

**WOLF
MOUNTAIN**

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ALICE
ROBERTS

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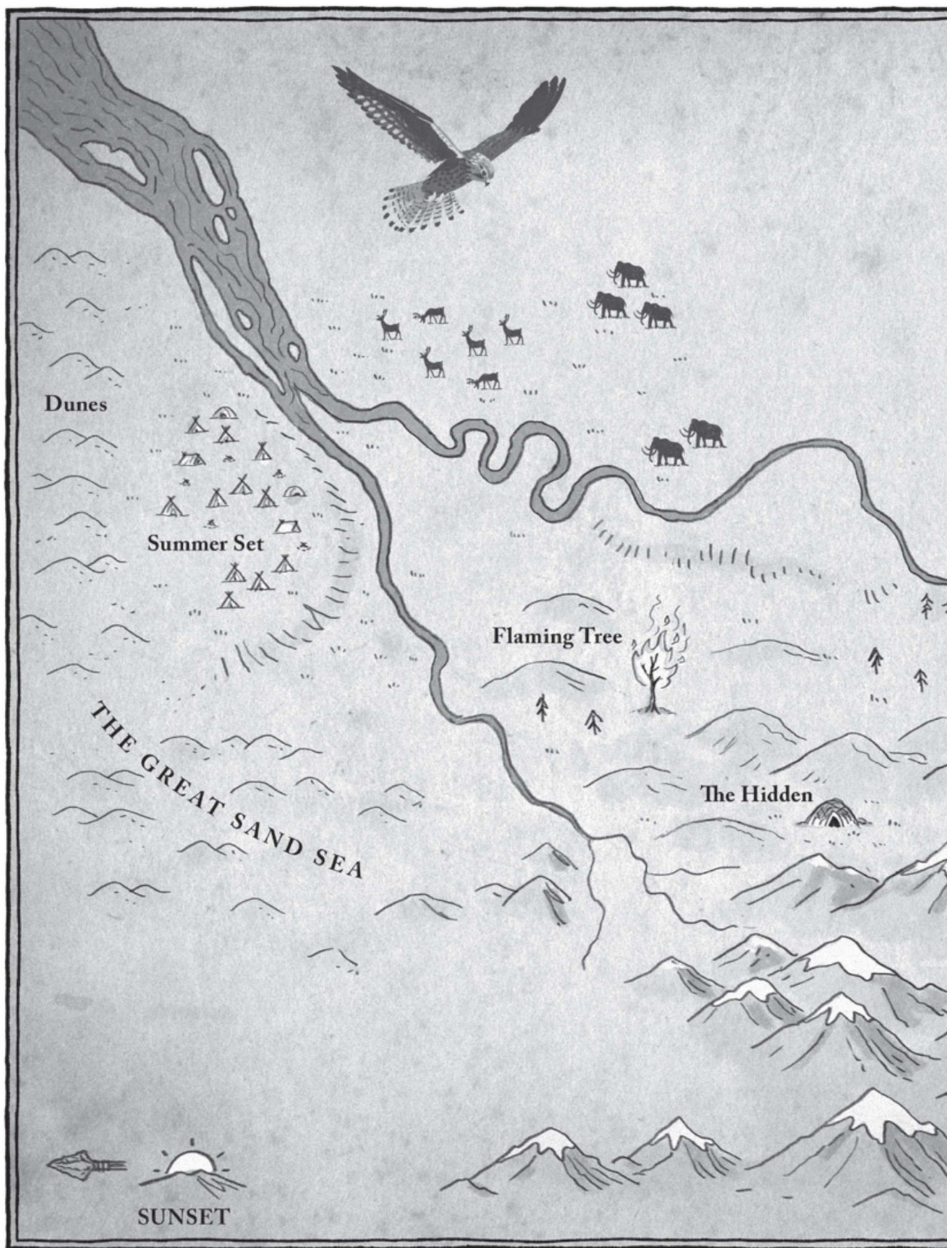
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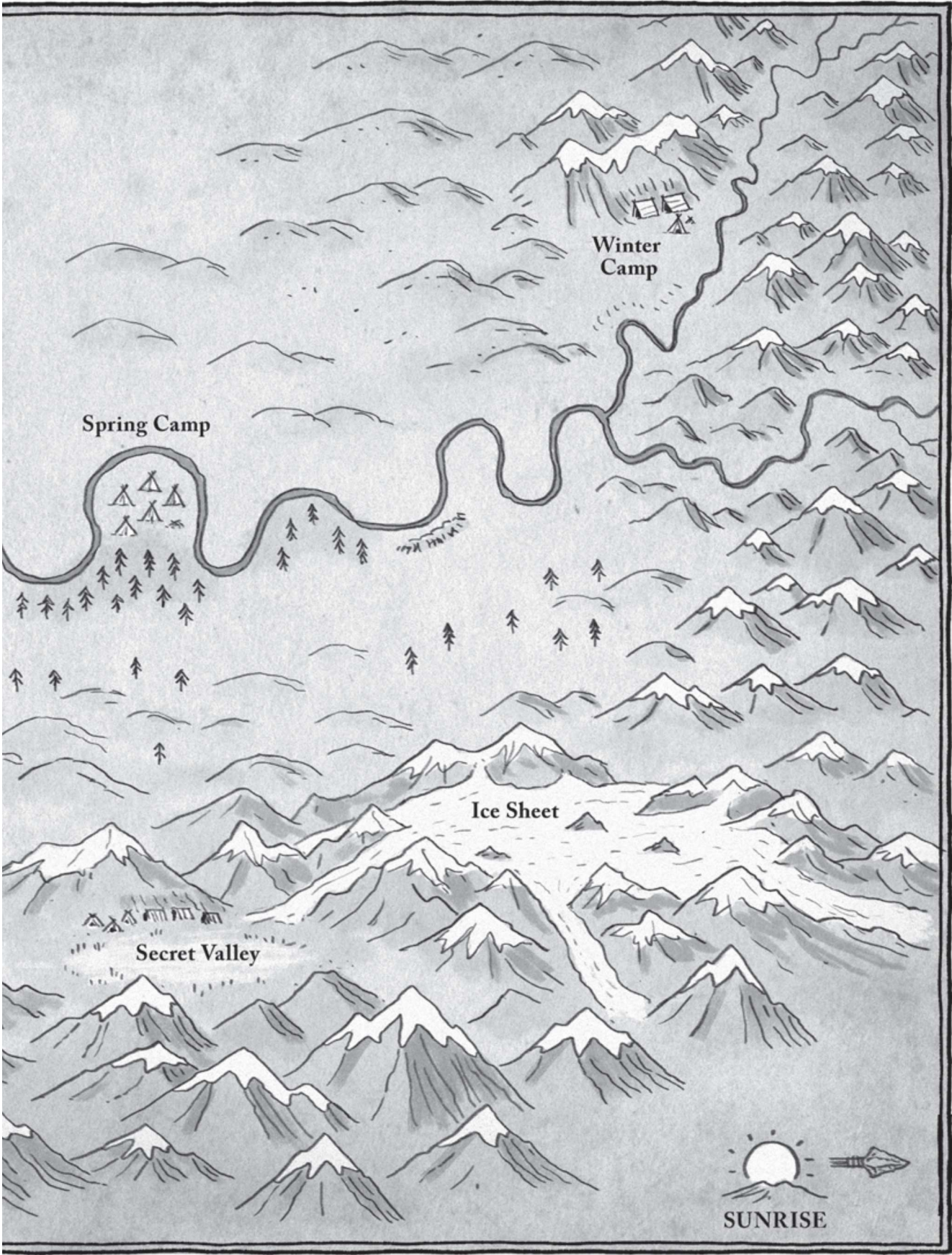
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To Tansy and Lev





PROLOGUE

The air was full of sea swallows and their high-pitched, mewling cries. With their translucent white wings and black heads, tails fanned, they circled above Tuuli. She was walking up into the hills, away from the Great Sand Sea, the shining estuary and the huge herd of reindeer with all their new calves. Away from the summer camp where all the tribes of the river valleys came together every year. Away from the great flocks of geese, swans and sandpipers that were the sights and sounds of her childhood summers. Tuuli walked away from all that shimmering, exuberant life. And into the unknown.



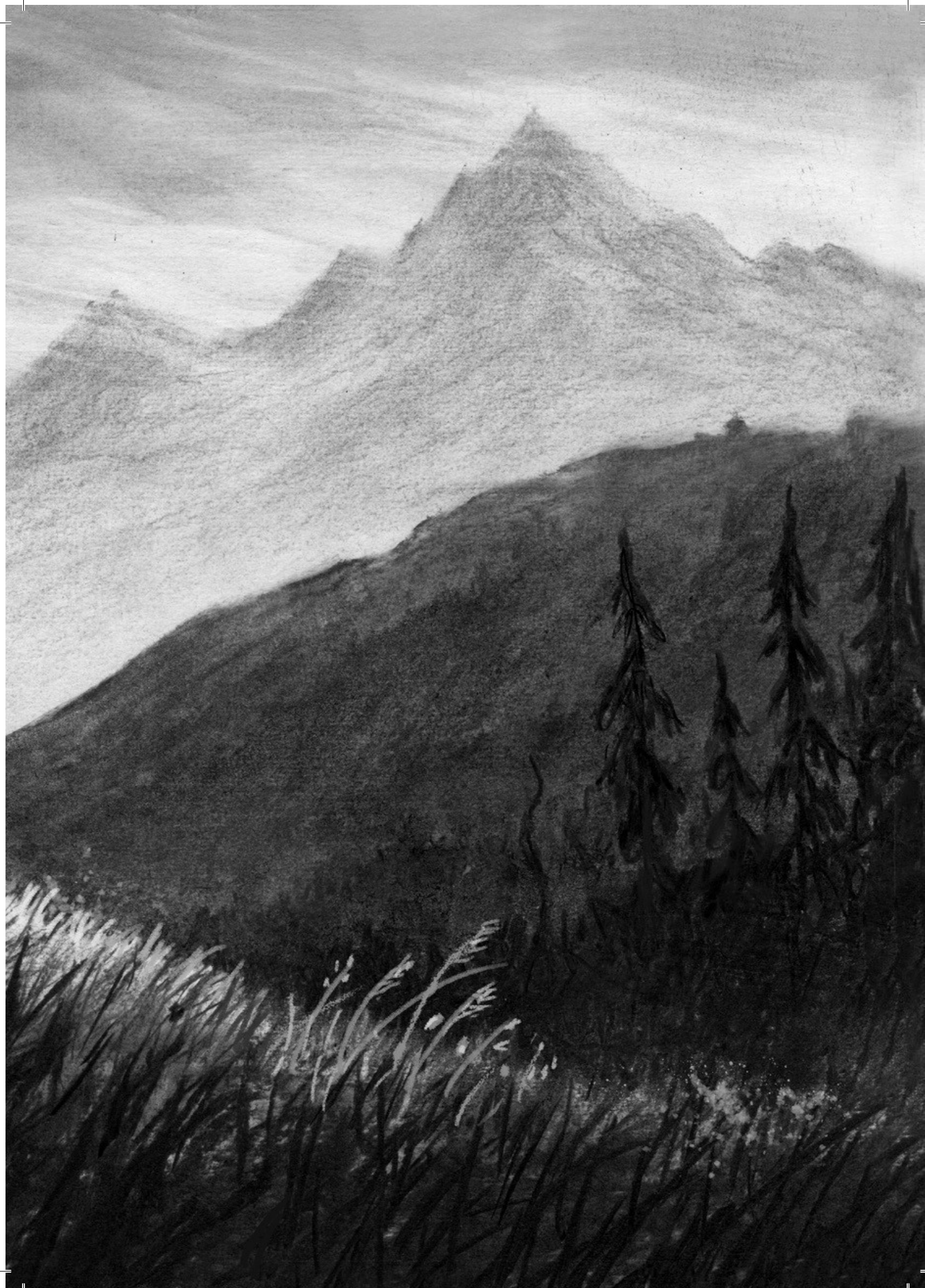
THE PATH

Leaving her people behind, Tuuli was on a quest. Her solitary path lay to the southeast. She would head higher and higher into the hills, until she reached snowy ground, and then she would keep going, up into the mountains. That was her plan. Because that was where her friend Andar had said his tribe was: in the southern mountains, the Mountains of the Sun. He had pointed towards a high peak, impossibly far away.

Tuuli wasn't completely alone, though, because she had Lupa close by her side. Tuuli had rescued the wolf pup two moons ago, and now there was an inseparable bond connecting them.

She was confident of the direction: she was going towards the morning sun, hitting an angle that took her upriver while





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moving away from the water – that lay to the east and south – into the foothills of the mountains. Every now and then she would pause and gaze up at those distant peaks, but mostly she looked down at her feet. Occasionally she broke off her determined march to hunt. She and Lupa would stalk whatever crossed their path: a fat capercaillie, a hare, sometimes even a small deer.

Tuuli carried a huge lump of sorrow and pain inside her. She'd made a new friend that summer and then suddenly lost him. Her sadness sat heavily in her chest, just under her breastbone. Sometimes she laid a hand there as if to keep the sadness in place, to settle it. Other times, she would forget about it, and then it would rear up, rising into her throat, pulling her up short and bringing her to tears. Those tears were never far away. It felt as though she were made of sadness, woven out of grief.

But she knew she had to keep going. Young people usually set off on a solitary journey, a Wandering, to test themselves, as they grew towards adulthood. But this was no ordinary Wandering. She had answers to find, and not just about herself, but about Andar. Each morning, Tuuli would rise with the sun, pack away her fur sleeping bag, roll it up and tie it onto her backpack. She wouldn't bother to reignite the fire from the evening before. Instead, she

THE PATH

would set off straight away – she'd get warm by walking.

The constant motion helped her push down the overwhelming grief. So every day she walked until her feet and her back ached. If they'd been lucky enough to find food, she would make a fire as the sun set, then cook the meat over it and share the meal with Lupa. Then they would curl up together, close to the fire, and Tuuli would sink immediately into a deep, dreamless sleep. Being unbelievably tired at the end of a day was a goal in itself. Sleep came as a welcome release.

Andar was constantly in her thoughts. Andar alive: laughing, singing, dancing before her tribe had reached the Summer Set. And then, her friend dead: lying in his grave as though he were asleep. Resting on his side, wrapped in soft furs and covered with red ochre as Tuuli scattered flowers over him.

Somewhere, alongside and *inside* the grief, there was anger, too. Because Andar's death hadn't been accidental. He'd been killed by a man she knew very well – an uncle called Leon. Whenever the image of Leon, the murderer, flashed into her mind she felt white-hot hate towards him, like a searing flame inside her. It scared her.

One foot in front of the other, she thought to herself. *I must keep going*. She focused her attention instead on the path, the destination.