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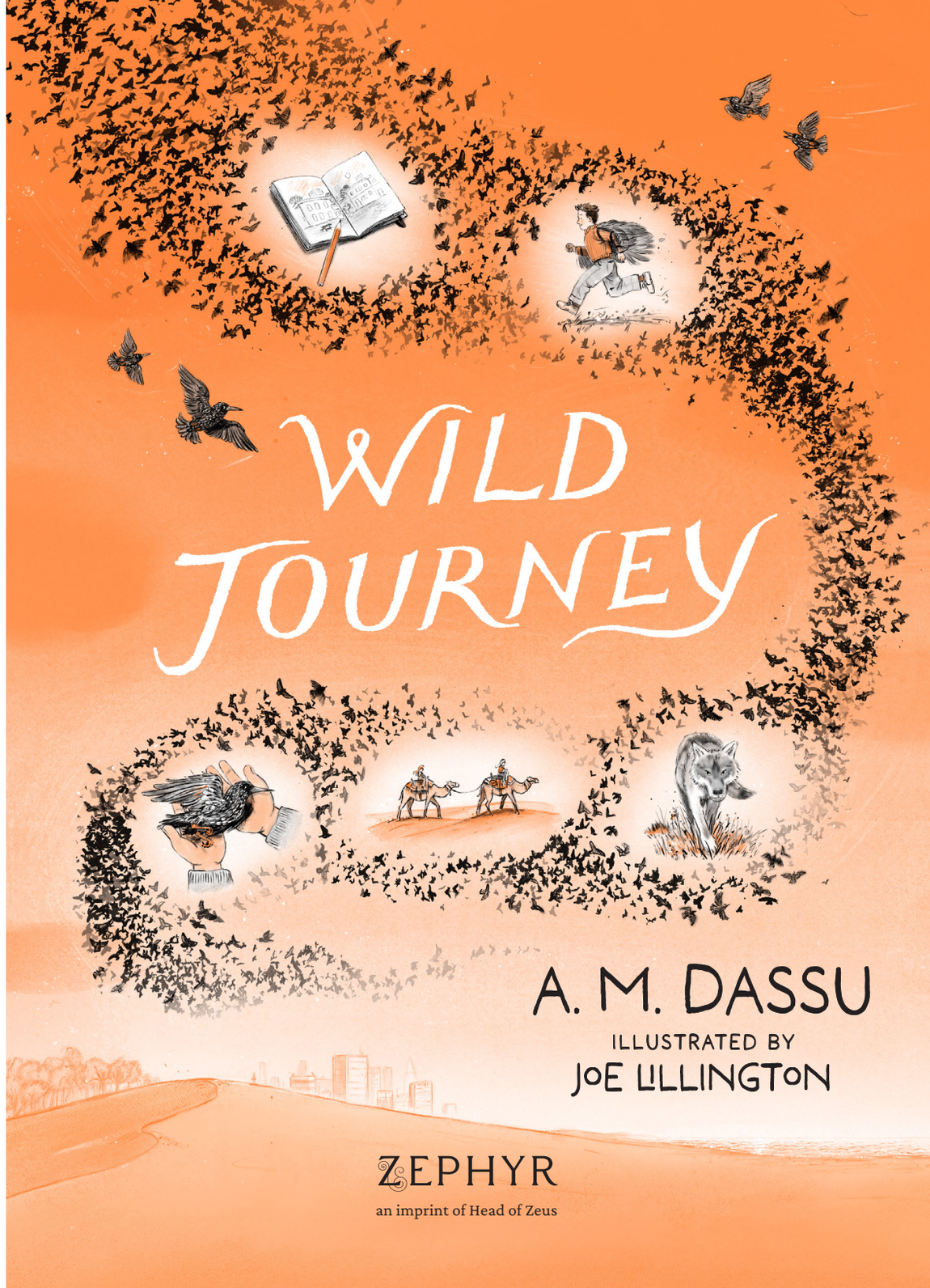
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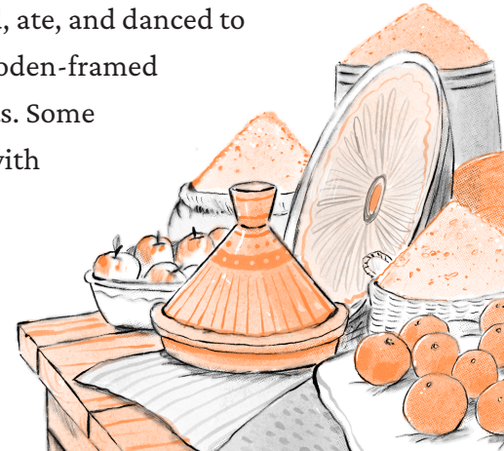


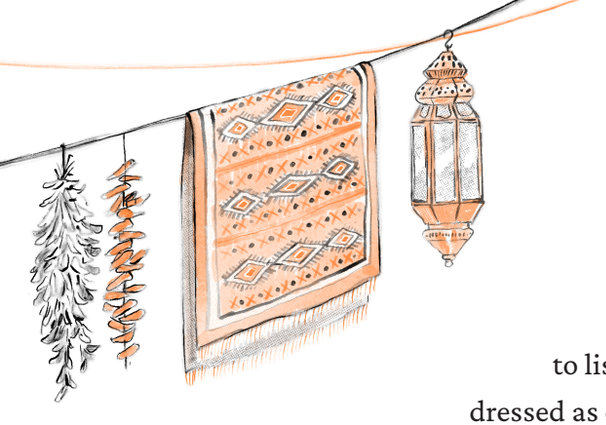


FEATHER

Ella raced down the hotel steps into the courtyard, around the fountain in the centre, then out of the carved wooden gate. They were in lively, noisy Marrakech, and tonight they were leaving for the Sahara Desert. Ella couldn't wait!

She followed her family into the market square, where crowds buzzed around brightly lit stalls. People wearing jeans and caps, and others wearing long coloured robes, walked, chatted, ate, and danced to music played by buskers on wooden-framed drums and stringed instruments. Some watched acrobats performing with





flaming torches, while others paused to listen to storytellers dressed as clowns. It was as busy as the night before.

Does no one ever rest in this place? Ella thought. She grinned as she stepped to the beat of the drums.

'Let's grab a shawarma,' said Dad, stopping at a stall with sizzling kebabs and chicken rotating on a giant skewer. Mum and Ella's little brother, Ben, sat at a table, while Ella watched a lady buying dried kiwi from the stall opposite.



A motorbike zipped past, dangerously close, but no one seemed fazed or even looked. Ella noticed a young boy wearing trousers that were too short and fraying at the hem, approaching the lady buying dried kiwi, holding out his hand and rubbing his stomach.



Ella's dad was taking the shawarmas from the stall holder and handing them to Mum and Ben.

Could Dad buy the boy one? Ella wondered. He looked thin and hungry. But when she turned back, toasty shawarma in hand, the boy had disappeared. Ella frowned.

'Thank you,' Ella said, tearing the paper to take a bite of steaming grilled chicken.

'Right, let's head to the car,' Dad said.

'Desert here we come!' Ben shouted.

'In nine hours, Ben. Don't get too excited yet,' said Mum. 'You need to get some sleep on the drive first.'

Ben groaned.

'But when we wake up, we'll be there!' Ella beamed. It was going to be epic!

'Welcome to Merzouga,' said Ahmed, their driver, with a smile.

Ella yawned and looked out of the window. They were in a small town at the edge of the desert. She rubbed her eyes and stretched. It was so different to anything she'd seen before. There were buildings made of mud or sand which appeared to have no roof, like gigantic sandcastles.

'Let's have breakfast, and then we'll meet our guide,' said Dad, as Ahmed parked outside a row of shops. 'We're going to see the desert before anyone has arrived. We can look for trails and figure out which animal they belong to!'

Ella jumped out of the car. She planned to eat as quickly as possible so they could start their desert adventure.

Once everyone had eaten their fill of eggs, olives and bread, and the adults had drunk their mint tea from small glass cups, the family walked along the main street. They passed restaurants, travel agencies and shops selling colourful spices and souvenirs. Finally, they reached a wide expanse of sand. The early morning rays threw light on the rippling lines that snaked across



the dazzling deep-orange dunes.

Ella gasped as she took it all in. The Sahara Desert.

'Okay,' Ahmed said. 'Wait here. Hassan, our guide, is coming with the camels.'

'Camels!' Ella and Ben said together, jumping in excitement.

Soon they arrived – four hairy camels with long legs, humped backs and slender necks dipping down and up. Mum and Dad passed their rucksacks full of drinks and snacks to Ahmed and Hassan, who loaded them onto the animals.

Hassan's clothes were different to Ahmed's T-shirt and trousers. He wore a bright blue robe with a matching turban. Hassan pulled fabric from a bag and handed a piece to everyone.

'Tie it round your head,' he said, undoing his own turban and showing everyone how to put theirs on.

Ella managed to wrap the fabric around her head, then got stuck. Hassan came over and tied the ends together, wrapping them below her chin and tucking them into the folds covering her ears.



'Won't we get hot?' asked Ella, stroking the soft cotton against her face.

'This will protect you from the sun, especially at midday, or if we have a sandstorm,' said Hassan, securing Ben's scarf around his head.

'A sandstorm!' breathed Ben. 'Cool!'



After everyone had fixed their turbans and the camels had been loaded and fed, Hassan asked Ella to climb up. The camel was sitting, but it was still taller than her. It was busily chewing something, its slimy mouth jutting in and out. Its eyelashes were as long as her fingers.

Ella approached it from the side and took a deep breath. She knew she could get on by herself and wanted to show everyone.

'Don't worry,' she said to Hassan. 'I can do it.'

Ella stepped back, then ran up so she could get one foot into the stirrup and throw her leg over the camel, like mounting a runaway horse. She straightened her shoulders and sat in the saddle, proud she'd got on without help.

Once everyone was mounted, Hassan told them to lean back as their camels stood.

'Woaaah,' Mum yelped, wobbling.

Ella leaned backwards, then forwards, giggling. 'We're so high up!' she yelled.

'Let us begin our expedition!' said Ahmed. Holding onto Ella's rope, he tied it to the back of Ben's camel, then Ben's to the back of Mum's, and Mum's camel to the back of Dad's.

Everyone swung back and forth as they made their way. The camel's hooves dug in and out of the hot sand. Ella couldn't stop laughing at the herky-jerky movement. It was so much fun!

'We are early, before anyone else, so look out for prints of lizards, frogs and other animals who wander through the desert at night,' called Hassan from the front of their small caravan of camels.

Ella leaned over. All she could see were beautiful, neat sand ripples. As if she was on the beach when the tide had gone out.

Water.

Ella realised there were no trees, no plants, no water in sight. The air was dry and the endless sky beyond the dazzling haze was wide and blue. There was nothing else but scorching sand and the beating sun.

She suddenly felt thirsty and reached into the bag hanging off her camel, pulling out a bottle of water. After she'd taken a few sips, the camel's movement made the bottle lid slip into the open bag. She wouldn't be able to reach it without falling off. She'd have to drink it all or spill it everywhere.

Or... it could be thrown over Ben! Ella flicked her bottle, but the water landed on the sand.

Oh well, thought Ella, shoving the now empty bottle back into the bag.

The group trekked further into the desert towards their camp and, as the sun rose, so did the temperature. The dunes climbed higher and higher, until it was as if they were surrounded by a sea of sand, with powerful waves that could fall at any moment.



