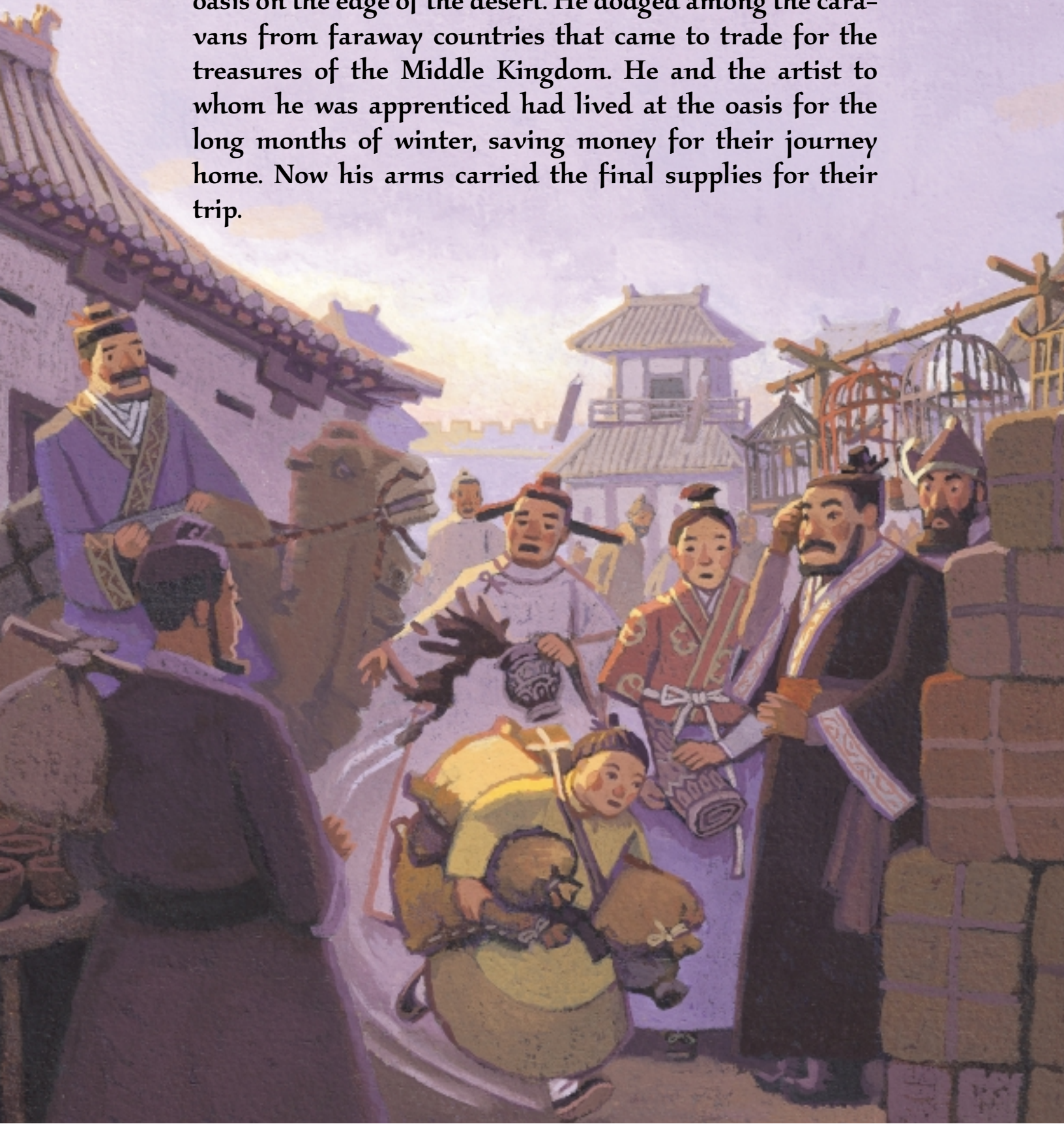


## THE WARLORD'S PUPPETEERS

**M**any years ago in China, a boy named Chuan scurried through the marketplace in a bustling oasis on the edge of the desert. He dodged among the caravans from faraway countries that came to trade for the treasures of the Middle Kingdom. He and the artist to whom he was apprenticed had lived at the oasis for the long months of winter, saving money for their journey home. Now his arms carried the final supplies for their trip.



"Hurry!" shouted the artist the moment he saw Chuan. "A group of travelers is leaving this morning for the river near our warlord's palace." He snatched bags of rice, millet, and vegetables from Chuan's arms. "Hurry," he said again as he tucked the provisions among their belongings in a small cart.



**T**he artist set off with long strides. "It is dangerous to travel alone," he called over his shoulder. "We do not want to be left behind."

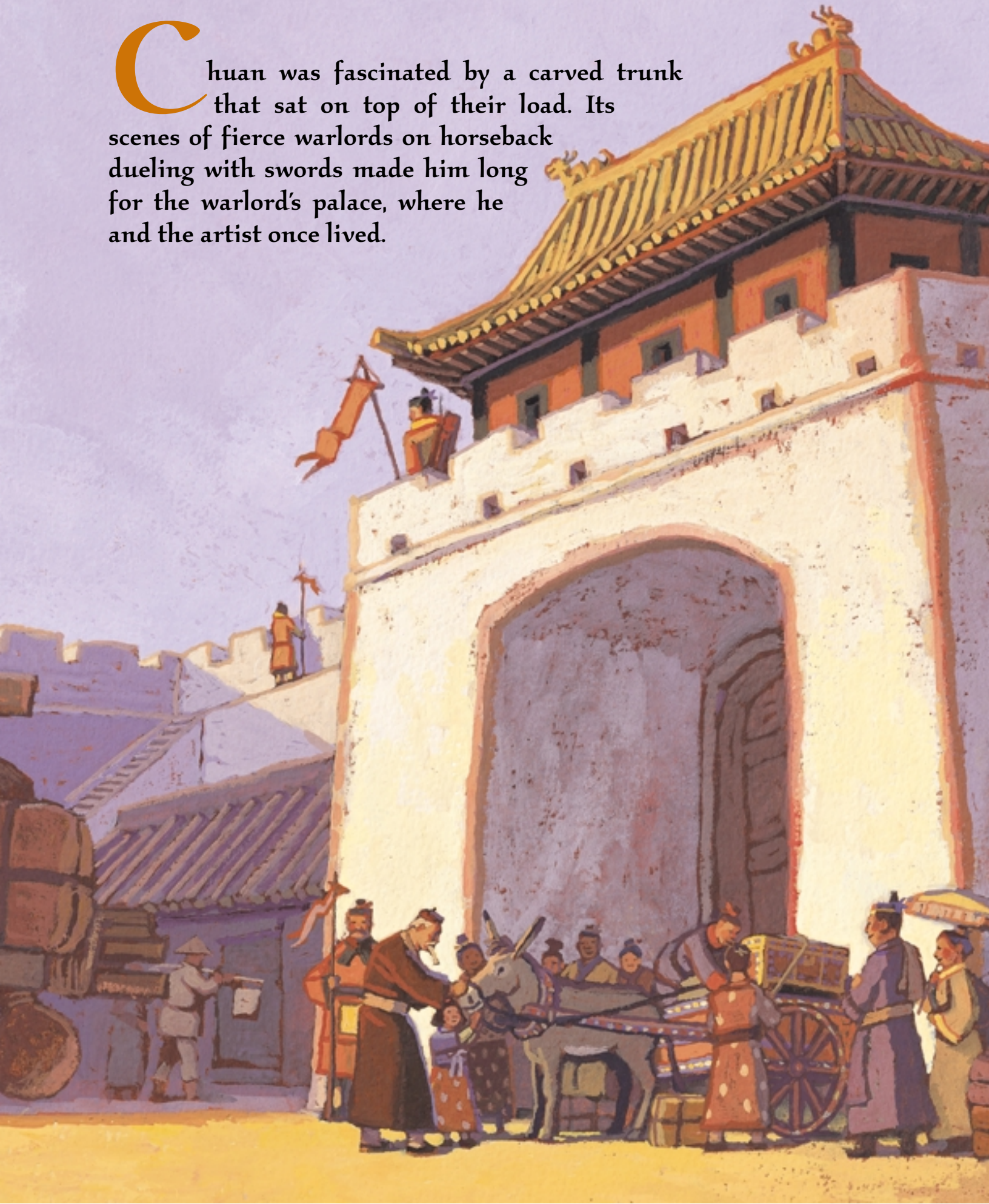
Chuan followed, pushing the cart as quickly as he could without tipping it.



**A**mong the travelers gathered at the gate, he recognized a troupe of puppeteers who had performed in the marketplace. The old puppet master and his young daughter were checking the harness that hitched their long-eared, gray donkey to a colorful, painted cart.



**C**huan was fascinated by a carved trunk that sat on top of their load. Its scenes of fierce warlords on horseback dueling with swords made him long for the warlord's palace, where he and the artist once lived.





**W**hen the little band set out, Chuan angled his cart so that he could walk near the donkey cart to get a better look. "Tell me about your trunk," he asked the puppet master's daughter when they stopped to eat and refresh themselves.

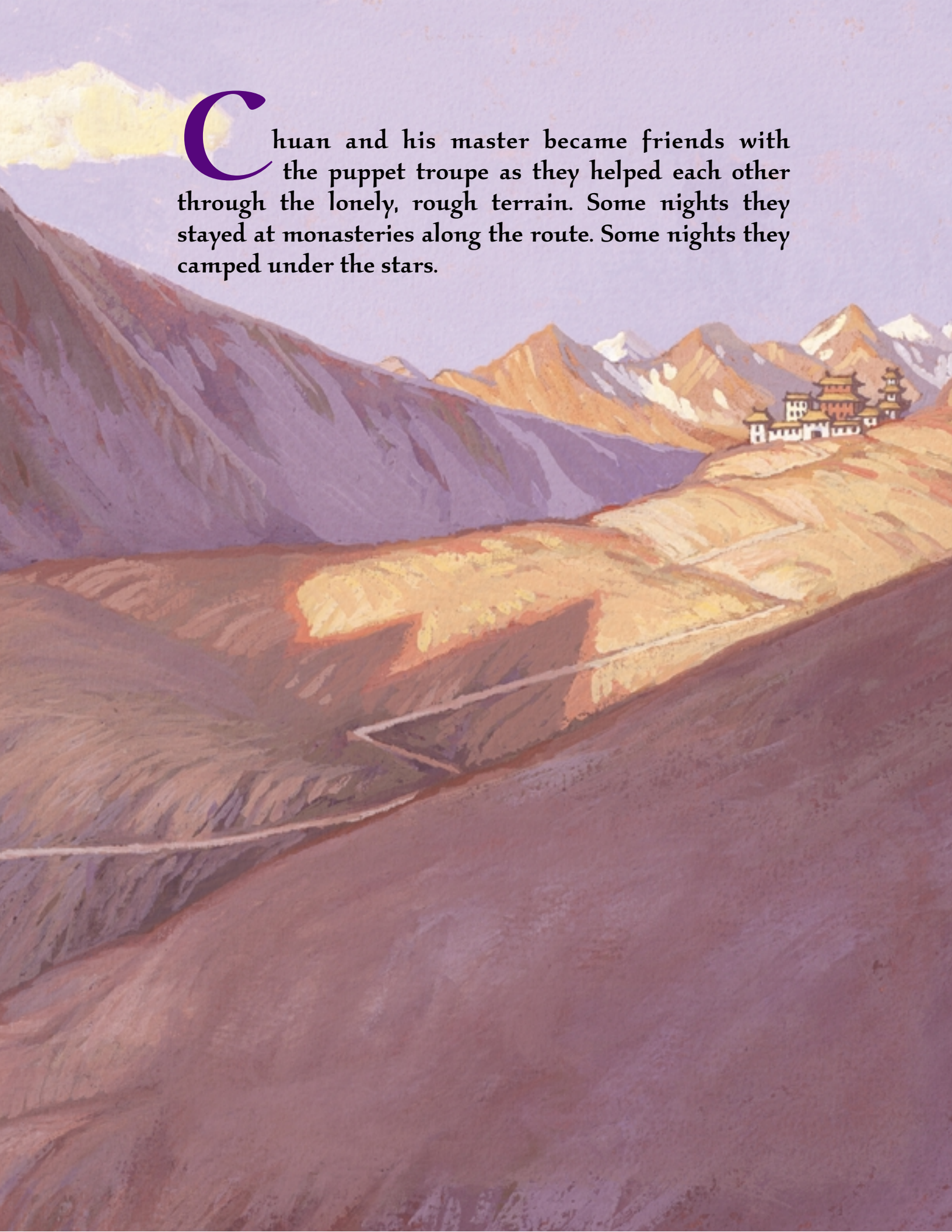
“It holds our puppets,” the girl answered, in a voice so soft that Chuan had to lean forward to hear.

“Our family has been puppeteers for generations,” said one of her older brothers, opening the trunk to allow Chuan to peek in. “My father buys only puppets made from the finest camphor wood. Each head takes the carver three months to create.”







A painting of a mountainous landscape. In the foreground, a steep, brownish-purple slope descends from the right. A narrow, winding path leads up the slope towards a cluster of traditional Chinese-style buildings with yellow roofs and white walls, situated on a hillside. The background features more rugged, brown and purple mountains under a pale, hazy sky. The overall style is painterly and atmospheric.

**C**huan and his master became friends with the puppet troupe as they helped each other through the lonely, rough terrain. Some nights they stayed at monasteries along the route. Some nights they camped under the stars.



Early one morning, riders appeared over a ridge, waving swords and shouting. "Bandits!" cried the artist.

"Give us your valuables!" the bandits screamed. Their snorting horses reared and pranced, sending clouds of dust over the camp.

