

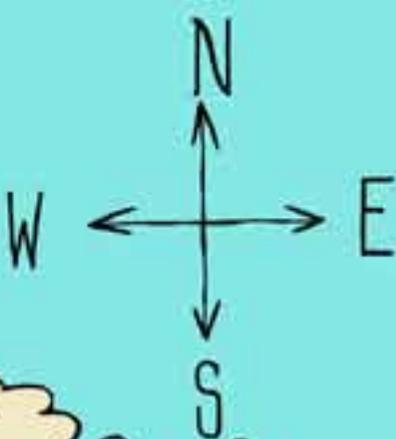
The White Witch

Pieretta Dawn





Mountains



VILLAGE
2 Hours Walk

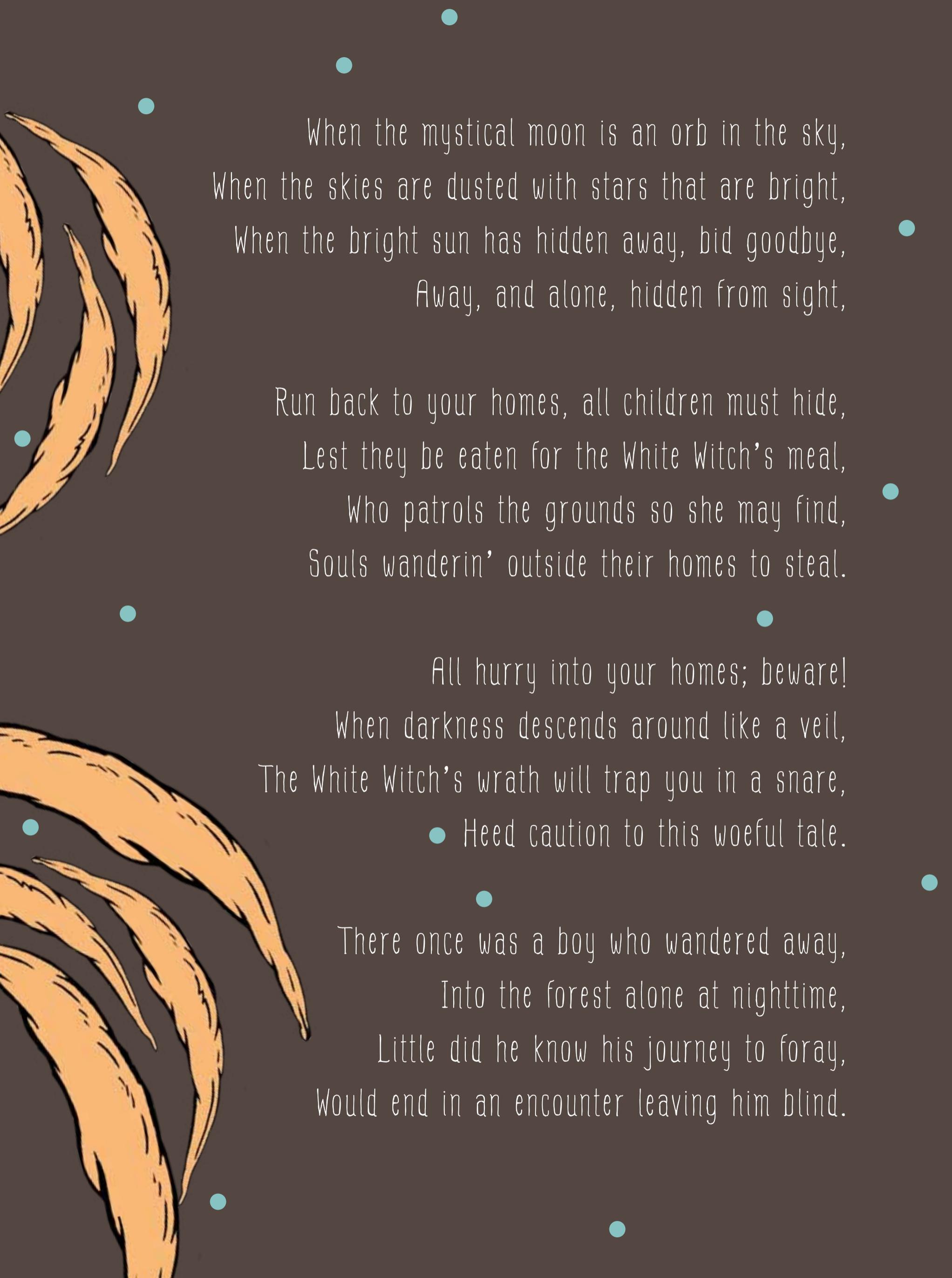
FOREST
Climbing 2 Days 9 Hours

Southern Mountains
2 Days Walk

River

Rolling Hills

Emerald Sea

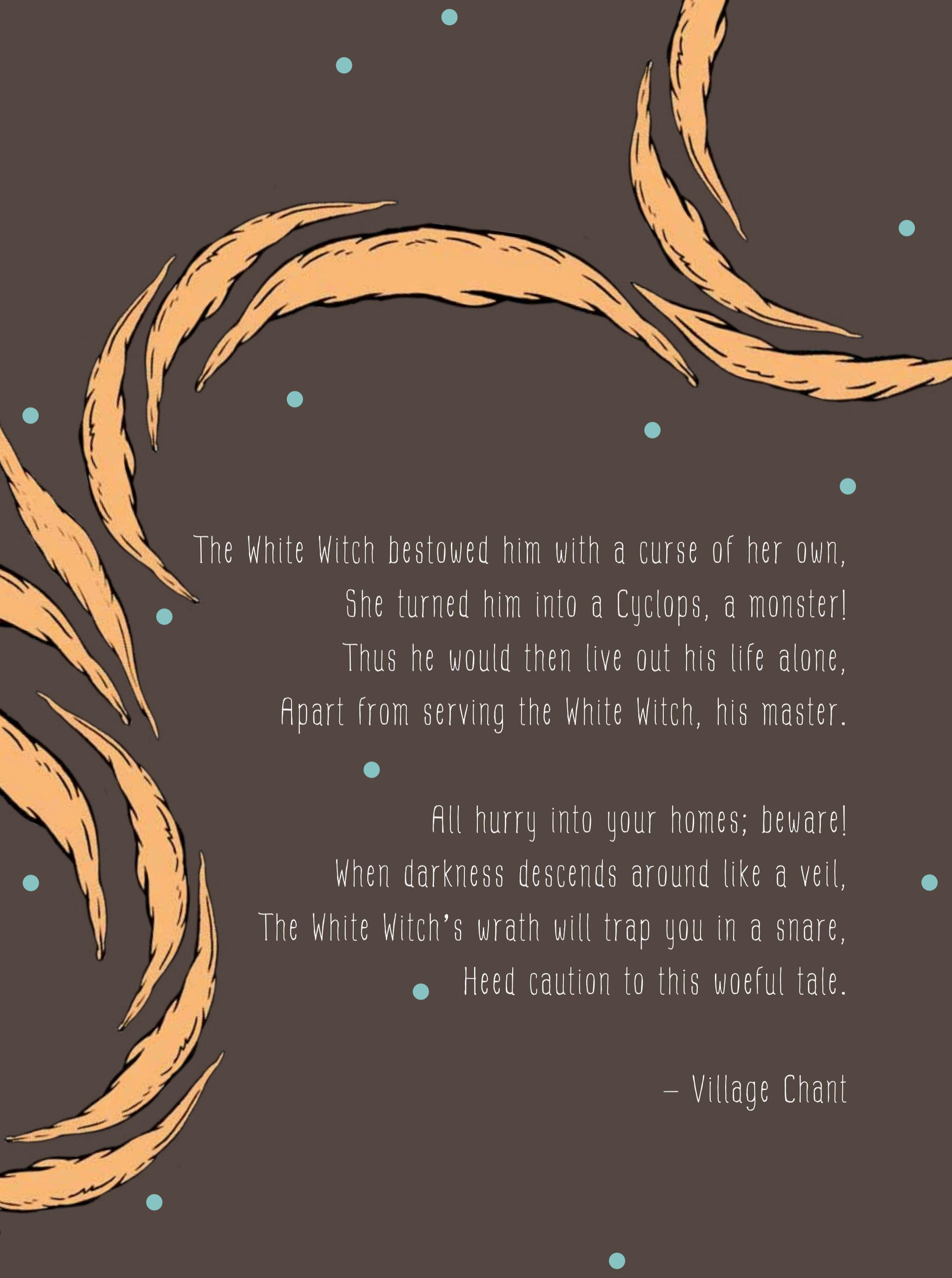


When the mystical moon is an orb in the sky,
When the skies are dusted with stars that are bright,
When the bright sun has hidden away, bid goodbye,
Away, and alone, hidden from sight,

Run back to your homes, all children must hide,
Lest they be eaten for the White Witch's meal,
Who patrols the grounds so she may find,
Souls wanderin' outside their homes to steal.

All hurry into your homes; beware!
When darkness descends around like a veil,
The White Witch's wrath will trap you in a snare,
● Heed caution to this woeful tale.

There once was a boy who wandered away,
Into the forest alone at nighttime,
Little did he know his journey to foray,
Would end in an encounter leaving him blind.



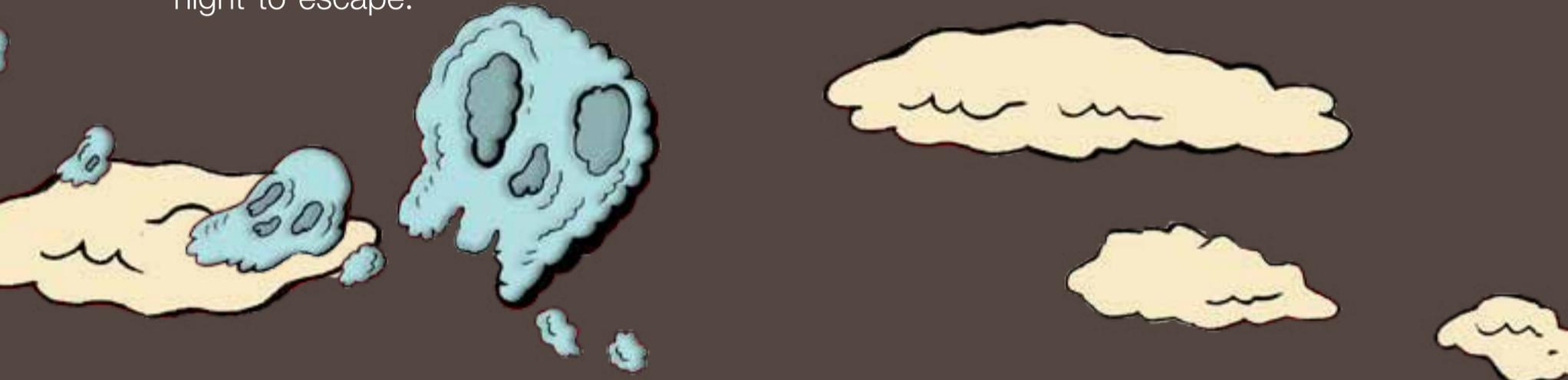
The White Witch bestowed him with a curse of her own,
She turned him into a Cyclops, a monster!
Thus he would then live out his life alone,
Apart from serving the White Witch, his master.

All hurry into your homes; beware!
When darkness descends around like a veil,
The White Witch's wrath will trap you in a snare,
Heed caution to this woeful tale.

– Village Chant

It was a cold, dark night, and the frosty wind swept over the barren landscape, howling mournfully on its journey.

Lani peered outside, watching the fat snowflakes hurtle past her in a dizzying dance. In her mind, she could describe the scene perfectly, finding the words that enabled anyone to conjure up what she saw before her: the perfect night to escape.

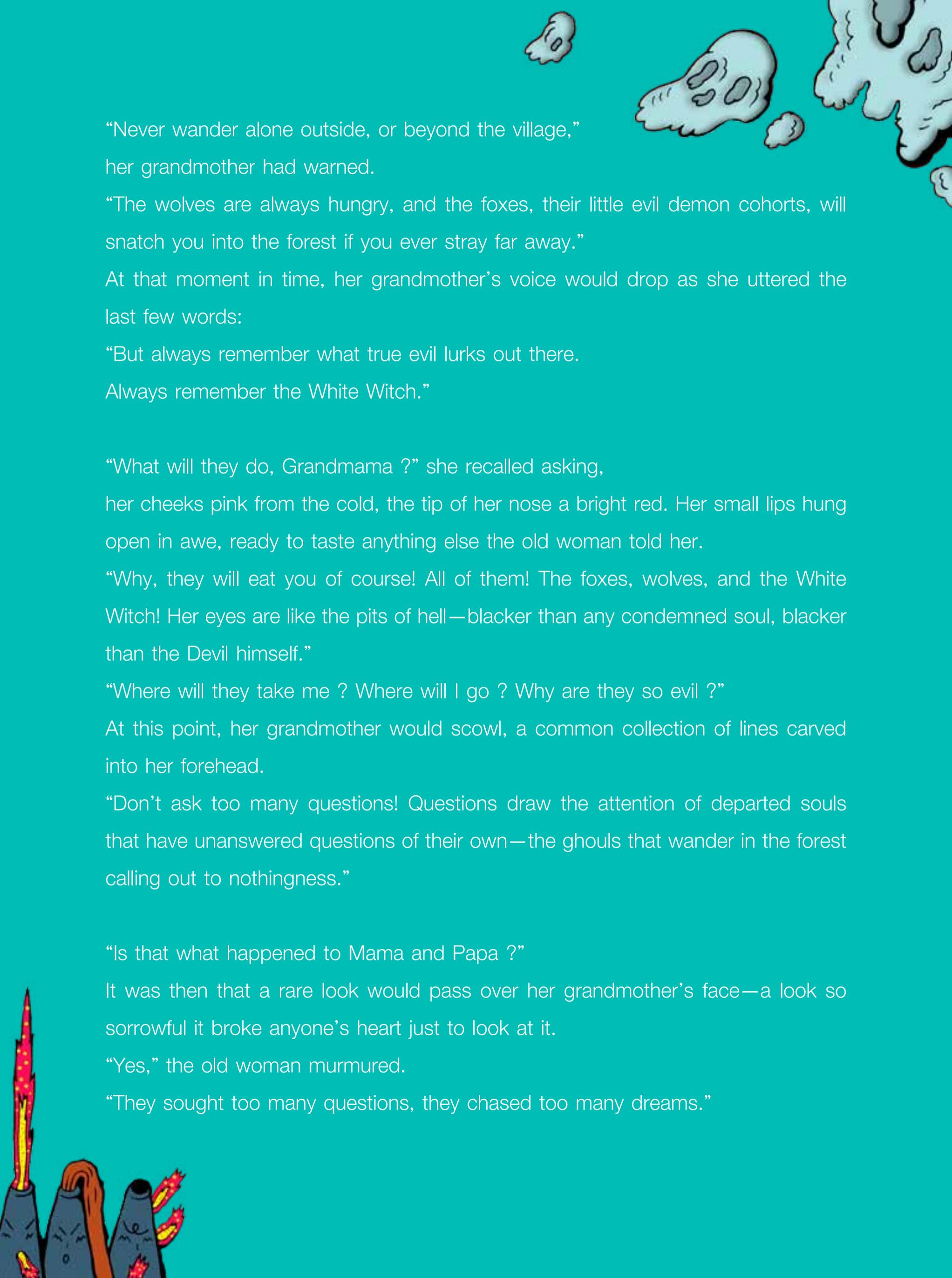


Her entire life had been spent in this valley. Never had she once ventured beyond the trees that fringed the frostbitten grounds, nor had she ever dared to scale the mountains around her side. The place she'd grown up in was empty, boring, and freezing cold most of the time. The winters were long and harsh, the landscape stripped of life. Here, thin trees rose like black skeletons against a never-ending white, swaying lopsidedly when bitter winds sprinted across the area. The skies were a grayish pallor, the color of her grandmother's hair, and brushes of clouds smothered the canvas above like dirty cotton, suffocating the mountains and keeping the chill inside. Each year, the short and almost temporary summer would appear momentarily, only to be chased away once more by the wretched claws of winter. Though a foreigner to the landscape would perhaps call it wondrous, the beauty and awe of sparkling white powder quickly lost its allure when the cold seeped so deep into your skin that it trickled down to your bones. The dark-haired girl glanced back inside her small house. She knew that the only way to escape the weather was to hide inside the cottages of the village, built sturdy and firm from wood and stone, and molded into shape by clay.



The homely single room behind her was dark and smoky, and it usually took a while for anyone's eyes to adjust to the dark after being so used to the blinding white snow. A small flame flickered weakly in the heart of the hearth, as if tired from fighting against the chill. Bundles of wild mushroom and herbs hung from the ceiling, and strips of meat swayed gently from above, always brushing her head every time she walked inside. Although the corners of the room were as damp and gelid as the White Witch's heart, it was always better than facing anything that lay outside in the wilderness.

Lani took a deep breath, watching the air condense as she exhaled. She could still remember the time when she was a small girl with her slightly upturned button nose and big, bright eyes, sitting on a small hay mattress as her grandmother told her the village's tales. She would hug her knees together, and wrap herself as tightly as she could in the rough blanket she had, shielding herself from the dark creatures her grandmother spoke of, and the deathly diseases that had snatched her grandfather away years ago.



“Never wander alone outside, or beyond the village,” her grandmother had warned.

“The wolves are always hungry, and the foxes, their little evil demon cohorts, will snatch you into the forest if you ever stray far away.”

At that moment in time, her grandmother’s voice would drop as she uttered the last few words:

“But always remember what true evil lurks out there. Always remember the White Witch.”

“What will they do, Grandmama ?” she recalled asking, her cheeks pink from the cold, the tip of her nose a bright red. Her small lips hung open in awe, ready to taste anything else the old woman told her.

“Why, they will eat you of course! All of them! The foxes, wolves, and the White Witch! Her eyes are like the pits of hell—blacker than any condemned soul, blacker than the Devil himself.”

“Where will they take me ? Where will I go ? Why are they so evil ?”

At this point, her grandmother would scowl, a common collection of lines carved into her forehead.

“Don’t ask too many questions! Questions draw the attention of departed souls that have unanswered questions of their own—the ghouls that wander in the forest calling out to nothingness.”

“Is that what happened to Mama and Papa ?”

It was then that a rare look would pass over her grandmother’s face—a look so sorrowful it broke anyone’s heart just to look at it.

“Yes,” the old woman murmured.

“They sought too many questions, they chased too many dreams.”



“Where are they now, Grandmama?”

The young girl only recalled vague memories of her parents.

Her grandmother’s face changed once more to its customary scowl.

“The less you know the better. Stay inside. Cook and clean and collect firewood from nearby. Don’t go anywhere we tell you not to. You are safe, as long as you obey.”

And for a while, she obeyed.



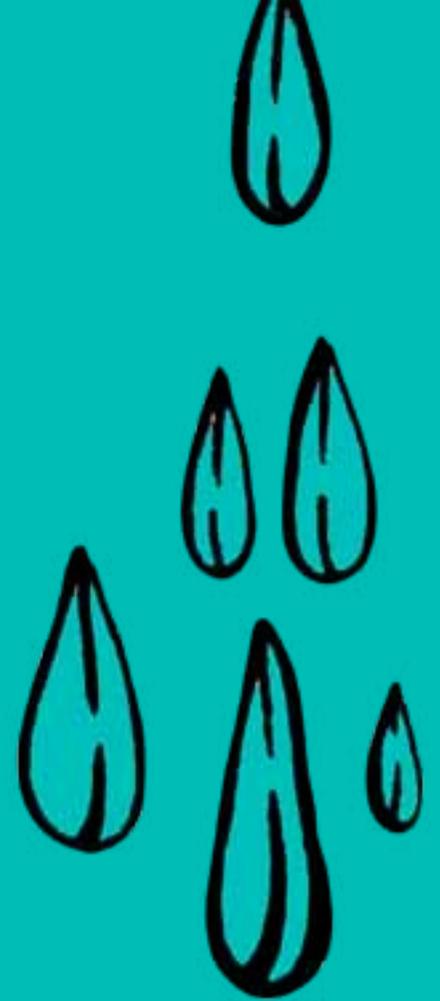
She kept mostly inside the cottage, and didn’t leave for too long on a rare errand of collecting herbs in the spring, or wild berries in the summer. Sometimes she would run outside to play with the other children in the village, but at dusk, as night was about to fall, she and the other children would have to split off and run into their own homes, lest they be eaten by the White Witch. Never, ever, did she stray from those rules.

But then years went by, and something grew within her. The stories her father used to tell found their way back into the forefront of her mind.

She remembered the spark in his eyes, the way they lit up as he spoke of the untamed wilderness, of swashbuckling adventures, of faraway lands just waiting to be explored. Her mother shared that same thirst for excitement, and it was only natural that Lani had inherited their wanderlust too.

But her grandmother always warned her it was this very wanderlust, this very unquenchable curiosity that got them killed by the wolves.

Nevertheless, that untamable, insatiable thirst grew within her—a thirst for something that she could not make go away. Inside her, a need for adventure stirred, and she longed for something more. She could no longer remain cooped up in what she knew. She knew it was something unhealthy, something her grandmother discouraged...but she could not ignore what she constantly hungered for.





She would have to risk facing the White Witch if she ever wanted to have the adventure her heart so desired.

Glancing around once more, Lani heard the soft grunts of her grandmother snoring away gently in her bed. She already knew the note she had left her wouldn't suffice for her actions, but she hoped it would help curb the old woman's worry, and perhaps she would forgive her when she finally did return.

She wrapped her shawl tighter around her thin frame, repositioned her rucksack on her shoulders, and stepped outside into the cold.

The wind flung her hood off her head and whipped her hair around her face, the force so ferocious she couldn't see. For a moment, she was blinded by the attack. She forced herself through the thick, powdery snow carpeting the ground, cursing inwardly at her feet—they always felt like they were dragging her behind, limiting what she could do and where she could go. If only she had magic legs that would allow her to plunder through the thickest snow, cross the deepest rivers, or leap over the highest mountains...

Lani froze. That noise. Was there something out there?

No. It's just the howling wind, she reassured herself, chastising her hyperactive mind for trying to scare her.

A few more steps, and she swore she heard it again.

She was only a couple of paces outside her home—she could still make it back.

No, the other part of her repeated. If you go back now, you'll never venture out again.

Steadying herself, and quelling any fearful thoughts, Lani trudged forward.

She recognized the dark shapes around her as cottages, and used her mental map to navigate around each home. After crossing over a dozen, she knew she was at the edge of the village. If she ventured out further, the cold could kill her, and she might never make her way back. She also knew that it was the only way forward, and that she had to make it to the forest at the edge of the mountains before resting. Once the snow stopped, her tracks would betray her—they would be as visible as bright berries during springtime, and surely the villagers would hunt her down only to bring her back.



Lani squeezed her eyes shut, and forced her feet forward, stepping over the invisible boundary of the village's perimeter. She opened her eyes. Freedom—! Her breath caught in her throat. No...it can't be.

“Where are you going?”

Before her, was a tall, skeletal shape. It had a human form, but wore a cloak that was such a bright white color that even in the dark it seemed to shine and reflect a million times in the snow, blinding her. She shielded her eyes and stared down at the figure's feet instead—except there were none. The bottom of the cloak trailed mysteriously off the ground, hovering a few inches above the snow. She dared to glance upwards once more, taking in the triangular hood of the cloak embedded with a blood-red cross right at the center. With a startled gasp, Lani noticed that in the place of eyes were two narrow slits, deep and dark as the pits of hell. The White Witch.

“Where are you going?”

the White Witch hissed once more, the sound a rasping noise like the angry scrape of dry wood before a forest fire. “It's past your bedtime.”





“I...” Lani couldn’t believe she could even form a single syllable. Her whole life she had never really once believed the tales of the White Witch. Of course, she had accepted them as a local fact, or perhaps had once trusted in them as a child. But as logic and reality set in with age, she never consciously realized that she had begun to see the White Witch as an old wives’ tale.

Until now.

The witch stretched out her arms, as if to grasp the young girl. Her thin, slim fingers reached forward, sharp like Death’s scythe.

Lani did the only thing that passed through her mind: she ran.

She ducked beneath the outstretched arms and sprinted for her life. Suddenly, the cold didn’t seem like such a problem anymore, nor did the fear of her grandmother or the villagers catching her. She was too far to go back, but there was no way she was going to linger around and be someone else’s meal.

The voice of the White Witch followed her every move, screeching terrifying things that she dared not register in her mind, for she knew it would make her freeze.

“NO MATTER WHERE YOU RUN, I WILL FIND YOU!”

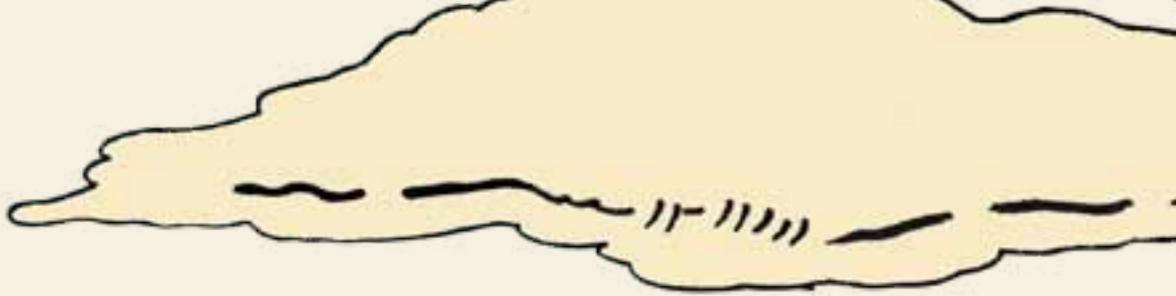
On and on Lani ran, ignoring the stabbing pain in her side, and the growing, aching strain on her muscles. She ignored the way every breath of chilled, frozen air felt like blades were carving icicles in her lungs, and forced herself onward. Her adrenaline had worn off, and with every step Lani thought she would collapse.

On and on she went, until she thought she could go no more. Suddenly, out of the gloom, a line of shadowy figures appeared, and Lani nearly felt herself collapse.

Oh no...it's her army, she thought desperately. It's the White Witch's army of other demons...

She froze, doubling over, her hands on her shaky knees, her breath coming out in anguished gasps. The wind was still whipping in a ferocious frenzy around her, howling in her eardrums. Wait. She could no longer hear the White Witch.





Had she truly outrun her?

Taking one last deep breath, Lani straightened. Those shapes in the distance...

The forest?

She stumbled towards them, staring up in awe. The gargantuan trees loomed before her, their frozen dead branches providing a little more shelter in their skeletal embrace. Lani ducked into the forest.

She suddenly became aware of how everything seemed so much quieter inside. Though the snow was still falling, many of the branches caught the flakes in their grasps before they hit the ground, and there was an eerie silence that greatly unnerved her.

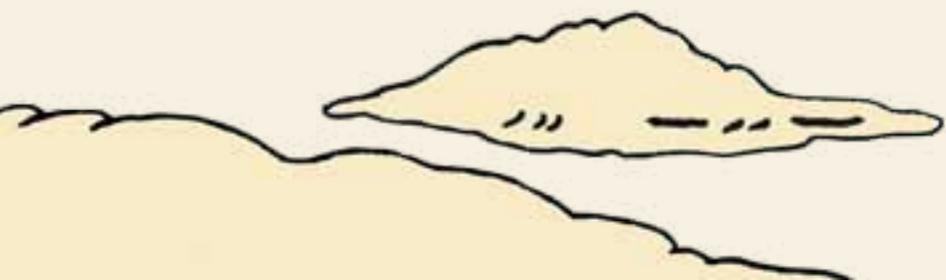
The trunks grew closer together, and soon Lani was forced to step over roots that poked through the layers of snow. There was no more howling wind, which was stopped by the thick barricade of trees. Instead, only a few flakes made it past the net of branches above and floated softly to the forest floor.

Soon, she regained some feeling in her legs, only to realize that they felt like liquid. Lani collapsed on to the snowy ground. She closed her eyes and took a few moments to collect her thoughts, knowing that she couldn't fall asleep in these conditions quite yet—everyone in her village knew that to do so out in the cold almost spelled certain death.

She had escaped from the White Witch. She couldn't believe it. She, a mere twelve-year-old girl, had outrun the wrath of the witch. Lani felt an elated yelp of glee escape from her lips, and then a shaky, uncertain laugh.

She glanced around. What now?

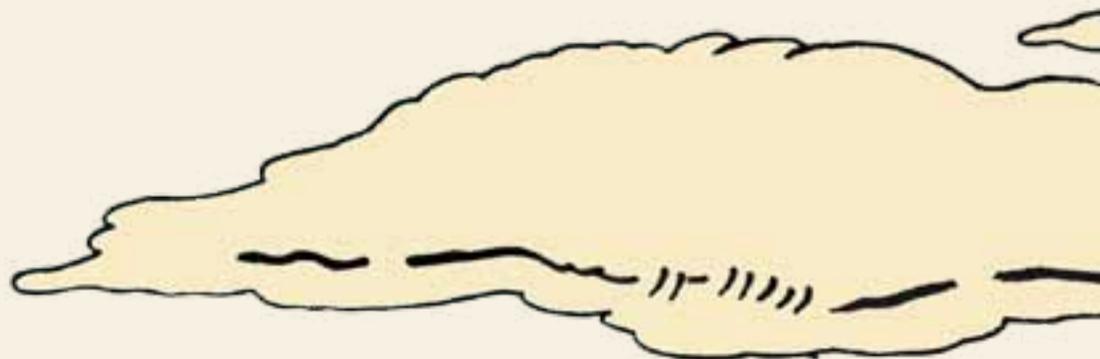
There was nothing as far as her eyes could see apart from trees, snow, and more trees and snow. Everything was a dark color, or blanketed by frosted white powder. A few roots stuck out here and there, but not much else.



Recalling what she had learnt over the twelve winters of her life, or what she still remembered of them, she set out to find what she needed. She eventually stumbled upon a large, curved root and decided that it would do. Around one side and on top of the root, she piled layer upon layer of snow. She worked quickly, feeling the cold creeping into her body and hands despite her thick gloves, but not too hastily that she would build up a layer of sweat, which could just as quickly freeze on her and cause her harm. Once the snow was thick and tightly packed, Lani carved out the other side and formed the shape of a small snow cave. It was large enough just so that if she curled up she could fit inside. She knew that although it seemed counter-intuitive, the snow cave would trap her body heat and keep it inside to warm her up even more.

Using a small blanket as a barrier between her and the chilled ground, and her rucksack as a pillow, Lani drifted off into a fitful sleep.

The next day, she journeyed on towards the mountains. The snow had stopped, and surprisingly the sun was shining. Although she knew the general direction of where she was going, every time she was uncertain, she would simply climb a tree (something she had been good at since she was young) and survey her surroundings. If there weren't any trees with appropriate footholds, she would instead search for an opening in the snow-topped branches and study the position of the sun. She knew the mountains she wanted to go to spanned south of the forest, which was in turn south of her village, so she simply had to head in that direction. She estimated that she was perhaps only a quarter of a day's walk away from the foot of the mountain range.





Despite the close setting of the trees, Lani felt a feeling she couldn't quite express. It was a strange uncertainty, like she had no clue what was going to happen in the next moment, let alone the next day. Then, with a jolt, she realized what it was: freedom.

For once, she could do whatever she wanted, whenever she wanted, however she wanted.

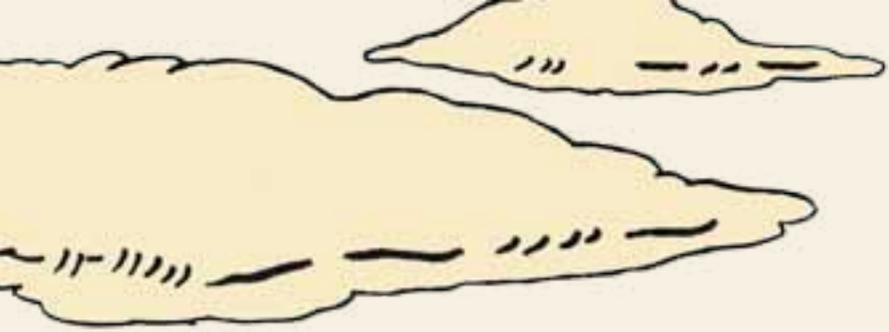
She was free to choose her own path, free to make her own choices, and free to live how she wanted to. She chose when to scout the surroundings, and chose when to eat another portion of her carefully rationed food, which contained primarily pieces of bread and cheese. Suddenly, the simple everyday task had a new allure to it.



Someone had once told her that past the Southern Mountains lay the Emerald Sea, where the weather was always warmer, and it was never known to snow. However, she could never quite confirm the fact, as hardly anyone from the village that she knew had journeyed past those peaks into the lands beyond.

The mountains themselves acted as physical barriers to the villagers, and—if what they'd told her was right—it was also a barrier that trapped the snowstorm clouds inside the valley, chilling its heart and soul. She sincerely hoped the other side of the mountain range would be green and ripe with fruit, as she knew for a fact that she couldn't possibly carry enough food for more than a few days' journey. If she did successfully cross the peaks, and everything was still in the frozen dead of winter, reality and hunger alone would force her to turn around and head back without having experienced what she'd journeyed out to explore.





Before midday, she'd reached the foot of one of the mountains. The climb looked steep, but definitely manageable, with plenty of trees and roots to grab hold on to if she ever slid. The ground was soft with snow, and though she never encountered an avalanche, she was always on the look out for them.

She climbed for the majority of the day. The physical exertion tired her small frame, but Lani celebrated the burn in her lungs, and the ache in her muscles—she was free and exploring unknown terrain. She knew her limits, and she rested when she needed to, and melted snow in her water pouch when she was thirsty. By dusk, clouds had rolled in once more, and were setting an attack on the surrounding countryside. Lani decided that it wouldn't be worth the risk climbing in such treacherous weather, and found in the side of the mountain a small mouth of a cave that was primarily covered with snowfall to rest for the night. Ignoring the thought that the place seemed almost like the jaws of some unknown beast, she ventured inside.

The cave was dryer than she expected, and unexpectedly warm, extending far into the mountain without any sign of stopping.

I definitely don't have enough courage to go too deep inside the cave without a strong source of light, Lani decided. I'll just spend the night near the mouth of the cave where I know I won't get lost.

She set up camp once more, and snuggled into her blanket, which still smelt strongly of home. Long moments passed by, and she drifted in and out of consciousness, her dreams interweaving with the reality around her. She pictured snowy landscapes juxtaposed with warm golden embers, and the cold hard earth beneath her was nothing compared to the memory of her soft hay mattress. It wasn't that she missed home, but rather that it was a foreign feeling for her to be completely and utterly alone.



Sometime during the night, somewhere in the recesses of the cave, a small shuffling sound ensued. Lani stirred, turning in her sleep. A tall, dark, bulky shape approached the mouth of the cave, nearing the place where the young girl slept. It stretched out an arm, reaching with a large, hairy limb towards her. Lani screamed.

“Please don’t be afraid! I’m sorry!”

Her breath came out in panicked bursts.

All she could see was a shape more than twice her size.

“Who are you?”

she demanded loudly, trying best she could to not appear like a frightened animal.

“I’m Benjamin,” a surprisingly small male voice replied.

Lani frowned. Her intuition told her that there was nothing to fear, but her common sense screamed otherwise.

“Who are you?” she repeated,

this time a little less panicked and more cautiously.

“I...” The voice paused.

Details began swimming into focus. The figure was undoubtedly large, probably larger than her grandfather at his prime. It had broad shoulders, thick, muscular limbs, and long, shaggy hair.



A simple visual impairment had caused the whole village to believe he was cursed to become a wicked Cyclops?

Lani wondered, as a pang of guilt and sorrow shot through her heart. Then, as quickly as the despair had come, it was replaced by suspicion, and Lani reminded herself, No. Just because he's not really a Cyclops doesn't mean he's not the White Witch's helper. She promised me she'd find me—maybe he's here to bring me to her.

"You..." she managed to croak out. She paused, clearing her throat.

"You say you're not all that they say you are...then..."—she cocked an eyebrow—

"Are you the White Witch's assistant?"

"Of course not!" the boy gasped.

"Why would I help the one who hurt me so?" Lani saw the dark shape of his head shake slowly.

“She blinded me, hurt me, and I had to run away. That’s why I disappeared, you know. Because everyone at the village believed me to be her evil creation. Even my own parents couldn’t look at me in the same way.”

Lani’s stomach coiled with an amalgamation of emotions, mixing together like a witch’s brew. A part of her felt so angry, so disappointed in the villagers—and in herself—for believing that story, that the boy was a cursed helper of the evil White Witch. Yet, another part of her also felt elated, as if a wave of relief had washed over her, cleansing her from the fear she’d initially encountered.

The reason this boy had to run away was a simple misunderstanding! When she returned home, she could take him back with her, explain everything, And all would be well.

But she couldn’t return yet. There was no way she would, after having journeyed this far already.



Though she didn't know exactly what she was looking for, she did know that there was something to be found in the vast landscape around her. She did know that her heart desired something more, and she wouldn't return until she found it.

Lani made a mental note to herself: the day she did, she would return to the village, with the boy by her side.

With restored hope, she held out a hand towards the stranger.

"I'm Lani," she said.

She felt an unexpectedly warm, soft hand clasp itself around hers.

"Benjamin," the boy responded.

She could hear the smile in his voice.

Throughout the night, Lani relayed to Benjamin the story her journey so far. Though a frequent traveler or someone who had wandered far beyond the reaches of a normal, homely human might not have called her account an epic tale, to Lani it was anything farther than she could have imagined. She finally had the chance to venture to lands only spoken of in her village, only rumored by legendary ancestors who had braved the impassable obstacles.

Benjamin listened with rapt attention and wonder, and seemed extremely interested, yet also alone and despaired, when Lani mentioned anything to do with the village. When Lani told him of her encounter with the White Witch, even in the dark she could tell his expression had become unreadable. Instead of being angry at the witch for blinding him in one eye, Benjamin simply seemed pained and confused simultaneously, as if curious as to why she even bothered to hurt him at all. Night fell around them, darkness wrapping around them like a veil. After inviting Benjamin to join her on her quest, and after he replied that he didn't have anything better to do than hide out anyway, Lani finally drifted off into a restful night's slumber.





“Let’s set out.”

Lani shouldered her pack, watching as Benjamin mirrored her action.

The duration of the day, they journeyed onward, climbing up towards the lowest point of the mountain range’s rim in order to cross over. Luckily for both of them, Benjamin was fairly acquainted with the area. He knew which paths to take, and where Lani would need help in climbing over a particularly large boulder, or crossing a particularly deep stream (in which he allowed her to perch on his shoulders as he carried both of them across).

In the daylight, Lani could better see her new friend’s features. His coarse, tangled hair, she could tell, was actually a beautiful chestnut color, and though it covered one of his eyes, the visible left eye was a deep warm brown. He had fairly round features, with a squishy potato-looking nose (though his jaw was square), and he wore the simplest clothes—materials colored in earthy tones—that he probably made himself.

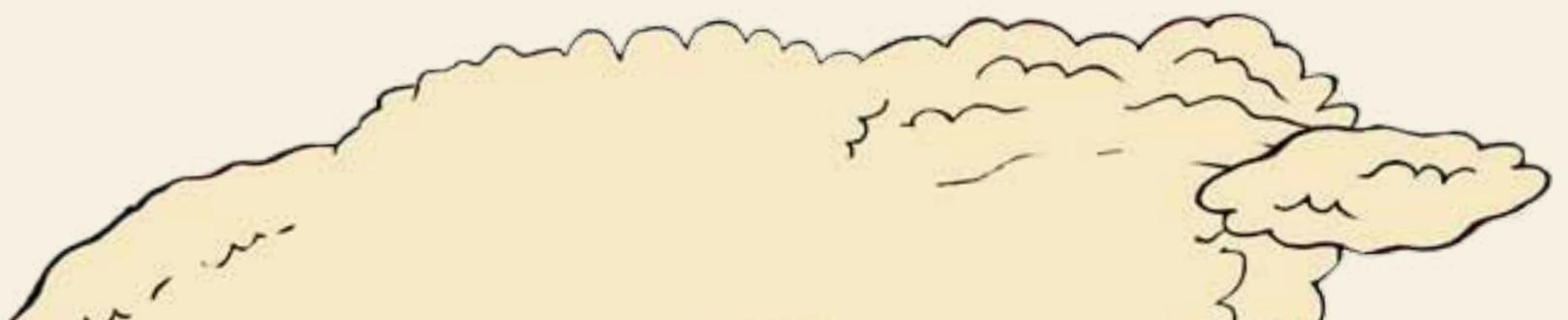
Benjamin knew everything there was to know about surviving out in the wilderness alone. He knew which fibrous plants would help insulate them against the chill, how to utilize birch-bark in building a fire, how to make a sweet drink with lingonberries, and which species of mushrooms were safe to consume. When Lani slipped and cut herself on a particularly sharp rock,

he used a handful of moss as an antiseptic to help clean and clot the wound.

In turn, they traded stories. Benjamin listened with rapt attention, absorbing anything Lani told him about her childhood. The stories she found to be the most boring that occurred in her life after the time he'd left (which was around when she was four years old), he seemed to find fascinating.

Bit by bit, the boy opened up. He told her how after he had been chased away into the forest, he'd relied on himself to survive. He had been around the age she was now, and Lani listened in wonder as he recalled the way he'd learned to become self-sufficient and survive in the bitter wilderness on his own. He would test what was safe to eat by studying the behavior of the animals; plants that were eaten by birds, caterpillars, and squirrels were often safe for him to eat as well. There had been times when he'd made the wrong choice, of course, and had ended up with a bad case of sickness. However, he'd made it this far, and Lani had no doubt whatsoever that if need be, Benjamin could physically survive on his own forever. The only question was could he do it emotionally?

When they crossed over the rim of the mountains in late afternoon, Lani couldn't help but gasp. The fog was nonexistent on this side of the range, and she saw the beautiful landscape in the distance. The snow seemed to magically halt a few steps beyond, and from the base of the mountain onwards was a terrain of moss-covered boulders, sprinkled into the far distance up until a large river snaking its way across the valley cut off the mossy rocks. Past the river were lush, green fields, illuminated by the warm rays of the setting sun—a rare golden galleon that she hardly ever saw, hung from a string in the sky. It hadn't occurred to her that what was known as the Emerald Sea was actually endless green grass and rolling hills; she had always believed it to be an ocean of some sort. Or perhaps the Emerald Sea was a body of water that lay even farther past what her eyes could see.



She knew at once that she would have to find a way to cross the river, and to get to those lands beyond.

Seeing the look in her eyes, Benjamin uttered,

“It’ll take us a day or two to get there.”

They stopped for the night and set up camp right on a cliff that jutted sharply out like a crooked hag’s nail. Munching on mashed berries and goat cheese on bread, Lani soaked in the sunlight. If someone told her that a magical barrier on the mountain rim separated the two lands—the snowy, desolate one behind her, and the one before her full of life and vitality—she would probably have believed them.

Benjamin turned towards her.

“What do you think?” he asked,

a quizzical look plastered across his face.

Lani merely smiled and, her eyes still locked on the magnificent carpet of green, replied, “Let’s rest. We have a long two days.”



She had escaped the wrath of the White Witch, had survived the dead frostbitten forests, traversed the Southern Mountains, and had crossed the snow-covered plains onward toward the Emerald Sea. The only thing stopping her was a wide, treacherous whitewater river. Somewhere in the recesses of her mind, the angry white foam of the river reminded her of the White Witch.

The river was too deep for even Benjamin to cross. Every time he stepped in, the current was far too strong and threatened to drag him away. Without a doubt, it was deeper than his height altogether.

“What do you want to do?” the boy asked.

“Do you want to go back?”

Lani shook her head, furiously wracking her mind for an idea.

“No. No way. We’ve come this far already, we can’t turn back.”

She tried desperately to keep the anxiety from seeping into her voice.

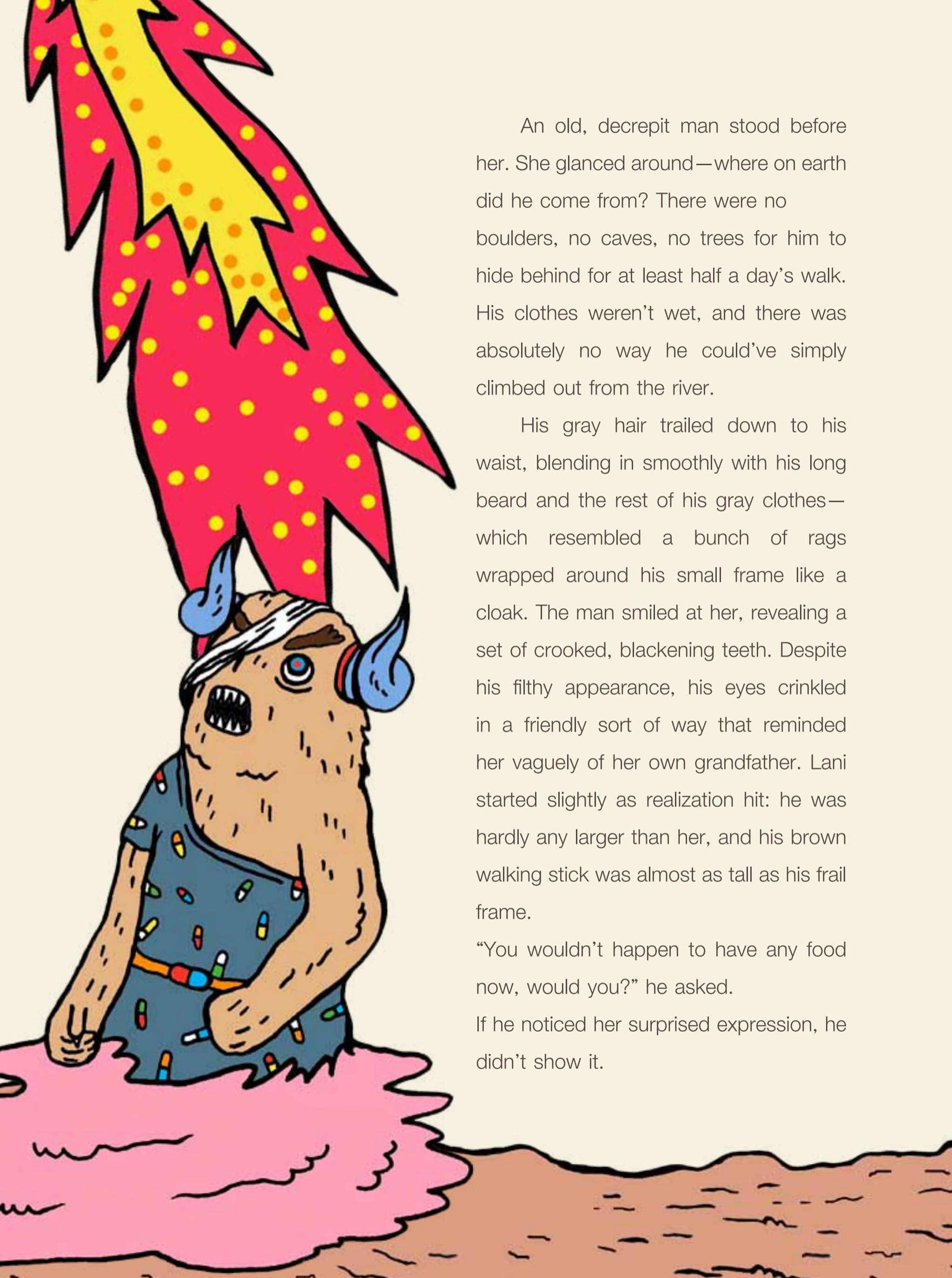
Turning away from Benjamin’s dubious eyes, she began pacing the riverbank, staring down at her feet. Tall weeds and water plants that grew around brushed against her legs, snaring themselves in her clothes. She felt as if they were pulling her back, trapping her. The sun was strong and bright, shining with full power on her dark hair and making her feel dizzy with the searing heat.

Maybe she should just stop thinking so hard and try swimming across the river? She couldn’t stay trapped like this any longer.

“You don’t have to feel trapped.”

Lani froze mid-step. That didn’t sound like Benjamin at all. With bated breath, she raised her eyes.





An old, decrepit man stood before her. She glanced around—where on earth did he come from? There were no boulders, no caves, no trees for him to hide behind for at least half a day’s walk. His clothes weren’t wet, and there was absolutely no way he could’ve simply climbed out from the river.

His gray hair trailed down to his waist, blending in smoothly with his long beard and the rest of his gray clothes—which resembled a bunch of rags wrapped around his small frame like a cloak. The man smiled at her, revealing a set of crooked, blackening teeth. Despite his filthy appearance, his eyes crinkled in a friendly sort of way that reminded her vaguely of her own grandfather. Lani started slightly as realization hit: he was hardly any larger than her, and his brown walking stick was almost as tall as his frail frame.

“You wouldn’t happen to have any food now, would you?” he asked.

If he noticed her surprised expression, he didn’t show it.



“Um...yes, we do,” Lani stammered. Reaching inside her bag, she drew out a piece of bread and some cheese wrapped in a bundle of cloth.

“Why thank you, dear,” the man responded, smiling once more.

Her instincts screamed at her to run away, but although he definitely unnerved her, Lani couldn't help but feel that something in her gut was tugging at her, telling her to stay.

He's probably harmless, and just needs some help, Lani reassured herself. She glanced back at Benjamin, who stood behind her. He shrugged, as if agreeing.

“Uh...” She cleared her throat.

“Where are you heading to?”

“Oh, nowhere,” the man said absentmindedly, shoving the food into one of the many folds in his gray clothes—presumably a pocket. As he moved, she heard a strange, muffling clunking sound that reminded her of smooth rocks tumbling over on one another.

“Just wandering around.”

Lani resisted the urge to raise her eyebrows.

“And you two ?”

“We wanted to cross the river,” said Benjamin.

“Do you know if there's a bridge nearby ?”

The man chuckled, a hoarse sound escaping from his dry lips.

“No! No bridge is strong enough to reach over this river.”

Benjamin pursed his lips.

“None at all?”

How about a shallower part of the river that we can cross?”

“None either!” the man laughed.

“This river is the White Serpent! Its ferocity never heels for anyone, apart from the dead of winter, when it freezes over.”



Lani frowned. Somehow, the loudness of the river struck her as extremely different to the quiet slyness of a snake.

“You get snow here ?”

“Of course,” the stranger scoffed, as if they were silly to think otherwise.

“But it’s only truly cold here for a month or so. Rumor has it that the river only freezes over during the week of the White Witch’s birthday.”

“And when is that ?”

“Well, from what I’ve observed, the chilliest winter day was about a month ago.” He twisted his beard, lost in thought.

“But if you do manage to cross the river, it’s green year-round on the other side.”

Lani bit down on the inside of her cheek, forcing the tears back and staring down at her feet.

She’d come this far, only to be turned around by a raging river ?

If the old man was telling the truth, she would have to wait another year for the river to freeze over and for her to safely cross. Otherwise, she would have to journey upstream for who-knows-how-long to perhaps try and find another way. She was so close, yet so far.

“I hate my legs.”

The old man, who had been staring off into the distance, seemed to suddenly reel back to reality. “What ?”

Lani ignored him and turned to Benjamin.

“I’m sorry, Ben. It’s my fault for not knowing what we were up against.

Maybe if I had stronger, longer legs I could cross this river, or walk right on it, or something—” Her voice cracked.

“I couldn’t even cross those small streams back there by myself, you had to carry me.”



Benjamin wore a pained look. “It’s okay,” he reassured her. “It’s not your fault.”

“Yes it is!” Lani cried out, her voice wavering. She hated herself for being like this, for being so close to breaking down for a reason that probably seemed stupid to everyone else except her. Yet she hated herself even more for her inability to go where she wanted to be. She was stuck. She tried so hard to find a way, but it wasn’t even like looking for a needle in a haystack—it was like looking for a needle that didn’t exist in the first place.

The old man shuffled up to her. Slowly, he held out his palm, and uncurled his fingers.

Lani stopped crying. Part of it was her fear of the man, but another was also from the way he looked at her, gazing into her eyes as if searching her soul.

“What is it that you want?”

Lani knit her eyebrows together, staring down in wonder at the little pebble lying in the man’s wrinkled hand. It was cloudy white, smooth, and perfectly contoured. She pondered absently where he found it. “I want to be able to have magic legs, so they can take me anywhere I want,” she found herself saying, still gazing at the stone.

“Then it shall be done.”

She stared up at the man, her face quizzical.

“My price is only one thing,” the stranger croaked. “Promise me that once you find out what you truly want in life, what your heart desires, what your soul thirsts for—once you finally realize what that is, come back and let me know, and return this stone to me.” He reached for her hand and transferred the rock to her palm; it was surprisingly heavy. “I’ll be by this river. If you don’t see me, wait—wait until I am here. Promise me.”

“I don’t understand—”



What harm could there be in saying yes ? “I promise,” she vowed.

“Good.”

“But I don’t understand—”

“You will.”

And with that, the old man raised his walking stick from the ground and brought it crashing down on the earth, and a bright white light flashed across the valley.

Lani opened her eyes. The sun was still bright, and it hardly seemed like two blinks of an eye had passed since the man tapped the walking stick on the ground. Uncurling her clenched palm, she found that the white stone was still there. She looked around. The man was nowhere to be found, but she spotted Benjamin a few paces away.

“Ben!” she exclaimed.

“Lani.” She saw his lips move, read them, but couldn’t hear him at all.

Was she deaf ?

No, I can still hear the wind whispering in the grass, the water roaring in the river...

Lani frowned. The roar of the water was coming from beneath her...

She glanced below, and gasped.

Instead of solid ground, her feet were hovering above the raging river below, droplets of water spraying her legs but reaching just under her knees.

It’s not possible...

And yet, it was.

She was flying.



Lani took a step forward, marveling at the excitement she felt rushing through her veins. She figured out soon enough that technically she wasn't flying, but rather she hovering just above the water.

Would it be the same for soil...?

A few more moments, and she'd experimented with her new, magical legs. They floated above both water and soil, but she could also touch the earth whenever she wanted, simply by acting as if she was stepping down some stairs.

Every time she leapt, her legs sent her flying high into the air, and when she ran, they magnified her movements, so that she could sprint almost as fast as the wind.

"Ben!" she cried.

"Look at my new legs!"

"I can't believe it!" he shouted back, his eye shining with wonder.

"Magic legs."

"I can go anywhere I want now !
I can travel the world,
I can cross these plains in a heartbeat, I
can—" She stopped mid-sentence.

"Oh, Ben, I'm so sorry."



The corners of his lips flicked upward momentarily. “It’s fine.”

Lani felt a pang of sadness tug at her heartstrings.

“I wish that old man could have given you magic legs as well,” she said, landing in front of him on the grass.

“If he were still here, I’d beg him to, so you can go with me.”

“It’s okay,” he reassured her again, his mouth forced into a smile. “Go,” he urged. “Go enjoy your freedom. You deserve it.”

“But—”

“Go.” Benjamin nudged her away softly.

Lani felt a soup of emotions in her stomach—excitement, fear, loneliness, happiness, and sadness, all mixing and churning and making her feel a bit sick. But she knew what she had to do. Benjamin understood. It was something she’d yearned for her whole life, ever since her father and his stories... That lust for adventure was in her blood, it flowed in her veins.



“I’ll be back some day,” she promised him. “Soon.”

“I know.”

“I’ll find you at the same place.”

“I know.”

Lani opened her mouth, but no sound came out. Though they had just met, she found that she had already grown an attachment to him. Plus, she owed him something.

“When I return,” she began,

“we’ll both go back to the village.

I promised you I’d clear the misunderstanding, and make sure people know you’re not who they think you are—”

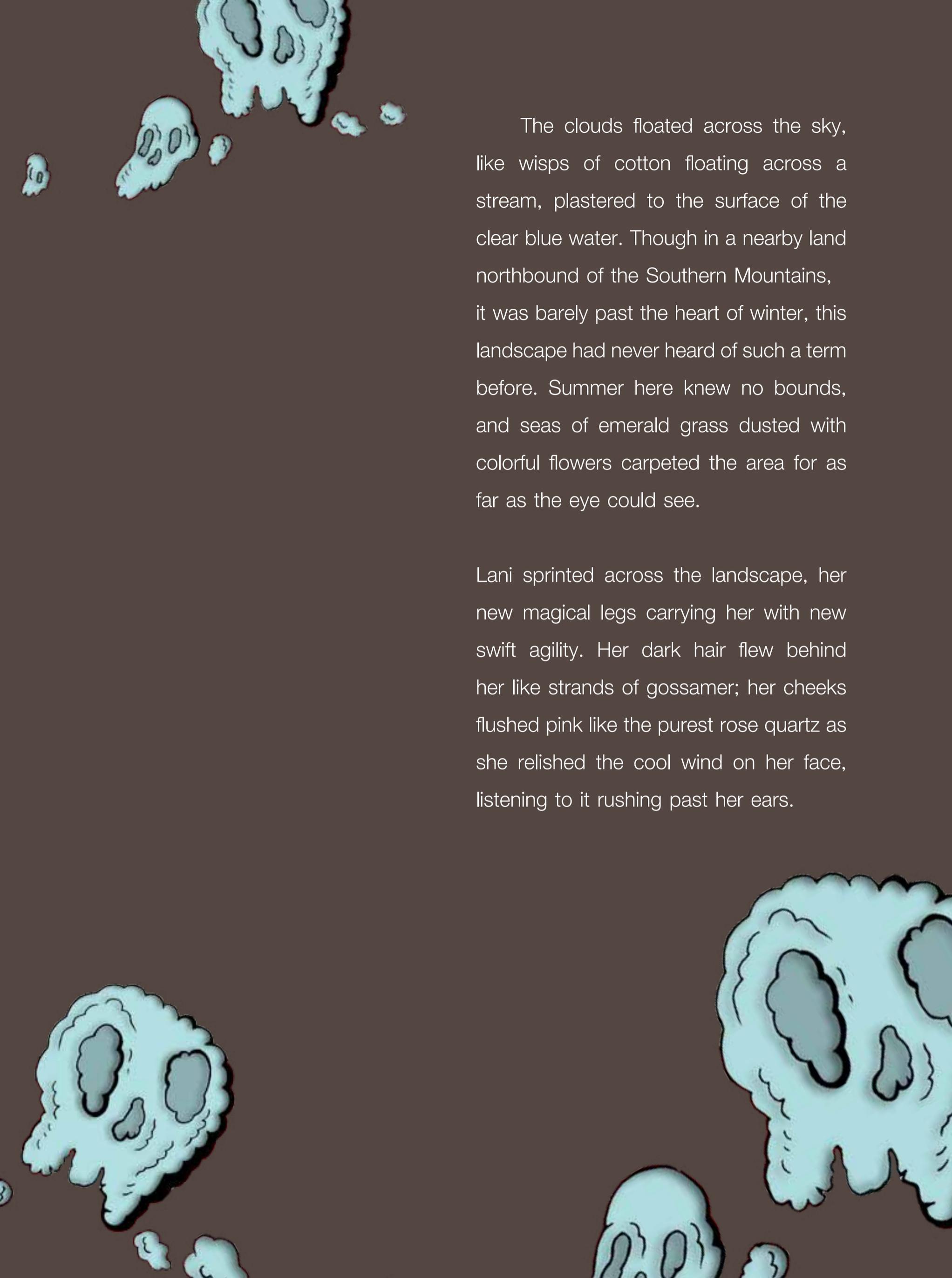
“Lani, I know,” Benjamin sighed. “Now go.”

She bit her lip, then threw her arms around his thick torso, hugging her friend. “I’ll be back soon,” she whispered against his chest.

With that, she drew her eyes away and leapt onto the river, her feet hovering above the water like some magical force repelled them from the liquid beneath.

She didn’t look back, for she knew that if she did, the sadness on his face would make her unable to ever leave.





The clouds floated across the sky, like wisps of cotton floating across a stream, plastered to the surface of the clear blue water. Though in a nearby land northbound of the Southern Mountains, it was barely past the heart of winter, this landscape had never heard of such a term before. Summer here knew no bounds, and seas of emerald grass dusted with colorful flowers carpeted the area for as far as the eye could see.

Lani sprinted across the landscape, her new magical legs carrying her with new swift agility. Her dark hair flew behind her like strands of gossamer; her cheeks flushed pink like the purest rose quartz as she relished the cool wind on her face, listening to it rushing past her ears.

On and on, she darted between, over, and through natural obstacles, hurtling over mountains and hopping over streams.

She skimmed across water, across mountains, and eventually across seas. She traveled on her own, rested when she grew tired, and ate what nature provided to her when she felt hungry. She'd learnt a lot from her time with Benjamin, and although she wasn't as proficient as him, she could make simple snares to catch live prey, and knew enough about what plants and fruit were safe to eat. On she went, and on she survived.

She was hurtling across a canyon when suddenly, she stopped.

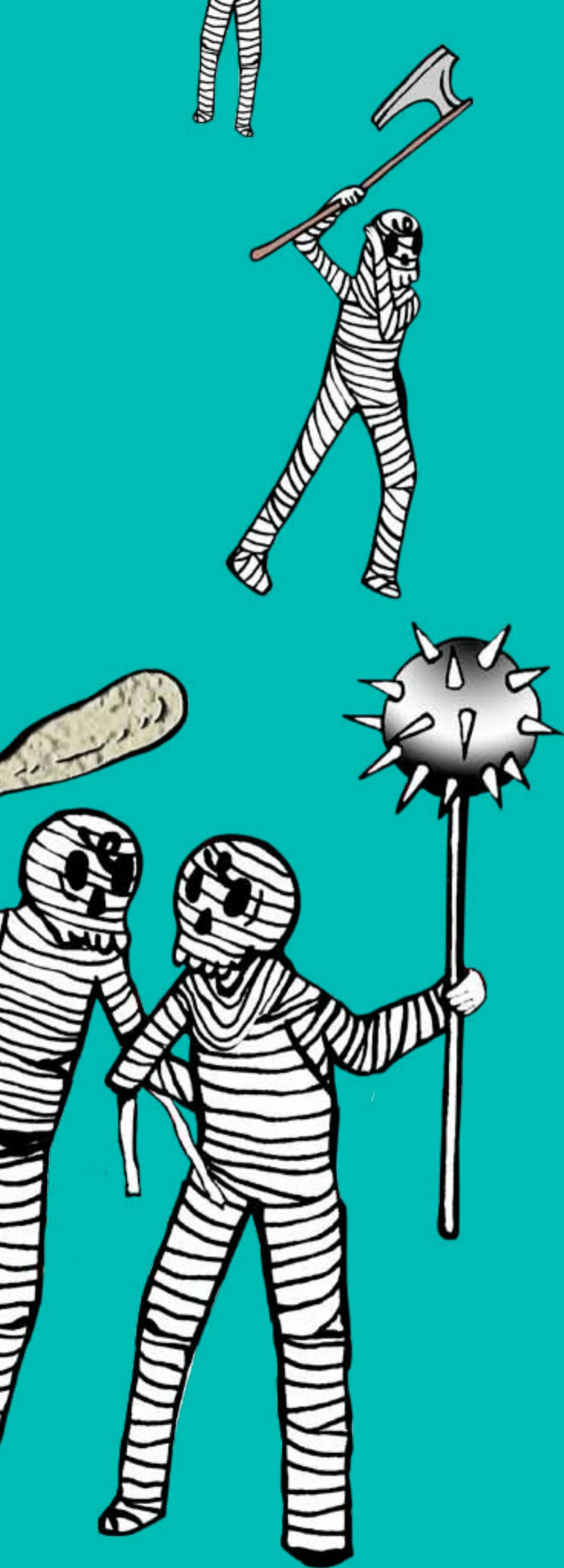
That night, Lani set up camp between two large boulders that would offer her protection from the mournful, sighing wind. The night was cool, and her breath condensed into strange shapes as she exhaled. The fire before her that had been crackling merrily away a few minutes earlier now tumbled upon itself, its flames nearly dead, reduced to an illuminated pile of orange embers as it extinguished its fuel. The small glowing heap reflected itself in her dark pupils, as she stared blankly into its center.

What am I doing ?

a voice in her pondered quietly.

What on earth am I doing?





She had chased after her dreams— wasn't that what she was supposed to have done? She had followed her heart, taken risks, and gone where she wanted to. She had grown independent, she had learnt to survive on her own, she had received magic legs !

But despite everything, despite the mesmerizing vistas and the serene landscapes, there was something missing in her heart.

She felt as if a wobbly tooth had been pulled out. It was something that had always been there, a consistency in her life that she had never realized until it was gone. Perhaps pulled out wasn't the correct way to phrase it—it had fallen out with age. She wasn't used to its absence, but a new one would grow in its place, just part of the natural process of growing up.

The only problem was she wasn't ready to grow up quite yet.

She'd experienced what she set out to learn, but didn't realize how much she'd miss home, and how—what was the word? Ah, that's right. Lonely. She didn't realize how lonely she felt. Traveling the world, traversing the universe, was nothing without someone to share it with. She missed Benjamin, she missed her grandparents, she missed her village. Lani felt tears welling up and squeezed her eyes shut. It's probably just the dry air, or the brightness of the fire, she told herself. Then she scoffed inwardly. Who am I kidding? Brightness of the fire? More like a weak, sizzling pile of embers.

She placed her hands on her legs, which now felt foreign to her. They were a magical gift. Without them, she never would have been able to see as much in such a short period of time. She never would have gotten the chance to see the world.

But did I really need these magic legs to do so?

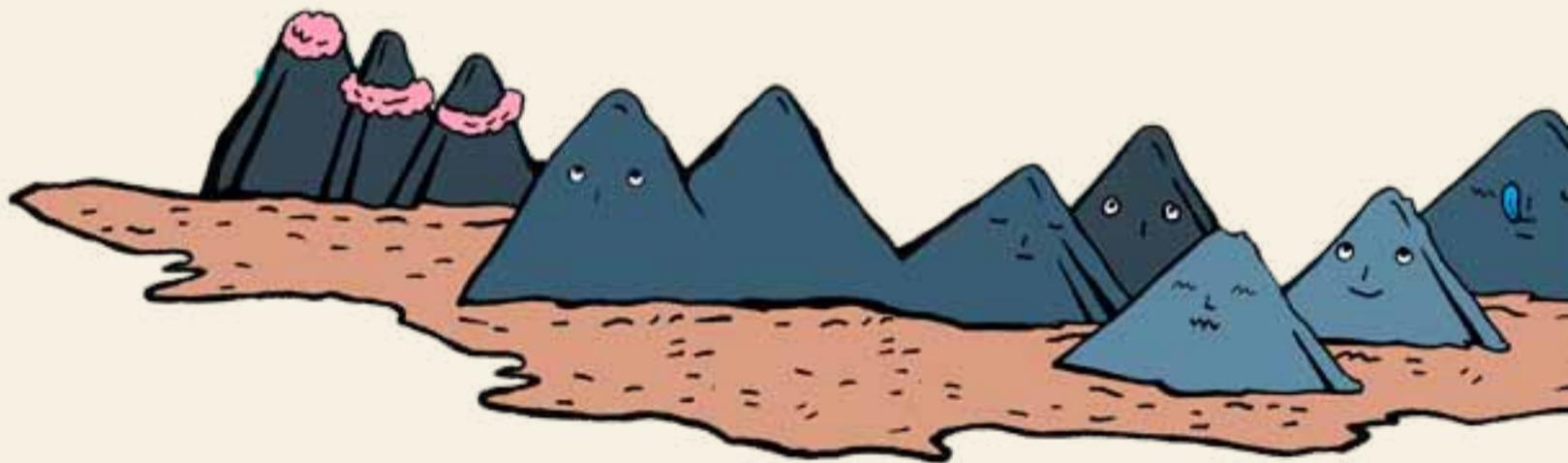


Suddenly, her jaw hardened, her lips set in a determined line. Out from her pocket, she pulled the white stone the old man had given her. She stared at it, then weighed it in her hands. Somehow, it seemed lighter.

Lani shifted her gaze out towards the canyon before her and the distant line of the dark horizon, parallel to a night sky riddled with a million splendid stars.

Lani returned to the edge of the river. The White Serpent slithered on in front of her—for some reason, it seemed much less angry than it had the first time she'd seen it. Perhaps her threshold for being surprised had changed as well.

She waited by the riverbank. The old man said he'd be there, and she knew she had to persevere, and that he would turn up soon. She also knew what she would tell him once she saw him once more. All she had to do was wait.



It was a few days later, and Lani was still camped at the riverbank. She didn't grow restless, but rather pondered in her own thoughts as she sought to describe what she'd seen and learnt. She wanted to pass on what she had come to realize—her so-called epiphany, perhaps—to others back at her village.

How would she tell them? What language would she use to describe the concoction of emotions she felt throughout the journey?

Lying on the grass and gazing up at the sky that looked like it had been painted with azure brushstrokes, she recalled how she had felt so trapped, so physically limited. It was this line of thought that she was contemplating when she heard a familiar voice say, “You don’t have to feel trapped.”

She found herself grinning from ear to ear, and she pulled her eyes away from the heavens. Standing up, she declared, “I know.”

The old man returned her gesture, his eyes crinkling at the corners. He was wearing the same rags as before. Lani realized that she was no longer afraid of him, like she was so many days ago. She frowned.

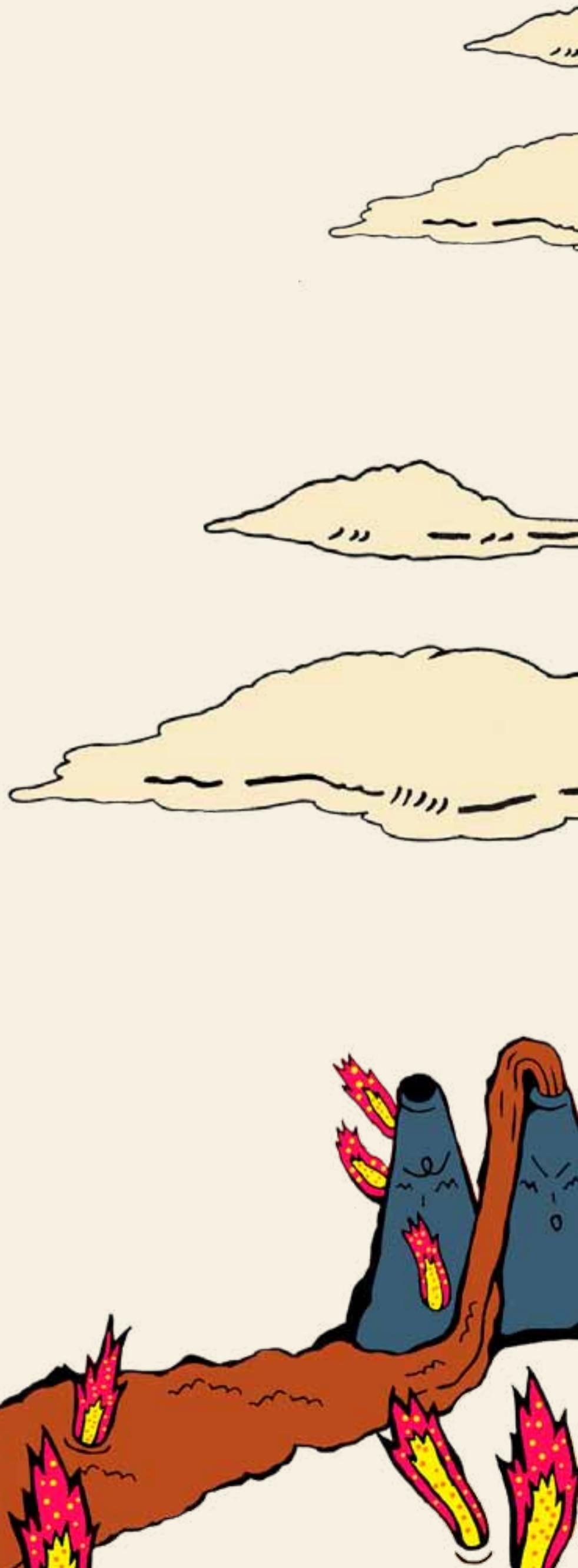
“How long has it been?”

The man shrugged.

“That does not matter. What matters is that you’re back. Do you recall our agreement?”

“Of course.”

He raised an eyebrow,





his eyes twinkling like he was chuckling at an inside joke.

“So tell me,” he murmured, leaning forward on his walking stick, “what is it that you have discovered?”

Lani glanced around at the surrounding landscape. She inhaled deeply, breathing in the scent of grass, water, and nature, filling her lungs with the essence of the wild. She felt the wind across her skin, fluttering her clothes.

“Myself.”

“You’ll have to be more specific than that.” A smile touched her lips.

My strength is my determination.

I’m able to travel even without magic legs. Eventually, I could have found a way to cross the river, but I was simply impatient. Under the desert stars, I finally grasped the fact that my strength doesn’t come from my magic legs. I don’t truly need them to achieve my dreams. I can achieve them by myself, if I’m patient and determined enough.

But instead of voicing her thoughts, Lani simply replied,
“I realized that I don’t need these magic legs anymore.”

The old man closed his eyes and inclined his head, as if in acceptance. A few moments later, he opened them again and stared at her, his face unreadable.

“May I have my stone back please?”

Lani nodded.

She was confused, but had learnt through experience not to ask too many questions about the peculiar idiosyncratic ways of the old stranger.

Taking the stone from her, he weighed it in his hand.

“It’s lighter,” he muttered.

“Good.”

Lani couldn’t help as the words tumbled out.

“What do you mean?”

The man merely stared at her.

“So is your heart.” Then he held out the rock.

“Take it.” He seemed to read the question in her mind.

“It will remind you of what you have learnt.”

As he stretched out his arm further to hand it back to her, a section of his rags lifted. Underneath it, Lani could have sworn she caught a glimpse of a netted pouch carrying at least a dozen more of the same stones.

Lani felt the pebble in her palm; it was cool and smooth. She looked up.

“Thank you,” she began.

But the man was already gone.





She found Benjamin in the same cave she'd taken shelter in during the first few days. He let out a noise that sounded somewhat like an elated yelp, and crushed her in his strong, warm embrace.

She relayed to him the story of what she'd done, but focused mostly on her adventures. When questioned about why she returned, she simply said that she missed him and she missed home. The boy seemed content with that answer. Lani kept the pebble in her breast pocket, and could always feel it near her heart. She didn't tell her friend about it; it wasn't that she didn't trust him, but rather she hoped one day he would find her own little pebble. Or perhaps he had already.

They began the journey back home. Surprisingly, she welcomed the snowy landscape with joy. Lani promised her friend that she would explain to the villagers his tale, that it really wasn't his fault, and it was a simple, tragic misunderstanding. Benjamin had reluctantly agreed, since there was no other way around it, but it didn't stop Lani from noticing the fear in his eyes and the change in his posture as they trudged back.

The duo was hardly a few steps out from the forest south of the village when Lani felt a sudden drop in temperature. She froze, and it felt as if an icy cold hand had gripped her heart. Immediately, she knew.

The White Witch.

“Run, Lani,”

Benjamin whispered urgently to her.

“Run!”

Lani shook her head. She knew how much the White Witch terrified her friend, and she knew just how much courage it had taken him to say that.

“I am not leaving you here. You’ve had to face her once before, I am not going to let history repeat itself!”

“I can’t protect you from her,” he replied. His eyes reminded her of a deer being hunted. “I can’t.”

Lani felt the stone in her pocket. It was a reassuring weight—it made her remember what she’d learnt, and it gave her strength.

She turned back to the figure of the White Witch that hovered before them, then shook her head slowly.

“You don’t need to,” she whispered, before stepping forward.

“LANI!”

Benjamin yelled out after her.





“What are you doing ?!

Are you crazy ? She’ll kill you!”

“Stay back, Ben!” she shouted back.

Although she knew it would be hard for him to move from where he was, as he was probably frozen to the spot, Benjamin’s courage might spur him to do something stupid, like leap in front of her to try and shield her from the evil before them.

Lani continued on until she was hardly a few arms’ length away from the floating figure. She gazed up at the tall, hunched form. Up close, the White Witch was still terrifying. She still wore a bright white cloak that trailed mysteriously off the ground, hovering a few inches above the snow. A triangular hood embedded with a blood red cross still covered most of her face, and worse of all, Lani could still see the two narrow slits that were her eyes, deep and dark as the pits of hell. But Lani was no longer backing down.



It wasn't that she no longer felt fear—that was an unwise thing to say. Fear made her stronger. Fear fed her strength. Without fear, there would be no courage. To be courageous is to stand up despite being in the face of fear. And now, she'd learnt to do just that.

“Why did you hurt him?” she said to the White Witch, gesturing back to Benjamin. “He never did anything wrong. Why did you have to hurt him, just like you've hurt all the other people?”

Something changed in the form of the witch. She almost seemed to pause, and Lani watched speechlessly as she actually saw the two slits blink repeatedly in confusion.

Slowly, the White Witch reached up with thin, gloved hands. She touched the place where her chin would be, and with two slim fingers, pulled off the dark skin in an upward motion.

Lani started to scream, but stopped, the sound caught in her throat.

She didn't know what she had been expecting, but it certainly wasn't what her eyes revealed.

Before her was a beautiful woman. Long, pale golden hair fanned around her, flowing like long willow leaves. Her lips were unexpectedly plump and red, and her chin tapered to a pointed end. Her dark, dark eyes were alluringly shaped, yet there was something incredibly melancholic about them that betrayed their perfection. Though age had added its fine lines to her face, Lani had no doubt that the woman had been a deathly beauty once upon a time.

With a start, the young girl realized that what the White Witch had pulled off was not her skin, but rather a mask connected to her hood. The slits she'd thought were the witch's eyes were merely slits cut into the dark cloth mask.





“I didn’t mean to hurt him,” the older woman finally replied.

Her voice was no longer screechy, but low and solemn.

“Then what happened?” Lani was surprised at the calmness of her voice.

A corner of the woman’s ruby red lips twitched upwards.

“You’re a brave one, girl,” she said softly, her voice like silk.

“You remind me of a young couple I met several years ago. They had the same courage as you, the same fire.”

The woman’s expression was unreadable.

“That flame is both a blessing and a curse. It can lead you to warm, wondrous places, but it can also burn you to death and scorch your soul.”

Lani didn’t respond.

“But I admire that spark. And because of that, I will tell you.”

Her eyes stared at the young girl, betraying a curiosity almost as intrigued as Lani’s own. Then, without waiting for a reply, her gaze drifted away into the distance, and she began.

“That boy,” she said, nodding towards Benjamin,

who was still standing far away, “was young and stupid. He wandered into the woods alone. It was the dead of winter, and the wolves were hungry.

So of course, he was hunted.” She scoffed.

“He was a clumsy fool, and he tripped after running into a poisonous thorn bramble that scratched at his face. I followed, and watched as the wolves closed in on him.

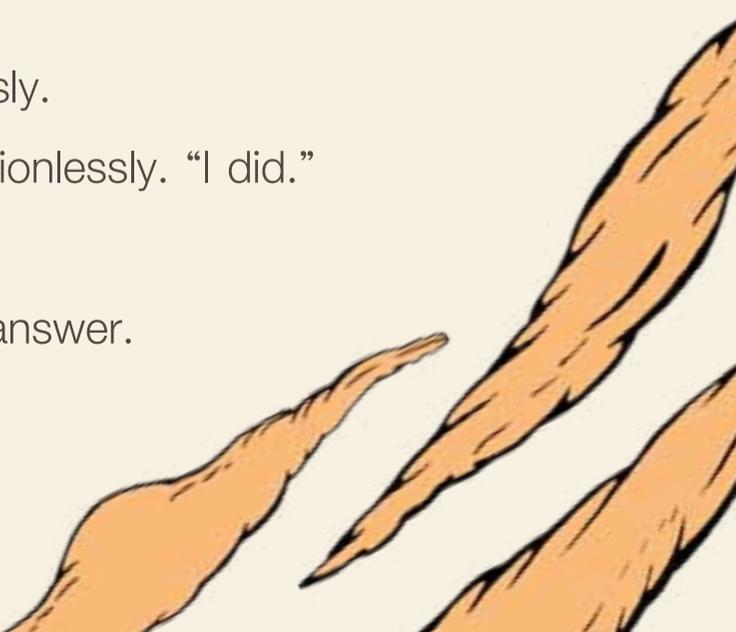
Then I cast them away.”

“You cast away the wolves ?” Lani repeated incredulously.

The White Witch held her gaze. “Yes,” she replied emotionlessly. “I did.”

“Why?”

“Because he would have been eaten.” It was a simple answer.



“But...” Lani trailed off. What she was hearing did not fit with what she knew.

No—it didn’t fit with what she had been told, with what the whole village believed.

“But what? I’m the malevolent, demonic, children-eating White Witch ?”

The woman barked out a laugh.

“The poisonous bramble had cut into that boy’s right eye. It would have spread to the rest of his body, so I had to destroy it.”

“The eye?”

“His blind one.”

Lani couldn’t believe it.

“You saved his life.”

“No.”

The White Witch shook her head, her glossy hair moving in a mesmerizing twirl.

“I cursed him to an eternity of isolation and solitude. He returned, and got cast away for his disfigurement. Even his own parents could no longer look at him. I did not purposely curse him, but my actions still did.”

Lani shook her head slowly.

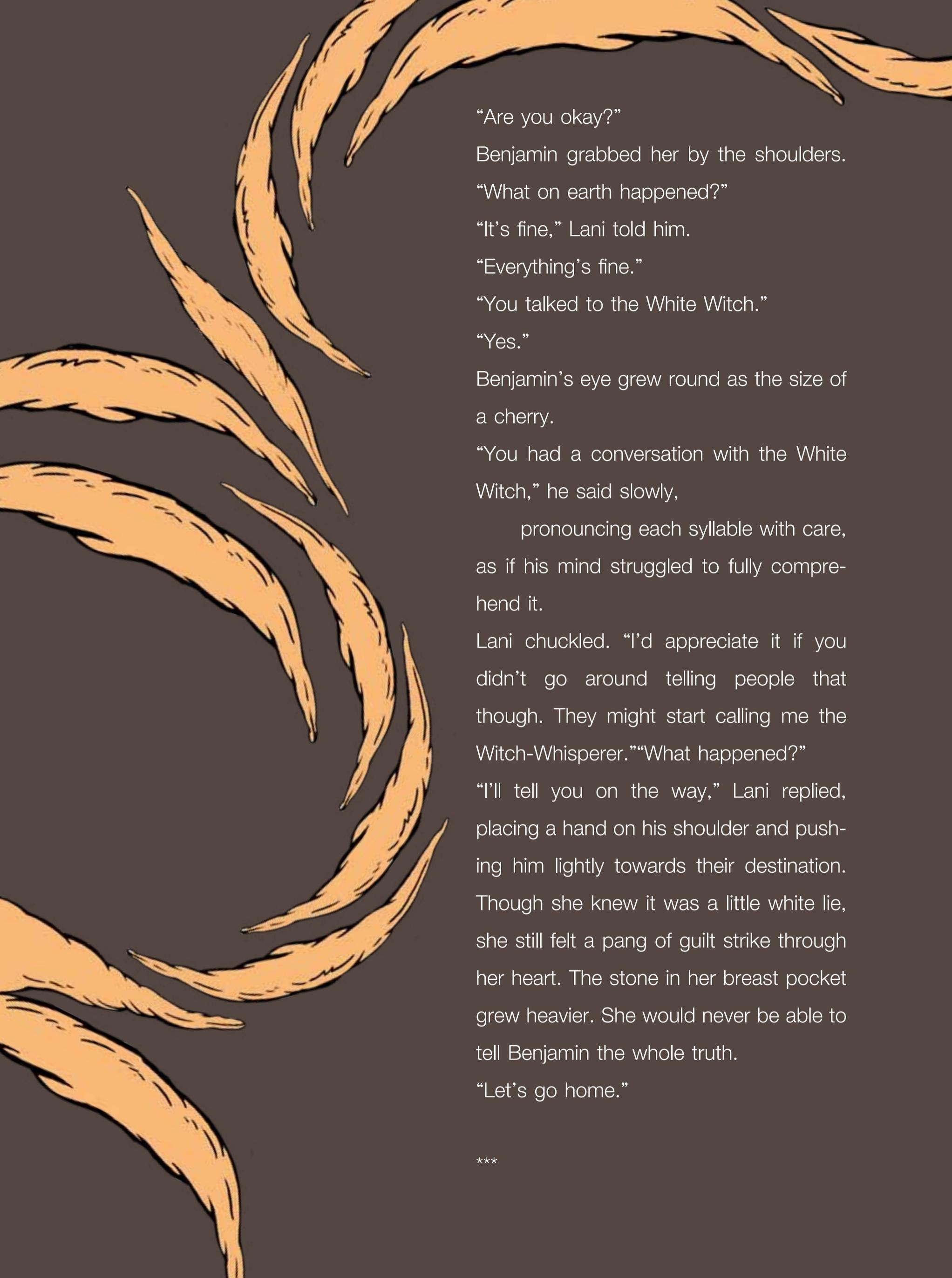
“Who are you?”

As the White Witch stared down at her, Lani felt her fear wash away.

A quizzical look spread across the witch’s face—and for a moment, she almost seemed human.

“Do you really want to know?”





“Are you okay?”

Benjamin grabbed her by the shoulders.

“What on earth happened?”

“It’s fine,” Lani told him.

“Everything’s fine.”

“You talked to the White Witch.”

“Yes.”

Benjamin’s eye grew round as the size of a cherry.

“You had a conversation with the White Witch,” he said slowly,

pronouncing each syllable with care, as if his mind struggled to fully comprehend it.

Lani chuckled. “I’d appreciate it if you didn’t go around telling people that though. They might start calling me the Witch-Whisperer.” “What happened?”

“I’ll tell you on the way,” Lani replied, placing a hand on his shoulder and pushing him lightly towards their destination.

Though she knew it was a little white lie, she still felt a pang of guilt strike through her heart. The stone in her breast pocket grew heavier. She would never be able to tell Benjamin the whole truth.

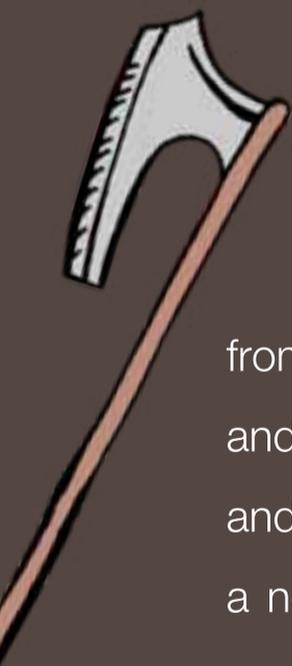
“Let’s go home.”



Lani shook her head in disbelief. She placed the quill down, and read the last few words on the pages before her. Then she turned to the first few pages and read the opening line: It was a cold, dark night, and the frosty wind swept over the barren landscape, howling mournfully on its journey.

She'd penned her tale, the story of her journey, and what she'd learnt. But no ending seemed fitting enough, and she knew she could never reveal the truth. She would never feel that catharsis.

So instead, she closed the tale off with a simpler ending—one more adventurous and less philosophical, one where she escaped the White Witch through stealth and distraction, with the help from her friend Benjamin (who was able to reunite with his family once more and try to make up for the stolen time). But Lani knew she would never be able to keep the truth to herself for the rest of eternity. With each secret, each responsibility, the stone grew heavier, and when the witch had told her the truth, she had become consciously aware of the increasing weight in her breast pocket. In turn, it almost seemed as if a weight had been lifted off the woman's shoulders.



A sad smile touched her lips as she recalled the moment when she parted from the White Witch. The woman had pulled on her hood and mask once more, and during the movement, something had fallen out from underneath her clothes and onto the breast of her shirt. It was a small, cloudy white pebble, hung from a necklace string. Despite the size, the string was taut. Lani wasn't sure if it was something else pulling on the necklace, but from what she saw, it looked as if the pebble was extremely heavy.





As the elusive figure floated away rapidly across the snow, Lani was reminded of how she must have looked herself when she'd flown across the landscape a few days before. In the back of her mind, she wondered: what would happen when the White Witch died? Who would take her place?

But then she realized she already knew the answer to that question.

In turn, she didn't feel the need to know exactly what happened to her parents. It was enough for her to believe that were they still here, they would be proud of her. She just hoped they had found their own little pebbles.

The girl drew out another piece of blank paper and penned on it a poem—one reciting the story of a snowy village, and the tragic tale of a young woman's personal sacrifice. The woman endured being a hated, dreaded figure to keep everyone out of harm's way. She patrolled the village at night to keep them in their homes, their fear of her keeping them away from the dangers outside. She instilled the fear, and it was this fear that kept them safe.

Once finished, Lani rolled up the piece of paper like a scroll, and hid it in a cabinet in her home. Perhaps one day, when the village no longer needed protection from the elements, from the wolves, from nature's wrath, they would be ready for the truth.

But as of now, they weren't. They would be content in reading a simpler ending about a young girl who had an adventure, realized the meaning of her existence, yet returned home, and managed to escape from the White Witch. They would live in fear, but also in safety. The story was somewhat true, but it was also a lie as white as the witch herself.



WHEN THE MYSTICAL MOON WAS AN ORB IN THE SKY,
WHEN THE SKIES WERE DUSTED WITH STARS THAT WERE BRIGHT,
WHEN THE BRIGHT SUN HAD HIDDEN AWAY, BID GOODBYE,
AWAY, AND ALONE, HIDDEN FROM SIGHT,



A MAIDEN, WITH GOLDEN FLAX-COLORED HAIR,
DID NOT KNOW THE TRAGEDY ABOUT TO UNFOLD,
THE TALE SO WOEFUL, SO SAD, SO UNFAIR,
BRINGS TEARS TO THOSE WHO HEAR IT TOLD.

HER FATHER, AND HER LOVER, TO THE FOREST THEY WENT,
TO HUNT FOR FOOD SO THE VILLAGE COULD BE FED,
LITTLE DID THEY KNOW THEIR TIME WAS SPENT,
AND THE HUNTERS BECAME THE HUNTED INSTEAD.

FOR IT WAS THE DEADEST, DARKEST WINTER'S NIGHT,
AND THE WOLVES WERE STARVING, HUNGRY FOR THE KILL,
THEY CHASED THE TWO HUNTERS, UNAFRAID OF THEIR KNIVES,
AND WOULDN'T REST UNTIL THEIR PREY WAS STILL.

HER LOVER WAS SLAYED IN THE NEARBY TREES,
RAVAGED SO NOTHING REMAINED FROM THE SLAUGHTER,
BUT THE FATHER HAD GONE O'ER THE MOUNTAINS TO FLEE,
HE JOURNEYED 'TIL HE REACHED THE WHITE SERPENT RIVER.



THOUGH DAYS HAD PASSED THE WOLVES DID NOT TIRE,
THEY TRACKED HIM DOWN 'TIL THEY REACHED THE WATER,
BUT THERE WAS NO WATER TO SEE DURING WINTER,
FOR IT WAS SO COLD, IT HAD FROZEN OVER!

ON ONE SIDE WERE THE WOLVES, THE OTHER THE STREAM,
EACH PLOTTING THEIR KILL FOR THE TRAPPED MAN BETWEEN,
HE THOUGHT, "THE RIVER MUST BE FROZEN, IT SEEMS,"
BUT ALAS, IT WAS NOT TO BE WHAT HE DEEMED.

FOR WHEN THE FATHER STEPPED OVER ONTO THE ICE,
HIS WEIGHT, AND THE WOLVES, COMBINED MADE IT CRACK,
IN HIS HURRY, HIS HASTE, HIS PRICE WAS HIS LIFE,
SO HE SANK BENEATH INTO THE LIQUID BLACK.

NOW THEY SAY WHETHER THE MOON IS AN ORB IN PLAIN SIGHT,
OR A SLIVER, A SLICE, PEEKING FROM BEHIND CLOUDS,
OR WHEN THE SUN HANGS FROM A STRING IN THE SKY,
OR BID ITS GOODBYE AND TAKEN ITS BOW.

WHETHER THE WEATHER, WHETHER THE TIME,
WHEN THE RIVER IS A DANGER TO THE UNWARY TRAV'LER,
THEY SAY AN OLD MAN LETS THEM CROSS BY FLIGHT,
HE GAZES WITH LONGING PAST THE MOUNTAINS TO HIS DAUGHTER.





FOR AFTER HIS DEATH, AND THE DEATH OF HER LOVER,
THIS DAUGHTER, THIS WOMAN, PROMISED TO THE SKIES,
THAT SHE WOULD GUARD HER VILLAGE,
FROM OUTSIDE DANGERS FOREVER,
UNTIL A WINTER COMES WHEN SHE TAKES HER LAST BREATH
AND DIES....

“It’s time for bed.”

“But I’m not sleepy yet.”

The nurse scowled, adjusting her triangular hat. The red cross embedded on the white material looked a bit like the color of blood.

“Sleep.”

Lani could tell the nurse had been beautiful once upon a time, but now all she did was frown and act as if she had a heavy weight on her shoulders.

She stuck out her bottom lip and lay down in her bed as the nurse unstrapped the metal braces from her legs. I’ll find a way to sneak out later, she promised to herself. Ben is waiting for me; after his eye is healed and they take off the bandages, we can play another game of adventure! I just hope my crutches don’t slow me down too much...once I get that operation, my legs should be as good as new. She smiled. No—they’ll be even better than before. They’ll be like magic legs. She pondered absentmindedly. Tomorrow, we’ll go visit the old man in that faraway ward again. He always tells us good stories and lets us throw wishing pebbles into the fountain.

Lani heard the door close. She stared up at the ceiling above, plastered with glow-in-the-dark stars. The air conditioning unit made soft whoosh noises as it blew across her cheeks, cooling them. Outside her white hospital bedroom, the sounds of the nurse’s footsteps as she patrolled the area reverberated across the corridor.

She closed her eyes, drifting off to sleep.

It was a cold, dark night, and the frosty wind swept over the barren landscape, howling mournfully on its journey...



