

The Librarian of Basra

A True Story from Iraq

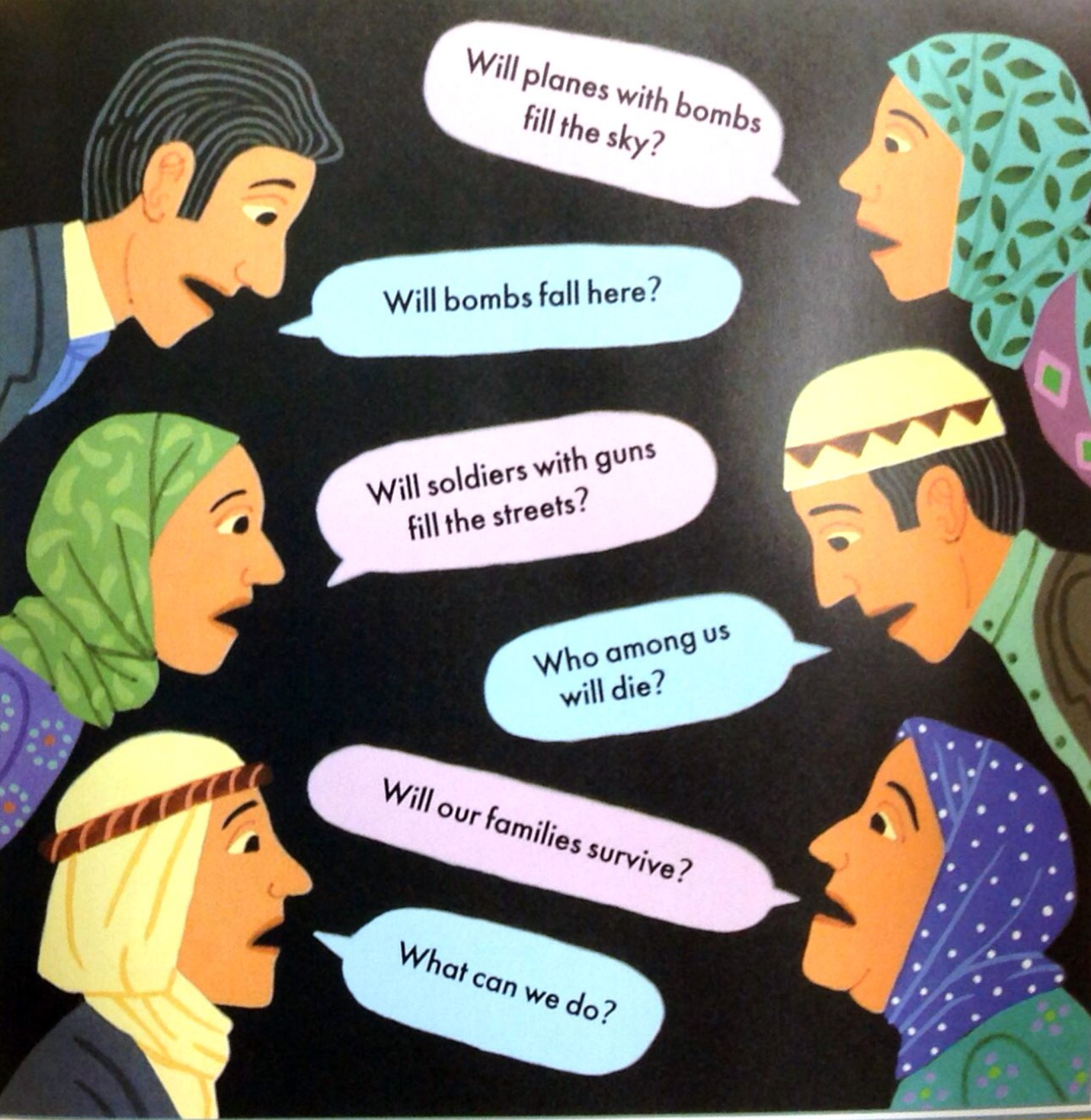




*A*lia Muhammad Baker is the librarian of Basra,
a port city in the sand-swept country of Iraq.



Her library is a meeting place for all who love books.
They discuss matters of the world
and matters of the spirit.



Will planes with bombs
fill the sky?

Will bombs fall here?

Will soldiers with guns
fill the streets?

Who among us
will die?

Will our families survive?

What can we do?

Until now—now, they talk only of war.



Alia worries that the fires of war will destroy the books, which are more precious to her than mountains of gold. The books are in every language—new books, ancient books, even a biography of Muhammad that is seven hundred years old. She asks the governor for permission to move them to a safe place. He refuses.



So Alia takes matters into her own hands.
Secretly, she brings books home every night,
filling her car late after work.



The whispers of war grow louder.
Government offices are moved into the library.
Soldiers with guns wait on the roof.
Alia waits—and fears the worst.



Then... rumors become reality.



War reaches Basra.



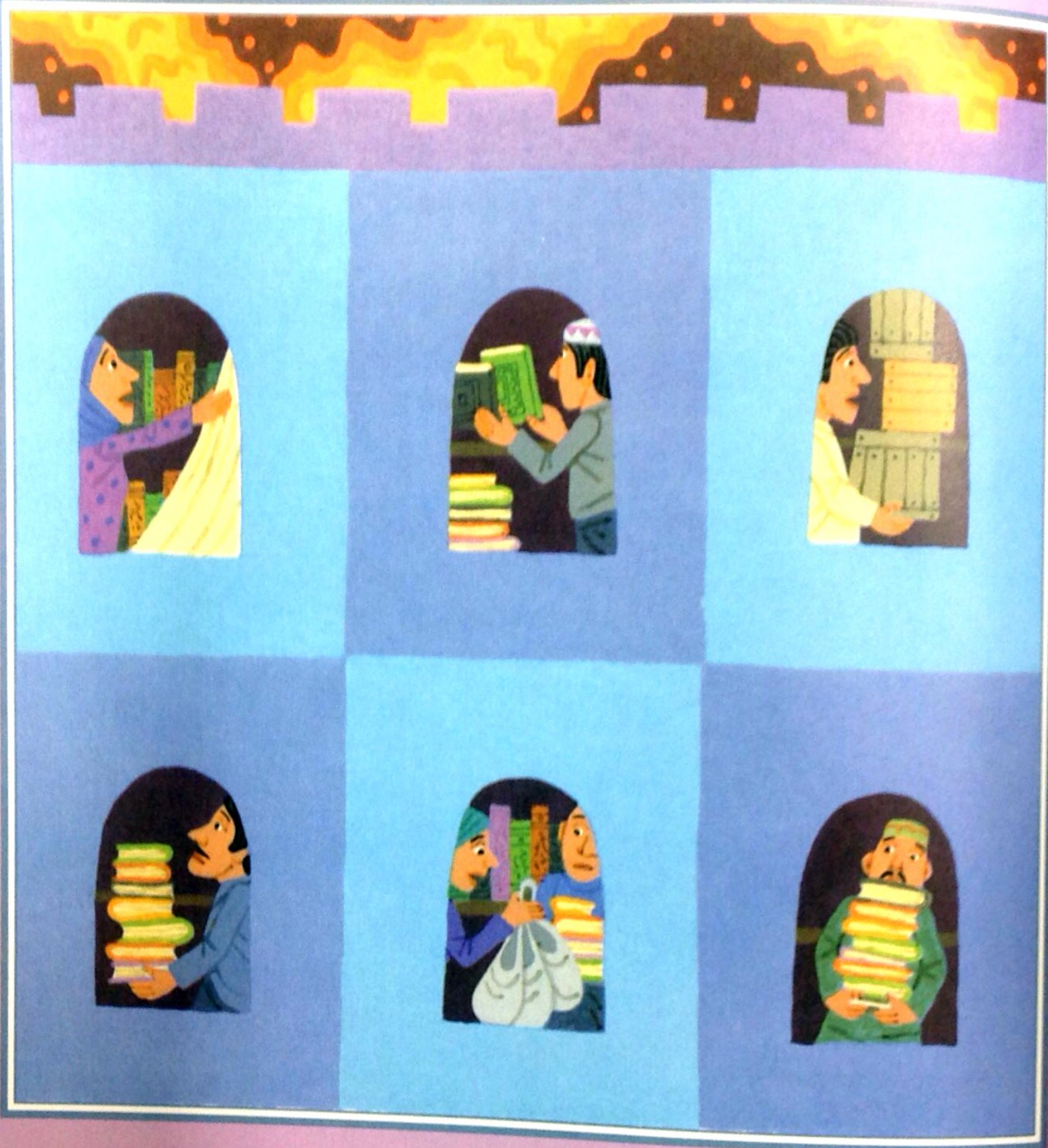
The city is lit with a firestorm of bombs and gunfire.



Alia watches as library workers, government workers, and soldiers abandon the library. Only Alia is left to protect the books.



She calls over the library wall to her friend Anis Muhammad, who owns a restaurant on the other side. "Can you help me save the books?"



"I can use these curtains to wrap them."

"Here are crates from my shop."

"Can you use these sacks?"

"The books must be saved."



All through the night, Alia, Anis, his brothers, and shopkeepers and neighbors take the books from the library shelves, pass them over the seven-foot wall, and hide them in Anis's restaurant.



The books stay hidden as the war rages on.



Then, nine days later, a fire burns the library to the ground.



The next day, soldiers come to Anis's restaurant.
"Why do you have a gun?" they ask.
"To protect my business," Anis replies.
The soldiers leave without searching inside.
They do not know that the whole of the library
is in my restaurant, thinks Anis.



At last, the beast of war moves on.

Alia knows that if the books are to be safe,
they must be moved again,
while the city is quiet.

So she hires a truck to bring all thirty thousand books
to her house and to the houses of friends.



In Alia's house, books are everywhere,
filling floors and cupboards and windows—



leaving barely enough room for anything else.



Alia waits.



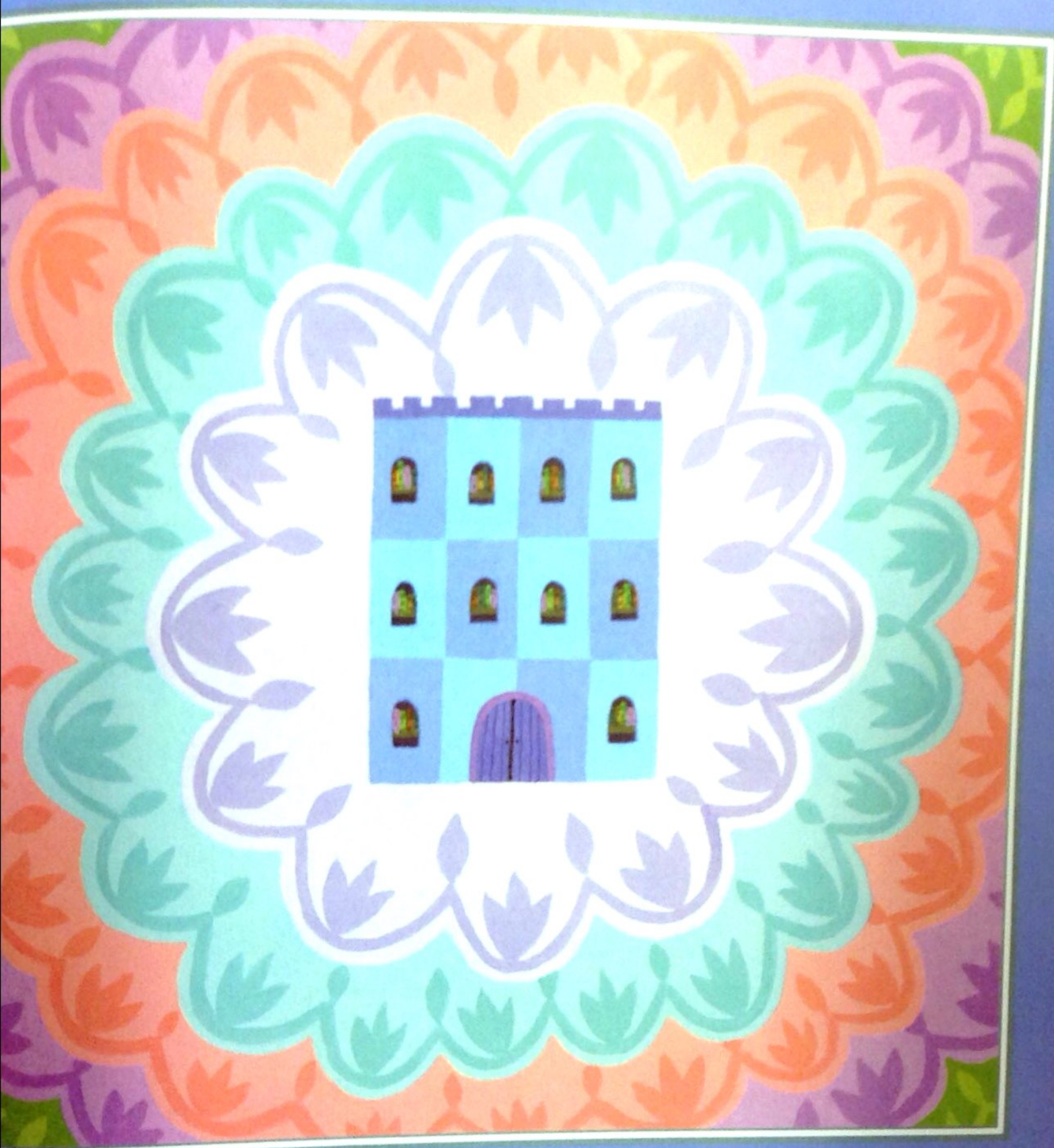
She waits for war to end.



She waits, and dreams of peace.



She waits . . .



and dreams of a new library.



But until then, the books are safe—
safe with the librarian of Basra.