

We Take Care of the Land as the Land has Taken Care of Us

Stories of Agriculture and Resistance from Kurdistan and Iraq



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Title: We Take Care of the Land as the Land has Taken Care of Us
Stories of Agriculture and Resistance from Kurdistan and Iraq

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We invite you to travel with us through the history of agriculture in Kurdistan and Iraq, through a geographical expanse that was once known as the fertile granary of the Mesopotamian region. Over the last century this land has suffered from severe exploitation and mismanagement. Until today, Iraq's agriculture continues to be impacted by past and current wars, climate change and resource misuse, toxicity released through oil fields, pesticides, the impact of dams built upstream, and drone attacks. Once a rich agricultural land, Iraq has become a country dependent on food imports.

From the 1920s/30s the British colonizers have attempted to gain control over the country and exploit its oil resources. Heba, the widow in our first story *A Widow's Tale*, refuses to leave her land, sending her children up the river in boats during attacks to keep them safe.

Saddam Hussein (1979-2003) had used agricultural politics to control the population. During the 1990s he drained the Mesopotamian marshes as a way to deliberately and systematically punish the population for their refusal to support the regime. In the second story *Living with the Water Buffalo* you will meet a family in the Marshlands in 1992.

The US war, the sanctions and the oil for food program after 2003, have curtailed the development of a local agriculture. During the US invasion in 2003, the national seed bank in Abu Gharib, where 1400 native seed varieties had been stored, was destroyed. Some of these seed varieties have since completely disappeared. This paved the way for multinational corporations to create hybrid seed markets that forced small scale farmers into re-buying new seeds from them each season. This new seeds policy abolished the previous Iraqi law that had not allowed for any private ownership of biological resources. These new regulations aimed at substituting and destroying the informal seed exchange and seed saving methods of local farmers. At the same time, oil companies and other sectors disposed of contaminated waste into rivers, waters and agricultural areas with impunity. The third story *The Confession* is set during this period, between 2003 and 2011.

The last story *The Shepherd Activist* documents the life of farmers between 2019 and 2023, under the constant threat of bombings and the growing effects of dramatic climate change on their lands. The story is told through the eyes of 11 year-old Hakkar who, despite all these dangers, continues to tend to the land and care for the animals.

Even though the political backgrounds and the repression of farmers in the four stories are sad and disturbing, their strength and love for the land are compelling. For me it has been wonderful to see an idea taking shape and developing into these beautifully drawn and narrated stories.

My special thanks goes to Shirwan Can from Paia Agency who immediately liked my idea to tell the history of agriculture in Iraq and Kurdistan through four families in the course of the last century. He and his team coordinated the creation of this graphic novel. The beautiful dialogues and Script are by Sara Eleonora Maria, Art Direction Bahroz Jaza, Illustrations by Tara Abdullah, Mohammed Fatih, and Kosar Jalal and Layout Design Safen Mohammed.

I'm particularly grateful for the dedication and thorough research that Dr. Schluwa Sama has invested into these stories. Not only has she diligently researched the agricultural politics of the respective areas in which the stories are set, but she also edited all the stories and dialogues. Without her knowledge and expertise, this graphic novel would not have been realized.

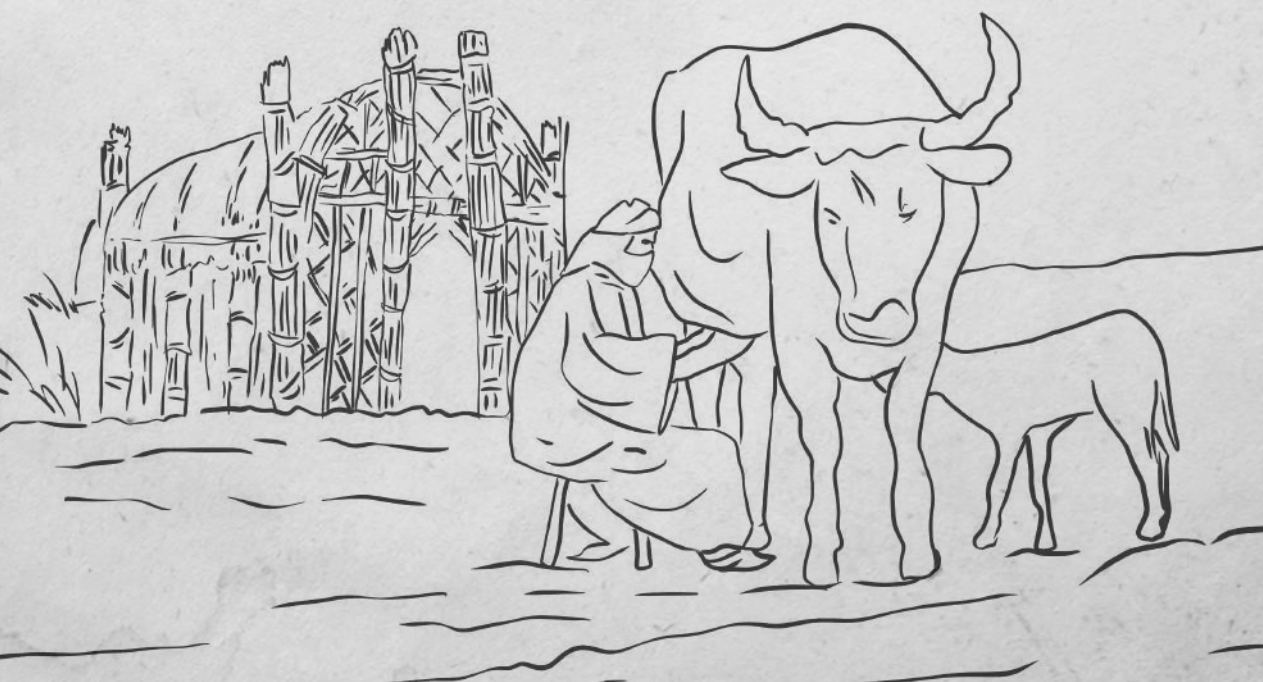
Beirut, 8th of March 2024

Tanja Tabbara

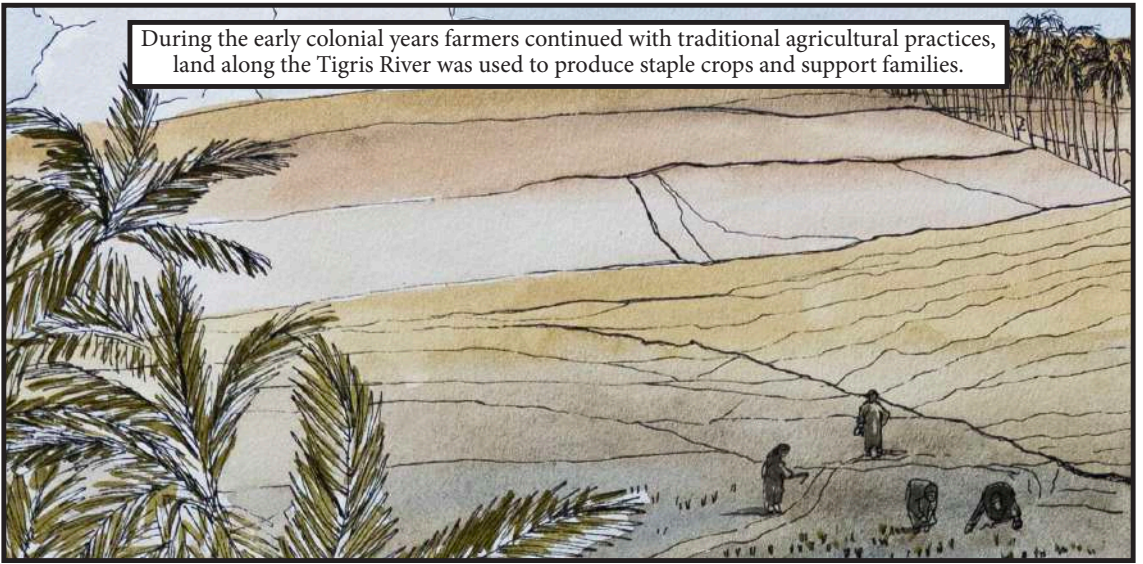
Head of the Regional Office Beirut

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A Widows' Tale



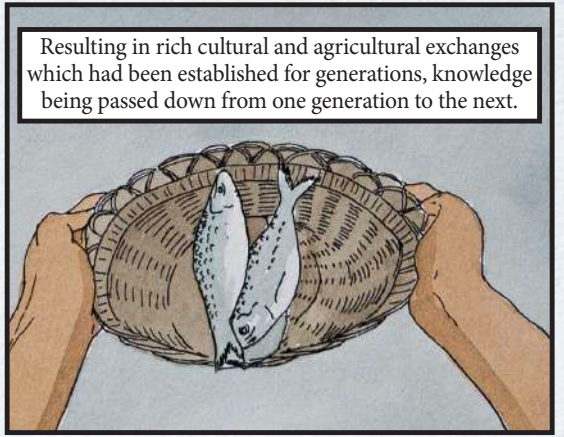
During the early colonial years farmers continued with traditional agricultural practices, land along the Tigris River was used to produce staple crops and support families.

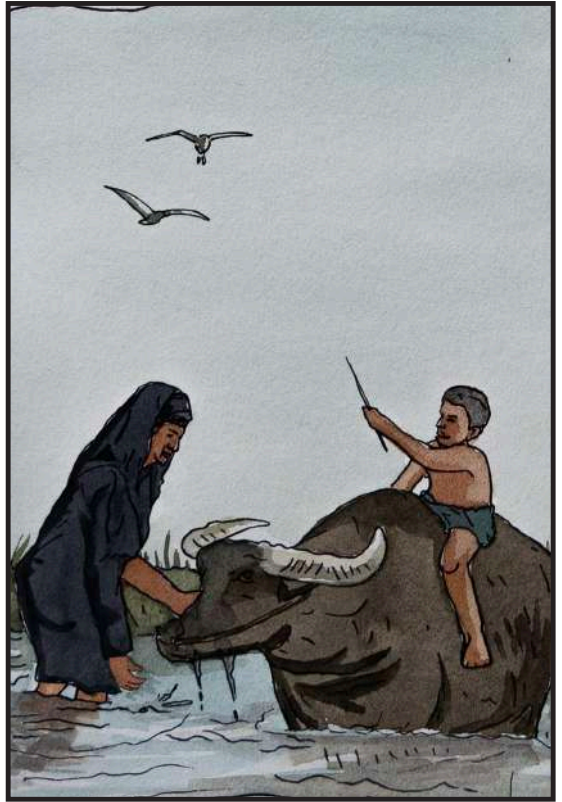
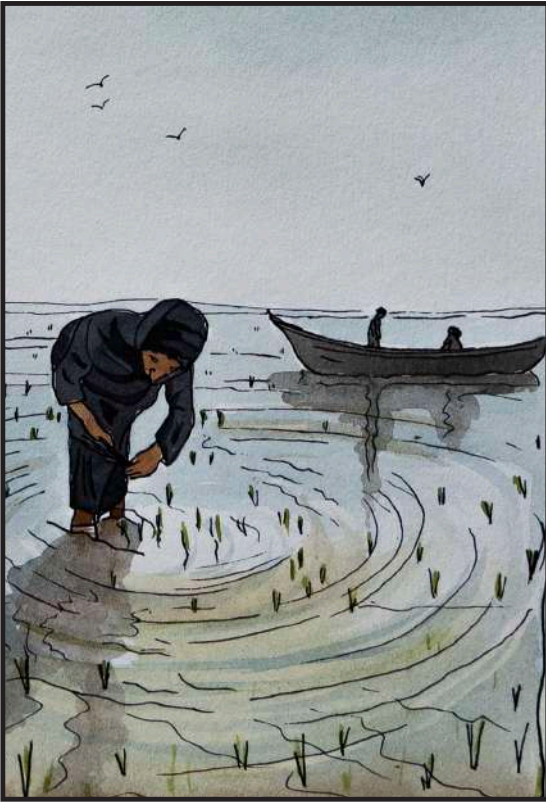
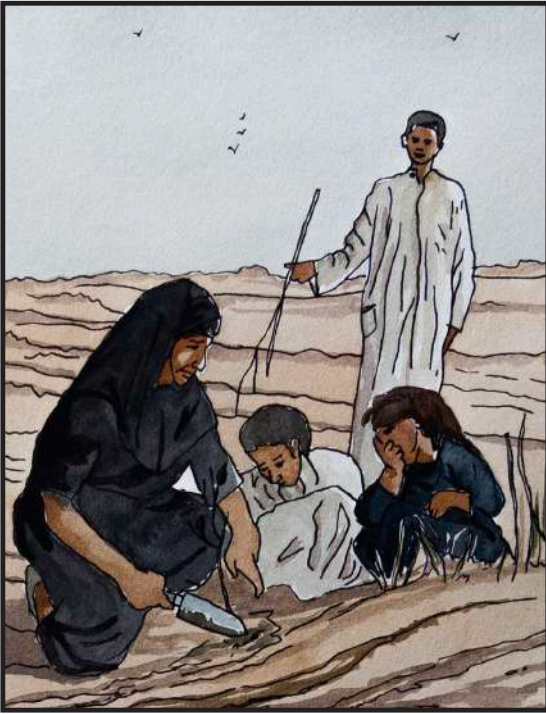


Family members traveled along the river to trade and exchange goods.



Resulting in rich cultural and agricultural exchanges which had been established for generations, knowledge being passed down from one generation to the next.

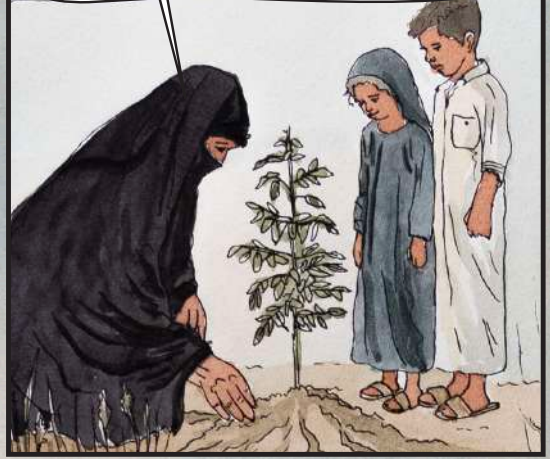




Since your father died, I have learnt everything needed to keep our farm strong.



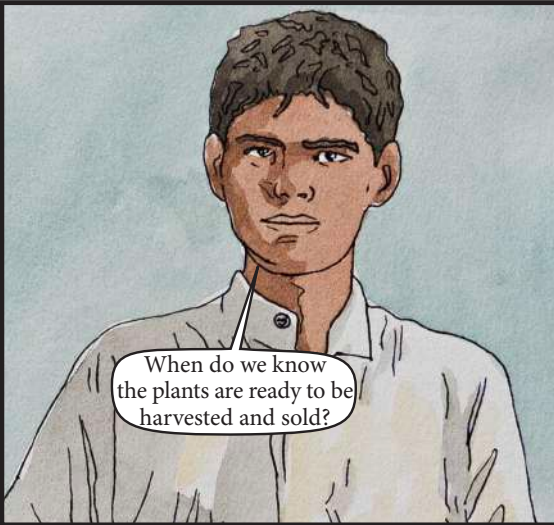
See these seedlings, they have grown strong from the water of the river, every day we direct water to distribute it between fields, one field each day so the plants will grow strong and can be traded for a good price.



The rice will be as high as your knee and the grains are plump, we then need to dry them in the sun and prepare the land for the next crop,

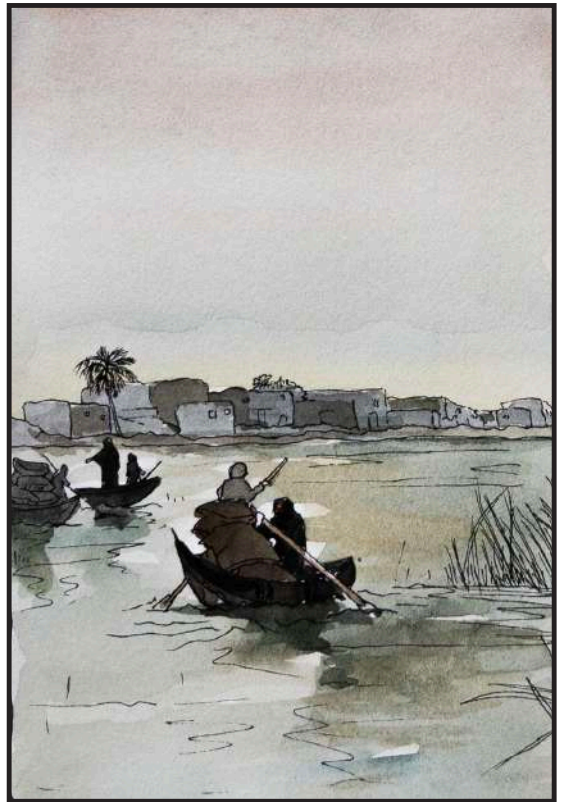


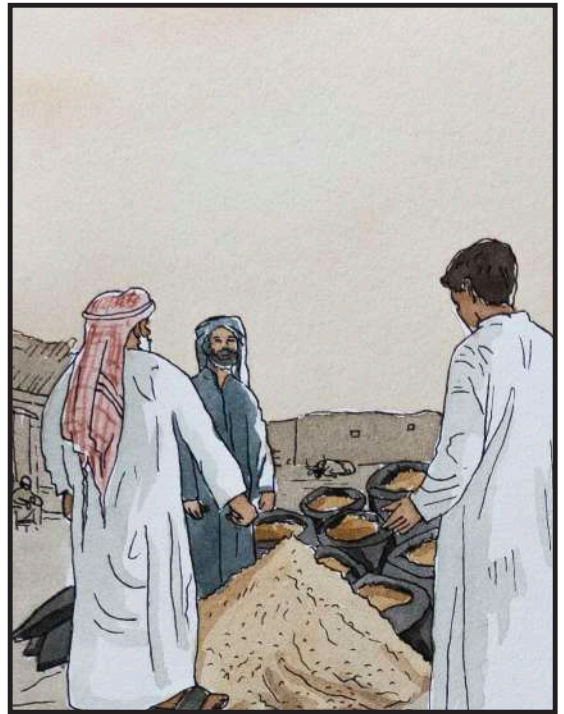
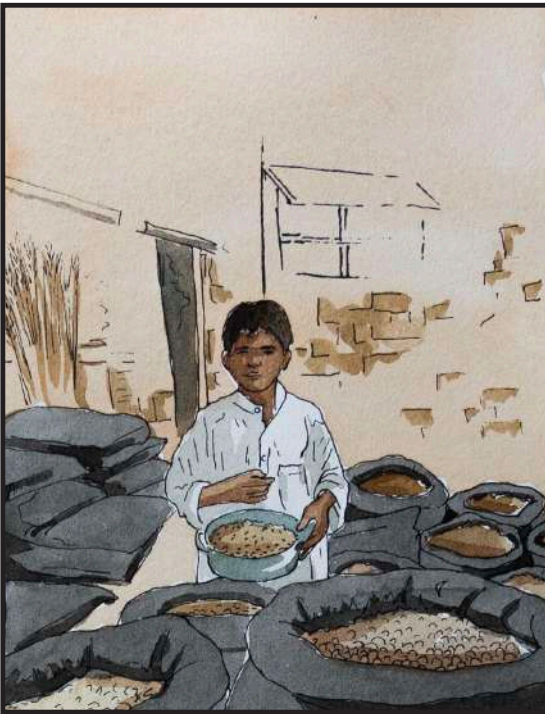
When do we know the plants are ready to be harvested and sold?



Come, these are not ready yet but I have some prepared to sell.



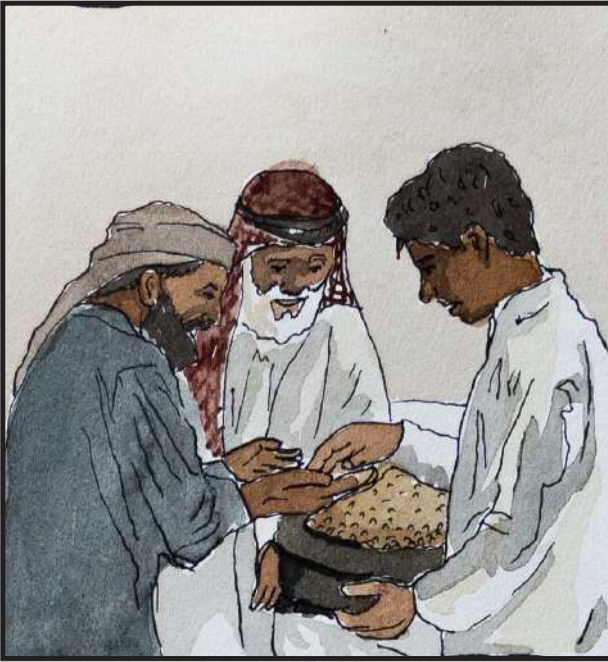




Hello young man, I need 3 kilos of this grain.



You know there are rumors starting, they're saying the British want our land, they want to use the farms to find oil.



I heard this from Ahmad who recently returned from Baghdad. Sheik Mohammad visited some farms in the village downstream, and some people are talking about leaving, or have had their farms burnt.

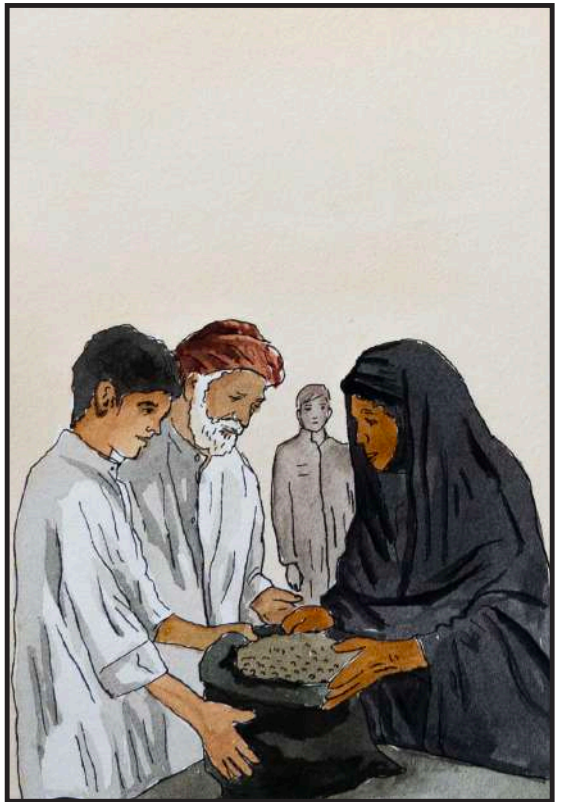
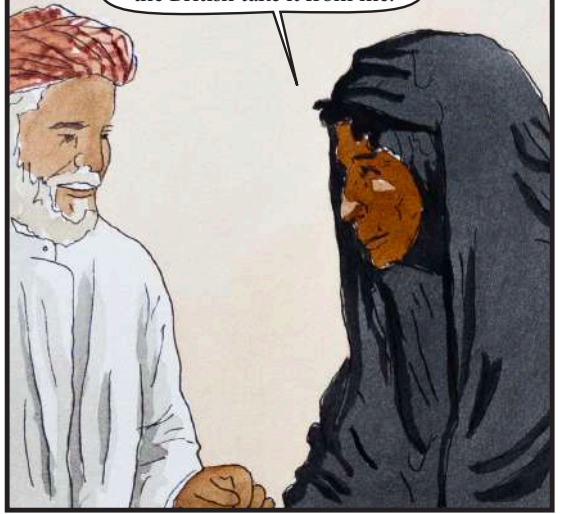
There are always rumors, our family have been on this land for six generations, my husband's parents, his grandparents, and their grandparents have kept this land, although the Ottomans' threatened to take it many times, or taxed so much our family were hungry for months. The British can't be worse than this. And we will not be leaving.

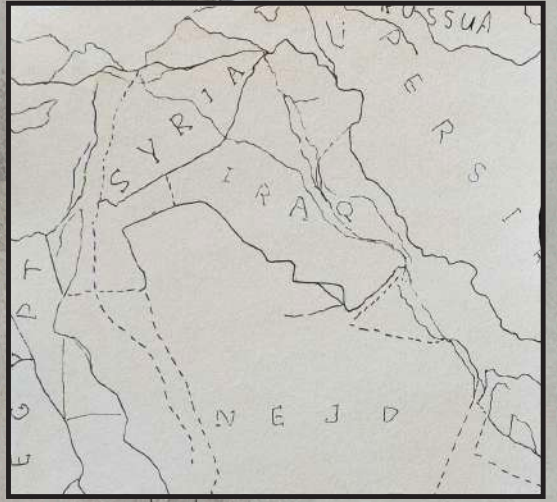


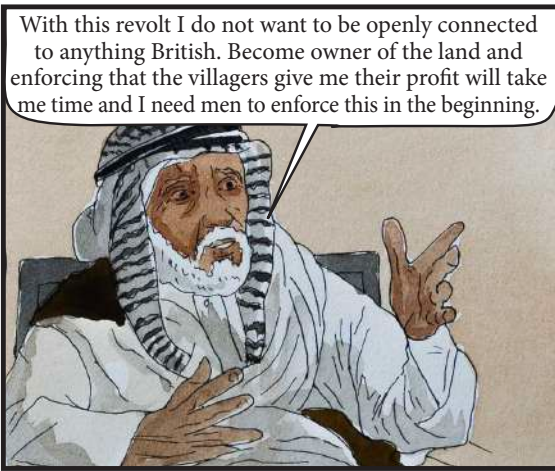
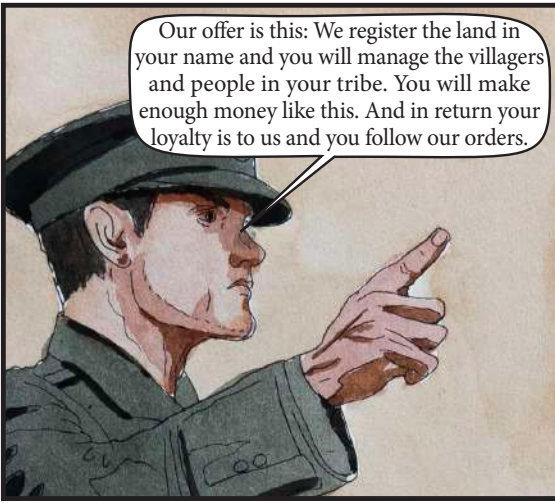
Be careful, you're a woman you know what they can do to you and your family. Some villages have protested because they do not want to leave their land and many have been killed.

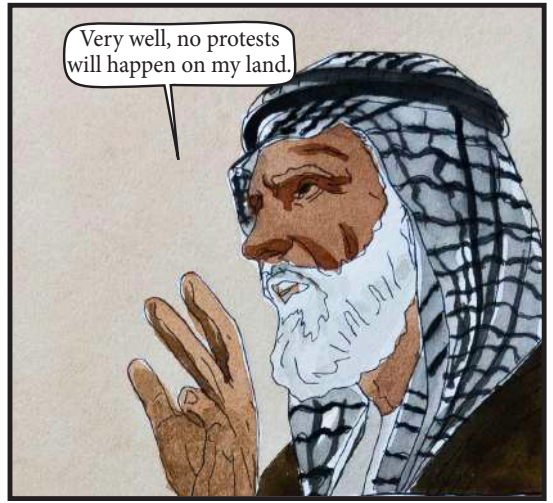


They will not come here, our village is strong and I will protect my land and my children, just let the British take it from me.

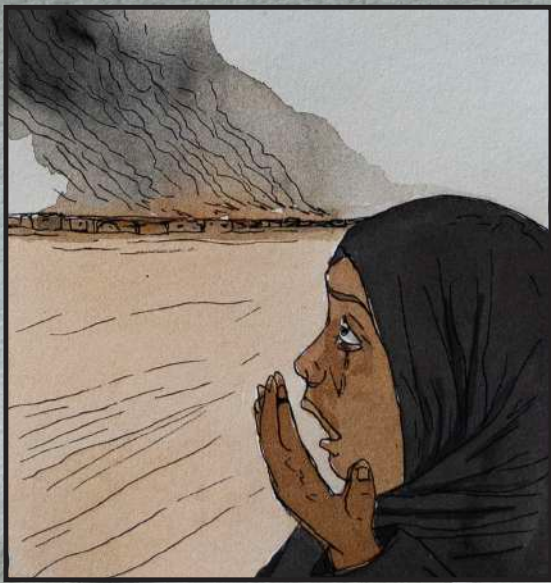


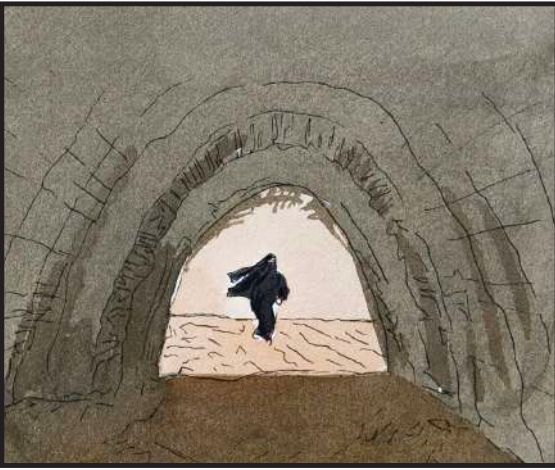


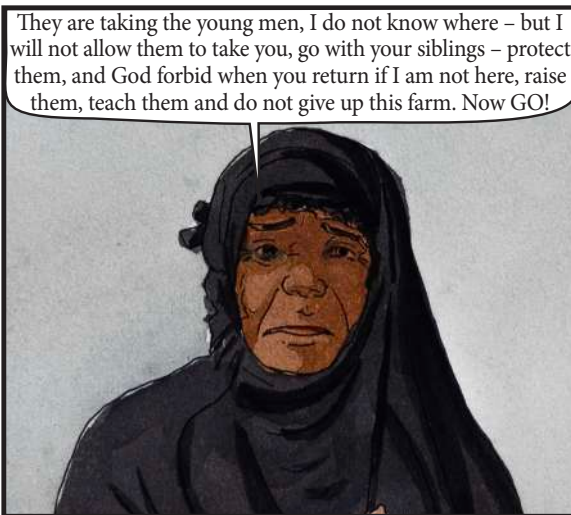
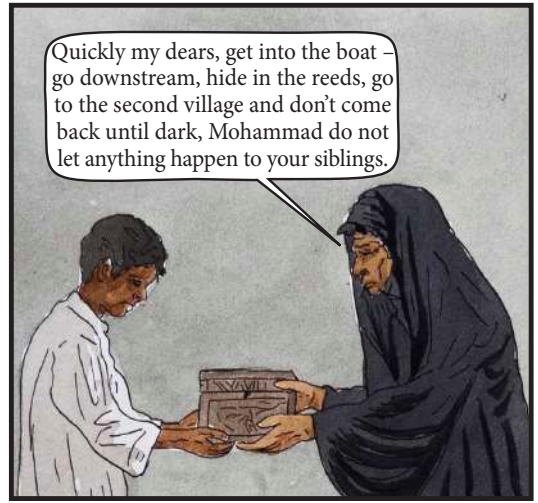






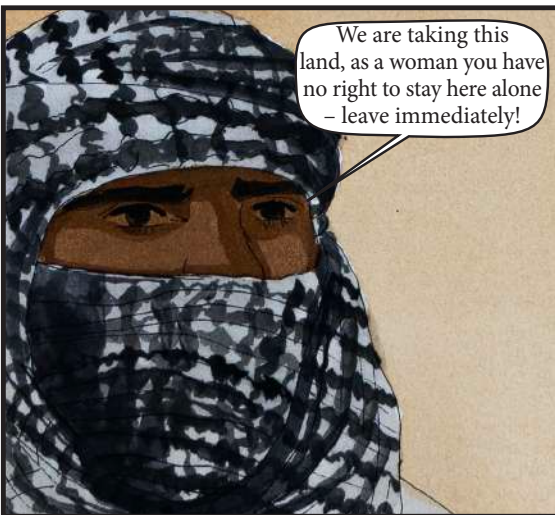
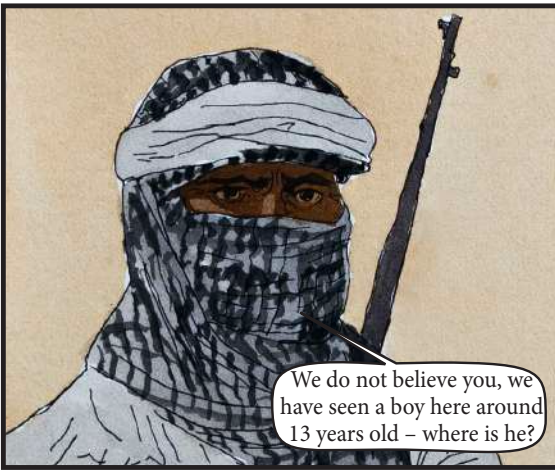
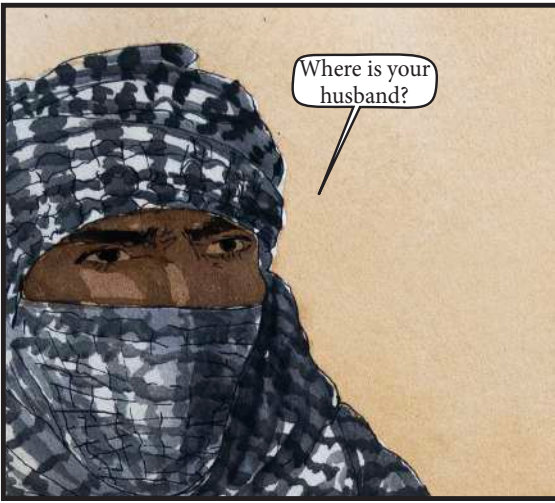


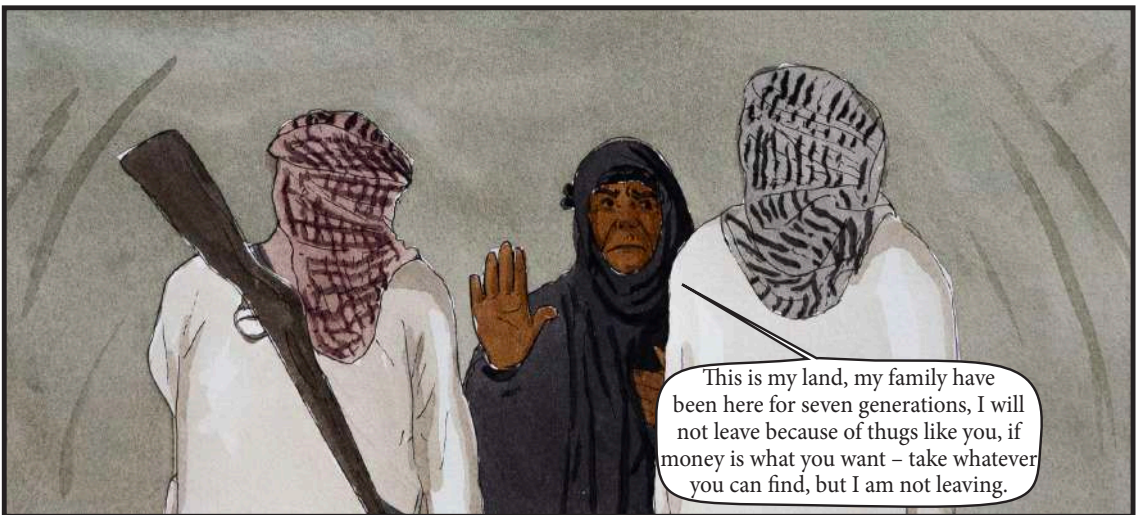
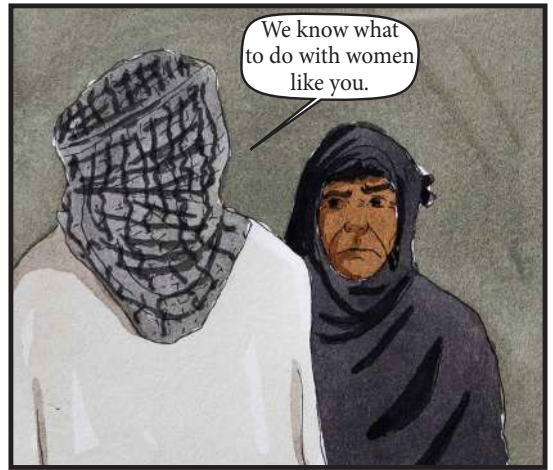
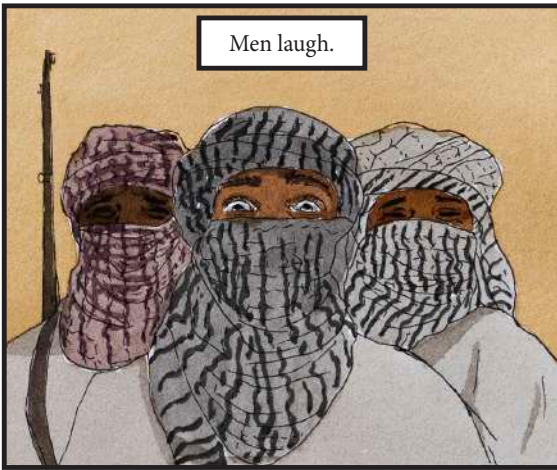
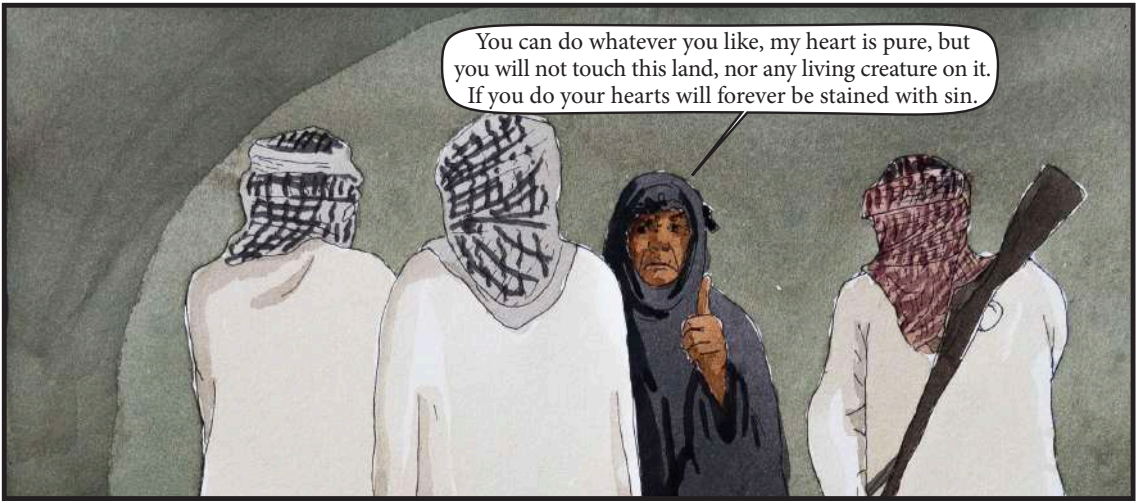














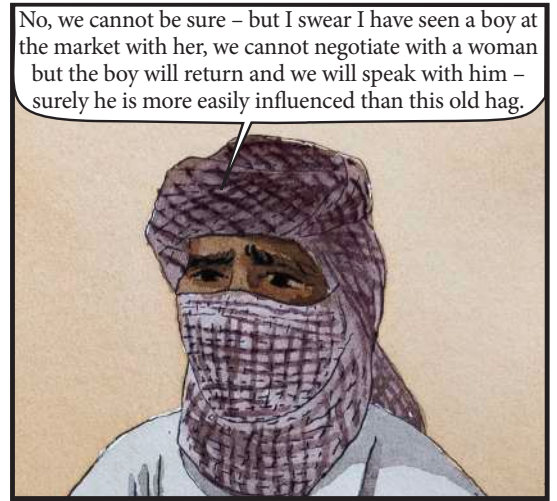
The men step back at the mention of Sheik Mohammad's name, they take the money and step outside.



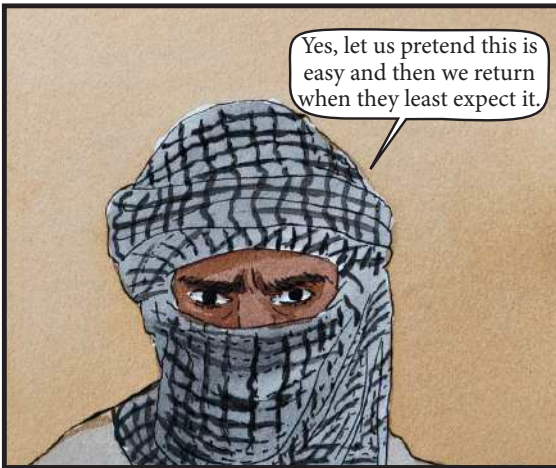


What shall we do? She says she has protection, can we be sure?

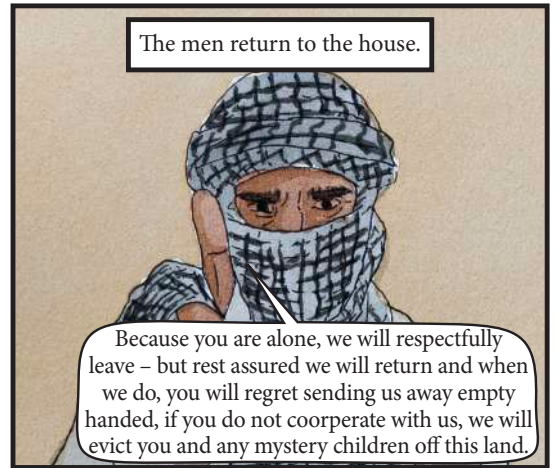
Let us punish her and see what protection she has.



No, we cannot be sure – but I swear I have seen a boy at the market with her, we cannot negotiate with a woman but the boy will return and we will speak with him – surely he is more easily influenced than this old hag.

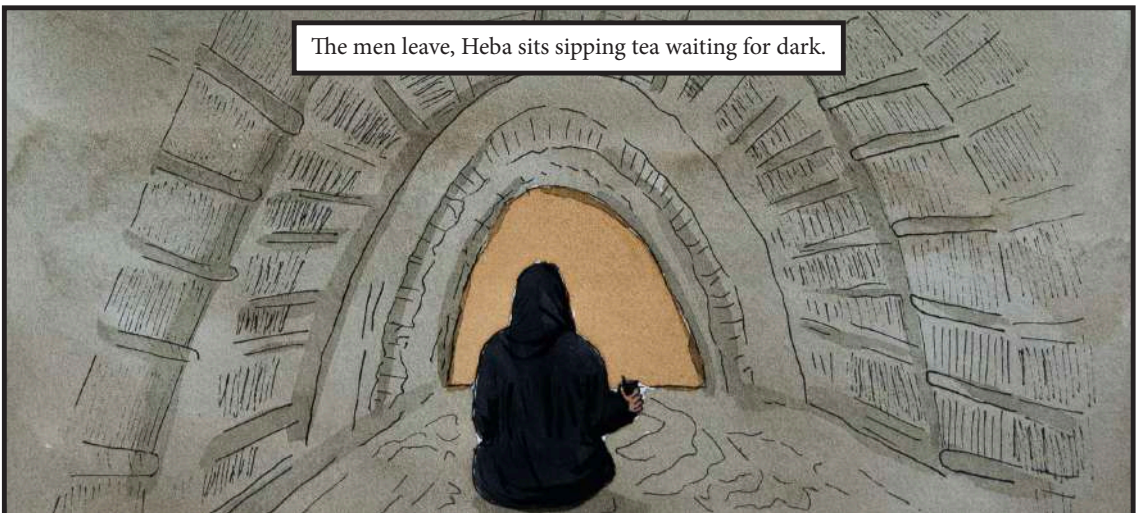


Yes, let us pretend this is easy and then we return when they least expect it.



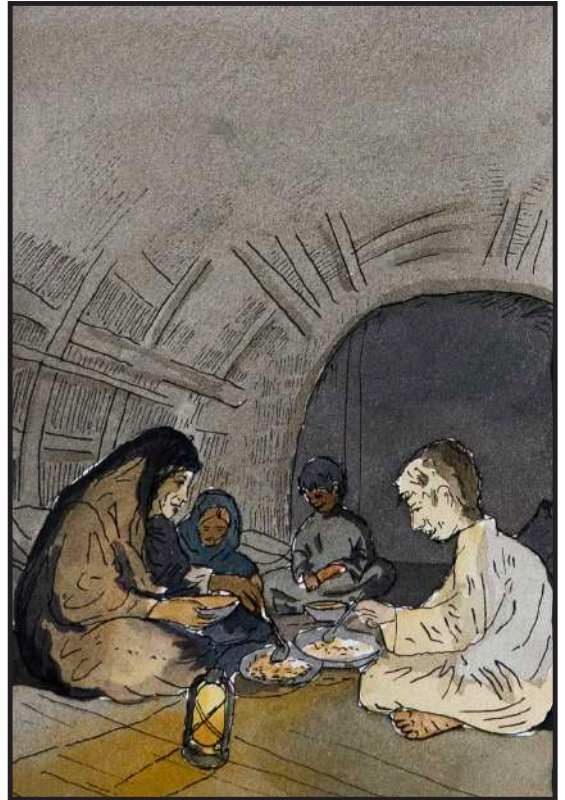
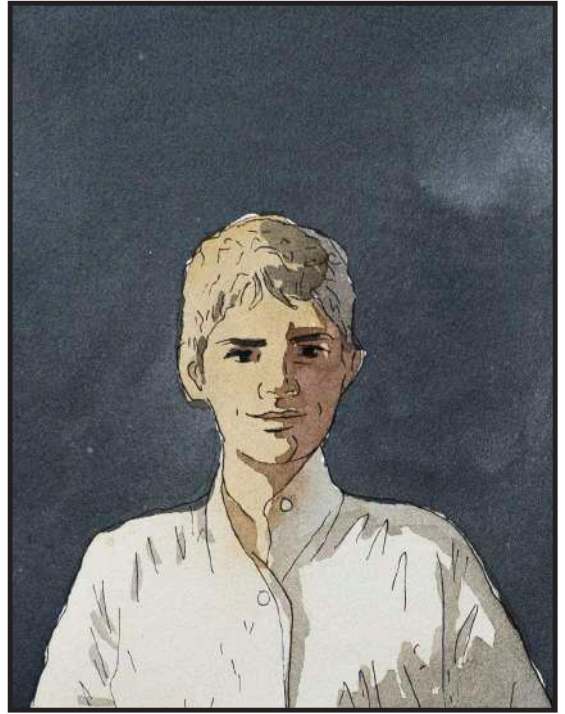
The men return to the house.

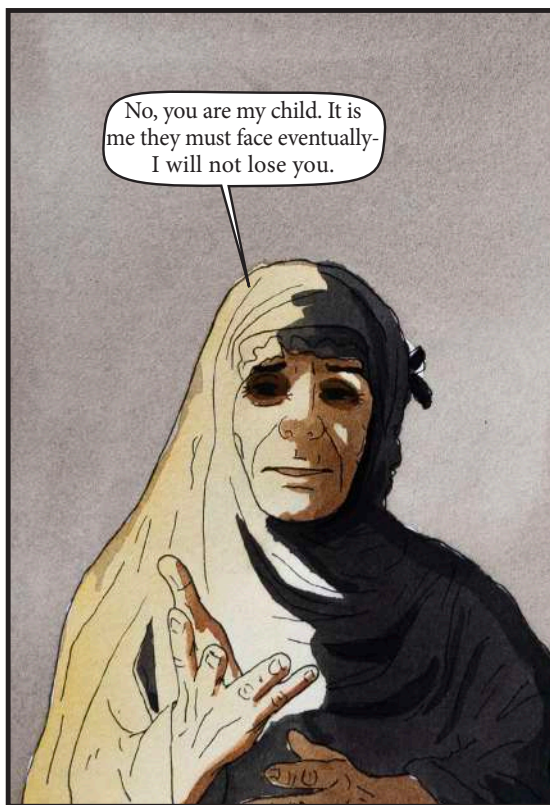
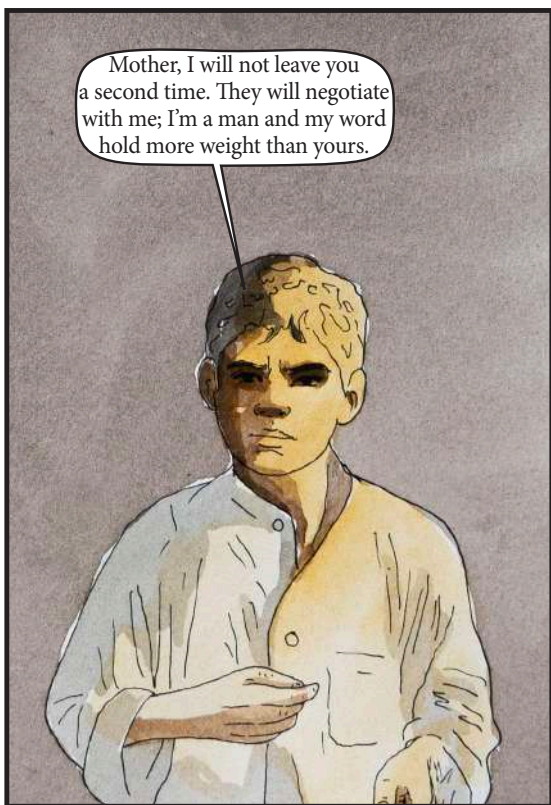
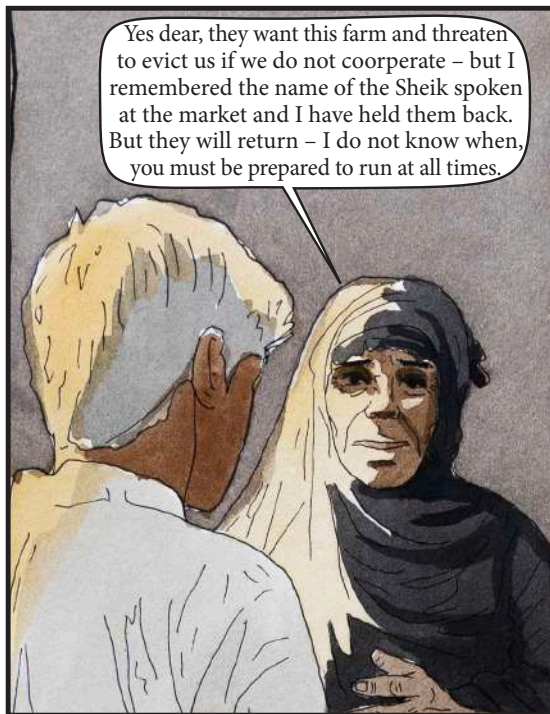
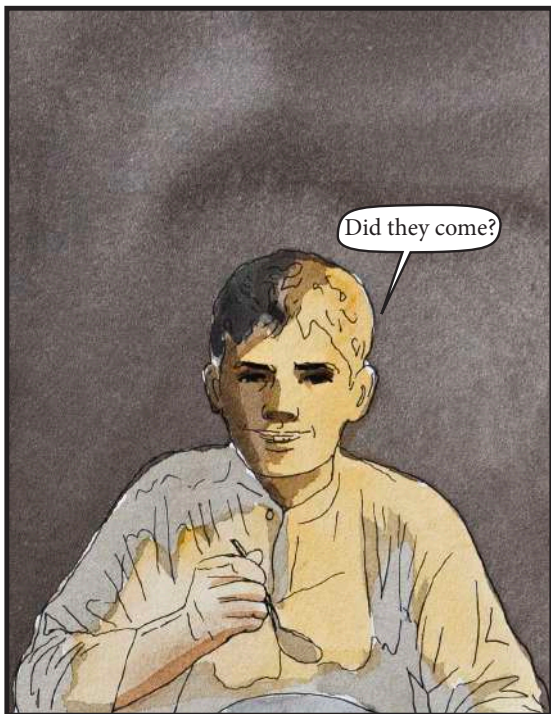
Because you are alone, we will respectfully leave – but rest assured we will return and when we do, you will regret sending us away empty handed, if you do not cooperate with us, we will evict you and any mystery children off this land.



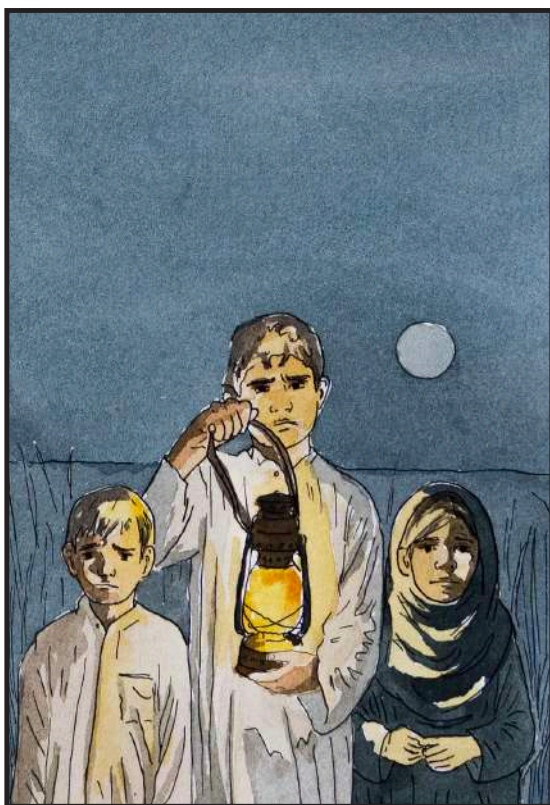
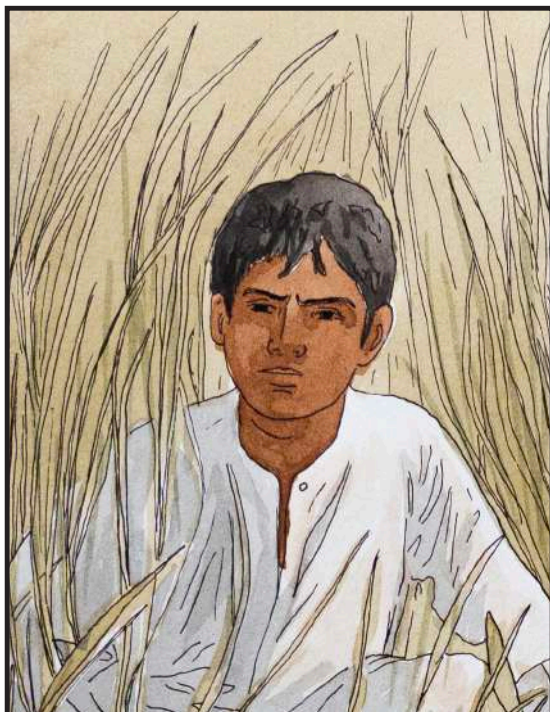
The men leave, Heba sits sipping tea waiting for dark.

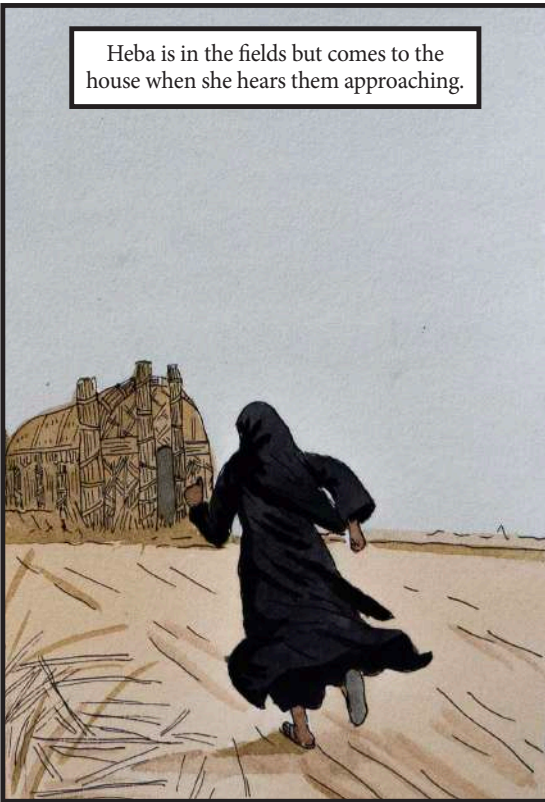
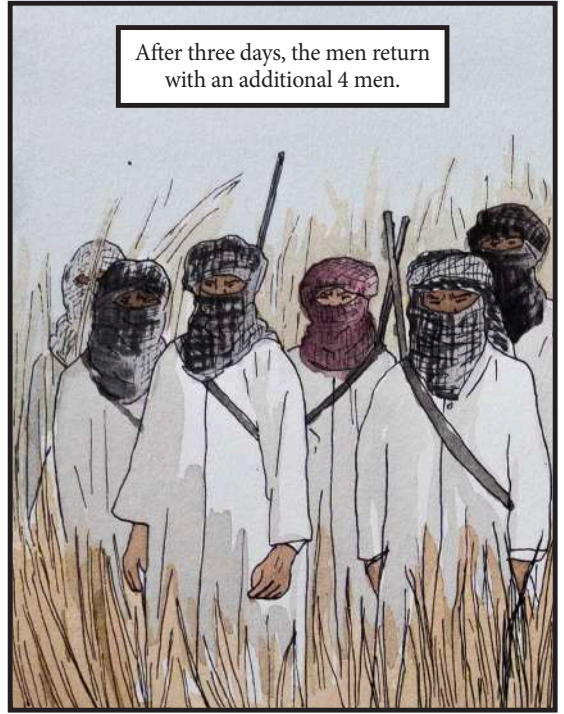
At night, the children return safely, they embrace their mother and the family eats a meal together.

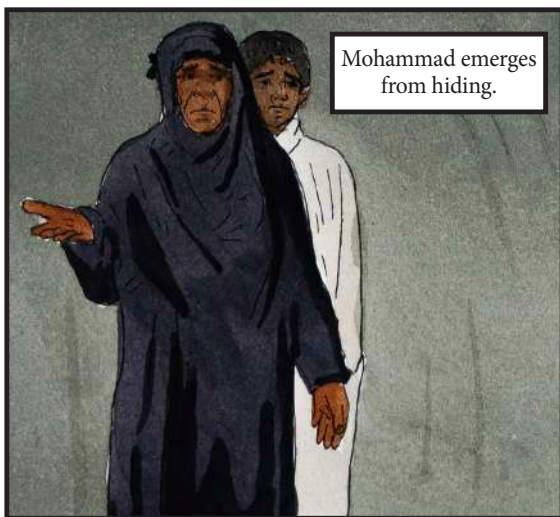
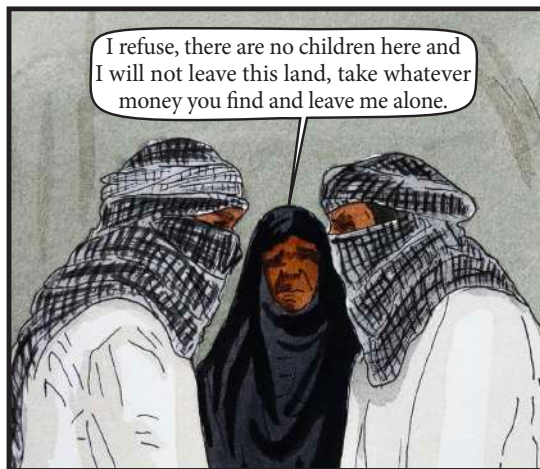
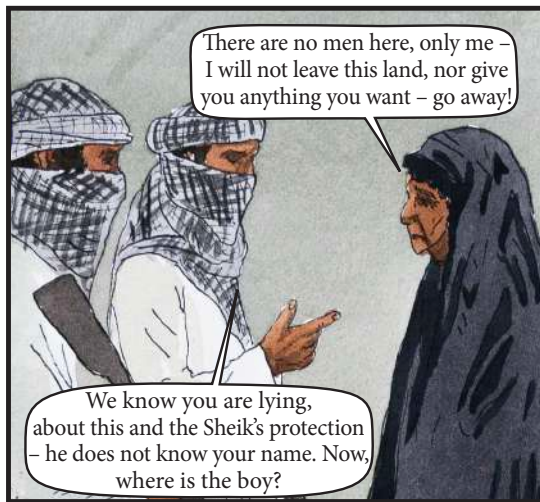




The children hide during the day and only emerge at night to eat with their mother.







Men laugh, one grabs Heba's arms and holds them behind her back.



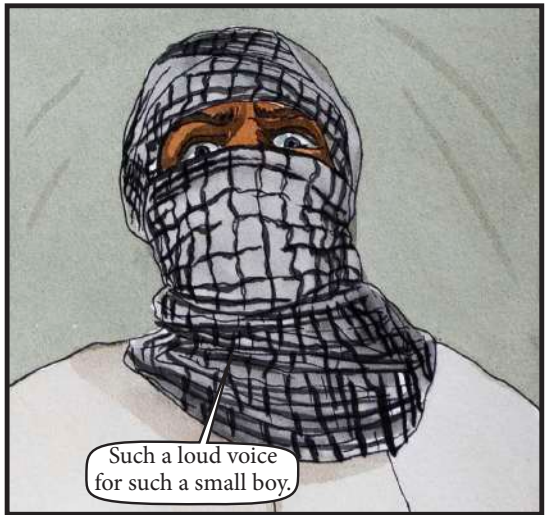
Well, we have someone we can negotiate with. Take that hag away.

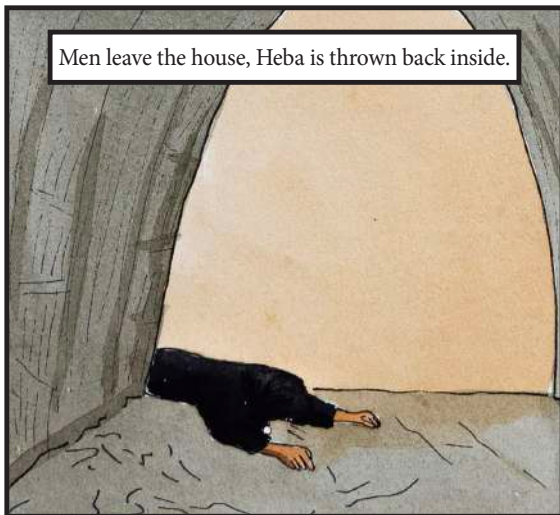
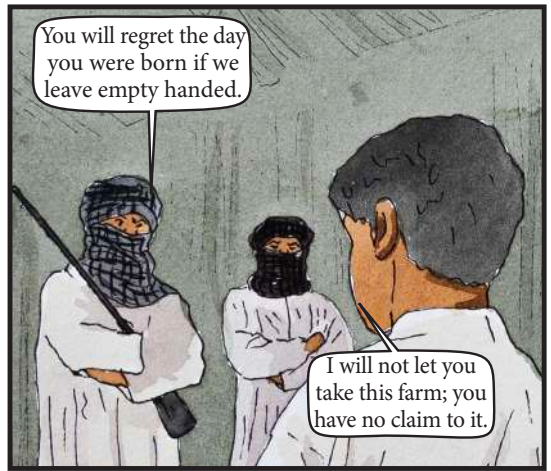
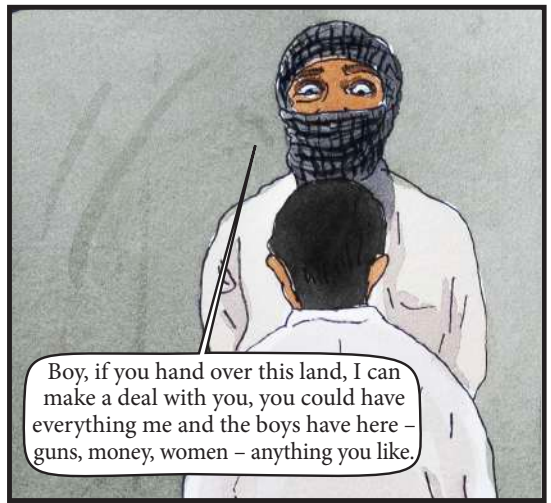


We will not leave this land; our family has lived here for seven generations and we are staying. Take what money you like but you will not have this land.

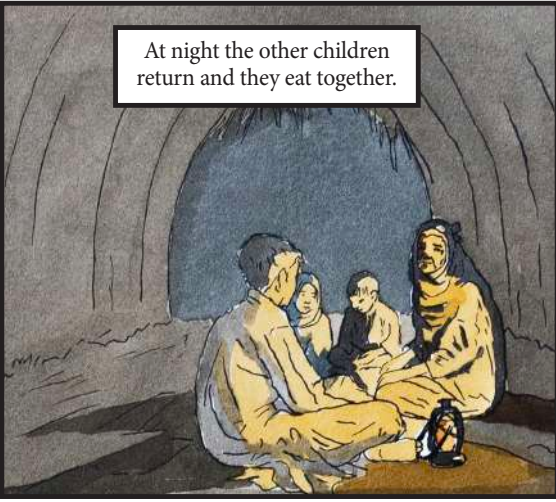


Such a loud voice for such a small boy.





At night the other children
return and they eat together.



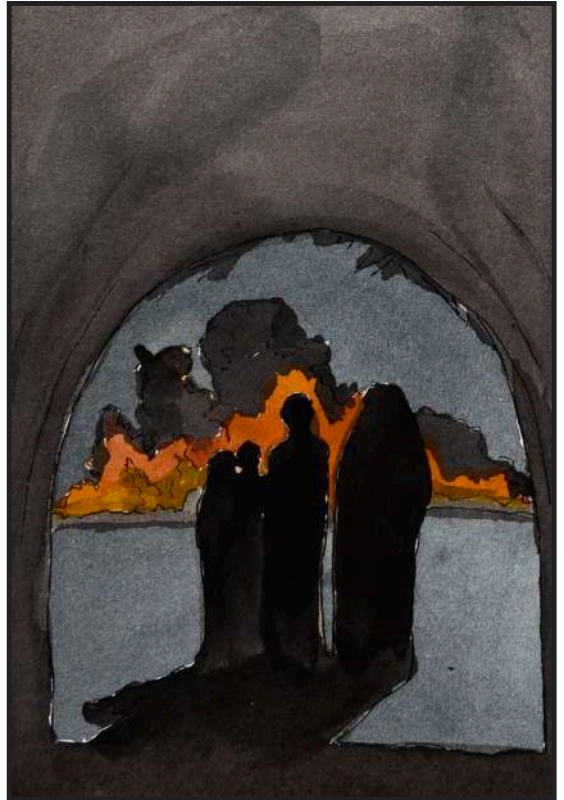
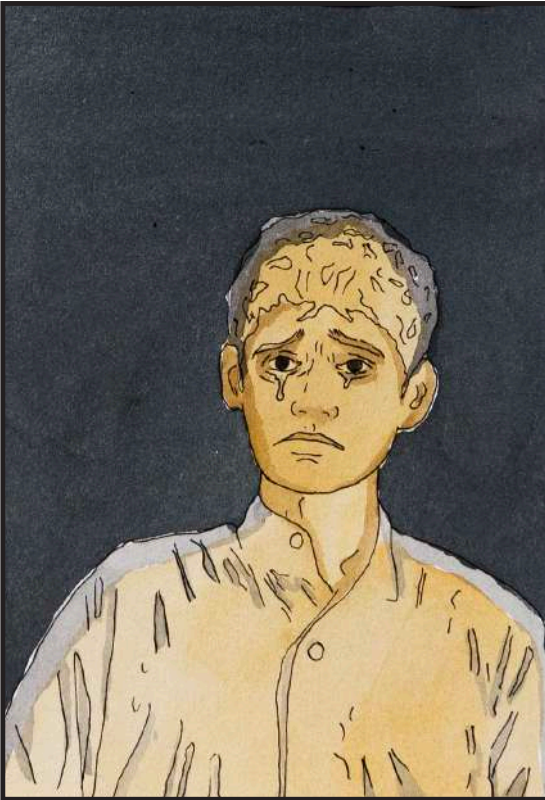
Well done dear,
your father would
be proud.



I smell burning.
They've come back.

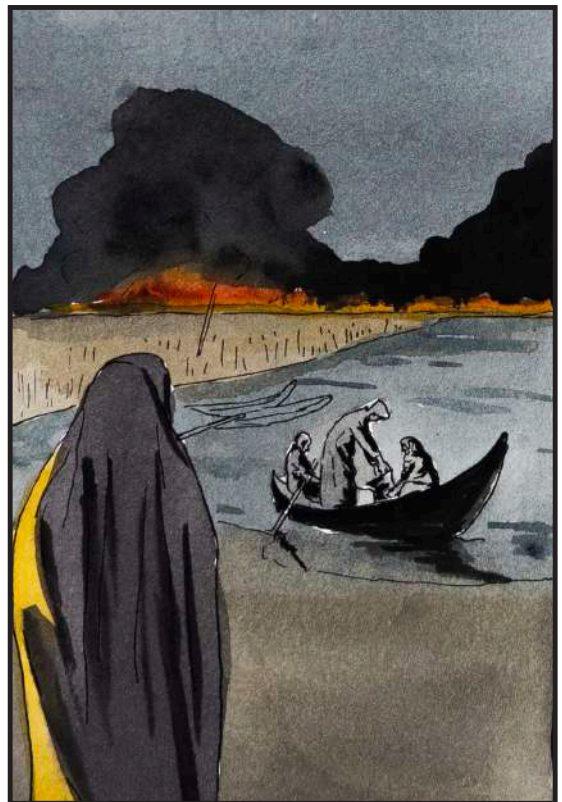
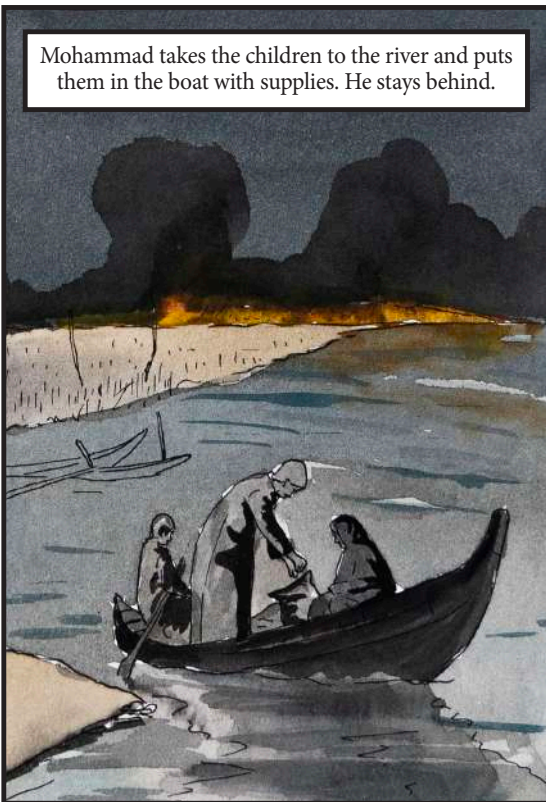


They look outside, most of the village is in flames.

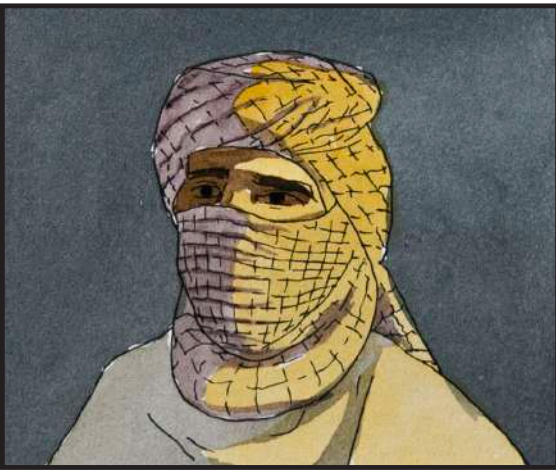
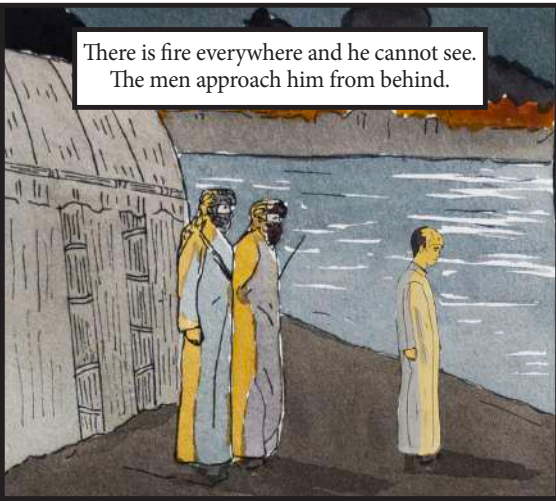


There are men lighting their crops on fire and taking any livestock they can find.

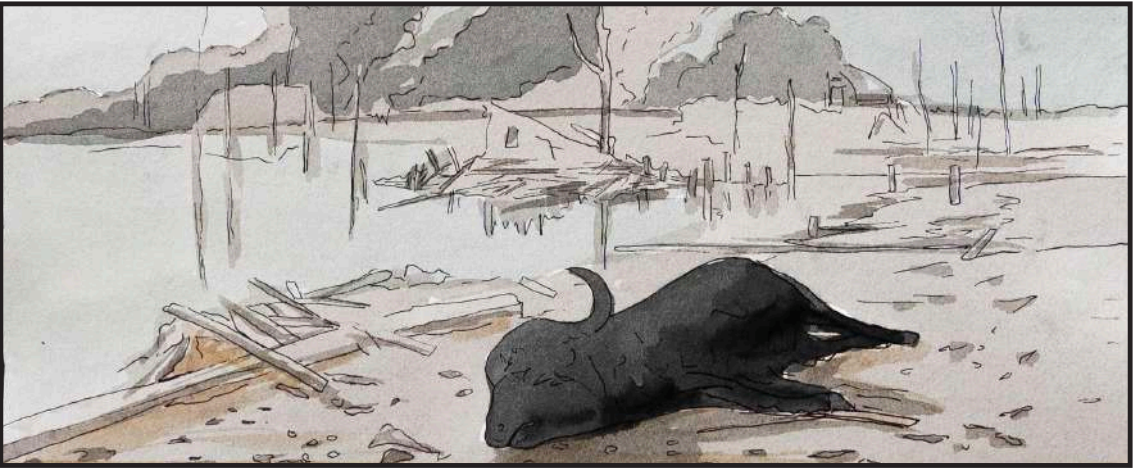
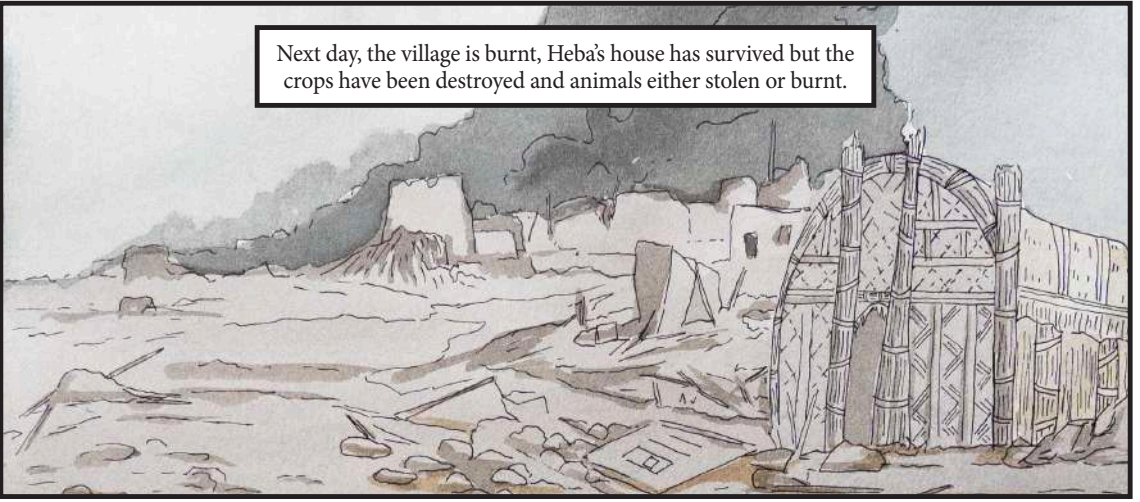




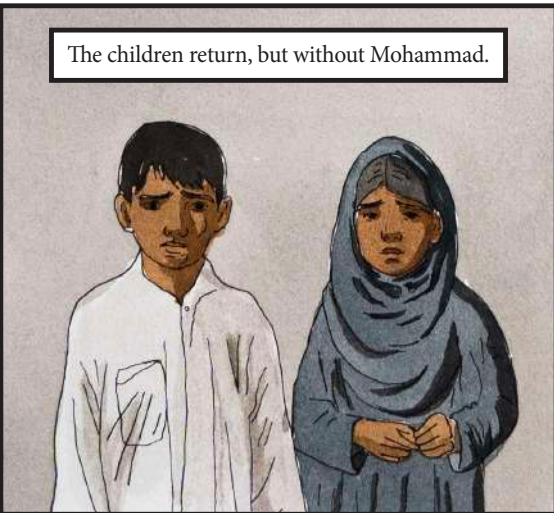
There is fire everywhere and he cannot see.
The men approach him from behind.



Next day, the village is burnt, Heba's house has survived but the crops have been destroyed and animals either stolen or burnt.



The children return, but without Mohammad.





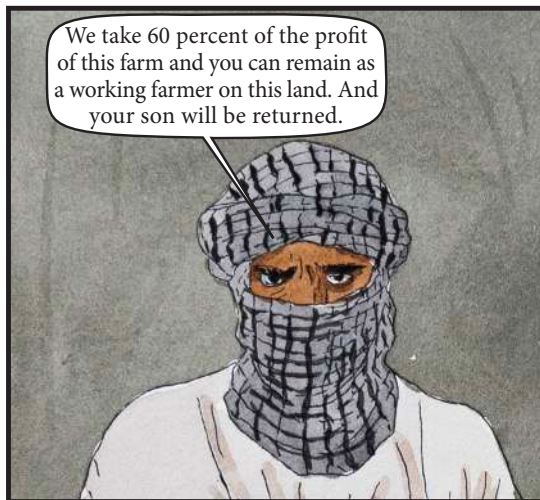
The same men arrive again after a few days.





We can do anything, for a price!

What do you want? I need to know my son is safe.



We take 60 percent of the profit of this farm and you can remain as a working farmer on this land. And your son will be returned.



No! We will not give up this land.



Well, your son can be used for many things – we're always looking for new recruits, a little encouragement will have him among the best of us.



No!

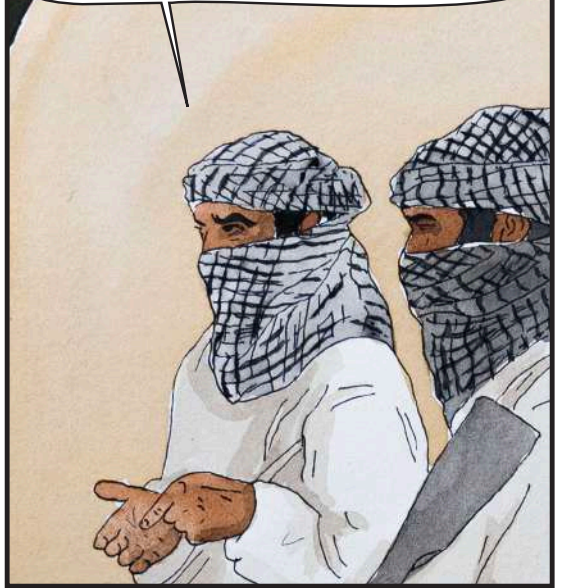
You fools! You think you can get away with abducting children, stealing, abuse – without justice. God will have the final say in this; he sees everything.

It's your choice, the farm or your son, I'm sure we also have work for the other children, your daughter is very pretty I'm sure there's something they can do.

Your choice is to give us the profits of the land as this is the Sheikh's land from now on, if you want to see your son again, if you don't, we will take everything you love away from you until you have no choice but to give us all of the land. Think about it – this way you get to keep most of it.



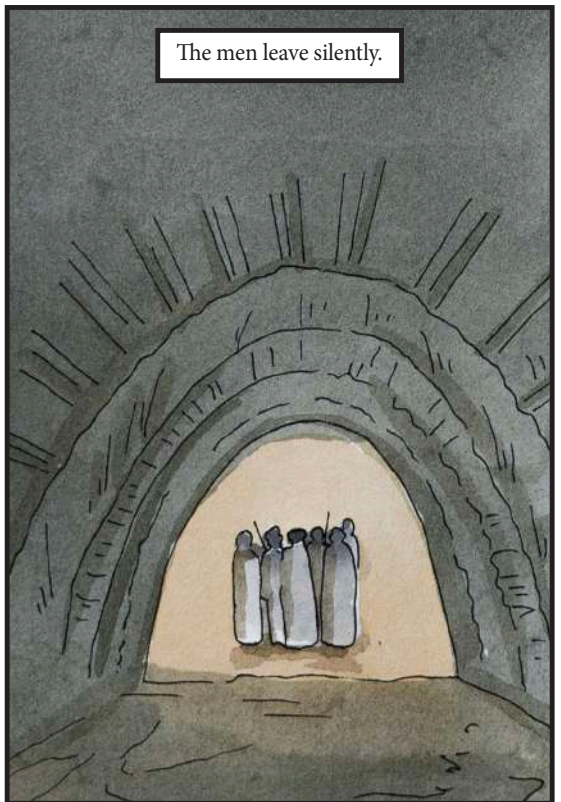
God knows we are acting in the best interests of humans; we have all authorities behind us worldly and unworldly. We will come back and take your children, one by one until you have nothing left and will leave this land to us.



Take the profit that you propose and bring me my son, unharmed. If he is harmed then you cannot take anything.



The men leave silently.

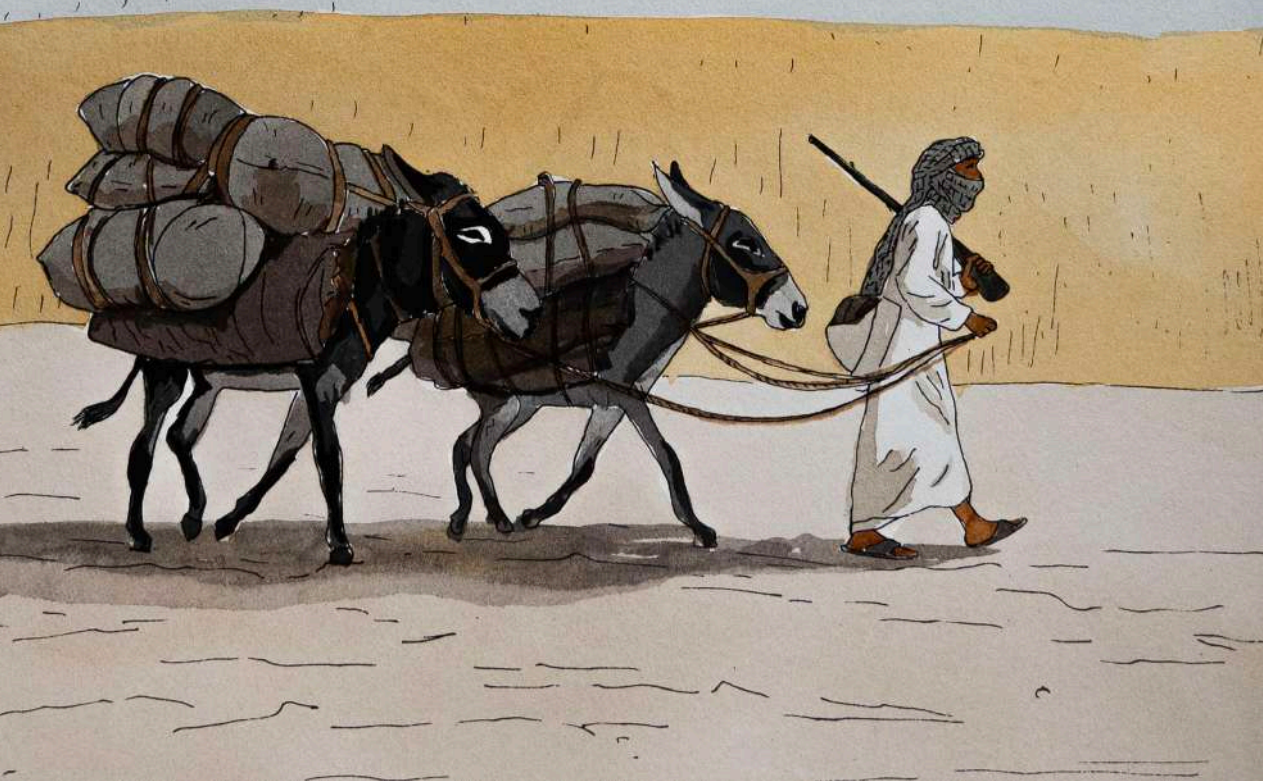


Heba is waiting with her children and life goes on.

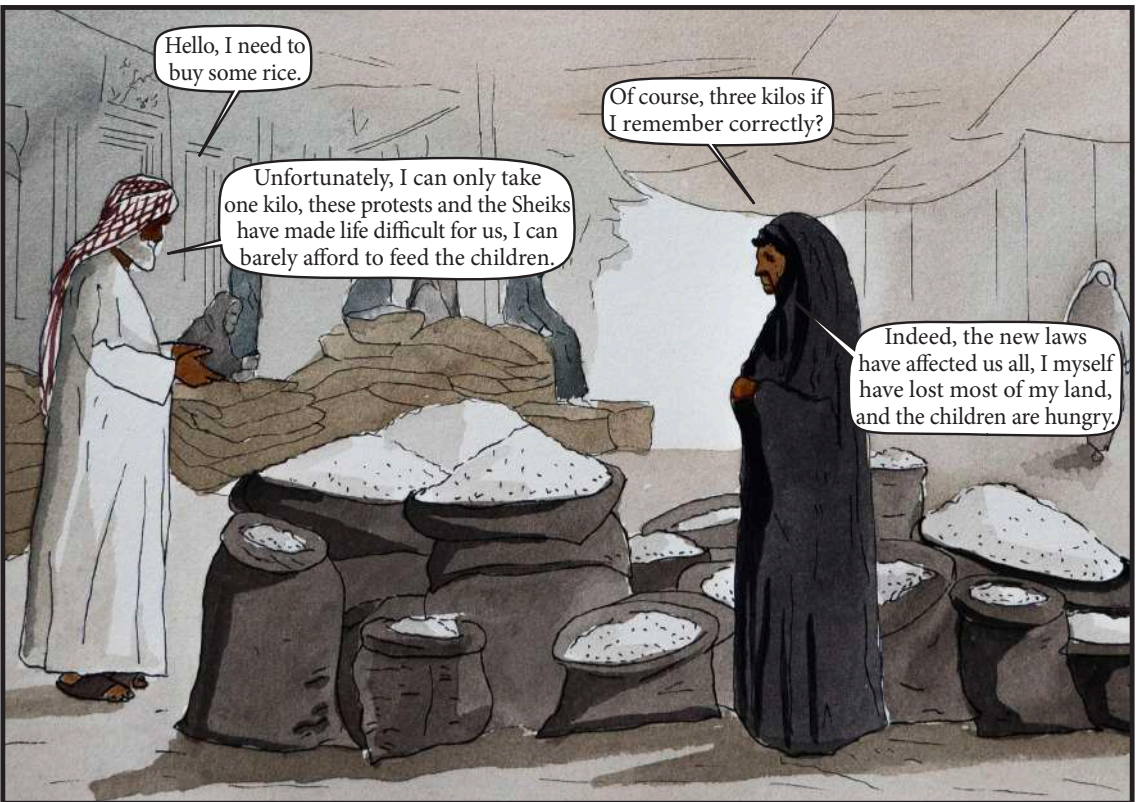
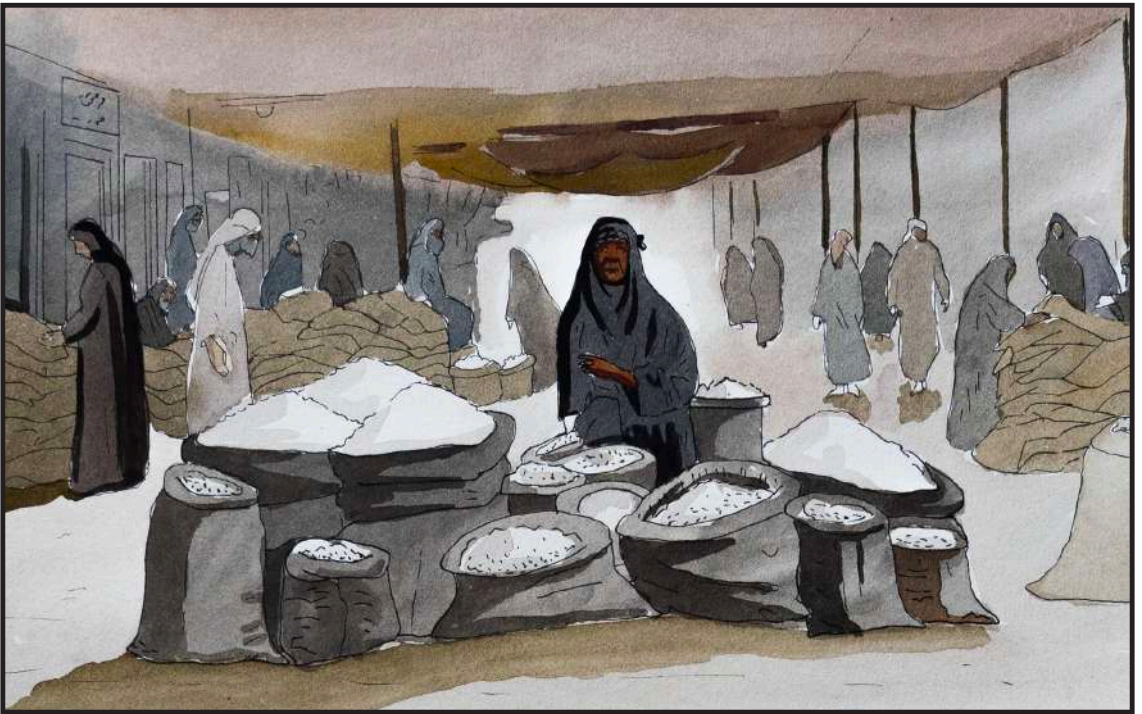


Some of the farm is taken away and fenced off from the family, and each season men come to take 60% of the harvest.







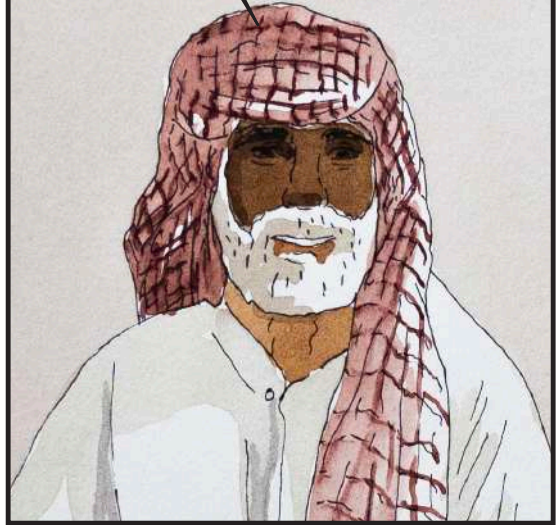


We will prevail you know, these Sheiks have guns and power, but we have the love of our land, we have our traditions to pass on. The farmers are resisting, and sacrifices have been made. There were fights and we have lost a lot, but our land is our life. My neighbor lost most of his land, his little daughter was killed when they burnt the house, but he continues on, the best dates in the village are on his farm.

There has been many losses, but we will continue on.



You had a son last time I was here - where is he?

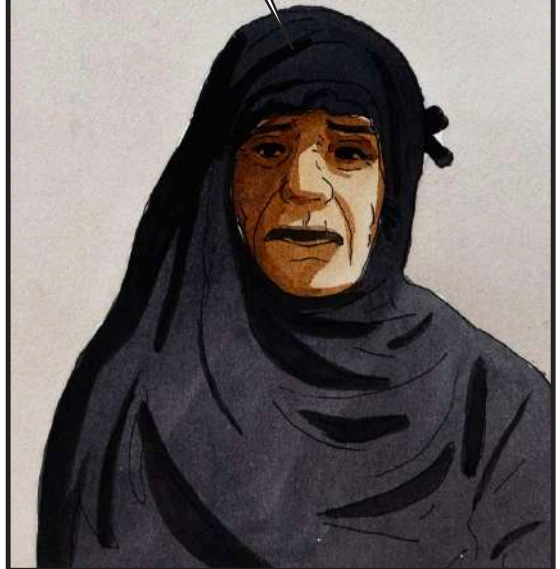


I don't know, they took him away and promised to return him if I gave them the profits from the farm, but so far no one has seen him.

May God keep him safe, many children were taken away, so far I did not hear of any returning.



I suspect they have either murdered him, or convinced him to join them, my heart is sore but I must continue for the other children, they are hard workers and will stay with me on the farm.





Farmers resisting, some being killed.

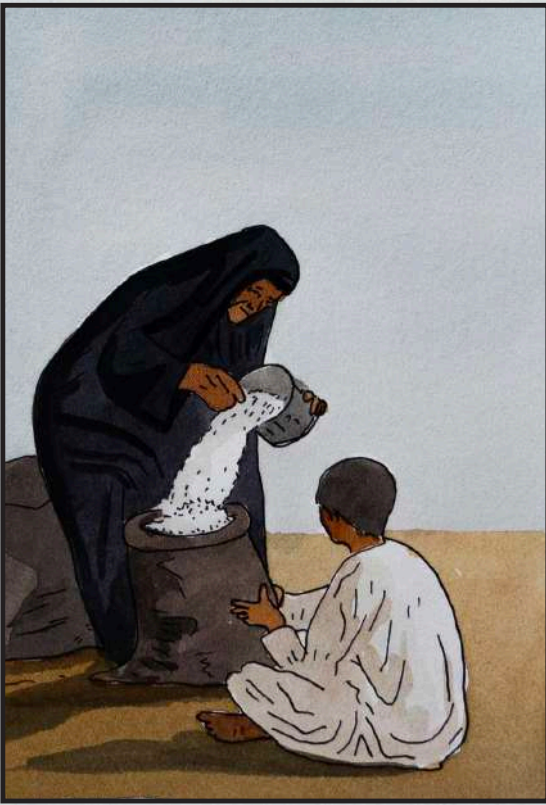


Resilient farmers returning to their land and continuing on with farming rice and dates.





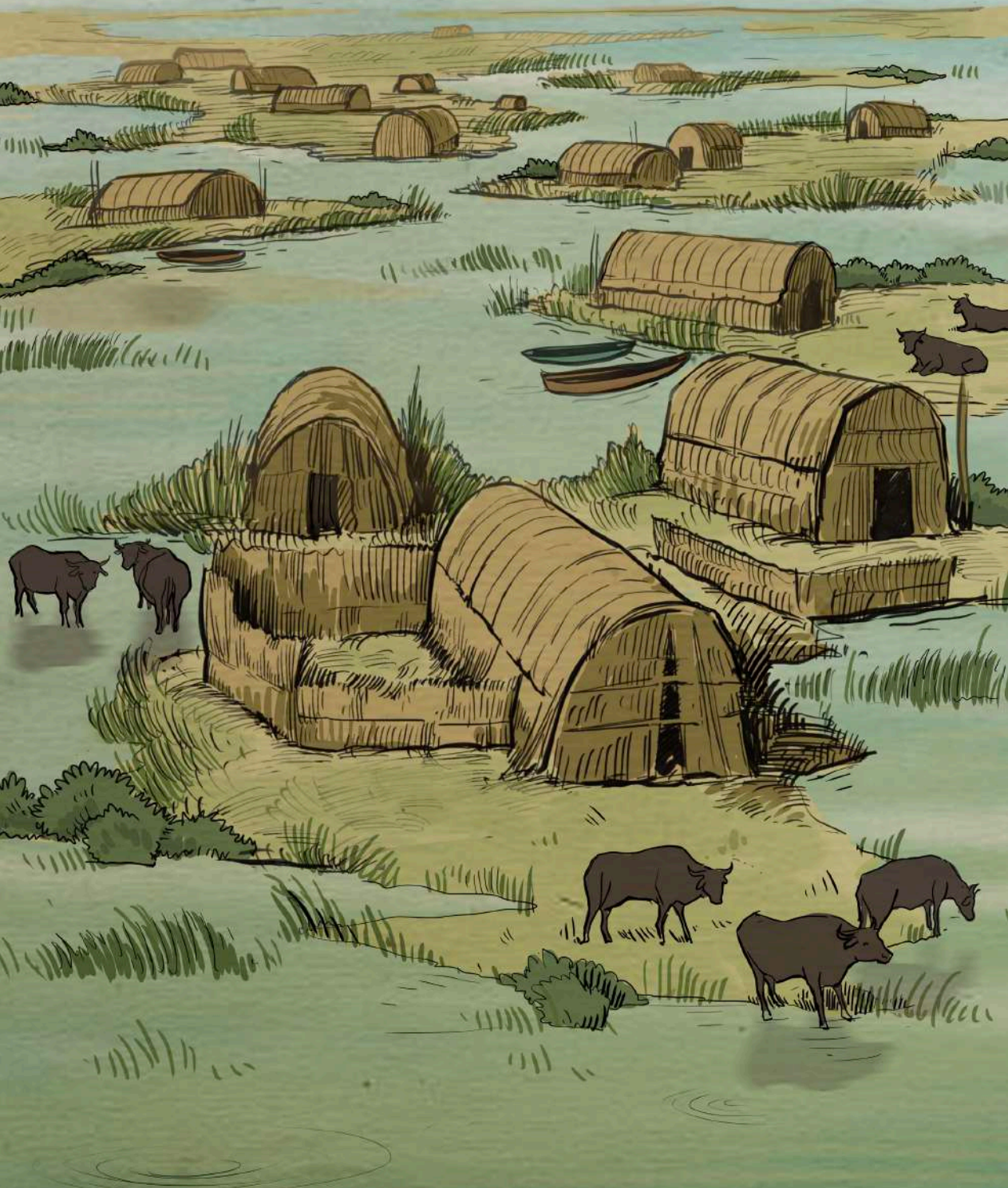




Living with the Water Buffalo



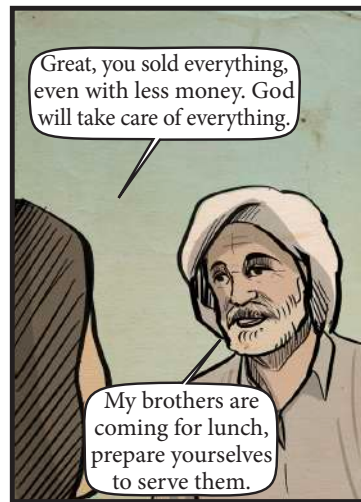
Part One
Roots
(1993/1994)

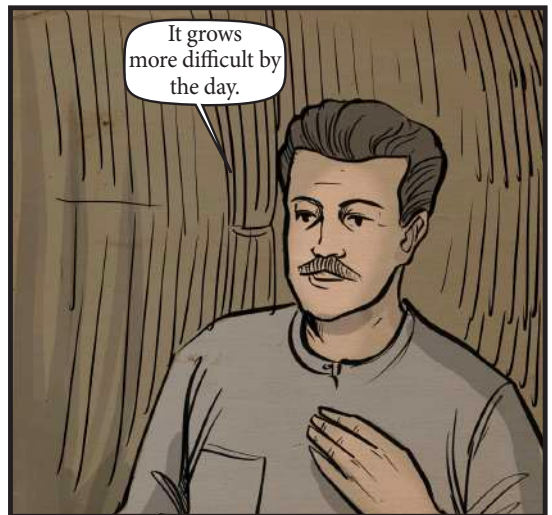
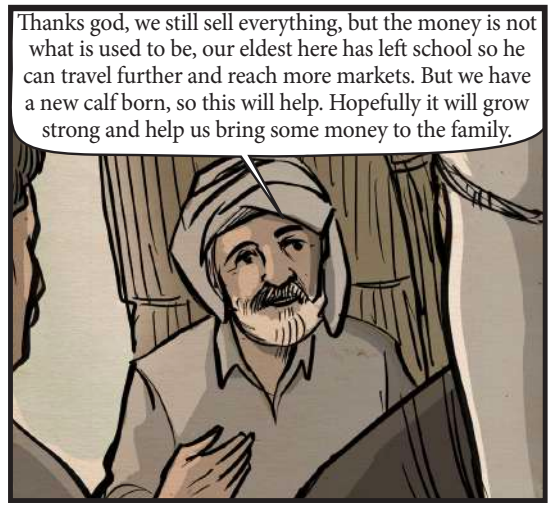
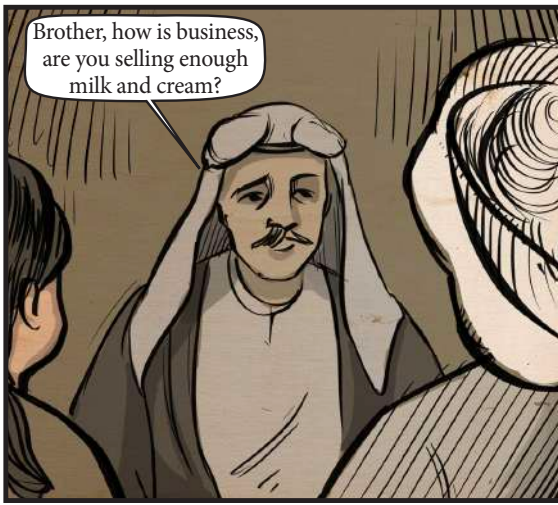




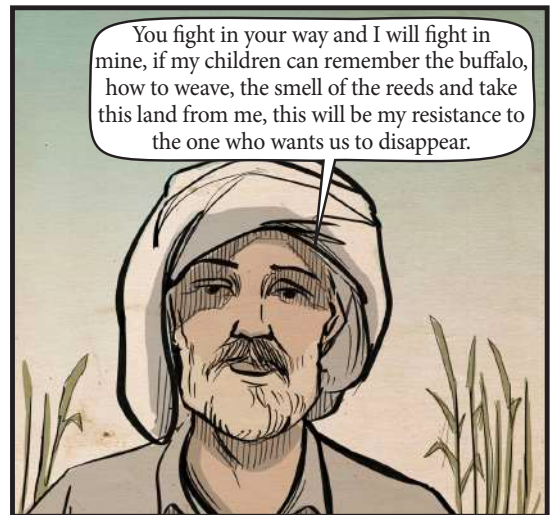
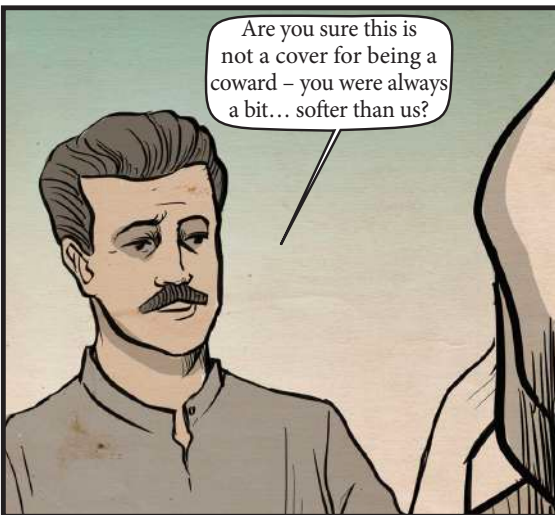
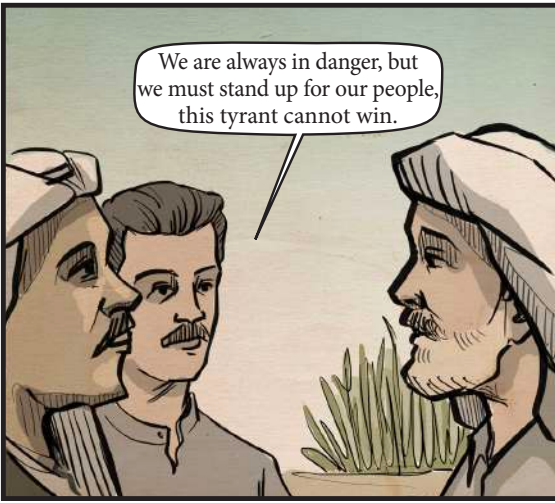


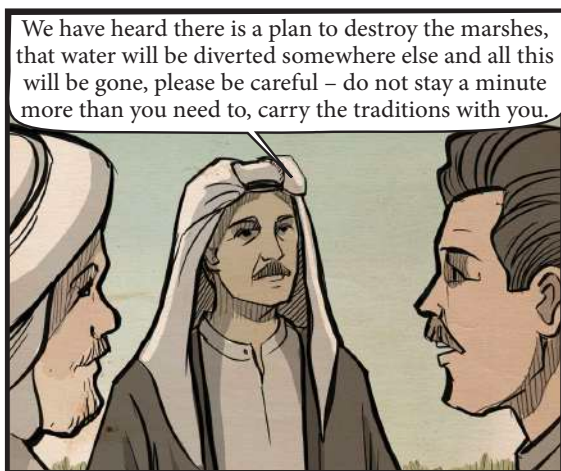
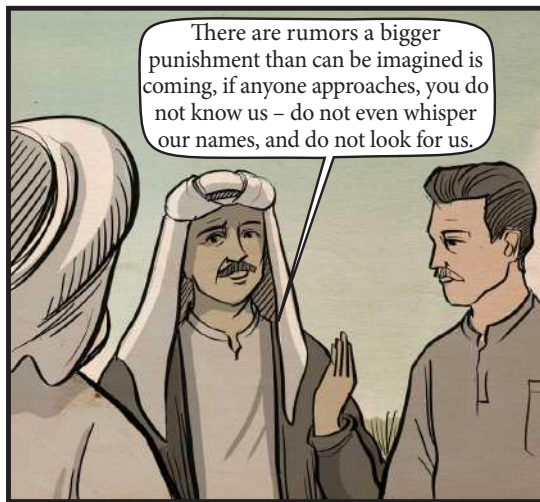


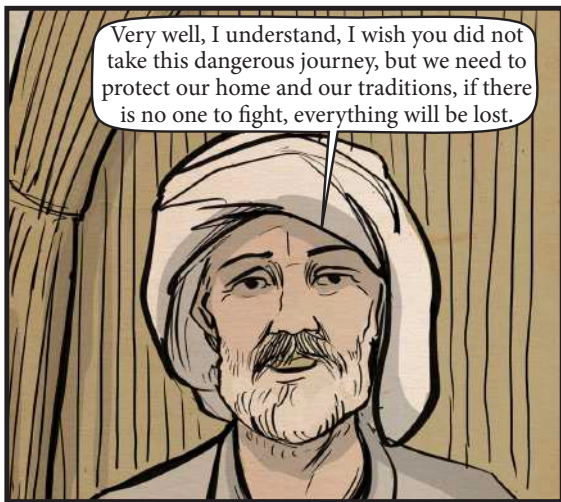




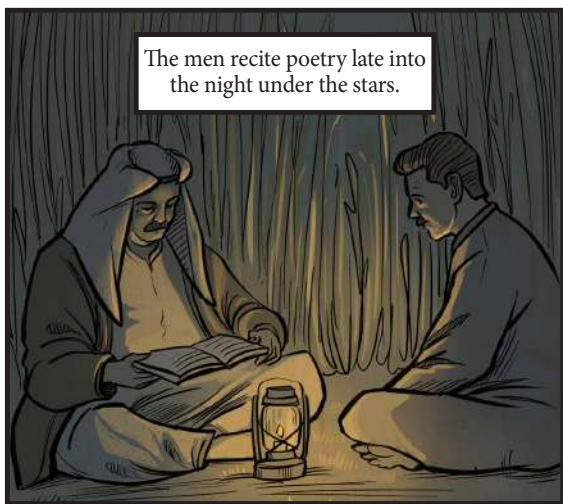




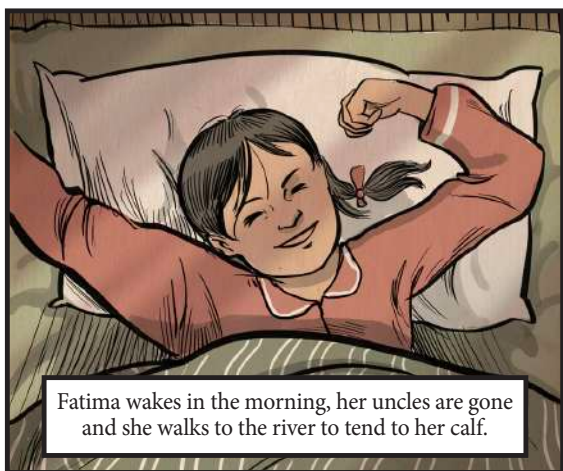




The men recite poetry late into the night under the stars.



Fatima wakes in the morning, her uncles are gone and she walks to the river to tend to her calf.



Good morning my lovely, I will call you Halwa, because you are so very sweet.



She feeds the calf but notices the water is lower than yesterday.



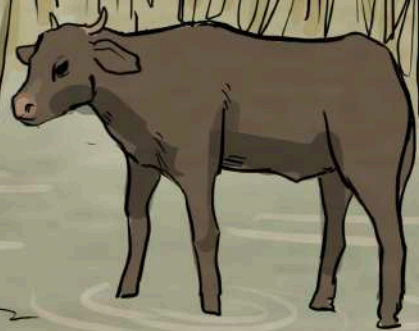
The older buffalo are further out than usual.



Mother, father! The water is lower, our sweet buffalo have moved to the deeper water and Halwa the calf cannot join them - what can we do?

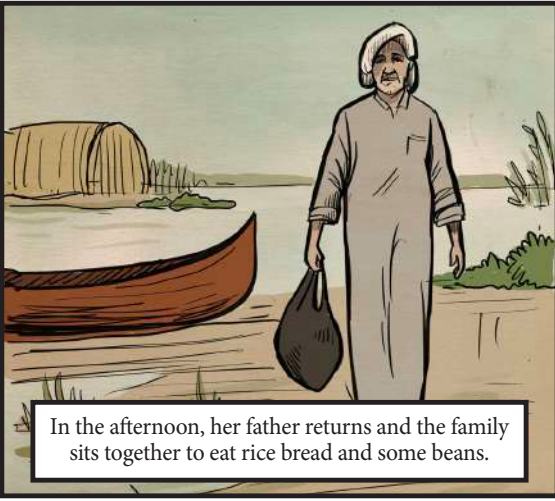
Keep her wet and encourage her to go towards the water, but not into the mud, watch her closely all day so she doesn't get stuck - I am off to the market, I will see what news there is about the water.

Fatima tends to the calf all day.









In the afternoon, her father returns and the family sits together to eat rice bread and some beans.

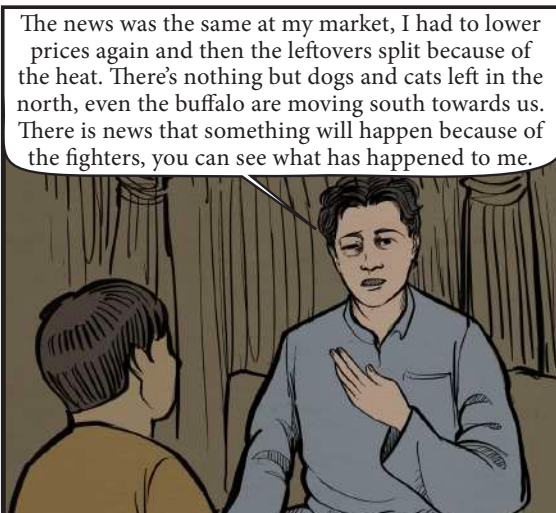
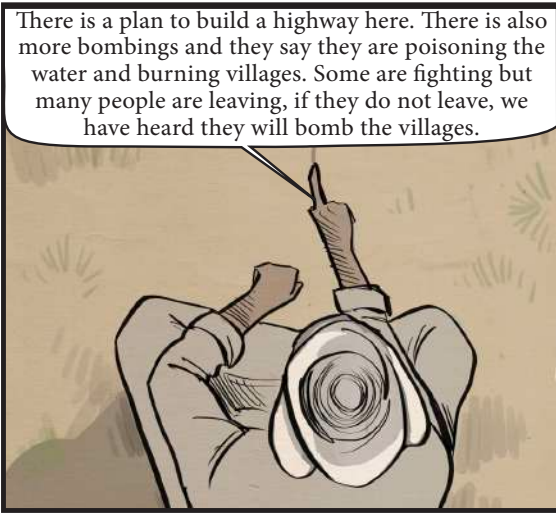
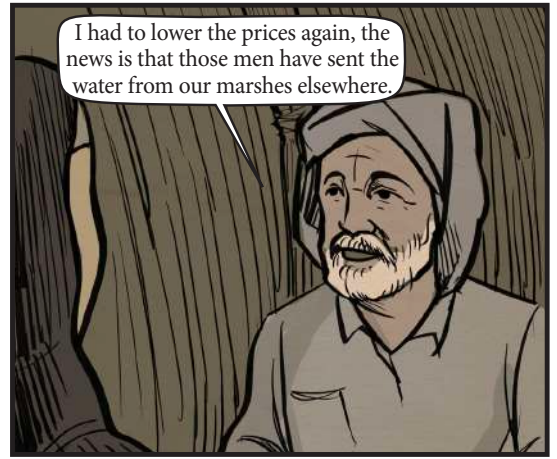


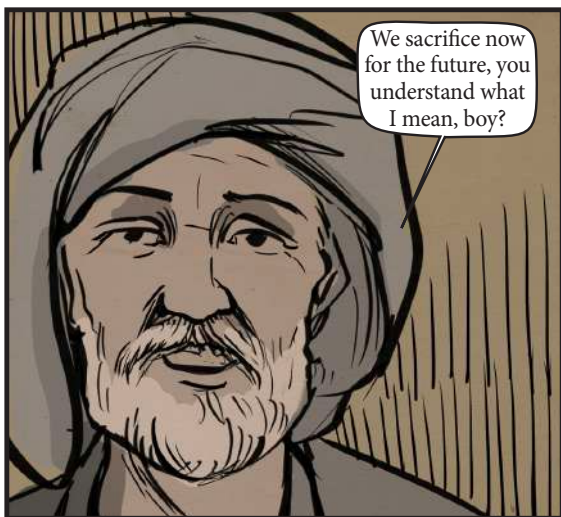
Khalid returns home, he has a black eye.



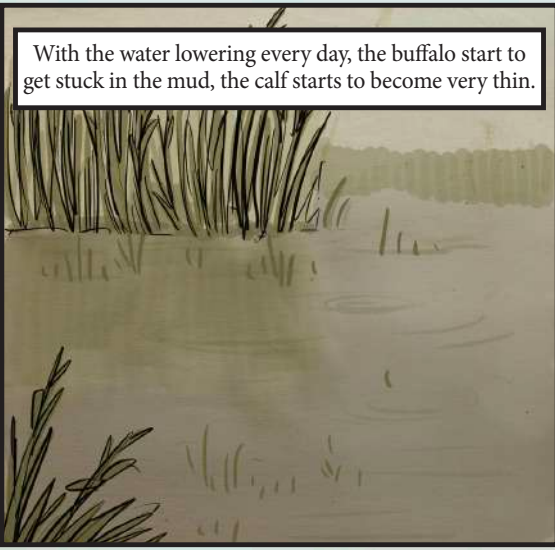
Son! What has happened to you? Who did this to you?



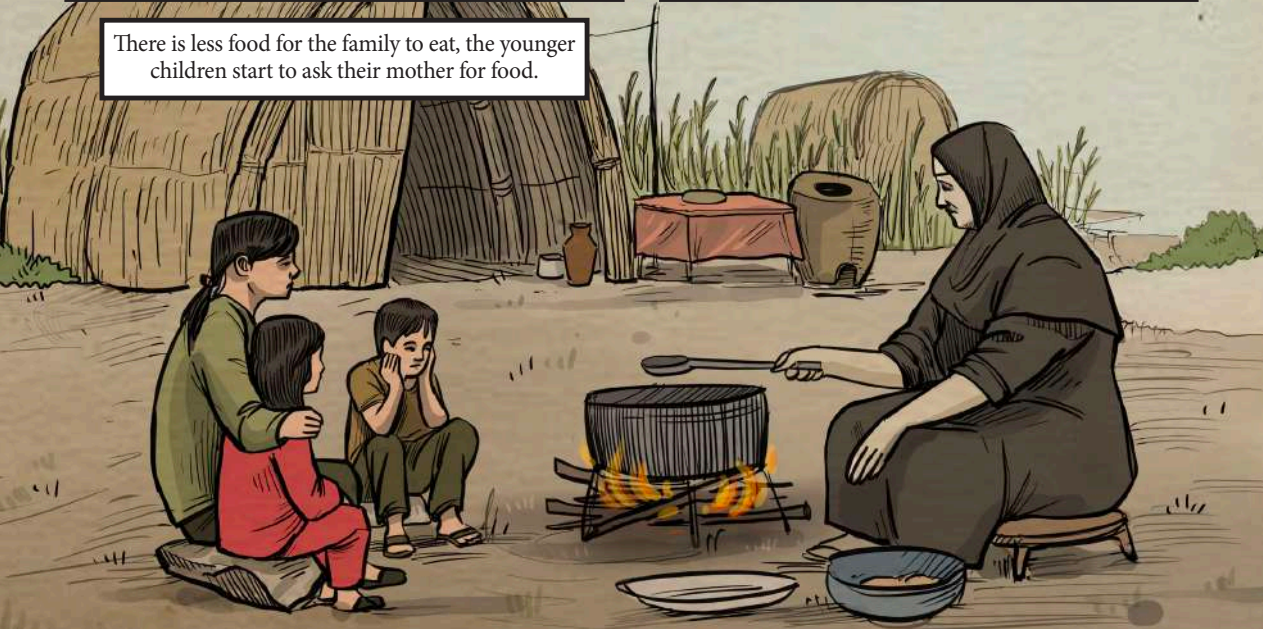




With the water lowering every day, the buffalo start to get stuck in the mud, the calf starts to become very thin.



There is less food for the family to eat, the younger children start to ask their mother for food.

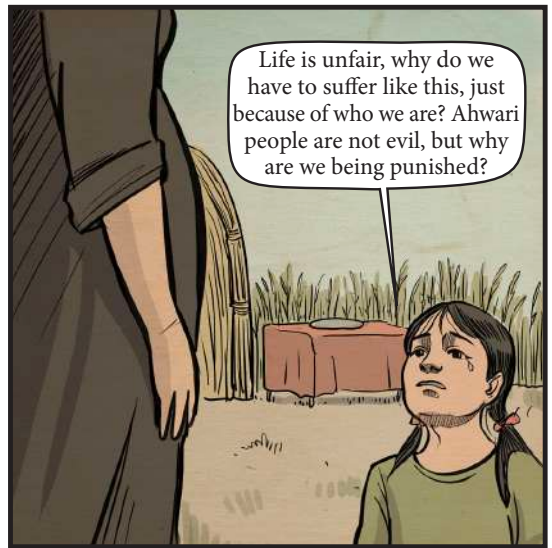




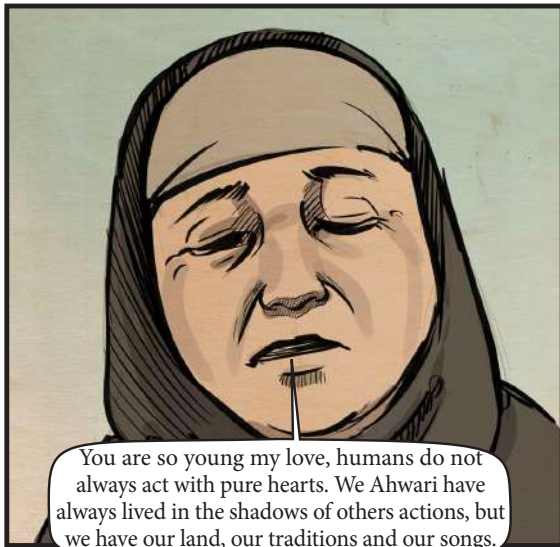




My dear, life goes in circles and is not always fair. Little Halwa suffered the worst consequences of this terrible situation, her soul is with Allah now, she is at peace.



Life is unfair, why do we have to suffer like this, just because of who we are? Ahwari people are not evil, but why are we being punished?

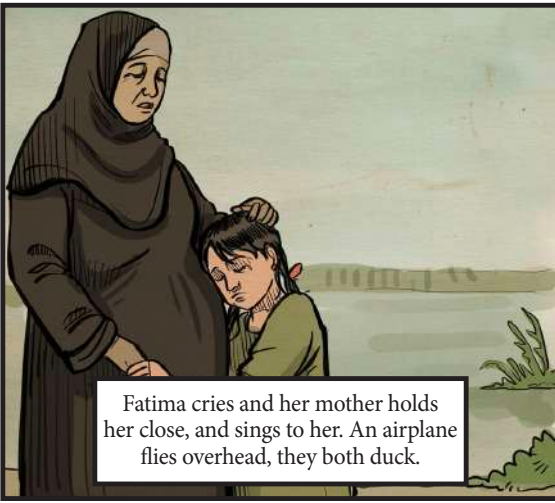


You are so young my love, humans do not always act with pure hearts. We Ahwari have always lived in the shadows of others actions, but we have our land, our traditions and our songs.



Sometimes humans do bad things to each other – even without a reason.











Fatima is tending to the adult buffalo and singing.



When she hears her younger sibling Amal crying, she runs to see what is wrong. Her sibling is lying on the ground holding her stomach covered.



My stomach hurts,
I can't breathe.



Little one, tell me,
what is wrong?



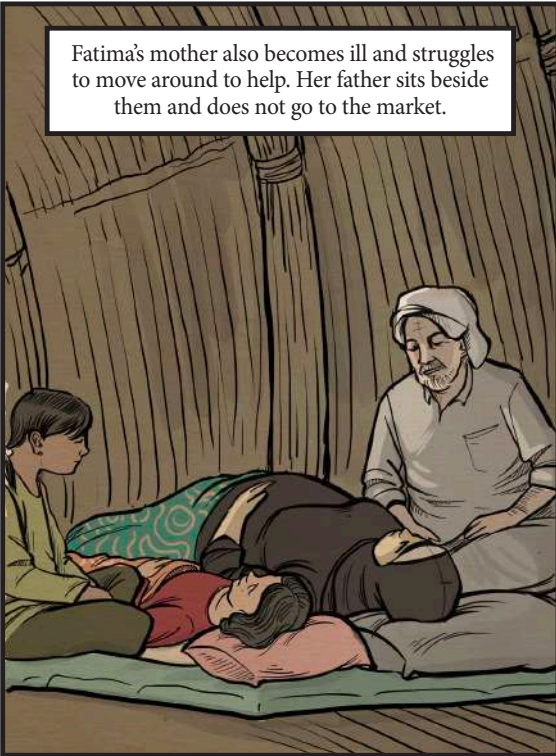
Mother! Amal
is very sick - we
need to help her.



Fatima and her mother are caring for Amal.



Fatima's mother also becomes ill and struggles to move around to help. Her father sits beside them and does not go to the market.





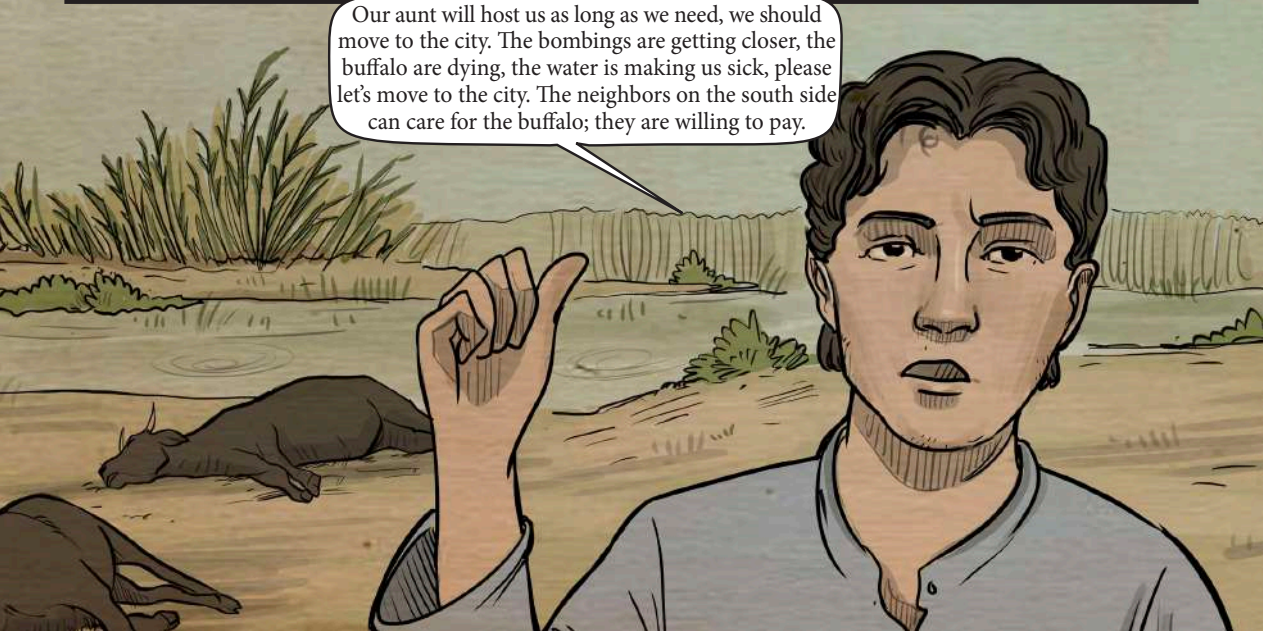
Khalid returns home one evening and the family surround their sick relatives.



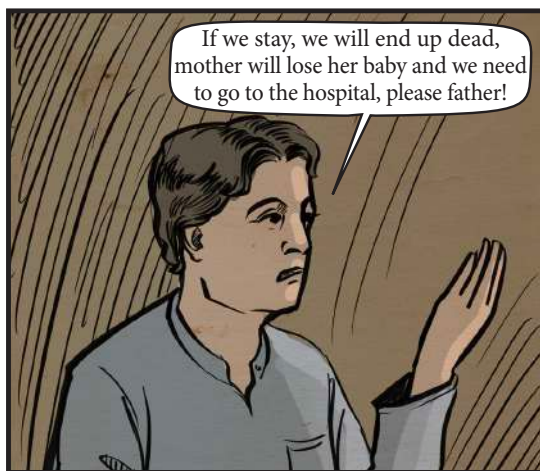
Father, I have news from the city. I was not able to sell everything today and I send cream and milk to my cousins. They returned a message.

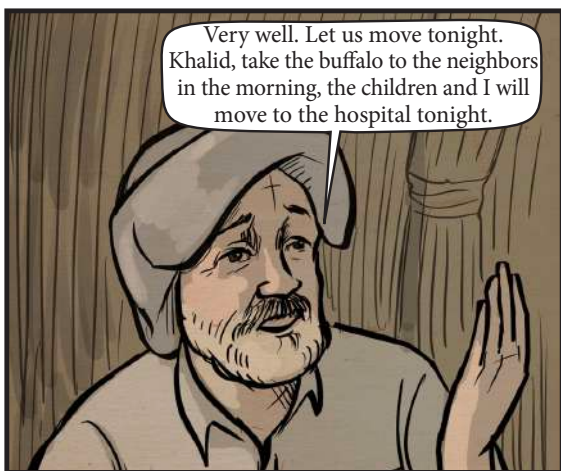


Son, your mother and sister are sick, we must take them to the hospital but there is no money to pay.



Our aunt will host us as long as we need, we should move to the city. The bombings are getting closer, the buffalo are dying, the water is making us sick, please let's move to the city. The neighbors on the south side can care for the buffalo; they are willing to pay.



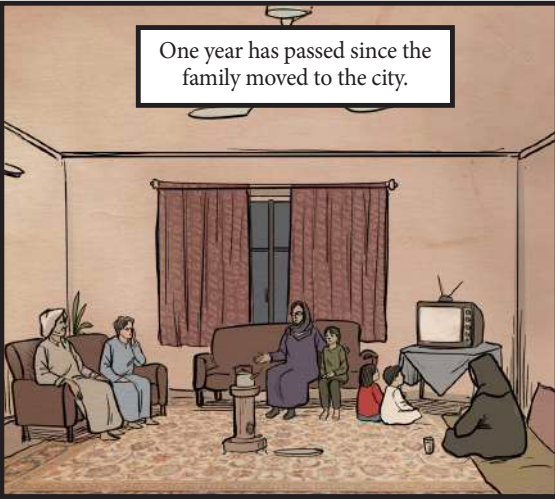






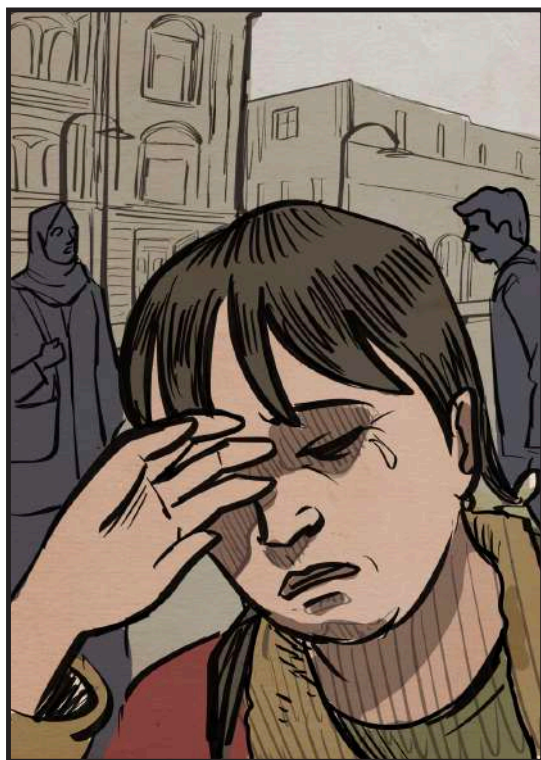


One year has passed since the family moved to the city.











الرشيد

مخيم البناء

الهدلي

بناية الهدلي
بناية الهدلي



Part Two
A New Life
(1999/2000)





Ah, remember our old meals, the smell and sound of the water against our house. Those were the days!



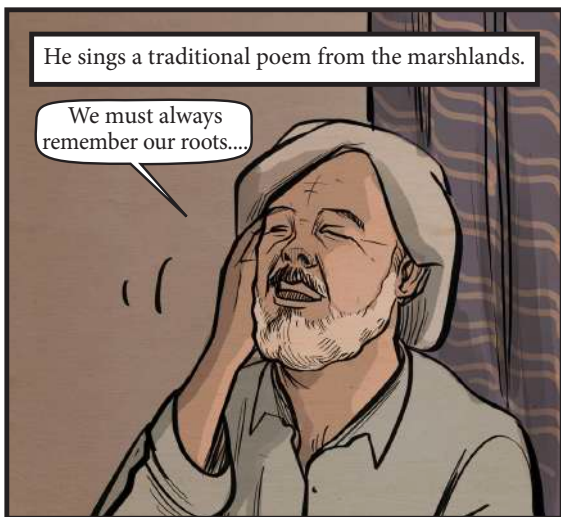
Leave those days behind, the marshes are destroyed, all the buffalo are gone, those days are over!



We must carry our memories with us, no matter where we are.



Father, remember the old poem – can you still sing it?



He sings a traditional poem from the marshlands.

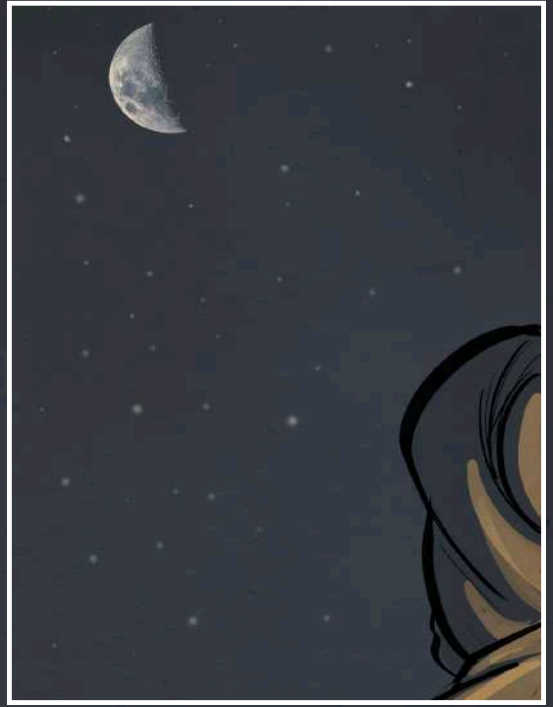
We must always remember our roots....



Your voice has the power to lift our spirits, ah if only my husband could hear it!

He will return to us hopefully, given time, we must not give up our roots or our hope.

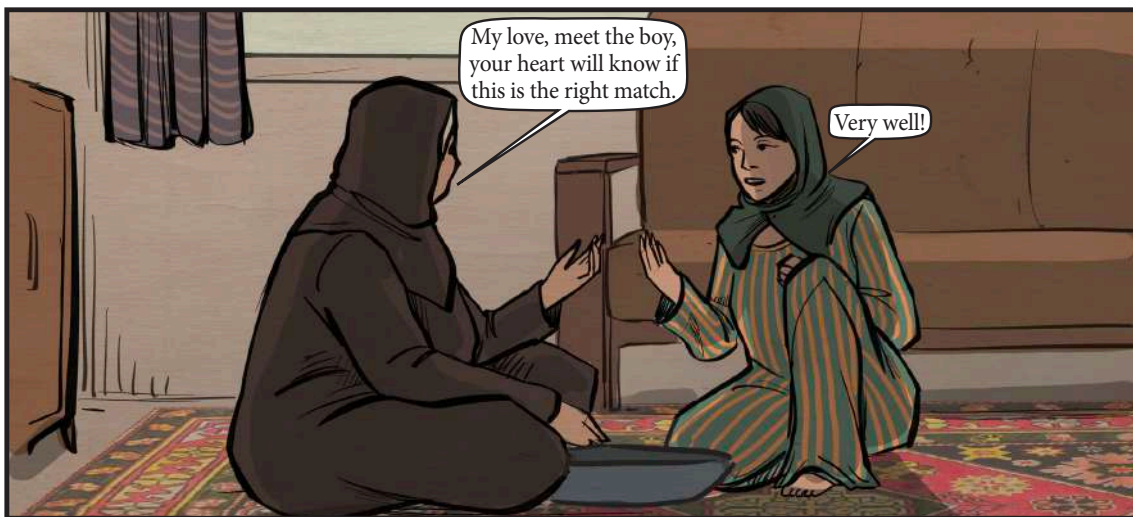
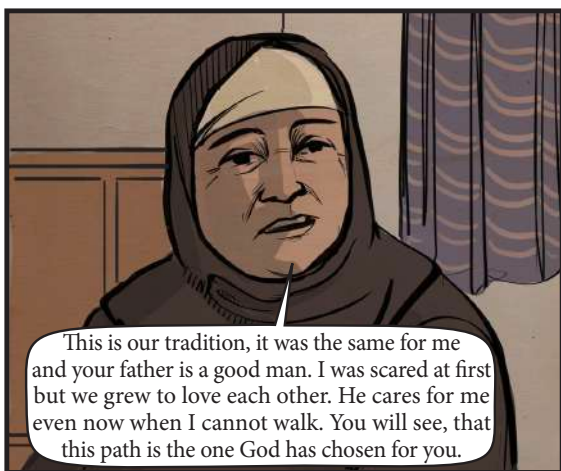




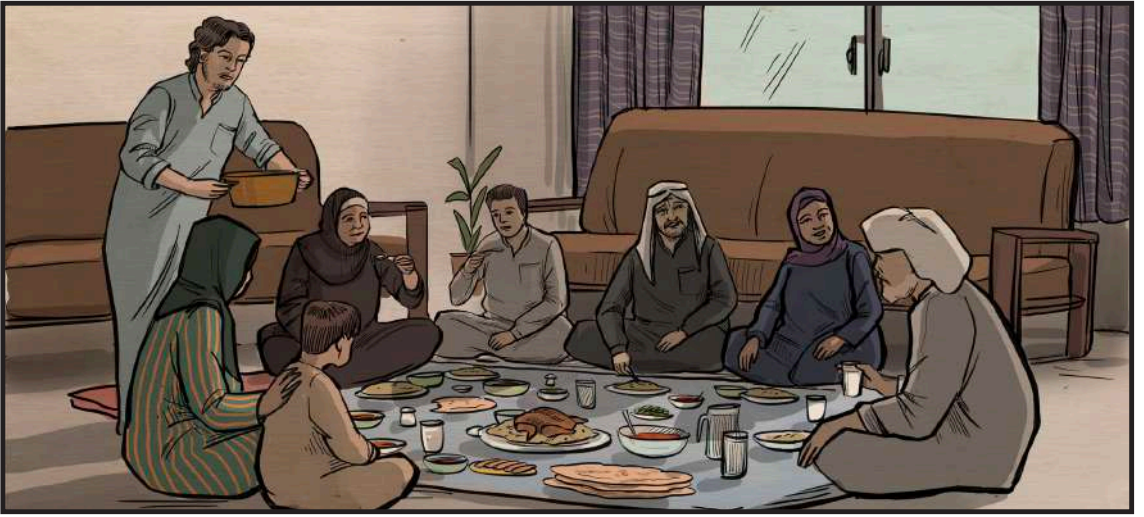
Hopefully our
lands will heal and
we can return.



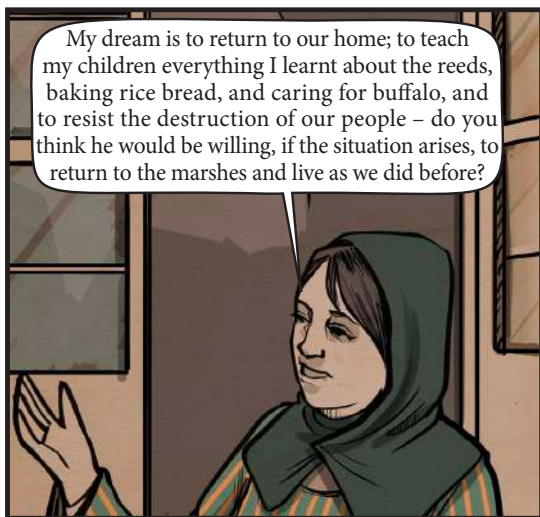














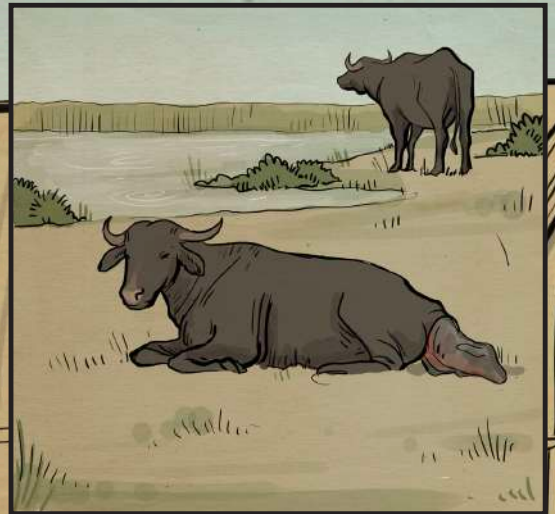




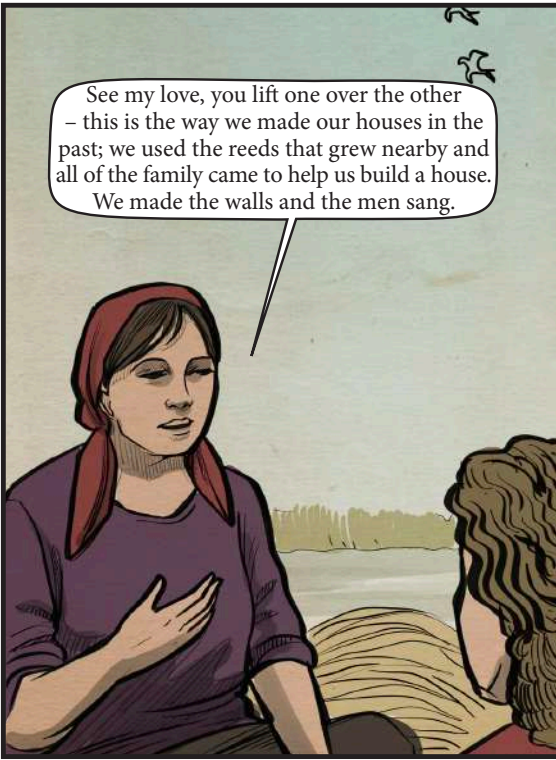


**Part three:
Return to the Roots
(2004)**









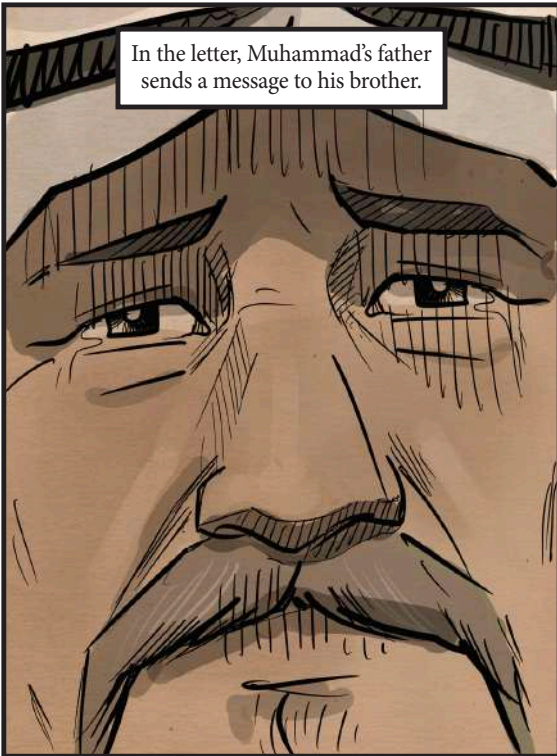




Mohammed writes a letter to his uncle about himself and his family.

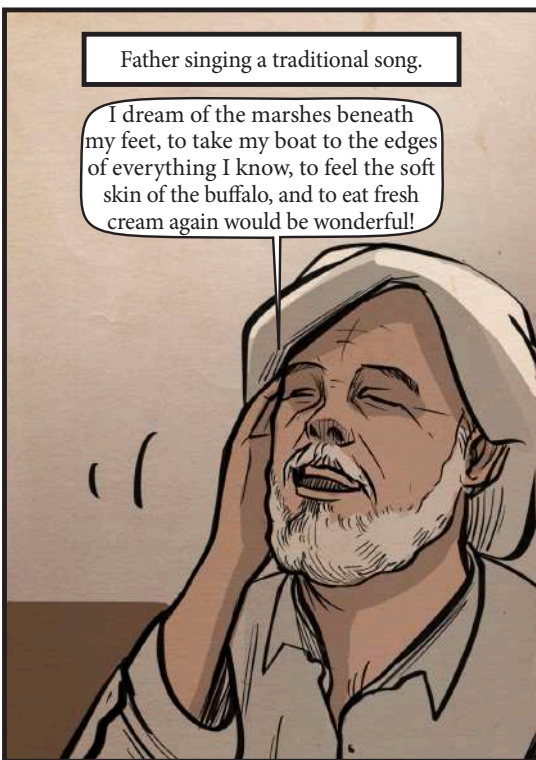


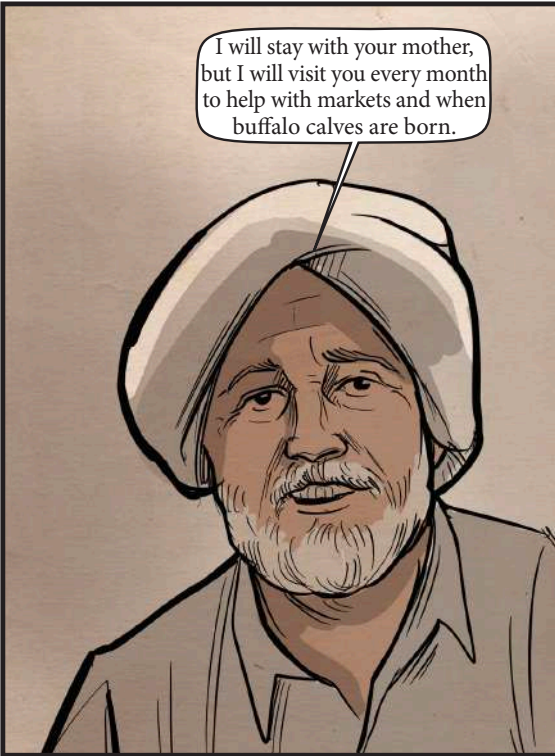
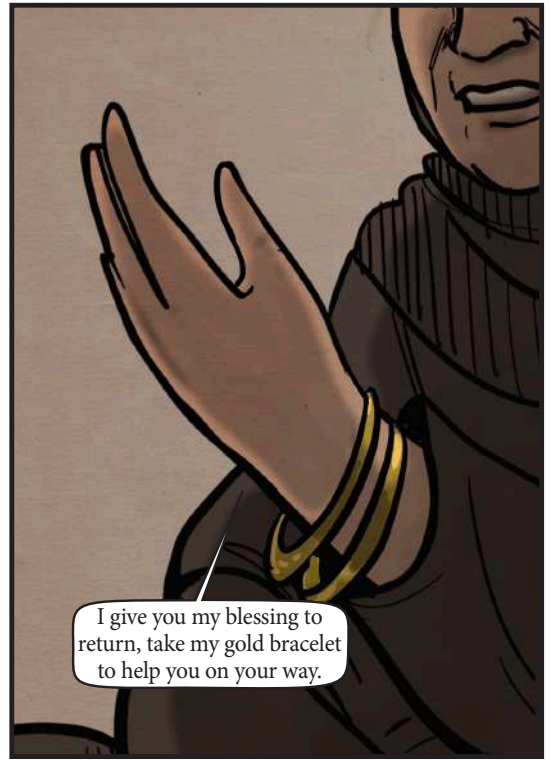
In the letter, Muhammad's father sends a message to his brother.



I fought for our land, my brother is still missing, we owe it to him to return to our lands.













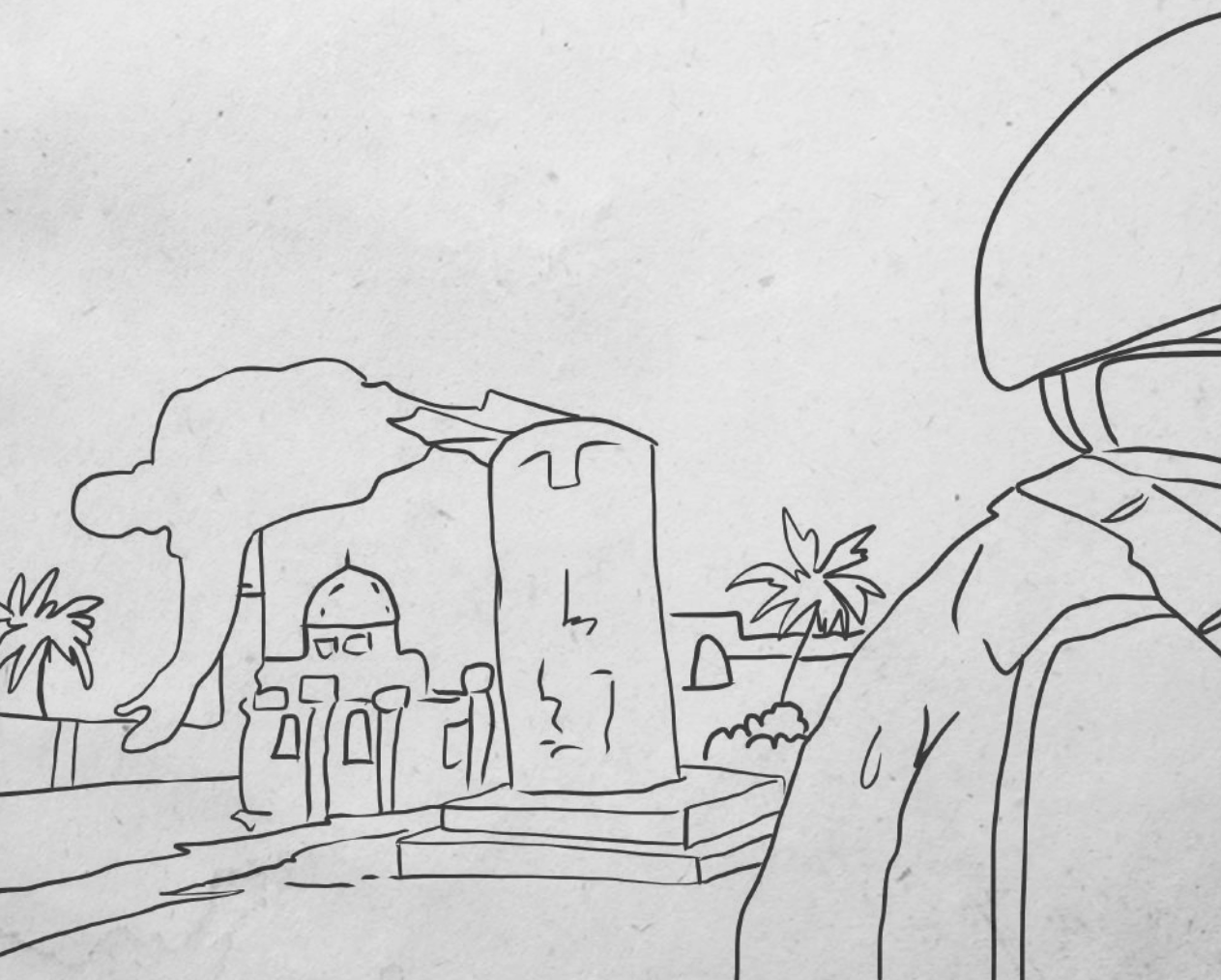




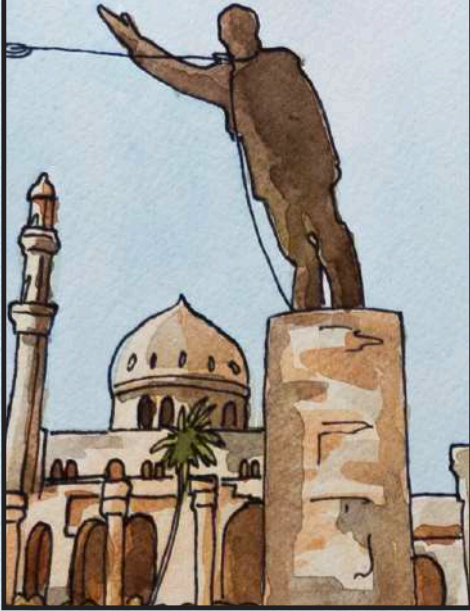


The Confession

2003-2011



In March 2003, the United States and allies invaded Iraq under the pretext of destroying weapons of mass destruction and overthrowing the rule of Saddam Hussein.



The US forces implemented a sectarian political system, dissolved the Iraqi state and with it the Iraqi army.



The invasion led to widespread sectarian violence, the rise of militias, widespread torture and enforced disappearances.



As a result of the invasion, the Iraqi seed bank in Abu Gharib was destroyed.



Over 1,400 seeds were lost, many of which disappeared.



100 orders were enacted by Paul Bremer, head of the occupation authority in Iraq, among which order 81 makes it illegal to re-use "new" plant varieties under patent law.



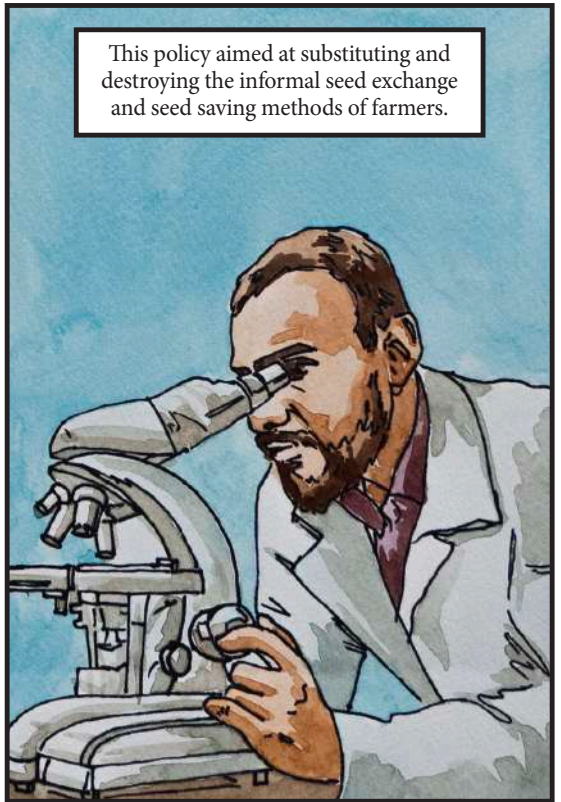
This led to creation of a new seed market for corporations that sell their seeds and force farmers to re-buy these seeds each season.



It abolished the previous Iraqi law that did not allow any private ownership of biological resources.



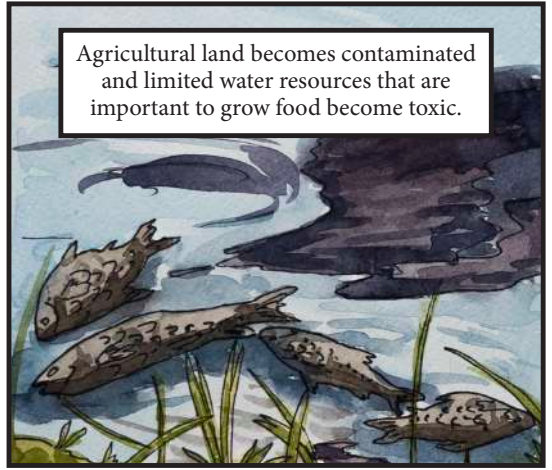
This policy aimed at substituting and destroying the informal seed exchange and seed saving methods of farmers.



At the same time, oil companies and other sectors dispose of contaminated waste into rivers, waters and agricultural areas with impunity.

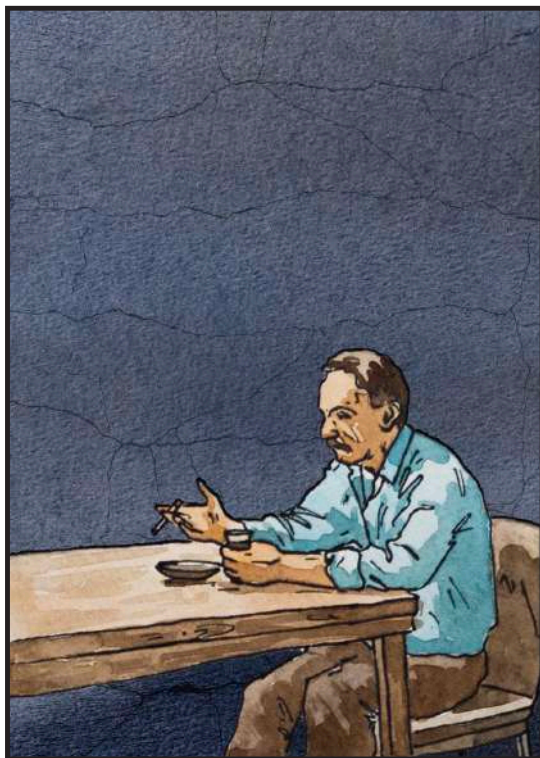
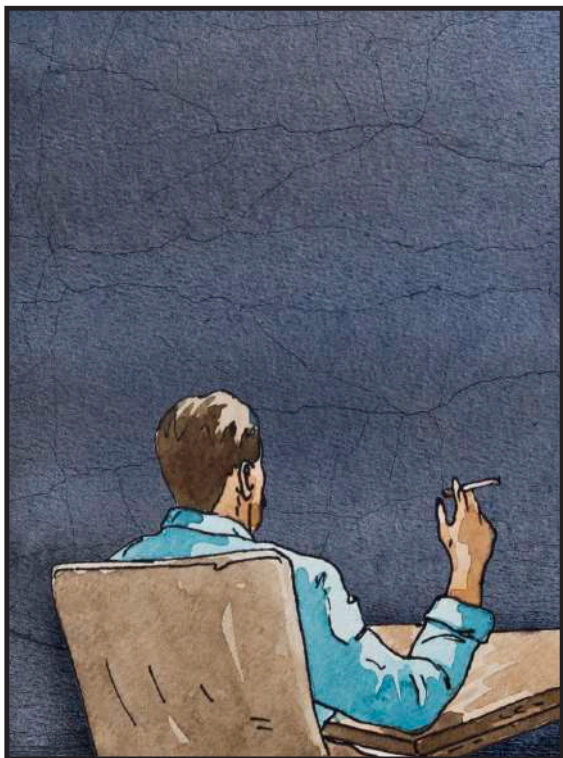


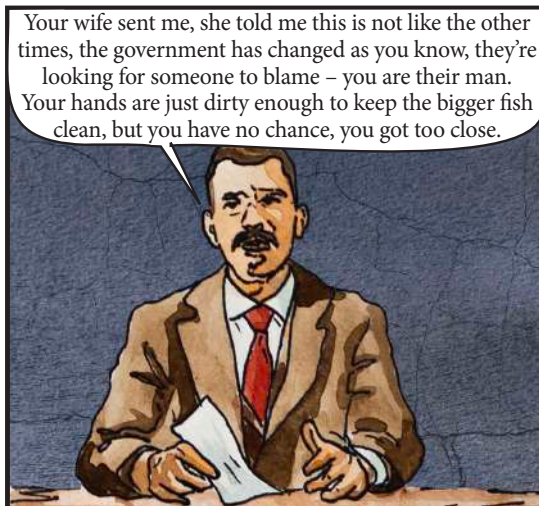
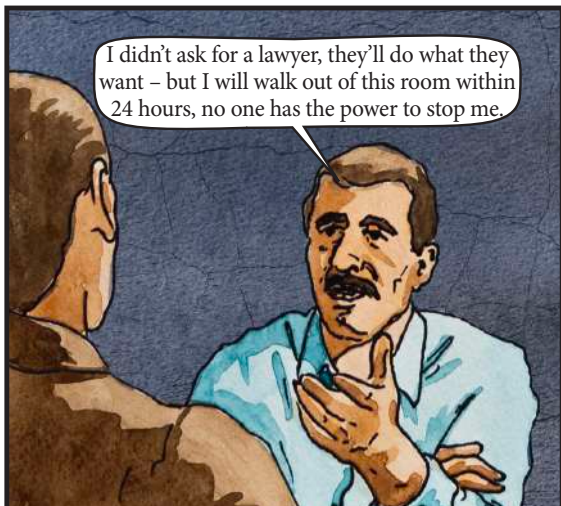
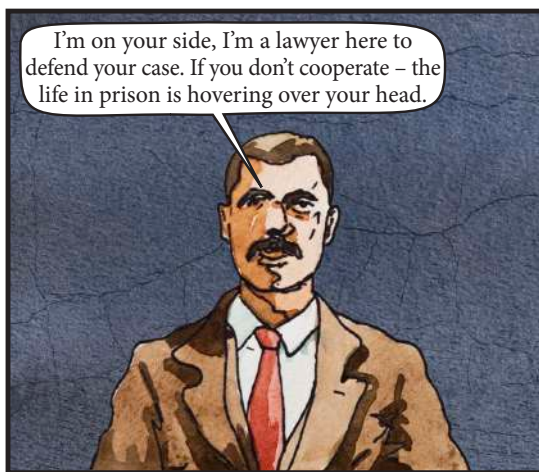
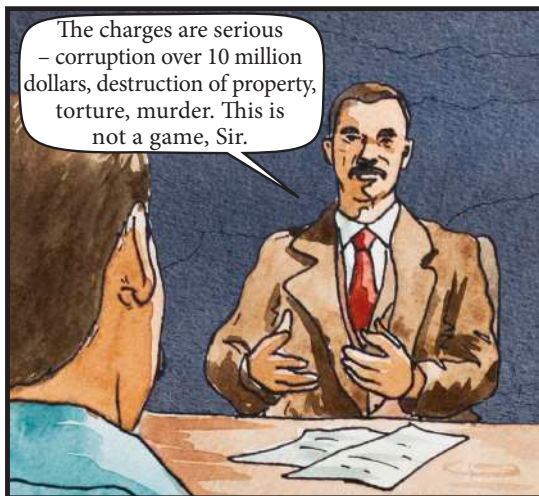
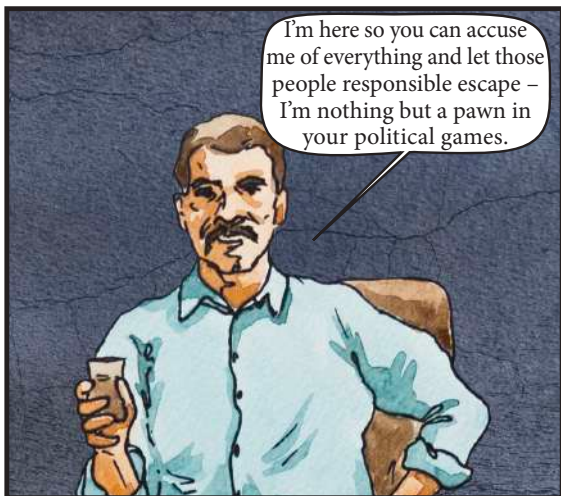
Agricultural land becomes contaminated and limited water resources that are important to grow food become toxic.



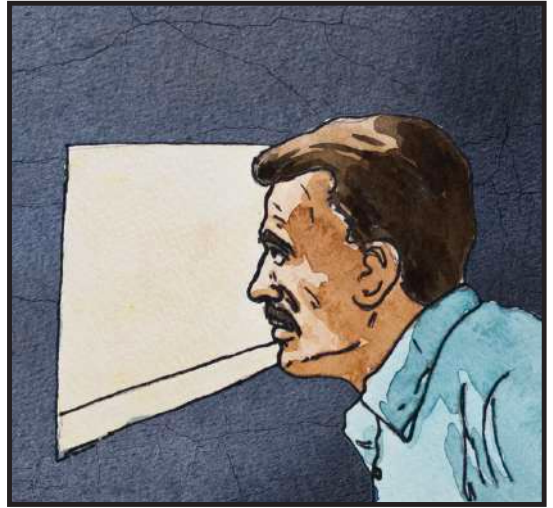
Individuals and organizations linked to oil production, continue to pollute and target agricultural land.







It's been such a long time, maybe it's a relief that all this has come out now. I didn't think they'd let a lawyer near me.



If you want me to represent you, I need to know the truth about everything. I don't care how messy, sordid or disgusting it is, my job is to keep you out of lifelong prison.



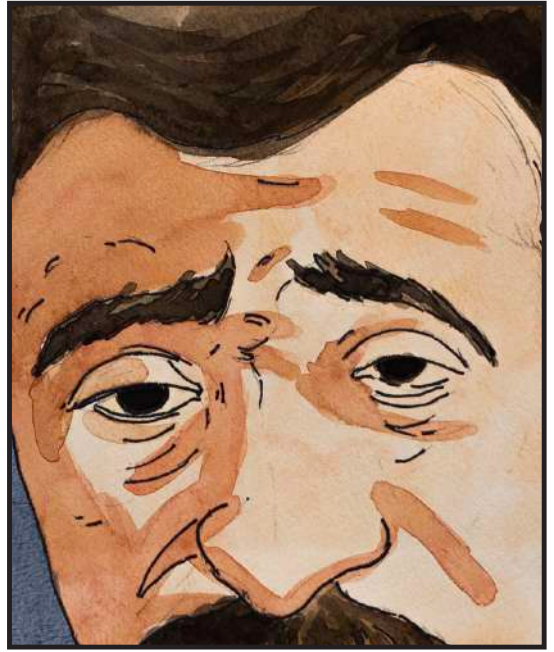
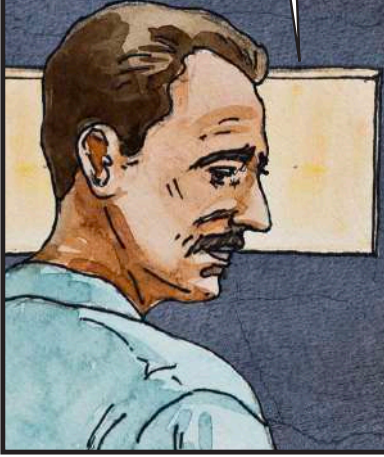
So, why did you take this up, why did they allow you here?



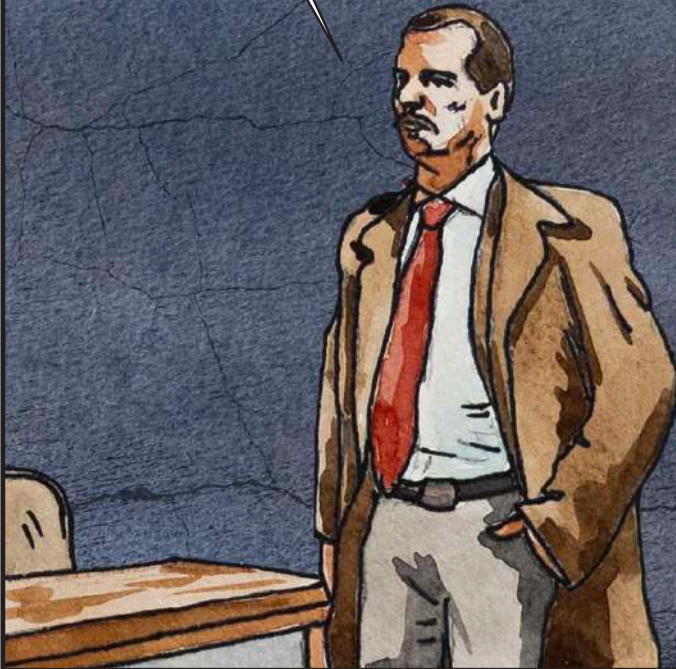
They want this to look clean, to prove that the court system works and convince the Americans that Iraq can manage its own legal system, get the army to stop interfering. Your downfall is an excuse for that. I'm taking this to prove that is not the case, torture, false imprisonment, disappearances are daily struggles, I believe that under the law all people deserve justice.



Very nice little speech, but you are young and naïve, if the government cared about this, they would have stopped me years ago.



Stopped you from....?



Before the Americans came and everything fell apart, I was in Al Jeish al- shaabi, a general.



People followed my word.



I fought for this country and in terrible wars, in Kuwait, Iran. I did not have much choice to fight. This was an order from the top. Anyone not fighting was killed immediately.



I was young, but the power never got into my head, I did my duty



Those wars, I lost my best men, my friends
were wounded so much suffering.



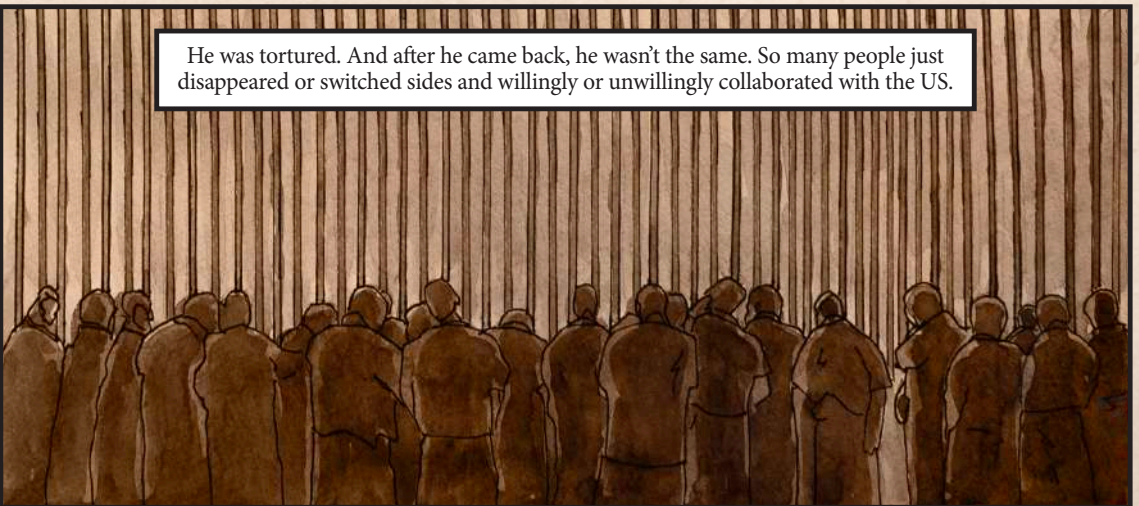
At the end, we were desperate and people
tried to rebel or flee from the army.

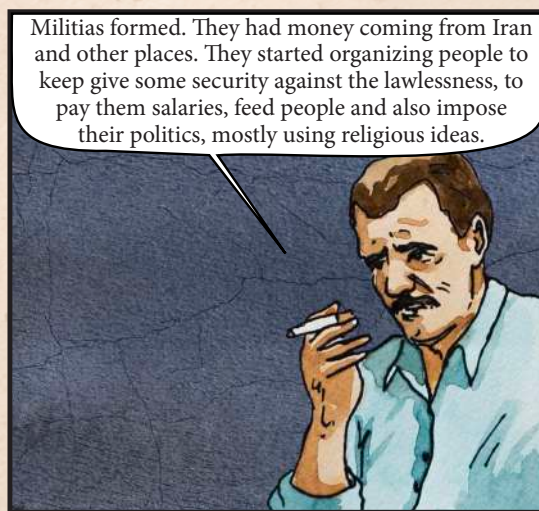
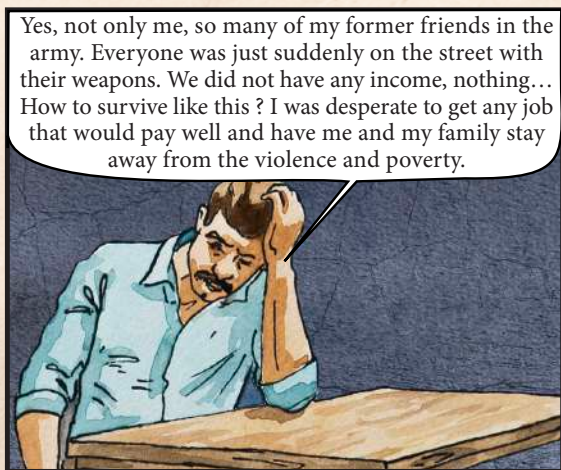
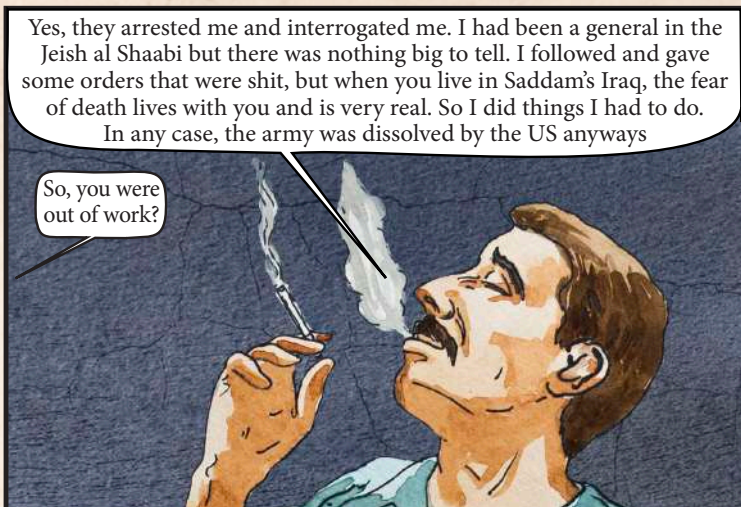
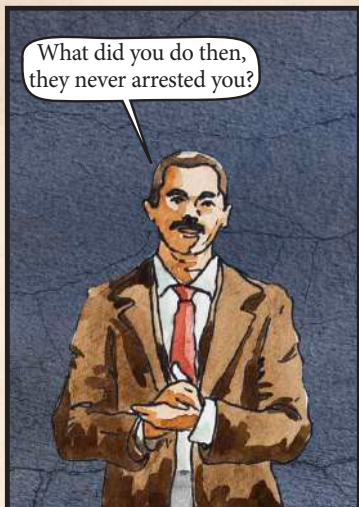


But then, the Americans came, my best friend,
a general – was arrested and imprisoned.



He was tortured. And after he came back, he wasn't the same. So many people just
disappeared or switched sides and willingly or unwillingly collaborated with the US.





These militias. They were sectarian. They started to clean out neighborhoods from different sects, and threatening other religious groups. Some fought the Americans. Those Americans, they destroyed my life. I don't like them, but I won't fight them like those brutal militias.



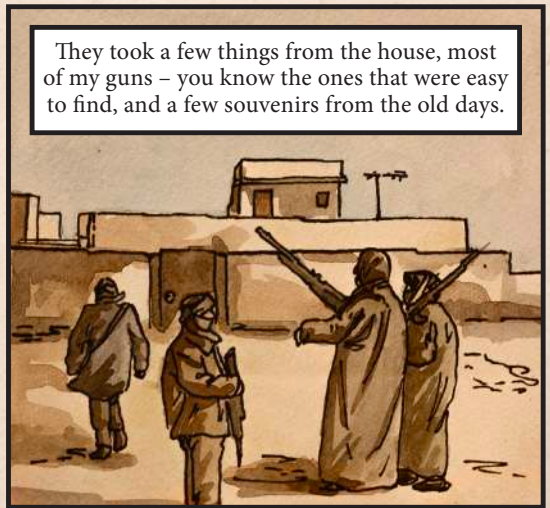
One day, they showed up at my house, said they had a deal for me, just like you are. They told me to join them - that the Americans took my job, that this was the best way to get back at them.



I refused to join; they said they would be back, so I sent my family away. I didn't care if they killed me, I had no work, and no income but I wouldn't let my wife and kids pay for my actions.



They took a few things from the house, most of my guns - you know the ones that were easy to find, and a few souvenirs from the old days.



I called an old friend; we fought together back in Kuwait, and won a few battles. He had good connections to this militia, and thought it was good to fight the US. Told him to tell the militia to leave me alone. I won't fight for anyone anymore. Not after all the wars that I had been too. I know what wars do and I don't want no part in this. My old friend said he might have another deal that allows me to get away from the militia and make some money.

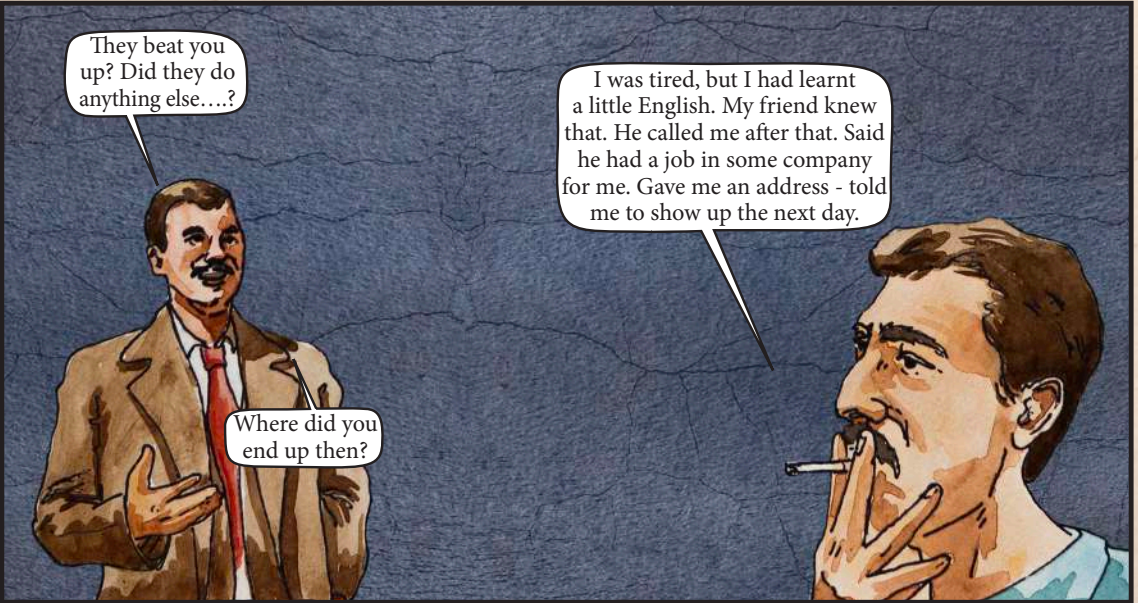
So, the militia came back, started asking me questions, threatened and beat me up, took anything in the house of value- the usual type of things. But I'm not going to join them...



They beat you up? Did they do anything else....?

I was tired, but I had learnt a little English. My friend knew that. He called me after that. Said he had a job in some company for me. Gave me an address - told me to show up the next day.

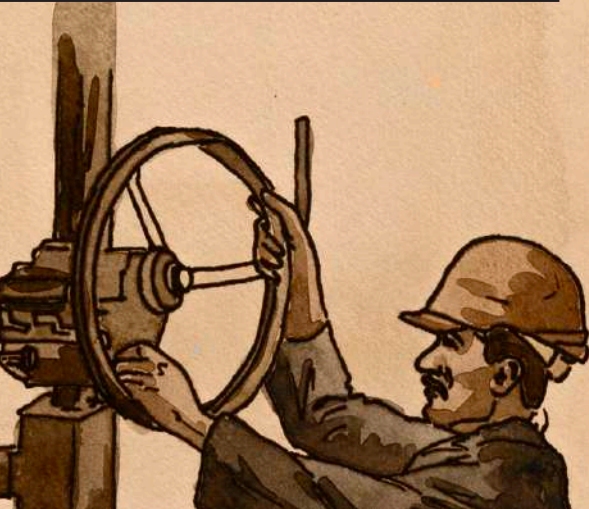
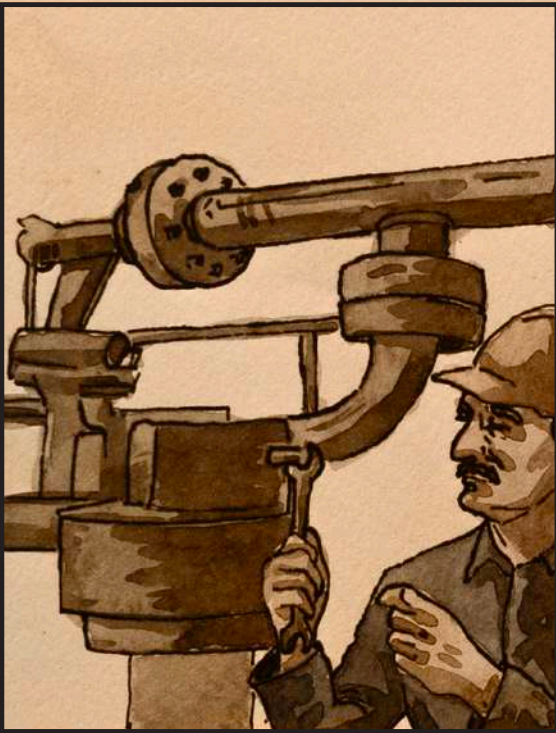
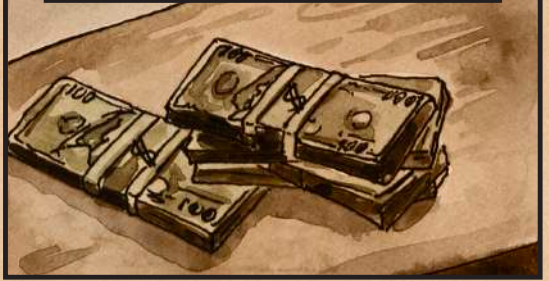
Where did you end up then?



I showed up at this oil place the next day, they seemed clean, and polite - there were some Americans, but not like the ones in the army. They were wearing suits, and treated me well.



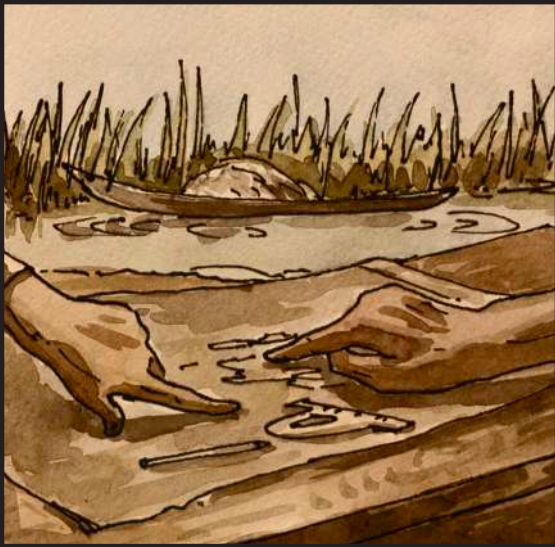
These guys, they were making more money than you could imagine, I didn't know at first, I was doing odd jobs, translating things, building good connections with them - whatever it took to make some money.



One day, it must have been about six months after I started, the boss – this big American guy, calls me into his office, tells me he knows my friend and that he needs some advice, seems that they want to drill for some oil in a village near my family.



I tell him the Muktar's name, where he lives and how to get around him, you know – to get him to agree to let them do some surveys or something.





The next day, boss calls me in.



Gives me keys to a new house, tells me I have new security. I have a big car, a driver. I have my own office.



I called my wife; she came back, the look on her face when she saw the palace, white tiles, security. She cried, she'd been with her family this whole time in a miserable place.



We could live as a family again. My kids, they could live safely with me.



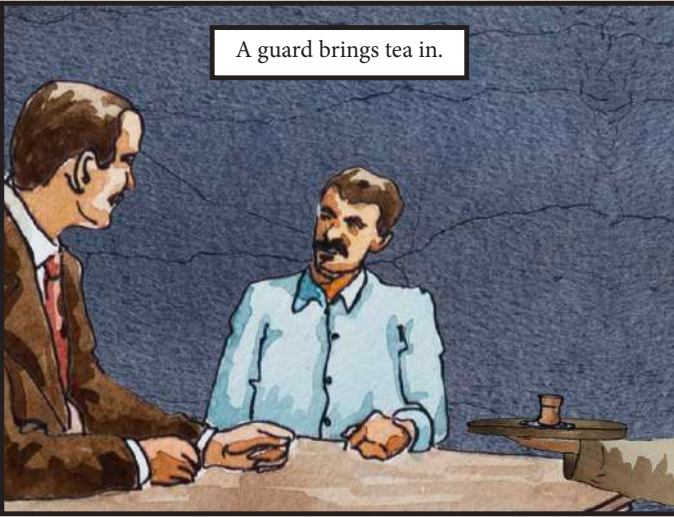
So, why this generosity?



Guess he thought I did an ok job?

So, can we get some more tea?

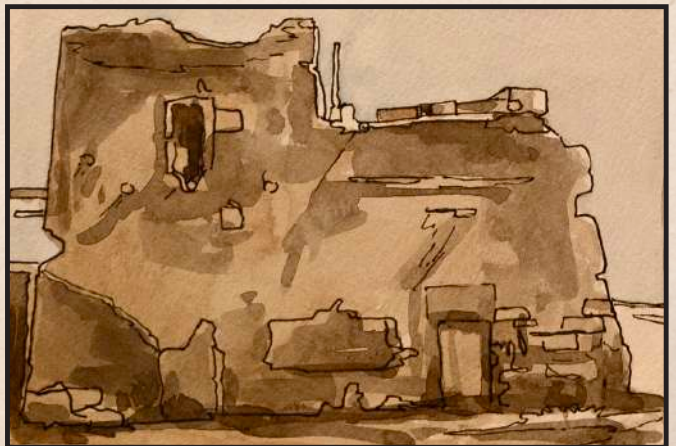
A guard brings tea in.



I got called into the boss's office a lot, he used to ask me questions about the villages, where there was oil, which families were in charge – how to get around them.



I never went with those investigators - they had some scientists doing surveys on the villages to show that it was safe to drill for oil there. I heard most of the villages were empty because of the war. It's really the Americans' fault, this company was just trying to make some money.



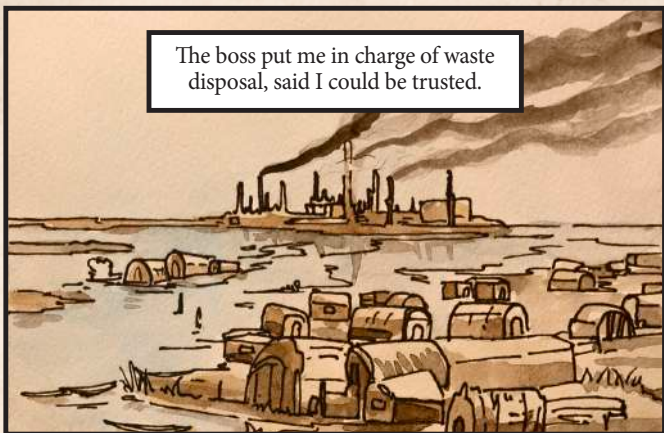
This country was a mess, militia everywhere, these religious extremists taking over – all of them with their own militia.



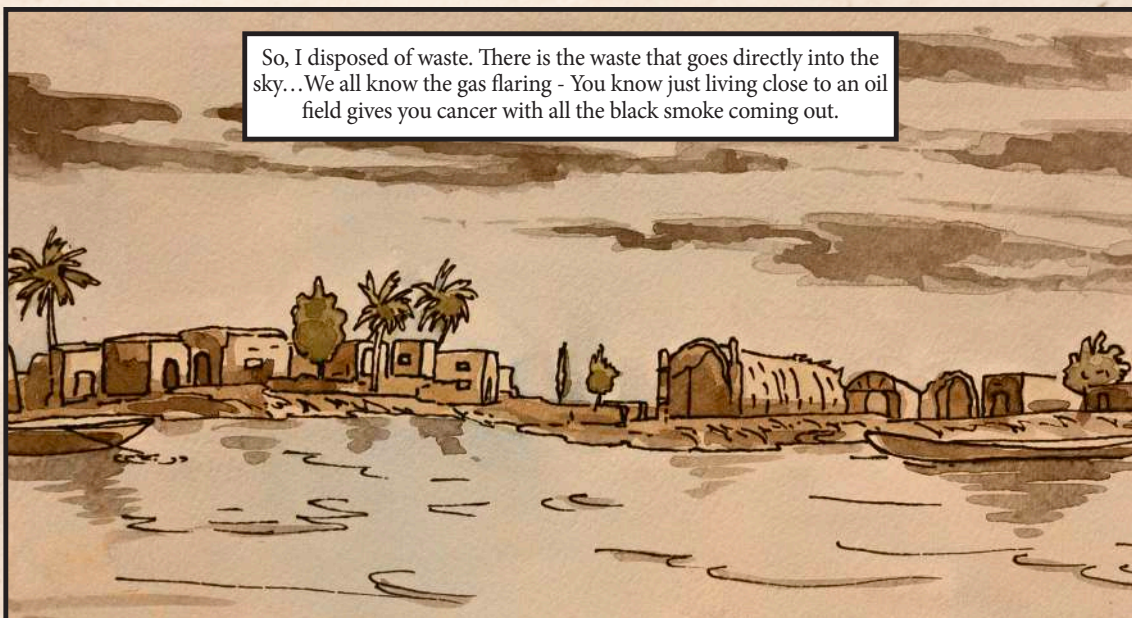
Americans attacking civilians – we've all seen the videos of torture in the prison of Abu Gharib, attacking women and children. The company has stability, a regular schedule, and my family stayed out of that mess.



The boss put me in charge of waste disposal, said I could be trusted.

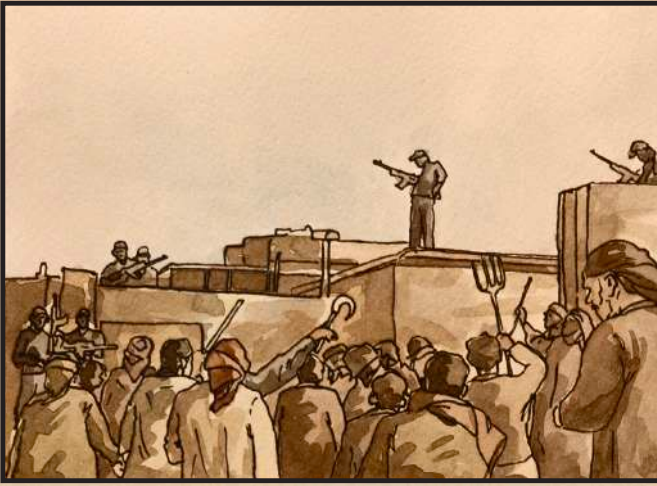


So, I disposed of waste. There is the waste that goes directly into the sky... We all know the gas flaring - You know just living close to an oil field gives you cancer with all the black smoke coming out.



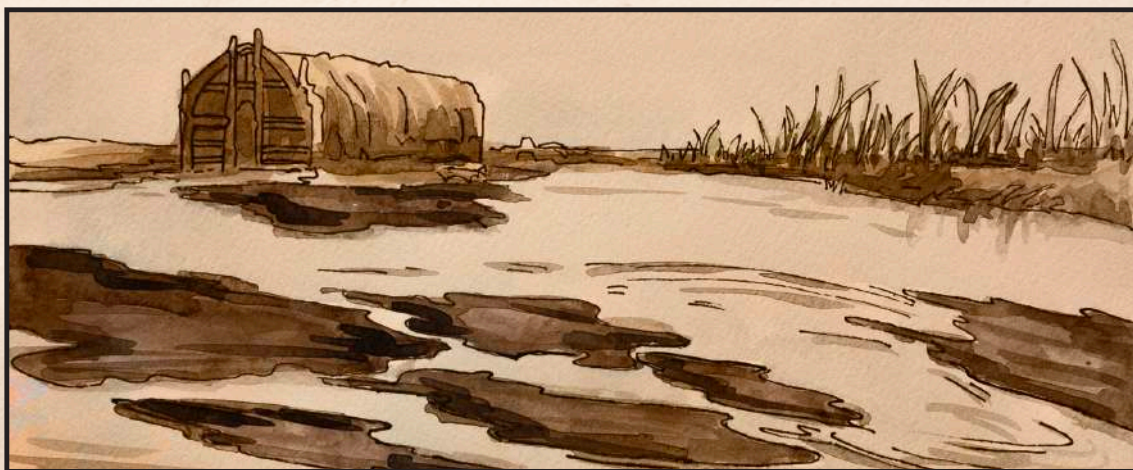
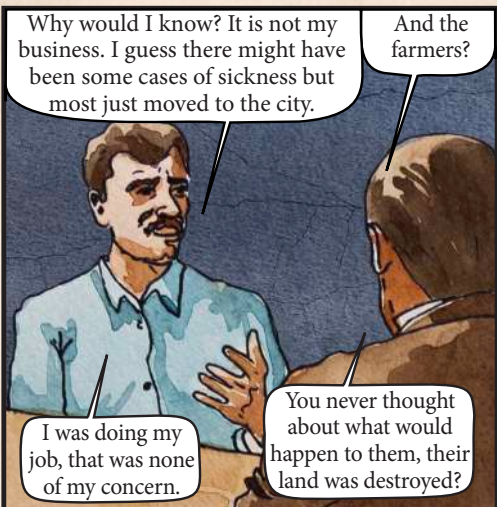
My job was to get rid of other waste that could not just be burned into the sky... We never touched anyone's land - but you know once the soil is full, the waste has to go somewhere.

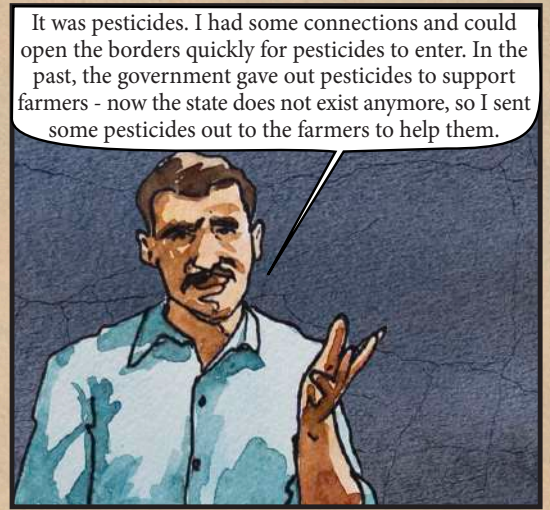
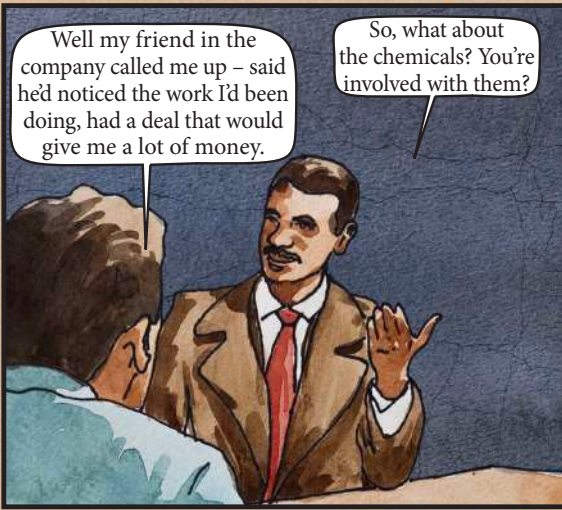


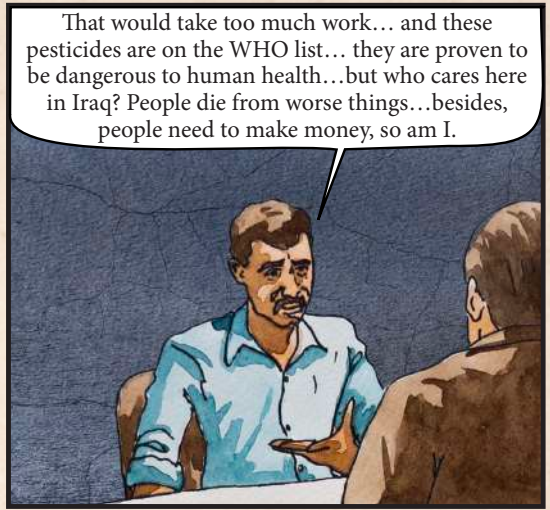
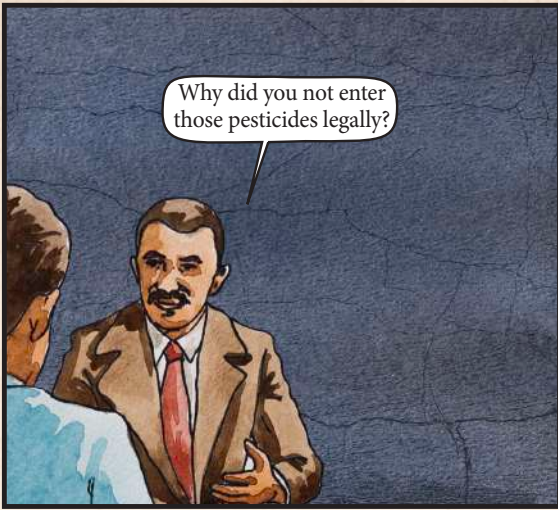


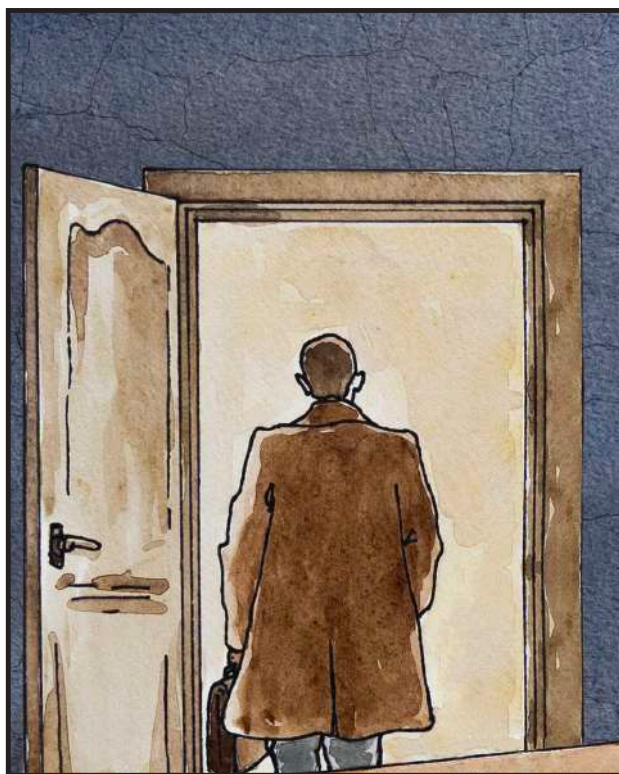
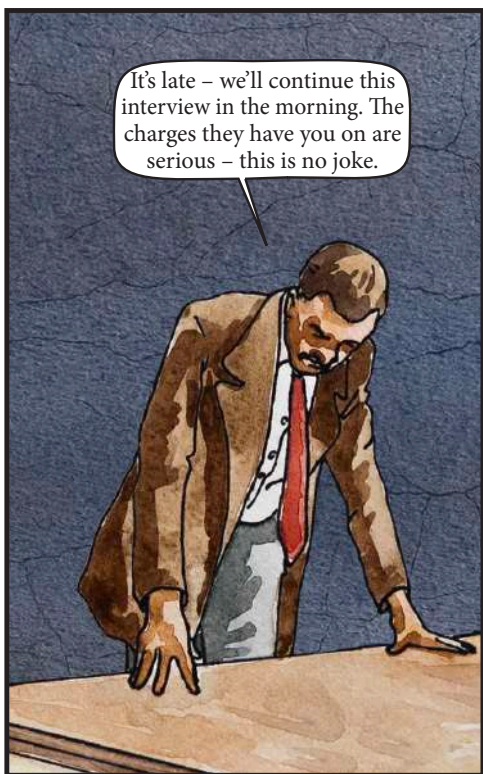
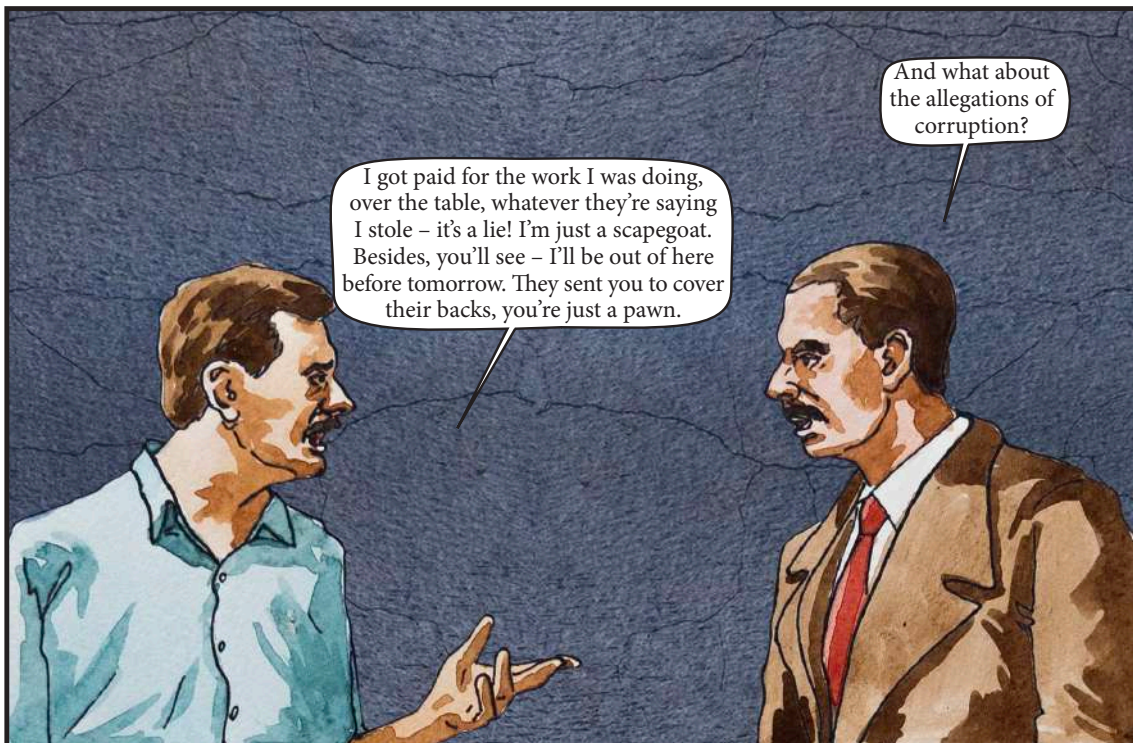
There were some protests I guess but this was not my business. Those things were taken care of by others. We got access to better land, more places to use, no one was going to stop us.

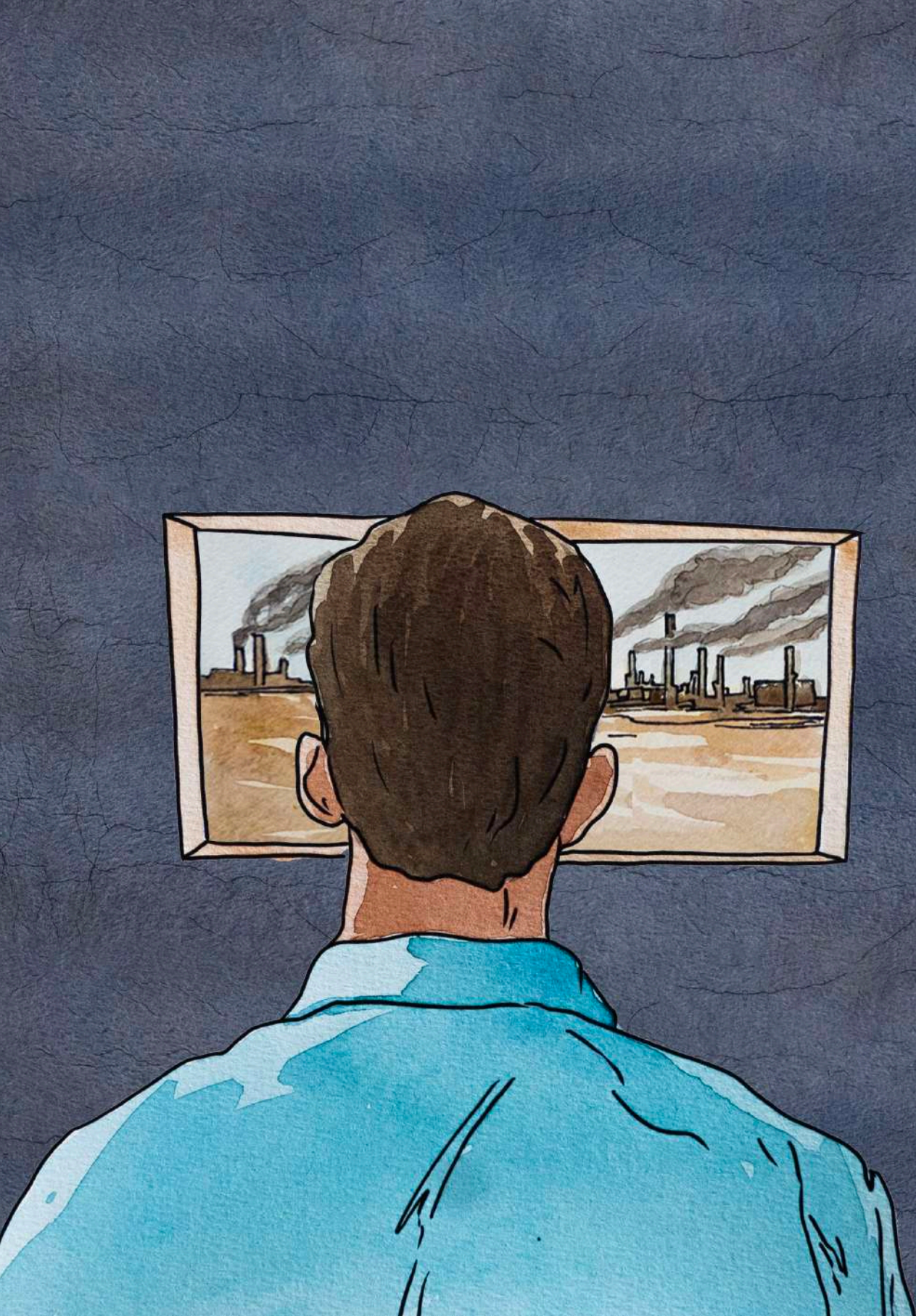


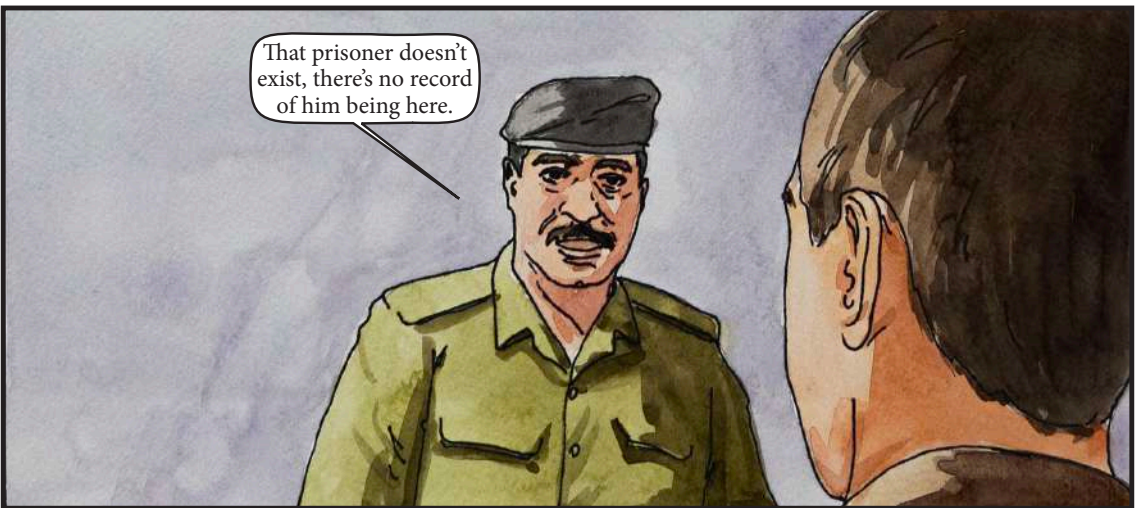












The Shepherd Activist

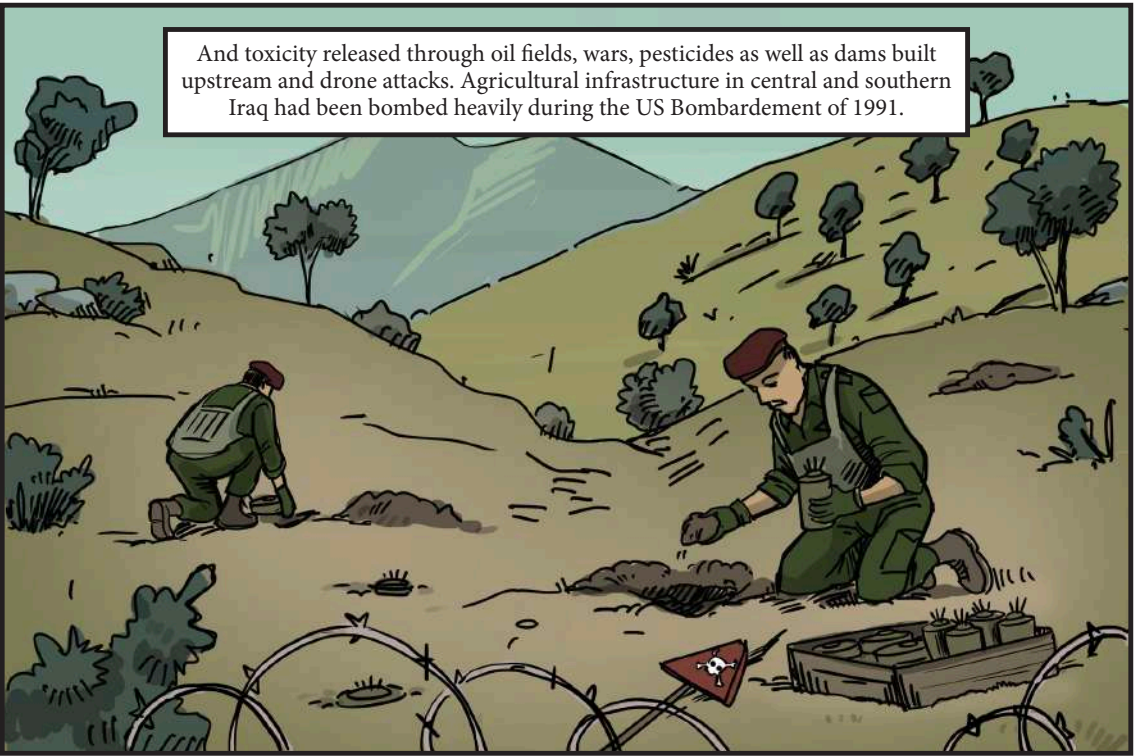
2011-until now



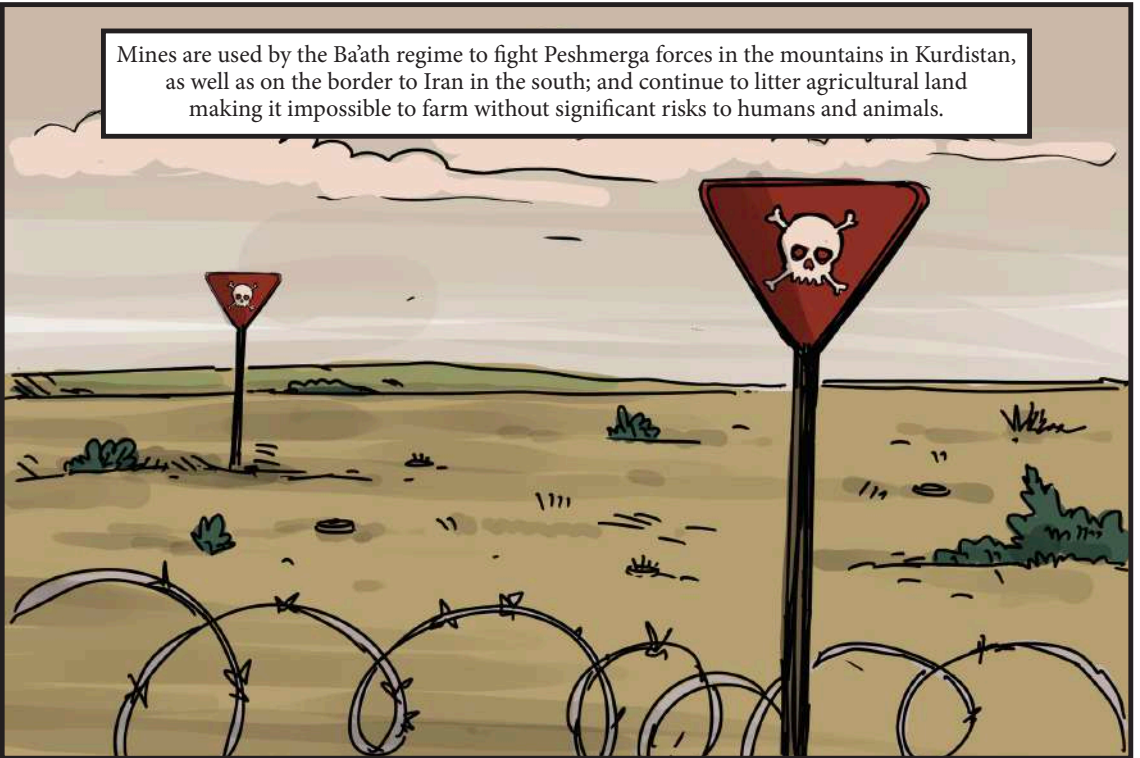
Iraq's agriculture continues to be impacted by past and current wars, resource misuse.

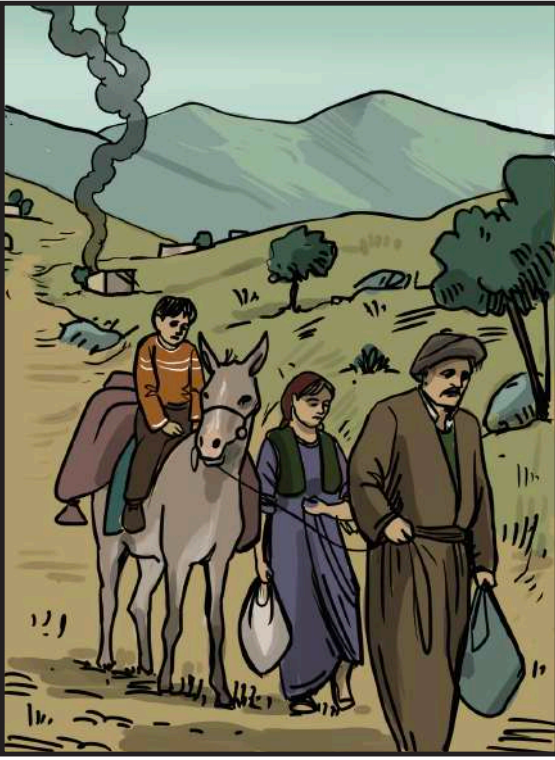


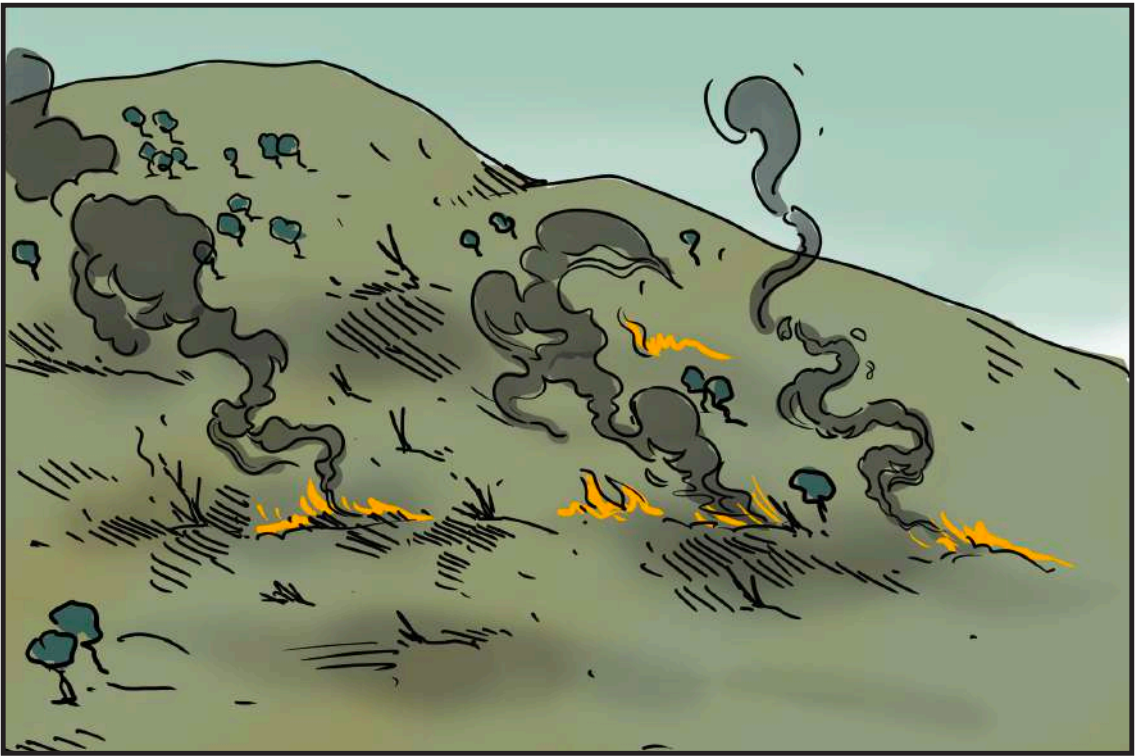
And toxicity released through oil fields, wars, pesticides as well as dams built upstream and drone attacks. Agricultural infrastructure in central and southern Iraq had been bombed heavily during the US Bombardement of 1991.



Mines are used by the Ba'ath regime to fight Peshmerga forces in the mountains in Kurdistan, as well as on the border to Iran in the south; and continue to litter agricultural land making it impossible to farm without significant risks to humans and animals.





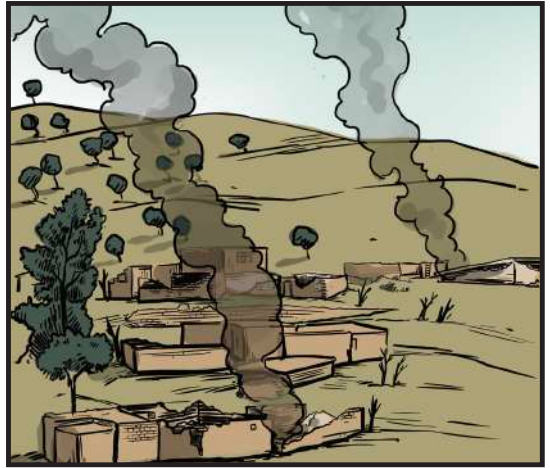
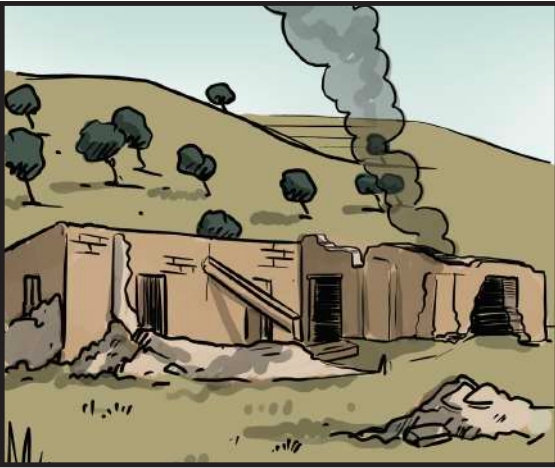
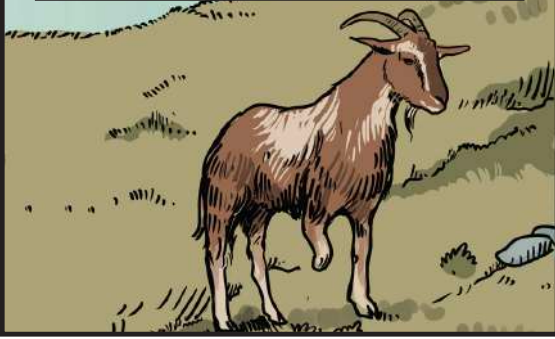


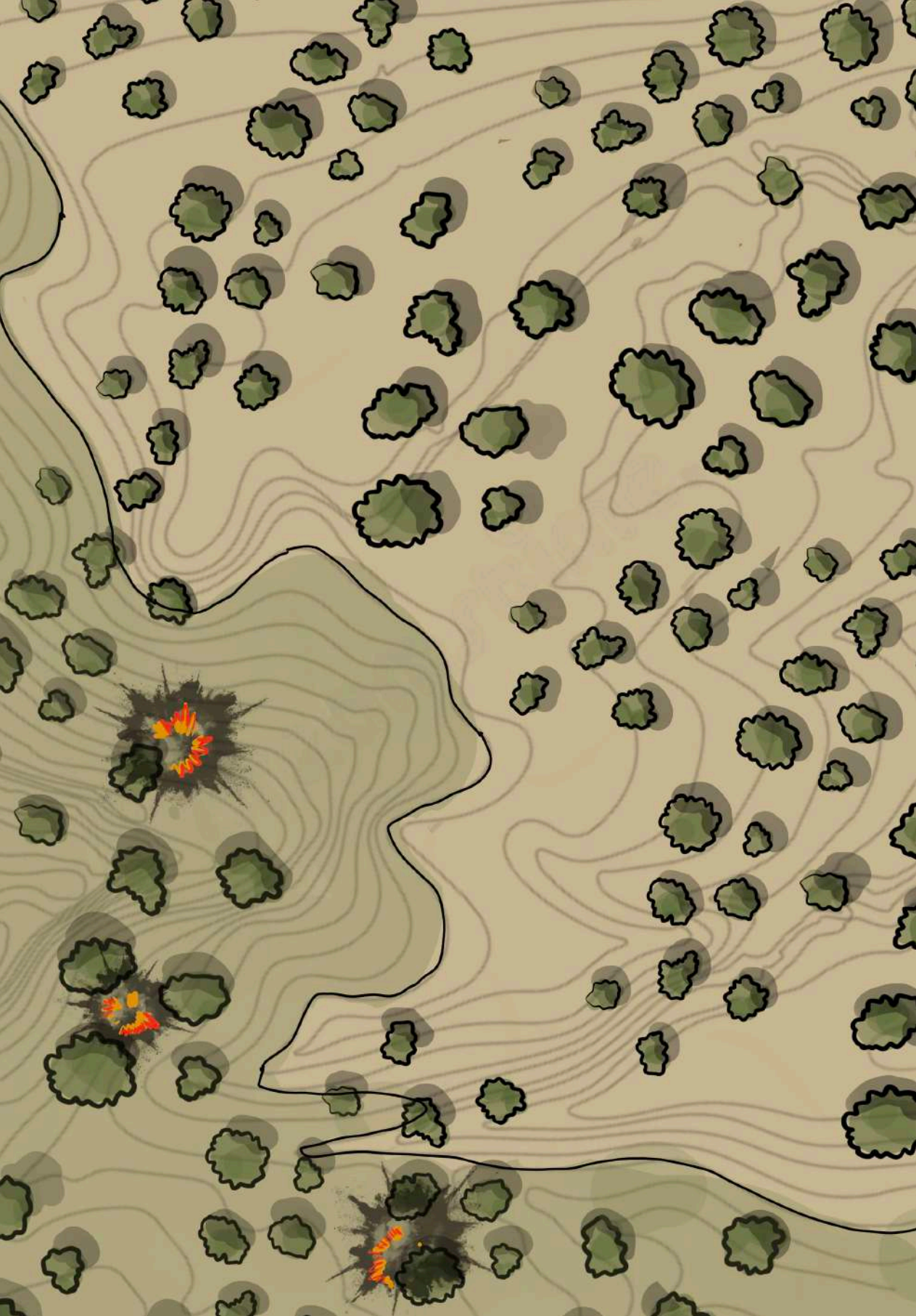
In 2016, Daesh set fire to the Qayyarah oil fields resulting in widespread contamination of soil and destruction of farmland. Conflict continues to have a huge impact on farmer's ability to tend to and harvest their crops safely.



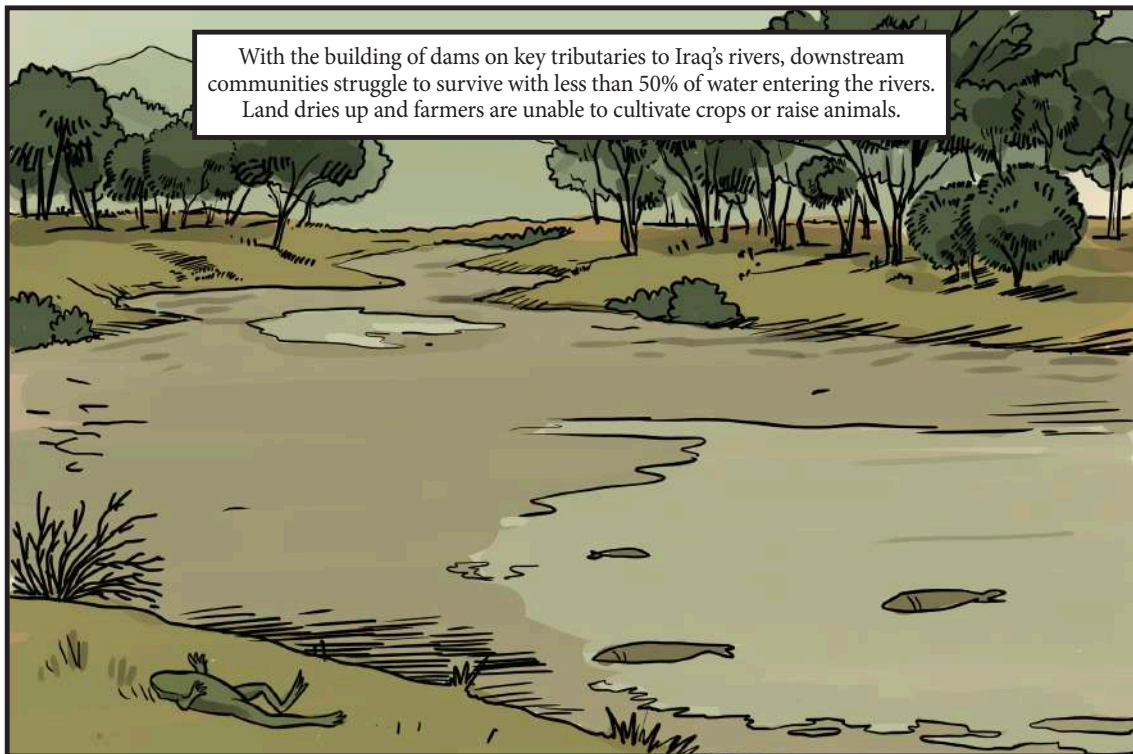


In 2020, cross border bombings by the Turkish government emptied 800 villages close to the border, destroyed farmland and crops – impacting farmers ability to produce food locally.





With the building of dams on key tributaries to Iraq's rivers, downstream communities struggle to survive with less than 50% of water entering the rivers. Land dries up and farmers are unable to cultivate crops or raise animals.



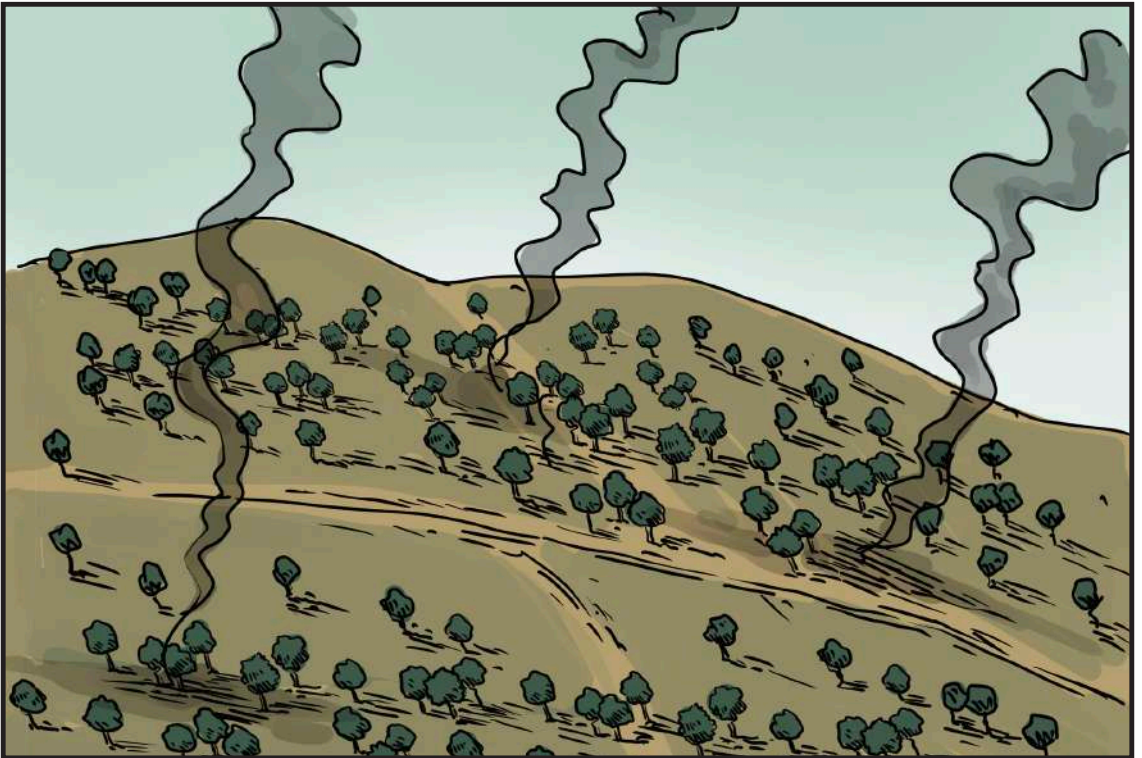
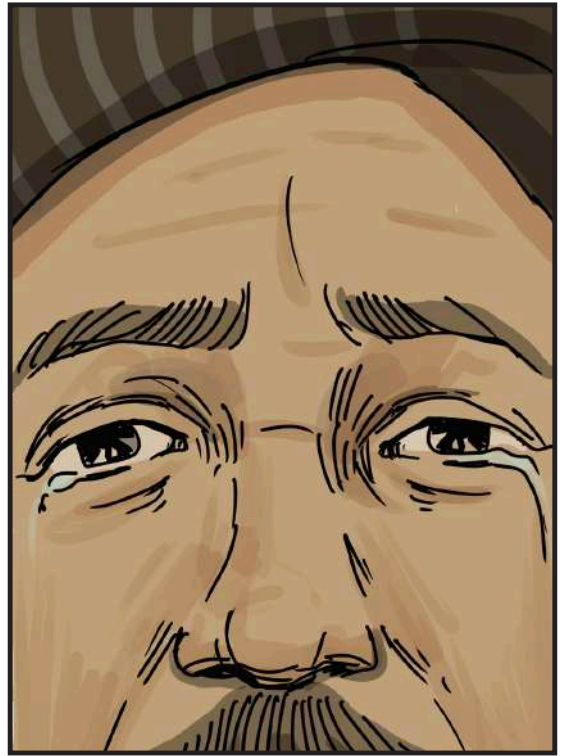




More families are forced to move to cities – adding more pressure to already stretched resources.







Our farmers are proud, our land, the food we grow from it, the animals we care for grow our hearts. We are able to feed ourselves and others. In the past, our food reached even until Basra, and during the resistance, we fed the Peshmerga.



Today it has become harder to live from this with all the imports coming from Turkey and Iran. But we are still here and we are growing food. People are close to the land here; they breathe with it.



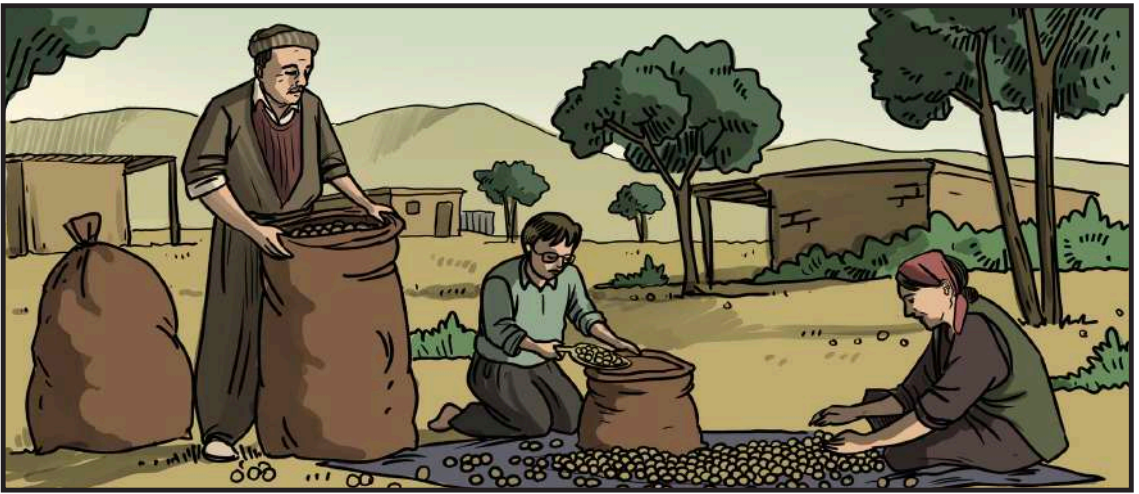
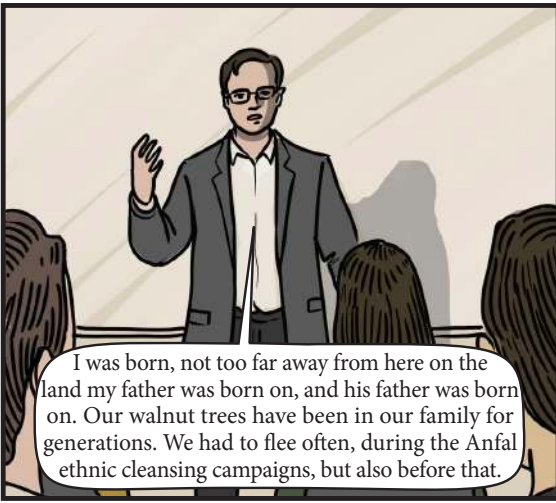
When the land is hurt – we all hurt with it, when the earth is burnt and thirsty, we suffer beside it.



I want to tell you my story, I want you to know how I can do this work, to fight for our people and our land.







When I was younger, it was my job to tend to the goats. Every morning at sunrise, I took them out to the mountains. We followed the same paths each day, alternating the paths at different times of year. I knew where all their favorite places were. I spent all my time out in the mountains, caring for them.





Each season I took them out and every day I cared for them. When I started to get older - I noticed subtle changes in the land. We couldn't find water in the places we were expecting to during the summer, sometimes there was very little grass for the herd - we had to walk further for them to get what they needed.

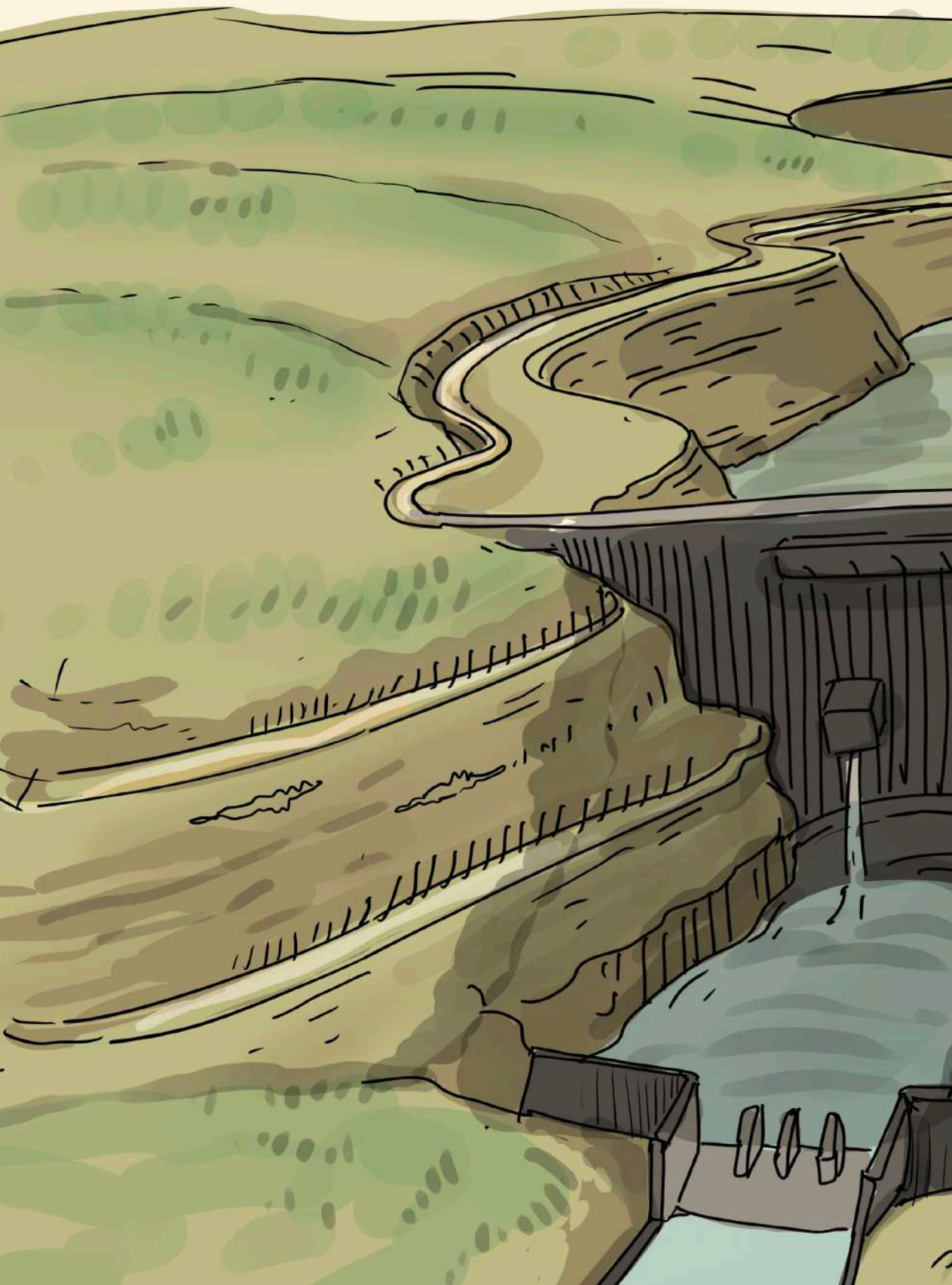


With all of these, difficulties – something worse was in store for us, I remember this day as though it is etched on my brain.

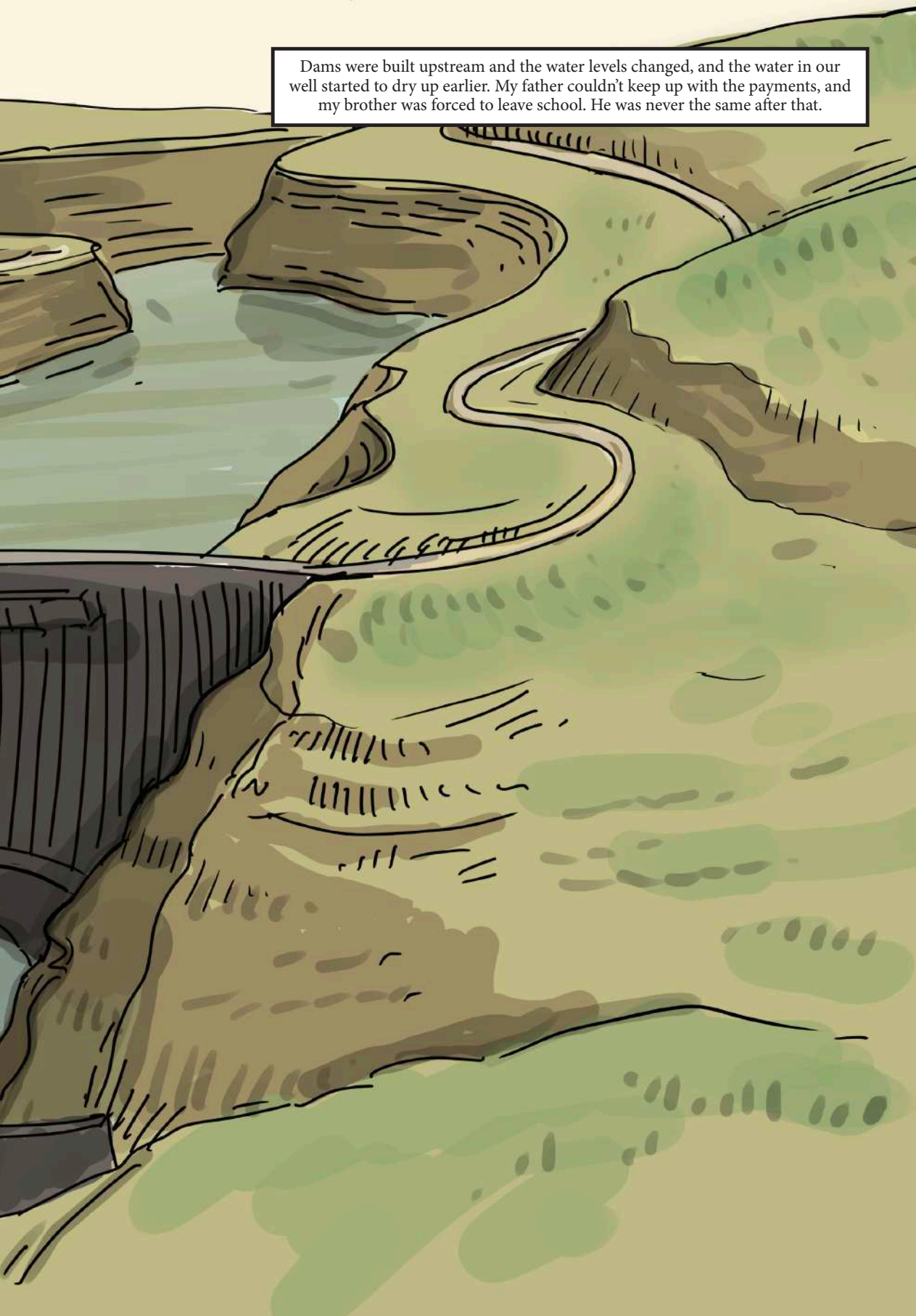


As the years went by, I started to notice more and more changes in the environment; our farm was producing less food.



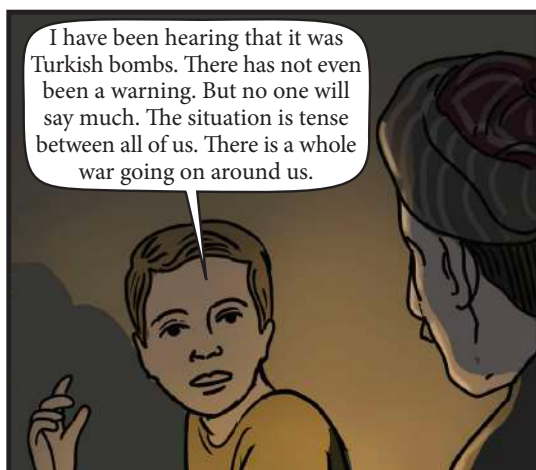


Dams were built upstream and the water levels changed, and the water in our well started to dry up earlier. My father couldn't keep up with the payments, and my brother was forced to leave school. He was never the same after that.

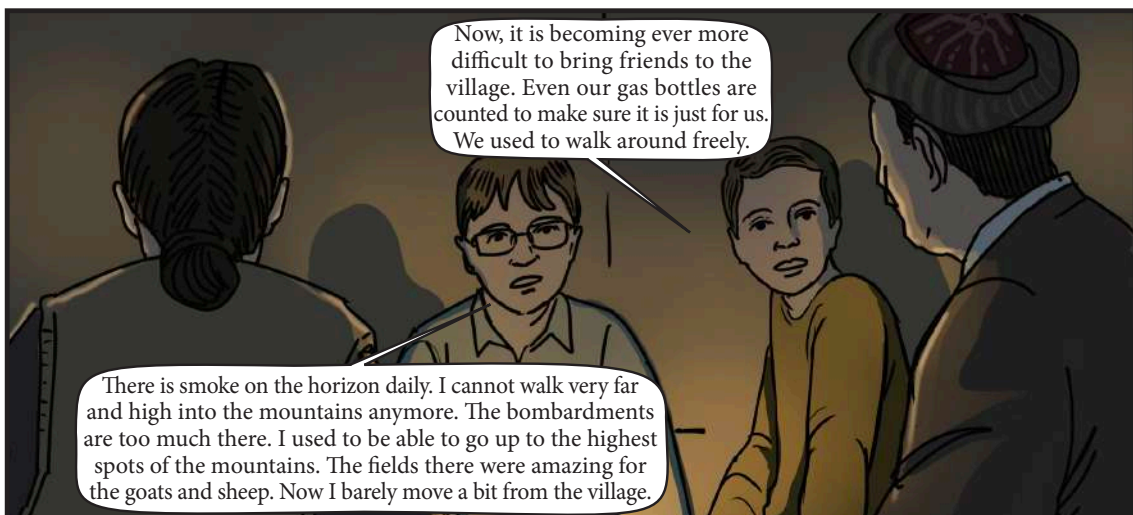




There are rumors that there were explosions west of us; three farms were burnt to the ground.




I have been hearing that it was Turkish bombs. There has not even been a warning. But no one will say much. The situation is tense between all of us. There is a whole war going on around us.

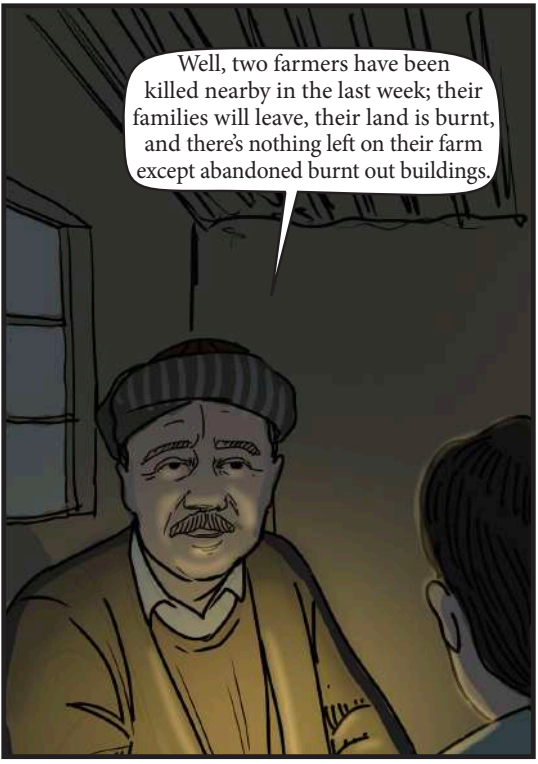


Now, it is becoming ever more difficult to bring friends to the village. Even our gas bottles are counted to make sure it is just for us. We used to walk around freely.


There is smoke on the horizon daily. I cannot walk very far and high into the mountains anymore. The bombardments are too much there. I used to be able to go up to the highest spots of the mountains. The fields there were amazing for the goats and sheep. Now I barely move a bit from the village.



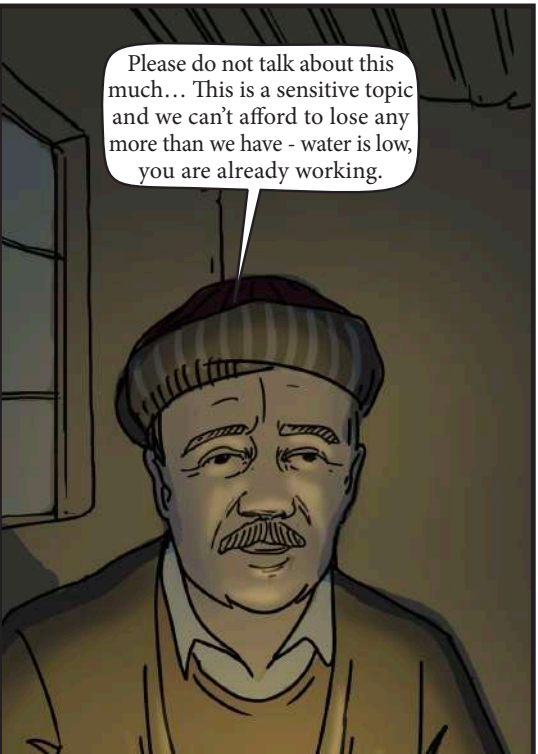
We have to stay close to the village. They are saying they will not bombard civilian areas.



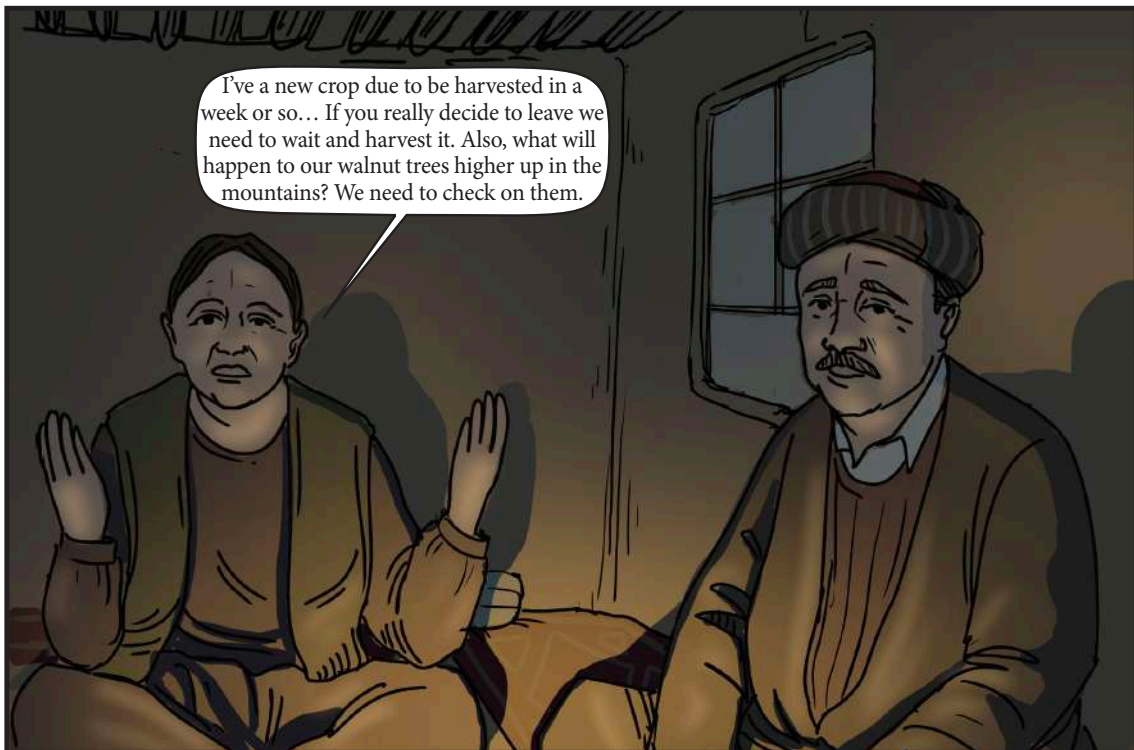
Well, two farmers have been killed nearby in the last week; their families will leave, their land is burnt, and there's nothing left on their farm except abandoned burnt out buildings.



No one will speak about it; no one cares for all this violence happening here.



Please do not talk about this much... This is a sensitive topic and we can't afford to lose any more than we have - water is low, you are already working.



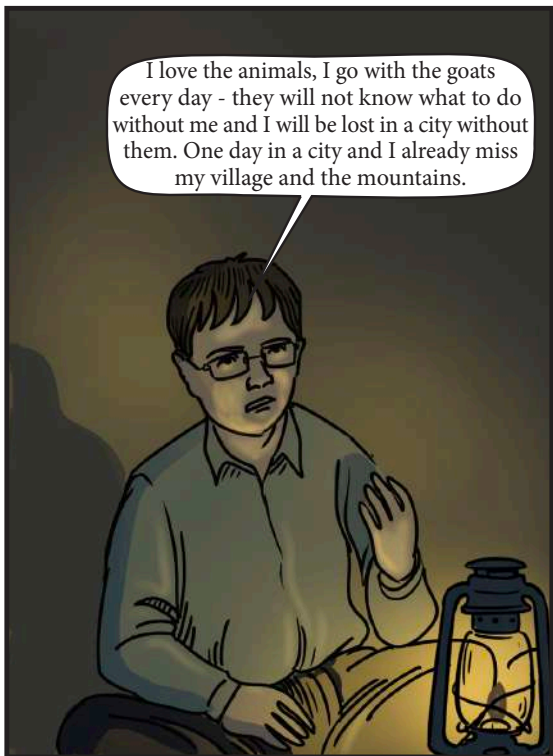
I've a new crop due to be harvested in a week or so... If you really decide to leave we need to wait and harvest it. Also, what will happen to our walnut trees higher up in the mountains? We need to check on them.



We should leave but the problem is where to? There is nowhere else to go to. In the city you need a good salary... This is our land. We have throughout all these wars managed to stay here.



We cannot leave our land!
I left school – as long as we
can stay I can work so we have
water to feed our trees.



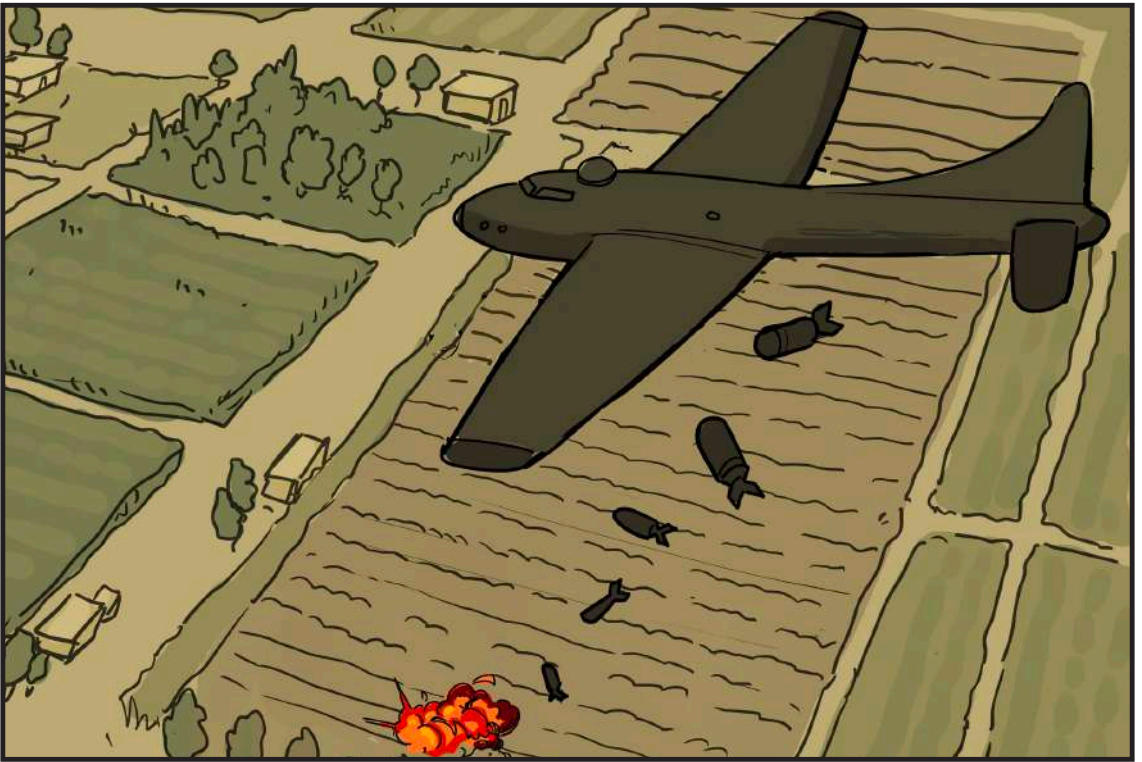
I love the animals, I go with the goats
every day - they will not know what to do
without me and I will be lost in a city without
them. One day in a city and I already miss
my village and the mountains.



So, it is decided, we stay and
make the best of things.


This was the beginning of my transformation - I come from a farming family. I love my area and it deeply hurts to see all these bombardments from Turkey... But we also got used to it... Nobody really cared about us and we had to inform and support ourselves in the villages to know where other bombings would be happening.





One day, shortly after this I came home to find my mother in tears.



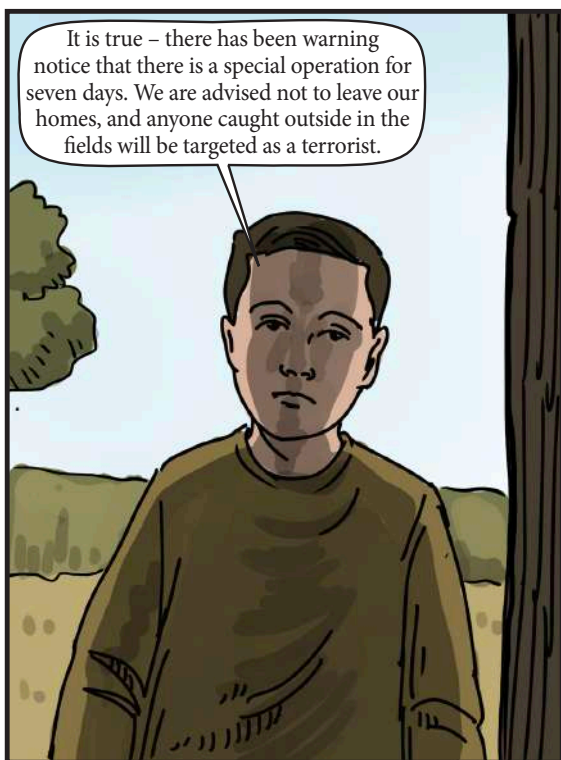
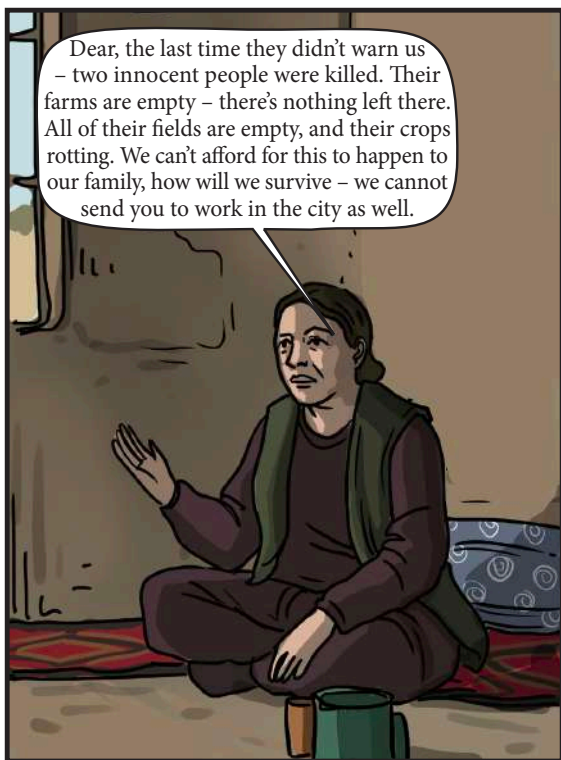


Mama! What's wrong,
why are you crying when
the harvest is almost ready,
we have work to do?

This can't be true; they can't
remove us from our own land!
We need to start the harvest so
that the fruits do not spoil!



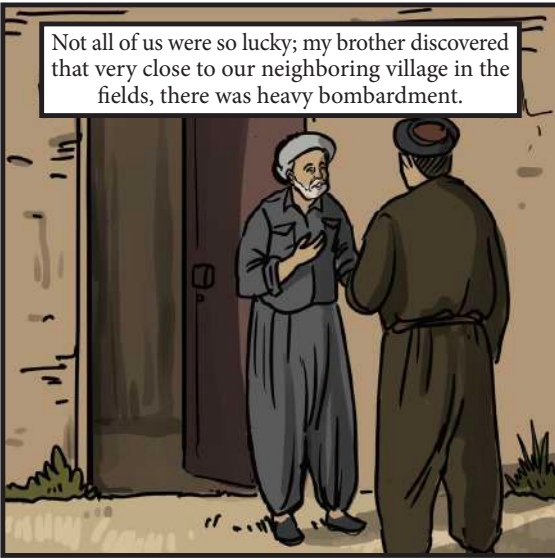
We are forbidden to go into the fields for one week; there is some kind of warning from the government that there will be a special operation in our area and we must stay home. I heard from our neighbor this morning; we are waiting for your brother to return from Dohuk with news.







Not all of us were so lucky; my brother discovered that very close to our neighboring village in the fields, there was heavy bombardment.



A child was killed there, and the family decided to leave. Our village would soon be one of the last standing in the region.



I realized the importance of staying in the village - the ability to know how to plant our ancient seeds, and how to grow them. How to tend to the soil and feed the village and others. The sheep and animals were waiting for me - they were hungry... Whatever people in the city say, our work is amongst the most sacred work. I will try my best to take care of our land as it has taken care of me.





Yes, but what about all this violence? Nobody cares if we die here!



We care and the village cares; and we have to all care and support each other. There have been many wars before this one here. And people always resisted. Continuing to grow our food is our resistance.



Yes! That is great. We have to find ways to keep producing our own food and not rely on imports. You know that many of the imports that enter Kurdistan have been produced with pesticides, and that there is often still pesticide residues in those foods. A lot of toxins are imported to us. So learning how to grow our own food and deciding how we want to do that is so important to be able to live on our land freely.



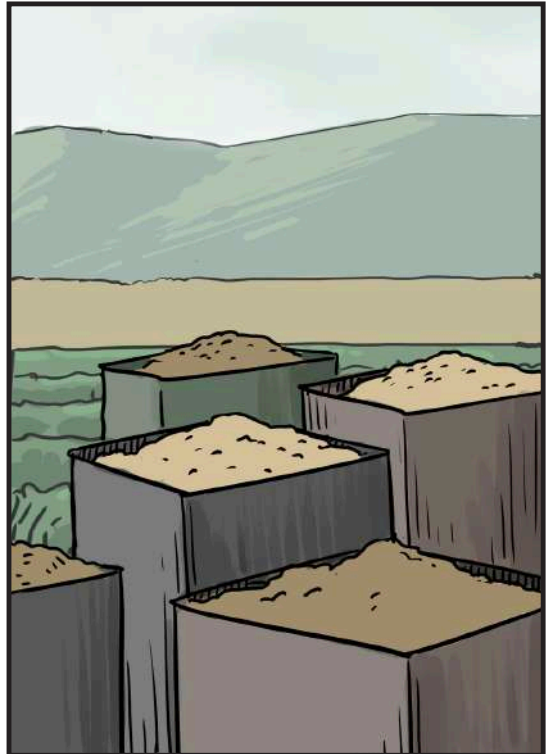
You see, we only need to take small everyday steps to move forward.



My family held onto their land and harvested on time for one week, my mother's eyes were so bright, and she fought with all her heart to keep her crops. We still lost some, but we stood firm.



I started collecting seeds and documenting the collection processes on social media – now we have a network of 50 Iraqi farmers documenting seed collection and replacing some of what was lost.

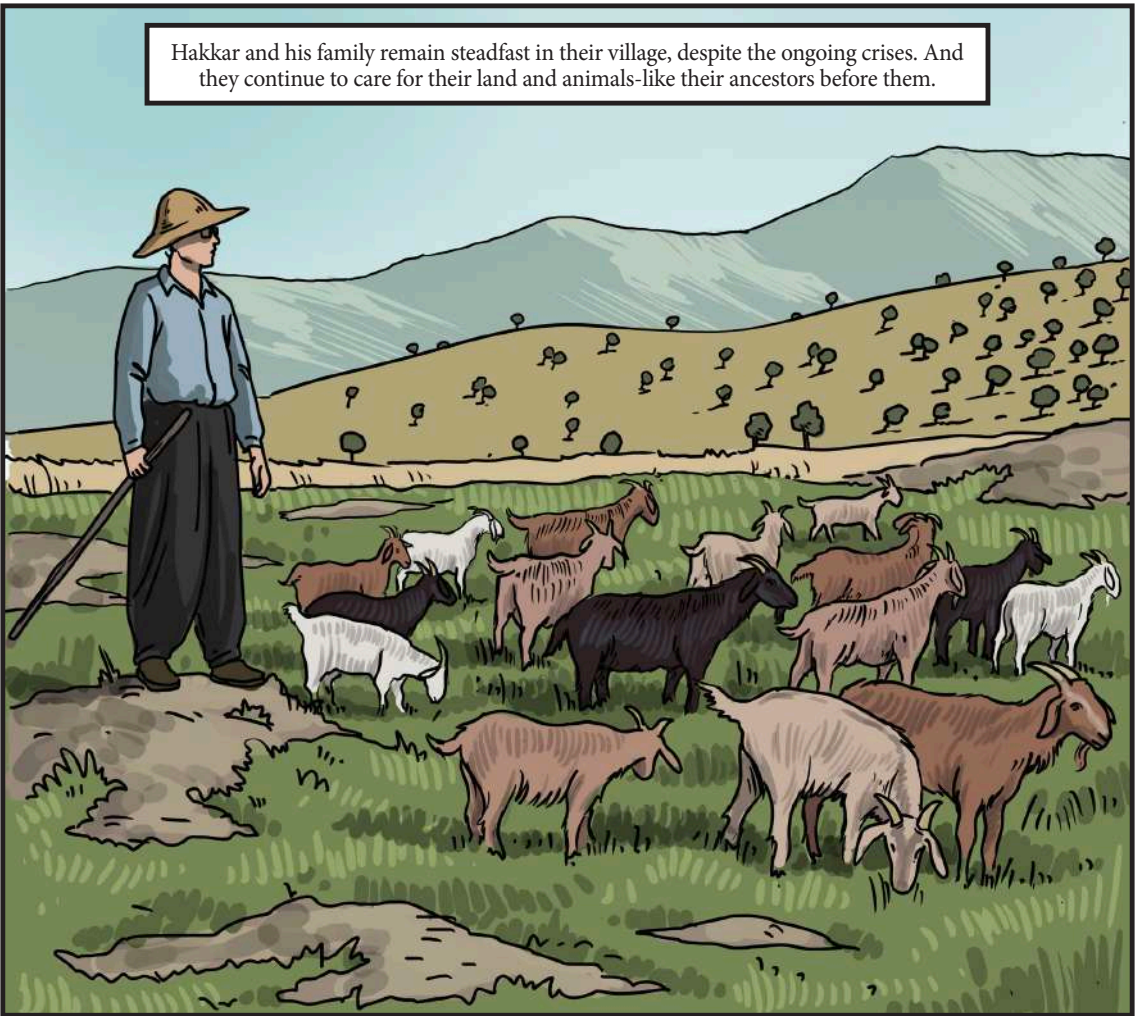


My family also lost and some of our land has been bombed. Despite these difficult circumstances, we have built a community and network of people who care - and who collect our ancient seeds, and who plant them without depending on pesticides; who are even able to feed themselves and make this public.





Hakkar and his family remain steadfast in their village, despite the ongoing crises. And they continue to care for their land and animals-like their ancestors before them.



At the end of Hakkar's passionate presentation, the participating youth from the city begin discussing their plans for a field-trip to the village to support his community and their cause.





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