

# **My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She's Sorry Study Guide**

**My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She's Sorry by  
Fredrik Backman**

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# Plot Summary

Fredrik Backman's novel, *My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She's Sorry*, is the story of relationships and devotion. This guide is based on the Amazon Kindle version of the book.

Elsa is a seven-year-old girl who has only one friend – her Granny. Granny is not an ordinary grandmother. She smokes and curses, and she shows Elsa how to reach the magical land of fairy tales by going to sleep in Granny's wardrobe. When Elsa's parents divorce and Elsa finds herself afraid of many things, Granny takes her to The Land-of-Almost-Awake. Together, they reach land by riding cloud animals. The land is extensive with multiple parkingdoms and many stories. Elsa learns to put the stories to use in her everyday life and later realizes that the stories are all “nicked” from other stories and from real life situations in Granny's past.

Granny spends time in the hospital, and Elsa overhears a conversation about Granny having cancer. Elsa hardly has time to process the information before Granny dies peacefully in the hospital with Elsa at her side. Over the coming days, Elsa discovers that life is even more difficult without her only friend before learning that she has other friends available.

Elsa struggles in school. She is bullied, but she also becomes embroiled in fights because she refuses to back down from her ideals. To make matters more difficult, she does not have any close friends her own age. When she is in trouble, Granny always stands up for her. Elsa never expects her mother to take her side; but, after Granny's death, her mother does stand up for Elsa.

Elsa thinks she knows the identities of all the people who live in her apartment building. After Granny's death, Elsa discovers that she is supposed to deliver a letter to a man who frightens her. She soon learns that he is not scary and that he has a past that is deeper than she could have imagined. She follows her Granny's trail of letters, each apologizing for some past action, with the hope that the final letter will be an apology to Elsa's mother, Ulrika. Granny was a doctor and was seldom home to care for Ulrika, a fact that has colored their entire relationship.

As she follows Granny's clues, she learns that the controlling neighbor, Britt-Marie, is really struggling with a horrible childhood and a failing marriage. Britt-Marie's husband, Kent, is always pretending to be rushing off to work. However, he is really spending time with his mistress. The taxi driver, Alf, is Kent's estranged brother. The young boy who has a syndrome and his mother are hiding from an abusive husband and father, Sam. Lennart and Maud, Sam's parents, are the nice couple who always have cookies and coffee. The large, scary man is a veteran who cannot live with the things he has seen in life. The busy young woman is also the woman who gets drunk nightly in an effort to deal with the deaths of her husband and sons. Elsa discovers that her Granny helped many of these people in one way or another and that they are all willing to help Elsa when it matters most.



When her half-brother is born, Elsa comes to terms with her parents' divorce and the new relationships that have formed because of it. She also develops a circle of friends at school, and they never again have to run away from the bullies who do not like people who are different. Elsa learns that Granny has put a great deal of responsibility in her hands by giving Elsa the apartment building where they all live, meaning Elsa will have to make the decision about the future ownership of the building.



# Chapters 1-3

## Summary

Chapter 1 is titled "Tobacco." The opening statement is that every child "deserves a super-hero." Elsa is seven-years-old, and Granny is 77. Elsa knows that she is not a very good seven-year-old because she is different. The headmaster at her school says she should "fall in line." Some people say Elsa is "very grown up for her age" but no one says that about Granny. Granny is prone to do what she wants, such as when she shot people with paint balls from her balcony.

Elsa and Granny are in a small room in the police station when the novel opens. Granny was in the hospital, but she and Elsa left the hospital and broke into the zoo. Elsa says she warned Granny not to climb the fence and that she should not have thrown animal feces at the police. The officer also says that Granny shouldn't have been driving without a valid license. They announce that they have called Elsa's mother, Ulrika. Elsa and Granny have a heated argument, partly in the secret language they share.

Outside the police station, Elsa fingers the hole in her green Gryffendor scarf. Granny says Ulrika can mend it. She suggests that Elsa tell Ulrika that she tore the scarf trying to keep Granny from climbing the fence. Elsa quietly says she knows everything Granny did that evening was so that Elsa could forget what happened at school. Granny agrees, saying she did not want Elsa to remember what happened at school, so she thought Elsa could remember it as the day they broke into the zoo. Elsa adds that they escaped from the hospital and "threw turds at the police." Granny says it was "mainly soil" she threw at them. She says that anytime they cannot erase bad memories, they should top them off with better ones. Elsa says that is a good superpower to have.

Chapter 2 is titled "Monkey." An angry, yet controlled, Ulrika picks up Granny and Elsa. Ulrika is expecting a baby. George is the baby's father. Since the baby will be Elsa's half-brother or half-sister, she calls it "Halfie."

Elsa is so tired that she is quickly in the secret kingdom of Miamas, one of six kingdoms in The Land-of-Almost-Awake. Granny taught Elsa about it soon after Elsa's parents divorced. They get there "on the backs of cloud animals."

Granny says all worthwhile fairy tales come from Miamas. She likes this the best of the kingdoms because storytellers are revered. There are five other kingdoms. The people of Mirevas stands guard over dreams. Sorrow is stored at Miploris. Music comes from Mimovas and courage comes from Miaudaces. The bravest warriors come from Mibatalos. The enemies of The Land-of-Almost-Awake are shadows. Wolfheart is the warrior who defeated the shadows in the War-Without-End.

Elsa says her mother's superpower is organization. She is "the boss" at the hospital where Granny is currently staying. Though Granny is the hospital, she slips out almost



everyday and does something fun with Elsa. Granny smokes in the hospital bathroom and Ulrika points out that she's pregnant. Granny points out that Ulrika shouldn't be worrying so much. Elsa asks when Granny is going home and, in their secret language, Granny says, "Probably tomorrow," which is what she always says.

Granny gives Elsa a bag full of chocolate treats and says Elsa should give them to "Our Friend." Elsa argues that she might be killed trying to carry out this mission, but Granny insists and gives Elsa instructions on when she should do it.

Elsa is preparing to leave the hospital for home when she realizes she has left her scarf outside Granny's hospital room. She runs back and hears Granny talking on the phone. She tells her lawyer that Elsa is smart enough to "make the right decision," even though she is just a child. She then says that "all seven-year-olds deserve superheroes" and that one of the superpowers "ought to be that they can't get cancer."

Chapter 3 is titled "Coffee." Granny lives on the top floor of their apartment building, directly across from Elsa, Ulrika, and George. George is Ulrika's partner and the father of her unborn child. Everyone likes George. Granny calls him "Loser," but only because she wants Elsa to know that she is on Elsa's side.

Britt-Marie and Kent live directly under Granny. The woman in the black skirt lives opposite Britt-Marie. Lennart and Maud live in the apartment below Britt-Marie. Alf lives opposite them. The boy with a syndrome and his mother live in the apartment below Lennart and Maud. The Monster lives across from them. There is another door on this flat with no name on the mail slot. That's where "Our Friend" lives. Elsa has seen the animal outside the flat once, in Granny's apartment. She was very afraid of it then, and she is still afraid.

## Analysis

The narrator expresses an opinion in the opening paragraph of the novel which becomes one of the main themes. The opening sentence indicates that "Every seven-year-old deserves a superhero." In many ways, this refers to Granny who saved lots of lives and who is Elsa's best friend. In other ways, this refers to Elsa's need for someone who will unconditionally stand up for her. Elsa talks about superpowers throughout the novel, but these aren't what most people would consider traditional superpowers. For example, she says that Granny's superpowers are the ability to save lives and "driving people nuts." Granny is very good at both.

There is a great deal of description about Granny's character in the opening pages of the novel, partly because Granny is a main character and the reader has to understand about her from the beginning. It's also necessary to establish the relationship between Granny and Elsa early because Granny dies very soon after this scene. The reader has to understand Granny quickly in order to grasp the impact her death has on Elsa.

Elsa believes that Granny stopped traveling the world and working as a doctor because she got old. She notes that Granny says "society" made that decision for her. Elsa



believes that Granny might have been forced out of the medical field because of her quirks. It's not until much later in the book that Elsa learns that Granny actually stopped traveling the day Elsa came home from the hospital as an infant. The fact that Granny complains about being chased out of practicing medicine when she apparently chose that step is another indication of Granny's character.

The details of what happened at school to cause the hole in Elsa's Gryffendor scarf are never shared, but they are not really important. It is soon clear that Elsa is struggling with her classmates and that she is relentlessly teased because she's different. There are some important details included in this scene. Granny is aware that Elsa is being tormented at school. Since Granny cannot do anything about that, she strives to help Elsa overcome the bad memories. Perhaps, this is not the most constructive way to help Elsa. Another important point is that Granny is apparently more aware of the problems Elsa faces than Ulrika appears to be. Elsa later says she tries to keep things from her mother so her mother won't be upset. For example, she tries to cover her face when she is in a fight so Ulrika will not know. The bullying and Elsa's relationships are two of the novel's themes.

The people who live in the apartment building become vital to the story line as the action progresses. Some who seem disconnected from the rest turn out to be very much connected. Britt-Marie is a stay-at-home wife. She seems like a busybody who argues about every infraction, regardless of how small. For example, she takes a small tuft of dryer lint around to the residents, explaining that they have to clean out the lint traps when they use the dryers. Elsa later learns that she had a horrible childhood. Britt-Marie's husband is Kent. He is a business man who is always talking about the cost of things and always says he is on his way to an important meeting. In truth, he is having an affair and Britt-Marie is aware of it. Alf is a taxi driver who often seems rude and uninterested in the others in the building. He is actually Kent's brother and was also in love with Britt-Marie when they were all young.

Lennart and Maud seem like a kind, older couple. He loves coffee, and she makes cookies they call dreams. They are actually the grandparents of the boy with the syndrome. Their son, Sam, abused the boy and his mother, which prompted them to move into the apartment building. They do not interact with the boy or his mother, probably because they feel guilty about their son's actions. The Monster was Sam's friend, and he is struggling with guilt over his role in the war. The woman in the skirt seems like a young business professional but she actually gets drunk every night and wanders the stairwell, singing and banging. She is dealing with the grief of losing her husband and two sons.

The reader gets only a basic introduction of each character in this chapter. The details and all their connections to Granny and to each other are explored later in the novel. Elsa will discover all those connections as she follows Granny's instructions after Granny's death.



## Discussion Question 1

Describe Granny. Keep the list and add to it as you find more information.

## Discussion Question 2

Why are Elsa and Granny in the police station as the story opens? Why do you think Granny put them in this situation?

## Discussion Question 3

What superpowers are revealed in the first chapter? Keep the list and add to it as more superpowers are revealed.

## Vocabulary

particularly, noblest, derogatory, methodically, absconds, dysfunctional, interaction, chaotic, bickered, perilous, entrepreneur





## Chapters 4-7

### Summary

Chapter 4 is titled "Beer." Elsa and Granny are playing Monopoly in Granny's hospital room. Both are avoiding talking about Granny's health. Elsa knows that Granny hates talking about death, especially when it's her own.

People often say that Granny has "crossed the line" with her most recent actions. Elsa thinks Granny likes Miamas because the kingdom doesn't end, so there isn't a "line" to cross. Miamas is built of imagination and the "moody" border wall sometimes simply moves. Granny explains to Elsa that she's the one who came up with the idea to have dragons guarding the treasure in all the good fairy tales. Before that, the dragons were unemployed.

Elsa confirms that she gave the chocolates to Our Friend. Granny then gives her an envelope containing a letter and a key, and Elsa knows she's going on a treasure hunt. Granny loves treasure hunts, which are a sport in Miamas. Granny says Elsa's job will be to protect her castle and her friends. Elsa asks what friends. Granny says Elsa is about to embark on a wonderful journey and that she'll have friends. She then pushes Elsa to promise that she won't hate Granny, regardless of what she finds out along the way. Granny says she is to blame for the fact that Elsa will find a dragon at the end of her adventure. Elsa tries to make Granny promise that she's going to get well. Granny evades the question by saying that everything will be better. They go to sleep together on the hospital bed. When Elsa wakes the following morning, Granny is "still in Miamas."

Chapter 5 is titled "Lilies". Elsa has always felt she had an army at her side because of Granny, who defended Elsa regardless of whether Elsa was right.

The shadows of Miamas had morphed over the years. They were originally dragons but had become more dangerous. One bite would result in a wound that allowed all one's imagination to leak out. Granny always told Elsa that idiot were mean to Elsa because she's smart.

Sometimes, Elsa went to sleep on Granny's bed, looking at all the pictures on Granny's ceilings. They were black and white, and each featured Granny with a man in a different place. Elsa always meant to ask Granny about one particular boy that she thinks looks like a Werewolf Boy, but she never got around to it.

Elsa is waiting outside for Ulrika to finish her business inside. She feels as if the entire apartment building is missing Granny. Our Friend has been howling for the two nights since Granny's death. While she's waiting, she gets a smell of Granny's tobacco. She's excited for a moment but then realizes it isn't Granny. There's a man across the street. Elsa's first instinct is to find a weapon, then she runs inside the funeral home. She



insists on seeing Granny. When she sees Granny in the coffin, Elsa complains that she doesn't want to do the treasure hunt Granny arranged.

Elsa knows that if she really has an argument with Granny now, there will be no way to ever put it right. She opens the letter and discovers that she can't read any of it except one word – Miamas. The name on the envelope is the same as the name on The Monster's mailbox.

Chapter 6 is titled "Cleaning Agents." Elsa is in the headmaster's office waiting for her mother. She's thinking about the letter Granny wrote. Elsa has always believed only she and Granny knew about Miamas, and she is furious that Granny might have included someone else. She had gone to Our Friend's door and shoved some chocolates through, trying to make the animal quieten down before Britt-Marie called the police.

Elsa has been in trouble before. In those times, Granny always came along even though the headmaster only called Elsa's parents. Once, the headmaster told Granny that Elsa had provoked a boy into hitting her, and that the boy couldn't control himself. Granny tried to throw a globe at the headmaster but Ulrika stopped her. Granny shouted that she'd been provoked and couldn't control herself. Elsa often gets rude notes in her locker, calling her ugly and other names. Before Granny's death, she tore them into tiny pieces and scattered them in different trash bins. She said she was protecting her tormentors because Granny would have beaten them if she'd known.

Back in the present, Ulrika arrives. The headmaster suggests Elsa should see a psychologist. Ulrika suggests that Elsa should tell her who's causing the problem. Elsa says she won't be a snitch. She thinks back to the boy who'd been furious that Elsa wanted to be Spiderman for a school project. The boy said girls couldn't be Spiderman but Elsa refused to back down. The teacher said Spiderman wasn't a literary character, and that no one could be Spiderman. Elsa said comic books were literature and argued with the teacher. Later, the boy and some of his friend chased Elsa. When she was cornered, she fought.

On the way home, Elsa and Ulrika have a heated argument. Elsa says she fights only because she's too tired to keep running away. Ulrika says Elsa isn't the only one hurting over Granny's death. They eventually lapse into silence and then argue some more.

Chapter 7 is titled "Leather." Elsa's dad picks her up on Tuesday because Ulrika and George have a doctor's appointment with the baby. Her father is uncomfortable in many situations, and he never tells Elsa no when she asks something, though she sometimes wishes he would. Her dad is married to Lisette who has children of her own. Her dad decided that it was "too messy" for Elsa at their house, which is why she only goes there every other weekend. Granny had called Elsa's dad a Nazi when she found out.

When Elsa and her dad arrive at the apartment, there is a stroller in the lobby and a sign on the wall that says strollers can't be left there. Britt-Marie is very upset and asks Elsa and her dad if they know anything about it. She also rants about the animal that



keeps barking, citing the danger to the residents. Elsa goes upstairs alone and her father leaves.

She goes to Granny's apartment instead of her own. She gets into the wardrobe and realizes that the wardrobe is no longer growing to accommodate her size. She puts it down to the lack of magic, saying nothing will ever be magic again. Maud, Lennart, the boy with the syndrome and his mother all arrive to help pack up Granny's things. The boy gets in the wardrobe with Elsa and falls asleep there. Soon, the drunk begins to rant about baths while walking the hall.

She is looking out the window when she sees the man she knows as The Monster. She rushes out to catch up with him but he doesn't stop and she has to follow him through the snow. He's huge. When Elsa does catch up with him, she grabs him and says her Granny sends her apologies. They have a brief conversation and Elsa later realizes he's speaking in the secret language. He hurries away and Elsa throws the envelope after him. Ulrika arrives and takes Elsa back inside.

## Analysis

Granny has lots of stories about The Land-of-Almost-Awake, and Elsa will later begin to recognize them as events that really happened. In one story, two princes fight over the love of a princess. Their battle almost rips the kingdom apart. Elsa will learn that Kent and Alf are the brothers and Britt-Marie is the princess. In another story, there is a sea-angel that wanders the beaches because of her grief. The woman in the skirt is grieving the loss of her husband and sons, all three killed in a tsunami. Wolfheart is a hero who lived in the forests until the kingdoms desperately needed him. The man known as The Monster in the apartment building is Wolfheart. He tries to stay away from everyone until he becomes needed.

There is also the story of the shadow that tried to kidnap the Chosen One, a loved dancer. Everyone came together to protect the Chosen One. It seems likely that Elsa would be this "Chosen One" because she is the heroine of the story. It's only much later that she – and the reader – learns that isn't the case. The fact that the Chosen One is a dancer is the clue that should lead the reader to realize that it's the boy with the syndrome, but that doesn't really become obvious to Elsa or to most readers until later.

The pictures above Granny's bed are an important symbol because they indicate Granny's life prior to Elsa's birth. Granny had traveled around the world and had helped lots of people until she gave it all up to be near Elsa. Granny probably put the photos above the bed so she could think about all her adventures at night when she was going to sleep. In a way, this is very much like the world she creates for Elsa.

The various relationships are an important part of the novel. Some of them are themes because they drive the action and literally create situations. Elsa's relationship with her mother is complex, as relationships between mothers and daughters tend to be. If Elsa has only a bruise or two from fighting, she usually tells her mother that she got it playing



soccer. Elsa believes that Ulrika believes the lies. Actually, Ulrika does not. The bullying is another theme. In the final scene of this section, Ulrika and Elsa have a moment of closeness, and Ulrika makes it clear that she knows Elsa is not telling the truth about a bruise, indicating that she knows about the others.

The man Elsa knows as The Monster is really a war veteran who is simply afraid of being around other people. Elsa is just beginning to figure out that he and Granny had a deeper relationship than she knew. This changes Elsa's thoughts about Granny, but the coming-of-age theme will kick in shortly. Then, Elsa will accept that her Granny was a person in her own right.

## Discussion Question 1

How does Granny die?

## Discussion Question 2

Describe what you know about Elsa's relationships with her parents at this point. Revisit these relationships farther along in the novel.

## Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Elsa refuses to tell anyone who is bullying her? With the modern-day focus on bullying, would Elsa's life be any different? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

chortles, insanely, prerogative, nattering, inclusive, discernible, traipsing, devastated, compliance, vexed, tentatively, livid



# Chapters 8-11

## Summary

Chapter 8 is titled “Rubber.” Elsa is being chased again, and she isn't certain why, except that one of the girls chasing her has made fun of Elsa's Gryffindor scarf. Elsa knows she can't get away and she hopes her father will be on time to pick her up. He isn't in the parking lot. Elsa takes advice from one of Granny's stories in which Wolfheart ran into a forest. His pursuers were so afraid that they didn't follow him. In this case, Elsa runs across a highway and into a park known to be a hangout for drug users.

Elsa arrives in the park and the kids chasing her pause. Then The Monster appears. He yells out that they are to leave Elsa alone and the kids run away. When Elsa turns back toward The Monster, she finds herself alone.

Chapter 9, “Soap,” opens with the statement that every single story in the real world originated from The Land-of-Almost-Awake with the “best” being from Miamas. Each story is told there first. At night, the enphants take the stories – which look like paper lanterns – and set them free from the Telling Mountain, the highest peak in the land.

Elsa looks back on her time with Granny and says she didn't realize the stories were interwoven. She now admits that she should have “understood everything” much earlier, but she doesn't yet say what she has discovered.

Elsa's father picks her up at school that Wednesday because Ulrika has a doctor's appointment. Their ride home is strained, as is typical when her dad has to pick her up unexpectedly. Police are present when they arrive at Elsa's apartment building and Elsa soon discovers that they are trying to decide what to do with the animal Elsa knows as Our Friend. She again realizes that she should have figured all this out a long time ago.

Wurses are large animals that are quick and strong. They guarded the castle in The Land-of-Almost-Awake until the princess accidentally prodded one while it was sleeping. The wurse woke and bit the princess in his panic, which prompted her parents to banish the wurses from the castle. The princess called the wurses back many years later, when a war threatened the entire kingdom. On the day the wurses returned, Wolfheart came out of the forest where he'd been hiding away from everyone. He remained only long enough to help defeat the shadows before returning to the forest.

The police are afraid of the wurse, even though they've only heard it barking and throwing its weight against the inside of the apartment door. They decide to leave while they wait for animal control to arrive. Once they're gone, Elsa talks to the wurse through the door. She tells the wurse the police plan to kill him, and urges him to get out of the apartment. She says Granny would have wanted him to escape.

Just then, The Monster emerges from his apartment across the hall. He warns Elsa to move, then uses the key that was in Granny's envelop to open the wurse's door. Elsa



hears police and animal control returning on the ground floor. Before she knows what happened, Elsa, the wurse, and The Monster are inside The Monster's apartment. The first thing she notices is that it smells like soap.

In Chapter 10, "Alcohol," they hear the sound of the police breaking through the apartment door where the wurse had been moments before. The wurse looks bored. The Monster is upset and rushes to the bathroom where he washes his hands in the bathroom, dries them on a small, clean towel, and neatly folds the towel into a laundry basket. Elsa finds the courage to ask why her Granny sent him a letter. He doesn't immediately answer but has Elsa put on blue bags, like he is wearing, over her shoes. He continues to try to clean up, even though the wurse is taking up a huge area of the floor.

Elsa tries to talk to The Monster again. He finally tells her that the key was in the envelope and that Granny had told him to "guard the castle." He goes on to say that Granny had said she was sorry. They talk on for a few minutes before Elsa recognizes that The Monster is in one of the photos above Granny's bed. Elsa always thought the boy looked like a werewolf but now she realizes that he's Wolfheart. The Monster nods, indicating that she's right.

Chapter 11, "Protein Bars" opens with Elsa's memories of Granny's stories. They all contained action and were dramatic. She never told about the daily lives of wurses and monsters, so Elsa does not know what to expect from this encounter. She soon discovers that The Monster and the wurse do not get along at all. They eventually take the wurse outside to use the bathroom. She presses The Monster again about the letter, and he says Granny also told him to protect Elsa. Elsa settles the wurse into Granny's empty storage locker. He is not there the next morning. George drives Elsa to school. He is complaining that he cannot find his protein bars. The wurse shows up at school, and Elsa hugs him, then gives him George's protein bars. She knows the other kids see her with the huge animal. No one puts rude notes in her locker that day.

## Analysis

There is a piece of foreshadowing in Chapter 9 when Elsa says she "should have understood everything" from the time Granny began telling her the stories. She has now discovered something important, but the narrator doesn't reveal Elsa's discovery to the reader at this point. The author's use of foreshadowing in this instance is not surprising but it is interesting that he reveals that Elsa knows something that the reader doesn't yet know. This further limits the perspective and means the reader knows there's a twist coming.

The park across from the school is known to be where drug users spend time. The fact that The Monster is there might support the idea that he is a drug addict. The people in the apartment building believe that's true and most seem to be afraid of him, though they hide that behind disapproval. This is yet another case of misrepresentation by the author, obviously intended to try to direct the reader to some conclusion that will turn out



to be false. The Monster is actually a veteran who is struggling with the things he saw in the war, but it may be that he's also struggling with drugs.

Elsa's relationships with the members of her family differ greatly from one person to the next. These relationships are one of the novel's themes and it's clear that Elsa struggles with some of these relationships. Elsa and her father love each other but they don't communicate well and he has no idea what Elsa endures on a typical day. He doesn't realize she's being bullied and he doesn't know she needs someone to help her feel better. Granny had understood that aspect of Elsa's life. When her dad picks her up after a particularly brutal day, Elsa shouts a greeting that includes calling him an "old hyena." It's what she would have said to Granny and Granny would have understood that Elsa was trying to make herself feel better. Her dad's reaction is just a confused look and Elsa doesn't even try to explain. This lack of communication will begin to change by the end of the novel as Elsa begins to mature and accepts the new situations that include stepparents and the loss of her Granny.

When Elsa hears the police trying to figure out how to get Our Friend out of the apartment, she realizes that this isn't a dog, but is actually a wurse. This is another of the details Elsa knows she should have figured out much earlier. In truth, the animal is a large dog that Granny has taken in. The stories Granny told were all taken from real life, but the author doesn't reveal the correlations for some time. Elsa remembers the story of a princess who tugged on a wurse's tail, prompting the wurse to bite her. Elsa will much later learn that this was based on a real incident that happened in the apartment building. Britt-Marie lived there as a child. Granny often took in stray dogs and one of them bit Britt-Marie, prompting her mother to insist that Granny stop having dogs in the building. This situation seems to be the reason Granny has hidden the dog.

Elsa's relationship with her Granny is vital to her and she struggles with the loss after her Granny's death. One example of this is seen in the scene in which Elsa is in The Monster's apartment. She asks what Granny wrote in the letter to The Monster. He says Granny had apologized. Elsa then asks for specifics but The Monster refuses to say. She gets angry and says that it was her Granny, implying that she had a right to know. The Monster countered, saying it was his letter of apology. Elsa has to admit that he's right on that score, and she doesn't have the right to pry. This indicates that Elsa is beginning to come to terms with her relationship with Granny and the fact that Granny had a life outside her friendship with Elsa.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Elsa run into the park across the street from the school. Do you think it was a smart move on her part?

## Discussion Question 2

How does Elsa manage to keep the police from killing the wurse?





## Discussion Question 3

What does Elsa learn about The Monster? What is the argument they have when Elsa asks him about the contents of Granny's letter?

## Vocabulary

oppression, clarifying, feasibly, lurking, intonation, lamentable, amassed, capitulate, palpable, intrigues





# Chapters 12-15

## Summary

In Chapter 12, "Mint," Elsa is trying to figure out where she will find Granny's next letter. She is also pondering other things, such as why Granny told The Monster to guard Elsa and the castle. Elsa and Ulrika are in Granny's apartment, packing up some of Granny's things. Elsa doesn't want to be there. When Ulrika says she will be at the hospital the following afternoon for a doctor's appointment, Elsa asks if there is anything wrong. Ulrika is evasive, and Elsa becomes angry. Their argument is interrupted by Britt-Marie's arrival. She says Granny's Renault is in Britt-Marie's parking space. After Ulrika is asleep that night, Elsa leaves the apartment because she now knows where she will find the next of Granny's clues.

In Chapter 13, "Wine," Elsa remembers that Granny always made a big fuss over Elsa's birthday which is two days after Christmas.

One of Granny's stories is about a huge wave that threatened The Land-of-Almost-Awake. Everyone ran away except 100 snow angels who spread their wings and created a magical wall that turned from the water. In Granny's story, only one angel turned away from the danger. She then spent her days wandering the beach in sorrow for those she lost. Elsa knows the moral of this story is that some "monsters" are created by the sorrow they endure.

Elsa goes to the garage where she knows she will find Granny's next letter. There's a name and address in Granny's familiar handwriting. Back inside, Elsa encounters the woman in the skirt. She's now very drunk and is raving about bathing while she walks around outside her apartment. Elsa discovers that the woman's headset is not connected to anything, meaning the woman has not actually been talking to anyone at all. She has only been pretending to be planning parties with other people so no one would know she is drinking all the liquor she brings home. Elsa is upset by the woman and Ulrika holds her to comfort her.

In Chapter 14, "Tires," Elsa knows that one of Granny's superpowers was the ability to take charge and make a difference when situations demanded it. Granny was far away in a war-torn land the day Elsa was born. She was on her way home when she heard about a tsunami. She went there to help before arriving home on the day Elsa came home from the hospital. Ulrika tells Elsa about that last trip as they are headed to school one morning. She says Granny brought the woman in the skirt home with her. Ulrika says no one in the apartment building really wanted to deal with the woman, so they just ignored her.

They talk more about Ulrika's childhood. She says Granny was often away. After Ulrika's father died, the neighbors stepped in to help care for Ulrika when Granny was away. Britt-Marie was one of those. Ulrika tries to make Elsa understand that Granny was a



“superhero” who helped other people. Elsa makes it clear she thinks Granny was wrong for leaving Ulrika alone so much.

Elsa's father told Elsa a story about Ulrika. She was pregnant with Elsa and they were in a traffic jam. The man behind her was honking continuously and Ulrika got out of her car and yelled at the man, threatening to “give birth here and now” if he didn't stop honking. Elsa wishes her mother was more like that now. As they sit in traffic on the way to school, Elsa loses her temper at the man behind her who is honking constantly. She gets out of their car and smacks his car's hood with her school book. She screams at the man that her mother is pregnant and that she will give birth on the man's hood if he doesn't stop. Just then, a police officer asks if there's a problem. Elsa says her mother is “about to give birth” and that they're having a difficult day. The officer misunderstands and insists on giving them a police escort to the hospital.

Unable to see an alternative, Ulrika follows him. They arrive at the hospital where Ulrika works. As they sit in the car outside, they talk at length about their feelings. Elsa admits she's mad at Granny for dying. They talk about the fact that Granny gave up her other job to be a Granny. As nurses head for the car, Elsa and Ulrika discuss what they'll do next. Elsa says Granny would make a run for it. Ulrika does just that.

In Chapter 15, “Wood Shavings,” Elsa recalls Granny's stories of the “regretters.” These are horse-like creatures in *The Land-of-Almost-Awake*. They often take off in one direction, then regret that decision and turn around, bumping into all the others following. They wind up with bumps on their heads. Some people confuse them with unicorns. Granny said they were an example of why a person should not change her mind. Now, Elsa hopes Granny regretted spending so much time away from Ulrika.

When Ulrika drops Elsa at school the next day, Elsa sneaks and uses her mother's cell phone to text her dad. The text says he should not worry about picking Elsa up from school that day as planned. She then deletes the text and her father's affirmative reply.

Elsa has decided that she is going to follow through with delivering Granny's letters, but not because Granny wants her to. Instead of going inside the school building, Elsa rushes home. She discovers The Monster doesn't have a computer and goes to ask Alf about the address on Granny's envelop. He tells her where to find the building but is grumpy, saying she woke him. Elsa stops to get the wurse and they head out with The Monster accompanying them. The Monster and the wurse have a brief fight and Elsa screams at them to stop. They all realize that she is about to cry. With that, The Monster and wurse settle down to the task. Elsa tells them that she is following Granny's quest only because she hopes the final letter will be an apology to Ulrika.

## Analysis

The arrival of Renault in Britt-Marie's parking spot is a mystery to Elsa. Interestingly, she does not even try to figure out how it got there. That seems out of character but it may indicate that she already knows that her mother is the one who moved the car. The fact



that the author doesn't even look how the car got there will distract most readers from trying to figure it out. At face value, it seems the car might have arrived by supernatural or mystical means, but that would be out of keeping with the overall story line in this novel. Ulrika will explain herself much later in the story.

Elsa says Granny's stories usually contain morals, though they are not the traditional morals of the well-known fairy tales. It is more accurate to say Granny's stories are explanations, usually spelling out how some people reached their current situation. The snow angels are a perfect example of that. The woman in the skirt is also the woman who becomes drunk every night. Elsa will soon learn the facts about her lie – including that her sons and husband were killed in a tsunami – and that will explain her grief. In Granny's story, the only snow angel who turned away from the danger of the huge wave grieved over her lost friends. Elsa says the “moral” of that story is that grief sometimes creates monsters.

In real life, people change, often because of necessity, but person's growth prompted by circumstances may not be welcome. Ulrika experienced this as a youngster because Granny was often away. This had a huge impact on her character and Elsa recognizes the seriousness of that part of Ulrika's life. At one point, she asks if Ulrika is angry that Granny was so devoted to Elsa when she wasn't devoted to Ulrika. Ulrika denies that but Elsa is certain she is lying.

As Granny prepared to send Elsa on her quest, she says that Elsa has to promise that she won't hate Granny, regardless of what she discovers about Granny's past. At that point, Elsa can't imagine what Granny's talking about but she begins to understand as she learns about Granny's past. Ulrika reveals some details, such as the fact that Granny had lots of boyfriends and that she left Ulrika in the care of her father and neighbors. All these things do make an impact on how Elsa feels about Granny; but, the fact that she's maturing will be an important part of Elsa's acceptance.

## Discussion Question 1

Where does Elsa find her next letter? Why does she think to look there?

## Discussion Question 2

What are some of the things Elsa has learned about Granny's past? Do you think she will resent Granny as she discovers that Granny has not always done what her family needs?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Elsa continue to deliver Granny's letters? Why do you think that she does not read any of them herself?

## Vocabulary

miffed, muster, linguistically, scything, reverberating, incandescent, dispersed, catastrophes, improbably, vehemently



# Chapters 16-18

## Summary

In Chapter 16, "Dust," Elsa plans to take the bus, but everyone at the bus stop is afraid of The Monster and the wurse. They set out walking and people still avoid them on the street. They reach the address and Elsa stops at a hamburger chain for food, taking time to mark through a typographical error on the restaurant's window. When they have eaten, Elsa goes to the elevator. The wurse outright refuses to enter. The Monster is careful not to touch anything. Based on the signs on the offices, Elsa discovers she is going to a therapist's office, though she says it is a "terrorpist."

Elsa discovers the office is closed and she settles in to wait. She and The Monster talk and she learns that Granny saved him from a refugee camp and later from abusive foster homes. She also learns that Miamas means "I love" in The Monster's native language. The Monster then reveals the contents of Granny's letter. He says she apologized because she was never able to find the Monster's mother. Elsa becomes unreasonably angry. She shouts that Granny was also a mother and that she left her own daughter alone while trying to find The Monster's mother. She then tells him he doesn't have to protect her. He says he is there because he is her friend.

They wait in silence after that until the woman in the skirt arrives. She is surprised to see Elsa. The Monster soon leaves. The woman explains that she used to have an office in a different building, and that is why The Monster accompanied Elsa. She says The Monster doesn't like her.

In Chapter 17, "Cinnamon Bun," Elsa recalls that a girl released a sea-angel from her curse, but Granny never explained how it happened. Elsa recognizes this woman as the sea-angel from Granny's stories. Now that she has met the wurse, The Monster, and the sea angel, Elsa wonders if the stories in Miamas mimic real life or if real life has begun to mimic Granny's stories.

The woman says Granny's letter apologized because the woman's family died and for making Elsa come see her because Granny knew their meeting would be painful for the woman. Elsa asks about The Monster. The woman says she tried to help him overcome his psychological issues but that he became upset when he talked about his past. Elsa asks questions and the woman reluctantly answers some of them. She grows angry and orders Elsa out of her office. Elsa retorts that the woman is just a drunk. The woman shouts again and Elsa runs from the office. She is crying bitterly when Alf orders her to get into the car. When Elsa asks why he is there, he says Granny would have wanted him to be there. Elsa and the wurse ride home in Alf's taxi. Alf gives her a cinnamon bun on the way home. That night, the drunk woman rants in the hallway but Elsa pretends not to hear.



Chapter 18, "Smoke" opens with Elsa having nightmares. She has always hated when she could not reach The Land-of-Almost-Awake, but now she knows that nightmares are worse than dreamless sleep. In her dream, Miamas is burning and everything is in ruins. A man smoking a cigarette points at her and shadows attack her.

Elsa wakes to hear her mother and Britt-Marie talking. As usual, Britt-Marie is complaining. Ulrika says the accountant called to say he will meet with the tenants today. Britt-Marie says the accountant should have called Kent. Britt-Marie says Kent is away on a business trip and that his plane has not yet landed. Alf contradicts her. Then Kent appears. Lennart and Maud arrive. Kent demands to know what the accountant said.

Alf explains to Elsa about the leaseholds everyone is talking about. He says they can pool their resources and buy the apartment building from the owner, then sell their apartments and make money from it, but they would then have to move. Elsa considers that might be the answer to everyone leaving Miamas "of our own free will."

The accountant arrives. He winks at Elsa, as if she knows something. As the meeting begins, Britt-Marie tells Elsa that she kicked a man out of the apartment the previous day. She says he was smoking in the stairwell. He described "a family friend," and Britt-Marie believes he was talking about Elsa. Elsa knows what's going to happen next, "because every airy tale has a dragon."

## Analysis

The author does not name all the characters. The woman in the skirt and the drunk turn out to be the same person, though that is not clear at the beginning. The author may be using this as a means of keeping the reader guessing about some of the identities. It's left to the reader to decide the ultimate purpose for this literary choice.

The woman in the skirt, who is also the drunk, is introduced in this chapter as a therapist. Elsa does not recognize the name on the envelop and the woman says it's because she uses her maiden name at the apartment but has never changed the sign on her door. She doesn't seem to be actively practicing. This is one of several characters that are not named and this is one of several instances of the author's use of misdirection. Elsa does not know where she is going until the woman arrives at her office, so the reader also does not know.

Elsa's feelings toward the changes in her life remain conflicted. Granny instructed The Monster to protect Elsa and he accompanies her to the therapist's office. Elsa knows he's comfortable speaking in the secret language but she refuses to use it because she is jealous of that connection between The Monster and Granny. Elsa is being forced to come to terms with changes in her relationships and she is balking against some aspects of these. As more time passes, she does find herself accepting more of the changes and information, including that Granny had a life and friendships before Elsa was born.



The question of whether the tenants should buy the building has been discussed since very early in the novel. In theory, they could pool their resources in order to become leaseholders, thereby making an investment that they could cash in. Elsa gets the basic gist of the situation, but she doesn't really understand what it means until Alf explains that anyone who sells out would then have to move. Elsa's comment, that this would give everyone a "chance to escape" from Miamas, is an important look at what she has come to see as a frightening situation. She is realizing that there are very real dangers and she is associating those with the relationship to Miamas.

The time setting of a story is important to understanding the people and events of the story. In this novel, Elsa is constantly checking Wikipedia and other sites on the internet for information. This firmly establishes a modern-day time.

## Discussion Question 1

Why do you think the author does not name all the characters? Make a list of the characters who do not have names and consider the reason each was left unnamed. Revisit the list at the end of the story and see if any of your opinions change.

## Discussion Question 2

How do people react to Elsa walking around town with the wurse and The Monster? Does this give any clue about the appearance of the wurse or The Monster?

## Discussion Question 3

What do you think Alf means when he says Granny would have wanted him to give Elsa a ride home?

## Vocabulary

epic, logical, demonstratively, discreet, despondently, spasmodically, fidget, chasm, banishing, imperceptibly, splutter



# Chapters 19-21

## Summary

Chapter 19, "Sponge Cake Mix," opens with the fact that there are "an infinite number" of possibilities to defeat dragons. But Elsa worries that this "dragon" looks like a person and that no one can beat it. That evening, Elsa takes cookies to the wurse and gives it sponge cake mix to finish the meal. Elsa believes Wolfheart is gone. Alf keeps her company while they take the wurse to do his business. They talk more about the possibility of becoming leaseholders. Alf says most of the tenants do not have the money to pay their share of the cost and that they will have to take out loans. Therefore, most will be forced to sell because they cannot afford the loans. Alf makes it clear he likes living here and does not want to move.

She and Alf talk some more. At one point, Alf says the opera he was listening to in the cab was about love. Elsa asks if he loved her Granny but he doesn't answer as he walks away.

Chapter 20, "Clothes Shop," opens as Elsa wakes after a "terrible" night. Elsa had moved the wurse to Granny's apartment during the night. Elsa announces that they have to go to Mirevas because that is where nightmare hunters are trained. Granny made Elsa a moo-gun for the purpose of hunting nightmares. It looks like a paintball gun but has a milk carton on the side and a catapult. Elsa loads the carton with milk and the catapult with cookies. Milk and cookies are the prime ammunition for scaring away nightmares.

Elsa thinks about her relationship with George. She knows she would like him if she allowed herself to do so, but she fears he will not pay her any attention once Halfie is born. As Elsa is thinking, the woman in the skirt appears, but she's wearing jeans today. She apologizes for the previous day. She says Granny told her to look out for Elsa. She says she bought Harry Potter books and plans to read them, only because they are important to Elsa. She thanks Elsa for reminding her that there are good things, such as this book, still in the world. She then gives Elsa a copy of *The Brothers Lionheart*, a book she read to Granny. Elsa has already read it but she lies and says she has not.

The woman describes the scene after the tsunami. She says the bodies were placed together and that she found her sons there. She believes Granny was disappointed in her but Elsa says it might have been because the woman is disappointed in herself.

Elsa and her dad spend some time together in the car. She wants to spend more time with him but she can not figure out how to say that. She believes her dad and Lisette are happy with Lisette's children because they are "undifferent," unlike Elsa. Elsa and her dad continue to talk. She asks if he and Lisette will have children of their own. He says it is not likely. She asks if it is because she is "different," but he says it is because





she is “perfect.” Her dad stops and Elsa goes in to meet Ulrika and George for Granny's funeral.

In Chapter 21, “Candle Grease,” Elsa enters the church and finds there are lots of people. She is angry that she has to share Granny with so many. Sorrow is stored in the kingdom of Miploris. Granny never wants to go there because there are so many warehouses with Granny's name on the front. These are places where Granny has left her own sorrow and she does not want to be reminded of it.

Elsa's thoughts return to the funeral. People are staring at her. She recognizes the priest as the same man who came to their apartment as the accountant. He winks at her. Other people stare and some point. Elsa can not stay. She runs out of the church and into the church yard. When she stops, she catches the smell of tobacco. As the foreshadowing predicted, Elsa hears Granny's voice commanding her to run, and she does. The man with the cigarette is limping, which is the only reason Elsa gets away. She continues to run, terrified, until The Monster grabs her.

He assures Elsa that he is guarding her, even when she does not know he is near. They begin to talk about the Land-of-Almost-Awake. He says Miploris means “I mourn.” Mirevas means “I dream.” Miaudacas means “I dare. Mimovas means “I dance.” Mibatalos means “I fight.” The Monster says he will never again fight. Elsa understands.

Alf is waiting with the taxi. There is a police woman Elsa has seen before. Alf pretends to be calm, but Elsa can tell he's afraid as he says he will take her home. She also knows that her mother is afraid and that she knows more than she has indicated. Elsa now realizes that a monster is sometimes the only thing that can defeat a dragon.

## Analysis

Elsa has trouble communicating with her parents but this begins to change as she ages. The coming-of-age theme is typical for novels of this type, and Elsa is no exception. In Chapter 20, she wants to talk to her father about her feelings and her fears. She is afraid that Ulrika and George will not have time for her once their child is born. She can't figure out how to talk to anyone about this fear. She also wants to spend more time with her dad, but she cannot seem to talk to him about that either. She is able to get past her fear about being displaced by the new baby later in the novel and she finds herself talking to her father and his wife, Lisette, about her needs. These resolutions are something of a “happy-ever-after” ending that makes the novel very predictable, but most readers will find them satisfying.

The novel is filled with comparisons between the real world and The Land-of-Almost-Awake. Granny might not have made up all aspects of the land for Elsa, but many of them serve her well as she tries to explain how things work. In Chapter 21, the narrator explains about Miploris, the kingdom where all sorrow is stored. People can go to Miploris and simply leave the things they are sorry about behind. Elsa says this is what happens in real life, because a person cannot withstand carrying around all their sorrow.



The man with the cigarette is symbolic of the dragon that wreaks havoc in Granny's fairy tales. He can also be symbolic of a shadow, which is basically anything that frightens a person. This and other instances of symbolism drive much of the story, but are so many symbols that some readers may struggle to keep track.

Elsa always refers to the former soldier as The Monster except on the rare occasion when she is comparing him to the warrior named Wolfheart in Granny's stories. However, this changes when she is running from the man with the cigarette. When The Monster grabs her, Elsa recognizes him as Wolfheart rather than The Monster. This indicates a state of mind. The idea of a monster is frightening. Wolfheart, however, is a soldier and a warrior who fights for good. The fact that Elsa changes his name in that reference indicates how much she depends on him.

Elsa says that everyone was afraid after Elsa ran from the man with the cigarette, including Alf and Ulrika. She now understands that Ulrika knows more about what is happening than she has ever indicated. Ulrika's knowledge and her role will not be revealed for several more chapters but most readers won't see it as a huge revelation.

## Discussion Question 1

What does Elsa learn about Alf in this section of the novel?

## Discussion Question 2

What is the significance between referring to the former soldier as The Monster and as Wolfheart?

## Discussion Question 3

Why is Elsa angry that there are so many people attending her Granny's funeral?

## Vocabulary

fascists, scrutinizes, fluently, infinite, chagrin, legions, oppressive, nemesis, scrupulously, pining, impeccably



# Chapters 22-25

## Summary

In Chapter 22, "O'Boy," Elsa knows that Granny hated fears so Elsa tried to never show any when Granny was alive. Back at their apartment building, Elsa and Ulrika get into Renault and talk. Ulrika pets the wurse and indicates Elsa is right to be afraid of the man with the cigarette. She says "we" know about him. The "we," according to Ulrika, is Lennart, Maude, Alf, and Ulrika.

They talk about The Land-of-Almost-Awake. Ulrika said she was getting older by the time Granny wanted to show her more about the kingdoms, and that she was too angry to be interested. Granny called her "the girl who said no," which is the basis for one of Granny's fairy tales. Ulrika says she believes Maud and Lennart should tell Elsa about the man with the cigarette. When Elsa arrives, Alf is there too. He's made her a glass of O'Boy, but put far too much powder in the drink. Alf reveals that the man isn't really looking for Elsa.

In Chapter 23, "Dishcloth," Elsa helps her mother get settled for a nap then returns to Maud and Lennart's apartment. The woman in the skirt appears. She says she was at the church that day. Elsa asks if she attended Granny's funeral. The woman apologizes, saying she couldn't bring herself to attend, but that she visited the graves of her sons. Elsa repeats one of Granny's favorite phrases and realizes the woman is pretty when she laughs. The woman then gives Elsa a letter from Granny. She says it was on the headstone at her sons' graves. This letter is for Lennart and Maud. Elsa gives the letter to them and they take it "meekly." She then says she has a friend who likes dreams – which is what everyone calls Maud's cookies. She is talking about the wurse. She asks if she can bring him to their apartment and they agree.

In Chapter 24, "Dreams," Maud gives the wurse cookies and other sweets. In the letter Granny apologizes for several things, including that they'll have to tell Elsa "the story." The boy with the syndrome enters, apparently very much at home. While Maud takes care of the boy, Lennart tells the story. He says their son, Sam, became addicted to drugs. He was abusive to his wife and son. Lennart and Maud ran a cafe and Granny was a regular customer. They began talking to her, because Granny was the kind of person everyone could talk to. Granny helped Lennart, Maud, the boy with the syndrome, and his mother, by giving them the keys to their apartments. Alf and Granny went to pick up some of the boy's things and Sam beat Alf. Sam is the man with the cigarette.

Lennart and Maud haven't seen Sam since but they believe he tracked them using Granny's death notice. Elsa and the boy with the syndrome are about the same size and their hair is the same color. Lennart and Maud believe Sam has mistaken Elsa for the boy.



Lennart and Maud reveal that Granny once saved Sam's life. He was in the hospital under Granny's care when he began smoking her brand of cigarettes. In Granny's letter, she apologizes because she isn't certain she should have saved his life. Maud tells Elsa about Sam. As a child, he was always in fights and "tormented other children." Then he went to war and became friends with a fellow soldier. This other soldier brought out the best in Sam. This other soldier is later identified as The Monster. The Monster introduced Sam to the woman he married. Sam's unit was caught in an explosion. Everyone died except Sam and The Monster. Sam ended up with a limp.

In Chapter 25, "Spruce," Elsa knows that everyone in the Land-of-Almost-Awake worked to save the Chosen One who lived in the Mimovas, the kingdom of love. The kingdoms are interdependent. Everyone knew that the Land-of-Almost-Awake would not survive if the kingdom of love crumbled.

Elsa's dad arrives to take her for their traditional outing the day before Christmas eve. They always buy an artificial tree together. Elsa has refused a real tree since Granny told the story about spruce trees being "sold into slavery" as Christmas trees. Elsa discovers that Kent is putting poisoned food around the apartment building, hoping to kill the animal he believes is a dog but that Elsa knows is a wurse. During their conversation, Elsa discovers that Renault is gone. The wurse had been hiding in the car. She screams at Kent and makes a grab for him, but only manages to get his cell phone. She throws it down the stairs and breaks it. Elsa rushes back upstairs. She begs Britt-Marie to stop Kent from killing the wurse. For a moment, she seems sympathetic but hears Kent's voice and returns to her uncaring attitude.

Next, Elsa goes to Alf. He argues with Kent, then returns with news that the car has been sold. Elsa and her dad get into Alf's taxi, and Alf soon finds Renault. Elsa's dad pays for the car to be towed back to the garage, and Elsa says it's the best gift he's ever given her. Then Elsa and her dad go buy the tree. As he is leaving, she wants to tell him all her fears but she knows it will upset him, so she says nothing.

## Analysis

As is the case with many things in this novel, fears are both real and symbolic. The fears in The Land-of-Almost-Awake are tiny creatures that "look quite a lot like blue tumble-dryer fluff." The symbolism here is seen in Britt-Marie's reaction when she finds that someone has failed to clean all the lint out of the dryers provided for the apartment tenants. She gets very upset, even though she has a dryer in her own apartment and doesn't need the ones used by the other tenants. She routinely takes pieces of the dryer lint and shows it to everyone else, insisting that they have to clean the lint traps. She seems like a busybody when she's at this stage, but she's actually trying to control this one thing in her life because she is losing control of so many other things. Her marriage is falling apart and she can't fix that, but she can make everyone aware of the need to clean out the lint traps.



The intricate workings of *The Land-of-Almost-Awake* indicates that Elsa and Granny have spent many hours creating the land, and this means that it has been important to them both. For example, the stories are created in Miamas but then the enphants have to take them to the top of Telling Mountain and set them free so they float off into the real world. If the stories all remained, there would eventually be so many of them that they would suffocate Miamas.

Many things that are intangible in the real world are tangible in *The Land-of-Almost-Awake*. Fears are one example and stories are another. In the real world, books take up literal space but stories do not. This lends a new level of understanding to the importance Granny and Elsa place on the stories. Granny told the story of knights that laughed at fears so that the fears turned to harmless stones.

Some modern American readers may not know that O'Boy is a powdered drink mix. This is one of several hints about the physical setting for the novel.

The author seems to depend on non-traditional wording to get some points across. When Elsa and Kent argue about the poison food, Kent is talking on the telephone. He says he's talking to Klaus about business. When Elsa tries to grab Kent, she winds up just grabbing the phone. Instead of saying that Elsa took the phone, the author says that she grabbed Klaus, then "throws Klaus down the cellar stairs." It is an interesting way to word the scene so that the reader can visualize an image on the screen of the phone as it shatters.

Elsa is a complex character, made more so by the way others treat her. She has some very adult ideas but she is, after all, still a seven-year-old child. When she and Kent argue about Granny's car, Elsa grabs his cell phone and throws it, shattering it. While the story line supports this kind of action from Elsa, the reality is that this is a callous disregard for another person's property. If this novel was real, it would seem that Elsa hasn't been taught this lesson. Seen from this angle, the scene appears to be a contradiction and it is left to the reader to decide whether Elsa is justified.

## **Discussion Question 1**

How does Elsa learn the identity of the man with the cigarette? What is his story?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Compare the fears of the *Land-of-Almost-Awake* to the fears Elsa faces in the real world.

## **Discussion Question 3**

Describe the scene in which Elsa confronts Ken about the missing Renault.

## Vocabulary

obstinate, laboriously, emanates, rhetorical, abyss, palaver, nonplussed



# Chapters 26-29

## Summary

In Chapter 26, "Pizza," Elsa and Granny always ate pizza on Christmas Eve. Granny said that was a law in Miamas. While Elsa never really believed that, she likes pizza and, as a vegetarian, does not eat most traditional Christmas food. Elsa and the boy with the syndrome play while the adults talk. Elsa knows the boy and his mother are moving into Granny's apartment because it will be easier to protect them from Sam.

At Ulrika's insistence, Elsa invites everyone in the building for Christmas dinner. Britt-Marie says they'll be having dinner with Kent's children. Elsa encounters Alf and insists that he should be the one to dress up as Santa this year for the boy with the syndrome. Alf argues but seems to give in. He catches sight of Elsa's Spiderman suit and asks when she wears that. She says she never does because "apparently" girls never get to be Spiderman. Alf says Granny would have said Elsa should dress up as anything she wants. Elsa asks if Granny had faced that situation. Alf says people thought Granny shouldn't be a doctor, but she did it anyway.

In Chapter 27, "Mulled Wine," Elsa goes outside to let the wurse use the bathroom. Alf goes with her. The talk turns to Kent. Elsa expresses her anger but Alf makes her stop. When Elsa asks why, Alf says he does not like it when other people say bad things "about my little brother."

Their conversation is interrupted when Sam arrives. Britt-Marie is outside as well. Sam has a knife and Alf confronts him with a hammer, the wurse at his side. Sam runs away as the police are arriving. One of the officers is a green-eyed woman Elsa has seen before. It turns out that she and Ulrika are friends. Britt-Marie is afraid but also furious that no one told her about the danger. During the conversation, the officer asks if Britt-Marie has seen the dog again. Even though she clearly saw the wurse as it was helping protect them from Sam, she now says that she might have been mistaken when she reported that it was still in the building. Elsa notes the way Alf looks at Britt-Marie, and she now knows Britt-Marie's identity.

Alf and Elsa take the wurse out again later. This time, Elsa asks Alf about Britt-Marie. She had comics and lollipops in her shopping bag when she encountered Sam, and said she was buying gifts for Kent's children. Alf says Kent's children are grown and that they have never visited Kent and Britt-Marie since they were very young.

Elsa thinks about this new information and she remembers Granny's story. There were two young princes in Miploris and they both loved the same princess. The princes fought until they hated each other and a witch stole the princess's treasure so that she became utterly sad. The wurse is guarding the princess's castle.



In Chapter 28, “Potatoes,” Elsa is on the landing on Christmas Eve morning. Kent and Britt-Marie's door is open, and Elsa can hear them arguing about what time to expect Kent's children and what time they will have dinner. Britt-Marie then reminds Kent to put his shirt directly in the washing machine when he gets home. The scene changes how Elsa feels about Britt-Marie, and she finds that she no longer really hates her.

In Chapter 29, “Swiss Meringues,” Elsa goes outside and finds the green-eyed police officer there. Police are standing guard to help protect the apartment building now. The officer says she was afraid of everything when she was young and that Granny inspired her to overcome her fears to be a police officer. Elsa asks about the role the woman played in the fairy tales. She admits that she and Ulrika were “many things” in Granny's stories. Everyone winds up gathering at Elsa's apartment for the Christmas meal. They have a very good time.

## Analysis

Until Granny's death, Elsa has not given a great deal of thought to Granny's past. When she is talking with Alf, she understands that Granny became a doctor at a time when the medical field was dominated by men. Women could become nurses, but few were brave enough to push into the role of doctors. Alf points out that there were a lot of people who told her what she could not do, but Granny ignored them and did what she wanted. This is an important aspect of Granny's character, and it seems obvious this is something she tried to pass on to Elsa.

Britt-Marie does not seem to be a major character until she is identified as the princess. As Elsa begins to learn more about Britt-Marie, the author is consciously creating a sympathetic character. This may be, in part, because there is a sequel to this book with Britt-Marie as the main character. She plays an important literary role in this novel because the story line so closely resembles a fairy tale. While Britt-Marie may not seem to be a major character in this story line, the princess is vital in a fairy tale.

## Discussion Question 1

What does Elsa learn about Britt-Marie in this section?

## Discussion Question 2

List at least three instances in which Granny based her stories on real life. Why do these become important as Elsa handles the letters Granny left?





## Discussion Question 3

Elsa learns that Kent and Alf are brothers and that they do not speak. Predict how the author will use this information to affect Elsa's relationship with the unborn baby she calls Halfie.

## Vocabulary

evasively, disconsolate, conclusively, brusquely, flummoxed, despondently, extricating, infuriates



## Chapters 30-32

### Summary

In Chapter 30, "Perfume," Alf declares that he is going to get a newspaper. Elsa and the nurse go with him. Elsa convinces him to tell her the story of his love for Britt-Marie. Alf and Kent lived in one of the apartments with their mother when Britt-Marie's family moved in. Britt-Marie's mother favored Britt-Marie's sister, Ingrid, and was brutal to Britt-Marie. One day, Britt-Marie's mother had a wreck right in front of the apartment building. Granny was a young medical student and the first on the scene. She found that Britt-Marie had a pulse, though her sister was dead. Granny rushed Britt-Marie to the hospital and saved her life but Britt-Marie's mother was furious, saying Granny had saved the wrong child.

Alf's phone rings several times. Alf says it is Kent and he does not want to answer, but Elsa does. She gives Alf the phone and a woman talks to him, then Alf rushes to the hospital. Kent has had a heart attack but will recover. Britt-Marie is there. She tells Alf that she has been pretending that Kent is not having an affair and that he really does have lots of business calls and has to go away on business all the time. She says she always brings him a clean shirt if they are meeting somewhere because Kent's mistress wears perfume and Britt-Marie hates smelling it. But Kent's mistress was the one who called Britt-Marie and told her about Kent's heart attack.

The three return to the apartment together. Britt-Marie joins the Christmas dinner. When Britt-Marie leaves the room and cries in the front hall, Elsa joins her.

In Chapter 31, "Peanut Cake," Elsa and the boy with the syndrome sleep that night in Granny's wardrobe. The next letter drops off the top of the wardrobe literally into Elsa's lap. This one is for Alf. He pauses to listen to a radio report about an accident that has roads closed, then reads it and says the letter is complicated, as everything was in Granny's life.

Just then, Elsa's dad arrives. He says Ulrika has given birth and that George ran all the way to the hospital to be with her. Elsa wants to go directly to the hospital but worries that the wreck will block the route. Alf says there are ways around the wreck. Elsa agrees that she'll ride in her dad's Audi, and that the nurse will go along. Lennart and Maud decide to go too, as well as the boy with the syndrome and his mother. The police are still there and Alf asks them to drive around the block so they have time to get the nurse into a car. When the police are gone, they begin to load up and Alf goes to get his taxi. Just then, Sam jumps out of the backseat of Dad's car. A fight ensues and The Monster arrives. Elsa knows he's intent on destroying Sam. Everyone is running to try to break up the fight but Britt-Marie gets there first. She is still standing between Sam and The Monster when the police arrive. Sam stabbed the nurse during the attack. As her father pulls her away, Elsa yells that the nurse can't die because this is a "Christmas tale" and there has to be a happy ending.



In Chapter 32, “Glass,” Elsa and Britt-Marie wait at the veterinarian's office for news. In the Land-of-Almost-Awake, a wurse can only die of a broken heart. Elsa is allowed in the room where the wurse lies dying. The police woman is there and she announces that they are going to have to take The Monster to jail. The Monster tells Elsa that the wurse is “very old” and “very tired.” He then gives her a map of Mipardonus, the kingdom he and Granny planned to build. Elsa releases the wurse to the Land-of-Almost-Awake while she and The Monster talk about forgiveness.

## Analysis

The symbolism grows in complexity as more details of real life are revealed to be the basis for Granny's stories. In this section, the reader discovers that Britt-Marie considered Elsa to be her treasure. Britt-Marie had taken care of Ulrika while Granny was away so much. When Ulrika had a child, Britt-Marie expected to be the one who would take care of the child as well. But Granny returned home and never left again, and she became the person who took care of Elsa. This follows Granny's story about the two princes who were in love with a princess. Part of that story is that an evil witch stole a treasure from the princess. This indicates that Granny was aware of what she was doing to Britt-Marie.

Another piece of the fairy tales come to light while Alf and Elsa are talking. Alf reveals that he was a soldier and that he struggled after the war, just as Sam and Monster did. Then Alf says that people “suffocate” if they do not have the opportunity to tell their stories. This mimics the situation in the Land-of-Almost-Awake. The stories are created there but then are released from the mountain because they will build to a suffocating level if they all remain in Miamas.

By this point in the novel, The Monster is always referred to as Wolfheart. For the sake of clarity, he is still called The Monster in this guide, except in direct quotes.

The scene in which Sam appears is chaotic, as is the scene leading up to that point. In this case, the scene's perspective seems to be completely dependent on Elsa, and she seems to be looking back at the situation from a future point in time.

## Discussion Question 1

Describe how the wurse dies.

## Discussion Question 2

How has Elsa's opinion of Britt-Marie changed during this section of the novel? What is the reason for the change?



## Discussion Question 3

How does Elsa learn Ulrika has had the baby?

## Vocabulary

intimates, outlandish, spasmodically, vehemently, cessation, hostilities, methodical, immobile, authority, hurtles



# Chapters 33-Epilogue

## Summary

In Chapter 33, "Baby," the author writes that fairy tales usually end with "happily ever after," but there are problems with that, including that some people die, leaving others to go on without them. Alf waits for Elsa, and they leave the veterinarian's office headed for the hospital. Elsa asks to stop at the apartment first. She is glad that Alf does so without question. She sets out to make 99 snow angels, and Alf helps. The woman in the skirt watches and laughs.

When they reach the hospital, Elsa rushes to George. She hugs him and thanks him for running all the way to the hospital to be with Ulrika. Ulrika reveals that Granny gave her the very first letter and Elsa knows that Granny would have done that to be certain Elsa was safe on this journey. Ulrika says Granny apologized for being a bad mother and explained that she was an orphan and that someone saved her life, which made her want to repay that. Elsa has already figured out that it was Ulrika who moved Renault into Britt-Marie's parking spot. Elsa has also figured out where the final letter is hidden.

Ulrika then reveals that she and George have decided to name Elsa's baby brother Harry, after the Harry Potter character. Elsa goes to the nursery and looks at Harry through the glass. She promises that they will be very close because she's seen what the alternative is with Kent and Alf. There's a doctor in Ulrika's room when Elsa returns there. She is surprised to see that it is the vicar from Granny's funeral and the accountant who presented information about the leaseholders. He says he is a doctor "first and foremost" and that he was a good friend of Granny.

He then explains that Granny owned their apartment building and that she has left it to Elsa. He says she will have the final say of whether the tenants buy the building or become leaseholders. She sent Elsa on this journey because she wanted her to get to know each tenant before she decides.

When Elsa gets back to the apartment, she goes to the foyer where there has been a stroller parked for days. There was a sign over the stroller for a while, saying that parking a stroller in the foyer was unsafe. It is kept in place by a small combination lock based on letters rather than numbers. Elsa enters her name and the lock clicks open. She finds a letter there to Britt-Marie.

In Chapter 34, "Granny," Elsa and her dad scatter the wurse's ashes over Granny's grave. They talk honestly about their feelings, including that dad agreed to the short visitation schedule because everyone wanted to be sure Elsa had plenty of time with Granny. Elsa accepts this but insists that her father has to be her dad more often. She announces that she's having her birthday this year at her dad and Lisette's house, and that she's already made all the plans with Lisette. When they are in the car, Elsa discovers that her dad is listening to one of the Harry Potter books on tape. He says he



knew everything she was reading when she was young, but he can no longer keep up. He is listening to Harry Potter because it is important to Elsa. He says he had planned to call Britt-Marie, “She-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named,” which is a term from the Harry Potter books, until Elsa began getting along with Britt-Marie.

Back at the apartment, Elsa gives Britt-Marie her letter. Britt-Marie has a letter for Elsa that she says she found in the lint trap in the dryer. Britt-Marie is packing and says she does not yet know where she will go. Britt-Marie reads her letter aloud. Granny apologizes for a lot of things, including shooting Britt-Marie with a paintball gun. She then says Britt-Marie does not deserve the unhappy life she has with Kent. Granny also included her car keys in Britt-Marie’s letter. Elsa and Alf watch as Britt-Marie leaves in Granny’s car.

Elsa opens her own letter when she gets in the wardrobe in Granny’s apartment. Elsa knows Granny must have really tried to spell everything correctly, but the opening line is, “Sorry I have to dye.” With that, Elsa gives up all her anger toward Granny.

The “Epilogue” begins with Granny’s letter. She urges Elsa to live her life to the fullest and to pass the stories on to Halfie.

The author then addresses the difficulties of having an epilogue in a fair tale because it has to wrap up all the questions without creating new ones. Elsa and Harry bond as she knew they would. Alf regularly drives Lennart and Maud to visit Sam in a place with “large security guards.” The Monster returns home after the police deem his attack was self-defense. Kent arrives at Alf’s apartment one day, and they move in together. Kent admits that his company has gone bankrupt. Britt-Marie writes to both of them every week.

Elsa returns to school after the Christmas holidays and soon makes a friend. That friend turns into a group of friends. They never have to run away from the bullies. One day, Elsa and her friend Alex get in trouble. Alex’s mom reaches for the headmaster’s globe, but Ulrika gets it first. Another day, the boy with the syndrome gets teased because he is dressed like a princess. Elsa and Alex call Elsa’s dad and he brings them clothes so that they are dressed like Spiderman princesses, which makes them heroes in the boy’s eyes.

## Analysis

Elsa’s relationships with her father, George, Ulrika, and even the neighbors continue to change, which is an example of the coming-of-age theme. The fact that Elsa is open to these changes indicates a maturity that some readers may find unrealistic.

Elsa has been worried that Halfie – now named Harry – would upset her life and that Ulrika and George would no longer want Elsa around once the baby was present. However, Elsa has learned something important from the relationship between Alf and Kent and she is determined that she and Harry will be very close. Naturally, she compares her role in his life to magical creatures in the Land-of-Almost-Awake.



While Ulrika and Elsa have the conversation in the hospital, Elsa finally realizes that Ulrika has been behind some of the things that happened. Ulrika was the person who moved the Renault, and Elsa says she had already figured that out. They do not discuss other specifics, but it seems that Ulrika must have put the stroller in the foyer.

Granny's letter to Britt-Marie is addressed to the "bat." There are several important points to this, including that Elsa immediately knew the recipient of this letter would be Britt-Marie. It's also notable that Granny's letter indicates remorse for some of her actions, but the address on the envelop is as sassy as ever. Granny's character would be less believable if she completely turned from her normal way of talking to Britt-Marie just because she was dying. Britt-Marie's role in the final paragraphs, including her decision to leave, sets the stage for the next book, which is titled Britt-Marie. The Kindle version of this book includes an excerpt from that novel.

The epilogue utilizes authorial intrusion to explain the epilogue. This puts the author talking almost directly to the reader, which is an effective way of making the reader conscious of the structure to come. There are small pieces of information about several of the characters. The section would seem disjointed except that the author has already explained the purpose of the section.

The author uses the same lines for the opening and closing of the novel, but the superhero and the kid are different characters. In the opening line, Elsa is the child who needs a superhero. In the closing, Elsa has become the superhero, and the boy with the syndrome is now the child in need of a hero.

## Discussion Question 1

How does Elsa get the letter Granny left her?

## Discussion Question 2

Describe Britt-Marie. Is she a believable character? Likeable? Understandable?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Elsa realize that she has to foster a close relationship with Harry from the beginning?

## Vocabulary

bewilderingly, obstinate, abhors, belligerently, proportions, perspective, emphatic, reverberates, blithe, forbade, despondent, scrutinizes, conceding, ambivalent



# Characters

## Elsa

Elsa is a seven-year-old girl who lives with her mother and visits her father every other weekend. Her Granny is the most important person in her life, teaching her to reach The Land-of-Almost-Awake as a means of dealing with her fears. When Elsa gets in trouble at school, Granny is her strongest ally. Elsa depends heavily on Granny, and she is terribly hurt when her Granny dies of cancer. The relationship between Elsa and her Granny is one of the most important themes of the novel, and Elsa really does not know how she is supposed to go on with her life without Granny.

Elsa is a strong, intelligent young woman with a strong eye for grammar, spelling, and literature. She loves to read. The Harry Potter series is one of her favorites. She also loves comic books and counts them as true literature. She is willing to stand up for what she believes in and doesn't back down even though she sometimes knows she's going to face serious consequences. For example, when her class is supposed to choose a literary character, Elsa picks Spiderman. A boy argues that a girl cannot be Spiderman, but Elsa stands her ground and argues back. When the teacher says Spiderman is not a literary figure, Elsa argues that comic books are literature.

Elsa is willing to follow the journey prompted by Granny's letters because she hopes the final letter will be an apology to Ulrika, Elsa's mother. This indicates that she's a sympathetic youngster despite the problems she's had with her mother. Overall, Elsa is likeable but not entirely believable. She is overly-intelligent for a seven-year-old, and she gets away with things that most parents would not tolerate.

Overall, Elsa is a likeable hero, and readers will be rooting for her to arrive at a better place in her life. She eventually does by making like-minded friends, but she never gives up on her own ideas over the course of the story.

## Granny

Granny is Elsa's maternal grandmother. She was a strong woman in her youth, and she has done things that most women of her time would not have considered doing. She became a doctor when women were encouraged to choose more traditional roles, such as nursing. She left her young child at home in order to pursue her passion for helping people. She apparently had a series of relationships and never truly settled into a family life. She did all these things because they were important to her and she defied convention to reach those goals.

Granny stopped her traveling and remained at home from the time Elsa was born. She may have been trying to spend time with her granddaughter to make up for the time she lost with her daughter. By the time Elsa is seven, Granny understands her and often provides exactly what Elsa needs. For example, Granny and Elsa sneak out of the





hospital and into the zoo on the evening after Elsa has a fight at school because of her Gryffindor scarf. Granny understands that Elsa desperately needs to get past the fight, and Granny provides a way for her to do that.

Granny seems rude to other adults, and sometimes to Elsa. She shoots Britt-Marie with a paint ball gun. She places a snowman on the ground to scare Britt-Marie. She often argues with Ulrika even over minor things. She once walked naked through Ulrika's apartment even though Ulrika's partner, George, was present. She even argues with Elsa but Elsa seems to be the only person who doesn't take it seriously.

Overall, Granny is a likeable character, though some adult readers may find her obnoxious.

## Ulrika

Ulrika is Elsa's mother and Granny's daughter. She is divorced from Elsa's father and is now in a relationship with a man named George. She gives birth to a son shortly before the end of the novel. Ulrika's relationship with Granny is strained. She admits that she is still somewhat angry because Granny was so often away from home when Ulrika was a child. Ulrika is devoted to Elsa, though Elsa sometimes believes that Ulrika is not really on her side at all. After Granny's death, Ulrika stands up more for Elsa, indicating that she might have been trying to be the voice of reason in earlier years when Granny was often violent in her defense of Elsa.

## Britt-Marie

Britt-Marie lives in Elsa's apartment building. She seems like a controlling busybody. She is bossy during the meetings the residents hold regarding the possibility of buying the apartment building and becoming leaseholders. Britt-Marie and Granny have a difficult relationship and Granny seems to go out of her way to aggravate Britt-Marie. Elsa eventually learns that Kent, Britt-Marie's husband, is cheating on her and that Britt-Marie knows about the affair. She also learns that Britt-Marie had a horrible childhood with her mother highly favoring Britt-Marie's sister. As the story comes to a close, Britt-Marie accepts that it's time to take her life into her own hands. She packs up to leave Kent. She also proves to Elsa that she can be an important ally when Elsa needs one most.

Elsa eventually learns that Britt-Marie is the basis for the princess in one of Granny's fair tales.

## Alf

Alf is a taxi driver who lives in Elsa's building. He seems to be self-centered and rude, but Elsa soon learns that his brusque manner of speaking is just an integral part of his personality. Alf makes it known that Granny was a good friend to him, and he steps in to



help Elsa as she sets out on the journey Granny has arranged. Elsa learns that Alf and Kent are brothers and both loved Britt-Marie.

## **The Boy with the Syndrome and His Mother**

The boy with the syndrome and his mother live in Elsa's building. They are never named, and the details of the boy's health problems are never shared. The boy is always happy, and Elsa likes that he never talks and dances a great deal. His mother is quiet and kind, and she is very attentive to the boy's needs. Elsa learns that they are actually hiding from the boy's abusive father, Sam, who shows up as the novel comes to a close.

## **The Woman in the Skirt/The Drunk**

Among the residents is a woman who always wears a skirt and who always seems to be talking on the telephone. She is immaculately dressed during the daytime. The novel is well underway before the reader learns that she is the same woman who carries on as a drunk in the stairwell each night. The woman is struggling with the grief over losing her two sons and her husband during a tsunami. Granny writes a letter to the woman, apologizing for not being able to save the woman's family.

## **Lennart and Maud**

Lennart and Maud are quiet, kind people who live in Elsa's building. They seem to be unrelated to any of the other tenants, but they are actually the grandparents of the boy with the syndrome. They are ashamed because they are Sam's parents. They are loving people and are among those who help Elsa hide the wurse when the police are looking for the animal.

## **Elsa's Dad**

Elsa's parents are divorced, and she knows it is partly because of her father's personality. He is uncomfortable with confrontation and is a very serious person. He suggests to Elsa one day that they should do something fun, but Elsa knows that he is only making the suggestion for her benefit because he would never choose to do something fun on his own. He does admit to being jealous of Elsa's emerging relationship with George. Elsa's dad seems pleased when Elsa says she wants to spend more time at his house.

## **Wolfheart/The Monster**

The Monster is really just a large man who lives in Elsa's building. He is Wolfheart in Granny's stories. In real life, he is struggling with his memories of war and the atrocities



he performed himself during wartime. He comes to Elsa's aid and promises that he will defend the "castle." He often disappears as he struggles with his own inner demons. When Sam shows up, The Monster almost beats him to death, but the act is declared to be self-defense. Elsa tells him that he must stop himself from becoming violent in the future.

## George

George lives with Ulrika and Elsa. He is Ulrika's partner, though they are not married. He is very likeable and cooks a great deal. Elsa continues to resist him just because he has moved into a spot in her life and she does not like that. When she learns that George ran all the way to the hospital to be there when Ulrika is giving birth, she is so grateful that she hugs him.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## The Secret Language

The secret language is a symbol of the close relationship between Granny and Elsa. Granny and Elsa speak to each other in a secret language that Elsa thinks only she and Granny can understand. She later learns that the language is really the language spoken by Wolfheart's mother. Elsa is hurt when she first finds out that it was not a language that only she and Granny shared.

## The Wurse

The wurse is symbolic of the need to protect the castle. The wurse is probably a really large dog, but it is presented as a magical creature. The wurses are fighting animals that live in The Land-of-Almost-Awake. Their purpose there is to guard the castle and the princess. One day, the princess surprises a wurse while it is sleeping, and it bites her. The wurses are then banished from the kingdom. Eventually, Elsa learns that Granny often took in stray dogs, and Britt-Marie was bitten by one of them when she was small. The incident prompted the ban on wurses from the apartment. The wurse dies after trying to protect Elsa and others from Sam.

## Granny's Wardrobe

Granny's wardrobe is a symbolic place of safety. The wardrobe seems to have magical properties, at least to Elsa. This is where Granny and Elsa sleep when they are going to The Land-of-Almost-Awake. Before Granny's death, Elsa believes the wardrobe gets bigger as she grows. She later believes the wardrobe has lost its magic, but she recovers it as she gets past the deepest point of her grief over Granny's death. The wardrobe is also where Granny hides the letter she leaves for Elsa.

## Halfie/Harry

Harry, Elsa's baby brother, is symbolic of the changes in Elsa's life. Harry is the name Elsa's mother and George choose for Elsa's half-brother. Before his birth, Elsa refers to him as "Halfie," because she does not know whether her half-sibling is a boy or girl. While Harry is actually a person, his more important role is as a motif in the novel. He is a symbol of how Elsa's life is changing. While Granny is gone from Elsa's life, Harry becomes a part of her life. Elsa's changing attitude toward him is one example of the coming-of-age theme.



## Elsa's Gryffindor Scarf

The scarf is symbolic of the bullying that Elsa endures. Since Elsa is a big fan of the Harry Potter books, she has a green Gryffindor scarf. Early in the book, the scarf is damaged, apparently in a fight. Later, Elsa is offended when a girl makes fun of the scarf. For Elsa, the girl's lack of understanding and tolerance about the scarf is just another in a long line of episodes of teasing and bullying.

## The Characters' Cars

The cars driven by the various characters are symbolic of the nature of those characters. For example, Granny drives a car that is a Renault, but Elsa refers to it as if Renault is a name. The car becomes an important part of Elsa's journey because it is where Granny hides one of the earliest letters.

## Cigarette Smoke

Cigarette smoke is symbolic of Granny's presence. Granny smokes a lot, and Elsa has come to associate Granny's presence with the specific smell of her brand of tobacco. Sam smokes the same brand, a habit he began when he was in the hospital under Granny's care. When Elsa catches a whiff of Sam's cigarette smoke, her first reaction is one of elation because she hopes Granny is near.

## Fears

The creatures known as fears in the magical land are symbolic of the fears Elsa and others face in reality. In *The Land-of-Almost-Awake*, fears are tangible creatures with the ability to move and act. Granny introduces them to Elsa, probably as a way of helping her manage her own fears. In *The Land-of-Almost-Awake*, the fears resemble little wads of lint from the dryer. The correlation to the real world is that Britt-Marie sees the lint in the dryer as a major infraction because it is one of the few things she can control in her world.

## Granny's Photographs

The photographs above Granny's bed are symbolic of the work she has done over the years. Granny has lots of photographs on the ceiling above her bed. They are black and white photos of Granny with people she met over the years. She is very young and beautiful in the pictures, and the men are obviously entranced with her. The photos are symbolic of Granny's life before she gave up her career to be at home with Elsa.

## Shadows

Shadows are symbolic of dangers. The shadows are dangers, both in The Land-of-Almost-Awake and in the real world. In Granny's stories, the shadows were originally the dangerous dragons. In the real world, the shadows are real dangers. The most important one is Sam. It is significant that he seems to usually hide in the shadows.



# Settings

## The Land-of-Almost-Awake

This is a magical land where Granny teaches Elsa how to address her fears. The wardrobe in Granny's apartment is the portal, and they arrive at the land by riding cloud animals. The land is comprised of several kingdoms, each with specific traits. For example, Miamas is the land of imagination where fairy tales are used as currency. The stories Granny tells about The Land-of-Almost-Awake tends to mimic real life. As she begins to learn more about her parents, her neighbors, and herself, Elsa can see that Granny used real events to shape the stories of this magical place.

The land is extensive, and the novel includes many details about it, including its geography. There is a high mountain where the fairy tales are released into the world and a forest where Wolfheart goes to ensure he will not hurt anyone else.

## Elsa's Apartment Building

The apartment building is typical of small complexes of modern times. There are several floors. Granny's apartment is directly across from Elsa's and she often goes to Granny's, even in the middle of the night. The individual apartments reflect their tenants. Wolfheart's apartment is incredibly neat with no dirt and nothing out of place. The building is the equivalent of the castle in Granny's fairy tales.

Early in the novel, Kent is leading the charge for the tenants to buy the building in order to become leaseholders instead of renters. He knows that they can make a profit then by selling their leases. Granny actually owns the building though none of the tenants know that. She sends Elsa on a journey to learn more about the tenants before handing over the ownership so that Elsa is the one to make the final decision about the building.

## Granny's Apartment

Granny's apartment is right next door to Elsa's apartment, making it easily accessible for Elsa and Granny to see each other. Usually, Elsa goes to Granny's apartment. Elsa says that Granny's apartment has a unique smell that she associates with Granny. An important aspect of the apartment is the wardrobe where Elsa and Granny begin their journeys to The Land-of-Almost-Awake. After Granny's death, Ulrika begins the task of packing up Granny's things and several of the neighbors pitch in to help. Elsa hates that change and she briefly hates her mother for prompting it.



## The Hospital

Elsa's mother works as an administrator in a hospital. This is where Granny dies and where Harry is born. The hospital seems to be a typical modern-day facility. It is several stories high and includes the equipment that a person would expect to find in a hospital. Granny and Elsa sneak out of the hospital one evening but Granny says it is not like an escape because there is no challenge to sneaking out. There are also modern-day rules that seem typical of most hospitals. There is no smoking in the hospital but Granny smokes in her room anyway. Elsa is not allowed in her mother's room immediately after Harry's birth. However, her mother is a hospital administrator. She demands that Elsa be allowed inside.

## Elsa's School

The school seems typical for an elementary school for the time and place. The author does not include many details except as they relate to Elsa's problems. There are traditional classrooms and hallways. At one point, Elsa throws a handful of change down in a hall to slow down her pursuers. Outside, there is an area for adults to wait in their cars to pick up students. There is also a highway just outside the school property and a park across the street. This park is where Elsa runs to get away from some bullies one day and where Wolfheart stands up for her.





# Themes and Motifs

## Granny's Relationships

Granny's relationship with Elsa is the most important thing in Elsa's early life, and it is the most important thing to Granny as well. Granny stops traveling the world and doing her work as a doctor as soon as Elsa is born. She loved her career and even left her own daughter, Ulrika, in the care of others to do her job. However, she became completely engrossed in Elsa's life and it is obvious that she influenced Elsa's early ideals. When Elsa talks to Alf about wanting to dress up as Spiderman, Alf says Granny would have dressed up as anything she wanted and would have refused to let anyone tell her not to.

Granny seems to know Elsa better than anyone else, and she figures things out without any communication at all. Elsa has no friends at school and is often teased by the other students. She has learned to stand up for herself, but this means that she often has to fight. One day, she has an argument that leads to a fight that ends with a torn scarf. Granny and Elsa have become so close that Granny immediately knows the basics of what happened, even though Elsa doesn't tell her. Granny is in the hospital undergoing treatments for her cancer, but she sneaks out with Elsa. They break into the zoo. Elsa is smart enough to know that Granny does it because she knows it will make Elsa feel better. Granny actually dies just a short time later, which means she probably didn't feel up to making the trip to the zoo at all. This is an indication of her devotion to Elsa.

Part of Granny's devotion to Elsa may have been prompted by Granny's relationship with her daughter, Ulrika. Granny continued her career while Ulrika was a child and a teenager. She traveled around the world and helped thousands of people, but she didn't take care of her daughter's daily physical and emotional needs. Ulrika admits that she was angry with Granny for never being at home, and it is obvious that the situation affected their relationship for the rest of their lives.

From Elsa's perspective, she and Granny share a special relationship, but she comes to learn that Granny had relationships with many other people. Granny and Britt-Marie seem to always be at odds and they often seem to almost hate each other. Granny pulls pranks of Britt-Marie, such as shooting her with a paint ball gun or lying in the snow just to scare Britt-Marie. It is not until Elsa delivers Britt-Marie's letter that she discovers a deeper relationship. Britt-Marie's mother favored Britt-Marie's sister to the point that it scarred Britt-Marie for life. They were in an accident and Granny was quickly on the scene. Britt-Marie had a pulse and her sister didn't, and Granny ran with Britt-Marie to the hospital and saved her life. Britt-Marie's mother accused Granny of saving the "wrong" daughter. Granny was something of a savior to others in the building, including the boy with the syndrome and the drunk woman. Each owed Granny for the kindnesses she demonstrated.



Granny's relationship with the Monster, also known as Wolfheart, is also significant. When Elsa talks with the Monster for the first time, she discovers that he knows the secret language that Elsa had believed only she and Granny knew. Actually, Granny helped the Monster and the secret language was based on the language of the Monster's mother. Granny derived the names for the kingdoms of The Land-of-Almost-Awake from this language.

## Coming of Age

Elsa is seven-years-old when the novel opens and she becomes eight near the end of the story line. She ages a little in terms of physical age over the course of events, but her emotional maturity is more important in terms of this theme.

Elsa is an intelligent child who reads a great deal. She also depends heavily on the internet for information. This means she is driven to learn new things. Because of her intelligence and her thirst for knowledge, she is constantly learning about the people and world around her. The sheer fact that she learns that Granny's stories were mainly "nicked" from real life is an indication that Elsa is maturing.

Elsa and Granny have always gone to sleep in Granny's wardrobe. It is a portal to The Land-of-Almost-Awake. Elsa believes the wardrobe is getting bigger as she grows, but Granny argues that it does not change size at all. Despite Granny's argument, Elsa continues in this belief until a short time after Granny's death. She is in the wardrobe when she realizes she can touch both ends if she stretches just a bit. She knows that she will be able to touch both ends without stretching within a year and that the wardrobe will not ever grow again. One day she discovers that the wardrobe has expanded to accommodate Elsa, the Boy with the Syndrome, and the wurse. Her acceptance that the wardrobe is not really growing is an indication of her growing maturity. The fact that she believes it has grown again to accommodate the wurse is an indication that she is mentally getting through her grief, but it does not change the fact that she is maturing.

Another aspect of this theme is seen in Elsa's relationships with the people in the building and with her family. She has been determined not to like George on principle, even though she admits that everyone except Granny likes George. But when Elsa learns that George ran all the way to the hospital in order to be there for Harry's birth, she hugs him to show her appreciation. Her attitudes about other people are changing, and her acceptance of these changes indicates that she is maturing.

Elsa's attitude about her unborn brother is another example of this theme. She initially resents the fact that there is going to be a sibling. She considers asking to spend more time with her dad, mainly as a means of avoiding the new sibling. But after Harry is born, Elsa realizes that they have an important bond and that she needs to find ways to nurture that bond rather than seeking to weaken it.



Elsa learns from her Granny and from her interaction with other neighbors that it is alright to be different, which is another sign of her awakening maturity. Alf talks to her about Granny's determination to establish herself in a male-dominated field and to follow her heart when it came to doing what she wanted. When Elsa begins to make like-minded friends, she discovers that she isn't as alone as she'd always believed.

## Elsa's Relationships

Elsa has complex relationships with various characters, and these change over the course of the novel. Elsa's only friend at the opening of the novel is Granny, and Elsa considers theirs her most important relationship. Elsa depends heavily on Granny and she does not really think about the fact that Granny has had other friends and other relationships over the years. Elsa does not really know the other people in her building. There are also many things she does not know about her family, until Granny sends her to deliver a series of letters. It is only then that Elsa puts her relationship with Granny into perspective and discovers there are other friendships in her life.

Elsa's relationship with her mother is one of the most troubling to Elsa in the early chapters of the novel. She and her mother do not seem to get along. Elsa is often in trouble at school, and her mother does not seem to understand why Elsa fights so often or why she cannot form friendships. Elsa believes that her mother does not want to understand. She does not expect her mother to ever be on her side. But when her half-brother is born, Ulrika and George decide to name the baby Harry in honor of Harry Potter. Their decision is made because Elsa is a huge fan of the Harry Potter books. When Elsa gets in trouble at school one day, Ulrika stands up for her just as Granny had done in the past.

Elsa knows the identities of the people who live in her apartment building, but she does not really know anything else about them. Britt-Marie is a prime example. Elsa sees her only as a controlling busybody until she discovers that Britt-Marie's husband is having an affair. She learns that Britt-Marie took care of Ulrika when she was young and that Britt-Marie had a horrible mother. Britt-Marie stands up for Elsa when the police are looking for the wurse, and Elsa approves of Britt-Marie leaving in Granny's old Renault.

Alf is another person who establishes a relationship with Elsa. He seems cantankerous and indifferent to Elsa during her early years but becomes an ally and friend after Granny's death. He helps Elsa hide the wurse and helps her recover the Renault. It is only after they begin to become friends that Elsa learns Granny fashioned a story based on the situation between Alf, his brother Kent, and Britt-Marie.

In each new relationship, Elsa learns more about the person before she is able to form a friendship. This is especially true with regard to Wolfheart. Elsa is afraid of him during the early chapters of the novel and she has to get to know him a little before she loses all that fear.



Elsa also has a series of complicated relationships with the members of her extended family. She sees her father only every other weekend in keeping with terms of the divorce, though he sometimes picks her up at school after Granny's death. Elsa wants to spend more time with him but she really doesn't know how to ask and she fears that changing things will upset her father. As a contrast, Elsa tries not to like George even though he's a very likeable person. She seems to feel that he's an interloper in the family but her attitude begins to change when she learns that he ran all the way to the hospital in order to be with Ulrika when she gives birth. This indicates that her relationship with George may continue to change, growing into a friendship. She also makes the decision that she is going to spend more time with her father and his wife, Lisette, which will probably change those relationships as well.

## Bullying

Elsa is subjected to teasing and bullying from other students, mainly because she doesn't fit into the mold to be like them. Elsa is not the typical seven-year-old girl. She loves to read and devours books that are usually for older audiences. She is very conscious of grammar and the correct use of words. All these things set her apart from most of her classmates. In a child's life, different is not usually a good thing.

One of Elsa's favorite characters is Harry Potter, and she loves the Harry Potter series of books. She has read them all multiple times, though she has favorites. She wears a green Gryffindor scarf. When a girl makes fun of it, Elsa's first reaction is that the girl must be a fan of the Slytherins instead. She then decides that the girl probably has not read any of the Harry Potter books at all. She stands up for herself to the girl, even though she knows that it will result in a fight.

A similar situation is seen when the students are supposed to choose a literary character for a class project. Elsa chooses Spiderman. The teacher objects, saying that Spiderman is not a literary figure, but Elsa argues that comic books are a genuine form of literature. A boy in the class then gets into a fight with Elsa when he says that a girl can't be Spiderman. Again, Elsa stands up for what she believes to be right and winds up in a fight because of it.

Elsa is often sent to the principal's office. When Granny is alive, she usually arrives at the office as well where she unconditionally stands up for Elsa. Without friends standing up for her, her Granny's unconditional support becomes vital to Elsa's happiness. While the other children sometimes get in trouble, it's often Elsa who is in trouble for fighting. At one point, Ulrika urges Elsa to tell them who she's having problems with. Elsa refuses. It has already become an ingrained response that she won't tell on anyone else. She says that "snitches get stitches," indicating that she knows the children will make it even more difficult for her if she does tell.

An important aspect of this theme is seen in the principal's reaction to Elsa. He suggests that Elsa is the one who has a problem and that she might need professional counseling. While some adult readers will see that Elsa could sometimes avoid



confrontations, it is also easy to see that there are other children who should also be corrected. Elsa has become so accustomed to being teased and chased that she instinctively tightens her backpack straps all the time. She knows that it is more difficult to run fast when the backpack is loose.

In a nice twist at the end of the novel, the author tells about the new friendships that help Elsa's situation. These are like-minded children who help Elsa stand up to the bullies and make her life better at school.

## The Importance of a Hero

The novel opens with the statement that every child deserves to have a hero. In the story line, there are several heroes. Each has a role in the lives of specific people. Arguably, the most important hero is Granny because of her role in Elsa's life. Elsa becomes afraid after her parents' divorce. She says she is afraid because she has realized that children can die, but it seems likely that the divorce played a big role in her newly-acquired fears. Once those fears became evident to Granny, she began to find ways to help Elsa get through them. Together, they began to sleep in the wardrobe in Granny's apartment as a portal to The Land-of-Almost-Awake. There, Granny taught Elsa ways to deal with fears and real-life situations. That in itself makes Granny a hero in Elsa's eyes.

Granny also stood up for Elsa with an unconditional fervor. When the headmaster at Elsa's school said that Elsa provoked a boy into hitting her, Granny became violent and said it was because the headmaster provoked her into the action. The times that Granny stood up for Elsa enhanced the image of a hero in Elsa's eyes. Prior to Granny's death, Ulrika always tries to be the peacemaker when Elsa is in trouble and that makes Elsa believe that her mother won't stand up for her. That image changes after Granny's death when Ulrika throws a globe at the headmaster. It seems likely that Ulrika always felt she needed to be the calm person in the situation because Granny was so volatile. When Ulrika does stand up for Elsa, she becomes a hero in Elsa's eyes.

Granny was also a hero to many other people. Britt-Marie and her sister were in a horrible accident when they were children. Granny was the first medical person there. She carried Britt-Marie to the hospital and saved her life. The young man Elsa believes is the Monster was really a young soldier when Granny met him. She helped him overcome enough of his struggles that he has survived. The woman who is drunk every night was a happy young wife and mother until her husband and children were killed in a tsunami. Granny was not able to save her family, but she helped the young woman. All these actions and others made Granny a hero in the eyes of many who knew her.

Elsa also finds heroes in literature. Her favorites are Spiderman and Harry Potter. She sees the best in both of these characters and believes in them as only a child can do. Her interest in Harry Potter is so strong that Ulrika and George decide to name their son Harry.

# Styles

## Point of View

The novel is written in third person from the perspective of Elsa. She is a seven-year-old girl who does not have much in common with other children. Her differences give her a unique perspective. Some readers will not identify with Elsa because she is an atypical character.

The limited perspective means the reader does not know anything unless Elsa knows it. For example, Elsa knows only that she is afraid of the man she knows as The Monster. The reader doesn't know anything about his identity until Elsa learns about him. The perspective in this book is even more limited than is typical for this type of perspective. There are some things that Elsa knows that are not revealed to the reader. When she figures out that the apartment building is the castle from Granny's fairy tales, she reveals that she should have known what was going to happen next. However, she doesn't reveal what that is until it happens. There also seems to be details that Elsa does not share. She may know that the woman who wears a skirt and always seems to be talking on the phone is also the woman who becomes drunk and roams around the stairway at night. The author does not reveal to the reader that they are the same person, but it seems likely that Elsa does know this fact. These additional limitations may be the author's way of keeping some twists for the right time in the story line.

The overall tone of the story line is one of hope, though there is underlying sadness, conflict, and struggles seen throughout the novel. Though Elsa experiences the grief over losing her Granny and the struggle to fit in with her classmates, family, and neighbors, she is not the only character with issues. As Elsa learns about the other people who live in her building, she discovers that many of them are facing fears and problems of their own. This tone and these discoveries impact the perspective because Elsa is literally on a coming-of-age journey.

## Language and Meaning

The author depends heavily on literary devices throughout the novel. Foreshadowing, personification, simile, and metaphor are the most prevalent. For example, the author personifies death during the scene at Granny's funeral. An example of foreshadowing appears at the opening of Chapter 30. The first sentences of that chapter read, "Only one person collapses with a heart attack late on Christmas Eve. But, two hearts are broken, and the house is never quite the same again." The use of foreshadowing is obviously intended to keep the reader intrigued.

The novel is divided between dialogue and narration. Traditional punctuation is used to distinguish the dialogue. The majority of dialogue is presented as conversations between characters. There are curse words scattered throughout the dialogue, and this





seems to be the author's attempt to make the conversations seem genuine. The curse words may be offensive to some readers, especially younger readers.

The story is apparently set in Switzerland, and there are words and phrases specific to the region. At one point, Kent tells Elsa the cost of a telephone, expressing it in kronor, which is the official currency of Switzerland. There are few other indications of the specific location, but the word "bloody" appears as a curse word throughout the dialogue. This seems to indicate a European influence on the language. The author, Fredrick Backman, is a native of Sweden which further confirms the setting.

## Structure

The novel is divided into thirty-four chapters. Each chapter has a one or two word title. In most cases the title is a single noun. The titles give a small clue about the contents of that chapter, though in most cases the clues might not lead the reader to the correct conclusion. For example, the chapter titled "Dreams" is not about a dream that occurs while sleeping. Maud's cookies are called dreams, and they appear in that chapter. In many cases, the reference is so insignificant that the reader might not even realize the point without consciously looking for it.

The events are presented in chronological order but with some flashbacks to explain past events. For example, Elsa's parents are divorced. However, the reader gets brief looks at their lives before the divorce. This helps Elsa come to terms with the current situation and helps explain the struggles faced by each of the characters. Other past information is presented when characters tell Elsa their stories, especially as they related to Granny. Maud and Lennart talk about their son, Sam, and how they came to live in the apartment with the boy with the syndrome and his mother.

The novel also includes an epilogue that gives some information about the months following the formal end of the story line. In that section, the author implements authorial intrusion, a literary device. The Epilogue begins with Granny's letter to Elsa. Then, the author talks about the importance of using an epilogue correctly so that it does not create unanswered questions for the reader.



## Quotes

Every seven-year-old deserves a superhero. That's just how it is."

-- Narrator (Chapter 1, "Tobacco" paragraph 1)

**Importance:** Elsa and Granny are introduced in the paragraphs following this statement, and it soon becomes clear to the reader that Granny is Elsa's superhero. The fact that "every" child deserves a hero is discussed in later chapters as Elsa learns that Granny has been a hero to dozens of people in addition to Elsa.

Elsa is the sort of child who learned early in life that it's easier to make your way if you get to choose your own soundtrack."

-- Narrator (Chapter 2, "Monkey" paragraph 69)

**Importance:** Elsa is listening to music on her headphones, which were a gift from Granny and Ulrika the previous Christmas. She puts on the headphones and turns up the music whenever Granny and Ulrika have an argument. In this case, they are probably talking about Granny's medical treatment. Elsa pretends her mom and Granny are actresses in a silent movie when she's in this situation. This indicates that Elsa doesn't want to hear the arguments and that she's still enough of a child to want to avoid being pulled into them.

There used to be just two people in the world who knew how to make Mum lose control. There now there's only one. That's a lot of power to put into the hand of someone who's not even eight yet."

-- Narrator (Chapter 6, "Cleaning Agents" paragraph 3)

**Importance:** Granny is dead, and Elsa is feeling the loss in extreme ways. She has always known that Granny was on her side, regardless of whether Elsa was right or the details of the situation. Now, Elsa is feeling more alone and she is fully aware that she and Granny have been the only two people who could make Ulrika become less controlled.

Only different people change the world,' Granny used to say. 'No one normal has ever changed a crapping thing.'"

-- Granny (Chapter 9, "Soap" paragraph 5)

**Importance:** Elsa is considered different by her peers at school and even by most adults she encounters. People are surprised by her intelligence, probably prompted by her avid imagination and the extensive reading she has done. An important aspect of Granny's character is that she never encourages Elsa to try to fit in, but she does encourage her to be herself, regardless of the immediate consequences. The language in this quote is typical of Granny's conversations and helps the reader understand her character.





People who see them on the pavement react as people generally do when they catch sight of a girl, a wurse, and a monster strolling along side by side: they cross the street.”  
-- Narrator (Chapter 16, “Dust” paragraph 5)

**Importance:** Elsa notices the reactions of people who see them. Some of them turn to go another way, pretending someone on their telephone is instructing them to that action. Others seem concerned for Elsa, apparently fearing that she might have been kidnapped. Other than Elsa's reaction, the more important part of this quote is that the narrator talks as if people often see little girls with wurses and monsters. This is another clue to the reader that the wurse isn't a mystical creature. Further proof will be given later when the wurse is taken to the veterinarian.

Every fairy tale has a dragon. Thanks to Granny, that is ...”  
-- Narrator (Chapter 18, “Smoke” paragraph 1)

**Importance:** This is another look at Granny's ability to tell stories, which is an important aspect of her character. She claims to have invented the idea of having dragons in the fairy tales and goes so far as to say they were unemployed before she came up with a role for them.

She doesn't want to share Granny with others. And doesn't want to be reminded of how Granny was her only friend, while Granny herself had hundreds of others.”  
-- Narrator (Chapter 21, “Candle Grease” paragraph 4)

**Importance:** Elsa is at Granny's funeral in this scene. She has just arrived at the church where she sees that many people have come to pay their respects to Granny. Most are strangers to Elsa, but they cared enough about Granny to attend her funeral. Elsa has begun to understand more about Granny in the past days, including that she had a life apart from her relationship with Elsa. These people are another reminder of that just at a time when Elsa is struggling with her own grief.

And that was the day Elsa heard the story of the boy with a syndrome. A fairy tale she'd never heard before.”  
-- Narrator (Chapter 24, “Dreams” paragraph 28)

**Importance:** Lennart is just about to tell Elsa how he, Maud, the boy with the syndrome, and the boy's mother came to live at Elsa's apartment building. Elsa called this a “fairy tale,” though it really happened to these people. This seems to indicate that she is making the connection between real life and fairy tales and that she knows all of Granny's stories are about things that happened in their lives.

The Princess of Miploris was so beloved of the two princes that they fought for her love, until they hated one another. The Princess of Miploris once had a treasure stolen by a witch, and now she lives in the kingdom of sorrow.”  
-- Narrator (Chapter 27, “Mulled Wine” paragraph 132)

**Importance:** Elsa's previous conversations with Alf give her the information to identify



the princess of the castle. The reader would naturally expect that Elsa will be that princess, but it is Britt-Marie. The witch is later identified as Granny, and Elsa is the stolen treasure because Britt-Marie had expected to be the one helping care for Elsa.

You have to believe. Granny always said that. You have to believe in something in order to understand the tales.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 29, “Swiss Meringues” paragraph 1)

**Importance:** Elsa never explains exactly what she believes in and Granny does not say what sort of belief is necessary. However, Elsa asks several people whether they believe in an afterlife. She is obviously trying to figure out where Granny has gone and whether they will be reunited. Granny has told Elsa she will be waiting in Miamas. As Elsa visits the Land-of-Almost-Awake, she avoids that kingdom because she is afraid Granny will not be there. It seems obvious that Elsa is struggling with a new level of belief as she tries to get through her grief.

It's important to the people in the Land-of-Almost-Awake that it should be this way, because they believe that nothing really ever completely dies. It just turns into a story, undergoes a little shift in grammar, changes the tense from 'now' to 'then.

-- Narrator (Chapter 34, "Granny" paragraph 1)

**Importance:** When Granny died, Elsa said she had remained in Miamas. Granny had always said “see you later” instead of “good-bye” because that is how the people in Miamas felt about parting for any reason. The fact that the author points out the changes that would make Granny's life into a story could be a reference to the fact that it is, in fact, this novel.

You are the best of us all. Grow up and be different and don't let anyone tell you not to be different, because all superheroes are different.” (Writer's note: The spelling errors are direct from Granny's letter.)

-- Granny (Epilogue paragraph 4)

**Importance:** This quote is from Granny's letter to Elsa. It indicates Granny's greatest wish for Elsa's future. Granny herself defied convention and became a doctor at a time when doctors were mostly male. She did not settle into the conventional role of a mother, and her actions saved many lives.