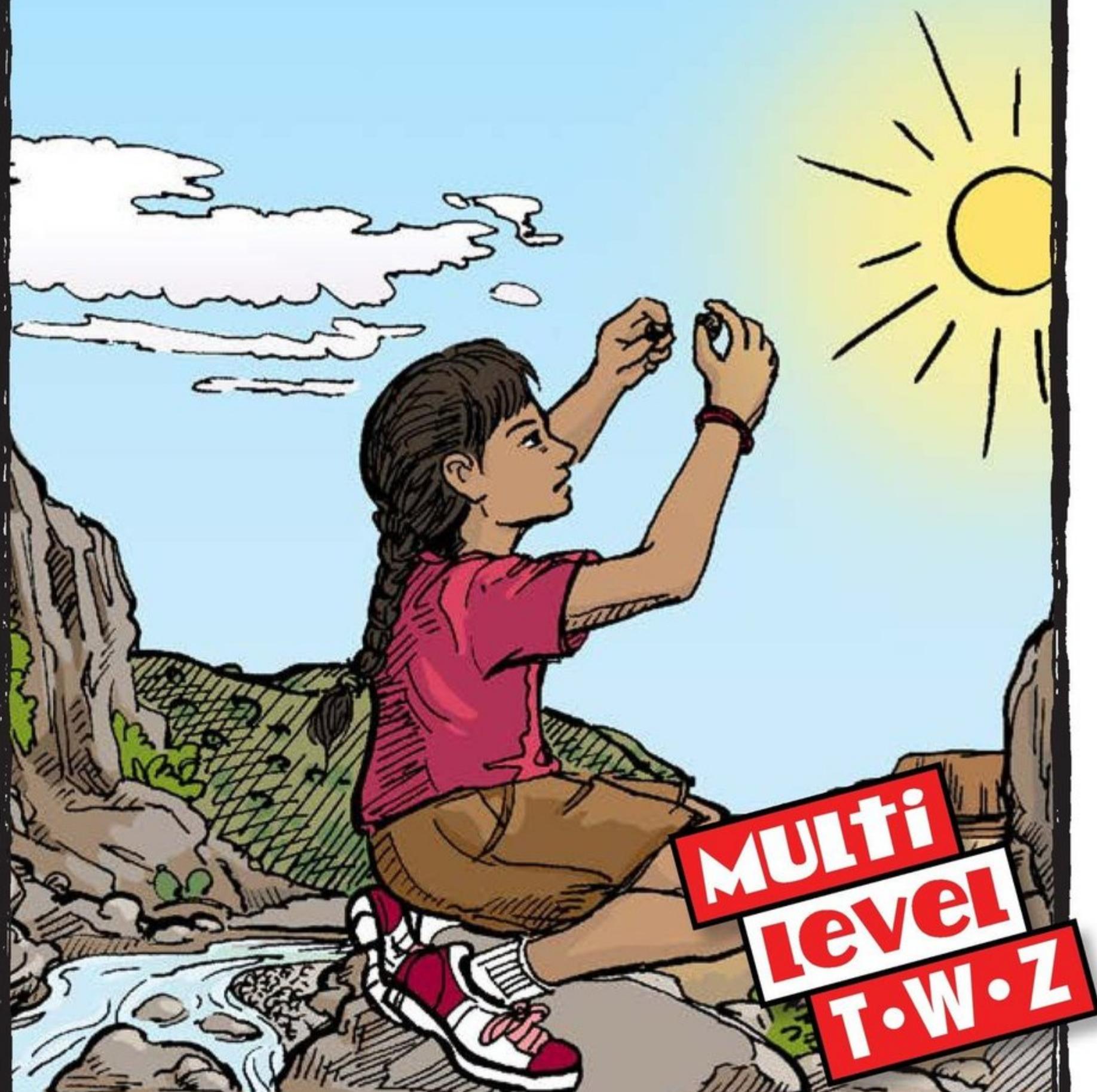


LEVELED Book • Z

The Black Stones



MULTI
level
T•W•Z

Written by Dina Anastasio • Illustrated by Lisa Ing

The Black Stones



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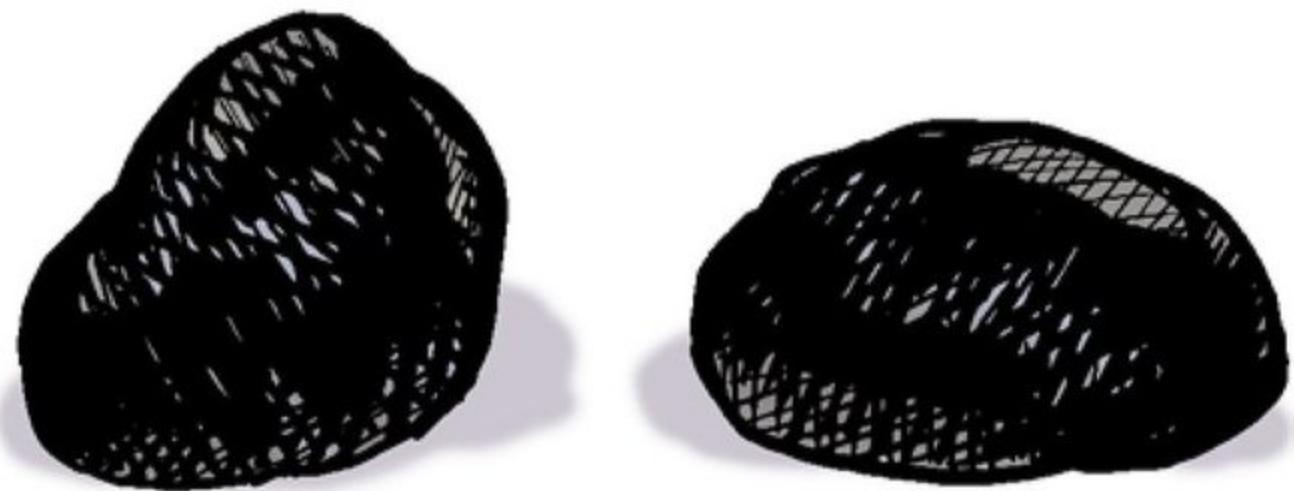


Table of Contents

The Stones	4
Volcanoes and Magic	9
The Experiment	13
Searching for Answers.....	16
Apache Teardrops	20
Glossary	23



The Stones

Tala glanced around nervously before snatching up the two small black stones near the riverbank at the base of **Apache Leap Mountain**. If her brother was watching, he'd desire the stones for himself, and she had no intention of surrendering them to him. She had discovered them; they were her personal property now.

Paco seemed **preoccupied** and was tossing pebbles into the swift-flowing river, so Tala knelt down and plucked the shimmering black stones out of the water. The jet black stones were as dark as a starless night and as smooth as glass—glass forged through natural processes, fashioned by the rapid cooling of lava. When she raised the **translucent** stones up to the sun, the light glittered through them faintly.

Paco gazed at the movements of the currents, trying to memorize the complex patterns revealed within them. Each **pilgrimage** to the riverbank offered new opportunities to observe interesting details for his painting of the landscape. The river whispered secrets to his **subconscious** mind; he hoped to reveal those secrets through his painting.

He was also **scouring** the riverbank looking for a good-luck piece, a **talisman**, possibly an arrowhead or a pebble of unusual coloring. A quail was his guide; whenever she stopped and pecked at the earth, he searched for his talisman in that location. If something caught his eye, he'd examine it, then lob it into the river if it was not perfect. At one point, he glanced up and saw his sister holding something up to the sun.

"Hey, Tala, what did you find?"

She immediately dropped her hands to her sides. "Let me see!" her brother called.

Tala groaned and clutched the stones tightly, thinking that if she were quick enough, she might be able to conceal them from her annoying twin. She hugged her knees and listened to her brother's footsteps as he **scurried** from rock to rock, moving closer and closer.

As he drew nearer, her heart pounded loudly in her chest. She was already irritated, knowing that he would behave like a blood-sucking leech, the way he always did. When he was behind her, she rose suddenly and walked away without a backward glance.

"Show me what's in your hand!" Paco said.

Tala knew that if she revealed the stones to her brother he would beg and plead with her to give them to him until she became furious or gave in to his **outrageous** demands. Tala spun around to **confront** him. "These stones are mine!" she shouted. "I found them, and I'm keeping them, no matter what you say."

"Just show them to me!" Paco darted forward and grabbed her fist, then tried to pry it open.

"Mom!" Tala cried, struggling to pull her fist away while tightening her grip on the stones.



"Mom!
Paco's
pestering
me again."

Mrs. Yates sighed and hurriedly raised herself from the flat rock where she had been sitting quietly for the last half hour, thinking about how challenging her life had become. The death of her husband three years ago had been difficult, but seeing their children take the anger and resentment they felt over his death and turn it against each other was becoming unbearable. She knew that she needed to find a way to bring Tala and Paco together, but nothing she had tried so far had worked. Perhaps today would be different. Maybe this time she would find a way.

For a few precious minutes, the twins hadn't been arguing, which was unusual for them. But things were back to normal now—they were at it again, hammer and tongs. *If only they could learn to get along—if only they could be friends*, she thought. She ran toward her **quarreling** children, whose yelling was growing more **frenzied** as they struggled with something in Tala's hand.

At the riverbank, she dragged her twins apart and sat them down on a boulder. She positioned herself squarely between them, letting them calm down before she spoke. She waited to see if either of them would apologize.

Paco shifted restlessly, and Tala jabbed the toe of her shoe into the dirt repeatedly, but neither said a word. The landscape seemed infected with the twins' anger: the river grew agitated, the sky darkened, and two Harris hawks shrieked and circled in the sky.

Tala clutched her stones tightly and thought about how the river had smoothed and polished them, gradually eroding the rough edges over countless lifetimes. These thoughts distracted her from her anger—but just for a moment.

"I found the stones," she said when she grew a bit calmer. "Paco tried to steal them from me, the way he tries to take everything. This argument is his fault; I didn't do anything."

"Yes, you did!" Paco insisted. "You wouldn't let me see them—not even for a second! Why

wouldn't you let me see what they looked like? I didn't want to take them from you; I just wanted to look at them."



“They’re mine!” Tala shouted.

“Everything is yours!” Paco shouted back.

“It just seems like I’m always trying to take things from you because you never want to share anything.”

“Oh yeah, right.” Tala’s eyes burned like lasers at her brother. “Name a single thing I own that you haven’t wanted to use or keep for yourself.”

Paco fumed silently.

Mrs. Yates closed her eyes to gather her thoughts and to block the sight of her children’s angry faces; she was exhausted by their fighting, and her heart felt heavy.

Volcanoes and Magic

“Your constant fighting makes me very unhappy,” Mrs. Yates said softly. “You are brother and sister—twins, even! You could be best friends for your entire lives if you would only try to get along or, failing that, to at least **tolerate** each other. Will you please try?”

Tala and Paco stared silently at the river, and Mrs. Yates could tell by the way their jaws tightened and their backs tensed that they had no intention of trying to get along—now or ever.

They were more alike than either of them realized, both tight knots of stubbornness, no matter what their mother did to loosen them. *Stubborn like their father*, she thought to herself. *At least they share that.*

She sighed and held out her hand. “Give me the stones, Tala,” she said.

“But it’s not fair,” Tala whined, still refusing to face her mother. She was furious, but she knew she’d cave in if she looked her mother in the eyes, and she wasn’t ready to surrender her anger—it was justified. “I found them, not Paco. They’re mine.”

Mrs. Yates waited. Tala’s lips were rigid with anger, but she dropped the shiny black stones onto her mother’s palm.

“It’s okay to be angry,” her mother said. “Sometimes life seems very unfair. Sometimes the things we love get taken away from us, and there’s nothing we can do about it. That is why we must treasure our friends and family. They are more important than the material things we find in the world.”



Tala folded her arms and felt her whole body stiffen. Was it such a crime that she wanted to keep something she had found on her own? She didn't have anything special to herself, not even her own birthday. Her brother could discover his own treasures; why did it always feel like he needed to take hers?

A moment later, Mrs. Yates told them to hold out a hand as she dropped one stone onto each child's outstretched palm. She expected each **sibling** to complain that the other had received the better stone, but the twins were silent. The silence continued as she led both of her children back up the trail to the car, and no one said a word during the drive home.

Tala and Paco may have been twins, but their **perspectives** on life were very different. Tala looked at the world as a scientist, which meant that everything was a question with answers that led to interesting **hypotheses** and **theories**. She wanted to know why the sky turned orange at sunset, how a seashell produced a sound when she held it to her ear, and what created lightning. She wished her brother could see the beauty of reality instead of always creating fanciful explanations for everything.

Paco wished that his sister could see that beauty was something worth appreciating for its own sake. There was more to life than scientific explanations for everything. He saw the world as a magical place filled with poems waiting to be written. He marveled at the beauty of an orange sunset, the mystery of a seashell's echo, the frightening yet exciting power of lightning.



He wondered if his stone was a portal into magical worlds. Maybe if he rubbed it three times a genie would appear, or perhaps it was a

good-luck charm that would protect him all his life. Maybe these stones were part of the secret the river was trying to communicate to him.

When Tala looked at her glassy stone, questions bubbled up in her mind: *How long had the stone been there? How old was it? Had it been formed by hot lava spewing out of a volcano?*

The twins argued about what it was and what it wasn't, and who was right and who was wrong, and—

"Stop it!" Mrs. Yates shouted when she just couldn't stand to listen to them **bicker** for another minute.

"But it's a volcanic glass rock," Tala insisted. "It erupted from inside the earth, and was cooled, and—"

"You're wrong!" Paco hollered. "It's a magical good-luck stone."

Mrs. Yates groaned and led the twins to the computer, sat down between them, and switched it on.



The Experiment

As the computer booted up, the twins argued about what website they should access first.

"We need to visit a website about talismans," Paco insisted, but his sister shook her head out of frustration.

"That will take forever, and we won't find anything about these particular stones," she said. "We need to start with geology, with a site about volcanoes—"

“That is so boring—”

“They’re my stones, so—”

“Hey!” Their mother held her hands up. “May I ask the two of you for a favor?” she said.

The twins waited.

“I would like you to do an experiment,” she said, looking at her daughter, who had perked up at the word. “As a gift to me,” she continued, now looking at her son, “I would like you both to research your stones without arguing, just this once. I’ll work with you to search for the answers, but no fighting. Life is much more enjoyable if you cooperate to solve your problems. Okay?”

Tala and Paco looked at each other for several seconds, and then they shrugged. “Okay,” they agreed reluctantly.

“What do you think we should search for first?” Mrs. Yates asked, her hands on the keyboard.

“I know exactly what we should do,” Paco announced. “We should . . .”

The look on his mother’s face made him hesitate. Maybe there was a better way to approach this experiment.

"You can decide," he said to his sister, who immediately suggested searching for the name of the stones. Paco was annoyed that she didn't even pause to thank him for letting her start.

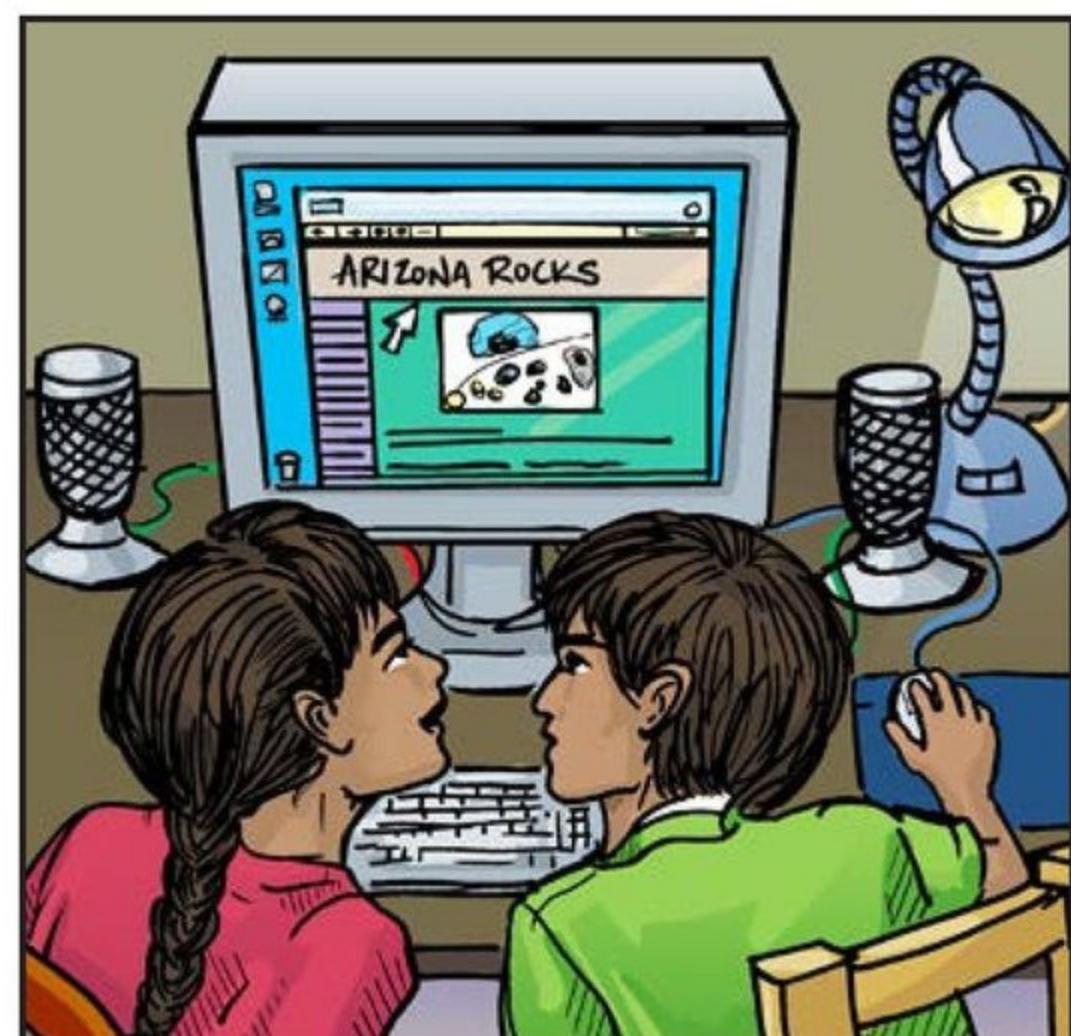
"Let's type the words *volcanic glass* into the search engine and see what websites come up."

"I don't care about volcanoes," Paco said.
"Let's type in *good-luck stones*."

"*Volcanic glass!*"

"*Good-luck stones!*"

Mrs. Yates put a gentle hand on each of their shoulders, and her firm but loving touch had a soothing effect. When they were quiet, she made a suggestion.



"How about both?" she said. "And how about we add where you found the stones as well?" she said as she typed the words *volcanic glass good-luck stones Apache Leap Mountain* into the search engine. Mrs. Yates knew that the more specific they made their search, the more likely they were to get the results they wanted.

When the long list of search results appeared, Paco and Tala studied them together, reading the website names and brief descriptions. One of the descriptions mentioned nearly all of the terms they had used in their search.

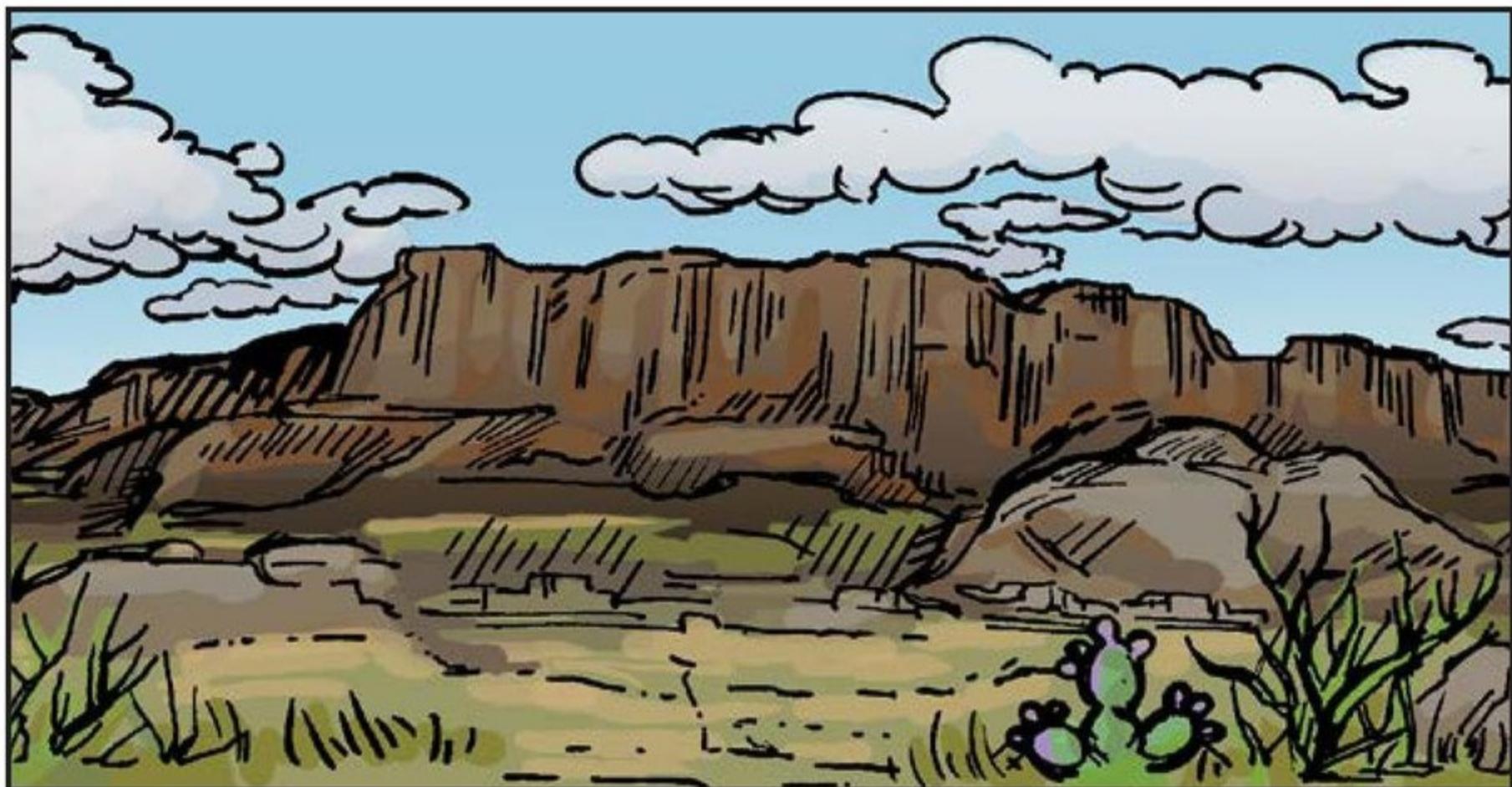
They both pointed to the screen and said, "Let's go to that one," at exactly the same time. Paco and Tala looked at each other in amazement; they had actually agreed on something. Mrs. Yates hid a small smile and clicked on the website link.

While the website loaded, Mrs. Yates went to answer the phone, leaving Tala and Paco alone. Her empty chair was a vast **chasm** between them, and neither of them really believed they could cross it.

Searching for Answers

The website showed various images of rocks that looked similar to the shiny stones Tala had found. Paco and Tala compared their stones to the ones on the page in front of them and grinned.

"That's our stone!" they said in **unison**, but this time they didn't look at each other; they just smiled to themselves. They wouldn't have admitted it to each other, but working together really was kind of fun.



The twins sat up straight and silently read the words on the monitor together.

"I told you!" Tala shouted, poking her brother. "Our stones came from inside the earth. They are called **obsidian**, and they were ejected from a volcano. So I'm right!"

Paco was too busy reading a different part of the page to listen to his sister, and when he was finished, he said, "I'm right! I told you these stones were good-luck stones."

"See that?" Tala said as she pointed to the part of the page she was reading, and Paco followed her finger to the words *volcanic glass* and read that part of the page. Then he focused his sister's attention on the words *good-luck stones* and watched as she read.

"It looks as if we were both right," Paco said.

“Yes,” his sister agreed. “These stones are probably millions of years old. They came from inside the earth, and they have brought luck to countless people.”

For once, they were working together as a team.

“Let’s read about the legend of the Apache Tears,” Paco finally suggested. “It doesn’t explain much on this page.”

“I guess we should do more research,” Tala agreed.

The twins went back to the search page, typed in *Apache Tears*, and waited as several results came up. One website mentioned the Pinal Apache, which was a name once given to a band of Apache from near Superior, Arizona, where Tala and Paco lived.

“Let’s try that site,” Paco said, and when his sister agreed, he was happily surprised. He began to realize that he was tired of fighting with her about every little thing.

This webpage showed an illustration of an Apache warrior above a poem called “Apache Tears.” Tala and Paco read the poem on the webpage slowly and carefully, and when they were finished, they read it again.

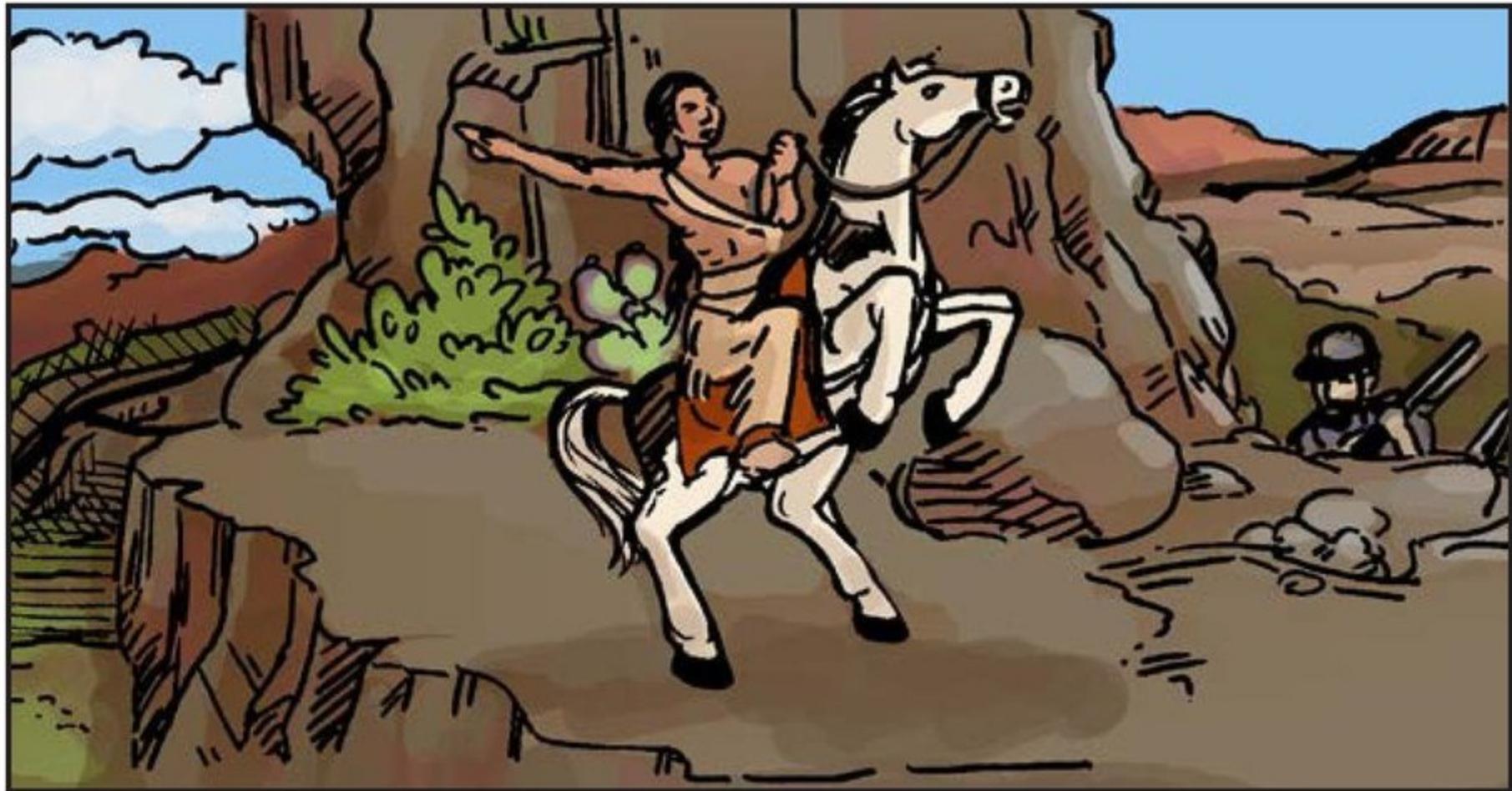
Paco noticed that his sister was rubbing her stone between her fingers as she read, and he wondered if she was making a wish. Tala didn't usually like legends—she enjoyed reading about science—but Paco could tell that his sister was **intrigued** by this story.

He decided that he would read about volcanoes and the various types of rocks, and he would try to understand how erosion transformed rocks into smooth stones. Maybe in the process, he would learn why these things fascinated his sister so much. Maybe it was his turn to think about sharing.

For now, Paco and Tala decided to write down their own version of the legend so that they would have it to remember. As Paco wrote the words, he realized that this must have been the story the river had been trying to tell him.



Apache Teardrops



The Legend of the Apache Tears

Long, long ago, before the white men came, the Apaches roamed free. But a time came when the white men began to move west in search of land. Hoping to protect their lands, Apache warriors came out to meet them, but the white men killed several Apache warriors. Some were driven to the edge of a cliff. Rather than be captured, the Apache warriors jumped from the cliff to their deaths. When the Apache women heard of their warriors' deaths, they were filled with pain and despair so profound that the Great Father embedded their tears into the black stones that rested in the river.

Whoever carries these stones will have good luck always, and whoever keeps these stones close will never again cry tears, for the Apache women have cried tears in their place.

Paco and Tala sat back and studied their stones in silence, raising them to the light and gazing into their centers, thinking about the women who had cried for their men. A blanket of sadness covered them both. They shut down the computer and thought about what they had learned.

When their mother returned, they told her the legend of the Apache Tears, taking turns naturally, without talking over each other. Mrs. Yates was touched to see how the legend had affected her children.

"Can you see the tear of an Apache woman?" Paco asked her as he held his stone up to the light.

Mrs. Yates took the stone and let the light filter through it. "I think I do see it," she said. "It's a tear for the man she lost, and it's a tear for the mournful children he left behind." She gave the stone back to Paco, closed his fingers over it, and squeezed his hand lightly. "It's a tear that says 'I wish my children were happy.'"

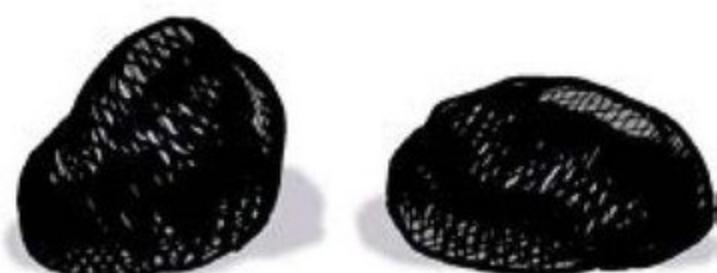
Paco and Tala gave each other a long look. They understood that their quarreling was only adding to their mother's grief over their father's death. They understood that their father was not coming back and that they needed to find a way to live in harmony as a family again.



That night, after talking it over, Paco and Tala gave their stones to their mother. At first, Mrs. Yates refused to take them since the stones seemed to have made her children friends again. Eventually, Paco and Tala convinced her that they wanted her to have the Apache Tears, so Mrs. Yates slept with the obsidian stones under her pillow that night. The next day, she went to a jeweler and had the stones made into a necklace. When the necklace was ready, she slipped it on and never took it off again. Apache Tears really had brought them all good luck!

Glossary

Apache (<i>n.</i>)	a member of a group of Native Americans in the Southwest; the language of these people (p. 4)
bicker (<i>v.</i>)	to argue about unimportant things (p. 13)
chasm (<i>n.</i>)	a deep rift in the earth (p. 16)
confront (<i>v.</i>)	to oppose directly and openly; to stand up to (p. 6)
frenzied (<i>adj.</i>)	very excited and upset (p. 7)
hypotheses (<i>n.</i>)	proposed explanations, based on limited evidence, that have yet to be proved (p. 11)
intrigued (<i>adj.</i>)	made very curious (p. 19)
obsidian (<i>n.</i>)	a smooth, glassy rock formed when volcanic lava cools rapidly (p. 17)
outrageous (<i>adj.</i>)	going beyond all standards of what is right or decent (p. 6)
perspectives (<i>n.</i>)	individuals' mental outlooks or points of view (p. 11)
pestering (<i>v.</i>)	bothering (p. 6)



pilgrimage (<i>n.</i>)	a spiritual journey to a sacred place (p. 5)
preoccupied (<i>adj.</i>)	busy thinking about other things (p. 4)
quarreling (<i>v.</i>)	disagreeing or disputing angrily (p. 7)
scouring (<i>v.</i>)	moving about quickly in search of something (p. 5)
scurried (<i>v.</i>)	moved around at a brisk pace (p. 5)
sibling (<i>n.</i>)	a brother or sister (p. 11)
subconscious (<i>adj.</i>)	existing in the mind but not available to conscious thought processes (p. 5)
talisman (<i>n.</i>)	a magical object believed to hold protective spells or prayers (p. 5)
theories (<i>n.</i>)	possible explanations that have not been proved to be true (p. 11)
tolerate (<i>v.</i>)	to suffer or endure something unpleasant (p. 9)
translucent (<i>adj.</i>)	not clear, but allowing some light to pass through (p. 4)
unison (<i>n.</i>)	at the same time (p. 16)

The Black Stones
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