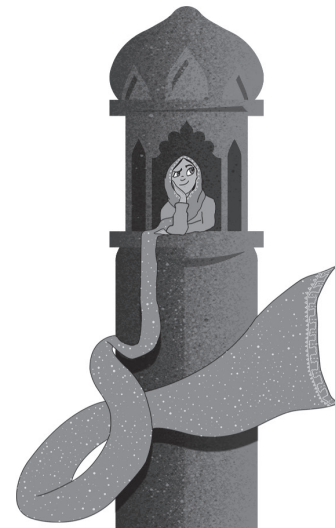


RUMAYSA

A FAIRYTALE



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RADIYA HAFIZA

ILLUSTRATED BY RHAIDA EL TOUNY

MACMILLAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS



Published 2021 by Macmillan Children's Books
an imprint of Pan Macmillan
The Smithson, 6 Bristet Street, London EC1M 5NR
EU representative: Macmillan Publishers Ireland Limited,
Mallard Lodge, Lansdowne Village, Dublin 4
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-1-5290-3830-9

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1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY



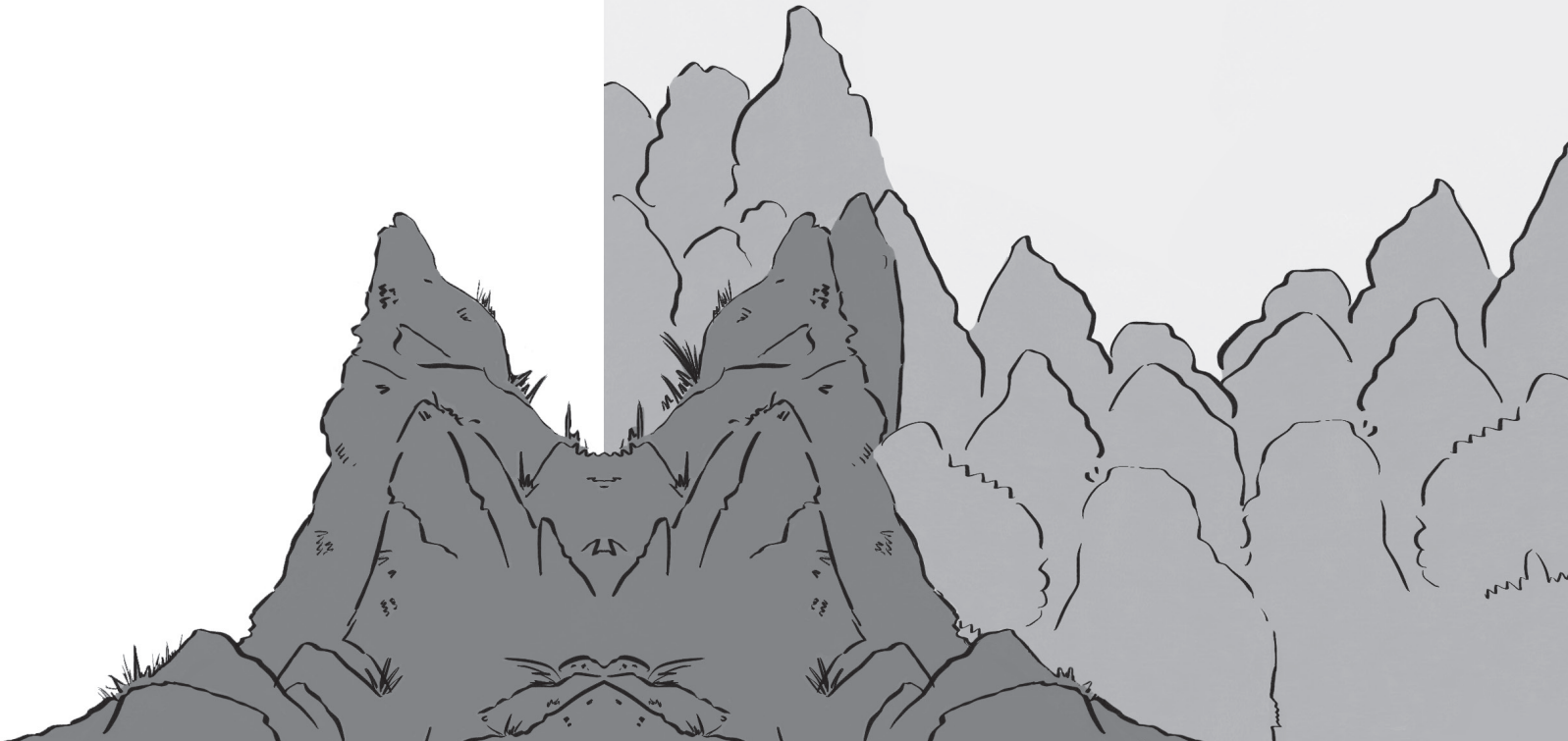
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For the lights in my life, my nieces and nephew

A, H & L

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Rumaysa



I



Once upon a time, in a land quite far away, snow was falling heavily from the dark sky, blanketing the land of Splinterfell in white. It was a night full of promise to some, for the first day of snowfall marked the beginning of winter and the coming of festivities and joy. It was time to shut up windows, spend time with loved ones and retreat from the outside world.

Not everybody could take part in such joy, though. There were some families who had less than others, and the fall of snow meant a definite end to the hopes of crops and work.

There was one family who were particularly less fortunate than others. Naina lived in a little hut on the outskirts of the village and spent her days sewing clothes for wealthier ladies.

Her husband, Samar, was usually gone for most of the day, trying to find work, but he never had any luck. Some said his bloodline was cursed to poverty. Others cruelly and unfairly whispered that he was a bad worker, so nobody would hire him.

When Samar returned home one night after another long, hard day of searching for work, his hands were once again empty. Naina began to weep, tired from her day of stitching, with nothing to eat since morning. She feared for her unborn child; there were only two more moons to go until the baby came. Unable to bear seeing his wife so upset, Samar went back outside in search of food.

Over the hill, right by the edge of the woods, there was one house to which nobody ventured too close. The dark wooden building was surrounded by different crops and berries in the garden. It was said the Witch of Splinterfell lived there – though nobody had ever seen her – and that anyone who stole from her bounteous garden would have to pay a price. What that price was, no one could be sure, but few were willing to take the risk to find out. Samar, however, was desperate. He snuck his way over to the house and slipped in through the large gates that encircled it.

Samar felt as though he had stepped into a dream. There were all kinds of fruits and vegetables growing in the Witch's garden. He stood in uncertainty for a moment, and then began to take as much of the food as he could carry. He ran back to his house, looking over his shoulder all the while. He spotted no sign of the Witch nor anybody else.

Naina was overjoyed when Samar came home with the food. She turned the vegetables into a stew and they ate merrily, with the fruits for dessert.

The next evening, Samar returned home again having had no luck in finding work. He hesitated before entering his house. Through the window he could see his wife lying in bed, cradling her large stomach. He gazed at her for a moment, making his decision.

Samar snuck back into the Witch's garden and took all he could carry again.

The Witch didn't seem to exist. So Samar returned again and again over the next two months, taking whatever food he could find. Naina began to glow with health and, soon enough, the time came for their child to arrive.

The birth of Naina and Samar's baby carried on through



the night and day. Finally, the baby came screaming into the world. Naina and Samar were weeping and laughing from exhaustion. It was a girl. They called her Rumaysa.

Just as Naina was holding her daughter for the first time, joyfully cradling her and stroking her cheek, a knock sounded on their wooden door.

‘Who is it?’ Samar called.

‘It is I,’ came a low voice. ‘The one from whom you have been stealing.’

Samar froze. The hairs on his body stood up.

‘Who is that?’ Naina asked, clinging her baby tighter to her chest.

‘I don’t know what you are talking about!’ Samar cried, frantically searching for some sort of weapon – but their small house was bare.

The door swung open with a loud *smack* to reveal a figure cloaked in black. All they could see of her pale face was dark red lips and a pointy chin.

Samar’s eyes widened in horror. It was the Witch.

‘For two moons you have stolen from my garden,’ the Witch said. ‘Now I have come to take what is mine.’ She lifted a skeletal finger and pointed at the baby.

‘No, you can’t,’ Samar said, paling with fear. ‘That’s our baby!’

‘You should not have stolen from me. You know how the old song goes, don’t you, Samar?’

Samar was terrified. How did she know his name?

He knew the song – everyone in the village did. But he thought it had just been another children’s rhyme.

The Witch began to sing, cackling:

*Under the dark moon, the Witch’s garden blooms.
Take what you will from the trees or the ground
But she will take your first seed to sprout.*

It was a terrible song, not catchy at all, but Cordelia (for this was the Witch’s name) seemed to think it was inspired.

‘No, please—’ Samar begged, but the Witch silenced him with a snap of her fingers. She strode over to Naina and snatched the child from her hands.

‘No – my baby!’ Naina cried out. ‘Please! You can’t take her!’ She struggled to get up. ‘Please!’

‘Too bad, dear,’ the Witch hissed. ‘She is mine now.’

‘No – *Rumaysa!*’ Naina fell out of her bed, struggling towards the Witch. Cordelia cackled and slammed the door

on her way out, disappearing with the child into the night.

‘No!’ Samar roared, his voice suddenly returning.

‘Samar, we have to do something!’ Naina screamed.

Samar could barely think. He desperately ran outside, trying to see which way Cordelia had gone. Up above, he saw what looked like a bat in the night, flying away towards the moon. He blinked and the silhouette was gone.

Panic coursed through him. ‘No! No! *No!*’ he screamed, clutching his hair. Samar ran towards the Witch’s house, through the brambles and boughs that led to the edge of the forest. But when he reached the house he’d so often visited, it was gone.

He stared around in shock. The land on which the Witch’s house used to sit was now just a charred patch of ground. There was nothing but burnt grass and ashes. Samar’s knees went weak and he fell to the ground in despair.

In the distance, a cackle echoed in the air.