

OUTSTANDING IN THE FIELD

by  
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FADE IN:

EXT. HILLSIDE - AFTERNOON

Thunder rumbles in heavy clouds. A band of furry travelers with packs and walking sticks trudge down the hill--strangely enough, wearing travelling clothes.

JAMES, a tall, handsome weasel, leads the way, plowing through branches and bramble.

Just behind, a head shorter, is his best friend: a black-footed ferret named CHRISTOPHER.

Behind him is VECK, James' brother--a swarthy and dissatisfied weasel.

A thin old gray squirrel named DESMOND zips ahead of them and up a bush. He pulls spectacles from a pocket, puts them on, and peers across the river. A large jagged rock looms on the other side--higher than the hill they're on. Desmond calls down.

DESMOND

Not a creature stirring, as far as I can see.

James pushes aside a low branch. Christopher passes James.

VECK

Leading us off the edge of the earth, James?

James glances skyward and grins.

JAMES

Mom always said stormclouds followed you.

CHRISTOPHER

Lighten up, Veck. Before you drown us.

Desmond descends and catches up. Veck takes the branch from James, goes past it, and releases it with a flourish. Desmond ducks. Veck snaps his fingers.

VECK

Almost got you that time, Desmond.

DESMOND

I don't need any more sense knocked out of me.

The thunder rumbles, closer. James stops and looks around.

JAMES

I'm sure I saw that smoke. No humans around here. Could be one of us--

DESMOND

Oh, just get going, or we'll get soaked.

Veck shifts his pack and grumbles.

VECK

Old fool could catch his death of cold.

Christopher descends, shaking his head. Veck follows, kicking rocks and muttering. Desmond thumps the ground with his walking stick and flicks his long, fluffy tail.

DESMOND

Veck and James. Different as night and day.

EXT. RIVER

James trudges through the water, holding several packs high. The water has a powerful current and reaches to James' neck-- it drags him off-course. At the other side of the river, he flings his packs up the tall bank. Christopher jumps in and paddles furiously. James meets him halfway across and helps him to shore. Desmond tenses, springs into the water, plows through it, and catches up with the others. He's up the other side lickety-split. Desmond's getting on in years, but he's still bouncy.

VECK

Really think we'll find anybody out here?

JAMES

(gesturing to Christopher)  
Find? We just about lost ferret-face here.

CHRISTOPHER

Oh, can it, Weasel Boy.

James makes as if to backhand Christopher, who shies away, but both grin, knowing they're kidding around.

Veck grimaces at the water and starts down toward it. Desmond rests with his feet dangling over the opposite bank.

DESMOND

What? Afraid of a little water?

EXT. ROCK FACE

James and Christopher scurry up the jagged rock. Halfway up, they turn and look out over the river valley. A waterfall trickles over a huge plunge down-river, and the land below is hidden in mist. A thin plume of smoke rises.

CHRISTOPHER

Nice view.  
(points)  
Hey--there's your smoke!

James looks, but the rain begins and the smoke fades out. James glances upriver--a silvery, flashing streak is building.

CHRISTOPHER (CONT'D)

It's gonna flood!

JAMES

Oh, no! Hurry!

EXT. RIVER

Veck is halfway across the shallows.

JAMES AND CHRISTOPHER (O. S.)

Veck! Get out! Flood!

Veck scrambles. Desmond braces a rope against a small tree and tosses it to him. James, Chris, and Desmond start to pull him up, but the flood hits, making everyone slip.

DESMOND

Don't let yourself slide! Dig in!

CHRISTOPHER

Reach! Don't you give up on me!

Veck strains as a large log careens toward them. It smashes into the bank, throwing the rescuers back and tearing Veck away. Desmond slams against the tall rock and crumples, breath heaving. James and Christopher stand and follow Veck down-river.

DESMOND  
Don't get yourselves killed!

Veck sputters water, battered but holding on tight. James and Christopher reach a low, slick branch over the waterfall. James lies down facing down-river. Christopher pins his legs.

Veck's log tumbles. James leans out farther. Christopher looks up-river.

CHRISTOPHER  
Almost--it's under us!

JAMES  
VECK! Give me your paw!

Veck does, but the log snags his leg. He screams as James pulls. The branch cracks and drops, nearly flinging James into the river. Christopher just barely snags James' arm and digs in with his feet, straining. Veck grabs James' leg. Christopher's the only thing keeping James and Veck from going over the waterfall.

CHRISTOPHER  
James, get out of there!

With a cry, James kicks free of Veck and struggles back to the log. Veck makes a last desperate grab, gapes as Christopher helps James up, then screams as he tips over. Christopher cradles one arm and winces as he and James collapse.

CHRISTOPHER (CONT'D)  
I couldn't hold you both.

JAMES  
Oh, Veck, I'm so sorry...

Veck and his log plummet into the mists below, and disappear.

EXT. VALLEY, RIVERSIDE

James pokes along the riverbank with his walking stick, pushing aside vines and bramble and checking beneath. Christopher ranges ahead, scanning the water. One of his arms is in a cast.

DESMOND (O.S.)  
Come quick! Have a look at this!

Christopher joins James as he leaves the riverside.

CHRISTOPHER  
 Ol' Acornbrain's had a lot of false  
 alarms this week.

JAMES  
 Well, our luck's due for a change.

EXT. SARAH'S HOME

Desmond bounces up a little hill with a half-circle window and an ivy-covered door built into it. A rough chimney of flat stones graces the top of the cozy dwelling.

DESMOND  
 A chimney! Intelligent life after  
 all!

Christopher looks up at the chimney, strains at a catch in his neck, and pops it. The others wince and shudder. He takes a step toward the house but trips on a tree root. He falls on his cast and groans, but sees a glint of glass. It's a window--half of the closed end of a pop bottle.

DESMOND (CONT'D)  
 Broken something else I'll have to  
 fix?

James begins to help Christopher up, but Christopher pulls him down, pointing. They both gape.

CHRISTOPHER  
 Look! A window!

JAMES  
 You're looking at the window?

INT. SARAH'S HOME, BATHROOM

Just behind and below the window, a black-footed ferret (!!!) named Sarah is taking a foamy bath in a metal tub, scrubbing herself with a bit of sponge, humming contentedly. She looks up, shrieks, and yanks the drapes closed.

CHRISTOPHER  
 So much for introductions.

A few feet away, the vine-hidden wooden door opens. Sarah, wrapped in a towel, pops her head out and glares at the travelers. She's shorter than Christopher, but feisty.

SARAH  
 Perverts!

JAMES  
Now, hold on just a--

Sarah pops back inside and slams the door shut.

JAMES (CONT'D)  
--second.

INT. SARAH'S HOME

Sarah bolts the door and stomps back to the bathroom, throwing her paws up in disgust.

INT. SARAH'S HOME, BATHROOM

Sarah throws the towel off and sashes back into her bath. There's a tap at the window. She leaves the drapes closed.

DESMOND (O.S.)  
Um, excuse me, miss--

SARAH  
Go away!

EXT. SARAH'S HOME

James winks at Christopher. He speaks a bit too loudly.

JAMES  
Darn, I guess we were wrong.  
Nothing strange. Just because she  
takes baths inside and uses fire  
doesn't mean she's one of us.

CHRISTOPHER  
(taking the hint)  
Oh. Yeah, come on, let's go.

There's a frantic splash inside.

INT. SARAH'S HOME

Sarah scrambles out of the tub, tucking the towel around herself.

EXT. SARAH'S HOME

The travelers turn as if to leave, but Sarah flings her door open and steps out, reaching after them.

SARAH  
Wait! What did you mean, "one of us?"

CHRISTOPHER  
 You're getting your cute little  
 feet dirty.

INT. SARAH'S HOME

Sarah has a few rough but comfortable chairs. She's carved a hearth in one wall; a teapot hangs over it, lid rattling as the water boils. Odds and ends are everywhere--a piece of mirror, a thimble, a framed postage stamp of the Wright Brothers' airplane. The travelers come in--it's a slight squeeze for James.

CHRISTOPHER  
 Cozy place you've got here, um--

SARAH  
 Sarah. Sorry about the mess, I  
 don't get visitors.

JAMES  
 They're missing out.

Sarah blushes and smiles. Desmond notices the stamp and adjusts his spectacles, squinting.

DESMOND  
 Now that's an old stamp. Quite a  
 collector!

SARAH  
 Oh, that's too kind a word for what  
 I do.

Sarah retrieves the teapot and sets it on a little table made from a few alphabet blocks.

SARAH (CONT'D)  
 Some of the miniatures, I just  
 plain stole.

Desmond turns to face her, but his fluffy tail sweeps bric-a-brac off a shelf above the fireplace. He clicks his tongue and bends to pick up the mess. Sarah and the others help. When they've restored some semblance of order, Desmond turns around again.

DESMOND  
 Sorry, Sarah. This tail's forever  
 in the way.

He flicks his tail too close to the fireplace and the tip leaps into flames.

CHRISTOPHER  
Desmond, look out!

He shrieks and everyone backs away in surprise. He dives for the table, rips off the lid of the teapot, and extinguishes his tail. He breathes a sigh of relief, but screams again.

DESMOND  
Hot! Hot!

He blows on his unfortunate tail. The others calm and glare.

DESMOND (CONT'D)  
I think I saw some acorns outside--

Desmond ducks out. Christopher shrugs apologetically.

CHRISTOPHER  
Squirrels. You know how they are.

JAMES  
Flighty devils.

Sarah drags strands of wet, scorched squirrel fur out of the teapot. She grimaces and sets the teapot aside.

SARAH  
Now, mind telling me what's going on? That nut that just ran out of here, he had--

She makes loops around her eyes with her paws.

CHRISTOPHER  
Eyeglasses?

SARAH  
(nods)  
You wear clothes, I wear clothes, all this junk in my house. What's the deal?

James and Christopher look at each other and gulp. Chris gestures for James to start.

JAMES  
Sarah, you were really sick once, when you were young--

Sarah gasps and nods, wincing and holding her stomach. James and Christopher pat her on her back as she sniffls.

SARAH  
 Yes, I was! I'd--I'd almost  
 forgotten--I tried so hard to--

CHRISTOPHER  
 Did you--lose anyone?

SARAH  
 My whole family--I miss them so  
 much--

She bows her head, tearful, and the others hug her close.

JAMES  
 Happened to us, too.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. FIELD BY WEASEL DEN - AFTERNOON

YOUNG JAMES bounds around, batting at dandelions and chasing grasshoppers. He's having the time of his life. He sneakily circles a grasshopper, which buzzes its wings but does not fly far. Young James leaps and catches the grasshopper with both paws, cupping them.

YOUNG JAMES  
 Gotcha!

He pulls his paws apart cautiously, peering in. He looks away sadly as he lets the lifeless, crushed insect fall.

YOUNG JAMES (CONT'D)  
 Why do I feel so bad when I do  
 that?

INT. WEASEL DEN

Young James cautiously pokes his head in, ears back.

YOUNG JAMES  
 M-mama? Sis?

JAMES (V.O.)  
 Everyone was sick. One morning, I  
 woke up and felt better. So did my  
 brother, Veck.

YOUNG VECK stumbles out of the dark, eyes haunted. Young James starts down into the den, but Young Veck holds him back.

JAMES (V.O.) (CONT'D)  
The others didn't feel anything  
ever again.

YOUNG VECK  
James--you don't want to go in  
there.

Young James pushes past and into the den beyond. He gasps and cries, but we see nothing. Young Veck pulls him away.

YOUNG JAMES  
Get me out, get me out, I can't  
breathe--

Young James clutches his throat as Young Veck drags him outside.

INT. SARAH'S HOME

James calms down, takes his paws away from his throat, grips the table, and shivers. Sarah pats his arm. Christopher shakes his head sadly, thumping his cast on the table.

CHRISTOPHER  
No one should die like that.

JAMES  
But Veck and I--we survived. We  
were never the same, though. We  
started to learn. And to keep an  
eye out for others like us--

EXT. CITY STREET OUTSIDE PET STORE - EVENING

Young James and Young Veck dodge between garbage cans and old boxes, out of the alley and in front of the pet store window. In a pitifully tiny glass tank with a broken-down wheel, YOUNG CHRISTOPHER stares glumly at passing cars. He hears a knock at the window and looks down, startled by Young Veck and Young James. Young Christopher breathes hard on the side of his tank, fogs it, and traces the word "HELP", getting the "E" backward. The others give him a thumbs up.

CHRISTOPHER (V.O.)  
A certain pet store owner was  
arrested the next day for trading  
in endangered species--namely, me.

INT./EXT. PET STORE - EARLY MORNING

Christopher's glass cage is empty. The clumsily-scrawled sign on his cage reads "Not For Sale".

CHRISTOPHER (V.O.)  
 But when Animal Control came to  
 clear out the store, we had  
 already--

INT. SARAH'S HOME

Christopher skips one paw off another in a slick move. Sarah laughs, already taking a bit of a shine to this newcomer.

CHRISTOPHER  
 --cleared out.

James shakes his head, smiling thoughtfully.

JAMES  
 That sickness we all had--it  
 changed something in us that needed  
 changing. It woke us up--even  
 though it hurt.

Desmond pops back in, chomping an acorn.

SARAH  
 (a beat, then exasperated)  
 Oh, do be more careful, Desmond.

DESMOND  
 Sure, sure.  
 (to James and Christopher)  
 Been explaining things to her?

They nod. Desmond sighs.

DESMOND (CONT'D)  
 Usual order of business then. I  
 found a good tree. You two handle  
 the lessons this time.

Sarah frowns.

SARAH  
 Lessons?

INT. SARAH'S HOME, KITCHEN

Christopher draws a big 'A' on a piece of chalkboard propped against the wall. Sarah nods uncertainly.

EXT. POND SHORE

James skips a rock out over the pond. It flashes along, finally sputtering to a stop. Sarah throws a rock and it sinks. She frowns.

James guides her arm in an expert arc and she tries it again. The rock skips out and across the water as Sarah laughs.

Christopher watches from a distance, a little jealous.

INT. SARAH'S HOME, KITCHEN

Sarah stands at the chalkboard with a piece of chalk and cautiously writes her name. She gets the 'S' backward. James rubs it out and Sarah slaps her forehead. She puts the 'S' back in, correctly this time.

EXT. OUTSIDE BATHROOM WINDOW

Christopher folds a piece of paper, Sarah watching intently. He holds up his finished paper airplane, and sends it soaring. Sarah follows it with her wide eyes.

James watches from a distance, already scheming.

INT. SARAH'S HOME, KITCHEN

Christopher finishes scratching out a sentence on the board, then points to each word with a stick. Sarah reads along.

SARAH

Sarah--is--a good--student. Why,  
thank you, Christopher!

James sits to one side, gritting his teeth a little.

EXT. SKY

Fluffy white clouds drift lazily by. Suddenly a brown-paper kite cuts across the sky, its long red-ribboned tail making curlicues.

EXT. MEADOW

Sarah points up at the kite, shading her eyes. James maneuvers the kite deftly, making it loop and swoop. He holds the line out to Sarah, who waves him away, protesting. He insists--she finally gives in and takes it. It nearly pulls her off her feet. James catches her and guides her paws, keeping the kite aloft. She gets the hang of it and takes over, still holding onto James.

Christopher broods, perched on a nearby rock. He pops the catch in his neck and glares at James. Sarah notices

SARAH

(shivering)  
You'll throw your neck out doing  
that someday.

EXT. DESMOND'S TREE

Desmond's dragging a collection of wires, springs, and gears into a hollow near the base of a very big old tree nearby. He 'hmm's thoughtfully and frowns as he watches the others.

DESMOND  
I smell trouble.

INT. SARAH'S HOME, KITCHEN

James writes a sentence, and Sarah follows along easily.

SARAH  
'Sarah--is very--pretty.' Oh, but  
it isn't true, I'm so plain it's  
painful --

James pats her shoulder, leaving a paw-print in chalk dust.

JAMES  
No, it's true.

Christopher stomps out of the room.

INT. DESMOND'S TREE

The hollow is spacious. Desmond's assembled a few working contraptions--they tick and whirl and swirl, most without apparent purpose. Parts are strewn everywhere. A rickety wooden staircase spirals up the hollow to a high exit where sunlight streams in.

There's a sudden, hard knock at the door. Desmond sets his soldering iron aside and answers the summons. He opens the door and Christopher storms in, holding his cast up.

CHRISTOPHER  
Take this damned thing off.

DESMOND  
Well, aren't we just the slightest  
bit testy?

Desmond begins to examine the cast.

EXT. LEAN-TO

Christopher (free of his cast) has built a large shelter against a tree, out of bits of cloth and long sticks. It's a substantial bit of work, lashed to the tree like a giant butterfly chrysalis.

INT. LEAN-TO

Christopher whittles away at a long piece of wood. A many-colored bundle of cloth is by his side, as well as a spool of thread with a needle stuck through it.

EXT. LEAN-TO

Sarah begins to lift up a flap of cloth covering the lean-to's entrance. Christopher quickly pops out and leads her away, putting a finger to his lips.

EXT. ROCK FACE

Christopher pulls Sarah up to a ledge. The river valley stretches out far below--this is where James and Christopher stood when the flash flood began. Sarah beams.

SARAH

You can see forever! This is beautiful!

Christopher gestures up the rock.

CHRISTOPHER

You haven't seen anything yet.

EXT. TOP OF THE ROCK

The rock flattens out up here. Christopher helps Sarah up over the edge, and her jaw drops when she sees the hang-glider. It's a patchwork contraption, but quite solid.

SARAH

Is that what I hope it is?

EXT. MID-AIR

The glider cuts through the air. Christopher and Sarah hang tight to the guide-bar, wind streaking their fur. Sarah yells with delight, gaping at the river that winds below like a ribbon of blue. She turns her head to look at Christopher--sunlight streams through the fabric of the glider, dappling the pair like a stained-glass window. Sarah shakes her head in wonder, then kisses Christopher on the cheek. Christopher grins wide and tips the hang-glider. Sarah slides closer to him and gasps in astonishment.

EXT. MEADOW

James shades his eyes and looks up at the glider as it slowly spirals in the sun. He sighs and looks at his feet. Desmond approaches and taps him on the shoulder. James jumps a bit.

DESMOND

You'll forgive my saying so, James,  
but Christopher would be better for  
her.

James waves him off and stomps away, turning his back and  
sitting down on a low log.

JAMES

No, I won't forgive you for that.

Desmond hops up on the log to sit beside James, who casts his  
eyes up to look at the hang-glider again.

JAMES (CONT'D)

I could make her just as happy.

DESMOND

For a while. But you're a weasel  
and she's a ferret. What if she  
wants children?

James chuckles bitterly.

JAMES

There is that...

DESMOND

Christopher was lucky to find  
another black-footed ferret at all.  
They're endangered, for heaven's  
sakes. Give Sarah up, let her be  
happy.

JAMES

It's not that easy. I'm really  
starting to love her.

DESMOND

Yes, but are she and Christopher  
your friends?

The hang-glider sets down softly in the meadow. Christopher  
and Sarah shake free of the glider and hug each other tight.

JAMES

My best friends ever.

DESMOND

Then give them time.

James smiles faintly and nods.

EXT. SARAH'S HOME

James has his walking stick and a full backpack--Desmond helps him adjust it. Christopher fidgets, but Sarah steps forward and hugs James. He pats her back.

SARAH  
You taught me so much.

JAMES  
It was a pleasure.

Sarah lets him go, wistfully. Christopher approaches.

JAMES (CONT'D)  
I'll find Veck and give him a decent burial.

Desmond twitches his whiskers thoughtfully.

DESMOND  
It'll be the first time Veck's been decent...

Christopher pulls James aside. Sarah frowns uncertainly.

CHRISTOPHER  
Why now? Why are you going alone?  
I could--

JAMES  
(nodding toward Sarah)  
--you could settle down.

Recognition dawns on Christopher's face.

CHRISTOPHER  
This is just an excuse! You're out of the game!

JAMES  
I quit while we were still friends.  
That means we all win.

A little teary, Christopher clasps James' arm thankfully. James turns away and walks downhill toward the river.

Christopher returns to Sarah's side and puts an arm around her. He squeezes her tight as they and Desmond wave goodbye. Actually, he knocks the air out of her--she makes an 'oomph' sound. She giggles shyly as their eyes meet.

SARAH  
Took my breath away.

CHRISTOPHER  
Let me give it back.

He kisses her on the lips. She doesn't mind one bit, and kisses back. Desmond watches James, now far down-river.

DESMOND  
Good show, James. Well done.

EXT. RIVERSIDE

James stomps along, pounding the ground with his walking stick and muttering.

JAMES  
Lucky little furball. I'm crazy.  
Gotta be.

He glances back. Chris and Sarah hold each other tight.

JAMES (CONT'D)  
Doesn't waste any time, does he?

He turns and trudges on, poking at vines along the riverbank.

JAMES (CONT'D)  
Just you and me, Veck.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. CAGE

Straw covers the floor. A water bottle hangs on one wall. A high-pitched, repetitive, mechanical squeak sounds.

A weasel runs in a wheel, grinding his teeth and whistling faintly. It's Veck. Suddenly he stumbles, skidding to a stop. He sneers, and swings himself around to sit up. He massages his leg.

VECK  
(bitterly)  
Thank you, James. Never did heal  
right--

INT. ANIMAL RESEARCH CENTER, LAB

Rows of cages are stacked on shelves. Obscure and painful-looking equipment lies ready in glass cabinets. A beautiful but cold brunette scientist in her early thirties--think of an ice princess--storms into the room with a clipboard, stopwatch, and a pocketful of pens. Her name is DR. OGLESBY--'Lila' to only a few.

TED  
This is a terrible risk! What are you going to tell the committee?

DR. OGLESBY  
I won't tell them a thing. They'd never let us release one of the animals, tracking device or not.

INT. CAGE

Veck cocks his head and listens harder.

VECK  
Now this is interesting...

INT. ANIMAL RESEARCH CENTER, LAB

Oglesby sets her clipboard aside and wrenches at her hair.

DR. OGLESBY  
They say they want results--then they tear my reports to shreds! We don't understand what makes these animals different yet!

She presses a button on a spinning centrifuge. It stops, and she holds up a vial full of separated blood.

DR. OGLESBY (CONT'D)  
Is it genetic? A disease? Just our imaginations running away with us?

TED  
I believe you, Dr. Oglesby. The committee might think you're chasing fairy-tales--

Ted lifts up a long sheet of graph paper protruding from a printer near Veck's cage. Long squiggly lines trail down it.

TED (CONT'D)  
But you and I have both seen these animals break out of a locked cage. We had to design new ones!

Oglesby fiddles with the latch to Veck's cage.

DR. OGLESBY  
(with a touch of regret)  
It doesn't mean they're intelligent. They just adapt more quickly.

Ted shakes the printout at her.

TED

Adapt? These animals plan. I think they might even talk to each other, Lila. Not words, maybe...

DR. OGLESBY

Never use my first name at work. And you're doing a bit too much dreaming yourself.

She returns her coffee mug, stomping over to Veck's cage.

INT. /EXT CAGE

Veck retreats into a corner but Oglesby grabs and extracts him. He writhes and tries to bite, but Oglesby holds him more firmly.

DR. OGLESBY

We'll track more of them down. And this one will help, like it or not.

EXT. RIVERSIDE - MORNING

James, curled against a rock and covered with a blanket and fallen leaves, stirs and opens his eyes. He yawns and reaches into the backpack propped against the rock. He removes a pad and pencil, sits up, and flips through sketches of his friends--mostly of Sarah. He adds a few strokes of detail to one, and begins to write. A chill wind whirls leaves around him, and he shivers. He inspects his fur--clumps of it are going white.

JAMES (V.O.)

Dear Diary: Getting my winter coat again. Late October now--half a year since I left. I could have taken a boat, but I don't want to end up a thousand miles away from my friends.

INT. SARAH'S HOME

Sarah carves at a little pumpkin. She sets the knife aside, scoops out a slimy pawful of seeds, and pelts Christopher. He ducks, but hugs her, both of them getting all sticky and giggling. In the living room, the story-telling Desmond speaks gruffly, growls, claws the air, then puts on a look of mock fright, all for KATIE (a stocky, muscular little ferret) and her brother BRIAN (bonier and taller). Both of course resemble their parents Sarah and Christopher.

JAMES (V.O.)  
 Still no sign of Veck. Time to  
 check on the others. I'm sure  
 Sarah and Chris are keeping each  
 other busy.

SARAH  
 Pumpkin all over. You need a bath.

Christopher raises an eyebrow.

CHRISTOPHER  
 No, we need a bath.

EXT. SNOWSTORM

James plows through the snow. A loose, rough, rabbit-skin  
 coat hangs around his shoulders, his breath freezing in  
 little puffs. Ice hangs from his face-fur, which has gone  
 white. His tail has too, except for a black tip.

JAMES (V.O.)  
 Dear Diary: In the thick of  
 November, now. My fur's gone white  
 like everything else. I'd freeze  
 without the rabbit skin. I don't  
 want to talk about the rabbit.

A wisp of smoke rises beyond another hill. Through the snow,  
 James sees a dark speck appear at the top of the hill. It  
 stumbles into snowdrifts, but stands and plows ahead.

JAMES  
 (shouts)  
 Hello!

James hurries down the hill and the STRANGER takes his time,  
 becoming clearer. About James' size, but thin as a rake,  
 he's wrapped in rags, and has a rattling cough. The rags  
 cover his face. James reaches him but keeps his distance.

JAMES  
 Are you friendly?

STRANGER  
 (chuckles and coughs)  
 I've never been accused of that--

James points toward a narrow rocky pass.

JAMES  
 I think there's a house that way!

The Stranger nods--they set off for the pass.

EXT. ROCKY PASS ABOVE HUMAN CABIN

James comes through the pass to see the cabin below. Smoke rises from a tall chimney.

JAMES  
Oh, thank God.

James rushes down the winding path. The Stranger follows.

INT. HUMAN CABIN

A plump old man with a bushy beard snores by a crackling fire, a mug of hot chocolate steaming on a little table at his side. Boxes and bags are stacked everywhere.

James and the Stranger push a sliding window open and squeeze through it onto a table in a back room. Wind whistles but cuts out as they shove it closed and collapse. The Stranger begins to unwrap itself like a frozen mummy. James tries to help, but the Stranger shoves his paws away. The Stranger's nose shows, then a jaw. He pulls away the rest of the rags like a cap. James gasps and grins.

JAMES  
Veck! How--

Veck looks hollow--his fur is white for winter, like James', but thin and patchy. He has a loose collar, half-wrapped in tinfoil.

VECK  
Hello, James.

James grabs Veck's shoulders, then hugs him. Veck reaches a paw up to hug back, but thinks better of it. James pulls back and looks him over.

JAMES  
Man, you are thin!

Veck tugs at the collar, a wicked gleam in his eye.

VECK  
I could almost slip this off--  
(chuckles)  
--if I wanted to. You're none too plump, yourself, but you look warm.

Veck rubs the fur of James' coat between his fingers, grinning and chuckling. James' smile falls.

VECK (CONT' D)  
 Hippity, hoppity, Easter's on its  
 way.

James winces, bares his teeth and digs into Veck's shoulders with his claws, shaking him. Veck rattles like a leaf, almost brittle somehow.

JAMES  
 That's nothing to joke about! It  
 was a very sad thing!

Veck shrugs, spreading his paws. James lets him go with a look of distaste.

JAMES (CONT' D)  
 You've changed.

VECK  
 No, I'm just more myself.

EXT. RIVERSIDE - SPRING AFTERNOON

Brian and Katie are sprawled out on the riverbank, watching the water. Brian wears trousers with suspenders. Katie wears a plain but pretty blue dress. Brian fiddles with a stick. Little fish swim by. Katie trails an arm in the water and a bigger fish comes up to snap at her. She cries out and Brian pounds the water with the stick, growling.

BRIAN  
 Here, fishy, fishy!

INT. WATER

The fish flashes away, looking as astonished as it can.

EXT. RIVERSIDE

Brian shakes the stick in triumph as the fish escapes. He shakes his head at Katie.

BRIAN  
Katie... I always gotta watch out  
 for you.

KATIE  
 I can take care of myself--

She tackles Brian. They wrestle, giggling. Brian snags a sleeve of her dress and rips it. Katie stands up, shocked, and rushes off through the weeds. Brian leans on his stick.

BRIAN  
Weird sister.

He turns at the sound of far-off voices. He squints downriver and smiles broadly.

EXT. SARAH'S HOME

Christopher and Sarah tend their garden. It's full of little wildflowers. Christopher picks a red one and carefully tucks it behind Sarah's ear. She giggles coyly. Christopher shakes his head in amused disbelief.

CHRISTOPHER  
How can you stay so shy, after all we've done?

SARAH  
We're all a little silly. Why don't you ever talk about the past?

Christopher thinks it out. He taps her lightly on the nose and she twitches gleefully.

CHRISTOPHER  
Because with you, the present is perfect.

Katie marches out of the weeds, holding her torn sleeve out.

KATIE  
Motherrr...

Christopher and Sarah rush to her, all concern, taking her in their arms. She squirms, frustrated.

SARAH  
(relieved)  
Oh, it's just your sleeve...

CHRISTOPHER  
We'll have that sewn up in a jiffy.

They set Katie down and she stomps her foot.

KATIE  
Brian gets away with everything!

BRIAN (O.S.)  
Mom! Dad! Come quick!

They all perk up their ears and look.

## EXT. RIVERSIDE

As his parents and the still-fuming Katie approach, Brian hops up and down, pointing up-river. He grabs Christopher's paw.

BRIAN  
Weasels! Lookit! Are they  
friendly?

Christopher squints upriver at the weasels and grins.

CHRISTOPHER  
That must be James. And Veck!

KATIE  
Which one's which? Desmond says  
James is the handsome one.

Sarah begins to point, but realizes she doesn't know, either.

Both weasels look road-worn, and their fur has gone brown again. Both look a little disgusted.

SARAH  
(irritated with herself)  
I--I can't tell. Not from here.

Christopher bends and pushes the kids ahead a little.

CHRISTOPHER  
Let's go meet 'em.

The kids rush on and their parents follow, arm in arm.

## EXT. OBSERVATION DECK

High in his tree, Desmond lounges in a deck chair with pedals on the end, little flip-down sunglasses over his spectacles. The deck is stretched out between a few strong branches. Desmond pulls a lever, then pedals. An acorn pops out of a tube by the chair, into a strange contraption. Desmond wrenches the lever back again, and a belt turns wheels and gears. The contraption pulls the 'cap' off the acorn, spins it around, and cuts around the shell. Desmond lazily retrieves the acorn, lifts off the 'lid', and chows down.

DESMOND  
(mouth full)  
I really can't believe I did it the  
hard way all those years.

He hears far-off greetings and cries of surprise, and leaps off the chair.

He rushes to the railing of the deck, flips the sunglasses up, swings a telescope around, and squints down it. He sees James lifting the happy but astonished Sarah and Christopher off their feet in a bearhug. Well, a weasel hug. Veck is nonplussed, studying the house. Katie tries to get his attention, but he brushes her off. Brian tugs at James' shirt.

DESMOND (CONT'D)  
 Veck? Alive? I was wrong! Oh,  
 well, a first time for everything--

He zips away, giving the telescope a playful spin.

INT. DESMOND'S TREE

As Desmond dashes toward the door, he pauses, and picks up something small from a workbench. He holds it up to the light--it's a plain golden ring.

DESMOND  
 Should I...no, their anniversary's  
 soon, don't blow a gasket--

He places it back on the workbench.

EXT. RIVERSIDE

Christopher leaves the others and approaches Veck, who stands with his arms crossed, grits his teeth, and glares.

VECK  
 (i c i l y)  
 You didn't come after me.

CHRISTOPHER  
 I'm sorry, Veck.  
 (gestures to SARAH)  
 I had a lot on my mind.

Veck clamps a paw on Christopher's shoulder.

VECK  
 Oh, that's all right. I don't  
blame you or anything.

DESMOND (O.S.)  
 Veck! James!

VECK  
 (under his breath)  
 If he hugs me, I'll rip his  
 whiskers out.

Desmond bounces in and grabs James' paw, shaking it violently and thumping his back. Veck looks relieved.

DESMOND  
 You did it! You found the  
 scoundrel!  
 (draws back)  
 But you're a mess, both of you!

Desmond lets James go and hugs Veck. Veck growls and recoils, raking his paws into claws. Desmond lets him go, adjusting his spectacles.

DESMOND (CONT'D)  
 Sorry, got carried away--

Sarah drags Christopher close again and they hug each other.

SARAH  
 Can you believe it? Chris and I,  
 we're actually married, by a  
 preacher, even!

Desmond stands taller, proud, whistling through his incisors.

DESMOND  
 --that was me. Forgot to tell you  
 I was an ordained minister.

VECK  
 How did that happen?

Desmond folds his paws prayerfully.

DESMOND  
 U.S. Postal Service, God bless 'em.

The kids hang on James. He hugs them tight--they squirm.

JAMES  
 They're great, Sarah! They look so  
 much like you and Chris.

SARAH  
 I should certainly hope so--  
 (scolding)  
 --children, you'll choke Mr. James.

Katie and Brian hang around James' neck--he does look as if he could use some air. They reluctantly let go.

VECK  
 Choke James, eh? Never crossed my  
 mind.

He chuckles and tugs his collar uncomfortably, pulling away the tinfoil. He rolls the foil into a ball, and tosses it to the kids.

VECK (CONT'D)  
Curses, foiled again.

The kids eye Veck questioningly, but kick the foil back and forth. Desmond reaches for Veck's collar, distrustful.

DESMOND  
Here now. Let me see that.

Veck strikes Desmond's paws away. Everyone turns to look.

INT. DR. OGLESBY'S VAN

Ted, the lab tech, sits in a swivel chair and sips coffee. He stares at a monitor screen. Speakers emit faint, warbly beeps. Suddenly a bright red dot appears on the screen, and the speakers ping loudly. Ted startles and spills his coffee all over his nice white lab coat.

TED  
Dr. Oglesby! Look!

Dr. Oglesby puts aside her magazine and nearly clambers over the driver's seat in her haste.

DR. OGLESBY  
The radio collar. Got you now.

EXT. DR. OGLESBY'S VAN

The black van starts up--its tires spin and it hurtles darkly down a dirt road far out in the country. Birds scatter.

EXT. RIVERSIDE

Desmond points at the collar, shaking with fury.

DESMOND  
That's right, a radio collar!  
Humans can follow him, and trust  
me, they'll come here!

JAMES  
Desmond's right.

Christopher and Sarah wheel around, looking wounded. James spits his words at Veck.

JAMES (CONT'D)  
Veck's ruined everything. Get him.

Veck backs up, but not fast enough, as the others circle him. Even the kids look vicious.

SARAH  
No biting, children.

CHRISTOPHER  
Well, maybe a little.

They all mob Veck--he struggles in a tangle of furry bodies.

INT. SARAH'S HOME - EVENING

James and the ferrets frantically throw clothes, pots, and such together and tie them up in bundles. Sarah takes the framed stamp from the wall. Christopher looks up.

CHRISTOPHER  
Honey, we can't take everything!

Sarah nods and tosses the frame and stamp into the fireplace. The glass shatters and the stamp burns. Sarah returns to packing more useful items.

SARAH  
I won't have some human poking through my things. I stole them fair and square.

INT. DESMOND'S TREE

Veck slurps down a bowl of soup. He's in a rough wooden cage, looking even more scratched and tired than before.

VECK  
Your cooking's improved, Desmond.

Desmond turns from disassembling a machine, and rattles a wrench along the strong bars of Veck's prison.

DESMOND  
Flattery will get you nowhere, you treacherous backbiter.

VECK  
Oh, it got me places. I could tell you stories.

DESMOND  
Me too. About a weasel named Veck, who never would have sold out his friends. He always complained, but never really hurt anyone.

Desmond presses his face close to the bars.

DESMOND (CONT'D)  
He fell over a waterfall and died.  
There's a story, whoever you are.

Veck winces, honestly wounded, but regains his composure and waves Desmond off.

VECK  
I'm just out for a little payback.

DESMOND  
Nuts to you. Time to get that collar off.

Veck tugs at the collar and chuckles.

VECK  
You'll have to knock me out, or I'll rip you to shreds.

Desmond taps his chin thoughtfully.

DESMOND  
Let me see--maybe I'll put something in the soup.

Veck does a double-take and flops into his soup, snoring. Desmond picks up Veck's paw and lets it fall with a thud.

DESMOND (CONT'D)  
Just like clockwork.

He unbolts the cage and picks up a heavy set of shears, snapping them open and shut a few times.

DESMOND (CONT'D)  
I should make sure you never breed.

INT. SARAH'S HOME

Packing is done. A pitifully small pile of essentials rests near the door. James and the ferrets survey their work.

KATIE  
That's it? This is--sad.

BRIAN  
I don't want to go.

James, Christopher, and Sarah hug the kids.

SARAH  
We've taken too long already--

INT. DESMOND'S TREE

Desmond has the collar off Veck and on a workbench. He sets his feet squarely and raises a hammer above his head. He brings it down and smashes the red plastic sensor box.

INT. DR. OGLESBY'S VAN

Ted's driving. Oglesby frantically ruffles a map, tracing lines with her finger. On the radar screen, the red light makes one last weak 'bloop' and goes out. Oglesby looks up. She swipes maps and a mug full of pencils off the seat.

DR. OGLESBY  
Dammit! We were close!

She stands and rockets to the front of the van, grabbing Ted's shoulder and making him swerve.

DR. OGLESBY (CONT'D)  
Stop the van!

EXT. DR. OGLESBY'S VAN

Oglesby flings the van door open, stands in the middle of the road, and pulls her long brown hair, cursing. Ted cowers in the driver's seat. A familiar tree shifts in the wind, just across the field, a wisp of smoke rising from Sarah's hill.

INT. DESMOND'S TREE

In the cage, Veck inches his eyes open, clutching his throat, which is rubbed bare of fur in spots--no collar. The hammer rests on Desmond's workbench. Desmond glances back and Veck shuts his eyes.

Desmond mutters and throws random bits of machinery into packs, takes them back out and throws them into a pile.

DESMOND  
Sure, I'm the squirrel, so they  
leave me with this nutcase--

Veck quietly crouches in his cage, Desmond's back turned to him. He reaches out and snags the hammer from the workbench with a grin of wicked glee.

Desmond turns as a vicious growl builds. Veck slams the hammer against the bars of his cage, splintering wood. Desmond jumps about a foot in the air--his glasses fall off.

Desmond dashes for the door, zips back to pick up the glasses, and escapes as Veck works at the cage, already squeezing through the broken bars and getting splinters.

INT. SARAH'S HOME

Everybody's got packs and bags, even the kids. Loaded down, they reluctantly head for the door.

DESMOND (O.S.)  
Help! This is awful!

Desmond pops in, gesturing frantically--everyone startles.

DESMOND (CONT'D)  
Veck's out!

Christopher sets his packs down and zips outside. James and Sarah take a few steps after him.

EXT. SARAH'S HOME

Christopher scans the scene, turns, and shrugs at the others, who take a few steps toward the door.

CHRISTOPHER  
Maybe he left.

EXT. TOP OF SARAH'S HOME

Veck roars and slams the hammer against the chimney again and again. He puts his shoulder to it and pushes it over the side of the house, stones and mortar crumbling.

VECK  
This'll keep you in!

EXT. SARAH'S HOME

Christopher startles and takes a step back. The huge pile of stone rains down on him. He falls toward the house, cries out, and is covered completely.

SARAH  
Christopher! No!

The kids retreat against the table. Desmond, James, and Sarah dig frantically at the rocks, but the door is blocked.

JAMES  
Hold on, Chris--

EXT. TOP OF SARAH'S HOME

Veck shouts down the hole where the chimney was, flipping the hammer in the air again and again.

VECK  
Oh, it's a lovely little house,  
Christopher, but now it's one big  
TRAP!

A human argument catches Veck's attention and he twists around, setting the hammer aside. Oglesby's van is at the top of a rise nearby, two tiny human figures gesturing and stomping. Veck collapses and rolls with laughter.

VECK (CONT'D)  
Doctor Oglesby! You couldn't have  
better timing, you coldhearted--

Veck regains his composure and streaks toward the humans. He leaps off the house onto the pile of chimney stones.

EXT. SARAH'S HOME

As Veck slams into the rocks and bounces away, a weak groan sounds and Christopher wedges a paw out of the rocks.

INT. SARAH'S HOME

Brian comforts Katie, who sobs. Brian glares at the ceiling.

KATIE  
Let us out, let us out! Mama...

BRIAN  
He hurt Dad! CREEP!

Choked, Sarah gathers up the kids. James and Desmond keep pulling at rocks, but shield themselves as mortar flies from a sudden collapse. Sarah gasps and perks up, remembering--

SARAH  
Desmond! James! The window!

EXT./INT. BATHROOM WINDOW

Inside the bathroom, James hammers at the glass with one of the chimney stones. It spiderwebs and crashes to pieces.

INT. SARAH'S HOME, BATHROOM

Sarah and James clear away the glass frantically. Sarah winces and pulls away, holding her paw.

James grabs a cloth and pulls Sarah to one side, pulling a long sliver of glass out of her paw as blood drips. He holds the cloth against the wound. Sarah bites her lip. Desmond heaves the kids up at the window--they're too heavy for him and James leaves Sarah's side to help. They get the kids through the window. The kids reach back in.

KATIE

C' mon, Mama!

BRIAN

Hurry up!

Desmond leaps up and scurries through the window. James lifts Sarah up and shoves her through the window, her wounded paw curled against her body. Desmond helps pull her through--it's a squeeze. She reaches back in with her good paw, and James climbs onto the bathtub's edge to take it.

EXT. DR. OGLESBY'S VAN

Oglesby stands with crossed arms. Ted opens the back doors from the outside as Veck crashes out of the bushes, growling. Oglesby does a double-take as Veck bounds back and forth along the road and zips into the brush. Oglesby rushes after him, cursing as weeds slap her legs and leave stickers.

DR. OGLESBY

Ted! Bring everything!

EXT. OUTSIDE SARAH'S WINDOW

James claws at the edge of the hole, stretches as far as he can, and falls to earth in frustration. The others pull on his arms, but he's stuck tight.

VECK (O.S.)

I know, let's chop him in half.

Sarah, Desmond, and the kids startle and look up. Veck is coiled on top of the house, shifting his eyes warily from James to the others. Sarah grabs the kids and thrusts them behind her, bristling and snarling. Veck curls his lip.

SARAH

Desmond! Take the kids and hide!

DESMOND

But I--

She turns and snaps at him, fur on end. She means it.

SARAH

GO!

Desmond grins nervously.

DESMOND  
Sure, no problem.

Desmond grabs an arm each and bounds off with Katie and Brian, both protesting and squirming. Sarah rushes to James, who writhes, growls, and twists onto his back to face Veck.

JAMES  
My own brother! How could you do this to us?

VECK  
That's a long story. I'll break your arm, or a few ribs, pay you back for this leg--

Veck turns, lifts a large chimney stone above his head, and hurls it. James' eyes widen and Sarah dives for him.

James wrenches his face up tight at the sound of rock slamming against flesh. He blinks, perplexed but unhurt.

Veck springs to the edge, shocked. He bites at his paws.

VECK  
No--not you! You were supposed to stay out of the way!

Sarah is stretched out across James' chest, unmoving. James pushes the stone away, then gasps and sobs as he runs a paw over her bloodied head.

Above, Veck turns his head away, tearing at his fur.

JAMES  
You've killed them both--monster!

Veck unlinks in shock.

VECK  
W-what do you m-mean?

James rocks Sarah gently, crying. Veck looks around.

JAMES  
They were so beautiful...

VECK  
James, where's Christopher? Why didn't he come out?  
(a beat)  
He wasn't--oh, no...

EXT. SARAH'S HOME

Veck heaves rocks away from the pile, uncovering Christopher's arm and finally his face. Christopher shifts and coughs wetly.

VECK

I only wanted them to catch you, I didn't--

A scuffle sounds. Veck twists around and bristles. Ted holds a net, as Oglesby levels a dart pistol at Veck.

DR. OGLESBY

There's our bad boy.

A dart streaks at Veck and buries itself in his haunch. He scrabbles and pulls at the dart, but gives up and rests against the pile of rubble, reaching for Christopher.

VECK

I never--do a job--halfway--

He flops over, unconscious. Ted bends and examines Christopher, who makes a weak attempt to snap at Ted's fingers, but fades out again.

TED

This one's useless. Near dead.

EXT. OUTSIDE WINDOW

James finally twists out of the hole and sets Sarah gently aside, crouching to hold her good paw and stroke her fur.

JAMES

Can you hear me, Sarah? Oh, please wake up--

A whistle of air sounds, followed by a 'smack.' James winces and turns around--a dart protrudes from one of his legs. Oglesby strides toward him. James stands for a second and tries to drag Sarah away.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Gotta get away, get away, get--

He blinks, stumbles, and falls on his face. All is dark.

EXT./INT. DR. OGLESBY'S VAN

Ted wedges a cage, with James in it, through the van doors. A tiny piece of metal breaks off as Ted jams the cage in.

INT. DR. OGLESBY'S VAN

James shifts and groans, opening his eyes to slits. Sarah's in the next cage, still unconscious. James reaches for her.

JAMES  
Oh, no. Why didn't you run?  
Sarah, please...

Sarah stirs and stretches stiffly, holding her head. James grabs the bars of the cage tight, rocking up on his knees.

JAMES (CONT'D)  
Thank God, you're alive!

SARAH  
What--what happened, the light  
went, and I... oh, James--

She stumbles to him. He holds her through the bars.

JAMES  
--shh, shh. You saved my life--

SARAH  
I had to... but the children, I  
can't leave--and Christopher's p-  
probably d--

JAMES  
--don't say it. We don't know.

Veck groans and mutters in his cage nearby. He sees Sarah and looks relieved--but only for a second.

VECK  
I guess I didn't use a big enough  
rock.

JAMES  
Shut up, you back-stabbing--

James growls, lets Sarah go, scampers back, and rushes at his cage door, shoulder lowered. He slams into the door and folds up, clutching his shoulder. Veck laughs heartily.

SARAH  
James, don't, you'll break  
something!

VECK  
Good. A taste of what you gave me  
at the waterfall. You and  
Christopher just didn't have it.

SARAH

They both have more courage in one whisker than you've got in your whole flea-bitten body.

James collides with the door and rolls in pain as Veck laughs. Oglesby hears, and stands, turning toward them.

SARAH (CONT'D)

Please, don't hurt yourself again!

James throws his weight into the cage door. It pops open. Veck stops laughing. Sarah smashes against her cage.

SARAH (CONT'D)

RUN!!

JAMES

I love you.

He leaps out and Oglesby grabs him. James bites her thumb, hard. She yells and drops James--he vaults out and away from the van. Oglesby kicks the empty cage as Ted runs up.

DR. OGLESBY

Let's get out of here. He'll run forever.

EXT. FIELD

James rushes through the weeds, stumbling. Desmond reaches him and both pause. James pants.

DESMOND

James, I'm so glad you m--

JAMES

--how's Chris? Is he--

Desmond starts to speak, but winces and shakes his head, spreading his paws. They're bloody.

EXT. SARAH'S HOME

James approaches Christopher, stopping and starting, unable to look. Christopher squints and coughs as blood trickles into one eye. He reaches out and manages a wistful grin.

CHRISTOPHER

(thickly)

Weasel Boy.

James sobs and breaks into a sprint, rushing to Christopher's side and taking his paw. Christopher looks down.

CHRISTOPHER (CONT'D)  
I'm--like--stoned, dude.

James grimaces and nearly laughs, but can't quite.

JAMES  
That's an awful joke, ferret-face.

Christopher writhes, shifting rocks but getting nowhere. James tries to hold him still. Desmond catches up.

CHRISTOPHER  
Tell Sarah--

JAMES  
You can tell her! C'mon, buddy, stay with me.

CHRISTOPHER  
(drifting)  
Can't. Make sure she's safe. Tell her--I love her. Promise.

James puts a trembling paw on Christopher's forehead, and another on his own heart.

JAMES  
I promise.

CHRISTOPHER  
(pleading)  
Don't try to weasel out of it...

He goes slack and his eyes close. James shakes him, but there's no response. Desmond puts a paw on James' shoulder.

DESMOND  
(voice breaks)  
He's gone.

James holds Christopher tight, fighting back tears and losing.

INT. DESMOND'S TREE

Off-screen, a door slams open. Katie and Brian huddle and shriek under a workbench. Trembling with fear, they inch out from under the bench, then they see James and run to him.

James bends and sits on the floor as the little ferrets ask quick, frightened, overlapping questions.

JAMES  
No, Katie, I can't--Bri--just a--

James grabs the kids suddenly and they shut up.

JAMES (CONT' D)  
Stop! Okay? Now listen to me.

The kids start to sniffle and cry.

JAMES (CONT' D)  
Jeez, don't do that.

He pulls them close and hugs them tight.

KATIE  
W-Where's Daddy?

JAMES  
I'm so, so sorry--

Katie wails. She and Brian clutch James tighter, sobbing. Desmond edges through the door.

DESMOND  
James--you... told them?

JAMES  
They know.

BRIAN  
W-what about Mom--is she--

James stands up, clenching his fists. The kids let him go.

JAMES  
Humans have her.

James growls his words through his teeth, muscles rippling. The kids back away--they sense something's going on.

JAMES (CONT' D)  
(disgusted)  
In a cage.

James raises his arms above his head, gnashing his teeth. The kids retreat beneath the stairs, cowering.

JAMES (CONT' D)  
A CAGE!

Desmond's whiskers droop and he steps back, waving his paws in a calming gesture. James snaps at him, eyes wild.

DESMOND  
Calm down, James, you know what happens--

James sweeps an arm at a shelf, crashing jars and sending boxes of gears and wire flying.

JAMES  
--WHEN I GET ANGRY!

Desmond grabs a jar as it hurtles toward the floor. Another jar crashes, sloshing liquid as the kids wince and clutch at each other. Desmond replaces the first jar but it wobbles.

DESMOND  
James, I'm so sorry. Would you--be careful! There's chemicals in here that should never--

Desmond turns around and whacks the badly shelved jar to the ground with his fluffy tail.

DESMOND (CONT'D)  
--mix--

The kids pull him away from a sudden blaze. It blocks the door and spreads. Everyone gapes.

DESMOND (CONT'D)  
Hothead! No respect for science!

The flames leap as Desmond snags Katie and heads for the stairs. James scoops up Brian, but something on the workbench sparks in the firelight--it's the ring. James quickly sweeps it up and drops it in a pocket as Brian screams and tries to climb him.

BRIAN  
Both arms, both arms!

Desmond bounds up the stairs and James follows, with Brian slung over one shoulder. Beneath the stairs, a tongue of fire snakes out, climbing after its stumbling prey.

EXT. DECK

Smoke pours from the exit at the top of the stairs, rising through the planks of the deck as the climbers step out, coughing and rubbing their eyes.

KATIE  
We gotta get down!

The edges of the deck blacken and crackle, fire licking closer and closer, holes opening in the deck.

KATIE (CONT'D)  
Of course, I'm in no hurry--

The deck crumbles toward the group. Desmond and James grab Brian and Katie, wrapping them up and covering them.

BRIAN

Isn't there another way--

His voice becomes a shriek as the last of the deck goes and they crash through. Wind whistling through their fur, they plummet into the dark cloud of smoke around the tree.

EXT. DESMOND'S TREE

The view tilts up, following the gnarled trunk of the tree, as flames shoot out the sides. James and the others should have hit by now. Suddenly a huge flapping blue-gray thing streaks free, trailing smoke. James, Desmond, and Katie clutch tight to feathers between the wings of SAM, a Great Blue Heron. He's got Brian clutched in one foot. Brian squirms and bristles.

KATIE

(relieved)

It's okay, it's okay, it's just Sam!

JAMES

Who the--where did you come from?

SAM

An egg, originally, I think. Speaking of, you guys almost got scrambled back there.

Sam stumbles to earth, and his passengers disembark. Katie rushes to Brian and he hugs her tight, patting her fur comfortingly, glaring as she sobs against his shoulder.

BRIAN

M-mom and Dad both--I hate Veck!

KATIE

What did they ever do? They loved us--

BRIAN

(shocked, low whisper)

What now? I'm so scared, Katie.

Desmond reels, disoriented and airsick. James dusts his clothes. Sam preens, a feather dangling from his mouth.

SAM

Howzit goin', Dez? And you're James, right?

Ferret Lady always talked about you.

(surveys the damage)

Wow. When I get tired of a tree, I just move. I don't burn it down.

Desmond shakes a menacing paw. Sam backs away in mock fear.

JAMES

Ferret Lady? You mean Sarah?

Sam removes the feather and taps it like a cigar--ashes really do fall from it.

SAM

What? Oh, yeah, Sarah. She fixed my wing a while back. Smart chick. Pardon the pun.

DESMOND

Sarah--humans took her away.

James winces. Sam shudders.

SAM

Humans--why'd it have to be humans?

JAMES

(groans)

And my brother killed my best friend.

He collapses, head in paws. Desmond pats his back. The kids huddle together, shivering. Sam clicks his tongue in sympathy.

JAMES (CONT'D)

The scientists--they'll hurt her. I have to do something.

DESMOND

(sighs)

Another damn-fool crusade. Count me in.

Katie and Brian hold onto James.

KATIE

Please, please let me help!

BRIAN

(growls)

I wanna see you stomp Veck into the ground!



CINDY  
 Don't go flying off in the rain  
 again, you'll catch a cold.

A single drop splatters on Sam's beak, making him sneeze.

EXT. HOLLOW LOG - NIGHT

Wind whips around the log, rain battering it. A frog thrashes through the muck, wickedly eyeing the log and digging his feet into the mud. He kicks mud into the hole. Someone groans in disgust and frustration inside the log. The frog hops away, chuckling in a croaky way.

INT. HOLLOW LOG - NIGHT

Katie leans out of the log, muddy and angry, shaking a fist.

KATIE  
 Cut it out, you warty little jerk!

Water drips from the 'ceiling' and hits Brian squarely on the nose as he wipes mud out of his fur. He shifts uncomfortably, his head resting against a small backpack.

BRIAN  
 "Don't worry," he says. "I'll be  
 back in a second," he says.  
 Birdbrain.

EXT. HERON'S NEST - DAWN

Cindy's sound asleep, Sam tucked under one wing. Sam wakes, and very cautiously lifts the wing, but as he gently lets it fall back, she flops over. Sam holds his breath. Cindy opens one eye, with difficulty.

CINDY  
 Wha--it's really, really early.

Sam looks away and trembles.

SAM  
 No time! Gotta go, love ya--

CINDY  
 Love you too--

He cuts her off with a little peck on the bill and flashes into the air. Cindy frowns suspiciously.

CINDY (CONT'D)  
 What's got his feathers in a knot?  
 He's up to something...

INT. HOLLOW LOG - EARLY MORNING

Brian and Katie are uncomfortably draped across lumpy, rough wood, fur soaked and necks at unlikely angles.

SAM (O.S.)  
Hey! Little guys!

Brian wakes up, grabs his head, and straightens out his neck with a loud series of pops. Katie rakes her paws through her headfur, disgusted. Brian stands stiffly, clenches his fists, snarls, and stalks toward the exit with his backpack. Katie throws hers on.

EXT. HOLLOW LOG

Sam hops back as Brian grumps out with a growl.

SAM  
I know how angry you must be.

Katie pops out behind him and clacks her little jaws.

KATIE  
Hello, breakfast.

SAM  
Angrier than I thought.

Brian bounds over and sinks his paws into feathers on Sam's side. He rips two pawfuls away as Sam backs up and shrieks.

SAM (CONT'D)  
Hey, watch it, I need those!

Katie hmphs as she and Brian rub the feathers all over.

KATIE  
Let's leave you out in a storm--

BRIAN  
--and see if you get wet.

They drop the wet feathers and vault onto Sam, gripping his back. Sam grumbles and flaps his wings, building up speed. He lifts his legs, airborne, and twists to look at the little bare spot.

SAM  
Great, I'm a towel.  
(sighs)  
You know, we might never come back.

KATIE  
I just want Mom.

SAM  
Well, James and Dez headed down-  
river--where are they going?

BRIAN  
Someplace--human.

They all shudder.

BRIAN (CONT'D)  
Guess we'll just have to wing it.

They glide and soar. In trees nearby, a figure perches on a branch, hidden by thick foliage. Its eyes are all we can see clearly, and they flash angrily, narrowing. Cindy erupts from the branches with a flapping of wings, and follows. Sam and the kids soar straight toward the sun.

INT. ANIMAL RESEARCH CENTER, LAB

A dead-white fluorescent light hums. Cabinets hold equipment and stacks of cages--in one, Sarah stirs.

Sarah's POV. Diffused light. Confused objects. A disembodied, calm voice speaks--brash and New Yorkish.

SYLVIE (O.S.)  
Just stay still, take it easy.

SARAH  
Who's there? Everything's  
swimming.

Sarah rubs her eyes. She rests against one cage wall.

SYLVIE (O.S.)  
Poor kid. What you need right now  
comes out of the little tube in  
front of you, on the cage door.

Sarah finds the water bottle, and drinks inexpertly.

SARAH  
Oh, thank goodness. But it tastes  
strange...

SYLVIE  
I said you need it, I didn't say  
you'd like it.

Sarah approaches the side of the cage nearest SYLVIE-- another black-footed ferret! She looks older than Sarah, and one of her arms is withered.

SARAH  
This feels silly. Have we met?

SYLVIE  
My name's Sylvie. That's okay, it happens sometimes when they put in the wires.

A patch of fur is gone from Sarah's head. A bundle of short wires protrudes from it. Sarah brushes them.

SYLVIE (CONT'D)  
Hey! Trust me, Sarah, don't mess with those.

SARAH  
My name's Sarah?

SYLVIE  
(Great, talk about a fresh start.)  
Those wires--leave 'em alone.  
Doctor Oglesby nearly killed you.

Sarah is terrified.

SYLVIE (CONT'D)  
No, it's okay, you made it this far. Look--

She turns her head. Fur has grown back up around her wires.

SYLVIE (CONT'D)  
--three years they been in. I'm almost ten.

SARAH  
Ten! But no ferret lives that long--

SYLVIE  
--no normal ferret. We're freaks of nature, according to Oglesby and her pet, Ted. A few years, and you'll think they're the freaks.

SARAH  
I don't plan on staying that long.

She sticks her paw through the door, feeling around it. Sylvie grimaces and looks behind Sarah.

SYLVIE  
Boy, does that sound familiar.

VECK (O.S.)  
Be quiet, my head's coming apart!

Sarah whirls around. Veck, in his cage beside Sarah's, moans and holds his head--it's wired. He pushes himself up.

SARAH  
I'm sorry, we'll keep it down, um,  
Mister...

VECK  
Veck. Forgotten me, after all our  
fun? I'm hurt.

Sylvie points to her head.

SYLVIE  
The wires. Made a clean sweep. I  
see they finally put yours in, now  
that you're back.

Veck curls a lip and reaches up toward his wires. He shuffles over and drinks from his water bottle.

SARAH  
Back? How did you get out?

VECK  
Time off for good behavior.

Veck and Sylvie stare at each other, disgusted.

SYLVIE  
More lies. Dr. Oglesby used him as  
bait. To catch you. Now you get  
to run.

She points her withered arm across the lab. In one cage is a scruffy but well-muscled bobcat named #12, green eyes flashing, constant low growl and twitching tail. His eyes lock in on Sarah and narrow to slits.

#12  
Hmm... fresh meat.

Sarah shrinks back from the edge of her cage, terrified.

SYLVIE  
Kid? Hey, Sarah. Come here.

Sarah advances, watching #12. Sylvie pulls her close, quick, with the withered arm.

SARAH  
--but your arm--

SYLVIE  
I beat that a long time ago. And  
we'll beat this together, okay?  
For as long as we can?

Sarah nods, still glancing nervously at #12.

SYLVIE (CONT'D)  
Partners?

SARAH  
Partners.

They shake on it.

EXT. RIVER

Desmond quivers and tenses, looking nervously downstream. He holds a heavy stick and tries to push the ramshackle wooden raft toward shore. The raft is heavy with packs.

DESMOND  
RAPIDS!!!

James pushes with his stick, too. They slip toward shore, but not quickly enough. They put both sticks in at the same spot and pry hard--both snap. James and Desmond gulp, staring at the broken ends--and the raft's sucked into a dip in the river, shoved toward the rocky, flashing water.

JAMES  
What now?

Desmond tosses away his broken stick.

DESMOND  
Trouble.

EXT. RIVER, RAPIDS

James and Desmond lie flat, straining to hold on as the raft slams back and forth, beginning to shake apart. The raft hits a huge drop-off and free-falls. James and Desmond shut their eyes and grab the raft tight.

DESMOND  
Oh, mercy--

They splash down again, losing more raft, but bob around in the calmer water. James warily opens one eye. Desmond heaves but doesn't lose anything.

DESMOND

I think I'm going to be sick again...

JAMES

You were chock full of nuts. I think your meter's on "E" now.

They slip off the remains of the raft, into the water, and pull it toward shore. James stretches and stumbles.

DESMOND

You look as bad as I feel.

JAMES

I just need a nap. Rough day.

DESMOND

Get out of the water first, you--

James woozily trips and belly-flops into the water. Desmond startles and drags him up the riverbank, slapping his face and shaking his shoulders. James sputters and snores.

DESMOND (CONT'D)

Well, I never! He's out cold!

INT. ANIMAL RESEARCH CENTER, LAB

Oglesby returns Sarah to her cage, asleep. Wires trail from her head out of the cage. Oglesby lays aside a hypo.

DR. OGLESBY (O.S.)

Pleasant dreams.

She reaches for Sylvie. Sarah twitches in her sleep.

TED (O.S.)

We sure get weird readings on these animals.

Ted holds up a chart with squiggly lines, tracing them. Dr. Oglesby picks up a hypo and heads for #12's cage.

DR. OGLESBY (CONT'D)

They are affecting each other somehow. Hmph. I'd say telepathy if I believed in it.

#12 calmly sticks out a leg and Dr. Oglesby gives him the injection. He relaxes as she clips a long wire to the wires on his head.

#12  
(very quietly)  
Thank you, Lila.

Dr. Oglesby doesn't hear, but she shivers, wiping her hands as she walks away.

DR. OGLESBY  
That always freaks me out.

EXT. ICE PLAINS

The gold ring from Desmond's workshop falls and bounces on ice, spiraling flat. James fades in, paw covering it. He sits by a pillar of ice. He picks the ring up, shrugs, and puts it in his pocket. He puts his paw out to lean against the pillar, and tumbles through. He stands quickly and backs away from it. He says something in surprise, but no sound comes out. He clutches his throat. He puts a paw into the pillar and yanks it out, grimacing. He rubs it and looks over the vast plain of pillars, connected halfway up by thin ice-bridges. A deep-blue sea washes a frozen shore. James eyes a thin column of smoke and starts walking.

Sarah opens her eyes and sits up, on an icy hillside. The wires are gone. The lab is gone. The glimmering network of bridges stretches out below. Snow whips by and Sarah shivers.

SARAH  
H-hello? Anybody here?

Sylvie taps Sarah on the shoulder. Sarah shrieks, then breathes heavily, paw on heart.

SYLVIE  
Sorry. Never freeze in here. Just run.

SARAH  
Where's "in here"?

Sylvie taps Sarah's forehead.

SARAH (CONT'D)  
You mean--this is just a dream?  
But it feels so real! And why are you here?

SYLVIE  
Partners, remember? But we've got  
ugly company.

Veck fades in and stammers in shock, rage, and confusion.

VECK  
It's you. What is this?

SYLVIE  
A dream. And remember the cuddly  
kittycat from the lab?

Stomping away, Veck waves her off. Sylvie slaps Sarah's arm.

SARAH  
Ow! What was that for?

SYLVIE  
Reality check. If Number Twelve  
gets his teeth on you, it will  
hurt.

Veck screams in holy terror, off-screen, and both ferrets  
cringe.

SYLVIE  
That's our cue--Amscray, pronto!

They slip toward the ice bridges below. Veck comes crashing  
behind them. He barely notices the two, and pushes past.

VECK  
Get out of my way!

A much larger figure suddenly looms out of a snow flurry.  
Sarah, Sylvie, and Veck freeze. It's #12. His eyes sparkle,  
his ears fold back, and his long dagger teeth show. His is  
the voice of the predator speaking to its prey.

#12  
So, Oglesby has wired up new toys  
for me. Run, toys.

They scatter as #12 pounces. He swipes at Sarah but misses  
and slides into a snowbank. Sylvie pops out from behind it.

SYLVIE  
This way!

The others follow closely. #12 pulls out of the snow.

#12  
 Sylvie, when will you realize  
 there's no point in keeping my new  
 toys away? I catch them soon  
 enough.

They enter a maze of thin ice pillars. Veck crashes into one. The thin, pointed tip shatters off and falls, nearly skewering Sarah. #12 smashes pillars, chipping toward them.

#12 (CONT'D)  
 Sticky situation, hmm?

Sarah wrenches the sliver of ice free and pitches it. It hits #12's eye dead-center--he claws at his face and mewls.

SYLVIE  
 Good shot, kid! Who taught you  
 that?

Sarah gasps and sees James in her mind's eye, guiding her arm in a perfect arc and sending a stone across the pond.

SARAH  
 I--I forget.

#12 crashes through the remaining pillars as everyone scrambles onto an ice bridge, Veck at the rear.

#12  
 You'll pay for that! You worthless  
 little...

His words become a scream as he jumps and lands behind the runners on the bridge, crashing through it and knocking it half away. He tumbles to the ice below, stunned, but picks himself up. The cracked half-bridge quivers and snaps under the runners. Veck stumbles, sprawled out on the ice. Sarah tries to help but he shoves her away. Sarah skitters away ahead and joins Sylvie, safe on thicker ice around a pillar.

SARAH  
 He'd rather die than let us help!

SYLVIE  
 Big surprise.

The bridge cracks and tilts out from under Veck. He grabs the jagged edge jutting out from the pillar. The others help him up, though he pushes them away again.

VECK  
 I'm cold. I just want to wake up--

Sarah points to higher ice. Veck shivers and huddles as the others start off.

SARAH  
I thought I saw smoke. We'll come back for you if we find anything--

VECK  
You won't find anything and won't come back.

SYLVIE  
That's the spirit...

Halfway up, Sarah's caught in a crosswind and hangs on tight, shielding her face from a snow flurry. She looks up again--a dark streak slides toward them from on high.

SARAH  
Back down! Quick!

SYLVIE  
You're kidding!

They backpedal. The furry slider above, in a parka, falls and slides on his stomach. He reaches over his shoulder, pulls a pick-like axe from a sling, and slams it into--the ice. He whips around. Sarah and Sylvie rejoin Veck. The hooded figure wrenches the axe out and approaches--but gets a catch in his neck and pops it with one arm.

SARAH  
Who always did that?

Veck rises, joints stiff.

VECK  
Come at me with an axe, eh? Fight like a--like whatever you are--

HOODED FIGURE  
What? I can't hear much with this on. Oh, the axe.

He drops it, then unlaces and throws back his hood. Veck's jaw drops.

VECK  
Christopher? Impossible!

SARAH  
You look so familiar. Have we met?

Christopher raises an eyebrow and bows grandly.

CHRISTOPHER

Wish I could say so. I don't  
remember much. Just this place.

VECK

You can't be! You died, they said  
you died!

Veck springs clumsily and misses as Christopher sidesteps.

SARAH

Veck! Stop!

CHRISTOPHER

You're wasting precious body heat.

VECK

Shut up! You're just another piece  
of this nightmare!

Veck trips on the axe, sending it spinning. It clatters onto  
a narrow ledge below the bridge. Christopher snags a chunk  
of ice and dances away from Veck.

CHRISTOPHER

I'm a figment of your imagination?  
This shouldn't hurt, then.

He hurls the ice and it twists Veck's head around. Veck  
staggers toward him. Sarah scrambles after the axe. Sylvie  
follows her. Sarah reaches for the axe, pawtips brushing it.

SARAH

Hold my feet!

She slides down, Sylvie straining at her ankles, and grabs  
the axe. Veck leaps at Christopher but careens into Sylvie.  
She's knocked off the bridge, holding onto Sarah, who slams  
the axe into the ledge. Sylvie hangs on as they crash  
against the bridge.

VECK

You should have stayed dead!

Veck swings at Christopher but hits the pillar--he howls and  
clutches his paw. Christopher pauses, catching his breath.

CHRISTOPHER

What's all this "dead" business,  
huh? You must have me mixed up  
with someone else!

Sarah makes it to the ledge, wrenches the axe out, chops into  
the ice higher up, and pulls Sylvie up.

SARAH  
I'll be back.

She climbs, taking the axe. Sylvie pounds a fist on the bridge.

SYLVIE  
Gee, thanks. I'll be a ferret-sicle by then.

Veck backhands Christopher, knocking him nearly off the sheer icy edge--he dangles there as Veck stomps at his paws.

VECK  
How does it feel, Christopher? It was like this at the waterfall. Now it's your turn. Again!

Sarah rises up behind him and clobbers him with the axe-handle--he crumples as she drops the axe, panting. She helps Christopher up and they brush snow off each other.

CHRISTOPHER  
Thank you. What a nasty travelling companion.

He shoves Veck with one boot. Veck groans but doesn't move.

CHRISTOPHER (CONT'D)  
Darn, you didn't kill him. Let's get your friend.

They pull Sylvie up. Christopher removes his parka and wraps up Veck. Sylvie grins.

SYLVIE  
Yes! Who cleaned his clock?

CHRISTOPHER  
This lovely and resourceful lady--um...

Sarah manages a blush through the cold.

SARAH  
I'm Sarah.

SYLVIE  
And I'm Sylvie--not that you asked...

CHRISTOPHER  
Sorry. Well, Sarah and Sylvie--we'll have to drag him.

EXT. CABIN

They drag Veck toward a driftwood shack against a pillar. A large sled rests against one side. Smoke rises from a chimney.

INT. CABIN

Warm, cozy and quiet. Christopher slams the door open and wind rushes in. The others drag Veck in.

CHRISTOPHER  
Rachel, I'm back! Where are you?  
(Not that she'd hear me...)

Sylvie drops Veck. He bounces on the floor and groans.

SYLVIE  
(shocked)  
Did you say Rachel?

Someone shrieks, pelting them with a barrage of bric-a-brac.

SARAH  
Well, honestly. That's no way to  
treat visitors!

A terrified ferret, about Brian and Katie's age, peers around a battered trunk. A bite is missing from one of her ears.

RACHEL  
Mama? MAMA!

She rushes to Sylvie--they hug, sobbing. Christopher and Sarah comfort them.

SYLVIE  
They took her away. Oh, it's been  
so long.

RACHEL  
Mama, don't let him get me!

Rachel sniffles and looks around jumpily, checking corners.

SYLVIE  
"Hi m" who?

RACHEL  
(pointing)  
HI M!

Sarah gasps as James strides closer, reaching out. Everyone hefts Veck away from the door--Sylvie slams it, bars it, and presses against it, but James strides straight through it and Sylvie, leaving a sparkle of frost on both. Sylvie shudders--James winces and stumbles.

SYLVIE  
That's cold. That's really cold.

James sees Christopher and mouths his name, smiling.

CHRISTOPHER  
I'm sure popular today.

RACHEL  
Go away!

She vaults into the trunk, holding the lid open a crack. Sylvie backs against the trunk, baring her teeth. James turns to Sarah, who shrinks away. James sighs and gestures at himself.

RACHEL  
Is he safe?

James crouches and holds out a paw. Rachel inches out, edges around Sylvie, and puts her paw through James's. James' touch silvers her fur with ice. James bites his lip.

RACHEL (CONT'D)  
Brr! You're made out of cold!

She retreats towards the fire as James clenches his paw in pain. Sylvie follows and warms herself, holding Rachel.

SYLVIE  
Sure gave me the chills. But I don't think it's on purpose.

James glares at her and shakes a fist, but nods. He shuts his eyes and begins signing. Rachel understands and grins.

RACHEL  
Hey, sign language! Maybe he's deaf like me!

James points at her and makes the sign for "deaf"--she nods and signs back, and he signs more quickly. Rachel giggles.

RACHEL (CONT'D)  
Slow down, it looks like you're trying to fly away. He wants to know where he is.

SARAH

We're at a laboratory, hooked up to a bunch of wires. This is an experiment.

Christopher frowns.

CHRISTOPHER

Experiment? Did I miss something again?

James frantically signs and points. Veck flings off the parka, wobbles to his feet, and holds his head, groaning.

VECK

Everyone I hate, in one room. Convenient.

James silently warns Sarah back as Veck advances on Christopher.

RACHEL

Don't you hurt him!

James pulls a pocketknife out of a shirt pocket, flicks it open, and steps in Veck's way. He takes a fighting stance and winks at Sarah. Veck rushes James, who sidesteps.

VECK

Nothing to say? You won't be so quiet when I rip your heart out!

James gestures--"just try it." Veck rushes straight through him and smacks his head on a low ceiling beam. Veck topples, his furry, and the shack shakes. James winces, but wipes imaginary dust off. Sarah clasps her paws together and laughs.

SARAH

I know you, I'm sure I do. From somewhere I've lost.

James frowns. The shack shakes again.

SYLVIE

Did he knock us loose?

SARAH

Not even Veck's head is that hard.

James crouches, takes a deep breath, and sticks his head through the floor. Rachel shrieks and grabs Sylvie. James opens his watering eyes--#12 slams into the pillar below. James pulls back up, paws moving quickly.

RACHEL  
The cat's down there!

The shack shifts and tilts. Christopher grabs a pile of ragged, patched blankets.

CHRISTOPHER  
We've got a ride to catch.

EXT. ICE PLAINS

The adult ferrets push the sail-sled, mast raised, up a gently rising ice bridge. James glances back nervously at the cabin on the quivering platform. The wind lashes them. Bundled on the sled are Veck (out cold) and Rachel.

CHRISTOPHER  
Great, you've brought a monster to tear down my house.

SARAH  
Oh, I'm sorry. Should we come back at a better time? Let you tidy up a bit, put some tea on?

SYLVIE  
You two act like a married couple.

The platform below cracks and the cabin comes apart. They're at the brink of a huge hill. As the sled's about to tip over, Christopher throws a lever. Spiky brakes bite into the ice. James gestures ahead, frantic. Cracks race up the bridge behind.

CHRISTOPHER  
Trust me! I know what I'm doing--I think...

He ties everyone else in securely. James tries to step onto the sled. He steps through it and pulls away, frustrated. Christopher ties himself in.

CHRISTOPHER (CONT'D)  
Sorry, Ghost Guy. Sarah, Sylvie, take those lines--pull 'em when I say so. Stay down, Rachel.

He wraps an arm around a line and pulls the brake release. Sarah gasps, and Rachel screams, as the sled plummets. Chunks of ice fly as the bridge collapses behind them. James falls.

RACHEL  
Lemme off! Lemme off!

CHRISTOPHER  
Sorry, no stops!

As the bridge levels out, Christopher tenses on the line.

CHRISTOPHER (CONT'D)  
Pull!

The sledders pull hard at the lines, bringing the sail up. They lurch and rocket forward, sail billowing.

Rachel looks down--#12 is following. A pillar smashes a nearby bridge. Sylvie shields Rachel from the spray of ice.

SYLVIE  
Trouble!

SARAH  
It's coming apart!

CHRISTOPHER  
And it's coming down! Pull!

They do--the sled hops a bump, skewing. All around, pillars and bridges jumble, spraying slivers of ice. One hits Sarah's wrist and knocks her line away as she cries out. She grabs after it as the sled skews. A huge gap in the bridge yawns ahead. Sarah grabs the line, gasps and points.

CHRISTOPHER (CONT'D)  
I see it. Hold on!

He wraps his line around an arm a few times.

SYLVIE  
Looks like a bridge too far--

There's a bridge far below, off to the left.

CHRISTOPHER  
Pull on three, Sarah. Just you.

SARAH  
I--

CHRISTOPHER  
Don't think, just do. One--

The crevasse looms.

CHRISTOPHER (CONT'D)  
--two--

Sarah trembles, opening and closing her paw over the line.

CHRISTOPHER (CONT'D)

--three!

Sarah throws her weight back and the sled flies off at a tilt, sailing down and left. Rachel shrieks. Veck opens his eyes.

SARAH

Never look down, never look down...

VECK

Mother...

They hit, hard, scrape along one side of the bridge, but fight the sled upright. The bridge ripples badly; their speech warbles. Veck thrashes, frothing at Christopher.

VECK (CONT'D)

What are you doing in my dream?  
You're dead!

CHRISTOPHER

Be good or I'll have Sarah knock  
you out again.

He and Sarah grin at each other.

RACHEL

L-let's f-f-find a smumumooother  
buhbuhbridge.

SYLVIE

One that isn't so close to him.

Their short flight's put them much closer to #12.

SARAH

He'll cut us off!

VECK

I'll cut you off. What the  
blazes...

RACHEL

Hey, look! James made it!

James cuts out from beneath a bridge, and #12 whirls. James bows sarcastically and zips ahead. He leads #12 away, cutting around falling ice. A chunk sideswipes #12, but he leaps to his feet.

#12

Where'd you come from? You'll  
never get away on foot!

James makes a quick sign that looks rude, and glances back. The sledders reach an "exit ramp" leading down to clear ice. James grins, but runs straight through a pillar. He winces, stumbles, and turns to shrug at #12, who skids to a halt.

#12 (CONT'D)

You should have told me. Can't eat ghosts.

He turns, but James sinks his icy arms deep into #12's leg.

#12 (CONT'D)

Get off of me! Agh!

He wrenches away, cold muscles locking. He rakes his claws through James, who doubles up in pain but goes after him again.

The sledders pick up speed and glide across the smooth ice.

SARAH

James certainly is a brave ghost-- taking on that monster--

CHRISTOPHER

Thanks to him we're back on solid--

Crunch. Crackle.

CHRISTOPHER (CONT'D)

--ice?

The world shifts violently.

RACHEL

I don't feel good...

The entire ice field ripples and cracks.

VECK

You've steered us onto an iceberg, idiots!

They streak toward the edge of the floating chunk of ice. Boulders of ice careen off each other, splintering and spraying. Christopher throws his weight to the side, skewing the sled.

CHRISTOPHER

Let up on the lines!

They do, and the sail goes slack. The sled skids to a halt and Christopher throws the brakes--their spikes dig deep.

SYLVIE

Anyone else here feel like they're  
stuck in a really bad video game?

The iceberg edge cracks off and everyone pulls on their lines in surprise. The sail comes back up as they drop, locked onto the ice. They splash down, drenched as their little iceberg dips and jerks forward. Rachel chokes and coughs. Sylvie pounds on her back.

VECK

I can't take it! Wake up, wake  
up...

CHRISTOPHER

Shut up. Is he always like this?

A SLAM! rocks them--just ahead, two icebergs bounce apart.

RACHEL

Watch out!

Sylvie pulls--they veer through a temporary, tiny gap.

CUT TO:

#12 leaping icebergs. James catches up and #12 slashes at him. This time, James recoils and bleeds from light cuts on his chest. He touches them and gulps--this is a problem.

#12

Why won't you lay down and die?!

He lashes again at James, who falls and screams in silent agony. #12 sees the sleds below and pauses in mid-swing.

#12 (CONT'D)

I'll deal with you in good time.  
They're quicker.

Roaring, he launches himself off the iceberg.

CUT TO:

Christopher, who looks up to see #12 plummeting, claws out.

CHRISTOPHER

Incoming!

#12 splashes down, plowing toward them. Two icebergs just ahead drift closer together, gathering momentum.

VECK

We're dead, we're dead!

CHRISTOPHER

There's not enough wind down here!

Rachel blows at the sail. #12 snags the little iceberg and pulls himself up, but James cannonballs straight through him. #12 screams as sudden frost crackles through his wet fur. James rises out of the water and freezes him to the ice quicker than he can rip loose. The icebergs ahead drift closer, the icebound sled now between them. James points, silently saying 'GO!!' Sarah shoves the brake lever and the sled water-skis bumpily away from the little iceberg. #12 yowls. The sled slips past the icebergs, free and clear.

SARAH

I hope I see you again, James!

Sarah's POV. James signs quickly.

RACHEL

He says to count on it.

The other sledders (except for Veck) hug Rachel.

#12 writhes, encrusted with ice.

#12

James, is it? I promise you this--  
I'll kill you slow.

James waves goodbye to #12, fading. The ring shows through his pocket, finally hovering alone. It flashes and is gone.

#12 looks up at less and less sky. The icebergs smash together.

INT. SHELTER

Desmond's built a shelter on the riverbank, against a tree. James twitches in his sleep--he suddenly bolts upright, flailing his paws and crying out. Desmond restrains him.

DESMOND

Calm down, just a dream!

James regains control and goes deadly still. He puts a paw inside his shirt and winces.

JAMES

Then maybe dreams can kill.

He pulls the paw out--a single drop of blood shows red against his fur.

EXT. CLOUDS OVER FOREST

Brian and Katie clutch Sam's feathers tight. Katie slides as Sam weaves, but Brian holds her close. Sam's shadow glides across the white, rippled surface as they soar.

SAM  
You sure? You don't mind?

The little ferrets shake their heads and hold tight. He does a loop--the kids press in, yelling, but like it.

KATIE  
Men. You're such showoffs.

Brian looks back and shakes Sam's shoulder.

BRIAN  
There's something behind us.  
Something fast.

SAM  
Uh-oh. Rough neighborhood.  
There's hawks in these woods--

The kids shriek, clutching tight as Sam drops through the clouds into dense trees, dodging through mist and branches.

BRIAN  
You're gonna get us killed!

SAM  
Don't mess with me, I hate backseat  
flyers!

He twists and flips through gaps in the branches, beats his wings quickly and lands.

SAM (CONT'D)  
Perfect landing.

He trips on a root, spilling Brian and Katie, but gets up quickly and ducks behind a tree. He and the ferrets scramble around it and scan the woods.

CINDY (O.S.)  
Sam! Slow down, you jerk!

Sam droops and hides his face with his wings.

SAM  
Oh, no...

Cindy settles on a branch and flaps a few times in frustration. Below, Sam steps into view, smiling sheepishly. Cindy glares.

CINDY  
You're a tough bird to catch.

SAM  
I didn't know it was you, honest!

Brian edges around the tree and waves. Katie grimaces and pulls him back behind the tree. Cindy shoots Sam with a "how-could-you" glare but then smiles.

CINDY  
Hey, kids! Come on out!

They edge around the tree. Cindy eyes the kids lovingly as they shuffle shyly.

CINDY  
Aww, couldn't you just eat them up?

She clacks her bill menacingly and they backpedal. Cindy turns the glare back on at Sam. She ruffles a wing in Sam's face. He cringes.

SAM  
Hey, watch the beak!

CINDY  
Why'd you drag them into this?

Sam peeks out from between his feathers.

SAM  
Hey, come on, if your mom was locked up--

CINDY  
--then she'd be a jailbird. We're gonna catch up to James and Desmond, then we're taking these two back home where it's safe.

She sweeps Katie up onto her back and takes to the air. Brian climbs onto Sam, and they follow.

BRIAN  
I wish we could lose her. But I think she'd kill you.

SAM  
 Nah. She'd never let me off that  
 easy.

EXT. RIVERSIDE

Desmond and James wrap rough twine around bits of the raft on the shore.

DESMOND  
 I'm for burning the damn thing and  
 going on foot.

Desmond looks up and shades his eyes.

DESMOND (CONT'D)  
 Oh, Lord, what now?

James does a double-take over one shoulder. He and Desmond scramble away, as Sam barrels through the raft, smashing it to bits with a yell of surprise.

BRIAN  
 Way to go, feather-head!

Sam twists around, shrugging sheepishly. Cindy flutters in, flaps to a stop, and puts her feet down. She makes a 'fist' and raps Sam on the head. He rubs it, glaring back.

CINDY  
 Hello? Anybody home? "Oh, that  
 looks like a good place to land."

Desmond picks up sticks and lets them fall with a shrug.

JAMES  
 Hello, raft-wreckers.

Sam shrugs sheepishly. Cindy glares at him.

CINDY  
 I'm Cindy. You already know Sam  
 and the midgets.

Katie and Brian growl. Katie thumps Cindy on the neck.

KATIE  
 Stop with the 'short' jokes, okay?

She and Brian start to climb down. James stomps over, hefts Brian off Sam's side and glares at him. Katie comes up behind him, and he grabs her, too.

JAMES

Just what were you two trying to do? Get killed? If Sarah knew you pulled a stunt like this--

They start to snuffle and cry. James softens and pats their shoulders, biting his lip. They settle down.

JAMES (CONT'D)

--she'd be very worried. She loves you. And I... you're so much a part of her, I've got to love you.

DESMOND

Well, that's settled. We love them, but what do we do with them?

James looks up at the birds.

JAMES

Sam--Cindy--will you take the kids back after you help us get our rescue supplies to the city?

SAM

Sure.

CINDY

Done deal.

DESMOND

I think they should go now.

Hugging the kids, James twists to speak over one shoulder.

JAMES

We need to move fast. And you can't beat birds for speed.

EXT. OVER FOREST - EARLY EVENING

Sam carries James and Brian. Cindy carries Desmond and Katie. Both herons struggle with heavy packs, too. They fly wingtip to wingtip, weaving in and out.

CINDY

I'm no featherweight but you need a serious diet.

SAM

This thing's killing me. What's in there--rocks?

Desmond is quite green.

DESMOND

No. Nothing for airsickness,  
either. I'm not a flying squirrel.

BRIAN

C'mon, Desmond, it's not that bad.  
Nice easy breeze, coasting along--

Desmond grimaces and rolls his eyes, moaning.

KATIE

--what's making that noise?

DESMOND

...urr...me, I think...

BRIAN

No, that other noise.

A screech builds, and everyone looks around for its source.

CINDY

Whatever it is, it sounds--

A HAWK swoops down suddenly, and Sam and Cindy scramble.

SAM

--hungry!!!!

The hawk dives at Cindy. It nearly hooks Katie, who shrieks.  
Cindy corkscrews straight down. The hawk turns to follow.  
Cindy strains, barely pulling up, flying low.

DESMOND

We're too heavy!

KATIE

I'll get the pack off!

Cindy's straining and wild-eyed. To get under and to the  
buckle, Katie dodges one of Cindy's pumping wings. She's  
nearly thrown off, but grabs feathers and the pack strap.

KATIE (CONT'D)

Got it!

DESMOND

Steady--now!

Katie yanks the pack strap. The pack hurtles away from Cindy  
and slams into the hawk, which flutters dizzily.

CINDY

Did that do it?

The hawk is furious, and charging full-out.

DESMOND  
Did it ever! Step on it!

Katie scrabbles for a better hold. The hawk climbs high. Very. Puffing, Sam catches up.

BRIAN  
Did it g-go away?

Silence. The hawk is nowhere to be seen.

DESMOND  
Well, maybe it did.

The hawk screeches, cannonballing at Sam. Cindy drops out of sight into the trees. As Sam tries to dodge, it rakes across his back, ripping Brian away as he slips through James' paws. James reaches after him. The hawk screeches triumphantly and glides off.

SAM  
Gotta land, gotta land, gotta...

He spirals giddily down to earth. James catapults off as the bird collapses. Cindy comes down with Desmond and Katie. They dismount.

DESMOND  
Where's Brian?

KATIE  
Oh, no--

Free of her passengers, Cindy rushes to Sam.

SAM  
Hawk. Really big. Huge. Claws and beak, claws and beak--

CINDY  
Sam! I thought you were toast!

Sam nods, bobbing and weaving--Cindy slaps his face lightly.

SAM  
Buttered toast, toast 'n' jam...

James tugs at Cindy's leg.

JAMES  
Cindy, I need your help! Now!

Cindy cradles Sam's head in her wings.

CINDY  
Take a number!  
(to SAM)  
Snap out of it, ya nut!

SAM  
Cinnamon toast, French toast,  
melba...

JAMES  
Please! Brian's in big trouble!

Cindy gasps, drops Sam unceremoniously and extends a wing.

CINDY  
Get on.

SAM  
That's--that's about it.

EXT. HAWK'S NEST

Brian struggles. The hawk lands. A single FLEDGLING rushes up, peeping. The hawk looks at it, and down at Brian. It raises its beak and stabs. Brian twists away and cowers. The hawk pins Brian down and raises its head to strike, but looks up as James and Cindy approach. The hawk lets Brian go and streaks at them.

EXT. FOREST NEAR HAWK'S NEST

James looks down at his paws and gulps as he flips his pocketknife open. He and Cindy close on the hawk.

CINDY  
This is insane!

The hawk extends its claws and shrieks. Cindy turns on a dime and James slashes at the hawk's leg. The hawk crashes into the top of a tree and flaps, entangled. Cindy flutters back on course for the nest.

EXT. HAWK'S NEST

Brian fends off the fledgling. It playfully knocks him down.

BRIAN  
Grr!! You're worse than my sister.

JAMES (O.S.)  
Brian!

James and Cindy land. Brian rushes for them. The fledgling hops away suspiciously.

CINDY

Look who's coming to dinner!!

The hawk swoops in and tosses Brian away. Brian begins to stand but the hawk clutches him. James quickly whirls around, grabs the agitated fledgling, and pins its wings back. The hawk eyes James murderously, limps forward, and tightens its grip on Brian. James shakes the fledgling and it peeps piteously.

JAMES

I wouldn't do that! Cindy, get ready.

Cindy hops onto the edge of the nest. The hawk flexes its claws, and Brian cries out. James pulls the fledgling's head back, his paws on its neck, and it flutters in fear. The hawk looks from Brian to the fledgling.

JAMES (CONT'D)

That's right. If you hurt mine, I hurt yours.

The hawk eases up on Brian. Brian takes a blessedly full breath. James eases up on the fledgling and it strains away.

JAMES (CONT'D)

What do you say, do we have a deal?

The hawk releases Brian. James lets the fledgling go and it scoots toward its mother.

JAMES (CONT'D)

RUN!

Brian runs to James, who catapults him onto Cindy. Cindy rockets away as James leaps on. James and Brian venture a look back. Cindy's still trucking.

CINDY

That bites.

BRIAN

She coulda killed you guys--

JAMES

We couldn't just leave you.

CINDY

If a hawk had its claws on me--  
brr!! You're brave, kid.

BRIAN  
Brave? I guess so. It's just--

The hawk rises again, but heads off in another direction.

CINDY  
Cheer up! You aren't dinner.

BRIAN  
But she'll kill someone else 'cause  
she let me go.

James hugs him with one arm, holding Cindy tightly.

JAMES  
Never feel guilty for surviving.  
It'll eat you up.

EXT. CAMPSITE

Desmond scratches letters in the dirt with a long stick. James watches the young ferrets intently. Brian yawns and the others can't help yawning. Sam and Cindy slouch sleepily against each other by the campfire.

DESMOND  
We'll work more tomorrow. You're  
quick learners.

Katie purses her lips and wipes at a tear.

KATIE  
Dad taught us some of this.

Brian hugs her.

BRIAN  
He didn't teach us what to do  
without him.

James looks at them sadly.

EXT. CAMPSITE, FIRESIDE

James, asleep, tosses and turns in the throes of nightmare.

CUT TO:

Christopher in his dying place, hazy in James' dream.

CHRISTOPHER  
Tell Sarah--

CUT TO:

James again, still asleep, tears welling.

CHRISTOPHER (O.S.) (CONT'D)  
Tell her--I love her.

James sits up suddenly, gasping.

JAMES  
I can't take that again.

EXT. CAMPSITE, EARLY MORNING

Everyone else is asleep. Brian and Katie are tucked in beneath one of Cindy's wings. James runs a paw over Brian's head and Katie's shoulder.

JAMES  
(quietly)  
Gotta go. Someday you'll understand. I hope.

He turns to Sam, and shakes his wing. Sam squints sleepily.

SAM  
(yawning)  
Early start, huh? You ever sleep?

JAMES  
Shh! I can sleep on the way.

The horizon lightens. James drags a half-full pack over. Sam starts back toward the others, but James grabs his wing.

JAMES (CONT'D)  
No, they stay.

He heaves the pack onto Sam's back and fastens the strap.

SAM  
Hey, that pinches. Aww, the kids are gonna miss all the fun.

JAMES  
They had enough 'fun' yesterday.  
That hawk--

SAM  
(shivers, miming claws)  
Don't even. Those claws--and that horrible shriek, like--

He starts to shriek, but James squeezes his beak shut. Brian flinches and Katie clears her throat. James mounts up, Sam builds up speed, and they take off.

SAM (CONT'D)  
Okay, okay, where to?

JAMES  
The city. Then you're going back.

Sam nearly stalls out for a second in surprise.

SAM  
They'll pluck my feathers off!  
What'll I tell 'em?

JAMES  
(gritting his teeth)  
Tell them I went to work.

EXT. LAKE - LATE MORNING

Sam and James fly low over a lake by a broad field, but the skyline of a city rises beyond. Sam "waterski" on his feet, but pulls them in as a fish snaps.

JAMES  
Watch it--

SAM  
Okay, okay. I'll pull up a little.

Sam begins to climb, but James winces and puts a paw to his forehead, slumping to the side.

JAMES  
Oh, hell, not again--

SAM  
Hey, hey, you're messing up my  
aerodynamics--

James rolls off his perch, crashing into Sam's wing--it catches the surface of the lake, sending them into a flapping tangle of feathers.

James and Sam crash into the water and all goes black.

INT. ANIMAL RESEARCH CENTER, LAB

Ted wheels a cart over and reaches for a syringe. Everyone but Veck and Sarah are already asleep. Veck slams his paws against the bars of his cage.

VECK  
That dream--that nightmare...  
Christopher, I thought you were  
gone for good.

Sarah rattles the bars of her cage. Veck jumps and growls.

SARAH

What do you have against Chris?

VECK

Oh, he just--pushed me over the edge. That's a long story you wouldn't like.

Ted opens Veck's cage door and reaches for him. Veck bristles, but covers his eyes with his paws.

EXT. RUINED CITY - EVENING

Wind blows dust through empty streets. Houses wrecked, windows broken, weeds taking over. A battered church with a once-impressive tower and a massive graveyard. A choked, many-bridged river trickles. And everything seems too small in scale--for humans, at least.

The ring appears above the graveyard, and falls. James fades in, one paw clenched around the ring. He crashes, groans silently, and pushes himself up. He does a doubletake and crouches to read a tombstone.

VECK (O.S.)

I knew that one. Even married her.

James whirls around, bristling.

VECK

What were we looking for all those years, wandering the earth? More of our "own kind?" Someone to talk to, live with, love, even?

James shrugs, but then nods.

VECK (CONT'D)

I found exactly what we were looking for, James.

He pats the tombstone, a thoughtful look in his eye.

VECK (CONT'D)

Do you like what I did with it?

He cackles madly, gesturing to the ruins. The rest of the gang appear in a flash of light. Christopher shivers.

CHRISTOPHER

I hate this place.

Veck mock-frowns.

VECK  
Fine way to talk about my home--

CHRISTOPHER  
I hate it worse.

RACHEL  
Are you gonna go crazy again?

Veck clicks his tongue.

VECK  
Crazy isn't something that stops  
and starts.

SARAH  
What on earth happened here?

Veck absentmindedly counts tombstones.

VECK  
They made the same mistake James  
did. They trusted me. And that's  
an incredibly stupid thing to do.

His voice, so full of truth for once, cracks. He falls to  
his knees, tracing the tombstone's letters.

VECK (CONT'D)  
Lori ssa, Lori ssa... James? Do you  
love Sarah?

James nods and signs. Christopher looks uncomfortable.

RACHEL  
More than anything in the world.

VECK  
Just think--if you had to bury her  
with your own paws.

James gulps and looks at his paws. He holds up the ring and  
frowns.

SYLVIE  
Who knows, might look good on you.

James shrugs, inching the ring toward his finger. With a  
crackle of electricity, the ring leaps onto it. Everyone  
backs away as sparks spit from James' raised fur with an  
unbearable glow. It cuts out and he crashes to the ground,  
smoking. Sarah reaches out and grabs his arm. She gasps.

SARAH  
James! You're here! Really here!

James stands with her help, tries to speak, but clutches his throat and signs.

RACHEL  
Not all the way.

The earth bulges. A huge form shakes off dirt and tombstones. It's #12. The others recoil.

#12  
Close enough for me. Well, be entertaining.

They scramble. James snags Rachel and picks her up. #12 bounds into pursuit. Veck trips and Sylvie helps him up.

SYLVIE  
You know this place?

VECK  
I took most of it to pieces...

SYLVIE  
Typical. Anywhere safe to go?

James points toward the ruined church.

VECK  
As good a place as any.

#12 snarls and closes. The others slip into the church and close the huge doors.

INT. CHURCH

Veck pulls a lever and a bar slams down across the doors.

RACHEL  
Will it keep him out?

#12 bashes against the doors. Mortar rains down.

VECK  
For a while...

SARAH  
Let me guess--only one way out--

#12 tears at the doors and slams into them again.

#12 (O. S.)  
NO WAY OUT!

CHRISTOPHER  
Thanks for clearing that up.

Veck strides toward a staircase to one side of the altar.

VECK  
Let me give you the ten-cent tour.  
But watch your step.

INT. RUINED STAIRCASE

They all jump missing stairs as they climb--the staircase used to be enclosed in the tower, but the troubled sky shows through huge gaps in the masonry. James helps the others.

RACHEL  
Why are there all these holes?

Veck chuckles grimly and turns so she can read his lips.

VECK  
You could say I reinvented  
gunpowder.

SARAH  
Why did you do this to a church?

VECK  
The good guys were inside.

INT. CHURCH

#12 crashes into the sanctuary, smashing pews and knocking the doors askew on their hinges. A sad-eyed marble Madonna and child (disturbingly weasel-like) admonish him silently.

#12  
What are you looking at?!

He squeezes up the staircase.

INT. BELFRY

The runners pause in the half-missing belfry at the top of the stairs. A bell hangs, just barely supported by rusty twisted iron. All but Rachel twist around at #12's voice.

RACHEL  
What? Did he get in?

Veck puts a finger to his lips and points up. Under the half-roof, small bats hang, asleep but stirring.

SYLVIE  
(whispers to VECK)  
If they suck blood, you're safe.

INT. RUINED STAIRCASE

#12 groans and pushes himself through the twists and turns.

#12  
You had to make this difficult.  
I'm not a kitten anymore!

INT. BELFRY

The bats wake and flutter off angrily. Everyone hits the floor except Rachel, who falls with a shriek. James pounds on the floor and signs frantically, pointing at the door. #12 roars, closer. James stands, grabs the bell rope, hangs onto it, and swings. The bell barely moves.

VECK  
What are you doing? You'll bring  
the place down!

CHRISTOPHER  
No, I think I get it--

CUT TO:

Everyone holds the rope at the edge of the belfry floor. Sarah knocks a brick loose, and it tumbles into the dark. Rachel recoils, holding her mother and Sarah.

RACHEL  
Do we have to do this?

Christopher nods and Rachel gulps.

RACHEL (CONT'D)  
Okay, I'll count. One--

#12 squeezes halfway through the door and pounds at the floor. The runners fall with loose stone, screaming. The rope tenses and the bell swings. The runners slow at the end of the rope.

CHRISTOPHER  
Let go! Now!

## EXT. RUINED CITY

They let go and crash to earth winded but unhurt. Above, the bell swings back and wrenches away from its supports. The belfry and tower shudder and shed blocks of stone. The runners scramble out of the way as the bell tower topples, #12 still wedged inside. It collapses around him, but he roars, shovels debris away, and heaves himself up.

The runners look back from a nearly dry riverbank.

VECK  
(wincing)  
I tried to knock that down for  
days.

He twists suddenly, grins, and dashes up the riverbank. The others follow warily.

## EXT. DAM AND SCAFFOLDING

Upriver, a substantial dam stretches across a rise. Behind lies a silent lake. Veck climbs wooden scaffolding beside the dam as the others catch up.

VECK  
(singing)  
I'm gonna wash that cat right outa  
my hair--  
(stops singing)  
Hurry, if you don't want a really  
deep bath!

James bends and Rachel grabs his neck. He pulls the others up. He and Veck have no trouble climbing, but the ferrets are too short. #12 reaches the base of the scaffolding.

#12  
Where do you think you're going?

He puts his paws up on the scaffolding and shakes it. Sarah slips and falls. James grabs her paw and pulls her up.

SARAH  
You saved my life--

RACHEL  
(as James signs)  
It's becoming a habit--

SYLVIE  
Flap paws later! Climb now!

#12 tests the scaffolding. It sways and snaps as he climbs.

Veck reaches the top, leaps onto a concrete platform and strains at a rusty wheel. The others catch up and help.

Floodgates open at the base of the dam. Water rushes through, and the river below becomes a raging torrent, flooding the city.

Earth washes away. The scaffolding sinks, folding and crumbling.

Veck and the others keep turning the wheel as #12 scrambles.

VECK

You stupid hairball, I got you!

#12 glares up as he slides.

#12

Not yet.

#12 claws his way up the splintering scaffolding to the platform. The others back away. #12 grabs the wheel to pull himself up, but it pops loose with a rush of water. #12 falls, caterwauling, and smashes into the water far below. He goes still and flashes out of existence.

SARAH

Didn't land on his feet that time!

She hugs James and Christopher. Veck is distracted.

VECK

Things fall apart...

Chunks of the dam crumble and the platform shifts wildly. The dam splits as the runners head for a hill to one side. James grabs Rachel and pulls Sarah along.

CHRISTOPHER

Shoddy construction, if you ask m--

The last bit of concrete drops away as Veck clutches for Christopher and barely grabs his paw. A landslide sends the two slipping, but they stop against broken scaffolding. Sarah dashes to the edge.

SARAH

Chris!

Another slide carries Sylvie, Sarah, and Rachel away. Rachel screams as they scabble against the crumbling hill. James has more stable footing, and reaches down. Veck grabs Sarah and strains toward James's paw--the one with the ring. Veck gets a tenuous hold but loses it and slides backward.

The ring pops off James's finger, sliding down the hill in the mud as he clutches after it. James sparks and fades, reeling and stumbling. The ferrets catch Veck.

RACHEL  
He lost the ring!

James tries to climb down, but can't touch anything. His ghostly paws slide through the rocks and roots.

Christopher inches toward the ring. Veck grabs him.

SARAH  
Christopher, no!

He twists free.

CHRISTOPHER  
I have to!

Veck and Sarah strain after him. Christopher slips and slides. He brushes at the ring. He gulps, looks down at empty space and jagged wood, and reaches. His paw closes over the ring.

CHRISTOPHER  
James! Catch!

He pitches the ring to James, who puts it on and reaches down with the other paw. His color comes back and he's substantial again. Veck heaves Sarah up to James, then reaches for Christopher. James holds Sarah back.

CHRISTOPHER  
Sorry, Sarah--

Christopher loses his grip and falls. Veck clenches his paw, closes his eyes, and looks away. Sarah sobs, clutching at James.

EXT. RIVER BELOW DAM

Sarah flees down the hill. She approaches a large rock. Bloody red mud slides toward the river. Sarah touches it.

SARAH  
Oh no--Christopher--Christopher?!

CHRISTOPHER (O.S.)  
Hey! Sarah. You okay?

Sarah steps around the rock and sees him. She makes a wounded, hopeless sound. Christopher lies in the mud, with a large jagged piece of wood run through him. He smiles.

CHRISTOPHER  
Got a really big pair of tweezers?

She rushes to him and finally forces herself to touch him.

SARAH  
Please, oh God, so much blood--

CHRISTOPHER  
You always said I'd throw my neck  
out one of these days--  
(coughs and strains)  
--this is a little more serious.

SYLVIE  
Don't move, Chris, we'll do  
something--

Rachel crouches and holds his arm.

RACHEL  
Don't die, Christopher!

CHRISTOPHER  
Sorry, Rach'. I've been dead a  
long time. Veck knew.

Veck looks up, clenching paws into fists, shaking them at  
Oglesby or God.

VECK  
WHAT THE HELL DO YOU WANT?  
(to himself)  
Isn't once enough? Isn't--

Veck flops down and curls up, cursing.

SARAH  
Oh, Christopher, don't leave me!

CHRISTOPHER  
Left you forever ago. Hurt then,  
too. I love you.

SARAH  
I--I remember. I love you too.

Christopher writhes. Sarah and Sylvie hold him down. James  
crouches by his side, gripping his shoulder.

CHRISTOPHER  
Get her home, James. No more bad  
dreams.

James puts a paw on his heart and grabs Christopher's paw.

JAMES  
(choked)  
I...

Tears streaking her fur, Sarah looks up, shocked.

JAMES (CONT'D)  
(weakly)  
I promise.

CHRISTOPHER  
Thanks, Weasel Boy. That's all--I  
was waiting for.  
(to Sarah, smiling)  
Sarah--I love my friend.

This startles a wistful half-laugh, half-sob out of Sarah. She nods, putting her paws over James' and Christopher's.

SARAH  
I do, Chris...

Christopher goes slack, eyes closed. Sarah shuts her eyes and hangs her head.

SARAH (CONT'D)  
No... no, please.

SYLVIE  
I'm so sorry, Sarah.

VECK  
He was my best, my only friend--  
God, strike me dead!

Veck clutches the back of his head as James reaches for Sarah and opens his mouth to speak.

SYLVIE  
VECK, NO! Don't--

INT. ANIMAL RESEARCH CENTER, LAB

Bloody wires lie in Veck's paw. A buzzer sounds. They're back in the cages. Sarah pounds her fists on the floor and sobs. #12 growls low with a chuckle as Dr. Oglesby flings open Veck's cage, grabs his limp form, and rushes from the room. Ted grumbles and follows.

EXT. LAKESIDE - DAWN

James wakes, half in the water, a soaked mess. He grabs his head with muddy paws, and groans. He thrashes angrily.

JAMES

No, not yet, she needed me!

The others cast about nearby. Sam's bad wing is bound with cloth strips. Brian pulls on Desmond's arm, pointing.

BRIAN

Hey! There he is!

Katie puts her paws on her hips and glares at James.

KATIE

Why did you leave us?

James waves them off and covers his ears, squinting.

JAMES

Don't talk... so loud. Or so high.

CINDY

Great. I love the smell of wet weasel in the morning.

She hops into the water, pushing him out as the others pull.

EXT. FIELD - MORNING

Wind blows tall grass, wildflowers everywhere. It's a huge pasture, barbed-wire fence running along one side. The pack of travelers (all but James--he's passed out on Sam's back) force their way through the weeds. Desmond whistles through his teeth, whacking weeds with his walking stick. Rising up ahead, hazy in its bubble of smog, is a city skyline.

James groans and stirs on his feather bed. Sam bends low, twists around, and prods him with his beak.

SAM (CONT'D)

Get off my back already!

James slides off Sam and the others help him stand upright. He looks ahead to the city and sighs with relief.

JAMES

Finally. But the kids should go back--

CINDY  
 Rules have changed, buddy. As long  
 as my mate here--

Cindy squeezes Sam and gives him a peck on the cheek. He  
 hugs her back, one-wingedly.

SAM  
 Your very lucky mate--

CINDY  
 As long as he's grounded, I'll  
 stick with him.

DESMOND  
 Next time, listen to me! We're  
 stuck with the kids now.

The kids cheer. James shakes his head.

EXT. HUMAN CITY - AFTERNOON

Skyscrapers. Children play in the park. A hot-dog vendor  
 with a pointy goatee and peaked paper cap forks hotdogs out  
 of his cart, emblazoned with the fiery words "Devil Dogs."  
 Cars push through congested streets.

Using all the cover they can, our crusaders creep past  
 benches, storefronts, and alleyways, all with their packs on  
 again. A stray cat yowls and flashes past-- everyone shrinks  
 into a corner but then sighs with relief.

EXT. ANIMAL RESEARCH CENTER - EVENING

The crusaders turn a corner revealing the building they've  
 come so far to rescue Sarah from. It has an odd slope,  
 tilting up at both ends.

SAM  
 This is it? I was expecting barbed  
 wire, at least.

JAMES  
 It's human--that makes it dangerous  
 enough. I--hey, wait a minute.

He dashes to the sign and traces the letters.

JAMES (CONT'D)  
 Animal --Research--Center. A-R-C.  
Ark!

He turns around and groans--the building's ship-shaped.

BRIAN  
Like Noah's Ark!

KATIE  
And this one's full of animals too!

They all dash over to the glass door and peer down a long, starkly lit corridor. James and Desmond pry at the door.

BRIAN  
How do we get in?

James looks around and up. A lit keypad by the door shines. James narrows his eyes and 'hmm's.

JAMES  
"We" aren't doing anything!

James grabs the kids by the arms and looks them in the eyes.

JAMES (CONT'D)  
If you two got hurt, I couldn't  
live with myself.

He lets go and turns away. Brian slips a hook and line out of the big pack, hiding it under his smaller one. Katie sees, but Brian shushes her.

JAMES  
Sam, you stay with the kids. Take  
care of that wing.

James takes a hook and line, winds up, and pitches it up. It catches on a gutter. James tests the line and climbs.

CINDY  
Keep both eyes on 'em all the time.

SAM  
Love of my life, when have I let  
you down?  
(thinks)  
Umm... don't answer that.

Cindy kisses him. Lovestruck, Sam sighs. The kids kick at the ground and grumble.

KATIE  
We always get left out!

Feet clomp closer. Everyone but James dashes into the shadows.

James hangs from the line, back in a shadowy recess, as the sleepy NIGHT WATCHMAN (N.W.) steps up to a keypad, enters the code (the five-note motif from Close Encounters) and goes in. The door closes. James waits until N.W. is out of sight, then swings back and forth, punching the code in with his feet. The door cracks open.

Cindy wedges herself in the doorway. James drops. Desmond leaps to the door--it whirrs, clicks, and starts to close. He and Cindy are nearly squished. James reaches the ground and flicks the line. The grappling hook comes loose and arcs back. James catches it.

CINDY

Nice catch! Now get over here!

Straining, James pushes the door open just a little more and squeezes inside. He looks over his shoulder.

JAMES

We'll be back with Sarah!

The door clicks shut as Brian and Katie rush up and put their paws up on the glass. James puts his own against the glass on the other side.

JAMES (CONT'D)

You might have to let us out--stay safe!

INT. ANIMAL RESEARCH CENTER, HALLWAY

James, Cindy, and Desmond peek around a water fountain. N.W. sits at a desk. His portable radio--no headphones--blasts heavy metal. N.W. nods, sipping coffee.

DESMOND

Heavy metal, music for the deaf.

JAMES

Light sleeper. Tricky...

EXT. ANIMAL RESEARCH CENTER

Katie and Brian brood, bored.

BRIAN

Stuck here doing nothing. Again.

SAM

You just wait. We'll get your mom out. Me and Cindy'll have a nice clutch of eggs--well, she will, anyway. And--

Ventriloquist style, Katie hides her mouth with one paw and sends frantic bird noises bouncing through the streets.

SAM (CONT'D)  
Did you hear that?

KATIE  
Hear what?

SAM  
Sounds like a bird in distress!  
Gotta help!  
(pleading)  
Please stay here and be good!

He flaps off. Brian turns and high-fives Katie, then pulls the hook and line from his pack. Katie points up at the keypad.

KATIE  
What did that sound like?

Brian whistles the motif, missing the last note badly. Katie winces and shakes her head, wiggling a pawpad in one ear.

KATIE (CONT'D)  
Not exactly--

INT. ANIMAL RESEARCH CENTER, ABOVE CEILING TILES

James and Desmond pull on a line. Light streams in from a missing tile behind them--below, Cindy gives them an "A-OK" sign and scuttles off. They hoist the radio through a hole, and lay it down flat.

DESMOND  
Would have been a lot easier with two lines.

They "walk" the radio up on end and back down, moving it.

DESMOND (CONT'D)  
Where is the other line?

JAMES  
Strange, I put them both--oh, no.

EXT. ANIMAL RESEARCH CENTER

Katie and Brian hang from the line, which is hooked on a ledge beneath the keypad. Sam returns.

SAM  
 Couldn't find anybody! Sounded  
 just like--  
 (realizes they're gone)  
 Kids? Kids!

Katie and Brian clamber up onto the ledge and scan the keypad. They push random buttons, which beep. Sirens blare and lights whirl. Sam twists and turns, flapping and cringing. Frantic, the ferrets push more buttons.

KATIE  
 I think I got it!

She quickly runs through the sequence, and the lights and sirens stop. The door clicks open. The kids swing back and forth on the line and let go, sailing for the door. They hit hard but scramble through it.

SAM  
 There you are--hey, no, stop!

Sam squeezes through after them and tries to hold the door open, but it slams on the tips of his wings.

INT. ANIMAL RESEARCH CENTER, HALLWAY

Sam extracts his wingtips from the door, flaps them, turns around and glares. The kids shuffle guiltily.

INT. ANIMAL RESEARCH CENTER, NEAR LAB ENTRANCE

N.W. nods, wakes, spills coffee, curses, and scans the desk.

ANNOUNCER (ON RADIO)  
 You're listening to KSNZ, K-snooze  
 104 F.M. --

N.W. takes his flashlight and creeps down the hallway.

N.W.  
 Bob? You there? C'mon, man, this  
 isn't funny. When you fell asleep,  
 I didn't hide your T.V., did I?

He unlocks a broom-closet and flicks the light on. The radio announcer's voice booms down. N.W. goes in, taking his keys.

N.W. (CONT'D)  
 It's like some kinda Twilight Zone  
 episode--

He pokes the ceiling tiles with a broom handle. The light goes, the door bangs shut, and we hear N.W. thrash around.

Outside, Cindy steps back from the door, chuckling.

CINDY  
Heheh, gotcha, sucker...

Inside, N.W. calms down and lights a cigarette lighter.

ANNOUNCER (ON RADIO)  
And now for another hour of  
uninterrupted easy listening.

Frantic again, N.W. pounds on the door furiously.

INT. ANIMAL RESEARCH CENTER, LAB

Sarah stirs. Only a few dim desk lamps light the lab. We hear N.W.'s radio and muffled thumps.

SARAH  
Sylvie? Sylvie, wake up! Listen!

Someone or something taps at the laboratory door, as though testing it. Everybody who wasn't awake before, is now. #12 clicks his claws suspiciously.

SARAH  
Maybe it's animal rights activists,  
coming to let us out!

SYLVIE  
Forget that--I hope it's animals.

VECK  
Shut up. My head hurts.

A rectangular section of the door begins to glow red and smoke.

SYLVIE  
(absently)  
Did you ever see "Star Wars?"

The section topples, smouldering. Desmond steps through, dark goggles on, and blows smoke off a cutting torch.

DESMOND  
I like the direct approach.

He rips the goggles off and looks up as James shoves past.

SARAH  
James? JAMES!

JAMES

Sarah!

He bounds toward Sarah, beaming broadly.

SYLVIE

I must be dreaming. But what a great dream!

#12

No. You'll never leave here. I'll kill you first!

He slams against the door, clawing at the bars.

VECK

This isn't happening. Nothing's real, go away!

James climbs to the countertop and runs to Sarah. He sticks his arms through the bars and she rushes into them, sobbing. James is pretty tearful himself.

SARAH

Get us out of here!

JAMES

Anything you say.

Offscreen, Sam coughs. James twists around to look. Sam, Brian, and Katie pop their heads through the hole.

SARAH

Brian? Katie? But--

The kids rush in, nearly knocking each other over. #12 bashes against his cage door and collapses.

#12

I hate family reunions...

James unbolts Sarah's cage and opens her door. Cindy flutters over with Desmond. Sam lowers his neck humbly as Cindy pulls him into the room.

SAM

I messed up. I'm sorry.

CINDY

You're all okay, I forgive you. This time.

JAMES

I told you kids to stay out!

SARAH  
This is an awful place, you  
shouldn't be here!

Desmond whips out a wirecutter and clips wires on Sarah's head, muttering.

DESMOND  
What the--strangest haircut I've  
ever given.

James opens Sylvie's cage. She edges out cautiously.

SYLVIE  
Seven years. Feels good to be out.

RACHEL (O.S.)  
Help me!! Over here!

Sylvie beams, and dashes off. She and Sarah zip around a partition. There, in her oversized, lonely cage, is Rachel.

SYLVIE  
RACHEL!

RACHEL  
Mama! Sarah! Get me out!

She embraces Sylvie through the bars. Sarah throws the latch and tries to open the door. Rachel pulls at Sylvie.

SYLVIE  
Honey, you have to let go to get  
out!

Rachel does, struggling out as Sarah pries the door open. Rachel cries as Sylvie and Sarah wrap their arms around her.

RACHEL  
Is this real?

SARAH  
You bet.

Back by Veck's cage, James holds a small pair of handcuffs.

JAMES  
I'm going to put these on you.  
Just until we figure things out.

VECK  
Okay, whatever. Dream's a dream.

Veck puts his paws out through a gap in the bars. James handcuffs him and opens the cage. Veck looks quizzically at Brian, who pulls himself up to the countertop and cracks his neck. Sam winces. Brian helps Katie up and starts toward James, but stops short as Veck glares.

VECK

You! Christopher, don't you ever stay dead?

He rushes at Brian, snarling, as Katie yells and dodges. James grabs Veck. Sarah and Sylvie rush up closer.

JAMES

Veck, no! Snap out of it!

SARAH

Don't hurt Brian!

Veck wraps up James, choking him with the handcuffs. James reaches into a pocket and pulls out his pocketknife, spilling the keys. Veck twists hard and James drops the knife. Veck bends to pick up the knife and keys, quickly unlocks and flings away the handcuffs, and slashes at the wheezing James. One of James's eyes disappears in a red flash. James cries out. Desmond sends a scalpel sliding toward James, who takes it and blocks a downward blow. James gets to his feet but Veck backs him to the counter edge. Veck leaps at him and the two weasels crash to the floor, entangled. Veck throws James off. Veck hacks at James, who just barely parries.

JAMES

He's Brian, Christopher's son!  
Chris is dead!

VECK

He won't stay that way!

Veck makes a vicious backhand swing, rattling James, then slashes at his chest. A "ching!" sounds. Veck gloats but James pulls a paw away from his chest. The gold ring rests on his paw, horribly dented.

JAMES

God bless you, Desmond.

He clutches the ring and advances on Veck. Veck backs away.

VECK

Just bleed like you're supposed to!

JAMES

You know what kept me going?

He swipes at Veck, stalking relentlessly forward.

JAMES (CONT'D)  
You know what kept me alive?

Veck backs against a corner, blocking cuts in every direction... scared. James lets up and Veck quivers. James swings hard, whipping the pocketknife out of Veck's paw. James flicks his scalpel against Veck's throat, holding the ring up with his other paw. Veck follows it, eyes wavering back to the scalpel point.

JAMES (CONT'D)  
I had to get Sarah back and give this to her.

James rolls the ring around and down his pawpads.

VECK  
I'm--uh--happy--for you--

JAMES  
Pretty thing, isn't it? Shame about the dent. You choose--want your throat cut, or a real close look at this?

VECK  
A--a real close l-look?

James puts the ring between his pawpads, makes a fist, and slams it into Veck's face. Veck hits the wall and crumples.

JAMES  
That felt good...

Brian, Katie, and Rachel all cheer, and Desmond whistles his approval. #12 coils, growling and straining, eyes hateful. He bounds with all his might at the cage door, which slams open. #12 stands, growling low and viciously.

SARAH  
Look out!

James turns, dropping the ring in shock.

#12  
James. How wonderful to hear your voice.

James flees, slipping on the linoleum, #12 hot on his track.

Sarah nearly dashes off the edge of the cabinet.

SARAH

JAMES!

The kids pull her away from the edge. Desmond looks up at a cabinet. He turns to Sarah.

DESMOND

Tranquilizers! We've got to take the cat out!

Sarah grabs Sylvie's paw.

SARAH

Come with me! Sam, stay there!

Cindy swoops at #12, pecks at him, and dodges as he lashes.

SAM

CINDY! BE CAREFUL!

(to Sarah)

Whatever you're doing up there, do it quicker!

Sarah and Sylvie climb up to the cabinet. They wrench one of the hypos loose and throw it to the countertop below. They unwrap it and Desmond pulls the cap off.

DESMOND

Build up some speed or it'll never go in!

SAM

Cat! Cat! Cindy, get out of there!

They get the hypo onto Sam's back, and Sarah pins it down.

KATIE

Good luck, Mama!

SARAH

Thanks, sweetheart. Let's put that kitty to sleep!

They flash into the air.

James cuts a corner and #12 scrabbles and claws around it. Sarah and Sam sight in on #12. Cindy flaps out of the way.

CINDY

'Bout time!

SARAH

Dive! All the way in!

Sam gulps but goes for it. They crash into #12. The hypo buries itself in #12's haunch, Sarah pushing the plunger. Not quick enough. #12 yowls and bats his attackers. The half-empty hypo skitters across the floor and Sarah slams against a cabinet. Sam lands in a heap, favoring one wing. Cindy flutters down.

SAM

I'm okay! Help Sarah!

Sarah has a long claw mark across her face. She cowers against the cabinet. #12 growls and stalks toward her, limping. Cindy swoops in, and #12 tosses her away. Cindy crumples as Sam rushes to her.

Brian, Katie, and Rachel are perched on a counter edge. #12 inches tauntingly toward Sarah, below. Sylvie grabs the kids' shoulders as they tense and almost spring off.

SYLVIE

Don't even think about it--

The kids shake free and launch themselves at #12. Sylvie shakes her head, takes Desmond's paw, and jumps after them.

They collide with #12's head, grab his fur and ears, and bite. #12 roars, and flings Desmond. Cindy scuttles back to break his fall. #12 launches Sylvie and the kids, all jumbled into a "butterfly" net propped in Veck's corner.

Veck twitches, half-conscious. He opens his eyes to slits and starts to pull himself toward the door. Someone says "psst," and Veck twists around to look. It's a hazy outline of Christopher.

VECK

Nightmare. Christopher, go...

CHRISTOPHER

If you were ever my friend, stand up. Sarah needs you!

Veck looks toward the door and freedom, but wobbles to his feet and turns back toward #12, clutching the pocketknife.

VECK

If it'll shut you up--

CHRISTOPHER

It just might.

Christopher grins and fades out. Veck shakes his head to clear it, but advances on #12.

#12, drowsy, looms over Sarah and raises a massive paw.

#12  
How about a bedtime snack, hmm?

VECK (O.S.)  
Here, kitty, kitty.

#12 whips around toward Veck.

VECK (CONT'D)  
She's just a mouthful. C'mon, take  
a bite out of crime.

#12 pounces at Veck, who hacks at him with the pocketknife and is ripped to shreds. Veck is thrown at Sarah's feet.

VECK (CONT'D)  
(weakly)  
Pop goes the weasel.

Glassware cracks across #12's skull. He mews in pain and looks up as James pushes another beaker. #12 dodges it. James leaps onto a rickety stack of cages and climbs, still carrying the scalpel. #12 stumbles sleepily toward him.

JAMES  
You're not gonna go to sleep on me,  
are you? Fraidy cat!

#12  
Come closer and say that.

#12 springs at James, who slashes at his paw. #12 yowls and lets go of the cages--they sway violently. #12 leaps and hangs onto a cage. It slides out slowly, and he frantically pedals the air with his hind legs. James gives #12 a curt salute and jumps. The cage slides out, and the entire stack comes down around #12, who lands wrong and snaps his back.

Sam and Cindy scramble out of the way. James is thrown aside. He lies still. Sarah staggers toward him.

SARAH  
James?

James groans, opening his one good eye--that eye widens.

JAMES  
Behind you!

Sarah turns as #12 brings a paw down and pins her.

Above, in the net--

BRIAN  
MOM!!!

KATIE  
NO!!!

RACHEL  
Leave Sarah alone!

Sylvie pulls Brian and Katie back as they freak out and try to clamber up the inside of the net.

Back below, #12 rakes at the floor with his other forepaw.

#12  
You ruined my fair fight, Sarah.  
Tranquiliizer--that's a mean trick.

Sarah tries to stay still.

SARAH  
I wish I c-could say I'm sorry.  
I'm n-not.

#12 chuckles and winces.

#12  
So--here I end, just a number. And  
my number's up.

SARAH  
W-would you like a name? Every  
villain needs one.

#12  
Better--hurry.

James tries to get up, but #12 spits and growls.

#12 (CONT'D)  
Stay right--where you are.

SARAH  
I've never named a c-cat before.  
How about--Pumpkin?

#12  
(snarls)  
TOO--CUTE!!

SARAH  
I'm sorry! Um--I've got it! How  
about "Green Eyes"? They always d-  
did scare me at night--

#12  
 (satisfied, drifting)  
 Green... Green Eyes. A name--to  
 strike terror into the hearts--of  
 the small and the weak.  
 (chuckles)  
 Well, not--not so very weak--

Sarah grins nervously at the half-compliment.

SARAH  
 P-leased to meet you, Green Eyes.

#12/GREEN EYES  
 Plea--pleased--to m-mm--

He gives one tiny, pitiful mew, and is still. Sarah pries his slack claws away and inches over to close his eyes.

SARAH  
 What a sad creature.

Sarah perks up with a shock of remembering, and rushes to James. He holds her tight with one arm.

JAMES  
 You're a sight for sore eyes--  
 well, one very sore eye--

Sarah shuts him up with a kiss. He's happily surprised, but relaxes into it.

CUT TO:

The battered survivors reaching Veck, who wheezes and bleeds.

SARAH  
 Lie still, Veck, Desmond can patch  
 you up--

Veck shakes his head, with effort.

VECK  
 I'm not worth it--you don't know  
 what I did--I killed Christopher--

Sarah looks to James, who nods and squeezes her shoulder.

SARAH  
 (tearfully)  
 I'd forgotten. But I can't hate  
 you anymore.

Veck looks sadly at her, his eyes soft for a moment, but then sneers again. He pushes himself up to a slump.

VECK  
Don't forgive me! Hate me forever,  
I'm damned!

JAMES  
Veck, take it easy. I'm serious,  
we can help you.

VECK  
To hell with your help! I don't  
want--

Somehow, Veck manages to struggle to his feet, scooping up the pocketknife. He draws back his arm, gnashing teeth.

VECK (CONT'D)  
--your help--

He draws a bead on James as Sarah stands her ground and spreads her arms in front of him, a furry, bristling shield.

Veck growls, turns on his heel, and pegs the knife. It whistles harmlessly through the air an arm's length from James' head.

VECK (CONT'D)  
--I want--better aim.

He crumples in on himself, making it halfway to the floor before the others rush in and slow his fall. James grabs Veck's shoulder as they lay him down.

JAMES  
You missed, you missed on purpose--

Veck's eyes spark with mischief, for the last time.

VECK  
Who said I was aiming at you?  
(a beat, then sincerely)  
Hurry.

He takes a gasping breath and lets it out. He doesn't take another.

SARAH  
What do you think--

James blinks, thinking. He traces a pawpad in the air and stands up very quickly, pointing.

JAMES  
One last twist of the knife.  
Thanks a million, bro...

Veck's pocketknife protrudes from a panel near the door. The panel emits a few sparks, but a rapidly blinking, red LED readout flashes "ALERT" over and over.

JAMES (CONT'D)  
EVERYBODY OUT! NOW!!!

EXT. ANIMAL RESEARCH CENTER

A security patrol car idles in the parking lot, roof lights flashing. A RENT-A-COP mashes the intercom buzzer over and over, gun drawn.

RENT-A-COP  
(into intercom)  
Phil? Phil, you there?

Dr. Oglesby whistles sharply to get his attention. He winces and whirls around.

DR. OGLESBY  
Idiot! How long have you been  
standing out here?

She storms to the door and quickly taps in the entry code.

DR. OGLESBY  
Now get in there!

INT. ANIMAL RESEARCH CENTER, HALLWAY

The Rent-A-Cop hurries ahead, pushing open doors down the hallway. Dr. Oglesby sees the sloppy desk N.W.'s left unmanned. Ted rushes up behind her.

DR. OGLESBY  
Guard! GUARD!

TED  
Where is he?

N.W. wakes up and pounds on the door again, in time with the music. Dr. Oglesby uses her keys. N.W.'s curled up.

N.W.  
(singing along with radio)  
Raindrops keep fallin' on my head--

DR. OGLESBY  
Dear God, man, what happened to  
you?

Fanatic fervor wells in N.W.'s bloodshot eyes.

N.W.  
Found me a new radio station.  
(singing again)  
No, cryin's not for me--

Dr. Oglesby rushes to the laboratory door and tries the lock. Agitated, she drops the keys. She crouches and frowns, sticking her hand through the cutting-torch hole as though something inside might bite. She jumps up, opens the door, and streaks in.

INT. ANIMAL RESEARCH CENTER, LAB

Only #12 and Veck are there, both dead. Veck's carefully outlined by glassware. Dr. Oglesby tears at her hair and takes a piece of paper off #12. On it are the hastily scribbled words: DON'T FENCE ME IN.

Dr. Oglesby woozily slumps onto a lab stool. Ted steps in. He very carefully walks up to Dr. Oglesby, who doesn't notice at first. He clears his throat. Dr. Oglesby looks up as Ted takes the note from her and reads it with a doubletake.

DR. OGLESBY  
They cut their way in. They. As in  
"fuzzy-little-critter commandos".

TED  
So they really were that smart.  
It's not too scientific to say "I  
told you so"--but, I told you so.

For the first time in a long while, Dr. Oglesby's face softens and she looks at Ted like he's a real person. It suits her.

DR. OGLESBY  
Ted--please, do me a favor.

TED  
Sure, Lila--it's the first time  
you've asked nicely--

DR. OGLESBY  
Tell the committee that I did this.  
All this crazy mess in here.

TED  
Why on earth--

DR. OGLESBY  
No one else needs to know what  
really happened. For now, this  
research project is... on hold.

Ted thinks about it for a second and grins.

TED  
I can live with that.  
(looks at the note)  
I think they can, too.

EXT. FIELD NEAR SARAH'S HOME - NIGHT

The full moon shines down. Sam and Cindy alight. Sarah,  
James (head and one eye bandaged), Desmond, Sylvie, and all  
the kids dismount.

SARAH  
Thank you so much. You really are  
feathered friends, you know.

The smaller adventurers wave and march off. Sam and Cindy  
return the wave.

SAM  
I think things are gonna be okay.

CINDY  
Don't think too hard. I like you  
just the way you are.

They take to the air, chasing each other through the night.

EXT. SARAH'S HOME

Desmond and the others kick at a few broken chimney-stones  
away from the entrance, all that is left of that sad pile of  
rubble. James and Sarah step away and circle around the  
house, but Desmond motions for the others to stay put.

EXT. BATHROOM WINDOW

Sarah touches the hole where the bathroom window was.

SARAH  
(wearily)  
I could use a good bath.

JAMES

The place sure looked empty without you.

(a beat)

My heart felt like that while you were gone.

Sarah takes his paw and squeezes it tight, tearing up.

SARAH

Oh, I missed you too, James.

(a beat)

I don't suppose it's safe to stay here--

James shakes his head.

JAMES

Probably not. But there are other places we can go... Sarah?

SARAH

Yes, James?

James wraps Sarah's paws up with both of his own.

JAMES

Sarah, would you do something for me? The most important thing anyone has ever done for me?

SARAH

Of course, you silly weasel. I'd walk off a cliff for you.

James takes a deep breath. Desmond steps out of the shadows, clears his throat, and motions. James lets Sarah go and steps over to talk.

JAMES (CONT'D)

What? I'm kind of busy...

DESMOND

Yes, yes, but do it right--

James fidgets as Desmond frowns and searches his pockets.

DESMOND (CONT'D)

Ah, here it is.

He leans close to James, winks, and produces the dented ring. James takes it and twirls it between his pawpads, grinning broadly, though he growls in exasperation.

JAMES  
You saved it! How--

DESMOND (CONT'D)  
Be good to each other. Go on.

James returns to Sarah's side, kneeling and holding the ring out. Sarah is speechless.

JAMES  
It's sort of bent, I don't know if  
it still fits--  
(gulps)  
--will you marry me?

Sarah gasps and embraces him. She pulls back to say:

SARAH  
Yes. Oh, yes I will.

James kisses her gently and squeezes her tight as the assembled friends and family all creep up behind Desmond and cheer. Desmond shakes his head good-naturedly at them.

JAMES  
Thank you, Sarah. I think we're  
going to be good together.

She presses against him, shaking her head happily.

SARAH  
Oh, good's too small a word for  
what we'll be. I think we'll be  
outstanding.

FADE OUT

THE END