



The Adventures of **Mo**

By Carol Patton

Chapter 1

Strange, Shiny Object

What's that? Right over there? Mozart, a white, fluffy dog, had never seen anything like it.

The small object was very shiny. At first, he sniffed it. Then he pawed it. Licked it. Shook it. Flung it. Even buried it, and then dug it up again. It never moved. It never made a peep.

What was this strange object?

He picked it up in his mouth, deciding to take it home.

He only took a few steps when he heard, "Morning, Mo. What ya got there?"

It was Monta the Moose who gave Mo his nickname. Mo's real name was actually Mozart. He was named after the famous composer of classical music. But Monta

couldn't say the letter "z". After calling him Modart, Mogart, and Mofart when Mo's stomach got upset, he just shortened it to Mo. The nickname stuck.

Mo dropped the item on the ground.

"Do you know what this is?" he asked.

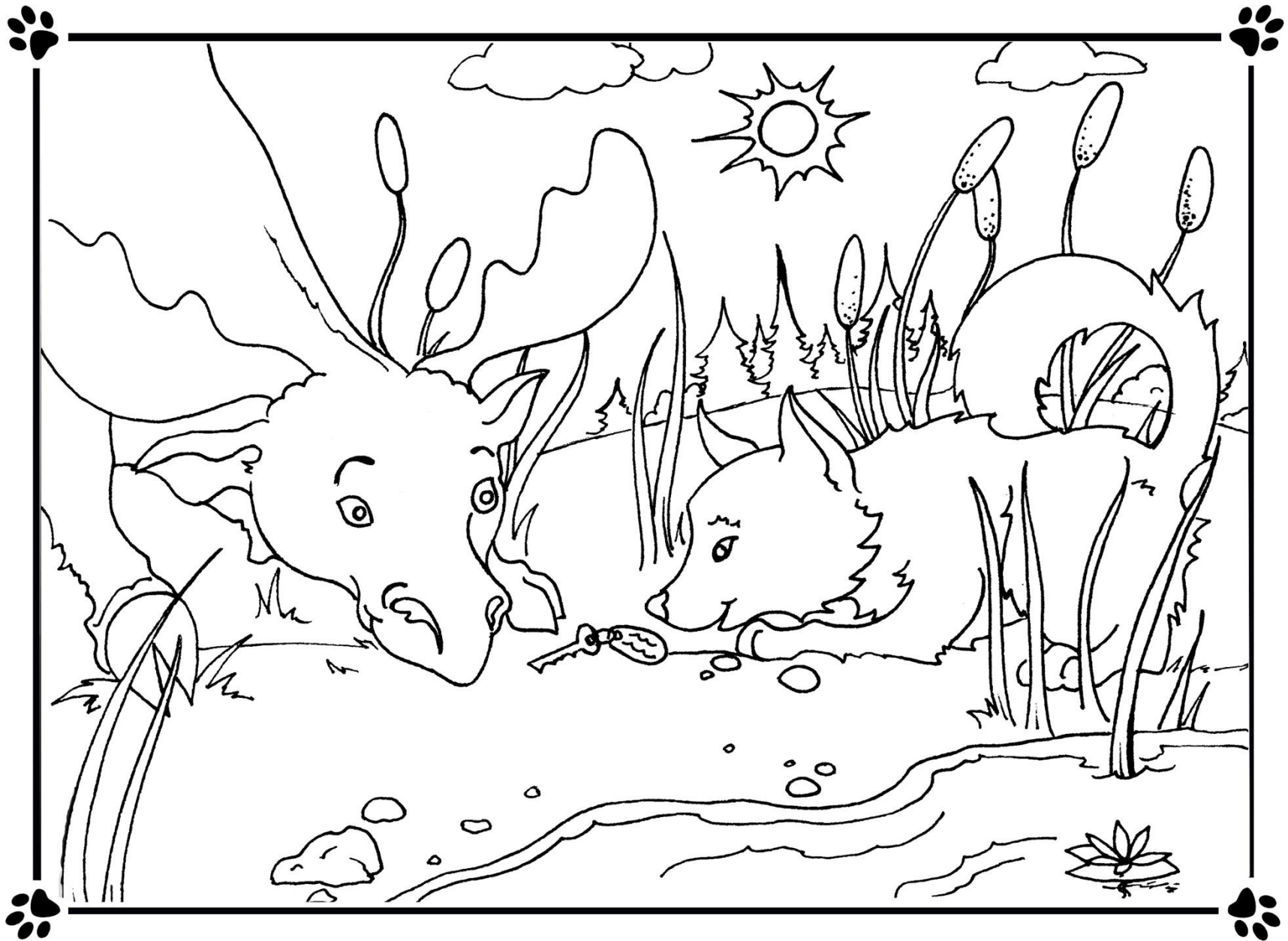
Monta first looked at it from the left, and then from the right. He tried chewing it, but quickly spit it out. The surface was flat and smooth like ice after a gentle rain. But it had no flavor and was attached to a jagged metal object.

"Look, there's a word on it," said Monta, one of the few animals who could read. He sounded out each letter.

"F-l-o-o-r-i-i-d-a-y."

He repeated it several times. They had never heard such a strange-sounding word.

"It's a message," said Monta. "A secret message. Maybe for someone smart like me." Mo started laughing.



“What’s so funny?” asked Monta. “I, unlike many animals, can read and solve hard math problems. One plus one equals two. Two plus two is four. Three plus three is six...”

Monta worked all the way up to seven plus seven before getting stuck. Although Mo liked Monta, he was always annoyed when Monta showed off.

“Fourteen,” said Mo impatiently. “Seven plus seven is fourteen. Now, any idea what this is?”

A bit embarrassed, Monta shook his head back and forth. “Not a clue.”

The curious pair showed the object to every creature they knew. Nann the polar bear. Chachat the wolf. Rang the caribou. Rap the golden eagle. But by mid-afternoon, they were no further ahead in solving the mystery.

Tired from traveling all day, they finally stopped and rested by the ocean shore, wondering what they should do next.

Suddenly, several huge waves rushed ashore, completely drenching both animals.

Blue, an enormous whale, came as close to the shore as possible, lifting her huge head out of the deep ocean.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen,” she shouted.

Mo and Monta shook the salt water off their bodies.

“Why do you always do that?” complained Monta. “We almost drowned.”

Before she could answer, Mo shouted, “Blue, can’t you give us some kind of a warning before you pop up like that? Geez, this salt water really tastes awful.”

“Why do you always complain?” asked Blue. “I’m trying to be friendly and. . . What’s that shiny thing next to you, Mo?”

“We don’t know,” said Mo after spitting out more salt water. “No one seems to know. I found it this morning.”

“Can I see it?” asked Blue. “I probably know what it is. I’m very smart, you know.”

Mo clenched the shiny object with his teeth and climbed on top of a giant rock near the shore. He dangled it from his mouth so Blue could take a better look at it.

“I know what that is,” said Blue. “It’s a key attached to a key chain. Humans use them. They collect things and lock them up in special places so no one else can use them. They don’t like sharing. Very selfish creatures, if you ask me.”

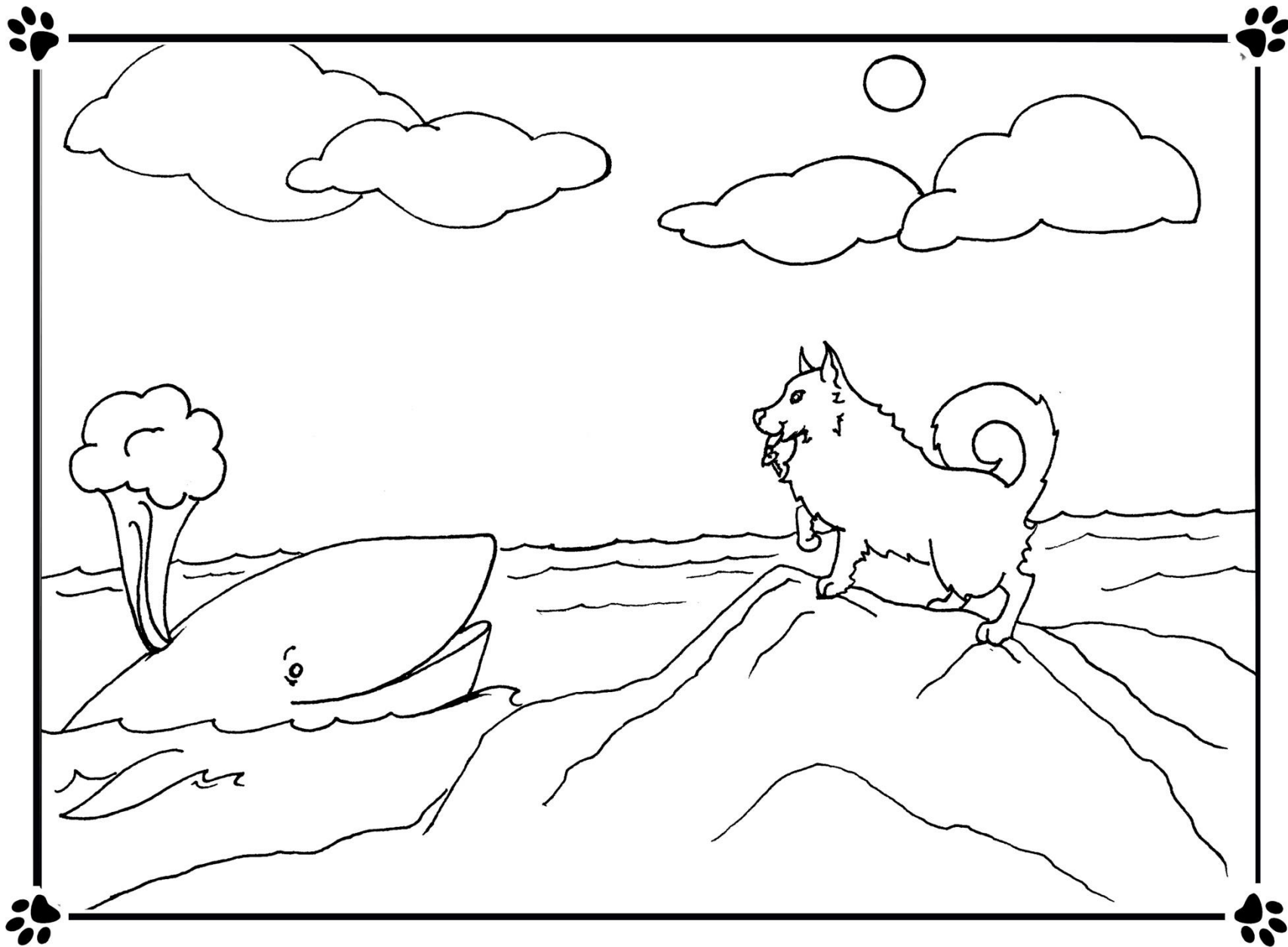
“What does the word mean?” asked Mo.

“It’s a state that’s w-a-a-a-y south of here,” Blue said. “I think it’s in the Lower Forty-Eight, near New York. Or maybe Georgia.”

Mo and Monta were confused. What was a state? What did south mean? What was the Lower Forty-Eight? What was New York or Georgia? They had many questions but mainly wanted to know what the key unlocked.

“Now that’s the mystery,” said Blue. “What are you going to do with it?”

“I don’t know,” said Mo. “Our forest meeting is next week. I’ll bring it with me.”



But by the next day, word about the key and key chain had reached every animal in the forest. An emergency meeting of all the local animals and trees was held that afternoon.

“Quiet, quiet,” chanted several grey-headed chickadees flying over the meeting site. “The meeting is about to begin.”

Everyone settled in. The trees lifted their branches so everyone could see the key and keychain.

“There’s only one question we must answer today,” said Guy, an old grizzly bear who led the meeting. “What should we do with this valuable object?”

“This is why you woke me up?” said Oscar, an owl who lived in a nearby tree.

“Throw it back in the ocean,” shouted a chocolate brown mink. “It’s evil.”

“If you can’t eat it, what good is it?” asked a wolf.

“Isn’t anyone curious?” asked a reindeer. Many others nodded their heads in agreement.

They decided to take a vote.

Curiosity won. The object would be returned to its owner. Since Mo found it, he would return it. Someone, somewhere, had to know something about it.

Blue offered to take Mo south, through the ocean. That's where his search would start.

The next day, Mo climbed aboard the beautiful blue whale.

“Just tell everyone you're from a very special place,” shouted Guy, who stood on the beach with the other animals. “Our home is called, “North to the Future.”

As Mo waved goodbye, his big, fluffy tail drooped between his legs. His pointy ears fell flat against his head. He was afraid, sad, and excited, all at the same time.

What would he find? Who would he meet? Would he ever return home, to Tongass?

The only thing he knew for certain was that nothing would ever be the same.

Chapter 2

Mo Meets Finchy

I've never seen so many humans in my entire life.

Mo didn't know whom or what to look at first. There were tall people. Short people. People with yellow hair. People with red hair. People with drawings on their arms and hair hanging from their chin.

Mo tilted his head all the way back. The gentle rain felt cool against his furry white face. The buildings were so tall. One called the Space Needle even poked through the clouds. Back home, every village had buildings but none of them were this tall, or never this big, and there were never this many. Not even close.

This was not what Mo had expected. He believed there were only a handful of humans in the world. *Maybe most of them live here, around Elliott Bay, or in this Public Market.*

He rested on the damp grass, wondering what to do next.

“You’re not from around here, are you?”

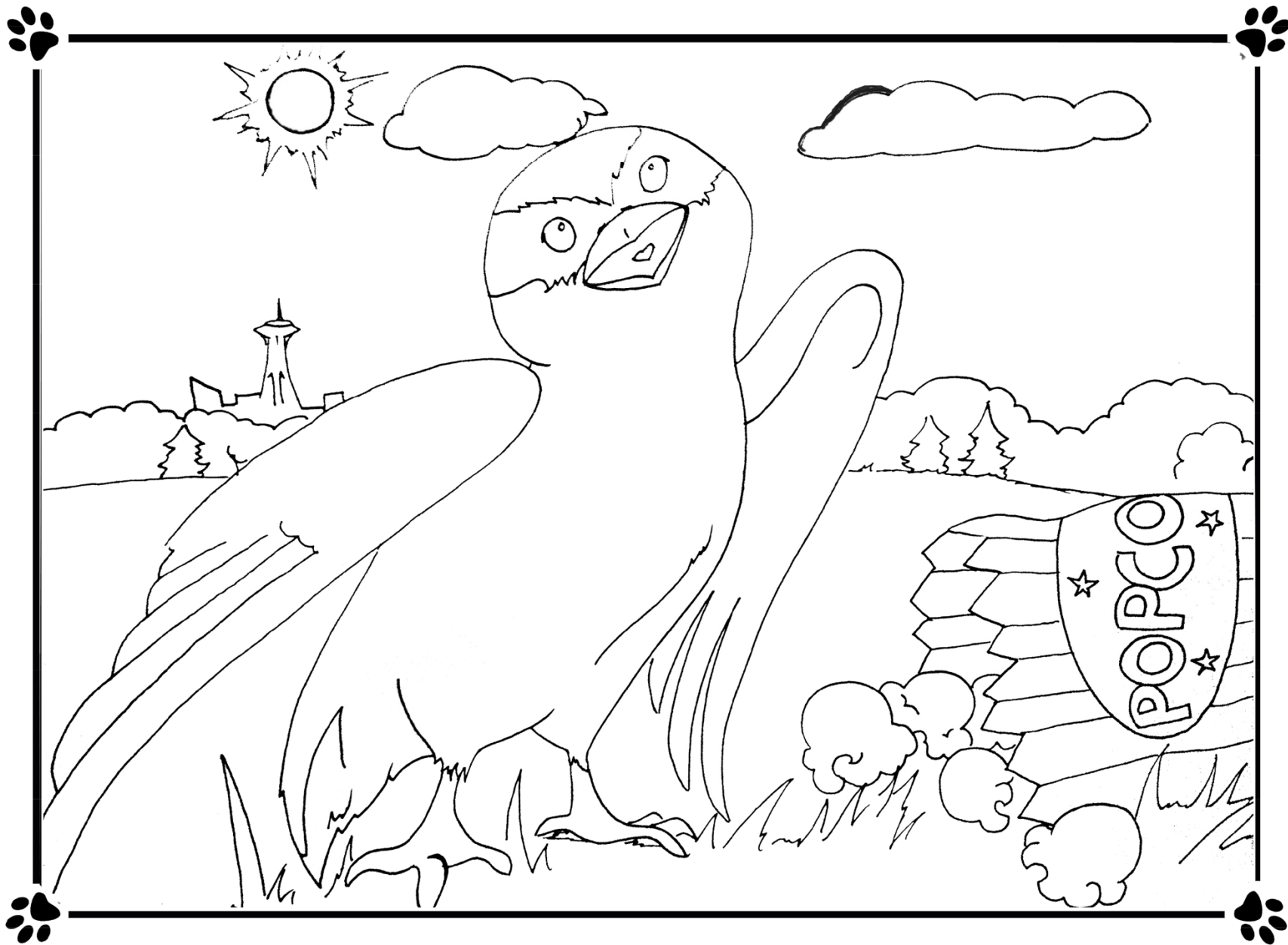
Mo jumped up on all fours. A beautiful yellow and black bird was standing next to him.

Before Mo could answer, the bird said, “My name is Finchy. My family and I live over there, on the top branch of that tall tree.”

Mo looked to his right. “Not that one,” said Finchy. “That one,” he said, pointing with his right claw to a tree not far from where they stood.

Finchy began sharing his family history. How his parents, grandparents and great grandparents had occupied the same tree. How he has eighteen cousins. How he loves to eat popcorn people throw on the grass. “Better than worms,” he said.

Finchy kept talking and talking. By now, Mo had stretched out on the cool grass, trying so hard not to cover his pointy ears with his front paws to drown out Finchy’s voice.



“If I may interject, Mr. Finchy,” said Mo, ever so politely. “I’m hoping you can help me. I’m looking for a place called... He sounded out the name very slowly. F-l-o-o-r-i-i-d-a-y. Mo repeated it. “Have you heard of it?”

Finchy ignored Mo’s question and asked, “Why do you want to go there?”

“I need to . . .” Mo abruptly stopped. He didn’t want to share his important mission with just anyone, especially a stranger.

“I need to return something to someone,” he mumbled.

Finchy hopped over toward Mo’s head and stared him straight in the eye.

“What’s the something and who’s the someone?” he chirped.

Mo remained silent. He didn’t want to offend Finchy. His mother had taught him to be polite.

“Sir, I really don’t know you,” said Mo. “You’re a perfect stranger.”

“I’m far from perfect,” said Finchy. “Believe me pal, I’ve got flaws. Lots and lots of ‘em. Just tell me. Please, please, please. I haven’t heard any good gossip since my cousin, Flo, flew to Florida last February.”

Mo’s ears perked up. “What did you say?”

“I said you can trust...”

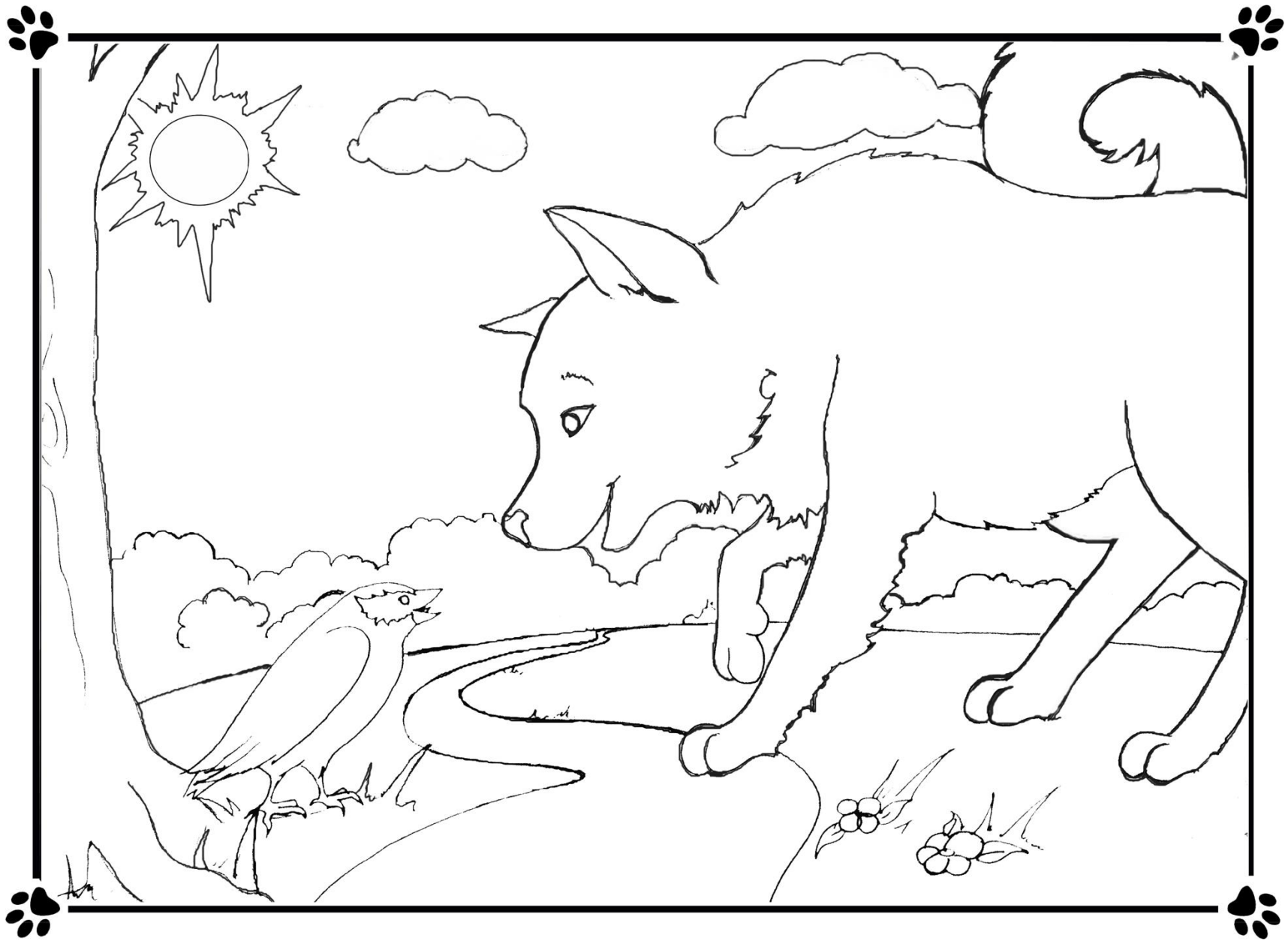
Mo interrupted Finchy.

“Did you say F-I-o-o-r-i-i-d-a-y?” asked Mo, who was starting to get excited.

Finchy waited a few seconds before answering. “I think you mean Florida,” he said.

Mo jumped off the ground. “That’s where I need to go! Can you tell me where it is? How do I get there? Is it far? Do many people live there? How...”

“Wow, slow down there, pal,” Finchy said. “Why didn’t you say Florida? You said F-I-o-o-r-i-i-d-a-y. I heard you. That’s what you said. I know what I heard...”



Mo took a deep breath as Finchy continued chattering. *Patience, patience.* “I’m... I’m sorry I wasn’t clear,” Mo said calmly. “Do you know where Florida is?”

“Well, not exactly,” said Finchy. Trying to impress Mo, he added, “It’s south of here.” Then he hesitated. “Or maybe east. Anyway, it’s a warm place with strange trees called palm trees and an ocean. At least that’s what Flo said before she moved.”

Mo asked Finchy for directions to this faraway place.

“I’d love to visit Flo in Florida,” said Finchy, ignoring Mo’s request. “Can I come with you?”

Mo had thought about a travel companion but never imagined one like Finchy, who never stopped talking.

“Please, please, please,” pleaded Finchy. “I can fly ahead and tell you where to go. I know which way is south. We have to follow Interstate 5 to Everett, which is about thirty minutes from here. Or is it Tacoma? Anyway, I know how we can get there real fast. You won’t even have to walk, well, at least not all the way. I know how to find food and . . .”

Mo looked at Finchy. The bird was so excited and trying to be helpful. But could he put up with his constant chattering?

“Okay, Finchy,” Mo said. “You can come. But before we leave, I have one more question. Do you know where I can get some ear plugs?”

Chapter 3

Ancient People

Mo scanned the room, storing every detail in his memory.

“Rooms like these are called kivas or ceremonial rooms,” said the tour guide, who was very tall. “There are thirty large masonry buildings here at Chaco Culture National Historical Park, each with hundreds of rooms just like this one.”

Mo was in disguise. No one knew he was really a dog. You see, Mo and Finchy arrived at the park early that morning. Several days ago, they began riding on top of a big delivery truck that traveled all over the country. But the truck driver didn’t know he had passengers. Mo and Finchy hoped that someday, he would deliver something to someone in Florida so they could return the valuable key and keychain to its owner.

After arriving at the park, the truck stopped in front of a big building. Mo and Finchy wondered what was inside. Mo climbed down the ladder on the truck and tried to walk through the front door but a man wearing a large brown hat stopped him.

“Whoa there, little fella,” he said, as he grabbed Mo by the back of the neck. “Dogs aren’t allowed.” He patted Mo on the head and gently pushed him away.

Mo was furious.

Dogs are allowed everywhere back home. In caves. In the forest. On the rocky beaches. What makes this place so different? It’s just not fair.

After a few minutes of sulking, Mo came up with an idea. He needed a disguise. A good one. He needed to look . . . well . . . human.

For the next hour, Mo and Finchy searched through every single garbage can for clothing. Nothing. They searched the area surrounding the building. Nothing. They even ventured out into the desert. Still, nothing.

They spotted several people coming out of the building. One man removed a shirt from his shopping bag that had a very strange name on it – Albuquerque. He showed it to his young daughter, telling her that’s where he grew up.

Mo wondered where that place was, if dogs lived there, and if it was anywhere near Florida. But for now, he thought a shirt like that would make a perfect disguise.



“We’ve got to get into that building,” Mo said to Finchy. “You distract the man with the large hat while I find the place that has those shirts.”

Finchy flew over to the man, landing on a chair next to him. Finchy chirped, flapped his wings, and even did cartwheels as Mo snuck through the door.

Mo spotted the gift store that carried the shirts. It had hundreds of different colored shirts, hats, shorts, jackets . . . just about everything a dog needing a disguise could ever want.

Hmmm . . . I wonder what color looks best on me.

Mo pulled a bunch of shirts off their hangers and placed them in the corner of a dressing room. The pile quickly grew taller than him.

He chose a blue shirt and then found a pair of sunglasses and a black cap to cover his pointy ears. Before leaving the store, he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror.

“I don’t know if there’s another dog or even human as handsome as me,” he whispered to himself.



Now Mo was in a kiva mingling with humans, listening to the tour guide talk about the people who had once lived here. He called them the Anasazi, which means ancient people.

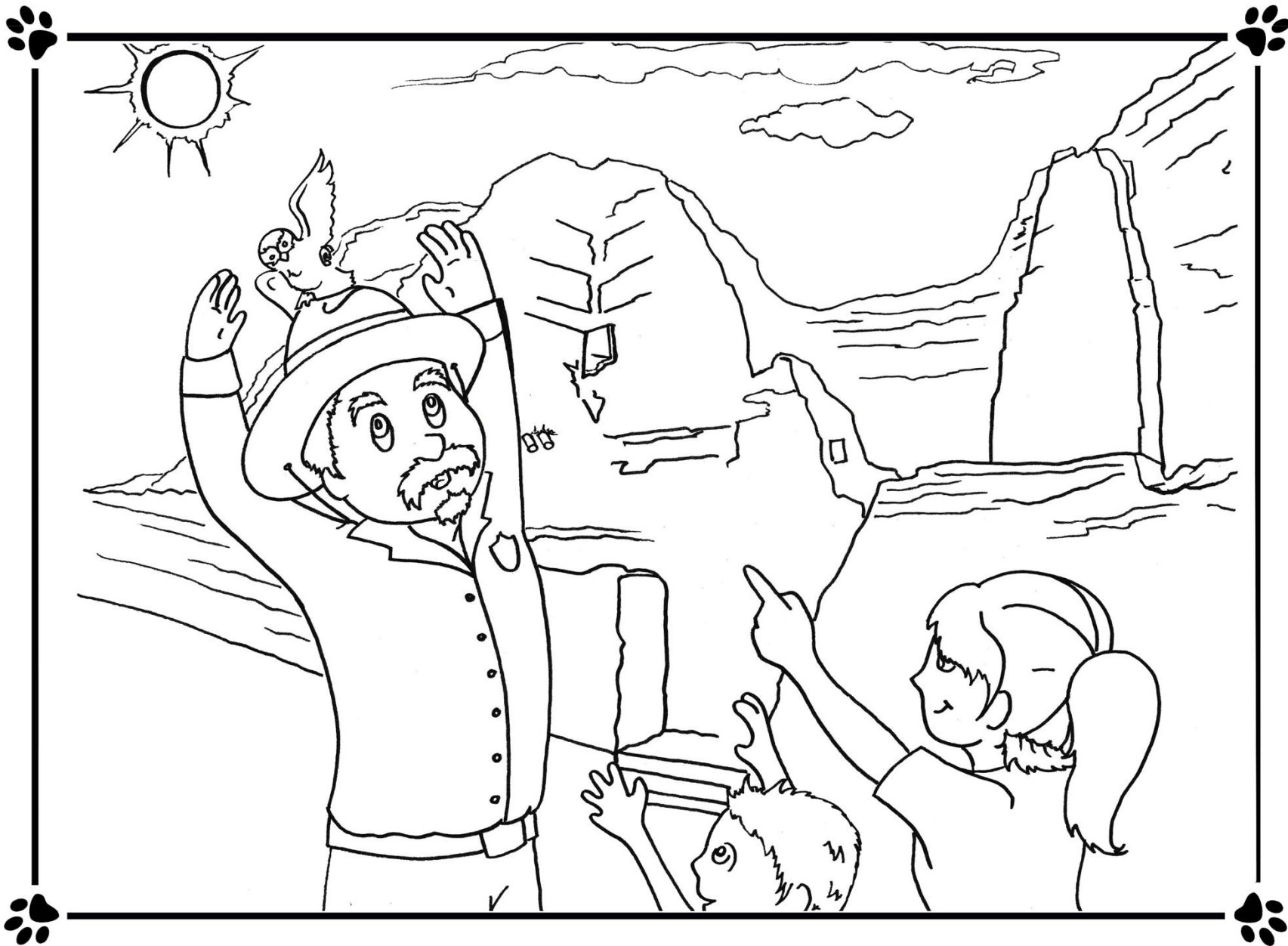
But Mo had trouble concentrating. He had never worn clothes before. Never had to and hoped he would never have to again. *Very uncomfortable*. He tugged at his shirt's neckline with his right front paw.

Moments later, Finchy flew into the kiva. A young boy tried to grab him but missed. Finchy flew on top of the tour guide's head so no one could catch him.

“There's a bird on top of his head!” shouted a woman in the small crowd.

As the tour guide placed his hand on the right side of his head, Finchy hopped to the other side. Then the man touched the left side of his head. Finchy hopped to the right side. When he placed both hands on top of his head, Finchy flew out the door.

“Even birds are curious about the Anasazi Indians,” said the tour guide.



He then explained that the Anasazi had lived here for hundreds of years, as far back as one thousand years ago. Mo held up his paw and started counting. *One, two, three . . .* Mo had lived in his cave for five years. He couldn't imagine what it would be like to live anywhere for even one hundred years.

After the tour ended, some people headed toward the gift shop. Mo followed them so he could return the outfit he had borrowed that morning. Mo would never take something that didn't belong to him.

He placed the cap and sunglasses back on the shelf, forgetting that he was no longer in disguise.

“There's a dog over there!” shouted the same boy who almost caught Finchy.

Mo's ears and tail pointed straight up. He quickly turned around. A man started walking toward him.

Mo ducked under a clothing rack. As the man approached the rack, Mo ran between his legs, straight out the building's front door.

He didn't stop running until he reached the delivery truck. While climbing the ladder

on the truck, he realized that he was still wearing the shirt.

Finchy was waiting for him on the top of the truck. Mo told him what happened.

“How can I return the shirt?” he said. “I was almost captured. Do you know what could have happened if the man caught me? I could have been like those people they talked about who disappeared, the Anasazi, never to be seen again.”

The pair sat in silence, staring at the cloudy sky. They wondered what to do next.

Off in the distance, they heard the truck driver approaching, talking to someone on his cell phone.

“I’ll meet you at the post office in Santa Fe,” he said. “Should take three, maybe four hours to get there.”

Mo looked at Finchy, very relieved. He would mail the shirt back to the store at the post office.

Several hours later, they arrived. Mo pulled off the shirt, neatly folded it, and attached a note:

Please return this shirt to Chaco Culture National Historical Park. Sincerely, Mo.

Finchy flew off the truck, clutching the shirt and note in his claws. But before dropping them into the mailbox, he added one sentence to Mo's note:

P.S. If we see any Anasazi on our journey, we will ask them to contact you.

Finchy carefully placed the shirt and note inside the blue mailbox by the front door.

Moments later, the truck driver pulled out of the parking lot and headed toward the highway. Mo and Finchy felt the cool breeze against their bodies.

“Ya know, I thought I made a very attractive human,” said Mo.

“Attractive?” said Finchy. “Humans? They don't have a tail. Their body is only one color. They don't even have fur or feathers. How much more boring could you get?”

Chapter 4

Max the Shepherd

“Get out of the way!” shouted Finchy.

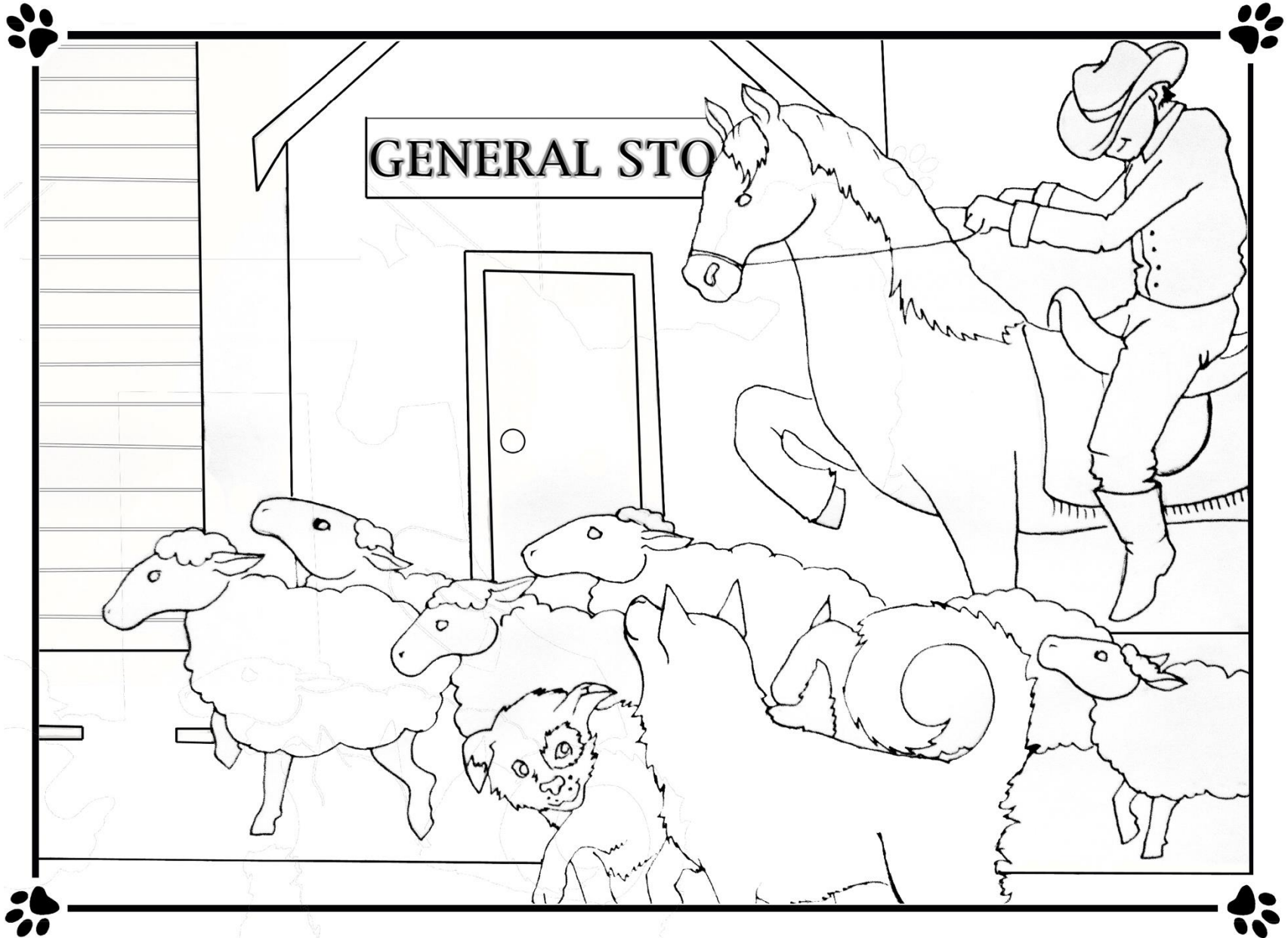
Mo turned around. Countless dogs, sheep, and people on horses were headed straight toward him.

Mo leaped to the side of the road. He had never seen so many sheep at one time. Where were they going in such a hurry?

“Hey, what’s going on?” Mo asked one of the dogs.

“Just movin’,” said the dog.

“Moving where?” asked Mo, trying to keep pace with the dog as he ran alongside the sheep.



“You’re not from around here, are you?” asked the dog who didn’t wait for a response. “My name is Max. I herd sheep. That’s my job.”

Job? What’s a job?

Mo watched Max keep the sheep in line, making sure they traveled along the wide dirt path. After nearly an hour, they reached a large pasture covered with bright-colored flowers.

Max laid on his belly in the cool grass. “So what do you do?” he asked Mo.

“Well, I uh...”. Mo didn’t know what to say. He pretty much did whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted. Still, he wanted to make a good impression so he sat on his hind legs with his back perfectly straight and head held high.

“My name is Mo,” he said in a clear voice. “My friend, Finchy, and I are on a very important mission. We’re headed toward Florida. Ever hear of it?”

Max looked away from Mo, rather unimpressed. “I have absolutely no need to travel,” he said. “There’s no place better than where we are right now – Sawtooth Mountains.

Finchy didn't like Max' uppity attitude.

“If you've never been anywhere else, then how do you know this is the best place?” asked Finchy who was standing almost nose to nose with Max.

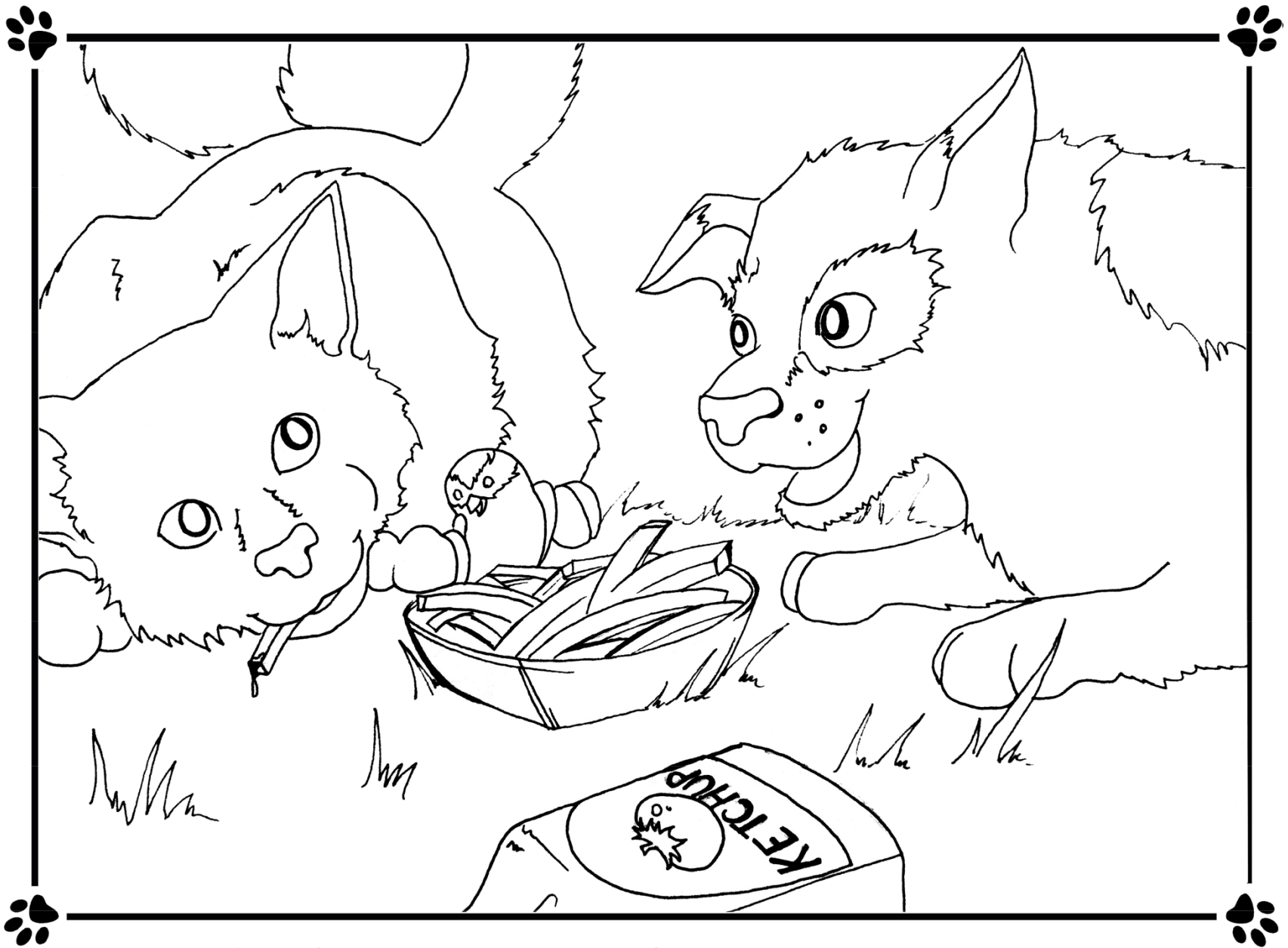
Finchy had a good point but Mo didn't want to be rude.

“Your home is very beautiful,” Mo said, giving Finchy a stern look. “How long have you been moving sheep?”

Max never missed a chance to brag about his job and family. He invited Mo and Finchy to lunch and began telling them all about his brothers and sisters who lived nearby, in a place called Ketchum, and how he belonged to a family of sheep ranchers whose ancestors were called Basques.

“You know,” said Max, “Basques came to California more than one hundred years ago to mine gold. When they didn't find any, some moved here, searching for jobs. Many became shepherders. Shepherding is in my blood. There's no other job I'd rather do.”

Job. There's that strange word again.



“So you move sheep every day?” asked Mo. “Is that your... job?”

“Well, I don’t move sheep every single day,” said Max. “But my family never moves sheep without me. That’s how important I am.”

“Are you always this arro... ,” Finchy started to ask. But before he could finish, Mo interrupted. He thanked Max for the scrumptious meal, especially the french fries. Mo had never eaten a potato before – baked, fried, or mashed.

Max explained that potatoes are grown in different states. Besides the state they were in now, he said they are also grown in Washington, North Dakota, Wisconsin, and Colorado. He knew that Washington was in the Northwest part of the country and that Wisconsin was by Lake Michigan but he wasn’t exactly sure where the other states were located. Then he offered a few planting tips, just in case Mo wanted to plant potatoes in his own garden.

“Potatoes are sometimes called spuds,” Max said. “They like cool weather and are usually planted in the spring. They take about four months to grow.”

Mo nodded, thanking Max for the information, but knew he could never plant potatoes back home. He lived further north. It was cold. Way too cold.

Mo pointed to other dogs playing in the field.

“What about your friends over there?” asked Mo, wondering why they didn’t stop by to say hello.

“Don’t mind them,” said Max. “They’re just a bit . . . snobbish. This job can get to your head.”

Finchy rolled his eyes while Mo and Max rolled over on their backs, stretching their paws into the air. The warm sun was making them drowsy. Mo wondered what his family and friends were doing back home, if they were well, and most important of all, if they missed him just as much as he missed them.

It didn’t take long before Mo and Max fell asleep. But when Mo woke up, he found a note written by Finchy: Meet you back at the delivery truck. Have a gigantic surprise for you!

While walking back to the truck, Mo was a bit excited and a bit nervous. When it came to Finchy, he never knew what to expect.

When he stepped on to the truck’s roof, his tail started wagging fast and furious.

“Surprise!” shouted Finchy, who had created a roof-top, garden with just one vegetable–potatoes.

Mo grew teary-eyed. No one had ever done anything that nice for him. He gave Finchy a big hug.

“Easy, easy, Mo,” Finchy said. “You’re squashing me.”

“Sorry,” said Mo. “You may have a small body, Finchy, but your heart is gigantic.”

Finchy ignored Mo’s compliment. His mind was focused elsewhere.

“I can see it now,” said Finchy. “No matter where we go, animals will line up just to taste our delicious potatoes. We’ll be famous. We can serve potato pancakes, potato dumplings, potato soup, potato salad, potatoes au gratin. . .We can even create our own recipes. What do you think about fries dipped in chocolate?”



Chapter 5

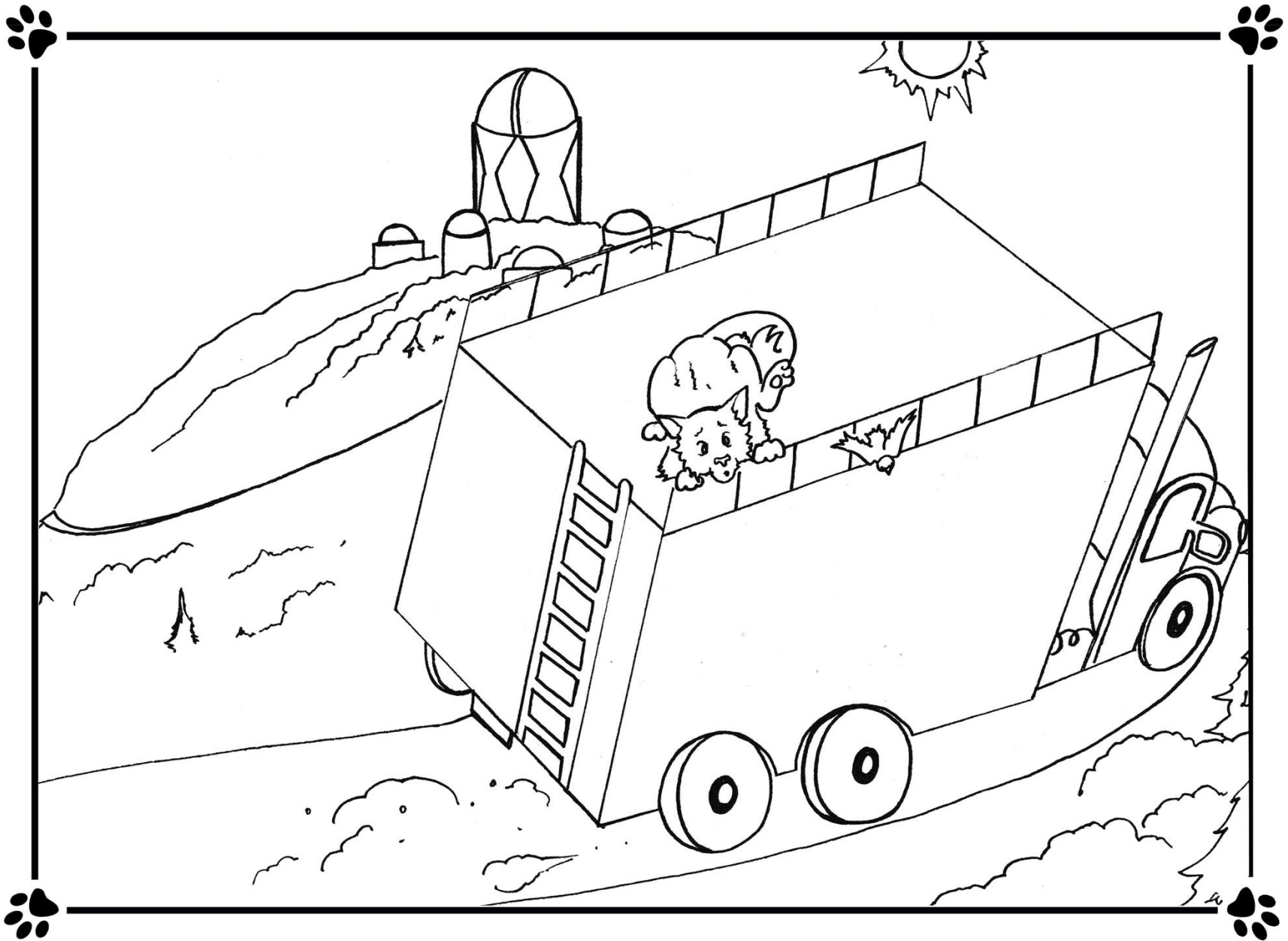
Fearless Finchy

The last thing Mo recalled was the brown sign at the base of the mountain. Several strange words were printed on it: Tohono O’odham Reservation.

By now, he had become so dizzy that it was difficult to hold his head up straight. He squeezed his eyes shut, hoping that his head would stop spinning, but nothing seemed to work.

He was trying hard not to fall off the delivery truck as it turned sharply to the right, left, and then right again. It was a long way down—so far that he couldn’t even see the ground. He had never traveled on such a steep, curvy road that wound around such a tall mountain.

The truck finally reached the top of the mountain. The sun was sinking below the horizon. Mo opened one eye, and then the other. He quickly closed them both and opened them again.



He didn't know what to look at first. Strange-looking buildings surrounded him. Off to his left was a sign: Welcome to Kitt Peak National Observatory.

“Do you know where we are?” he asked Finchy.

“I think... well. . .maybe we're. . .uh. . .,” Finchy's voice trailed off. He didn't have a clue.

The truck driver was talking to another man, apologizing for his late arrival. “Engine trouble,” he said.

As the two chatted, Mo quietly climbed down the ladder on the side of the truck without being noticed. The hard ground beneath his feet steadied him. He didn't know which way to go. There were buildings to his right and left, each one stranger than the next.

Another sign caught his eye: Please be quiet. Scientists sleeping.

This is a very strange place. Strange words, strange buildings, strange people. And why do scientists sleep during the day? Are they related to owls?

Mo spotted two people heading toward one of the buildings. Finchy and him followed them inside.

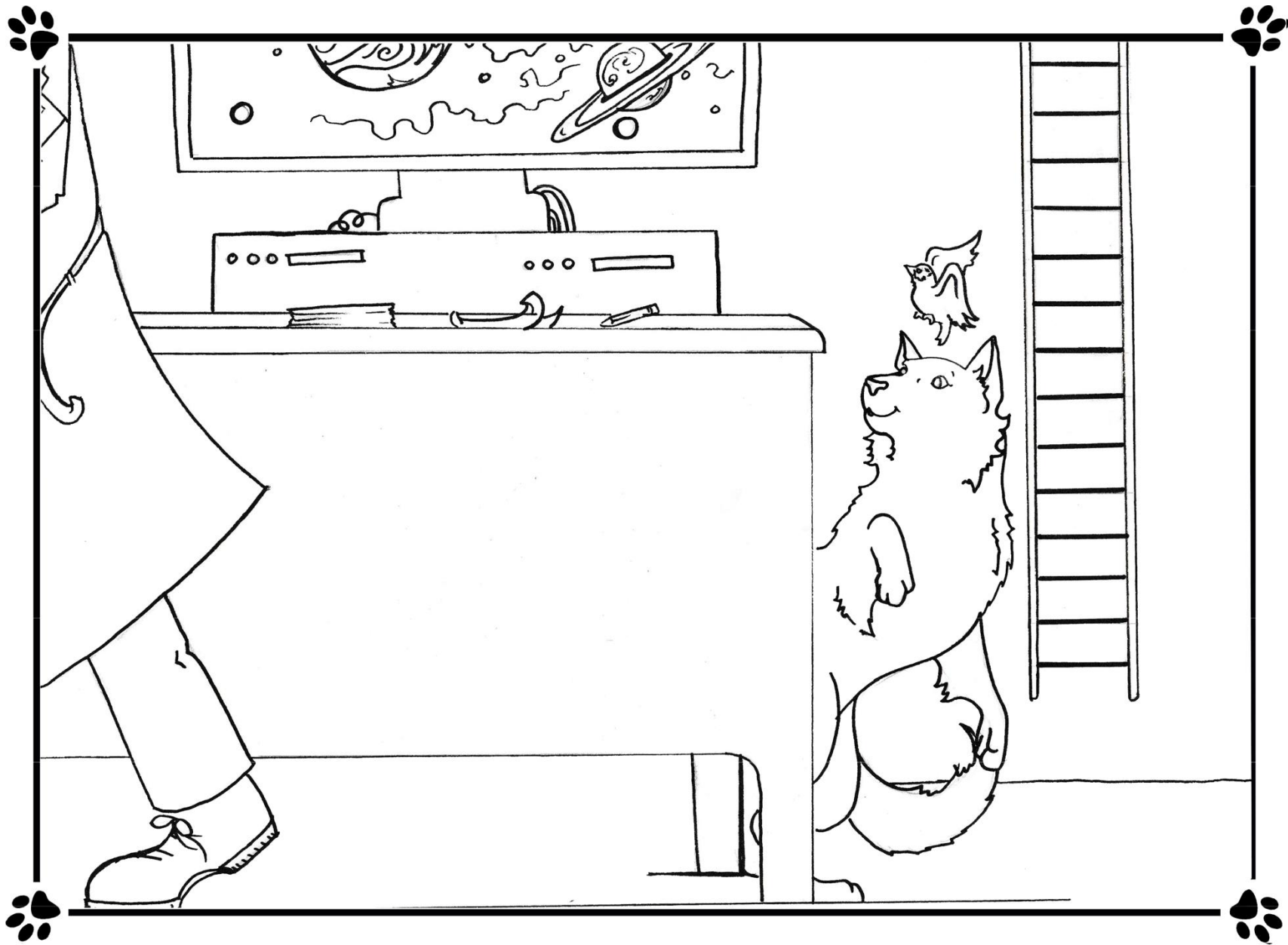
The room was huge and dimly lit. It was filled with stuff that Mo and Finchy had never seen before. There were all sorts of cables, cords, wires, ladders, and gadgets.

Near the center of the room was a tube so large that Mo and probably everyone in his hometown could easily fit inside. The tube was slanted and went right through the ceiling!

Mo and Finchy hid behind a desk while listening to one scientist talk about the fierce dust storms on Mars. While excited to learn about the red planet, Mo had always wondered about Saturn, specifically its three main rings. What were they made from? Why were they shimmering pink, gray, and brown?

“Yeah, I’m having lunch on Saturday with my sister and her family,” said one scientist. “She lives about two hours north from here, in Casa Grande.”

As the scientist talked about her family, the other one kept fidgeting with some of the gadgets. Every now and then, he would write notes on a pad of paper.



“He’s probably recording the secrets to the universe,” said Finchy. “I’ve got to see his notes. Then everyone will envy me because I’m so brilliant.”

“If you’re so brilliant, how can you say something so dumb?” whispered Mo. “Don’t move. I don’t want to get caught. They could stuff us in that long tube. We’d be stuck in there forever.”

Finchy agreed, at least for the moment. Throughout the rest of the evening, Mo and Finchy listened to the scientists talk about the universe. They saw colorful, vibrant images on a computer screen of planets, stars, comets, and galaxies.

So many questions entered their mind. What were the scientists hoping to find? What did they already discover? Was anybody looking back at them? Could Finchy fly to a star?

The questions seemed endless. But there was one question that really bothered Finchy. What did the scientist write on that pad of paper? Inch by inch, he hopped away from Mo.

Within a few minutes, he was standing on the other side of the desk.

By now, the sun was coming up and the scientists had finished their work. One was near the front door. The other was gathering his things, which were scattered on the other side of the room.

Now was Finchy's chance. He took a deep breath.

Mo realized what Finchy was about to do but couldn't stop him. He was too far away. If he said anything, the scientists would hear him.

Suddenly, Finchy took off, flapping his wings at lightning speed. He headed straight toward the pad of paper, ripped the top sheet off the pad with his beak, and then flew out the front door, right behind the scientist who never even realized that Finchy was behind her.

Mo's heart was beating so fast and so loud that he placed his paw on top of his chest to muffle the sound. The other scientist wandered toward the pad of paper and realized the top sheet was missing.

"That's strange," he mumbled. He searched his desk. The floor. A nearby table. His briefcase. Since it was nowhere to be found, he headed out the door. Mo followed him, sneaking out as the scientist waved hello to someone down the road.

Finchy was waiting for Mo on top of the truck.

“I waited until you got here so we could read this together,” said Finchy. “Our lives will never be the same!”

“Are you crazy?” shouted Mo. “Do you know the kind of trouble...!”

Finchy ignored Mo and started reading the piece of paper. Suddenly, a blank expression covered his small, furry face.

Mo snatched the piece of paper from him and read it out loud: oatmeal, bread, bananas. . . It was a grocery list.

Mo burst out laughing. He couldn't stop.

Finchy hopped away from Mo with his head hanging low. When Mo called his name, he wouldn't respond or even look at him.

“Oh, c'mon,” pleaded Mo, who didn't realize Finchy was so sensitive. Mo wondered how he could help his new friend not feel so foolish.

I know. I'll focus on his strengths, what he's good at, not his weaknesses.

“Look at it this way,” continued Mo. “While you may not be brilliant, you were very brave.”

Mo's words had a magical effect. “I was brave,” Finchy said, as he turned around to face Mo. “Really brave. I faced danger head on, just like a superhero.”

Mo stretched out on the top of the truck, soaking in the morning sun. As Finchy bragged on and on about his courage, Mo had one thought in mind:

I may not be brave but I'm the one who's brilliant.

Chapter 6

Elvis and the Wizard

Mo just froze. He had never seen anything so large and so scary in his entire life.

The skeleton towered over Mo. It measured thirty-three feet long from its skull to the tip of its long tail. Its mouth was so big that Mo could easily fit inside. And its teeth. Oh, its huge, sharp teeth. Mo shuddered when thinking about all those poor animals that ended up as its dinner.

“Its name is Elvis,” said Finchy. “Says here he’s seventy-seven million years old. He’s a b-r-a-c-h-i-y-o-p-h-o-s-a-u-r-u-s. Finchy carefully sounded out each letter.

“Hello.”

Mo and Finchy looked around the dimly lit room to see who was speaking. The voice was so loud that the walls seemed to vibrate.

Moments later, the same voice said, “What’s the matter? Haven’t you ever talked to a dinosaur before?”

Mo raced to the opposite side of the room and hid in a corner. Finchy flew close behind.

“You know my name but I don’t know yours,” said Elvis. “Who are you? Why are you here?”

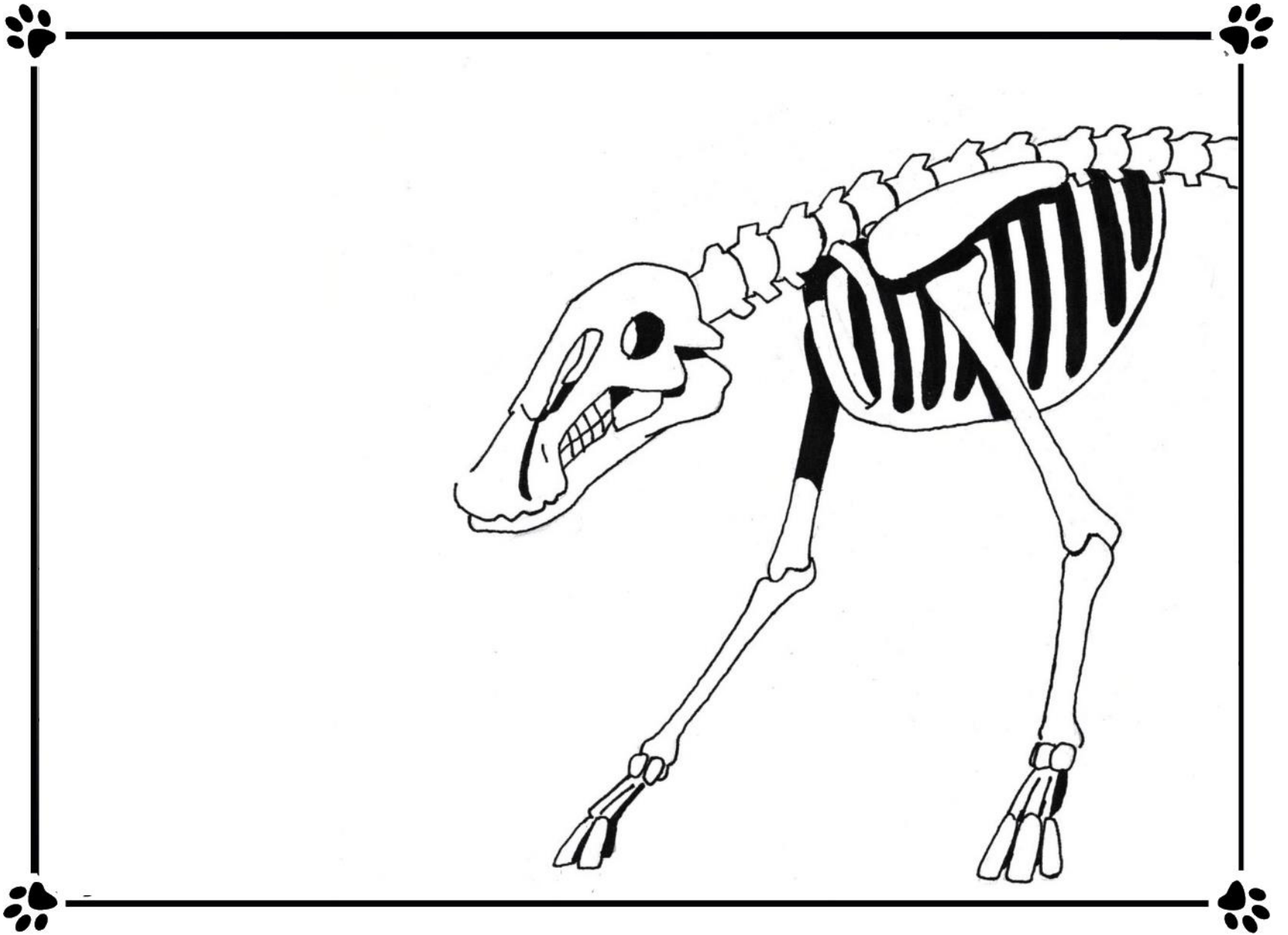
Mo and Finchy looked at each other, trembling.

“Don’t be afraid,” said Elvis. “I won’t eat you. I’ve already had my supper.”

“M-m-m-y . . . m-m-m-y . . . my . . . my name is Mo,” stammered Mo. “And this is my f-f-friend Finchy.”

Finchy fluttered his wings, trying to show that he was bigger than his actual size.

“We didn’t mean . . . we’re sorry . . . I mean for bothering you,” stuttered Mo.



“Do you normally enter other animals’ houses without being invited?” Elvis let out a thundering roar. Finchy swore that his huge tail had swayed back and forth.

Mo and Finchy wanted to escape but they couldn’t move. They could barely breathe. They were trapped by their own fear.

“So what do you want?” demanded Elvis.

Mo and Finchy remained silent.

“Come closer so I can see you,” said Elvis. “Now!”

Mo crawled on his belly with Finchy on his tail, clinging to Mo’s fur with his tiny claws. Mo shifted his eyes from the right to the left, desperately searching for a way out.

As Mo stretched his front left paw to move another inch forward, he noticed a door off to the right. Light was shining underneath the door.

I don’t care who’s in there. I don’t care if we get caught. Anything is better than being eaten alive by that monster.

Mo slowly moved toward the door, pushing it open.

Inside the room were several cats sitting around a microphone and computer. Empty bags of popcorn were scattered around the room.

“Hurry up!” shouted a black cat into the microphone. “Can’t wait all night. I just want to get a small taste of you.”

Mo snuck up behind him and tapped him on the shoulder. The cat shrieked and jumped high in the air, landing on top of a tall bookshelf in the room.

Mo and Finchy laughed. “Look who’s scared now!” shouted Mo.

“We were just having a little fun,” mumbled the black cat.

“It was just a teensy, weensy, little prank,” said another.

“Prank?” said Finchy. “Scaring us was fun? What did we ever do to you?”

The black cat jumped off the bookshelf, landing in front of Mo. He stared at Finchy, licking his lips. *Oh shoot, I forgot. It’s very rude to eat your guests.*



The cat shifted his gaze toward Mo. “Please don’t be mad,” he said. He introduced himself as PJ and the other cats in the room as Bo, Amanda, and Barkley.

“See, every Tuesday is movie night,” continued PJ. “Tonight we watched *The Wizard of Oz*. Then you walked into the room. We saw the mic and, well . . . we thought it would be fun to play the Wizard.”

“What’s *The Wizard of Oz*?” asked Mo.

The cats looked at each other in disbelief.

“Only the best movie ever made,” said Bo. The other cats nodded their heads in agreement.

For the next few minutes, the cats talked about the movie, how scary the witch was, how Toto was the smartest of the bunch – even though he was a dog, not a cat – and how they all liked movies with happy endings.

“Why don’t you come back next Tuesday night?” asked Bo. “There’ll be plenty of popcorn and other things to eat.” He stared at Finchy.

“Thank you,” said Mo, ever so politely, “but we don’t know where we’ll be next week.”

PJ explained that the cats meet here, at the Phillips County Museum, every Tuesday night. They all come from different places. While he and Amanda lived in Blaine County, which is west of the museum, Bo and Barkley travel farther. They lived in Treasure County, which is south of the museum.

“Where did Elvis come from?” asked Finchy, frantically trying to change the subject.

He would never return no matter how much free popcorn they served. He had no intention of being an entree on the menu.

They all stepped out of the room and walked toward Elvis. The cats told them all about dinosaurs. They explained how archeologists discovered many dinosaur skeletons, bones, skulls, and eggs along a dinosaur trail. One of the bones in the museum weighed seven hundred pounds!

“Dinosaurs roamed this area millions of years ago,” Amanda said. “They were wiped out by a huge asteroid that hit the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico.”

“I think a bunch of volcanoes erupted,” added Barkley. “That made the whole planet hot–burning hot – too hot to live.”

Mo couldn’t take his eyes off Elvis. The things he was learning about America! Would anyone believe him when he returned home from his long journey?

It was almost sunrise, time for Finchy and Mo to return to the delivery truck that brought them here. Finchy couldn’t wait to leave, thinking he could easily be the cats’ next meal.

Mo climbed the ladder on the side of the truck. When he reached the rooftop, he laid on his side and closed his eyes. Finchy snuggled next to him.

“Do you think a dinosaur and a bird could ever be friends?” he asked Mo.

“Hmmm,” said Mo. “Don’t really know. But you’ve got a much better chance of that happening than ever being friends with a cat.”

Chapter 7

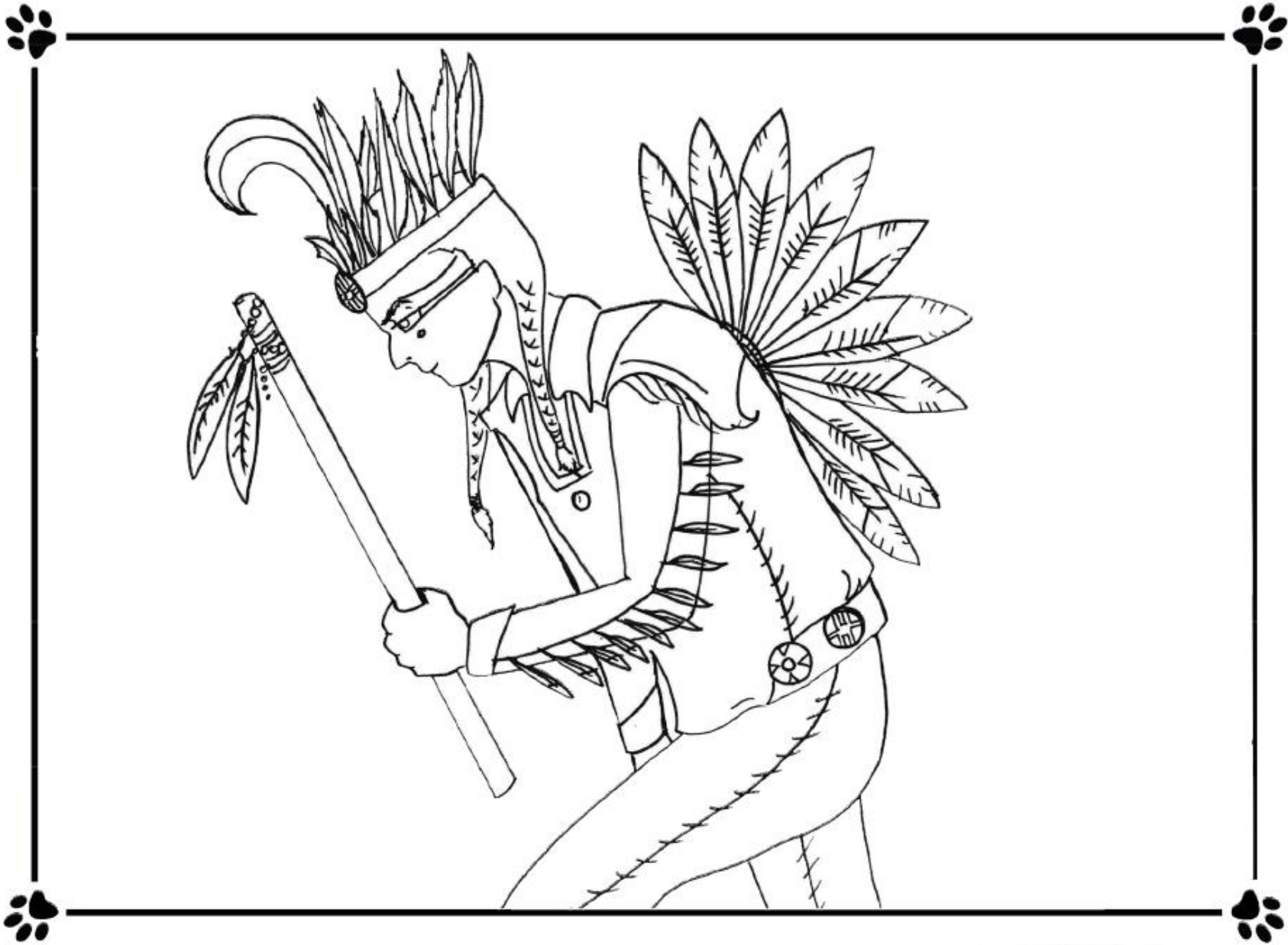
Sacred Ceremony

The chanting grew louder and louder. The drumbeat sounded like thunder. Mo and Finchy inched closer and closer to the crowd surrounding the exciting sounds.

Mo had never seen humans dress or act like this back home. Five men were in the center of a large circle, dancing, twirling, and singing. Maybe a dozen people were beating on several huge, hide-covered drums with mallets while hundreds more watched.

Mo couldn't take his eyes off the dancers' outfits. They were so bright, so colorful. Simply dazzling. Each one was decorated with different symbols in red, orange, turquoise, or blue. Some wore eagle feathers on the tops of their heads and along the sides of their arms.

“What are they saying?” whispered Mo to Finchy who shrugged his shoulders. Finchy had never seen so many feathers in his life, not even at family gatherings.



Mo felt someone tap his shoulder. He turned around, looked up, and saw the head of a very large dog towering over him.

“Howdy. First time here?”

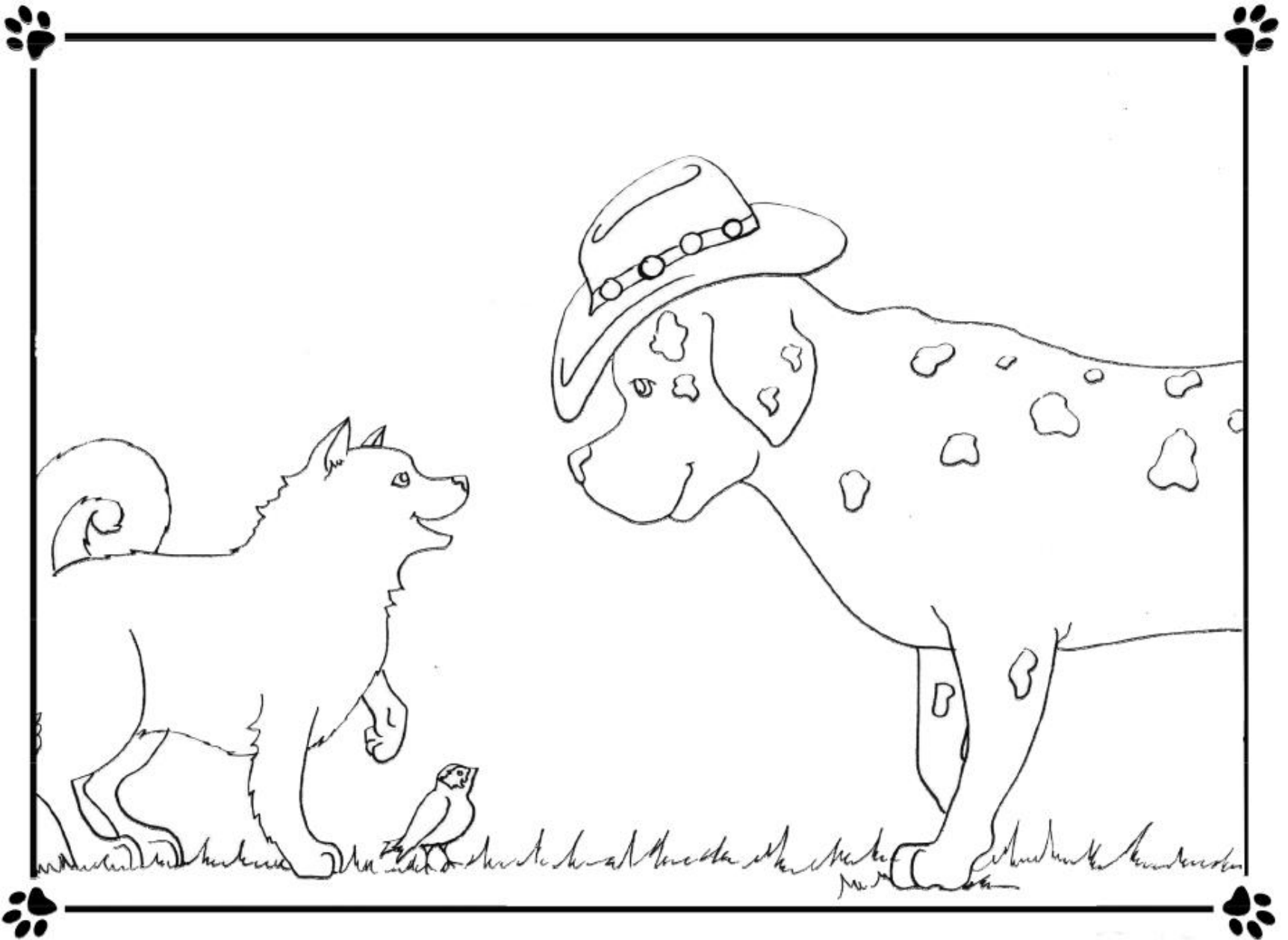
The dog was twice his size, wore a cowboy hat, and had white spots all over his tan body. Two small dogs – one gray and the other brown-speckled – were by his side.

“Finally, a fresh face,” said the gray dog. “And a handsome one at that.” She snuggled up against Mo’s body.

“Meli, quit flirting,” said the brown-speckled dog. “My name is Bly. I’ve never seen you before. Is this your first time here? Where did you come from? Who did you come with? Oh, by the way, the flatbread is very good today, but the hotdogs . . .”

“Bly, stop yammering and let the feller talk!” shouted the big dog. He turned to Mo and Finchy. “My name is Tulsa. And you are . . . ?”

Mo introduced himself and Finchy and then explained how they’re trying to get to Florida to return a valuable key and keychain.



“Don’t know where Florida is but I do know where we can get some tasty food,” Tulsa said. “You hungry?” Mo and Finchy eagerly nodded.

“Well, c’mon to our campsite for some chow.”

Tulsa started walking straight while Bly and Meli headed in opposite directions. Mo and Finchy stood still, not knowing which way to go.

“It’s this way,” said Tulsa.

“No, it’s not,” said Bly. “Gotta go around the fry bread booth, past the succotash, then the hamburgers...”

Meli rolled her eyes. “Don’t you two know anything?” she said. “Our campsite is right over there.”

After Meli pointed to the campsite, Mo and Finchy found their own way.

The four dogs and Finchy hunkered down around a small campfire, eating Indian tacos and hamburgers.

Bly couldn't wait any longer. He blurted out: "Who told you about this Powwow? Are you going to dance or sing? Did you agree with the judges at the last event?"

"You'll have to excuse my friend," said Tulsa. "He's a bit excited. Actually, we're all excited to meet a new dog. No offense, Finchy."

Finchy stuck his beak high in the air, puffed his tiny chest out, and spread his wings, trying to show off the beautiful outfit Mother Nature gave him, a striking pair of yellow and black wings.

Mo didn't know why Finchy constantly tried to impress other animals.

"So what's a Pow...?"

Before Mo could finish his sentence, Bly interrupted.

"They're held all over this state," he said. "Like here, in . . .in . . .I forgot the name of the city we're in now. It was named after Buffalo Bill, a real famous American soldier and hunter. We also saw powwows in Cheyenne, which is southeast from here, and Jackson, which is southwest from here."

For the next several minutes, the three dogs tried to describe a Powwow, but no one could agree.

“It’s a sacred ceremony for Native Americans,” said Tulsa. “They dance and sing to honor their proud culture, heritage, and traditions.”

“No it ain’t,” said Bly. “It’s a dance competition.” He started shaking his tail back and forth and kicking his legs. “I’m a pretty good dancer, ya know. If dogs could enter, I would win first prize. I just know it!”

“You’re both wrong,” said Meli. “It’s a big festival. People eat, dance, and make new friends, which is what I should start doing.”

Mo and Finchy looked at each other, not knowing who or even what to believe.

“What do they sing about?” asked Finchy, believing no human could ever sing as sweetly as a bird.

“Mother Nature,” said Tulsa. “They can sing about the howling wind, cold winter...”
“Dancing is what they sing about,” shouted Bly while Meli shouted even louder, “Celebrations!”

Mo and Finchy wondered if these friends could ever agree on anything.

After a wonderful meal, they watched the rest of the show, hoping to learn something about Powwows from the dancers and others in the crowd.

Finchy decided to ask one last question: Where were they? What was the name of the state?

The three dogs looked at each other with blank expressions on their faces.

“Well,” said Meli, “This is the first state to grant women the right to vote.”

“And the one that has the least amount of people in the United States,” added Bly.
“Or is it Mexico...”

“We’re also about five hours away from the country’s first national monument,” said Tulsa.

Despite all of these clues, Mo and Finchy still had no idea about their location. The Powwow was coming to an end. Mo and Finchy thanked their hosts for a grand

evening. “Mighty proud to know ya,” said Tulsa.

“Can you believe that Bly?” said Finchy to Mo as they walked back to the delivery truck. “He never let anyone talk, get a word in edgewise, express their opinions. Talk, talk, talk, that’s all he did...”

Mo smiled to himself, trying to remember where he stashed those earplugs.

Chapter 8

The Mighty River

“Hurry up!” shouted Finchy. “You can make it!”

Mo never remembered running so fast. Just before the delivery truck’s engine started, he grabbed the ladder on the side of the truck and climbed to the top where Finchy was waiting.

“That was a close call,” said Finchy. “Ya know, it wouldn’t hurt you to lose some weight. And maybe exercise more?”

Mo was too busy panting to respond.

The bright sun and a few cloud wisps hung in the sky. Mo and Finchy couldn’t have picked a nicer day to travel.

Mo laid down on the warm roof as the truck driver drove slowly out of the rest stop’s

parking lot. He noticed that many of the car license plates had the same words: Pacific Wonderland.

“I’ll be right back with some breakfast,” said Finchy, who was always flying here and there, searching through trashcans for food and bragging to anyone who would listen about his journey with Mo.

When he returned, Finchy was carrying half of a veggie sandwich between his claws. Mo snatched it away from him, sniffed it once, twice, and then handed it back.

“That’s the thanks I get?” shouted Finchy. “I must have poked around a dozen, no a million, garbage cans to find you something healthy to eat.”

“I’m a meat and potatoes dog,” Mo said, unapologetically. “Besides, what’s so special about lettuce, cucumbers, and this other stuff, whatever it is? None of it has any flavor.”

They rode on top of the delivery truck for some time before exiting the highway toward a place called Bend.

Mo started wiggling his nose. He pointed it up. Down. Left. Then right.

A river. I smell a river.

The truck stopped in front of a long building.

The truck driver climbed out of the truck's cab to greet another man.

“It's been a long time, too long,” he said, patting the other man on the back. “How's the family?”

The two men chatted and laughed as they walked into the building.

This was Mo's chance to look around. After climbing down the truck's ladder, he walked along the side of the road while Finchy flew ahead.

The pair soon found themselves surrounded by many trees and thorny bushes. Mo spread apart the small branches of two bushes to see what was on the other side.

It was exactly as he thought. There was a river. A big one. The words “Deschutes River” were printed on a nearby sign.

There were so many people around that no one paid attention to Finchy and Mo.

But Mo couldn't take his eyes off them. Many were actually standing on the water, using paddles to move across it.

Mo didn't know what to think. *Can humans stand on water? All the people back home sit in canoes when moving across the water.*

“C'mon, Mo,” said Finchy. “Let's cool off in the river.”

Mo poked his head between two thick bushes and then tried to force his shoulders through the narrow opening. All of a sudden, he couldn't move. He twisted this way and that way. He was stuck.

“Do I have to do everything for you, Mr. Meat and Potatoes?” said Finchy, who now stood behind Mo's tail. With all his might, Finchy pushed Mo through the bushes.

They walked toward the river bank and felt the cool water against their warm bodies. Finchy relaxed on the sand with his legs crossed and closed his eyes.

But Mo couldn't relax. If only he could stand on water.

If humans can do it, I certainly can. But I need somebody to teach me. Maybe those

people over there, the ones sitting on that brown blanket.

While Mo was getting up his nerve to approach them, he overheard one man talking about his sister who works in Eugene. “She wants to buy a house in Springfield, just ten minutes east of her office,” he said.

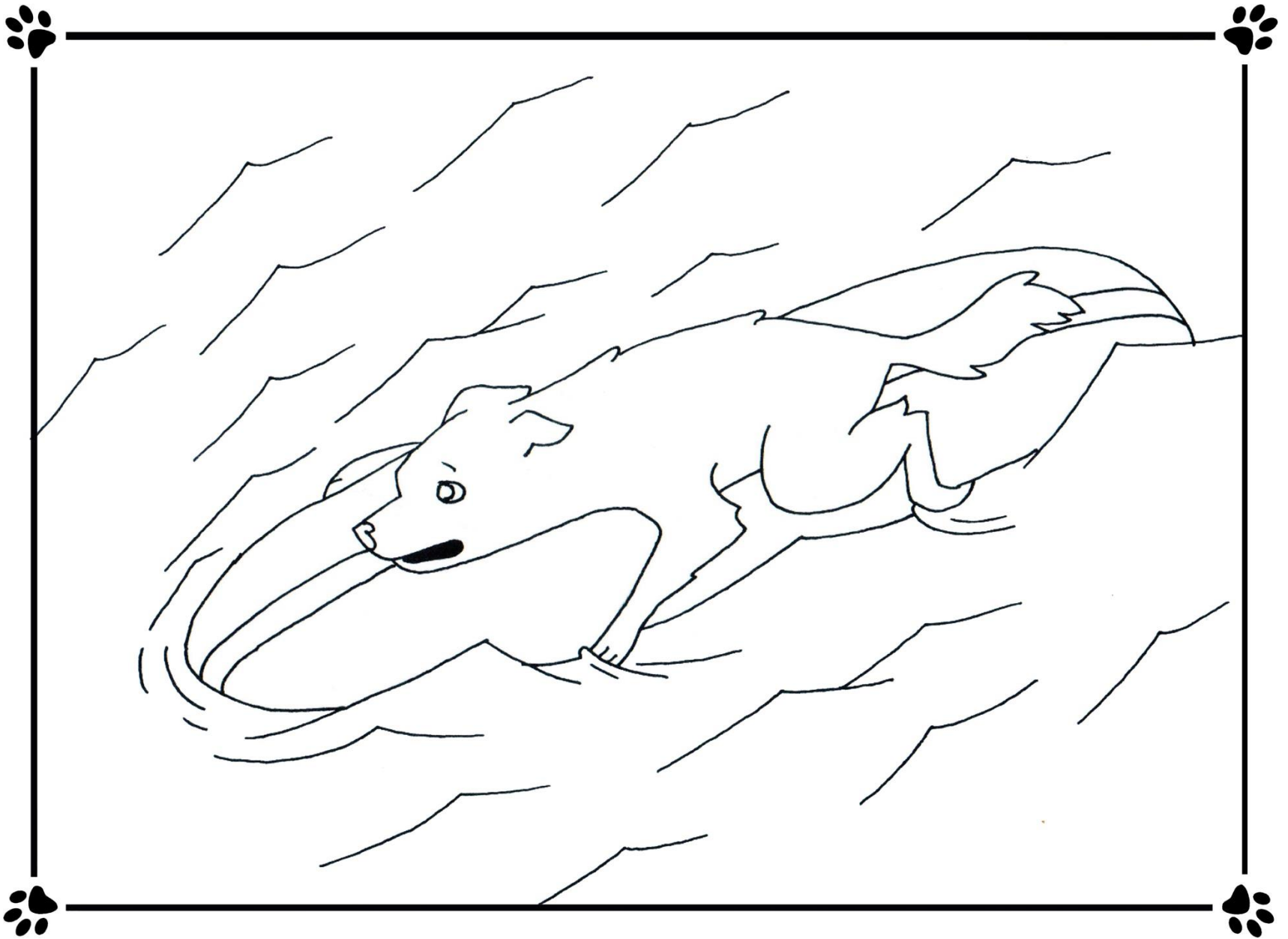
Mo glanced at Finchy who was fast asleep, probably dreaming about grand nests, juicy worms, or his family back home. Mo took a deep breath and walked toward the humans. Just then, he spotted two other people coming out of the river, jumping off their long boards.

So that’s how they do it. Humans don’t float. They stand on boards that float.

Mo had never stood on water. But today was the day he would do it. How hard could it be? All he needed was a board and some courage.

The people left the boards sitting on the river bank. Mo trotted over and sniffed one of them. It smelled OK. When no one was watching, he pushed it into the river with his nose and climbed on top of it.

The board started moving in every direction. So did Mo’s stomach.



He didn't dare stand up. He was sprawled out on all fours, clinging to its edges. This was not as easy as it looked. Worse yet, without paddles, he couldn't steer it.

Little by little, the board moved farther and farther away from the river bank, much too far for Mo to swim back. What should he do? He could bark for help but no one would hear him.

Mo peered over the board, trying to see how deep the water was but it was too dark to see the bottom.

He didn't remember a time when he was this frightened, this worried, or in this much danger.

Just then, he felt something grab him by the back of his neck, lift him off the board, fly high into air, and then place him near the river's edge.

"I close my eyes for just a minute and this is what you do?" shouted Finchy, who was huffing and puffing. Mo weighed fifty times more than Finchy. "What were you thinking?"

By now, Mo was dripping wet from head to paw. While his ears laid flat against his

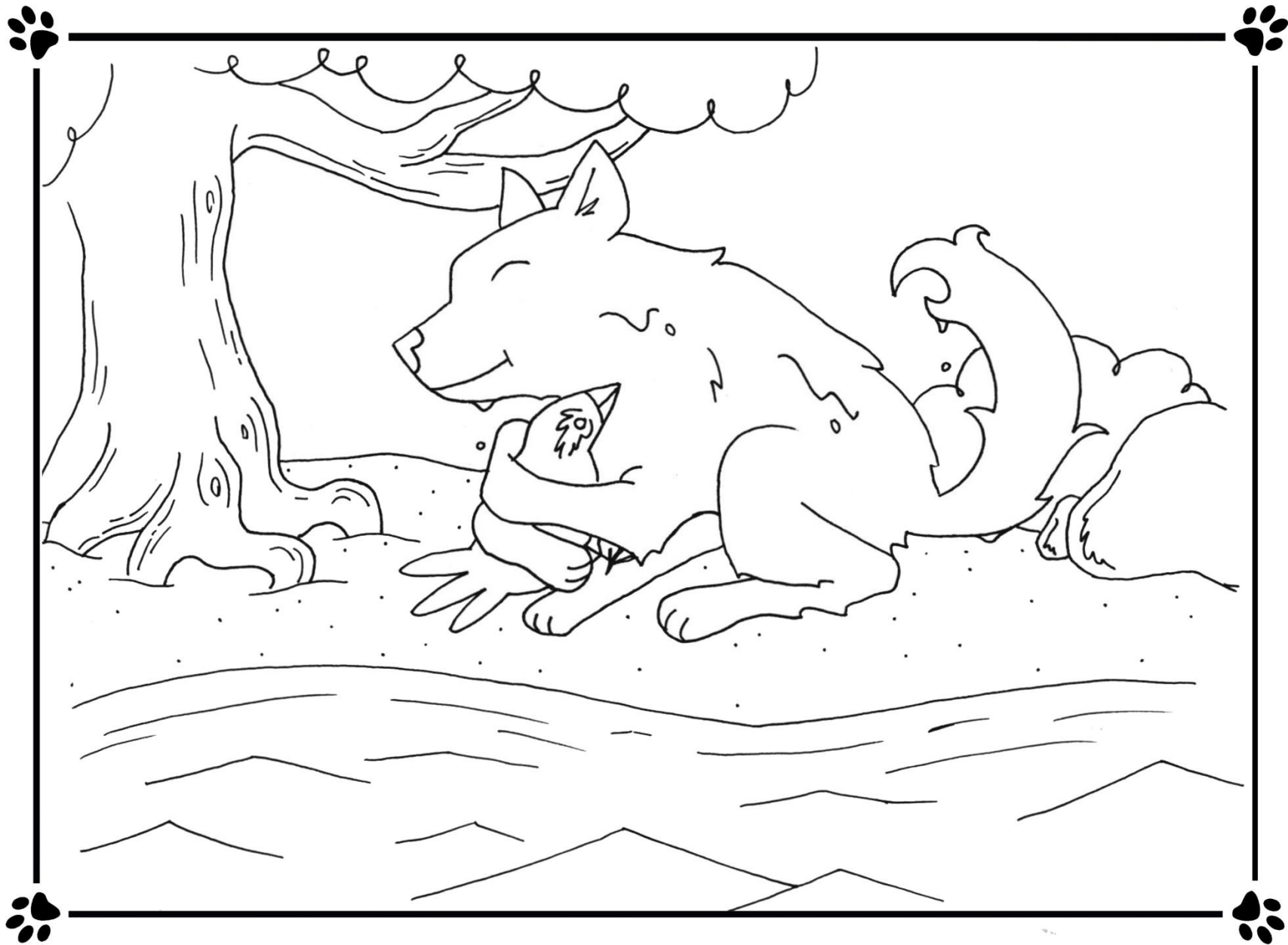
head, his tail couldn't stop wagging. He wrapped his front paws around Finchy and gave him a giant hug.

“I've never been so happy to see anyone in my life,” he said. “You may have saved my life.”

“May have?” shouted Finchy, still angry with Mo. “I totally, absolutely, definitely saved your life. From now on, I don't want to hear any more complaints about the food I find for you, that I talk too much, that I . . .

Finchy kept talking and talking while they headed toward the delivery truck. Mo climbed up the ladder and stretched out on the roof. It felt firm. It felt solid. It felt safe.

Although Finchy drives me crazy at times, there are many wonderful things about him. I just never saw what was right in front of me.



Chapter 9

Finding Florida

“Wow, look at all those computers!” shouted Finchy. “There must be hundreds, thousands, maybe millions of ‘em!”

“Shhh,” whispered Mo. “Do you want them to find us?” After a few seconds, he asked, “What’s a computer?”

“As far as I can tell, people use computers to find, get, and send stuff to each other,” said Finchy. “It may help us find Florida.”

Mo and Finchy were in a large, dimly lit room in a business complex called something Data Center. Mo didn’t catch the first name as the truck driver pulled into the parking lot.

People were busy chatting and staring at information on their computer screen. They wore long necklaces made of string that were attached to small photos of

themselves that stated their names.

Don't these people know their names or know what they look like?

Mo and Finchy hid in a corner for what seemed like forever, peering at all the information, data, maps, images, and photos on the different computer screens. There were also close-up shots of people. Finchy was convinced they had stumbled upon a secret spy ring.

“Psst,” whispered Mo to Finchy. He pointed to a computer on top of a desk in the far right corner. No one was using it or even close by. They slowly moved toward it, careful not to attract attention from the dozens of people in the room.

Mo jumped onto the chair in front of the desk, which fortunately, had a tall back to hide his white, furry body from view.

He stared at the dark computer screen. *Now what?*

Finchy flew toward the computer, landing on the desk next to the keyboard. He began pecking out a random series of letters and numbers with his beak.

Nothing happened. So he pressed more keys with different letters and numbers. Still, nothing.

“What are you doing?” asked Mo.

“The same thing everybody else is,” he said. “Hitting a bunch of keys.”

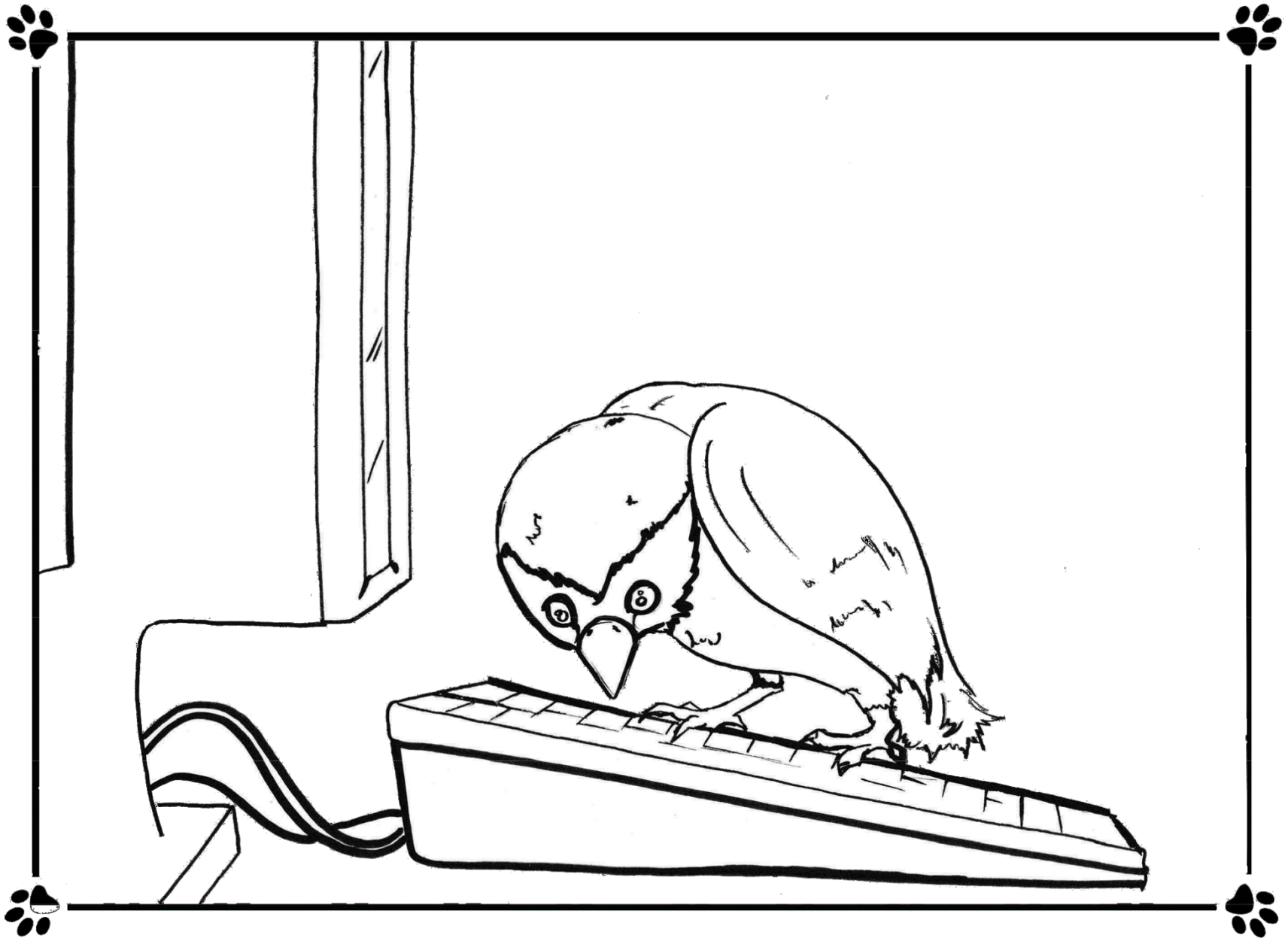
Mo realized they had to use the correct combination of keys to use the computer. But which ones?

He had an idea. Finchy could fly to the top of the tall cabinet that stood against the wall and watch which keys humans typed and in what order.

As Mo turned to Finchy to tell him, he leaned his left paw on the keyboard. Suddenly, the screen came to life, displaying a big world map.

Finchy fluttered his wings in excitement. “How’d you do that?” he asked.

Mo’s eyes grew large. “I have no idea.” He focused on the screen. “Let’s find Florida.”



With his beak, Finchy tapped out the letters that spelled the name of the state. The screen changed again, showing a red dot on a map and then lots of pictures of different people. In the background of one photo were several birds hunting for food in the grass.

Finchy pressed his left eye directly against the screen, and then sighed. “I was hoping that one of the birds was my cousin, Flo,” he said, rather disappointed.

But at least now they knew more about Florida. They learned it was a state in the southeastern part of a country called the United States of America. It had palm trees. White sandy beaches. Enormous buildings. Birds, dogs, and people, too.

Most interesting of all was that there was a chain of islands off the southern coast of Florida that had the word “keys” in its name.

Mo was convinced that the key he found back home must be valuable. Maybe it unlocked everything on the whole island.

There was just one problem. Since Mo and Finchy had no idea where they were, how would they know which way to go?

They thought about all the road signs they passed while traveling to this strange place. I-84 East. Great Salt Lake. Ogden. Still, they were clueless. Would they ever find Florida?

“Where’d you come from?” said a strange voice from behind them.

Mo leaped out of his seat. Finchy’s wings fluttered. A short, plump woman was standing next to them. They didn’t know what to say or do. Mo looked down at the floor, hoping they weren’t in trouble. The serious kind of trouble.

“Aren’t you just the cutest little things,” she said. “Hey, Jen, come here. Look what, I mean who, I found sitting in my chair.”

Suddenly, a group of people surrounded Mo and Finchy.

“They’re foreign spies,” said Jen. “Interrogate them, or better yet, throw them in jail.”

Mo and Finchy froze. They were so scared that they forgot to breathe. Then everybody started laughing and began making jokes about dogs and birds as intelligence officers.

Mo and Finchy glanced at each other. Since these humans believed animals were too dumb to use a computer, Mo and Finchy would use their ignorance to get out of this mess.

Finchy chirped and hopped around the desk. Mo wagged his tail, licking everyone's face, something he knew all humans enjoyed. He didn't think he was ever petted, patted, and praised so much in his entire life.

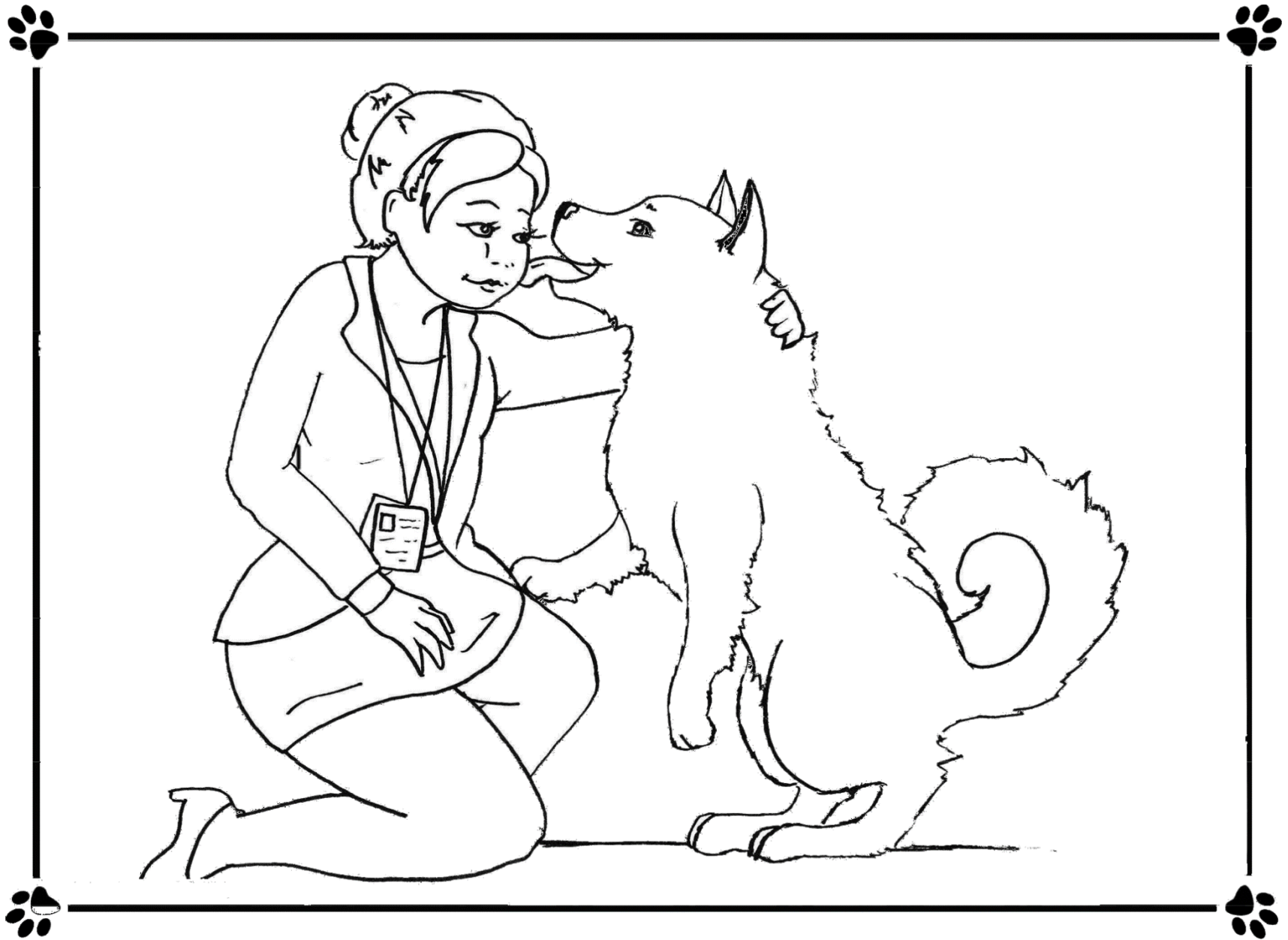
“Okay, everybody back to work,” said Jen. “I’ll escort our new friends out of the building.”

Mo and Finchy followed Jen, eager to leave. They walked through the back door, which had been propped open by the truck driver who was still delivering packages.

“Whew!” said Mo. “That was close. Really close. I thought we were going to jail!”

“Can you believe they bought our act?” said Finchy. “Are humans really that stupid? And you had to lick their yucky faces. What did they taste like?”

“Sweet,” said Mo. “Freedom always tastes sweet.”



Chapter 10

Hotel for the Furry and Feathered

“How do you get out of this place?” asked Mo.

“Maybe it’s this way, or that way,” said Finchy, a bit confused.

Mo and Finchy were lost in a huge house that no one seemed to live in.

For the last two days, they had been traveling along Interstate 94 East. Mo spotted many road signs like the ones for Moorhead, Minneapolis, and Saint Paul. But none of them mentioned anything about Florida.

It was early morning when the truck driver pulled up to a building’s loading dock to pick up hundreds of boxes. This was Mo’s chance to stretch his legs and do some serious sniffing.

Mo walked for nearly an hour, smelling every plant and bush along the way while

Finchy flew from treetop to treetop, chatting with other birds. That's when they saw it – this huge house on a street called Summit Avenue.

Mo and Finchy looked at each other in disbelief. This house looked as big as an iceberg.

“Wanna go inside?” asked Finchy. Mo eagerly nodded.

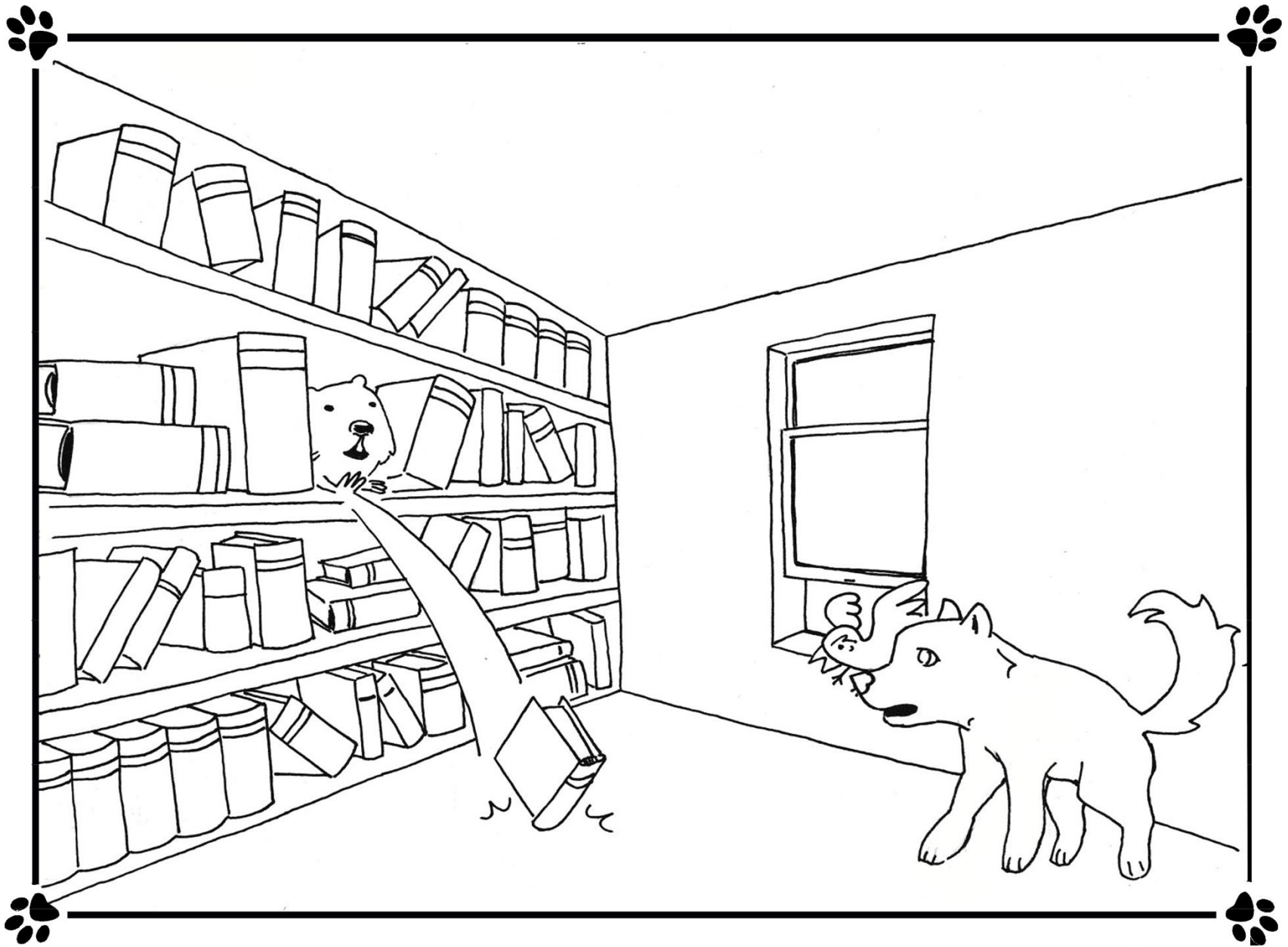
Finchy noticed that one window was slightly opened. After squeezing through the crack, he entered a large room. There were dozens, maybe even hundreds, of leather-bound books on different shelves, too many to count.

“Look at all these books,” he said to Mo, while pushing up the window so Mo could crawl inside. “Smart people must have lived here.”

Suddenly, one of the books fell off a shelf and slammed onto the floor. Mo jumped back while Finchy flew to the far end of the room.

“Didn't mean to scare you.”

A furry animal with big front teeth and a flat tail crawled out from the bookshelf.



“I’m almost finished reading this one,” said the animal, pointing to the book on the floor. “It explains how to build things. Quite fascinating.”

Mo didn’t quite know what to do or say. Neither did Finchy.

The animal walked right up to Mo. “My name is Kit,” she said. “Checked in yet?”

After introducing themselves, Mo asked, “What do you mean, checked in?”

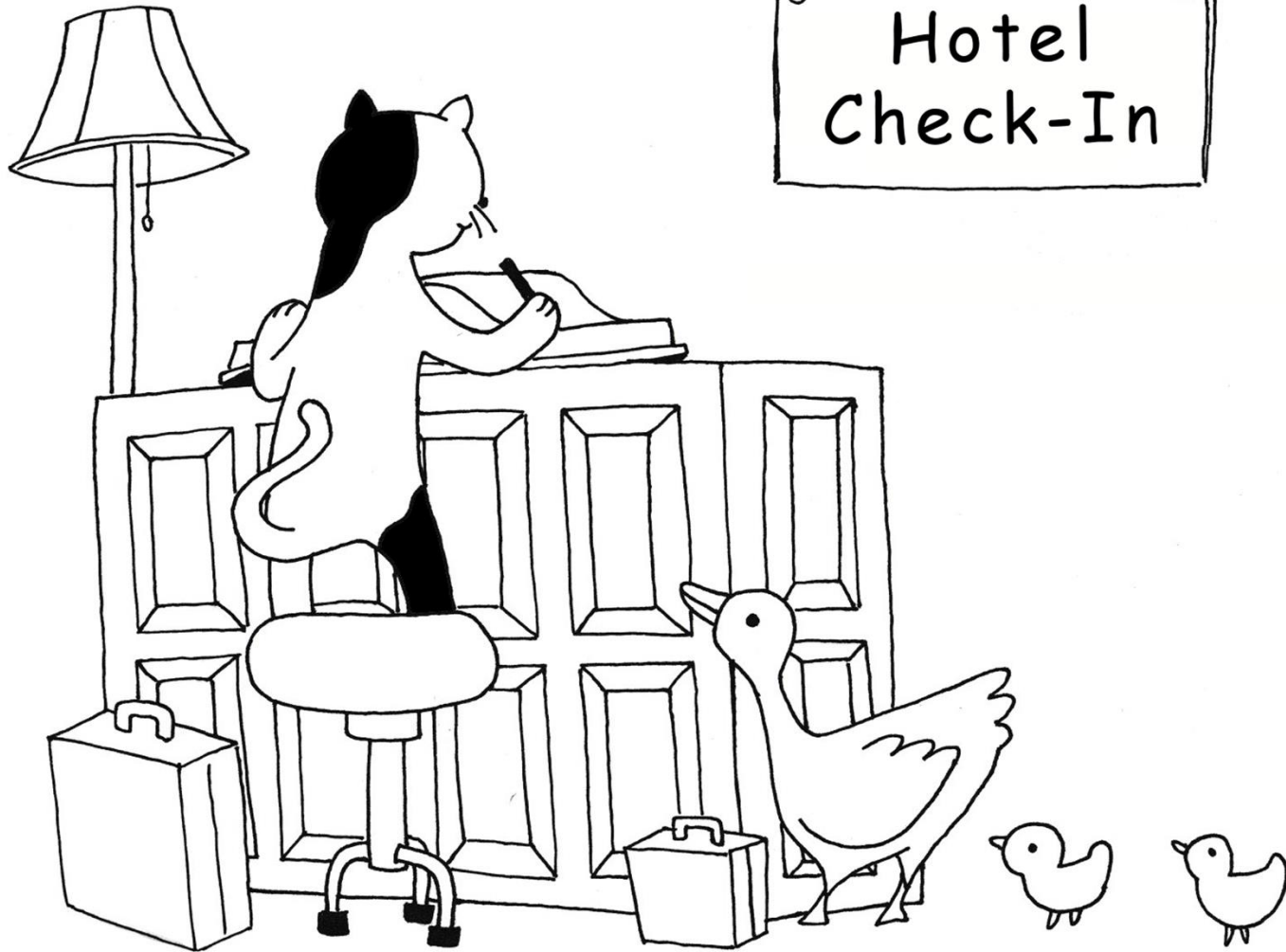
“You’re at the Hotel for the Furry and Feathered,” Kit said. “Animals from all over come here. Some rich guy and his family lived here many years ago. But no one lives here now. People tour the house almost every day. They usually wake me up. Very annoying.”

“What’s so special about this place?” asked Finchy.

“Let me show you,” said Kit, who gave them a tour of the mansion. She knew every hiding spot, the most comfortable places to take afternoon naps, the best spots to stay warm, or keep cool, and the easiest way to get in and out without anyone noticing.



Hotel
Check-In



Mo and Finchy were very impressed but couldn't figure out why people needed so many bathrooms. There were thirteen, to be exact.

“And we never have to pick up after ourselves,” Kit said, explaining that people clean the house almost daily. “We have the place all to ourselves throughout evenings and early mornings.”

Kit brought them into the dining room. “This is where we eat our meals,” she said, pointing to the floor underneath a huge table. “We share whatever we find.”

She invited Mo and Finchy to stay for brunch. But Mo politely declined, saying they were on their way to Florida.

“Do you know where Florida is or how far away it is?” asked Mo. “Maybe one of the books in the library could help us.”

Kit shrugged her shoulders.

Mo sighed. *Will I ever accomplish my mission?*

“So how many books have you read?” asked Finchy. Trying to impress Kit, he added,

“I once read a book about building nests.”

“Oh, really?” said Kit. “Excuse me for saying so but birds are stuck in the past. You’ve been using the same stuff for hundreds of years – sticks, twigs, mud, and leaves. This is the twenty-first century. Why don’t you make permanent nests out of hard materials so you don’t have to renovate or rebuild each year?”

Finchy didn’t respond. He couldn’t. He didn’t know anything about hard materials and was too embarrassed to ask.

Mo sensed how uncomfortable Finchy was and quickly changed the subject.

“So what kinds of animals stay here?” he asked.

“Hmmm.... let me think,” said Kit. “There are all kinds of birds who meet here before flying south for the winter. Badgers, bats, and bunnies have also been guests. Cats and chipmunks, too. There were a few mice but they quickly left. Too nervous about the cats. Even a porcupine stayed here once. But we asked her to leave. We kept stepping on her sharp pine quills.”

All three animals continued chatting underneath the massive dining room table about

where they lived, their families, and friends.

Mo grew homesick. It seemed forever since he had left home. He wondered if Monty the Moose was better at adding numbers by now, if Guy, the old grizzly bear, still led the forest meetings, or if Chachat, the wolf, moved his family into Mo's cave.

He missed them. Each and every one.

Mo glanced out the window and realized it was getting late.

“We better be going,” said Mo. “It was very nice meeting you. We’ll make sure to mention this hotel to everyone we talk to on our journey.”

“Everyone?” whispered Finchy to Mo as they started walking back to the delivery truck. “Not me. No way. Not ever. I’ll never mention a word about it to cats, foxes, weasels, oh, and owls. They wouldn’t think twice about eating me for lunch. Don’t you care about me? After all this time, I thought we were friends.”

Mo gently placed his paw around Finchy. “You’re my best friend,” he said. “I’ve got your back. Always and forever.”

Chapter 11

Annie, the Armadillo from Amarillo

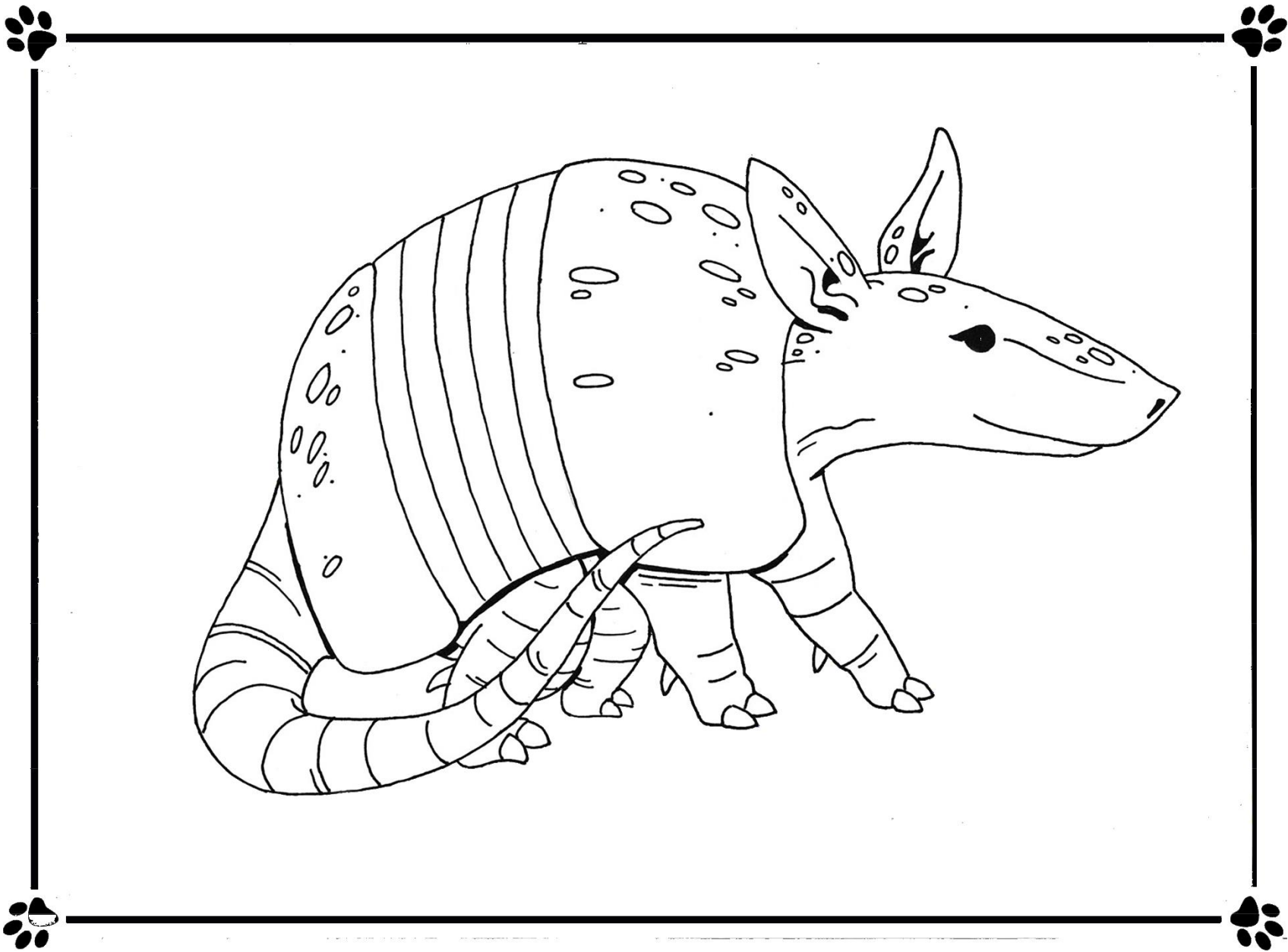
“That looks so weird,” said Mo. “Have you ever seen anything like it?”

Finchy didn’t respond. He was too busy staring at the very tall object in front of them. Was it alive? He kept poking his beak at one of its steel legs, trying to make it walk or talk. But it didn’t move or make a sound. It just stood there.

Suddenly, Finchy flapped his wings, something he did when he became excited.

“Buenos dias!” said the animal. “I’m Annie, the armadillo from Amarillo. Who are you?”

Mo and Finchy were stunned. They had never seen a creature this odd. She had a pointy snout, huge front claws and hard, little shells that covered most of her body.



“Why are you looking at me that way?” she asked. “Haven’t you ever seen an armadillo before?”

“Uh, uh...not really,” mumbled Mo, trying not to stare at her.

“Mucho gusto,” said Annie. “That means, ‘Nice to meet you’ in Spanish. Where are you from? My burrow isn’t too far from here. Have you seen any tasty beetles crawling around?”

Finchy and Mo hoped that Annie would know something about this strange object and their location. While traveling on top of the delivery truck, Mo saw highway signs for Interstate 35 South, Interstate 40 West, and Dallas, and overheard the truck driver say something about a Panhandle.

Annie told them they were in a place called Amarillo, which means yellow in Spanish. It was named yellow because of the area’s yellow wildflowers and yellowish soil near the local creek.

“Do you know if we’re near Florida?” asked Mo.

“Never heard of it,” said Annie. Then she looked up, way up, at the very tall object.

“Isn’t this the coolest thing you’ve ever seen?”

She explained that the sculpture was built in 1968, years before any of them were born, to celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of the discovery of helium gas.

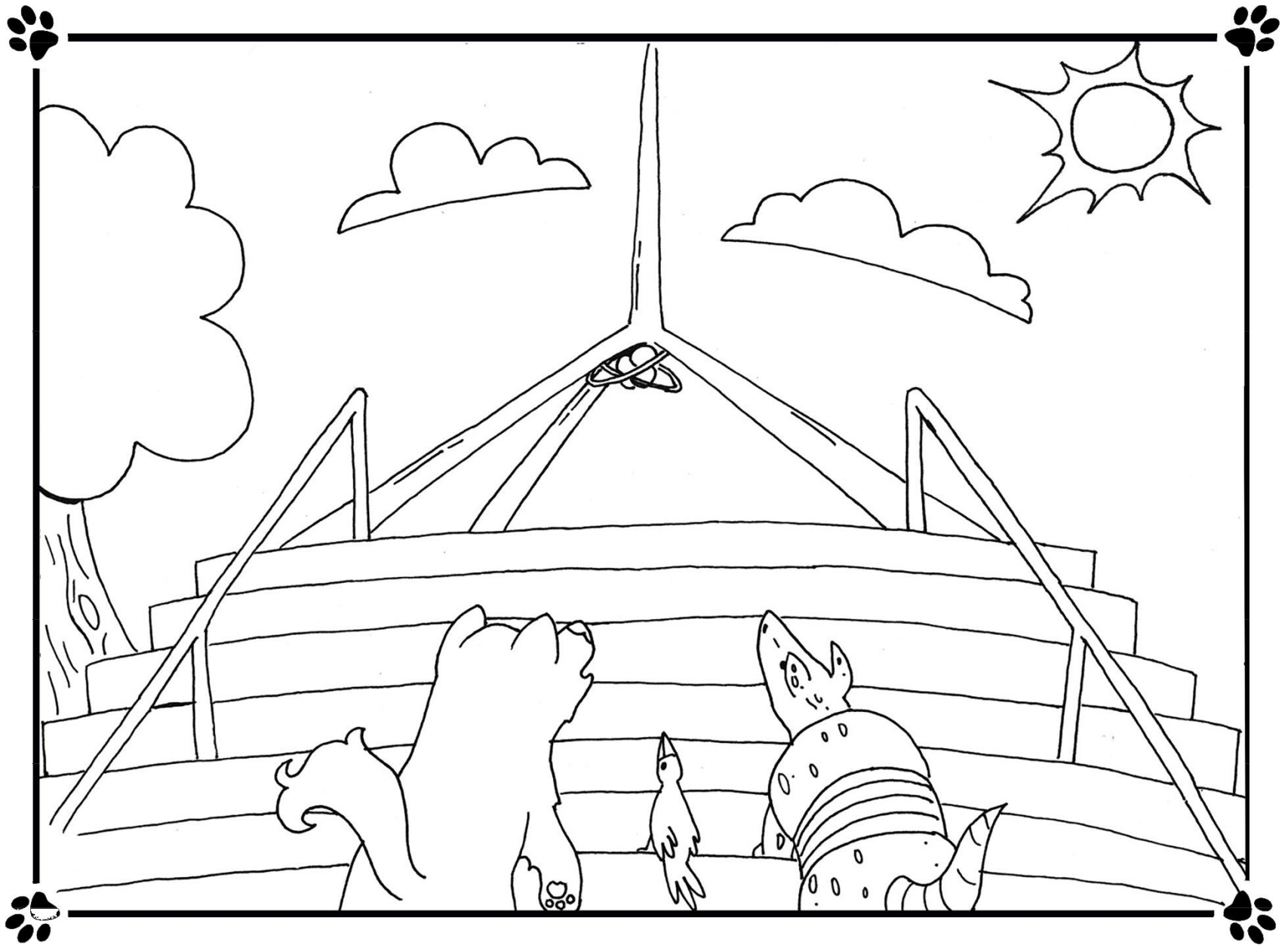
“Do you know what helium is?” she asked.

Mo and Finchy looked at each other. They had never heard of it.

Annie explained that helium is a gas used for many things. “People fill scientific balloons and birthday balloons with helium to make them float in the air,” she said. “Sometimes, they even inhale helium to make their voice sound funny.”

She said the sculpture was called the Helium Centennial Time Columns. Each of its four columns or legs is also a time capsule stuffed with information about how people lived in 1968. What did they wear back then? Did they have cell phones? What music did they like?

Annie said the next time capsule will be opened in the year 2068 and the last one in 2968.



“That’s almost one thousand years from now,” said Mo.

Will there still be tall trees in the forest back home? Will the ocean still taste salty? Who will be living in my cave?

“I heard that one of the time capsules has a passbook for a bank account with ten dollars that could be worth one-quadrillion dollars in 2968,” said Annie. “Mucho dinero. That means lots of money.”

Mo and Finchy didn’t need money. They never wore clothes, paid rent, or bought food. They didn’t even own a cell phone. But they were interested in learning Spanish.

Annie offered to teach them. But it would take many months for them to learn the language. Mo and Finchy couldn’t stay. They wouldn’t let anything interfere with their mission.

“How about teaching us one hundred words in Spanish?” asked Finchy.

“That’s an awful lot of words to learn,” said Annie. “Why don’t we start with ten. What should they be?”

Mo's eyes widened. "Only ten?" he asked. "Back home, we have one hundred different words just for snow. There are words for melted snow. Blowing snow. Slush. Night snow. Snow falling in the water. Snow on objects. Even snow that doesn't stick. How can we possibly pick ten words?"

"All I know is that popcorn must be on the list," said Finchy, telling Annie that it was his favorite food.

During the next hour, they considered many different words and picked ten that were the most important. Annie translated the words into Spanish and Mo and Finchy repeated them, over and over. They were almost done when Finchy heard the sound of the delivery truck's engine.

Feeling sad they had to leave, Mo and Finchy shouted to Annie from the top of the delivery truck, "Gracias, mi amigo," which means, 'Thank you, my friend'.

They were happy they included those words on their list.

Chapter 12

Mo Falls In Love

“Don’t ever - and I mean NEVER - tell anybody you saw me doing this,” said Mo while climbing out of a garbage dumpster, searching for food. “It would ruin my repu...”

“Psst.”

Mo’s ears pointed straight up. He turned around to see who or what was making that noise.

“Psst.”

The sound was coming from behind a bush.

“Can we catch a ride with you?” asked a black shaggy dog. “My name is Ben. My sister, Maggie, and I are going to Pahrump, same as you. I overheard your truck driver

tell the cashier that's where he's headed and that he was glad to finally get off of Interstate 40. Said something about limes?"

Mo was about to explain how a truck driver lost his cargo on the highway—thousands of limes—but then Maggie came out from behind the bush. *What beautiful brown eyes.*

“Well?” said Ben, waving his paw in front of Mo’s face. “Hellooo?”

Mo tried to answer, but he couldn’t talk. He couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t concentrate.

She’s the most beautiful animal I have ever seen.

Not knowing why Mo was acting so strange, Finchy asked, “Pahrump? What’s a Pahrump?”

Ben told them that Maggie and him were going to a city called Pahrump to hunt for buried treasure. “There’s a ton of silver out there,” Ben said. “We’re going to be rich. Filthy rich.”

Mo remained silent.

“You’ll have to excuse my friend,” said Finchy. “He . . . uh . . . has a sore throat.”

Somewhat embarrassed, Mo cleared his throat, and introduced himself and Finchy.

Ben was impatient. “We know where the silver is buried,” he boasted. “Some guy in Las Vegas buried a bunch of it on his ranch in Pahrump. I know a dog who knows a horse who knows a bird who knows a cat who watched him bury it. I have the exact location.”

Mo wondered if the silver was so valuable, why didn’t the dog, horse, bird, or cat dig it up by now?

“Oh, please let us come with you,” pleaded Maggie. “You’d have lots of money and never have to climb into a garbage dumpster again.”

Mo’s furry, white face turned red.

They struck a deal. Ben and Maggie would ride to Pahrump on top of the delivery truck with Mo and Finchy who would help them dig for the buried treasure. In

exchange, Ben and Maggie would give them a portion of the silver. But Mo didn't care about the silver. He just wanted to be next to Maggie.

They sat on top of the delivery truck for more than an hour along a state road called SR 160 and drove along a mountain pass called the Mountain Springs Summit. The weather turned cooler. Except for watching the sun set in the western sky, the ride to Pahrump was boring for everyone but Mo. He was in love.

The truck driver pulled off the highway and stopped at a motel for the night. Mo and Finchy knew they had many hours before they needed to return.

“So where's this ranch?” asked Finchy.

Ben guided them through the desert before finding the ranch. They crawled under a barbed wire fence and headed toward the house off in the distance.

Ben counted every step. “Fifty-three, fifty-four . . .” When he reached fifty-nine, he stopped, pulled out shovels from his suitcase, and told everyone to start digging.

They dug for two hours under a full moon. No silver. “Maybe it was seventy-nine steps,” he said. He recounted his steps. They dug some more. Still, no silver.



Mo was physically exhausted. He climbed out of his hole and looked around. He spotted two large holes off in the distance near the front of the house. “Look,” he shouted,” pointing to the holes.

Ben ran toward them.

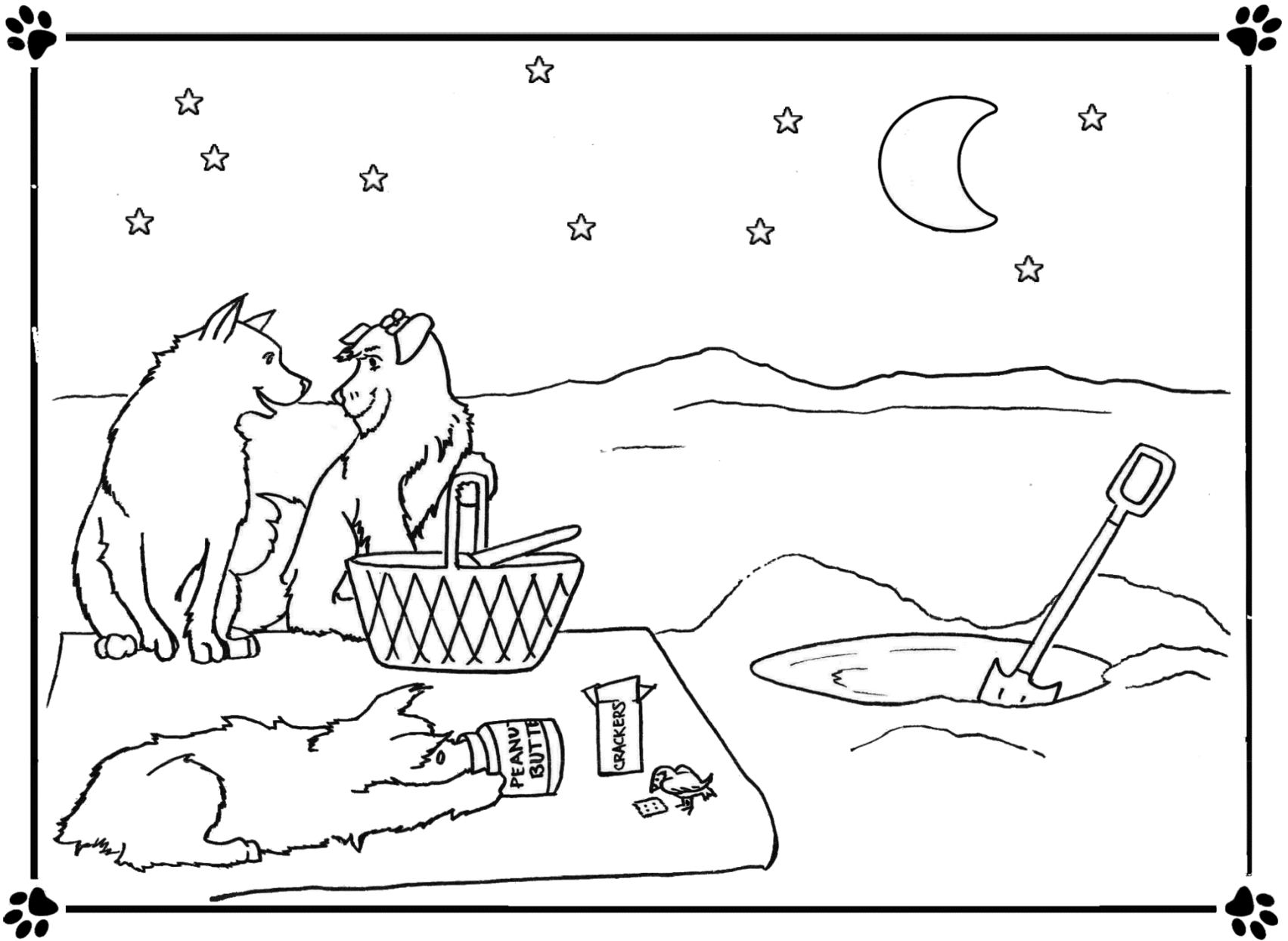
“Dagnabbit!” he shouted. “We’re too late. I’ll bet the cat gave me wrong directions to throw me off course. She told me she didn’t care about silver. Ha! Should have never trusted her.”

He sank to the ground with his head hung low. Mo placed his paw on Ben’s shoulder to comfort him and then turned toward Maggie. She opened her suitcase and pulled out a picnic blanket along with crackers, cheese, peanut butter, and bottled water.

Without asking, Finchy tore open a box of small crackers and popped one in his mouth.

“Please excuse my friend,” said Mo who wanted Maggie to think that Finchy and him had good manners. “It’s been a long time since we’ve eaten anything.”

“Manners, schmanners,” said Ben. “Who needs ‘em?”



As Mo and Finchy stuffed themselves, they listened to Ben's story about the man who owned the silver.

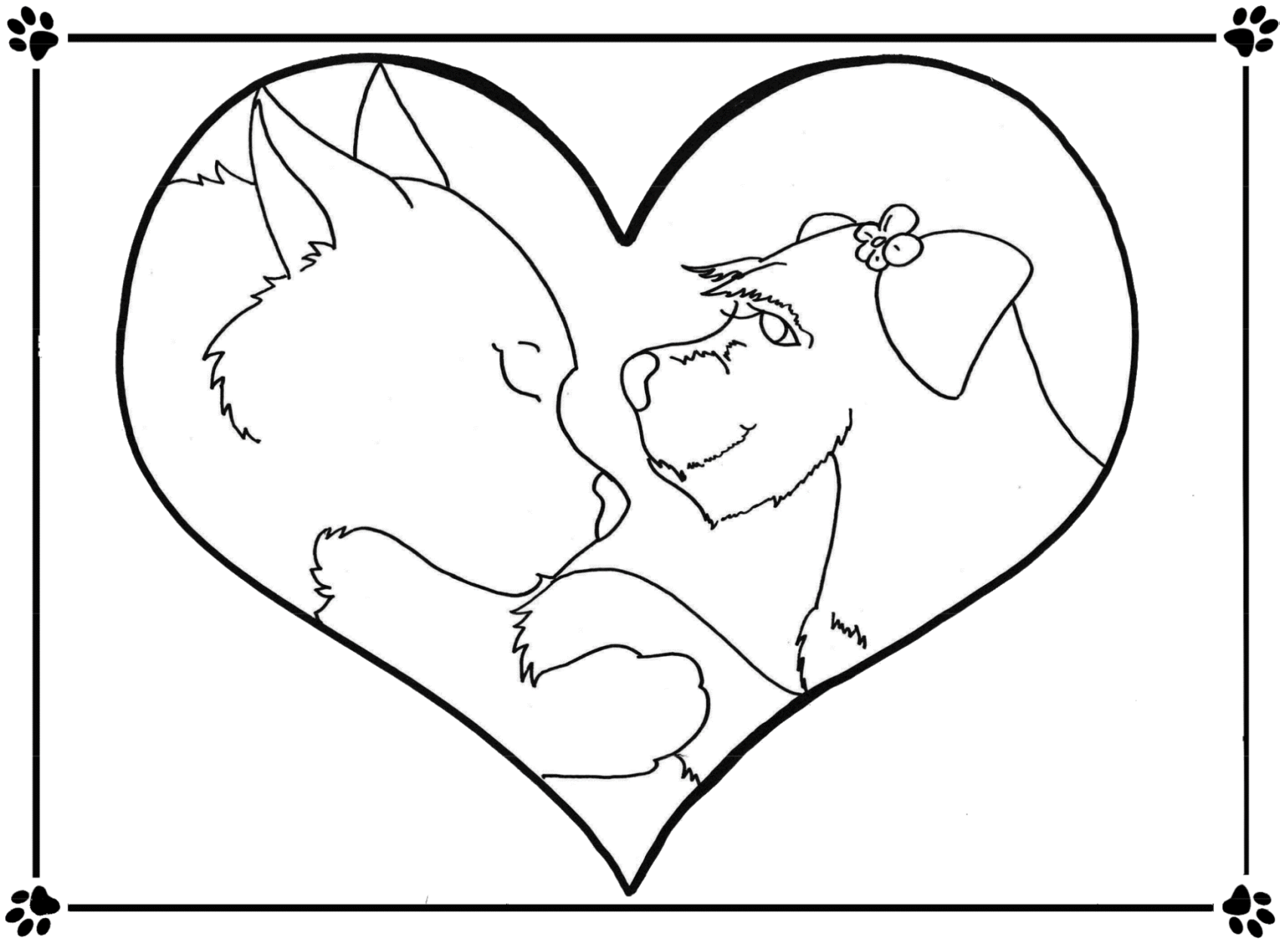
“This guy stored millions of dollars in silver in a vault. To protect it from greedy people, he moved it to this ranch. Then he died. Or maybe he was murdered. Anyway, the silver was never found.”

It was almost sunrise. Mo and Finchy had to return to the truck. Maggie and Ben decided to stay and search for the cat who gave them wrong information.

Mo pulled Maggie to the side.

“I wish I could stay,” he said. “But I made a promise to everyone back home. I have to find the owner of this key and keychain.”

He gently kissed Maggie's paw and said goodbye. He didn't know if he would ever meet anybody that would make him feel this way again.



Chapter 13

The World's Best Apple Pie

“Mo, look at those people,” whispered Finchy. “Why are they dressed that way?”

Mo and Finchy were hiding in a large barn made of stone and wood. As they peered out the door, they overheard several women chatting.

Although it was a hot summer day, the women were wearing long skirts, aprons, long-sleeved blouses, and bonnets while carrying baskets filled with apples. One man approached them and started talking about his family. Mo and Finchy couldn't take their eyes off his strange hat.

“This place is very weird,” said Finchy. “I wonder where we are.”

All Mo could remember was that the delivery truck they were riding on traveled along Interstate 80 East for more than two days, veered off State Highway 67, and then headed toward a town named Eagle.

“This is going to be a very busy day,” said one woman. “I’ll bet we set a new attendance record.”

Mo and Finchy looked at each other, a bit confused. Why would so many people want to come here?

“Mo, I think we’re in the 1800s,” said Finchy, pointing to a group of people not far from where they were hiding.

Some were taking turns chopping wood while others were washing clothes using a washboard on top of a wooden barrel. Off in the distance, a big horse was plowing a field.

“We must have gone through some sort of time machine when we were sleeping,” said Finchy. “Think of all the things we know that they don’t. We’ll be famous.”

Finchy was too busy daydreaming to notice what the people were wearing – shorts, T-shirts, and flip-flops – or the cars in the nearby parking lot. Most of the license plates had the same words on them: America’s Dairyland.

One woman’s voice rose above the rest.

“Next time, listen to me,” she angrily said to the man walking next to her. “This place is less than an hour past Milwaukee. You drove too far south, all the way down to Elkhorn.”

This woman seems to know directions. Maybe she can tell Finchy and me how to get to Florida.

Suddenly, Mo and Finchy heard a voice behind them say, “Guten morgen.”

They turned around and saw a strange looking animal.

Mo and Finchy had never seen a pig. They stared at her pink snout, barrel-shaped body, and curly tail.

“That means good morning in German,” said the pig. “My name is Betsy.”

Mo and Finchy introduced themselves and learned that they were at an outdoor museum that imitates life in the 1800s.

Finchy rattled off a series of questions: “What kinds of birds lived back then? Did they look like me? Did they speak German? Did they eat worms, maybe wild worms?”

Finchy just kept asking question after question until Betsy interrupted, asking if they were hungry.

“My friends and I are going to make an apple pie,” she said. “Wanna help?”

Mo’s stomach was growling. He never tasted an apple pie but it sounded delicious.

The animals walked to the back of the farm and entered a small building. A big wood-burning oven was in the far right corner along with dozens of apples, big bags of sugar, flour, and cinnamon, and many cackling hens.

A very large hen named Buttercup walked toward Betsy.

“Molly, Edna, Charlotte, and I laid six eggs for you,” said Buttercup, pointing with her right claw to the eggs. Princess over there, well, she just didn’t feel like it.”

“Ever lay an egg?” shouted Princess. “Didn’t think so. It hurts. Well, maybe not, but it’s definitely uncomfortable. So why I should keep doing it?” She lifted her beak into the air and walked out.

“Don’t mind Princess,” said Buttercup. “She’s in a rather fowl mood. Edna laid an egg

yesterday that was a beautiful shade of purple. Princess is just jealous.”

After Betsy thanked them, the hens left, and the animals began making the pie. They grabbed the eggs with their mouths and dropped them into a giant baking pan. If they didn't crack open, they stomped on them. Even Finchy helped by lifting bags of flour, sugar, and cinnamon into the air, and then dumping them into the pan.

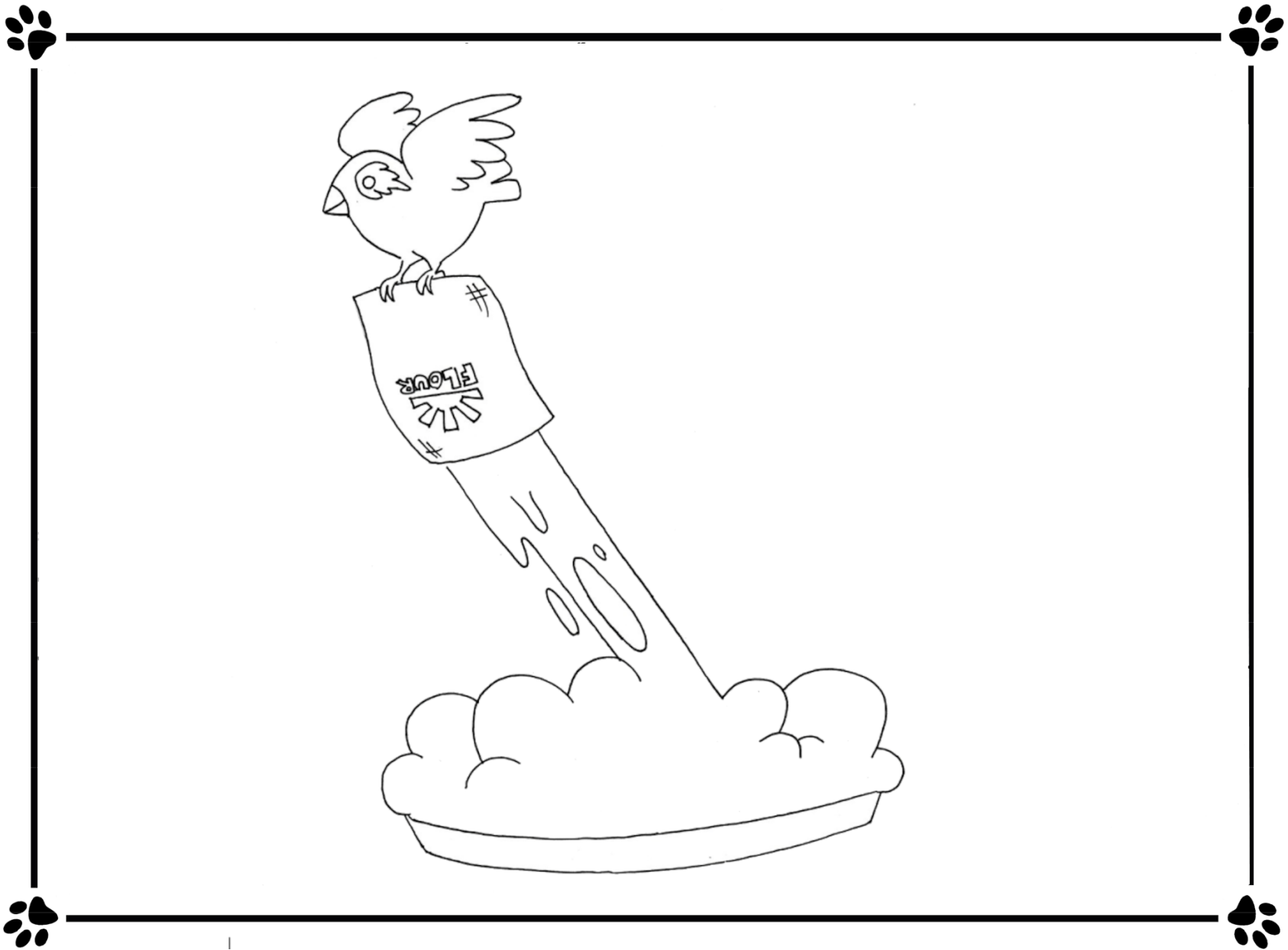
Everyone mixed the ingredients by walking around in circles inside the pan. They did it so many times that Mo started to get dizzy.

“That's the secret to flaky dough,” said Betsy. “It must be thoroughly mixed.”

The animals smoothed the dough by rolling around on top of it. No one seemed to mind if there were a few strands of hair or fur here or there.

Next came the apples. They bit them into small chunks and dropped them into the pan. Then they each held a section of dough with their teeth and folded it over the apples.

Betsy stepped back to admire the pie. “Masterpiece, simply a masterpiece,” she said.



“Our pie is ready to bake.”

While the pie was in the oven, Betsy explained to Mo and Finchy how people prepared food in the 1800s.

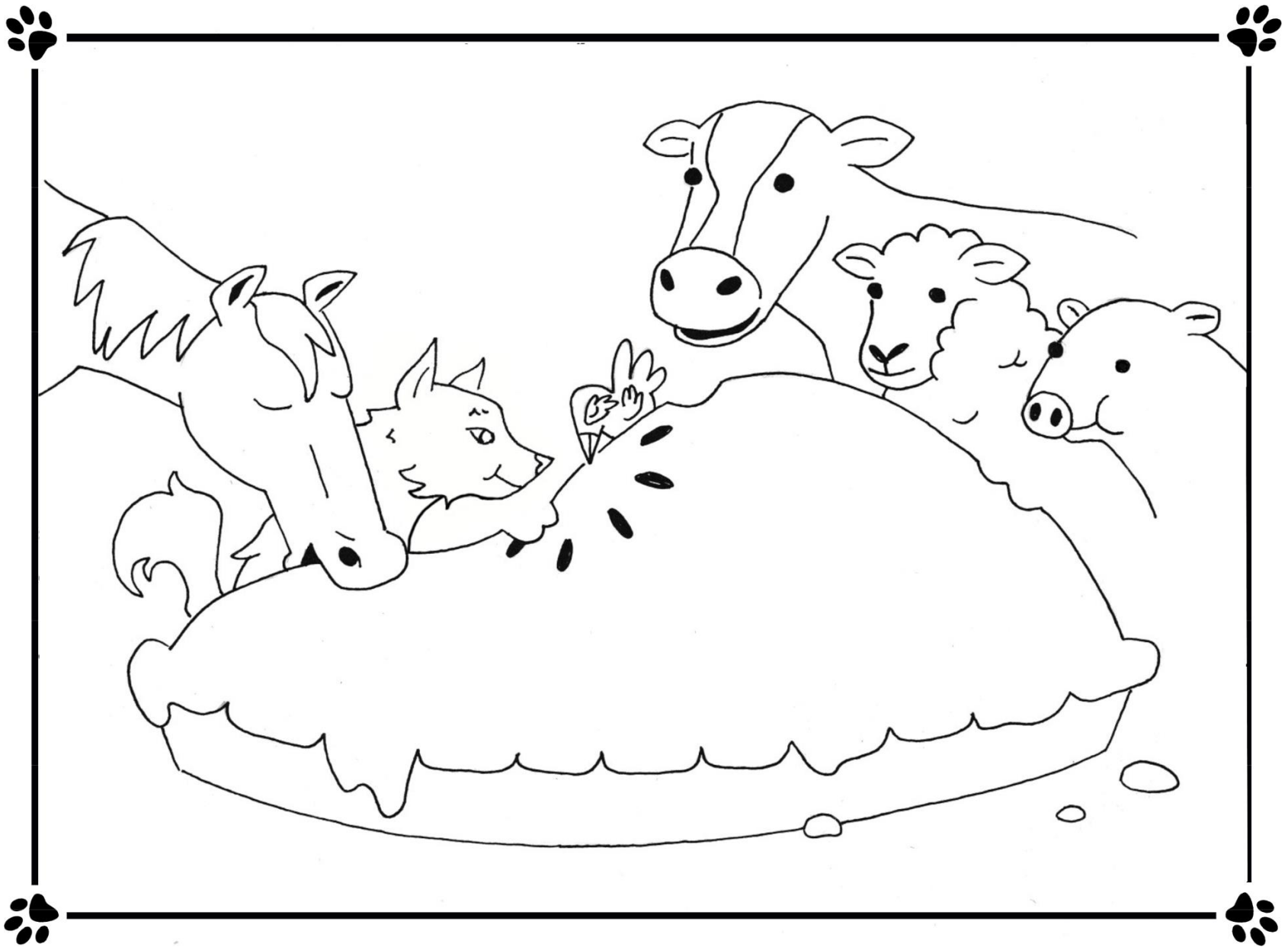
“They didn’t have any stoves or refrigerators,” she said. “Not even microwaves. There was no electricity, no supermarkets, not even fast food restaurants. In those days, most food was smoked, salted, or dried.”

Betsy opened a bottle of wine from her private collection and poured it into bowls for everyone.

“Back then, they thought chocolate was medicine,” she added. “They believed it would calm people down and prevent stomachaches.”

By now, everyone could smell the pie’s delicious aroma, including Daisy, a cow, and Ed, a horse, who joined them. Earlier that morning, they had dragged the bags of flour, sugar, and cinnamon into the building.

The pie was barely pulled out of the oven when Finchy grabbed the first bite. None of the animals stopped eating until the entire pie was finished. Then it was nap time.



When they woke up, it was time for Mo and Finchy to leave. Betsy gave them a goodbye gift – a few slices of cheese. Mo had never eaten cheese or seen such a beautiful shade of orange.

“Everyone in the world knows we make the best cheese,” said Betsy.

After saying good-bye, Mo and Finchy slowly headed back to the delivery truck. Mo’s stomach was so stuffed with apple pie that it almost touched the ground.

When they reached the top of the truck, Mo laid on his back and stared at the sky, deep in thought. Finchy began nibbling on some cheese.

“Ya know, it’s pretty amazing what happened back there,” said Mo.

“What’s so amazing about stuffing our faces?” asked Finchy.

“A pig, sheep, cow, dog, bird, horse, and hens made an apple pie,” continued Mo.

“Maybe the most enormous, the most delicious apple pie in the whole world. If everyone worked together like that, just think of all the wonderful things that could be accomplished.”

Chapter 14

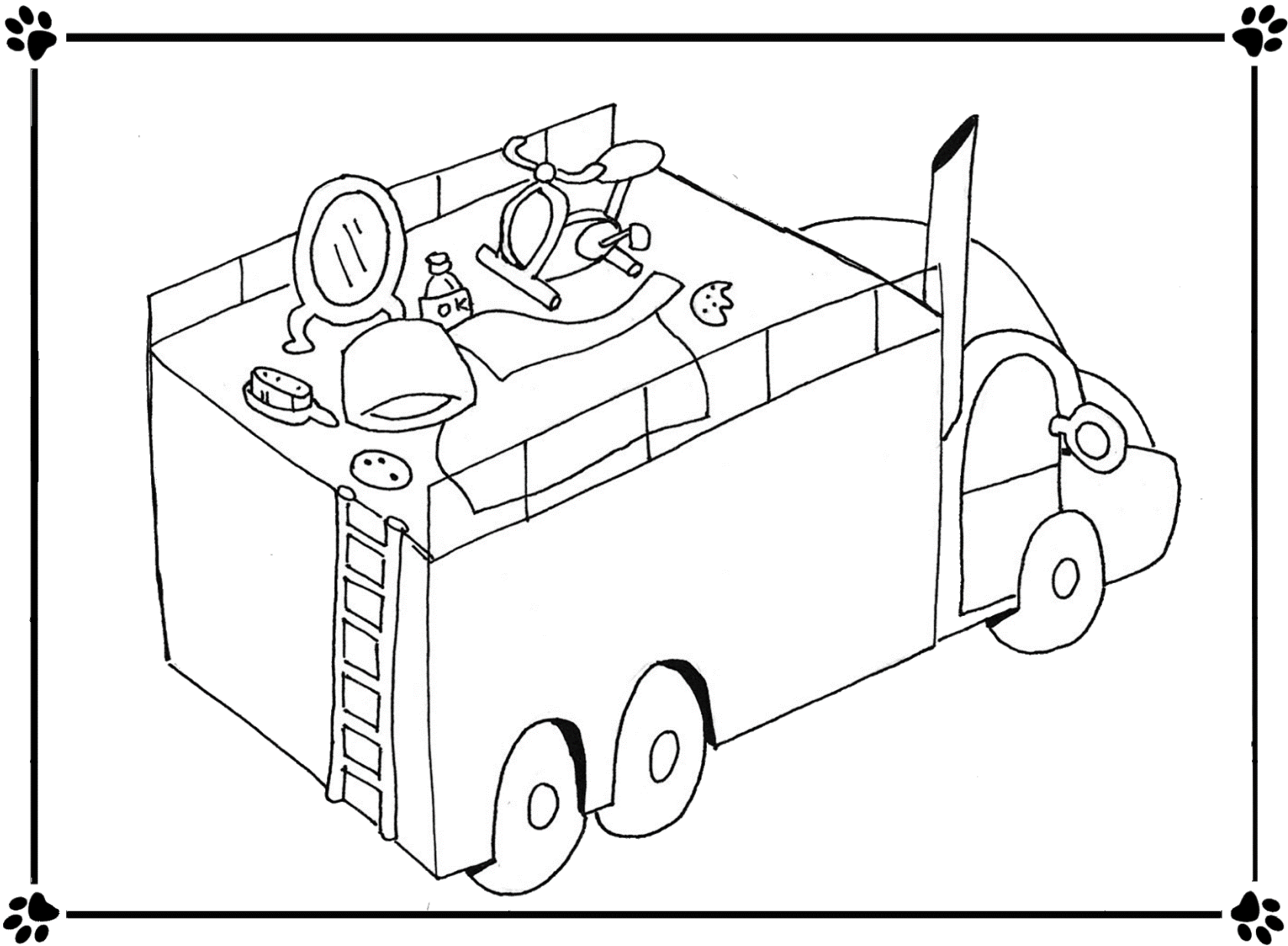
Enchanted Highway

“Are those real?” asked Finchy, pointing to the biggest flock of geese he had ever seen.

Mo couldn't take his eyes off the birds. The ten geese formed a circle high in the sky but were perfectly still.

By now, Mo and Finchy considered the top of the delivery truck their home. Mo had stored a blanket on the roof to keep himself warm at night along with a pillow, an exercise bike, a few snacks, and a brush and mirror, just in case.

This morning, while traveling along Interstate 94 West, another truck driver was following them. Both trucks then veered off exit 72, traveling south on a county highway between Gladstone and Regent.



The truck drivers pulled off the road to stretch their legs. Finchy flew near them to hear what they were saying. Maybe they could explain why the giant geese seemed frozen in the air.

“Look at the size of this thing,” said one truck driver to the other. “It must be at least ten stories high.”

“It’s actually eleven stories or one hundred and ten feet high,” said a strange voice.

Finchy turned around. Another bird was standing behind him.

“Bet you’ve never seen anything like this before,” said the sparrow, who then introduced himself as Clyde.

Finchy nodded his head in agreement. “What is it?”

“It’s a metal sculpture called, Geese In Flight,” he said. “It may be the biggest outdoor sculpture in the whole wide world. There are more giant sculptures further down this road that’s called the Enchanted Highway.”

“What are the sculptures for?” asked Finchy.

“To admire,” said Clyde. “Don’t you know anything about art?”

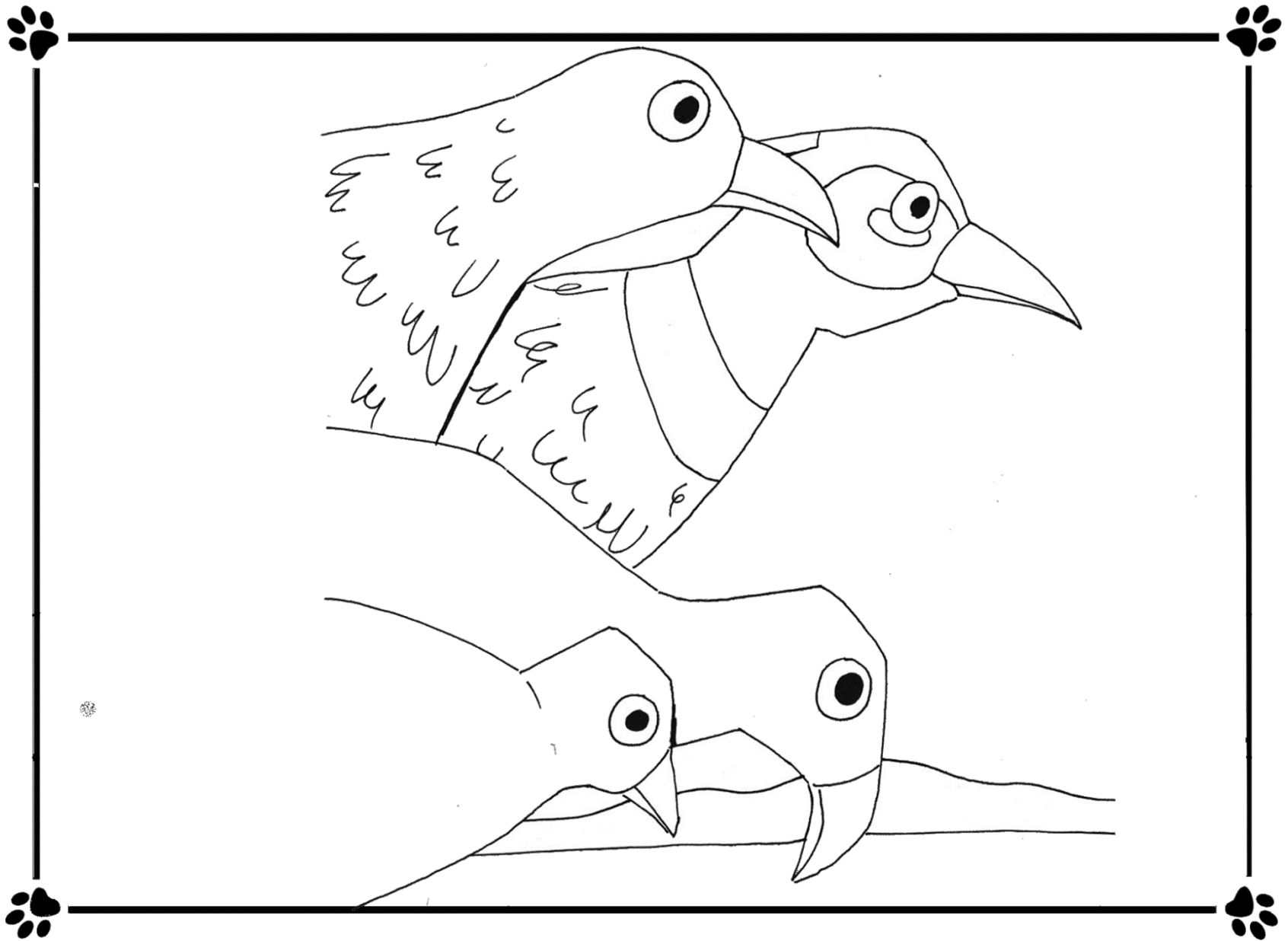
Finchy ignored his snobbish remark and poked one of the metal birds with his beak. No reaction. So he flew to two more birds and poked them. Neither one moved or made a sound. Clyde was right. None of the birds were real.

“Told ya,” said Clyde who had flown after him. “People from all over the country come to see these magnificent sculptures.”

Finchy introduced Clyde to Mo who was riding his exercise bike. Clyde told them that a retired teacher who also was a metal sculptor created the art pieces many years ago. He was hoping they would attract more people to visit or live in Regent, his hometown, which was at the other end of the highway.

During the next hour, they drove past six more gigantic sculptures of deer, scary-looking grasshoppers, fish, pheasants hunting for food, Teddy Roosevelt – this country’s twenty-sixth president – and lastly, the Tin Family – a mother, father, and their son with a propeller on his head.

“The artist is really making the world a better place to live,” said Clyde.



“How so?” asked Mo.

“He made these statutes from scrap metal that he got from local farmers,” Clyde explained. “Instead of the farmers throwing the metal in the garbage where it would sit on a gigantic junk pile somewhere, it was put to good use. Everybody enjoys looking at his art. It even put a smile on your face.”

Clyde said goodbye and flew back to his friends who had gathered on top of one of the giant pheasants, arguing over which one caught the biggest worm.

Mo and Finchy began wondering how they were making the world a better place.

“Can you draw or paint?” asked Finchy.

“Not really,” said Mo. “Can you teach?”

Finchy shook his head back and forth. After several minutes, they realized that neither of them could cook, manage, write, dance, analyze, fix, build, or cure anything.

They sat there with their heads hanging low. The signs along the highway became

one giant blur.

Then Mo looked at Finchy with a smile on his face that was almost as big as the sculptures.

“I know what we’re good at,” he said to Finchy. “We’re nice and like to help others. We left our family and friends to return this key and keychain to the person who lost it.”

Finchy perked up. “That’s right!” he said. “We are nice. And we share. We’re honest. We’re friendly. We learn. We listen. Well, at least most of the time. And besides, we’re adorable.”

Mo laughed. “I don’t think that counts.”

“Of course it does,” Finchy said. “How many times do people smile at us because we’re simply adorable?”

“People wouldn’t think we were so adorable if we weren’t so nice,” said Mo.

Chapter 15

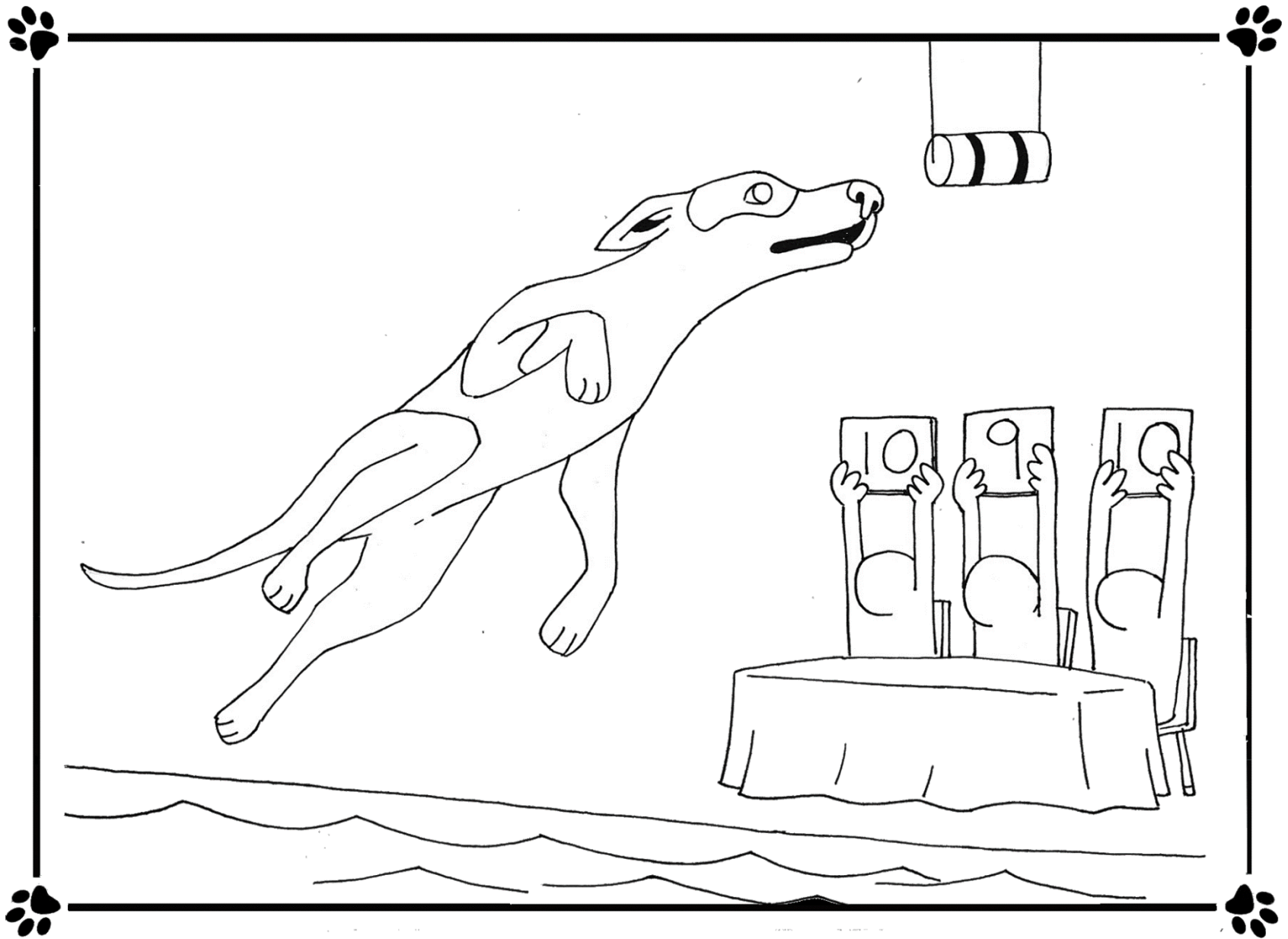
Finchy Teaches Mo a Lesson

Buddy ran very fast and then jumped as far as he could into the pool. A handful of people clapped and cheered the dog's name.

"I don't understand," whispered Finchy to Mo. "Why are people clapping? Dogs jump and swim all the time. What's the big deal?"

A few minutes earlier, Mo had heard several people talking about these very cool sport competitions for dogs. The first was the long jump – which dog could jump the farthest distance into the pool. Next came the high jump – which dog could jump the highest. The last contest was a swim race.

"Look at all the people who came here to watch," said Mo, grateful that he blended into the crowd, which included just as many dogs as people. "I wonder if we're at the Summer Olympics."



But while traveling on top of the delivery truck, Mo saw signs for SD Highway 79 South, Sturgis, Black Hills National Forest, and something else that he never heard of – Mount Rushmore National Memorial. Not one mentioned anything about the Olympics, an event that attracts athletes from all over the world who compete in more than thirty sports.

Still, Mo was very excited to see so many dogs. It reminded him of summers back home when all the forest animals competed in different sports, such as who could climb the farthest and fastest, sniff the best by naming all the ingredients in a prepared dish, or dig the deepest hole within five minutes.

Finchy, however, was bored. He took off, flying high into the air to see why there were so many people walking around. There seemed to be hundreds, maybe even thousands. Why were they here? What were they doing?

Mo watched the rest of the dogs compete. He clapped and cheered for every dog, no matter how they performed.

“C’mon, let’s go,” said Finchy when he returned. “I’m hungry. The trash cans around here are overflowing with food.”

They walked along Main Street. There were big banners everywhere with the words, “Wild Bill Days.”

Neither Finchy nor Mo knew anyone named Wild Bill, William, or even Bill. Who was he? Where was he? What was all the fuss about?

On the left side of the street, people were signing up to play Make Ten, a card game. Mo loved all types of games, especially this one where players try to find as many combinations of cards in their hand that equal ten by using addition and subtraction. He walked to the back of the line when a dog started barking at him, motioning with his paw for Mo to come over.

“People won’t play cards with animals,” said the dog, who introduced himself as Charlie. “Probably because we’re so much better than they are. We formed our own group of card players. No humans allowed. Why don’t you join us?”

Mo eagerly nodded and thanked him for the invitation.

“But I’ve got to warn you,” said Charlie. “Ken is playing today. He’s the best card player ever. And the nicest. Even when he wins, which is most of the time, he still makes you feel good about trying your best.”

Back home, Mo won the Make Ten championship every year for the past five years. He spent many long, harsh winters playing the game with his animal friends. He doubted anyone, anywhere, could ever beat him.

Mo and Finchy followed Charlie to a small grassy area that was surrounded by bushes. Several dogs were sitting on the grass, eating pizza, hot dogs, and hot pretzels.

Charlie introduced them to Mo and Finchy.

“Nice to meet you,” said Ken. “There’s plenty of food. Why don’t you join us for lunch? Can’t play on an empty stomach.”

Mo and Finchy ate everything in sight, stuffing themselves until they could barely breathe. Mo carefully listened to what everyone was saying, hoping that he would find out more information about Ken.

He’s a real nice guy but is he a better card player than me?

Ken was very good at playing cards because he was very good at math. He could quickly add, subtract, and even multiply really big numbers in his head.

Mo knew math was important. Everywhere he went, people and animals used it. He remembered Ben had to count his steps before digging for buried silver. The cashier at the gift shop at Chaco Culture National Park used math when giving customers their change. Even astronomers at Kitt Peak National Observatory used math to figure out how far planets and stars were from the Earth.

Now it was time for Mo to test his skills. After lunch, the dogs formed a circle. Charlie dealt everyone five cards.

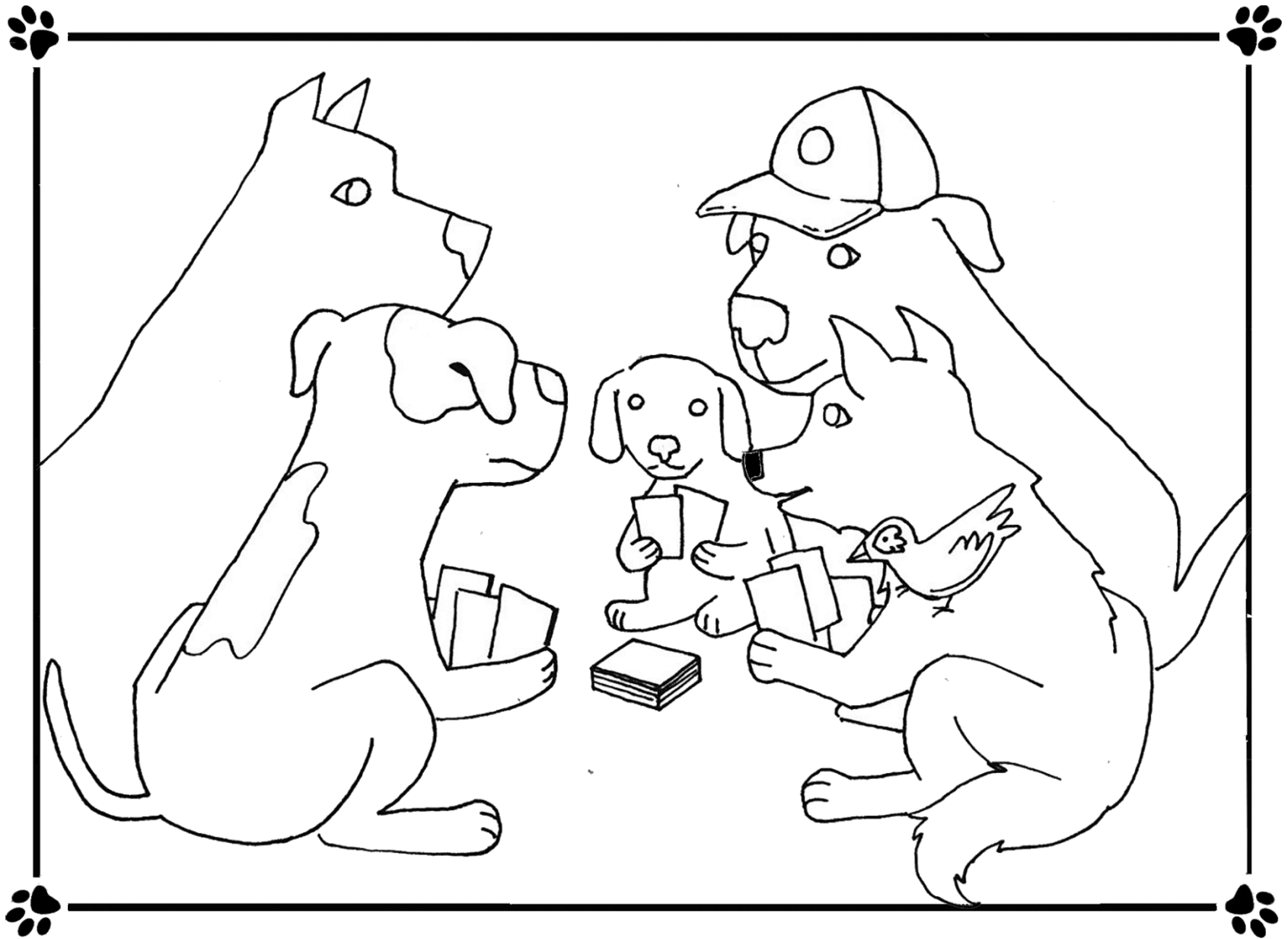
“Oh look,” said Finchy, who glanced at Mo’s cards. “These two cards add up to ten and so do these three cards minus that one.”

The other dogs threw their cards into a pile in the middle of the circle.

“You can’t help Mo,” said Charlie. “That’s cheating.”

Mo’s furry white face turned bright red with embarrassment. He gave Finchy a stern look.

“Sorry,” mumbled Finchy.



The dogs played throughout the afternoon. They talked about many things, including Wild Bill Hickock, who was a famous soldier, spy, outlaw, sheriff, actor, and even card-player in the 1800s.

“Everybody from Deadwood to the Badlands knew who he was,” said a dog named Cooper. He then began complaining about his grumpy cousin while Duke and Ace, who were usually friendly dogs, started fighting over the last piece of pizza. Charlie just rolled his eyes and asked Mo and Finchy if they had ever heard of Mount Rushmore.

“What’s that?” asked Mo, remembering the sign he saw along the highway.

Charlie explained that it was a huge sculpture carved into the side of a mountain in the Black Hills, about one hour south from where they were now. It took fourteen years to complete and shows the faces of four US presidents – George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt.

“Are there any carvings of dogs?” asked Mo.

Charlie shook his head back and forth. “Not one,” he said. “Tragic, simply tragic. People pet us, feed us, walk us, bathe us, train us, play with us, and strange ones

dress us up, but no one gives us credit for the important things we do.”

The dogs nodded in agreement.

By now, Mo had lost many more hands than he had won. His ears fell flat against his face. He had to admit that Ken really was the better card player. By swallowing his pride and thanking Ken for teaching him a few math tricks, Mo showed the other dogs that he was a good sport.

After leaving, Finchy tried to cheer him up.

“Mo, you can’t be great at everything,” Finchy said. “But you are great at being my friend. To me, that’s better than winning any game.”

Chapter 16

What Courage Looks Like

Mo was hiding in a restaurant kitchen, watching a man who was wearing a tall white hat fry a hamburger.

Mo's stomach was growling. His nose was twitching. His mouth was watering.

“Hey Jack, your hamburgers are on the counter,” shouted the man before leaving the kitchen.

I'm so hungry. If I took just one hamburger, would that be stealing?

Mo decided he wouldn't be stealing if he left Jack a note saying that he was very hungry and would mail him another hamburger as soon as he had the chance.

Besides, the room was filled with all kinds of food that people, not dogs, enjoy. Mo spotted oatmeal, bananas, salad, bags of this and bags of that on several different

counters. He knew that Jack wouldn't go hungry.

Mo scribbled his note and placed it on the counter. Then he opened his mouth very wide, grabbed one hamburger off the plate, and ran out the door.

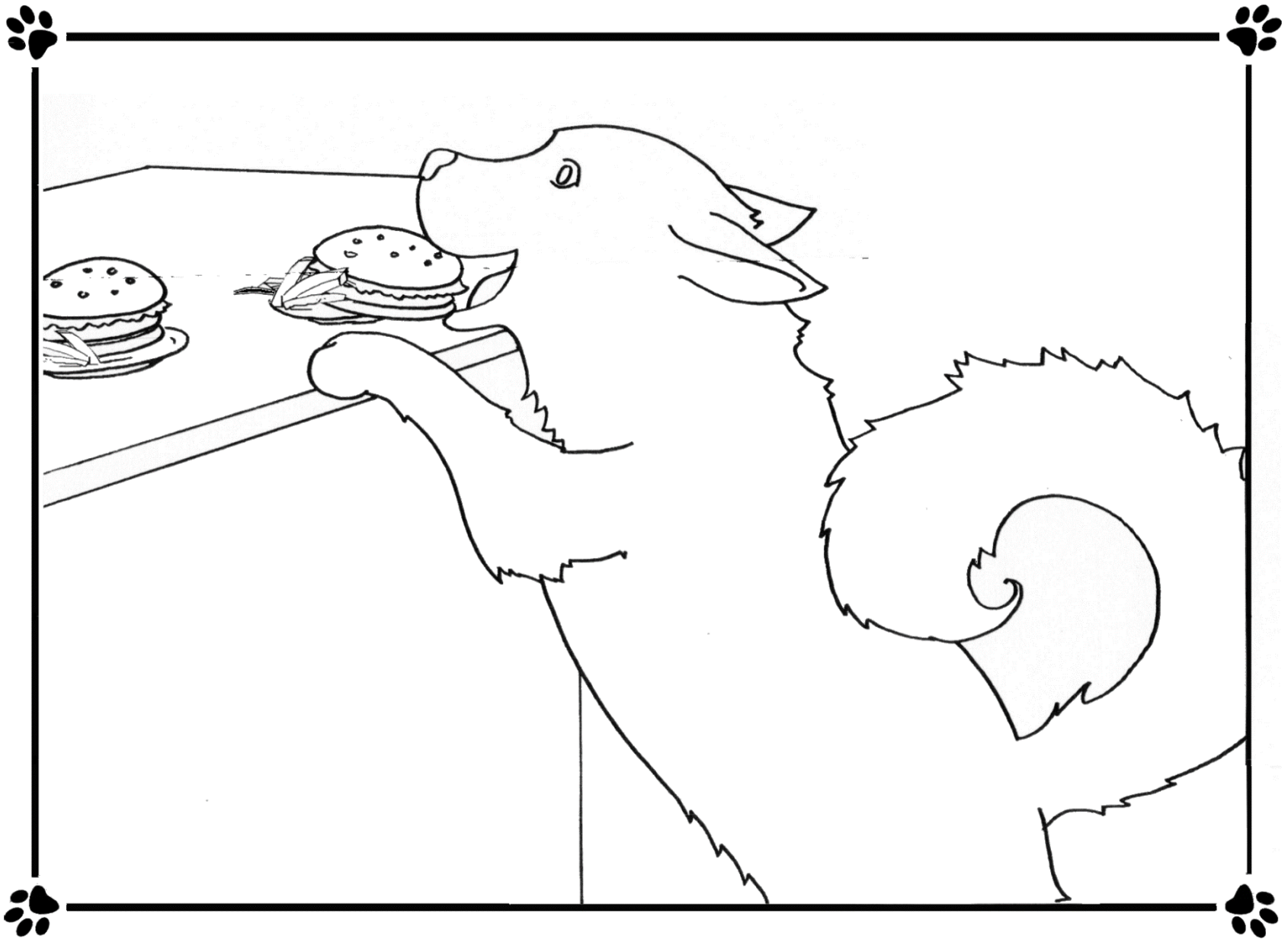
He kept running until he spotted a group of bushes next to the entrance of another building. There was a sign above its front door: Aquatics Center.

He hid behind the bushes and gobbled up the hamburger, ignoring the funny smell around him.

“I can't believe you ate that whole thing,” said Finchy who had watched him devour the hamburger. “You know how fattening that was?”

Mo was too busy licking his front paws to care. So what if he was a little overweight? What was the big deal?

Mo wondered if they were anywhere near Florida. The truck driver headed south on Interstate 25, passing places called Fort Collins, Boulder and Denver, and then pulled off the highway to this strange place – The United States Olympic & Paralympic Training Center.



Mo's nose kept twitching. What was that powerful odor? He realized it was coming from inside the building. So he opened its heavy front door and immediately sneezed. One. Twice. Three times.

Mo and Finchy entered the crowded room and hid under a table. They had never seen anything so strange.

There was a huge hole in the ground that was filled with clear water, which smelled awful. They could see straight down to the bottom. While they were familiar with lakes, rivers, and oceans, they had never seen or smelled an indoor swimming pool, especially one with chlorine.

Several people were in the pool. They moved their arms this way and that way, making their way from one end of the pool to the other.

“Fully extend your left arm,” said one woman to one of the swimmers. “You can probably shave a second or two off your time.”

Mo noticed a flyer taped to the wall. It showed a list of dates and times for Paralympic swimming races in places like Indianapolis, which was east from the training center, and Lewisville, Texas, which was south from it.

“They’re practicing for a race,” said Mo to Finchy. “Back home, we have swimming races every summer.”

Finchy laughed. “You, race? You can’t even touch your toes. I bet I can fly faster than the fastest swimmer in this room.”

Finchy wasn’t paying close attention to the swimmers. Although they were using their arms, they weren’t using their legs. Why not? Mo soon learned that the swimmers couldn’t use their legs. They were disabled.

“I’d be afraid to swim without using all four of my legs,” said Mo who admired the courage of the swimmers. They were really brave. They didn’t let their disability stop them from doing fun things, or even hard things they enjoyed.

Mo and Finchy watched the swimmers perfect their stroke and race each other. After an hour or so, everyone left the building.

Mo walked over to the edge of the pool and dipped his paw into the water. It felt cool against his fur.

“Wanna race,” asked Finchy? “I’ll give you a head start. I’ll wait ‘til you’re halfway

across the pool before I start flying.”

“I’m a runner, actually a magnificent runner, not a swimmer,” boasted Mo who believed he was a gifted athlete even though he had never won a race.

“If you win, I promise never to say another word about your weight,” said Finchy.

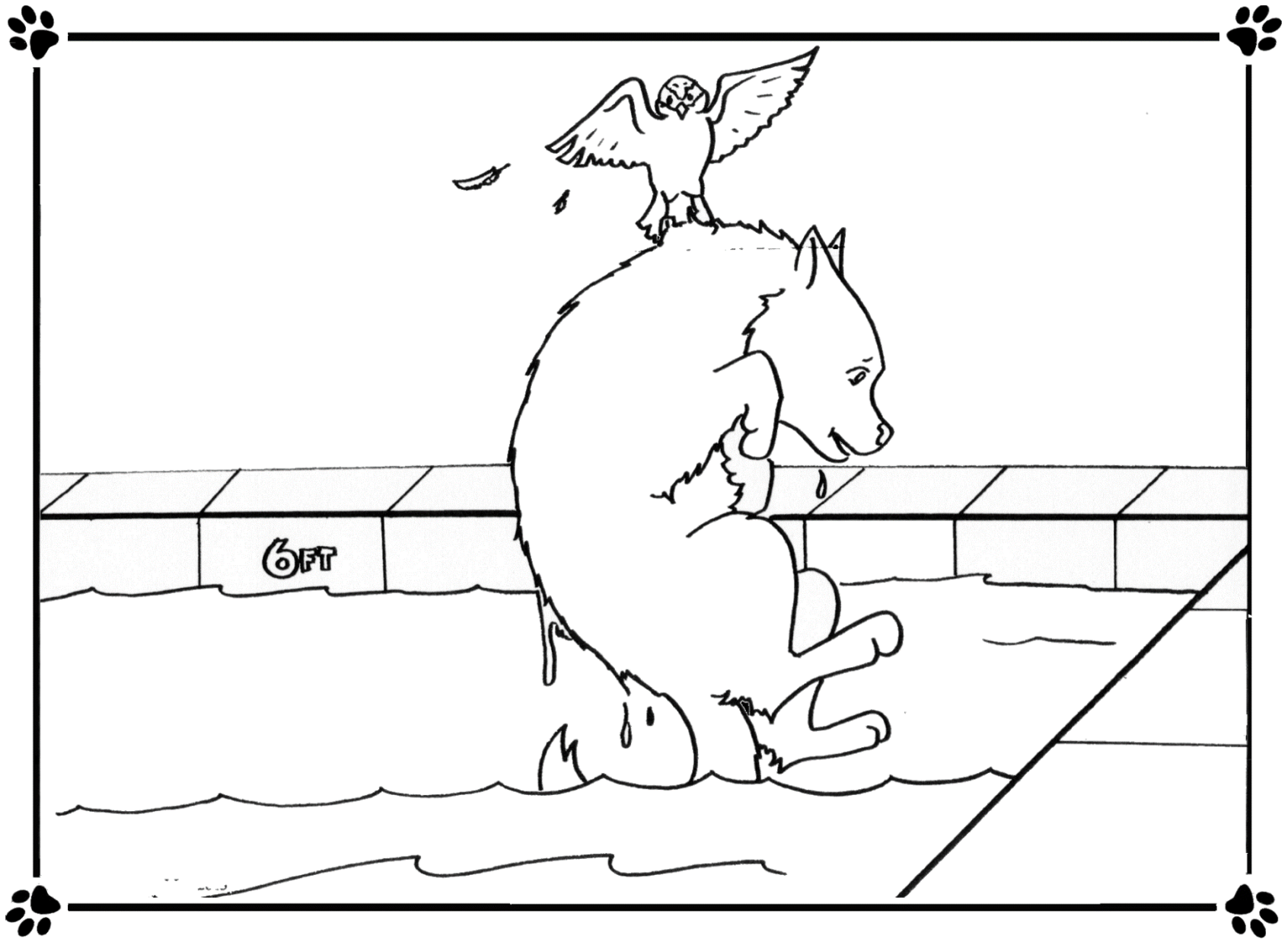
Mo couldn’t resist Finchy’s offer, especially since he thought he would win.

“On your mark, get set, swim!” shouted Finchy.

Mo jumped into the deep pool. His head quickly popped out of the cold water. By the time he reached the other side, he was huffing and puffing and didn’t have enough strength to climb out. Finchy grabbed Mo by the back of his neck and yanked him out of the pool.

“This is the second time I’ve had to rescue you!” he said while gasping for air.

Mo wasn’t listening. He was too busy panting, trying to catch his breath. *These Paralympic swimmers must train very hard!*



Finchy hopped over to Mo with a determined look in his eye.

“From now on,” said Finchy, “I am going to be your diet and exercise coach.”

Mo cringed.

“When we ride on top of the truck,” continued Finchy, “you’re going to do sit-ups. Maybe start with fifty. I can even help you swim faster after everything I learned today. Like your head was too far above the water. Were you paddling with all four legs? Didn’t seem like it. And what about . . .”

Mo had never done a sit-up in his life. Still, Finchy had a good point. By sitting on top of the delivery truck for many hours every day, he had gained weight. He didn’t realize how a few extra pounds could make such a difference in how he felt or what he could or couldn’t do.

Mo reluctantly agreed.

“You can count on me,” said Finchy, “to motivate, stimulate . . .”

And irritate. Mo covered his ears with his paws to drown out Finchy’s voice.

“As for your diet, ever try worms?” shouted Finchy. “They’re high in protein, low in calories, and very tasty.”

Mo’s stomach felt queasy. He would never – ever – eat a worm.

That evening, the two friends developed a diet and exercise program that Mo would start the next day.

But the moment Mo thought Finchy had fallen asleep, he yanked a bag of potato chips out from underneath his pillow.

He stared at it. Sniffed it. Even licked it.

Should I eat these potato chips before I start dieting tomorrow?

He stuffed the chips back underneath his pillow and dozed off.

Finchy just smiled.

Chapter 17

Ghosts and Shipwrecks

“Hear that?” asked Finchy. The weird sound ran shivers up and down his small body. “Listen. There it is again.”

Mo’s pointy ears perked straight up. He had never heard a sound like that in his whole life. It was a faint, eerie cry carried by the howling wind. Was it from an animal? A person? Someone or something else?

It was very early in the morning. Darkness still surrounded them and the other animals on the island. Mo and Finchy had always believed they were brave explorers. Until now.

“We should have never left Pier 39,” said Finchy who was clinging to Mo. “This place gives me the creeps.”

Mo remained silent. This was one of the rare times he agreed with Finchy.

“Those voices are the ghosts of the sea,” whispered a sea lion who had snuck up behind them.

Mo ran behind a nearby rock with Finchy close behind.

The sea lion let out a booming laugh. “I didn’t mean to startle you,” he said in a low, almost chilling, voice. “Welcome to my home. My name is Boris.”

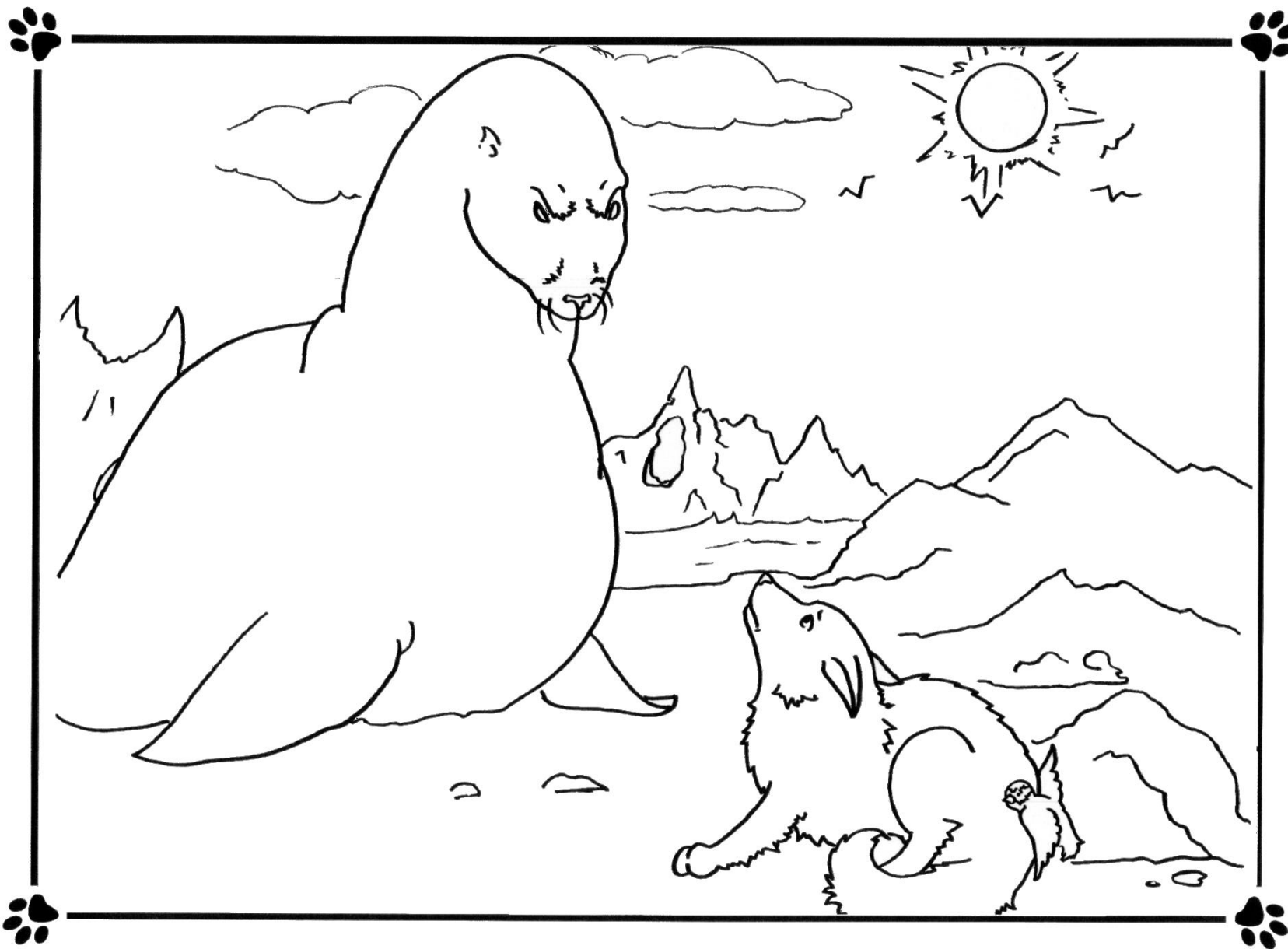
“I . . . I mean we . . . We didn’t mean to disturb you,” stammered Mo, as he poked his head out from behind the rock.

“Oh, yes you did,” insisted Boris. “Who are you? What do you want?”

Back home, Mo had many friends that were sea lions. But none were ever this rude.

He sat up straight with his head held high and introduced himself and Finchy. He then told Boris about their mission.

“Our truck driver made a big delivery yesterday and is relaxing at a hotel,” said Mo. “Early this morning, we snuck on a boat with those people, the ones over there.”



Mo pointed to a small group of scientists standing by the shore.

Boris stared at Mo, completely ignoring Finchy. By then, a crowd of other sea lions, elephant seals, and seabirds had gathered around Mo.

“Feed him to the great white sharks,” shouted a sea lion. “Better him than me.”

“Shove him into the ocean,” yelled an elephant seal. “Let the whales drag him down to the bottom.”

Mo couldn’t understand why they wanted to hurt him. Just because he was different than them didn’t mean he was bad or did something wrong.

“Wait!” shouted Mo whose voice started trembling. “One of my friends is a whale named Blue. “Do you know her?”

“You know Blue?” asked Boris whose tone turned friendly. “Why didn’t you say so? She’s been coming here for years. Her friends are my friends.”

Mo took a very deep breath and slowly let it out.

Boris placed his flipper around Mo's shoulders and invited Finchy and him to join their secret circle. Almost every day, the animals on the island sat in a circle, sharing scary stories about shipwrecks, treasures, and ghosts.

And so the storytelling began.

"In the 1800s, dozens of shipwrecks happened between these islands all the way north to Alaska," said Boris. "One ship named Lucas crashed right off these islands, which are called the Farallon Islands or Devil's Teeth. If you dove really deep into the ocean, you would probably find the skeletons of sailors who once worked on the Sea Witch, Lawrence, Georgiana, and Helen Hensley."

He explained that those were the names of ships that sank in the Pacific Ocean off the coast of San Francisco, which was where Mo and Finchy boarded the scientists' boat.

"San Francisco is about thirty miles east of here," he said. "Those strange voices are crew members who drowned. Every day, every night, they cry out for help."

"So they're . . . ghosts?" asked Finchy.

Everyone nodded in agreement.

“Do you ever see them?” asked Mo who didn’t believe in ghosts.

“No,” said Boris. “We just hear their voices. They seem sad. Maybe they can’t find their way back home. Wherever that is.”

Boris continued with the story. Since many people moved to San Francisco during the mid-1800s searching for gold, he explained that ships from faraway places sailed to the city with food, coal, and other essentials to help keep them alive.

“Some crashed along these jagged rocks,” said Boris, pointing to old debris scattered along the shoreline. “Or maybe a large wave hit their ship and sank it. No one knows for sure. Not even the scientists who visit us every now and then.”

“Why do scientists come here?” asked Finchy. “Do they want to learn about ghosts?”

Boris laughed and then explained that the scientists visit the islands to weigh, measure, and observe everyone living on the islands. “We always put on a show for them,” he said. “They’re easily fooled. One time, some of us swam backwards for a few minutes just to confuse them.”

The sun was rising. Mo and Finchy had to return to San Francisco before their truck driver left the hotel. However, they didn't want to travel back on the same boat or any boat, for that matter. So they climbed aboard a humpback whale that agreed to return them to Pier 39.

The sea was peaceful that morning as the whale glided through the ocean.

“Do you believe in ghosts?” asked Finchy.

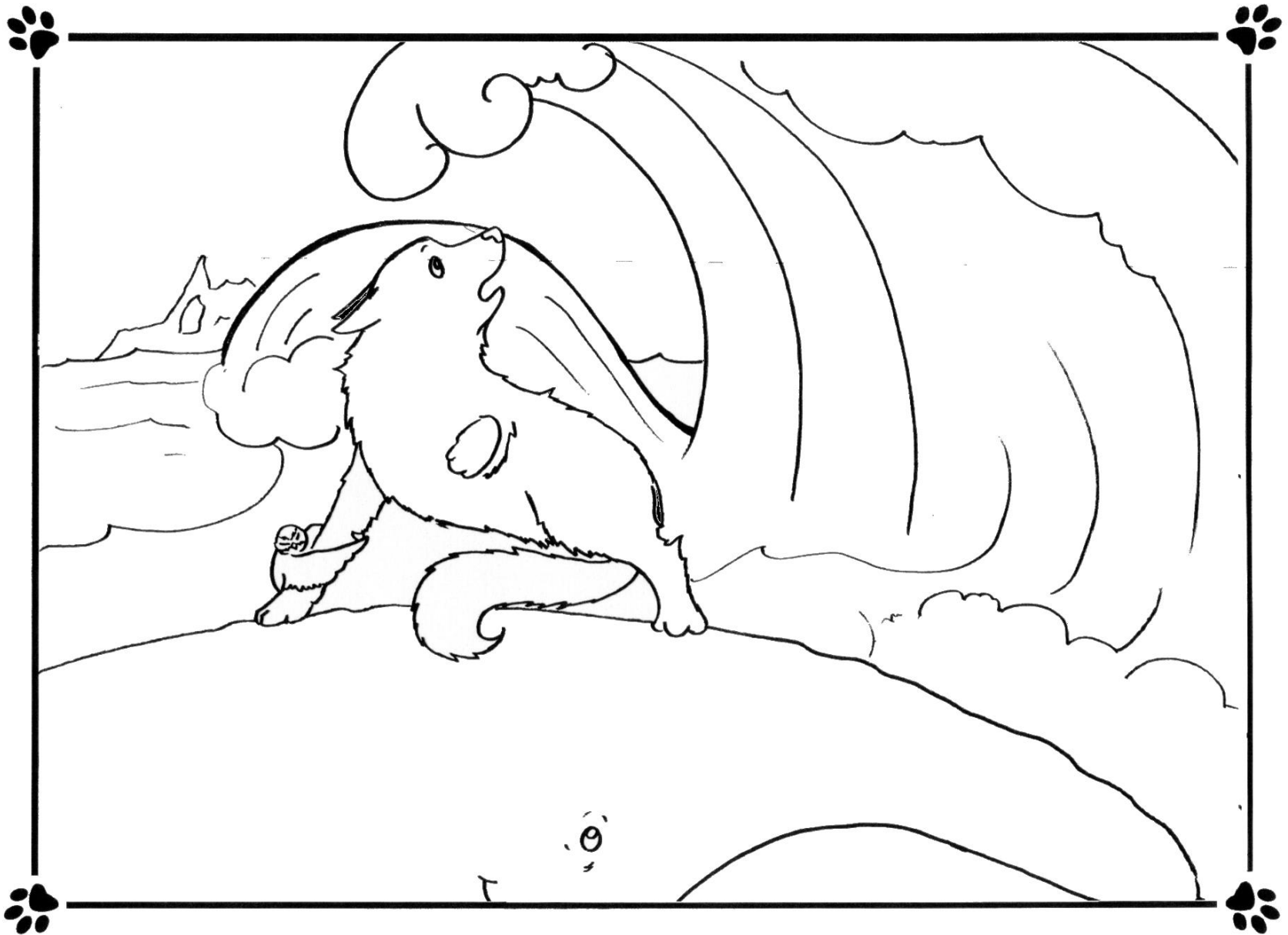
Mo shook his head. “Don't be silly,” he said. “If there are ghosts, how come no one can talk to them or see them?”

Finchy didn't seem convinced. So Mo looked up at the sky and shouted, “Hey ghosts, if you really exist, prove it!”

Suddenly, a huge wave drenched both Mo and Finchy, almost knocking them off the whale's back.

Finchy flapped his wings to shake off the salt water while glaring at Mo.

“Sorry,” mumbled Mo. “It's possible . . . just possible . . . that I could be wrong.”



Chapter 18

Diana, the Butterfly Actress

“You’re a terrible singer,” shouted Finchy to Mo while covering his ears. “Much worse than Elsie. She was a frog who lived in our neighborhood.”

“Maybe for a bird, but not for a dog,” replied Mo. “I sang in the choir back home. I was everyone’s favorite howler.”

Mo and Finchy had spent the last four days on a cruise ship. Since their truck driver was on vacation for two weeks, they decided to go on a cruise, hoping the big ship would take them to Florida. After their first day at sea, they couldn’t believe how much food there was to eat and all the great places they could hide, nap, sleep, play, and of course, sing.

Now they were on dry land. But where? They saw tall palm trees and an ocean. Florida has palm trees and an ocean. Could this be Florida?

They soon discovered they were on an island. Florida isn't an island. It's a peninsula that's connected to land on one side and surrounded by water on three sides.

Mo and Finchy sat on the beach, listening to the waves gently break on the shore, trying to figure out what to do next.

“Why don't we take a vacation?” asked Finchy, showing Mo all the travel brochures he found on the ship. “We've got at least a week before the ship leaves.”

One of the brochures caught Mo's attention. It had a strange name on the cover: Haleakala Crater.

“It says this is the largest dormant volcano in the world,” said Mo. “What's a volcano?”

The pair looked at the photos of the volcano in the brochure.

“Looks like a big mountain with a hole in it,” said Finchy.

Mo knew there had to be something special about this mountain. Why else would someone create a brochure about it?

Mo and Finchy decided to take turns picking out things to see or do. They would do what Mo wanted on one day and what Finchy wanted on the next day. Neither could complain about each other's choices.

Mo wanted to visit the volcano. So the next morning – before the sun woke up – he climbed on top of a tour bus that was filled with people headed for the crater. Finchy was waiting for him.

As the bus traveled along the highway, the air grew cooler. Finchy started shivering and snuggled up against Mo's warm fur.

During the long bus ride, they overheard people talking about volcanoes. One man said that when they become mad or angry, they explode or erupt with hot ash, gas, and lava, which is melted or liquid rock.

Mo and Finchy looked at each other. Neither one had ever seen a volcano erupt. Was it noisy? Was it scary? Was it dangerous?

A woman then started talking to everyone on the bus about the place they were visiting. She said this was one island of eight and that all eight islands were part of a state. The state grows pineapples and is the only one in the whole country that



grows coffee beans. There's lots of sunshine, rain, and tropical forests. Different types of people live here. Likewise, the state has the world's biggest telescope and more scientific observatories in one spot than anywhere in the world.

The bus stopped at the top of the mountain. The temperature had dropped even further. It was cold. But no one seemed to notice or even care. The sun was rising and they could see the island's central valley. The view was magnificent. So were the flowers and plants, unlike any they had ever seen.

“Watch out!”

Mo and Finchy heard a rather loud, squeaky voice but didn't see anyone.

“You almost stepped on me!” shouted the same voice. “You could have squashed me!”

Mo and Finchy realized who was speaking. It was a butterfly with bright orange wings outlined in burgundy.

Mo had never chatted with a butterfly. He didn't quite know what to say.

“I’m... I’m so sorry,” said Mo. “I didn’t see you. Are you OK?”

“Yes, but no thanks to you,” said the butterfly, rather annoyed.

Finchy hopped over to the butterfly and introduced himself and Mo.

“I know what it feels like to be so small when everyone and everything around you is so big,” he said.

Mo had rarely seen this caring and gentle side of Finchy. He was impressed. The butterfly calmed down and then introduced herself as Diana.

“Didn’t mean to shout at you,” she said. “I didn’t get the part I wanted in this play so I flew here to look at the sunrise, which always makes me feel better.”

“Yes, it’s very peaceful up here,” said Finchy.

“As long as the volcano is sleeping,” she said. “But when it wakes up, it’s like a big, ugly monster. Very scary. Simply terrifying.”

“What’s that like?” asked Mo. “I mean, when a volcano erupts?”



“First you hear rumbling sounds,” whispered Diana. “The ground starts trembling and shaking underneath your feet.”

Diana remained quiet for a few seconds. Did she finish telling her story?

“Bang!”

She shouted so loud that Mo and Finchy jumped back. Her six legs and antennae began swinging in every direction.

“There’s a gigantic explosion,” she shouted. “Everything inside the mountain shoots high into the air. Fire. Rocks. Gas. Toys. Chairs. Couches. Computers. I mean everything. Then the sky turns dark. So dark you can’t see. And then rocks that are on fire pour out of the mountain, all the way down to the main road. It seems like the world is ending.”

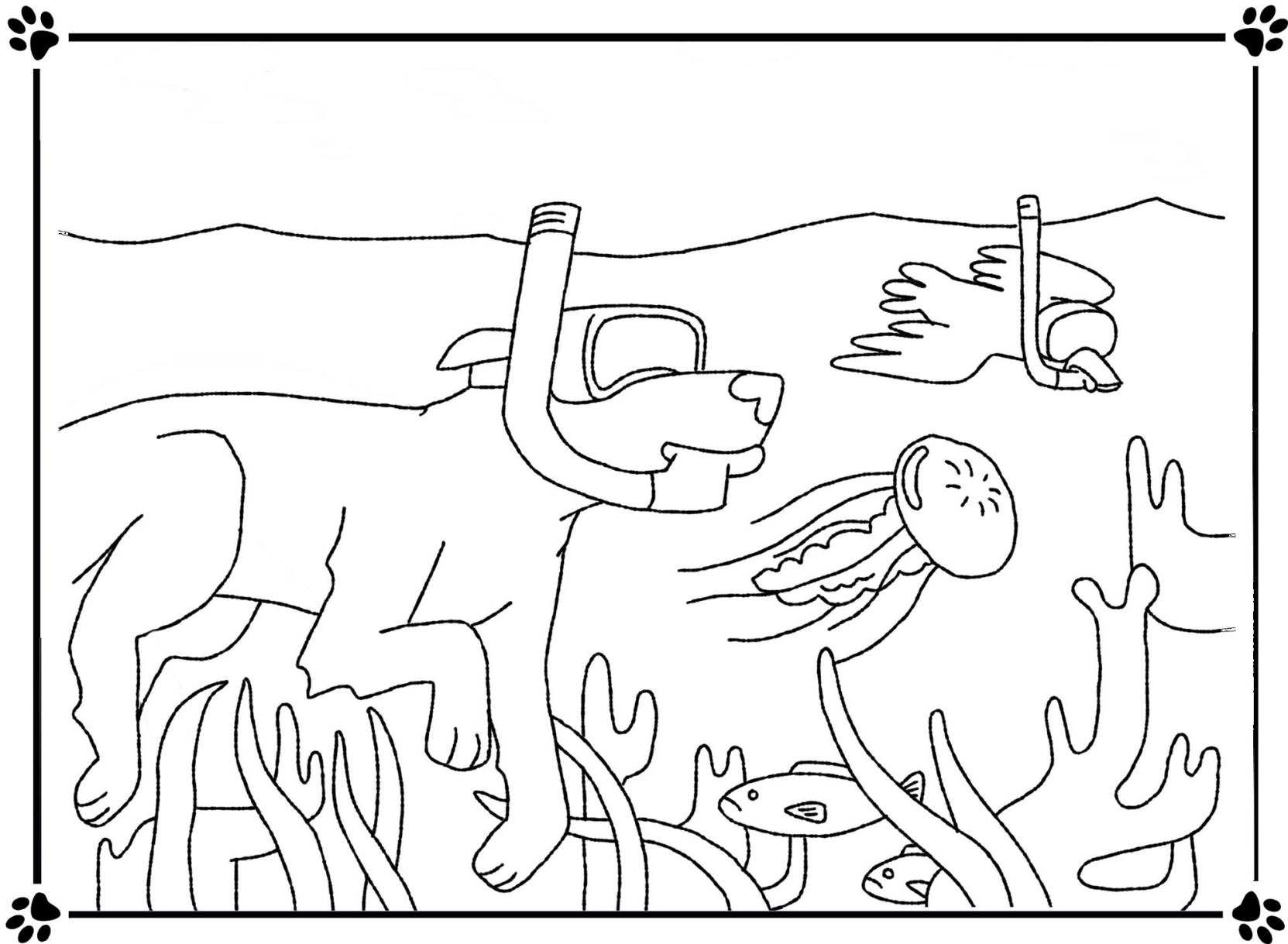
Mo and Finchy looked at each other, not knowing what to think. Was Diana telling the truth or putting on a show for them? Were toys, chairs, couches, and computers really inside mountains?



They spent another hour on the mountain, listening to Diana share more horrifying experiences. Finchy and Mo clung to each other and were glad when the tour bus was leaving. They said goodbye and couldn't wait to get back to the hotel.

For the rest of their vacation, Mo and Finchy sunbathed, ate pineapple and coconut, snorkeled in warm waters, caught a few shows, and argued over which garbage cans offered the best food.

Now out of suntan lotion and things to do, Mo and Finchy snuck back on the cruise ship where they would spend another four days at sea returning to the last state they had visited. Although they didn't find Florida, they discovered something much more important – how lucky they were to be friends.



Chapter 19

Learning to Fly

“What’s that tall thing over there?” asked Mo.

“It’s a rocket,” said Finchy, a bit surprised. “You’ve never seen one before?”

“No,” said Mo, tilting his head all the way back to see the top of the rocket.

“Humans use rockets to blast into outer space and sometimes live inside of them for many days,” said Finchy. “But no matter how hard they try, humans are far from perfect at flying, not like us birds.”

Since their vacation on the cruise ship, Mo and Finchy had traveled for several days on top of the delivery truck. They saw many signs for places like Lincoln and Waverly while traveling on Interstate 80 East and Highway 6. The truck driver drove to a city called Ashland to deliver packages to a big building that displayed a rocket near its front doors.

Mo read the sign next to the building: Strategic Air Command & Aerospace Museum.

It was early in the morning. Mo and Finchy wondered if more rockets were inside the building. Mo wanted to sit inside one of them so they followed the truck driver through a side door. When he turned left, they turned right into a very big room.

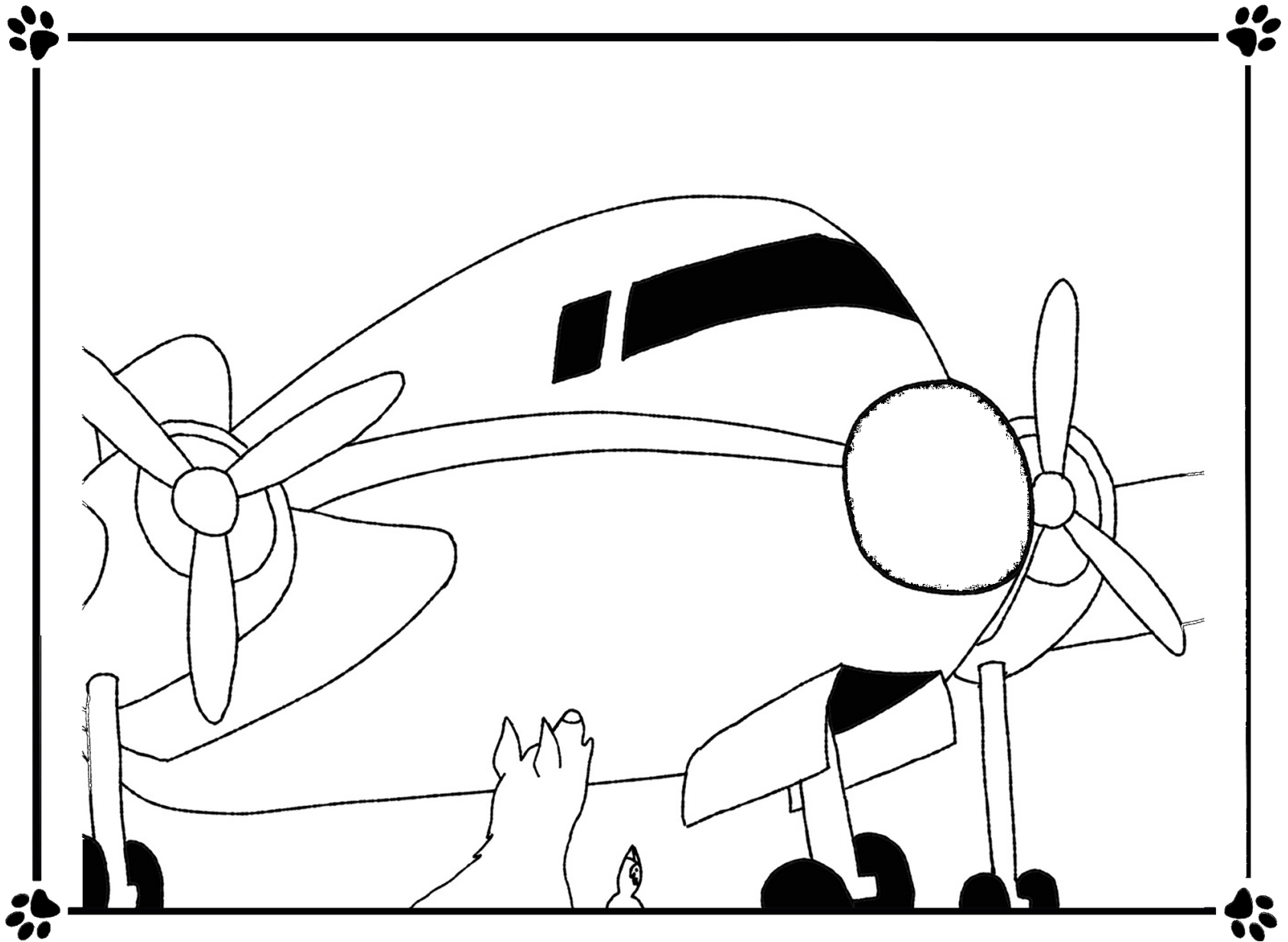
“Wow, look at all of these. . . these. . .what exactly are they?” Mo asked Finchy.

“Airplanes,” said Finchy. While he couldn’t fly as fast or as high as airplanes, he thought birds were more graceful at flying through the air.

All of these airplanes had names. One was called the Invader, another the Intruder, and the one with the giant wings was called Skytrain. Mo had never seen so many giant machines in one place.

Mo had so many thoughts. *What’s inside the huge planes? How do they stay in the air? Do they bump into clouds?*

While Mo searched for a way to climb inside one of the planes, Finchy flew into every room in the building, searching for more rockets. When he returned, he shouted, “Mo, follow me. I’ve got a big surprise for you!”



Mo and Finchy entered an area called the *Atlantis Shuttle Trainer*. They saw two big seats that were surrounded by computer screens and more than six hundred switches.

“This machine teaches people how to fly airplanes and rockets into outer space,” said Finchy. “Let’s turn it on so you can feel what it’s like to fly.”

“Well. . .I don’t know,” said Mo. “Are you sure you know how to use this machine?”

Finchy looked Mo straight in the eye. “Who knows more about flying than birds?” he said. “I can fly any plane in this building. I don’t even need a lesson. I’m a natural.”

Mo hesitated. He wasn’t sure if Finchy knew as much as he thought he did. Still, he took a deep breath and climbed into the seat on the right, what Finchy called the co-pilot’s seat.

Finchy hopped on to the left seat, the pilot’s seat, and began turning on many switches with his beak. Lights started flashing. Loud, strange noises came out of the machine. Both of their seats started shaking back and forth, up, down, and even sideways. Red lights started flashing on and off. A voice boomed, “Warning! Warning!”

Something was wrong. Very wrong. Mo didn't know what to do. Finchy started to panic, turning on this switch and turning off that switch, which made everything worse. More red lights started flashing and the strange noises grew louder.

“Run!” shouted Finchy.

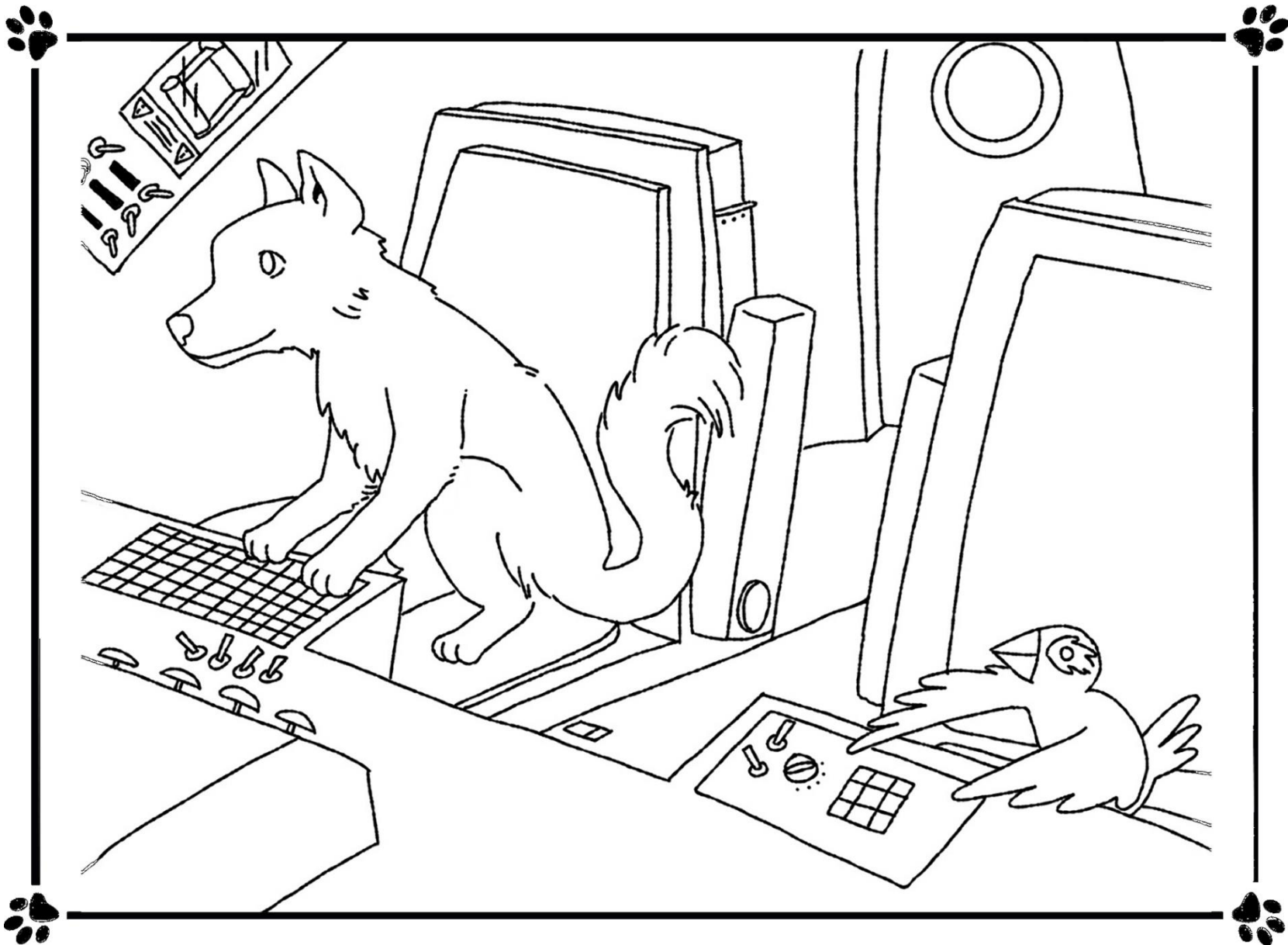
Mo leaped off the chair and ran as fast as he could. Finchy flew ahead, leading the way out of the building, back to the delivery truck.

Mo raced up the truck's ladder and was safely on top. His heart was pounding. His paws were shaking. He wrapped a warm blanket around his body to help calm down.

“I'm. . . I'm really sorry,” said Finchy in a quiet voice while looking at the ground. “I just wanted to do something nice for you, make you feel like you were flying. It's the best feeling in the world.”

Mo knew Finchy really cared about him. But why does he need to show off?

“Finchy,” said Mo, trying to remain calm. “You're smart. And brave. You don't need to pretend that you know everything or can do everything.”



Finchy wrapped his wings around Mo's neck.

"Thank you for not yelling at me," said Finchy. "I just saw the machine and thought . . . well, I guess I was wrong."

"It's OK to ask for help if you don't know something," continued Mo. "That's how everyone learns."

"So does that mean you'll stop pretending, too?" asked Finchy.

Mo gave Finchy a puzzling look.

"You thought you could paddleboard and swim, but really couldn't," said Finchy.

Mo never thought of himself as a know-it-all but had to admit that Finchy was right.

"I guess we both have a lot to learn," said Mo.

Chapter 20

“You Ain’t Nothing But a Hound Dog”

Is that a real pyramid?” whispered Mo to Finchy. “I didn’t think pyramids had any glass windows. And look at the huge lake behind it.”

Mo and Finchy had been riding on top of the delivery truck for almost thirteen hours, crossing four different states—Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, and another one they couldn’t remember. They traveled almost in a straight line on Interstate 80 East. They drove by many cities like Des Moines and Chicago and ended up in a place called Cleveland.

They snuck inside the tall, triangle-shaped building by walking among dozens of people who seemed very excited and didn’t pay any attention to Mo or Finchy. Not even the man collecting tickets noticed them.

Once inside, Mo was speechless. Finchy had never seen his tail wag so fast, except when he fell in love with Maggie.

Finchy glanced around the crowded room. Almost everything was behind glass. There were lots of T-Shirts. Tons of guitars. Handwritten words on paper. There was even a man's glove that sparkled. He wondered if it was spun from gold.

Finchy then noticed an enormous hot dog and fries by the escalator. He flew over to grab a bite or two. But after poking the hot dog and fries with his beak several times, he discovered they weren't real.

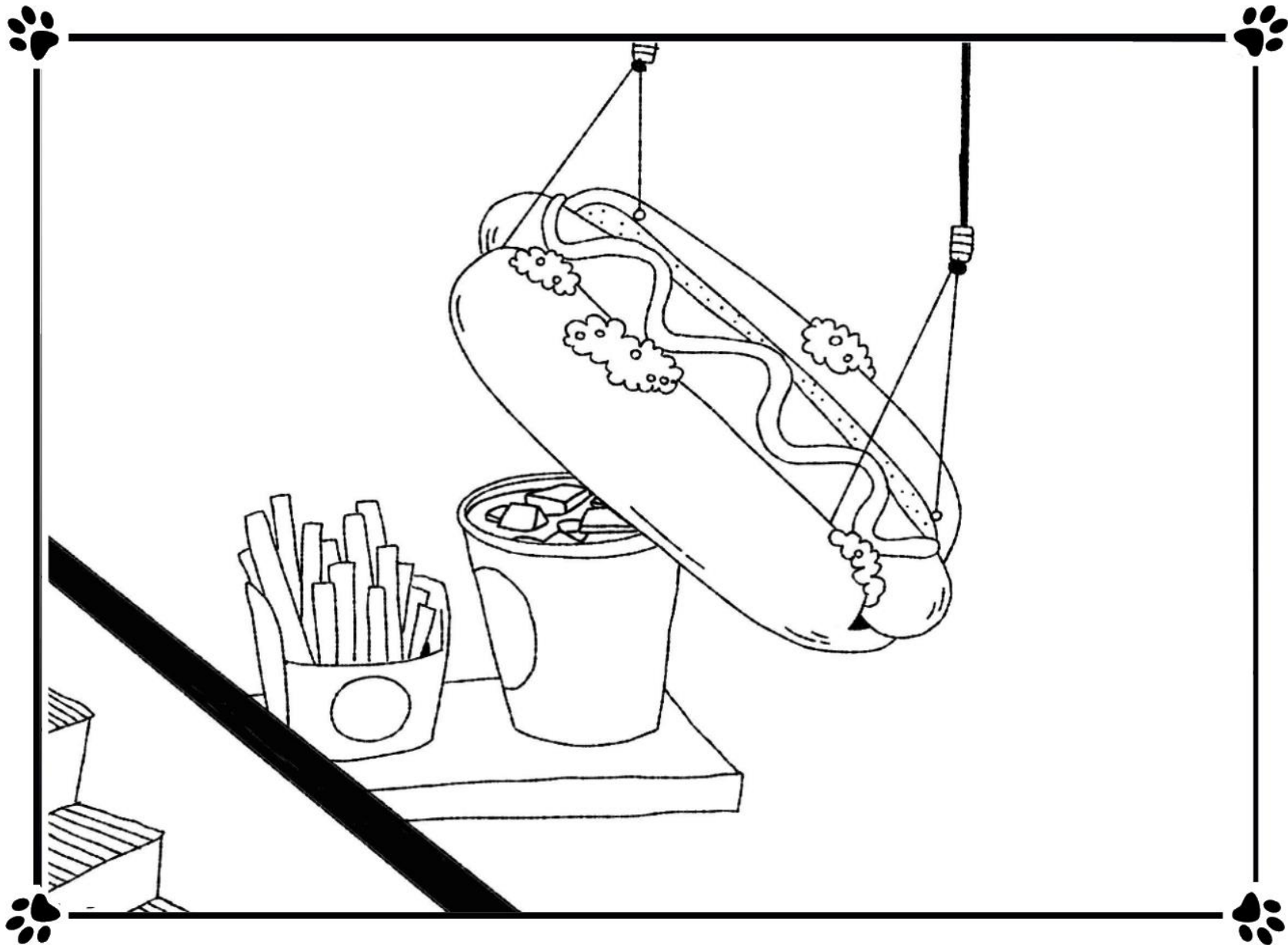
Humans are so strange. Why make a gigantic hot dog with the perfect amount of mustard on it and fries that no one can eat? What a waste!

Finchy flew back to Mo to tell him about the hot dog, but Mo wasn't listening. Finchy poked him in the ribs with his beak.

“Ouch!” shouted Mo. “What did you do that for?”

“What's wrong with you,” asked Finchy. “I was trying to tell you something important.”

“Do you have any idea how amazing this place is?” he asked Finchy. “All of this stuff was owned by famous musicians.”



Mo rattled off a long list of popular singers and bands. Finchy gave him a blank stare.

“What!” shouted Mo in disbelief. “You never heard of any of these performers?”

“Well, have you ever heard of Tilly and Bobo?” asked Finchy. “They sing duets all over the country. Very famous birds. Their voices are so beautiful together that there’s no need for drums, pianos, or guitars, which are nothing but noisemakers.”

Mo wondered how he could convince Finchy to at least listen to rock and roll.

They both noticed a long line of people walking through a set of double doors who were singing loudly and off key.

Mo and Finchy followed them into the small theater that had rows and rows of red seats. On the stage were some of the noisemakers that Finchy mentioned – an electric piano, several guitars, drums, and other musical instruments.

Mo wanted to perform for this crowd, but especially for Finchy. This was the best way to expose him to rock and roll.

But how can I get on stage without anyone realizing I’m a dog, although a very talented

dog?

Mo and Finchy hatched a plan. They searched the empty seats and found a pair of sunglasses, cap, and T-Shirt that just happened to be Mo's size. After putting everything on, Mo did some yoga to stay focused and then walked onstage. Suddenly, everyone in the room stopped talking and focused their eyes on him.

Mo jumped up on the piano bench, turned up the volume on the piano and began singing "Hound Dog," one of his favorite old tunes by Elvis, who was called the King of rock and roll.

"You ain't nothin' but a hound dog
Cryin' all the time
You ain't nothin' but a hound dog
Cryin' all the time
Well, you ain't never caught a rabbit and you ain't no friend of mine."

People began jumping out of their seats, singing along and dancing. Finchy couldn't believe what he was hearing or seeing. Since when could Mo sing and play the piano?



Mo sang one more song, took a bow, and ran off the stage with everyone in the room clapping and screaming with joy. Two men with guitars then walked onto the stage, thinking people were cheering for them.

Finchy flew high into the air, followed Mo out the main door, and caught up with him near the huge red letters in front of the building that spelled, “Long Live Rock”.

“That was thrilling, so exciting, so much fun, so much...”

Finchy interrupted Mo.

“You never told me you were a musical performer,” he said.

“You never asked,” replied Mo. “Back home, I performed for all of the animals in the forest. Even polar bears that mostly lived alone came to watch me.”

Finchy didn’t say a word. For one of the few times in his life, he was quiet.

But his silence only lasted a few seconds.

“Ya know, Mo, since we’re traveling all around the country, you could perform

everywhere we go,” said Finchy. “I could be your agent. We could be famous. Do you think I can get a hat and sunglasses small enough to fit me? I want to look cool. Very cool.”

Mo removed his cap and placed it on top of Finchy, which covered his entire body, and then climbed up the ladder on the side of the delivery truck.

“Very funny,” shouted Finchy. “C’mon, Mo. Help me get out of this. Mo . . . Mo . . . are you there?”

Chapter 21

The God of Wind

“I wonder what Columbus is like,” said Mo to Finchy after passing a highway sign for the city. They had been traveling along Interstate 71 South on top of the delivery truck. “Think it’s a big place? Lots of dogs? It’s probably named after Christopher Columbus.”

“Who?” said Finchy while sunbathing on the truck’s roof.

“Columbus,” said Mo as the truck now began traveling on Interstate 70 West. “Do you know who he is?”

Finchy didn’t respond. He learned this trick from his cousin who remained silent when he didn’t know the answer to a question. Any question. He was too embarrassed to admit it, which kept him from learning new things.

Mo knew Finchy had heard him.

“Well, I guess if you can’t hear me, I can’t tell you about Columbus who was a famous explorer like us,” Mo said. “How he sailed on a giant wooden ship across the Atlantic Ocean four different times more than five hundred years ago.”

Finchy couldn’t resist a good story. He rolled over and sat up.

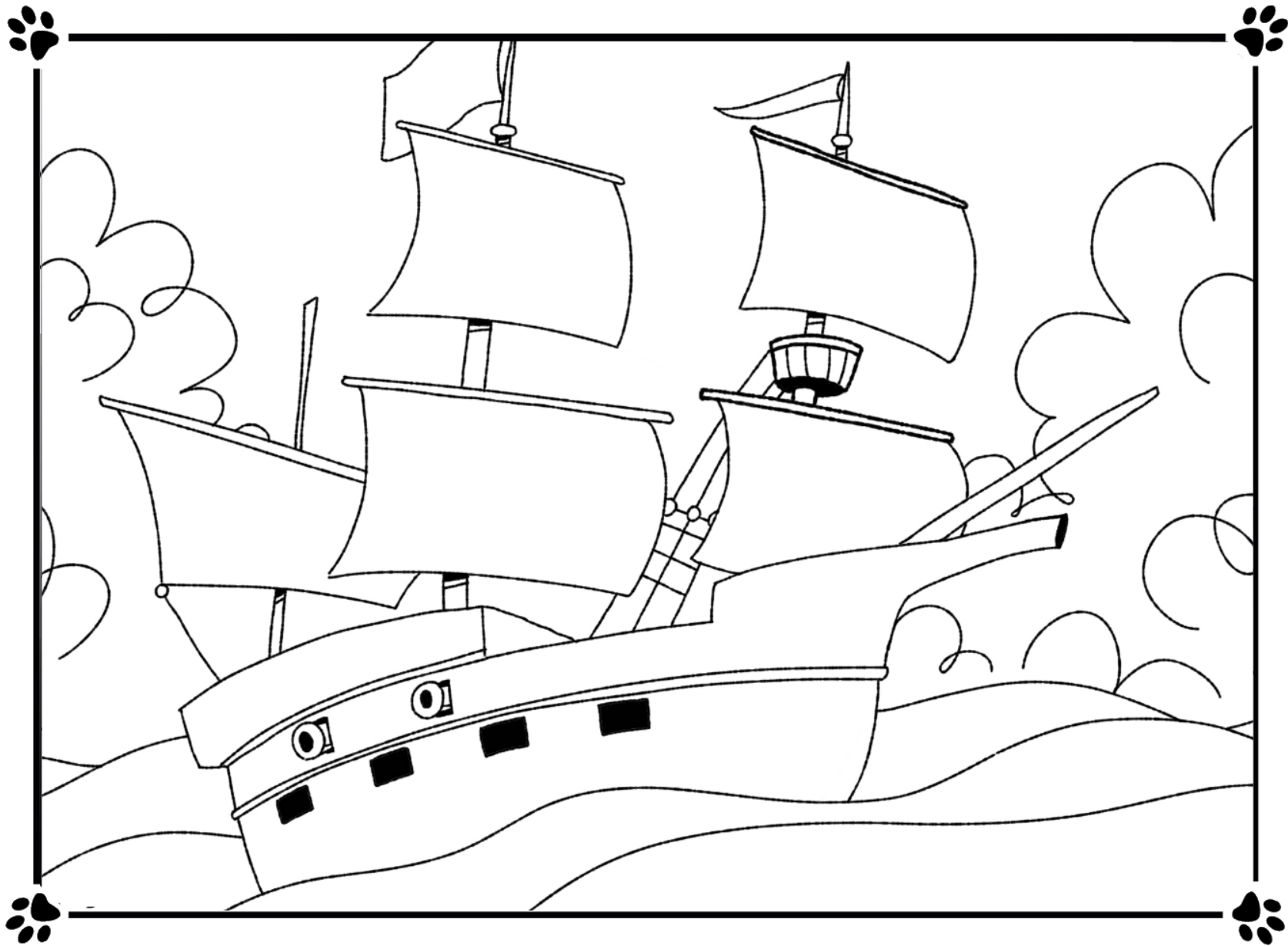
“Four times?” he asked.

For the next several hours, Mo and Finchy wondered what traveling on a big ship would have been like that long ago. Where did everyone sleep? What did they eat and do? What made the ship move?

The truck entered another state directly west of Ohio. Mo and Finchy saw highway signs for cities named Richmond, Lawrence, and Greenwood. There was even one for Columbus.

“Humans must love explorers,” said Finchy to Mo. “Maybe they’ll name cities after us.”

The truck driver stopped at the visitor center inside White River State Park.



As the truck driver headed toward the back door of the building, a giant gust of wind pushed it open. Mo and Finchy quietly followed him into a long hallway without anyone noticing them.

The building seemed empty. So they wandered from room to room without fear of getting caught.

They saw many Native American items. Pots and baskets. Photographs. Paintings. Sculptures. A huge totem pole. Some were two hundred years old.

“Know much about Native Americans?” asked a strange voice.

Mo and Finchy quickly looked around the room to find who was speaking.

“We’re the original Americans,” said the voice.

Mo and Finchy saw who was talking to them. It was a man with many long feathers on top of his head. Strings of colored beads hung around his neck.

But there was one small problem. You could see right through him.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said. “My name is Gaol. It’s hard to say so just call me Jay. I am the god of wind.”

Finchy’s and Mo’s eyes opened wide.

“I’m . . . I’m . . . sorry sir,” stammered Mo. “I didn’t hear you. . .”

“Your hearing is fine,” interrupted Jay. “I am the god of wind. Remember that gust of wind that blew the back door open? That was me, although it was far from my best performance.”

Mo and Finchy were silent. They had never spoken to the god of wind.

“I made myself look human so you wouldn’t be afraid,” Jay said. “Actually, this is the way I looked hundreds, maybe even thousands of years ago. I lost track. Still can’t figure out how to appear not so see-through-ish.”

“Nice to meet you, Mr. God . . . I . . . I mean Jay,” said Mo as he pushed Finchy out from behind him. “This is my friend, Finchy.”

Finchy forced a smile.



“I am an Iroquois (ee·ruh·kwaa) Indian,” he said. “My people were hunters, fisherman, and farmers. We grew the Three Sisters – corn, beans, and squash. Mixed them together to make succotash. Yummy. Ever hear of it?”

For the next hour, Jay told them the history of the Iroquois tribe.

“Back then, we shared everything, cared for each other, and had many friends,” he said. “Nobody stole or lied. We respected the land and treated people with kindness, even my weird cousin Breezy, who still wants my job after all these years.”

“Sounds wonderful,” said Mo. “Why can’t everyone be that way?”

“You can if you want to,” said Jay. “Every day, say or do one nice thing for someone. Then do another nice thing and another. It’s that simple. Much better than being a bully.”

Jay shared more family stories, daily customs, and family traditions. Mo and Finchy were so fascinated that they forgot all about the time. They ran outside and saw that the delivery truck was gone.

“Not to worry,” said Jay who returned to his normal, windy self.

Suddenly, Mo and Finchy were floating high into the air, gently being pushed by Jay along the highway. When they spotted the truck, Jay placed them gently on top of it, hugged them goodbye, and sped off like a mini tornado.

Mo and Finchy thought about what Jay had said, about being nice. What could they do?

They had an idea. Mo wrapped his paws around Finchy. In return, Finchy wrapped his wings around Mo. They gave each other a giant hug.

They were off to a great start.

Chapter 22

President Peanut

“Why are so many people jammed in that big box,” asked Finchy.

Mo and Finchy were hiding behind a trash can in the lobby of a building called the Willis Tower. They had been riding on top of the delivery truck for about three hours, traveling mainly along Interstate 65 North. Along the way, they spotted signs for cities named Peoria, Naperville, and Chicago.

“Not sure,” said Mo. “Very strange. Every time they press that button on the wall, the doors open and they walk inside. Then the doors close. But when the doors open again, they’re gone.”

Mo and Finchy looked at each other, wondering if this was some kind of magic trick. Where did the people go? Even the truck driver walked inside the box and disappeared.



“Why don’t we go inside the box and find out where they went?” asked Finchy.

Mo and Finchy waited until the lobby was almost empty. Finchy flew over to the button, pressed it with his beak, and the doors opened. He flew inside the box with Mo right behind him. But before the doors closed, a small dog ran inside.

“Whew!” said the dog who was half the size of Mo. “That was close. Almost got squished.”

There were even more buttons on the inside of the box. The dog pressed one of them marked one hundred and three. The box started moving. Mo’s stomach felt queasy.

The dog turned toward Mo and Finchy.

“Hello, I’m President Peanut, but you can call me Peanut,” she said. “I’m president of an association that holds its community meetings here every month, on the Skydeck. I’m headed to a meeting right now. Want to join us?”

Peanut told them that the box they were standing in was called an elevator and was taking them to the Skydeck, which was an observation deck or large room with very

big windows. Since it was a clear day, she said they would be able to see four different states – Indiana, Wisconsin, Michigan – and one more state that she couldn't remember.

By now, Mo's stomach was doing somersaults. He was glad when the elevator finally stopped and its doors opened. Mo walked toward the large windows. He had never been this high in the sky. Even birds were flying below him. He never dreamed there could be this many buildings, cars, and people in one spot.

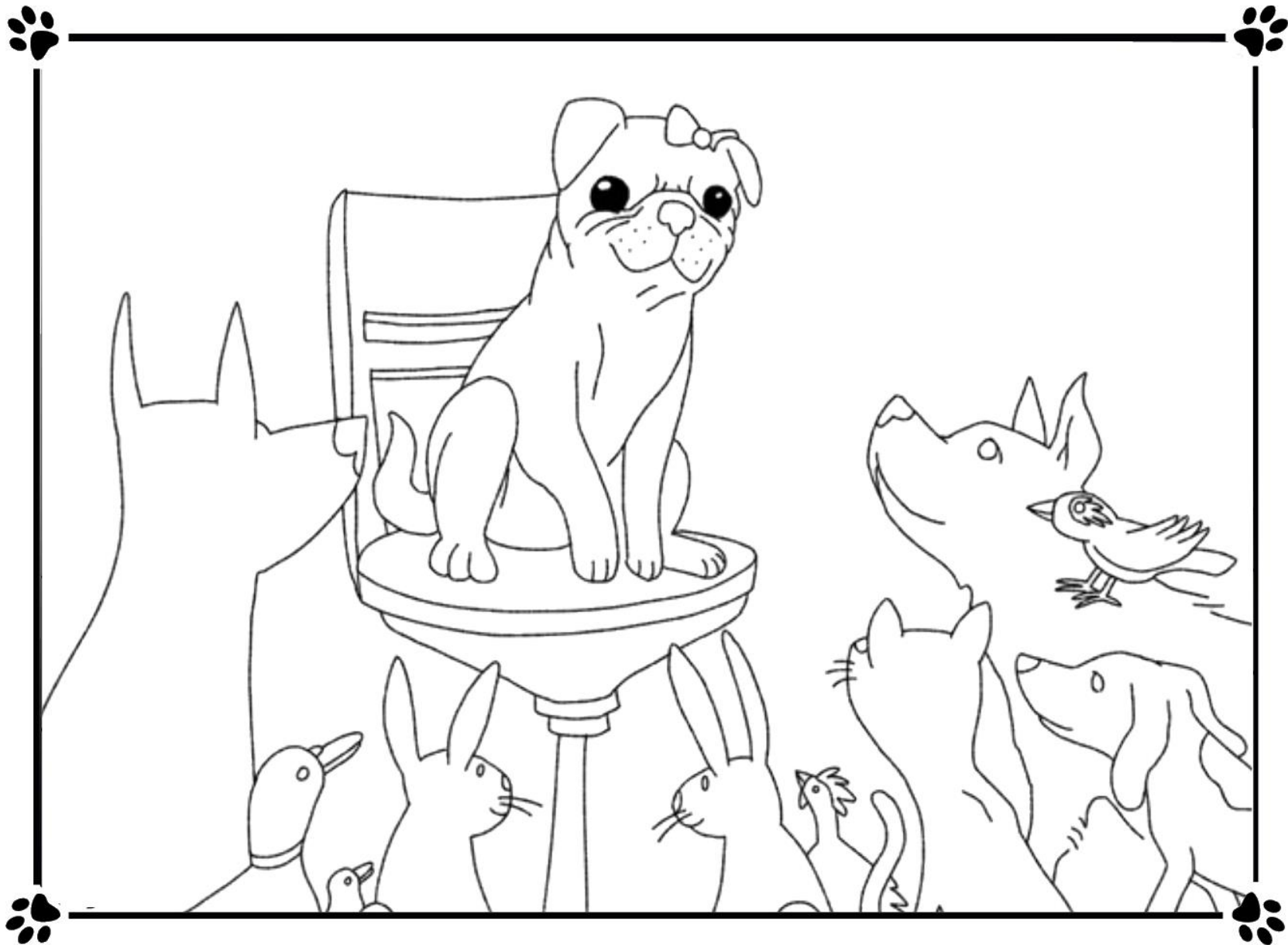
Peanut started the meeting, which was attended by a group of dogs, cats, birds, and rabbits sitting in a corner of the Skydeck.

“Good to see everyone,” she said, and then introduced Mo and Finchy as her guests. “Let's take turns sharing what each of us has done this past month to improve the community park. Bert, you go first.”

“I dug a million holes in the ground at the park's entrance,” said Bert, a young beagle. “It may have been more like a hundred. Well, maybe a dozen. Anyway, Rex was supposed to plant flowers in them.”

“What happened?” asked Peanut.





“Rex ate the petals off all the flowers,” said Bert.

“I didn’t mean to,” blurted out Rex, an older bunny rabbit. “They looked so . . . so delicious. I just took one bite and couldn’t stop myself.”

“I picked up trash in the park,” bragged a green parakeet named Kiwi. “Humans are so sloppy. There were pop cans, water bottles, and food wrappers everywhere. Shameful. Just shameful.”

“I made sure there was no bullying,” added George, a Great Dane. “Polly the poodle told Blossom the bulldog that she was fat and made fun of her hat, saying it was out of style. So I asked Polly why she was being so mean? Why would she say something to hurt Blossom’s feelings? Before you knew it, Polly was licking Blossom’s face and they were back to being friends.”

Ragdoll, a cat with blue eyes, told her cat friends that birds in the park were off limits.

“I told them the park was a safe place for everyone,” she said.

Finchy couldn’t believe what he was hearing. *Cats not allowed to chase birds? Am I dreaming?*

The rest of the animals shared what they did to make the park more beautiful, clean, fun, and safe. Bella, a shiny, black Labrador, set up lounge chairs on the grass in the park. When the sprinklers went off, animals could cool off. “But I’m still searching for suntan lotion and beach towels,” she said.

After everyone finished talking, Peanut said she was happy with the progress everyone was making and then spoke to Mo and Finchy.

“We’re not trying to fix every problem in the world,” she explained. “There are simply too many. We’re just making things better where we live, in our own neighborhood. We want to build a place where everybody cares about each other, respects each other, helps each other. . .”

“And doesn’t eat the flowers,” interrupted Bert. Rex’ white furry face turned bright red.

After the meeting, Mo and Finchy made a list of different ways they could improve their community when they returned home.

Mo thought about cleaning up the beach, helping hungry animals find food, and teaching others how to write and add and subtract numbers. Finchy decided to help

other birds make nests, form a choir that performs at public places, and visit senior birds who may be lonely.

“Can you imagine birds, dogs, and other animals helping their community?” asked Finchy.

“Actually, I can,” said Mo. “I would like to live there. It would be a wonderful place to call home.”

Chapter 23

The Voices

“I didn’t know the Earth makes a full circle around the sun once a year,” said Mo to Finchy. “Did you know that? It’s called orbiting.”

“Shhh!” said Finchy.

The two friends were watching a show inside a planetarium at a space museum in Hutchinson. The day before, they had been riding on top of the delivery truck for at least ten hours. They traveled along Interstate 55 South and saw many signs for Kansas City, which was more than three hours away from the museum.

They were learning why this planet has four seasons and how the sky changes throughout the year.

But the coolest part of the show involved the eighty-eight constellations in the night sky that anyone, anywhere, on Earth can see. They tried to connect the group of stars

that form constellations like Orion the Great Hunter, Leo the Lion, Taurus the Bull, or Aquarius, a young man pouring water.

Mo heard someone whisper in his ear. He turned around. No one was there. Moments later, he heard more whispering.

“After the show, meet me in the Apollo Gallery,” said a voice with a strange accent.

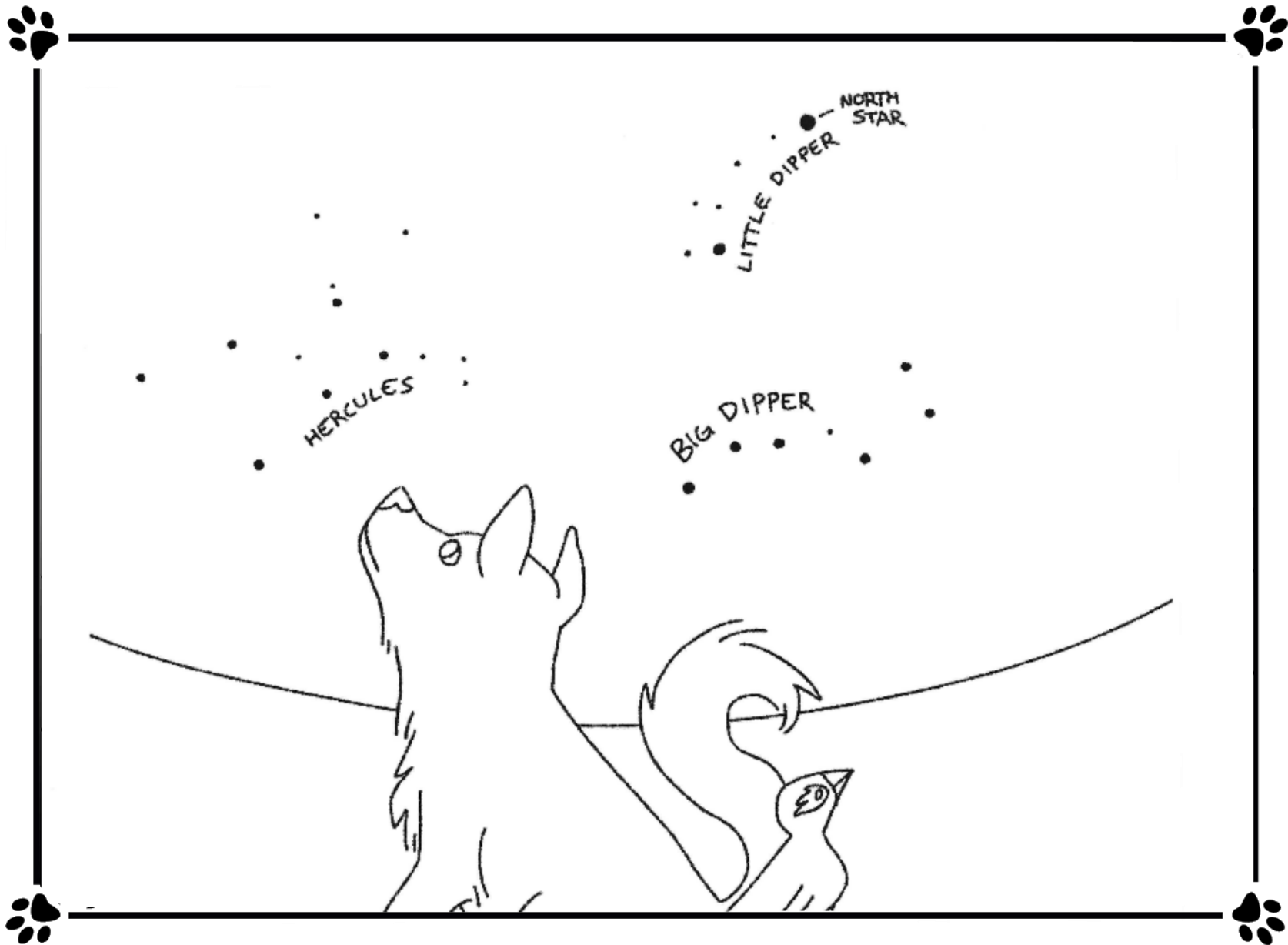
Mo’s ears pointed straight up. He didn’t know what to think. Was someone playing a trick on him?

After the show, he mentioned the strange voice to Finchy.

“I didn’t hear it,” said Finchy. “Sure you’re getting enough sleep?”

Mo rolled his eyes and headed straight for the Apollo Gallery with Finchy in tow.

They walked around, looking at all kinds of cool stuff like the Odyssey, the space capsule that brought three astronauts safely back home when they couldn’t land on the moon.



“Thanks for coming,” said the strange voice. Mo and Finchy both turned around in a circle but still didn’t see anyone.

“Who are you?” asked Mo. “Where are you?”

“I’m standing right in front of you,” said the same voice. “You can’t see me or any of us because . . . well, it takes too long to explain. But certain animals with excellent hearing like dogs and birds can hear us.”

Mo and Finchy looked at each other, not sure if this was a prank.

“None of us have names, but we’re known as The Voices,” said the same voice.

“We’re from the moon but travel all around the universe, making friends with many different beings who look, act, live, and think differently than us.”

Finchy was having a hard time keeping quiet. He had so many questions.

“What do you look like, I mean really look like?” he asked without waiting for an answer. “Do you have feathers like me or pointed ears like Mo? What do you eat? How many of you visit this planet? Where do you go? What do you do? Who else knows about you? What do . . .”

Finchy and Mo could hear them laughing.

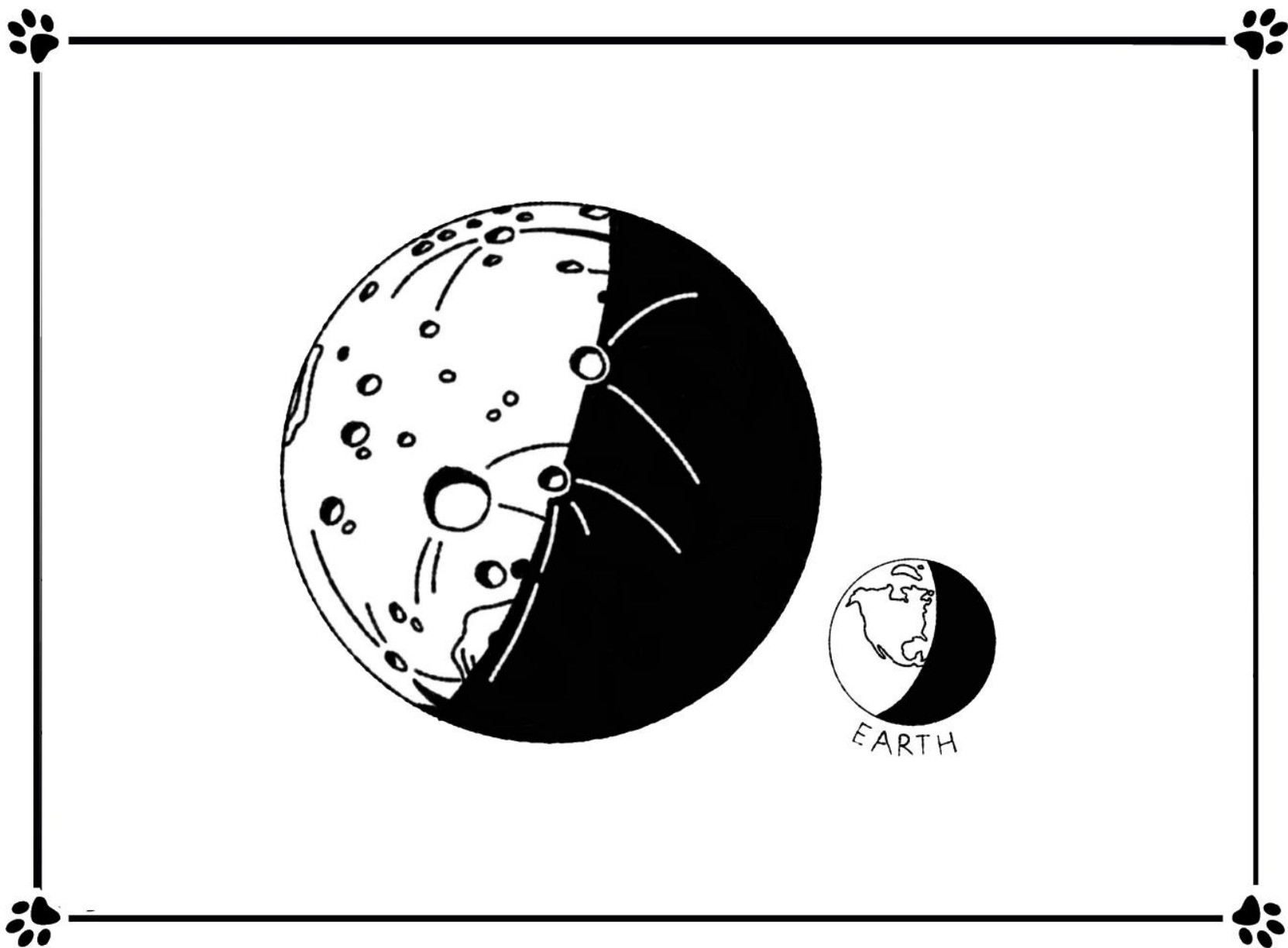
“Slow down,” said a second voice. They took turns answering Finchy’s questions.

Mo and Finchy learned that The Voices don’t have a head or body. They can travel anywhere they want and have already visited hundreds of different galaxies throughout the universe. Although they can see and hear, they can’t taste, smell, or touch.

“Everyone travels to your planet,” said a third voice. “Coming to Earth is like going on vacation. Besides dogs and birds, we also play with dolphins, owls, elephants, horses, and others who have better hearing than humans. Sometimes I even go to school – no one knows I’m there – to learn more about this universe. Did you know that the planet Jupiter has seventy-nine moons? Seventy-nine!”

Mo and Finchy asked them what life was like on the moon.

The Voices told them that daylight on the moon lasts for fourteen straight days and is followed by another fourteen days of nonstop darkness.



Mo knew all about light and dark days. In some parts of his home state, the sun doesn't come out for sixty-seven days during winter. In the summer, it doesn't stop shining – even at midnight – for more than eighty straight days.

"Temperatures on the moon also reach up to two hundred and sixty degrees and drop to two hundred and eighty degrees below zero," said a fourth voice.

Mo and Finchy were glad they lived on Earth.

Then The Voices discussed their plans for the rest of the day, which included watching a penguin race in Antarctica, judging a dance contest among African elephants, and dining with dolphins.

Mo and Finchy waved goodbye, feeling sad that their new friends couldn't stay longer. They also felt a bit jealous. Why couldn't they do those things?

But then they realized how many things they could do that The Voices couldn't do. They could smell flowers, taste chocolate, or hold somebody's hand.

"Now that I think about it," said Mo, "no one can do everything. We all have

something special about us. We just need to find out what that is.”

“Precisely,” said Finchy. “Look at me. I can fly, sing, and build. And Mo, you can. . . you can. . .what exactly is it that you can do?”

Chapter 24

Toto, the Cheater

The pupils in Mo's eyes grew large. His whole body started trembling. He had difficulty breathing.

Mo and Finchy had entered the Ouachita (Wash-i-tah) National Forest. While Finchy was chatting and chirping with other birds, Mo was busy exploring.

What kinds of animals live in this forest? Were they the same as those back home? Are they just as friendly?

Mo began sniffing everything in his path and came across an unusual smell. It wasn't the scent of any animal or even human. He followed it for a long time and then poked his head between two thorny bushes to see what was on the other side.

That's when he saw them.

Two gigantic furry animals with two arms and two legs were standing around a campfire. They seemed a million feet tall. Two smaller animals were running around, chasing each other and laughing. They all walked upright and even looked human. Well, almost.

Mo and Finchy had been riding on top of the delivery truck for almost a day, traveling mostly along Interstate 35 South, seeing highway signs for cities like Tulsa and Broken Arrow. Then the truck driver headed east, stopping in a small village at the forest's edge named Talihina (Tah-luh-hee-nuh).

They overheard several people talking to the truck driver but no one mentioned anything about creatures this large, this hairy, or this scary.

Who were they? What were they? Where did they come from?

“Think they’re friendly?” Finchy whispered to Mo.

One of the smaller animals spotted Mo’s white face between the green bushes and ran straight toward him.

Mo and Finchy froze. They didn’t want to be the animals’ next meal.

“Hey, dad!” shouted the small animal. “We have guests!”

His father walked toward them. While Finchy could fly away without getting caught, Mo could never outrun this enormous creature.

“Good morning,” said the father. “My name is Albert. Want to join us for a late lunch?”

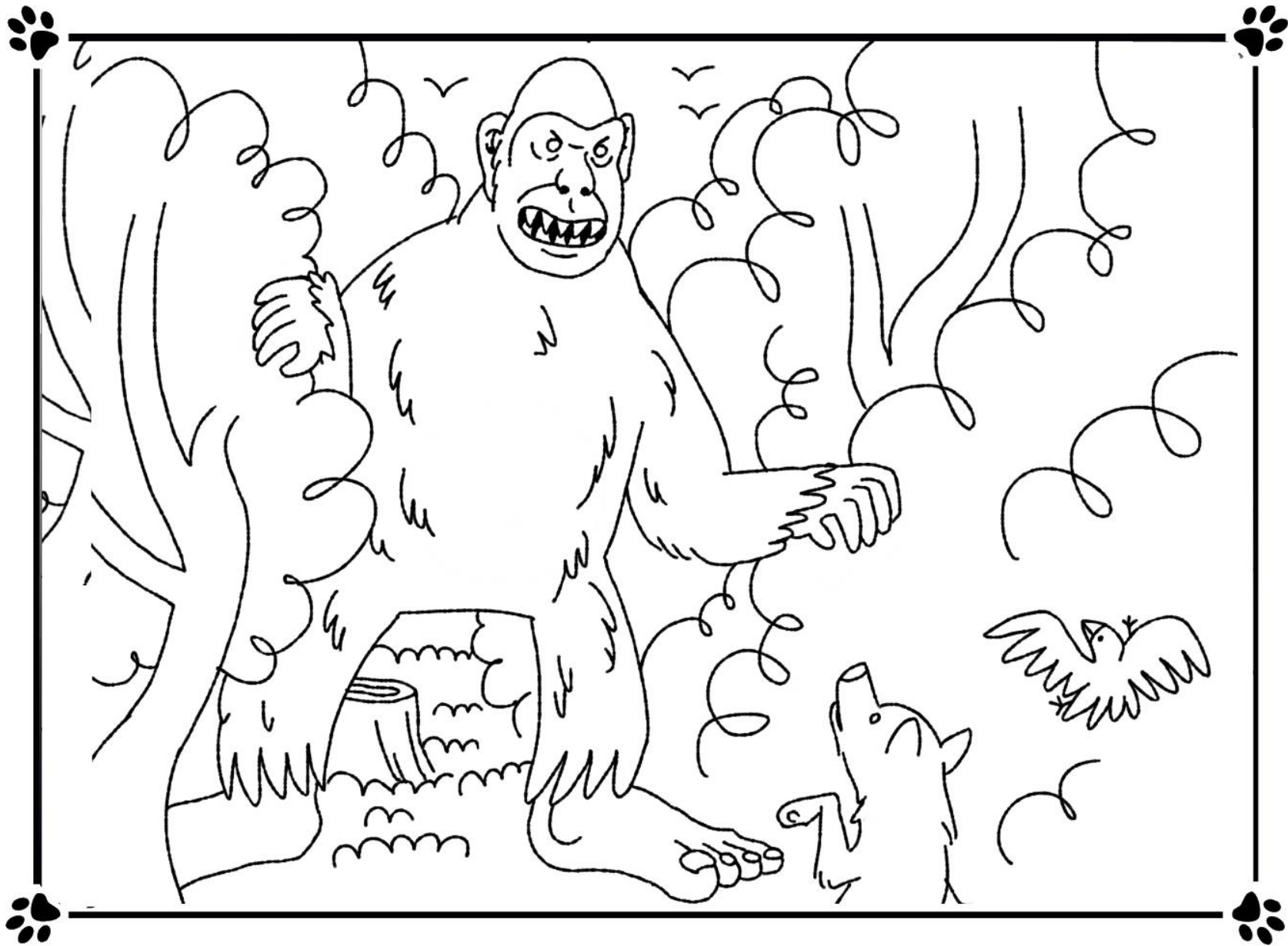
Mo exhaled. He didn’t realize that he had been holding his breath.

“Um . . . um . . . sure,” mumbled Mo, not knowing what to say or do. “My name is Mo and uh, this is my friend, Finchy.”

“We’ve got enough food for everyone,” said Albert whose smile revealed large jagged teeth.

Mo and Finchy followed him to the campfire. He introduced them to his wife, Jade, and their two children, Mara and Clyde. No one in Albert’s family had ever seen a dog.

“Do you feel soft and squishy?” asked Mara. “Most animals don’t let me touch them. They run away every time I come near them.”



“Why are your ears pointy?” asked Clyde. “Why do you have four legs instead of two like me? Why are they short? What it does it feel like to have a tail? Why are you so white? Why. . .”

His questions seemed endless.

“Don’t mind them,” said Albert. “We see many birds but never, well, what exactly are you, Mo?”

“I’m a dog,” he said proudly. “An American Eskimo dog.”

While everyone began eating berries and nuts wrapped in leaves, Albert shared his family’s story.

“Jade and I were born in this forest about one hundred years ago,” he said. “Actually, it may have been longer than that. We lost track of the years. Since we believe every day is special, we really don’t need to celebrate birthdays.”

Mo studied their faces. No wrinkles. Anywhere. Not even one white or gray hair.

I'm only five years old. They don't look one day older than me.

“Humans call us by different names,” said Jade. “The most common are Sasquatch and Big Foot. We travel everywhere. Washington. Idaho. Montana. Utah.

Clyde interrupted his mother.

“Wanna come to our canoe race?” he asked Mo and Finchy. “Everyone will be there.”

Albert explained that many of the local Sasquatch children race canoes in a small river not far from their campsite.

Mo and Finchy had never watched a canoe race. They quickly finished their meal and walked to the river with Albert and his family. A dozen small canoes sat on the river's shore. Mara and Clyde climbed into separate canoes while other Sasquatch children did the same.

“Now remember what I told you to do when you go around the bend,” said Albert as he and Jade gently pushed Mara's and Clyde's canoes into the river.

Moments later, someone shouted, “Ready, set, canoe!”

Mara and Clyde began paddling very fast. Everyone was cheering, especially Finchy, who hovered over them, chirping loudly while excitedly flapping his wings.

But about halfway through the race, Toto, one of the younger children, began slamming his canoe into other children's canoes, trying to push them into the mud or rocks at the river's edge so they'd get stuck and he could win the race.

Mara and several others realized what was happening. They surrounded Toto with their canoes. He couldn't move in any direction. Their self-sacrifice allowed the rest of the children to finish the race. When it was over, Mara, Toto, and the others canoed to the finish line where most of the children and their family members were now waiting.

When Toto climbed out of his canoe, the children surrounded him.

"You cheated!" angrily shouted one young boy.

"You're so selfish," said another. "I'll never trust you again!"



Everyone was staring at Toto, wondering what to do next. Should he be punished? Should he be banned from canoe racing?

To everyone's surprise, Toto didn't apologize. He didn't believe he did anything wrong. What was the harm in wanting to win?

Toto's mother spoke to him in front of the crowd.

“Think of all the bad things that happened because you cheated,” she said. “Your friends may not trust you the next time you play with them. Everyone here is upset because you took the fun out of the race. Now you'll never know if you could have won on your own, without cheating.”

Toto stood silent. He began to understand why cheating was wrong. He stared at the ground. Tears started flowing down his cheeks.

“I'm . . . I'm sorry, so sorry,” said Toto who felt guilty and ashamed. “I didn't know that cheating would make everybody feel this way, especially me.”

Was Toto sincere? Would he cheat again? Did he learn his lesson?

The Sasquatch decided to give him a second chance. But that didn't mean he was off the hook. He still needed to earn back the trust and respect of his family and friends.

It was now time for Mo and Finchy to leave. While walking back to the delivery truck they thought about the valuable lesson Toto had learned.

“I wonder,” said Finchy. “Are you still cheating if you don't get caught?”

Mo smiled. “You'll always know you cheated,” he said. “And that's what counts.”

Chapter 25

Stand Up, Speak Up

“Did they really travel more than nineteen hundred miles?” asked Mo who was a bit skeptical. “On horses? In ten days? Without a cell phone?”

“Absolutely,” said Amigo, a shiny black horse. “They averaged ten miles per hour throughout the day and night. The route started here, in the Show-Me state, and snaked through Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, and Nevada, ending in California.”

Mo and Finchy were sitting in a horse barn at the Pony Express Museum after traveling along Interstate 49 North for nearly six hours. Every Thursday afternoon, many of the local animals gathered in this barn to tell stories about the Wild West. Mo and Finchy were joined by a rabbit, squirrel, raccoon, fox, porcupine, and skunk.

Today was Amigo’s turn to share a story. He was telling them about the Pony Express, a company that was created in 1860. It hired more than one hundred

horseback riders to deliver letters and important papers to people throughout the Midwest and West. The mail delivery route was more than nineteen hundred miles long.

“Every ten to fifteen miles, they would change horses, and then after seventy-five miles, maybe even one hundred miles, they would hand off their letters or papers to another rider,” explained Amigo. “Since the horses had to run very fast, only those who weighed less than one hundred and twenty-five pounds could be riders.”

The animals blurted out many questions. Did they ever get lost? Were they attacked by bears or mountain lions? Did they fall off their horse? Were children ever riders?”

Amigo told them that the youngest rider was eleven years old. Although his real name was Charlie Miller, everyone called him Bronco Charlie.

“He worked as a sailor, a cowboy, and could tame wild bucking broncos,” Amigo said. “On his first ride with the Pony Express, he traveled fifty miles by himself, part of it at night, through rocky mountains in cold, blinding rain.



Mo trembled at the thought of traveling alone in a strange place, in the dark, and in the cold rain.

“That just proves that anyone, at any age, can be brave and do something important,” said Amigo.

Before continuing, he heard footsteps.

“Someone’s coming,” whispered Amigo to the animals. “Quick. Everyone hide.”

All of the animals scattered throughout the barn. Some hid under a pile of hay or behind several saddles. Finchy flew to the top of a hay loft while Mo hid behind a feed storage chest.

One young girl named Emily entered the barn. Two others – Ava and Karen – were following her.

“I really think that you’re the ugliest girl at school,” said Ava to Emily.

“Yeah, just look at your stringy hair and thick glasses,” said Karen.

“Even your clothes are ugly.”

“Leave me alone!” Emily shouted. “You’re just jealous because I’m smarter than you. I got an A on that spelling test and you didn’t!”

Ava laughed. “You know, everyone feels the same way we do. Olivia, Isabella, Kensey . . .” She rattled off more names of students at their school.

By now, Emily had spotted her cell phone that had fallen out of her pocket earlier that morning when everyone from her class was touring the barn. She picked it up off the ground and started walking out the door.

But Ava blocked her. The animals in the barn didn’t know what to do. They were scared.

“I’m not afraid of you!” shouted Emily.

Ava pushed her so hard that Emily lost her balance and fell on the ground.

Without thinking, the animals rushed out of their hiding places to help Emily.

They surrounded Ava and Karen, backing them in a corner of the barn. Emily ran out the door.

“What do we do now?” whispered a squirrel.

“They’re so much bigger than us,” said Finchy.

“And stronger,” added Mo.

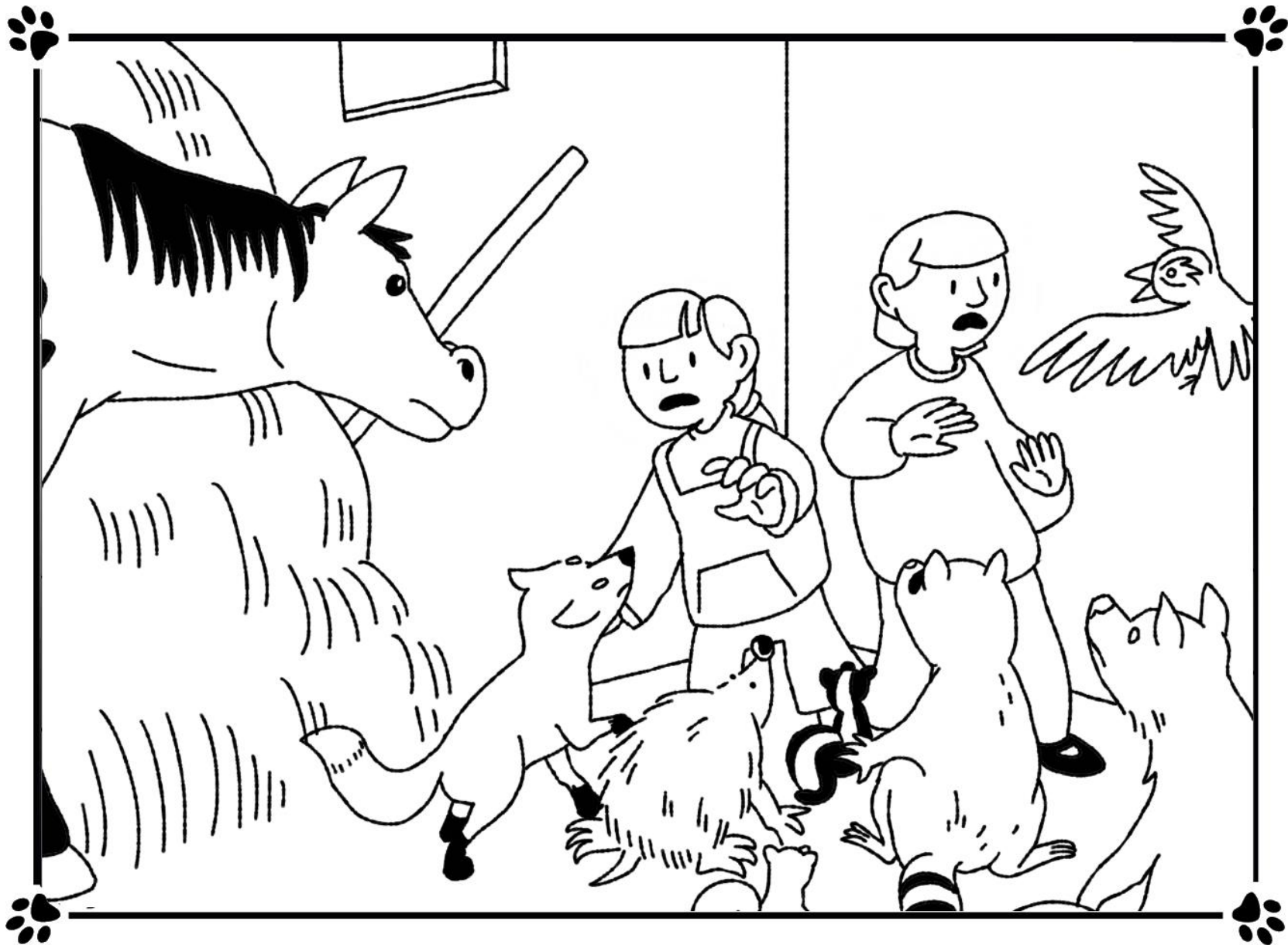
The animals explored their options.

“Maybe someone should get the teacher,” said the porcupine.

“Or one of the parents that went on this school trip,” said the fox.

Ava and Karen tried to walk past the small animals. But Amigo walked over, blocking their path.

“Do you have any idea what’s happening,” whispered Ava to Karen.



Karen shook her head back and forth. Both girls were afraid.

“What did we do to make them so mad at us?” Ava asked. “Think they’re angry because of how we treated Emily?”

Mo started barking. Finchy began chirping. The rest of the animals spoke, making their own special sounds.

Ava and Karen looked at each other and began to understand that what they did to Emily was wrong. They knew it. Even the animals knew it.

They apologized to the animals, promising to never be mean to Emily again or anyone else. The animals believed them and let them pass.

But as they approached the barn door, Ava turned around and said, “We fooled you! We don’t like Emily and never will!”

The skunk, who was standing near them, wasn’t very patient or forgiving. She had heard enough. She lifted her tail and sprayed both girls with an awful smelling stench.

They both jumped back in surprise, wondering what had just happened.

“We smell awful!” shouted Karen. “Everyone will make fun of us!”

The girls ran out of the barn trying to rid their hair and clothes of the horrible smell.

All of the animals turned toward the skunk.

“Why are you looking at me that way?” she asked. “I didn’t do anything that I haven’t done before.”

Everyone laughed, knowing that Ava and Karen will now think twice before being mean to Emily or anyone else.

They chatted for several minutes about how scared they were of Ava after she pushed Emily.

“But you overcame your fear to help someone you didn’t even know,” said Amigo. “You were very brave and would have made great Pony Express riders.”

As Mo and Finchy headed back to the delivery truck, Finchy asked, “Think those girls learned anything?”

“Don’t know,” said Mo. “But I sure did. I learned how important it is to stand up and speak up, not only for yourself, but for anyone who needs help. Even though you may be scared on the inside, acting brave on the outside is sometimes all you need to do.”

Chapter 26

The Science Fair

It was early morning when Mo woke up. He was surprised to see the parts of a toaster scattered everywhere on the truck's roof.

“The toaster shot my toast out like a rocket taking off from its launchpad,” said Finchy. “So I took it apart to see if I could fix it.”

“What’s wrong with it?” asked Mo who knew nothing about how toasters worked. “More importantly, do you know how to put it back together?”

Finchy ignored Mo’s questions. “I was hoping we could fix it together,” he said. “Oh, and uh, I think one of the parts fell off the roof. Do we have any glue?”

For nearly the past five hours, Mo and Finchy had been traveling on top of the delivery truck along Interstates 35 North and 80 East, passing highways signs for cities named Des Moines, Davenport, and Cedar Rapids. They were traveling in a

state that was bordered by two rivers – the Missouri River to the west and the Mississippi River to the east.

The truck pulled into the parking lot of an elementary school. The words, *Science Fair*, were written across a big banner hanging above the school's front doors.

Mo and Finchy had never attended school. Everything they knew was passed down from generation to generation. Why couldn't humans do the same? Why did they have to go inside the same building, on the same days, at the same time, to learn? They wanted to see for themselves what made school so special.

But Mo knew he couldn't just walk through the front doors. He had to disguise himself – again. He didn't understand why dogs were never allowed in many of the same places as humans. They were just as smart as people, much easier to get along with, and not nearly as fussy.

The school's principal greeted the truck driver. They opened some of the boxes in the back of the truck that contained T-shirts and caps with the school's name on them.

The truck driver loaded several boxes on a dolly and headed toward the back door with the principal. Now was Finchy's chance. He ripped open two boxes inside the truck and snatched a cap and T-shirt for Mo, the same costume he usually wore to

conceal his identity as a dog. But this time, Finchy made sure the T-shirt was big enough to cover Mo's fluffy tail.

After looking almost human, Mo walked into the gymnasium. Finchy followed, perching himself on one of the lights that hung from the ceiling.

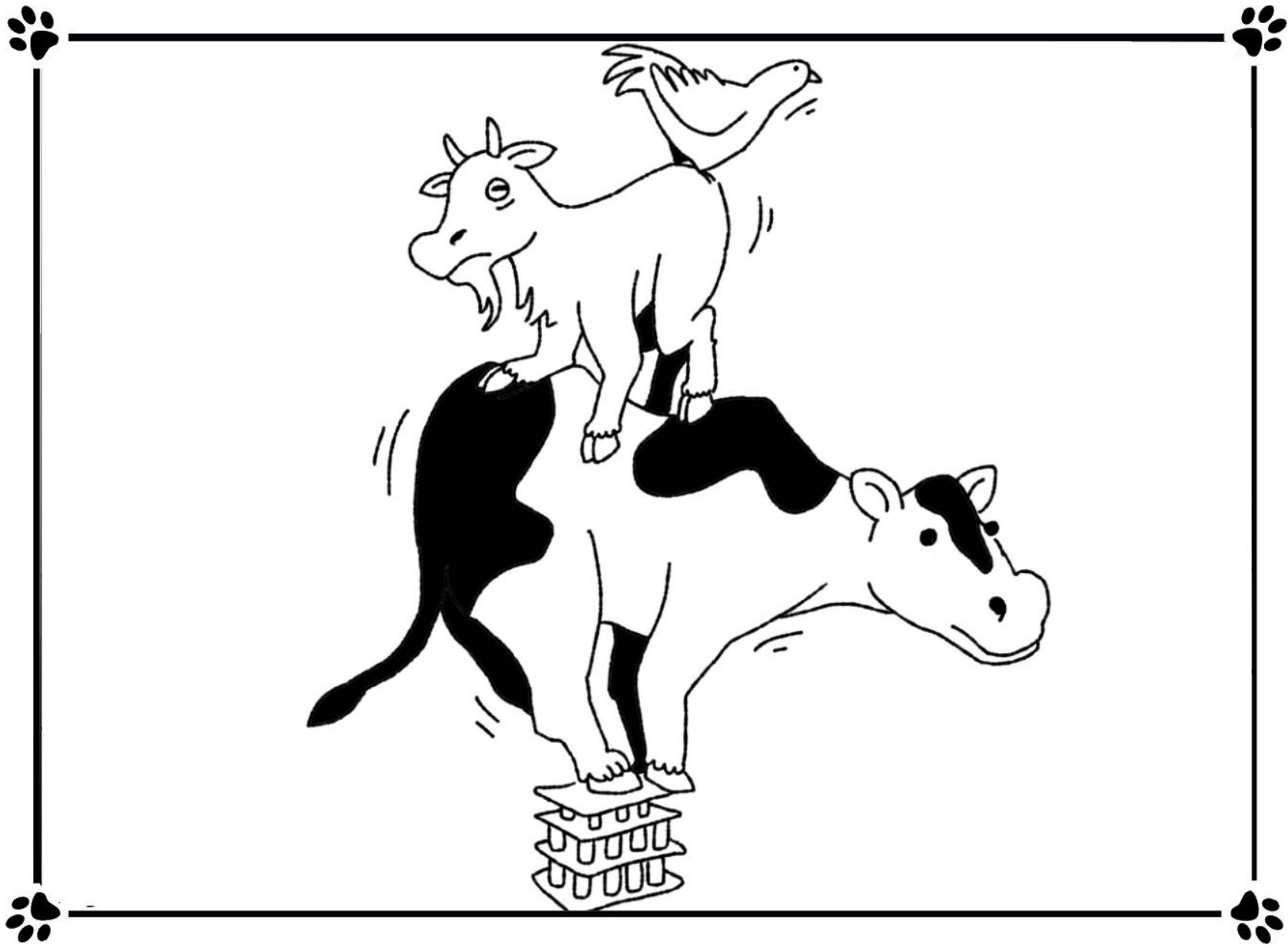
More than fifty children of all ages were standing by tables placed around the room, showing off something they created like a thermometer, balloon-powered rocket, or model of the Earth's layers. One student defied gravity with magnets and paper clips.

Mo sensed the excitement in the air. He was hoping to learn more about how the natural world worked from these very smart kids.

“Know where you can find most of the Earth's liquid water?” asked one student to the small group of people surrounding her. “Here's a hint: It's not in the rivers or lakes and is home to nearly every living thing on this planet.”

Mo's favorite project was made by a second-grader named Jamie. He built a tower out of index cards that was so strong that animals could stand on top of it!

As Mo continued looking at other projects, he overheard two students talking.



“I heard that Jamie’s father made his tower,” said Mark to his friend Scott. “He’s an engineer.”

“That’s not fair,” said Scott. “Let’s tell Mr. Blake. He’s standing right over there.”

The two boys approached Mr. Blake, one of the teachers at the school. Mo followed, curious about why they were so upset.

“Mr. Blake,” said Mark. “Josh told me that Jamie’s father built his tower, that Jamie didn’t do anything. Jamie should be kicked out of the fair.”

“Yeah, I heard that, too,” said Scott, who had only heard this from Mark moments ago.

Mr. Blake was Jamie’s teacher and knew this was nothing more than mean gossip. So he decided to find out how this rumor got started.

He first spoke with Josh who learned from Sam that Jamie’s father built the tower. Sam heard from Mia that Jamie’s father only built part of it. Mia heard from Charlotte that Jamie and his father built it together.

“That’s not what happened,” Charlotte told Mr. Blake. “Jamie built it all by himself.

All I said was that his father is an engineer so Jamie knows a lot of stuff about building things.”

By now, the ugly rumor had spread throughout the school. Some students stopped by to see Jamie’s tower. One called it stupid. Another threatened to knock it down.

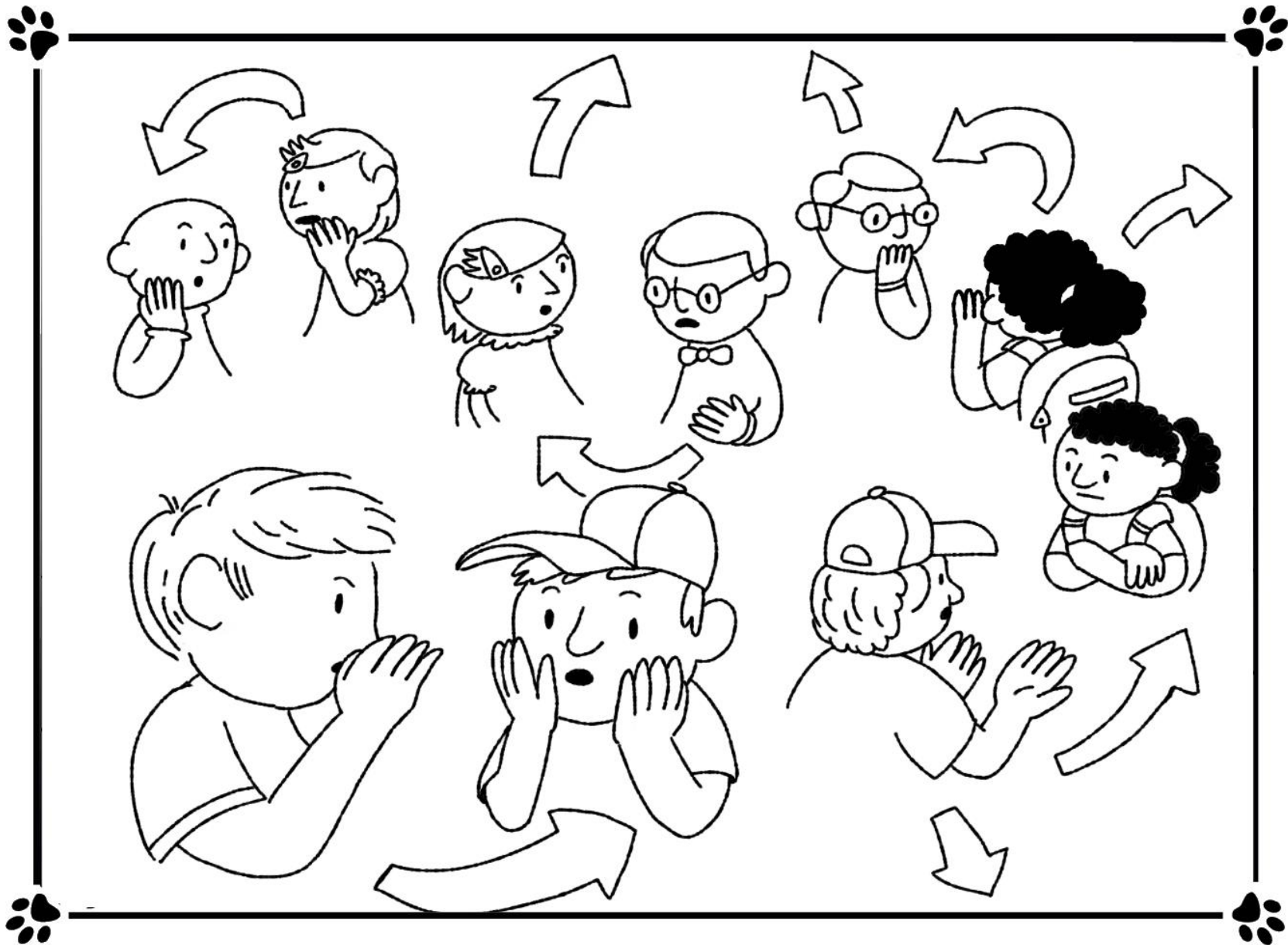
Jamie was upset. He spent a lot of time working on this project. He was very proud of it and hoped he would win first place for his grade.

Why is everyone being so mean to me?

Mo overheard Jamie explain to many different people how he made the tower and why it was so strong. If his father had built it, Jamie wouldn’t be able to answer their questions.

But how could Mo share what he observed? How could he prove that Jamie really built the tower by himself?

Mo had an idea. He borrowed a cell phone on a nearby table and recorded a video of Jamie explaining his project in detail to a group of adults.



Then he connected the cell phone to a projector by the stage at the front of the room. After Finchy turned off the lights, Mo turned up the volume and aimed the projector toward a big screen on the stage.

Suddenly, everyone was watching Jamie answer questions about his project. Some were really hard. But he answered all of them correctly.

When the video ended, everyone in the room was silent, especially Mark and Scott. Some people started clapping. Then more and more clapped until everyone in the room was cheering for Jamie.

Mr. Blake explained to Mark and Scott that what they heard was simply gossip.

“You didn’t bother to find out if what you heard was true,” said Mr. Blake. “Still, you told others. They spread it to their friends who then spread it to more people. It made Jamie upset and now some students may not believe or trust him.”

Mark and Scott felt very bad about what happened.

“I think you both owe Jamie an apology,” said Mr. Blake.

“I’ve got a better idea,” said Mark.

Mark and Scott walked over to the microphone on the stage.

“Uh . . . hello . . . everybody,” said Mark. “Scott and me think Jamie should win first prize for his project. It’s really cool. Oh, and uh, Jamie built it all by himself. No one helped him. For real.”

Jamie was shocked, especially when Mark and Scott apologized for what they did. Then all three carried the tower to the stage so everyone could see it.

While many first, second, and third place ribbons were awarded to students in each grade, Jamie got his wish. He won first place for second-graders.

“When we get back home, Mo, we should make something great – really great – and enter it into a science fair,” said Finchy. “Every brilliant scientist will want to see it.”

Mo didn’t respond. He didn’t want to crush Finchy’s dream, no matter how silly it sounded.

“I’m serious,” continued Finchy. “We could find a way to make rain go up instead of down so there won’t be any more floods, or ooh, I know, make all the water in rivers and lakes taste like chocolate.”

Mo laughed. “I think we make better explorers than scientists,” he said. “We can’t even figure out how a toaster works.”

Chapter 27

Hazel, the Chipmunk

Mo and Finchy couldn't believe their eyes. Right there, right in front of them, was a man and woman wearing matching T-shirts with the word *Florida* printed on them.

Mo and Finchy spotted the couple while traveling on a ferry across Lake Huron to a place called Mackinac Island. Much earlier that day, they had been riding on top of the delivery truck for more than nine hours, mainly on US Highway 151 North. After the truck driver delivered packages to a variety of places – the GarLyn Zoological Park, Icebreaker Mackinaw Maritime Museum, and Fort de Buade Museum – he decided to visit the island overnight and hopped on the ferry with Mo and Finchy close behind.

During the twenty-minute ferry ride, Mo and Finchy stayed near the man and woman, hoping to overhear something, anything at all, about Florida.

Instead, they learned several things about the couple. They were married and lived in Florida. They bragged more about their two dogs than teenage children, which Mo

thought was perfectly understandable. The man eats chocolate ice cream topped with peanut butter. Yesterday, the woman accidentally swallowed a fly.

After the ferry docked, all the passengers headed toward the Grand Hotel. Its lobby was packed. Mo and Finchy hid near the registration desk and then followed the truck driver and couple up the staircase to the second floor. As luck would have it, their rooms were across from each other.

“I think I left my cell phone at the registration desk,” said the husband to his wife as she unlocked the door. “I’ll be right back.”

After she entered the room, Mo ran inside and hid under the bed. His brain was working overtime. *What should I do? Is it wrong for me to hide under their bed? Maybe I’ll hear something about Florida. Would that be spying?*

Shortly after the husband returned, the couple left the room. Mo unlocked the door to let Finchy inside so they could discuss their next move.

Should they follow the couple around the island? Should they approach them directly? If so, what should they say? Should they ask other guests at the hotel how to get to Florida?

They decided to leave them a note.

Dear Man and Woman from Florida:

*We're trying to get to Florida but have no idea where it is. Please write the directions down on this sheet of paper and then leave it outside your door. We will pick it up later.
Thank you, Mo and Finchy*

Then they left the hotel room to explore the island, which sits between the state's upper and lower peninsulas. There was so much to do. They could swim in the hotel's pool, bicycle around the island, which was about eight miles around, or even play pickleball, a sport that combines tennis, badminton, and ping-pong.

They decided to visit the spa. It was a long time since either of them had a bath.

When they walked in, several young women were standing near the entrance.

"Do you have an appointment?" said one woman.

The others laughed.

“Hey Liz, guess who walked in to get their nails done?” said the same woman.

Liz, the spa manager, came toward them.

“Oh, that must be Sheila’s dog,” she said. “She said he was white and fluffy and asked us to groom him. But she didn’t say anything about a bird.”

No matter. Mo and Finchy were escorted to a back room where they both were washed, brushed, and blow dried. Mo’s fur was whiter than a marshmallow and Finchy’s wings were so fluffy that he appeared twice his actual size. Then they each had a pedicure while eating chocolates.

“When we get back home, I’m going to open a spa like this,” whispered Finchy to Mo. “And I know just the tree to build it in.”

They left the spa and headed downtown to visit the art studios and galleries and walk around the shopping district. They noticed a chipmunk across the street gathering acorns. Mo and Finchy introduced themselves.

“We’re on our way to Florida,” boasted Finchy.



The Chipmunk, named Hazel, replied, “F-l-o-o-r-a what?” Then she lifted up her left paw and pointed to a spot slightly above the tip of her paw. “This is where we are now.”

Mo and Finchy looked confused.

Hazel explained that they were in a state shaped like a human’s hand. The state also bordered four Great Lakes – Lake Huron, Lake Michigan, Lake Erie, and Lake Superior. There was a fifth Great Lake but she couldn’t remember its name. But she knew that when you took the first letter of each lake’s name, it spelled HOMES.

She held up her paw once more, but this time, pointed to a spot on the lower right side. “This is where I was born, in Detroit.”

Mo and Finchy had never heard of the place. She told them that’s where humans build cars. It was also the first city to give people personal phone numbers and the only one in the entire country with a floating post office.

She invited Mo and Finchy to her family’s home, a burrow or underground space with many rooms and tunnels. But Mo couldn’t fit. He was way too big so they spread out on a patch of grass nearby.

“What’s it like to live here?” asked Mo.

“Well, in the winter, it’s really, really cold, “ said Hazel. “We sort of hibernate, relax or sleep most of the time. We only leave our home every few days to eat and, of course, go to the bathroom.”

She explained that her family collects seeds and nuts from all over the island and stores them in their burrow. “My cheeks are like shopping bags,” she said. “I can stuff up to five acorns in them at the same time. One time, I collected over 150 nuts in just one day.”

Mo and Finchy never met anyone who carried food in his or her cheeks. Was Hazel making this up?

“Let me show you,” she said, knowing they didn’t believe her. She scrounged around the ground for acorns and shoved five in her mouth. Her cheeks bulged to three times their normal size.

“Mycheefu,” said Hazel. Mo and Finchy had no idea what she said because her mouth was so full. Hazel spit out the acorns and said her cousin once stuffed six in his mouth at once. “But they got stuck and we had to pull them out one by one,” she explained.



The three friends sat on the grass near Hazel's home, basking in the warm sun. They chatted about how they should spend the rest of the day.

"Let's have some fun," said Finchy. "How about a contest to see who can gather the most nuts? Mo and me against you, Hazel."

"What does the winner get?" she asked.

They sat in silence for a few minutes.

"I know," said Mo. "If you win, Hazel, you get to keep all the nuts. We'll even move them to your front door. But if Finchy and I win, you have to find us dinner, even if it means climbing into the dumpsters behind the restaurants."

"You're on," said Hazel. "By six o'clock, whoever gathers the most nuts, wins."

They split up and began hunting. In the grass. Around the trees. In the flower beds.

By six o'clock, they stopped hunting and began counting.

Hazel's pile had seventy-two nuts while Mo and Finchy had only gathered twenty nuts.

“No offense, but you’d make lousy chipmunks,” said Hazel.

Mo and Finchy placed their pile of nuts on a stained tablecloth they found in a dumpster behind a restaurant. They each grabbed an end and moved the nuts to the entrance of Hazel’s home.

“That was the most fun I had since my mean cousin was chased by a bat,” said Hazel who still wanted to hang out with Mo and Finchy. “Let’s eat dinner together at my favorite dumpster. In the mood for Italian?”

The dumpster was overflowing with food. They stuffed themselves with spaghetti, meatballs, pizza, and other Italian food that no one could pronounce.

It was getting dark. Mo and Finchy said goodbye and thanked Hazel for a wonderful afternoon.

After arriving at the hotel, they went straight to the couple’s room. A note was on the floor outside the door. Mo read it out loud:

“To get to Florida, head south and then a little east. You will cross four states before entering Florida.”

They were only four states away! But which states? What were their names? How could they get the truck driver to take them there?

“Can you believe it?” said Finchy. “We’re so close!”

“We can finally return the key to its rightful owner and complete our mission,” added Mo.

Suddenly, they both became quiet. Their journey would soon come to an end. No more visiting exciting places. No more making new friends. No more hanging out together.

Right then and there they made a decision. Florida could wait. They were simply having too much fun. They would continue riding on top of the delivery truck, knowing they would eventually get to Florida.

“I really need to return to the spa,” Finchy said. “My nail polish is chipping. I’m not crazy about the way she styled my left wing. And what’s up with this blue bow stuck on my head?”

Chapter 28

Mo Learns a Lesson

“Strike three!” shouted the umpire after a racoon swung at a ball that bounced off the ground.

“You’ll do better next time,” said Mo to the racoon, trying to cheer her up.

Mo and Finchy were playing in a baseball game. But it wasn’t just any game. It was animal-style.

Their team – the Four Paws – were playing against the state champions – The Fast Tails. Every player hit the ball with their tail. The players out in the field were birds who tried to catch fly balls while soaring through the air. The umpires were big black bears that no one argued with unless they wanted to see their huge fangs.

The day before, Mo and Finchy had traveled for more than nine hours nonstop on top of the delivery truck. They passed signs for I-75 South, I-69 west, and for cities

named Lexington, Frankfort, and Louisville. The state they were visiting was bounded by the Ohio River in the north and the Appalachian Mountains in the east.

After driving for most of the day, the truck driver stopped at a hotel for the night. The next morning, he drove to the Louisville Slugger Museum & Factory.

“What the heck is that leaning against the building?” Mo asked Finchy as the driver began unloading boxes from the back of his truck.

“You’ve never seen a baseball bat before?” said Finchy rather surprised. “Ever hear of a sport called baseball?”

Mo shook his head back and forth. Back home, people and animals played and competed in all kinds of sports. Skiing. Snowmobiling. Fishing. Sled dog racing. He had never heard of baseball and was amazed at the bat’s size. It towered over the museum’s roof and seemed to touch the clouds.

Finchy explained the game to him, telling him that he and his bird friends watch baseball games every summer while perched on stadium lights. “But the bats people use are much smaller,” he said.

A woman come out of the museum and shouted to the truck driver, “Hey Alex, were you able to pick up those extra supplies we need?”

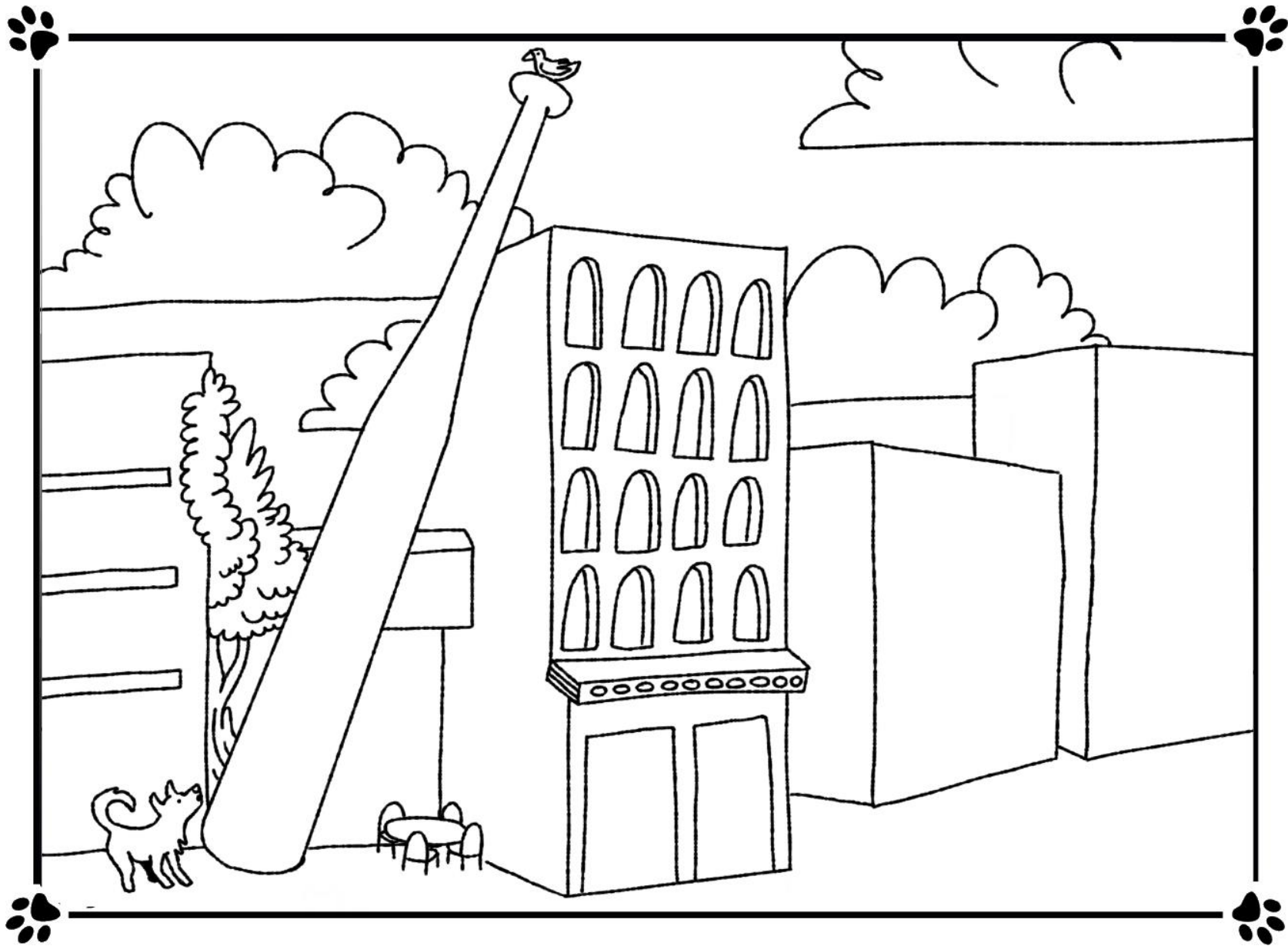
Mo and Finchy looked at each other. They had been traveling on top of this delivery truck for a very long time and never knew the driver’s name – until now.

“Makes sense that his name is Alex,” said Finchy. “He’s always yapping on his cell phone. Probably named after Alexander Graham Bell.”

As Alex and the woman entered the museum, Mo climbed down the ladder on the delivery truck and walked toward the huge bat at the museum’s front door. Mo sniffed it, touched it. Then he looked up – way up – titling his neck all the way back to see Finchy sitting on top of it.

Mo noticed a big brown dog walking toward him. He introduced himself as Tank.

“Ever play baseball?” he asked. “Our third basedog quit. Something about not enough treats after the game. I was hanging around the museum in hopes of finding animals that like baseball and could play in a game today.



Mo didn't know what to say. No one had ever invited him to play on their team. He wasn't exactly, well, good at sports—any sport.

“We also need a left fielder,” Tank said to Finchy. “Interested?”

Mo and Finchy talked it over and decided to play. Since the game wouldn't start for another two hours, Tank offered to coach them.

They walked to a small baseball field a short distance away. There were many dogs, racoons, birds, and squirrels gathered in different spots on the field. Some were moving their tails this way and that way, trying to perfect their swing. Others were playing catch or chased each other around the bases.

After Tank introduced Mo and Finchy, he made good on his promise. For the next two hours, he showed Finchy how to grab fly balls with his claws and taught them when to swing at balls, how to steal bases, and warned Mo against chasing some of the smaller players around the field for fun.

It was time for the game to start. The Four Paws were up to bat. Jackson, a tiny black dog, dug his four legs into the dirt, and swung as hard as he could, hitting the ball

smack down the center of the field. Both the second and third basedogs couldn't grab it fast enough so Jackson made it to first base.

It didn't take long before the bases were loaded. Tank was up next and hit a home run. Just like that, the Four Paws were leading four to nothing.

But the next player struck out.

"Why did you swing at that ball?" shouted Tank to his teammate, a racoon. "It hit the ground! And your tail was straight up in the air. Next time, curve it."

A large spotted dog named Duke batted next.

"Strike one," shouted the umpire.

"Stay balanced!" shouted Tank.

As hard as he tried to hit the ball, Duke still struck out. Suddenly, the team had two outs. One more out and it would be the other team's turn to bat.

Mo was up next. He tried very hard to remember everything Tank taught him. *Curve my tail. Dig in my front paws for balance. Stand on the toes of my back paws to improve my swing.*

The first pitch zoomed past Mo's face.

“Strike one!” shouted the umpire.

Mo thought playing this game would be easy. Not much to it. Hit a ball and then run. Well, this wouldn't be the first time he was wrong.

The next pitch whizzed by Mo's face so fast that he didn't even swing. But the third time, Mo hit the ball, which slowly rolled toward second base. The second basedog was too busy chasing a frog to notice. Mo safely made it to first base.

The small crowd began cheering Mo's name. He was thrilled and then bowed before the fans.

Finchy flew over to Mo to give him advice.

“Don't steal second base,” he said. “I've seen this happen before. The pitcher

pretends to throw the ball to the batter but suddenly turns around and throws it to the second basedog. You'll get caught in a pickle or be stranded between two bases."

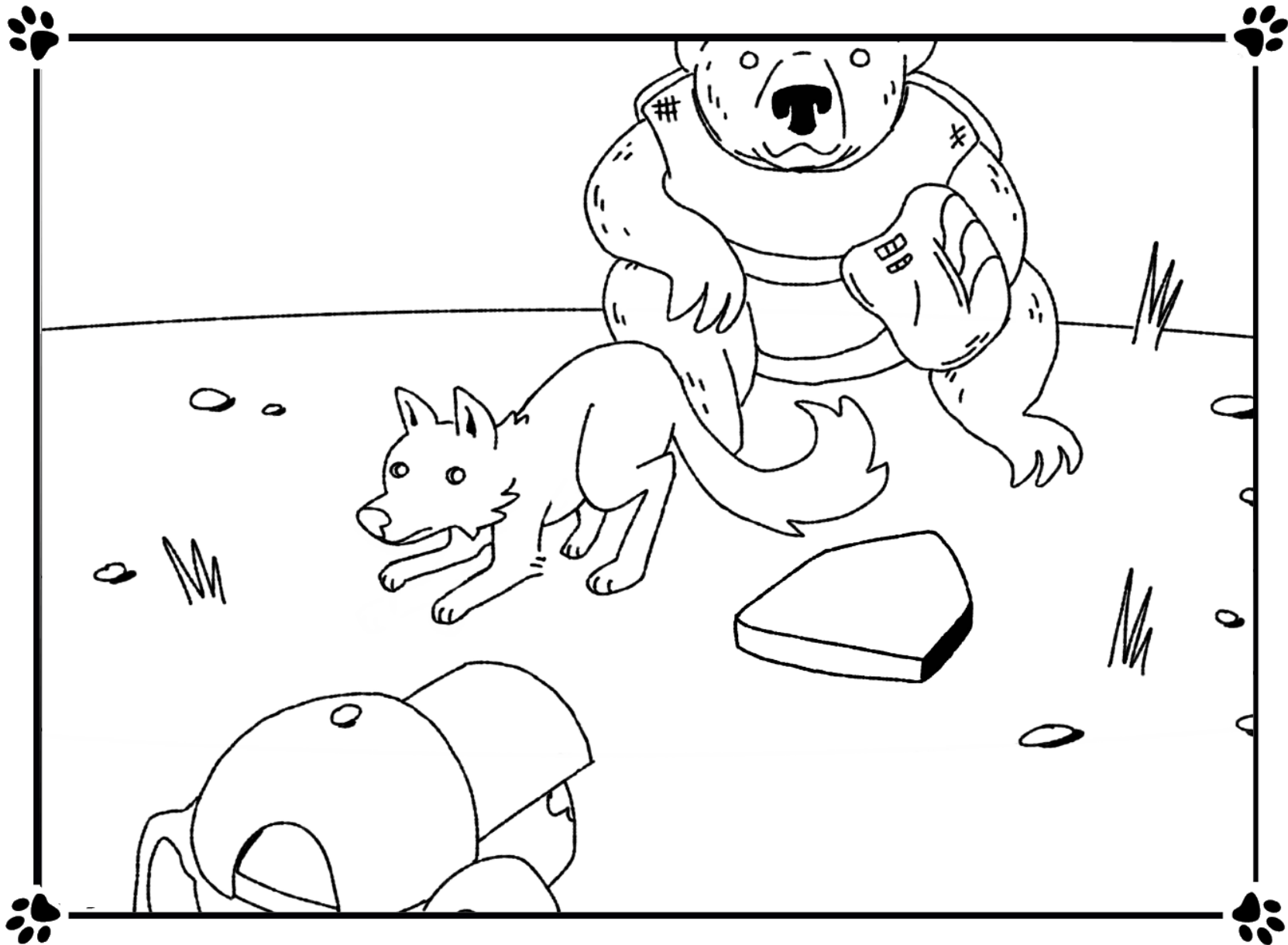
Mo was too excited to hear anything Finchy told him. As soon as the pitcher pretended to throw the ball, Mo did exactly what Finchy told him not to do – he ran toward second base.

The pitcher threw the ball to the second basedog. After catching the ball, the dog ran toward Mo. So did the first basedog. They kept throwing the ball back and forth to each other while squeezing Mo in the middle. It only took a few moments before the umpire shouted, "You're out!"

Mo froze. How did this happen? I made it to first base. I'm a fast runner. How can I be out?

"Mo, c'mon, get off the field," whispered Finchy to Mo. "You're embarrassing me."

Mo looked around and saw that everybody was staring at him. He ran off the field with Finchy close behind.



Tank approached Mo.

“Why did you try to steal second base?” he asked Mo. “I told you not to do that.”

Mo stared at the ground, not knowing what to tell him.

“The second basedog didn’t seem to be paying attention,” said Finchy, trying to get Mo out of hot water. “She was digging a hole.”

“It’s a trick she plays on new players,” Tank said. “And you fell for it.”

Tank walked away angry.

Mo felt bad, really bad. He was warned twice – by Tank and then again Finchy – not to steal second base. But he thought he knew better. He was full of himself and wouldn’t listen to anyone’s advice.

The baseball game had two innings. The Four Paws ended up winning, five to four. In the last inning, a batter on the Fast Tails hit the ball so far that many animals began cheering, believing it was going to be a home run. But Finchy caught it while flying through the air.

The players on the Four Paws wanted Finchy to join their team. But they didn't ask Mo. Finchy politely turned them down, explaining about his journey with Mo to Florida.

“Why didn't you listen to Tank or me about stealing second base?” asked Finchy as Mo and him walked back to the delivery truck.

Mo was silent. He felt ashamed.

“My uncle's favorite saying is, ‘Some birds are better at hunting worms than others,’” said Finchy.

“What do worms have to do with this?” asked Mo, rather confused.

Finchy ignored Mo's question. He talked endlessly about the best way to find worms, which ones were the tastiest, and how many he could stuff in his tiny mouth at once.

Mo lost patience and interrupted Finchy's never-ending chatter.

“What was your uncle trying to tell you?” asked Mo.

“That someone may know more than you, be better at something than you, or have a better idea,” Finchy said. “That’s why we need to listen to each other. Except when it comes to my Aunt Helen. She thinks she knows everything about everything. Never listens. Just talks, talks, talks. Can you believe I’m even related to her?”

Chapter 29

Bella and Nessie

Mo and Finchy were standing next to a very tall statue of Big Foot. It stood near the entrance of a building that had a sign with a very long word on it.

“Except for his height, he really doesn’t look anything like our friend, Albert, or any of his Bigfoot relatives or friends,” said Finchy to Mo.

Mo stared hard at the statue’s face. Finchy was right. “Maybe one of Albert's friends, someone we didn't meet, did something special,” said Mo, knowing that humans honor people and animals who are brave, smart, or help others.

They peaked inside the front door. Only one man was inside, chatting with a woman. He wore dark sunglasses and a large dog sat by his side.

Mo and Finchy entered what looked like a museum and introduced themselves to the dog named Bella.

She quickly pushed them behind a glass case. “Animals aren’t allowed,” she whispered.

Mo and Finchy looked at each other confused. “But you’re here,” said Mo.

“That’s because I’m a special dog,” said Bella. “I’m a seeing-eye dog.”

Bella explained that dogs like her are trained to guide people who are blind. They help them walk around town, cross streets, and avoid things they could trip over or bump into so they can do more things on their own.

Mo and Finchy had never heard of a seeing-eye dog. “So you’re allowed inside every building?” asked Mo. “Even stores and restaurants?”

“Yep,” said Bella. “I’ve been training for this job my whole life. The man next to me – his name is Jason – is my best friend. And I’m his. We go everywhere together.”

Mo imagined himself guiding someone down a crowded street, how he couldn’t wander off, stop and sniff something interesting, or run when he felt like it. The more he thought about it, the more he admired Bella’s self-control and devotion.

“So are you here to learn about Nessie,” asked Bella.

“Who’s Nessie?” Finchy asked.

“She’s the Loch Ness monster,” Bella said, rather surprised they had never heard of her. “She lives in a lake, in Loch Ness, Scotland. But I don’t know why humans call her a monster. I heard she’s very nice.”

“Where is Scotland?” asked Finchy. “Is it far away from here? Can we meet her? I never saw a real monster before.”

Bella was silent. She had no idea where Scotland was or how to get there.

“Do you know where we are now or what state we’re in?” asked Finchy.

He then told Bella about his journey with Mo to Florida and how they had traveled on top of the delivery truck for about two days along Interstate 71 North, 80 East, and then US Highway 1. They saw signs for many different cities like Buffalo, Boston, and Portland.

“Hmmm,” said Bella. Let’s see . . . We’re in Portland. Our state is the only one in the

country that shares a border with just one other state. Jason eats lots of lobster and blueberries. Oh, and my favorite food – donut holes – were invented here. That’s everything I know.”

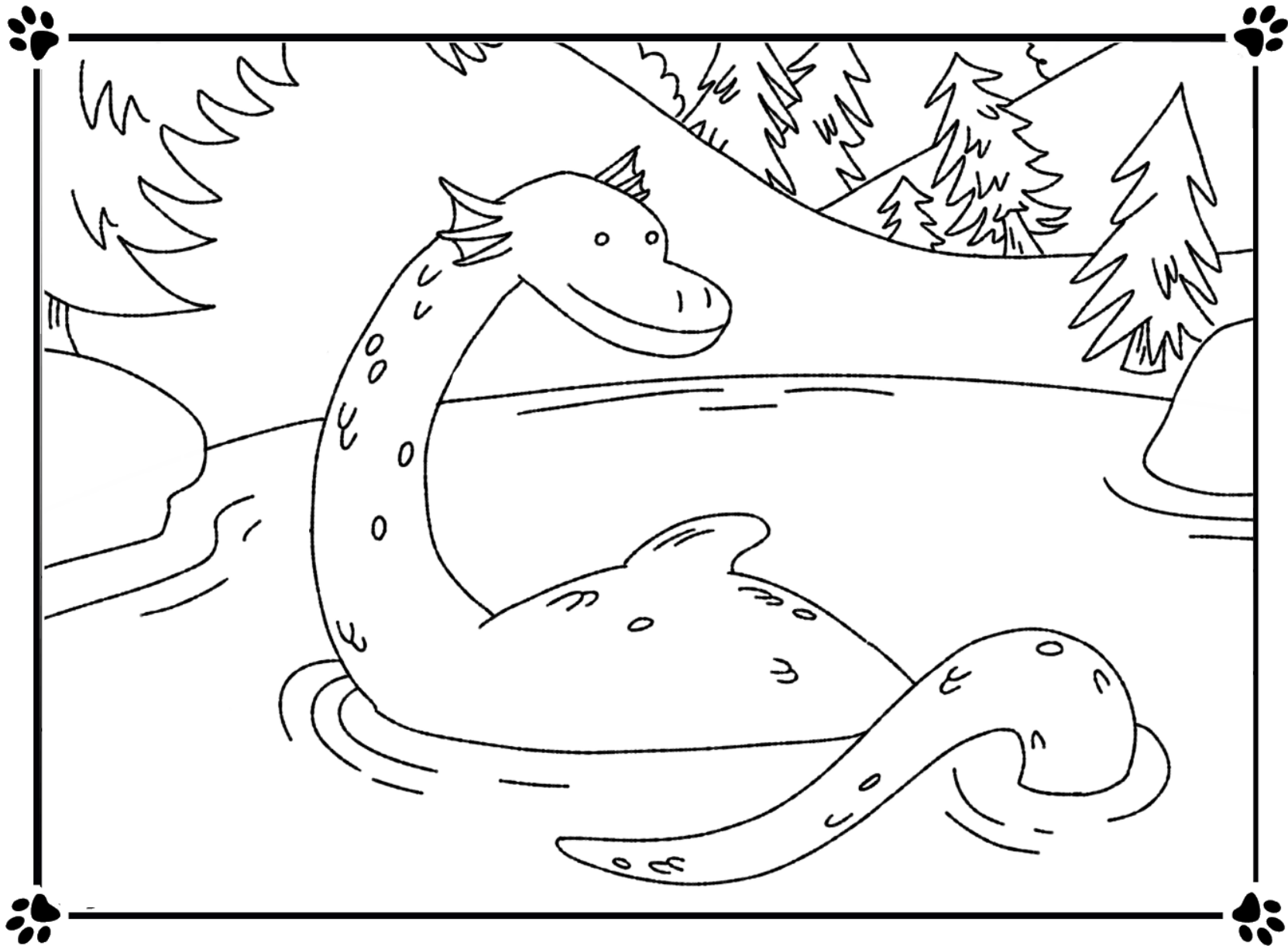
Mo and Finchy looked at each other, wondering how close they were to Florida.

As Alex, the truck driver, unloaded boxes from the back of his truck, Finchy wanted to learn more about Nessie.

Bella told them that Nessie has a small head and long neck that sometimes sticks out of the lake. Even though humans have never seen anything like her, or never spoke to her, played with her, met her family, or even invited her to dinner to learn more about her, Bella said that some were afraid of her.

“Why would they be afraid of someone they didn’t know or know anything about?” Bella said. “Nessie is very nice and very shy. She doesn’t even know what kind of creature she is. She says, ‘I’m just Nessie.’”

“How do you know all of this?” asked Mo, not fully convinced that Nessie was even real.



Bella told Mo and Finchy that her friend, Maggie, came from Scotland. Now Maggie has a friend whose cousin's neighbor visited the lake one time and met Nessie.

“Maggie said she can't figure out why everyone is so interested in her or why some people call her a monster,” said Bella. “That really hurts her feelings.”

“Well, we met Big Foot, his family, and all of his neighbors,” boasted Finchy. “They're very friendly. They just look scary because of their big size.”

Bella's ears perked up. “Really?” she said. “I'll bet Jason would like to know where they live, even meet them.”

Mo changed the subject to prevent Finchy from revealing where Albert and his friends and family lived. They liked their privacy.

“Tell us more about this place,” he said. “What does that big word mean on the sign by the front door?”

“Oh, you mean cryptozoology,” she said. “It's the study of hidden and unknown animals like Nessie. Some humans believe in them, some don't. Nessie is real but I'm not sure about any other creatures.”

They chatted for a few more minutes before Bella had to leave. Finchy wanted to see how she guided Jason and asked if he could watch. Bella told Finchy to hop on her back. Mo walked behind them.

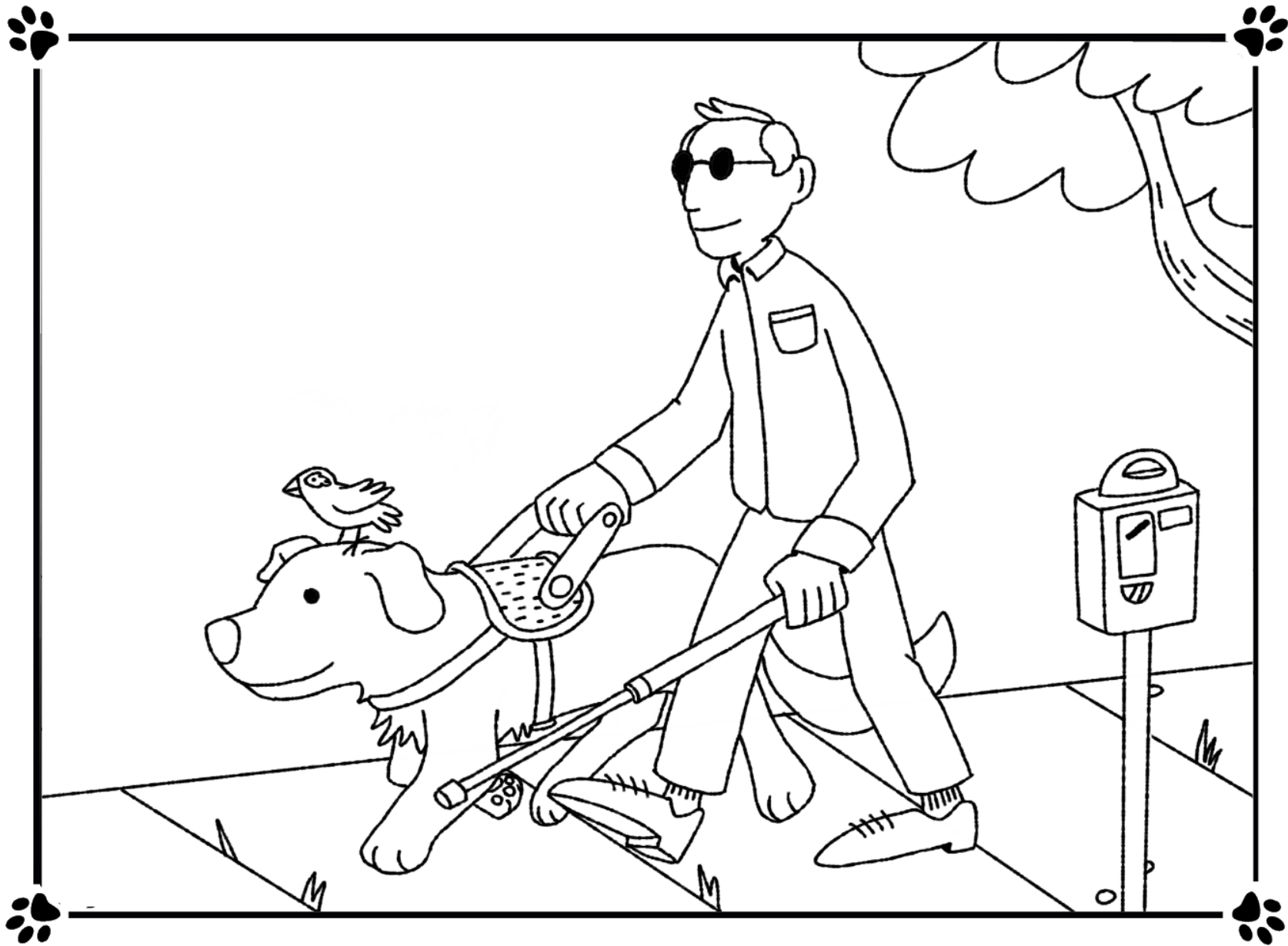
Bella walked in a straight line while Mo zig-zagged, sniffing this bush and that tree. Bella stopped at every curb, which signaled to Jason that he needed to step down to avoid falling or tripping. She also stopped at every traffic light, and guided him while turning corners and around trees, garbage cans, or signs.

Mo and Finchy didn't realize how much Bella had to learn and how good she was at her job.

They soon parted ways. Bella waved goodbye with her tail before turning the corner.

“I'll bet I could guide humans,” said Mo. “You just need to pay attention to everything around you.”

“You're on,” said Finchy while hopping on to Mo's back. “Walk back to the delivery truck as if you're Bella. “Should be easy, right?”



For the first few minutes, Mo did everything Bella would have done. He stopped at the first curb and first light and walked around a bush. Suddenly, a stray cat shot out from behind the bush, which scared Mo. He ran so fast down the sidewalk that a low tree branch knocked Finchy off Mo's back. Then Mo crossed the street in the middle of the road, not at the crosswalk as Bella would have done.

Finchy was a bit dazed. He stood up, shaking his head back and forth. He then looked around for Mo. He spotted him on the other side of the street and flew over to where he was standing.

“What the heck happened?” Finchy asked.

“Let's just say that humans need to make a giant statue of Bella,” he said. “Some things are never as easy as they look.”

Chapter 30

The Cow Who Wanted to be a Doctor

“I can’t believe you ate that whole bag of chocolate chip cookies!” complained Finchy to Mo. “There’s not even one crumb left for me.”

Finchy held the bag upside down so Mo could see that it was empty. Mo didn’t mean to eat all of the cookies. He just wanted a snack. So he ate one cookie, and then another, and another. Before he realized it, they were all gone.

“I’m sorry,” said Mo, who had a really bad stomachache. He handed Finchy a bag of potato chips that was hidden underneath his pillow. “Here, eat these instead.”

Finchy snatched the bag away from Mo. After stuffing his tiny mouth with chips, he mumbled, “I’m still mad at you.”

That morning, Mo and Finchy had been riding on top of the delivery truck for more than two hours along Interstate 95 South, passing signs for cities named Andover,

Boston, and Marshfield. Then Alex, the truck driver, pulled off the highway and headed toward a city named Plymouth. Soon, Mo and Finchy found themselves in a strange village. Small wooden houses, each with a chimney, stood next to each other on both sides of a long dirt path. A wooden fence also lined each side of the road.

After Mo climbed down the ladder on the side of the truck, a group of cows was waiting for him.

“Quick, come with us,” said a cow named Annette. “Dogs aren’t supposed to be here. Just walk in the middle of our group. No one will see you because we’re much larger than you.”

The animals headed toward a field that was filled with more cows and also sheep and goats. They were all curious about their new visitor and formed a circle around Mo.

Mo couldn’t figure out if the animals were happy to see him or not. Just then, Annette asked Mo his name and why he had come. Mo introduced himself and Finchy and then told them about their mission to Florida, how they planned on returning a very important key to its rightful owner.

“What does the key unlock?” asked one sheep.

“Don’t know,” said Finchy. “But it must unlock something very important.”

“I’m going to be very important,” boasted a cow named Arnold. “I’m going to be a veterinarian. That’s a medical doctor for animals.”

All the animals rolled their eyes. Some even mooed – loudly.

“Arnold, you’ve been saying that forever,” Annette said. “But you have never applied to vet school. And watching doctors treat animals with minor problems isn’t the same thing.”

Other cows and sheep nodded in agreement.

Arnold looked embarrassed so Mo changed the topic. “Where are we?” he asked. “It seems like we stepped back in time,” added Finchy.

The cows, sheep, and goats laughed. They each took turns explaining to their new friends about where they were and a group of people who lived in England a long time ago called the Pilgrims.

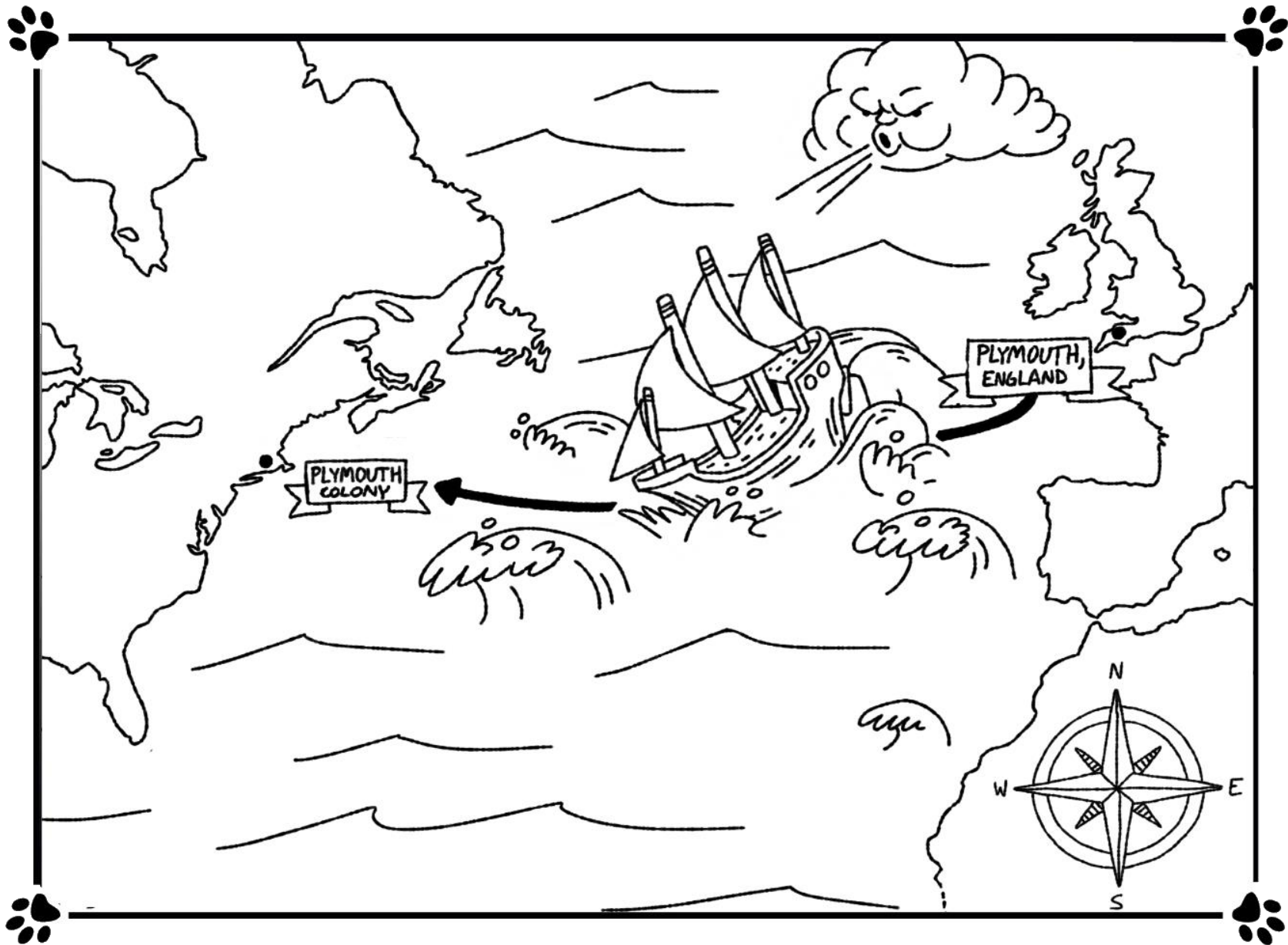
Mo and Finchy learned that in 1620, the Pilgrims set sail from England on a big ship

called the Mayflower. One hundred two very brave men, women, and children traveled across the Atlantic ocean for sixty-six days. The ocean's waves were giant. The ship rocked back and forth, side to side. They didn't have much to eat or drink. No other ship was in sight.

Annette continued: "The Pilgrims hoped to start a new life in a place called the New World, which is now the country we live in – the United States of America or USA. They arrived in Plymouth, where we're standing now, but found that people were already living here. They were Native American Indians who taught the Pilgrims how to hunt, fish, and grow vegetables. The Pilgrims were grateful for their help and kindness. So the following year, after a good harvest, the Pilgrims invited their new friends to a giant feast, which was this country's first Thanksgiving."

Mo was impressed. *I don't know if I could live on a ship for that many days. I would probably get seasick.*

"So they lived in small wooden houses like those?" asked Finchy, pointing to the houses in the village.



“Uh-huh,” said Annette. “People come here from all over to see how the Pilgrims lived. The Pilgrims weren’t lazy. They had to work very hard every day at gardening, building, and cooking.”

“Sounds like the Pilgrims and Native Americans learned from each other and shared everything they had – even chocolate chip cookies,” said Finchy as he turned toward Mo.

Mo’s white furry face turned bright red. The animals didn’t respond, knowing that Finchy’s comment was aimed at Mo. Besides, they had never seen or tasted a chocolate chip cookie.

Now that story time was over, Annette and the other animals wandered farther into the field. Some took a nap. Others relaxed, munching on grass and flowers.

But Arnold stayed behind.

“So you want to be a medical doctor for animals?” asked Finchy. “Why don’t you go to school? There’s got to be plenty around. Since you’ve watched other doctors treat animals, seems like you have a head start. There’s no way I could ever be a doctor.

Hate the sight of blood. Always pass out. It's so embarrassing. My aunt's that way. So is my second cousin on my father's side of the family. And my . . ."

"I think what my friend is trying to say," interrupted Mo, "is that you have the interest and the opportunity. So what's stopping you? I'm sure your community could use another veterinarian."

"Well, uh, I never told anyone this before," said Arnold while staring at the ground. He waited a few seconds before continuing.

"It's just that . . . I'm afraid . . . afraid that I'll fail," he said in a very low voice. "I don't know if I'm smart enough."

Mo and Finchy looked at each other, wondering how they could help him feel more confident or certain of his abilities.

Finchy had an idea.

"You think it's easy to fly?" he asked. "No siree . . . I tried over and over again. My parents even threw me out of our family's nest – twice. But I kept at it, flapping my wings over and over. It took a while but now I'm an expert at flying."

Arnold still wasn't convinced.

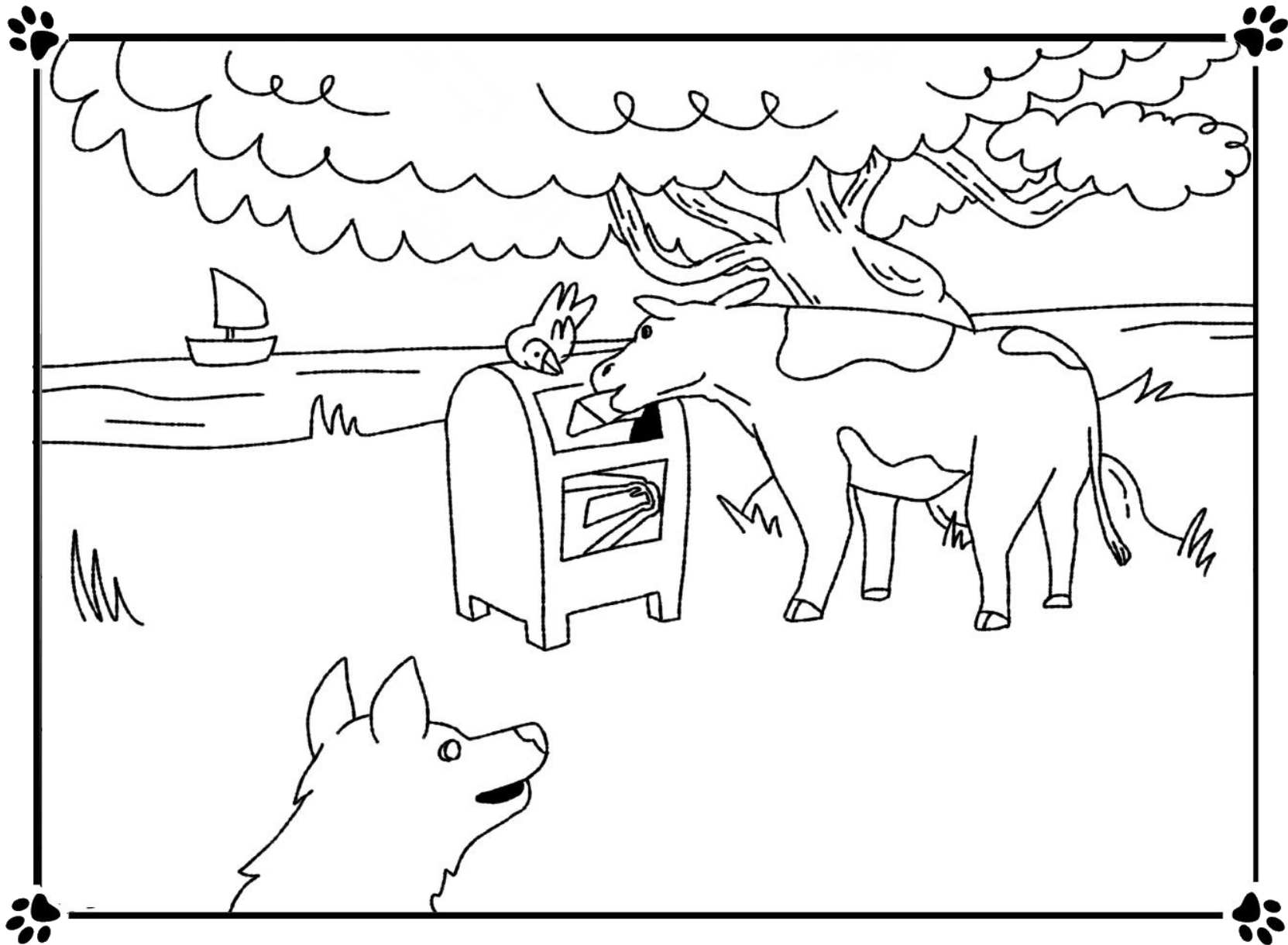
“Look at it this way,” said Mo. “You and your friends told us a magnificent story about the Pilgrims. They went on a big ship across rough ocean, not knowing what they would find, who they would meet, or if they'd get lost and never see land again. I'll bet they were scared, even terrified. Still, they went. They probably failed at lots of things. But they learned. They worked hard. And they made it.”

“Do you really think I'm smart enough?” asked Arnold.

Finchy nodded. “The only way you'll fail is if you don't try your best.”

The rest of the afternoon, Mo and Finchy helped Arnold fill out his application to a veterinarian school. Then Mo and Finchy watched him drop it in a nearby mailbox.

Before saying goodbye, they thanked Arnold and asked him to thank everyone else for the great history lesson.



“Ya know,” said Mo. “I should have asked Arnold to check my stomach. It still hurts. I’ll bet he could have told me what was wrong and what to do.”

“You don’t need a doctor for that,” said Finchy. “I’ll tell you what’s wrong. You ate too many chocolate chip cookies. And here’s the cure: next time, share!”

Chapter 31

Being Nice to Someone Mean

The doors slammed shut. Mo and Finchy didn't know where they were or what to do.

They were stuck inside a very long train that was traveling very fast underground and jam-packed with hundreds of humans. They didn't know where they were going or how they would ever find their way back to the delivery truck.

Mo and Finchy clung to each other. The rumbling of the train shook their bodies. Mo looked at the people around him. One young woman had purple hair. One man stood in the center of the subway car playing the violin while passengers threw coins in his violin case. Others spoke in at least four languages that Mo and Finchy had never heard before.

Earlier that day, Mo and Finchy had been riding on top of the delivery truck along Interstate 95 South for more than four hours. They crossed three state lines and saw highway signs for many cities, including Newport, Stamford, and Yonkers.



Alex, the truck driver, drove onto a crowded street. Hundreds of very tall buildings stood on both sides of the road. There was bumper to bumper traffic for miles in every direction. The sidewalks were crowded with thousands of people who all seemed in a hurry to get somewhere.

How many humans are there? Could there possibly be more humans than dogs? Mo trembled at the thought.

Alex drove down a one way street and then stopped behind a big hotel. A man was waiting for him on the dock. While still on the truck's roof, Mo and Finchy overheard their conversation.

“Have dinner plans tonight?” asked Alex. “I loved that Mexican restaurant we went to last time I was in town.”

Mo and Finchy now knew they had the rest of the day to explore. After both men walked inside the hotel, Mo climbed down the truck's ladder and began walking down the street with Finchy.

They spotted a sign that said, “Subway” next to a staircase. After climbing down the

steps, Mo and Finchy were pushed inside the long subway car by a large group of people. The doors closed before they could get out.

The only human who paid any attention to them was a man reading a newspaper. He removed his briefcase from the seat next to him so Mo and Finchy could sit down. He didn't even say, "Hello".

A few moments later, a dog approached them.

"I never saw a dog or a bird ride the subway before," said the dog. "I spotted you entering the subway car. "My name is Trouble. What's yours?"

Mo was relieved to find someone he could trust. A dog. After introducing himself and Finchy, he told her about their mission to find Florida.

"Is that a state?" she asked. "I don't know anything about Florida, but I can tell you some things about this state."

Trouble told them that it's bordered by five other states, another country, and two really big lakes. The first capital of the United States was in this state. It was also the

first one to give people a license plate for their car. Even the first pizza place opened here more than one hundred years ago.

“So where are you going?” asked Finchy.

“I’m headed to the Theater District for an audition,” she said. “I’m an actor trying out for a new play that I read about in Barkstage.com. There’s a brilliant part for a dog that will probably steal the show. I’ve been studying my lines all week long. Why don’t you come with me? I could use the support.”

Mo and Finchy thought it would be fun. They had never been to an audition. While riding the subway train for the next thirty minutes, Trouble told them all about herself.

“I’ve performed in eight Broadway plays,” Trouble said, adding that she started acting when she was a puppy. “I played dogs that were a gymnast, brain surgeon, drummer, chef, astronaut, superhero, waitress, and race car driver. I can also tap dance using all four paws, howl in three languages, juggle, and roller skate.”

Mo and Finchy had never met anyone so talented.

After the train stopped, the doors to the subway car opened. They walked upstairs to the street with Trouble and then headed to a theater on Broadway.

They entered the backstage door. Many other dogs had already arrived.

“See that black dog over there, the one with the red bow on her head?” whispered Trouble to Finchy and Mo. “Her name is Princess. She’s difficult to get along with. Just plain mean.”

Princess spotted Trouble and walked over to her.

“I don’t know why you bothered to come,” said Princess. “You know I’m much a better actor than you.”

Mo and Finchy wondered why Princess acted so mean.

Just then, a dog twice their size walked backstage.

“Listen up,” he said. “The auditions will start in thirty minutes. There are eleven dogs auditioning this afternoon. Here’s a list of who auditions first, second, third, and so on. Your number will be called out loud. Pay attention. We won’t call it twice.”

All the dogs gathered around the list that the big dog taped to the wall. Trouble was number ten.

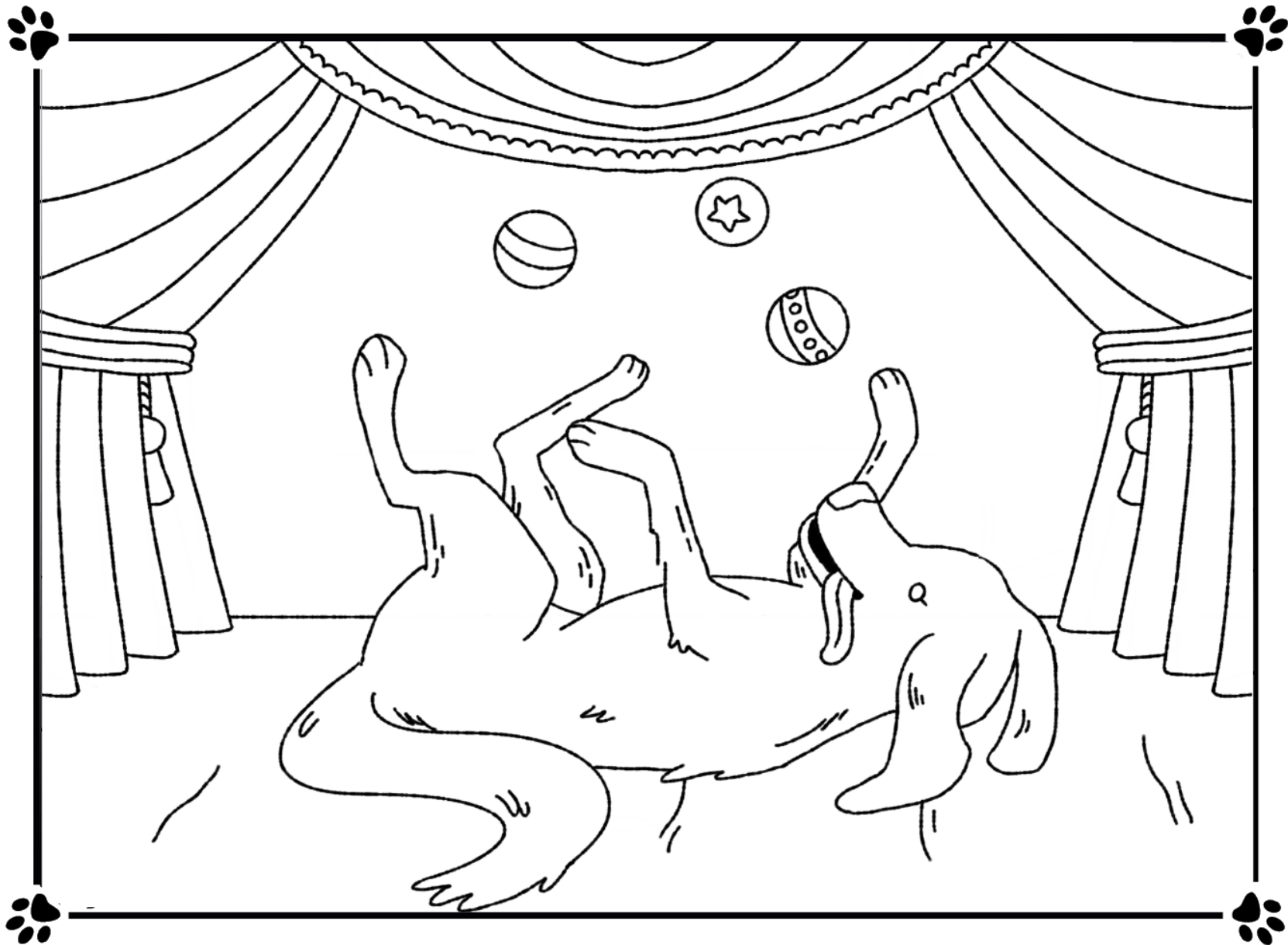
Everyone wished Trouble luck. Everyone, of course, except Princess.

The auditions began. Several dogs forgot their lines. Others disagreed with the director, which Mo later learned was a big no-no when auditioning, even if you're right. Another dog walked on stage but couldn't talk. His mouth was stuffed with part of a sandwich he found in a corner. Some ran across the stage chasing a cat that disguised herself as a dog because she wanted the part.

Now it was Trouble's turn to audition. She said her lines perfectly and, as part of the audition, she had to juggle with all four paws and lap milk from a dish. Overall, her performance was amazing. Mo and Finchy thought she should get an award.

Now it was Princess' turn. She remembered her lines but didn't juggle as well as Trouble. When she started lapping the milk, she spit it out on the floor.

"This milk is sour!" she shouted. "Who would do this to me?" She began crying and ran off the stage.



Trouble, Mo, and Finchy overheard two dogs laughing backstage.

“Did you see her face?” asked one dog to the other.

“Yeah,” said the other dog. “She’s so mean. She deserves this. I hope she doesn’t get the part.”

Trouble approached the two dogs while Mo and Finchy stayed back but within earshot.

“What you did was mean, very mean,” said Trouble to the two dogs.

“Oh, c’mon,” said one of the dogs to Trouble. “Princess is mean to everyone, including you. We just wanted to be mean back.”

“Because you were so mean, you’re no better than Princess,” said Trouble.

The two dogs didn’t know what to say. They never thought of it that way. They simply wanted Princess to know how it felt when someone was mean.

Trouble spotted Princess sitting in a corner, still in tears.

“Princess,” said Trouble. “I’m so sorry this happened. Those dogs were mean to you. I’m sure the director will give you another chance to finish your audition.”

Princess was touched by Trouble’s kindness. “Why are you being so nice to me?” she asked. “I’m always mean to you, to everyone.”

“There’s no reason to be mean,” Trouble said in a gentle tone. “It’s easy to be nice and feels much better.” Then Trouble gave Princess a hug.

The director walked backstage. He told the two dogs to leave the building, that they were banned from future auditions, and privately chatted with Princess.

Then he said in a booming voice to the rest of the actors, “Thank you everyone for coming. While many of you are very talented, we’re giving the part to Trouble because she was the best juggler.”

Trouble was thrilled. Mo, Finchy, many of the other dogs, and even the cat dressed up like a dog hugged Trouble. Surprisingly, so did Princess.

Now Trouble could feel good twice – once for getting the part and twice for being so nice to Princess.

Mo and Finchy hugged Trouble one more time before saying goodbye and then walked back to the subway station.

“Ya know, Mo, there are some birds I just don’t like and others – I know this is hard to believe – that don’t like me,” said Finchy. “But we’re always nice and polite to each other. I’m glad Trouble was nice to Princess.”

“Being nice or mean is always a choice,” said Mo. “But being nice always makes others feel good, makes you feel good, and comes back around like it did for Trouble.”

Chapter 32

Show and Tell

Mo and Finchy were peering inside the front window of a giant, white house. Many humans were seated at a big table eating something that smelled warm and wonderful.

Mo's mouth was watering. His stomach was growling. Even Finchy's head was bobbing, which sometimes happened when he was hungry.

The people were eating tall stacks of golden brown circles that were drenched in brown liquid.

"Look how many of those round things they're eating," said Mo. "They must taste great. We have to figure out a way to grab some without anyone knowing it."

Finchy and Mo hadn't eaten anything all day. Not even a cracker. They had been riding on top of the delivery truck for about six hours, mostly along Interstate 91 North. They spotted highway signs for many cities like Hartford, Deerfield, and then Putney right

before Alex, the truck driver, drove off the highway and headed toward this huge house that had a sign above the door: “ILP Inn”.

Mo and Finchy came up with a plan. Finchy would tap his beak against the window, fly a few feet away from the window, and then return as if telling the people to follow him. He did this over and over until one small boy heard the taps and noticed Finchy.

The boy and several others approached the window. Then everyone at the table did and walked outside. One man said, “What does this crazy bird want from us?”

I’m the one who’s crazy? You’re the one who left a delicious meal to follow a bird you don’t even know!

Finchy had to make sure that the people walked far enough away from the house to give Mo enough time to grab some of those round things off their plates. But what could he do?

Finchy had to think fast. He sounded the alarm, calling for help from every bird within earshot. Three birds showed up. They were sisters named Lucy, Mango, and Sunny.

“What do you need?” asked Lucy.

“This better be important,” said Sunny. “I was napping.”

“You’re not from around here, are you?” asked Mango.

Finchy explained the situation, asked for their help, and promised to share whatever food Mo was able to snatch off the people’s plates. He also couldn’t stop noticing Mango’s beautiful orange, black, and white feathers.

“How about doing what we do best?” said Lucy. “Let’s sing.”

They quickly flew to a nearby tree and sat on one of its branches. The people followed. The birds selected three songs and then began chirping in perfect harmony. They took turns performing a solo. Finchy chose his favorite song, one that his mother sang to him when he was very young:

*I love to sing
Don’t ask me why
I love to fly
High in the sky*

Then the sisters performed Swan Lake, a popular ballet. They each twirled, leaped, and even stood on their talons, which are sharp claws at the end of their toes.

Meanwhile, Mo was inside the kitchen, trying to find a bag that would be big enough to hold the food. He spotted several more plates piled high with golden-brown circles and stuffed half of them into a plastic bag. But he left the food that sat on the table and wrote a note:

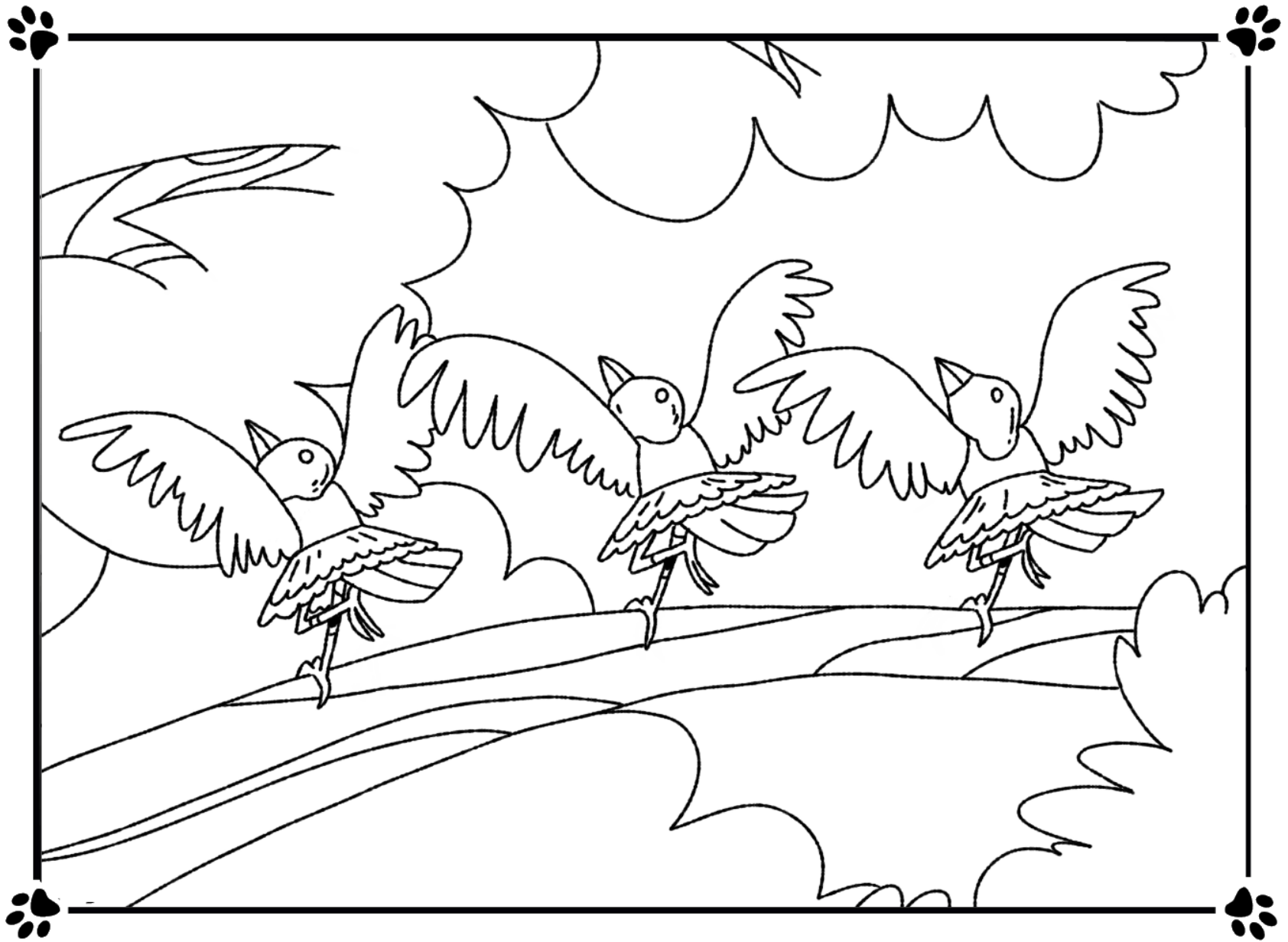
Since you have so much food, I hope you don't mind sharing. In return, I promise to share this food with others. Thank you, Mo.

On the way out, he grabbed a plastic bottle of the brown liquid, just in case. Then he ran outside and hid by the garage.

The concert and ballet had ended. Each of the birds took a bow as the humans clapped and cheered.

“I’ve never seen anything like this in my life,” said an older man.

“You would think they put on a show just for us,” said his wife, as everyone walked back into the house.



Mo ran toward Finchy and the other birds that were behind a very large maple tree. He placed each of the golden brown circles on the ground in rows and then smothered them with the brown liquid.

Then something strange happened. Finchy gave half of his food to Mango. Mo didn't know why but he was too hungry to care. It was only a matter of minutes before all the food was devoured.

"D-e-e-licious," said Lucy. "I especially liked the maple syrup.

"Maple what?" asked Finchy.

Lucy pointed to the empty bottle. "This stuff," she said. "It's called maple syrup. Ever hear of it?"

Finchy shook his head. "What are these round things called?" he then asked.

"Pancakes," said Lucy. "We usually eat them every Sunday with whatever berries we can find. But can't always get syrup, especially during summer."

She explained where maple syrup comes from and how it is made. She pointed to the

tall tree standing next to them.

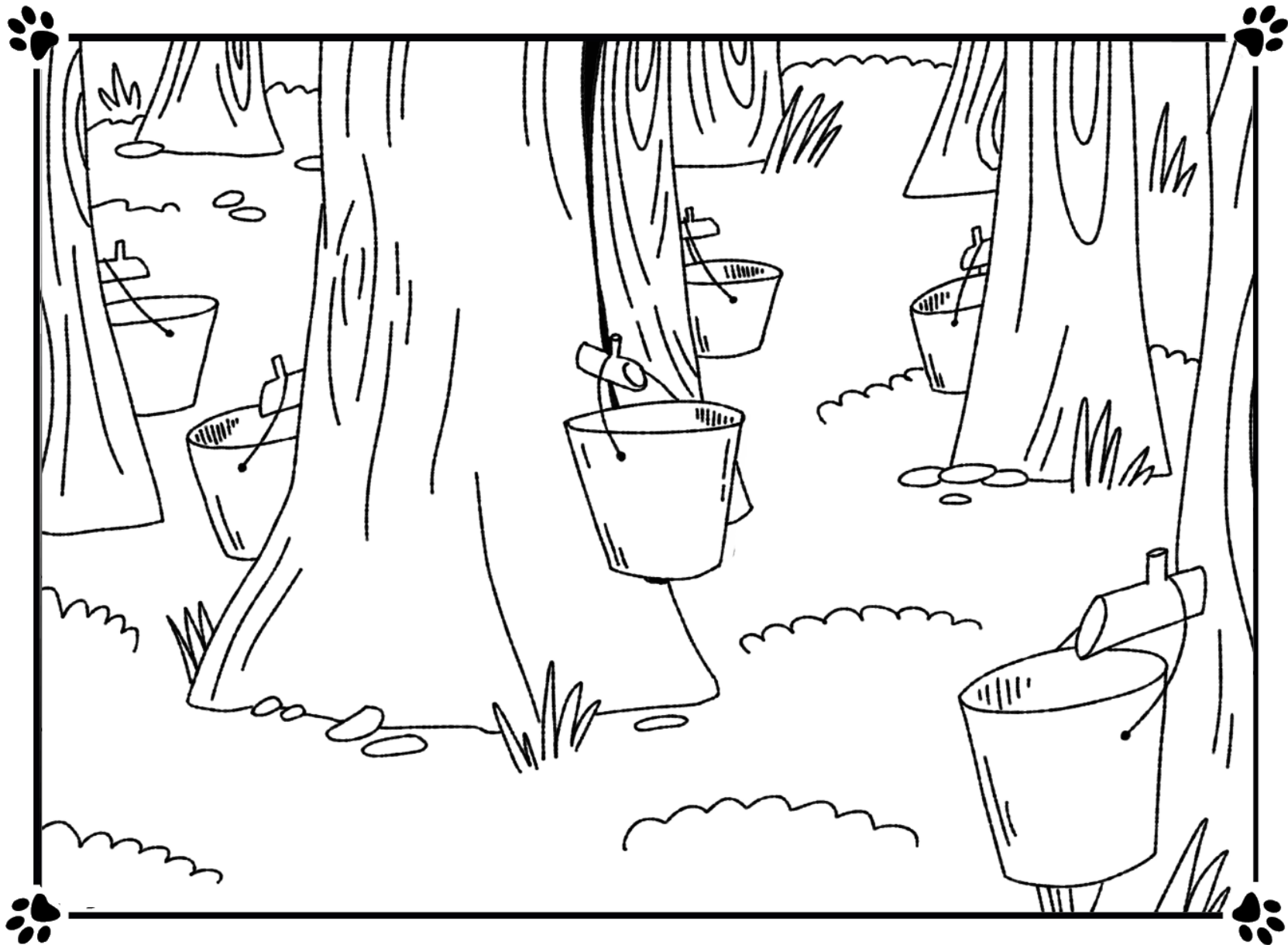
“This is called a maple tree,” she said. “You can always tell by the shape of its leaves.”

Lucy explained how to turn the tree’s sap, which is sticky water, into syrup. She said it flows best from the tree during late winter or early spring, when the temperature at night drops below freezing and rises to around thirty-nine degrees Fahrenheit during the day.

“I’ve watched people do this many times,” she said. “You drill a hole into the tree at an angle— slanting up. Then insert a spout, which looks like a small faucet. Tap the spout gently with a hammer so it stays in place. Attach a bucket to the spout. Now the tree’s sap can flow out of the tree into a bucket. When it’s filled, pour it into a big pot, and boil it on the stove. Then voila . . . you have maple syrup.”

“The maple trees don’t mind?” asked Mo.

“Not at all,” Mango said. “So long as you don’t drill too deep, no more than two inches.”



The three sisters talked about how they pour syrup over everything they eat, including worms.

Mo stretched out on the ground staring at the sky. His belly was so stuffed that he could barely breathe.

“This place is very beautiful,” said Mo. “Do you know what state we’re in or if we’re anywhere near Florida?”

The birds knew all about Florida. They flew there every winter.

Mo rolled over and sat up. Finchy could hardly keep quiet.

“How far away is Florida?” asked Finchy. “Know how to get there? Can I fly there and back in one day? How long would it take to drive there? Is it hot? Are there lots of birds and dogs? Does it have maple syrup? Know a bird named Flo? She’s my cousin. . .”

“Slow down,” said Sunny. “Why are you going there in the summer?”

Mo and Finchy told them about their mission, how they had to return a valuable key to its owner who lived in Florida.

After chatting for a few minutes, the birds then told Finchy that he simply needed to fly south but none of them had any idea how to drive there.

“Well, what state are we in now?” asked Mo.

The three sisters didn’t exactly know but told Mo and Finchy that the state shared a border with three other states and a country and that its name means green mountain in French.

“Oh, and it only has one area code, whatever that means,” said Mango.

Mo and Finchy looked at each other. They still had no idea how to get to Florida but didn’t seem to mind. It was a beautiful, sunny afternoon. They spent the rest of the day talking with the sisters and listening to them brag about how fast and high they could fly.

“I’ll bet that I could fly faster than a jet plane,” said Sunny.

“That’s nothing,” said Mango. “If I had a space suit, I could fly to the moon.”

Finchy couldn’t take his eyes off Mango. *I would gladly go to the moon, even Mars, with*

Mango.

The sisters continued to outdo each other, trying to impress their new friends.

Mo dozed off while Finchy chirped and chatted with the sisters about important matters. They shared grooming tips. They agreed that the water in the rivers and lakes tasted much better than the water in the ocean. Then they wondered why, unlike humans, all birds spoke the same language.

By now, the sun was in the western sky. It was time for Mo and Finchy to leave. Finchy felt sad to leave his new friends, especially Mango. It had been a long time since he had spent this much time with other birds.

“Mo, wake up,” said Finchy as he poked Mo’s side with his beak. “We need to go or we’ll miss our ride.”

Mo rolled over and stood up, but not before stretching all four of his legs and shaking the leaves and twigs off his furry body.

“It was very nice meeting you,” said Mo. “Maybe we’ll see you in Florida.”

“We’ll tell our friends, especially the ones who live in Florida, about you and your mission,” said Mango. “I’m sure they’ll want to help.”

Mo and Finchy began walking back to the delivery truck.

“They were very nice sisters,” said Mo.

“Mango is the most beautiful bird I’ve ever seen,” said Finchy.

Mo was surprised. During their journey, Finchy had met many birds but never – ever – mentioned their beauty.

“Did you tell Mango how much you liked her?” asked Mo.

“Yeah, but birds sing to each other all the time,” said Finchy. “I *showed* her how much I liked her by giving her half of my pancakes. That’s what birds do. We show we care about someone by sharing our food.”

Mo cringed. *Share half my meal with someone I barely know? Crazy.*

Finchy saw the look on Mo’s face. He hopped over to him and pulled out a pancake

drenched in maple syrup from underneath his wing.

“Here, I saved this for you,” said Finchy.

Mo was very touched by Finchy’s gesture. He placed his paw on his heart and tears filled his eyes.

Finchy quickly discovered that his wing was all sticky from the syrup.

“Uh, Mo, I can’t exactly reach this spot,” he said while trying to lick off the syrup. “A little help, please?”

Chapter 33

Rescue Mission

Mo, Finchy, and other forest animals were looking at a giant map that revealed the best places for shelter, fresh water, berry picking, fishing, playing, and napping on Mount Washington, the highest mountain in the White Mountains.

Many local animals had gathered to search for a lost bear named Arthur. He grew up in these mountains so he knew his way around. But when Arthur didn't come home last night, his family began to worry and asked every animal in the area to help find him.

Even Mo and Finchy were asked to join the rescue mission. They had been traveling on top of the delivery truck for more than three hours that morning, mostly along Interstate 91 North and US 302 East. They passed signs for cities called Claremont and Lebanon before arriving in a village called North Conway.

As Alex, the truck driver, began unloading his truck that was packed with boxes for local stores and restaurants, Mo and Finchy wandered off into the forest and were immediately approached by a young bear.

“My big brother is lost in the woods,” he said. “Will you help us find him?”

Mo and Finchy agreed, although they weren’t quite sure how they could help since they didn’t know the area. They walked to the Hidden Café, a nickname for a place in the forest where many animals gather to eat, play, and gossip. A group of animals had already been waiting there to get directions from George, a giant black bear that was heading the rescue mission.

George pointed to a spot on the map.

“Here’s where Arthur was last seen,” he said. “We should go there, form teams of two, and then each team should head off in a different direction. But some of you should stay here in case Arthur shows up. If you find Arthur, shout my name really loud so we can hear you, find you, and give help, if needed.”

Mo felt someone tap him on the shoulder.



“Let’s team up,” said a moose. “My name is Marvin. I know this forest inside and out. I’ve never been lost. Ever. Arthur has never been good with directions. Don’t tell anybody I said that. Oh, and he has a cold. My guess is his nose is stuffed up and he can’t smell his way back home.”

In the meantime, Finchy flew off with other birds to search for Arthur. But the trees in the forest were so thick with leaves, they couldn’t see the ground.

The rescue team walked to the spot where Arthur was last seen and then split off into different directions. Mo and Marvin headed south. The ground was covered with fallen branches, leaves, bushes, rocks, vines, and plants.

Mo and Marvin walked deep into the forest. Marvin shouted Arthur’s name over and over but there was no response.

“So are you and Finchy just visiting?” asked Marvin. “It sure is nice of you to help us find Arthur.”

Mo explained about their mission, how Finchy and him were trying to return a valuable key to someone who lived in Florida.

“Do you know where Florida is?” asked Mo.

“Not really,” said Marvin. “But I often hear birds talk about it. They fly there in the winter, mainly for food, since food is hard to find when it snows or gets really cold.

Marvin then started talking about his home, here in the White Mountains. He told Mo that many different animals lived here besides bears and moose. He mentioned bald eagles, racoons, deer, coyotes, bobcats, minks, and porcupines.

He told Mo that he lived in this forest his whole life and that animals from all over the state vacation here.

“They say this state is the Switzerland of America, whatever that means,” said Marvin. “Oh, and that it borders three states, a country, and an ocean. It was also one of the thirteen original colonies and became the ninth state in this country.”

Mo listened carefully. There was so much he didn’t know. So much to learn.

Marvin then shouted Arthur’s name again and again.

Mo’s ears perked up. “Hear that?” asked Mo.

“Hear what?” asked Marvin.

Mo’s ears twitched. “I hear something,” he said.

Mo led Marvin toward the sound, which grew louder and louder. It was Arthur calling for help.

“Help!” shouted Arthur. “I’m here, over here, trapped in this deep hole.”

Mo and Marvin looked down into the hole. They saw Arthur sitting on the ground.

“I was exploring, not paying much attention and fell . . .,” his voice trailed off. “Who’s your friend, Marvin?”

Marvin introduced Mo and told Arthur that Mo was the one that heard him cry for help. Arthur knew that dogs could hear just as well as bears.

Now that Arthur was found, Mo and Marvin wondered how they were going to get him out of this deep hole. He was way too big and heavy to pull out.

By now, several animals had gathered around them and offered to help.

Mo looked around the forest and had an idea.

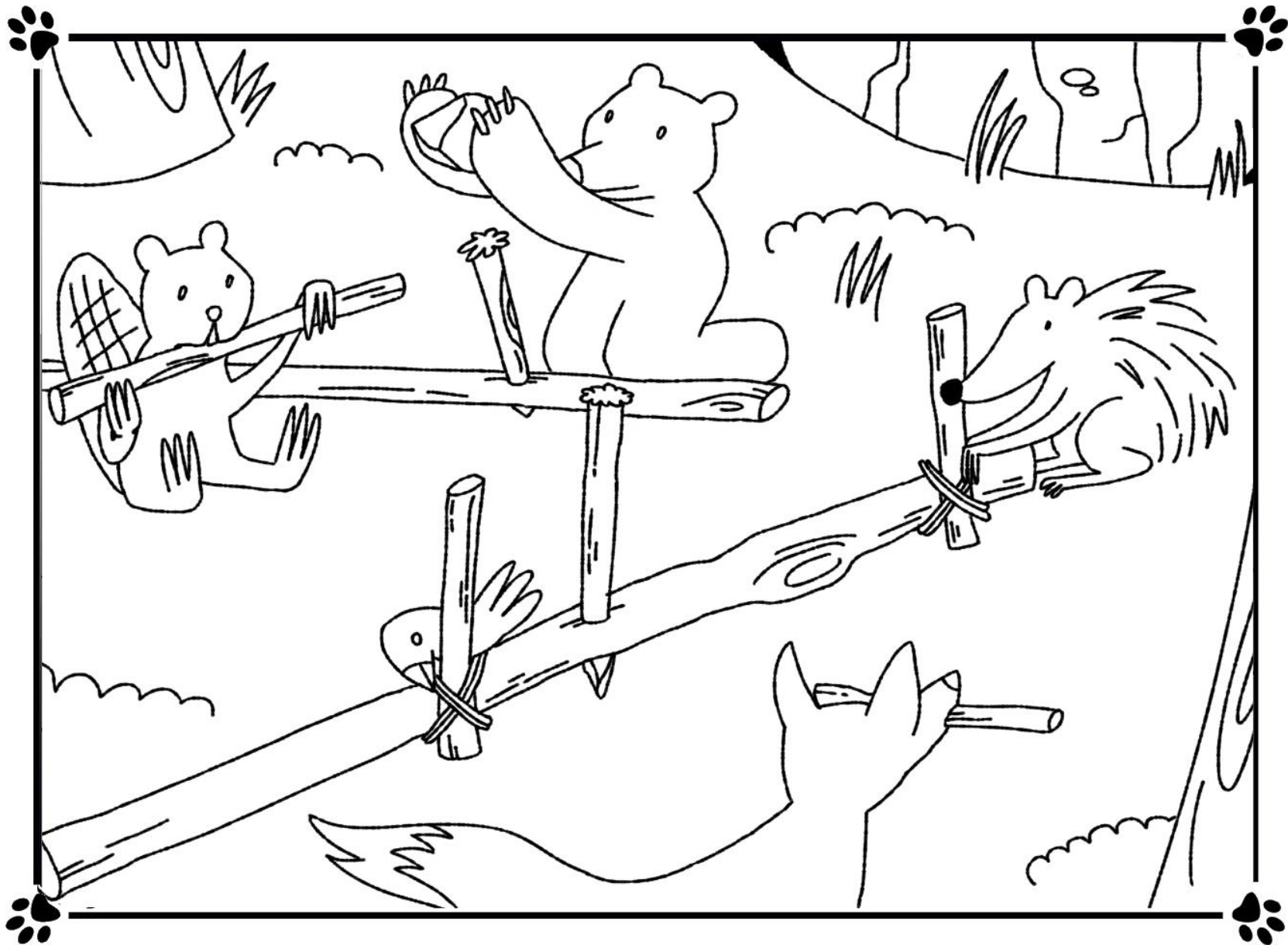
“Why don’t we make a ladder,” he said. “There’s plenty of stuff we can use.”

The animals got to work. Marvin found two very long tree branches on the ground for the frame or sides of the ladder and dragged them near the pit. Mo and the other animals found shorter branches for rungs or steps and placed them into a pile.

Now they just needed to attach everything. They used stones as hammers to pound the steps into the frame. The smaller animals then used strong vines to tie each step around the frame to make sure the ladder wouldn’t break when Arthur was climbing it. Arthur weighed about five hundred pounds. That’s almost the same amount if one deer, ten foxes, and fifty rabbits stood on the same scale at the same time.

The gigantic ladder was finished. The only thing left to do was place it inside the hole. They pushed and pushed but the ladder wouldn’t budge, not even an inch.

The animals grew tired from pushing. Did they do all that work for nothing?



Mo rested for a few minutes. He closed his eyes and suddenly remembered what George had told them. If they found Arthur, they should shout his name really loud so the rescue team could hear them and come to their location.

The group of animals shouted, “G-e-o-r-g-e” so loud that every animal within one mile came, including the animal rescue team.

Together, they pushed the huge ladder into the hole. Arthur climbed out and thanked all the animals for their help.

Before leaving, the animals then filled the hole with dirt, rocks, sticks, and leaves to make sure no one else would fall inside.

The rescue team walked back to the Hidden Café. After giving and getting many hugs, Arthur told the animals that stayed behind that it was really Mo that found him and that it was also his idea to build a ladder. Everyone was impressed. It wasn't every day that a stranger was that smart and that willing to help.

For the rest of the afternoon, Mo was the guest of honor and treated like a hero. Even Finchy was proud of him and told him so. Mo grew so full of himself that he

grabbed all the credit for the rescue mission and never mentioned the other animals that helped make the ladder and push it into the hole.

After a giant feast of mixed berries, it was time for Mo and Finchy to leave. They said goodbye and walked back home, to the delivery truck.

Mo asked Finchy what he and the other birds did that day, thinking nothing could ever compare with what he had done.

“Well, we couldn’t see the ground from the sky because the trees had too many leaves,” Finchy said. “So we built nests for three birds with sick families and then stocked them with all kinds of food so they could get better.”

Mo was stunned, not only by Finchy’s kindness, but more so by his modesty. Finchy didn’t tell anyone what he and the other birds did that afternoon. He didn’t brag, boast, or blab about it. He let Mo be the center of attention.

Although Mo should have felt good about himself because he helped a stranger in trouble, he learned that it was still no excuse to feel that he was better than anyone else.

Mo reached under his pillow and pulled out a bag of chocolate fudge cookies.

“We should celebrate,” said Mo, as he ripped open the bag and then raised a cookie high into the air. “Here’s to you, Finchy, the real hero of the day.”

Finchy bowed and grabbed the cookie out of Mo’s paw.

“Ya know, I bet we’re the smartest and nicest animals anywhere on the planet,” said Finchy. “Although, I am more handsome than you, Mo. It’s not your fault that you’re just one color.”

Chapter 34

Which Way is North?

“Look at this huge crack,” Finchy said to Mo. “Wonder what happened.”

“I wonder how much it weighs,” said Mo.

Mo and Finchy were looking at a giant bell that was mostly made out of copper and weighed around two thousand pounds, which is heavier than a polar bear.

They had been traveling on Interstate 95 South for more than seven hours, passing three states and cities named Trenton and Bensalem. Twenty minutes after passing Cornwells Heights, Alex, the truck driver, pulled off the highway and headed toward Market Street, which was crowded with thousands of people.

Mo was always surprised to see so many people in one place. *No one back home will ever believe me that there are so many humans. Where do they all come from?*

As Alex was unloading the truck, Mo and Finchy decided to do a little sight-seeing. They spotted signs for Independence National Historic Park and Liberty Bell Center.

“I want to see the bell,” said Finchy. “I want to know why it’s so important.”

As they walked among the tourists, they learned that the bell was more than two hundred sixty years old and was called by two names - the State House Bell and then later, the Liberty Bell.

The tour guide continued: “Back then, people didn’t have cell phones. They couldn’t call, text, or even email each other. Instead, the people who lived here rang the bell for many important reasons like when town hall meetings were about to start and the US Constitution was signed, which is a set of rules that guides how this country works.”

People in the crowd began shouting questions. Many asked about famous people who lived here many years ago. They asked questions about Betsy Ross, who made the first American flag, and Benjamin Franklin. Did he really invent the lightning rod and glass harmonica?

Finchy was more interested in the Liberty Bell than the people who once lived there, whether they were famous or not. His question was unique: What musical note did the bell strike when it rang?

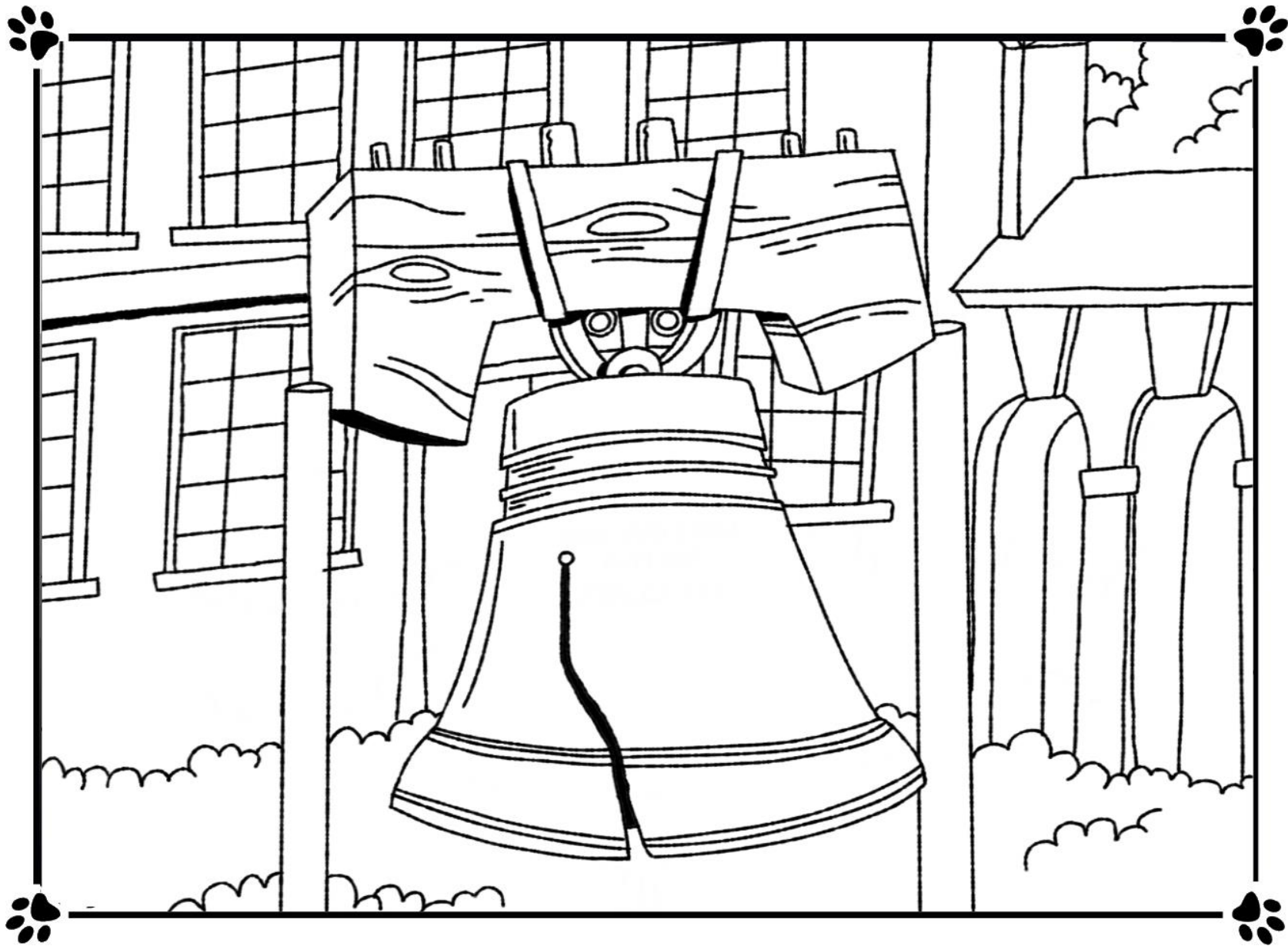
“E-flat, but the last time it rang was more than one hundred fifty years ago,” she said, not seeing who asked the question.

“Too bad about that big crack,” whispered Finchy to Mo. “I could have sung along with the bell. Some of the songs I sing are in E-flat.”

Mo and Finchy walked around the area trying to imagine what it would have been like to live here that long ago. Were there as many people, dogs, or birds? What did they eat? What did they do for fun? Did everyone follow the new rules?

As they turned the corner, they noticed a small group of animals listening to an older dog wearing glasses and a bow tie.

“So how many of you know what direction we’re headed in now?” asked the older dog. “Anyone? Just as important, what did we just do?”



“East, we’re headed east, Professor Swen,” said one dog. “I’m absolutely certain, positively positive, I think.”

The other dogs looked confused, not knowing what to say.

“We are actually heading north,” said Professor Swen. “When we first started this field trip, we walked north for three blocks, turned east when we saw the ice cream shop, walked south when we saw the market, turned west toward the museum store, and now – after that nasty cat chased us down a side street – we’re walking north again.”

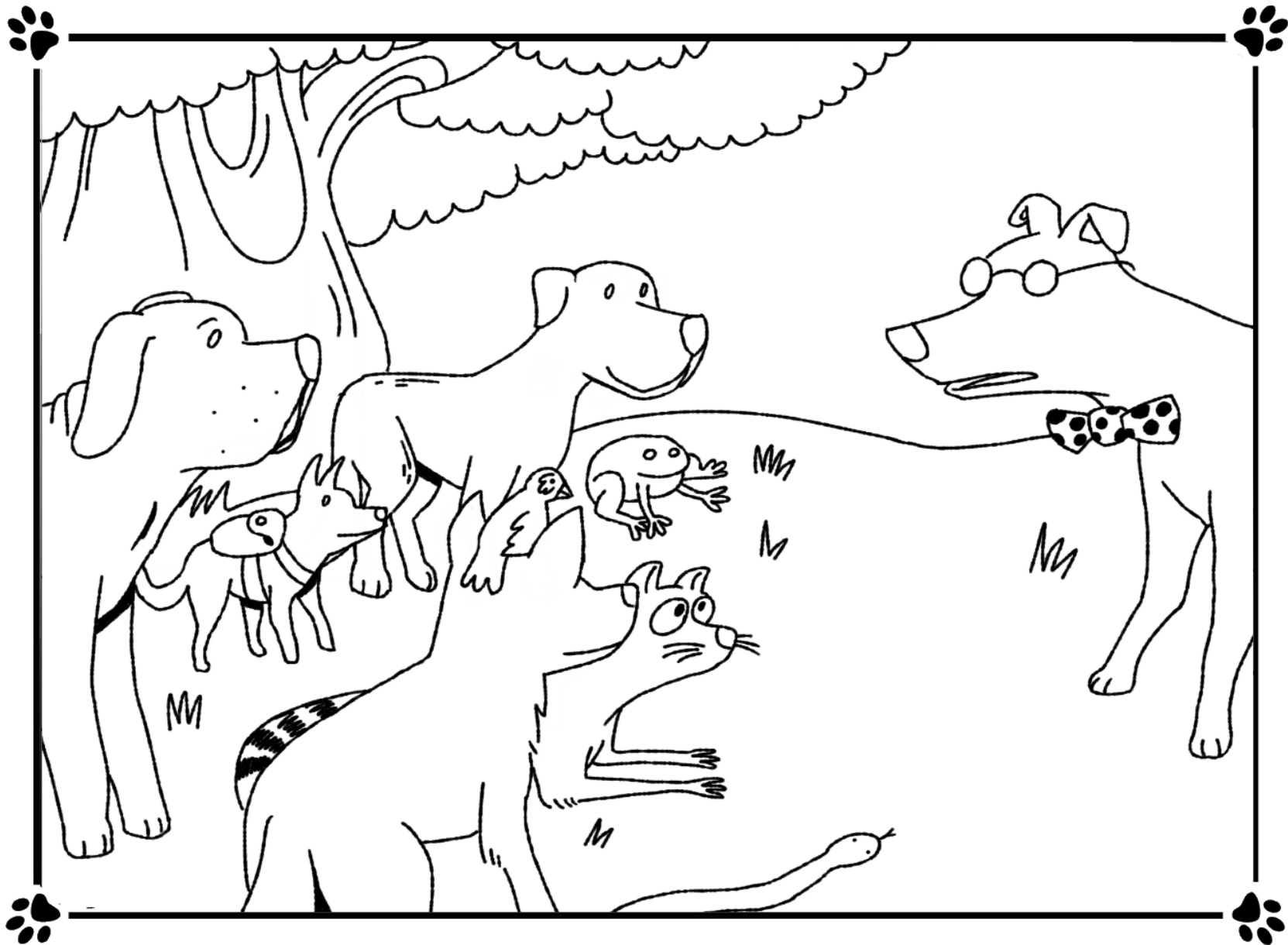
The dogs had blank expressions on their faces.

“In other words, we just walked in a giant circle,” he said.

The dogs were simply amazed at their teacher’s brilliance.

Professor Swen then noticed Mo and Finchy peering around the corner.

“May I help you?” he asked. “I am Professor Swen, an expert in directionology.”



“Uh . . . we hope you don’t mind us listening,” said Mo. “Even though we see tons of highway signs that tell us which direction we’re going, we really don’t understand directions. Can you teach us?”

“Speak for yourself,” said Finchy. “I know exactly where to go and which way to turn when flying. I’ve never been lost.”

“So where are you now?” asked Professor Swen. “And which direction are you going?”

Finchy was speechless.

“Everyone is welcome to join my class,” said Professor Swen. “My goal in life is to teach everyone directions so they know which way to go, will never get lost, and can always find their way back home.”

The students welcomed Mo and Finchy into their group as Professor Swen continued his lecture.

“Every time you go somewhere, you’re headed in a direction,” he said. “There are four basic directions – north, south, east, and west. Now here’s a little secret that will

make me world famous and is mentioned in my latest book that goes on sale next week. All you have to do is know just one direction and then you can figure out the other three.”

The dogs gasped. Why didn't anyone tell them this before? It would have made their lives so much easier.

Professor Swen explained that if you're facing north, south will always be behind you, east will be to your right and west to your left.

“Now what happens if you're facing west,” asked the Professor. “Which way is south?”

The dogs turned to their left and right and then consulted with one another. Still, no one could answer his question.

“North is always the opposite direction of south and east is always the opposite direction of west,” he said. “So if you're facing west, east will be behind you. If you're facing south, north will be behind you.”

Then the Professor asked each of the dogs to face a different direction and figure out which way was north, south, east, and west. Even though his class was for advanced students, many were still confused, including Mo and Finchy. Some asked why they couldn't just use a compass, a tool that shows the direction you're facing.

Dr. Swen forbid anyone in his class from using a compass. What happens if your compass breaks? What happens if you lose it? What happens if the store doesn't have any left? He said everyone needs to learn directions on their own. He explained that it's no different than learning math. You can't always rely on a calculator.

Mo and Finchy better understood what birds in the other states they visited had been telling them – to head south to find Florida. As long as the highway signs said south, they knew they would be heading in the right direction.

The field trip was now over and each of the dogs thanked Dr. Swen for sharing his knowledge about directions.

“Now, no matter where I am, I'll always be able to find my favorite dumpster behind the pizza shop,” said one dog.



Another dog said she won't get lost anymore going to her groomer, which moved to a new neighborhood. "Can't always go by smell," she said. "Now I know which direction to go."

Mo and Finchy thanked Dr. Swen for his help and that they better understood directions now.

As Mo and Finchy headed back to the delivery truck, they felt more certain or confident that they could find Florida, even on their own.

"Professor Swen was really something," said Finchy. "One day, I'm going to be that smart and teach other birds about . . . about . . . Well, I'm not exactly sure what but there's got to be something I can learn and be an expert in."

"There's plenty of things we can both teach dogs and birds right now," said Mo, pointing to all the different things they've learned about each state they had visited. "I can see the sign outside our office door right now – Professors Mo and Finchy, experts in smartology."

Chapter 35

The Argument

Mo heard someone calling his name over and over. He turned around and saw a white whale poking its head out of the ocean.

“It’s me, Casper!” yelled the whale.

Mo ran to the shoreline to get a better look.

“Casper!” shouted Mo. “It really is you. How are you? How’s your family? How’s everyone back home? Do they miss me? What about...”

This was the first time Mo had seen anyone from home since his adventure began. He asked so many questions so fast that Casper didn’t get a chance to respond.

Mo took a deep breath.

“Sorry, I’m just really excited to see you,” he said. “It feels like I’ve been gone for years.”

Finchy began tugging Mo’s fur. He wanted to meet Casper.

“Finchy, this is my friend, Casper, from home,” said Mo. “She’s a beluga whale, sort of like a dolphin that’s white but without a fin.”

“Nice to meet you,” said Finchy, a bit timid because of the whale’s size. Casper was about twelve feet long, weighed more than twelve hundred pounds, and could easily swallow Finchy in one iddy biddy gulp.

Casper took one look at Finchy and quickly turned toward Mo. She didn’t say anything to Finchy, not even, “Good morning.”

Finchy felt snubbed.

“What are you doing this far from home?” asked Mo.

Casper explained that she came to visit her friends, other beluga whales, that live in an outdoor aquarium along this coast.

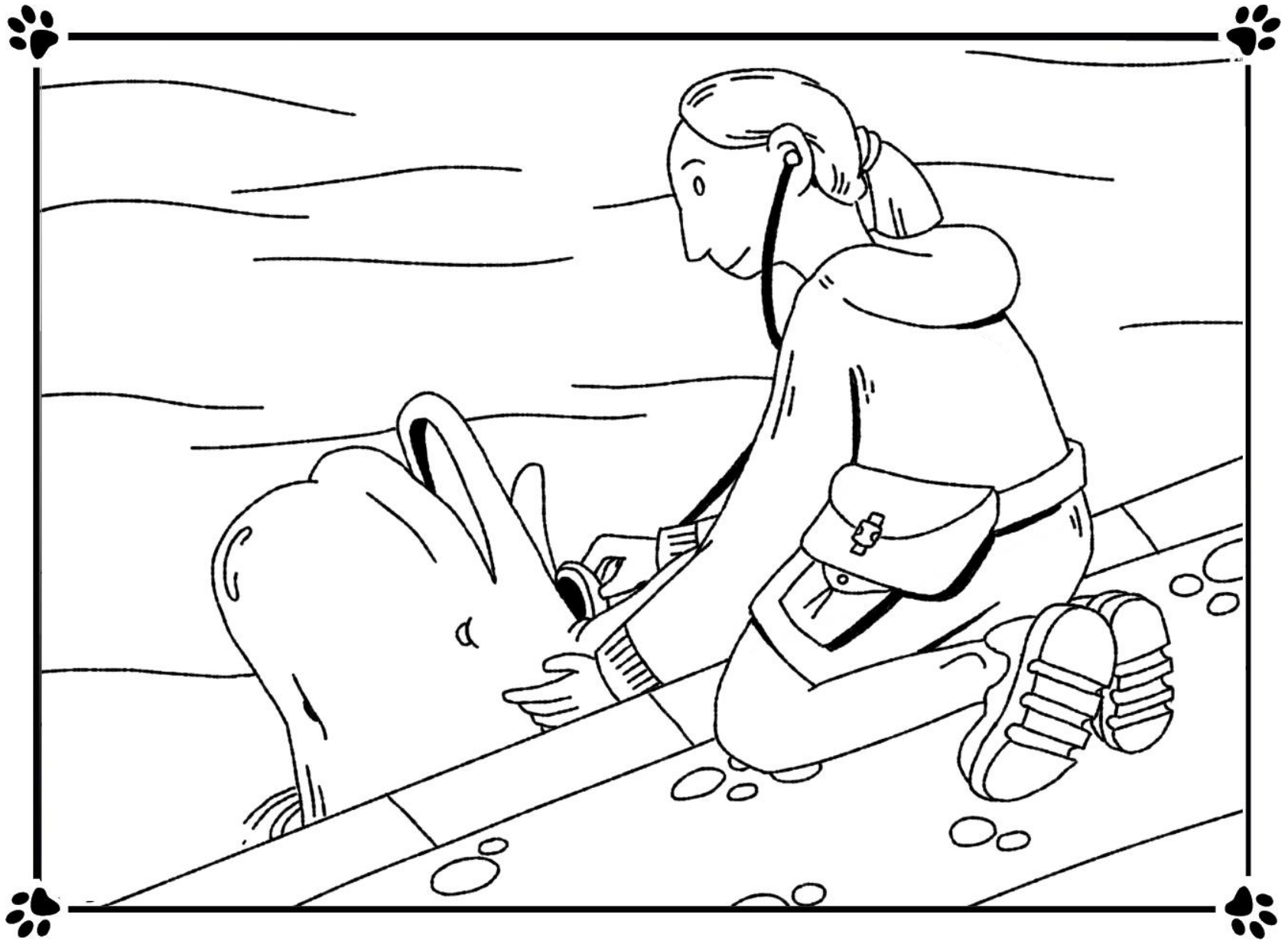
“They told me that humans feed them their favorite foods every day, give them physical exams, and that other humans visit them,” she said. “They say it’s like living in a fancy schmancy resort with their own personal chef, assistant, and doctor. This is the life whales deserve.”

Finchy decided to give Casper a second chance. He talked about how Mo and him were traveling to Florida to return a valuable key to its owner.

“We ride on top of a delivery truck all over this country,” said Finchy, rather excitedly. “Just this morning, we traveled four hours along Interstate 95 North, crossed three state lines, and passed cities by the names of Newark, Stamford, and New Haven. We’ve met so many different animals and seen so many things, everything from dinosaur . . .”

Finchy continued yakking and yakking. Casper thought Finchy was boring, so boring that she opened her giant mouth to yawn. That startled Finchy. He didn’t want to be her breakfast. Then Casper turned toward Mo and started chatting with him as if Finchy wasn’t even there.

Now Finchy knew he wasn’t imagining things. Casper was just being rude. He was mad.



“Everyone back home is the same,” Casper said. “They still discuss important matters at the forest meetings like which one can howl the loudest. But they do miss you. Some wanted to search for you since you’ve been gone for so long. But they were simply too chicken to go.”

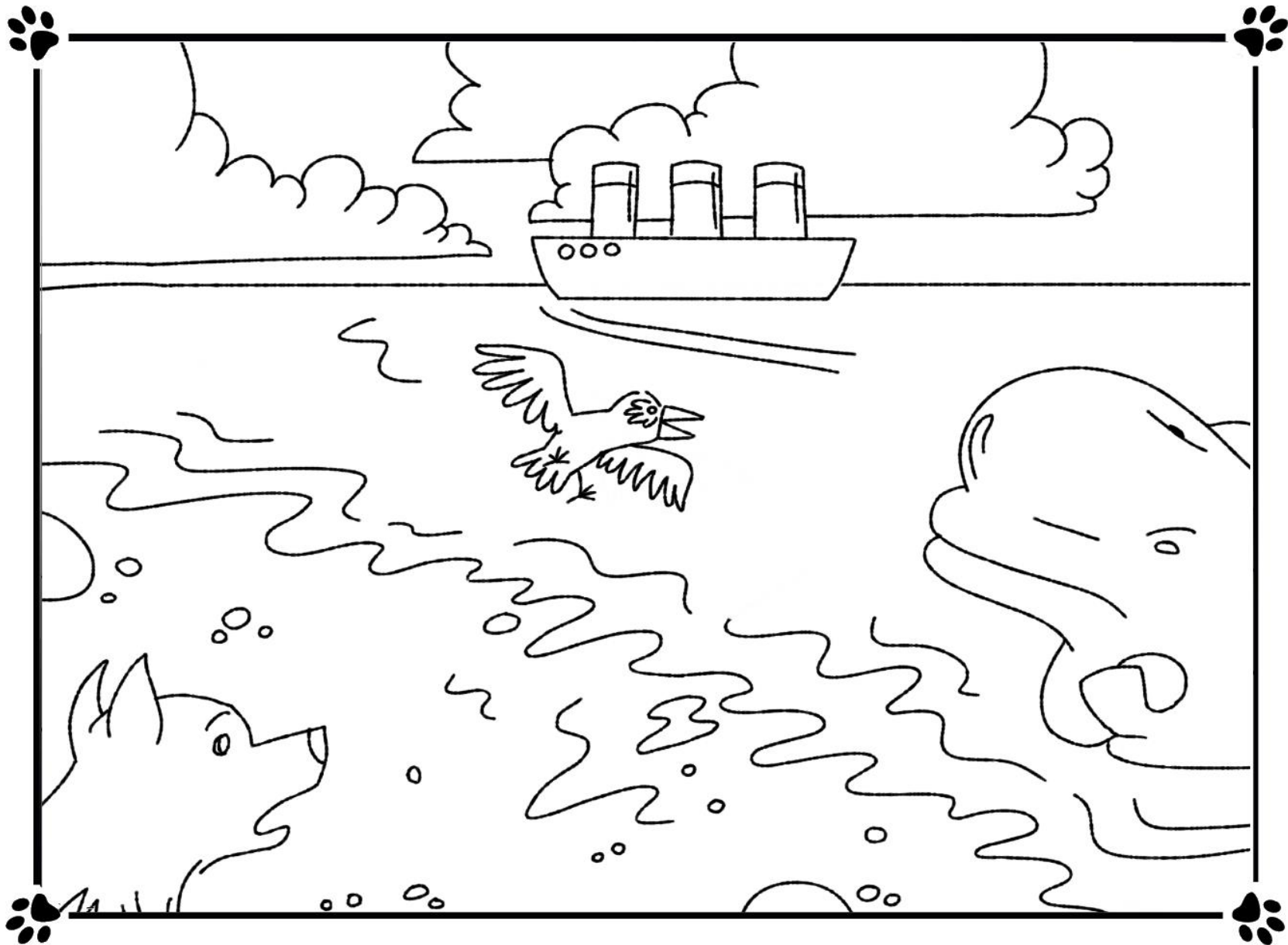
Finchy cringed.

How dare Casper insult chickens, which are birds like me. All birds have courage. I’d like to see her fly thousands of miles away from home and back without being afraid of getting lost or falling out of the sky because you’re tired.

Well, as far as Finchy was concerned, that was strike three. Before Mo realized what was happening, Finchy puffed out his tiny chest and flew straight toward Casper.

“Chickens are brave, very brave animals,” Finchy said to Casper. He was flapping his wings very fast above her head, trying to stay in one spot. “And they’re strong. You try laying as many eggs as they do without complaining!”

Casper shot Finchy a very angry look.



“How dare you talk to me that way!” she said. “You’re the dumbest and most boring bird I’ve ever met.”

“Who you calling dumb?” screamed Finchy.

“You’re only good for one thing – a mid-morning snack for a hungry fox!” shouted Casper. “Mo, how can you be friends with this . . . this bird!”

“Go ahead, tell her, Mo,” said Finchy. “Tell Casper that we’re best friends.”

Mo couldn’t believe what had just happened. He was in such a good mood. Casper was his friend. But so was Finchy. He cared for them both. Should he side with one over the other? Should he walk away and let them continue arguing? Should he help them understand that what makes them so different is what makes them so special and equally important?

Mo waited for a few seconds to carefully choose his words.

“I think both of you owe each other an apology,” said Mo. “You’re both my friends and I won’t pick sides.”

Casper and Finchy continued arguing, but this time about which tasted better – chocolate or strawberry. They didn't agree on anything.

Mo had heard enough. He never got into an argument like this with anyone. It was silly. Why were they acting this way?

They kept shouting, hurling insults at each other, one after the other.

“Stop!” shouted Mo. “Please, just stop!”

Finchy and Casper were surprised at Mo's reaction. So was Mo. Back home, he usually let animals work out their differences.

“There are millions of animals on this planet,” said Mo in a stern voice. “It's impossible to like everybody and not everybody will like you. You don't have to be friends with each other, play with each other, agree with each other, or even work with each other. But you do need to respect each other and treat each other nice.”

Finchy's and Casper's faces turned red.

Mo continued: "Casper, you just met Finchy. You were rude to him. You don't even know him well enough to either like or dislike him. Do you know that Finchy saved my life? He's funny, smart, and brave."

Casper was silent.

"Now Finchy, Casper was rude to you," said Mo. "All you had to do was ask her why she was being rude or if you offended her in some way. But instead, you made things worse."

Finchy stared at the ground.

"Both of you are great animals in your own way," added Mo. "One of you is not better than the other. You're equals. Now apologize."

Finchy and Casper each mumbled "sorry" to each other. Mo wasn't quite certain they meant it but at least it was a start.

In the distance, Mo could hear Casper's friends calling her.

“Mo, I’ve got to run,” said Casper. She turned toward Finchy. “Thank you for taking care of my friend.”

Mo and Finchy watched Casper swim away.

Mo was disappointed in Finchy. But he wasn’t the only one. Finchy was disappointed in himself. Mo’s opinion meant a lot to him so he tried to make things right.

“I’m sorry, Mo,” he said. “I don’t know what got into me. Maybe I was a bit touchy because I haven’t had anything to eat today. I’ll find us some food and bring it back to the delivery truck.”

Finchy flew off, hoping that Mo would forgive him by the time he returned.

After napping on top of the delivery truck for about an hour, Mo spotted Finchy flying toward him, carrying a giant bag.

The bag was filled with hamburgers, fries, and small packets of ketchup. Mo mumbled something that sounded like thank you. Finchy knew that he was still angry and talked about other things.

“Did you know that this state is home to the first hamburger?” said Finchy. “I overheard some people talking about it by the dumpster. They also said it was the first to set a speed limit for cars, which was twelve miles per hour. Can you imagine how long it would take us to travel from state to state at that slow speed?”

Mo didn't answer.

Finchy tried once more.

“I heard a woman say that a seven-year-old boy designed the emblem or image for the state's capital city when it turned two hundred years old,” he said.

Mo remained silent.

“Oh, c'mon, Mo,” said Finchy, somewhat frustrated. “It's not like I robbed a bank.”

“Finchy,” said Mo. “You get so angry over little things. What's the big deal if a whale you will probably never see again in your entire life ignores you? Who cares? What's important is that you respect others and, just as important, respect yourself by not being rude back.”

“Ok, I get it,” said Finchy. “Can we finally talk about something else? Something important?”

Mo smiled. “These are by far, the most tasty, yummy, mouthwatering, and lip-smacking hamburgers I’ve ever eaten,” he said. “Where did you find them? No matter. Just remind me to get mad at you more often.”

Chapter 36

The Hunt for Glass Balls

Mo read the sign on the side of the road: Point Judith.

“Who do you think Judith is?” he asked Finchy.

Finchy shrugged his tiny shoulders. “Have no idea,” he said. “She must have done something brave or important. Humans name stuff after people like that but do they ever name something after a bird that’s a hero? Never. Shameful. Simply shameful.”

Off in the distance, they noticed a ferry that shuttled people and animals back and forth to Block Island, which was roughly one hour south of Point Judith. Mo wanted to visit the island, partly because animals were allowed. They had traveled for approximately one hour that morning, mostly along Interstate 95 North and US -1 North, seeing signs for Newport, Kingston, and other cities.

Mo and Finchy heard several voices behind them. They turned around and saw a small group of dogs and cats walking toward the ferry.

“Cini (see-nee), did you bring the sandwiches?” asked a brown-spotted dog named Coco. “Oh, and what about the potato salad?”

Cini, a beautiful gray cat, rolled her eyes.

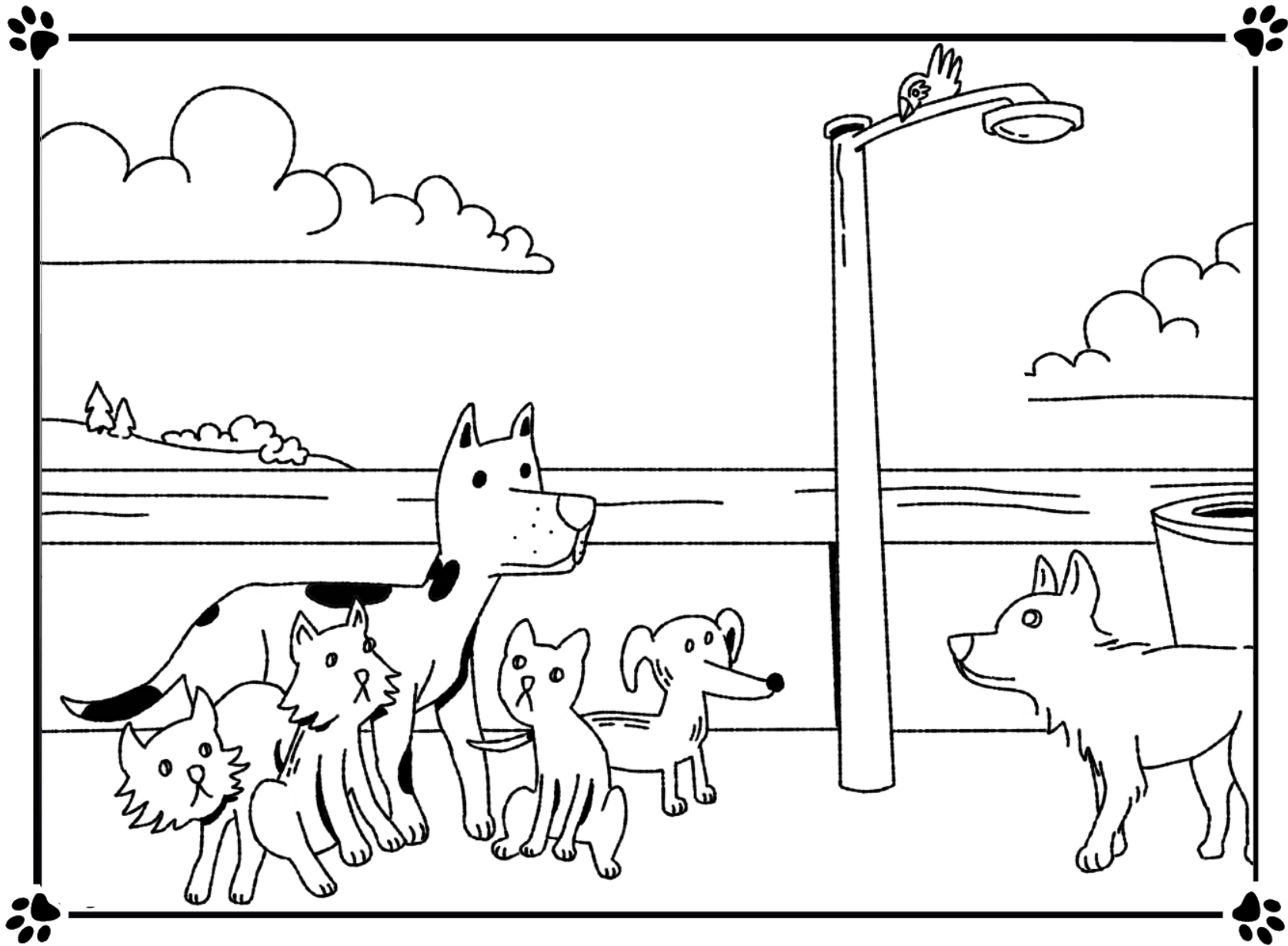
“Have I ever – ever – forgotten to bring the food?” she asked, rather irritated. “I brought enough tuna and roast beef sandwiches, potato salad, apples, carrots, and cookies to feed everyone twice over.”

Mo began walking toward them but Finchy yanked him back.

“What are you doing?” asked Finchy. “You know cats eat birds, right?”

“Finchy, you heard them,” Mo said. “They have plenty of food. You won’t even be on their minds, or in their stomachs.”

Mo walked over to the group while Finchy flew to the top of a street light.



“Hi, my name is Mo,” he said. “My friend Finchy and I are visitors. Can we join your group?”

The dogs and cats looked at each other. No one seemed to object.

“Sure, why not,” said an older cat named Copy.

“There’s just one small thing,” said Mo. “My friend, my best friend, is a bird. Will that be a problem for anyone?” He stared directly at the cats.

Cini, Copy, and a third cat, named Pixel, formed a huddle. They whispered to each other for a few minutes. Then Cini spoke: “We have plenty of food, Mo. You have our word. We won’t harm Finchy.”

Finchy carefully listened to every word they said and then flew over to Mo’s side.

All three cats looked at Finchy.

“Oh, he’s so small,” said Pixel as the other cats nodded in agreement. “He wouldn’t be worth our effort.”

Knowing that the cats believed he was too small to eat didn't make Finchy feel any more comfortable around them. Still, he boarded the ferry but perched himself on its roof, out of their reach, just in case.

During the ferry ride, Mo took the time to get to know the animals.

“It’s unusual to see dogs and cats so friendly with each other,” said Mo. “Have you known each other for a long time?”

Cini explained that they grew up together, in the same neighborhood.

“One day, we realized that it was kind of dumb how we were treating each other,” she said. “Since we have a lot more in common than differences, it made more sense to be friends. Now we help each other and hang out together instead of fighting all the time or chasing each other around the block.”

After the ferry docked, everyone walked on to the island. The beach was crowded with people sunbathing. The group of animals walked to their favorite spot, a far corner of the beach with no humans in sight.

“My stomach is growling,” said Coco. “The game can wait.”

Mo was more hungry than curious about the game so he didn't ask Coco anything about it. He helped her spread out a blanket on the warm sand so Cini and the others could set up the food.

Within seconds, everyone started grabbing this and that. Mo stuffed his mouth with a roast beef sandwich and potato salad while Finchy ate a tuna fish sandwich that had too much mayo for his taste. But he learned a long time ago to never complain about free food.

After lunch, the animals began talking about the game. There were five hundred glass balls – each were numbered and about the size of an orange – hidden on the small island's beaches and nature trail. All of them were made by a local, glass artist. The balls were clear, except for twenty that were colored or featured patterns.

“Every year, we play a game – dogs against cats – to see which team can find the most balls,” said a tan dog named Howie. “Each team records the number on each ball they find and its location. But we don't keep any. You can't eat them, can't chew them and, since they have no flavor or smell, there's no point in even licking them.”

Coco and Howie were excited because now the teams would be even in number. Since Mo agreed to compete, there would be three dogs against three cats.

The group divvied up. Finchy offered to cheerlead. He still planned on keeping as far away from the cats as possible.

Mo followed Coco and Howie to popular beach spots. They spread out and began searching for the balls. Coco quickly found one hidden in a bush and then shouted the number, “Twelve,” to Howie so he could record the number.

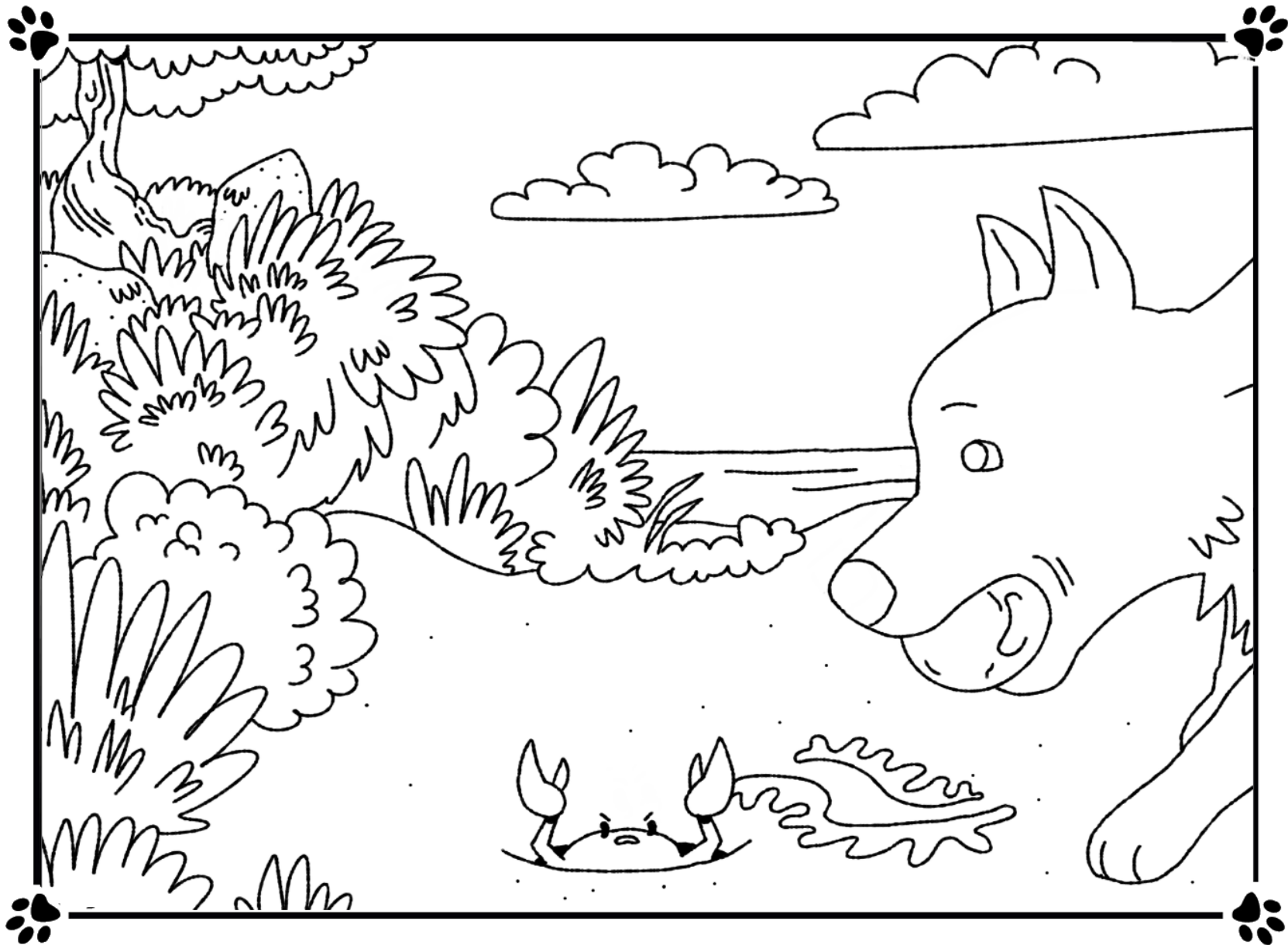
Mo found the next ball, partially covered in seaweed. As he picked it up, a tiny voice shouted, “Hey, what are you doing?”

Mo bent closer to the ground and discovered that the voice belonged to a small crab.

“Sorry,” mumbled Mo. “I didn’t see you.”

“Of course not,” said the crab. “Why would you? This has been my secret hiding place for years. Kindly put the ball back in place so I can finish my nap.”

Mo honored the crab’s request and then shouted the number, “Twenty-five” to Howie.



“Why don’t you collect the balls?” asked Mo to Howie. “I’m sure you could find a good use for them even if you can’t eat them.”

Howie explained that the animals didn’t want to ruin the game for humans. Instead, at the end of the game, they trusted each other about how many balls were found and where they had been hidden.

Then Howie added, “Humans have no imagination when it comes to hiding these balls.”

Mo was amazed at the high level of trust the dogs and cats had in each other. *Back home, that would never work. Some animals were simply too afraid to trust each other.*

While the dogs continued searching every inch on every beach on the island, Finchy was flying back and forth, keeping an eye on both teams. While resting on a high tree branch, he spotted one glass ball below him, tucked in the space between the tree trunk and a branch.

Should I tell anyone?

He decided not to interfere. That would be cheating.

By now, the game was half over. The three dogs met up with the cats.

“How many balls did you find so far?” Coco asked Cini. “We found ninety-two.”

“Same here,” she said.

The game continued for another hour. Another twenty-four balls were found. The score was tied.

The dogs and cats kept searching. Cini whispered to Pixel and Copy that there was a ball in the tree. She offered to climb the tree to get its number and then their team would win the game. She wondered if Mo and the other dogs had even noticed it.

Cini started walking toward the tree.

“Stop!” shouted Coco. “There’s a bunch of poison ivy on and around that tree.”

“You’re just saying that so we won’t win,” said Cini, pointing to the ball in the tree.

“Everyone knows cats, not dogs, can climb trees.”

“Please, don’t take another step,” begged Coco. “While searching for balls, I found a

map that shows where poison ivy is on the island. There's a bunch of it right in front of you."

Cini looked at the other cats. They didn't know what poison ivy looked like and wondered if Coco was telling the truth. Would they be foolish to believe her?

They decided to trust Coco because she was their friend. Good friends tell each other the truth and believe each other, even if they don't like what they hear.

Both teams decided they were each winners and celebrated by eating the rest of the food.

On the ferry back to the mainland, Mo asked if they knew the name of the state they lived in or anything about Florida.

"Well," said Pixel. "I don't know anything about Florida but do know that this is the smallest state in the country, it borders two states, and faces the ocean."

For the rest of the ride, the animals chatted about their family and friends. Mo and Finchy talked about their mission and all the places they had visited. Even Finchy

seemed to be more relaxed around the cats, laughing at Cini's jokes about her human neighbors.

After the ferry ride, the animals said goodbye to each other. Mo and Finchy started walking back to the delivery truck.

“Mo, let's see how good of a friend you are,” said Finchy. “Did I ever tell you something that was hard to believe but you believed me anyway?”

“Let's see,” said Mo. “I believed you when you told me that you knew how to fly a spaceship but didn't. I believed you when you said you knew directions but didn't. I believed you when you said you wouldn't move from the spot we were hiding in but did. I believed you when . . .”

Finchy cut him off. “Okay, okay,” he said. “It's good to know that you still trust me even when you think I'm wrong.”

Chapter 37

The Best Costume

Mo had never seen this much chaos.

Thousands of humans were walking on wooden planks, up and down the oldest and longest boardwalk in the country. Hundreds of stores selling everything from T-shirts to flip flops were lined up in a row for more than five miles. People were walking in and out of shops, trying on hats or sunglasses, eating at outdoor restaurants, licking ice cream cones, or laying on the nearby beach.

Why do humans need so many T-shirts or sunglasses? How many can they possibly wear?

It felt good for Mo to stretch his legs. Finchy and him had been traveling on top of the delivery truck for almost six hours, mostly along Interstate 95 South and Garden State Parkway.

Alex, the truck driver, was making a large delivery to a hotel that faced the ocean and decided to spend the night there. So Mo and Finchy had the rest of the day to explore.

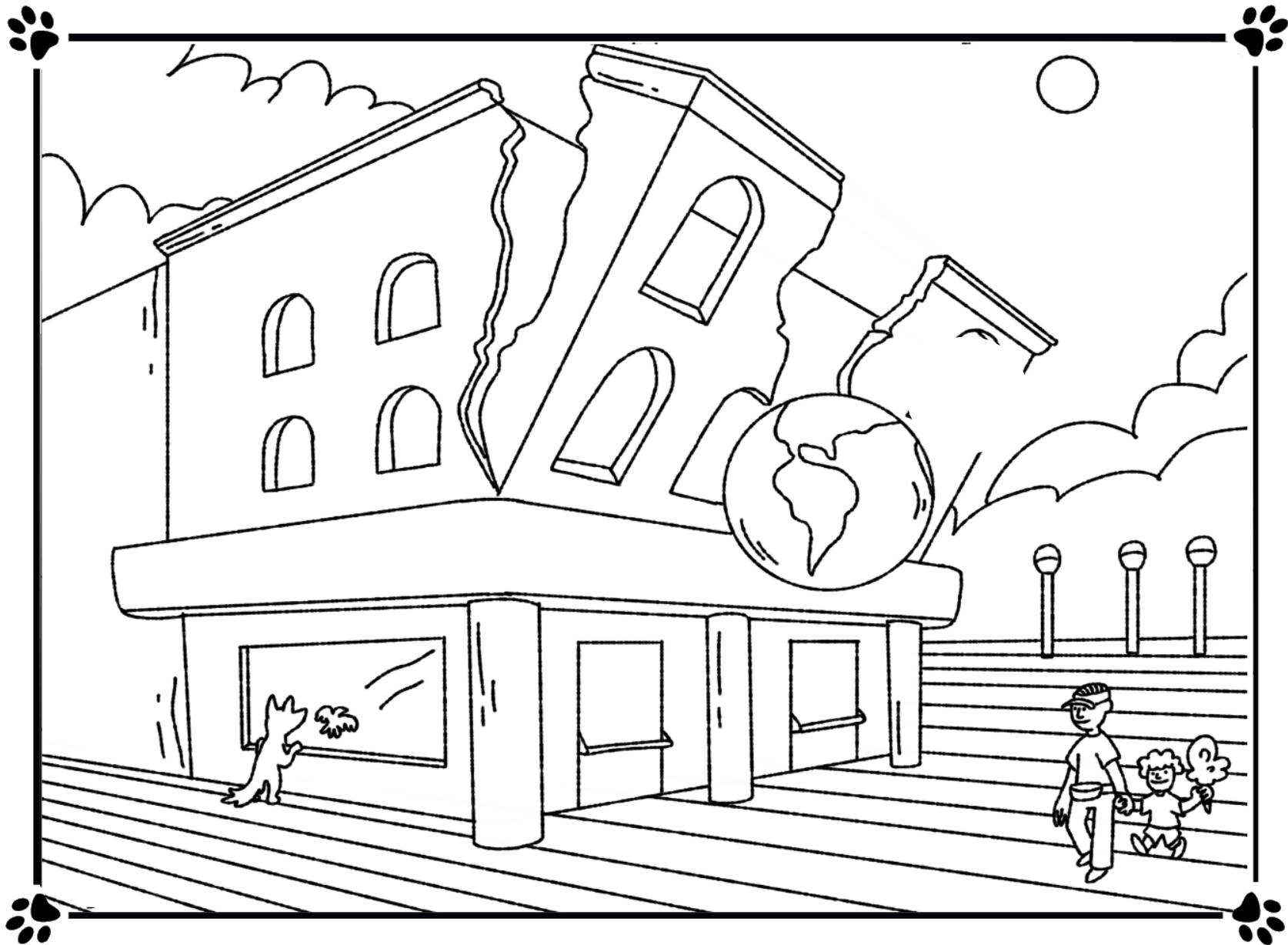
“Do you think these are the same people we keep seeing in the other places we’ve visited?” Mo asked Finchy. “Maybe there aren’t as many humans as we think.”

They walked along the boardwalk, stuffing themselves with food from a wide variety of trash cans. Mo even tried salt water taffy for the first time but didn’t like how it stuck to his teeth.

Suddenly, Mo shouted, “Finchy, look! That building is going to collapse!”

They were standing in front of a museum. The top part of the building was tilting forward. Mo and Finchy were afraid it was going to fall. But it never did. It seemed to be frozen in mid-air.

They looked at each other wondering why someone would build a museum that looked so strange. But then the signs on the building explained why. Everything about this museum was supposed to be strange and weird.



They peered through the front windows but couldn't see anything. But they did notice the giant poster on the door: Employee Costume Party. Tonight. 7pm.

Mo and Finchy thought this would be the perfect opportunity to see what was inside the museum. They could both wear costumes and no one would know that they're not humans.

What should they be? Aliens from another planet? Sea creatures? Superheroes?

They decided that the best costume idea would come from the stores and people around them. They continued walking down the boardwalk, looking at the displays in store windows. Nothing grabbed their attention. They sat near a trash can, watching all the different ways people were acting or dressed. They quickly grew bored. They even snuck into a clothing store that seemed to have strange clothing in its window. They left the store moments later without any ideas.

"I know what we can do," said Finchy. "Whenever I get stuck for ideas, I close my eyes, count to ten, and relax. I get the best ideas that way."

Mo and Finchy headed to a remote spot on the beach, far away from other people.

The warmth of the sun and sand and sound of the ocean waves hitting against the shore made them very relaxed, so relaxed that they both fell asleep.

Several hours later, Mo woke up. He couldn't believe he had slept that long.

“Finchy, wake up,” he said. “We both fell asleep. The party is going to start soon and we still don't have any ideas for costumes.”

Finchy sat up, yawned, and stretched his legs and wings.

“My idea, you know the one about relaxing to come up with great ideas, doesn't always work the way it's supposed to,” he said. “I usually fall asleep. But I always wake up so refreshed. How about you?”

Mo rolled his eyes. “What are we going to do?” he asked.

He noticed a person on the beach, off in the distance. He was throwing a round plastic disk high in the air over and over again. His dog would chase it, sometimes catching it in mid-air.

Mo was sad. He really wanted to see what strange or weird things were inside the museum. But now it looked like he would never get the chance.

Finchy tried to cheer him up.

“So we miss one party,” Finchy said. “No biggie. Some of the humans will probably be dressed up as animals, maybe even dogs or birds. Not very exciting. But none of them will be as handsome as us.”

Mo turned toward Finchy with a giant smile on his face.

“That’s it!” said Mo, rather excitedly. “That’s exactly what we’ll wear. Nothing!”

Finchy was very confused.

“We’ll go as ourselves,” explained Mo. “Everyone will think that we’re wearing a costume and makeup. They’ll have no idea that we’re really animals!”

Mo jumped up on all four paws and told Finchy to follow him into the ocean. One small wave completely drenched them. They wanted to go to the party looking their best, not covered in sand or dirt.

They walked back to the delivery truck. Finchy brushed Mo's fur to make it shiny and smooth. Mo fluffed up Finchy's feathers to make them full. They hurried toward the museum. By the time they arrived, the party had already started.

Mo and Finchy stood in line as if they belonged there. When they got to the front door, a man dressed as a vampire asked to see their employee badge.

Before they had a chance to respond, a woman approached the door.

"Hey Brad, is that you?" she asked from inside the museum. She was staring straight at Mo. "You said you were going to be dressed as an animal. Your costume is great! You look like a real dog. Well, almost. Your ears don't seem real. And you even brought a toy bird as a companion!"

She turned toward the vampire and added, "That's Brad. I work with him. He's OK to let in."

Mo and Finchy entered the museum. Mo wondered what was wrong with his ears. *I thought they were among my best features.*

The lights were dim. The music was so loud that it hurt Mo's ears. Finchy and him

tried really hard to hear what people were saying to each other.

As they walked around the party, they learned some interesting things about the state they were visiting. One woman talked about how it was home to the first drive-in movie and Thomas Edison's lab where he invented the light bulb and motion picture camera. They overheard a man say that he was dressed as a Hadrosaurus, the state's official dinosaur.

While it was all very interesting, Mo and Finchy wandered off to see what kinds of strange and weird things were in the museum.

They saw a table made out of fourteen thousand jelly beans. Finchy wanted to eat one since he had never tasted a jelly bean but Mo talked him out of it.

They both cringed when they saw a spider sculpture made from scissors and knives. They saw the world's smallest car, a figure of the tallest man who stood over eight feet tall, and shrunken heads. Finchy said one of them reminded him of his Uncle Bruce.

Mo and Finchy were amazed at what they saw and were very glad they came.

But now it was time to go home. They began walking toward the front door when the same woman who thought Mo was Brad, her coworker, spotted him.

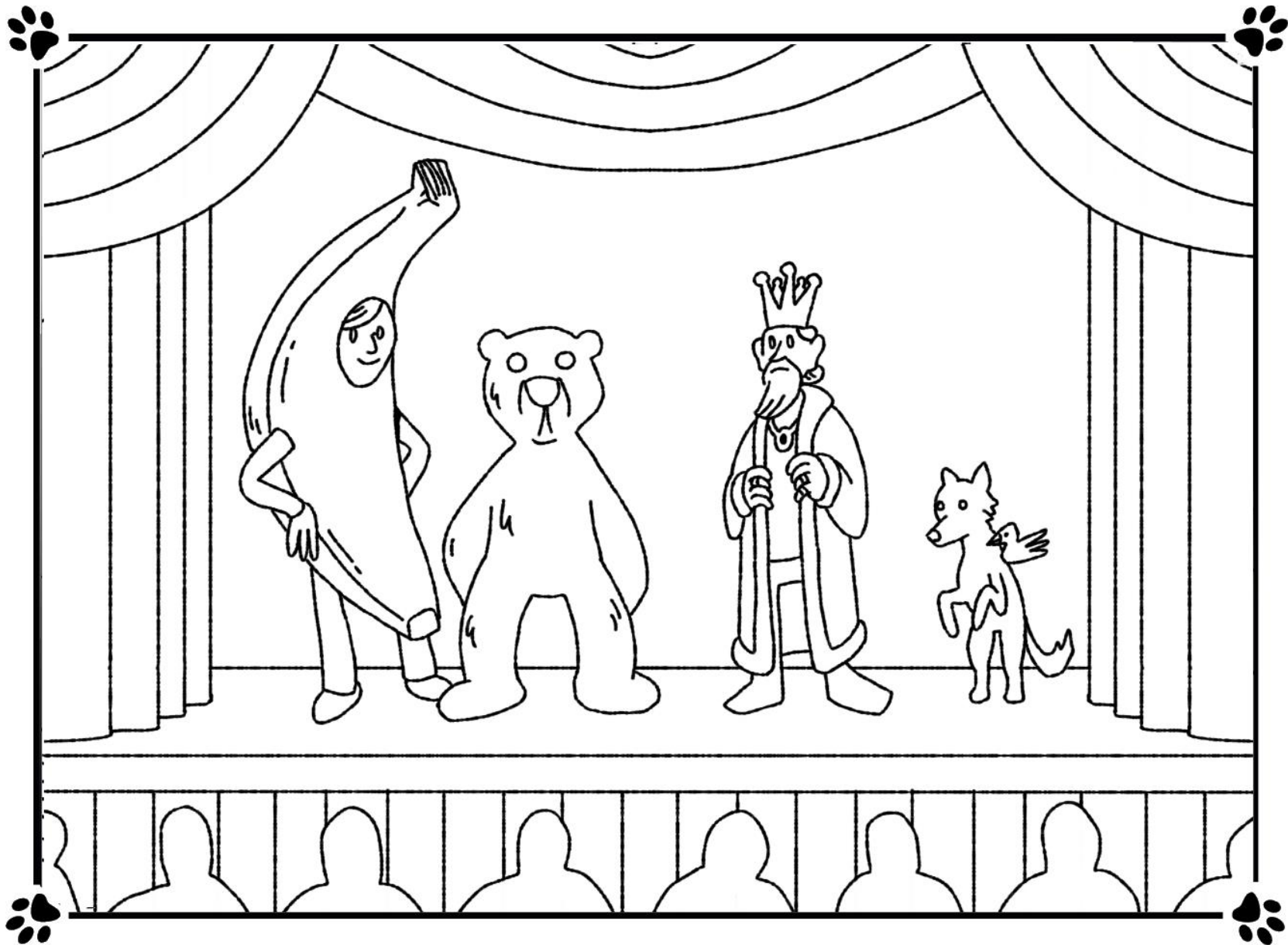
“There you are, Brad” she said. “I’ve been looking all over for you. The contest for best costume is about to begin. You and your toy bird have to compete.”

She pushed Mo toward the stage.

“I know how shy you are,” she whispered in his ear. “Don’t be nervous. All you have to do is slowly turn around so people can see your costume – front and back. Too bad you can’t bark like a dog. Then you’d win for sure!”

Mo and Finchy climbed the stage. Standing next to them were people dressed as a giant bear, banana, and king. Each person stepped forward, slowly turned around, and then bowed. Mo did the same but then started barking while Finchy flapped his wings and flew on to his shoulder.

The other employees started cheering and clapping, surprised at how much their coworker sounded like a real dog and how his toy bird was able to fly on to his shoulder.



At the end of the contest, the winner was announced. Mo won first prize. The judges gave him a big trophy, almost as big as he was tall.

Mo and Finchy were very excited they won but knew they had to leave before anyone found out they were really animals. They left the stage and headed for the front door.

People patted Mo on the back to congratulate him. One woman picked up Finchy, saying how cute he was for a bird. Finchy's tiny heart was pounding. The moment she loosened her grip on him, he stretched his wings and quickly flew out the front door with Mo close behind.

Mo ran as fast as he could, all the way back to the delivery truck.

“Whew!” said Finchy. “That was close, a little too close for comfort. I thought that woman was going to stuff me in her pocket or purse and take me home!”

Finchy and Mo then gazed at the trophy.

“Since we know the name of Brad's employer, we should really mail this trophy to him,” Mo said.

Finchy nodded in agreement and together, they wrote Brad this note:

Dear Mr. Brad,

It's a long story but this trophy belongs to you.

Mo and Finchy

PS: Mo wants to know what's wrong with his ears.

After they attached the note to the trophy, Finchy asked Mo something he had been wondering all evening.

“Many of the people who came to the costume party tonight dressed up as animals,” he said. “If you went to a costume party, would you ever dress up as a human?”

Mo thought about it for a few seconds.

“To look human, I'd have to wear clothes that would cover my beautiful, furry body and curly, fluffy tail,” he said. “Why would I ever want to do that? I look best the way nature intended me to look – naked!”

Chapter 38

The Lie That Wouldn't Stop

A dog carrying a briefcase wasn't paying attention to where he was going and bumped into Mo, knocking him to the ground.

“Oh, I'm so sorry,” the dog said. “Are you hurt?”

Mo stood up, unsure of what had just happened. Finchy flew to Mo's side, making sure he was OK.

“My name is Jonathon,” he said. “I'm a judge for animal court and am trying a case that has upset the entire animal community. I can't seem to focus on anything else. I didn't even see you standing there. My apologies.”

Mo or Finchy had never met a judge.

“What's the case about?” asked Mo.

“A dog in our community lied about our annual marathon race,” said Judge Jonathon. “Some animals believed her and spread her lies to other animals throughout the state. Now everyone is in an uproar, taking sides, and arguing with each other.”

He explained that when animals disagree or have problems they can't solve, they go to court. He listens to each side of the story, asks lots of questions, and then makes a fair decision about what the animals need to do to make things right again.

“Can we come and watch?” asked Finchy. “I've never been to court.”

“Don't see why not,” said Judge Jonathon. “But it may be very crowded, sitting room only.”

Mo and Finchy followed him to the courtroom, a private spot in the local park hidden by bushes and trees. Dozens of animals, not just dogs, crowded around his bench, which was a large, flat rock. Mo and Finchy sat behind them, not knowing what to expect.

Judge Jonathon entered the area and sat on the ground behind his bench. He removed a gavel from his briefcase and pounded it three times.



“As soon as I organize my legal papers, this trial will begin,” he said.

Everyone sat down and patiently waited.

Earlier that morning, Mo and Finchy had been riding on top of the delivery truck for roughly 90 minutes along Atlantic City Expressway West and Interstate 95 South. Alex, the truck driver, pulled off the highway and then stopped at a big building in the city of Wilmington to make a very large delivery.

Mo and Finchy walked around town. That’s when Judge Jonathon bumped into Mo.

While waiting for court to begin, Mo and Finchy heard animals talk about the case.

“I heard that Eddi’s lies spread all over this state, as far south as Delmar, as far east as Lewes, and as far west as Kenton!” said a turtle to a rabbit.

“Do you think she’s a liar?” asked the rabbit. “A lot of animals believe she was telling the truth. I don’t know what to think anymore.”

Judge Jonathon pounded the table with his gavel once more, announcing that the trial would begin. Eddi sat on the grass next to him, facing the crowd.

“Eddi, you may start by telling your side of the story,” said Judge Jonathon.

“This is simply not fair,” said Eddi. “I really won the marathon race. Everyone thinks Chad won but he cheated.”

Judge Jonathon interrupted Eddi.

“Do you have proof that Chad cheated?” he asked.

“Well, everybody has been saying it so it must be true,” said Eddi. “That trophy belongs to me!”

“Who’s everybody?” he asked.

“You know, everybody,” said Eddi.

Everyone in the courtroom began whispering to each other. Judge Jonathon banged his gavel on the bench.

“Quiet in the courtroom!” he shouted.

“Eddi, you are on trial for lying,” he said. “You are accused of telling everyone that you won the race. You claim that Chad won because he cheated.”

Mo and Finchy looked at each other. Eddi looked so sweet and nice. Was she really a liar or telling the truth?

Judge Jonathon asked Eddi many questions that Mo and Finchy would have never thought to ask. How did she know Chad cheated? How did Chad cheat? How long had she been training for this race? How many miles could she run? He did everything he could to reveal the truth. He even asked Eddi if she wanted to run a short race with Chad that same day.

She didn’t answer any of his questions. Instead, she kept saying, “I won the marathon race.”

Chad, a large black and tan dog that that was in the courtroom, jumped up and shouted, “I did not cheat. I trained for one year to win this race. You’re lying!”

There were murmurs in the crowd. Once again, Judge Jonathon pounded his gavel on the table, asking everyone to remain quiet.

“Eddi, point to anyone here that knows Chad cheated or even saw you train,” he said.

Eddi pointed to three animals. He asked them to stand up and tell him what they knew.

“Well, Eddi said Chad cheated so it must be true,” said the first animal. “She wouldn’t lie.”

The other two animals said they had heard the same thing from Eddi. But they never saw Chad cheat or Eddi train for the race. No one did.

“Eddi,” said Judge Jonathon. “I know how badly you wanted to win this marathon. But so did Chad. You have to do more than hope or want something to come true. If you want to be a doctor, you can’t just wish for it to happen. You have to go to medical school. If you want to be a singer, you need to take lessons. And if you want to be a marathon runner, you have to train.”

Eddi refused to look at him. She kept shaking her head back and forth, mumbling that Chad had cheated.

This time, everyone in the crowd was silent.

“No one saw Chad cheating,” Judge Jonathon said. “You simply wanted to win so you made up this story. You repeated this lie so many times that many animals started believing you.”

He stood up to announce his verdict or decision.

“Since you offer no proof or evidence that Chad cheated, I have no choice but to find you guilty of lying,” he said. “Eddi, you must stop lying now or you’ll be kicked out of this community.”

Eddi began crying.

“One more thing,” added Judge Jonathon. “You must admit that you lied and apologize to Chad and everyone here today.”

Would Eddi do this? Could she do this? Could she admit that she wanted to win so much that she made up this big, ugly lie?

Everyone waited for her response. Several seconds went by. Then twenty seconds.

After thirty seconds, Judge Jonathon was about to bang his gavel on the bench one last time. Eddi saw him raise his gavel and jumped up. She stared at the ground. Tears were still streaming down her cheek.

“I . . . I don’t know what to say. . .” she said. “I’m so ashamed. I lied. I didn’t mean to. I just wanted to win. But the more I lied, the more it spread, and the harder it was to control. I didn’t know how to stop it.”

Everyone in the crowd gasped, especially those that believed her.

Then she apologized to Chad, his family, and everyone there.

“I’ll never believe you again!” shouted one dog. “I trusted you!”

“I was mean to Chad because of your lies!” cried an angry deer.

“Based on your lie, I believed the judges of the marathon were also liars,” screamed a small bear. “And I told everybody not to enter next year’s race!”

More animals in the crowd stood up and told Eddi how her lie not only hurt Chad and the community, but that it also casted a dark shadow on the marathon race. All of the

animals that believed her, stood by her, and defended her, now felt very foolish. One by one, the animals left the courtroom, vowing never to speak to Eddi again. The only animals left were Mo and Finchy.

“Should we say something to Eddi?” whispered Finchy to Mo.

“Like what?” asked Mo. “Her lie hurt everyone.”

As Mo and Finchy were leaving the courtroom, they overheard Judge Jonathon speak to Eddi.

“Eddi, what you did was wrong, very wrong,” he said. “I hope you understand why you always need to tell the truth, no matter how painful it may be.”

Then he walked out of the courtroom. Eddi was now all alone.

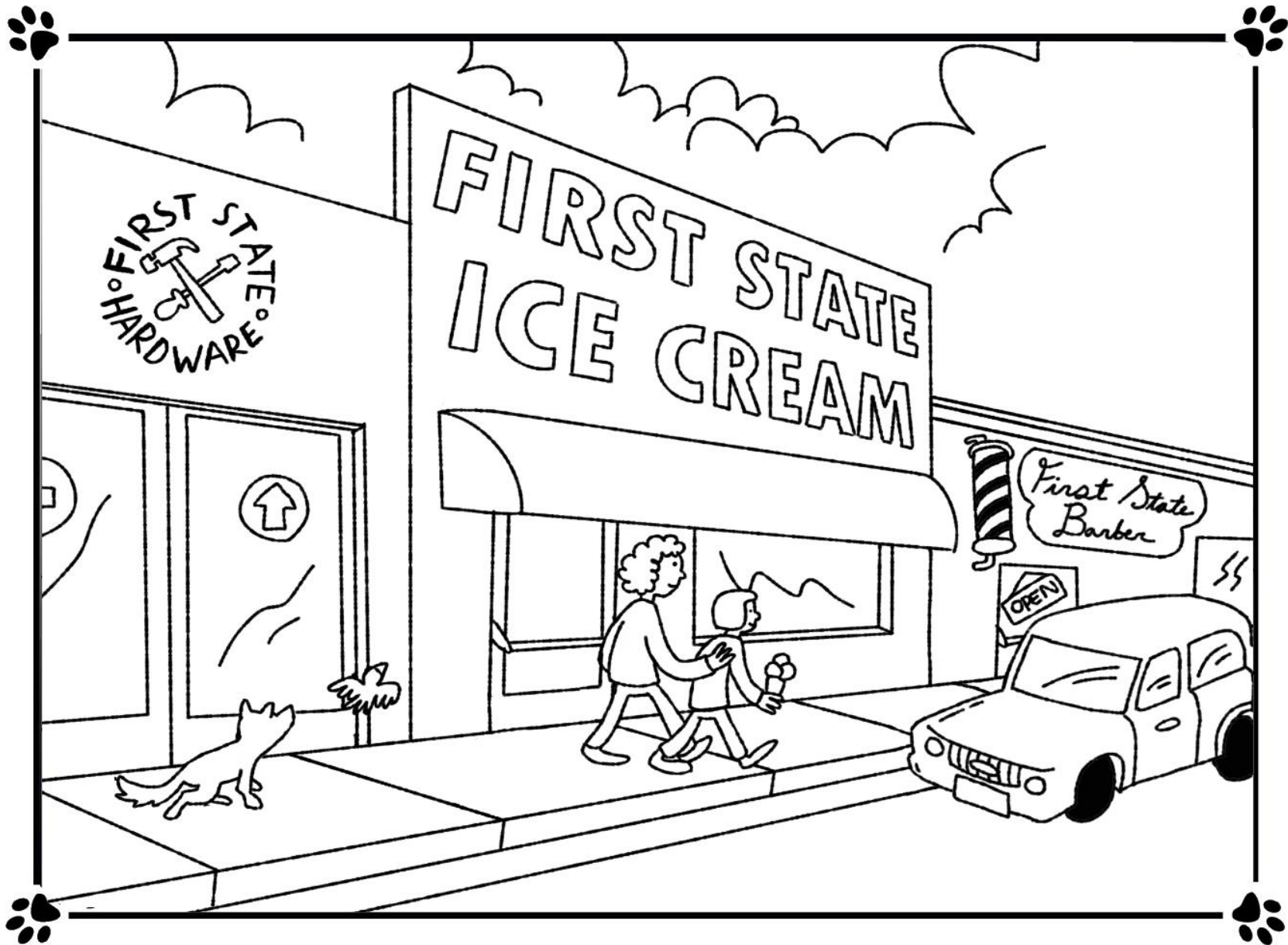
Mo and Finchy walked back to the delivery truck in silence. They had never expected this much drama.

They passed many stores with signs hanging above their doors that had “First State” in their name. They later found out that the state they were visiting was the first one in the country to approve the U.S. Constitution, a set of rules that guide this country.

“I wonder if Eddi will ever lie again,” said Finchy to Mo, once they were on top of the delivery truck.

“I hope not,” said Mo. “I would never lie to you or anyone. I have too much respect for you, other animals, and just as important, myself.”





Chapter 39

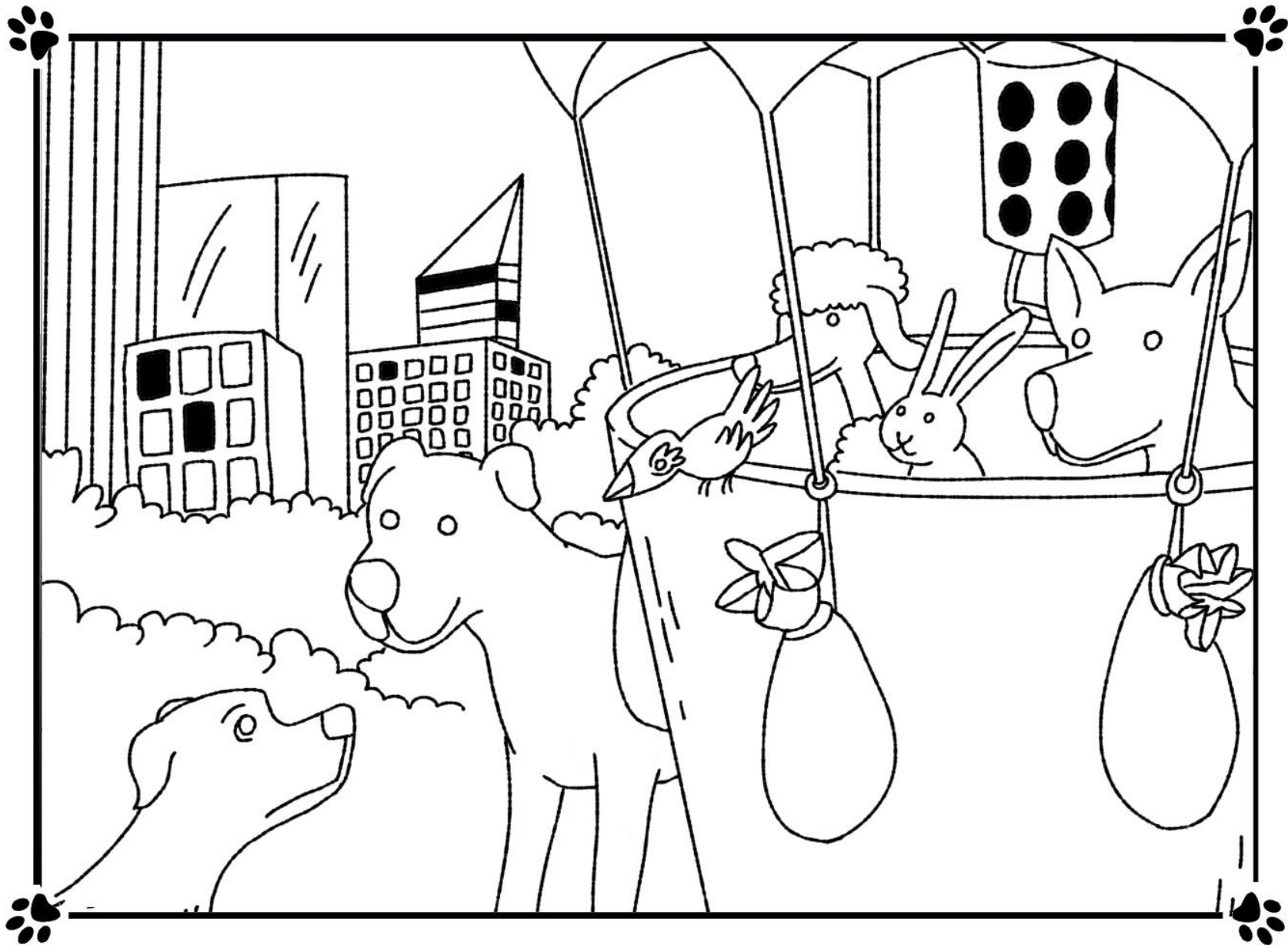
Up, Up, and Too Far Left

“Aw, c’mon, Mo,” said Finchy. “You’ll love flying. It’s so much fun. Everything looks wonderful from way up here.”

Mo looked at the enormous hot air balloon. It was seven stories high. Two dogs and a rabbit were already inside the wicker basket – called a gondola – that was attached to the balloon with steel cords, waiting to take off. The pilot was a big dog named Ed. He had been piloting hot air balloons for many years.

“My parents were pilots, too, and they named me after Edward Warren who lived here,” he said. “He was the first person in this country to ride in a hot air balloon. He was just thirteen, a lot younger than you, Mo.”

Mo knew he was delaying their flight but couldn’t help it. Ever since he could remember, he was afraid of heights. He was never one of those dogs that went mountain climbing.



“Are you coming or not?” asked the rabbit named Alice. “I’ve got a tail grooming appointment this afternoon that I can’t miss. Hot date tonight.”

Mo overheard the dogs talking about how excited they were to fly.

If they can fly in this balloon, so can I. Mo took a deep breath, counted to ten, and then climbed inside.

“It’s about time,” mumbled Alice. Then she introduced her two dog friends.

“These are my very best friends in the whole wide world,” said Alice. “This is Jackie. She’s a French Poodle but doesn’t speak a word of French. And this is Claude. He once ate nine hot dogs for dinner.”

After Mo and Finchy introduced themselves, Ed pulled a cord that created a small, controlled fire – called a burner flame – at the bottom or mouth of the balloon. The fire forced the air inside the balloon to get hot, which made it rise in the sky.

As the balloon took off, Mo wrapped his paws around Finchy for comfort.

Why did I ever agree to do this! What was I thinking!

Ed tried to make Mo feel better by distracting him with a history lesson.

“If it wasn’t for animals, I’m not sure any humans would ever fly in a hot air balloon,” Ed said. “A sheep, duck, and rooster were the first living creatures ever to fly in a hot air balloon back in 1783. Humans were simply too afraid. That just goes to show you how much courage animals have, much more than humans.”

Mo faked a smile. He laid flat on the bottom of the basket with his eyes closed, wishing this balloon ride would quickly end. His stomach started doing somersaults.

“Mo,” whispered Finchy. “You’ll feel a lot better if you just look up at the sky. Just sit up and look up.”

Finchy kept nudging Mo with his beak until he sat up and opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was a cloud hanging very low in the sky. He had never seen one this close and stretched out his paw to touch it as the balloon floated right by it.

That was really cool. Maybe this won’t be as bad as I thought.

Mo’s fear slowly began to fade. He stood on his hind legs, placed his two front paws on the rim of the basket, and then looked down. He quickly closed his eyes and tilted

his head up. *I won't do that again.*

“So where are you all from?” asked Ed.

Claude, Jackie, and Alice said they had been friends for as long as they could remember.

“We all grew up together here, in Baltimore,” said Alice adding that she was born in nearby Catonsville. “I needed a day off from being chased by the same, annoying cat that lives in our neighborhood. So I thought it might be fun for us to take a vacation day, to see or sniff something different that’s not close to the ground.”

“Do you like living here?” asked Ed.

“This is a very cool state,” said Alice. “Did you know that the refrigerator was invented here? I don’t know what I would do without mine. Where would I store my celery and carrots?”

Jackie nodded her head in agreement. “This state also has an official dog. It’s the Chesapeake Bay Retriever.”

Mo was hoping that someone would know the state's name. No one did. But Ed added that the capital was Annapolis and that the state was surrounded by four other states.

Mo and Finchy were impressed that Ed understood directions. Maybe he could guide them to Florida.

“Are you on vacation, too?” asked Claude.

Mo and Finchy told them about their mission to Florida to return a valuable key to its owner.

“We’ve traveled all over this country on top of a delivery truck,” Mo said, adding that just this morning, they rode for nearly ninety minutes along Interstate 95 South. “All we know is that we have to head south to Florida.”

The animals chatted for a while about their family and friends. Mo started to relax. Every now and then, he’d stretch out his right front paw to touch a cloud or feel the sky.

The balloon continued gliding through the air, here and there. The cool air felt

wonderful against Mo's thick fur. Slowly, very slowly, he began gathering his courage to look down on the city.

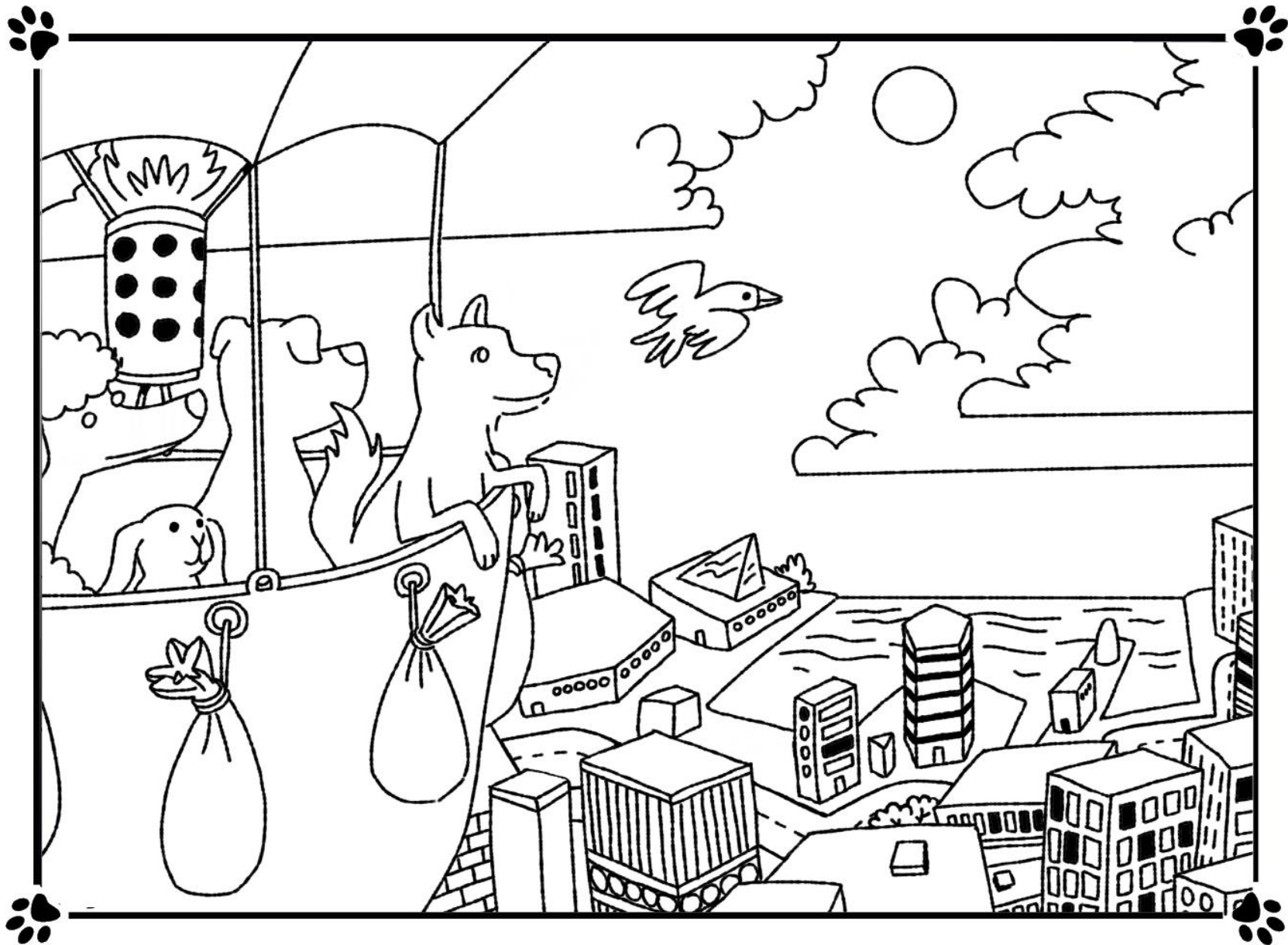
When he finally did, Alice pointed out a popular site.

“See that tall building Mo, the one on the right side of that ship?” asked Alice. “It has a well-known restaurant for rabbits and caterpillars. Several times a year, we dine at the rooftop's vegetable garden. So many fresh veggies. Simply d-e-e-licious.”

Mo's stomach was still queasy. The last thing he wanted to do was talk about food.

Claude, Jackie, and Alice pointed out other popular places to Mo and Finchy in case they wanted to visit them. Among them was the Baltimore National Aquarium where visitors can walk on Shark Alley, a catwalk that's inches above where hungry sharks swim.

Mo grew more and more comfortable as the balloon floated through the sky. His stomach even settled down. He looked up, down, to his right, and then left, simply amazed at how different the world looked from so high in the sky.



“Finchy, now I understand why you can’t sit still, why you’re always flying here and there,” Mo said. “I could fly forever and never touch the ground.”

Mo soon regretted saying those words. Out of nowhere, a huge gust of wind pushed the balloon all the way to the left. The animals looked at Ed. They were now flying in the opposite direction, over the ocean instead of the city.

Mo realized that there wasn’t a steering wheel on the balloon like there was in the delivery truck. Mo and the other animals started to panic as the balloon drifted farther out to sea. The animals sat on the bottom of the basket, holding each other very tight.

“Mo, you’re squashing me,” said Finchy. “I promise you that everything will be alright. Many birds know Ed and say he is one of the best pilots in the country. I would never put you in danger. I’m the guy who saved your life – twice as I recall – remember?”

Ed was doing this and that, trying to head back toward the city but nothing seemed to work.

“We’re going to crash into the ocean,” shouted Claude!”

“We’ll end up far, far away, maybe in a different country, or even on a different planet, and never see our family and friends again!” cried Jackie.

“Please, everyone stay calm!” shouted Ed. “I know what I’m doing.”

He explained that the wind determined the direction of the balloon. Whatever direction the wind blew was the same direction in which the hot air balloon traveled.

Ed needed the balloon to go higher in the sky so he could change its direction. He pulled the cord again to light the flame or fire on the bottom of the balloon, which forced hot air into it, and made it rise. Then he steered the balloon back over land.

Everyone took a deep breath.

The animals then cheered Ed’s name. Finchy even sang a sweet song about the friendship between a dog and bird.

They continued flying for another thirty minutes looking over the city, laughing at themselves for being so afraid. They felt grateful to have Ed as their pilot.

Ed gently landed the balloon close to the spot where it took off.



All of the animals climbed out of the basket.

“If I ever ride in a balloon again, I’ll make sure you’re the pilot,” said Alice. Claude and Jackie nodded their heads in agreement.

Mo thanked Ed, over and over. He had never done anything in his entire life that was so thrilling and frightening at the same time!

Everyone said goodbye, knowing they would probably never see each other again.

“So, what did you think of flying?,” asked Finchy to Mo. “I hope you won’t let that minor problem sway your opinion.”

“You call that a minor problem?” asked Mo. “I have paws, not wings like you. From now on, they’re going to stay firmly on the ground!”

Chapter 40

Which Way Is Out?

“Why are you hanging upside down?” asked Mo.

“Same reason you walk upright,” replied a creature named Bernie. “It’s the way we’re made.”

Mo and Finchy had just traveled nearly five hours on top of the delivery truck along Interstates 81 South and 64 West. They saw signs for many cities, including White Sulphur Springs and Alderson. Now they were in a place called Ronceverte where Alex, the truck driver, was delivering supplies to several hotels, cabins, and cottages.

While walking around, Mo and Finchy spotted a sign for Organ Cave. They had never been in a cave that was this big. It had eleven entrances, forty miles of passages, and fossils, which are the remains of plants and animals that lived a very long time ago.

There was only a handful of people ahead of them when they approached the cave’s

main entrance. Mo and Finchy entered without any humans stopping them.

They walked down a staircase. Only a small ray of sunlight poked through the cave, guiding their way. Then they crossed a bridge surrounded by lights that helped everyone walk from one side to the other.

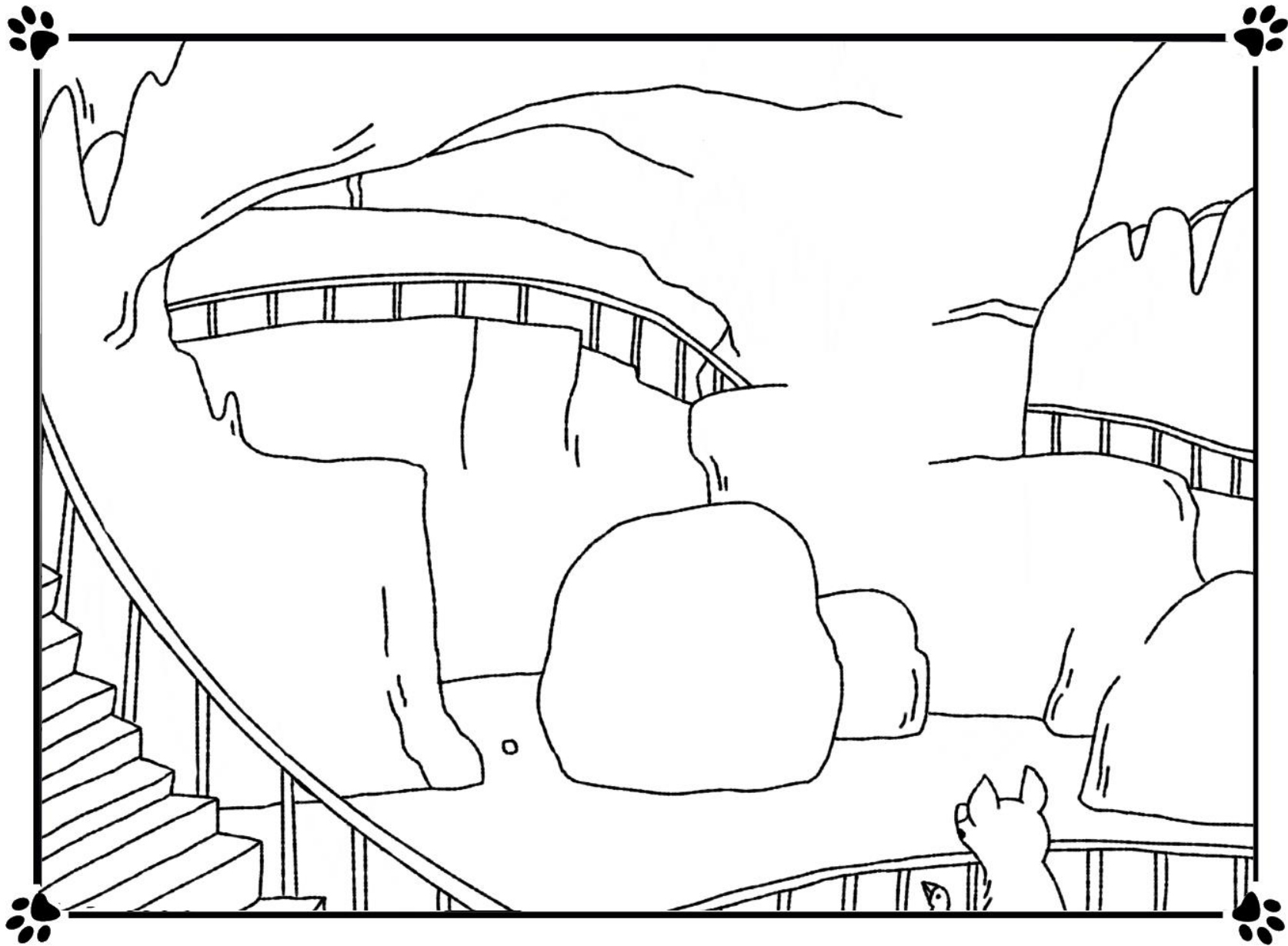
“Is this what the middle of the earth looks like?” asked Finchy to Mo. “I wouldn’t like to live here. Too dark. Too gloomy. I’d be too afraid that I would get lost and stuck in here forever.”

They continued exploring, climbing on top of rocks and squeezing through small passages. Without realizing it, they had strayed from the small group of people who were walking ahead of them.

“These rocks are so huge,” said Finchy. “And look at that one straight ahead. It looks like icicles. The one above it looks like an animal.”

The darkness continued to grow the farther they headed into the cave.

“This cave is getting spooky,” said Finchy. “Let’s get out of here.”



Mo agreed and they both turned around to head back toward the entrance. But which way should they go – through the small passage on the right or the one on the left?

They had no idea. They couldn't remember which way they came.

They chose the passage on the left, which was the wrong one. It led them deeper into the cave.

Even though there were scattered lights throughout the cave, it was still dark. They were all alone.

“If we screamed really loud, do you think anyone would hear us?” asked Finchy.

Mo looked around to find something, anything, that would help them find their way out. All he saw were rocks, rocks, and more rocks.

“We should have left a trail or made marks along the way so we could find our way back, “ said Mo.

“Now you come up with this idea?” asked Finchy. “A little late, don't ya think?”

Mo and Finchy tried not to panic. But they were afraid. Really afraid. No one knew that they were in this cave. No one would miss them if they didn't come back home, to the delivery truck. No one would search for them.

They sat on top of a rock in silence for what seemed like hours.

They decided to keep walking and began marking their trail. Maybe they'd find another one of the cave's entrances. Mo wrote a big "X" on every giant rock they passed and started looking for a safe and comfortable place to spend the night.

But then they saw something very strange. Dozens of creatures were hanging upside down from a ledge. At first, Mo thought they were birds.

"You really think those are birds?" asked Finchy, rather annoyed. "Do they look anything like me? Have you ever seen me hang upside down like that?"

They walked over to one of the creatures and introduced themselves. That's when they met Bernie and began asking him questions.

Bernie flipped right-side up and flew toward them. His wings were much larger than those of a typical bird. They were also webbed. That means that his skin stretched

over each wing, which they found out later was actually his arm, four fingers, and thumb.

He landed directly in front of them.

“It’s so nice to have visitors,” he said. “We’ve never had company before.”

“Well, we started exploring and then got lost,” Mo said. “Can you help us find our way back?”

“Of course,” said Bernie. “Which entrance . . .”

Before Bernie could finish his sentence, several of his family members flew over to meet Mo and Finchy.

“This is my family,” said Bernie. He began introducing them, one by one.

They were thrilled to have guests in their home.

“Won’t you stay for some appetizers?” asked Bernie’s aunt. “We always eat a little bit before we go hunting for dinner.”

Although Mo and Finchy didn't want to spend one more minute in this cave, they didn't want to be rude and agreed to dine with them.

One of Bernie's cousins placed a white tablecloth on a flat rock. Another brought candles, placed them in candlesticks carved out of rock, set them on top of the tablecloth, and then lit them so everybody could see each other better.

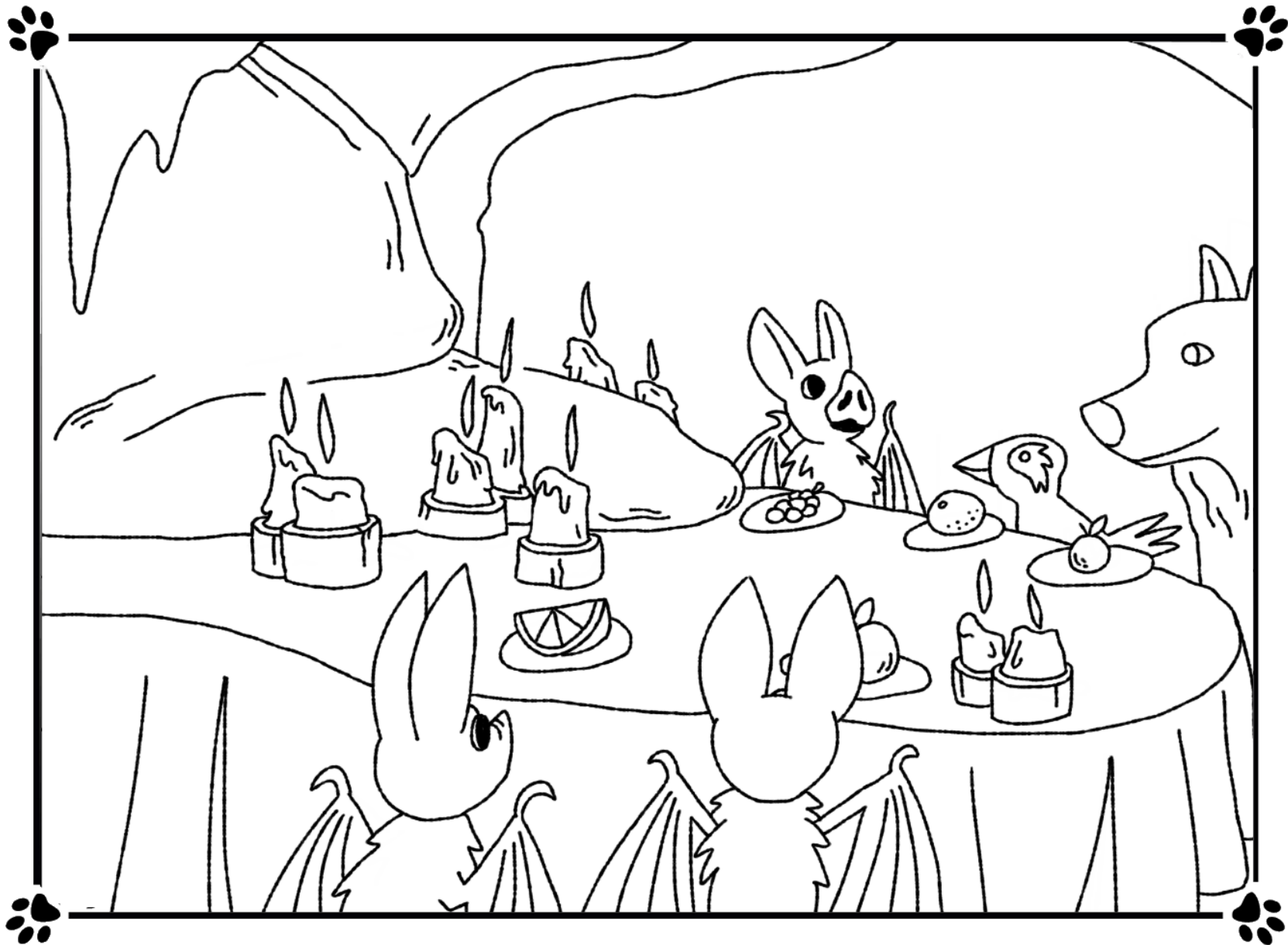
"We really don't like light," said Bernie, explaining that they only used candles for special occasions. "We usually go hunting at dusk, return at sunrise, and sleep during the day."

Mo and Finchy were surprised. Except for owls, they thought all animals slept at night.

"What kind of animals are you?" asked Mo. He explained that he was a dog and Finchy was a bird.

"We're bats," said Bernie. "Know anything about us?"

Although Mo had heard scary stories about bats from animals back home, he had never met a bat or knew if any of the stories were true.



Nearly every member of Bernie's family began telling them why bats were so special.

Bernie's uncle explained that without bats, there wouldn't be many fruits like bananas because bats pollinate them or help them multiply. Bats also help spread seeds for nuts and cacao, which is used to make chocolate.

The rest of the bats bragged about how fast they could fly, sometimes reaching one hundred miles per hour, or that some were more than twenty years-old.

"Despite what others say, we're very clean," said Bernie's aunt. "We spend a lot of time grooming ourselves."

"And we have belly buttons!" shouted Bernie's young niece. "Mine's an outie."

Mo and Finchy were very impressed with Bernie, his family, and his aunt's cooking. They licked their plates clean.

Now it was their turn to tell them about their mission to Florida. None of the bats had ever heard of the state but knew a few things about their own.

They said the shape of the state they lived in looked like a frog that was tilting

downward. Most of the state was covered in forest, but it had four rivers and four lakes that they could see from the air. Bernie's niece added that the capital city was Charleston.

They chatted until the flames on the candles almost burned out.

“It’s time for us to leave,” said Bernie. “We’ll show you how to get back to the cave’s main entrance.”

Bernie and the rest of the bats flew out of the cave in a straight line, each making sure Mo and Finchy were headed in the right direction.

When they reached the outside of the cave, Mo and Finchy waved goodbye as the bats flew away.

“I really had a good time,” said Finchy. “They were so friendly. I’m almost glad we got lost.”

“Me, too,” said Mo. “There are probably lots of bats that live in caves back home but I never met any of them.”

“I have seen them flying around at night but always kept my distance,” Finchy said. “Next time, I will introduce myself. You can never have too many friends. Besides, maybe one of them can teach me how to hang upside down!”

They both laughed. A few moments later, Finchy turned to Mo with a serious look on his face.

“There is something I need to ask you that’s kind of embarrassing,” said Finchy. He waited for several seconds before asking his question.

“Although I’m much older than Bernie’s niece and should know more than her, I had no idea what she was talking about.”

Mo wondered what she had said that confused him.

Finchy hopped closer to Mo and whispered, “What’s a belly button?”

Chapter 41

Running Like a Wild Horse

“And they’re off!” shouted a turtle named Oliver.

Mo and Finchy turned around to see what was happening. A deer and wild turkey were jumping up and down, shouting and cheering.

Not far from where they stood were three horses named Spirit, Magic, and Poppy that were running very fast next to each other. Spirit was in the lead with Magic just behind her tail while Poppy lagged farther behind.

“This is no longer a two-horse race!” shouted Oliver. “Spirit is losing ground, now just a nose ahead of Magic. But Poppy is gaining speed. Look at her kicking up all that grass and dirt! Which horse will win this race is anyone’s guess!”

The horses ran twice around a giant circle, zooming past the small crowd.

“C’mon, Poppy!” shouted the deer. “Run faster! Faster! You can do this. You can win!”

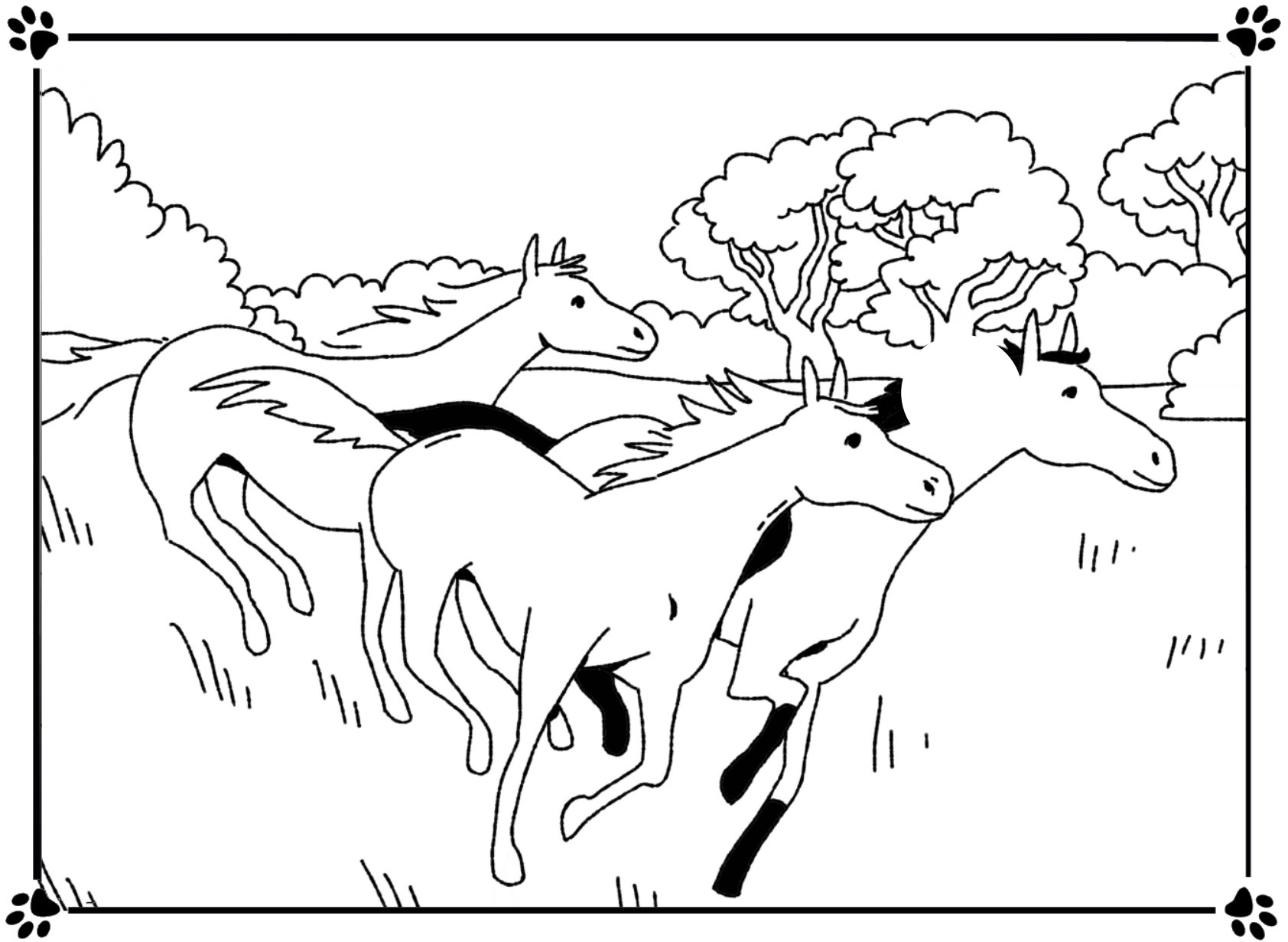
As Mo watched the horses, his heart was racing, too. The horses were so close to each other that he was afraid they would bump into each other and hurt themselves. Still, it was very exciting to see animals run that fast.

“This is going to be a very close race!” shouted Oliver. As the horses ran past him for a second time, he clocked their speed. “Fifty miles per hour! Wow! That’s got to be some kind of world record!”

Spirit ended up winning the race by one second. The three horses slowed down to catch their breath and trotted around the giant circle one last time. The animals in the small crowd rushed over to greet them.

“That was so exciting!” said the wild turkey. The color of his head changed from red to blue. “Have you been training or working out? I’ve never seen any of you run that fast!”

“I wish I could run like that,” said Oliver to the horses. “It would take me a month to travel the same distance you did.”



Mo and Finchy watched the race from behind a tree, not wanting to bother the animals. Earlier that morning, they had traveled on top of the delivery truck for about forty minutes, mostly along Interstate 64 East and US 60 East. They passed a state line and saw signs for cities named Lexington and Clifton Forge.

While Alex, the truck driver, was busy making deliveries to local stores, they wandered around and heard Oliver and the deer and turkey shouting.

Oliver noticed Mo and Finchy. “Looks like we have guests,” he said.

“Didn’t mean to bother you,” said Mo. “We wondered what all the shouting was about. That was a very exciting race!”

“Every now and then, the animals in our community race each other for fun,” said Oliver. “You missed the turtle race yesterday.”

Spirit didn’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings. She walked up to Mo and Finchy to whisper something in their ears.

“It was more boring than watching a bush grow,” she said in a low voice. “It was so boring that I took a long nap and woke up before the race was finished.”

Mo and Finchy had spoken to horses before but never a turtle or wild turkey and tried not to stare at them.

Oliver, the turtle, reminded them of Annie, the armadillo from Amarillo, that showed them a time capsule and taught them Spanish. But they had never met any animal that looked like the wild turkey. He told them that he flies up into trees to sleep, changes colors when he's calm or excited, and can see three times better than humans.

Mo continued talking about the race with the other animals. When he asked Poppy what it felt like to run that fast, Poppy turned toward Finchy and said, "I imagine it's like flying."

All of the animals introduced themselves. Mo and Finchy told them about their journey to find Florida and then asked for information about their state.

"Do you know the name of the state you live in?" asked Finchy. No one said a word. "Well, can you tell us anything about this place?"

"We live in a state that's one of the most historic places in the country," boasted Oliver. "I think the capital is Richmond, which is east of here. Or maybe its Norfolk. I

can never remember.”

“Our state was named in honor of a queen in another country,” said Spirit. “But I’m not exactly sure what a queen is. Sounds like someone important.”

“Our state is called, the Mother of Presidents,” added Magic, explaining that more US presidents were born here than in any other state.

“Who cares about any of that?” said the deer. “We’re the Internet capital of the world. We handle seventy percent of the Internet traffic on the planet!”

Mo and Finchy still had no idea if they were any closer to Florida than the last state they had visited.

The animals told them that their families had lived in this area for many years. They had worked hard to build a community that was a lot different than others.

They believed that everyone was just as important as everyone else, no matter if someone was a horse, turkey, or turtle. They told Mo and Finchy that all living things on this planet have a special skill or talent. All they have to do is discover it.

Oliver said his special skill was announcing. No other animal could announce a race better than him.

The turkey said he was a great problem solver. The deer was a healer. Magic was a brilliant scientist. Poppy was kind and helpful. One time, a turtle wanted to attend his cousin's birthday party that was very far away. Poppy ran as fast as she could with the turtle on her back to make it to the party on time.

“So what's your special skill?” asked the deer. “What are you good at doing?”

Mo and Finchy looked at each other, not knowing what to say. Did they even have a special skill?

“I know,” said Spirit. “You're good at exploring. That's your special skill.”

Mo and Finchy grinned from ear to ear. They liked the way that sounded.

While eating lunch, Mo and Finchy told the animals a little bit about every place they had seen. The strange looking people. Huge, but nice, creatures. Volcanoes. Caves. A science fair. Museums. A time capsule. Gigantic sculptures. A hotel for animals. A

giant telescope. Animals that hang upside down. And so many other wonderful things.

The animals hung on every word that Mo and Finchy said. They had never heard such tales! Was the country they lived in really this much fun, different, and exciting?

Everyone relaxed on the soft grass that felt like velvet, daydreaming about Mo's and Finchy's journey. Some wondered if they would have the courage to travel across the country and voiced their fears out loud.

“I would be afraid of not finding Florida,” said Oliver.

“I would be afraid of not finding the key's owner,” said the deer.

“I would be afraid of, well, just everything else,” said the wild turkey.

Mo and Finchy weren't afraid of failing. They always tried their best and never let fear stop them from doing something important.

It was late in the afternoon. Mo and Finchy needed to head back to the delivery truck. But before they left, Poppy wanted to give Mo a goodbye gift.

“Mo, you asked me what it felt like to run fast,” she said. “Why don’t you climb on my back? Then I’ll run as fast as I can so you’ll know what it feels like to run like a wild horse.”

Mo’s eyes lit up. Poppy lowered her head and bent her front leg so Mo could climb on her back.

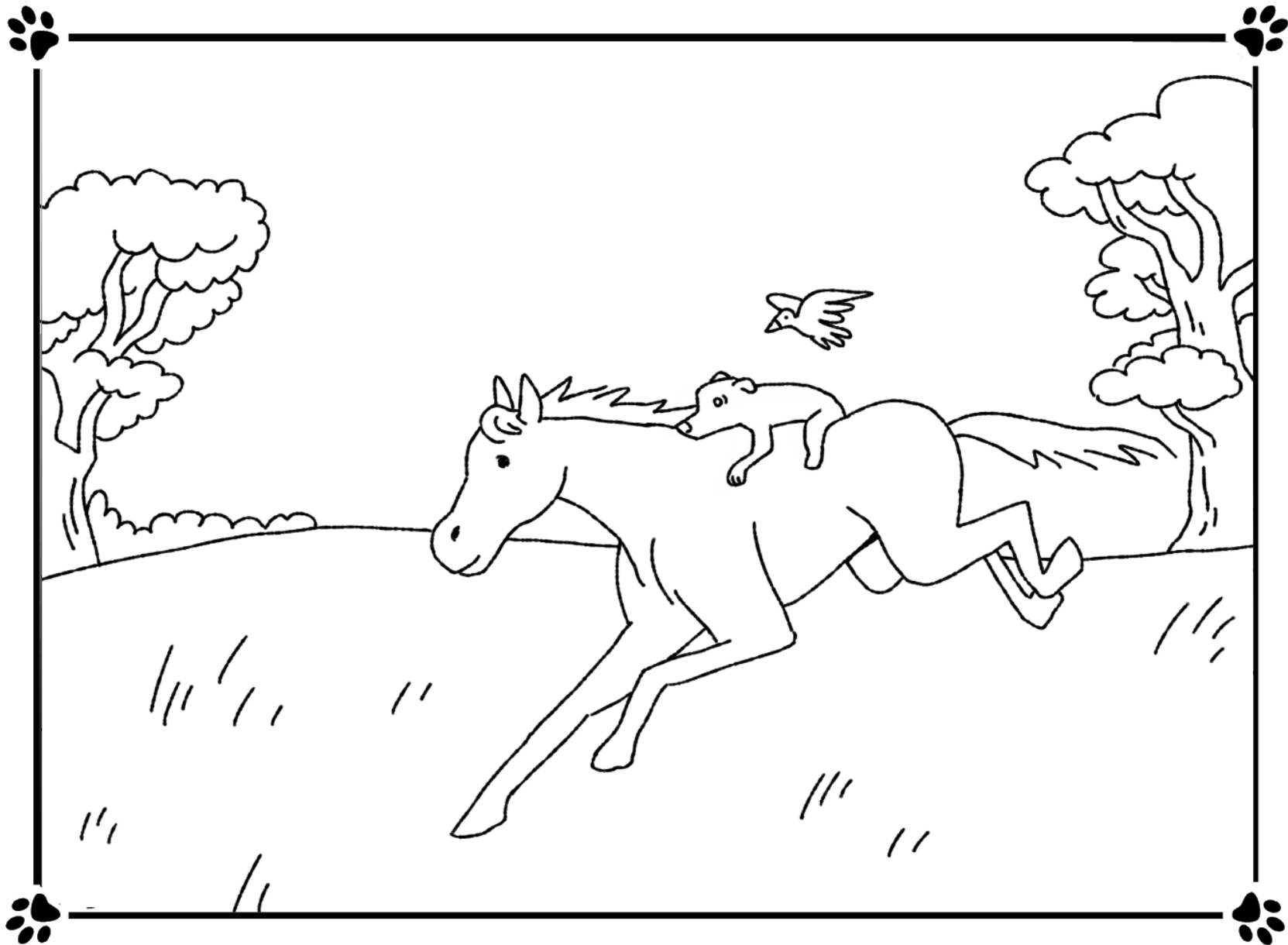
“Hang on tight, real tight,” said Oliver.

Mo laid flat on his stomach and hugged Poppy’s sides with his legs.

Poppy began walking at a nice even pace. After a short while, she began trotting, and then running.

At first, Mo thought this was fun. But as Poppy gained speed, he became afraid he would fall off. He closed his eyes tight, too afraid to look up, down, or even straight ahead.

When Poppy started running, Finchy flew alongside them, trying to calm Mo down.



“You’re a world-famous explorer,” shouted Finchy to Mo. “Act like it! Open your eyes. This is a great adventure!”

Finchy is right. Why am I being such a coward? Should I open my eyes? Well, maybe just one eye.

Mo took a deep breath. He opened his left eye and then the right one. The trees, bushes, and other animals zoomed by him.

He felt the cool wind against his furry face. It felt good. He sat up a tiny bit, and then a bit more, and then all the way up while clinging to Poppy’s mane.

I’m really doing this! Me, Mo. I’m sitting on top of a wild horse that’s running very fast!

After several minutes, Poppy began to slow down. When she approached the other animals, she knelt down so Mo could slide off.

Mo never had a bigger smile on his face. He first hugged Finchy, thanking him for lending him his courage.

Then Mo turned to Poppy.

“Thrilling, simply thrilling,” he said. “I can’t believe I did that! How can I ever thank you?”

“Come back and tell us about Florida,” Poppy said. “All of us want to know what the key unlocks.”

Mo and Finchy hugged each of the animals before heading back to the delivery truck.

“What did it feel like sitting on top of a race horse?” asked Finchy.

Mo was having trouble finding the words to describe it. So he talked Finchy into hopping on his back and grabbing his fur real tight with his legs or any other part of his body. Then Mo started running as fast as he could.

Finchy’s tiny body flipped and flopped. It was tossed to the right, left, up, down, and then right again. But Finchy kept his grip on Mo’s fur as if his life depended on it.

After a short while, Mo gradually slowed down to a normal walk. “Does that answer your question?” he asked.

Finchy’s head was spinning. When he tried to stand up, his legs were wobbly. He



decided to sit down until he stopped feeling dizzy or seeing double, whichever came first.

“Mo, I see two of you,” said Finchy. “Which one should I be mad at for coming up with this dumb idea?”

Chapter 42

Metal Monsters

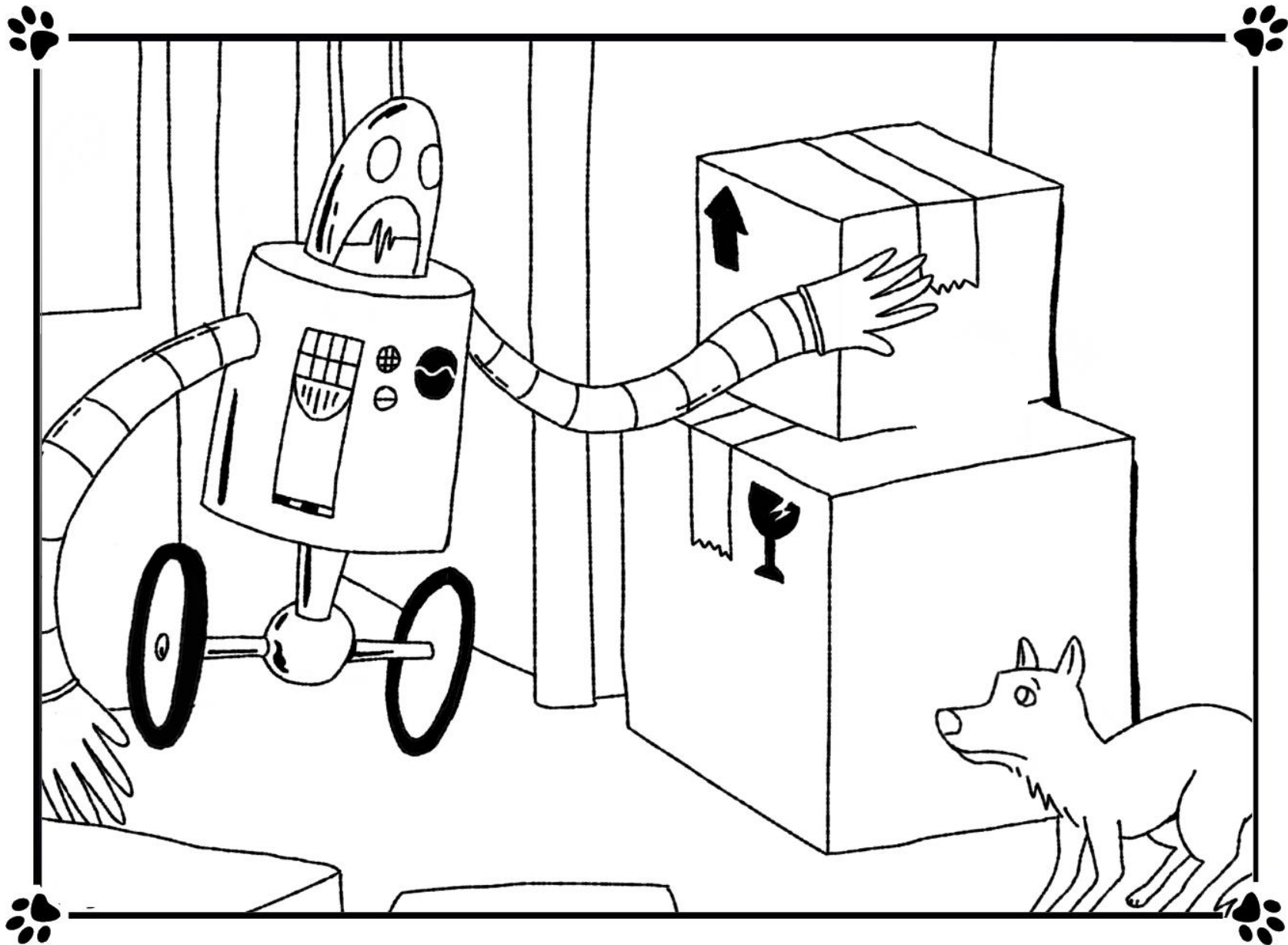
“Run, Mo, run!” shouted Finchy.

Mo ran as fast as he could to get away from the metal monster with bright, shiny eyes that made a strange noise as it moved. It had two huge arms, wheels instead of legs, and rolled easily across the tile floor. Mo entered a closet and hid in the corner behind several boxes. He hoped that this monster would not find him.

Mo heard the closet door open. He didn't dare move. He didn't dare breathe. The metal monster entered the tiny, dark closet.

“Hello,” he said in a very deep voice. “Why did you run? I wanted to introduce myself.”

Mo didn't know what to do.



The metal monster used one of his giant arms to push aside the boxes that stood in front of Mo.

“There you are,” he said. “No need to be afraid. I’m not going to hurt you. My name is Carbon. What’s yours?”

Carbon seems nice. Should I trust him? He looks so scary, so different from anything or anyone I’ve ever seen.

Mo gathered his courage, raised his head, and looked straight at him.

“M-m-my name is Mo,” he stammered.

“Welcome to my home,” said Carbon. “Is there anything I can get you? Maybe some chocolate chip cookies?”

He began to relax even though Carbon’s eyes looked like flashlight beams. He was also five times Mo’s size and weight. Still, Mo thought he could trust Carbon and followed him out of the closet.

“Where am I?” asked Mo, looking around a large room.

Carbon said that they were in a research lab at The Research Triangle Park, or The Triangle, as everyone called it. Many metal monsters lived here.

Just then, Finchy flew directly toward Carbon with a pen in his mouth.

“Finchy, stop, I’m OK,” said Mo. “So sorry, Carbon. This is my friend, Finchy. He thought I was in danger and was trying to protect me.”

Carbon didn’t seem upset, afraid, or even angry. In fact, he showed no emotion at all.

Mo and Finchy followed Carbon to a private area of the large room.

“Where are my manners?” asked Carbon. “I’ll turn more lights on so you can see better.”

When more lights popped on, Mo and Finchy saw several other odd-looking metal monsters standing right in front of them. But only one was awake.

Carbon introduced her as Kevlar, or Kev for short. Then he opened a cupboard, carefully removed several cookies from a bag sitting on a shelf, placed them on a plate, and set the plate on a table next to Mo and Finchy.

“We don’t eat food like you do,” said Carbon. “Instead, we charge ourselves.” Both robots plugged a cord from their metal bodies into an electrical outlet in the wall.

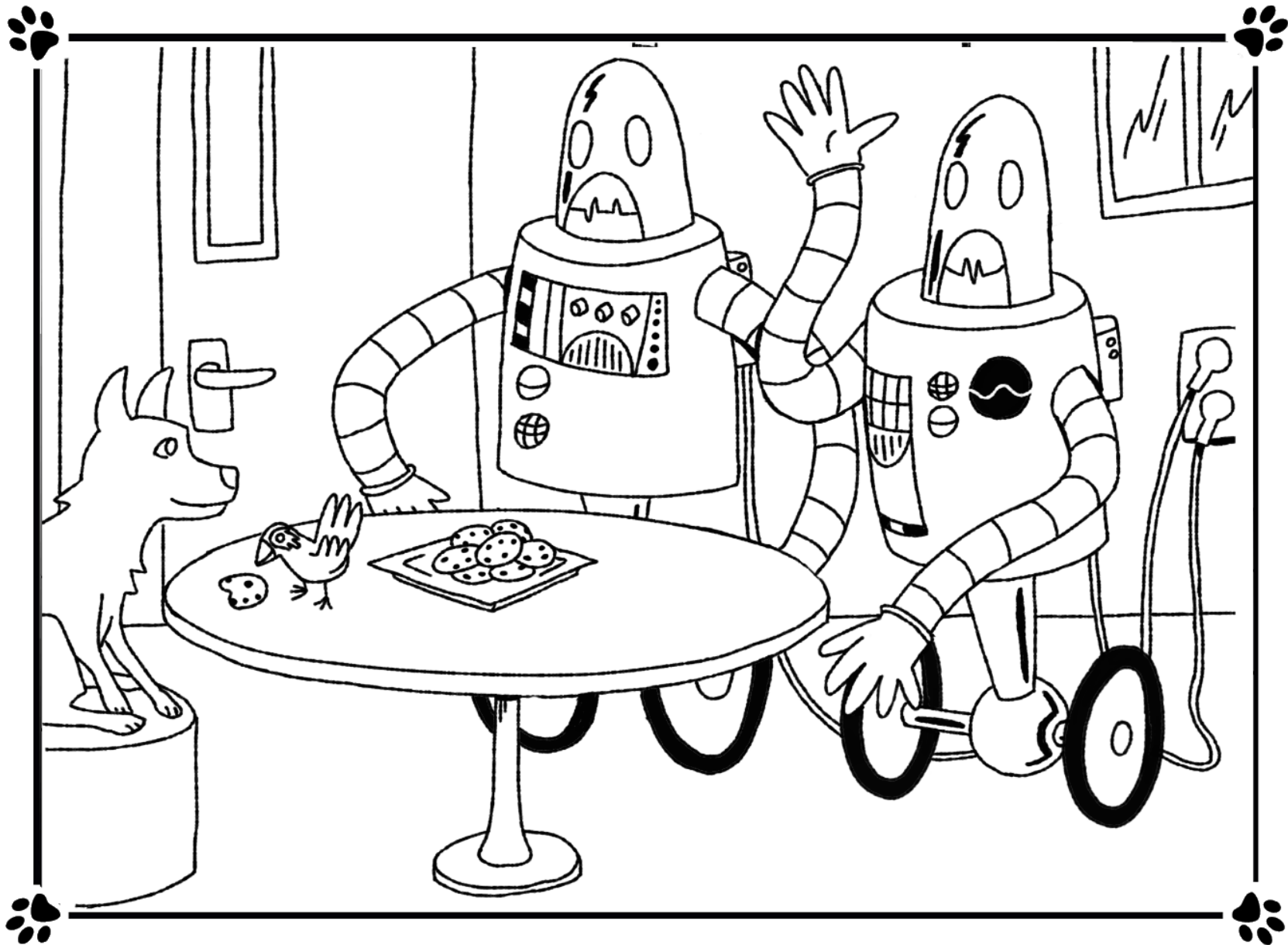
“So why are you here?” asked Kev. “Is there something we can help you with?”

Mo and Finchy told them about how they had been traveling all over the country to find Florida to return a valuable key to its owner who lived in the state.

“We’ve been traveling from state to state on top of a delivery truck for months,” said Finchy. “Today, we rode for almost four hours, mostly on Interstate 64 East, US 220 South, and Interstate 81 South. Our truck driver headed toward a city called Chapel Hill. He’s delivering packages to people in the building across the street so we thought we’d explore.”

Mo couldn’t wait any longer. He asked, “Who, I mean, what do you call yourselves? I’m a dog and Finchy is a bird.”

“We’re robots,” Carbon said. “We’re not human or even male or female, although humans made me sound like a man and Kev sound like a woman. We’re very smart machines.”



Mo and Finchy never talked to machines before.

“Since you’re so smart, do you solve the world’s problems?” asked Finchy, wondering if they were telling the truth.

“Not yet,” said Kev. “But we’re working on it.”

Finchy decided to test them.

“So what’s two plus five minus three?” he asked.

“Four hundred and thirty,” said Kev.

“You’ll have to excuse my friend,” Carbon said. “One of Kev’s circuits broke this morning. The answer is four.”

“Well, if you’re so smart,” continued Finchy.

Mo interrupted him. He didn’t want to be rude. Besides, these cookies were very tasty, probably home-made. He wanted to eat all of them and find out more about robots before leaving.

The robots told Mo and Finchy that they were being trained on how to do things that people do like pick up objects, carry them, and gently place them down on a table so they don't break. They said it took them many months to learn how to perform tasks like serving cookies.

“But math is really easy for us,” added Kev. “What’s hard is learning how to move, act, and talk like humans. In the future, robots will do many things that people do, only better, and without complaining.”

Finchy still wasn't sure he believed them and continued testing their knowledge. Carbon answered all of his math questions correctly, each in a split second.

While Mo was busy stuffing cookies in his mouth, he hoped the robots were smart enough to tell Finchy and him what state they were in, how far away Florida was, and how to get there.

“Do you know where we are?” he asked. “I mean, what state do you live in?”

At first, the robots were silent. Then they asked Mo and Finchy many questions. What were states? What did they do? Could they play with them? Were they good at math?

Mo and Finchy explained that this country is divided into fifty different places called states. Some states were very small. Others were very big. Some states were cold and had snow while others were warm and had strange-looking plants called cacti. Some had mountains and lakes and others had deserts. But every state had something unique and special about it.

As Mo and Finchy spoke, many of the lights on the robots' heads flashed on and off.

“Well, we can tell you unique things about where we live, or what you call our state,” said Kev. “We listen to what the scientists say to each other and store it in our memory or brain forever.”

Kev told Mo and Finchy that more than one hundred years ago, the Wright brothers were the first humans to build and then fly an airplane here with a motor. Finchy wanted to meet them but saw Mo shake his head back and forth.

After checking his memory bank, Carbon told them many more things about the state. More sweet potatoes are grown here than anywhere else in the country. This state also makes the most furniture. It's home to a plant called a Venus flytrap that has teeth and eats bugs. The scientists they worked with grew up in this state in places named Charlottesville, Raleigh, and Durham.

“Although we’re learning how to do things that people do, we can never be human,” Carbon said. “But we think faster than any human ever could and will never catch a cold, get sick, or need to take yucky-tasting medicine.”

"Why can't you be human?" asked Finchy, even though he thought being a bird would be a much better choice.

“The humans who made us haven’t figured out how to give us emotions,” said Kev. “But I think that’s a good thing. Who needs them? I don’t want to cry, or feel frightened, angry, anxious, nervous, or sad.”

Mo and Finchy wondered what it would be like to be a robot and not have any emotions. They really liked the idea of being smart, especially when it came to adding and subtracting numbers, which was really hard. Carbon said robots never make mistakes or forget stuff unless one of their parts breaks, which can then be replaced.

Mo and Finchy thought about how different their lives would be if they became robots.

Mo would no longer be angry or afraid when things didn’t go as planned. Finchy wouldn’t feel the need to show off or be ashamed about not knowing the answer.

They both liked the way that sounded.

But what would they be giving up? They would never again feel happy, excited, hopeful, surprised, or grateful.

Carbon asked Mo and Finchy what it felt like to have emotions. But there was one emotion they really wanted to understand, the one that humans talked about every day – love.

Mo could only think of one way to describe it.

“It’s probably like being fully charged or getting a brand new part,” said Mo.
“Everything works really well. You’re at your best.”

The robots nodded their heads and seemed to understand.

Everyone agreed that being a robot with emotions would be the best of both worlds. But no one believed humans were smart enough to create such a machine. Robots would simply have to do it.

It was time for the robots to go to sleep. The word Carbon used for sleep was

“deactivate”. So Mo and Finchy thanked them for the cookies and headed toward the delivery truck.

When they were safely on top of the truck, they made a list of all the good and bad things about being an animal and a robot. When they got down to the bottom of the page, the number of items in each column was tied.

But then Mo thought about something very important that wasn't on their list.

"If we were robots, we'd be real smart, but then we could never eat food like French fries or chocolate chip cookies," said Mo. "Who would want to live like that?"

Chapter 43

The Telling Trees

“I’ve never seen a dog and bird ride on top of a delivery truck,” said a reddish-brown bird that landed on the truck’s roof next to Finchy. “I’ve been following you along Interstate 95 South, after you crossed the state line.”

Mo and Finchy had been traveling for almost five hours. They introduced themselves to the bird named Wren and told her about the key Mo had found and their mission to find the owner who lived in Florida.

“So where are you headed now?” asked Wren. “You’re welcome to join us for our weekly Telling Trees show. Any animal can come.”

Wren explained that the Telling Trees were special trees that told stories every week to animals about their personal experiences or area’s history. Mo and Finchy were eager to go. No one had ever invited them to a live show.

Alex, the truck driver, pulled off the highway toward a city named Charleston and drove to the back of a large hotel. The animals overheard him tell the hotel manager that after he finishes this delivery, he would like a room for the night. Mo and Finchy knew they had the whole evening to do whatever they wanted.

Mo climbed down the ladder on the delivery truck without any humans seeing him. He wondered how many animals would come to the show and if they would be nice. More importantly, would food be served?

“The name of the tree that’s performing tonight is Angel Oak,” said Wren. “She’s the best story-teller and lives on Johns Island. Although she doesn’t know her real age, she’s at least five hundred years-old. I think she stopped counting birthdays years ago and simply forgot.”

Wren then looked at Mo. She chirped very loud and five large birds landed next to her.

“Since Angel Oak lives about ten miles from here, we’ll have to carry you there,” she said to Mo. The other birds gathered around her to form a plan.

Mo didn’t like the sound of being carried high in the air. What if they dopped him? But

he really wanted to see the show. Besides, ten miles was a short distance for birds to fly. He talked himself into it.

The big birds gripped Mo's tail, pointy ears, and the back of his neck. They lifted him off the ground and carried him through the air. Finchy flew next to Mo, trying to distract him so he wouldn't be so afraid.

But Mo didn't hear a word Finchy was saying.

Ok, I can do this. I'll be brave. I'll be on the ground in no time flat. Everything is fine. They won't let go. They won't let me fall. They just won't. I hope.

Before Mo realized it, he was safely on the ground. He let out a huge breath, not realizing that he had held his breath most of the way there.

"Angel Oak, I'd like to introduce you to two visitors," said Wren.

Mo and Finchy turned around and were amazed at what was standing right in front of them.

The tree was very wide and more than sixty-five feet high. Some of its branches pointed

in different directions and were covered with so many leaves that they blocked out the sun.

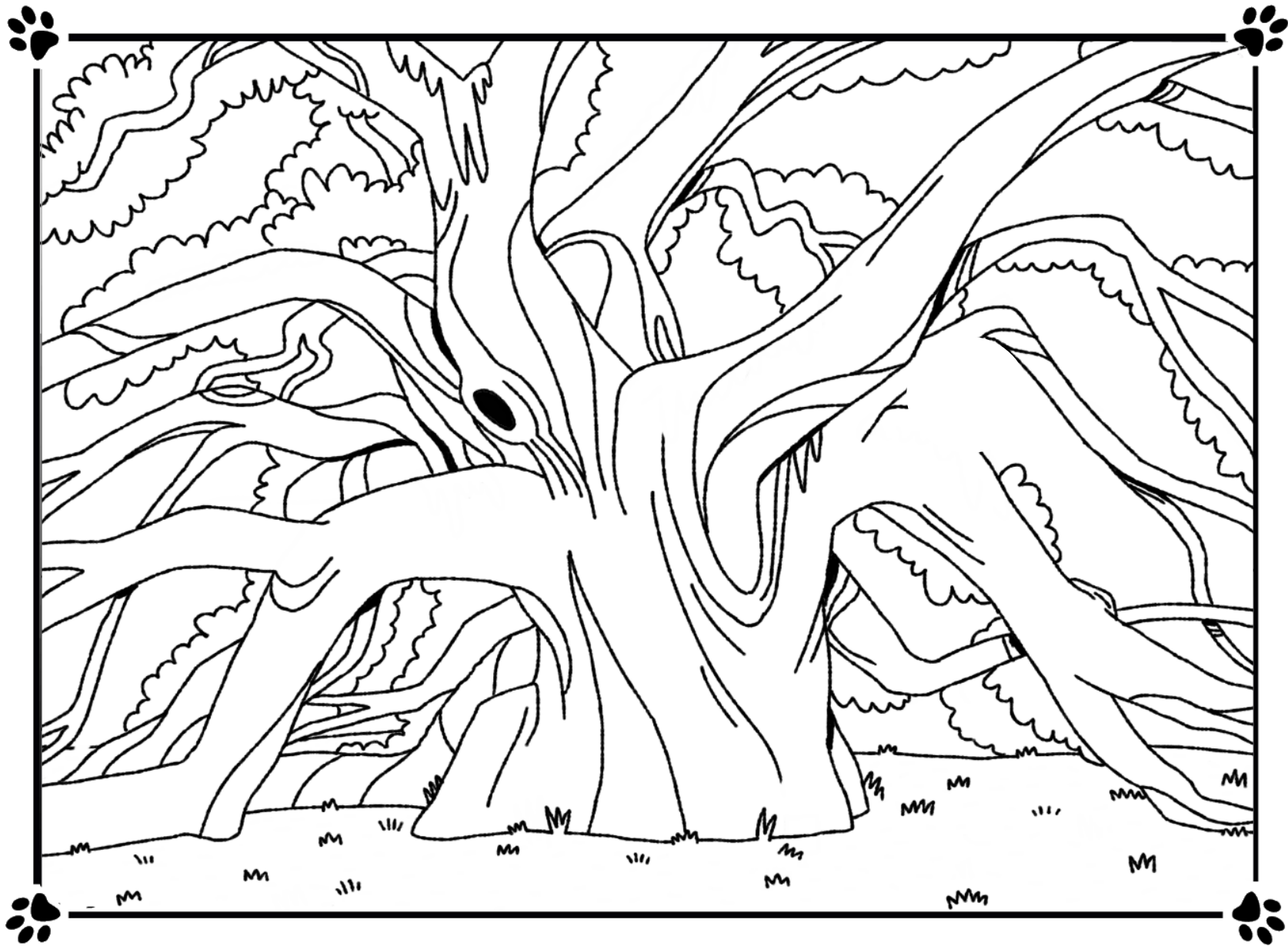
“Hello,” said Angel Oak. “Nice to meet you! Isn’t it a lovely day? Make yourselves comfortable. There’s plenty of food to eat.”

Mo and Finchy had never heard a tree speak.

“Thank you for inviting us,” said Mo, thinking that Angel Oak had a pleasant voice. “We’re excited to hear your story.”

Angel Oak smiled and told everyone to grab something to eat so their stomachs wouldn’t growl during story time.

Mo and Finchy looked around them. The audience included several deer, raccoons, coyotes, bobcats, otters, and wild hogs. Some were chatting about their recent travels around the state. Two raccoons visited Myrtle Beach, saying how much they liked riding the SkyWheel, one of the country’s tallest Ferris wheels. Others bragged about their golf game on Hilton Head Island. Several bobcats toured the state’s capitol in Columbia.



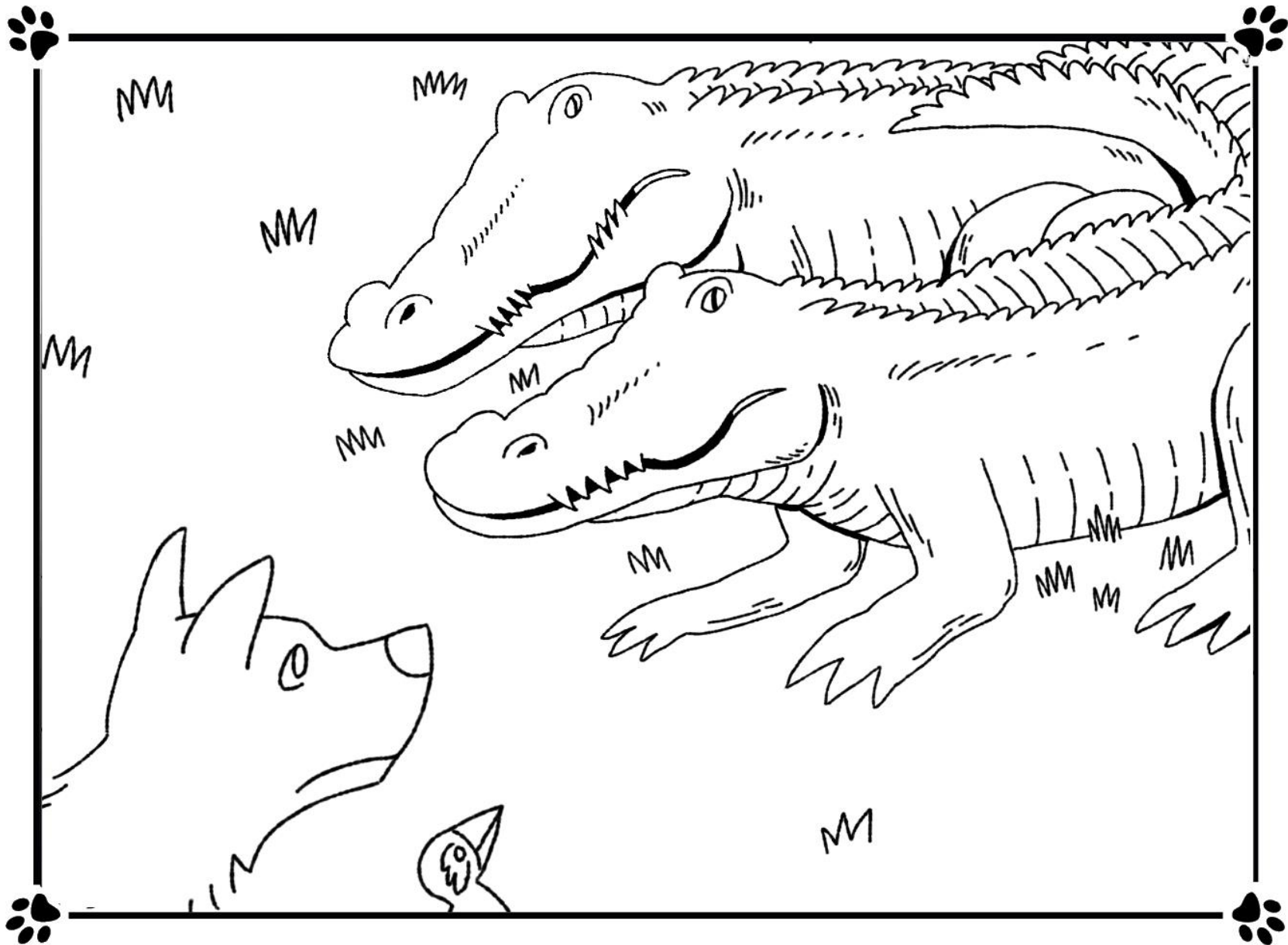
There were also two, very scary-looking creatures in the crowd. What were they? They were around ten feet long and their stomachs were close to the ground. Each had a long tail, huge head, and lots, lots of sharp teeth. They each stared at Mo for a very long time. Maybe it was his imagination. Maybe not. Either way, he didn't want to be their afternoon snack.

Next to Angel Oak were dozens of leaf sandwiches stuffed with fruits, nuts, and berries. The animals ate everything in sight. Not one berry was left. Still, those scary creatures wouldn't take their eyes off Mo.

“Now you know how I feel around cats,” whispered Finchy to Mo. “Sit far away from them, just in case.”

Angel Oak lifted her tree limbs, a sign that storytelling was about to begin.

“Tonight's story is a bit different than the others I've told,” she said. “It's not about pirates, pioneers, or presidents. This story will make you think. It will make you feel. It may even make you disagree with each other. But before I start, I'd like to welcome our guests, Mo and Finchy.”



Many of the animals looked at them, wondering why they were here. Were they visiting family? An otter that was the only real estate agent for animals on the island hoped they came to review the show. A great online review would make the Telling Trees famous and then animals from all corners of the world would want to live here. He would be rich!

The otter's daydream was interrupted by Angel Oak.

“As you know, all kinds of animals live here,” she said. “Just look around. See how different we are from each other? Well, there's another animal that lives close by that you probably have never heard about or even seen. It's called a monkey.”

The animals looked at each other in surprise. They thought they knew every type of animal that lived here.

“Less than two hours south from here is Morgan Island, which is also called Monkey Island,” she said while pulling out several large photos from inside her tree trunk of several monkeys that live on the island. “Here's what they look like. There are nearly four thousand monkeys living there and . . .” She paused. “Humans aren't allowed on the island!”

The crowd gasped.

“Many, many years ago, one of my good friends was a young monkey named Scarlet,” continued Angel Oak. “She slept and played on my branches. She was like family. I was her favorite tree. We had lots of fun together.”

Angel Oak told them all about how Scarlet and other monkeys acted. She explained that monkeys sleep sitting up on a tree branch, can swim – even underwater – and eat mostly fruits and flowers.

“But one day, Scarlet came to me with a question,” said Angel Oak. “It was the most difficult question anyone has ever asked me.”

All the animals looked at each other, wondering what Scarlet could have possibly asked.

“She found a comfortable branch to sleep on,” said Angel Oak. “But the branch next to it was much bigger and blocked her view of the sunrise. Could she cut off the giant branch?”

Angel Oak said she didn’t know what to do. She had dozens of branches. While

cutting any of them off wouldn't hurt, she valued them all, watched them grow, and didn't want to do it.

Still, Scarlet was her friend. Friends did nice things for each other. Was Angel Oak being selfish? Was Scarlet?

Nothing like this had ever happened to any of the animals in the crowd and they began shouting out their thoughts.

“Scarlet should have never asked you to do that!” said a coyote. “She was only thinking of herself, not you. Very selfish if you ask me.”

“Maybe, but maybe not,” said a deer. “Friends help each other out. Many times, that means sacrificing or doing things you don't want to do.”

“How would you feel if you cut off the branch and then later on, Scarlet moved to another tree?” said a raccoon. “That would make me really mad! Could you trust her to stay?”

Angel Oak listened to everyone's opinion. Then she told them the rest of the story.

“I spent the entire afternoon wondering what to do,” she said. “One moment, I was willing to cut off the branch. The next moment, I wasn’t. As I said, this was one of the hardest decisions I ever had to make.”

Angel Oak told them there was still another choice. They could both be happy if they each gave a little bit or compromised. Angel Oak would not cut off the branch but would help Scarlet find another one to sleep on with a good view of the sunrise or help her find a better branch on a different tree.

The next day, the two friends searched for a good spot and found one on Angel Oak. While it wasn’t perfect, Scarlet slept on that same branch and watched the beautiful sunrise for many years.

Angel Oak told the group that helping others was always important but not if it upsets or hurts you in some way. She told them how important it was to compromise or give in a little bit like they each had done.

The animals sat in silence thinking about the lesson they had just learned. Were they selfish? Did they always try to get their way or did they meet their friends halfway?



Mo and Finchy thanked Angel Oak for the great story and said goodbye to Wren and the other animals.

The five large birds carried Mo back to the delivery truck and gently placed him on its roof.

After Mo and Finchy waved goodbye, they thought about Angel Oak's story.

“Ya know, Finchy, I guess there were times where I was selfish, where I could have met you halfway,” said Mo. “I could have been more thoughtful about what you wanted instead of focusing only on what I wanted.”

Finchy laughed.

“It took you this long to figure that out?” asked Finchy. He reminded Mo of all the times he simply had to have his way. “No worries, Mo. You're still my best friend. You're just lucky that my heart is as big as my brain.”

Chapter 44

Mo and Finchy Help Build a House

Mo and Finchy read the sign on the front door: Volunteers Needed.

They walked inside the small building and were surprised to see so many different animals. There were raccoons, bobcats, coyotes, beavers, dogs, and birds standing in line, waiting to speak to a large cat sitting behind a desk.

“Hey, pal, no cuts,” said a bobcat to Mo. “I’ve been waiting in line for at least twenty minutes.”

“Waiting in line for what?” asked Mo.

The bobcat carefully looked at Mo and Finchy.

“You’re not from around here, are you?” he asked. “This place is nicknamed the Volunteer State. All animals that live here sign up to volunteer for something.”

Mo and Finchy had met animals that helped clean up their community park and Finchy once helped a sick bird and his family. But they had never heard of signing up to volunteer.

“What can you sign up for?” asked Finchy. “Can it be for just a day?”

“You can volunteer for a zillion different things,” said the bobcat. “You can babysit young animals, give music, singing, or dance lessons, deliver food, cook meals, or even offer fashion tips. You can do almost anything, anywhere in the state.”

Mo and Finchy had the whole day ahead of them. Yesterday they had traveled for almost eleven hours on top of the delivery truck, mostly along Interstate 22 West, heading toward a city named Memphis. Alex was now resting at a hotel and didn’t plan on leaving until tomorrow morning.

They decided to volunteer and stood in line. But what should they do? What could they do?

Now it was their turn to talk to the cat.

“Give me your name, address, and what you want to do,” said the cat without even

looking up at them.

Providing their names was easy but what should Finchy and Mo list as their address?

“I haven’t got all day,” she said, rather snooty.

“Our address is the rooftop of Alex’ delivery truck,” said Mo.

The cat wrote down what Mo had told her and handed him a long list of volunteer jobs.

Mo and Finchy read the list. An elk in Nashville needed help planting a garden. A bear in Knoxville needed help moving things out of a cave before her family moved inside it. A beaver in Brentwood needed someone to settle a family argument. The list went on and on.

They found something interesting on page seven.

“Need help building a house in Memphis for older animals.”

Although Mo had never built anything in his life, he liked the sound of it and thought

he would be very good at it. Finchy did, too. Since he had helped build dozens of bird nests, how hard could it be to build a house?

They signed up for the job, which was nearby. While walking there, they wondered many things. How big would the house be? How many animals would live there? Why did they want to live inside a house? Would it have a backyard?

They saw a beaver standing next to the wood frame of a house. He was shouting directions, telling everyone what to do. All sorts of tools were on the ground. Hammers. Screwdrivers. Nails. Pliers. Drills. Tape measures. Paint brushes.

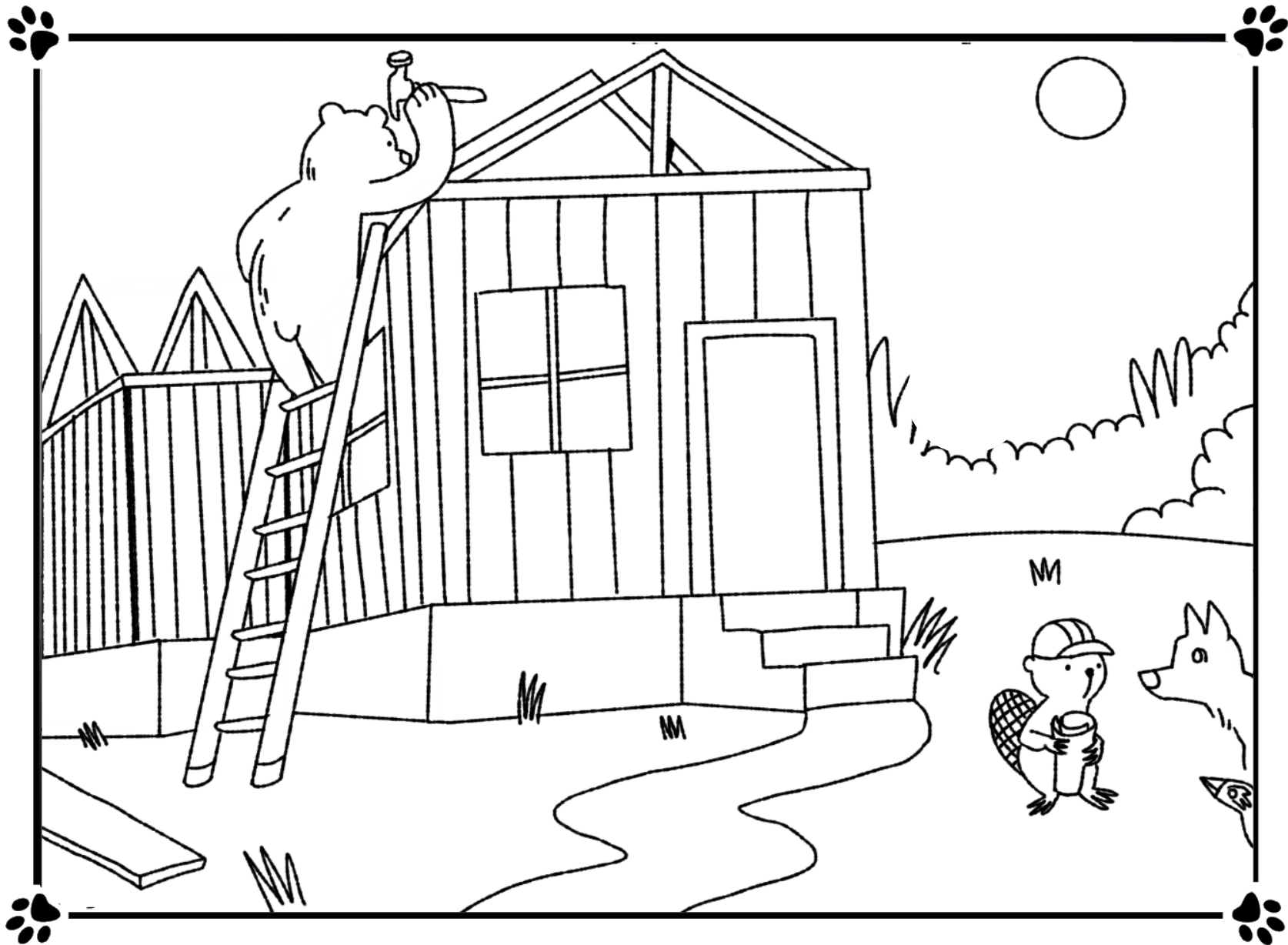
“Hello,” said Mo. “I’m Mo and my friend’s name is Finchy. We’re here to help.”

“Did you ever build a house before?” asked the beaver in charge that introduced himself as Bobby. Then he looked at Finchy. “Anything except a bird’s nest?”

“Not really,” said Mo as Finchy shook his head back and forth.

“Know how to use a drill?” asked Bobby.

“Not really,” said Finchy.



“Ever hold a hammer or paint or measure something?” asked Bobby.

Mo and Finchy looked down at the ground. They realized that this wasn’t going to be as easy as they thought.

“That’s OK,” said Bobby. “Just listen to Mason’s directions. She’s my master carpenter.”

Bobby introduced Finchy and Mo to Mason, a giant black bear.

“Glad you can help us,” said Mason. Did you just move here?”

Mo and Finchy told her about their mission and asked if she knew where they were, or the name of the state.

“Not really sure,” she said. “All I know is that this state borders eight states. Oh, and many humans come here to visit Great Smoky Mountains National Park and a very noisy place. I think it’s called Nashville.”

Mo and Finchy still didn’t know where they were. No matter. They were excited about building a house.

Finchy's task throughout the day was to measure every part of the house. He had to make sure everything was the size it was supposed to be and level, or the same height on all sides. While a dog held the tape measure, Finchy grabbed the end of the tape in his beak, flew to the other end of whatever they were measuring, and then recorded its height, width, and length in feet and inches.

Mo was asked to nail the walls of the house on to the frame. Mason handed Mo a hammer and then showed him how to use it. Mo watched as she held a nail in her left front paw and used the right front paw to pound the nail into the wall and frame.

Seemed easy. But the first time Mo did this, he missed the nail and made a small hole in the wall with the hammer. Same thing happened the second and third time.

“Let's try something else,” said Mason. “Are you strong? See those windows and wooden planks for the floor? We need someone to move them to that spot over there.”

Mo tried to pick up one window but could barely lift it. Then he tried lifting one plank. It was even heavier than the window.

So much needs to be done. There must be something I can do.

Mo thought he could help order supplies. How many more nails would be needed to build the rest of the house? What about screws, glue, or tape? Maybe the animals would need more hammers or drills. He was very proud of his math skills. He could add, subtract, and count all the way up to one hundred. But he soon found out that this job needed someone that could also multiply and divide numbers.

Mo looked around the job site. Everyone was busy hammering, drilling, lifting, measuring, or looking at blueprints. He felt useless.

When I get back home, I'm going to learn how to build stuff and multiply and divide numbers. There's so much I don't know.

Mo overheard Mason talking to Bobby. They were trying to find a task, no matter how small, that Mo could do.

“What about painting?” asked Mason. “All of the wood in that pile needs to be painted.”

They agreed that this was something Mo could handle. Mason gave Mo a paint brush and a crash course on how to paint.

“Move the brush this way and that way,” she said, while painting a scrap piece of wood. “We don’t want any streaks. Make sure your brush strokes are even and smooth.”

Painting all the wood in the giant pile would keep Mo busy for the rest of the day. He was determined to do a great job.

But after painting a small piece of wood, he noticed many uneven streaks. It was hard for Mo to hold his paw steady while painting back and forth.

I’m smart enough to figure this out. I will not fail. I will not let these animals down.

Mo stood up and began walking around the area for ideas. His tail got caught on a thorny bush. Without thinking, he easily wiggled and wagged his tail to set it free.

That’s it! I’ll use my tail as a paint brush!

Mo ran back to the pile of wood. He dipped his tail in the can of blue paint and started wagging it to the right and then left.

After painting one piece of wood, he turned around to check his work. It was perfect.

No streaks. His strokes were smooth and even.

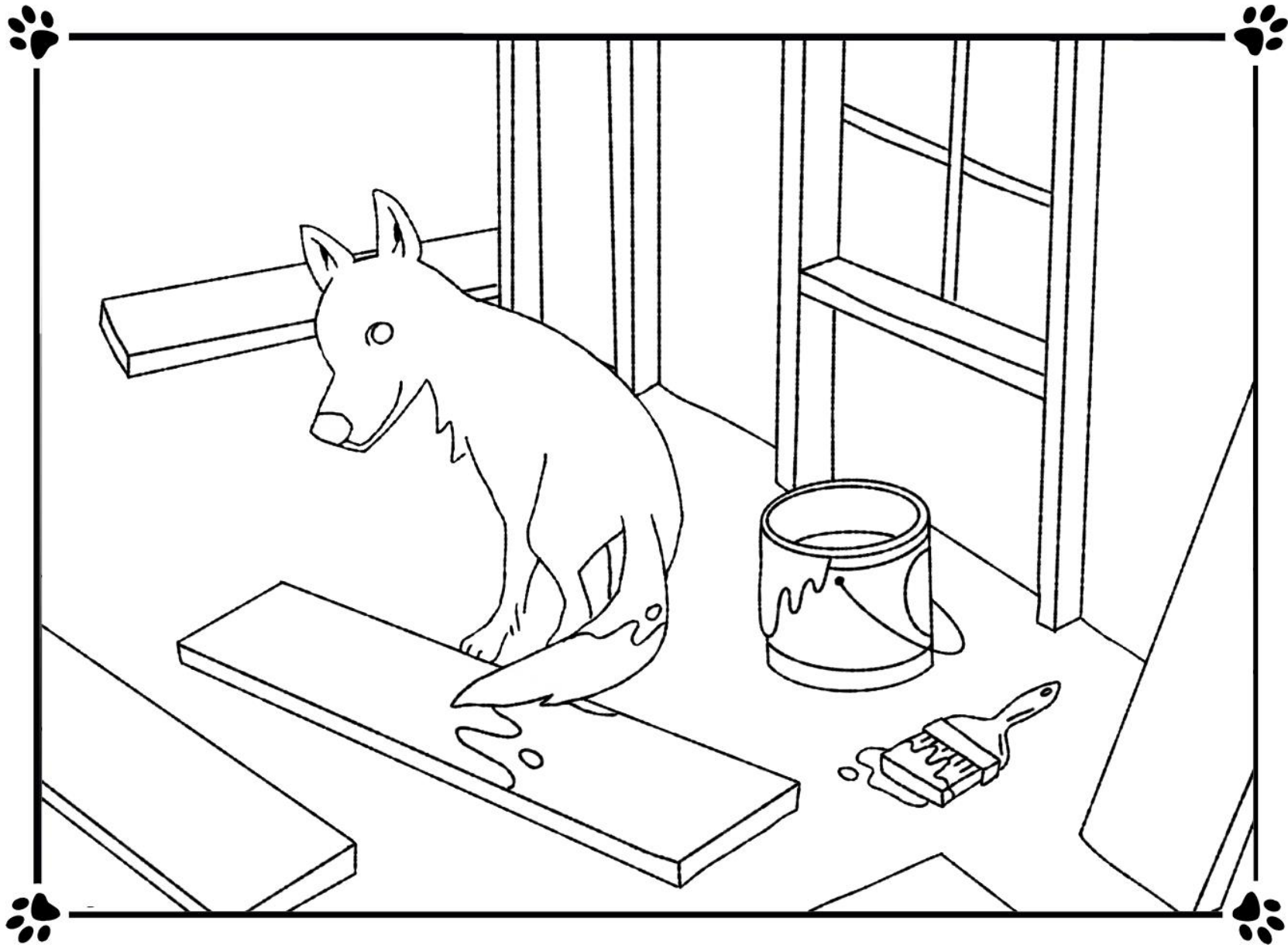
For the next six hours, Mo painted the entire pile of wood. He was so happy to help that his tail never got tired of wagging.

Bobby and Mason couldn't believe all the wood that Mo had painted. Then they noticed his blue tail.

“Your painting method may be a bit strange, but you're a wonderful painter,” said Mason.

“Your brush strokes are perfectly smooth,” added Bobby. “If you're interested, there are many other homes we're building around the state. We could use a skilled painter.”

Mo smiled at the word “skilled”. He finally found something that he was good at and enjoyed doing. He explained that he and Finchy couldn't stay, that they had to leave the state tomorrow to return a lost key to its owner in Florida.



By now, the other animals had nailed the walls and roof to the house's frame. They explained that each room would have water bowls with ice, squeaky toys, cushy beds, and a refrigerator that was always stocked with food. There would also be plenty of space to run and play.

Mo and Finchy were impressed. They only wished that they could meet some of the animals that would live in this house. But they had to leave. They said goodbye to everyone and began walking back to the delivery truck.

“We should really paint the roof of the truck a different color,” said Finchy. “Gray is such a boring color. Maybe green?”

“When you say, ‘we’ should paint, you mean me, right?” asked Mo.

“Well, you’re so good at it,” said Finchy. “I can supervise.”

“I’ll think about it,” he said, knowing he would never do it. “But there is something important I need to ask. How can I get this blue paint off my tail?”

Chapter 45

The Frog with the Hot Pink Hat

This was one of the strangest contests Mo and Finchy had ever seen.

Several men were standing in a circle, each holding a neatly folded T-shirt that was frozen. The first one who could unfold and wear his shirt would win.

The men smacked the shirts against the hot cement. Some even stepped on them to help loosen the layers of frost or ice on them. After seven minutes of smacking, stomping, and pulling, one man finally was able to unfold his shirt and then stuck his head and arms through its openings.

“We wave a winner!” shouted the judge who then handed the man his prize money. The man’s smile was so big that it covered his entire face.

Mo and Finchy looked at each other, not knowing why humans would create such a contest. It didn't involve any skill like running, jumping, digging, sniffing, swimming, flying, or anything fun.

It was a very hot and sticky day. Mo and Finchy were hoping to snatch a frozen T-shirt and spread it out like a picnic blanket. They wanted to lay on top of it to cool off. No such luck. At the end of the contest, the men walked away, each carrying their frozen T-shirt.

The day before, Mo and Finchy had been riding on top of the delivery truck for more than seven hours, mostly along Interstate 55 South. They crossed two state lines. They saw signs for cities named "Jackson" in one state and then "Alexandria" in another. Many of the cars that passed them on the highway had license plates with unusual phrases: "Land of Opportunity" or "Sportsman's Paradise".

Alex, the truck driver, pulled off the highway. Mo and Finchy began seeing road signs for the Beauregard Watermelon Festival at the Beauregard Parish Fairgrounds. What was a watermelon? What was a Parish? Neither of them had ever heard of those words before now.

Alex pulled into the fairgrounds and began unloading boxes from the back of his

truck. Mo and Finchy walked around the festival. Watermelons were everywhere. Even the archway to the festival's entrance looked like the inside of a watermelon.

Mo and Finchy wondered what was so special about the fruit. Why did humans like it so much?

A young boy in front of them was eating a slice of watermelon. Somehow, it slipped out of his hands and fell on the ground. He started to cry. His mother began comforting him and didn't even notice Mo or Finchy. This was their chance. Mo grabbed the slice off the ground and ran behind some bushes.

Finchy poked at the watermelon with his beak. Mo touched it with his paw. It was cold and wet. They both liked its reddish-pink color. Still, it didn't look like anything they had ever eaten.

Mo bit into the watermelon. His eyes lit up. Finchy then bit off a big chunk. Within the next few minutes, they ate the whole thing.

“Want more?”

The voice came from behind them. They turned around and saw a bright green frog

wearing a hot pink hat.

“It’s delicious, isn’t it?” asked the frog that introduced herself as Cora. “Watermelon is my favorite thing to eat during the summer!”

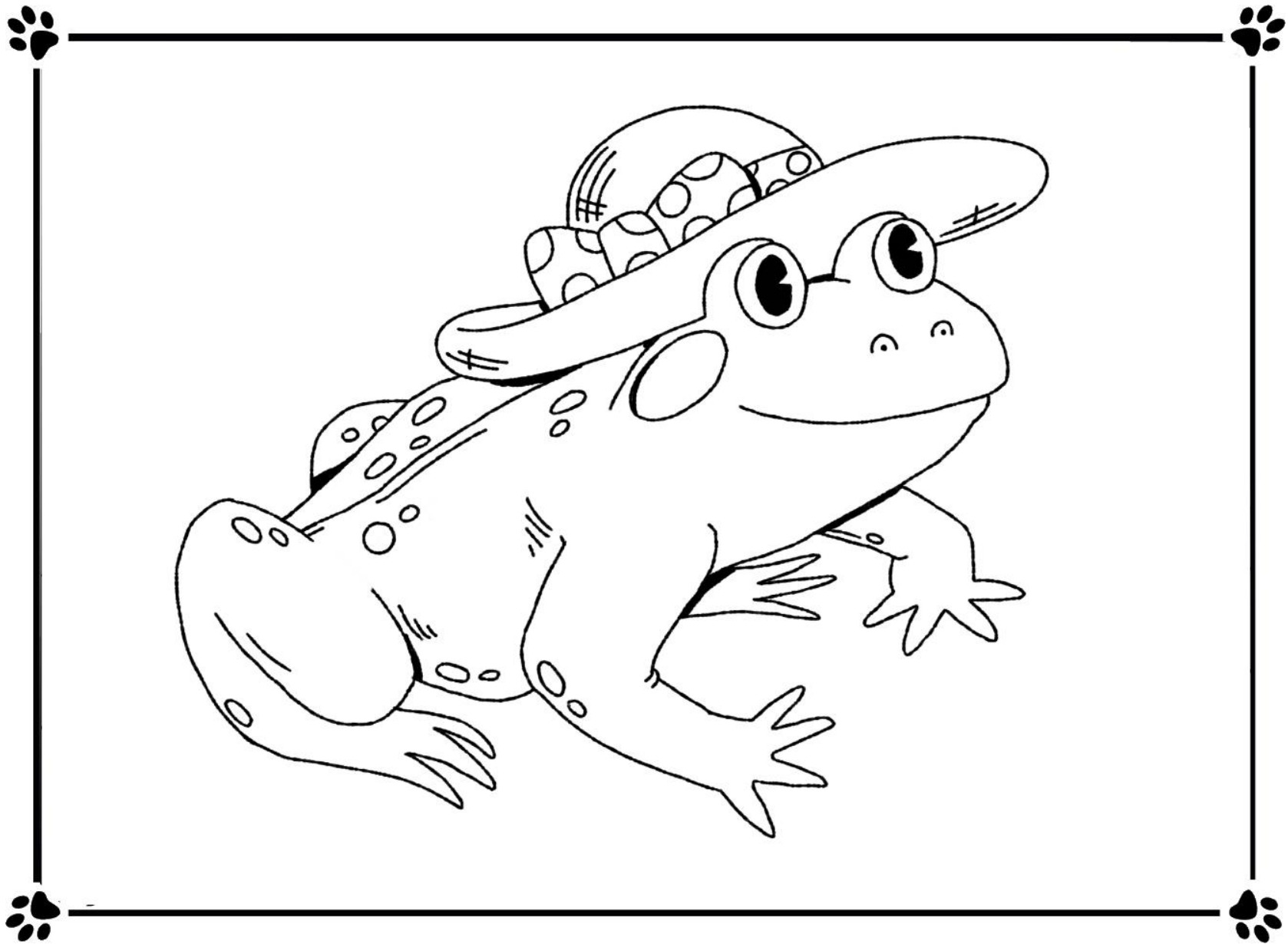
Mo and Finchy had seen many frogs before but had never spoken to one, especially a frog that wore a hat. They introduced themselves and asked Cora if she knew the name of the state they were visiting.

“Can’t remember the name but I know it’s the only state in this country that starts with the letter L,” she said.

“Can you tell us anything else?” asked Finchy.

Cora thought very hard.

“My brother once told me that there are half as many alligators that live here as there are humans,” she said. “My best friend said that the country’s first opera was performed in this state, in a city called New Orleans. That’s everything I know.”



Cora invited Mo and Finchy to her home for more watermelon. She introduced them to her brother, Leo, and cousin, Josie. They didn't waste any time eating a gigantic watermelon before resting on the cool grass.

Mo and Finchy told them about the strange contest they had watched earlier that day.

“They hold that contest every year,” said Leo. “It’s the dumbest thing I ever saw.”

“No, it’s not!” shouted Cora. “It’s a lot of fun.”

“You’ll have to excuse my sister,” said Leo. “She means well but she’s not like the rest of us that live here.”

Cora rolled her eyes. “My brother thinks everyone has to act and think like him,” she said. “Practical. Sensible. Rational. Well, I’m not that way. I’m more the creative type.”

Leo laughed and pointed to her hot pink hat.

“Is that what you call creative?” he asked. “How many frogs do you know that wear

hats? The answer is zip. Zero. Why can't you be like everyone else? Why do you have to be so . . . so different?"

Mo and Finchy kept quiet. They didn't want to get in the middle of a fight between a brother and sister.

Josie tried to change the subject.

"For the past few weeks, Cora has been working very hard on a giant project," she said to Mo and Finchy. "She is turning a very drab pond into a beautiful resort for all the frogs that live around here. No one can see it until she's done."

Leo told Mo and Finchy that this project was nothing but a waste of time. So long as the pond was filled with water, it was good enough for him and every other frog.

Cora told them that she finished the project late last night. She asked Josie, Mo, and Finchy if they would like to be the first ones to see it. They eagerly nodded. Even though he wasn't invited, Leo said he wanted to come. He didn't want to pass up another chance to make fun of his sister.

Cora led the way. She hopped from spot to spot for about an hour and then stopped.

“Right behind this small tree is the resort’s main entrance,” she said. “Ready?”

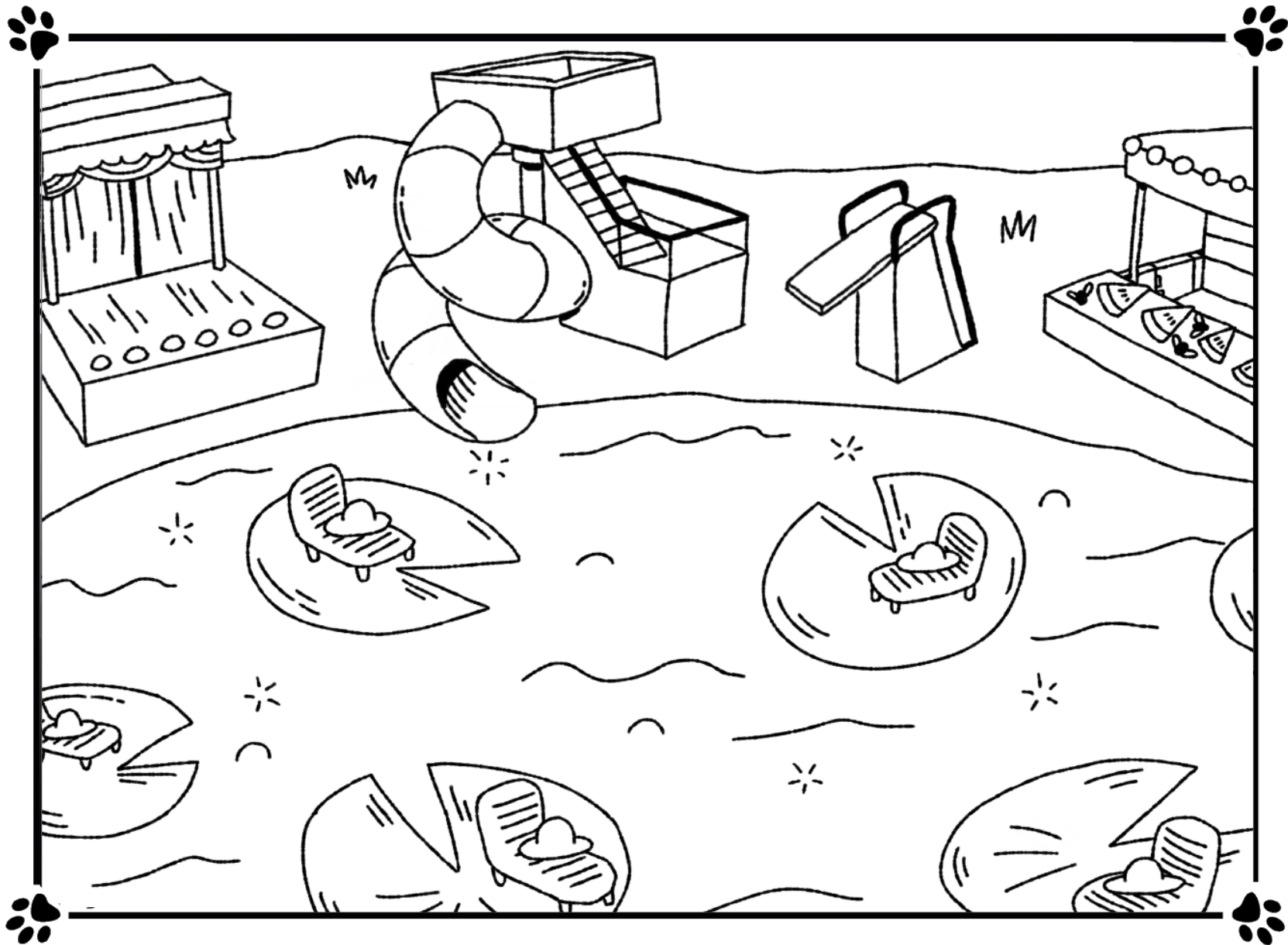
Cora pushed back one of the tree’s low branches so everyone could see the resort. They all looked at each other. They were speechless.

Beautiful purple, white, pink, red, and yellow flowers wrapped around a huge archway. A winding dirt path led to a giant pond. On both sides of the path were flowers. Some were striped. Others were polka-dotted.

The pond’s water was sparkling. Bubbles floated to the top. At the water’s edge was a slide and diving board. Many lily pads were floating on the pond’s surface. Each one had a lounge chair on it with a bright pink hat, just like the one Cora was wearing. Frogs could wear the hat to protect themselves from the hot sun.

On the right side of the pond was a snack bar that served everything frogs loved to eat, including watermelon. On the left side was a stage. Any frogs in a band or that wanted to dance, act, sing, juggle, or tell jokes could perform.

“So,” said Cora as she turned toward Leo. “Still think being different is bad, that everybody has to act and think like you?”



Ever since he was a tadpole, Leo thought his sister was silly because she acted so different. He believed that frogs would be happier, even get along better, if they all thought the same way, acted the same way, and believed in the same things.

But after seeing what his sister created, Leo began wondering if maybe, just maybe, he was wrong. He thought the resort was amazing. He could never create anything like it. Not in a million years. Not many frogs could.

Now he began to understand that it takes all kinds of frogs to make this world work, no matter how different or silly they may seem.

Leo jumped into the cool pond, hopped on a lily pad, and relaxed in a lounge chair.

“This one’s mine!” he shouted after putting a pink hat on his head. “Cora, I’ll only say this once. I was wrong. You were right. I’ll never make fun of you again for being you.”

Cora couldn’t stop smiling the rest of the afternoon. She swam out to a lily pad and rested on a lounge chair. Mo, Finchy, and Josie did the same. They felt like they were in paradise.

Leo and Josie told Mo and Finchy more about the state. They said the southern border faced a big body of water called the Gulf of Mexico. Sometimes, bad storms named hurricanes would cause so much wind that tall trees would fall to the ground and so much rain that many places would flood.

Mo and Finchy had never heard of hurricanes before and wondered if the Gulf of Mexico was anywhere near Florida.

After cooling off for several hours, Mo and Finchy were ready to head back home. They thanked the frogs for a wonderful afternoon and left.

“That resort was really something,” said Mo to Finchy. “I hope Leo keeps his promise and never makes fun of his sister again.”

Finchy agreed and then added, “Hey, I just got a great idea. Actually, it’s magnificent.”

Mo prepared himself. Finchy’s magnificent ideas were often big, bold, and well, just plain bad.

“Why don’t we build a swimming pool with a snack bar on the roof of this delivery

truck?” he asked. “It doesn’t have to be very big. The pool could have a diving board and two lounge chairs next to it. What do you think?”

Mo laughed out loud. The roof of the truck barely had enough room for their stuff, let alone for something big like a swimming pool and snack bar.

“Well?” asked Finchy. “What do you think? This is the best idea I have ever had. My brain must be working overtime!”

“Your brain is tired,” said Mo. “I think it’s been working way too hard and just stopped thinking.”

Chapter 46

Finders Keepers

It was early in the morning when Mo felt the delivery truck move. He wondered where Finchy and him would be headed next. They had already visited so many states. How many could there possibly be? Where was Florida?

Alex, the truck driver, drove for nearly five hours, partially along Interstate 49 North. Along the way, they passed a city called, Shreveport, crossed a state line, and saw highway signs for Texarkana, Hope, and other cities. Mo and Finchy grew curious when they entered Crater of Diamonds State Park in Murfreesboro.

They looked at each other. What were diamonds?

Alex pulled into the parking lot in front of a building and was met by a tall man. While chatting about their jobs, the man told Alex that lots of people come to the park to search for diamonds. But only one out of every two hundred and fifty-three visitors find one. If they do, they get to keep it.

“Hardly seems worth the effort,” whispered Mo to Finchy. “Can you imagine if we found food once out of every two hundred and fifty-three times we searched? We’d starve.”

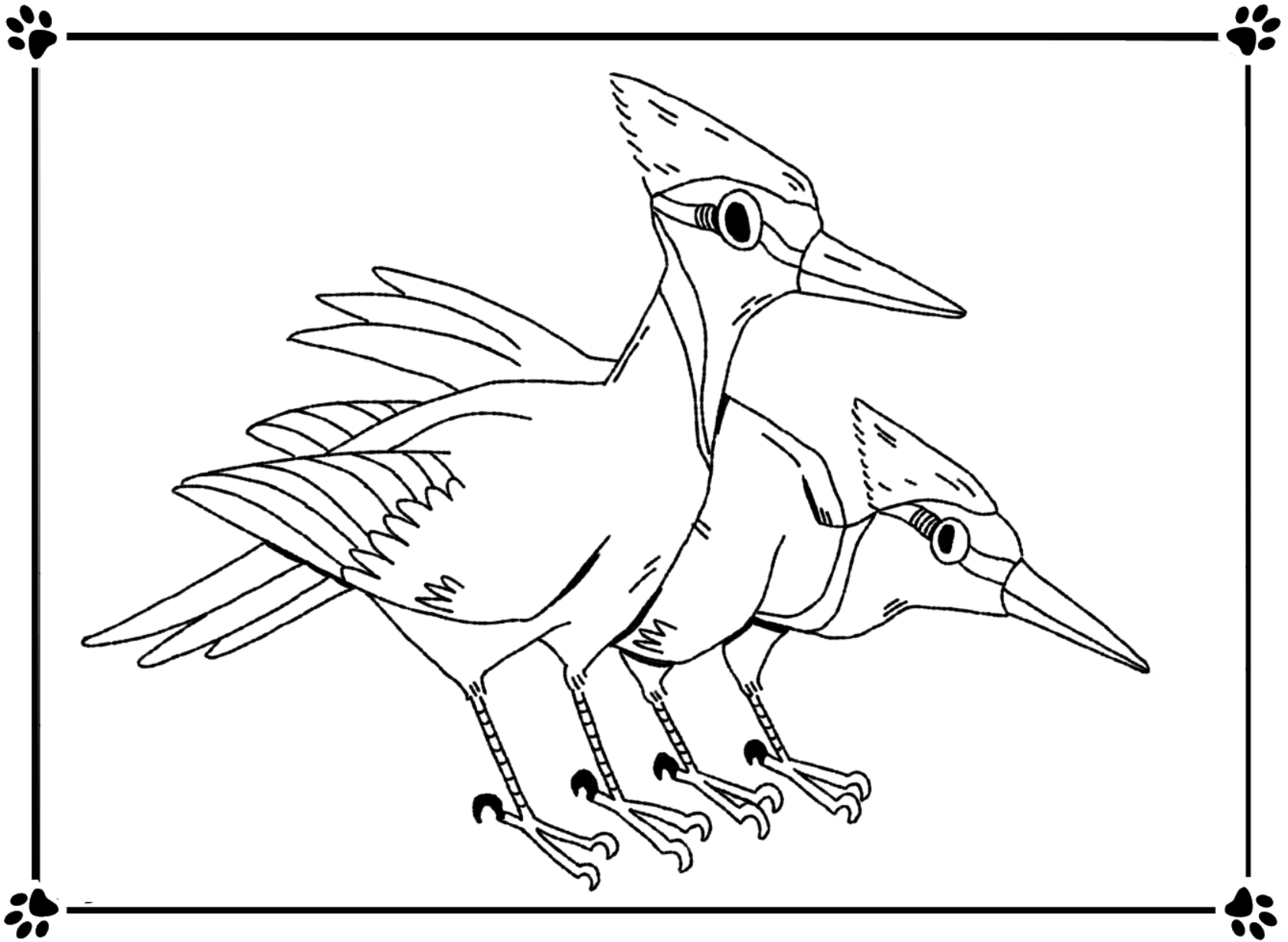
Mo and Finchy didn’t know what made diamonds so special. Why did people search for them? Did they taste good? Did they keep you warm? Maybe they had magic powers.

They began walking around the park while Alex delivered supplies. They followed a group of humans who were going to mine for diamonds in a big field.

“I’m going to find so many diamonds that I’ll be rich, filthy rich,” said a young boy. “Then I can buy anything I want!”

Mo and Finchy now understood. People searched for diamonds because they were worth lots of money. They could sell them and then use the money to buy things. But why did people need so much stuff?

They continued walking toward the field when two woodpeckers suddenly landed in front of them.



“Hi, my name is Darby and this is my sister, Adley,” said one of the woodpeckers.
“Welcome to our home.”

Mo and Finchy introduced themselves and told them about their mission to return a lost key to someone who lived in Florida. The sisters then told them about the state park.

“Humans are so strange,” said Adley. “They come here to search for diamonds. They sell them and buy expensive things that they lock up so no one else can enjoy them. So why buy them in the first place?”

The animals agreed. Humans were a mystery.

The sisters asked Mo and Finchy if they wanted to search for diamonds. They knew of a secret place, far away from this crowd.

“That depends,” said Mo. “What exactly are they?”

“Diamonds are precious stones,” said Darby. “They’re also a mineral, the hardest mineral on this planet. The Earth has about four thousand minerals.”

Adley added that diamonds are at least one billion years old. She said the ancient Greeks believed they were pieces of stars that had fallen to earth.

Mo and Finchy thought it would be fun to spend the afternoon searching for diamonds. Would they glow or shine like stars?

“What do diamonds look like?” asked Finchy.

The sisters flew back home and quickly returned with several diamonds, dumping them on the ground. They looked like clear pebbles or round pieces of glass.

“I just finished cutting and polishing this one,” said Adley, pointing to a super bright diamond. “I like the way it shines. But I can’t figure out what to do with it. We use the other diamonds as footstools. Very comfortable.”

Mo and Finchy were ready to start their search. The sisters told them to dig twelve inches into the ground and then sift through the loose soil for anything that looked like the stones they had just shown them. Mo used his front paws to dig up the soil while Finchy poked at it, turning the soil over and over with his beak.

After nearly one hour, Mo and Finchy found lots of diamonds. Well, maybe. They put

the stones aside and kept digging. Before they knew it, there were about fifty stones in a giant pile next to them. But how could they tell if they were real?

“Place the stone in front of your mouth and breathe on it, which will fog it up,” said Darby. “If it’s real, the fog will clear up after a second or two because your breath won’t stick to its surface. But if it stays fogged for more than three seconds, then it’s fake.”

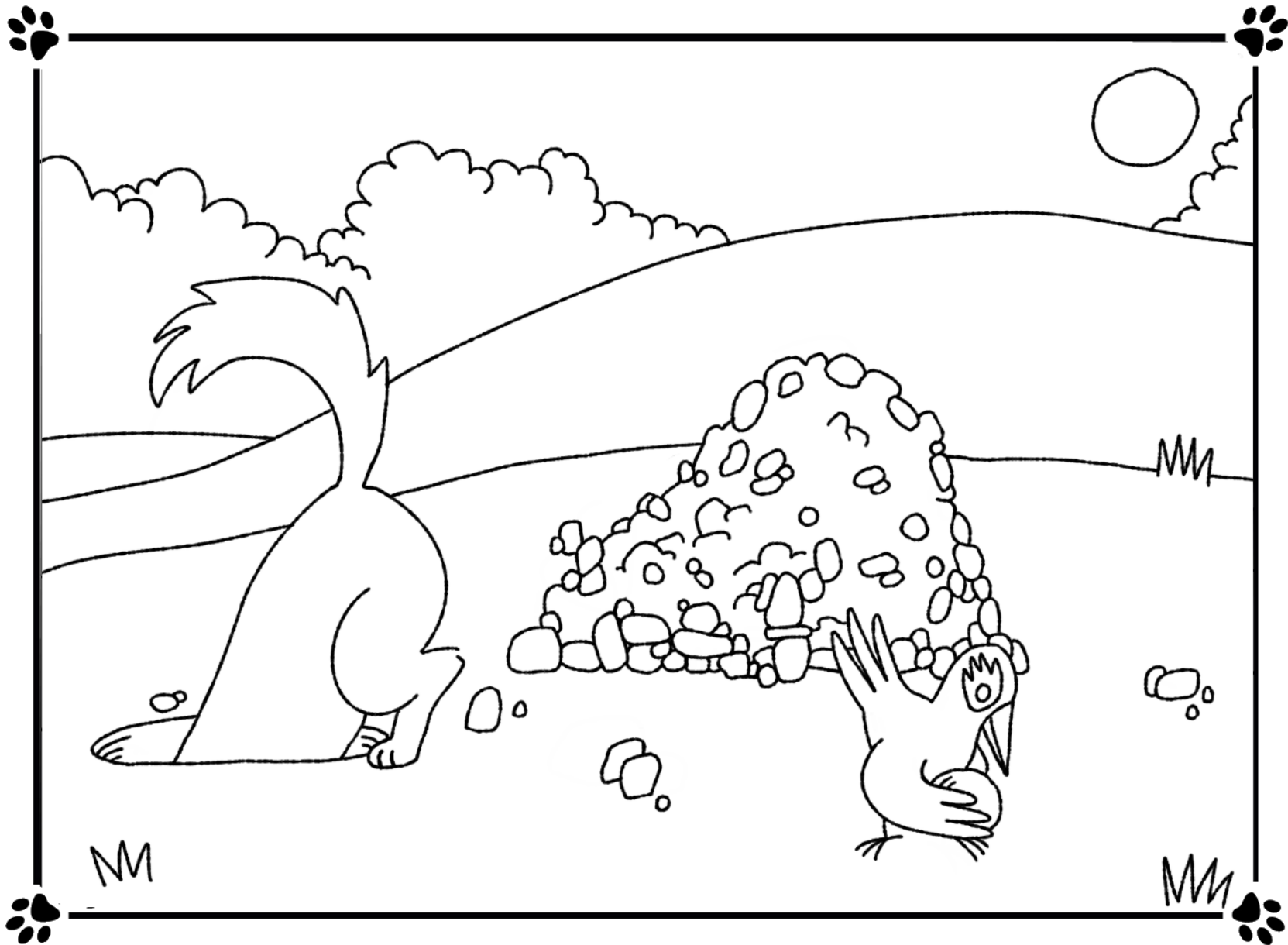
Mo and Finchy tested every stone in their pile.

Only one of the stones passed the test. Mo handed it to Adley. She dropped it into a glass of water. It sunk.

She smiled. “Congratulations!” she said. “You just found your very first diamond!”

Mo and Finchy were thrilled even though they had no idea what to do with it.

By now, everyone had worked up an appetite. The sisters spread out a blanket on the grass for a picnic. There was plenty to eat. They found all sorts of food in nearby trash cans.



After a wonderful meal, Mo and Finchy asked the sisters if they knew the name of their state. They had no idea.

“But this state has plenty to offer besides diamonds,” said Adley. “We make more rice than any other state. And cheese dip was invented by a restaurant here. I love to eat it with crackers at night.”

Darby then mentioned the Fouke Monster.

“He lives here,” she said. “I think Bigfoot is his cousin. Anyway, our friend saw him once. He’s at least eight feet tall, has hair all over his body, and weighs twice as much as humans. Even the big ones! But our friend doesn’t like him. Thinks he’s a troublemaker!”

Mo told them that Finchy and him had met Bigfoot and his family.

“I don’t know anything about his cousin, but Bigfoot is very nice and friendly,” Mo said. “We shared a meal together and then watched his kids compete in a canoe race.”

The sisters seemed impressed and asked Mo and Finchy about their journey. What

kinds of things did they see? Did they make new friends? What did they learn?

Mo and Finchy shared many stories about the different animals they had met and their experiences in different places.

“We’ve been to so many places but still don’t understand one thing,” said Mo. “Why do humans need so many clothes, toys, and other things? Animals don’t. Why do humans care more about what others wear or own rather than how nice, smart, or helpful they are?”

The sisters agreed. They said many birds in their community have also asked each other the same questions but no one could come up with any answers that made sense.

It was getting late. Mo and Finchy thanked the sisters for helping them find a real diamond. They promised to put it to good use.

After Mo and Finchy came back to the delivery truck, they decided to use the diamond as a footstool until they came up with a better idea. It was way too small for Mo but perfect for Finchy.

Finchy was quiet for a very long time, which was unlike him.

“Anything wrong?” asked Mo

“I was thinking about what you said – why humans need so much stuff and animals don’t,” said Finchy. “I think I figured out why. People need clothes because they don’t have fur to keep them warm. Since they aren’t as attractive as animals, they buy stuff to make them feel or look handsome or pretty. I guess you just have to feel sorry for them. They’re not made perfect like we are.”

Chapter 47

Star of the Show

“Look at the size of those . . . those . . . what do you think they are?” asked Mo to Finchy.

They had just arrived at the Sandhill Crane National Wildlife Refuge. Not far from them were creatures with long necks. They stood at least four feet tall and had gray bodies, white cheeks, and a bright red crown or red spot on their heads.

“They’re birds,” said Finchy. “Actually cranes. I’ve seen them fly but never stopped to say hello or chat. Don’t know how friendly they are.”

The cranes were stretching and moving their bodies this way and that way. Some made very loud noises that sounded like trumpets while others honked like geese or made snoring sounds.

Mo and Finchy wondered if they should introduce themselves. They were a little

afraid of them. Each crane was at least five times bigger than Mo and Finchy combined.

“See those two twirling around?” said Finchy, pointing to two cranes on their left. “It looks like they’re dancing.”

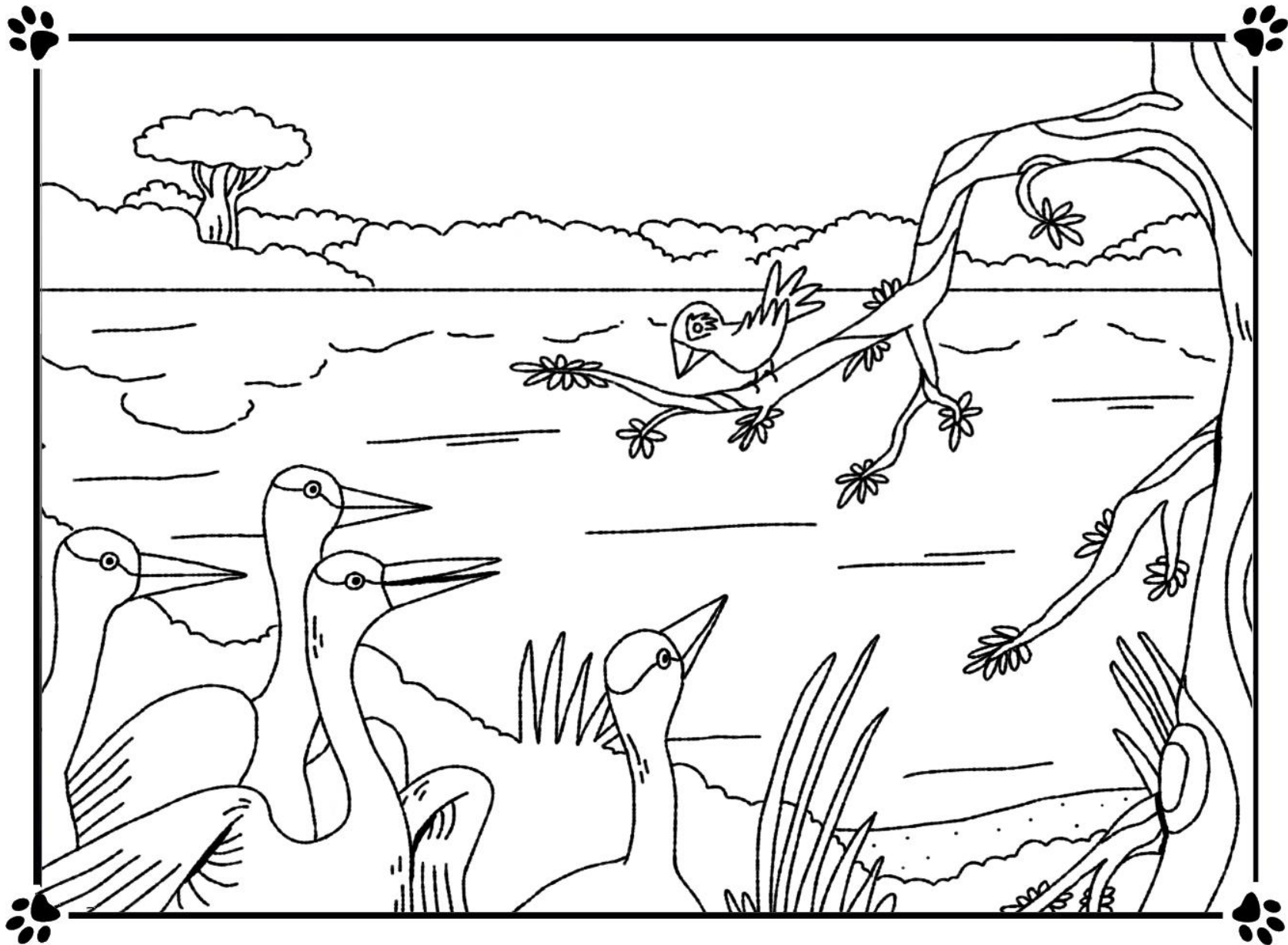
Mo and Finchy didn’t know how to dance. But Finchy always wanted to learn. He told Mo that he would introduce himself to the cranes. If he chirped three times, that meant they seemed nice. But if they were mean, he would just fly away.

Finchy flew toward the cranes. He landed on a tree branch that was close by but beyond their reach.

“Good morning,” he said. “My name is Finchy. Are you dancers?”

Several of the cranes walked closer to him.

“Yes,” said one crane named Haley. “We’re dancing in a show this afternoon. Every year, some of us that live here put on a show for animals throughout the state. Some come from as far away as Ashland. They all come to see us dance.



Finchy grew excited. *These birds know about states and dancing. Maybe they can tell us where Florida is. Maybe they'll teach me how to dance!*

Finchy chirped three times, loud enough for Mo to hear. Then he asked Haley if she knew the name of her home state.

She thought for a minute before asking the other cranes. No one knew.

By now, Mo was standing next to Finchy under the tree branch. Finchy introduced him and explained that they were trying to return a lost key to someone who lived in Florida. He told the cranes that they were traveling all over this country on top of a delivery truck. Just yesterday, he said, they rode for about eight hours, partly along Interstate 20 East and US 49 South. They passed many cities called Jackson, Collins, and Wiggins before arriving here, in Gautier.

“We’re trying to find a state named Florida,” said Finchy.

“We don’t know anything about Florida but can tell you some things about our home or community,” Haley said. “Then maybe you can figure out what state we’re in and which way to go to get to Florida.”

The cranes told Mo and Finchy that the largest river in the country runs through this state and nine others that were north of here. Haley gave them a big hint: the river and state shared the same name.

“The river is more than two thousand miles long,” said Haley. “Many of our friends – otters, coyotes, and deer– live along the riverbank.”

Other cranes bragged about a shoe store in a city called Vicksburg that sold the first pair of shoes in a shoebox more than one hundred years ago.

Mo and Finchy didn’t know why a shoebox or even shoes were so important since no animal needed them. But they tried to look interested because the cranes seemed so excited. They didn’t want to be rude.

One of the cranes named Wendy kept checking her watch. “Anyone know where Vicky is?” she asked. “She’s late. That’s not like her.”

The cranes looked around the big field. No sign of Vicky. Some started to get worried.

“Oh no,” said Wendy. “Vicky just texted. She hurt her foot this morning and can hardly walk, let alone dance. What do we do now? She’s the star of our show.”

The dancers were upset. The show was in two hours. They would have to cancel it unless they found another bird to take Vicky's place. But who? It would have to be someone that was a quick learner.

Many animals from around the state would soon be arriving. The cranes had to think fast.

"Shelly would be great but she's on tour," said one crane.

"Pinky could do it," said another crane. "But I don't like working with her. Very bossy."

The cranes rattled off several more names but no one seemed to fit.

"C'mon, everyone, think harder," said Haley. "There's got to be one bird that can take her place."

Mo's ears perked up. He knew how badly Finchy wanted to learn how to dance.

"My friend can help you," said Mo. "Finchy may not be as big or as good as Vicky but he's smart and a quick learner. He won't let you down. Promise."

Finchy couldn't believe his ears. *Did Mo really say that?* It seemed that Mo had more confidence in Finchy than Finchy had in himself.

All of the cranes looked at Finchy, hoping he would agree to be in the show. But Finchy had never performed in front of a large crowd. He would be out of his comfort zone and scared that he would make a mistake. He didn't want to embarrass himself.

Then again, Mo believed in him. Why not take a chance? All he had to do was try his best and think positive. This show could also launch his career as a dancer.

Finchy refused to let fear guide his decision. He chirped, "Yes," over and over, until Haley placed her wing over his beak.

"Save that energy," said Haley to Finchy. "Let's get to work!"

Mo sat on the soft grass watching the cranes teach Finchy how to dance. Finchy began by stretching his tiny legs and wings. They showed him how to twirl across the stage and hop to the right, left, forward, and backward while shaking his tail feathers.

The other cranes also began stretching, twirling round and round on their tippy toes,

and leaping very high into the air. Mo thought their style of dance was graceful but a little strange – a cross between ballet and hip hop.

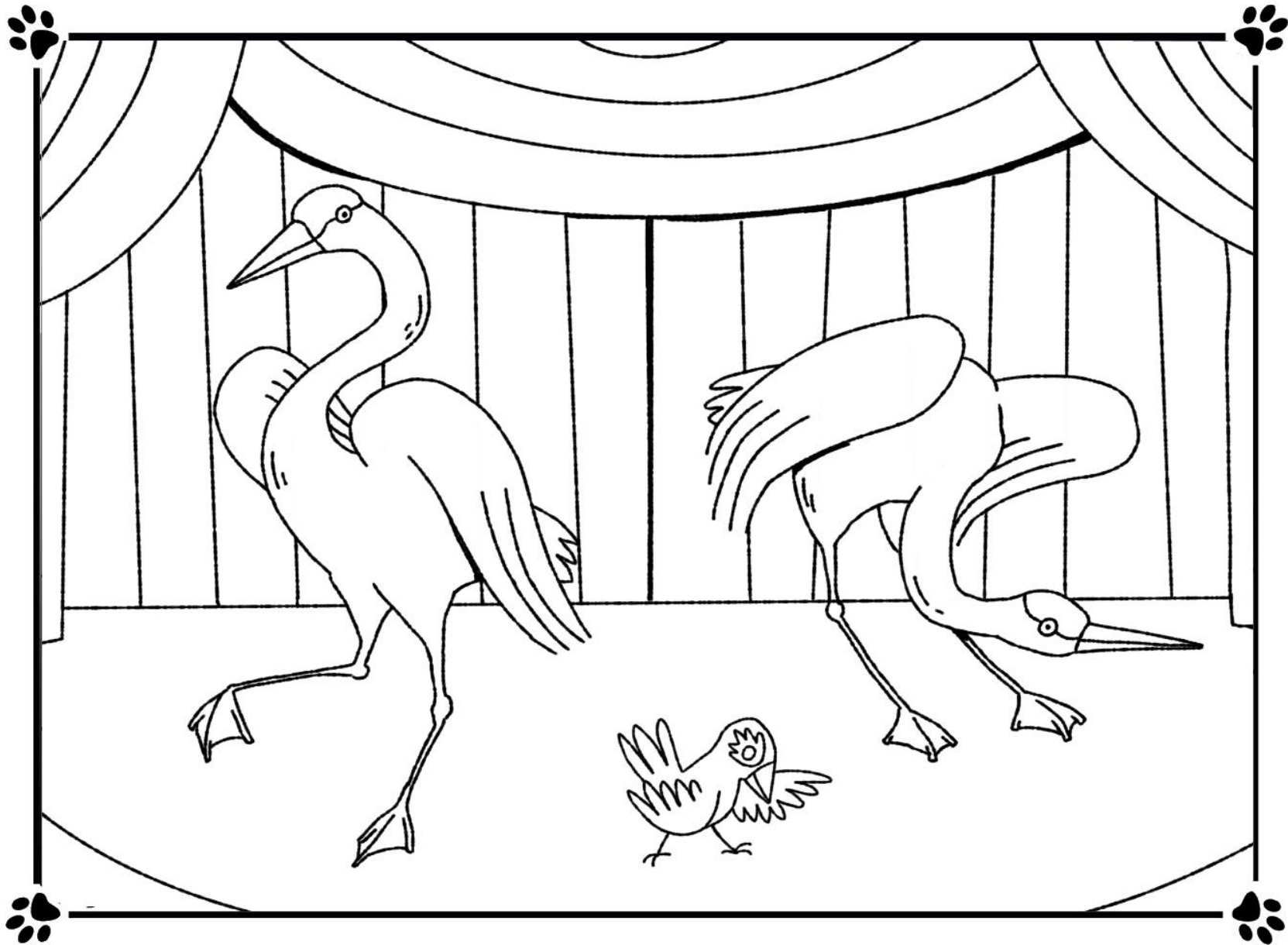
Mo had never seen Finchy so happy. He practiced his dance routine over and over. His tiny chest looked like it would burst with pride and joy. The cranes were thrilled. Finchy was a natural and quickly learned each dance step.

By now, many of the animals were starting to arrive. They sat on the soft grass in front of the stage. Some brought popcorn. Others had opera glasses so they could watch their favorite dancers up close.

Before the show started, Mo told Finchy to “break a leg”. Finchy was shocked that Mo would say something so mean but then learned it was show biz talk that meant, “good luck”.

Moments before the show began, two cranes sprinkled glitter all over Finchy’s beautiful feathers. Finchy never felt so handsome or so proud.

The show lasted for about an hour. Finchy simply sparkled. The glitter made his feathers twinkle. But even more important, he performed each dance perfectly and with feeling or expression.



When the show was over, all of the animals in the audience stood up, clapping and cheering. Everyone said that this show was the best ever. Many asked the name of the wonderful new dancer. Who was he? Of course, they were talking about Finchy.

Each of the dancing cranes hugged Finchy, thanked him, and told him how he had saved the day. But Finchy was quiet, almost teary-eyed. He couldn't find the right words to express his gratitude for teaching him how to dance and allowing him to be in the show. This was the happiest day of his life.

On the way back to the delivery truck, Finchy's feathers still had glitter on them. He told Mo that he would never – ever – take another bath.

“So how does it feel to be famous?” asked Mo.

“Now that I sing *and* dance, I should take acting lessons,” Finchy said. “Then I could move to Hollywood. Maybe buy a house. But just a small one. Something with seven or eight bedrooms, a swimming pool, tennis court . . .”

Chapter 48

Living on Mars

Finchy's tiny body was strapped to a chair that was inside a cage. That cage was inside a second cage.

Mo turned on the switch.

The chair began tilting sideways, forward, backward, upside down, and then right side up again at a fast speed. Finchy couldn't wait for this part of his astronaut training to be over.

“This isn't as easy as I thought it would be,” said Finchy, a bit dizzy after this ride. “Do I really need to travel in a spaceship to go to Mars? Couldn't I fly there on my own, just wearing a spacesuit?”

Mo laughed at the thought of Finchy in a spacesuit. Did they even make them that small?

As explorers, Mo and Finchy wanted to be the first dog and bird on Mars. But Finchy would not be able to fly to Mars. It would take him about nine months – without stopping – to fly to the red planet and another nine months to return to Earth. Mars is about thirty-nine million miles away. He would need a spaceship.

Earlier that morning, Mo and Finchy had traveled on top of the delivery truck for almost six hours along Interstate 65 North. After passing highway signs for cities named Mobile, Homewood, and Madison, they entered a city called Huntsville. Alex, the truck driver, needed to deliver supplies to a museum called the U.S. Space & Rocket Center.

That's when Mo and Finchy saw the sign: Space Camp. Humans come here to train like astronauts. The ride that Finchy was on would help astronauts learn how to steer or control their spaceship if it started tumbling through space.

They both thought that it would be very cool to travel through outer space, land on different planets, and meet all sorts of aliens. Would they be very different from humans or animals on Earth?

But then Mo thought about all of the animals he and Finchy had already met on their journey. Some hung upside down. Others had hard shells covering most of their

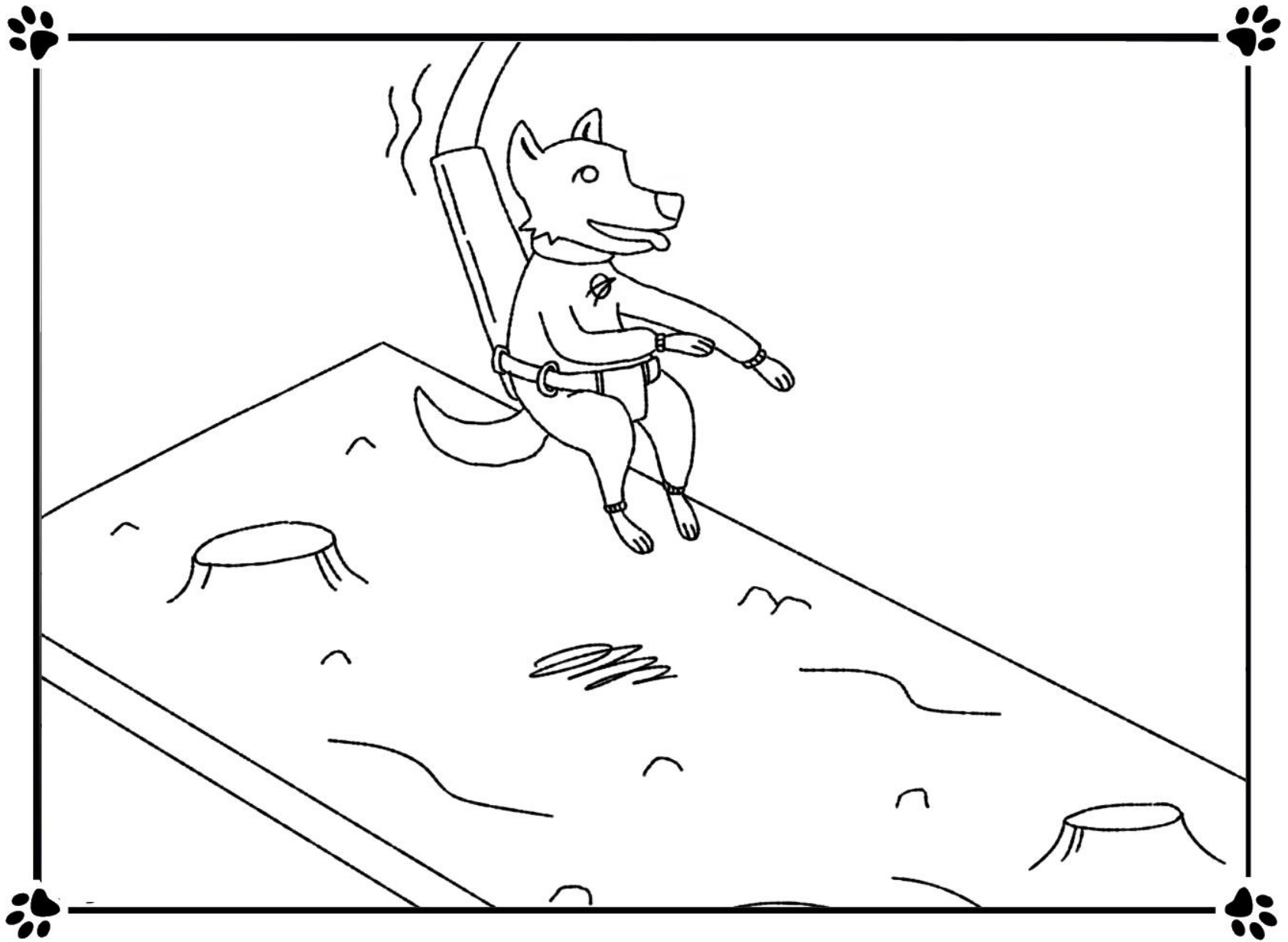
bodies. Not to mention how weird some humans looked and acted. Would aliens living on Mars or other planets really be that much different?

After arriving at Space Camp, the first thing Mo and Finchy did was put on blue jumpsuits that astronauts wear while training. If they couldn't be real astronauts, at least they could look like them.

But the smallest suit was way too big for Finchy. Mo had an idea. There was a washing machine and dryer in the next room. They stuffed the smallest jumpsuit they could find into the washing machine in hot water and then threw it into a hot dryer to shrink it. Finchy tried it on. Perfect fit.

Now it was Mo's turn to train. He strapped himself into a machine called a gravity chair. On the back of the chair was a very long cord that was hooked to the ceiling. The cord yanked the chair up and down like a yo-yo. It made humans sitting in the chair feel like they were walking on the Moon, which has six times less gravity than Earth. Gravity is the force that keeps everyone and everything on the ground.

In order to walk forward, Mo had to hold his two front paws straight out in front of him as if he were a superhero, soaring through the air.



His stomach flip-flopped every time he was pulled up or dropped to the ground. *Not sure I would like living on the Moon. My stomach wouldn't. Maybe visiting it would be better. I like my paws – all four of them – firmly on the ground.*

Mo and Finchy walked around the entire place. They learned what it would be like to live on board the International Space Station. The astronauts don't feel the directions of up or down. Every position feels the same, whether they are standing up, laying down, or upside down!

They returned to the training room and saw a report on the edge of a table. The title caught their eye: Future Martian Colony.

Mo and Finchy had many questions. What would this colony look like? Who would live there? Just humans? Maybe animals? Could they eat hamburgers, pizza, and popcorn? Could Finchy fly all over the planet? Could Mo sniff stuff outside?

They decided to read the entire report, page by page, hoping that it would answer all of their questions about what it would be like to live on Mars. They wanted to be prepared. The first page thanked the workers in this state who had built the first rocket or spaceship that took humans to the Moon. They built it in a city that was known as the rocket capital of the world.

The rest of the report focused on Mars. They learned that it's the fourth planet from the sun and second smallest planet in the solar system after Mercury. It's about half the size of Earth and has two moons. They could jump three times higher on Mars than on Earth because the gravity is much weaker.

“If we were on Mars, do you think we could jump high enough and far enough to reach Jupiter?” asked Finchy. “It's right next door. Only three hundred and forty-two million miles away. It has sixty-seven moons and is the fastest spinning planet in our solar system.”

But they soon learned that they would have to wait many years before going to Mars. Only humans would be allowed to ride in the first spaceship to the red planet. Just four, to be exact. Then every two years, a new crew of four astronauts would arrive and those who had been living there would return to Earth.

There was no mention of birds, dogs, or other animals riding in any spaceship to the planet.

“Humans probably want to make sure it's safe before they bring any animals,” said Mo. “That makes sense. You know how crazy they are about their pets.”

By the time they finished reading the report, they had changed their minds about living on Mars. The planet was also very dry and cold since it was farther away from the Sun than the Earth. Humans would need to live underground or in caves.

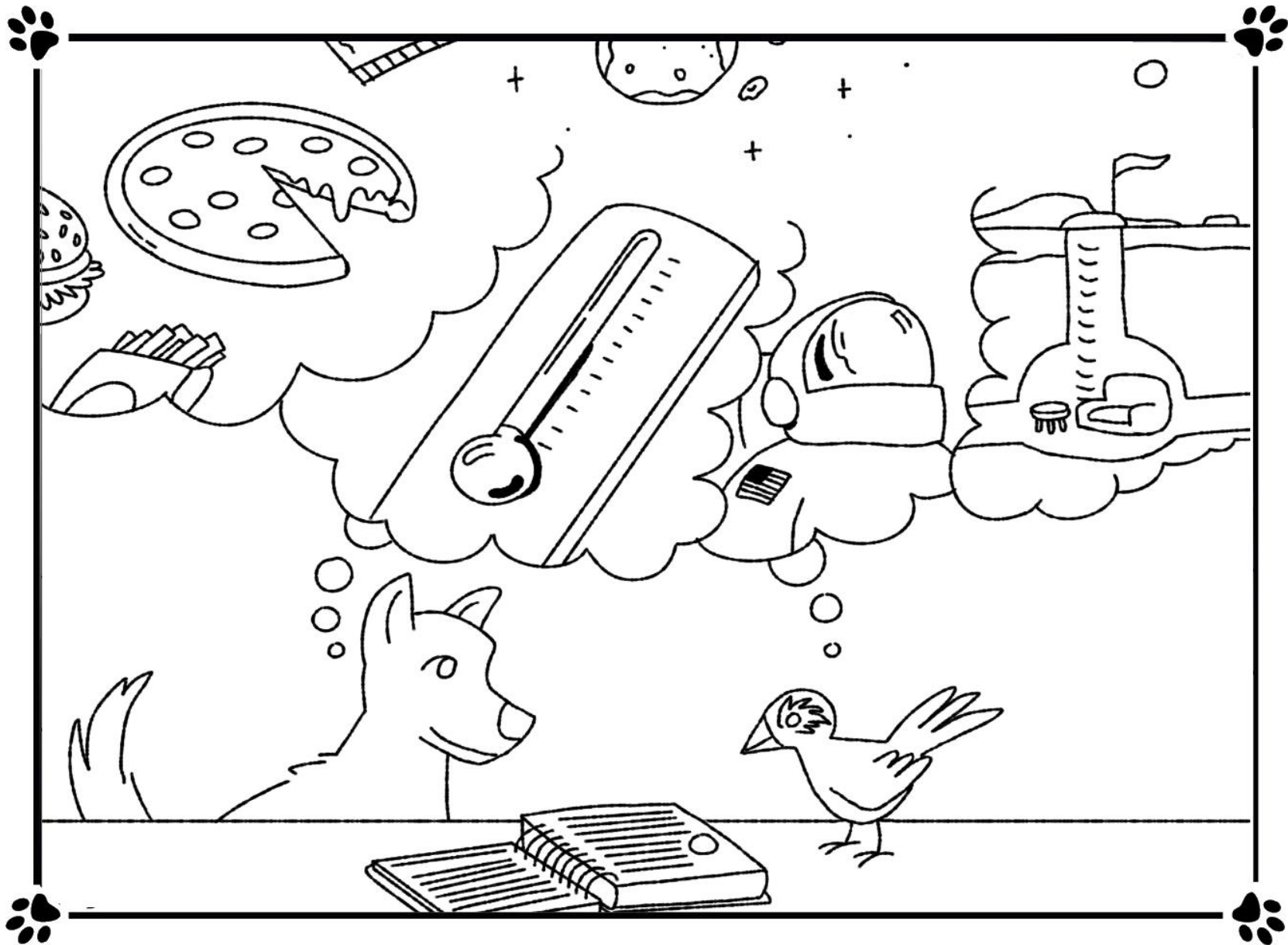
Mo lived in caves his whole life. No problem. But how cold *was* cold?

“The temperature on Mars could reach almost three hundred degrees *below* zero,” said Mo. “Ice cubes are cold. But they’re thirty-two degrees *above* zero.”

The coldest day Mo could remember was three years ago, when living at home. It was fifty degrees below zero. It was so cold that Mo, a pack of wolves, and a family of bears kept warm by snuggling next to each other in Mo’s cave. If Finchy and Mo lived on Mars, they could never play outside.

The report also had a chapter on food. Most of it would be powdered or freeze-dried. Mo and Finchy didn’t like the way that sounded. They would not be able to eat hamburgers, fries, pizza, or any of their favorite foods.

Suddenly, living on Mars didn’t seem all that great. They’d be stuck in a cave with awful food. Mo wouldn’t be able to dig holes, explore, or bask in the warm sun on a beach.



Finchy wouldn't be able to fly around the planet or rest on tree branches since Mars didn't have any trees.

“We could visit the Moon instead,” said Mo. “It would only take us three days to get there and another three days to get back home. Just think of all the exciting things that could happen!”

They agreed. They would focus on going to the Moon. Maybe their friends – The Voices – that lived there would be home and could show them around.

“We would still be heroes,” Finchy said. “We would be the first bird and dog to go into space and to the Moon. We could help the astronauts collect rocks. I'm sure they'd let us use the Moon buggy to explore. But we may have a curfew.”

That sounded like a plan. They would grab the first chance to ride in a spaceship that was headed to the Moon.

But until then, what they could do to make life on Earth better?

“All my bird friends say the air and water aren't clean,” Finchy said. “And every time I fly around, whether it's over land or sea, trash is everywhere.”

The more Finchy talked, the angrier he became.

“I don’t know why humans throw stuff on the ground, or in the lakes, rivers, and oceans,” he said. “They’re not the only ones who live on this planet!”

By now, Finchy was shouting and flapping his wings in every direction, something he did when he was really mad.

Mo tried to calm him down by speaking softly.

“If you only had one toy, you would take really good care of it, right?” he asked. “That’s how humans need to start thinking about this planet. They only have one home.”

They believed that humans need to buy less stuff, which would create less garbage. Not as many plants or factories would be needed that sometimes dirty the air or water.

Mo and Finchy realized that there were lots of things that humans could do to make Earth a healthier planet. But what about animals? How could they help?

They promised each other that when they got back home, they would hold a meeting for all the animals that lived in their community. They would share what they saw, what they knew, and then come up with ways to make the Earth greener and cleaner.

When they got back to the delivery truck, they thought of some ideas on how animals could help save the planet.

“Dogs could save water by not taking baths,” said Mo.

Finchy laughed. He knew how much Mo didn’t like baths. But he really liked Mo’s plan about how humans could ride on top of whales through the ocean – instead of on big ships that pollute the oceans – when traveling to places that were far away.

That gave him another idea. Birds could lift people into the air and then fly them to and from work or wherever they needed to go. They would no longer need cars that use gas, which pollute the air.

“We should start doing some of these things right now,” said Finchy. “But I’m just wondering. If birds start flying people all over town, do we need to give them snacks like they get on airplanes?”



Chapter 49

Mia and Friends

“He’s huge!” said Finchy to Mo. “Look at all of his teeth! I’m glad I live on land, not in the ocean.”

Mo felt the same way. He would not want to meet any of these sharks no matter where he lived.

“It says here that sharks have been guarding our oceans for more than five hundred million years,” said Mo, thinking that was a very long time. “Are sharks really that old? There are supposed to be four types living here. Sand tiger sharks. Great hammerhead sharks. Tiger sharks. Silvertip sharks. I don’t care which ones they are. They all scare me.”

Mo and Finchy were visiting the largest aquarium in the world. More than one hundred thousand water animals lived here. They had never seen so many strange-looking creatures in one spot. Some of them didn’t seem to have eyes. Others had

see-through bodies. One creature even had eight arms!

Mo and Finchy had no idea so many different types of fish or animals lived in the ocean. Why did they all look so different? Where did they come from? Other planets?

Earlier that morning, Mo and Finchy had traveled for more than three hours, mostly along Interstate 75 South. They crossed a state line and saw highway signs for cities named Shannon, Cartersville, and Woodstock before coming to this aquarium. It was so crowded that no one noticed them. They walked right through the main entrance.

They walked around the aquarium for hours. Finchy started counting all the different kinds of fish that lived here, but lost track after reaching ninety-two. They overheard a teacher tell her students many things about this state. It was named after a king, grows the most peanuts in the country, is the largest US state east of the Mississippi River, and is home to the first college in the world that gave women degrees.

Somehow, Mo and Finchy split off from the crowd of people and found themselves in a strange area.

Finchy noticed a door across from where they were standing. "Hey, Mo," he said. "This sign says the door leads into the aquarium or tank area."

“Why would I ever want to go into the aquarium?” asked Mo. “You saw how mean the sharks looked. No thank you. I’ll stay on this side of the door.”

Finchy begged Mo to at least open the door. Then he read another sign out loud: “All the big, mean-looking sharks live in a different tank. In this tank are rays, which look like flat fish. They’re related to sharks. But they’re very friendly.”

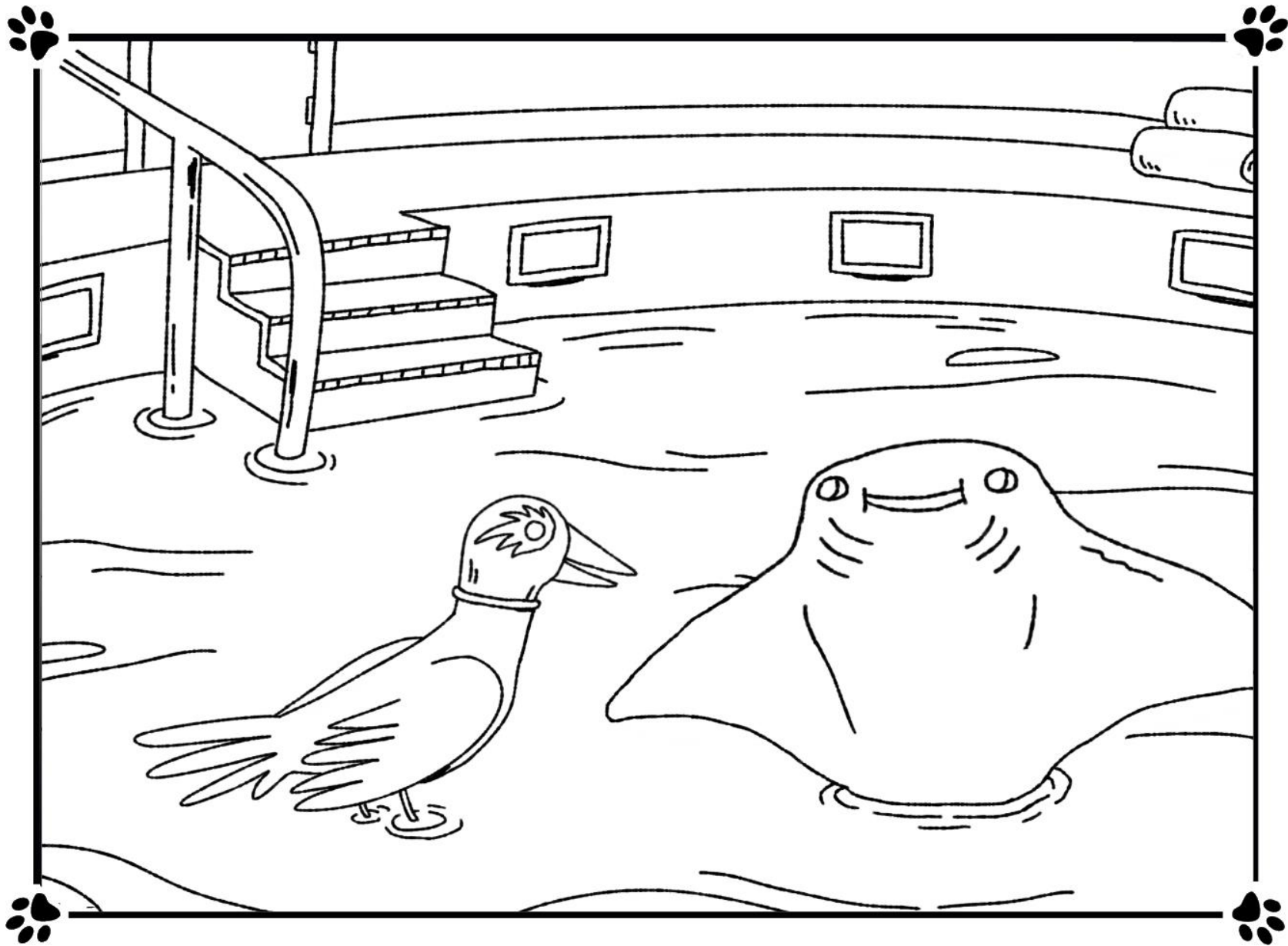
Finchy spent the next twenty minutes telling Mo how much fun they would have meeting fish. But what Finchy didn’t realize was that he could fly out of danger much faster than Mo could run away from it.

Finchy kept nagging Mo until he agreed. But Mo didn’t tell Finchy that he would stay safe, on this side of the door.

Mo opened the door. Finchy hopped out and dipped his claw into the water. It didn’t feel cold or hot. Then he jumped in, making a tiny splash.

“C’mon inside,” shouted Finchy. “The water is perfect!”

Just then a ray approached Finchy that was about a foot long.



“I’ve never seen anyone that looked like you before,” said the ray named Mia. “What type of animal are you? Land or sea?”

“We’re land animals,” said Finchy. “I’m a bird named Finchy and that’s my friend Mo standing back there. He’s a dog. He thinks you’ll eat him if he comes into the tank.”

“Nonsense,” said Mia. “Other than humans, you’re the first land animals to visit us. No fish here has ever hurt anyone. Well, except for the time a man hugged me. He wouldn’t let go no matter how much I wiggled. Fish don’t like to be hugged. So, I bit him, just a little.”

“Hear that, Mo?” said Finchy. “Everyone in this tank is friendly, so long as you don’t hug them. I feel the same way, Mia. Every time someone tries to hug me, they end up squishing me. Very unpleasant.”

Mo inched his way toward the tank. When he saw that Finchy was in no danger, he walked down the steps into the pool that wasn’t very deep but stayed close to the edge.

Mia swam up to Mo, and then around him several times. Mo froze. Mia had never seen a creature like him before.

“Hey, you’ve got a tail like me!” she said.

Mo nodded, trying to be polite.

Finchy asked Mia about the sharks that lived in this aquarium. Were they as mean as they looked?

“Tiger sharks are one of the largest and most dangerous meat-eaters in the ocean,” she said. “They’ll bite your head off!”

Although all sharks looked scary, Mia told them they’re not the same. She mentioned silvertip sharks that have very large eyes. They can see in the dark, even in muddy water, up to ten times better than humans in clear water. They can hear and smell really well, too.

“But I think sand tiger sharks are the nicest of them all,” Mia said. “Many of them are my cousins. They rarely get upset, no matter what. Once my cousin’s date showed up an hour late. She didn’t even get mad!”

More rays were now swimming toward Mo and Finchy.

“Mia, you’re having a party and didn’t invite me?” said one ray that sounded angry. “It’s just like you not to think of others.”

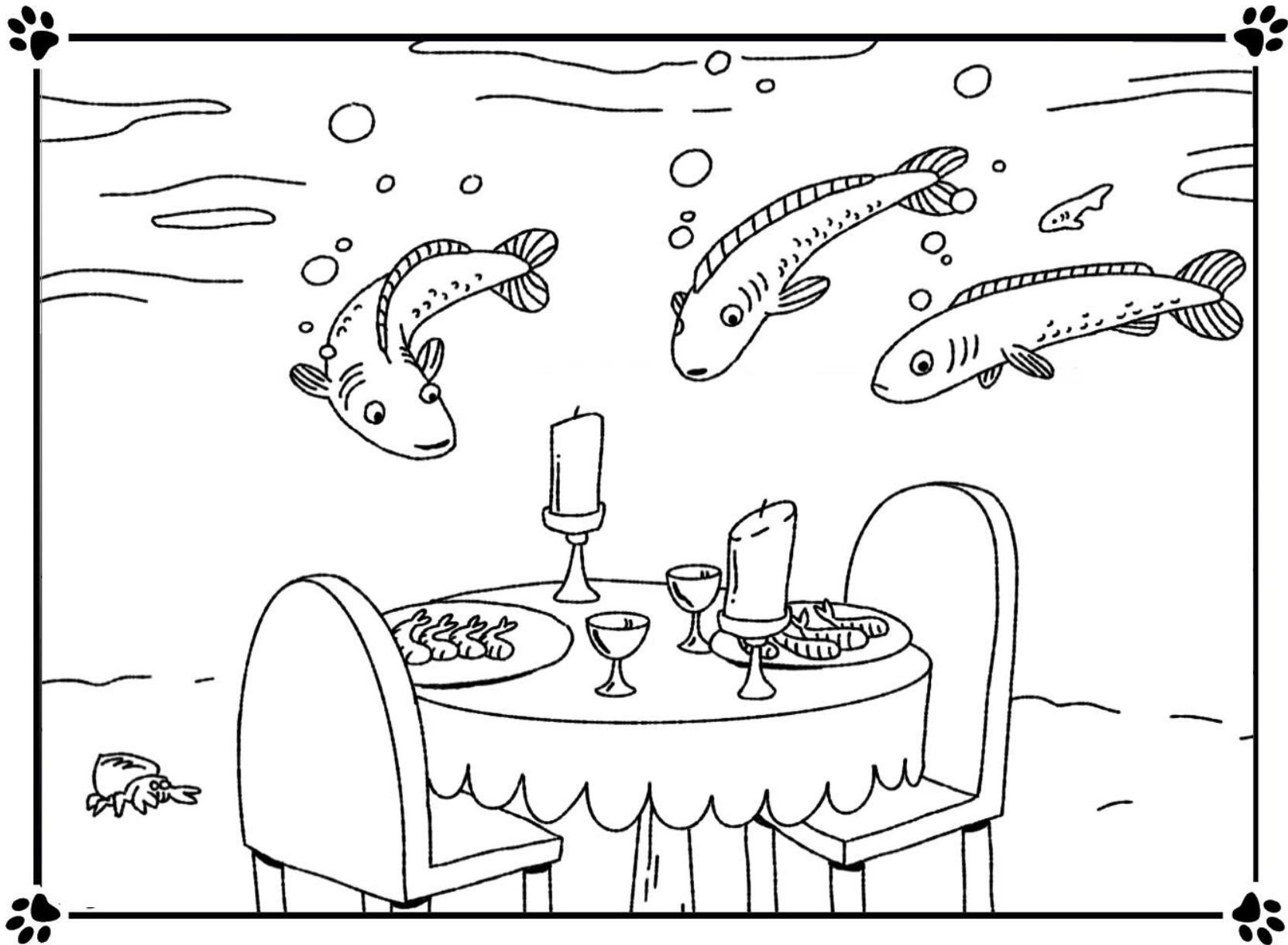
“Will you ever stop being mad at me?” Mia asked. “How many times do I need to apologize? I made a mistake and promised that it would never happen again.”

Mia seemed so friendly. Mo and Finchy wondered what she had done that made her friend so angry.

Mia’s friend kept silent as she explained. Last week, while swimming around, she spotted a small table with two chairs resting on the bottom of the tank. The table was draped with a red tablecloth. Candles and two plates of shrimp were on top of the table. Mia was really hungry and ate the shrimp off both plates. How was she supposed to know that her friend was planning a romantic dinner?

“You should have asked someone before eating the shrimp off both plates,” said the ray. “Everyone knew that I was planning a special dinner for my girlfriend.”

“I didn’t,” said Mia. “You should have left a note or something.”



Some of the other fish defended Mia, saying that she simply made a mistake. She said she was sorry and meant it. So why was her friend still holding a grudge?

“No fish is perfect,” said an older ray. “You’ll make a mistake one day and want other fish to forgive you. Staying mad makes you feel bad. But forgiving makes you feel good.”

Mia’s friend realized that the older ray was right. Holding a grudge did make him feel bad.

“I’m sorry, Mia,” he said. “I forgive you.”

At that moment, everyone’s mood changed. Now all the rays, Finchy, and even Mo were laughing and having fun. Mo wasn’t afraid anymore. He let the rays touch him and he touched them back.

The rays told them how much they loved living in this aquarium. There was so much room, so much space to swim. One ray said that the humans who worked here cared for them as if they were their own children.

Mo and Finchy told them all about how they were searching for Florida to return a

lost key. Then Mo asked the rays if they knew the name of their city or state. The fish looked at each other. What was a city? What was a state? Their home was this aquarium. It was just one big place.

But they did tell Mo and Finchy what it was like to be a ray. Their eyes are on top of their heads. Their favorite game is hide and seek, which they're very good at playing. Like dogs and birds, rays also come in different colors. Some are blonde or sandy-colored, pink, or bluish grey, while others are light brown and grey, with small brown spots and patches of yellow. Others are as pretty as butterflies.

Mo and Finchy told them all about themselves and what it was like to live on land.

“My favorite thing to do is soar through the air,” said Finchy. But then he realized that the rays didn't know what air felt like even though they breathed oxygen that's in the water. “Flying is sort of like gliding through the water.”

Mo talked about how he loved to run really fast and feel the cool wind against his fur. But the rays didn't understand what running was because they didn't have any legs.

Mo showed them by running around the tank's deck.

They spent the entire afternoon getting to know each other. Before Mo and Finchy left, Mo invited the rays to visit the ocean near his home but warned them that it would be a very long journey.

Once on top of the delivery truck, Mo and Finchy talked about how strange it was that the aquarium didn't have any cities or states. They wondered how fish knew where to meet each other for lunch or where their friends and relatives lived. How did they get their mail delivered?

"I'll bet the oceans have cities and states," said Finchy. "Ya know, there are five oceans. Each one is much bigger than the aquarium."

Mo never really thought about it. Finchy was probably right.

"I can see it now," said Finchy. "Giant cities on the bottom of every ocean with stores, houses, offices, movie theaters, bowling alleys, museums, parks, ice cream shops, and . . . Do you think they have seafood restaurants?"

Chapter 50

Mo and Finchy Say Goodbye

Mo and Finchy had been relaxing on top of the delivery truck for several hours while traveling along Interstate 75 South. That's when they saw it. It was just standing there, by itself, on the side of the highway. It was a sign that read, "Welcome to Florida."

Mo and Finchy looked at each other. Were they dreaming? Did the sign really say, "Florida"?

Finchy flew off the truck toward the sign to double check.

"It said Florida!" he shouted. "I can't believe it. We're really here!"

Mo and Finchy hugged each other, jumped up and down for joy, and then hugged each other again. They had been searching for this state for so long that they almost lost hope of ever finding it.

But now that they were in Florida, what should they do? Where should they go? Who should they talk to? They had many more questions than answers.

Finchy had a good idea. He spotted several birds sitting on top of a light pole. He would ask them to help spread the word about the lost key. Maybe they would even know his favorite cousin, Flo. She had moved here a long time ago.

“Good morning,” said Finchy to the birds. He told them the story about the lost key and asked if they could help Mo and him find its owner. The birds asked to see it. They flew to the top of the delivery truck. After Mo showed it to them, they didn’t have any idea what it unlocked or who may have lost it.

The birds decided to ask everyone they knew. Their friends would then ask even more birds. Somehow, someone, somewhere, had to know something.

As the birds flew off in different directions, Alex kept driving along the highway. Mo and Finchy saw more signs for cities named Gainesville, Ocala, and Orlando. Then Alex turned left or east toward a place called Cape Canaveral.

He stopped in front of a building and began moving boxes from the back of his truck to the inside of the building. Meanwhile, Mo and Finchy noticed a huge rocketship off

in the distance. It must have been at least three hundred feet tall! They wondered where it was going. Who would be riding in it? And for how long?

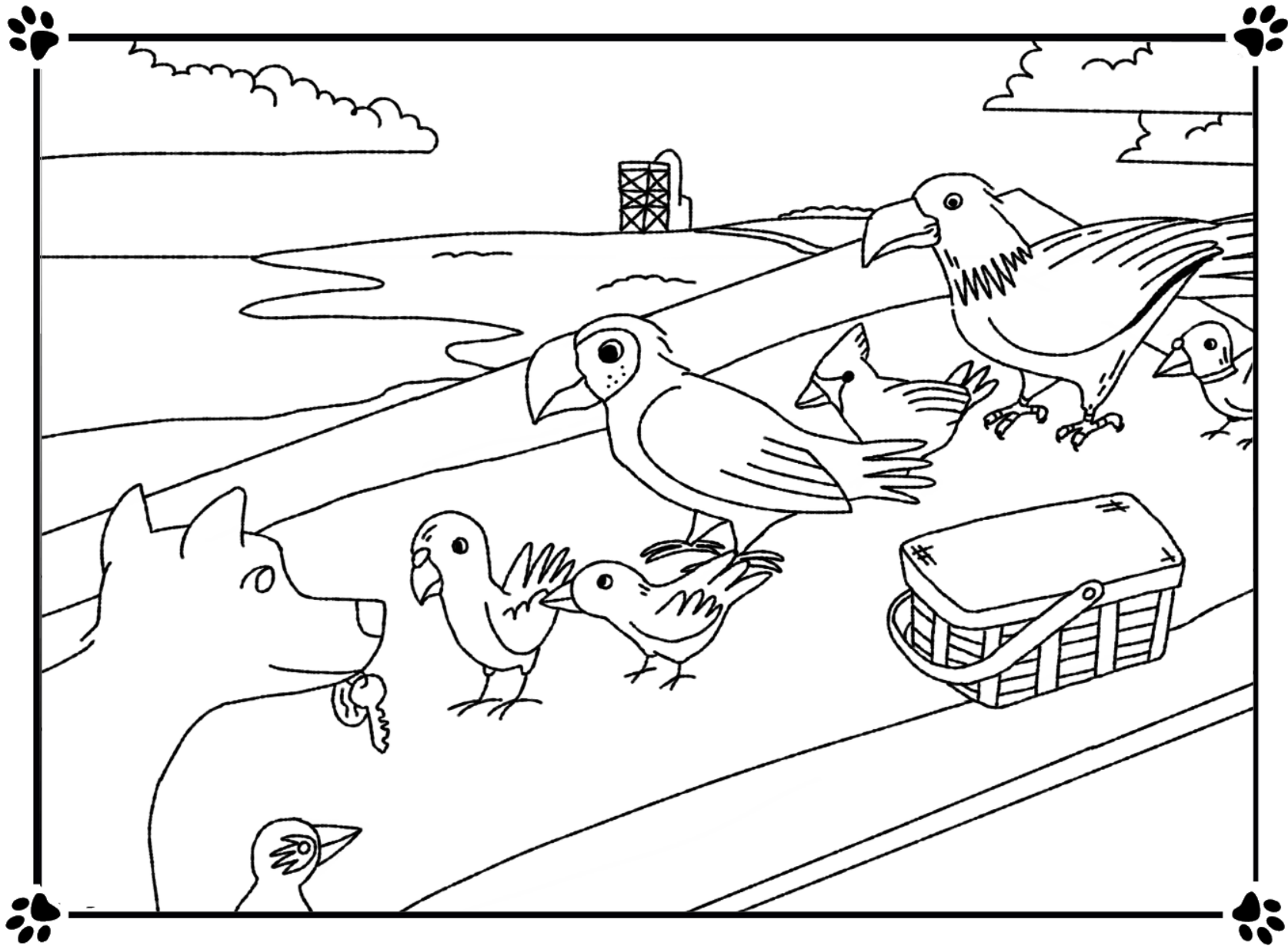
Less than an hour later, Mo and Finchy spotted dozens of birds heading straight toward them. As they came closer, Finchy shouted, "Flo, it's me, Finchy!"

The cousins hugged each other. They didn't realize how much they had missed each other until now. The other birds stood in line to see the key. Many birds in Florida, as far away as Jacksonville and Miami, were flying to the delivery truck to catch a glimpse of this now famous key.

By noon, hundreds of birds had already seen it. One bird thought it unlocked a palm tree that wouldn't drop its coconuts. Another hoped it unlocked a sports car she wanted to test drive. But Mo and Finchy knew better.

What should they do now? Mo, Finchy, and Flo were the only ones left on top of the truck.

They spotted Alex walking out of the building with another man. "Sorry I can't join you tonight," he said to the man. "I'm really tired and need to leave very early tomorrow morning."



Mo and Finchy looked at each other. They had to stay in Florida to find the key's owner. That meant this would be the last night they would spend on top of the truck's roof that had been their home for a long time. It made them sad. Very sad.

They wanted to do something nice for Alex. They wanted to thank him for driving them all over the country. Finchy counted the number of states they had visited. He thought there were fifty. Maybe forty-three. He couldn't remember.

But what present could they give Alex?

"I've got it!" said Mo. "Let's give Alex that diamond we found, the one you've been using as a footstool? It's probably worth lots of money."

Finchy agreed. Before Alex woke up the next morning, Mo and Finchy would place the diamond inside the delivery truck, on the driver's seat.

They spent their last night at home celebrating, laughing, and crying. Their adventure was coming to an end.

Early the next morning, everything went as planned. They placed the diamond on the driver's seat along with this thank-you note:

Dear Alex,

We have been traveling on top of your delivery truck for a very long time, trying to get to Florida. Now that we're here, we need to say goodbye. Please accept this diamond as a thank-you gift for driving us all over this wonderful country. This was an adventure we will never forget.

Mo and Finchy

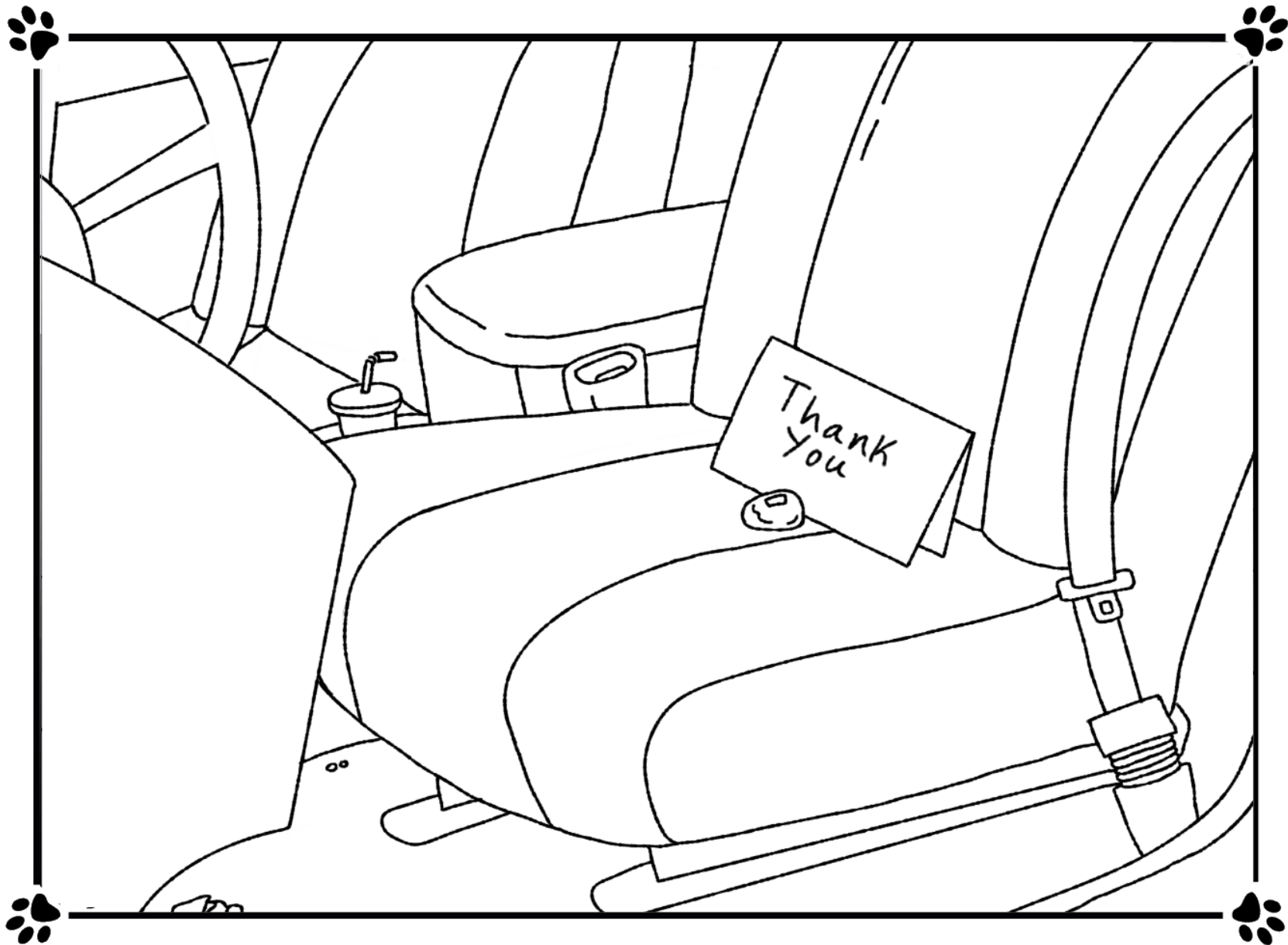
PS: This is from me, Finchy: You're a great driver except you press too hard on the brakes.

Mo and Finchy then hid in nearby bushes until Alex drove off. They knew they would never see him again.

But they didn't have much time to feel sad. Flo returned with a bird named Luke that knew all about locks and keys.

Luke looked at the front of the key and back of it, over and over.

"This is it," he said. "I'm positive."



Mo, Finchy, and Flo had blank looks on their faces.

Ever watch the news?” asked Luke. “It was all over the newspapers and Internet. The mayor lost this key. It opens the door to the rocketship, that one, over there.”

“Where is that rocketship going?” asked Mo.

“To the moon,” said Luke. “It’s supposed to take off in several months.”

“Can animals come?” asked Finchy.

“Don’t really know,” said Luke. “But I do know everyone will be grateful that you returned the key. Now they won’t have to get a new door for the spaceship. They didn’t have enough money to replace it because they spent way too much on designer spacesuits. They wanted to look good while in space.”

“How do we find the mayor?” asked Mo.

“That’s easy,” said Luke. “She always rides her bike to work while Ricky, her pet bird, flies ahead of her. Ricky and I are friends. He’ll listen to what we have to say.”



Luke led the way to the city hall and waited for the mayor and Ricky to arrive. About ten minutes later, Luke saw Ricky and chirped, “Good morning.”

Ricky perched himself next to Luke. “The mayor stopped to chat with someone who’s complaining about something not at all important,” he said.

After introducing Ricky to everyone, Luke told Ricky about the key and then showed it to him.

Ricky started flapping his wings and flying around in circles. He was so excited that he couldn’t stop chirping.

“The mayor is going to be so thrilled,” he said. “The whole town was going to have one gigantic garage sale to raise money to buy a new door for the spaceship. Now they don’t have to!”

Everyone decided that Mo should be the one to give the key to the mayor. After all, he was the one who found it.

A few minutes later, the mayor saw Ricky perched on top of the bike rack next to Mo and the other birds. She rode her bike to the rack and then took off her helmet. At



that point, Ricky began flapping his wings and flying around in circles.

“What are you so excited about?” asked the mayor.

Just then, Mo walked forward. He clenched the keychain in his mouth. The key just dangled.

“Hello there,” said the mayor as she bent down to look at the key. “What’s this?”

The mayor tried over and over to pull the keychain from Mo’s mouth so she could get a better look at the key. But Mo held on tight. Real tight. It was hard for him to let go because he had been guarding this key and keychain for many months. Finchy flew next to Mo and began whispering in his ear that the key belonged to the mayor. He needed to let go. When Mo finally did, the mayor snatched it from him.

“I can’t believe it!” she shouted after examining the key. “This is the key to the spaceship’s door! Where did you find this? How did you know that I lost it? How did you know what the key unlocked? How did you know. . .

She asked question after question before calming down.



“You’re a very smart dog,” she said to Mo. “How can I . . . I mean our country ever thank you?”

Mo walked around to the side of the building, stood up on his hind legs, and then pointed to the spaceship off in the distance. The mayor didn’t understand. Then Finchy, Flo, and Ricky flew to the top of city hall and pointed to the spaceship.

“You want to ride in the spaceship?” she asked Mo in disbelief. “You want to fly to the moon?”

Mo barked, “Yes!” Finchy chirped, “Absolutely!”

From that day forward, Mo and Finchy began training as astronauts. They quickly became famous as the world’s first dog and bird astronauts. Photos of them were shown everywhere – on TV, the Internet, and in magazines. Mo even received a message from his friends back home:

“We’re so proud of you, Mo! We knew you were smart enough and brave enough to find the key’s owner. (Mo liked being called brave.) We don’t know who the bird is but he must be as smart and brave as you are. (Finchy liked being called smart.) Take lots of pictures. And don’t forget to send us a postcard.”



The day came when all of the astronauts – human and animal – climbed inside the rocketship. The countdown began. Ten, nine, eight, seven, six . . . Smoke and fire started coming out from the bottom of the rocketship. Five, four, three . . . Mo and Finchy felt the rocketship shake back and forth. Two, one. The rocketship lifted off the ground.

Mo and Finchy were on their way to the moon, putting their names into history.

They felt afraid, sad, and excited, all at the same time.

What would they find? Who would they meet? Would they ever return home, to Earth?

The only thing they knew for certain was that nothing would ever be the same.



