NANA KOBINA GYAN I

THE KING WHO WOULD NOT BOW



MUSEUM ELMINA

A True Story. Gold Coast. 1872–1894.

PROLOGUE

Elmina Castle was built by the Portuguese in 1482, and for the centuries that followed the people of Elmina traded with the Portuguese and the Dutch under terms their own kings had agreed. In April 1872 the Dutch transferred the castle and the town to the British in an arrangement made between the two governments. Nana Kobina Gyan I, who had been king since 1869, later stated that he had not been consulted. This is the story of what he did next, what it cost him, and what happened to the town in June 1873.

ABOUT THIS WORK

This comic is based on historical accounts and archival records, including the written record of what the king said in the Council Chamber on 12 March 1873, which is quoted as it survives. Where the records are silent we have used artistic licence. Scenes, settings and expressions are imagined, characters are drawn from limited descriptions, and apart from the king’s recorded words the dialogue is dramatised. The dates, events and outcomes follow the historical record.

Museum Elmina made this work to retell Elmina’s silenced histories in a form that is easy to read and easy to remember, and to put them within reach of the public.

“The governor offered me as a bribe a large sum of money to let that transfer go on smoothly and peacefully. I refused the bribe because had I taken it, the chiefs would have turned around on me afterwards and said I sold the country for money.”

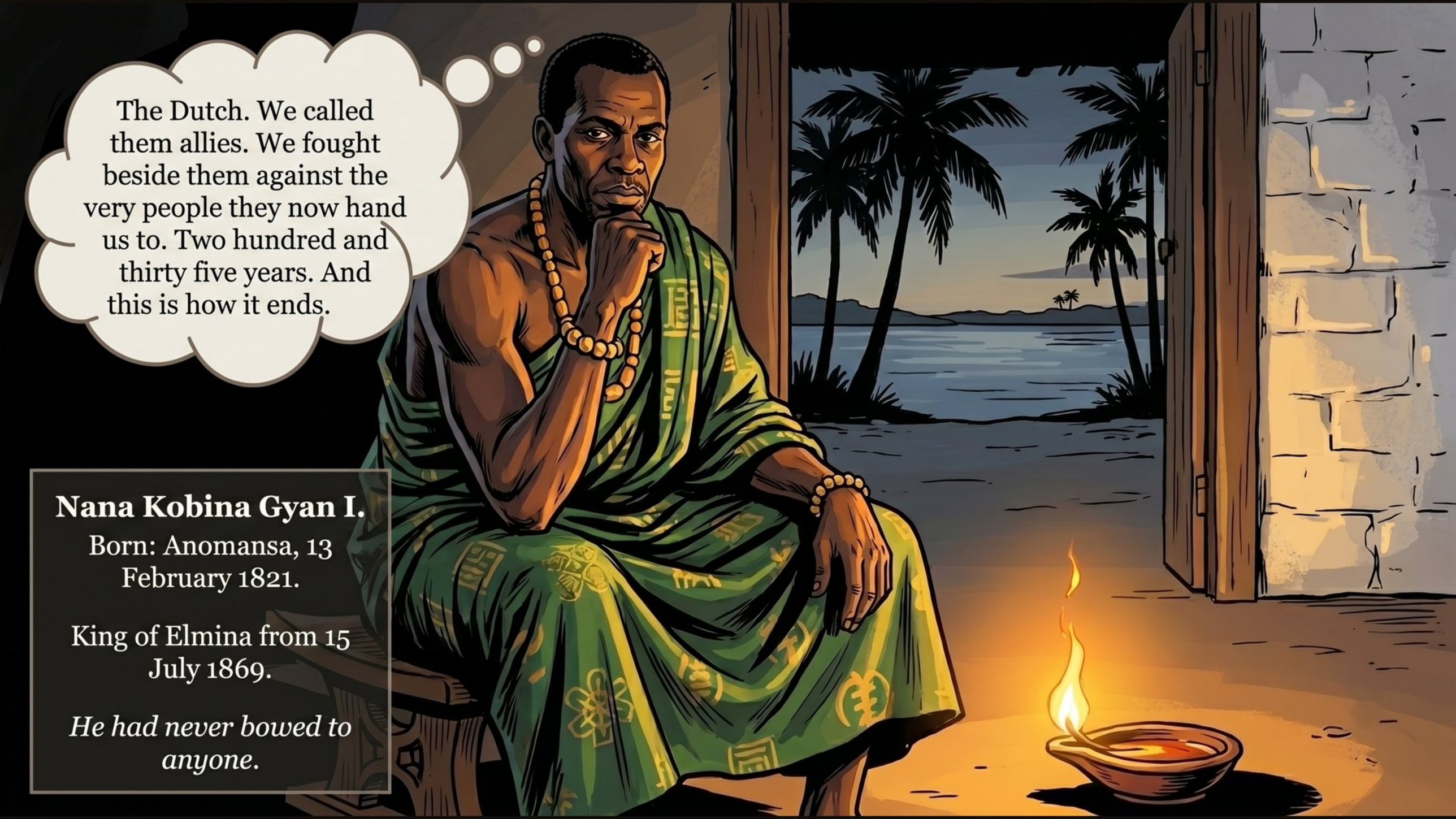
NANA KOBINA GYAN I

Elmina Castle, 12 March 1873

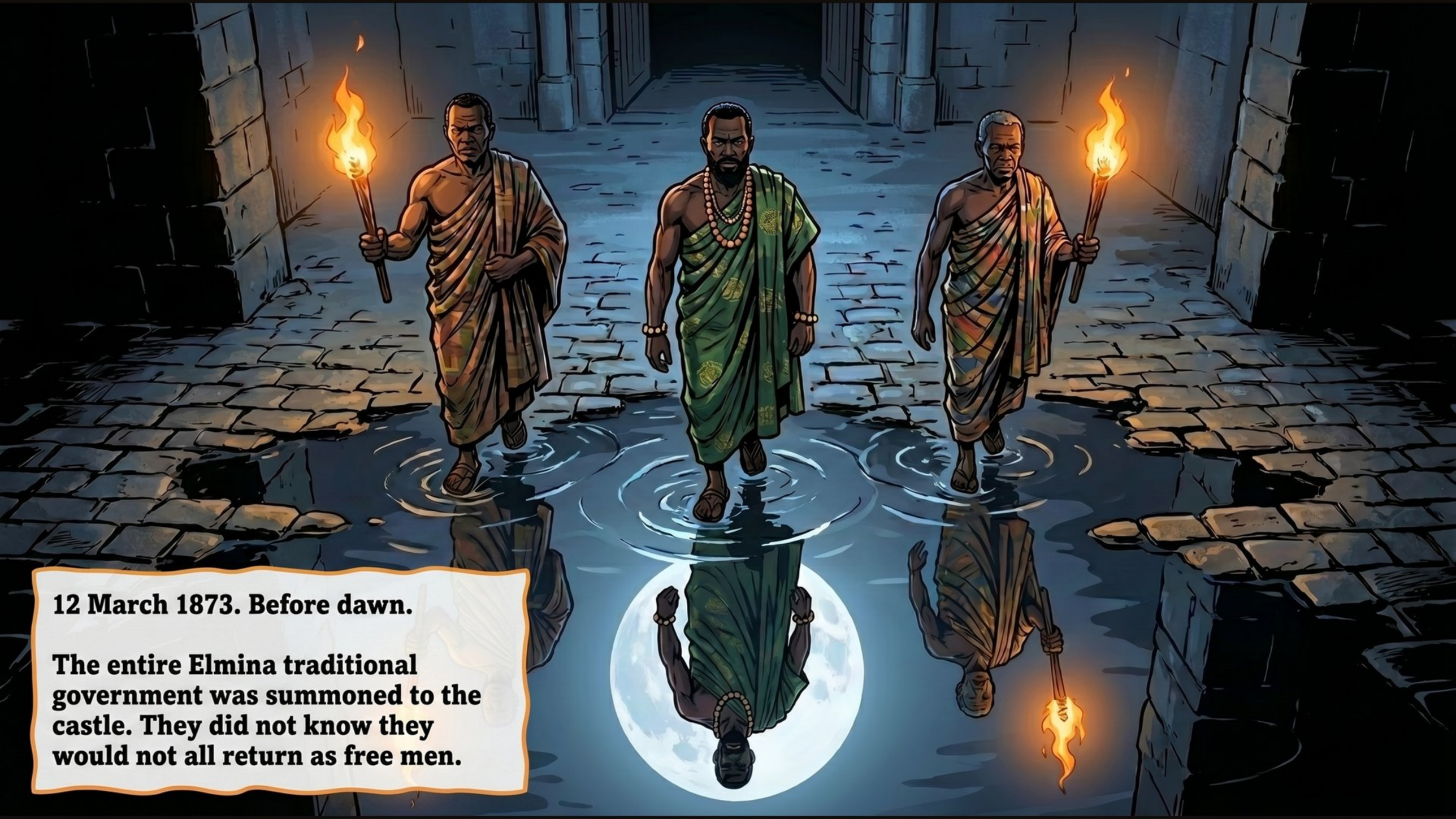

ANOMANSA. EDINA. ELMINA.
Gold Coast, West Africa. 1872.
A city of over 12,000 people.


Elmina Castle built in 1482 by the Portuguese.
Captured by the Dutch in 1637.
For 235 years the Dutch and the people
of Elmina built one of the most
prosperous trading cities on the
West African coast.
Until one afternoon in 1872.


They don't need to.
They will not understand.
TREATY
ELMINA
GOLD COAST
6 April 1872. The Dutch signed 235 years to the British. One afternoon. One signature. Nobody in Elmina was asked.


The Dutch. We called them allies. We fought beside them against the very people they now hand us to. Two hundred and thirty five years. And this is how it ends.
Nana Kobina Gyan I.
Born: Anomansa, 13 February 1821.
King of Elmina from 15 July 1869.
He had never bowed to anyone.


Governor Hennessy arrived in Elmina in April 1872 to formalise the British takeover. The flag he handed Kobina Gyan was not a gift, it was a test of submission.
A gift, Your Highness. A sign of our friendship.
He never raised it. He never flew it. He hid it under his bed. And there it stayed.


12 March 1873. Before dawn.
The entire Elmina traditional government was summoned to the castle. They did not know they would not all return as free men.


Why summon us at this hour? The town is still sleeping.
A man who summons you before dawn does not want the town to see.
That alone tells us everything.


Sign the pledge. Accept British protection. This is not a request.
The castle belonged to the Dutch. The people of Elmina are freemen. We are no slaves for anyone to compel.

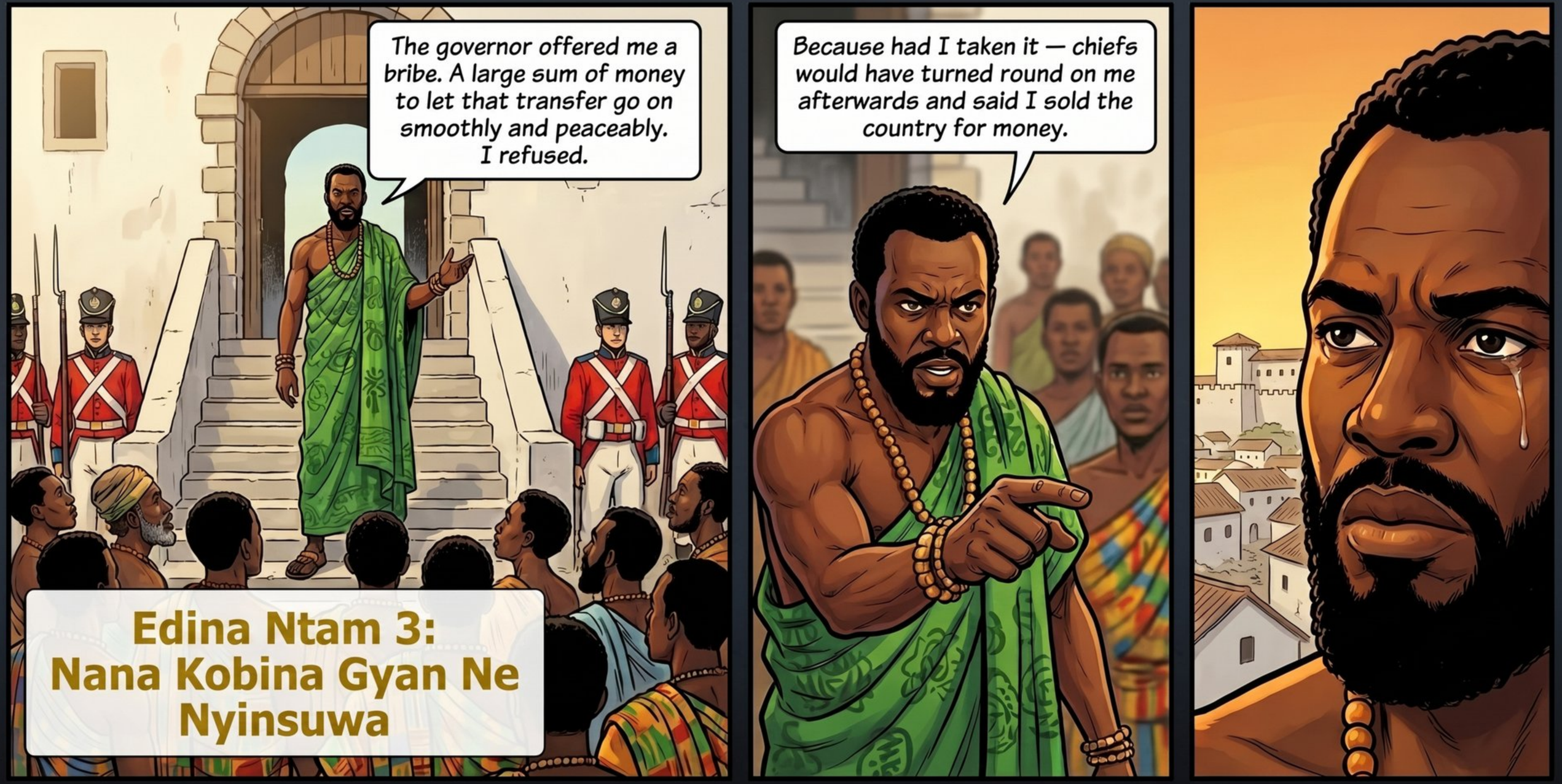

I AM NOT AFRAID OF YOUR POWER. YOU MAY HANG ME IF I WILL NOT SIGN ANY PAPER.
We have taken oath to oppose the English coming to Elmina. That oath is not broken.


SEIZE HIM!!!

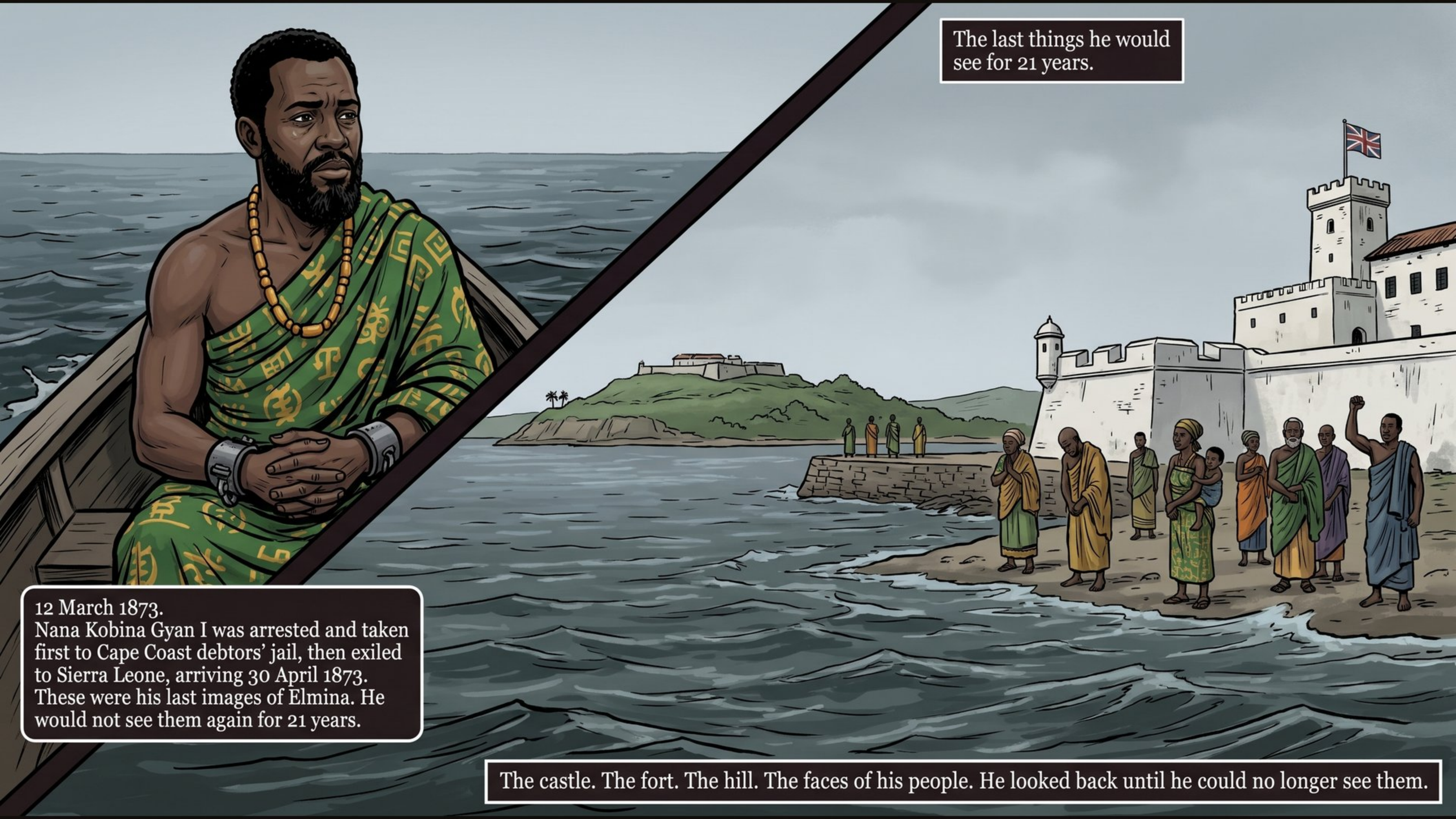

Without trial. Without charges.
They were arrested.


12 March 1873. Night.
He needs to address his people, Harley. The Asantes are not far. Without him holding them back — they will riot.
He can speak to them in the morning. Then he goes to Sierra Leone.
Same night. Below.

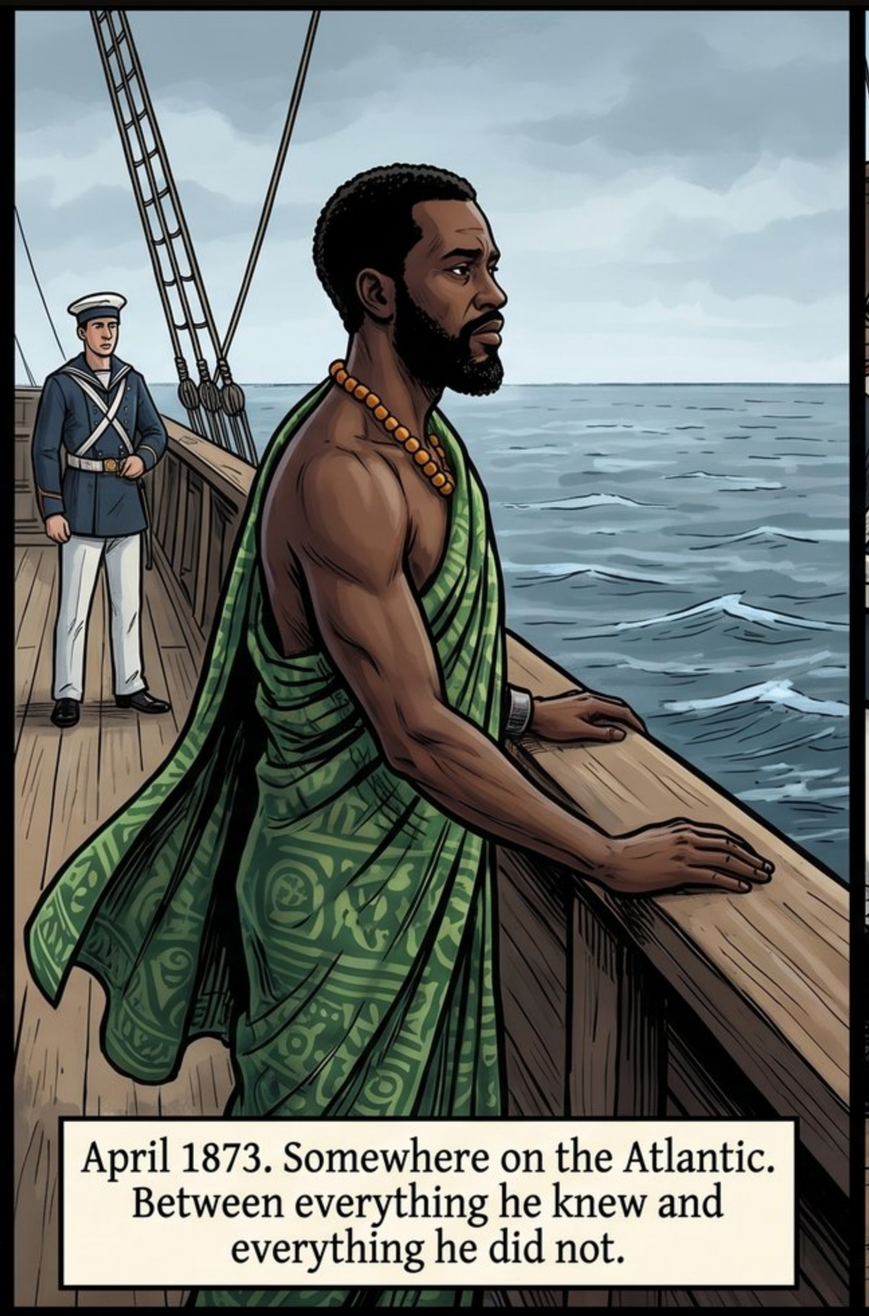

13 March 1873. Dawn.
The *HMS Seagull* waited in the bay.
RELEASE OUR KING NOW!!!
They have no right.
WE WANT OUR KING BACK!!!
12,000 people. One king. A wall of British steel between them.



By custom, a king does not cry in public. He cried the day they took him. The Edina people swore the ***Third*** *Ntam (Oath) in his memory.*
'The Tears of Nana Kobina Gyan I' That oath is kept in Elmina to this day.


The last things he would see for 21 years.
12 March 1873.
Nana Kobina Gyan I was arrested and taken first to Cape Coast debtors' jail, then exiled to Sierra Leone, arriving 30 April 1873. These were his last images of Elmina. He would not see them again for 21 years.
The castle. The fort. The hill. The faces of his people. He looked back until he could no longer see them.







The journey from king to exile. 48 days. Three places. One man who never stopped being a king.


The hills above Elmina.
The Asante garrison. They were already close enough to see the smoke from the town.
Our spy in Cape Coast confirms it. The king has been moved. Cape Coast to Sierra Leone.

Inside the command tent.
Bantamahene General Amankwatia.
June 1873.

The British have declared martial law in Elmina. Our window is closing.

We need to be strategic. These British, we cannot trust them. They move move like a net, not like a spear.

Elmina Castle

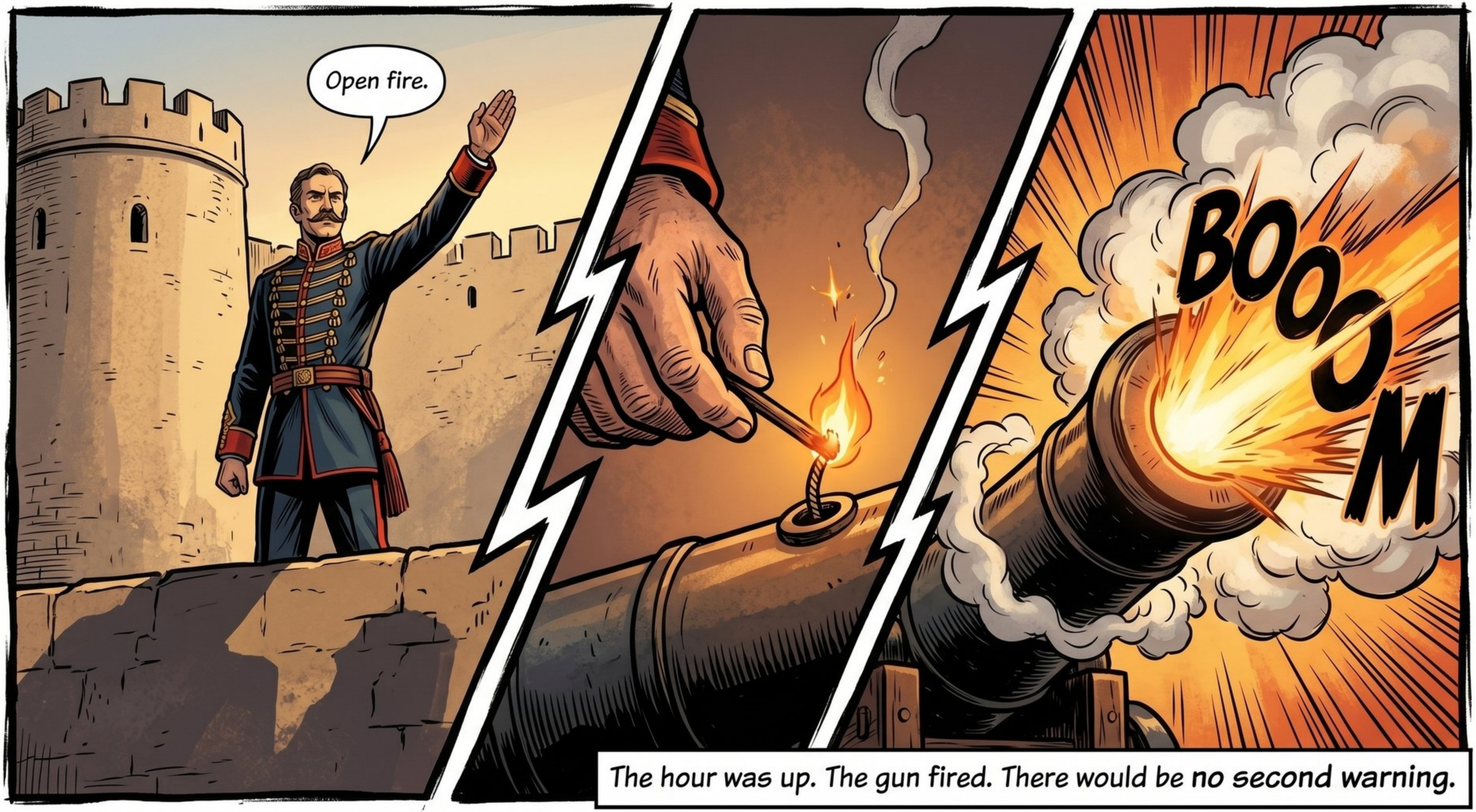
British positions


ELMINA
We strike hardest from the ocean and the river. They won't be able to hold both fronts.
And the Asante will counter. They always do.
Let them come. We'll be waiting.
ELMINA
N
12 June 1873 the night before. The plan was already set.


They say Friday the 13th is an unlucky day. In Elmina, it became the day verything changed. By mid morning, the British ships were already lined up off the coast, guns trained on the town. The British would later claim the people had been warned, that everyone had time to move into the castle. But Elmina was home to over 12,000 people. Could the castle really have held them all?




13 JUNE 1673


Open fire.
BOOOM
The hour was up. The gun fired. There would be no second warning.



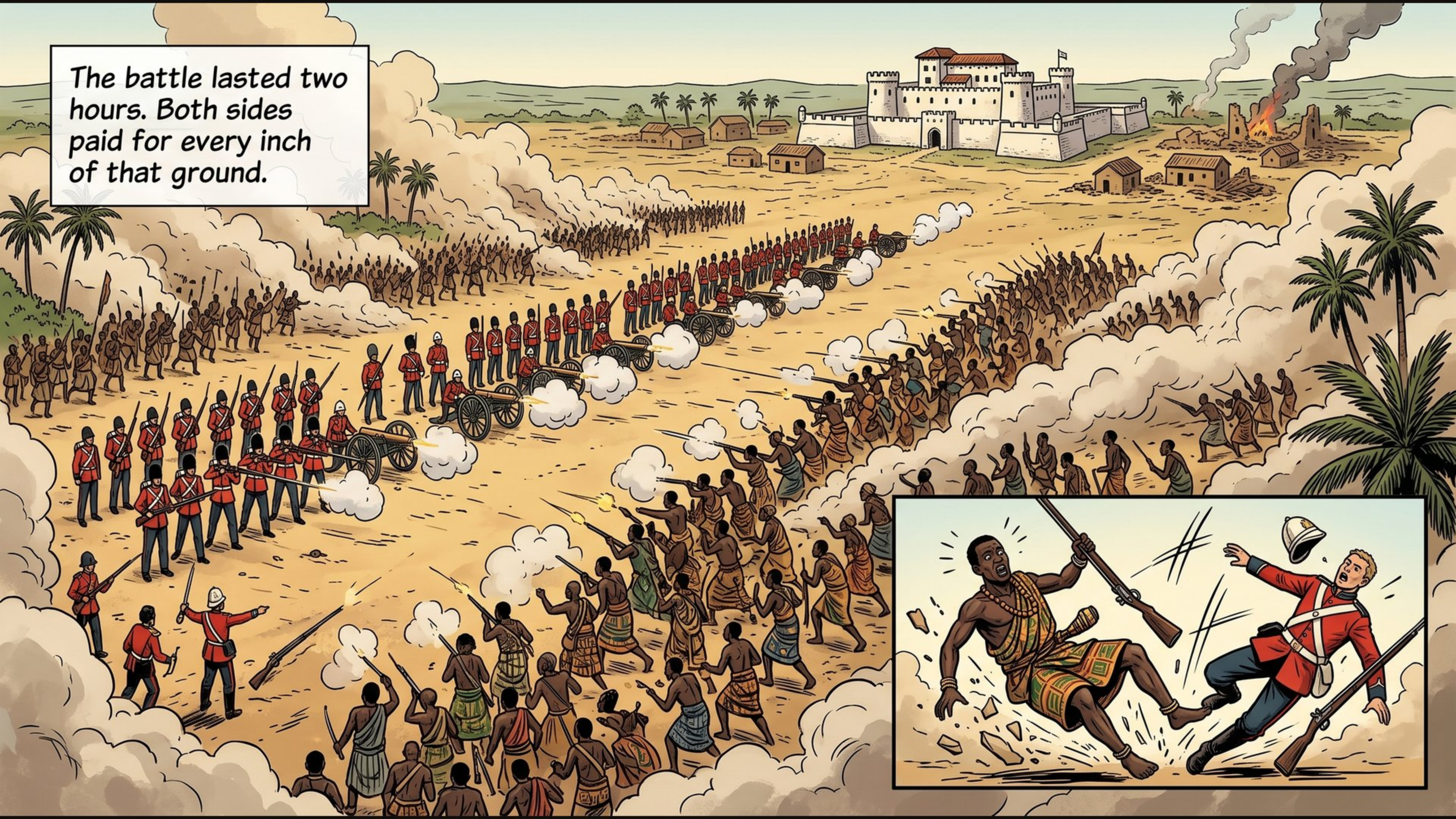
13 June 1873, the ancestral home of Edinaman (Elmina) was razed to the ground, never to be seen again. This act gave rise to the Fourth Ntam (Oath) : Edinaman Bɔ, the bombardment of Edina (Elmina), still kept to this day. A once prosperous town of 12,000 reduced to a British colonial outpost.


By the time the smoke began to settle, there was nothing left to save.


It's time we dealt with the Asante.
They're already on the march. Our men are waiting.
I'll lead the charge.
The smoke had barely settled before the next threat arrived.
@GovernorHarley

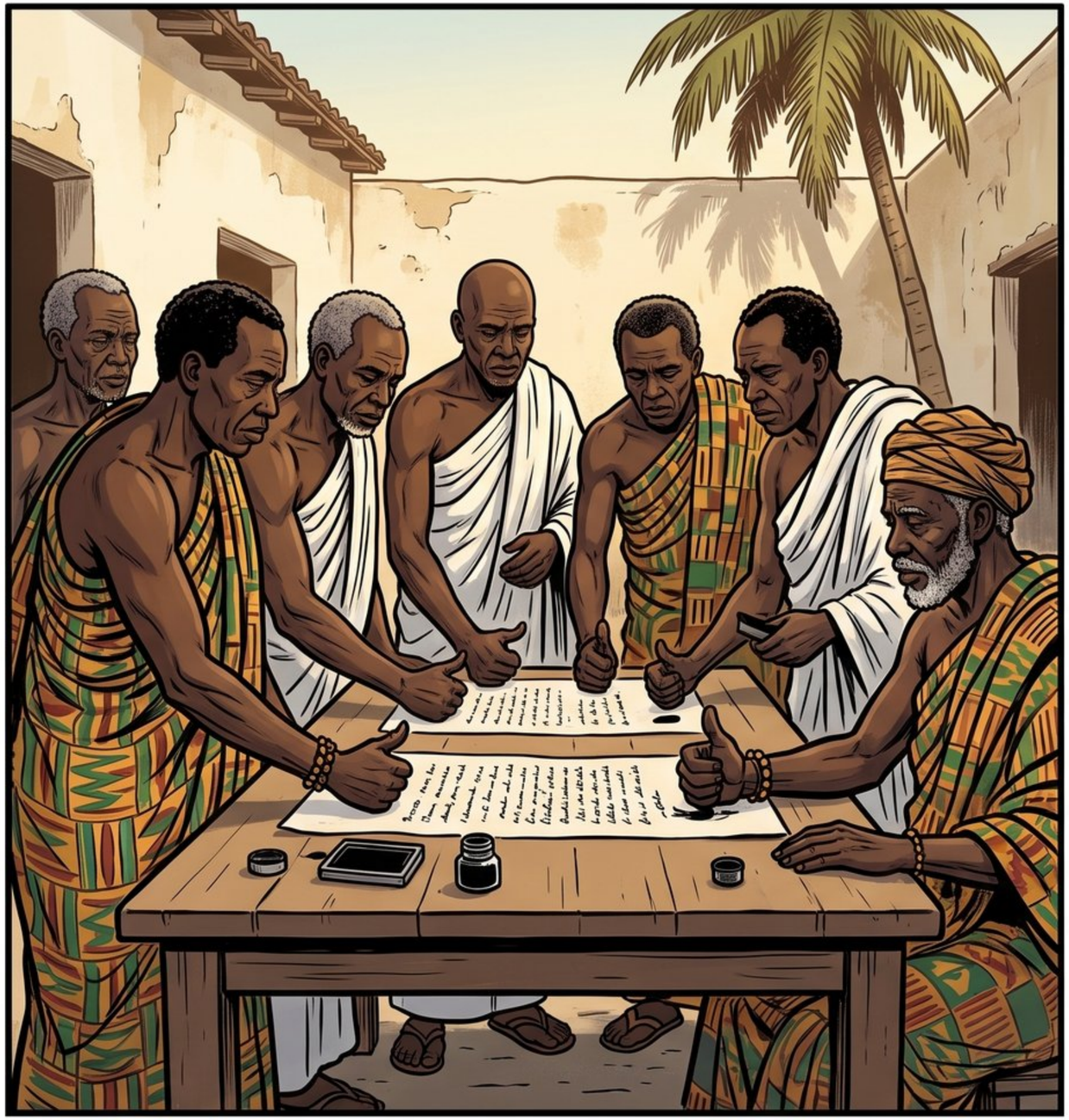

Hold the line! Fire by volley make every round count!
13 June 1873.
The bombardment came at midday.
The Asante struck that afternoon.


Hold this line whatever it costs!
Forward! Take back what is ours!
Two commanders. Two armies.
One city about to be caught between them.


The battle lasted two hours. Both sides paid for every inch of that ground.


Fall back! Into the bush, fall back!
They're breaking.
Two hours, that was all it took.

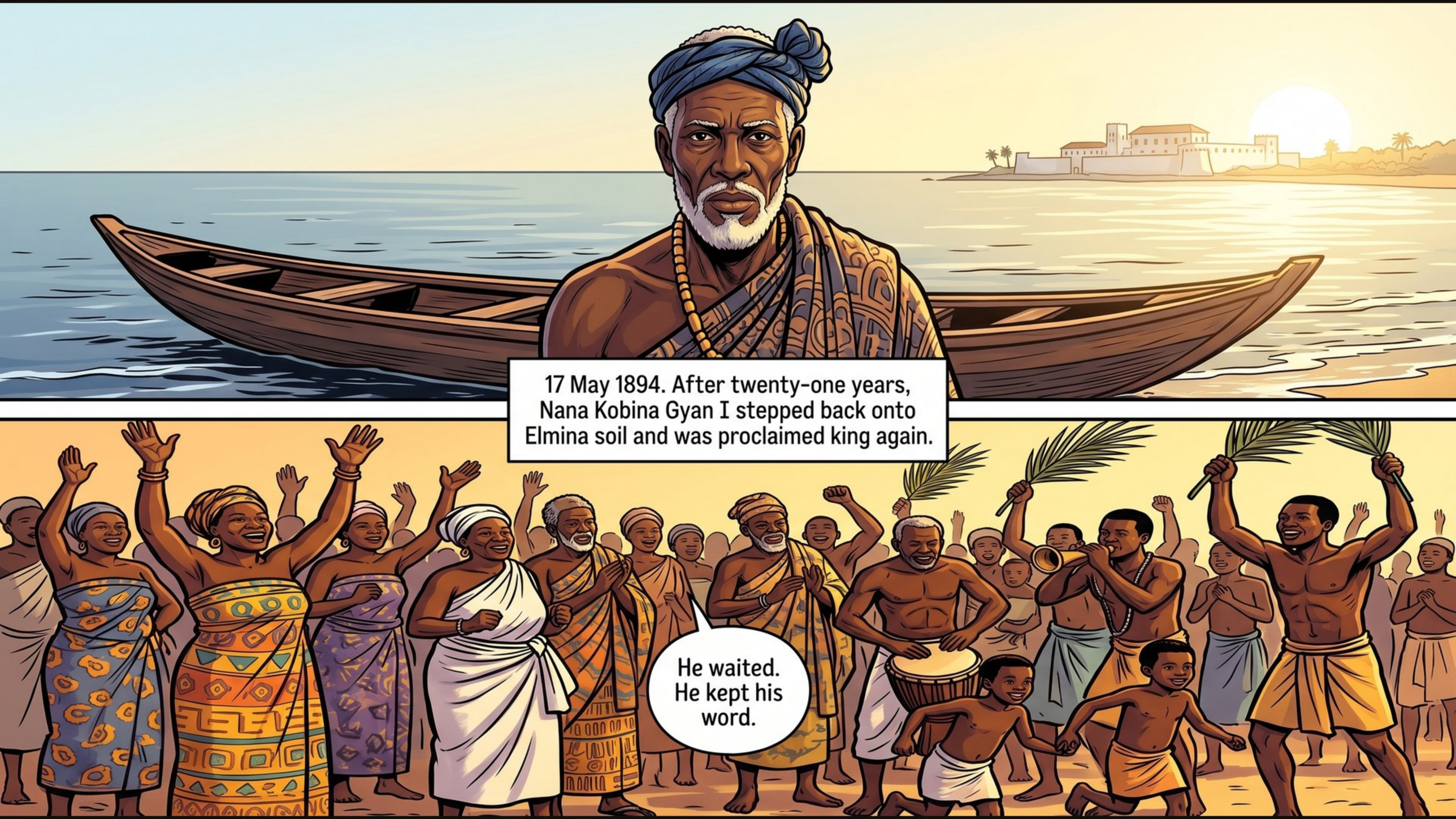

My beloved Edinaman, what has become of you?
Meanwhile, over 1,300 km away in Freetown, the king sits lamenting his town, after whispers among the colonial staff of the Asante army's defeat at Elmina.





1877. Four years into the exile, the people of Elmina petitioned for the return of their king. The British agreed on one condition, that he come home as a private citizen. He refused, because he had been exiled as a king, and the exile lasted another 17 years.


1894. Twenty-one years after the arrest, the people of Elmina petitioned again for the return of their king. The District Commmissioner, Hendrik Vroom, took their case to the colonial government.
The people have suffered long enough. The king is 73 now, and frail.
We do not want another uprising. Make arrangements for the return of the king.


17 May 1894. After twenty-one years, Nana Kobina Gyan I stepped back onto Elmina soil and was proclaimed king again.
He waited. He kept his word.


1894. Nana Kobina Gyan I stood on the ground where the old town of Elmina once stood, and could hardly believe what had become of his ancestral home.


Nana Kobina Gyan I reigned for less than two years after his return. He died on 12 March 1896, aged 75, and was buried in the Dutch Cemetery, Elmina.

Nana Kobina Gyan I is remembered in Elmina today. A public square bears his name in recognition of his bravery and steadfastness against colonial rule, and it forms part of the town’s tangible cultural heritage.

“I am not afraid of your power. You may hang me if you like. I will not sign any paper. I and some of the people of Elmina have taken oath to oppose the English government from coming to Elmina and we have not broken that oath yet.”

NANA KOBINA GYAN I

Elmina Castle, 12 March 1873