

DUST

by

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ABSTRACT

KAREN ALICIA SCHEEWE. *Dust*. (Under the direction of DR. BALAKA BASU)

In a culture dominated by Eurocentric traditions and narratives, there are many silences in our discourse. I seek to address the absence of multiculturalism in children's literature. This creative project subverts the dominant white structure of our society in favor of an inclusive viewpoint which promotes the reception of marginalized subjects. In this undertaking, I write towards what is missing including minority protagonists, diverse mythologies, and multicultural communities. This narrative attempts to take readers away from the Eurocentric foundation and immerse them in a culturally different world through a graphic Webcomic. The story pulls from various Asian, South Pacific, and some South American legends, architecture, customs, and more. This story utilizes visual mediums to demonstrate an alternate worldview, one that is inclusive of ethnic diversity, normalizing what is considered "other." Such narratives are essential in order to expand our worldviews and also to diversify our currently limited narratives.

INTRODUCTION

This project evolved as I examined the boundaries of text and how such boundaries were exclusionary. We live in a society where media is oversaturated with Caucasian protagonists. If present, the racial other often takes a secondary sidekick-like role. This doesn't mean that diverse narratives don't exist, but they are few and far between. This social trend has trained audiences to expect whiteness. In order to combat this whiteout, we must be aware consumers; consumers who recognize portrayals of race, culture, and class as well as the absence of these depictions.

The dominating standard of literature is narratives which are euro-focused. As in other media, storytelling falls short of multicultural integration thus creating a silent form of aggression against those whose story and lifestyle lie just outside accepted norms. My project pushes traditional storytelling limits in stylization, representation, and topic. This undertaking seeks to cast a light on those marginalized stories and cultures by employing them in the form of a graphic narrative.

The choice to make this project a graphic one is a direct response to the current trends of children's literature. This project gives me the unique opportunity to *show* culture and racial variety rather than call attention to the existence of diversity. As pointed out, audiences tend to assume characters are white unless otherwise corrected. And in pointing out that one character has dark skin or slanted eyes, the white-other binary is reinforced. *Telling* of diversity sustains the flawed cultural tendency to place whiteness as the norm, and separate anything not white as alien. It seems to me, that we need to retrain ourselves, opening the possibility of the non-white as something that is not only normal, but something to be expected in our ever diversifying world. Showing racial

and ethnic diversity through art enables a more natural acknowledgement. This project endeavors to create a narrative which fosters the normalization of the multicultural world. It begins the breaking down of the Eurocentric walls that hedge our society and our literature.

In this graphic undertaking, illustrations are a key component. Images used hand in hand with written text are often criticized because graphic stories carry a reputation of being juvenile. Many argue that stories with pictures are less complex, a copout to the reader, or useful only to those who cannot comprehend the text without visual crutches. However, I along with others dispute these criticisms, advocating that images can be just as complex as prose, and even add depth to textual interpretation. Images are icons for real world objects, experiences, and emotions. Because of this, they can reach readers on a more direct, often intimate level. Images are crucial to portraying cultural diversity and normativity in my project. My main characters, Rei-Jin, Eila, and Omi, are of Northeast Asia and South Pacific decent and their environment ranges from anything in and between these regions. While a purely text based narrative would be forced to point out the unique cultural background of these characters in order to differentiate their world from the white norm, visual depictions show diversity as a norm.

I take my project one step further into the border of familiar narratives by publishing it as a webcomic. Webcomics demonstrate a convergence of many traditional forms of storytelling. The medium, being the Internet, allows for vast exploration and interactivity in the form of flash animation, sound bites, hyperlinks, and increased user interactivity.

Webcomics are not synonymous with comics, but rather are a new form of storytelling. They are stories specifically designed and developed for the Internet and digital consumption. As a form of storytelling, webcomics are relatively young, its first origins dating back to the early 90's with the advent of the personal computer. Internet content is generally free and allows for widespread authorship. Web content is made, consumed, reused, adapted, collaged, and re-appropriated. Because of this amateur authorship and viral nature of information and content, the Web is perceived as an uncontrolled entity awash with low art which could not hope to achieve the so called "prominence" of printed text. Many webcomic artists and authors strive to mimic printed comics in layout, presentation, and form, hoping this sets them apart as "real" authors. Other webcomic creators push the boundaries of the traditional form. These are noteworthy for their use of flash animation, short clips, and other special effects. However, too much digital nuance can hinder the reading experience. If used too often, the visual and audial features can be disorienting and even get in the way of the story.

Vertical or horizontal layouts, and flash animation are not the only feasible forms for webcomics. In his book *Reinventing Comics*, Scott McCloud purposes the idea of an infinite canvas. This is an exploratory form, utilizing scrolling in a new way. The panels can continue in any direction, enhancing the story by creating sensations of falling, climbing, or traveling. McCloud argues that narratives can take many shapes in this infinite canvas; horizontal, staircase, vertical, spiral, cubic, and any other means of shape 2 or 3D of which we can conceive.

However, in my study I have found that when applied to a story as a whole, the infinite canvas can be disruptive to the narrative. While at times innovative, the form can

be overused. It calls for excessive scrolling, never allowing the screen to remain stagnant for long, subsequently leaving readers out of breath. Authors risk losing their readers along the way due to a complicated or unfamiliar form. This may be why so many webcomics cling to the traditional print-style. Perhaps reserved for moments of heightened drama or tension, the infinite canvas has the potential to enhance the reading experience.

Digital displays are meant for horizontal multitasking and reading. As such, vertical oriented illustrations are chopped off and the reading experience can be frustrating. The story is interrupted by a few inches of the screen break. This jerks the reader out of the story, especially when a full page is dedicated to a single image. In my project I attempt to account for all of these stylistic and spatial choices, selecting a form that encourages familiarity and a layout which is fostered by a computer screen.

One particularly attractive feature of the webcomic is virtual access. Content is available to any with access to the Web. Libraries are finite spaces. They are restricted in what they may offer to the public. Libraries provide a selection which is categorized by newly printed books, often popular to mainstream culture, and slanted towards those books which have won awards. This leaves a gap for the independent publisher, the racial minority character, and other books which fall out of the mainstream pop culture. The Internet provides an infinite space for stories. There are no limitations on popularity, circulation, or access. As such, this is the perfect space for my project. On the Web, my categorically divergent subject will have a place to inhabit, a place not limited by current trends or cultural restrictions.

In addition, there exists an open source aspect which the Internet invites and fosters. Readers have a direct line to authors in a unique way, able to offer criticism, suggestions, and creative collaboration through a comments section or email. A certain transparency is encouraged as writers and artists intermingle with readers, share samples of earlier work, and discuss craft and process. Because Webcomics are serial in nature, a page or so published weekly or biweekly, readers often make requests for certain storylines to continue or a background character to reappear. The author is able to receive immediate feedback for what works and how to continue.

While I have discussed at length my visual intentions, my literary aesthetics have undergone great consideration as well. Not unlike a play or film, the graphic narrative can be strongly driven by dialogue. Such is the case with my project. Dialog needs to move the story forward, reveal character, or be intended for humor. Especially when speech bubbles need to be concise as to not dominate the visual aspects, no time or space can be wasted in needless exposition. At times it comes down to a single word which may make or break a panel because of its dominance of space. Many times, I had to cut lines upon lines of what I considered essential dialog because the audience isn't just reading, they are seeing. In order for a graphic story to be compelling, it's necessary that the characters show movement, just like in a film. Of course readers use their imagination to superimpose movement and tone. And while sharing many similarities with other modes of storytelling, graphic narratives are a unique form. Unless added with special effects, there is no sound or animation. Images and words work together though to what extent each dose can be adapted.

Revisiting the visual side of storytelling, it will be essential to establish setting and help the reader to feel the tone and mood through illustration. Deciding how much detail to include in each panel is another challenge that I faced in the creation of my project. Story can be completely driven by illustration as seen in Shaun Tan's wordless graphic novel *The Arrival*. This graphic novel tells the story through series of events and communicates tone through various visual techniques including scale, perspective, and texture. In scenes dealing with suspense I will endeavor to employ such techniques. There are moments where my characters face mythical beasts, leading to chases and physical conflict. As I draw on emotions conveyed by my art, I hope to draw the reader into the perspective of the characters.

During the course of this project I experimented with the construction of identity with intentional word choice and deliberate visual selection. Artistic aspects, such as texture, scale, contrast and more, all serve to influence the viewer and their interpretation. For example, a page may use primarily warm colors to create a sense of activity or intensity. Visual languages, often iconic, vary depending on culture and nation, needing to be learned. As I acquired the visual languages of narrative art, I constantly encountered my own limitation of not being an artist. To overcome this, I looked to the instructional texts listed in the bibliography of my project. Each offers valuable direction in the construction of visual craft. In addition, I also relied on the methods discussed in my visual semiotics class. In this course I used close analysis of graphic novels, picture books, illustrations and more, to identify which visual forms were at work. Through the critical examination of texts in such courses, I've learned the sophisticated visual forms used in graphic storytelling and have exerted to apply these forms in my own work.

Also covered in several classes, were how different levels of realism in subjects and background effect reader connectivity with the story. Theories lean toward a simply illustrated protagonist, facilitating the ease with which the face can be interpreted and identified with. Complex backgrounds and realistic settings are suggested to create a space in which readers can inhabit since we commonly see such things every day. In my initial character designs, I tended to take a more realistic approach. However, more recently I have tried to experiment with style. Japanese manga often exaggerates facial features to depict emotions. In many animated cartoons home and abroad, object integrity is upset in the form of rubber hose animation. In such many cases with manga and cartoons the amplification of action and feeling serves primarily for humor. But in addition, magnifying feeling also intensifies its impact. As emotions become externalized, readers are able to more fully connect with characters, experiencing the physicality of actions and feelings. Especially while working with word bubbles, to convey intensity of speech and even sound effects, I've experimented with how text can not only be representative of the ideas attached to them, but also be an artistic expression.

Feeling as invoked by visuals further connects to my studies on user interactivity in narratives. As readers accept a pretend world as something tangible and alive, they are enticed to play with the text, engaging not just with their imagination but bodily. As a text invokes the senses, it immerses the reader. I've endeavored to achieve this immersion through all of the techniques discussed above, including realistic dialog, balance of text and images, and an expressive art form.

This webcomic takes a traditional form in its design, but undertakes an untraditional focus in its narrative. The familiar presentation will enable readers to enter

the non-Eurocentric world with ease. The marginalized minority will be presented as the standard. Through the duration of this project, my personal art style incorporated the bright colors found in primitivism such as the artist Paul Gauguin. Eastern and tribal influences are shown in the architecture as well as everyday living environment of the characters. When the protagonists enter the borderlands where magic and legends live, I will include magical realism in both the landscape and creatures. Overall I seek for an eastern cultural influence upon visual aesthetics especially the setting. I hope to draw in readers with the unexplored oriental culture, providing a platform for them to enter the text not just as an outside observer, but as an active participant in seeing and experiencing the world for themselves. In this way, the strange might become familiar, and the concept of what is considered typical may stretch to include Rei-Jin, his friends, and their lifestyle.

In the introduction to children's literature course, one particularly compelling issue which heavily informed this project was the sparsity of ethnic representation in illustrations. There are many silences in literature when dealing with the "othered" minorities. In an age when race and culture blend into identity, children's texts tend to misconstrue or simply ignore the issues of a multiracial identity. Though we claim to live in a post-race culture, we still marginalize and underrepresent many of today's youth, repeatedly defaulting to the white protagonist. The struggle to fairly represent and to understand identity exists in our society, reflected in our literature by the absence of multicultural texts. As discussed, it was this issue of the untold identity which shaped my motivation to create a world in which the other is normalized. And not only normalized, but diversified, so that depictions of minorities are not limited to side-kick activities or

service as plot devices. I wish to show minority characters in a number of capacities, playing many roles in society to demonstrate the range that exists in peoples so often categorized as one thing or the other.

The four chapters submitted for this project contain the first part of this epic serial. In them, I set up the world and characters in preparation for a larger narrative. The webcomic is currently hosted, or stored, on a site called *Comic Furry*. Here, using search tools to narrow categories such as genre and style, readers are able to browse through various webcomics. By clicking links, readers are taken to a webpage where they can then view the narrative.

It is my hope that this project and others like it will present alternatives to the conditioned whiteness in our literature. By familiarizing ourselves with other cultures, traditions, legends, and peoples our world view is expanded. Then, when given the option to imagine the appearance of a literary world, our minds will not jump as they have in times past to Eurocentric boundaries. Instead we may be free to imagine the world as it is, diverse, colorful, and boundless.

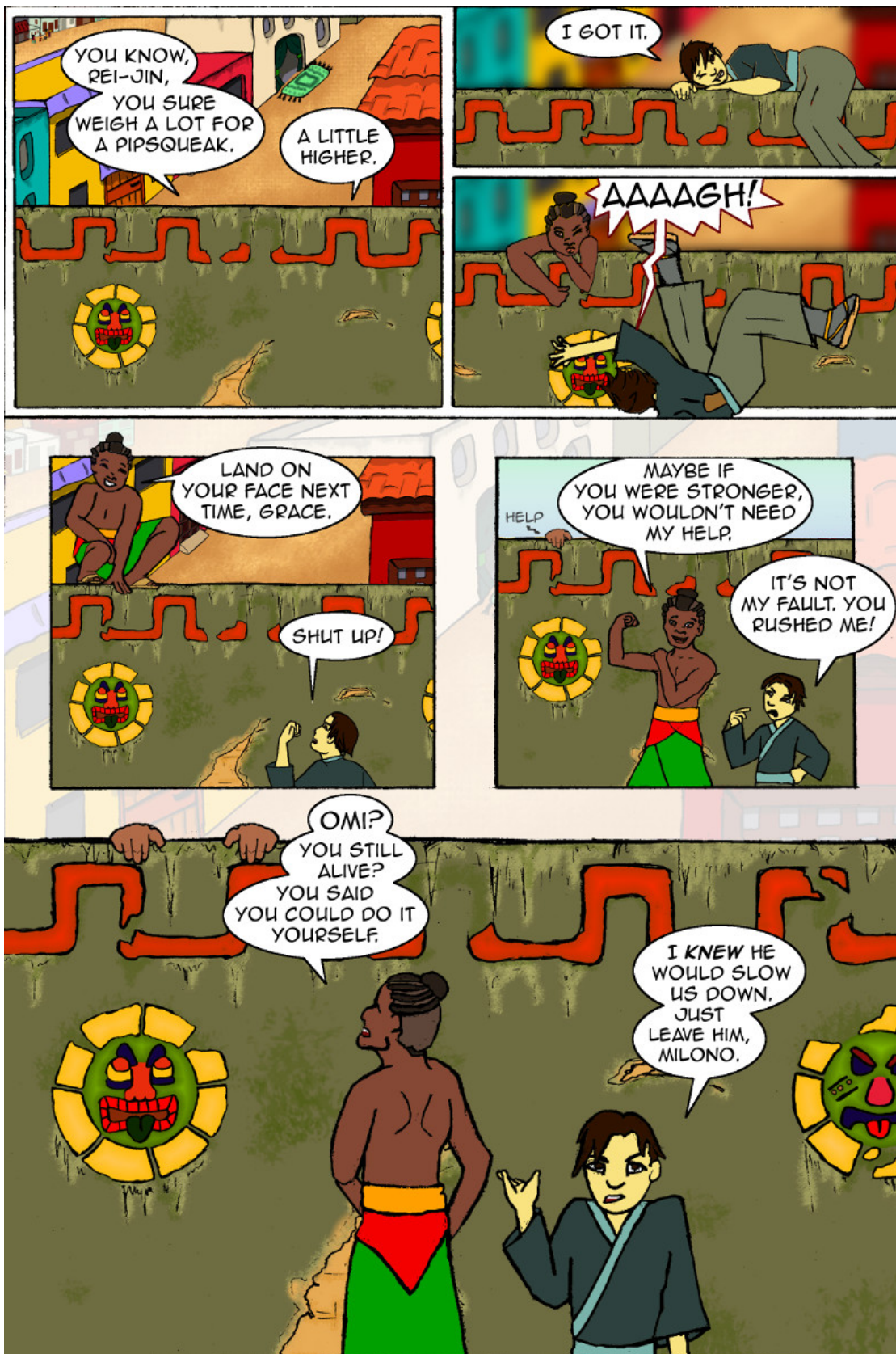
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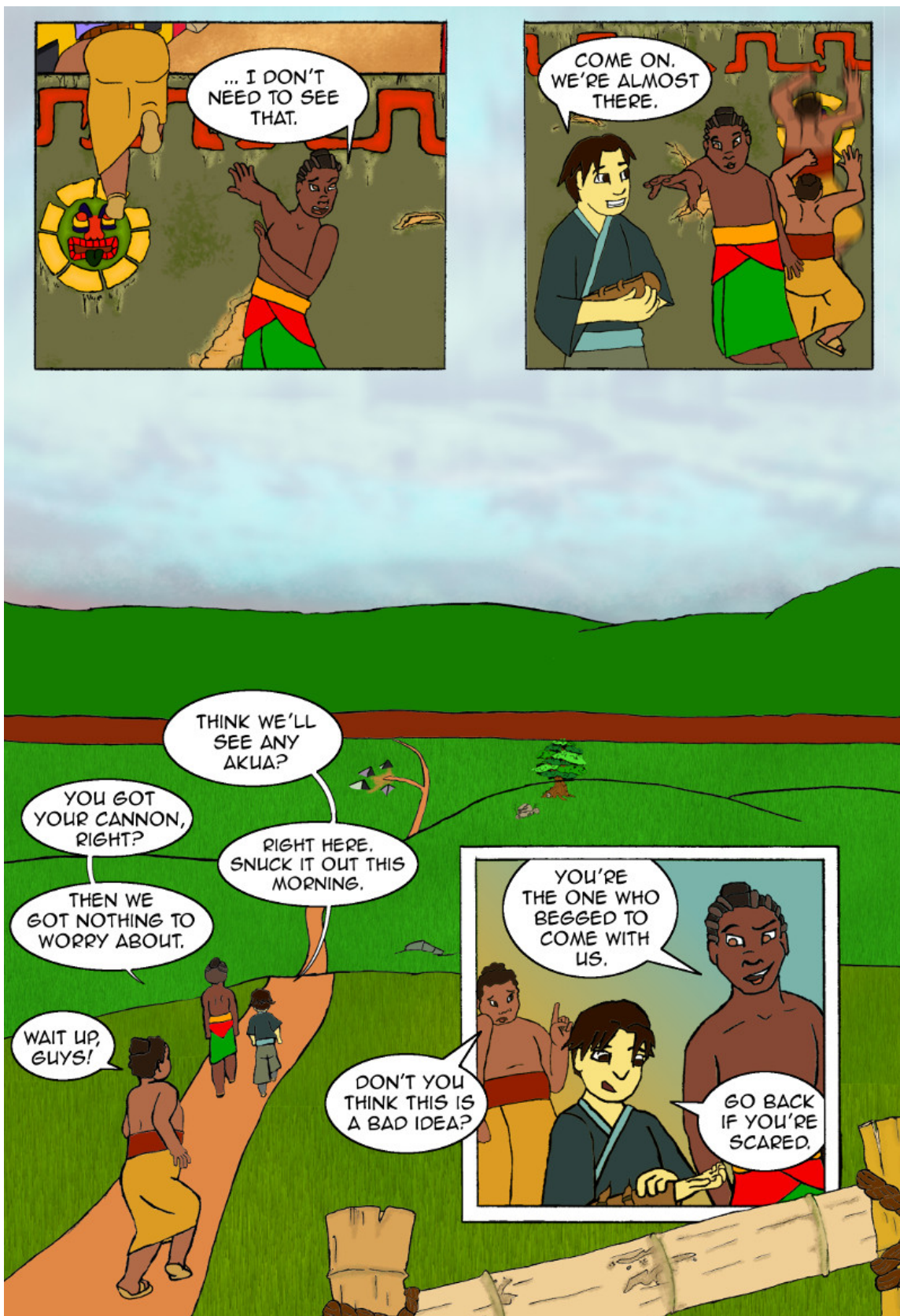
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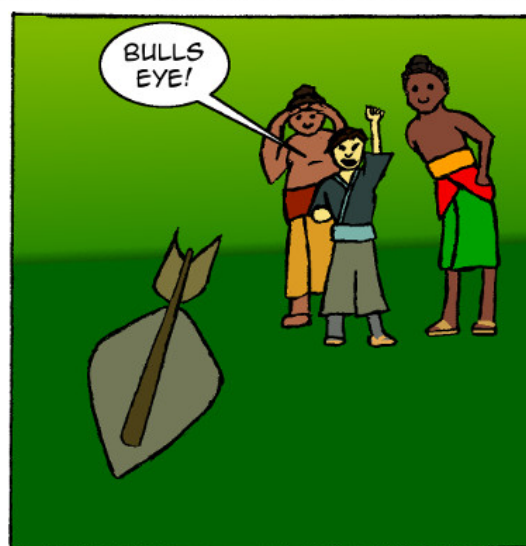
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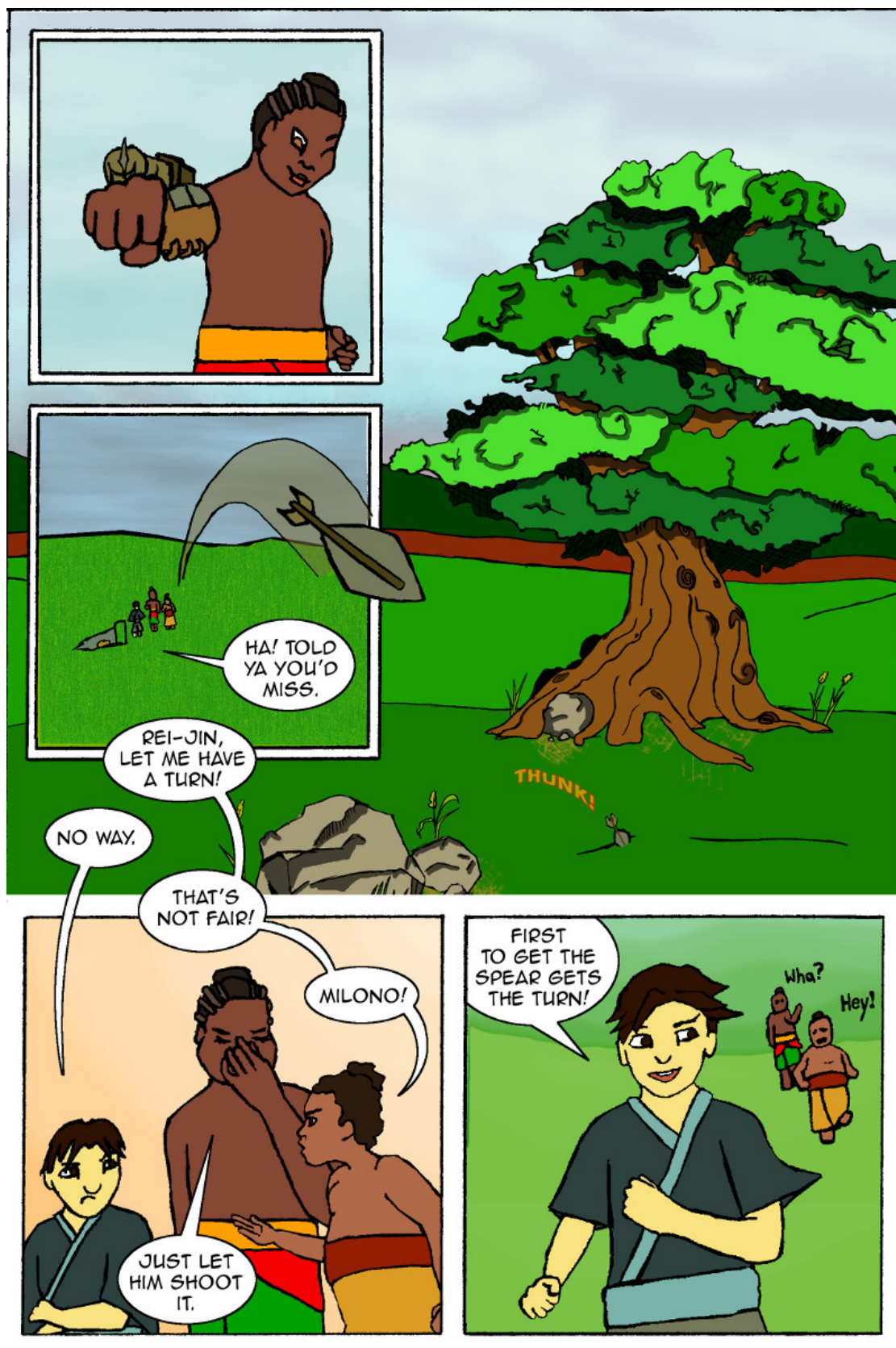
*Milono, Rei-Jin, and Omi sneak out of town to journey to the forbidden border.
They meet Eila, a friend to the group.*







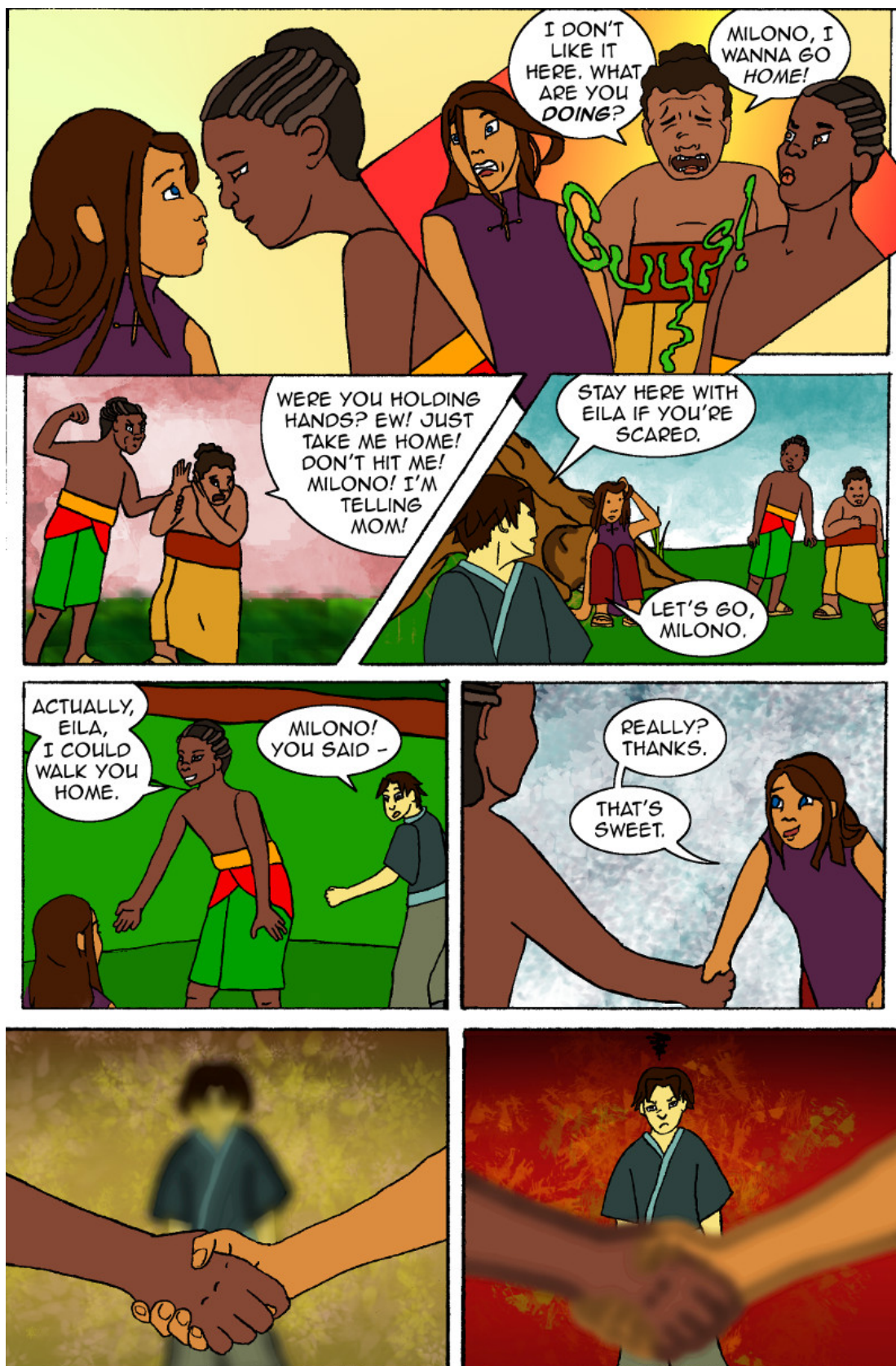


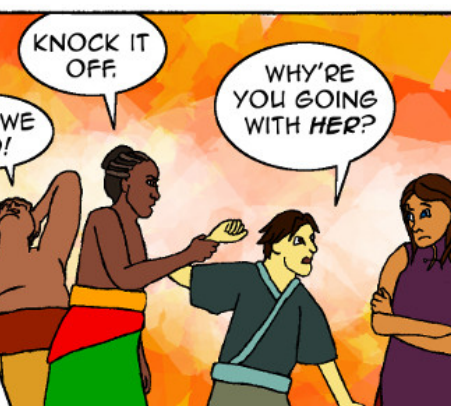




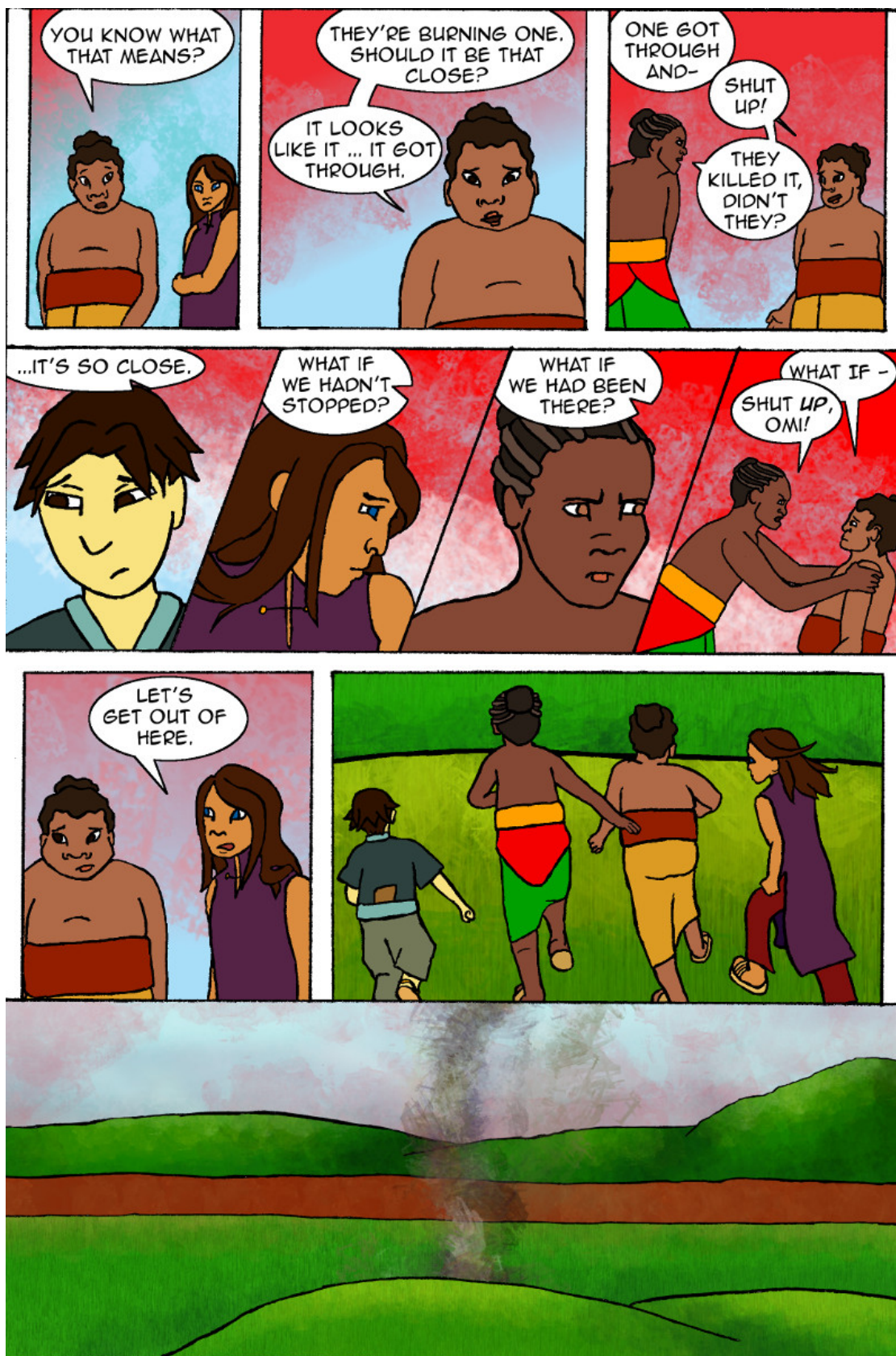








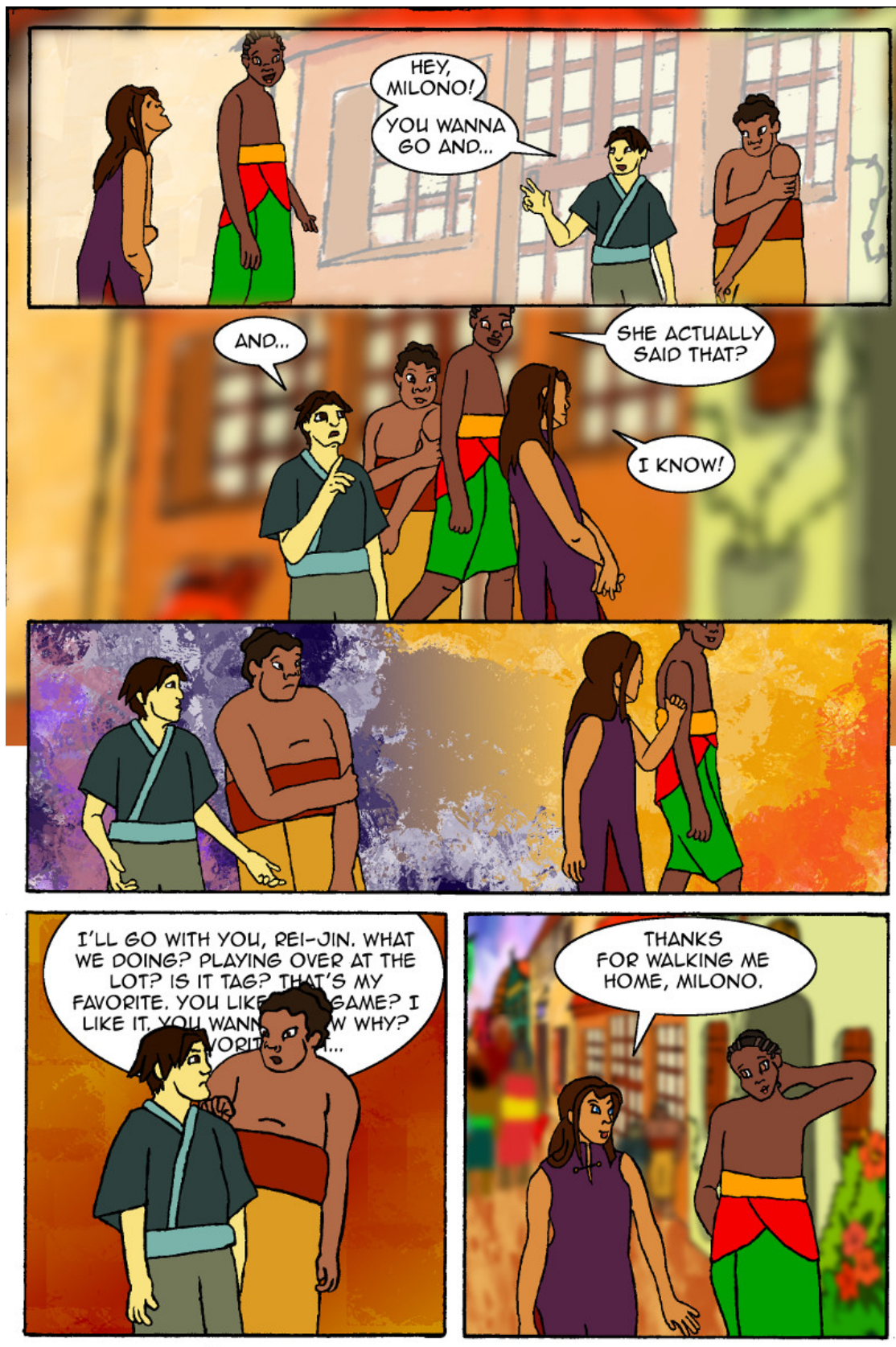




CHAPTER 2: DAY IN THE LIFE

Back in town, the four friends go their separate ways. Rei-Jin remembers a time with his older sibling. The next day, Milono rises early to work with his father in the forge.







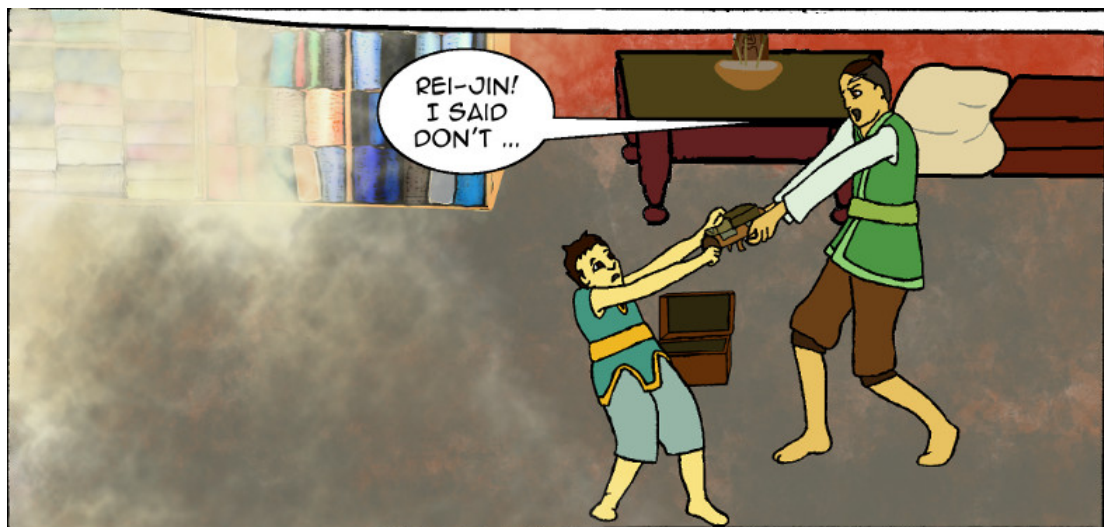








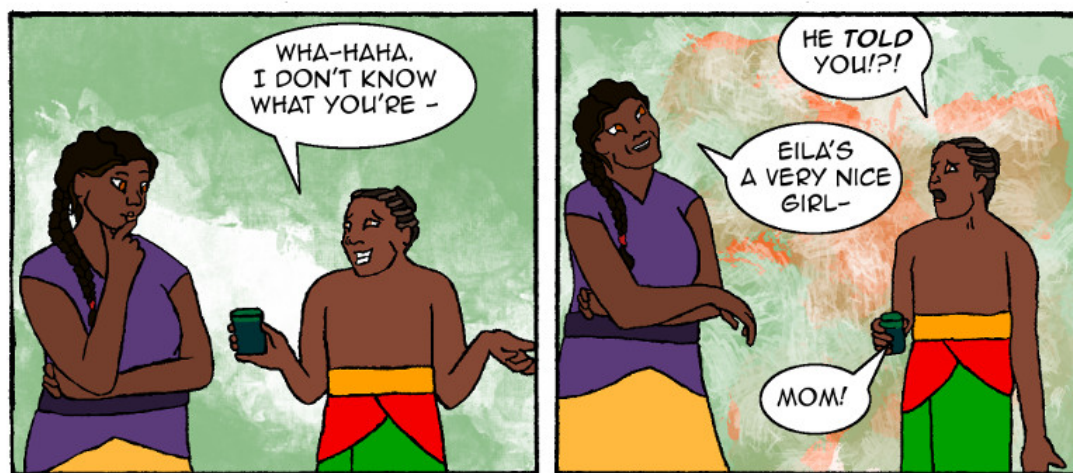
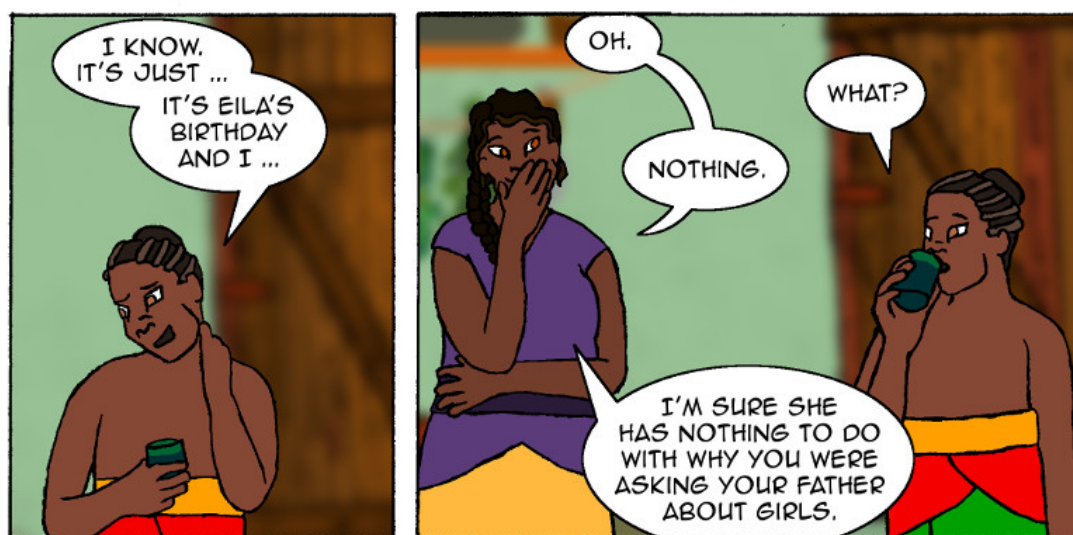




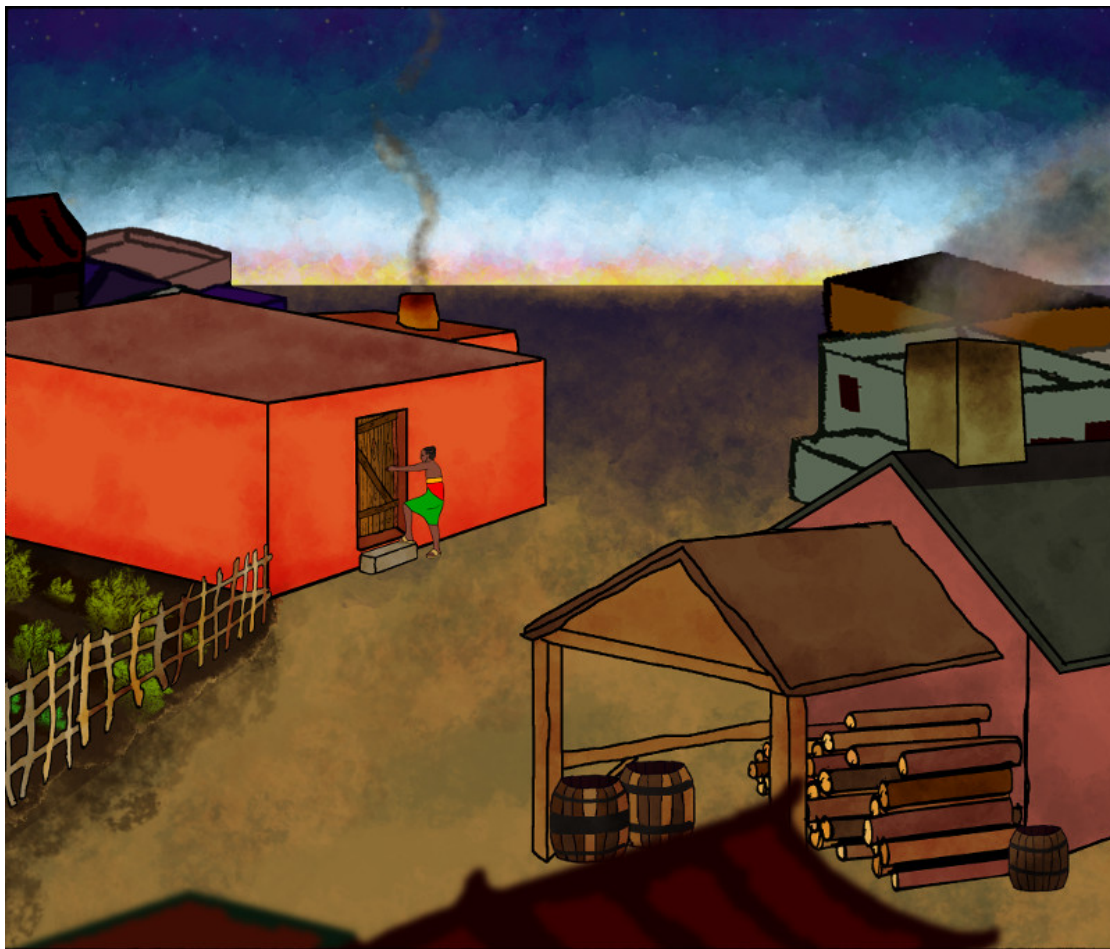


















CHAPTER 3: THE CAPTAIN

Later that day, Rei-Jin, Omi, and Eila attend school. Afterwards, Eila takes Rei-Jin to meet the captain of the bordermen. The meeting is cut short when the captain is called away.









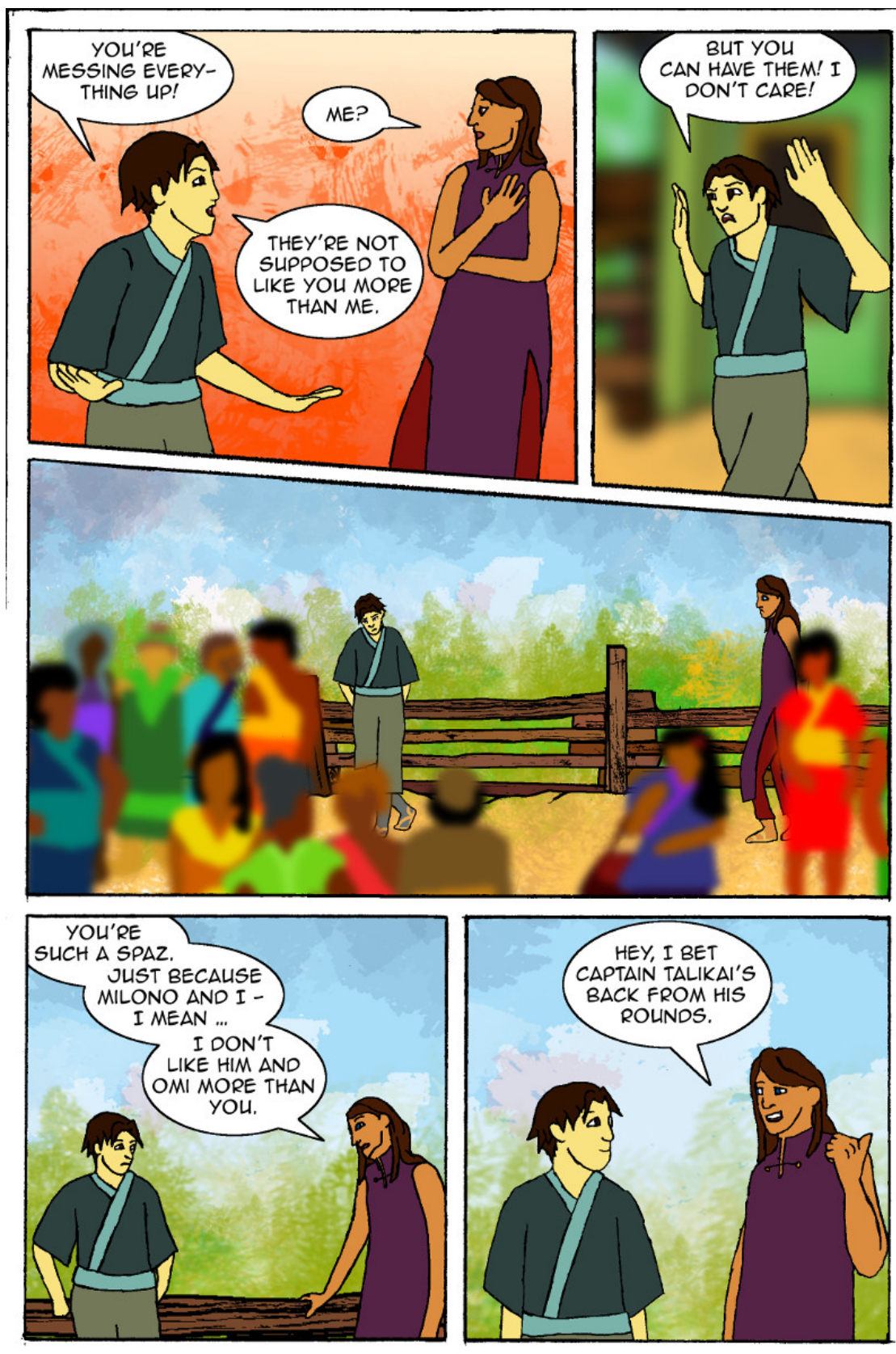














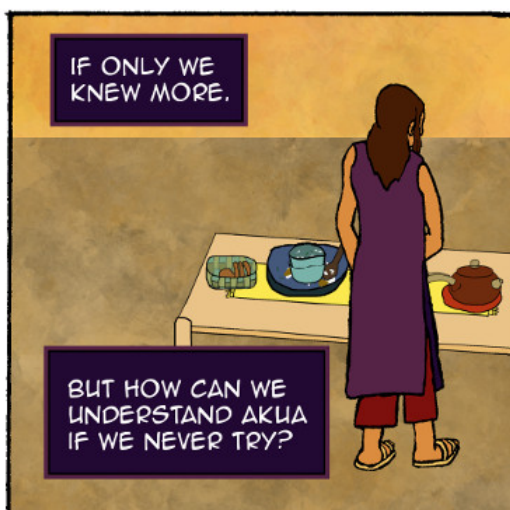










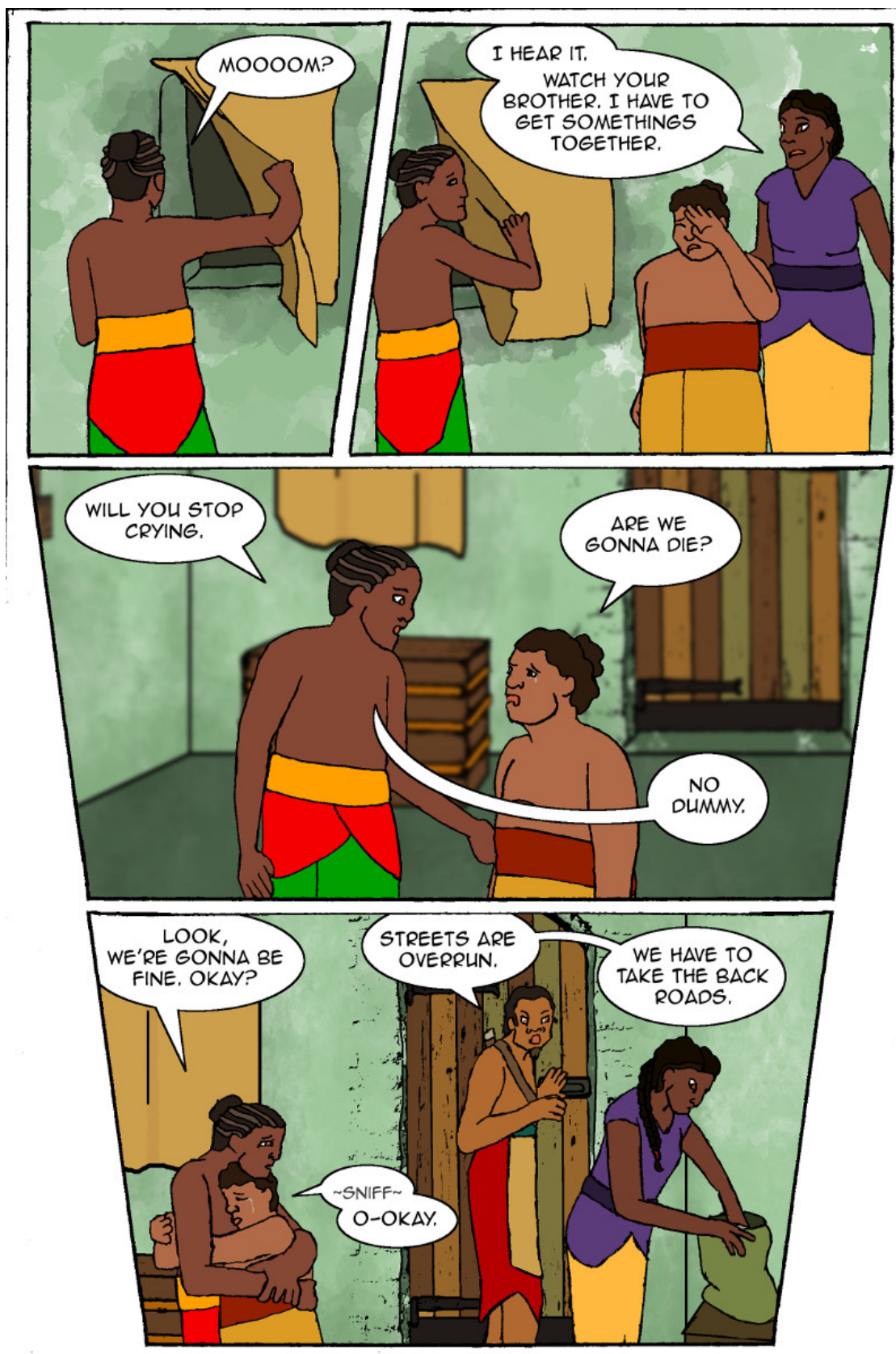


CHAPTER 4: BREACH

Later that night, the border is breached by magical creatures. Rei-Jin and his mother, and Milono, Omi and their parents, all attempt to make it to the tavern to safety.



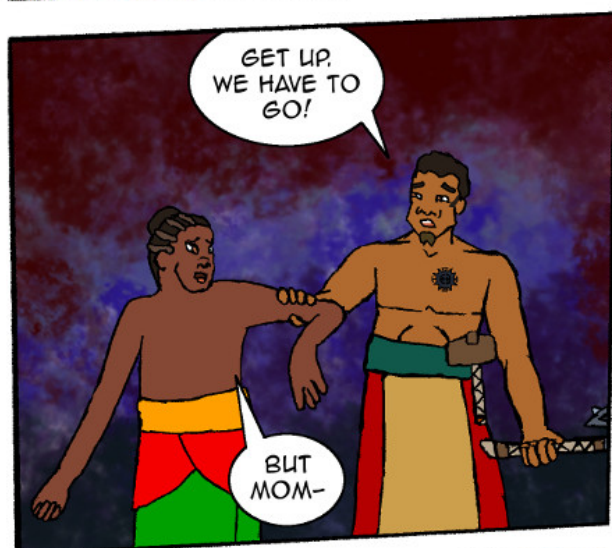






































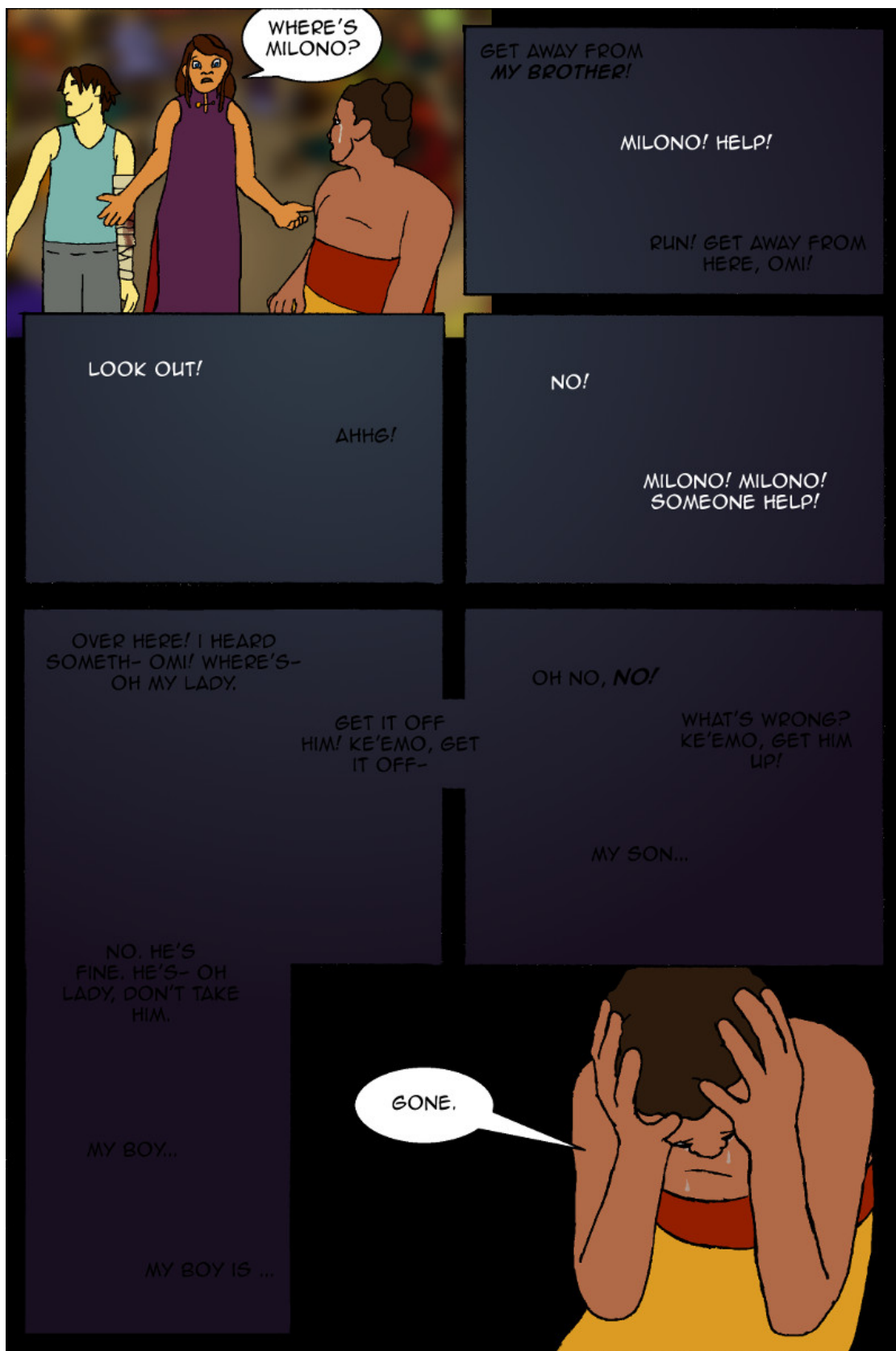














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