

Tell us our story, Grandma



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First Edition 2020

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ISBN - 978-624-96254-0-2

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Printed by

Tharanjee Prints (Pvt) Ltd.

No. 506, Highlevel Road,

Nawinne, Maharagama.

Tel: 2804773

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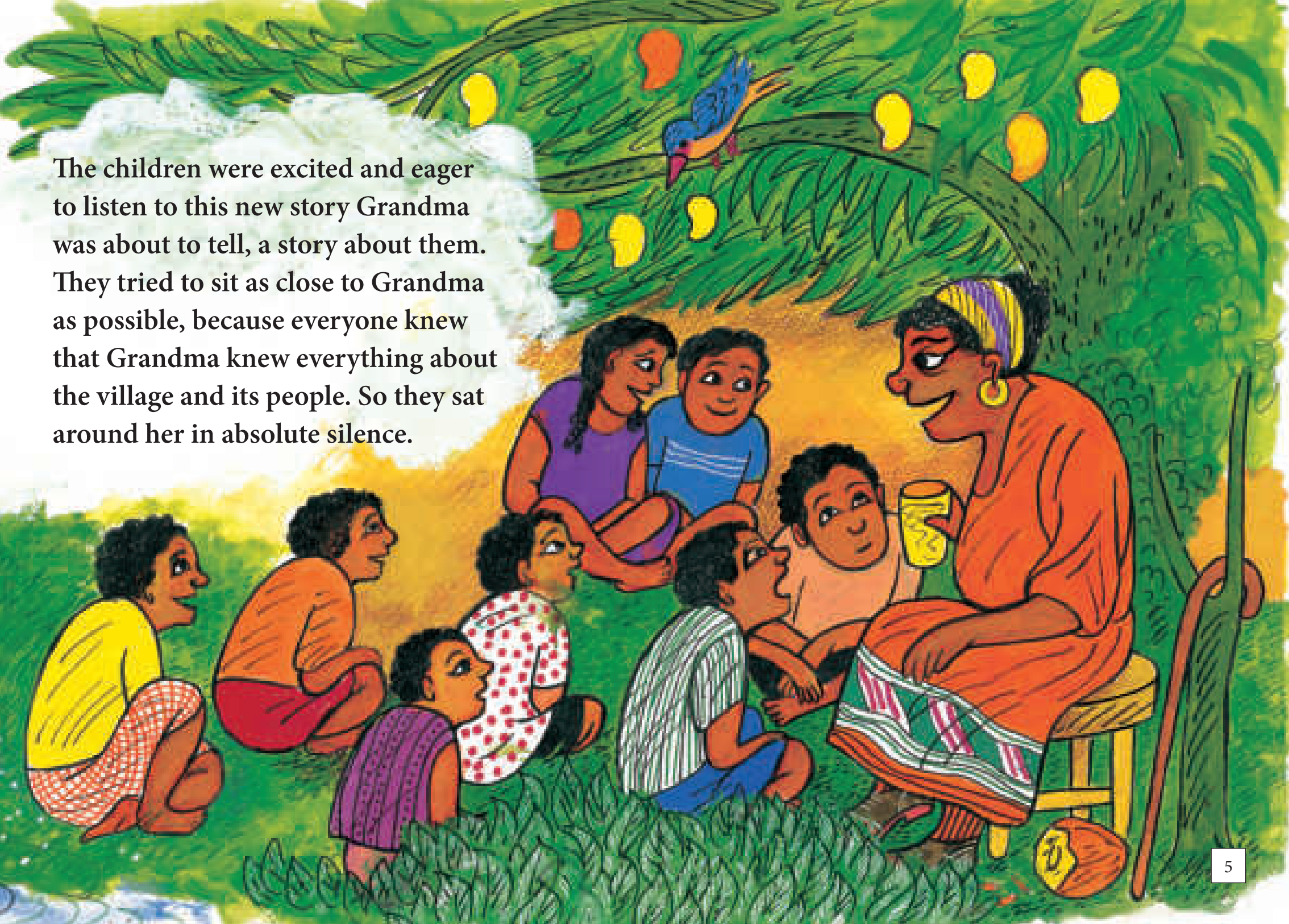
It was a hot sunny day. As usual, the children sat under the mango tree where it was cool and shady. Grandma sat on her chair sipping coconut water, with the children at her feet. This was the best place to listen to grandma's story telling.

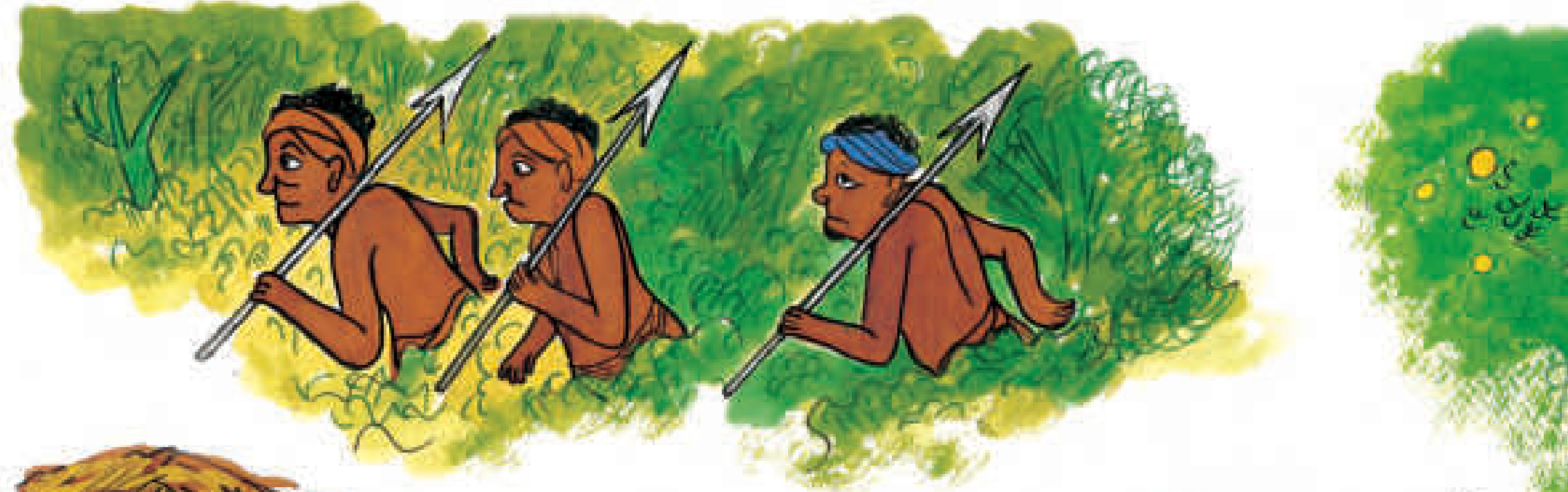
On one such a day, Roshan asked Grandma a very special question. 'Grandma, our friends at school want to know why we look different from the other children here. Please Grandma, tell us why?'

Grandma clapped her hands and said: 'That indeed is a very special story children. That is your very own story. Listen, let me tell you all about it in great detail.'

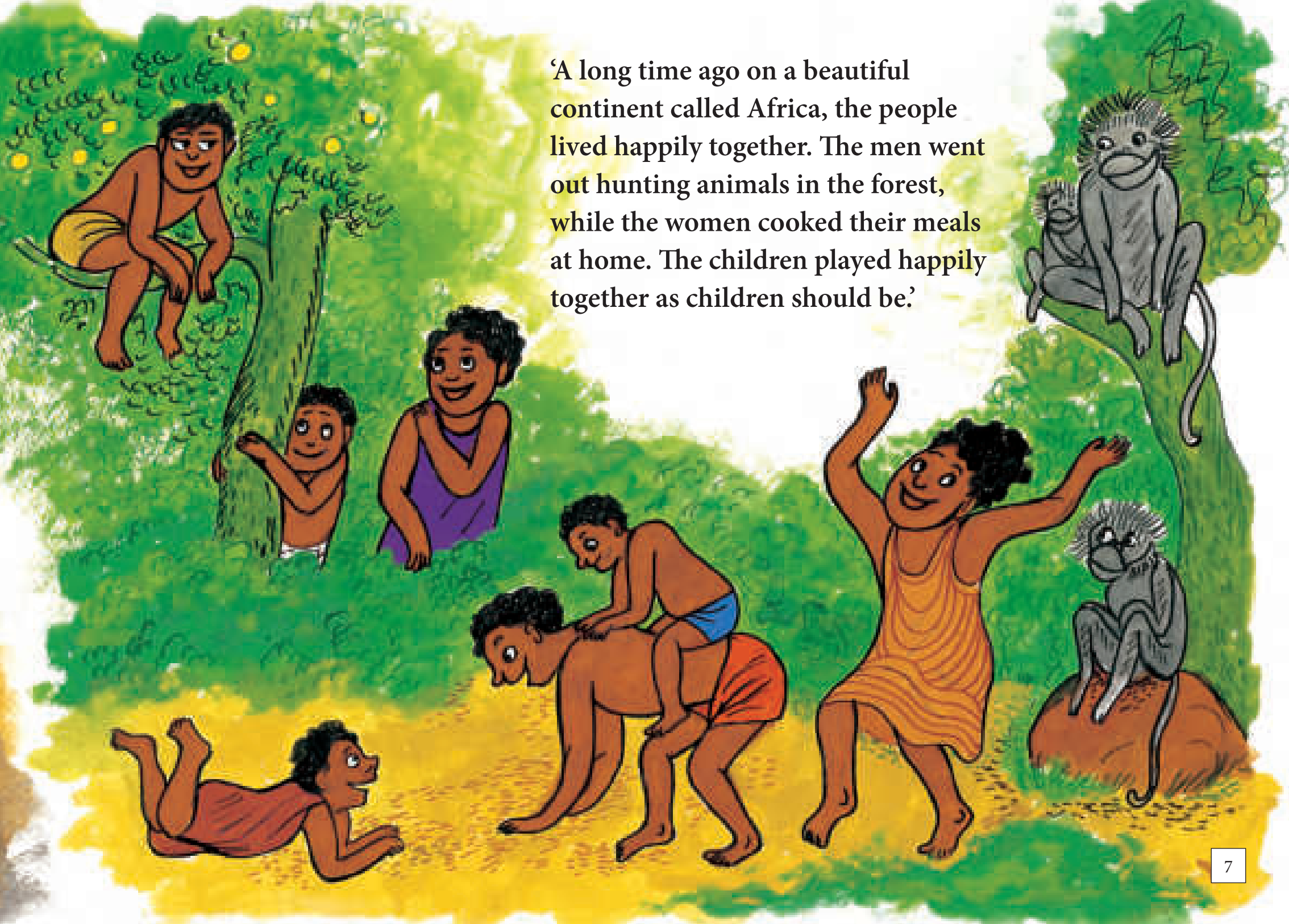


The children were excited and eager to listen to this new story Grandma was about to tell, a story about them. They tried to sit as close to Grandma as possible, because everyone knew that Grandma knew everything about the village and its people. So they sat around her in absolute silence.





‘A long time ago on a beautiful continent called Africa, the people lived happily together. The men went out hunting animals in the forest, while the women cooked their meals at home. The children played happily together as children should be.’

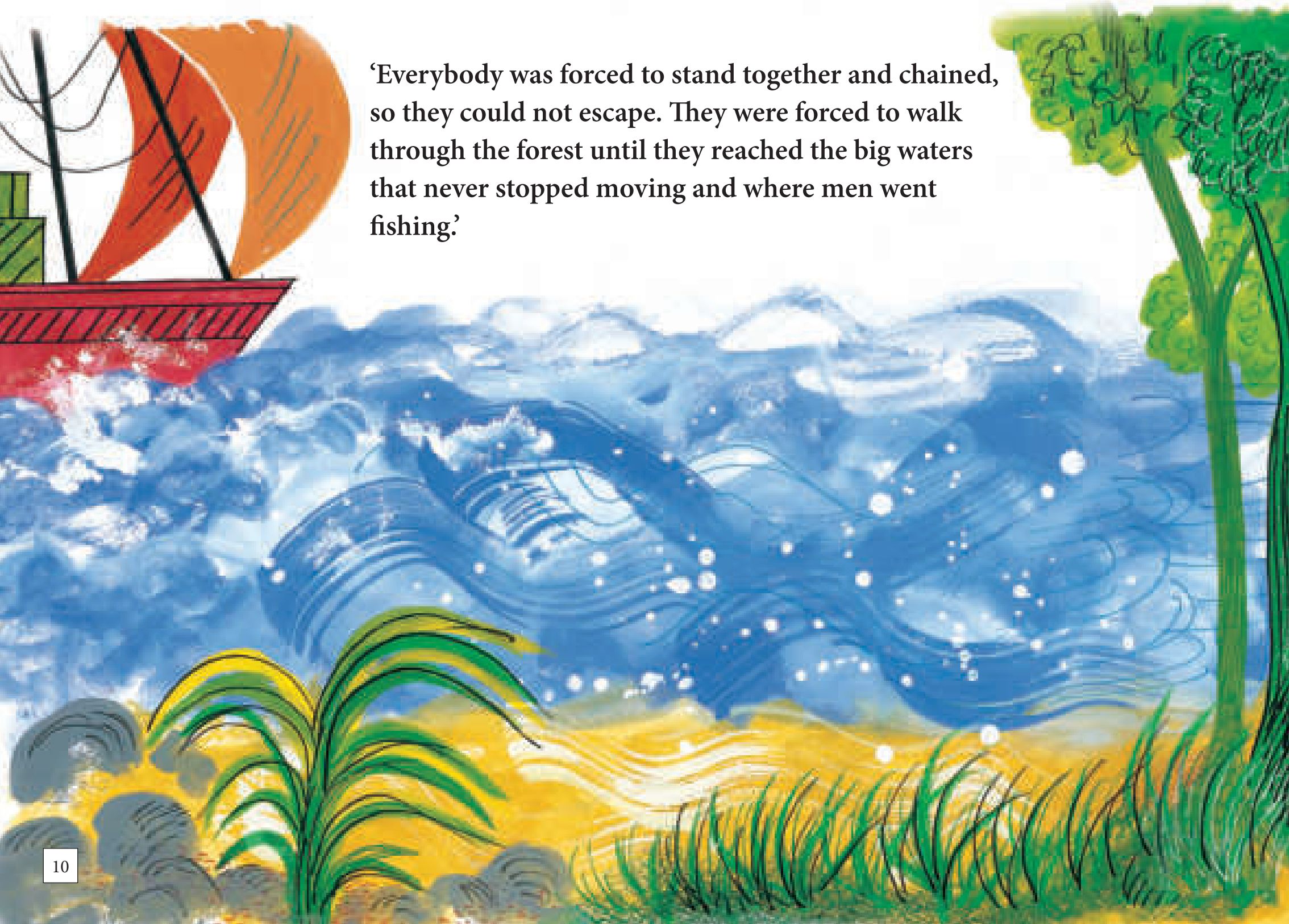


‘And then one day something terrible happened! In the usually quiet village, a great noise was suddenly heard. People began to run around shouting and screaming.’



‘A large number of men all dressed alike in pants, jackets and funny hats rushed into the village with big scary metal things that made loud popping noises and with smoke bursting out of them. No-one had ever seen men who were the colour of yam after they were peeled.’





‘Everybody was forced to stand together and chained, so they could not escape. They were forced to walk through the forest until they reached the big waters that never stopped moving and where men went fishing.’

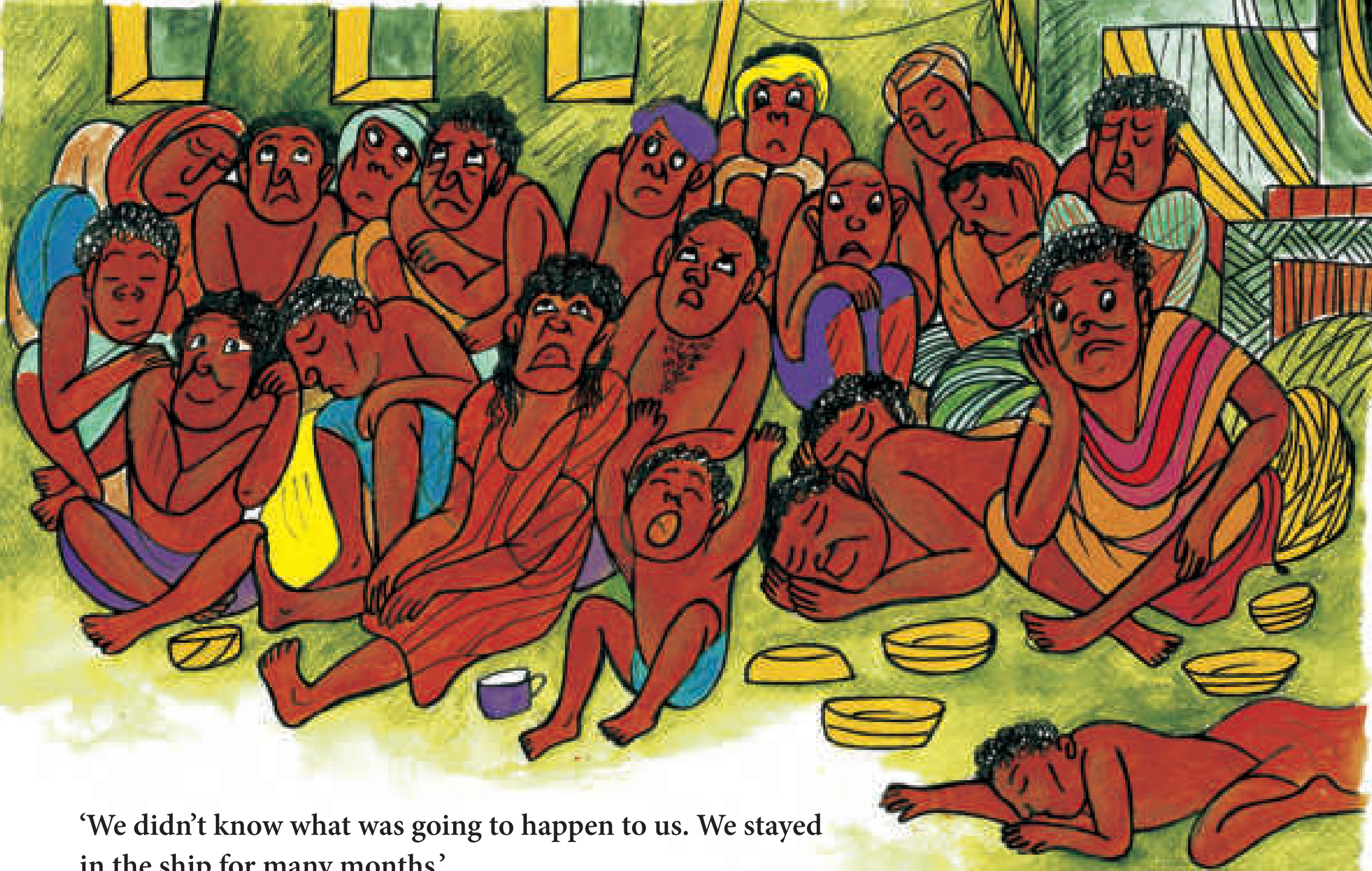


‘But Grandma,’ asked Aruni, ‘why did the bad men do this?’

Grandma looked sadly at Aruni and the other children and said, ‘They did this because they wanted us to work in another country for them. But we didn’t know this till we were loaded into a ship. They were taking us to a country called Serendib. Serendib! The word tasted so strange in our mouths. All we knew was that we were going on a long, long journey.’

‘What was it like on the ship Grandma?’ asked Roshan with eyes big with worry.

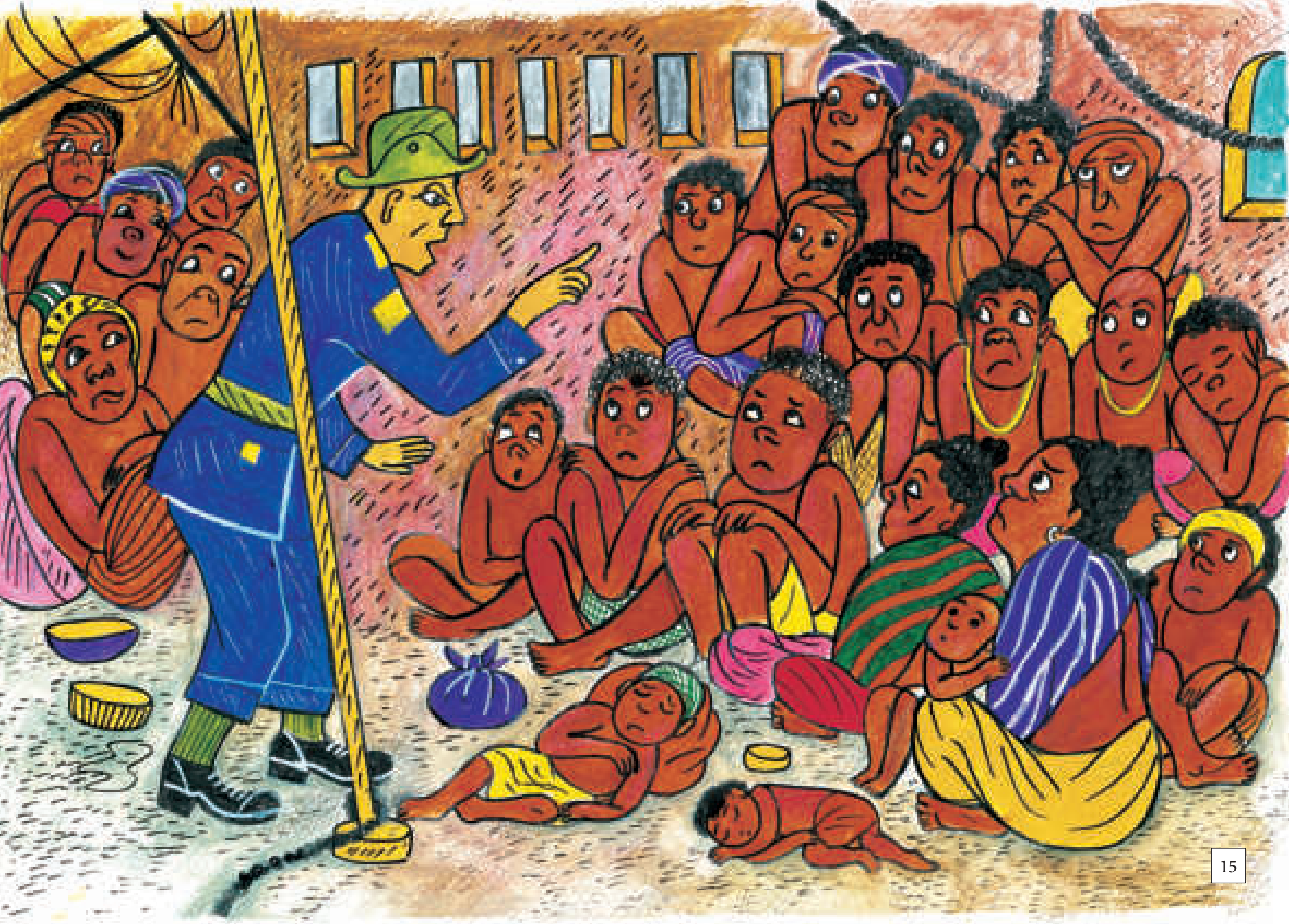
‘Oh! It was terrible! Everyone was pushed together into a small dark hole where you could see nothing around you. All you could hear was crying and moaning.’

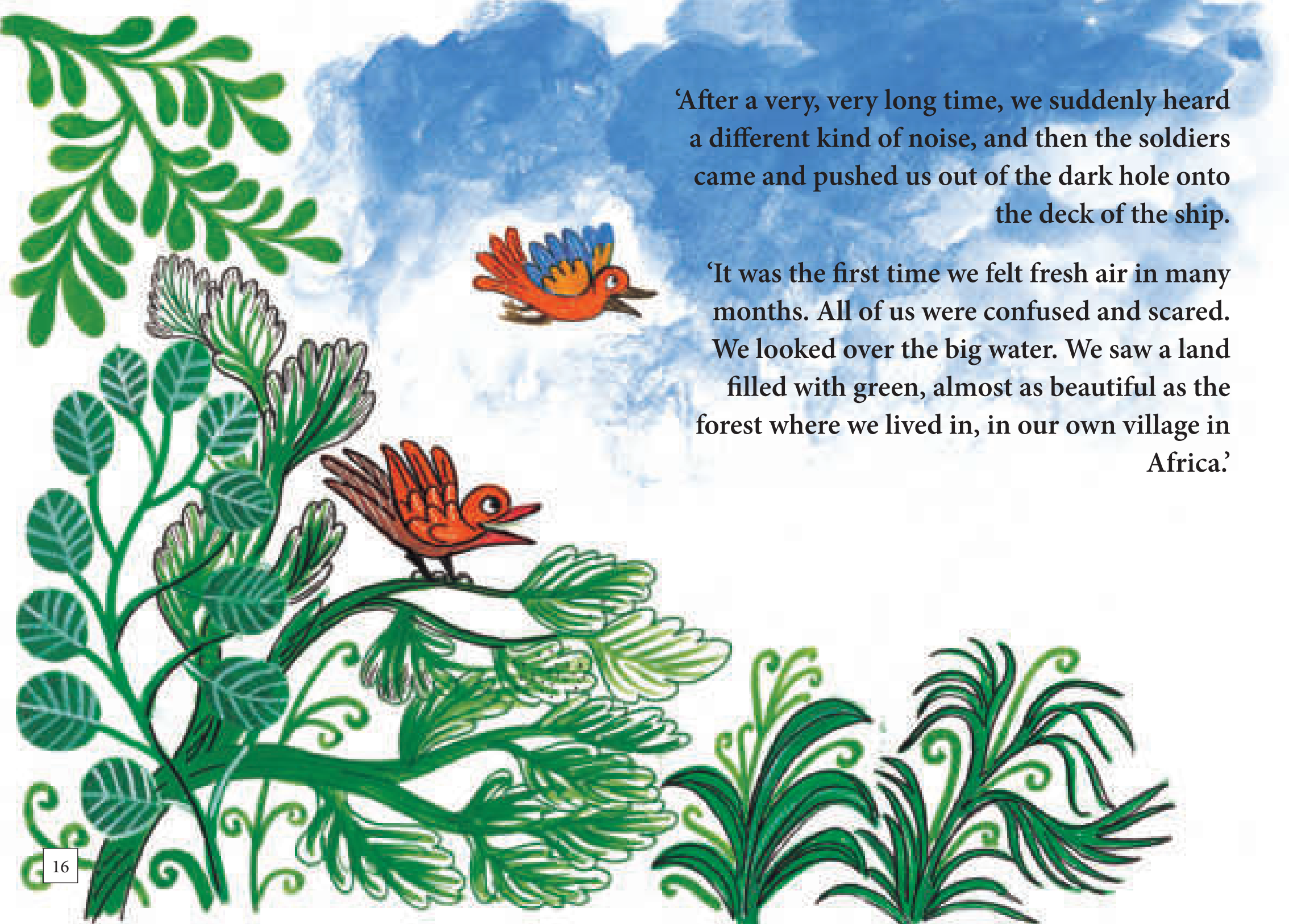


‘We didn’t know what was going to happen to us. We stayed in the ship for many months.’

‘While on the ship, we were given one meal a day of porridge only. When we fell ill, there was no help. We prayed to the Great Spirits above to save us. But we were helpless. Some of us became so weak, they died. The dead were taken away by soldiers and were thrown out into the sea for the fish to eat!’



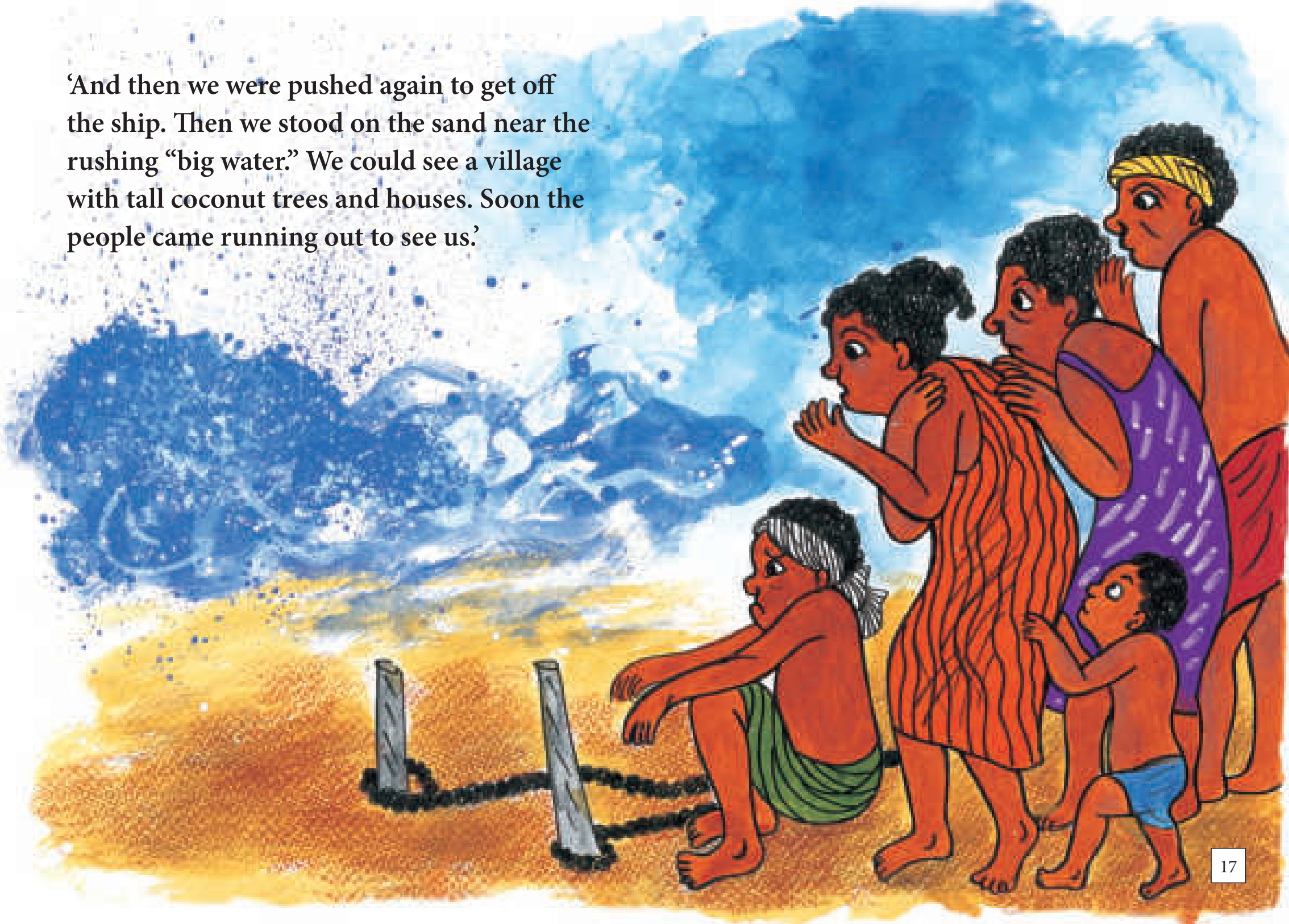




‘After a very, very long time, we suddenly heard a different kind of noise, and then the soldiers came and pushed us out of the dark hole onto the deck of the ship.

‘It was the first time we felt fresh air in many months. All of us were confused and scared. We looked over the big water. We saw a land filled with green, almost as beautiful as the forest where we lived in, in our own village in Africa.’

‘And then we were pushed again to get off the ship. Then we stood on the sand near the rushing “big water.” We could see a village with tall coconut trees and houses. Soon the people came running out to see us.’





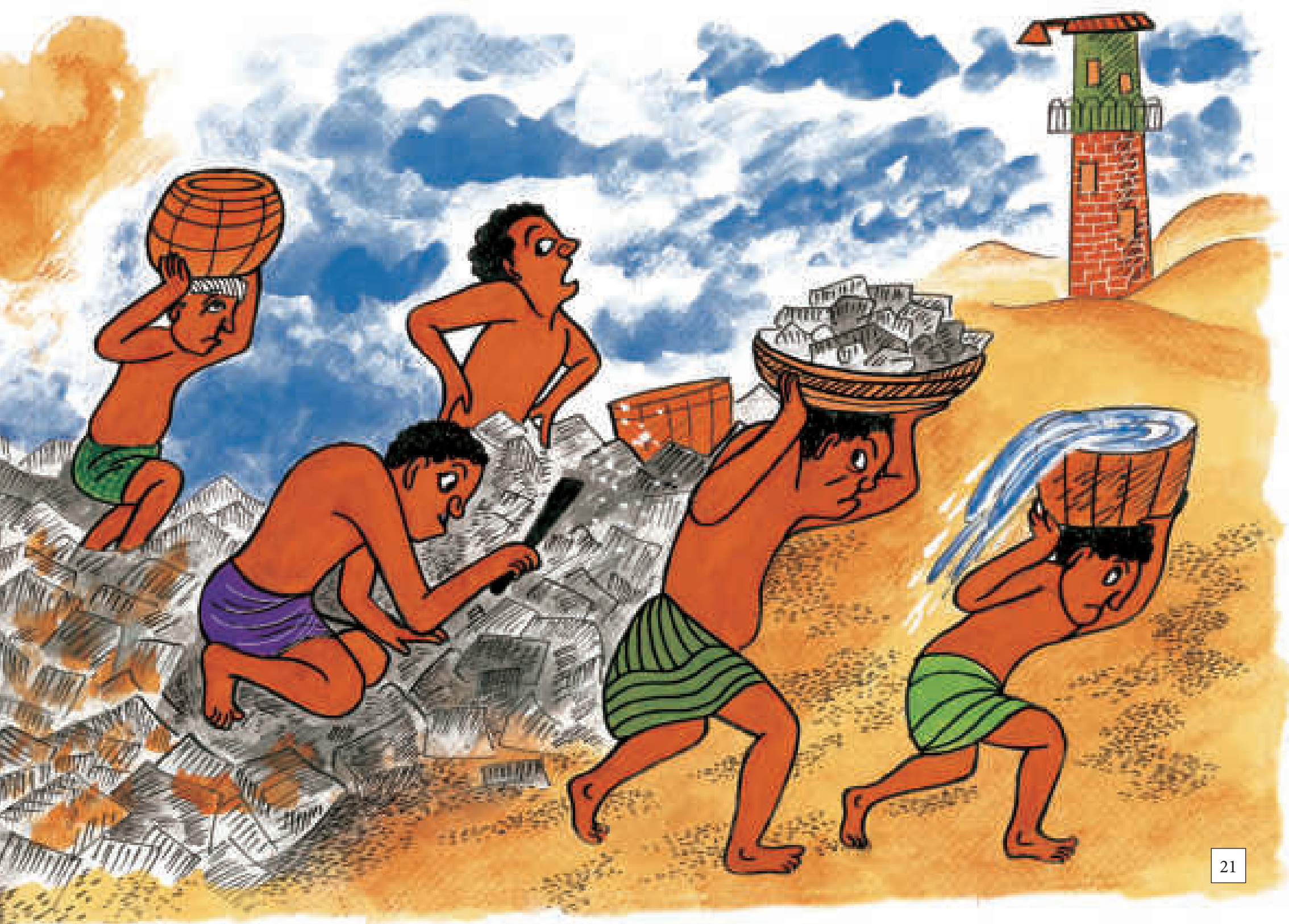
‘Then we saw the people who lived on this beautiful island for the first time.’

‘They had the same beautiful brown and black colour like us. But their hair was long and straight like coconut leaves. They looked at us with great curiosity and friendliness.’



‘We were then taken to different places where we were told we would live and work. Many of us were taken to places like Galle, Trincomalee, Jaffna and Matara and others where we were made to work heavily, chopping stones to build forts, churches and bridges. The hours of work were hard and long. If we complained of being tired, we were beaten or locked up in a dungeon.’







An illustration showing a group of four people walking along a path. From left to right: a woman in an orange dress, a young child in a blue and white striped shirt, a woman in a white tank top and orange skirt carrying a large yellow basket on her head, a man in green shorts carrying a brown basket on his head, and a man in a green wrap carrying a large yellow sack on his back. In the background, there is a building with a sign that says "SLAVE ISLAND".

SLAVE ISLAND

‘Others were taken to a place called Slave Island to work in the homes of rich local people. They were strange-looking white people, called Europeans. There too, we were made to work for long, long hours. After night fall, we were not allowed to leave our dwellings.’

‘We were like prisoners.’





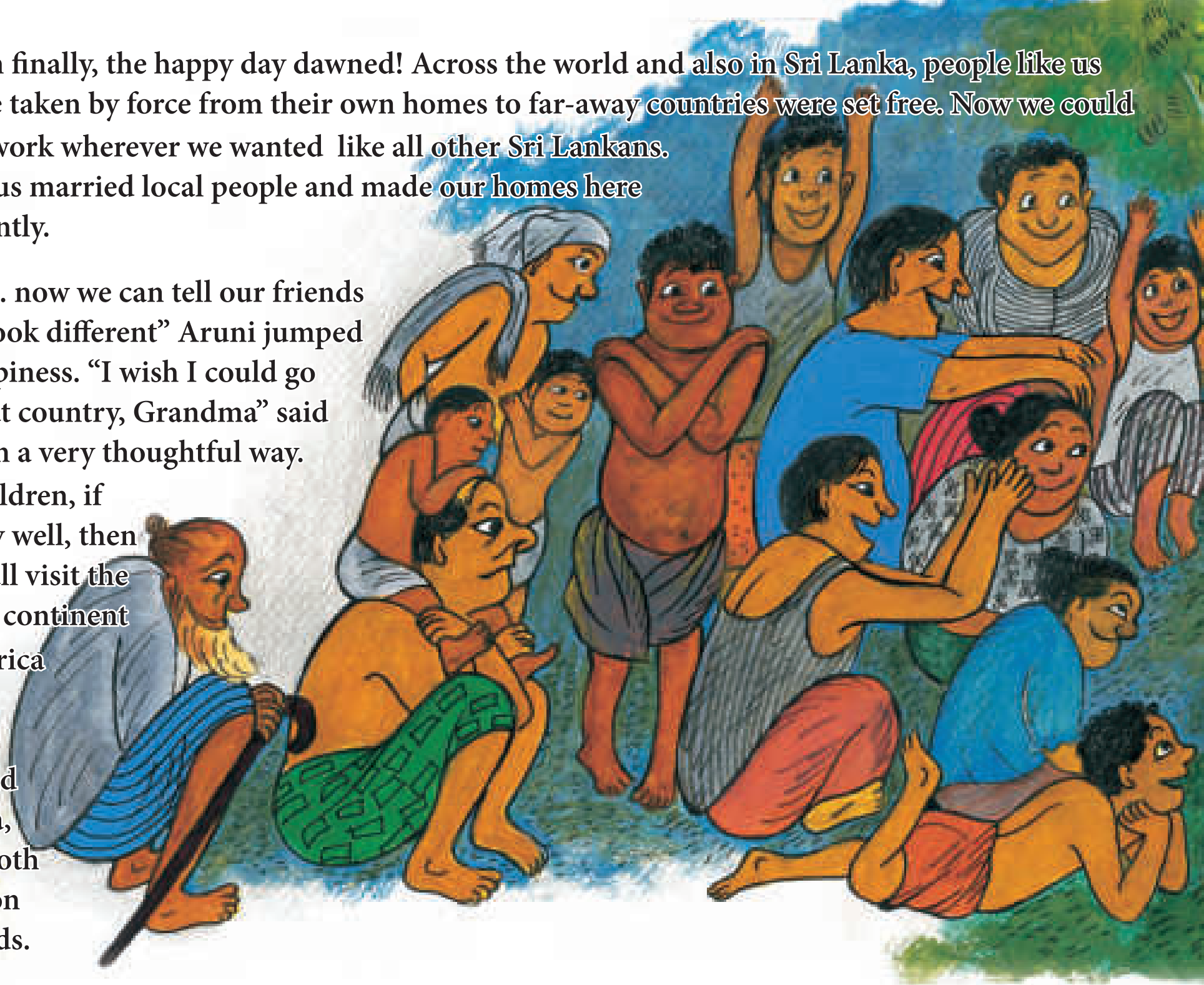
‘After a while, we were happy to make friends with the local people. They wanted to know where we came from. Our children made friends with the children here. We learnt so many things about this country.

But we missed our beautiful village. And we were not free to work and live where we wanted. We were sad, since we did not belong to ourselves. We wanted to be free like everyone else on this island.’

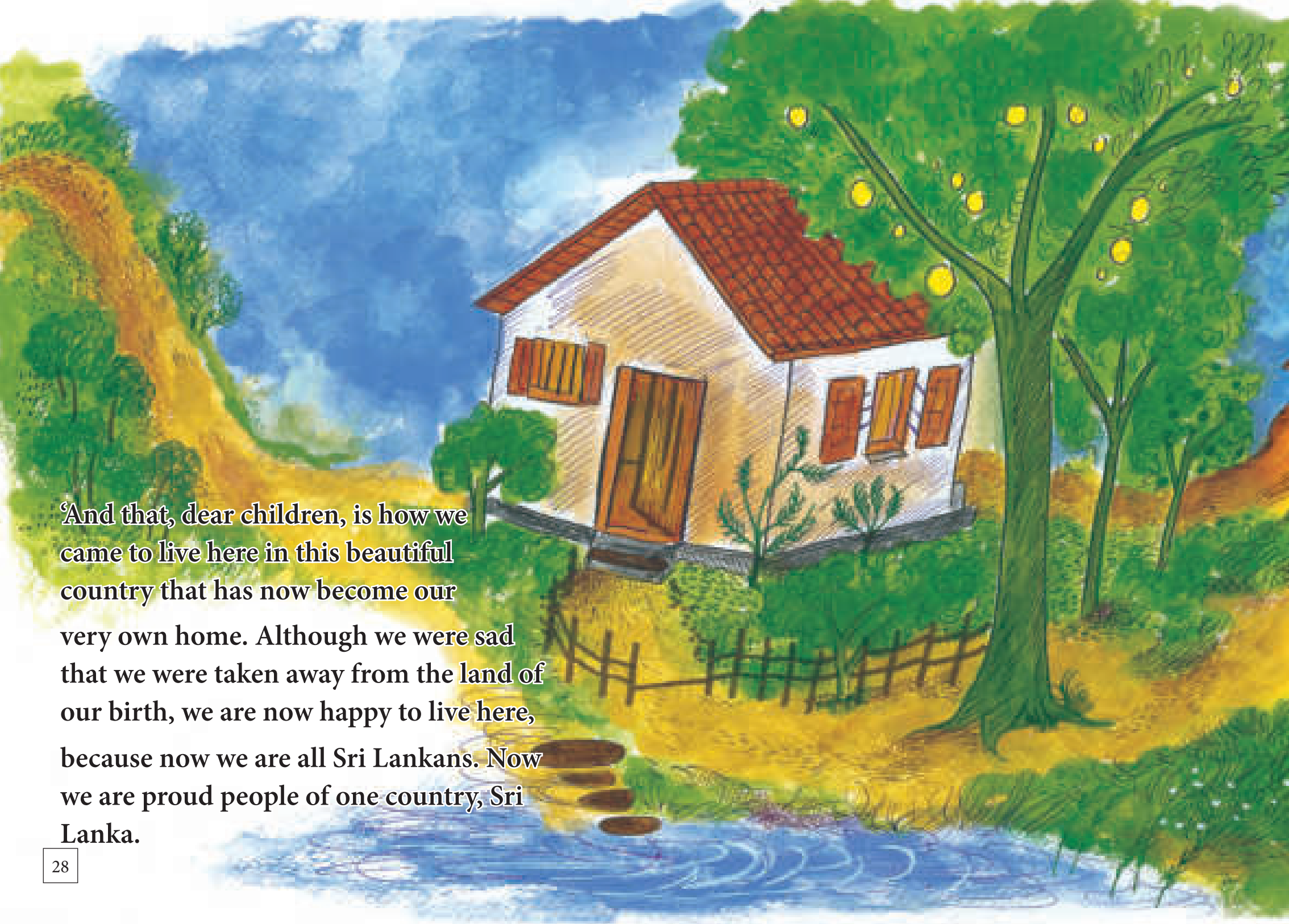
‘And then finally, the happy day dawned! Across the world and also in Sri Lanka, people like us who were taken by force from their own homes to far-away countries were set free. Now we could live and work wherever we wanted like all other Sri Lankans. Many of us married local people and made our homes here permanently.

“Yey..yey.. now we can tell our friends why we look different” Aruni jumped with happiness. “I wish I could go to see that country, Grandma” said Roshan in a very thoughtful way.

“Now children, if you study well, then you can all visit the beautiful continent called Africa where we came from”, said Grandma, patting both of them on their heads.







‘And that, dear children, is how we came to live here in this beautiful country that has now become our very own home. Although we were sad that we were taken away from the land of our birth, we are now happy to live here, because now we are all Sri Lankans. Now we are proud people of one country, Sri Lanka.





Message from the author

This book tells the story about the many Africans taken by force from their homes by slave traders across the Atlantic and Indian Oceans to live and work in Sri Lanka. The trade in people as slaves started as far back as the 15th century, and resulted in thousands of Africans displaced here to live and work in horrific conditions across Sri Lanka. In particular, the many Forts that were designed by colonial countries like the Portuguese and the Dutch, as well as bridges and churches. And of course, African slaves were also forced into servitude to European settlers, and many of them could be found in what came to be known as Slave Island where they were confined under strict curfew. Slavery was finally abolished in Sri Lanka in 1844.

This book helps to remind us that no human being should ever be bought or sold to another, and that we must all have respect for each other's lives and dignity irrespective of the colour of our skin.

This book was made possible through the generous contribution of the Capital Maharaja Organization to whom we are immensely grateful.

I want to thank Professor K. D. Paranavitana and Dr Lionel Mandy who provided valuable historical research and guidance. The Galle Heritage Foundation, in particular Shiranga Jayasekara provided field research and historical tours on the history of the Galle Fort that was indispensable to this process.

Finally, we hope that this book will serve as a living testimony of remembrance, hope, contrition and dedication to the lost lives of thousands of Africans enslaved in Sri Lanka, and left a lasting legacy of sacrifice that still endures in the built environment and shared blood ties of some of its people with Africa.

I also want to thank Nirosha Kulasekara for assisting and co-ordinating the translations.

And finally, our warmest thanks to our Afro-Lanka family in Sri Lanka with whom this book was developed, and who provided the building blocks of the story during a series of community meeting and individual workshops with adults and with children.

The South African Embassy in Sri Lanka is proud to present this book to all children of Sri Lanka, so that we may appreciate that we are many people, but in one united Sri Lanka!




A Special Message to all children of the world from Nelson Mandela

‘For to be free is not merely to cast of one’s chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.’





Children of the world come together
Like the birds of a feather
Under the sun.
No matter where we all belong.
Our hearts are joined together
As one,
In goodwill, peace and harmony



*Black or brown,
No matter what the colour of your face,
It matters not in the long run.
We give the world a heavenly grace
And all we need is to be loved for long
To be loved for long
To be loved for long!*



About the Illustrator: Sybil Wettasinghe

Sybil Wettasinghe is the illustrator of this publication, “Tell us your story, Grandma.’ Sybil says she derived immense pleasure out of creating the pictures of this book, since it is a true tale of human suffering. “Deep sorrow is a blessing in disguise. The patience to forbear it all brings immense joy in the end,’ declares

Sybil. Illustrating a story of this nature is a most exhilarating experience and Sybil wishes to thank the South African High Commissioner to Sri Lanka Madame Robina P. Marks for selecting her as the illustrator of this wonderful story book for children of the world.

