



This story was developed as part of the regional initiative "Stories in Colors: Children Telling Stories about Climate Change," part of the Human Security Collective's activities under the regional Civic Horizons program, in collaboration with the Tunisian Raedat for Equality Association, the Saida Manoubia Regiment of the Tunisian Scouts, and the Arab Institute for Human Rights.

Elaf the Guardian of Sabkha

Authors

Children of Saida Manoubia and Hay Hlel

Illustrator/Designer

Ahlam Gamal

Guiding Author

Montasar Laamiri



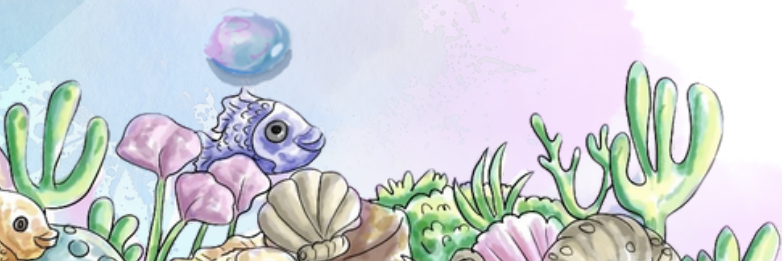
We would like to highlight the brave and creative storytellers children and teens who participated in weaving this story, rich with meaning and lessons about climate change, protection of Sabkhat Sejoumi, and environmental justice. They inspired us with their imagination and reminded us that a child's voice can make a difference:

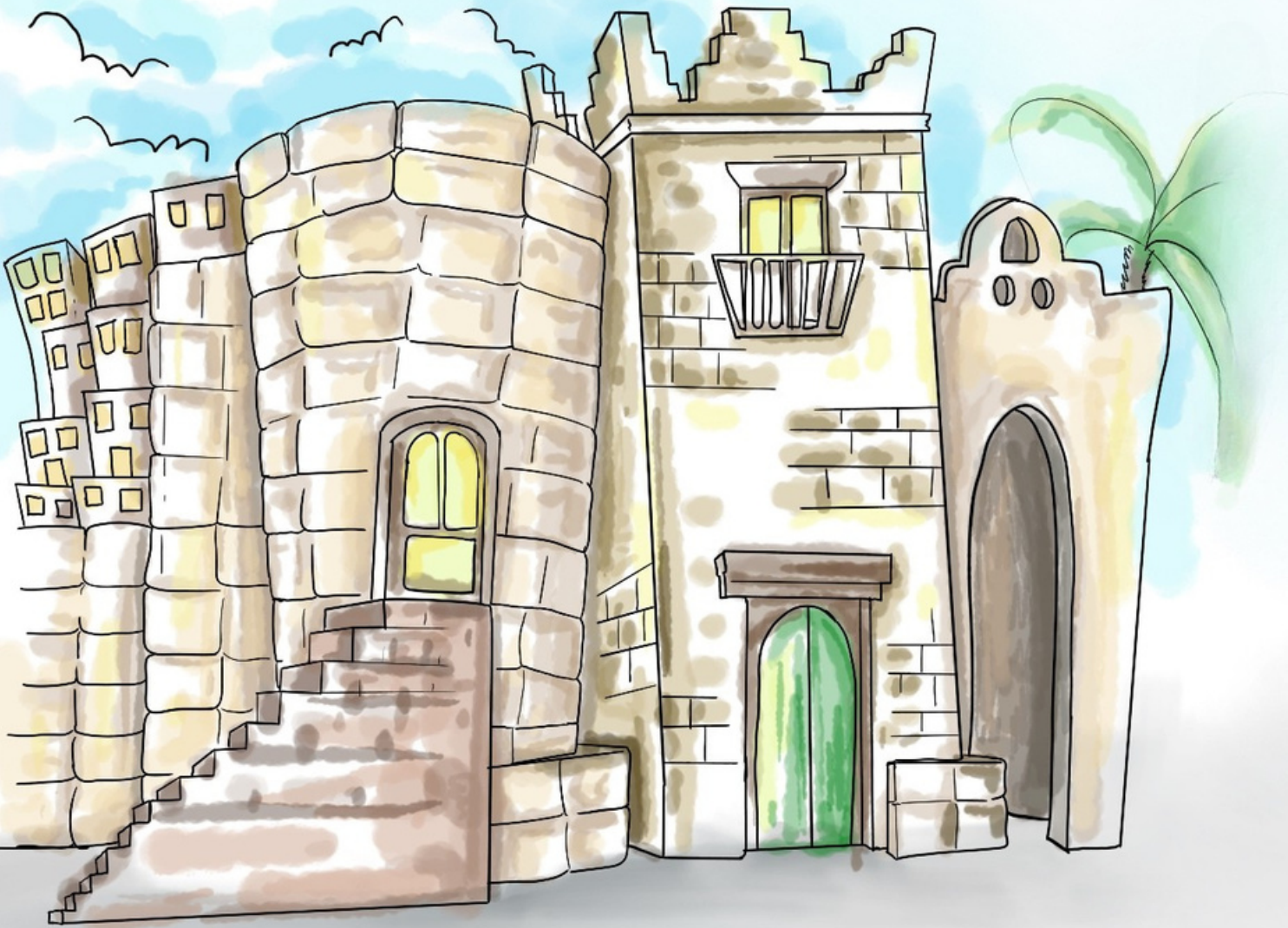
- Maram Grami
- Tasnim Taieb
- Nour Taieb
- Chaima Taieb
- Sabine Amdouni
- Mohamed Amdouni
- Mariem Dhaoui
- Hssen Hdiji
- Obey Ben Sassi
- Yahya Ben Sassi
- Maya Zidi
- Mohammed Salman Zidi
- Mohammed Rayen Aouni
- Iskander Ajala
- Ibrahim Mejri
- Azer Mejri

A heartfelt thank you to Mr. Montasar Laamiri, the storyteller, who skillfully facilitated the interactive writing workshops and helped transform the ideas and imagination of children and teenagers from Saida Manoubia and Hay Hlel into a rich, creative story. We also extend our sincere appreciation to the four environmental activists whose thoughtful contributions helped shape the narrative during the workshops and discussions: Ms. Iman Abidi, Ms. Nabila Khlifi, Ms. Soumaya Abbasi, and Ms. Cyrine Ghrissi.

Their insight and dedication enriched the story's environmental messages, grounding them in real-world relevance. Special thanks as well to Ms. Abir Fayali for her meticulous proofreading of the Arabic version, ensuring clarity, accuracy, and linguistic elegance.

Storytelling here is more than an art. It is a means of empowerment, a catalyst for awareness, and a bridge to envisioning a more just and sustainable future.





Once upon a time , there was a young girl named Elaf. Her beauty and charm captivated all those who saw her. Her long black hair was braided in two neat braids that fell over her shoulders. Her hazel eyes sparkled like precious gems in the sunlight, and her smile was like the morning sun, lighting up everything around her with warmth and joy.

Elaf lived between the two neighborhoods called Saida Manoubia and Hay Hlal, near a big wetland called Sabkhat Sejoumi. She lived with her family consisting of her father, mother and younger brother.

At ten years old, Elaf was in her fifth year of primary school. She was diligent in her studies, always well-dressed, and deeply passionate about learning. She asked many questions, and sometimes her parents didn't have all the answers because Elaf was very wise for her age.

Elaf's family lived a simple life. They didn't have much money, and sometimes it was hard to buy everything they needed. Yet her father worked very hard every single day to provide for his family. Her mother helped too, making their home a place full of love and care. . Even when things were tough, they never gave up.

Elaf was the bright light in their lives, the hope that lit their path. Her parents dreamed of her reaching for the stars and one day having a special place in the world.



One day, during science class, Elaf's teacher asked the students to form groups for a special project. They were going to learn about the Sabkhat Sejoumi, the big wetland they walked past every day. The Sabkha was a place well known to everyone in Saida and Hay Hlal, young and old alike, but now it was their turn to discover its secrets and the challenges it faced.



But unfortunately, Elaf had no colleague to team up with for the project. Still, she was determined not to give up. She decided to take on the project alone and prove that she was more than capable of doing it by herself.

As she walked home from school that day, her mind was full of ideas. "Why not do a field study?" She thought, "That way, I can make my project stand out. While the others rely on information from the internet, they won't really learn anything from that I'll go out there myself. I'll explore the Sabkha and discover what it holds with my own eyes."

Since Elaf's house was close to Sabkhat Sejoumi, she decided to go right away. Reaching the edge, she gently set her school bag down on the shore and began to explore the muddy banks with eager eyes.



"If only I could dive beneath the surface and uncover the hidden secrets of this place," she whispered to herself, her heart fluttering with curiosity. But as she stood there, lost in thought, something unexpected happened!



The ground beneath her feet began to shift. Suddenly, she was sinking! The thick mud clung to her legs, pulling her down deeper and deeper. Panic rushed through her as her body was swallowed by Sabkha. She struggled, gasped, cried out. sure she was about to vanish forever. And then, a miracle! Elaf could breathe. Stunned, she looked down at herself. Her legs were gone, replaced by a shimmering fish's tail. She felt cool water pass easily through newly formed gills on her neck. She had transformed into a mermaid! She began to cry and scream in fear, thinking she would stay like this forever.

In a moment of realization, a vision of her family appeared before her eyes, and a deep sadness filled her heart. She thought of her mother and father, of her younger brother , and imagined how worried they would be for her, and how heartbroken they would feel thinking she was gone. But as the fear faded, a new feeling stirred in her chest: wonder.

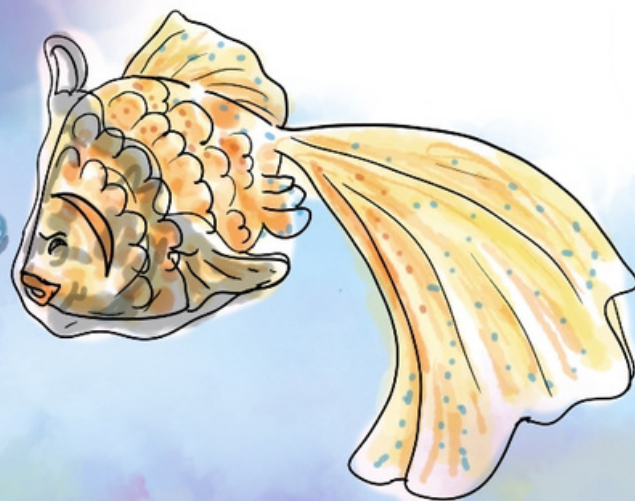
She wiped away her tears and took a deep breath. Maybe... just maybe... This was meant to be an adventure.

With courage rising inside her, Elaf began to swim, gliding through the mysterious waters of the Sabkha, searching for answers, for a way back, or perhaps... for something she was meant to discover all along.



Elaf kept going, determined to help. She swam through the reeds and around smooth underwater rocks, until she saw something amazing: a long stone staircase rising up, up, up! At the very top stood three enormous doors, each one surrounded by stone columns covered in beautiful carvings. Elaf stopped and stared in wonder. Just then, the little fish gently pushed one of the big doors open. Behind it was a glowing courtyard, full of soft light and magical creatures, all talking quietly together.

"I have to follow her," Elaf whispered. "If I don't help her, she might not survive from the plastic bag she swallowed."





She pushed the door open and entered. And then, she saw him. Standing before Elaf was a towering king, majestic and full of mystery. He wore a robe made of shimmering seaweed that changed colors with every step: glowing greens, sparkling blues, and deep ocean purples. On his head sat a crown like no other, decorated with glowing seashells that twinkled like stars dancing on the sea. One of his large hands was covered in shiny fish-scale armor that sparkled in the light. Around him stood his royal guards: graceful flamingos with soft pink feathers, blue-billed ducks, spoonbills with funny flat beaks, snowy white egrets, tall grey herons, and many other creatures.

The little fish swam quickly to her mother and father, who looked very worried and stayed close to her sides.

Then, the great king lifted his hand high. His voice boomed through the courtyard: "Seize the intruder!"

Before Elaf could say a word, the royal guards surrounded her. She didn't even get the chance to explain. They took her away to be questioned and locked her in a deep underwater prison: a cold, silent place where no sunlight could reach.



It was a dark, narrow cell, built from enormous seashells fused together with underwater plants and thick algae found in the deepest parts of the Sabkha.

Elaf sat in silence, her heart pounding with fear and sadness.

"I'm innocent, I didn't mean any harm. I only wanted to help the little fish, not hurt her" Elaf screamed.

The king's deep voice echoed through the chamber:

"Help her? How? Who are you, and why have you come to the Sabkha?"

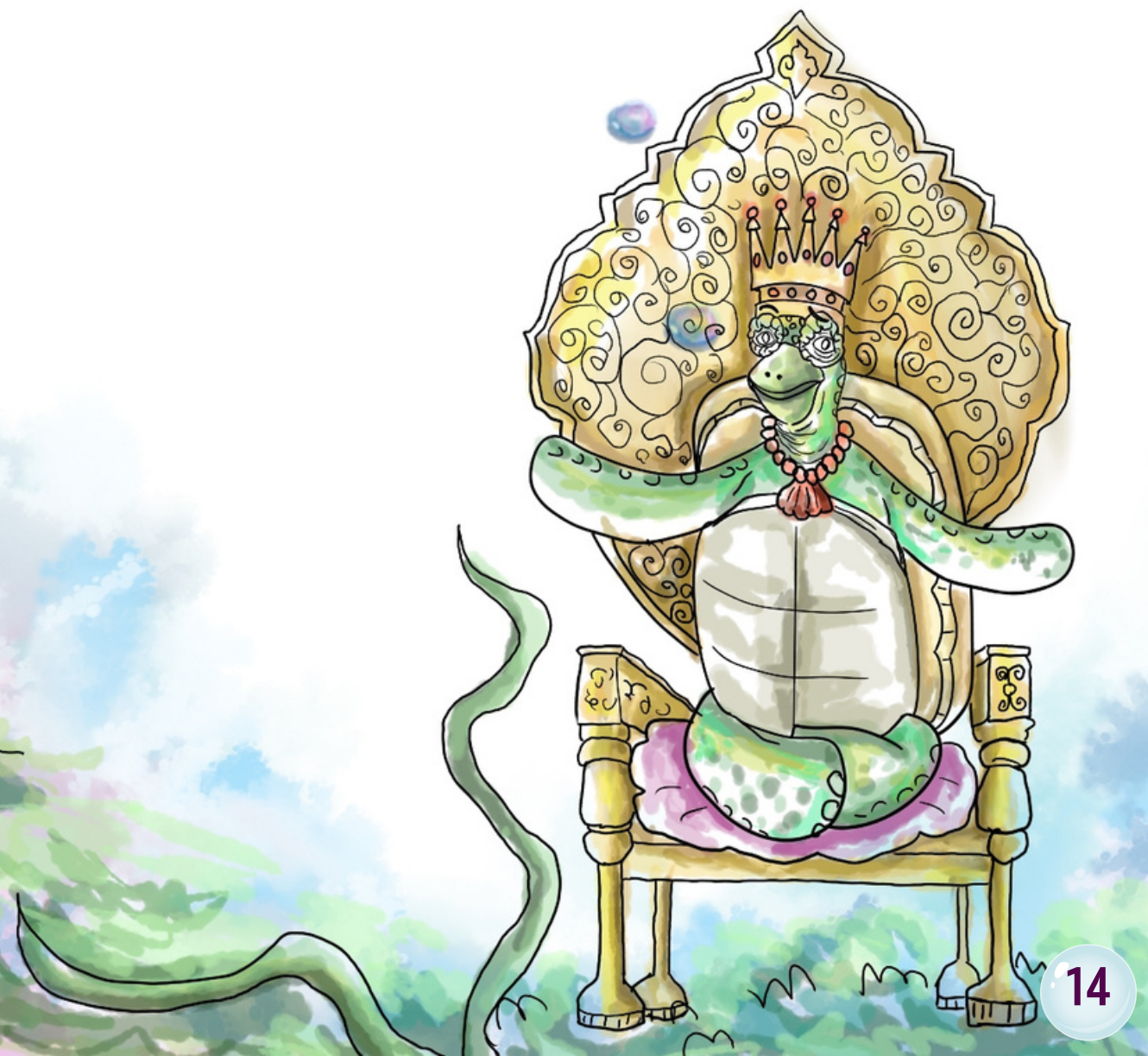


Elaf answered:

"I'm a girl. I used to be human. But when I tried to explore Sabkha and learn about what lies beneath it... I sank. And when I did, I became a mermaid. That's when I saw the poor fish choking on a plastic bag. I just wanted to help her but she was scared and swam away. If you don't believe me, Your Majesty, then let me out of this prison, and I'll show you proof of my innocence."

The king's stern expression slowly softened. He gave a small nod to his guards and commanded "Release her".

The guards immediately opened the shell-like cell, and Elaf swam out, relieved but still focused on the little fish.





Without hesitation, Elaf approached the frightened fish slowly and gently. The small fish flinched for a moment, but this time didn't swim away. Elaf reached out carefully and removed the black plastic bag that had been lodged in its mouth. The fish gasped and then began to breathe freely again and hugged its mother and father, who cried with joy.



Seeing that, the king believed that Elaf was innocent and told her, "As long as you are innocent and your intentions are pure, we shall honor you and make you the guardian of Sabkaht Sejoumi." Elaf was overjoyed and proud, and said to him, "I hope I will live up to the trust". The King took out a letter, its letters made of Sabkha clay, and said to Elaf, "Indeed! You carry a great responsibility! This is the message we want you to take to the people of the earth". Elaf couldn't hold back, and her curiosity overcame her. She opened the letter and began to read it.



From the King of Sabkhat Sejoumi to the residents of the surrounding neighborhoods:

Day after day, my people are disappearing because of the waste you have been dumping into our waters. We no longer see the pink flamingos as we once did, and many of the creatures that used to share this home with us have disappeared. Plastic and waste now cover our home. The water is no longer safe for us.

Would you live in a house filled with garbage and bad smells? Of course not. Just as humans cannot live in dirty conditions, we can't either. To the families, neighbors, municipality and city leaders: We need your help. Stop polluting the wetland, our home. Clean it and protect it.

The Sabkha still has life in it. There is still time, but not much. Let us work together while we still can, before the Sabkha disappears.

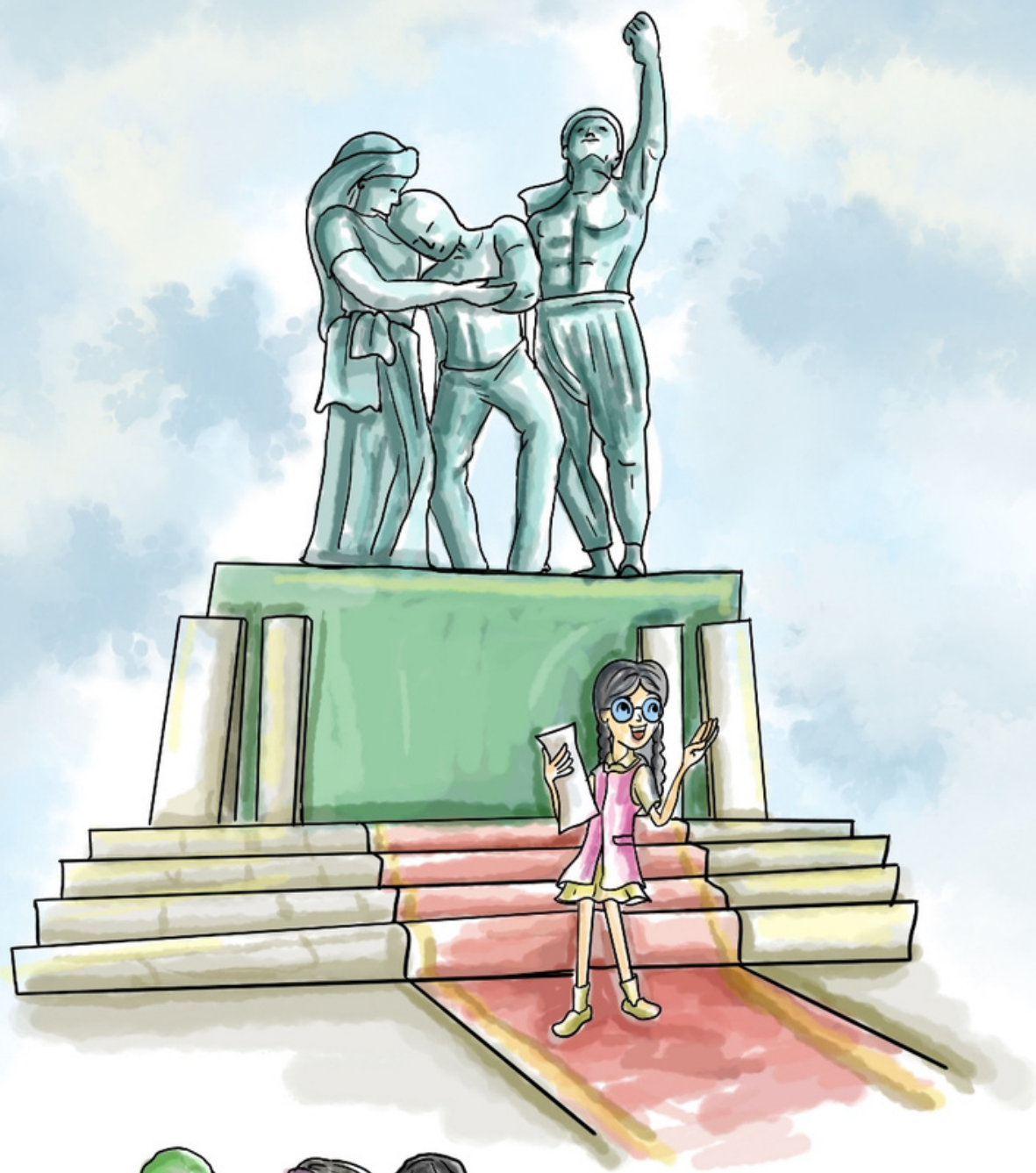
After reading the letter, Elaf felt a deep sense of responsibility. She was determined to help in every way she could and to live up to the responsibility.

The king gently placed a crown made of pearls upon her head and said: "Now, return to your home, your parents must be worried about you."

Elaf stepped out and climbed onto the back of a pink flamingo with soft feathers shimmering in warm shades of white and pink. It soared gracefully, carrying her through the water and then the sky until they reached the shore, the very spot where she had first entered the Sabkha.

As they flew, Elaf looked down and saw the Sabkha from above. It was much larger than she had ever imagined. The water sparkled, clear and radiant under the shining sun. In her mind, she pictured the wetland as clean, home to many animals, and surrounded by greenery on all sides.





And so, Elaf returned to her human form, picked up her school bag as if nothing had happened, and made it home just in time. She told her mother and father everything, a story so unbelievable, just like a dream.

The next day, Elaf took the letter and headed to a place the locals called "Al-Shara", a communal square where all the neighbours gathered. With determination and sense of responsibility, she began to address the crowd. Her tone was sharp and serious, it was as if an adult was speaking, not a ten-year-old girl. Elaf had seen with her own eyes the suffering of the creatures of Sabkha.

She urged the residents to stop polluting the Sabkha. She called on city leaders to find a solution for the sewage flowing into it. She asked environmental organizations to help by teaching people about how pollution hurts the animals in the Sabkha and the people who live close to it. The crowd was surprised by Elaf's words but they also felt deeply moved, as if her words were a wake-up call, making them think hard about their actions.



The next day, people gathered from every neighborhood, Hay Hlal, Saida, Sidi Hssin, and Sejoumi. They all came together to clean the Sabkha, picking up every bit of trash, no matter how small. Even municipality and local officials heard about the event and came to lend a helping hand in the cleanup campaign.

As they were busily working along the edges of Sabkha, something magical happened: a kingdom began to rise from its center. Castles emerged, and creatures that looked like animals but spoke like humans began to appear. Ducks and birds, all talking and among them stood the king, the very one who had knighted Elaf.

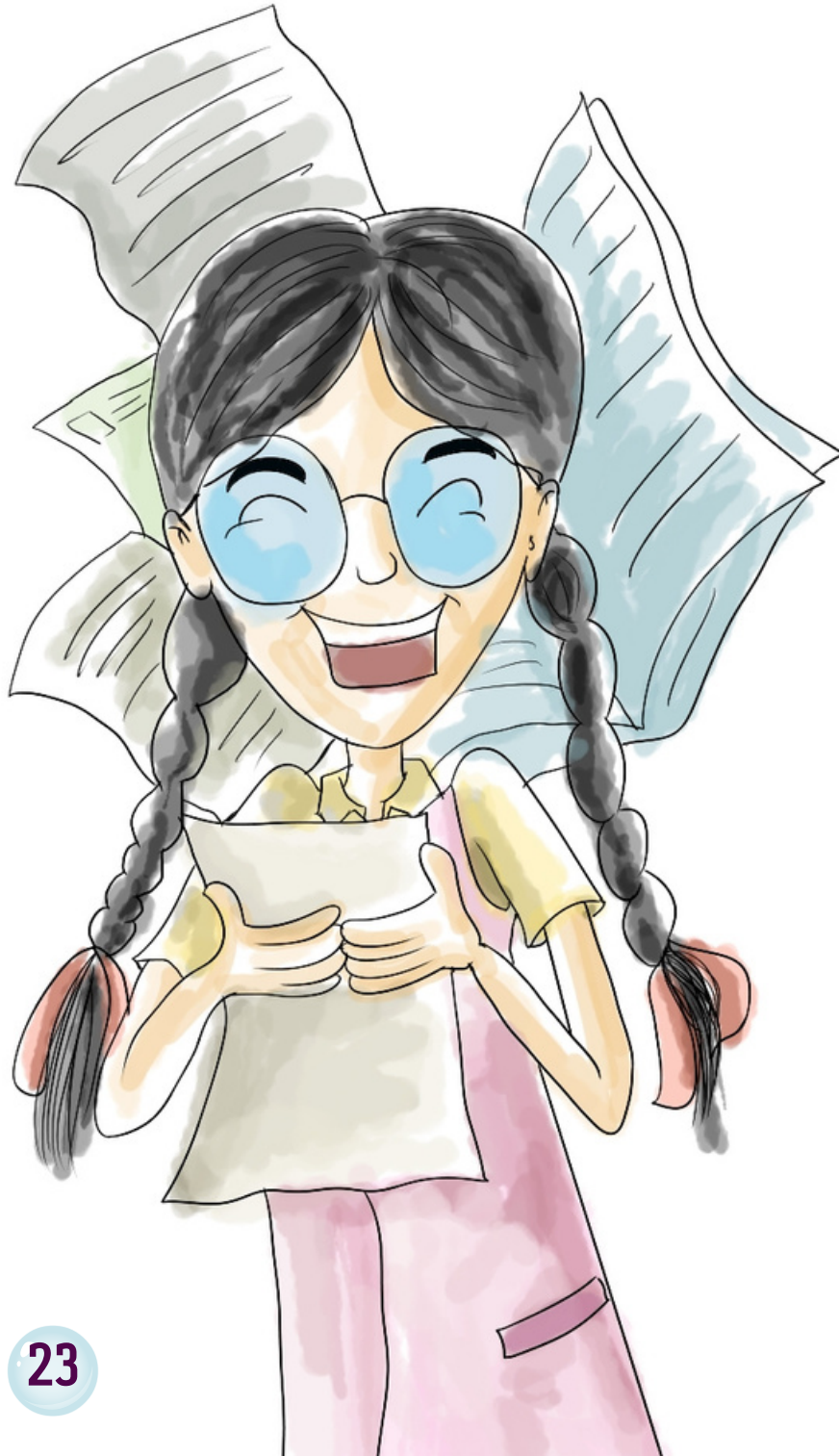
He stepped forward and thanked Elaf, her family, her classmates, and all the residents who had come to help. Standing proudly with his royal court before the people, the king declared that Sabkha is a shared treasure, for the people of the land and the creatures of Sabkha alike.



He warned them that if it were to return to its polluted state, it could bring sickness and danger to everyone living nearby. The bad smells and harmful insects could turn the wetland into a curse instead of a blessing.

And so, the king asked everyone to promise to take care of the Sabkha, so it would remain a beautiful home for animals, a happy place for families, and a precious treasure worth saving. In the end, Elaf decided to write down the story she had lived and share it with her classmates as her research project, but in a completely different way.





When she presented her story to the class, her peers applauded her. They chose her as a role model to learn from, someone who had taught them the importance of protecting the environment, especially their beloved Sabkhat Sejoumi. Elaf was honored by her school for her remarkable work, her sense of responsibility, and leadership. From that day on, she had made many new friends. Everyone started calling her “The Guardian of Sabkha.”

The school administration created a special corner called “Success Stories” to encourage students like Elaf to share their experiences and inspire their classmates to become role models.

And that’s where our story ends.