

SMUDGE DREAMS BIG



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Smudge Dreams Big

The Search for Somewhere

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Keep going. You'll find it.

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Welcome

Welcome to a **Sacred Geometry School** adventure.

This is a story about Smudge, his dog Biscuit, and a dream of somewhere important.

Together, they set off in search of the Sanctuary of Symmetry—a place that may not be quite as easy to find as Smudge first hoped. Along the way, there will be strange tests, wrong turns, mysterious helpers, suspicious cookies, and a goat who is very much in the way.

So settle in, turn the page, and come along for the adventure.

The search for somewhere is about to begin.

And if you enjoy this adventure, there's a whole world waiting.

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1

The Dream



Smudge was on a mission. That's right. Smudge was really going places, and the world was his oyster. And Biscuit's—*obviously*. Biscuit was Smudge's dog, and Biscuit insisted on being mentioned in all important announcements. Absolutely nothing could stop them now. The adventure had begun. The winds of destiny were calling. The path was unfolding.

Sort of.

Well... actually, *no*. Not quite.

Smudge and Biscuit were still sitting on the doorstep of their house. They hadn't gone anywhere at all. Not even one teeny, tiny step. In fact, they'd probably gone backwards slightly, as Smudge was now leaning with his back against the door. Biscuit hadn't even finished his breakfast biscuit—although Smudge had definitely finished his.

But soon—oh boy—were they going places. Great big, wondrous places. Magical places. Places that made Smudge burst with excitement. The only problem was that they didn't know exactly where. Not precisely. Not exactly on a map.

"How," you may be wondering, "can they know where they're going and also... *not?*" Well, let me explain.

Smudge had seen something. He had seen it in a dream. Not just any dream—the *Dream*.

It was a place, a vision... a home-but-not-a-home. It was the Sanctuary of Symmetry.

Its whole essence seemed to breathe and shimmer—a perfect balance of light and life. Tall arches and steady pillars rose in quiet harmony. Round windows caught the light like moons. Across the walls, patterns curled and unfolded—circles within circles, spirals that seemed to turn without end, and glowing shapes Smudge didn't have names for.

Smudge had never seen anything like it in his life. Not in books,

not in the forest, not even in cloud shapes (and Smudge was an expert cloud-watcher).

However, the *Dream* hadn't exactly come with directions. No map. No guide. No signpost pointing: *THIS WAY TO MYSTICAL TEMPLE*. All Smudge had was a feeling inside—a feeling so big and bright it filled his chest like warm sunshine.

He knew he had to get there, and he knew for sure that he would. He could *see* it. He could see himself and Biscuit sitting on the steps of the Sanctuary. He could see it all, plain as day right in front of him—not with his eyes, but with his heart and mind.

And for Smudge, that was enough. More than enough.

2

Decisions



Biscuit looked up at Smudge. Smudge looked down at Biscuit. It had quietly turned into a competition of who knew what they were doing the least. It was close—very close—but Smudge won. (He had years of practice.)

“Right,” Smudge said, brushing crumbs from his mouth. “One thing’s for sure... the Sanctuary of Symmetry isn’t *here*.”

“Woof!” Biscuit barked in full agreement.

“I guess we should just set off then,” Smudge continued.

“Woof!” Biscuit barked in agreement once more.

“Every journey begins with a single step,” Smudge declared as he placed one foot very dramatically in front of him and marched down the garden path. Biscuit trotted behind, tail and hopes high.

This is easy, Smudge thought—until...

They reached the garden gate and stepped out.

Now came the tricky bit.

Left... or right?

Smudge stood very still, tapping his chin.

Left looked sensible. Left looked tidy. Left looked like the sort of direction someone would choose if they wanted to make a proper decision—an adult decision.

That’s me, Smudge thought proudly. *Smudge the adult*.

“Left seems right,” he said confidently—though he did pause for a moment to wonder how left could possibly be right, but decided not to worry about it.

And so, with great seriousness, he turned left.

Biscuit, however, did *not*.

Smudge walked a few steps and glanced over his shoulder. “Come on, Biscuit! We are going left! Left is right!”

Biscuit looked at Smudge, quite rightly, as if Smudge was actually wrong, then planted himself like a tiny, furry statue.

Turning away from Smudge, he stared down the right-hand path with deep dog seriousness.

Smudge took a few more steps. "Biscuit," he tried again, "this way..."

Biscuit moved not one inch. He was an excellent example of the opposite of moving.

This was all very strange. Biscuit usually followed Smudge everywhere—into cupboards, under tables, even once into a recycling bin (they nearly got recycled). But now? Now Biscuit just wasn't interested.

Smudge squinted—first at Biscuit, then at the right-hand path. It didn't look especially special. Just a path. A very ordinary path. No glowing signs of destiny. No magical butterflies. Nothing.

Smudge sighed. "Fine. I'll come your way. But only because you're cute and I love you."

So just like that, Smudge about-turned. He marched towards (and past) Biscuit, and headed down the right-hand path.

As he did, a quiet feeling fluttered inside him. *Hmm... I guess right does feel kind of right*, Smudge thought to himself. While he'd been busy trying to work everything out in his head, he hadn't noticed how beautiful the right-hand path actually was. The trees seemed a little greener, the flowers a little brighter, and the sky above opened into a friendly blue.

When he glanced back toward the left-hand path, it already looked like it might rain.

Smudge straightened up and pretended this had been his plan all along. "Yes, well," he said grandly, "I always knew right was right. How couldn't it be?"

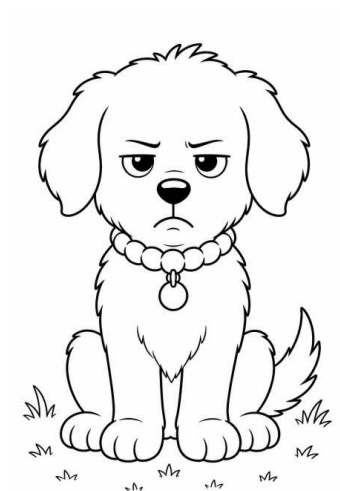
He looked back at Biscuit, who was already trotting confidently behind him, looking quietly victorious. Not for the first

time, Smudge had the feeling Biscuit had some secret sense that couldn't be explained in woofs. Or perhaps he was simply keeping it to himself. It was hard to tell.

SMUDGE DREAMS BIG

3

The Journal



Smudge and Biscuit had been walking for what felt like at least seven hours. Possibly eight. Maybe nine.

Smudge wiped his brow dramatically. "This," he declared, "is the longest journey anyone has ever taken... in the history of journeys."

Biscuit gave him a look: *Stop being dramatic.*

Their house was still perfectly visible behind them.

Mum stood in the window, holding a cup of tea, watching them. She looked wonderfully proud of her brave little adventurer... who was currently nineteen steps from home. Smudge waved. Biscuit wagged. Mum waved back.

Smudge cleared his throat. "Perhaps we should... um... take a short break. We don't want to overdo it, do we?"

Biscuit rolled his eyes but indicated his agreement by sitting down with a plop.

Smudge dropped onto the grass and swung his backpack round. "Let's see what Mum packed."

Out came the sandwiches: two beautifully wrapped creations, triangular, symmetrical, crusts neatly cut off—Mum knew Smudge appreciated good geometry.

"Oh!" Smudge gasped. "What's this?"

Hidden beneath the snacks was a small wrapped parcel. Smudge inspected it from every angle, then tore it open.

Inside was a small, sturdy journal with a deep blue cover and faint geometric patterns pressed into the front. Tucked neatly inside was a folded note:

"For your adventure. Record everything you discover along the way for me.

—Mum"

Smudge appreciated the thought, but was not overly impressed—mainly because journals required writing. Long,

wordy writing. His absolute nemesis.

He closed the journal with a soft *whump*.

“Well, I suppose it doesn’t have to be perfect, does it? Let me see what I can do.”

Setting the journal aside, Smudge dug into the sandwiches. They were delicious. Too delicious. Smudge knew he shouldn’t eat them all at once. He absolutely knew. Mum had definitely intended them to last longer than five minutes.

But the sandwiches were so symmetrical. So perfect. So there.

“I’ll save half,” Smudge declared bravely.

He took a careful bite.

Then another.

Then a not-so-careful bite.

And suddenly both sandwiches—and half the snacks—were gone.

Biscuit stared at him in disbelief. His tail paused mid-wag.

Smudge shrugged.

Biscuit huffed through his nose, the universal dog sign for:
And where is mine?

4

Chilly

Journal Entry

You only find what you're looking for.



The day had started wonderfully. In fact, it had started perfectly. Smudge and Biscuit were finally on their way—paws pattering, boots stomping, heads high. The sky was bright, the breeze was warm, and the path ahead stretched out like it had been rolled out especially for them.

“Nothing can stop us now,” Smudge said proudly.

Everything felt right. Everything felt easy. Everything felt... well... beautiful.

But journeys have a funny way of changing.

First, the warm breeze turned cool.

Then the cool turned cold.

Then the cold turned *very* cold.

Little clouds began to sneak across the sky, followed by their big, grey daddies. Colour slowly drained from the world. Even Smudge’s excitement dimmed, which was quite impressive because Smudge was very committed to being excited.

Biscuit began to shiver. Smudge did too. Their tummies rumbled. Their toes went cold. Their backpacks—previously helpful—were now worryingly empty.

They stood together in the cold, the dark, the nothingness. It occurred to Smudge, somewhat belatedly, that they had not planned this very well.

“It could be worse,” Smudge told himself, in an attempt to feel better about the situation.

He was right. It started to rain.

“Don’t panic,” Smudge said, instantly panicking. “ARGH—don’t panic! Biscuit, whatever you do, do *NOT* panic.”

Smudge ran around in a tiny frantic circle with his hands in the air, screaming, “THIS IS FINE! TOTALLY FINE!”

Biscuit remained perfectly unpanicked, which was admirable. And then, just when everything felt hopeless, Smudge turned

to look back where they had come from... and froze.

A house.

A proper house.

Warm golden light poured from its windows. A small chimney puffed a perfect curl of smoke into the air—the steady smoke of a toasty warm fire. The whole thing stood there calmly, as if it had been waiting all along. As if it had always been there.

“Biscuit... was that there before?”

Biscuit tilted his head. He wasn’t so sure.

Smudge wasn’t sure either. How had they walked right past an entire house and not noticed?

Well, because they weren’t looking for one then.

And now? *Now*, they definitely were.

5

Naughty

Journal Entry

Things feel wrong for a reason.



“Come on!” said Smudge, suddenly full of energy as he hurried toward the house. Biscuit trotted beside him, nose twitching. Every few steps, Biscuit glanced back at the cold and darkness behind them. A lovely warm house was better than THAT. What could possibly go wrong?

Up close, the house looked even nicer. The windows glowed in two neat squares, and the roof sloped at such a satisfyingly precise angle that Smudge couldn’t help noticing it. Everything looked cosy, welcoming... and oddly arranged, like a picture someone had drawn very carefully.

Nothing seemed unusual at first glance, except for the curious strings and little ropes hung around the place—neat loops, tidy knots, braids that looked professional. Smudge didn’t quite know why, but they made the house feel... neat.

“Here goes nothing,” said Smudge as he knocked on the door. No answer.

He knocked again, louder this time.

Still nothing. No one was home.

As they stood there, the wind howled through the trees. Biscuit whimpered softly, shifting from paw to paw. Smudge’s stomach made an unhelpful grumbling noise.

The rain continued. The wind continued. Their enthusiasm for standing outside did not.

Smudge considered their options carefully, all of which involved being cold except one.

Biscuit’s expression spoke clearly: *It looks warm, seems magical, and that is enough information for now.*

With a deep, hopeful breath, Smudge tried the handle.

Crrrrreeeeak...

The door eased open all by itself, slowly and smoothly, as if it had been expecting them.

Smudge and Biscuit exchanged a look. It was a very specific look. A look that said: *This might be a terrible idea.*

But also: *We're freezing, hungry, and out of sandwiches, so...*

Smudge felt a flutter of doubt in his chest, but the warm air drifting out of the doorway wrapped around him like a soft blanket. And it smelled—just faintly—like something sweet.

They knew they shouldn't. They knew they really shouldn't... but they did.

6

Cookies

Journal Entry

When things feel wrong, listen.



The house was oddly perfect inside. It smelt amazing, and a lovely fire crackled in the hearth. Interestingly, a table stood in the centre of the room, set for two: two chairs, two cups, two plates. Not three. Not one. Two. And in the middle of the table sat a stack of fresh, warm, golden cookies.

“Someone must live here,” Smudge concluded.

Unsurprisingly, the room did not answer.

Biscuit was already sitting neatly in one of the chairs, tail wagging politely, as if waiting to be served. As you may imagine, he had a particular weakness for cookies.

“Biscuit,” Smudge warned, “we shouldn’t. Really. We don’t know—”

Then the smell hit him too.

Warm. Sweet. A little bit magical.

“Oh...” Smudge murmured. “Oh no. That smells delicious.”

His stomach rumbled loudly, as if to say, *I’ll take over the decisions from here, thank you.*

“Fine,” Smudge sighed as he climbed into the other chair. “Just one. One tiny taste. One crumb.”

He reached out. Biscuit reached out. Their fingers and paws touched the warm cookies at the same time.

They lifted the cookies.

They looked each other in the eyes.

They slowly took a bite.

And—

WHOOSH.

The floor dropped.

The chairs vanished.

The table folded like paper.

Caught in a chaotic whirlwind of ropes and knots, Smudge tried to shout, “THIS WAS A TERRIBLE DECISION!”

But all that came out was:

“AaaaaaAAAHHH!”

Up they went.

Down they fell.

And then—

SNAP.

Everything stopped.

Smudge dangled upside down, swinging gently from his ankles. Biscuit dangled beside him, his little paws tied together in neat knots, swinging gently like a puzzled furry pendulum.

Confused, Smudge swallowed his mouthful of cookie and blinked. “Biscuit...?”

Biscuit gave a soft, embarrassed whimper.

They didn’t struggle. Instead they dangled in the calm resignation of the mildly naughty, who knew this was at least partly—all right, entirely—their own fault.

7

Truth

Journal Entry
Don't hide things.



Smudge dangled. Biscuit dangled. They swung together in slow, tragic unison like two ornaments on a very confused Christmas tree.

“Well,” Smudge said at last, “this is new.”

They stared at each other, upside down and certainly perplexed. “Hmm, how do we—”

“Enjoy the truth cookies, did we?” interrupted a voice.

A figure stepped calmly into the centre of the room.

She wore a patchwork coat with frayed edges and a belt with all kinds of gadgets—neatly coiled ropes, mysterious tools, you name it. Her expression was unreadable, but faintly amused.

“Name’s Tether,” she said, resting her hands in her pockets. “It looks like you could use someone who knows their knots.”

Smudge gasped. “You set *the* cookie trap!”

Biscuit barked once in upside-down outrage.

“I didn’t set anything,” she said. “I just left a bit of rope lying around.” She flicked her chin toward them. “You trapped yourselves.”

She had a point. In fact, she was *100% correct*. They had wandered in uninvited and helped themselves to her cookies.

Tether raised an eyebrow. “Honestly. Leave a plate of truth cookies out and you’ll get all sorts in here.”

Truth cookies, Smudge thought. *Why does she keep saying that?*

Then Smudge felt something odd.

A tickle.

A bubbling in his chest.

A fizzing in his throat.

Oh no.

Not this.

Anything but *THIS*.

“I... I have a confession,” Smudge blurted uncontrollably.

He clapped his hands over his mouth.

Tether smiled. “Yes?”

Smudge shook his head frantically. He tried to stop himself. He tried to think of something else—clouds, triangles, broccoli, absolutely anything.

But the words burst out of him like fireworks:

“I ONCE ATE THE LAST CHEESE SANDWICH AND BLAMED BISCUIT!”

Biscuit barked in outraged betrayal.

“I’M SORRY!” Smudge wailed. “IT WAS TOO DELICIOUS, AND I PANICKED WHEN MUM GOT ANGRY!”

Biscuit swung upside down in sheer horror.

“And-and-and—” he gasped, trying and failing to stop. “I DON’T REALLY KNOW WHAT I’M DOING MOST OF THE TIME!”

“Oh yes,” Tether purred, “anything else?”

“I WAS SCARED OF THE DARK UNTIL LAST YEAR!”

“I SOMETIMES PRETEND I KNOW WHAT ‘POLYGON’ MEANS!”

“I ONCE TOLD BISCUIT I HAD A PLAN WHEN I DIDN’T!”

Another truth tumbled out.

And another.

And another.

All the little things Smudge kept tucked away.

It took slightly longer for Biscuit’s truth cookie to kick in, but kick in it did.

“WOOF!”

(Translation: “I didn’t sense anything magical earlier—I just smelled cookies!”)

Smudge gasped. “I KNEW IT!”

Tether stepped closer. “That’s it. Let it out. Let it all out...”

And they did.

For what felt like several hours, the truth poured out of both of them like an unstoppable waterfall of confessions. And together—with all the dignity they could manage while dangling upside down—they spoke every truth they'd never said aloud, not knowing that each confession was slowly, quietly... setting them free.

Smudge confessed every tiny thing he'd ever done: the time he said he didn't know who ate the last slice of cake (it was him), the time he blamed Biscuit for the muddy footprints (also him), the time he pretended not to know where Mum's favourite pen went (it was still in his pocket), and the time he told Biscuit he didn't mind him snoring (he did).

Biscuit, under truth-cookie influence, yapped, whined, and barked out his own confessions: the shoes he chewed, the suspicious hole in the garden he absolutely did dig, and the fact that he always knew where Smudge hid his sweets—he just let Smudge think he was being clever.

By the end of it, they hung there like two soggy tea towels, emotionally wrung out but strangely lighter.

Tether nodded, satisfied that there were no more secrets to be kept.

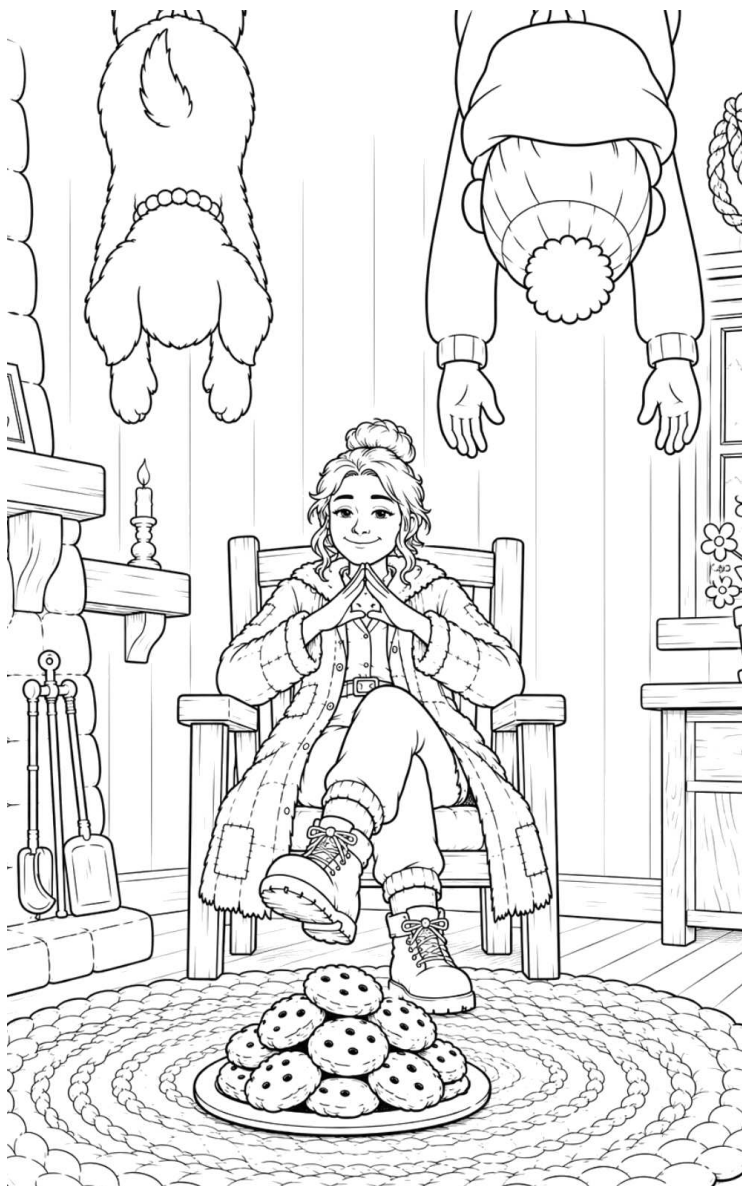
"Now then," she said. "Why don't you tell me what you're doing here?"

8

Landing

Journal Entry

Fresh starts feel good.



Smudge blinked. His head felt fuzzy from all the truth that had just exploded out of him.

“We... uh... we want to find the Sanctuary,” he said at last. “The one with—well—impossible shapes and glowing geometry and all that. We want to find it.”

Tether’s expression softened—only a fraction, but enough for Smudge to notice.

“Ah,” she said softly. “So that’s your dream, is it?”

Smudge flung his hands up (technically down, given his predicament, but let’s not get technical).

“You know it?!”

Ignoring the question, Tether wandered over to them, reached up, and gave one of the ropes the slightest, most elegant tug.

Smudge and Biscuit’s return to earth was, however, anything but elegant. They landed with an “oof” and a “woof,” respectively—Biscuit on top.

“Well,” she said, “you’ve got a fresh start now at least. A clean slate. Without that, you weren’t going to get very far at all.”

Smudge rubbed the back of his head and frowned. “So... what happens now then?”

Tether turned toward the door. “Now? You sleep.” She gestured lightly toward a neatly made bed and a small dog basket.

“There are some ordinary cookies in the cupboard. Help yourselves. And in the morning...” She paused, glancing back at them. “In the morning, we’ll see what we can do.”

And with that, she left.

Smudge watched her go, feeling just a little more hopeful.

Biscuit, meanwhile, was already in the cupboard.

Zero shame.

9

The Test

Journal Entry

Little boxes can contain bad things.



In the morning, Smudge and Biscuit lay sprawled across the bed, both staring thoughtfully at the ceiling.

It was the kind of thoughtful staring that suggested something important was happening inside their heads. Something significant. Something weighty and serious and possibly even world-changing—the kind of deep, focused contemplation that great decisions are made of, that destinies are shaped by, that history is built upon.

Smudge furrowed his brow.

Biscuit furrowed his, too, in the way dogs do when they are concentrating very hard.

“I hope there are sausages for breakfast,” said Smudge at last.

Biscuit wagged his tail, which suggested that this would be more than acceptable.

They both fell quiet again as they thought carefully about exactly which type of sausages they’d like. Smudge was partial to a good thick pork one, slightly crispy at the ends. Biscuit, for his part, was not fussy—he was fond of all sausages equally.

The sausage silence lingered for a moment.

Then it was broken by a slow, deliberate knock at the door.

Another followed, and then a third. Three firm knocks, evenly spaced.

Smudge and Biscuit froze. They looked at each other, and then at the door.

“You get it,” said Smudge.

Biscuit gestured, quite clearly, for Smudge to get it.

They stared at the door for another couple of seconds.

“Come in!” called Smudge.

“Woof!” added Biscuit.

The door creaked open and Tether stepped inside.

Immediately, Smudge felt something was afoot. Tether

seemed even quieter than before. More serious.

She was not smiling at all, and under her arm she carried a small, plain box—thin and flat, more like a case than anything else.

“Sleep well?” she asked finally.

Smudge and Biscuit nodded.

Tether gave a small nod of her own and walked slowly across the room. She placed the case carefully on a small table, then sat down opposite them.

“So,” she said. “You want the Sanctuary of Symmetry.”

It wasn’t a question. But Smudge answered it anyway.

“Yes,” he said, sitting up a little straighter.

“Good,” Tether replied. “You know what you want. And if you know what you want, then I can help you.”

Smudge’s face brightened immediately. Biscuit’s tail began to wag.

“But only,” Tether added gently, “if you can prove it.”

“Prove what?” Smudge asked.

“That you really want it. Really, *really* want it.”

Smudge blinked. “I just said I did.”

“Yes,” said Tether calmly. She rested her hand lightly on the case. “But words are easy.”

Smudge frowned. Biscuit’s tail slowed.

“We *do* want it,” Smudge insisted again.

Biscuit gave a firm “Woof,” which very much supported this claim.

Tether nodded once again, in a no-nonsense sort of way. “Then this will be easy,” she said, and pushed the case gently toward them. “Take off your socks.”

Smudge paused. “Sorry... what?”

“Take off your socks. Sit comfortably. Feet up.”

Biscuit tilted his head. Smudge frowned even harder. This was all very confusing.

“What’s in the box?” he asked.

Tether did not answer. Instead, she turned the case to face them and opened it carefully.

Smudge looked.

Biscuit looked.

They both looked.

Inside lay a feather.

A single, very ordinary-looking feather.

Smudge went pale.

“You wouldn’t,” he said.

Tether picked it up and held it lightly between two fingers.

“You can’t,” said Smudge. “That is—I mean—there must be another way. Any other way. I’ll do something else. I’ll climb something. I’ll jump something. I’ll—Biscuit, back me up here—”

Biscuit had already deserted Smudge and was hiding behind the cushions.

A small, almost mischievous smile appeared on Tether’s face.

“This,” she said, “is the tickle test.”

10

Smudge Proof

Journal Entry

Some things are too tickly to face alone.



Tether set the feather down in front of the case and folded her hands in her lap.

“The rule is simple. You get a proper foot-tickling, though you may stop at any time.” She paused. “But if you stop... you fail.”

Smudge opened his mouth.

“If you really, truly, genuinely want the Sanctuary—if it matters to you both as much as you say it does—then this shouldn’t be a problem. Should it?”

Silence.

A deeply uncomfortable silence.

Smudge looked at the feather.

Biscuit pressed himself slightly further into the cushions.

Tether unfolded her hands and picked up the feather. “So,” she said at last, “who’s it going to be?”

Smudge looked at Tether.

Tether looked at the feather.

Biscuit looked at both of them and wanted no part in this whatsoever.

“Okay, okay,” said Smudge. “I’ll do it.”

Tether tilted her head. “Will you?”

“Yes,” said Smudge, with the confident air of someone who had feet made of tickle-proof steel.

Biscuit looked extremely concerned. He knew this was completely untrue. A few well-timed dog-tail tickles could send Smudge running. He had done it many times—especially when he wanted the sofa to himself.

Regardless, Smudge pulled off his socks, sat back, and put his feet up with great ceremony. Despite his considerable doubts, Biscuit settled in beside him and watched with great interest and full moral support.

Tether said nothing. She simply held the feather up and passed it gently from one hand to the other.

Without even touching his feet, Smudge smiled.

A small smile at first.

Then a bigger one.

Then his shoulders started going.

Then his whole face crumpled and an enormous, unstoppable laugh burst out of him—HA HA HA—and he curled sideways into the cushions clutching his stomach.

“Stop, stop,” he wheezed. “I can’t—I can’t take it—”

Tether lowered the feather. “Smudge.”

“I know, I know—” He sat up, wiped his eyes, and composed himself. “Right. Ready. I’m ready. I mean it this time.”

Tether raised the feather again.

Smudge lasted approximately one second before bursting into laughter.

“STOP.”

“I haven’t started yet.”

“I KNOW.” Smudge pressed his lips together. “It’s—it’s just the thought of it. It’s too much.”

“Smudge,” she said, not unkindly, “you understand that I have not actually tickled you yet.”

Smudge tried to say yes, but he was laughing too hard to answer properly.

“Not even a little bit,” Tether continued.

“I know.”

“Not only have I not touched you, but the feather is currently”—she held it up for inspection—“about three feet from your actual feet.”

“Yes, I’m aware,” said Smudge, who was now sitting with both feet tucked underneath him.

“I want to,” Smudge said. And he meant it—that much was clear. His face was earnest and sincere. “I genuinely, really, truly want to. I just...”

He paused and looked over at Biscuit. It was the kind of look that, if you were an actual biscuit, would mean you were about to be eaten.

Biscuit didn’t quite understand at first. He tilted his head. He looked at Smudge. He looked at the feather. He looked back at Smudge.

Then he understood.

Smudge smiled—the warm, hopeful smile of someone who was about to ask a terrible favour and knew it. He patted the chair beside him gently.

“Why don’t you just... sit here for a moment, Biscuit? Just get comfortable. Just—”

Biscuit was already backing away.

“Here, boy,” said Smudge, switching at once to the special voice reserved for walkies, treats, and other genuinely excellent things.

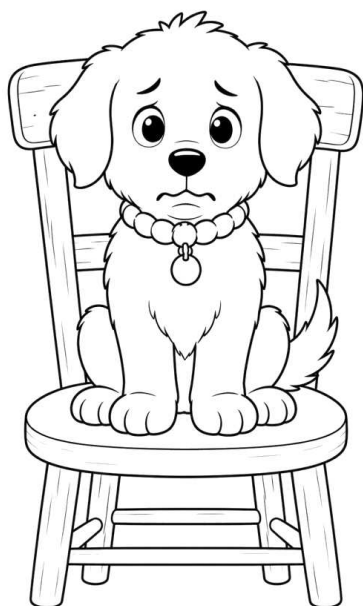
“Good boy. Good Biscuit. It’s just a chair. Nice chair. Friendly chair.”

11

Dog Proof

Journal Entry

Sometimes one carries the other.



After considerable persuasion, Biscuit climbed into the chair. It appeared he didn't have much choice in the matter.

Once settled, he looked up at Tether with an expression that said: *I want it on the record that I am not happy about this.*

Then, with enormous reluctance, he lifted all four paws.

Smudge stood to one side, watching. "There's a good boy."

Tether gave Smudge a disappointed look, then picked up the feather. She looked at Biscuit. Biscuit looked ready.

So she began.

For the first two seconds, Biscuit held perfectly still. His ears were flat. His eyes were fixed on the far wall. His expression was one of absolute determination.

Then the howling started.

Not a bark. Not a whimper. A full, resonant, operatic howl—the kind that does not seem physically possible.

AWOOOOOO.

Smudge took a small step backward.

AWOOOOOOOO.

The howl filled the room completely. It bounced off the walls. It rattled the windowpanes. Somewhere outside, a squirrel dropped its nuts.

But Biscuit's paws stayed up.

Tether continued, methodical and unhurried, giving each paw a full and proper tickle.

Biscuit howled through it all—magnificently, wholeheartedly, with the full voice of a dog who found this completely unbearable and was bearing it anyway.

His tail thumped. His ears went up, then down, then sideways in a direction ears don't normally go. At one particularly difficult moment, his entire face scrunched into an expression of such profound suffering that Smudge had to look away.

But throughout it all, his paws stayed up.

Through every howl, every twitch, every dramatic full-body shudder—his four paws stayed up.

Smudge had never felt so proud of anything in his entire life. He had also never felt quite so guilty. Biscuit was doing what Smudge could not—but that was the thing about being a team. Sometimes one carries the other.

A moment later came the most beautiful sound in the world: silence. It was over.

Tether set the feather down on the table.

The room went quiet.

Biscuit sat in the chair for a moment, all four paws still in the air, as if he hadn't quite registered that it was over. Then, slowly, he lowered them. He blinked. He looked at Tether. He looked at Smudge.

Then he climbed down from the chair, placed all four paws carefully on the floor, and gave himself an enormous full-body shake—ears flapping, jowls wobbling, tail swinging.

Tether watched with admiration.

She reached out and gave Biscuit two slow, respectful pats on the head. "Well done," she said. "You want it."

12

Supplies

Journal Entry

Do what matters first.



Wasting no time, Tether briskly headed towards a door at the back of the room—a door Smudge was almost certain had not been there before—and opened it.

“We’ll leave within the hour,” she announced abruptly. “You’ll need supplies. Equipment. Proper things for a proper journey. Take what you need. I’ll pack my own things and meet you back here.”

And with that, she left them to their own devices.

Smudge and Biscuit looked at each other.

Then they looked through the door.

Then they looked at each other again.

“Oh my,” said Smudge.

It was a large room. Larger, somehow, than the house it belonged to. The walls stretched up and up in a way that didn’t entirely make sense, lined from floor to ceiling with shelves, hooks, rails, cubbies, and drawers of every conceivable size. There were lanterns that glowed without flames. Ropes that coiled themselves neatly when you set them down. Cloaks, bundles, bottles, blankets, maps, tools, tins, and all manner of curious things.

Smudge wandered in slowly, turning in a full circle, eyes wide.

“We should be very organised about this,” he said.

Biscuit agreed through a mouthful of something biscuity he had already found.

“Systematic,” Smudge added. “Methodical. Pack only what we truly need.”

This was an excellent plan.

* * *

Some time later—rather more time than was strictly necessary—

Smudge was wearing a velvet magician's hat and had read the first three pages of a book called *Everything Is Probably Fine*. Biscuit was wearing a small pair of goggles that made him look extremely professional for... well, something.

Neither of them had packed anything sensible.

Somehow, a table tennis table had also been unfolded. It was unclear who had done this. Neither of them was saying.

But there they were—Smudge on one side, Biscuit on the other, Biscuit's goggles slightly askew, both of them absolutely focused on the most important match of their lives.

POCK.

POCK.

POCK.

Mid-game, the door opened.

Tether stepped in. Unlike Ping (Smudge) and Pong (Biscuit), she was ready to leave—coat buttoned, her own bag over one shoulder. It was a sturdy bag, old and well-worn, giving a quiet clink and clunk whenever she moved. That was the sound of being ready for anything.

Smudge and Biscuit were ready for nothing other than the next point. Although, in fairness, they were ready for it at a championship level. A miniature blackboard had been found, a score had been kept, and Biscuit was winning in a manner Smudge considered suspicious.

Tether looked at the table tennis table.

She looked at their bags, untouched, on the floor.

A silence followed.

Then, without a word, she walked to the table, folded it in one smooth motion, and stood it against the wall.

She placed their empty packs on the floor in front of them and pointed at the shelves.

“Five minutes,” she said, tapping her watch.

This time, they actually packed.

Unfortunately, what Smudge and Biscuit thought they needed was not quite the same thing as what they actually needed.

Smudge packed the hat, two packets of sweets, a ukulele, a shiny flask shaped like a moon, and a small folding cushion “for morale.” He also briefly stopped to play the ukulele, just to make sure it worked.

Biscuit packed several treats, the goggles, a squeaky ball, and what appeared to be three biscuits hidden beneath a scarf.

The results were not encouraging.

Within five minutes—or something close to it, accounting for the ukulele situation—they stood at the front door with bulging bags and very satisfied expressions.

Tether looked them over once and sighed.

“Okay, then,” she said.

She opened the door, and off they went—ready or not.

13

Confused

Journal Entry

The help you need isn't always the help you want.



The morning had started wonderfully once again. In fact, it had started brilliantly.

Birds sang from the branches overhead. Sunlight spilled between the trees in long golden stripes. The air was crisp, clean, and just chilly enough to make the whole world feel awake.

Smudge walked with his pack on and his head high. Biscuit trotted beside him in his goggles, looking like a very small but highly qualified travelling professional. Tether followed a few paces behind, hands in her pockets, saying nothing at all.

For a while, everything felt exactly as it should.

Smudge breathed in deeply. "This," he said, "is more like it."

Biscuit wagged in agreement.

They walked a little further.

The path remained lovely. The birds remained birdy. The trees remained extremely tree-ish. It was all so reassuring, in fact, that Smudge began to feel almost suspiciously cheerful.

Then a thought occurred to him.

He slowed.

"So..." he said, glancing back over his shoulder at Tether, "this is the right way then, is it?"

Tether looked at him.

"I don't know," she said.

Smudge stopped walking.

Biscuit stopped walking.

"What?!" said Smudge.

"I don't know," said Tether again.

"No, I heard the words," said Smudge. "I'm just hoping they meant something else."

Tether waited.

Smudge blinked. "What do you mean, you don't know?"

"It means the opposite of *I know*," said Tether.

Smudge stared at her.

"Oh boy," he said at last. "Oh boy. I thought you knew where we were going."

"I never said that."

"You didn't?"

"No."

Smudge frowned. "Are you sure?"

Tether said nothing.

"You did!" said Smudge. "You said..." He paused. *Actually, did she?*

"I said," said Tether calmly, "that I could help you."

Smudge opened and closed his mouth once or twice.

"How can you help me," he asked, "if you don't know where it is?"

Tether stepped a little closer.

"Because not everything is found the way ordinary things are found," she said. "If you lose a sock, you look under the bed. If you lose your way, you look for signs. If you want a place like the Sanctuary..." She paused. "Well. That's different."

Smudge frowned harder.

"Look, I can't point at it and say, 'There. Three miles east, left at the large rock, mind the nettles.'"

"So how can you help me then if you can't do that?" asked Smudge, quite rightly.

"I can help you become the sort of Smudge who gets there," Tether replied without hesitation.

Smudge looked at Biscuit.

Biscuit looked back.

It was safe to say Smudge had not taken this revelation from Tether well. He had expected a map. Possibly a shortcut. At the very least, someone pointing confidently at something.

Instead, he had received the deeply unsettling news that the journey somehow involved becoming a better version of himself.

This, Smudge felt, called for a snack.

Trying to hold it together, he sat down on a nearby log, opened his pack, and began rummaging.

“What are you doing?” asked Tether.

“Having an emergency snack,” said Smudge. “Sweets. They feel necessary.”

Biscuit, who fully agreed, sat down beside him.

Tether remained standing. She set her own bag down beside her with a low, solid clunk and watched.

By this point, Smudge and Biscuit were sitting among the emptied-out contents of their packs. It turned out the folding cushion “for morale” was actually quite handy.

And it had to be said, the snacks were excellent. They were also, as snacks in the possession of Smudge and Biscuit tended to be, gone within a very short time. This did not, in any obvious way, bring them closer to the Sanctuary.

14

Lost

Journal Entry

You can learn from going nowhere.



After Smudge had calmed down and accepted that they had no idea where they were actually going, they set off again. Tether followed, still saying nothing.

Nothing much happened after that until Biscuit found a scent. It was, by all accounts, a very compelling scent. An urgent scent, according to Biscuit. A scent that could not possibly be ignored, and Biscuit communicated this by putting his nose to the ground and charging off the path at considerable speed.

“Biscuit!” Smudge called—and followed him. Because this was what Smudge always did, and had always done, and would apparently always do.

Tether watched them go. She looked at the path. She looked at the direction they had disappeared in. Then she followed, quietly, at a slight distance—close enough to keep them in sight, far enough to let them get thoroughly lost first.

They went left. Then right. Then in a wide arc that felt very much like progress until the undergrowth thickened, and the path was gone entirely. Biscuit lifted his head and looked around with the unmistakable look of a dog who had absolutely had a reason for going this way five minutes ago. Now, not so much.

Hmm, are we lost? thought Smudge. *Is it even possible to be lost when you don't know where you're going?*

Then, after a moment: *Actually yes. Apparently you can still be lost even if you don't know where you're going.*

Sure enough, the afternoon arrived and went. Then, without ceremony, evening arrived. The temperature dropped—first cool, then cold, then the specific kind of cold that reminds you that you have eaten all your food and have no idea where you are.

Smudge's pack was basically empty, unless you counted the ukulele, which this was clearly not the moment to do. Biscuit

walked very close to Smudge's heels, occasionally glancing up with a guilty expression.

"Don't panic," said Smudge.

He looked to Tether for reassurance, but none was coming.

Eventually, after what could fairly be described as clear panicking, they pushed through a final cluster of trees and stumbled out onto a clearer stretch of ground.

Smudge looked up.

Ahead of them, warm golden light poured from a window. A small chimney puffed a neat curl of smoke into the darkening air.

"Oh thank goodness," said Smudge, with enormous relief. "A house. We're saved."

He strode toward it, Biscuit trotting gratefully at his heels.

Up close, something about the door looked familiar. And the roof. And the curious arrangement of ropes and neat knots hanging around the porch.

Smudge's footsteps slowed.

He looked at the door for a long moment.

He looked at the ropes.

He looked at Biscuit.

Biscuit already knew. He had known for the last ten minutes. He had simply been hoping Smudge would not notice.

"Biscuit," said Smudge, very quietly. "Is that..."

Biscuit said nothing. His tail gave one very small, very apologetic wag.

It was. It was absolutely, entirely, and without any possible doubt, Tether's house. The very house they had left that morning full of purpose and good intentions... and to which they had now returned.

15

The Loop

Journal Entry

Walking in circles gets old.



Tether ushered them inside and put soup on the stove. It was the kind of soup that fixes things—thick, warm, and exactly what you need when you have spent an entire day walking in circles and not realised it until supper.

Smudge ate two bowls. Biscuit ate a mystery number that was more than a lot.

Tether sat across from them, her own bowl mostly untouched, watching them the way she always watched things.

Nobody said very much.

The fire crackled. The wind moved in the trees outside. A log shifted and sent a small shower of sparks up the chimney.

Smudge stared into the bottom of his bowl, put his spoon down, and looked over at Biscuit.

Biscuit looked back, ears low, tail still. He looked like he had also been thinking about the rather disappointing day.

Smudge sighed—a long, slow sigh that seemed to come from somewhere much deeper than his stomach.

“We can’t go on like this, Biscuit,” he said.

Biscuit said nothing, but his eyes agreed.

The fire crackled again.

Tether reached into her coat pocket and set something on the table between them.

It was a small loop of rope—tied impossibly, ends joined, no beginning and no end.

Smudge looked at it.

He picked it up. Turned it over. Set it back down.

“What’s this for?” he asked.

“You tell me,” said Tether.

Smudge frowned at the rope. Biscuit leaned over and sniffed it, which told him nothing useful but felt important to do.

The loop sat there quietly on the table.

As Smudge looked at it, the day began to arrange itself differently in his mind—not as a journey through the forest, but as a string of very familiar little choices.

Stopping for snacks far too early.

Stepping off the path to look at things.

Letting Biscuit chase scents.

Following him when he did.

Choosing what felt easy instead of what led forward.

Smudge picked up the rope and looked at it closely. A circle. No beginning. No end. Just a never-ending cycle.

“If we don’t change,” Smudge said slowly, “we’ll keep going round in circles, won’t we?”

Tether nodded.

Smudge sat with that for a moment. And it was not a comfortable thing to sit with.

“How can we change?” he asked.

Tether didn’t answer immediately. She finished a mouthful of soup, then set down her spoon.

“You’ve done the hard part, Smudge,” she said. “You’ve realised you need to.”

16

Back

Journal Entry

Think like someone who arrives.



Morning arrived with the smell of toast. Smudge and Biscuit awoke to find Tether already at the table, their packs open, empty, and waiting. Breakfast was brief, and Tether wasted no time leading them back to the supplies room.

It was exactly as they had left it. Only this time, Smudge saw it a little differently—not as a room full of fun and games, but as a room that could get him to the Sanctuary.

“Right,” said Tether. “Pack what you need.”

Smudge nodded seriously and reached for the first thing. It was a rubber duck.

Tether looked at the rubber duck. Then she looked at Smudge.

“It’s lucky,” Smudge explained.

“Is it?”

Silence.

Smudge opened his mouth. Closed it again. Slowly, he put the duck back down on the table.

“No. Not that.”

Tether said nothing. She simply reached to one side and drew forward a neat little spread of objects that looked painfully familiar: the things they had packed last time. Smudge had been wondering why their packs were empty. Now he knew.

There was the ukulele, the shiny moon-shaped flask, the cushion, a framed picture of Biscuit, the squeaky ball, and one or two other items whose purpose had never been especially clear, even at the time.

Smudge looked at the pile. Yesterday, it had looked exciting. This morning, it looked like a very fun way of getting nowhere.

Tether’s voice softened slightly. “Imagine the Smudge who finds the Sanctuary.”

Smudge looked up.

“What is he doing?” she asked. “What is he saying? How does

he carry himself? What does he feel like?"

Smudge frowned, thinking. "He's... calmer," he said slowly. Tether nodded.

"He's not stuffing his face with snacks every ten minutes."

Biscuit looked away.

"He's paying attention," Smudge went on. "He's not getting distracted by every interesting stick, leaf, pebble, cloud, noise, smell, shadow, or suspiciously shaped mushroom."

Biscuit looked away more deeply.

"And?" said Tether.

Smudge looked down at the table again. "He packs what he actually needs," he said.

Tether nodded. "Good. Then do that."

For a moment, Smudge just stood there. Then he began. He set the duck aside. Then the moon-flask. Then the ukulele, though he did feel this was artistically unwise. Then everything else he had been so certain might turn out to be essential.

One by one, the pile of almost-useful things moved to one side.

Then he went to find what he really needed: a good compass, some sensible food, a blanket, a light, and a few useful things that did not squeak, shine, sing, or require explaining.

One by one, he packed them.

When he lifted the pack again, it was lighter than he expected.

"Why does it feel different?" he asked.

"Because you packed it," Tether said, "as someone who arrives."

Smudge stood there with the pack on his back and said nothing for a while.

It was an odd feeling.

Satisfaction, yes—but not the full-of-ice-cream kind. This

was quieter. Steadier. The feeling of having done one small thing properly.

“Ready?” asked Tether.

Smudge looked at the rubber duck sitting on the table. He looked at Tether.

“Yes,” he said.

He left the duck where it was. He didn’t look back at it. Not even once.

That was new.

17

Distractions

Journal Entry

Nothing is faster than focus.



Smudge stood at the door with his pack on and looked at the path ahead.

The same path.

He knew that.

“Same road,” he said to Biscuit.

Biscuit looked at him with an expectant expression.

“Different us,” Smudge added.

Biscuit considered this, then wagged once. Cautiously. As if he was prepared to believe it, but wasn’t going to commit fully until he had seen some evidence.

Tether said nothing. She fell into step behind them as they set off, hands in pockets, as always.

Smudge noticed she seemed to be watching them slightly differently. Less like someone waiting for something to go wrong. More like someone curious to see what might go right.

They had been walking for perhaps fifteen minutes when Smudge noticed something in the trees to the left.

A multicoloured ladybird crawled across a fern beside the path, its shell shimmering red, blue, gold, and green whenever it caught the light. Irresistible.

His feet slowed.

One foot half-turned toward it.

He felt the pull—familiar, comfortable, entirely automatic. *Just a quick look.* It would only take a moment. He was already half-stepping off the path—

He stopped.

He stood very still.

Then, quietly, he turned back to face the path.

“No,” he said. To the ladybird, but also to the part of him that always followed distractions. *It’s not the Sanctuary.*

He kept walking.

Biscuit, who had been watching with interest, trotted on beside him. His tail gave a single, approving wag.

Behind them, Tether's mouth moved very slightly. It might have been a smile. It was gone before anyone could be sure.

They walked on.

After a while—earlier than was sensible—Smudge's hand moved toward his pack.

Snack time.

He felt it as a pull rather than a thought. His hand was already reaching before his mind had caught up. The zip was half-open—

He paused.

He closed it again.

He stood for a moment with his hand resting on his pack.

It's not time, he thought.

"Not yet," he said out loud.

Biscuit stared at the pack with an expression of profound personal suffering.

"Not yet," Smudge said again, more firmly, and continued walking.

Biscuit followed, glancing back at the pack once, twice, three times, before finally facing forward with the dignity of a dog who was choosing to be better.

This time, Tether definitely smiled.

They walked further than they had the day before. Without getting lost. Without walking in circles.

The path wound through a part of the forest they hadn't reached last time—taller trees, different light, the ground rising gently underfoot. It felt like somewhere new. It felt, in a very quiet way, like progress.

Then Biscuit's nose went down.

Smudge saw it happen. The exact moment—the twitch of the nostrils, the lowering of the head, the sudden intense focus on something only Biscuit could smell. Biscuit’s whole body began to angle off the path.

This was the moment. Smudge felt it.

“Biscuit,” he said.

Biscuit didn’t look up. His nose was too busy.

“Biscuit!”

One ear swivelled toward him. The nose stayed down.

Smudge crouched to Biscuit’s level.

“I know,” he said. “I know it’s interesting. But we’re not going that way. Not now. Not today. Not until we find the Sanctuary. Okay?”

Biscuit looked off the path.

He looked at Smudge.

He looked off the path once more with an expression of longing.

Then he looked at Smudge one final time.

The nose came up.

He turned back to the path.

They walked on.

And as they did, Tether fell into step beside them—not behind them this time, but beside them.

A little while later—without drama, without fanfare, without even fully noticing it at first—the path changed.

The trees thinned. The ground levelled. The light ahead opened into something broader and brighter, and the path beneath their feet stopped curving back on itself and began, unmistakably, to go somewhere.

Forward.

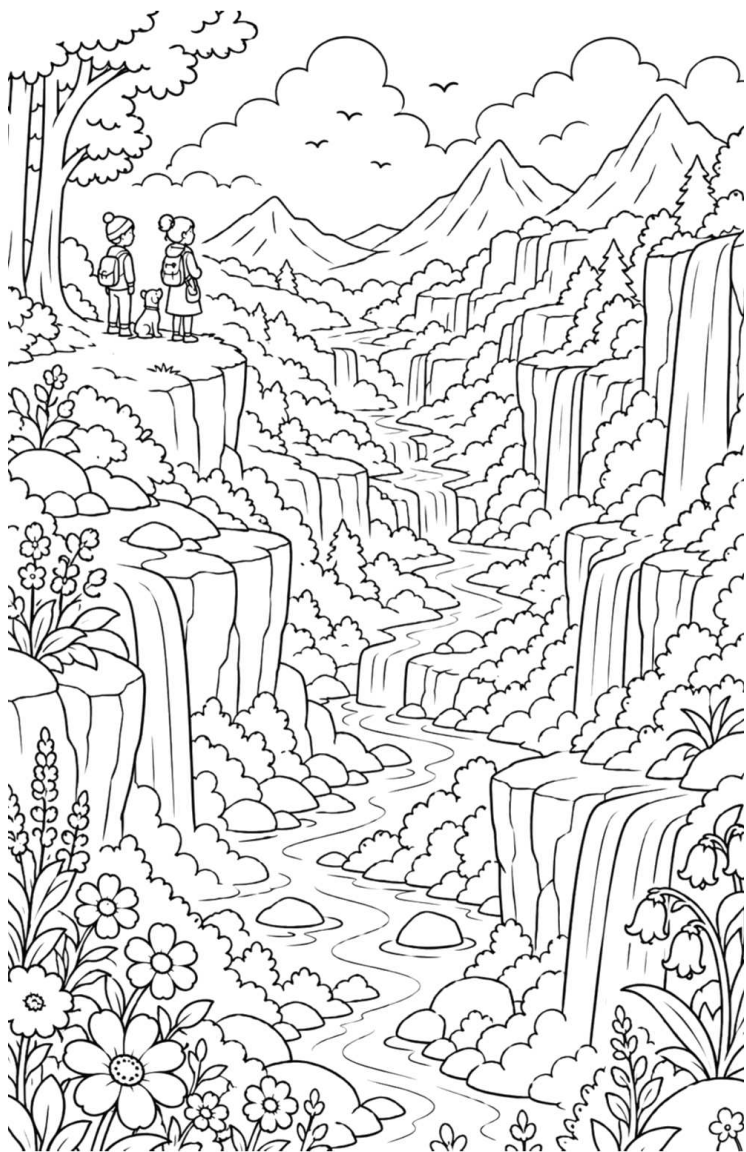
Actually forward.

18

Noises

Journal Entry

Forward feels different.



Smudge stopped walking. Biscuit stopped beside him. Even Tether paused, and Tether did not usually pause for scenery.

The valley below them opened like it had been waiting a very long time to be seen. A river threaded through it in silver ribbons. Waterfalls dropped from high rocks in three, four, five places at once. Flowers grew in colours Smudge didn't have names for, and the air tasted cleaner, warmer, fuller somehow, as if it contained more of whatever air is made of.

"Oh my," said Smudge, because those were the only words available.

Biscuit sat down. Not from tiredness, but from the need to take it in properly, the way dogs sometimes do when a standing sniff won't cut it.

They stood there for a long moment, the three of them, looking at a world that seemed to have arranged itself entirely for their benefit.

Then they went down into it.

The path—the new one—wound easily through the valley as if it knew where they wanted to go before they did. Things kept appearing as they walked: a cluster of fruit trees, heavy with something orange and sweet-smelling, right when Smudge's stomach began to think about lunch; a flat, dry rock in a patch of sunlight, right when Biscuit's paws needed a rest; a clear pool, perfectly still and mirror-flat, right when Smudge wanted to see how the new Smudge looked.

"Things keep just... appearing," he said.

Maybe, he thought, it had always been like this. Maybe he had just been too busy being the old Smudge to see it.

* * *

After following the river for a while, they climbed down towards a wide, misty pool where a waterfall dropped from the rocks above. Up close, the sound of it was enormous—a deep, constant, comfortable roar.

Biscuit walked right to the edge of the pool and stood there with his eyes half-closed, nose twitching gently.

Then, all at once, he froze.

Not the relaxed stillness of a resting dog, but the sharp, electric stillness of total attention. His ears were forward. His nose worked fast. His eyes were fixed on the tree line to their left.

“Biscuit?” said Smudge.

Biscuit didn’t move. He just let out a small growl.

Then Smudge heard it: not loud, not close, but deliberate. The snap of something underfoot, followed by another, then another. Something—or someone—was moving through the trees towards them, not bothering to be quiet.

The sound grew closer, louder, and faster.

The trees directly ahead shifted. Branches moved. Something large was in there, pushing through.

Tether stood back, turning away slightly as if she knew what was coming.

Smudge took a breath.

The branches parted—

And it hit them all at once.

19

Blinding

Journal Entry

Things can always get brighter.



Biscuit jammed his face into the back of Smudge's knee, which helped neither of them but seemed emotionally correct. Try as he might, Smudge just couldn't look at the glare. It was simply too much. Whatever it was, it was now standing right in front of them.

Then it spoke.

"Beautiful day, isn't it?"

Smudge lowered his arm an inch.

Slowly, very slowly, their eyes adjusted to what stood before them: a strangely bright figure at the edge of the treeline, wearing an enormous smile and the most outrageous suit anyone had ever seen.

It was not a normal suit. It was so outrageously colourful that it was almost impossible to look at directly, as if a rainbow had exploded and tailored itself.

That, Smudge realised, was what had blinded them: not the man, but the suit.

Smudge squinted as he tried to look at him directly.

Biscuit emerged from behind Smudge's knee wearing his goggles, assessed the situation, and sat down. His tail began, somewhat reluctantly, to wag.

Tether lowered her hand.

"Dazzle," she said. "It's good to... try and see you."

"Tether," replied Dazzle warmly. "Still tying up loose ends, I see."

"And you," said Tether, glancing at the suit, "are still rather a lot for ordinary eyes."

Dazzle beamed, apparently taking this as a compliment.

Tether turned slightly towards Smudge. "Smudge, this is Dazzle," she said. "He's what happens when imagination puts on a jacket and says hello."

Dazzle placed a hand on his chest and gave a little bow.

Smudge offered Dazzle his hand. "Smudge."

"Delighted," said Dazzle, seizing Smudge's hand with such cheerful intensity that Smudge nearly lost his balance.

Biscuit gave a single, pointed bark.

"Oh," said Smudge. "And this is Biscuit."

Biscuit sat up straighter.

Dazzle gave him a careful pat. "Biscuit," he said. "An excellent name. Very noble. Slightly crunchy."

For a moment, Smudge, Biscuit, and Tether stood there, blinking and squinting and very gradually adjusting to the brightness.

"That," said Smudge, still narrowing his eyes slightly, "is a remarkable suit."

Dazzle beamed. "Thank you very much. Would you like to see the lining?"

"Sure, why not?" said Smudge.

Dazzle opened his jacket.

All three of them immediately threw their arms across their eyes again. Biscuit turned in a full circle, and a nearby family of birds departed their tree with considerable urgency.

Smudge had not, until that moment, considered the possibility that anything could be brighter. He was wrong. The inside was.

"Stop doing that," said Tether, from behind her arm.

"Sorry," said Dazzle, closing the jacket. "I always forget."

It had to be said that he did not look particularly sorry. He was smiling far too much.

20

Imagine

Journal Entry

You find some things inside.



The trio lowered their arms again one by one, blinking as their eyes gradually readjusted. The world returned in stages: first the trees, then the water, then the grass, and finally Dazzle himself.

As Smudge's vision recovered, he began to notice something strange. Not something he could quite see, exactly. More like something he could feel. A warmth that had nothing to do with temperature. A lightness in the chest, you might say. A mild but insistent sense that something good was about to happen.

Smudge looked at Biscuit. His tail was going properly now, full and steady, the kind of wagging reserved for things that were genuinely excellent. He looked at Tether. Even Tether—yes, even Tether—had an actual smile.

It was impossible to stand near Dazzle and not feel it. Whatever he carried around with him was contagious in the best possible way.

"Now then," said Dazzle, clasping his hands together enthusiastically, "what brings you here?"

Smudge explained. The dream. The Sanctuary. The journey. The loop. The packing. The new path. All of it.

Dazzle listened like Biscuit hearing a packet open: 100% attention. He nodded at the right moments. He winced sympathetically at the part about getting lost. He looked suitably impressed by Biscuit's contribution to events in general. His eyebrows performed a surprisingly wide range of duties.

When Smudge finished, Dazzle was quiet for a moment.

"And so where is it?" he asked. "The Sanctuary."

"That's the thing," said Smudge. "We have no idea."

Smudge's face brightened suddenly. "Do you?"

Dazzle shook his head. "No," he said. "I'm afraid I don't."

Smudge's hopes sank like a stone wearing heavy boots.

"But," said Dazzle, raising one finger, "I know how to find

out.”

Smudge’s eyebrows shot upward.

Without further explanation, Dazzle sat down cross-legged on the grass and looked up at Smudge expectantly.

“Well,” he said, “sit down.”

Smudge hesitated for a moment, then sat. *What do we have to lose?* he thought. And by now, Smudge was beginning to understand that strange advice was often the useful kind.

Biscuit, for his part, was always very open to sitting down.

“Close your eyes,” said Dazzle, once they had all settled.

“Now,” he continued, “take a few breaths. Don’t think about where the Sanctuary is. Don’t try to work it out. Don’t force anything.” He paused. “Just let go of your thoughts and wait.”

At first, trying not to think was surprisingly difficult. The moment Smudge tried to quiet his mind, it immediately filled itself with thoughts about mountains, maps, sandwiches, whether he was doing this correctly, and what exactly counted as “not thinking” anyway.

But slowly, little by little, the thoughts loosened. The sound of the waterfall filled the gaps between them. His breathing slowed. The tight, busy feeling in his head softened.

And after a while, Smudge’s mind went... well, quiet.

This was highly unusual.

It was also rather nice.

For a while, he simply sat in the stillness. It was a warm, peaceful feeling, and not one Smudge could remember having met before.

Then, without effort or searching, something appeared in his mind.

It was the place.

High and clear and open to the sky in every direction, the whole

world spread out below, the air thin and bright and still. The kind of place where everything below looked small and everything felt possible.

He held the vision there, clear and certain, for a long moment.

“Well?” said Dazzle gently. “Do you see it?”

“Yes,” said Smudge. “I see it.”

“So where is it?”

“On a mountaintop,” said Smudge. “It’s on a mountaintop.”

Dazzle smiled. “Good. Now hold that feeling for a moment.”

Smudge was glad to. The place stayed with him—still, high, and strangely real. Somehow more real than the world around him.

“Now,” said Dazzle softly, “open your eyes.”

Smudge was quite happy to keep them closed, but slowly, reluctantly, he opened them to find Dazzle looking at him with that enormous smile.

Dazzle turned, lifted one bright sleeve, and pointed easily towards the horizon.

“Like that one there?” he asked.

Smudge looked.

There, in the far distance—so far it was barely visible—was a mountain.

“Yes,” said Smudge quietly. “Like that one.”

21

Further

Journal Entry

Don't worry about how things look.



They spent a good long while looking at the mountain in the distance. It was the sort of mountain a person could stare at for quite some time and feel they were doing something important. And perhaps, in a way, they were.

But admiring it from afar was certainly not going to get them there, especially when what lay between here and there looked thoroughly uncooperative: dense folds of forest, swamps, shelves of rock, and enough uneven ground to suggest that the mountain had no particular interest in being reached easily.

"How on earth do we get there?" asked Smudge eventually.

Dazzle sprang to his feet and brushed down his suit.

"Well," he said brightly, "I can certainly get you closer."

Smudge stood up at once. "Really?"

"Absolutely," said Dazzle, giving a little spin before pointing the way. "Follow me."

And so they did.

* * *

Dazzle led them away from the open valley and down towards the river, moving with that same cheerful spring in his step. Along the way, he was endlessly fascinated by everything around him: a bird with "remarkable energy," a branch that looked like a moustache, and a cloud that he insisted "knew more than it was saying."

Every so often, he took a break from his endless wonder, glanced back over his shoulder, and called, "Nearly there!"

Smudge, hearing this, felt encouraged for a while, then slightly less encouraged, then briefly encouraged again, and finally confused, because the further down they went, the less they could see of the mountain.

At first, the mountain was partly hidden by the rising folds of the valley. Then by trees. Then by rocks and the bend of the land itself, until finally it vanished from view completely.

Smudge kept walking anyway, partly because Dazzle seemed very sure of himself, and partly because it felt rude to question a man in a suit like that.

"Nearly there!" Dazzle called again.

So on they went. The grass grew longer, the air grew thicker, and the sound of the river swelled from a soft murmur into something broader, steadier, and much closer.

At last Dazzle came to a stop on the riverbank and turned around with a flourish.

"Here we are," he said, spreading his arms wide.

Smudge looked around. They were standing beside a wide stretch of water, slow-moving and silver-grey, with reeds at the edges and smooth stones shining in the shallows.

It was lovely, certainly.

But it was not the mountain.

Smudge frowned. "Where's the mountain?"

Dazzle pointed down the river and into the distance.

"There," he said.

Smudge squinted.

Far, far away—ridiculously far away, so far that it was almost rude—was the mountain. Or rather, what appeared to be a tiny dark speck against the sky, so small and remote it barely looked real.

Smudge stared at it. Then he turned slowly back to Dazzle.

"How," he asked very patiently, "is this any closer?"

Dazzle smiled. "Because it is."

"But it looks further away."

"It does."

Smudge blinked. "How can further away be closer?"

Dazzle gave a small shrug, as though this were one of life's more delightful mysteries. "It just can."

Smudge looked at the tiny mountain again. He was not impressed at all by Dazzle's explanation, but he was, against his better judgement, still listening.

Dazzle's smile brightened slightly. "It doesn't matter how things look," he said. "What matters is how you look at them."

22

The River

Journal Entry

Solutions can find you—if you let them.



They sat by the river for a while without saying anything at all.

The water moved past in its own steady way, neither hurrying nor hesitating, as if it knew perfectly well where it was going and saw no reason to make a fuss about it.

Smudge watched it. Then he thought about the distance. He thought about the mountain, now even tinier and—seemingly—even further away. He thought about walking, and how long walking would take, and whether there was another path, and where that path might begin, and what they would need to follow it, and—

“Do you think it’ll be windy up there?” said Dazzle suddenly. Smudge looked around.

Dazzle was stretched out on a beautiful rock striped like a pastel-coloured rainbow. He lay on his back with his legs crossed and his hands behind his head, staring up at the sky as if this were all going very well indeed.

“What?”

“At the top,” said Dazzle. “Do you think it’ll be windy?”

Smudge frowned. “I... don’t know.”

“I do,” said Dazzle. “I think it’ll be wonderfully windy. The sort of wind that makes your clothes flap dramatically. I can already picture Biscuit’s ears flying about like little furry flags.”

Smudge gave him a look.

Dazzle continued. “And I expect the light will be lovely too. Very bright. Very clear. The kind of light that makes everything feel wonderful.”

Smudge said nothing, but the mountain no longer felt quite so far away.

“And the view,” Dazzle went on. “Oh, just imagine the view. Everything below, all neatly arranged from above. Your Sanctuary right there at the top. You sitting on the steps looking

extremely pleased with yourself.”

Despite himself, Smudge felt the corners of his mouth begin to lift.

That would be nice, he thought. Then, without really deciding to, he lay back on the grass and relaxed into the thought of it all.

The ground was warm from the day. The sound of the river filled his ears. Above him, the sky seemed unusually beautiful.

“Well?” said Dazzle mildly. “What’s it like?”

Smudge closed his eyes, and the small smile turned into a big one.

“It feels like home,” said Smudge.

He lay there for a few moments, warm and still, enjoying the thought of it all.

Then Biscuit interrupted with a small, curious “woof?”

Smudge opened his eyes.

Biscuit was sitting at the river’s edge, watching something drift slowly downstream: a log. Large, dark, and weathered, it moved with the current in no particular hurry, barely seeming to do anything at all except drift... drift towards the mountain.

Smudge sat up and watched it.

Dazzle was already smiling.

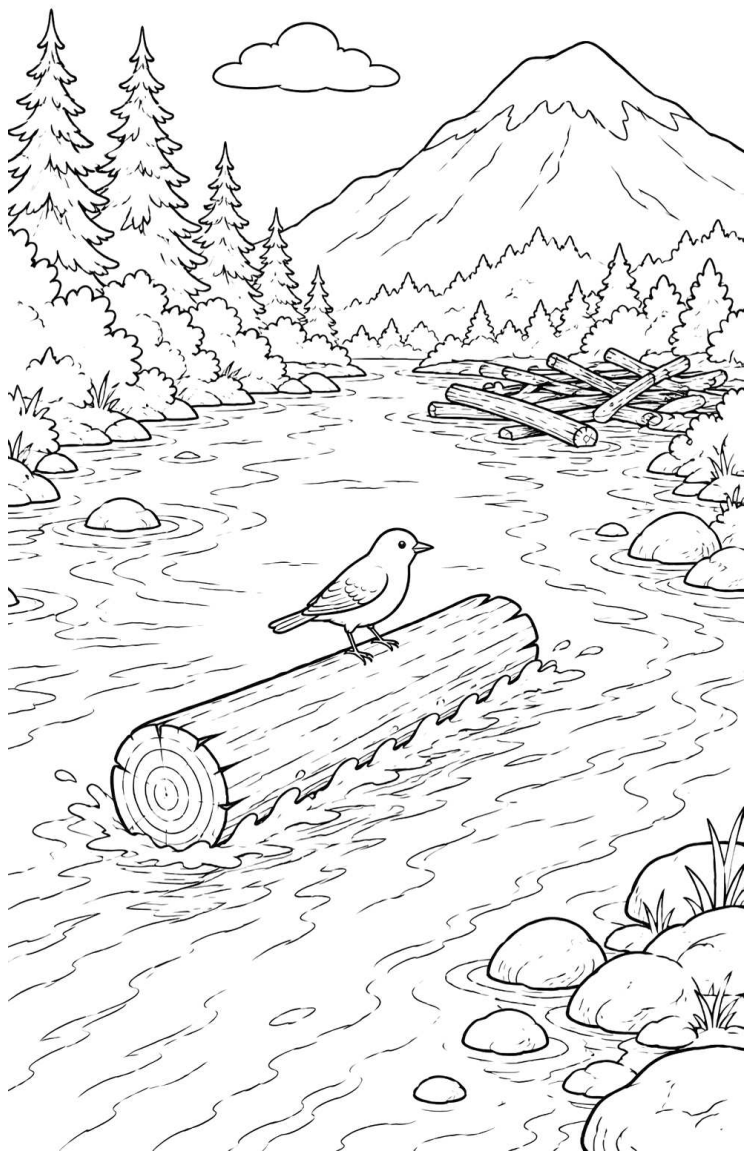
Smudge pointed. The way was floating towards him.

23

Logs

Journal Entry

Strong solutions are simple.



"A raft," said Tether.

"A raft," confirmed Smudge with a firm nod.

Tether looked at the river. She looked at the tiny mountain. Then she looked back at Smudge with the expression of someone running quiet calculations.

"I can do the knots," she said.

"Brilliant." Smudge clapped his hands together. "Right. I'll get the logs."

He said this with great confidence.

Then he stood completely still for a moment, because it occurred to him that he had no idea where logs came from. Or rather, he knew in a general sense—trees—but the specifics of getting from tree to usable log were not something he had previously needed to consider.

"Right," he said again, more quietly.

* * *

Smudge tried the obvious thing first, which was to look for logs. This produced two sticks, a branch that crumbled when he picked it up, something that turned out to be a very long root, and a piece of bark that Biscuit immediately claimed as his own and refused to give back.

"Okay," said Smudge. "Okay."

He tried the less obvious thing second, which was cutting down a tree himself. He found one—tall, straight, and very log-shaped—and stood before it. Other than a particularly determined expression, he had absolutely no plan beyond that.

He put his hand on the bark.

The tree was enormous. Old. Deeply rooted. The sort of tree that had been there long before Smudge arrived and clearly

expected to remain there long after he left.

Smudge stood there for a moment.

Then he took his hand away.

“No,” he said, mostly to himself. “Not that.”

Out of ideas, Smudge went back to the bank and sat down. He looked at the river. He thought about logs. He thought about where one might get logs without cutting anything down. He thought about all kinds of things, including whether he was overthinking things again.

After a while, the thoughts began to feel a bit tangled.

Feeling frustrated, Smudge decided to let the thinking go for a moment and simply sit and watch the river drift by. He imagined the raft: solid and low in the water, moving downstream with the mountain growing closer at every bend, and beneath it all, the quiet feeling of everything being just right.

Then something unexpected happened.

Another log floated past.

Smudge sat up immediately and looked upstream. Around the river's bend, just visible, was the edge of something large and organised. Logs. Lots of them, floating in a cluster, caught in a slow eddy near the bank.

Where do you get logs from? thought Smudge. *Where they come from, of course.*

24

The Beaver

Journal Entry

Sometimes you have to speak beaver.



When they got there, they discovered that the logs already had an owner, and that owner was a beaver.

The beaver was large, very focused, and currently gnawing the end of a branch. It had the air of someone who had not yet been interrupted today and hoped, with luck, not to start now.

Smudge interrupted.

The beaver glanced up briefly, assessed each of them in turn, and then returned to its branch as if none of them had passed inspection.

"Excuse me!" said Smudge, too excited about logs to be considerate.

The beaver ignored him and continued gnawing.

"Helloooo," said Smudge, a little louder.

This time the beaver paused, set down the branch, and looked Smudge up and down.

"Yes?" asked the beaver with a heavy sigh.

Smudge blinked. He wasn't sure what he had been expecting, but a talking beaver was not it. But there he was, and here they were.

"We're trying to build a raft," said Smudge, "to get to the mountain."

"No," said the beaver.

"We haven't asked anything yet."

"You were about to ask for my logs."

"Yes," said Smudge.

"No," said the beaver again.

Smudge looked at the logs, then at the beaver, then at the half-built arrangement of branches, stakes, and mud further upstream. If he wanted the logs, he was going to have to speak beaver.

"What are you building?" he asked.

The beaver narrowed its eyes very slightly, as though this were a more interesting line of inquiry.

"A dam," it said.

"Where?"

The beaver pointed with its chin. "Upstream. Narrow point. Good current. Solid banks."

Smudge nodded gravely, as though these were all highly important technical matters. Which, to be fair, they were.

"Excellent... dam qualities, those are," said Smudge, despite never having previously considered dams at all.

The beaver paused.

Smudge pressed on.

"Water control," he added thoughtfully. "Very important. And of course you'd only want the best logs for a dam like that."

The beaver studied him for a moment. Then, very slightly, its expression softened.

"Yes," it said. "Obviously. I only make the best dams."

Smudge nodded thoughtfully. "I can see a few misfits in your log stack. Some won't be quite right, surely. Too small. Too awkward. Not worthy of the dam of a master craftsman, I'm sure."

The beaver looked at the pile, then at the river, then back at the pile again. It appeared to be doing sums.

"We could take the dead wood off your paws, so to speak," Smudge offered. "Consider it free waste disposal. But don't go telling all the other beavers now."

The beaver continued staring at the pile for a moment longer.

"Six logs," it said at last. "The small ones at the back. You can have six."

Smudge had his logs. He also had no idea he was such a good beaver charmer. But apparently, he was.

25

The Build

Journal Entry

Do the next right thing.



They built the raft on the bank, above the waterline. This was harder than it looked, which was itself harder than Smudge had expected. The logs rolled. The ropes slipped. Biscuit's contribution in the early stages consisted largely of sitting on the logs, which was useful until he moved.

Dazzle tried helping too, though his gifts lay in other areas. He held one end of a rope for nearly a full thirty seconds before forgetting what he was doing and chasing a dragonfly.

Tether relieved him of the rope without comment. She, on the other hand, knew exactly what she was doing. Her hands moved quickly and calmly, lashing the logs together with the ease of long practice. Every so often, she adjusted something or told Smudge to hold here or pull there, and gradually, out of six river-worn logs and a considerable length of rope, something unmistakably raft-shaped began to appear.

It was not beautiful, but it was solid. And when they finally pushed it to the water's edge and nudged the front in, it dipped, rocked, and floated.

Smudge stared at it with the quiet wonder of someone who had just discovered that an idea could turn into a thing. And that thing could float.

For a moment, they all stood looking at the raft. The river moved past, deep and easy and sure of itself, heading toward the mountain.

They were ready, and this was it. Not the top. Not the Sanctuary. But the next right thing.

Smudge picked up the long pole they had cut for steering and stepped aboard. The raft dipped, rocked, then steadied. Biscuit stepped on after him, delicately, and sat at the front. He could feel this was going to be an excellent opportunity for ears flapping, tongue out, eyes half-closed, looking exactly as a dog

on a raft ought to look.

Tether stepped on last, settled her bag beside her, and took up her place at the back.

Dazzle remained on the bank.

Smudge looked at him. "You're not coming?"

Dazzle smiled. "No," he said. "I think you've got it from here."

Before Smudge could reply, Dazzle gave the raft one clean, cheerful push. The current caught it at once—gentle, sure, unhurried—and the river began to do what rivers do.

It carried them downstream.

26

Downstream

Journal Entry

Find the flow. Follow it.



The river did the work. Smudge put his feet up.

He wasn't pushing. He wasn't pulling. He wasn't trying to figure anything out, make anything happen, or correct anything that had gone wrong. He was simply on the raft, on the river, going where the river went.

And the river, it turned out, knew exactly where it was going.

The current carried them smoothly around long bends that opened into straight stretches, each one revealing another piece of the valley ahead. At first the mountain grew in small increments; then faster, filling more of the horizon with every turn of the river.

Biscuit stood at the front of the raft, nose up, ears back in the breeze, eyes half-closed. He looked completely, entirely correct in this position—as if rafts had been invented specifically to give dogs a good place to stand. Tether sat at the back, quiet as always, one hand resting on her bag.

It occurred to Smudge, as they drifted past a particularly beautiful bend, that they were making real progress. Despite doing less than ever, they were getting further—and faster—than ever before.

Dazzle was right. Sometimes closer can look further away, until suddenly it doesn't.

Without warning, the mountain filled the sky. Not gradually, but all at once. They came around one final bend and there it was, directly ahead, so close and so enormous that Smudge's head tipped back automatically as he tried to see the top of it.

He couldn't. He tried again. Still couldn't.

It simply went up and kept going.

The raft drifted to a natural stop against a flat shelf of rock at the water's edge.

Smudge stepped off first. Biscuit jumped off after him and

immediately sat down, staring upward. Tether stepped off last, took one look at the mountain, and set her bag down beside her with a quiet clink.

They stood together at the foot of it and said nothing for a while, because nothing seemed adequate.

Smudge looked up at the mountain once more—at the cloud where the top should have been.

Then he looked at Tether.

Tether looked back.

“Well,” said Smudge.

“Yes,” said Tether.

He looked up again.

“Right then,” he said.

27

The Climb

Journal Entry

Don't forget how far you've come.



The first hour of the climb was steep but manageable: a proper path winding upward, the ground soft underfoot, the trees providing shade. Smudge set a good pace. Biscuit trotted alongside him. Tether walked behind them. Life was good.

“This isn’t so bad,” said Smudge.

The mountain couldn’t talk, of course. But if it could, it would have said, *We’ll see about that, shall we?*

The path got narrower. The trees thinned and gave way to open rock, which gave way to steeper open rock, which gave way to the kind of terrain that required hands as well as feet and a complete reconsideration of what the word *path* meant.

Smudge’s pack began to feel as if it had been quietly filling itself with gravel. Biscuit, being shorter and closer to the ground, was faring better in practical terms, though his expression had turned, let’s say, unimpressed.

Smudge rested for four minutes, then got up and climbed again, because stopping somehow felt more uncomfortable than continuing.

By the second hour, Smudge had stopped talking. This was unusual. Smudge was not, generally speaking, a person who ran out of things to say. But the mountain had a way of filling the mind with something that left no room for words—not thought exactly, not worry, just the next step, and the step after that, and the simple, relentless arithmetic of *up*.

His legs hurt. His back hurt. His pack hurt.

He couldn’t see the raft below or the spot where they had landed. He could see only the general shape of the journey they had been on, and from up here it looked surprisingly small.

He stopped for a moment, partly because he needed to, and partly because the view had earned it.

“Look how far we’ve come,” said Smudge.

Biscuit sat beside him and looked down with the same quiet focus. For once, he did not sniff anything, chase anything, or appear concerned about snacks. He simply sat there, taking in the world below.

Then, satisfied that the moment had been properly appreciated, he looked up the mountain and gave a small dog-huff.

"I know," said Smudge. "I know." He straightened up and got back to it.

By now, the path was barely a path at all. Sometimes it was a ledge. Sometimes it was a gap between rocks. Sometimes it was just a place to put your hands and hope your feet worked out the rest.

Then, quite suddenly, the ground levelled out and the next bend revealed a rope bridge.

Well, that's useful, you might be thinking.

And in most cases, that would have been true.

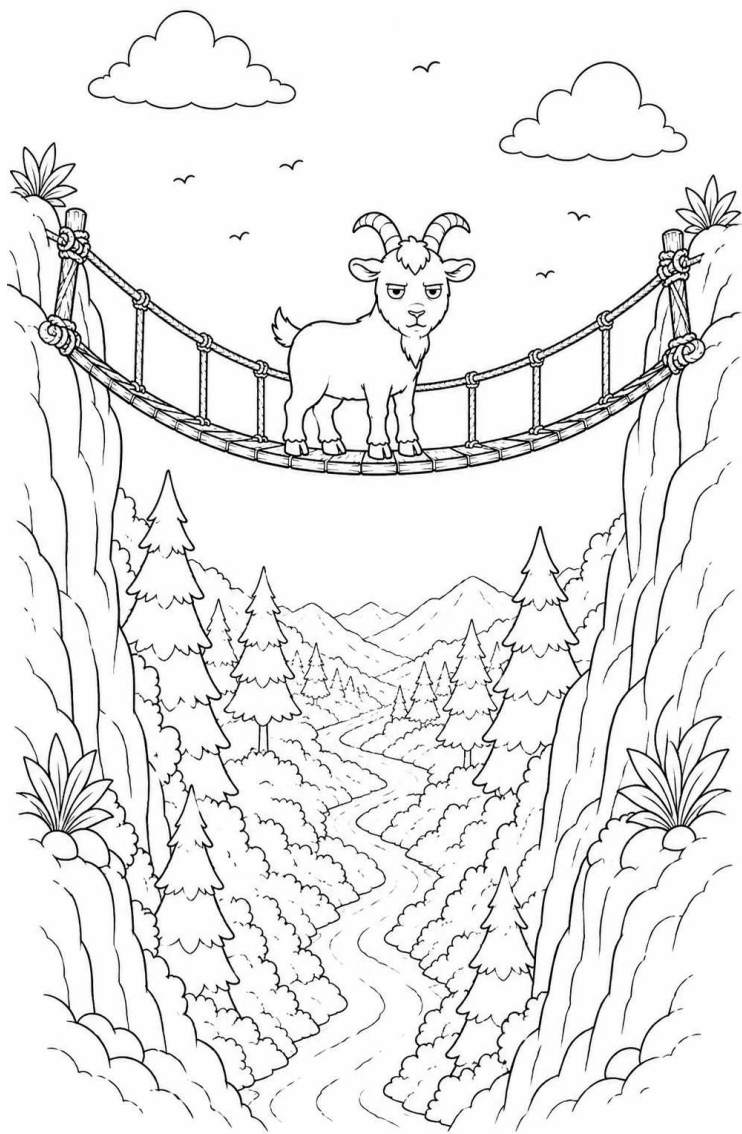
Except this rope bridge belonged to Trevor.

28

Trevor

Journal Entry

The way forward is together.



The bridge wasn't long—fifteen, perhaps twenty feet across a gap between two rock faces, with a considerable drop below. It was old but solid, the ropes thick and well-knotted, the wooden boards worn smooth with use.

Standing in the exact centre of it, facing them, was Trevor—a goat who looked stubborn and, as it quickly turned out, very much was. He was medium-sized and grey-white, with a beard that conveyed authority. His eyes conveyed something between judgement and mild contempt.

He stood with all four feet planted, taking up considerably more of the bridge than his physical size really justified, and looked at them with the complete stillness of something that was going nowhere.

"Hello," said Smudge.

"No," said the goat.

Oh, here we go again, Smudge thought, though it did occur to him that his recent experience with a prickly beaver might prove unexpectedly useful.

"I haven't asked yet," Smudge said.

"You want to cross," said the goat. "The answer is no. Nope. Nah."

"Why?"

The goat looked offended, as if this were an unusually foolish question. "Because I'm here," he said.

Smudge looked at Tether for guidance. Tether looked at the goat. She had encountered Trevors before and had learned to let events develop.

"What's your name?" asked Smudge.

After a pause, the goat replied, "Trevor."

"Trevor," said Smudge, "we need to get to the top of the mountain."

"Lots of people need things," said Trevor.

"This is really important to me, Trevor."

"So is standing here," said Trevor. "To me."

Smudge sat down. He looked at the bridge, then at Trevor, then at the mountain beyond. Then he looked at Trevor again—properly this time.

"Trevor," said Smudge, "what would it take for you to let us cross?"

Trevor's beard shifted slightly. This simple question seemed to stump him a little. Most people, Trevor had found, gave up and went away at this point.

"Something interesting," he said after some consideration.

Progress, thought Smudge. That's not a no.

"What sort of interesting?"

"The right sort," said Trevor. "I'll know it when I hear it."

Smudge thought for a moment.

"All right," he said. "What if we run across very quickly?"

"Trevor says no," said Trevor. "Absolutely not."

Trevor muttered something into his beard in disbelief at such an outrageous suggestion.

Smudge nodded solemnly. "Understood."

Trevor said nothing.

"What do you want?" said Smudge.

"No."

"That wasn't even a yes-or-no question."

"It wasn't interesting."

Smudge frowned. He looked at the bridge again. He looked at Trevor again. He looked at the mountain beyond. Then he looked at Trevor again—properly this time.

Trevor stood in the middle of the bridge as if it belonged to him, which, for all practical purposes, it did. He guarded the

way up. He had the air of someone who had been standing there for a very long time and had not, perhaps, been invited to do anything else in quite a while.

Smudge tilted his head.

"Trevor," he said slowly, "have you ever been to the top?"

There was a long pause.

"No," said Trevor.

Smudge nodded once.

Then he asked the question.

"Do you want to come with us?"

Trevor did not move.

Biscuit's ears lifted.

Trevor blinked once. Then twice.

Smudge waited.

"Well?" he said.

Trevor looked up the mountain, then at the bridge beneath his feet, then back at Smudge.

After another pause, he said, "Yes."

SMUDGE DREAMS BIG

29

Summit

Journal Entry

Some help has horns.



Trevor nodded and stepped to the side, pressing himself against the rope and leaving just enough room for them to pass.

“On you go,” he said.

So they went—Smudge first, then Biscuit, then Tether—all squeezing past Trevor with murmured thank-yous that he received with grave dignity.

Safely on the other side, Smudge glanced back.

“Trevor?”

Trevor stepped neatly off the bridge and fell into place behind them. As if someone had flicked a switch, his whole manner changed. Not softer, exactly. Trevor was not built for softness. But sharper. More purposeful. He no longer looked like a goat guarding a bridge. He looked like a goat on a mission.

“Up,” he said briskly.

It was safe to say that Trevor was a no-nonsense kind of goat. So up they went.

The last stretch of the climb was the hardest, and Trevor took to it with fierce, practical commitment. He picked the quickest line without fuss, paused only when pausing was useful, and whenever Smudge slowed too much, Trevor gave him a short, determined nudge from behind with his horns.

“Move,” Trevor would say.

And so Smudge kept moving, onward and upward.

Whenever the path narrowed, Trevor was there. When Biscuit scrambled, Trevor waited. When Smudge slipped, Trevor caught him—with hooves, horns, and help.

It was a funny kind of kindness, but kind it was. And more importantly, it was progress.

The cloud layer came and went. The air thinned. The world below disappeared behind them.

And so it went on: Smudge would stop, Trevor would nudge

him firmly in the bottom, and the climb would continue.

“Ouch, Trevor!”

“Up!”

One foot, then the other, then again.

“Ouch.”

“Up!”

Then, without announcement or ceremony, the slope began to level off. The rock underfoot grew flatter.

A few more steps, and there it was: the top of the mountain.

Smudge looked up. He looked around. He stood very still.

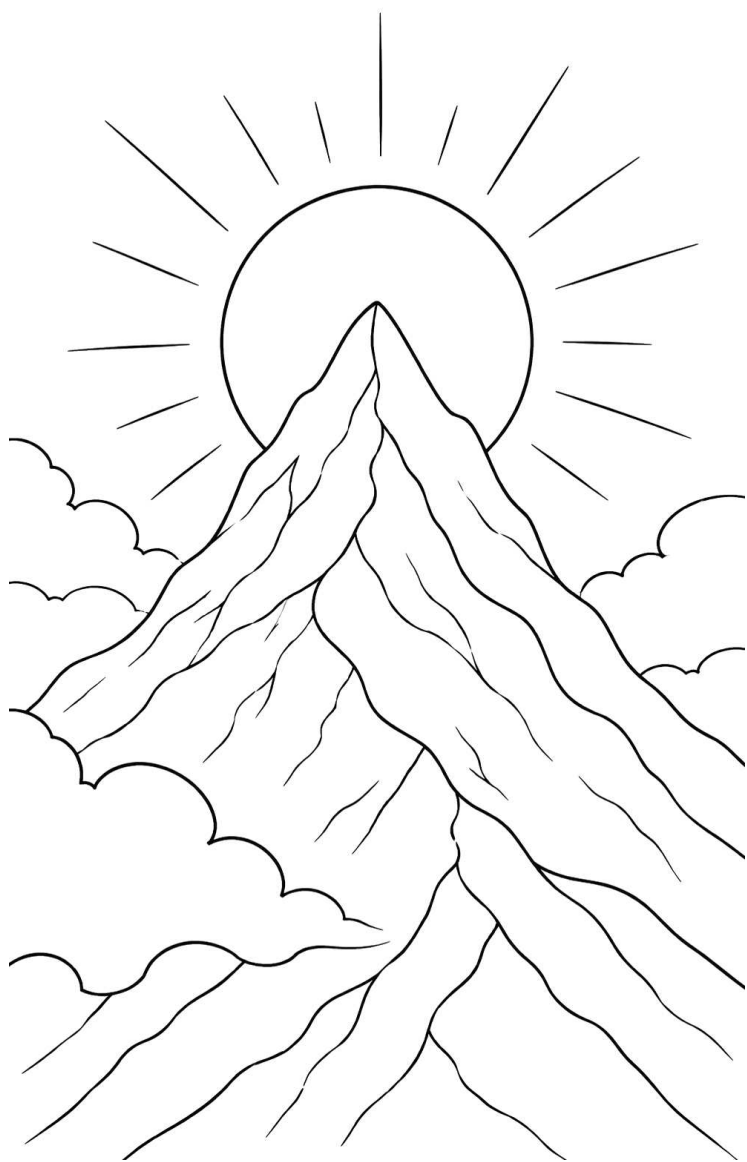
The top of the mountain was empty.

30

X

Journal Entry

There's always a way.



It wasn't there.

Smudge shook his head in disbelief.

It just... wasn't there.

He turned slowly in a full circle, taking in every direction. The mountaintop spread out around him—wide and flat and open to the sky.

Just no temple.

No intricate patterns. No glowing polygons. No roof catching the light. Nothing but rock and wind and the enormous, indifferent sky.

It was beautiful, sure, but there simply was no temple.

Smudge shook his head again, as if the problem might somehow be with his eyes rather than the mountain.

It didn't help.

Biscuit was not ready to accept this. He put his nose down and went to work—methodical, thorough, criss-crossing the mountaintop in long, urgent lines, sniffing every inch of ground. He checked behind the larger rocks. He checked the edges, where the ground dropped away. He doubled back and checked the middle again.

His tail was going the whole time—not the happy wag, but the working wag. The determined one. Then it slowed. Then it stopped.

Biscuit lifted his head. He looked at Smudge. He looked around the empty mountaintop. Then he sat down slowly, with the quiet, deflated dignity of a dog who had done everything right and arrived at the wrong answer.

"No," said Smudge quietly. To himself. To the mountain. To nobody. "No, no, no."

He stood there, staring at the ground, his hands hanging uselessly at his sides.

"It's not here," he said.

The wind moved past him.

"It's not here."

Behind him, Tether set her bag down and began pacing.

Smudge didn't turn around at first. But after a while, he noticed that her footsteps weren't panicked or rushed. They were slow and deliberate.

What on earth is she doing? thought Smudge.

He turned to face her.

Tether was pacing the mountaintop in long, careful strides, eyes lowered, lips moving slightly as if she were counting to herself.

She paced the length of the flat ground, then the width.

She stopped, looked at the view, looked at the sky, looked at Smudge, and then nodded.

Then she looked down.

With the toe of her boot, she pressed into the dirt and dragged a short line, then another across it: a neat, deliberate X.

"Here," she said.

Then she calmly walked back to her bag and emptied it on the ground.

Out came real tools: a level, a set square, a mallet, measuring rope, stakes, a folded set of plans tied with a neat knot, a chisel, and a small, well-worn notebook full of things that looked very much like calculations.

Smudge looked at the tools. He looked at the X on the ground. He looked at Tether.

"I'm going to build it, aren't I?" he said.

"Yes, Smudge," said Tether. "You're going to build it."

Epilogue

Several Years Later

The Sanctuary of Symmetry was everything Smudge had dreamed... and more.

Tall arches and steady pillars stood in perfect alignment, every line placed with quiet precision. Round windows caught the light like moons. Across the walls, intricate patterns curled and unfolded—circles within circles, spirals that seemed to turn without end, and glowing polygons that held the last golden light of afternoon long after the sun had moved on.

The whole Sanctuary seemed to pulse softly, as if it were alive with something ancient, patient, and wise.

It had taken a long time to build. Longer than Smudge had expected, which was fine, because most good things do. There had been days when the measurements were wrong and the whole thing had to come down before they could begin again. Days when the weather had other ideas. Days when they felt like giving up.

But then they imagined how good it would feel when it was complete.

So they picked up the tools and carried on.

Again and again, until they got it right.

And now here it was. Real and solid, sitting on the top of the mountain as if it had always belonged there.

Smudge sat on the front steps. Biscuit sat beside him, close enough that their warmth was shared, watching the sun make its long, slow descent towards the horizon. The valley below was turning gold. The river caught the light in a kaleidoscope of patterns. The forest beyond it was the deep, warm green of evening.

Smudge looked at all of it.

He didn't say anything. There didn't seem to be anything that needed saying.

After a while, Smudge leaned back, hands behind his head, and looked up at the sky.

"Biscuit, look at that star."

Biscuit did not look at the star. He looked at Smudge.

He looked at Smudge with a very particular expression.

Smudge knew it immediately.

"Biscuit," he said, "don't."

Biscuit wagged harder.

"Biscuit, please."

Then he pounced.

Smudge yelped, twisted away, and sprang to his feet laughing as Biscuit launched a merciless tickle attack with paws, nose, and one extremely fluffy tail.

"Stop! Mercy!" Smudge shouted, fleeing around the back of the Sanctuary with Biscuit charging after him.

Journal Entry

Learn to tickle back.

Also by Mark Randle



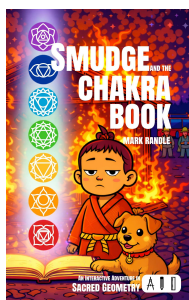
Mandala School

Smudge opened the doors of Mandala School with one goal: to share the magic of circles. But when parrots, hippos, frogs, and even Whiskers the cat crowded into class, lessons quickly turned into an adventure of rulers, ripples, and more laughter than geometry should allow.



The Forest of Shapes

In a crooked city where nothing seems quite right, Lyra dreams of a world of perfect harmony. But when a mysterious stone falls into her hands, she discovers that her sketches of circles, triangles, and spirals might hold the key to unlocking a hidden truth—one that could change everything.



Smudge and the Chakra Book

Smudge wasn't looking for enlightenment—just a way to get through the week without another explosion. But when he gets his hands on a strange book full of swirling symbols and talk of invisible energy, curiosity gets the better of him.