



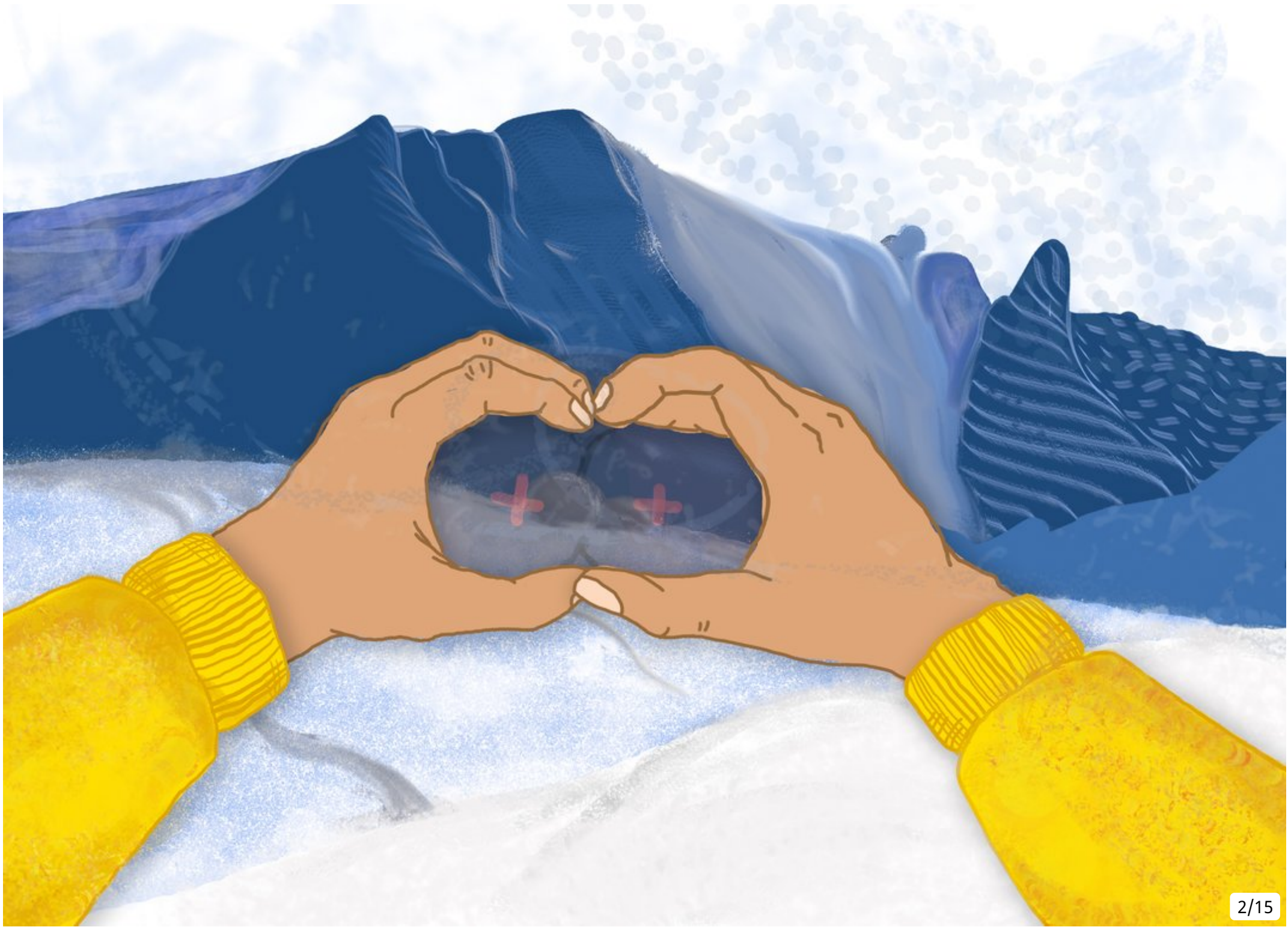
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Level 4

Gyalmo, the Queen of the Mountains

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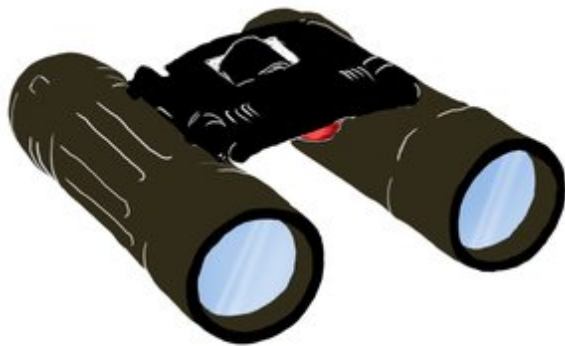
In the cold desert mountains of the Himalaya, where the climate is too harsh for even trees to grow, lives an animal almost as mythical as the Yeti. This is the Snow Leopard. The most elusive of big cats.

Peering through her binoculars, Koyna was sure she was looking at this fabled animal.

“There! Can you see?”

“That’s a rock!” her friend Lobzang, replied.

They were in the Spiti Valley, one of the few places in the world where snow leopards live. On that day it was -20°C . Koyna and Lobzang were lucky as in winter it could go as low as -40°C .





Gyalmo, the snow leopard, was asleep on a ridge as the sounds of humans drifted towards her. She lazily opened an eye, and on the slope opposite her, she spotted two humans clumsily trudging up. A deep gorge separated them from her. She could see them rubbing their palms together and shuffling from foot to foot.



"It's cold for them even though they are wearing so many furs," Gyalmo thought. Her thick fur and long tail, protected her from the cold. She wrapped her long tail snugly around herself and settled down to watch.



Koyna and her friend spotted a herd of *bharal*, a wild sheep, grazing in the meadow ahead of them. "Maybe if we watch them, the snow leopard might come and attack the bharal," Lobzang said. Snow leopards are carnivores and they hunt wild sheep and wild goats like bharal, ibex, and argali. "They might be difficult to catch," Koyna said.



Gyalmo felt insulted when she heard that. "Ha! I can easily catch a bharal!"

For a moment she thought of showing them her hunting skills but her stomach was still full from her last meal. She remembered the wily little bharal she had hunted the previous day. She knew he was the one she wanted when she first saw him. He was smaller than the rest, and was grazing a bit away from the herd. Big mistake. She crouched low and crept as close to the herd as she could, without them seeing or smelling her.

Slowly...

Slowly...

When she finally leapt forward the little bharal looked up, startled, then turned and ran.

The game was on.

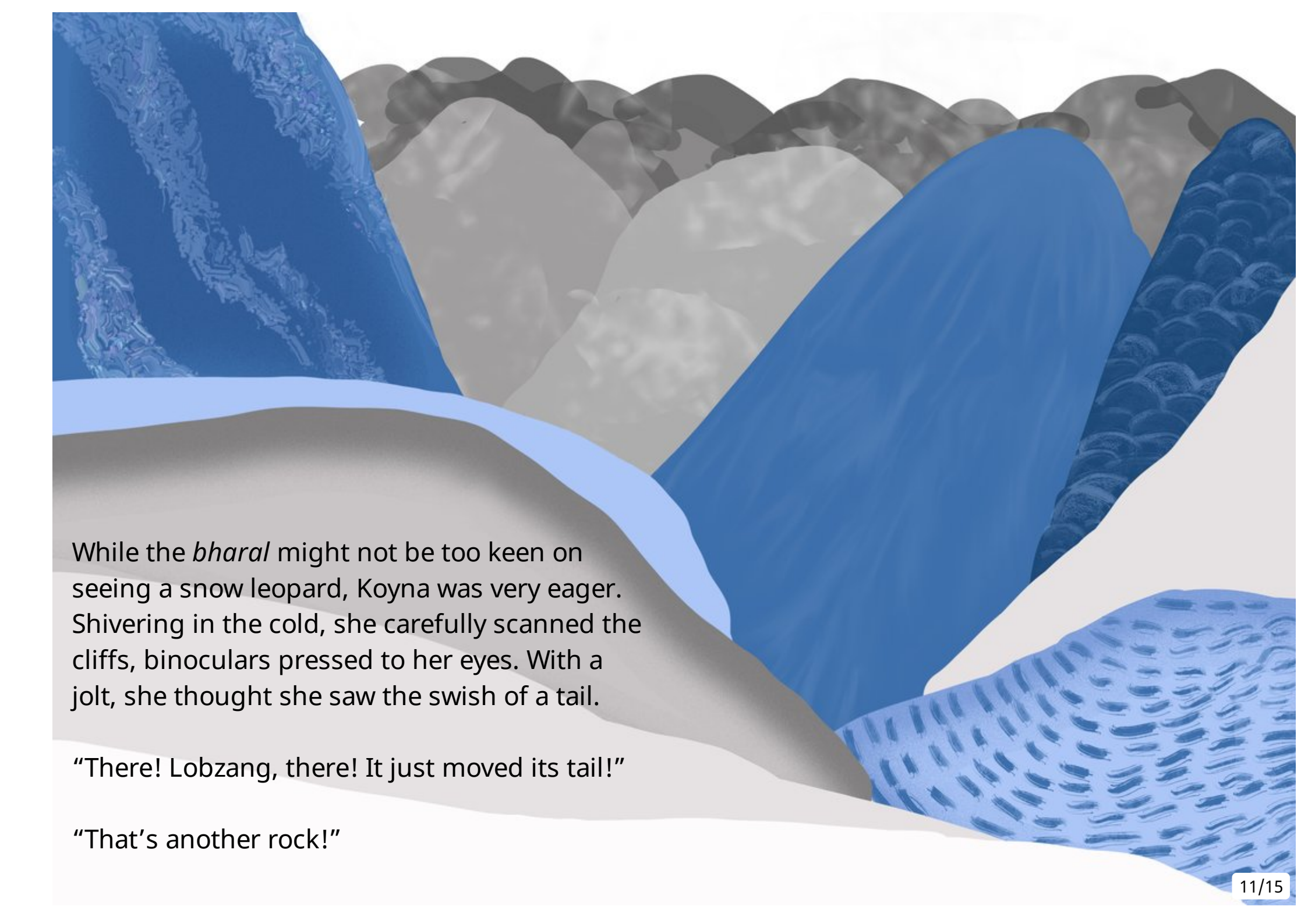


A mix of snow and dust swirled behind them as they ran up the steep mountain. The bharal made a sharp turn, jumping over a rock, and ran in the opposite direction, trying to shake her off. Without missing a beat, she turned as well, her long tail helping her maintain her balance. When she was close enough, she stretched out a paw and tripped the bharal. He stumbled. Before he could regain balance, she was on him.

That had been a heady experience! Gyalmo's heartbeat accelerated in excitement, thinking of it.

"Ah, the thrill of the chase!"



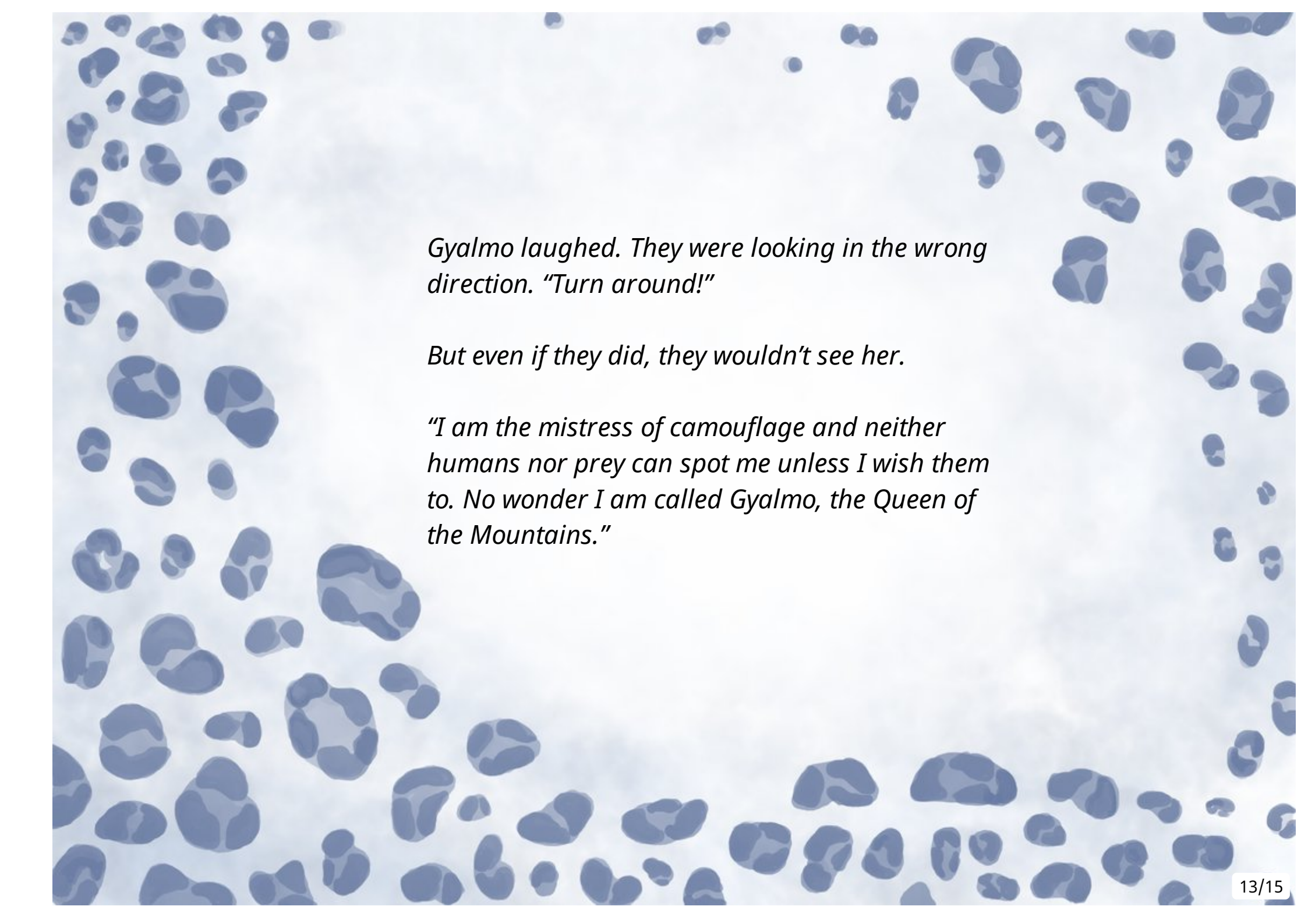


While the *bharal* might not be too keen on seeing a snow leopard, Koyna was very eager. Shivering in the cold, she carefully scanned the cliffs, binoculars pressed to her eyes. With a jolt, she thought she saw the swish of a tail.

“There! Lobzang, there! It just moved its tail!”

“That’s another rock!”





Gyalmo laughed. They were looking in the wrong direction. "Turn around!"

But even if they did, they wouldn't see her.

"I am the mistress of camouflage and neither humans nor prey can spot me unless I wish them to. No wonder I am called Gyalmo, the Queen of the Mountains."

Koyna was learning the hard way why the snow leopard was called the Elusive Cat, the Ghost of the Mountains, a mythical creature. Even though she waited and waited for hours, she saw nothing but snow and rocks. She went away, half frozen, without having seen the Queen of the Mountains.

Gyalmo watched the humans leave, grinning and dreaming of Bharal.



Bharal (*Pseudois nayaur*): Also called blue sheep, is a wild ungulate that is neither a goat nor a sheep. They are found in the high Himalayas and inner Mongolia. They are a very important source of food for the snow leopard.

Asiatic Ibex (*Capra sibirica*): This is a species of wild goat that is found throughout the snow leopard's range. It is usually found between 2000 to 5000 meters but in Mongolia can be found as low as 700 meters.

Argali (*Ovis ammon*): This is the largest species of wild sheep in the world. The males have long horns that curve inward and can reach upto 6 feet in length! If there are enough Argali, they can form herds that are as big as 200 to 300 animals.

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Gyalmo, the Queen of the Mountains

(English)

Koyna is in Spiti Valley trying to spot a snow leopard with her friend Lobzang. Gyalmo, the snow leopard, watches from a distance as they try their best to spot her.

This is a Level 4 book for children who can read fluently and with confidence.



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