



story
weaver

A Tale of Two Oxen

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Level 4

About the Author

Born on the 31st of July in 1880 as Dhanpat Rai Srivastava, Premchand went on to become one of the most prolific writers in the Indian subcontinent. He was bestowed with the honorary title of 'Munshi' due to his mastery over words. He is considered to be the pioneer of the modernist Hindustani literature. He authored (roughly) 300 short stories and several dozen novels in his lifetime. Premchand was also a popular dramatist and a translator. His famous works include novels like *Karmabhoomi*, *Seva Sadan*, *Godaan*, *Nirmala*.... and short stories like *Eidgah*, *Lottery*, *Bade Bhai Sahab*, *Do Bailon ki Katha* and *Poos Ki Raat* amongst many other notable titles.. He was given the title of *"Upanyas Samrat"* (*Emperor among Novelists*) by the other writers of his times. Majority of his writings present a slice of life of the pre-independence era. His writing is steeped in realism and he is known for his Hindi-Urdu literature. His style of writing is more direct and he is considered to be the first Hindi writer to showcase the concept of realism in his writings. Subjects like colonialism, corruption, poverty, child widowhood and exploitation of the poor etc. feature prominently in his works. He wrote extensively about the life of common people of his times. Munshi Premchand died on October 8, 1936 but his work continues to be commemorated even today.

About the Story

Do Bailon Ki Katha is a gripping tale about freedom and the will to pay the price for it. Hira and Moti are two oxen who happily live at Jhuri the farmer's home. To help his brother-in-law, Jhuri sends the oxen with him. The oxen do not like this and return home. They are sent back. In order to subdue them, Jhuri's brother-in-law mistreats them. Only the motherless daughter of the house is sympathetic to them. The oxen run away again only to end up in the pound with other animals who have lost the will to be free. Hira and Moti break the walls of the pound and free all the animals and themselves. After a few adventures on the way they finally return to Jhuri.

The story can also be read as a message to all nations under British rule to make a concerted effort to overthrow the yoke of slavery. Hira and Moti seem to symbolize the two seemingly opposed sections of freedom fighters: the supporters of peaceable ways, and the revolutionaries who took to arms.

The donkey is considered the most intelligent among animals. However, when we wish to call someone an absolute fool, we call him a donkey. It is difficult to decide whether a donkey really is stupid or is just called so because it is simple, harmless and tolerant.

Even gentle cows use with their horns when they need to. A cow protecting its calf can be as ferocious as a tigress. The dog too is humble, but bites when it gets angry sometimes. But I have neither heard about nor seen a donkey being angry. You might thrash the poor animal or feed it rotten hay but it never seems dissatisfied. It may prance around sometimes at the peak of summer, but I have never seen it really happy. No matter what happens, its doleful look remains unchanged. A donkey has all the highest qualities of wise sages, and yet we call it dumb. Such complete disrespect of high virtue is unparalleled.

Perhaps this world does not reward guilelessness. See how Indians suffer in Africa! They are not allowed to enter America. They don't drink, don't pick fights, avoid getting into arguments, work extremely hard, save a little money for harder times; and yet they are given a bad name. They are accused of lowering standards of living. Had they learnt to hit back, they might even have been branded civilised. Look at Japan - a single aggressive victory won it a place in the cultured world.

The donkey has a younger brother which is considered slightly less stupid. That brother is the ox. We call a person '*uncle of the calf*' in the same sense that we call him a 'donkey'. Some may consider the ox the most stupid, but I do not think so. The ox sometimes hits back. Sometimes oxen are stubborn as well. The ox expresses its dissatisfaction in other ways too, so it ranks lower on the dumbness index than the donkey.

***uncle of the calf: Literal translation of the Hindi idiom 'bachiya kaa taau.'*



Jhuri had two oxen named Hira and Moti. Handsome, well-built and hard-working, the two had been together for a long time and were like brothers. Sitting side by side they would exchange views in silence. I do not know how they understood each other's thoughts, but they certainly possessed some mysterious power that humans, who claim superiority over all beings, don't have.

They would express their love by licking and sniffing each other, and sometimes they would playfully lock horns, the way good, close friends slap and punch each other. Without such play, friendship is somehow less enjoyable and seldom lasts long. When they were yoked to the cart or the plough, each tried to take on more load so that the other would not get tired.

When they were released from the yoke after their day's work at noon or in the evening, they would lick and nuzzle each other to ease their fatigue. When oilseed cake and straw were tossed into their feeding trough, they would stand and eat together. If one stopped eating, the other would stop as well.

One day, Jhuri sent them both to his in-laws' home. The oxen thought that their master had sold them. Jhuri's brother-in-law Gaya had a hard time leading them to his home. When he drove them from behind, they ran left and right. If he pulled their rope from the front, they dug their feet into the ground. When he struck at them, they lowered their horns and bellowed.

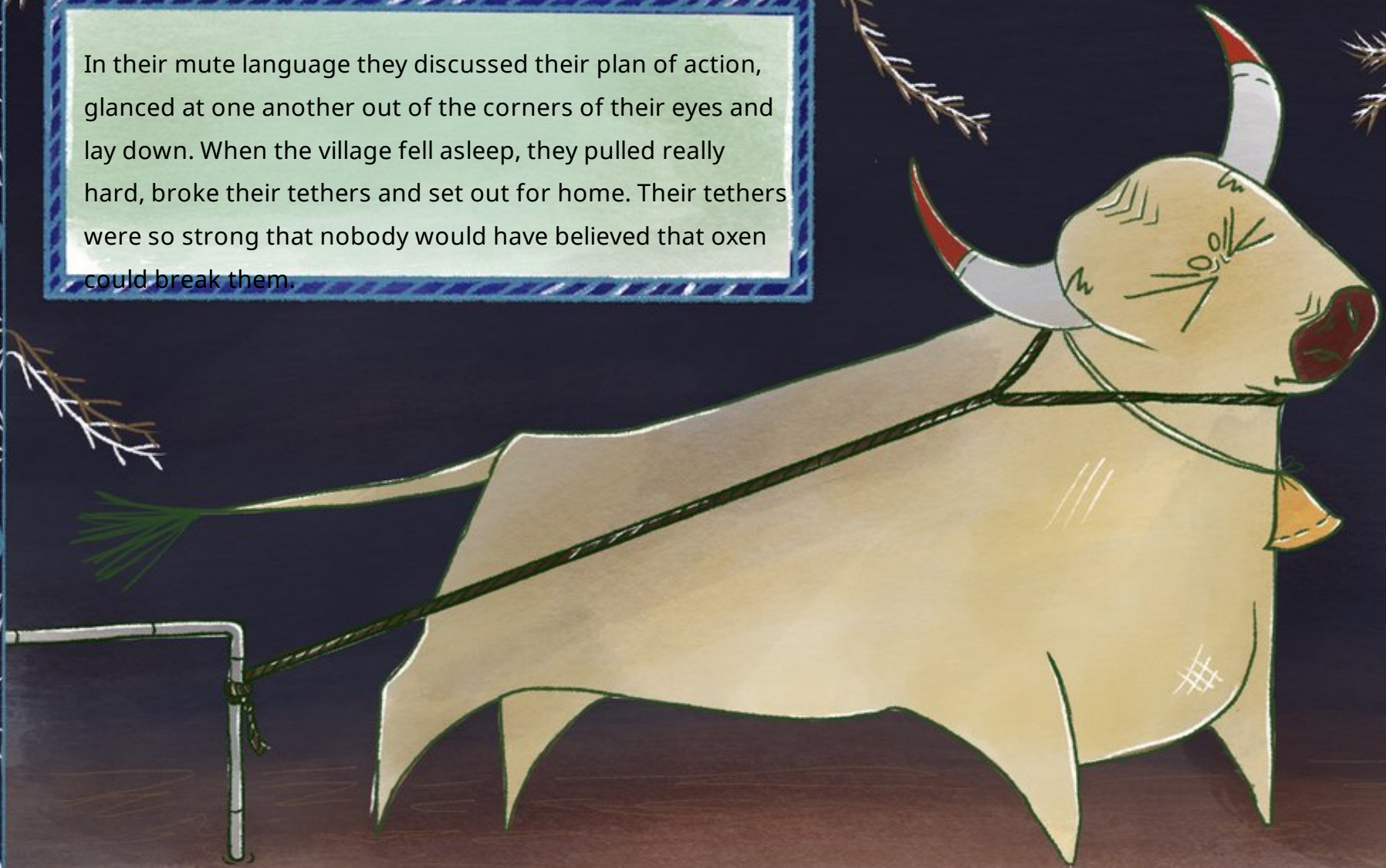
If they could have spoken, they would have asked Jhuri, "Why are you throwing us poor wretches out?"



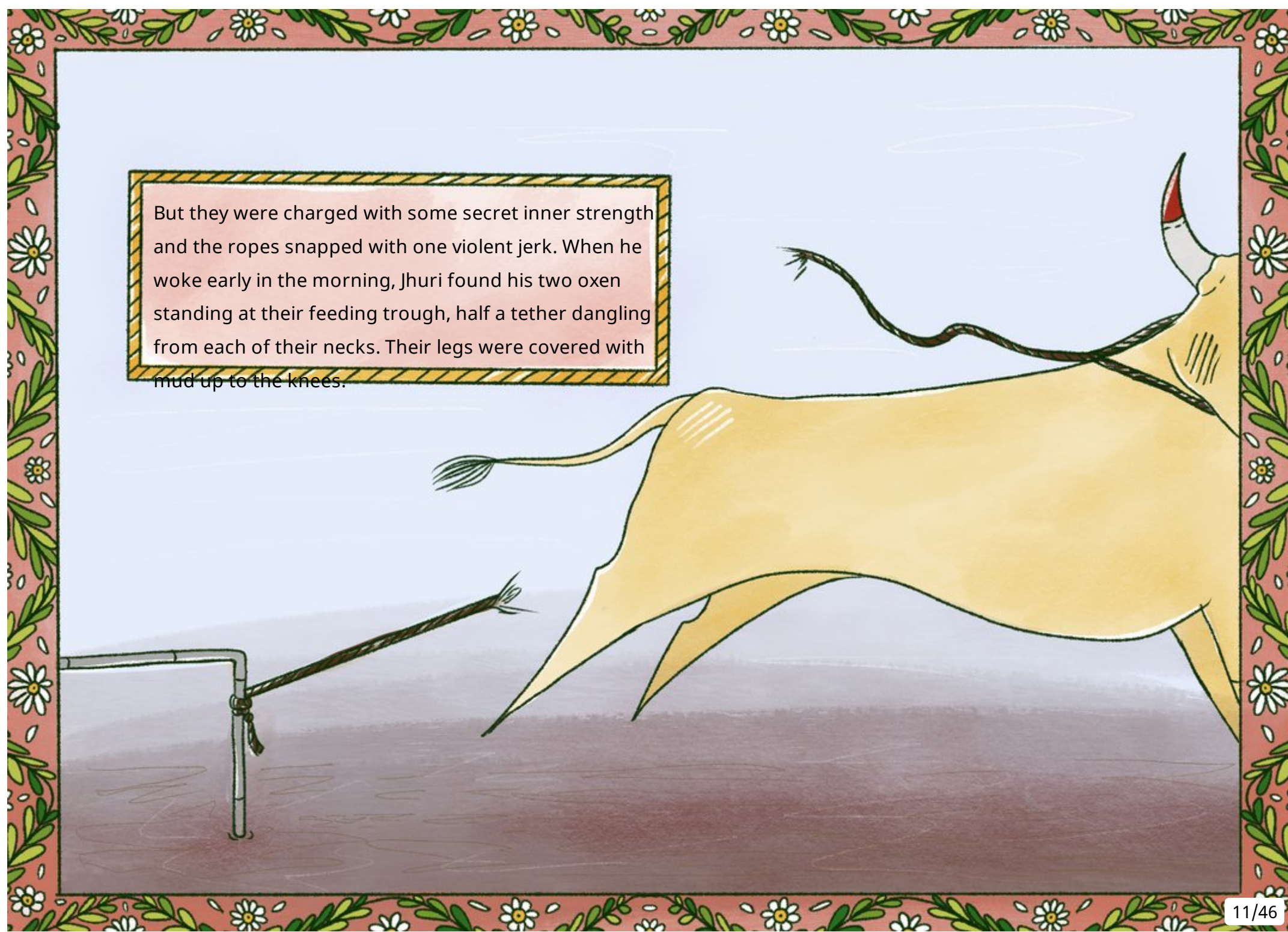
"We did our best to serve you well. If our hard work was not enough, you could have made us work harder. We were willing to die working for you. We never complained. Whatever you gave us to eat, we bowed our heads and ate it humbly. So why did you have to sell us to this tyrant?"

By evening the two oxen reached their new home. They were hungry but when they were brought to the feeding trough neither felt like eating. Their hearts were heavy. They were far from the home they had thought was their own. New house, new village, new people - everything seemed strange to them.

In their mute language they discussed their plan of action, glanced at one another out of the corners of their eyes and lay down. When the village fell asleep, they pulled really hard, broke their tethers and set out for home. Their tethers were so strong that nobody would have believed that oxen could break them.



But they were charged with some secret inner strength and the ropes snapped with one violent jerk. When he woke early in the morning, Jhuri found his two oxen standing at their feeding trough, half a tether dangling from each of their necks. Their legs were covered with mud up to the knees.



They looked at him with love and some resentment.



Bursting with love, Jhuri ran and threw his arms around their necks.

The children of the house and the entire village gathered, clapping their hands in welcome. This incident, though not unprecedented, was a landmark in the history of the village. The council of children decided to felicitate the two heroes. One child brought *rotis* from his home, another brought some *gur*, yet others some bran and straw.

One child said, "Nobody has oxen like these."

Another agreed, "They came back from so far away, all by themselves."

A third child added, "These are not really oxen. In their past life they were human." Nobody disagreed with this. But Jhuri's wife saw the oxen at the gate and grew very angry. "What ungrateful creatures! They didn't work at my father's house for even a single day and ran away!" she said.

****Rotis: Round, flat bread.**

****Gur: Jaggery, unrefined country sugar.**



Jhuri countered, "You call them ungrateful? At your father's house they must not have fed them, so what were they to do?"

In her overbearing way his wife said, "Oh! So you are the only one who feeds his oxen well, everybody else gives them only water." Jhuri teased her, "If they had been fed why would they run back?"

His wife was irritated, "They ran away because my people don't make fools of themselves by spoiling oxen like you do. They feed them but they also make them work hard. These two are shirkers, so they ran away. Let me see how they'll get oilseed and bran now! I'll give them nothing but dry straw. They can eat that or drop dead." So that's exactly what happened. The hired hand was given strict orders to feed them nothing but dry straw.



When the oxen checked their feeding trough they found only bland straw. Nothing juicy, nothing tasty to savour. How were they going to eat it? They looked out hopefully at the door of their stall.

Jhuri prompted the hired hand, "Why not throw in a little oilseed?"

"The mistress would kill me."

"Well, do it on the sly."

"Oh no, brother! Afterwards you too will side with her."



The next day Jhuri's brother-in-law came and drove the oxen back again. This time he yoked them to his cart. A couple of times Moti wanted to knock the cart into the ditch but the more tolerant Hira stopped him.

At his house, Gaya tied them with thick ropes and punished them for the previous day's mischief. Then he threw them some dry straw. To his own oxen he fed oilseed cake and ground lentils along with their straw.

The two oxen had never suffered such humiliation. Jhuri had never hit them. The two of them would fly at a single click of his tongue. Here they were being beaten. Adding to their hurt pride, the straw was dry and tasteless. They didn't even bother to look at the feeding trough.

The next day Gaya yoked them to the plough but it was as though both of them had taken an oath to not lift a hoof. He grew tired beating them but they would not budge. When the cruel man rained blows on Hira's nose, Moti lost control and ran away with the plough. The plough, the share, the rope, the yoke, the harness - all broke. Had they not had thick ropes around their necks, it would have been impossible to catch the two oxen.

Hira said in his silent language, "It's useless to run away."

Moti answered, "But he would have killed you!"

"We'll be beaten hard now."

"So be it! We have been born oxen, how can we escape beating!"

"Gaya's coming on the run with two men and they're both carrying sticks."
Moti said, "Just say the word and I'll show them what it's like to wield a stick!"
"No, brother!" Hira counselled. "Just stand still."
"If he hits me, I'll knock one or two of them down."
"No, that's not the right thing to do."





Moti somehow held his temper. Gaya caught them and took them back. Fortunately he didn't beat them this time, or Moti would have struck back. When they saw how fierce he looked, Gaya and his helpers concluded that it would be best to keep the 'disciplining' for some other time. Again they were given the same dry straw. They stood in silence. In the house the family was eating dinner. A little girl came out stealthily, fed them a roti each and went away.

A *roti* was not enough to assuage their hunger, but it nourished their hearts. So, a gentle person lived here too!

The little girl was Bhairo's daughter. Her mother was dead. Her stepmother beat her often, so she felt some kind of empathy for the oxen. The two were yoked all day and were beaten badly for their stubborn behaviour. In the evening they were tied up in the stall. At night the little girl would come out and feed them a *roti* each. The happy result of this gift of love was that even though they ate only a couple of mouthfuls of dry straw each day, they did not grow weak. Yet their eyes and every cell of their bodies were filled with rebellion.





One day Moti said in their silent language, "I can't take this anymore, Hira!"

"So what do you want to do?"

"I am going to drive my horns into somebody and knock them down."

"Do you know that sweet little girl who feeds us rotis is the daughter of the head of this household? The poor child would be orphaned."

"Then I will knock over the mistress of the house. She is the one who thrashes the girl."

"You forget we are forbidden to attack women."


"You leave me no option! Should we break the ropes and run away?"

"I would agree to that but how would we break such a thick rope?"

"There is a trick. Gnaw at the rope a bit, then it will snap with one jerk."

At night, after the little girl fed them and left, the two tried to gnaw at their ropes but the thick cord wouldn't fit in their mouths. The poor fellows tried hard without any success.





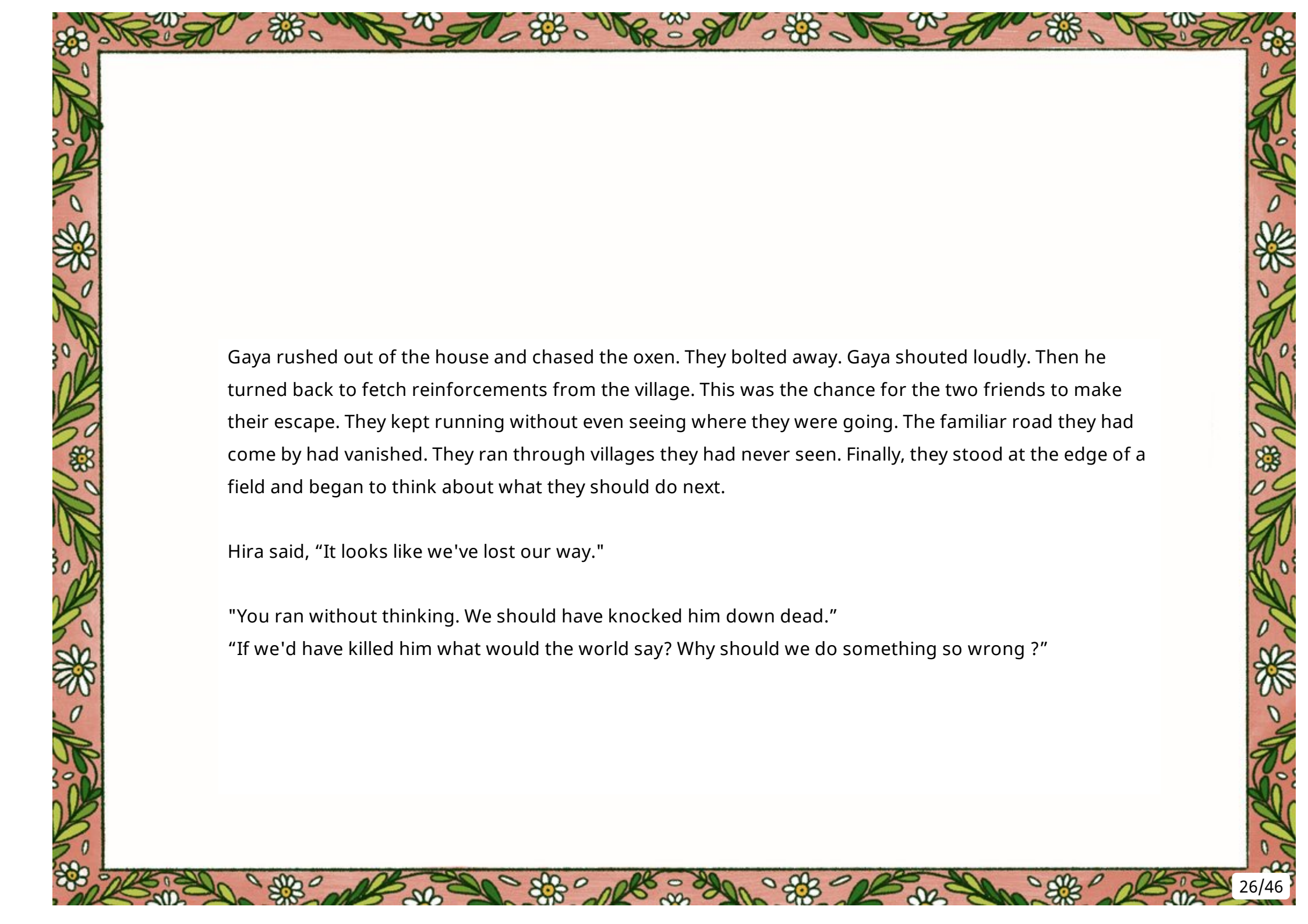
Suddenly the door of the house opened and the little girl came out. The bullocks lowered their heads and licked her hand. She stroked their foreheads and said, "I am untying you. Quietly run away or these people will kill you. They are talking about putting rings in your noses."

She undid their tethers but the two stood silent.

Moti asked, "Well, why don't you move?"

Hira replied, "Tomorrow this orphan would be in trouble. The family will suspect her."

Suddenly the little girl yelled, "Uncle's oxen are running away! Father! Come quick, they're running away!"



Gaya rushed out of the house and chased the oxen. They bolted away. Gaya shouted loudly. Then he turned back to fetch reinforcements from the village. This was the chance for the two friends to make their escape. They kept running without even seeing where they were going. The familiar road they had come by had vanished. They ran through villages they had never seen. Finally, they stood at the edge of a field and began to think about what they should do next.

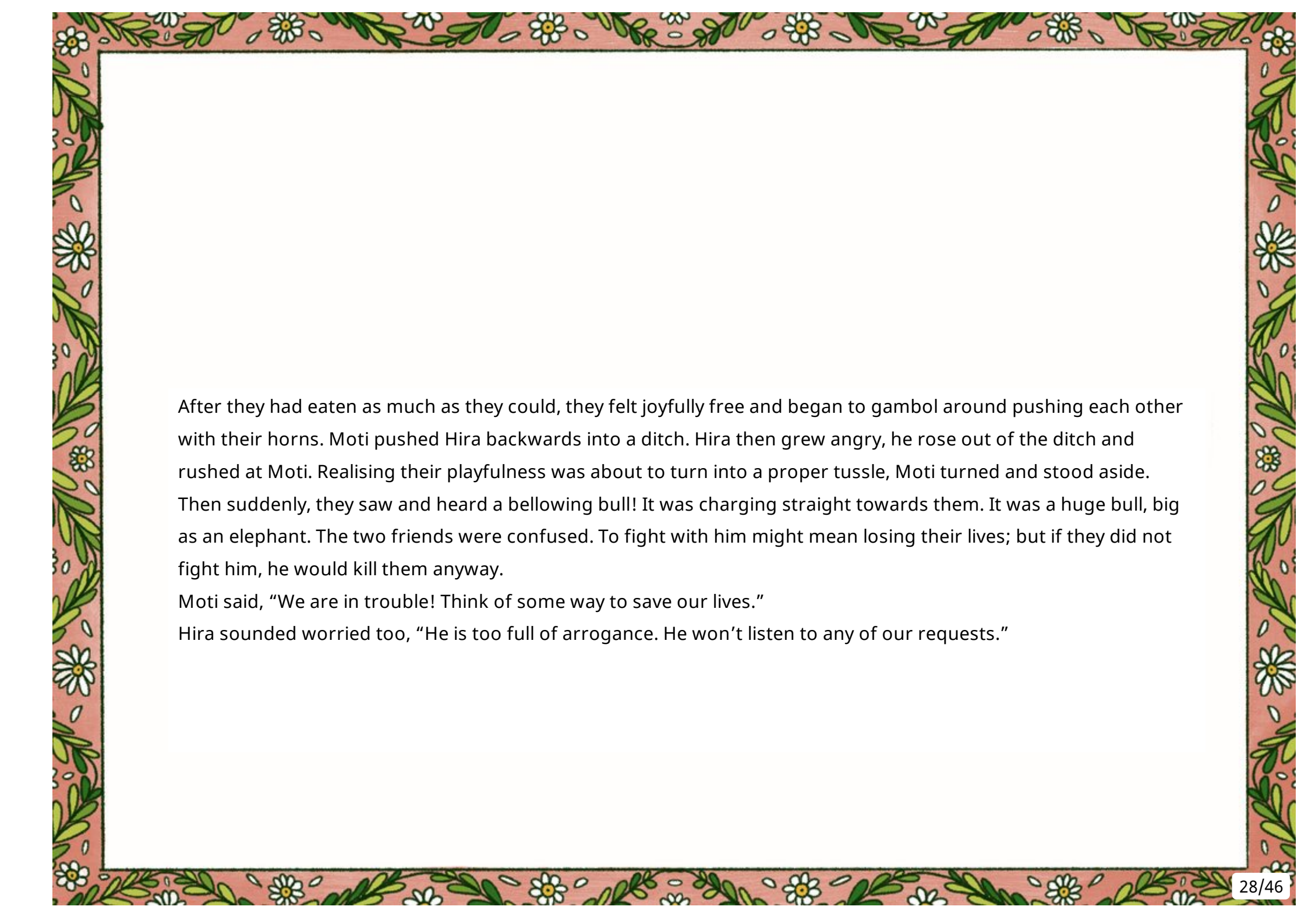
Hira said, "It looks like we've lost our way."

"You ran without thinking. We should have knocked him down dead."

"If we'd have killed him what would the world say? Why should we do something so wrong?"

They were both very hungry. Looking around, they saw that they were standing in a field of peas, so they began to graze, stopping frequently to listen for anyone approaching.





After they had eaten as much as they could, they felt joyfully free and began to gambol around pushing each other with their horns. Moti pushed Hira backwards into a ditch. Hira then grew angry, he rose out of the ditch and rushed at Moti. Realising their playfulness was about to turn into a proper tussle, Moti turned and stood aside. Then suddenly, they saw and heard a bellowing bull! It was charging straight towards them. It was a huge bull, big as an elephant. The two friends were confused. To fight with him might mean losing their lives; but if they did not fight him, he would kill them anyway.

Moti said, "We are in trouble! Think of some way to save our lives."

Hira sounded worried too, "He is too full of arrogance. He won't listen to any of our requests."

"Why don't we run away?"

"That would be cowardly."

"Fine! You stay here and be killed. I am running off."

"What if he chases us?"

"Well, think of a way out then."

"The way out is for both of us to attack him together. I will charge him from the front, you do the same from the back. When we hit at both ends, he will run away. If he lunges at me, pierce his stomach with your horns. Of course it is risky, but there is no alternative."

So both took the risk and lunged forward. The huge bull had no experience in fighting against two united opponents.

He was used to attacking a single enemy. As Hira struck at the giant bull, Moti charged him from behind. When the bull turned towards Moti, Hira assaulted him. The big bull wanted to knock them down one by one, but both fought intelligently and did not give him a chance. When the enraged bull rushed to kill Hira, Moti thrust his horns into his stomach. In a fury the bull swung around and then Hira gored him on the other side.

After some time, the massive bull ran away, wounded. The two friends chased him a long way. Finally the exhausted bull fell to the ground. Then they left him alone.

Happy and victorious, they walked away.


In their silent language, Moti said, "I felt like killing him."

Hira scolded him, "One must not gore a fallen enemy."

"That's nonsense! An enemy must be struck till he cannot rise again."

"Now let us think about how we are going to get home."

"Let's eat first. We can think later."



Moti re-entered the field of peas. Hira forbade him but Moti refused to listen. He had scarcely eaten a few mouthfuls, when two men with sticks came running and surrounded the two friends. Hira was on the embankment and slipped away; but Moti was stuck in the soggy field. His hooves were so deep in the mud that he couldn't run fast and he got caught. When Hira saw his friend in trouble he dashed back. If they were going to be trapped, then they would be trapped together. So the watchmen caught him too.

Early in the morning the two friends were locked up in the village pound.

For the first time in their lives, the two received nothing to eat all day. Not one blade of straw! What a strange master this must be, even Gaya had been better than this one.

They saw many buffaloes, goats, horses and donkeys - all lying on the ground almost as if they were dead. None had any hay before them.



Some of the animals were so weak they could barely stand. All day the two friends looked towards the gate but no one brought them any hay. They licked the salty mud wall but it couldn't satisfy them. When they received no food even at night, Hira's heart revolted, "I cannot bear this anymore, Moti."

Moti hung his head and replied, "I feel I will die here."

"Don't lose hope so soon, brother. Let us think of a way of getting out of here."

"Let us smash the wall."

"I have no energy left."

"What about your strong spirit?!"

"That was all bravado and it has vanished."

The mud compound wall was weak. Hira being very strong, pushed his sharp horns into it. As he tossed his head, a large chip of mud fell off the wall. Encouraged by this, he charged at the wall again and again. Each time he knocked off more mud from the wall.

Then the watchman arrived with his lantern, to check on the captive animals. Seeing Hira's unruly behaviour, he hit him with his stick and tied him with a thick rope.

Lying prone on the ground, Moti commented, "You got thrashed for all your effort. What did you achieve?"

"I did all that I possibly could."

"No point in doing all this, if it is going to get us tied down even further."

"I will keep trying no matter how much they tie me down."

"You might get killed."

"I don't care. We all die here anyway. Just think, how many lives could have been saved had the wall been broken. Our captive brothers here are so weakened. If this continues, they will die soon."

"Yes. That's true. Alright! I will help you to break down the wall."

So Moti got up and began to strike the wall with his horns. Each time he struck, more mud fell off.

Encouraged by this, he kept butting the wall as though he was fighting to defeat a deadly opponent. After about two hours, he had knocked down a foot off the top of the wall. Greatly encouraged, he pushed hard at the wall again - and half of it fell down.

As the wall tumbled down, all the weakened animals stood up, suddenly alert. The three mares trotted off at once. The goats followed promptly. The buffaloes fled too. But the donkeys stood right where they were.

Hira asked them, "Why don't you run away now?"

One of the donkeys replied, "What if we get caught again?"

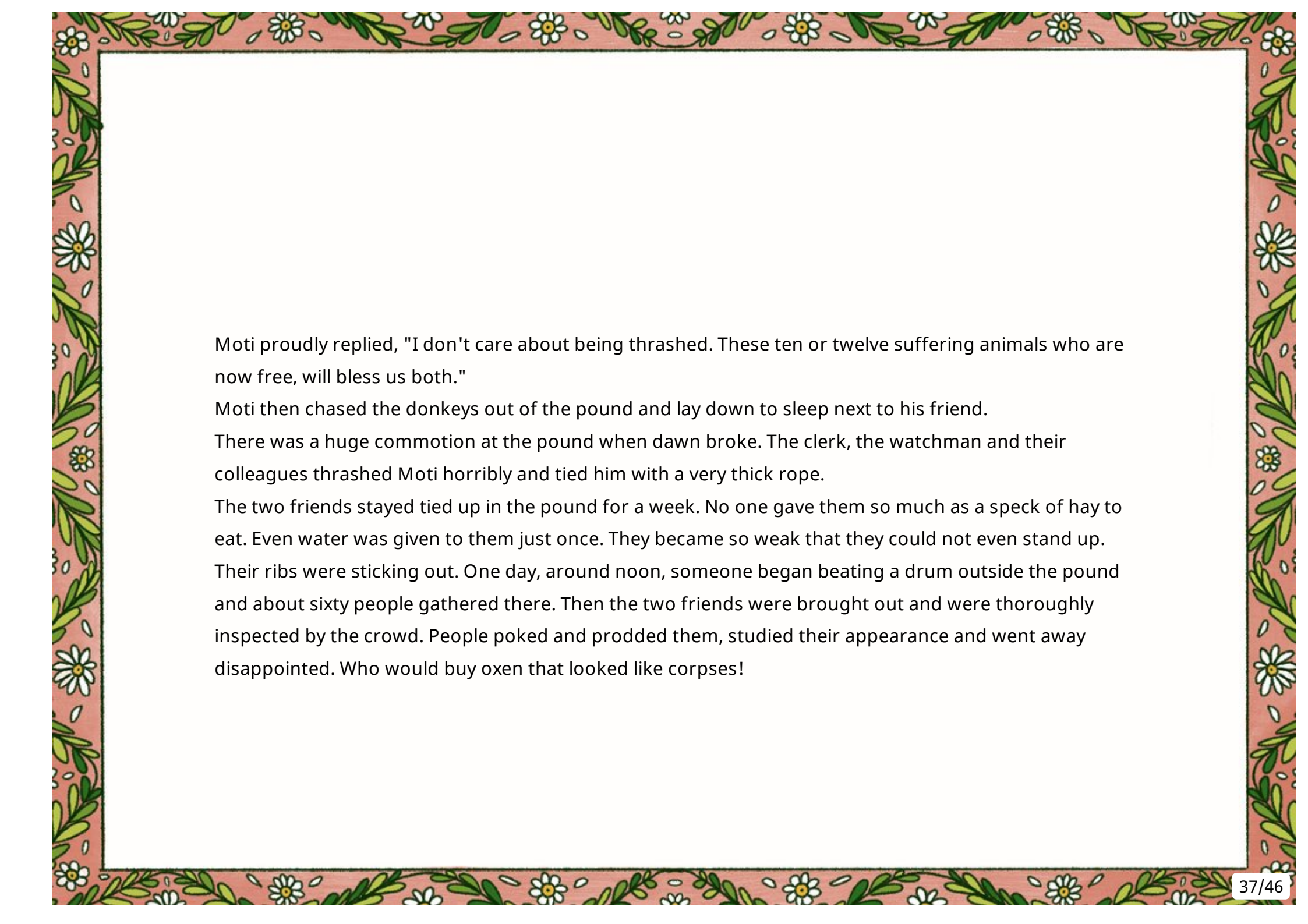
"What is the harm?! Now you have your chance to escape!"

"We are scared. We will just remain here."

It was past midnight and the donkeys were still in a dilemma whether to stay or walk free. Moti was desperately trying to break his friend's tether. When he failed to break it, Hira pleaded, "Please leave immediately. Don't wait for me. We will meet again somewhere."

Weeping, Moti scolded him, "Do you think I am that selfish? We have been together for so long. Should I desert you now that you are stuck in trouble?"

Hira warned him, "You will be severely thrashed. They will know that you have done all this damage."



Moti proudly replied, "I don't care about being thrashed. These ten or twelve suffering animals who are now free, will bless us both."

Moti then chased the donkeys out of the pound and lay down to sleep next to his friend.

There was a huge commotion at the pound when dawn broke. The clerk, the watchman and their colleagues thrashed Moti horribly and tied him with a very thick rope.

The two friends stayed tied up in the pound for a week. No one gave them so much as a speck of hay to eat. Even water was given to them just once. They became so weak that they could not even stand up. Their ribs were sticking out. One day, around noon, someone began beating a drum outside the pound and about sixty people gathered there. Then the two friends were brought out and were thoroughly inspected by the crowd. People poked and prodded them, studied their appearance and went away disappointed. Who would buy oxen that looked like corpses!

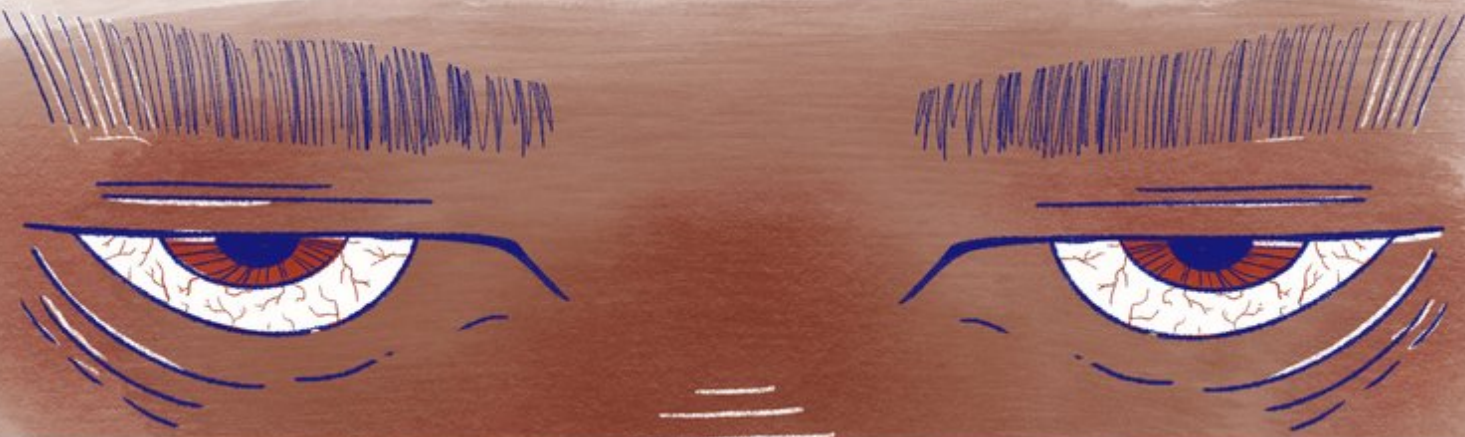
Suddenly a man with red eyes and a cruel face came forward. He dug his fingers hard into the haunches of the oxen and then began to speak with the clerk. The hearts of the two friends grew faint from what their intuition told them about the man. They had no doubt at all as to who he was and why he had prodded them the way he did. They exchanged frightened glances and lowered their heads.

Hira said, "We ran away in vain from Gaya's house. We won't survive this."

Moti callously asked, "They say God has mercy on everybody. Why isn't He being merciful to us?"

"It's all the same to God whether we live or die. It's good that we will get to live with Him for a while.

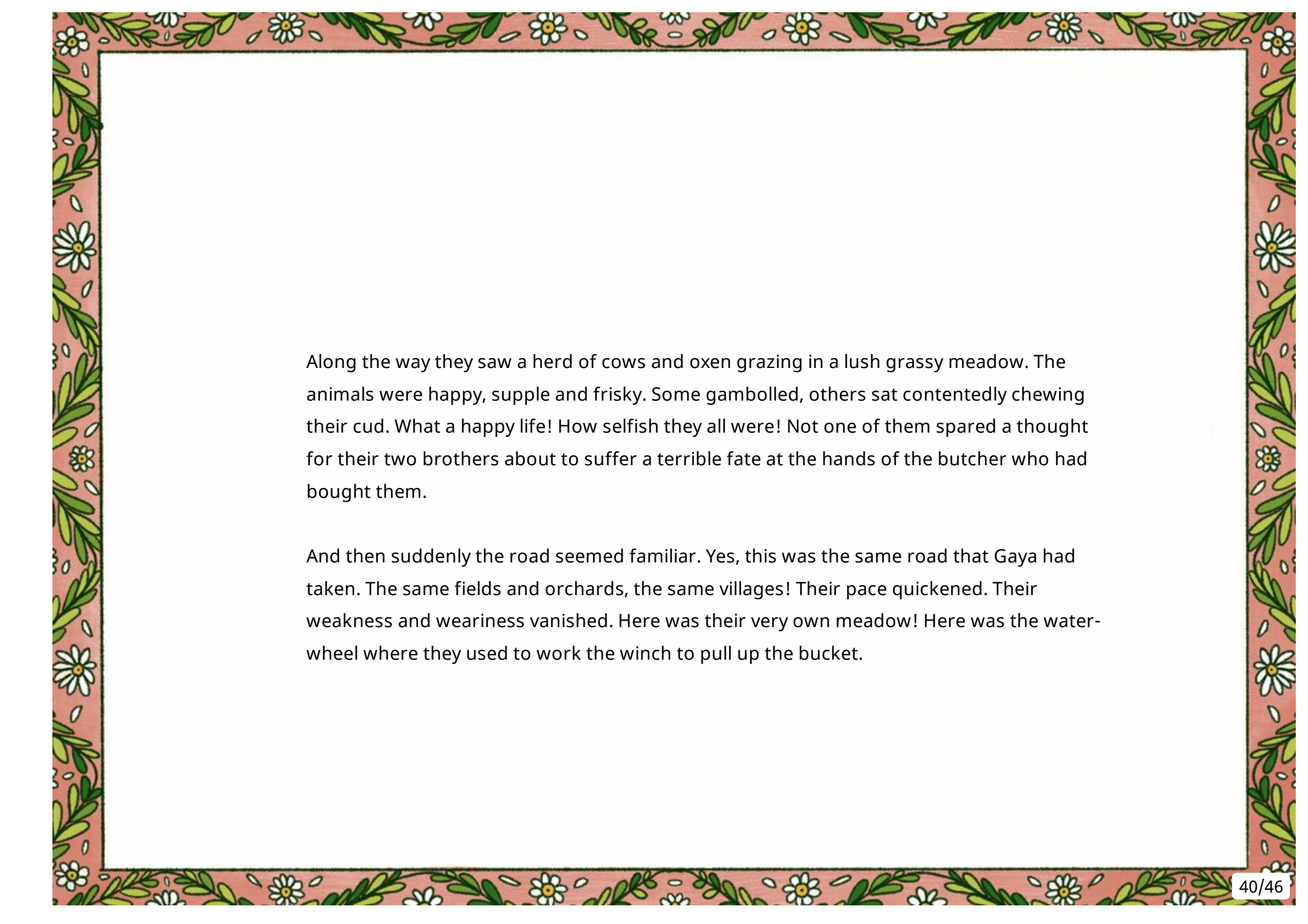
He once saved us in the form of the little girl. Won't He save us in some way now?"



"This man is going to slaughter us. Just wait and see."

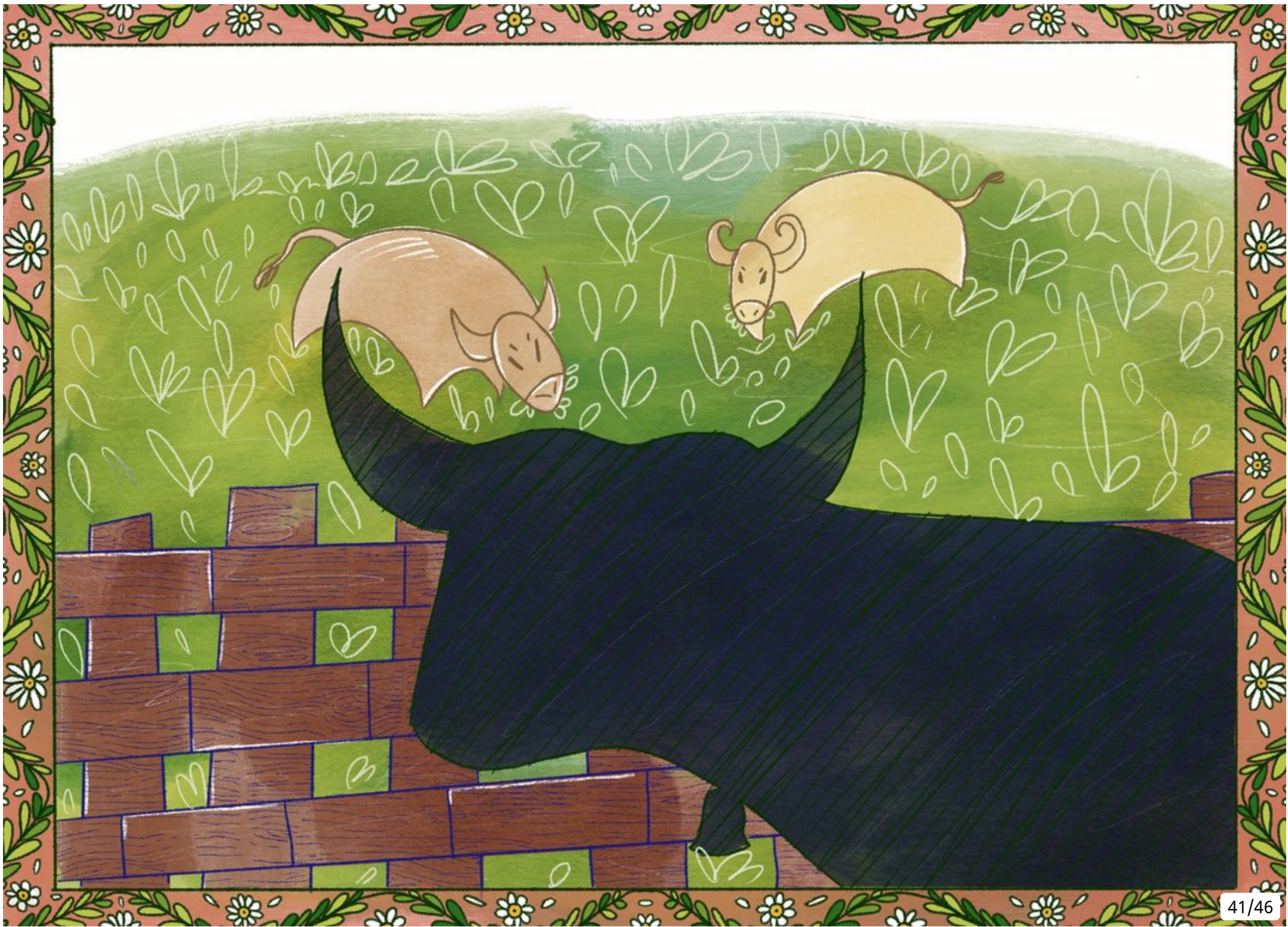
'If he does, then why worry? Every bit of us - flesh, hide, horns and bones will be useful for people."


When the auction was over, the two friends went with the man who had bought them. Every muscle of their bodies trembled. The poor beasts could hardly lift their feet but driven by fear, they stumbled along - because if they slowed down at all, the man hit them with his stick.



Along the way they saw a herd of cows and oxen grazing in a lush grassy meadow. The animals were happy, supple and frisky. Some gambolled, others sat contentedly chewing their cud. What a happy life! How selfish they all were! Not one of them spared a thought for their two brothers about to suffer a terrible fate at the hands of the butcher who had bought them.

And then suddenly the road seemed familiar. Yes, this was the same road that Gaya had taken. The same fields and orchards, the same villages! Their pace quickened. Their weakness and weariness vanished. Here was their very own meadow! Here was the water-wheel where they used to work the winch to pull up the bucket.





Moti exclaimed, "Our house is close by!"
"God has been so merciful!" replied Heera.
"Let us make a run for home!"
"Would the butcher let us go?"
"I'll knock him down and kill him."
'No, no, let's just run and go straight to our stalls. We won't have to go anywhere from there ..."
Joyfully kicking up their heels like calves, they ran for the house. They could see their stall! They ran and stood by it. The butcher who had bought them, went running after them.



Jhuri was sitting outside his door in the sun. He ran and embraced the oxen again and again. Tears of joy flowed from the two friends' eyes. One of them licked Jhuri's hand. The butcher who had bought the oxen ran up and grabbed their tethers. "These are my oxen." said Jhuri.

"How can they be! I just bought them at the cattle pound auction."

"I think you stole them," retorted Jhuri. "Leave quietly. The oxen are mine. They'll be sold if I sell them. Who has the right to auction off my oxen?"

The butcher who had bought them threatened, "I'll lodge a complaint at the police station."

"The oxen are mine. The proof is that they came and stood at my door."

Enraged, the butcher stepped forward to drag the oxen away. That is when Moti angrily lowered his horns. The butcher stepped back. Moti charged and the butcher ran - with Moti pursuing him. They only stopped at the outskirts of the village where Moti took his stand guarding the road. The butcher stopped some distance away, yelling threats and insults and generally creating a scene. Moti stood blocking his path like a victorious hero. The villagers came out to watch the entertainment and had a good laugh. When the butcher acknowledged defeat and went away, Moti returned strutting.

Hira said, "I was afraid you'd get so angry that you'd kill him."

"If he'd caught me, I wouldn't have given up till I killed him."

"He won't come back now."

"If he does, I'll take care of him long before he gets here. Let's just see him take us away now!"

"What if he has us shot?"

"Then I'll be dead, but I'll be of no use to him."

"Nobody thinks of the life we have, as being a life."

"That's because we are so simple..."

Their feeding trough was filled with oilseed cake, hay, bran and grain and the two friends began to eat happily. Jhuri stroked and embraced them. Jhuri's wife came running in and kissed the oxen's foreheads.



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A Tale of Two Oxen

(English)

Meet Hira and Moti, two handsome oxen, happy and content with their loving owner, Jhuri. Hira and Moti work hard everyday, are clever, kind and best friends to each other. They stay together during times of woe and harmony. Their days are filled with work, love and juicy oilseed cakes. Until one day, when they are forcibly dragged away from home and put to work under harsh and inhuman conditions. Will Hira and Moti surmount all the troubles that come along their way and finally go back home?

This is a Level 4 book for children who can read fluently and with confidence.



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