

The Big Eel Adventure

A River Friends Coloring Book

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Mugen Press, Pittsburgh

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CREDITS and ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing this story was a pleasure, and creating a coloring book came as an unexpected adventure. Before you dive into the story of eel and how it affects our freshwater quality, or before you start coloring the line art images that come along with it, I would like to acknowledge the following people and organizations, who made this effort possible:

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Enjoy reading, coloring, and learning! To find about the many ways American Rivers protects our clean water access, quality, and environment, please visit their website at www.americanrivers.org.

Thank you,

Kate Pavelle

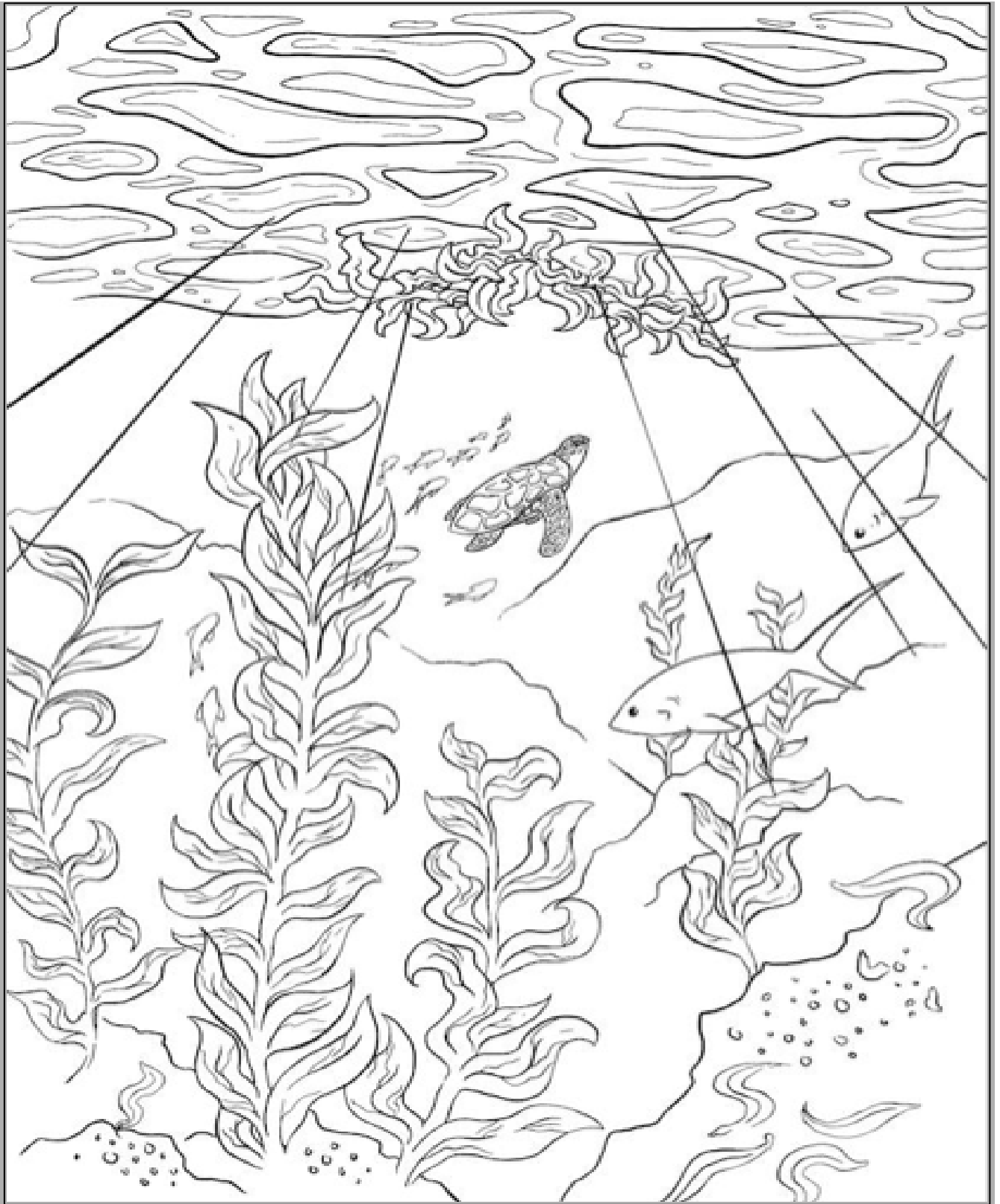
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Chapter 1

The Sargasso Sea lays east of Bermuda, a quiet expanse of super clear water surrounded by four Atlantic Ocean currents. You can see clear down to where baby fish hide and play in the tangled stems of the floating seaweed mats.

Eel lay their soft eggs in its protective leaves. The baby eel hatch from the eggs, short and thin and looking like a willow leaf made of glass. The schools of hungry newborns eat the “marine snow” of organic particles floating in the sea until they grow into longer and rounder shapes. The sargassum leaves help them hide from bigger, just as hungry fish as the ocean currents move them north and west. That's where their parents came from.

Eventually, the eel grow big enough to stretch their see-through, willow-leaf shape to the size of an ocean earthworm. At that point the biggest one, Slippy, took charge.



Chapter 2

"Let's swim this way," she said, with a nod to the others. "It just feels right." Slider, the biggest of the guys, objected.

"I don't feel any such thing!"

A large shape from the seaweed grove answered before Slippy could. "She's right. It's the magnetic pole she's feeling." The speaker swam up. She was so big! No seaweed leaf could begin to hide the big eyes in her bulbous head. Four flippers stuck out of her protective shell, paddling the salty water.

"How do you know?" Slippy asked. "You're not an eel!"

"I'm a sea turtle," the newcomer smiled. "My name is Agnes, and I'll be your escort to your next station. You'll need to lead, but I will answer your questions along the way."

"And you won't eat us?" asked Slider, who was always protective and a little suspicious.



Chapter 3

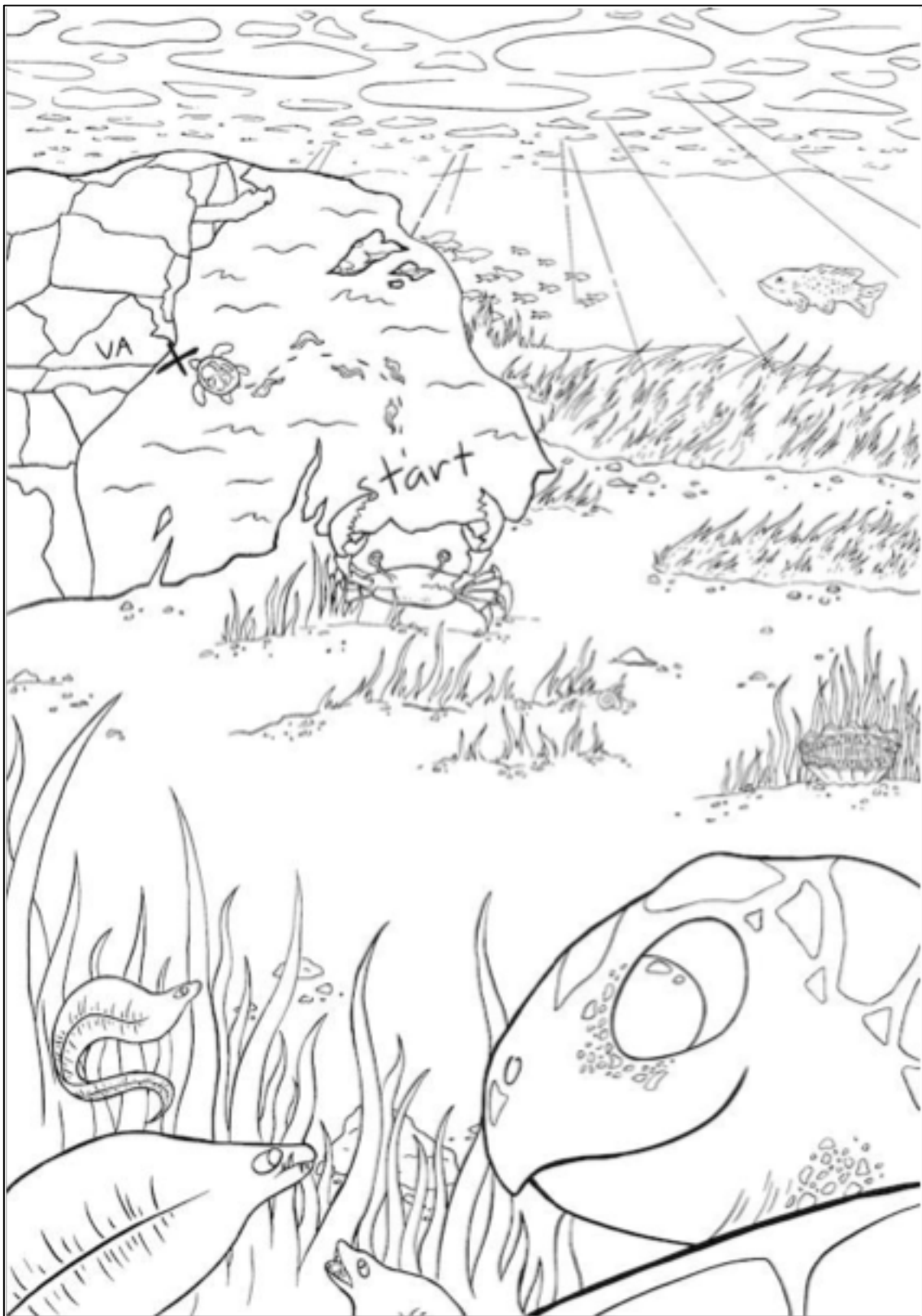
The eel led on with Agnes at her side. “Baby eel swim through the sea to the mouth of their parents’ river,” she said. “The water gets shallow there, and less salty. It’s a long way off! By the time we arrive you’ll be big enough to start eating delicious things like mussels and clams!”

They swam for almost a year before the Slippy and her school finally saw the sun reflections dance on the sandy seafloor of Chesapeake Bay.

“The water tastes different here,” Slippy said. “And look at all the new types of fish!” She dove low in search of shelter. “Hide from the fish, everyone!”

The eel had all lost their baby teeth, and now had a row of small, sharp teeth to bite off pieces of food. Several of them dove on an open shell and ate the mollusk on the inside. Their teeth were big enough for that, but for self-defense? Not yet.

“Don’t worry,” Agnes said. “After a year in the river, you will be so big, most fish will avoid you!”



Chapter 4

The eel hunted at night and hid in the seaweed and behind rocks during the day. Eventually they grew until their digestive system showed through their bodies like a thin, dark rope inside a thick glass shoelace. When Agnes saw that, she nodded. “It’s almost time to head upriver. Can you feel the pull?”

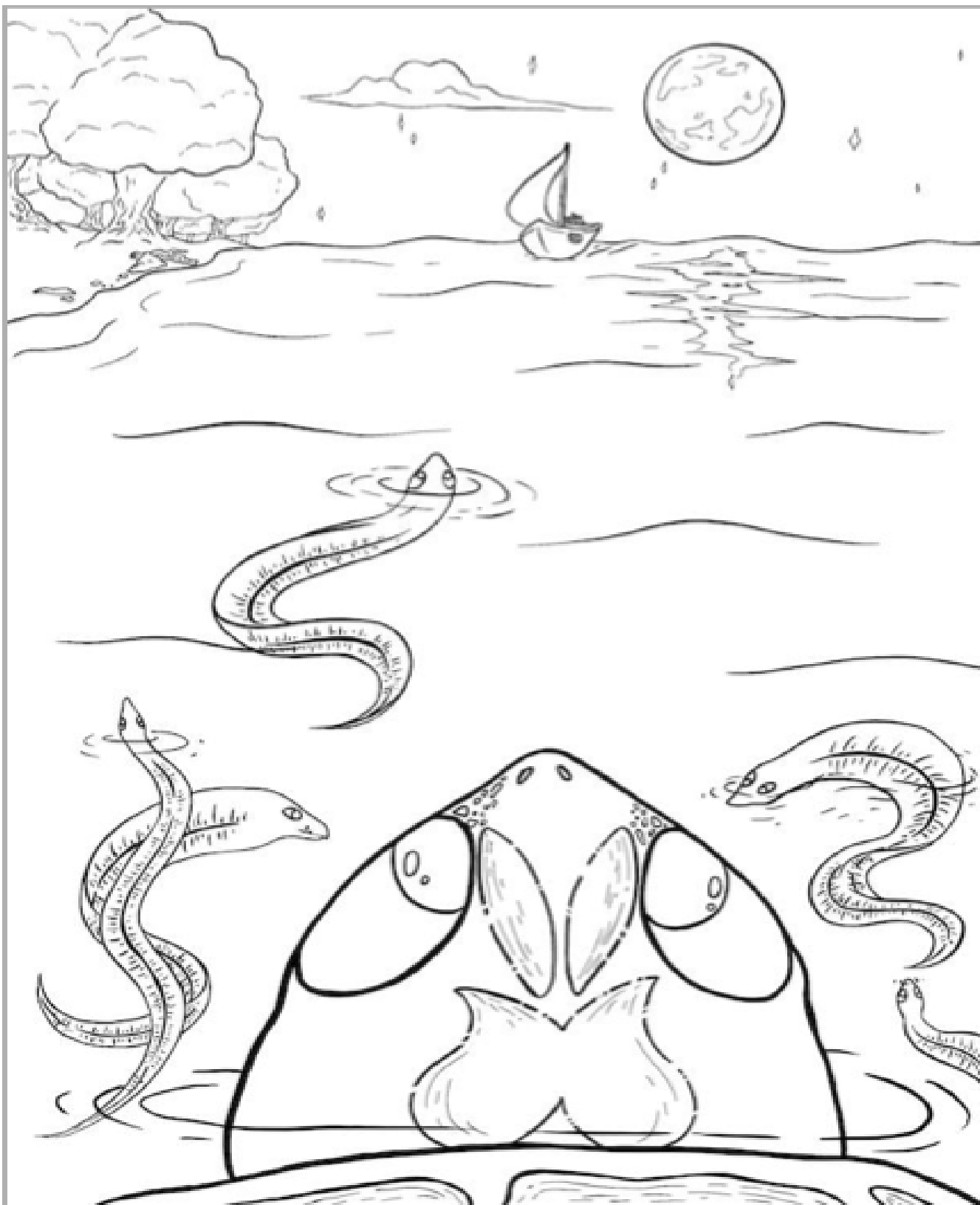
Slippy and Slider nodded, and so did their siblings.

“Every day the water tastes saltier,” Slider said, “even if it’s really just the same. I think my taste is changing!”

A few days later Agnes rose to the top of the water. A big, black bird soared across the moon and, to all their surprise, settled right on top of Agnes’s shell.

“Hi, Molly!” Agnes craned her head up, greeting her old friend. “Are you ready to take your turn as the eel guide? It’s time for me to head back to the Sargasso Sea.”

The raven nodded back and then peered into the water, where the thin rays of the moon reflected from the hard-to-see eels. “Hi, kids! I’m Molly Bluefeather. I’ll take over for Agnes as you move into the Susquehanna and grow some color into your skin!”



Chapter 5

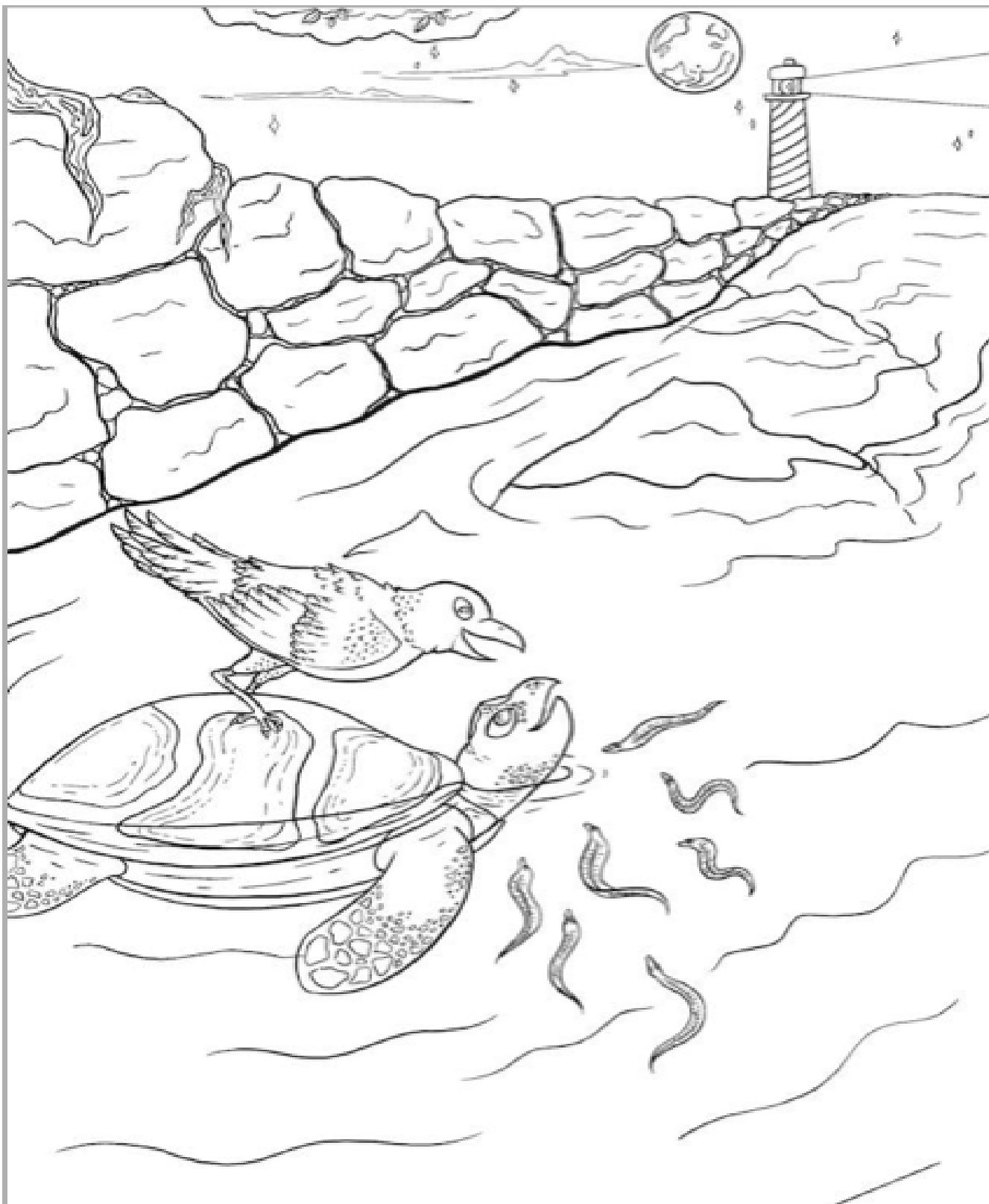
Agnes and Molly chatted through the night. When the sun began to color the sky to the East in pink and orange, Slippy and Slider swam up to them. “It’s time,” Slider said. “We can feel the pull!”

“Thank you for escorting us, Aunt Agnes,” Slippy said and splashed her long, snake-like tail. Her top and bottom fin now stood up and down like a blade that cut through the water. It made her fast and sneaky. The fins joined at the tip of her tail, making her strong enough to swim against the river's current.

“Good-bye!” said the other eels. “We’ll miss you!”

Agnes laughed. “We’ll see each other again when you’re all grown up and come back to lay your own eggs in the Sargasso Sea.”

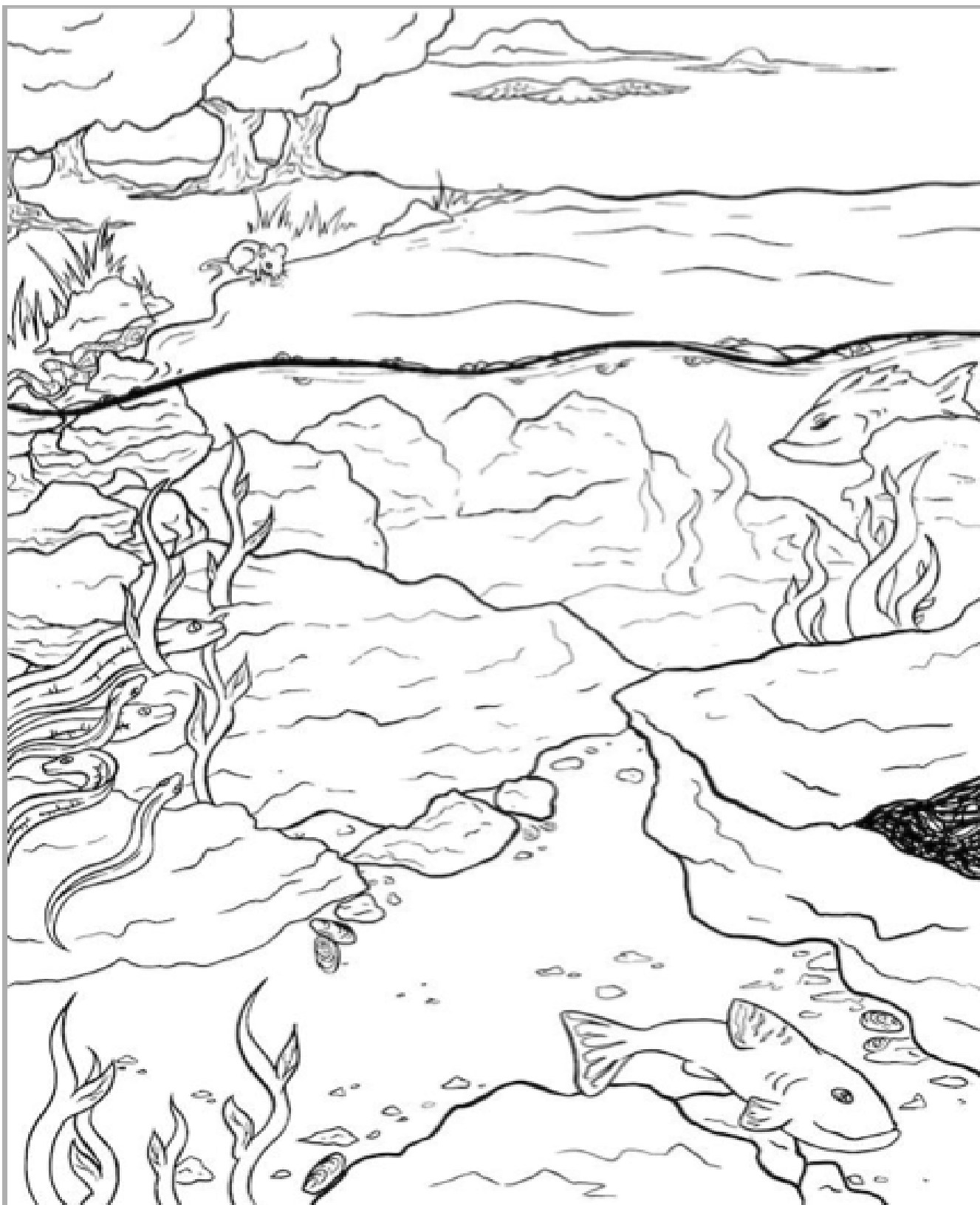
“If you don’t get eaten,” she thought to herself. Agnes knew here eel friends could each lay up to four million eggs. Only a few thousand had made it here, to the mouth of the river. Most of those wouldn’t be there to see her the next time. That was the web of life. Fish laid so many eggs precisely so that at least some of them would survive and have children of their own.



Chapter 6

Eel are nocturnal. They hid from bigger fish during the day and hunted for food at night as they struggled upstream. Trout passed them in the other direction as they headed downstream and toward the ocean. The trout were also small and young, but bigger than the eel and no less hungry. Slippy told everybody to avoid them.

They saw other fish too. Bass that hid in the quiet water holes, walleye and sauger that hunted in packs. All of them wanted a taste of young eel. One day Slippy and Slider hid behind a rock to avoid some hunting minnows. As they peeked around, a walleye flashed by and ate two minnows at once! It was a dangerous world!



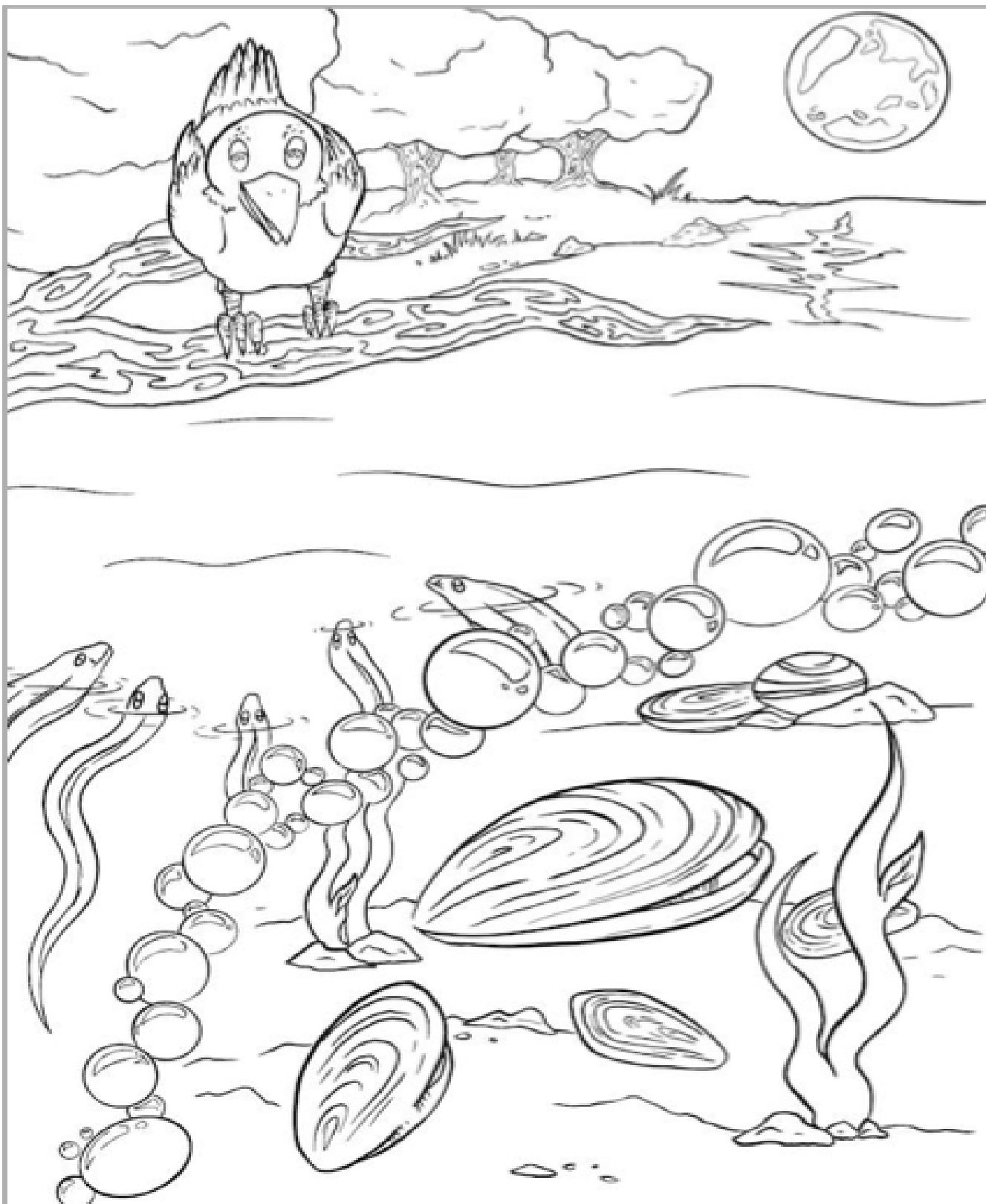
Chapter 7

One evening when the moon was up, Molly landed on a branch and called to the growing eels. “Look for mussels on your swim tonight,” she said. “The little ones are easy to eat, and easy to find down here where the river is wide. Later, when the time comes, they will need you your help. You'll help them travel upstream so the water can stay clean and healthy!”

The eels chased each other in a tangle, spinning like a glistening ball in the water, but they did listen to their teacher. “How do mussels keep water clean?” Slippy asked.

Molly cawed in laughter. “That’s your assignment for tomorrow! Look for a big mussel, one that’s open, and watch what it does. See if you can figure it out.”

Slippy and Slider led their siblings along the river bottom, staying to the sides where the water was shallow enough for the sun to reach all the way down. The reeds lined the shore and arrowroot plants grew from the river mud all the way up to the surface. Their arrow-shaped leaves offered shade and concealment to the little eels, and also a quiet place for the grown-up mussels.



Chapter 8

Slider called out, “Molly said this one is called an Eastern Elliptio mussel. Can you see what it’s doing?”

Slippy edged little closer to the mussel’s open shell, but not too close. Neither of them dared scaring the little animal inside into closing the shell before they could see how it worked. “I don’t know,” she said. “But the edges of the shell look all fuzzy! It has hair growing around the shell that waves in the current.”

Slider swam closer too. “Look there! Some of the floating bits are getting stuck in the hair. Do you think it’s their food, like the marine snow we ate back in the Sargasso Sea? Bits and pieces of plants and animals too small for us to eat anymore?”

“Good observation!” Slippy cheered. “I think you’re right. Maybe we were the water cleaners back there, keeping the water so crystal clear. And that’s just what the mussels do here in the river!”

Molly cheered when they told her their idea. “You are some very smart little fish!” she said.

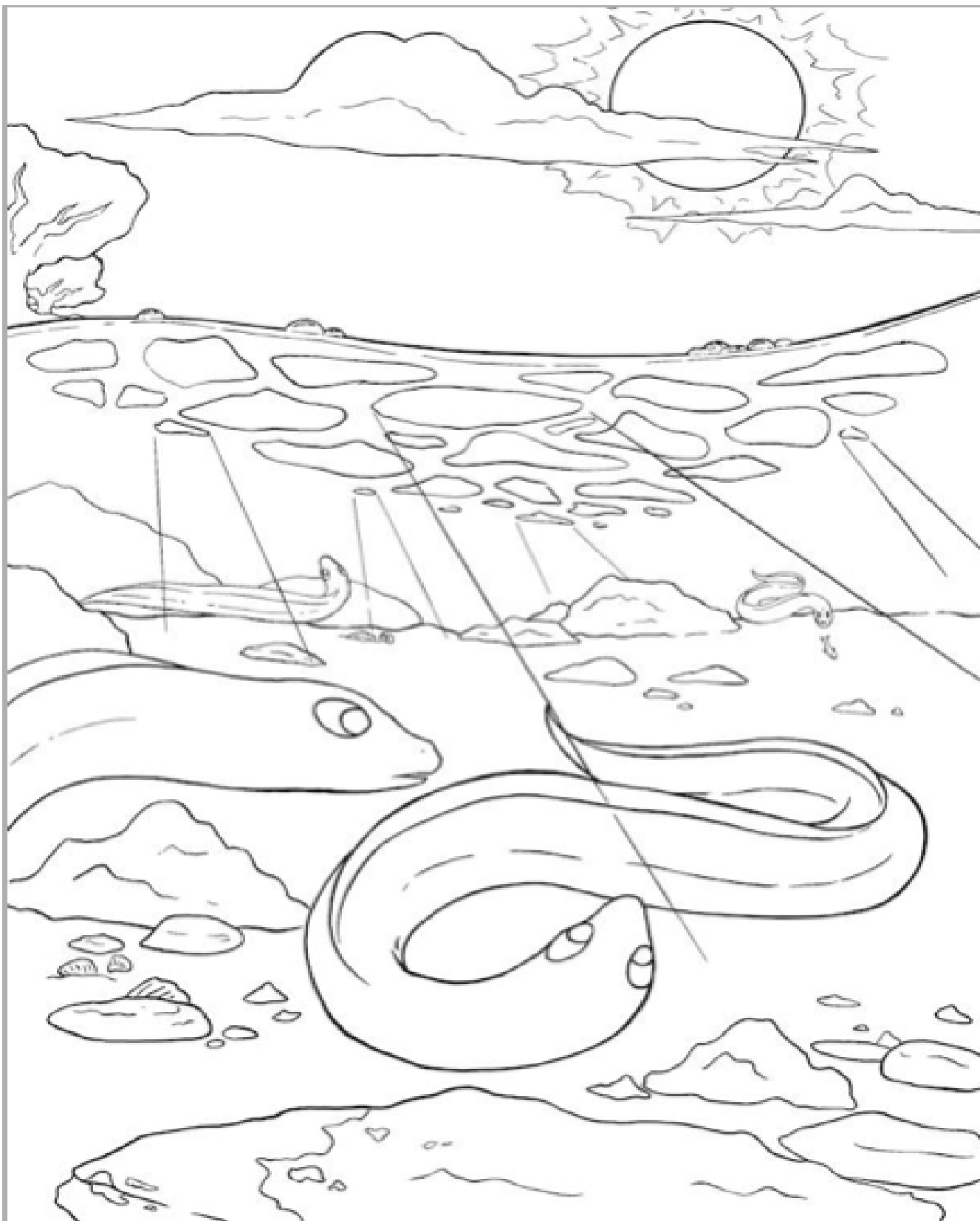


Chapter 9

Time passed as they moved upstream, and the mussels grew harder to find. "I miss their yummy taste," Slider said one night as they searched for something to eat. A minnow swam by. The eels still had to hide from the big fish, but the minnows didn't seem so scary anymore. In fact, Slippy sneaked after one of the smaller ones, caught it in her double-hinged jaw, and ate it right up. "It was so easy," she hurried to tell the others. "They're delicious!"

Hunting fish wasn't as easy as the mussels had been. Minnows were fast if they saw her coming, and the eels weren't as see-through anymore." Slippy looked at her tail. She saw that she now had shades of brown and yellow reaching all the way up her skin. She looked over at Slider and realized that he, too, looked like a stealthy shadow in the dark. In daylight he looked as colorful as she did - and so did the others.

Slider and the rest of her brothers also looked smaller, which worried her a bit.



Chapter 10

Slippy swam over to their raven guide the next time she perched on a rock to see how the eel were doing. “Aunt Molly,” she said, “do you think some of the eels should eat more?”

Molly craned her head to the side. “Why would you think that, dear?”

“We all turned browner, just like you said we would. But Slider used to be almost as big as me, and now he isn’t.” She fretted a bit. “Do you think I should share some of my food with him?”

Molly cackled. “It’s kind of you to worry, but no. Girl eel always grow bigger than the boys. There’s no need to share. See, all the boys will grow smaller than you girls, but they are good hunters.” She cocked her head to the side. “That’s one of the reasons why they’ll stay down here, where the river is wide. You and your sisters will feel a pull to go further upstream. The guys will be waiting for when you’re grown up enough to swim back out to sea.”



Chapter 11

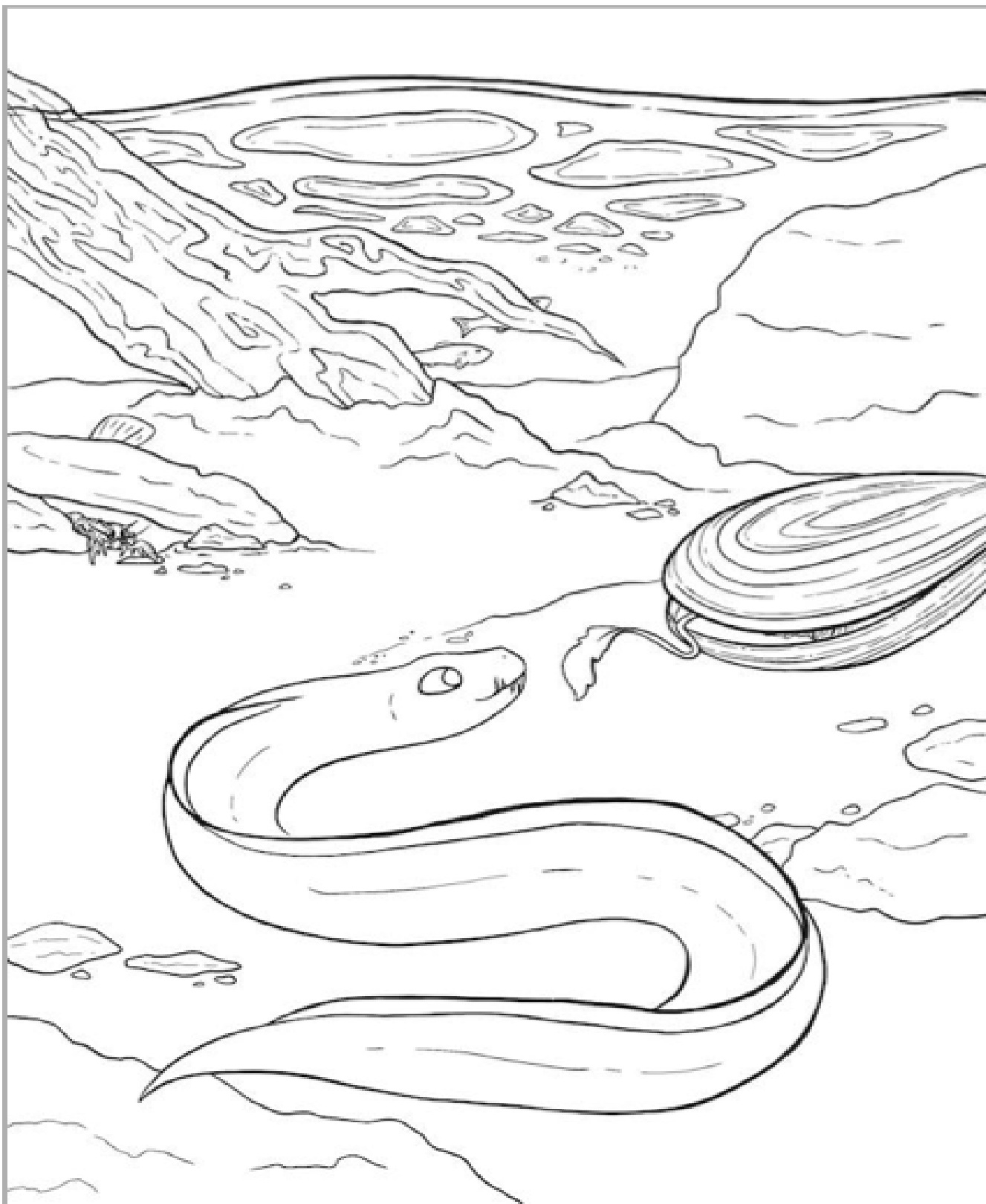
A few days later, Slippy saw a really big mussel as she hunted hungrily in the shallows. The big ones were hard to open – but this one was open already and had a treat floating right in front of its shell!

Oh, it smelled so good! She slid closer, careful not to startle the mussel into shutting her shell. Closer... Closer... The yummy bit wiggled. Quick as a lightning, Slippy snapped at the treat. But it didn't come off! Instead, the treat pulled her in, the shell snapped onto her nose, and the mussel spat gritty water into her mouth! Slippy sulked away, but felt better later on when she found three smaller mussels for dinner.

Slippy described the event to Molly the Raven during her next class. A chorus of other eel voices spoke up right after she finished.

“It happened to me too! And me! And us!”

That helped. She felt kind of stupid, being tricked by her food, but at least she wasn't alone. Molly reassured them all. “This is just as it should be. Don't worry about it. Just keep on eating, growing, and getting stronger. You have a long way to go.”



Chapter 12

The raven got another earful during the next class. “The mussels keep biting back, Aunt Molly!” Molly cawed with laughter. “That’s because they need your help. Do you eat a lot of mussels?”

“Lots and lots. They’re the best!” Slider answered.

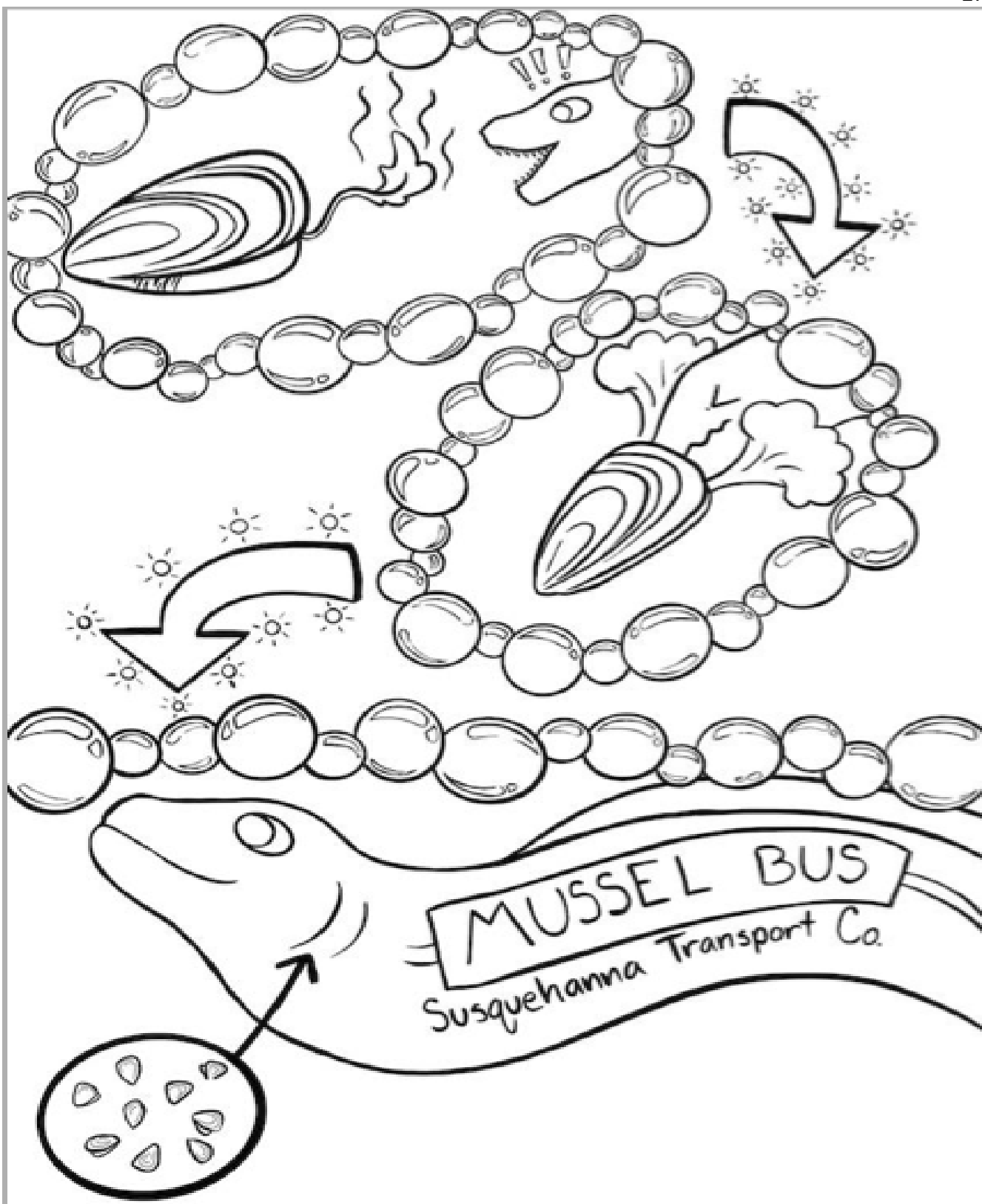
Molly nodded. “So why are there any left?”

The eel thought hard. “There’s less than there used to be. What will happen if we eat them all?”

Molly said, “You won’t, because each of the bitey ones is a mother mussel. She tricks you like that because she can’t move. So she puts her tiny, gritty larva babies right inside your mouth.” She paused to see if they were paying attention. They were, even Slider, who always wanted to swim off and go hunt.

“So we’re eating their babies too? That makes no sense.”

Molly gestured from her branch. “Most of the babies settle in your gills, not in your stomach. It won’t hurt you any, but it gets them a free ride all the way upstream. They fall off once you’re there, and then grow bigger as they clean the water and slowly tumble back down to here, just in time for another batch of little eel.”



Chapter 13

The eel swam steadily on until they reached Harrisburg. They were all a lot bigger now, though even the smallest girls were bigger than any of the boys. Their progress stopped when they ran into a low-head dam that spanned the river's width.

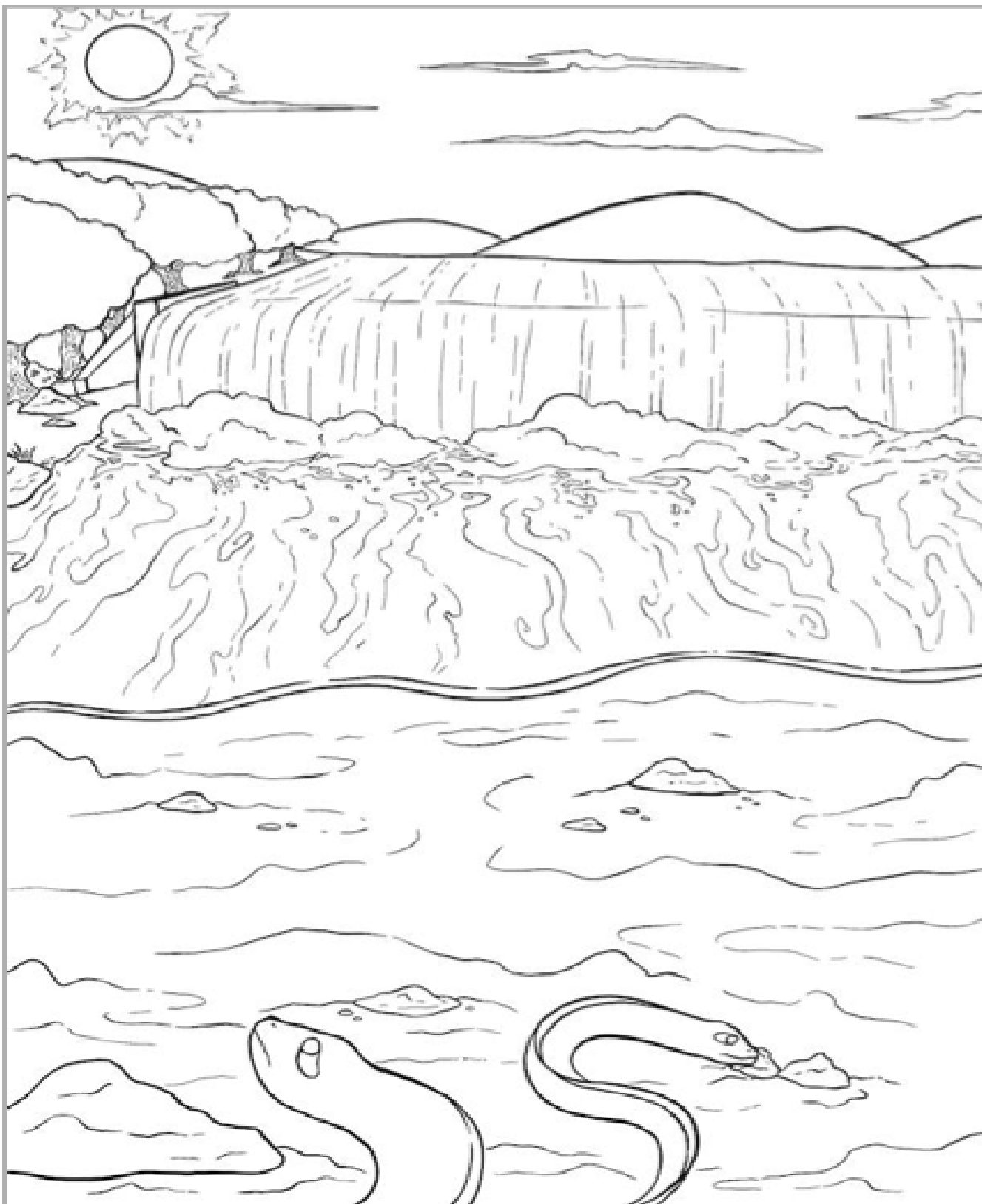
"Salmon or trout can usually jump it," Molly said, "but eel need to climb. Good luck!"

Slippy, Slider, and their siblings fought their way against the current to scout along the dam's wall. It was so steep! There were no convenient paths to climb.

The boys, being smaller, began to grumble. "This doesn't seem worth it. Let's stay down here, where the river is wide! The hunting's good enough."

"Good enough for you," said the girls, "but we need to eat more. The pull says we need to go on!" They talked it over, and then the boys said good-bye. The current was just too strong to fight anymore. They decided to ride it back down to calmer waters.

Some of the eels were sad, but Molly reassured them. "Every species has its own path. This is yours. Except now there's a dam in the way."



Chapter 14

The girls now faced their challenge alone. Even they couldn't climb a wall this high. Some even tried to slither around the dam, but the rocks were too dry. Nothing worked, but that didn't stop them from trying.

Two fishermen stood by, watching the struggle.

"I feel so bad for them!" Susie said.

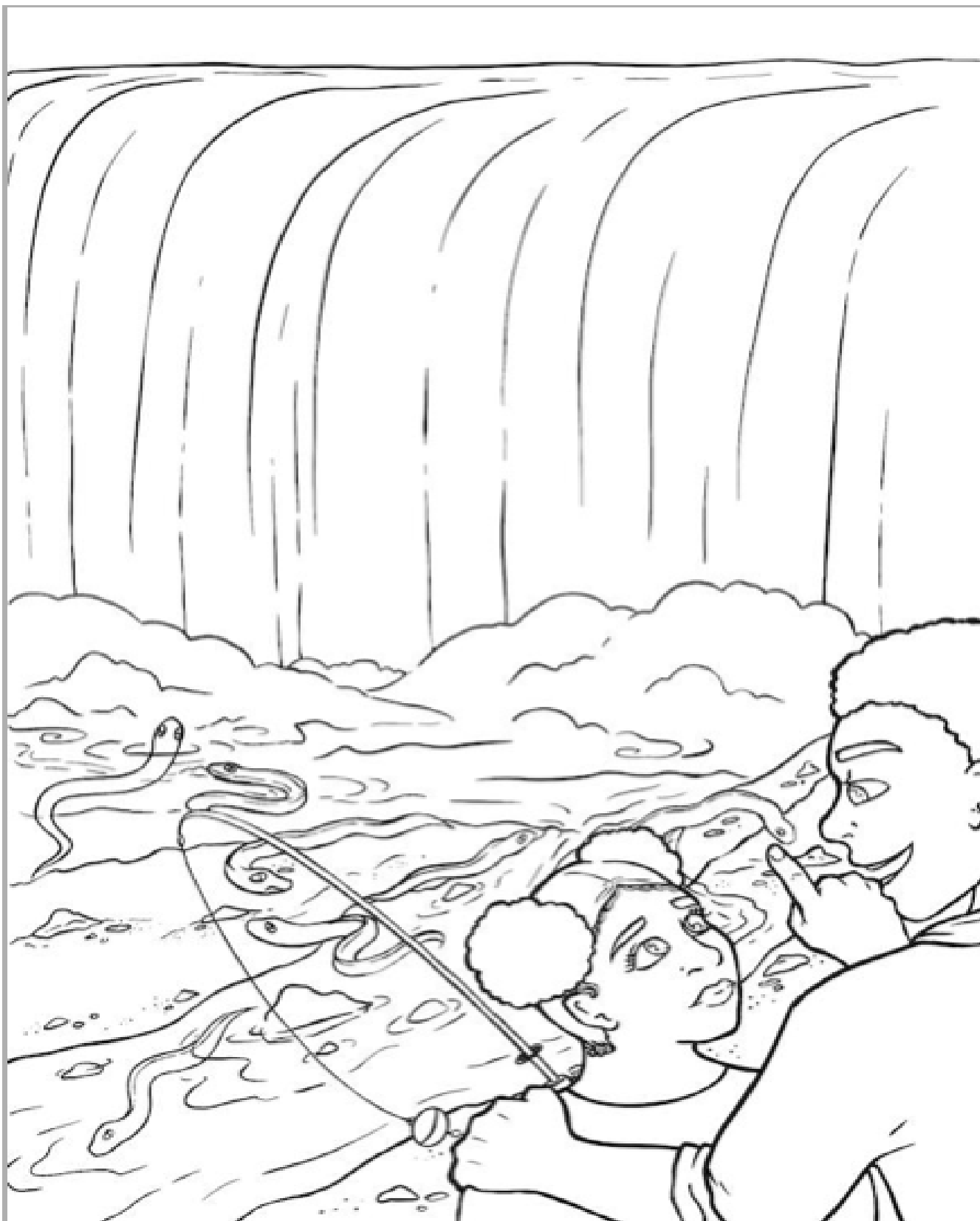
"It happens every year," said her Uncle Al. "The most we can do is to help the ones on these rocks back into the water."

Susie reached out a hand, but her uncle stopped her. "You mustn't touch them, Susie! The slime gives people a rash. We need to use our fishing nets instead."

He held his net out and used a stick to push one of the drying eels inside. Then he moved on to the next.

Susie did the same, collecting five young eel to her uncle's seven. Then they both climbed down to the shore and let the eel splash back into the water.

"Uncle Al," Susie said, "What happens if the eel need to stay down here?" "I don't really know. Let's do some research when we get back home." "Good question," said a voice from behind.



Chapter 15

A truck with three men had driven up behind them. The men carried big, white buckets along with nets that looked a lot like Uncle Al's and Susie's.

"We saw you rescuing those eels. Good job!"

Susie eyed their nets suspiciously. "Are you here to catch them?"

"Only to put them into these buckets and give them a ride above the dam.

We'll let them go up there!"

"Just to grow big?" Susie asked.

"And to carry the baby mussels," the second man said. "Did you ever find those big, oval mussel shells?"

She nodded. Those were her favorite.

"Those mussels clean the water for everyone. You and me as much as the fish.

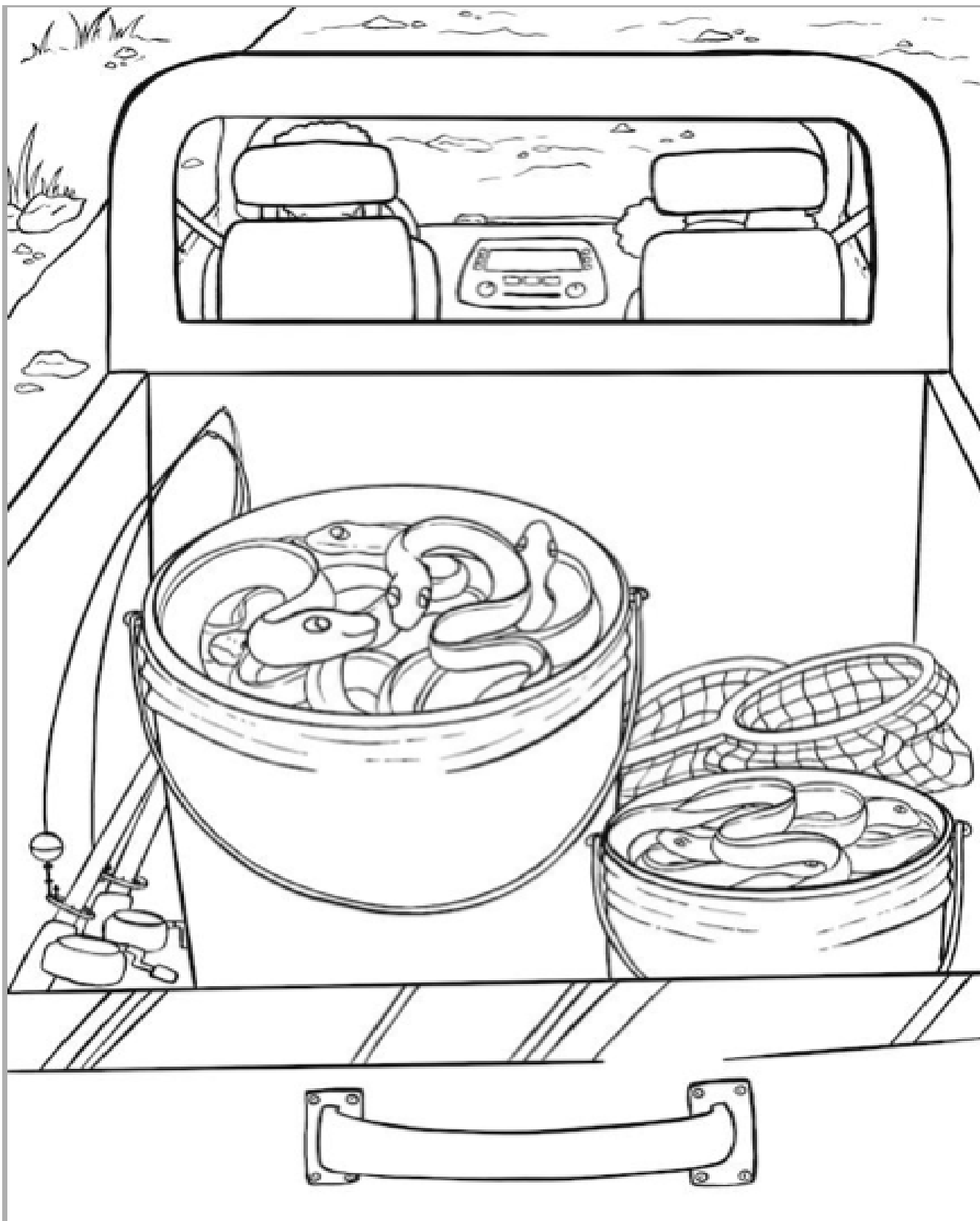
The mama mussels sneak their babies into the eels to get them far upstream.

We help the eel so they can do that job. The water would get all brown and filthy again if we didn't."

"Eew," Susie said. Then her eyes got big "So each eel is like a school bus?"

"Yep," said Uncle Al. "Slippy, slimy, mussel busses!" Susie laughed. The three men groaned.

Susie and Uncle Al watched for a while, then waved good-bye and drove off in Uncle Al's car.



Chapter 16

Slippy was so tired she barely noticed when the men dropped her into the bucket. Then the loud, rumbly truck began to move – and she realized only one or two of her bucket-mates smelled like her siblings. There were so many eel! The men would be moving them all night long, with this just the first night of many.

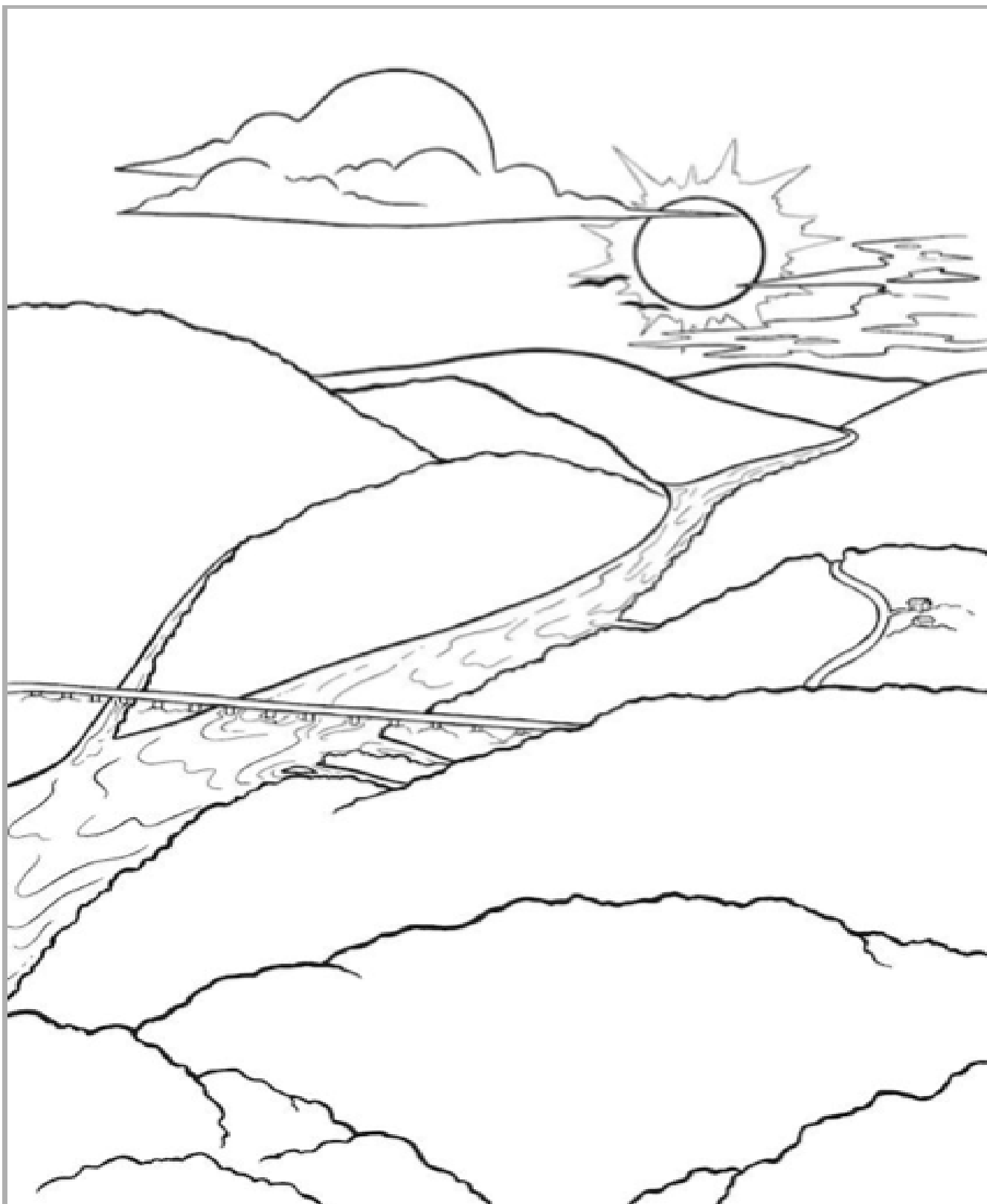
“I’m Slippy. What are your names?” There were far too many to remember, but she soon gathered that all these eel families came from the same end of the Sargasso Sea and felt the pull to swim upstream.

Molly landed as the truck stopped for a crossing. “It should get easier from now on. Small rivers and creeks pour into the river from the dam on up. The Susquehanna has many sources.”

“Susquehanna. What a beautiful name!” Slippy thought.

“Just follow the pull and trust yourselves! Some of you will leave us soon. Goodbye in advance! The openings to the first tributaries are coming up, and I will be staying with the main group all the way north of the Endless Hills.”

Some of the eels started shouting. “Thank you, Aunt Molly!” Not Slippy. She knew she’d be swimming all the way up.



Chapter 17

Lovely, undulating hills flanked the river as they swam past a small town. The river changed. “There are no plants here,” Slippy called out.

“And no mussels!” someone added.

Nothing lived here at all! The current changed, too, and when Slippy poked her head out, she saw why. “There’s another dam up ahead! I hope the men with trucks will help us again.”

Molly fluttered her wings, all upset. “I’m sorry, girls,” she said. “The men with trucks don’t come to this dam!” She paused. “You will have to be very brave and trust a friend of mine.”

“Who is your friend?” Slippy asked.

“An eagle and his family, but a family of herons wants to help too.” She fluffed up her feathers. “I trust the eagles not to eat you. They’ve helped on other trips. I’m not sure about the herons, though.”

They’d all learned to watch out for herons. When they spread their wings, they flashed feathers of beautiful, bright blue color. Their long, graceful legs helped them walk in the water. Their necks, together with their long beaks, were good only for one thing: hunting frogs and snakes, and also fish.

None of the eels wanted to end up being their dinner. “Let’s talk to them before we decide,” Slippy suggested.



Chapter 18

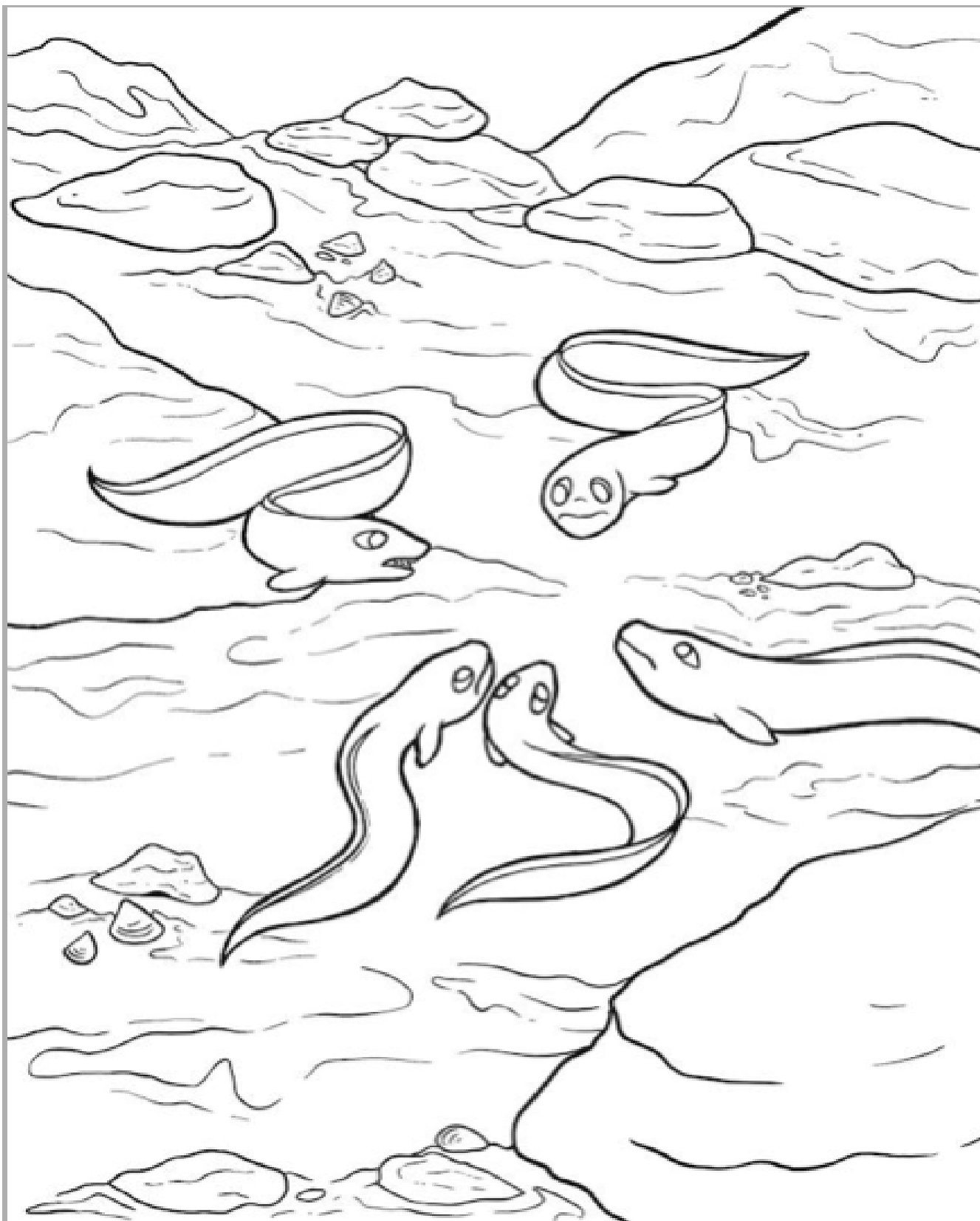
Slippy couldn't sleep that day. She swam around slowly in the shaded resting pool and checking on everybody else. The rest of the eel felt nervous too.

Trusting the birds was scary. If they ate just seeds, it would be okay, but they were all fish-eaters.

"Molly says Roy is her student and they've done this before," she reminded them. "She's teaching the young herons too."

"I just hope they eat a good breakfast before they come to fly us over," an eel from another family said. "I'd rather go with the eagles."

Slippy thought fast. "Don't worry. I'll go with the herons, and I'll go first," she said. "Molly will report if there is trouble, and you will know to avoid them." She was their leader. Going first was her responsibility.



Chapter 19

Molly's helpers arrived that evening, after the eel woke up and before the eagles went to bed. Slippy and the others clustered by the rocky bank. The current from the dam pulled hard, but nobody dared to go further. Over by the shallows, the herons stood on the bank, waiting.

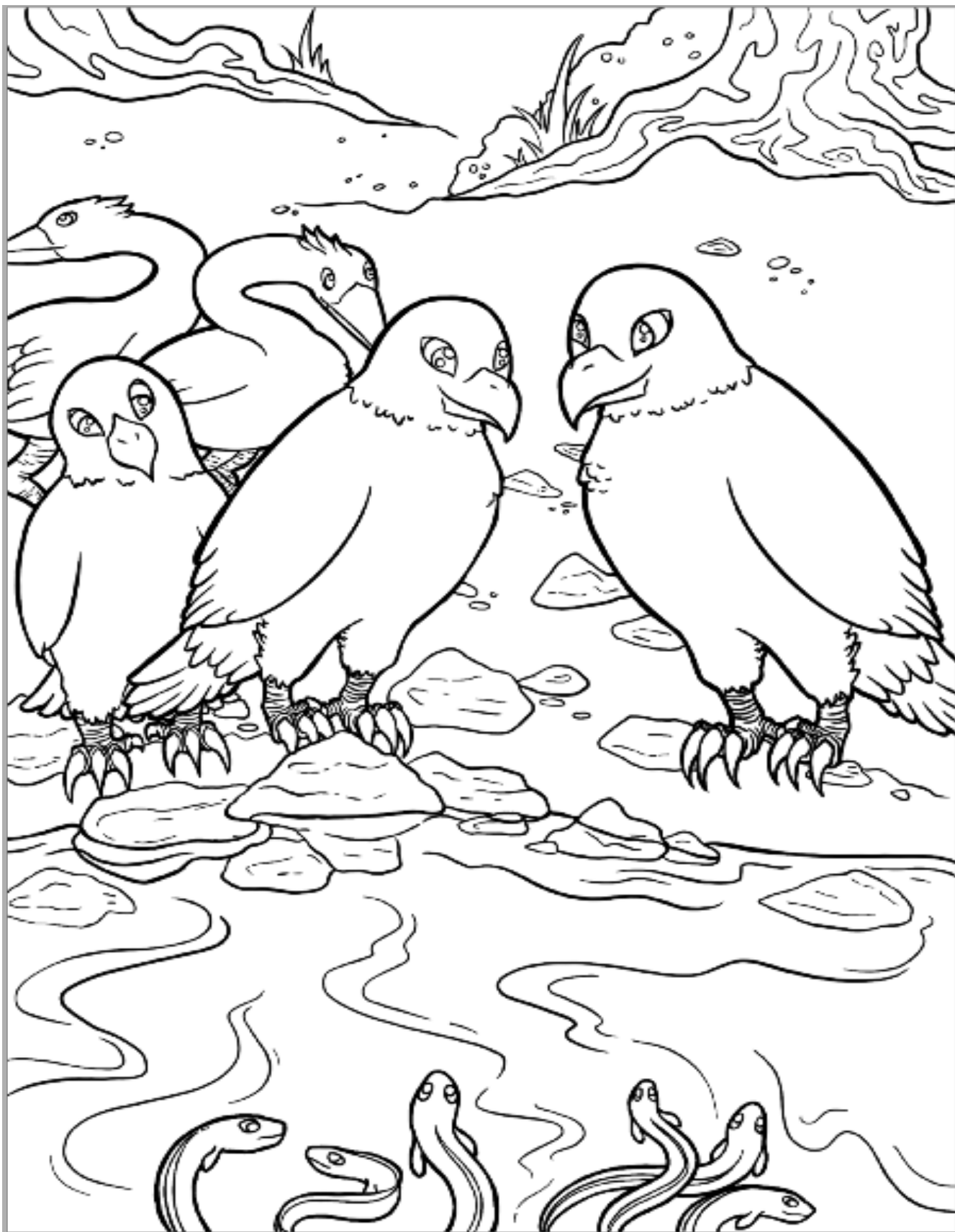
“My name is Roy, and I’m in charge of fish transport,” said an eagle. He looked smaller than the other eagles, though his colors said he was almost a grownup. “Our family will borrow human buckets to fly you and the baby mussels over the dam. We need mussels too. No one lives well when the water goes bad!”

Another heron landed and the eels flinched back. “I’m Arch, and this is my family.” The four herons standing on the bank nodded.

The herons stared down at the eels in the water. “You look hungry,” Slippy said accusingly. “How can we possibly trust you?”

Arch answered, “there won’t be eels or herons if there are no mussels. We promise. No one will eat any eel until everyone is over the dam. Heron’s honor.”

“Promises are important,” Molly said. Roy the eagle nodded. “Heron’s Honor will have to do.”



Chapter 20

The herons lined up by the bank at dusk, showing off a big, white curtain made of lace. “We found this on a laundry line,” Arch said. “We’ll carry it in our beaks while you sit inside.”

“Sounds great,” Slippy said. “I’ll go first!” She liked the idea of the curtain. Herons with their beaks full of fabric couldn’t eat any eels.

The four biggest herons walked into the water, holding the curtain by its edges. The fifth one flew ahead. “I’ll tell you where to go!” she called out.

Slippy swam into the curtain. Her sisters followed as their family stuck together. Molly waved to the others after her last sister swam in. “Wait for the next trip!”

The herons aimed in the same direction and stretched out their wings. They batted at the air with big, powerful strokes. Lifting this many eels was hard!

“You can do it!” Roy and his family cheered them on.

Finally, they got airborne and with a lot of effort, they lifted the window curtain full of eels out of the water. Slowly, carefully, they flew over the dam.

The smallest two herons released their beaks, and the eels splashed into the water.



Chapter 21

Slippy dove into the green water. Then she stuck out her head. “Thank you, and good job!”

“Thank you for keeping the water clean,” said the heron who wasn’t holding the curtain anymore. “Have a safe trip!”

Slippy joined the rest underwater. “Let’s wait for the others,” she said.

The water was strangely shallow and warm, with a lot of mud on the bottom and densely crowded plant stems very different from the species in the faster-flowing river. Some had round leaves and beautiful, white, and yellow flowers that floated on the surface.

The fish were different here, too. She saw one that was all orange and shiny, and a group of pretty sunfish with dangerous-looking spikes in their dorsal fins. She wouldn’t try eating those. Not even a small one.

A big bass came up. “Moving upstream? Make sure you leave soon. I don’t want the people to come and watch. Someone will bring a rod and reel, and then try to catch me.”



Chapter 22

More and more eels dropped out of the sky as Slippy looked on. The eagles used plastic buckets they'd taken from people's backyards. Some had held tools or dirt, but Roy and his family had dumped all that on the people's porches. That way, the owners could find their things later.

They also knew to return the buckets in time when people weren't around. Last year, the people had run after them, even though the eagles were going to bring the buckets right back!

Slippy thought about all of this as the eels kept dropping from the sky. She loved seeing the broad, strong wings of the eagles from underneath as they glided over the water. She could enjoy the sight. This time, she knew the birds were helping instead of hunting.

"That's all for us," Roy told her at last. "The herons will make the last trip with their curtain." He shook his head. "That curtain will never smell the same. I hope the people won't notice."

Slippy didn't understand his worry. Eels smelled perfectly fine to her.



Chapter 23

The herons and eagles lined up on the edge of the dam once the final eel had settled in. They looked tired but proud, and they enjoyed having water running over their feet.

“Thank you for helping us over the dam!” Slippy called out. “We truly appreciate it!”

“Thank you, thank you!” the rest of the eels called from behind her.

“It was a pleasure,” Roy said for all of them.

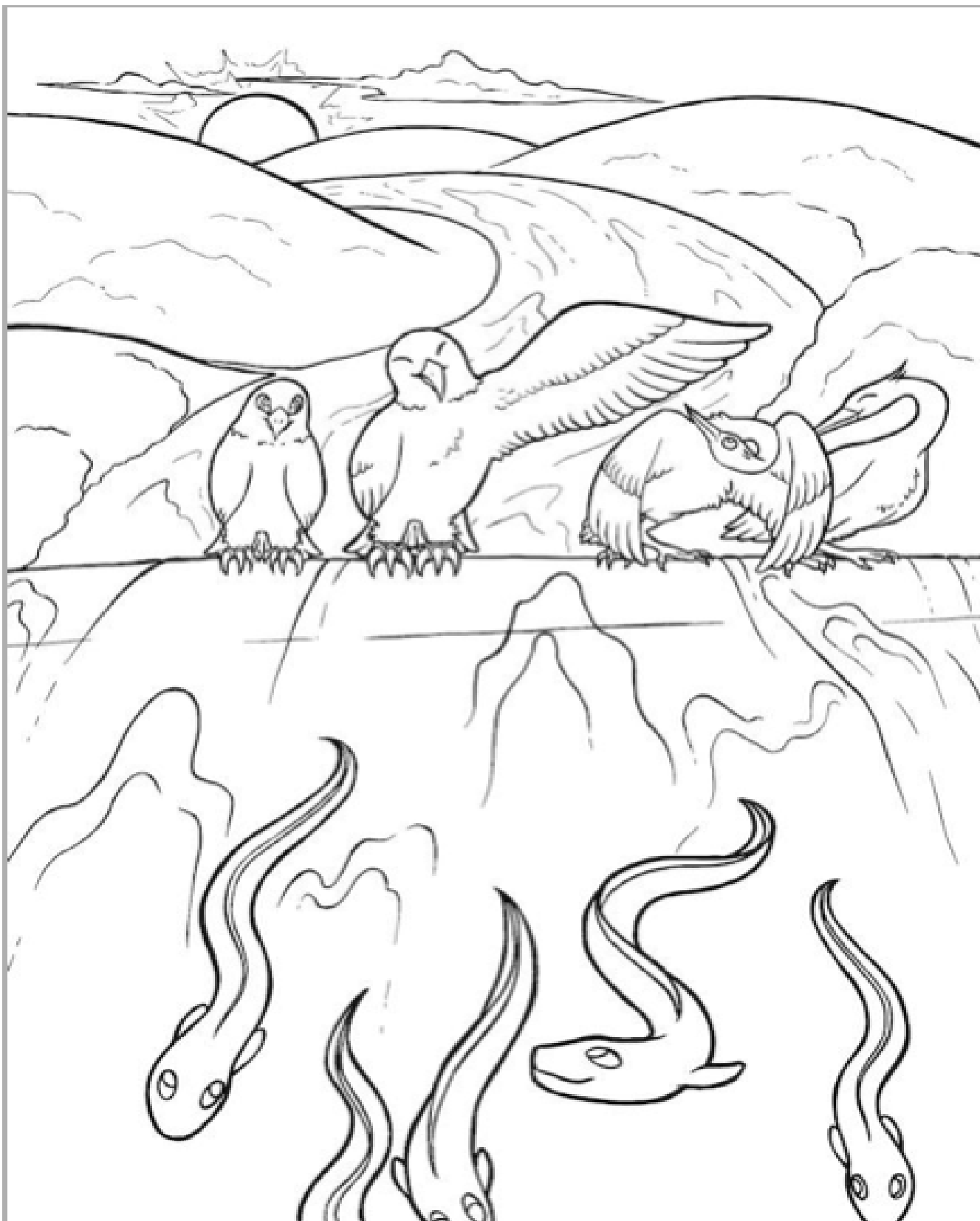
“Thank you for trusting us,” Arch said.

Molly circled down to a nearby branch. “I am very proud of you all,” she said.

“Heron Honor will be good enough for me from now on!”

The youngest heron said, “All that work has made me really hungry, but you can have a good head start. That’s what we promised, and that’s what we’ll do.”

This was their signal to leave. “Let’s go, girls,” Slippy said. She dashed all the way to the bottom, and then led the way out of the slow, too-warm dam water. Soon they would be in a healthy stream again.



Chapter 24

The trees had lost almost all their leaves by the time Slippy and her four remaining sisters felt the pull ease away. “This is a good spot,” she said. “I like how the trees shade the creek.”

“I like the rocks and the fallen trunks,” her sister added. “They make good resting pools. Some of them even have fish!”

The water felt cool and moved at just the right speed. Mussels and clams lived in the sandbar across the stream.

“It’s a good place for the baby mussels too,” Slippy said.

“Eels are mussel school buses!” her sisters chanted, laughing.

A raccoon and her young waddled to the water near a drinking deer, hoping for a nice dinner of mollusks. “They’re eating our mussels!” an eel exclaimed. “No wonder we have to keep bringing more!”

“We’ll eat them too,” Slippy said. “Everyone is someone else’s food. That’s what Aunt Molly called the Circle of Life. We’ll eat a lot before it’s time to head back to the Sargasso Sea!”

Slippy sighed happily as she nestled down to sleep the next morning. The narrow creek was just the right size and teemed with life. The headwaters of the Susquehanna River would make a perfect home for them all!



Chapter 25 - 30 years later - Old Friends

Slippy was hungry. The smaller fish and mussels didn't feed her almost 5-foot body anymore, and she moved downstream toward bigger, more nourishing fish.

Swimming downstream, she remembered the warmer waters of the broad and generous river in the lowlands. It was time, she decided, to follow the pull and return to the Sargasso Sea.

When she swam through a familiar-looking town, she expected to splash down a dam. Memories of adventures and of old friends flooded her. Slippy stopped and looked around. Soon, she spotted an eagle perched in a tall, healthy tree.

"Hi there!" she yelled from the water. "Are you Roy?"

The eagle glided down to a large stone wall. "Roy's my grandpa," he said. "I'm Hunter. How do you know his name?"

Slippy splashed her tail in excitement. "He helped me and my sisters over the dam! He and the herons." She told him the story.

He craned his head. "That's not just tales? I always thought he was just making it up. Even the dams got removed before my father hatched!"

"Not just tales," she said. "It was a true adventure!" Before she headed downstream, she yelled. "Say hi to Molly the Raven!"



Chapter 26 - 30 years later - New Adventures

A group of young, see-through elvers swim upstream. Slippy ate a trout, then headed into the salt water of the Chesapeake Bay.

Agnes floated there, guiding another group of elvers. She had grown even bigger than before!

"Hi, Agnes!"

"Slippy!" Agnes laughed. "You are so long and so strong! Have a good trip to the Sargasso Sea!"

Soon, the salty waves turned crystalline. Slippy swam through a kelp forest. Above her, the sargassum seaweed floated in enticing clumps. The clear water would be safe for her eggs, and the leaves would hide the baby eel that hatched later.

An eel she'd never met gave her a toothy grin. He was short like the other guys. "Hi, I'm Feral," he said.

"I'm Slippy," she said, tasting the water. He smelled just right, and he had a fun grin. Did she already meet her mate? Perhaps she would lay eggs with him before they swam off to greater adventures.

Scientists don't know what the eel do after spawning. The eel keep their business a top secret! Maybe they go off on in search of excitement, knowing that their kids will know to "just follow the pull."

~the end~



Thank you for visiting!

If you enjoyed this story and this coloring book, find out more about our next project! The following story will be turned into a coloring book next, and its star is Salvie, the Eastern Brook trout! She also travels up the Susquehanna River, and she even meets some eel along the way! Download a free copy of the story here:

The Big Trout Adventure (<https://dl.bookfunnel.com/8yib1naq0m>)

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