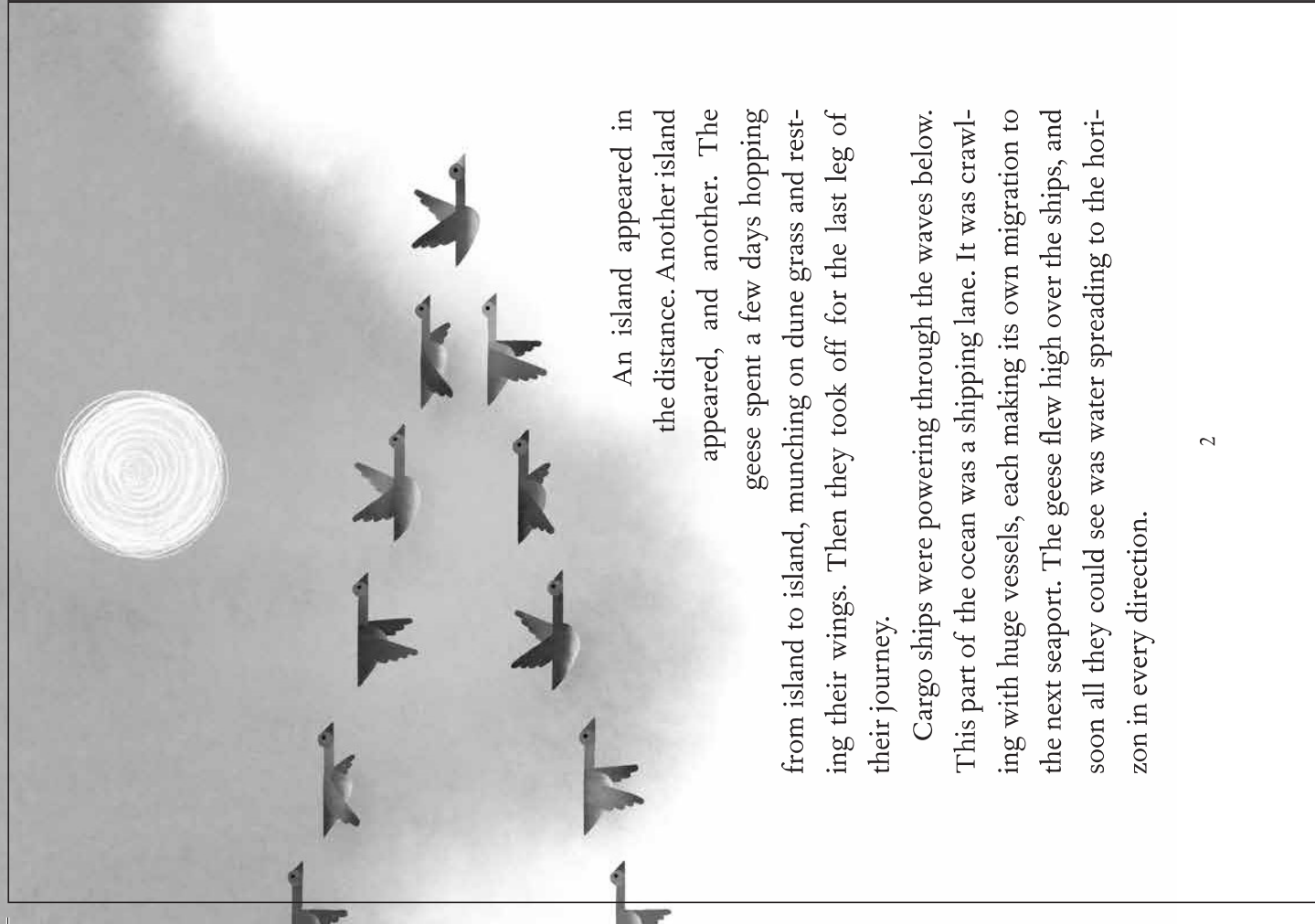


CHAPTER I

THE SKY

Our story begins in the sky, with a bright sun and puffy clouds and a large flock of geese. After spending the cold months at their southern wintering grounds, the geese were migrating back to their northern home. They flew in a perfect V formation, and leading the way was a graceful young goose. The leader kept his eyes forward, constantly searching for bad weather or airships, but the sky was clear of any trouble.

Towns and roads and meadows and rivers passed beneath the geese as they flew. Far ahead, where the land met the sky, the dark blue line of the ocean gradually came into view. The ocean grew closer and closer, and then the flock was soaring above a sandy beach and out over the water.



Hours passed before the geese spotted the familiar rocky shapes of their home island. They quickened their pace. Now they could see the mountain, and the forests, and the white slash of the waterfall. Now they were flying over the coastline. Now they were circling above the beaver pond.

The flock glided

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An island appeared in the distance. Another island appeared, and another. The geese spent a few days hopping from island to island, munching on dune grass and resting their wings. Then they took off for the last leg of their journey.

Cargo ships were powering through the waves below. This part of the ocean was a shipping lane. It was crawling with huge vessels, each making its own migration to the next seaport. The geese flew high over the ships, and soon all they could see was water spreading to the horizon in every direction.

to the pond and splashed onto the surface. They floated there, quietly cleaning their feathers, until, below the water, their webbed feet started paddling, and they swam to shore and waddled onto a pebble beach.

While the others made themselves at home, the leader wandered into the forest by himself. He followed a path through the undergrowth, passing old trees and mossy stones and thick brambles, and he stopped in a small clearing.

The goose honked loudly and listened for a response. Silence. And then the forest began to move. A cluster of ferns shook and the ground bulged up and chunks of dirt

tumbled aside, and there, standing in front of the goose, was a robot.

Reader, you and I would have been terrified in that moment. It's not every day you see a robot burst up from the ground. But the goose wasn't terrified—he was happy. You see, that robot was his mother. He fluttered onto her shoulder. Then the two of them spoke to each other in the language of the animals.

“I've missed you, Ma!” said Brightbill, the goose.

“Welcome home, son!” said Roz, the wild robot.



CHAPTER 2

THE REUNION

Roz and Brightbill, mother and son, were eager to catch up, and they immediately started talking about all that had happened over the winter. But their conversation was interrupted by the sound of little claws scampering through the treetops. A tiny voice was muttering, “Brightbill’s back Brightbill’s back Brightbill’s back!” Then a squirrel came bounding out to the tip of a branch.

“Hello, Chitchat!” said Brightbill to the squirrel. “How have you been?”

But Chitchat had come a long way, and she was out of breath. Wind rushed from her mouth, and she held up her paw as if to say, “Hang on a minute.” When she was ready, the squirrel unleashed the following flurry of words:

“Brightbill I’m so glad you’re home I always worry

about you when you’re gone which is silly because I know you’re clever and tough and I’m also clever and tough so I hope you don’t worry about me oh right you asked how I’ve been well I have some very exciting news which is that I am now a mother can you believe it I have three young kits and I can’t wait for you to meet them....”

Chitchat jabbered on and on. And on. And the squirrel’s jabbering voice caught the attention of nearby creatures. Fink, the fox, crept out from the bushes. Mr. and Mrs. Beaver climbed up from the pond. Swooper, the owl, flew down to a log. More and more animals emerged from the forest, smiling and laughing, eager to reunite with their old friend Brightbill.

And then a screechy voice called out from afar. The voice was repeating something, over and over, but nobody could make out the words. Roz and the animals hurried to the edge of the forest just as a seagull named Gale appeared in the sky. She was frantically squawking and flapping toward them. Gulls were rarely seen so far inland. Something had to be wrong. And as Gale flew nearer, her words became clear.

“Help! Help! Help!”