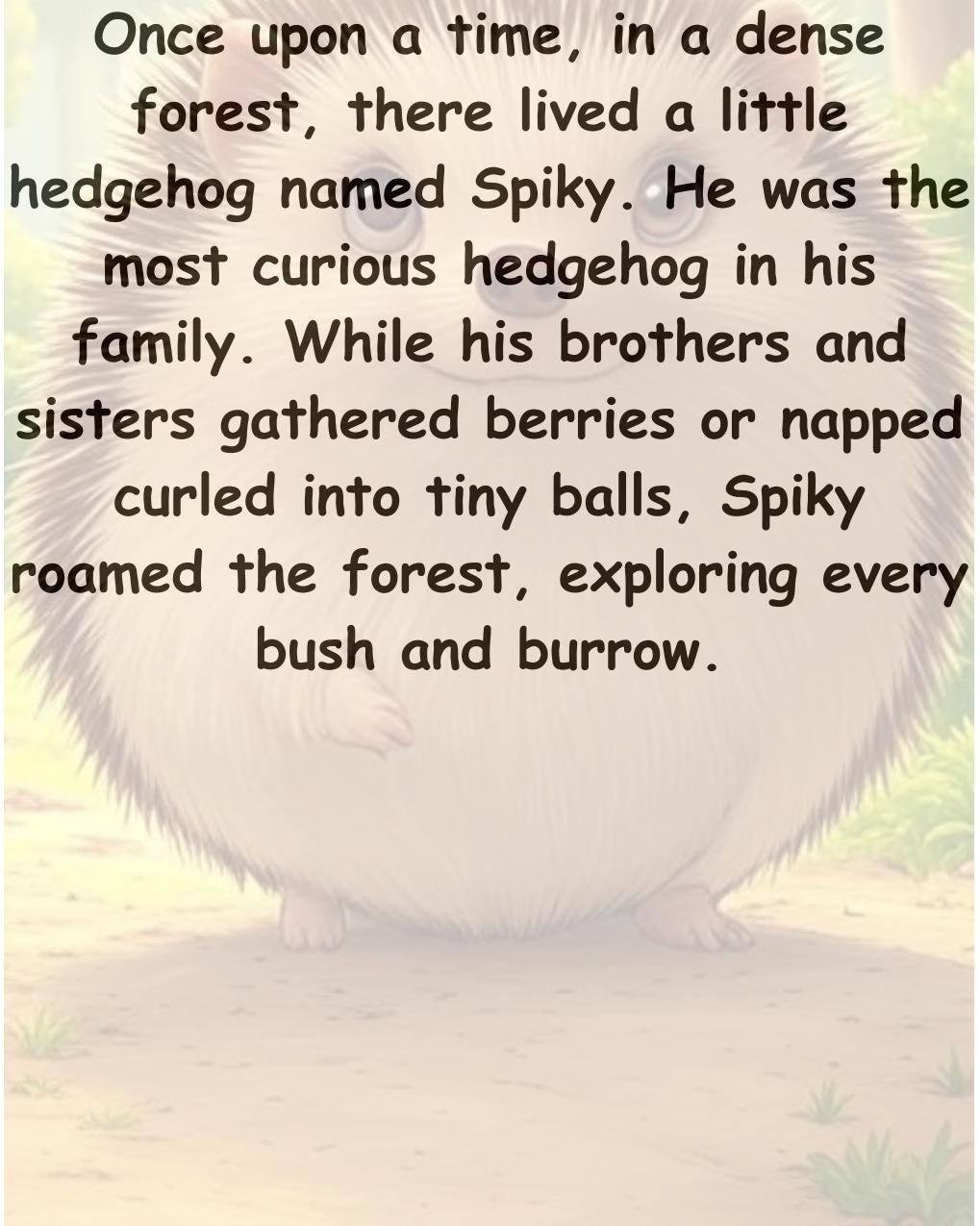


Evgeny Ponomarev

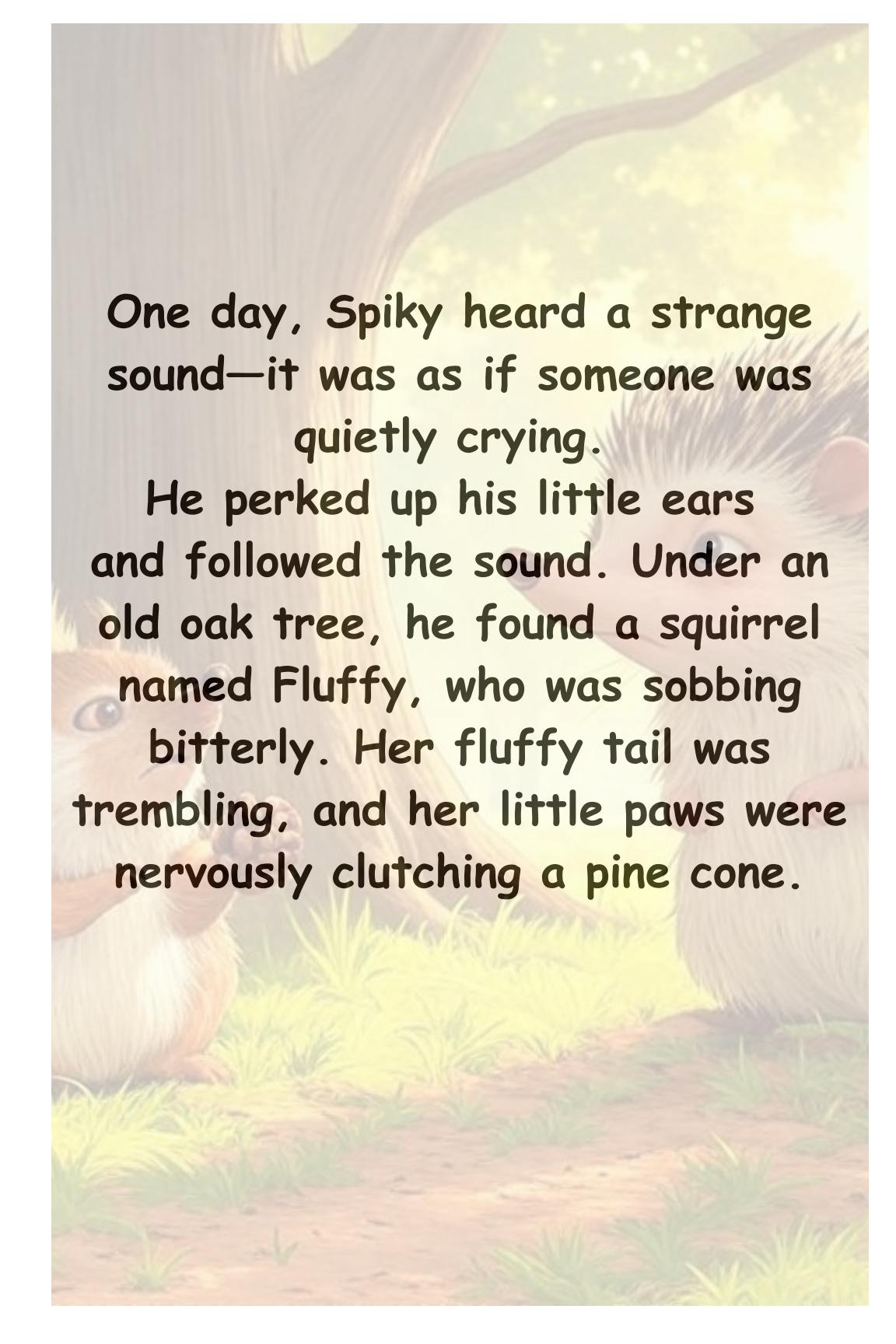
Spiky and the Shiny Pebble





Once upon a time, in a dense forest, there lived a little hedgehog named Spiky. He was the most curious hedgehog in his family. While his brothers and sisters gathered berries or napped curled into tiny balls, Spiky roamed the forest, exploring every bush and burrow.





One day, Spiky heard a strange sound—it was as if someone was quietly crying.

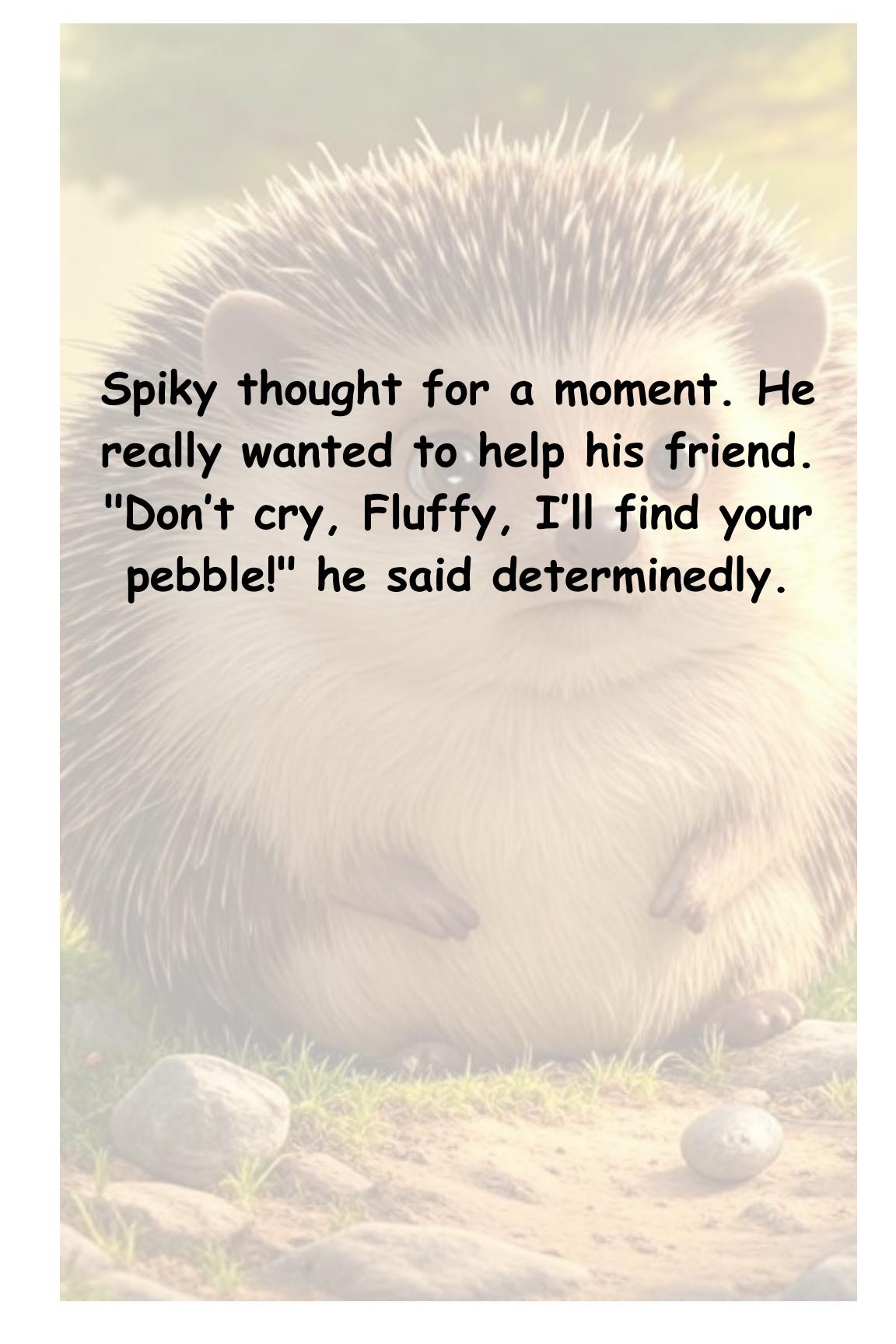
He perked up his little ears and followed the sound. Under an old oak tree, he found a squirrel named Fluffy, who was sobbing bitterly. Her fluffy tail was trembling, and her little paws were nervously clutching a pine cone.





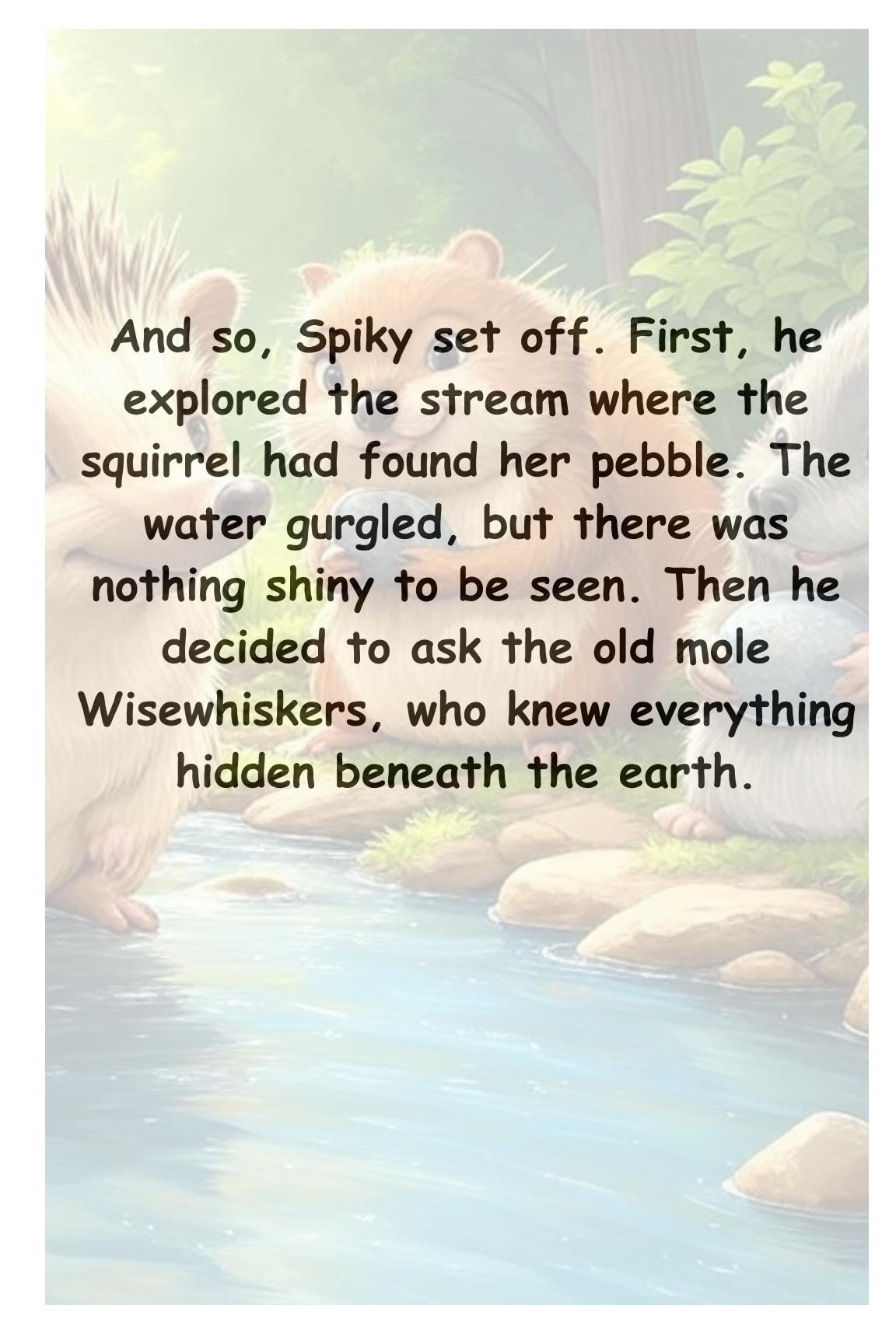
"Fluffy, what's wrong?" Spiky asked as he approached. "Oh, Spiky, I've lost my treasure!" sighed the squirrel. "It was a shiny pebble I found by the stream. It sparkled like a star, and now it's gone!"





Spiky thought for a moment. He really wanted to help his friend. "Don't cry, Fluffy, I'll find your pebble!" he said determinedly.

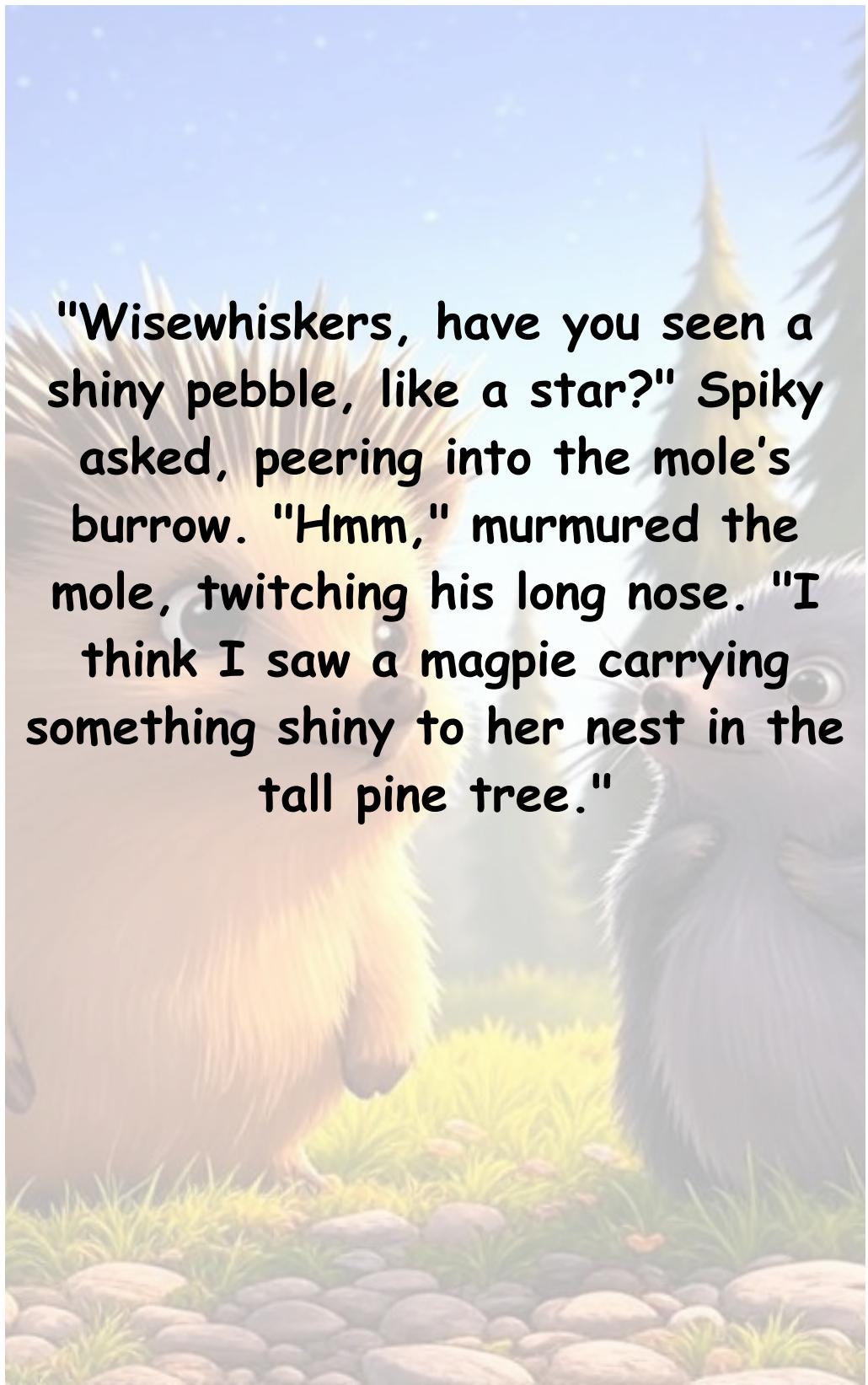




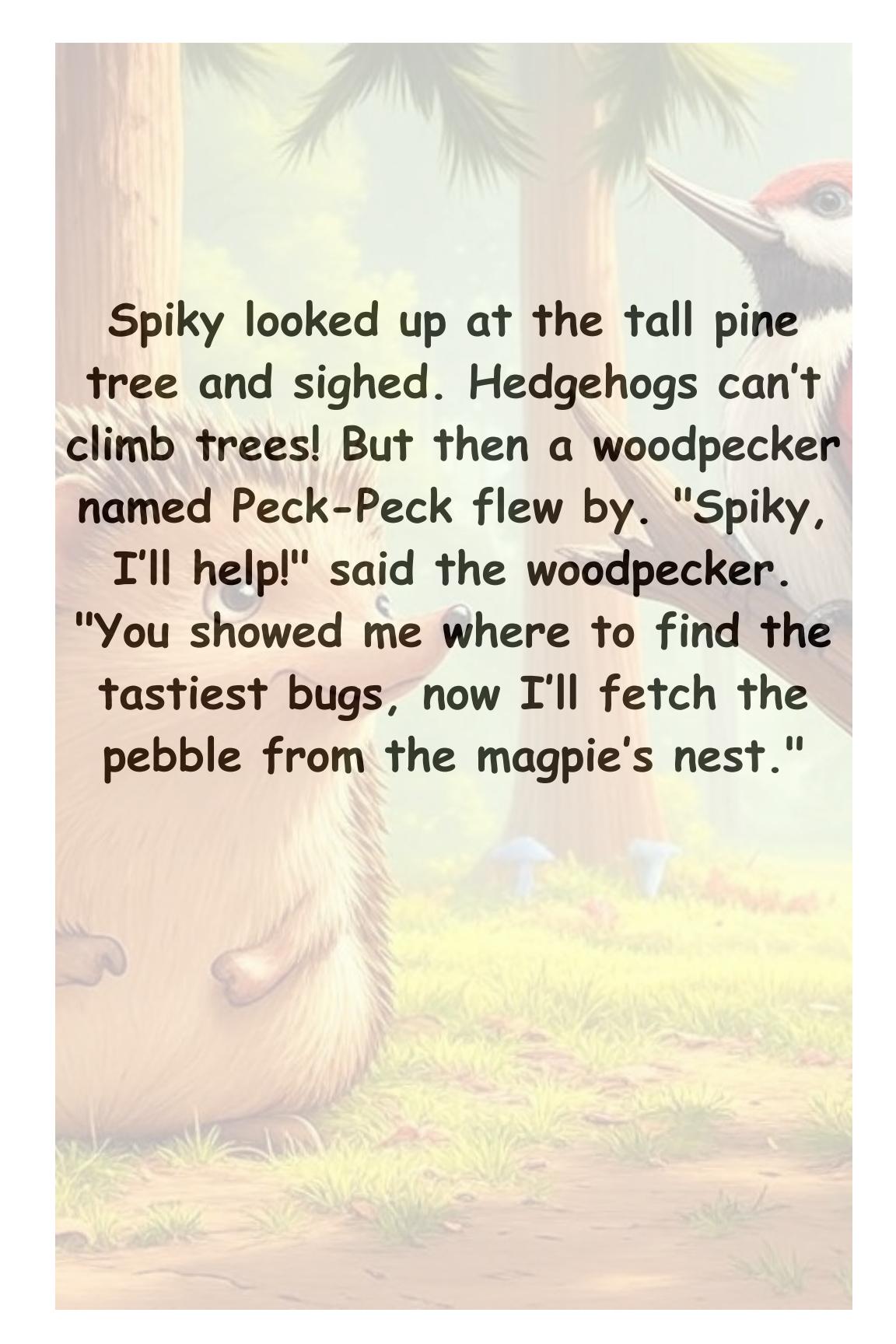
And so, Spiky set off. First, he explored the stream where the squirrel had found her pebble. The water gurgled, but there was nothing shiny to be seen. Then he decided to ask the old mole Wisewhiskers, who knew everything hidden beneath the earth.



"Wisewhiskers, have you seen a shiny pebble, like a star?" Spiky asked, peering into the mole's burrow. "Hmm," murmured the mole, twitching his long nose. "I think I saw a magpie carrying something shiny to her nest in the tall pine tree."

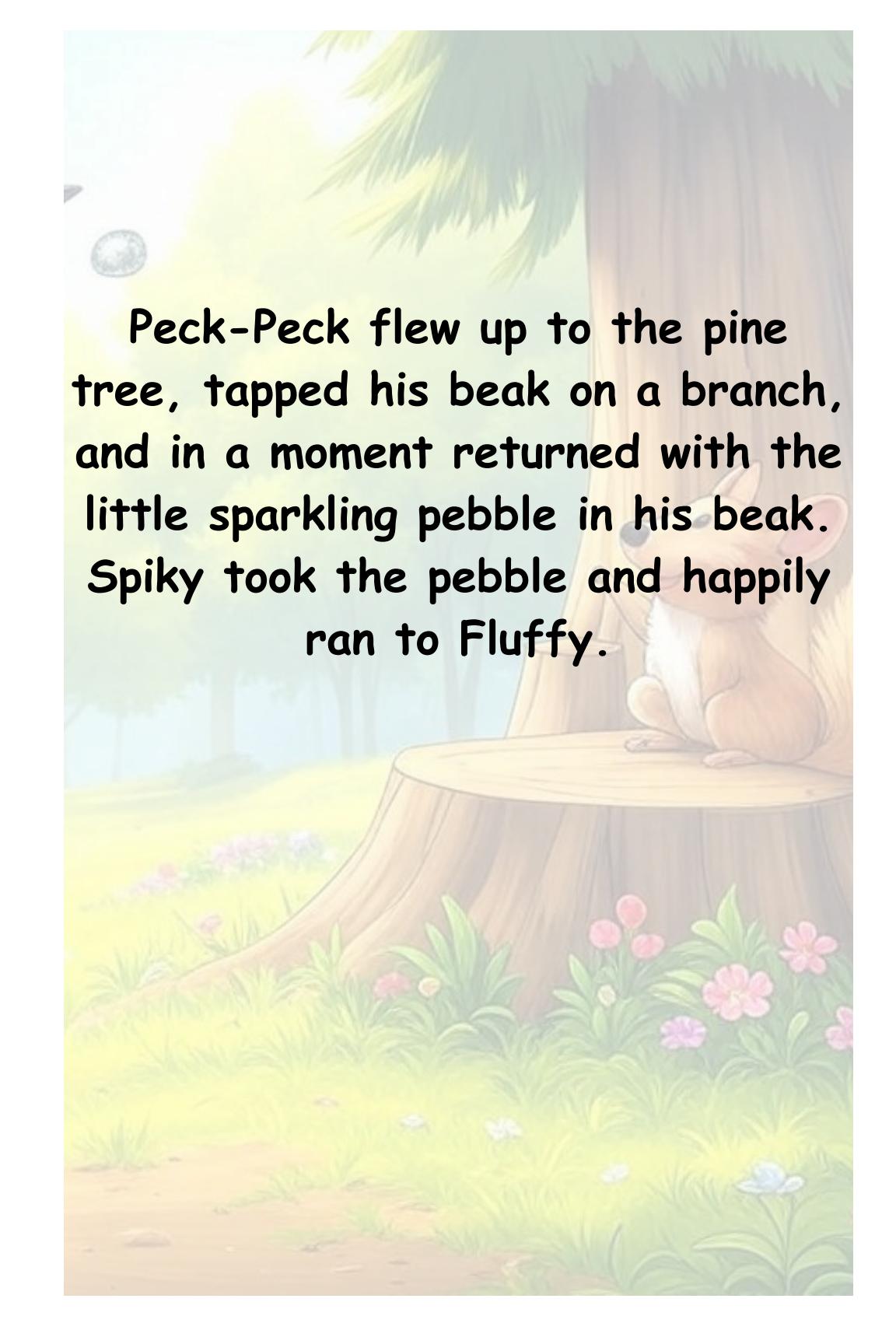




A soft-focus background illustration shows a hedgehog with a brown, spiky back on the left, its head buried in the ground. On the right, a woodpecker with a white body, red crest, and black stripes is perched on a tree trunk, looking towards the hedgehog.

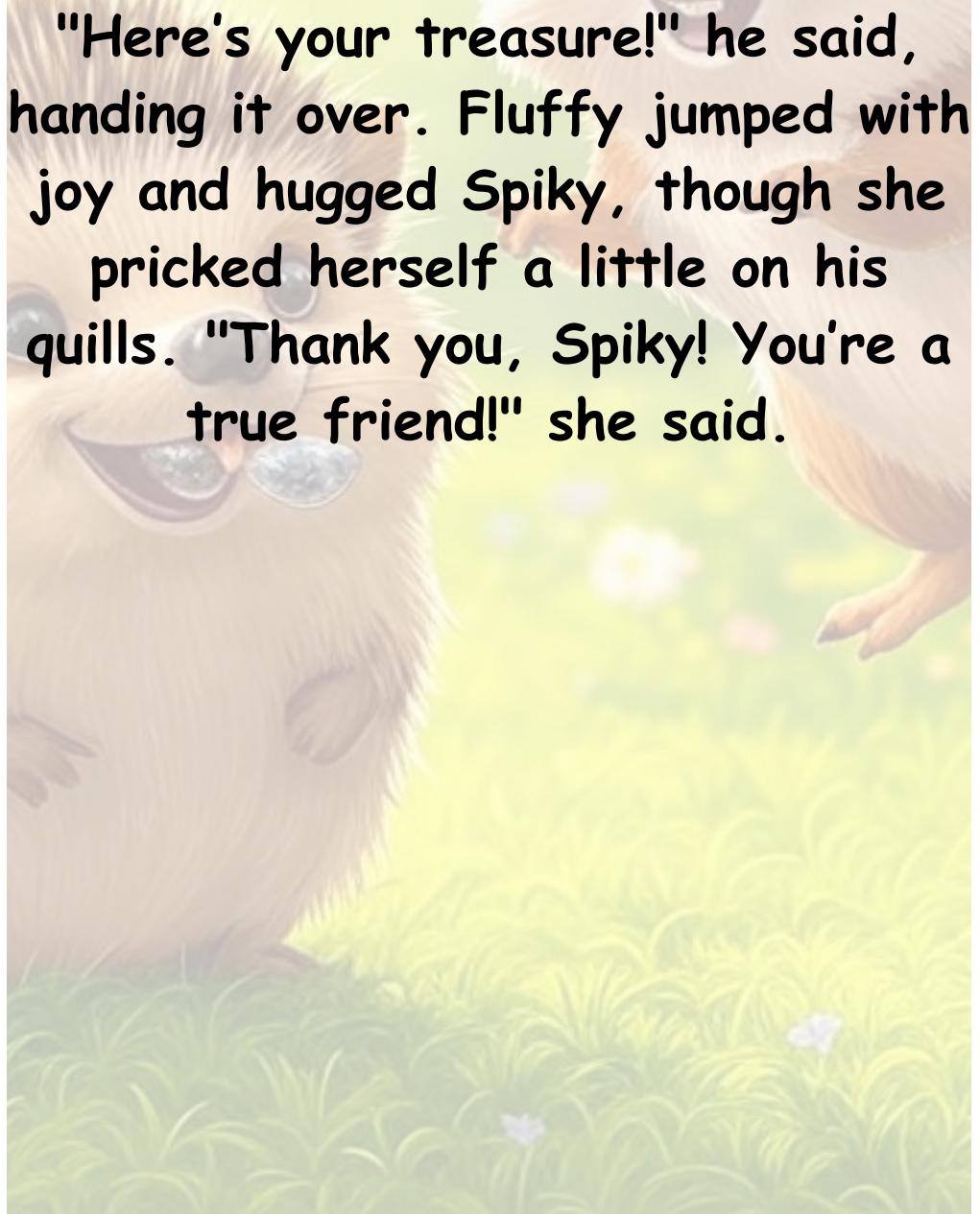
Spiky looked up at the tall pine tree and sighed. Hedgehogs can't climb trees! But then a woodpecker named Peck-Peck flew by. "Spiky, I'll help!" said the woodpecker. "You showed me where to find the tastiest bugs, now I'll fetch the pebble from the magpie's nest."





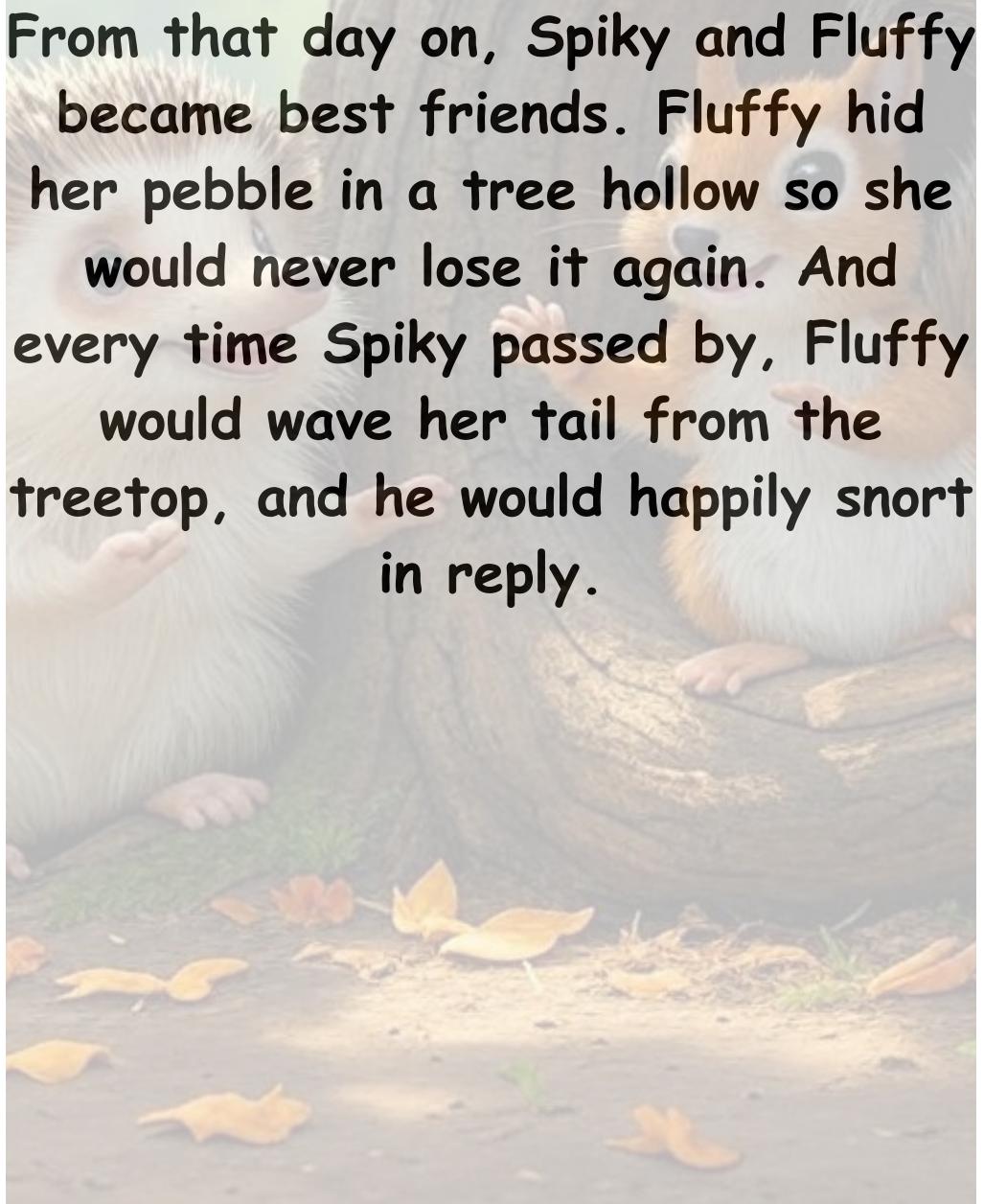
Peck-Peck flew up to the pine tree, tapped his beak on a branch, and in a moment returned with the little sparkling pebble in his beak. Spiky took the pebble and happily ran to Fluffy.





"Here's your treasure!" he said, handing it over. Fluffy jumped with joy and hugged Spiky, though she pricked herself a little on his quills. "Thank you, Spiky! You're a true friend!" she said.





From that day on, Spiky and Fluffy became best friends. Fluffy hid her pebble in a tree hollow so she would never lose it again. And every time Spiky passed by, Fluffy would wave her tail from the treetop, and he would happily snort in reply.

