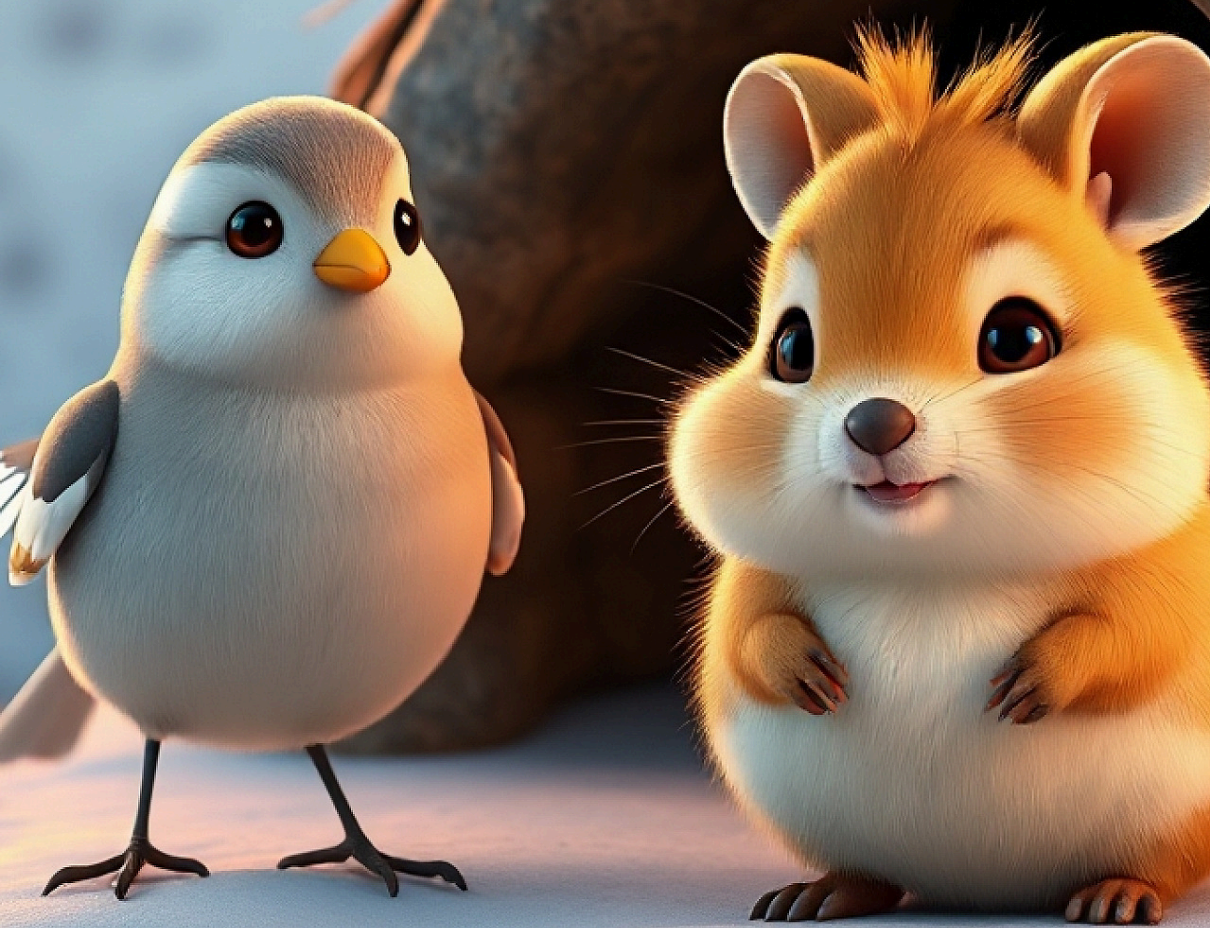


The Little Pika's Friend



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High on a windy mountain, where the rocks were gray and the sky was wide, lived a little pika. He was small and round, about the size of a baked potato. His fur was soft golden-brown, with a lighter cream belly. He had tiny rounded ears, big dark brown eyes, a small black nose, and short whiskers. Every morning, he scurried out to gather grass and watch the clouds.



One crisp morning, a small bird landed on a rock near the pika. It was a snow finch, with pale grey-brown feathers, white wing patches, and a short dark beak. Her bright black eyes twinkled. "Hello!" she chirped. "I'm flying south for the winter, but I stopped to rest." The pika smiled. "I'm staying here," he said. "I've never had a friend visit before."



The snow finch fluttered down beside him. "I like your mountain," she said. "It's so big and open!" The pika showed her his favorite spots: a sunny rock, a patch of sweet grass, and a little stream. They played hide-and-seek among the stones. The finch was quick, but the pika knew every hiding place. "You're good at this!" she laughed. The pika felt happy and warm inside.



As the sun set, the wind grew colder. The snow finch shivered. "I should find shelter for the night," she said. The pika looked worried. "I don't have a good shelter yet," he admitted. "I've been too busy playing." The finch tilted her head. "Then let's build one together!" she said. "But first, I heard the first snowfall is coming soon. We must hurry." The pika's eyes grew wide.



"The first snowfall?" the pika squeaked. "That means cold nights and deep snow!" He had never built a shelter before. "Don't worry," said the snow finch. "I've seen many shelters. We can make a cozy one." She flew up to a rocky nook. "This spot is perfect! It's protected from the wind." The pika nodded. "I'll gather soft grass," he said. "And I'll bring twigs and moss," she added.



The pika scurried to a sunny patch where the grass was dry and soft. He pulled up tufts and carried them in his mouth. Back and forth he went, his little legs working fast. The snow finch flew to a nearby bush and snapped off small twigs. She found soft moss under the rocks and carried it in her beak. "This will make the shelter warm," she chirped. The pika smiled. "We make a good team!"



All afternoon they worked. The pika stuffed grass into the cracks between the rocks. The snow finch wove twigs together to make a roof. "It needs to be strong," she said. "The wind can be fierce." The pika found more grass and packed it tight. "My paws are tired," he said. "But I'm happy." The finch brought a beakful of moss. "Just a little more," she said. "We're almost done."



As they worked, the sky turned gray. A cold wind blew. "The snow is coming," said the snow finch. "We must finish quickly." The pika's heart beat fast. He gathered one last armful of grass. The finch placed the last twig. "There!" she said. "It's done!" They stepped back to look. The shelter was small but snug, with a soft grass floor and a roof of twigs and moss. "It's perfect," whispered the pika.



Suddenly, a white flake drifted down. Then another, and another. "Snow!" cried the pika. The snow finch fluttered to his side. "Inside, quick!" she chirped. They hurried into the shelter. It was cozy and warm. The pika could hear the wind outside, but inside it was quiet. "We did it!" he said. The finch snuggled close. "We did it together," she said. The first snowfall had begun.



That night, the snow fell thick and fast. The mountain turned white. But inside the shelter, the pika and the snow finch were safe. They shared stories and laughed. "I'm glad you stopped to rest," said the pika. "Me too," said the finch. "I found a best friend." The pika's big dark eyes shone. "Friends can face any challenge together," he said. The finch nodded. "Especially with a cozy shelter."



The next morning, the snow had stopped. The pika peeked outside. Everything was white and sparkling. "It's beautiful!" he gasped. The snow finch flew out and landed on a snow-covered rock. "It's cold!" she chirped. "But our shelter is warm." The pika joined her. "Let's play in the snow!" he said. They slid down small hills and made snowballs. The pika's cream belly was soon covered in white flakes.



As they played, the snow finch grew quiet. "What's wrong?" asked the pika. "I was supposed to fly south," she said. "But I stayed because I found you." The pika's ears drooped. "Will you leave now?" he whispered. The finch looked at the snow. "I can't fly far in this cold," she said. "Maybe I can stay until spring." The pika's eyes lit up. "Really? You'll stay?" She nodded. "Friends stay together."



The two friends went back to their shelter. They added more grass and moss to make it even warmer. "We can make it bigger," said the pika. "A little home for both of us." The snow finch brought more twigs. "And we can store food," she said. They worked side by side, happy and busy. The pika gathered dried grass seeds, and the finch found berries under the snow. "We'll be ready for anything," said the pika.



That evening, they sat at the entrance of their shelter and watched the sunset. The sky was pink and gold. "I used to be lonely," said the pika. "But now I have you." The snow finch leaned against him. "And I have you," she said. "We built a shelter, and we built a friendship." The pika smiled. "Friends can face any challenge together," he said. The finch chirped in agreement. They felt warm and happy.



All winter long, the pika and the snow finch stayed in their cozy shelter. They told stories, played games, and shared food. The wind blew and the snow fell, but they were safe. Sometimes they peeked outside and watched the white world. "I'm glad we met," said the pika. "Me too," said the finch. "And when spring comes, we'll have even more adventures." They snuggled close, two friends on a snowy mountain.



And so, high on the windy mountain, the little pika and the snow finch learned that friends can face any challenge together. With soft grass, twigs, and moss, they built a shelter. With kindness and teamwork, they built a friendship. And when the snow fell, they stayed warm and happy inside. The end.