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# YENNEGA

## PRINCESS OF GAMBAGA



UNESCO Series on Women in African History





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Cultural Organization

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UNESCO specialist responsible for the project: Sasha Rubel  
Editorial and artistic direction: Edouard Jouveaud

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Cover illustration: Yann Degruel  
Layout: Dhiara Fasya, Maria Jesus Ramos



# YENNEGA

## PRINCESS OF GAMBAGA

UNESCO Series on Women in African History  
Editorial and artistic direction: Edouard Joubeaud

Comic strip  
Illustrations: Yann Degruel  
Script and text: Sylvia Serbin

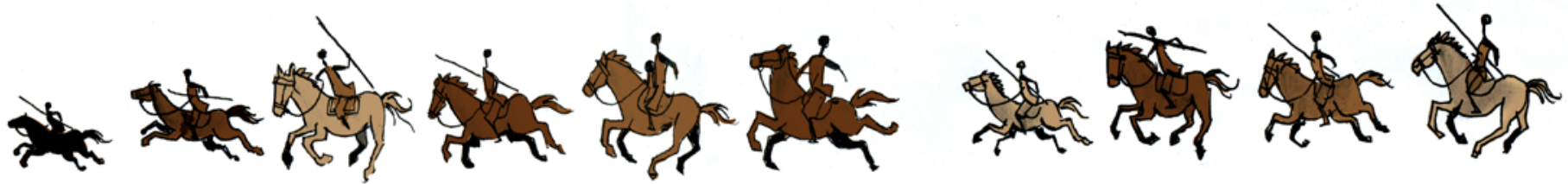
# Yennega, Princess of Gambaga

## Foreword

Knowledge about Yennega has been gleaned from Moaga oral tradition (e.g. origin tales, dynastic timelines, etc.) and contemporary documents written by researchers who conducted population surveys at the time.

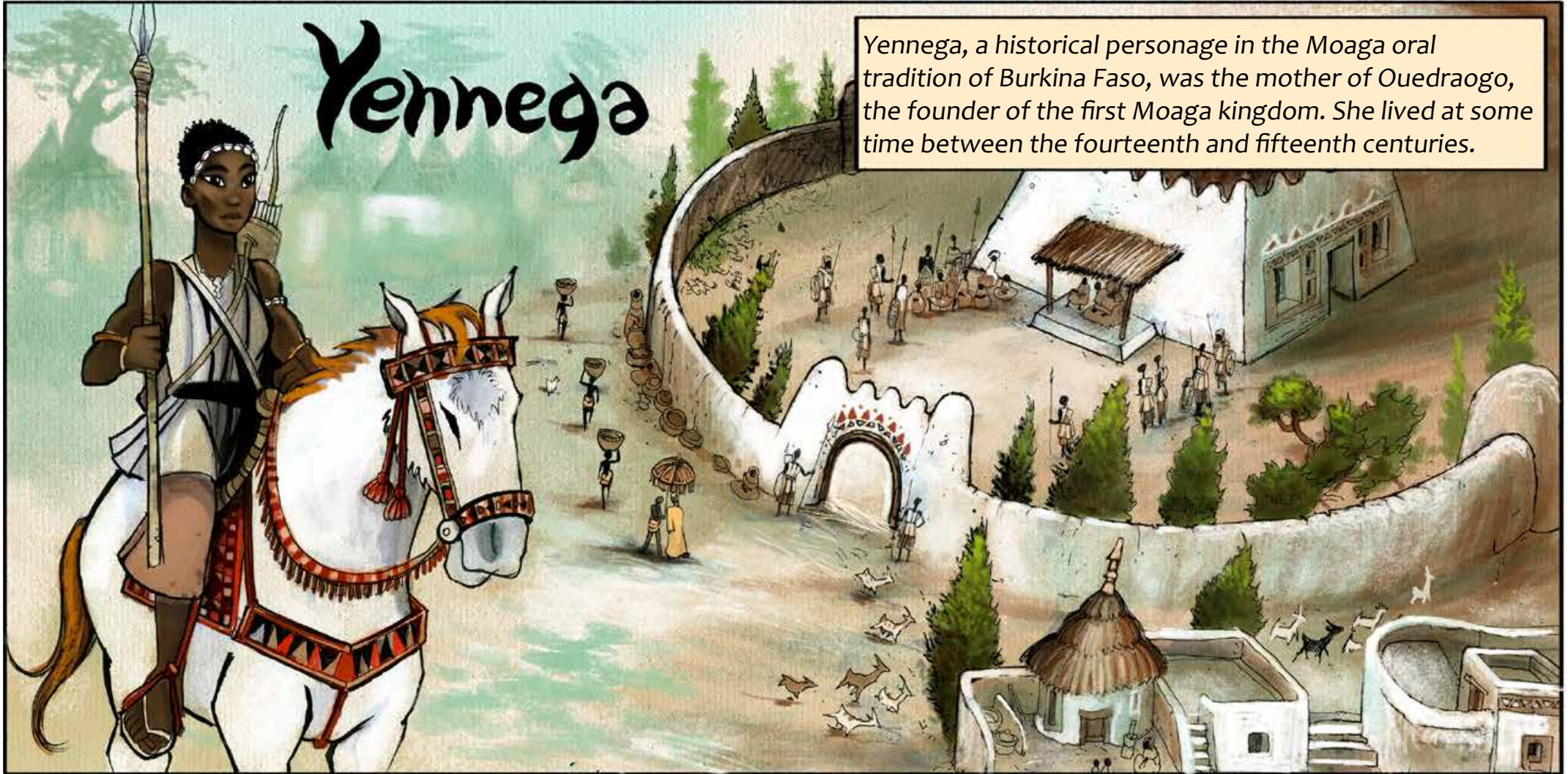
In this comic strip, Yennega meets Riale, as recounted in the dominant Moaga oral tradition.

The illustrations are based on historical and iconographic research into Moogo, the Moose and Burkina Faso. These portrayals do not claim to be, in any way, an exact representation of events, persons, architecture, clothing, hairstyles or accessories of the period.



# Yennega

Yennega, a historical personage in the Moaga oral tradition of Burkina Faso, was the mother of Ouedraogo, the founder of the first Moaga kingdom. She lived at some time between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.





*Yennega's family lived in Gambaga, the northern of present-day Ghana. The town of Gambaga exists to this day in Ghana.*

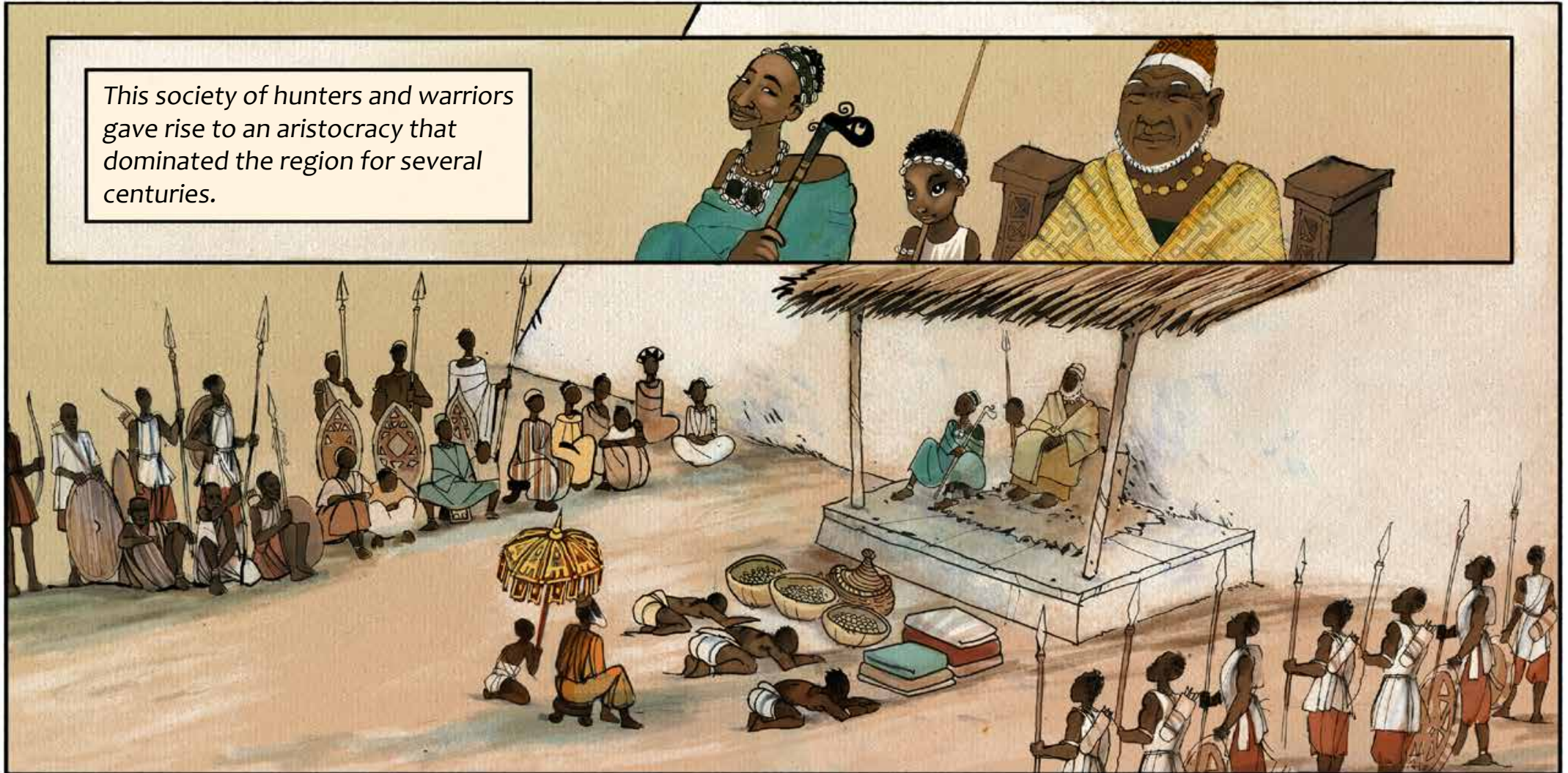


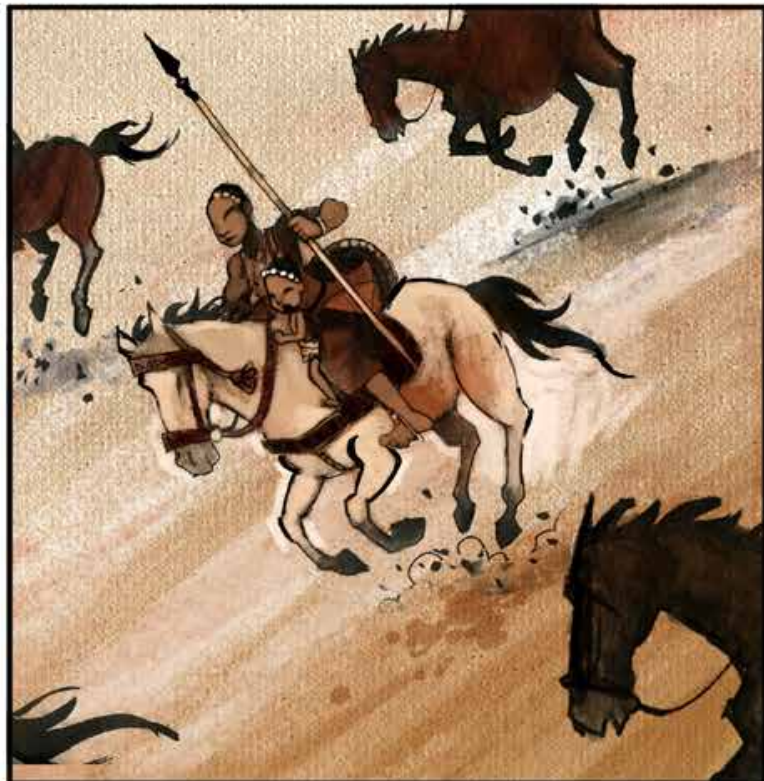
*Yennega's father, Nedega, was the chieftain of a conquering people from the East.*



*Nedega succeeded in bringing various population groups in the region under his sway.*

*This society of hunters and warriors gave rise to an aristocracy that dominated the region for several centuries.*





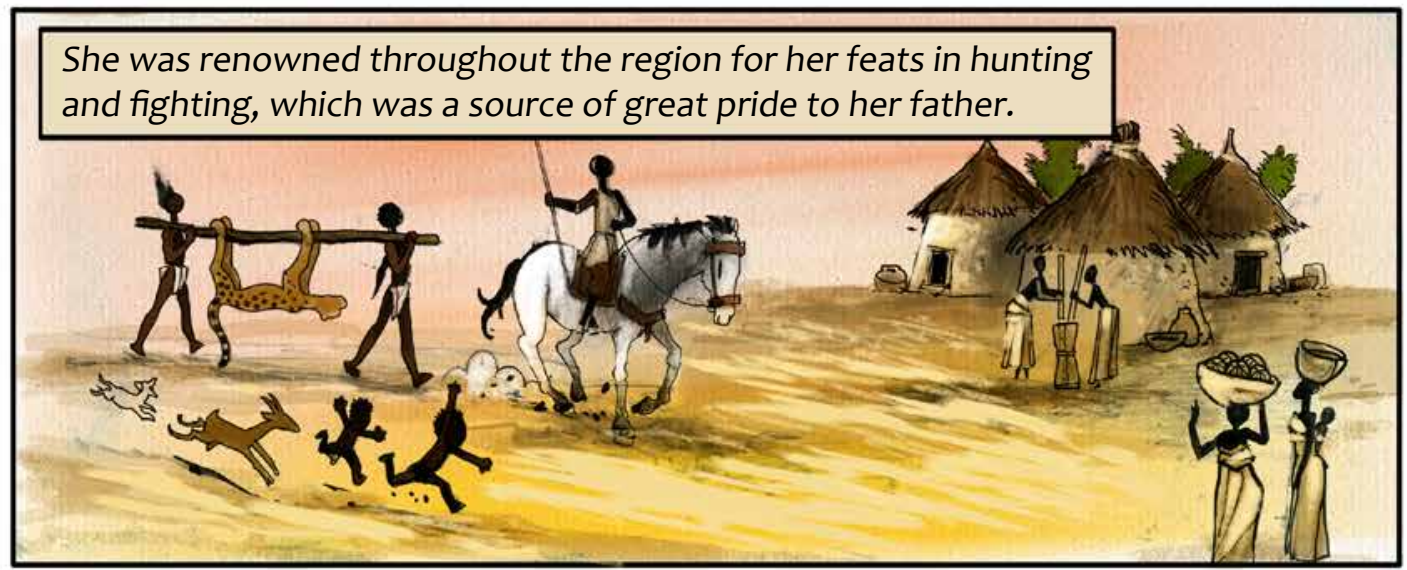
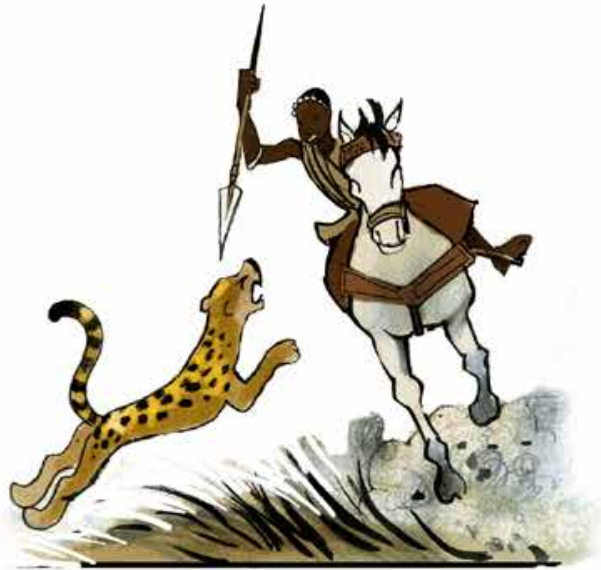
*Raised as a boy by Nedega, Yennega became accustomed to hunting with her father from an early age.*

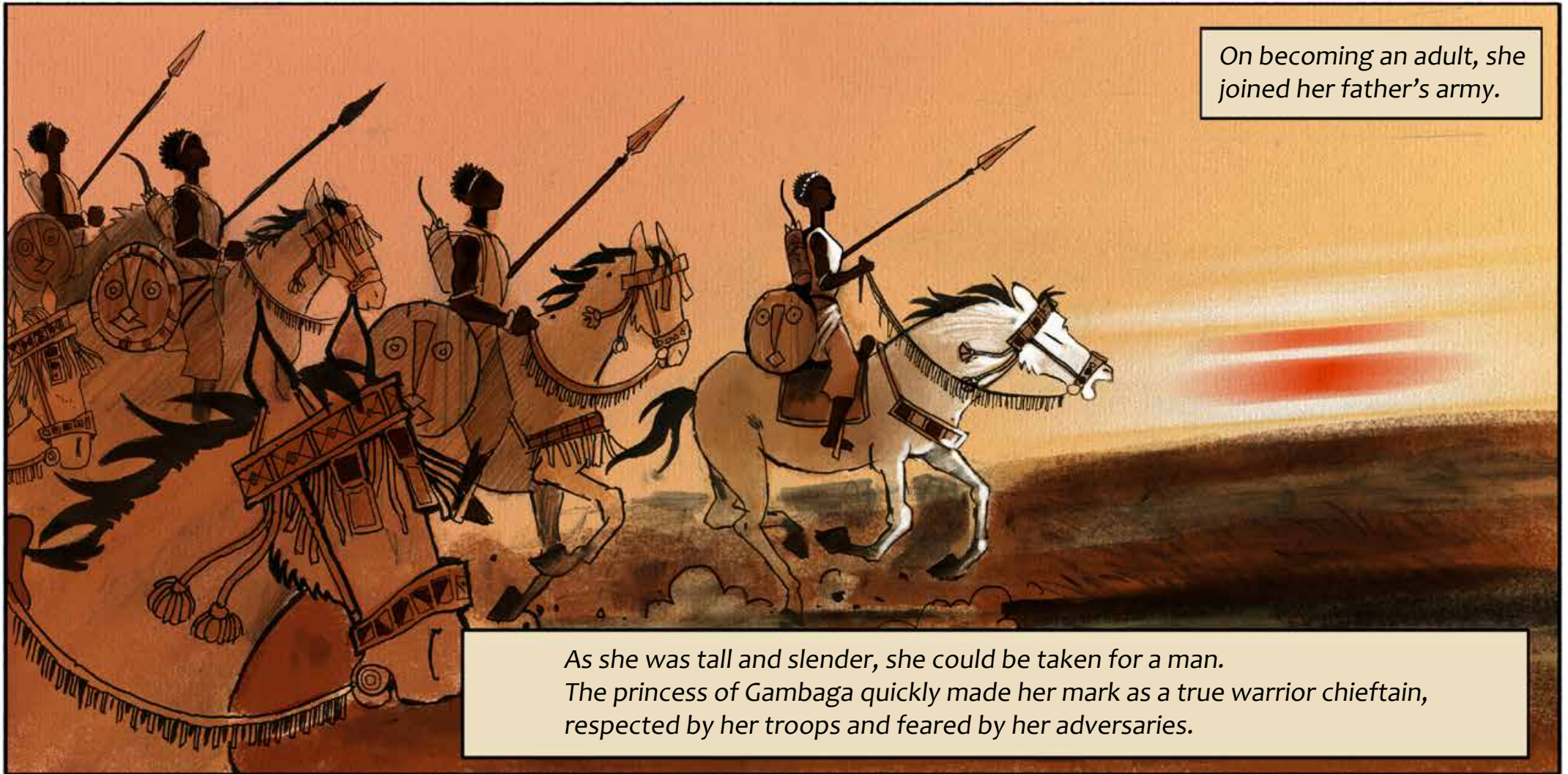


*The young girl, dauntless and tireless, adapted easily to the world of combatants.*





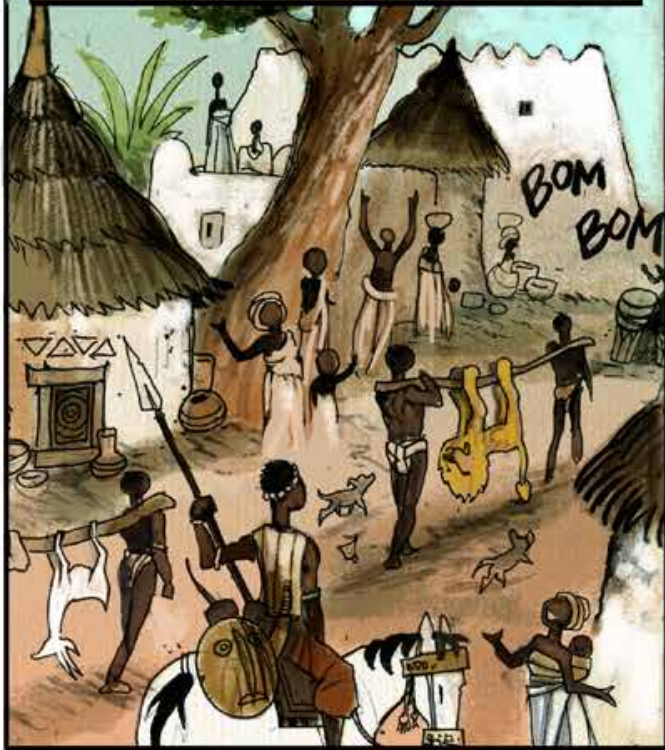




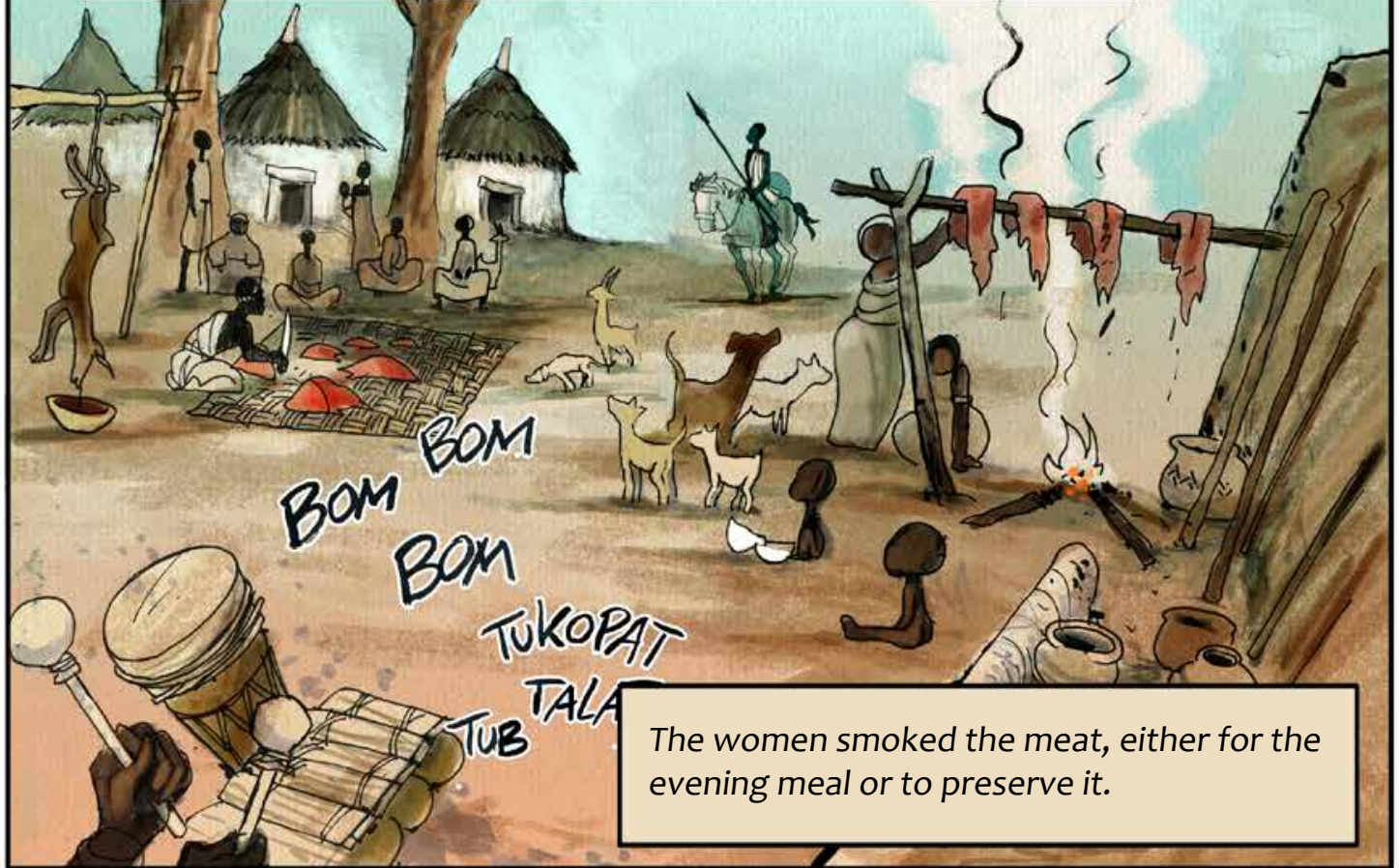
On becoming an adult, she joined her father's army.

As she was tall and slender, she could be taken for a man. The princess of Gambaga quickly made her mark as a true warrior chieftain, respected by her troops and feared by her adversaries.

When Yennega returned from hunting, the villagers would rush out to greet her as she passed and to admire the game that she and her men had brought back.

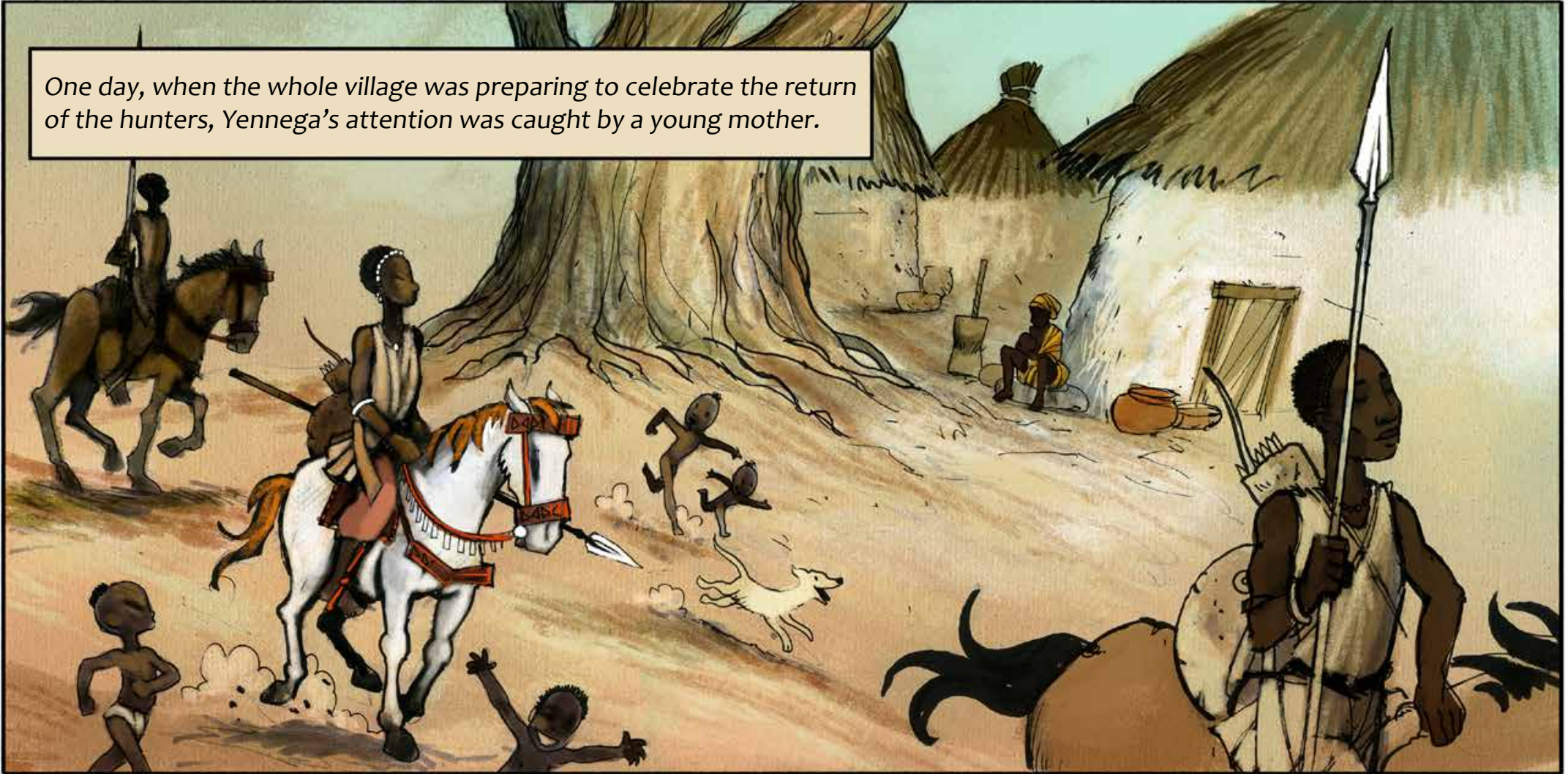


Everyone then set about their particular tasks: the men distributed the game among the various families.



The women smoked the meat, either for the evening meal or to preserve it.

One day, when the whole village was preparing to celebrate the return of the hunters, Yennega's attention was caught by a young mother.



The young mother was wholly absorbed.



Feeding her child tenderly and affectionately.

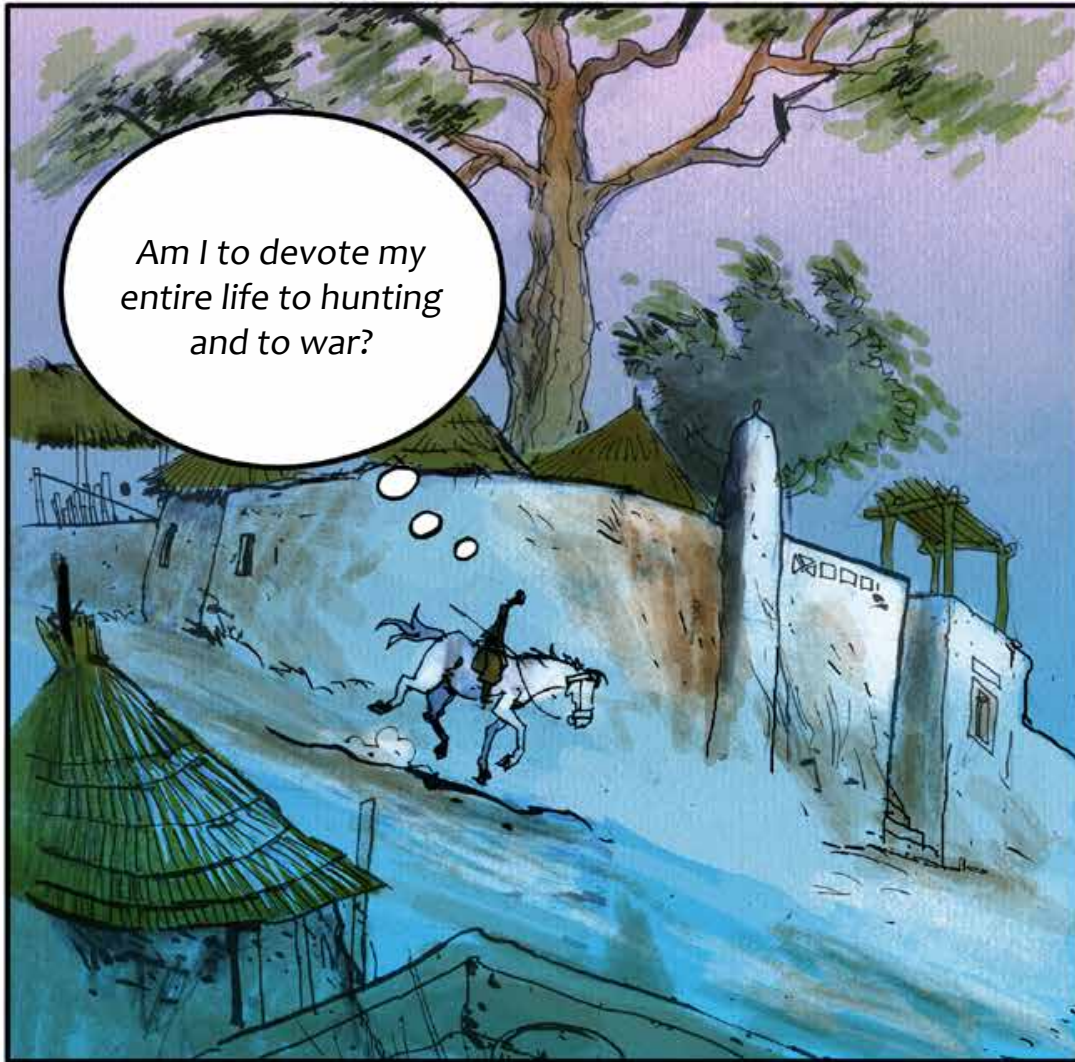


This display of maternal love stirred feelings that lain buried deep inside Yennega.

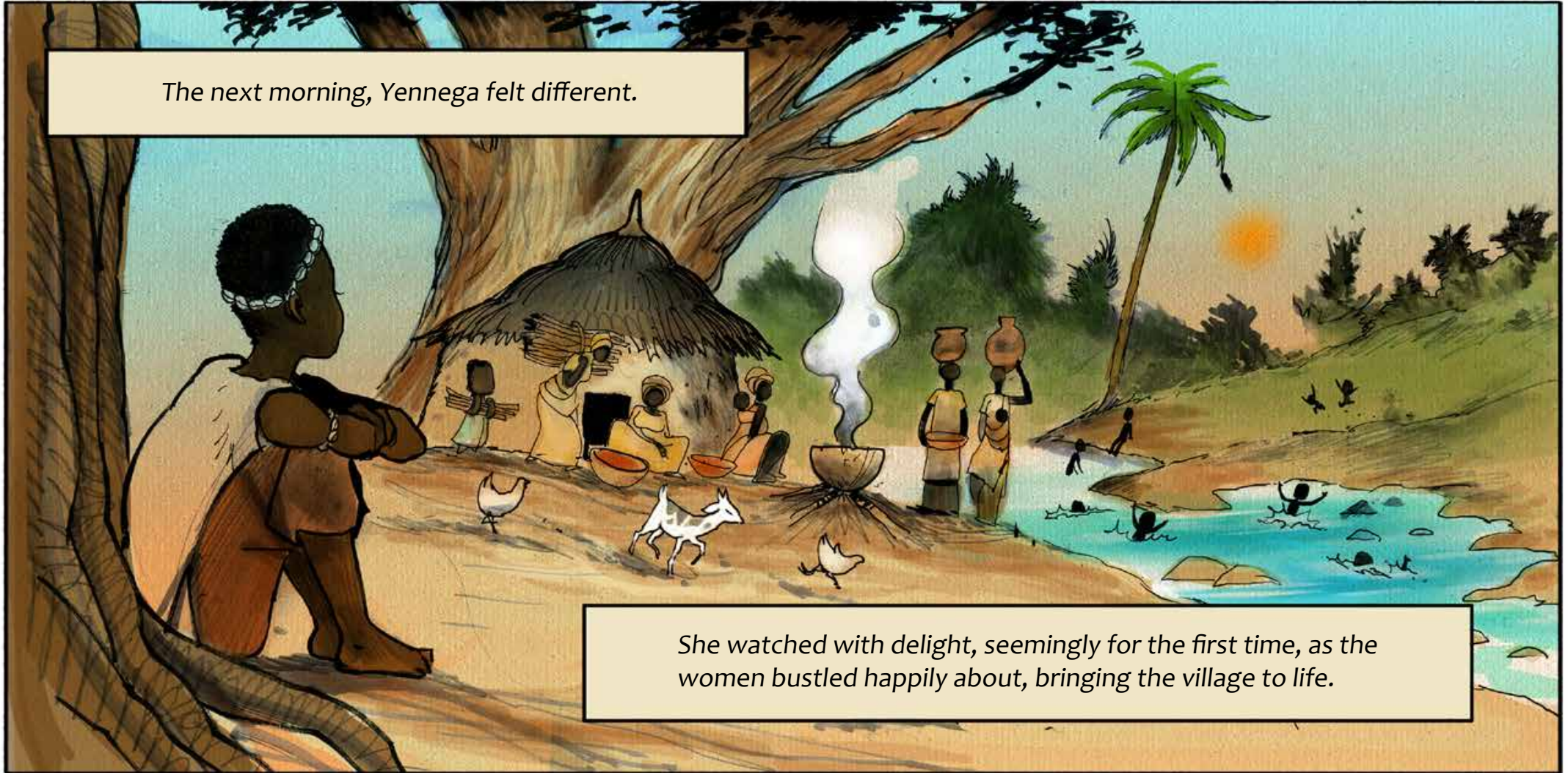


She was much troubled.





The next morning, Yennega felt different.

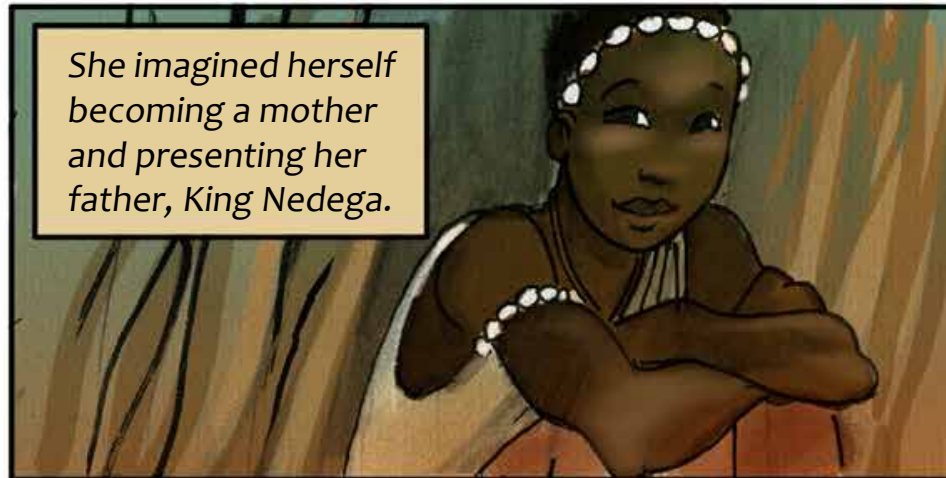


She watched with delight, seemingly for the first time, as the women bustled happily about, bringing the village to life.

From that point on, she longed for a different life, far removed from war and battles.



She imagined herself becoming a mother and presenting her father, King Nedega.

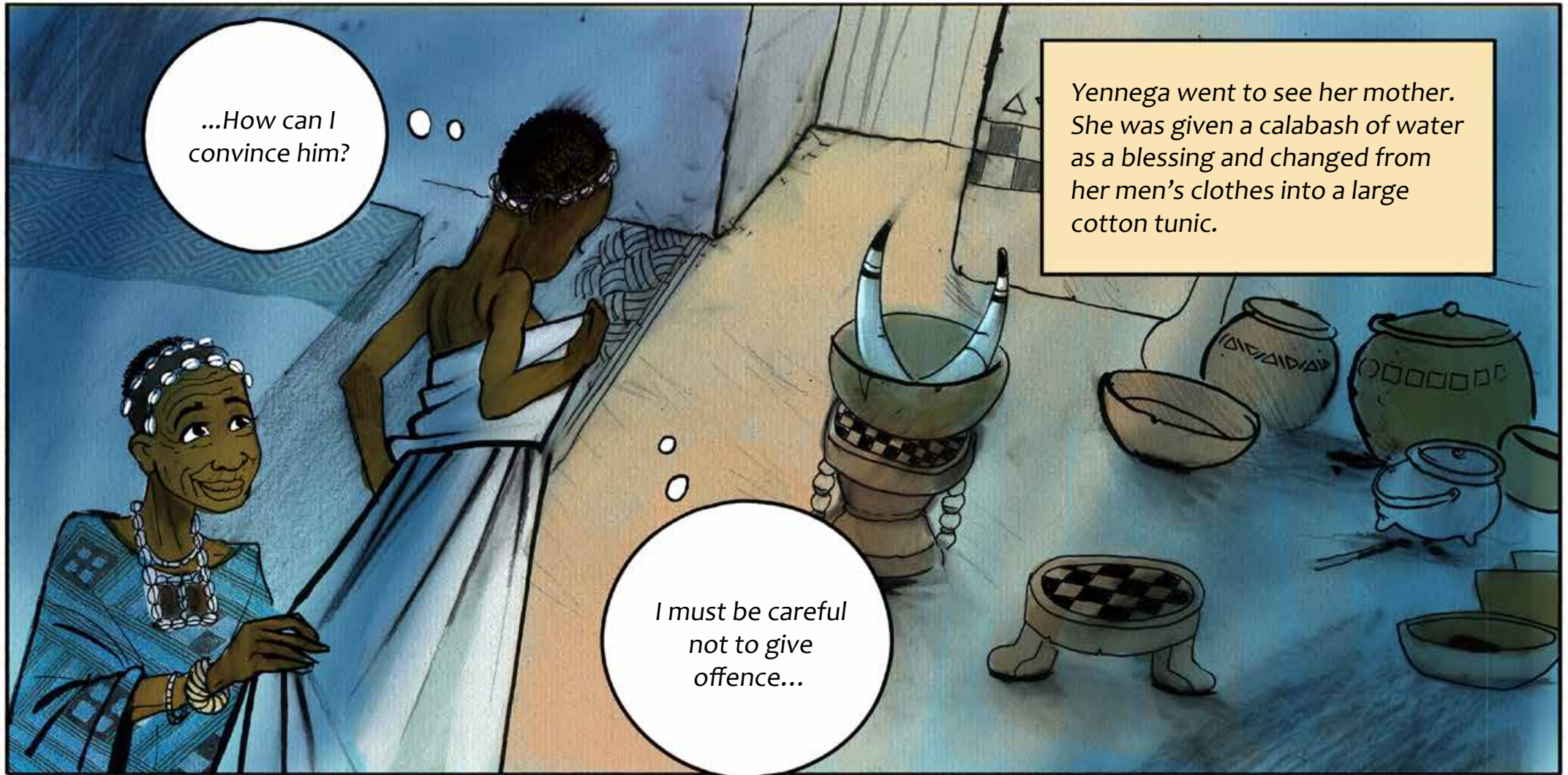


That's it!  
I will speak to  
my father and  
persuade him  
to find me a  
husband!







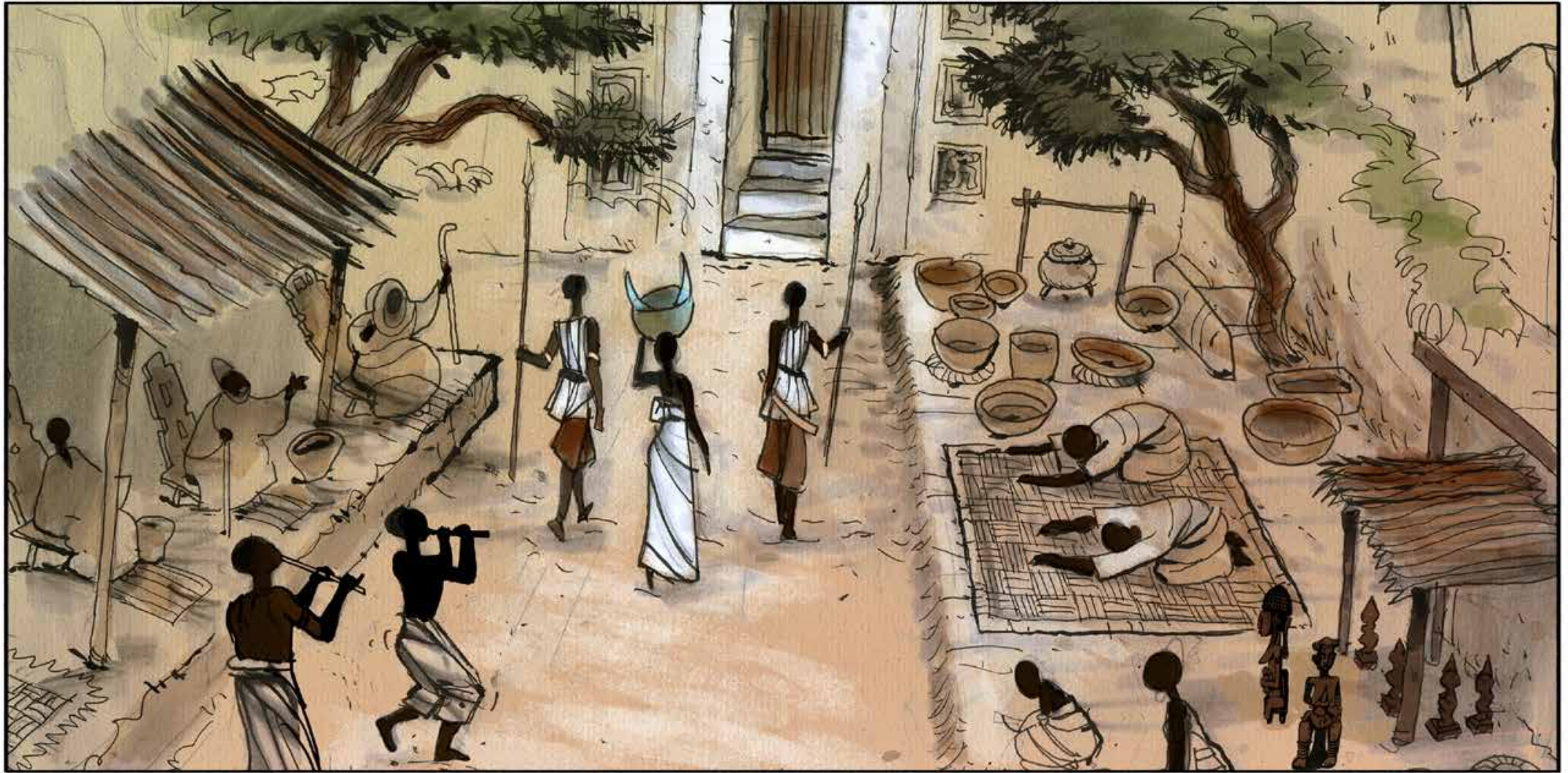


...How can I convince him?

Yennega went to see her mother. She was given a calabash of water as a blessing and changed from her men's clothes into a large cotton tunic.

I must be careful not to give offence...



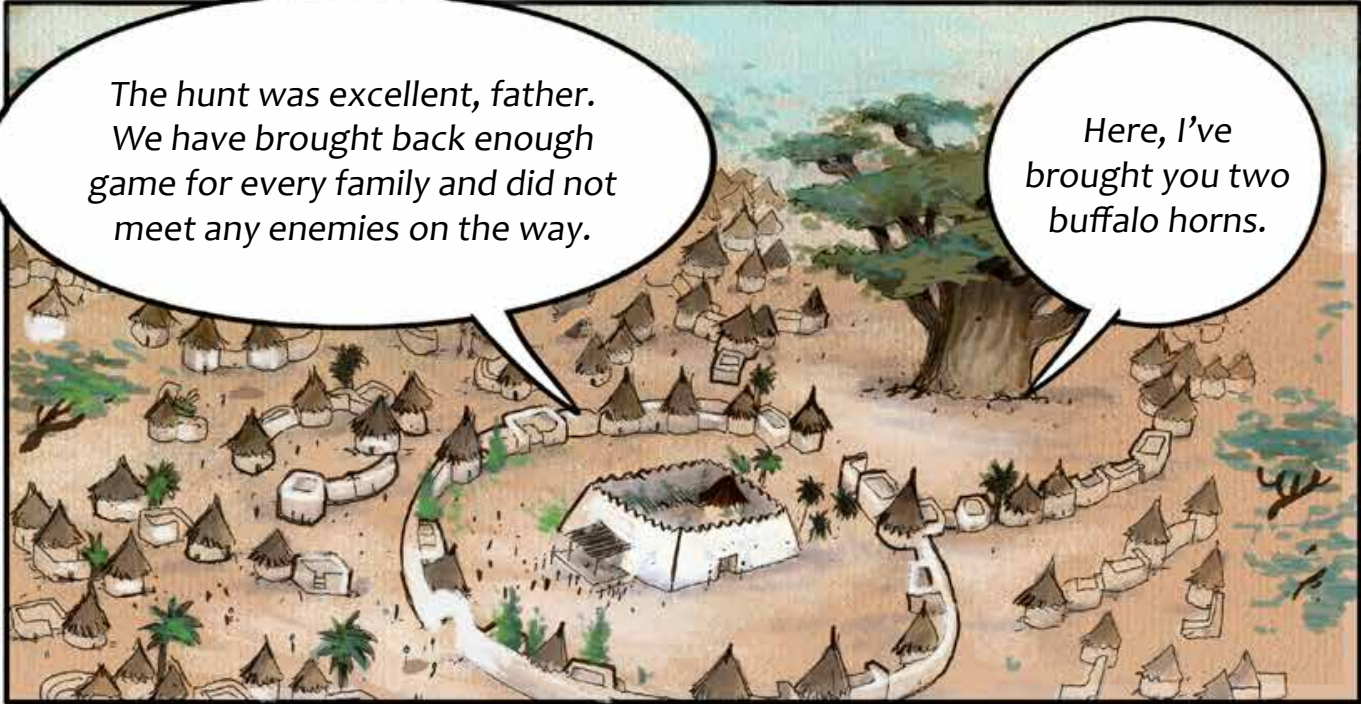




My daughter!  
We are so  
happy to see  
you.



Tell me, how  
was the hunt  
today?



The hunt was excellent, father.  
We have brought back enough  
game for every family and did not  
meet any enemies on the way.

Here, I've  
brought you two  
buffalo horns.

After a moment's silence, Yennega grasped the nettle.

Father...

forgive me, but I must speak to you...

I see girls of my age becoming mothers, while I spend my days training with the men, leading the hunt and taking our soldiers into battle.

Father...

I long for a son In due course, he would succeed to you and rule the kingdom.

Will you, then, consider finding a husband for me?

A husband! You have enough to do as it is! There is no hurry, my daughter. We can think about that later.



What a brazen child!

Get married!

When she is our best warrior!

We want her to succeed us one day in Gambaga and to become a great and respected chieftain.

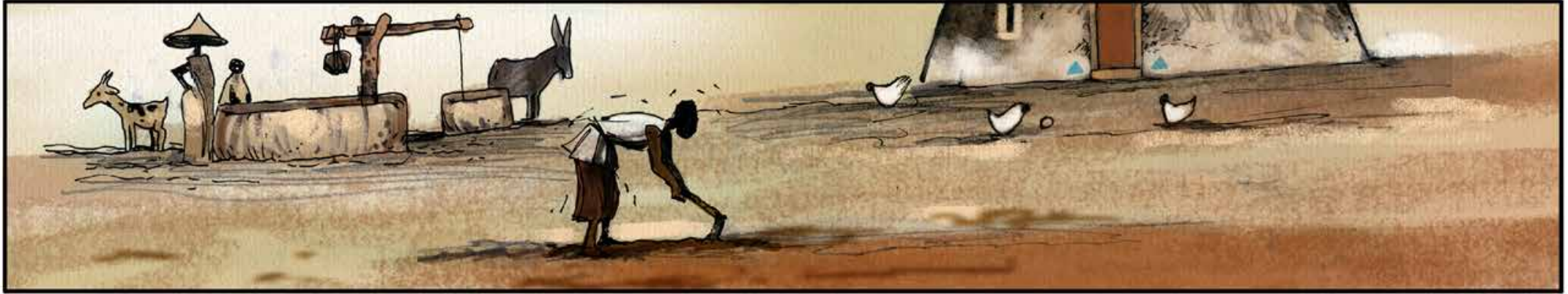
We shall find a husband for her later.

Yennega swallowed her sadness and continued to lead the life of a warrior as if nothing had changed.

It was forbidden for her to go against her father's wishes.



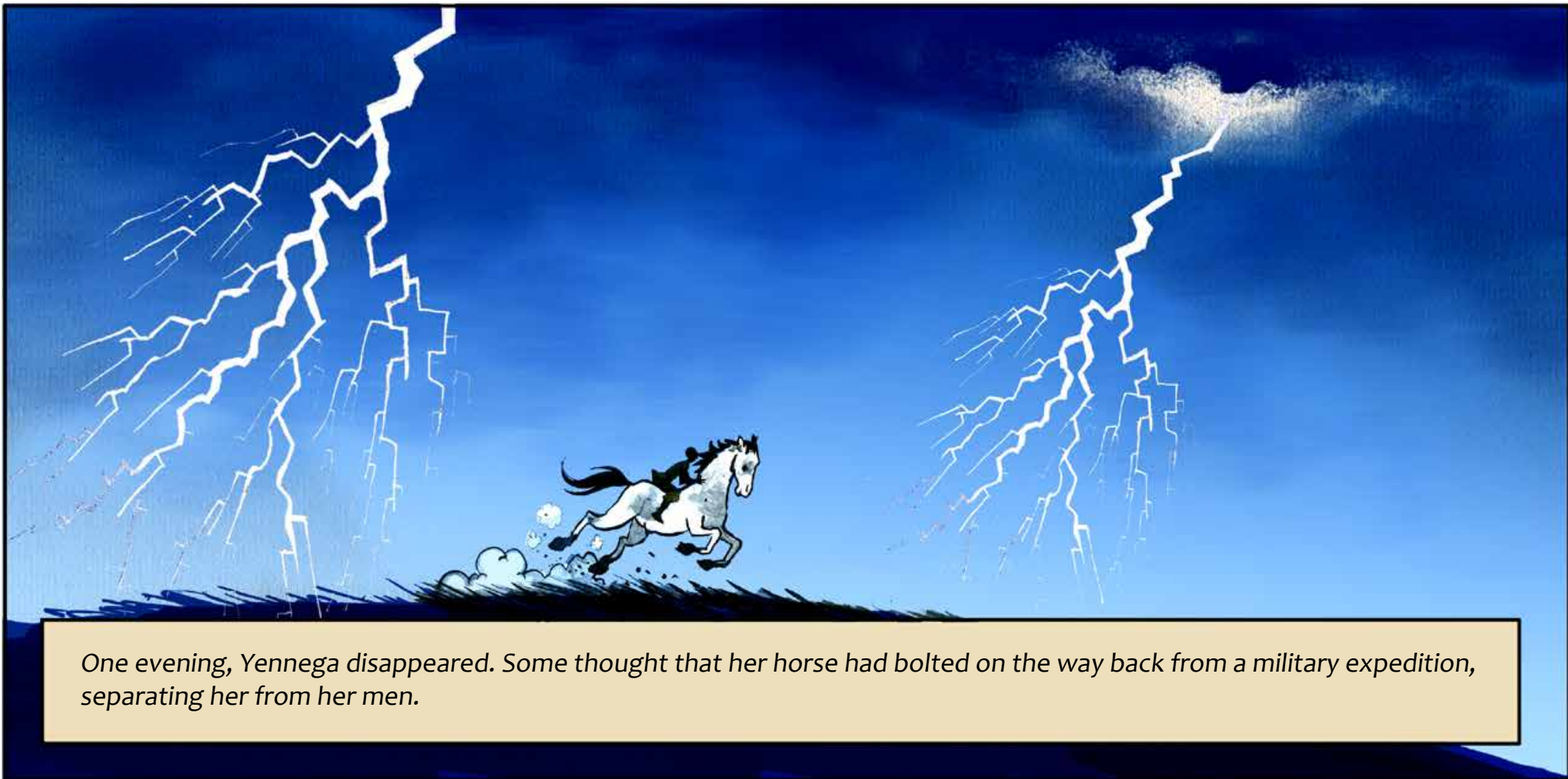




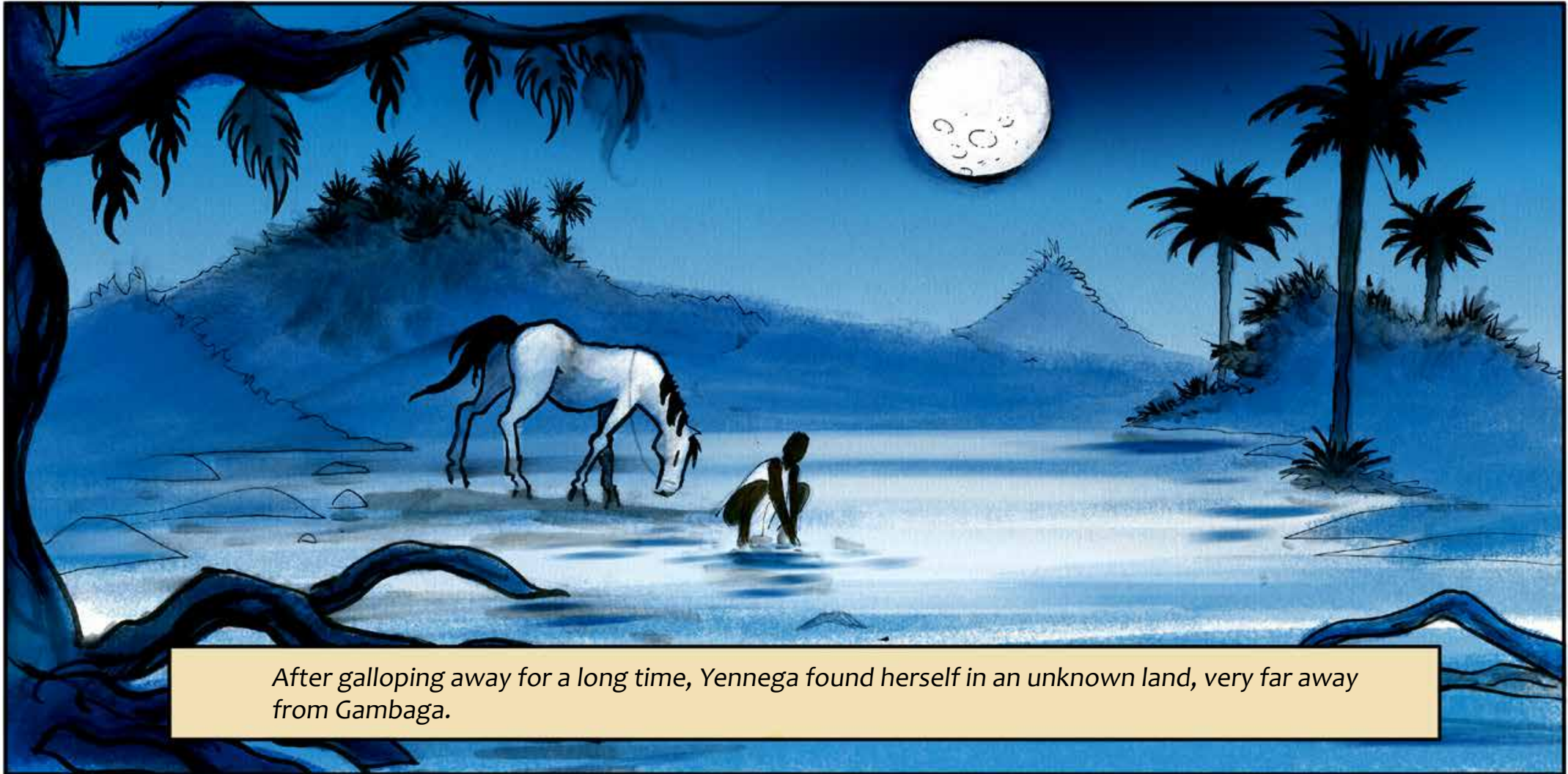
*Then one day, in a gesture of defiance, she planted some okra in front of her father's house. When the time came to pick the okra, she allowed the crop to dry up and the okra pods to die uncut.*



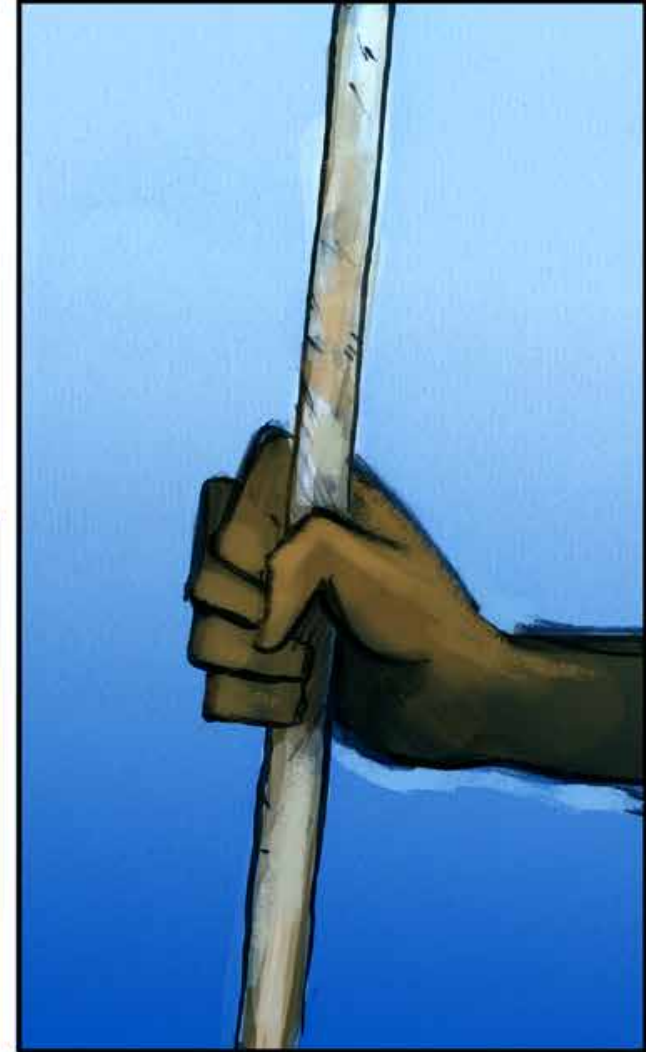


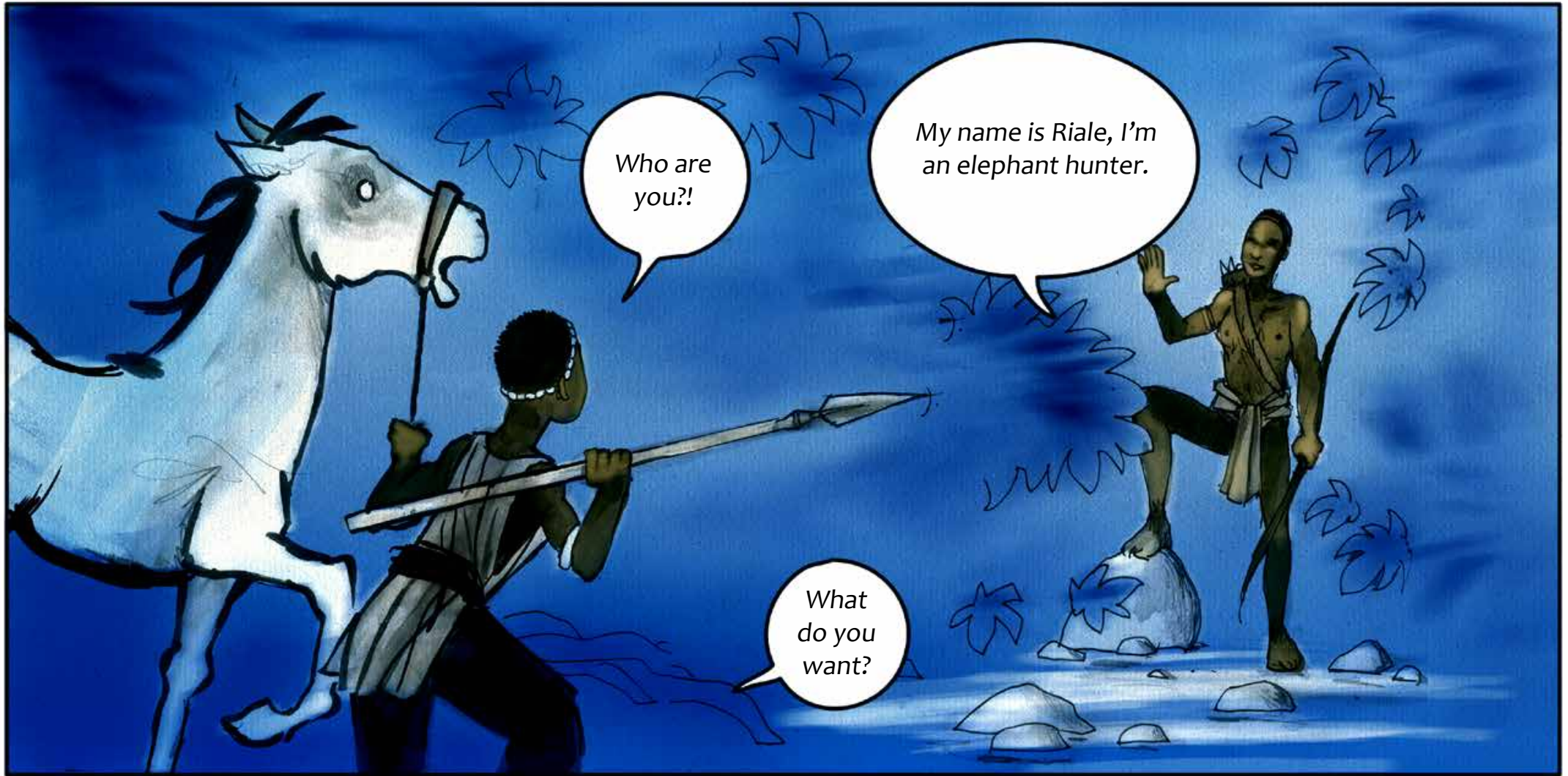


*One evening, Yennega disappeared. Some thought that her horse had bolted on the way back from a military expedition, separating her from her men.*



*After galloping away for a long time, Yennega found herself in an unknown land, very far away from Gambaga.*





Riale told Yennega about himself and how he lived alone in the forest of Bitou, in the south west of today's Burkina Faso.

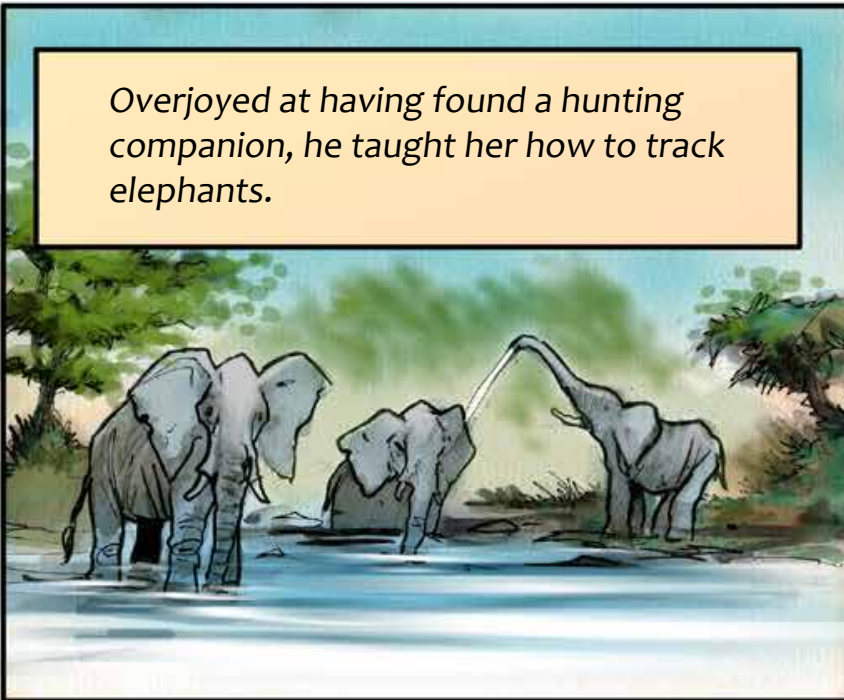
I travelled here...



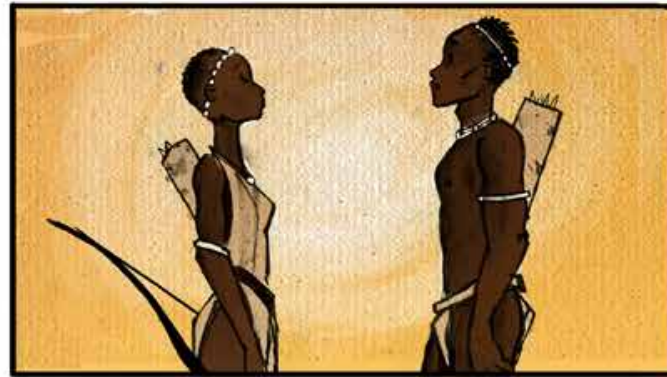
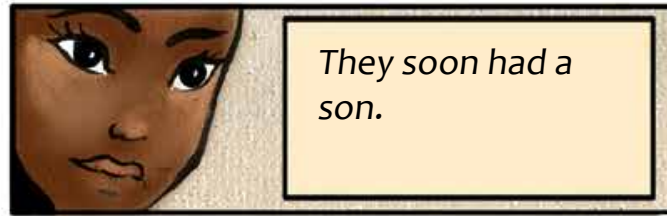
...from a land very far away, from the Malinke region.



I left my family when I discovered that my brothers had stolen my family's entire inheritance when my father died.

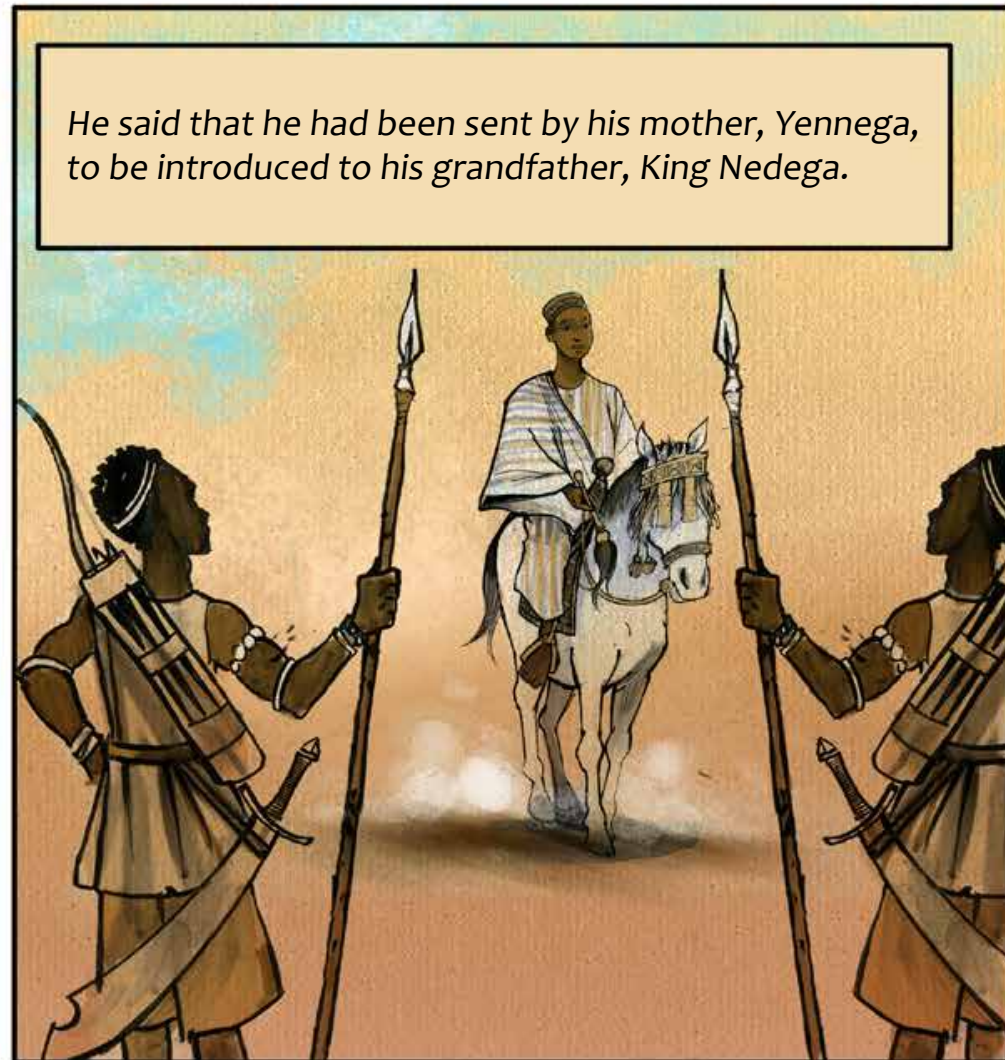






*Yennega, completely absorbed in her happiness in the forest of Bitou, forgot all about her kingdom. Throughout this time, the king had his men search everywhere for Yennega, but in vain. Gambaga mourned its valiant warrior and Nedega sank into the deepest despair.*

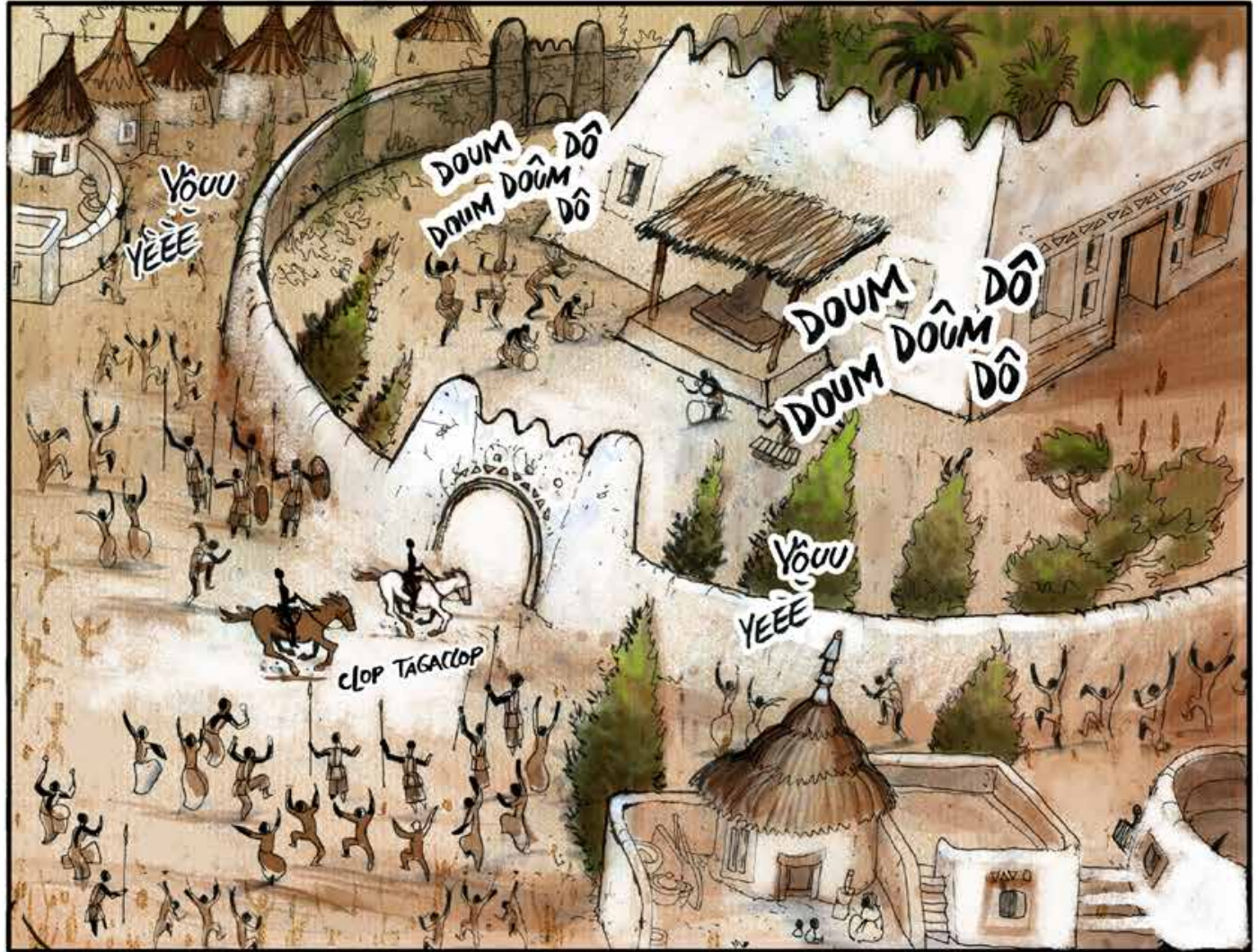






*The elderly king was so happy to learn that his daughter was still alive and that he now had a grandson that he gave the order for lavish celebrations to be prepared in Gambaga. The very next day, he sent envoys to Bitou to request his daughter to return to the family fold.*

There was much rejoicing at the Yennega's return to Gambaga accompanied by Riale. Overjoyed at finding her again, Yennega's parents forgave her for having run away and welcomed her back most affectionately.



*Yennega subsequently returned to the forest in Bitou and lived there happily with her husband.*



*Ouedraogo stayed with his grandfather to complete his learning.*



*Then Ouedraogo, too, returned to the region of Bitou. His grandfather gave him a cavalry, cattle and other goods. Many young men travelled with him to settle down away from their homeland.*



*Ouedraogo and his sons became leaders of a powerful army and conquered many lands around Bitou, setting up the first Moose kingdoms and mixing with the local people. They continued to expand their rule down through the centuries. The Mousse oral traditions still keep the memory of Yennega, her son Ouedraogo and their many descendants alive to this day.*

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### **Yennega, Princess of Gambaga**

Yennega, an emblematic figure in Burkina Faso, was the mother of Ouedraogo, the founder of the dynasties of the Moose chieftains. She is thought to have lived between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Weary of the warrior role in which she had been cast by her father, the King of Gambaga, she ran away and met a solitary hunter. A legendary figure in West Africa, Yennega is the epitome of the female warrior, a free and independently minded woman.

### **Women in African History**

By way of various artistic and pedagogical resources available online, this UNESCO project highlights a selection of historical female figures, from Africa and of African descent, who have distinguished themselves in the history of the continent in areas as diverse as politics (Gisèle Rabesahala), diplomacy and resistance against colonization (Njinga Mbandi), defence of women's rights (Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti) and environmental protection (Wangari Maathai).

The selection of women figures proposed in the framework of this project is not exhaustive and represents only a small part of the contribution of African women, known and unknown, to the history of their countries, Africa and all mankind.

**For additional pedagogical resources, please visit the web site [www.unesco.org/womenin africa](http://www.unesco.org/womenin africa)**

**The UNESCO Project *Women in African History* was realized with the financial contribution of the Republic of Bulgaria.**



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