

THE SLEEPING VOLCANO



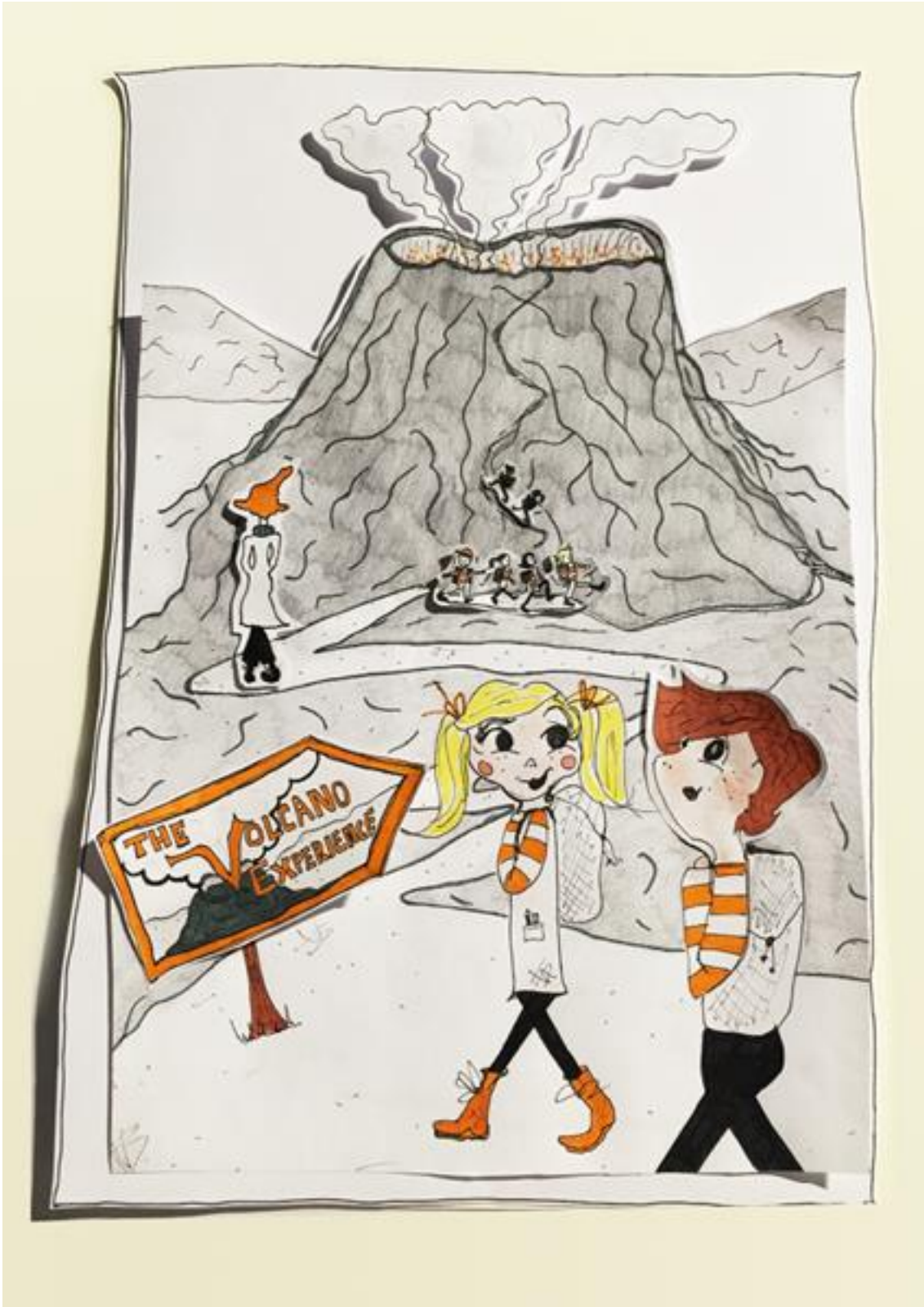
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“This has to be the world’s most boring volcano,” Seb moaned. He and Ellie were trailing behind the rest of their school party as they slowly zigzagged up to the volcano’s crater. It was a long, hard trek to the summit. At first the path had been soft and sandy, snaking gently up the lower slopes, but now it had become steep, rough and rocky. Tiny stones of shale scattered and slithered underfoot or got stuck in the tread of their boots. Every step stirred up clouds of dust.

“What did you expect, fireworks and molten lava?” Ellie sighed, though she had to agree. This ‘Volcano Experience’, which just meant trekking up a volcano cone, was a big disappointment.

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They could just about see Mr Forbes, their form teacher, at the head of the party. Every now and then a few facts about volcanoes drifted down towards them on the dusty air.

"There are three main groups of volcanoes: active, dormant and extinct," they heard him say.

"How many are active, Mr Forbes?" Bradley, the class swot, was right at Mr Forbes's heels.

"Around five hundred are active, not counting those beneath the oceans," Mr Forbes answered. "There could be as many as twenty volcanoes erupting right this minute."

"Could this one explode, I mean erupt?" Their classmate Jessica sounded worried.

"No, no, this is a dormant, or sleeping, volcano," Mr Forbes reassured her. "It might erupt again some time in the future, but it has not been active recently."

"Well it looks extinct to me," Seb muttered. "I mean, I expected a bit more than that puny bit of smoke." He pointed to the summit, which was gently smoking.

"An extinct volcano is one that scientists think will not erupt again," Mr Forbes went on.

"Extinct. This one is definitely extinct," Seb said, scuffing through the shale. "This is a waste of time!"

Mr Forbes must have heard him, because without turning around he thundered, "We are climbing one of Nature's wonders and you think you are wasting your time Sebastian? Just look around you. You can see the lava fields from here."

Mr Forbes pointed out the lava flows, which spread like octopus tentacles across the landscape.

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"If you look carefully you can see the different lava flows, fast and slow. The slow flow is called a'a. The fast flow is called pahoehoe..."

"Pooh pooh, more like. It's getting stinky now," Seb chipped in.

A smell of sulphur, like hard-boiled eggs, hung in the air as they crunched over the lava.

"It's getting colder too," Ellie said, fumbling in her bag for the paper face mask she had been given at the start.

"And there above us is the summit, the crater of the volcano!" Mr Forbes said excitedly. "A crack in the Earth's crust through which the magma has escaped, this super hot rock that extends right down to the Earth's core, thirty kilometres underground."

"Do we get to see inside it?" Seb piped up. This was beginning to sound a bit more interesting.

"No, we will be stopping at this point," Mr Forbes told them. "Health and safety. But you can observe the steam clearly from here."

Everyone looked up to the crater, which was belching clouds of steam.

"So, shall we begin the descent?" Mr Forbes said brightly. "We should be able to see some geysers, or hot springs, on the way down and I want to examine the lava stone more closely."

"My nan has a pumice stone in the bath. She said it came from a volcano," Jessica chipped in.

"Indeed, she is quite right. Pumice stone is formed when hot lava mixes with water and..."

Seb was hanging back.

"I'm not climbing all this way and not seeing the crater," he told Ellie.

"But Mr Forbes says we're not allowed any further," Ellie reminded him.

"That's only because they're worried some idiot will fall in and the organisers at The Volcano Experience will get into trouble!" Seb said.

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“What kind of volcano experience is it when you don’t get to see inside the crater?”

Ellie heard a scuffling sound behind her. When she looked back, Seb had vanished.

“Seb, Seb!” she called. The party were already snaking down the steep path.

Where had he gone? The path zigzagged out of sight and Ellie could no longer see him. Muttering under her breath, she scrambled up after him. It would be cool if they could tell the others they had seen inside the crater, she had to admit. But on the other hand, she didn’t want them to get left behind on the volcano. She had to persuade Seb to hurry up before they lost sight of the party.

The sulphurous smell was getting stronger as she got closer to the smouldering summit. Below her, the crater of the volcano opened up like a monster’s mouth, deep and gaping. Ellie looked around her. Her heart was beginning to thump. There was no sign of Seb anywhere.