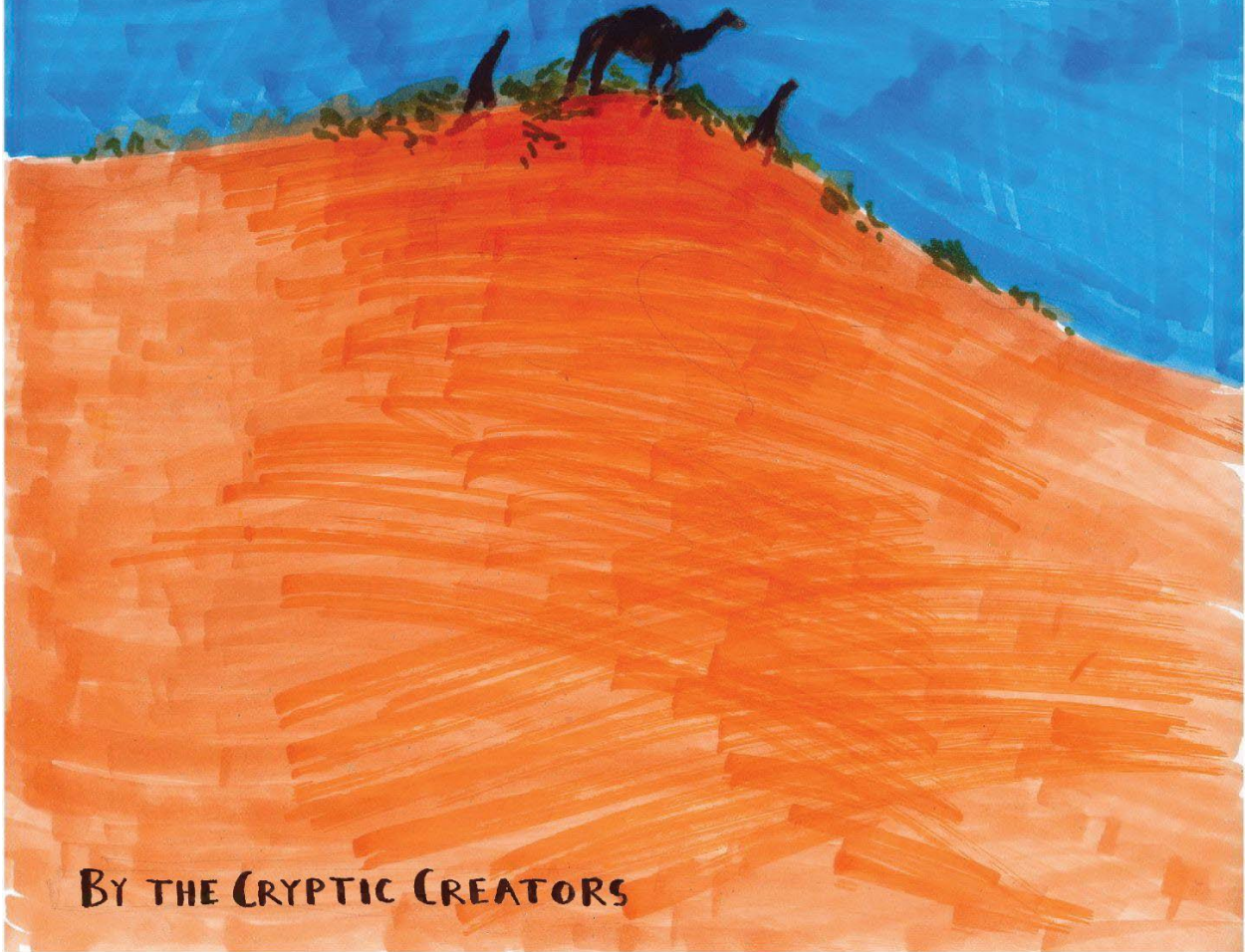


JEWEL OF



THE DESERT



BY THE CRYPTIC CREATORS

Parameters Form

Team Details

STATE: Victoria

Division: Middle School

School/Group: Box Hill High School (BOX HILL)

Team Name: Cryptic Creators

Team ID: 892

Parameters and random words

Parameters

Primary Character 1: Princess

Primary Character 2: Interpreter

Non-human character: Camel

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Prologue

The honourable Princess Medika, seventh heir to the throne of the coastal kingdom, groaned as she wiped the mud from her eyes.

The reddish brown slime dripped from head to toe, covering her best-embroidered dress. With the water reeds tangled in her hair and her siblings' laughter echoing from the riverbank, she once again felt like nothing more than the punchline of a cruel joke.

“Did you find the platypus?” one of her brothers jeered from the river bank.

Medika flushed red. How could she have known there wasn't really a platypus in the creek? She felt nothing but bitterness. The chill of the water made her **shiver**, and with the sun low in the sky, there wouldn't be much more heat left of the day. Typical.

“Have fun drying off!” one of her sisters teased, as the group sauntered off.

Being the youngest child, her brothers and sisters never treated her seriously. Never. It was Medika who was never allowed beyond the walls of the keep, Medika who got stuck with the worst jobs during festival preparation, and Medika whose suggestions never got heard over the clamour of everybody else's, or if it did, it was made into the butt of a joke.

They got handed roles, responsibilities and respect from the kingdom. And what did she get? Water weeds.

Medika plucked out the straggly reeds and threw them on the ground with a damp slap.

She could take a joke, but only to a limit.

Chapter One

Night had fallen by the time Medika set off. From here, she would leave behind the twisting, winding river banks and the confinement of the sprawling castle walls.

Is this really what I want?

Grasping tightly onto her beloved amethyst necklace, Medika instinctively turned back to catch one last glimpse of her home. A towering castle stared intently back at her, standing boldly at the foot of the mountains. Glowing under the dim moonlight in all its glory, the spiky shadow of the portcullis loomed like a majestic beast.

Somehow, standing outside made the great cobblestone walls lose their constraining grip. Whatever twinge of regret she felt was quickly extinguished by a tidal wave of determination and defiance.

Medika hastily tucked the necklace under her plain old clothes. She couldn't afford for anyone to see her wearing such a lavish piece of jewellery. Who knew what kinds of ruffians lived beyond her kingdom? From now on, she felt her royal identity had to be concealed.

"I have to prove that I deserve my title as Princess, and it wasn't just handed to me," Medika eyes glistened with determination, *"I must show them that they were wrong about me, and that I am capable of more than just being a sheep."*

Under the cloak of night, Medika hurried from the stone rooms and followed a dirt track away from her castle and through the desert. Her anxious steps gradually turned into confident strides.



Chapter Two

Medika pictured the look of shock on her siblings' faces when they would realise that she'd left, all by herself. Even better if she could return with some kind of exotic treasure or token, and also revel in their slack, dumbfounded expressions, proving that 'little sister Medika' really could make it by herself.

No longer would her siblings continue their cruel tricks. No longer would anyone doubt her capabilities and determination. No longer would she be denied the roles, responsibilities, and respect a Princess deserves. It was time for a change, a worthy one, which she rightfully deserved.

As the darkness of the sky washed into dawn, fatigue weighed down on Medika's shoulders. The darkness always frightened her and simultaneously brought up terrifying memories, but she felt mesmerised by the magnificent array of stars shining from the sky.

"Beautiful," she commented, as she rested her back on the sand.

The next morning, the feeling of hunger arose but didn't deter her as she'd already amassed more than enough food and water. Hours before she left, she had approached the dozens of cooks in the palace and requested that they make her something **tasty**.

Whittling away slowly at her food, Medika savoured every bite just like her etiquette classes had taught her to. It had the advantage of quickly replenishing her only after a medium-sized food proportion.

*The food just **melts** in my mouth. Is it supposed to ...?*

Once finished, Medika eagerly began searching through her pack for some much-needed water. To her dismay though, the waterskin she'd packed was empty. Empty! Even shaking it upside-down yielded only a few scarce drops. She had to find water.

Stumbling to her feet, Medika hurriedly gathered up her things and set out once more along the track. She made out a bleached wooden sign with the symbol for water, which pointed towards a nearly dip in the land. A creek! She wasted no time getting down to its banks, and began to fill up her waterskin.

Just as she was about to leave though, the peaceful morning silence was cut by a jarring bellow. Medika whirled around, nearly jumping out of her skin. Not much further along the bank, a camel was sprawled at a strange angle in the river mud, its front leg and shoulder sunk into the bank. Medika gasped. She had to help it.

As she rushed towards the stricken creature, it let out another pitiful sound, which struck her to the heart. But how to help it? The camel was large, and a few glances around her revealed nothing but reeds and broken wood. She would just have to haul it up as best she could.

Even these efforts proved enough though. With the extra help, the camel staggered to its feet. It blinked its long-lashed eyes a few times and fixed Medika with a curious expression - perhaps she was imagining it, but the look on the camel's long, leathery face seemed to change from shock, to gratitude, and then to something which she couldn't quite interpret. Resolve? Earnest? It stood up a little straighter, took a few slow steps away from the river bank, and swung its pale yellow head back towards her, expectant. Now it was her turn to blink. What did this camel want from her?

Puffing out the last of its unreciprocated grunts, the poor camel resorted to grinding its teeth out of sheer frustration. Medika awkwardly attempted to solace it with more pats, but she knew she just couldn't hear it out.

"Camel," Medika squeezed out as she pointed to the animal. "Kamil. That's your name, okay?"

Kamil nodded before a warm smile stretched across its weathered muzzle. Gaining some confidence, Medika started to dig through the possibilities and finally felt the hope sink in. Maybe they couldn't talk through sounds, but what's stopping them from gesturing to each other? As unladylike as it is, body language *is* universal...

Medika abruptly stood up and patted the sand off her clothes before doing her best - and biggest - impression of a mime, drawing big circles with her arms and flapping them around like wings. Kamil tried to return the favour, but it could only do so much with its hefty, cumbersome legs.

Chapter Three

A tall silhouette steadily made its way into Medika's sight, briskly approaching her and Kamil.

"What is happening here?" asked the silhouette. A few more steps from in front of the blinding sun revealed it to be a man, square-shouldered and with a pale akubra hat and cloak. He spoke in a crisp tone, almost like a cool breeze.

"Kamil here is trying to tell me something, but I just can't understand it," gushed Medika in an overly honeyed voice. "I just wish I spoke camel language."

He sniggered, "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"I beg your pardon?" she stuttered, "You actually can understand it? You're not pulling my leg?" Medika waited for the man to chuckle at her, but he said nothing.

When the corners of his mouth did eventually lift, it was at Medika's dumbfounded expression. "Yes, I can," he confirmed, "And that camel's a 'he', not an 'it'. He wants you to follow him."

"Follow him?" Medika wondered out loud. The prospect initially sounded bizarre, but she perked up a bit as she realised this could be the start of an adventure. A journey with a determined camel and a mysterious man who could speak to him! None of her siblings back home could boast about *this*. She couldn't wait to keep going.

As Kamil and the man began to trek determinedly further along the dirt path, Medika scurried to keep up with them. "So, what's your name? And how come you can understand Kamil?" she asked.

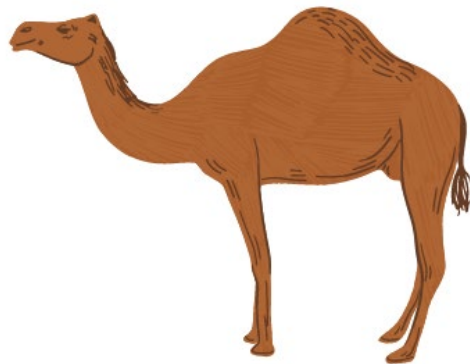
“Jarli,” he answered curtly. After a few more steps of silence, he continued in a measured tone. “I come from a family which possesses some... special abilities. Myself, I can communicate with animals.” A few more steady steps. “That’s how I knew about Kamil.”

Medika was surprised to hear Kamil let out a snort after Jarli’s speech. Kamil didn’t seem to like him very much. “Anyway, my name’s Medika,” she interjected, then left a long silence. She didn’t really want to explain her dreams of having an adventure - to someone like Jarli it would sound like a childish dream. She chose instead to ask about Kamil.

As it turned out, Kamil had experienced more than she expected.

“Several years ago,” Jarli explained, “Kamil worked in mining, and was involved in an accident at a remote mine. Not many of the humans or the working animals had survived.”

That explained some of Kamil’s earlier anguish at getting stuck. But Medika didn’t stop to wonder about his motives for leading them.



Chapter Four

“Hey, so where are you from?” Medika poked curiously as she kicked her right leg over Kamil, wrapping her arms around his neck.

Jarli rolled his eyes as he straddled behind her, flicking his scraggly hair out of the way. He tapped her shoulder and pointed to his right. “Somewhere around there. It’s all desert anyway. Doesn’t make much of a difference.”

That answer was good enough for Medika. She bobbed her head a little as she gazed into the immense tapestry of sand in the distance, still trying to process its existence in her reality. Where Jarli comes from felt liminal to her, like it’s just a stop on a journey and not quite a place you could comfortably call home.

“You must know so much about this place,” Medika remarked in awe, her voice slightly shaky from Kamil’s rumbling footsteps, “I bet you have to live two lives to explore it all. Or maybe five, I wouldn’t know. Tell me about it! Who you grew up with, how you even *survive* in this weather without people fanning you...”

Jarli swooped in to answer before Medika had a chance to ramble on even more. “I spent my childhood with my brother. And about the heat, I guess we’re just used to it. Complaining isn’t going to make it better.”

Wandering through her thoughts, Medika tried to sieve out a couple words. She opened her mouth to speak, but the uneasiness made her gulp down her questions. Somehow, as different and foreign the bush was, it still radiated the same old feeling of inferiority her brothers and sisters conditioned her to. Her blatant lack of knowledge just jarred against Jarli’s confidence so brutally.

Fortuitously, Jarli seemed to be able to read her feelings fairly well. "It's not all bad. You adapt to your surroundings and learn from them," he pointed out with the most wisdom he'd probably had in his entire life.

"Like a **sponge**," exclaimed Medika.

Caught by surprise, Jarli slowly blinked a couple times to himself before continuing. "Sure. Basically, no need to fight against it. Just let it all work together like a puzzle."

Chapter Five

"Looks like this is it," huffed Jarli as he dismounted Kamil. "Go on then, do your thing."

Medika caressed Kamil's fur as she ushered him to go inside. Kamil reluctantly nudged his head inside the mine, bending his neck at a rather disturbing angle. However, no matter how small he tried to make himself, it was still impossible to hide the fact that he had outgrown the slim entrance of the cave. After all, it had been years since Kamil worked there - he was not a nimble little baby anymore!

"I guess it's just us then."

The ominous darkness of the cave seemed to leach out into the sand. Intimidated, Medika slowly lowered her head and glanced at Jarli out of the corner of her eye.

"Surely, you're thinking what I'm thinking? I wouldn't be so sure about this..." Medika blurted out with an uncharacteristic quake in her voice. "I've read my share about mines, and I know they're always dark, and I know they're always deep, but we...haven't got a map. Or our guide."

Jarli scrunched his eyebrows as he stoically trudged into the mine, scrutinising what little of its sides he could see. Medika dragged herself to follow him after a little negotiating with herself. She was just about to commend his bravery when she saw his legs shaking too.

"It's not that bad, is it?" scoffed Jarli.

"Yeah, sure, we'll take it," muttered Medika, her voice consistently spiralling higher into a shrill note with each word.

“Why did you follow me anyway? What even brings you here?” inquired Jarli as he marched on, unimpressed. “It’s not like you’re getting much out of this.”

“You wouldn’t understand! I’m not fussed about the treasure, I just want to make a name for myself. Doesn’t have to be a medal for me to *try*,” Medika blared, trying to drown out the relentless crunching beneath their feet. “And I would *really* appreciate it if you could *try* and do something about the SUPER SCARY SUSPICIOUS SNAKES AND SPIDERS!”

Chapter Six

They walked through the mines together, bumping into walls, snakes, spiders and spiderwebs frequently (which Medika was *not* enthused about at all). Twice Jarli almost dropped the torch (a stick he struck against the mine walls to light) because of Medika’s yelps.

“Let’s sit down for a while,” Jarli said flatly after Medika almost tackled him into a wall when encountering a particularly huge spider.

It was cold and dim in the mines, and Medika shivered, pulling the shawl closer around herself. She slid down the wall beside Jarli.

“I can’t see your face, you know,” Medika said quietly.

Jarli does not reply.

Maybe because Medika is comforted by the fact that Jarli can’t see her, maybe because she’s a little unsettled of the dark, maybe because her fear of the spiders and snakes reminded her of how terrified she was of her own brothers and sisters...but she speaks up.

“The dark...reminds me of my siblings.” She cringes. It’s such an odd start to her past, but Jarli doesn’t seem to mind. She sees his fingers pick at a thread on his pants, and swallows before continuing.

“They would take my things. Just a little at first. You know, a week would pass and one of my pins would disappear.

“Then bigger things. A dress for a cousin’s coronation. A brooch from my grandmother. And they started openly...teasing me.”

Jarli’s voice was jarring in the dark. “Teasing? How?”

Her voice started to waver. “Shoving me into walls whenever we walked,” she ticks them off with her fingers as she lists them. “Locking me in closets- that’s why they remind me of the dark. And pushing me in the creek. That was the last straw,” Medika murmured. “They’re the reason why I left the palace.”

A sharp, deep breath echoed in Medika’s ear.

“So you *are* royalty,” Jarli said. His tone was totally ambiguous.

“Did you guess because of the necklace?” she asked.

Jarli gave her a funny look. “What necklace?”

“What?” She reached up to tug at said necklace.

Nothing was there.

“Oh.” Medika wasn’t sure how to react. “I...I had a purple amethyst necklace. Purple is the symbol of royalty, so I thought you guessed.” She touched her head. “When did I lose it?”

“It wasn’t there when I met you,” Jarli said.

“I guess I lost it rescuing Kamil, then,” she murmured. She instinctively grasped the spot where it used to be, momentarily startled by the emptiness on her chest.

“It’s a habit I need to break,” Medika reminded herself. *“Huh. I don’t miss it.”*

She looks back at the cave entrance, which they’ve long left behind. *I mean, look at how far I’ve come. “From rescuing Kamil to opening up to Jarli, I really have changed from the princess I used to be.”*

“It’s okay. It doesn’t matter,” she assured Jarli, who nodded curtly.

There’s another pause before Medika speaks again. “I left the palace because I was sick of being the bullied little sister to my siblings. I wanted to prove to them that I was more than a doll they could kick around, that I could make a name for myself, *be* something to them. And so, the treasure really doesn’t matter to me that much. More like I hope it’ll matter to my family.”

He didn’t ask about her parents. She was glad.

They sat in silence for a while longer, so long that Medika wondered when they were going to get up again so they could continue through the mine.

The clearing of a throat.

Is he...?

"I'm looking for a **ruby**," he said shortly.

No way.

"It's a family heirloom," Jarli continued. "Once you reach a certain age, the **ruby** would grant you a magical gift. Mine is languages, which is why-"

"You can talk to Kamil," Medika blurted.

He looked mildly irritated that she interrupted him, but continued nonetheless. "Yes. However, my father brought the **ruby** to this mine for safekeeping, and it-"

"Collapsed when Kamil was young, trapping him and the **ruby** inside along with countless other miners and camels!" Medika interrupted again, her voice rising in volume and pitch.

Jarli looked even more irritated. "Can you let me finish?"

"Oh- sorry."

He cupped his knees before speaking again, his voice rougher with irritation. "So the **ruby** was lost before my brother could come of age. He is the only one in our family without a gift. He feels alienated and alone, though he has never told me."

*I need to get the **ruby** back. I need to help my brother.*

"I was..." Jarli swallowed, and *at last* he looks nervous. "I was not planning to leave this mine with you originally."

Medika nodded her head at first, then scrambled to push herself up when it occurred to her.

"You mean you were going to leave this place *without me?*" she snapped.

Jarli winced, his hands coming up to cover his ears. "You did not matter to me much in the beginning," he said bluntly. "You were careless and annoying, and did not know your way around the desert. You did not notice that I left out information that Kamil had given us."

Medika's eyes stung with tears. *He hid information from me?*

"Then why did you keep me around?"

"At first it was out of necessity," Jarli said, his voice careful and soft. "You had food, which I had run out of, and you had Kamil on your side."

She opened her mouth, heart constricting with hurt.

"But." He holds up a hand. "You started to...grow on me after our ride through the desert. I no longer stay out of necessity, but out of-" he makes a face- "genuine enjoyment of your company."

Medika was not moved.

She could punch him.

Why not?

Put your fist down, her mind whispered.

But I really want to punch him, she whispered back.

Put. It. Down.

Medika sighed and lowered her clenched fist.

"Let's...just go. The **ruby's** in here somewhere, isn't it?"

Jarli seemed startled for a moment.

Then his face schooled back into a neutral expression.

"Yes. Let's go."



Chapter Seven

They were close to the end of a tunnel when they found it.

“It’s this one,” Medika said confidently.

Jarli raised his eyebrows at her. “You said that about the past eight tunnels. Half of them collapsed back in Kamil’s time.”

“It’s this one!” Medika insisted. “It’s literally right in the corner!”

His eyes widened and he rushed inside. True enough, the ruby was sitting innocently in a corner, shining like it was out in the sun rather than inside a dark mine tunnel.

“That’s it, isn’t it?” came Medika’s unsure voice.

“Yes,” Jarli replied, picking it up. It still shone, more like a glowworm than glitter.

“Alright. I can’t see it because you’re blocking, but we should probably go- OH MY GOSH.”

Jarli turned around. "What-"

He didn't get any other explanation as Medika grabbed his arm and *hauled* him out of the tunnel, running faster than Jarli could ever think.

"Wait, what-" He looked back, and *oh*.

The tunnel was collapsing.

Whole chunks of debris were falling from the ceiling, smashing into the minecart tracks and covering the rest of the tunnel. Thankfully, it was a lot slower than any of Jarli's books described, and they could outrun it.

"Where's the exit?" Medika yelled.

Jarli whipped his head from side to side as they hit a crossroad, and tried to remember the way they came. "This way!" He pulled them to the right, still sprinting.

They powered their legs, their feet hitting the ground in a rapid rhythm. Debris was still crumbling to the ground all around them, and they choked from the dust in the air.

"Why's it collapsing?" Medika yelled. Again with the questions.

"It's older than me and Kamil!" Jarli shouted back. "It was probably only a matter of time before it collapsed anyway!"

"Is that the exit?" she hollered for a third time.

Medika pointed to a wall of blinding light in the near distance.

Jarli squinted. "Yes!" he yelled. "Run! We're almost there!"

They ran and ran to reach the light that screamed safety.



Chapter Eight

Medika scrambled out of the mine, her hair coated in dust and sand.

“Thank goodness we’re out of there,” she exhaled.

Jarli stumbled out a few moments later, raising a single dark eyebrow at her. “You didn’t even check if I had the **ruby** with me before we left the room.”

Medika huffed. “I didn’t need to,” she insisted. “You’re always so meticulous about things, you would’ve definitely taken it with you!”

An eye roll. “Glad you have so much faith in me.”

Medika helped Jarli stand up, and they walked away from the mine to find the oasis palm they tied Kamil to. There was silence once again, but it felt...different. Comfortable, almost. Medika replayed the words Jarli had said to her earlier, in the chilly depths of the mine.

"I was...I was not planning to leave this mine with you originally."

Why didn't she punch him?

She tugged her shawl around her face, thinking. What stopped her? It's not like there was anyone to reprimand her.

Was it her etiquette lessons? Had they finally taken effect on her?

Somehow, she didn't think that was it.

"Have fun drying off!"

Oh.

She didn't want to be like her siblings.

She didn't want to hurt someone like that, even briefly.

Did Jarli's betrayal plan sting?

Yes.

Was she going to hold it against him?

No.

I can't. What he wanted to do for his brother...he does care.

And I know what it's like to be the odd one out.



Chapter Nine

When they found Kamil again, Medika bent down by the oasis pond and drank thirstily. "I forgot what it was like to drink water," she sighed, splashing her face.

Jarli snorted from behind. Was he untying Kamil? "You drank before we went into the mine."

"Yeah, but a lot's happened since then!" Medika protested.

Another silence. Medika could tell they were both thinking about the confessions they'd made to each other.

*How my siblings treated me...and the history of the **ruby** he was searching for.*

"Where are you going to go?" Jarli's voice broke through her thoughts, and she felt a jerk of surprise that the ice prince of their trio was asking her a question unprompted. He almost sounded like he cared.

"Probably back home," she answered regretfully. "I can't stay out here forever, as much as I'd like to."

And...I need to face my siblings.

Jarli didn't nod, but he looked down at his feet and shifted the reins around Kamil's neck.

"What about you? Are you going back home?"

He looked up at that. "Yes." The **ruby** glinted in the sun as he turned it in his hand. "I have to give this to my brother. So he won't be left out anymore."

It occurred to Medika then.

"We won't see each other again," she whispered.

The words burned and cut in her throat. She could not imagine this: a life back in the cold, opulent palace, her siblings shoving her in creeks and stealing her things, and all without her only friend.

Kamil grunted, as if to remind her that he was her friend, too, and Jarli inhaled sharply.

"He wants to come with you," the latter said, sounding amazed.

"Oh, good. I was going to take him with me anyway."

Jarli makes a face at her. "What if I wanted to take him with *me*?"

A laugh from Medika. "He would never let you take him anywhere, Jarli." She shot a sly smirk at him. "He likes me better."

Kamil bobbed his head in agreement, making Jarli scowl and Medika howl with laughter.

She pulled herself together, the smile fading from her face as she looked at Jarli again. "So...I guess, we have to say goodbye."

“Yes.”

“That’s all you have to say?” Medika frowned and tilted her head.

Jarli met her eyes straight-on. “What else is there to say?” he asked simply.

“Maybe an actual goodbye,” she retorted.

A snort. “Fine.”

He slipped the **ruby** into his pouch and turned to her again. “Goodbye, Medika,” he said, his voice just a little softer than usual (at least, she hoped).

Her voice was caught in her throat. “Goodbye, Jarli,” she choked, wishing she didn’t sound so strangled when farewelling a man she’d never see again.

Medika watched him one last time, trying to memorise her friend: the straight pull of his mouth, his scraggly hair, his confident stance.

He waited, then turned away without a word.

“I’ll miss you,” she blurted before she could stop herself.

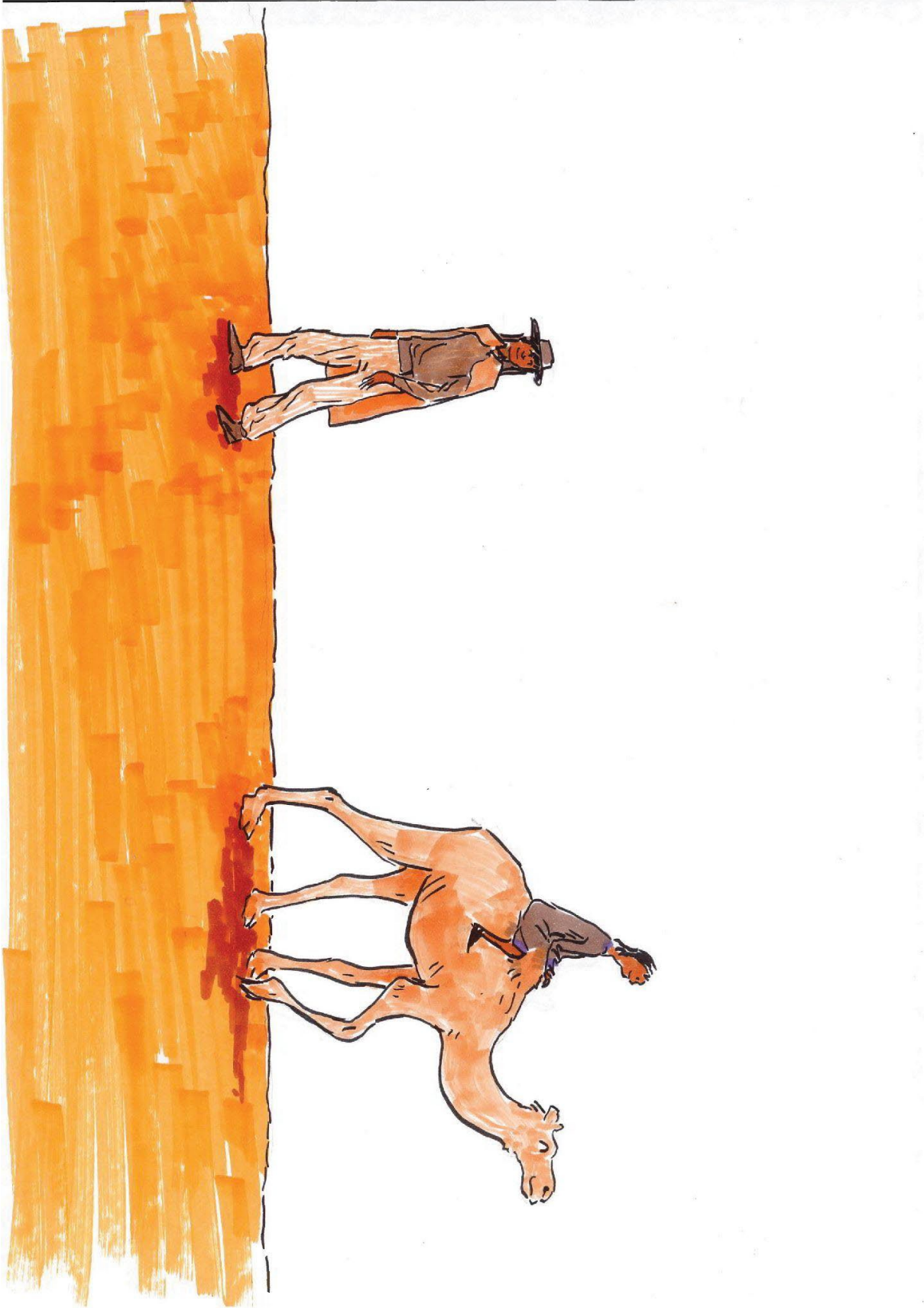
A pause in Jarli’s step.

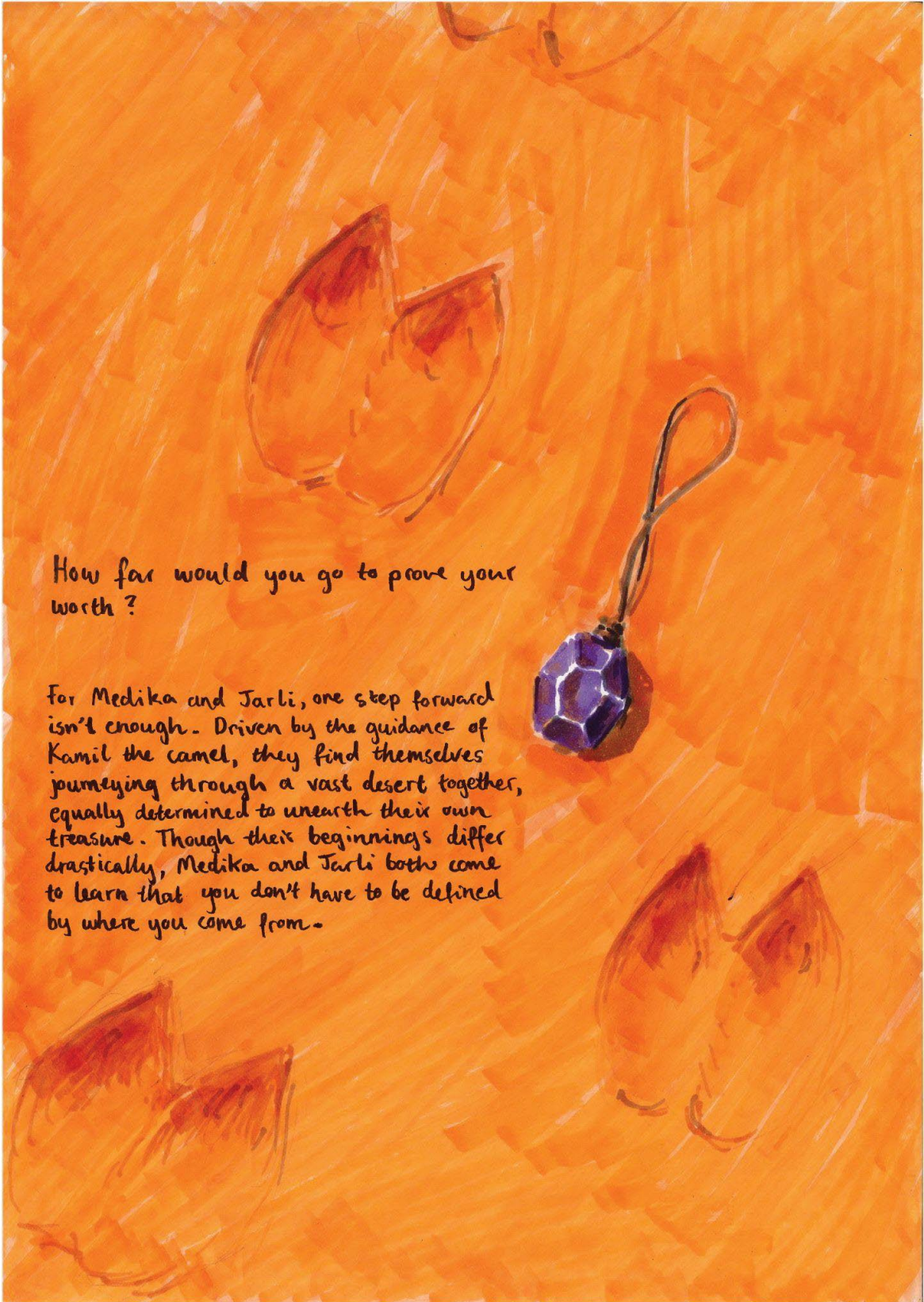
Should she have said that?

I guess I’ll never know, she thinks, as Jarli continues on, on, on, back to his hometown.

She turned away too, mounting Kamil and plodding off on the long journey home.

But Princess Medika did not look back to see a young desert traveller turn to watch her with a smile.





How far would you go to prove your worth?

For Medika and Jarli, one step forward isn't enough. Driven by the guidance of Kamil the camel, they find themselves journeying through a vast desert together, equally determined to unearth their own treasure. Though their beginnings differ drastically, Medika and Jarli both come to learn that you don't have to be defined by where you come from.