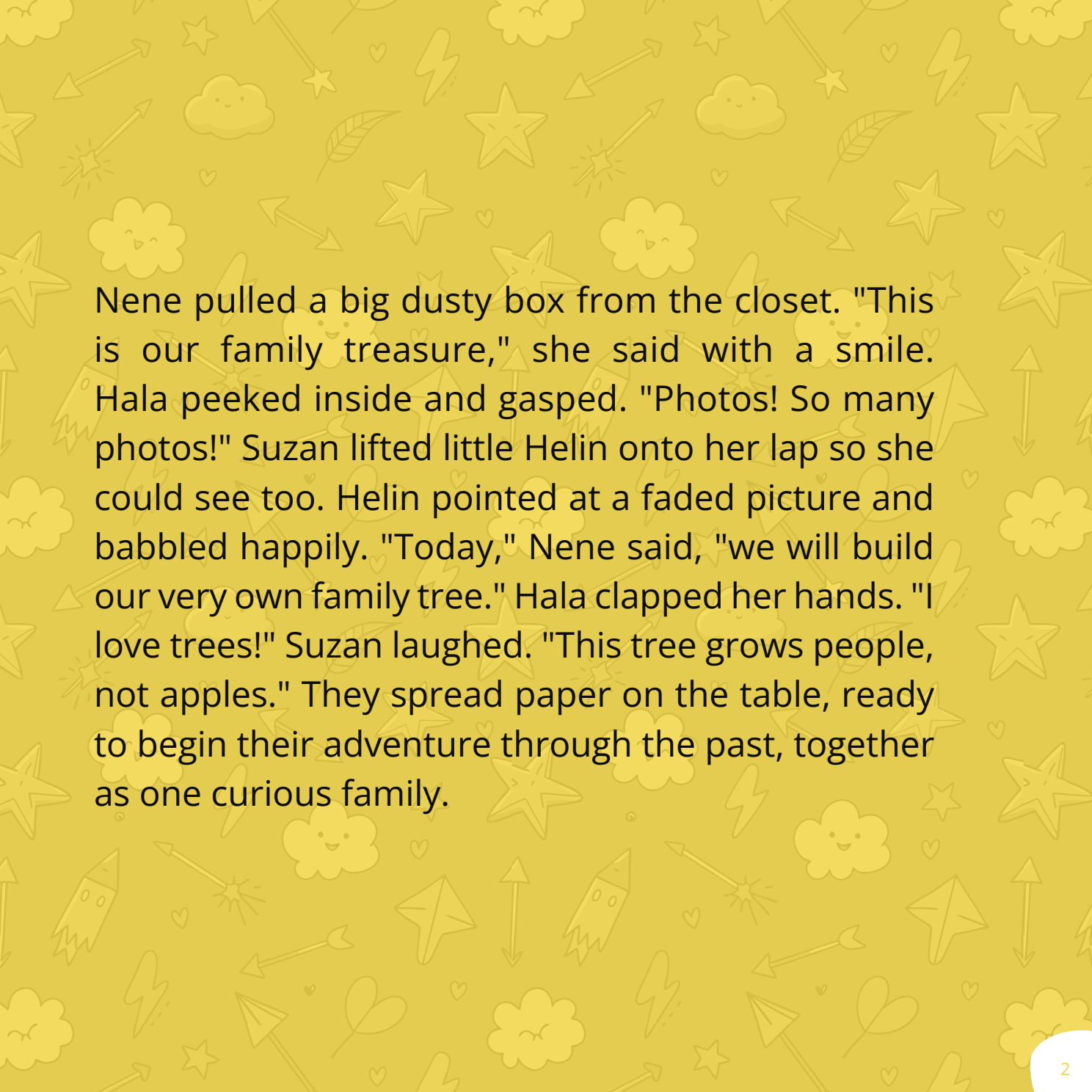


The Family Tree

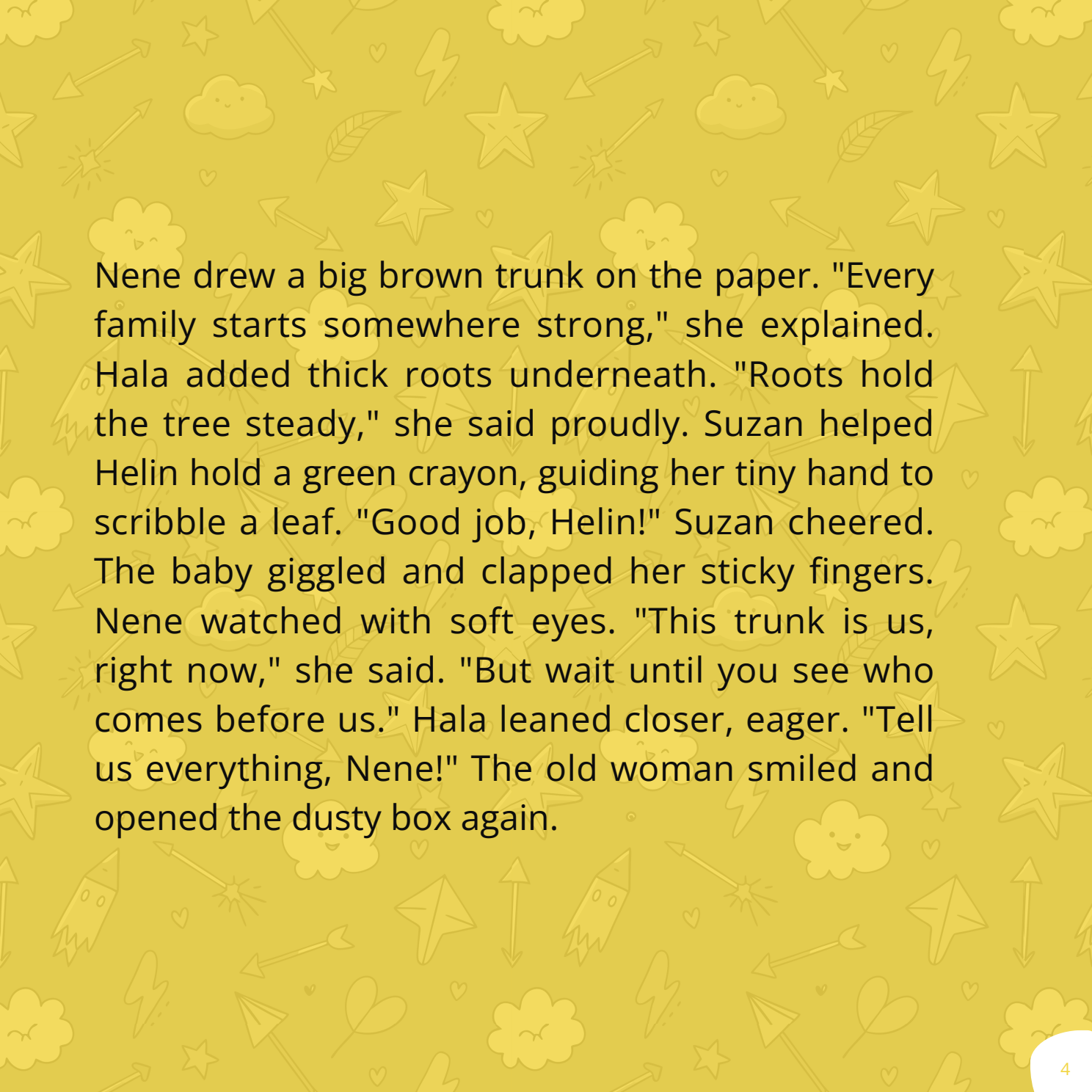


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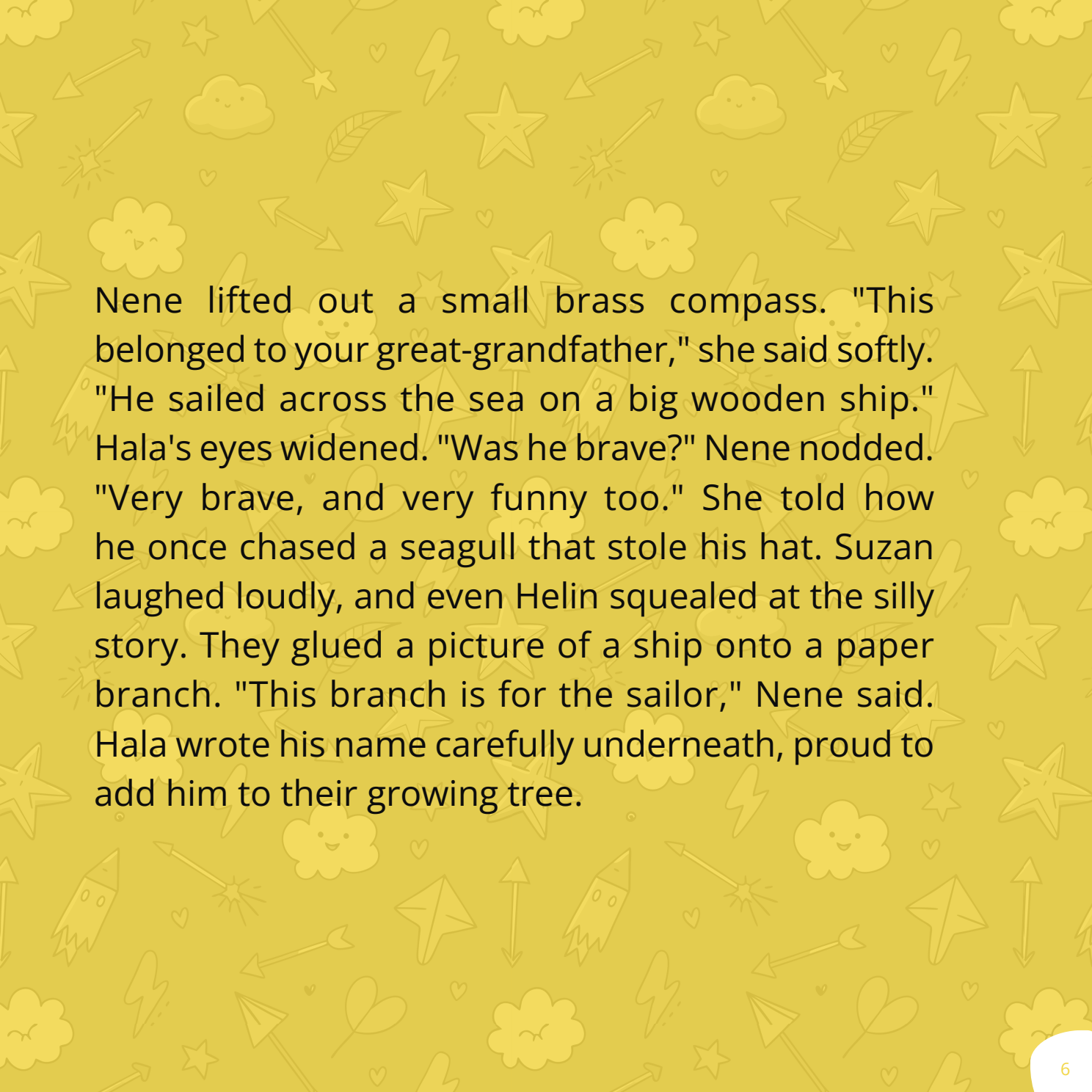
Nene pulled a big dusty box from the closet. "This is our family treasure," she said with a smile. Hala peeked inside and gasped. "Photos! So many photos!" Suzan lifted little Helin onto her lap so she could see too. Helin pointed at a faded picture and babbled happily. "Today," Nene said, "we will build our very own family tree." Hala clapped her hands. "I love trees!" Suzan laughed. "This tree grows people, not apples." They spread paper on the table, ready to begin their adventure through the past, together as one curious family.



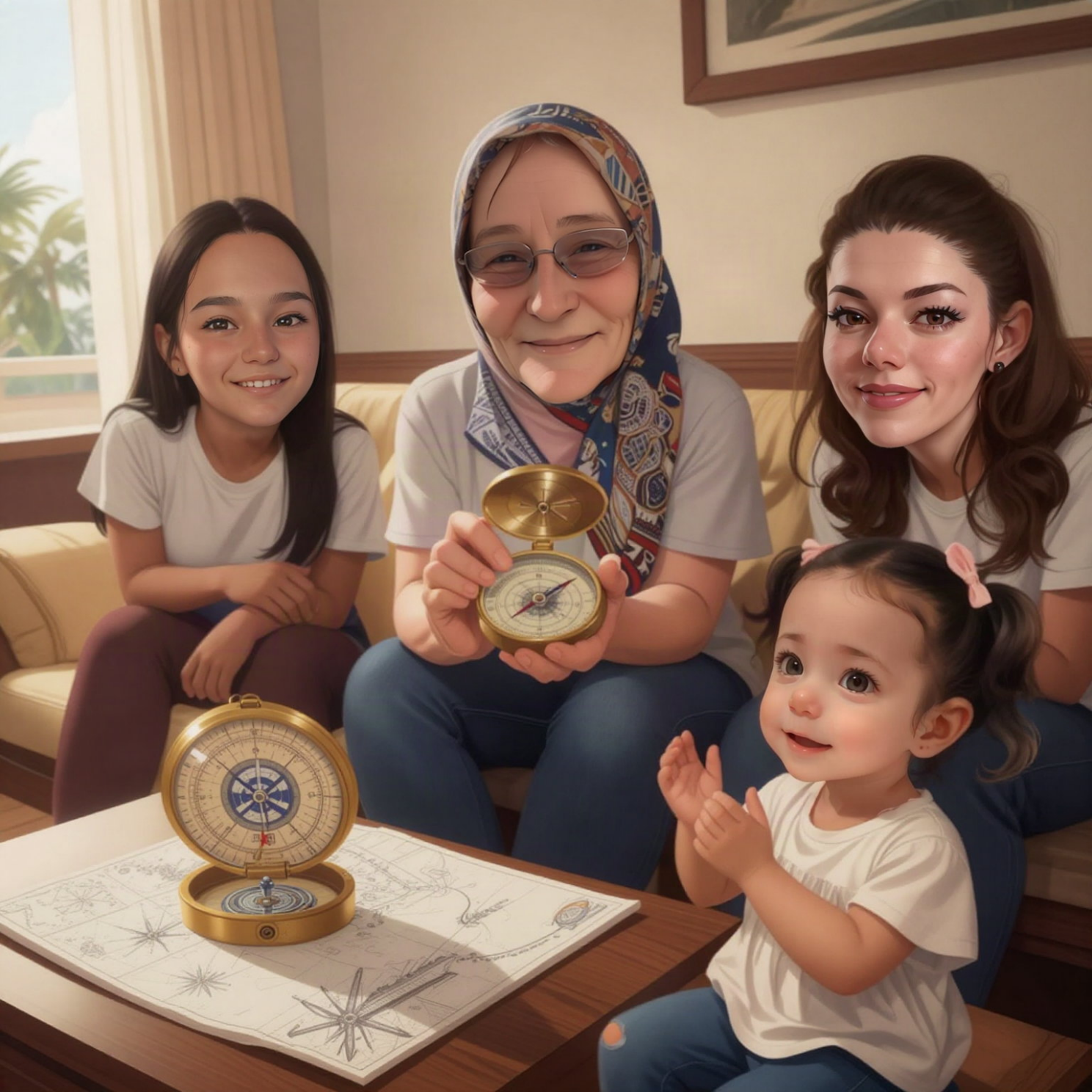


Nene drew a big brown trunk on the paper. "Every family starts somewhere strong," she explained. Hala added thick roots underneath. "Roots hold the tree steady," she said proudly. Suzan helped Helin hold a green crayon, guiding her tiny hand to scribble a leaf. "Good job, Helin!" Suzan cheered. The baby giggled and clapped her sticky fingers. Nene watched with soft eyes. "This trunk is us, right now," she said. "But wait until you see who comes before us." Hala leaned closer, eager. "Tell us everything, Nene!" The old woman smiled and opened the dusty box again.





Nene lifted out a small brass compass. "This belonged to your great-grandfather," she said softly. "He sailed across the sea on a big wooden ship." Hala's eyes widened. "Was he brave?" Nene nodded. "Very brave, and very funny too." She told how he once chased a seagull that stole his hat. Suzan laughed loudly, and even Helin squealed at the silly story. They glued a picture of a ship onto a paper branch. "This branch is for the sailor," Nene said. Hala wrote his name carefully underneath, proud to add him to their growing tree.



Next, Nene unfolded a tiny flowered apron. "This was your great-grandmother's," she said. "She baked the sweetest bread in the whole village." Suzan smiled. "I remember her kitchen smelled like cinnamon." Nene nodded, eyes twinkling. "She always gave bread to hungry neighbors, even strangers." Hala glued a small paper loaf onto another branch. Helin reached out, trying to grab the picture, making everyone laugh. "Careful, little one," Suzan said, kissing her cheek. The family tree was growing taller, each branch holding a story warmer than the last, filling the quiet room with gentle laughter and love.



"Now it's your turn, Helin," Nene said, smiling at the baby. Suzan helped Helin press her tiny hand into green paint. Carefully, they stamped a small handprint leaf onto the paper. "That's your very first branch," Hala said, clapping gently. Helin squealed with delight, waving her painted fingers in the air. Nene wrote "Helin" beneath the colorful handprint. "Every leaf matters," she said warmly, "even the newest one." Suzan wiped Helin's messy fingers with a cloth, still smiling. The baby reached for the paper again, curious about her own bright green mark glowing proudly on the growing family tree.



Digging deeper, Suzan found a photo of herself as a little girl. "Look, that's me on Nene's farm!" she said, surprised. Hala giggled. "You had such curly hair!" Suzan laughed, remembering chasing chickens barefoot in the grass. Nene smiled gently. "You were always running, never still." They glued the photo onto a branch marked with Suzan's name. Helin reached for the picture, patting it with her small hand. "That's your mama," Hala whispered to her. Helin looked between the photo and Suzan, blinking in wonder, as if suddenly understanding that mothers were once little girls too, long ago.



Hala found an old photo of a man kneeling beside tall sunflowers. "That's your grandfather," Nene said. "He grew the biggest garden in town." Hala smiled wide. "I love flowers too!" Nene nodded. "You got that from him, my dear." Suzan added, "Maybe that's why you always bring us wildflowers." Hala blushed happily, gluing a tiny paper sunflower onto her grandfather's branch. Helin reached out, patting the paper flower gently. "Pretty," she babbled, her first clear word that afternoon. Everyone gasped with joy, celebrating the moment as another sweet memory joined their growing, colorful family tree.

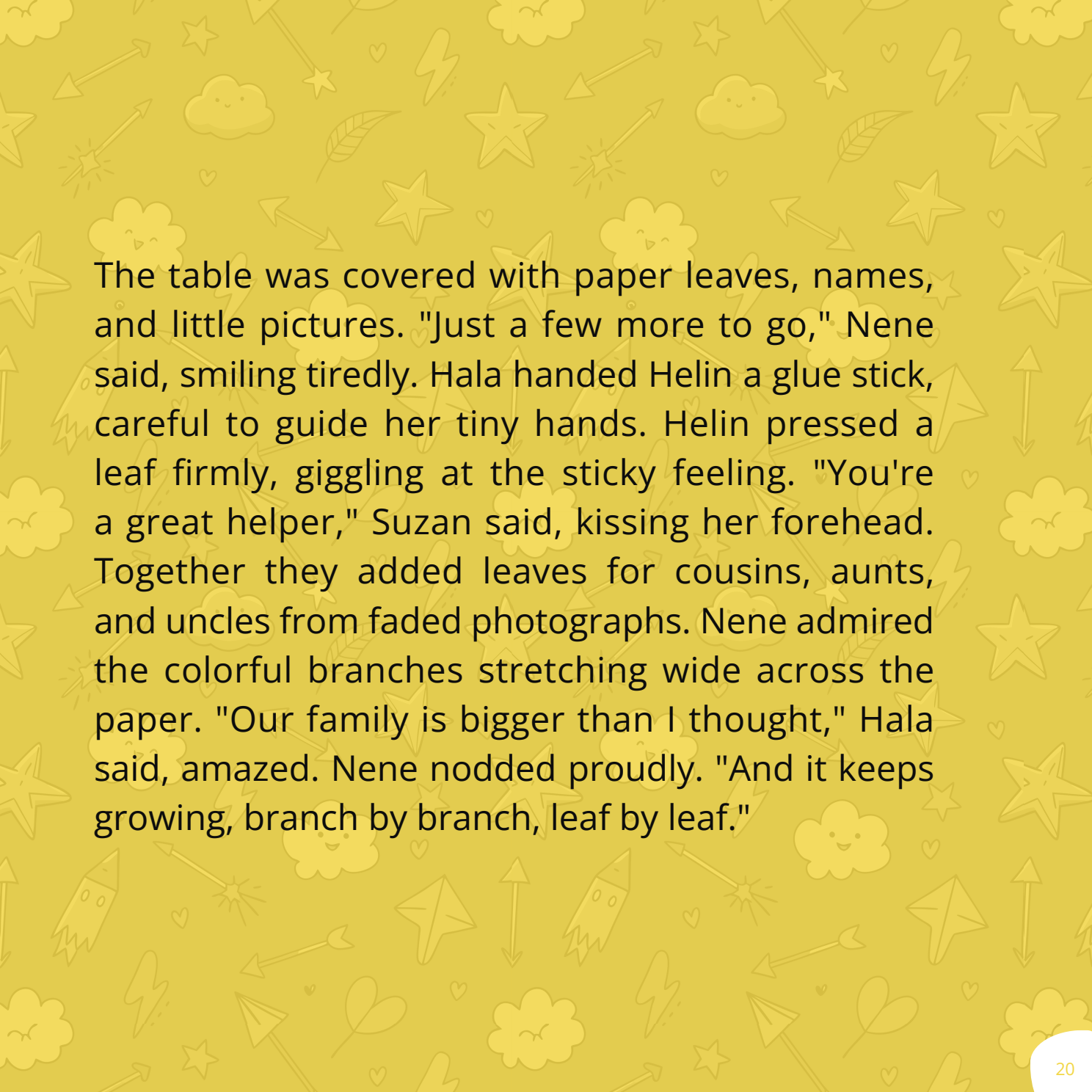


At the bottom of the box, Nene found a folded yellow letter. "I've never seen this before," she whispered, surprised. Hala leaned in curiously. "What does it say?" Nene carefully unfolded the fragile paper, her hands trembling slightly. "It's from my own grandmother," she said softly. Suzan gasped. "That's so old!" Helin looked up, sensing the excitement in everyone's voices. Nene smiled, eyes glistening. "Let's read it together," she said. The family gathered close around the table, hearts curious and warm, ready to discover another hidden story waiting patiently inside their family's long and winding history.



Nene read the letter aloud, her voice gentle and slow. It told of two young people who fell in love at a village dance. "That's how your great-great-grandparents met," Nene explained. Hala sighed dreamily. "That's so romantic!" Suzan smiled, holding Helin closer. "Love starts every branch on this tree." Nene nodded, folding the letter carefully. "Every story began with someone brave enough to love." They glued a tiny paper heart onto the oldest branch, honoring the couple who started it all. Helin reached up, touching the heart gently, as if she somehow understood its quiet importance.



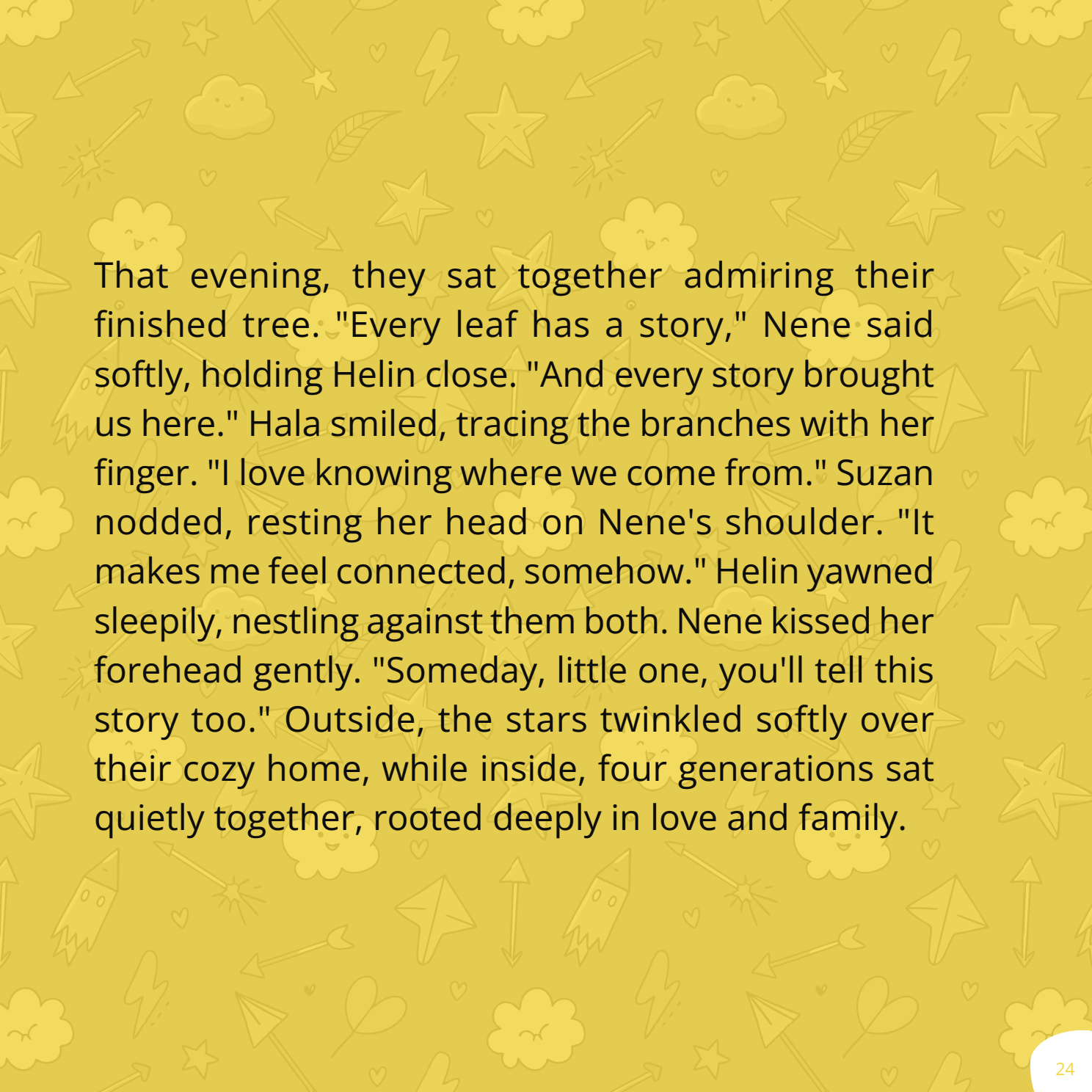


The table was covered with paper leaves, names, and little pictures. "Just a few more to go," Nene said, smiling tiredly. Hala handed Helin a glue stick, careful to guide her tiny hands. Helin pressed a leaf firmly, giggling at the sticky feeling. "You're a great helper," Suzan said, kissing her forehead. Together they added leaves for cousins, aunts, and uncles from faded photographs. Nene admired the colorful branches stretching wide across the paper. "Our family is bigger than I thought," Hala said, amazed. Nene nodded proudly. "And it keeps growing, branch by branch, leaf by leaf."

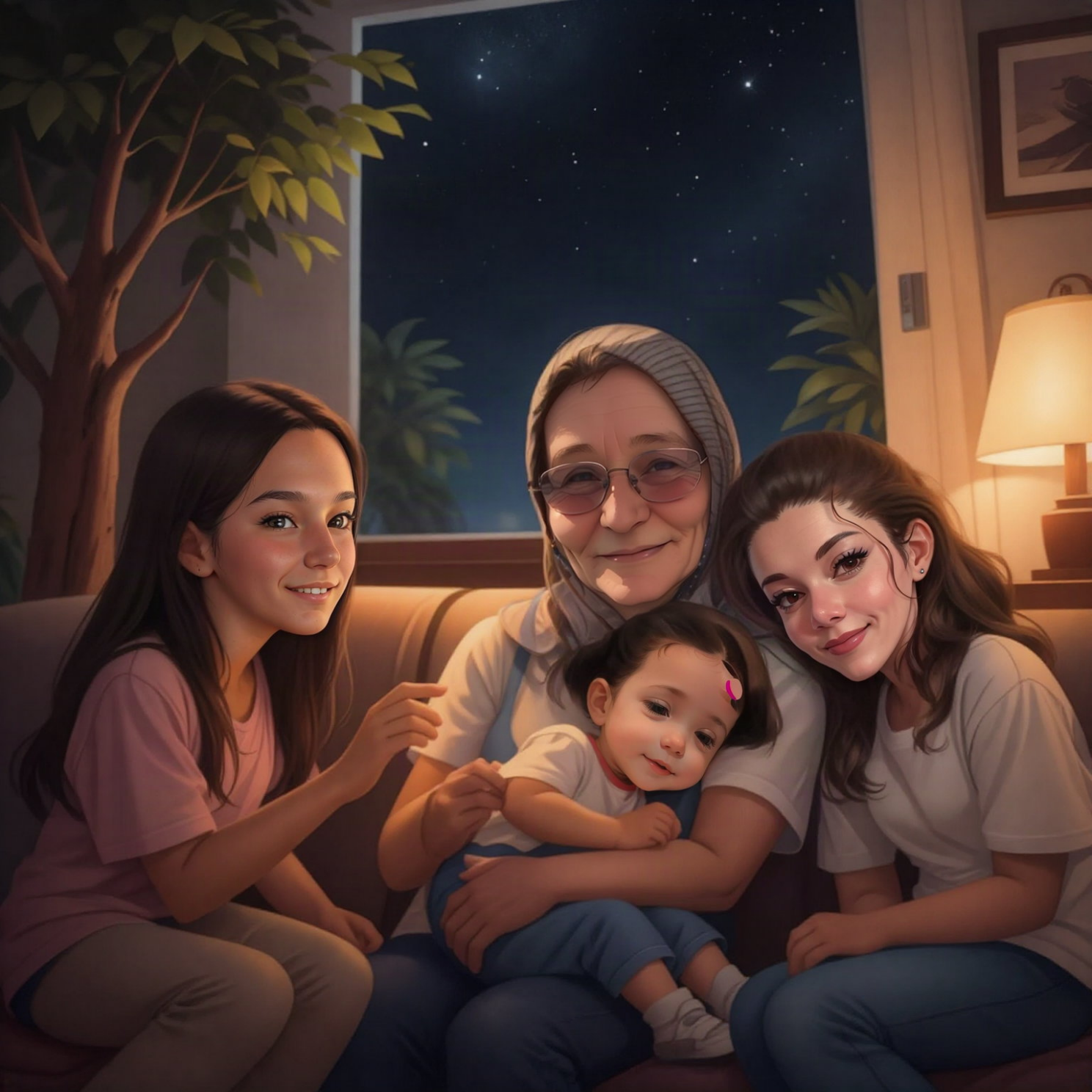


Finally, the family tree was finished, bursting with colors and names. Suzan helped tape it carefully onto the living room wall. Hala stepped back, admiring the big, beautiful paper tree. "It's perfect," she whispered, smiling softly. Helin pointed excitedly at her own green handprint leaf. "Mine!" she squealed proudly. Nene laughed warmly, wrapping an arm around her. "Yes, little one, that's yours forever." Sunlight streamed through the window, lighting up every branch and leaf. The room felt warmer somehow, filled with stories, laughter, and love stretching far back through time, now hanging proudly for everyone to see.





That evening, they sat together admiring their finished tree. "Every leaf has a story," Nene said softly, holding Helin close. "And every story brought us here." Hala smiled, tracing the branches with her finger. "I love knowing where we come from." Suzan nodded, resting her head on Nene's shoulder. "It makes me feel connected, somehow." Helin yawned sleepily, nestling against them both. Nene kissed her forehead gently. "Someday, little one, you'll tell this story too." Outside, the stars twinkled softly over their cozy home, while inside, four generations sat quietly together, rooted deeply in love and family.



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