



For Eternity

Imhotep's
Children

EBOOK
ENGLISH

Prolog

In this land, all men must die, and all things must crumble.

That is the law the gods themselves have written.

But in the Other Land, the worthy live forever...

This is the story of how, through our toils and efforts,
we earned our place in the afterlife...

... of how our family rose to prominence, from our humble origins
in a shabby little village amidst the marshes, ...

... toiling through times of peace, and through times of strife...

... and how through our humble efforts, and guided by the gods...

... our great buildings earned us a place at the
right hand of the Sons of Horus...

... to faithfully serve them in the Other Land, ...

... for Eternity.

The Great Famine

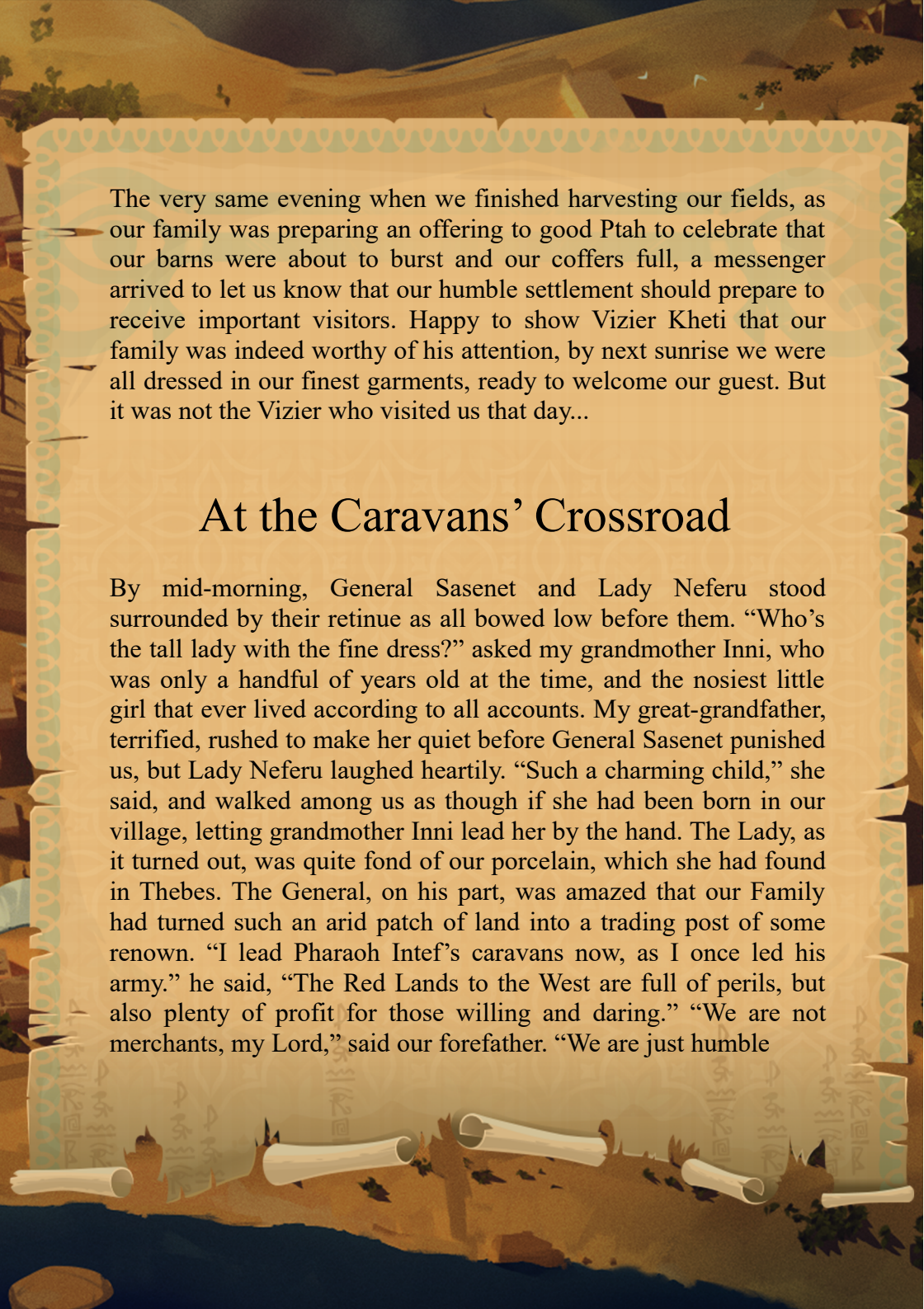
The gods cherish change, and every end seeds something new. Just like fiery sunsets give birth to the night sky, our family's good fortune was born in a time of strife: generations ago, the last king of the fallen Neferkare dynasty reigned for unusually long; his unnaturally late death was followed by bickering and dispute among his heirs, and amid their bickering a great drought fell upon the lands of the Nile. The great famine followed the drought, tearing what was once a unified kingdom into several warring provinces and nomes, each nomarch busy wrestling power from each other while their subjects starved. The great Pharaoh Intef, our divine ruler and heir to the throne of Horus, wisely ignored these squabbles and gave us a single command: "Food. Produce all the food you can." He also gave permission to settle in the Western Marshes near Naqada, which were uninhabited at the time, save for the holy crocodiles. No farmer had thus far attempted to tame those swamps, preferring the gentle grasslands nearer to the Nile. Yet our family were not just farmers, but also builders. Praying to good Ptah to be on our side, our great-grandparents set forth to lay claim to that land.

It was not easy, not at all. The toil was long, and the struggle was hard, but step by step, and brick by brick, our forefathers learned how to tame the wild marshes. So that is how, under good Ptah's guidance, our family was able to turn fasting into feasting, making sure our labors were well kept and guarded, so they would not be spoiled by carelessness.

Rock Farmers

Vizier Kheti was greatly pleased, and I dare say quite impressed with how much food our family had managed to produce, and how our ancestors had turned the Western Marshes into some of the richest farms under our great Pharaoh's rule. The Vizier himself inspected our storage yards, which were filled to the top with grain, and with a nod of approval he thanked motherly Isis for bestowing such plenty on us. "Tamed you have these swamps, as you said you would," Vizier Kheti said. "If marshes were no match for you, then mountains and boulders should not be a challenge." And thus saying, he requested our family to travel towards sunrise and relocate East of Dendera, in the rocky crags where farmlands are scarce, but stones are plentiful. Grandmother Inni once told me that lesser men would have wailed and pleaded to the Vizier to allow them to stay in their farms, or would have done as commanded while cursing their bad luck under their breath. But our greatgrandparents prayed to good Ptah that very same night, thanking the Guider of Craftsmen for this opportunity to show our betters that we were worthy of their trust. By the time great Ra rose the following dawn, our Family was already well on their way.


The way of the gods is sometimes hard to comprehend; that is why a deben of faith is worth nine debens of intellect. Kind Thoth sent us his guidance in the form of a Kushite merchant, who opened our eyes to the opportunity to sell our potters' ceramics in Thebes and obtain, through trade, what we could not produce ourselves in our rocky village.

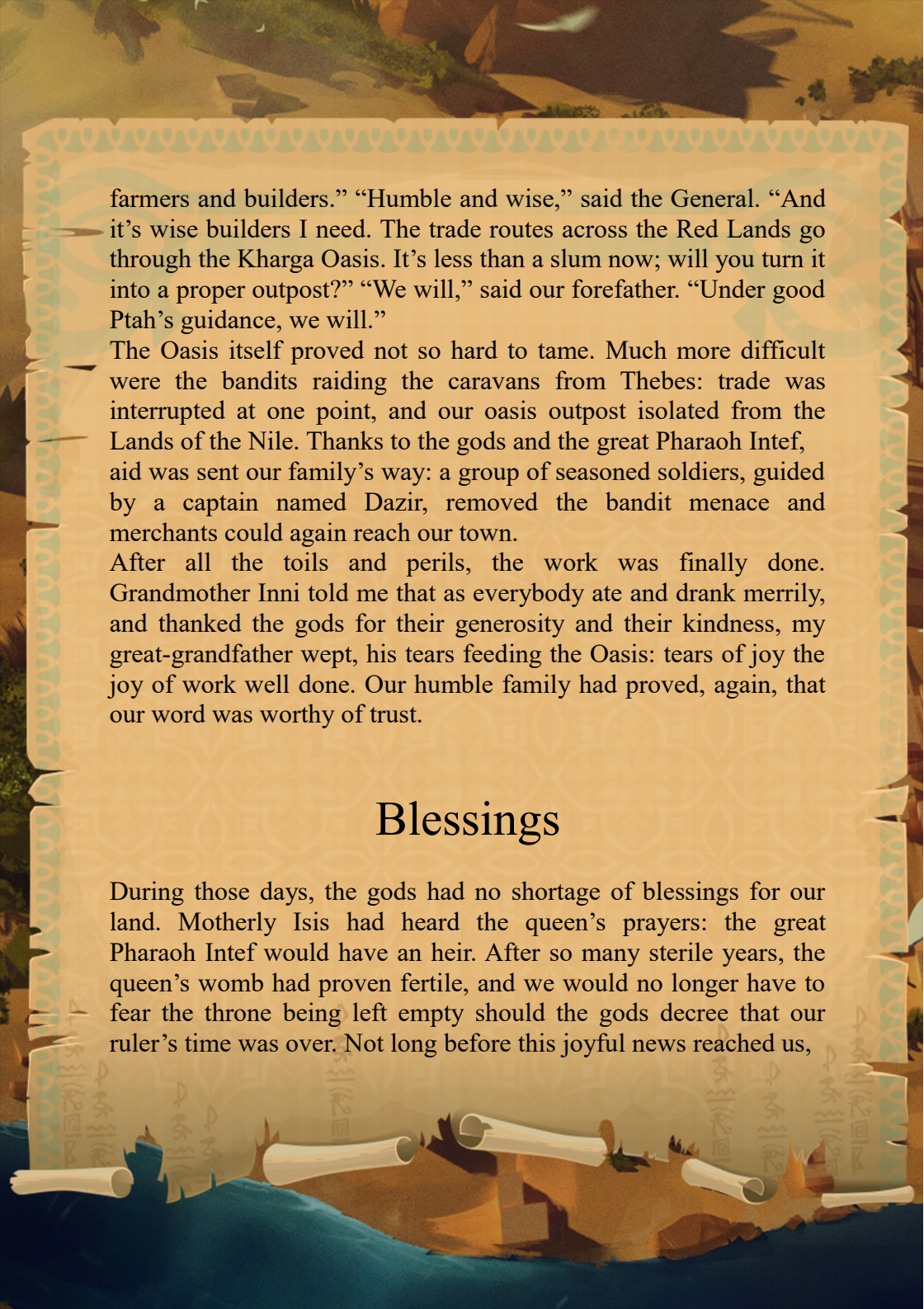


The very same evening when we finished harvesting our fields, as our family was preparing an offering to good Ptah to celebrate that our barns were about to burst and our coffers full, a messenger arrived to let us know that our humble settlement should prepare to receive important visitors. Happy to show Vizier Kheti that our family was indeed worthy of his attention, by next sunrise we were all dressed in our finest garments, ready to welcome our guest. But it was not the Vizier who visited us that day...

At the Caravans' Crossroad

By mid-morning, General Sasetet and Lady Neferu stood surrounded by their retinue as all bowed low before them. "Who's the tall lady with the fine dress?" asked my grandmother Inni, who was only a handful of years old at the time, and the nosiest little girl that ever lived according to all accounts. My great-grandfather, terrified, rushed to make her quiet before General Sasetet punished us, but Lady Neferu laughed heartily. "Such a charming child," she said, and walked among us as though if she had been born in our village, letting grandmother Inni lead her by the hand. The Lady, as it turned out, was quite fond of our porcelain, which she had found in Thebes. The General, on his part, was amazed that our Family had turned such an arid patch of land into a trading post of some renown. "I lead Pharaoh Intef's caravans now, as I once led his army," he said, "The Red Lands to the West are full of perils, but also plenty of profit for those willing and daring." "We are not merchants, my Lord," said our forefather. "We are just humble






farmers and builders.” “Humble and wise,” said the General. “And it’s wise builders I need. The trade routes across the Red Lands go through the Kharga Oasis. It’s less than a slum now; will you turn it into a proper outpost?” “We will,” said our forefather. “Under good Ptah’s guidance, we will.”

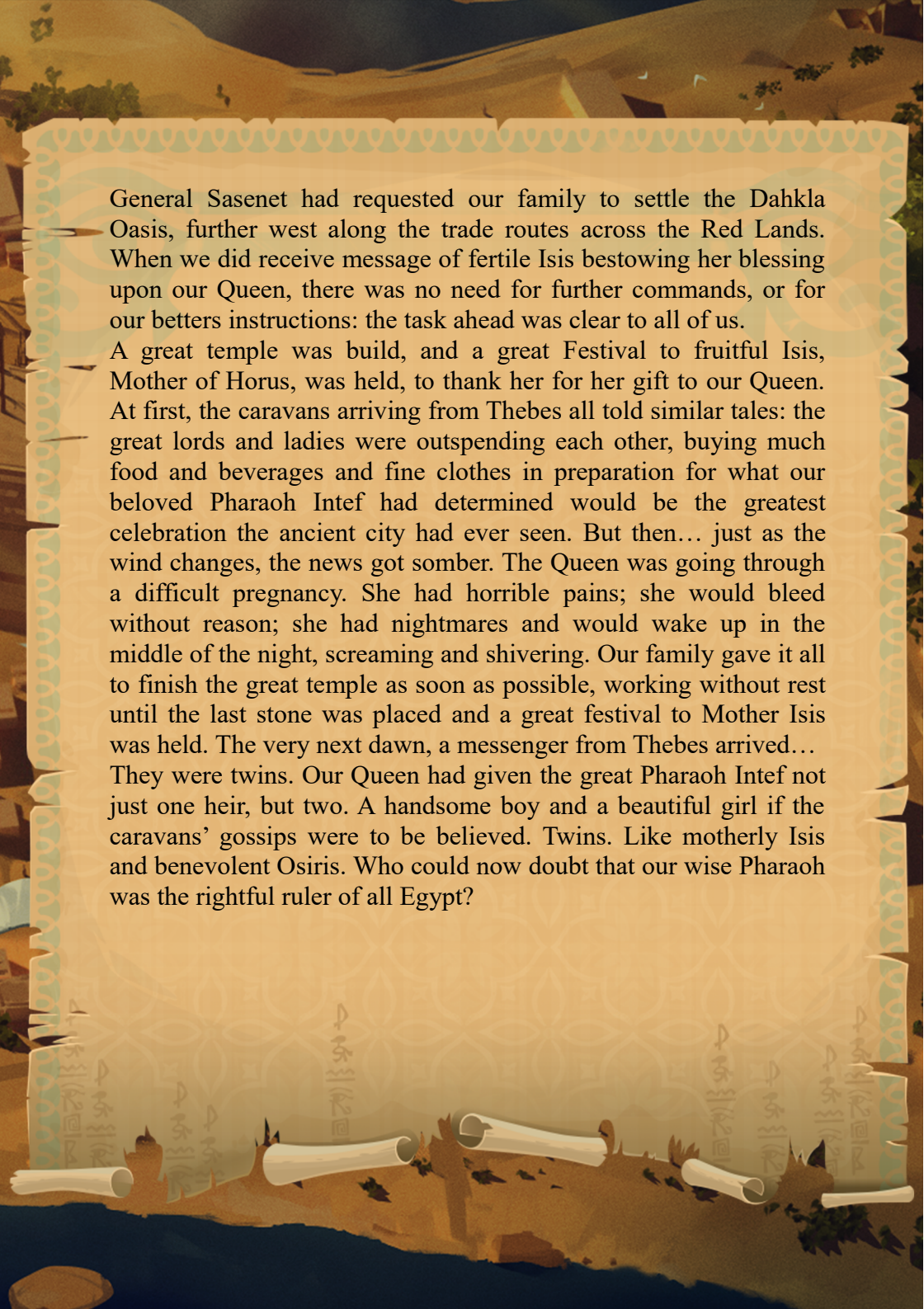
The Oasis itself proved not so hard to tame. Much more difficult were the bandits raiding the caravans from Thebes: trade was interrupted at one point, and our oasis outpost isolated from the Lands of the Nile. Thanks to the gods and the great Pharaoh Intef, aid was sent our family’s way: a group of seasoned soldiers, guided by a captain named Dazir, removed the bandit menace and merchants could again reach our town.

After all the toils and perils, the work was finally done. Grandmother Inni told me that as everybody ate and drank merrily, and thanked the gods for their generosity and their kindness, my great-grandfather wept, his tears feeding the Oasis: tears of joy the joy of work well done. Our humble family had proved, again, that our word was worthy of trust.

Blessings

During those days, the gods had no shortage of blessings for our land. Motherly Isis had heard the queen’s prayers: the great Pharaoh Intef would have an heir. After so many sterile years, the queen’s womb had proven fertile, and we would no longer have to fear the throne being left empty should the gods decree that our ruler’s time was over. Not long before this joyful news reached us,



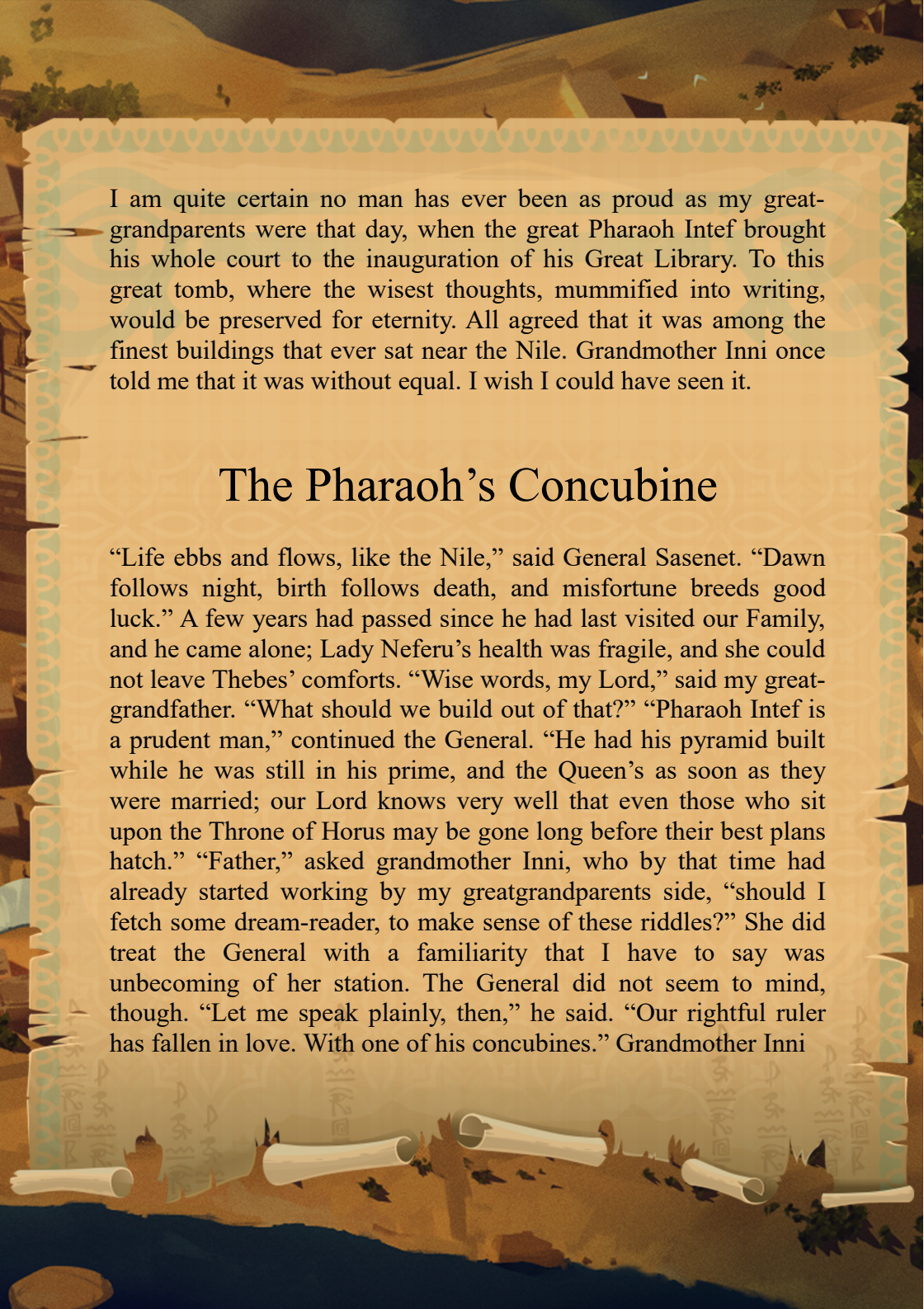


General Sasetet had requested our family to settle the Dahkla Oasis, further west along the trade routes across the Red Lands. When we did receive message of fertile Isis bestowing her blessing upon our Queen, there was no need for further commands, or for our betters instructions: the task ahead was clear to all of us.

A great temple was build, and a great Festival to fruitful Isis, Mother of Horus, was held, to thank her for her gift to our Queen. At first, the caravans arriving from Thebes all told similar tales: the great lords and ladies were outspending each other, buying much food and beverages and fine clothes in preparation for what our beloved Pharaoh Intef had determined would be the greatest celebration the ancient city had ever seen. But then... just as the wind changes, the news got somber. The Queen was going through a difficult pregnancy. She had horrible pains; she would bleed without reason; she had nightmares and would wake up in the middle of the night, screaming and shivering. Our family gave it all to finish the great temple as soon as possible, working without rest until the last stone was placed and a great festival to Mother Isis was held. The very next dawn, a messenger from Thebes arrived... They were twins. Our Queen had given the great Pharaoh Intef not just one heir, but two. A handsome boy and a beautiful girl if the caravans' gossips were to be believed. Twins. Like motherly Isis and benevolent Osiris. Who could now doubt that our wise Pharaoh was the rightful ruler of all Egypt?

Wisdom for the Ages


Shortly after the Queen gave birth, General Saset and Lady Neferu visited our family. Lady Neferu had come bearing gifts, including a luxurious lapis lazuli necklace for grandmother Inni, who was still the nosiest child that had ever wet their feet in the Nile. The General had a most unusual request. "A... great house for storing papyrus?" asked my puzzled great-grandfather. "My Lord, what would be the point of that?" "I suppose you could call it storing papyruses, yes," smiled the General. "In the same way that the great Pyramids of Giza could be called houses for storing dead bodies..." They say our forefather's face went white as sandstone at the General's nearly blasphemous remark. "Just as our bodies are vessels for our souls," said the General solemnly now as he had noted our forefather's distress, "these papyruses are vessels for wise words: words our enlightened Pharaoh Intef wishes to preserve for eternity." "A... tomb?" our forefather asked. "Pharaoh wishes us to build a tomb for words?" "Words of great wisdom," said the General. "They deserve a truly great tomb." Our forefather nodded in understanding. "By the way," smiled the Lady, her slender hands on grandmother Inni's shoulders, "the General and I would be honored if you would allow your charming daughter to come with us to the Pharaoh's court. Would you like that, child?" "Yay!!" yelled Inni, thrilled. "It's a splendid place to turn unruly girls into proper ladies," the General whispered to our forefather. "Or so I hear." Tears welled in my greatgrandparents' eyes. Our long hard work, and all our sacrifices were finally being rewarded.

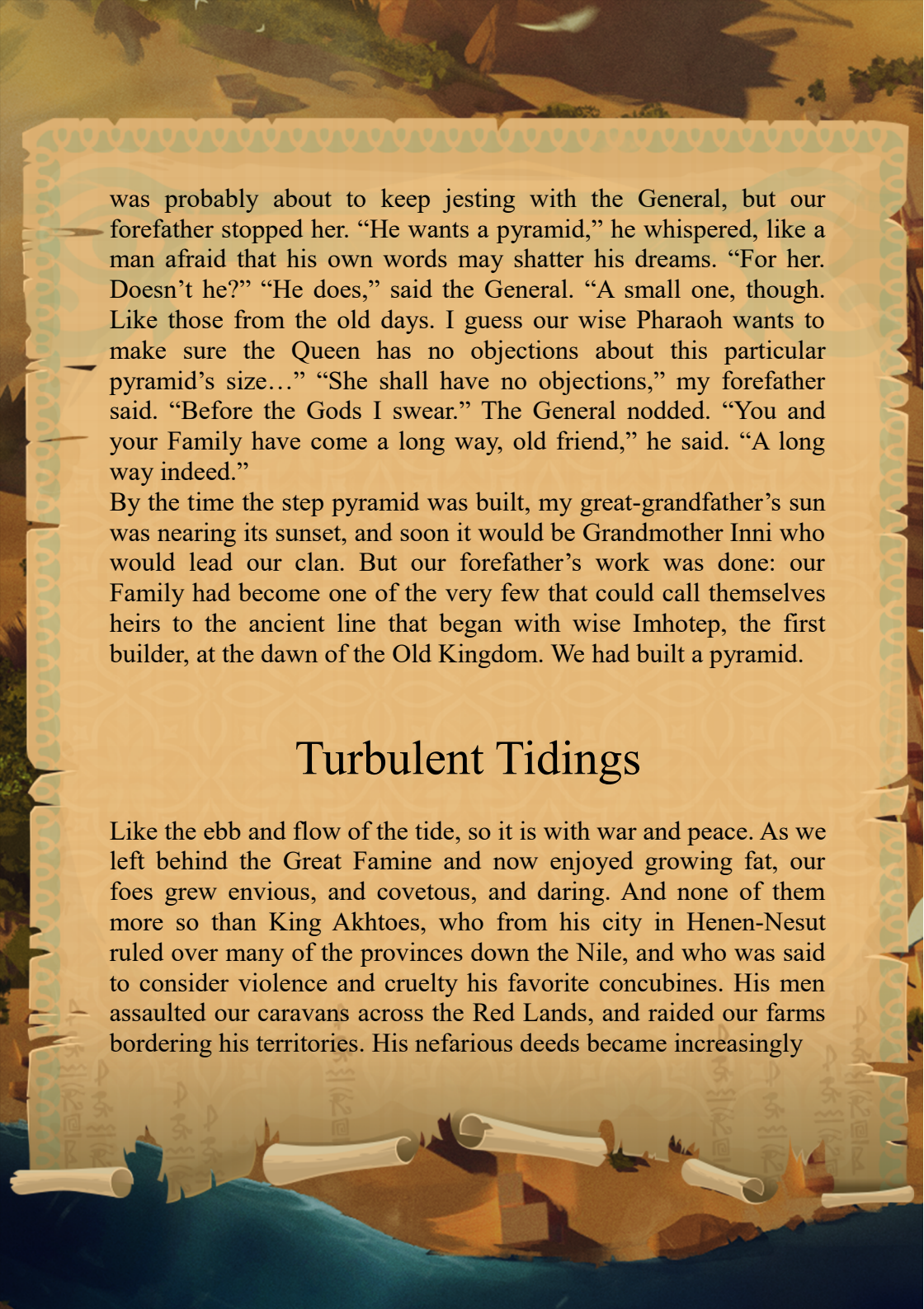


I am quite certain no man has ever been as proud as my great-grandparents were that day, when the great Pharaoh Intef brought his whole court to the inauguration of his Great Library. To this great tomb, where the wisest thoughts, mummified into writing, would be preserved for eternity. All agreed that it was among the finest buildings that ever sat near the Nile. Grandmother Inni once told me that it was without equal. I wish I could have seen it.

The Pharaoh's Concubine

“Life ebbs and flows, like the Nile,” said General Saset. “Dawn follows night, birth follows death, and misfortune breeds good luck.” A few years had passed since he had last visited our Family, and he came alone; Lady Neferu’s health was fragile, and she could not leave Thebes’ comforts. “Wise words, my Lord,” said my great-grandfather. “What should we build out of that?” “Pharaoh Intef is a prudent man,” continued the General. “He had his pyramid built while he was still in his prime, and the Queen’s as soon as they were married; our Lord knows very well that even those who sit upon the Throne of Horus may be gone long before their best plans hatch.” “Father,” asked grandmother Inni, who by that time had already started working by my greatgrandparents side, “should I fetch some dream-reader, to make sense of these riddles?” She did treat the General with a familiarity that I have to say was unbecoming of her station. The General did not seem to mind, though. “Let me speak plainly, then,” he said. “Our rightful ruler has fallen in love. With one of his concubines.” Grandmother Inni



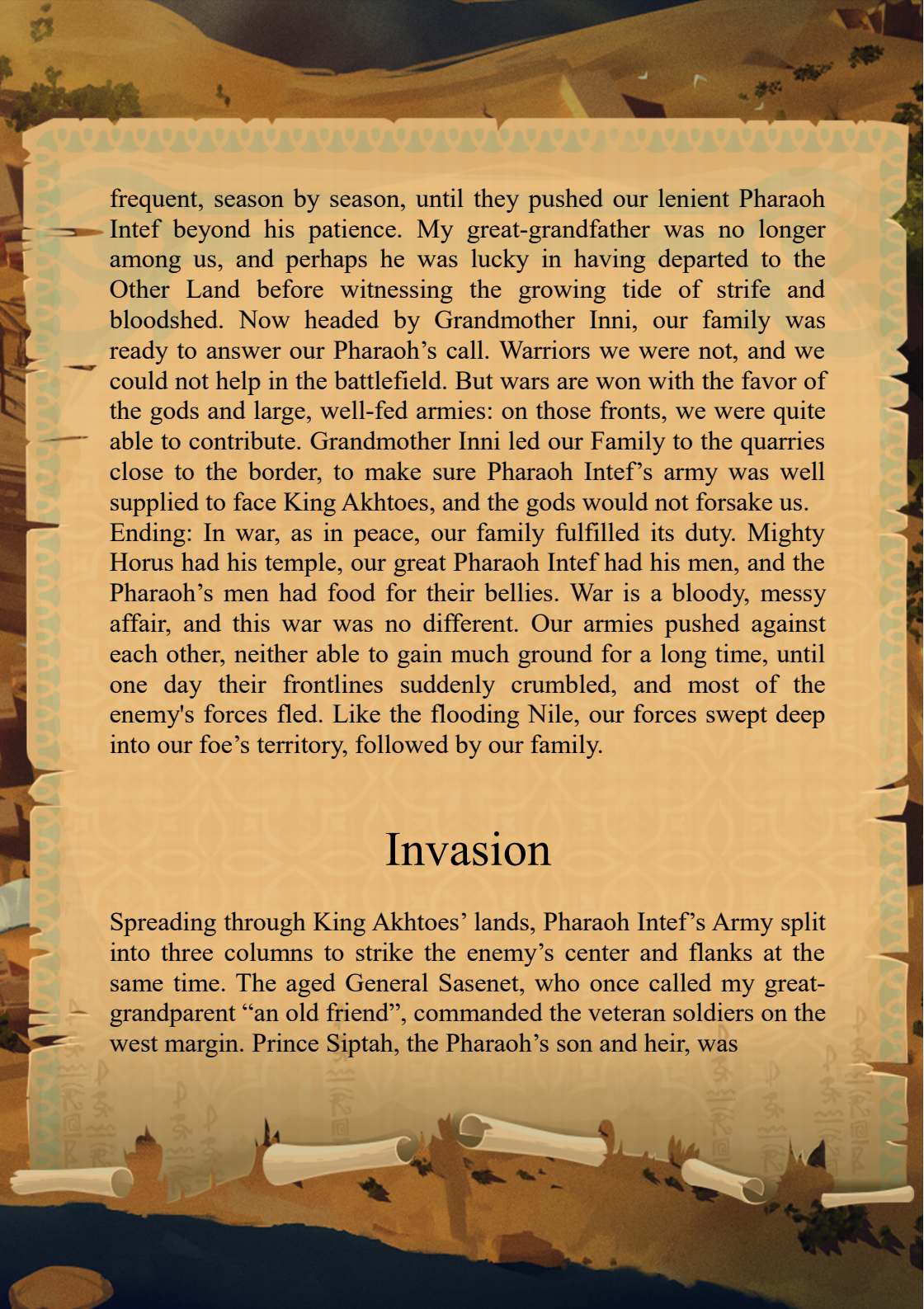


was probably about to keep jesting with the General, but our forefather stopped her. “He wants a pyramid,” he whispered, like a man afraid that his own words may shatter his dreams. “For her. Doesn’t he?” “He does,” said the General. “A small one, though. Like those from the old days. I guess our wise Pharaoh wants to make sure the Queen has no objections about this particular pyramid’s size...” “She shall have no objections,” my forefather said. “Before the Gods I swear.” The General nodded. “You and your Family have come a long way, old friend,” he said. “A long way indeed.”

By the time the step pyramid was built, my great-grandfather’s sun was nearing its sunset, and soon it would be Grandmother Inni who would lead our clan. But our forefather’s work was done: our Family had become one of the very few that could call themselves heirs to the ancient line that began with wise Imhotep, the first builder, at the dawn of the Old Kingdom. We had built a pyramid.

Turbulent Tidings


Like the ebb and flow of the tide, so it is with war and peace. As we left behind the Great Famine and now enjoyed growing fat, our foes grew envious, and covetous, and daring. And none of them more so than King Akhtoes, who from his city in Henen-Nesut ruled over many of the provinces down the Nile, and who was said to consider violence and cruelty his favorite concubines. His men assaulted our caravans across the Red Lands, and raided our farms bordering his territories. His nefarious deeds became increasingly

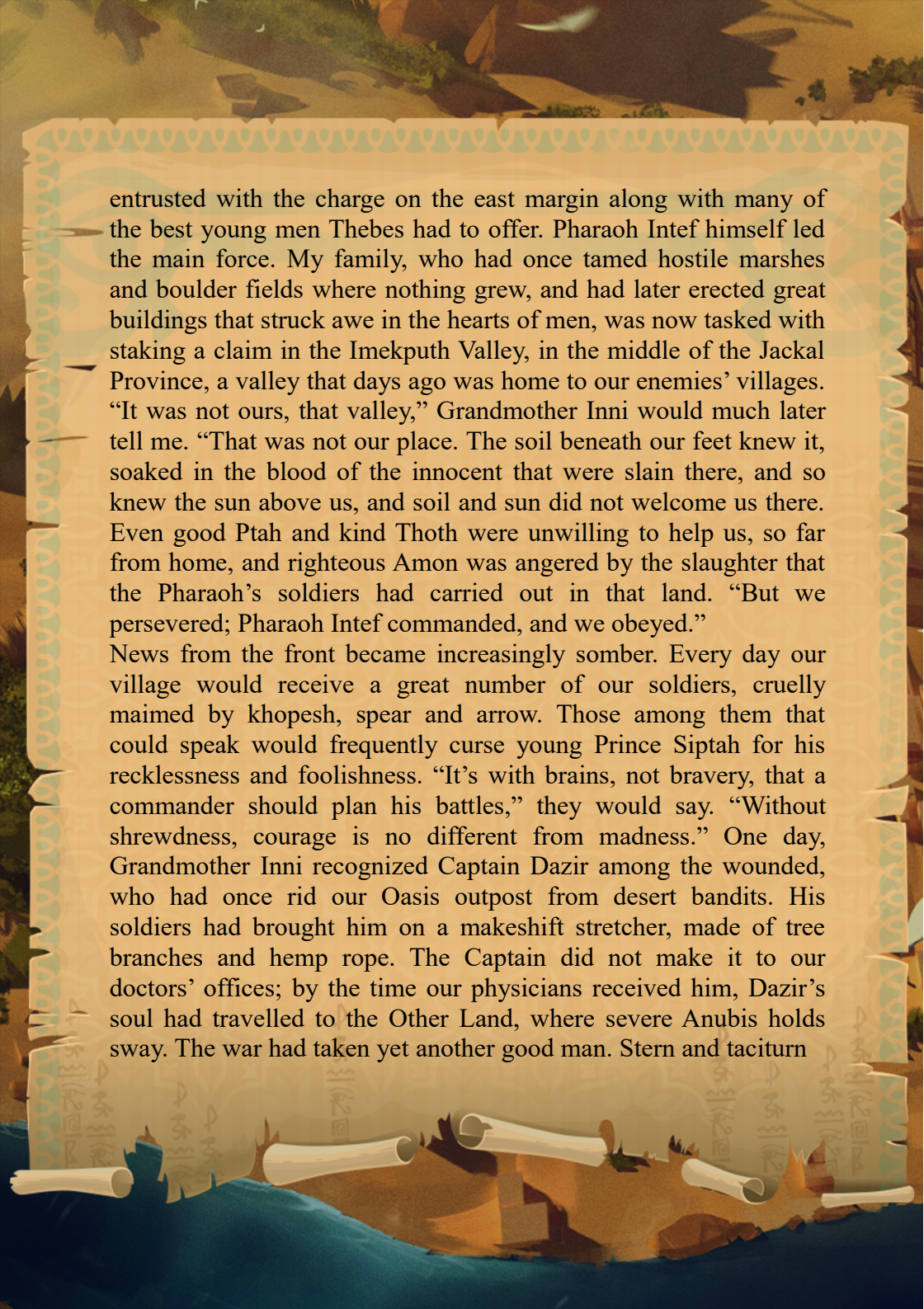


frequent, season by season, until they pushed our lenient Pharaoh Intef beyond his patience. My great-grandfather was no longer among us, and perhaps he was lucky in having departed to the Other Land before witnessing the growing tide of strife and bloodshed. Now headed by Grandmother Inni, our family was ready to answer our Pharaoh's call. Warriors we were not, and we could not help in the battlefield. But wars are won with the favor of the gods and large, well-fed armies: on those fronts, we were quite able to contribute. Grandmother Inni led our Family to the quarries close to the border, to make sure Pharaoh Intef's army was well supplied to face King Akhtoes, and the gods would not forsake us. Ending: In war, as in peace, our family fulfilled its duty. Mighty Horus had his temple, our great Pharaoh Intef had his men, and the Pharaoh's men had food for their bellies. War is a bloody, messy affair, and this war was no different. Our armies pushed against each other, neither able to gain much ground for a long time, until one day their frontlines suddenly crumbled, and most of the enemy's forces fled. Like the flooding Nile, our forces swept deep into our foe's territory, followed by our family.

Invasion


Spreading through King Akhtoes' lands, Pharaoh Intef's Army split into three columns to strike the enemy's center and flanks at the same time. The aged General Saset, who once called my great-grandparent "an old friend", commanded the veteran soldiers on the west margin. Prince Siptah, the Pharaoh's son and heir, was





entrusted with the charge on the east margin along with many of the best young men Thebes had to offer. Pharaoh Intef himself led the main force. My family, who had once tamed hostile marshes and boulder fields where nothing grew, and had later erected great buildings that struck awe in the hearts of men, was now tasked with staking a claim in the Imekputh Valley, in the middle of the Jackal Province, a valley that days ago was home to our enemies' villages. "It was not ours, that valley," Grandmother Inni would much later tell me. "That was not our place. The soil beneath our feet knew it, soaked in the blood of the innocent that were slain there, and so knew the sun above us, and soil and sun did not welcome us there. Even good Ptah and kind Thoth were unwilling to help us, so far from home, and righteous Amon was angered by the slaughter that the Pharaoh's soldiers had carried out in that land. "But we persevered; Pharaoh Intef commanded, and we obeyed."

News from the front became increasingly somber. Every day our village would receive a great number of our soldiers, cruelly maimed by khopesh, spear and arrow. Those among them that could speak would frequently curse young Prince Siptah for his recklessness and foolishness. "It's with brains, not bravery, that a commander should plan his battles," they would say. "Without shrewdness, courage is no different from madness." One day, Grandmother Inni recognized Captain Dazir among the wounded, who had once rid our Oasis outpost from desert bandits. His soldiers had brought him on a makeshift stretcher, made of tree branches and hemp rope. The Captain did not make it to our doctors' offices; by the time our physicians received him, Dazir's soul had travelled to the Other Land, where severe Anubis holds sway. The war had taken yet another good man. Stern and taciturn

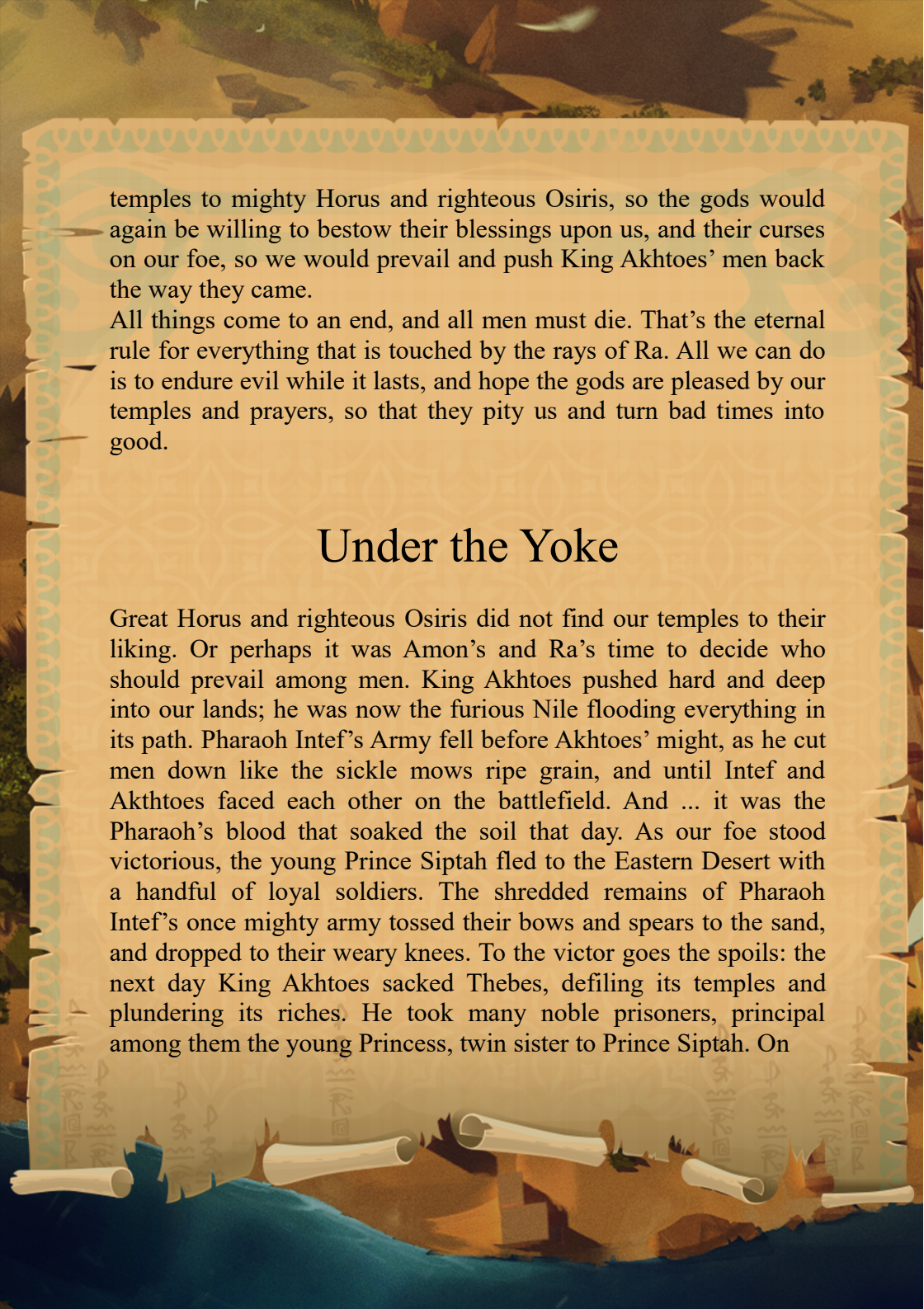


as he was, no one could claim that he ever broke a promise, and his soldiers' grief knew no end when they learned their Captain had departed.

Through all that conflict and bloodshed, our family persevered. We did all we could. Even under Amon's scornful gaze, we did exactly as great Pharaoh Intef had commanded us. But a large, well-fed army still needs to be led proficiently to gain the upper hand.

Retreat

King Akhtoes' cruelty was surpassed only by his cunning. His early raids on our lands had been a bait; his hurried retreat as we first struck was nothing more than an elaborate ruse, for which we fell like fishes eager to jump into a net. Mighty Ra and righteous Amon, the gods held in greatest regard by King Akhtoes, did the rest: blinded by our own pride, we forgot the prudence that good Ptah preaches and we thought ourselves the striking falcon, when we were in fact the unsuspecting prey. Our family learned of this when the Pharaoh's Army fled past our settlement in hasty retreat, followed closely by the men that General Sasenet had led. That was when Grandmother Inni learned that the General, who had once called our forefather "old friend", was now reunited with his own ancestors in the Other Land. Grandmother Inni wept bitter tears that night. By dawn she said: "Grab what you can; burn down the rest," and with King Akhtoes on our heels everybody fled back to the lands from which we came. As our family reached our former home, Pharaoh Intef's command reached us: We were to build great

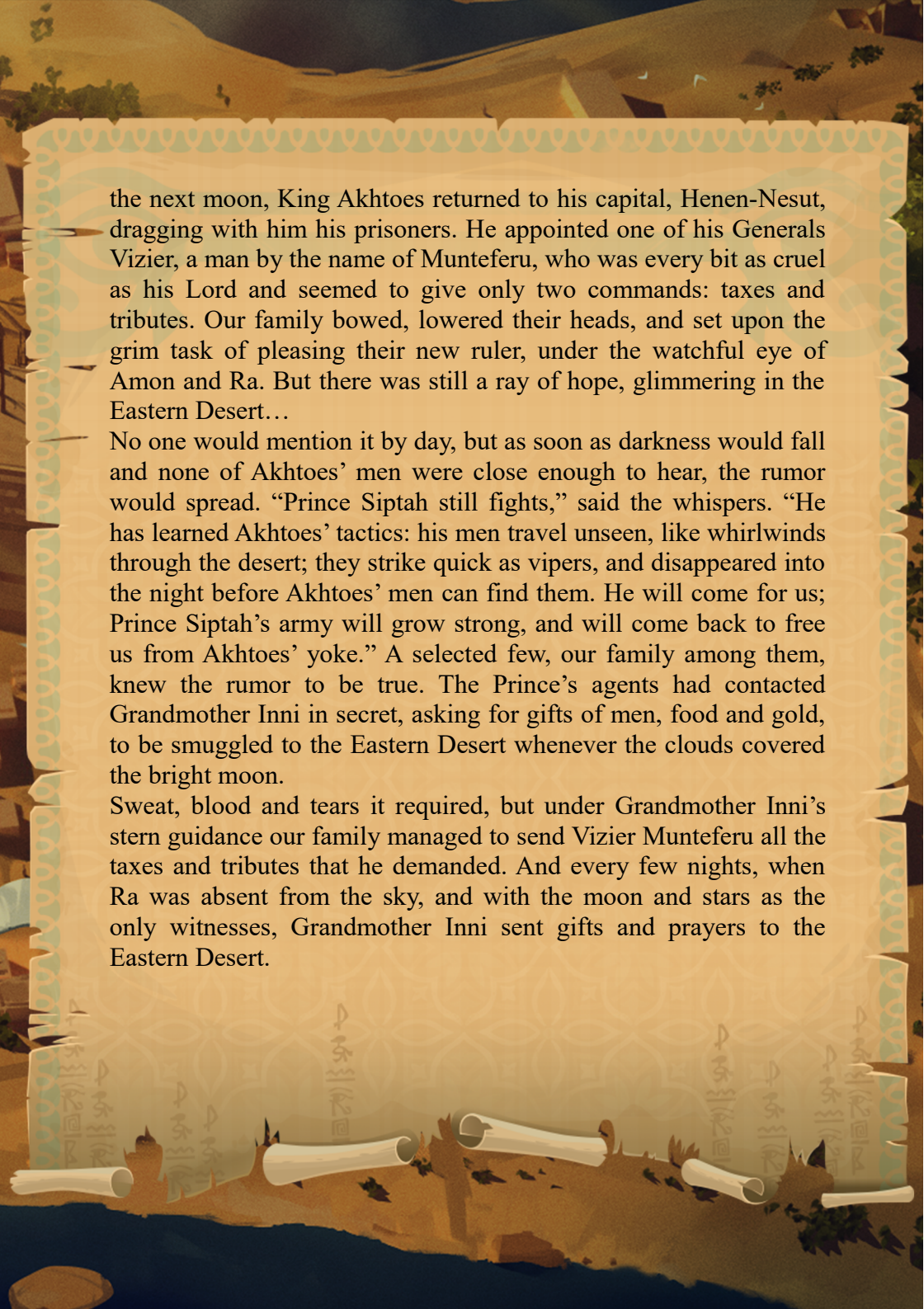


temples to mighty Horus and righteous Osiris, so the gods would again be willing to bestow their blessings upon us, and their curses on our foe, so we would prevail and push King Akhtoes' men back the way they came.

All things come to an end, and all men must die. That's the eternal rule for everything that is touched by the rays of Ra. All we can do is to endure evil while it lasts, and hope the gods are pleased by our temples and prayers, so that they pity us and turn bad times into good.

Under the Yoke


Great Horus and righteous Osiris did not find our temples to their liking. Or perhaps it was Amon's and Ra's time to decide who should prevail among men. King Akhtoes pushed hard and deep into our lands; he was now the furious Nile flooding everything in its path. Pharaoh Intef's Army fell before Akhtoes' might, as he cut men down like the sickle mows ripe grain, and until Intef and Akhtoes faced each other on the battlefield. And ... it was the Pharaoh's blood that soaked the soil that day. As our foe stood victorious, the young Prince Siptah fled to the Eastern Desert with a handful of loyal soldiers. The shredded remains of Pharaoh Intef's once mighty army tossed their bows and spears to the sand, and dropped to their weary knees. To the victor goes the spoils: the next day King Akhtoes sacked Thebes, defiling its temples and plundering its riches. He took many noble prisoners, principal among them the young Princess, twin sister to Prince Siptah. On



the next moon, King Akhtoes returned to his capital, Henen-Nesut, dragging with him his prisoners. He appointed one of his Generals Vizier, a man by the name of Munteferu, who was every bit as cruel as his Lord and seemed to give only two commands: taxes and tributes. Our family bowed, lowered their heads, and set upon the grim task of pleasing their new ruler, under the watchful eye of Amon and Ra. But there was still a ray of hope, glimmering in the Eastern Desert...

No one would mention it by day, but as soon as darkness would fall and none of Akhtoes' men were close enough to hear, the rumor would spread. "Prince Siptah still fights," said the whispers. "He has learned Akhtoes' tactics: his men travel unseen, like whirlwinds through the desert; they strike quick as vipers, and disappeared into the night before Akhtoes' men can find them. He will come for us; Prince Siptah's army will grow strong, and will come back to free us from Akhtoes' yoke." A selected few, our family among them, knew the rumor to be true. The Prince's agents had contacted Grandmother Inni in secret, asking for gifts of men, food and gold, to be smuggled to the Eastern Desert whenever the clouds covered the bright moon.

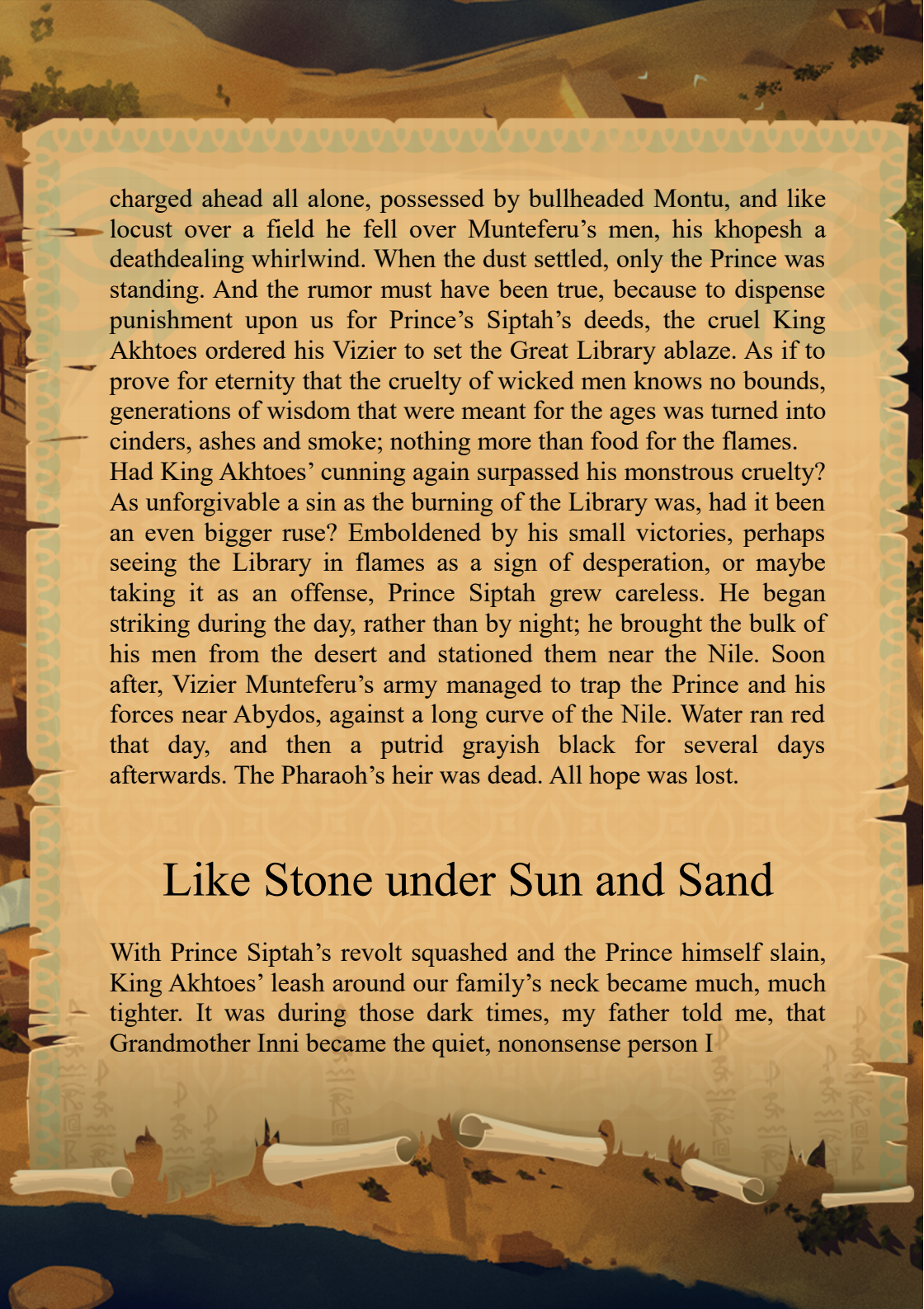
Sweat, blood and tears it required, but under Grandmother Inni's stern guidance our family managed to send Vizier Munteferu all the taxes and tributes that he demanded. And every few nights, when Ra was absent from the sky, and with the moon and stars as the only witnesses, Grandmother Inni sent gifts and prayers to the Eastern Desert.



Hope from the Eastern Desert

As night covered the Nile, little scraps of hope were smuggled in hushed tones. “The Prince’s men have raided one of Akhtoes’ caravans,” someone would whisper. “I’ve heard they took down a small garrison near Qau,” someone else would whisper back. “We must endure,” Grandmother Inni would say. “Endure, like the monuments and great buildings we once built. Endure until the bad times are gone and good times come, like the dawn, from the Eastern Desert.” And the rumors must have been true, because Vizier Munteferu was certainly not pleased. The tribute he demanded grew as news of the Prince’s daring deeds became more frequent. One day the Vizier had a specific task for our family: as the renowned builders we still were, Vizier Munteferu requested a great temple to Amon to be built near Thinis, the place where King Akhtoes had defeated Pharaoh Intef, to commemorate such glorious victory. “We will,” said Grandmother Inni to the messenger. “If that’s what King Akhtoes and his great Vizier wish us to do, we will build it.” And thus, our family set themselves to the task that would keep them busy during the day, while whispers were exchanged throughout the night.


And the whispers grew until even Akhtoes’ men were talking. A group of Munteferu’s soldiers had tracked Prince Siptah down to where he was hiding: the Prince, to avoid detection, was travelling with only a handful of men. Munteferu’s soldiers outnumbered him three to one said some, five to one said others, and some said seven or nine to one. When he found himself surrounded, Prince Siptah

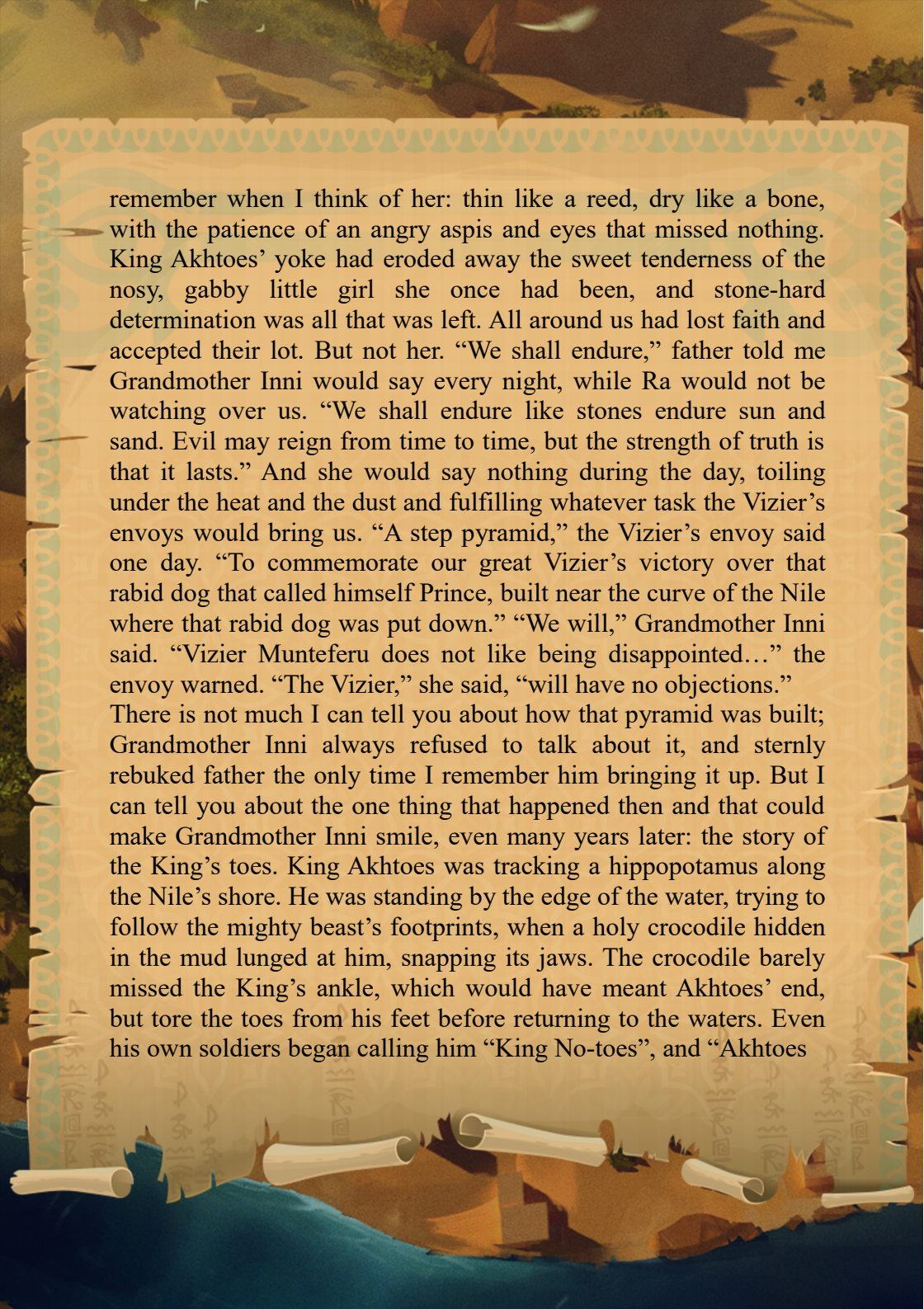


charged ahead all alone, possessed by bullheaded Montu, and like locust over a field he fell over Munteferu's men, his khopesh a deathdealing whirlwind. When the dust settled, only the Prince was standing. And the rumor must have been true, because to dispense punishment upon us for Prince's Siptah's deeds, the cruel King Akhtoes ordered his Vizier to set the Great Library ablaze. As if to prove for eternity that the cruelty of wicked men knows no bounds, generations of wisdom that were meant for the ages was turned into cinders, ashes and smoke; nothing more than food for the flames. Had King Akhtoes' cunning again surpassed his monstrous cruelty? As unforgivable a sin as the burning of the Library was, had it been an even bigger ruse? Emboldened by his small victories, perhaps seeing the Library in flames as a sign of desperation, or maybe taking it as an offense, Prince Siptah grew careless. He began striking during the day, rather than by night; he brought the bulk of his men from the desert and stationed them near the Nile. Soon after, Vizier Munteferu's army managed to trap the Prince and his forces near Abydos, against a long curve of the Nile. Water ran red that day, and then a putrid grayish black for several days afterwards. The Pharaoh's heir was dead. All hope was lost.


Like Stone under Sun and Sand

With Prince Siptah's revolt squashed and the Prince himself slain, King Akhtoes' leash around our family's neck became much, much tighter. It was during those dark times, my father told me, that Grandmother Inni became the quiet, nonsense person I





remember when I think of her: thin like a reed, dry like a bone, with the patience of an angry aspis and eyes that missed nothing. King Akhtoes' yoke had eroded away the sweet tenderness of the nosy, gabby little girl she once had been, and stone-hard determination was all that was left. All around us had lost faith and accepted their lot. But not her. "We shall endure," father told me Grandmother Inni would say every night, while Ra would not be watching over us. "We shall endure like stones endure sun and sand. Evil may reign from time to time, but the strength of truth is that it lasts." And she would say nothing during the day, toiling under the heat and the dust and fulfilling whatever task the Vizier's envoys would bring us. "A step pyramid," the Vizier's envoy said one day. "To commemorate our great Vizier's victory over that rabid dog that called himself Prince, built near the curve of the Nile where that rabid dog was put down." "We will," Grandmother Inni said. "Vizier Munteferu does not like being disappointed..." the envoy warned. "The Vizier," she said, "will have no objections." There is not much I can tell you about how that pyramid was built; Grandmother Inni always refused to talk about it, and sternly rebuked father the only time I remember him bringing it up. But I can tell you about the one thing that happened then and that could make Grandmother Inni smile, even many years later: the story of the King's toes. King Akhtoes was tracking a hippopotamus along the Nile's shore. He was standing by the edge of the water, trying to follow the mighty beast's footprints, when a holy crocodile hidden in the mud lunged at him, snapping its jaws. The crocodile barely missed the King's ankle, which would have meant Akhtoes' end, but tore the toes from his feet before returning to the waters. Even his own soldiers began calling him "King No-toes", and "Akhtoes




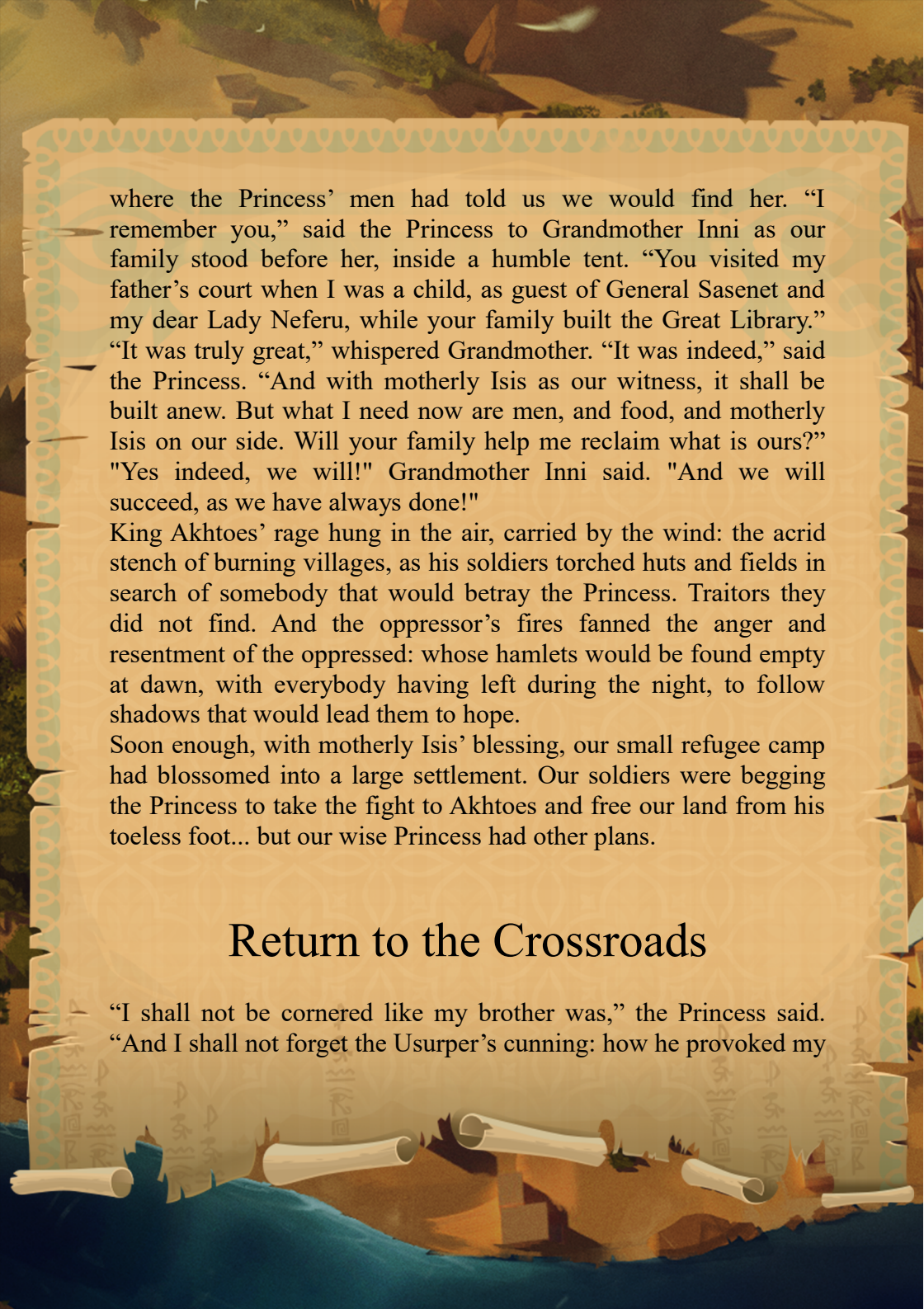
the Toeless". Vizier Munteferu decreed that uttering those names would mean death, but if our Family had a grain for every time those names were heard, an army could have been fed. Still, toes or no toes, the Vizier's step pyramid was built.

Vizier Munteferu did not have objections. His step pyramid stood exactly where Prince Siptah had been slain. It was bigger than the pyramid our family had once built for Pharaoh Intef's concubine, yet smaller than the smooth pyramid King Akhtoes was said to be erecting for himself near his capital, Henen-Nesut. Even with a tight leash around our throats, our family's word was stronger than the strongest stone in the land.

A New Dawn

The story spread like wildfire: the young Princess, held captive in King Akhtoes' palace, had managed to escape. Details were blurry, prone to shift with each retelling: Akhtoes' youngest concubine had taken pity on the Princess and had helped her escape; others said it had been a eunuch who had aided to her, still more that it had been a shadow-devil that left no footprints, sent by Pharaoh Intef from the Other Land to rescue his daughter. But escaped she had, and was summoning her father's subjects to join her. Many dismissed the rumor, as sometimes the downtrodden avoid hope and consider it a luxury they cannot afford. Others believed it but did not dare follow the Princess, out of fear of Akhtoes' retribution. Our Family did believe. We abandoned the flea-infested huts near the Pyramid that Vizier Munteferu had deemed worthy of us, and set West to





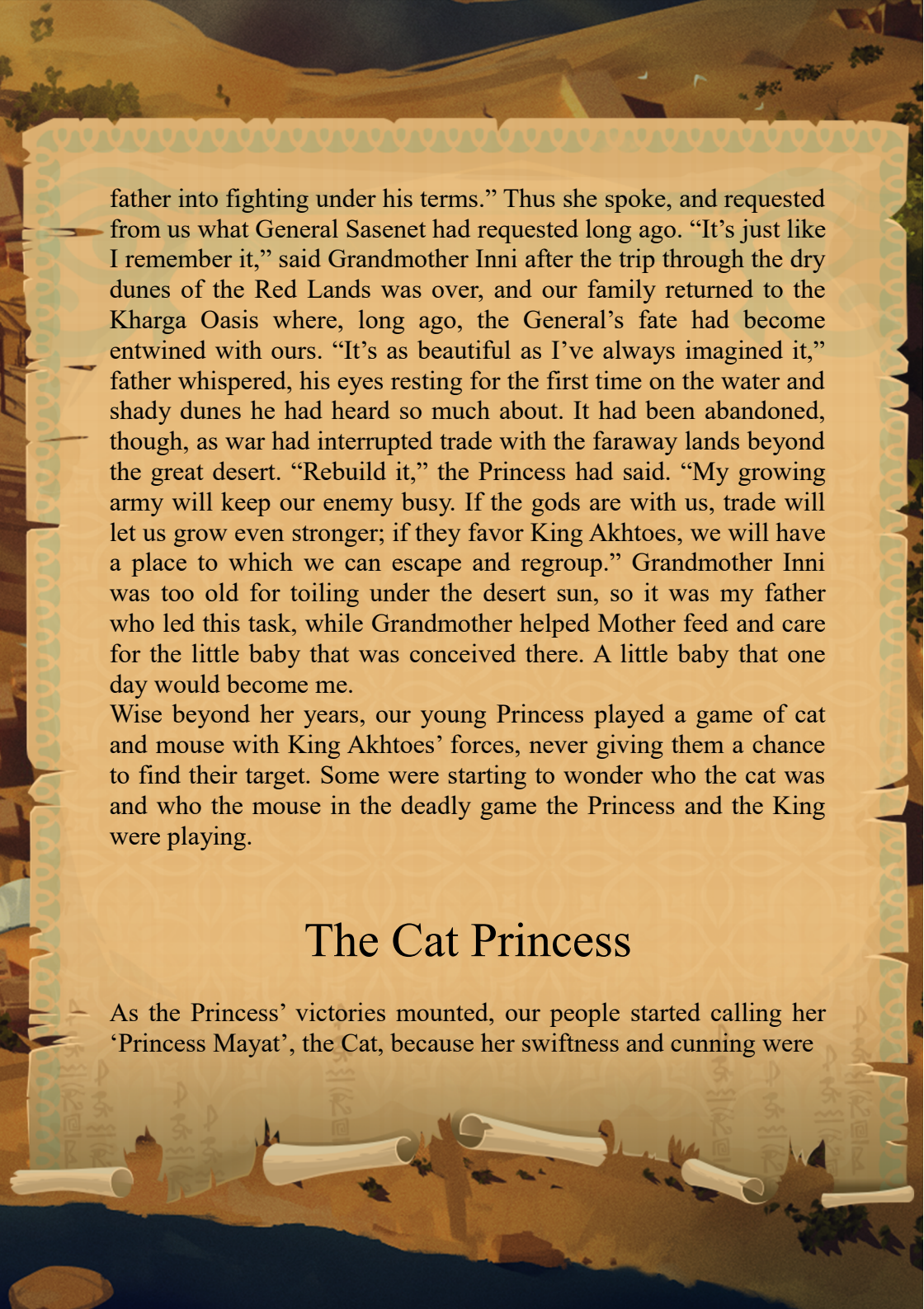
where the Princess' men had told us we would find her. "I remember you," said the Princess to Grandmother Inni as our family stood before her, inside a humble tent. "You visited my father's court when I was a child, as guest of General Saset and my dear Lady Neferu, while your family built the Great Library." "It was truly great," whispered Grandmother. "It was indeed," said the Princess. "And with motherly Isis as our witness, it shall be built anew. But what I need now are men, and food, and motherly Isis on our side. Will your family help me reclaim what is ours?" "Yes indeed, we will!" Grandmother Inni said. "And we will succeed, as we have always done!"

King Akhtoes' rage hung in the air, carried by the wind: the acrid stench of burning villages, as his soldiers torched huts and fields in search of somebody that would betray the Princess. Traitors they did not find. And the oppressor's fires fanned the anger and resentment of the oppressed: whose hamlets would be found empty at dawn, with everybody having left during the night, to follow shadows that would lead them to hope.

Soon enough, with motherly Isis' blessing, our small refugee camp had blossomed into a large settlement. Our soldiers were begging the Princess to take the fight to Akhtoes and free our land from his toeless foot... but our wise Princess had other plans.

Return to the Crossroads

"I shall not be cornered like my brother was," the Princess said. "And I shall not forget the Usurper's cunning: how he provoked my




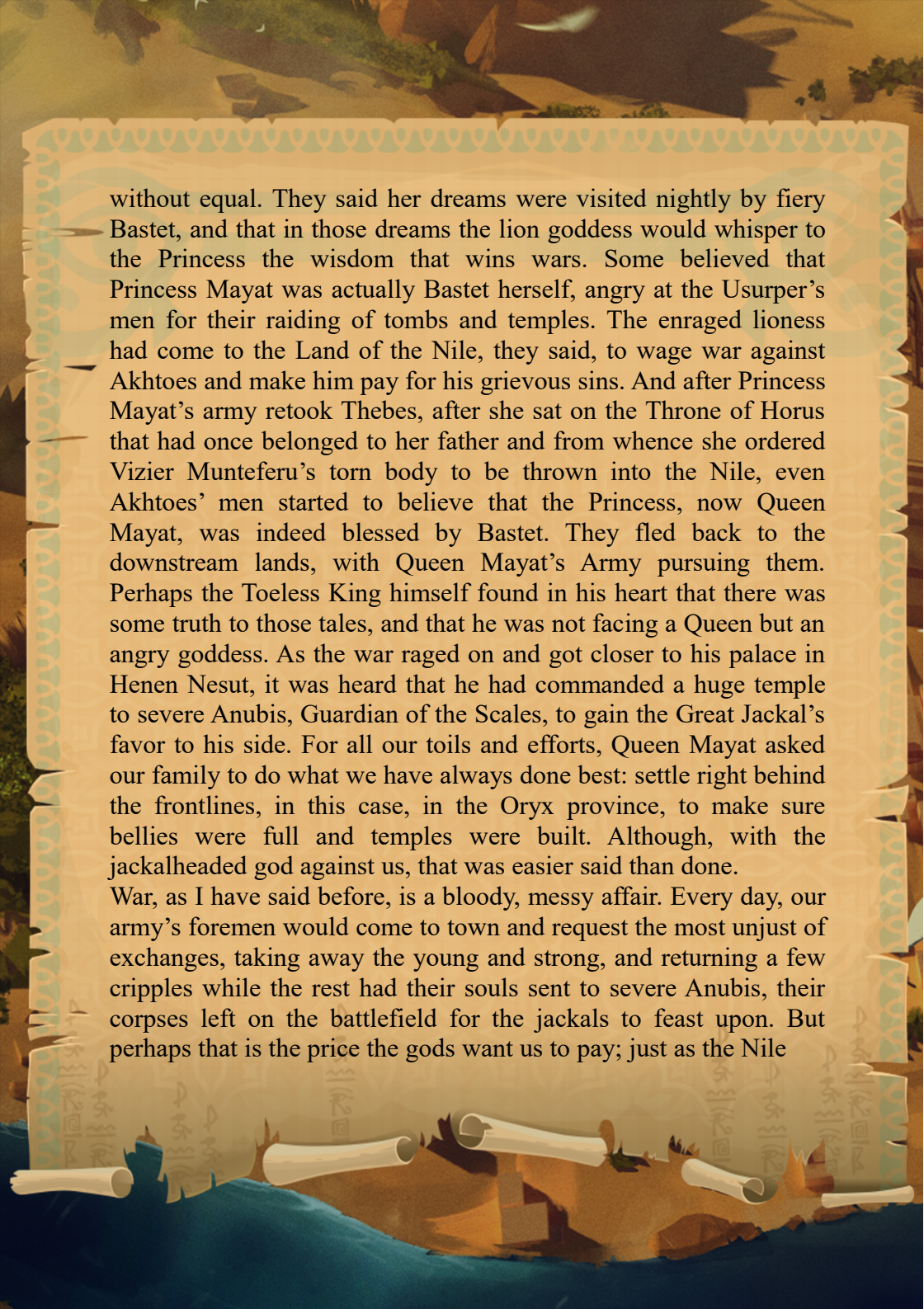
father into fighting under his terms.” Thus she spoke, and requested from us what General Sasetet had requested long ago. “It’s just like I remember it,” said Grandmother Inni after the trip through the dry dunes of the Red Lands was over, and our family returned to the Kharga Oasis where, long ago, the General’s fate had become entwined with ours. “It’s as beautiful as I’ve always imagined it,” father whispered, his eyes resting for the first time on the water and shady dunes he had heard so much about. It had been abandoned, though, as war had interrupted trade with the faraway lands beyond the great desert. “Rebuild it,” the Princess had said. “My growing army will keep our enemy busy. If the gods are with us, trade will let us grow even stronger; if they favor King Akhtoes, we will have a place to which we can escape and regroup.” Grandmother Inni was too old for toiling under the desert sun, so it was my father who led this task, while Grandmother helped Mother feed and care for the little baby that was conceived there. A little baby that one day would become me.

Wise beyond her years, our young Princess played a game of cat and mouse with King Akhtoes’ forces, never giving them a chance to find their target. Some were starting to wonder who the cat was and who the mouse in the deadly game the Princess and the King were playing.

The Cat Princess

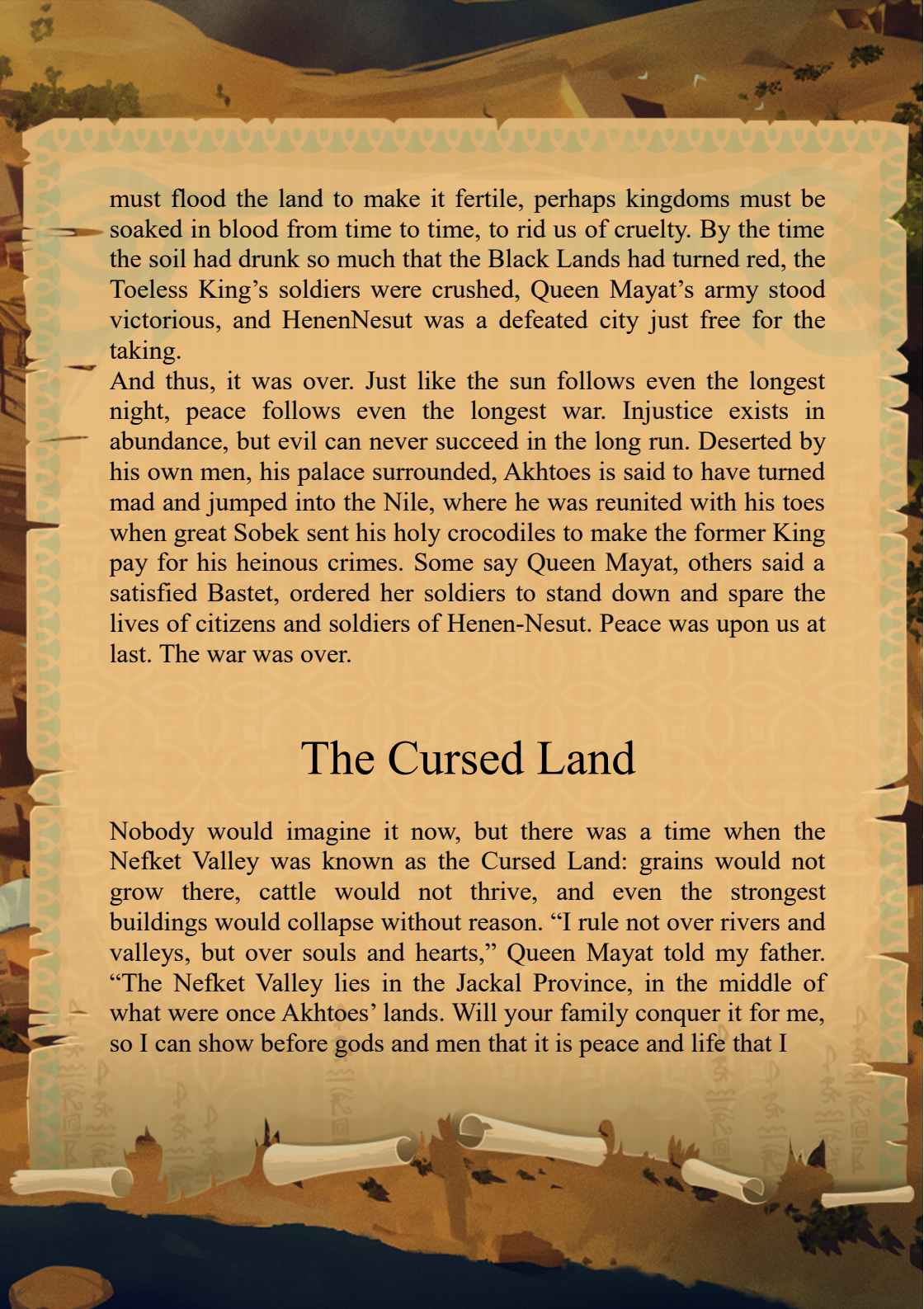
As the Princess’ victories mounted, our people started calling her ‘Princess Mayat’, the Cat, because her swiftness and cunning were





without equal. They said her dreams were visited nightly by fiery Bastet, and that in those dreams the lion goddess would whisper to the Princess the wisdom that wins wars. Some believed that Princess Mayat was actually Bastet herself, angry at the Usurper's men for their raiding of tombs and temples. The enraged lioness had come to the Land of the Nile, they said, to wage war against Akhtoes and make him pay for his grievous sins. And after Princess Mayat's army retook Thebes, after she sat on the Throne of Horus that had once belonged to her father and from whence she ordered Vizier Munteferu's torn body to be thrown into the Nile, even Akhtoes' men started to believe that the Princess, now Queen Mayat, was indeed blessed by Bastet. They fled back to the downstream lands, with Queen Mayat's Army pursuing them. Perhaps the Toeless King himself found in his heart that there was some truth to those tales, and that he was not facing a Queen but an angry goddess. As the war raged on and got closer to his palace in Henen Nesut, it was heard that he had commanded a huge temple to severe Anubis, Guardian of the Scales, to gain the Great Jackal's favor to his side. For all our toils and efforts, Queen Mayat asked our family to do what we have always done best: settle right behind the frontlines, in this case, in the Oryx province, to make sure bellies were full and temples were built. Although, with the jackalheaded god against us, that was easier said than done.

War, as I have said before, is a bloody, messy affair. Every day, our army's foremen would come to town and request the most unjust of exchanges, taking away the young and strong, and returning a few cripples while the rest had their souls sent to severe Anubis, their corpses left on the battlefield for the jackals to feast upon. But perhaps that is the price the gods want us to pay; just as the Nile




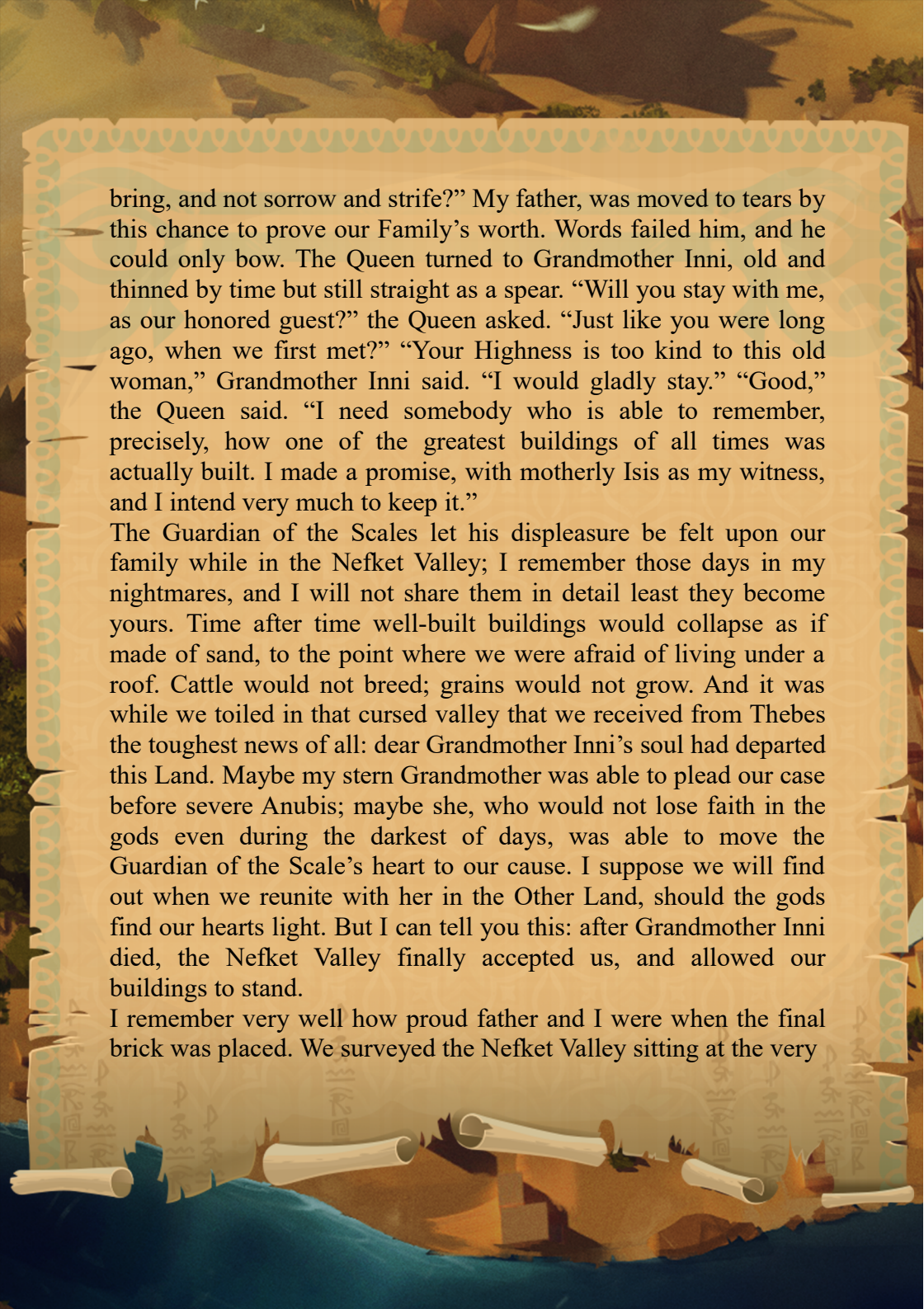
must flood the land to make it fertile, perhaps kingdoms must be soaked in blood from time to time, to rid us of cruelty. By the time the soil had drunk so much that the Black Lands had turned red, the Toeless King's soldiers were crushed, Queen Mayat's army stood victorious, and HenenNesut was a defeated city just free for the taking.

And thus, it was over. Just like the sun follows even the longest night, peace follows even the longest war. Injustice exists in abundance, but evil can never succeed in the long run. Deserted by his own men, his palace surrounded, Akhtoes is said to have turned mad and jumped into the Nile, where he was reunited with his toes when great Sobek sent his holy crocodiles to make the former King pay for his heinous crimes. Some say Queen Mayat, others said a satisfied Bastet, ordered her soldiers to stand down and spare the lives of citizens and soldiers of Henen-Nesut. Peace was upon us at last. The war was over.

The Cursed Land

Nobody would imagine it now, but there was a time when the Nefket Valley was known as the Cursed Land: grains would not grow there, cattle would not thrive, and even the strongest buildings would collapse without reason. "I rule not over rivers and valleys, but over souls and hearts," Queen Mayat told my father. "The Nefket Valley lies in the Jackal Province, in the middle of what were once Akhtoes' lands. Will your family conquer it for me, so I can show before gods and men that it is peace and life that I

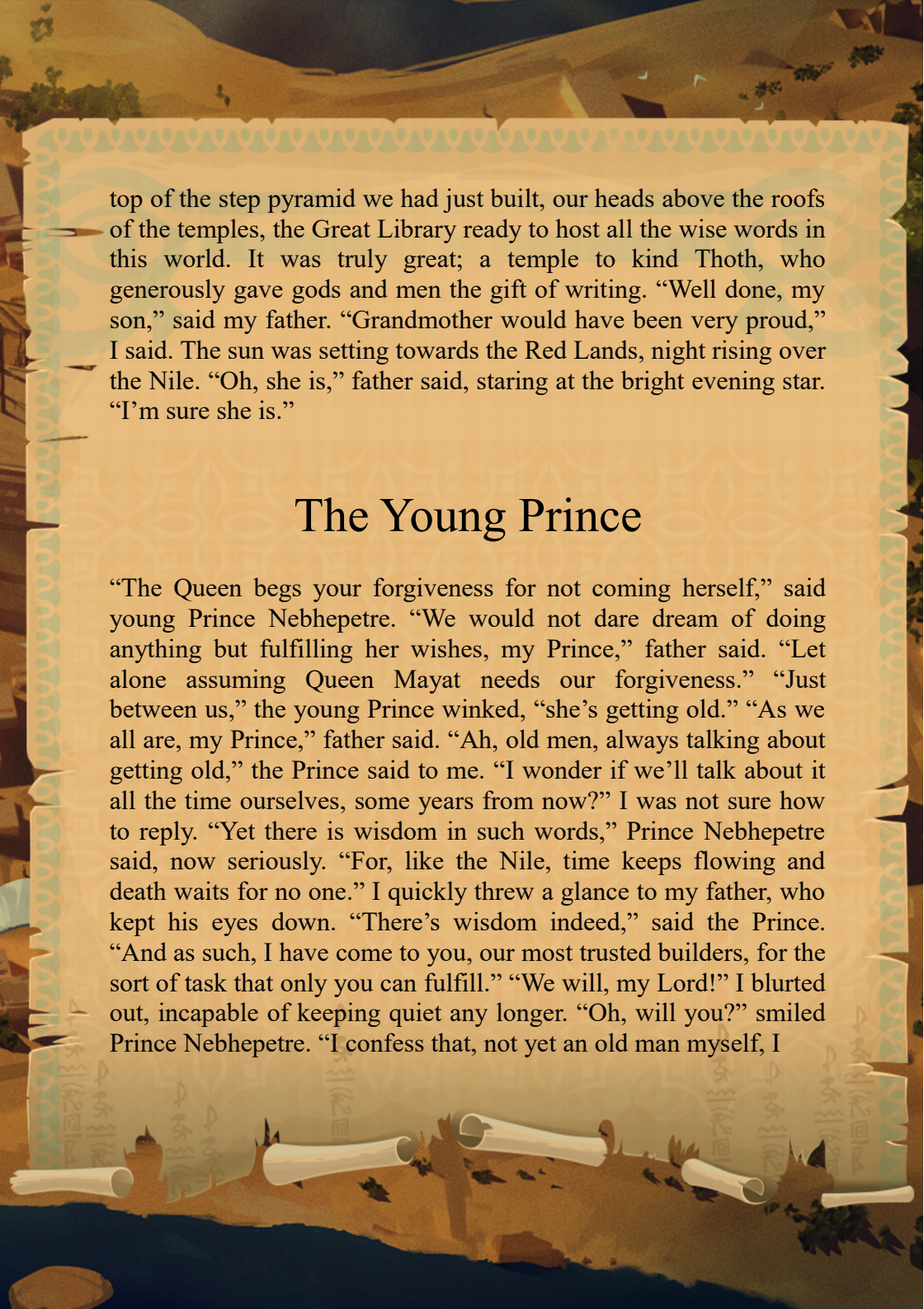




bring, and not sorrow and strife?" My father, was moved to tears by this chance to prove our Family's worth. Words failed him, and he could only bow. The Queen turned to Grandmother Inni, old and thinned by time but still straight as a spear. "Will you stay with me, as our honored guest?" the Queen asked. "Just like you were long ago, when we first met?" "Your Highness is too kind to this old woman," Grandmother Inni said. "I would gladly stay." "Good," the Queen said. "I need somebody who is able to remember, precisely, how one of the greatest buildings of all times was actually built. I made a promise, with motherly Isis as my witness, and I intend very much to keep it."

The Guardian of the Scales let his displeasure be felt upon our family while in the Nefket Valley; I remember those days in my nightmares, and I will not share them in detail lest they become yours. Time after time well-built buildings would collapse as if made of sand, to the point where we were afraid of living under a roof. Cattle would not breed; grains would not grow. And it was while we toiled in that cursed valley that we received from Thebes the toughest news of all: dear Grandmother Inni's soul had departed this Land. Maybe my stern Grandmother was able to plead our case before severe Anubis; maybe she, who would not lose faith in the gods even during the darkest of days, was able to move the Guardian of the Scale's heart to our cause. I suppose we will find out when we reunite with her in the Other Land, should the gods find our hearts light. But I can tell you this: after Grandmother Inni died, the Nefket Valley finally accepted us, and allowed our buildings to stand.


I remember very well how proud father and I were when the final brick was placed. We surveyed the Nefket Valley sitting at the very

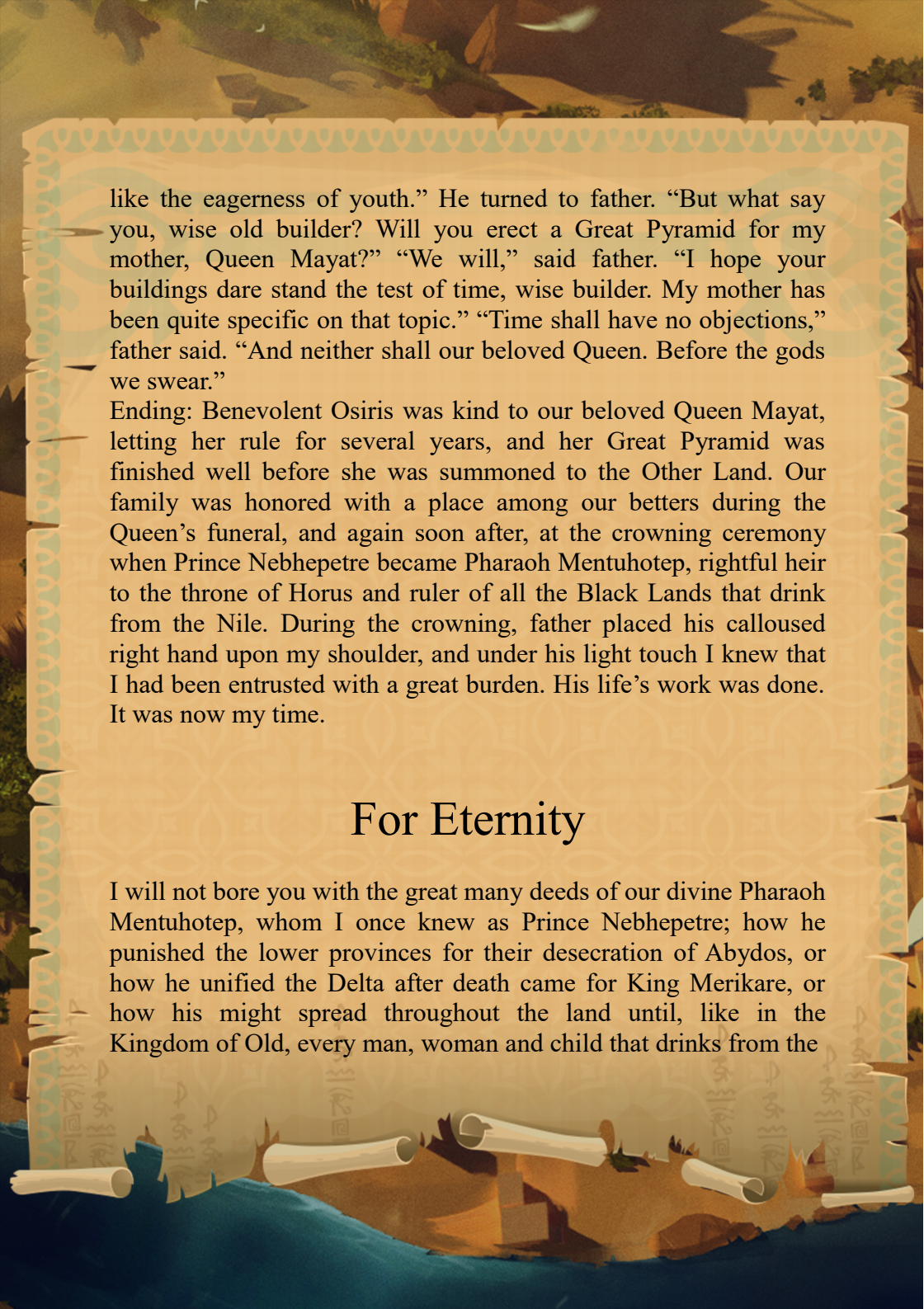


top of the step pyramid we had just built, our heads above the roofs of the temples, the Great Library ready to host all the wise words in this world. It was truly great; a temple to kind Thoth, who generously gave gods and men the gift of writing. “Well done, my son,” said my father. “Grandmother would have been very proud,” I said. The sun was setting towards the Red Lands, night rising over the Nile. “Oh, she is,” father said, staring at the bright evening star. “I’m sure she is.”

The Young Prince

“The Queen begs your forgiveness for not coming herself,” said young Prince Nebhepetre. “We would not dare dream of doing anything but fulfilling her wishes, my Prince,” father said. “Let alone assuming Queen Mayat needs our forgiveness.” “Just between us,” the young Prince winked, “she’s getting old.” “As we all are, my Prince,” father said. “Ah, old men, always talking about getting old,” the Prince said to me. “I wonder if we’ll talk about it all the time ourselves, some years from now?” I was not sure how to reply. “Yet there is wisdom in such words,” Prince Nebhepetre said, now seriously. “For, like the Nile, time keeps flowing and death waits for no one.” I quickly threw a glance to my father, who kept his eyes down. “There’s wisdom indeed,” said the Prince. “And as such, I have come to you, our most trusted builders, for the sort of task that only you can fulfill.” “We will, my Lord!” I blurted out, incapable of keeping quiet any longer. “Oh, will you?” smiled Prince Nebhepetre. “I confess that, not yet an old man myself, I







like the eagerness of youth.” He turned to father. “But what say you, wise old builder? Will you erect a Great Pyramid for my mother, Queen Mayat?” “We will,” said father. “I hope your buildings dare stand the test of time, wise builder. My mother has been quite specific on that topic.” “Time shall have no objections,” father said. “And neither shall our beloved Queen. Before the gods we swear.”

Ending: Benevolent Osiris was kind to our beloved Queen Mayat, letting her rule for several years, and her Great Pyramid was finished well before she was summoned to the Other Land. Our family was honored with a place among our betters during the Queen’s funeral, and again soon after, at the crowning ceremony when Prince Nebhepetre became Pharaoh Mentuhotep, rightful heir to the throne of Horus and ruler of all the Black Lands that drink from the Nile. During the crowning, father placed his calloused right hand upon my shoulder, and under his light touch I knew that I had been entrusted with a great burden. His life’s work was done. It was now my time.

For Eternity

I will not bore you with the great many deeds of our divine Pharaoh Mentuhotep, whom I once knew as Prince Nebhepetre; how he punished the lower provinces for their desecration of Abydos, or how he unified the Delta after death came for King Merikare, or how his might spread throughout the land until, like in the Kingdom of Old, every man, woman and child that drinks from the






Nile were under the Pharaoh's command. I shall only tell you of the humble part that this Son of Horus deemed me fit to play, and for my part in this story I shall be brief, because by now it is a part you know well. The Pharaoh commands, and our family serves. For victory, like life, is fleeting; all men in this land must die, all things in this world must crumble, and only death lasts forever. Death, and the Great Pyramids we build for those that sit on the Throne of Horus. Only they are for eternity.


Do you see that tomb over there, under the shadow of our beloved Pharaoh's Great Pyramid? That is our own tomb. From our humble origins in a swampy village, by the endless toil and grim determination of our forefathers, and the great kindness of the gods and our divine rulers, our family has finally earned a place in the afterlife, here at the right hand of the Pharaoh, to serve him faithfully in the Other Land just as we have served him in this one.

Epilogue

My sun now reaches its sunset. My soul is ready to travel. Soon I shall reunite with our forefathers, and my father, and dear Grandmother Inni.

But I shall also be reunited with our other family. A family that was born at the birth of the Old Kingdom, when many dynasties ago, the wise Imhotep, blessed by kind Thoth, built for King Djoser the very first pyramid.



The background of the page is a stylized illustration of an ancient Egyptian landscape. At the top, a river flows through a desert landscape with some greenery and a small boat. Below the river, a large, light-colored scroll with a repeating geometric pattern (a series of interlocking circles and squares) covers most of the page. The scroll has a decorative border with a scalloped edge. At the bottom of the page, there are several smaller scrolls and a small pyramid, all set against a dark blue background that suggests a night sky or a body of water.

A family line tied not by blood, but through mind and spirit.

A line as long as the Nile, as ancient as Egypt, that will survive wars, plagues and royal dynasties. A family that will test time itself: the family that build the Pyramids.