

Shadows Over Etna

A Haunted Walk Experience

Written and illustrated by

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Walked by

YOU!



Everyone has a holiday that is their absolute favorite. For some, it might be Christmas or Hanukkah. For others, maybe Kwanza. Or Diwali. Maybe, for you, the Fourth of July or Memorial Day is the greatest holiday of them all.

Everyone also has holidays that they think are just *okay*. These holidays aren't the *best*, but they're still better than a regular, non-holiday day. (Especially a non-holiday *school* day).

Perhaps, for example, you might like getting together with your family for a meal on Thanksgiving, but you don't like the taste of turkey. Or maybe you enjoy the basket of candy you get at Easter, but don't enjoy the thought of *how* that candy arrives: a giant pink bunny who, you've always thought, is just a tad bit frightening...



Most people, though, don't have a holiday that they *hate*. Pete wasn't most people. Pete had a holiday he truly, deeply *hated*.

Pete was eight years old. He'd hated Halloween since he'd been six.



Pete liked the *idea* of Halloween: dressing up, staying outside late into the night, and getting delicious chocolate at each door you approached.

Hershey bars in exchange for uttering those magic words, "Trick or Treat?" *That* seemed like a good bargain to Pete. (And, as a bonus, receiving the chocolate didn't even involve an oversized bunny creature coming into your house).

Everyone Pete knew, however, all went trick-or-treating together. Everyone in Pete's class traveled around town as one boisterous group of ghouls, goblins, princesses, and ninjas.

But not Pete.

Wonderful Readers, during this Haunted Walk, you'll get to participate in Pete's adventure, too! On your way to the next Story Sign, tell someone you're with what **YOUR** favorite holiday is!

Pete found it difficult to make friends and sometimes felt unsure of how to act or what to say around other people.

Pete had once had an amazing friend, however: Lucky.



Lucky had been a marvelous mutt. He'd been a dog mixed up in his composition, a blend of a dozen different breeds who had also been singular in his beliefs: Lucky the dog had believed that his boy Pete had been the best person in the world, and Lucky had wanted to spend every moment by Pete's side.

Pete had felt the same about Lucky. So, that fateful Halloween when Pete had been six and had dressed like a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle, he'd brought Lucky trick-or-treating with him.

Lucky, though, had become afraid. All the kids in costumes – the skeletons and werewolves, the creepy clowns and grinning zombies – had scared Lucky. And the dog panicked. And he'd run.

And Pete had never seen Lucky again.

The worst part was that it had been Pete's fault. He was sure of it. Pete had taken Lucky with him even though he'd worried it might not be the best idea. And he had lost Lucky forever.

How, Pete wondered, could he be trusted to have a friend, ever again? What if he made another friend and then let them down horribly, too? What if someone else he cared about also became lost or hurt because of Pete?

So, Halloween reminded Pete that he had trouble making friends. And it reminded him of the day he'd lost Lucky. Which was why Halloween was the holiday that Pete hated. and the holiday he refused to celebrate, ever again.

After losing Lucky, Pete had started avoiding kids in his class. He began avoiding anyone who might become a friend.

And, above all else, he began avoiding Halloween. Now, each Halloween, he spent the long night of costumes and candy at his perfect place, instead.

Just like everyone has a favorite holiday, everyone also has a *perfect place* – that one spot in all the world where they feel most comfortable and most themselves. For some kids, it might be the baseball field. For others, a favorite hiking trail, or a certain room in their house or at their school. Pete's perfect place was the Etna Library.

He lived a few doors down from his town's library and could walk there by himself, on the trails in the fields behind the library's brick building.

Pete still remembered being taken to the Etna Library for the first time. He'd been four and a half years old, and he and his parents had just moved to the town of Etna, which is in New Hampshire.

On the way to the Etna Library, Pete's dad kept telling Pete how small it was. But when Pete entered the building, the first thought he had was that it looked like a wizard's library. It was *magical*.

And, though the building *was* small, the longer Pete was inside, the larger the space seemed to him. And the larger *he* kept feeling while inside its walls. He continued to notice new details – decorations and toys, even a model train! – and the stories on the shelves surrounding him seemed endless.

So, that was where Pete was now: at the Etna Library.

Outside, Halloween was unfolding with its colors of black and orange, its jack-o'-lanterns, and its sweets and treats. Inside the Etna Library, Pete was waiting for it all to pass.



He was on his favorite couch, reading a new book in a series he loved as the antique clock ticked and tocked behind him and as the librarian worked at his desk.

Pete turned the page of his book and, as he did, the *world* seemed to turn, too.

It was as if Pete's body and the library and the wide world outside had all suddenly turned from one thing to another; had changed.



The library was instantly old.

Well, the library had *always* been old, Pete knew – at least to him. That was one of the things Pete loved about it.

The Etna Library was built in 1905, and the shelves, clock, and many pieces of its furniture were from 1905, too.

The library had looked like a piece of preserved past before, but now, with the sudden changes around Pete, he felt like he had been transported back *into* the library's past.

He was no longer seated on his favorite couch, but on an unfamiliar wooden bench. The electric lights were gone, replaced by gas lamps and tabletop candles. What was going on?

Pete stood. And he blinked. A card catalog he'd never seen before also now stood in a corner. (Card catalogs, Pete had learned in school, were ancient artifacts once used – in the Jurassic era, was it? – to figure out which books a library had in its collection.)

The computer the librarian had been working on was also gone. And... well, the librarian himself was gone, too, Pete realized. Pete was alone.

And then, from outside, he heard a strange sound.

The noise coming from outside the library sounded like wind.

Only... strong wind. *Very* strong wind. *Angry* wind, even. Wind that was having a truly terrible day and wanted to take its frustrations out on the world by blowing everything and everyone over and away.

The temperature plummeted inside the library, and the candle flames sputtered and dimmed.

It was still better inside than outside, though, Pete thought to himself. He wasn't sure what had happened inside the library. But outside, the wind was roaring. Outside, Halloween had taken over the night.

This, in fact, was probably all Halloween's fault, Pete realized. Somehow. This certainly seemed like the kind of weird, awful mess a holiday like Halloween would cause...

So, Pete's plan hadn't changed. He'd stay in the library, and he'd read, and he'd wait for Halloween to pack up its bags and head out of town until next October.

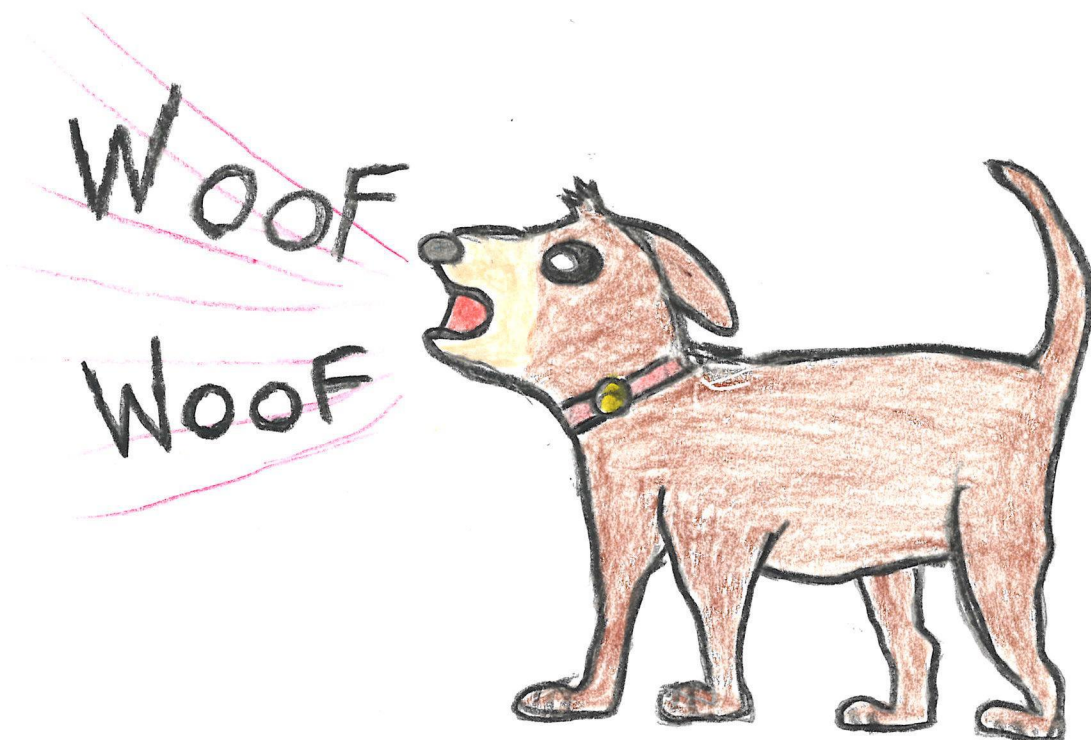
But then Pete heard another sound. A sound rising over the roar of the horrible wind. The sound of barking.

And it was barking that Pete knew. He was *sure* he knew it!

Woof! Woof! Woof! Woof!

Pete burst through the library's door and ran down its steps. The barking grew louder, battling the wind. Wind whipped at the hood of Pete's sweatshirt, rattling tree branches all around him. But Pete dashed ever forward, into the field next to the library, towards the barking, towards...

Lucky.



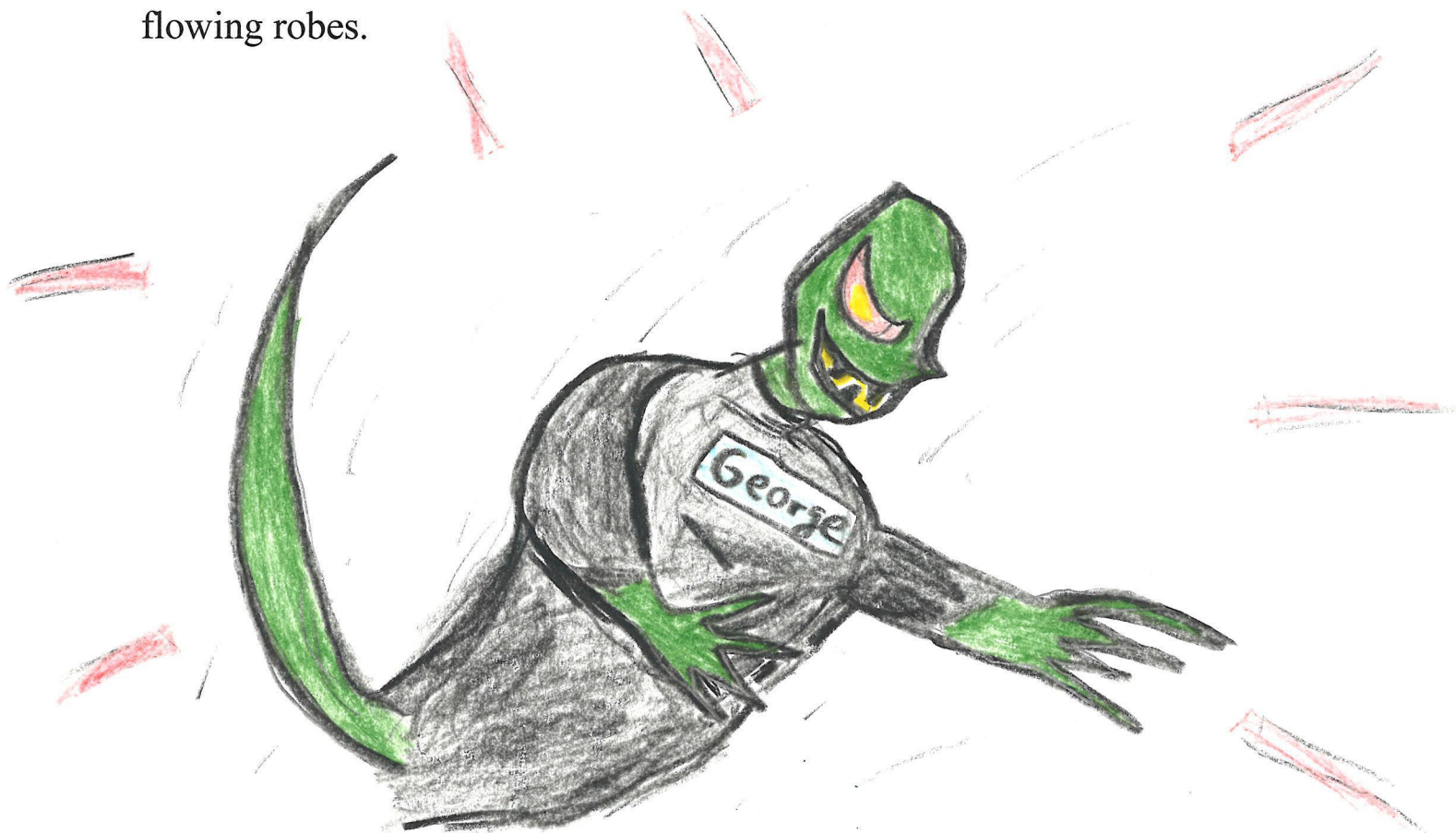
He saw the barking dog, now. And it was. Somehow it truly *was*! Pete had in fact recognized the bark; this dog was Lucky! His Lucky. Lucky, who had gotten lost two whole years ago.

Lucky, who was miraculously back....

Lucky, who was currently biting at the long black robes of what could only be described as a nine-foot-tall, clawed, tailed, living nightmare with a face.

Or, well, as George.

The creature could, apparently, be described in more than one way, after all. And one of those other ways of identifying the beast seemed to be ‘George’. For that, strangely, was the nametag the monster wore on his flowing robes.



Pete sprinted towards his dog. He didn't much care *what* the creature was, or if its name was George, Elvis, Peppy, or even Consuelo – he had to protect Lucky from it!

The living nightmare – or, George – was scary looking. Terrifying, in fact. The monster was at least as scary as a growling bear standing on its hind legs and much, much scarier than even the Easter Bunny.

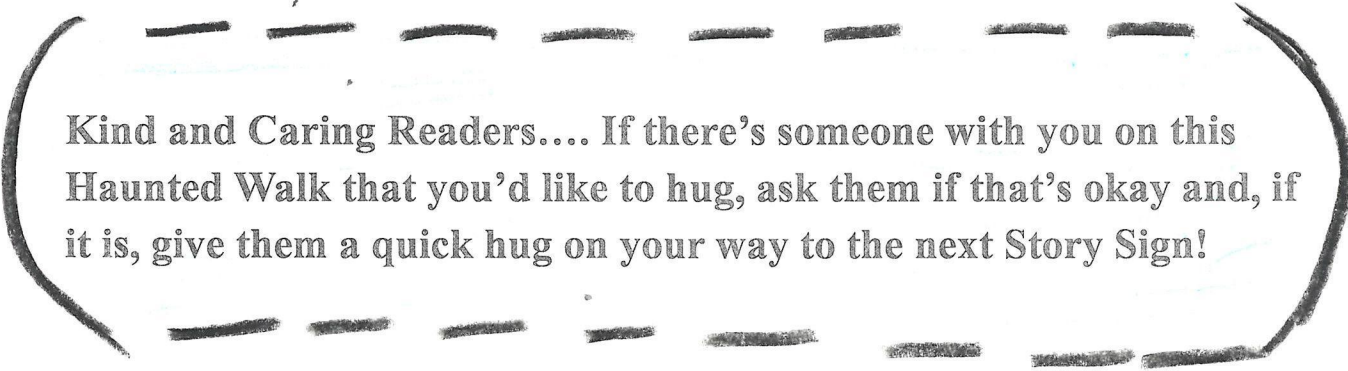
It seemed, though, that Pete was rather terrifying to look at, too... at least if you were a monster. The creature took one glance at Pete, shrieked, and ran into the woods.

Lucky turned and faced Pete. And Pete, seeing his dog there, right in front of him, did the only thing he could, and cried.

When people feel sad, they sometimes cry. Pete wasn't crying because he was sad, though. In fact, he was feeling *so* far from 'sad' that he almost launched himself right past 'happy', too. He was feeling emotions of such strength that crying – crying tears of joy and relief and confusion - was the only action he seemed capable of.

Then Lucky ran over to him. And, suddenly, Pete found that he could do at least one other thing with his emotions; one other thing in this moment.

He wrapped his arms around his dog and held him, hugging Lucky tighter than he'd ever hugged anyone or anything before.



Kind and Caring Readers.... If there's someone with you on this Haunted Walk that you'd like to hug, ask them if that's okay and, if it is, give them a quick hug on your way to the next Story Sign!

Pete was certain he'd just experienced the most miraculous things in the last ten minutes that he'd ever experience for the entire rest of his life: the library had mysteriously transformed around him; his long-lost dog had returned after years away; and he'd encountered a monster wearing a nametag.

He was wrong. For just then, he heard a voice... a voice that was perhaps the strangest thing yet to happen during this already strangest of nights.

"Hi, Pete!" the voice said.

The words themselves weren't strange. And the tone and pitch of the voice speaking them were quite normal, too, sounding clear and deep.

No, the strangeness of the voice came from the voice's *speaker*. Lucky the dog was talking.



“**H**ow are you doing that?” Pete asked his dog, stumbling back a bit, in shock.

Lucky tilted his head, his ears flopping. “Doing what?”

“Speaking!”

“Oh!” Lucky’s tongue rolled out of his mouth. “Well, you trained me how to ‘speak.’ You trained me to do lots of tricks, Pete! Don’t you remember?”

Pete rubbed the back of his head. “I trained you to *bark* when I’d say the word ‘speak.’ I didn’t train you to speak English!”

“Well,” Lucky said. “I’m sure you were going to work on that trick with me next, Pete. Teaching me English, or maybe French. You’re a great trainer, you know! You probably would have taught me how to read by now, too. Even though I can talk, I *still* can’t read. But, well... then we got separated. And everything changed. *I* changed.” The dog’s voice became quieter. “It’s been so long.”

Lucky’s tail stopped wagging, and his head drooped. But then, just as quickly, he looked back up at Pete, and his tail whipped back and forth again. “It really is so good to see you!”

Pete was about to tell Lucky how incredible it was to see him again, too. And, also, to apologize to him. To apologize to his dog for taking him trick-or-treating that Halloween years ago. For losing him and letting him down...

But that was when the wind began to scream again. And when a rustling sound came from the trees.

Another monster shambled out from the woods. It looked much like the first. This one was named 'Joe,' according to its nametag.

"What are they?" Pete asked, warily watching as the creature stumbled towards the edge of the field.

"I call them Named Howlers," Lucky said. "Because they howl like the wind. And because they really love nametags..." Lucky scratched at his ear with a hind leg. "Not sure why. But they're terrified of humans, as you saw before."

Pete turned towards the steps of the library. "Well, I'm rather terrified of them, too!" he said. "Let's just get back inside the library. It's safe there."

"We can't," Lucky said.

Pete was quite confident that they most certainly could. And should. And *had to*, immediately. "What?" he said, glancing again towards the Named Howler. "Why?"

“Pete,” Lucky said, “these monsters are here from another dimension. That’s where I’ve been all this time. In there, with them. That’s where I... changed.”

“That’s where you learned to speak like a human?”

“That’s where I changed in lots of ways,” Lucky said. “I know kung fu now, too, for instance.” Lucky appeared poised to demonstrate with some type of kung fu chop using his paw and/or tail, but then decided against it. The dog glanced worriedly back towards the still-approaching creature.

“Anyway,” Lucky continued, “the monsters are coming into this world through a portal. We need to reach this portal and seal it. We need to stop the monsters!”



Skilled Readers.... On your way to the next Story Sign, practice your kung fu moves! (Just be careful not to accidentally hit anyone)!

“**W**hat?” Pete laughed nervously. “I can’t stop monsters! I wouldn’t be able to shut down a portal! I can’t do any of that. I wasn’t even able to keep you safe! I....”

Screams sounded from the rolling fields behind the library.

“People!” Lucky said, his ears lifting, listening. “They sound like they need help!”

Pete bit his lip. “But *I* can’t help! What can I do?”

Lucky looked up at his boy. “You can try. That’s all you can ever do.”

“But what if I make it worse?” Pete felt tears at the corners of his eyes. *These* were the sad kind of tears. “What if I fail? Like... like I failed you?”

“You’re my boy,” Lucky told Pete. “You’ll always be my boy.” The dog sat at Pete’s feet and looked up at him. “Remember when I was a puppy, and I ate your favorite pair of sneakers? You were mad, but you didn’t stop loving me, did you? I didn’t stop being your dog, did I?”

“No,” Pete said. “But..”

“Whether we’re side-by-side, or separated by a dimension, or divided by something even something bigger than that, we have each other. We’re part of each other, even when we make mistakes. Dog and boy.” Lucky smiled his full, tongue-flopping smile. “Friends.”

The screams could be heard again, louder.

“So, we try,” Pete said.

“Yes, we try.” Lucky licked Pete’s hand. “*That’s* my boy.”

Pete took a deep breath. He wasn’t sure about this. But his friend was back by his side. And they had to try. Together.



Because that’s what friends do.

Boy and dog bounded over the hill. Immediately, the screamers – and the source of the screamers' screams – came into view.



Two children, dressed as monsters, were surrounded by actual monsters. The children – one costumed as Frankenstein and the other as a vampire – were yelling in fear as a pack of Named Howlers closed in on them.

“It’s their masks!” Pete said, realizing the problem. “The monsters aren’t scared of the kids because the kids are wearing masks. The monsters don’t realize the kids are human!”

Lucky looked up at his boy. "You don't have a mask, though."

"Right!" Pete ran faster, down the hill. "Then let's show those monsters just how human I am!"

"Boo!" Pete yelled as he approached the Named Howlers. The monsters turned. "Look at me!" Pete yelled. The monsters did.

"I'm a human!" Pete continued. "A fearsome, frightful human!" The monsters could see that very well, their eyes growing wide and afraid.



Helpful Readers.... Pete needs a hand scaring away the Named Howlers! Between this Story Sign and the next, act as much like a HUMAN as you can! Walk on two legs instead of four, talk to one another using complex spoken language, or make some tools with your opposable thumbs! 😊

The monsters backed away from Pete and his obvious humanness. They groaned in distress. And, with louder howls than ever, the nametag-wearing beasts turned and fled for their lives.

“You saved us!” the kid dressed as Frankenstein said as he threw his arms around Pete. “We were being chased! We got separated from our friends. Then, those beasts were about to eat us! *Devour* us! Chew on us, with their long teeth, and stinky breath, and-”

“Relax, Charles!” the vampire girl interrupted. She put a calming hand on her friend’s back. “We’re okay, now.” She looked at Pete. “Thank you! You really did save us.” She scrunched up her face in thought, her fangs glinting in the moonlight. “You’re... Pete, right? You’re in our class.”

Pete looked from vampire girl to Frankenstein boy and shrugged. “Maybe?” he said. “It’s hard to tell... I don’t usually see Frankenstein or vampires at my school.”

Frankenstein gasped. “I’m Frankenstein’s *creation*,” the boy behind the mask exclaimed.

Pete raised his eyebrows. “Huh?”

“Oh, don’t get him started on this...” the vampire girl said, sighing.

“‘Frankenstein’ was the name of the *scientist* who created the monster – or, *creature*, really. The creature didn’t even have a name! That fact symbolizes how the ‘monster’ was abandoned and—”

“Enough already!” the vampire interrupted. She turned towards Pete. “It’s me, Suzie,” she said, becoming less a vampire and more a girl as she popped fangs out of her mouth. Pete could recognize her from school, now.



“And, I – Dr. Frankenstein’s tragic creation – am better known as Charles,” the boy said as he removed his mask. “Thanks again for rescuing us!”

“You’re welcome,” Pete said, somewhat embarrassed. He had never been treated like a hero before and was pretty sure that nobody should be treating him as one now. “You guys should go to the library,” Pete told Suzie and Charles. “It’s safe there.”

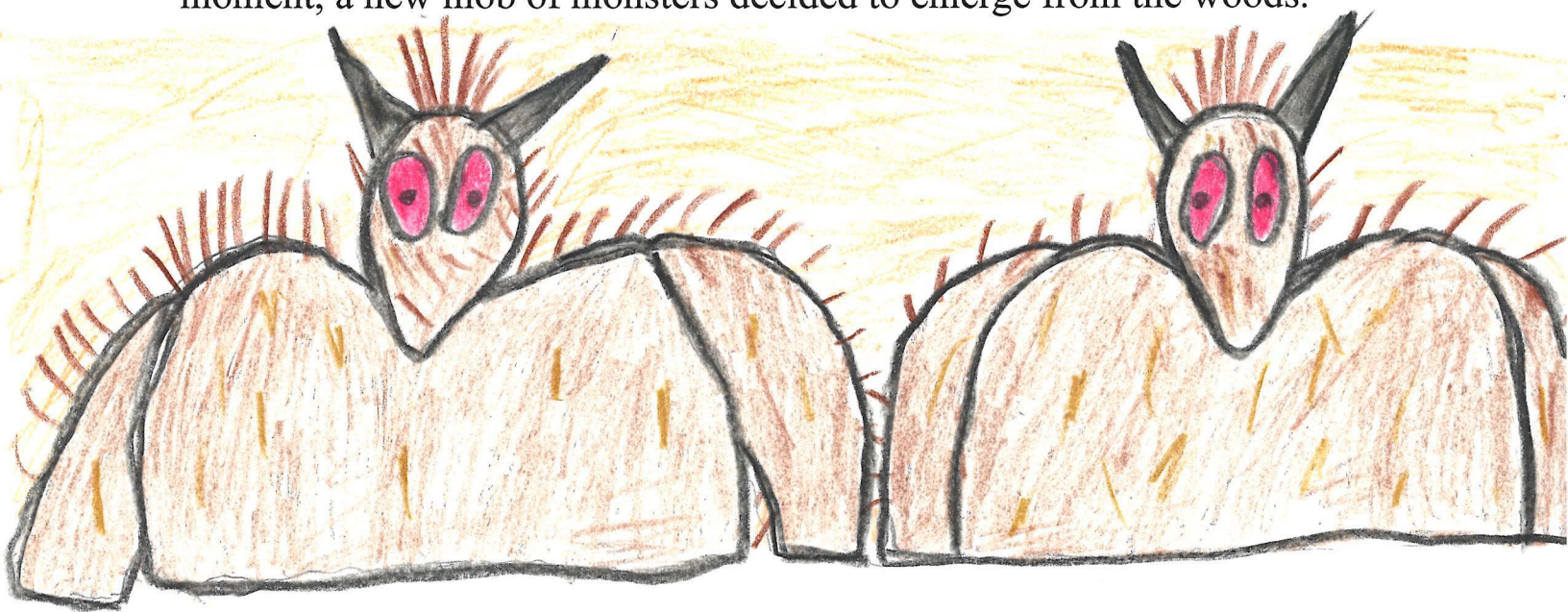
Pete lifted a hand in farewell and followed Lucky, who had started running up the hill and towards the dark forest.

“Wait!” Charles chased after Pete. “Where are you going?”

Pete was quiet for a moment. He wasn’t sure how to explain things... Luckily, Lucky knew just what to say: “We’re going to close a portal and banish the monsters,” the dog announced. He then added: “Thereby saving the world.”

Charles’ and Suzie’s response to hearing a dog talk would almost certainly have been shocked gasps followed by the baffled question, “Did that dog just *talk*?”

The two children didn’t have time to react, however. For, at that very moment, a new mob of monsters decided to emerge from the woods.



These monsters were different. They weren’t wearing nametags, for one thing. Or howling. They were huge, though – their fur-covered bodies bulging with muscles and their long heads topped with horns. Although it didn’t seem possible, these monsters were even scarier than the last group.

“I call this type ‘Hairy Horns,’” Lucky said. The dog turned his head sideways. “Hmmm... I might not be the best at naming monsters,” he reflected.

Pete turned towards Charles and Suzie. “You two need to get to safety! I... I don’t know if I’ll be able to do this. But I need to try to set things right. Lucky and I need to try. I don’t want you guys to get hurt, though. Please, go to the library!”

“I don’t know what’s happening,” Suzie said. With her black vampire cape swirling around her in a gust of wind, she looked quite impressive. “But I know you saved us, Pete. And I know that I want to help. I want to help with whatever is going on.”

“I can’t let you come,” Pete began. “I don’t know what I’m doing. I might get you both hurt. Or... or lost. Or...”

Charles adjusted the monster gloves on his hands. “So, we’ll help you figure out what to do, as we go. We’ll figure it out together.”

Trying, Pete thought. *Together* – like friends did, with each other and for each other. “Are you sure?” Pete asked.

“We’re sure,” Suzie and Charles answered at once.

“**O**kay.” Pete took a deep breath and turned towards his dog. “Lucky, do we need to get past these monsters – these ‘Hairy Horns,’ to reach the portal?”

Lucky nodded. “The portal is in the middle of the forest, behind the library. And, unfortunately, behind these monsters.”

Pete frowned. This wasn’t great news. “Is this type of monster afraid of humans, too?” he asked Lucky, hopefully.

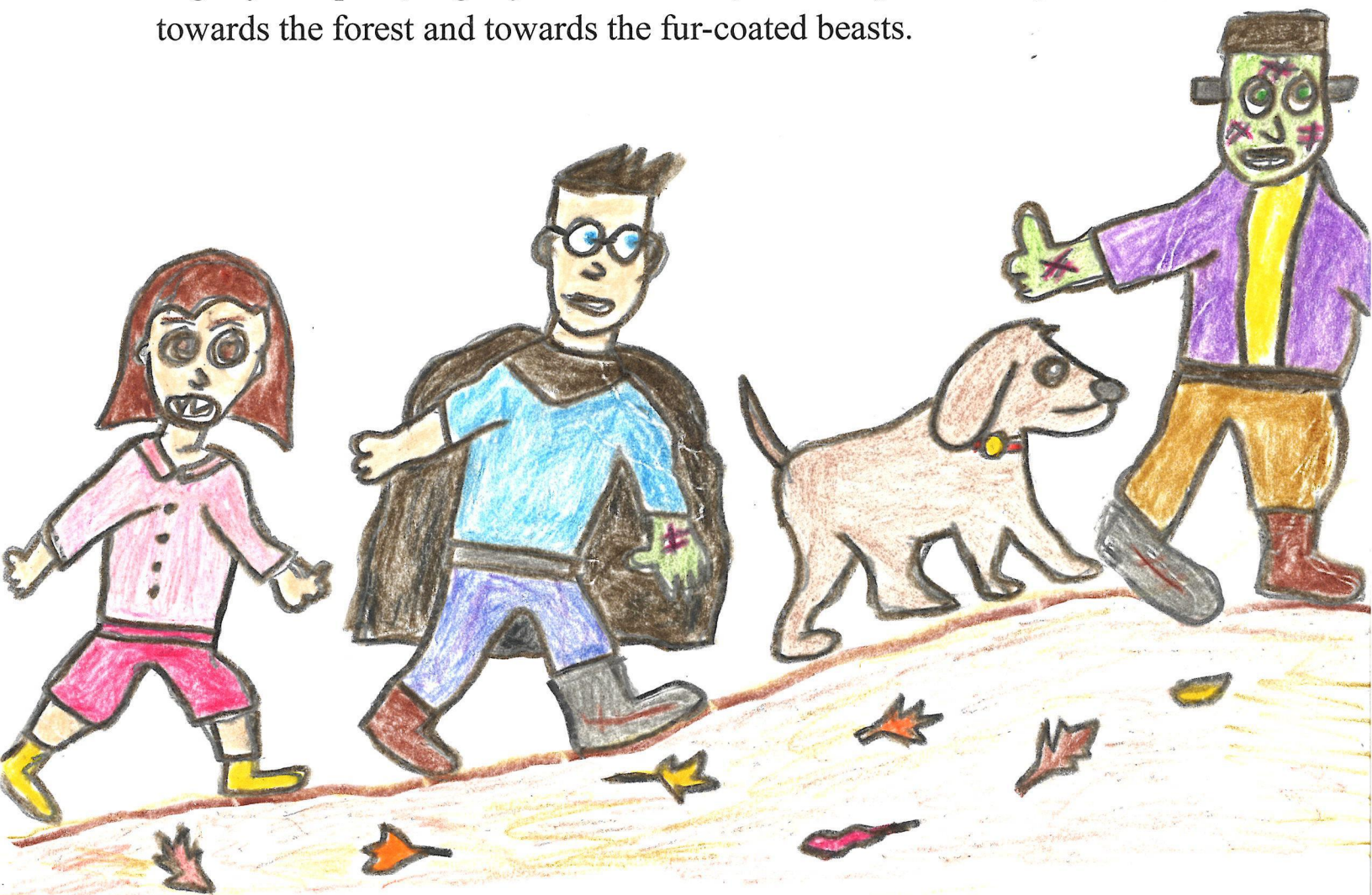
“Quite the opposite,” Lucky said. “These monsters think humans look delicious. They **ARE** scared of other monsters, though.”

“Well, then,” Suzie said, sliding the fangs back into her mouth. “*That* we can work with.”

Charles fitted his mask back over his head. “I’m more of a misunderstood ‘creature’ than a true ‘monster,’ but that will still count, hopefully...”

“And for you, Pete,” Suzie said as she handed him her cape, and as Charles gave Pete one of his monster gloves and one of his monster boots.

Then, the four of them – one of them a talking dog, one of them a vampire, one of them Frankenstein's creature, and the last of them a slightly vampiric, slightly monstrous boy – bravely walked up the hill, towards the forest and towards the fur-coated beasts.



Courageous Readers.... Pete, Lucky, Suzie, and Charles need your help! They are headed into the same woods where you are right now!

On your way to the next Story Sign, pretend to be a monster! 'Swim' like a sea creature; 'fly' like a vampire bat; or 'shuffle' like a zombie. See if you can trick the 'Hairy Horns' into thinking you're not human, too!

Pete's heart hammered in his chest as he and the others approached the monsters. The Hairy Horns weren't paying attention.

Soon, they were so close that Pete could *smell* the beasts. The stink of the monsters reminded Pete of that time Lucky had first rolled in mud, and had then been sprayed by a skunk, and had finally been bathed in tomato juice by his parents...

I'm a monster, I'm a monster, Pete kept thinking to himself as he walked closer to the beasts. *I'm like you. I'm scary, and I'm stinky, and I'm mean. I have great big teeth, and I'm not afraid of anything!*

Just as the kids and the dog were right in front of the creatures, the Hairy Horns finally looked up. One of the monsters cleared its throat, which sounded like a combination of a lion roaring and a firework exploding.



"M-monsters!" one of the creatures then screamed. The Hairy Horns scrambled away, bursting through bushes, terrified. Pete and the others had done it! They were rid of the monsters, out of the field, and into the woods!

Pete looked down at himself in his vampire cape and his Frankenstein glove and boot. He was, he realized, wearing a Halloween costume for the first time in two years. It felt better to be dressed up for the holiday again than he ever could have imagined.

“That was amazing!” Charles said. “We were amazing!”

“Frankenstein’s creature has proven his worth!” Charles exclaimed.
“We’re a fantastic team, guys!”

Lucky began weaving between trees. “We are,” the dog said, his paws crunching over fallen leaves. “But we must keep going. Follow me!”

“Now that there aren’t – for once - any monsters trying to attack us,” Suzie said, “can we finally ask about the fact that you have a *talking dog*?”

“You can,” Pete said, ducking under a branch, “but I don’t really understand it, myself.”

“I was trapped in the monster’s dimension,” Lucky said. “And, while there, I transformed in some ways. I learned to talk. And became a kung fu master.”

“He’s also a *kung fu master*?” Charles whispered to Pete, his eyes widening with shock.

“That’s what he keeps telling me,” Pete said.

The group arrived at a small clearing in the woods. Red and yellow leaves littered the ground as pale moonlight filtered through the branches above.

“Something feels... wrong,” Suzie said. She wrapped her arms around herself. “I sense something. Close.”

Then the group heard something. Something *very* close.

Howls.

Pete had time only to take a single, scared step backwards before the werewolves burst through the trees.



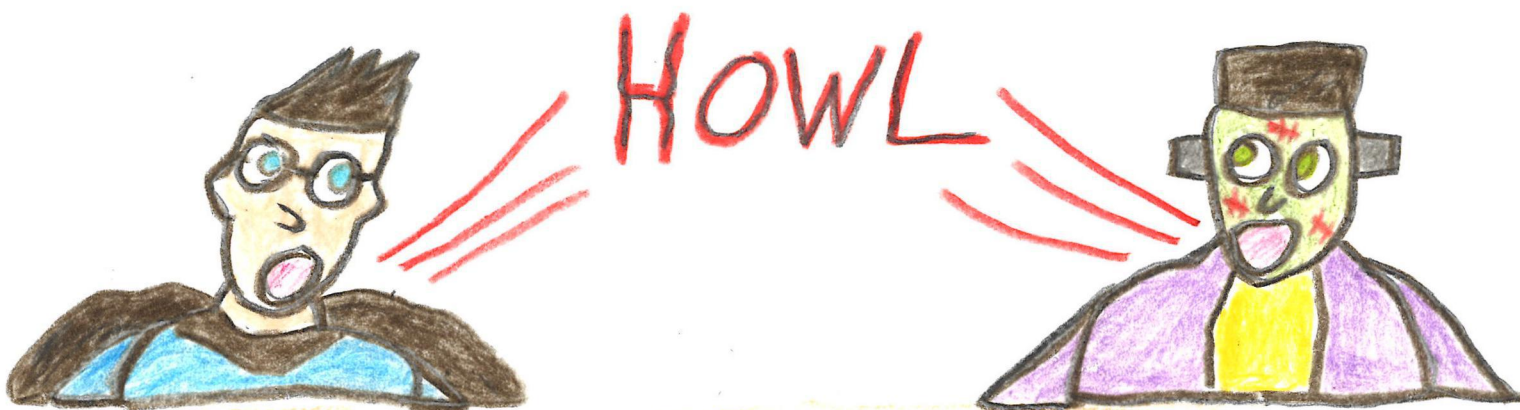
“Don’t run!” Lucky said as the werewolves ran closer, the creatures’ claws tearing at the earth. “It’s like when you see a black bear,” the dog said in a rush. “If you run, the bear’s instincts will kick in, and it will chase you. We must stand our ground!”

Pete remembered his parents telling him what to do if he ever came across a bear. They’d told Pete that he should make himself look bigger than he really was; make himself louder than he normally was; make himself appear braver than he might truly feel.

So, Pete did all these things now. He stood where he was. He lifted his arms over his head. And he was terribly brave, even though he was also terribly terrified.

And as the werewolves began to howl, Pete howled back.

Lucky howled next, and then Suzie and Charles, too. Standing on dead leaves, touched by moonbeams, the three children and the dog howled as loud as they could. They howled even louder than the werewolves.



Brave Readers.... Help Pete and the others scare away the werewolves! While you’re headed to the next Story Sign, howl like a wolf!



The werewolves' howls transformed to yelps. Pete's howls grew louder. The monsters seem to shrink. Pete raised his hands higher; became larger.

Finally, whimpering, the werewolves backed away, disappearing among the trees.

"You out-howled a pack of werewolves, Pete!" Charles said, clapping Pete's back in celebration.

Suzie laughed. "I was so scared! But, Pete, when you started howling, I suddenly knew we could do it. I knew we could win!"

Lucky's ears pricked upward. "Wait," the dog whispered. "I hear something..."

Suddenly, a bizarre voice rang out from within the trees: "What, pray tell, would the weight of an average kiwi be... if it were taken to the planet Mars?"

"Um... who said that?" Charles asked, scanning the dense wall of trees.

"I ask the questions, young man," the voice said again. A figure rose out of the bushes, dark and shadowy. "I don't give answers; I collect them."

The figure moved closer. He had a wild, orange beard that reached down to his bare toes and a hat shaped like a question mark. His eyes glowed like embers from a dying campfire.

“I see all. I know all. I *ask* all!” The strange man continued, stroking his beard. “I throw questions into the world and then drink and eat their answers. I am... the Asker!”

Suzie turned towards Lucky. “It’s not just you,” she told the dog. “They’re bad at naming *themselves*, too...”

“Silence!” the Asker bellowed. “I will ask you a question. If you get the answer correct, you may pass.”

“That sounds fair,” Pete said. “But... what if we get the answer wrong?”

The Asker smiled. It was not a nice smile. “If you get the answer wrong,” he said, “I eat you.”

“That seems less fair,” Charles said.

The Asker clapped his hands loudly. “Your question,” he said, not giving Pete and the others any chance to figure out what they should do, “is: ‘What nametag was the first monster that Pete saw tonight wearing?’”

Wise Readers.... Pete needs your help! Think back to the start of this story: What name was on the tag of the first Named Howler that Pete encountered? Come up with an answer on your way to the next Story Sign!

Hearing the question, Pete froze. The Asker stared at him.



This was bad! This was a question only Pete could answer! Suzie and Charles hadn't been there when Pete had met the first Named Howler.

And Lucky, while now a brilliant conversationalist, had mentioned that he still didn't know how to read, so the dog couldn't have read the nametag, either.

This was all up to Pete! This is what he'd been dreading! His best friend Lucky had returned. And Suzie and Charles were with him, too. Pete realized suddenly that they were his friends now, also. The thought caused warmth to bloom in Pete's chest.

Tonight, on Halloween – the holiday he hated so much – Pete had faced his fears. He'd found an old friend and, for the first time in so long, he'd made new friends, too.

But now, just like when Pete had gotten Lucky lost, he was about to let his friends down, again. He wasn't going to be able to protect them. The Asker was going to eat them all, and it would be because of Pete!

Pete felt something wet and warm against his hand. He looked down to see Lucky licking his fingers.

Even at this moment – this awful moment - the dog was wagging his tail. "You were still my boy, and my friend, when I got lost for so long," Lucky said. "And you'll still be my boy, my friend, no matter how tonight ends."

"No one's perfect, Pete." Charles put a hand on Pete's shoulder. "But we're with you, no matter what. All you can do is try, right?"

Suzie took Pete's hand in hers. "Let's do our best," she said, staring up at the Asker. "Together."

Pete, with his friends by his side, once again stood his ground. He once again made himself look bigger than he truly was. He once again made himself appear braver than he truly felt.

He realized he might fail. But he also realized that even if he did answer this question wrong, that wouldn't make him a bad friend. As long as he tried his best, his friends were here for him. And Pete was here for his friends.

So, Pete took a step towards the Asker. And he answered.

Wise Readers.... What was the name of the first Named Howler Pete saw tonight? Speak that name... now!

Pete's answer echoed through the forest. The Asker's face dropped. "That... that's correct..." the Asker said, deeply disappointed. The Asker's question mark-shaped hat fell to the ground. His beard shriveled. And, with a *poof*, he vanished into the night.

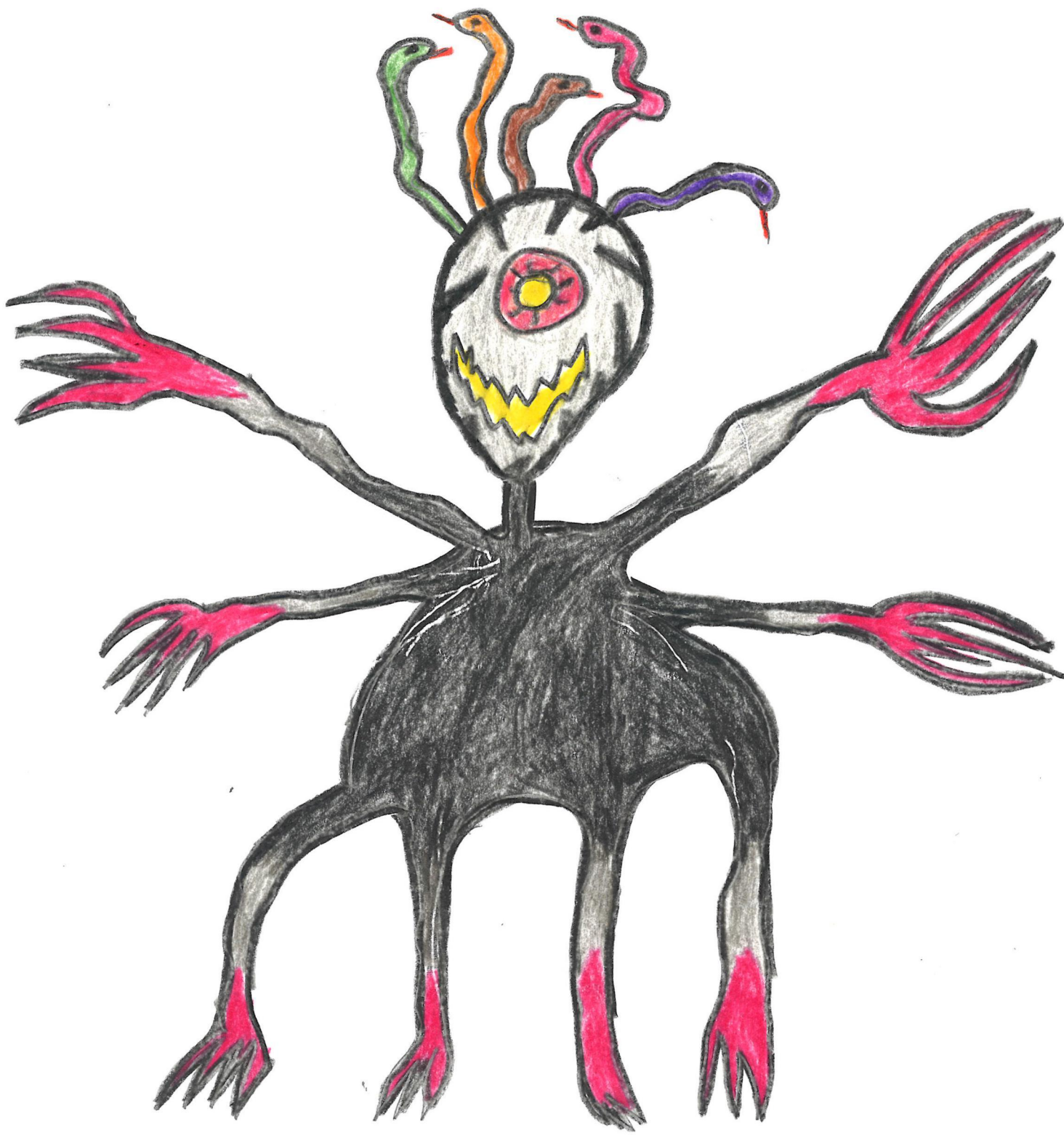
"Brilliant work, Pete!" Suzie said, laughing.

"We're almost to the portal!" Lucky said as he ran ahead. "Follow me! Let's finish this!"

The dog's paws crunched over fallen leaves as icy wind carried the scents of dark, faraway spices. Lucky sped around a large boulder, leapt over a fallen tree, and flew up a steep hill. The children raced to keep up.

At the top of the hill, Lucky stopped. Pete reached his dog's side, gasping for breath. He looked down the opposite side of the hill, onto a deep valley: the portal! It was right there!

And so was the most fearsome monster they'd seen all night, guarding it.



Pete stared at the monster who stood in front of the swirling blue portal. It was the largest, scariest-looking creature yet. "Oh, no!" Pete whispered. "What now?"

Lucky gazed up at Pete. "Do you trust me?" the dog asked. "Believe in me?"

"Of course!" Pete placed a hand on Lucky's head. "You're my best friend. You always will be."



Lucky smiled, the red of his tongue peeking out of his mouth. "Then let me show you something amazing!"

Lucky tore down the hill, the small dog moving with the speed and the force of a freight train.

On this night of wonders, Pete, Charles, and Suzie now watched, from atop the hill, a sight even more wondrous than everything else they'd already seen.

Lucky leapt. He spun. He did a backflip, kicking with a paw that shattered the monster's armor. The dog bounced off a tree and then chopped downward with his paw, smacking the monster's head with astounding force.

Lucky seemed to be everyone at once, striking with every part of his body – his tail a whip and his head a battering ram. Lucky was a one-dog army; a furry force to be reckoned with.



"Your dog..." Suzie whispered in disbelief. "Your dog really *does* know kung fu!"

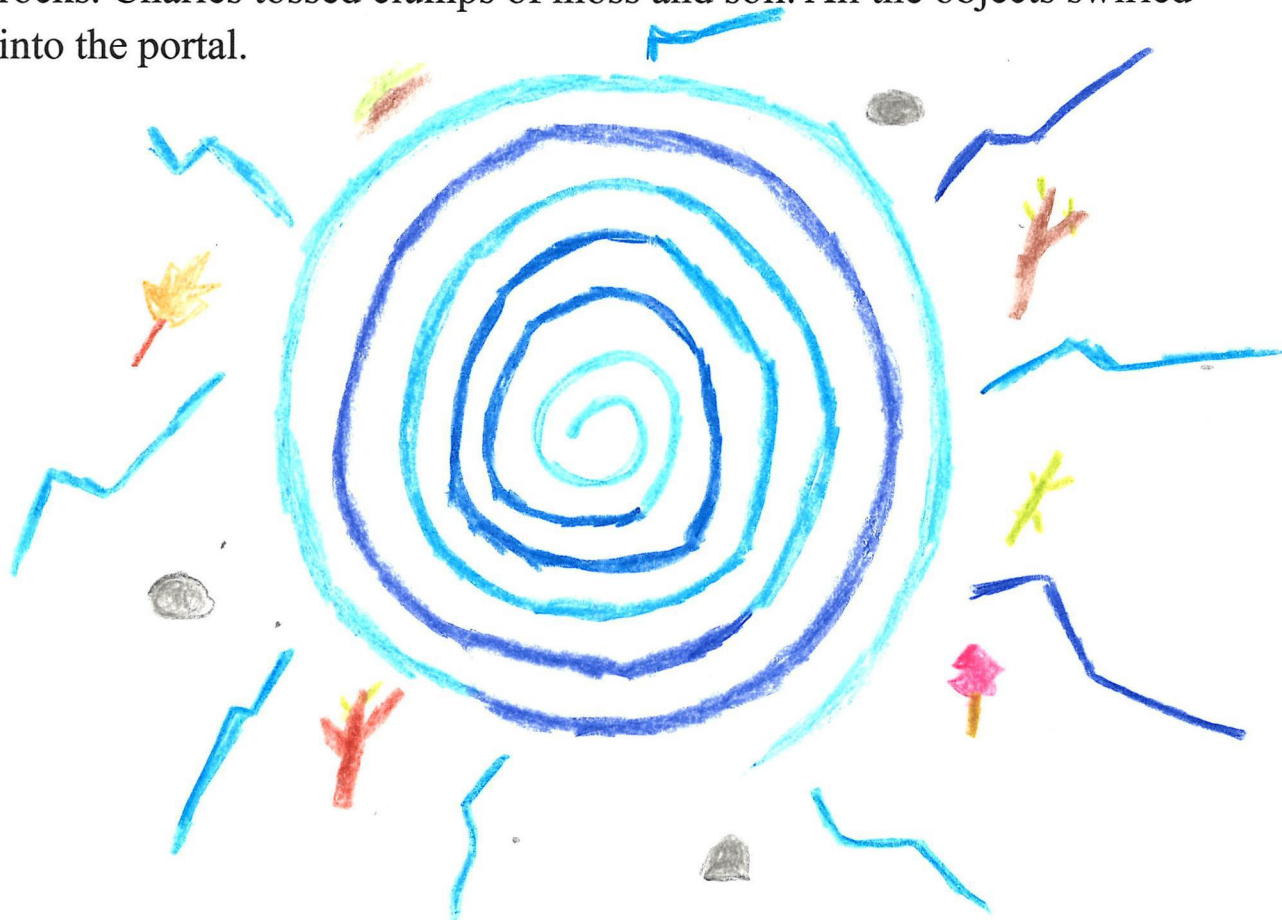
With a final, crushing blow from his paw, Lucky sent the monster crashing backwards into the woods.

Pete ran down the hill and gave Lucky a huge hug. “That was unbelievable!” he told his dog.

Lucky leaned his head against his boy. “All in a day’s work for a speaking dog who just so happens to also be a kung fu master,” he said.

The dog faced the portal. “Now, everyone, help me throw as much stuff into the portal as possible – leaves, branches, rocks... whatever you can grab! That should overload the portal and force it to close!”

Pete threw sticks. Lucky kicked leaves with his hind legs. Suzie heaved rocks. Charles tossed clumps of moss and soil. All the objects swirled into the portal.



The blue light of the mystical gateway began to flicker and, as Pete launched one last stick directly into its center, the portal disappeared.

The four friends looked at one another, giant smiles on their faces.

“We did it!” Suzie yelled, beaming.

“We really did!” Charles said. “We saved the world!” He looked around the suddenly quiet forest. “But... what now?”

What now, indeed? How could they celebrate everything they’d just accomplished together? Pete and the others now faced a question that very few people ever had to ask themselves: What *did* one do after saving the world?

Pete suddenly had an idea. “Follow me!” he said.



Pete, Suzie, and Charles sat at the long wooden table in the Etna Library. Lucky lay on the floor, near Pete's feet.

The librarian was at his desk again. He glanced occasionally at Lucky – Pete had managed to convince the librarian to allow the dog inside. The librarian had no memory of anything strange happening.

The library also looked exactly as it had before the world had transformed. Everything had gone back to normal.

Well, *almost* everything. Lucky could still talk. Pete had made the dog promise not to speak inside the library, but Lucky sometimes couldn't help himself and would whisper from beneath the table as the group recounted the night's adventures.

And Pete... Pete hadn't gone back to normal, either. He was still in the mismatched pieces of his costume; he still had brand new friends; and he was quickly realizing that Halloween was now his *favorite* holiday.

Suzie looked at their surroundings – at the library's tall wooden bookcases and green-shaded lamps. "This library is amazing, Pete!" she said. "I can't believe I've never been inside before. Bringing us here was a great idea!"

"It was!" Charles said. He also looked around. "You know, it kind of looks magical in here. Like a wizard's library."

Pete smiled. "It really does," he said.

The librarian had once told Pete that the chairs and the table where he and his new friends now sat were as old as the library building itself – 120 years old.

Pete would often think about all the people who'd sat on these same chairs and at this same table before him—all the people throughout the library's long history.

Pete thought of individuals reading by candlelight before electricity. He thought of farmers and doctors, moms and kids, all seated here, some yesterday and others a hundred years ago. Pete thought of groups – countless groups with countless interests - gathering at the library throughout the decades and from one century to the next. So many people here, across a vast stretch of time, all in this very building and at this very table.

Still, looking from Lucky to Suzie to Charles, Pete was sure. He was sure that, in 120 years of people sitting in this exact spot, there had never been a group quite like the one sitting at the table now. There had never been a group quite like his group.

No one, Pete was certain, had ever been as appreciative to be inside this library, on these chairs, at this table, and with their friends, as Pete was at that moment.



The End.