



Once Upon Our Planet

By Vitta Murrow

Once Upon an Island



Locate in your mind a
place where curving
sandbanks give way to
tranquil seawaters.



Where a crop of islands is spread wide. Atop these islands position abiding towers: coconut trees.



For generations, these islands have endured rains that saturate, waves that carve and winds that test. In a constant state of transformation, these islands will someday yield to the sea. Therefore, existence has long been a topic of discussion here. This is one such conversation.



Once upon an island, there were two coconut trees. They craned over the turquoise waters. One was tall, the other was short. On a hot and gutsy day, as heavy clouds rolled in the distance, the tallest of the trees turned to the smallest.



“I suspect this next storm will be my last,” the tall tree, named Hassan, sighed.

“Your last?” the smaller tree, called Sitha, asked, aghast.

“As days wear on, we coconut trees are less and less appreciated,” Hassan explained.



“What do you mean?” Sitha asked her elder innocently. For she saw their world through fresh eyes. Her palm fronds were bright, and she was without the flowers of a more seasoned tree.



“Once, we were everything here,” the big tree said,
slumping their leaves towards the water.

“Look around, little Sitha. Now we are just part of the
background.”



Sitha saw that some guests of the island, who dwelt in tall boxes, who arrived on watercrafts and air machines, frolicked along the sandy circumference and paid them little regard.



“We have been reduced to ‘just a place to hang a hammock’,” Hassan lamented.

Thunder emanated from beneath the dark clouds. The sky mirrored Hassan’s mood.

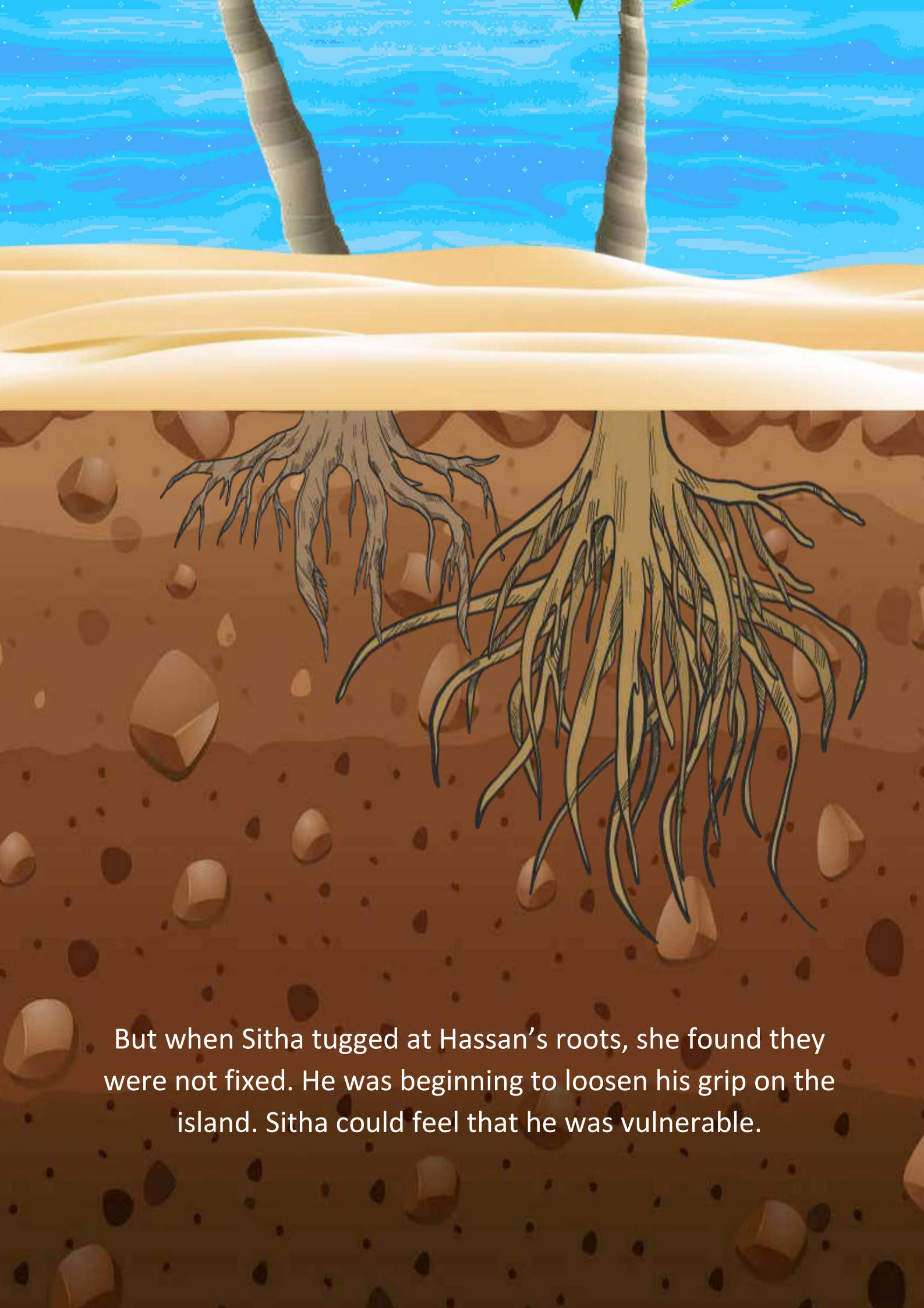


“The end is near for me,” Hassan brooded. The elder tree released a loose coconut with a thud.



Sitha worried for her elder. Hassan had glued and protected her. Some of her roots were even entwined with his. She wanted to reassure him and stretched her roots deep into the earth to find his.





But when Sitha tugged at Hassan's roots, she found they were not fixed. He was beginning to loosen his grip on the island. Sitha could feel that he was vulnerable.

Hassan sagged further towards the water. A grey heron zipped ashore on the salty air, eager to get ahead of the weather. With it, an idea came to Sitha.

“Bird-friend!” She called to the grey heron.

“Yes, Little Palm?” the heron replied.

“Come and sit with me. I need your help,” Sitha invited.



The heron came to rest in the shade of Sitha's leaves.

"You see the strong elder beside me? He has lost his purpose," she explained. "Can you help me I am young and I am still learning, but you have seen many things."

The grey heron nodded, accepting the challenge.



“Uncle Palm!” he said, turning to the elder tree. “Your leaves are the island’s very reason for being. I come and go, but you remain here steadfastly. I’ll prove it. Follow my path,” the grey heron proclaimed and lifted into the sky.



Sitha nudged Hassan out of his funk. “Hassan, do you see that grey heron?” she called to Hassan, who shrugged. “He is going to take us on a tour.”



First, they grey heron flew to a market lined with stalls. There, the island's people were cooling off after a day of hustle in the steamy sun. They could be seen quenching their thirst with milk from mature coconuts. They slipped through the smiling face holes at the top, then cracked open the shell and scooped out the tissue to fill their bellies.



The coconut was the centrepiece of their days end relief.

“See here?” the grey heron called to the palms. “Those coconuts fell from your branches.”



“Look!” said Sitha, impressed. She shook her fledging branches in Hassan’s direction. “Your coconuts mean something.”

Hassan looked briefly but turned back to the water. The waves grew as the storm intensified.



The grey heron zoomed between the trees and the duo watched as the bird swooped near a small boat. Sitha leaned over the water to get a better look and saw that the boat was made from palms much like her and Hassan's. The unmistakable pattern of the trunk was carved with seagoing designs.



Sitha beamed up at Hassan. He humoured her and nodded.



They grey heron followed the vessel as it disembarked, and its sailors carried bundles ashore.



They strode to a spot on the beach where fallen palm leaves had been collected and stacked together to form a shelter. The sailors gathered under its protection as the storm's first raindrops landed.



The sailors dug a nook in the sand and layered cut wood with dried leaves and their catch from the sea. Soon it was alit and warming them all. more islanders joined, with open coconuts, herbs and plants in generous baskets woven from palm leaves.



“Well, would you look at that?” Sitha marvelled.

“It does look festive,” Hassan had to admit.



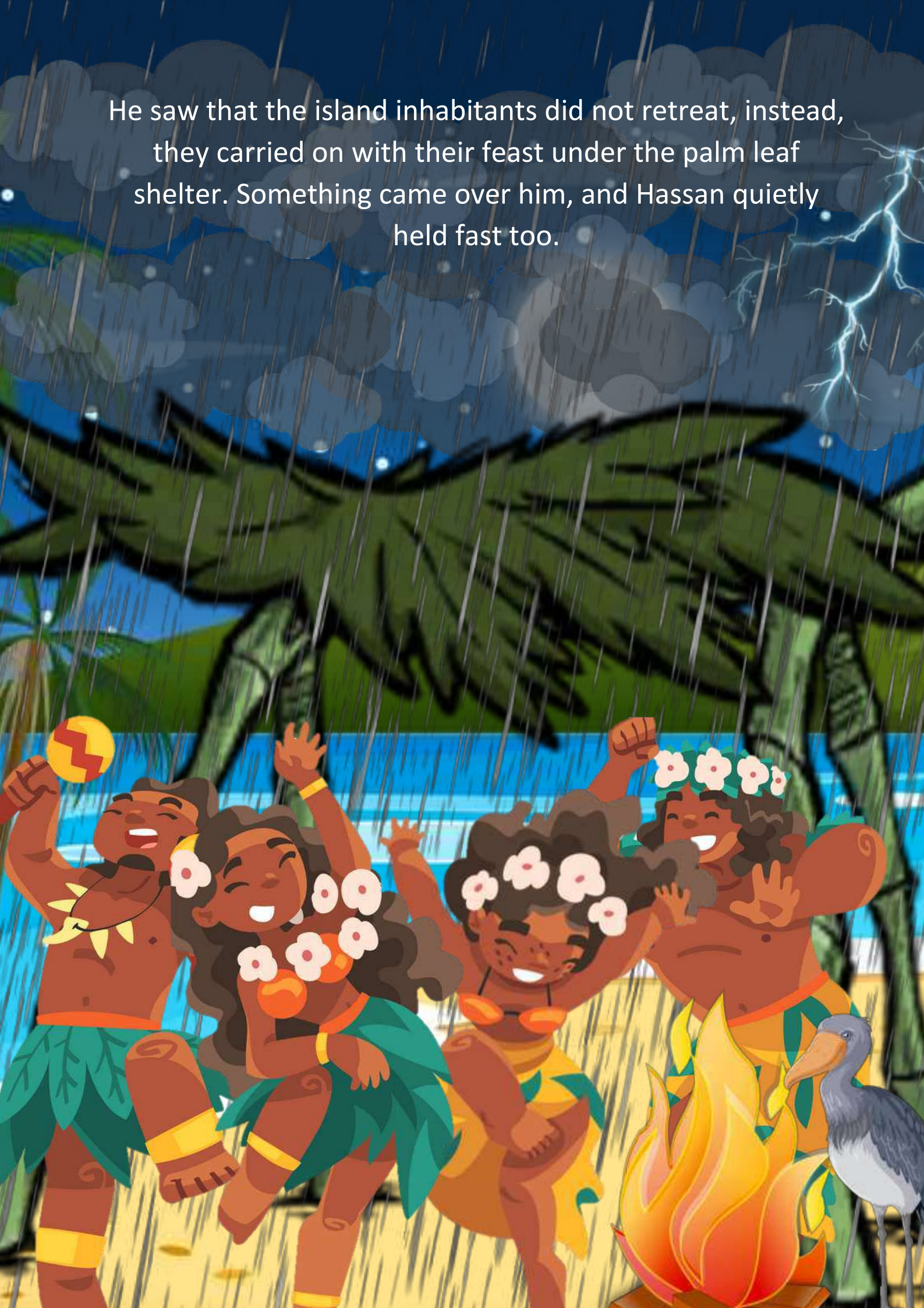
The rain became a downpour, but the assembled islanders remained dry in the shelter. They laid their offerings on the fire, and soon savoury, smoky, spicy and sweet smells, filled the air. Little ones ran to huddle close to the fire and take the first bites of the cooked fish. The grey heron, knowing they were messy eaters, lingered for morsels that he might snap up.



In spite of the merriment the storm still beset the little island. As it arrived in full, Hassan nearly returned to the doldrums. The grey heron let out a squawk to keep his attention. And Hassan looked closely at the scene before him.



He saw that the island inhabitants did not retreat, instead, they carried on with their feast under the palm leaf shelter. Something came over him, and Hassan quietly held fast too.



The evening wore on and when the storm lost its energy, a gentle pitter-patter of rain became background noise. Stars showed themselves in the early night sky and a new mood took over the inhabitants.



As the little ones became sleepy, the fire died down leaving rosy embers. The islanders formed a tight circle with a singular focal point. It was one of their elders. Oil was poured from a coconut into seashells and lit from the ends of the fire to create luminaires.



The elder islander took a palm broom in one hand and swept the area in front of them. They then took a shell and drew a story in the wet sand.



All eyes were on this one wise storyteller. Hassan became immersed in their tale. The story told of the great palm tree who delivered everything necessary to make the island a home. The elder drew a towering tree and as they worked, gestured at Hassan, the model and inspiration for their story.



Sitha looked to Hassan too. His quietness had changed from that of foreboding to something softer, warmer. Sitha could feel his roots stretch beside her own – a great yawn in preparation for a pleasant rest.



When the story was over, the inhabitants of the island dispersed from the palm pavilion. The elder was the last to leave. He extinguished the lamps and poured the coconut oil from the shells into his hair. Sitha and Hassan watched as the elder combed the coconut oil in. It brought a shine to his hair so strong that the moon was reflected.



The elder then kneaded the remaining coconut oil on his skin and into his muscles. He stretched tall like a tree and grew a whole inch before their eyes! He reached wide like a palm leaf and his limbs moved with elegant ease.



And when he went on his way, Hassan, Sitha and the grey heron saw a spring in his step usually reserved to one much younger.



Sitha turned to Hassan, ready to pepper him with ideas and happy observations. But instead, Hassan hushed her with his own thoughts.



“I see now, Little Palm; we coconut trees are more than our fruits and flowers. We are more than materials and pieces ... We are the centre for those who also call out islands their home. We must stay here as long as they are here.”



Sitha bent her trunk beneath his as the grey heron
flew over to rest on her branches.

“Their story is our story, Little Palm. It belongs to all
of us,” said Hassan.





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