



Hero

who cared about the forest and wanted to transform it



AISHA SO

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Playing
with
the
Trouble



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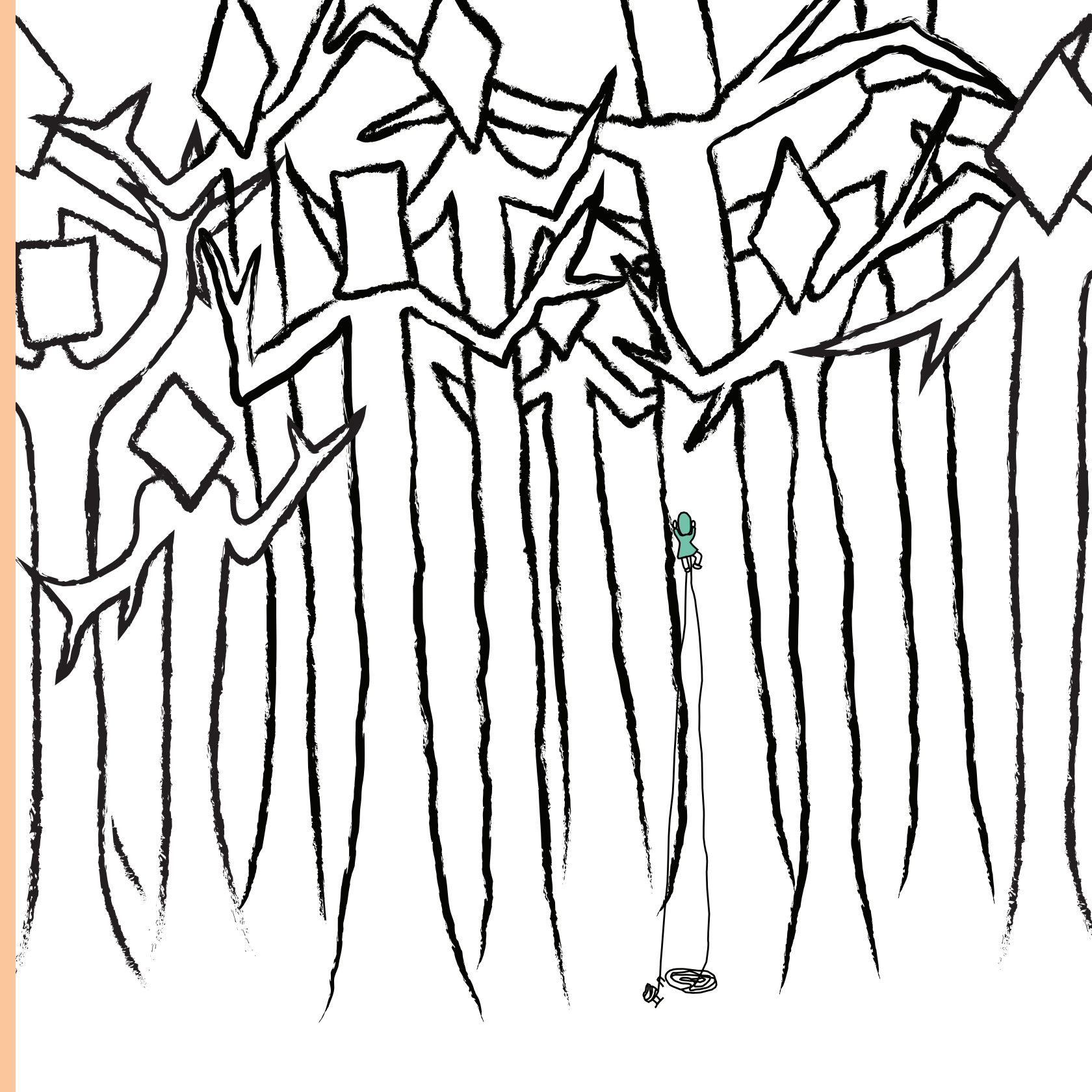


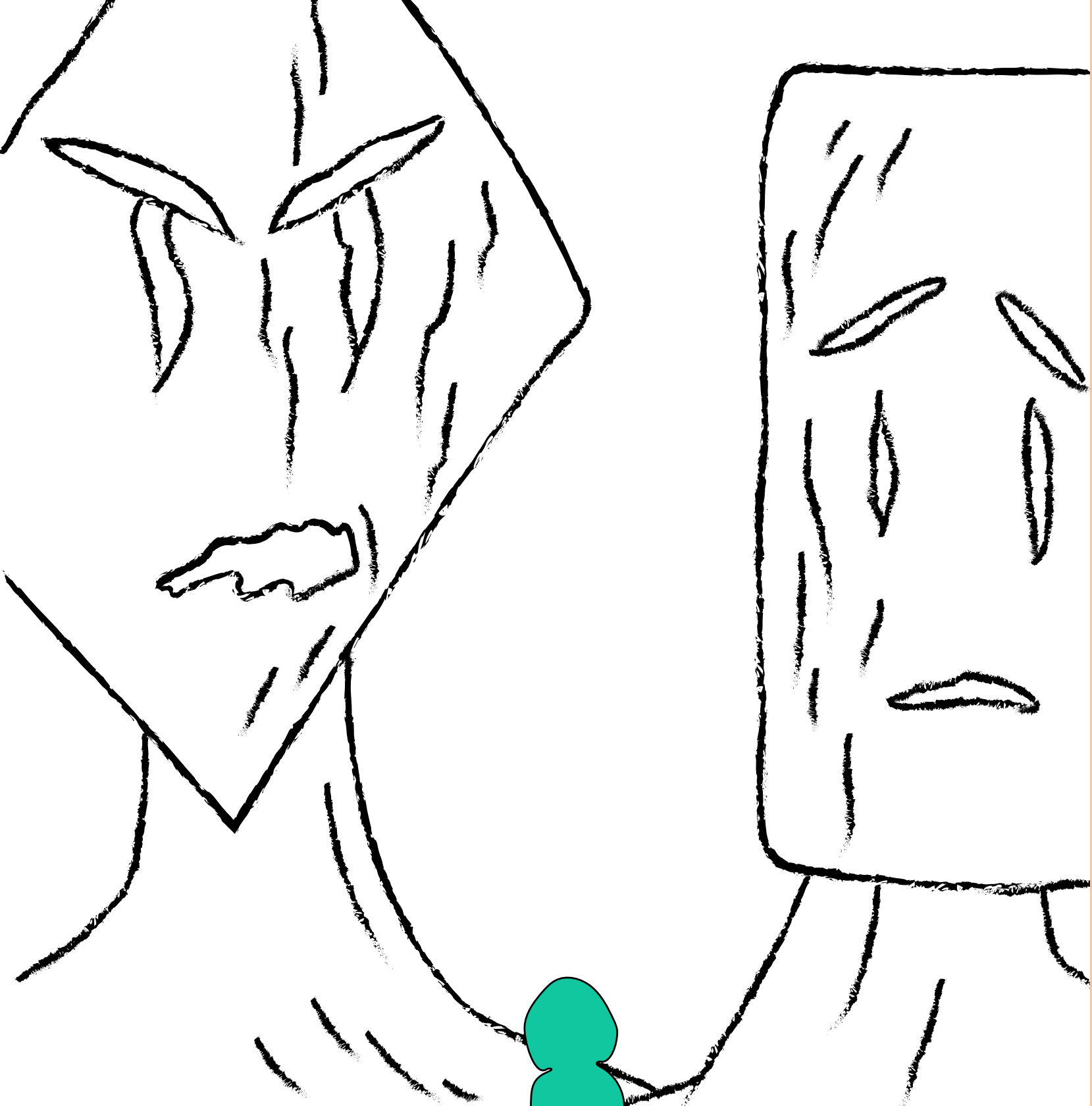
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One day, not so long ago, far from here, Hero found herself in a forest. The trees were barren, high, and stern-looking, and they seemed to rule over the forest. The forest was not doing well. The soil was dry and rigid, and there were no animals to be found.

Hero felt that something had to change, so she climbed up to the trees to ask them about the forest.





“The wind is to blame,” said the most sternlooking tree, “they blow all our leaves off.” “Oh, I see,” Hero said.

“And the animals,” another tree added, “they help the wind, so we try to keep them out.” “Oh, I see,” Hero said.

And indeed, from so far above, the gushing wind seemed intimidating, and the thought of scurrying treacherous animals down below was unnerving.

“How do you try to keep the animals out?” she asked. A large, worried-looking tree replied: “We build walls with the very leaves they make us shed. It is the only way to keep the forest alive!”

Hero looked around, she saw several determined trees who were busy building walls.

But not all trees seemed equally determined. A few seemed uncertain, or even reluctant.

Hero approached a young tree, who had watched the conversation with doubtful eyes. “I contribute my leaves to the walls,” the tree said, “but I wonder if this is truly the way to save the forest. It must be, if my whole family says so...”

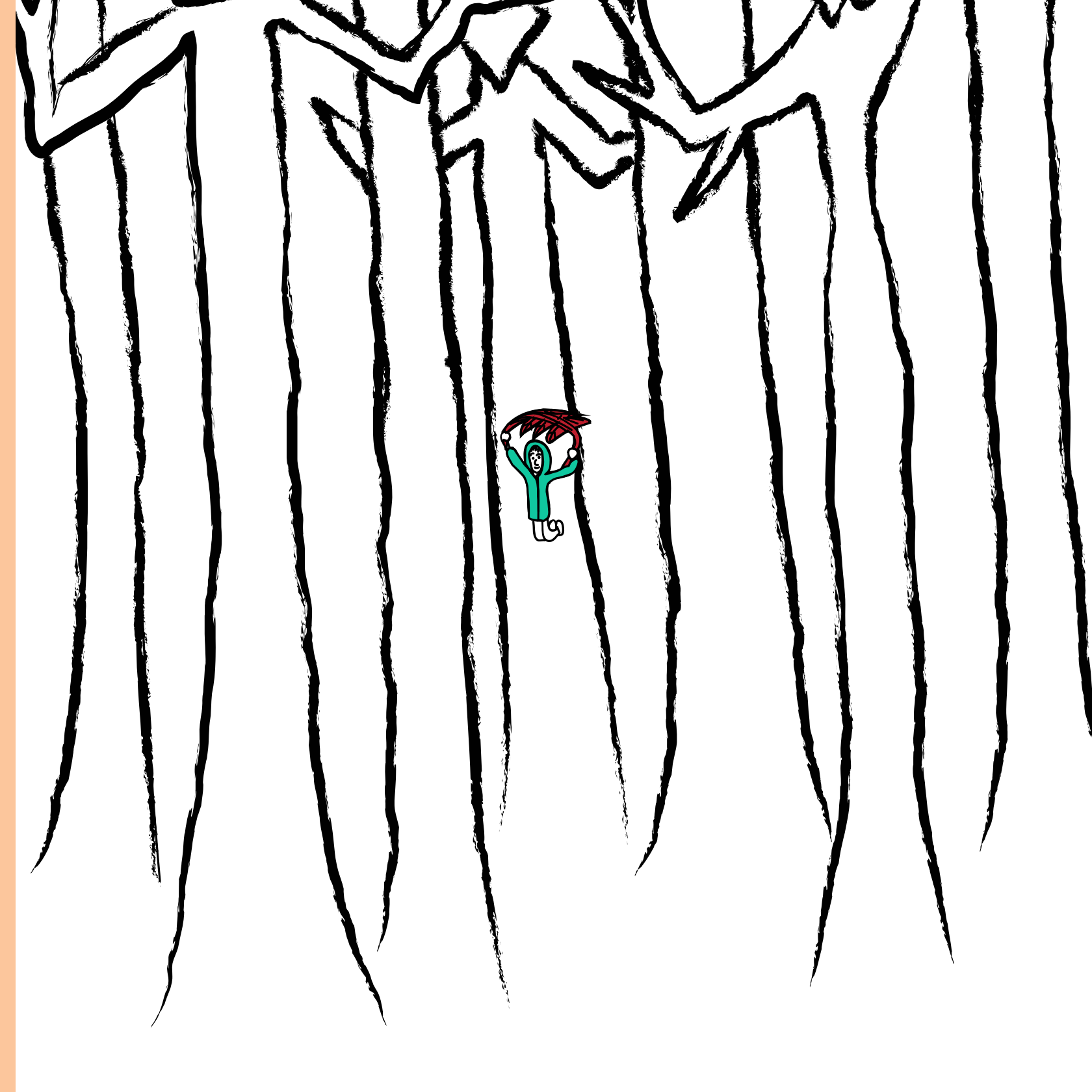


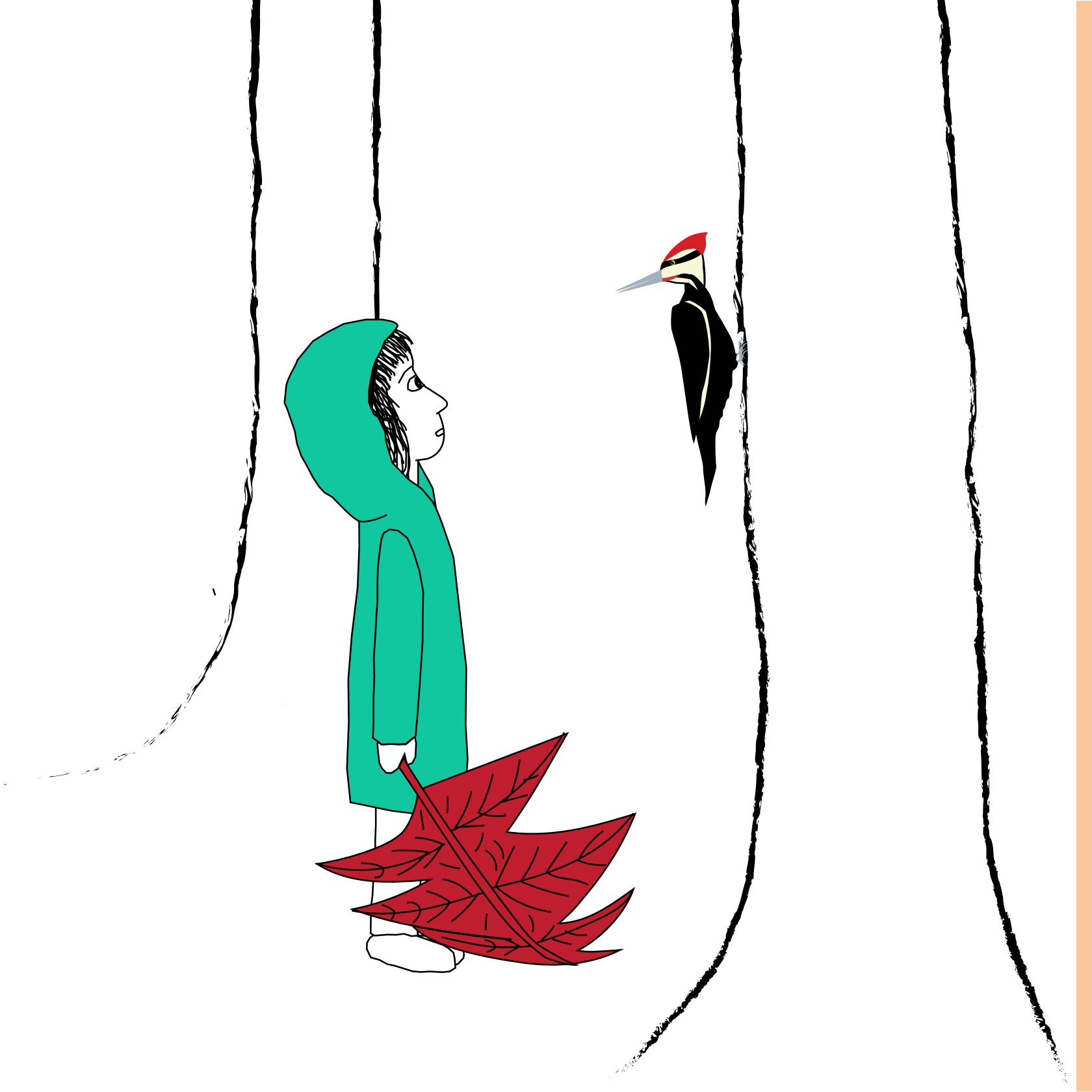


Then, a woodpecker landed near the trunk of a particularly determined-looking tree, and started pecking away.

Hero was very happy to finally see an animal, and she decided to go down to talk to the woodpecker.

When she said goodbye to the trees, they gave her a farewell gift. It was a leaf, a beautiful red leaf, that she could use to get down safely. She said, “Thank you, goodbye!” And she flew down to the woodpecker.





“It’s the trees,” said the woodpecker earnestly, “they are building walls to keep the animals out. But the animals are needed for a healthy forest. The animals can keep the soil healthy, and only they can make the trees regain their leaves.”

“Oh... I see” Hero said, getting confused.

“The animals try to break down the walls,” the woodpecker explained, “but the trees just keep building more. Leaves can be useful for the forest, but not when they form walls to keep the animals out.”

The woodpecker seemed very smart and knowing. “Oh...” Hero said.

“And the trees blame the wind, ha ha!” the woodpecker suddenly laughed, “how stupid can they be?”

What?! How could the woodpecker make fun of the trees while they try to do the right thing? “The trees care about the forest!” she exclaimed. She felt misunderstood, and hurt, on behalf of the trees.

“I’m sure they do,” said the woodpecker dismissively, “but they try to care for the forest by trying to control it, and that will only do harm...”

Hero felt confused, and sad, and she wanted to walk away, but then the woodpecker continued.

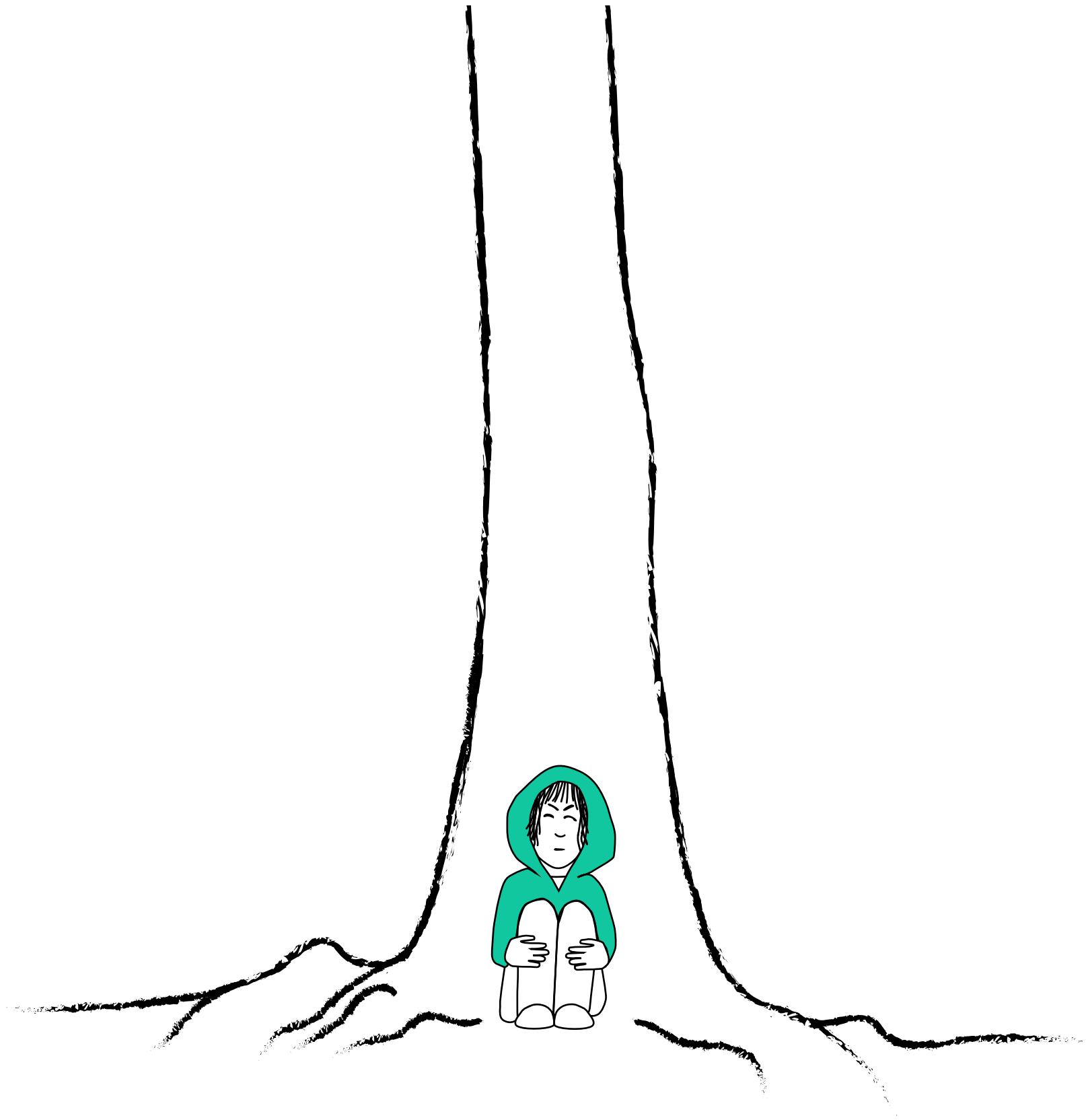




“There exist other forests, you know? Forests far, far away, in which the trees are not separate from the animals, or the wind. These forests are one; one being. In these forests, building walls would be like cutting the forest in pieces.” Hero looked at the woodpecker with wide eyes. The woodpecker continued: “There is a risk that if our trees don’t change, they will contaminate these other forests with their practices...”

Hero had heard enough. She needed to think, so she said goodbye to the woodpecker.

Sitting by herself in the forest, and thinking about trees, animals, leaves, walls... the words made her head spin. But when pondering over the words of the woodpecker, they did make sense... Why would the wind and the animals hurt the forest? That didn't sound right. Surely the wind and the animals were supposed to be a part of a healthy forest? But then why would the determined-looking trees be so sure about their walls? It was clearly not going well so far, was it? How did this situation arise? She felt disappointed and frustrated about the trees for being so sure. And she felt frustrated with the woodpecker for not being more friendly with the trees. But she also felt nervous and hesitant. She was nervous about what might happen if she would confront the trees. Would they start building walls to keep her out too? And she was hesitant to stay friends with the trees. Would she legitimize their actions by staying so close? And who was she to say or do anything, anyway? Should she just walk away?



But she also cared about the trees...and about the animals, and the forest...

She decided she would try. She would try to make something change. But she needed not only friendliness and care to change the forest, she also needed power and evidence... So, she made a plan.

She would stay close to the trees, and talk. She would talk to the determined trees, and to the uncertain trees. And she hoped that this would give her some power that she could keep, like the leaf they had already given her.

She would also go to the animals and the woodpecker, to collect different views and histories about the forest. She might be able to show the trees that there are other ways of thinking, and different stories. Maybe this could be done by talking. Or maybe they would draw, or sing...



She would visit the very different forest that the woodpecker had told her about. The forest that was one being. The forest where building walls would be like cutting the forest in pieces. She thought that her forest might learn a lot from this other forest. She would go back to her trees and show them what she had found.

And then, she would gather the doubting trees and invite them to talk, or draw, or sing to each other. She would try to find trees who did not contribute their leaves to the walls, or trees that were in contact with the animals. She would discuss with them – and those animals – how things could be different. And she would go back to all trees and show them what they had found.

Together, they would talk, or draw, or sing more, and the walls might break down. Maybe she would get angry, maybe the trees or the animals or the woodpecker would get angry, or sad – and maybe they would feel lost, or regret their actions.

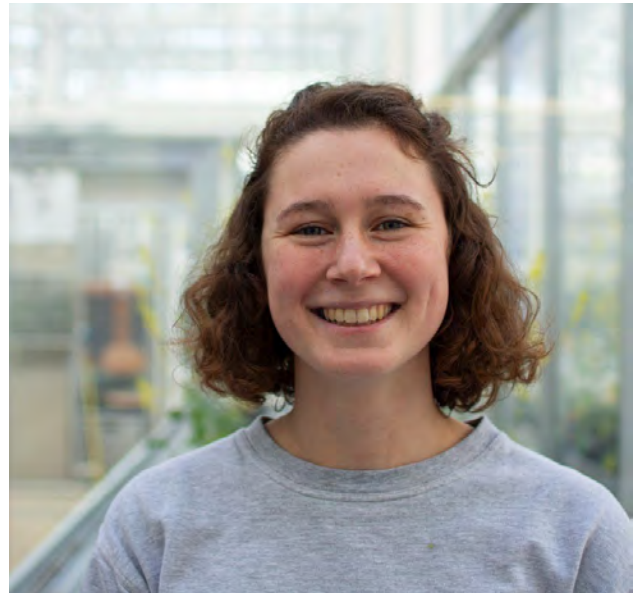


But that would be good, because that would mean they cared. And through this process, the trees, the animals, and the woodpecker might start to reflect critically and listen openly. And maybe they would start to understand each other better.

So now, if you walk in a forest, the trees might have shed, and regained, and shed their leaves. And maybe some walls will appear again. But I hope that, with your help, the trees will also break them down again every time. Or maybe the trees will not even decide about those walls anymore...

Author Biography

Aisha So is a PhD candidate at the Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development, Utrecht University, in The Netherlands. Before starting her PhD, she obtained a double masters degree in Environmental Science and Plant Biotechnology from Wageningen University. During her master's degree, she investigated the roles and responsibilities of plant scientists in the governance of genome-edited crops. She currently investigates how diverse perspectives (on agriculture) might be included into (plant) research projects.



Aisha made the first version of this illustrated story for the PhD course "Transformative Research for Sustainability Challenges", co-organized by Wageningen University, Utrecht University, University of Twente, and Stockholm Resilience Centre. In 2024, the story won a prize in the short story competition that was organized as part of the EASST-4S conference in Amsterdam.

Afterword

The first version of this story was created during the course "Transformative Research for Sustainability Challenges." In my application letter for this course, I wrote that I aim to do transformative research on the interaction of plant science, plant breeding, and agriculture. In the context of agriculture, various actors have long argued that the current industrial agricultural system needs to transform towards just and sustainable alternatives. And historically, the plant science field and plant breeding sector are seen as drivers of this current system, and their influence on agriculture might reinforce harmful worldviews and structures. I envisioned that my research could be transformative by opening up existing perspectives and processes, and by constructing new, transformative ones.

But I had many questions. In particular, I wondered how I can stay open for different perspectives, without dismissing anyone, and still maintain a clear vision of what is sustainable and just agriculture, and what is not. How can I open up existing visions? How can I be 'inclusive' and of whom? What new visions are to be constructed and who do these belong to? And how can I make sense of the homogenous mash of perspectives and values that I felt was approaching me?

During the the course, I did not get pre-made or necessarily concrete answers to these questions, but I found many helpful ways to make sense of both my questions and the

emotions underlying them. And at the end of the course, instead of writing directly about my research situation that involves plant scientists, various views on technology, and Dutch agriculture, I wrote this story to get my feelings on paper.

In the story, Hero struggles with doubts that are similar to the ones I just raised. She feels close to the powerful trees that are criticized for their actions, and it would feel wrong to dismiss them. But she is also afraid to reinforce injustices by not doing so, because she sees sense in what the woodpecker says. The character 'Hero' in the story plays with the “hero” archetype in a paper by Josie Chambers and her colleagues ("Co-productive agility and four collaborative pathways to sustainability transformations", 2022), which represents someone driven to create solutions but who risks becoming overly focused on their own ideas, losing sight of the bigger picture. Our Hero in the story is afraid of becoming an archetypical "hero". But in contrast, the "woodpecker", like another archetype in Josie's paper, questions everything and risks stalling action altogether. And so Hero does not want to be a woodpecker either.

Writing this story helped me to gather my thoughts and my feelings, and it was a lot of fun. I hope that it can now be useful or fun for other people as well!