



Rise Above

by Ghina Chahwan

Illustrated by Christel Saneh

*To all the athletes and the people who inspired it,
To all those great souls fighting a battle,
To all those who inspire the lives of others,
Thank you for empowering those around you.*

*And to you guys, because of whom my life took a turn for the better:
Amy Dahmen, thank you for igniting this spark in me
and teaching me to:*

“only do what only I can do,”

*Tony Tarraf, no words, pages or books can even do you justice,
Christel Saneh, thank you for always leading by example
and keeping me grounded,*

*Vincent Bassil, thank you for believing in me
more than I ever believed in myself.*

*Finally,
to those who inspired it
but will not get the chance to read it.*

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Edited by Yasmina Jabre

The following stories are written with respect to the people who lived them

*Special thanks to the International Olympic Committee for believing in this project and funding it.

*Because some stories
were never meant for children...*

Based on true stories



Introduction

Once upon a time, there was a family of four. They lived happily together in their little house in the city. The father, mother, their older son and their little girl lived in perfect harmony. They knew they could always count on each other and they always had each other's back.

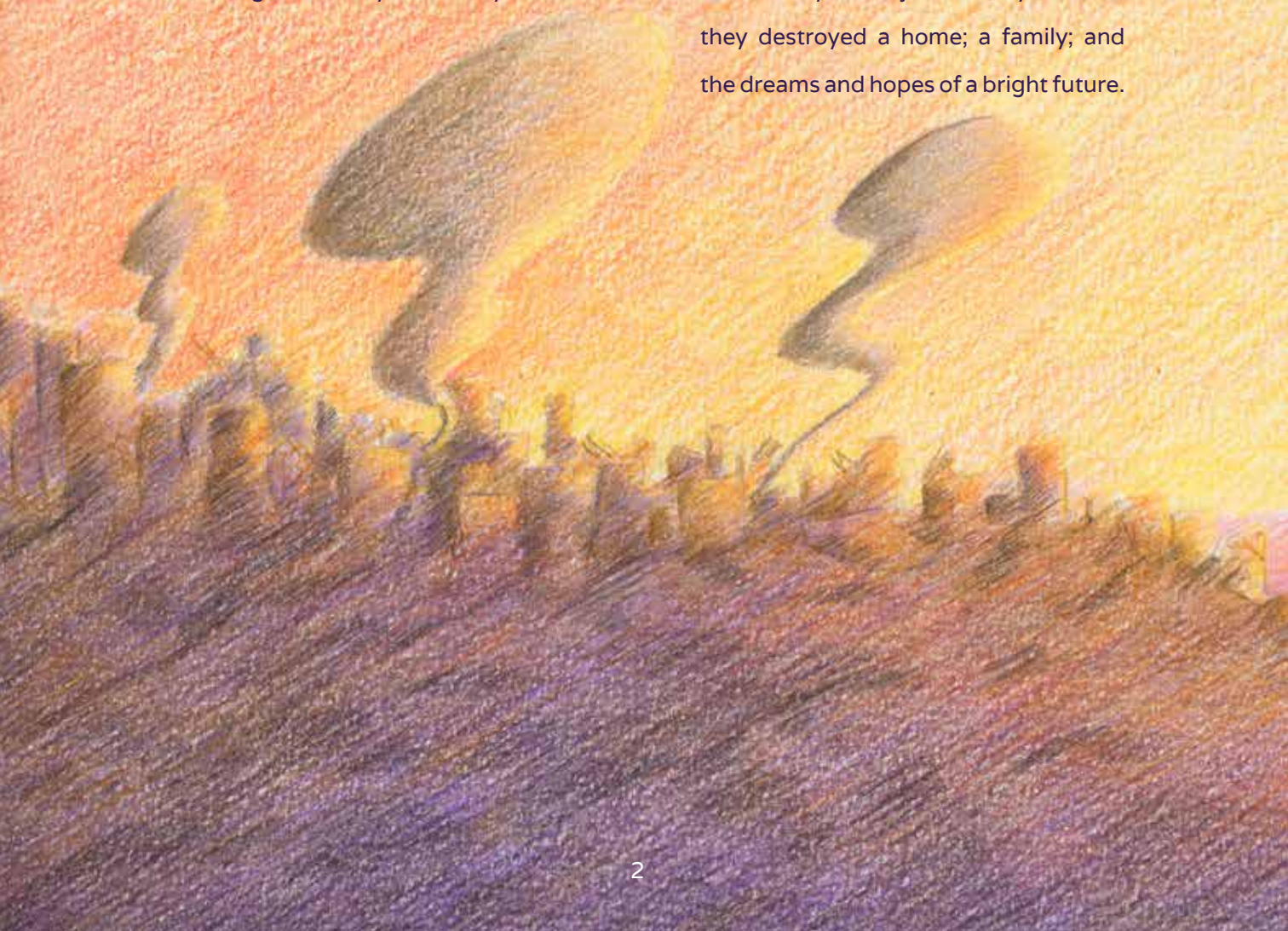
Every morning, the parents went to work. The boy, 10 years old, and his younger sister, 7 years old, rode the bus to school together. The children loved their school and loved playing with their friends. When they came back from school and their parents from work in the afternoon, they all sat together and ate lunch. The kids then went to their rooms and studied. The boy had always dreamt of becoming a lawyer, and the girl a journalist, so they studied hard and worked even harder to make their dreams come true. The siblings were big sport fans too; the boy played football and the girl was a long-jumper. They loved playing together, and sometimes, they went outside to have fun in the sun.



One day, when the boy and his sister were playing hide and seek, they saw a blinding flashing light and heard a thunder-like blast in the distance. Everywhere around them, people were running in despair. No matter how hard they clenched their fists and how tightly they squeezed their eyes, the crippling fear they were feeling would not fade away. They rushed to their house, but to their dismay, it was crumbling apart. The little boy and his sister could not stop crying. How could it be that their house had no more walls? Their parents held them tight and promised to protect them. “Don’t worry kids,” said the father, “We have raised you to be strong, body and mind.” The girl wanted to get her favorite training shoes and the boy wanted his football. But it was too dangerous to stay, so they had to run and hide.

Suddenly, big, armed men came and took the father. He had no choice but to go with them. Not only did the family lose everything that had taken them so long to build, but now they had also lost their backbone, their guiding light in the dark, their protector when times got hard. They separated the family members that were living so well together. They took away a father and a husband. They didn’t just destroy a house,

they destroyed a home; a family; and the dreams and hopes of a bright future.



The kids had no one left except their mother. She held their hands and walked a long way with them. They were very scared as they wandered about the blood-covered streets. They trudged in the wilderness in the extreme heat, and sometimes even walked through storms. They walked and walked until they reached the sea. In there, they set sail on an inflatable boat and left what had been their home for their entire lives. They left everything behind in search of safety.

When nighttime came and the little girl closed her eyes to sleep, she would have nightmares about the frightening scenes she had to live, and she'd wake up in the middle of the night, crying in distress. The little girl and her brother would think to themselves, "why is life so hard? Why is it so unfair?" For the longest time, they thought they were going to die. They couldn't see the light at the end of the tunnel. But after leaving their loved-ones behind; after leaving their lives behind, they reached the land, safe and sound.

A new country, a new beginning. But it wasn't that easy at first. They didn't understand the language, let alone speak it. The children missed their friends very much every day. It was hard for them to meet new people and make new friends. They had to turn the page and start over. They had to rebuild piece by piece what life had stripped them of. They had to find a new home, away from home...

This is the not so "fairy" tale of 65.5 million living souls across the globe, who fled their war-torn countries because of persecution, conflict, and violence, in search of a better life.





Farid Walizadeh

Northern Afghanistan – 1997

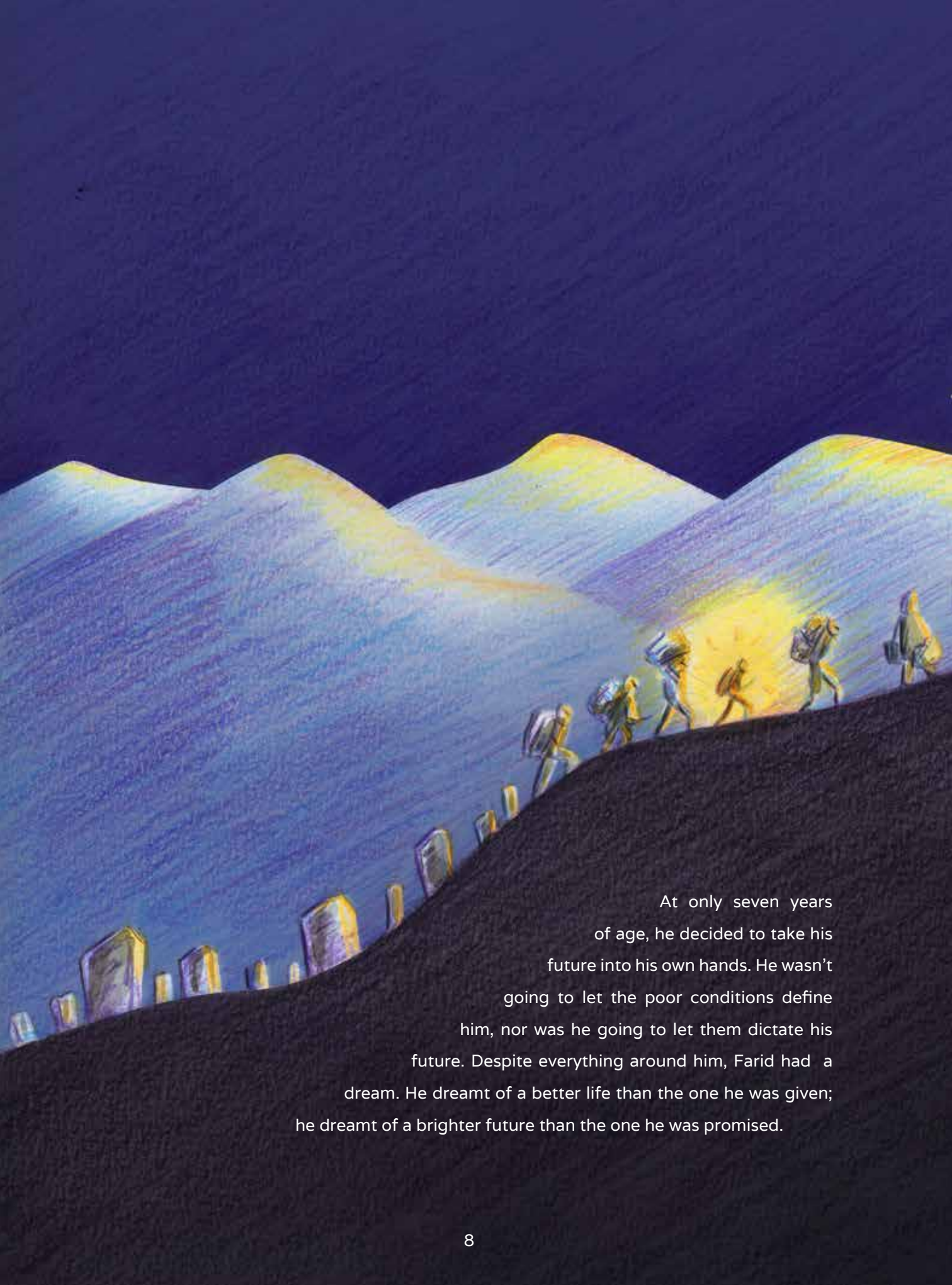
In a small city in the suburbs of North Afghanistan, Farid Walizadeh was born. He lived in very dreadful conditions. In the city of Baghlan, very few are those who can make it, and even fewer are those who can afford leisure and activities.

Afghanistan was a war-torn country, and people lived in constant fear of attacks. Ever since the seventies, wars had been continuously raging, taking the lives of millions and millions of people. It was not a safe home for families, much less for kids. Very few people had electricity. The living conditions were meager in the bitter cold winter, and even worse in the dry hot summer. Oppression, abuse and poverty defined the commonplace life for Afghans.

Farid did not choose to be born in North Afghanistan, nor did he choose to live there.







At only seven years
of age, he decided to take his
future into his own hands. He wasn't
going to let the poor conditions define
him, nor was he going to let them dictate his
future. Despite everything around him, Farid had a
dream. He dreamt of a better life than the one he was given;
he dreamt of a brighter future than the one he was promised.



And so, his death-defying journey began.

The youngest of two-hundred people fleeing the country, Farid began walking through the dry cold mountains of Afghanistan. Most nights, he would sleep without any food or water. Throughout the days, his body would wear out and he'd be too weak to even stand up, but something kept him going. He wasn't going to give up so easily. As he went by foot to Pakistan, the people he was escaping with slowly passed, one by one. Only a few of them made it to their destination after three months of walking.

When in Pakistan, things got even more dangerous. Stateless and without any legal documents, Farid could not be caught. He hid in the mountains and in the forest. He lived in constant fear of being attacked not only by terrorists, but also by wolves and other wild creatures of the forest. There, he was mostly by himself. When he wasn't hiding, Farid was mostly working very small jobs in return for food. He was hardly able to get by.

After staying for several months in Pakistan, his next destination was Iran. With his small frail body of a 7-year-old boy, Farid continued his perilous journey, walking and walking in the hot desert until he made it to the Persian Land. He only stayed there for a month, but the scars of his journey and the dehydration were visible on his fragile body.

Once outside of Iran, he was yet to take on the hardest part of his journey. After almost two years of traveling by foot from one country to another, Farid had made it to Turkey. He stayed there for two years, trying to escape on several occasions and by several means. But escaping Turkey wasn't going to be so easy. For more times than he could count, Farid tried fleeing Turkey to find shelter in Greece. On his first few attempts to escape the country by sea, he fell short every single time. He fell into the deep waters of the Mediterranean Sea and fought the fear of drowning time and time again.





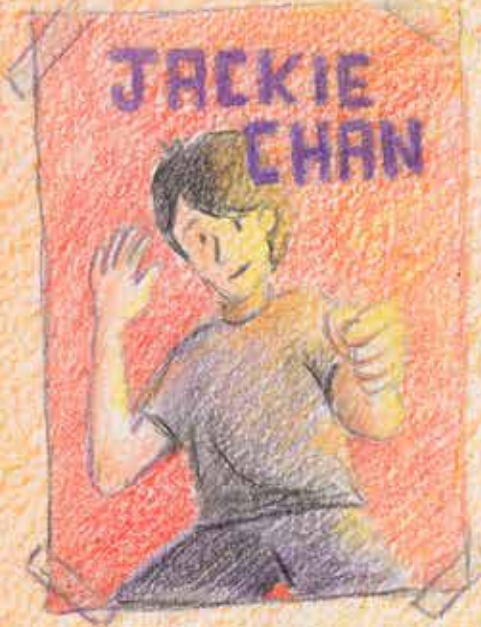


If there was one thing that Farid learned throughout his journey, it was to pick himself up even when the odds were against him... especially when the odds were against him.

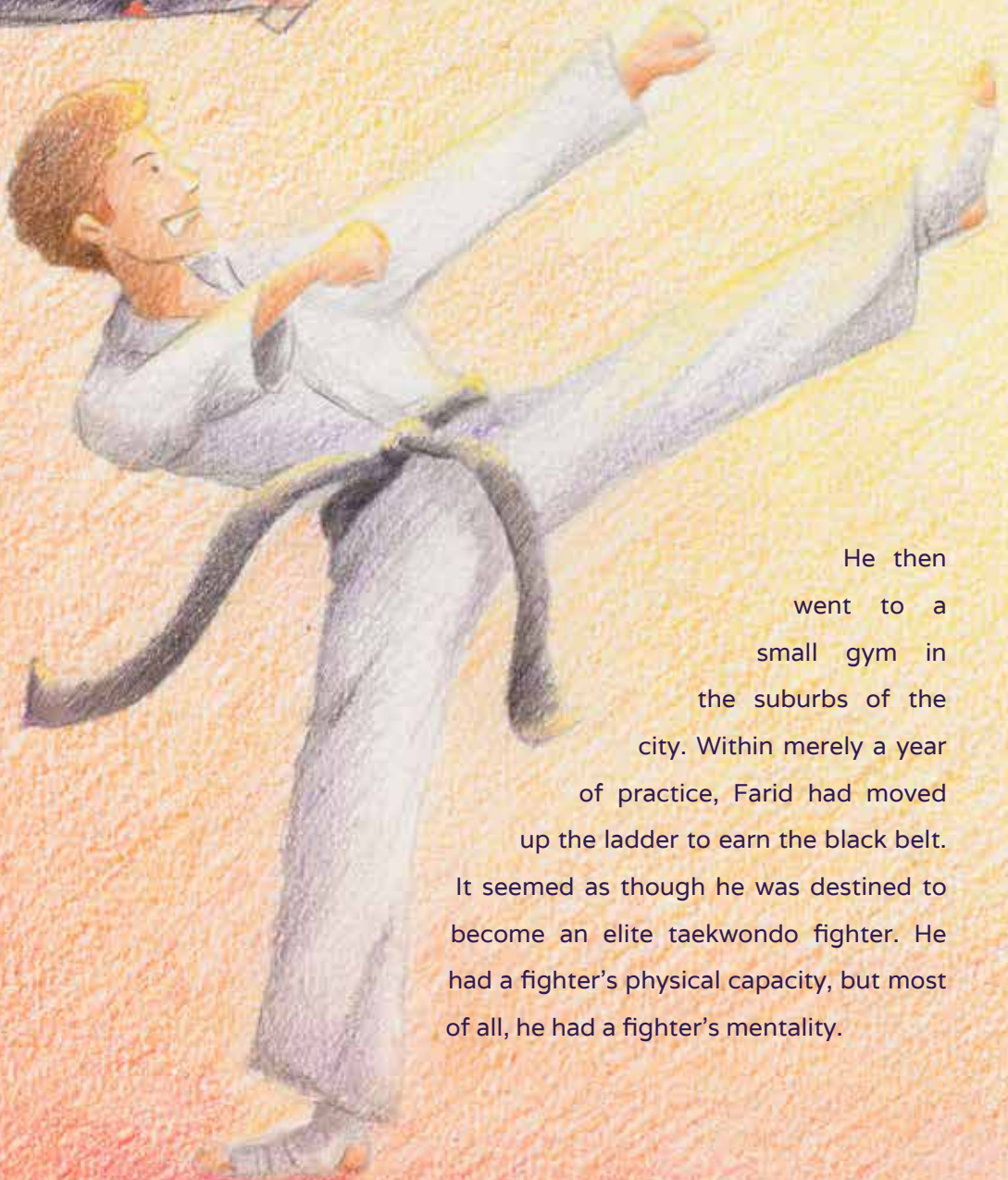
So, he tried escaping Turkey again, but the police caught him twice, and just like that, at only nine years of age, Farid found himself in Turkish prison. But even in prison, he did not lose hope. He always tried to look at the cup half full instead of the cup half empty.

Farid knew that even if the sun set, it was bound to rise again; and even when darkness came, the light was bound to shine again. He tried drawing to escape his reality, until he was finally put in an education center. There, kids did not like refugees. Farid barely had any friends, and he had no one to protect him or look after him. He had to take care of himself, by himself; he had to become his own hero.



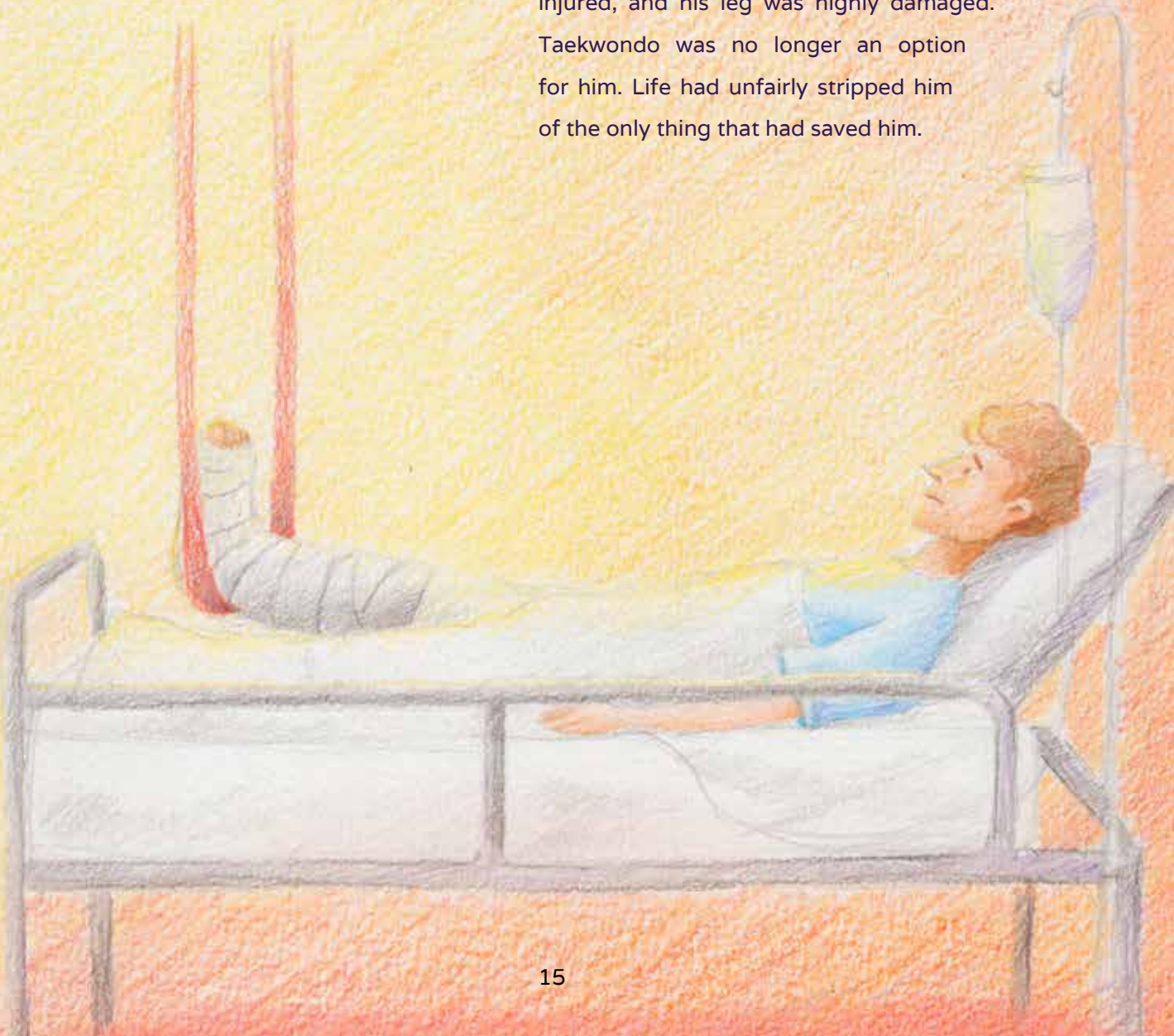


At the age of twelve, Farid watched a Jackie Chan movie. This was the turning point of his life. It inspired him in more ways than one. That's how he got into martial arts, especially taekwondo. He used sports to channel his anger and protect himself, but above everything else, he used it to give himself a sense of freedom and hope. Farid first began taekwondo with a friend of his from his home country Afghanistan.



He then went to a small gym in the suburbs of the city. Within merely a year of practice, Farid had moved up the ladder to earn the black belt. It seemed as though he was destined to become an elite taekwondo fighter. He had a fighter's physical capacity, but most of all, he had a fighter's mentality.

Sports gave Farid strength, both physical and mental. Because as a refugee always on the move, it took courage to dream, and Farid was the embodiment of courage. For Farid, life always managed to get in the way. On a day like any other, he was going to school. He did not have the privilege to ride the bus or go by car, instead, he was walking. He was minding his own business, when a drunk driver came out of the blue and hit him. In the blink of an eye, Farid saw all his dreams shatter. He could barely stand up, let alone walk. He was severely injured, and his leg was highly damaged. Taekwondo was no longer an option for him. Life had unfairly stripped him of the only thing that had saved him.



A few months later, the decision came and Farid was going to be relocated to a refugee center in Lisbon, Portugal. Most nights, he could barely sleep. He was having terrible nightmares of his past experiences. He needed a way out, and he needed it fast. Farid had hit rock bottom. He did not know what to do. He went to the refugee center director and only said one thing: "I want martial arts."

By that time, Farid had lost everything.

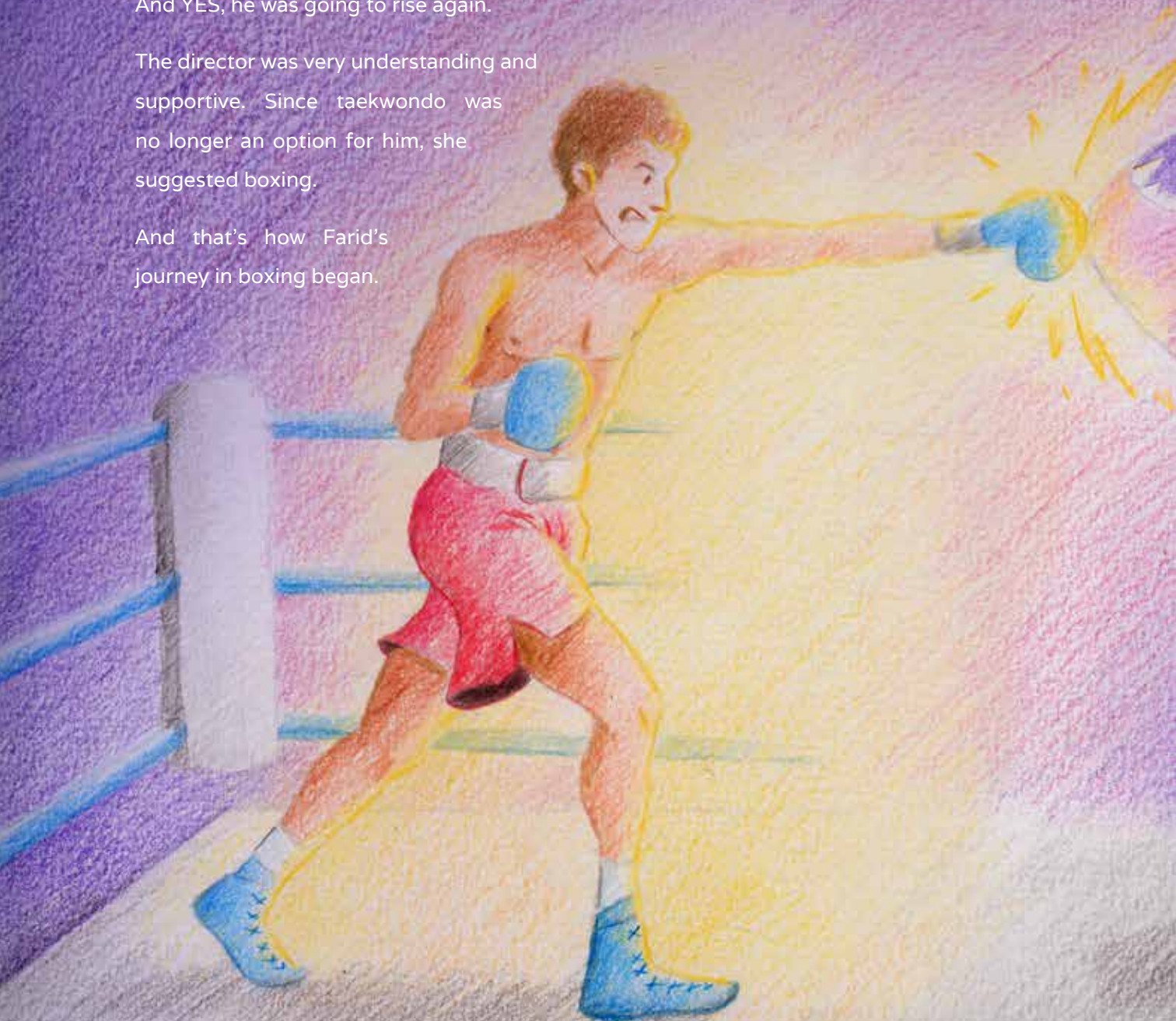
YES, he had lost his family.

YES, he had lost his home.

And YES, he was going to rise again.

The director was very understanding and supportive. Since taekwondo was no longer an option for him, she suggested boxing.

And that's how Farid's journey in boxing began.



When he first started boxing, Farid slowly started forgetting his trauma, and even more than that, he started learning how to deal with his trauma. He could finally fight all his demons. He made his entire world revolve around sport. Every day, Farid woke up at five in the morning and went to his small gym to train. In his mind, only one thought: “just one more day to prove I can do it.” Six months of rigorous training, and Farid was already national champion. He grew stronger, and his dreams grew even bigger. Farid knew what he wanted, but life had other plans for him.



After two years of boxing, he had to get operated on. His training came to an abrupt stop. At the age of eighteen, he started working in order to put food on the table for his family. He temporarily put his dreams on hold to try bringing his family from Afghanistan to Portugal, and he did.

In 2019, just one year before the biggest sports event of the world, Farid got back on track. He had his heart set on making it to the Olympics; an achievement no one could pull off in such a short period of time. Not only did Farid resume training, but he also went to university to study architecture. He knew that if he tried his best, there was nothing he could not do. So, he woke up every day and tried his best, day in and day out.

After losing everything, he had also lost hope, but his dream gave him the confidence to hope once again. After stumbling, falling and crawling, his dream gave him the courage

No one gave him the nerve to try again
believed that a seven- because he believed
year old boy would find his way out of in the power of his dream.
Afghanistan by foot – but he did.

No one believed that a refugee
in prison would do sports
– but he did.

No one
believed
that he could recover
from his leg operation – but he did.

More often times than not, Farid defied the odds. Every time life tried to knock him down; he stood up and fought back, each time harder than before. For the majority of his life, Farid had to fight to survive, now he fights for his ultimate goal – a medal at the Olympic Games.

His journey might have left him scarred, but he wears his scars with pride, as proof that he has made it; He wears his scars with pride, like wings that have taken him far beyond his wildest dreams.





Yusra Mardini

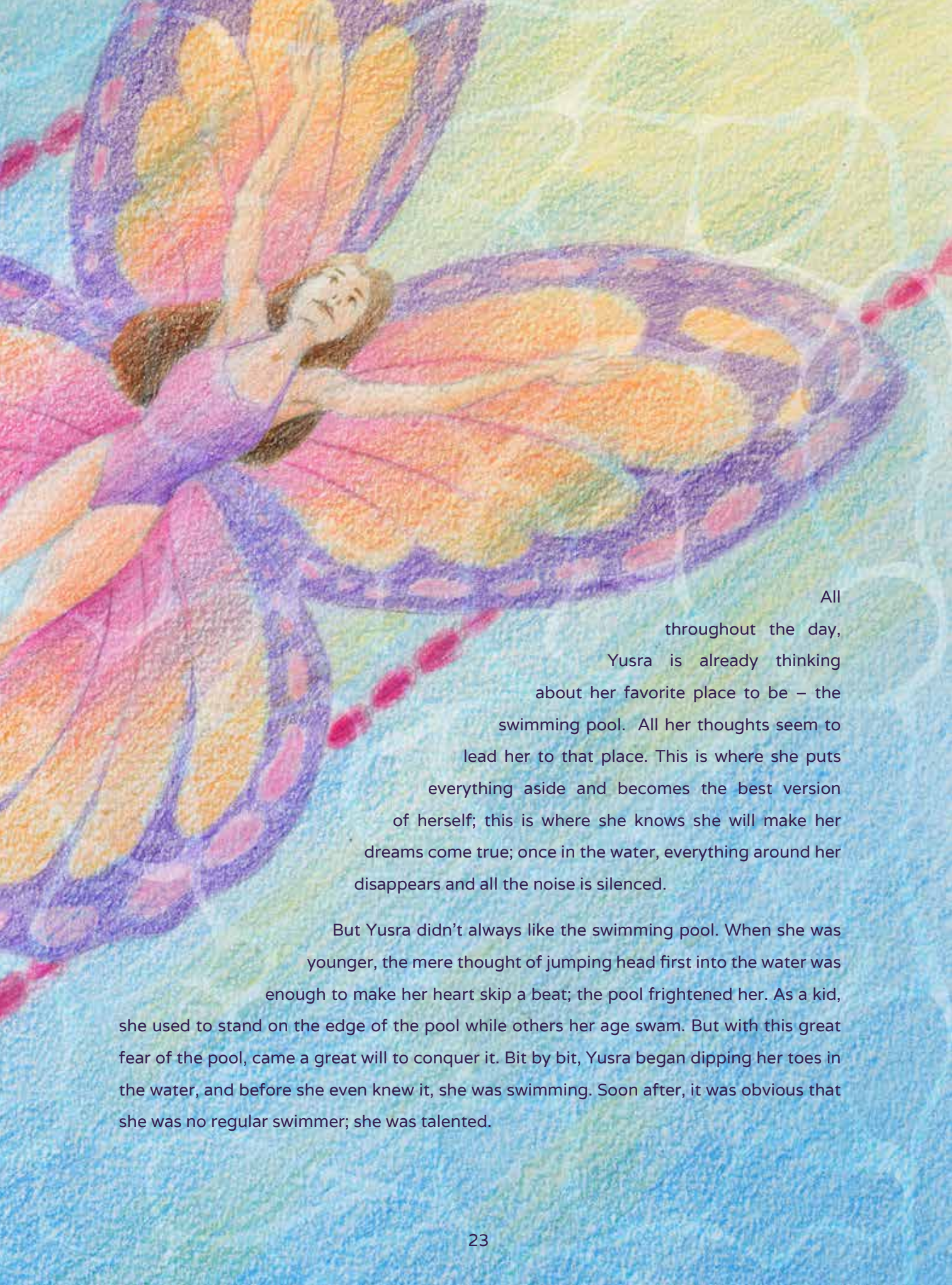
Syria, Suburbs of Damascus.

7:00 AM, the alarm goes off.

“Wake up honey, time to go.”

Yusra and her sister wake up to the sweet sound of their mother’s voice. They get dressed, pack their lunch boxes, and wait for the school bus outside. Their mom places a kiss on each of their foreheads and waves them goodbye as the girls leave for school.

Yusra and her sister Sarah lead a life as normal as it gets. They study hard and dream of a bright future where nothing can stand in their way.



All
throughout the day,
Yusra is already thinking
about her favorite place to be – the
swimming pool. All her thoughts seem to
lead her to that place. This is where she puts
everything aside and becomes the best version
of herself; this is where she knows she will make her
dreams come true; once in the water, everything around her
disappears and all the noise is silenced.

But Yusra didn't always like the swimming pool. When she was
younger, the mere thought of jumping head first into the water was
enough to make her heart skip a beat; the pool frightened her. As a kid,
she used to stand on the edge of the pool while others her age swam. But with this great
fear of the pool, came a great will to conquer it. Bit by bit, Yusra began dipping her toes in
the water, and before she even knew it, she was swimming. Soon after, it was obvious that
she was no regular swimmer; she was talented.

Her dad then decided to coach her and her sister Sarah, and although she didn't always like it, Yusra was a gifted swimmer. Not only did she start competing, but she also started winning competitions left and right. Her fear of the water was nothing more but a distant memory.

Yusra, thirteen years old already, worked with her coach, day in and day out, in the gym and the swimming pool with only one goal in mind: the Olympics. Her coach had very high hopes for her. After all, she was dedicated, passionate, and hardworking –all the qualities you need in an athlete who wants to thrive.

To her, there was no problem big enough that the water couldn't drown. Unfortunately, life is not a wish granting factory. Sometimes, it gets in the way. Yusra found herself facing a setback that not even the swimming pool could solve – war broke out in her beloved country, and destroyed her hometown of Damascus. It raged on and on for years. Day after day, people died; not soldiers, not rebels, but regular people: men, women and children. Yusra and her family heard nothing but horrifying news that only went from bad to worse, with each passing day.

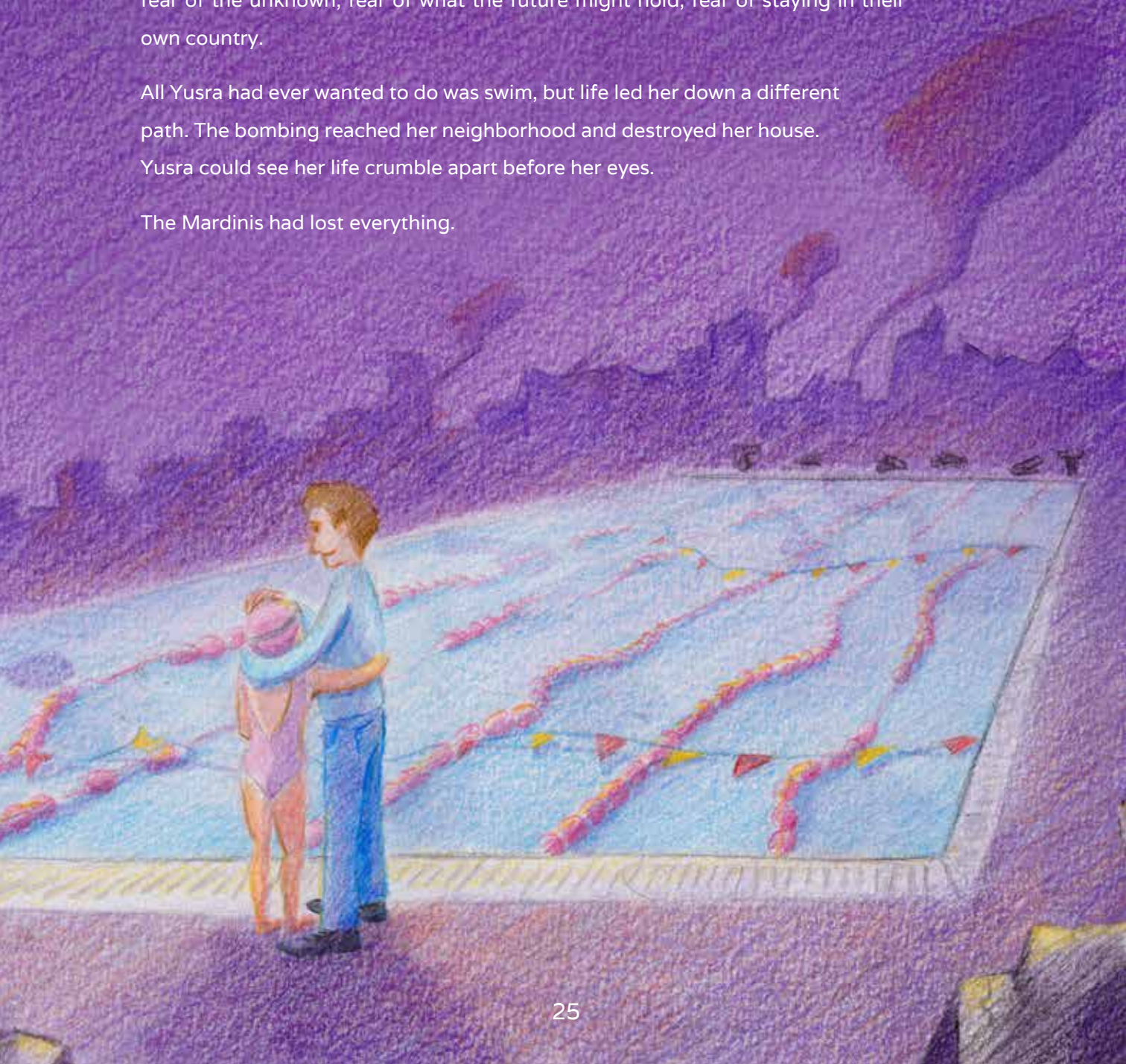
At first, Yusra and her family were safe in the suburbs of the capital, but the more time passed, the more dangerous it got for them, until war eventually went beyond the borders of Damascus.

Despite everything, nothing was going to get in the way of Yusra. She kept going to the pool every day to swim.

On a day just like any other, Yusra and her Dad went to the swimming pool to train. Once they got there, they were surprised to see that the “safest place in the world” was not so safe anymore; the roof of the swimming pool was riddled with huge holes. Just then, Yusra felt her heart sink. Her dreams were nothing more but the dust that had fallen into her pool and ruined it. “Dad, where am I going to swim now? What are we going to do?” She cried. Not even her dad could answer these questions. The entire family was now living in fear: fear of the unknown; fear of what the future might hold; fear of staying in their own country.

All Yusra had ever wanted to do was swim, but life led her down a different path. The bombing reached her neighborhood and destroyed her house. Yusra could see her life crumble apart before her eyes.

The Mardinis had lost everything.



Yusra's mom had a plan for their family. She came to her daughters with a heavy heart, tears dripping down her cheeks and a proposal that silently broke her heart. Relatives of Yusra were planning to leave to Europe, and Yusra and her older sister could go with them, but this was not an easy decision to make. Yusra and Sarah would have to leave now, without knowing when, or even if, the rest of the family would join them.

"Wake up honey, time to go." The mother said as her voice broke.

Yusra and her sister woke up to the shaky sound of their mother's voice. They got dressed, packed their bags, and embarked on a new journey. Their mom placed a kiss on each of their foreheads and waved them goodbye.

The girls were unable to hold back the tears as they left for another country; another life. They left the life they were familiar with behind because they still dreamt of a bright future where nothing could stand in her way.

Yusra, Sarah, their cousins, and a group of refugees began their long journey to Europe, destination: Germany. Their first stop was in Beirut, Lebanon, and then Istanbul, Turkey. But a constant fear was gripping them; the fear of being caught by the police and sent back to Syria.



Once in Turkey, they had to go to Greece by boat; the hardest part of their journey. Because not only did they have to travel by boat, but they also had to avoid Turkish guards in the process. The group of refugees hid in the woods, between tall trees, and once the smugglers deemed it was safe for them to flee, they loaded them onto a boat way too small to fit everyone. Not even a few minutes into their trip, Turkish guards spotted them, and forced them to go back to the shore. Their first attempt to escape was a mere failure. A few hours later, as the sun had gone down and darkness had fallen, they decided to try again. They set sail and left the shore. The forest in which they hid slowly grew out of sight as they sailed farther and farther in the Mediterranean Sea.



Just as Yusra thought things were getting easier, the boat engine made a sharp sound that left all the passengers worried. Something was wrong with the boat, and it started moving slowly, so slowly, that it eventually stopped moving at all. People thought they were going to die; they thought this was it. Time was running out as the boat was slowly filling with icy water. In a desperate attempt to make the boat lighter, passengers threw their belongings into the deep sea. They had lost everything. Many of the travelers were elderly or children who did not know how to swim; they could not save their own lives. Stuck in the middle of the sea, with no one to help the passengers, somebody had to take action... FAST.

Yusra looked at Sarah, and without a second thought, they jumped into the sea to save their lives and the lives of all the passengers on that boat; because they were Mardinis, and the Mardinis were swimmers; because they knew that no matter where they were from, dreams were still allowed, and no one, not a single soul on this earth, could take away their dreams. Yusra was pulling the boat with a rope from the front, while Sarah and two other passengers were pushing it from the back. Time was going by so slow, and Yusra's body was starting to wear out.

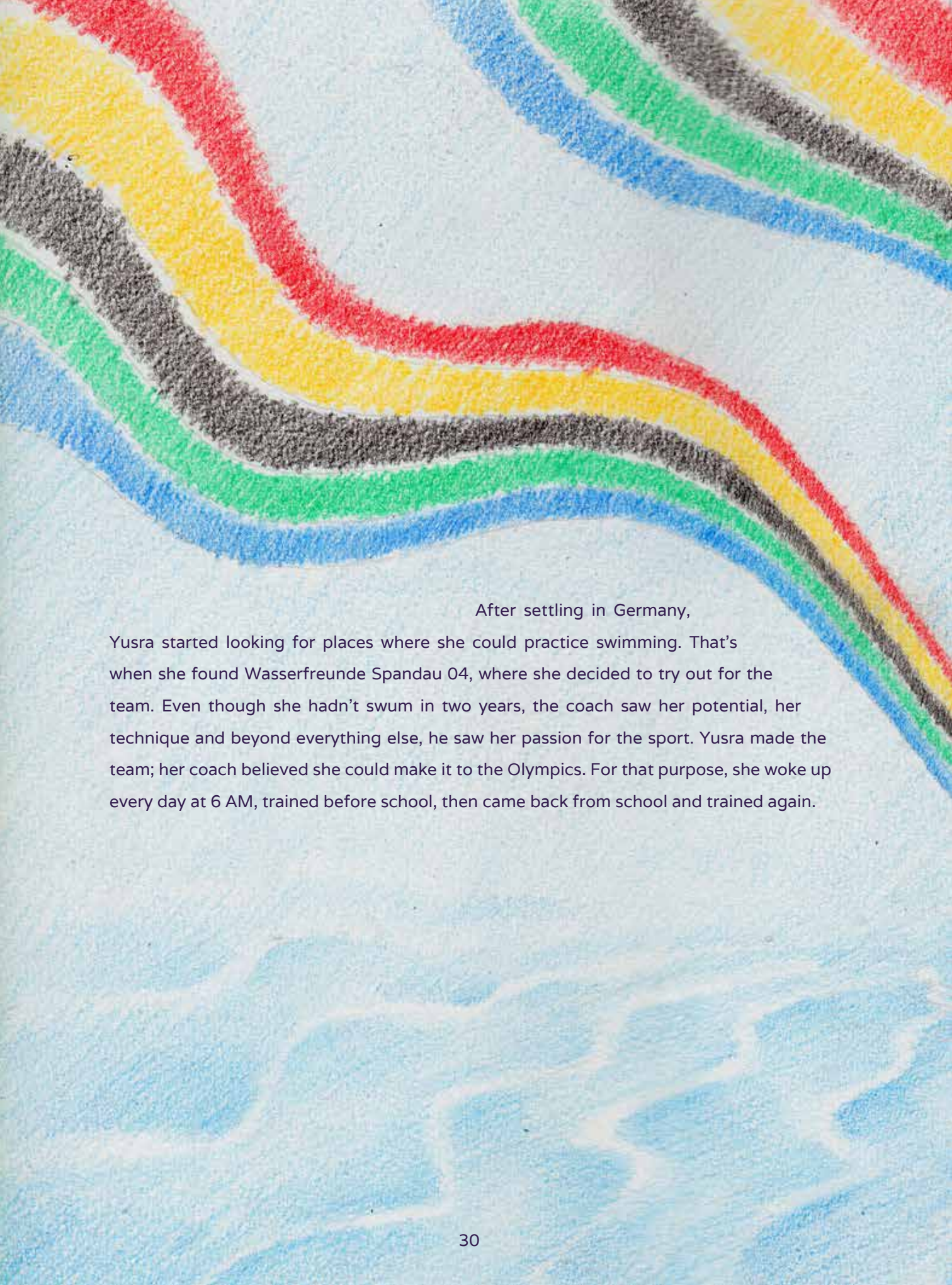


She and the other people swimming and pushing the boat were exhausted, but she had to hold on. She had to hold on to her dream; she had to hold on because letting go was just not an option; because she couldn't let her sister down; because she couldn't let all those innocent people down; because she wasn't going to let herself down.

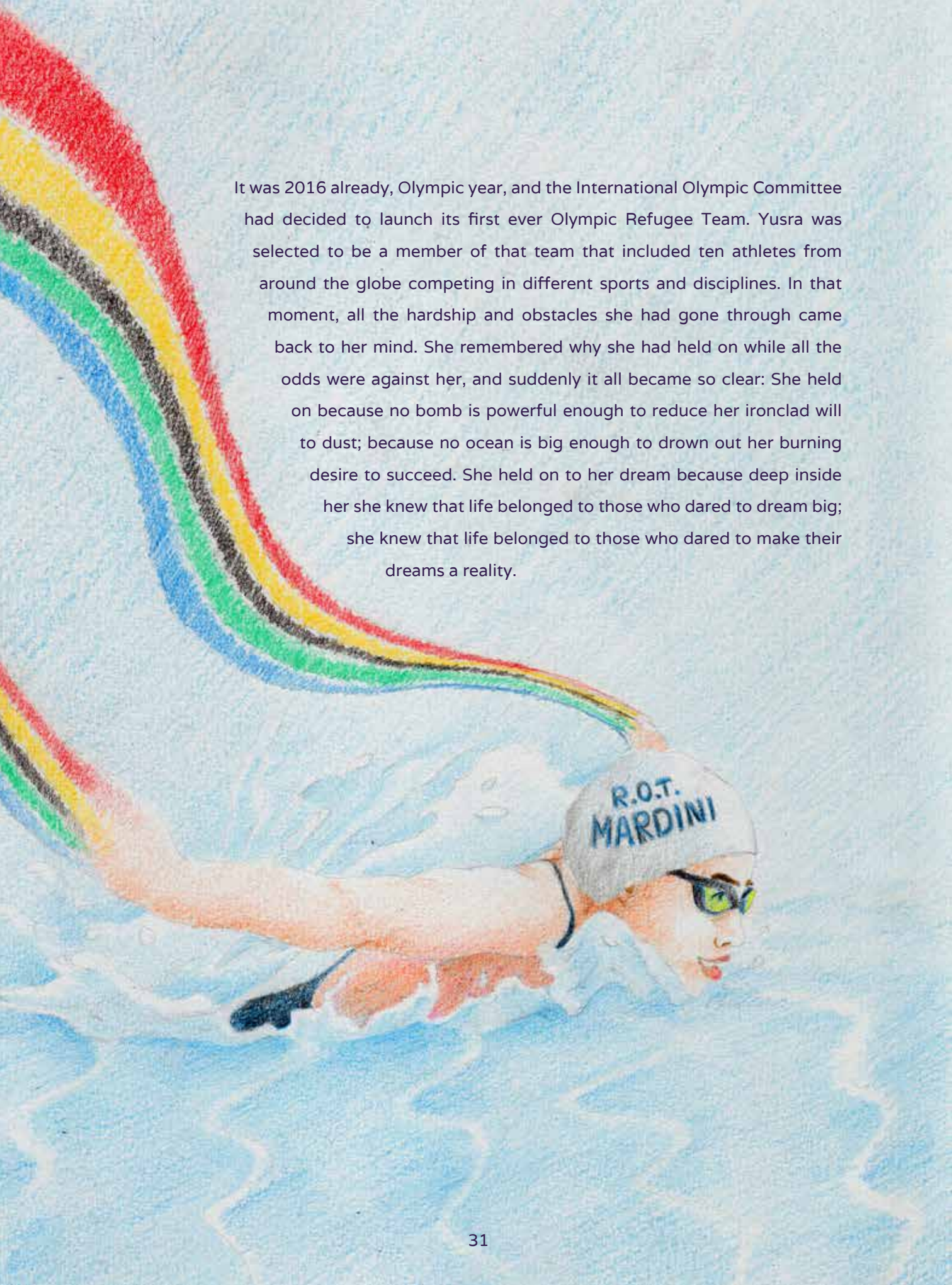
After three and a half hours of swimming in the sea and pulling a boat with sixteen people in it; after thinking the darkest thoughts to herself; after thinking she wouldn't be able to see her family again: her father, mother and little sister; after thinking she was going to die, she finally saw the Greek shore, and she felt like the weight of the world was finally off her shoulders.

From Greece, destination: Berlin. A month and nine countries later, Yusra and Sarah had finally made it to Germany. Although it was no rainbows and butterflies over there, at least they were alive and safe.





After settling in Germany, Yusra started looking for places where she could practice swimming. That's when she found Wasserfreunde Spandau 04, where she decided to try out for the team. Even though she hadn't swum in two years, the coach saw her potential, her technique and beyond everything else, he saw her passion for the sport. Yusra made the team; her coach believed she could make it to the Olympics. For that purpose, she woke up every day at 6 AM, trained before school, then came back from school and trained again.



It was 2016 already, Olympic year, and the International Olympic Committee had decided to launch its first ever Olympic Refugee Team. Yusra was selected to be a member of that team that included ten athletes from around the globe competing in different sports and disciplines. In that moment, all the hardship and obstacles she had gone through came back to her mind. She remembered why she had held on while all the odds were against her, and suddenly it all became so clear: She held on because no bomb is powerful enough to reduce her ironclad will to dust; because no ocean is big enough to drown out her burning desire to succeed. She held on to her dream because deep inside her she knew that life belonged to those who dared to dream big; she knew that life belonged to those who dared to make their dreams a reality.





Parfait Hakizimana

On the 3rd of July, in 1988, a little boy was born in Gitega, Burundi. Little did everyone know that this boy had something special in him; something very few had; this boy had ironclad will.

Parfait Hakizimana grew up in Burundi. He lived with his family of six, and his parents always tried to make ends meet. Parfait was never the demanding type, he helped his family when he could, he was polite and he was never out of line. Parfait never asked for much. All he ever wanted was to keep living peacefully in his hometown, with his parents, and continue his studies. He wanted to have a normal childhood, and lead a normal life where he could do whatever he pleased, be it sports activities or academic activities. Unfortunately, his country could not even provide him with the safety and security he needed to exercise his most fundamental rights.

Gitega is a city marked by religious and ethnic conflicts, which often lead to wars within the city itself, or within the country. When war breaks out, education services are often put on hold, healthcare becomes scarce, and poverty widespread. In Burundi, it is often advised to remain very careful and always alert, because there's a very high risk of criminal activity. It is not a safe place for people to live in, much less for children to grow up in. When children leave their houses, their parents always worry because they don't know if their kids are going to make it back home safe and sound; tragedy often strikes and spares no one. That's what happened to Parfait Hakizimana, on the 21st of July 1996. Tragedy came knocking on his door, and he couldn't keep it away. As an 8-year old, when you hear gunfire and see people firing bullets at you, you rarely know what to do.



On that gloomy day of July, a rebel group railed the city of Parfait and his family, firing gunshots at people. Dozens were dead, and hundreds were injured. Parfait was no exception to this rule. He received a bullet in his left arm, and saw his mother killed in front of his own eyes. In Burundi, tragedy spared no one, and Parfait was yet another perfect example.

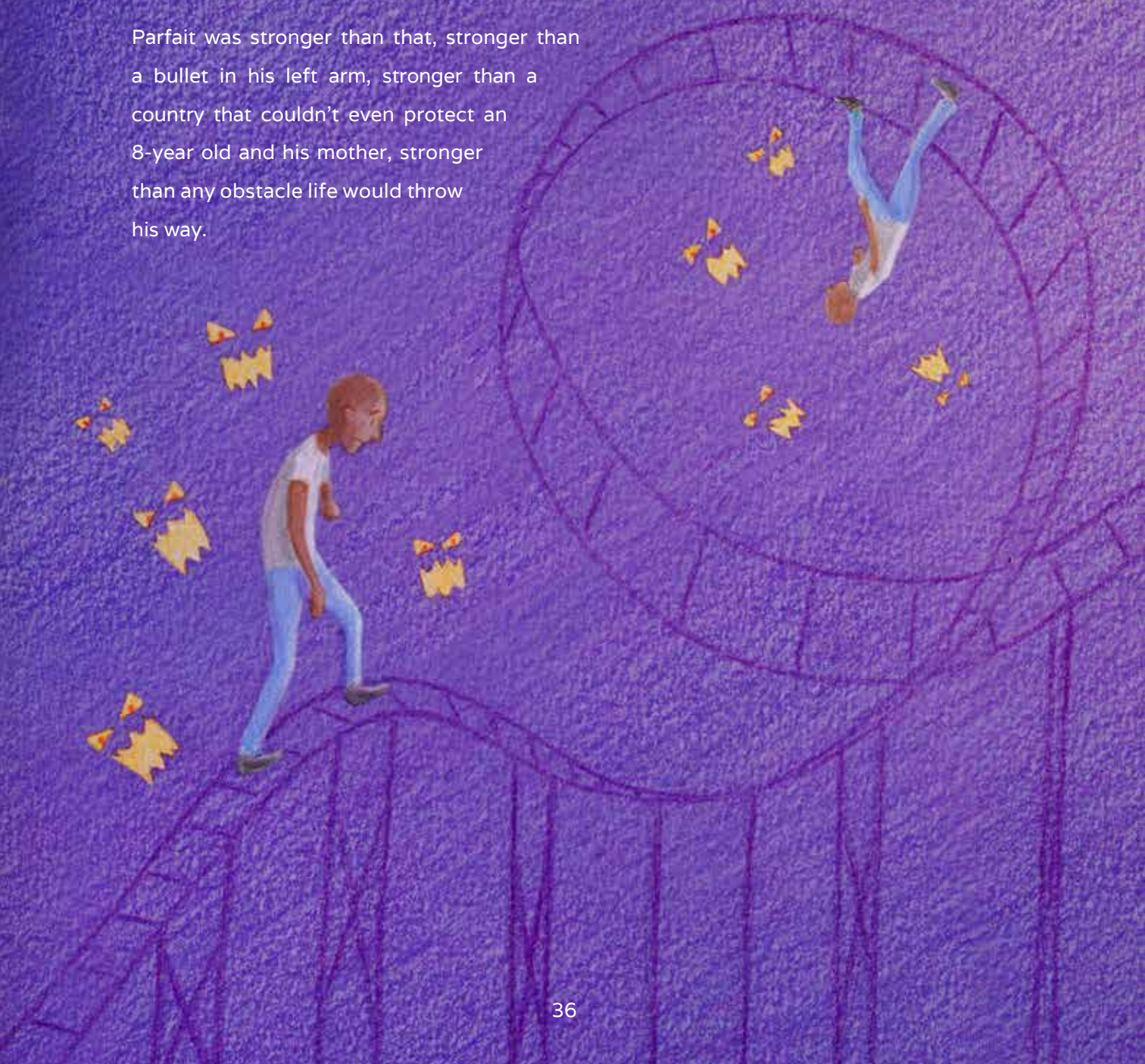
What do you say to an 8-year old whose only wish was to grow up next to his family, but who no longer could? How do you explain to him why he no longer had a left arm? How do you tell him that he was going to grow up without the love of a mother? How do you make him erase these traumatic images from his mind?



After this painful incident, Parfait's life took a different turn. Not only did he have to grow up without a mother, but he also had to grow up without an arm. Being a person with disability, he got his fair share of bullying. People started looking at him differently, and treating him differently, and not always in a good way. Way too often, people could not see beyond his disability; they failed to see the kind-hearted person in him. Because of that, Parfait had to suffer a great load of physical pain, and an even greater load of mental pain. When people saw him in the streets, very few could hide their shock at the sight of his amputated arm.

Parfait had big dreams; dreams so big that his country could not even understand. He wasn't going to let judgmental eyes and minds keep him from doing what he wanted to do.

Parfait was stronger than that, stronger than a bullet in his left arm, stronger than a country that couldn't even protect an 8-year old and his mother, stronger than any obstacle life would throw his way.



Parfait was stronger than his circumstances, and he would not let them define him.

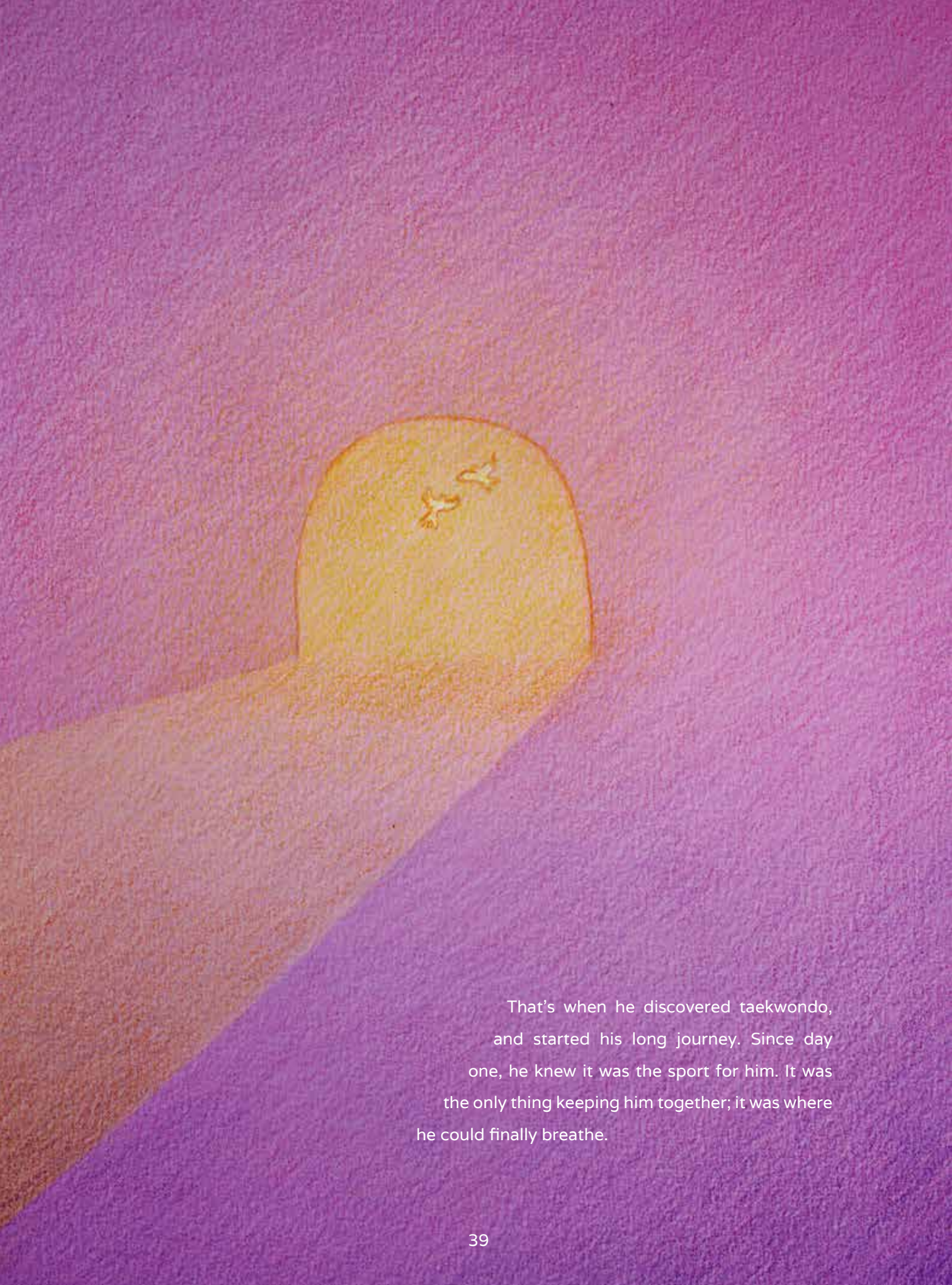
Parfait decided that he would chase his dreams one by one. First, he graduated high school, and made it as far as university.



In 2007, at 19 years of age, when Parfait thought he had already suffered enough, life decided to challenge him again. On a day that Parfait would never forget, he got the news that his father had a motorcycle accident. He rushed to the hospital to try and save him but it was too late. Parfait had no one left except his brothers and sisters. He had lost his mother, and a few years later, life had stripped him of his father as well.

Amputated and orphaned, Parfait could not see the light at the end of the tunnel, until he decided he wanted more for himself than what life was giving him. He began playing sports as a way to escape all this misery. He began with volleyball, then seatball, and he even tried football, but he didn't find himself in any of these sports. Indeed, they had given him a way out, but he felt there was always something missing; something more he needed to achieve.





That's when he discovered taekwondo,
and started his long journey. Since day
one, he knew it was the sport for him. It was
the only thing keeping him together; it was where
he could finally breathe.

In parallel with his studies, Parfait was going to taekwondo trainings every other day. He went on to go to the University of Economics and Business Management, all while he was in a country where freedom of speech is non-existent. Against all odds, he got his Bachelor's degree in business management, but his country would not allow him to pursue the higher education he had in mind. He was not allowed to become more educated, because educated people are a threat to the power of the state.

With only a Bachelor's degree in hand, Parfait said to himself "Enough is enough. If I want something, I won't stop at anything until I get it, even if it means leaving my friends, family, and hometown behind." That's how he decided to leave Burundi and head to Rwanda. Political conflicts, religious struggles, oppression and instability all led him to flee the country. In 2015, he arrived to Rwanda.

He found himself in a new country, with new people and a completely new environment without neither friends, nor family. The only thing he still had was taekwondo; it was the only constant in his ever-changing chaotic life.



Despite everything he had been through, Parfait never stopped taekwondo. When everything was against him, when people told him he couldn't, when he had no one left, Parfait rose to the occasion and shone. That is exactly when he kept pushing for his dreams. Taekwondo gave him back what life had taken away from him. Taekwondo gave him the opportunity to meet new people and make new friends who see past his disability; people who believe in him and in everything he has to offer this world. Taekwondo became his family; his life.



Parfait now trains to qualify for the Paralympic Games in Tokyo 2020. He wants to give back to a sport that has given him so much, so when he retires, he aims to build his own taekwondo gym where prosperity and discipline reign.

Parfait has given everyone a life lesson: What matters in life is not the obstacles that come your way; it's not the hardship that life keeps throwing at you; it's not the difficulties you run into; What matters is that you just don't give up; and Parfait did not give up. He did not give up on his dream; he did not let life get the best of him. When life knocked him down and threw him to the ground, he chose to get back up; he chose to fight; he chose to rise because it all comes down to the will; the will to win, the will to fight, the will to survive.





Farid Walizadeh fought for his life more than once, he was knocked down and came out on the other side, each time stronger than before. He became a fighter. He rose above.

Yusra Mardini swam to save her life and the lives of others, now she swims to inspire millions around the world. She rose above.

Parfait Hakizimana held on by a thread to a little smidge of hope. He defied the odds. He never gave up, even when the cards were stacked against him, especially when the cards were stacked against him. He rose above.

They all suffered, they all endured a great load of pain and grief, but they all overcame; they fought to rise above.