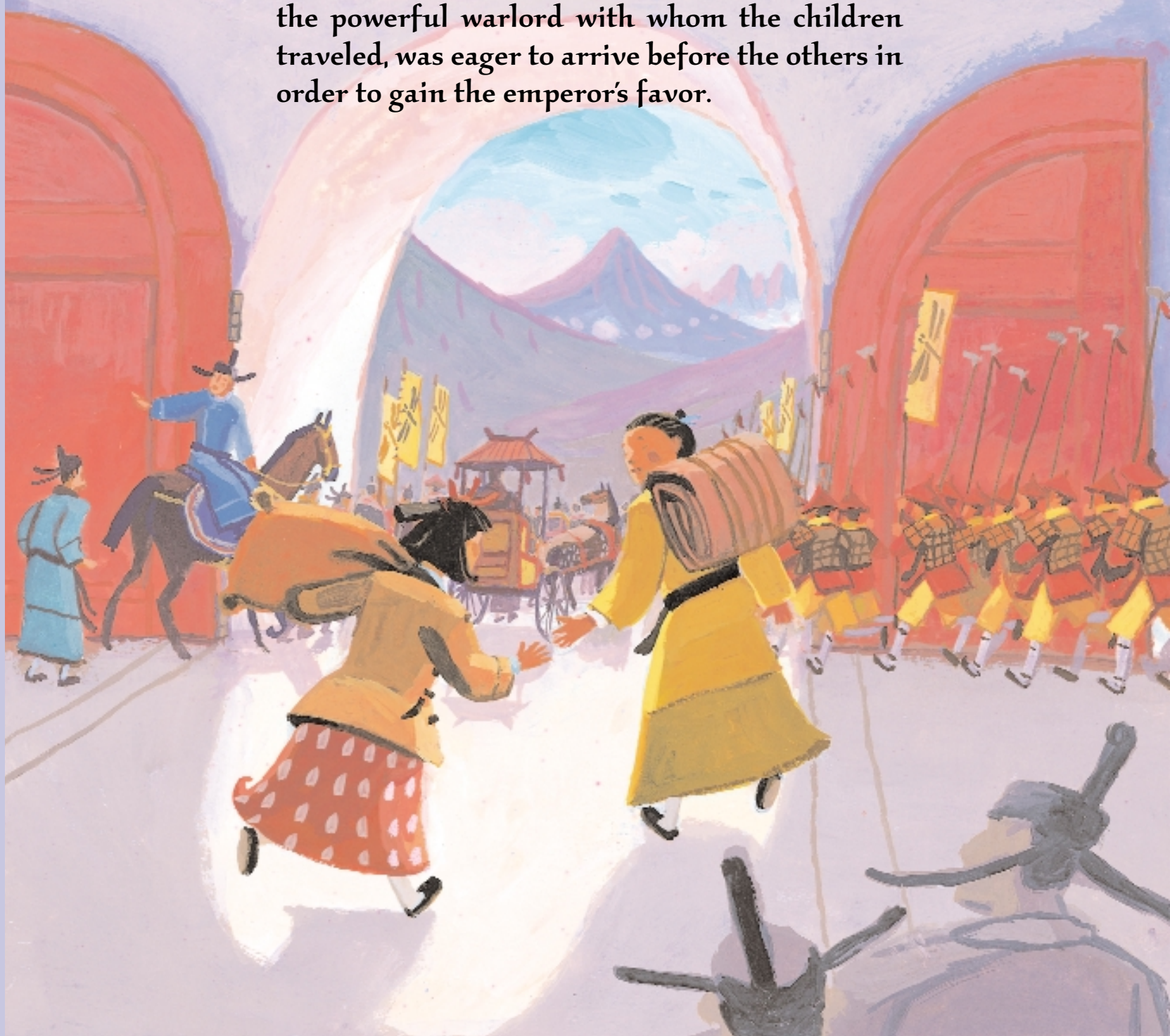
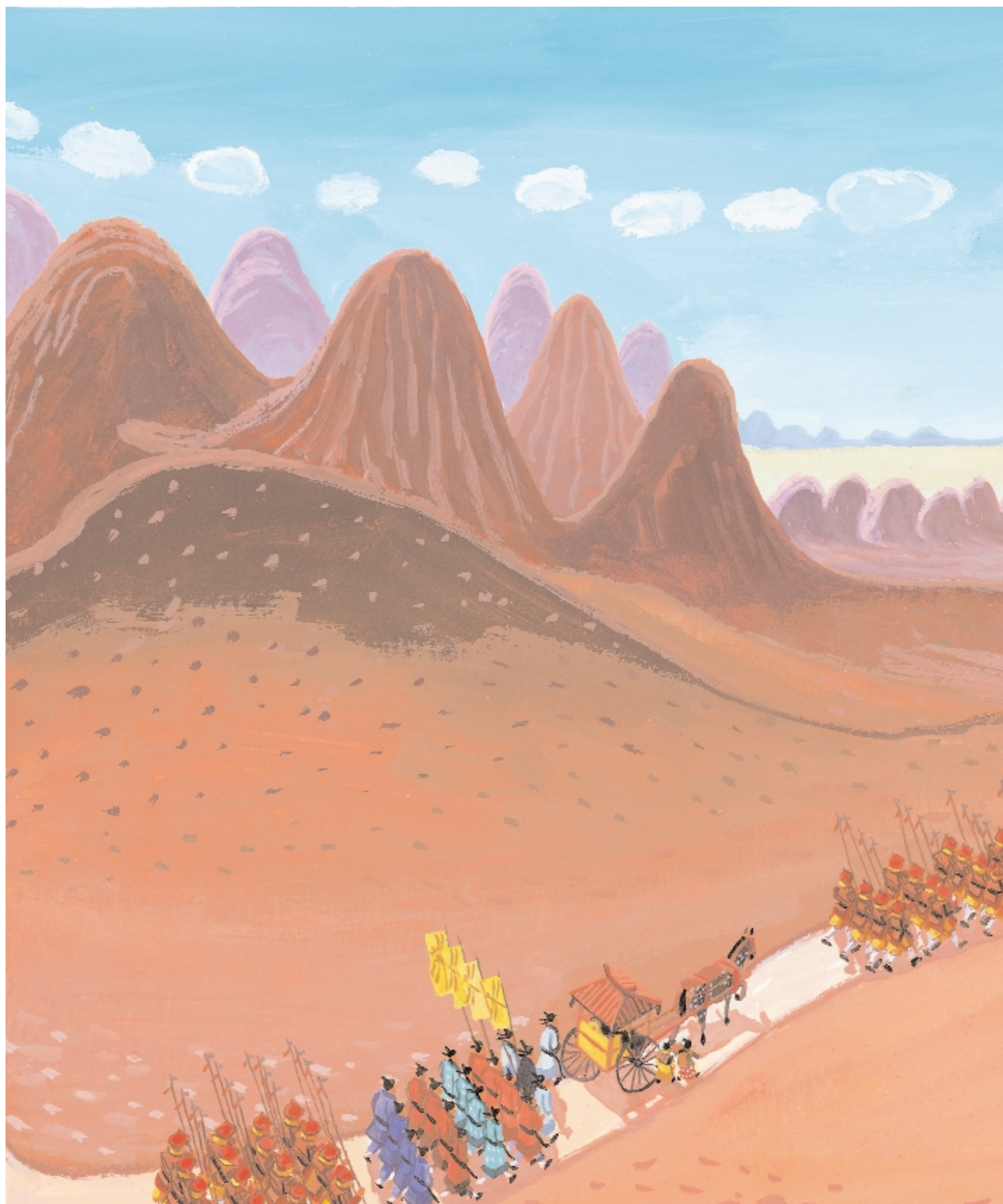


## THE WARLORD'S ALARM

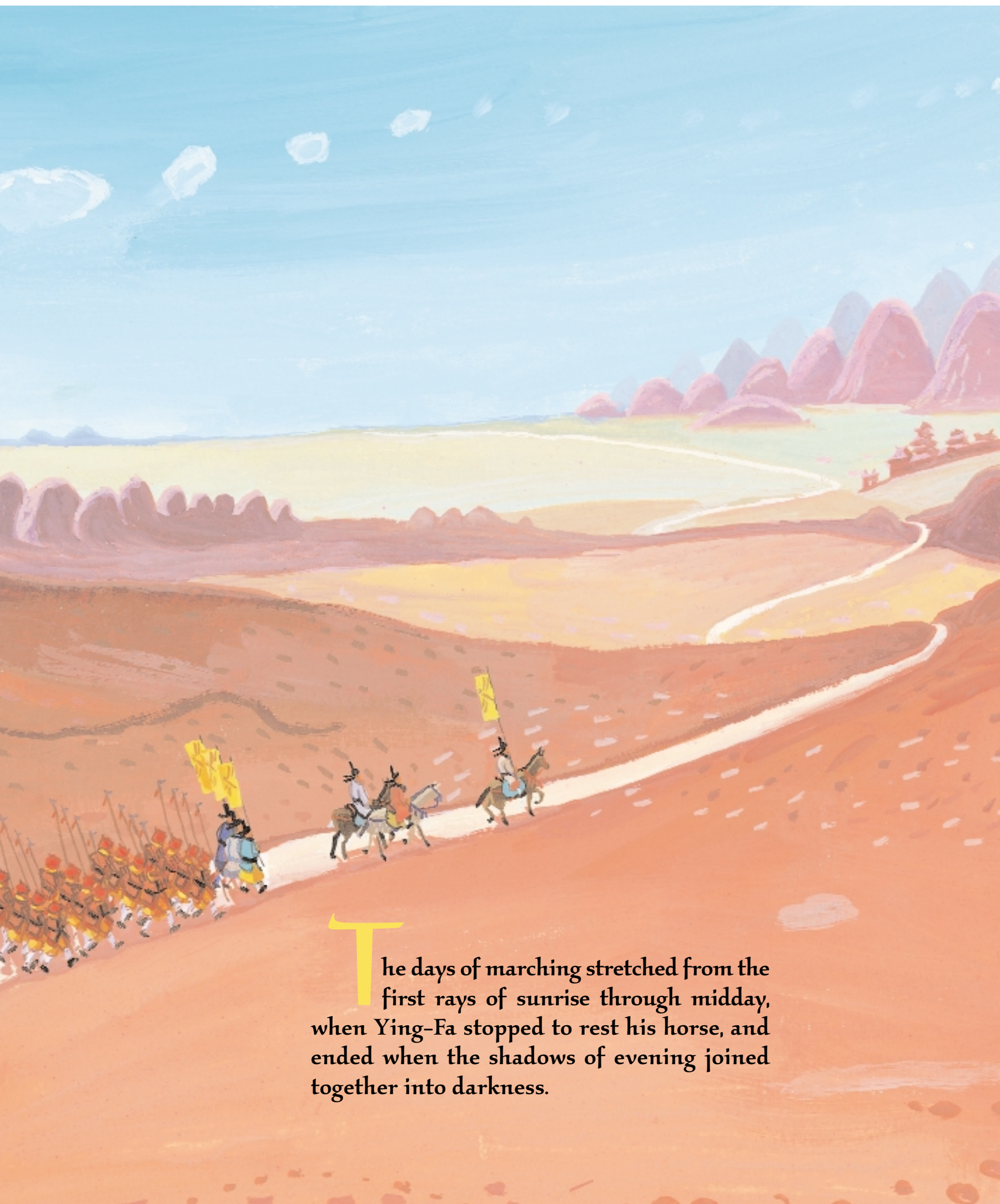
**M**any years ago in China, a young boy named Chuan and his friend Jing set out on a journey to the city of the emperor. It was a time of unrest in the Middle Kingdom. The emperor had invited all of his military governors to a feast in order to determine which ones remained loyal to him. Ying-Fa, the powerful warlord with whom the children traveled, was eager to arrive before the others in order to gain the emperor's favor.











**T**he days of marching stretched from the first rays of sunrise through midday, when Ying-Fa stopped to rest his horse, and ended when the shadows of evening joined together into darkness.





“Time passes slowly,” Chuan grumbled.



“Each day passes in the time it takes for my leather water bag to empty,” said Jing Jing. “I fill it every morning and it leaks out through this tiny hole by nightfall.” She wrung moisture from the bottom of her coat and made a face.





After some days they noticed more people on the road. Farmers trotted along, baskets swinging from their carrying poles. Carts heaped with vegetables rolled by. A rival warlord mounted on a fierce horse nodded at Ying-Fa as he passed and smiled a cold, haughty smile.

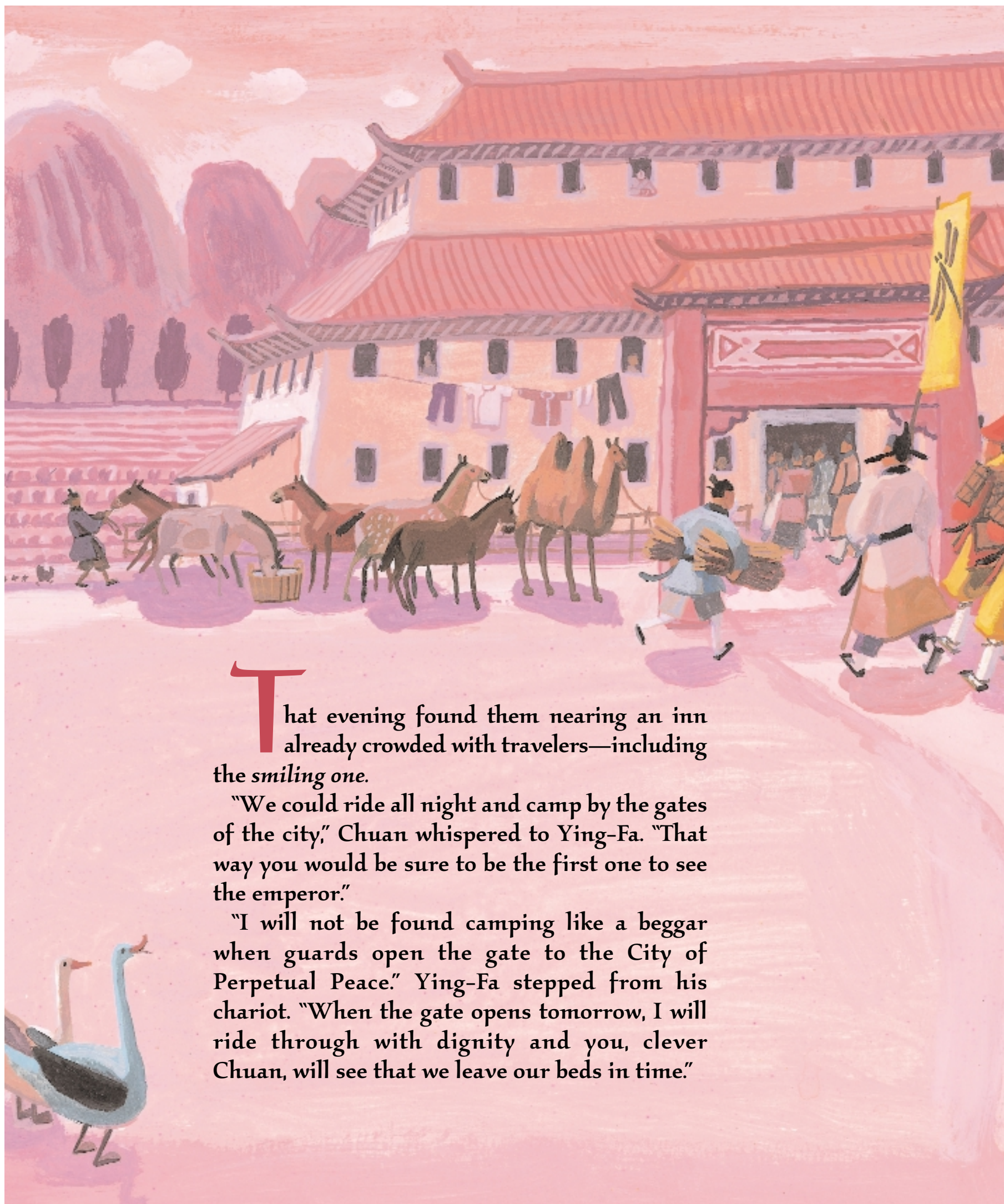






“do not trust the *smiling one*,” Ying-Fa said with a scowl. “He, too, travels to the emperor’s feast. We are less than two days from the city. If he reaches the emperor first he will tell lies and spread mischief about me.”





**T**hat evening found them nearing an inn already crowded with travelers—including the *smiling one*.

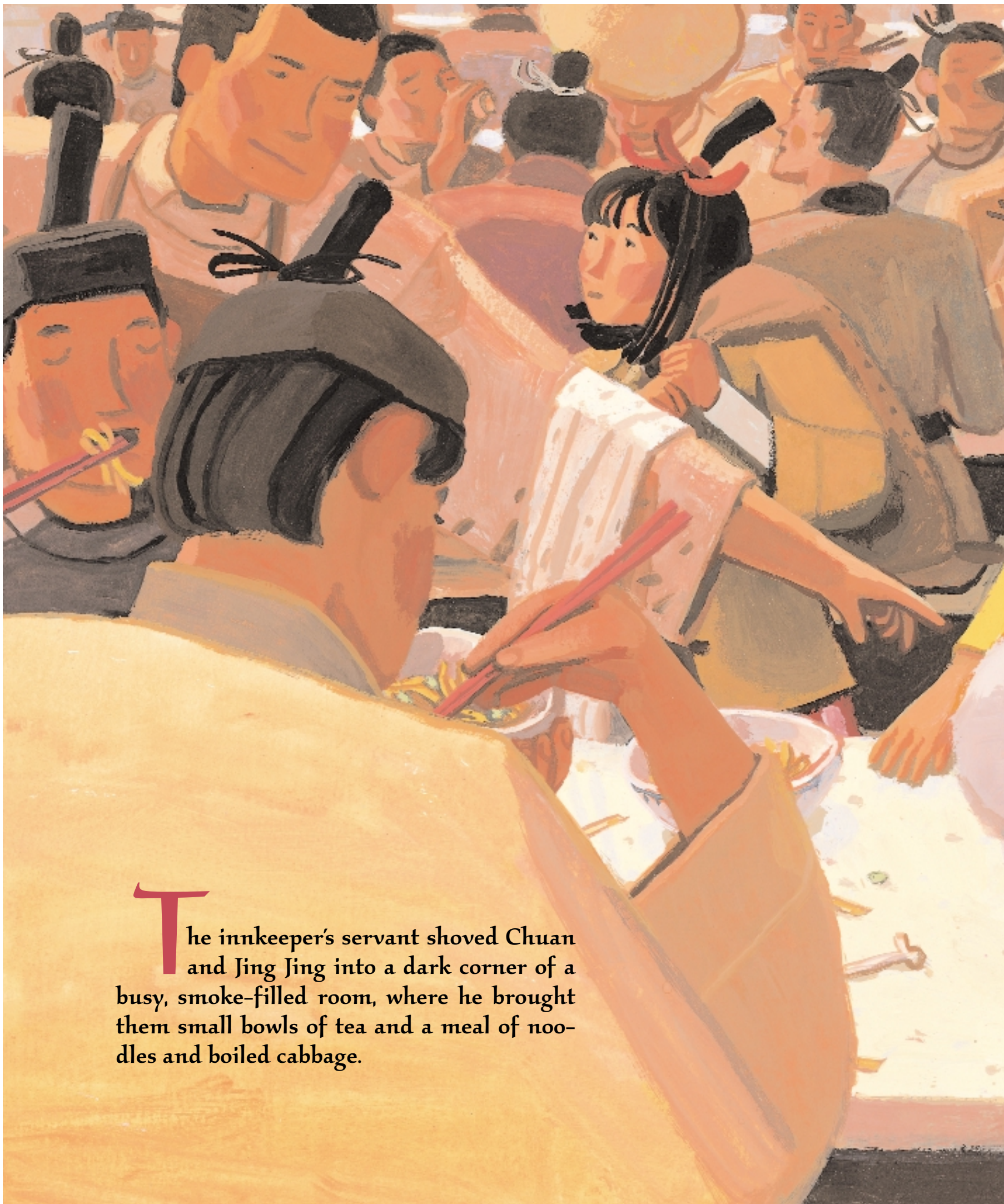
"We could ride all night and camp by the gates of the city," Chuan whispered to Ying-Fa. "That way you would be sure to be the first one to see the emperor."

"I will not be found camping like a beggar when guards open the gate to the City of Perpetual Peace," Ying-Fa stepped from his chariot. "When the gate opens tomorrow, I will ride through with dignity and you, clever Chuan, will see that we leave our beds in time."



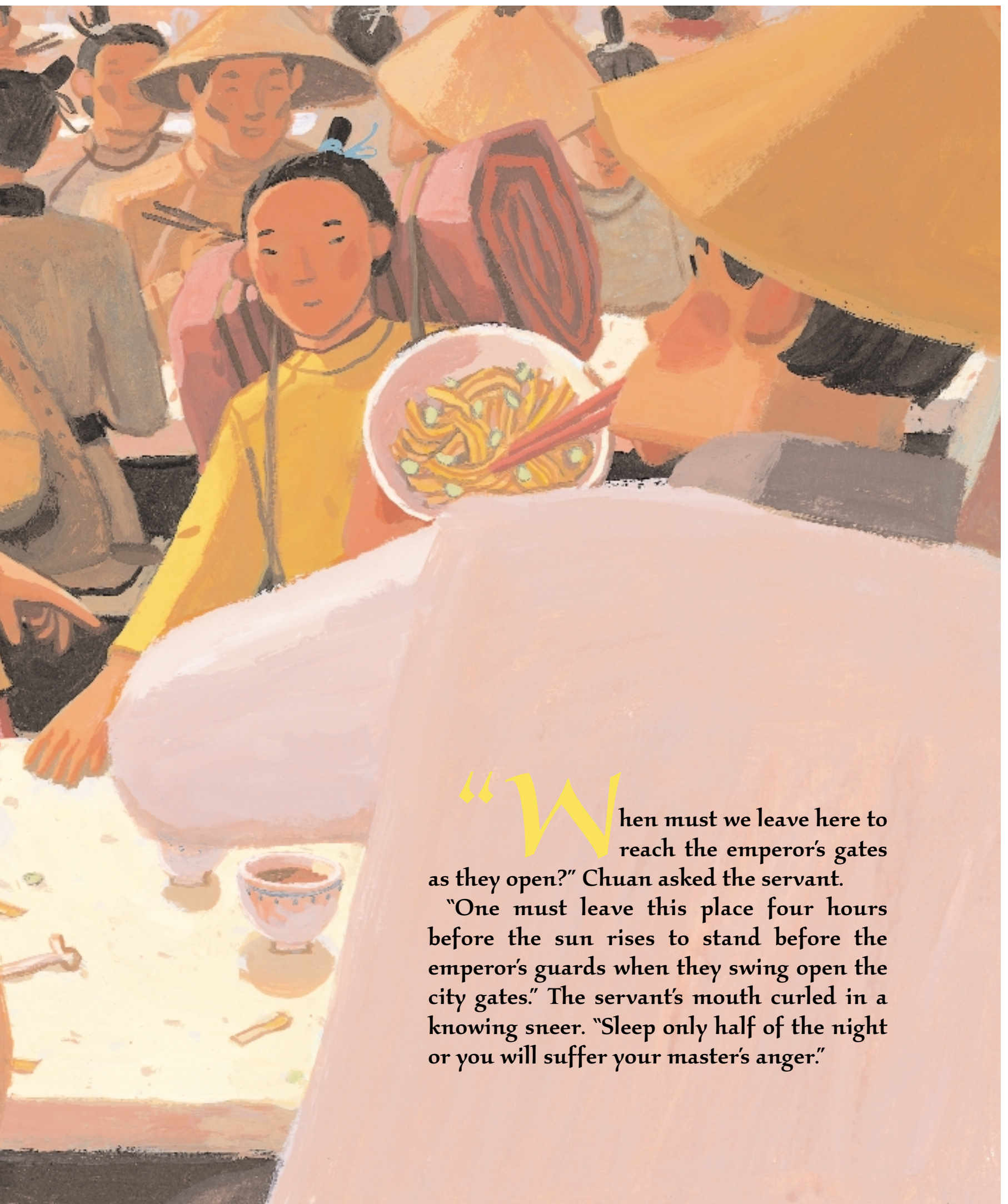






**T**he innkeeper's servant shoved Chuan and Jing Jing into a dark corner of a busy, smoke-filled room, where he brought them small bowls of tea and a meal of noodles and boiled cabbage.





“When must we leave here to reach the emperor’s gates as they open?” Chuan asked the servant.

“One must leave this place four hours before the sun rises to stand before the emperor’s guards when they swing open the city gates.” The servant’s mouth curled in a knowing sneer. “Sleep only half of the night or you will suffer your master’s anger.”