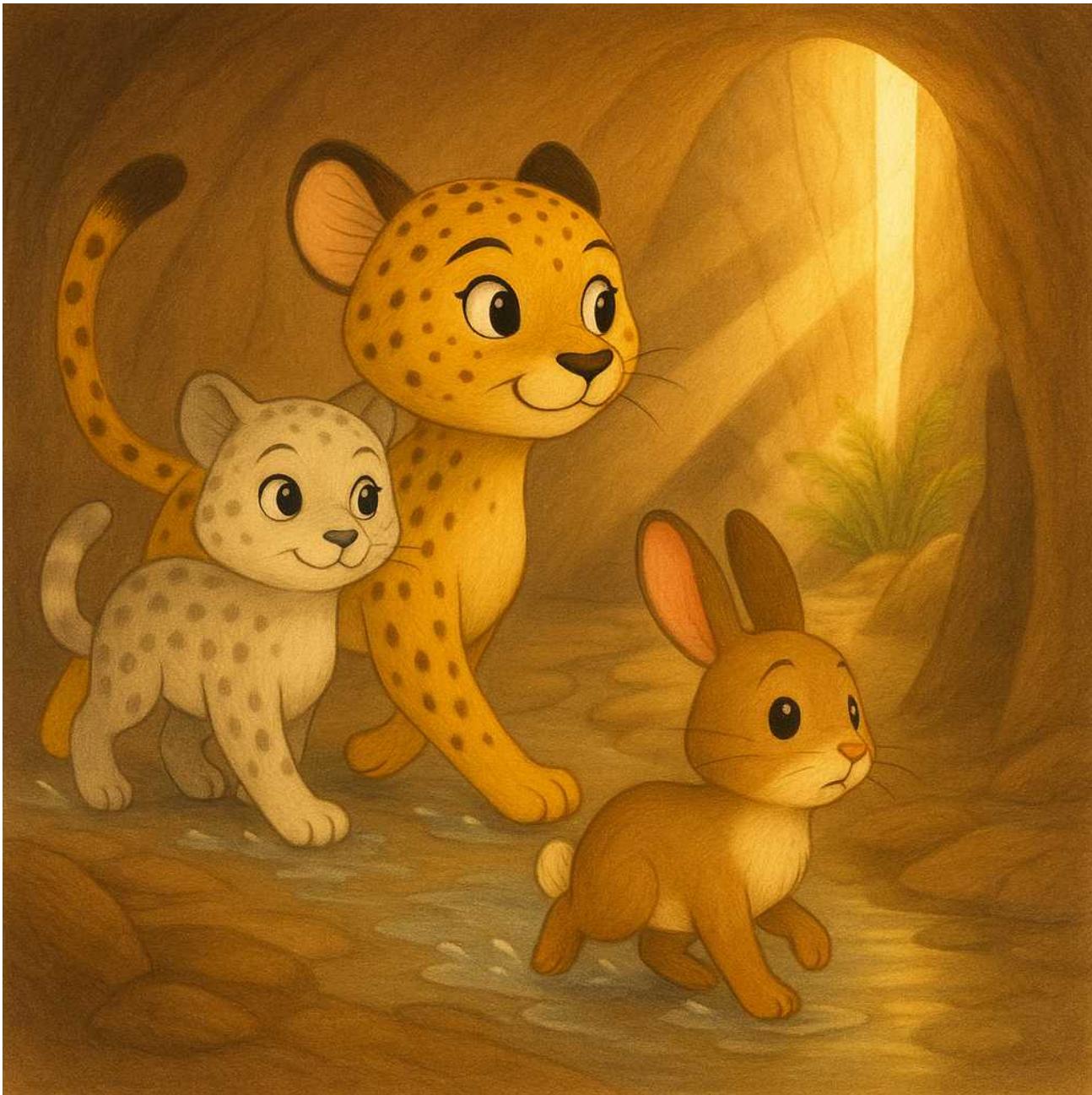
"And... bunnies!"

"Are you sure?" Anna asked.

"Yes!" Milo squeaked.

"That is my family's smell!"

"Let's go!"



They hurried.

Their paws splashed in shallow puddles.

The tunnel curved and twisted.

Then it opened into a tall room.

A wide crack was high in one wall.



Sunlight poured in and made the stone look gold.

Ferns grew under the crack, reaching for the light.

Bunnies huddled near the ferns.

Lots of bunnies.



Small ones.

Big ones.

Fluffy ones.

Sleek ones.

Their ears shot up when Anna, Evie, and Milo
slid to a stop.



"Milo!" cried a brown rabbit with worried eyes.

She ran to him and almost tripped.

"Oh, Milo! Milo, Milo, Milo!"

"Mom!" Milo shouted.



His fear turned into happy tears.
He jumped into her arms.
She hugged him so tight that his ears stuck
out like exclamation points.
Two other rabbits came.



One had a patch over one eye.
One had a notch in one ear.
"You're okay!" said Patch-Eye.
"We looked everywhere!" said Notched-Ear.



Milo laughed and cried.

"I got lost!"

"But Anna and Evie found me!"

"They are cheetahs, but they are nice."

"They are my friends."



"They did not eat me."

"They said they do not eat bunnies and—"

"Milo," his mother said gently.

Her eyes were wet.

"Breathe."



Milo took a big breath.
"They helped me," he said slowly.
"They promised to help me find you."
"And they did."
All the rabbits looked at Anna and Evie.



Anna felt very tall and very spotty.
She did not know what to do with her paws.
She gave a small wave.
"Hi," she said.
"We come in peace and friendship."

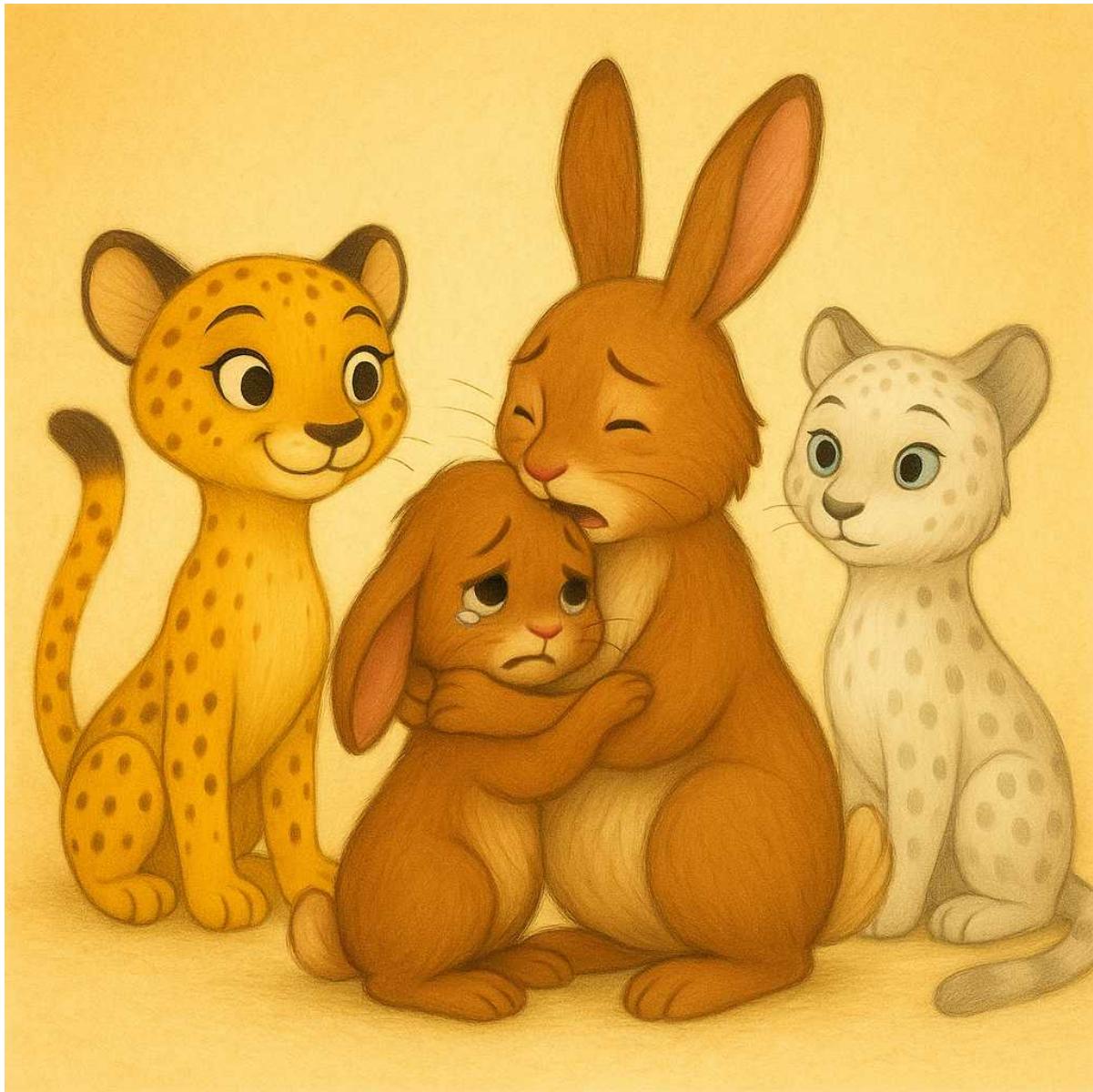


"And maybe jokes."

Evie bowed her head.

"We are glad we found you," she said.

"Milo was very brave."



Milo's mother set him down and hopped to them.

"Thank you," she said.

Her voice shook.

"We were playing hide-and-seek."

"Then we could not find Milo."



"We followed his smell as far as we could."

"We got mixed up and ended here."

"We can smell the outside, but we cannot reach it."

She looked up at the high crack.



Evie looked around the room.

"There must be another way out," she said.

"We came through tunnels."

"That might not be safe for all."

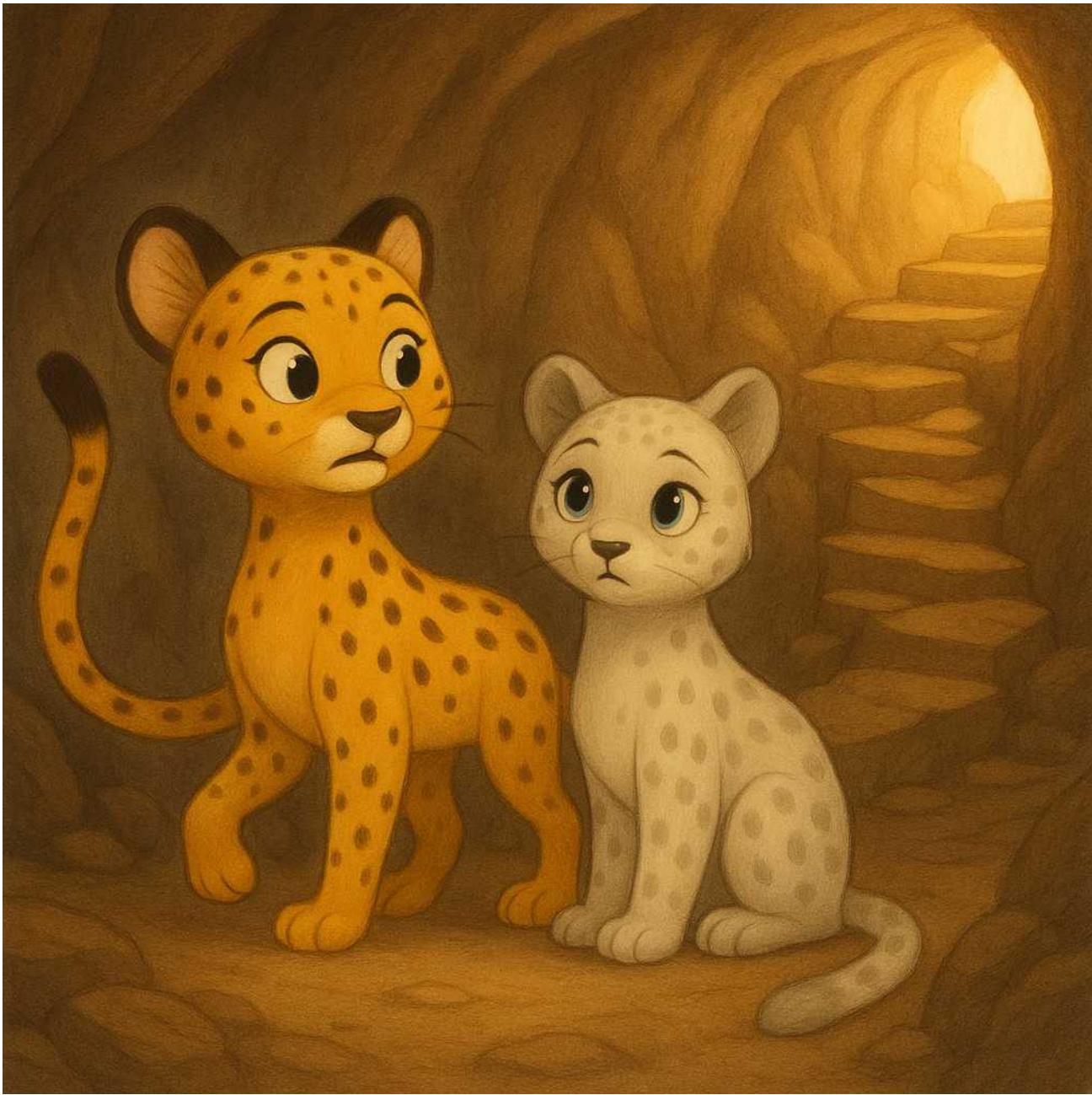


"Maybe we can climb up to the crack."

Anna scanned the walls.

Her eyes moved over bumps and ledges.

"Look," she said, pointing with her tail.



"Those rocks make steps."

Along one side, rocky parts made a rough
stair.

It zigzagged up toward the light.

"It is steep," Evie said.



"But if we go slowly, we can help everyone."

Milo's mother looked worried.

"What if someone falls?"

"They won't," Anna said.



"I have a plan."

"My plans are mostly silly, but the good part works."

Evie smiled a little.

"What is the plan?"



"Simple," Anna said.

"We go one step at a time."

"I go first and test each rock."

"If a rock is wobbly, I will find out."



"Evie stays behind the bunnies so no one slips."

"We move together."

"Slowly."

"Carefully."



She looked at Milo.

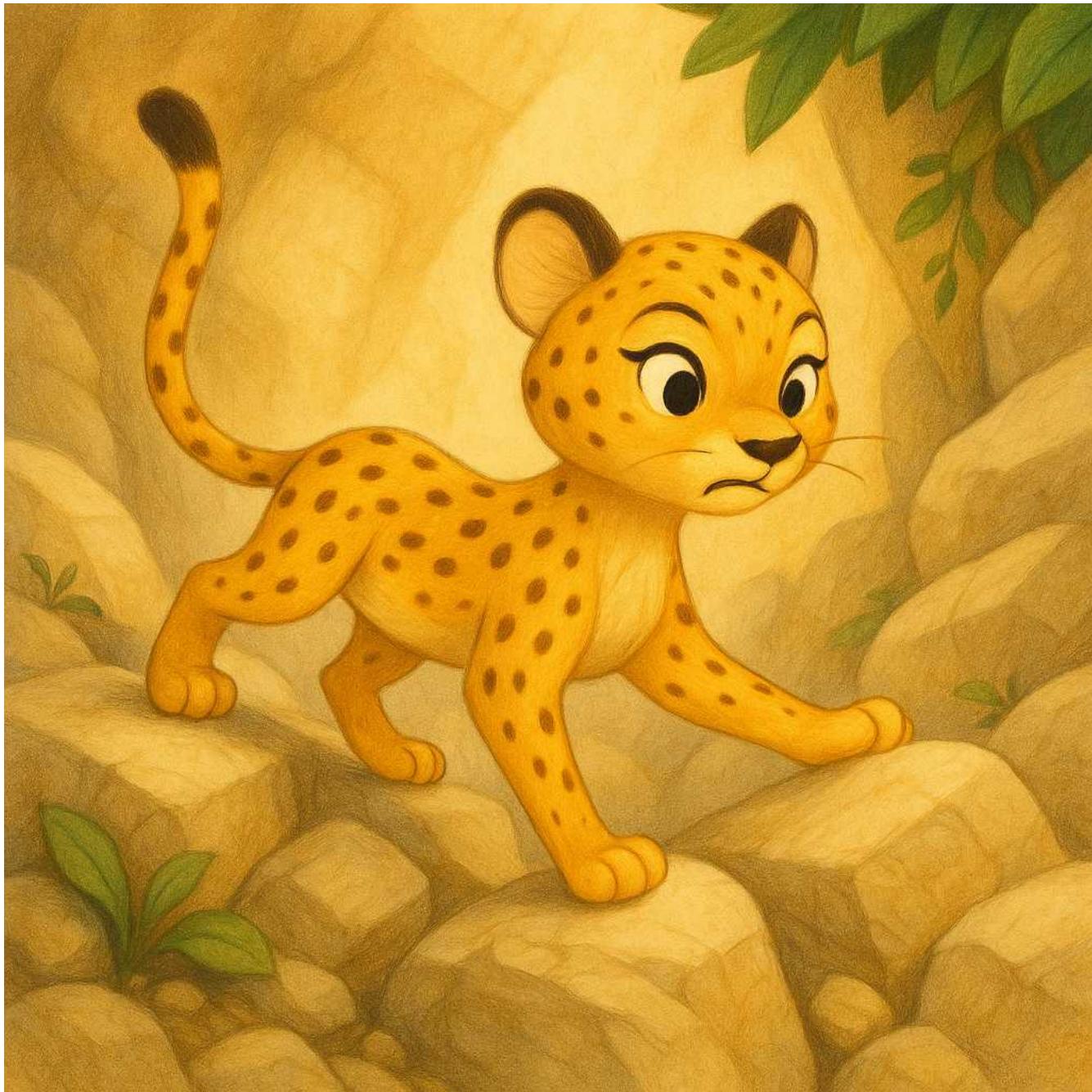
"And bravely."

Milo lifted his chin.

"I can be brave," he said.



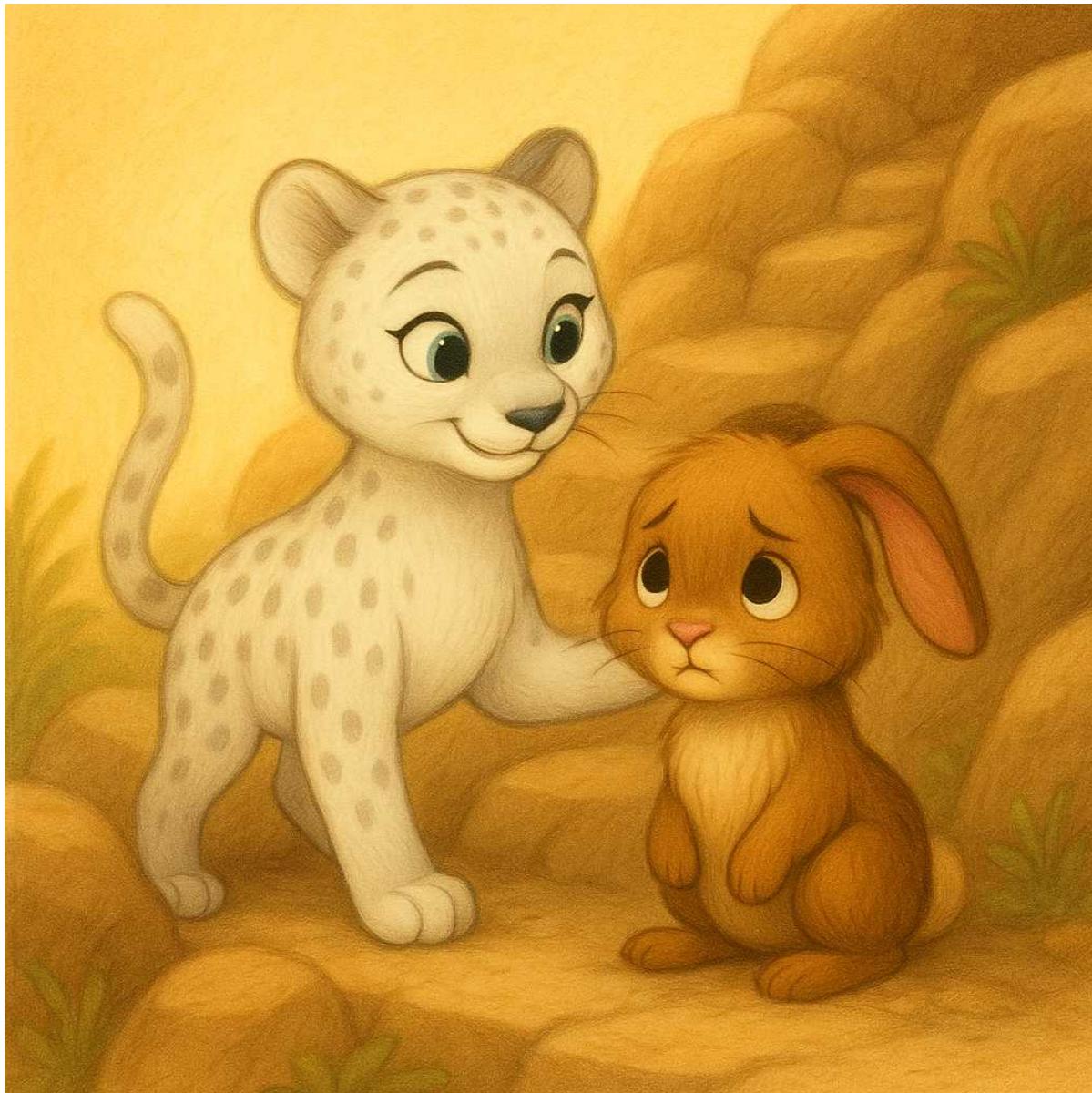
"We know," Evie said warmly.
"You already are."



The climb took a long time.
Anna went first.
She tested each rock with her paws.
If a rock moved, she jumped hard on it.



Then it would stay still or roll away.
"No wobbly rocks in this plan," she said each time.
The rabbits came behind her.
They moved slowly and carefully.



Evie walked right behind them.
If a rabbit wobbled, she pressed gently and
spoke kind words.
"You're doing great," she told a tiny bunny
who shook.
"Just one small hop at a time."



“I’m scared,” the Evie sead. Wenn yui
feel scared but keep going. Milo climed

“I’m scared,” the bunny whispered.

“That’s okay,” Evie said.

“When you feel scared but keep going, you
are brave.”

Milo climbed near the front.



He looked back a lot.

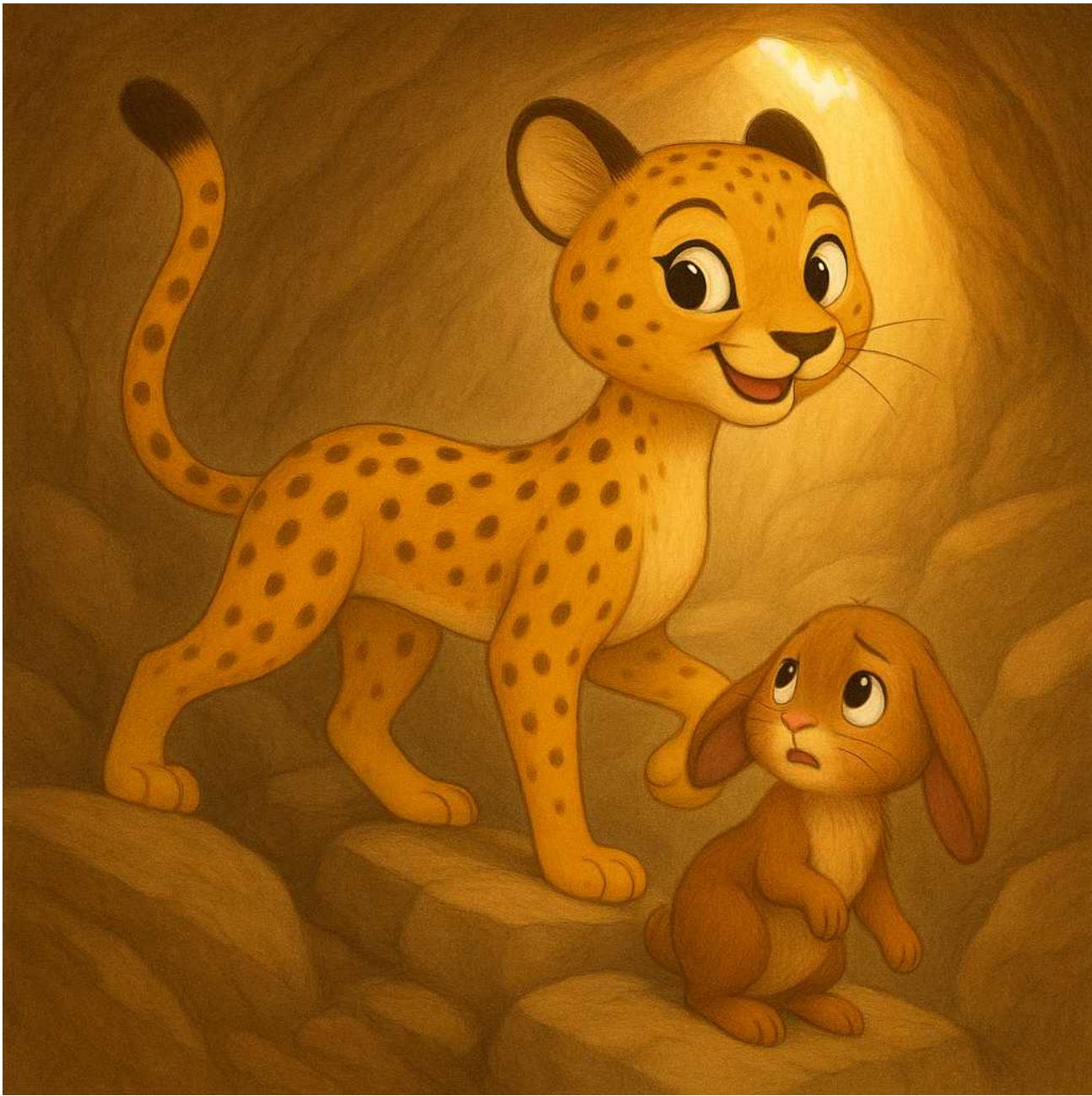
"Come on," he called softly.

"We're almost there!"

A small pebble rolled under Milo's foot.



He slipped and gasped.
His paws scrambled.
Before he could fall, Anna wrapped her tail
around his middle and held him still.
"Got you," she said, a little out of breath.



"See? My tail is not just for looking nice."

"Thank you," Milo squeaked.

They climbed higher and higher.

Light from the crack grew brighter and warmer.



Fresh air blew in.
It smelled like leaves and sky.
At last, Anna pulled herself onto a ledge
under the crack.
From there she saw the jungle.

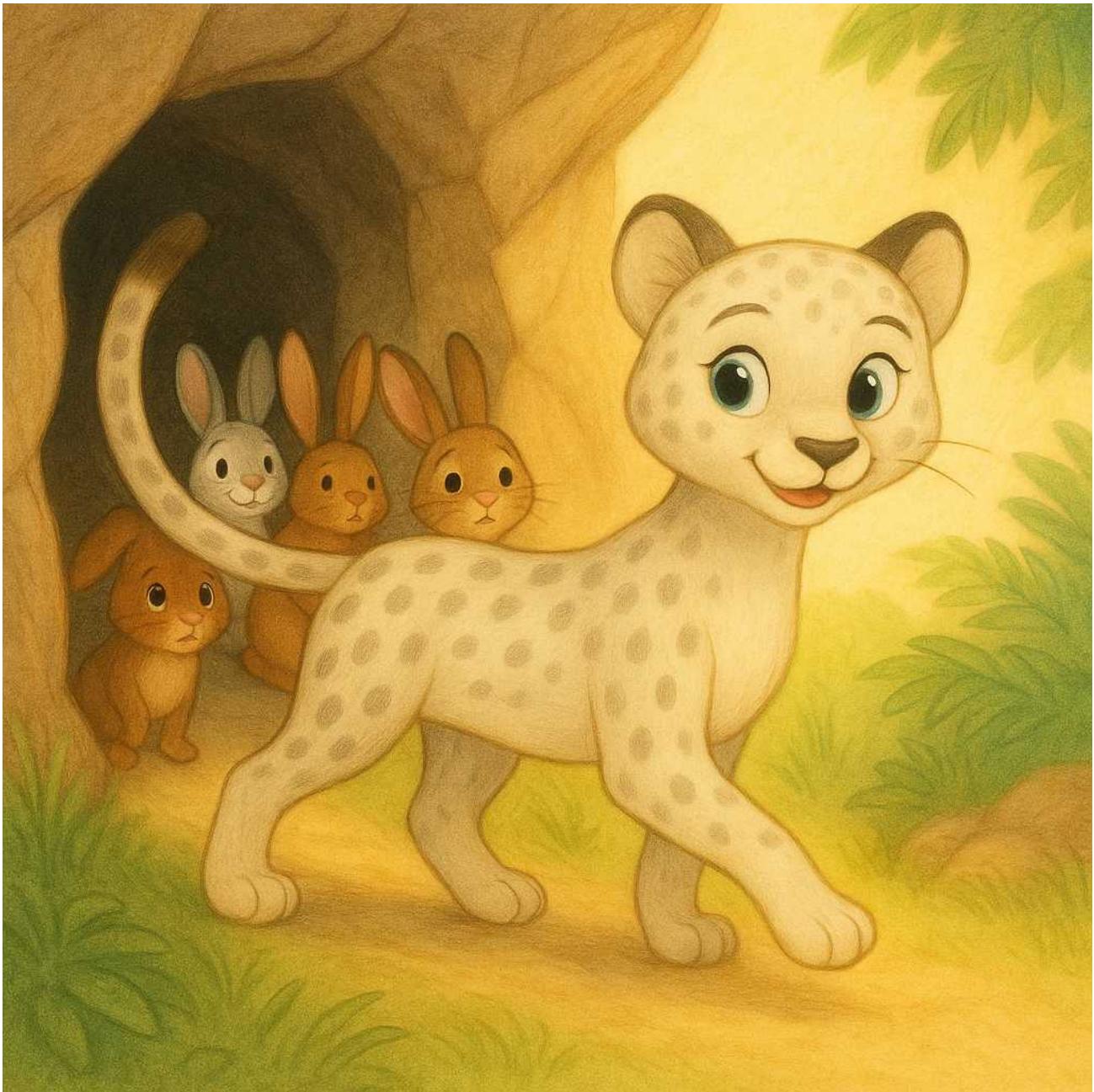


Ferns and roots went down to a patch of trees she knew.

"Home is right there!" she shouted.

Evie reached the ledge.

The first rabbits came next.

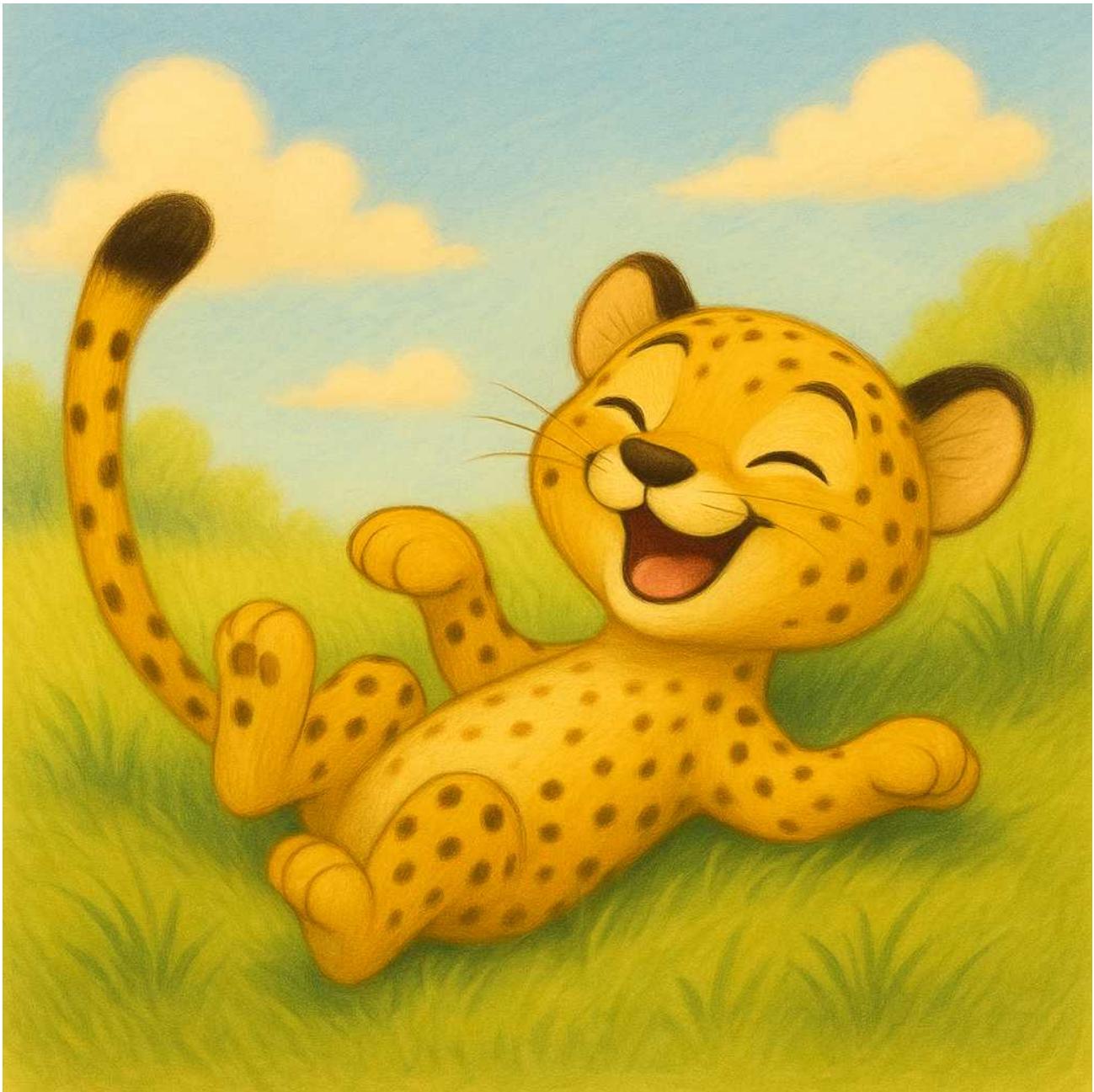


They went through the widest part of the crack one by one.

They popped out into the sunshine.

"Careful," Evie said.

"The ground goes down, but it is soft."



Milo wriggled through the crack.
He tumbled onto the grass.
He lay on his back and laughed at the bright
sky.
"It's so bright!" he cried.



"And not rocky!"
One by one, all the rabbits came out.
Soon the whole family stood on the hillside,
blinking in the sun.
Milo's mother turned to Anna and Evie.

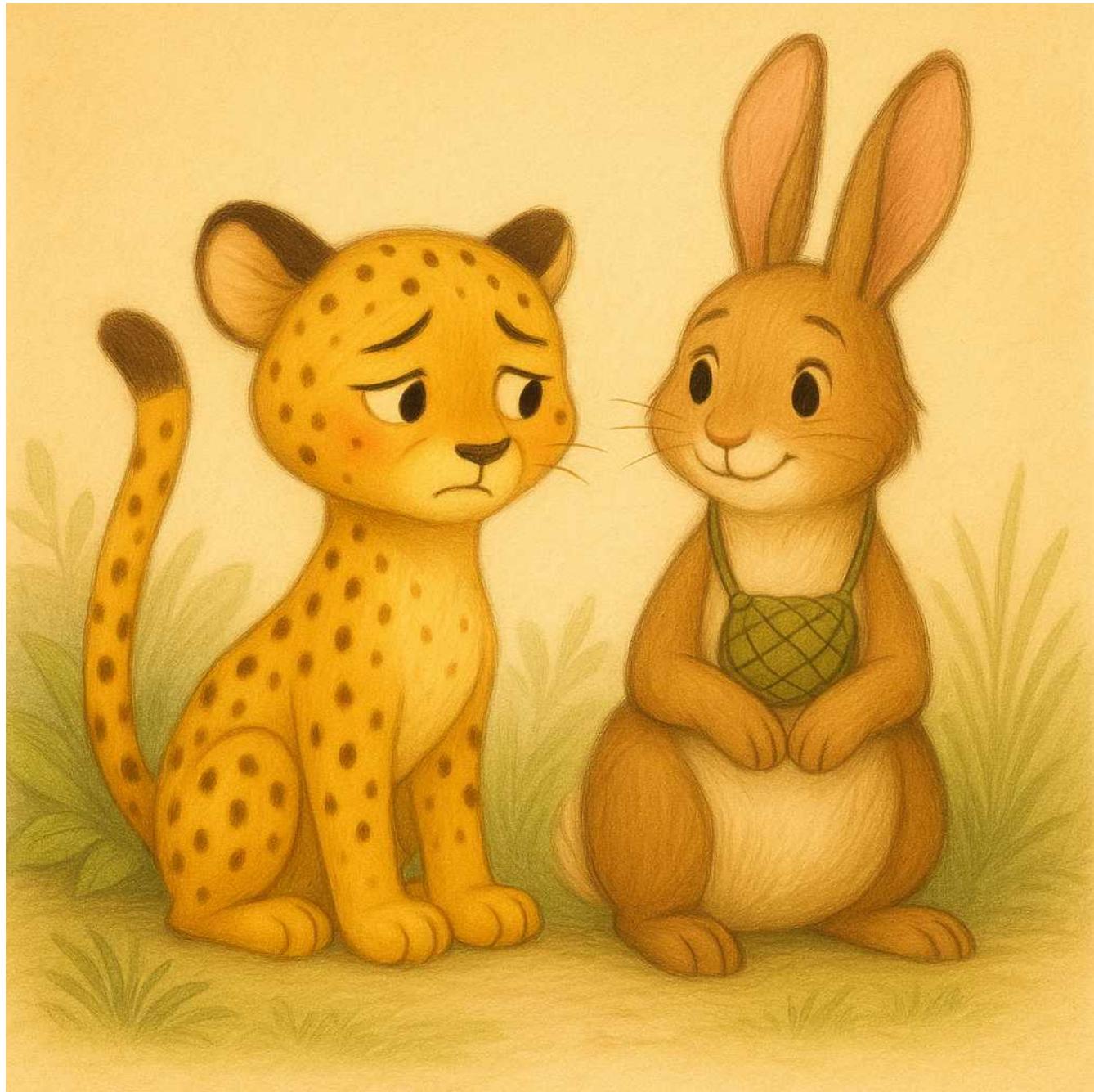


"We don't know how to thank you," she said.

"You kept Milo safe."

"You found us."

"You got us out of the cave."

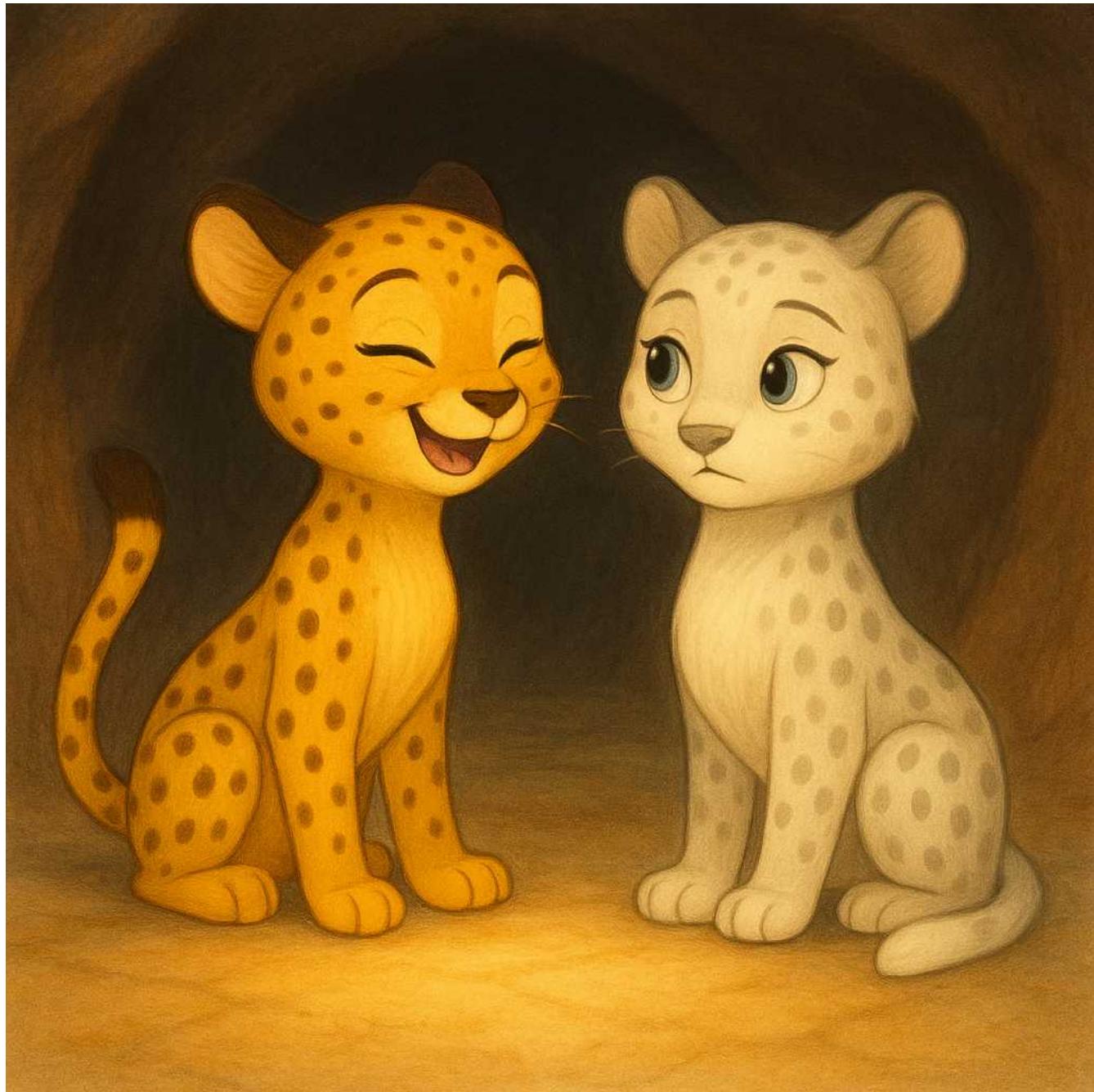


Anna felt shy.

"It was nothing," she said.

"Well, not nothing."

"There were rocks."

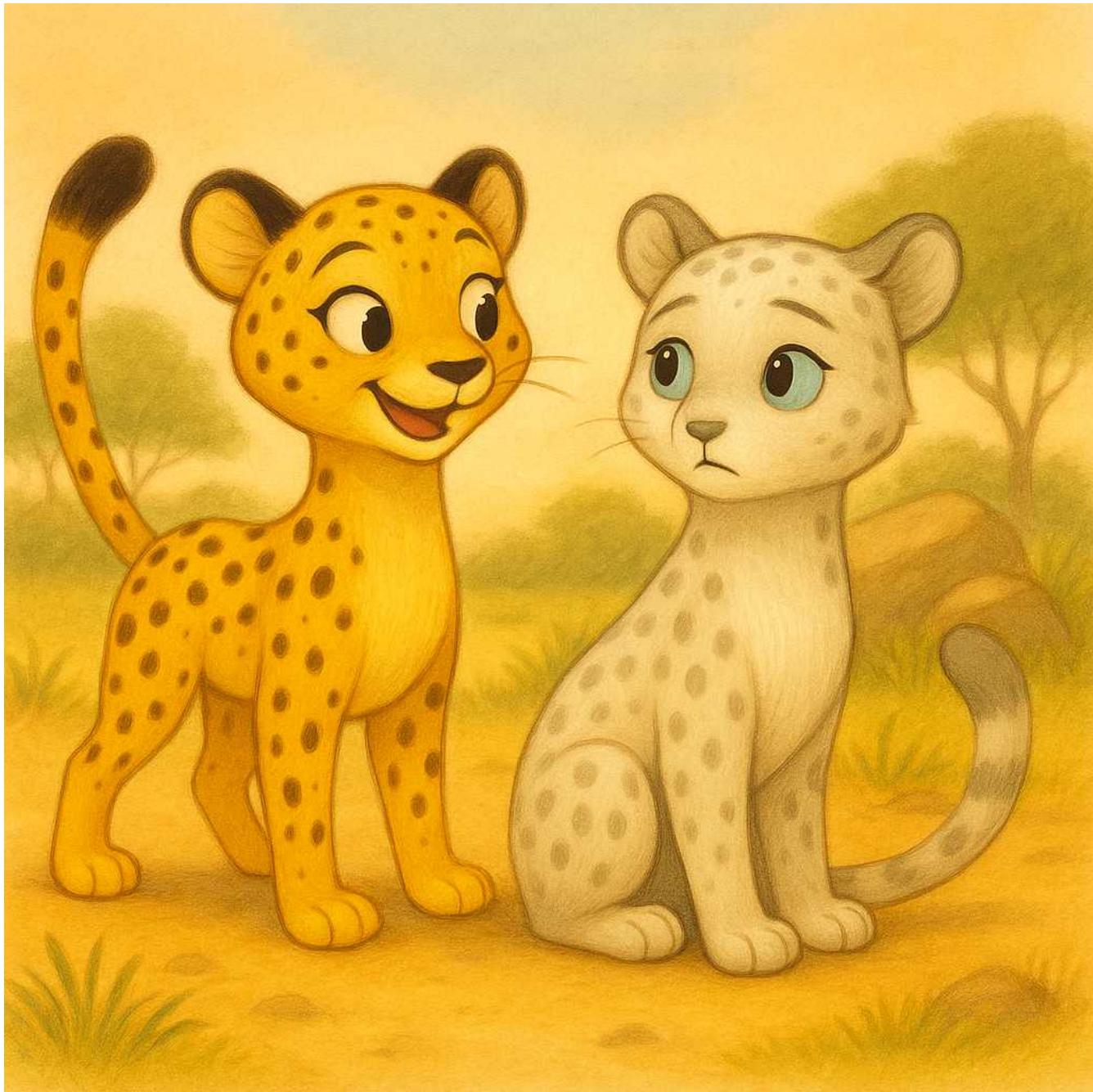


"And darkness."

"And feelings."

"But it was fun."

Evie gave her a look.



"Scary fun," she said.

"The best kind," Anna said.

She looked around.

"Speaking of scary, I hope Soren doesn't—"



She stopped.

Down below, near the bottom of the stone hill, they saw a long, shiny shape move in the bushes.

It was Soren, the snake.

He slid along a log and searched near the cave.



He looked up at the hill.
He saw only trees, ferns, and rocks.
The rabbits hid in the plants.
The cheetahs crouched low.

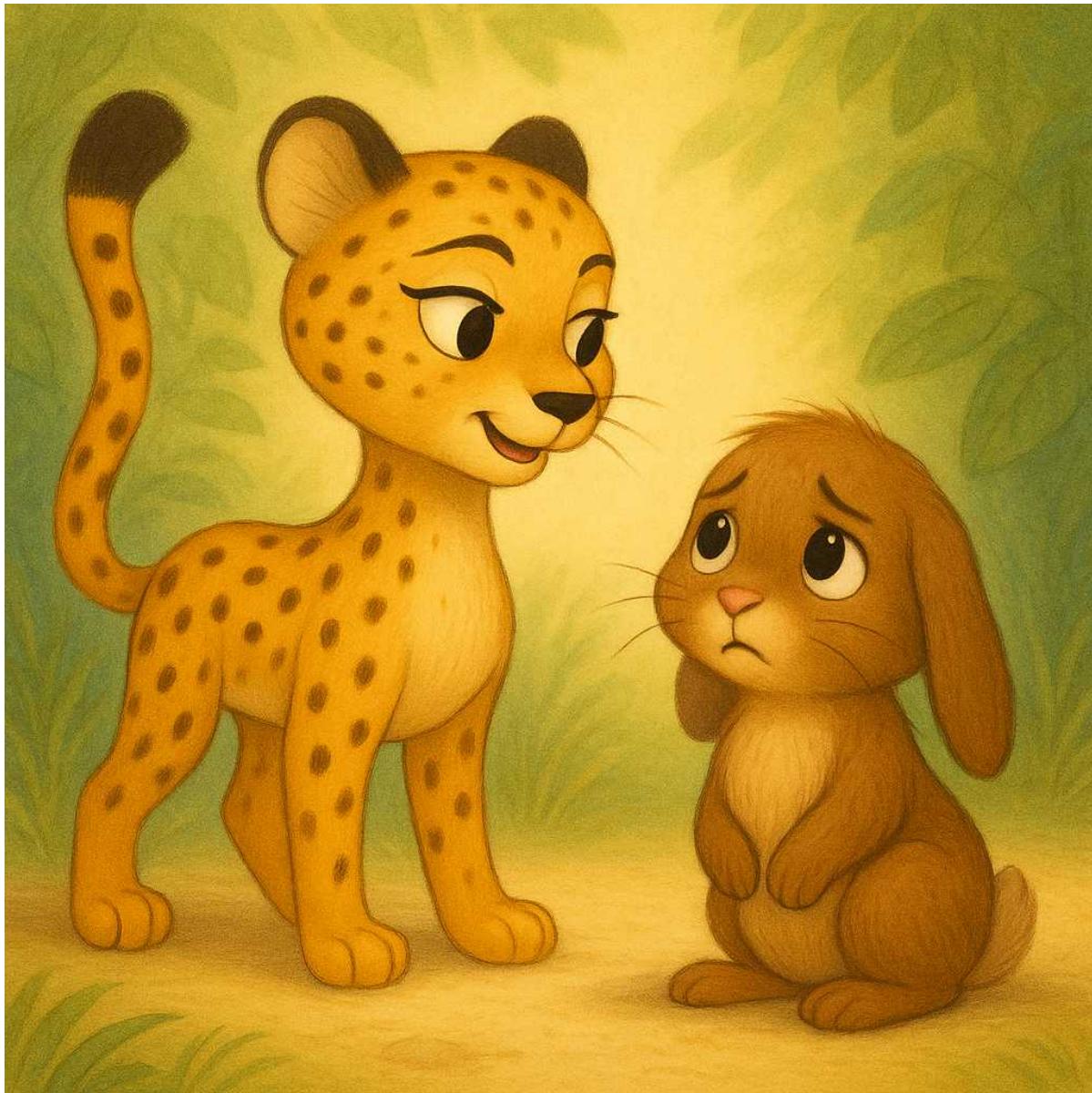


"He looks confused," Milo whispered.

"Good," Anna said.

"Let him be confused.

He tried to trick you."

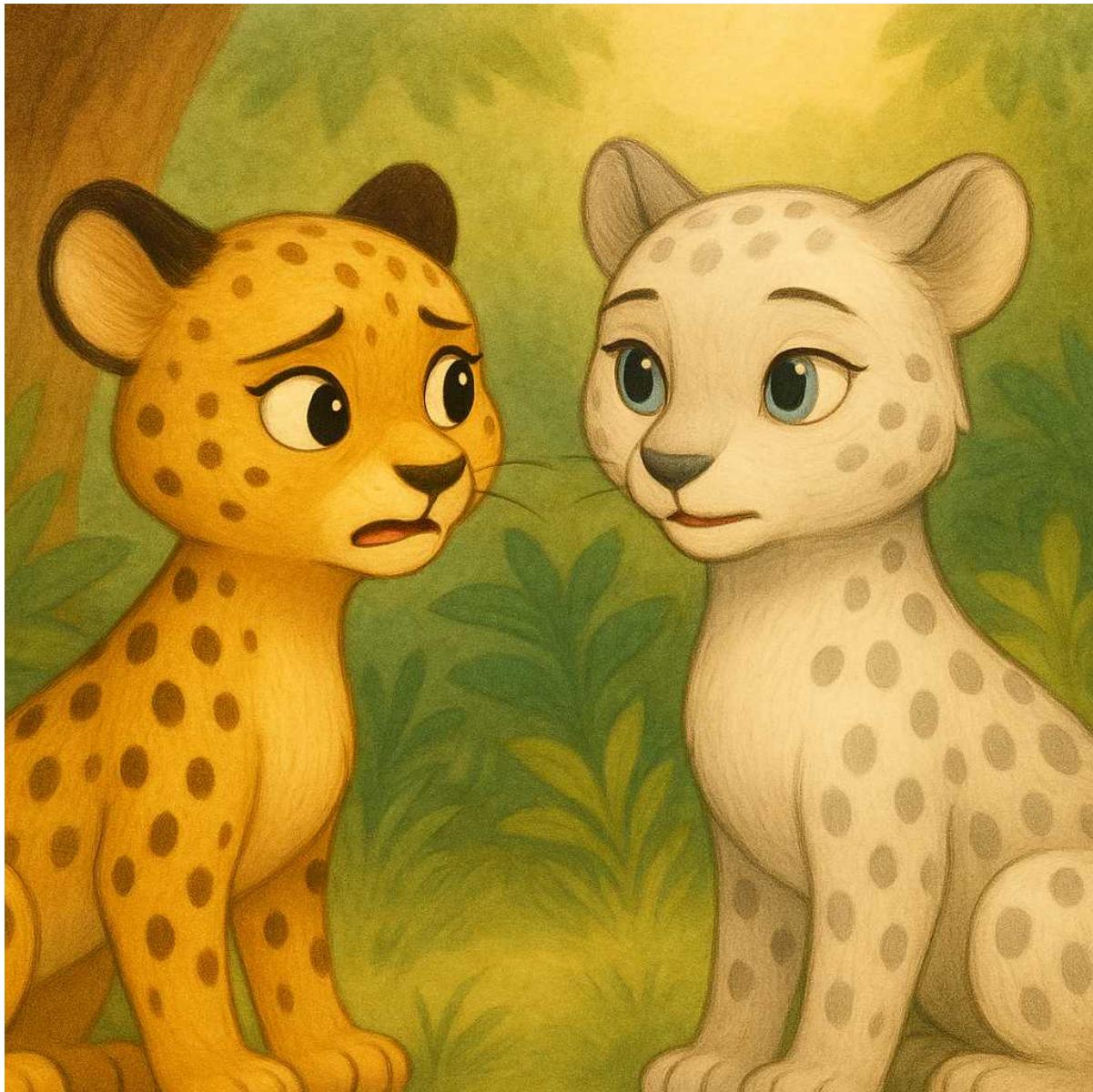


"How do you know?" Milo asked.

Anna thought about Soren's smooth voice and wide smile.

She thought about the way he stared at Milo, like Milo was a snack.

"I just know," she said.



"My whiskers told me."

Evie nodded.

"If someone says they want to help but won't let your friends come," she said gently, "that is not help."

"That is a trap."



Milo's nose twitched.

"I will remember," he said.

Soren slid past the hill and went into the trees.

Anna let out a long breath.



"Okay," she said.
"Our work is done."
"Rabbits together."
"Snake avoided."



"Cave finished."

She grinned.

"We're getting good at this, Evie."

"Maybe we should start a business."



Evie laughed.

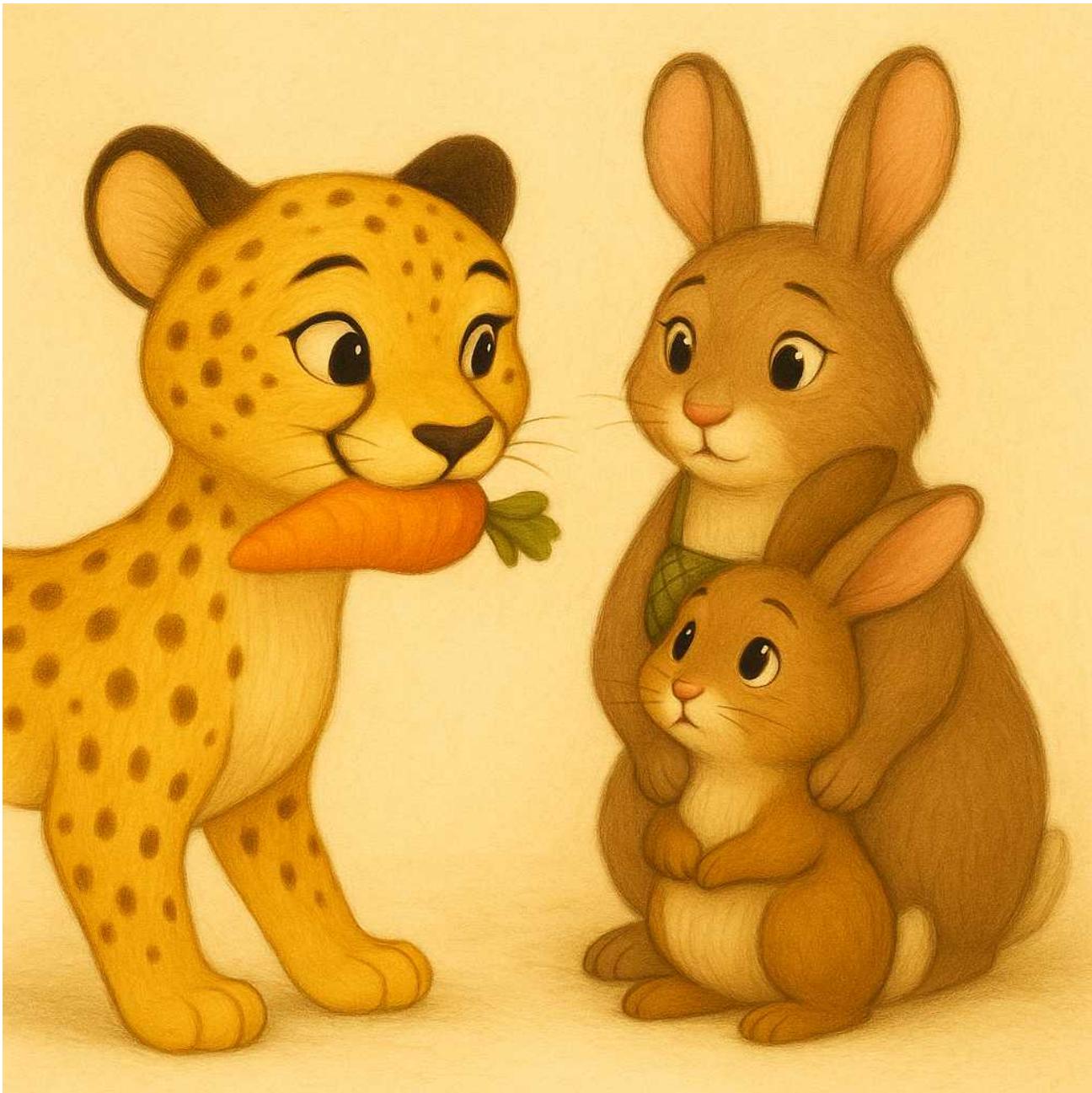
"A business?"

"Yeah! 'Anna and Evie's Lost-and-Found Adventure Service,'" Anna said.

"We find lost things—bunnies, toys, the last cookie, you name it."



Milo's ears perked up.
"What about lost carrots?"
Anna thought.
"We can talk about our pay."



"I take stories and snacks."

Milo's mother stepped forward.

"We don't have much," she said.

"But you can use our burrow anytime you need a safe place to rest."



"And..."

She opened a small pouch made of woven leaves around her neck.

She took out a small, crooked carrot.
It was bright orange and very clean.



"This is the last carrot from our garden," she said.

"We saved it."

"I want you to have it."

Anna's eyes went wide.



"For us?"

"Yes," Milo's mother said.

"For saving my son."

Anna took the carrot gently in her teeth and set it down.



"We will share it," she said.

"All three of us."

Milo's eyes sparkled.

"Carrot-friendship ceremony," he said.



They found a sunny spot under a nearby tree.
Milo split the carrot into three pieces.
One tiny piece for himself, one medium piece
for Evie, and the biggest piece for Anna,
because she had the biggest mouth.
They munched in happy silence.



"This is the best carrot I have ever eaten,"
Anna said in a serious voice.

"It's the only carrot you have ever eaten,"
Evie said.

"That makes it the best," Anna said.
"Also, it tastes like winning."



Milo giggled.

"And family."

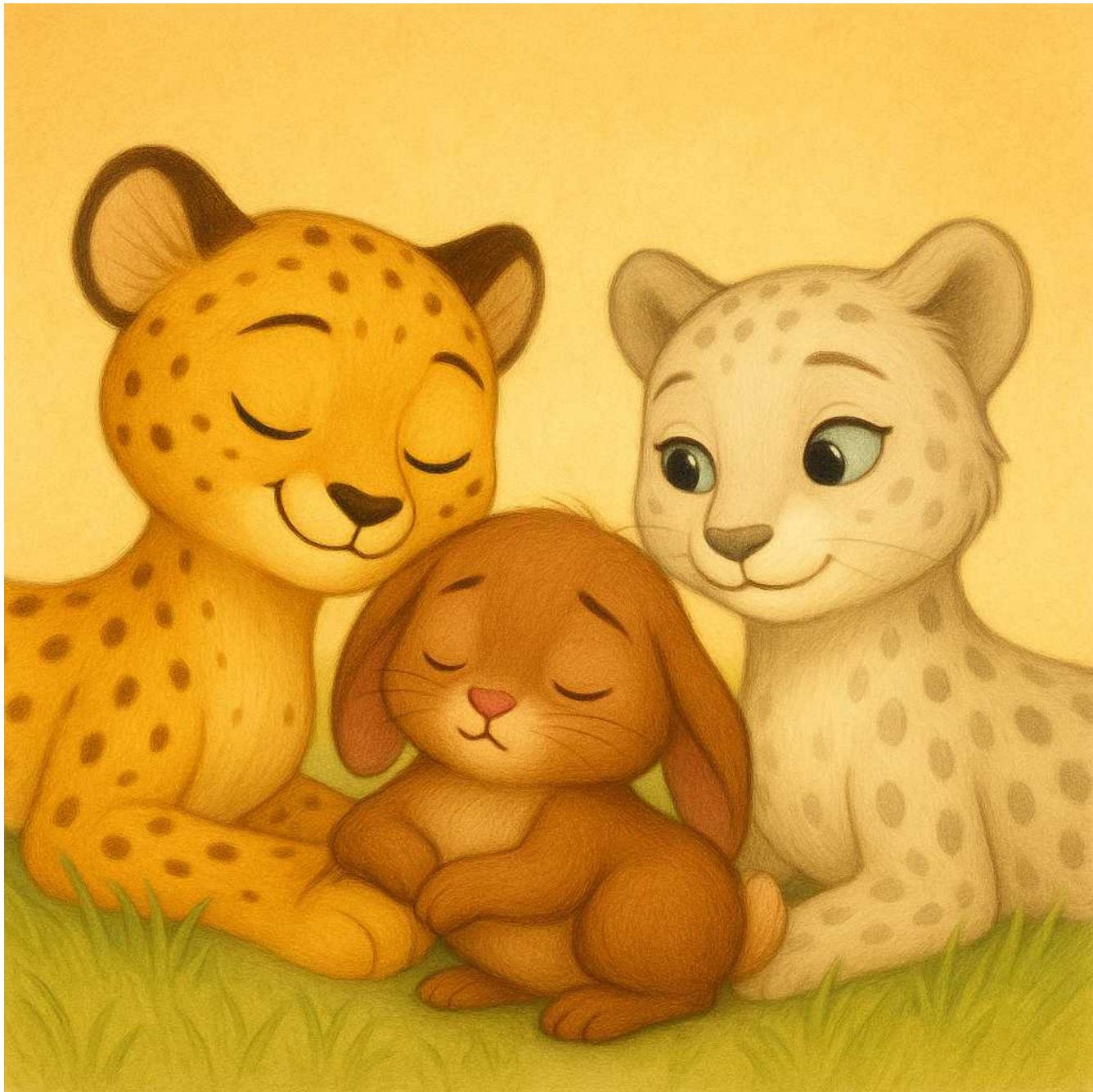
"And friendship," Evie added.

They finished the carrot.



They lay back in the grass and watched the clouds drift by.

The jungle hummed softly around them.
After a while, Milo leaned against Anna.
His eyes drooped.



"I'm glad I got lost," he mumbled.

Evie blinked.

"You are?"

"Not really glad," Milo said.



"But if I did not get lost, I would not have met you."

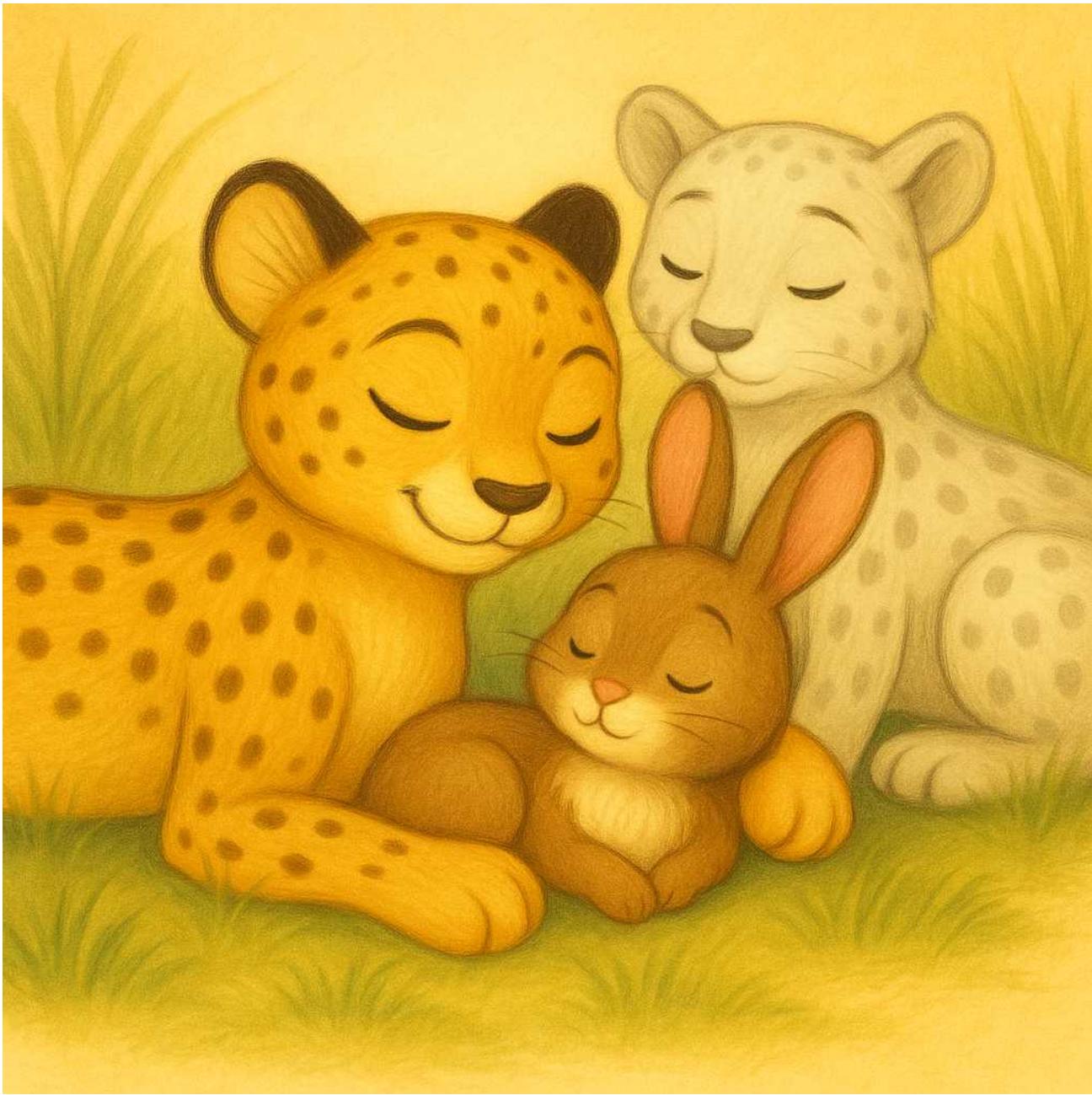
Anna's heart did a little twist.

She nudged him with her nose.

"We are glad we met you too, Milo."



Evie smiled.
"From now on, if you ever get lost again—"
"I won't," Milo said quickly.
"But if you do," Evie went on, "you know who to call."



Milo's eyes closed.

"Anna and Evie's Lost-and-Found Adventure Service," he whispered.

"That's us," Anna said softly.

The sun felt warm.



The grass felt soft.

For the first time that day, everyone felt safe.

The jungle had caves and snakes and tricky paths.

But it also had friends—fast, kind, loyal, and very silly friends.



They would always help each other get home.
Anna yawned.
Her eyes drifted shut.
"Hey, Evie?" she mumbled.



"Yes?" Evie said gently.

"Next time we have an adventure," Anna said sleepily, "let's not get lost inside a mountain."

Evie chuckled.

"I'll try."



"And maybe," Anna added, almost asleep, "we can get lost where there are snacks."

Evie smiled at her best friend and the little bunny sleeping in the grass.

"Deal," she whispered.

In the golden afternoon light, the jungle sang softly.



Anna, Evie, and Milo slept—safe and together.

After a good nap, they would be ready for whatever came next.