The Traverser

It was nearing dark as the young girl trudged along the forest's winding trail toward her village. Her favorite red cloak, now tattered, torn, and covered with gray fur, clung to her frame. She was missing a shoe, her blonde hair was matted like an old lion's mane, and she was caked in a sickening mixture of blood and dirt. The trees surrounding her, which once seemed so welcoming and alive, now cast ghastly shadows all around and loomed over the youth, like the wolf had merely hours before. She whimpered at this memory and quickened her pace. It was clear to her that she would not reach the village before nightfall. Every last streak of sunlight was completely engulfed by a deep indigo. In desperation, the red-cloaked girl began to run along the path, yelping at any noise, even the twigs cracking under her feet. Unable to see clearly, her foot caught a stray root and sent her skidding into the dirt. She lay there for a time, crying at her foolishness to venture back home alone, until she caught a flicker of movement out of the corner of her eye. The girl tried to scream, but no sound passed her lips. The figure in the shadows ventured closer and flicked on a small source of light, blinding and terrifying her even more.

"Hello there," called a gentle voice from behind the miniature sun. "I'm terribly sorry to have scared you, love, but it seemed like you needed some help." The child's eyes adjusted to the artificial light. She could make out the figure of a woman.

"Wh-who are you? Please don't hurt me!" she shrieked as she scooted further from the stranger.

The woman chuckled softly as she kneeled on the edge of the path. She sat the little sun-maker next to her. The girl could now notice her unusual appearance. The woman wore a waist-length, gray cloak with small, silver teeth lining the inner edges; a close-fitting white
tunic as short as her cloak; thick, dark-blue breeches; and knee-high brown leather boots. "I'm not here to harm you, love. I've come here to explore and happened to hear your shouting." She looked down at the little girl's knee, which was still trickling a small amount of blood. "Would you like something to cover your wound? I have some bandages in my bag." She slid a blue pack off her shoulders, unfastened the silver teeth on it with a zip, and pulled out a roll of cloth. Gingerly, she held it out for the red-cloaked child to inspect.

The girl wiped drying tears from her eyes and cautiously took the cloth. "Thank you," she replied between little bouts of hiccups. After her knee was wrapped, the woman gave her two strips of sticky cloth, explaining that these were strips of tape to keep the cloth from unraveling while she walked.

"So," said the strange woman after a few minutes, "You must be Little Red Riding Hood."

"Only my mother called me Little Red," she furrowed her brows, "How do you know that?"

"Why don't we talk while I walk you to your village, love. It could be dangerous in these woods." She got to her feet and held out a hand for Little Red. "Unless you'd like to sit here all night," the woman said with a grin.

Red sat there for a minute, then decided she would rather walk with this kind stranger than wait for another wolf to appear. She stood up on her own and hesitantly started towards her village again. The woman followed close behind, raising her sun-maker to illuminate the path.

"How did you capture the sun?" Red asked as she reached out to touch the sun's cage.

The woman threw her head back in laughter. "I didn't capture the sun, love. This is called a lantern. It lights up the dark, like a candle but without a flame. These are common where I come from."

"And what kingdom is that?"

"Not a kingdom, a whole different world." She pulled a book out of her cloak's pocket. "This," she handed it to Little Red, "is how I know your nickname and how I was
able to travel from my world to yours."

She studied the binding carefully, turning it over in her hands with the greatest of care. The front cover was decorated with life-like depictions of a wolf, a sleeping woman, a frog with a crown on its head, and many other peculiar characters. "*Children's and Household Tales* by The Brothers Grimm. I've never heard of this title before, but it looks like an ordinary book."

"It *is* an ordinary book, love, but check the table of contents."

Red obeyed. Cautiously she turned the pages and to her surprise, one of the chapters was *Little Red Riding Hood*. "Is this about me?"

She nodded. "And other prominent figures in this world like Cinderella and the Frog Prince."

Red was dumbfounded. All she could do was look from the book back to the strange woman and back again. "But... What... How," she stammered. "Am I... Am I simply a character in a story?"

"Yes and no," the woman explained. "Have you ever read a book where you feel like you're actually in the story? You are so sure you can physically *see* what goes on." After a tiny nod she continued, "Well, what you are reading is *actually happening* or has happened in another world. I knew you were Little Red because your nickname is used in this book and I read about what happened to you."

"So, when I read, I could be sucked into another world?" Little Red began to get upset again.

The woman placed a hand on Red's shoulder. "No, love. Not unless you know how to traverse." Red cocked her head to one side. "That is, to walk between the different worlds using books as your guide. You can't be sucked into a story by reading it."

Red sighed and relaxed. "Are you a witch then, since you know how to traverse?"

The woman grinned. "Your culture may say so, but no I'm not. The only extraordinary feat I can perform is traversing."

Little Red was quiet for a while, soaking in the information she was given. It all seemed slightly absurd to her, but the strangely-clothed woman would argue how talking
wolves are not common where she is from. Everything seemed warped and odd now. "This is it," Red said as she pointed to a wooden arch, "the beginning of my village." She turned to the woman, who was already heading back for the woods and had also pulled out another, considerably smaller, brown leather book from her pocket. "Wait!" Red called after her. The woman stopped and faced Red once more. "I-" She looked at her feet. "I wanted to thank you for helping me. And also for everything you told me about traversers."

Illuminated by her lantern, the woman's smile glowed. "No problem," she replied. "Why are you leaving now?" The little girl's bottom lip quivered.

The woman carefully set down her lantern and crossed the distance between them in large strides. She cupped Red's face gently, brushing away wisps of hair and stray tears from her face. "Listen to me," she said softly. "I must leave, but I'll never be far." She rummaged a hand around in her pocket and pulled out an exact copy of the leather-bound book and gave it to Red.

More tears streamed down Red's face. "Please don't leave me. I have no one left; my mother sent me to my grandmother's, but I cannot stand her. I only came back to find work." She hugged the woman tightly, not wanting to let go. "Please... please."

"I can't stay here. I'm sorry," the woman stroked Red's hair, "but you could always come with me."

Red gave a faint smile and held her tighter. "Can I?"

"Only if you want to. You're in charge of your own story, love." The embrace lasted a few moments longer. "Come, love. We have a lot of work to do."

Hand-in-hand, the two turned their backs to the village's gate and headed back for the woods. As Red bent down to pick up the lantern, the woman once again pulled out the little brown book. Red noticed the woods becoming quieter, as if every creature was waiting. As the lantern's glow faded further into the woods, the woman began to read.