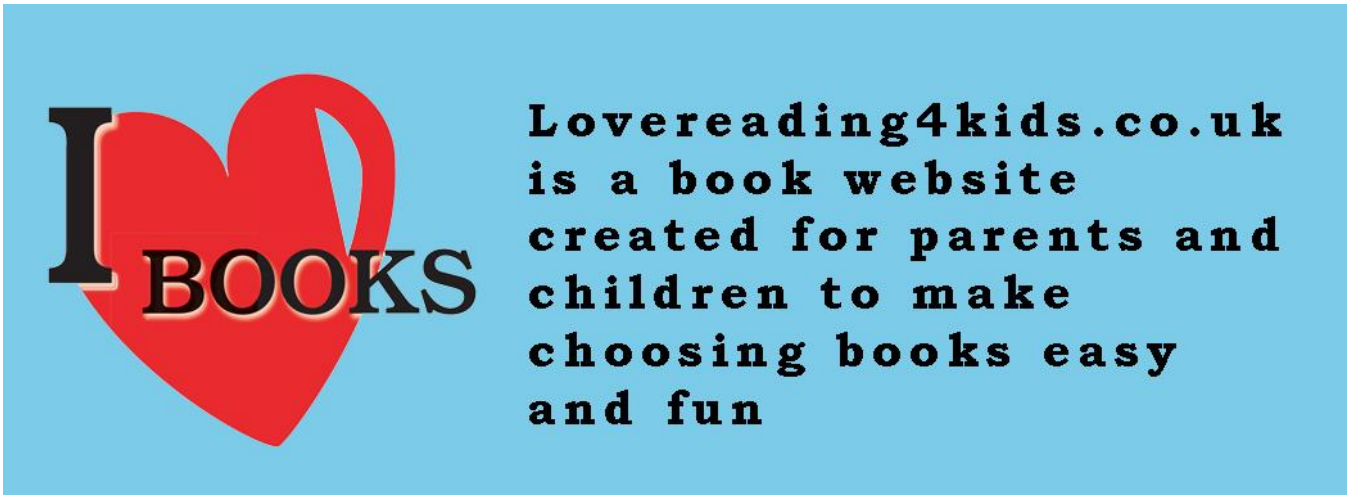


Opening extract from

Running on the Roof of the World

Written by

Jesse Butterworth

Published by

Orion Children's Books an imprint of Hachette Children's Group

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First published in Great Britain in 2017
by Hodder and Stoughton

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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

ISBN 978 1 5101 0208 8

Typeset by Input Data Services Ltd, Bridgwater, Somerset

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

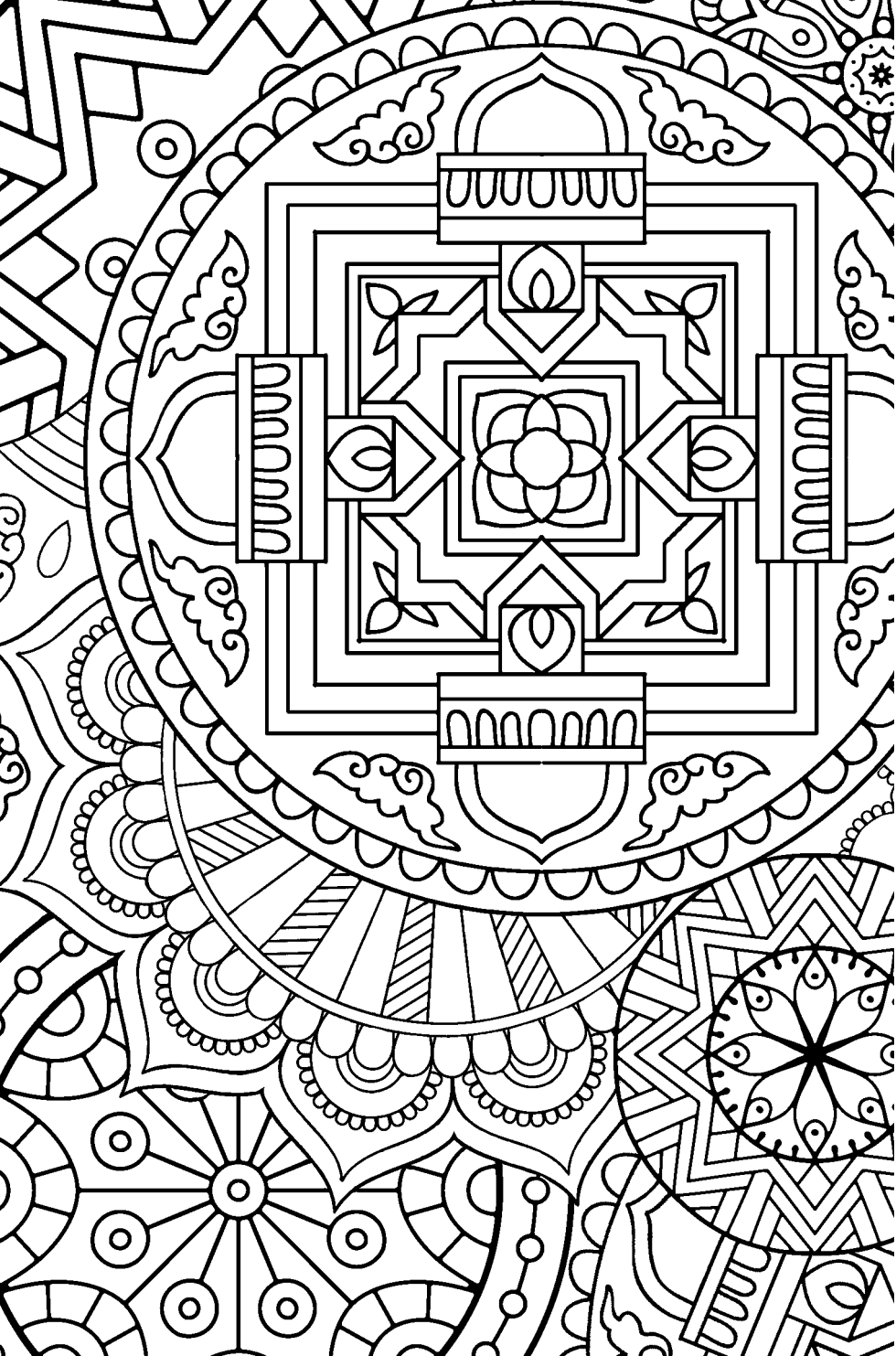
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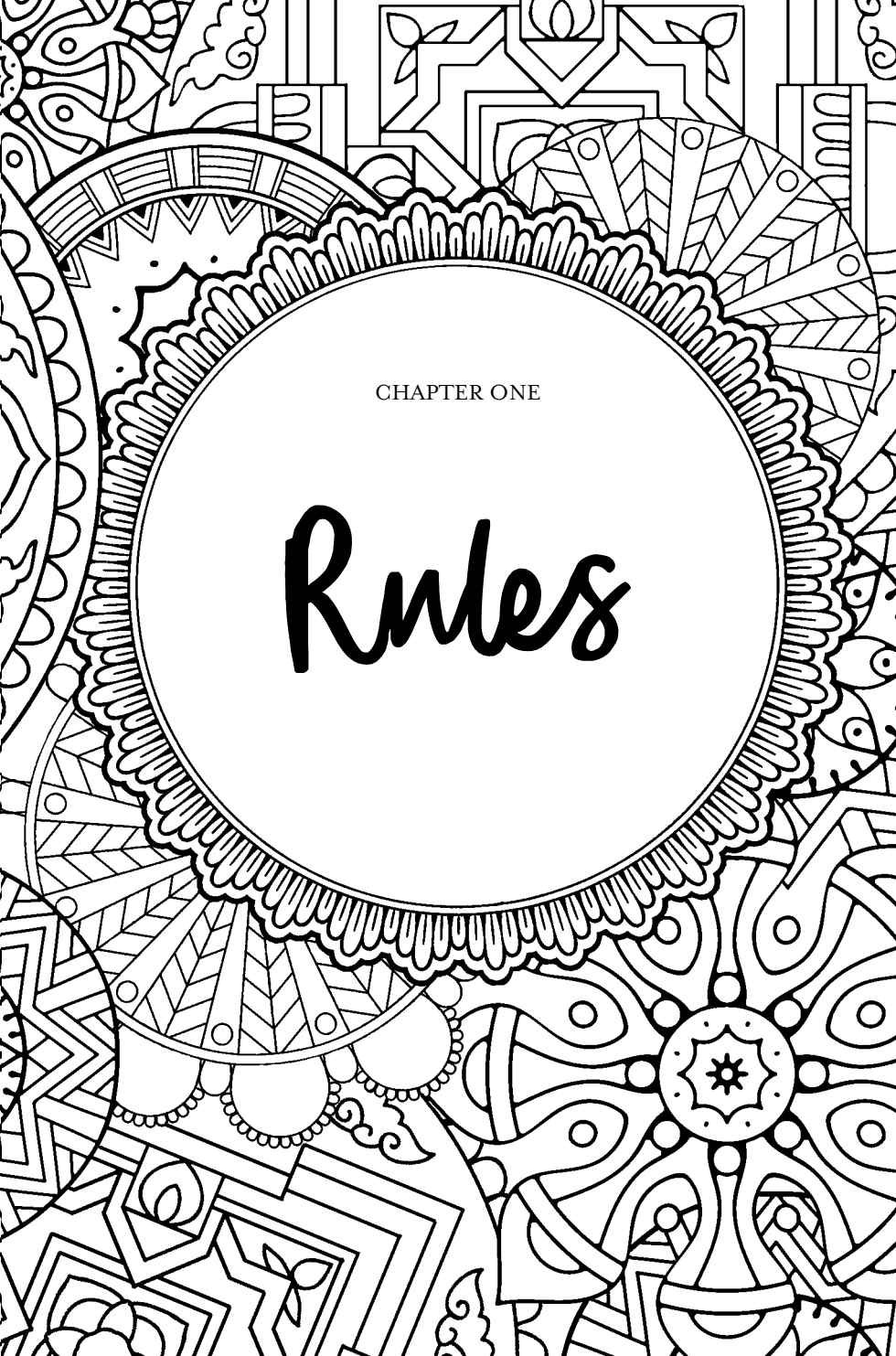


Orion Children's Books
An imprint of
Hachette Children's Group
Part of Hodder and Stoughton
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK Company

www.hachette.co.uk
www.hachettechildrens.co.uk




CHAPTER ONE
Rules

My feet pound against the gravelly path as I dash through the barley fields enclosed by the mountains. The wind bites, stinging my nose and cheeks. When I've been stuck in school all day, racing Sam home is my favourite thing to do.

I stick my arms out and soar like the golden eagles. My fingers rustle the barley stems. It disturbs the stink bugs and they fly out, buzzing into the air. My school bag thuds against my back.

'Tash,' shouts Sam. 'Stop!'

I'm not falling for that again. I focus on the uneven ground, dodging the stones and leaping across the dips in the earth. Falling over now would be the ultimate defeat.

'Soldiers,' hisses Sam. 'Please stop, Tash!'

I raise my head and my stomach drops. Thirty yards ahead are three soldiers. I recognise them immediately: Spaniel, Wildface and Dagger.

I dig my heels into the earth, but my right foot slips and I crash to the ground.

Sam's footsteps slow behind me.

'Are you all right?' he whispers.

I nod and hold my breath, willing the soldiers to keep walking.

Rule Number One: Don't Run in Front of a Soldier.

Spaniel turns, his hand on his rifle. He spots

me and taps Dagger on the shoulder.

They stride towards us, getting closer and closer. Three hard faces glower at me. I lower my eyes to the ground, fighting the urge to glance up.

Rule Number Two: Never Look at a Soldier.

The pebbles crunch under their heavy boots.

'Get up,' hisses Sam, shaking my shoulder.

I can't get my body to move.

The footsteps slow. The soldiers bend over me.

'What's going on here?' asks Dagger softly.

Sam's hand is gripping my arm. I stand on shaky legs before them.

'Going home,' I say. 'I tripped.'

Rule Number Three: Say as Little as Possible. They always try to catch you out.

'You know it's against the regulations to run?' Spaniel's nose twitches. His rifle points straight at me.

Everyone at school says he can sniff out anybody who has broken the rules.

'Maybe we should take you to the *Wujing* and you can tell them where you were running to?' he says.

People taken to the *Wujing* Police never return.

Sam's eyes dart and I know he's hunting for an escape route. We could dash into the fields but

with all the checkpoints they'd soon find us.

'What about you?' asks Spaniel, pressing his face close to Sam's. 'You think you can run and get away with it?'

Sam's breath is heavy.

Spaniel stays rooted to the spot for what feels like forever. I look upwards. The wind dies down and the clouds pause in the sky, waiting for something to snap.

Muffled voices blare from the satellite phone slung on to Dagger's belt. He raises it to his ear and turns to the others. 'The crowd's too big at the market. They need backup.'

'We'll be watching you,' Spaniel warns. 'Come on. Let's go.'

The soldiers march back down the path into town. I want to run and scream and kick at them. But I stay silent, clenching my fists.

'Are you okay?' I ask.

Sam nods. 'You?'

'Yeah,' I say, hearing my voice quiver.

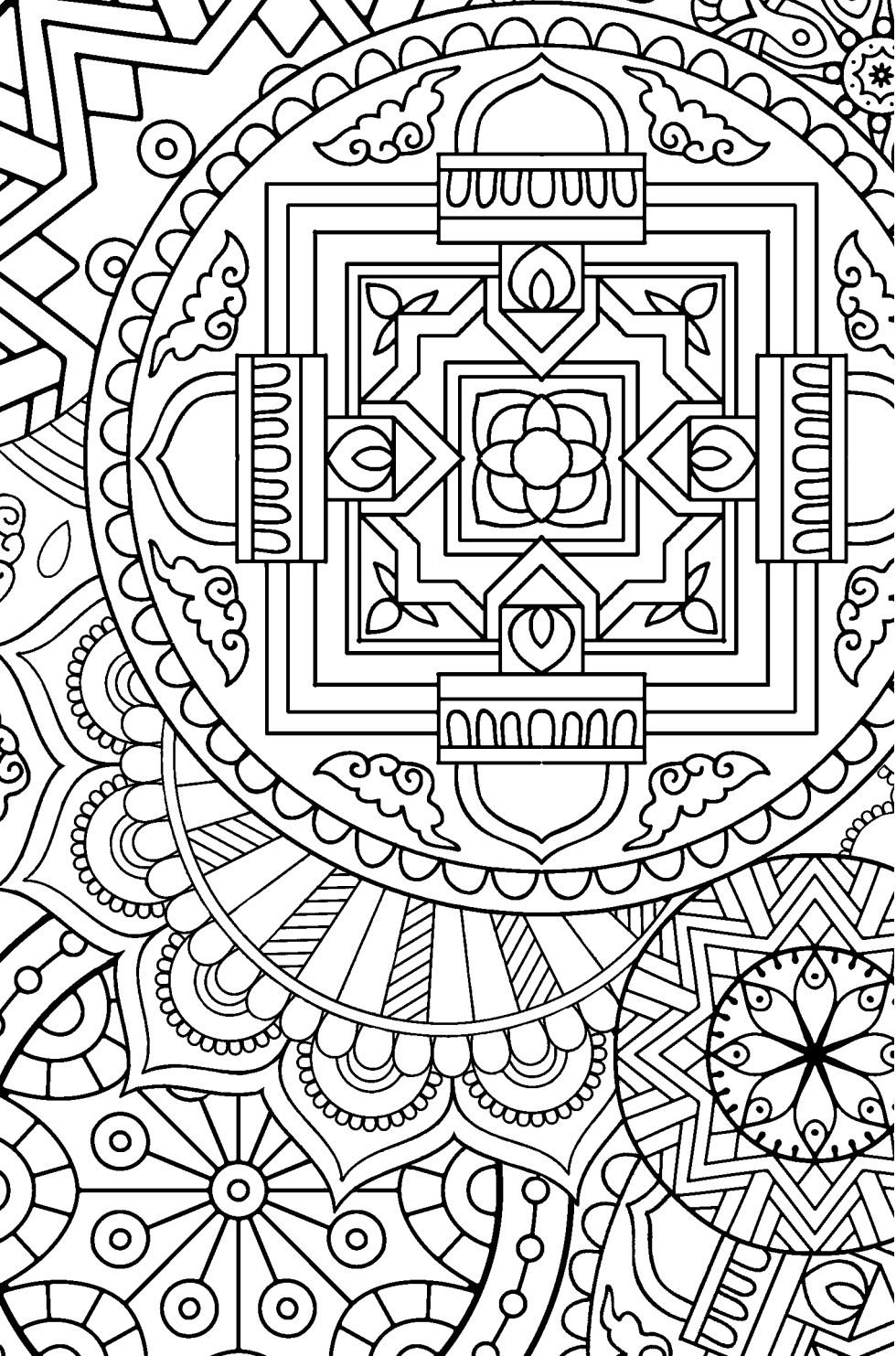
We all have our ways of protesting against the soldiers. Mum sings songs about what it was like when she was a child, before they arrived. Dad scribbles cryptic leaflets for the resistance movement.

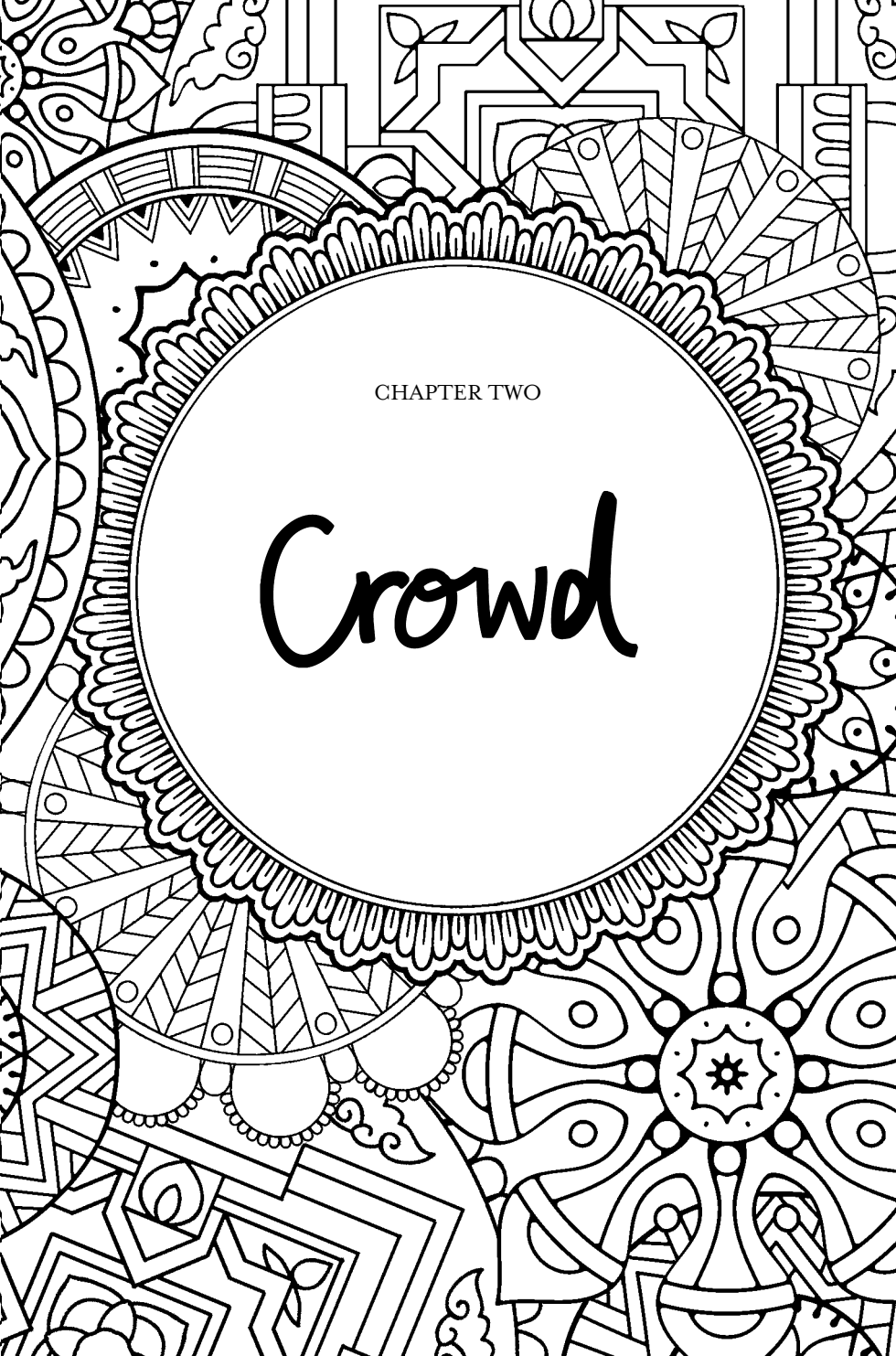
As for me? There are two words that are banned in Tibet. Two words that can get you locked in prison without a second thought. I think these

words often. Sometimes, I even say them.

I watch the soldiers tramping away and call the words after them.

'Dalai Lama.'




CHAPTER TWO
Crowd

My words melt into the air, up to the snowy Himalayas around us. My skin tingles. The Dalai Lama is the leader of my people. When I say his name it's as if he's protecting me, all the way from India, where he lives in exile.

'I can't believe you just said that,' Sam says.

'What?' I ask, snapping a piece of barley in half and picking at the kernels. 'You say it too.'

'Never with soldiers near! Do you know how close that was?'

I kick at the pebbles, scattering them. Sam doesn't look different but recently he's changed.

I realise we've stopped in the middle of the path.

Rule Number Four: Don't Draw Attention to Yourself.

'Walk next to me,' I say.

Sam waits while I catch up to him. We walk in unison, taking slow steps. I hum to myself, like Mum does, trying to be as ordinary as possible.

The winding path home takes forever. Sam's silence makes it drag.

We're almost at the checkpoint before the corner into the main square. There's a fence to ensure that everyone going in and out of town is monitored. I reach in my pocket for my school papers.

Sam halts and raises his arm to stop me.

'There's no one there,' he says.

I creep closer.

Sam's right. The chairs are empty. One of them has fallen on its back.

'Where did they go?' I ask.

I scan the land around us, spotting the purple skirts of women bent over in the fields picking out the weeds. A yak herder whistles beside the stream trickling down from the glaciers. There's no sign of any soldiers.

'Should we wait?' asks Sam.

The mining trucks growl in the distance.

'Let's go,' I say, crossing in front of the checkpoint. 'We need to get home.'

Just as we pass, sirens blare close by.

'It must be coming from town,' shouts Sam. He grabs my hand, pulling me past the fence.

We race round the corner and into the main square.

Usually after school the square is busy with people shopping, sharing food and laughing.

But today it's different. Everyone is gathered in the middle, pressed against each other. They face the same direction, watching something. Silence ripples through the group and there are no smiles.

I stand on the outer side where the crowd is thinner and scan faces, checking for Mum and Dad. An old lady holding hands with two toddlers hurries past us, away from everyone. I

spot Dad's friend Dorjee, who always gives me a lump of rock sugar to share with Sam when I buy supplies for Mum. He's walking stiffly into the huddle of people.

Soldiers wrestle their way through the crowd, gripping their rifles. I swallow, trying to ignore the sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. We stop next to the vegetable shop. People scramble to get a better view of the commotion. Someone knocks over a box and carrots tumble across the dirt.

'What's happening?' I ask and stand on tiptoes. A man shakes his head. I still can't see.

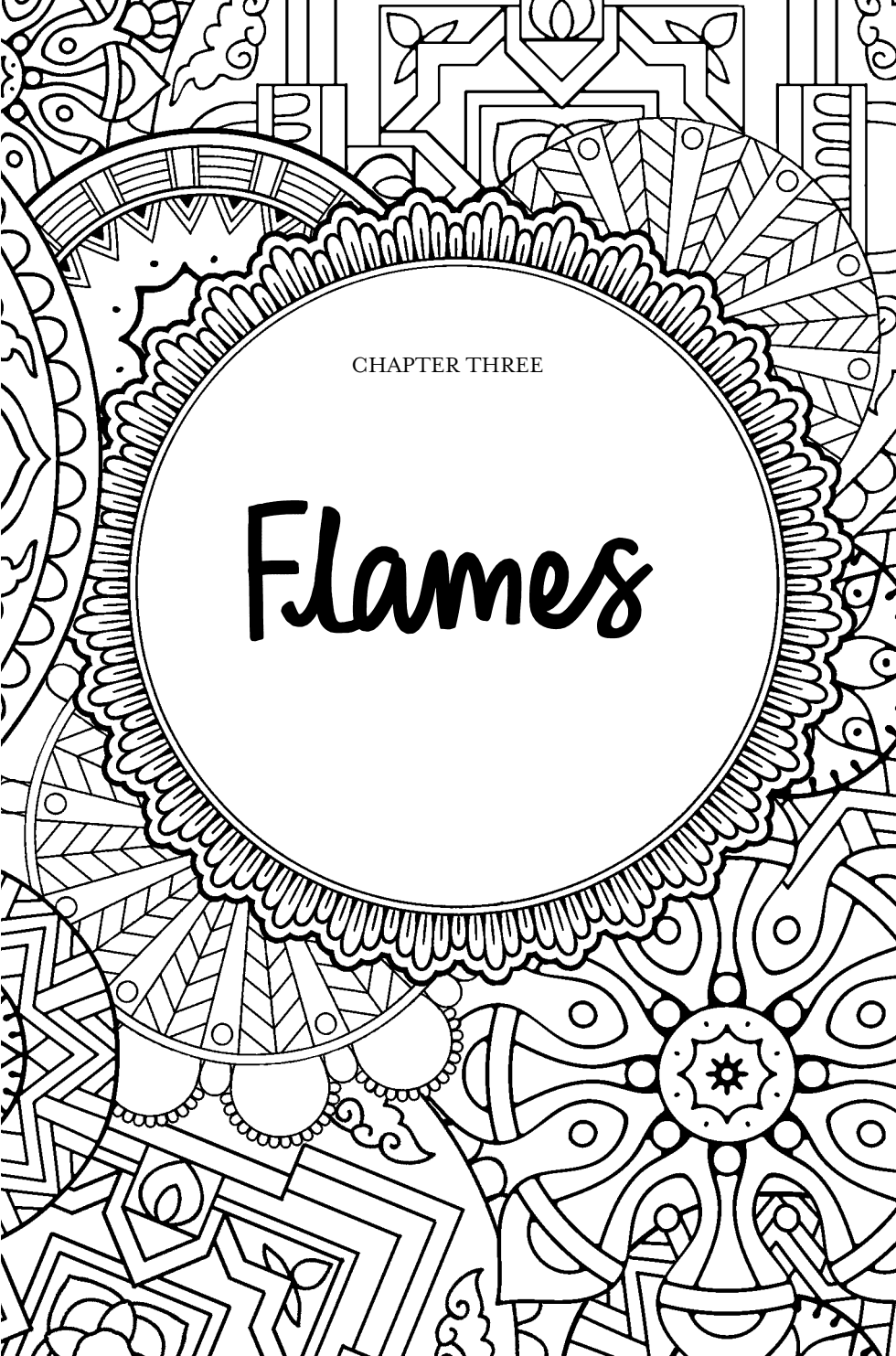
I look for Sam. He's gone. Lost in the mass of people.

I push past a group of women, grasping at their striped dresses.

'Let me through,' I cry, as I dart in and out of the bodies.

Finding an opening, I burst out of the crowd. A wall of heat rushes against my face. I see a fireball in the street.

In the middle of the flames is a man.


CHAPTER THREE
Flames

For a split second I don't think it's real.

The man stands, gripping a Tibetan flag over his head. Flames lick the corners of the fabric and they curl as the red ink bleeds into the blue and yellow. He looks to the sky and shouts. My ears are ringing. The edges of my vision blur.

The man on fire steps forward and flames cling to his body. He runs past Dorjee's camping shop, leaving a trail of thick smoke. His mouth is wide and roaring.

The crowd draws back and my mind begins working again.

The man on fire races down the street, past the shop selling copper teapots. Flames swirl around him.

The crowd fights to get out of the way.

Fire rips through the flag above the man's head. It tears down the middle.

The women next to me are watching, hands in front of their mouths.

'Why is no one doing anything?' I whisper.

I can't tear my eyes away. He stumbles and falls on to his hands and knees. The flag has burnt away.

In seconds, soldiers are all over the man on fire, smothering the flames under blankets. They shove the onlookers back, bundle him up and steal him away in an army truck.

The crowd is alive.

'He did it to himself.'

'He doused himself in flames.'

I'm wedged between two men and the weight crushes my chest. A hand grips my arm. It's Sam.

'Follow me,' he says.

I scramble forward, squinting through stinging eyes. In every breath I taste burning.

I reach the shops and lean on a basket of iron pots to steady myself. Barely stopping, I sprint up the track and fly past the rows of square, stone houses with their flat roofs, cut into the side of the mountain.

Our front door is open and I spot Mum in the kitchen. I dash past the house and climb the mountain, scrabbling at the jagged rock. I heave myself on to the flat ground. The river gushes below. The back of my throat burns.

Who was that person?

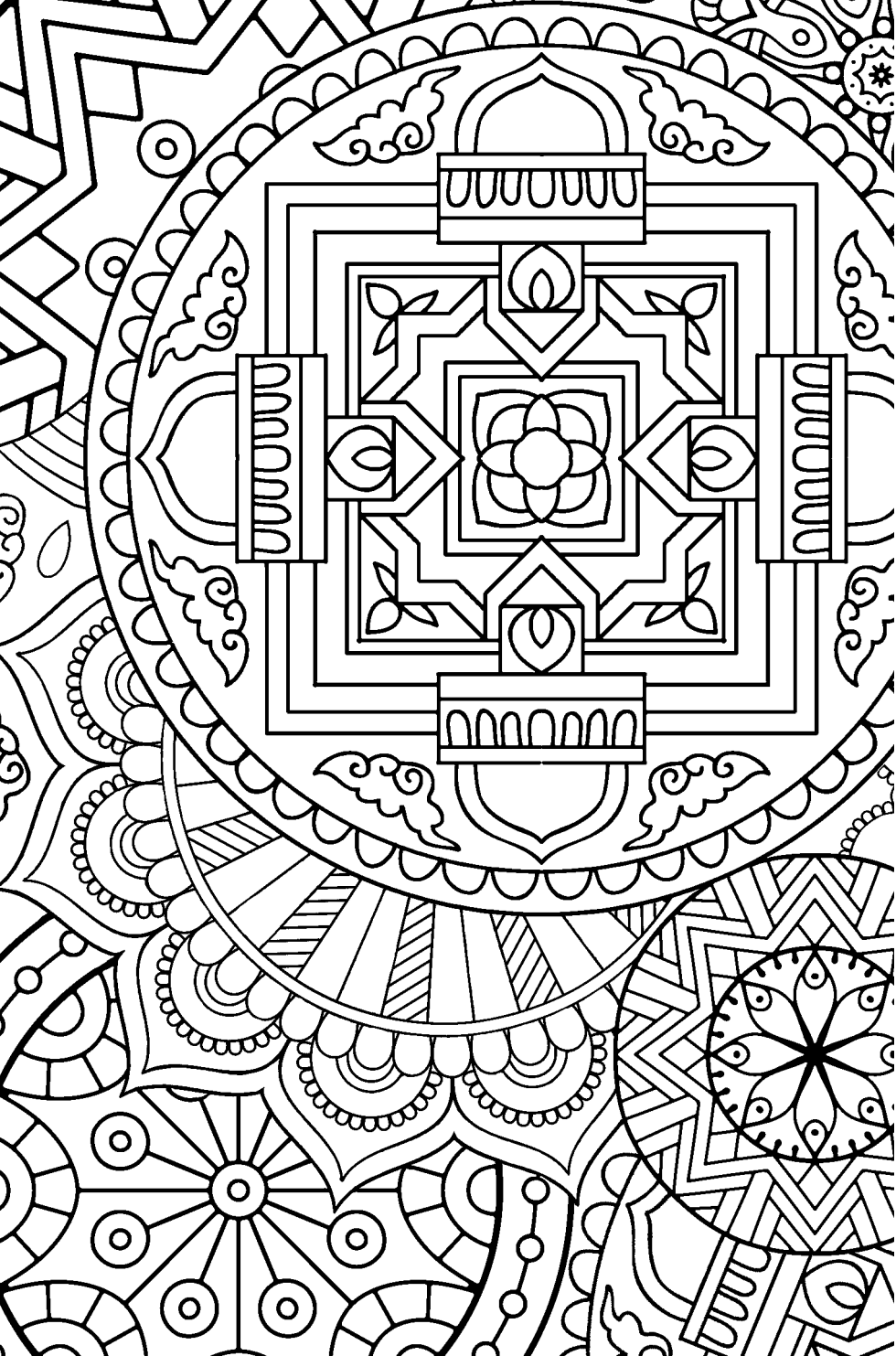
Why did they set themselves on fire?

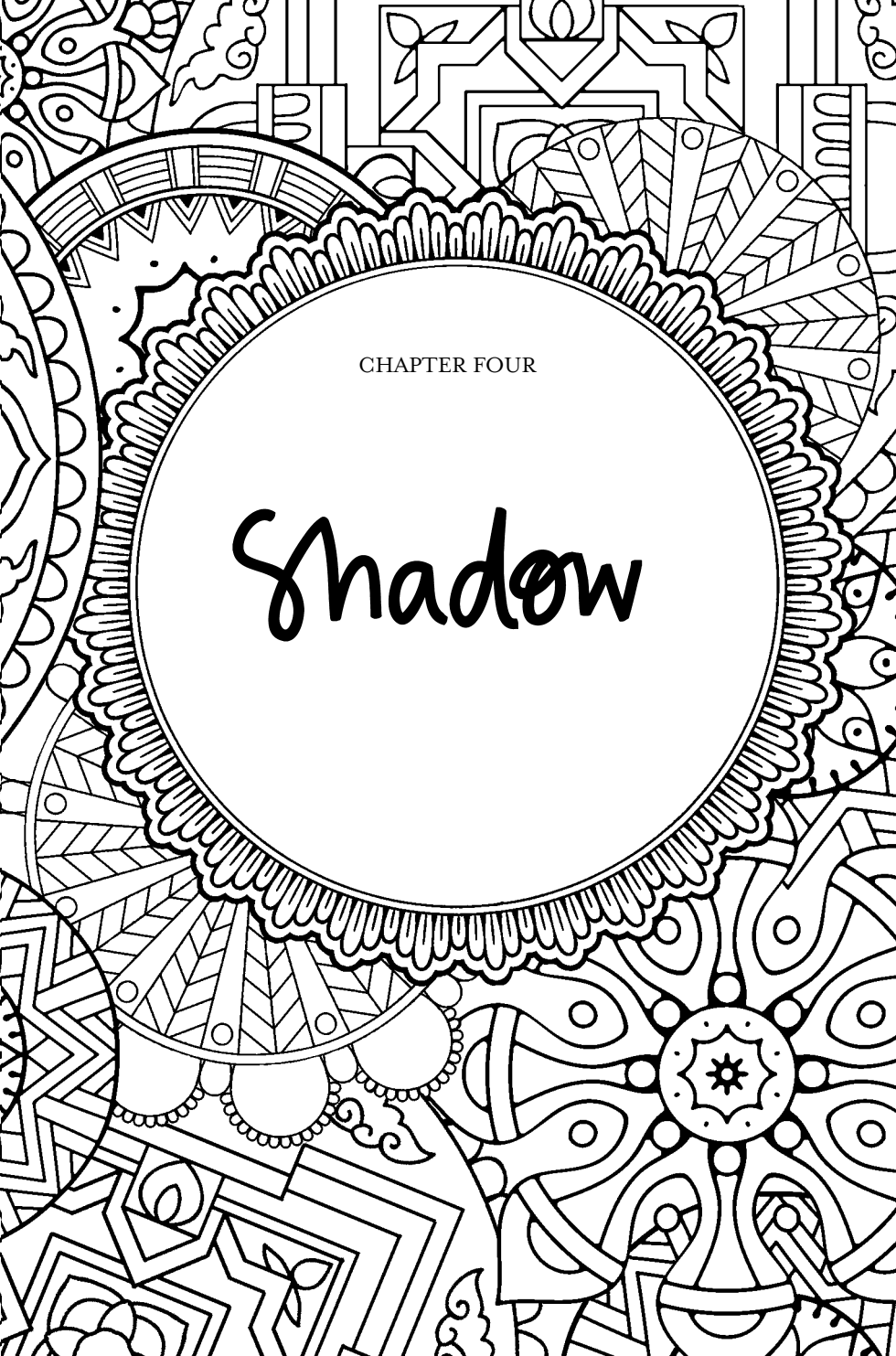
In the distance the late sunlight catches the twisted branches of the vulture tree. The twigs dissolve into flames. I blink. It's not real.

Something touches my shoulder and I jump away. The wind blows wisps of hair across Sam's face. They stick to the sweat on his broad cheekbones.

I let my body sink onto the cold stone.

Sam squats down next to me. We sit in silence, listening to the wind roar.




CHAPTER FOUR
Shadow

'We need to find your dad,' says Sam. 'He'll know what to do.'

I nod in agreement. When we were younger we thought the same thing so often that we pretended we could read each other's minds.

Dad will help the Man on Fire. He has to.

I hear the thud of footsteps. Kalsang, our neighbour, rushes down the path. His coat is unbuttoned and flaps behind him.

'Have you seen Tinley?' he asks.

'Not since school,' I say, brushing my hands together. The dirt sprinkles onto the ground.

Kalsang scans the ridge.

'What about you?' he asks Sam.

Sam shakes his head apologetically.

Kalsang hastens onwards, heading down towards the river, dodging the goats wandering across the path.

As we hurry towards the houses, I scratch my hand on the wall of branches stacked at the side to stop the goats from straying. Ahead, smoke rises into the clear sky from the chimneys. Winter will be here soon.

Another neighbour, Dolka, is hunched over a spindle in front of her house, spinning yak's wool. A carved walking stick rests against the axle. Her long grey hair is parted neatly down the middle and swept into a bun. She hears us and looks up.

'Get inside Tashi-la,' she says. 'There's a curfew tonight.'

The sun is setting behind the monastery on the slope opposite us. The rectangular rooms are etched into the grey mountain like steps. At the top stands the temple.

No one will be allowed outside after dark.

'The sun will be gone in thirty minutes,' says Sam.

I spot flashes of dark red as the monks walk in and out of the rooms. I used to dream of becoming a nun, until Mum told me I'd have to live in the monastery forever and shave my head. After that I changed my mind, but I still stood next to the stone building whenever I could. If I got close enough I would lean against the cool stone, catching whiffs of thick incense and snippets of deep prayers.

I am lost in the memory; it's easier than thinking about anything else right now.

'Tashi-la,' says Dolka, 'you should listen to your elders.' She bends over, reaches into the woven basket, and wraps a new piece of wool around her fingers.

'Sorry,' I mumble. 'We're going now.'

There's movement at the bottom of the monastery. Rows of soldiers march up to the base and gather around the building like a shadow. My heart thumps.

'Not the monastery,' says Dolka, letting the wool drop to the ground. 'Please not them.'

'Tash!'

I know that voice. It's Mum. She strides towards me, gathers me in her arms and hugs me so tightly I can hardly breathe.

'I told her to go inside,' says Dolka.

'Thank you,' says Mum, loosening her grip. She squeezes Dolka's hand. 'You should go inside too.'

Mum glances at the monastery. It's surrounded by soldiers. They're camouflaged against the grey rock.

'Quickly,' says Mum, gesturing towards our house. 'We haven't much time.'

The path is deserted. Our feet tap against the stones. A siren shrieks close by, warning that the curfew is coming.

We sprint after Mum down the alley to Sam's house.

'Do I have to go home?' asks Sam. 'Can't I come back to yours?'

'Not tonight,' says Mum. 'Your dad will be worried about you.'

When we arrive, Sam's dad is sitting by the window, frowning. He points at us, leaving a mark on the glass with his finger.

I usually try to avoid Sam's dad; it's impossible to know how he's going to act.

He scratches his beard before heaving himself up and stumbling on his bad leg. He opens the door. The draught carries the smell of boiling goat meat.

'It's not Samdup's fault they're late,' Mum says quickly. 'Did you hear about the market today?'

He looks up at her. 'I know what's been going on out there and we don't want any part of it.'

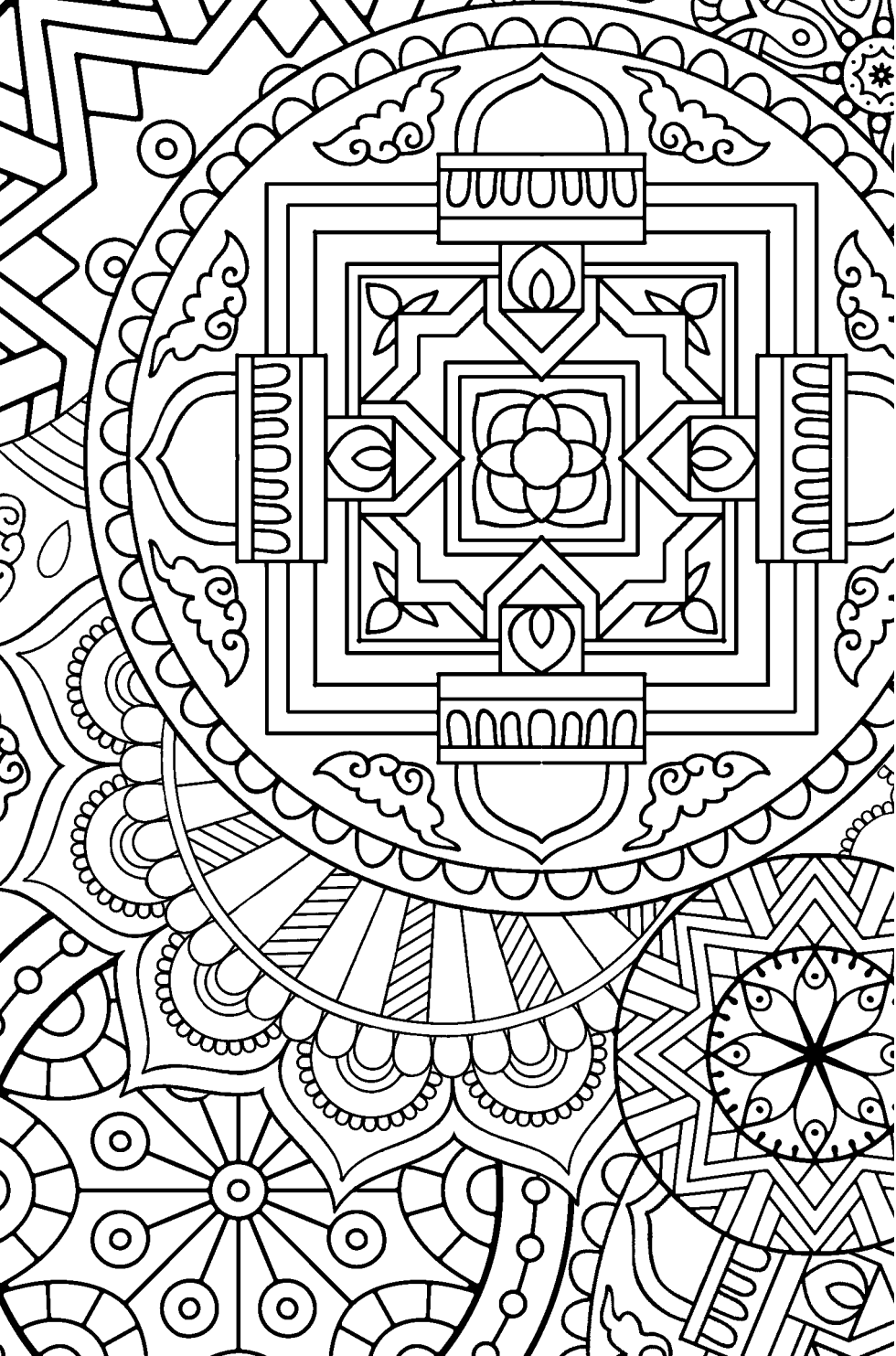
I peer behind him into the house, spotting the piles of dirty pots and pans on the countertops.

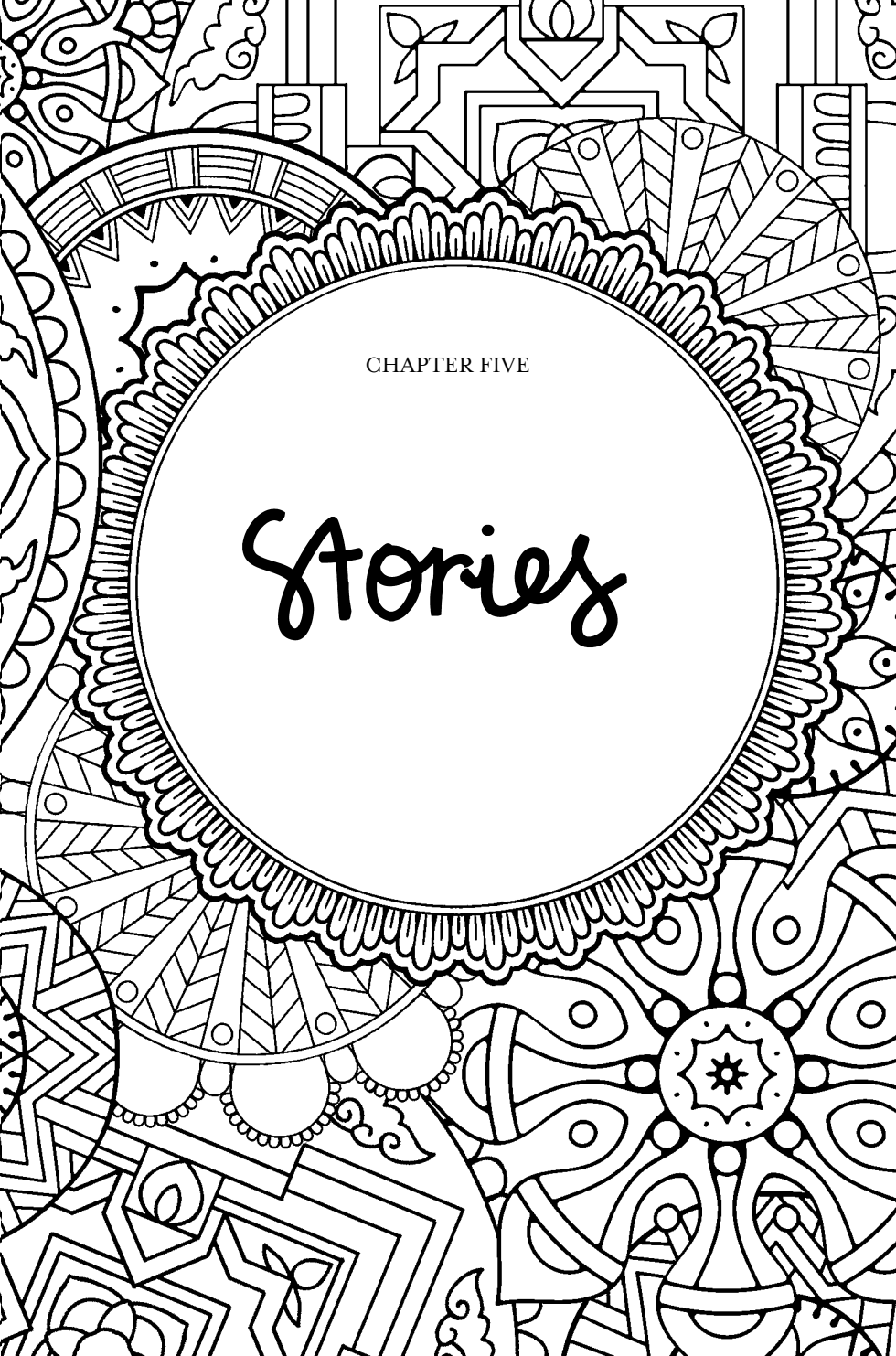
Mum squeezes my shoulder.

Sam opens his mouth, then shrugs and steps inside. His eyes say everything.

Sam's dad thumps the door shut.

The last of the light is gone now. It's dark and we're breaking the curfew.




CHAPTER FIVE
Stories

Mum grips my hand and leads me briskly towards our house. I'm alert. My eyes flicker over shadows and my ears tune in to every rustle.

When we reach the front door Mum fumbles with the padlock and I keep it steady as she slides in the key. As soon as we're inside, Mum gathers our warm jumpers and throws them onto the bed in a pile. I breathe in the familiar scent of home. I bend down to take my shoes off.

'Leave them on until Dad gets home,' she says.

'Are we going somewhere?' I ask.

Mum glances out the window. 'I don't know yet.'

Dad strides in minutes later, wrapped up in layers of woollen coats, and kisses Mum. He hugs me, his long hair falling from under his hat. His cold nose presses against my cheek. I smell the leathery tang of the animals.

'Listen to me,' says Dad, taking my shoulders. 'The whole village is going to be blamed for this. The *Wujing* will think we're all behind it. No more going off by yourself.'

I notice the wrinkles on his forehead and around his eyes as I nod and sit down on the bench at the table.

Dad unhooks the rusty teapot hanging above the stove, slides his hand inside and pulls out a bundle of *yuan* fastened with red string. The same kind the monks bless and give out as bracelets.

He snaps the string with a knife before reaching into his pocket and pulling out more notes. He peels back each corner and counts them, before dividing the money into three piles.

'I want you to hold on to this, my little yak,' he says, handing me the biggest bundle. 'In case anything happens. Hide it. Keep it safe.'

I look to Mum. She smiles at me. I stand tall, shoulders back. 'You can count on me.' I stare Dad straight in the eye, so he knows I really mean it. It's the first time he's ever trusted me with something like this. I fold the money in half and hide it in my inside pocket. It's the most money I've ever held.

Dad sighs then draws me and Mum towards him, scooping us under his arms. The fur from his coat is warm and soft. I lean my head against it and close my eyes. The Man on Fire glares back at me, surrounded by bright orange and screaming.

'What do we do?' whispers Mum.

'Carry on like normal,' replies Dad, squeezing us before letting go. 'Try not to draw attention to ourselves.'

I nod slowly but stay rooted to the bench, grappling with Dad's words.

Dad drags his desk to the window and sits looking out. 'Turn the light off,' he says.

'You should eat something,' Mum says to him, breaking up the dried yak's manure and feeding it to the kitchen fire.

'In a minute,' he says. 'I need to write first.'

By day Dad works for the local newspaper. By night he writes leaflets for the secret resistance.

Mum lights a butter candle off the fire and places it on his desk.

The smoke stings my nostrils. The room flickers, the flames reflecting in the tiny glass windows that keep out the draughts. Shadows dance on the wooden ceiling beams that Mum painted with swirling pictures of clouds, dragons and snow lions.

'Eat,' says Mum, passing me a plate of mutton *momos*.

My favourite. I dip one in the red chilli sauce and bite into the dough. The juice spills down my fingers.

'Will the man be alright?' I ask, quietly.

'He's in the hospital,' says Mum.

'Who is he?'

'It's Mr Tenzin,' she replies. 'The tailor.'

'Why did he do it?' I ask, making patterns on my plate with the *momo* and sauce.

Mum is silent next to me.

'He wants change,' says Dad, from his desk. 'He wanted to tell the world how bad it is.'

'Enough,' says Mum. She pulls another candle

out of a drawer and lights it from the fire. 'This is for him.'

Throughout dinner there's nothing to mask my thoughts. I hear every chew of meat and scrape of chopsticks against plates.

'Can't you hum?' I ask Mum.

'It's not a night for humming,' she replies.

I stand and run my fingers over the spines of my favourite books.

'Well, can you tell me a story?' I ask. 'Like you used to.'

She clears the plates and sits next to me by the fire. Her face is lit up by the flames.

'Long ago, your grandfather was a nomad,' she says. 'He'd roam the grasslands with his yaks, churning buttermilk and collecting the wild flowers. Back then the land was filled with spruce trees and colourful prayer flags hung between them, fluttering in the wind. Herds of wild deer grazed the grasses and birds filled the blue skies.'

Dad reaches for Mum's hand and she smiles.

'What changed?' I ask, twisting my turquoise ring round my finger.

Mum passes me a yak's wool blanket and I cuddle up with it.

'There's never a good time for that story,' says Dad.

Mum leans forward. 'One day, the Chinese army invaded and herded the nomads in a way

that they would never even do to their own animals. They forced them off the land. They ripped up the ground and dug deep into the earth to mine, scarring the landscape. The deer leapt away. The birds and the butterflies flew off.'

Mum rearranges the red wool braided into her hair.

'Maybe that's enough,' says Dad.

I can't take my eyes off the fire. With every flick, my skin crawls.

There's a tap on the door.

Dad glances at us. His forehead creases.

Mum grabs my hand.

There's another tap.

'Get back,' Dad says. He stands, knocking his chair over. It scrapes across the floor.