

The Twins of Planet Naan



by Nathania Rubin

Chapter 1: Everyday

It is a fresh start morning on Planet Naan. The Stretchy Stars spark through silken sky. Electric embers.

All creatures blink awake, reflexively shooting signals back and forth. Noiselessly, without a trace. The Planet's sky, a synapse. Knowledge, mental moves, shared, spread, smoothed across all minds and bodies.



The Twins twitch and stir inside their proximate pods atop the Tree of Synching Sleep.

Their minds have successfully synched overnight, as they always do.
Their bodies have successively recharged in the night, as they always do.



The Peaceful Maiden of Directed Dreams has perfectly performed her nocturnal duties, as she always does. Curating the Twins' dreams and energy transfer so that on this fresh morning, as on every morning, when the Stretchy Stars start their glow, the Twins wake up with the same mind, the same ideas, memories, and impressions. They wake up every day, as one being spread across two bodies.

Ready. Go.

Always cautious, but with steady urgency, the Twins exit their elevated pods. Descending. From either side, their sticky palms grip the slick trunk, releasing gluey resin calibrated to the trunk texture. All the way down.

The energy of the Sleep Tree emerges into morning along with the Twins, sparking through its lower branches, warming to its outermost twig tendrils. As the Sleep Maiden sheds her night duties, the entire structure stretches and swirls. Catching currents.

At the base of the tree, the Twins stop, fueling up on the briefest, most efficient snack of micro-kernels. The shortest break possible. They must start their journey of 5,000 Naanian miles across the entire Planet. Their daily trek. Timed to a science. If they lose even a moment... even a few extra minutes would destroy their rhythm. They must reach their destination at the precise moment that the Coalescing Window opens. They must get back to the Sleep Tree in time for the start of Full Sleep. Were any of this to go awry... unfathomable anguish, bodily decay.

Stay on course.

The Twins tread through the Grove of Relaxation and Rejuvenation, with its twist-turny branches tangling and untangling as the Planet unfurls to this new day.

The Grove is the most tranquil zone on all of Naan, nestled in a thicket deep within the lush Forest of Injoenita. Even in daytime, the Grove of R and R emits a soporific ether, through warm and permeating air. It soothes anyone and anything inside its realm into a state near slumber. Making everything forgetful and soft.

Letting go of the burden of muscles reaching.
Letting go of the burden of thought.

The Twins must push past the temptation to rest in the Grove's soothing atmosphere, generating alertness, until they reach its outer limits. Here they encounter the wide stretch of Injoenita's Forest proper and jolt into gear.

They step into the Forest, anticipating the typically taught terrain to support their Signature Spring Step, which saves them time. It allows them to jump without jumping, soaring up and forward, distances three times the length of their legs at once. But it isn't working. The Forest Floor, normally stubbornly steady, trampoline-like and easy, today is sticky, silky and sinky. A vat of tricky mud, deep and pulling. Just walking is a challenge. Each step sinks the Twins down, so they must stop and forcibly extricate each foot against the mud's suck. Slurping sounds, resistance. Squishy soil holds their feet in confused viscosity. They wiggle against its liquid grip.

Slow. Trouble. Solve. Now. Click. Click.

They sharpen focus. Attune their steps and foot-texture to the new surface. The little Twins shift their weight upwards, lighening towards the air above, so they don't sink. They develop a soft gliding technique just barely grazing the ground's surface, skating. Not pressing on the mud long enough or hard enough to sink. It works.

Better.

But just when the Twins feel oriented to the new texture, hopeful, they look out at the vast expanse of forest and see not only liquidy mud, but swirling Eddies. Chaotic spirals. Turbid, slippery.

Escalating in circular intensity with every second. Whorling, fierce currents.

Stepping out into this sloppy snarl, the Twins are sucked by the spirals into unproductive circles, throwing them off their trajectory, sliding uncontrollably in undesired directions



They hone their focus further.

Focus on Naan is a powerful tool, capable of making the impossible possible. The Twins specialize in focus. Focus and Will. Planet Naan, on healthy days, functions as one organism. Its powers and characteristics are unevenly distributed. Localized in certain bodies. The Twins are the epicenter for focus, concentration, perseverance, and will. With these, their superpowers, they manage to tune into the slick surface of the slippery mud, hardening its texture. The ground, caught up in aggressive chaos, yields to the Twins' influence as best it can. Like lightening, the Twins anticipate the mud's movement and convince the surface to care about theirs. A skating technique emerges, the Twins riding each swirl's circumference, clarifying the circular currents. Getting their bodies where they need to go.

Control. Better. Go. Keep going.



But what is causing this turbulence?

The Twins have to acknowledge, in the small part of their minds not focused on navigating their trek, that Naan is going through some extra processing, something... complicated. Some entity has entered the Planet's realm, demanding Naan's effort and attention. The Planet is trying to metabolize something new, to integrate it into Naan's fabric. But the integration is incomplete, barely started. The new entity is still unknown, and its lack of assimilation, taxes and strains the Planet, taking a brutal toll on all functions.

Strange. Unknown. Bad.

No one has seen the Stranger yet, but the Planet feels an impending presence. The Land itself, the air above and all its spawn, affected

Everything, everyone on Naan is connected and perceiving in a way that human languages cannot neatly encapsulate. If something happens anywhere on Naan, it ripples through every creature, place and thing. Like a bell's vibratory ring, filling a room with echoes. If anyone or anything on Naan hears something, they all hear it (somewhat), they all know it (somewhat). But hearing and seeing on Naan are not like they are on Earth. Naanian sensing is intuitive. Bodily. From where and when you are, you cannot fully understand Naan's methods of perception and connectivity. But hopefully, it will excite you to know that what you might think of as magic exists on Naan.

I used to live unaware of it too, until I learned the truth.


But back to that morning.

As soon as the Twins get past the treacherous mud swirls, hoping to resume their normal flow and regain time in their journey, another unexpected obstacle descends. The terrain has solidified, but now the sky above becomes a problem.

Falling Jumbo Tumble Leaves of deep jade flecked with weighty golden specs.

A combination of metallic and soft botanic fibers, the massive Jumbo Leaves plunge swiftly down all around the tiny Twins. The gigantic fronds have a rare capacity for levitation because of their sail-like structure and their relationship to the branches above and the roots below. The Leaves always fall this time of year, but today, the tendons tying them to their home trees are tenuous. Their connections fragile and frazzled. Blocked and fritzed by the air around them, the confusion inside.

Are the Twins focused on this unknown energy? Of course not. But also yes.



Their practical attention stays firmly fastened to the task at hand: where they must get to, where they must always get to. Every. Day.

But in the outermost particles of the tiniest strands of their hair, that in uncharacteristic disobedience stray from their determined skulls, these particles on the outer limits of their bodies, almost of the air itself, wonder and reach out into the unknown, Just a bit.

What. Fast. Watch. Go. Dart. Dart. Go.

The Twins dodge the falling Leaves, any one of which would crush them.

But we mustn't blame the Tumble Leaves. They try their best not to land on the scurrying Twins, but their calibrating powers are temporarily, radically compromised. They can't control their own trajectories. So much interference.

Confusion. Chaos.

You don't know the Twins yet, but chaos is very much their enemy. At this point in their lives, the Twins require routine. They are organized, responsible, capable of wildly difficult tasks, like trekking to the exact other side of the Planet and back every... single... day. Their minds are a tunnel of systematic persistence. Their focus, sharper than lasers, is capable of honing a world to their will. But all around this tunnel of control, is a wild, world-shattering fear. Fear of anything and everything that does not flow neatly through their realm of agency.

You can see it all play out on their faces. Though "faces" isn't really

the right word.

In the Twins' face place swirls shifting arrays of gray smudge. Like charcoal erased and redrawn, like a cloud that looks like one thing and then another. You can never be certain that the shape you see is there or from your own mind. Whatever the Twins are processing, whatever mode they are in, the sparkling charcoal of their faces moves.

A living pigment. The smudge dynamics reflect not only the Twins' feelings, but their calibration to the fluxing energies of the Planet.

As they dart around the plunging Jumbo Leaves, suppressing concern for the Planet and themselves, suppressing fears about what all these environmental anomalies might mean, streaks particulate, scatter and reorganize. They transform from fuzzy whisps into sharp points of 3-dimensional depth that stretch into their minds and back out.

Dart. Go. Fast. Left. Right. Faster, faster. Go.

One Leaf falls, then another.

Almost more than the Twins can physically handle.

Finally, they make it through to the edge of the Forest of Injoenita, entering the Vast Array of Swinging Dunes.



A relief to be out of falling Leaf danger, their smudges loosen. But the Dunes ahead soon manifest their own version of the Planet-wide agitation. The Swaying Dunes normally undulate in a mellow, meditative motion, like grass tickled by breeze. But today, the Dunes are tight. Frozen in concentration, maybe fear. This stilted state requires adjustment from the Twins yet again. More calibration. *Adjust. Adjust. Fix. Calibrate.* You might think it would be easier for the Twins to make their way across mounds that are not moving, but any change to their routine, including this one, throws them off. They are used to tuning into the sways of the Dunes. Used to aiming their Signature Spring Step towards each mound's destination, not where the mound currently is.

They tighten their focus. Their precision aperture.

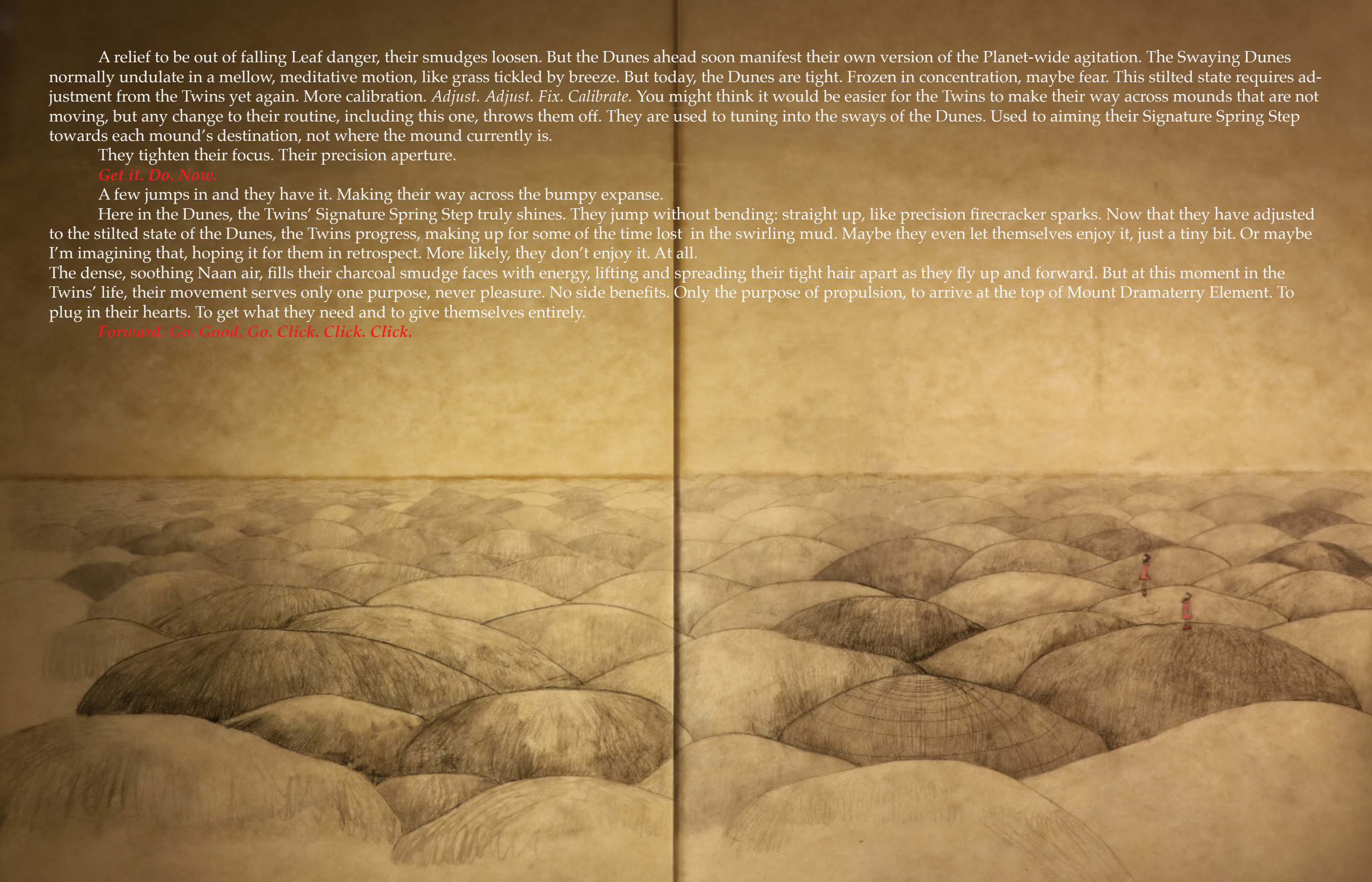
Get it. Do. Now.

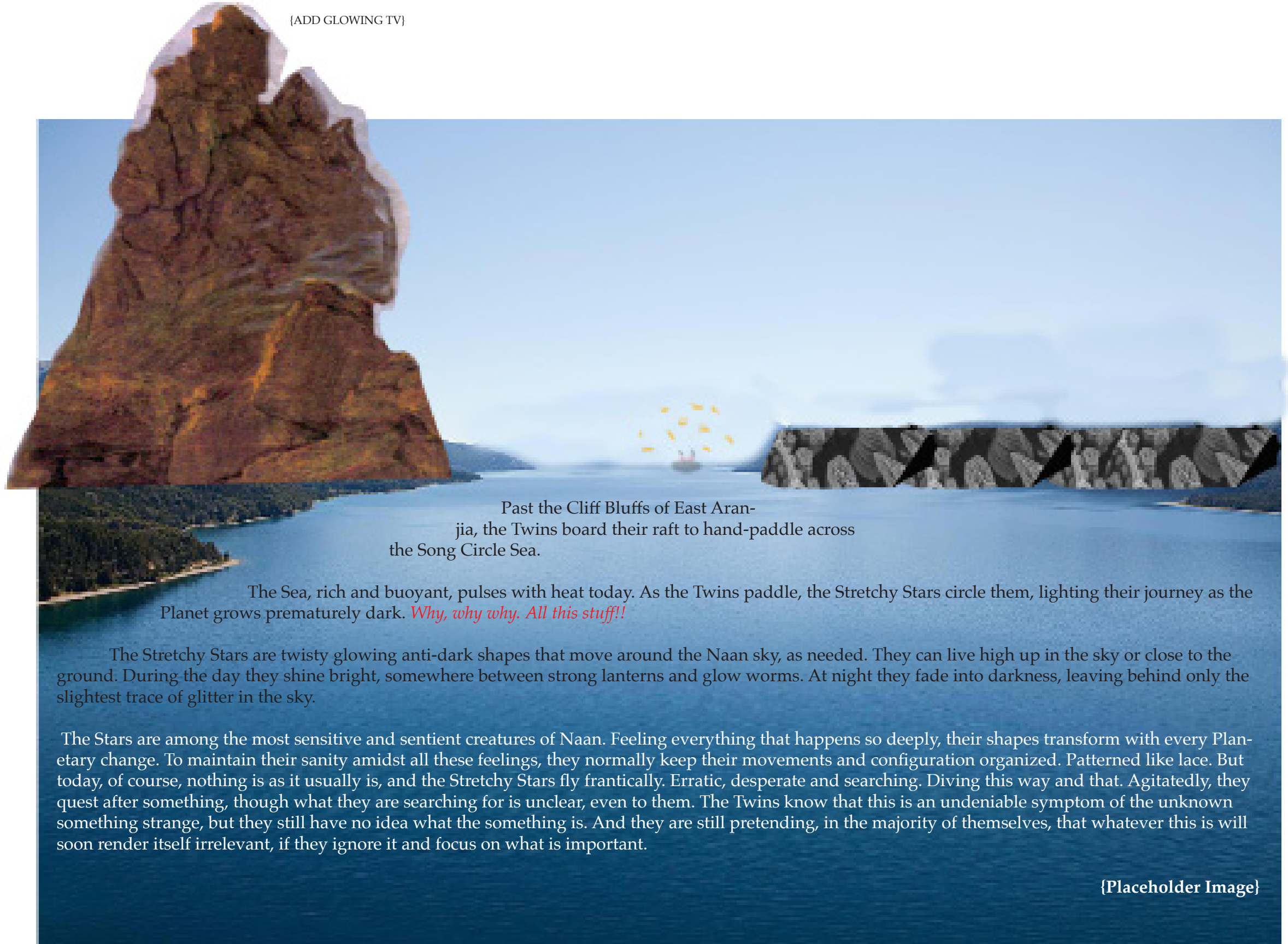
A few jumps in and they have it. Making their way across the bumpy expanse.

Here in the Dunes, the Twins' Signature Spring Step truly shines. They jump without bending: straight up, like precision firecracker sparks. Now that they have adjusted to the stilted state of the Dunes, the Twins progress, making up for some of the time lost in the swirling mud. Maybe they even let themselves enjoy it, just a tiny bit. Or maybe I'm imagining that, hoping it for them in retrospect. More likely, they don't enjoy it. At all.

The dense, soothing Naan air, fills their charcoal smudge faces with energy, lifting and spreading their tight hair apart as they fly up and forward. But at this moment in the Twins' life, their movement serves only one purpose, never pleasure. No side benefits. Only the purpose of propulsion, to arrive at the top of Mount Dramaterry Element. To plug in their hearts. To get what they need and to give themselves entirely.

Forward. Go. Good. Go. Click. Click. Click.





Past the Cliff Bluffs of East Aran-
jia, the Twins board their raft to hand-paddle across
the Song Circle Sea.

The Sea, rich and buoyant, pulses with heat today. As the Twins paddle, the Stretchy Stars circle them, lighting their journey as the Planet grows prematurely dark. *Why, why why. All this stuff!!*

The Stretchy Stars are twisty glowing anti-dark shapes that move around the Naan sky, as needed. They can live high up in the sky or close to the ground. During the day they shine bright, somewhere between strong lanterns and glow worms. At night they fade into darkness, leaving behind only the slightest trace of glitter in the sky.

The Stars are among the most sensitive and sentient creatures of Naan. Feeling everything that happens so deeply, their shapes transform with every Planetary change. To maintain their sanity amidst all these feelings, they normally keep their movements and configuration organized. Patterned like lace. But today, of course, nothing is as it usually is, and the Stretchy Stars fly frantically. Erratic, desperate and searching. Diving this way and that. Agitatedly, they quest after something, though what they are searching for is unclear, even to them. The Twins know that this is an undeniable symptom of the unknown something strange, but they still have no idea what the something is. And they are still pretending, in the majority of themselves, that whatever this is will soon render itself irrelevant, if they ignore it and focus on what is important.



After paddling their little hands across the Circle Sea, they finally reach the small isle of Naan that houses Mount Dramaterry Element, keeper of their destination.

Around the base of Mount Dramaterry Element is a thicket ring of Brainfield. A well-trod path through the Field leads directly to the Mountain's base and entry trail.

In a typical Naanian year, the Brainfield grows perhaps three new eggs. Everything that anyone knows on Naan has been known for a long, long time. The slow emergence of new eggs each year comes from steady, subtle growth, little by little as the Planet and all its creatures learn about life and their world. (Of course, the Year When Everything Went Wrong was a different story for the Idea Eggs, and a tale for another time.) Normally, Eggs rarely emerge.

On a typical Naanian day, the Brainstems hang loose and slowly receive soft charges, quietly sending inspirational pulses from one to another.

Today, however, the Stems stand at full attention, shooting incessant jolts to one another across the field. And at their tips, many(!) fresh glowing Idea Eggs, full and large, float upward into the atmosphere, bursting high above the ground, immersing their novel chemistry into the realm, permeating every particle of sky and Planet. No wonder everything was so fritzed. The incorporation of these Idea Eggs alone would send the soil, the Jumb Leaves and the whole Planet into a state of stress. It's a lot to assimilate. But where are these Ideas coming from?

The Twins cannot, rather will not, stop to wonder. They will not stop to feel the awe of this new sight. Never have they seen Eggs this big, Eggs this bountiful. The implications of what this will mean for the Planet... they will not stop to think about this. They will not stop for anything.

They forge through the thicket, enduring electric shocks around and through their tiny bodies.

When they get out of the Brainfield, they may now enter their daily negotiation with the lowermost creature of Mount Dramaterry Element: the Page Worrier.

The Twins arrive at Mount Dramaterry Element later than usual, but as usual, the Page Worrier is terrified by their arrival. His teeth chatter from fear, transmitting tremors through the Mountain.

One would think that the Page Worrier of Mount Dramaterry Element would be used to the Twins’ visits by now, happening as they do every single day, month after month, year after year. But the phenomenon of worry has no relationship to memory. It looks toward the future, trembling.

The Page Worrier’s memories are there, but his worry-knots fill the atmosphere, like a sky too cloudy for the sun to shine through. His memory is eclipsed by concern.

When he sees the little ladies coming his way, he doesn’t think about what happened when he saw them yesterday. He only asks himself what threats they might pose and what dark outcomes may be afoot.

The Page tries to calm down. He takes two slow breaths in and two even slower breaths out -- a breathing technique he has cultivated to deal with moments such as these.

After twelve breaths, his muscles relax just enough for him to regain control of his face, enough to override twitching and to speak. With what bravery

he can muster (for bravery is action in the face of fear, not lack of fear), he voices the words required to vet the Twins, intruders to his Mount.

Page Worrier: *What do you want here? Why are you here?*

The Twins almost always speakthink in fragments, straight to the point. But with the Page Worrier, they slow it down. Taking pains to make each phrase precise.



One false move and all will be lost. Placation is always the name of the game when it comes to the Page Worrier.

The Twins: *We need to reach the top of the Mount Dramaterry Element. We mean no harm and will proceed with great care.*

Page Worrier: *What if you burn down all the trees on the mountain? On purpose OR by mistake?*

The Twins: *We carry no source of fire and will proceed with the utmost caution. Caution. We love this mountain and will do nothing to harm it.*

Page Worrier: *Ok, well... what if you break off a substantial mineral chunk of the mountain - in-ad-ver-tent-ly! – (He pauses with his eyes wide, making sure each syllable sinks into their psyches.) And this destabilizes the structure of the en-TIRE MOUNTAIN?!*

The Twins: *[sigh, remain calm.] We are very small as you can see. So our steps will not break off any piece of the mountain. Intact. We will climb with great care. Safe. We will tread lightly, on tip toe if we have to. We will not disrupt the structure of this mountain.*



The interlocution proceeds like this for some time and ends as it does every day with the same query -- the greatest of concerns for the Page Worrier.

Page Worrier: *What if you hurt Eleanor Grand in some way? In ANY WAY?!*
The Twins: *[although they get this question every day, confront it with great great solemnity.] We would never hurt Eleanor Grand. She is our friend. She likes us too, and will be happy to see us. And she is wiser than you. So you can trust her judgement if you do not believe us. But we always treat Eleanor Grand with great care and respect.*

The Page Worrier reluctantly allows the Twins to proceed. He closes his eyes to contain the concern he feels as the tiny Twins hike past him.

Mount Dramaterry Element has a stern, steep slope. Its surface is riddled with irregularities and diverse obstacles.

The Twins make their way around the Page's trunk-like neck and now face the tricky task of traversing the rough and rocky crumble of the Mountain's lowest, widest region. As they clip and clomp their way up, something strange about the day again: Shadows dart across the Mountain, throwing fast-moving black diamonds across the hiking path. The Twins look up to determine the cause of this penumbra. They see the Stretchy Stars soaring wildly this way and that, in discomfort and confusion.

The Twins hasten their climb up the initial, choppy terrain at Mount Dramaterry Element's foundation until they reach the Sanguin Squid, lying characteristically calm within the Mountain's face.

The Sanguin Squid is the most relaxed creature on Naan. The hermaphroditic jelly dangler lies languid all day, allowing its spindly tendrils to catch the breeze, gently swaying, without agenda, without ambition, with no awareness of time or place. It feels the moment and nothing else.

The Twins belay up the Sanguin Squid's soft and squishy swinging tentacles, one hand over the other, inch by inch. Slipping occasionally on the tentacles' slime. *Up. Hand. Slip. Again. Up. Hand.* Repeated and repeated and repeated and repeated. Exhausting. Their tired little arms. For a moment they almost cry, which is not like them. They are strong and don't often think of themselves. But this journey is difficult and today even more so, due to all the atmospheric disruptions. The threat of this unclear invasion has added an almost intolerable weight to their already strained muscles and challenges their laser-sharp focus. It keeps threatening to derail their mission. The internal effort needed to stay on course, requires almost more energy than they have.

they have.

But the will of the Twins is as strong as anything on Naan. Once they reach the Sanguin Squid's squishy mesoglea, there remains only a comparatively painless hike to Eleanor Grand and her Spontaneous Garden. Their muscles can ease just a little, but of course, they don't.

Eleanor Grand is pleased to see the little Twins, as she always is, though this day has been disruption-ridden and strange. Eleanor Grand's weathered eyelids have flutter, her spirit frazzled in a manner entirely new to this ancient creature. In all her many many years, something she doesn't know how to know is peaking around the corner.

The rest of Naan will count on her to make sense of whatever this is. She, Eleanor Grand, grounds all Naanian beings with the gravitational force of her wisdom. Her stately composure. Her steadfast steadfastness, her unflappably capable solidity. She is the foundation upon which they all rely.

Because she is so old and so wise, Eleanor Grand is more deeply entrenched in the life forces of Naan, than other creatures of the Planet, who are all, entrenched in the life forces of Naan. These forces extend, from root and soil to Stretchy Stars, and everything in between.

With her senior status, Eleanor Grand harnesses the Planet's energy to grow food instantaneously, at will. Her glorious garden manifests spiraling fruits, crisp leaves with veins of hydrating juice, radiant roots... all fresh from the electric soil of Mount Dramaterry Element.

When the Twins arrive at Eleanor Grand, the penultimate stage of their ascension, it takes only a mild gust of the wise being's intention for her to produce luscious produce, grown on the spot, to nourish the tiny trekkers.

The lunch is abundant as it always is, more than the Twins could hope to consume. The excess comforts them and they begin to relax just a little little little little. Relaxing is not their specialty, but when they are this fatigued and this hungry, they cannot help but seek an ease to their tension. Just a little little little.



Normally, the Twins have reached this point in the journey much earlier. And with time to spare before the Coalescing window, they rest in Eleanor Grand's garden snacking, before ascending the last stretch of Mountain. But today, they are *late, behind, unthinkable*. Disoriented.

Eleanor Grand knows they are eager to make it to their destination at the summit. The turmoil and turbulence, she sees too. Her wisdom condenses all noise to a faint hum. She sees sharply only what is most important. The pull of the Twin's tiny hearts, to that which their souls eternally serve. She sees their urgency and fear.

Bring your food with you to the top, she tells them.

She knows the Twins will not relax enough to eat until they have reached their destination. They grab what they can hold in their small arms, while balancing on the last winding, vertical stretch of trail, Eleanor Grand's tresses. A steep spiral, its materiality is a mixture of hair and mountain minerals. Its structure organized in smooth filaments, comprising massive blocks.

With one last exertion, almost dizzily, the Twins trudge up the well-worn path within Eleanor Grand's curly mane, their arms full of food, their shared hearts full of longing.

Finally, they arrive atop the entirety of Mount Dramaterry Element. The most elevated spot on the entire Planet. From the Mountain's peak, one can see a beautiful view, to be sure, but the Twins disregard this aesthetic pleasure, focused on something far more beautiful than any landscape. The single beauty that concerns them, eclipsing all concern and all worldly majesty. No sky configuration, no spread of flowers can compete. And they have made it in time. They have not missed the Coalescing Window.

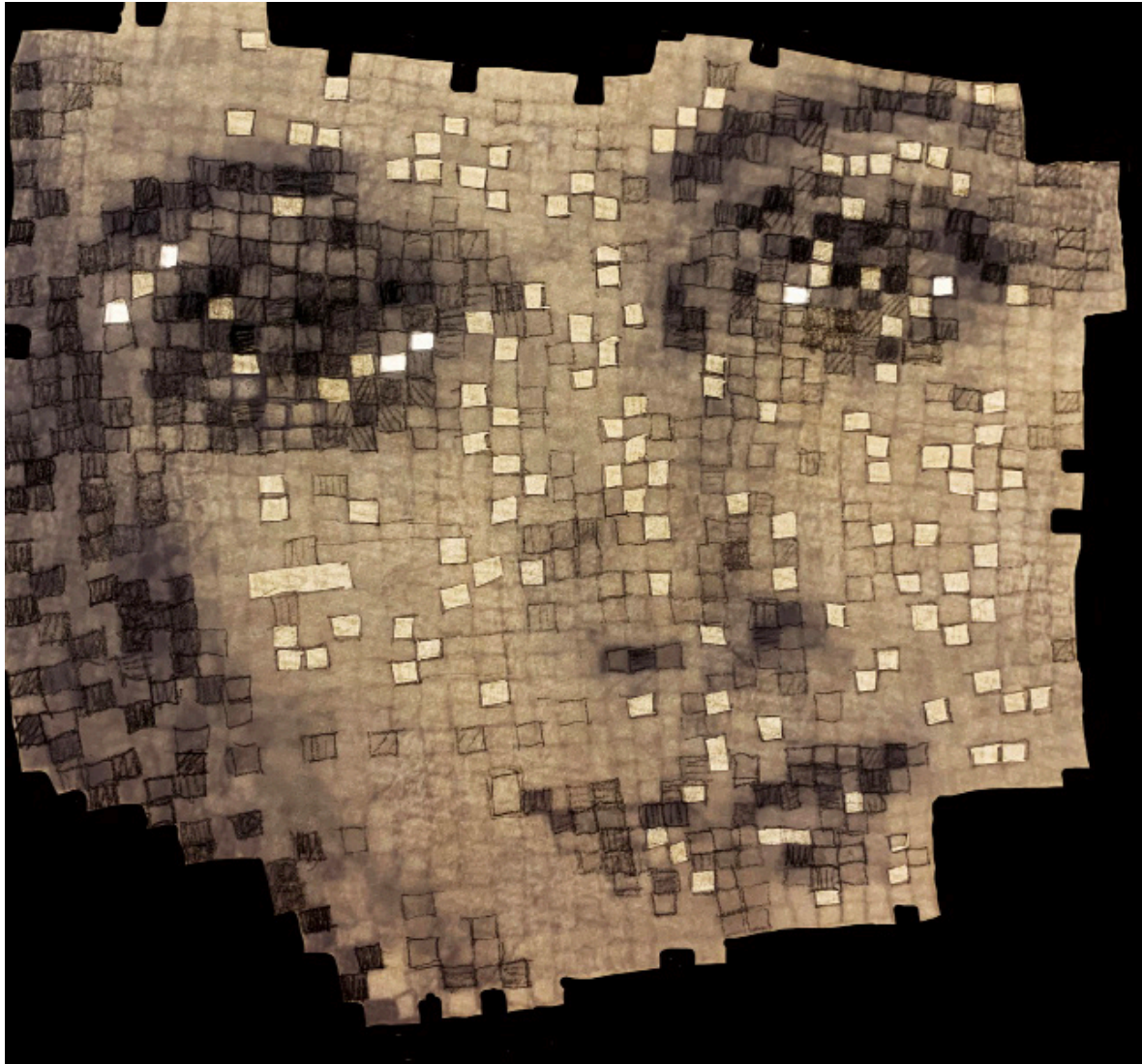
In this small moment, at this special location each day, the Twins' tender anxiety, echoes of guilt, shadows of fear, tension of uncertainty, all evaporate into nothing. For just this moment, they are able to have it. Peace and love. The pure warmth of everything.

Here on the Mountain's peak, at this wondrous altitude, sits a square box, charged by something like an electric current, surging through the mountain, like blood. I think of it as a box or a TV, but this is a bit like calling a rainbow a common lamp. We have to call it something though, so let's call it a TV Glow Box. There is no proper word for what this is in human language and even on Naan, its phenomenon knows no precedent.



Inside the TV Glow Box, hundreds of tiny squares emanate varying vibrancies of light, creating a shining and glorious, pixelated presence that only appears for one hour each day. This glittering soul means more to the Twins than anyone or anything, including themselves. It is perhaps, the only being that means anything to the Twins. Her name is Aphrena. She is the Twins' Mom.

While the Page Worrier is the most anxious creature and the Sanguin Squid is the most relaxed, and Eleanor Grand is the oldest and wisest, the Twins' Mom, Aphrena Hearth, is a creature portal for the greatest warmth, love and kindness on all of Planet Naan. Imagine a feeling of cozy socks, a cuddly pet and the warmest fireplace. The most soothing tea with honey and lemon, a baby's



smile, a sunset just for you. The feeling of wholeness on a blissful beach, gazing out into the majestic ocean as waves visit your open feet. Knowing that the world itself embraces you. Loves you with every particle of air.

Aphrena is the pulsing love, the beating heart of Planet Naan.

Beings far and wide, feel the glow of Aphrena's tenderness in their hearts, but to be in her actual physical proximity, especially for the Twins, is to be as close to a celestial light of infinite love as any living creature can hope to be.

Aphrena is as beautiful on the outside as she is on the inside. A radiant being, whose heart sings more magnificently than ever, out of love for her Twins. She does not speak in thought-words but through song-melody. Her music cannot be separated from the emanating light that shines through her, that is her. All waves of her light are waves of music.

The Twins' arrival ignites an elation that reverberates love throughout the Planet. Naan is never happier than during the Coalescing Window, the one hour of every afternoon that the Twins sit with their Mom, basking in love's unrelenting light.

After eating their lunch from Eleanor Grand's Spontaneous Garden, the Twins come as close to relaxing as they ever do, their breathing slows and they allow themselves to forget that they are on a rocky peak. They forget the limitations of their access to Aphrena, forget the long journey to and from this sacred peak. They nourish and immerse their hearts in this moment. Aphrena sings their morning song. She sings the morning song even though it is late afternoon, because she could not be with her babies in the morning. Stuck as she is, where she is. Aphrena's voice never soars too high nor falls too low, but weaves wavelengths together in gloriously layered harmony.

The song's vibrations soften and tingle the Twins' toes and ears and everywhere in between. Their thoughts, so stabbing with urgency, calm into sweet noodles, wiggling into nothing. *Wasn't that silly? Nevermind. Listen. Be.*

Their muscles softened, doubts erase, warmth and happiness emerging in their place. Each musical vibration releases echoing waves of comfort and hope that burst into Naan's atmosphere like bubbles of joy. The Planet needs this song as much as the Twins do, and Aphrena can sing it only for them.

Light and harmony create a bath of warmth and joy around the Twins, warming their hearts and hearts all across the Land.



The Coalescing Window's warmth has soothed the Planet. Naan feels recovered, has forgotten the turbulence and unexpected, unspecific interruptions of the day. Perhaps everything is back to normal now. It feels like everything is back to normal. Naan sighs with ease.

Since the Twins' journey to Aphrena has taken even longer today than it usually does and they still have the entire return journey to endure, they must leave a little early to regain lost time and get back to the Sleep Tree before full night.

Night is serious.

Everyone needs to be where they need to be when the Stretchy Stars go dim.

The Twins must get back to the Sleep Tree for rejuvenation. If they were to miss a night under the Sleep Maiden's care, not only would their synchronization suffer irreparably, but their minds and bodies would slowly cease function.

Like little batteries that need charging, or toys that need batteries, their life motor is strong, but only with the botanical backing of the magical Sleep Maiden and her vital branch bronchioles, infusing and invigorating, weaving perfect dreams together and balancing the pods so each Twin can know the other one's mind this time, that time, every time. Always.

They never want to leave.

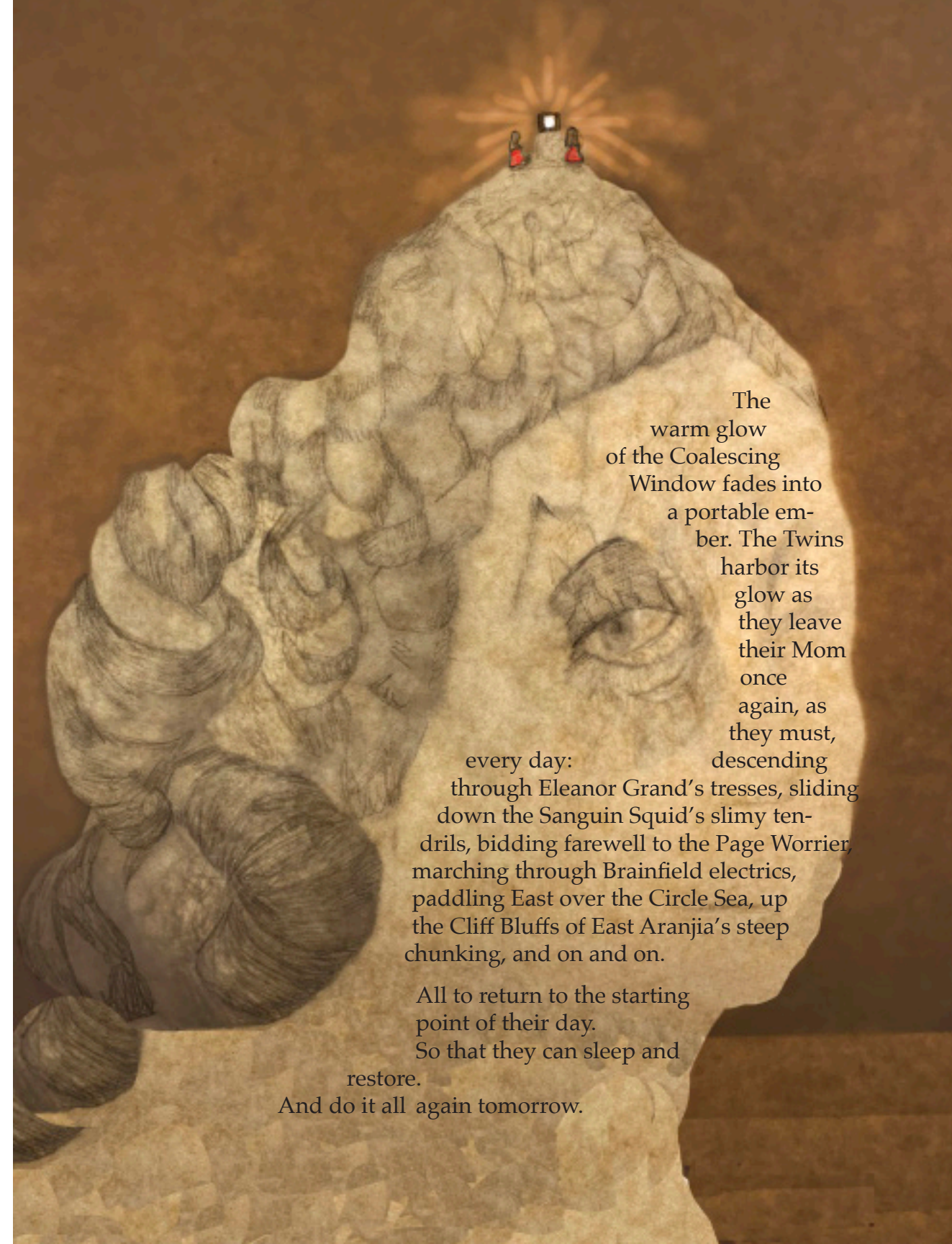
The Twins' connection to Aphrena lives in them always, but leaving her proximity still feels like a violent fracture of the soul. Aphrena tries to make it smooth and light, but the Twins know she is sad too. Almost as sad as they are to leave her there, alone on the Mountain Top, encased and electric. They want to stay in their cozy bubble with melodies, beaming warmth and loving language. A love that is so clearly felt, that it is almost visible as a substance between them, within them, feeding all of Naan with its glow.

But they are also used to this. There is another side to all of it. *Lucky. Mom. Here. Us. Today. Tomorrow. Lucky.* At least they get to see her. At least she is still with them, even if it is in this... limited form. And there is the urgency that snaps back like a clock tick. *Time to go. Always. Tick Tick.* They ride the rigidity of their journey's logistics like a train, parallel to the hard feelings. Their mission's tedium, helps them cope, helps them exit the spell of sadness. They focus on survival.

Before leaving, they wipe the TV Glow Box's clean with static poppy fibers they have carried from the Grove. Using their Spring Step to reach every illuminated square. Making sure nothing new has settled on the glossy surface.

Aphrena sings a nighttime song to carry in their hearts, since she will not be with them when they fall asleep. The nighttime song is even richer than the daytime song, soothing and ethereal. It lets them know that it is ok to encounter the unknown, as all creatures must do when they sleep.

The Twins know Aphrena's songs by heart, but never tire of hearing them. They bask and bloom in the bell bright voice cascading them through sweet melodies composed just for them. Love in musical form, filling them. Guiding and soothing their bodies and soul. Smoothing the transition to a space without their Mom. The songs lingers.



The
warm glow
of the Coalescing
Window fades into
a portable em-
ber. The Twins

harbor its
glow as
they leave
their Mom
once

again, as
they must,
descending

every day:
through Eleanor Grand's tresses, sliding
down the Sanguin Squid's slimy ten-
drils, bidding farewell to the Page Worrier,
marching through Brainfield electrics,
paddling East over the Circle Sea, up
the Cliff Bluffs of East Aranjia's steep
chunking, and on and on.

All to return to the starting
point of their day.

So that they can sleep and
restore.

And do it all again tomorrow.

Everything is fine.

No turbulence anymore. The struggles and irregularities of the day have subsided. Everything seems fine. *Strange. Imagined. Not real. Fine.* The choppy Sea and soaring Stars. The firing Brainfield with more Idea Eggs than they have ever seen, the frozen Dunes, falling Jumbo Leaves and swirling mud. Everything and everyone seems normal now. It all must have happened in a dream, another life. And the Twins are too tired for thinking anyway. This day, every day. *Tired. Nevermind.*

Their little bodies drag dutifully along like rags, their strong force of will fuzzing and fading. But this is the easy part.

Tranquil energies that emerged during the Coalescing Window, continue across Naan as the Twins make their way back to the Sleep Tree.

In the darkening Naanian light, as day turns to evening, the Stars tame their sparkle, preparing for the great powering down of the Planet.

The Stretchy Stars simmer. A typical Naanian twilight.

The Brainfield pulses at a low vibratory hum, like a soothing heartbeat.

The Circle Sea is calm as glass.

The Vast Array of Swinging Dunes... *wait.*

Chapter 2: The Visitor

The Twins step out onto the gently swaying Dunes with their Signature Spring Step. Though tired, they remain precise and agile. Executing progress. One Two Three. *Step. Step. Tree Sleep. Get. Tomorrow. Step. Step. Step.* Until suddenly, the Dune Mounds jolt like vertical earthquake lightening under the Twins' feet, sending them flying high into the air like tiny rockets. They land askew, having not once before, ever fallen while traversing the Vast Array of Swinging Dunes.



Their complacency shatters.
Things are not back to normal. Things are not fine!
The Dunes are a mess - rising and falling. Base regions of Dune Mounds that have never before come above ground, now reveal themselves to the Naanian air - raw and coated with soot. Subterranean emergence.

What. Now. Nooooooooooooo! Aeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!

The Twins stay for a moment, shocked in their fallen position, tousled by the now frenetic Dunes, like little popcorns. Bumping and bouncing with no control. The sky just above the Dunes, turns from soothing sunset to short circuit seizure. The sky up high is pitch black, but one small area near the horizon fritzes with frenetic light, like a panic disco. This one spot in the distance has all the attention of the Stretchy Stars.

At this time of day, the Stars normally emit a soft amber glow, having no energy left for full blast, but the current circumstance (whatever that is!) brings them into full force, which they can only muster in short bursts. The Stars blinker on and off, darting in a funnel-like formation far from the Twins, but coming closer. Closer. A tornado of flickering light.

The Twins quickly pull themselves together. Their heads blare with uncontained energy, but their bodies remain calm and steady. They regain footing on the Dunes. *Stabilizing.*

Here. Now what?

They take steps toward the whirlpool of Stretchy Stars, swirling in the distance near the horizon, growing closer. Slowly, but steadily. Their bodies move toward the phenomenon, though their minds whisper-wonder, *Why off course? Sleep Tree, other way.*

The Twins do not consider themselves brave.
They do not even consider themselves curious.
They do not consider themselves much at all, for self-consideration is beside the point. Energy wasted.
They have no energy for themselves or for curiosity. It is always beside the point. But right now, for some reason, they are heading in the direction of this turmoil. Even though, it is off their path toward the Sleep Tree. Even though, it is unknown. Even though, whatever this is will be a distraction, or worse.

But still...

They find themselves moving toward it. Not with their usual military-like Spring Step and focused, steady pace, but with cautious creeping.

*What.
Is.
That?*

A funny thing about seeing, is that you see a thing differently once you know what it is. Before you know what it is, you can interpret the sight of it, in any number of ways. At first, you might not even interpret it. You might simply encounter it. The sight of it in all its specificity, not putting it into any category, the sort of place in your head where things with names go. The only descriptor you have for it is: Something you don't know yet. And your only recourse is to get to know it.

When the Twins see the Stranger stumbling on the Vast Array of Swinging Dunes, they see a jumble of white, black, buttons and tubes. They have never seen an Astronaut before, or any human before, and have no way of knowing



that the Traveler's space helmet, is not part of its body. Since the Twins themselves lack distinct facial features, the helmet appears to be a face not unlike their own. So, the grey-faced Twins assume that the Stranger's space helmet is its head.

Around this head, that looks like theirs, the frantic Stretchy Stars, encircle and recircle the Stranger, trying to assess and access this new being. No one yet understands (including the Astronaut) that there can be no knowing between the Creatures of Planet Naan and the Visitor until the helmet is removed. Until it is removed, Naan cannot attach to the Astronaut's inner self, feelings or mind. Nor can the Astronaut attach to them.

The Traveler doesn't know about this type of mind-sharing yet. And the Naanians have never met a creature who was not psychically calibrated to everyone and everything else on the Planet. The hard barrier between them sends a pervasive, vibratory panic across the Land. As though Naan were a single organism (which it is), invaded by something foreign and incongruous, composed of a very different substance than its own. A substance with inscrutable intentions. Like a tumor, incorporating itself only physically, unable or unwilling to play along with the host body's rules.

The Twins could be afraid. They have been prone to caution ever since the devastating events that led to their Mom's TV Glow Box encasement. They no longer take risks of any sort, leave nothing to chance. They stick with rabid fervor to daily routine, avoiding anything unexpected. Usually. *But*. Something compels them toward this Visitor like a magnet. They approach with uncharacteristic daring.

They have not felt curiosity in so many years, but here it is again, an old sensation. A forgotten feeling. A tempting tickle teasing in the distance. Who knows how this will end? They peek into this new excitement. A sparkle in their feet, a fast flicker of their hearts. *What is happening?*

As they edge their way towards the Stranger, a sense stronger than curiosity starts to simmer. A feeling about fate. A feeling that this new Being is actually, somehow deeply important for them. Like a portal they always knew they would one day walk through. It calls them in a way that can only be compared to the pull they feel towards their radiant Mom, a pull that draws them all the way across Naan every single day. But this pull is different. Something new, but inevitable.

A swell of warm energy rapidly expands in the Twins' bellies. They are so close now. Almost close enough to touch the Visitor. At their low altitude, they encounter the Creature's dark and sturdy base. Thorough FootBottoms, able to deal with all kinds of terrain. They tell the Twins something about the Visitor. *Adventure, brave. Explore. Strange. Brave. Tough. Brave.* In a premonitory glimpse of the psychic merging about to occur, they incorporate two new words they had not known this morning. *Cool boots.*

Meanwhile, the Astronaut is dealing with a complex set of difficulties and confusion: swirling Stars soaring incredibly close, chalky undulating Mounds underfoot, destabilizing every attempt at walking. *Gonna fall... can't see with these lights flashing in my face...* Trying to adjust to the terrain, trying to assess the Planet's viability, livability, prognosis. *Will I survive?*

The Stranger somehow senses that it might be ok. And more than that - that if the space helmet comes off, something important will happen. That there is progress to be made here, that can only be made once the space helmet is removed. There is no reason to think this. There is no evidence, but a feeling that is clearer than any words could be. The Astronaut sometimes had this type of feeling on Earth, but usually as a faint murmur. Here on this strange planet, all of a sudden, the feeling emerges, bold as lava, as loud and undeniable as a thunderstorm. This feeling is the only source of guidance the Astronaut has.

Two tiny figures with glowing bellies in the distance. *Aliens, whoa! Wait, is it one creature or two?*

Am I safe? Will I be able to breath if I take my helmet off? Are these stars or flying creatures or what?

All of these thoughts dance together in unproductive circles within a deep, lush lethargy. A fatigue incompatible with journeying a single step further. Dragging a body forward that feels like lead, the only thing keeping the Astronaut from collapse is how exciting this all is! *I'm on another freakin' PLANET!!!! But also, I actually might die of exhaustion if the air here doesn't kill me.* The Astronaut's expedition has not just been from one side of the Planet to another (as the Twins' has, and they are tired enough), but from another Planet entirely. And unlike most space travel at that time, it was not planned in advance.

The Astronaut had not slept a wink the night before. The sleep deprivation and adrenaline crash from the magnitude of this journey pull down on the Traveler's negligible energy, causing even more fatigue and physical strain. As though the Planet had ten times the level of gravity as Earth (which it doesn't). Beyond the fatigue, it is difficult for the Astronaut to even move because of the swarming Stars, like a frenzied hive of bees just released, blocking visibility and the strange movements of the darting Dunes. *I might not make it. So tired. Where will I even make it to? If this is the end though... pretty cool way to go down.*

The Twins appear to the Astronaut as a beacon of hope. A light to hold onto in the middle of chaos and radical confusion. Hopefully that is what they are.

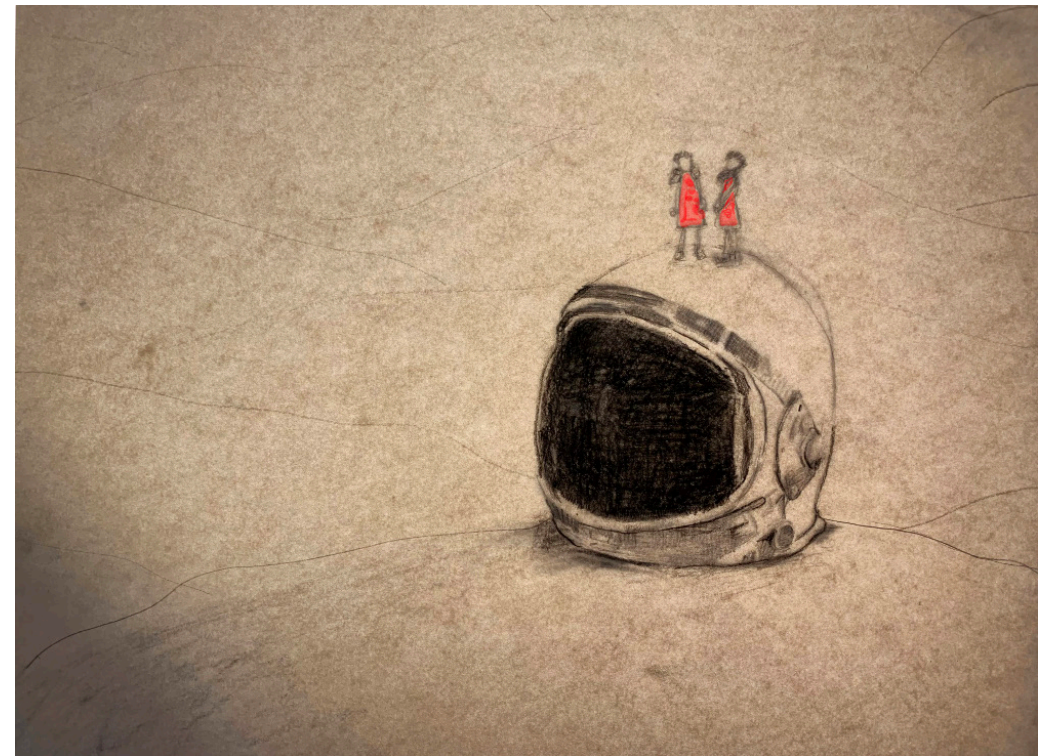
A long moment passes as the Twins and the helmet-laden Astronaut slowly near one another. And then freeze. The Twins fix on the sturdy boots in front of them and the towering creature sprouting up from the explorer's massive shoes. A whole new world. A totem of total strangeness. To the Astronaut, the Twins

appear both marvelously powerful and absolutely adorable. *Are these two separate creatures? They seem to be one, but in two bodies? And... oh my G-d look at their faces!* The Astronaut sees a metallic cloud fighting to form different shapes instead of facial features. It makes sense somehow. *I want more of this! Wait.* The Planet's confusion continues to escalate. The Dune Mound beneath the Astronaut suddenly jolts, sending the Stranger stumbling almost onto the Twins. *Can't see. Can't breathe.*

The Traveler's oxygen is almost all gone. Carbon Dioxide fills the helmet, clouding its visor. The Space Gear meant to keep the Traveler safe is swiftly shifting into a sarcophagus. Nothing breathable left. *Won't survive.*

The Stranger will suffocate if any more time goes by. *No time to get back to the Ship. Won't fly anyway.* It is clear: The Astronaut must remove the space helmet and hope that whatever counts as air on this Planet is breathable for humans.

Here goes nothing.



The Twins, still believing the Helmet to be the Astronaut's head, watch in awe as the Strange Creature reaches up to the top of its body and starts to pull it off! And suddenly...

There I am.



Theodora Isaac Meaney, but people call me TIM.

The day I arrive on Planet Naan, I am twelve years old, but I don't feel twelve. There is a Bob Dylan song that goes, "I was so much older then/I'm younger than that now." So much complicated time has passed since the day I land on Planet Naan. The day that young TIM takes off her helmet to greet a strange planet. The day she meets creatures who will change her life forever, make her feel beyond herself. A meeting that merges the fates and forces of two worlds.

Did you know that every cell in your body eventually dies and is replaced by a new one? And every seven years, every single one of your cells, EVERY ONE, has been replaced by a new cell? So, am I even the same person as I was that day? The girl first stepping foot onto those chalky Dunes? My story, TIM's story... I see them through time. So much will happen to me: to my insides, my feelings, my mind and my soul. More than happens to most people, more than simple cell replacement, because of the story that I'm telling you. So, in some ways, it is me on the Dunes that day, meeting the Twins for the first time. But also, it is not me. TIM the AstroTraveler is brave and a bit reckless. She is more jaded and hurt than she knows. Angry and desperate, she searches for something to contain the feelings that overwhelm her so much, that they have propelled her to an entirely other Planet. She is as sad as she is strong and doesn't need anyone. Doesn't trust anyone.

I'm younger than that now. (Though the wrinkles on my face say otherwise.)

I think that when TIM arrives on the Planet, the story that brought her there, may seem to many and even to herself, like she is young and foolish or young and brave, but I see it differently. I see how cynical she is, like she has nothing to lose. Because even though in years she is so young, so very young, she feels old and tired. Old and frustrated. Fed up, mad and at the end of the line with the world she knows. Truly at the end. And so has she left it. And now here, Naan. This strange world.

The Twins have yet to hear her story, how she came to Naan, but immediately, they think TIM is the coolest. A creature cross between a Lion and a Warrior (both images they suddenly acquire from the portal of TIM's mind). So fierce and dynamic. Chills rattle the Twins' little bodies. Their grey smudges soften in shyness, but dilate decisively. Desperate to ingest this mysterious creature and anything she will show them.

And then the great merging.