



Moonlight in the Sea

Author: Kartik Shanker

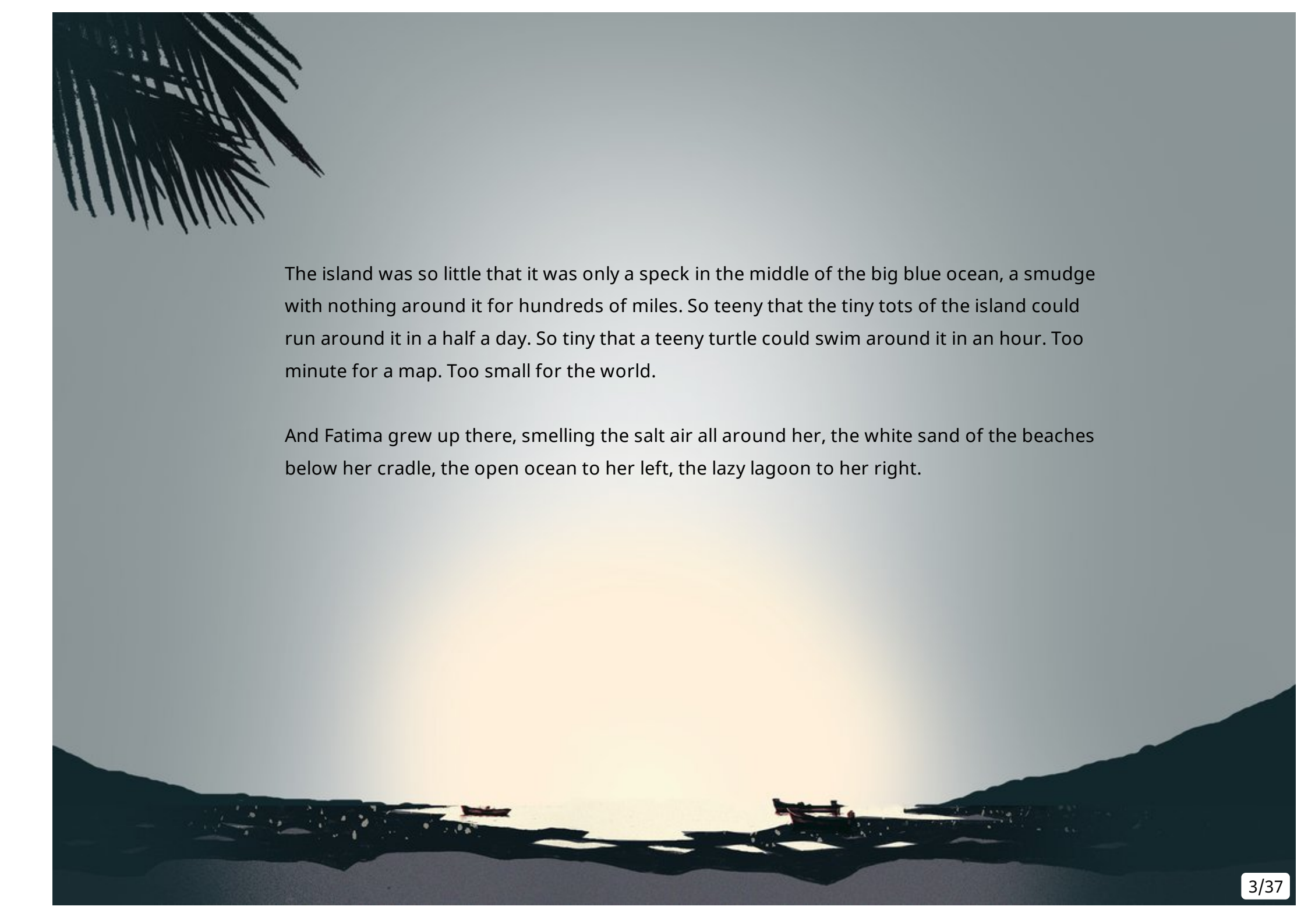
Illustrator: Prabha Mallya

Level 4



Nihla meets Fatima

Nihla smiled at Fatima, the baby, just moments after she was born. Full and bright, Nihla smiled radiantly at the baby girl. Her cool gaze washed over the little island, off the tops of coconut-laden trees, and bounced off the green waters of the lagoon.



The island was so little that it was only a speck in the middle of the big blue ocean, a smudge with nothing around it for hundreds of miles. So teeny that the tiny tots of the island could run around it in a half a day. So tiny that a teeny turtle could swim around it in an hour. Too minute for a map. Too small for the world.

And Fatima grew up there, smelling the salt air all around her, the white sand of the beaches below her cradle, the open ocean to her left, the lazy lagoon to her right.



Fatima meets Nihla

Fatima smiled at Nihla much later. Her first memory was the sand and the water, and the light in it.

She imagined that someone had gathered up light from the streets, the houses, the shops, and thrown it helter-skelter into the water.

And then one day she thought to look up and there was Nihla wearing her broad grin, almost saying, 'Well now, you've finally found me, haven't you?'

And she looked up at the moon and down at the water and marveled that Nihla could swim so easily. Fatima loved the swimming Nihla, loved watching the light splash and flow through the water. She imagined she could chase Nihla in the water, cup her in her palm, and bring her home.

She dug her toes into the sand and let the gentle waves of the lagoon lap and drown her feet. And the little twinkling algae lit up like sparklers in the water. And later, when she walked home, her feet were covered with bits of the minute living sparklers, green and glowing, lighting up every footprint she left in the sand.



Fatima Falls In

Fatima spent much of her day on the beach by the boats. Fatima loved boats. The little one that her father used to fish in the lagoon, the lapping sounds of the paddle in the still of the night. The big one that he used to fish at sea, the growl of the motor against the whitecaps in the noon sun.

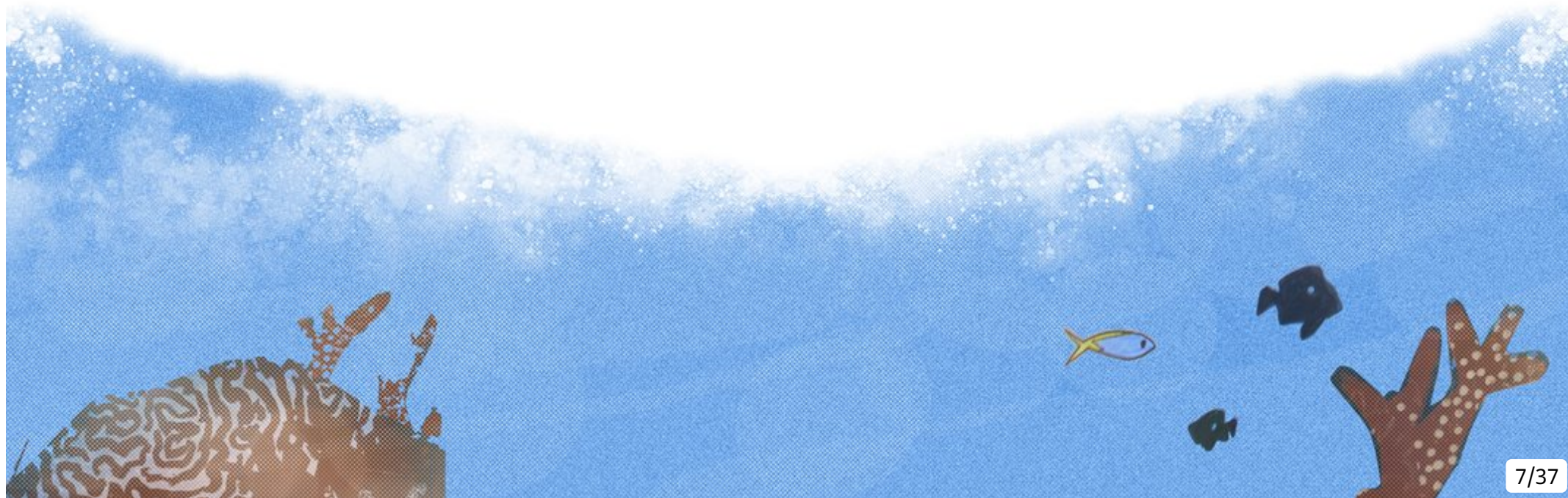


One day, her father decided he would take her with him to fish in the lagoon, just a short trip. Fatima could not believe her luck. Her father lifted her onto the boat and his boys jumped in and paddled the boat out.

Slowly they put their nets out to catch bait for their tuna. One of the nets snagged, and as they pulled, the boat tilted to a side and Fatima saw the world tilt over, until suddenly she was in the water.

Later, she remembered the sound of her father yelling at the boys, but she remembered the light in the water more. The light in the water that was swimming around her and reflecting off these strange and wonderful sights.

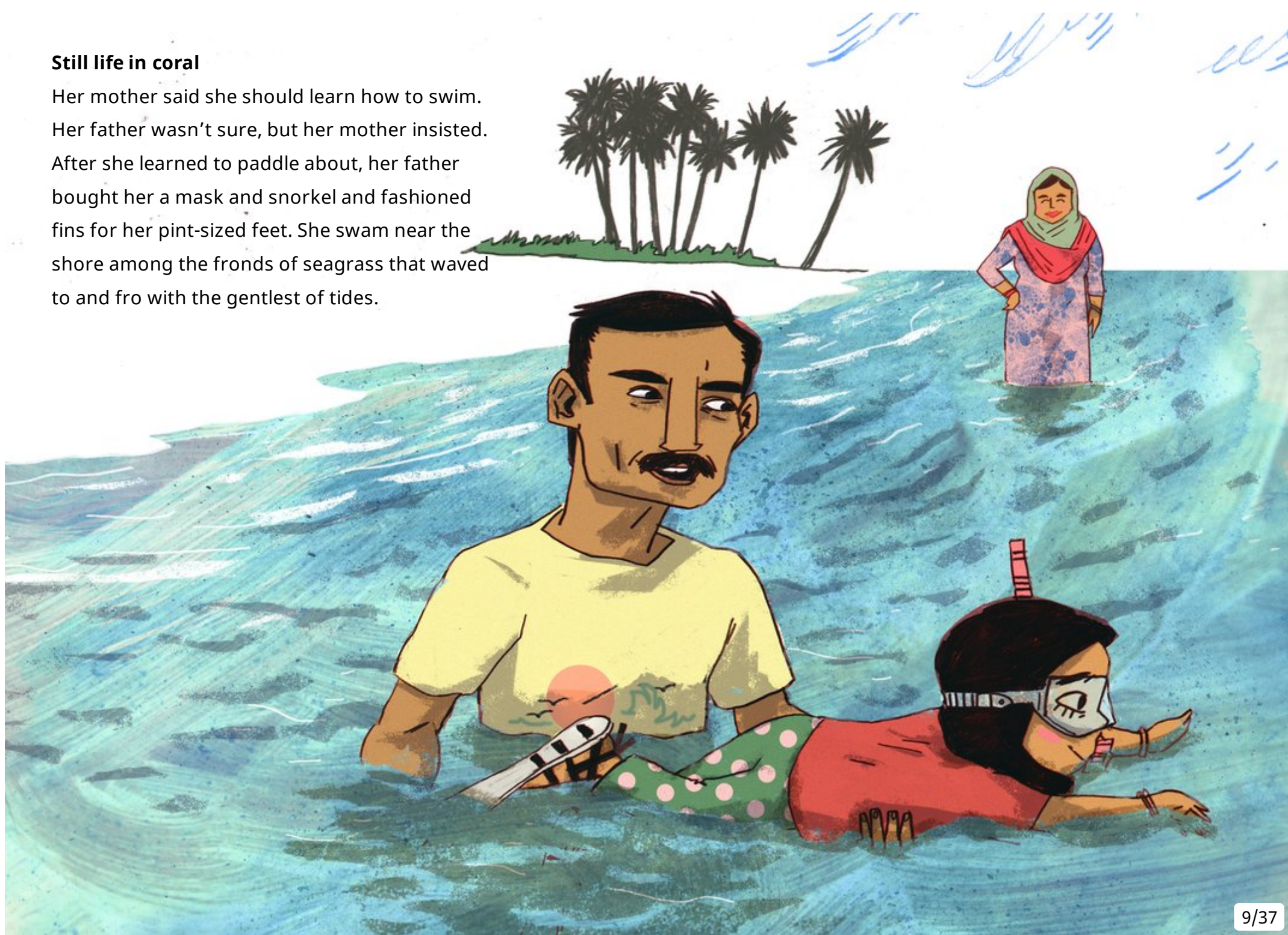
It seemed like the longest time, but within seconds, a hand grabbed her and brought her on to the boat. And she knew then that she would have to go back, to join Nihla in exploring this world that she did not know about.






Still life in coral

Her mother said she should learn how to swim. Her father wasn't sure, but her mother insisted. After she learned to paddle about, her father bought her a mask and snorkel and fashioned fins for her pint-sized feet. She swam near the shore among the fronds of seagrass that waved to and fro with the gentlest of tides.



One day, her father rowed to the middle of the lagoon and lowered her into the water. As she adjusted her mask and looked below, the world exploded into colour - purple, red, blue, green. She saw fingers of branching coral, the huge boulder-like massive coral, the table coral, the brain coral,



An underwater scene with a light blue, slightly hazy background. In the bottom left corner, there are two pieces of coral: one is reddish-orange and the other is a lighter, more delicate structure. Several fish are scattered throughout the scene. On the left, there are a few dark grey fish. In the center, there is a small school of light blue fish. On the right, there is a larger school of dark grey fish. The overall atmosphere is calm and serene.

Fatima realized suddenly that in the flurry of colour, the shock of shapes, she had forgotten to breathe. With the smidgeon of air left in her little lungs, she blew water out of her snorkel and took a deep gulp of air.

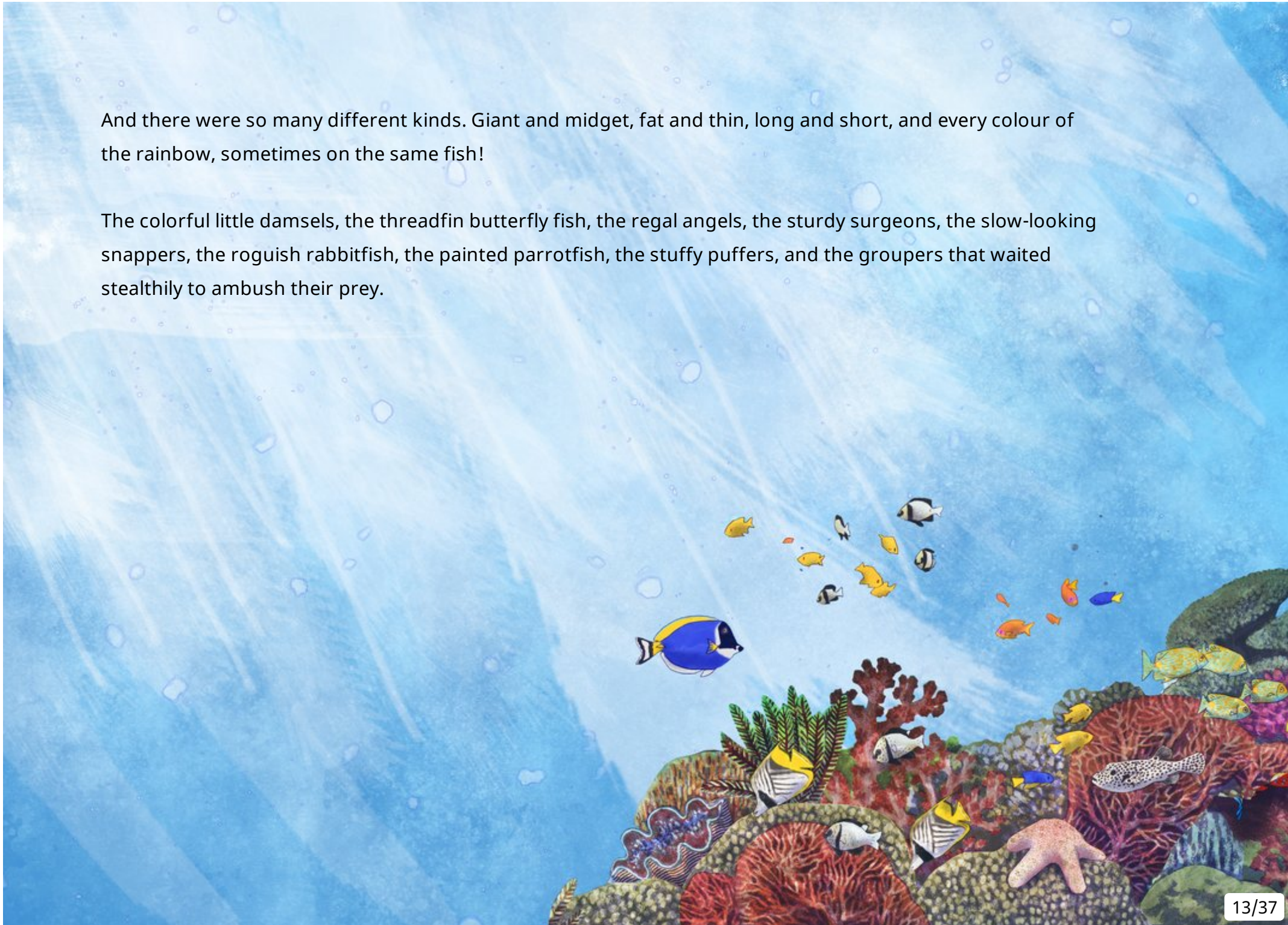
She paddled around, with her head under water, absorbed with the world below, oblivious to the one above.



Every chance Fatima got, she would get her father or one of the boys to row her out into the lagoon. She would spend hours in the water watching the coral, trailing the turtles, following the fish.

And there were so many different kinds. Giant and midget, fat and thin, long and short, and every colour of the rainbow, sometimes on the same fish!

The colorful little damsels, the threadfin butterfly fish, the regal angels, the sturdy surgeons, the slow-looking snappers, the roguish rabbitfish, the painted parrotfish, the stuffy puffers, and the groupers that waited stealthily to ambush their prey.



Grumpy and pompous

Fatima loved to compare the fish to the people she knew. Grumpy grouper was her uncle who came home to eat tea and biscuits. Pompous puffer was her father's friend who owned the big shop down the road. Of course, beautiful butterflyfish was her mother, and exquisite angelfish was her little sister.



And needless to say, she was a baby sweetlips, brightly coloured, yellow and black, swimming wildly and dashing about in fits and bursts of energy, but trying to stay far from big fish with bigger teeth.



And one night, swimming near the reef, she saw something she would never forget. Her father was fishing nearby and she jumped into the water with a torch. Suddenly, she was surrounded by a snowstorm, a powder cloud of pink and

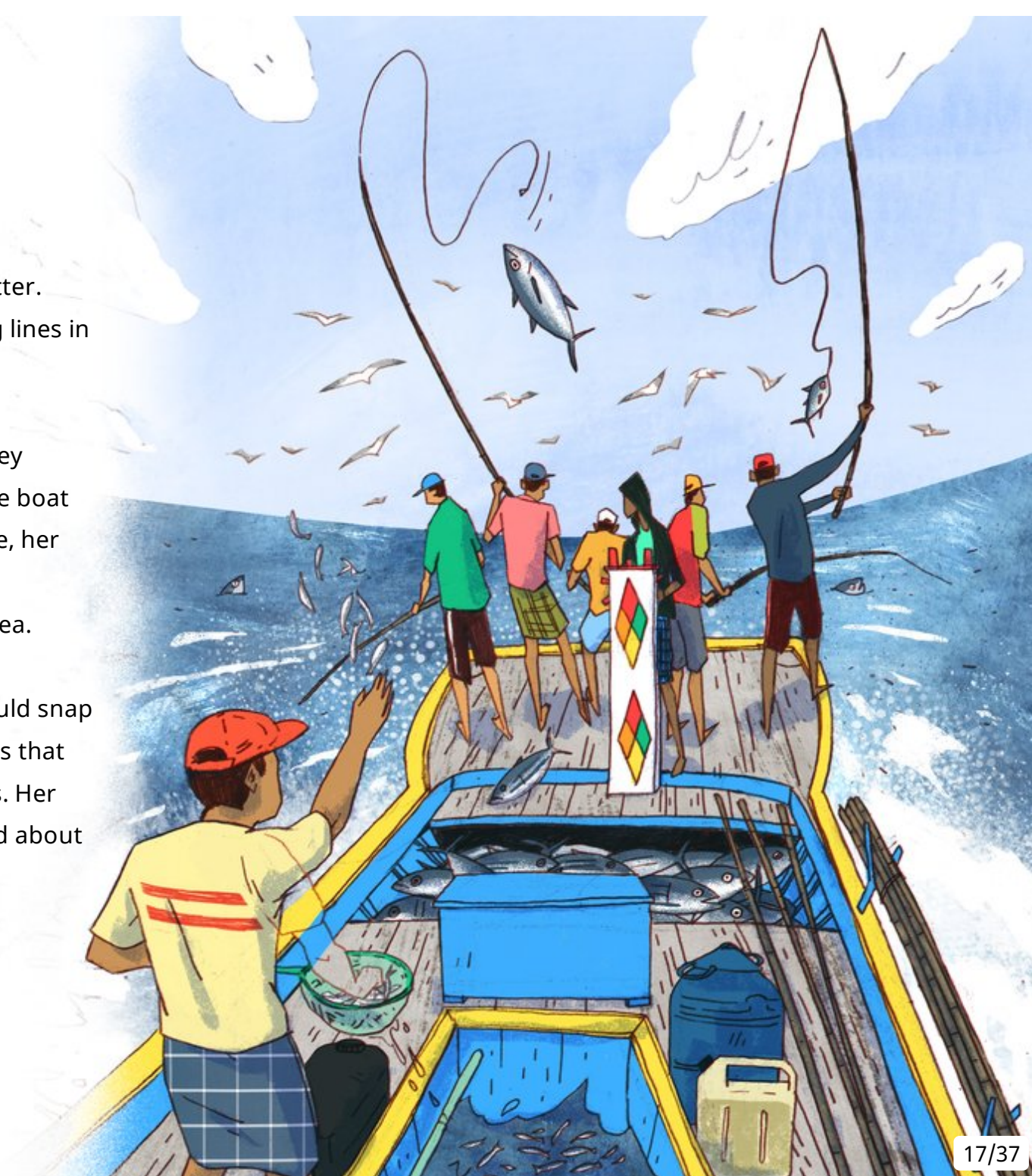


Fatima goes fishing

Much as she liked fish, she liked fishing even better. First, she learned to fish from the jetty, throwing lines in the water and pulling up small silvery fish.

Sometimes, she went fishing with her father. They would go out with live baitfish in a big box on the boat and search for tuna shoals. Once they found one, her father would guide the boat through the shoal, spraying water and scattering baitfish into the sea.

In the feeding frenzy that followed, the tuna would snap at anything silvery and shiny, including the hooks that dangled from the lines that hung from the poles. Her father and his boys would swing the tuna up and about and flick it off the hook into the boat.



Fatima liked to catch rainbow runners on the lines that trailed behind the boat. She loved feeling the line jerk against her hand, and the weight of the fish as she pulled it in. Already, she would be thinking of the spices her mother would use to make the curry.

And sometimes, the boys would cut and clean the fish on the boat itself, add some salt, chop it into little pieces and throw them into the boiling rice along with other spices.

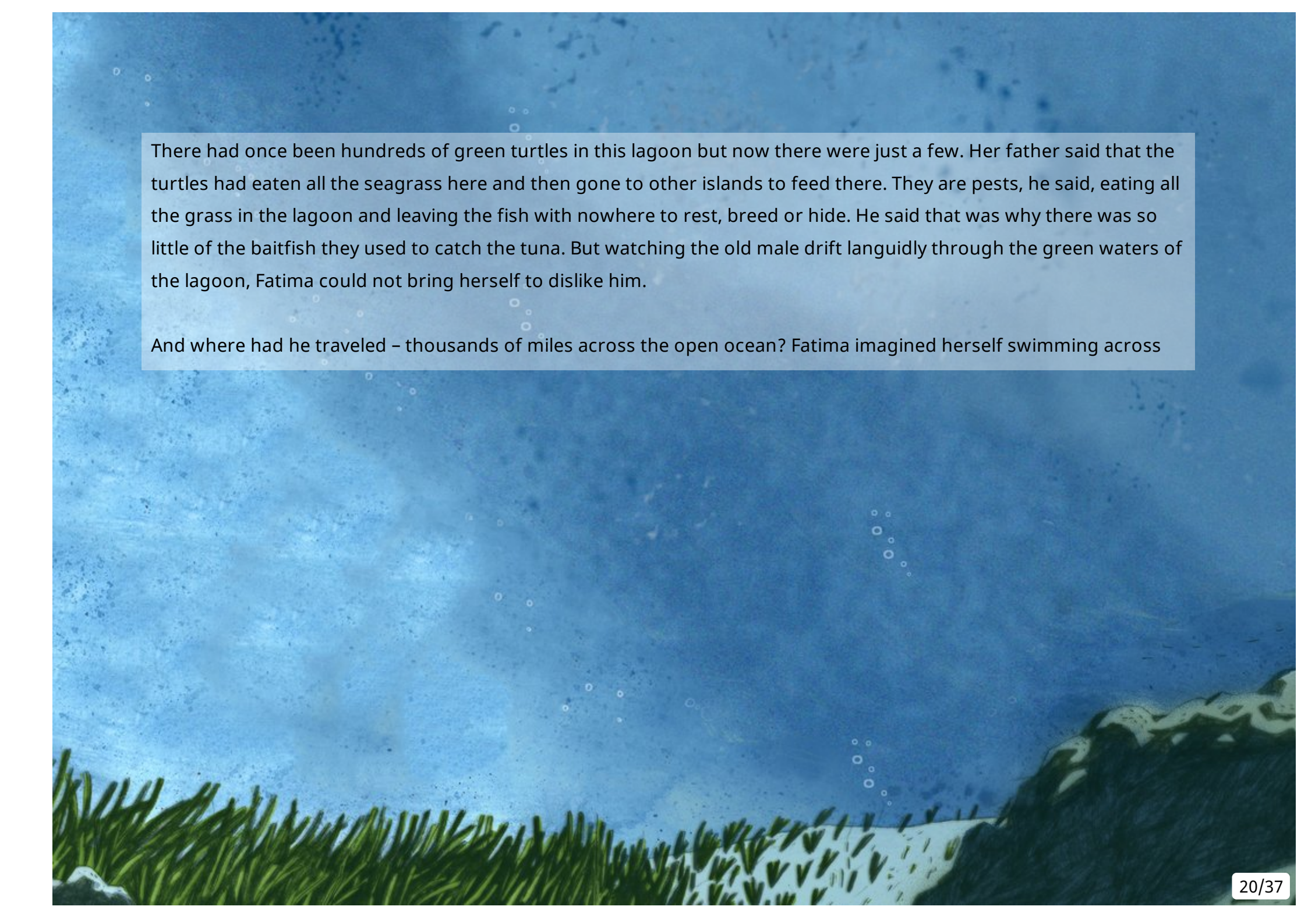
Fish

biryani. It was heaven!





One day, while Fatima was snorkeling, she saw a big green turtle, a male with its long tail protruding behind it. She had seen it in the lagoon many times. This time, she decided to follow it as it lazily swam on. It was an old turtle, with crud on its carapace, and half a flipper missing. What shark had chewed on this grizzled giant, she wondered.

An underwater scene with a blue background and green seagrass at the bottom. A semi-transparent text box is overlaid on the scene. Bubbles are visible in the water.

There had once been hundreds of green turtles in this lagoon but now there were just a few. Her father said that the turtles had eaten all the seagrass here and then gone to other islands to feed there. They are pests, he said, eating all the grass in the lagoon and leaving the fish with nowhere to rest, breed or hide. He said that was why there was so little of the baitfish they used to catch the tuna. But watching the old male drift languidly through the green waters of the lagoon, Fatima could not bring herself to dislike him.

And where had he traveled – thousands of miles across the open ocean? Fatima imagined herself swimming across



The sudden storm

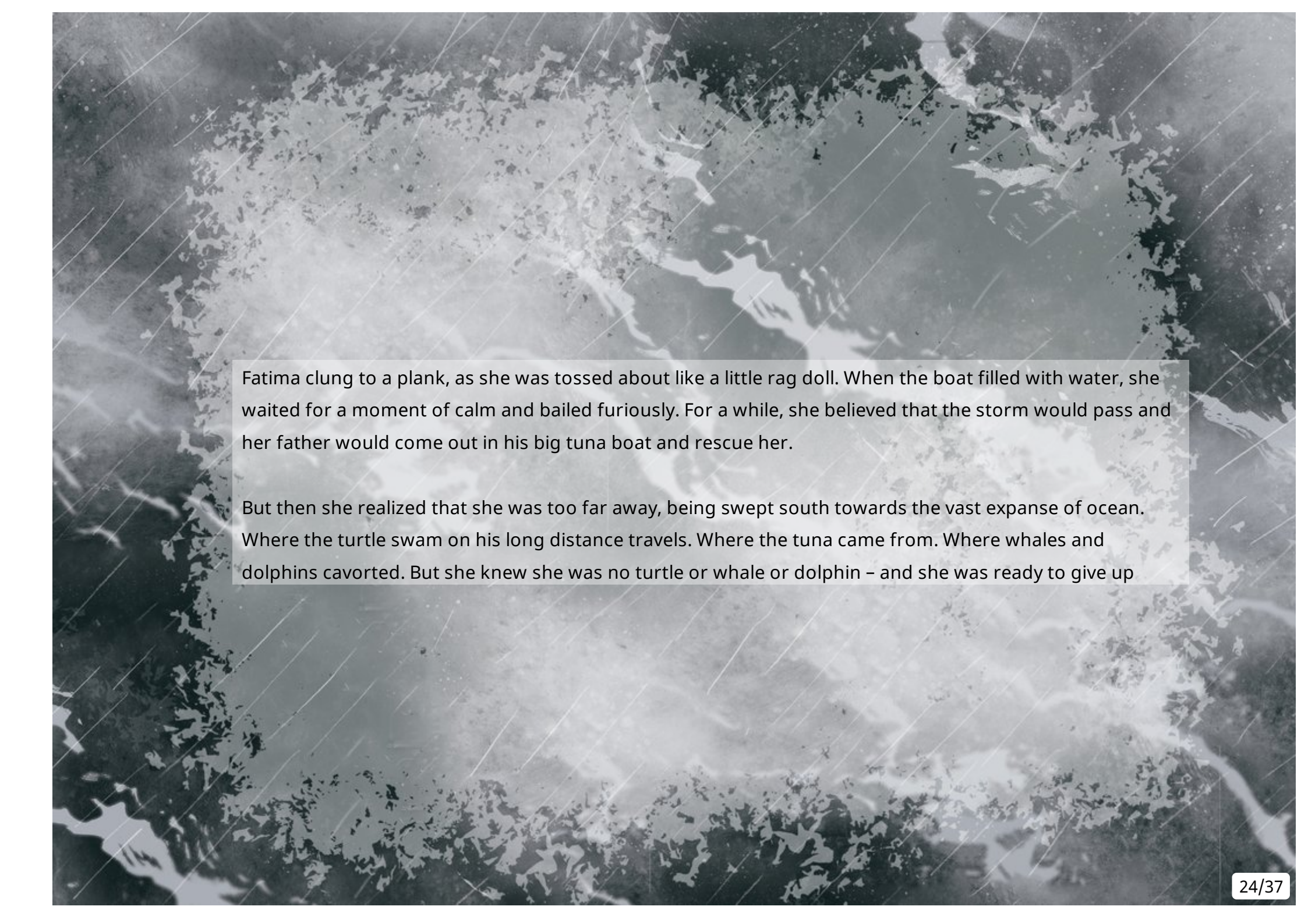
When Fatima was nine, she often took her father's boat and paddled into the lagoon to snorkel on her own and sometimes, to fish. The storm came without any warning. Big dark clouds, drum rolls of thunder, lightning streaking across the sky and wet sheets of rain. Fatima was not afraid, for she was in the lagoon, but she could not even see the island any more.

She huddled in the boat and waited for the storm to pass, bailing water out of the boat. An hour later, the storm had not passed. Two hours later, it was still raining buckets. Three hours later, it was clear that the heavens had sprung a major leak.

And the waves were getting bigger. And bigger. The sea looked like it was boiling. Big bubbling swells rose up as if from the very depths of the ocean, lifted the boat high up towards the sky and brought it hurtling down.



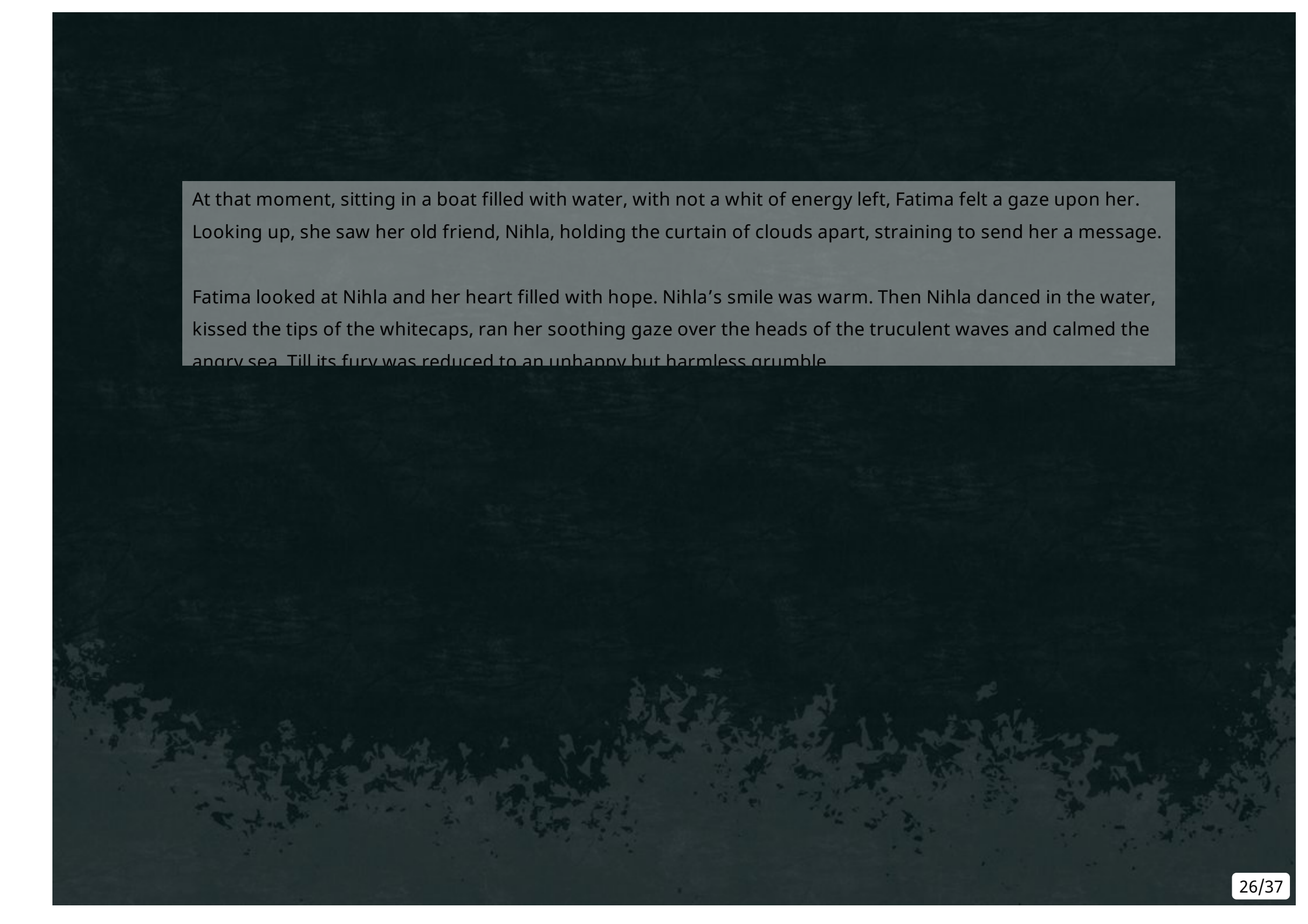
For hours and hours and hours, the little boat was rocked by gigantic waves. And Fatima realized she had been swept far out to sea.



Fatima clung to a plank, as she was tossed about like a little rag doll. When the boat filled with water, she waited for a moment of calm and bailed furiously. For a while, she believed that the storm would pass and her father would come out in his big tuna boat and rescue her.

But then she realized that she was too far away, being swept south towards the vast expanse of ocean. Where the turtle swam on his long distance travels. Where the tuna came from. Where whales and dolphins cavorted. But she knew she was no turtle or whale or dolphin – and she was ready to give up

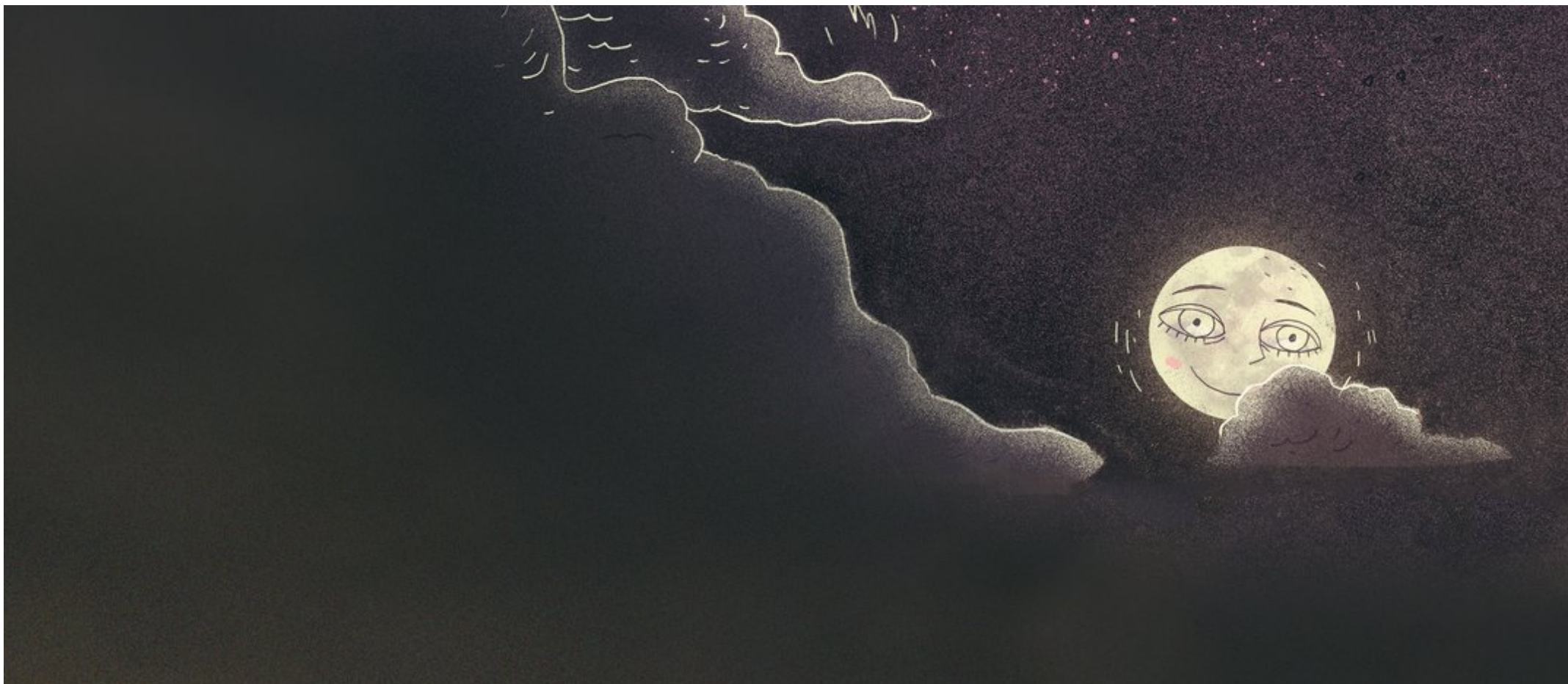




At that moment, sitting in a boat filled with water, with not a whit of energy left, Fatima felt a gaze upon her. Looking up, she saw her old friend, Nihla, holding the curtain of clouds apart, straining to send her a message.

Fatima looked at Nihla and her heart filled with hope. Nihla's smile was warm. Then Nihla danced in the water, kissed the tips of the whitecaps, ran her soothing gaze over the heads of the truculent waves and calmed the angry sea. Till its fury was reduced to an unhappy but harmless grumble.





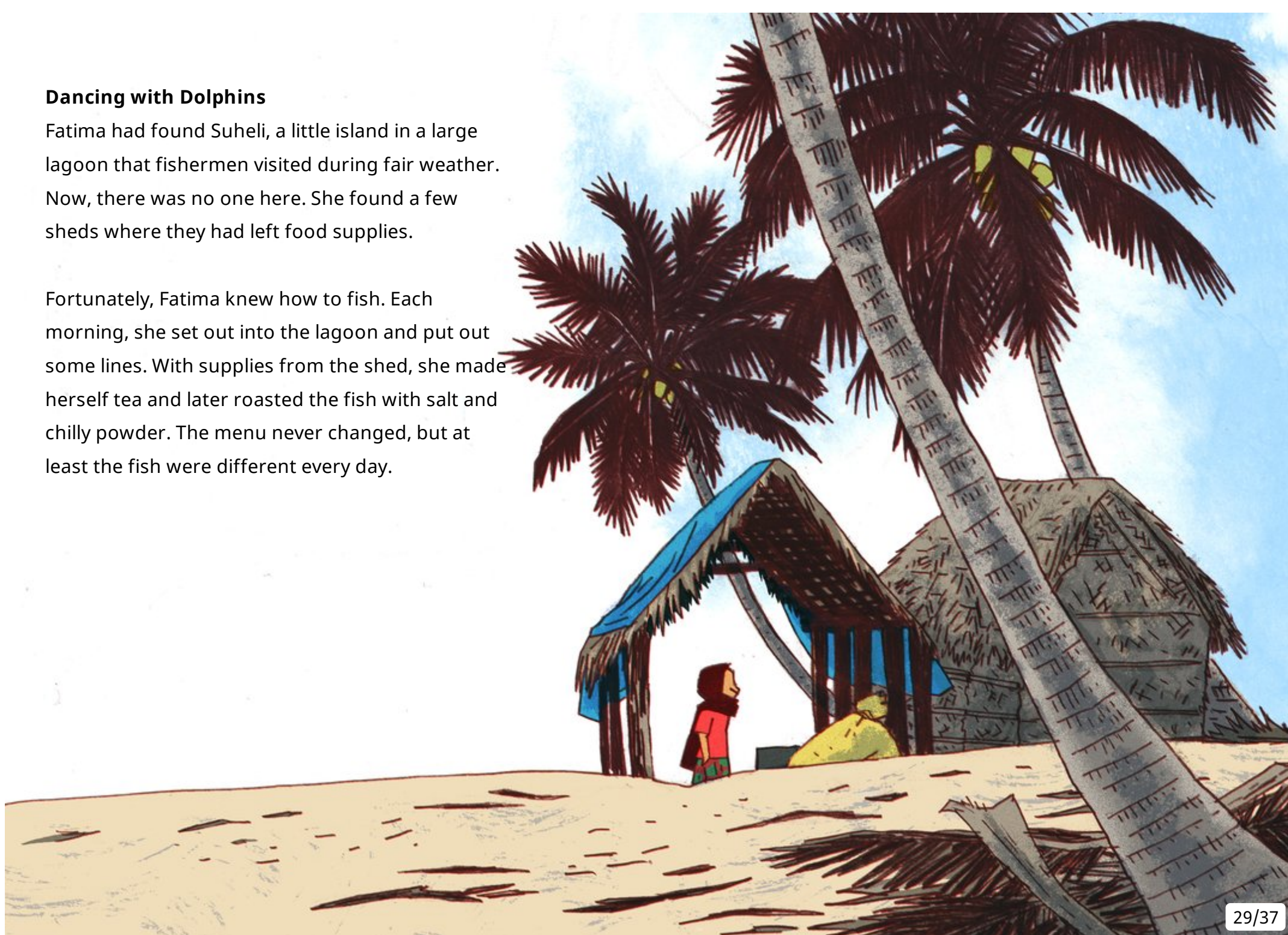
Fatima looked around, and in that moment of silence saw, in a little cone of moonlight, an itsy-bitsy island, a little blip in the ocean.

Bailing and paddling furiously, Fatima made her way into the lagoon and towards the haven. Smaller even than the one she had

Dancing with Dolphins

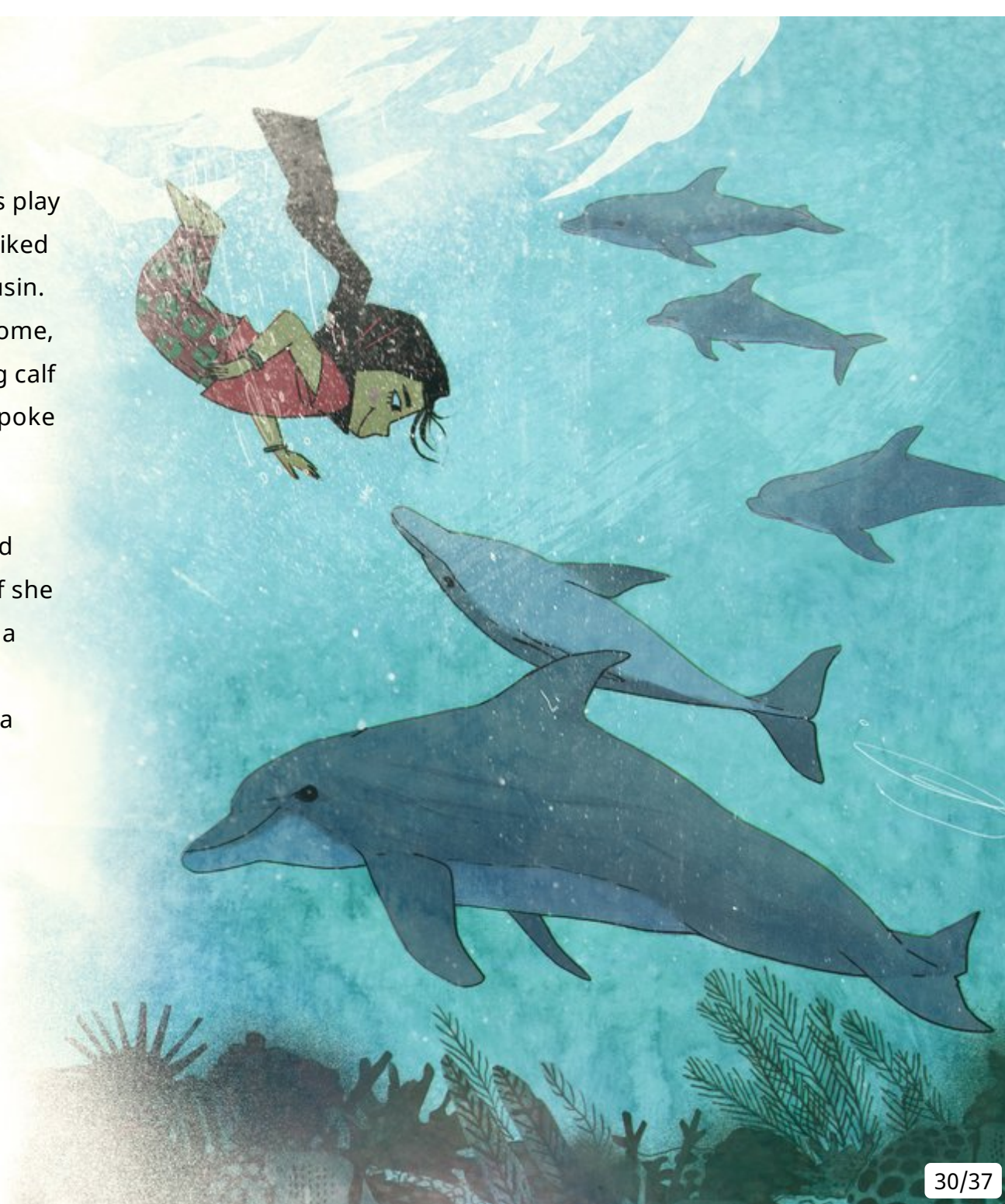
Fatima had found Suheli, a little island in a large lagoon that fishermen visited during fair weather. Now, there was no one here. She found a few sheds where they had left food supplies.

Fortunately, Fatima knew how to fish. Each morning, she set out into the lagoon and put out some lines. With supplies from the shed, she made herself tea and later roasted the fish with salt and chilly powder. The menu never changed, but at least the fish were different every day.



At the edge of the lagoon, she watched the dolphins play and sometimes she swam with them. The dolphins liked Fatima and adopted her as a somewhat strange cousin. She did not see them every day but when they did come, there would be much frolicking around her. A young calf was particularly fond of Fatima and would playfully poke her in the side.

Fatima had heard stories about how dolphins helped people and wondered if they might take her home if she rode on them, like in some pictures she had seen in a book. But the adult dolphins never let her get close enough for that. And as friendly as they were, Fatima was still just that little bit afraid of them.





Moonlight and Manta

One day, she paddled out to the reef and found a little opening into the ocean. The sea was calm like a sheet of glass and Fatima could not resist paddling a little further. The blue water was so clear, she could see the coral twenty metres below. From the little compartment below the planks, she pulled out her little mask and snorkel, and jumped into the water.

Holding her breath, Fatima could now dive several metres underwater. She saw the familiar shapes of the blue tangs, the butterfly fish, a Moorish idol, a regal angelfish. And the larger shapes of a Napoleon wrasse, a school of bump-headed parrotfish swimming near a coral mound some distance away, jacks and trevallies circling.





And suddenly from a distance, she saw a manta ray swim towards her, gliding through the water like a sci-fi stealth jet, wing tips upturned ever so slightly. It swooped towards the reef and passed below her, its grace and elegance so complete that once again, Fatima realized she had forgotten to breathe.

At that moment, Fatima realized that she wanted to spend the rest of her life in the water. To watch and learn and understand this beautiful world.

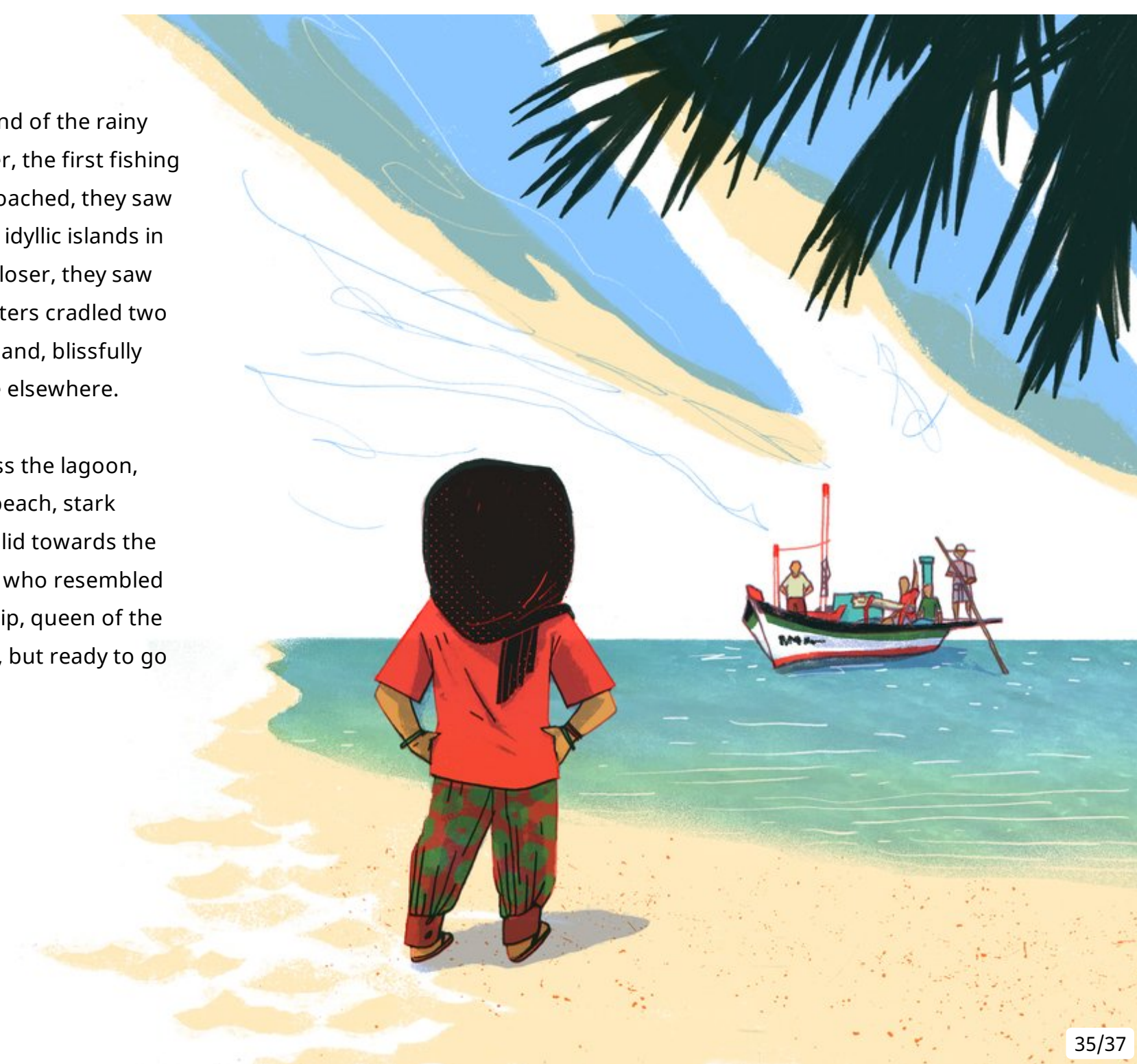
Queen of the island

Suheli was serene, but Fatima knew she had to leave soon. To go back to school, to college, to university, to go around the world. To come back to Suheli.



Fortunately, this was the end of the rainy season and a few days later, the first fishing crew arrived. As they approached, they saw a gigantic lagoon with two idyllic islands in the middle. As they came closer, they saw that the turquoise blue waters cradled two palm-covered mounds of sand, blissfully unaware of the buzz of life elsewhere.

As the boat hummed across the lagoon, they saw a white sliver of beach, stark against the trees. As they slid towards the beach, they saw a little girl who resembled the moon, a hand on her hip, queen of the island, content to be there, but ready to go home.



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Moonlight in the Sea

(English)

Fatima grows up on an idyllic island in the Lakshadweep, watched over by Nihla, the moon. She falls in love with the underwater world of colourful corals, fascinating fish, mysterious manta rays, grizzled old turtles and dancing dolphins. One day, in a terrible storm, she gets lost at sea. Join Fatima on her incredible adventure on remote islands with wonderful marine creatures.

This is a Level 4 book for children who can read fluently and with confidence.



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