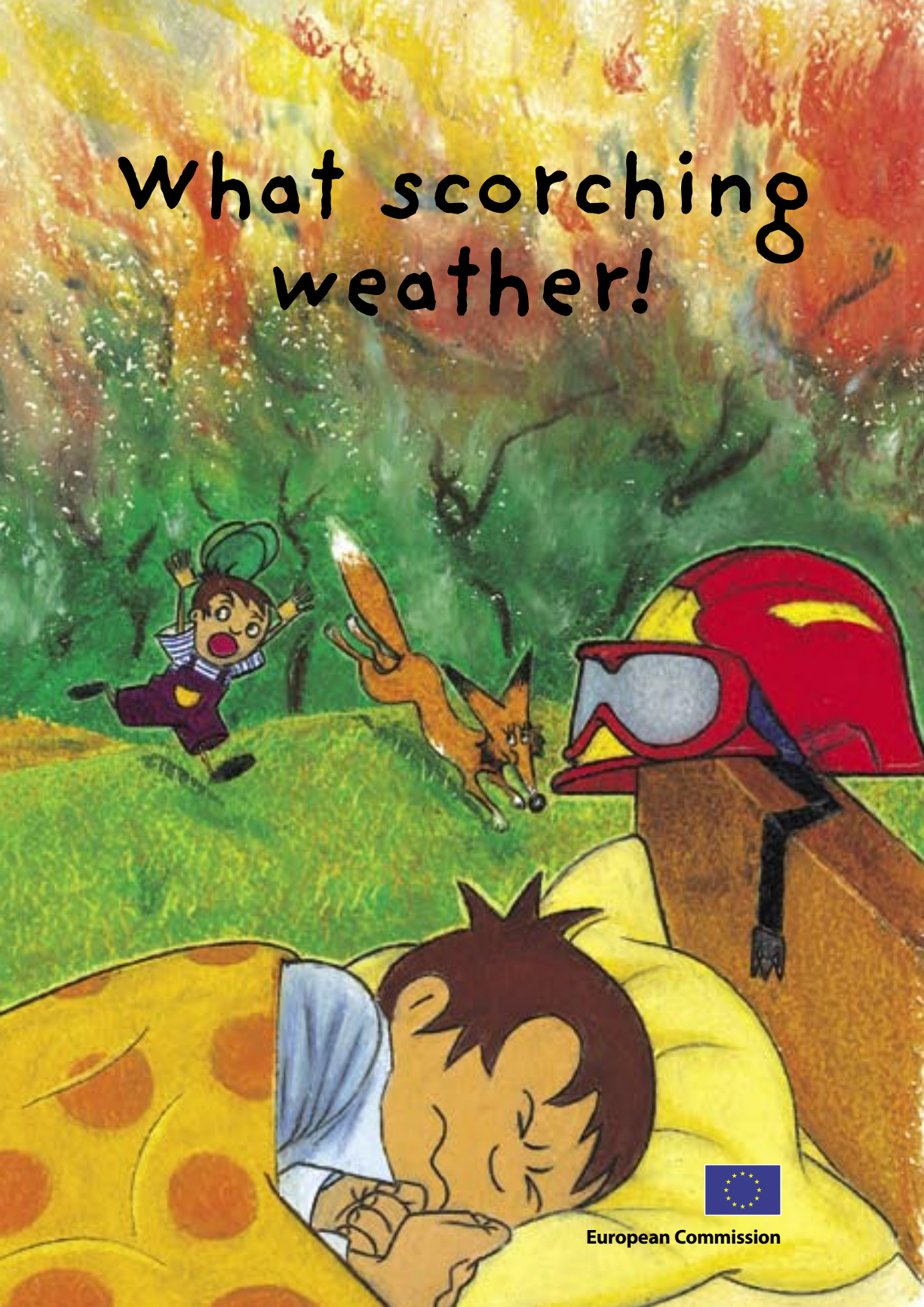


What scorching weather!



European Commission

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Script: Benoît Coppée

Illustrations: Nicolas Viot

Technical production: Qwentes KANTOR

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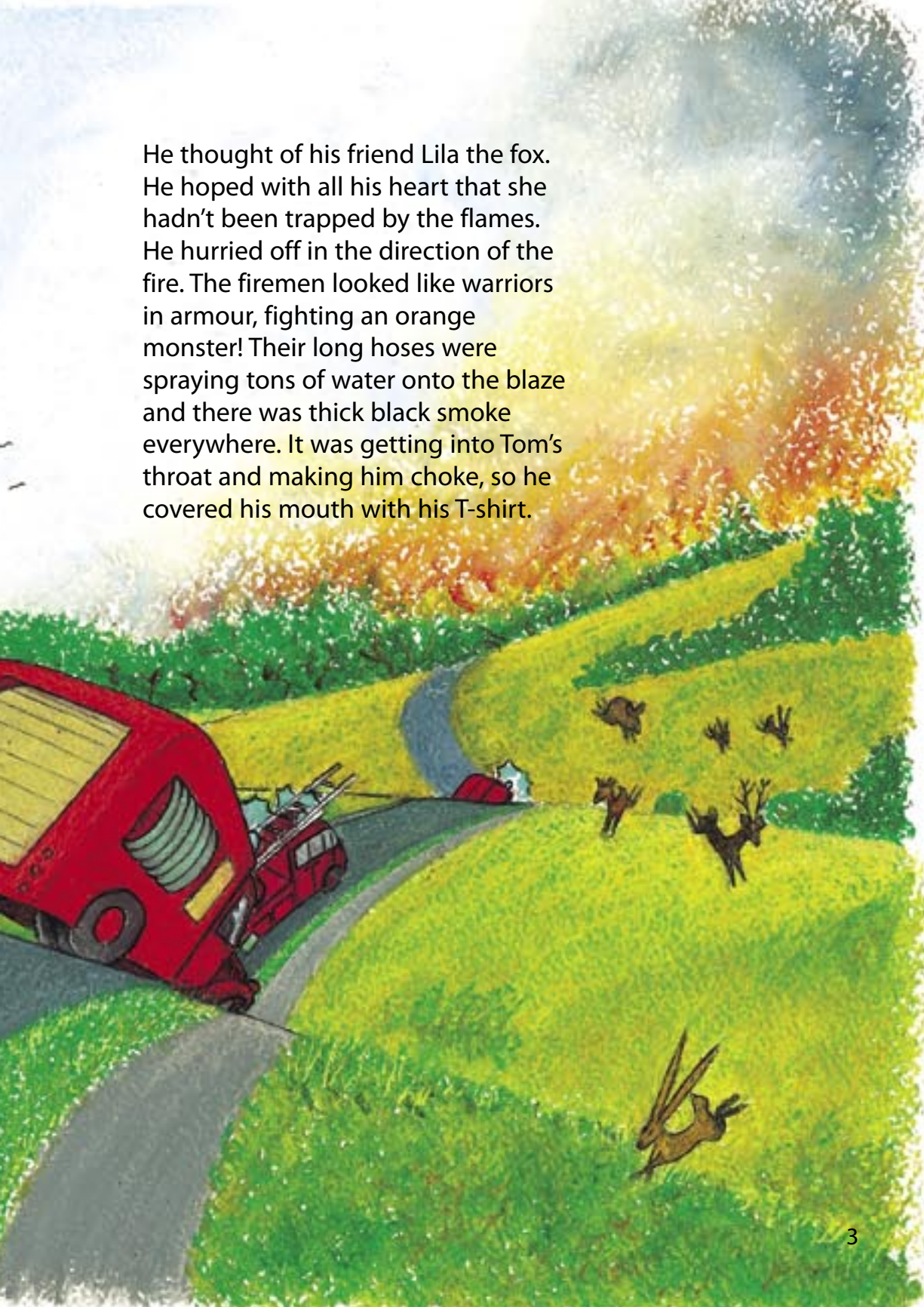
Under the blazing sun, the trees and hillsides were turning brown. The TV news had announced that: *"It is unusually hot in Merlin City, and scientists are concerned! They think this heat wave is probably due to climate change. The emergency services are asking everyone to be especially careful! In these extremely dry conditions it is dangerous to light fires in woodland areas..."*



Tom was out enjoying the countryside. How nice and peaceful it was! Then, suddenly, the sound of a siren broke the silence. PAM-POM! PAM-POM! A fire engine went rushing by: whoom! Then another one: whoom! And a third one. Oh no! Look over there! A tall column of smoke was rising high into the sky. A forest fire must have started, right outside Merlin City! What a disaster! Tom suddenly felt very anxious.



He thought of his friend Lila the fox.
He hoped with all his heart that she
hadn't been trapped by the flames.
He hurried off in the direction of the
fire. The firemen looked like warriors
in armour, fighting an orange
monster! Their long hoses were
spraying tons of water onto the blaze
and there was thick black smoke
everywhere. It was getting into Tom's
throat and making him choke, so he
covered his mouth with his T-shirt.



One of the firemen shouted:

"The fire's too big! We won't have enough water in the fire engines!"

The Chief Fireman turned and looked towards the river. There was a very solemn expression on his face.

"With all this dry weather, there's not enough water in the river either" he said. "This is serious!"

Tom glanced quickly all around him. "Lila! Where are you?" he yelled. "Lila! LILAAAA!"

At that very moment, Lila the fox came running up to him and brushed against his legs.

"Oh, Lila! I'm so glad you're safe!" said Tom.



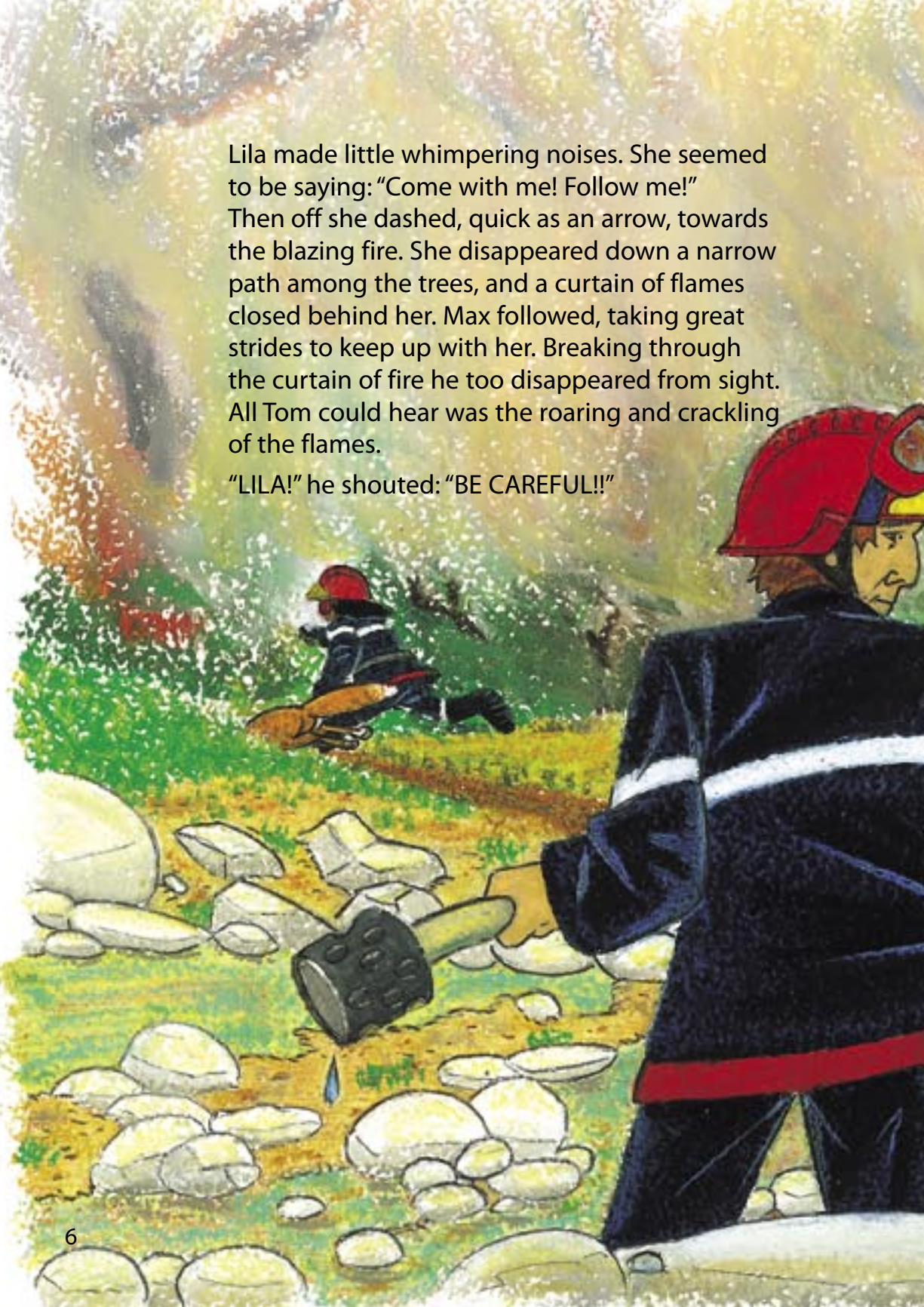
But Lila still looked terrified. She kept nuzzling Tom's legs and turning round and round in circles. Then she grabbed the trouser leg of one of the firemen, whose name was Max. He knelt down beside her.

"What is it, my pet?" he asked. "What are you trying to tell us?"



Lila made little whimpering noises. She seemed to be saying: "Come with me! Follow me!" Then off she dashed, quick as an arrow, towards the blazing fire. She disappeared down a narrow path among the trees, and a curtain of flames closed behind her. Max followed, taking great strides to keep up with her. Breaking through the curtain of fire he too disappeared from sight. All Tom could hear was the roaring and crackling of the flames.

"LILA!" he shouted: "BE CAREFUL!!"



The Chief Fireman came over to where Tom was standing.

"Don't worry" he said: "Max is the best fireman in the whole country! Lila is in good hands! Still... we need water, and quickly!"

Tom had an idea.

"I know where there's a secret spring!" he said. It's in that cave over there!"

"Are you sure?" asked the Chief Fireman.

"Yes, I am!" shouted Tom.



The Chief Fireman grinned.

"Right!" he said: "We'll take the hose over there. Lead me to the spring, my lad! By the way, what's your name?"

"Tom", said Tom, and the two of them set off running towards the cave.

"Why is the weather so hot just now?" asked Tom, as they ran. "On TV they said..."



"Yes, I heard that too" said the Chief. "You see, Tom, the problem is that the world is getting warmer. The climate is changing, so we're getting heat waves like this one. And storms, and floods, and all sorts of other natural disasters! The ice at the north and south poles is melting, and so are the glaciers on high mountains like the Alps. The melted water runs off into the rivers and down to the sea, so the sea level is rising. Some islands and coasts are likely to disappear under the water! At the same time, if the climate goes on getting hotter, some countries will become deserts!"



"But why is all this happening?" asked Tom.

The Chief Fireman was getting out of breath running and talking at the same time, but he tried to explain anyway.

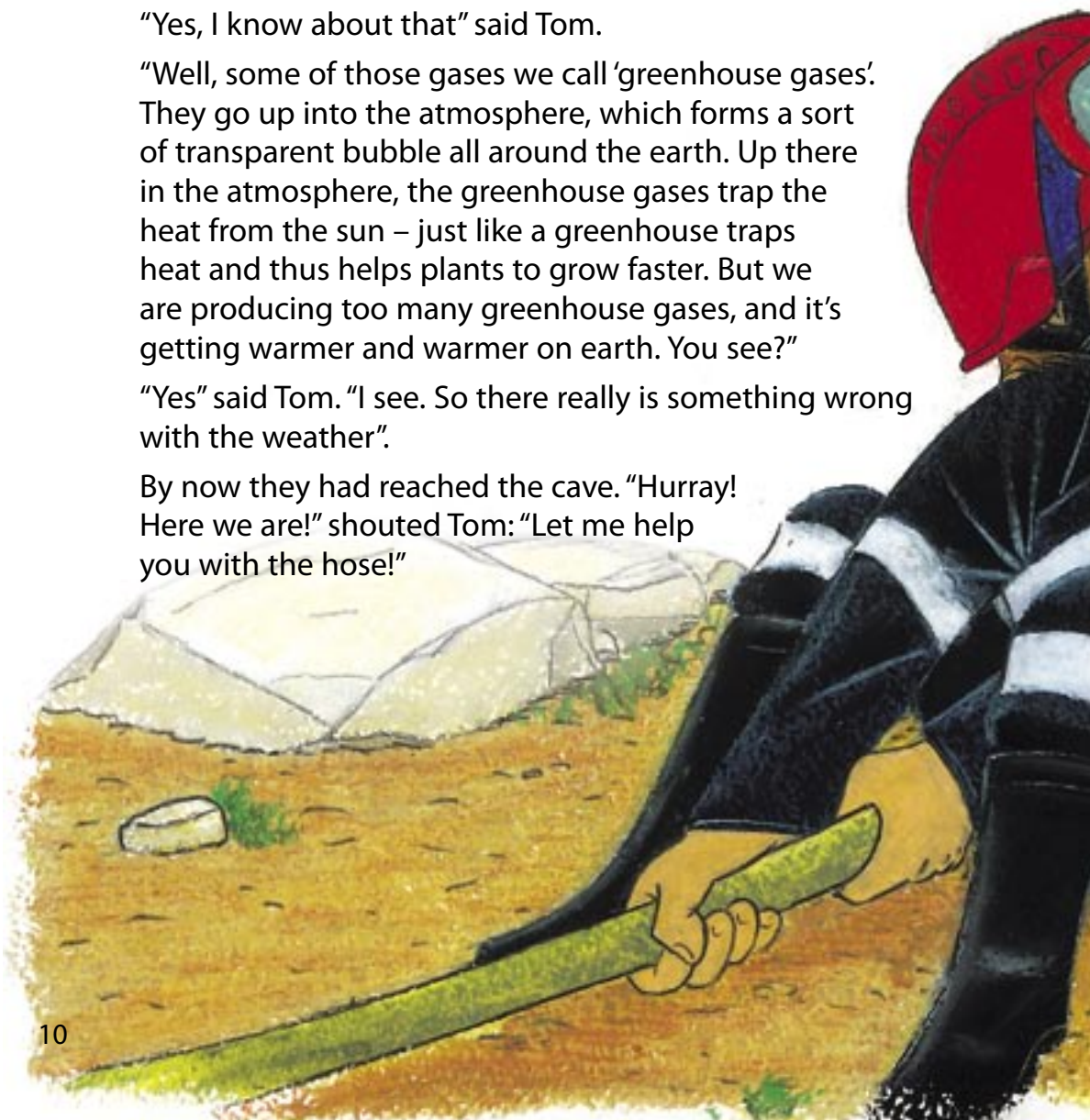
"Well, Tom, you know that cars and planes and factories and all sorts of things like that give off exhaust fumes and gases?"

"Yes, I know about that" said Tom.

"Well, some of those gases we call 'greenhouse gases'. They go up into the atmosphere, which forms a sort of transparent bubble all around the earth. Up there in the atmosphere, the greenhouse gases trap the heat from the sun – just like a greenhouse traps heat and thus helps plants to grow faster. But we are producing too many greenhouse gases, and it's getting warmer and warmer on earth. You see?"

"Yes" said Tom. "I see. So there really is something wrong with the weather".

By now they had reached the cave. "Hurray! Here we are!" shouted Tom: "Let me help you with the hose!"



Tom took the end of the hose and went forward into the cave. A few moments later, his voice rang out, echoing in the darkness:

"REA-DY-y-y-!! WA-TER-ter-ter-er!!"

The Chief Fireman understood. He called out to his men:

"START PUMPING!!"

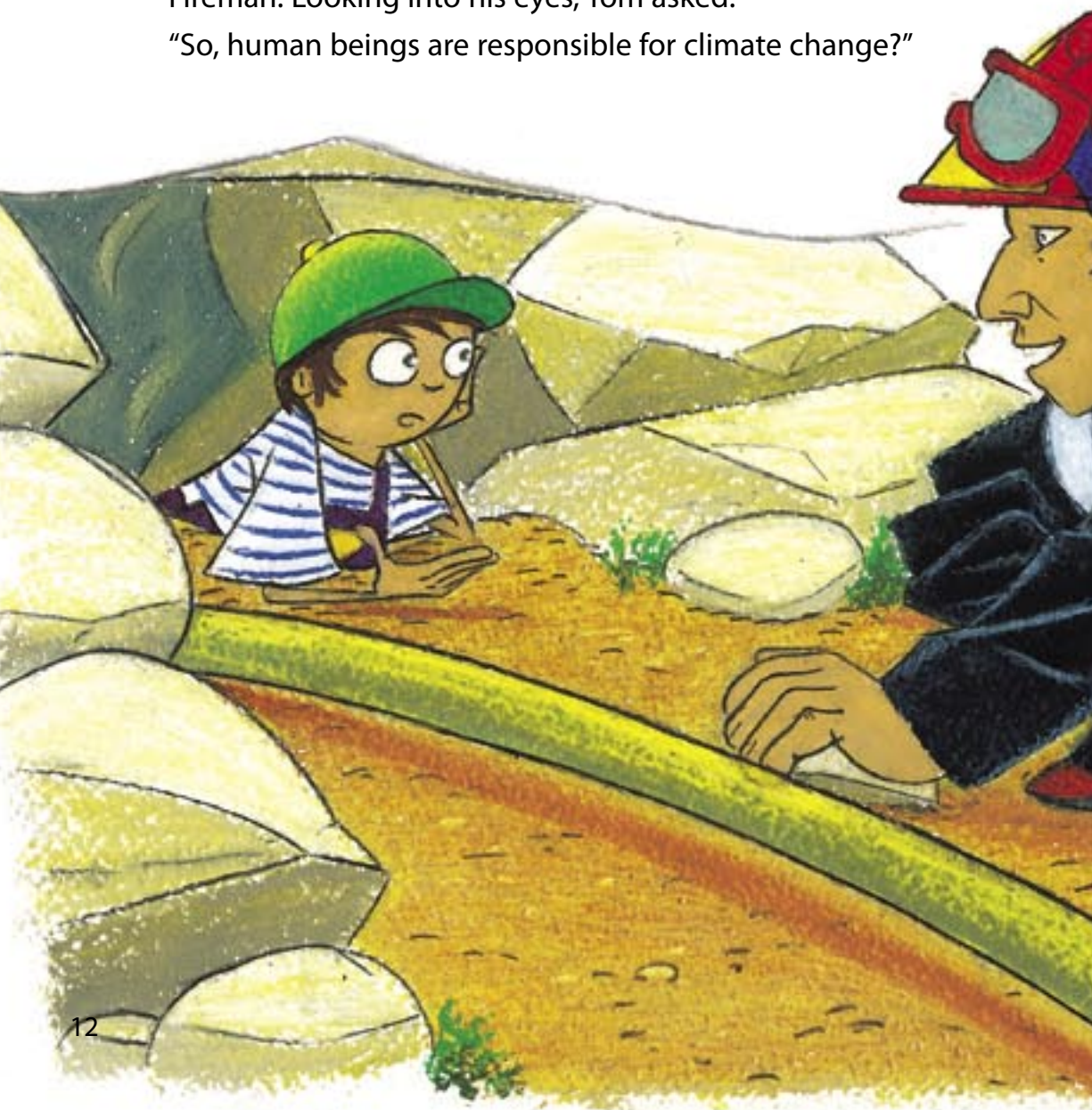


The hose began swelling as it filled with water from the spring.

"Well done, Tom!" shouted the Chief Fireman. "There's enough water here to put out the fire! Hurray!"

Tom came back out of the cave, his face muddy but happy. He came over and sat down near the Chief Fireman. Looking into his eyes, Tom asked:

"So, human beings are responsible for climate change?"



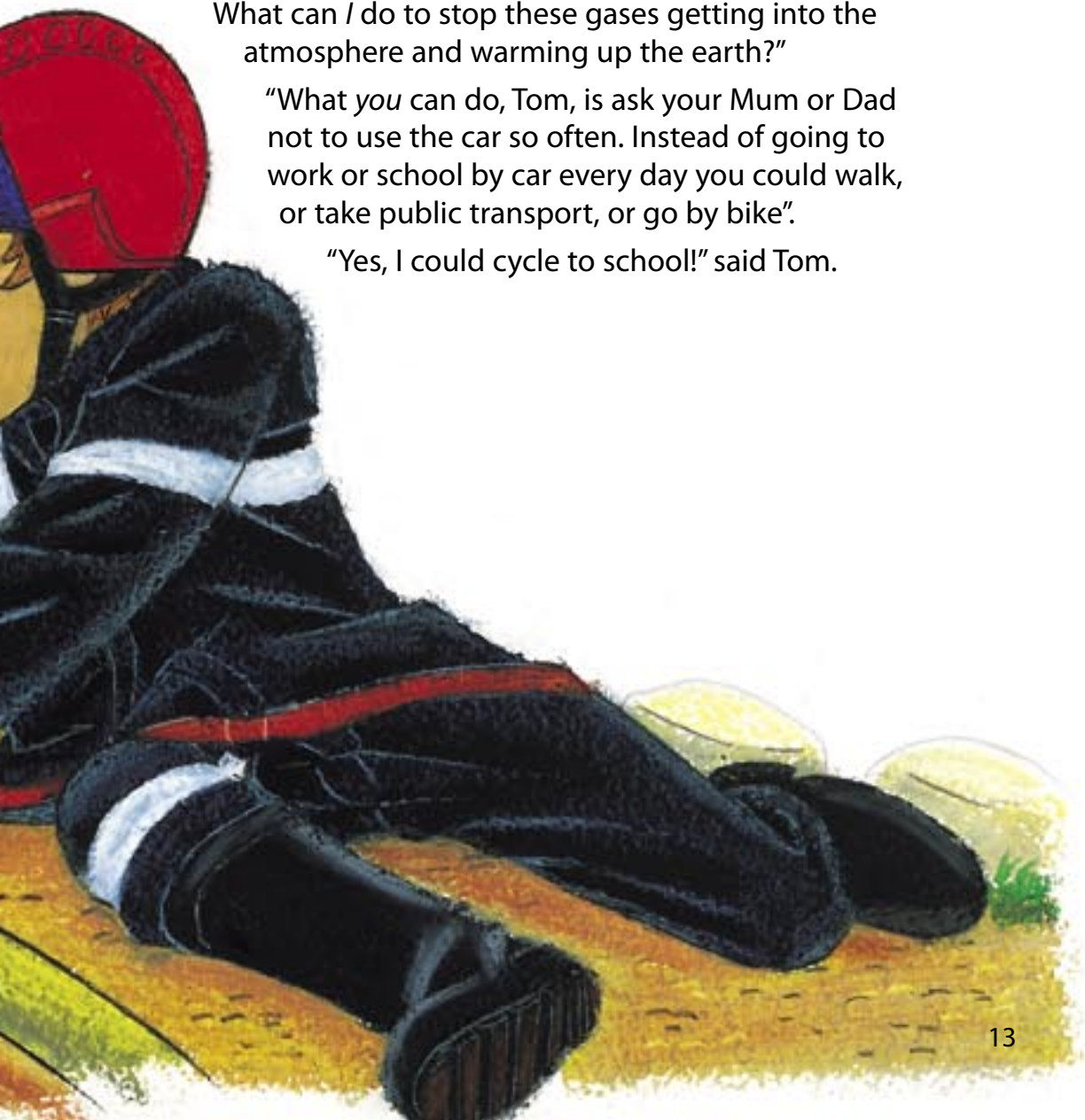
The Chief Fireman was silent for a moment.
Then he said:

"Yes, Tom, the greenhouse gases come from our cars, our planes, our factories, even our fire-engines; so we all have to take our share of the responsibility".

"Oh" said Tom, who was thinking hard. "Right. So...
What can I do to stop these gases getting into the atmosphere and warming up the earth?"

"What *you* can do, Tom, is ask your Mum or Dad not to use the car so often. Instead of going to work or school by car every day you could walk, or take public transport, or go by bike".

"Yes, I could cycle to school!" said Tom.



"Right" said the Chief Fireman. "Then you could make sure you keep your bedroom window shut when the central heating is on. Because central heating boilers produce greenhouse gases too, and because we need to save energy!"

"Yes, of course" said Tom.

"You'd be surprised" went on the Chief Fireman "how much of the heat in our homes gets wasted. Draughts come in under the door, and through windows that don't close properly. And that means we have to turn the heating up! And more heating means more greenhouse gases!"

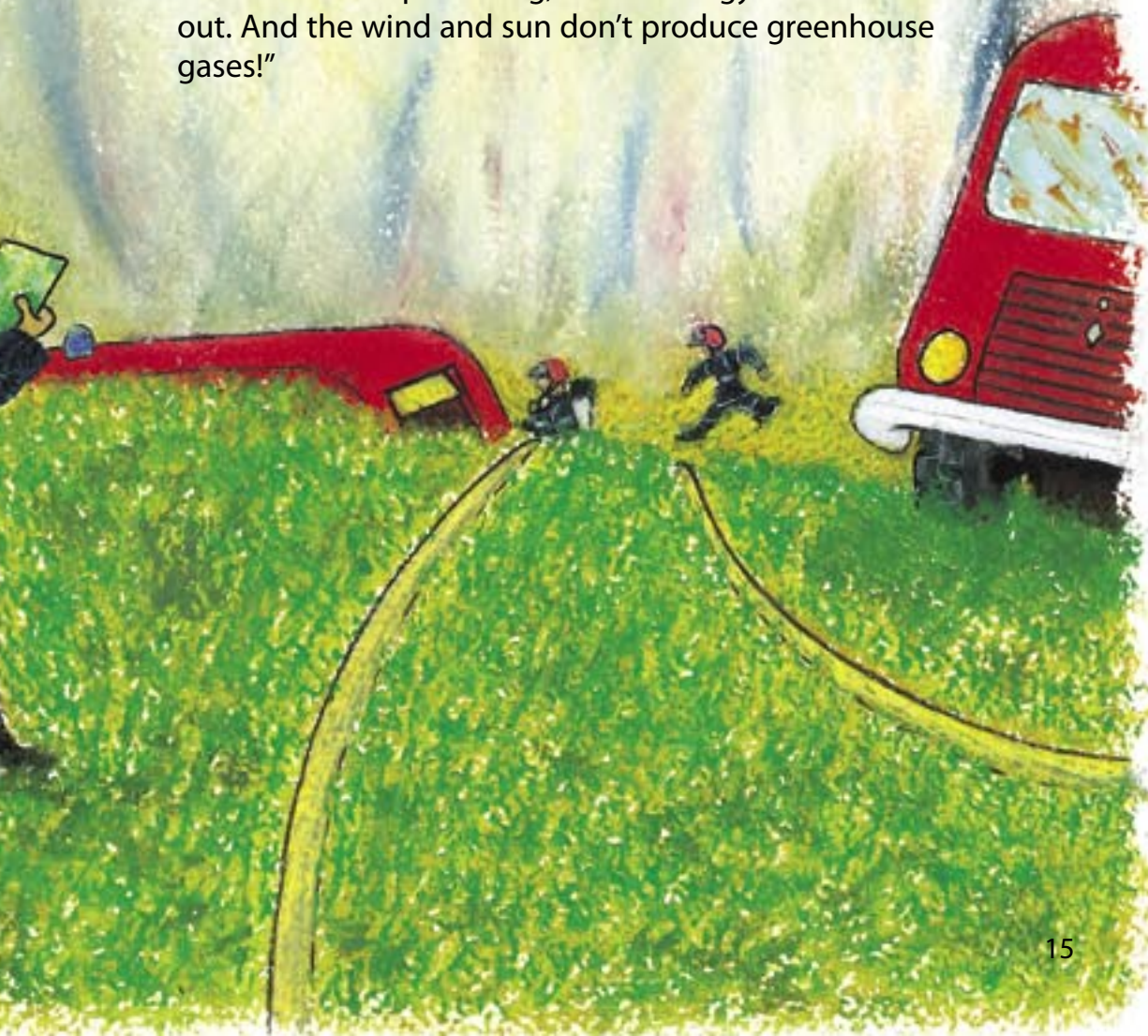
"I never thought of that" said Tom. "That's really interesting! So, what *else* can I do?"



"Well," said the Chief Fireman, "make sure you switch off all the lights you don't need because electricity is made in power stations, and they too produce greenhouse gases! So before you leave for school in the morning, check that your bedroom lights are all switched off".

"I will!" said Tom. "And what else?"

"You could ask your parents to buy electricity that's produced by the wind or by the sun... That's what we call 'renewable' energy, because the wind keeps blowing and the sun keeps shining, so the energy doesn't run out. And the wind and sun don't produce greenhouse gases!"



Suddenly, a loud shout interrupted their conversation.

"WE'RE BACK!"

It was Max the fireman, and he had Lila with him! They had come back safe and sound from the burning forest! Tom and the Chief Fireman were delighted to see them – and also to see that the firemen were managing to put out the fire at last, with all the water from the secret spring.

Max, his face exhausted and blackened with soot, had tears in his eyes. He said, in a hoarse voice:

"Look what Lila wanted me to save" – and he showed them what he was carrying in his arms: four little fox cubs!

Lila nuzzled her head against Tom.

"So that's what you were trying to tell us, Lila!" he said to her, gently.

The Chief Fireman patted Tom on the head.

"Yes, Tom, she wanted us to save her children! And thanks to you and her..."

A sudden flash of light interrupted his words.

It was a photographer, and just behind him came the Mayor of Merlin City. The Mayor stepped up to the Chief Fireman and shook his hand. FLASH! Another photo.

"Hot, isn't it!" said the Mayor. FLASH! He bent down and picked up Tom. FLASH! The Mayor wiped his sweaty forehead with a handkerchief. FLASH!

"Well done" said the Mayor. "Thanks to you, to your courage and hard work, the forest fire at Merlin City has been extinguished! I wish to express to you my deepest gratitude and to present you with these medals..."

FLASH!

Lila, Tom and Max – carrying the four fox cubs – stepped forward to greet the Mayor. Tom said:

“Mr Mayor, please take a look at these poor little fox cubs. They nearly died today... And it’s all because of climate change! I think you should give these medals to people who are trying to save the earth!”



FLASH! Another photo.

"Really?" said the Mayor, rather taken aback.

"But I thought... I mean, I just wanted..."

Then the Chief Fireman spoke up.

"Mr Mayor, we're fireman. We were just doing our job. But we see that the earth is warming up. Today's forest fire was not a coincidence. We humans were probably responsible. The climate *is* changing!"



And so saying, the Chief Fireman took Lila's cubs and gave them a gentle hug. They looked so sweet! FLASH! Yet another photo.

"I tell you what" said Tom: "Why not give medals to everyone who rides their bike every day, and everyone who uses energy from the wind and the sun, and everyone who leaves their car at home and takes the bus instead... Give medals to everyone who tries to stop producing greenhouse gases! Those people are the *real* heroes!"

The Mayor smiled at Tom.

"That is a great idea!" he said. "I will do something about it straight away!"



The fire was out. In the morning, the photos were in all the Merlin City newspapers. There was the Mayor with the Chief Fireman. There was Max smiling, standing next to his fire engine. There was Tom, looking tired. But everyone's favourite picture was of Lila feeding her four little cubs. They were all alive and safe. But it had been a close thing...



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