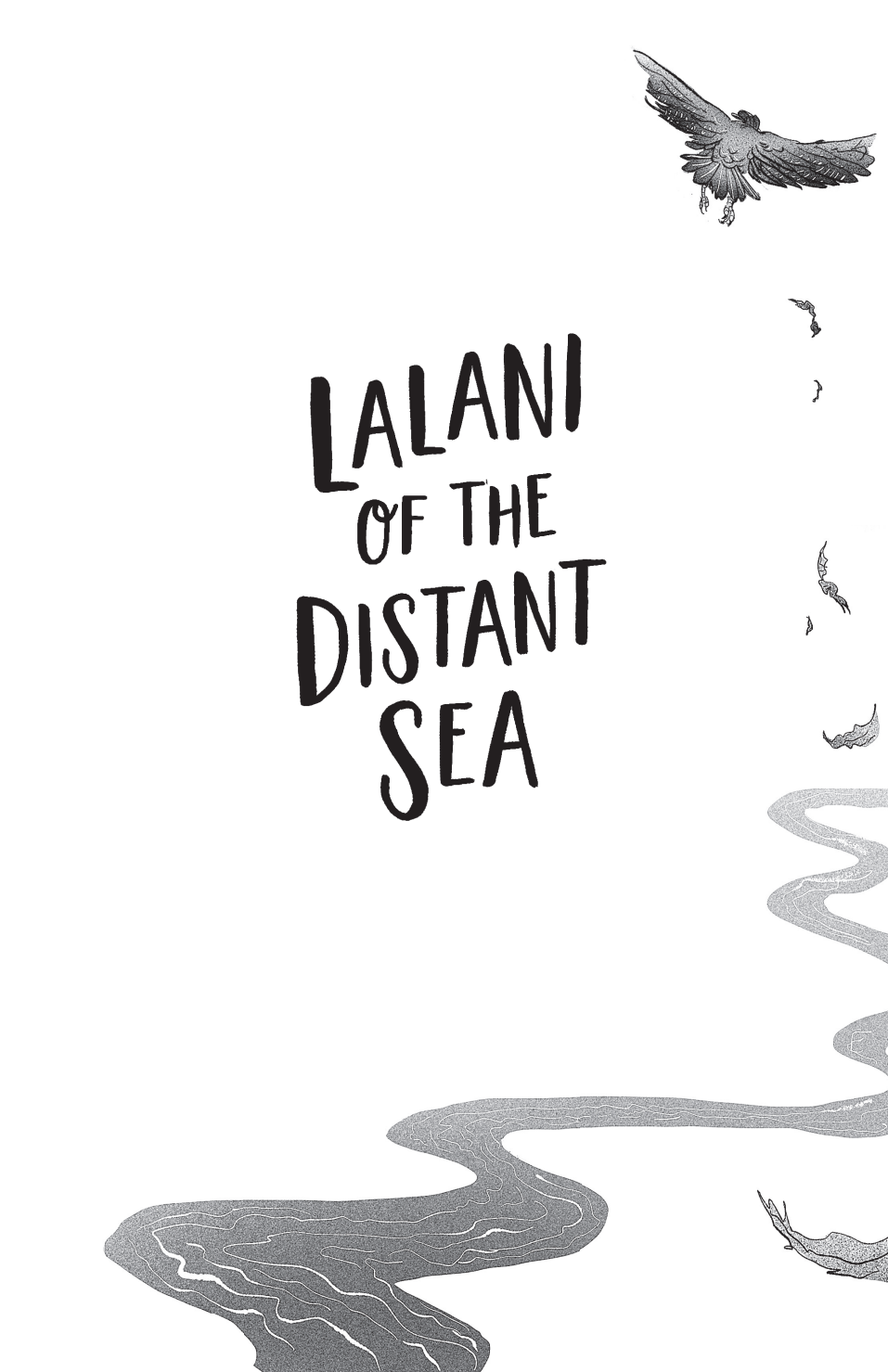
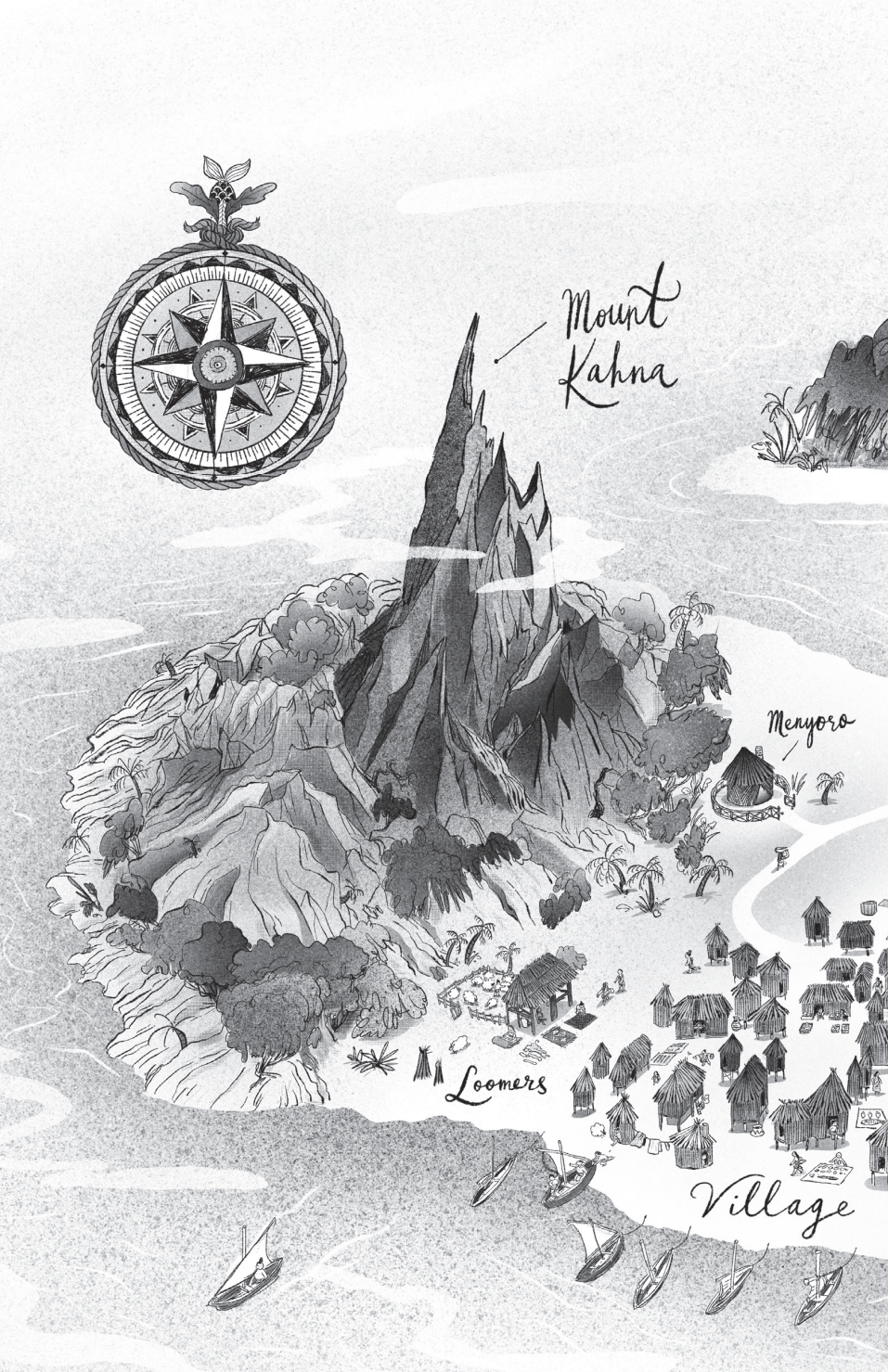
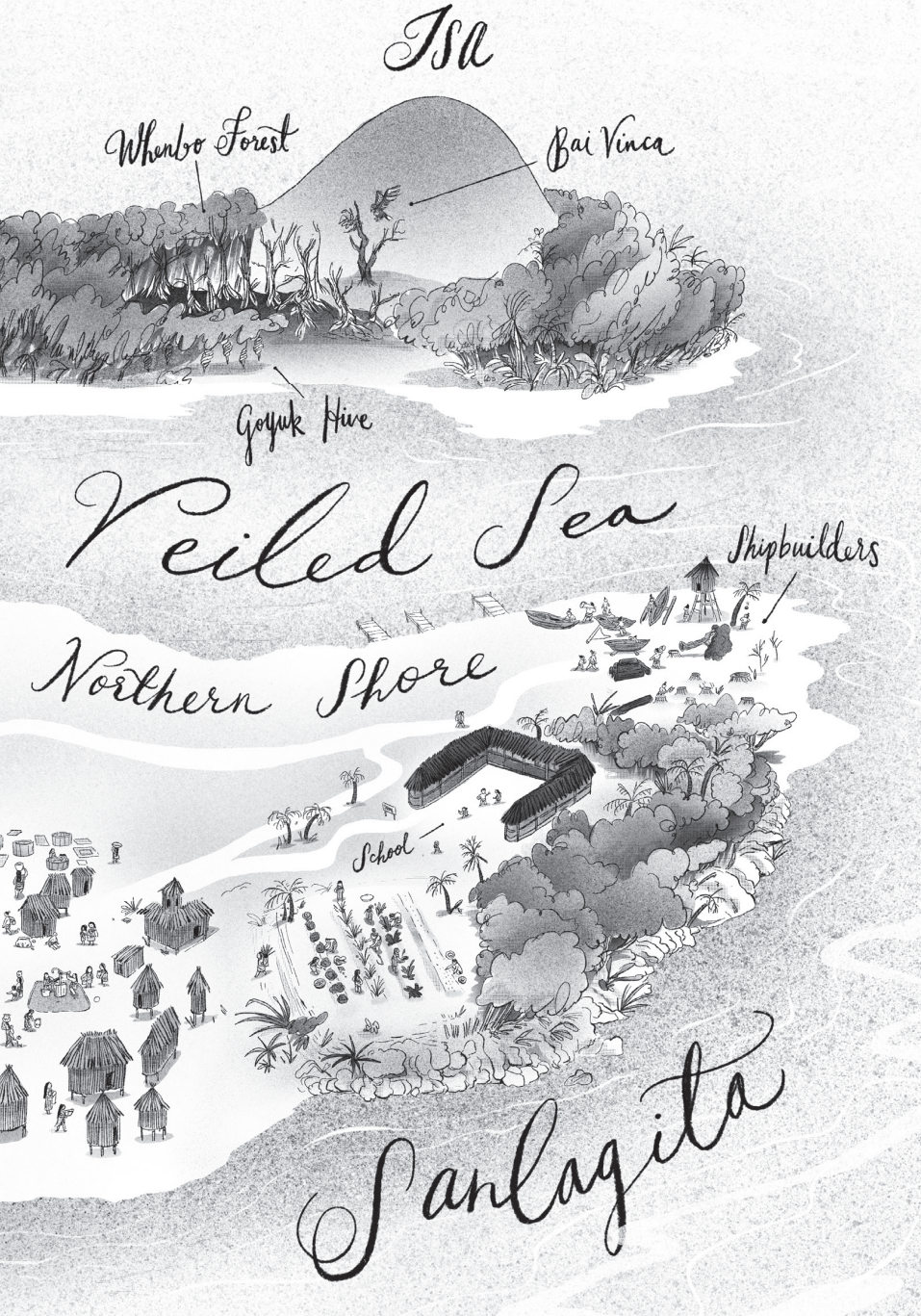

LALANI
OF THE
DISTANT
SEA


Mount Kahna
Menyoro
Loomers
Village


Isla
Whenbo Forest
Bai Vinca
Goyuk Hive
Veiled Sea
Shipbuilders
Northern Shore
School
Sanlagita

There are stories of extraordinary children who are chosen from birth to complete great quests and conquer evil villains.

This is no such story.

Sometimes, you are an ordinary child.

Sometimes, you choose yourself.

Come closer. Nestle deep. Travel now to two mountains. They are alive, at least to those who live among them. One of them

towers darkly. It casts a shadow of vengeance, impatience, and fear. The Sanlagitans call it Mount Kahna.

The other mountain—if you can call it that—is bathed in light. Set foot here, and you will have all of life's good fortunes, whatever those may be. This is Mount Isa.

You can't see Isa now. No human has ever laid eyes on her. Nevertheless, the Sanlagitans are certain the mountain calls to them. They die trying to answer. They attempt journey after journey. They are pushed by their faith, not knowing that they believe in the wrong things.

Their ships sink. Their hearts break. And yet, they make the trip, because they feel Isa's presence on an invisible horizon. Somewhere far away, yet close enough to touch. Somewhere beyond the distant sea.

The Three of Them

Twelve-year-old Lalani Sarita had heard the story of the mountain beast many times. She knew of his mangled face, his house of stolen treasures, and his penchant for evil trickery, but she begged to hear it all again anyway. It was the perfect night for ghost stories. The moon cast a bluish glow through the slats of the Yuzi house, and jars of bulb flies shined like stars in the corners of the front room. Lo Yuzi leaned forward in her rocking chair to eye the members of her audience closely. There were three of them, of course: Lalani; her best friend, Veyda; and Veyda's younger brother, Hetsbi.

"Imagine you are an old man," Lo Yuzi, who was Veyda and Hetsbi's mother, said. She spoke in the loudest of whispers, and the chair creaked when she moved. Her hands, rough and scarred from years of pulling plants, sat folded on her lap. "Your face is weary with wrinkles, and your nose is missing."

Lalani pressed her palms to her cheeks and pulled them down, imagining her face sagging with age. Hetsbi, who was only one year younger than the girls, laughed behind a closed fist.

"You live on Mount Kahna," Lo Yuzi continued. "You spend your days all alone, dreaming of your other life, when you had friends and family. But you know that this life is what you're due, because of all your sins. And one day, a brave but frightened boy decides to climb the mountain, even though all the villagers tell him not to." Her expression darkened. "'Mount Kahna doesn't wish to be disturbed!' the villagers say. 'It will eat you alive!'" She snatched at the air in front of their faces and they all flinched, even though she'd done this dozens of

times before. "And you know they're right, because the mountain only loves evil things, like you. But this boy doesn't listen to the villagers. He fills his lucky bronze canteen and sets out anyway. And this makes you happy because—"

"Wait," said Hetsbi, frowning. "You forgot the eyes."

Oh, right! Lalani realized that, too. The eyes were the most important part of the story.

Veyda tossed her long, raven hair over her shoulder and braided it, something she did when she was impatient.

"Ah, yes, the eyes," Lo Yuzi said. She sighed and leaned back. *Creak*. "I suppose we'll have to start again another time."

"Just backtrack a little bit and we can keep going," said Lalani quickly.

"I'd rather start a new path than trace old ones," Lo Yuzi said. "Besides, it's time for sleep. We need to wake as early as we can to beat the sun."

But there was no point in that, and they all knew it. There'd been no rain for months, and the heat was

relentless. It didn't matter what time you woke up, you were going to sweat.

Veyda was already half standing. Lo Yuzi snapped her fingers toward her daughter and motioned for her to sit back down. "We have benediction."

Veyda sighed and took her seat again.

Lo Yuzi bowed her head. Lalani did, too.

"Mount Kahna," they all said in unison—although Lalani suspected Veyda wasn't saying a word. "Spare us another night. Remain quiet and peaceful in our gratitude."

Once they were nestled in their oostrum-stuffed blankets, which splayed across the floor of the sleeping room, Veyda grumbled as usual about the benedictions.

"It's so silly," she whispered. She turned on her side to face Lalani. Lo Yuzi was in the basin room, rinsing the vegetables they'd picked earlier that day. "Why are we asking a mountain to remain quiet? Mountains are mountains."

"Don't say that!" said Hetsbi. Lalani didn't know another boy who spooked as easily as Hetsbi. Maybe because he didn't have a father to show him all the ways of men. Then again, many boys didn't. Not if they were children of sailors, as the three of them were.

The life of a sailor didn't last long in Sanlagita, after all.

"Either way, it's a good story," Lalani said. "I wish my mother told stories like that."

She thought of her mother's lined face and tired eyes.

"But that's all it is. A *story*. This place has too many of those," said Veyda.

"Maybe you should go climb it then," Hetsbi said, elbowing her in the back. "Since it's 'just a mountain.' Take a canteen and go up tomorrow and let's see how brave you are."

"I have more important things to do," said Veyda. "I need plants for Toppi's salve."

Toppi Oragleo, the sick baby three houses down.

Lalani pushed her blanket away with her feet. Too

warm for a blanket. Too warm for anything.

"I'll help you pick them," Lalani said.

Veyda smiled mournfully. "I'm not sure I'll need much help, sola. There aren't many plants left."

"Speaking of Toppi," Hetsbi said excitedly. "His sisters said they found hair on the rocks along the southern shore. *Ziva's* hair."

"Really?" Lalani said. Veyda rolled her eyes. "How do they know it's Ziva's?"

"It was long and black and stretched between the rocks like a web!" Hetsbi said, weaving his narrow fingers together. "There's no other explanation."

"All the women in the village have long, black hair," Veyda said. "It could belong to anyone."

Hetsbi dropped his arms to his sides. "But how did it get between the rocks then?"

"Any number of ways," said Veyda. "Like I said, this place has too many stories. We need to solve real problems, like how I'm going to make medicine without any plants."

The three of them lay there, silently.

That was a real problem indeed.

"Maybe we can ask the mountain for rain," Lalani said softly.

"I'm not asking the mountain for anything," Hetsbi whispered. "What if the mountain beast hears us? What if he's listening now, with his pointed ears, and he comes and steals us in our sleep?"

"They're just stories," Veyda said.

Lalani took her friend's hand and squeezed. "I'll ask, just in case."

She closed her eyes. *Please, Kahna, give us rain*. Her imagination floated up and up the mountain, trying to picture a peaceful benefactor. Instead, she saw the beast, just as Lo Yuzi described—except now he had sharp, pointed claws. He scrambled toward her, scuttering like a tree creature, toppling treasures in his wake.

Give me your eyes, he hissed. *And you can have anything you wish for.*