

Strength

——《Tales of Tarsylia》17

吴焱作品

w e 3 1 4 1 5 @ 2 6 3 . n e t

Long ago...
When the world was pitch black, I was once asked this:
"How strong must someone be
to hold onto their happiness?"

That was a long time ago...

Tarsylia, Year 5 of Heroes
Coastal village on the outskirts
of the Beast Mines



The old guard only know how to kill, loot, and burn. Those mad dogs...



Luckily they've all sailed away...
It's a lot quieter now. Is there not a single living soul here?



No, there should always be a few clever ones who manage to escape fate's notice...



Let me sense around...



The mountain is protected. I'll look for a "child" then...



Found them. They're somewhere below the well, three meters to the right. But none of them have the willpower I seek...



Oh? That's a pity. But it would be weirder if we found children who met your requirements that easily! Well then, wish me luck. Maybe I'll find the children that I need. Meet me by the rock lizard carriage in half an hour.



10 minutes later
Cellar entrance by
the well



Alright...Now, I'll be performing six gestures. Whoever mimics them gets a piece of bread. Watch closely, I'll only do it once!



20 minutes later



You, come here.

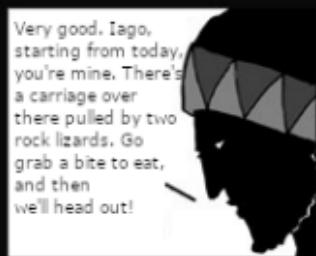


Do you have
a name?



I...I do, sir! My
name...is Iago.
Iago Bell...

Very good, Iago,
starting from today,
you're mine. There's
a carriage over
there pulled by two
rock lizards. Go
grab a bite to eat,
and then
we'll head out!



And...sir...what about the
others?



Of the six gestures I performed,
only you got more than 3 correct.



In this world, you
need skills to
survive.



B...but....

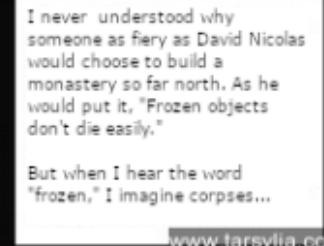
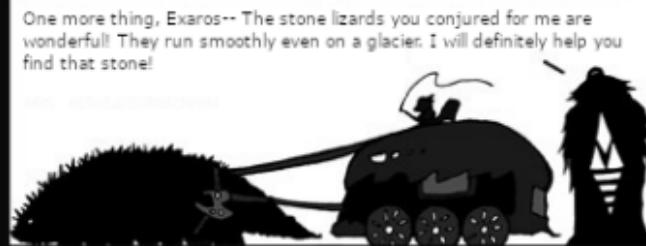
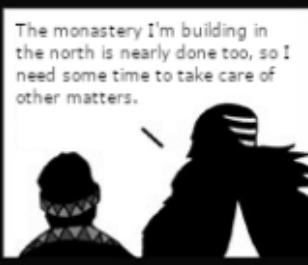
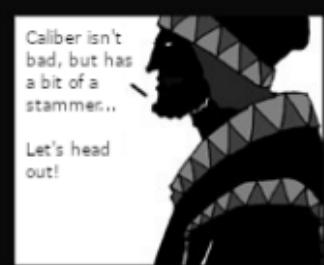


Stay here and die if
you want. The
carriage leaves in 5
minutes!



Alright children, we're going home.





Tarsylia
Year 6 of Heroes

Teacher, that white-haired kid has been following us for two days now...

I'm not interested in teaching someone incapable of learning even one hand gesture.

But...

Shut up! And if you keep throwing your bread off the carriage, I'll turn you into a rock and throw you off too!

Very good, Parker. Keep the glow steady.

The next day

Exaros's Mage Tower

Teacher, look! He's still right behind our carriage!

Give him some food and water...

Vessir!

What's your name?

My name's Iago.



Get out...of my way...I can still walk.



I...can...



I'm gonna...myself...



This little desert will be a forest by next year...



I want to walk in... on my own two feet...



Once it does...I'm going to plant fruit trees...



Are you...stupid...I said... Put me down! I want to...

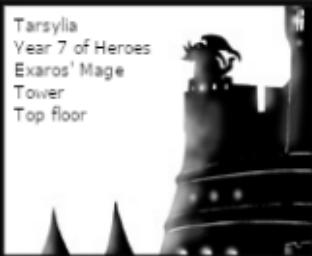


I've met people like this before.
They are strong but brittle, simple but dangerous.
They are withdrawn yet crave recognition...
The best part is they are defiant and yet easily controlled.

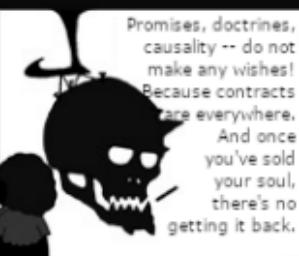
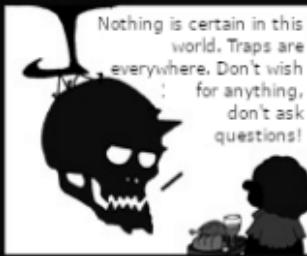
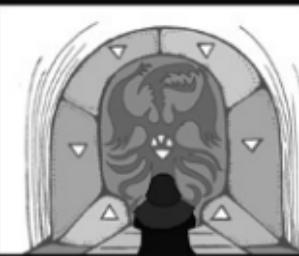
These people have one more thing in common -- they all die young.



Tarsylia
Year 7 of Heroes
Exaros' Mage
Tower
Top floor



Exaros's private alchemy lab



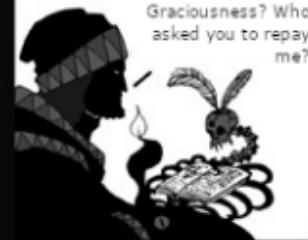
Who told you to? Did I not give you enough homework?



...No.... My dad said to...
...to never take someone's graciousness for granted.
This...this is the only thing I can offer in return....



Graciousness? Who asked you to repay me?



You aren't even worth being called my tool yet. Don't get too full of yourself!



An ignorant apprentice like you should be worrying about how to surpass others, how to survive in this cruel world.



But...you were like everyone else...complaining about the food from the kitchen... so...so I...



~Sineax tannila!



Whoosh----



Oh, great lord, how can we be of service?



Their food is disgusting?



Olahar!

Then we'll find someone that can cook!



AHHHH!!!!



Idiot....

....oh?



Not bad...



This best thing I've eaten in my life was a barbecued skinworm from some beast-man named Rotten Ears. That first bite, seasoned by starvation, is one I will never forget.

Year 8 of Heroes
Student cafeteria



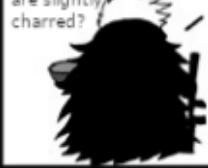
Today's dinner is venison, truffle boar stew, and an entire sea conch. Just like yesterday, there will also be six-vegetable chowder.



That's enough, Kago. You're disturbing the boss. I'll give you the bones once everyone is done! Everyone, time to eat!



Iago! A bowl of porridge, two pieces of snake meat, and do you have any pieces of venison that are slightly charred?



This afternoon, I'm going to try the Black Soul Curse. As long as I have a full belly, I'll definitely succeed!



Didn't you throw up your entire lunch yesterday?



That's why I need to eat even more today!



Haha, I sure miss Sibelius's feral logic! I'll get the same as him...



I missed this food while I was at the Glacier Monastery! They should just feed their chef to the beastmen!



Amen!!



Enjoy.

Parker, I heard that you learned nothing from that barbarian place.

That's right. There was no spell magic at all. Father said that wizards don't pick up soul magic easily.



Once I can summon dragons, I'll show those Chaos bastards!



Father also said, the limits of soul magic can't compare to our spell magic. That's right, Sibelius, what happened to your leg?



I fought with Chaos, and then Teacher hung me upside down in the Rat Room for 3 days...



To be honest, I didn't expect to see him when I came back. This isn't just a little bit of trouble. The principal dotes on his son -- you overstepped this time!



He had it coming! You don't know what that little prince has been up to these past three months! Wait, what does this have to do with me?



Sibelius, you need to think these things through. Thank goodness he has hard bones that set easily, or else... who knows what would have happened to you...



-- Oy! You ate my venison!
-- You blabber too much.
-- Then I'll take your...
-- Do what you want, I only have the soup left...
-- Almedar!!
-- Are you eating that snake?

Dinner is lizard skewers. It'll be ready at 6...Everyone please come grab your dinner then.



Didn't I say to first send lunch to the inner chambers? You dared to make us wait--are you tired of living? Also, how many times do I ned to tell you -- don't stick those weird things all over yourself. I can't keep down any food while looking at that.



I...I'm sorry, principal... I'll send it over immediately...



Mr. Iago, sir, we have a request...



You know what kind of mood the lord has been in recently...



I got it, give the lunch to me. I'll send it over after I get changed!



If you ask me, there's no such thing as friends, only comrades. That day, my closest comrade David and I had falling out...We had been shield brothers for so many years....By his principles, he sent Parker back; by his principles, he found me that rock; and by his principles, he will never forgive me!

Year 9 of Heroes
Mage tower top floor
Summoning deck



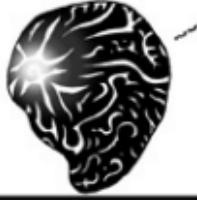
Sorry to interrupt, Teacher...



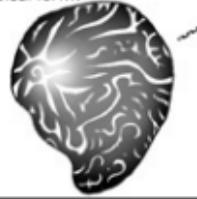
The laws of the worlds have all been achieved!



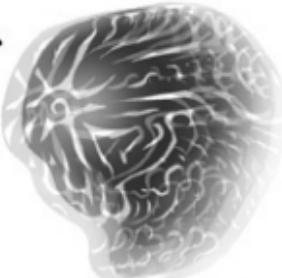
Summon the abyss, the contract has been fulfilled!



Come, let me return to my physical form.



No....



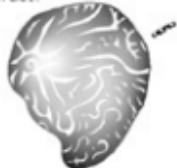
Today's vegetable costs were as follows:

Cauliflower 20 silver bits, broccoli 34 silver bits, cabbage 199 silver bits, liberty mushrooms 19 silver bits, black wolfberries 20 silver bits, apples and pears were on the house, since I've been buying from the same farmer for 2 months now. Beef 17 gold pieces, sirloin 29 gold pieces, house-bred fowl were 9 silver bits for 13.

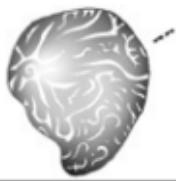
(Note: Outsider cannot hear sounds that come from inside the giant cocoon.)



I am not a despicable demon. I have no obligation to comply with a contract!



If you're not a demon, then tell me what your name is, evil spirit!



I am He Who Delivers Father Time's Wrath -- Albus the Punisher. Commoner, time to pay the price for disturbing my rest!



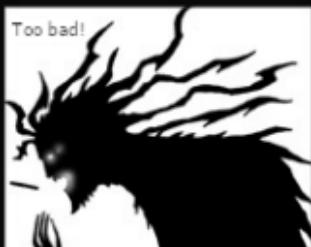
You poor Fallen soul, if you don't want to obey the contract, then just surrender to me!



Ah!



ARGH!



Too bad!

You lowly maggot, you piece of demon shit, don't expect to get away with stealing my soul! Our souls are connected now...hahaha! I'll wait for you at the Vengeful God's shrine, where you will be tortured in tens of thousands different ways!...Even if I am much weaker in the physical plane, our souls are not connected enough for you to control me. What wishful thinking!





Why didn't you run away, Iago? It's dangerous here... huff...huff...

But you were here, Teacher.



Enough, I'm tired today. Next time, don't bother me with such trivial matters...huff...



But this was about the grocery budget you give me every week. And you don't even look at my receipts, sir...



Iago, right now...I don't lack for money. What I do lack is time...



I don't care how you spend that money, as long as everyone is satisfied with the food.



You don't need to worry about pinching pennies...



Then...I'll keep records in the log book. If one day you ever want to look into it...



Get out of here! And also, if in class tomorrow you still can't negotiate with fallen spirits... huff...



Huff...I'll... keep you in the kitchen for the rest of your life!



Really? Teacher...



In truth, I should have realized that Nicolas wouldn't be so generous as to give me a stone that precious. He must have been up to something. I hate these kinds of wizard-eat-wizard games. As the last few great wizards left, I had hoped that the two of us could join forces and usher in a new era!

Year 10 of Heroes
Mage Tower
Living room



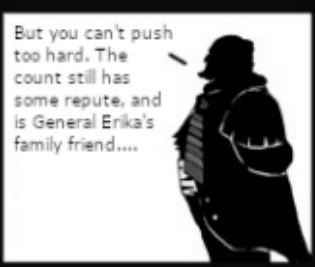
Earl Christal requests a few more months of leniency. This year our harvest was a disaster. Even the count's guard was reduced by half...



He's been in debt for a year now, and is still borrowing endlessly!



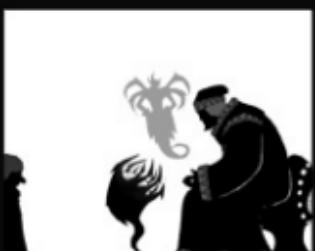
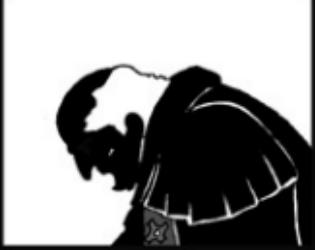
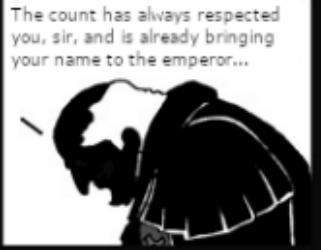
But you can't push too hard. The count still has some repute, and is General Erika's family friend....



If it weren't for the general....



The count has always respected you, sir, and is already bringing your name to the emperor...



Butler; according to my sources, the count's harvest this year wasn't bad at all.

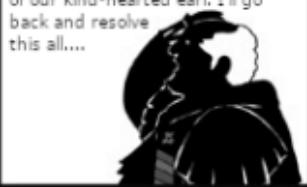
The grains you sold us were four coppers cheaper than last year. The vegetables and livestock were also discounted, and potatoes and fruit were on the house....this certainly doesn't seem like a year of disasters!



Ah...



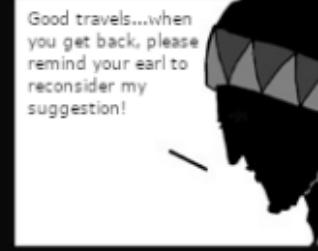
That...that's...those tricksters definitely were taking advantage of our kind-hearted earl. I'll go back and resolve this all....



I'll return with a reply for you tomorrow!



Good travels...when you get back, please remind your earl to reconsider my suggestion!



This is the logbook you're always nattering on about?



That's right....it's a bit messy, but everything is in there.



That it is...you're probably the only one who can read this.



I'll give you 30 minutes each day, to give me some "useful" accounts. Remember that!



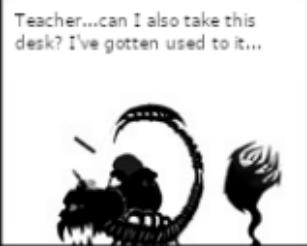
Al....alright, Teacher.



Keep this key safe. Once you're done, make sure to lock the door!



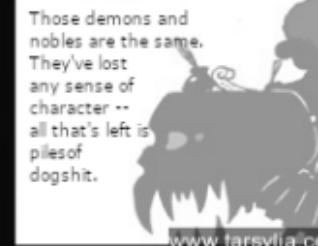
Teacher...can I also take this desk? I've gotten used to it...



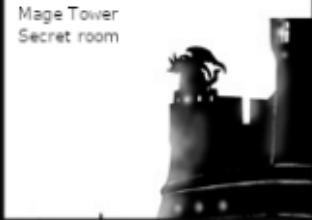
When you've gotten stronger, you can make one that suits you better!



Those demons and nobles are the same. They've lost any sense of character -- all that's left is piles of dogshit.



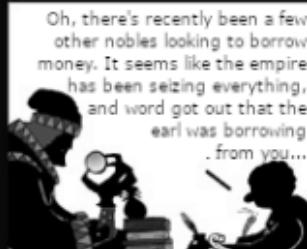
Year 11 of Heroes
Mage Tower
Secret room



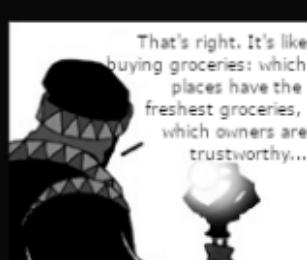
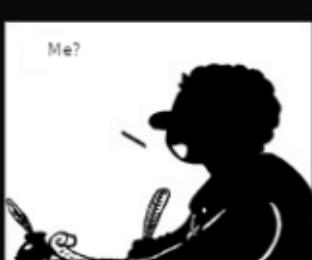
How is our income this year?



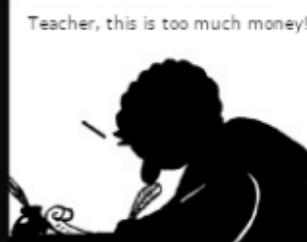
That's right, up until he uses his title as collateral.



Me?



One in twelve...I've got it! Take a look at what's sealed in here...

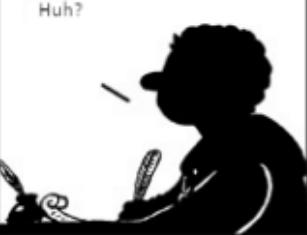


That's why you need to do the bookkeeping!

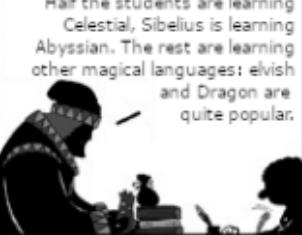




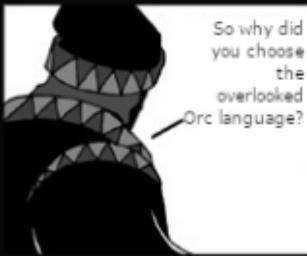
That's right...why did you learn the orc language?



Huh?



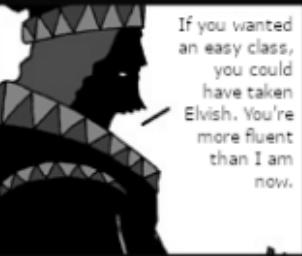
Half the students are learning Celestial, Sibelius is learning Abyssian. The rest are learning other magical languages: elvish and Dragon are quite popular.



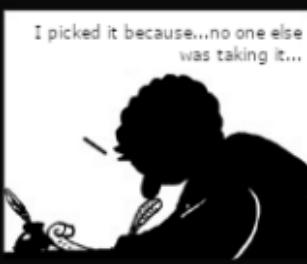
So why did you choose the overlooked Orc language?



I....



If you wanted an easy class, you could have taken Elvish. You're more fluent than I am now.



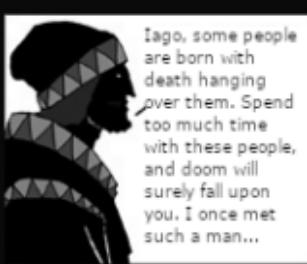
I picked it because...no one else was taking it...



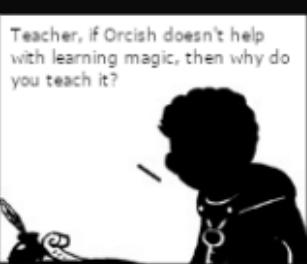
Just like how no one else wanted to be friends with Sibelius, so you became his friend?



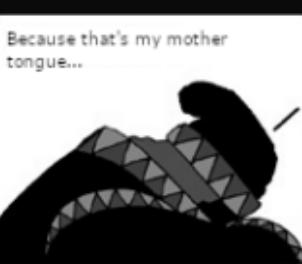
No! That...he has friends...



Iago, some people are born with death hanging over them. Spend too much time with these people, and doom will surely fall upon you. I once met such a man...



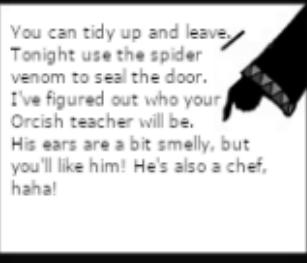
Teacher, if Orcish doesn't help with learning magic, then why do you teach it?



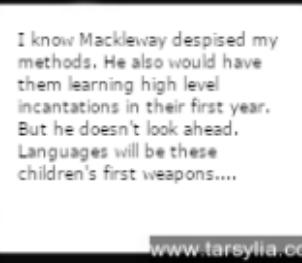
Because that's my mother tongue...



Oh?



You can tidy up and leave. Tonight use the spider venom to seal the door. I've figured out who your Orcish teacher will be. His ears are a bit smelly, but you'll like him! He's also a chef, haha!



I know Mackleway despised my methods. He also would have them learning high level incantations in their first year. But he doesn't look ahead. Languages will be these children's first weapons....

Year 12 of Heroes
Mage Tower
Bridge entrance



Alright. Before I leave, Iago the Cauldron-Hand, I have one last Orcish test for you. Are you ready?



I, Iago the Cauldron-Hand, accept your test, nay, your challenge.



What do you say to ridicule an orc who looks as if a strong gust could blow them off their feet?



I would say, "You must have been raised by humans."



Second question! If you were to ask an Orcish lady permission to court her what would you say?



"You're stronger than my mother. Our child will definitely become chieftain!"



There's no stopping you! Last question:



The chieftain caught and grilled an eight-year old brown bear for a hunting feast. How old should the skinworm it's baked with be?



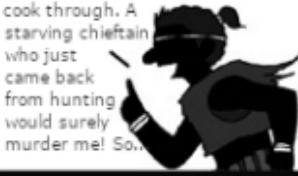
An eight-year old bear will have a lot of fat, so I would use a twenty-year old skinworm, in order to capture all of the bear's umami.



...If I answered that, it would definitely be incorrect. Right, Master Hongla?



When using a skinworm, the meat must be slowly baked on low heat, and takes at least three hours to cook through. A starving chieftain who just came back from hunting would surely murder me! So...



Enough, you pass! Exa the Fire-Spitter, you don't have objections, right?



I've said it before...this is a gift. Whatever you wish.



Then my work here is done. I had better haul ass to do some hunting on the holy mountain. This is goodbye then.



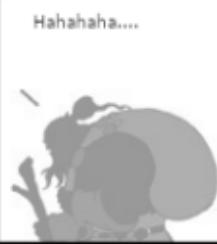
Exaros the Fire-Spitter, Iago the Cauldron-Hand, we'll meet again!



Goodbye, Master! Take care of yourself. I'll come visit you!



Hahahaha....



Good hunting!



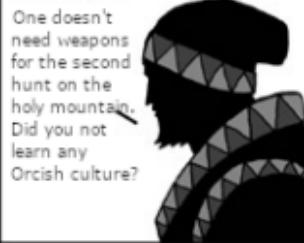
....Brother.



Teacher, is Master Hongla returning to his tribe first? He said he was hunting, but he doesn't have any weapons.



One doesn't need weapons for the second hunt on the holy mountain. Did you not learn any Orcish culture?



Master never mentioned the holy mountain.



Then I'll give you a make-up lesson: Orcs all visit the holy mountain before their twelfth birthday, as a rite of passage. They go alone, bringing only weapons they forged or ones gifted by their tribe. Atop the mountain live creatures known as megalodons. Megalodons travel alone, gliding on top of the snow with their rotting limbs. Their teeth can easily crack open full-body plate armor.

To be acknowledged as a warrior, the orc must kill the first megalodon they see, and bring home a flail made from its skull. This tradition has been followed for generations upon generations. Those who are weak or unfavored by fate die. Those who are brave have a chance at survival. This is also why orcs have always been limited in number.

Orcs typically mature around age ten, and reach old age when they are fifty. Those who live a life of war and glory rarely see their fiftieth year. If they survive to sixty, then they leave the tribe and visit the holy mountain for the second time. Without weapons...because at that point, they are a burden to their tribe, wasting precious food and supplies. Worse is for chieftains, whose senility can destroy a tribe. Orcs can never let this happen. To serve your tribe and fight for sixty years, and thereby earn the chance to visit the holy mountain again, is a warrior's greatest honor!

Hongla....turned sixty this year!



What?! Wait...Master!



Come back,
dumbass!



Demonic Chains!
Narnalo...



No...Teacher, don't! We can invite him to stay here!

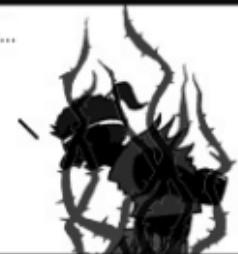


Waah....



I know what you're thinking, but right now that would be the greatest humiliation for him. In our eyes, you humans and your aspirations for a long life are the real tragedy!

But...

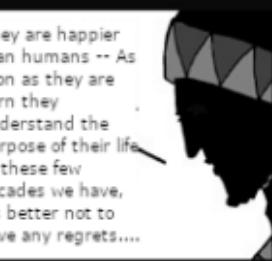


You can't change the world according to your ideals. The only thing for you to do now is to watch him leave -- This is life!

Orcs' spirit and culture have been passed down like this for generations.

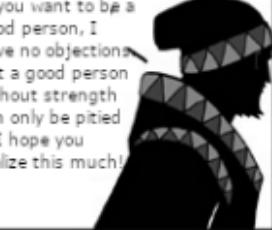


They are happier than humans -- As soon as they are born they understand the purpose of their life. In these few decades we have, it's better not to have any regrets....



To know the value of your life and do your utmost to achieve it, and then end with glory and honor!

Waah...waah....



Rotten-Ear Honglai!
Good hunting!



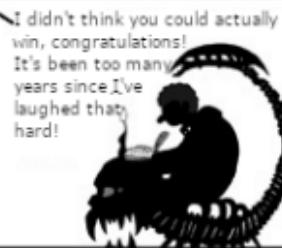
If you want to be a good person, I have no objections. But a good person without strength can only be pitied -- I hope you realize this much!

Without strength, you can't even hold onto yourself, let alone help others or change all that you abhor...Get stronger, and catch up to them!



More than thirty years ago, when I was vacillating between the Orc and human worlds, an elder told me, 'Not deciding is also a decision! On that day, my brother grabbed his bone knife without a word and accompanied me out of the tribe. We stepped onto human soil....

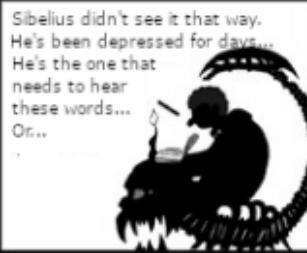
Year 13 of Heroes
Mage tower
Secret chamber



The fact that I
didn't dispute
your battle
already proved
my opinion!

Sibelius didn't see it that way.
He's been depressed for days...
He's the one that
needs to hear
these words...
Or...

I'll talk to him, as a price for
winning, and even promote him
to the inner magic guild!



That's amazing,
Teacher!



You, on the other hand, haven't
attended practice once. You are
staying in the outer guild.



That is...to be expected. I
don't have their skill...



Idiot! They're leaving you
farther and farther behind!



If you miss out on these golden
years, you'll regret it for the rest
of your life!



Teacher, I'll get
you some milk...

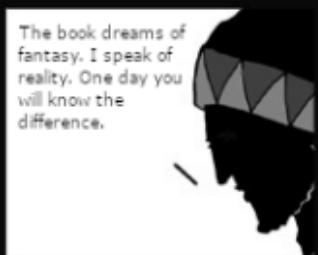
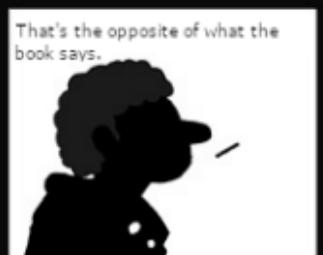
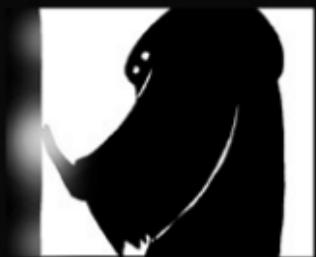
When you're done with the
bookkeeping go home and prepare.

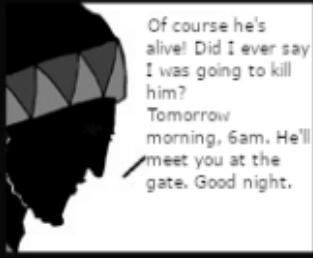
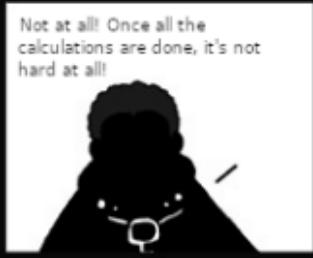
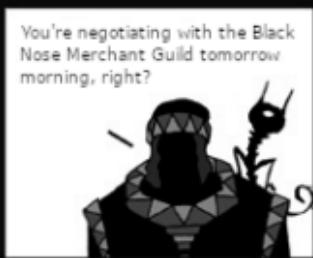


Tonight we're using a fourth-level
displacement spell to seal the
door.



Understood!





The next morning



K...Kago...
Th...This was your favorite
bone...



Do you want
it?



AAWOOOOO.....



Ahh.....



S...



Sorry, Kago!



When Parker explained how to
change the dosage for four
ingredients in the werewolf-potion, I
managed to reverse the effects!

My talent is truly frightening...



Year 14 of Heroes
Mage tower
Secret chamber

BANG! THUD!
POPI

You really are an
impudent rat!

When you secretly used my money to buy trees and livestock for the tower, I didn't complain. When you secretly extended the debt repayment period, I also looked the other way, but don't think I didn't notice!! And now you've let peasant farmers settle on my land around the tower. On top of that, you used my name to declare no taxation for two years. Who do you think you are? You think you can leap across the line again and again without repercussions? You are nothing but a brainless apprentice who can't even make a charm!

Waah....Teach...



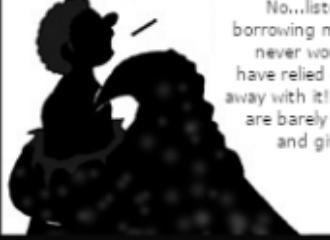
You want to be a good Samaritan? Have people sing your praises all day long? Or is it that you think once I heard some mealy-mouthed flattery, I'd welcome those poor bastards with open arms? Did you believe that I wouldn't kill these pieces of trash and feed them to the demons? I can send you all to hell with a wave of my finger!

These...these refugees...are all
originally from Earl Christal's lands...

So what? You were my main
accomplice in ravaging his
territory. Did it hurt your angelic
soul?

It's....not that....The earl was a
cow! You're nothing like that.
These people will
follow you.

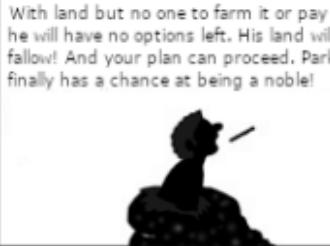
You think I'm a trash collection
agency? Have you forgotten what
I've told you? If you want to help
others, you must have enough
strength. And you don't!



No...listen please...the earl only cared about borrowing money from us. If that continued, he never would have given us his land. He would have relied on his position as a nobleman to get away with it! But...but...the farmers in his territory are barely surviving. Now we've taken them in, and given them comfortable lodging. Once word gets out, every one of his farmers will run to us.



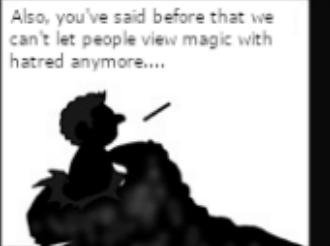
Hic...Christal owes us hundreds of thousands of gold pieces. He won't dare ask for workers!



With land but no one to farm it or pay taxes, he will have no options left. His land will go fallow! And your plan can proceed. Parker finally has a chance at being a noble!



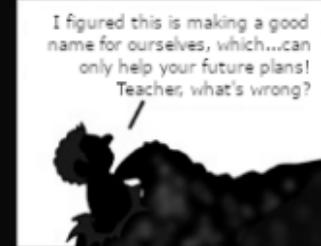
Gugugu...



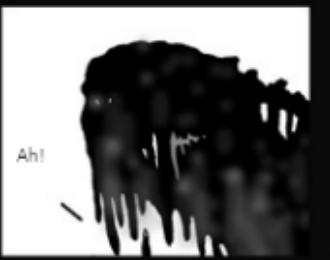
Also, you've said before that we can't let people view magic with hatred anymore....



Gugugu...



I figured this is making a good name for ourselves, which...can only help your future plans!
Teacher, what's wrong?



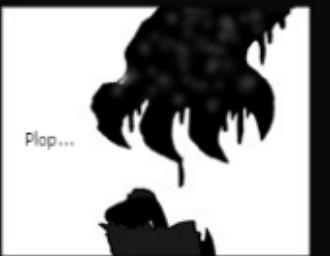
Ah!



Huhuhu...



Teacher...



Plop...



Huhuhu...



Hivalala...

Child, you're too naive...I'll forgive you this time...huhuhuhu....
because you haven't endured any life-or-death tests...nor have you
experienced bottomless despair...
Do you really believe that if you carefully plan out each step, life is
yours to control?
...hah...



I...don't understand...



You'll understand soon enough.
That's enough for tonight.



Teacher, are you still suffering
from Mackleroy's curse? Your
body...

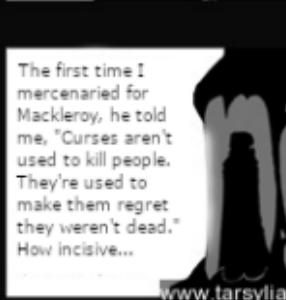


Haha...this is the Curse King Mackleroy's...magnum opus...
Even if we summoned the seven elven high priests on the holy
mountain, they may not be able to cure it completely. As is, I'm
fortunate that I can find a demon every day to absorb some of it.

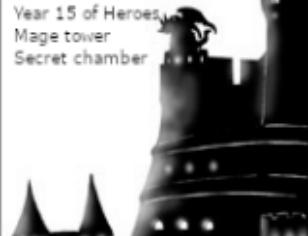
Let's go -- scramble the digits on the transfer
spell and lock the door.



The first time I
mercenary for
Mackleroy, he told
me, "Curses aren't
used to kill people.
They're used to
make them regret
they weren't dead."
How incisive...



Year 15 of Heroes,
Mage tower
Secret chamber



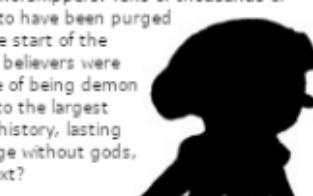
You've been standing quietly the whole day. Are you mad about something, Iago?



At the end of the Age of Chaos...



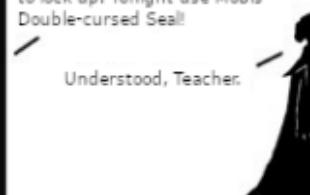
Believers of angels and demons united and butchered scores of nature deity worshippers. Tens of thousands of them were suspected to have been purged by Devoy's men. At the start of the Age of Gods, all pagan believers were accused by the empire of being demon worshippers. This led to the largest massacre in Tarsylia's history, lasting twelve years. In this age without gods, who do you think is next?



Teacher, I hope you can consider my earlier suggestion.



Do what you want....Don't forget to lock up. Tonight use Mobis' Double-cursed Seal!



Late that night



啊呜呃啊

Huff...huff...
Huff.....
Huff.....

Thunk!



AHHH....UWAHHH
AHH.....
AHHHHHH....
AHHHH.....
AHH....

AHH...AHHHH
UWAHHHH...
AHH....
AHHH.....
AHHH...AHHHH

Looks like you've absorbed its parasitic curse. It will feed off your pain -- and grow quickly.



Huff.....
Huff....



AHH.....IT HURTS!! PLEASE KILL ME....AHHHH



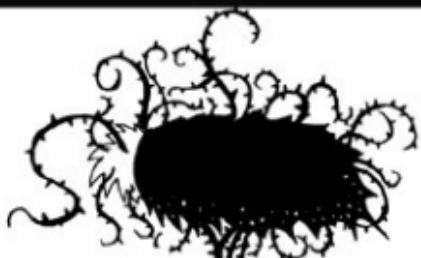
HAH....
....OWW....



As thanks for serving as my scapegoat, I won't punish you. But next time you break into my secret chambers...

Heh...there might not be a second time...

AHH.....
AH....



Tch....
....



....



Teacher...I...
I'll stay!
I'll stay!



I won't go anywhere!



Now isn't the time. These hell-thorns are manifesting in his soul. He won't be rid of them even in death. So....with my power...

The best I can do is save his life. Come help!



Yesir, thank you, Teacher!



It feeds on human emotions and desires, nourishing the parasite's soul. Any flicker of emotion will cause excruciating pain -- unless the host turns into ice. But Sibelius of all people was a ball of fire. Would he calm down or perish? That is the question.

Year 16 of Heroes
Mage tower basement
Iago's secret chamber



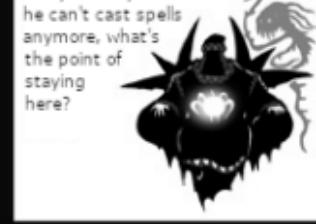
I haven't seen a trace of you all day. Can he get up yet?



Yes.



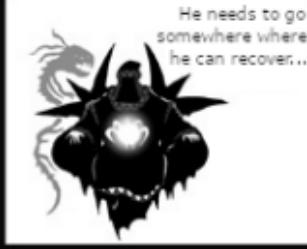
Are you still pissed? If he can't cast spells anymore, what's the point of staying here?



But he has nowhere to go!



He needs to go somewhere where he can recover...



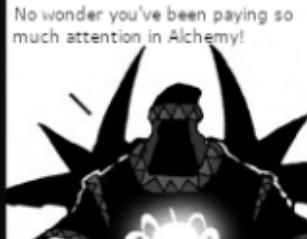
If he can't attain tranquility, he will eventually die from the pain!



Ancient elvish law books mention a potion that can make someone immune to pain.



No wonder you've been paying so much attention in Alchemy!



The potions I brew can only make people numb so far...



If you had put this much effort in from the beginning...



But that numbness is ineffective against the agony those thorns cause Sibelius!



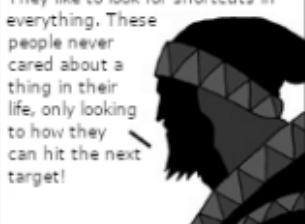
People often say mages have to be clever. But I think...



Even idiots can be great mages. More important than intelligence is judgment and intuition. Smart people are too often prideful and indolent....



They like to look for shortcuts in everything. These people never cared about a thing in their life, only looking to how they can hit the next target!



What does this have to do with Sibelius?



A mage without emotions can't be a real mage! If Sibelius can no longer be a mage.... he isn't like you!



.....



I am pressuring him. He's heading towards a dead end. No, his entire life has been a dead end since he was born!



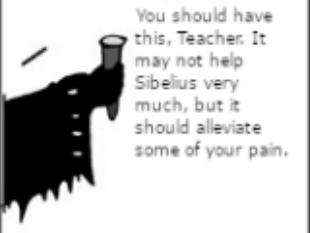
But...



If he still can't cast spells normally in a month, then he's leaving the mage tower, or I will kill him in cold blood. That's just how it is.



You should have this, Teacher. It may not help Sibelius very much, but it should alleviate some of your pain.



First take off this ridiculous elephant face. Its protection is not as strong as Aimedar claims.



I know. He laid it out very clearly when he brought me the mask.



But what you don't know is that three months ago, Parker brewed a potion for me that is twice as strong as what you're holding!



Next time you brew something this dangerous, wear a demon skull. Also, remember, stop owing Aimedar so many favors!



Alright, I'll remember.



Also, I just took a look at your balance sheet. Why is the empire's new law costing us 150,000 gold pieces a year?

You said this law would help us...

Earlier I evaluated it from an economic perspective. Who knows when this became a political maneuver!

I...I'm too naive when it comes to politics! Those nobles must have formed an alliance.

If that's the case....interesting!

No! Teacher!

Teacher...some methods.... I want to respect their rules, and use their methods to retaliate. Even though I still don't understand a lot, when it comes to using regulations, I will not be defeated!

Methods? I just care about their intentions!

But different methods can lead to different outcomes... Not unlike your own work...

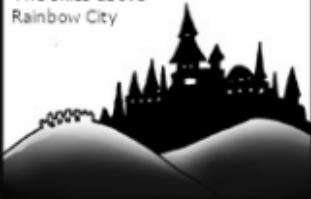
Well then, you also have a month!

Don't think playing politics is as easy as bookkeeping! You can ask Parker to help you with alchemy. As for politics...go talk to Aimedar. Also, stop leaving all this slime in the living areas.

In orc tribes, politics is a weapon. Humans laugh at orcs, but also never tire of playing these political games...

The way I see it, politics is solely for self-advancement and adultery. So everytime I hear of politics, I have an urge to tear the other party into pieces.

Year 17 of Heroes
The skies above
Rainbow City



Haha...I never thought that this piece of junk could also fly.



Rainbow Kingdom's territory extends to here. We own seven cities. The generals and politicians we backed are now in positions of power. Other than the palace, we possess all the policy-making power.



What else?



The discussion to enoble Parker is scheduled soon. There is no opposition, and the palace is also in full support.
They...

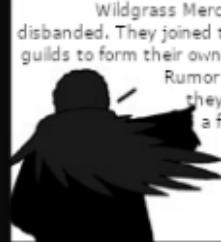
You're worried I will slaughter them? Don't. There's no need to.



Next...
How is that merchant guild doing?



Wildgrass Merchant Guild disbanded. They joined three other guilds to form their own city-state. Rumor has it that they're making a federation.



With Xidal as a base, they harassed neighboring cities until they joined the alliance. Even the Silent Home vampires were convinced!
I'm impressed.





Well done!



The most important part is that the most powerful nobles and merchants are under our control.



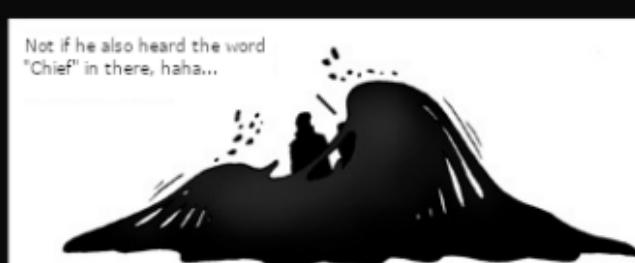
Then it's time for that to debut. Land on that mountaintop.



Alright, Chief Hongla, let's descend.



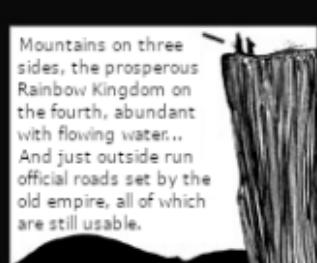
Hongla would be furious if he knew that you named your slime monster after him.



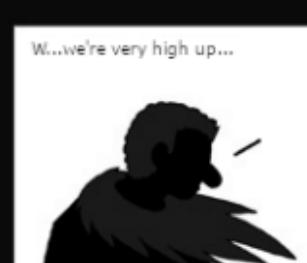
Not if he also heard the word "Chief" in there, haha...



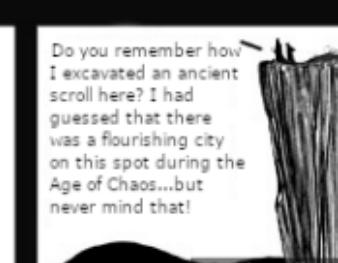
We flew around this valley a lot.



Mountains on three sides, the prosperous Rainbow Kingdom on the fourth, abundant with flowing water.. And just outside run official roads set by the old empire, all of which are still usable.



W...we're very high up...



Do you remember how I excavated an ancient scroll here? I had guessed that there was a flourishing city on this spot during the Age of Chaos...but never mind that!

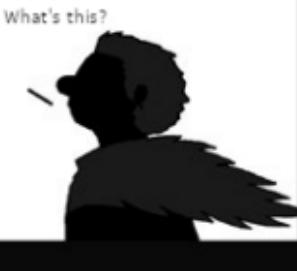


What's this?

This is what's important!



Rainbow City! A city made of wizards -- no, a country! A place where wizards can live like everyone else! My dream!



If you want to establish such a city, I'm afraid...



We have the money, and we have the land. Do you think your puppets will revolt?



The past few years...I've had a lot of dealings with them... I think...where we are now... It's probably the limit...



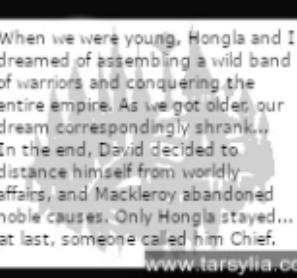
If we keep pushing...



So to move forward, I have to find someone else to rely on? Haha...



I know you don't like to get your hands dirty, but they're plenty dirty already!

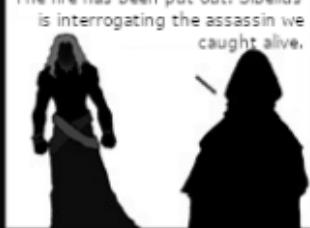


When we were young, Hongla and I dreamed of assembling a wild band of warriors and conquering the entire empire. As we got older our dream correspondingly shrank... In the end, David decided to distance himself from worldly affairs, and Mackleroy abandoned noble causes. Only Hongla stayed... at last, someone called him Chief,

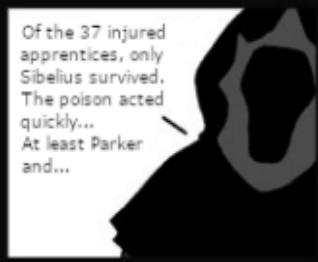
Year 18 of Heroes
Midnight
Mage tower

The fire has been put out. Sibelius is interrogating the assassin we caught alive.

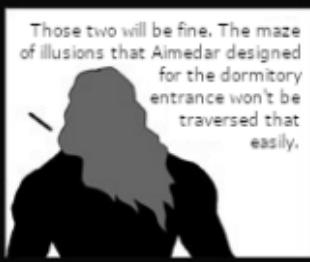
How's Salem?



Of the 37 injured apprentices, only Sibelius survived. The poison acted quickly... At least Parker and...



Those two will be fine. The maze of illusions that Aimedar designed for the dormitory entrance won't be traversed that easily.



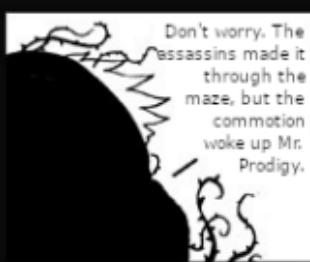
You think he's omnipotent? Someone managed to break through his magic! Ahaha...



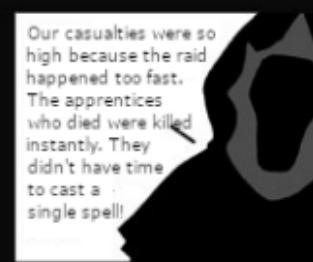
What?!



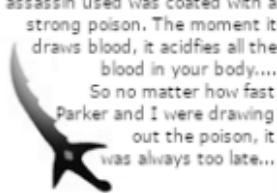
Don't worry. The assassins made it through the maze, but the commotion woke up Mr. Prodigy.



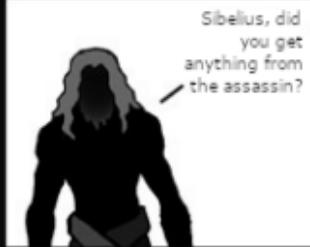
Our casualties were so high because the raid happened too fast. The apprentices who died were killed instantly. They didn't have time to cast a single spell!



The short sword that the assassin used was coated with a strong poison. The moment it draws blood, it acidifies all the blood in your body.... So no matter how fast Parker and I were drawing out the poison, it was always too late...



Sibelius, did you get anything from the assassin?



My glorious teacher, aside from this short sword, the assassin gave away nothing!



Or maybe I shouldn't trust you piece of trash with this. Lead the way. I'll interrogate him myself!

What?

T...Teacher, what he means is... this assassin is so tight-lipped even under torture... He's not...

Shut up, you rotten filth. You should have died on the floorboards with the rest of your kind!

But we don't have a feud with the Lost Country! How do you know all this?

Dusk is based in Xidal. Could this be the Merchant Alliance?

Have you heard? Some mad elf created a city they're calling the Lost Country! Hehe...his half elf deputies are the renowned Green Shadow assassins. Beneath the lake, they've constructed some stupid bunker they're calling the Labyrinth. Based on the skill of these assassins, they were trained there. So what dogshit illusion maze would stop them?

I went on a quest for treasure with some thieves from the Labyrinth. I know what you're about to say -- let's put it this way... they have no grudge against us.

Don't be stupid. The merchants in the Alliance are too shrewd for that. Dusk is an intermediary: they accept any clients, and then contract out the work to the most suitable assassins. Their motto is, "No one is our enemy!" So there's no need for us to waste time seeking revenge on the assassins or mercenary groups! The bastard who paid these assassins' bills is our real enemy!

My apologies, I thought you had already seen them... These assassins. Their willpower is perfect! Maybe Aimedar's magic would have been more effective, if he could speak with dead people!



We're stepping stones on their way to fame. The ones who hired them were likely the Dusk Mercenary Corps. All of Tarsylia's rats and maggots have been crawling that way recently. I've hired them a few times!



What a beautiful plan! The Labyrinth paid the principal, sent out all their top assassins, and earlier gathered intelligence on us. They probably even bought someone out. I dare say the bribe was enough to rival a dragon's hoard. From today on, the Labyrinth's assassins' price has increased one hundred fold. We're the only losers here...Teacher, say the word and I'll obey. I swear it!

Ahahaha....

Three hours later



Is this a declaration of war? I never would have thought those idiots would dare defy me! Total extermination?! I'll give them exactly what they're asking for.

He's right. The only ones who could afford this...



Teacher, if it comes to that, we aren't prepared!



The ones who died...weren't they your friends?



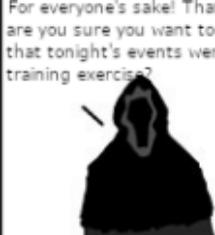
Of course they were, which is why....



You have to rein Sibelius in. Let Aimedar and me handle it. You and Parker do everything in your power to mobilize the Tarsylia Wizarding Association!

You want me out of it? For Sibelius?

For everyone's sake! That's right, are you sure you want to announce that tonight's events were a training exercise?



That's right! Include this: all surviving apprentices are promoted to upper class!

You too...



Tarsylia
Year 19 of Heroes

Upper
Wizard
District



So many wizards attended the meeting!

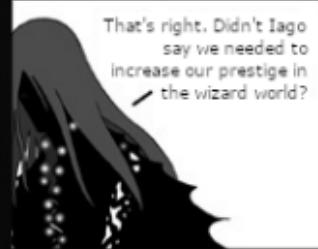
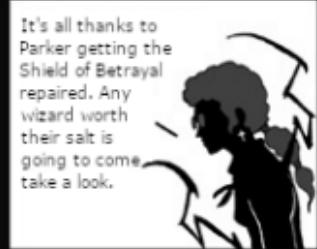
There were also a few on our kill list that also popped out of the woodwork!



It's all thanks to Parker getting the Shield of Betrayal repaired. Any wizard worth their salt is going to come take a look.

I hear you made it the prize for the jousting tournament.

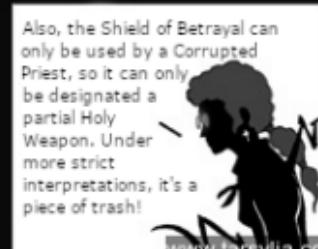
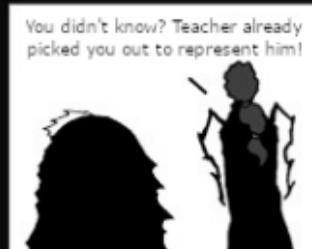
That's right. Didn't Iago say we needed to increase our prestige in the wizard world?



With this Holy Weapon...you're basically forcing me to participate.

You didn't know? Teacher already picked you out to represent him!

Also, the Shield of Betrayal can only be used by a Corrupted Priest, so it can only be designated a partial Holy Weapon. Under more strict interpretations, it's a piece of trash!



Who asked you? You thought I didn't know, Sida? Lousy wench!

WHAM!

I don't have time to bicker with you. I have something to take care of at Four-eyed Grape City! Start! Oh, I placed a bet at Xidal that Aimedar would destroy you! Haha...

KLANG! KLANG!

KLANG!

Why does this woman insist on using such raucous contraptions? Aimedar, are you really going to participate?

Me? I'm aiming for the second place prize, the elven manuscript "On Dragons."

You...what's that supposed to mean, you arrogant manchild?

I'm pleased to inform you that your commotion woke Teacher up. He's arriving soon. I hope you all have suitable reasons to request an audience!



Are you serious? Well, see you all later.



Tap tap...

I'm getting there first. That Osiris...



Oy! You two!



Stormdance!



Wait up!



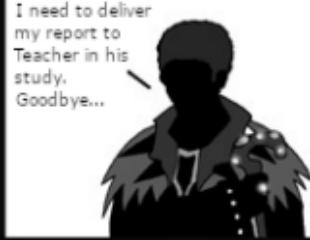
Huff...huff...



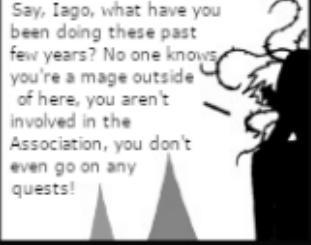
You...I...I'll show you!
Huff...huff...



I need to deliver
my report to
Teacher in his
study.
Goodbye...



Say, Iago, what have you
been doing these past
few years? No one knows
you're a mage outside
of here, you aren't
involved in the
Association, you don't
even go on any
quests!



You don't know how famous
those fuckers are in Rainbow City!
Everyone treats us like cattle,
while they show off!



I'm not as powerful as you guys...



And I'm not built for...



Nor do I like to...



Ten minutes later

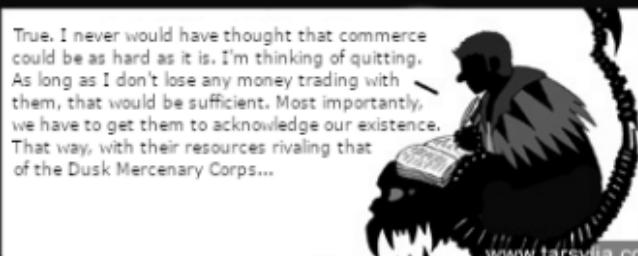
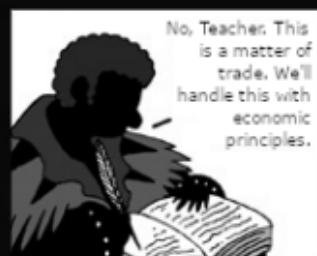
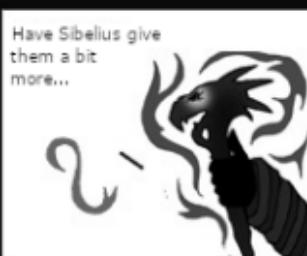
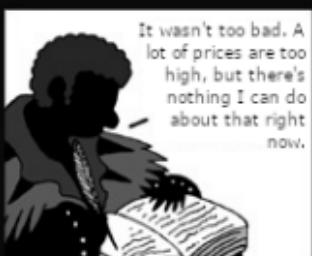




Alfonso's two princes wrote to me. They want to come here to study magic.



Almedar and Parker did well at the palace.



That mercenary group? They need to be uprooted!



Their waters run deep, and monsters hide in their depths. But still, many drink happily from it.



If we had the support of the four great merchant guilds, can we move against them?



There's no need. We're already one of their bosses behind the scenes!



It's still not as good as the backing of the four masterminds, but if ever there's another attack on people in our care, we will hear about it first.



Well done. You've earned a reward.



A reward? That doesn't seem necessary!



In the future, you will travel to many places, serving as my agent.



You may find yourself in perilous situations. If someone wishes you harm...



I don't dare imagine the result!



Hiss....



This brand will keep us connected. No matter where you are, I can always find you.



Huff...thank you...Teacher...



That's all for today's accounts.



Year 20 of Heroes



What did you say? You want to get married?
You must be joking....
You...You're not even twenty!



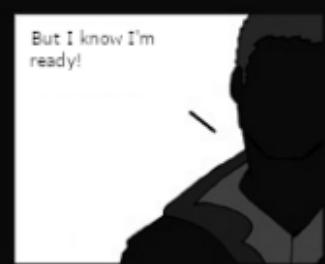
Teacher, you
don't know my
actual age do
you?



You're still
young, child!



But I know I'm
ready!



Parker was just bestowed a fief.
Aimedar and his crew are about
to start their pilgrimage. Sida is
garrisoned at a dwarven city.
Only Sibelius is still around...

The palace, the Alliance, the
Wizarding Association....there
are still a lot of disputes for us to
settle. Uncountable forces are
watching us, waiting to
pounce. If you...



My teacher, a marriage wouldn't
affect our work. I will still be your
student. I simply won't sleep here
at night.



Who...who is it?



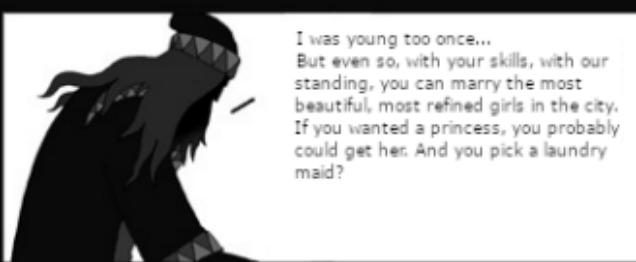
Her name's
Betty, from the
Kesser family.



The girl from
Needlemouth
Laundry?



I'm glad you
recognize
her.



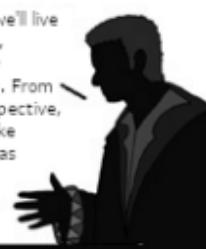
I was young too once..
But even so, with your skills, with our
standing, you can marry the most
beautiful, most refined girls in the city.
If you wanted a princess, you probably
could get her. And you pick a laundry
maid?

I'm not
very
ambitious,
as you
know...



Gods...

Teacher, we'll live
very close,
practically
neighbors. From
your perspective,
it will be like
nothing has
changed!

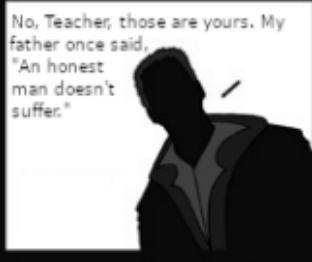


I am staying
by your side.



You...You're planning to live in the
laundromat? We own some great plots of
land, even a castle...
Right, you probably know better than I
do, hehe...pick whatever you want.

No, Teacher, those are yours. My
father once said,
"An honest
man doesn't
suffer."



You still remember your father?



When you took me
away, I was
already seven
years old.





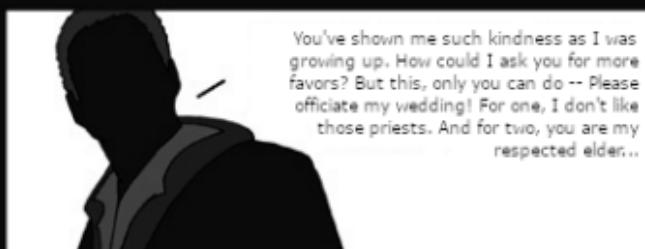
I...I envy him a bit.



Right, I have one more very important request to ask of you. It's about my...



In over ten years, you've never once asked me for something for yourself. Do you want me to undo...no, you go first.



You've shown me such kindness as I was growing up. How could I ask you for more favors? But this, only you can do -- Please officiate my wedding! For one, I don't like those priests. And for two, you are my respected elder...



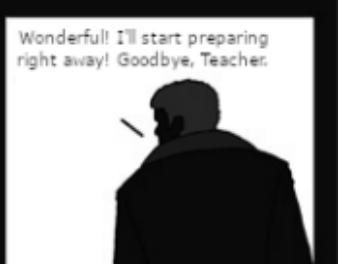
What?! But... I've never...



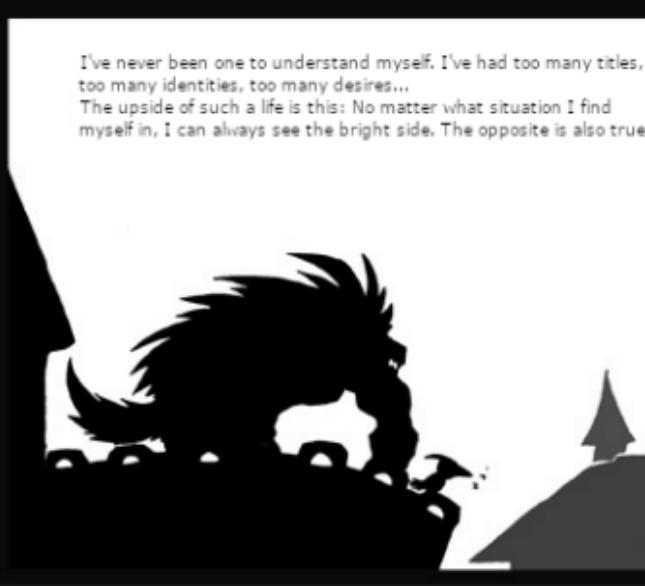
That's not a problem. You just need to say a few words. Please, don't refuse me this.



Alright, I will, child.



Wonderful! I'll start preparing right away! Goodbye, Teacher.



I've never been one to understand myself. I've had too many titles, too many identities, too many desires... The upside of such a life is this: No matter what situation I find myself in, I can always see the bright side. The opposite is also true.

Seven days later
Rainbow City
In the garden of the
Kesser Laundromat



Your highness, even dressed up as commoners, we're too conspicuous here! Let's go back.



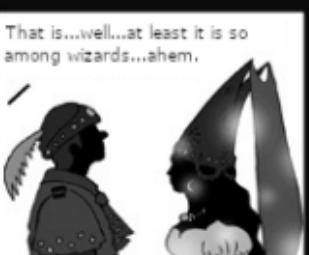
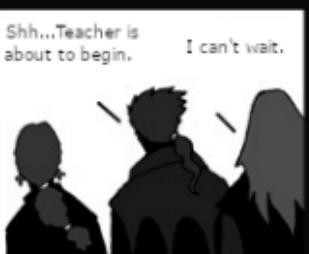
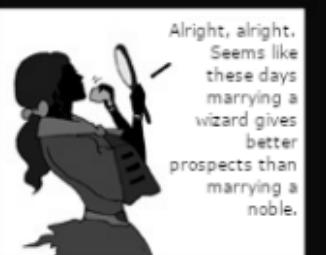
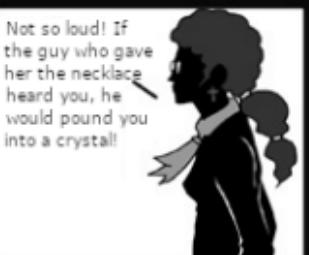
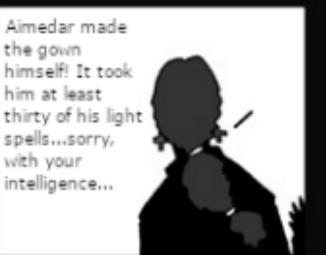
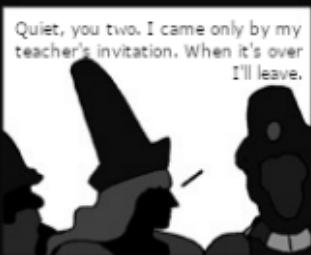
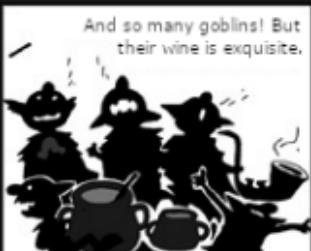
That's right, it's pandemonium here!
There's demons and monsters everywhere.

There's a stone golem over there.



And over there is a man with two heads. Good gods!





Happiness...happiness is a type of persistence...
Hehe...turns out I'm not good with words.

Long ago...
When the world was pitch black
I was once asked this:
"How strong must someone be to hold onto their happiness?"

That was a long time ago....

Now I understand that I wasn't given a question, but an answer:

I'm babbling again...
But I trust that this young lady and gentleman will hold tight to their happiness.
Yes...I believe it...

Then, by the gods above...
In the name of the king...

By the Great Forest's Endless Life,
may you have many valiant sons!

Right. Let's stop here. Everyone, let's toast our brave warrior as he starts his next hunt!



Congratulations,
you two!

My dear!

One hour later

BOOM!



Didn't the celebratory fireworks finish already?



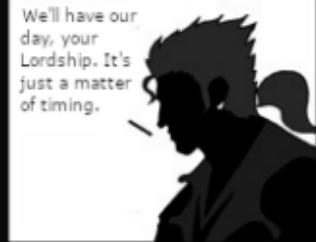
Did you see how much Sibelius drank? That's definitely his fireball spell.



Throwing a fireball at the sky? Poor Iago...



We'll have our day, your Lordship. It's just a matter of timing.



Really?

You betcha! We're both way more good-looking than Iago!

But if you married a
princess...oho

.....

It was a joke.

How about this? Let's go
back and get
plastered.

But Dad's there.
How are we going
to do that?

We're going
back to get
Mr. Fireball
under
control,
right?

That's right! If we're not there,
who's going to mind Sibellus?
Hahaha...

Iago's greatest regret was that,
despite raising five valiant sons,
he didn't have a single
daughter.

His oldest two sons would open
Rainbow City's finest winery --
Silver Cup Winery. Its workers
were all goblins...

Six years later, Parker eloped with
a princess. They didn't announce
their marriage until Year 30 of
Heroes.

But before he passed away, he
saw the smiling faces of four
granddaughters.

That same year, Tarsylia would
have its first goblin serve as labor
commissioner...

Eight years later, Aimedara went
missing....

Sibellus got drunk only once in
his life.

In Iago's direct lineage, it took
four generations before someone
became a wizard. But that's a
story for another time.