

# THE SCARAB'S SECRET

Nick Would

*Illustrated by Christina Balit*



**F**  
FRANCES LINCOLN  
CHILDREN'S BOOKS





THE PHARAOH'S PAINTERS have just finished decorating his new temple. Most of all I like the stars. Aren't they beautiful?

By special request of the Pharaoh I have been painted too. There, on the far wall, just below the man with the head of a jackal – that's me, Khepri, the scarab beetle. And this is the tale of how I came to be honoured...



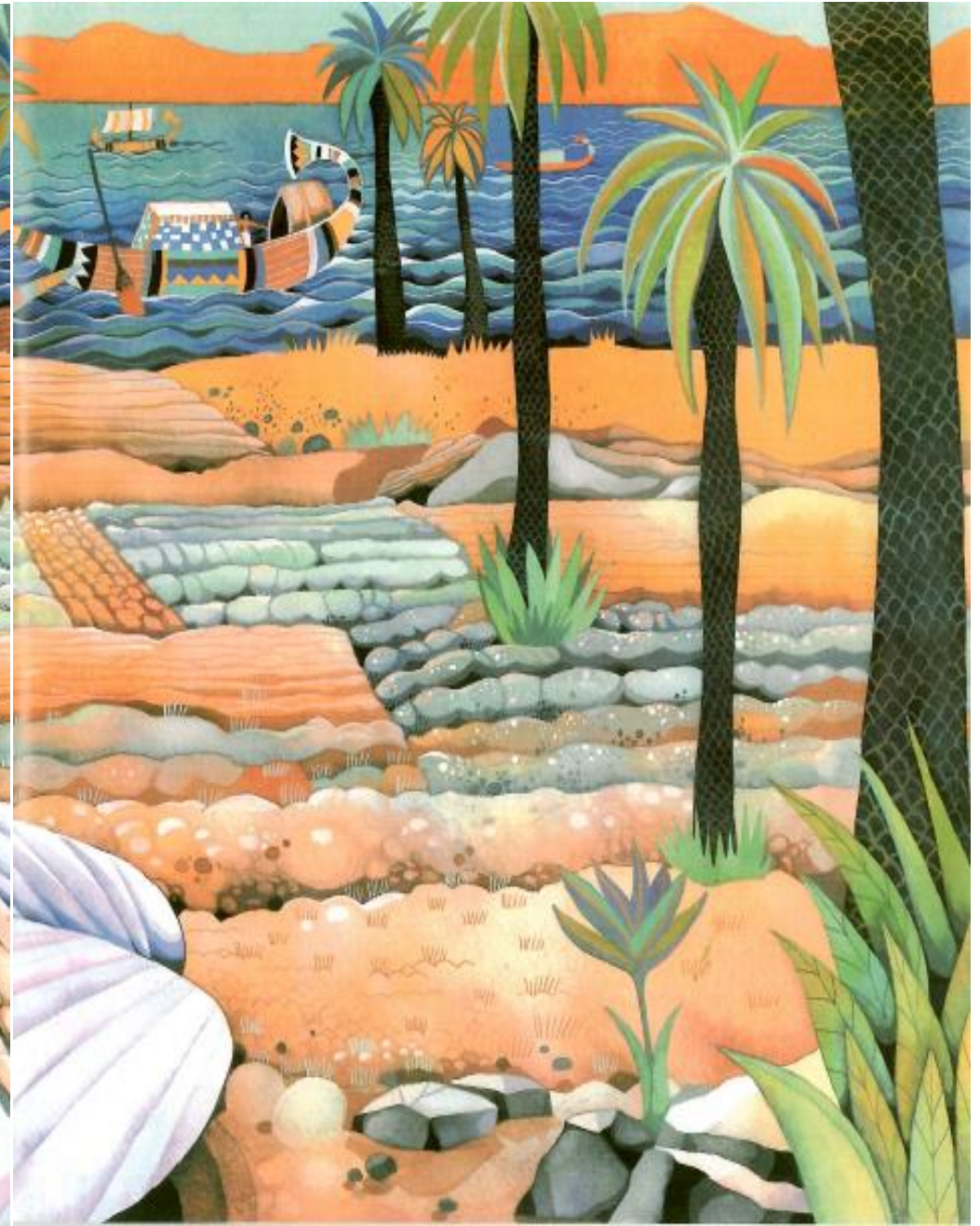
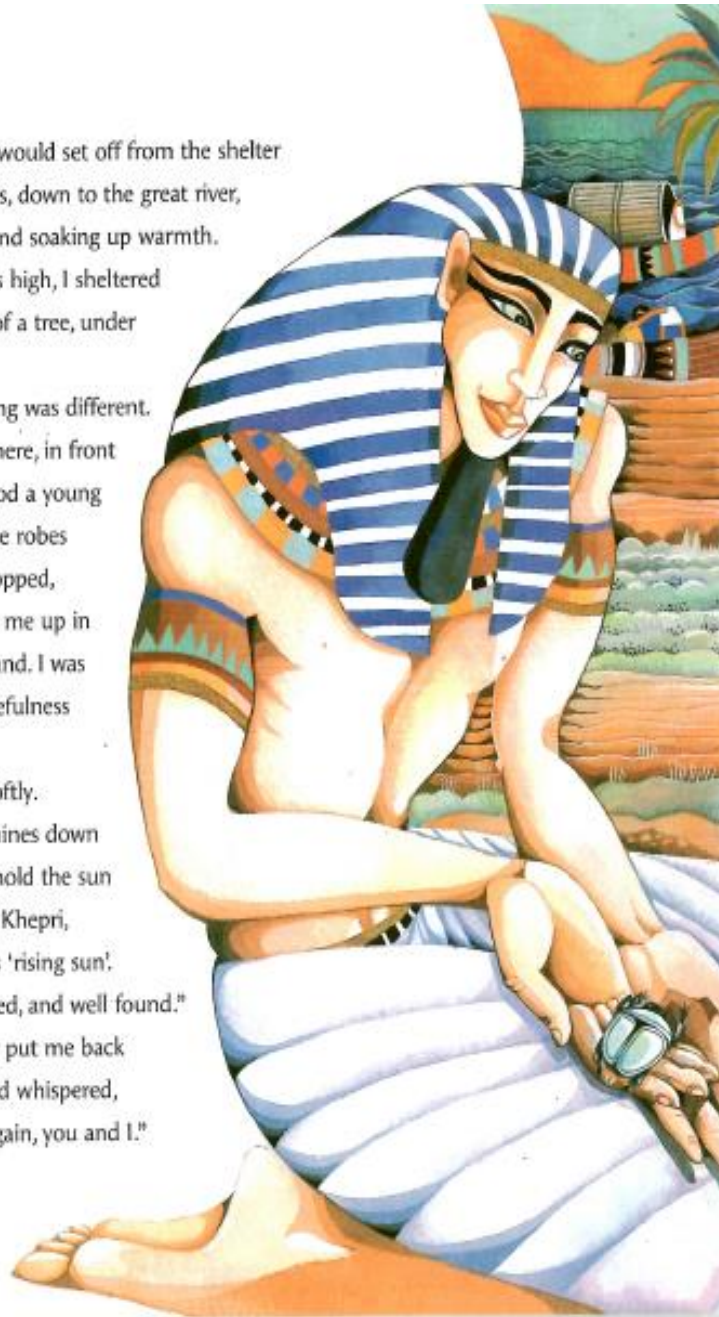


EVERY MORNING I would set off from the shelter of the temple walls, down to the great river, looking for food and soaking up warmth. When the sun was high, I sheltered among the roots of a tree, under a stone.

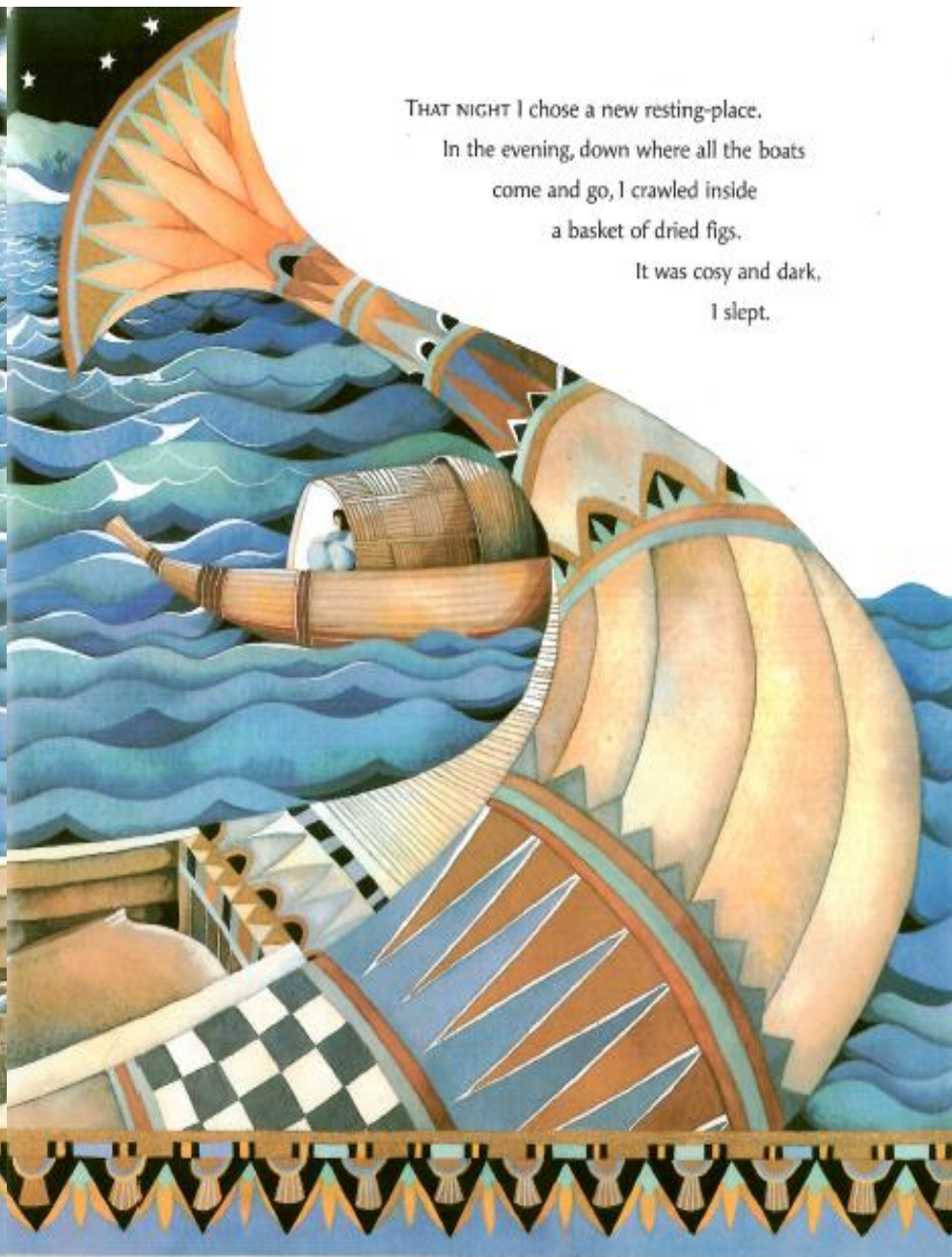
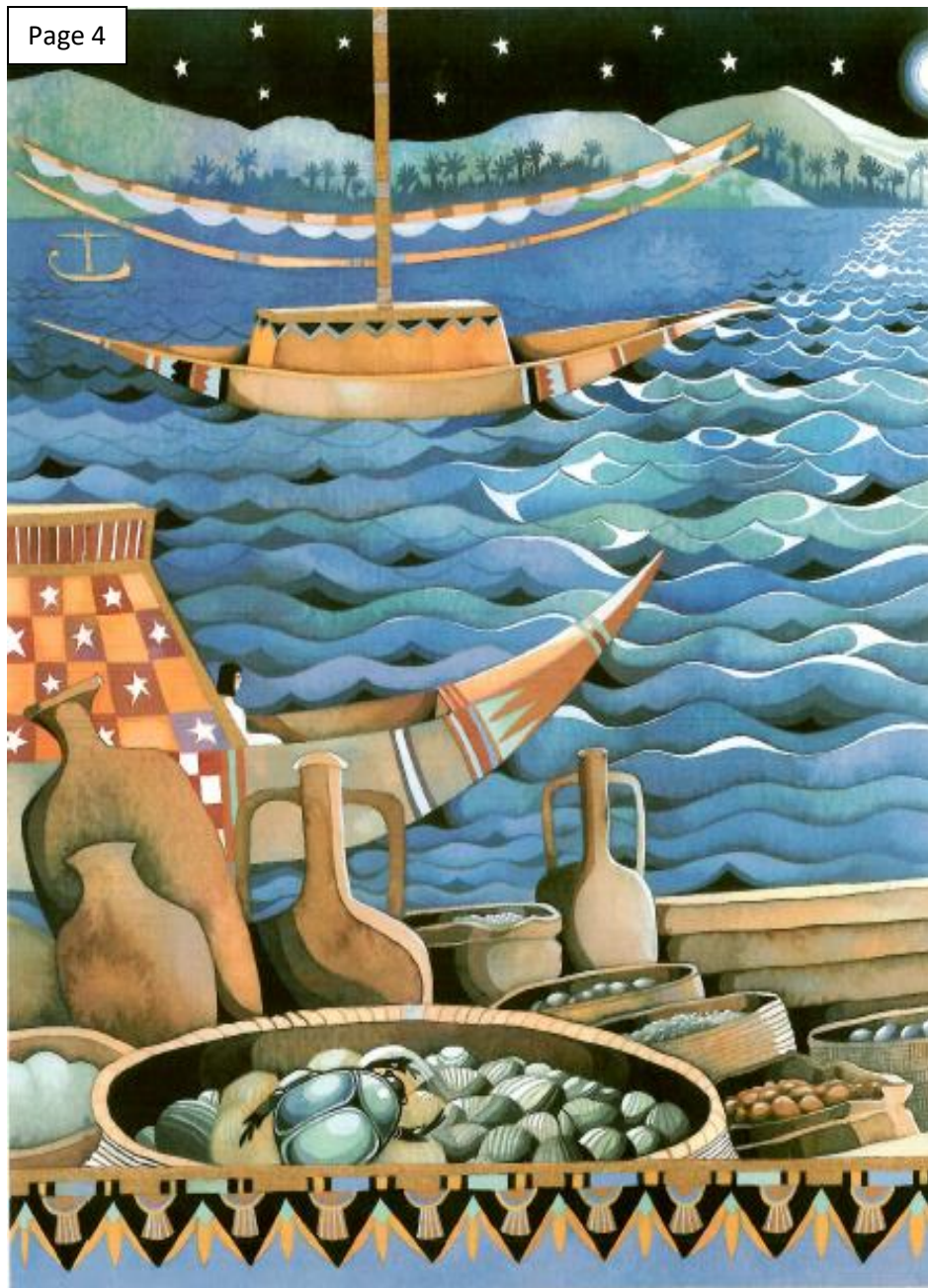
But one morning was different. I looked up and there, in front of the temple, stood a young man dressed in the robes of a prince. He stopped, bent and scooped me up in the palm of his hand. I was not afraid. A peacefulness filled me.

"So," he said softly. "The rising sun shines down on me, and yet I hold the sun in my hand – for, Khepri, your name means 'rising sun'. You are well named, and well found."

Then he gently put me back on the ground and whispered, "We shall meet again, you and I."





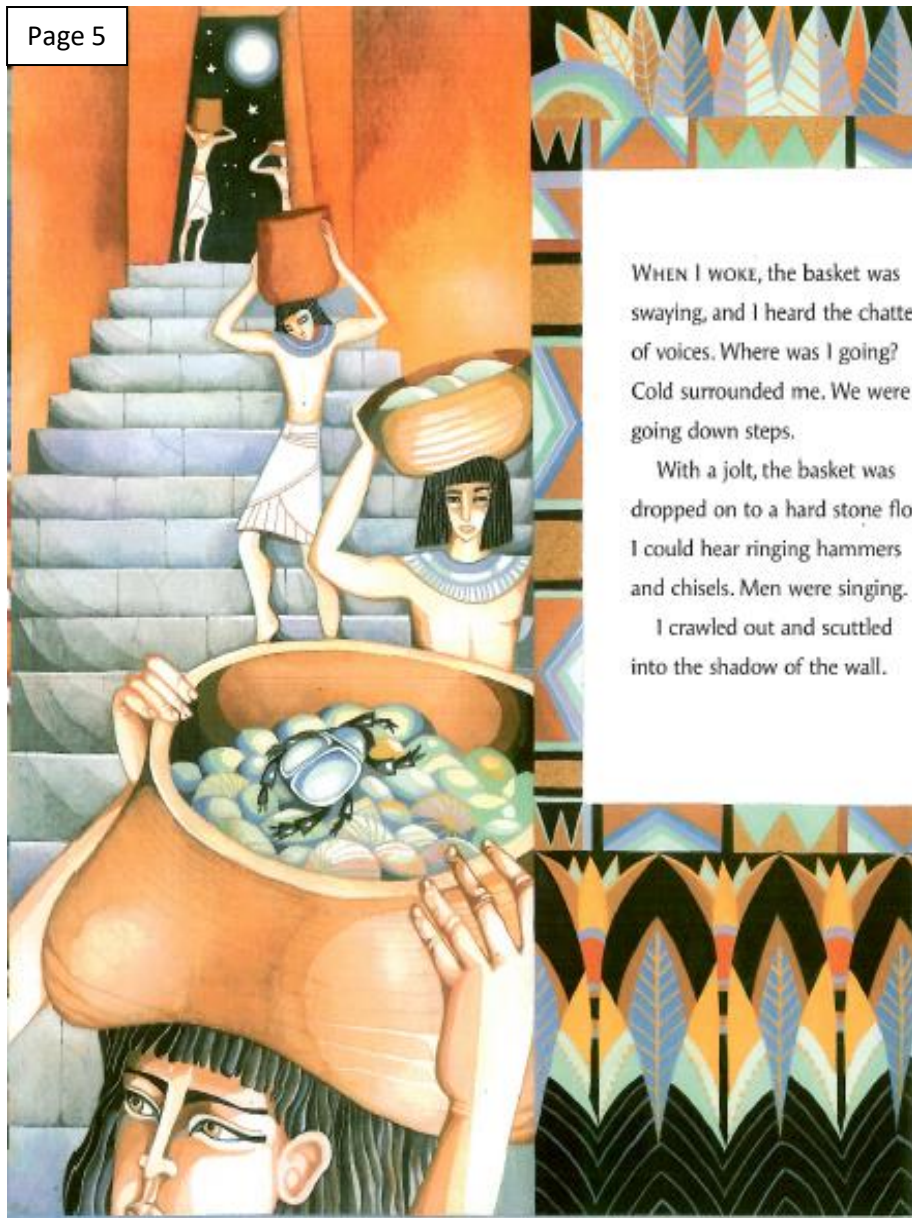


THAT NIGHT I chose a new resting-place.

In the evening, down where all the boats  
come and go, I crawled inside  
a basket of dried figs.

It was cosy and dark,  
I slept.

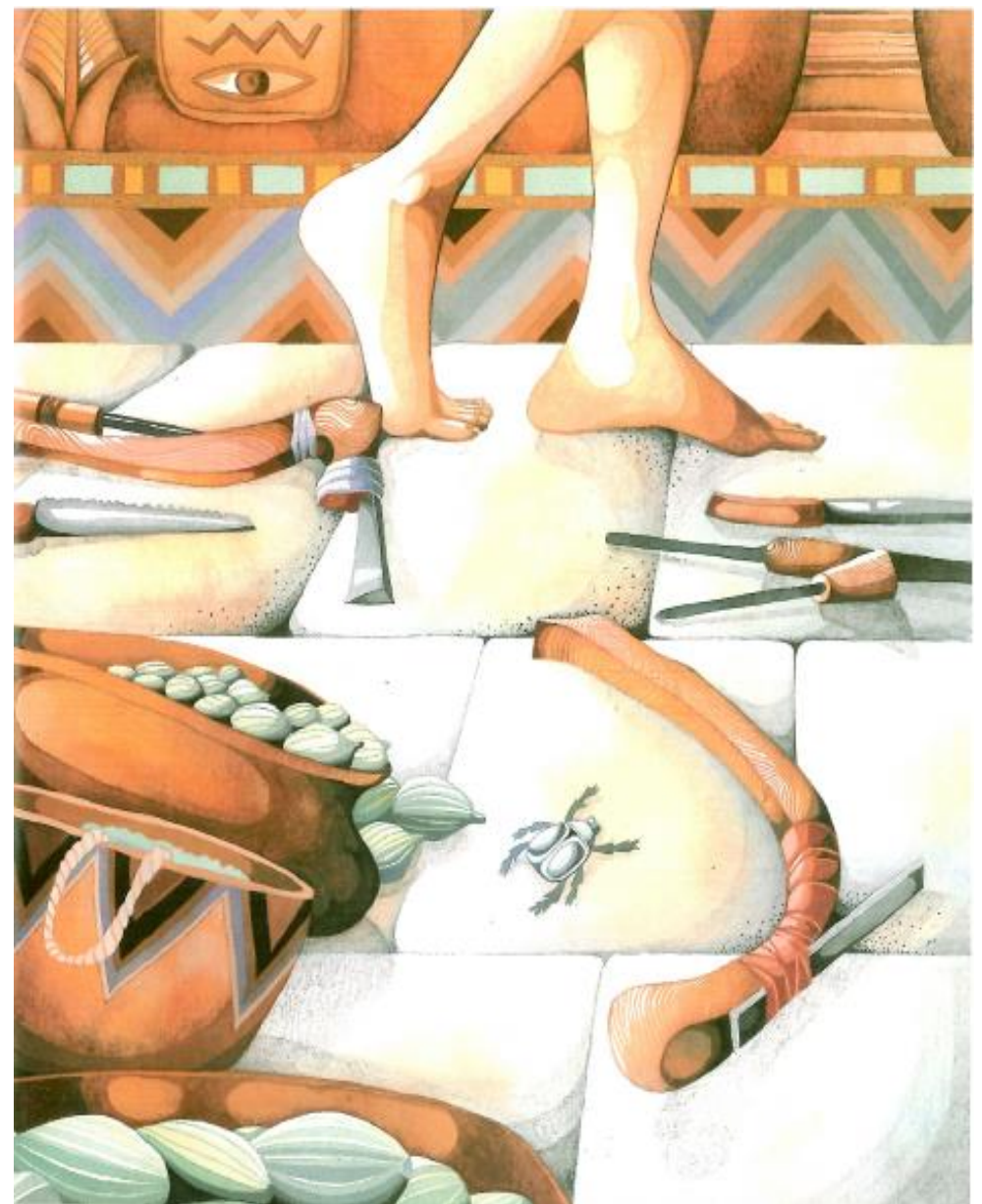




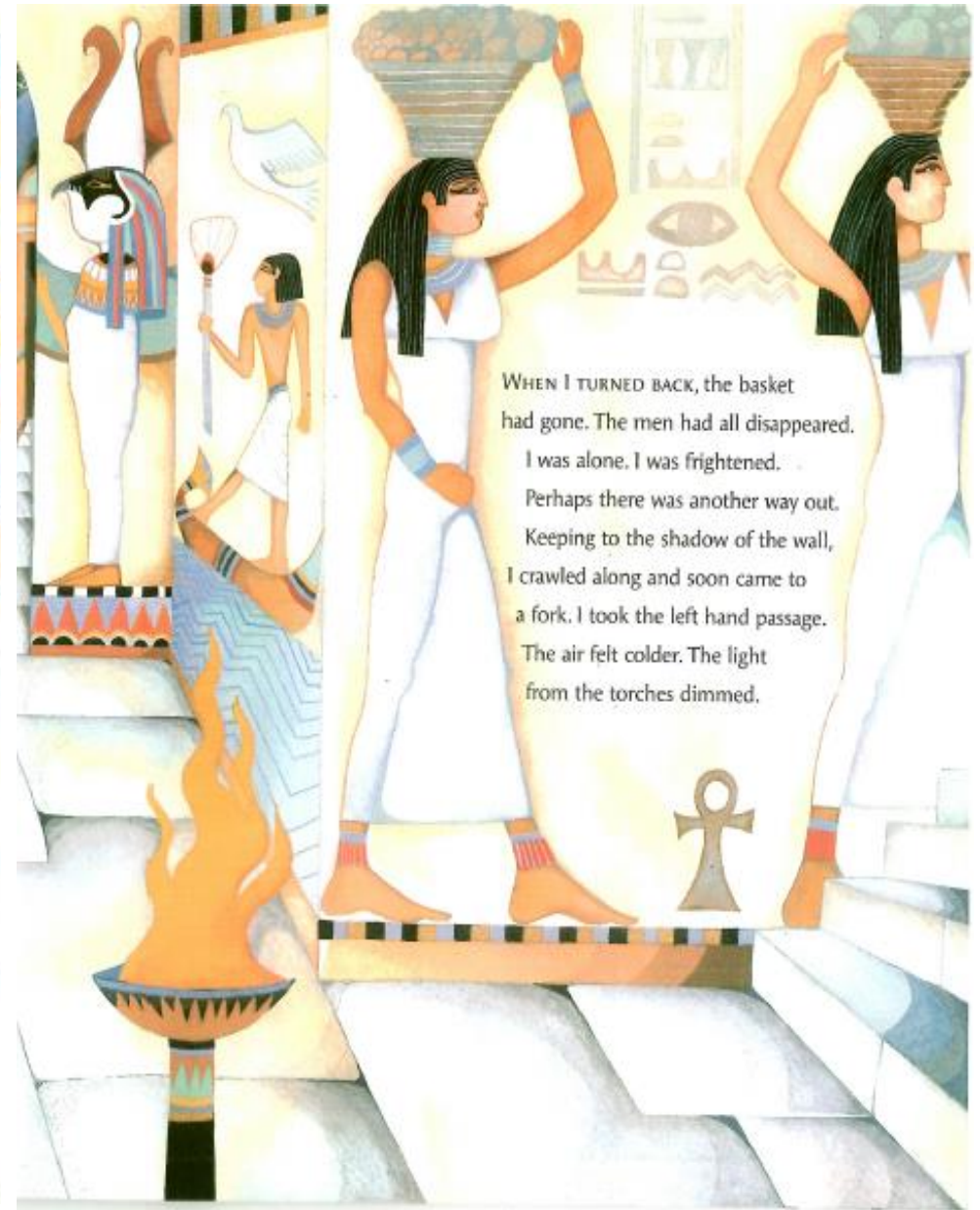
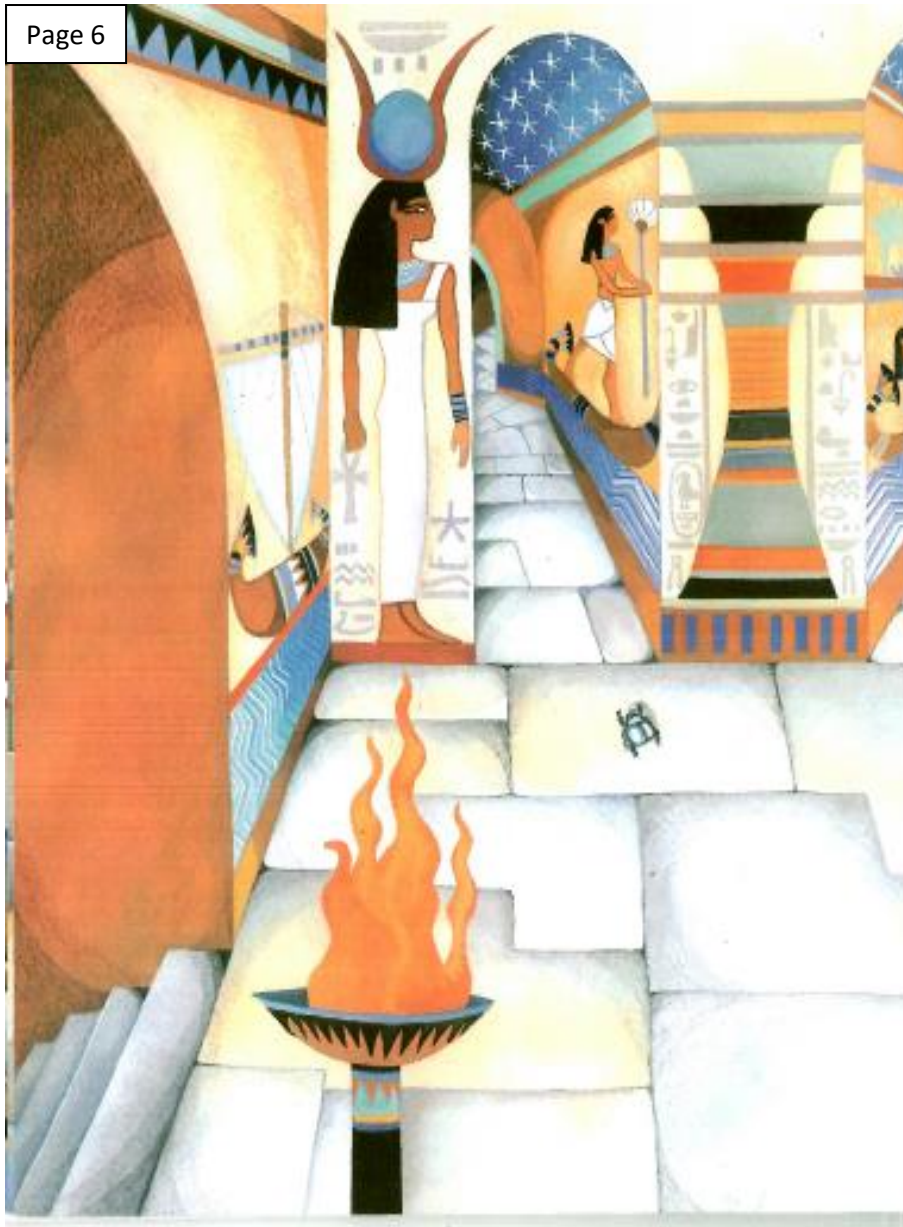
WHEN I WOKE, the basket was swaying, and I heard the chatter of voices. Where was I going? Cold surrounded me. We were going down steps.

With a jolt, the basket was dropped on to a hard stone floor. I could hear ringing hammers and chisels. Men were singing.

I crawled out and scuttled into the shadow of the wall.







When I turned back, the basket  
had gone. The men had all disappeared.  
I was alone. I was frightened.  
Perhaps there was another way out.  
Keeping to the shadow of the wall,  
I crawled along and soon came to  
a fork. I took the left hand passage.  
The air felt colder. The light  
from the torches dimmed.



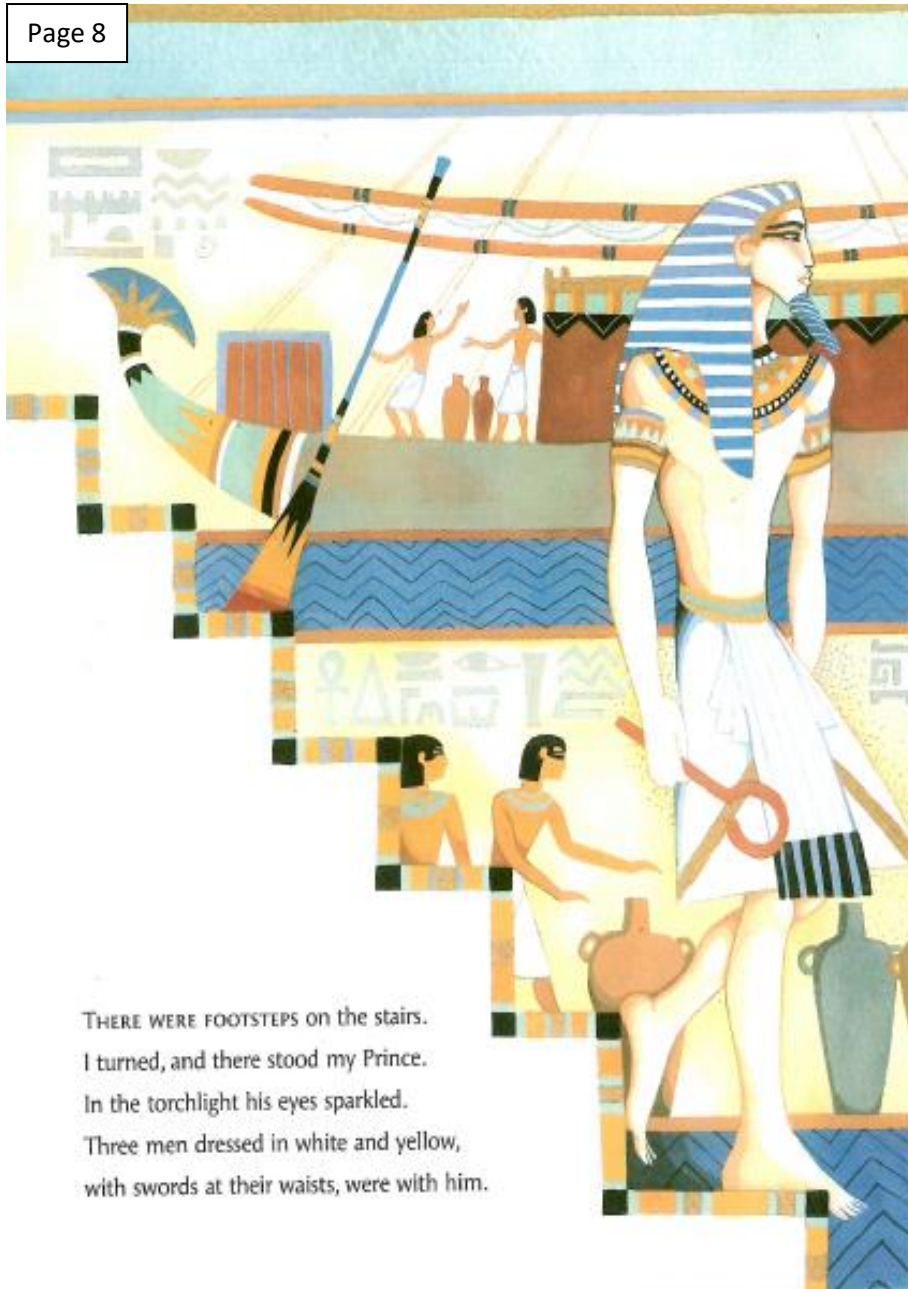
SUDDENLY I STOPPED. I sensed danger. Very, very slowly I took a step forward – and then I felt it: a crack in the smooth floor so fine even I could hardly see it. It ran from one wall across to the other. Why was it there? I jumped across it and, as I landed, I knew why. The stone slab beneath me gave way, sank down and then rose back up. It was perfectly balanced, like a feather on a knife-edge.



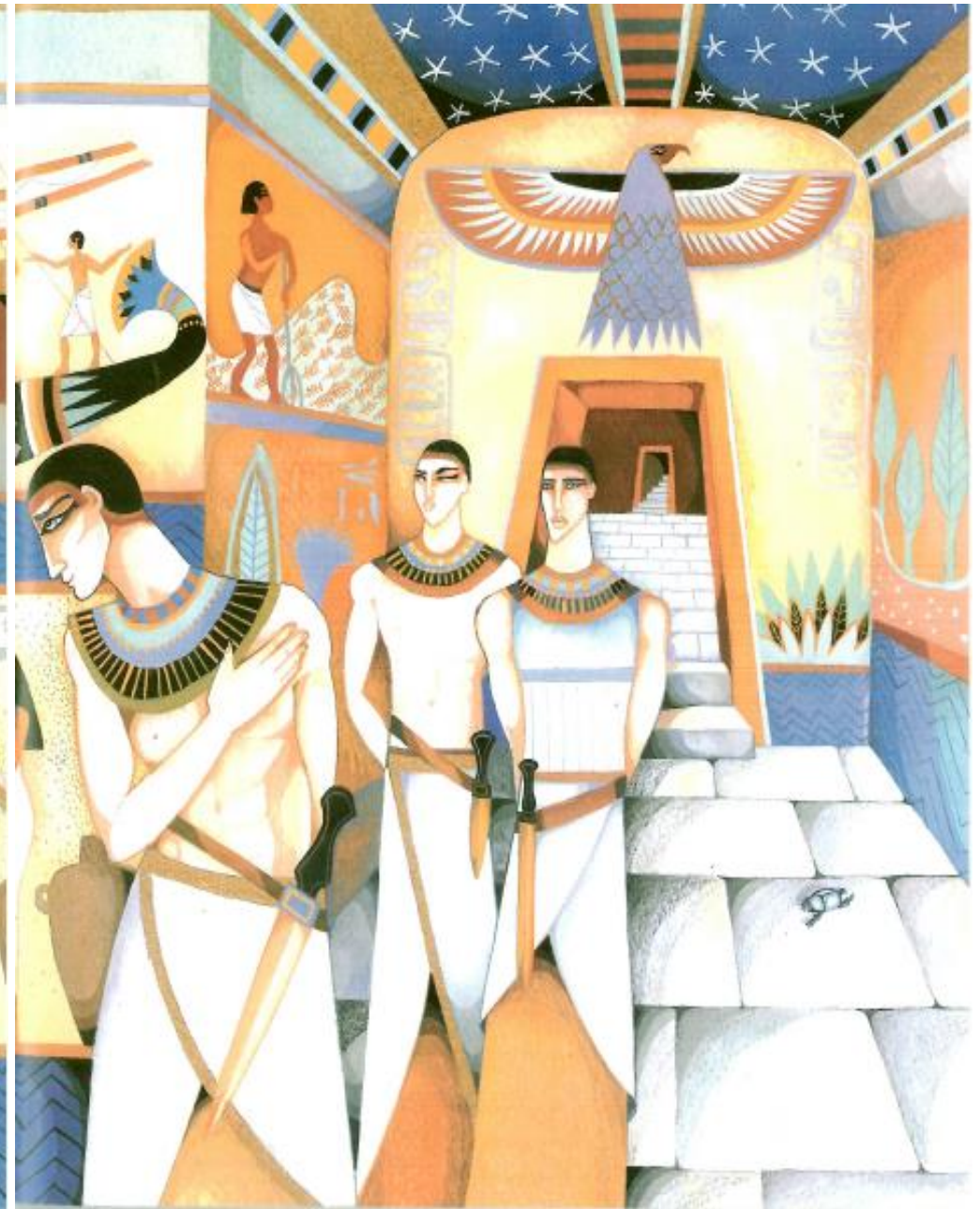
If the mere weight of a tiny beetle could make it sink, then...? I shuddered. A man walking along this passage would fall straight through to certain death.

I leapt back to the safety of the solid stone floor and scuttled as fast as I could back to the stairwell.





THERE WERE FOOTSTEPS on the stairs.  
I turned, and there stood my Prince.  
In the torchlight his eyes sparkled.  
Three men dressed in white and yellow,  
with swords at their waists, were with him.





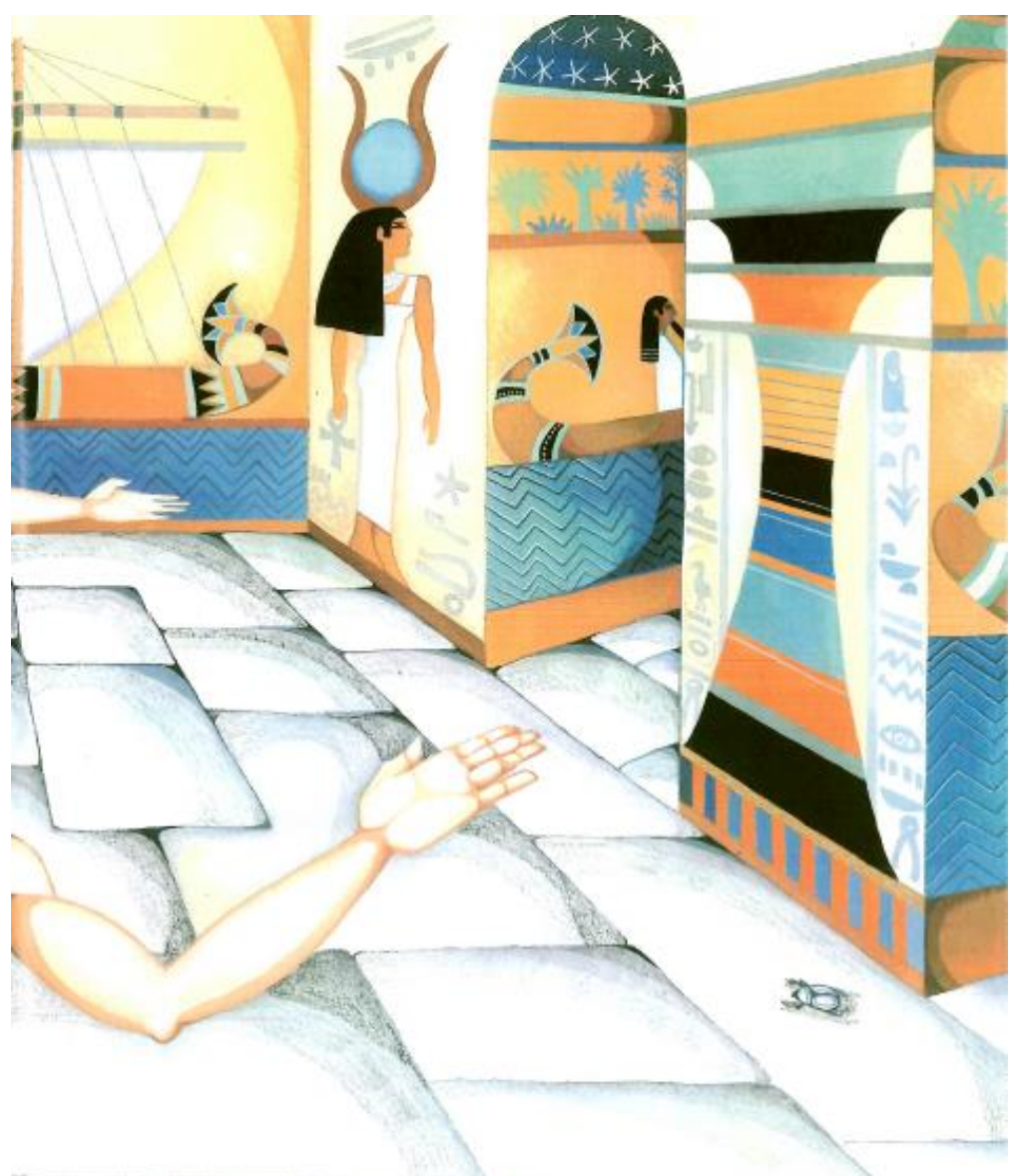
I HID IN A CORNER as the men went from chamber to chamber. The Prince was inspecting the work. While he visited the largest room, I waited in the passage that led to the fork.

The four men approached. "This way, Your Highness," said one, and pointed down the left hand fork.

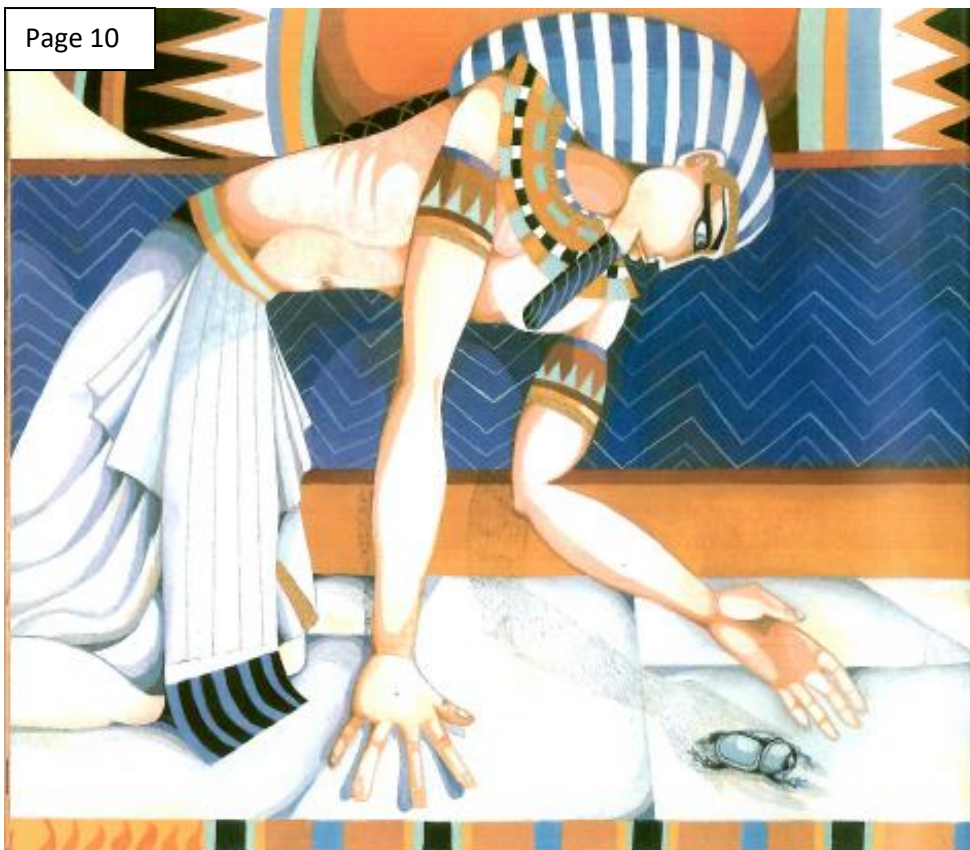
I wanted to cry out, "NO!" If the Prince went down there, he would die. Surely the men knew that? And then I realised – of course they knew. That was why the tomb was empty. There were to be no witnesses to the Prince's death, apart from a lowly beetle – me.

The Prince stopped, eyed each man in turn and then asked in a clear voice, "You are sure this is the passage we take?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."







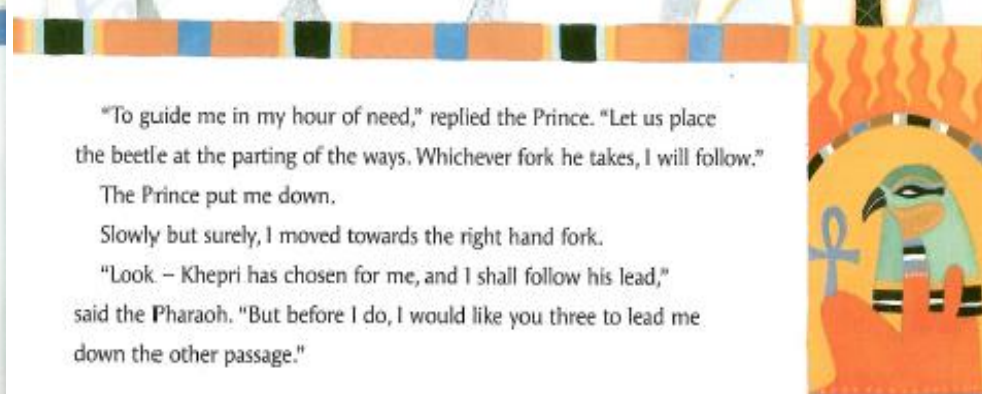
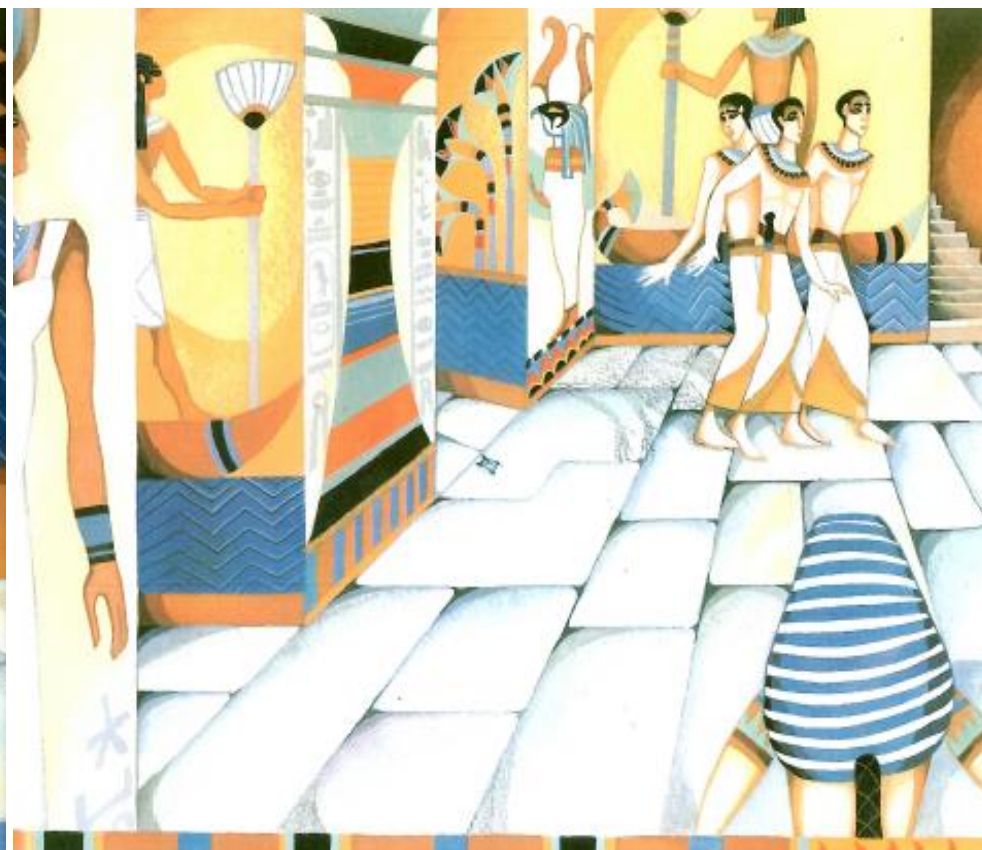
THE PRINCE STOOD STILL and slowly his gaze fell downward.  
I moved forward into the light.

A faint smile flickered across his face. "Khepri, we meet again."

The men glanced nervously at each other as he knelt and scooped me up.

"The great god Ra created all things," declared the Prince. "This beetle is as precious to Ra as the Pharaoh himself. Ra has placed him here for a reason."

"What reason could that be?" asked one of the men anxiously.



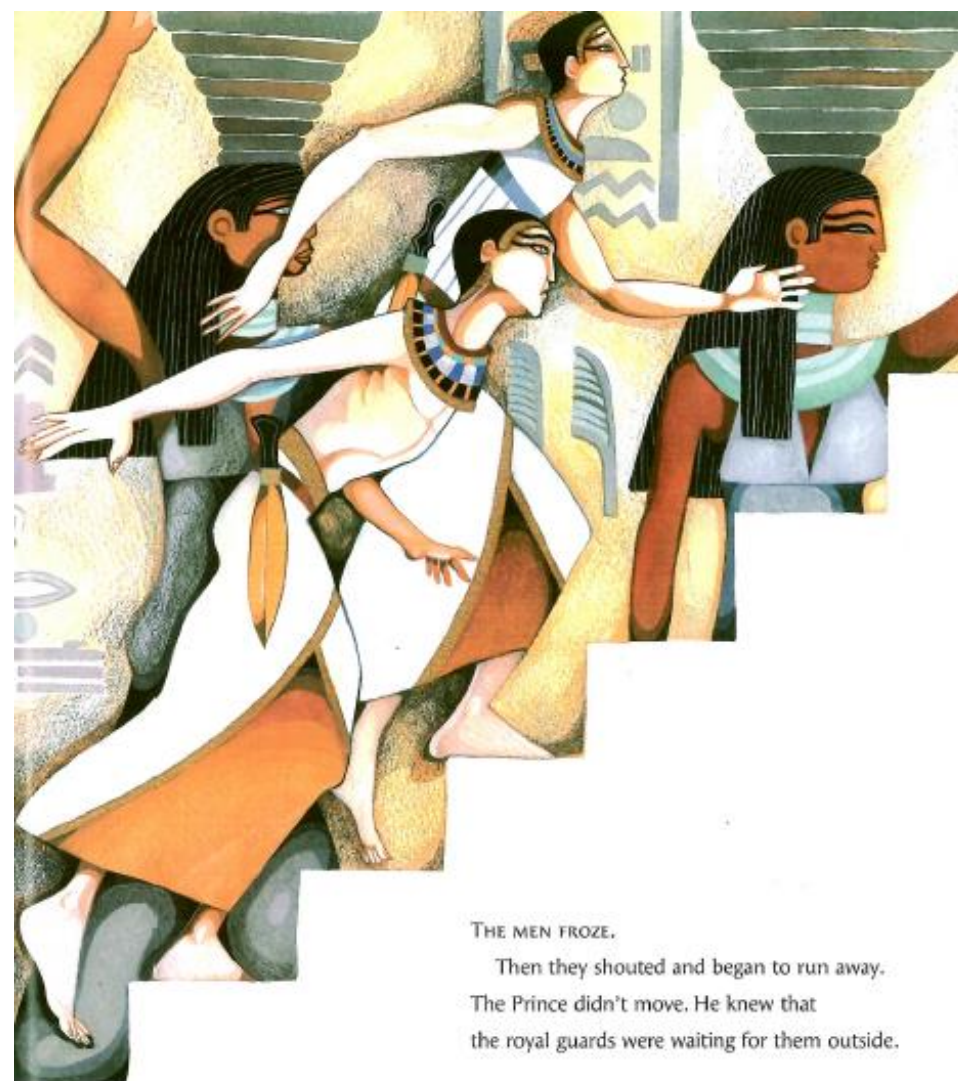
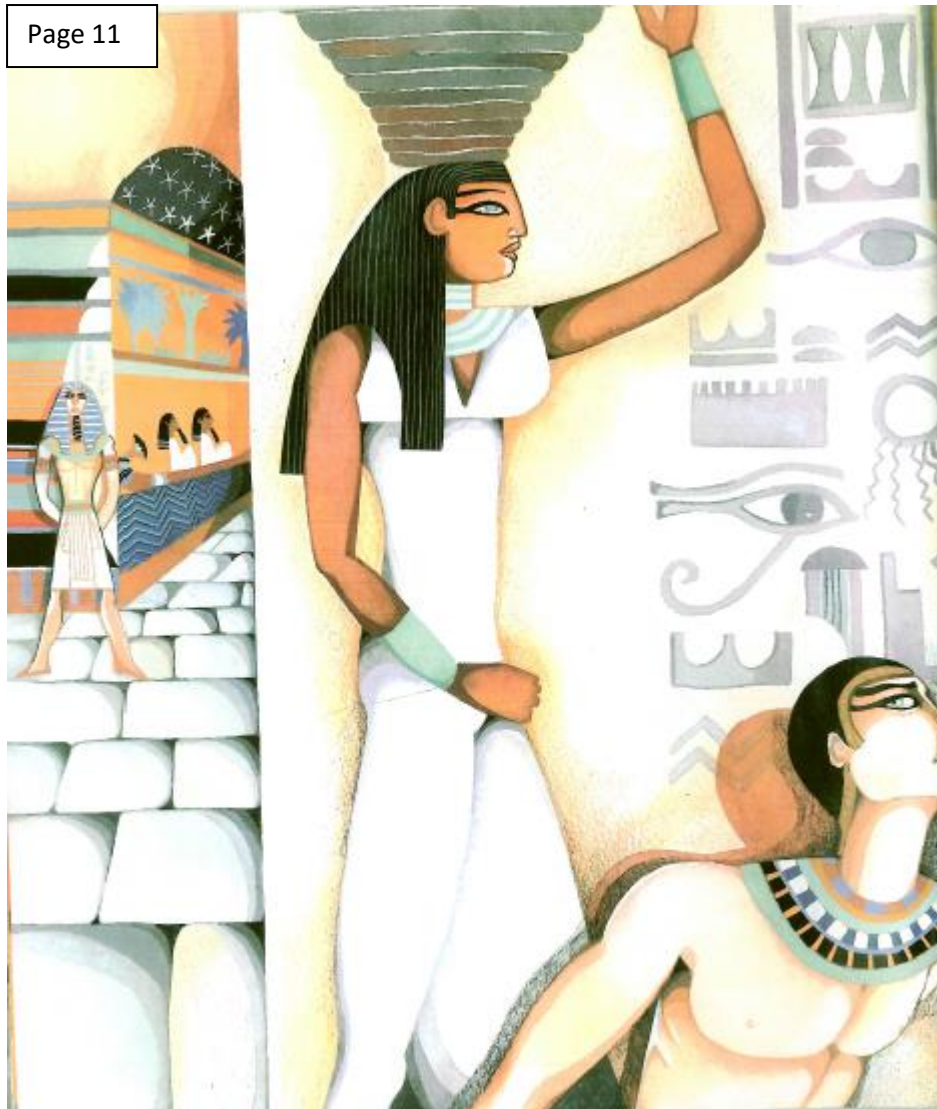
"To guide me in my hour of need," replied the Prince. "Let us place the beetle at the parting of the ways. Whichever fork he takes, I will follow."

The Prince put me down.

Slowly but surely, I moved towards the right hand fork.

"Look – Khepri has chosen for me, and I shall follow his lead," said the Pharaoh. "But before I do, I would like you three to lead me down the other passage."





THE MEN FROZE.

Then they shouted and began to run away.  
The Prince didn't move. He knew that  
the royal guards were waiting for them outside.





HE BENT DOWN and gently picked me up.

"As Ra decreed, we meet again," he whispered. "This tomb is no place for you, Khepri. Come, I shall take you back across the river to the temple, where you and I belong."

Now the stars of Egypt burn above me once more.  
The night is warm and my tale is told – a tale that shows  
how even a humble beetle can play its part in the life  
of a great prince.