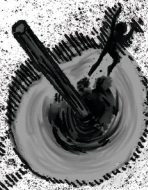




Singe's eyes shot open.





The voice belonged to a short witch jogging through the field. She headed straight toward the stake and *leaned* her backpack, which had a dead toad strewn on top, against it. "Stakes are signs of trouble most of the time... But this one is kinda nice!"



"But who cares about excuses?" She knelt down beside Singe. "I should have started with aloe!"



"Hello." Singe responded.

"No, ALOE, for the **burns**." The witch doctor said, producing a thick aloe vera plant from one of her pockets. "But also, hello!" She cut into the plant with a pocket knife.



"You mentioned a village nearby?" Singe asked, "I'm sure they can help."

"This is stronger than it looks," said the witch doctor as her knife sliced through the gel like butter. When Singe didn't respond, the doctor added, "And... *it's enchanted!*"

"Besides, you don't want to go to that village." Her tone changed as she prepped the paste. "They probably **burned** you."

"No." Singe reassured her, "You're only **burned** for practicing the cursed arts." The sentiment rose from some *hopeful* place within her.



"That's a lie, but it's good that you remember something from before the stake. The Smoke Witch warned me the **fire** might've **burnt** all your memories."

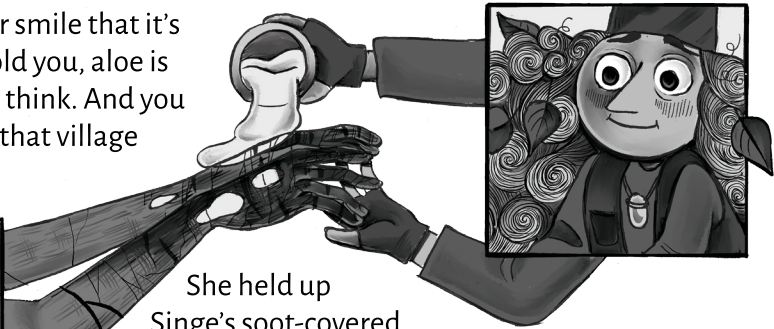
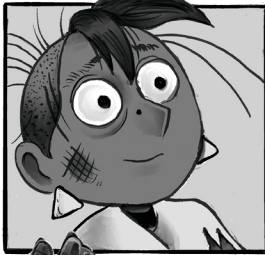
"The **fire burnt** my memories?" Singe asked.

"**Fire burns** magic. And since you had memories of your magic, it **burned** those away too. The pain you felt last night was your magic extinguishing."



She tipped the contents of the mortar onto Singe's arms and a cool sensation ran up her fingertips.

"I take it from your smile that it's working?" See, I told you, aloe is stronger than you think. And you are stronger than that village thinks."



She held up Singe's soot-covered arms, "These are the ashes of dead magic. If the fire had kept burning, it would have burned away all your magic."

She set down the mortar and pestle.

"Now it's my job to heal you up."



Singe stared at her hands. Under the soot were hundreds of fine red scars crawling up her arms. As she began to wonder how far up they went, she caught her reflection in the doctor's knife. Burn holes and ash covered her dress, but her face was mostly spared, save her hair. The worst of the scars were on her hands.



"You were lucky, the strong wind and rainfall saved you from the fire yesterday." The witch doctor said as she put away the aloe and knife. Then she straightened up and held out a hand.

"I'm Yew-Veda, I'll help you get back on your feet."



Singe took Yew-Veda's hand and stood up, "My name is -AAAH!" She dropped to the ground, her **gloopy** hand having slipped out of Yew's grasp.

"Whoops," said Yew-Veda, hand still extended, "I should have said it takes the aloe ten minutes to dry. Um, you were saying...?"

"My name
is

Singe..."

Yew nodded, then wiped her hand on her backpack and hefted it on. The "dead" toad on top yawned and sat up in a very-much-alive way.

"And I'm Bufo Wonder,
pleasure to meet you."

Singe fainted.

Luckily
she was

on the

ground already...