



Gulalai and the Legend of the Golden Mahseer

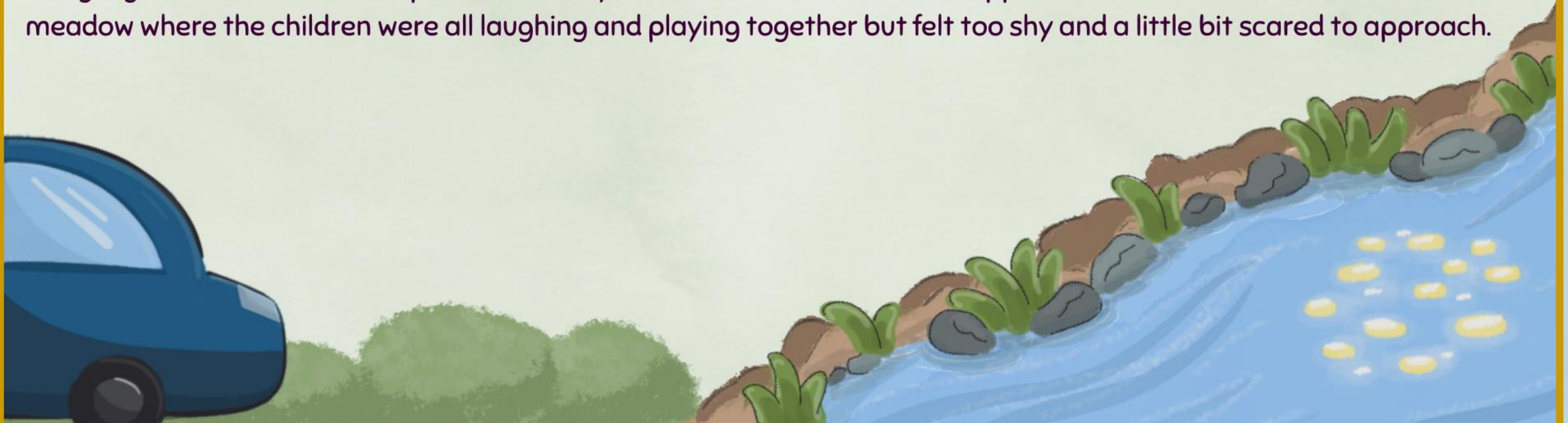
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for Conservation Optimism

A young girl gazed out the window of her car. Her small nose pressed against the glass as she took in the surroundings of her new home. The trees here were denser, and a small creak ran down an unfamiliar hill beside a rocky road. She could not help but think of her old home, and all her friends waving her goodbye. She slid back into her seat with a sigh.

'I wonder if I'll be able to make any friends here', she thought.

Just then something glimmering in the water caught her eye. A twinkle, or a sparkle, as if some gold treasure was being carried by the creak. It swam and then sank into a pond just beyond the trees. The car followed, and came to a stop by a cottage not too far from the pond. There were a few other cottages nearby, and some children were playing in the meadow between them.

The girl grabbed her little backpack, fixed the yellow hat on her head, and stepped out of the car. She looked onto the meadow where the children were all laughing and playing together but felt too shy and a little bit scared to approach.



Instead, she found herself walking towards the pond, her eyes searching for a golden glimmer.

“Gulalai!” her mother called.

“Ma, there was something in the water!” she said, pointing to the pond.

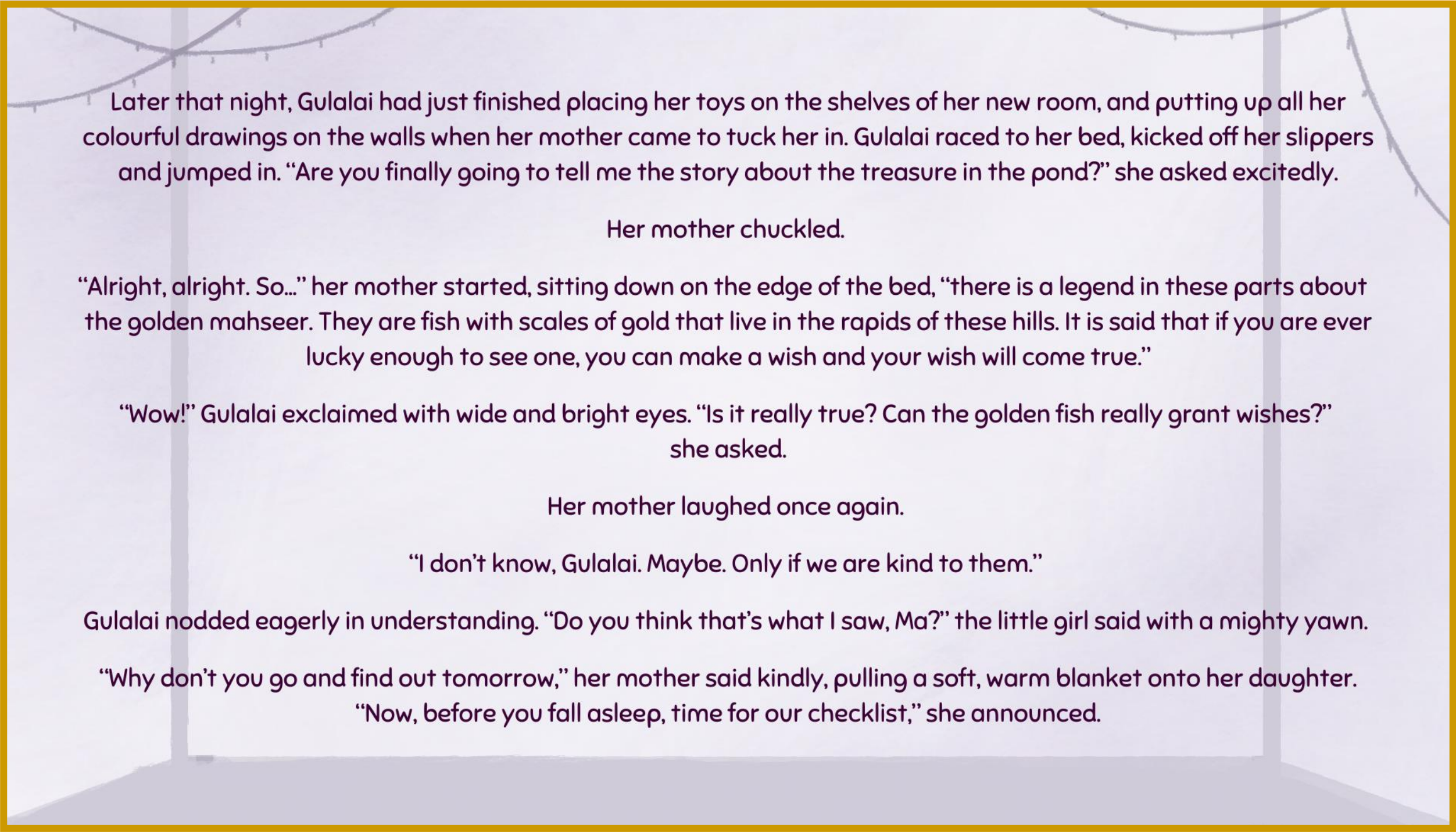
“Exploration later, dinner first! It’s getting late now,” her mother said, holding the door open for her.

“But it was gold! Like treasure!” Gulalai chirped excitedly.

“Gold, hmm? Come in for food, and I promise I’ll tell you a story about it later,” her mother assured her with a smile.

With a final glance at the pond, Gulalai made her way over to her mother, and into her new home.





Later that night, Gulalai had just finished placing her toys on the shelves of her new room, and putting up all her colourful drawings on the walls when her mother came to tuck her in. Gulalai raced to her bed, kicked off her slippers and jumped in. “Are you finally going to tell me the story about the treasure in the pond?” she asked excitedly.

Her mother chuckled.

“Alright, alright. So...” her mother started, sitting down on the edge of the bed, “there is a legend in these parts about the golden mahseer. They are fish with scales of gold that live in the rapids of these hills. It is said that if you are ever lucky enough to see one, you can make a wish and your wish will come true.”

“Wow!” Gulalai exclaimed with wide and bright eyes. “Is it really true? Can the golden fish really grant wishes?” she asked.

Her mother laughed once again.

“I don’t know, Gulalai. Maybe. Only if we are kind to them.”

Gulalai nodded eagerly in understanding. “Do you think that’s what I saw, Ma?” the little girl said with a mighty yawn.

“Why don’t you go and find out tomorrow,” her mother said kindly, pulling a soft, warm blanket onto her daughter.

“Now, before you fall asleep, time for our checklist,” she announced.



“Pyjamas on, teeth brushed?”

“Check!”

“Switch on night light?”

“Check!” Gulalai said, picking up a machine from her bedside table and switching it on. As she did, beautiful and gentle blue light washed over the room and slowly began to move like water.

“Switch on white noise?”

“Check!” Gulalai said, pressing another button on the device, and the gentle whooshing sound of waves flowed into the room.

“No pain or ringing in your ears to report?”

“Check!”

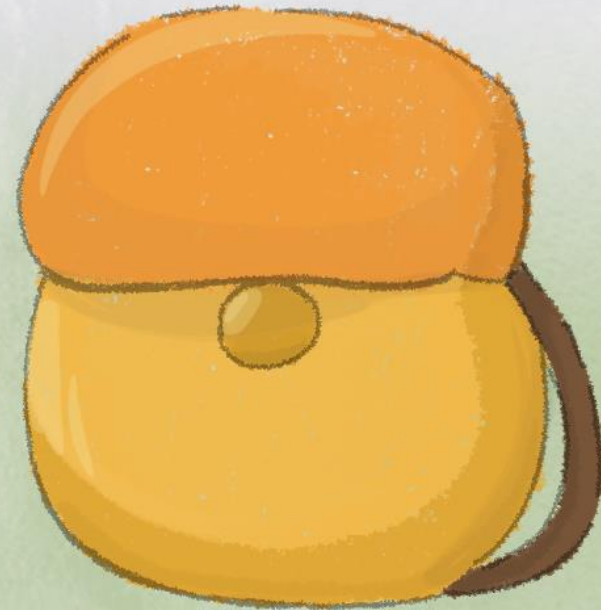
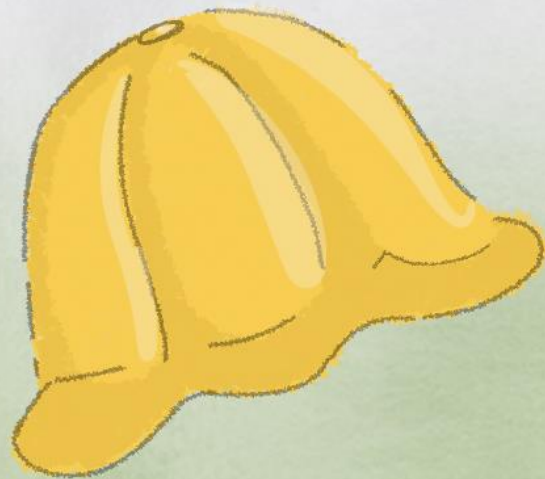
“Take off hearing aid?” her mother asked, picking up a clean tray from the bedside table and holding it out for her daughter.

“Check!” Gulalai said, carefully removing the purple and yellow device from her ear and placing it on the tray.

“Great! All done,” her mother said with two thumbs up, making sure Gulalai could see her lips move too.

With the soothing sound and pretty light of the waves, and her mother caressing her hair, Gulalai felt safe and happy. Before she knew it, she was sound asleep, dreaming of the fish with scales of gold swimming into her room.

When she awoke the next morning, Gulalai could hardly contain her excitement. She went about her morning routine as quickly as she could, and was out of the door just after breakfast. She grabbed a backpack and filled it with everything she thought would be useful for her adventure. Then, with a tap on her hearing device, her favourite yellow hat snug on her head, and her heart filled with determination, Gulalai started on her way to find the treasure.



When she first arrived, there was no shimmering in sight. It felt like she had run up and down along the creak and around the pond a hundred times when she felt like giving up. Tired, she dropped onto a tree root by the edge of the pond.

"Maybe I won't be able to make my wish after all," she said with a sigh.

Just then, out of the corner of her eye, she caught a twinkle. She jumped to her feet and raced over to find a broken bottle lodged between some rocks, and inside it something gold.

"Oh my! There's a fish in there!" she cried.

Sure enough, there was a small golden fish frantically bumping into the walls of the bottle.

"Hang on, I'll get you out of there!" She kicked off her shoes and stepped into the pond, carefully lifting the bottle out of the rocks, freeing the fish into the surrounding water. It swam around her happily, tickling her ankles.



"How did you get here? Are you lost? Shouldn't you be in a stream?" she thought out loud. The little fish swam around her feet frantically, splashing water everywhere.

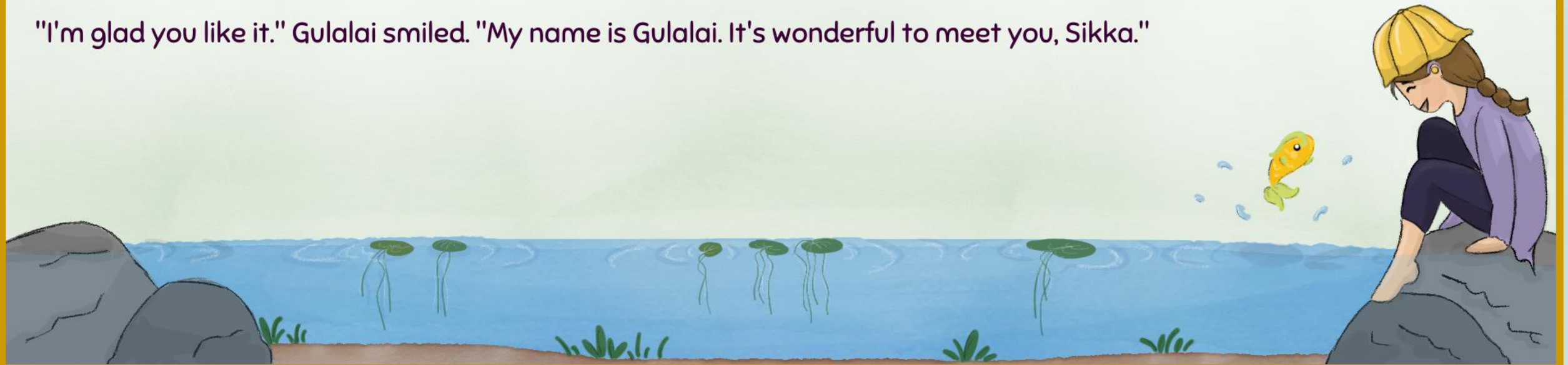
"Hey, don't panic, little fish! Don't worry! I'll help you find your way," she assured the little creature. The fish slowed its hasty thrashing and went back to swimming about her ankles, nuzzling them occasionally. "Let's see. I think I remember seeing a large stream on the way here, up the hill. Is that where you live, little fish?" she inquired.

The little fish splashed up and down as if in agreement.

"I'll take that as a yes. We have to at least try, right little fish? Oh, I can't just keep saying 'little fish'. How about I call you..." she thought to herself for a moment, "how about 'Sikka'! Like a coin!"

The little fish did a happy little somersault, his scales glimmering in the light like a flipped coin tumbling through the air.

"I'm glad you like it." Gulalai smiled. "My name is Gulalai. It's wonderful to meet you, Sikka."

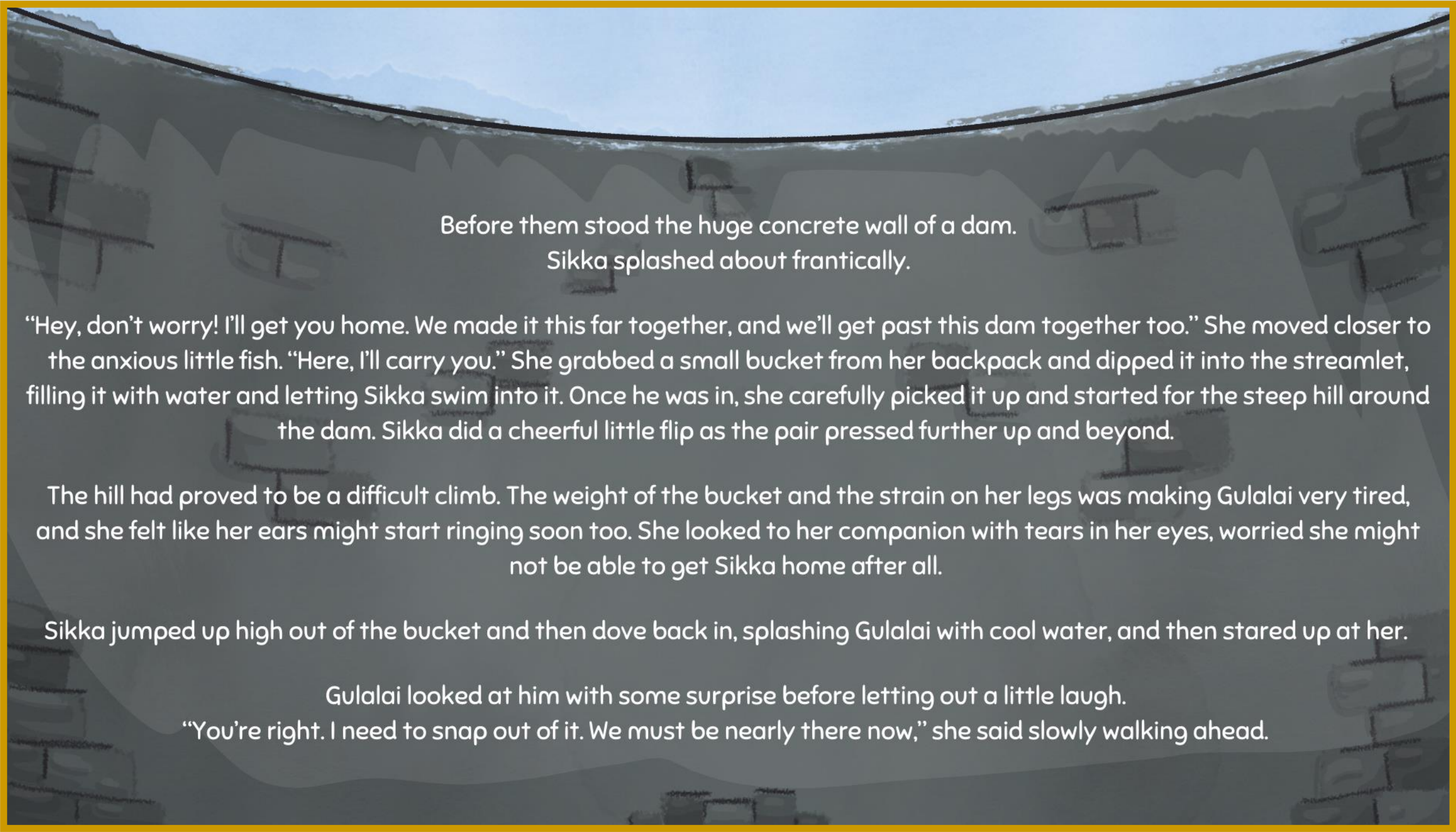


Gulalai walked along the creek, Sikka swimming happily in the water beside her, and they soon came across another streamlet leading to a small pond by some fruit trees. Sikka quickly swam over to some fruit that had fallen in, nibbling at it and then nudging it over to Gulalai. She picked it up and bit into it.

"Wow! This is delicious!" she exclaimed, eyes twinkling. "Here, let me grab some more." She climbed up the nearby tree and grabbed another fruit, split it in half and tossed it to Sikka who immediately began to nibble away at it.

After their little snack break, Gulalai and Sikka carried on along up the creek until they came face to face with their biggest challenge yet, looming tall in front of them, blocking the path, blocking the water, and blocking away all the light.





Before them stood the huge concrete wall of a dam.
Sikka splashed about frantically.

“Hey, don’t worry! I’ll get you home. We made it this far together, and we’ll get past this dam together too.” She moved closer to the anxious little fish. “Here, I’ll carry you.” She grabbed a small bucket from her backpack and dipped it into the streamlet, filling it with water and letting Sikka swim into it. Once he was in, she carefully picked it up and started for the steep hill around the dam. Sikka did a cheerful little flip as the pair pressed further up and beyond.

The hill had proved to be a difficult climb. The weight of the bucket and the strain on her legs was making Gulalai very tired, and she felt like her ears might start ringing soon too. She looked to her companion with tears in her eyes, worried she might not be able to get Sikka home after all.

Sikka jumped up high out of the bucket and then dove back in, splashing Gulalai with cool water, and then stared up at her.

Gulalai looked at him with some surprise before letting out a little laugh.
“You’re right. I need to snap out of it. We must be nearly there now,” she said slowly walking ahead.

Soon enough, the gentle and familiar whooshing of a stream washed over her ears, soothing them and calming her nerves. Gulalai couldn't help but think of home. The light and sound of the waves in her room, her mother flipping through the pages of her favourite storybooks about brave heroes and adventures.

The thought filled her with comfort and courage, and she reminded herself that Sikka must miss his home too. So, with a huff and a puff, she pushed further up the hill beyond the trees. The scales on Sikka's face caught the sunlight and sparkled, making it look like he was flashing her a smile.

Gulalai smiled back, cheeks rosy, and eyes bright with determination once more as she carried on her journey. They had made it halfway up the hill when she heard voices calling out.

"Hey!" someone called out.

"Wait up, new girl!" cried another.

"Yeah, wait for us!" said a third.

Gulalai turned around with Sikka to see some of the children from the meadow making their way up the hill behind her, all sweaty and huffing.



“We heard you talking to that little fish!” one of them said.

“You said he was lost, and his family was nowhere to be seen!” said the other.

“Then you left so quickly, and climbed so fast! It was so difficult to catch up with you!” said the last.

“Anyway, my name is Faizy, and this is Yasmin, and Lyla.”

“We were wondering if you wanted some help getting the fish home!”

“We know you had to do most of it alone and got so far already but...”

Gulalai looked down and nodded at her little friend in the bucket and then back up at the children with her toothy grin.

“I’m Gulalai, and Sikka here and I would love it if you came with us.” She beamed.

The children all cheered happily, and taking turns to carry the bucket to share the weight, made their way all the way up the hill in no time. When they reached the top, the sun was shining down on them in brilliant golden colours, making Sikka’s scales shine all the more.

The dam sprawled ahead of them, and beside it was the stream. Sikka did his signature excited flips, somersaulting in and out of the water over and over, splashing the children, making them all giggle and squeal.



“You know, I forgot all about making a wish,” Gulalai whispered aside to Sikka, “but you made it come true anyway. Thank you for becoming my friend, with or without magic.”

Sikka pressed his little fins and his head to the bucket, and Gulalai pressed her forehead against it, cherishing the moment. “And look, together we both made even more friends”

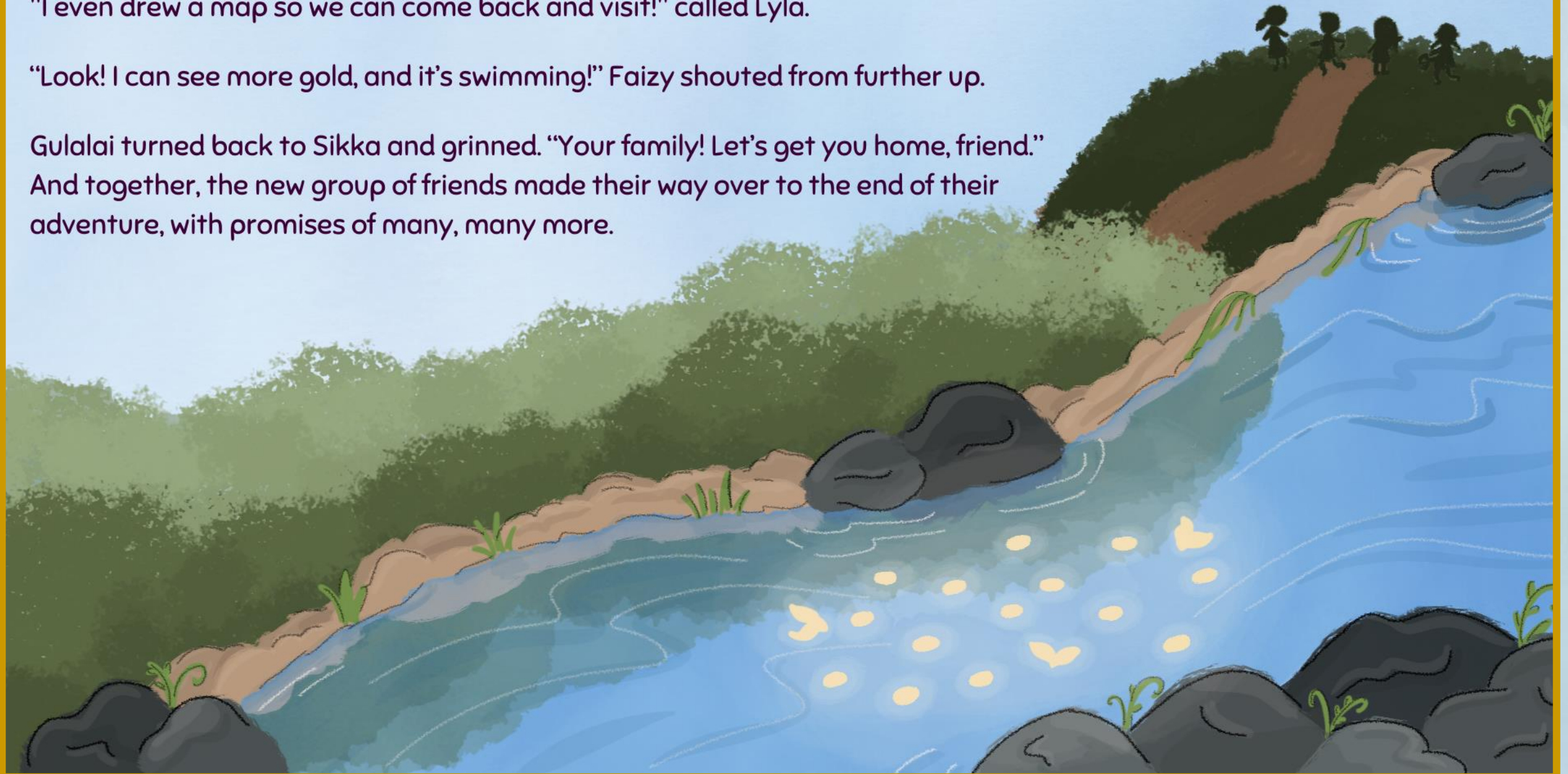


“Gulalai! Sikka! Come on!” cried Yasmin. “The stream is just up ahead!”

“I even drew a map so we can come back and visit!” called Lyla.

“Look! I can see more gold, and it’s swimming!” Faizy shouted from further up.

Gulalai turned back to Sikka and grinned. “Your family! Let’s get you home, friend.”
And together, the new group of friends made their way over to the end of their
adventure, with promises of many, many more.



End.

