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Caribou Man



An Eskimo Folktale Retold by William Harryman
Illustrated by Maria Voris

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Many, many seasons ago, the uncle of my uncle lived with his wife, Arnorrii, and two children. Their winter home was an igloo in a village near the sea. Onhgarouk was a decent husband and father, and a gifted hunter who provided well for his family.



One year, however, the winter was extremely severe. The traps were almost always empty, and the hunting was meager. Onhgarouk tried to furnish meat to feed his family, but the winter was long, and he grew weary. He even overheard his wife's father telling her that Onhgarouk was a terrible husband. Those words made Onhgarouk's heart hurt, because he knew he could be a better husband. The father wanted to take Arnorrii back to her home village where food was more plentiful. She was loyal, though, and remained with Onhgarouk.

When the season turned and the hunting improved, Onhgarouk still remembered the harsh winter and wished to know how to make life less difficult. He remembered what Arnorrii's father had said and also wished to become a better father and husband. He spoke with his brother, and his brother suggested that things would get better. But Onhgarouk's mind was set, and he decided to leave. He told his brother he was leaving to learn more about life and asked him to watch out for his family.

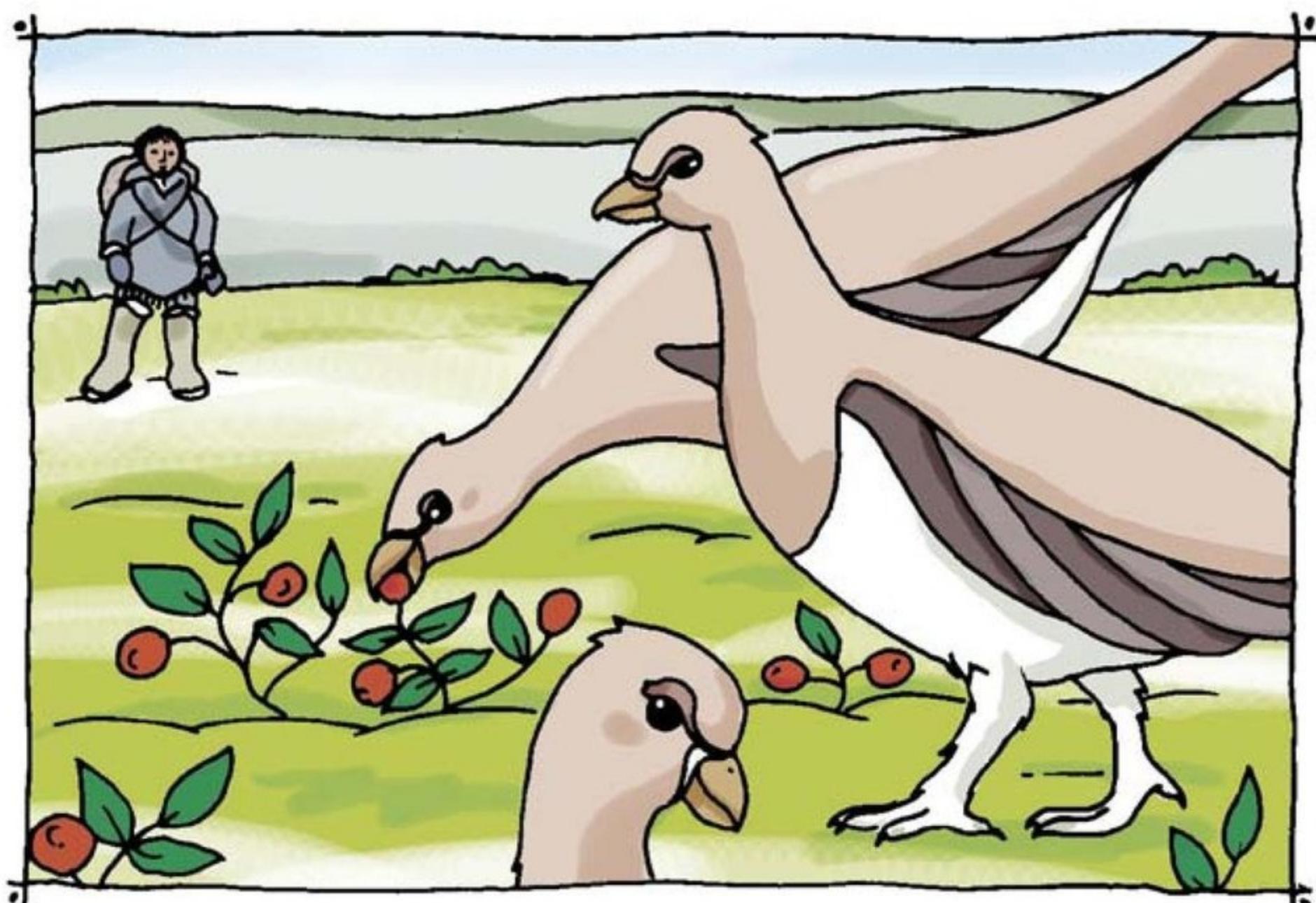




The next day Onhgarouk showed his wife how to take care of the traps. He told her where he kept the spears, bow and arrows, and the sharpest knife. When he told her that he was leaving the next morning, she pleaded with him to stay, insisting that her father hadn't meant the things he had said. But Onhgarouk explained that he felt the need to become a better man, and he left the following morning.

Onhgarouk wandered the treeless tundra for many moons. Over time he became angry and grew to dislike the loneliness of his life. He had learned nothing about being a better man. He wished to be something else, believing that other animals did not suffer the complicated lives of humans. As he wandered inland, he discovered a flock of ptarmigan. The birds, surrounded by green plants, seeds, and small berries, looked happy and their life seemed easy.

"Well," said Onhgarouk, "if I could be a ptarmigan, my life would be simple. Then I might find happiness."





He stayed close to the small flock, watching them, hoping they might pity him and use their magic to change him into a bird. As the ptarmigan flew from place to place in search of food, he followed, looking for them. But every time he found them, they moved to another spot. All day it went like this, until at sundown the ptarmigan settled into a small village just over a ridge.

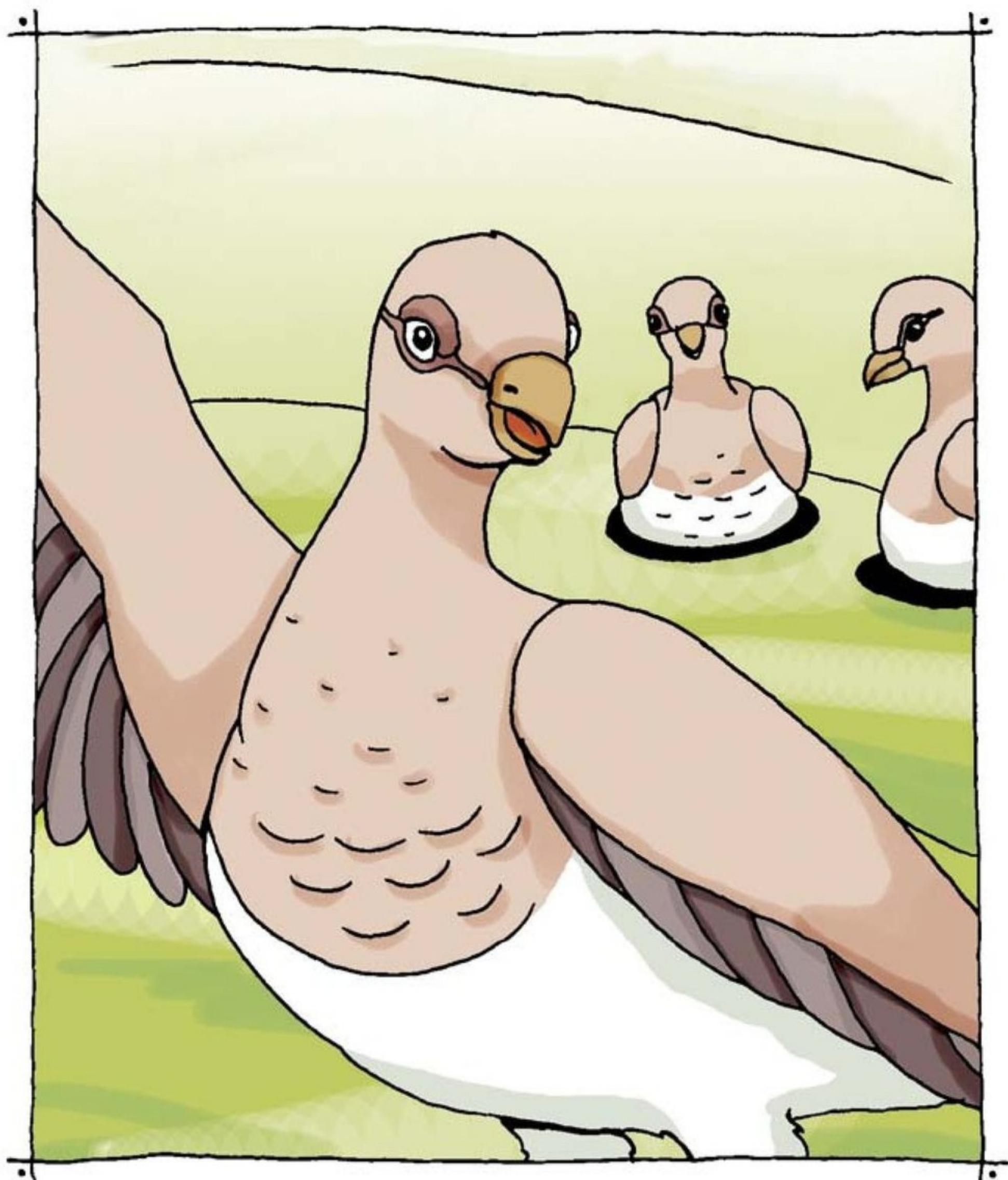
Onhgarouk followed the ptarmigan to their village. He walked straight to the *kazhgie*, the central house where the single male birds lived. Inside the kazhgie, many ptarmigan sat around the fire in the corner of the room.

"Human, why have you been following us all day?" the chief ptarmigan inquired. He did not seem angry.

Onhgarouk replied, "I followed you hoping to become a ptarmigan. I am tired of being a man and want a better life."



The chief stood and faced Onhgarouk.
“Our lives are not so simple. While it is nice to be able to fly, and we seldom lack food, it’s not easy being a ptarmigan. There are many creatures, both in the sky and on land, that hunt us. Our lives are always in danger. Surely, this is not the life you seek?”





Onhgarouk had not considered these problems. The chief was right—this was not the life he was seeking. The chief graciously allowed him to sleep in the kazhgie that night.

Onhgarouk was very fatigued from walking all day and fell asleep immediately.

When Onhgarouk woke the following morning, all the ptarmigan were gone, as was the village. Everything had disappeared except Onhgarouk and his pack.



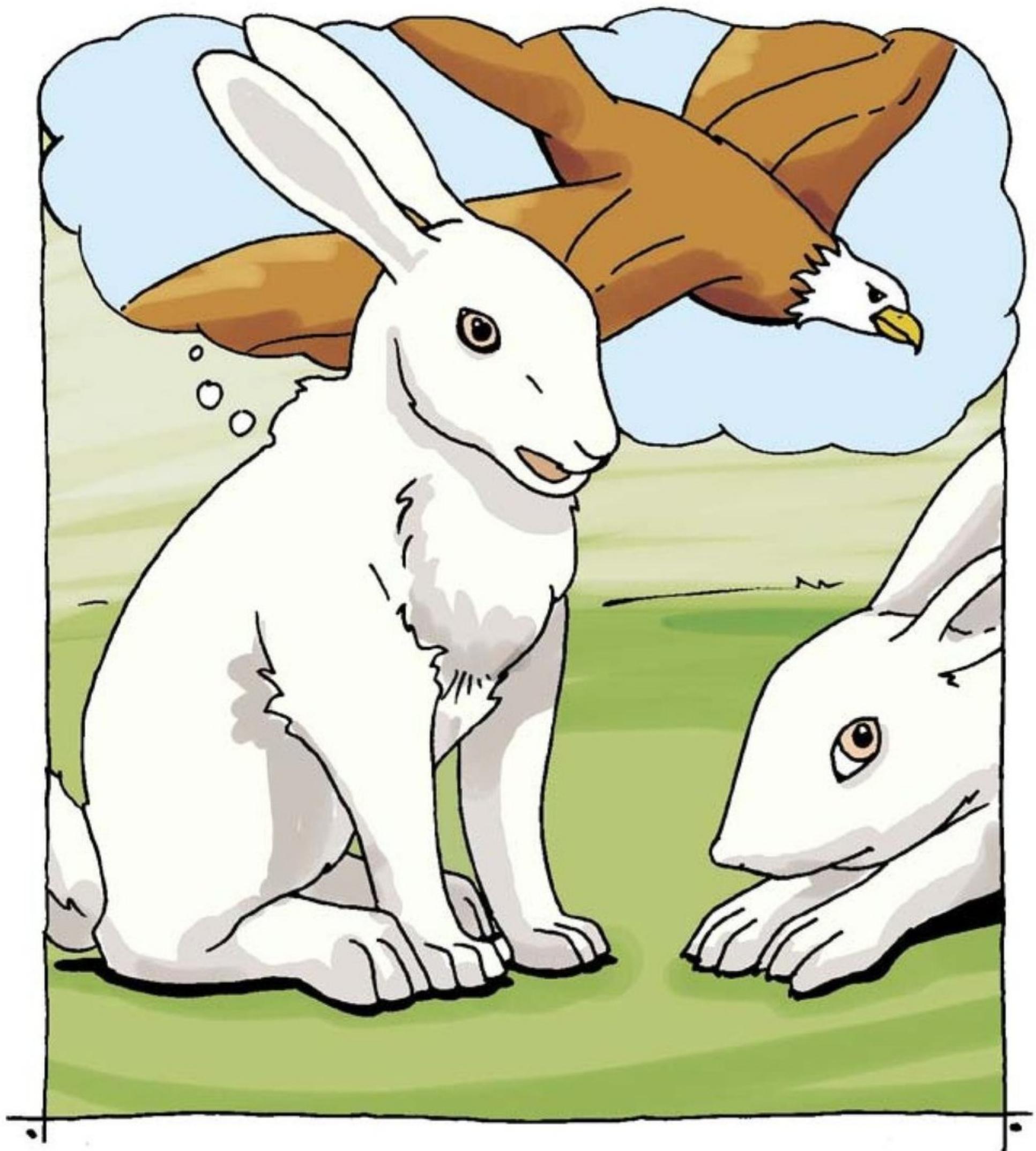
Once again, Onhgarouk began his search for a better life. He didn't know where he was going and didn't care. Around midday he noticed two snowshoe rabbits playing in the bushes. He watched them chase each other and laugh as they played.

For the remainder of the day, he followed the rabbits, hoping to talk with them. But each time he got near, they disappeared over a hill. He followed them all day, just as he had the ptarmigan.

Just after sundown, he found the igloo in which the two rabbits lived. When he entered the igloo, the rabbits asked why he had followed them.

Onhgarouk explained how difficult it was to be a human. As he spoke, the rabbit people served him some dinner. He told them that he wanted to become a rabbit so his life could be playful like theirs.

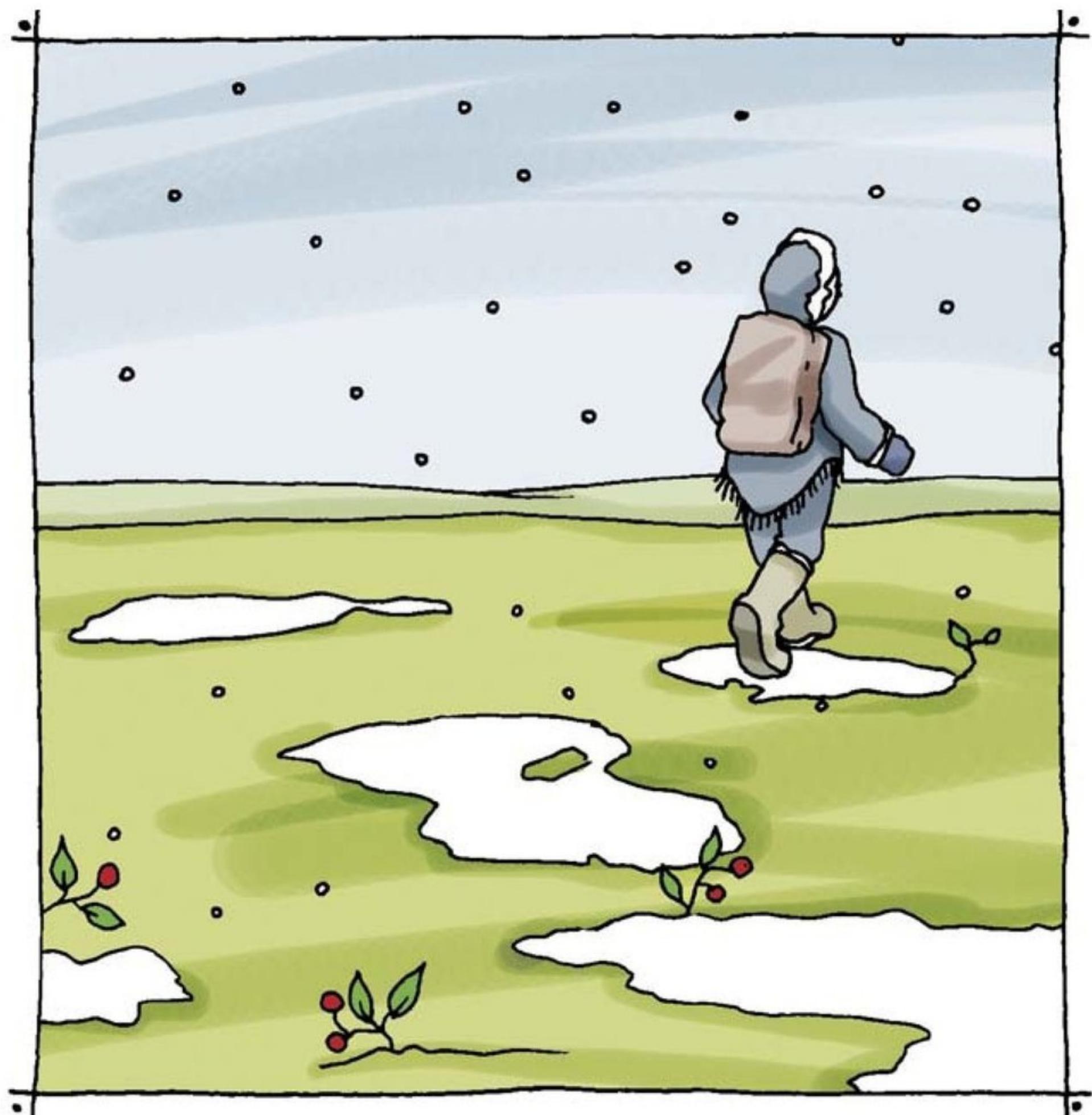


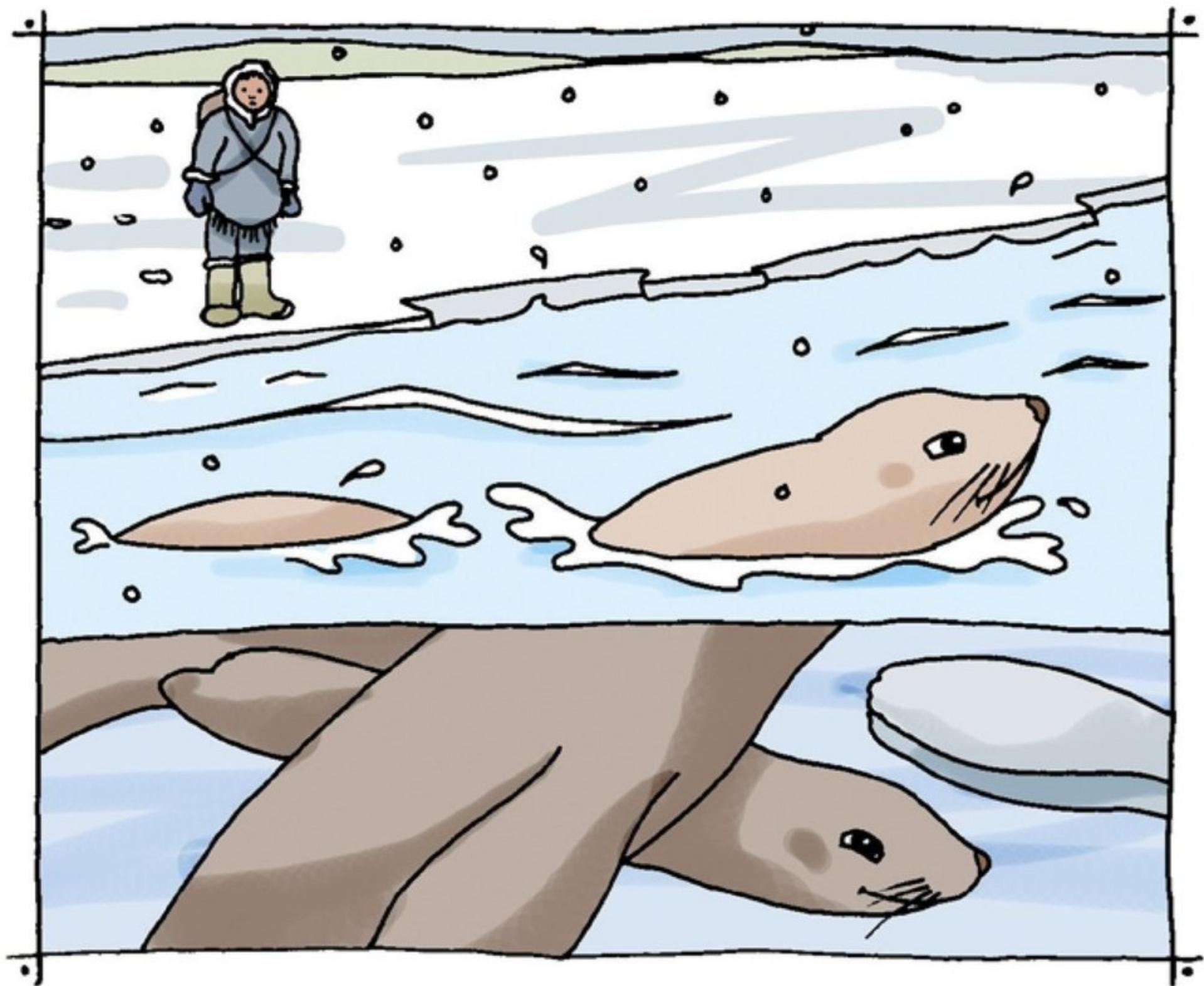


When he finished speaking, the male rabbit spoke. "Our lives look carefree, but at any moment an eagle or a hawk could take us for dinner. Or a fox or a wolf might chase us for a snack. Even smaller animals take our children. We play as we do because we may not see tomorrow. Surely, that is not the life you wish for?"

Onhgarouk agreed that being a helpless rabbit was not what he wanted. The rabbit people offered him a blanket, and he was soon deep asleep.

When he woke, the igloo, blanket, and rabbits were gone. Again, Onhgarouk wandered aimlessly across the tundra, searching for a better life where he could be happy and uphold his responsibilities.



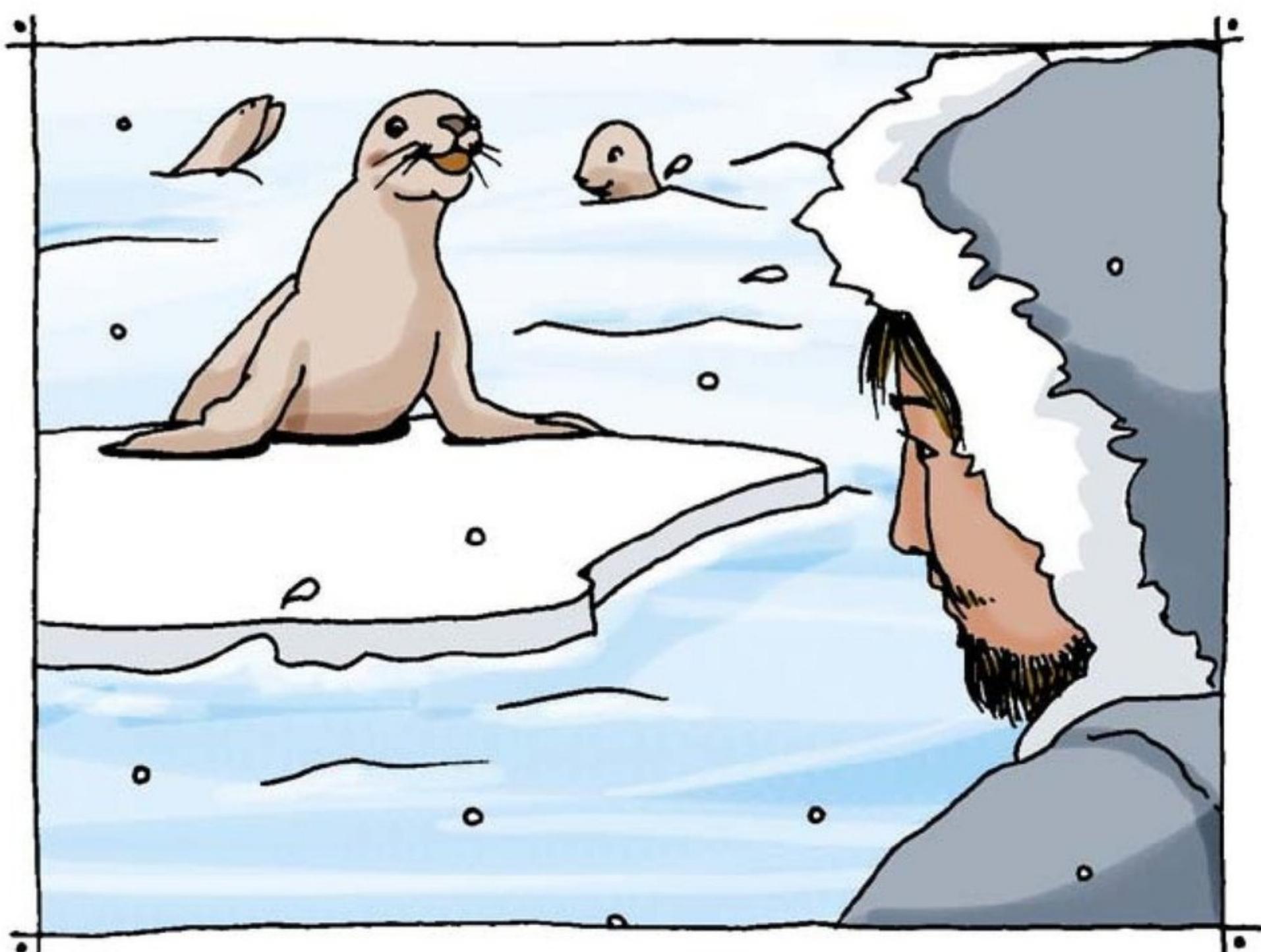


In the afternoon, Onhgarouk approached the coastline. As he neared the water, he spotted several large bearded seals swimming near the surface. They moved gracefully in the water, and they had plenty of fish for food. “Their life must be pleasant,” he thought to himself. He tried for hours to get close enough to speak, until finally he could talk to the seals.

“Please, Brother Seal,” Onhgarouk said to the largest of the three, “I have traveled very far to become one of you.”

The large seal swam up to the edge of the ice beside the Eskimo and listened as he told the same sad story all over again. When Onhgarouk had finished explaining his life, the seal thought for a moment and then spoke.

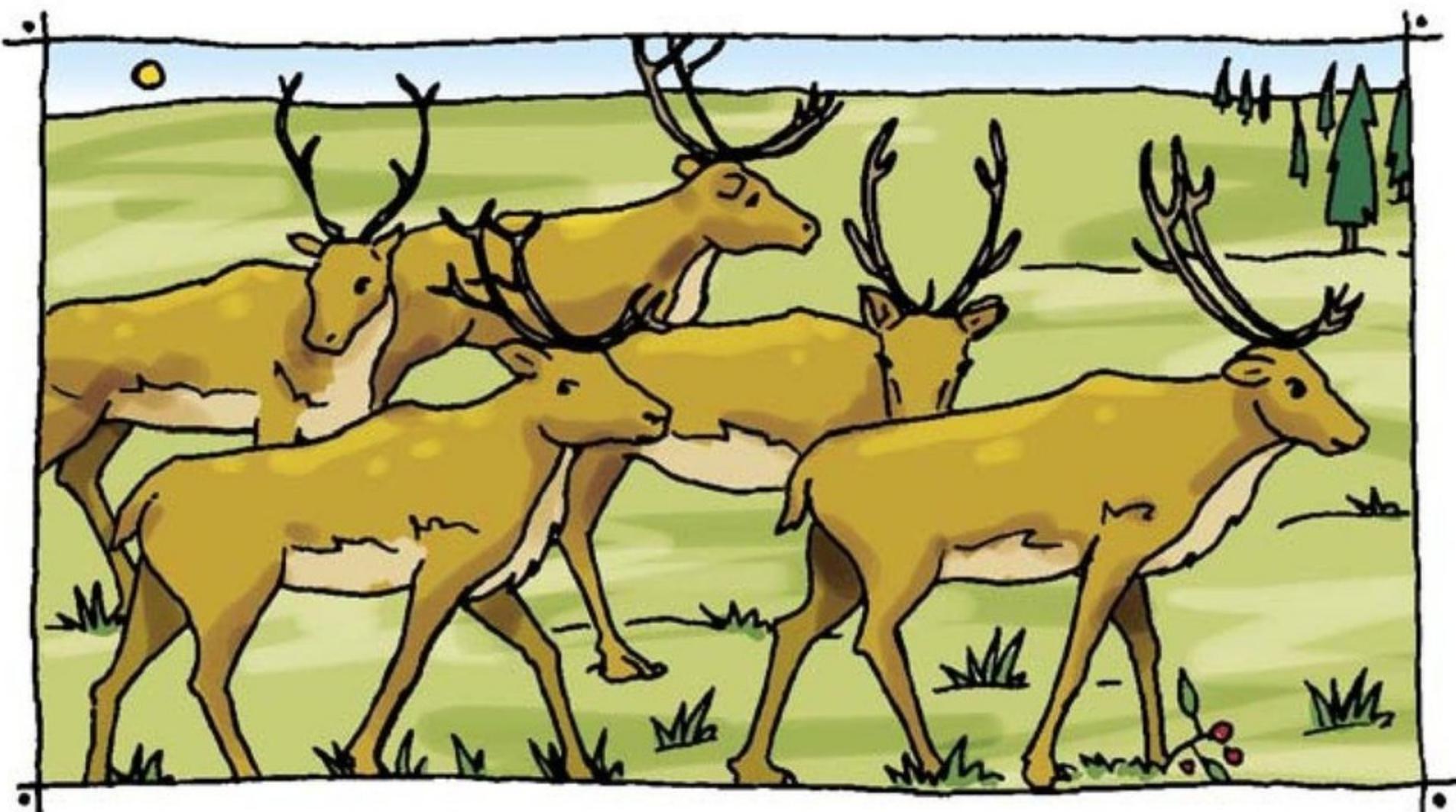
"You don't want to be a seal," he said. "Our lives may look easy, but we are afraid much of the time. Whenever we approach a hole in the ice for air, we fear a hunter or a bear is waiting for us. Besides," he confided with a shiver, "even with our layer of fat, this water is very cold."



Onhgarouk had not considered the difficulties of living as a seal and decided this was not the life he wanted. Because it was evening, the seals invited him to sleep in their igloo for the night. They prepared fish for his dinner, after which he quickly fell asleep.

When he woke up, the seals and the igloo were gone. Onhgarouk gathered his things and resumed his quest across the tundra. He was convinced that today he would find an animal with the better life he wanted.





Soon Onhgarouk spotted a herd of caribou. He hid behind a tree and watched them graze on thick grass. They looked so strong and healthy. Some of them were even fat. With such a large herd, he assumed they must be safe from other animals. He decided he wanted to join their herd.

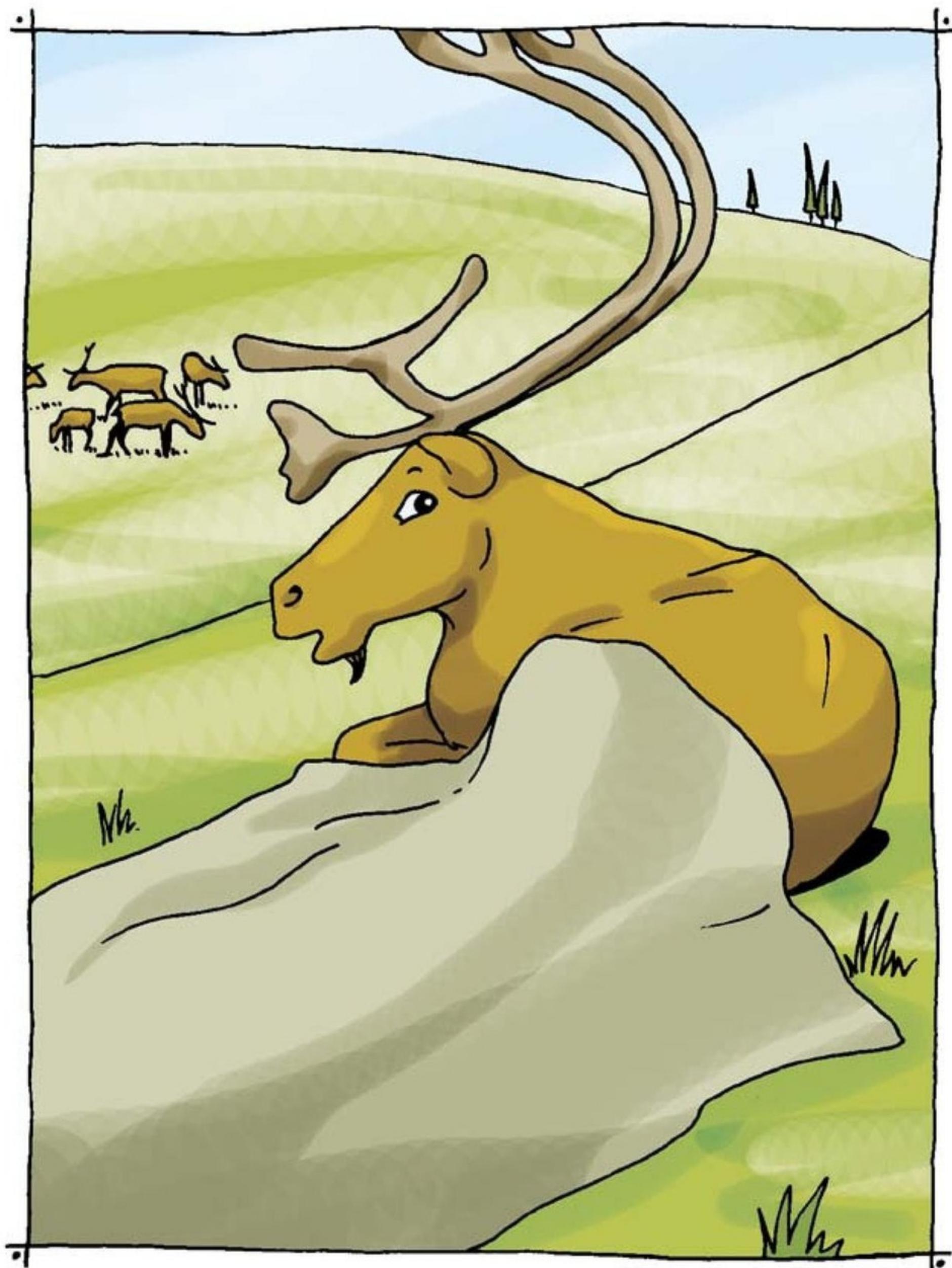
When he approached, just as he had with the ptarmigan, rabbits, and seals, they disappeared. As the sun sank low in the sky, he noticed the herd lope over a small hill. When he peered into the valley where they had disappeared, he saw many igloos and a large kazhgie in the middle of the village. He quickly walked down into the village and entered the kazhgie.

The leader of the caribou people saw Onhgarouk and walked to meet him. All the caribou in the kazhgie stopped their conversations and turned to stare at him. “Tell me, human,” said the leader, “why have you been following us all day?”

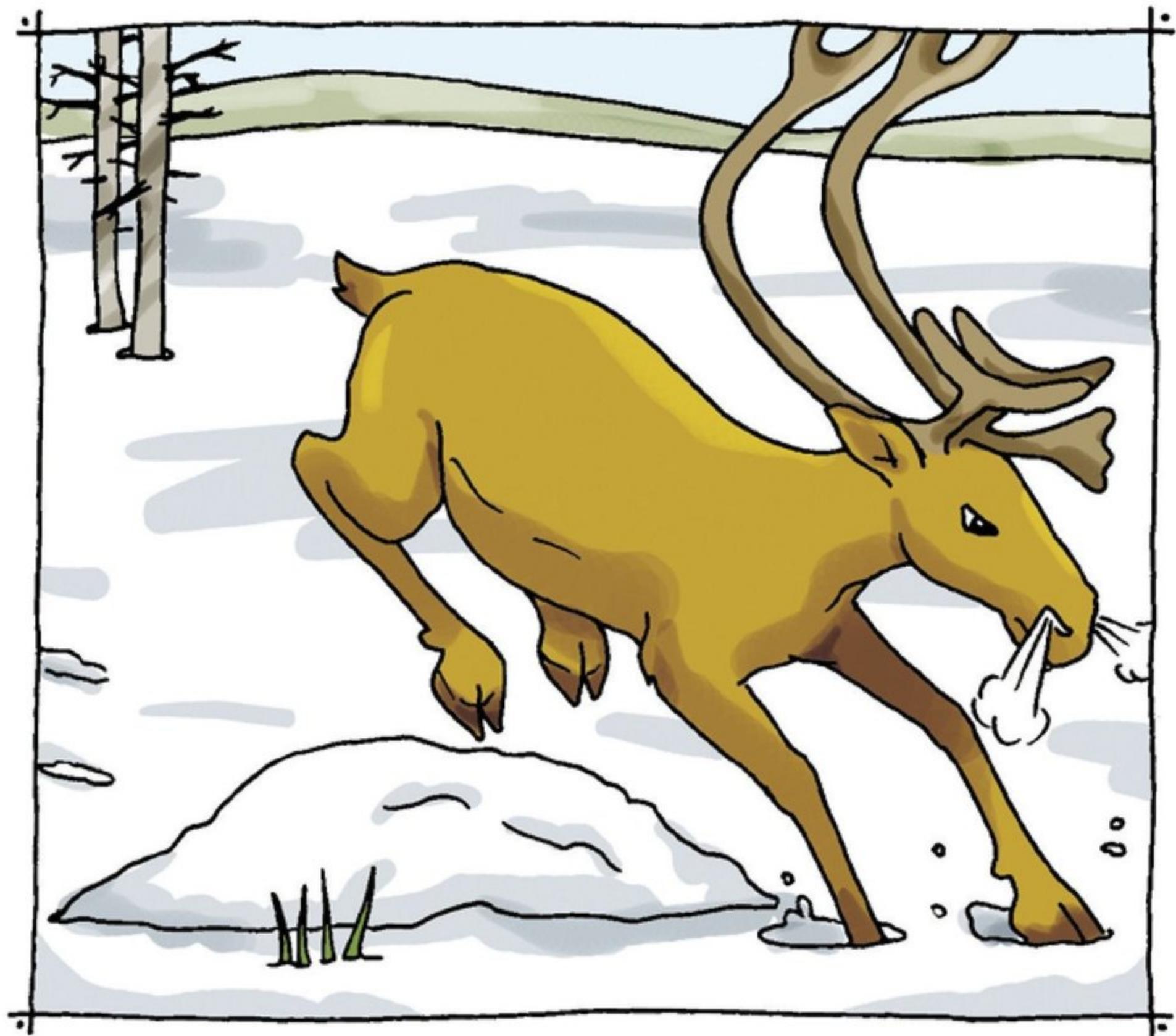
Onhgarouk replied, “I have watched you and wish to become one of you.”

He told the same old story about his difficult life. The caribou people offered him some dinner, which he gratefully accepted. They listened to his story and his desire to learn more about life as a caribou. The caribou leader, offering him a blanket, suggested that he sleep on his decision.





When Onhgarouk woke in the morning, the village had vanished. There was only a herd of caribou grazing in the valley. But something miraculous had happened—he was now a caribou, too!

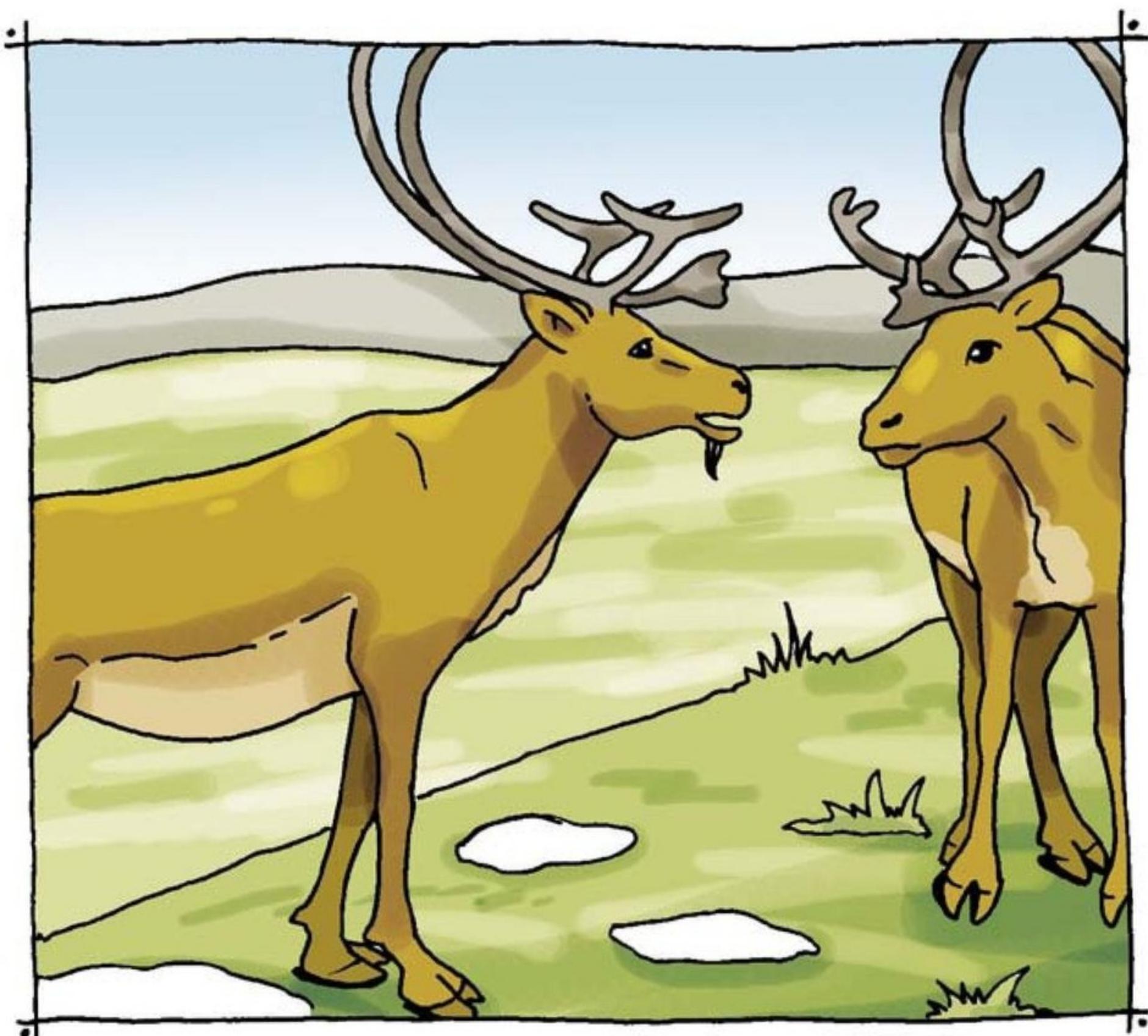


For many years Onhgarouk lived among the herd, considering himself a member of the caribou family. Over time he became big, strong, and rather quick for his size.

Although the herd was often preyed upon by wolves, and some of his brothers were taken by Eskimo hunters, he always managed to escape. He also learned to avoid the traps that killed some of his friends. Life wasn't easy, but he was happy and content to be a caribou.

After many years had passed, though, Onhgarouk began to miss his wife and children. He realized he had learned many things about life. He felt he was ready to resume his life as a human.

He decided he wanted to return to his former life. He approached the leader of the caribou and asked if he could return to life as a human. Understanding his feelings, the sympathetic leader told Onhgarouk he could become human again.



Onhgarouk thanked the caribou leader and left for his village, still a caribou. He traveled many difficult days and had to avoid many traps and hunters, until he finally reached his village by the sea.

As he neared his old house, he tripped into a snare trap and was caught. Two men quickly came running, surprised to have caught a caribou so close to home. When they approached the large animal to kill it, the caribou spoke to them in a human voice.

“Please release me and remove the fur from my head,” the animal said.





The two men just stared for a moment, never before having heard a caribou speak. The caribou repeated his request, and they finally agreed. The men saw that it was a man beneath the fur. The caribou man asked them to remove the fur from the rest of his body until he was completely human again.

After they finished, the two men invited Onhgarouk home with them. When he entered their house, he was speechless. His wife, Arnorrii, stood looking at him and recognized him at once. She had waited for him, always believing he would return. The two young men were his sons who had grown to adulthood.

Onhgarouk was happy to be home. But Arnorrii was angry that he had left her alone all those years. He begged her forgiveness, explaining he had learned many things in his time away.





When others in the village heard of Onhgarouk's adventures and his life as a caribou, all the hunters came to him for advice. But he would not betray the secrets of the caribou. The villagers believed only a great medicine man would have been given the magic to live as an animal. They offered Onhgarouk a position as a tribal elder.



He declined their offer to become an elder, telling them he wanted to spend his remaining days with his family. Still, the villagers believed he had acquired great wisdom and trusted his opinions. He always used the wisdom he had learned from the animals when he gave advice.

Onhgarouk spent the rest of his life making his wife happy and getting to know his sons. He provided meat for meals, shared the chores with Arnorrii, and always remembered to tell her how much he loved her. After a while, she forgave him for leaving, and they grew old together in happiness and harmony.

Although some Alaska natives prefer to be called "Inuit," "Inupiat," or "Yupik," none of those terms is inclusive of all people from the different northern native cultures. As it is unclear which group this folktale comes from, we have retained "Eskimo" as it is used in the original version.

Pronunciation Guide:

OnhgaroukON-gar-ook or on-GAR-ook

Arnorrii.....ar-NOR-ee

kazhgieKAUZ-gee

ptarmiganTAR-mi-gan

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