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Sarah Kamel Marzouk

April 9, 2023

Moving Mountains

by

Sarah Kamel Marzouk

Joe Conway
Adviser

Film and Media Studies

Joe Conway
Adviser

James Pellerito
Committee Member

Walter Kalaidjian
Committee Member

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An abstract of
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Abstract

Moving Mountains

By Sarah Kamel Marzouk

When an evil mining company tampers with the magical stability of the mountains, a young girl named Meera must continue the journey her lost mother started to save the mountains from collapsing on her home. This is the story told in *Moving Mountains*, a 90-120 page animated action-adventure screenplay. This thesis consists of the written screenplay followed by a support paper detailing the inspiration and process of creating the story. The screenplay combines historical inspiration from West Virginia coal mining culture and history with fantastical elements of magical realism to tell a fun but serious story that highlights the unfair grittiness and exploitative livelihood of miners and harsh mining practices.

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MOVING MOUNTAINS

an animated feature-film screenplay

written by

Sarah Marzouk

April 9, 2023

FADE IN:

OVER BLACK

A sweet, motherly voice speaks...

FEMALE VOICE (V.O.)
Did you outgrow your nightlight,
Meera?

And young MEERA responds:

YOUNG MEERA (V.O.)
Yep! I'm not scared of the dark
anymore!

Suddenly, a light switch FLICKS on, illuminating the room in a dim, warm glow. And we are in:

INT. MEERA'S CHILDHOOD BEDROOM - NIGHT

We see young Meera, around 7 years old, curled up in her bed. She's tucked neatly underneath her purple flower-patterned duvet. Various stuffed animals surround her: a white fluffy bunny, a small orange cat, a classic teddy bear.

White paper planes hang from the ceiling with invisible wire, swaying with the smallest breezes.

Meera's brown hair is in two long braids. Her eyes are a deep blue.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)
My strong little girl.

Meera's MOM, named LILY, walks over to Meera's bed. We don't see Lily's face, just her back profile.

She leans down and kisses Meera on her forehead.

YOUNG MEERA
When will you be back, Mommy?

LILY
Soon, my love.

YOUNG MEERA
I'm gonna miss you.

LILY

And I'll miss you too, sweetie. But
come close! I have to tell you a
secret.

Meera widens her eyes with curiosity and excitement.

We CUT to..

EXT. A FIREPIT - SUNRISE

...and shift our focus to an older Meera, her hair still in two braids, as she sits by a firepit in front of a cabin situated between tall valleys. Meera is now around 17. Despite being older, her stature is still small. You can see determined curiosity in her eyes. The flames of the fire cast an orange hue on her.

LILY (O.S.)

Just like you and me...

Meera raises her head upward and yearns to the tops of the mountains, where the sun rises behind risen Earth. We see the sun reflect in Meera's soft eyes. She has a faint scar by her right eye.

LILY (O.S.) (CONT'D)

...the mountains around us...

She thinks of those next words, the last words her mother spoke to her...

LILY (O.S.) (CONT'D)

(whispering)

...are alive!

We ZOOM into the tops of the mountains that Meera stares at, and then we FLY down the mountains, alongside white birds, taking in all the beauty that surrounds Meera's home.

The Earth is bumpy and beautiful, with rolling mountains and greenery filling up every curve. Orange sunlight flows along every leaf. The rising sun pours into the valleys of the mountains. An almighty liquid gold sealant.

We continue to fly through the valleys with the white birds!

And then we see the makings of a small mining town. Small buildings scatter between the valleys. Little houses and cabins, shabby and homemade. People slowly trekking the streets, tiny ants in a larger antfarm. In the middle of the beautiful mountains is a struggling town.

Soaring by with the birds, we see the atmosphere changing.

High-tech coal mining sites, a wash of dull steampunk machinery, starkly blot against what once was free nature. Hundreds of miners, men and boys, march into caves. Gray, defeated, strong, but powerless.

We join a line of miners entering a dark cave, where our focus centers on a young boy whose eyes quickly look around. A boy far too young to be working in the mines, but old enough to wonder why. This is NATE (13).

As Nate walks along, he sees a man in a navy suit surrounded by other talkative businessmen.

The navy-suited man is glossy and glitzy, with blonde slicked-back hair. Nate notices a nametag on his blazer. It reads MR. ZAVIER (38). CEO of the Mining for All Corporation.

In slight slow motion, Nate's eyes meet Mr. Xavier's piercing gaze. Mr. Xavier smirks. Nate's eyebrows furrow.

Then we suddenly DIVE past the line of workers into a pitch black cave, following the clashing, colliding sounds of steel and rock.

INT. MINE - CONTINUOUS

SWINGING pickaxes glisten against coal. Dozens of miners, ranging from young boys to bulkier men, swing and swing their tools against the damp cave walls.

Dim lanterns line the roof of the tunnel. A minecart runs by on a long rail.

Nate swings at a vein of coal with his pickaxe. He gets a few weak hits in.

Then suddenly, the vein crumbles a bit more than usual.

A little beam of light peeks through a hole...

Nate's eyes widen.

He hits the vein again. It crumbles a bit more.

A few swings later, enough of the vein has fallen to create a small crawlspace.

Nate looks around and sees all the other miners are too busy to notice him.

He then crawls through the hole in the wall.

He crawls through a very small tunnel, and the further along he goes, the stronger the light becomes.

Until finally the tunnel starts to get larger...

And Nate arrives at an opening.

He stands up, tries to dust the dirt off his already dirtied clothes, and then sees...

He is in a MASSIVE cave!

The space is spherical, with the ceiling reaching stories high. Sharp stalagmites hang. The sound of dripping water echoes throughout the dark cave.

Tiny glowing and flashing yellow lights fly about the cave, too. Fireflies.

A firefly approaches Nate's face, and he blinks in wonder at the flickering glow.

Nate takes a step forward and hears a soft splash of water. He looks down at his feet and his eyes widen. The ground is a shiny, pristine material, like reflective opal, stark white against the dark coal-colored walls of the cave. The floor of the entire cave is coated in a very shallow pool of water.

Nate looks up and notices something peculiar...

Light beaming vertically on a stone altar.

He slowly walks to the center of the room where the altar stands, water splashing beneath his feet.

There is a clear empty space on the altar. Something should be there but isn't.

Nate tilts his head in confusion. He looks around.

There is nothing else in the cave. The beaming light is funneled through a small hole in the ceiling--such a feat should be impossible. The cave is deep underground.

The sunbeam reveals millions of tiny particles of sparkling dirt and dust.

Nate reaches his hand up to touch the light.

And when the tip of his coal-dusted finger graces the light for only a mere millisecond...

THE CAVE STARTS TO SHAKE!

Nate looks around in confusion!

And he hears cracking beneath his feet...

He looks down and the ground is BEGINNING TO SPLIT!

It's an EARTHQUAKE!

The entire mountain shakes even more!

Nate hears SCREAMING from the direction he came from!

Rock and coal begin to fall from the ceiling!

Nate RETREATS!

He runs and crawls back into the tunnel to reach everyone else, falling on the way to the tunnel and hurting his arm...

When Nate is finally gone, we watch as the altar stands, immobile against crumbling earth.

Well...

Until it topples into pieces.

Then we cut to...

EXT. SMALL GARDEN - DAY

...a woman, mid-40s, with frizzy short hair, tending to her garden. We'll come to know her as WENDOLYN.

She dons an eclectic smile, dozens of rings on her fingers, and a loose-fitting outfit consisting of various shades of deep blue. She also wears a thin white scarf around her neck.

She gives off the air of a mad scientist on the verge of breakthrough, a combination of excitement and sleep deprivation.

A small deer lays sleeping by her side.

But Wendolyn hears the collapse of the mine, the shaking of the mountains...

She jolts her head upward and looks off into the distance where nearby mountains reside.

WENDOLYN

It is time. We need to get her.

EXT. FRONT YARD OF A CABIN - SUNSET

In a valley between towering mountains sits a cabin.

A flock of birds fly high above.

A stream runs by, water quietly singing.

It is sunset, but the mountains block the horizon line. Here, you cannot see the sun until it is high in the sky.

A fireplace burns in front of the cabin, heating the cool summer night. Meera's father, ELLIS (49), sits on a log, basking in the fiery heat.

A cane leans against the log he sits on. His eyes are warm and relaxed, even though you can see the marks of rugged life across his facial features.

The cabin door suddenly opens.

And Meera walks out, holding a poorly wrapped present. A burst of primary color. It seems to hold together a couple of things. We focus on the gift's heartwarming craftsmanship, and the nimble but scarred fingers that hold the present.

Ellis looks to Meera as she walks over.

ELLIS

Meera, what is this?

MEERA

Happy birthday, Dad.

Her voice is soft, but excited.

Meera hands the gift to her father. He opens it.

The colorful wrapping paper drifts down to the ground as the gift is revealed to be three bagged items: graham crackers, chocolate bars, and marshmallows.

Ellis gasps.

ELLIS

Is this for--

MEERA

For s'mores!

ELLIS

Where'd you get the materials?

Meera sits down next to Ellis.

MEERA
Out of town, actually.

ELLIS
You went that far?

MEERA
It's no big deal! I was happy to
get you something exciting this
year.

Meera looks at Ellis's cane. It is clear he could not travel
far on foot.

MEERA (CONT'D)
(quieter)
Y'know, with you being bored from
not working and all.

Ellis lets out a sad smile.

Meera recalibrates!

MEERA (CONT'D)
Besides, I wanted s'mores, too!

Meera suddenly whips out long wooden sticks to roast the
marshmallows on.

She hands Ellis a stick and they each roast a marshmallow.

ELLIS
You don't have to worry about me,
Meera.

Meera gives a playful shrug.

MEERA
Pssh. I don't know what you're
talking about.

Ellis sighs.

The night darkens and the marshmallows burn to a comfortable
crisp.

MEERA (CONT'D)
Mmm. I can see why Mom always made
s'mores.

ELLIS
She really loved them. Almost as
much as she loved you.

Meera lets out a small smile.

ELLIS (CONT'D)
She had such a strong spirit,
y'know. You two are very alike in
that way.

Meera nods. Ellis starts forming a s'more. Meera follows suit.

He bites into his s'more. Pure happiness seeps through him. Meera smiles and bites into her s'more too.

She then clears her throat to say something, holding her half-bitten, gooey s'more with two hands.

MEERA
Sooooo... while I was out of town,
I heard something interesting...

Ellis raises an eyebrow.

MEERA (CONT'D)
Someone told me about a magic gem.
One that can tell you anything you
want to know.

Ellis looks to Meera.

MEERA (CONT'D)
Apparently, it was buried hundreds
of years ago around here. In the
mountains.

ELLIS
Meera, I don't think...

MEERA
But what if I found it?

After a bit of silence...

ELLIS
Meera, it'd be best if you stayed
here. Kept helping with the town
like you have been, working at the
store. There aren't many of you
young strong kids left who aren't
forced in the mines.

Meera sighs.

ELLIS (CONT'D)
Besides. I don't want to lose you
too.

MEERA
You won't lose--

Ellis is getting a bit frustrated now, but out of anxiety,
not anger.

ELLIS
Meera, please. I've told you before
your mother left for a reason. Do
not leave Rittledon chasing a
legend.

Meera's body slumps a bit. She finishes her s'more, then gets
up.

MEERA
Yeah, you're right. It's okay. I'll
stay. I'm gonna go get us some
water.

Ellis nods as Meera heads back into the cabin.

We widen our scope a bit and see other small cabins, filling
the valley more as they go further into the distance. Tiny
dots of light scatter the view, as houses have a little
lantern or two outside their doors. It seems Ellis and Meera
live on the edge of the town, just barely reaching
civilization.

The mountains tower on every side of the valley with nowhere
anyone could go but up.

The sun hides behind mountaintops, sinking, ending the day.

EXT. RITTLEDON - MAIN STREET - MORNING

We watch Meera's back as she treads through a poor town full
of lives but devoid of color.

She wears more-or-less typical attire; medium-wash jeans, a
navy t-shirt, and a deep-green corduroy jacket. Oversized,
like it's her father's. Her hair is still in two braids, and
she doesn't wear any jewelry.

She looks ahead in the distance a bit, and we see a faded
sign above a run-down store says RITTLEDON GENERAL STORE. She
heads that way.

The desolation she walks through is called Rittledon, and it is her home. Full of shacks, sad attempts of houses, and open-air shops selling to people with no money.

People are dressed in shabby clothes, and kids run around barefoot. Some mothers sit outside of their homes and stores with babies in their arms, with nothing to do but beg for help.

The tired men and young boys that pass by her are dirtied with coal, returning from a day's work at the mines. Some have bandages around their arms or heads.

She looks to the direction where the bandaged miners come from, and sees a large white tent set up. An infirmary. Underneath the tent are flimsy hospital beds, and just a handful of female nurses running around tending to dozens of miners. Meera hears groans of pain, alongside the sobs of women who stand beside the beds of their husbands, sons, brothers.

Meera continues to thread herself through crowds of melancholy people.

She finally reaches the general store, and as soon as she opens the doors, she hears the loud boasts of a crowd and a vague voice booming through a microphone...

Meera turns around and, intrigued, walks towards the noise. The sound leads her to the part of town where the mines begin.

She finds herself in the back of a crowd that listens to a speaker...

Mr. Xavier.

His voice glides like polished steel.

He stands at a podium at the entrance of the mines with a microphone. He is surrounded by security guards wearing all black jumpsuits and black hard hat helmets. They also wear black face masks. You can only see their eyes.

MR. ZAVIER

We are thrilled to announce that the profit we made in our recent mining season is our highest profit to date yet. Thanks to your commitment to coal mining, you are powering towns and cities across the land.

A man in the crowd scoffs loudly and speaks in a deep southern accent.

MAN

What 'bout our town, huh?! What
'bout what happened yesterday?!
Some of our men died in those mines
and you won't even say nothin'
'bout it!

People nearby chime in with words of agreement, shocked gasps, sighs and rumors. Meera looks around, subtly watching everyone.

She spots a woman crying into a tissue, with her young daughter holding on to her leg.

Meera looks back to Mr. Xavier.

His smile doesn't stray...

MR. ZAVIER

I can assure you, sir, that your
safety is our utmost priority.

MAN

Don't look like that to me!

Mr. Xavier keeps his creepy, plastic-looking smile. His face looks like it wasn't meant to express joy.

MR. ZAVIER

Please don't worry. In the next few
days we will be bringing new mining
equipment that will make everyone's
lives easier. Rittledon will be
better than ever.

People start to boo.

MR. ZAVIER (CONT'D)

In the meantime, keep mining, and
remember...

An anthem starts to play over the speakers...

And Mr. Xavier, with his arms down his side, subtly motions towards a spot in the crowd with two fingers.

Then, two of the security guards near Mr. Xavier make their way to the MAN who was shouting earlier...

And for a second, Mr. Xavier's eyes meet Meera's, even though she is in the back of the crowd.

MR. ZAVIER (CONT'D)
What's mine, is yours.

The two security guards GRAB the man who was objecting earlier. The crowd freezes in fear.

MAN
LET GO! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!

The security guards drag the man out of the crowd toward the front of the mines as people clear the way. Some people leave, and others watch in confusion. Nobody dares to intervene. Meera stays still.

Mr. Xavier gets off from his podium surrounded by security agents and gets safely escorted into one of the big black SUVs lined up on the side of the mines.

The man from the crowd gets SHOVED into another black SUV.

Meera watches.

The man is THROWN to his knees, and just as the sliding doors of the SUV close...

One of the security guards HITS the man on his head with some sort of GIANT BULKY WEAPON, perhaps a baseball bat.

Right at the point of impact, the SUV doors close.

Meera flinches.

The cars drive away.

As Meera turns to leave, she notices an older woman nearby looking her up and down disapprovingly.

The woman whispers to her friend, another elderly woman.

OLDER WOMAN #1
(to friend)
That's the one. Whose mom caused those riots years ago.

OLDER WOMAN #2
The one who left town?

OLDER WOMAN #1
Yes. Look, she's got them same violent eyes.

Meera turns in place quickly and heads out. As she walks away we see her pained face.

Then...

Meera hears an inviting sound... like... windchimes...?

She turns toward the sound, and notices something shiny in a bush...

And the bush slightly shakes...

And a little DEER SPRINTS from the bush toward a path that leads up a mountain!

Meera looks around for a second, wondering if anyone else saw what she saw. It seems nobody did.

She notices the deer left a small trail of blood...

MEERA

Oh no...

She sees the direction the blood leads and, without hesitation, follows the trail into the mountains.

EXT. RITTLEDON - MOUNTAINS - MORNING

Meera hikes through the mountains. She threads through trees skinny and wide, and green foliage surrounds her. Sunlight beams through and casts dancing shadows on her. She looks to the ground and continues following the trail of blood the deer left.

She reaches a somewhat flat clearing and moves a bundle of leafy tree branches out of her view.

She sees the deer, leg injured, blood still trailing. Its back faces her, so it doesn't see her.

MEERA

Hey, lil' guy...

But then, the deer suddenly TURNS its head to its left!

And it makes eye contact with A HUNTER!

The hunter holds a bow and arrow, and the arrow is drawn back...

It aims at the deer, who is frozen in fear...

MEERA (CONT'D)

NO!

Meera JUMPS FORWARD IN FRONT OF THE DEER, and closes her eyes!

THE HUNTER RELEASES HIS ARROW!

AND THEN, as we see Meera BRACE ONTO THE DEER...

THE ARROW STOPS MID-AIR!

Meera, realizing she was not hit, opens her eyes slowly and looks up...

She sees the arrow frozen mid-air, a slight blue aura encasing it.

She then sees a mysterious hooded woman holding her right arm up, with her bandaged hand extended.

The woman uses her other arm to take her hood down, and we see...

It's WENDOLYN!

Meera looks back to the hunter, whose eyes are wide and frightened.

WENDOLYN
(to hunter)
Go. Now.

The hunter DROPS his bow and arrow and SPRINTS back into the woods!

Wendolyn sighs and lowers her arm, letting go of the arrow. It drops onto the ground softly.

MEERA
Thank you, miss...

WENDOLYN
CORNELIUS!

MEERA
What?

The deer, still around Meera's arms, suddenly perks up! His ears point upright.

And the deer, now with a name...

Speaks!

CORNELIUS
Wendolyn!

MEERA

WHAT?!

Cornelius RUNS out of Meera's arms and into Wendolyn's legs!

Wendolyn bends down and comforts him, noticing his injured leg.

WENDOLYN

Oh my stars, you're hurt!

CORNELIUS

Oh, it's nothing--

Wendolyn raises her bandaged hand again, and hovers it around Cornelius's injury...

Healing it!

WENDOLYN

There.

Wendolyn and Cornelius simultaneously remember Meera is still kneeled on the ground, frozen in confusion.

They turn to her and her eyes are wide.

MEERA

You...

She points to Cornelius.

MEERA (CONT'D)

Talk... and... you...

She points to Wendolyn.

MEERA (CONT'D)

Just... stopped an arrow... AND
healed him... I don't...

Wendolyn lets out an innocent smile.

WENDOLYN

Don't what?

Meera blinks.

Cornelius and Wendolyn act as if nothing is out of the ordinary.

CORNELIUS

She tried to save me, Wendolyn!

WENDOLYN

I saw! I couldn't be more grateful to you, dear. What's your name?

MEERA

Uhhhh... Meera.

WENDOLYN

Wait, wait, wait. Meera?

Suddenly, Wendolyn gets up and walks towards Meera, getting closer to her, studying her. She bends down over Meera as she still sits on the floor.

Meera slowly crawls backward.

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)

Oh my good word.

MEERA

Ummm, I don't know what you--

WENDOLYN

I should've known. Your eyes...

Meera's eyes are a deep enchanting blue, almost blue-black.

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)

Same color as your mother's.

MEERA

What?! You knew my mom?

WENDOLYN

You could say that. She was my baby sister.

MEERA

She... sister? You're my aunt?

WENDOLYN

I'll explain the rest. Come with me.

Meera looks at her without saying anything.

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)

Don't worry, I'm a good witch! I just saved your life, didn't I?

Meera looks down at the arrow on the ground.

The possibilities of answers start to fill her head...

She sighs.

MEERA

Okay.

INT. WENDOLYN'S HOME - LIVING ROOM - EVENING

Wendolyn's home, being in a small cave, has no natural light-
-however, her plethora of lamps makes the dark space feel
cozy and full of life.

The walls are plastered from floor to ceiling in various art,
photographs, and notebook pages crammed with notes and
reminders.

Meera, sitting patiently on the couch, marvels at all the
little pieces of the comfortable chaos of Wendolyn's home.
She's definitely a witchy maximalist.

A wall clock reads 7 o'clock P.M. It's been a few hours.

MEERA

You live kinda far... took a while
to get here.

WENDOLYN

Yeah, sorry about that. You've
gotta admit it's peaceful, though!

Wendolyn heads over holding a silver tray with a vintage tea
set on it. Meera notices her right hand is bandaged.

MEERA

What happened to your hand?

WENDOLYN

My hand? Oh. It's just a blight.
Happens to witches, usually when
their magic is too strong for their
body. Or they use curses.

MEERA

Curses?!

WENDOLYN

Mine was an accident! Happened when
I was younger. Price of curiosity.

Wendolyn pours tea into both cups. She adds five sugarcubes
to her own cup. Meera takes her teacup and holds it close to
her face with both hands, feeling the warmth of the steam
rise to her face. She takes a sip.

Wendolyn smiles.

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)
Two hands. Just like Lily.

MEERA
Why did nobody tell me about you?
Why haven't you come to see me? Can
you tell me how--

WENDOLYN
Hold on! I can't give you all the
answers you want, but I can tell
you this. Your father and I agreed
that the less you knew about me,
the better. To keep you safe. You
would've run off to find me as soon
as you knew, right?

Meera lets out a slight chuckle and a shrug.

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)
And the last thing we needed was
another family member gone.
Especially because, well...

MEERA
Well, what?

Wendolyn always gives in to peer pressure.

WENDOLYN
...as your mother's daughter, let's
just say you have a strength beyond
anyone else.

Meera sinks in her seat a bit, a little at disbelief.

MEERA
Yeah, yeah, Dad says the same. But
why am I meeting you now?

WENDOLYN
I'll tell you why!

Wendolyn suddenly gets up and walks excitedly over to a very
wide floor-to-ceiling bookshelf. She scrambles and combs
through different giant books.

Meera watches, slightly amazed at how chaotic her aunt is as
things comedically fall and Cornelius naturally avoids flying
objects.

Wendolyn finally finds the book she wanted.

She comes back, clears the coffee table, and puts down a huge leather-bound landscape book. There is no cover or title.

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)

You know the mine collapse that happened the other day?

MEERA

Yeah.

WENDOLYN

That wasn't just a mining accident. The mountains are losing their strength.

MEERA

What?

Wendolyn flips to the first page of the book. It looks like a children's book.

Immediately you can tell the storybook was handmade. The art isn't perfect, but it's passionate. A little childish, but it has a bit too much technical power to be created by a child. Crayons, colored pencils, and some oil pastels were used.

The first spread, with the drawing spanning across two pages, is simple--a flat grassy landscape with a kingdom drawn. A sun beams high in the sky. The grass consists of different shades of green, and the kingdom is drawn in bright contrasting colors.

WENDOLYN

This is my sketchbook. I made this when I was younger.

MEERA

Aw, how old were you?

WENDOLYN

Sixteen.

Meera tries to stifle a laugh.

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)

Our family is many things, dear, but we are not artists.

Wendolyn lets out a mischievous smile...

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)

But here, maybe this will make things easier...

Wendolyn raises her bandaged hand and closes her eyes. She sways her hand around a bit...

And suddenly, Wendolyn's childish drawings start to MOVE IN THEIR PAGES!

The grass and kingdom start to sway.

Suddenly, a YELLOW GLOWING WOMAN appears in the drawing!

Meera's eyes widen.

Then, the room darkens a bit, like a movie theater preparing for a show.

And beautiful swirls of color spill out from the pages to coat the entire living room. The colors sway around Meera and everything else.

Suddenly, the streaks of magic merge and the same woman in the drawing stands in the room, life-size and realistic, in muted sepia yellow. Like a projection of a memory.

The woman looks graceful, with long flowing hair and a long dress that covers her feet, making it look as if she floats when she moves.

Suddenly, kingdom common folk emerge from thin air and walk by and around her. She stands, happy and proud. These are her people.

MEERA

This is...

WENDOLYN

What, you thought I wasn't the real deal?

Meera smiles.

Wendolyn's bandaged hand flinches a bit from pain. Meera notices.

Wendolyn begins to tell her story, passionately and theatrically, like the way a parent tells their child a story from their favorite storybook.

The events that happen within the story unfold in the living room through magical projection. Characters move across the room like ghosts. What Wendolyn describes appears, and Meera watches, baffled.

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)
Thousands of years ago, the land
was flat. Then, the mountains were
created by a goddess named
Hathoria.

Suddenly, the people vanish and the golden woman, Hathoria,
FLOATS UP into the air, with her eyes glowing and her arms
raised. Mini rolling mountains RISE from the ground around
Wendolyn's furniture. Meera stares in astonishment.

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)
Wanting to protect her beloved
kingdom from nearby invaders, she
rose the flat Earth so armies could
not get through.

Then, a RED GEM falls from the sky and floats in Hathoria's
open palms.

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)
Then, Hathoria imbued her soul into
a red gem, a jewel now called the
Soulstone.

Hathoria closes her eyes, and exhales.

Suddenly, the Soulstone glows bright red and BEAMS light.

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)
She then placed this stone deep
inside the mountains to keep them
strong. Her kingdom lived in
protection forever.

Hathoria disappears, and the Soulstone floats there, glowing,
beating.

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)
The Soulstone is immensely
powerful, and is kept alive by
magical beings called the Mountain
Spirits. Also known as The
Protectors. If a human manages to
reach the Soulstone, however, they
are granted with the power to know
anything they wish-if Hathoria
deems them worthy.

Meera stares at the Soulstone, her eyes glowing with
possibility.

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)

But 10 years ago, Mining for All dove into the mountains and stole the Soulstone. They forcefully drained it of its magic with machinery, using it for their own evils.

Then, the Soulstone VANISHES and the room goes dark.

Wendolyn walks over to a floor lamp and turns it on. Meera looks to Wendolyn.

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)

The mountains became unstable, which caused major earthquakes and mining accidents. That was when the first mining riots and protests against Mining for All began. And this, Meera, is when your mother comes in.

Meera straightens up with anticipation.

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)

When the Soulstone was stolen, something... awakened in your mother. She not only led the protests, but she also stole the Soulstone back. I don't know how.

Wendolyn sits down next to Meera.

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)

But the Soulstone is somewhere with Lily, and has been for 10 years.

MEERA

What?

WENDOLYN

She told me she would return it herself, and when she did, the mountains would be stable. But she warned me that if 10 years pass and the mountains begin to collapse, then she failed. And that I have to go find the Soulstone and return it.

Meera suddenly GETS UP FROM HER SEAT!

MEERA

Does that mean you'd find her too?

WENDOLYN

Hold ON! Nothing is guaranteed.
Finding either will not be as easy
as you think.

Meera sinks down into her seat again.

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)

All we know is that with the
mountains collapsing now, something
went wrong. And I promised her I
would help.

Suddenly, Wendolyn's cave home starts SHAKING.

Dust falls from the ceiling. Lights start flickering.

Then the shaking stops.

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)

Speaking of...

A pause...

And the shaking STARTS again.

Wendolyn SHUTS the book and sticks it in a large worn
backpack. She gives the bag to Meera.

Wendolyn then goes to her giant bookcase and leans up against
it to slide it across the wall.

A small hole behind the bookcase is revealed, with various
little cloth bags all wrapped up tightly and neatly. She has
prepared for this.

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)

Put all these bags in the backpack.

MEERA

O-okay.

The cave shakes MORE. Things are now falling off the walls
and shelves.

Cornelius huddles near Meera's feet.

WENDOLYN

Keep filling up the bag!

MEERA

Okay!

Wendolyn RUNS to another room to grab more things.

Meera finishes filling up the backpack and throws it on.

Cornelius is huddled by her legs, scared but ready to run.

Wendolyn comes back from the other room holding a bunch of random items in her arms.

WENDOLYN

Let's go!

The three of them RUN toward the front door as the ceiling of Wendolyn's cave home begins to FALL!

And as they outrun the collapse of the inner mountain, they BREAK FREE into daylight.

EXT. WENDOLYN'S HOME - FRONT ENTRANCE - EVENING

As soon as they run out, the entrance to Wendolyn's home gets BLOCKED by rock.

The three stand there, panting, in disbelief of what just happened.

Wendolyn drops the things she was holding.

She walks toward the front entrance of what used to be her home. Even though she knew this would happen, she cannot help but feel deeply saddened.

WENDOLYN

Well, when one door closes...

Meera walks up to her, standing beside her.

MEERA

I'm sorry.

WENDOLYN

Don't be. It is what it is.

She turns to Meera and puts her hands on her shoulders.

Wendolyn is not as perky as she usually is. She sounds somber, serious, but determined. She is talking quickly, like time is running out.

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)

Meera, I need to find the Soulstone and return it. And I need you to come with me.

MEERA

Me?! But I... I don't know magic,
and I've never been out of
Rittledon...

Wendolyn move her injured hand to hold Meera's.

WENDOLYN

Don't worry. We'll be together, and
I'll protect you.

Meera breathes in shakily.

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)

When your mother left, she said she
needed to see a friend of ours
named Julie. We will head to her
village, see what she knows. But
it's a difficult trip, and requires
going into the Outer Forest, which
doesn't take kindly to strangers.
But I think... because you are
Lily's daughter, the forest will
let us in.

Meera thinks for a moment...

MEERA

If I come with you, and we return
the Soulstone, will its power...
bring me answers? Like in the
legend?

WENDOLYN

I don't see why not.

Meera exhales.

MEERA

I can't leave my dad alone, though,
Wendolyn. He can't be on his own
too long without help, and I'm
working for the both of us, too.

WENDOLYN

I can send Cornelius to him to tell
him what's happening.

Cornelius assuredly nods, wanting to help.

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)

But besides that, I fear he will
have to make it on his own for a
few days until we come back.

Pain strikes Meera's eyes.

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)

If we do not move now, the
mountains will fall. And they will
fall on Rittledon.

Meera looks off to the direction of her home in the
distance...

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)

Meera. I wouldn't be asking you to
do this if I didn't think you were
capable.

MEERA

How do you know I'm capable? You
barely know me.

WENDOLYN

Not just anyone would risk their
life for a deer, Meera.

Meera looks down to Cornelius, with big grateful eyes.

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)

And I knew your mother. I sense her
strength in you.

MEERA

She wasn't strong enough to come
back.

WENDOLYN

Meera.

Meera closes her eyes and breathes in deeply. She then looks
to Wendolyn.

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)

She is stronger than you know.
Trust me.

Meera's eyes soften.

She looks back to Cornelius.

MEERA

(to Cornelius)

I live on the edge of town, along
Sunset Creek. My dad will probably
be sitting outside by the firepit.
He has a cane. Please make sure
he's safe while I'm gone.

Cornelius perks up, ready to take on his task.

CORNELIUS
You can count on me!

Wendolyn exhales and her body relaxes.

But then she flinches from the pain in her blighted hand.

WENDOLYN
We need to start moving. We'll camp
on the way and get to Julie's
village tomorrow.

Meera nods. She starts to pick up the items Wendolyn dropped earlier and puts them in her backpack.

Wendolyn turns to Cornelius and bends down, petting him with her uninjured hand.

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)
Good luck, Cornelius. I know you'll
be fine. Thank you for doing this.

CORNELIUS
Of course! Good luck, you two!

Cornelius then gives a small nod, and starts his trek down the mountain.

He yells behind his shoulder:

CORNELIUS (CONT'D)
Tell Julie I said hello!

Wendolyn and Meera stand, smiling a bit.

They look at each other.

WENDOLYN
Alright. Off we go, then.

Meera nods. The two of them walk together away from the town and from Wendolyn's home, beginning their long journey.

But then...

A tiny buzzing mechanical fly enters our focus.

And with the mechanical buzzing of the fly, we start to hear the clanking of machinery and the fusing of metal through drills and welding materials...

These sounds transition us to...

INT. MINING FOR ALL CORP FACTORY - NIGHT

...a massive factory run by Mining for All.

The first thing we see is a man in protective welding armor, his head covered by a giant metal helmet. He wears gloves and a protective yellow outfit, and he drills into metal.

We zoom out and see hundreds of other workers also drilling and welding into a giant machine that rises dozens of stories high and wide...

The machine looks like a dragline, a mountaintop-removal machine. Except it is bigger, stronger, and scarier.

The body of the machine sits on the ground, square in shape, with windows all around. From the body rises dozens of long and thick metal masts, poking out, like a spider. From the ends of the masts hang giant metal scoops, each about the size of a house.

The machine is monstrous and man-made.

And when we zoom out more...

We see the entire factory is the size of an airplane hanger, and is full of these machines.

We slowly pan up to see the view from a higher perspective.

And as we back up a bit, we see...

Mr. Xavier beside us, standing in a glass room, looking out to his creations.

He stands with his hands behind his back.

And his peace is broken by the loud SLAM of a door SWINGING open behind him.

He turns around.

MR. ZAVIER

Davis.

We see a young man holding too many clipboards and papers and folders, breathing quickly. He had been running.

DAVIS (27) is Mr. Xavier's assistant, lanky and shaky, wearing large glasses he is constantly readjusting, despite his hands being full.

DAVIS

Lily's daughter is on the move.

Mr. Xavier's face hardens.

Davis walks quickly to Mr. Xavier and holds out a tablet. On the screen is the view from the buzzing mechanical fly we saw earlier, watching Meera and Wendolyn walk away.

DAVIS (CONT'D)
They said they're going to the
Outer Forest to find the Soulstone.

Mr. Xavier narrows his eyes to the tiny Meera on the screen.

DAVIS (CONT'D)
If they get to the Soulstone, the
mountains will be too strong to
flatten. Our draglines won't work.

MR. ZAVIER
I'm aware.

Mr. Xavier looks out to the machines.

MR. ZAVIER (CONT'D)
Will they still be ready today?

DAVIS
They need... another day or two.

Mr. Xavier inhales. We zoom into his face, which grows angry.

MR. ZAVIER
Send troops to the Outer Forest. We
need to capture Meera.

EXT. RITTLEDON - MAIN STREET - NIGHT

Cornelius has made it to the center of Rittledon.

He stands and hides behind bushes and various rocks, not wanting to be seen by people.

CORNELIUS
Sunset Creek, Sunset Creek...

He scans the area for potential indicators of which way to go next.

Then, his eyes fall on a wooden directional sign that points to Sunset Creek.

CORNELIUS (CONT'D)
Bingo!

Suddenly, a small foot STEPS on Cornelius's tail!

He SCREAMS from pain, then QUICKLY covers up his mouth with his paw!

CORNELIUS (CONT'D)

Why you--

He turns around and sees a small boy, around 5 years old, staring at him.

Cornelius is clearly trying very hard to not speak, so as to not reveal his magical status.

Then, in the distance...

NATE

PETER! Where are you!

Nate, the boy we saw in the mine earlier, walks up to Cornelius, where his younger brother PETER (5) stands on Cornelius's tail.

Nate has one arm in a sling.

NATE (CONT'D)

Peter, come on, don't hurt the animals.

PETER

He talks!

Cornelius freezes.

NATE

I'm sure he does. Come on, get off of his tail.

Nate grabs Peter's hand and pulls him off Cornelius's tail.

And Cornelius SPRINTS away, toward Sunset Creek.

PETER

No! Come back!

Peter BREAKS FREE from Nate and runs after Cornelius.

NATE

Peter! Wait!

Cornelius is running away, way too fast for Peter. He laughs.

CORNELIUS

Deer are always faster!

Cornelius SPRINTS down the valley, toward Meera and Ellis's home.

He gets there...

And there's nobody by the firepit.

CORNELIUS (CONT'D)

Huh..?

EXT. MOUNTAINOUS OUTSKIRTS OF RITTLEDON - NIGHT

Meera and Wendolyn trek through deep woods, with Meera following behind Wendolyn. The sun starts to set. They are both very tired.

Bugs occasionally land on Meera. She freaks out and tries to smack them. This happens multiple times.

WENDOLYN

Not an outdoorsy person, are you?

MEERA

I actually love hiking. Bugs just freak me out a bit.

They keep walking.

WENDOLYN

Your mom was terrified of ladybugs.

Meera laughs a teeny bit...

MEERA

Really?

WENDOLYN

Oh, absolutely! Couldn't even look at them. And it bothered her so much, she would always be saying, "ladybugs aren't even scary! Why am I scared of them?!" But Lily was so stubborn. So you know what she did?

MEERA

What?

WENDOLYN

Studied them for weeks. She would keep them on her fingers when they landed, or in her hair. She would take photos, sketch them, paint them.

(MORE)

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)
And after a while, she wasn't
scared of them anymore. She
realized they were just like any
other bug.

Meera looks to the ground as they keep walking.

MEERA
Was my mom scared of anything else?

WENDOLYN
Hmmm... she was not scared of many
things. But she was terrified of
being a bad mother.

Meera exhales.

MEERA
Well, if she had at least tried a
little longer...

WENDOLYN
I understand your sentiment. But
she had her reasons for not coming
back, Meera. Reasons that were out
of her control.

MEERA
What do you mean--

Then SUDDENLY, Wendolyn STOPS in her tracks.

Meera BUMPS into her.

MEERA (CONT'D)
OW! Why'd you stop?

WENDOLYN
I'm not sure.

MEERA
What?

WENDOLYN
My feet are stuck!

Meera backs up a bit and looks down at Wendolyn's feet...

Which are WRAPPED UP BY SQUIRMING VINES!

MEERA
OH!

Meera HOPS BACK quickly to avoid also getting caught in the vines!

And the vines loop around Wendolyn's ankles to eventually cover her feet entirely.

And then she starts to sink.

WENDOLYN
I'M SINKING!

MEERA
DON'T MOVE!

Meera looks around quickly, scanning the area, looking for anything that can help her...

She notices a long, thick stick, about two meters long, and GRABS IT!

Then she looks up above where Wendolyn is and notices the leafy branches of the trees above her.

Meera stands on a large rock and raises the long stick towards the leaves above Wendolyn...

WENDOLYN
Ummm... What are you doing, Meera?

MEERA
One... second...

Meera REACHES AS HIGH AS SHE CAN, standing on her tiptoes!

Wendolyn SINKS A BIT MORE!

She's now WAIST-DEEP in vines!

But finally, the stick in Meera's hand gets lodged between the branches above Wendolyn, and Meera TUGS the stick to PART the leafy branches, as if she's parting curtains, to reveal...

Moonlight!

Which BEAMS through the opening Meera has created, shining down on Wendolyn and the vines...

And then the vines FREEZE!

Wendolyn blinks. She looks down.

The vines suddenly relax.

And Wendolyn begins to wiggle herself out!

Meera then points the stick toward Wendolyn, and she grabs on to it as Meera slowly PULLS her out!

Wendolyn is freed!

She sits on the ground, breathing quickly.

Meera tosses the stick to the side.

MEERA (CONT'D)

Those were snakevines. They freeze when exposed to moonlight. I've come across them once while hiking.

WENDOLYN

You have?!

MEERA

I've explored a lot of the area outside of Rittledon. I'm kinda familiar with the terrain...

Wendolyn stands up and dusts the grassy vine remnants off of her. She readjusts her white scarf.

WENDOLYN

I would've been a goner if you weren't here. Thank you, Meera.

MEERA

Of course.

WENDOLYN

Well, I think it's time we call it a night. Let's find a place to rest. And from now on, YOU lead!

Meera lets out a chuckle.

And the two of them walk off into the woods, away from the snakevine pit, where the moonlight still beams.

We look up to the moon, which then transitions into...

EXT. RITTLEDON - MEERA'S HOUSE - MORNING

...the sun.

But we are back at Meera's house.

Where Cornelius sits behind a bush anxiously waiting for Ellis.

It seems he's been awake all night... he has eyebags underneath his eyes and he shakes with jitters.

CORNELIUS

Oh gosh... he's been gone all night... I don't know where to look...

Cornelius begins pacing...

CORNELIUS (CONT'D)

I had one job, and if Wendolyn knows I messed up... and oh, I can't let Meera down... I just--

Suddenly, Cornelius hears footsteps.

He runs to hide back in the bushes!

The door of Meera's house opens...

And Ellis walks out in pajamas.

He yawns.

He had been sleeping.

Cornelius lets out a sigh of relief.

Then he topples over from the sudden release of stress...

And falls asleep!

Ellis looks at the bush Cornelius is in, hearing the rustling...

Then he shrugs.

He looks around outside.

ELLIS

Where on Earth is Meera...

EXT. EDGE OF THE OUTER FOREST - DAY

Meera and Wendolyn approach the edge of the Outer Forest. Meera walks in front, with Wendolyn behind her.

The trees are monstrously tall, reaching at least two hundred feet, with trunks meters wide. They look like Redwoods.

This forest is clearly different from the forest that surrounds Rittledon.

The two reach the edge of the Outer Forest, not entering yet.

WENDOLYN
This is it. The Outer Forest.

MEERA
Can we... go in?

WENDOLYN
Technically anyone can go in. But not everyone comes out.

Meera swallows.

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)
But it'll be fine, because you're here!

Wendolyn suddenly comes up behind Meera, puts her hands on her back, and WALKS FORWARD, forcing Meera to also walk forward as basically... a human shield.

MEERA
Wendolyn, I'm not familiar with--

WENDOLYN
Come on! We've made it this far!

And then the two DISAPPEAR into the Outer Forest!

We watch from the outside for a second.

INT. OUTER FOREST - CONTINUOUS

And then we are inside too!

The inside of the Outer Forest is a bit dark, but not in a gloomy way. The leaves from the immense trees block out sunlight, making for lots of shade with glimpses of sun. There's a sense of magic here, with little fireflies floating about and specks of dust glistening in the sparse streams of sunlight...

A little bunny hops about on the ground, nibbling on the grass.

But then the peacefulness is disturbed...

By the sound of Wendolyn still PUSHING MEERA THROUGH THE FOREST!

The bunny turns toward the sound, then HOPS AWAY!

And Meera and Wendolyn CHARGE THROUGH!

MEERA
WENDOLYN! I THINK IT'S OKAY NOW!

Wendolyn's eyes are closed, like she was bracing for the entrance...

MEERA (CONT'D)
WENDOLYYYYYN!

And suddenly Wendolyn OPENS HER EYES and STOPS!

WENDOLYN
Oh my stars we've made it.

The bunny from earlier hides behind a bush, looking at Meera and Wendolyn.

The two of them stand for a moment, taking in the atmosphere of the hidden Outer Forest as visitors to a new land.

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)
It seems we can keep moving... Come on. The village should be nearby.

Wendolyn and Meera walk forward.

Meera notices small details of the forest. The fireflies dashing around her face, the other small bunnies hiding.

She looks behind her as they keep walking forward, watching other woodland creatures peek behind bushes and between leaves...

MEERA
This place is beautiful,
Wendolyn...

No response.

Meera looks in front of her...

And immediately BUMPS into Wendolyn's back, who has stopped!

MEERA (CONT'D)
Wendolyn? Please stop doing that--

Meera looks to what Wendolyn is looking at.

She freezes too.

As they look at a few human-shaped GLOWING GREEN SPIRITS.

WENDOLYN
Tree Spirits...

The Tree Spirits' eyes are all GLOWING ORANGE. They stand there, a bit menacing, wearing loose-fitting bland clothing and holding wooden-carved spears and swords.

Suddenly, there's rustling behind Meera and Wendolyn.

Meera turns around and DOZENS MORE TREE SPIRITS EMERGE.

They surround Meera and Wendolyn in a circle.

And one Tree Spirit, wearing a special helmet of some kind and holding a staff, makes its way to Meera and Wendolyn. It must be the leader.

Meera gets closer to Wendolyn.

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)
(to leader Tree Spirit)
Hi... I'm Wendolyn, and this is
Meera... we don't mean harm... we
are just passing through to see a
friend...

The leader Tree Spirit gets closer...

And it stares at Wendolyn.

The Spirit RAISES ITS STAFF!

And the other Tree Spirits CLOSE IN ON THEM!

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)
We're sorry, we can go back--

Meera locks eyes with the leader...

And the Spirit... tilts his head. Does he... know her?

But it's no use! The other Spirits are JUST ABOUT TO SWARM
MEERA AND WENDOLYN!

UNTIL--

WOMAN
STOP!

And the Spirits FREEZE!

And they all turn their heads to the direction of the voice!

Meera and Wendolyn look...

And a slender woman emerges, mid-50s, wearing a flowing green gown, with long auburn but slightly graying hair.

She gasps.

It's JULIE!

JULIE
Wendolyn?!

WENDOLYN
JULIE!

Julie motions to the Tree Spirits.

JULIE
Everyone! It's okay! They're
friends!

The Tree Spirits slowly back away from Meera and Wendolyn, giving them space.

Julie quickly moves to Wendolyn and hugs her.

JULIE (CONT'D)
I thought you'd come.

WENDOLYN
You did?

Julie then looks to Meera. She smiles, knowing exactly who she is.

JULIE
Yes. Now, hurry with me.

Meera nods.

EXT. OUTER FOREST - SUNSET

Meera, Wendolyn, and Julie keep trekking through the Outer Forest.

Wendolyn and Julie are at the front, chatting together. Meera is behind them.

JULIE
Sorry for the walk. I was out
scouting. Chief duties. But we are
almost there.

Meera looks around...

MEERA

Um... I don't see a village.

Wendolyn and Julie stop walking.

They turn to Meera and smile.

WENDOLYN

Look again.

Wendolyn points upward.

Meera looks up.

Her mouth drops.

Above Meera and Wendolyn, in the trees, is the village!

It exists entirely in the trees, with bridges and treehouses and lights all connecting from tree to tree. The bridges sway a bit. We see glimpses of people walking along the bridges and standing on wooden platforms. They wearing loose flowy outfits that are shades of brown and green and cream. They almost blend in with the trees, bark, and flowers.

And we also see streaks of green lights flying about, almost like fireflies, but bigger and with more life.

JULIE

Welcome to Arbor Village.

Meera still watches one of the little green lights float about...

Until suddenly, the light GLOWS BRIGHTER and TURNS INTO A PERSON! Tree Spirits in action.

Meera's eyes widen.

Julie heads towards one of the large trees that holds up Arbor Village, and Meera and Wendolyn follow. It looks like a normal tree, but when she presses on a specific spot, a door-like entryway opens up, revealing a spiral staircase inside.

Meera is mesmerized, and Wendolyn smiles.

WENDOLYN

Fascinating what magic can do,
isn't it?

Meera nods.

They all go up the spiral staircase.

INT. ARBOR VILLAGE - JULIE'S RESIDENCE - NIGHT

Meera, Wendolyn, and Julie are seated on comfy floor pillows for dinner in a cozy wooden home. Dark wood is illuminated by small lanterns and lights that scatter throughout the room. Everyone eats delicious colorful food filled with wild herbs and vegetables. Meera is amazed.

Julie puts her silverware down, finishing up her plate.

JULIE

I'm sorry, Wendy. I haven't seen Lily since she came by asking about the Mountain Spirits ten years ago.

MEERA

Are the Mountain Spirits like the Tree Spirits we saw?

JULIE

Kind of. There are different spirits for different elements of nature. There's River Spirits, Sand Spirits, Ocean Spirits... they exist all over the world, everywhere. But they can shapeshift into humans, so sometimes you can't tell a human from a spirit.

MEERA

Do they help you guys?

JULIE

Yes! If you take care of a spirit's home, they are happy to help you.

MEERA

That's so cool.

Julie smiles.

JULIE

The Mountain Spirits are a very elusive batch, and their sole purpose is to protect the Mountains. Sometimes they're referred to as the Protectors.

Julie pauses...

JULIE (CONT'D)
Actually, I'm reminded of an old saying... "when the soul returns home, the Protectors will emerge from stone..."

Julie realizes something.

She turns to Wendolyn suddenly.

JULIE (CONT'D)
Wendy. I think your best bet is to find a Mountain Spirit. They'll also be looking for the Soulstone, and you could work together.

Meera sits back, amazed at the knowledge.

WENDOLYN
Do you know any Mountain Spirits, Julie?

JULIE
I haven't encountered one in over a decade. I really wish I could help more. I'm sorry.

WENDOLYN
Don't apologize. Thank you for the food and for letting us stay the night. We'll figure out where to go next.

Wendolyn begins to stand up.

Julie notices Wendolyn is cradling her bandaged hand.

JULIE
Is your hand alright?

WENDOLYN
My hand? Oh, yes, I'll be--

JULIE
Nonsense. Come, I have a healer. I'll bring you to her.

WENDOLYN
Oh that'll be alright--OH!

Julie cuts her off and GRABS her arm, dragging her away to be healed.

Meera can't help but chuckle.

EXT. RITTLEDON - MEERA'S HOUSE - NIGHT

We visit Ellis for a bit.

Ellis sits at the log outside his house, waiting. His cane leans against him. Same old, same old.

His right leg, his only good leg, is shaking up and down from anxiety.

Then, in the bushes... a noise.

Ellis looks up toward the sound.

ELLIS

Meera?

No response.

He shakes his head--no, of course not.

He sighs.

ELLIS (CONT'D)

Where is she?

Then, more noises from the bush...

And Cornelius JUMPS out!

CORNELIUS

I'M AWAKE! I'M AWAKE!

He stands there, an adorable little deer.

Ellis didn't really process that Cornelius talked...

ELLIS

Oh, how cute!

CORNELIUS

Cute? I am NOT cute!

A beat.

Ellis blinks.

Cornelius blinks.

Then...

ELLIS

And it talks! What joy.

Cornelius blinks again.

CORNELIUS
Why aren't you scared! Be scared!

Ellis lets out a small laugh.

ELLIS
There's only one person I know who
would have talking pets.

CORNELIUS
I am NOT a pet, I am a free--wait,
what?

ELLIS
You're Wendolyn's.

Cornelius slumps a bit.

ELLIS (CONT'D)
I sense you have some things to
tell me.

And Cornelius smiles shyly.

EXT. ARBOR VILLAGE - NIGHT

Meera walks around Arbor Village, watching all the bridges
and platforms bustle with people and spirits.

Then she notices a young girl...

She stands alone, leaning her chin against a wooden handrail,
looking down at something. She can't be any older than 10.

Her hair is dark brown, long, and sways loosely in the wind.
It blends in with her loose dark brown dress. If she stood
still enough near a tree trunk you just might miss her.

Meera walks over beside her. The girl doesn't look over.

Meera looks down where the girl looks and sees a group of
kids playing with paper airplanes made out of deep green
leaves.

MEERA
Have you ever made paper airplanes
before?

The girl jumps a bit, caught off guard by Meera's presence.
She looks to her with big hazel eyes.

MEERA (CONT'D)
Sorry, didn't mean to scare you!

The girl holds onto the handrail with her two hands, tightening her grip from anxiety.

MEERA (CONT'D)
It's okay. Here. Wait.

The young girl tilts her head to the side, showing confusion.

Meera reaches above her for a handful of green leaves from a branch that dips just above the two girls' heads.

She pulls the leaves off and brings them down to the girl.

MEERA (CONT'D)
I'll show you!

Meera proceeds to take one of the leaves and expertly folds it into an airplane. The girl watches, mesmerized at every move.

After a bit of folding...

MEERA (CONT'D)
Ta-da!

Meera holds out a leafy paper airplane!

MEERA (CONT'D)
Wanna try?

The girl takes a leaf and, with the look of extreme focus, folds the leaf in the ways she saw Meera do so.

With quick cuts between the folding and the intense focus on her face, the girl...

Creates one of the flimsiest looking paper airplanes ever.

Meera holds back a laugh.

MEERA (CONT'D)
Pretty good for a first plane!

The young girl smiles.

MEERA (CONT'D)
Now, take your plane...

Meera pulls her arm back, and aims toward the horizon in view...

MEERA (CONT'D)

And throw it!

And she LAUNCHES her plane!

It glides for a second, does a slight loop... then points vertically downward and crashes headfirst onto a wooden platform.

It stands upright on its head for a second.

Then it falls over defeatedly.

The girl lets out a small laugh.

MEERA (CONT'D)

Okay, well, that happens sometimes.
Doesn't matter. Now you go!

The girl follows suit, bringing her arm back, focusing on the distance ahead of her, and LAUNCHES her plane!

And somehow, miraculously, that flimsy, crumbly plane glides and glides, loops and loops, until it elegantly lands on a bridge.

MEERA (CONT'D)

Wow. Way to make me look bad.

The girl smiles, looking at her plane on the bridge.

Then, a few young kids run by and pick up her plane excitedly, taking it.

She sighs. Meera notices.

MEERA (CONT'D)

Are those your friends?

YOUNG GIRL

I don't have any friends.

MEERA

That's not true!

The girl tilts her head in confusion.

MEERA (CONT'D)

You have me.

The young girl smiles.

MEERA (CONT'D)

What's your name?

A bit of hesitant silence, then...

YOUNG GIRL

Nilā.

MEERA

Nice to meet you, Nilā! I'm Meera.

Nilā, still immensely shy, but desperate to make conversation with her new friend...

NILA

Are you new here?

MEERA

Kind of. I'm visiting for a bit.

Nilā slumps a bit.

NILA

So you're going to leave?

Meera freezes for a split-second. Then she reorients herself and immediately replies:

MEERA

Well, yes, technically, but I'll be back!

NILA

Really?

MEERA

Absolutely. I just have to finish a trip. When I'm done, I'll come back, and we can fly more airplanes together. How about that?

Nilā finally lets out a genuine smile. Her teeth shine a bit, and her big eyes light up.

Meera smiles back.

INT. ARBOR VILLAGE - JULIE'S RESIDENCE - MORNING

Meera sleeps soundly in a cozy guest room.

But then... mechanic rumbling creeps its way closer.

She wakes up at the sound, which booms much like an earthquake.

She looks out her window, dazed and sleepy. Then she gasps at what she sees.

An army is making its way towards Arbor Village.

MEERA

Oh no!

Meera BOLTS out of her room and runs down the spiral stairs.

MEERA (CONT'D)

Wendolyn! Julie!

Suddenly Meera BUMPS into Wendolyn.

WENDOLYN

Oh!

MEERA

Wendolyn! Did you see--

WENDOLYN

Yes, I did, and Julie did too.
She's already on the ground.

MEERA

What's she going to do?

WENDOLYN

In all honesty, I do not know what
she can do.

Wendolyn looks out a window.

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)

Mining for All must know we are
trying to find the Soulstone.

Loud noises echo from outside.

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)

Come with me.

Wendolyn suddenly takes off to descend the trees through the tree trunk spiral staircase. Meera follows.

EXT. ARBOR VILLAGE - MORNING

Wendolyn and Meera appear from the spiral tree staircase. Dozens of villagers also descend from spiral tree staircases throughout the entire village.

MEERA

Why is everyone getting on the ground? Wouldn't they be safe in the village?

Then, appearing from behind Meera and Wendolyn:

JULIE

Not if Mining for All plans on attacking.

Meera and Wendolyn turn to see Julie, her face stressed.

MEERA

Attacking?

JULIE

You two stay back here.

Julie bolts through the crowds of people to get toward the side where Mining for All are entering.

Meera, while watching Julie leave, notices children running down the spiral tree staircases, being dragged by the hands of their fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, friends. Faces of confusion as they all evacuate, leaving their only home behind.

People spilling out of the trunks of trees like overflowing sap.

Then, Meera sees Nila.

She makes eye contact with her.

Meera catches the hurt in Nila's glossy and bewildered eyes for a mere second.

Meera steps forward. But she stops when she hears a crunch below her feet. She looks down.

Under her foot, squashed and torn, is Nila's leafy plane.

Meera takes a deep, shaky breath.

Then the urge to act seeps through her entire body.

She runs!

WENDOLYN

Meera?! Wait!

Wendolyn runs after her, albeit slow and coughing. She clutches her chest, but keeps running.

Meera runs and threads through the villagers, sprinting and sprinting, breathless and fearless and scared all at the same time.

She SPRINTS past Julie, who notices.

JULIE

Meera?!

EXT. OUTER FOREST - MORNING

Meera runs through the Outer Forest, following the sound of the ground's rumbling and the clash of machines.

She finally sees Mining for All's army.

Lines and lines of giant tank-like machines roll their way through the forest. Now that Meera is closer, she can get a better look at them.

They glisten silver, brown, and green. Sticking out from all sides around each vehicle are giant rotating circular chainsaws. These chainsaws are cutting down the entire forest, and have already done immense damage.

Meera realizes what will happen, and speaks with a panicked, rushed exhale.

MEERA

They're going to cut down Arbor Village.

They get closer.

She RUNS BACK TO ARBOR VILLAGE.

EXT. ARBOR VILLAGE - MORNING

Meera makes it back to the edge of the village, where a number of the evacuating villagers see both Meera and the army incoming.

She stops at the edge of the village, not going in any further. She turns to face the army, who were right behind her.

And suddenly, rising from the centermost tank is Mr. Xavier.

Meera makes eye contact with him and narrows her eyes.

He notices and smiles.

He raises a hand, and the army stops.

Mr. Xavier speaks to Meera.

MR. ZAVIER
You're in my way, miss Meera.

Meera freezes up a bit.

MEERA
How do you know my name?

MR. ZAVIER
Let's just say your mother was... a
friend of mine.

A surge of rage rushes through Meera.

MEERA
You have no right to be here.

MR. ZAVIER
We'll leave if you and your witchy
friend hand yourselves in.

MEERA
We won't be doing that.

Mr. Xavier sighs and shrugs.

MR. ZAVIER
So be it.

He raises his hand. The army moves forward.

He yells over the loud sounds of the machines.

MR. ZAVIER (CONT'D)
It's either you two or Arbor
Village. Which will it be?

Meera stands in the way of the army, a mixture of stubborn
immobility and paralysis.

What does she do? What does she do?

Her eyes dart back and forth between all the tanks and the
chainsaws and the vehicles. They get closer, and closer, and
the sound of the chainsaws are ear-pounding.

But suddenly--

Wendolyn JUMPS in front of Meera...

MEERA

WENDOLYN!

Meera TRIES TO HOLD WENDOLYN BACK!

But Wendolyn HOLDS OUT HER RIGHT, BANDAGED, WOUNDED HAND...

And yells a SPELL!

WENDOLYN

HERESAH!

STREAMS OF BLUE MAGIC, reminiscent of the beauty that is
AURORA BOREALIS, ERUPT from Wendolyn's hand!

The army STOPS out of confusion! Mr. Xavier SHIELDS his eyes!

And the magical lights COAT THE ENTIRE ARMY IN A SHINING BLUE
GLOW, which STOPS THEM FROM MOVING ANY FURTHER, FREEZING THEM
IN MOTION!

They try to move forward, but FAIL, as if they are trying to
OPPOSE A MAGNETIC FIELD.

Wendolyn stands with her hand outstretched, her face writhing
with strength and pain. The blight spreads up her arm.

Meera watches ASTONISHED, still holding on to Wendolyn. She
STARES at the magic emitting from Wendolyn's hand, magic that
twinkles like a whole galaxy that exists just from Wendolyn's
strength.

Mr. Xavier raises his arm, impatient!

MR. ZAVIER

WHY HAVE YOU ALL STOPPED? FORWARD!
NOW!

The army tries to move forward but CAN'T!

Wendolyn YELLS at Mr. Xavier:

WENDOLYN

NOBODY...

The stream of magic BRIGHTENS a bit...

The army BEGINS to somehow inch closer, the circular
chainsaws almost REACHING WENDOLYN...

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)

...TOUCHES MEERA!

As soon as the infinite row of chainsaws almost touches Wendolyn...

A BLINDING WHITE LIGHT EXPLODES!

Meera CROUCHES DOWN to shield herself!

The machines are HIT by an IMMENSE GUST OF FORCE!

And they SCATTER and FLY BACK! Doing so with such ease that they look like a child's plastic toys toppling over from wind.

Tanks LAY on the ground, damaged and defenseless. Chainsaws litter the dirt.

Meera stands up slowly and watches the remains of the army retreat. She's ecstatic!

MEERA

Wendolyn, Wendolyn, you did it!
That was insane!

But then she turns to Wendolyn...

Who stands dazed, blighted arm still out, and the bandages from around her hand fall off to reveal...

Her entire hand and arm is blackened and raw.

Meera gasps.

Wendolyn falls over.

Meera just barely catches her, and lays her on the ground. Meera gets down on her knees.

MEERA (CONT'D)

Wendolyn?

Wendolyn moves slightly, and gasps for air, but is unresponsive, and the blight goes up her arm to her shoulder.

MEERA (CONT'D)

No no no no...

Wendolyn coughs harshly. Meera looks up and around her and calls out desperately for help.

MEERA (CONT'D)

SOMEONE HELP! PLEASE!

WENDOLYN

Meera...

Meera looks down at Wendolyn. Her voice is raspy and breathless.

MEERA

Wendolyn?

Wendolyn COUGHS AGAIN and starts to close her eyes.

MEERA (CONT'D)

No, no, Wendolyn, stay with me,
please! Hold on, I'll get help! I-

As soon as Meera tries to get up, Wendolyn GRASPS her hand with her own BLIGHTED hand.

WENDOLYN

Here...

Wendolyn points to the white, thin, silk scarf around her neck. The blight is beginning to reach it.

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)

Take it.

Meera listens, and takes Wendolyn's scarf off her.

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)

That scarf was your mother's. She
gave it to me before she left.

Meera holds tighter onto the scarf. The blight moves up Wendolyn's neck...

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)

Magic offers great power. But I
think ordinary objects are just as
powerful. That scarf...

Wendolyn COUGHS...

WENDOLYN (CONT'D)

I wore it over my chest for years.
In a way, Lily was always
protecting my heart. Funny, isn't
it?

Wendolyn brings her blighted hand to Meera's face, where she begins to cry.

MEERA

Wendolyn. Please. I'm not strong
enough to do this alone.

WENDOLYN

Oh, Meera. You are your mother's
daughter. You are stronger than you
know.

Wendolyn smiles weakly.

Then her hand falls, and her eyes close, and the little bit
of magic that remained in that wildly witch seeps from her
chest in the form of blue streaks of light, going into the
sky.

Meera watches as the magic flies upward, into the atmosphere,
far far away, and suddenly, a twinkle in the sky, which stays
there, like a star being born, death into life.

EXT. ARBOR VILLAGE - SUNSET

Back in Arbor Village, the night sky is darkened, and the
atmosphere is somber.

Still on the ground, villagers, holding lanterns and flowers,
walk to the center of the village in the manner of a wake. In
the center of the village is the largest tree, its trunk
multiple meters wide, and reaching tall to the sky.

People place flowers at the base of the tree's trunk. Dozens
and dozens of flowers grace the tree.

A piece of Wendolyn's white scarf lies entangled with the
flowers.

Julie stands, grieving. Meera stands in front of her, closest
to the tree. Her eyes are shiny from crying and tired.

Tied around her wrist is a torn piece of the white scarf.

She left half for Wendolyn, half for herself.

Then, Nila walks to Meera's side. She hugs her.

Meera wipes away one of her tears.

NILA

I'm sorry.

MEERA

Thank you.

Nila takes Meera's hand.

NILA

What are you going to do now?

MEERA

I have... to continue my trip. I have no idea where, though. I was told to find the Soulstone, but I need to contact a Mountain Spirit to do that...

Silence.

Then...

NILA

I can help you.

MEERA

Really? How?

NILA

I know where you can meet a Mountain Spirit.

Meera's eyes light up.

NILA (CONT'D)

I met one at Crescent Pond. It's at the top of a mountain nearby. It's not too far, but the hike is a bit rough.

MEERA

Could you really take me? Would you do that for me?

NILA

Friends... help each other, right?

Meera lets out a sad smile.

MEERA

Always.

NILA

Then I will help you.

Meera takes a deep breath in.

Hope shines through her eyes.

MEERA

Thank you, Nila. Let's go.

INT. MINING FOR ALL'S ARMY BASE CAMP - MR. ZAVIER'S TENT - NIGHT

At the army base camp a little outside of Rittledon, where dozens of tents are set up and the few remaining machines lie, Mr. Xavier angrily paces around inside his tent, holding an empty can of soda.

Davis walks in, frightened as always.

DAVIS

Mr.--

MR. ZAVIER

That little TWERP!

Mr. Xavier THROWS his can of soda at Davis and he comedically DUCKS just in time to avoid it.

MR. ZAVIER (CONT'D)

If that WITCH hadn't stopped me, we
would've known where the SOULSTONE
IS BY NOW!

Mr. Xavier continues pacing around and thinking.

DAVIS

W-well, sir, the witch is--is dead.

Mr. Xavier stops pacing.

He takes a deep breath.

MR. ZAVIER

So that just leaves Meera.

Mr. Xavier doesn't speak for a moment...

MR. ZAVIER (CONT'D)

Davis!

Davis, who had been standing there the whole time, jumps slightly, in fear of what may happen.

DAVIS

Yes!

MR. ZAVIER

Send the new mining equipment to
Rittledon. We must flatten the
mountains. Now.

Davis gulps.

DAVIS
I don't know if they're ready--

MR. ZAVIER
I DON'T CARE! Send them NOW!

Davis bolts out of the tent.

Mr. Xavier clenches his fist.

MR. ZAVIER (CONT'D)
Forget about the Soulstone. I'll
crush the mountains myself.

EXT. OUTER FOREST - MORNING

Meera and Nila trek through the Outer Forest. Meera carries Wendolyn's same backpack on her back.

They walk through leafy trees and branches.

And they get to a deep river that's uncrossable.

Meera surveys the area. The river is long with wild rapids, and there's nowhere to go.

MEERA
(to Nila)
How have you gone to Crescent Pond
with this in the way?

Nila walks towards the river, standing on the edge.

MEERA (CONT'D)
Nila, be careful!

Suddenly, Nila closes her eyes and raises two arms towards the river.

Meera tilts her head in confusion.

Then, the ground slightly shakes...

And there's gurgling and bubbling from the river...

And, with weak but strong-minded magic, an AGED STONE BRIDGE
RISES FROM THE RIVER!

Slowly but surely, and spilling water everywhere, onto the outside of the river as well.

Meera's mouth drops.

Nila's eyes are closed and she is focusing hard.

And once the bridge has risen clearly from the water and is walkable, it locks into place.

Nila turns around and smiles.

MEERA (CONT'D)
You know magic too?!

NILA
A little.

MEERA
Who taught--you know what, I'm just gonna accept it at this point.

The two of them cross the stone bridge safely.

Once they cross to the other side, the bridge sinks back down.

MEERA (CONT'D)
Wow.

NILA
I can teach you if you want! It's not as hard as it seems.

MEERA
Well, that's just because you're a very talented young girl.

Nila smiles.

Suddenly, the sky darkens. Meera looks up--it's cloudy and the winds are picking up.

MEERA (CONT'D)
How much closer to the pond?

NILA
It's at the top of this mountain.
Not too far.

Nila points to a mountain that starts in front of them.

It starts to rain. Thunder cracks in the distance.

MEERA
Let's hurry.

EXT. RITTLEDON - MAIN STREET - AFTERNOON

Ellis briskly walks, cane in hand and Cornelius trotting alongside him, in the center of town in Rittledon.

Cornelius gets almost trampled by other people as he tries to keep up with Ellis. He's unsure and out of breath.

CORNELIUS

I'm not so sure about this plan,
big guy... can't we just keep
waiting for Meera and Wendolyn to
come back?

ELLIS

No. I'm not waiting any more.
Something is wrong.

CORNELIUS

How do you know that?

ELLIS

I just do.

They end up at the entrance of a large white tent. The infirmary for those who were hurt in the mine collapse.

CORNELIUS

What, you know magic, too?

ELLIS

Something like that.

Cornelius tilts his head.

ELLIS (CONT'D)

Stay out here.

Cornelius nods. He lays down near the front of the infirmary.

INT. RITTLEDON - INFIRMARY - CONTINUOUS

Ellis walks into the infirmary and looks around. Men all sit and lay down, bandages on their heads, legs in casts, arms in slings. There's only two or three nurses caring for dozens of people.

ELLIS

I wonder where she would be...

A nurse quickly walks by Ellis. He stops her suddenly.

ELLIS (CONT'D)

Excuse me, is Anisera anywhere nearby?

NURSE

Anisera? She'll be here in the evening. If you need her, you can wait around a bit.

ELLIS

Thank you.

The nurse nods and continues on.

Ellis looks around. Then he notices Nate, the only young boy in the infirmary. He wears a baseball cap with a team logo on it.

Ellis walks towards him.

Nate notices. He's curious--does he know this man?

ELLIS (CONT'D)

Hey, kiddo, I like your hat!

Nate reaches up to his cap with his free hand and smiles a bit.

NATE

Thanks.

ELLIS

Mind if I take a seat?

NATE

Sure.

Ellis sits down on a chair next to Nate's shabby bed. He settles down and rests his cane, exhaling. Nate notices.

Ellis can see Nate is curious about his cane, but does not wish to pry.

ELLIS

Had an accident, and now I've got a funky leg forever. My daughter works for us.

NATE

Is she in the mines?

ELLIS

Oh, no, not at all. Meera just works at the general store.

Nate sits upright.

NATE

Meera?

ELLIS

Yep. That's her. Do you know her?

NATE

She helped me one time.

ELLIS

Really?

NATE

Yeah. At the store. I needed medicine for my little brother, and my mom was out of town, so I didn't know what to get. And I had no money. Meera let me have me some medicine for free.

Ellis smiles.

ELLIS

Did it help your brother?

NATE

Yes! He was fine the next day.

ELLIS

I'm glad.

Ellis looks at Nate's arm.

ELLIS (CONT'D)

I can tell you're a tough one. You get that in the mines?

Nate looks at his arm.

NATE

Yeah.

Ellis breathes sharply.

ELLIS

Don't worry. If you need any more medicine, just ask Meera! But don't tell anyone I said that.

Nate chuckles.

ELLIS (CONT'D)
What's your name, kid?

NATE
Nate.

ELLIS
Nice to meet you, Nate. I'm Ellis.
Care if I keep you company while I
wait for someone?

NATE
Not at all!

Ellis smiles.

EXT. OUTER FOREST - AFTERNOON

Meera and Nila sit in a cave to hide from the thunderstorm
that rages outside.

A small fire is lit.

MEERA
This isn't good. We're being slowed
down.

Nila sits with her knees to her chest, twiddling her fingers,
looking around. She seems hypervigilant.

When thunder cracks, she jumps a little.

MEERA (CONT'D)
Don't like storms?

NILA
Nuh-uh.

Meera looks around. All that is in the cave are rocks.

She gets an idea...

She gets up and gathers rocks of various sizes together.

Nila watches, confused but curious.

Meera brings a bunch of rocks back in front of the firepit,
holding them all together with her arms.

She then begins to balance three rocks on top of each other;
biggest one on the bottom, a medium one in the middle, and a
small one on top.

She then takes a stick and carves a little smiley face on the smallest rock at the top.

MEERA

Ta-da!

Nila stares...

MEERA (CONT'D)

It's a snowman!

Nila lets out a small smile.

NILA

But that's not snow.

MEERA

Okay, yeah. Well, a... rockman?

Nila laughs a little.

Meera smiles. Success!

Nila looks at the other rocks beside Meera. She stares...

She holds her arm out, palm to the rocks, and focuses...

Suddenly, three rocks of various sizes float from the pile!

And they float up above Meera, and down to Nila's side, gently and gracefully settling themselves on top of each other to make another rockman.

MEERA (CONT'D)

Wow.

NILA

You should try!

MEERA

That's very kind of you, Nila, but
I don't think I have a magical bone
in my body.

Meera looks at the pile of rocks.

She looks down at her right hand. She remember's Wendolyn's blight.

MEERA (CONT'D)

(to herself)

Besides, what if I mess up...

NILA

Hmm?

MEERA

Oh, nothing!

Silence...

Then Meera speaks.

MEERA (CONT'D)

Do your parents know you're out here?

NILA

Um... I ran away. A while ago.

MEERA

Oh... really?

NILA

Yeah. I'm not from Arbor Village.

Meera's face drops a bit.

But she manages to prevent herself from an emotional outburst. Where instead, she simply asks:

MEERA

Why'd you run away?

NILA

My mom thought I was fragile. I wanted to prove her wrong by surviving on my own for a while.

Meera listens, and breathes in for a moment.

MEERA

Anyone can survive on their own. The question is if you want to.

Nila listens, and pauses.

But then she asks...

NILA

What about your parents?

MEERA

Oh. My dad is back home, and my mom... left a long time ago. When I was little.

NILA
Oh. I'm sorry.

MEERA
No, it's fine!

Meera looks out to the rain.

MEERA (CONT'D)
I'm sure your mom misses you.

Nila looks to the rain too. They both watch for a moment.

Then lightning strikes.

And when Meera looks up to Nila... when the flash of light
glows through the cave...

The cave wall starts to crumble a bit.

Meera quickly stands up.

MEERA (CONT'D)
Let's go. Now.

Meera holds Nila's hand to bring her up. They leave
immediately, covering their heads from the rain with arms and
the hoods of their jackets.

The rockmen sit, swaying in the wind a little.

Then the cave COLLAPSES on to them.

INT. RITTLEDON - INFIRMARY - EVENING

Outside of the infirmary, Cornelius naps soundly.

Inside, Ellis sits in the same chair next to Nate's bed. He's
also asleep. Nate must have left a while ago.

The nurse Ellis spoke with earlier walks toward him. She
gently tries to wake him up...

NURSE
Um, sir?

Ellis then jolts awake.

ELLIS
OH! Sorry about that...

NURSE
It's okay. Anisera is here.

ELLIS

Oh! Good!

Ellis gets up slowly, grounding himself with his cane.

Then suddenly, Nate runs in excitedly toward Ellis!

ELLIS (CONT'D)

Hi there, sport!

NATE

I didn't know you know my mom!

ELLIS

I know your mom?

Ellis looks up and sees the woman walking toward them.

He stops talking. The woman stops walking. She widens her eyes.

ELLIS (CONT'D)

I know your mom...

WOMAN

ELLIS?

ELLIS

Hello, Anisera--

ANISERA (47), tall with lean muscle, wearing a militant-style outfit with a badge on her chest, and hair in a long ponytail...

Turns in place and SPRINTS the other way.

ELLIS (CONT'D)

Oh dear.

Ellis briskly walks toward Anisera with his cane in hand. Nate trails after, and runs up to his mom.

ELLIS (CONT'D)

Anisera, please, just--

ANISERA

I said I am NEVER working with you again!

ELLIS

That was YEARS ago!

ANISERA
I don't care! You gave me enough
headaches to last a lifetime!

NATE
Mom! Please!

Nate RUNS in front of his mom and stops her in her tracks.

NATE (CONT'D)
He wants to help Meera!

Anisera freezes.

She looks at Ellis.

ANISERA
Is Meera okay?

Ellis catches up to her.

ELLIS
Last I know, she was. But it's been
a few days and I've heard nothing.
And I'm worried something is wrong.
And I thought, since you have
authority with the mines... which,
congratulations, by the way, I had
no idea--

ANISERA
Ellis, can you get to the point,
please?

ELLIS
Either Mining for All is after
Meera, or they're going to head
here. Either way, we need to hold
our own.

A slight pause...

ELLIS (CONT'D)
And they might bring that mining
equipment Lily warned us about.

Anisera sighs.

ANISERA
Okay. What do you need?

ELLIS
All the coal we have.

Anisera raises an eyebrow.

As we cut, we hear the rising noise of chattering crowds and high-energy movement...

EXT. RITTLEDON - MINING SITE - CONTINUOUS

We follow Anisera and Ellis as they walk quickly through crowds of miners, who all are shouting and moving huge carts and buckets of coal. Cornelius walks alongside Ellis's feet.

ANISERA

I need everyone to move all the coal to the far end of town now!

Anisera and Ellis stop walking as hundreds of miners move around them.

ANISERA (CONT'D)

So you said to dump all the coal at the edge of town...

ELLIS

And I'll take it from there.

ANISERA

What do you mean you'll take it from there?

Ellis shifts his cane, now having both hands rest on it.

ELLIS

Lily left me instructions.

ANISERA

Oh boy.

Ellis smiles. The two of them watch as miners passionately move coal. They clearly are enjoying this more than mining.

ANISERA (CONT'D)

Lily would've loved the sight of this.

ELLIS

Miners rebelling and getting rid of coal?

Ellis takes a deep breath.

ELLIS (CONT'D)

Yeah, she would've loved this.

Anisera gets closer, and speaks in a hushed tone...

ANISERA

So does this also mean what Lily
said about the mountains was true?

Ellis looks down at his cane.

Anisera inhales sharply.

ANISERA (CONT'D)

We're wasting all of our resources
based off an old legend Lily dug
up.

ELLIS

We're not wasting anything. We're
still using the coal. Just in a way
that helps us. Something we are not
used to.

ANISERA

You know, if Mining for All finds
out I facilitated this, I'm gonna
be in big trouble--

ELLIS

It's going to be fine.

Anisera sighs.

ANISERA

How do I always get roped into your
crazy plans?!

Ellis lets out a small, mischievous smile.

He looks on as the miners transport coal. As he steps his
cane forward to move, when his cane hits the ground...

EXT. OUTER FOREST - CRESCENT POND - SUNSET

...thunder strikes near Meera and Nila.

The two of them trek uphill through dark rain and wind, with
Meera holding tight onto Nila's hand.

Meera looks up ahead and notices the top of the mountain is
very close.

She grips tighter onto Nila and pulls her along.

MEERA

Come on! Almost there!

Nila braces herself.

And finally, when they break through leafy branches...

They see they have made it to the top.

It's flat, with fewer trees than the rest of the mountain, but a couple large ones scatter the area. The rain has died down a bit, turning into light rain.

And Meera finally sees it: Crescent Pond, shaped as a crescent moon. It reflects the white and gray storming clouds above, and raindrops bounce off the clear water.

Meera's energy rapidly boosts.

MEERA (CONT'D)

We made it, Nila!

Meera runs to the pond. Nila, however, does not look as excited as expected.

Meera looks into the pond and sees her reflection in the slightly still waters.

She then looks up and around, curious but impatient.

MEERA (CONT'D)

I don't see any Mountain Spirits, though.

NILA

Ummm...

Nila walks over to the pond, looking down into it. She speaks quieter than usual, and slow.

NILA (CONT'D)

I think... they come from the water.

Meera's eyes widen a bit. Despite Nila's uncertain tone, Meera takes her word.

MEERA

Oh! Really? How do we let them know we're here?

Nila then reaches her hand and dips it into Crescent Pond.

Meera watches her hand as the water starts to bubble and swirl, totally entranced...

Light starts to emanate from the surface...

But then--

Nila takes her hand out.

NILA

I...

Nila backs away from the pond.

MEERA

Nila... what's wrong?

Nila stares at the ground.

Meera looks at Nila's hands, which are unscathed.

MEERA (CONT'D)

How have you not hurt yourself yet?

NILA

What?

MEERA

With magic that powerful. And
you're so young and little.
Wendolyn said witches often injure
themselves if they use power that
is too strong for them...

Meera stops...

She looks to Nila's face, and sees her eyes.

They shift color a bit, from their usual brown...

To a non-human gold.

MEERA (CONT'D)

What are you not telling me, Nila?

Nila doesn't respond. There's an awkward silence...

NILA

If I tell you the truth, will you
be angry?

Meera's eyes soften.

MEERA

Of course not. Friends don't get angry.

Nila takes in a deep breath.

NILA

I'm... I'm a spirit.

MEERA

Are you a--

NILA

I'm the youngest Mountain Spirit, yes. But I don't know where the Soulstone is. I was hoping a stronger spirit could help you. But they... aren't here.

MEERA

Where are they?

NILA

I guess they're deep in the mountains, keeping them stable.

MEERA

Then why are you out here alone?

NILA

Well... I did... run away. I wanted to prove I could live as a human for a while, because all the spirits who had turned into humans said it was difficult.

The breeze dies down, silencing swaying leaves.

NILA (CONT'D)

But the thing is, I--

MEERA

Nila, just come find the Soulstone with me, and when we return it--

NILA

I can't turn back into a spirit!

Silence.

MEERA

What?

NILA

I don't know how to turn back into a spirit. I still have my magic, but it's weaker than usual. I can't show up as a human to everyone, not after running away.

MEERA

Nila, don't you think your family would love you no matter what shape you take?

NILA

You haven't met my mom.

Meera chuckles.

MEERA

Nila, I'm sure your mother would love to see you again. Please.

Meera reaches out her hand toward Nila.

Nila holds out her hand.

And as they just almost touch in slow-motion...

The ground below Nila...

CRACKS.

Meera notices.

The crack INSTANTLY LENGTHENS...

And the earth BEGINS TO SPLIT UNDERNEATH NILA'S FEET!

Nila has ONE LEG ON EACH SIDE OF THE CRACK!

The ground is RAPIDLY SEPARATING!

MEERA (CONT'D)

NILA NO!

But Meera immediately JUMPS TOWARD NILA AND PUSHES HER OFF THE CRACKED EARTH!

We see Nila STUMBLES BACKWARD TO SAFETY!

Our focus stays on Nila...

She reorients herself for a second, and looks back to Meera and sees...

MEERA IS DANGLING FROM THE EDGE OF A NEWLY MADE CHASM!

Her hands are GRIPPING the cliffside, and a CHASM, a few meters wide and HUNDREDS of feet deep, envelopes Meera in darkness.

Crescent Pond was SPLIT in the chaos, and the water from the pond POURS INTO THE CHASM.

NILA

MEERA!

MEERA

NILA! GET TO RITTLEDON AND--

The earth Meera was grasping on to CRUMBLES.

And she FALLS.

Down and down into an abyss.

NILA

MEERA!!

Nila breathes heavily. She stares down the abyss, and looks to the remnants of Crescent Pond. There is no way for Nila to go after Meera.

Nila looks out to the distance toward Rittledon.

Her eyes widen.

Far in the horizon, making its way toward Rittledon, is Mining for All's mountain-flattening machinery.

Heading straight for the edge of town that Meera lives on, toward the entrance to the valley that leads you to Rittledon.

NILA (CONT'D)

Oh no, oh no, oh no...

Suddenly the mountain begins to SHAKE AGAIN, signaling more crumbling to come.

Nila immediately gets up and tries to keep her balance.

She closes her eyes and breathes in deep, standing still, feet firmly rooted in the ground as it shakes beneath her.

We zoom in to her face...

Then suddenly, her eyes OPEN, and they are GLOWING YELLOW.

She begins to GRACEFULLY FLOAT UPWARD.

And her body begins to glow a soft, ethereal yellow. Her hair floats up and sways as if she's underwater.

Her outfit is the same, and she looks human, but she glows and flies like a spirit.

Nila looks at her hands and arms, almost in disbelief.

Then, she smiles.

And with no time to waste, she FLIES to Rittledon!

We are left behind, watching the rest of the mountain collapse, looking down beneath the chasm.

And we transition from the darkness of the chasm over to...

EXT. RITTLEDON - NEAR MEERA'S HOUSE - NIGHT

...the darkness of heavy mounds of coal being dumped near the entrance to Rittledon.

The weather is foggy, the horizon unclear.

Mounds and mounds of coal are dumped all over the entrance to the valley, connecting, making a lined barrier between the outside and inside, just a short distance from Meera's house.

Hundreds of miners stand and sit in the dip of the valley, waiting for what's to come.

The mountaintop removal machines that we saw in the factory move slowly toward the valley, gliding on wheels.

Ellis sits on his usual log in front of his house, cane beside him, waiting. Cornelius sits next to him. Anisera stands in front of them with binoculars.

We see the machines through Anisera's binoculars. They're massive, and they're infinite.

Anisera lowers her binoculars. She turns back to Ellis.

ANISERA

You were right. So now what?

Ellis gets up and walks toward the immense barrier of coal.

The machines get closer and closer. We get another good look at them: shiny and new, shades of green and brown and bronze that glisten threateningly underneath cloud and fog.

We see the drivers inside the bodies of the machines that sit close to the ground. The drivers are dressed all the same in head to toe black, driving with mindless determination, like they were built for this and nothing else.

They inch closer, picking up speed...

And Ellis does not do anything.

Anisera gets panicked. The miners start to rile up.

ANISERA (CONT'D)

Ellis!

The machines tower and tower and move closer.

Like giant spiders...

Ellis stares the most centermost machine down...

He lifts his cane up from the ground. He begins to point it toward the coal.

The machines are only a few meters away now.

But as Ellis's cane sways a bit in mid-air, right before he brings his cane closer to the mound of coal, signifying he will soon place his cane into the coal, we see a small, tiny glow from the bottom of his cane.

Attached to the bottom of his cane, carved and glued into the wood...

Is a tiny glowing red gem.

A piece of the SOULSTONE!

The machines are FEET AWAY!

And Ellis STABS the mound of coal with his cane!

And as SOON as he does that, and as SOON as the machines touch the coal--

THE COAL EXPLODES FROM THE CENTER OUTWARD!

KNOCKING THE MACHINES BACK!

Fireworks of red and orange sparks ERUPT from where the coal mounds were!

We get a shot of some of the drivers inside the machines, who topple over and fall out of their seats due to the explosions.

Ellis stumbles back a bit but Anisera catches him.

The crowd of miners watch, stunned and amazed.

And then...

From the flames of the coal, a MAGICAL FORCEFIELD SHOOTS UPWARD!

CREATING A SHIELD OF PROTECTION, a reflective shield the color of a warm sunset, with different shades of oranges and reds mixing together, a shield that begins from the coal mounds in front of Ellis and goes UPWARD, immensely high, and CURVING slightly inward to create something like a BUBBLE.

Ellis smiles.

Anisera looks to Ellis, but before she can even ask anything...

ELLIS

Lily.

Anisera, about to speak, closes her mouth.

Ellis lifts his cane up.

ELLIS (CONT'D)

She left this stone for me. Said to use it when I needed to protect me and Meera. I recently carved it into my cane for safekeeping.

Anisera can't help but smile at Ellis's cleverness.

Anisera looks at the forcefield, which reaches high, disappearing into the fog.

More mountain-flattening machines drive forward, alarming the miners.

Anisera looks intently at the forcefield.

And as the vehicles move forward, as the first few hit the forcefield...

They crash against it!

They can't move past the forcefield.

All the vehicles pile up against the forcefield, on top of each other, loud and bright sounds of machinery clanking and clanking, like a swarm of spiders trying to escape.

They desperately try to keep driving forward despite being clamped together. They have nowhere to go!

The miners start to cheer!

Anisera lets a sigh of relief.

But Ellis looks closely at the shield...

In the center, he notices a small crack.

A crack that grows bigger.

His eyes widen.

Anisera notices his discomfort.

ANISERA

What?

ELLIS

It's breaking.

Anisera looks to where Ellis is looking and sees the crack.

ELLIS (CONT'D)

It can't hold.

Cornelius huddles near Ellis's legs.

CORNELIUS

That can't be good...

More miners start to notice the crack as it grows and grows.

Everyone falls back!

People huddle together, some run away, some are stunned.

The machines, somehow...

Begin to shrink?

ANISERA

What on Earth?

And they start to SEEP THROUGH THE HOLE, tiny machines spilling through like a leak in a pipe...

And after they make it over onto the other side...

They INSTANTLY GROW AGAIN!

ELLIS
It's magic! They're enchanted!

The vehicles keep spilling over and GROWING, over and over, but some of the vehicles, due to the sheer mass and force of them being immensely packed, FLY OUT, in their FULLY-GROWN FORM--

--toward Meera and Ellis's house--

CRASHING ON TO THEIR HOME.

Ellis freezes.

Cornelius gasps.

And as Ellis drops his cane and time slows down...

As the shield is BROKEN and the machines INFILTRATE THE VALLEY...

A YELLOW BEAM OF LIGHT FLIES BY ELLIS...

Everyone watches--

The beam of light goes toward THE BREAK IN THE SHIELD...

As it TAKES FORM into:

ELLIS (CONT'D)
(hushed)
Is that... a Mountain Spirit?

Nila, in her glowing yellow form we saw earlier, HOLDS HER ARMS OUT toward the shield, CAPTURING THE MACHINES that are falling through the break.

She holds and holds--

And she brings one arm down to the ground, and then SWAYS it up, causing the dirt and rock of the Earth beneath her to CATAPULT UPWARD and HIT THE MACHINES SEEPING THROUGH THE HOLE!

She then uses the rest of the dirt to CLOG THE HOLE, and then with more magic, HARDENS THE DIRT to create DARKENED ROCK, similar to molten lava.

While the shield is shabbily but somehow sturdily repaired, Nila FLIES AROUND THE VALLEY and KNOCKS OUT THE REMAINING VEHICLES with SPEARS OF ROCK!

And when debris or vehicles fly toward miners, Nila QUICKLY CREATES SHIELDS FROM ROCK that grow from THE GROUND UPWARD.

The miners are shocked, but immensely relieved.

Nila looks back at the forcefield, and sees her repairs are BEGINNING TO GIVE OUT.

NILA

Meera, please, please come back!

INT. THE HEART OF THE MOUNTAIN - NIGHT

Meera is FALLING AND FALLING down the dark, seemingly neverending chasm!

She bumbles along, occasionally HITTING THE WALLS OF THE CAVE, injuring herself, until finally she SPLASHES and SUBMERGES into a small pool of water.

She swims to the surface and gasps for air.

She grimaces and groans, and grabs her left arm from pain.

She looks around, bobbing up and down in the water.

She's in a dark but beautiful cave covered in shining, sparkling gems and jewels.

The drip-drop of water echoes through the cave, an aural sensation of twinkling.

There's a small path that is illuminated by little fireflies.

MEERA

Wow.

Meera gets out of the pond, and as she emerges, she lifts up her long sleeve and we see her left arm is full of scratches and semi-deep wounds. She is bleeding.

Her face also has some scratches, with a larger gash on her forehead, and she checks her other arm. It is also scratched but not as badly injured as her left arm.

She reaches with her right hand to touch her wounds but she JERKS her hand back from the stinging.

But then...

The tiny piece of her mother's soaking wet scarf tied around her left wrist...

Starts to sparkle.

Meera tilts her head.

And she watches as a very dim stream of light, which seems to be imbedded within her bloodstream, moves from where the scarf is, up her arm.

And as the light moves past her wounds, they stop bleeding. They heal. But they leave scars.

We watch as the light moves onto her face, through the veins on her forehead, and heals the gash on her forehead.

Her other arm is also healed.

Meera remembers what Wendolyn said.

MEERA (CONT'D)
Magic in the ordinary, huh...

She takes a deep breath.

She wrings her wet hair out, and looks around to see a path from the cave.

She goes down the path, following the glow of fireflies, who buzz by and twinkle against dark rock.

Dripping water echoes throughout the tunnel...

Until she reaches a large, wide, empty space. A huge cave, with high ceilings covered in stalagmites.

The same cave Nate bumped into earlier.

The ground is reflective, a very shallow pool of water covering everything.

And then she sees, in the center of the large cave, where a thin ray of moonlight somehow beams vertically down into this cavernous, desolate space...

The SOULSTONE is ALREADY THERE.

It FLOATS MID-AIR in the BEAM OF LIGHT.

MEERA (CONT'D)
What?!

Meera quickly walks to the center of the cave. Her footsteps echo with the faint splashes of water.

Meera looks up to the Soulstone. Her eyes glisten with the moonlight.

The Soulstone is red, but it is dull.

It does not glow like it did in the story.

MEERA (CONT'D)

Its magic is still drained...

She reaches her hand toward the Soulstone...

And then, as soon as her hand just barely touches the Soulstone...

A force PULLS IT UP, OUT OF MEERA'S REACH. She pulls her arm back a bit.

And then a female voice speaks:

FEMALE VOICE

Who are you?

The voice speaks slow and echoes, like she's existed for thousands of years.

Meera lowers her hand and arms and looks around.

MEERA

Are you--are you Hathoria?

HATHORIA

I am. Why are you here? Are you going to take the Soulstone again?

MEERA

NO! No! I was here to help return the Soulstone. But I see... it's still... here.

HATHORIA

You wanted... to help me?

MEERA

Yes.

Silence...

HATHORIA

You lie.

MEERA

What?

HATHORIA

You want something. I can feel it. You still want the Soulstone's power for yourself.

MEERA

I--

HATHORIA

It wasn't like this thousands of years ago. But now, you humans always want something.

MEERA

I just want to--

HATHORIA

Even my youngest daughter left me. Still, when I gave her everything, she left me.

MEERA

Please, Nila didn't mean--

Meera braces...

She realizes.

She looks to the dying Soulstone.

MEERA (CONT'D)

(to herself)

Oh my god. The Soulstone is failing because Nila is gone.

HATHORIA

You know my daughter? Where is she?

Hathoria's voice grows louder.

MEERA

Yes, she's human now, but she--

HATHORIA

HUMAN?

The CAVE starts to SHAKE...

HATHORIA (CONT'D)

You have corrupted her. Manipulated her to stay human. You are the reason she has not returned to me.

MEERA

No, please, listen to me--

HATHORIA

You should not have come here. This space is not for humans. But you never listen.

The cave starts to SHAKE MORE...

MEERA

Please, hear me out--

HATHORIA

I have had enough of humans infiltrating my mountains. You come and you take. Your pickaxes have jabbed into me for hundreds of years. I am always bleeding. I was able to handle the pain, I was merciful. But now Nila is gone. Now I would rather fall than be wounded any more.

The cave shakes EVEN MORE!

MEERA

I don't want to hurt you! And I'm sorry you've been in pain all these years!

STALAGMITES FALL FROM THE CEILING!

Meera dodges them, narrowly avoiding getting hurt.

HATHORIA

It is too late for apologies. I will not allow you to leave.

The cave SHAKES VIOLENTLY!

Meera starts to lose her balance!

But she decides...

To SNATCH the Soulstone from the beam of light!

Then she BOLTS to the entrance she came from!

She runs and she runs!

But as soon she SLIDES into the tunnel, ROCKS falling all around her...

The cave falls COMPLETELY and TRAPS MEERA IN DARKNESS.

Meera huffs and puffs, laying on the ground.

She looks around, squinting in the dark.

There's no exit anywhere.

MEERA

No no no no no...

She gets up and moves to one end of the cave.

She pushes hard on the wall--nothing budes.

She moves to the other end and pushes. No budging.

Meera stands, trapped in a cave no bigger than a living room.

She breathes quickly.

She looks around more and then...

She freezes.

In the corner of the cave, lies the Soulstone.

Broken in two.

MEERA (CONT'D)

What??

Meera quickly goes over to the broken Soulstone. She holds one half in each hand. She puts them back together hard, like trying to attach two magnets, in the hopes they will stick. They do not.

Meera slumps to her knees.

Her eyes start to shine with the buildup of tears.

MEERA (CONT'D)

That's it. It's over.

Then she sees, through her teary-eyed clouded vision, underneath her long sleeve which slightly rides up, that piece of the sparkly, translucent, ghostly sheen of her mother's white scarf tied around her wrist. It has dried now.

Meera touches it with her other hand. It's thin, but has somehow not torn despite the damage and turmoil Meera has undergone.

It even shines a bit in the dark.

Meera inhales.

She sets the two pieces of the Soulstone down on the ground in front of her, connected but not healed back together.

And then, with her right hand, she loosens the scarf.

She unties it.

And lets the fabric fall from her wrist.

Then, she grimaces in pain--

Her wounds from falling down the chasm reappear.

She begins to bleed again, and the cut on her forehead emerges once more.

She takes deep, shaky breaths.

Meera then takes the fabric and, with shaking hands, loops it underneath the two halves of the Soulstone that lay on the ground.

She brings the fabric upward, tightens it around the two pieces of the Soulstone so that they stay together, and ties the fabric into a bow.

The Soulstone sits there, damage still visible, but now dressed as if it's a gift.

She stares at it.

MEERA (CONT'D)

Come on, come on...

And then the scarf begins to glow.

And it dissipates, turning into yellow golden flakes, sinking into the Soulstone.

The flakes move toward the center of the two broken halves and brings the two tightly together, and with a BEAMING GLOW, the Soulstone...

Becomes one again.

It sits there, glowing softly.

Meera picks it up and holds it in her palms, gently.

She looks at it.

She glides a finger over it...

Any question she would want answered...

Meera takes a deep breath.

She then lifts her palms up into the air, holding the Soulstone out. Hoping Hathoria forgives her.

MEERA (CONT'D)
Please, Hathoria. I don't need
answers. And you don't have to
bleed anymore.

Silence.

Meera stares, wounded, hopeful.

She closes her eyes.

Then...

The Soulstone begins to LEVITATE.

Meera opens her eyes and looks up, and watches as the Soulstone floats in the air.

She lowers her arms.

And the Soulstone GLOWS EVEN STRONGER, the light nearly blinding.

And then...

Bits of yellow light start to seep through the cracks in the cave's walls.

And the cave starts to glow, streams of yellow moving like water, like vines.

Fireflies also seep through the walls, floating about around Meera, excited and curious.

Meera watches, still seated, as the cave she is in gets illuminated.

And in front of her...

A glowing yellow figure starts to take shape...

Meera squints from the light, her wounds still gaping.

A woman takes form, with shoulder-length flowing hair... but we do not see her face yet.

Meera opens her eyes.

She GASPS.

There, floating in front of Meera...

MEERA (CONT'D)

MOM!!!

...is her mother.

In spirit form.

We finally see Lily's face. Kind, with a proud, grateful smile.

LILY

Hi, sweetheart.

Meera LUNGES herself at her mother to HUG HER!

They embrace, mother and daughter, in a cave that glows.

Meera releases, and she is crying.

MEERA

How did-- are you-- why--

LILY

I never got to tell you. But I had faith you would be able to find out. Meera, my love. I wasn't always human. I gave up being a Spirit so I could have you.

MEERA

You... you did?

LILY

Yes. And I would do it all over again. But when the Soulstone was stolen... I had to make a choice. I turned back into a spirit to return the Soulstone and prevent the mountains from falling on you.

MEERA

So you left...

LILY

To protect you.

Meera starts to tear up again.

LILY (CONT'D)

Oh, sweetie, I'm sorry I wasn't able to tell you.

MEERA

Can you come back home with me?

LILY

I can't. I have just returned the Soulstone, and now my duty is here, in the mountains.

Meera slumps.

MEERA

Yeah. I know.

LILY

But, Meera...

Lily looks to the healed, glowing Soulstone.

LILY (CONT'D)

...it seems Hathoria has taken a liking to you.

MEERA

It was your scarf that healed her.

LILY

No. It was your heart that gave her hope.

Lily holds Meera's face with her hand.

LILY (CONT'D)

Meera, my daughter. I am sorry I cannot be with you anymore. But I hope you know that no matter what I am, or where I am, I will always be your mother.

Lily gives Meera a kiss on her forehead.

And then Lily disappears.

But...

The cave's streaks of yellow light, coming from all directions on the walls, start to move toward Meera, through the ground she sits on.

And then, the yellow light streaks SHOOT UP, ENCASING Meera in a BEAUTIFUL GLOWING TUNNEL OF LIGHT.

Her hair floats around. She feels power surging through her.

Her tears float upward and glow.

And then Meera also floats in the glowing tube of light!

Her movements are fluid, as if flying already comes naturally to her.

She smiles and nods her head.

She holds her hands out...

The light in the cave glows brighter and brighter...

And as soon as she closes her eyes and takes a deep breath...

We CUT TO BLACK.

And go to...

EXT. RITTLEDON - NEAR MEERA'S HOUSE - NIGHT

We still see BLACK... it's silent for a moment.

But then we hear RUMBLING and nothing else...

Like an earthquake...

We CUT BACK to a visual...

We see Ellis's cane laying on the ground, shaking...

Ellis looks down at it.

A CRACK emerges from underneath the cane.

And it QUICKLY MOVES from BOTH SIDES OF THE CANE...

To the MOUNTAINS ON BOTH SIDES OF THE VALLEY.

It seems as if time is STOPPED as these cracks GROW AND GROW TOWARD THE MOUNTAINS.

People notice, and watch the cracks.

And when the cracks REACH the mountains, and there is a PAUSE...

LOUDER RUMBLING IS HEARD FROM THE MOUNTAINS AS THEY SHAKE...

And as SEGMENTS OF THE MOUNTAINS BEGIN TO LOOK AS IF THEY ARE CRUMBLING...

What is really happening is this:

They are SHAPESHIFTING.

Everyone WATCHES IN AWE.

AS GIANT STONE, TREE-COVERED, GRASS-LINED PEOPLE EMERGE FROM THE MOUNTAINS.

Slowly, awakening from slumber thousands of years long.

These DOZENS OF ROCKMEN ARE AS TALL AS THE MOUNTAINS, and are DRESSED AS KNIGHTS. They HOLD SHIELDS AND SWORDS, they WEAR ARMOR, all STONE with OVERGROWN GREEN.

These are, as legends foretold: THE TRUE PROTECTORS.

Mr. Xavier, who WATCHES FROM A HELICOPTER OVERHEAD, who is looking down with binoculars...

Takes his binoculars off.

The Protectors are MASSIVE. He does not need binoculars to see them.

His hand is shaking.

Back to the ground, we see Ellis's face LIGHT UP WITH JOY.

He whispers, proudly:

ELLIS
Lily was right. The mountains are
living.

Nila WATCHES TOO, her EYES WIDE, still TRYING TO KEEP THE SHIELD INTACT.

NILA
Meera was able to awaken... the
ancient Protectors? I thought they
weren't real...

Anisera, her eyes GLAZED OVER with AMAZEMENT, tilts her head to Ellis.

ANISERA
What... did Meera... do?

ELLIS
She listened to her mother.

Anisera lets out a smile.

Ellis smiles back.

The Protectors make their way to the Mining for All forces and do what they were built to do:

Protect the valley.

They do a VARIETY OF THINGS to protect this home.

They PICK UP machines and THROW THEM FAR, and the vehicles that CRASH to the ground MAGICALLY BECOME ROCK! We see drivers CRAWL out of these hardened vehicles, confused and SCARED.

Some of them simply TOUCH the machines with their fingers, INSTANTLY TURNING THEM INTO STONE AS WELL.

And others WALK THROUGH THE FORCEFIELD UNAFFECTED, and take care of the rest of the mountaintop removal machines by MAGICALLY TURNING THEM INTO ROCK.

It seems these magnificent giants seek to create EARTH AND ROCK from machines designed to DESTROY.

As the Protectors continue their fighting, Mining for All fighters SCATTER as they RUN AWAY and ABANDON THEIR TANKS!

The entire army gets WIPED OUT.

Mr. Xavier, from his helicopter in the sky, is furious from being severely defeated.

He GRUNTS WITH ANGER...

And GETS UP, TAKES CONTROL OF THE HELICOPTER FROM THE CURRENT DRIVER, AND STARTS TO FLY IT AWAY!

He flies TOWARD ONE OF THE MOUNTAINS WHERE THE PROTECTORS EMERGE FROM, and goes STEEPLY UPWARD TO GO OVER IT...

And as he RISES TO THE TOP OF THE MOUNTAIN...

A GIANT STONE HAND APPEARS AND GRASPS TO THE TOP OF THE MOUNTAIN, CLIMBING IT!

Mr. Xavier STOPS SUDDENLY!

And the GIANT STONE PROTECTOR EMERGES FROM CLIMBING THE MOUNTAIN, BIGGER THAN ALL THE REST...

And, in addition, this one is a WOMAN.

With SHOULDER-LENGTH BUT FLOWING ROCK HAIR, and EYES THAT PIERCE, possessing that of a MOTHER'S INSTINCT TO PROTECT.

And MEERA is standing ON THE SHOULDER OF THE ROCK WOMAN.

Her own hair FLOWING from wind and magic, her body with an AURA OF POWER UNLIKE ANYTHING SHE HAD BEFORE.

The rock woman STRAIGHTENS HER STANCE and her back, her head DOZENS OF FEET above the mountain.

The helicopter FLOATS IN PLACE in front of the rock woman's head, with nowhere to go.

The helicopter driver that was with Mr. Xavier JUMPS OUT with a parachute. Mr. Xavier sees him escape, and anxiously looks around for his own parachute...

Meera sees Mr. Xavier. She speaks loudly so he can hear her above the whirring of his helicopter.

MEERA

Mr. Xavier...

Mr. Xavier DESPERATELY looks around for a parachute...

MEERA (CONT'D)

Because you believed progress could only happen with destruction...

The rock woman reaches her right hand out...

MEERA (CONT'D)

You failed to complete either.

...and with just two fingers, GRASPS ONTO ONE OF THE HELICOPTER'S BLADES, stopping it! She holds it mid-air.

The sudden stop JOLTS Mr. Xavier around in the helicopter.

The helicopter begins to turn into BLACKENED STONE, like COAL...

Mr. Xavier GASPS FROM FEAR...

MR. ZAVIER

No, please, I didn't realize I would offend you, oh wise Earth Goddess--

The stone QUICKLY GOES TOWARD MR. ZAVIER...

MEERA

Goodbye, Mr. Xavier.

And the black coal SEEPS INTO MR. ZAVIER, as he REACHES HIS ARM OUT IN ONE FINAL ATTEMPT TO ESCAPE, he becomes IMMORTALIZED IN STONE, along with the rest of the helicopter.

So there, the rock woman stands tall behind a mountain, holding a stone helicopter with her two fingers, as the people of Rittledon watch from the ground cheering, as Meera stands proudly on the shoulder of a goddess.

The sun begins to rise behind the rock woman.

The mountains and Rittledon are now safe!

And the stone Protectors, now realizing their duties are completed, move into formation...

The forcefield dissipates, and the Protectors move together in a sort of planned and meticulous fashion to the dip of the valley where the shield once was.

And the Protectors line up, get down on one knee in a domino effect, stick their swords into the ground, and freeze into statues. A new type of shield.

Meera looks down to the crowd and catches Ellis's eyes.

He smiles, and a tear slides down his face.

Meera smiles back.

And she heads home.

In quick succession, Meera HOPS OFF the rock woman's shoulder and ONTO the mountain, where, with the flick of her wrist, she creates a STONE SURFBOARD right before she lands, which allows her to essentially SURF DOWN to the bottom of the valley.

Already a master at her new power.

She reaches the bottom, SPRINTS off her stone board, and RUNS TO ELLIS, hugging him.

Cornelius stands beside Anisera, and the two of them look at each other and smile.

ELLIS
I knew you'd be fine. My strong
girl.

Meera cries into her father's shoulder.

Her mother's scarf glistens around her wrist.

And in the buildup of the sounds of celebration, we transition to...

EXT. RITTLEDON - MAIN STREET - DAYS LATER

Rittledon is bustling, and these are the happenings:

The mines are closed down, the entrances boarded up.

Construction everywhere--houses are being built, old houses being fixed and patched up. People are helping each other.

And...

The Mountain Spirits are floating about!

Glowing orbs of yellow light, similar to the Tree Spirits, float about, helping with construction and tasks. We see some of them transform into humans, too, but retaining their glowing yellow aura.

They look very similar to the common folk from Hathoria's ancient kingdom...

Further out of the center of town, kids play on and around the now-stone machines like they're new playgrounds.

Of course, Mountain Spirits play with them. Some in their glowing human form, some in their light form, flying about like fireflies. Like the fireflies in the caves Meera encountered.

And Anisera stands with a clipboard and Ellis next to her, cane still in hand. The two watch and converse as people ask them questions on where building materials should go, or what to do next, or if they need more help.

Nearby, Cornelius plays with Nate and Peter, speaking freely, no longer hiding his magical self. Nate's arm has healed.

Meera approaches Ellis and Anisera. Ellis smiles.

He walks to her.

MEERA

I think the Mountain Spirits feel
right at home.

ELLIS

I think so too.

Ellis looks around...

ELLIS (CONT'D)

Where's Nila?

MEERA

She went off to explore more. I
think East, to the ocean.

Meera looks off toward the end of the valley.

ELLIS

You know, if you wanted to go out
and explore...

MEERA

...I know.

The breeze whistles, and Meera's hair flows.

MEERA (CONT'D)

I told Nila I would catch up to
her. After Rittledon is patched up.

ELLIS

I think that's a wonderful idea.

MEERA

You'd be fine without me?

ELLIS

Meeraaaaaa. I hope you don't think
you get all your strength just from
your mother!

Meera lets out a smile.

ELLIS (CONT'D)

I will be fine.

A pause...

MEERA

Do you think Mining for All will
ever come back?

ELLIS

I think what's turned to stone,
stays stone.

Meera looks to the Protectors lined up, solid, guarding.

ELLIS (CONT'D)

I wish your mom and Wendolyn could
see this right now.

MEERA

Who says they can't?

Ellis turns to Meera. She winks.

He smiles.

Meera looks up to the sky.

Two faraway lights twinkle in the daytime.

Then a flock of white birds fly by.

We SOAR UP to meet them and fly behind them.

They SWOOP along the tops of the green, full mountains.

The mountains soak in the sunlight, savoring the golden hues of life that dip between the valleys where sunlight failed to reach for so many years.

The birds DIVE DOWN to soar between the stone Protectors.

When they get close to the ground, and fly right above grass, right at the feet of the Protectors...

We see that they GLIDE past...

Bundles of fresh white and blue lilies.

Their petals sway from the breeze of the birds.

But their thick green stems remain sturdy.

Grounded, fragile, free.

FADE TO BLACK.

Moving Mountains: An Animated Feature-Film Screenplay Exploring Mother-Daughter Relationships alongside West Virginia Coal Mining Culture

I. Introduction

When you think of West Virginia, John Denver’s “Take Me Home, Country Roads” probably starts to ring in your ears. There’s something so comforting about belting out the words *West Virginia, mountain mama* in a crowd at a sports game, or with friends, or on a long road trip. Years ago, I heard a band play the song while I was thousands of miles away from my home in West Virginia. I was visiting my other home—my parents’ home—Egypt, and here I was, listening to “Take Me Home, Country Roads” on a boat on the Nile River. What a surreal joy it was to learn that my mountain mama can traverse oceans.

Moving Mountains is an animated, magical, action-adventure feature-length screenplay that was born out of my complicated but unwavering love for West Virginia. I’ve lived in the state since I was six years old, in two different areas: first the rural Logan County, then state capitol of Charleston, where I live now. Throughout my life, I’ve encountered many out-of-state people who are quick to make assumptions about West Virginia. These assumptions are usually negative and stereotypical. While I understand why people have these initial misconceptions about the state, the one thing people often miss is that West Virginia is struggling because nobody is helping.

Another thing people miss is that West Virginia’s nature is so, so beautiful.

West Virginia is entirely covered by the Appalachian Mountains. Every time I fly back home on a plane, I look out the window to watch the sunlight beam upon the rolling hills of my home. The state experiences all the seasons in full, with snowy winters, hot summers, pollen-filled springs, and colorful autumns. My friends and I have hiked through just a few of the many

trails in the state. My family and I regularly make visits to a lake nearby, and I have childhood memories of watching my grandmother fish when she would visit from Egypt, where my parents are from. One night I gazed up at the Milky Way from an isolated park hidden within the mountains. I grew up amongst hordes of trees, between valleys, in mountains. And I loved it.

But there were days where I also hated it.

Growing up in small towns, especially ones where you are not originally from, can get boring. Going to Target with friends to roam around was a frequent occurrence. I watched my local mall shut down almost all its stores in the span of three years, and now the space is ghostly. The Charleston airport says it's international, but there are a total of five gates. As a youthful, spirited teenager living in a small town, I oftentimes felt trapped. Not just because of the lack of things to do, but also because of who I am.

My parents immigrated to the United States from Egypt in 1998. I tell people I am Muslim and Egyptian-American, but depending on who is asking, someone will usually pick one or the other to assign me. To my family in Egypt, I am American. To my friends in West Virginia, I am Egyptian. To some Muslims, I am not Muslim enough. To some West Virginians, I am, put simply, an atrocity. Growing up, I never felt tied to a community. I personally do not know anybody in a situation exactly as mine. Identity and home, to me, is complicated and paradoxical. I live and breathe the complicated.

Thus, I wanted to tell a story that embraced complexity. In *Moving Mountains*, I take inspiration from something as serious as mining wars, and I tell a fantastical story of a young girl named Meera trying to both find her mother and save her home, in a setting that is simultaneously run-down and beautiful, where the mountains are magical and legends come true, with love and loss and love again. Meera learns difficult lessons, with the biggest being how to

let go. The mountains are alive, full of spirits and magic, even with a Mountain Goddess as a character inspired by the concept of West Virginia being the wonderful mountain mama.

Further, for maximal imaginative freedom, and to fulfill the goal of telling a deeply moving story in an accessible manner, I wrote my screenplay with the intention of it being an animated film. I wanted to write this story as an animated film from the start. I am a fan of animation, and I am fond of animated films that, despite their often-childish genre, tell stories dealing with serious issues. I wanted to tell a gritty but positive story in a medium that is inherently fantastical. I chose animation because I believe that hard-hitting stories do not have to be difficult to understand. You can experience a deeply moving story through an animated medium, and it does not lose any vitality if it were presented in a live-action film. Instead, the animated medium adds a thematic layer of trying to find reality within fantasy. Ultimately, *Moving Mountains* is a part of a greater movement of redefining animation as a genre not just for children, but for everyone.

When you read *Moving Mountains*, I want you to experience beauty in complicated forms. The beauty of the mountains, the hidden beauty of beat-up coal-mining towns, the beauty of communities filled with people who help each other overcome sky-high obstacles. Because I realized time and time again, I am trying to find the beauty in the complicated. *Moving Mountains* is about finding beauty in the seemingly defeated. Such a feat is difficult, and oftentimes I lack motivation to do it myself. But when you succeed, it feels as if you have moved mountains.

II. Literature Review

West Virginia and The Coal Wars

To begin, I want to provide context on a West Virginian historical event that inspired my story from the start: The Coal Wars. The Coal Wars were a series of coal mining labor uprisings that occurred in West Virginia roughly between the 1890s and 1930s, where miners went on strikes, often violent, to protest poor conditions and, primarily, economic exploitation (Green, page 1-9, 22). While my screenplay is not intended to be a historical depiction of any kind, the events behind The Coal Wars sparked my ideas for the themes I wanted to explore in a story of my own. The bulk of my understanding of the historical event comes from a comprehensive book I read by James Green titled *The Devil is Here in These Hills: West Virginia's Coal Miners and their Battle for Freedom*. I also read *On Dark and Bloody Ground: An Oral History of the West Virginia Mine Wars*, written by Anne T. Lawrence, which covers the same event but solely through conversations and the words of people local to the event. For the purposes of contextualization, I will be using Green's book to explain the history of The Coal Wars briefly. It is not necessary to know historical details for understanding my screenplay's inspiration, but having a brief knowledge of The Coal Wars can help visualize my story's atmosphere and themes.

Green's book provides an in-depth historical account of The Coal Wars. The Prologue has a sentence summing up much of the energy of the time: "in late August 1921, nearly ten thousand workers had marched over fifty miles of rugged terrain to liberate fellow union members who had been jailed under a martial law decree imposed on Mingo County, where a vicious mine war had raged for more than two years" (page 1). This tumultuous time in West Virginia consisted of marches, strikes, arrests, violence, and above all, the coal miners' desire for liberty and freedom from poor treatment from the coal companies.

The Prologue also describes writer and reporter James M. Cain's visit to West Virginia in 1922, with his mission to "search out the truth about what had caused a massive insurrection of armed coal miners" (page 1). Upon visiting, Cain himself writes, "in this untamed section of West Virginia two tremendous forces have staked out a battled ground. These are the United Mine Workers of America and the most powerful group of nonunion coal-operators in this country. It is a battle to the bitter end; neither side asks quarter, neither side gives it" (page 3). The Coal Wars were bloody battles between miners and the powerful coal companies. The concept of a war waged between two sides—the worker and the company—is the basis for the background and buildup of my screenplay's story and climax, where a battle occurs at the end.

"Chapter 1: The Great West Virginia Coal Rush, 1877-1890" details further the circumstances which led to the eventual rise of The Coal Wars. While the coal industry at this time is lucrative, with coal termed as "black gold," the miners of said coal did not live in luxury (page 13). Miners would be forced to live in towns close to the mines which had coal-company owned grocery shops. These grocery shops, while nearby, were more expensive. Thus, miners were trapped in a cycle of obtaining money from the coal mining companies they worked at, then spending their paychecks on grocery stores owned by those same companies (page 22). This unfair cycle was the main reason miners decided to rebel against the coal companies. In my story, I bring attention to mining companies' poor treatment of these mining towns. I do so by making the main setting of my story a struggling mining town and making the antagonist a mining company and its CEO.

The West Virginia Coal Wars is an integral piece of history to the state. Coal abundance and coal mining has long been a source of pride for many West Virginians, despite the rapidly declining importance and reliability of coal. It is especially interesting for me personally to learn

about The Coal Wars because I lived in Logan for a few years, one of the small coal mining towns that was at the center of these intense battles. I am very familiar with the state of these towns now, and they need a lot of help. *Moving Mountains* is, in a way, a manifestation of a wish I have. The wish that mining towns will someday be seen as places where people live, not just places where miners and opportunities for profit come from.

West Virginia Now

West Virginia is not widely written about today in media or news—unless Senator Joe Manchin is mentioned. While trying to learn more about West Virginia’s media presence, I found a handful of articles that all explore the downfall of the state. Emily Badger’s *New York Times* article *West Virginia Has Everyone’s Attention. What Does It Really Need?* begins with a subheading stating, “With the right federal response, [West Virginia] could become a model of renewal for other places around the country that prosperity has left behind.” The article paints West Virginia as an ideal starting point for figuring out how to help other struggling places around the country. Despite this idea, action is not being taken. The article includes Kelly Allen, executive director of the West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy, explaining how, “the region’s decades-long role in powering the nation through coal... came at an enormous cost to the health of local residents, their environment and their economy.” West Virginia’s long-standing pride—its booming coal mining industry—eventually brought not prosperity, but self-inflicted damage throughout the state.

In terms of the “cost to the health of local residents,” I can say I have experienced this cost firsthand. My father is the only Pulmonologist in Logan County, a small town we lived in, where most of its inhabitants either were miners or are still miners—in fact, The Battle of Blair Mountain, one of the huge violent strikes during the Coal Wars, took place in Logan County

(Green, page 272-274). My father sees many cases of miners with poor lungs due to harsh mining conditions, with one frequent disease being black lung. In fact, on February 17, 1969, Arnold Miller, a miner who was “disabled by black lung disease,” helped “organize thousands of active and retired miners for a march on the state capitol in Charleston with the goal of gaining more compensation for the victims of pneumoconiosis, an extremely common disease among coal miners” (page 352). Even decades after The Coal Wars, miners still struggle, especially medically. In a state where medical attention is most needed, it is unfairly very minimal.

Badger in her *New York Times* article mentioned before also details how West Virginia “ranks among the most distressed states in child poverty rates and median incomes, in population loss and in working-age adults out of the labor force.” West Virginia has racked up a lot of poor statistics, a stark contrast to the state’s once-booming coal industry. While the coal companies have consistently been in profitable business, the rest of West Virginia is in shambles. This unfair circumstance displays the exploitative relationship between coal companies and their miners. I explore this dynamic between miners and coal companies in my screenplay, a damaging relationship that has unfortunately persisted over long periods of time.

I want to bring up a second article, posted on *NBC News* and written by Andrew McCormick, titled, *West Virginia’s coal powered the nation for years. Now, many look to a cleaner future*. This article—and even just the title—echoes the sentiment that coal is no longer what is best for West Virginia, both economically and environmentally. The article includes words from southern West Virginian Jacob Hannah, who explains, “it’s difficult for anyone who grew up in Appalachia not to feel a sense of defensiveness and protectiveness towards coal.” Hannah’s sentiment brings forth a necessary and unique perspective to the discussion of the negative effects of coal mining in West Virginia. Coal mining is more than just an industry in

West Virginia. It's a culture, one that has shaped generations of towns and families and lives. West Virginians are often very proud of their backgrounds. Sticking by the side of coal, even when that side is losing, is something I have experienced in interactions with people in the state myself.

Lastly, I found another article that, like Badger's, emphasizes how West Virginia is a good starting point for looking at great misfortune. *To understand life expectancy fall, start in West Virginia*, written by Mike Stobbe for *AP News*, starts off: "If you want to understand why U.S. life expectancy is declining, West Virginia is a good place to start. The state is a bellwether of bad health, portending major problems years before they became severe nationally." In the article, Dr. Michael Brumage, a public health expert who once ran the health department in Charleston, states, "It seems that the worst outcomes happen here first... we're the canary in the coal mine." The image of a "canary in the coal mine," painting West Virginia as a bird that wishes to fly but is surrounded by rock, is a tragically beautiful way to describe West Virginia's status.

Mountaintop Removal

My screenplay includes a mining company that threatens a mining town and its mountains with magical mountaintop removal equipment. Mountaintop removal mining is a real and dangerous method of mining that occurs often in Appalachia. Richard Schiffman's article "A Troubling Look at the Human Toll of Mountaintop Removal Mining" for *Yale Environment 360* details how "the widespread mining practice is leading to increases in disease and deaths in Appalachia." The "air and water pollution caused by this mining practice, which involves deforesting and tearing off mountaintops to get at the coal, is leading to increases in cardiovascular disease, lung cancer, pulmonary disease, and birth defects," as per the research of

Indiana University researcher Michael Hendryx. The article, which interviews Hendryx, dives into the negative environmental and societal consequences of mountaintop removal mining. Hendryx explains how the method “removes up to 800 feet off the tops of mountains to try to reach coal seams that are not accessible by other mining techniques because the terrain is too steep or the veins are too thin.” Hendryx also elaborates on how mountaintop removal mining became more popular because it was “more attractive economically... even though it ended up being very destructive of the local environment and to the health of the people who live in these communities.” While underground miners themselves suffer from many diseases due to the harsh conditions of their work, mountaintop removal is a mining method that causes non-miners—civilians and families that simply live on the surface near mining sites—to also suffer from health issues. Such an unfair circumstance is something that inspired my antagonists in my screenplay, wherein the evil mining CEO is not afraid to tear down nature and mountains for his own economic gain.

Animation Theory

I love the childlike wonder that is often explored through animation, and I also love how an inherently childish medium can, when done right, hold a lot of symbolic weight. I strongly believe that serious issues can be conveyed in optimistic, magical ways. While writing my screenplay, I strived to strike a balance between youthful imagination and real-life issues and lessons.

The connection of animation with reality is something I studied and read about while preparing for my screenplay. I read a collection of theoretical essays on animation titled *Animating Film Theory*, edited by Karen Beckman. This was especially exciting for me because I did not know animation theory was written about enough to create a collection of essays. In the

collection, I found a section within the essay in Chapter 1, “Animation and History,” written by Esther Leslie, to be thought-provoking: “animation does to history what it does to nature. Animation evokes history, plays with it, undermines it, subverts it, but it does not have it, just as it does not have nature. It has second nature. Or different nature. It has different history” (page 35). I found this point to be eerily applicable to my project, where I am balancing the concepts of animation, history, and nature all in one story. Animation evoking history and not having it also brings light to the fact that animation is a newer medium (page 25). Further, Leslie states, “animation is not a depiction of a recognizable world” (page 27). I think this is important to keep in mind especially as I am writing a story inspired by a real place. However, while this quote may signify there is a divide between animation and our world, I think, if approached properly, this divide can be used to the benefit of the story at hand. Animation does not depict recognizable worlds. Therefore, the all-encompassing imaginative question of *what if?* can be explored to great, free depths.

Another essay I read in the collection, in Chapter 13, written by Thomas Lamarre and titled “Cartoon Film Theory: Imamura Taihei on Animation, Documentary, and Photography,” also inspired me when researching for my project. Lamarre in this essay discusses animation and how it connects with reality by drawing upon film theorist Imamura Taihei. Lamarre points out how Taihei approached “cartoons as a form of realism” (page 221). I admire this viewpoint of animation, and I agree with it. Cartoons are made by real people, coming from real events, and tell stories that feel real despite their inherently unrealistic medium. Animation is so often visually opposite of real-life. I believe this means, though, that being able to tell a real-life story through animation is an immense display of narrative and thematic skill. Lamarre’s essay also brings up the idea that “animation does not stand in opposition to documentary” (page 229). I

have kept this idea in mind while writing my screenplay because my story, being historically inspired, was made to work in tandem with the concept of documentary. Overall, it is nice to see that theorists believe animation, despite its fictionality, can coexist with reality.

III. Cinematic and Literary Inspiration

Stories that Stick: Hayao Miyazaki

Earlier this year, I watched a documentary on one of my favorite storytellers, Hayao Miyazaki. A Japanese director and animator, Miyazaki is a co-founder of the award-winning animation studio titled Studio Ghibli. The documentary, titled *Never-Ending Man: Hayao Miyazaki*, gets an intimate glimpse at Miyazaki following his retirement in 2013.

Miyazaki is an eccentric man. In the documentary, he repeatedly pokes fun at himself for being old, saying he is an “old geezer.” He is always wearing a white apron. He expects perfection from himself and his animating staff. He is a strange combination of pessimistic but youthfully hopeful. Even when saying he has retired, throughout the documentary, he works with staff on a new short film. And in 2021, Miyazaki came out of retirement at age 80. The reason? “Because I wanted to,” he said (Mishan, 2021).

Miyazaki’s films are my greatest inspiration. A large portion of my favorite films come from Miyazaki, with *Howl’s Moving Castle* being one of my top films of all time. One reason I heavily admire Miyazaki is because he does a masterful job of creating gorgeous, magical worlds that highlight the natural beauty of life, while also inserting deeper, darker tones and themes such as war, personal struggle, and the complexity of advancing technology. I find it fascinating that Miyazaki can create such fantastical and beautiful worlds that are also very thematically complex. I kept Miyazaki’s unique storytelling methods in mind as I wrote my screenplay, because I wanted my story to exist within a gorgeous, magical world, but to still be filled with

events and issues that are serious and real. Miyazaki's films balance optimism with pessimism in a beautiful medium. For me, his films remind me that the strongest form of optimism is one that stands powerful despite being met with seemingly impossible odds. I wrote *Moving Mountains* with this dynamic in mind. Miyazaki is a master of his own, and his work has always inspired me. He is creatively complicated, and I admire that.

The Genre of Magical Realism

Along with being a Film & Media major, I am also an English major. Being a double major in these two fields means I am graced with experiencing stories that encompass a vast realm of mediums. In my studies, I have tried to submerge myself in stories by people whose voices are often unheard—whose voices I have never heard. I've taken English courses on Gender and Sexuality in Native American Women's Literature, Black and White Queer Literature, and Black British Literature. I've taken film courses such as Modern China in Film and Fiction, Iranian Cinema, and Korean Cinema. In each of these courses, I was entranced by the various methods of storytelling, and how one's mode of storytelling can be heavily and gracefully influenced by one's identity, culture, and life. I know I can say that is true for myself. However, since I am so captivated by good stories, I found myself being a bit over-perfectionist with my own. This is a hurdle I was forced to get over while writing my screenplay, where I learned to trust my creativity and instinct, and to not be afraid to put what I want on the page.

Getting over this fear entailed following the genre I adored the most: magical realism. Ever since reading the pivotal *Beloved* by Toni Morrison in high school, I learned there was a term to describe my favorite storytelling genre. Creating magic in a world that is like ours in some ways and different in others is, I believe, one of the strongest results of a good imagination. With my screenplay, I did not want to feel limited by reality. I thought creating a magical world

would enhance the story I want to tell, that it would allow audiences to think about familiar things in unexpected new ways. My story originates from reality, but it reaches far beyond.

Animation Style

While writing *Moving Mountains*, I envisioned the style to be reminiscent of Disney and Pixar animated films, with 3-D graphics and full flexibility in terms of motion and dimension. *Tangled* (Nathan Greno and Byron Howard, 2010), one of my all-time favorite animated films, is a great example of the style I imagined, mainly in terms of background, atmosphere, and color-coding. *Encanto* (Byron Howard and Jared Bush, 2021) also has a style I admire, especially for its character design and depiction of magical effects. For my story to exist visually to its fullest capability, I would prefer it to be in 3-D animation. However, I still adore 2-D animation. I previously expressed a deep love for Miyazaki, and I grew up watching flat 2-D cartoons. I think, though, that my screenplay would better suit a 3-D animated style.

IV. The Creative Process

Discovering the Scope of Feature-Film Narration

The very first thing I want to mention is that I have never written a story this long, which made this project so fun yet so unfamiliar. I like to consider myself a creative writer, but I mainly write poetry and occasional short stories in my free time. However, I have recently acquired much more experience in screenwriting. My first screenplay was a 25-page short film I wrote in my Introduction to Screenwriting class in Fall 2021. My screenplays after that were written in two other classes: my Writing the Short Film class in Spring 2022, where I wrote a handful of very short screenplays that never reached more than ten pages; and my Advanced Screenwriting class in the same semester, where I wrote a 45-page television show pilot and a series bible. Reflecting now, I am realizing that I was only truly familiar with stories that are either very

short, consisting of just a moment, or stories that could be expanded upon for dozens of hours and hours. Writing a feature-film length screenplay, of 90-120 pages, I learned, was both daunting and energizing. I experienced a new scope of storytelling. I was not writing about one detailed moment like in a short film, and I was not setting the stage for hours of stories to come like a television pilot. I had to learn how to bring the audience on a complete (and worthy) journey from start to finish in under 2 hours.

I achieved that goal. But my writing style had to adapt to work with this mode of storytelling, especially because my ideas changed very frequently while writing. Even with every outline of my story, my ideas changed. I found myself unable to feel grounded in the scenes and events I imagined until I physically wrote them in screenplay format. This resulted in many scene rewrites and deletions. Further, due to the length and scope of a feature-film screenplay, I came to realize every moment and every scene had to be smoothly connected and make sense from start to finish. Because I would frequently revise or come up with new ideas while writing, this made for a lot of jumbled scenes in my story that I had to reconfigure after-the-fact. However, I was always open to recalibrating scenes when I got new ideas. Probably because writing new content for me is much harder than revising. And probably because when I felt I had a new and better idea, I wanted to write it as soon as possible.

Of course, even though I've never written a feature-length screenplay, the things I learned in my screenwriting classes were still perfectly applicable to this project. I knew how to write in the screenplay format; I was familiar with the narrative structure of screenplays with the act breaks and plot points of contention; and I had studied and analyzed films with strong writing. In addition, I am someone that can easily transfer what I learn from different classes into new projects and ways of thinking that are seemingly unrelated. I had no issue relaying what I

had learned from classes while writing this screenplay. Instead, my problems arose with the fact that I had no firsthand experience writing a feature-length screenplay. With that, I realized I had to write everything out first for myself before I really got a grasp on the narrative.

Biggest Struggles

Most of my struggles came with the inevitability of writing such a long story for the very first time. I struggled to find solid ground in terms of how I wanted my story to start, and I know why. The first pages of any new writing project always take me the longest because I feel an immense pressure to have a strong, impressionable start. It took me a couple tries and a couple rewrites to come to an introduction to my story that I really liked. And, of course, as always in my writing endeavors, my best work ended up coming to fruition when I was not overthinking.

My writing works in domino effect. That is, when I struggle for the first few pages, I struggle for many pages after. This meant I had to try hard to get through the middle part of my story, where I ran into a lot of narrative trouble. I believe this is because a feature-length story is such a wide yet narrow scope, and I was worried I would be veering from what was important, or that I would rush too quickly, or take too much time to jump into a scene. I did indeed make all these mistakes. But when I saw these problems for the first time, with my own eyes and with the guidance of others, I was able to recognize them later when they would pop up.

For some reason, one of the biggest takeaways I reminded myself about over and over was how to essentially get straight to the point in scenes. I would sometimes create introductions of dialogue that took too long, wherein I could instead simply drop the audience into an interaction and, with the properly written dialogue and details, have the audience understand exactly what is going on instantly. I would remind myself to ‘get to the point’ over and over

while writing my screenplay, scene by scene, line by line. But while this was sometimes frustrating, I think I was able to develop a nicely paced narrative rhythm.

An element of writing I wish to master in the future is outlining. I had many outlines of my screenplay when I was first thinking of my story and first generating ideas. But I found myself veering from my outlines when I would go to write, either because I didn't like what I initially thought of, or I would get a new idea I wanted to explore. I think one of the major reasons I struggled so much with outlining for this screenplay was because I was getting used to the expansive scope of a feature-length film. Figuring out how to tell a straightforward journey, but still have enough scenes and events in-between to fill the gaps, without writing unnecessary scenes that are just filler, was difficult for me. Because of that, I found myself feeling an urge to quickly complete a full draft, where I could see exactly how long my scenes were down to the page numbers, so I could get a grasp on my story's scope. I did write out my ideas and do essentially mini outlines while I was writing, which helped me pace my scenes and keep track of my intertwining narratives. These mini outlines also helped me break down my writing process in more manageable doses, allowing me to notice mistakes or points of confusion I may have otherwise missed. I hope the next time I write a screenplay I get more comfortable with the concept of creating an outline I really like before I dive into the screenwriting.

In addition to learning how to face my writing for dozens and dozens of pages at a time, I have also learned, mainly near the end of this project, that I need to be open to having fresh eyes read my work and offer advice. While writing, I was caught between what I believe is to be a typical writer's dilemma of trying to write what I want, and trying to see if what I want to write makes any sense to other people. Deep down, I am a bit protective of my work because I am

sensitive. But I learned to show my work to people who I trust, and who I know will give me beneficial feedback in a nonjudgmental manner.

Deciding When to Stop Writing

With academic-centered papers or projects, it is somewhat easy for me to find an ending point. In contrast, I found that while working on a creative project this long, my brain was always buzzing with new ideas and possibilities. Some that would be better than what I initially planned, some that would be worse. And some that would be better but would require me to delete scenes or writing I really liked. (I came to understand firsthand what it means to ‘kill your darlings’.)

This issue I had of always wanting to improve my story also fueled another problem I had: the struggle to feel like a creative project is the best it can be. I think writing can *always* be improved. But I think it is probably impossible to improve writing to the point of complete perfection. Or at least, I will never feel my writing is perfect. Especially if I am writing something entirely on my own and not in a team or with a larger group. But after writing a creative project that is so long, I realized I don’t have to think my writing is perfect. What I do have to be is happy with my writing. And I am happy with the story I have told in my screenplay because it is full of things I love. West Virginia, animation, strong female characters, magic. I did not stray from the elements of film and storytelling that I admire the most, and because of that, I am happy with my outcome.

V. Conclusion

I wrote *Moving Mountains* for many different reasons. To explore the beauty of the mountains. To expose harsh mining practices and the damaging consequences they bring to the environment and to communities. To learn how to tell a story that takes at least 90 minutes to

tell. To figure out how to take inspiration from media and concepts that I admire and create something of my own that I am proud of. Above all, writing this story was, for me, an exercise. A steppingstone toward learning how to tell better stories, write better screenplays, explore better themes. Because I am always learning, always thinking, always creating. Even when I do not like what I write, I will keep going. Even when I have no idea what I am feeling, I will keep writing. Storytelling is something that takes years and years to practice and practice. I am excited to keep honing my craft in screenwriting, and to use the lessons I learned while writing this screenplay and apply them to future projects. I have a better sense of the feature-film plot structure and pacing, and I have a better sense of the types of stories I enjoy telling. I am very grateful for the opportunity to have embarked on such a fascinating journey of creation and self-exploration. I am excited to submit my screenplay to some screenwriting competitions, and then I will move on from this story and follow the sparks of some other ideas I have. I look forward to experiencing again the joy of coming up with new stories, characters, places, themes, and I am eager to see where my inspiration takes me. I will, like Meera, bravely follow the path of a flickering firefly deep in a dark cave.

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