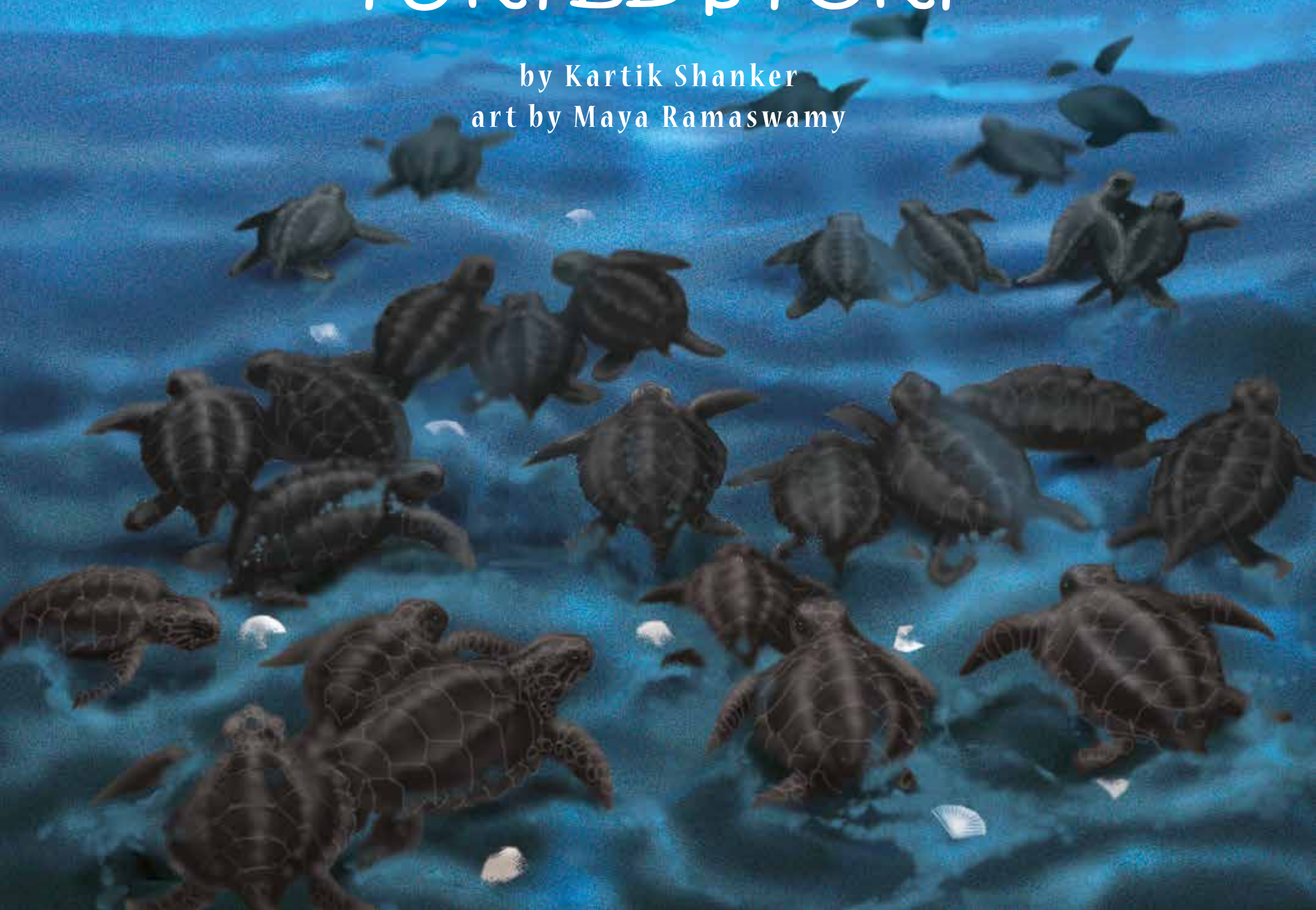


# TURTLE STORY

by Kartik Shanker  
art by Maya Ramaswamy





**‘Turtle Story’** by Kartik Shanker

Art by: Maya Ramaswamy  
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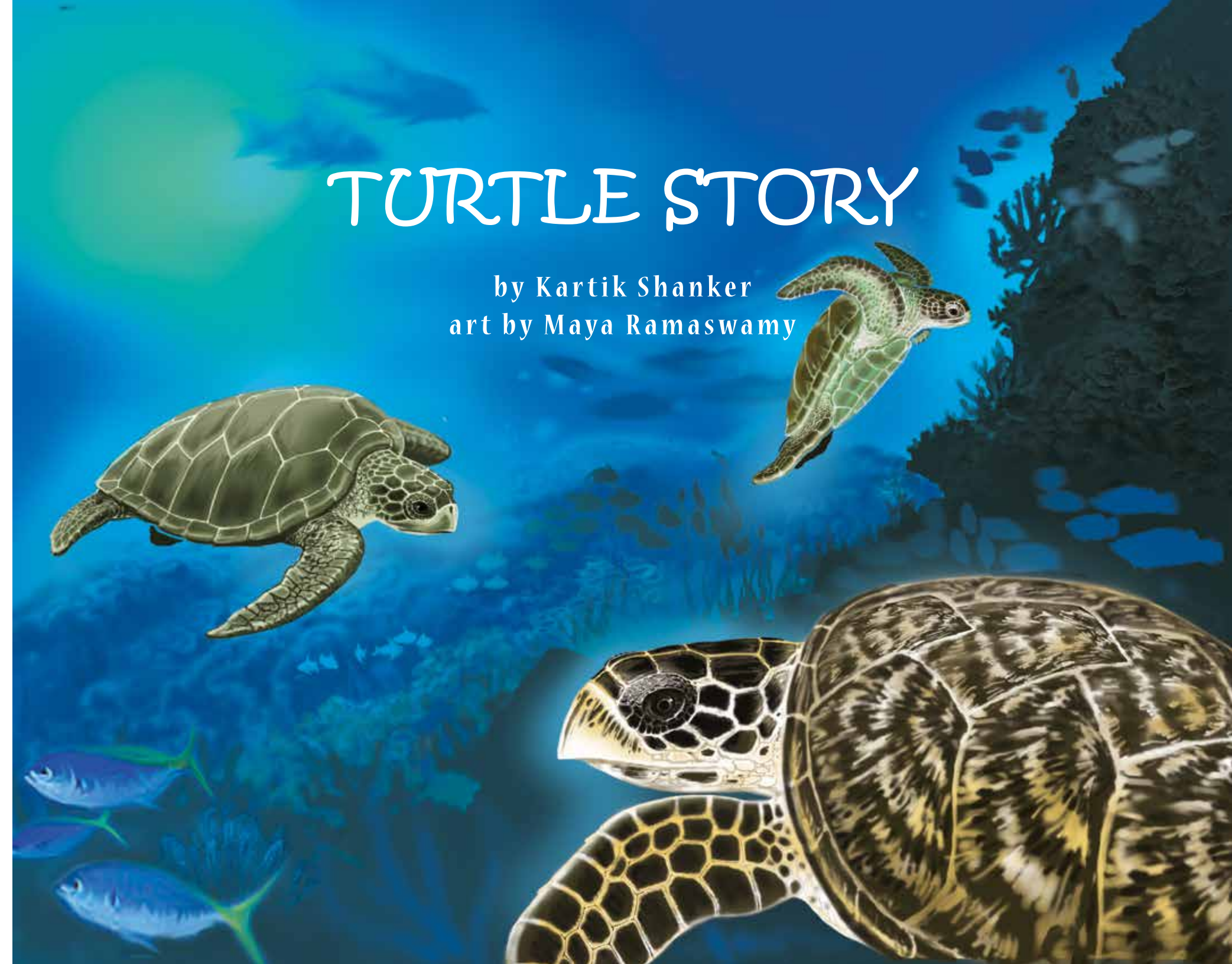
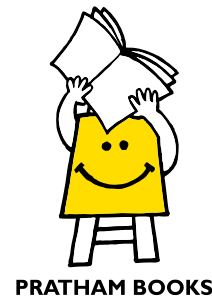
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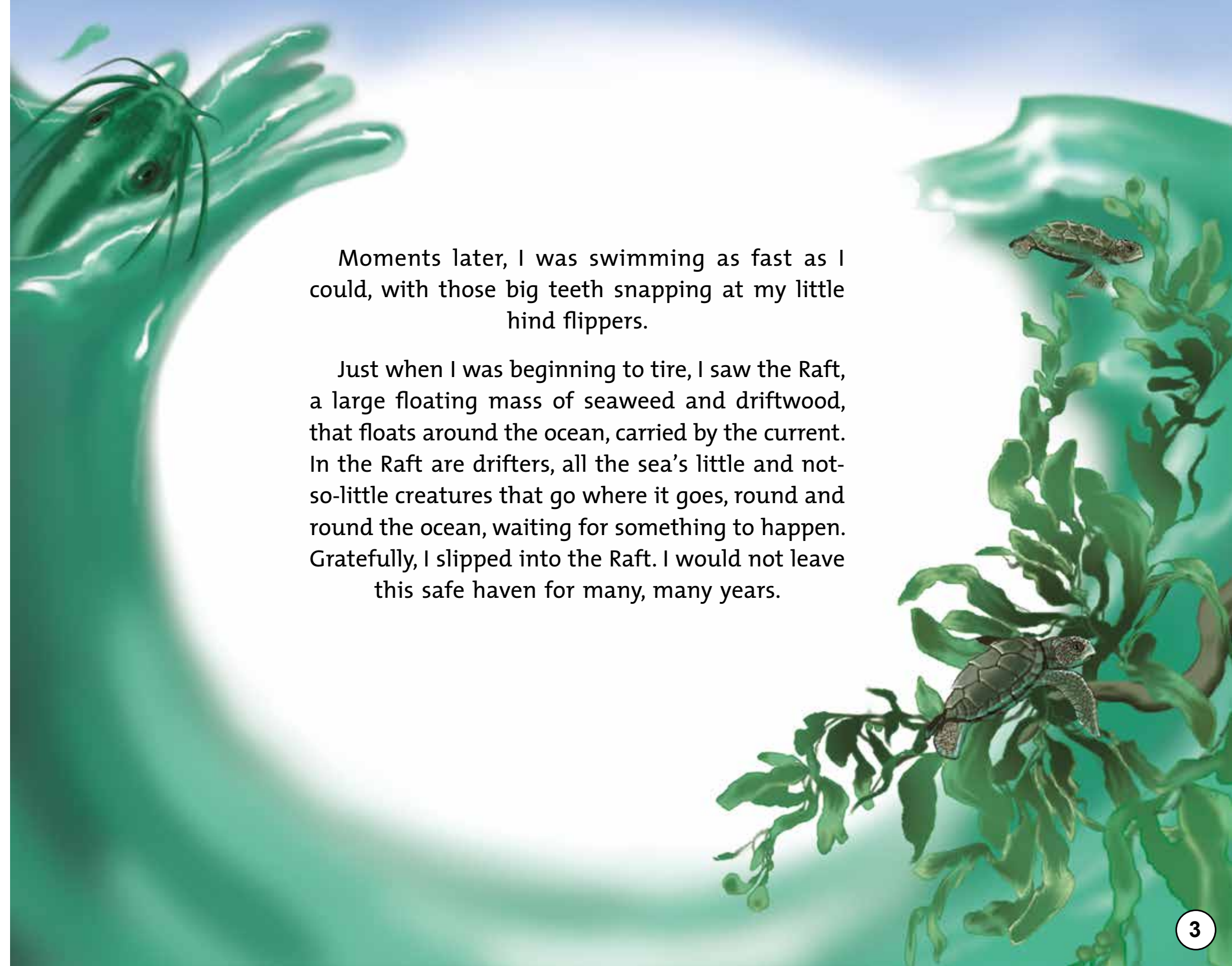
When I woke up in the morning, the sun was shining again. For a moment, I wondered where I was. And then I remembered. I was a baby sea turtle – an olive ridley – in the middle of a watery world. The ocean, someone had called it. Water all around, blue and green, little flecks of white foam on lazy breakers, and the sunlight playing games with the clouds. So calm and comfy. I tucked my flippers close and floated for a while, letting the current carry me along.

I didn't know where I was. But that doesn't matter when the water is warm and your tummy is full. Rays of sunlight bounced off my back, filling me with new energy. I felt I could spend the rest of my life here.

But just then, a school of fish went rushing by. And chasing them was a really big fish that had lunch on his mind.

When he saw me, his eyes lit up.

"Mmmmm," he seemed to be thinking, "baby turtle soup!"



Moments later, I was swimming as fast as I could, with those big teeth snapping at my little hind flippers.

Just when I was beginning to tire, I saw the Raft, a large floating mass of seaweed and driftwood, that floats around the ocean, carried by the current. In the Raft are drifters, all the sea's little and not-so-little creatures that go where it goes, round and round the ocean, waiting for something to happen. Gratefully, I slipped into the Raft. I would not leave this safe haven for many, many years.





The Raft was like a world cruise. It took you to places that you had never been before, but you saw it all from a safe distance. I enjoyed it very much, but after a few years, I decided it was time to be more adventurous. To explore the wild world outside. I had heard wonderful things about a place called the Reef where a lot of other turtles lived.

Everyone said the Reef was the fairyland of the ocean. That it was full of beautiful, brightly-coloured creatures. Some quite harmless like the clown fish, others venomous like the scorpion fish.

I wondered how I would find it.

All of a sudden, it became very dark, and a huge shadow covered me. Alarmed, I looked up, only to see the biggest turtle I had ever seen. His back was soft and leathery. I stared. A turtle with a soft back? Never. All the ones I know have very hard backs.

The big turtle caught me staring. "Surprised?" he grunted pleasantly. "You shouldn't be. I'm a leatherback turtle."

How appropriate, I thought to myself.







"Where are you going, Mr. Leatherback? To the Reef perhaps?" I asked him hopefully.

"Ah," sighed Mr. Leatherback, "I wish I had that luxury. But no, I am too busy searching for jellyfish. My favourite food."

"And where do you search for them?" I asked.

"Out in the deep, deep sea," said Mr. Leatherback. "Sometimes I have to dive more than a 1,000 metres, searching, seeking. Where it's dark and cold. Where the sperm whales hunt for giant squid."

"Could you take me there?" I asked.

"No other turtle could survive in such cold waters," he said haughtily.

What a fathead, I thought to myself.

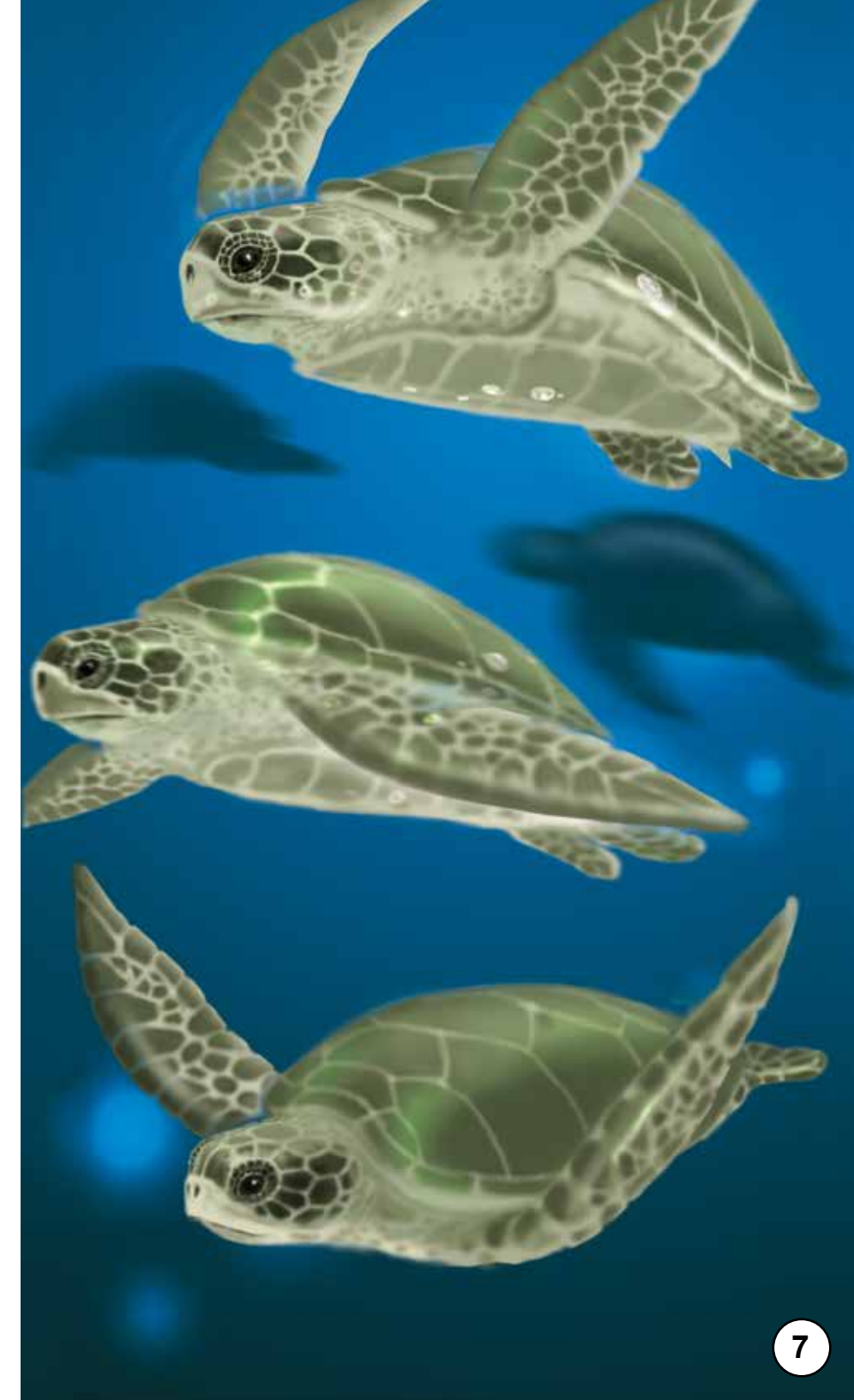
"It's not my head that's fat, young lady," he said. I didn't realise I had spoken aloud.

I apologised quickly, and he said, "You know, I weigh nearly 600 kilograms. And I'm proud of it all, including the fat which helps me survive the cold and get through the long journeys."

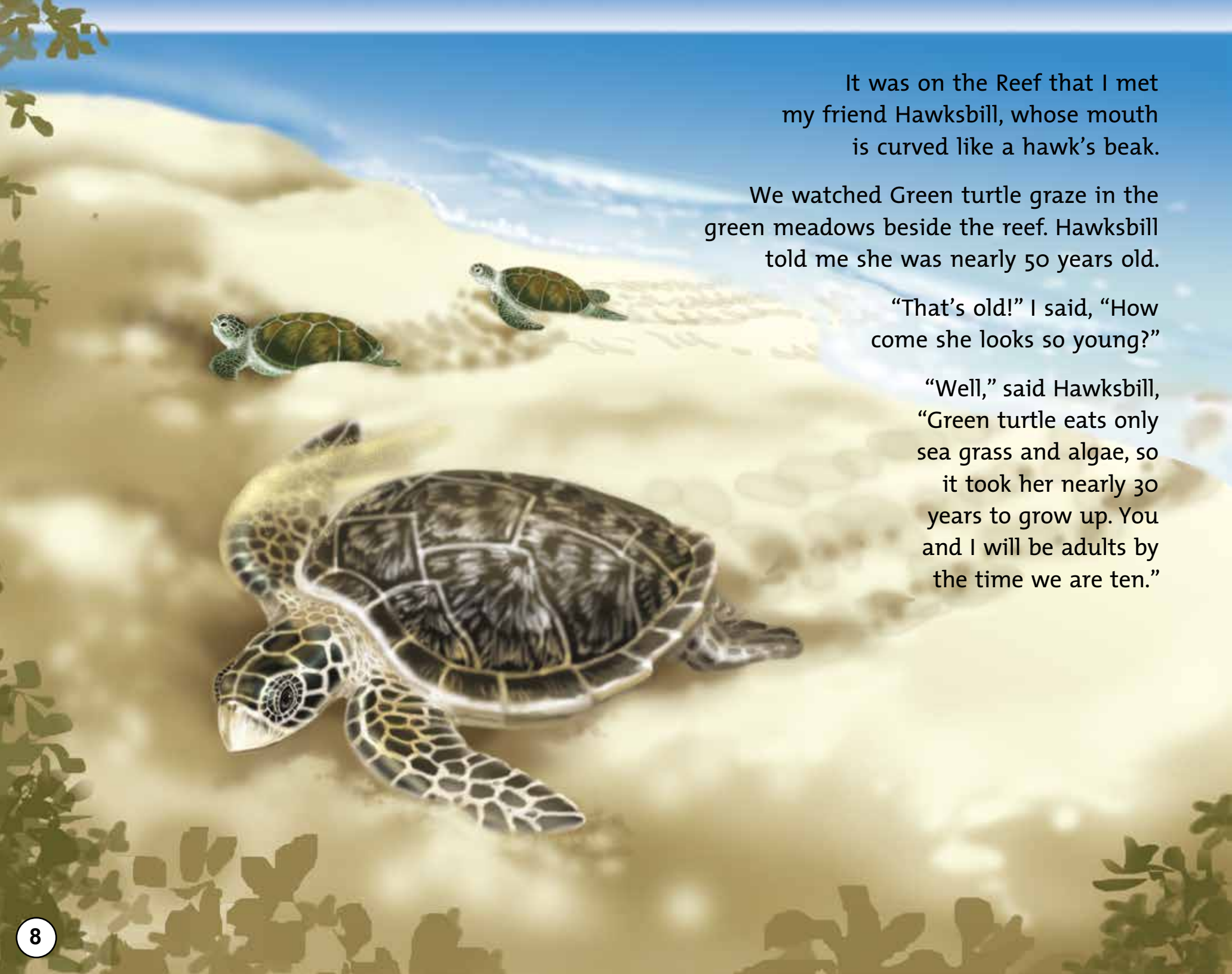
"That's great," I said, marveling at his size, "but before you go, could you tell me where I might find the Reef?"

"That way," said Mr. Leatherback, flicking a flipper and gliding gracefully away.

"Enjoy the jellies," I called out as I swam towards the Reef.





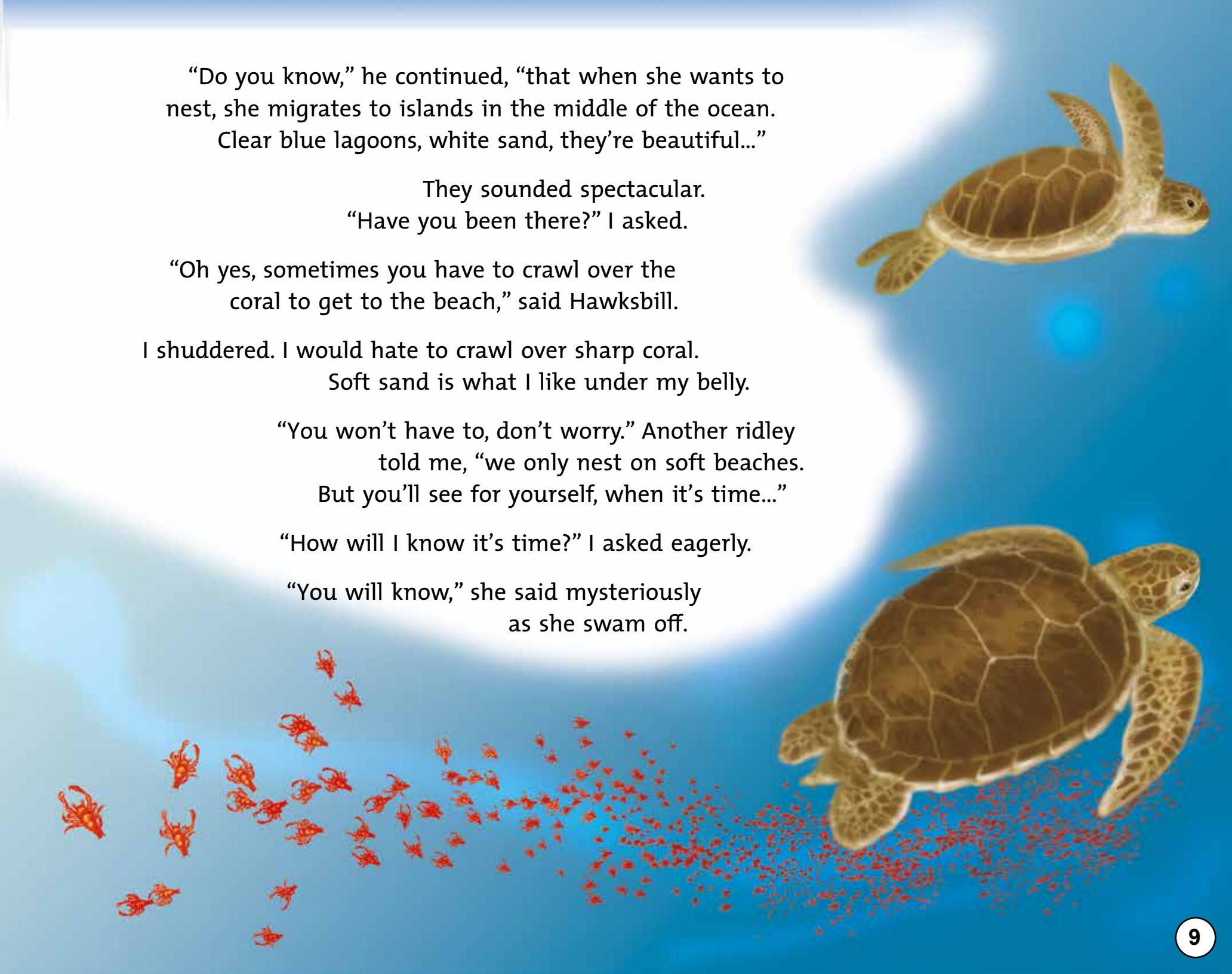


It was on the Reef that I met  
my friend Hawksbill, whose mouth  
is curved like a hawk's beak.

We watched Green turtle graze in the  
green meadows beside the reef. Hawksbill  
told me she was nearly 50 years old.

"That's old!" I said, "How  
come she looks so young?"

"Well," said Hawksbill,  
"Green turtle eats only  
sea grass and algae, so  
it took her nearly 30  
years to grow up. You  
and I will be adults by  
the time we are ten."



"Do you know," he continued, "that when she wants to  
nest, she migrates to islands in the middle of the ocean.  
Clear blue lagoons, white sand, they're beautiful..."

They sounded spectacular.  
"Have you been there?" I asked.

"Oh yes, sometimes you have to crawl over the  
coral to get to the beach," said Hawksbill.

I shuddered. I would hate to crawl over sharp coral.

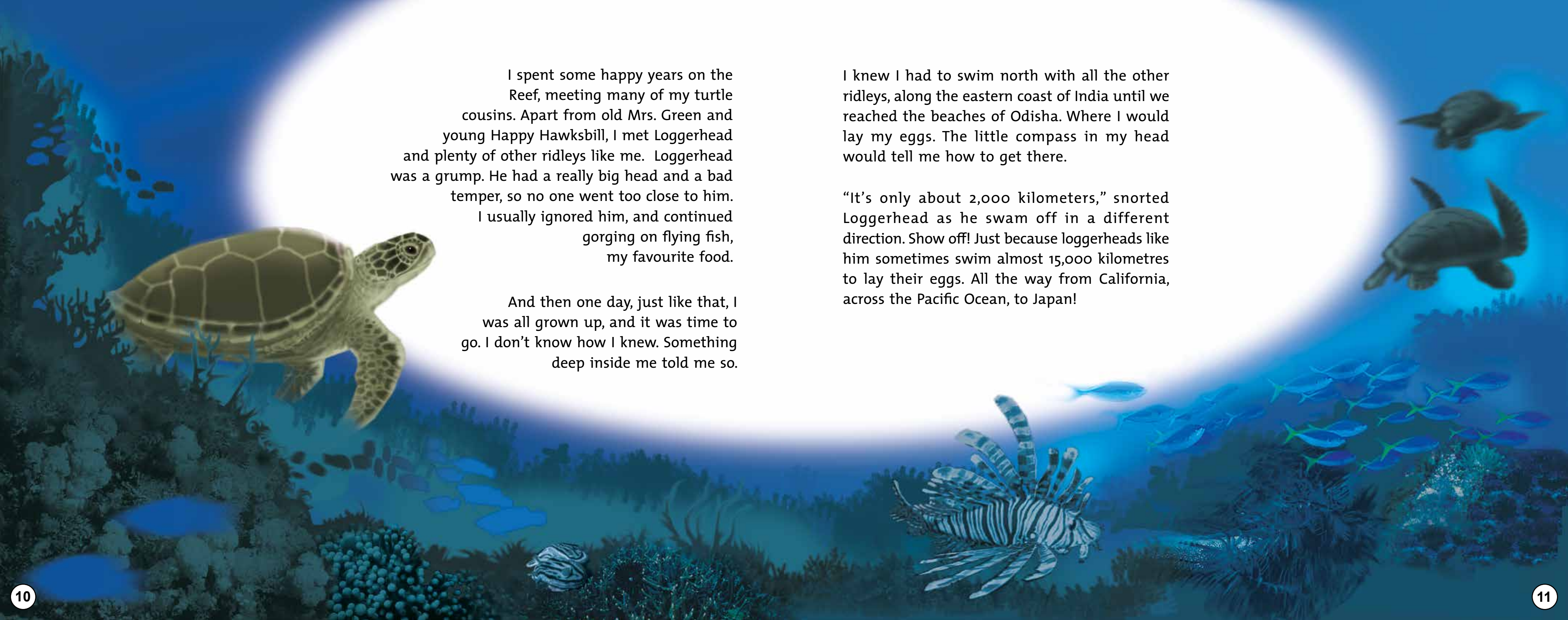
Soft sand is what I like under my belly.

"You won't have to, don't worry." Another ridley  
told me, "we only nest on soft beaches.  
But you'll see for yourself, when it's time..."

"How will I know it's time?" I asked eagerly.

"You will know," she said mysteriously  
as she swam off.



A large, detailed illustration of a sea turtle swimming in a vibrant coral reef. The turtle is positioned on the left side of the page, facing right. The reef is filled with various types of coral, including branching and brain coral, and is populated with numerous small, colorful fish. The background is a deep blue, suggesting the ocean's depth. The overall scene is bright and lively, with a warm, golden light emanating from the center, creating a sense of depth and wonder.

I spent some happy years on the Reef, meeting many of my turtle cousins. Apart from old Mrs. Green and young Happy Hawksbill, I met Loggerhead and plenty of other ridleys like me. Loggerhead was a grump. He had a really big head and a bad temper, so no one went too close to him. I usually ignored him, and continued gorging on flying fish, my favourite food.

And then one day, just like that, I was all grown up, and it was time to go. I don't know how I knew. Something deep inside me told me so.

I knew I had to swim north with all the other ridleys, along the eastern coast of India until we reached the beaches of Odisha. Where I would lay my eggs. The little compass in my head would tell me how to get there.

"It's only about 2,000 kilometers," snorted Loggerhead as he swam off in a different direction. Show off! Just because loggerheads like him sometimes swim almost 15,000 kilometres to lay their eggs. All the way from California, across the Pacific Ocean, to Japan!



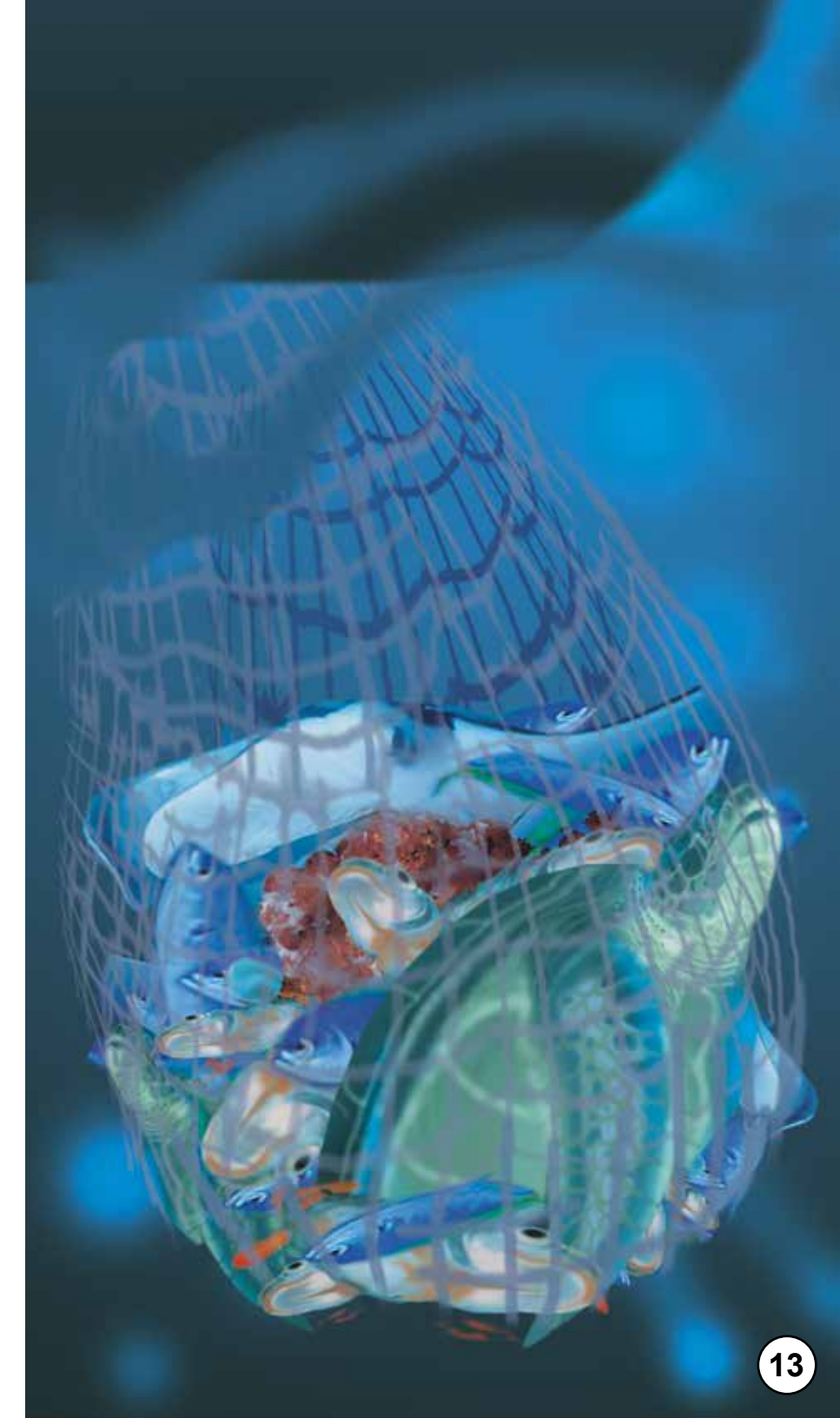




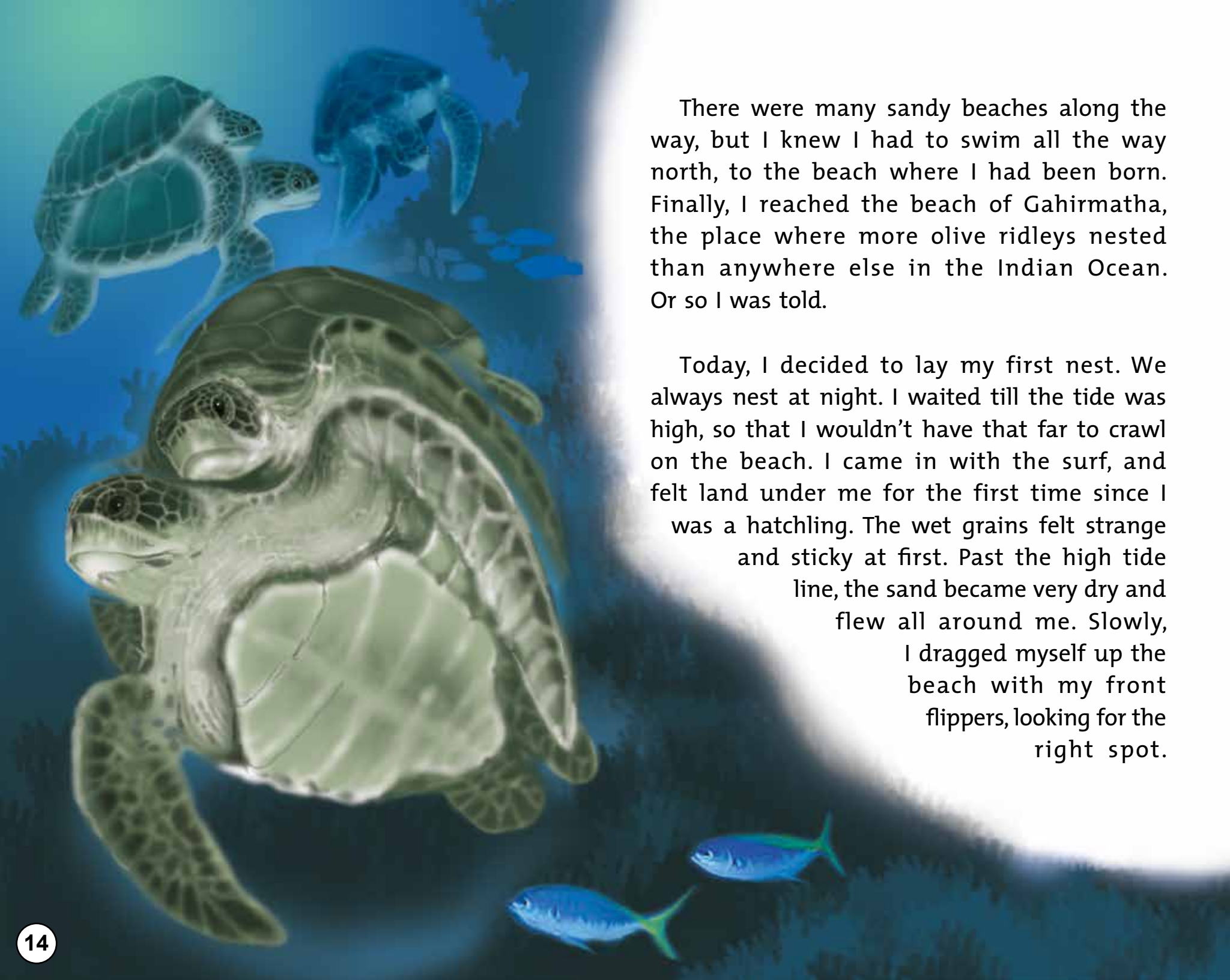
The big journey began. The water around me was full of other ridleys, swimming powerfully. It wasn't an easy journey.

Along the way, there were many dangers. Though I was now bigger than most of the fish, and could eat them, there were still sharks that could eat me. But the sharks were not as dangerous as the many fishing nets that we had to swim past.

I swam as carefully as I could, avoiding all the nets, especially the terrible trawl nets. I managed to escape them all, but some of my friends weren't so lucky.





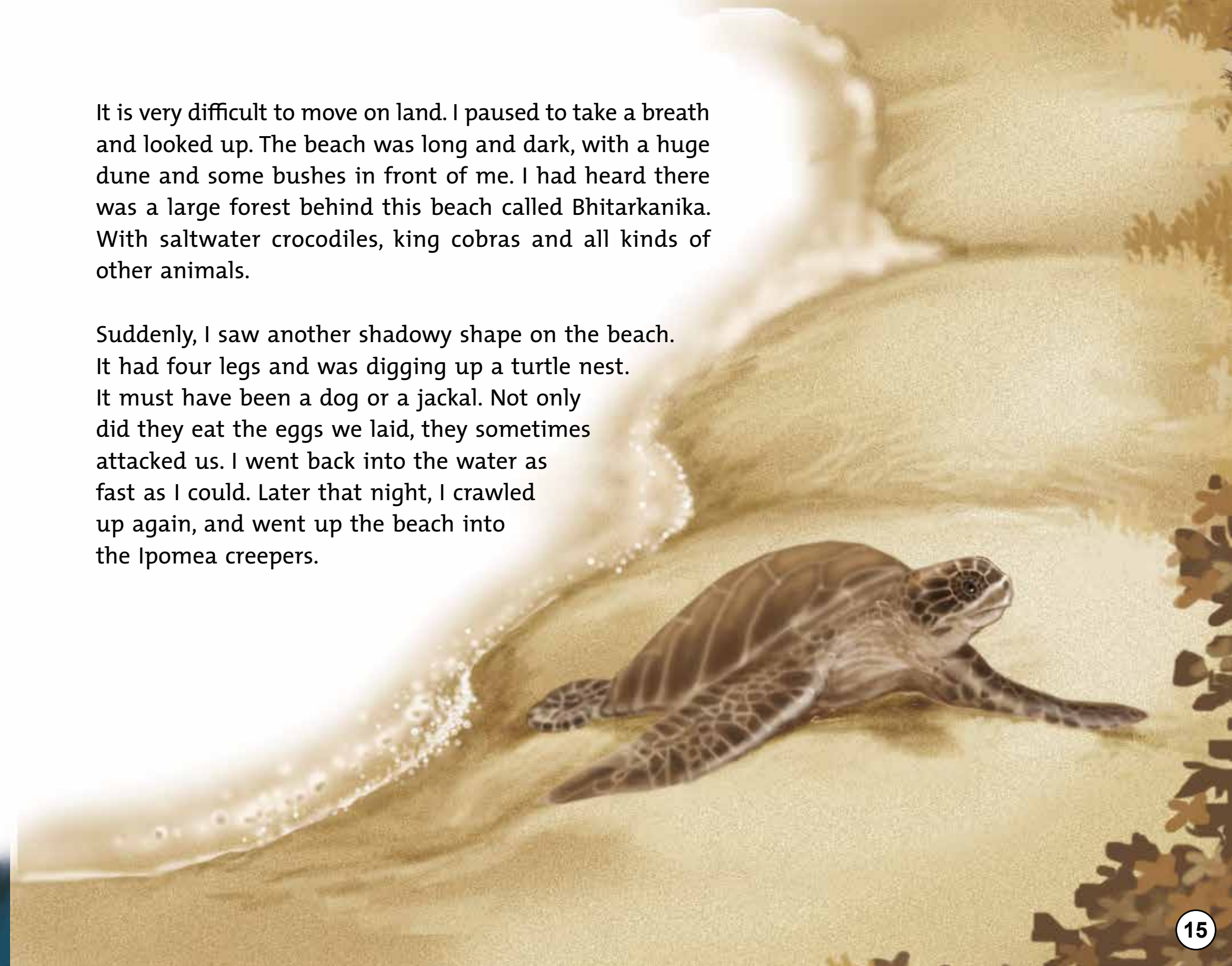


There were many sandy beaches along the way, but I knew I had to swim all the way north, to the beach where I had been born. Finally, I reached the beach of Gahirmatha, the place where more olive ridleys nested than anywhere else in the Indian Ocean. Or so I was told.

Today, I decided to lay my first nest. We always nest at night. I waited till the tide was high, so that I wouldn't have that far to crawl on the beach. I came in with the surf, and felt land under me for the first time since I was a hatchling. The wet grains felt strange and sticky at first. Past the high tide line, the sand became very dry and flew all around me. Slowly, I dragged myself up the beach with my front flippers, looking for the right spot.

It is very difficult to move on land. I paused to take a breath and looked up. The beach was long and dark, with a huge dune and some bushes in front of me. I had heard there was a large forest behind this beach called Bhitarkanika. With saltwater crocodiles, king cobras and all kinds of other animals.

Suddenly, I saw another shadowy shape on the beach. It had four legs and was digging up a turtle nest. It must have been a dog or a jackal. Not only did they eat the eggs we laid, they sometimes attacked us. I went back into the water as fast as I could. Later that night, I crawled up again, and went up the beach into the Ipomea creepers.







At my chosen spot on the beach, I cleared away the dry sand, and made a big pit with my hind flippers. Though I had never nested before, I knew I had to be very fussy. I always put one flipper in after the other, scooped up some sand and threw it out.

After scooping up many, many flipperfuls of sand, my nest was ready. About 2 feet deep and shaped like a flask with a narrow neck and deep cavity, it was a beauty. I then began laying my eggs. 1, 2, 3, ... 99, 100, and then I was done.

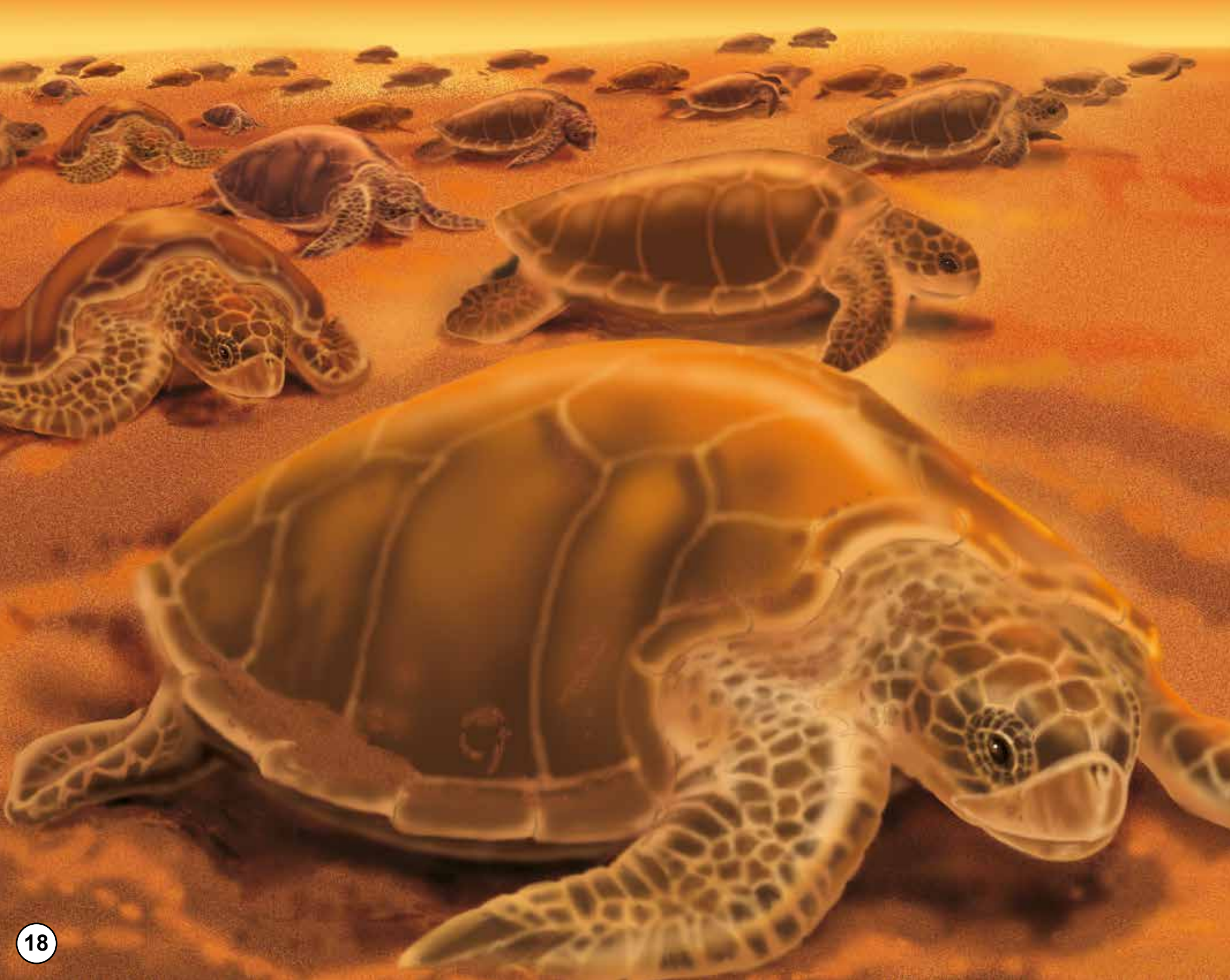
I covered my precious eggs carefully with sand, and thumped it down with my body. Finally I threw some sand around to make sure that no one would find my nest.

Quickly, I crawled back into the sea where I felt much safer.

Two weeks later, I was getting ready to nest again. We usually make enough eggs to lay two or three nests during a season. Common sense told me that it would be a good idea to nest again where I had the previous time. It seemed like a good, safe place.







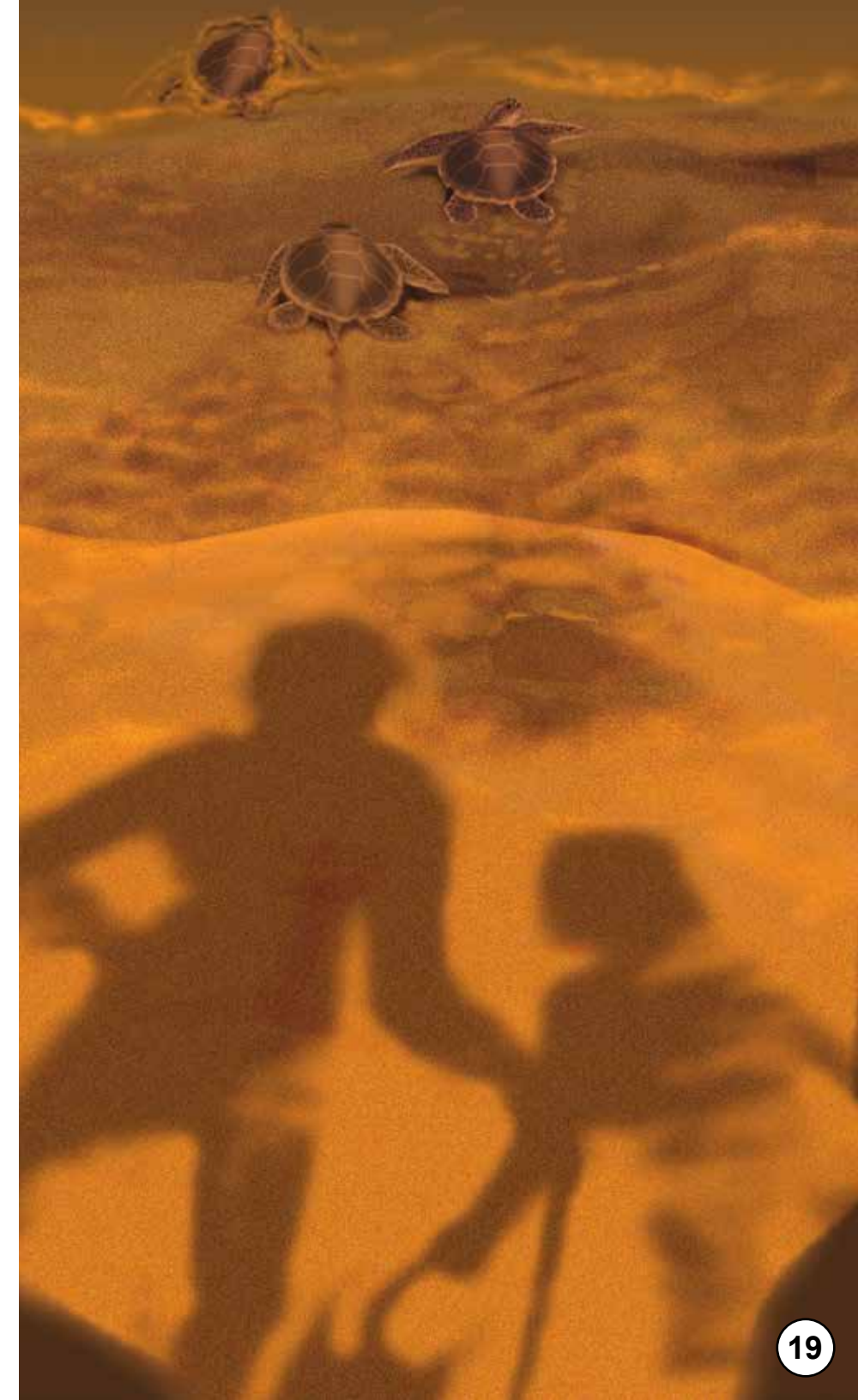
That night, as I was waiting offshore, I noticed that the wind was stronger and blowing from the south. Suddenly I realised that there were hundreds, no, thousands, of other ridleys around me, waiting to nest. Oh, I had never ever seen so many together.

And then, we were rushing up the beach. Which was already full with thousands of other ridleys, sand flying in the air, turtles bumping into each other. Somehow, I found a clear spot, and dug a nest for myself. The turtle next to me was an old friend. She was in such a hurry that she started to lay her eggs even before she could finish her nest. I was shocked, we turtles never do that.

“Its an arribada, lady,” she said, “we all get a little crazy during this time.”

Nobody really knows why we do this. Maybe it was something our great great grandmothers decided to do many, many years ago, so that millions of hatchlings would all hatch and come out of the nest at the same time. And most would escape being caught by birds, crabs and jackals.

Now, we have humans to worry about as well.







Finally, it is time to leave and return to my feeding ground. I will spend a year or two there, eating and building up energy for another visit to this beautiful beach.

As I leave, I think of the little ones I have left behind. For 50 – 60 days, the eggs will remain under the sand warmed by the sun. And then one day, they will hatch, breaking open the shells with the tip of their snout. They will huddle together, over a hundred hatchlings under the sand, waiting for the sun to set and the sand to cool. Then, in the darkness, when it is safe, they will come out, all at once. They will see the moonlight bouncing off the sea, and know which way to go. Hopefully there will be no streetlights to make them go in the wrong direction.

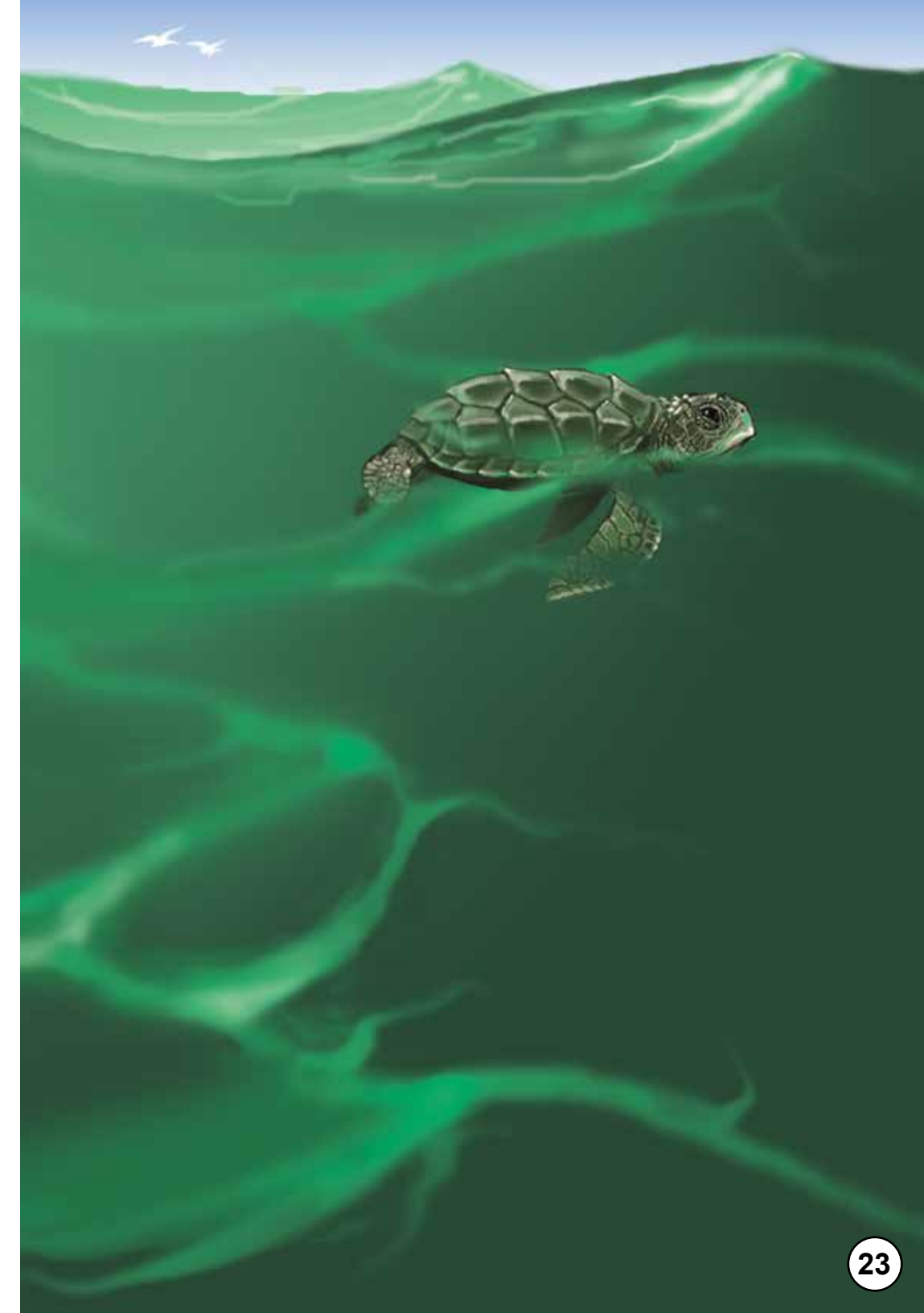






They will swim against the waves and dive under the oncoming breakers. Oh, there will be big fish and seagulls and eagles, all out to get them, and seagulls and eagles, but some will get away. Out into the open sea where they will find their own little Rafts, their floating homes for many years. Then they will grow up, and perhaps they will come to my feeding ground. Perhaps we will meet, though I will not know them.

Still, I am happy knowing that they are out there somewhere, and that someday they will return like me to this very beach to lay their own eggs, and start the whole wonderful circle of life all over again.





## A MESSAGE FROM THE OLIVE RIDLEY TO YOU

Sea turtles are in danger worldwide, for many reasons. Some species of turtles are killed for their meat, which is used to make turtle soup. The shell of the hawksbill turtle is used to make tortoiseshell products like eyeglass frames and hair accessories.

Many turtle eggs and hatchlings are eaten by predators like dogs and crows. But the biggest danger comes from fishing. Many sea turtles get accidentally caught in a variety of fishing nets, drown, and die.

In India, there are many conservation groups that are trying to save sea turtles. Each coastal state has one or more such groups.

### What can YOU do to protect sea turtles?

If you live near a beach where turtles come to nest:

Help keep the beach clean so that baby and mother turtles do not get hurt.

Educate the adults in your locality about how streetlights and other lights near the beach can be harmful to turtle hatchlings – once they hatch, hatchlings figure out where the sea is by looking for the reflection of moonlight on water, so if there are other bright lights in the area, they can get confused and wander off in the wrong direction, and into danger.

Find out if your state has a local sea turtle conservation group and see if you can join them.

If you don't live near a beach:

Read more and more about sea turtles and talk to everyone you know about the dangers they are facing. Spreading awareness is a BIG part of conservation.



**Dakshin Foundation's mission is to inform and advocate conservation and natural resource management, while promoting and supporting sustainable livelihoods, social development and environmental justice. We adopt interdisciplinary approaches in our research and conservation interventions to promote ecologically and socially appropriate approaches to conservation and management in coastal, marine and mountain ecosystems in India.**

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**To Adhith and Murali, the incurable turtle boys  
and all the other hatchlings!**

**Kartik Shanker is an ecologist with a love for both mountains and marine life, and an occasional writer of children's fiction. If he had a choice, he would spend all his time visiting cool places, looking for sea turtles & diving at reefs, or hanging out with his students, talking about fish and frogs and other interesting creatures. His other children's books include *The Adventures of Philautus Frog* and *Lori's magical mystery*.**

**Maya Ramaswamy is a wildlife enthusiast and an illustrator. Her work has appeared in several books, including *Walk The Rainforest With Niwupah*, *Nono the snow leopard* and *The adventures of Philautus Frog*.**





Under cover of darkness, baby olive ridley turtles hatch from sun-warmed eggs on remote beaches. One of them, the little hatchling who is the narrator of our story, is delighted to make it across the beach and into the ocean without losing her way or being captured by predators.

But can our little olive ridley survive the dangers of the ocean? Will she make it past the deadly sharks and the terrible fishing nets and reach adulthood? Will she ever have the pleasure of laying her own brood of eggs?

Find out in this charming life story of an olive ridley turtle, and meet several other interesting creatures along the way...



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