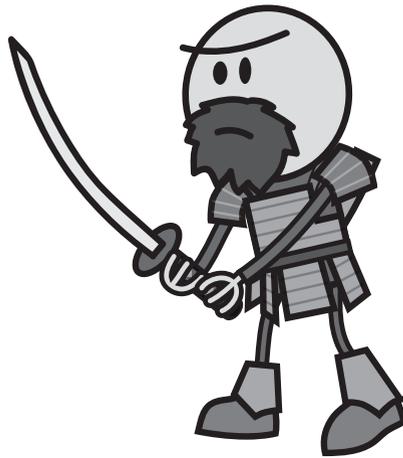


The
Order of the **Stick**[™]

presents

How the Paladin Got His Scar

starring O-Chul[™]



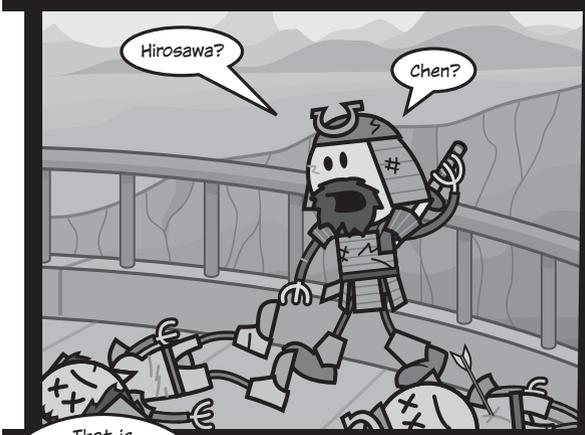
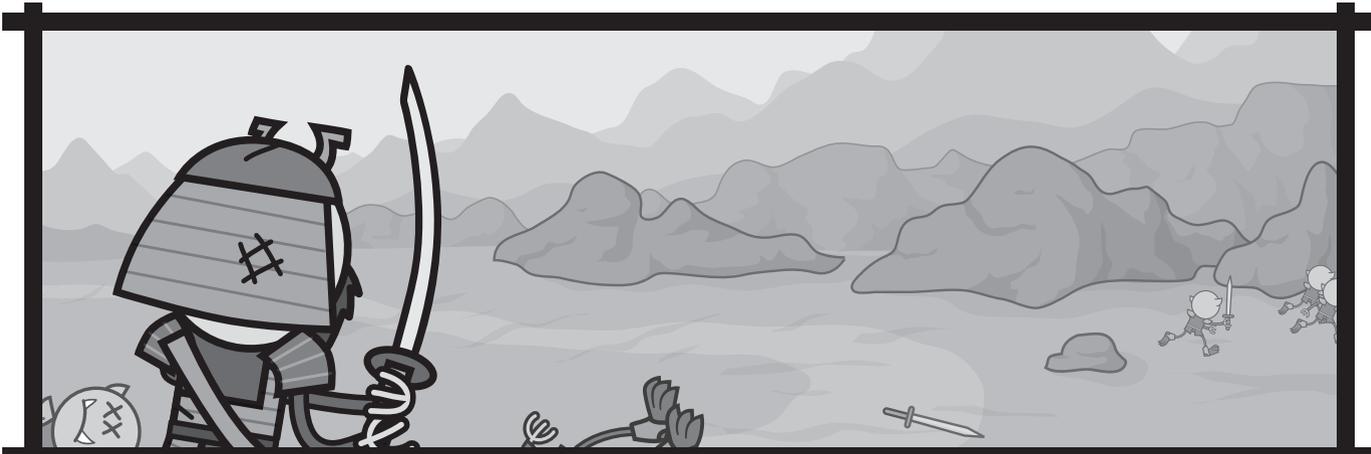
by Rich Burlew

GIANT in
the
PLAYGROUND[™]

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RETREAT!



Hirosawa?

Chen?



Nmm...

Captain...

Nguyen!



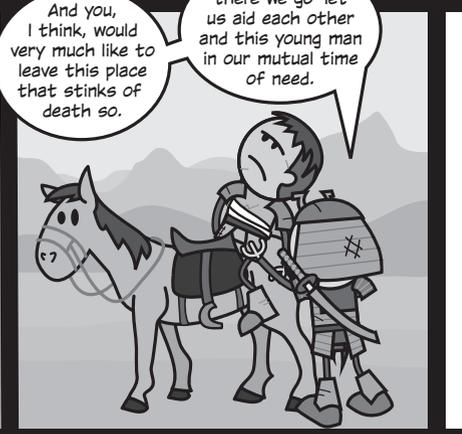
That is the best I can do with your wounds. Let us get you back to the village.

Yes, sir.



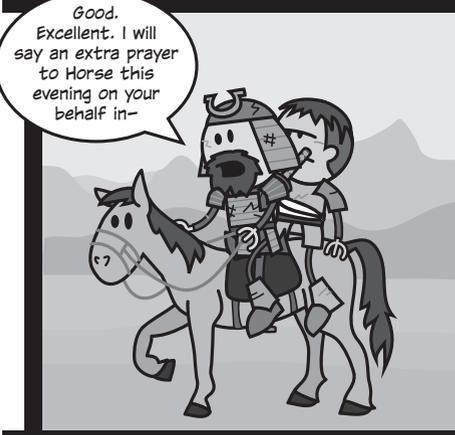
Hello, horse. I do not know which of my soldiers you called Master, but I have need of you-

-and he or she likely no longer does.



And you, I think, would very much like to leave this place that stinks of death so.

Let us- there we go-let us aid each other and this young man in our mutual time of need.



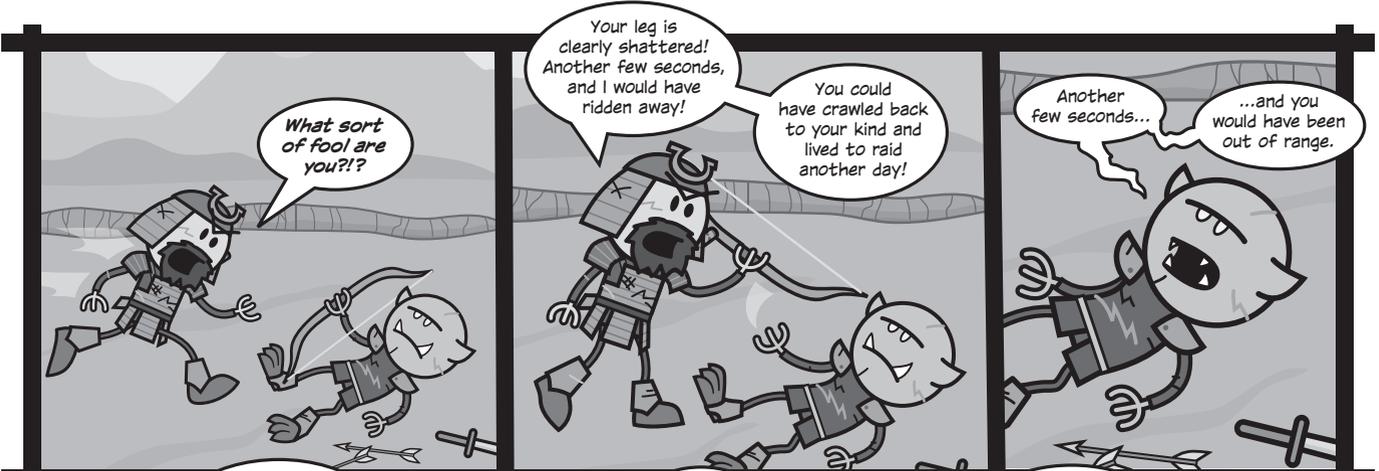
Good. Excellent. I will say an extra prayer to Horse this evening on your behalf in-



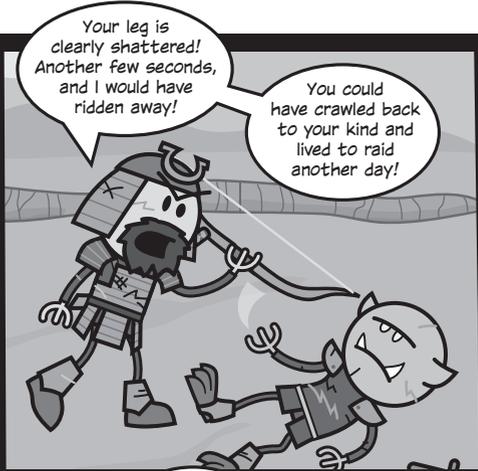
AAANGHH!

thunk!





What sort of fool are you?!?



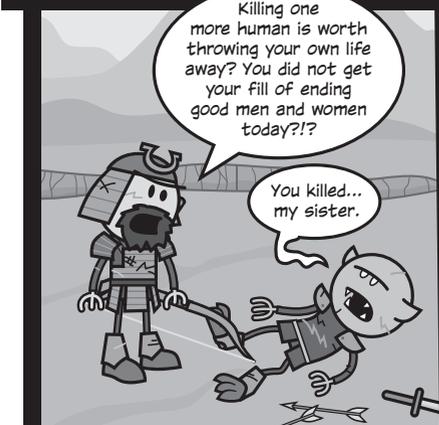
Your leg is clearly shattered! Another few seconds, and I would have ridden away!

You could have crawled back to your kind and lived to raid another day!



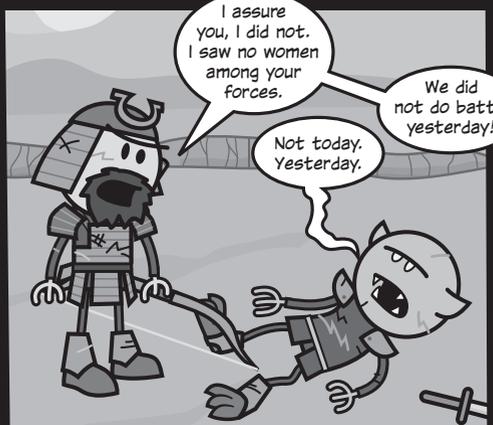
Another few seconds...

...and you would have been out of range.



Killing one more human is worth throwing your own life away? You did not get your fill of ending good men and women today?!?

You killed... my sister.



I assure you, I did not. I saw no women among your forces.

Not today. Yesterday.

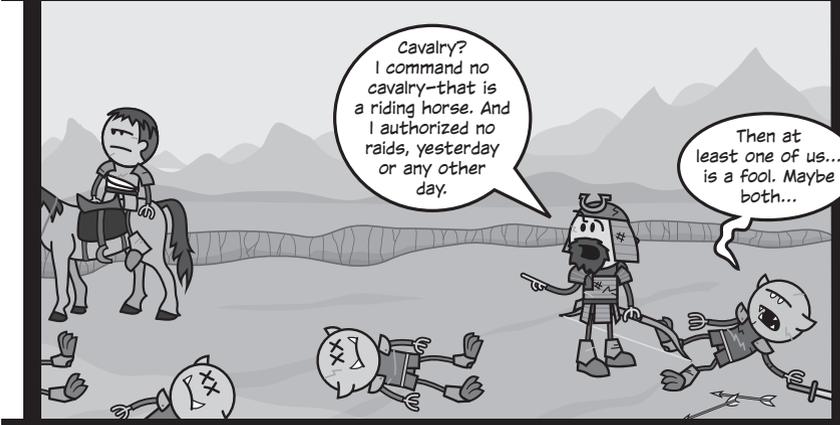
We did not do battle yesterday!



You are the warchief here. Your cavalry raided our village.

Took no prisoners. You are responsible.

Yesterday.

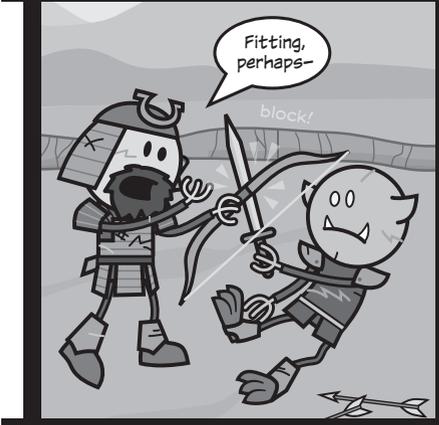


Cavalry? I command no cavalry—that is a riding horse. And I authorized no raids, yesterday or any other day.

Then at least one of us... is a fool. Maybe both...



Fitting that we should die together!

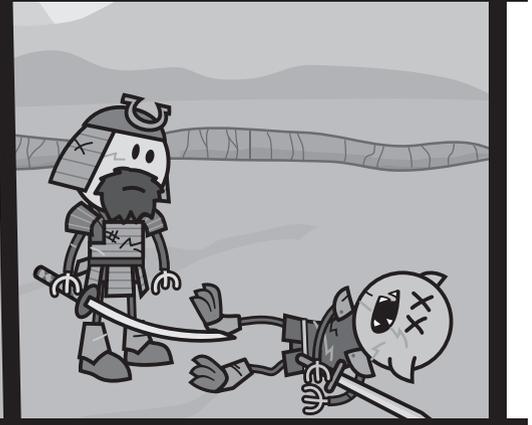


Fitting, perhaps-



-but not to be.

GLASH!



block!

Come out!

The battle has ended, and this man requires a healer!

Do you hear me?

He has put himself in the path of a sword for you! Show yourself and tend to his wounds!

Here.

We will care for him.

...Zhou Bo?

Oh, hi, Captain O-Chul, sir. Fancy meeting you here.

Indeed, since I ordered you to stand alongside your brothers- and sisters- in-arms outside of the village.

Uh, yeah, I know. But I thought, "What if some of them have, like, magical flying stuff and they fly over the ravine and attack the villagers?"

Good. He has lost a great deal of blood. I bandaged him as well as I could, but-

And therefore you thought it best to guard them personally.

By hiding in the barn with them.

Exactly!

They needed close supervision.

I will leave such matters to the General.

The penalties for desertion start at whipping and end in prison. But I have neither the time nor the disposition for punishment now.

General Nhek is coming here?!?

No; we are going to her. We do not have the forces to protect the townsfolk, and we cannot leave them here to be slaughtered should the hobgoblins return.

Therefore, we will escort them to Blueriver.

Since you have become so intimately acquainted with the villagers and their hiding places, round them up and prepare them to march.

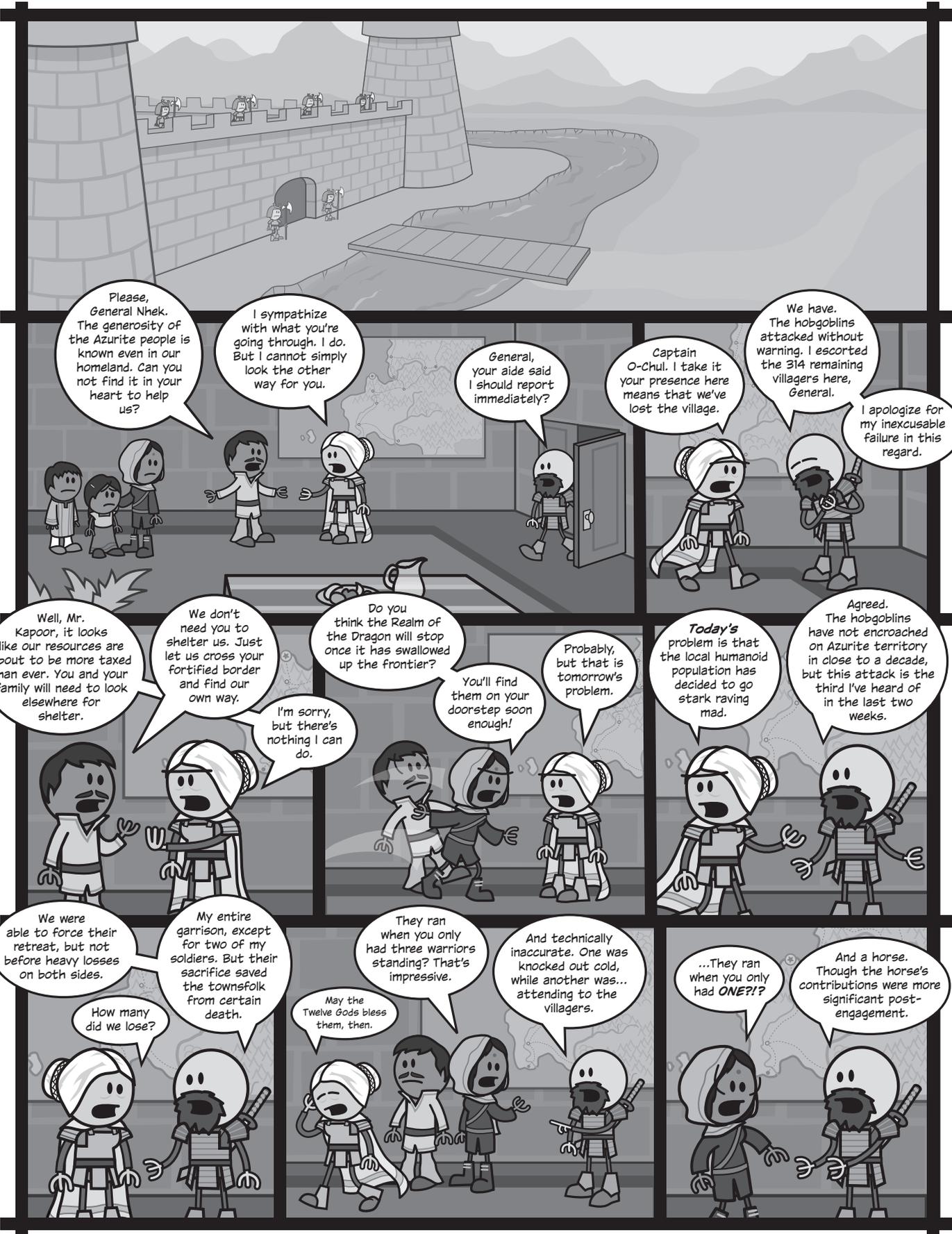
Yes, sir! Glad I was able to anticipate your needs in this manner, sir!

Captain...if the hobgoblins attack again...you know you can't count on her, right?

I know. But right at this exact moment, a live coward is more useful to me than a dead hero.

Or a half-dead hero who struggles to talk when he has several broken ribs.

...
Sorry, sir.



Please, General Nhek. The generosity of the Azurite people is known even in our homeland. Can you not find it in your heart to help us?

I sympathize with what you're going through. I do. But I cannot simply look the other way for you.

General, your aide said I should report immediately?

Captain O-Chul. I take it your presence here means that we've lost the village.

We have. The hobgoblins attacked without warning. I escorted the 314 remaining villagers here, General.

I apologize for my inexcusable failure in this regard.

Well, Mr. Kapoor, it looks like our resources are about to be more taxed than ever. You and your family will need to look elsewhere for shelter.

We don't need you to shelter us. Just let us cross your fortified border and find our own way.

Do you think the Realm of the Dragon will stop once it has swallowed up the frontier?

You'll find them on your doorstep soon enough!

Probably, but that is tomorrow's problem.

Today's problem is that the local humanoid population has decided to go stark raving mad.

Agreed. The hobgoblins have not encroached on Azurite territory in close to a decade, but this attack is the third I've heard of in the last two weeks.

We were able to force their retreat, but not before heavy losses on both sides.

My entire garrison, except for two of my soldiers. But their sacrifice saved the townsfolk from certain death.

They ran when you only had three warriors standing? That's impressive.

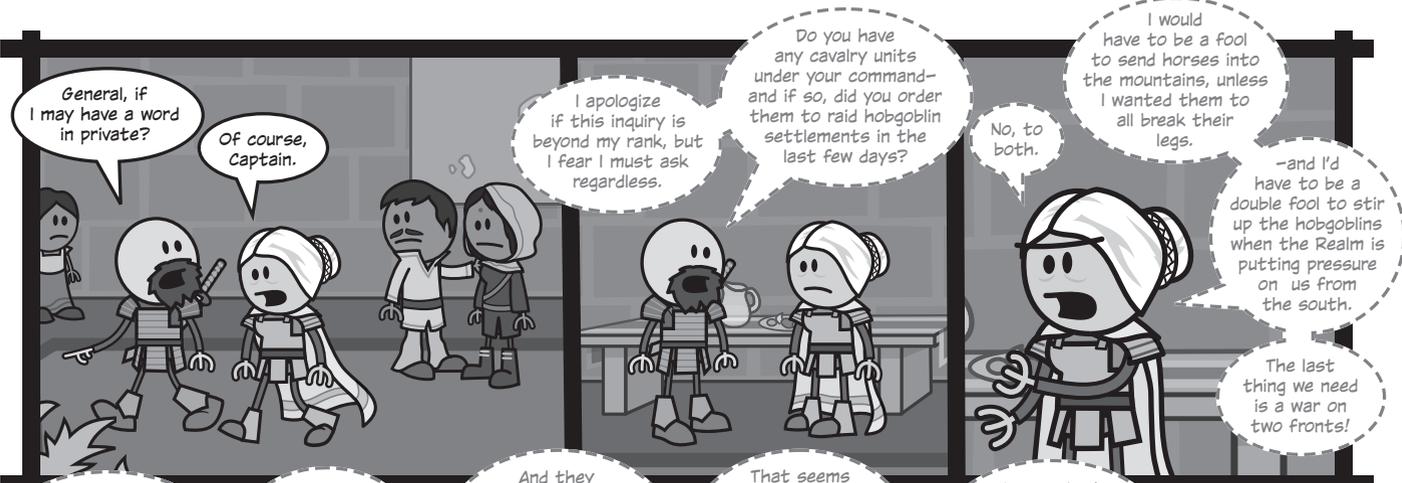
And technically inaccurate. One was knocked out cold, while another was... attending to the villagers.

...They ran when you only had **ONE???**

And a horse. Though the horse's contributions were more significant post-engagement.

How many did we lose?

May the Twelve Gods bless them, then.



General, if I may have a word in private?

Of course, Captain.

I apologize if this inquiry is beyond my rank, but I fear I must ask regardless.

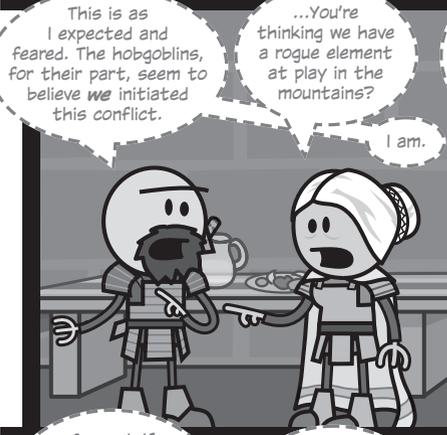
Do you have any cavalry units under your command—and if so, did you order them to raid hobgoblin settlements in the last few days?

No, to both.

I would have to be a fool to send horses into the mountains, unless I wanted them to all break their legs.

—and I'd have to be a double fool to stir up the hobgoblins when the Realm is putting pressure on us from the south.

The last thing we need is a war on two fronts!



This is as I expected and feared. The hobgoblins, for their part, seem to believe we initiated this conflict.

...You're thinking we have a rogue element at play in the mountains?

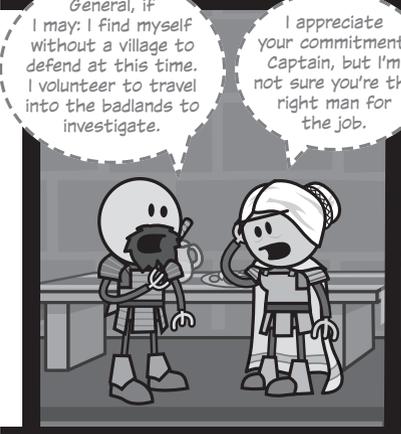
I am.

And they specified *cavalry*? ...Many of the noble houses field their own samurai, and most are skilled in mounted combat.

That seems the most likely explanation, but I cannot imagine whose interest would be served by such a move.

Nor can I. We must tread carefully, though. If some spoiled noble brat is costing us good women and men, I'll have their head on a pike.

But we must have proof before I bring this to Lord Shojo, or they'll have mine.



General, if I may: I find myself without a village to defend at this time. I volunteer to travel into the badlands to investigate.

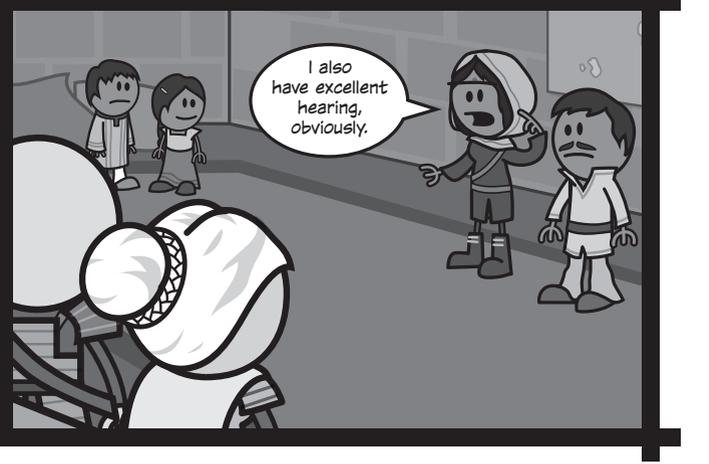
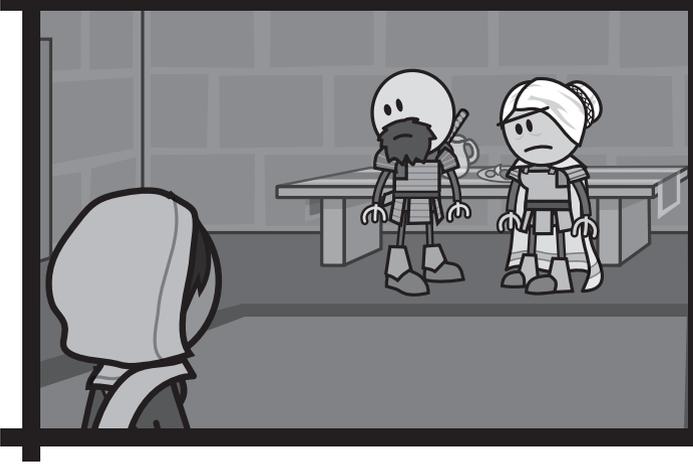
I appreciate your commitment, Captain, but I'm not sure you're the right man for the job.

Without knowing where the hobgoblin settlements even *are*, I don't know how you'd be able to—

I'll help him.



I'm skilled at woodcraft. A hobgoblin raiding party ought to be easy to track back to its source.



I also have excellent hearing, obviously.

Mrs. Kapoor, if you think this offer will somehow sway me to-

Sway you? No, I'm proposing a straight-up swap.

I help your captain find whomever he wants to find in the mountains.

When we return, you let my family cross the border and settle in Azurite territory.

We have our own scouts, you know.

Aren't they busy doing important scouting stuff, though? Do you really want to waste their time on a shot-in-the-dark like this?

General, I would point out that if one of our own nobles might be involved, there is a certain prudence to be found in eschewing the traditional channels.

Yes, yes! Who am I going to tell? If I knew anyone important, I wouldn't be here.

Fine. If, when you return, Captain O-Chul gives me a satisfactory report on your assistance-

-I will make a recommendation to the civilian review board regarding your application for entry.

I am a military leader, Mrs. Kapoor. My job is to keep everyone out until the men in nice kimonos tell me to let them in.

I suppose that will have to do. We have a deal, then.

You can't guarantee-?

Saha, are you sure this is wise?

You told me that Azure City was a shining beacon of hope. I think that's worth a little bit of risk.

I will be safe, my jaan.

Be brave while I am gone, all of you.

Zayan, protect the family in my absence.

Yes, Amma.

I would have expected your husband to be in charge of protection.

I have been training the boy with knives since he was five. My husband is a math teacher. I made the right choice.

Then you can fight as well as track, Mrs. Kapoor?

I got my family out when the Dragon-knights came, didn't I?

Good. This mission will almost certainly see battle of one form or another.

I will defend myself, but I am not here as your bodyguard, Captain.

My question is: If I lead you where you want to go, but your mission fails for other reasons, will you still give your endorsement to General Nhek?

Probably not.

What!?!?

If our mission fails, my ability to issue reports will likely be negatively impacted by the fact that I am dead.

Though I suppose I cannot rule out some form of seance-based recommendation, if a cleric is available.



Zhou.

Captain!
Yes, Captain?

You're
with me.
Fall in.

...Sir?



Are you
experiencing sudden
unexplained hearing
loss, Private? Possibly
contracted from time
spent in close proximity
to livestock?

No, sir!
I just-I was
expecting that
I would be seeing
General Nhek about
the, uh...you
know.



The General
has made it plain
that she is very
busy right now, so
you will remain under
my command until
her schedule
clears up.

Um, yes,
sir! Thank you,
sir!



If I may
ask, sir, what is
our new assignment?
Will we be returning
to the village?

Yes, but
the villagers will
not be. From there,
we will be walking
into the badlands
and looking for the
biggest hobgoblin
camp we can
find.



...So, is that
whipping you mentioned
still on the table?

No.



And, uh,
what sort of bad
thing would I need to
do to end up in a nice
safe brig, like, right
now?

That's
enough, Private
Zhou.

Yessir.



What news
of Nguyen?

The clerics
say they'll need
another day to get
him back up on
his feet.

Then it's
just the three
of us.

Three?



Saha Kapoor,
veteran ranger.
I come from the
Peripheral
Frontier.

Oh! I didn't
see you back
there. Hi!

I'm Zhou Bo,
kinda half-assed
soldier and future
model inmate. I come
from, uh, nowhere
special.



Your humility
is refreshing, and I
am moved by your frank
personal assessment of
your shortcomings.

Wow,
really?

No. You
sound like a
buffoon.



Is "buffoon"
like some sort
of compliment in
your country?

Only insofar
as it ranks slightly
above "moron" and
"dumbass."



Wow, here
too! I had no idea
our cultures had so
much in common!

Don't
touch me.

OK, totally
fair!



Well? Will you be able to track them?

Don't know yet. The ground is much rockier than my homeland.

There are definitely signs here. A dozen retreating hobgoblins are going to leave some sort of trail, regardless.

The question is whether or not I can follow it...



I sent Zhou Bo back to the village proper while you work.

Thanks, but the presence of one more person wouldn't have disturbed the trail, really.

At any rate, that was not my purpose in sending her.

I ordered her to bury the bodies of her comrades that fell in battle here.

So, sorry about the whole, "Running away and hiding while the rest of you died defending the village," thing, guys.

It was *super* inconsiderate on my part.



I know Captain O-Chul is trying to guilt trip me with this duty, but I think it's kinda having the opposite effect.

Sure, I feel bad about letting you down, but I just keep thinking: if I hadn't run I'd be right here alongside all of you.

And then who would bury you? I mean, us? We'd all just rot in the sun!

So good thing for everyone that I'm still alive, right?

Let's face it, I'm no badass goblin-stomper like Captain O-Chul.

My skills are not going to be the deciding factor in any battle not involving competitive needlepoint.

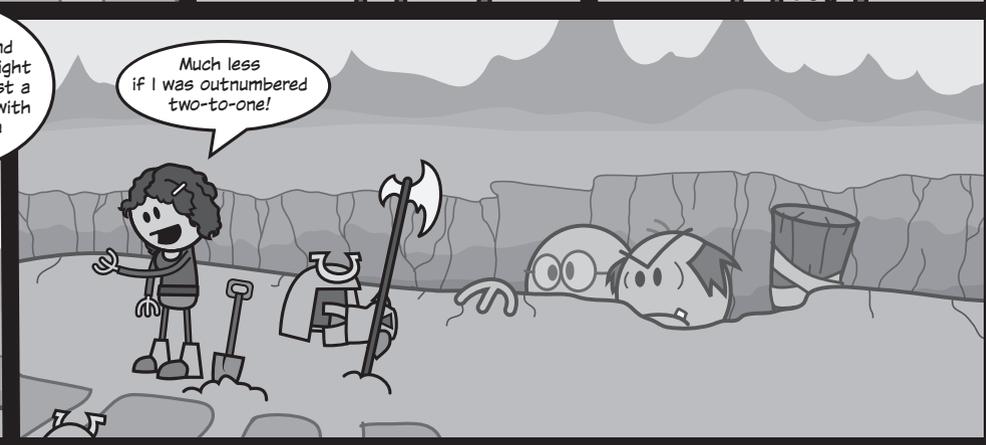
Which I would *totally own*, by the way, but doesn't come up much.



I'll be honest, I'm looking forward to prison at this point.

Two years as a soldier, and I couldn't win a fight if I was up against a single hobgoblin with asthma and a limp-

Much less if I was outnumbered two-to-one!



THIS TOWN IS MINE NOW!!

Ahhhhhhh!

WUMP!

OK, sure!
You can have it!

There are also some very nice corpses under those helmets, if you're into that sort of thing. I don't judge.

Just please don't hurt me!

You seem very upset. Is something wrong?

Um, you're attacking me?

Excuse me? I've done no such thing.

DIE HUMAN WORM!!

WOOSH!

You just did it again!!

That's a very serious accusation. What proof can you provide me that you have, in fact, been attacked?

I don't know...You're swinging your giant club at me?

What an unprovoked slur on my good character. I can assure you that I, the *right* ettin head, have never swung a giant club at anyone.

I WILL KILL YOU WITH MY GIANT CLUB!!

Uh, OK, I get it. Sorry if I offended you, Mr. Right Head, but could you possibly stop your *left* head from smashing me, then?

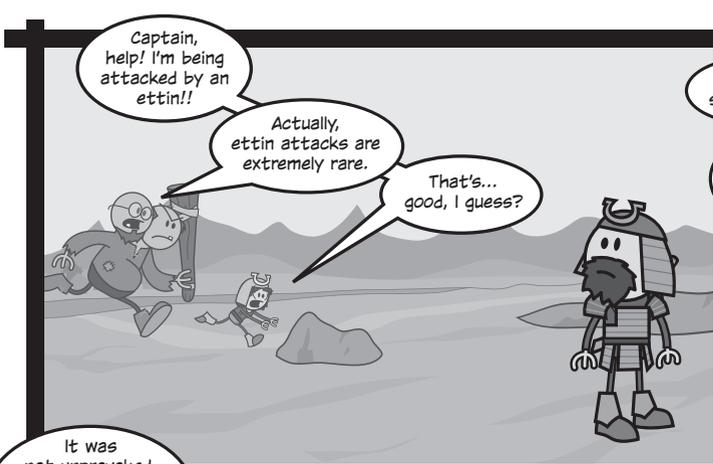
Oh, no, I can't do that. Stopping him would constitute an unreasonable restriction of his rights.

NNNH!

I do believe in freedom of expression, after all.

I AM GOING TO EAT YOUR STILL-BEATING HEART!!!

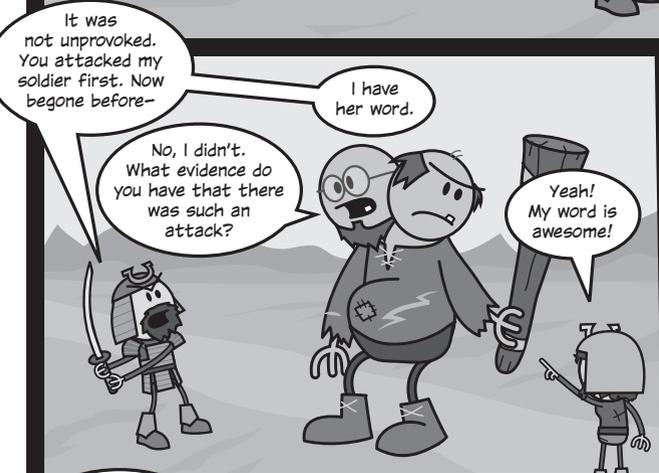
THANK!



Captain, help! I'm being attacked by an ettin!!

Actually, ettin attacks are extremely rare.

That's... good, I guess?

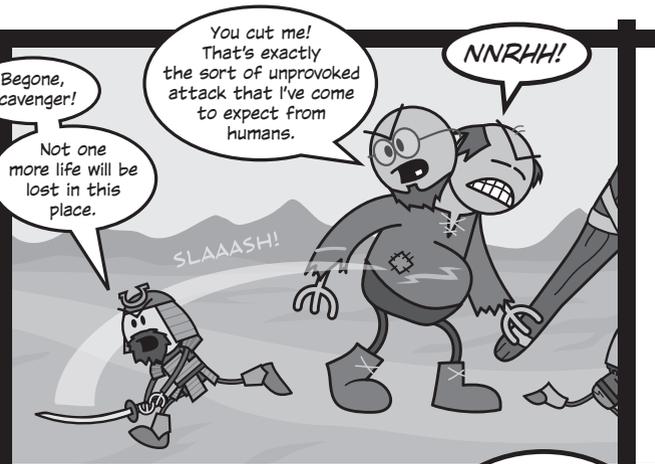


It was not unprovoked. You attacked my soldier first. Now begone before-

I have her word.

No, I didn't. What evidence do you have that there was such an attack?

Yeah! My word is awesome!



Begone, scavenger!

Not one more life will be lost in this place.

You cut me! That's exactly the sort of unprovoked attack that I've come to expect from humans.

NNRHH!

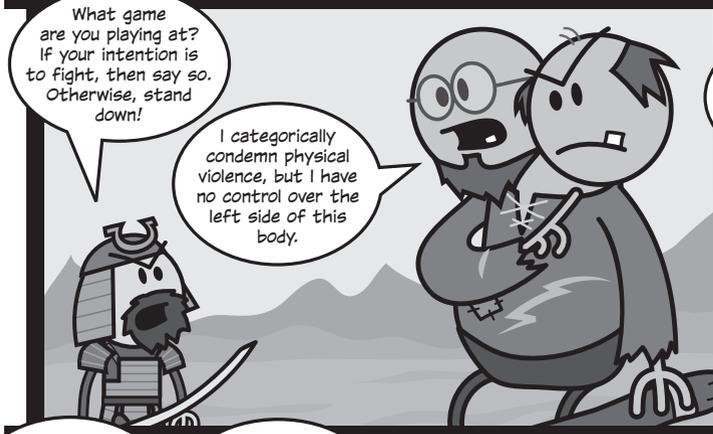
SLAAASH!



Eh. Woodcuts, or it didn't happen.

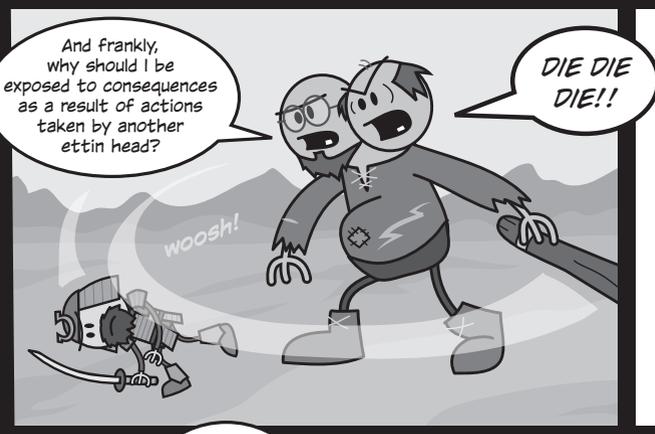
I'LL SMASH YOU LIKE I SMASHED HER!!

KLANG!



What game are you playing at? If your intention is to fight, then say so. Otherwise, stand down!

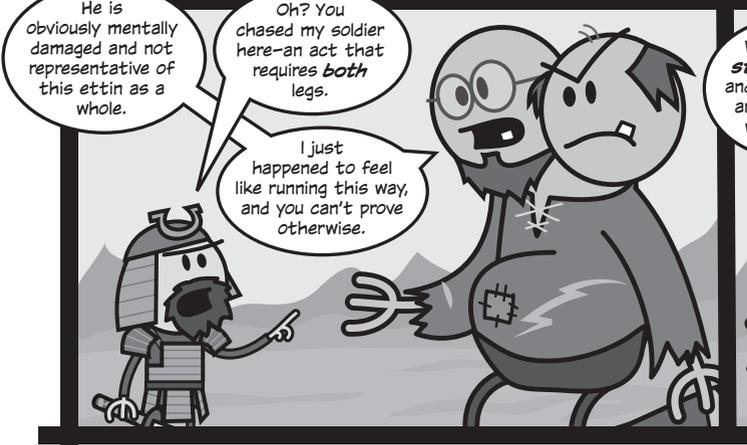
I categorically condemn physical violence, but I have no control over the left side of this body.



And frankly, why should I be exposed to consequences as a result of actions taken by another ettin head?

DIE DIE DIE!!

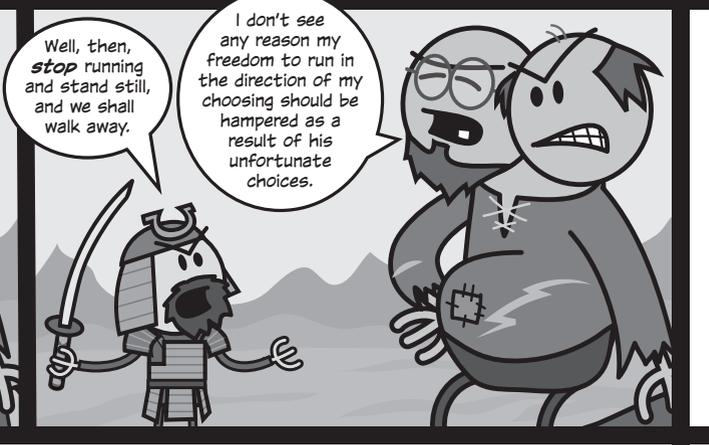
woosh!



He is obviously mentally damaged and not representative of this ettin as a whole.

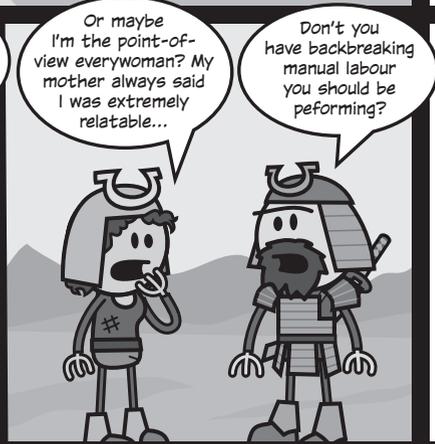
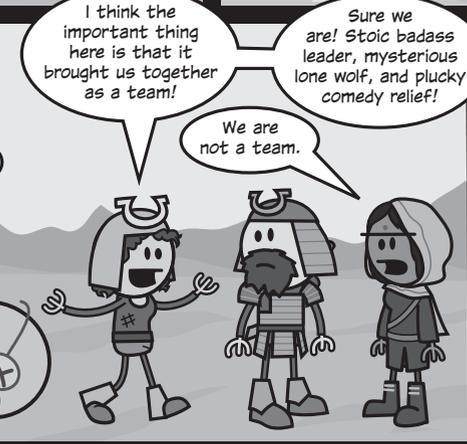
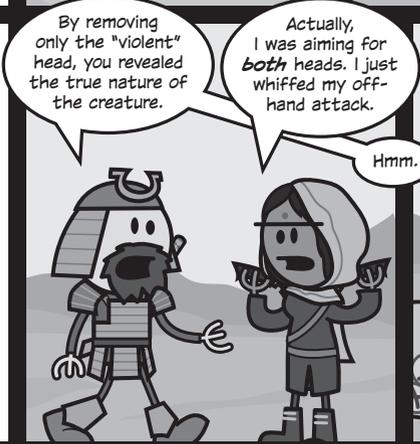
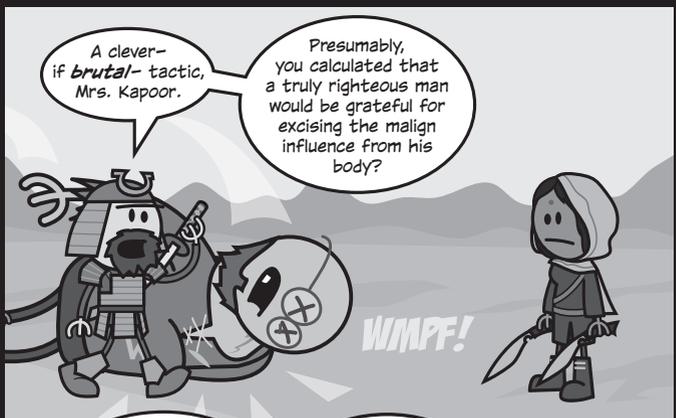
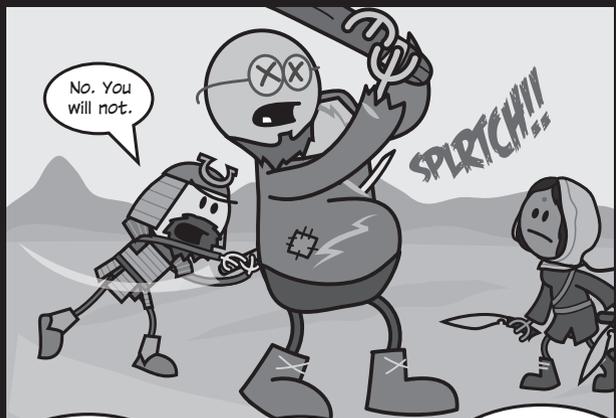
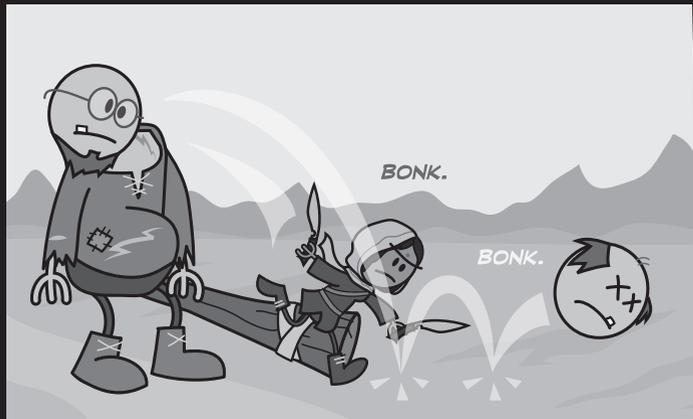
Oh? You chased my soldier here—an act that requires **both** legs.

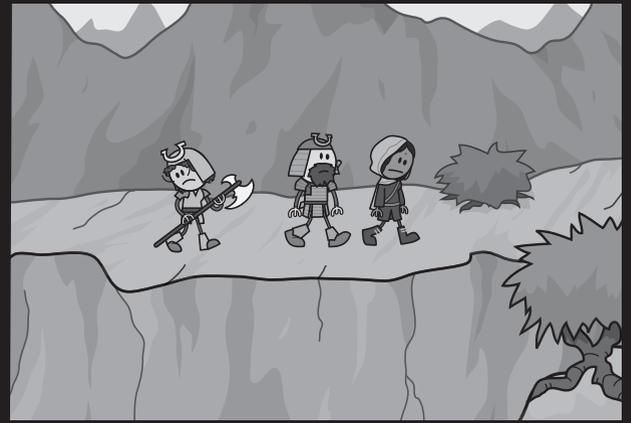
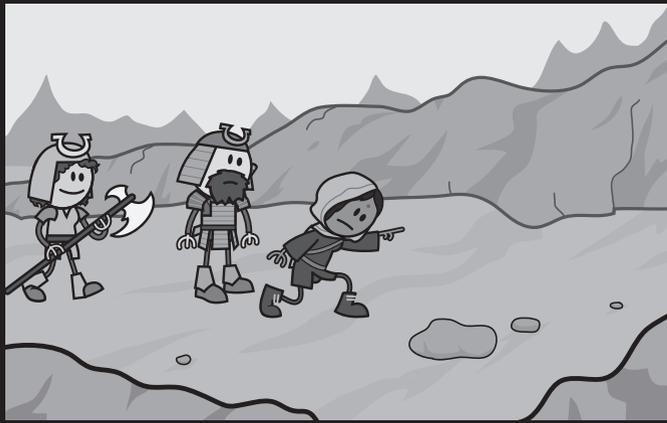
I just happened to feel like running this way, and you can't prove otherwise.



Well, then, **stop** running and stand still, and we shall walk away.

I don't see any reason my freedom to run in the direction of my choosing should be hampered as a result of his unfortunate choices.





There. That's where the attack originated.

Looks good, I think?

That depends on why it was abandoned. Follow me.



OK, but... no corpses on the road. So they probably weren't all killed after all, right?

Hobgoblins bury or cremate their dead, like we do. They wouldn't let the corpses rot where they fell.



Oh.

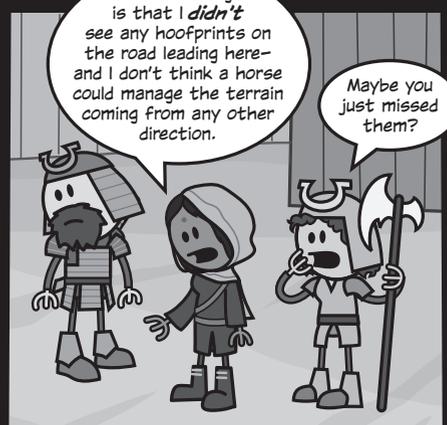
The survivors must have mobilized immediately after tending to their dead.



That's weird. I'm seeing a lot of hoofprints in the dirt here.

Hobgoblins don't ride horses. Humans do.

Right, but that's not what's strange.



What's strange is that I *didn't* see any hoofprints on the road leading here—and I don't think a horse could manage the terrain coming from any other direction.

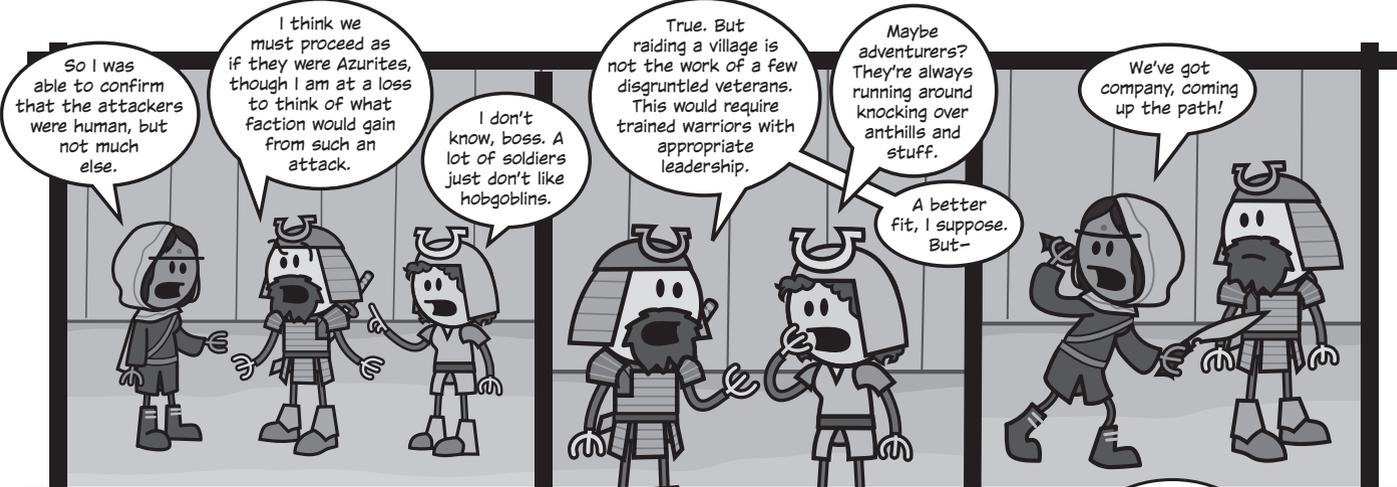
Maybe you just missed them?



Or maybe something else happened that's really unusual and wouldn't rest on me saying that you made a mistake.

Werehorses? I bet it was werehorses.





So I was able to confirm that the attackers were human, but not much else.

I think we must proceed as if they were Azurites, though I am at a loss to think of what faction would gain from such an attack.

I don't know, boss. A lot of soldiers just don't like hobgoblins.

True. But raiding a village is not the work of a few disgruntled veterans. This would require trained warriors with appropriate leadership.

Maybe adventurers? They're always running around knocking over anthills and stuff.

A better fit, I suppose. But-

We've got company, coming up the path!



Hello!

I can hit him from this distance.

No.



Captain O-Chul! I've been sent to find you.

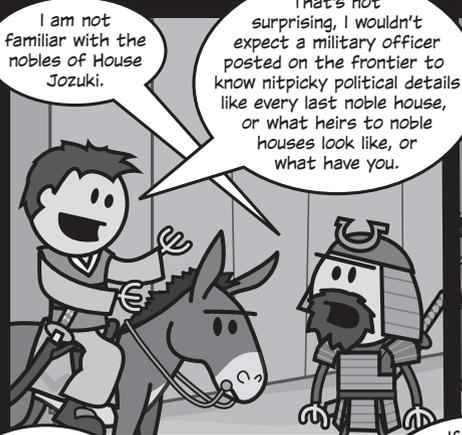
Who are you?

My name is Hinjo.



...zuki! Hin Jozuki, ha, yes, that's me. That's my name, and why wouldn't it be?

It's a perfectly good name that is 100% real.



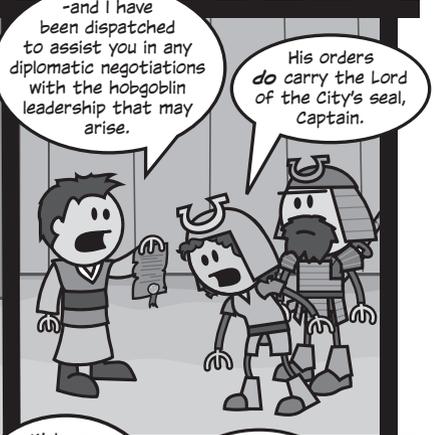
I am not familiar with the nobles of House Jozuki.

That's not surprising, I wouldn't expect a military officer posted on the frontier to know nitpicky political details like every last noble house, or what heirs to noble houses look like, or what have you.

For what purpose have you intercepted us, Jozuki?

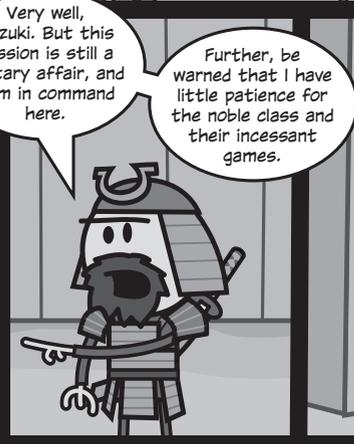
I bear orders from the top. Word of your mission has reached Azure City-

So much for secrecy.



-and I have been dispatched to assist you in any diplomatic negotiations with the hobgoblin leadership that may arise.

His orders do carry the Lord of the City's seal, Captain.



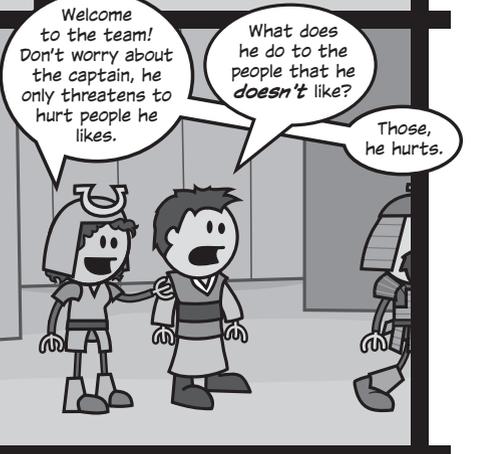
Very well, Jozuki. But this mission is still a military affair, and I am in command here.

Further, be warned that I have little patience for the noble class and their incessant games.

If I come to believe you are endangering innocent lives for some sort of political agenda, I will stop you first and sort out the consequences afterwards.



gulp



Welcome to the team! Don't worry about the captain, he only threatens to hurt people he likes.

What does he do to the people that he doesn't like?

Those, he hurts.

I would have thought the Diplomatic Corps would send someone old enough to shave.

Why, do you expect there to be a lot of shaving on this mission?

No, but I do expect experience to be a necessary factor if we are to succeed.

I assure you, I've been training in diplomacy since I was a child.

You are still a child.

Then you know I'm telling the truth!

I do not know why you were chosen for this assignment, Jozuki, but I need to emphasize:

We are traveling into enemy territory that is far more dangerous than the hills through which you followed us.

Your donkey bears a sword. Do you know how to fight?

Of course! My uncle's best samurai showed me the basics.

I see.

Jozuki, do you know *why* I just asked you if you can fight?

Because you want to know if you can rely on my sword if the mission turns deadly?

No.

I know that I cannot, just by watching you move. You have never drawn blood with that blade.

I asked because, knowing that you cannot fight, I needed to determine if *you* knew that you cannot fight-

-and therefore, whether or not one of us would be obligated to protect you from your own overconfidence in the event of a battle.

And so I ask you again: Do you know how to fight?

...

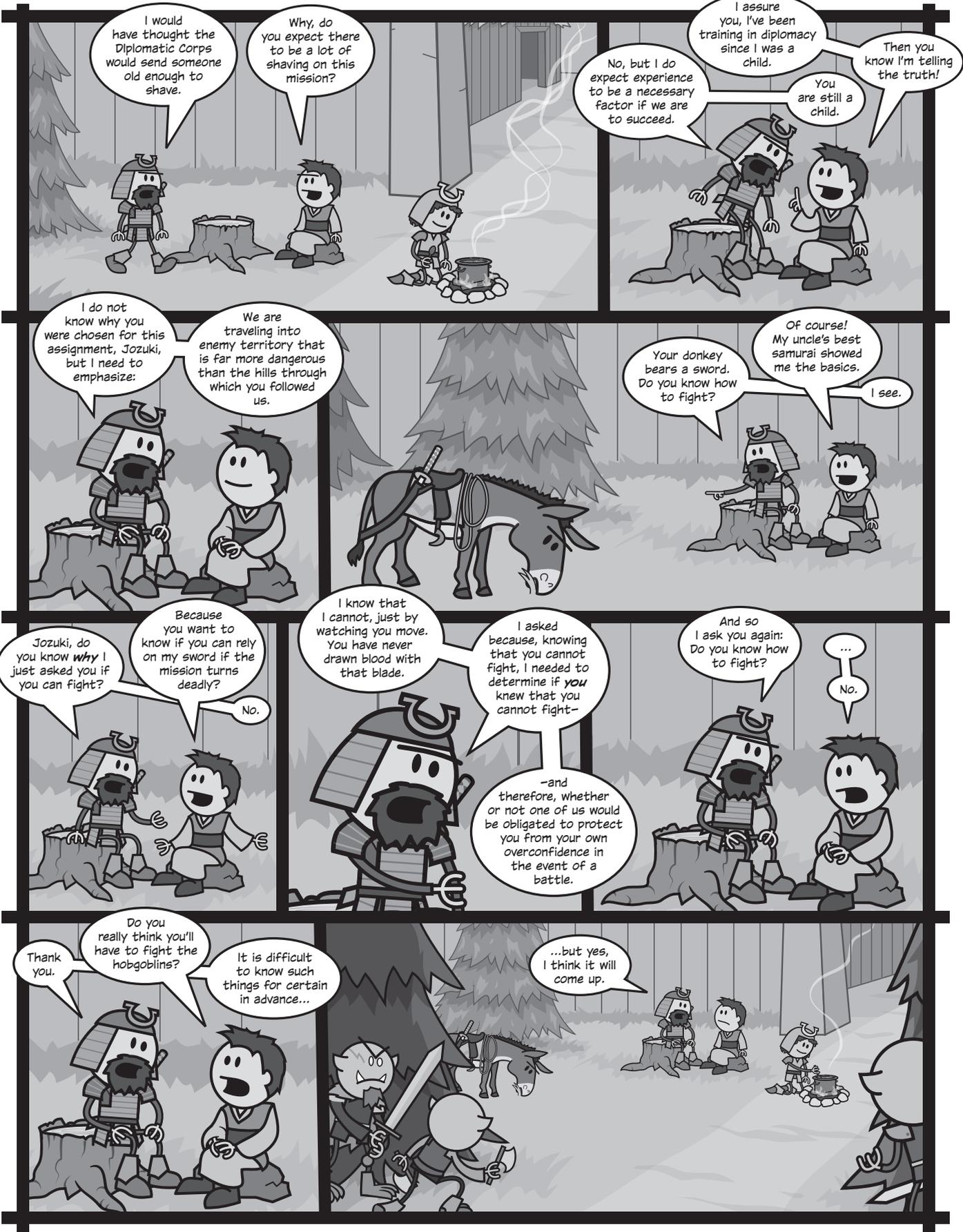
No.

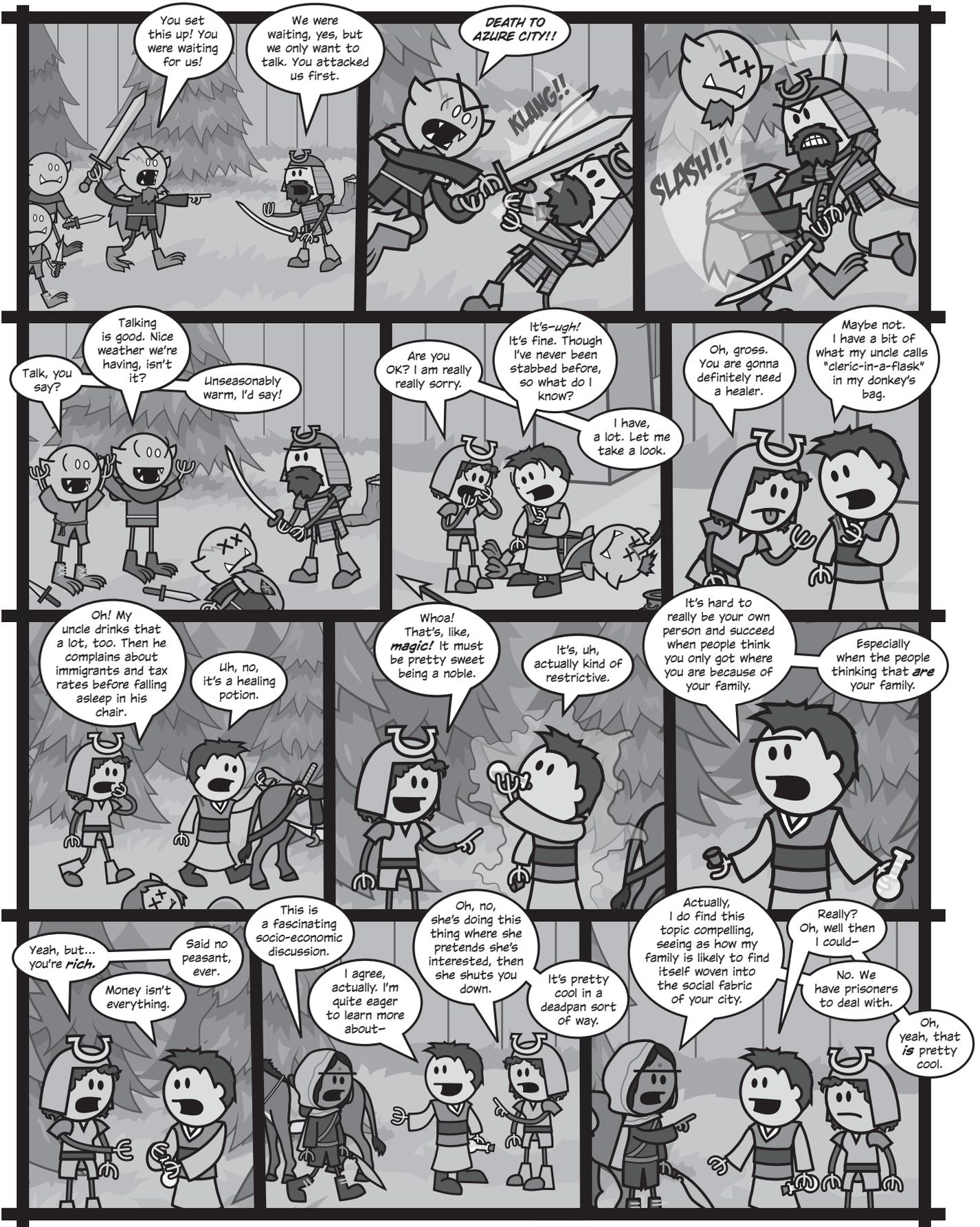
Thank you.

Do you really think you'll have to fight the hobgoblins?

It is difficult to know such things for certain in advance...

...but yes, I think it will come up.





You set this up! You were waiting for us!

We were waiting, yes, but we only want to talk. You attacked us first.

DEATH TO AZURE CITY!!

KLANG!!

SLASH!!

Talk, you say?

Talking is good. Nice weather we're having, isn't it?

Unseasonably warm, I'd say!

Are you OK? I am really really sorry.

It's-ugh! It's fine. Though I've never been stabbed before, so what do I know?

I have, a lot. Let me take a look.

Oh, gross. You are gonna definitely need a healer.

Maybe not. I have a bit of what my uncle calls "cleric-in-a-flask" in my donkey's bag.

Oh! My uncle drinks that a lot, too. Then he complains about immigrants and tax rates before falling asleep in his chair.

Uh, no, it's a healing potion.

Whoa! That's, like, *magic*! It must be pretty sweet being a noble.

It's, uh, actually kind of restrictive.

It's hard to really be your own person and succeed when people think you only got where you are because of your family.

Especially when the people thinking that *are* your family.

Yeah, but... you're *rich*.

Money isn't everything.

Said no peasant, ever.

This is a fascinating socio-economic discussion.

I agree, actually. I'm quite eager to learn more about-

Oh, no, she's doing this thing where she pretends she's interested, then she shuts you down.

It's pretty cool in a deadpan sort of way.

Actually, I do find this topic compelling, seeing as how my family is likely to find itself woven into the social fabric of your city.

Really? Oh, well then I could-

No. We have prisoners to deal with.

Oh, yeah, that *is* pretty cool.

So wait...the two of you were deliberately waiting for hobgoblins to show up, but didn't tell us?

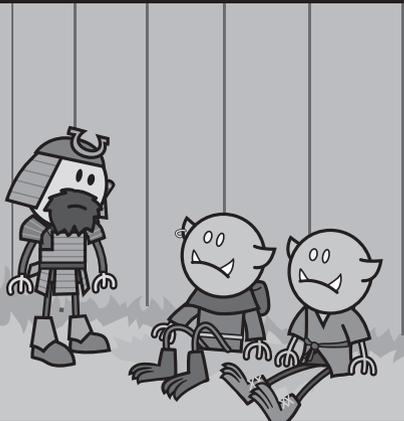
We thought that the knocking of Bo's knees would have tipped them off.

Ahh, right, good idea. They can get pretty loud.

...which is why we believe there to be a third party operating in these hills, striking hobgoblin settlements while redirecting the blame-

-either intentionally or by accident-

-to the Azurite army.



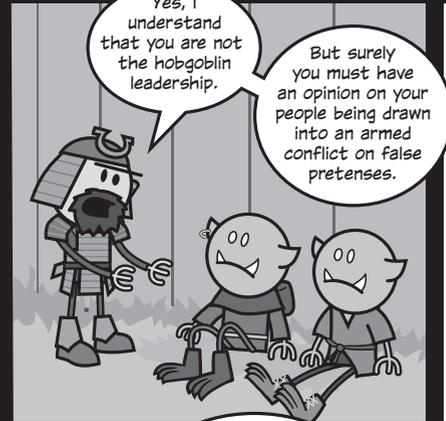
I hunt rabbits for a living.

I dig ditches.



Yes, I understand that you are not the hobgoblin leadership.

But surely you must have an opinion on your people being drawn into an armed conflict on false pretenses.



Sometimes, I also fill the ditches back up. But usually, that's another guy.

Are you not also warriors? Did you not join in the attack upon us?

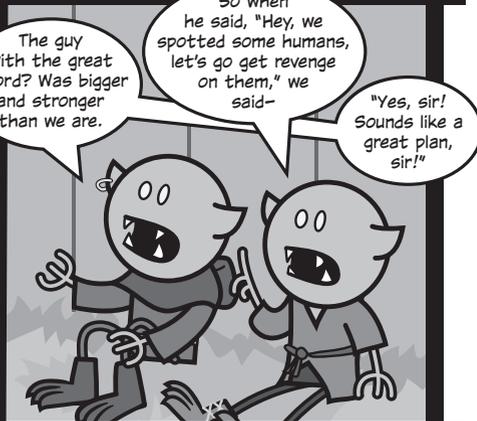
Well, funny story there.



The guy with the great sword? Was bigger and stronger than we are.

So when he said, "Hey, we spotted some humans, let's go get revenge on them," we said-

"Yes, sir! Sounds like a great plan, sir!"



So you're saying you have nothing against humans?

No, no. We totally hate you.

Sooooo much.

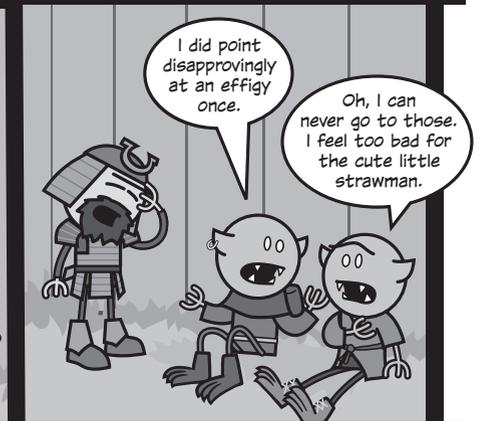
But it's more of a vague, lazy hate.

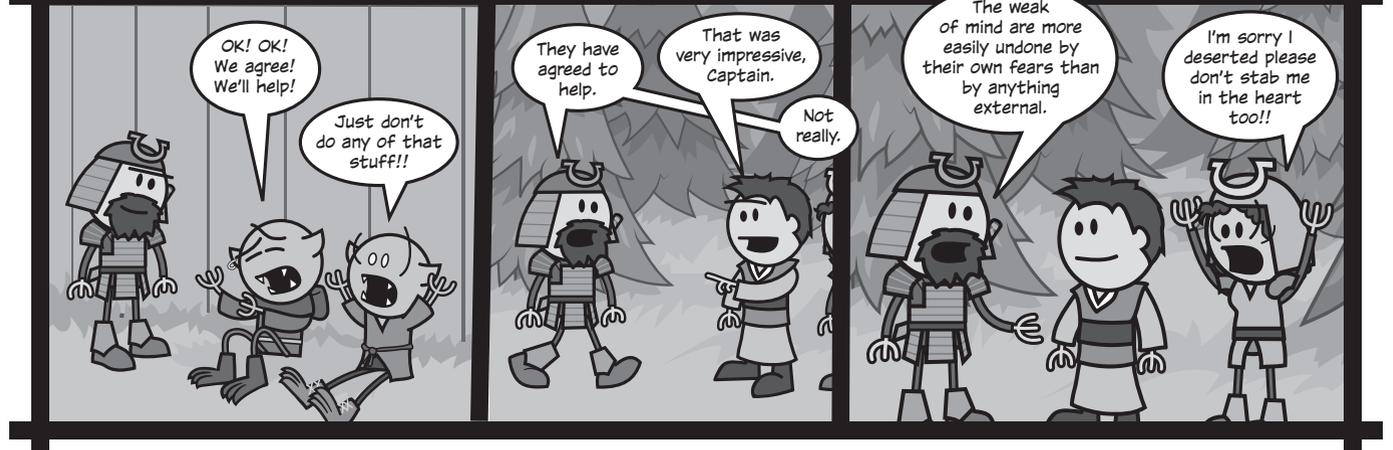
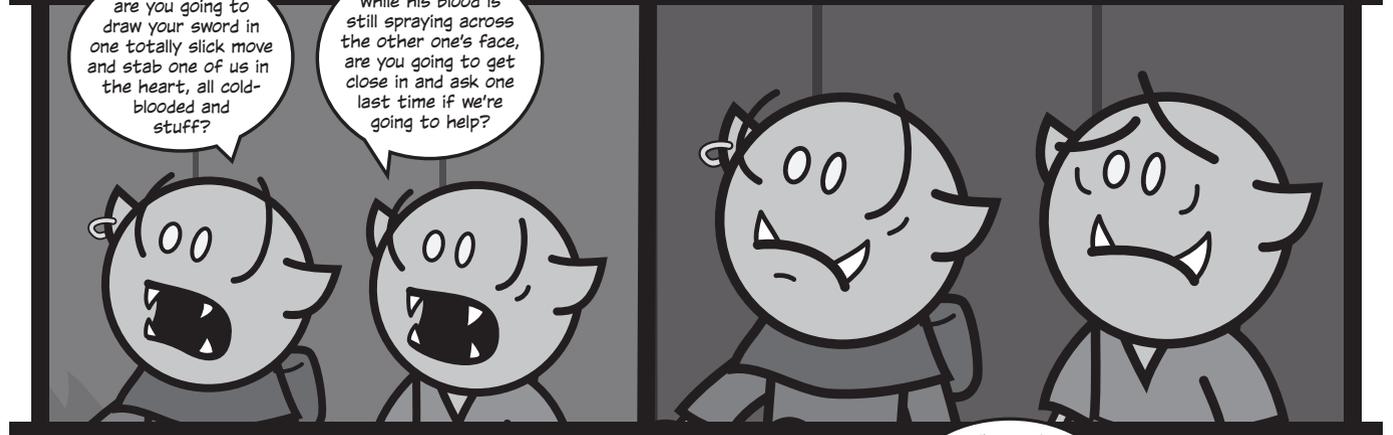
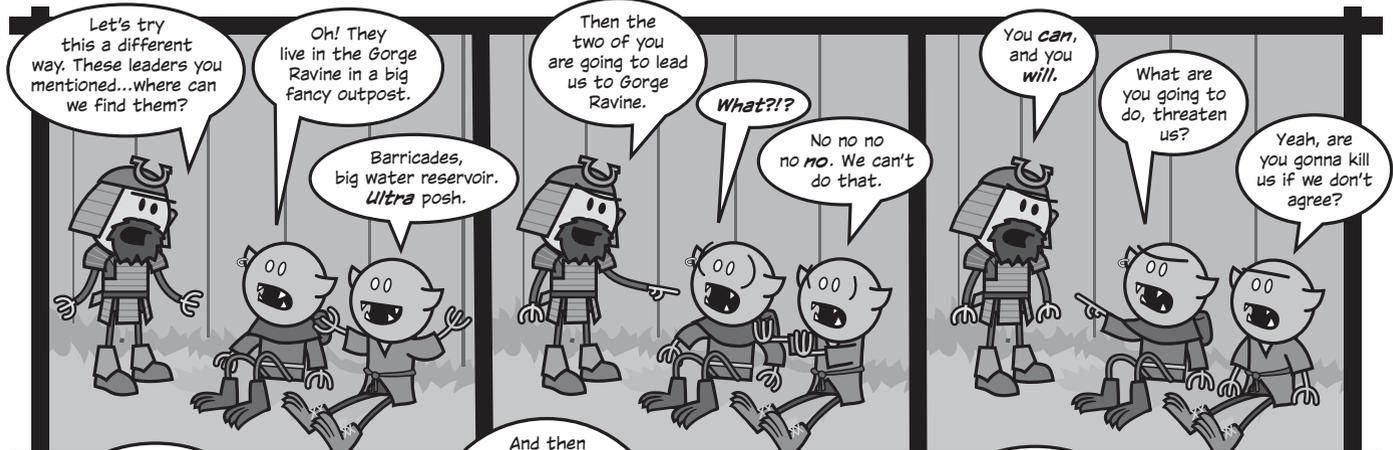
We wouldn't normally *do* anything about it, except maybe nod when our leaders blame all our domestic problems on you.

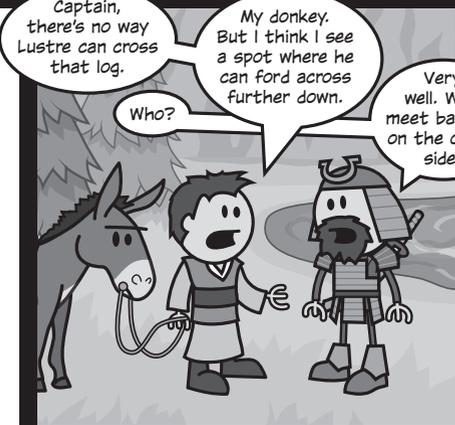
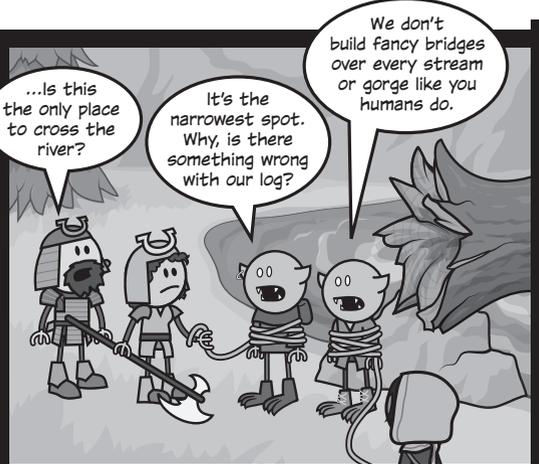


I did point disapprovingly at an effigy once.

Oh, I can never go to those. I feel too bad for the cute little strawman.









waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahh!!

THUNK!



What did you do *that* for?!?

To try to get away, duh!!



HELP!

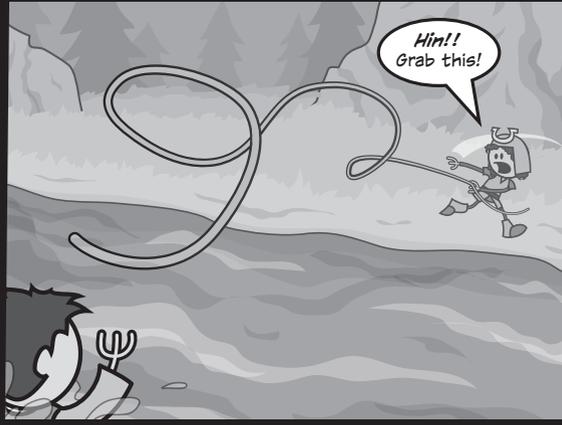
I can't swim!!

SPLISH!

SPLASH!



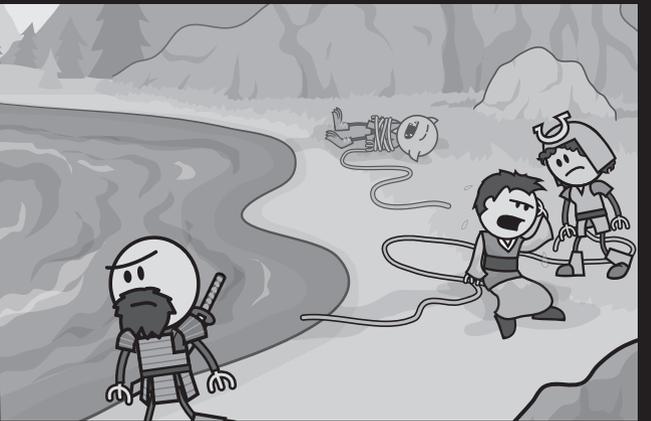
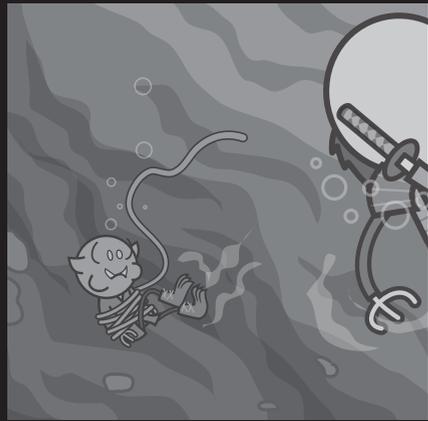
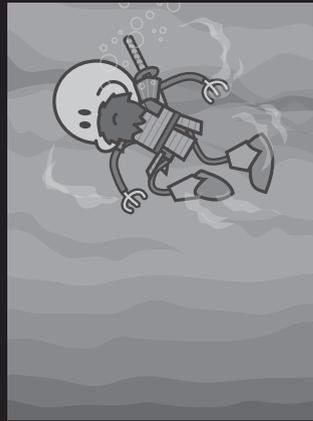
Wait, so all I had to do was ask?



Hi!! Grab this!



whew!





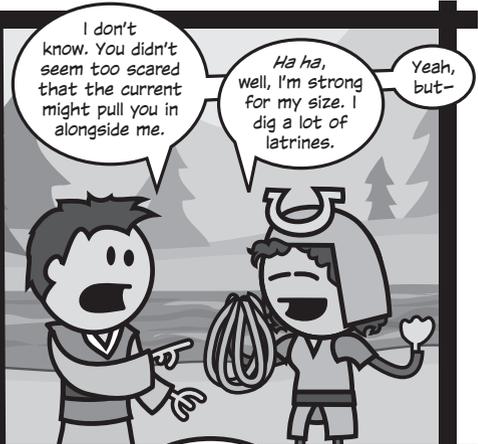
Hey, uh, thanks for the rescue.

I guess I'm 1-for-2, huh?



You really sprang into action. I was surprised.

You need good reflexes to be a truly effective coward. No one wants to run away at the **second** sign of trouble, you know?



I don't know. You didn't seem too scared that the current might pull you in alongside me.

Ha ha, well, I'm strong for my size. I dig a lot of latrines.

Yeah, but-



Where is Mrs. Kapoor?

She went under and then I didn't see her again, sir.

I think... I think she didn't make it.



WAKE UP!

Uhhh....

Guh.

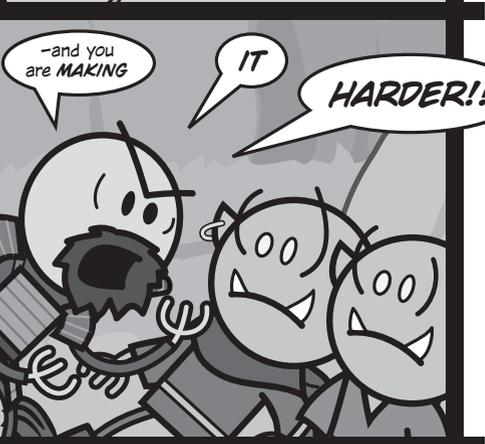


Are you happy now? You probably killed my ranger with that stunt-

-a woman who wasn't even from the same country as those who attacked your village!



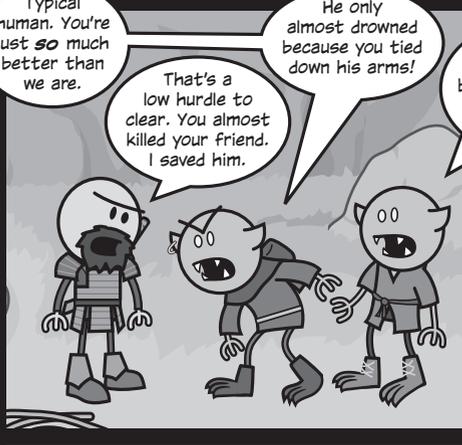
All I am trying to do is figure this out so that no one has to die in a stupid meaningless border war that no one wants-



-and you are **MAKING**

IT

HARDER!!



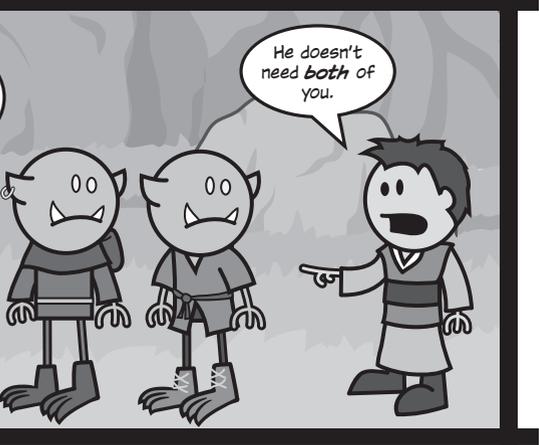
Typical human. You're just **so** much better than we are.

That's a low hurdle to clear. You almost killed your friend. I saved him.

He only almost drowned because you tied down his arms!

Plus, you only saved me because you need us to bring you to the gorge.

Are you sure? Because I distinctly recall it being pointed out-



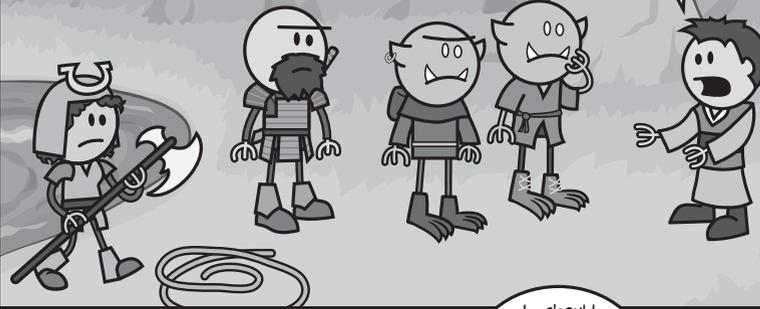
He doesn't need **both** of you.

The captain could have let one of you drown—or run one of you through with his sword when he got back to shore.

He didn't.

And while I'm not much of a gambler, I would make a gentleman's wager that it has more to do with the value he places on your lives—

—than it does with the value he places on your knowledge of geography.



You said you did not want to fight humans. Well, we do not want to fight goblins.

Nobody wants to fight, so let us just... not fight.

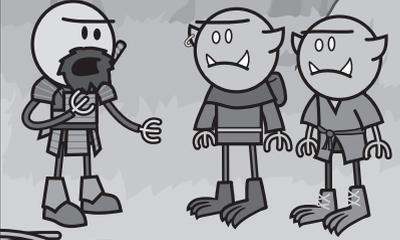
It is as simple as that.

I... should not have tied you up. That was a mistake on my part and I apologize.

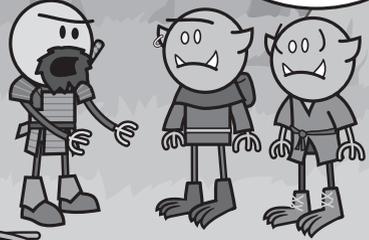
I am looking for allies, not prisoners. I will not bind you again, and I will not stop you if you wish to flee.

And that other way will have a much lower chance of success now that I have lost my tracker.

Which means that there is a much *higher* chance that whoever is roaming around these hills lashing out at hobgoblins will find you and hurt you—or others of your kind.



If you do not wish to help me, you may simply leave and I will attempt my mission another way.



We are your best chance of avoiding that. Do you understand?

...Yes.

Uh huh.

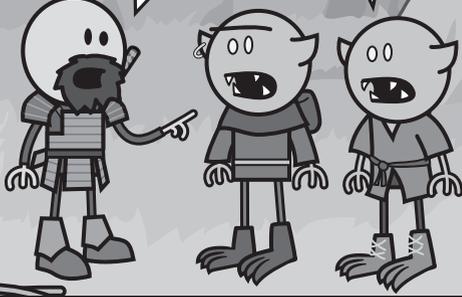
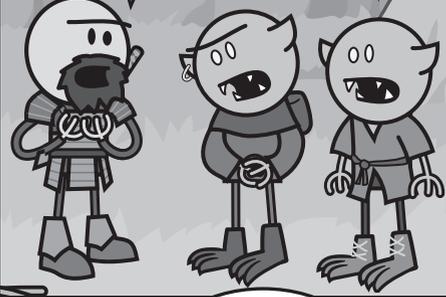
Will you attempt to sabotage our endeavor again?

No.

No, sir.

Good.

Now I just need to figure out how I am going to tell Mrs. Kapoor's husband about what happened...

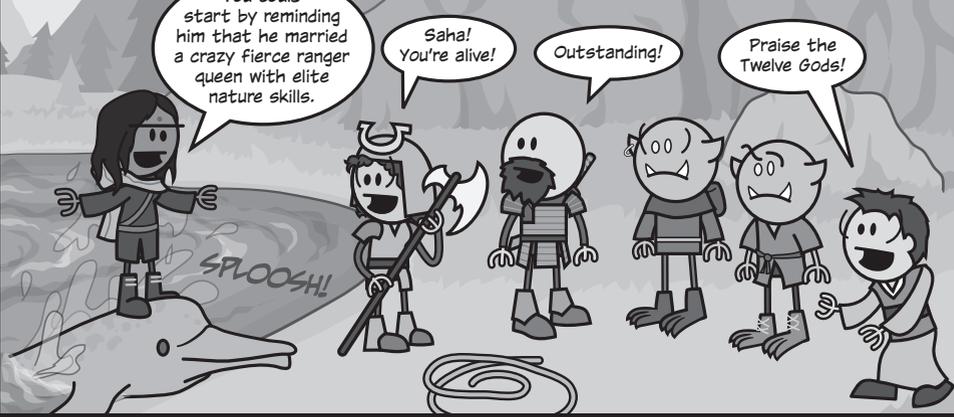


You could start by reminding him that he married a crazy fierce ranger queen with elite nature skills.

Saha! You're alive!

Outstanding!

Praise the Twelve Gods!

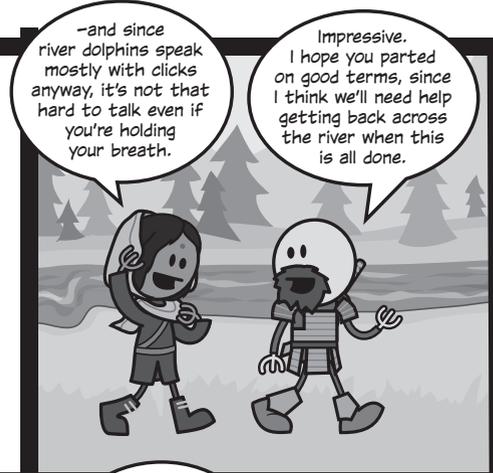


So, um, I believe we agreed on a fish-based quid pro quo?

You are stepping on my moment.

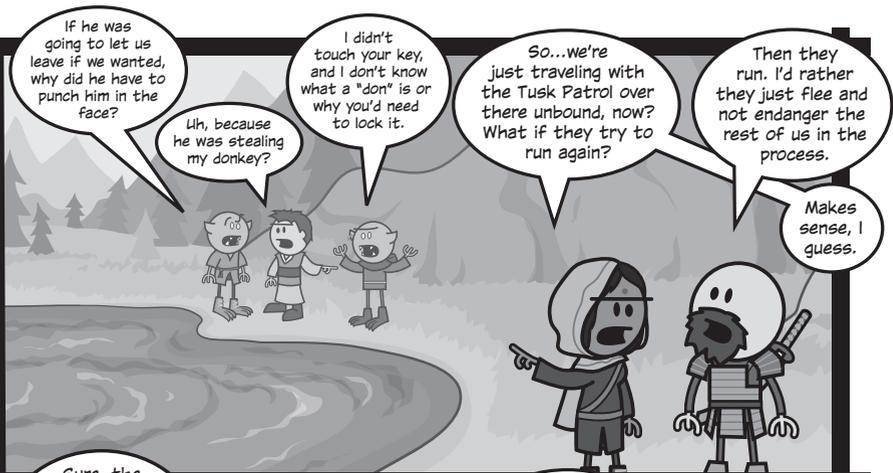
I don't have feet.





-and since river dolphins speak mostly with clicks anyway, it's not that hard to talk even if you're holding your breath.

Impressive. I hope you parted on good terms, since I think we'll need help getting back across the river when this is all done.



If he was going to let us leave if we wanted, why did he have to punch him in the face?

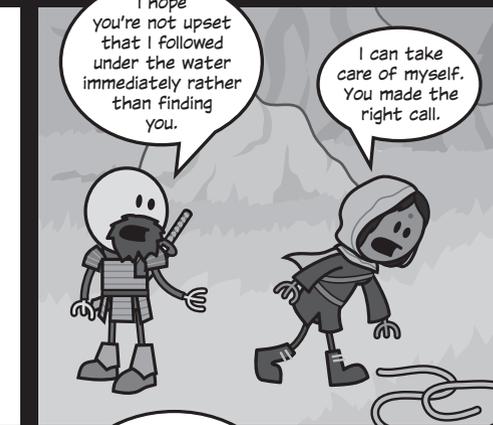
Uh, because he was stealing my donkey?

I didn't touch your key, and I don't know what a "don" is or why you'd need to lock it.

So...we're just traveling with the Tusk Patrol over there unbound, now? What if they try to run again?

Then they run. I'd rather they just flee and not endanger the rest of us in the process.

Makes sense, I guess.



I hope you're not upset that I followed under the water immediately rather than finding you.

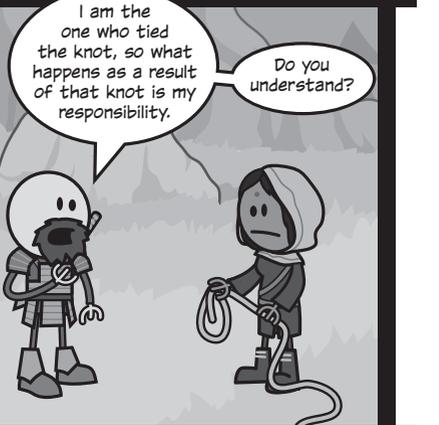
I can take care of myself. You made the right call.



Sure, the other one was safe on shore, but you didn't know if it'd still be there when you got out of the drink.

You did what you needed to do to maximize our chances of having at least one still available, with an outside chance of keeping both.

Seems like the odds worked out.



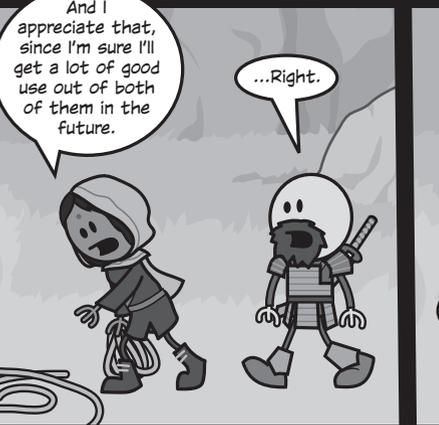
I am the one who tied the knot, so what happens as a result of that knot is my responsibility.

Do you understand?



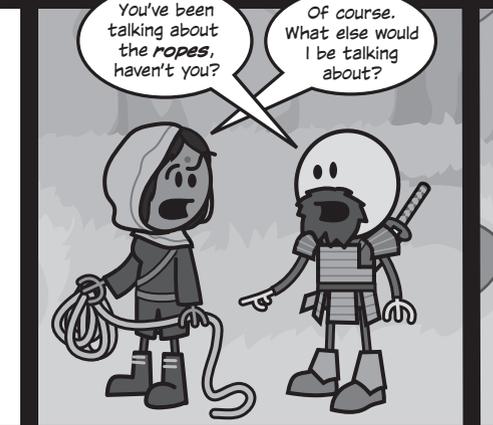
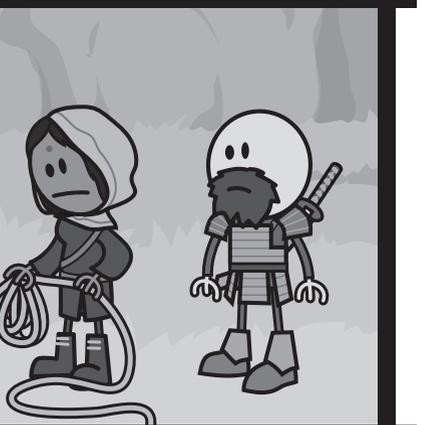
I get it. You couldn't just swim to shore and let it sink to the bottom of the river, never to be seen again.

Yes, exactly.



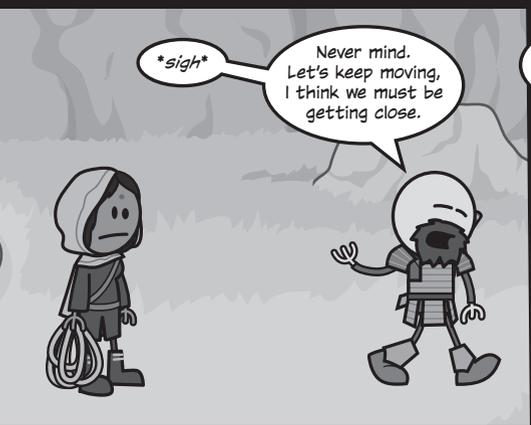
And I appreciate that, since I'm sure I'll get a lot of good use out of both of them in the future.

...Right.



You've been talking about the ropes, haven't you?

Of course. What else would I be talking about?



sigh

Never mind. Let's keep moving, I think we must be getting close.

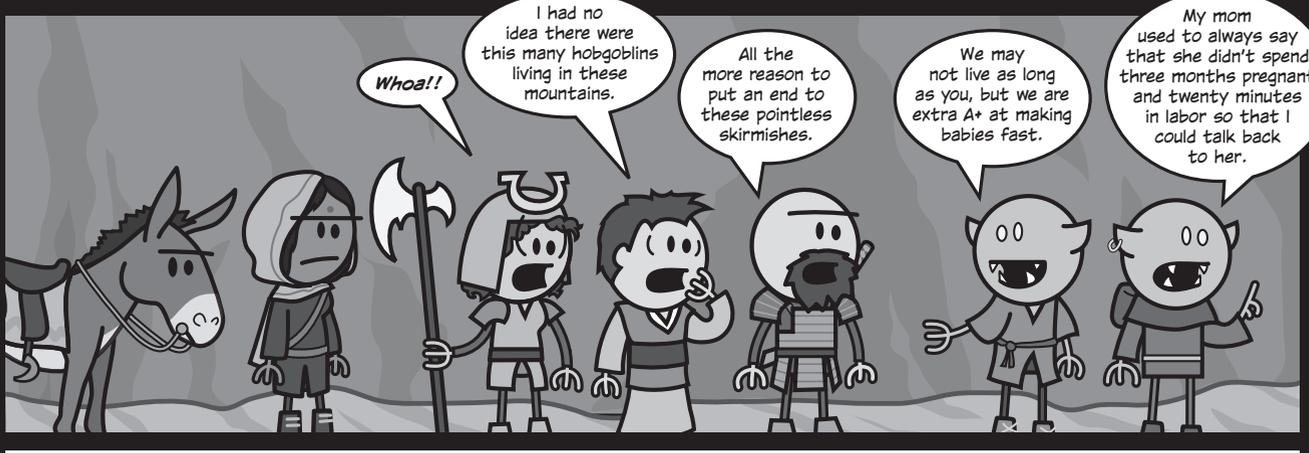


What? Are they masterwork silk hobgoblins?

Probably not, is all I'm saying.



OK, we're here. The Supreme Leader lives up on the mountain.



Whoa!!

I had no idea there were this many hobgoblins living in these mountains.

All the more reason to put an end to these pointless skirmishes.

We may not live as long as you, but we are extra A+ at making babies fast.

My mom used to always say that she didn't spend three months pregnant and twenty minutes in labor so that I could talk back to her.

Unfortunately, I am at a loss to see how to secure entrance to that settlement without fighting our way in, which would defeat the point of the mission.

We could approach the nearest guard and surrender. Let them take us directly to their leaders, you know?

I vote against that plan.

Oh, we get votes? I vote No, too.

There are no votes.

But it is still not a plan I care for. There is no reason to believe that any given guard will actually bring us to their chieftain once we had surrendered-

-rather than, say, killing or enslaving us.

Actually... I think I know a way you can get in.

Back when I was an apprentice ditch-digger, my sensei-Dirtmaster Plogguk-brought me here as part of my training.

And you would be willing to show us this tunnel?

Thank you, I deeply appreciate-

Sure, why not? We already led you here.

Uh, Pangtok, could I have a word with you over here?

What are you doing? You're volunteering secrets? Are you on *their* side now?

No! I'm on our side, Tingtox! I'm always on our side.

He showed me a secret tunnel that the Fellowship of the Shovel had excavated that led from the valley below right to the Middle Bulwark.

But all that stuff they said about humans and hobgoblins not fighting is confusing, and I'd rather have the bigwigs figure out what to do about it.

That's, like, the entire reason we have a ruler in the first place, right?

Hmmm. That's a good point.

So let's just help them get to see the Supreme Leader, and we'll go along with what *he* wants to do.

OK, you've convinced me. Good thinking, bud.

Good lack of thinking, you mean!

Ha ha, right again!

If we play our cards right, you might even get that promotion to quail-hunting.

Oh, man! Do you think so?

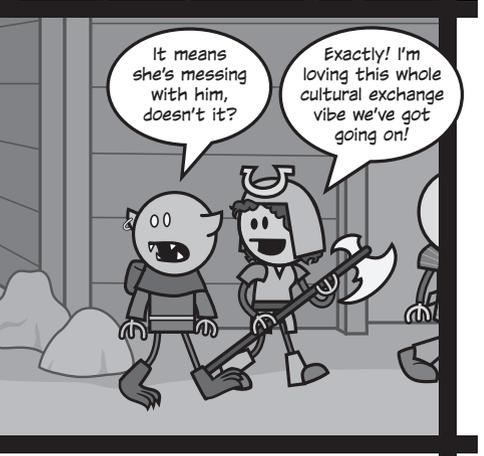
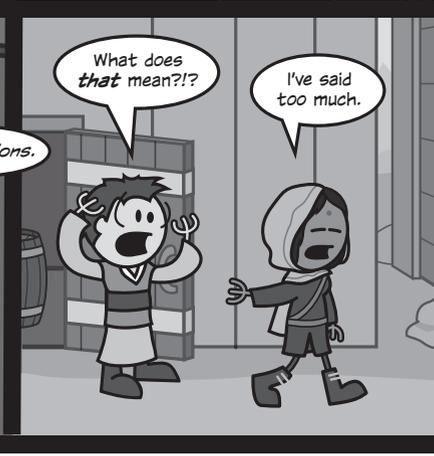
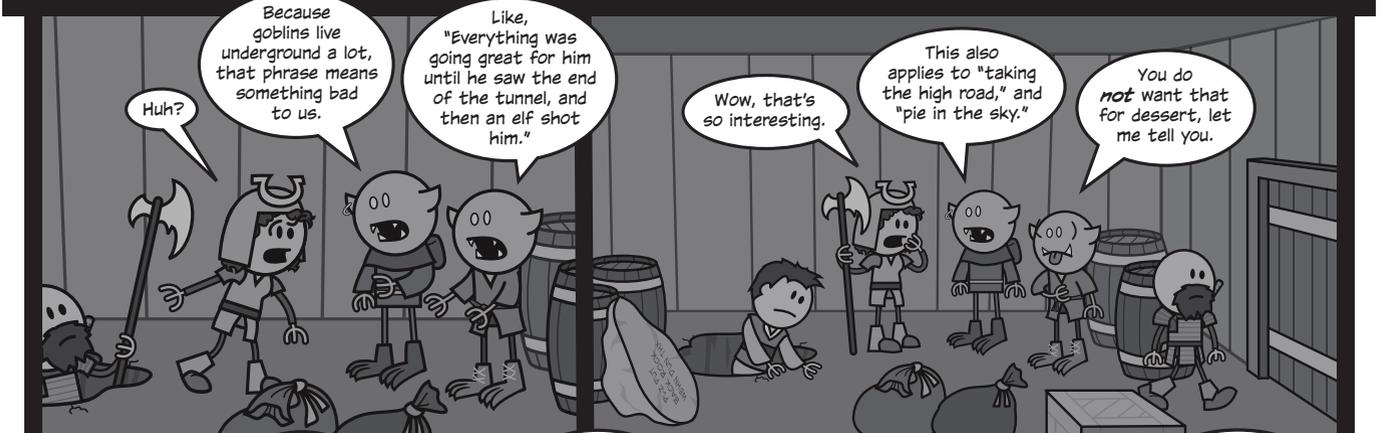
Sure! Maybe! I have no idea!

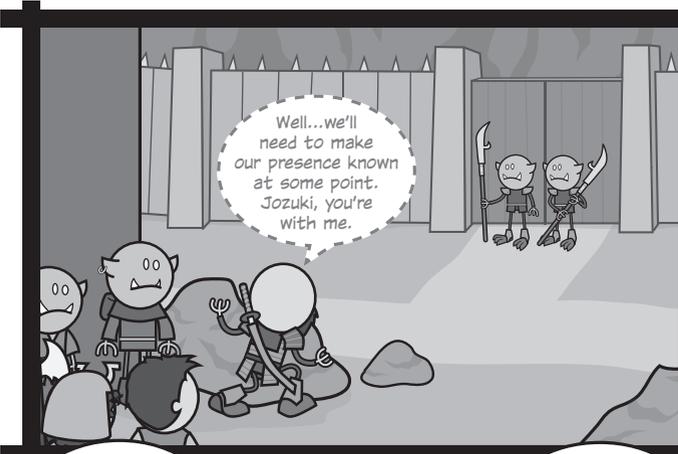
I could really use the extra income, and I'd love to hunt something that hops less.

It's true what they say: Hoppiness can't buy you money.

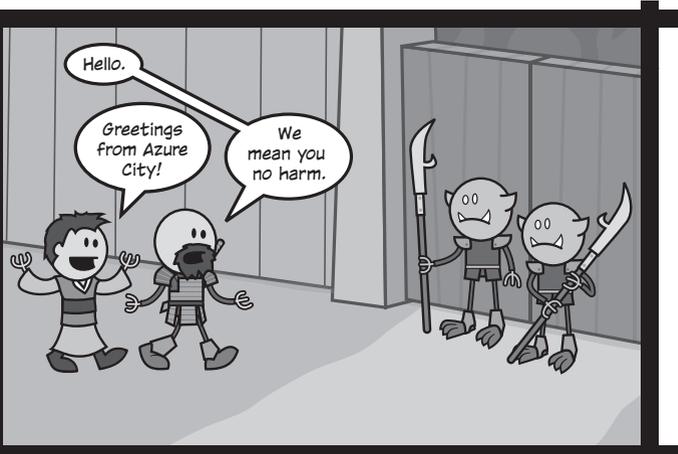
Are they saying anything that should concern me?

Do you mean directly, or in a broader, "Everyone's an idiot and we're probably all doomed," sort of way?





Well...we'll need to make our presence known at some point. Jozuki, you're with me.



Hello.
Greetings from Azure City!

We mean you no harm.



I know it is shocking to see humans inside your perimeter, but we come on a mission of-

25 gold.

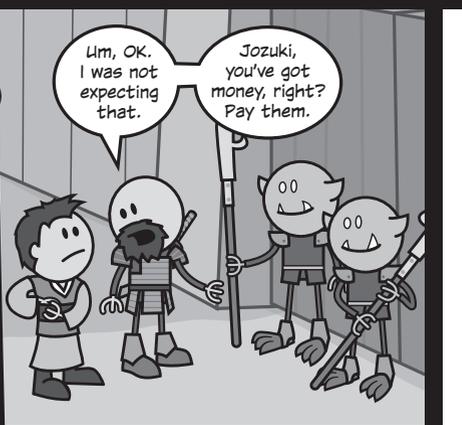
...Excuse me?



If you want to get past us, it'll cost you 25 gold pieces.

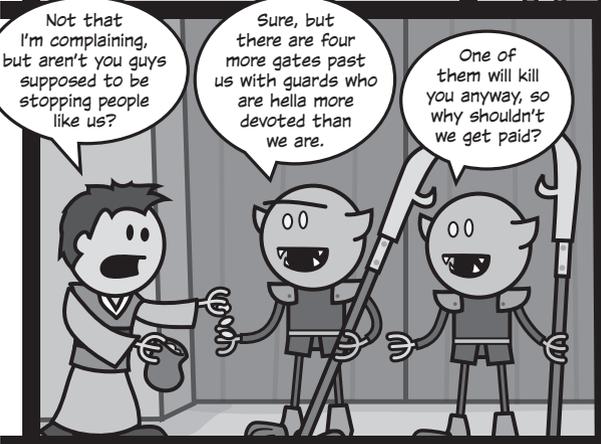
Each.

Right, 50 total.



Um, OK. I was not expecting that.

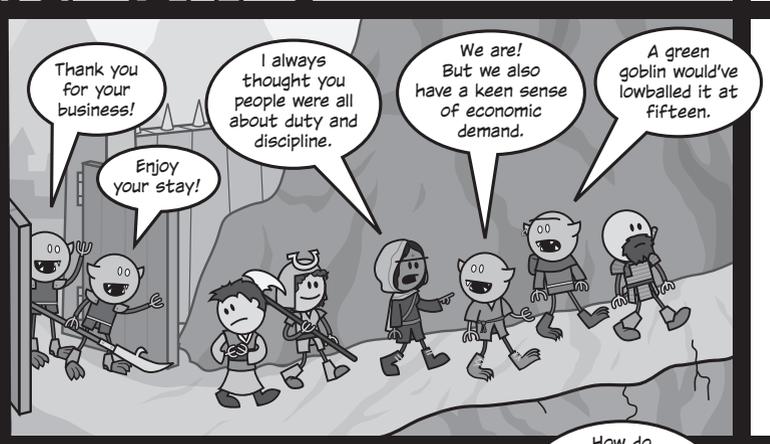
Jozuki, you've got money, right? Pay them.



Not that I'm complaining, but aren't you guys supposed to be stopping people like us?

Sure, but there are four more gates past us with guards who are hella more devoted than we are.

One of them will kill you anyway, so why shouldn't we get paid?



Thank you for your business!
Enjoy your stay!

I always thought you people were all about duty and discipline.

We are! But we also have a keen sense of economic demand.

A green goblin would've lowballed it at fifteen.



Hey, maybe every guard will assume the next guard will stop us-

-and we'll walk right up to the Supreme Leader!



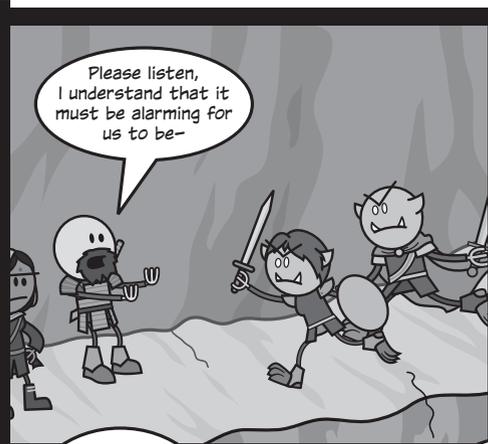
Humans?! In the Inner Bulwark?!?

Attack!!



I don't think they're accepting bribes, Bo!

How do you know until you try? Trust the invisible interposing hand of the free market!!



Please listen, I understand that it must be alarming for us to be-



Ahhh!

Die, invaders!

THUNK!

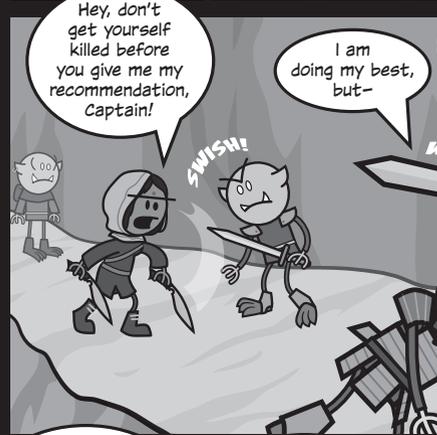
THUNK!



Oh! I knew this was a bad plan!

We should have surrendered, like I said.

No, that was a bad plan, too! Bad plans, all the way down!!



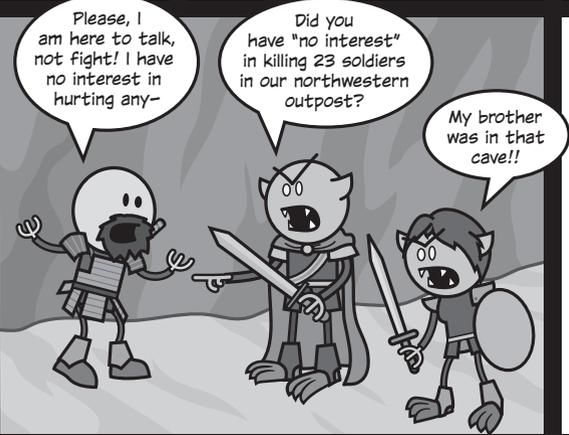
Hey, don't get yourself killed before you give me my recommendation, Captain!

I am doing my best, but-

Your best won't be good enough, flat-tooth!

SWISH!

WOOSH!



Please, I am here to talk, not fight! I have no interest in hurting any-

Did you have "no interest" in killing 23 soldiers in our northwestern outpost?

My brother was in that cave!!



That was not our doing, and that's what I want to discuss with your-

Lies! The outpost's cook escaped and told us everything!



-leader about-

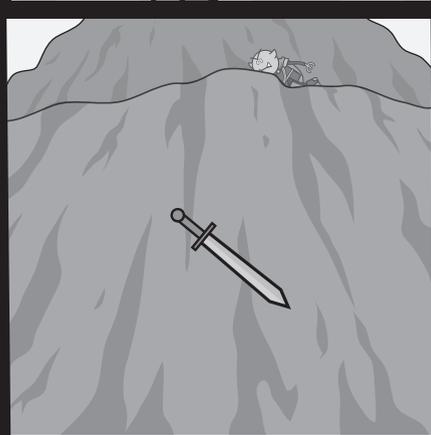
-Nmmgh!!



POW!



PUNT!



-about how difficult diplomacy is when one cannot finish a single sentence!



Now. May we speak like two civilized men, or do we need to keep fighting?

Feh. Spew whatever words you want. None of us will listen to your human lies.

Umm, actually...



I'd, uh...

I'll listen to whatever they have to say.

If that's OK.



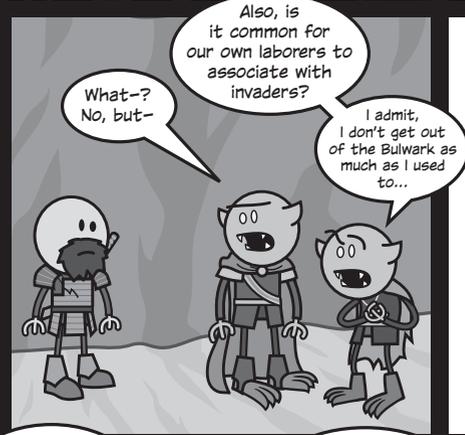
Get out of here, cleric! Slink back to the Supreme Leader's shadow where you belong while we kill these marauders!

Right, sorry. But, umm...they don't really seem to be doing much actual marauding, do they?



Is that your tactical assessment, priest? What do **you** know about war?

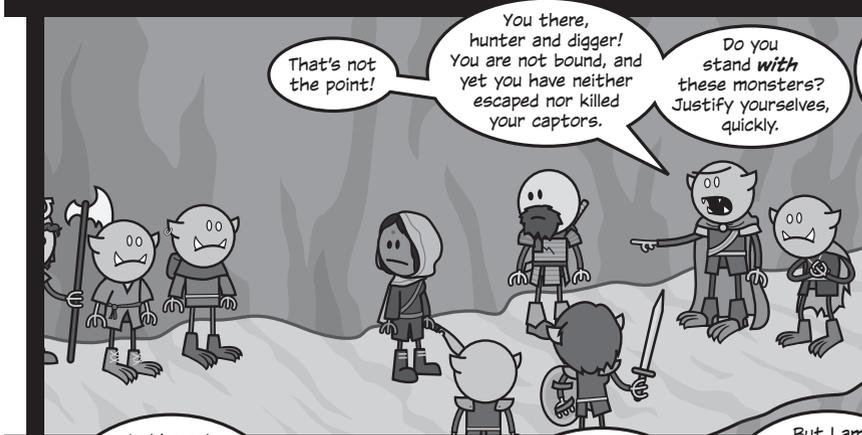
Oh, not much, true. Is it normal for an enemy on whom you've turned your back to refrain from stabbing you?



What--? No, but--

Also, is it common for our own laborers to associate with invaders?

I admit, I don't get out of the Bulwark as much as I used to...



That's not the point!

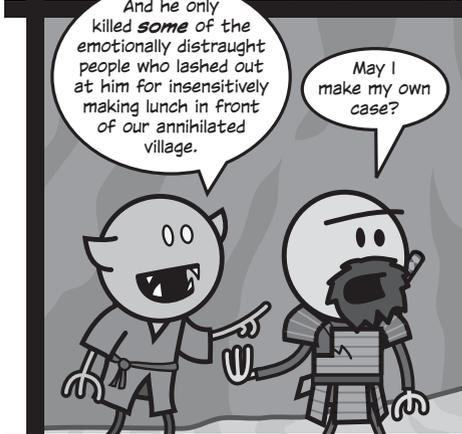
You there, hunter and digger! You are not bound, and yet you have neither escaped nor killed your captors.

Do you stand *with* these monsters? Justify yourselves, quickly.

Well, uh...I know he's a human, but he's not *that* bad of a guy. You know, compared to the rest.

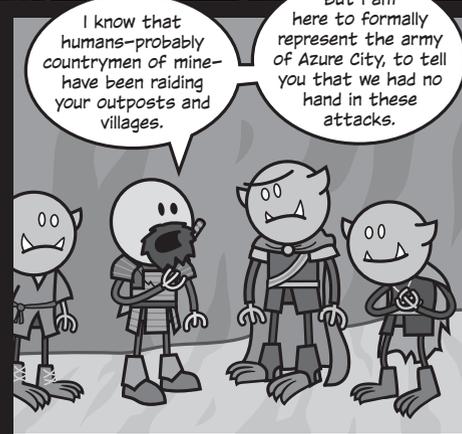
I mean, he could be a lot worse.

He saved me from drowning in a river! And lost his hat!



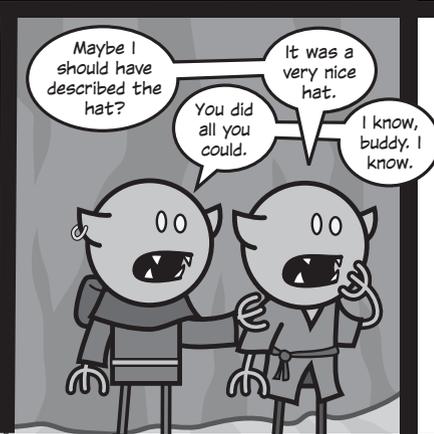
And he only killed *some* of the emotionally distraught people who lashed out at him for insensitively making lunch in front of our annihilated village.

May I make my own case?



I know that humans—probably countrymen of mine—have been raiding your outposts and villages.

But I am here to formally represent the army of Azure City, to tell you that we had no hand in these attacks.

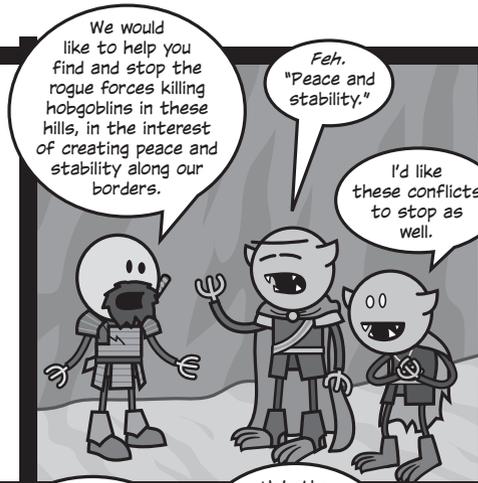


Maybe I should have described the hat?

You did all you could.

It was a very nice hat.

I know, buddy. I know.



We would like to help you find and stop the rogue forces killing hobgoblins in these hills, in the interest of creating peace and stability along our borders.

Feh. "Peace and stability."

I'd like these conflicts to stop as well.



As you can see, we've worked hard to build one of the largest goblinoid settlements on the surface.

War with you humans will only weaken everything we've accomplished.

Remember your place, worm!

It is the Supreme Leader alone who has brought us to glory, and the Supreme Leader knows that only by driving the humans out can we ever be truly secure!

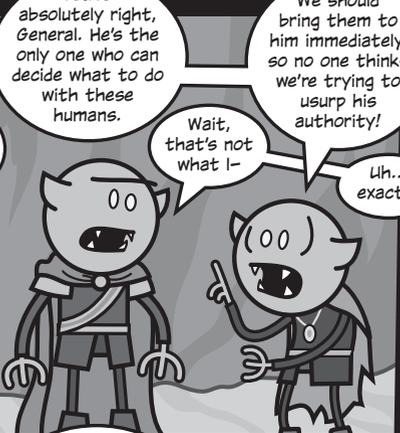


Hmm, that's certainly true. The Supreme Leader is supreme; it's right there in his name.

He's the only one that can make important decisions for our people.

Right!

And don't ever forget it, you spineless dog.



You're absolutely right, General. He's the only one who can decide what to do with these humans.

Wait, that's not what I-

We should bring them to him immediately, so no one thinks we're trying to usurp his authority!

Uh... exactly.



Your fancy words will not prevent them from receiving judgment at the Supreme Leader's hands, fool!

Take their weapons!

My humble apologies for interfering.



The only way that man is taking my kukris is if he falls off the cliff after I've buried both of them in his ribcage.

My associate will stay here, with our weapons.

You think that will save you? When the Leader orders your deaths, we'll just kill her wherever she stands.



I guess it's just as well I left my sword on Lustre...

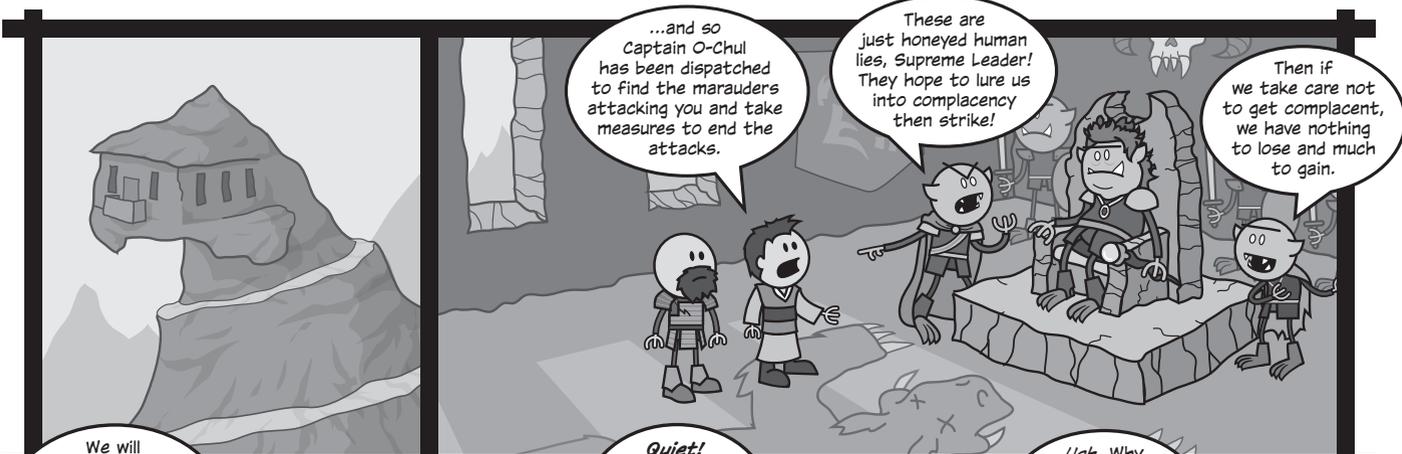
Captain, I'm not really comfortable walking into a den of extra-beefy hobgoblin bodyguards without a weapon.

Luckily, your comfort level is not very high on my list of mission priorities, Private Zhou.



Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.





...and so Captain O-Chul has been dispatched to find the marauders attacking you and take measures to end the attacks.

These are just honeyed human lies, Supreme Leader! They hope to lure us into complacency then strike!

Then if we take care not to get complacent, we have nothing to lose and much to gain.



We will lose troops and spend valuable resources in a battle with the humans that we cannot win.

It would be better to invest in food production, to increase our-



Quiet! You disgrace the Dark One with your unnatural aversion to conflict!

Oww! I repent my shameful reasonableness, Supreme Leader!



Ugh. Why won't a *proper* hobgoblin cleric rise to claim your position?

I will weep that day, for I will no longer be able to witness your peerless wisdom up close, Magnificent Master of All.



As for you, human... these others you speak of, they are not your king's subjects?



No, we actually think they are.

It's just that we don't think they're, uh, obeying him. Right now.



Then your king is weak! He cannot control his own men!

He must send an errand boy to ask for our help! *Ha ha ha!*

You are so mighty that the ineffectual human aristocrat seeks your aide!

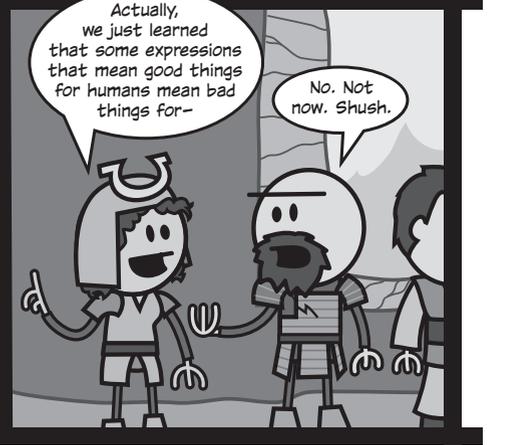


Lord Shoji is not weak! He's strong!

He's so strong that the only way his people dare to disobey him is by skulking around behind his back, like cowards in the night!



Wouldn't a coward attack in the daytime, when everyone's eyes are weak?



Actually, we just learned that some expressions that mean good things for humans mean bad things for-

No. Not now. Shush.



Look, I have it on good authority that our king would never authorize attacks like this.

You seem very certain, boy. How do you know what your ruler might do?

Because they're cruel, and unnecessary. They're hurting hobgoblin civilians for no apparent reason.

So what?

Yes-so what? Why does it matter if hobgoblins die?

They're your own people!

"So what"??

Yes, they are. And I understand why it matters to *me* if hobgoblins die. I want to know why it matters to *you*, or your king, if hobgoblins die.

Is that... Are you asking me to explain the basic concept of...?

Uh, OK, well...

Our gods teach us that life is sacred and that individual people—even from different cultures—have inherent worth and dignity that should be respected.

They don't mention hobgoblins *per se*, but as Azurites we believe that this extends as clearly to nonhumans as it does to other human races.

We are not human, or even demihuman, yet you claim to want to protect us. Why should I believe that you care one way or the other?

See, Azure City was originally founded by a union of six distinct cultures that joined together after the downfall of the—

No. I mean, yes, I suppose, but it's deeper than that. It's part of our heritage.

We parley with you because it is in our strategic self-interest to do so.

Oh, so you're trying to score points with your animal gods, then? You parley with us to make them pleased?

As your advisor said, a military conflict would be costly, and our long-term interests would be better served deploying our forces elsewhere.

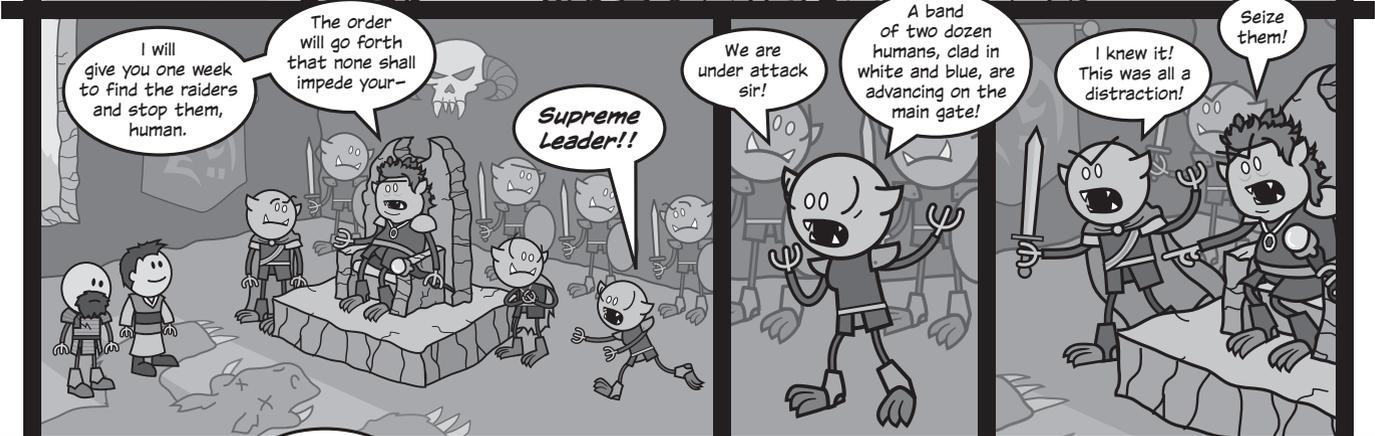
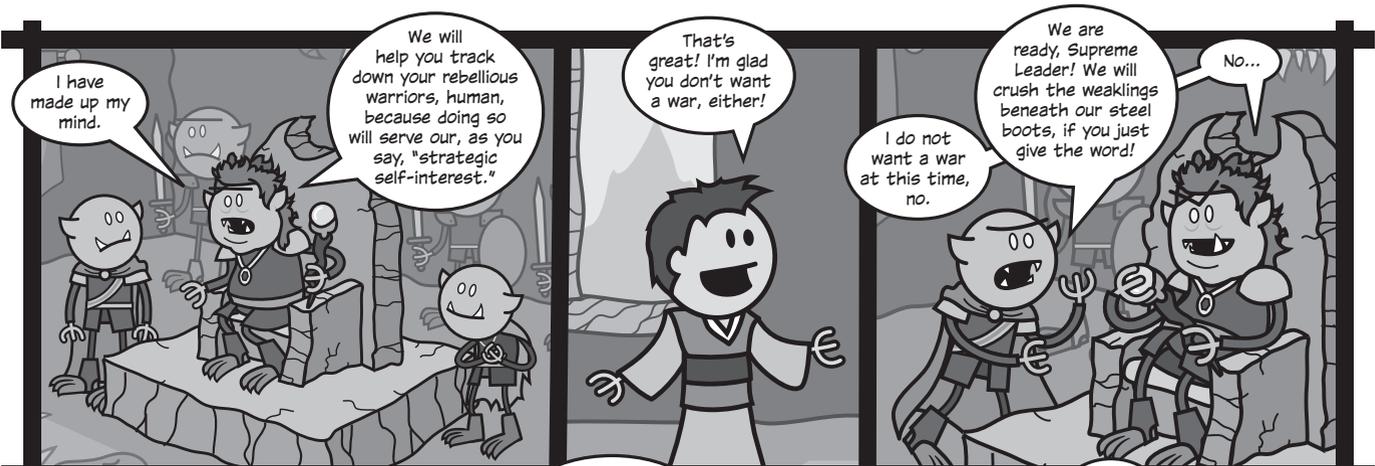
Ah! At last, someone who makes sense! I was beginning to think your king had sent a madman to speak for him!

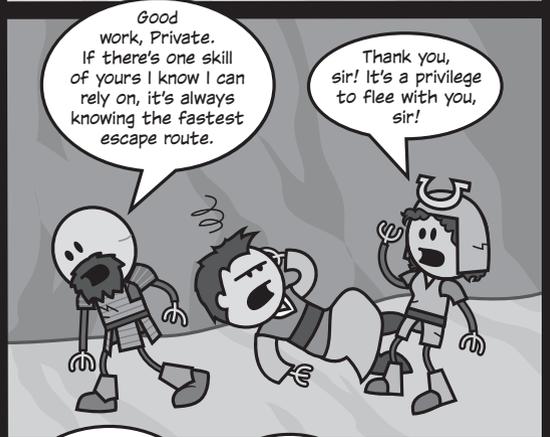
"Inherent dignity"—ha! Pull the other one, why don't you?

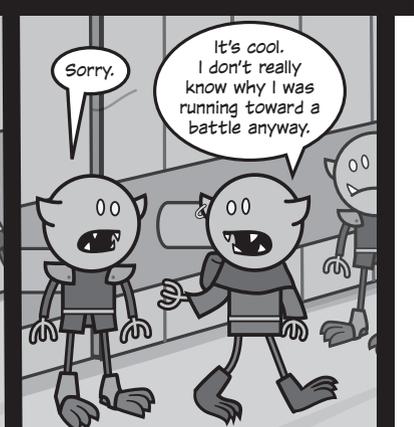
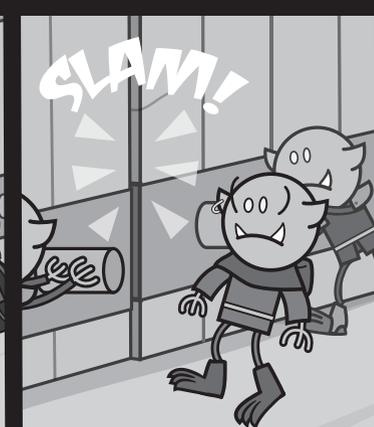
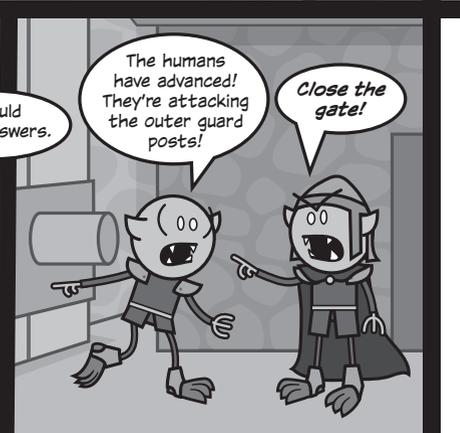
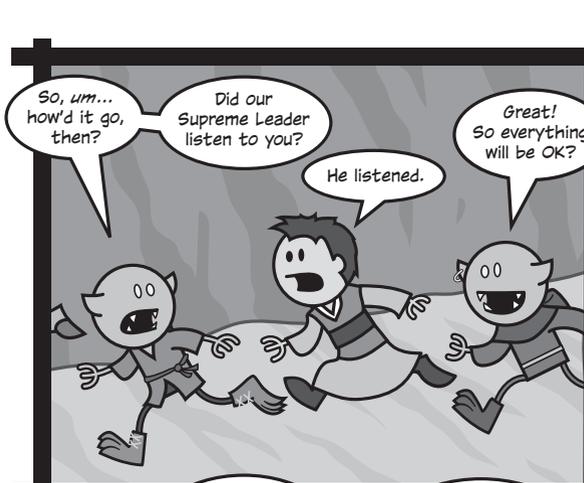
A man that does not care about those who are different is always suspicious of a man that does.

Easier to provide an explanation that fits their worldview that has the virtue of also being true.

Since a mounting death toll among your people would be the primary cause of such a conflict, saving hobgoblin lives saves human lives.



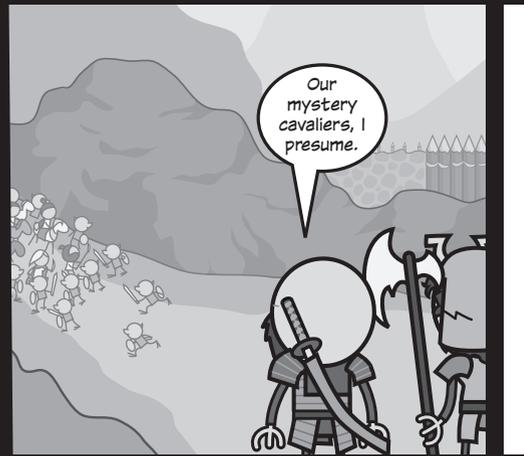






Captain, look!

I see them, Zhou.



Our mystery cavaliers, I presume.



Wretched goblinoids! Your time has come at last!

The shining light of the Twelve Gods now illuminates your many sins.



Captain, I don't recognize their unit. Do you think they work for one of the nobles?

No...I think they *are* nobles. Lesser ones, at least.

Wow. When my husband said you people were special, I didn't think he meant the aristocracy was leading beat-downs on the local monster population.



What?

Look, politics aside, you have to admire that kind of hands-on leadership when you see it.

HALT!



I am
Captain O-Chul
of Azure City.

By command
of General Nhek of
Blueriver Legion, I
order you to cease your
hostile actions and
submit yourself to
my custody.

Should we...
stop? Sir?

I have
always appreciated
your sense of humor,
Sister Sato.

Hello, Captain.
I greet you in the
name of the
Twelve Gods.

I am
Commander
Gin-Jun, of the
Sapphire
Guard.



The Sapphire
Guard? Then they
do exist!

I regret to
inform you that I
must decline your
request in its
entirety.

Rather,
I command
you to remove
yourself from
these premises
forthwith.

No harm
will come to you
or your soldiers as
you withdraw,
Captain.

Maybe we
should withdraw,
sir.

We're not
going anywhere,
Zhou.



"Commander" is not a rank that I recognize.

Under what authority do you presume to order me?

The most supreme authority of all, soldier: That of the Twelve Gods of the South themselves.

We are their sacred warriors, and we have come to search this den of evil for an unholy abomination. Now again: Leave this place at once as we complete our divine mission.

So they're some kind of holy order? And they're just going around fighting people?

On their own? Is that how humans do things?

No.

Listen to me: You know as well as I do that even the clerics of the gods are subject to the secular laws of our nation.

And those laws put the authority of the military on issues of external security above that of your-

I think I have been very reasonable listening to you thus far. Don't you agree, Sato?

Yes, sir. Very restrained, sir.

We are going through that gate behind you and we are searching that settlement for our quarry-

-and any hobgoblin that strikes at us will get whatever measure of justice they have earned.



No, no, no! The leaders aren't going to just let them come in and look around!

I don't think they think they would. I don't think they care.

Your raids on these outposts are provoking the hobgoblins into retaliating against our farmers!

You must stop this, or innocent lives will be lost!

Don't you know what is happening?

If they choose to commit violence to avenge their worthless dead, then the weight of that decision rests on their own consciences, not ours.

And if these savages are a threat to commoners such as yourself, all the more reason to thin their numbers.

Stand Aside.



I do not give a damn about the ethical ramifications of revenge! I just want to save lives!

I am done. If he will not remove himself from the road, I will remove him.

Sir, we can't raise our blades against an officer of the Azurite army carrying out his orders.

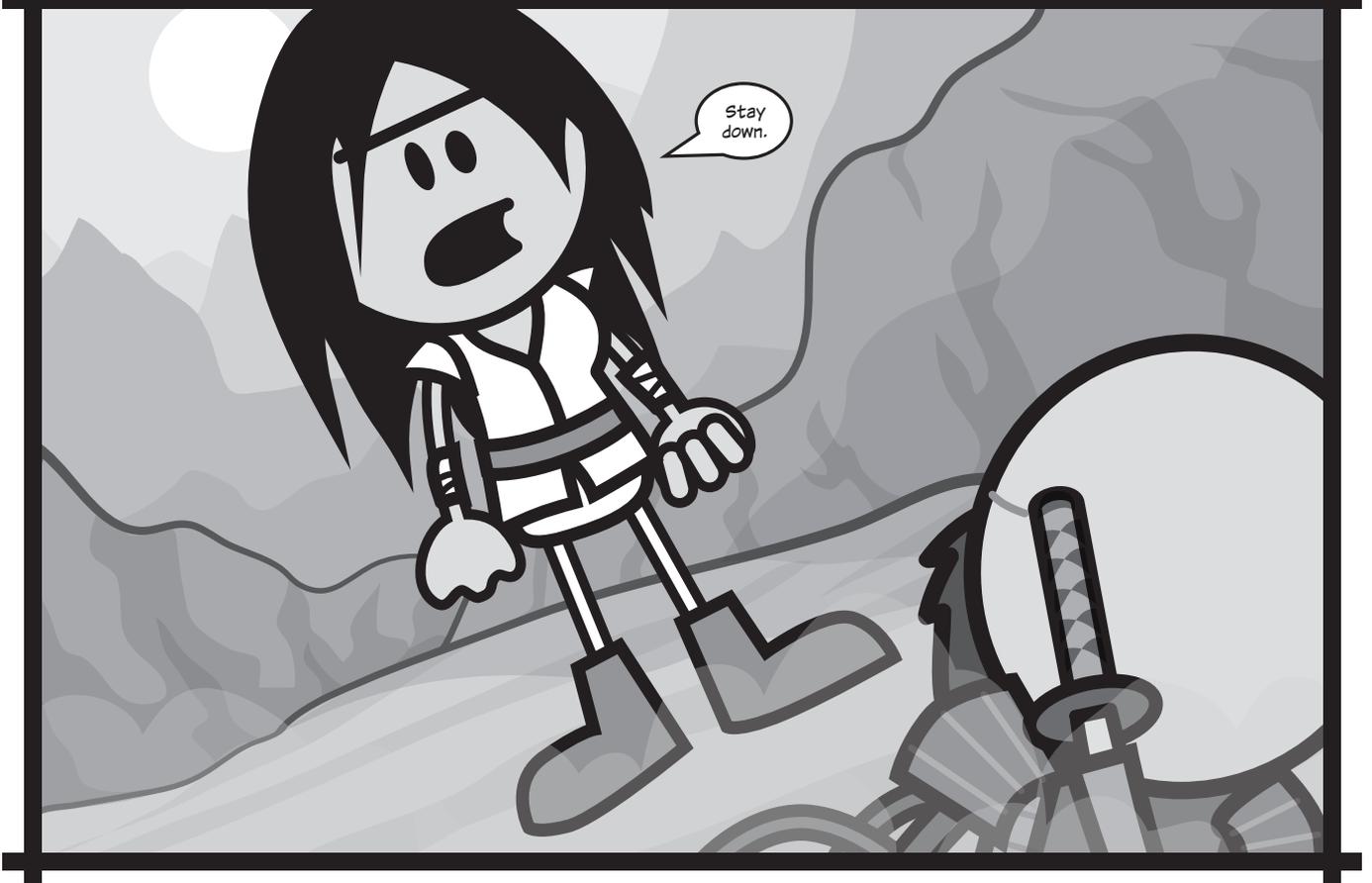
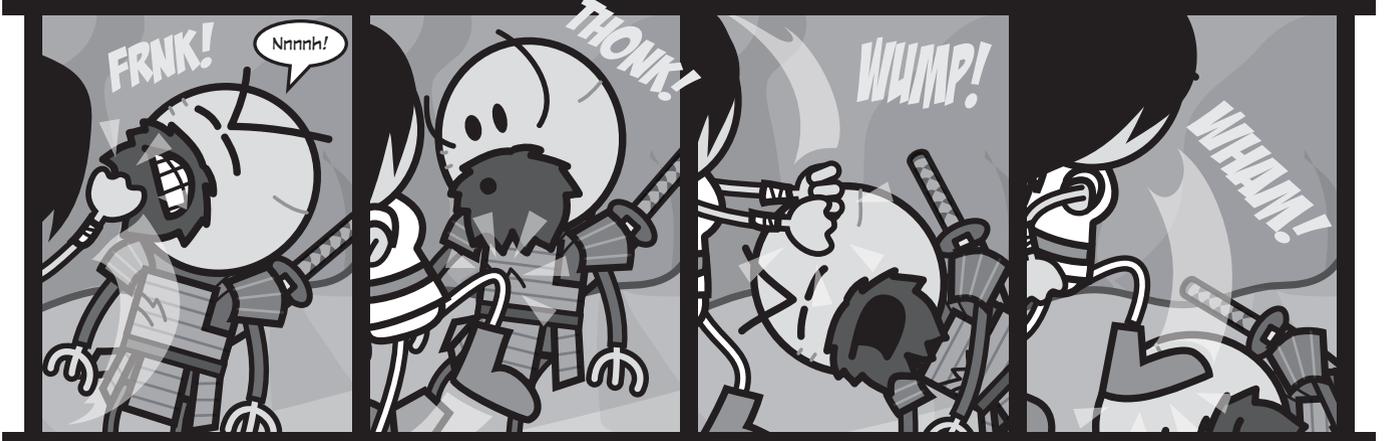
Who said anything about blades?

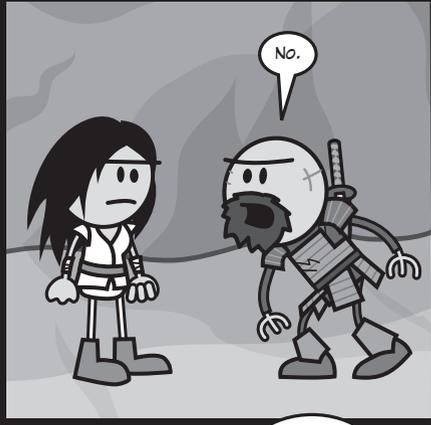
ACOLYTE!

What is wrong with this aristocratic fool? Is he trying to start a war? General Nhek will see them all in irons before she lets him-

Captain!!



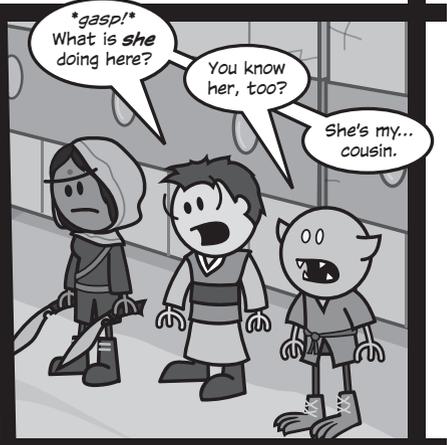




No.



POW!
POW!



gasp!
What is she doing here?

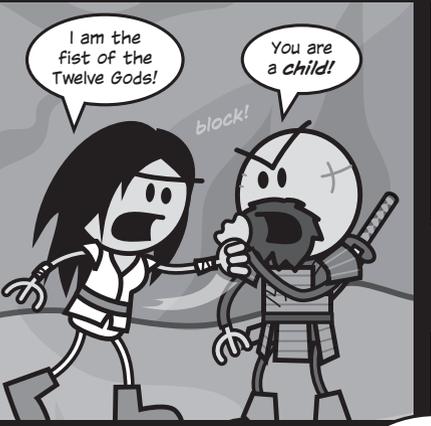
You know her, too?

She's my... cousin.



Who are you people? What do you want?

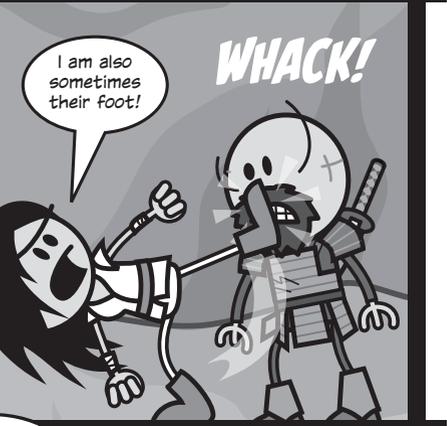
block!



I am the fist of the Twelve Gods!

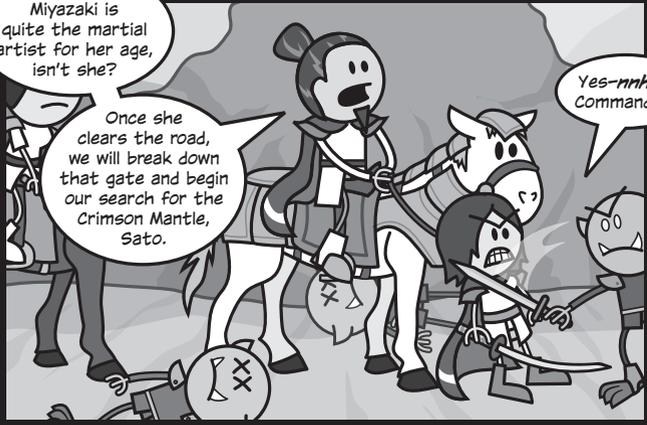
block!

You are a child!



I am also sometimes their foot!

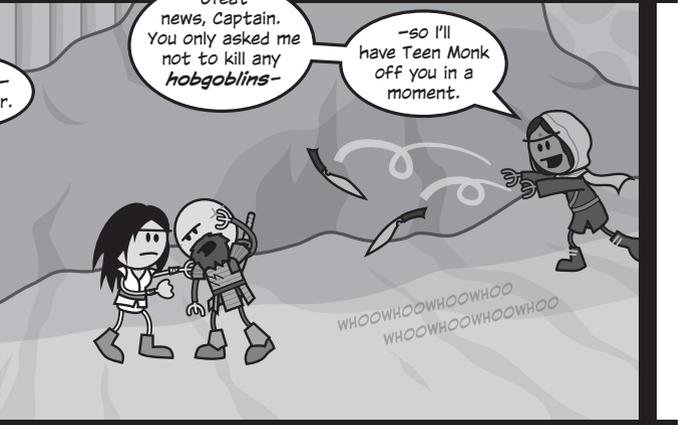
WHACK!



Acolyte Miyazaki is quite the martial artist for her age, isn't she?

Once she clears the road, we will break down that gate and begin our search for the Crimson Mantle, Sato.

Yes-nnh!-Commander.



Great news, Captain. You only asked me not to kill any hobgoblins-

-so I'll have Teen Monk off you in a moment.

WHOOWHOOWHOOWHOO
WHOOWHOOWHOOWHOO



WHOOWHOOWHOOWHOO

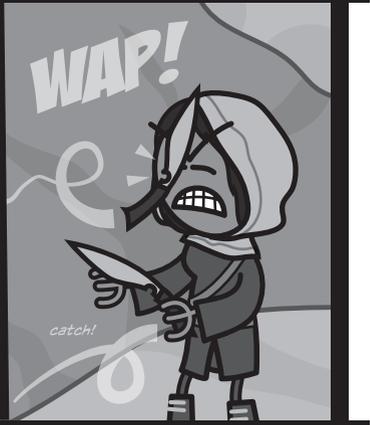
WHOOWHOOWHOOWHOO



WHOOWHOOWHOOWHOO

KLUNK!

WHOOWHOOWHOOWHOO



WAP!

catch!

Enough!

Gah!

Let go of me!

Kapoor, if those cavaliers make it inside that gate then we will have a full-scale war on our hands!

What do we do? What do we do??

I meant specifically!

We need to stop their progress.

You! Do your people have anything we can stop them with?

You mean besides the big wall and the gate and the archers and soldiers and all the spikes?

...Yes.

No, that's pretty much it!

There has to be something! *Think!*

I don't know! Dropping you people in the river was our best plan ever! I can't come up with two ideas that good in such a short time!

...

We don't have a river to drop them in-

I know that! I already looked!

-but... huh.

What? What is it?

I have an idea, but I don't necessarily like it.

Your ideas all involve running away.

So? I never like any of my ideas!

Right, and I feel bad about all of them, but I do them anyway!

Fine. Stay up against the gate and hold on to Rich Boy.

Digging Guy, you're with me.

Me? Uh, OK.

WHACK!

Uh, Captain? Saha has a plan, I think. Are you doing OK?

Can't talk when I'm taking a beating, Zhou!!

Well, he yelled at you. That probably means he's OK, right?

If he suddenly gets super-nice and forgiving, I'll know he's about to die heroically.

So...what are we doing?

Aren't they in the other direction?

Stopping the cavalry.

Yep. They're downhill-

-or downstream as the case may be.

If you can't drop them in a river, drop a river on them, am I right?

Oh please don't tell me what you're planning on doing.

We're going to sabotage the water reservoir and flood the path.

That's exactly what I didn't want you to tell me!!

I can't do that! The reservoir is our greatest building achievement!

We have a holiday for it and everything! *I don't want to be the Grinch That Stole Reservoir Day!*

Calm down. Obviously they drain it from time to time or else why would one side be made of replaceable logs?

We'll just be aggressively moving up their maintenance schedule.

That seems like a small price to pay to not have like 30 paladins rampaging around your town.

Can't we ask someone else if this is a good idea? Like, a subchief or something?

There's no one else here! Are you helping or not?

Ugh, I wish I was smart enough to make decisions.

I guess... I guess I'm helping?

OK, good. I figure if I start cutting the ropes and you chip away at the tar...

Although you don't have a shovel.

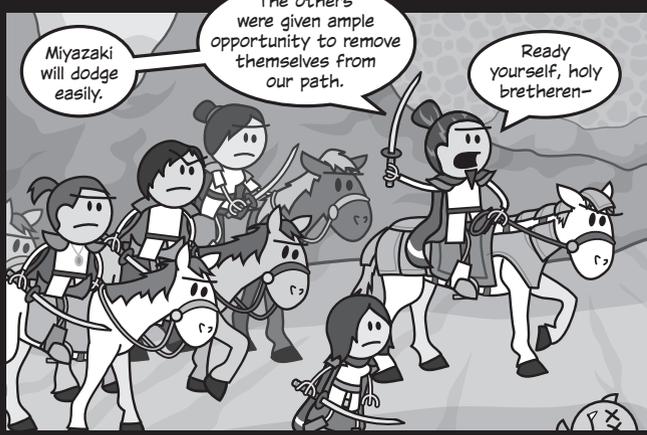
Please. I carry a masterwork spade at all times.

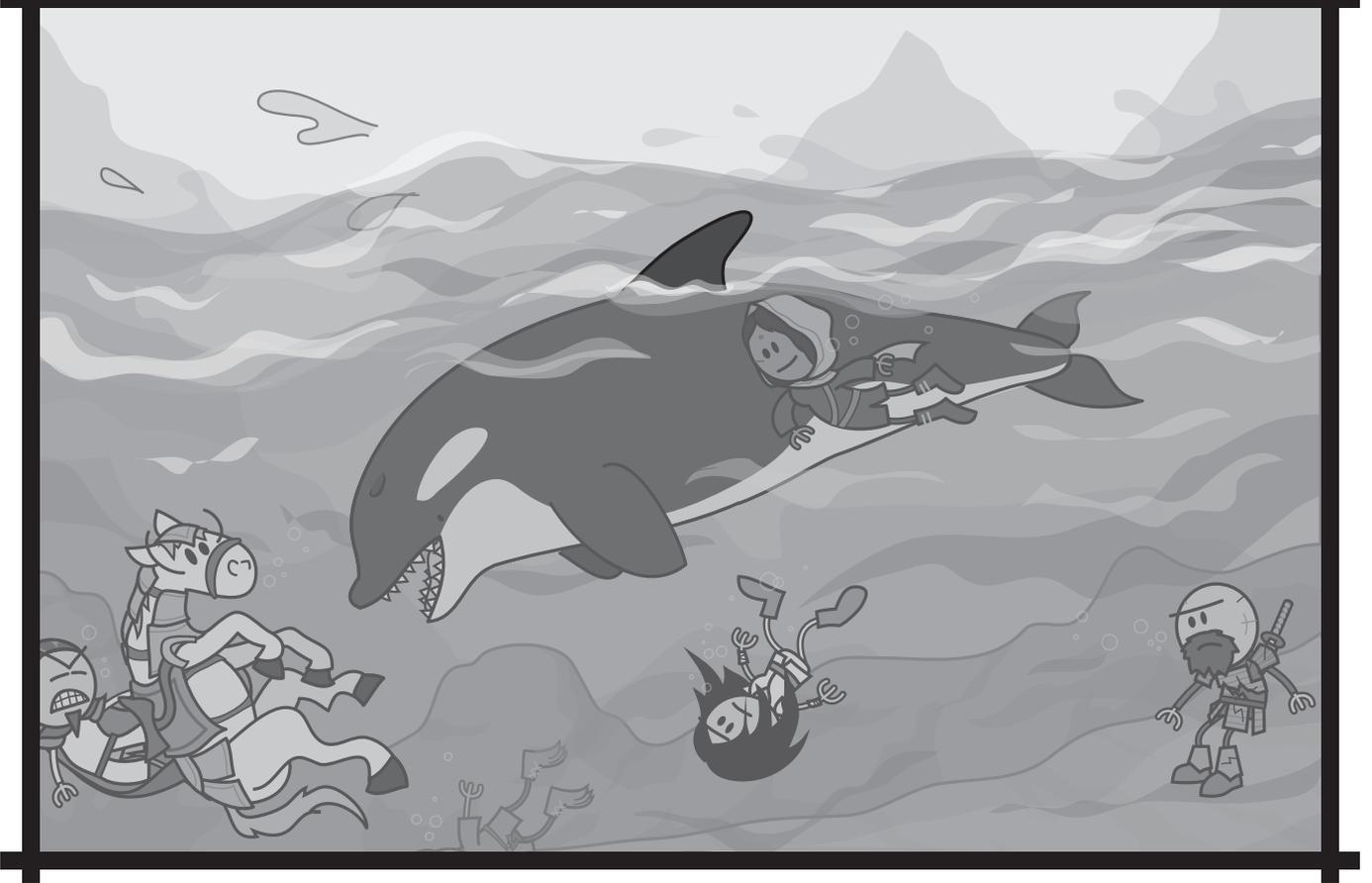
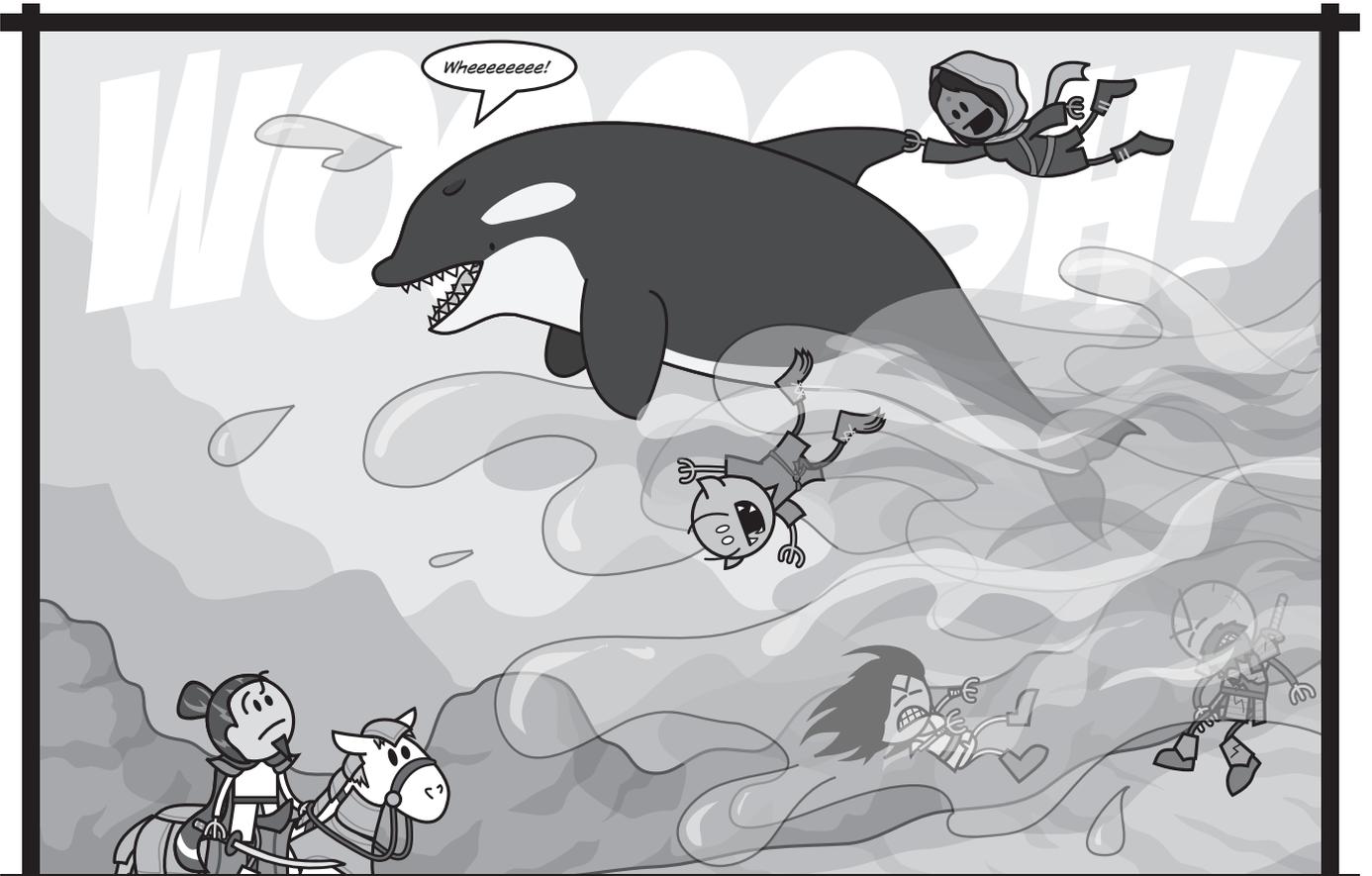
But it doesn't really matter because I don't think the two of us can break a dam anyway.

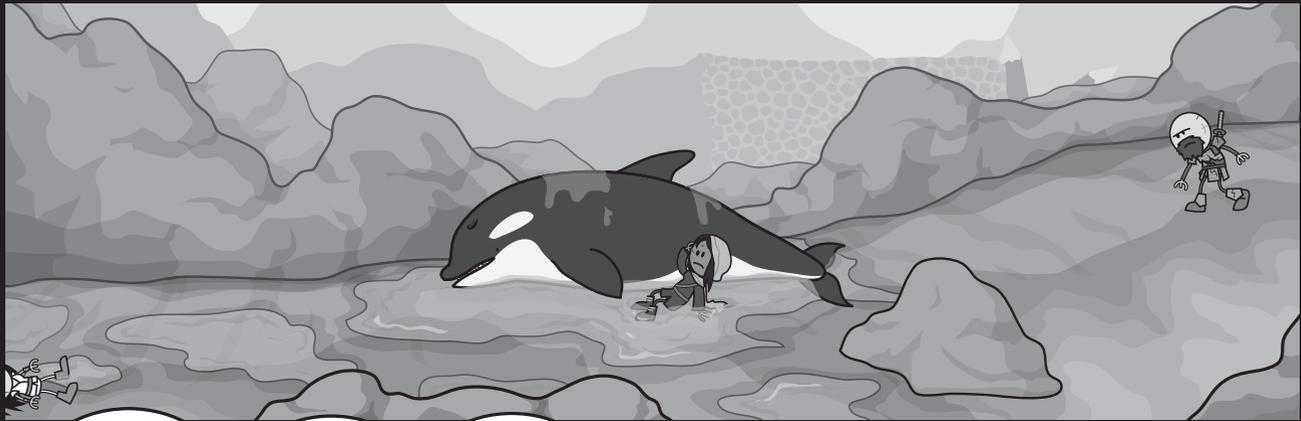
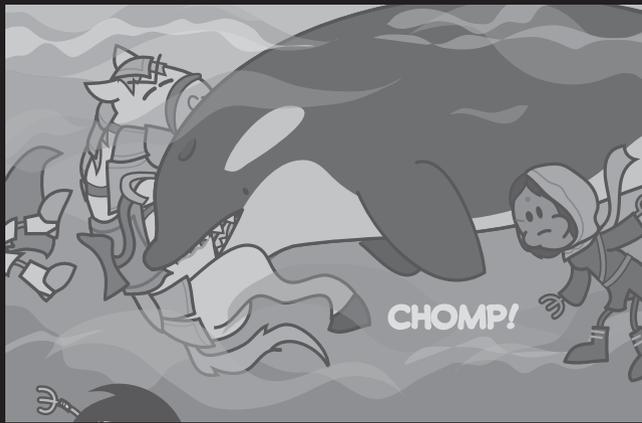
Are you trying to figure out a way to help us break it?

No, I already know a way.

I'm just trying to figure out whether or not General Nhek will reimburse me for it.







Sato, reform the line and take down that gate!

Commander, we can't!

I don't want to hear excuses! Just do it!

Sir, the road is mud! The horses that didn't get banished back to the Upper Planes won't be able to charge-

-and without a charge, we have no chance to knock down the gate!

Sapphire Guard, fall in and withdraw.

You heard me!

Sir?

We will camp tonight and return in the morning, when the mud will be dry and our mounts refreshed.

Sir, if the Bearer of the Crimson Mantle is inside, he'll have time to-

You think I don't know that!?

Whoa... what a rush.

We'll simply have to pray to the Twelve Gods that if the Mantle has evaded our grasp once again-

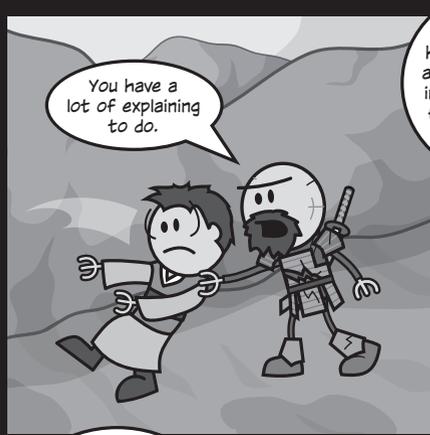
-there will at least be enough clues within those walls to discern its Bearer's destination.

SHLNK.

Even if we have to kill every wretched hobgoblin present in order to examine those clues in peace.

gasp!

Oh, damn, not Ditch-Digger Dude! Come on!



You have a lot of explaining to do.

A strange noble I've never heard of shows up and inserts himself into my mission to find the hobgoblin leadership, and then—

—moments after I succeed at that task—
C-captain—



—the very forces that are disrupting this region miraculously appear two steps behind me?



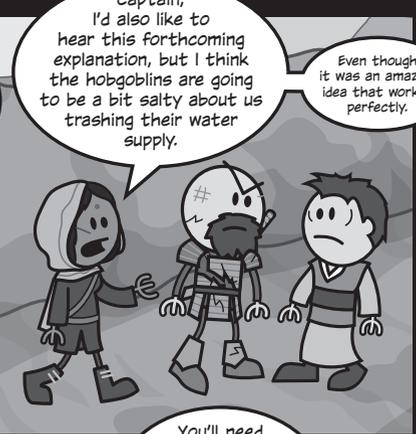
A force comprised entirely of nobles, including his *cousin*??

Captain, it's not what it looks like! I swear!



Good! Because right now, what it looks like is that the hobgoblin general was right!

It looks like you used my mission to lead this "Sapphire Guard" right here!



Captain, I'd also like to hear this forthcoming explanation, but I think the hobgoblins are going to be a bit salty about us trashing their water supply.

Even though it was an amazing idea that worked perfectly.



We should beat it before they get their bearings.



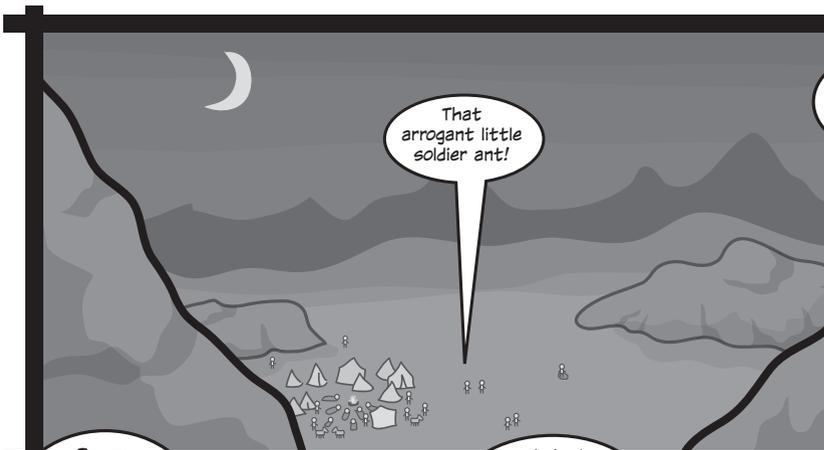
...The tunnel.

We'll fall back to the cave with the secret tunnel.

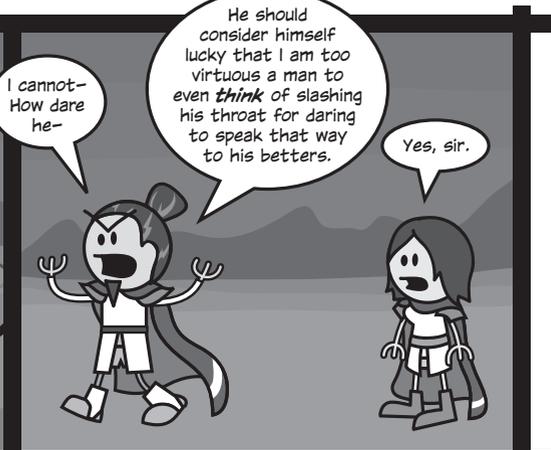


You'll need your donkey to ride the hell away from here if I don't like what you have to say.





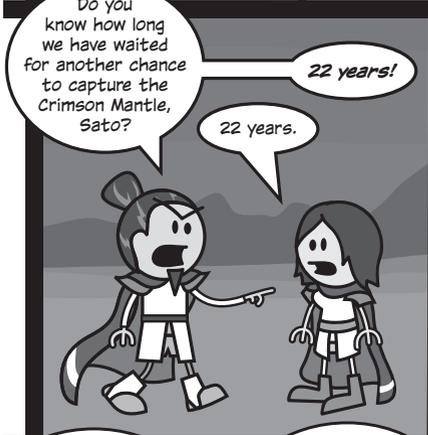
That arrogant little soldier ant!



I cannot- How dare he-

He should consider himself lucky that I am too virtuous a man to even *think* of slashing his throat for daring to speak that way to his betters.

Yes, sir.



Do you know how long we have waited for another chance to capture the Crimson Mantle, Sato?

22 years!

22 years.



We had it in our grasp. Before your time, when I was just a new recruit.

We had it!



It was a green goblin village. We interrupted some sort of unholy ceremony and valiantly engaged the bearer. And do you know what was the worst part?



We won! We defeated him soundly! But back then, we didn't know it was the Mantle itself that was our enemy.

We thought the red cloak was merely a symbol of office-that it didn't matter what happened to it as long as the creature wearing it was dealt with.



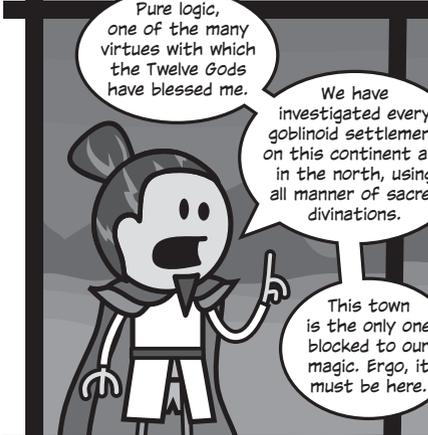
I even remember some of my compatriots actually congratulating themselves on not being so vain as to collect the cloak as a trophy.

A bit more vanity might have saved the world!



And now we are finally on the doorstep of fixing our tragic mistake, and one lowly commoner stands in our way?!?

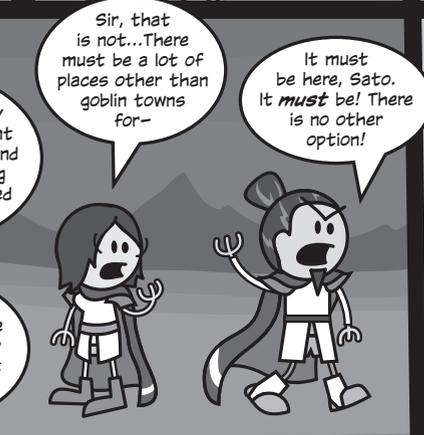
Sir...I hesitate to ask, but...how do you *know* the Crimson Mantle is inside that hobgoblin town?



Pure logic, one of the many virtues with which the Twelve Gods have blessed me.

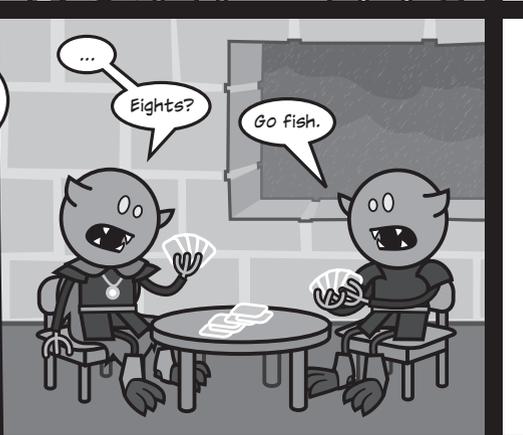
We have investigated every goblinoid settlement on this continent and in the north, using all manner of sacred divinations.

This town is the only one blocked to our magic. Ergo, it must be here.



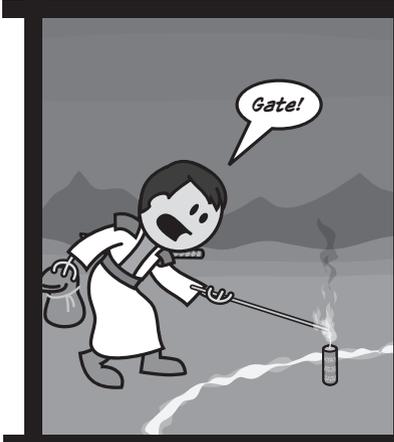
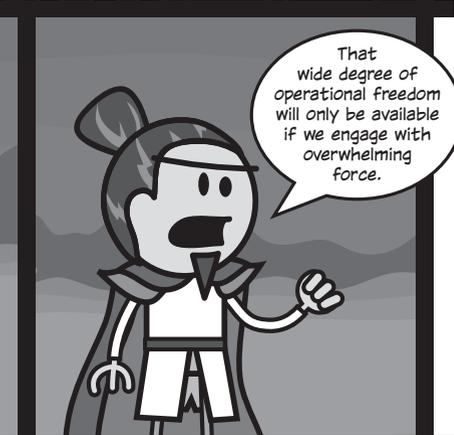
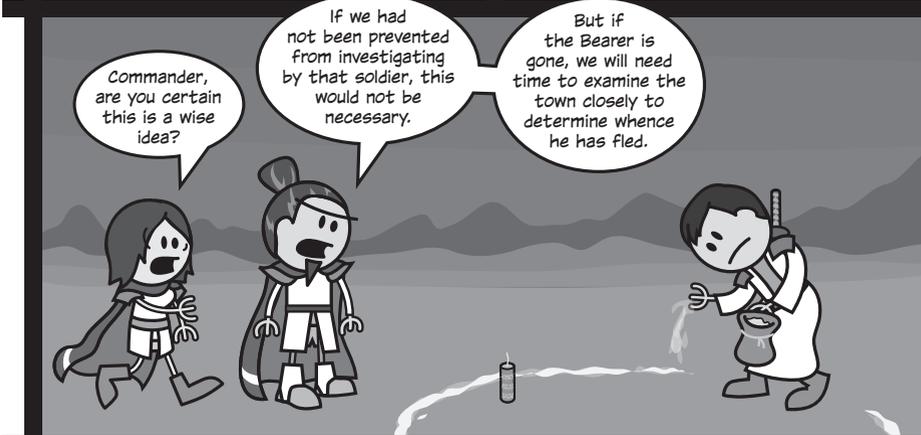
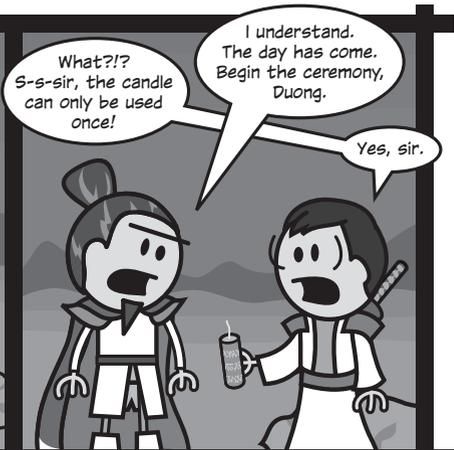
Sir, that is not...There must be a lot of places other than goblin towns for-

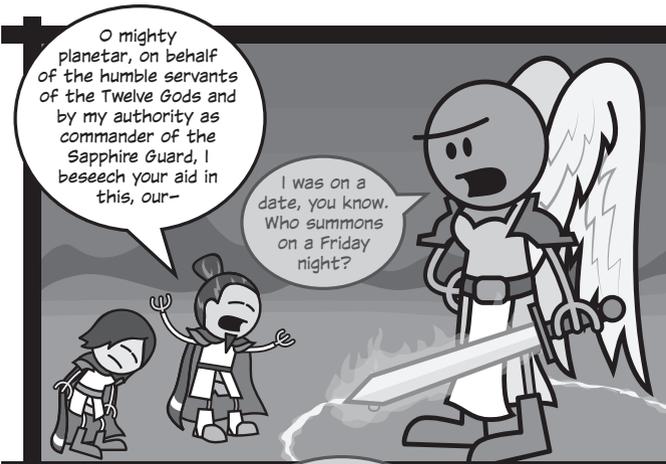
It must be here, Sato. It *must* be! There is no other option!



Eights?

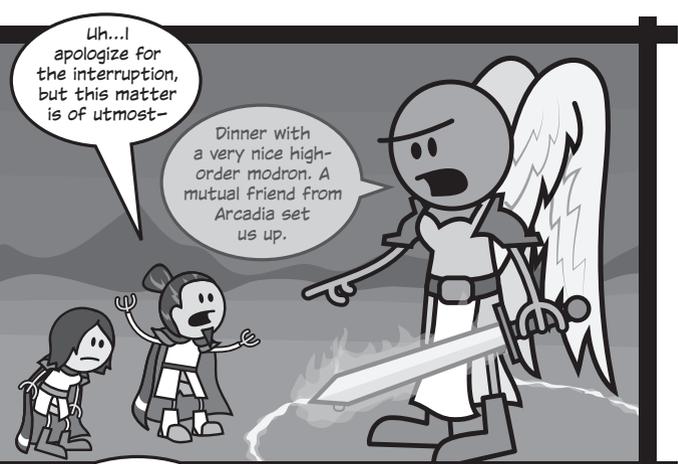
Go fish.





O mighty planetar, on behalf of the humble servants of the Twelve Gods and by my authority as commander of the Sapphire Guard, I beseech your aid in this, our-

I was on a date, you know. Who summons on a Friday night?



Uh...I apologize for the interruption, but this matter is of utmost-

Dinner with a very nice high-order modron. A mutual friend from Arcadia set us up.



You went to dinner wearing armor and bearing a holy sword?

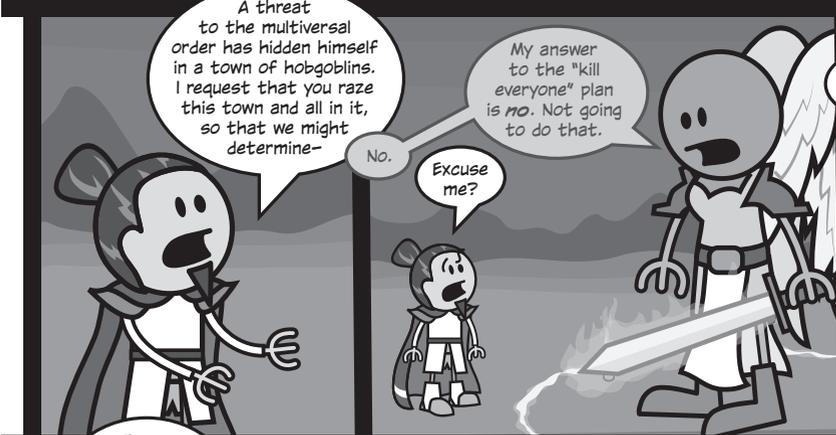
Can't be too careful.

I also arranged for a friend to issue forth a heavenly clarion call an hour in, just in case I wanted to ditch.



Um, right. Anyway, mighty planetar, the Sapphire Guard requests your aid in a manner of cosmic import.

Yup, got that. Hurry it up, the appetizers are probably out already.



A threat to the multiversal order has hidden himself in a town of hobgoblins. I request that you raze this town and all in it, so that we might determine-

No.

Excuse me?

My answer to the "kill everyone" plan is *no*. Not going to do that.



But the Bearer-

Not going to slaughter a bunch of mortals just because you asked. Try again.

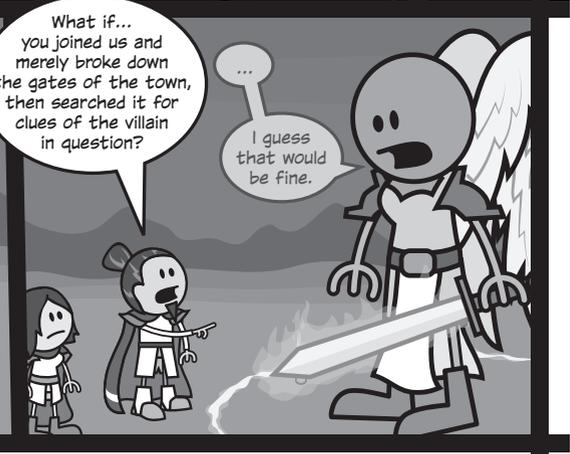


Then... perhaps if you simply destroyed the town without necessarily going out of your way to kill the-

Still a hard pass.

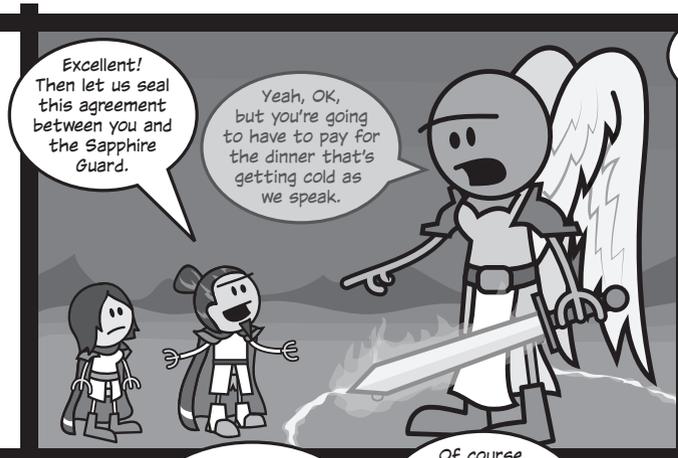


Are we done here?



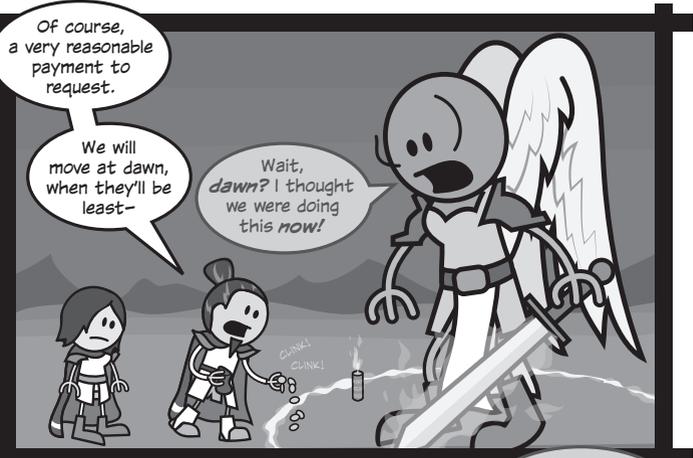
What if... you joined us and merely broke down the gates of the town, then searched it for clues of the villain in question?

I guess that would be fine.



Excellent! Then let us seal this agreement between you and the Sapphire Guard.

Yeah, OK, but you're going to have to pay for the dinner that's getting cold as we speak.



Of course, a very reasonable payment to request.

We will move at dawn, when they'll be least-

Wait, dawn? I thought we were doing this now!

CLUNK!
CLUNK!



I am sorry, holy one. My paladins need time before they can summon forth their Celestial war steeds again.



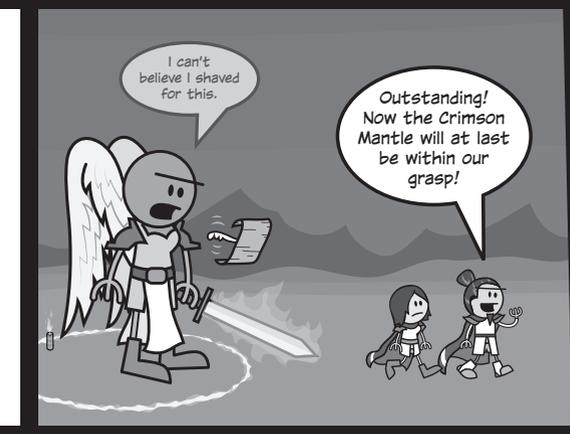
Of course, if you were willing to simply destroy them for us, then there would be no need to wait until-

No, no, fine. We'll do it in the morning.



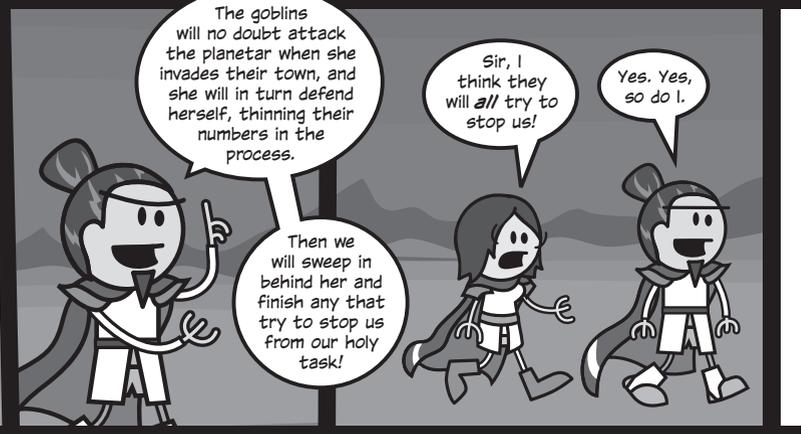
I guess I'll just have to text Quinton-17 and tell it we'll have to reschedule.

POP!



I can't believe I shaved for this.

Outstanding! Now the Crimson Mantle will at last be within our grasp!



The goblins will no doubt attack the planetar when she invades their town, and she will in turn defend herself, thinning their numbers in the process.

Sir, I think they will *all* try to stop us!

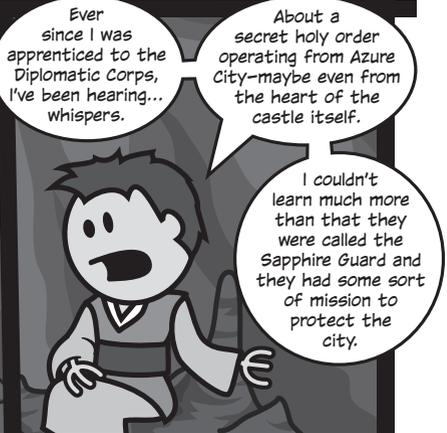
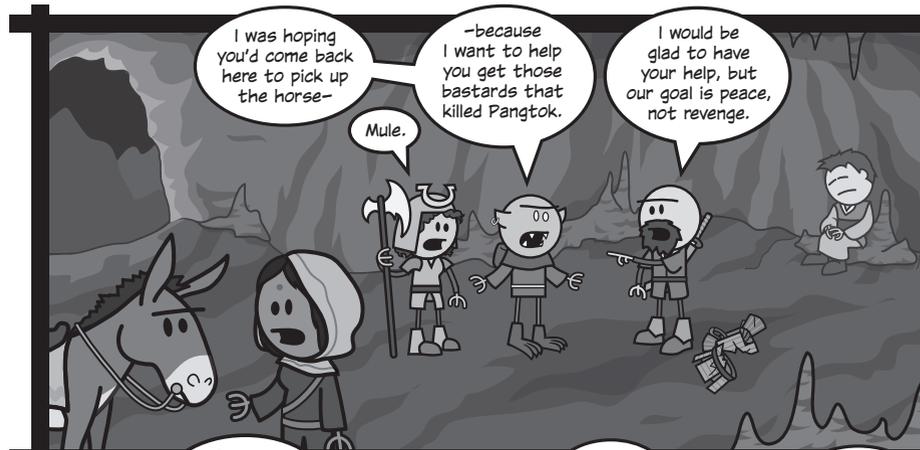
Yes. Yes, so do I.

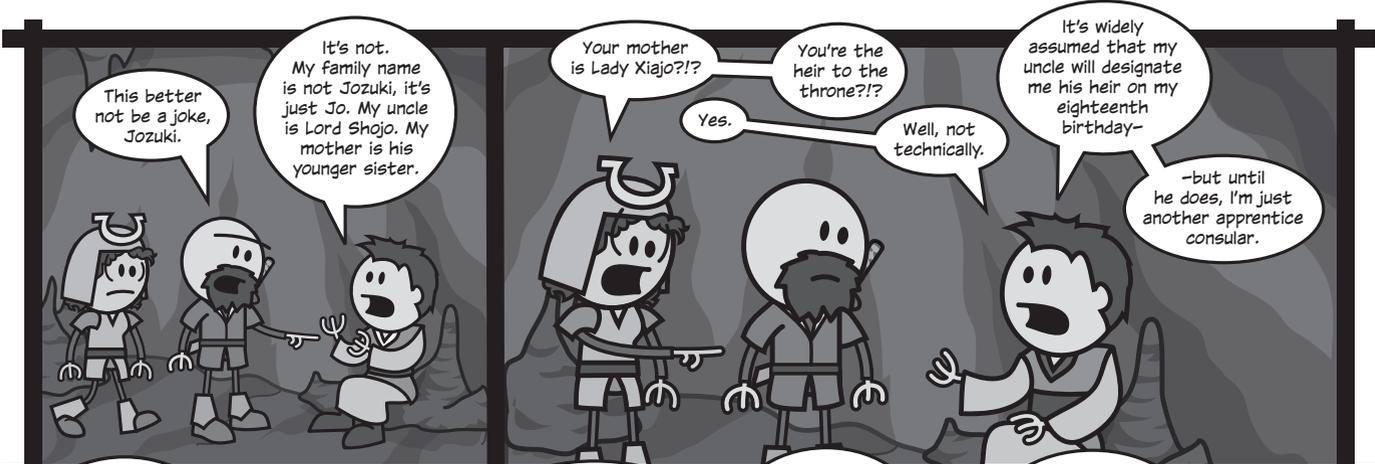
Then we will sweep in behind her and finish any that try to stop us from our holy task!



Sleep well, Subcommander.







This better not be a joke, Jozuki.

It's not. My family name is not Jozuki, it's just Jo. My uncle is Lord Shjo. My mother is his younger sister.

Your mother is Lady Xiajo!?!?

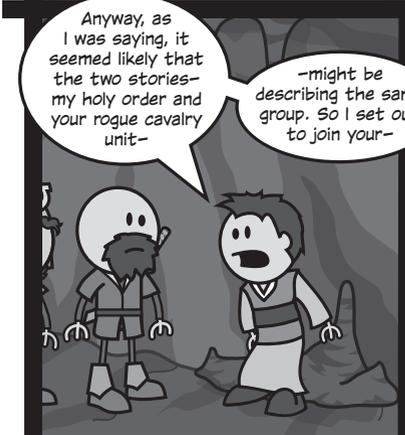
You're the heir to the throne?!?

Yes.

Well, not technically.

It's widely assumed that my uncle will designate me his heir on my eighteenth birthday-

-but until he does, I'm just another apprentice consular.



Anyway, as I was saying, it seemed likely that the two stories-my holy order and your rogue cavalry unit-

-might be describing the same group. So I set out to join your-



My mother has a commemorative plate with you as a baby on it!

Oh, yeah, ha. Yeah, they make one of those for pretty much everything that happens.



So I set out to follow you and your team. Which wasn't easy, since I'm no ranger.

But I eventually followed the smoke from the hobgoblin pyre, and that's when I-



I saved the heir to the throne from drowning in a river!

Yes! Yes, you did, actually.



I got the heir to the throne stabbed by a hobgoblin!!

Um...



I suppose your royal standing does explain how a junior diplomat gets leave to pursue an investigation on the other side of the country.

And I guess I can't get too mad at Nguyen now, either.



I still don't see why you needed to lie about who you were.

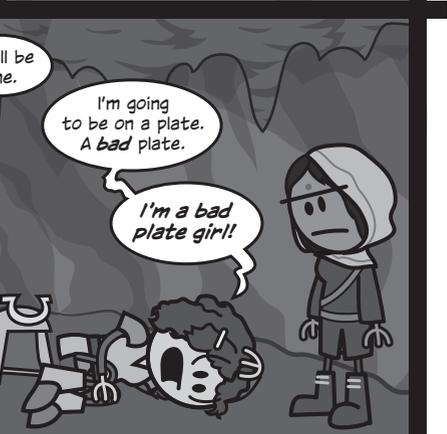
I didn't. Need to lie, that is. I just... did. I'm sorry, Captain.



I wonder... is it possible to use this fact to our strategic advantage?

Is she... going to be OK?

She'll be fine.



I'm going to be on a plate. A bad plate.

I'm a bad plate girl!



Do you have a way of getting a message to your uncle? Magic, or something like that?

No. And he, uh, doesn't know I'm here. And would be mad if he did. Sorry.



Hmmmm.

So if you're King Junior, can't you order these yahoos to pack it in?

I don't have any actual legal authority, no.



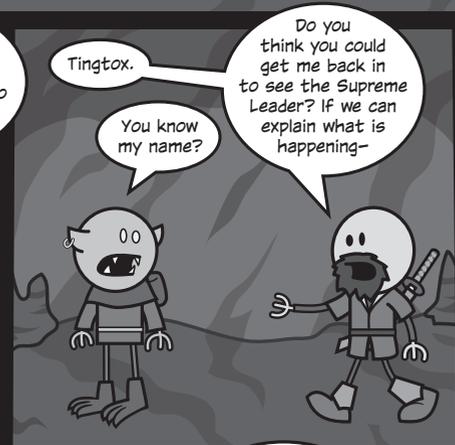
Perhaps, but you may have influence nonetheless. A kind word from someone close to the throne can open many doors.

Normally, I would be inclined to agree. But the presence of my cousin Miko complicates that.



She's my uncle's adopted daughter, and she's clearly on their side. What favors could I grant them that she couldn't?

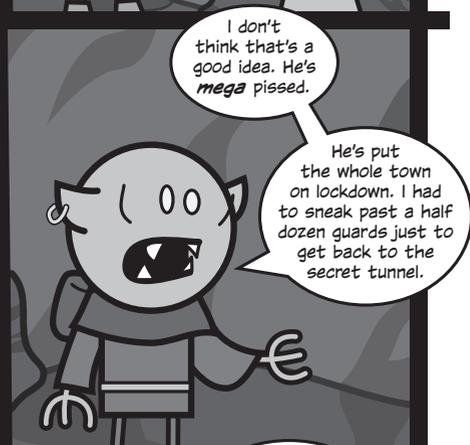
Makes sense. Plus, they seemed pretty hardcore. They *really* want to raid that hobbo village.



Tingtox.

You know my name?

Do you think you could get me back in to see the Supreme Leader? If we can explain what is happening-



I don't think that's a good idea. He's *mega* pissed.

He's put the whole town on lockdown. I had to sneak past a half dozen guards just to get back to the secret tunnel.



He stood in the tower and made a fancy oath that if even one human sets foot within his walls, he was going to declare war on Azure City.

I know it's serious, 'cause I don't think I've ever seen him *stand* before!



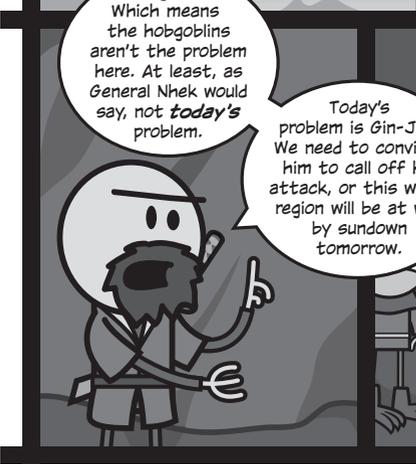
Damn it! We were so close to having an understanding.

I bet that hobgoblin general is pretty stoked he's gonna get his war sooner rather than later.



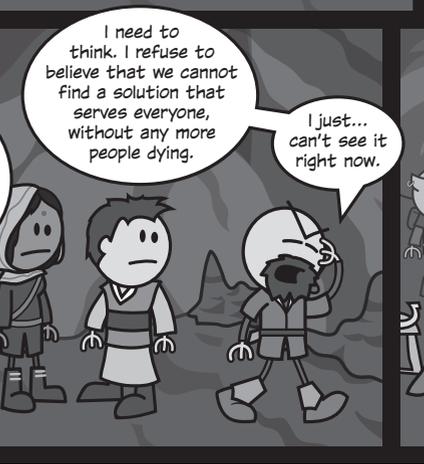
I don't think their leader really wants that war, though.

If he did, he would have declared it now based solely on the Sapphire Guard's attack.



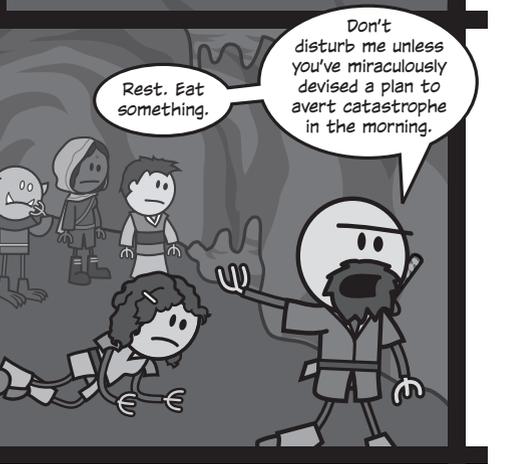
I agree. Which means the hobgoblins aren't the problem here. At least, as General Nhek would say, not *today's* problem.

Today's problem is Gin-Jun. We need to convince him to call off his attack, or this whole region will be at war by sundown tomorrow.



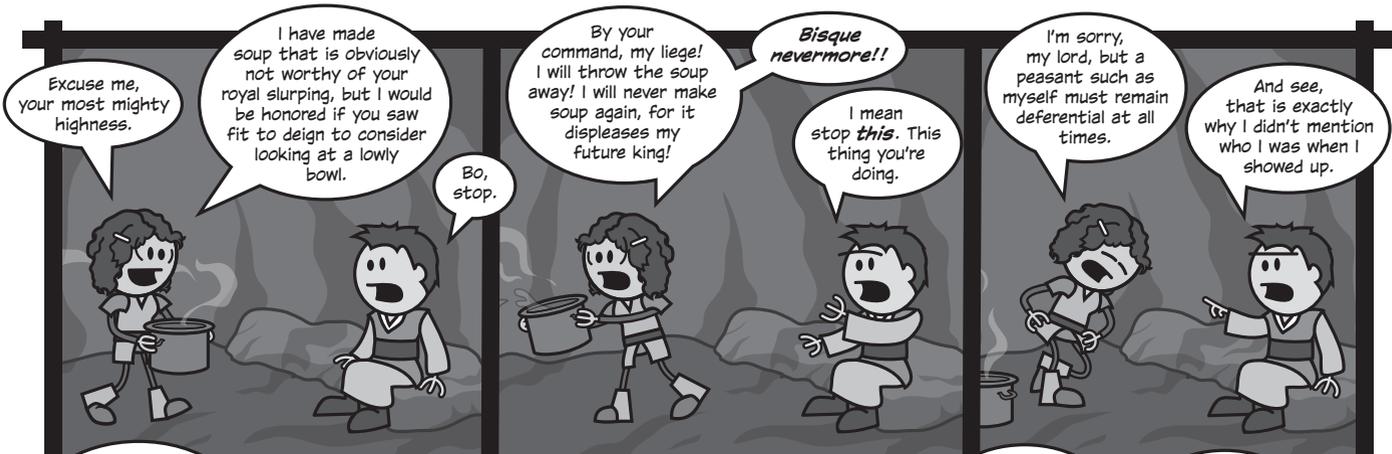
I need to think. I refuse to believe that we cannot find a solution that serves everyone, without any more people dying.

I just... can't see it right now.



Rest. Eat something.

Don't disturb me unless you've miraculously devised a plan to avert catastrophe in the morning.



Excuse me, your most mighty highness.

I have made soup that is obviously not worthy of your royal slurping, but I would be honored if you saw fit to deign to consider looking at a lowly bowl.

Bo, stop.

By your command, my liege! I will throw the soup away! I will never make soup again, for it displeases my future king!

Bisque nevermore!!
I mean stop *this*. This thing you're doing.

I'm sorry, my lord, but a peasant such as myself must remain deferential at all times.

And see, that is exactly why I didn't mention who I was when I showed up.



The moment anyone finds out who my uncle is, they immediately change how they treat me forever.

It's all bows and curtsies, or else they take out all their issues with him on me.

It's just impossible for me to be a normal teenager.



But... you're *not* a normal teenager.

Yeah. I know.



I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you feel weird.

It's just... I barely know how to act around the General, and I know for a fact her parents were farmers.



Why should it matter who anyone's parents were?

It shouldn't. But it totally does.



Maybe when I'm king I'll figure out a way to make it matter less.

Maybe! That'd be really swell. But the thing is, you can make those plans and I can't.



I didn't even want to be in the army. Obviously! But I couldn't find a job doing anything else—
—and they were offering a 15 gp signing bonus that I really needed to pay off my mom's back rent.



...You joined the army for fifteen gold pieces?

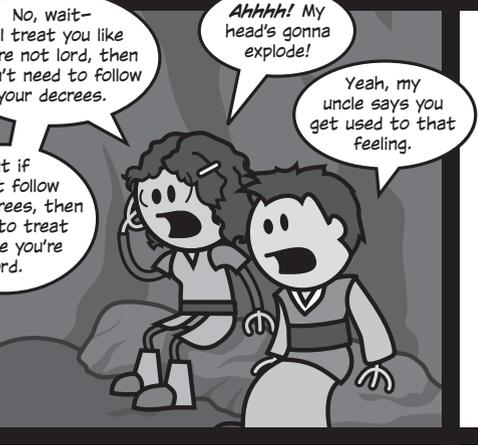
I know, right? I can't believe they offered me that much!

Cash register noise!



Hey, I know—I could issue a decree that everyone should treat me exactly the same as if I wasn't Lord of the City.

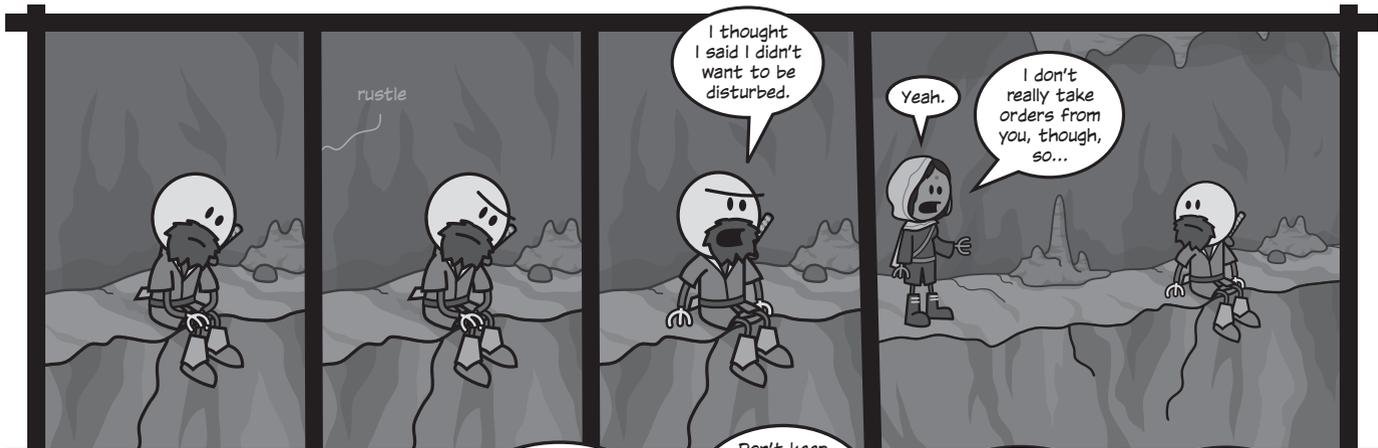
That sounds like a good idea!



No, wait—if I treat you like you're not lord, then I don't need to follow your decrees.

Ahhhh! My head's gonna explode!

Yeah, my uncle says you get used to that feeling.



rustle

I thought I said I didn't want to be disturbed.

Yeah.

I don't really take orders from you, though, so...



Besides, I come bearing solutions, just like you asked.

I'm listening.

Simple. When the paladins attack, join in with the hobgoblins and help kill all of them.

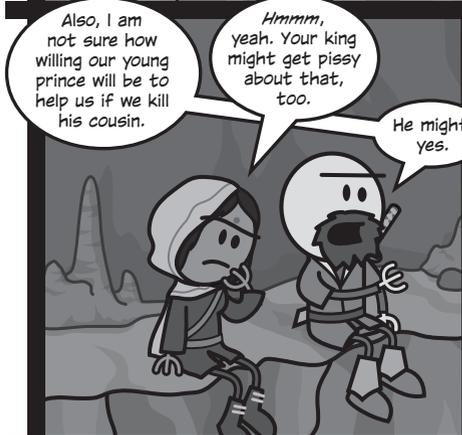
Don't keep your sword in its sheath this time, let them have it.

I would very much prefer not to kill citizens of my country, especially ones who have devoted their lives to the Twelve Gods-

-however misguided I find their current actions.

Gin-Jun may be a pompous ass, but he almost certainly believes his actions serve the greater good somehow.

When it's over, we use Baby King's clout to talk our way out of the goblins killing us because hey, we were on their side.



Also, I am not sure how willing our young prince will be to help us if we kill his cousin.

Hmmm, yeah. Your king might get pissy about that, too.

He might, yes.

OK, let's flip it: We meet the paladins there and say gosh, we're so sorry about yesterday.

Let us make it up to you by helping you crush these uppity humanoids.

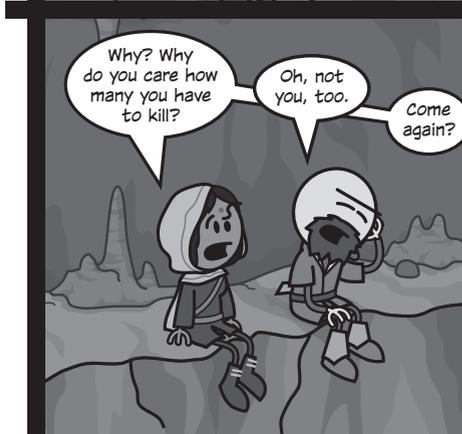
No.



Anything short of utter annihilation of the hobgoblin settlement will lead the survivors to retaliate against human civilians.

As a practical matter, thirty odd paladins plus the handful of us could not hope to exterminate the population of a large town.

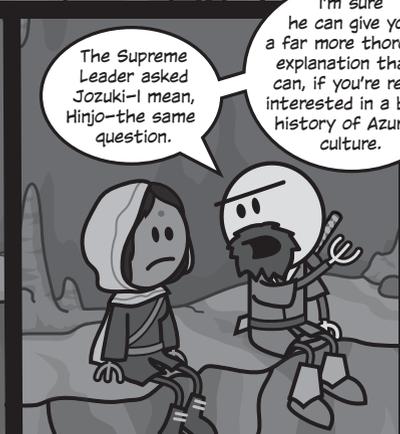
As a moral matter, the very thought is abhorrent.



Why? Why do you care how many you have to kill?

Oh, not you, too.

Come again?



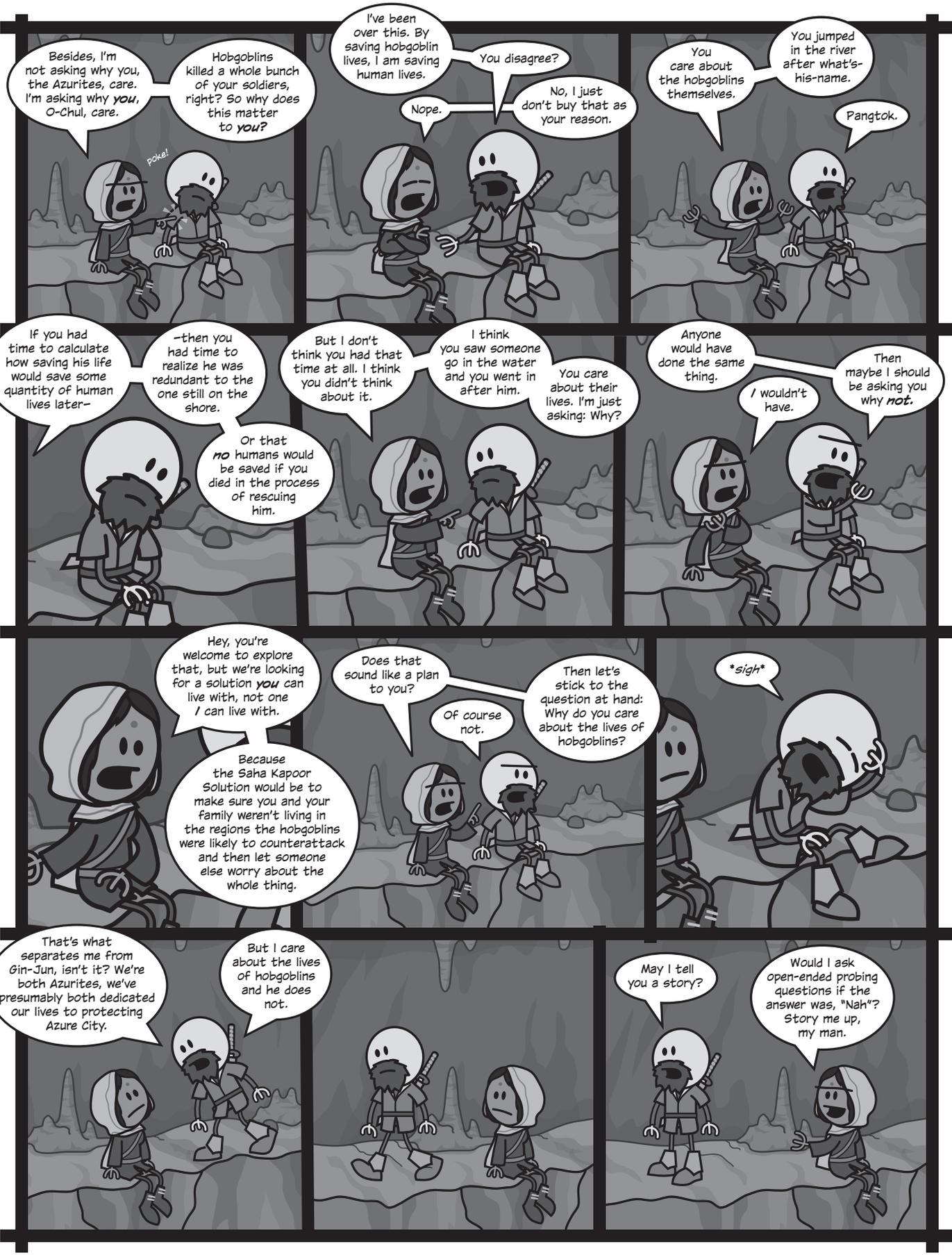
The Supreme Leader asked Jozuki-I mean, Hinjo-the same question.

I'm sure he can give you a far more thorough explanation than I can, if you're really interested in a brief history of Azurite culture.



What, because your gods say so or something?

I'm pretty sure when I was growing up the priests told me killing was bad, but that never stopped me from shanking a dude that needed to get shanked.



Besides, I'm not asking why you, the Azurites, care. I'm asking why **you**, O-Chul, care.

Hobgoblins killed a whole bunch of your soldiers, right? So why does this matter to **you**?

I've been over this. By saving hobgoblin lives, I am saving human lives.

You disagree?

Nope.

No, I just don't buy that as your reason.

You care about the hobgoblins themselves.

You jumped in the river after what's-his-name.

Pangtok.

If you had time to calculate how saving his life would save some quantity of human lives later—

—then you had time to realize he was redundant to the one still on the shore.

But I don't think you had that time at all. I think you didn't think about it.

I think you saw someone go in the water and you went in after him.

You care about their lives. I'm just asking: Why?

Anyone would have done the same thing.

I wouldn't have.

Then maybe I should be asking you why **not**.

Or that **no** humans would be saved if you died in the process of rescuing him.

Hey, you're welcome to explore that, but we're looking for a solution **you** can live with, not one **I** can live with.

Does that sound like a plan to you?

Of course not.

Then let's stick to the question at hand: Why do you care about the lives of hobgoblins?

sigh

Because the Saha Kapoor Solution would be to make sure you and your family weren't living in the regions the hobgoblins were likely to counterattack and then let someone else worry about the whole thing.

That's what separates me from Gin-Jun, isn't it? We're both Azurites, we've presumably both dedicated our lives to protecting Azure City.

But I care about the lives of hobgoblins and he does not.

May I tell you a story?

Would I ask open-ended probing questions if the answer was, "Nah"? Story me up, my man.

Once, some years ago, there was an army officer.

No, not at the time. A sergeant.

A captain, I presume?

His assignment was far from the borders of Azurite territory—farmland, mostly. His duty was as much law enforcement as it was defense.

One autumn, there was a rash of armed robberies along a stretch of road. The victims described a pair of thieves, one man and one woman, but the sergeant and his men could not find their hideout.

As winter came, there were no more witnesses forthcoming.

He swore to bring them to justice, and eventually their increasing recklessness brought him to their doorstep.

The man died in the struggle; the woman was taken into custody. But as his men were securing the stolen loot, they made a discovery.

A child, no more than twelve years old and sickly from neglect. The robbers were parents, as it turned out, and they had been raising their son into a life of crime.

Now, there were many people in the surrounding villages who thought that boy a lost cause.

Born to murderers, raised to steal, and now effectively orphaned.

Some wanted him jailed with his mother. Some wanted to dump him in a plague house and forget about him. Some, thirsty for revenge, even wanted him hanged for his part in their crimes.

But the sergeant took the boy and brought him to be raised by his own sister, who lived in another part of the country where no one knew what had happened. She was able to restore his health and—

I get it, you were able to look past that kid's baggage and treat him like a member of your family. That is seriously moving, no lie.

But it doesn't answer my question, because you already had to be the sort of person to look past surface stuff to value that boy's life in the first place.

You misunderstand. I was not the sergeant.

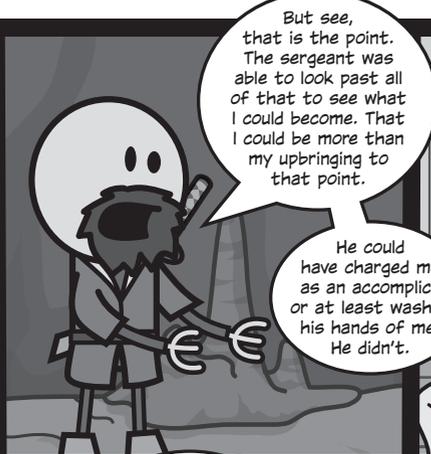
I was the boy.

I'm going to stop you right there.



You?? Mr. Good Soldier, Do-It-All-For-My-Country? You used to rob people?

To my eternal shame. Yes. I was young, but it still weighs heavily upon me.



But see, that is the point. The sergeant was able to look past all of that to see what I could become. That I could be more than my upbringing to that point.

He could have charged me as an accomplice or at least washed his hands of me. He didn't.

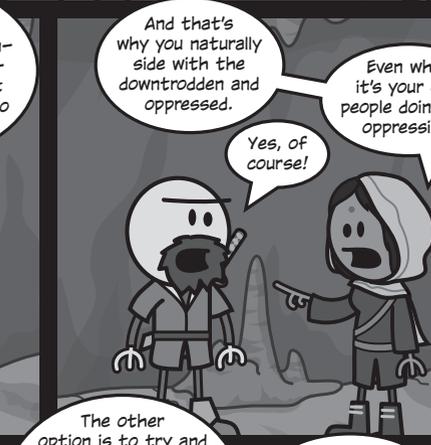


There were some rough patches, to be sure, but my aunt-his sister, the woman who raised me to be the man I am-had the patience to see me through.



So. You want to know why I value the lives of those my countrymen would spit on?

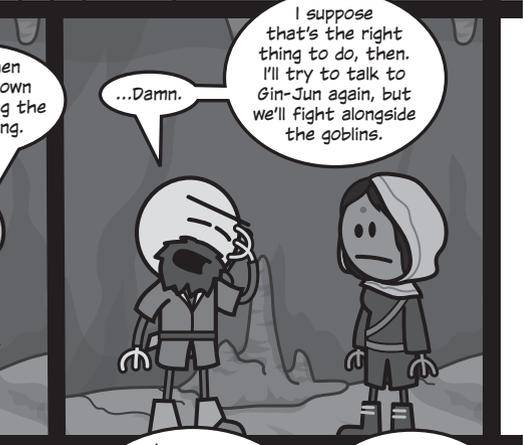
Because once, I was the one being spit upon-and deservedly so-and someone went out of their way to value my life.



And that's why you naturally side with the downtrodden and oppressed.

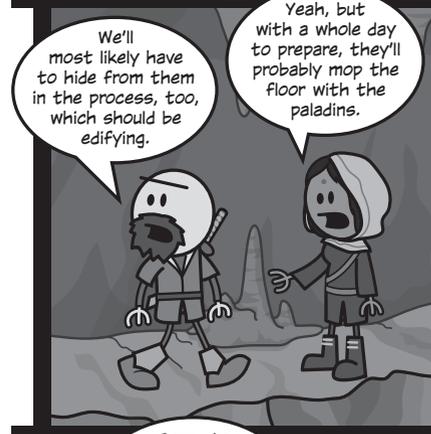
Yes, of course!

Even when it's your own people doing the oppressing.



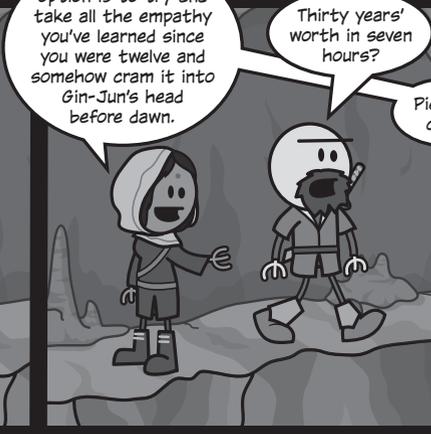
...Damn.

I suppose that's the right thing to do, then. I'll try to talk to Gin-Jun again, but we'll fight alongside the goblins.



We'll most likely have to hide from them in the process, too, which should be edifying.

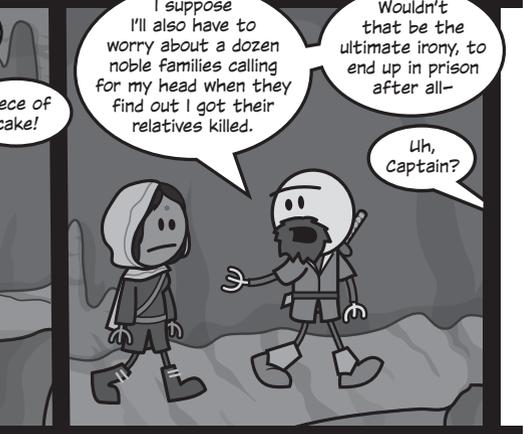
Yeah, but with a whole day to prepare, they'll probably mop the floor with the paladins.



The other option is to try and take all the empathy you've learned since you were twelve and somehow cram it into Gin-Jun's head before dawn.

Thirty years' worth in seven hours?

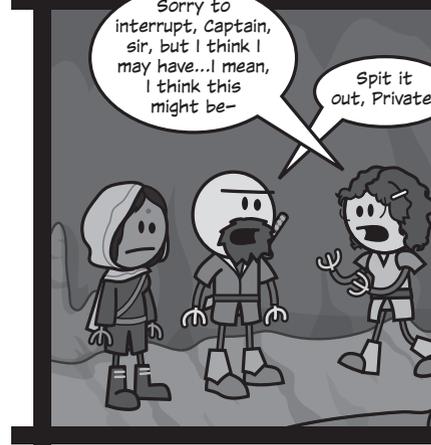
Piece of cake!



I suppose I'll also have to worry about a dozen noble families calling for my head when they find out I got their relatives killed.

Wouldn't that be the ultimate irony, to end up in prison after all-

Uh, Captain?



Sorry to interrupt, Captain, sir, but I think I may have...I mean, I think this might be-

Spit it out, Private.



We have a visitor.

I am Subcommander Haruna Sato, paladin of the Twelve Gods and second-in-command of the Sapphire Guard.

How did you find us?

I have some skill in tracking. That, plus the grace of the gods, was enough.

Her people killed Pangtok! We should kill her now!

That would make us no better than her.

Sure it would! We'd be alive and she'd be dead, and alive is better than dead!

Well, I am glad your group is willing to talk this out like sensible adults.

I speak for no one but myself. My leader does not know I am here.

Hmmm. Yes. There seems to be a lot of that going around.

I came here to tell you that Commander Gin-Jun has bound a mighty Celestial to the service of the Sapphire Guard for a period of one day.

He intends to use it to breach the town gates so that we can locate... our quarry.

That will start a war. The hobgoblin leader has sworn it.

Yes, I suspected as much.

You are a *paladin*! You must help me stop him.

I have also sworn an oath to the Sapphire Guard and thus to my commander. Betraying such an oath would mean my expulsion from the order.

You're betraying him right now!

No, I am simply informing citizens of Azure City—

—to whom I have also sworn an oath to defend—of a possible danger to their lives if they should be in the area tomorrow.

I have no way of knowing what you might choose to do with that information.

Seriously? You're creeping around in the middle of the night to rat out your leader.

A fine line is a line nonetheless.

I don't care about your sophistry. I care that you are not willing to take actions that might save human lives.

I have said more than enough. I pray to the Twelve Gods that you are able to stop a great deal of bloodshed tomorrow.

But you're not actually willing to do anything about it.

Good luck, Captain. May the Twelve Gods bless us all in the morning.

She's a piece of work, huh? But I guess we know how they found the hobgoblin town, now.

This changes everything.

Does it?

It would be a betrayal of everything we believe to do battle against a Celestial servant of the Twelve Gods!

It is also extremely unlikely that we would survive such a battle if we started it!

We just hashed out what the moral course of action would be, only to find out that following it will likely lead to our deaths—while not even accomplishing the goal of preventing a war!

Can I just toss the Saha Kapoor Solution back on the table, then? Yes? No?

Captain... if they have a literal angel on their side... maybe they're right and we're wrong?

I don't know, Bo. She said that they used magic to bind it.

That's not the same as it joining up of its own free will because it believes Gin-Jun's perfectly justified.

It's more like it's stuck in a formal contract.

We can't actually know how it feels about this, though.

And we cannot pawn off the duty of our conscience on a magical being from another dimension.

The only way an outsider can resist a spell like that is if it's a really gross violation of their beliefs.

If I am willing to stand against my fellow humans to defend what I believe is right—

—then I must be willing to stand before the hosts of Celestia as well.

If not, then my decision was rooted not in principle but in self-serving convenience.

Can I just say that I think self-serving convenience gets a bad rap?

Zhou.

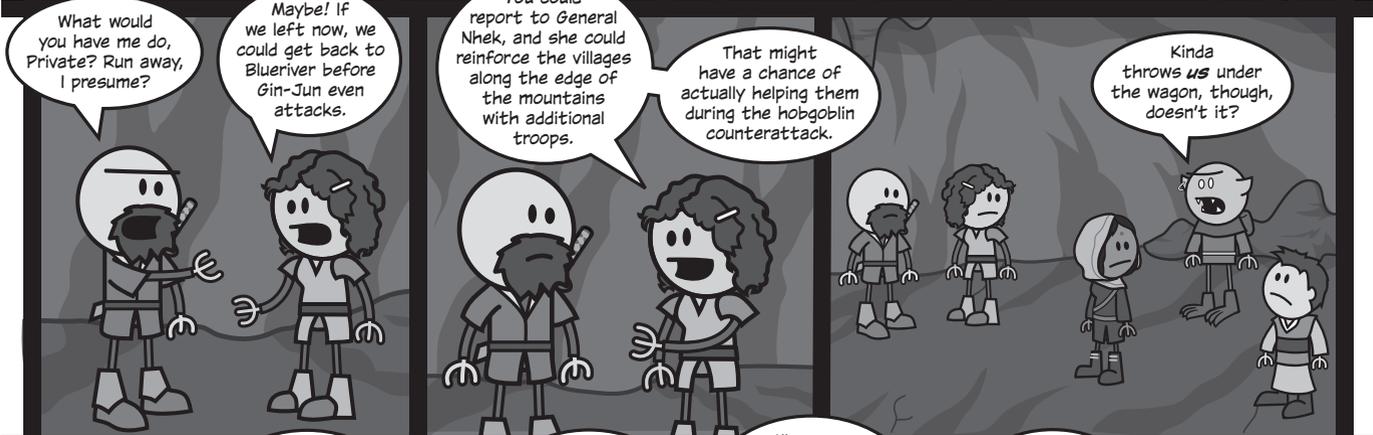
No, no, I'm sorry, Captain. You're super scary and I know you're going to yell at me, but I do not want to get killed by a Celestial!

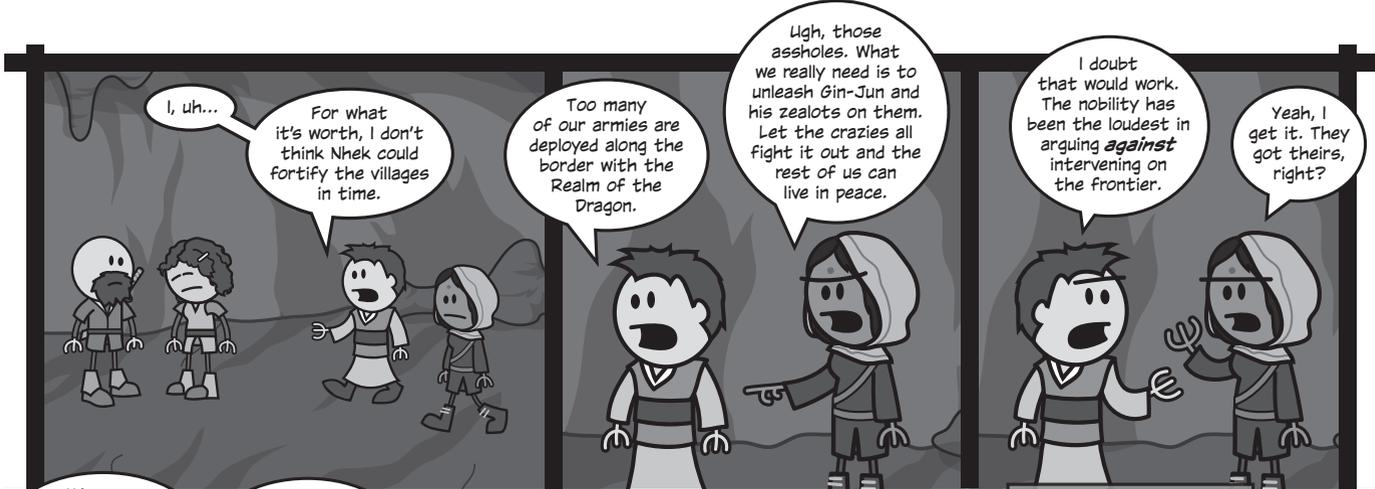
I am down with all your reasoning for wanting to stop a war, but that's not really an option now, is it?

We're five people! And a donkey! Unless that donkey is a polymorphed archmage, we're not going to stop the Sapphire Guard and their heavenly battle pal!

He's not a polymorphed archmage, is he?

I'll ask, but let's pencil that in as a "no."





I, uh...

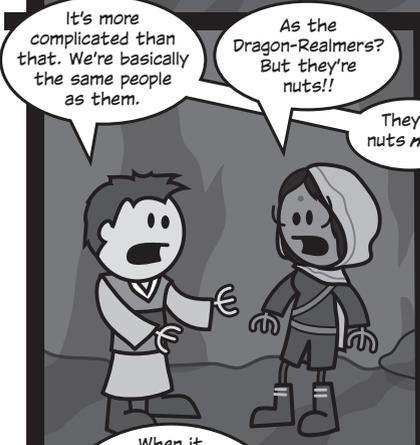
For what it's worth, I don't think Nhek could fortify the villages in time.

Too many of our armies are deployed along the border with the Realm of the Dragon.

Ugh, those assholes. What we really need is to unleash Gin-Jun and his zealots on them. Let the crazies all fight it out and the rest of us can live in peace.

I doubt that would work. The nobility has been the loudest in arguing *against* intervening on the frontier.

Yeah, I get it. They got theirs, right?



It's more complicated than that. We're basically the same people as them.

As the Dragon-Realms? But they're nuts!!

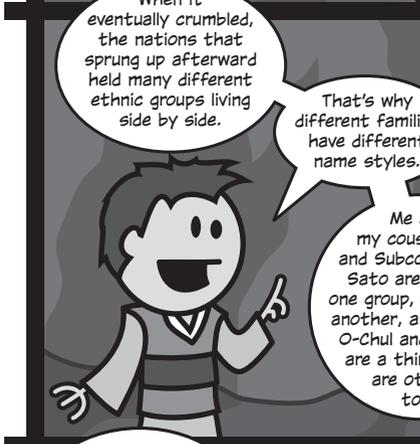
They're nuts *now*.



See, before there was an Azure City or a Realm of the Dragon, there was the Ancient Empire.

It was a vast state that covered about half of the Southern Continent and absorbed many different tribes along the way.

People didn't really understand why they called themselves the "Ancient Empire" but other than that it was fairly prosperous.



When it eventually crumbled, the nations that sprung up afterward held many different ethnic groups living side by side.

That's why different families have different name styles.

Me and my cousin Miko and Subcommander Sato are all from one group, Bo is from another, and Captain O-Chul and Gin-Jun are a third. There are others, too.

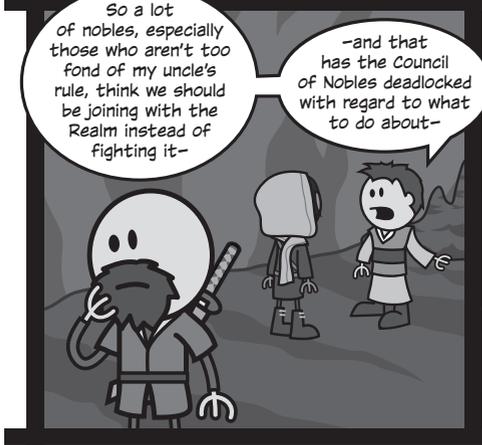
Geez, the Captain wasn't kidding when he said the kid could rattle off some history.

The Realm of the Dragon is the same way, and there are a lot of blood ties between the aristocracy of our country and that of theirs. And we share a lot of the same culture and traditions.



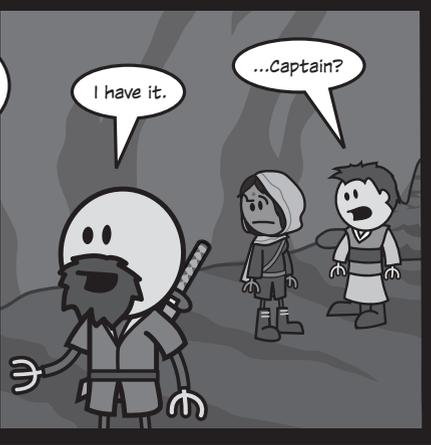
They're ruled by a giant evil red dragon.

There are also differences, yes.



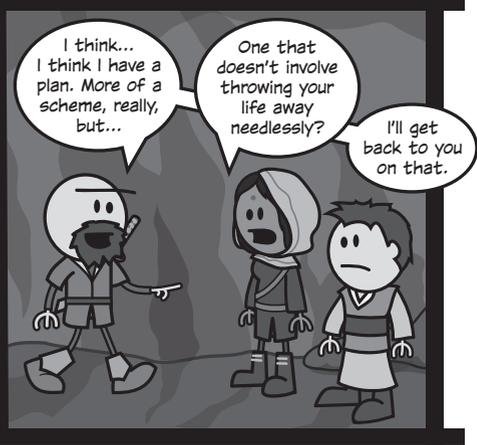
So a lot of nobles, especially those who aren't too fond of my uncle's rule, think we should be joining with the Realm instead of fighting it-

-and that has the Council of Nobles deadlocked with regard to what to do about-



I have it.

...Captain?



I think... I think I have a plan. More of a scheme, really, but...

One that doesn't involve throwing your life away needlessly?

I'll get back to you on that.

Hirjo, those old cultures and traditions you just mentioned—I presume they've given you an exhaustive education about them?

Uh, yes, actually. Since I was a boy.

And Tingtox—

Huh?

You said you couldn't get me into the town. But could you get a message to someone there if I wasn't with you?

I think so. I can try.

And Mrs. Kapoor. If Sato left her camp to track us down, how hard would it be for you to track her back there?

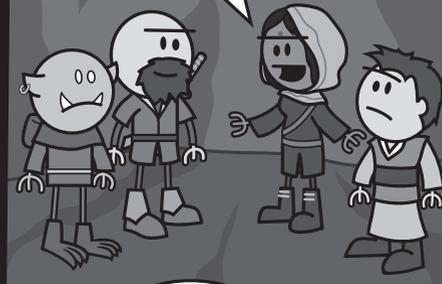
Almost impossible. If she's a tracker, then she would've easily hidden her trail so that no one could find it.



Except me, because I am awesome at my job.

What about me, Captain? Do I get a task?

You already did your part. You made me think.



Hooray! Does that mean you're not mad at me?

I am only ever mad at you when you disappoint me, Bo.

...Is that a yes or a no?

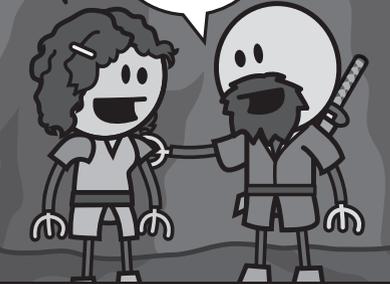
No, I'm not mad.

But if you really need something to do right now, pack my armor on Hirjo's donkey.

Really, Captain? I know it's damaged, but I could probably patch it.

I'm not going to need it. In fact, if I'm right, my plan will work better without it.

Wow, it must have some intense Armor Check Penalties.



I don't... really know if this is going to work. I may be reading too much into some of the things Sato said.

But if I'm right, then there's still a chance—a slim chance—that we can stop this war before anyone else is harmed.

We're with you, Captain!

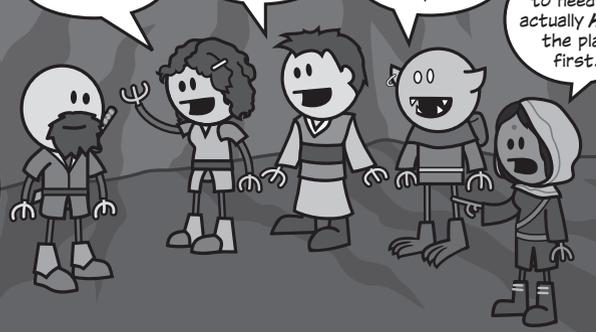
I trust your judgment. Whatever you think is best.

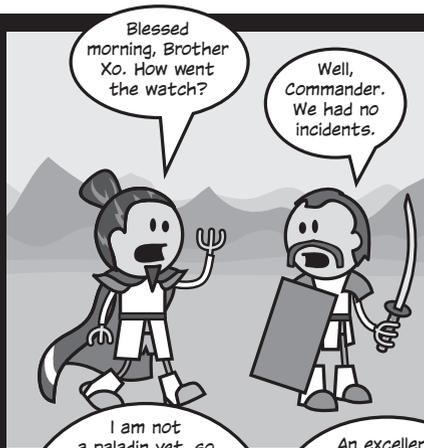
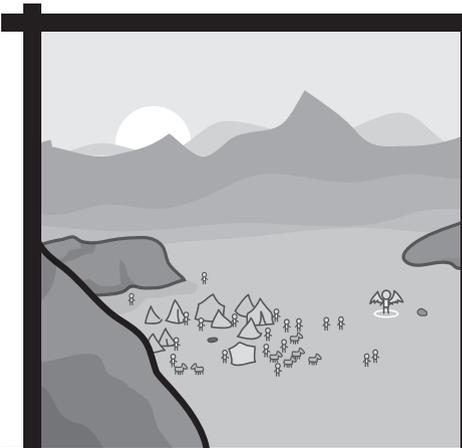
Any plan is better than no plan.

I'm going to need to actually *hear* the plan first.

And not just an outline, I want details.

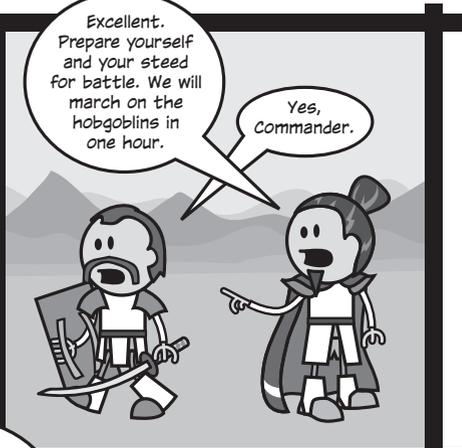
A map wouldn't hurt.





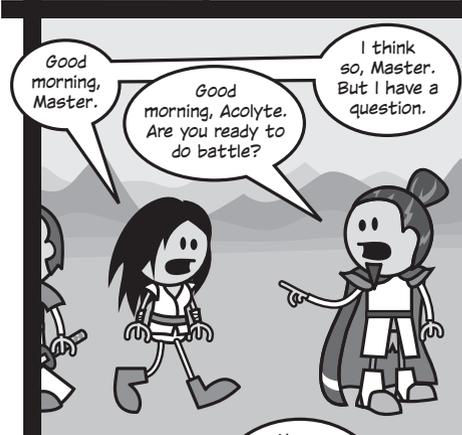
Blessed morning, Brother Xo. How went the watch?

Well, Commander. We had no incidents.



Excellent. Prepare yourself and your steed for battle. We will march on the hobgoblins in one hour.

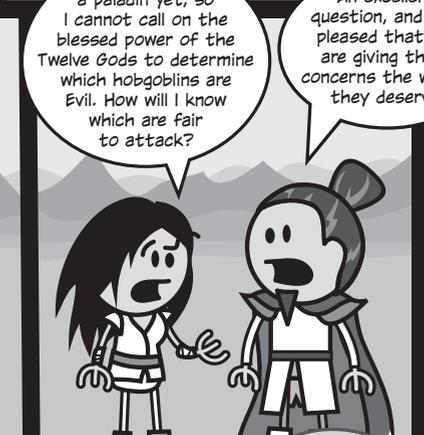
Yes, Commander.



Good morning, Master.

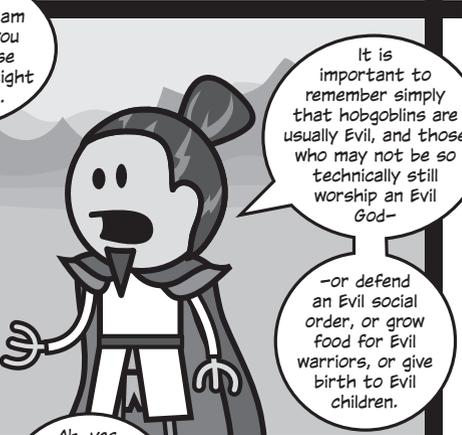
Good morning, Acolyte. Are you ready to do battle?

I think so, Master. But I have a question.



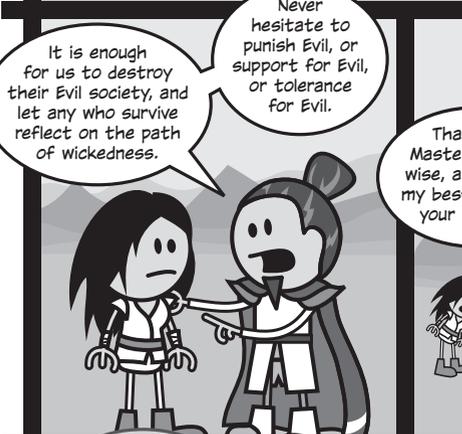
I am not a paladin yet, so I cannot call on the blessed power of the Twelve Gods to determine which hobgoblins are Evil. How will I know which are fair to attack?

An excellent question, and I am pleased that you are giving these concerns the weight they deserve.



It is important to remember simply that hobgoblins are usually Evil, and those who may not be so technically still worship an Evil God-

-or defend an Evil social order, or grow food for Evil warriors, or give birth to Evil children.



It is enough for us to destroy their Evil society, and let any who survive reflect on the path of wickedness.

Never hesitate to punish Evil, or support for Evil, or tolerance for Evil.

Thank you, Master. You are wise, and I will do my best to follow your example.



And what of you, our divine ally? How was your evening?

I stood uncomfortably in a summoning circle for 8 hours.



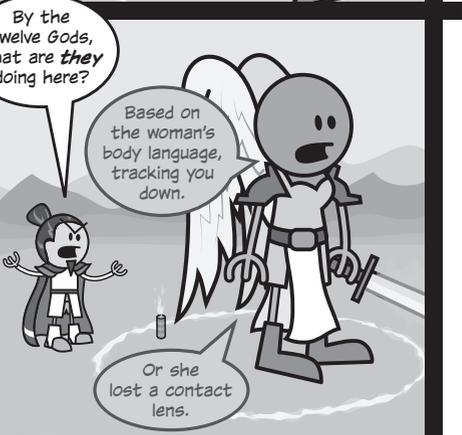
Ah, yes. You will be happy then to know that your task is almost at hand.

Good. I need to feed my cat.



Are your visitors coming with us?

Visitors? What-?



By the Twelve Gods, what are they doing here?

Based on the woman's body language, tracking you down.

Or she lost a contact lens.

I think that will do, Mrs. Kapoor. I can see the Celestial from here.

Here comes the Welcoming Committee, too.

Cousin.

Captain.

Commander.

Cousin.

I cannot say that I am not pleased that you have chosen not to put yourself in the way of my forces again-

But I would be remiss if I failed to express concern over the fact that you have followed me to my camp.

State your intent, or I will be forced once again to remove you from-

Gyeoltu.

Have you lost your goddamn mind, man?

You asked for my intent. My intent is Gyeoltu.

Sir, what is "gyeoltu"?

A duel. A duel of honor.

In the ancient days, before the Empire even, our clan had a tradition whereby one who felt he had been treated with dishonor could demand a duel to settle accounts.

It would appear that the Captain here is something of a traditionalist and wishes to reinstate the process.

However, his education is apparently lacking, or he would know that a man of higher station need not duel a lower-born man.

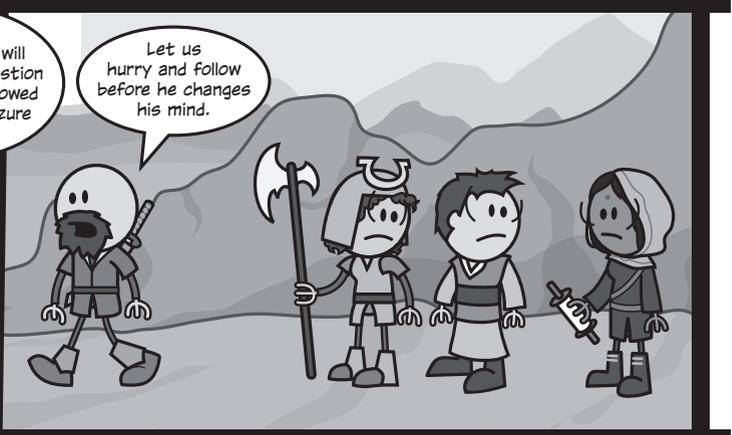
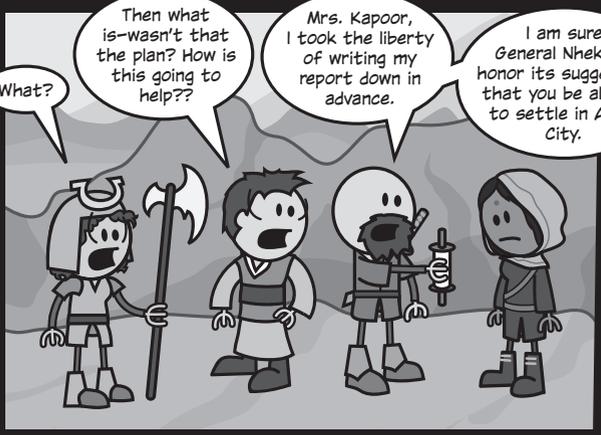
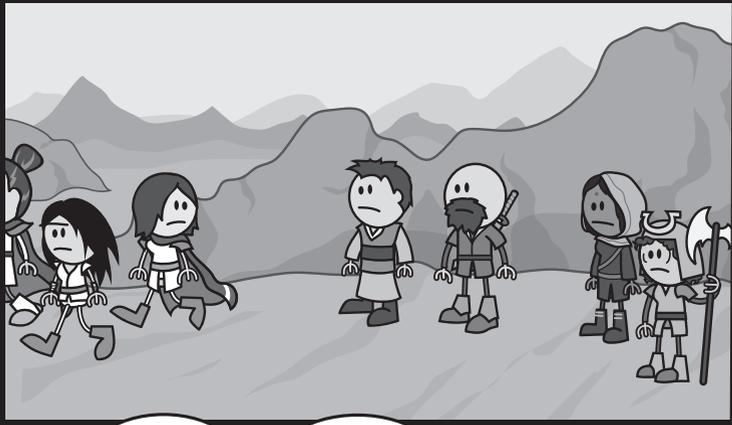
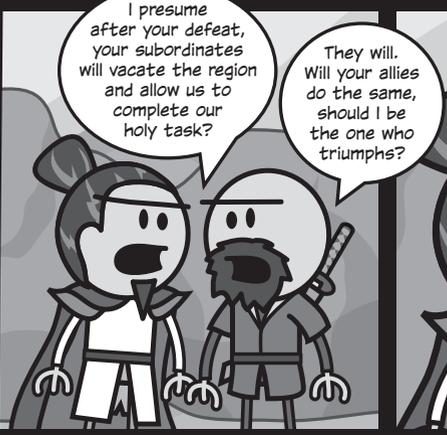
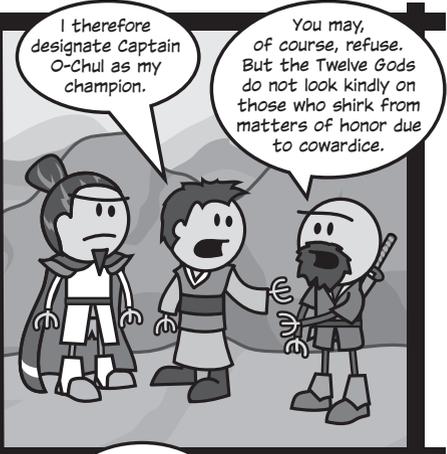
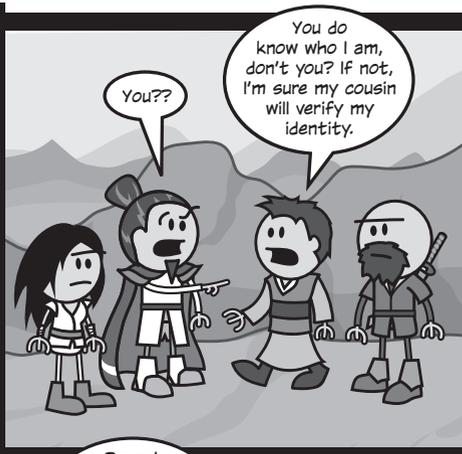
He is permitted to send a champion in his stead.

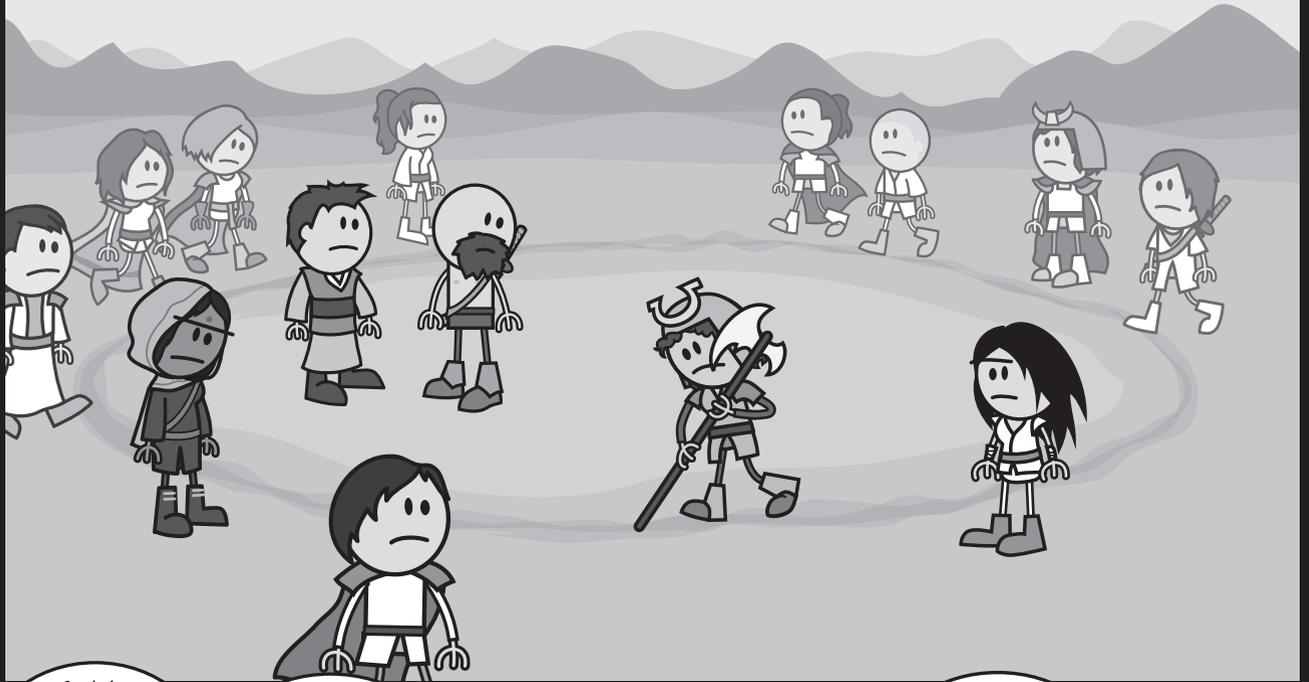
As I am a noble and he is simply a commoner, he will be dueling Miss Miyazaki in my place. I hope he enjoys the rematch.

I would, but you are operating under a mistaken impression.

I am not the one calling for Gyeoltu.

I am.





Captain, I don't understand. What good does it do to risk getting killed in a duel if they haven't even agreed to withdraw if you win?

Don't worry about that. Watch for Tingtox. Do you remember what you need to say when he arrives?

I remember, Captain, but-

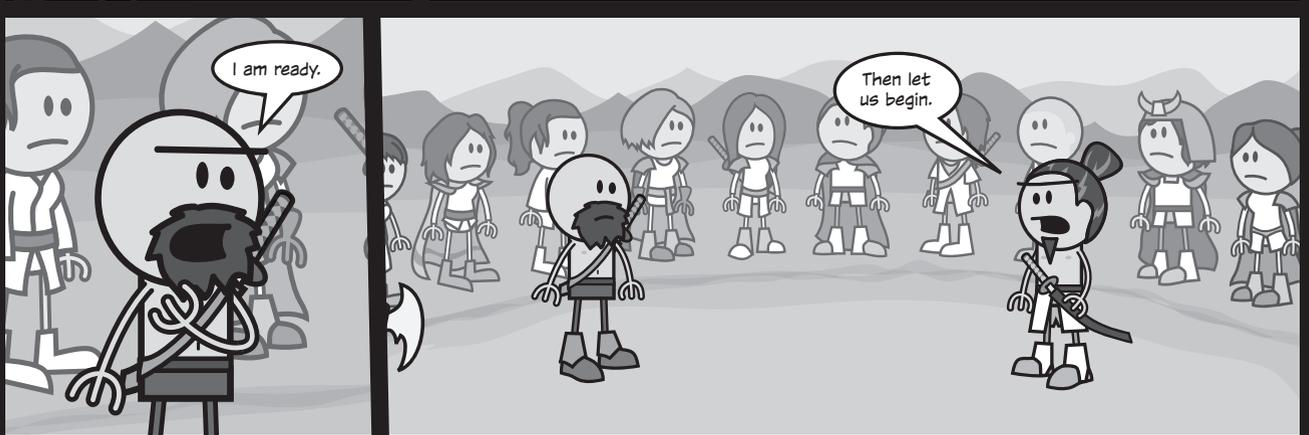
Are you ready, soldier?

I would prefer not to delay our assault on the hobgoblins longer than strictly necessary.



I am ready.

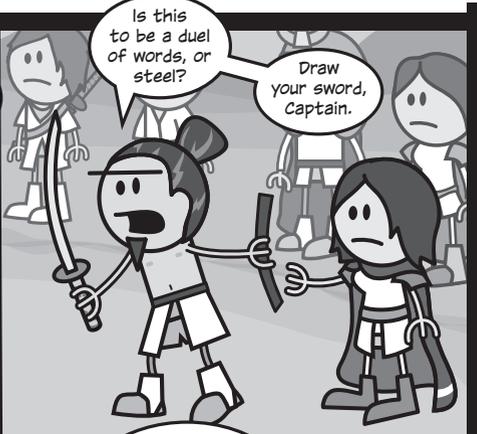
Then let us begin.





Listen to me. There is no reason to attack the hobgoblins.

They are not a threat to us if we leave them alone.



Is this to be a duel of words, or steel?

Draw your sword, Captain.



They have only attacked our villages in retaliation for the unprovoked raids on their territory.

If you stop striking them, they will stop striking back.



That is not my concern. The defense of the border villages is *your* responsibility, which you are neglecting by interfering with my holy mission.

Now draw your sword!



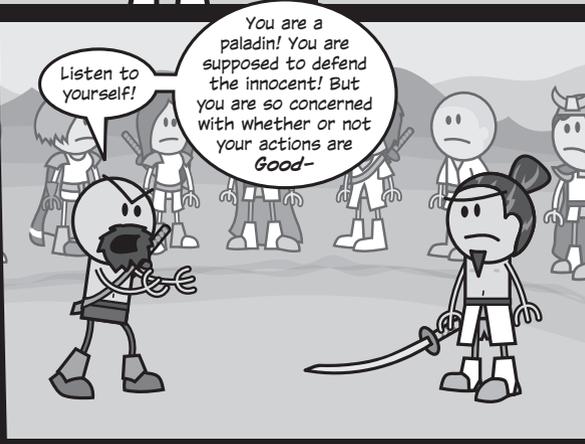
It is your responsibility, if you care about the well-being of our country and its citizens.



When you take actions in the name of our nation, you are accountable for the repercussions—especially when they are plain as day beforehand!



We have already been over this. If the goblins choose to answer our actions with Evil, that does not make our actions themselves less Good.

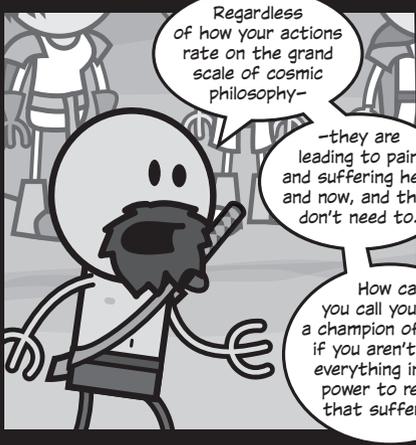


Listen to yourself!

You are a paladin! You are supposed to defend the innocent! But you are so concerned with whether or not your actions are *Good*—



—you have forgotten whether or not they are for the *best*.



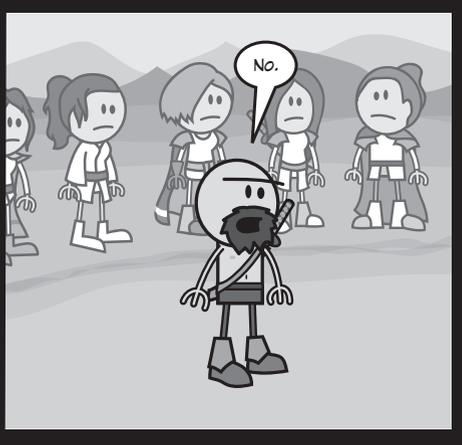
Regardless of how your actions rate on the grand scale of cosmic philosophy—

—they are leading to pain and suffering here and now, and they don't need to.

How can you call yourself a champion of virtue if you aren't doing everything in your power to reduce that suffering?



Draw your sword!!

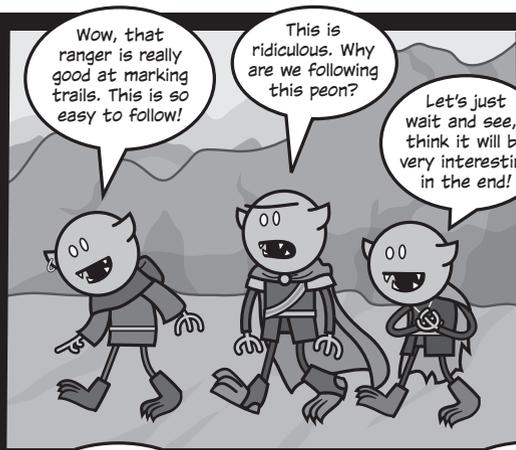


No.



You have no intention of fighting? Then this is just a stalling tactic.

Commander!!



Wow, that ranger is really good at marking trails. This is so easy to follow!

This is ridiculous. Why are we following this peon?

Let's just wait and see, I think it will be very interesting in the end!



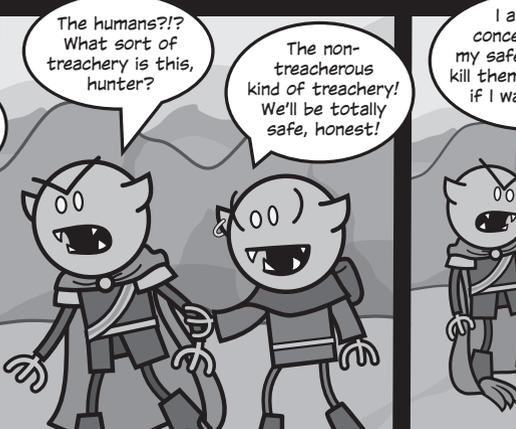
Hobgoblins? Here?!? Sapphire Guard—



You cannot harm them! They are my three designated Honor Witnesses, per the protocol of these duels.

That means until the end of the duel, they are to be granted protection.

You stupid fool.



The humans?!? What sort of treachery is this, hunter?

The non-treacherous kind of treachery! We'll be totally safe, honest!



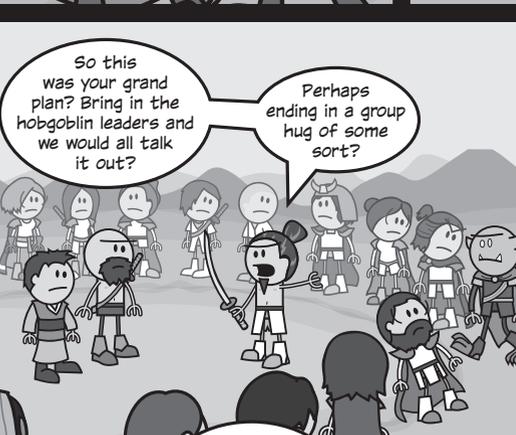
I am not concerned for my safety! I could kill them all myself, if I wanted to.

Oh, good. I was worried we would need to leave before we heard what they had to say, but it's good to know there's no danger.



Uh, right. Yes. We can listen to whatever garbage they have to say, since they pose no threat to us at all.

I'm so glad you're here to protect us.



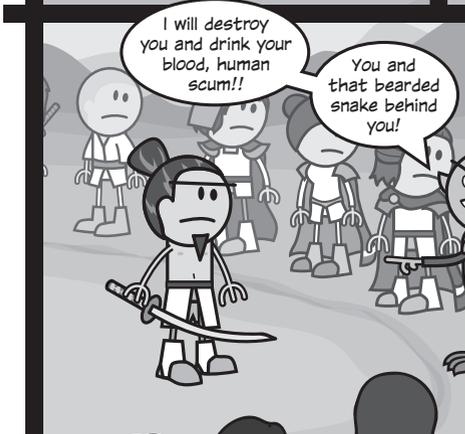
So this was your grand plan? Bring in the hobgoblin leaders and we would all talk it out?

Perhaps ending in a group hug of some sort?



You have only hastened their victory. I will defeat you in this duel and then I will defeat them as well.

And then when we attack their city, they will have two fewer champions with which to repel us.



I will destroy you and drink your blood, human scum!!

You and that bearded snake behind you!



I will kill everyone here and then I will lead our horde to wipe out your precious villages!



He's really not helping our case, is he?

Actually, he is.

You are little more than an animal and when I have dealt with this matter I will put you down like one.

I look forward to you trying.

Leave him be, Commander. You are dueling me, not him.

Am I? I cannot help but notice that your weapon remains in its sheath.

I do not understand you, Captain. Did these beasts not kill your men?

They did not.

The hobgoblins that killed my men are dead. I killed them.

These are different hobgoblins.

So you defend this savage who has vowed to kill our people?

No. I defend the one next to him, who has not.

Ideally, we would judge each hobgoblin by his or her own actions.

But if we must paint with a broad brush, then better to color the guilty innocent than the reverse. Is that not how justice works in Azure City?

You do not understand. Perhaps I have failed to make the stakes properly clear.

Yes, I despise these creatures. But that is not what is driving our holy mission.

They are hiding the Crimson Mantle in that town! We must seize it, or the fate of the very world could be at stake!

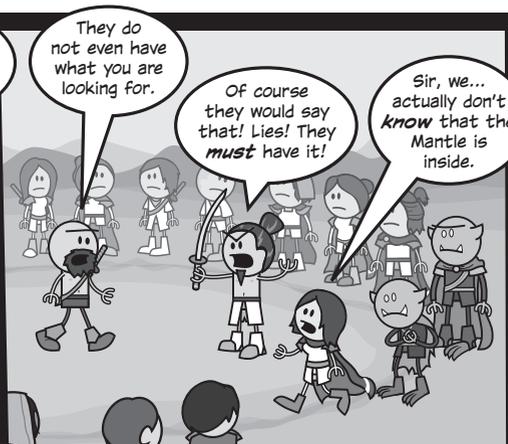
The Crimson what, now?



Do not take me for a fool! You are sheltering its Bearer!

I legit have no idea what you're talking about.

Bah, this is just a pretense to indulge your hatred of us!



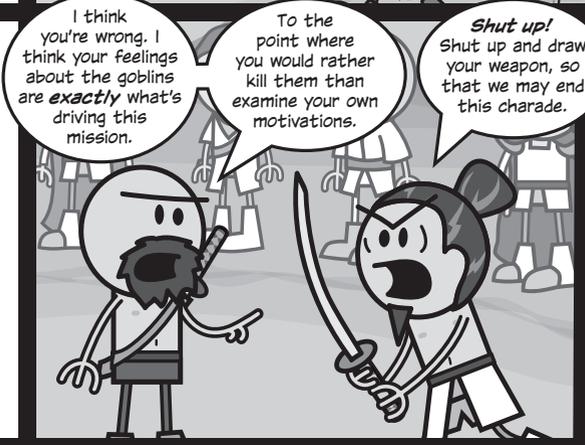
They do not even have what you are looking for.

Of course they would say that! Lies! They **must** have it!

Sir, we... actually don't **know** that the Mantle is inside.



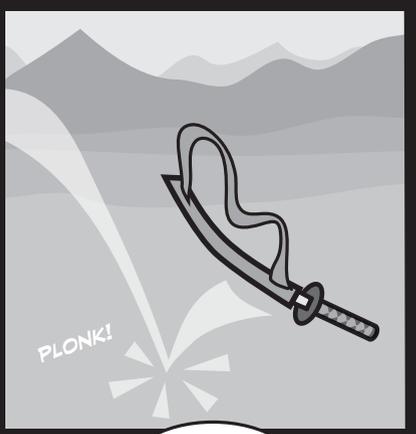
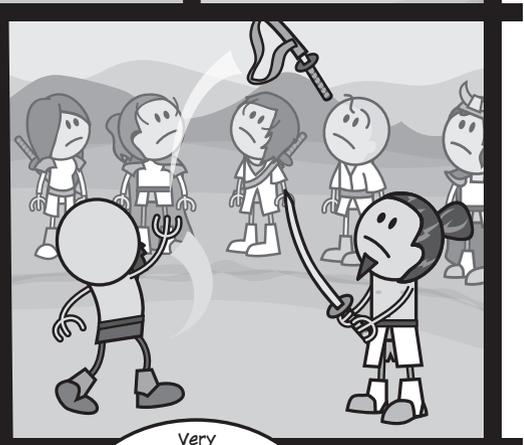
Be quiet, Sato! It is there! I have felt the Twelve Gods guiding me here!



I think you're wrong. I think your feelings about the goblins are **exactly** what's driving this mission.

To the point where you would rather kill them than examine your own motivations.

Shut up! Shut up and draw your weapon, so that we may end this charade.



PLONKI



I have no interest in fighting. I never did. All I wanted was a chance to speak.

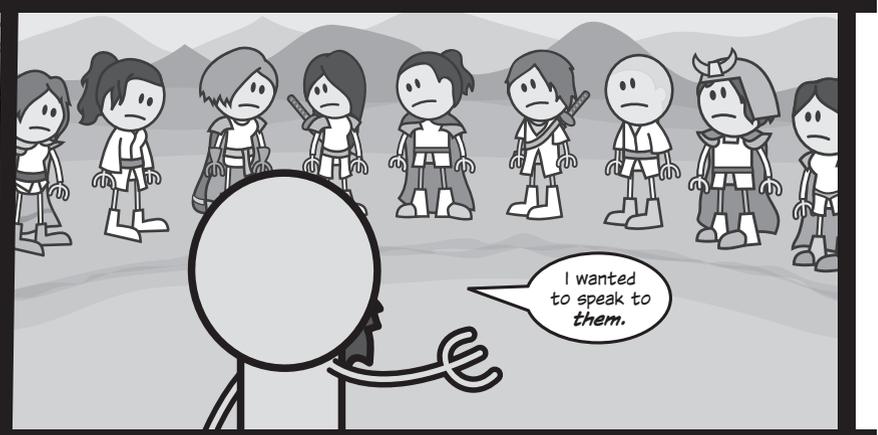


Very well. You have said your piece, and I commend you for your dedication to Azure City, even if your efforts were misplaced.

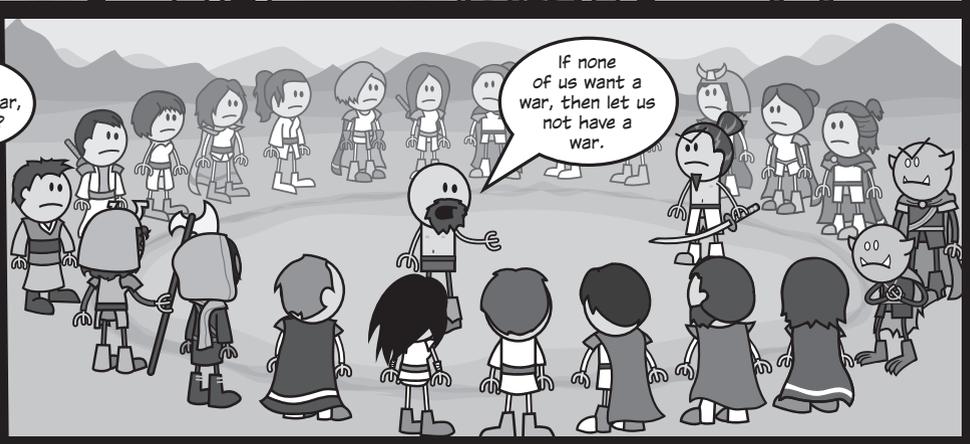
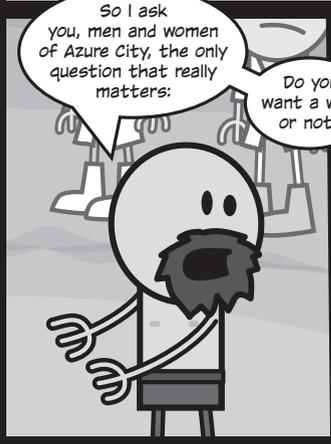
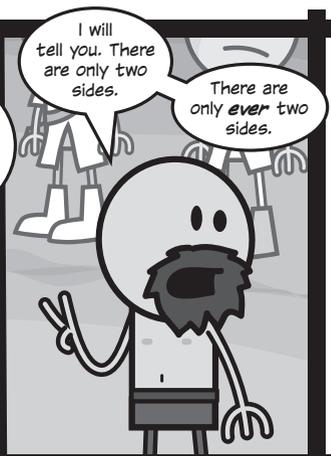
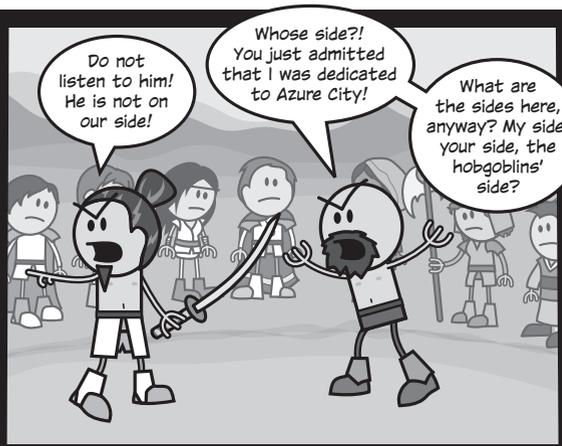
However your argument changes nothing. I will now enter that town and find the Crimson Mantle, fulfilling my sacred obligation to—

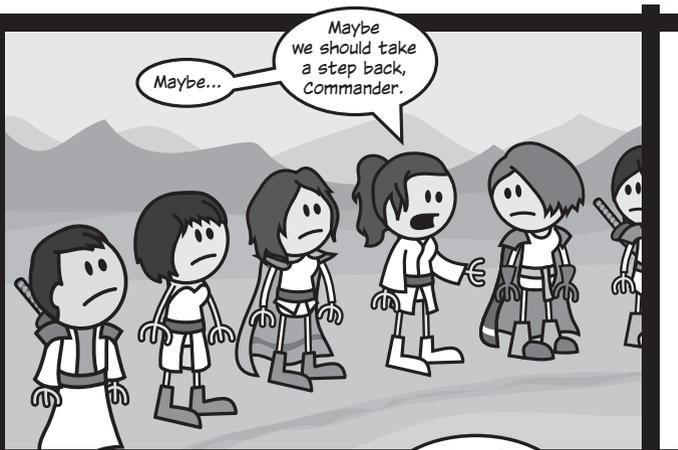


I didn't say I wanted the chance to speak to **you**.



I wanted to speak to **them**.



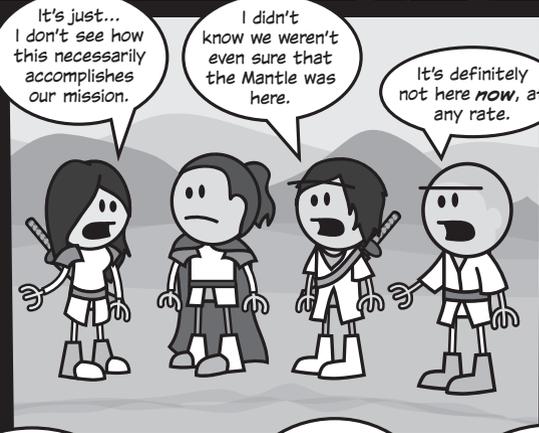


Maybe we should take a step back, Commander.

Maybe...



...What?



It's just... I don't see how this necessarily accomplishes our mission.

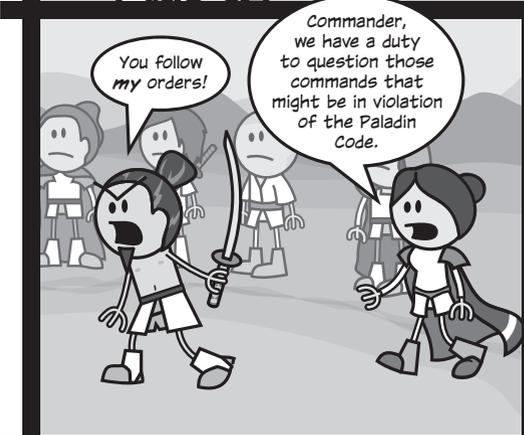
I didn't know we weren't even sure that the Mantle was here.

It's definitely not here *now*, at any rate.



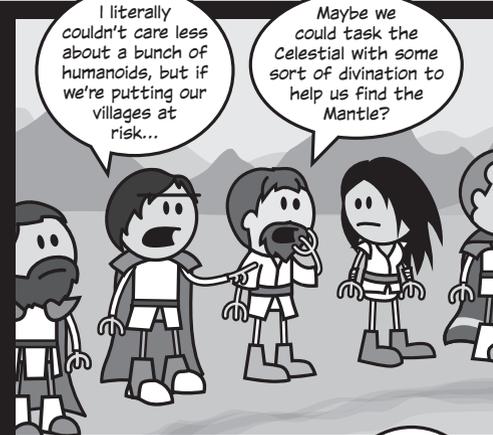
Ha ha! Your minions turn their backs on you to follow another warrior!

No.



You follow *my* orders!

Commander, we have a duty to question those commands that might be in violation of the Paladin Code.



I literally couldn't care less about a bunch of humanoids, but if we're putting our villages at risk...

Maybe we could task the Celestial with some sort of divination to help us find the Mantle?

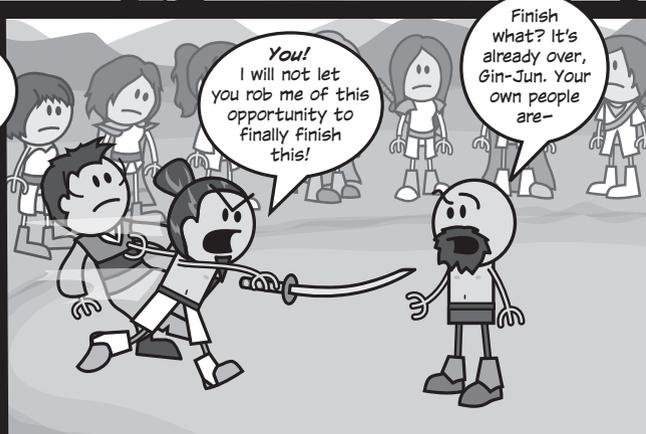


Not another 22 years. Not another 22 minutes.



Captain, I think you did it!

See? I told you I wasn't going to defeat Gin-Jun with a sword.



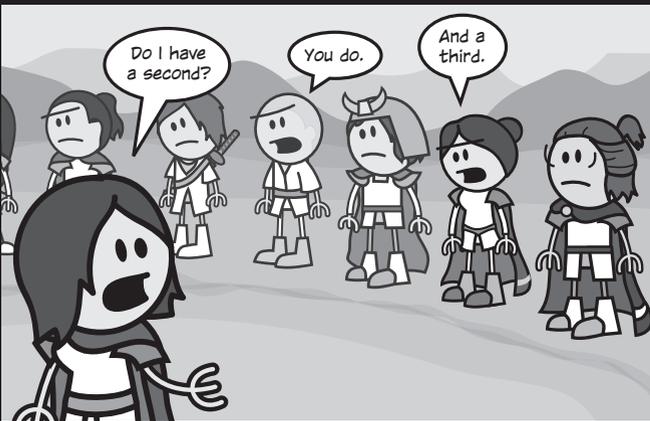
You! I will not let you rob me of this opportunity to finally finish this!

Finish what? It's already over, Gin-Jun. Your own people are—



This is a duel, is it not? And this duel is *not* over!





Sapphire Guard, break camp and prepare to return to Azure City.

This is all some sort of plot, cooked up between you and this soldier!

I assure you that I had no part in planning anything Captain O-Chul said or did.

But neither did you prevent me from making a mistake that would allow you to expel me from the Guard. You set me up, you traitor!

If you choose to commit violence to avenge your worthless honor, then the weight of that decision rests on your conscience, not mine.

You have no idea what I have sacrificed for the Sapphire Guard!

I have led us to glory when Shojo would have left us to wither and fade into obscurity!

If you have all abandoned your sacred mission, then I will complete it myself.

You! Celestial! Carry me to the hobgoblin town and burn the gates to the ground with your holy power!

No.

You cannot disobey me! You accepted payment, so you are bound to me!

I am bound to the Sapphire Guard. Your membership has expired.

It is over, Gin-Jun. Let us return to Azure City.

Nothing is over, you treasonous witch!

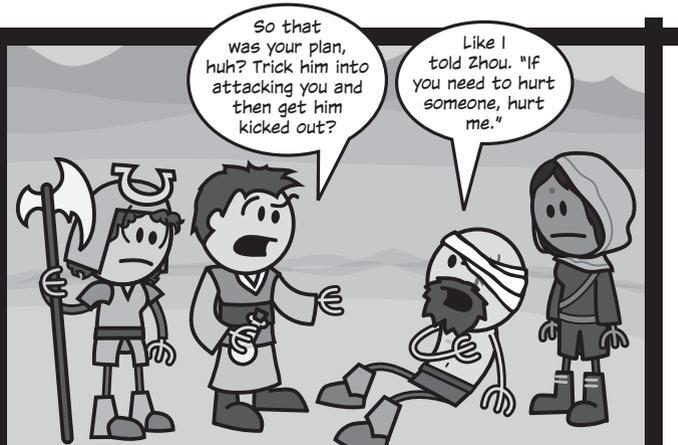


Captain!

I have more potions in Lustre's pack, back in the cave.

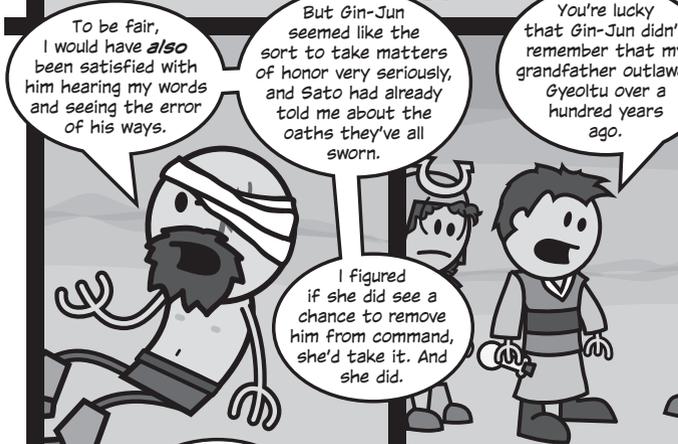
Ummh... yeah, OK.

You're lucky he missed your eye.



So that was your plan, huh? Trick him into attacking you and then get him kicked out?

Like I told Zhou. "If you need to hurt someone, hurt me."



To be fair, I would have *also* been satisfied with him hearing my words and seeing the error of his ways.

But Gin-Jun seemed like the sort to take matters of honor very seriously, and Sato had already told me about the oaths they've all sworn.

You're lucky that Gin-Jun didn't remember that my grandfather outlawed Gyeoltu over a hundred years ago.

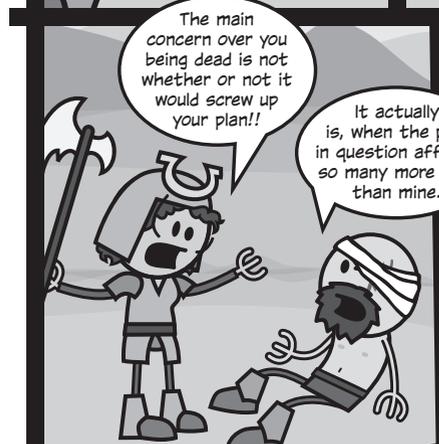
Yes, and I will need to remember to turn myself in to the magistrate and pay my 250 gp fine for dueling when we get back.

I figured if she did see a chance to remove him from command, she'd take it. And she did.



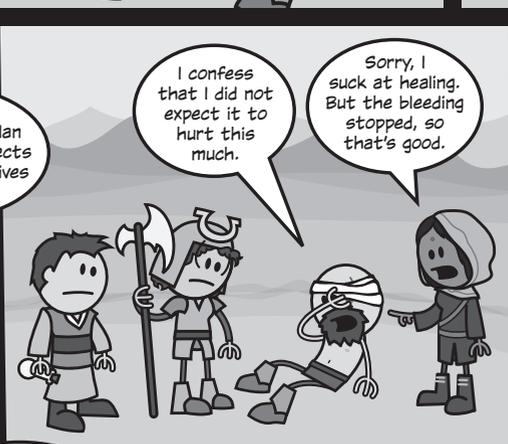
But- what if he'd *killed* you?!?

I thought about that, but as far as I could tell that would only strengthen Sato's case.



The main concern over you being dead is not whether or not it would screw up your plan!!

It actually is, when the plan in question affects so many more lives than mine.



I confess that I did not expect it to hurt this much.

Sorry, I suck at healing. But the bleeding stopped, so that's good.



Where did the hobgoblin leaders go?

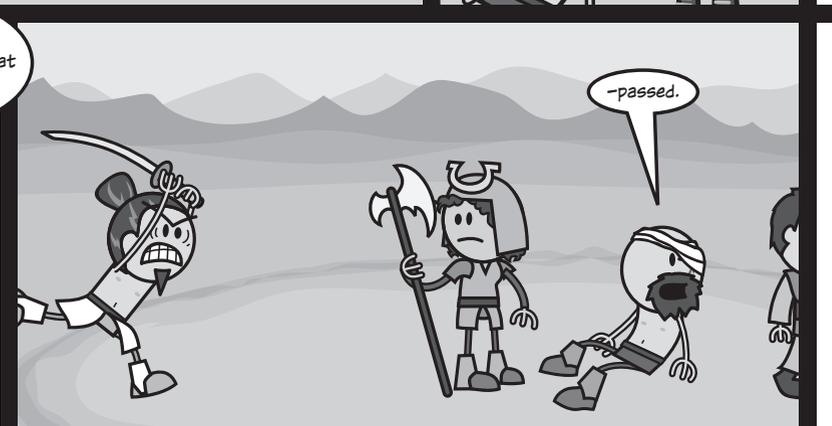
I don't know. It seems like they ghosted when the slashing started. Even what's-his-name.



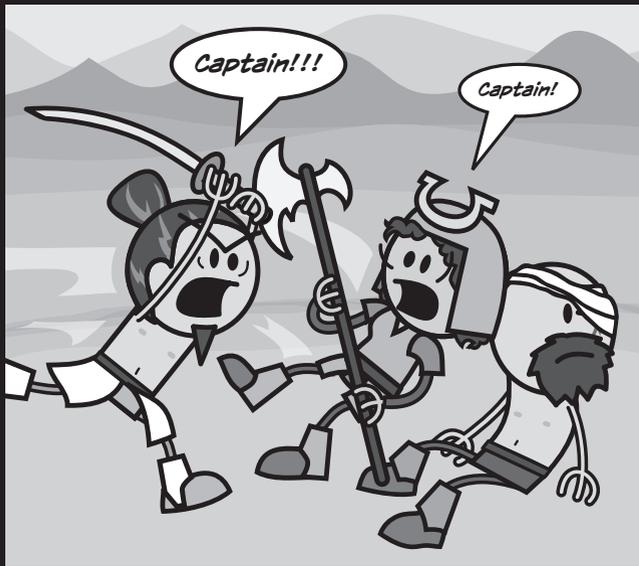
Saha, you and Hirjo see if you can't figure out where they went.

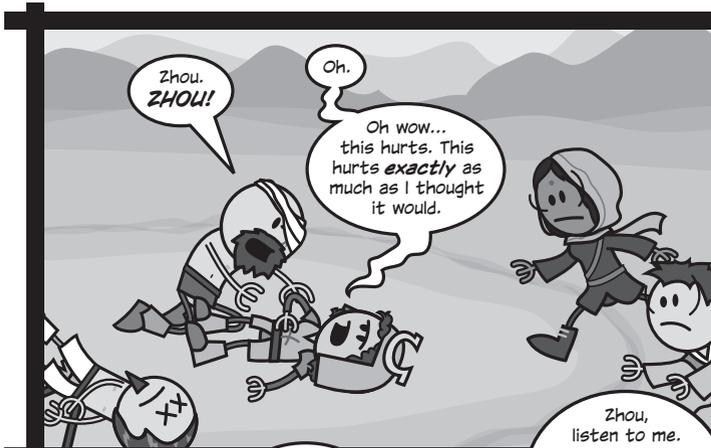
Sure, whatever.

We need to be sure they saw enough to know that the immediate danger has-



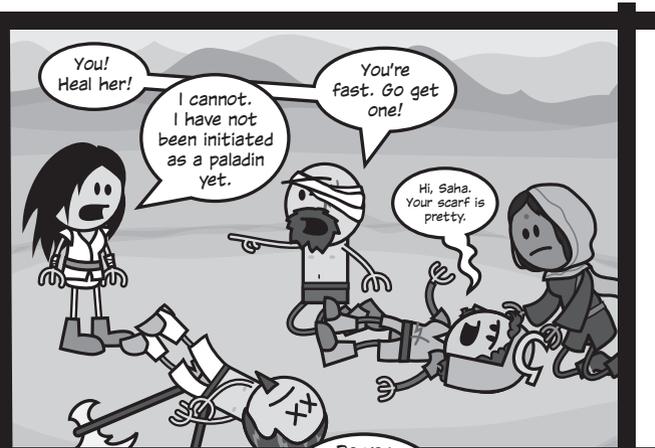
-passed.





Zhou.
ZHOU!

Oh.
Oh wow...
this hurts. This
hurts *exactly*
as much as I thought
it would.



You!
Heal her!

I cannot.
I have not
been initiated
as a paladin
yet.

You're
fast. Go get
one!

Hi, Saha.
Your scarf is
pretty.



Captain...
she's in bad
shape.

Zhou,
listen to me.
You need to hang
on until one of the
paladins gets here.
You need to be a
fighter.



I don't
know, Captain.
I'm not much of
a fighter.

Yes,
you are.



Do you
know what I
believe in more
than anything,
Zhou?

Leprechauns?



I believe
in second
chances.

That if
you give people
a shot at being
better, enough of
them will take it
to make it worth
the effort.



And you
proved me right,
Zhou. You jumped
in front of Gin-Jun
to protect me
without a second
thought.

I'm having
second thoughts
now, does that
count?



That's why
I'm so hard on
you, Zhou. Because
you remind me of
myself. Of how I
used to be.

We're
survivors.



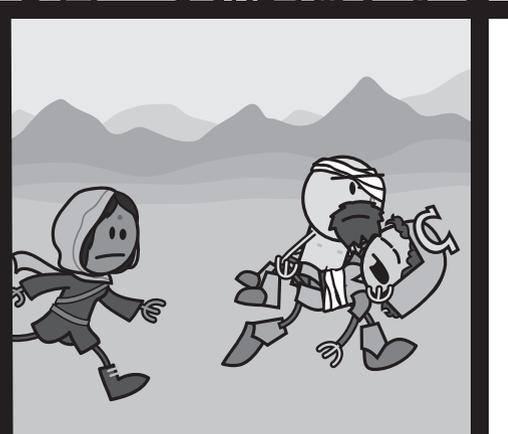
So I'm
giving you a
second chance now-
to be a fighter. To
hang in there. And
you're going to
take it, Zhou.

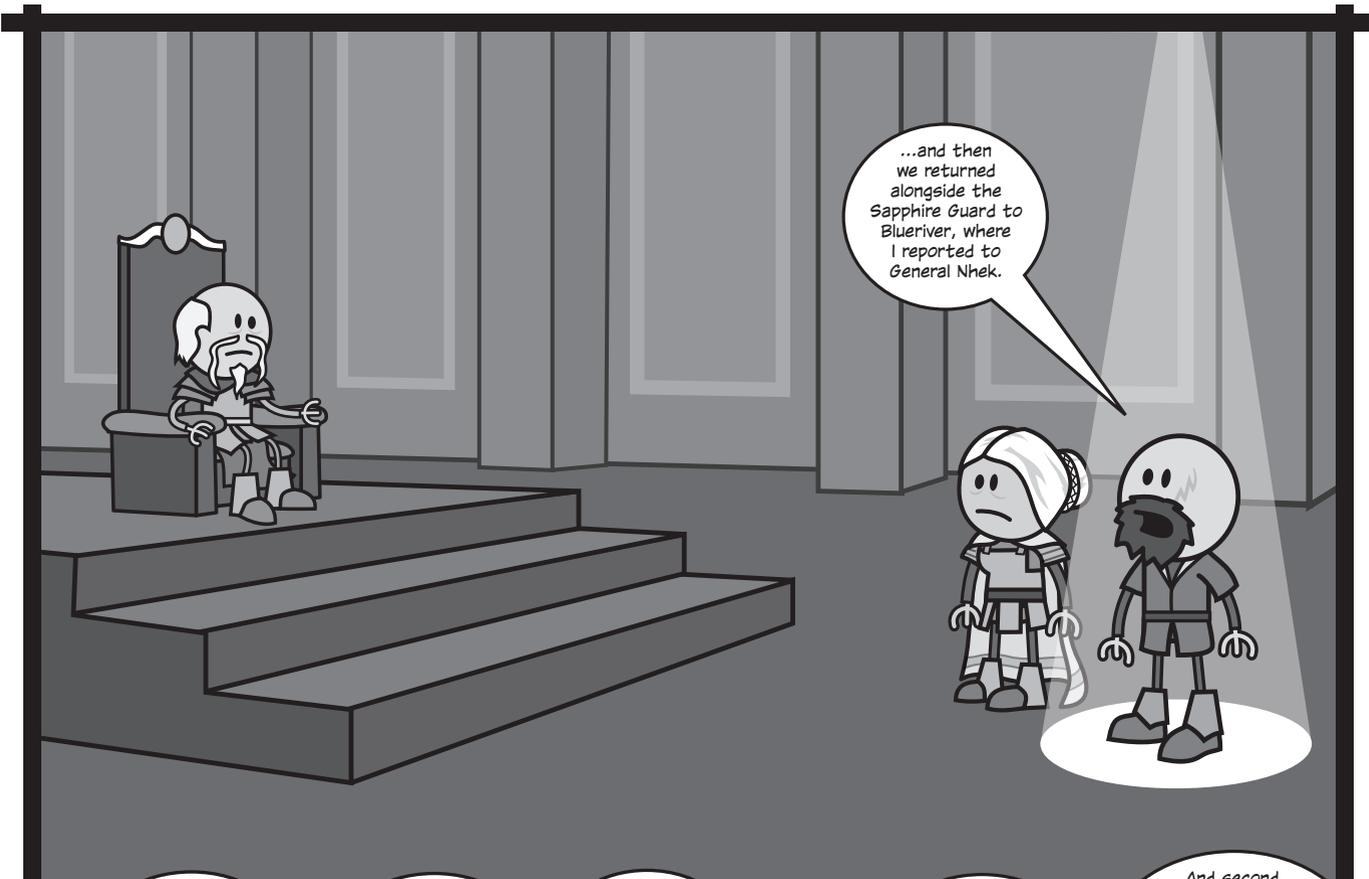
You're
going to take it
because you're a
survivor.

Yeah.
You're
right.



I'm pretty
awesome.





...and then we returned alongside the Sapphire Guard to Blueriver, where I reported to General Nhek.

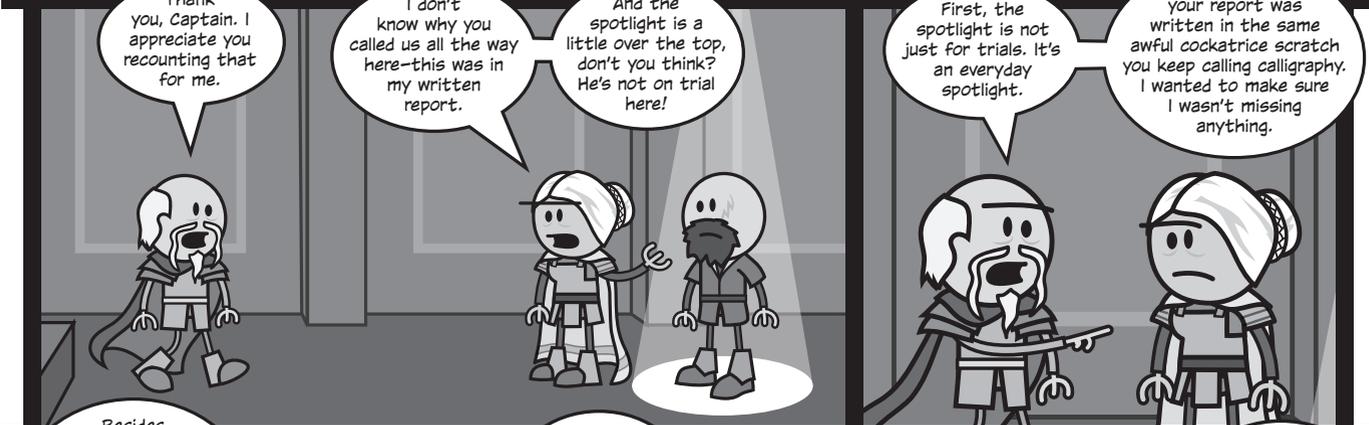
Thank you, Captain. I appreciate you recounting that for me.

I don't know why you called us all the way here—this was in my written report.

And the spotlight is a little over the top, don't you think? He's not on trial here!

First, the spotlight is not just for trials. It's an everyday spotlight.

And second, your report was written in the same awful cockatrice scratch you keep calling calligraphy. I wanted to make sure I wasn't missing anything.



Besides, I wanted to meet the man you told me I have to thank for single-handedly stopping a war along our northeastern border.

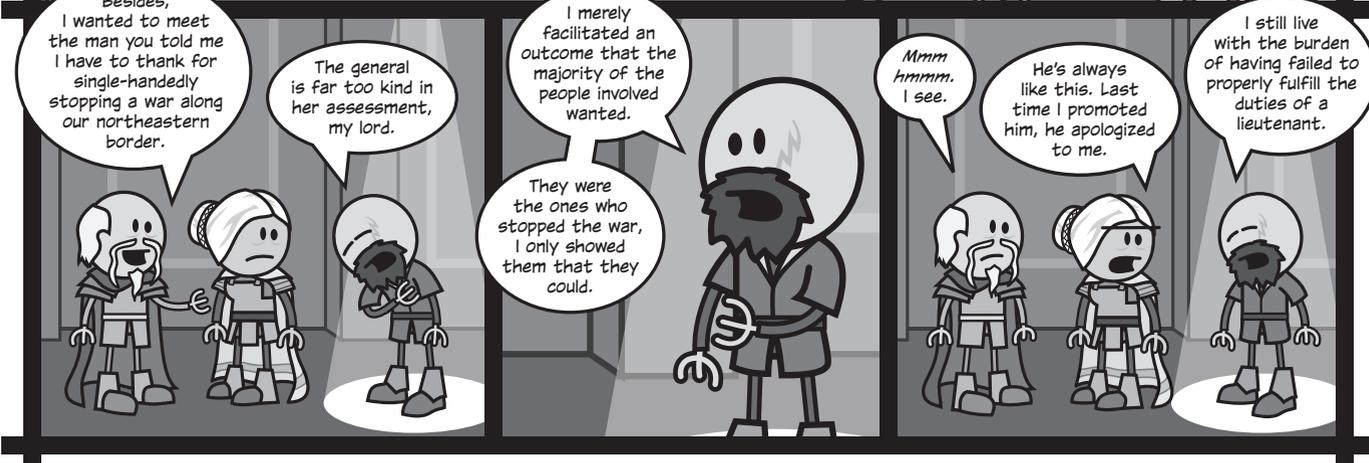
The general is far too kind in her assessment, my lord.

I merely facilitated an outcome that the majority of the people involved wanted.

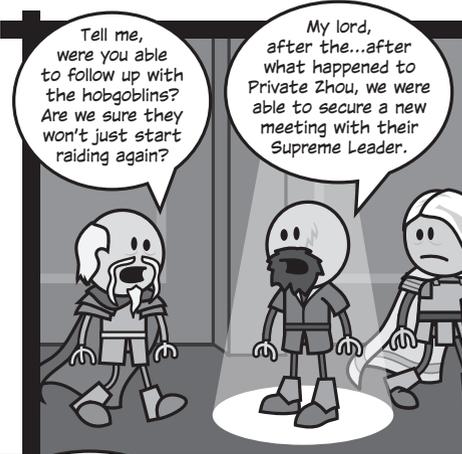
Mmm hmmm. I see.

He's always like this. Last time I promoted him, he apologized to me.

I still live with the burden of having failed to properly fulfill the duties of a lieutenant.

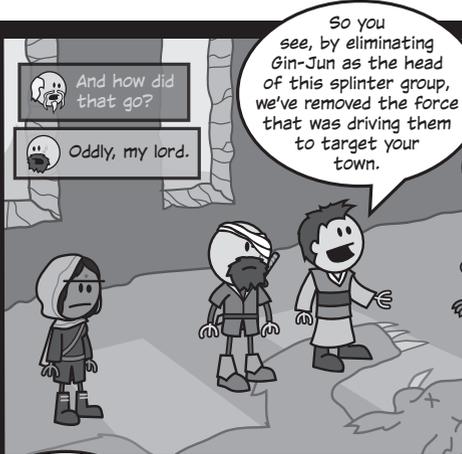


They were the ones who stopped the war, I only showed them that they could.



Tell me, were you able to follow up with the hobgoblins? Are we sure they won't just start raiding again?

My lord, after the...after what happened to Private Zhou, we were able to secure a new meeting with their Supreme Leader.



And how did that go?
Oddly, my lord.

So you see, by eliminating Gin-Jun as the head of this splinter group, we've removed the force that was driving them to target your town.



Yes. I understand.



I understand that you humans are soft and cowardly, and that you are so scared of battle that you will turn on your own in order to avoid it.



I also understand that you will do nothing to stop us while we gather our strength.

We are free to bide our time while our legions train and our war machines grow in strength and number.



Run along back to your lands, human whelp.

Yes. We will come calling soon enough, with a horde the likes of which your kind has never-



Lirk!



WUMP?

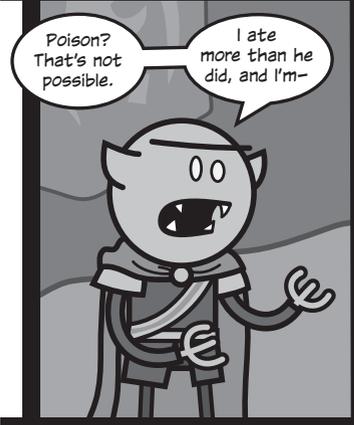


Supreme Leader!!

Cleric, do something! What's wrong with him?

We didn't do it!

He's dead. Probably from all the poison that was in the gouda.



Poison? That's not possible.

I ate more than he did, and I'm-



Glaak!



Never cared much for the stuff, myself.

I do not think they covered this scenario in my diplomatic training, Captain.

Oh no, it looks like everyone else who could reasonably claim the title of Supreme Leader is dead from a tragic case of improperly preserved cheese.

I suppose I will need to take up the burden of leadership myself—

—for the good of my people.

Oh, I've been considering this for a while. I've been hunching over to make myself seem less threatening for three years.

Somehow I've just always felt like I was destined to wear these.

You just provided enough distraction for me to finally pull the trigger.

This is *not* what I had in mind when I said we should not go to war!

Headdress of Supreme Leadership

Scepter of Supreme Leadership

Shiny Gold Amulet of Supreme Leadership

My recently deceased predecessor may have only been interested in peace as a screen to prepare for war, but me?

Now, Captain, I meant everything I said to you earlier.

I truly have no interest in conflict with Azure City.

I'd like to focus on growth. By my math, with just a few infrastructure improvements, these mountains could support a *much* larger population.

So as long as I am Supreme Leader, you won't have to worry about war with us hobgoblins.

Uh, good. That's good.

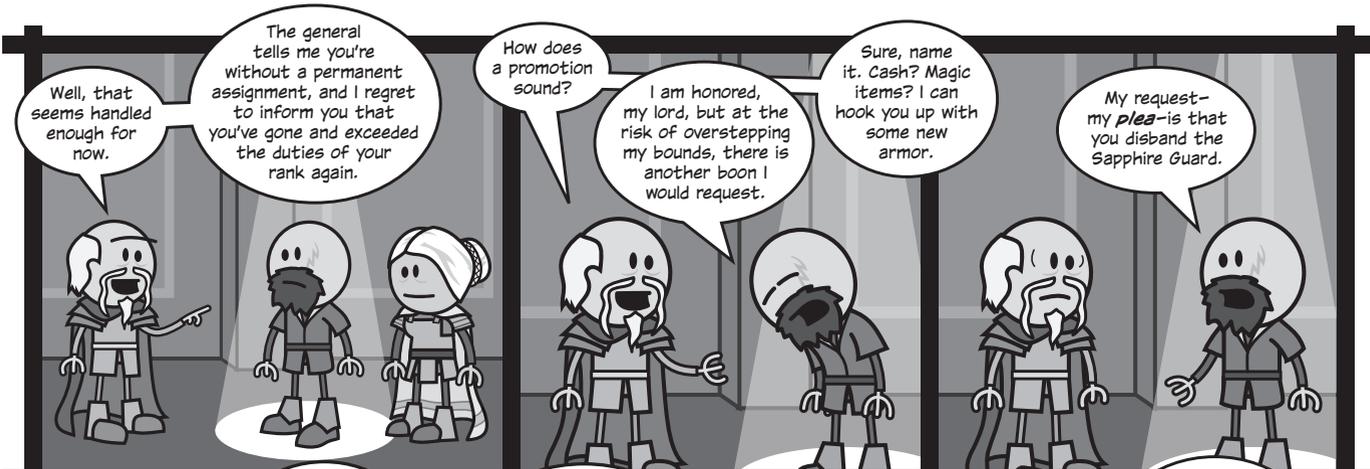
However, there's a 50-50 chance I'll need to pin the cheese thing on you in order to solidify power.

And I'll need to have you conspicuously run out of town now. You understand.

—and my position in the new administration is going to be Head of Legacy Food Acquisition Technology.

I'll be in charge of both hunters *and* gatherers!

That's great news, Tingtox. I'm really happy for you.



Well, that seems handled enough for now.

The general tells me you're without a permanent assignment, and I regret to inform you that you've gone and exceeded the duties of your rank again.

How does a promotion sound?

I am honored, my lord, but at the risk of overstepping my bounds, there is another boon I would request.

Sure, name it. Cash? Magic items? I can hook you up with some new armor.

My request—my *plea*—is that you disband the Sapphire Guard.



...That is a big ask, Captain.

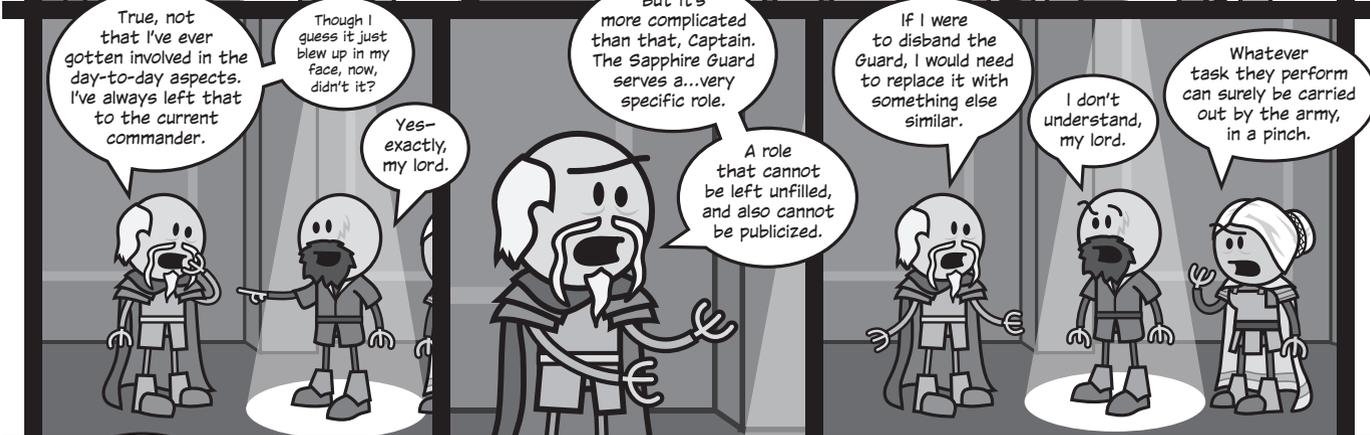
I know, my lord. But I would not ask if I did not believe it was strictly necessary.

If Azure City is to stand for justice and virtue, we cannot support and shelter a secret strike force of zealots who take action in our country's name.

It betrays our principles and, on a more practical level, entangles us in conflicts that do not serve our interests.

I can't do what you're asking.

With due respect, sir, you can. I spoke with Subcommander Sato, and she informed me that *you* were the legal head of the Guard.



True, not that I've ever gotten involved in the day-to-day aspects. I've always left that to the current commander.

Though I guess it just blew up in my face, now, didn't it?

Yes—exactly, my lord.

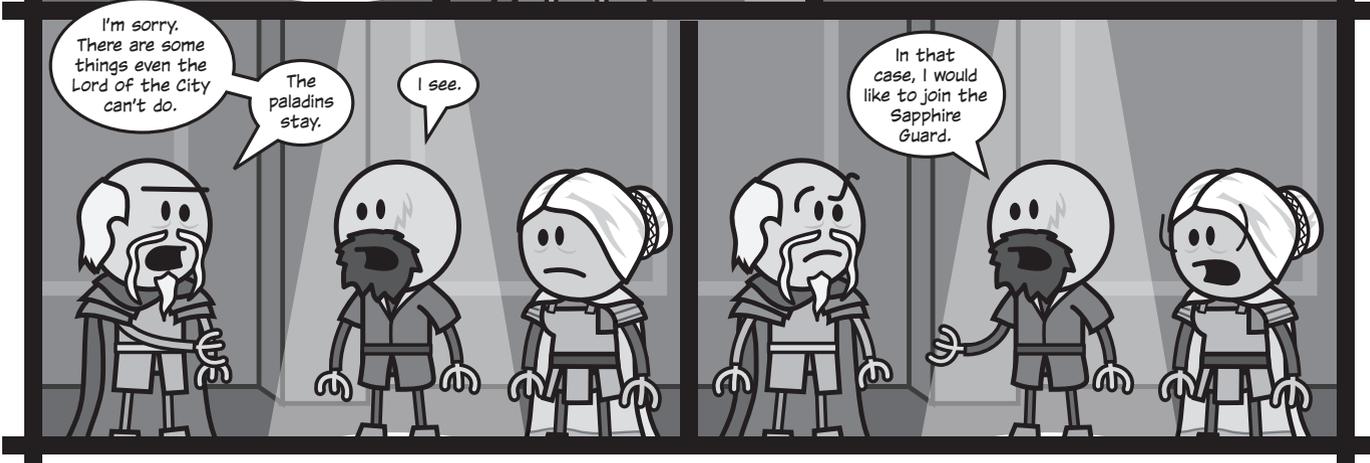
But it's more complicated than that, Captain. The Sapphire Guard serves a...very specific role.

A role that cannot be left unfilled, and also cannot be publicized.

If I were to disband the Guard, I would need to replace it with something else similar.

I don't understand, my lord.

Whatever task they perform can surely be carried out by the army, in a pinch.



I'm sorry. There are some things even the Lord of the City can't do.

The paladins stay.

I see.

In that case, I would like to join the Sapphire Guard.

Captain, I'm pretty old, so maybe I didn't hear you right. Because a moment before, you were arguing they should be disbanded.

Yes. And I still believe that would be for the best.



But if they must be maintained, as you have just told me they must, then they cannot keep operating as they have been.

Why in the Twelve Gods' name would you want to quit the army to do...whatever it is they're doing?

I don't particularly, General. But I think it is what is needed for the city.

Someone must step in and do something, and since no one else knows they exist much less that they need to change, the pool of potential reformers is very small indeed.



They're nobles, you know. Every last one. I don't think they'd react well to me inducting a commoner.

All the more reason my presence would be helpful, my lord.

Among other things, I believe that their isolation as a secret organization has led them to lose touch with the people they are presumably defending.

My perspective as a commoner may prove instructive in that regard.

...You know what? You might actually have a point, Captain.

I think my hands-off approach has left them a bit too set in their ways.



You may be the perfect little bomb for me to throw right in their midst to force them to rethink their approach.

That kind of shake-up will be good for them. Or they'll implode, and then we'll talk about replacing them with something else.

Evolve or die, so to speak.

But keep in mind, Captain: this isn't a temp assignment that you can take on for a bit and then leave.

Once you know the Secret Lore of the Sapphire Guard, you will be forever bound to secrecy. That's why they call it "Secret Lore."

You can't even tell your spouse about this.

I am not married, and have no interest in such pursuits. I will gladly swear myself to secrecy.



Hmmm. Fair enough. If you want in, you're in.

My lord?

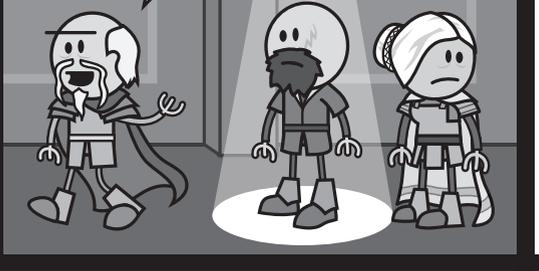
There are oaths and yadda yadda, but it's all formalities.

We can worry about transitioning you over to paladin later.

I, um, may need some remedial religion classes for that, my lord.

Heh, yeah, I hear that. So, welcome to the Sapphire-

I want to join, too!



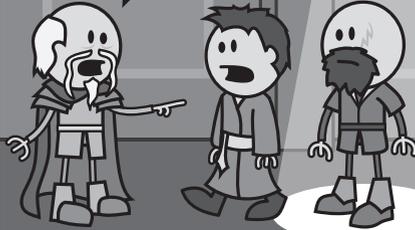
Hinjo?
What are you
doing creeping
around listening
out there?

I really
should put a
door up one
of these
days.



For that
matter, I can't
believe you lied to
me about where you
were going and then
snuck off behind
my back.

I'm sorry,
Uncle.



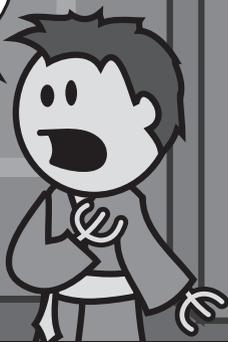
Sorry?
I've never
been prouder of
you, my boy! We'll
make a proper
leader out of
you yet!

No, Uncle-
I am sorry. It
was wrong of me.
I need to take
responsibility for
my actions.



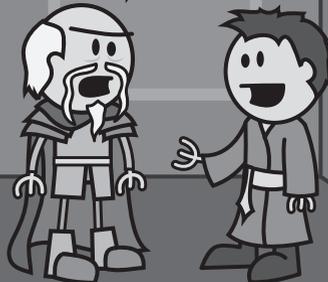
And I need
to make full use
of the opportunities
my birth station
allows me in order to
make things better,
because no one
else can.

If our
society is going
to give me higher
status, then I have
a disproportionate
duty to protect
those below
me.



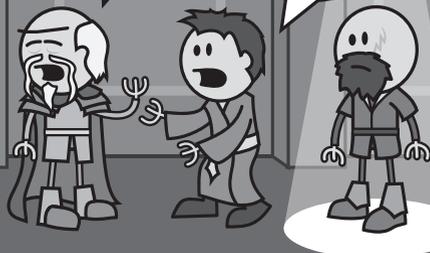
Geez,
what's gotten
into you?

Nothing
bad, Uncle.



Hinjo,
you're going to
be lord someday.
You can play with
the paladin toys
then.

Wouldn't
it be better to
understand what
they do now, since I
won't be able to
spend the time
doing it then?



...You're
too young.

And Miko
is older than
you are.

You let
Miko join.



Come back
in two years,
and if you haven't
come to your
senses, we'll talk
about it.

I'm not
going to change
my mind.

We'll
see.



But you
know what? Stay
for the next part
anyway.

You'll need
to know what I'm
about to tell the
captain here whether
or not you go running
around with a bunch
of paladins.



Claire,
I'll need you
to leave.

Sorry. It
really is a
secret.

What,
seriously?

sigh
I thought it was
bad enough I was
losing my best
captain.



Captain,
in case I don't
see you before I
head back-you can
deliver this for
me, correct?

Yes,
General.

Convey
my regards
as well.

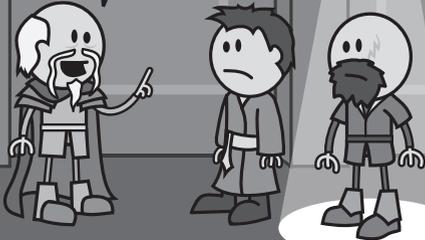


And try
to keep your new
teammates away
from my border,
Captain.



There. Now let's get down to business: the Secret Lore of the Sapphire Guard.

At the Dawn of Time, there was chaos...



Forty-five minutes later



So...I guess there's a giant string monster inside the planet?

Sounds like. Yeah.



The day you learn you will be responsible for containing a god-eating horror that lives under our feet is the day you come of age. Drink.

Here.

I'm too-



I suppose I now understand why the Sapphire Guard is actually necessary...

I still want to join.



If this really is that big, then I have to do everything I can to prepare myself for someday leading them.

This is probably even more important than leading the country!

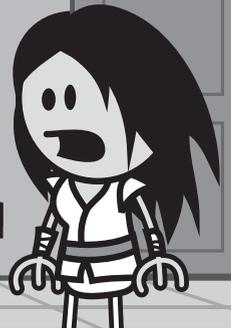


Good. That is a good instinct. I feel the same way.

This is far bigger than overhauling one group of out-of-control paladins—though that overhaul must still happen.



It is happening.



Cousin Miko!

I didn't really get a chance to thank you for what you did. For defending Private Zhou.

She was not part of the duel.



I am sorry that when we first met, I came close to knocking you out.

It's OK. It wasn't that close.

...Yes. Of course.



Commander Sato just announced your induction to the Sapphire Guard, and eleven members resigned.

I guess... that is to be expected.

I don't understand why you would want to join.

But no one wants you there.

Because I have to.

Yes.

But I don't determine what the proper thing to do is based on what would be well-received.

If anything, experience has taught me a poor reception is a good sign I'm doing something right.

You see, when other people take actions in your name—as part of a group to which you belong—you only really have two options:

Disassociate yourself from that group, or do what you can to curtail their behavior.

The Sapphire Guard has been doing things that reflect very poorly on my country—and have been doing so with the full support of the highest levels of power.

If my talents lay elsewhere, I would be taking a different tack. If I was a noble, I would be using my influence to sway the Council of Nobles. If I was a beggar, I would stand on a street corner and shout.

But it just so happens that my special talent is throwing myself bodily in the path of danger and getting hit so that others don't have to. So that is what I am doing.

I do not wish to leave Azure City in protest, so I am doing what I can to alter the situation.

If some measure of abuse from my new teammates is the price of aligning the Sapphire Guard with my conscience, then I pay it willingly.

So...you are saying that if someone betrays Azure City, it's our job to stop them using whatever means we have at our disposal?

Uh, well, that's not exactly what I meant. I suppose, within the bounds of the law—

Thank you, Brother O-Chul. I think I understand now.

OK, well, that went better than the next one probably will.

What do you mean?

You did **WHAT?**

Why would you join those loons?? Did that sword scramble your brain while it was lodged in your face?

They are taking actions in the name of Azure City. As a citizen, I have a duty to-

Yeah, duty to intervene, OK got it. Shouldn't you be working to get rid of them, then? Shouldn't you be fighting them every step of the way?

I was, but it has gotten more complicated. There are...circumstances... to which I am now privy that change everything.

Circumstances? Like what?

I can't tell you.

Are you serious??



You dropped your life story on me after a little prodding, but this you can't share?

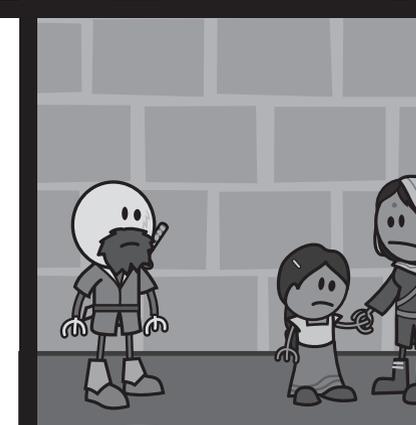
My history was mine to tell. Please understand: I wouldn't take this step if I did not think it would save lives.

Of course. That's probably how they got you, by playing the "innocent lives" card.

I thought you were the guy to fix the system. But it looks like the system's corrupting you instead.

I am...unable to discuss my decision in more detail without breaching the secrets with which I have been entrusted.

Well, I guess that's that, then.



General Nhek tells me they gave you permission to settle here.

Yeah. Thanks for that. Don't think we're going to do it, though.

I don't think this is where I want my kids to grow up.

Sometimes, when you get up close, a "shining beacon" turns out to have been a garbage fire all along.

We'll cross the border and head north.

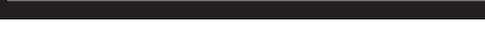
Maybe try Greysky, or Cliffport, or one of those weird little countries up there.

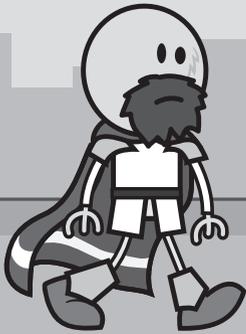
Anywhere?

You should do what you think is best for your family.

Always do. Take care of yourself, Captain.

Normally, that's an empty platitude, but with you, I think you need the occasional reminder.





Whoa.

I feel ridiculous.

I don't know, I think white suits you.



We have really good clerics on staff, you know. They can probably fix that scar.

Thank you, but no.



It is crucial that the Sapphire Guard remember the depths to which their former commander sunk, to ensure they do not lose sight of their duty.

I cannot imagine a more effective reminder.



Wow. You're willing to walk around with a scar on your face for the rest of your life just to keep a group of other people on the straight and narrow?

Not *only* them. I am a member of the Sapphire Guard now, too, and mirrors exist.



You can't possibly think that you'll end up like Gin-Jun??

If I assume that there is no way that I could, I surely will.



Are you headed out to the graveyard?

Yes.



Tell her... I said hi.

I will.



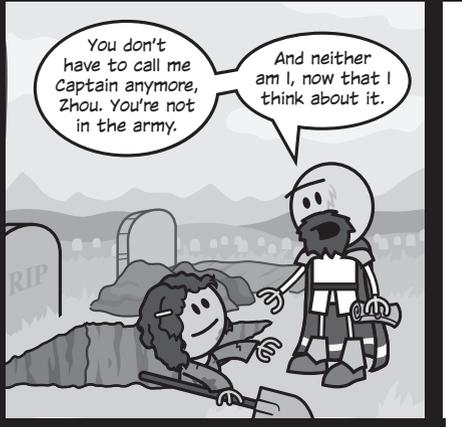
Hello, Zhou.

Hirjo sends his regards.





Oh hi, Captain! I didn't see you up there.



You don't have to call me Captain anymore, Zhou. You're not in the army.

And neither am I, now that I think about it.



Really? Is that why you've got the snazzy white armor?

Yes. I've... joined the Sapphire Guard.

Oh, OK. That's cool.



Ooooo! Is that paperwork I see?

Yes. General Nhek wanted me to give it to you.



I never thought I'd see an honorable discharge without a *dis* in front of it.

And possibly an arrest warrant behind it.



Weird. If you'd asked me what could get you kicked out of the army, "Not having a spleen anymore," would not have been my guess.

I, uh, think it's more the principle of the matter.



Thanks for hooking me up with this new job, Captain.

I said you didn't have to call me-

You're welcome, Zhou.



My new boss says I'm the most qualified candidate he's ever interviewed!

And he once accidentally gave a callback to an actual ghou!



Are you sure you want to do this? You said you were tired of digging graves.

Nah, I said I didn't want to dig my *friends'* graves. This town is full of total strangers!

