

*As the Old Magic fades, a new hope will rise . . .*

# THE SILVER ROAD



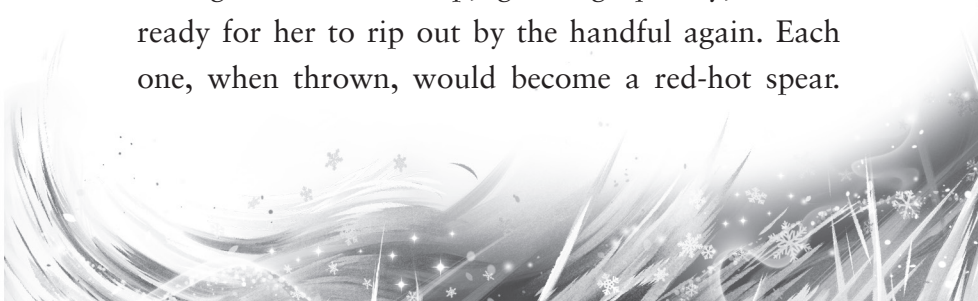
SINÉAD O'HART

## Prologue

Lightning clawed through the coal-black sky, throwing jagged brilliance onto the ruined earth. Cold rain lashed the island like a whip and, far below, the sea writhed endlessly. The land was facing a mighty onslaught, one not seen since the long-ago battle of Moytura three thousand years before.

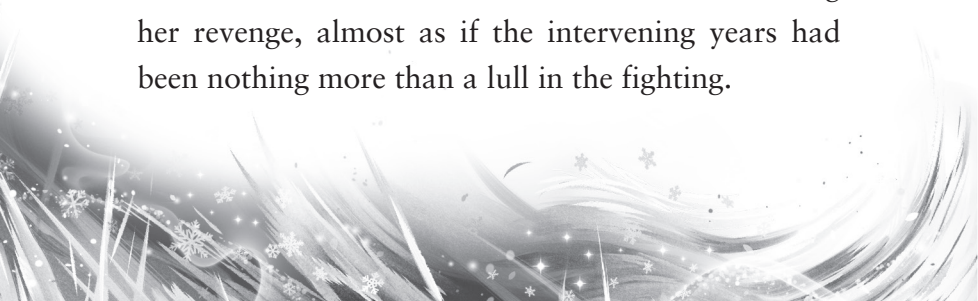
*And if I do not stop this here and now,* thought Sioc, as he dragged himself through the mud, *that terror will be unleashed once more.*

‘Are you ready to surrender, ice giant?’ came the roar of the witch, Cethlenn, her voice more than powerful enough to be heard over the howl of the storm. Fresh needles of hair were already pushing through her bald scalp, growing quickly, almost ready for her to rip out by the handful again. Each one, when thrown, would become a red-hot spear.

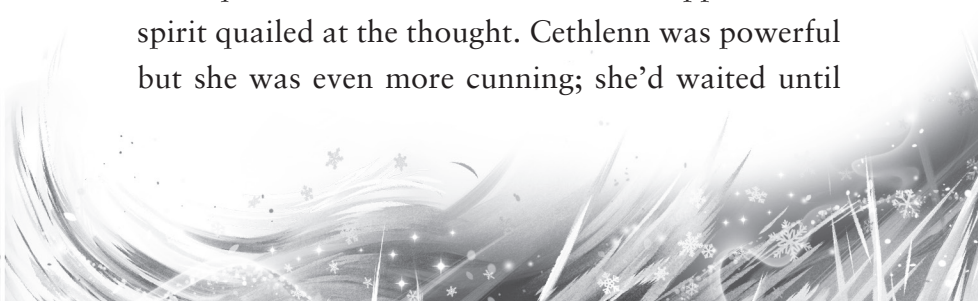


‘There are none now to relieve you. None to fight for you. None to fight *with* you. It is time for me to take what I need and then end you, just as I destroyed your king and the rest of your clan!’

Sioc lifted his head and peered through the frost-flecked rain, his thoughts heavy with the devastation Cethlenn had brought and the damage she could yet do. The image of Oighir, king of the ice giants, tumbling lifeless into the waves only moments before, was like a spike in his mind, and Cethlenn’s shriek of triumph was still echoing cruelly in his ears. He tried to push back the pain and focus on the enemy. Cethlenn stood on a rocky outcrop battered on both sides by the sea. It was all that remained now of Tor Mór, where Balor of the Evil Eye had once lived. Balor had been the most feared creature in all of Ireland until the forces of the Tuatha Dé Danann – including the ice giants – had overcome him at Moytura, and the great god Lugh had finally brought him down. The witch, Balor’s wife, had been there that day, too; she and the ice giants had remained enemies through the centuries that followed. And now she was taking her revenge, almost as if the intervening years had been nothing more than a lull in the fighting.



As Sioc tried to gather his strength, his thoughts turned back through the centuries to the last time he'd faced Cethlenn in battle. After Moytura was done, and before anyone could stop her, Cethlenn had used her magic to retrieve a weapon from the carnage of the battlefield – the *tathlum*, the powerful stone that Lugh had wielded in his mighty sling, and which had put out the poisonous light of Balor's evil eye. Cethlenn, in secrecy and darkness, had hidden the stone away ever since, guarding it with her life, biding her time and building her power – until now. She had come back here, back to the island of her husband's birth, and to the ice giants that could only mean one thing – the thing they feared the most. Destroying the clan of the ice giants – the Guardians of Toraigh – hadn't been Cethlenn's aim, Sioc knew; it would have added to her sense of victory but they were not the reason she had come. All she wanted was a handful of the soil of Toraigh – the final step in a plan she must have been waiting thousands of years to bring about, a plan that would have dire consequences . . . unless she could be stopped. Sioc's spirit quailed at the thought. Cethlenn was powerful but she was even more cunning; she'd waited until

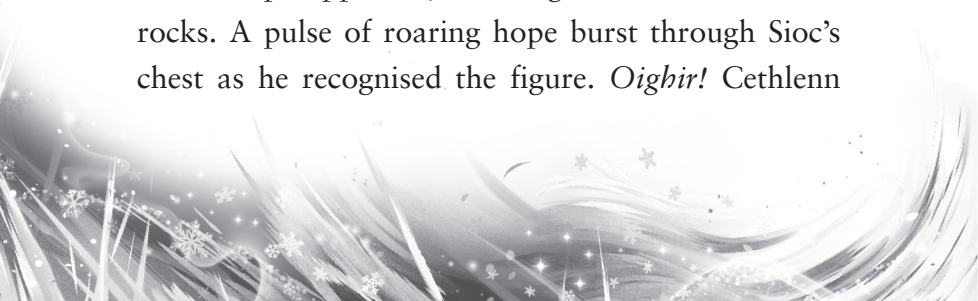


the ice giants had grown careless and her own strength was high before striking this fatal blow. He tried to gather his strength. If he was the only hope left, he would fight to the end. *She has not won*, Sioc told himself. *Not yet*.

As Sioc struggled to get to his feet, Cethlenn conjured two balls of flaming magic, one in each hand. Their terrible red-and-yellow light burned between her fingers, licking her skin and shining against the teeth that suddenly pushed their way out of her mouth.

‘You will not take it from me,’ Cethlenn growled. Her teeth grew further, twisting, sharp-edged and dark as obsidian. ‘My lord Balor’s time has almost come again, and you will not stand in his way.’ Cethlenn brought her hands together and her fire spells melded into one gigantic sphere of power. The ice giant could feel its heat, and he trembled with fear.

Then, in the darkness behind the witch, Sioc spotted something unexpected. Further out on Tor Mór, impossibly close to the pounding sea, a white-silver shape appeared, crawling one-armed over the rocks. A pulse of roaring hope burst through Sioc’s chest as he recognised the figure. *Oighir!* Cethlenn



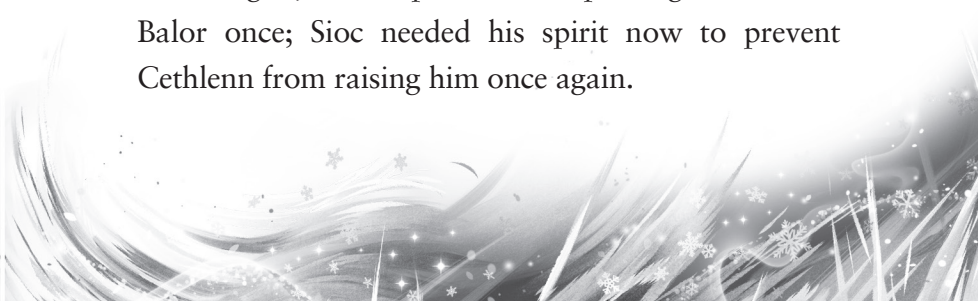


had sent him tumbling down the rocky cliffs with a lance of red-hot magic, but somehow the king had survived. Sioc looked back at Cethlenn, knowing his task now was to distract her, to keep her busy enough not to notice Oighir's approach. He closed his eyes for a moment and braced himself, then he raised his head even further and got slowly to his feet, his long arms swinging as he stood before the fire witch.

'Still not ready to admit defeat? Pathetic creature,' Cethlenn gurgled, her words almost lost in the noise of her teeth clashing and grinding against one another. 'No matter. Soon you will be something I never have to think about again.' She laughed, the sound thick and phlegmy, and Sioc noticed each strand of her fast-growing hair was now like a blade.

Her laugh stopped, and in the next heartbeat Cethlenn threw her fire spell.

Sioc raised his arms, casting a shield of protection, pouring every shard of his power into it. He knew no shield, no matter how thick, would withstand Cethlenn for long – but he called upon Lugh Lámfhada, the warrior god, as his spell took shape. Lugh had felled Balor once; Sioc needed his spirit now to prevent Cethlenn from raising him once again.



*Lugh, hear me!* Sioc called inside his mind. *Lugh the Skilled, Lugh the Brave, Lugh the Sure-Shot, Lugh of the Long Arm – aid me!*

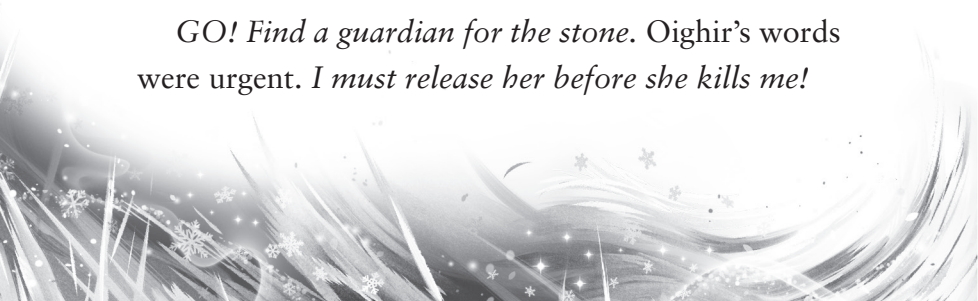
With a shriek of rage, Cethlenn's attack cut off and Sioc dropped his shield to see her struggling against a restraint, like a rope made of ice magic. It looped around her chin, pulling her mouth open, preventing her from closing it.

*I cannot hold her for long,* came Oighir's voice inside Sioc's mind. *Even now her magic overwhelms mine. You must reach in and find the stone – and then flee!*

Sioc did not hesitate. Cethlenn's eyes burned red with hatred, her body jerking as she fought to be free of Oighir's grip, and Sioc plunged his arm down into her throat, hoping with all he had that the stone – the *tathlum* – would make itself known.

Then he felt its warmth against his hand, almost like the stone had leaped into his palm. He pulled it free, hearing Cethlenn's ferocious shrieking. Her eyes tracked the *tathlum*'s path as Sioc wrapped his fingers around it.

*GO! Find a guardian for the stone.* Oighir's words were urgent. *I must release her before she kills me!*



Sioc looked past the struggling witch. Oighir, his king, was clinging to the rocky promontory.

*But, Your Majesty* – Sioc began, sending his words to Oighir’s mind, as was the way of his kind.

*No more!* Oighir’s command was clear. *Fly! Trust the Seandraíocht to guide you.*

Sioc nodded, turning away, feeling the ripping pain of betrayal at abandoning Oighir. He began to run and then took advantage of a gust of stormy wind to lift himself into the air. Instantly he became a cloud of glittering ice shards, the stone held at its heart.

He didn’t dare to look back again, but he knew that Cethlenn was already on his trail.

*Seandraíocht!* he called as he flew, using the old name for the Old Magic. *Wake, and guide me!*

And, far below, the Old Magic began to stir, its silver tendrils spreading out across the countryside. It urged Sioc on as Cethlenn’s fiery fury drew ever closer, and he flew as fast as he could, hoping to find a place of sanctuary before the witch caught up with him – and their last hope was extinguished forever.







Rose heaved a silent sigh as Emer McGuire and her scattering of cronies approached. *Oh, great*, she thought. Even finding herself a nook in the quietest corner of the school yard wasn't enough to escape. *I can't believe I've got to put up with her in nearly every class and I can't even get a break at lunchtime.* Out of the corner of her eye, Rose watched as Emer sat on the bench opposite, plonking her school bag down beside her, taking up all the available space. At her feet, her 'fan club' (as Rose liked to call them) settled, trying not to look awkward as they made themselves as comfortable as they could on the chewing-gum-speckled tarmac. Biting back her irritation, Rose refocused on her book, trying to block out everything but the words on the page.

This corner of the yard was where people came to sit when they wanted to read, or listen to music on their phones. It was cold, it smelled a bit odd, the wall-mounted benches were uncomfortable, and it was close to the entrance nearest the staff room, so Rose had been sure Emer wouldn't be caught near it. Yet here she was.

'So yeah, Lanzarote was so good,' came Emer's voice a few moments later, buzzing into Rose's thoughts like a persistent, irritating fly. 'It was, like, twenty-*seven* degrees most days? Maybe hotter, even. Dad would've been crispy if he'd been with us. At least Mum and I take care of our skin in the sun, but you know how *he* is.' As Emer spoke, she casually touched her flawless dark cheek with a perfectly manicured finger. 'Dad's paler than paper but just refuses to put on sunblock, even when we visit Mum's family in Lagos.' This was greeted with giggles, and Rose rolled her eyes. She took another bite of her sandwich and flipped over the page of her book.

'He stayed home again, then?' someone asked.

'Too much work, yada yada, the usual,' replied Emer. 'He's too busy making money to spend any of it.'

*Or spend any time with his family,* Rose thought.

*Though I can hardly blame him.*

‘You are so lucky, Emer,’ sighed one of the other girls. ‘All *we* did for Easter break was go to our holiday chalet in Wexford. I mean, *boring*.’

Rose glanced across at them. Emer held her pink-cased phone in one hand, angling it so that her fan club could check out her holiday photos.

One of the fan club gasped, her eyes bright with jealous admiration. ‘OMG, your mum let you wear a *bikini*?’

Emer shrugged. ‘Mum lets me do whatever when we’re on vaycay.’ She raised an eyebrow and flicked to the next photo.

‘That’s the pool?’ someone squeaked. ‘It’s bigger than my garden!’

Rose sighed, closing her book carefully. It was due back to the library in a few days – she’d been hoping to finish it this lunchtime so that Mam could drop it off tomorrow on her way to work, but she’d try to do it later instead. She put the remains of her sandwich back into her lunchbox and stood up, brushing crumbs off her uniform and zipping up her jacket, before turning to leave.

‘Oh, *sorry*,’ Emer said, sitting forward. She locked

her phone and put it down. ‘Are we disturbing you, Rosie-Roo?’ Her mouth was pursed sympathetically, but Rose could see the glint in her dark brown eyes.

Rose gave a tight smile. ‘No, not at all. I’m just done.’ She put the book beneath her arm and tried to walk past the group, but just as Rose thought she’d managed to get away, Emer stuck her legs out. Rose stumbled, dropping her book and her lunchbox. The book landed face-down, crumpling some of the pages. Rose pressed her lips together and stayed quiet. Speaking back only made Emer worse.

‘Oh, whoops!’ Emer trilled, as her friends laughed. ‘Rachel, pick up Rosie-Roo’s little book there, will you?’

A red-headed girl Rose recognised from Maths picked up the book by one corner and tossed it to her. ‘*A Wizard of Earthsea?*’ Rachel scoffed, as Rose caught the book. ‘What’s that about?’

Rose tried to flatten the damaged pages as she answered. ‘It’s – there’s a wizard, named Ged, who lives in this place called Gont, and –’

A gush of laughter from the others drowned out Rose’s words. She looked up, her pale cheeks flushing, to see Emer’s eyes shining with cruel amusement.

‘Oh my God, she actually thought you *meant* it!’

Rose stared at them. ‘Well, you asked,’ she said in a small voice.

‘Most of us gave up reading books about *wizards* when we were, like, *eight*,’ Emer said, her eyes on Rose. ‘But I’d hardly expect you to understand, right? I mean, where you come from, things are probably done a bit . . . differently.’

Rose squashed back the words she wanted to say. She was from Carriganawn, the same town as Emer and most of her gang – but that’s not what Emer meant and Rose knew it. She lived in a council estate while Emer lived in a fancy house on the far side of town. She’d gone to a small primary school not far from her house while Emer had gone to the posher one a few miles outside Carriganawn. And last year, most of Rose’s friends had gone to the community school at the top of Druid’s Hill, but Rose had taken the entrance exam for Carriganawn Grammar School. She’d not only passed but gained a full scholarship. Now she was here, and Emer never let her forget that she didn’t, and would never, belong.

‘Look, lunchtime’s nearly over, so . . .’ Rose shrugged, hoping Emer would take the hint and move



her leg. Emer paused for a painfully long moment, and Rose could feel the weight of her judgemental gaze, before she finally sighed, delicately, and pulled her legs back. She tucked her school skirt neatly beneath herself and shifted to sit up properly.

‘It’s Irish after lunch, right?’ she called, as Rose walked past. ‘Save me a seat, Rosie-Roo!’

Rose shuddered as she picked up her lunchbox and strode across the yard. Emer was in most of her classes except, luckily, for Maths (one of her favourites) and Art, but it didn’t really matter. If Emer wasn’t keeping an eye on Rose in person then one of her gang was doing it instead. Rose felt watched all the time and she hated it. But there was no point in talking to the teachers, who never seemed to take any side that put them in opposition to Emer McGuire or her family, and there was no point in talking to her parents, either. Her dad worked for Mr McGuire, Emer’s dad, and Rose was painfully aware of how much would be put at risk if the two men were to fall out.

Rose put the battered copy of *Earthsea* back into her locker and took out the schoolbooks she’d need for the afternoon. Irish, Geography and Science. Her head thudded as she pushed them into

her bag. *At least I can call to visit Nellie and Gracie on the way home*, she thought, trying to console herself with the prospect of friendly company, but also, hopefully, of tea and cake. Feeling brighter, she closed her locker and slung her bag onto her shoulder, making her way to her Irish class just as the bell began to ring.

Emer slid in late, as usual, whispering apologies to Ms O'Connor, as usual, but the teacher just raised an eyebrow as Emer took a seat behind Rose.

A few minutes into the class, as Rose was writing out verb conjugations, she felt a jerk as her chair was pushed forward. She stiffened, forcing herself not to look around. *Don't give her the satisfaction*, she told herself, trying not to imagine the smirk on Emer's face. In the next moment there was another sharp kick as her chair was nudged again. Rose put her pen down and squished her hands into fists for a minute, before picking up her pen once more and starting to write – only for her work to be ruined when another push from Emer made her hand jolt, sending a scribble through her carefully laid-out columns of words.

She turned her head, catching Emer's mocking

eye. ‘*Stop!*’ she whispered.

‘Rose! Cad é an fadhb?’ said the teacher. ‘What’s going on?’

Rose whipped her head around again, to face Ms O’Connor. ‘Tá brón orm,’ she apologised.

The teacher raised both eyebrows disapprovingly, and Rose swallowed a mouthful of irritation at herself. She’d given Emer what she wanted: she’d made the teacher angry *and* she’d get marked down for messy work. It was all so unfair! Everything had been going wrong lately, and sometimes – like now – it just seemed to build up, like water behind a dam, until it felt overwhelming. Rose squeezed her eyes tight shut, willing herself to stay calm.

*Think about cake.* Rose’s breathing slowed. *And being out of here.*

Mr Murphy’s Geography class passed quietly, mostly because Rose managed to get a seat on the far side of the classroom from Emer, but by the time the bell went for Mrs Mooney’s Science class, the last lesson of the day, she was so tired that she could barely keep her eyes open. She wasn’t paying enough attention to notice Emer sliding onto her bench, taking the seat beside her, until it was too late.

‘Right, everyone,’ Mrs Mooney began, clapping her hands for attention. ‘I want to talk to you all today about your end-of-year project. We have about six weeks until summer break, okay? And in that time we’re going to focus, in pairs, on a topic that I’ll assign you at random. The person you’re sharing a bench with today will be your partner for this project until the end of term.’ Muttering greeted this pronouncement, and Rose turned to Emer with undisguised distaste.

Emer winked. ‘Guess you’re stuck with me, Rosie-Roo,’ she whispered, her words smelling like bubble-gum.

‘I’m going to leave a card face-down on your benches as I pass,’ Mrs Mooney continued. ‘When every pair of students has their card, you may all flip them over and see what your topic is. No peeking!’

Rose ignored her bench-mate, keeping her eyes focused on the small piece of white card that Mrs Mooney had placed in front of them. She didn’t care what the topic was – the idea of doing any sort of project with Emer was stomach-turning.

‘Now,’ Mrs Mooney announced from the back of the class. ‘You can all check your topic.’ Rose reached

for the card, but Emer, whip-fast, grabbed it first.

‘Oooh,’ Emer said, staring at Rose over the top of the card. ‘*This* should be good. I’m sure I can leave most of it up to you, since you’re practically Greta Thunberg anyway.’

Rose frowned. ‘What? Just let me see it, please.’ She snatched the card from Emer. *The Climate Crisis* was written on it in Mrs Mooney’s neat lettering. Rose’s heart sank. Emer was right: Rose knew, right away, that this project wouldn’t be a team effort. *Even if it had been on the chemical composition of lip gloss, I would’ve had to do it all myself*, she thought, bitterly.

‘If anyone has any questions, come to me at the end of class,’ Mrs Mooney said, striding back to the top of the room. ‘Now, if we’re all ready? Let’s get back to the life-cycle of the sheep fluke, please!’

Rose stuffed the card into her pencil case. Emer was guaranteed a mark for doing nothing, and Rose knew there was nothing to be done about it. She ignored her for the rest of the lesson, despite Emer’s best attempts to distract her, and when the bell rang for the end of the day, Rose jumped into the queue of students wishing to speak to Mrs Mooney, in the hope that Emer would get bored waiting for her



and leave. She didn't actually have a question for the teacher, but she hoped it would delay her long enough for Emer and her gang to be gone. Out of the corner of her eye she watched Emer slowly pack her bag and shuffle out of the classroom, and Rose heaved a relieved sigh.

But then she made it to the top of the queue, and she still didn't have a question for Mrs Mooney. 'Well, Rosaleen,' the teacher said, using her full name, 'I'm surprised to see you here.'

'Um,' Rose began, desperately trying to think of something that didn't sound stupid. 'I was just . . . wondering, about the project. I mean, can it be a diorama? Or an experiment? Or does it have to be, just, written out, or whatever?'

Mrs Mooney gave her a quizzical look. 'It can take whatever form you and your project partner –' the teacher's expression softened – 'or whatever form *you* want it to.' Mrs Mooney gave a sympathetic grin. 'I know you'll do a great job,' she continued in a whisper.

Rose brightened, settling her bag on her shoulder more comfortably. 'Thanks, Mrs Mooney,' she said.

'Now, go on,' the teacher continued, ushering her

towards the door. ‘You’ll be late home.’

Rose frowned as she walked out into the corridor. It didn’t matter if she was late – her baby brothers were at the childminder’s, and her parents were both at work, so there was nobody there to notice what time she got home.

When she got to her locker, Rose checked her phone. She kept it on silent and locked away all day, following school rules, but as she saw, with a sigh, it wouldn’t have mattered anyway. There were no messages. Nothing from Sophia or Rory – her closest friends from primary school, who had started ghosting her weeks ago – and nothing, thankfully, from Emer, or anyone in her class. She threw the phone into her school bag along with the books she’d need for homework, and made her way out by the school’s small side entrance, which led towards the old heart of the town of Carriganawn. Using this gate usually meant she could avoid Emer and her fan club. Plus, she thought with a grin, it was the quickest way to get to Hargate Street, and on Hargate Street she’d find Nellie and Gracie.

Rose had first come across Nellie and Gracie when, like today, she’d been searching for a way home that

took her away from Emer and the others. She'd lost herself in the warren of the old town and eventually found herself on a quiet street with a quaint shoe repair shop (which she'd since learned was called a 'cobbler's') on one side and a sweet-shop opposite, and a pedestrian crossing in the middle. *Gréasaí*, she'd read over the cobbler's shop, and the sound of the word – *Gracie* – had sighed through her head. And then the man himself had appeared, emerging out of his shop and striding across the pedestrian crossing with the air of one who fully expected any traffic to wait until he was good and ready. Rose had been enchanted by his long, knobbly limbs and his tufts of snow-white hair, and when an equally ancient lady with a face full of softness and sunshine had greeted him on the far side, standing in the doorway of her sweet-shop, Rose had smiled. The lady had given her a fond wave before they disappeared inside the sweet-shop, and that had been that. Even though Rose's first visit to the sweet-shop hadn't happened that day, they'd been friends ever since.

Thinking had sped Rose's feet, and soon she found herself at Nellie's. She pushed the sweet-shop door open, hearing the *ting* of its little bell, and she was greeted by

the sound of music – or at least singing, of a sort.

‘Ah, hello, love,’ Nellie said, bustling through from her kitchen into the shop, her arms laden with a tray of freshly made sweets. She nodded towards the sound of the singing. ‘Gracie’s in good order, as you can hear.’

‘Hi, Nellie,’ Rose said, slipping her school bag off her shoulder and down to the floor. ‘Can I help?’

‘Not at all, not at all,’ the older lady said, making her way around the back of her counter. It had a large glass-fronted display cabinet, the type that curved at the top to give customers the best view of the delicious treats inside, and every nook and cranny behind the glass was piled high with sweets and chocolates. Hanging on the wall next to the window was a metal scoop for digging out the goodies; on the counter beneath the scoop was a pile of paper bags, ready to be filled. Nellie’s skilful hands quickly placed the fresh sweets into an empty compartment, and Rose could see her satisfaction as she gazed at the display. ‘There now,’ Nellie whispered, putting the tray down and wiping her hands on her apron. ‘We’re all set.’

‘It’s yourself!’ came Gracie’s voice, and Rose

turned, already smiling, to see the old man come climbing up the steps from Nellie's kitchen and into her shop. The kitchen door stood open behind him at the end of a short corridor, and Rose could see the small, cosy room, its lace-curtained windows letting in the light. 'Had you a good day, mo chroí?'

'Oh, you know,' Rose replied. 'The usual.'

'Indeed, and I don't know,' Gracie chuckled, shuffling around the back of Nellie's sweet counter. He reached in a gnarled hand to help himself to a lump of fudge, fast enough to avoid being smacked across the fingers by Nellie. He twinkled at Rose as he scurried away. 'It's been so many centuries since I sat in a classroom that I can't remember a thing about it.'

'Well,' Rose said, drawing in a breath, 'it's nothing that can't be fixed with a cup of tea.' She looked at Nellie hopefully. 'And whatever might be in the oven?'

'It's soda bread today,' said Nellie, with a wink. 'But there's plenty of fruit in it. I might see if I have any golden syrup to drizzle over it, if you're feeling fancy.'

Rose gave a wide grin, her tummy already gurgling, and the worries of the day starting to fade. 'That sounds *perfect*.'





An icy whirl swept through the night sky, approaching the sleeping town of Carriganawn. In its midst spun a blood-red stone, worn smooth by time. Sioc couldn't help but check, again and again, that he still had the weapon in his grasp – he could hardly believe he'd been successful in taking it from Cethlenn, and he thought gratefully of Oighir's courage, without which everything would already be lost. But he felt his energy waning, and knew the time was soon coming when he would have nothing left to draw on.

For now he flew on, casting about for somewhere to land, the stone seeming to grow heavier with each passing second. Below, he could see the Silver Road, like a gigantic net spread across the countryside. The web of bright magic shone into the darkness, and Sioc knew that the Seandraíocht had heard his cry for help.

It was doing what it could to aid him, but he couldn't help but notice that its sheen was dim – worryingly so. Cethlenn truly had chosen well: it was not only the ice giants of old who were weak but the very magic of the Seandraíocht itself. All the more reason, Sioc knew, to guard this stone with everything he had, until its true protector could be found. Grimly, he tightened his grip on the *tathlum*.

He became aware, somewhere below, of a ripple in the Silver Road – a knot in its net that seemed to shine more brightly than the rest. A junction of particular power, perhaps? Or maybe a human person who knew the old ways of the Seandraíocht? Someone who would know what to do and where to go, someone who would be a worthy keeper of the stone . . . The sparkling threads of power glowed once again, and that was enough. Sioc swirled one last time to take a look behind him. The witch was coming, blacker than black, sucking the light from the stars with every yard she flew. But still there was time.

There *had* to be time.

Sioc thickened himself into hard pellets of ice and began to fall, the stone clutched tightly in his frozen heart, and hoped for the best.

Rose's parents and brothers had gone to bed hours ago. The house was silent and still. Only the noise from the road outside, which never really stopped, was keeping her company – but Rose was used to the hum and whoosh of the passing cars, and the swoop of their headlights as they went by.

Yet somehow, despite nothing being out of the ordinary, Rose was wide awake.

She sighed as she sat up in bed. There was no point lying there staring at the ceiling, after all. Everything was covered in a filmy grey shadow, a little light seeping in through the crack where her curtains didn't hang quite closed. Her mamó, her dad's mam, had made them for her when she was a baby, and they were still covered with the dinosaur pattern Rose had loved when she was little – but the carefully stitched loops had started to come loose and Mamó wasn't here to fix them . . . Rose swallowed hard as she looked away. Mamó had become sick almost a whole year ago, and that had been the beginning of everything going wrong. Rose had started at the Grammar School in September, a few months after Mamó's first big operation, and Emer had been a problem right from day one. Then things got worse:

Mamó had spent Christmas in hospital, and she'd died a few days afterwards, just before the end of the year. Rose missed Mamó so much. Nothing seemed right any more. There was a jagged gap in her heart which just wouldn't close over, no matter how hard she pushed it. And Mamó had left traces of herself all over the place – photos, books, her old knitting needles and wool, things she'd made or fixed or built – so sometimes Rose felt there was nowhere she could look that wouldn't remind her of their huge loss.

She wiped her cheeks, tossing back the duvet and swinging her legs out of bed. Pushing her thoughts about Mamó away, she slid her feet into her furry slippers and straightened her nightdress. As she passed her chair, she grabbed her cardigan from where she'd thrown it earlier. She pulled it on and then crept to her bedroom door. The day had been warm for April, but now the air seemed cool; Rose wrapped the cardigan around her as she peered out of her room. Moonlight pooled in the upstairs hallway. From the next room she heard her dad's rumbling snore and her mother coughing in her sleep. The gentle glow of the nightlight spilled out of Colm

and Brian's room, but there was nothing but silence from behind their door. Rose tiptoed towards it and peeped in at the sleeping babies in their side-by-side cots; they were plump-cheeked and rosy, their tiny eyes shut and their arms and legs spreadeagled, like they were playing star-jumps in their dreams. She smiled and crept out again, counting her quiet steps as she made for the stairs.

The soles of her slippers went *swish-swish-swish* on the tiles as she walked towards the kitchen, and Rose pressed her lips together as she went. *This is your house, ninny*, she told herself. *Plus, whoever heard of a Darke afraid of the dark?* Still, she was relieved when she reached the kitchen and was able to switch on the light. The naked bulb hung over the dining table and shone brightly enough for her to see the whole room. Everything, of course, looked entirely normal. *Boringly* normal. Almost ridiculously ordinary. Rose smiled at herself. *If Emer McGuire could see me now . . .* Her smile faded a bit. 'I think about her enough when I'm at school,' she whispered, pushing her hands into her cardigan pockets. 'I *really* don't want to think about her here.' She shuddered, pulling a face as her eyes fell on her school bag.

*I could make a start on my Science project, Rose thought. Or I could try to finish Earthsea so Mam can return it.*

It was an easy decision. Rose pulled her library book out of her school bag and curled up in the old fake-leather armchair by the back door, the one Grandad O'Mahony had loved to sit in whenever he visited, and picked up the story from where she'd left off earlier.

Just as she was starting the next chapter, Rose heard something odd. She sat up, senses jangling, and listened hard.

There it was again. A *pop*, like a stone hitting the window – or landing on the glass of the skylight over the kitchen.

Quickly, she shut the book and pushed it back into her school bag. Then, on slippered feet, she stood up and slid forward, step by slow step. Keeping her eyes on the skylight, Rose waited.

Another barrage of popping made her jump. She spun on her heels, surveying the room. The empty kitchen was to her back now, and facing her was the messy dining table, covered in the twins' finger paintings which her mam had left out to dry overnight.

She saw the sagging, dusty bookcase in the corner, the playpen set out in front of it and the bottom shelves still crammed full of Rose's favourite baby books, which her brothers now spent many happy hours chewing to pieces. She let her gaze hop to the back door, its window dark as the night outside.

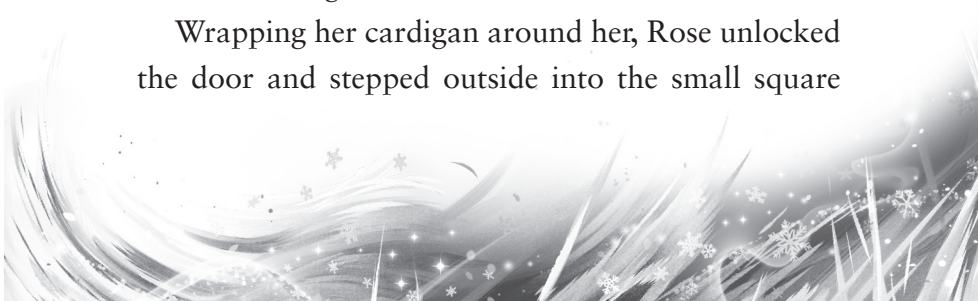
*Pop. Pop. Popopopopop.*

Rose gasped, stifling a yell. There was no grumbling or groaning from upstairs, no sound of the floorboards creaking. *How can they not hear it?*

The noise returned with explosive vengeance, and Rose looked straight up. The pane of the skylight above her head was quickly filling with tiny white crystals – hard, round balls of ice. Every time one landed, it made a *pop* against the glass.

‘Hail?’ Rose whispered, her eyes widening. *But there's so much of it – and it's so loud!* Her skin prickled with unease. Acting on impulse, she reached out and opened the cutlery drawer, pulling out a wooden spoon. Gripping it tightly, she looked to check if the back door key was hanging on its nail beside the fridge. She lifted it down.

Wrapping her cardigan around her, Rose unlocked the door and stepped outside into the small square



patch of garden. The moon was bright, and the garden swam in silver light.

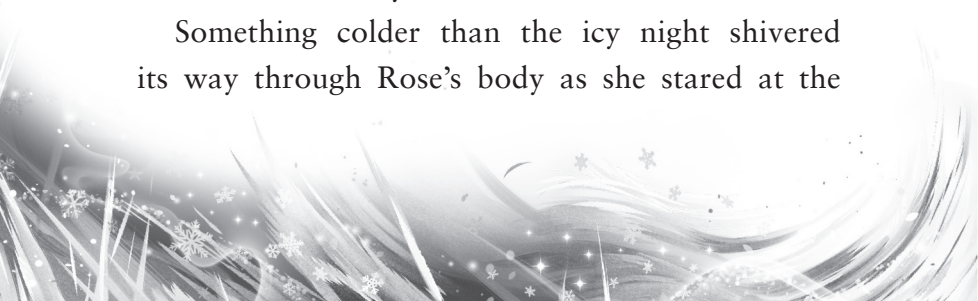
The ground was covered in a sea of white.

As she walked her steps crunched, her ankles and legs pimpling into gooseflesh as the cold breeze swept around them. She stared up into the sky. The moon was full and the night was clear.

The hail was coming down hard, yet somehow it didn't hurt. It landed in her hair and on her face, melting almost as quickly as it came, and her breath was like a cloud around her head. She stood and watched it fall, mesmerised by the patterns it made in the air, wondering if this was the universe's way of telling her to get started on her Science project after all. It had been a mild, settled day, with barely a wisp of breeze and no cold forecast – so conditions weren't really right for hail. Yet, here it was.

Then Rose looked at the ground – and her breath caught in her throat. On the grass, right in front of her, the hail was beginning to form into two piles. She raised the wooden spoon like a sword as the hail built itself into two frosty towers.

Something colder than the icy night shivered its way through Rose's body as she stared at the





two hailstone heaps, which had taken on the unmistakeable shape of legs. They grew taller and taller until they met to form a torso, which branched out into two huge arms that seemed to bristle with long, sparkling hair, and then, finally, a gigantic head formed – a head with spikes all around it, like the shell of a conker, and two round eyes that looked like the darkness between stars. The hail stopped, its job done, and the night grew quiet once again.

Rose shook from head to toe as she stared at the giant made of ice, which was standing in her garden. It was taller than the kitchen roof, and the longer it stood there the more real it seemed to get.

‘Who –’ she began, looking back up at the ice giant. ‘Wha-what –’ The words wouldn’t form, and the giant said nothing. In fact, when she looked closer it didn’t seem to have a mouth.

After a few moments the giant started suddenly, as though it had heard an unexpected noise. It crouched, lifting its massive head to the sky and then back to look at Rose. The darkness of its eyes seemed to suck at Rose like a black hole. It reached out one gigantic hand, unfolding three long fingers and a thumb which had been curled protectively around something.



It was a stone, reddish and oval-shaped, and the giant held it out for Rose to take.

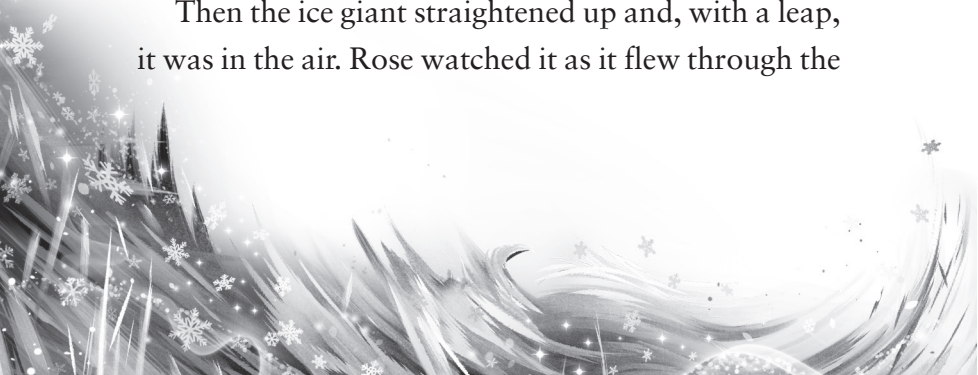
Her brain swirling with thoughts and questions, Rose looked up at the sky, wondering what the giant had heard. Everything seemed quiet; all she could see were stars, twinkling silently in their usual formations – and then she felt something cool and heavy on her shoulder. It was the giant's other hand. Her attention was pulled away from the sky and back to the face of the ice giant, which was now only inches from her own.

*Please*, the giant seemed to say, offering her the stone once again. *You must take it.*

Rose blinked away from the ice giant's eyes and reached into its palm. She lifted the red stone free. It was warm somehow, despite the ice giant's touch, and Rose closed her own fingers around it as best she could, just as she'd seen the ice giant doing.

The creature had no mouth to smile, but Rose knew it was pleased.

Then the ice giant straightened up and, with a leap, it was in the air. Rose watched it as it flew through the

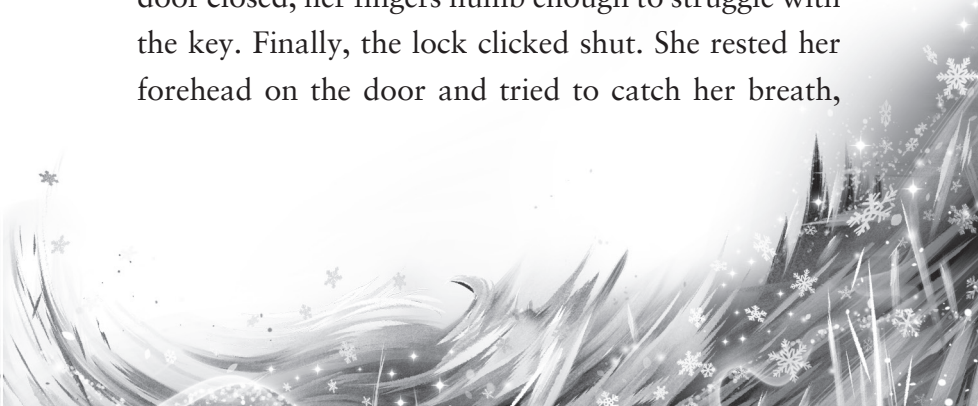


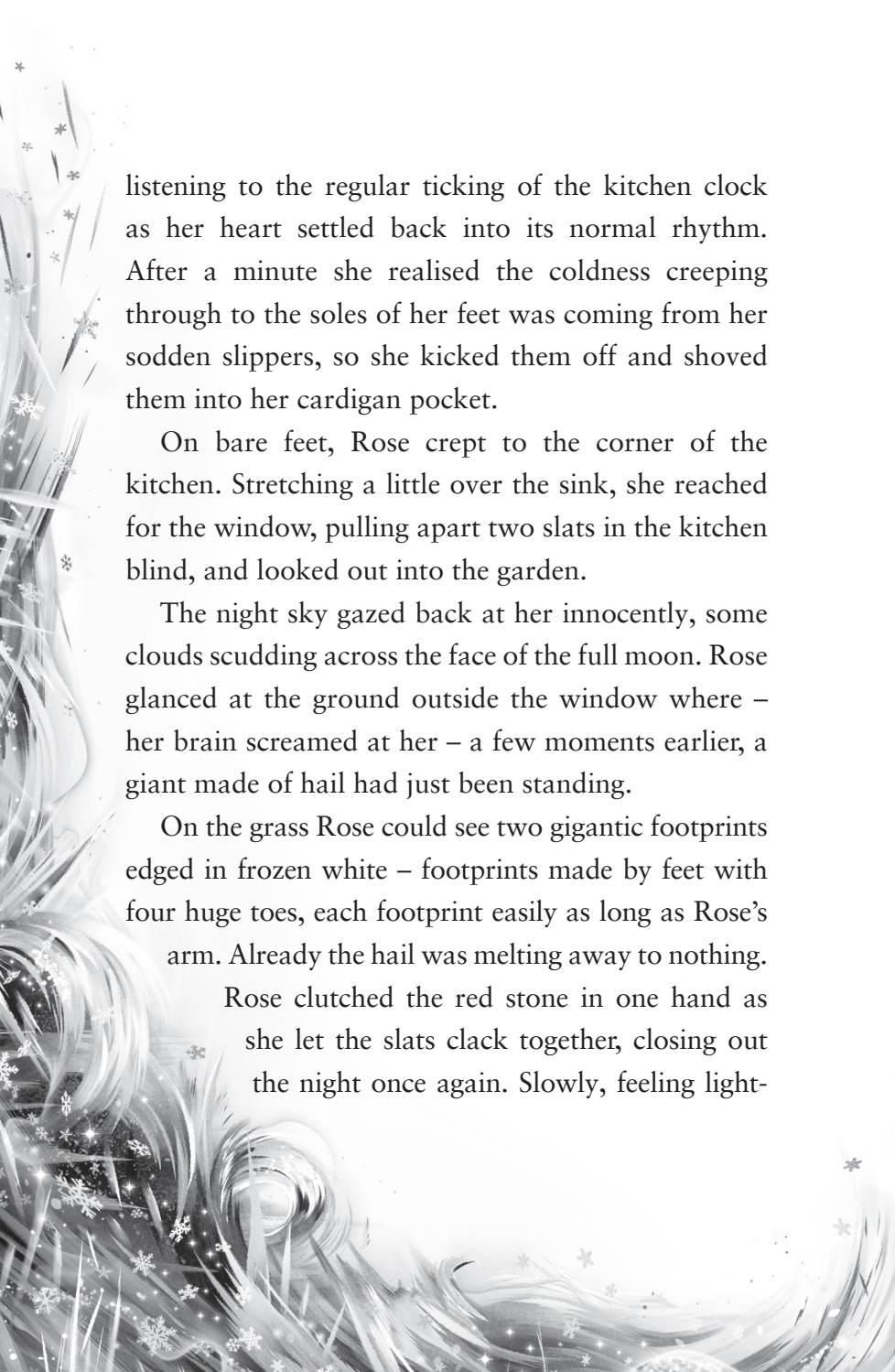
darkness, its body white enough to stand out against the night sky – and then it seemed as though some of the blackness of space moved to intercept it. Rose's mouth opened in shock as she watched. Quick as a blink, the gigantic frost creature disappeared, like the night had swallowed it.

The red stone suddenly grew uncomfortably warm, and Rose opened her hand to look at it.

Instantly she knew she shouldn't have, and she closed her fist tightly around it again.

She looked back up at the sky overhead and saw something in it twist about, as though a shape in the darkness had turned to search for her, and Rose's panic bypassed her brain. She whirled around, dropping the wooden spoon in her haste, her slippers skidding a little on the hail, and ran for her house. The back door was still open, spilling the light from the kitchen out into the night, and Rose hurried towards it. Seconds later she barrelled through and pulled the door closed, her fingers numb enough to struggle with the key. Finally, the lock clicked shut. She rested her forehead on the door and tried to catch her breath,





listening to the regular ticking of the kitchen clock as her heart settled back into its normal rhythm. After a minute she realised the coldness creeping through to the soles of her feet was coming from her sodden slippers, so she kicked them off and shoved them into her cardigan pocket.

On bare feet, Rose crept to the corner of the kitchen. Stretching a little over the sink, she reached for the window, pulling apart two slats in the kitchen blind, and looked out into the garden.

The night sky gazed back at her innocently, some clouds scudding across the face of the full moon. Rose glanced at the ground outside the window where – her brain screamed at her – a few moments earlier, a giant made of hail had just been standing.

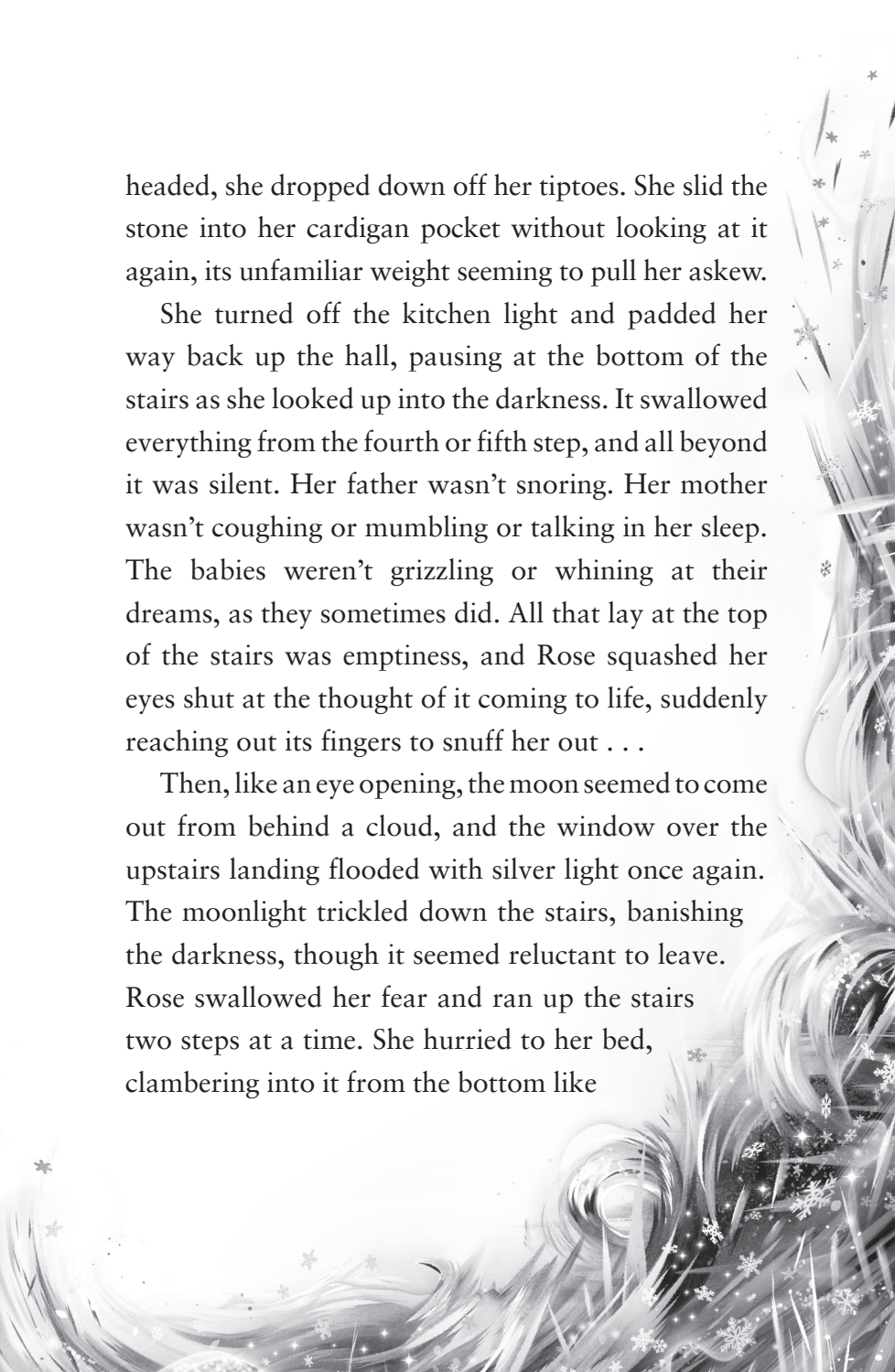
On the grass Rose could see two gigantic footprints edged in frozen white – footprints made by feet with four huge toes, each footprint easily as long as Rose's arm. Already the hail was melting away to nothing.

Rose clutched the red stone in one hand as she let the slats clack together, closing out the night once again. Slowly, feeling light-

headed, she dropped down off her tiptoes. She slid the stone into her cardigan pocket without looking at it again, its unfamiliar weight seeming to pull her askew.

She turned off the kitchen light and padded her way back up the hall, pausing at the bottom of the stairs as she looked up into the darkness. It swallowed everything from the fourth or fifth step, and all beyond it was silent. Her father wasn't snoring. Her mother wasn't coughing or mumbling or talking in her sleep. The babies weren't grizzling or whining at their dreams, as they sometimes did. All that lay at the top of the stairs was emptiness, and Rose squashed her eyes shut at the thought of it coming to life, suddenly reaching out its fingers to snuff her out . . .

Then, like an eye opening, the moon seemed to come out from behind a cloud, and the window over the upstairs landing flooded with silver light once again. The moonlight trickled down the stairs, banishing the darkness, though it seemed reluctant to leave. Rose swallowed her fear and ran up the stairs two steps at a time. She hurried to her bed, clambering into it from the bottom like



she used to do as a kid. A moment later there was a muffled thump as she pushed her cardigan, with her still-sodden slippers in one pocket and the mysterious stone in the other, out onto the carpet, and Rose lay there, her head beneath her duvet, thoughts ping-ponging around inside her brain. *None of that was real, it was a dream – it had to be a dream . . .*

It only seemed like minutes later when she jerked awake, her eyes popping open at the sound of her mother's voice from downstairs. The room was bright with daylight, and Rose realised she'd slept through the night.

'Who left my good wooden spoon out in the garden?' Mrs Darke shouted. 'Rosaleen!'

Rose's head emerged from underneath her duvet. Her face, behind a tangle of hair, was pulled tight into a grimace.