

A Gathering of Races

—《Tales of Tarsylia》11

吴淼作品

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Tarsylia Age of the Heroes, Year 99
Xidal, center of the Xidal Trade Federation

The infamous poet Ramedic described the city in his poetry anthology "The Night Wolf's Sorrow" like this:

...the city of Xidal, where the sun never rises.

...the city of Xidal, where the sun never sets.

...the city of Xidal, where the sun never rises.

"Remember this kiss In the morning She may be
laying in another's embrace
Remember this kiss Tonight She may be wearing
a new face of makeup.
Remember this kiss Because They were once
imprinted on your two lips
Remember this kiss Because only the picture of a
rose Will never wilt"

(Xidal's mercenary den "One Last Glass")

Oh, it's a new guy. I
fucking love new guys.

I hope he's not a little
duckling that can't even
hold its own piss, haha...

As long as you follow the
rules, you'll find out we're
one big happy family.

Old man,
doesn't being
called 'sir' just
give you the
chills?

Hey punk, the boss
doesn't like
answering people
when he's eating.
You can call him
'Cockroach.'

I'm here to join the
mercenary group
assigned to raid
Halwen Castle. Who
should I be
reporting to?

Chomp...chomp...chomp...

Don't mind him.
Everyone calls
him Cockroach.

Then how about
I call you
stinkbug?

You...what did you say?! You sick of living already?



Stinkbug sounds like a lovely name.



If I'm called Cockroach, why can't you be called Stinkbug?



What do you think?



...as you say, boss.



As for you, kid, you can call me Cockroach Cayman. Where did you serve before?

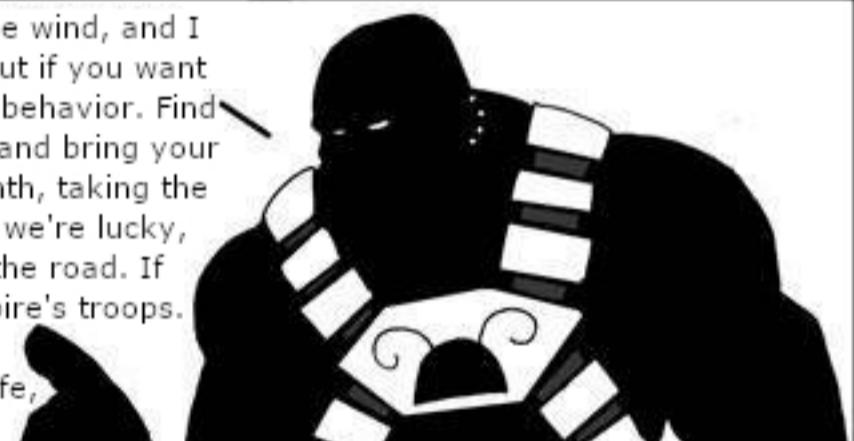


I was an archer in the northwest defensive line at Broken Blade Fortress for 6 years.



I don't know what you've been hearing in the wind, and I don't give a damn about why you're here. But if you want to join my troop, you better be on your best behavior. Find me at the front gate before dawn tomorrow, and bring your own supplies. We'll be on the road for a month, taking the caravan route straight to Halwen Castle. If we're lucky, we'll run into the gold cargo transport on the road. If we're unlucky, we may have to fight the empire's troops.

I don't care if you're fresh-faced out of momma's steats. If you're willing to sell your life, then there's money for the taking.



Of course, Sir Cayman!



Pleased to be joining your team. Til tomorrow...



Remember, before dawn!



Dusk, same day

Xidal's Noble District

The much acclaimed Silver Lips Gallery

Sorry, we are closed
for today. Please come
visit tomorrow!

I am confident
my two hands
will be of great
use to you.
(code phrase)

Since I was here
anyway, I collected
some intelligence
loitering around the
Dasker mercenaries'
Miracle Hall.

You're certainly a
very eager young
man. But I prefer
people who are
punctual!

Mr. Pelican, it has
been my utmost
pleasure to join
your team,
especially since I
have learned I was
hand-picked by
yourself.

Is that so? I've
been having
second thoughts...

I wasn't late
on purpose! I
just wanted to
get more
information
related to the
mission.

I was talking about your clothes.
You have no sense of style. The
colors don't match, and the cut
doesn't suit you
at all!

But sir, these
clothes are best
for sneaking
around at night.

Listen up Gopher,
I don't care what
the Maze taught
you, but in my
team, you better
be sashaying
down the street!



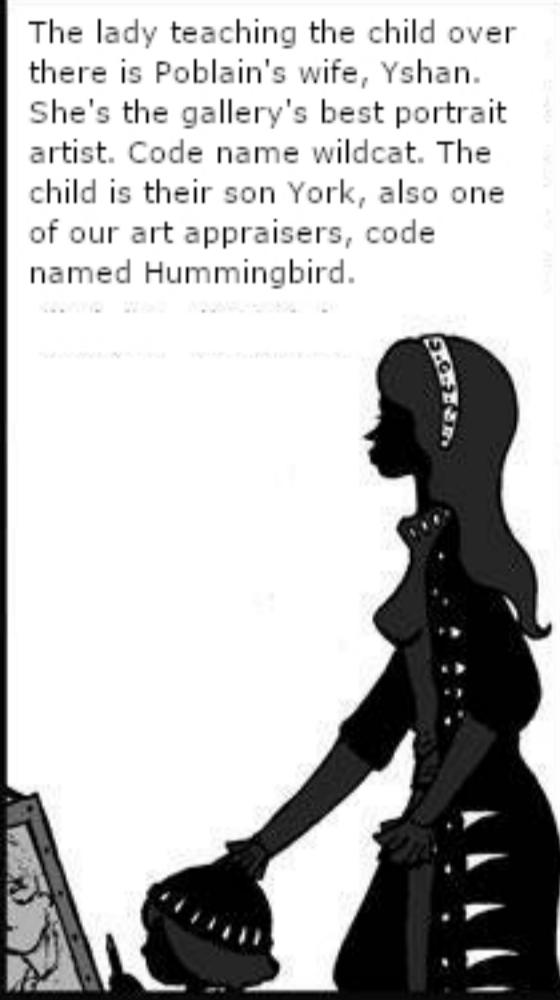
Sir...I...I will adjust to your team. Believe me...



Forget it. I'll introduce you to the rest of the team.



He's Poblain, my gallery's resident art appraiser and sculptor. Code name Leapfrog.



The lady teaching the child over there is Poblain's wife, Yshan. She's the gallery's best portrait artist. Code name wildcat. The child is their son York, also one of our art appraisers, code named Hummingbird.



What? That child is also...



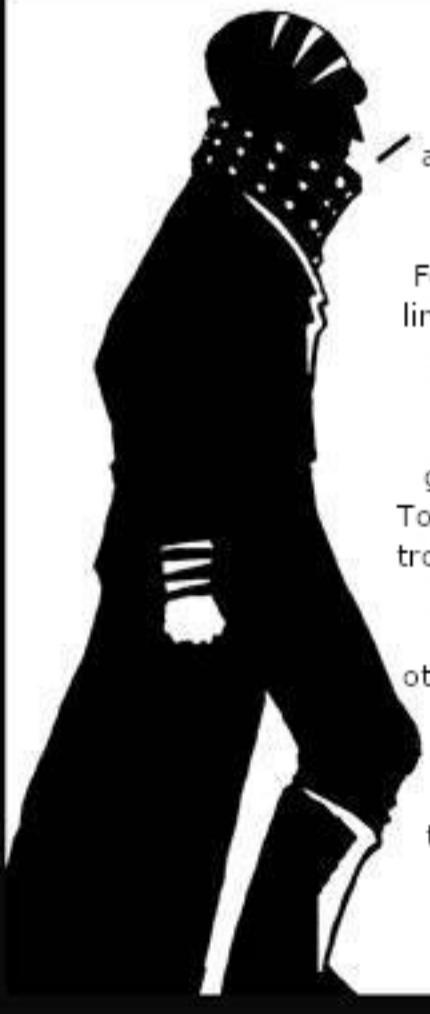
Is it that strange? The child inherited both parents' artistic talents. His future is a bright one!



Your most important responsibility is to protect the both of them, especially young York!



Alright, now you can share what intel you learned today.



The news about the baron of Halwen Eidocles being hunted by the empire spread fast. This morning, the Dasker mercenary group already arranged a group to head over and plunder the castle. Rumor also has it that the Jesperites dispatched an elite troop from Broken Blade Fortress, in order to break through the dwarven line of defense, attack Halwen Castle, and arrest the baron! I heard straight from teh mouth the troop. Their leader is a man named Cockroach Cayman. It's said that whereever this scourge goes, not even a blade of grass is left behind... To conclude, it doesn't matter which of these two troops reaches Halwen Castle first. This will have a huge effect on our intelligence-gathering! So we should move as quickly as possible. One other suggestion: assassinate that Cockroach on the road. That way we'll at least be rid of one headache. As for the Jesperites, they'll need to break past the dwares' blockade and pass through the heart of the Twin Mountains range. That will take them a while. End of report.



There's two things you must understand: that Cockroach can't be killed, and I detest killing people.



And one more thing: as fast as they are, they can't outrace my pigeon. The baron will like have vanished come morning. Let's sleep, we head out in the morning!



7 days later
Outside Scaleclaw City

New guy,
you're on watch!

Hah, having a new guy is the best! My legs are about to fall off with this non-stop march.

No problem, sir. I'll keep watch, so you can sleep soundly.

You've been up for 7 nights straight. Aren't you tired?

Back when I was a lookout at the fortress, I had to stay up for several days keeping watch for a dwarven attack. I'm used to it...

You're a deserter!

Did I say that I had deserted?

Why else would a perfectly healthy Jesper soldier leave his position to join a mercenary troop?

I'm a bit slow, so maybe I just don't understand.

Have you heard of the Battle of Cirhalan Gorge?

Of course!

You've heard of it?



The only part of my brain not obsessed with women or booze is filled with battle trivia. Five years ago, Jesperites poured everything into this single battle against the dwarves, to finish the Broken Blade Fortress. I heard it was a light cavalry with only 225 men that lured over one thousand dwarf infantrymen into the gorge, and then triggered a giant avalanche. Not a single one of those 225 soldiers survived... Afterwards, the pope posthumously bestowed them with the title of paladin.



That's not all true. At least 2 men survived. The one who made it out with serious injuries got reborn...



The more lightly injured one was me. Afterwards, I met a group of fellow adventurers and spent time exploring the Twin Mountains.



How did you survive in that situation?



Usually, if I can't hide, then I'll climb to the highest possible point.



Why didn't you go back? Afraid of losing the title of paladin?



That day, our orders were actually to reunite with the main force after luring the dwarves into the gorge.



I stayed away because... I didn't know what to do. Five years later, I still haven't figured it out!



If I showed myself, I'd become the enemy of my own country! What would the families of all my brothers-in-arm think?



If I had picked silence... If I could have picked silence...



...how great would that have been.



What about your own family? Do they know you're still alive?



My parents have dreamed of me being one of Jesper's paladins since before I was born! It's the greatest honor a soldier can have. I always worked hard so I wouldn't disappoint them. I can imagine their smiles when they learned I was promoted... I would become my little brother's hero, and my family would be honored and respected! If it were you, could you bear to take that all away?

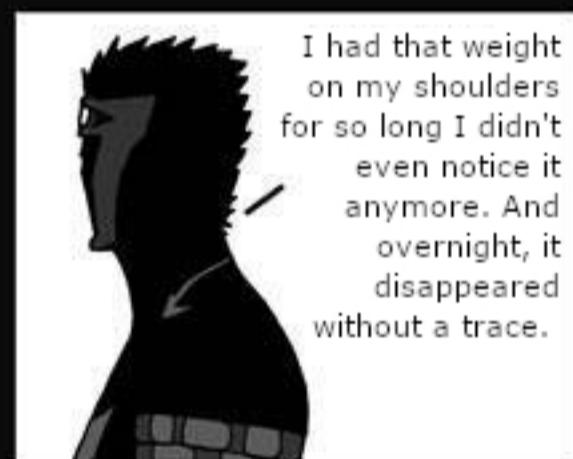


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What a wonderful feeling!



The dream I planned to spend my life working towards...I've already achieved it!



I had that weight on my shoulders for so long I didn't even notice it anymore. And overnight, it disappeared without a trace.



I was also a soldier once.



Is that so, sir?
Where did you serve?



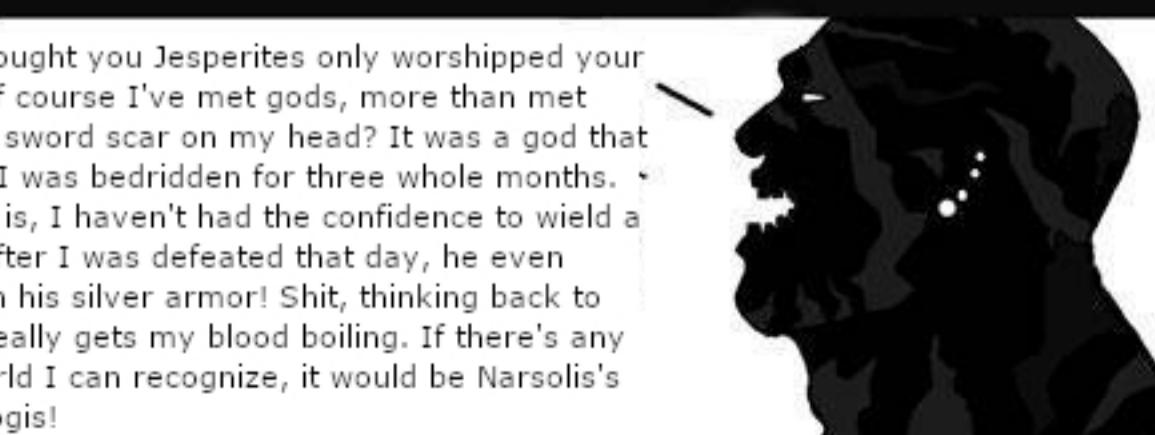
Narsolis...



Narsolis? Did you meet a god then?



Haha, I had thought you Jesperites only worshipped your own heroes! Of course I've met gods, more than met them. See this sword scar on my head? It was a god that gave me that. I was bedridden for three whole months. The worst part is, I haven't had the confidence to wield a sword since. After I was defeated that day, he even bowed to me in his silver armor! Shit, thinking back to that moment really gets my blood boiling. If there's any god on this world I can recognize, it would be Narsolis's Holy Knight Klogis!



How scary!

Well of course!

I had one-fifth of a sword sliding past my armor and piercing between my ribs. Thank god I had retreated a step!

I was calling you scary! How could you survive such a serious injury?

I heard that only one person could challenge him a day. And because he never held back, even fewer survived! Was his sword really as fast, as powerful as they say? Hurry up and spill!

When it came to speed and precision, Knights of the Holy Spirit have the advantage. His strength was also no match for the berserkers at their peak.

All of us foot soldiers in Narsolis had learned the ancient sword arts, but there were only 7 among us who could truly wield the god-like power. Among those, Klogis was by far the greatest.



Then what made him so special? And what were the god arts? Some sort of magic?

I'm not sure. One story describes it as the inherited spirit of old Narsolis himself! But I would rather believe...

...That it's a skill honed over hundreds of battles. As long as I continue to fight, one day...

I will also predict my opponents' next steps. On that day, I will return to Narsolis!

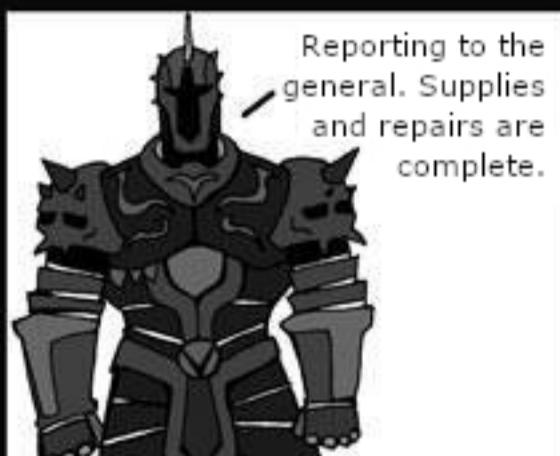
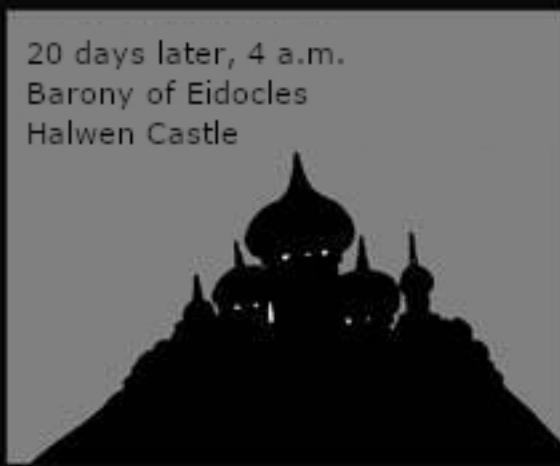
GRAAAAAAH...I will be back!



Why go back? It'll all end the same. There's only one way to find out. You're sure he was going all out? Of course... I would guess...

20 days later, 4 a.m.
Barony of Eidocles
Halwen Castle

Halwen Castle East Gate



Reporting to the general. Supplies and repairs are complete.



Ready to march. Please give the order!



How is the troop's condition?



There are 12 people remaining in the troop. All are ready to march and fight.



Very good. Troops, march to Broken Blade Fortress!



Take care of the baron. Protect him well!



Yessir!



Goddammit!



How did this happen?



We took the Viper's airship, but they still beat us here!



These tin buckets had to cross the mountains and break through the defence all without horses, yet...



Sir, don't you find it odd?

First of all,
they are
imperial
soldiers.



Second, they
are elite
imperial
soldiers
trained for all
terrains, the
Iron Guard.



Their martial
ability is
second only
to the
church's
Spirit Guard.



The one
with the
broadsword,
could that
be...



Is he one of
Broken
Blade
Fortress's
two generals?



Our baron
has quite the
reputation.



Child,
remember.
Don't look
down on any
imperial
soldier!



Even if they
aren't from
this time,
they still
are soldiers.



They live
for honor,
and fight
for their
faith.



Pure, sharp,
they're like
a sturdy but
primitive
totem pole.



Four with serious
injuries, three
with
medium...



The rest
aren't in
much
better
condition.



Sir, should we
go rescue the
baron?



You're curious?

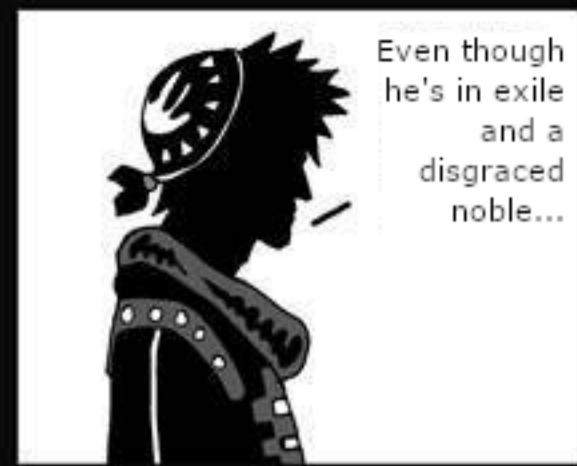
When you say that,
why don't your eyes
have the same fire as
before?



Or...are you just saying empty words?



Even though he's in exile and a disgraced noble...



But his family is a part of Jesper's history. These kinds of old school nobles have been studying etiquette from birth.



Their so-called elegant pace requires each step to be shoulder-width apart...This kind of thing is a habit that sticks with you your whole life.



No matter what situation you find yourself in! And his steps...they're a-bit messy!



His shoes look big...



You had said he was a talented portraitist...but look at his hands!



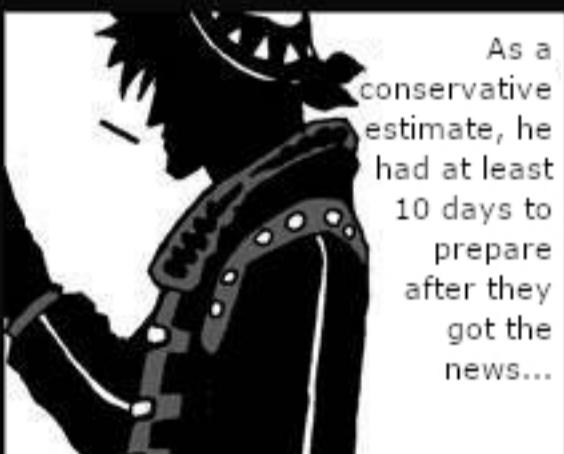
Callused and thick like my father's -- they're the hands of a blacksmith!



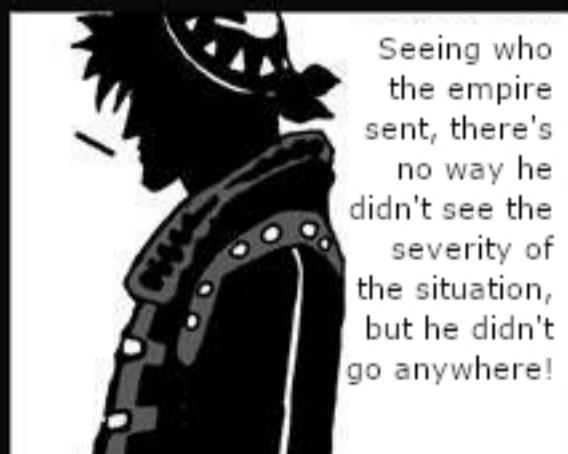
Your conclusion?



As a conservative estimate, he had at least 10 days to prepare after they got the news...



Seeing who the empire sent, there's no way he didn't see the severity of the situation, but he didn't go anywhere!



I conclude that this is a body double, one that they had already prepared in advance.



Very good.
You pass.



Thank you, sir!



You have already reached the skill of Jesper's top agents!



Do you see those three paintbrushes?



I see them. They are great props for a fake artist.



What high quality animal hair! Soft, yet tough. In the north, in the wildest lands around the Dragon Mountains, there live a huge pack of winter wolves...



They travel unseen and attack instantly. Not even the dwarves or barbarians of the north can touch them! It is said that only the baby fur on the heads of the purest winter wolf pups...



...can be used to create such perfect, velveteen brushes. In the black market, a single brush can go for over 100,000 gold pieces. Even worse...

I searched for 6 years and never found them! This damned double couldn't have known that and, even if he did, wouldn't have brought them to die with him!



So this man must be the baron!



Sorry, sir, but... I... his hands?



You did a great job. Your analysis was flawless... and you didn't know he was also into sculpting!



Using this new information, proceed...



He wanted to be caught. He wanted the Jesperites to mistake him for a fake.

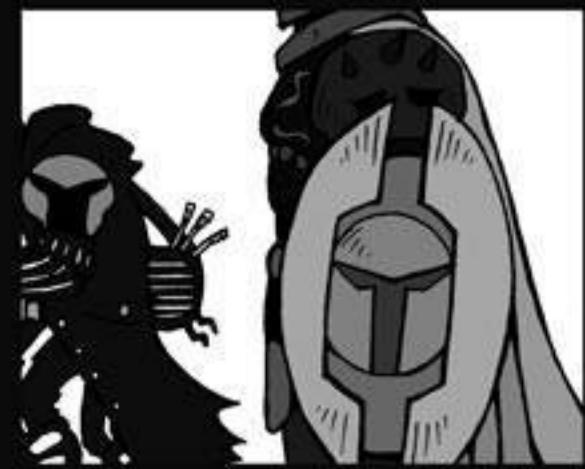


He was desperate, and thought he saw a chance to sneak back to the country that had exiled him. Then all would be well.



He must be a crazy gambler!





Will pretending to be a dead fish help you survive in a country of cats?



Maybe he hasn't realized yet... Or maybe he's got friends elsewhere...



Gopher, are you getting excited?



What?



There's a secret right under our noses...



And we're going to find out what it is.



Didn't you say those soldiers had searched through the entire castle last night?

That's right, but they are soldiers. No matter how careful, they're still soldiers.



Oh, also...



Do you know the baron well?



I've appraised some of his oil paintings.



Then how did you know about the secret path from the village? The one that went straight to his studio?



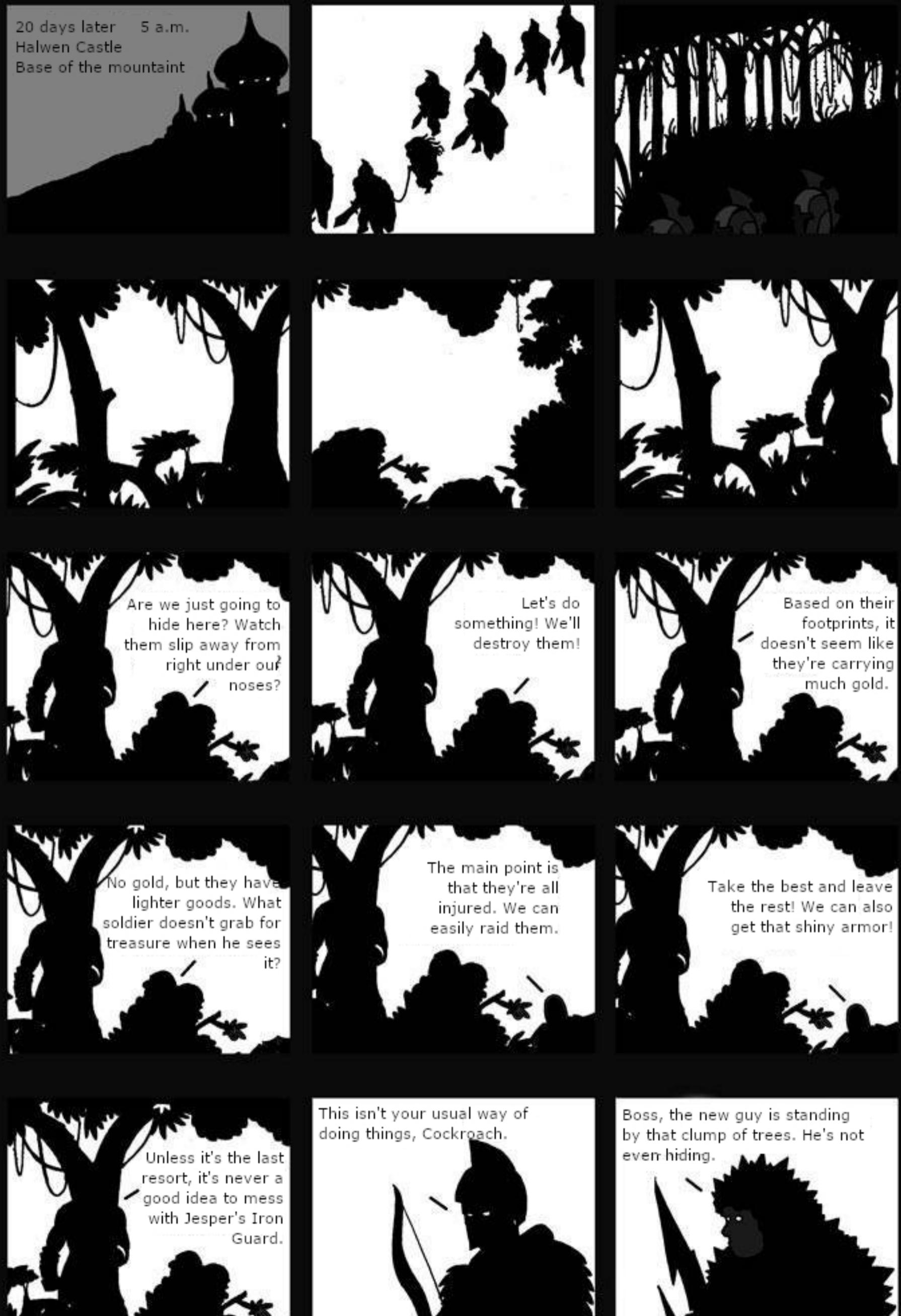
Because there's a decent brothel in the city...



And his reputation in these parts was so good...



20 days later 5 a.m.
Halwen Castle
Base of the mountaint



I got it...



You won't understand. Just go hide...goddammit!





I changed my mind. Prepare to attack, immediately!



Porcupine, prepare your iron net!



Yes...yessir!



Are we going fishing?



Boss, are you crazy? Why are we fighting Jesper soldiers?



I am the boss, and my word goes. You better understand that before I get angry.
Prepare all of your artillery for the raid.



Alright, you big ox. Don't say I didn't warn you.



Thanks.

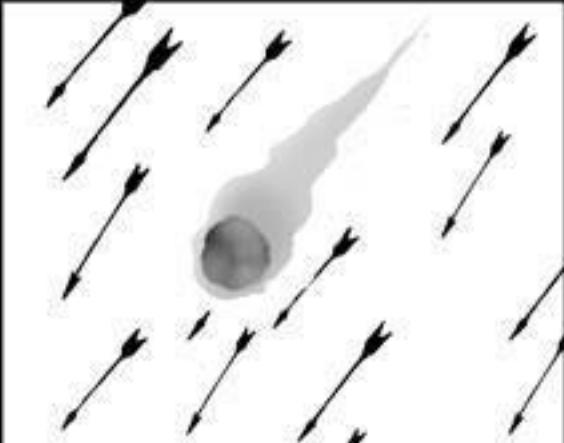
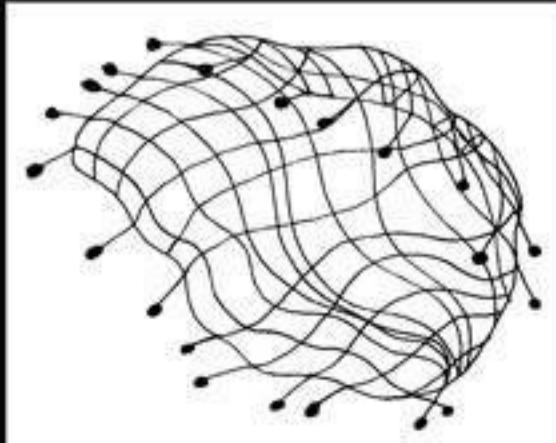


Ready!

As soon as you see the new guy move...



Attack!



20 days later 6 a.m.
Halwen Castle

The baron's private
studio

I stand by what I
said!

This isn't Jesper black. Look,
there's a layer of paint underneath
that's been completely covered.

Maybe it was his own paint. A lot
of artists like to create mix own
pigments.

My dear, this is important. This
kind of black pigment comes
from the ashes of ore refineries
in the north.



The Green Shadow Merchants were the
first to bring some back from the
dwarves in the north. Later on, the
Jesper imperial academy took
it for their own.

Papa, why did they select that
color?

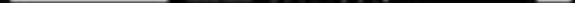
Because black is a
holy color for the
empire, so they
refused to use
pure black when
painting.



They liked to use let
other colors peek
through the black.
That way it would
look more
approachable, and
give it what your
mother calls a
breath of fresh
air.

The charcoal that
dwarves mine can do
exactly that when
mixed into a
pigment.

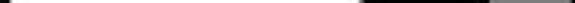
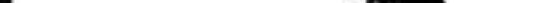
Please, the merchants just
wanted more profit. They mixed
the pigment with a diluting gum
to get five times the
product. That's where
the color effect
comes from.



You're making it sound like the
Jesper empire is something
special, when it's just a
party of fools.

That's exactly right. Gum can be
used to dilute the pigment, to get
5 ounces of paint from one ounce
of ash. But if the paintings in this
room...

None of the black has been
diluted with gum. It's only made
of freshly ground ash,
mixed with a small
amount of paste.



That is to say, if there were too much gum, the color would be less saturated?



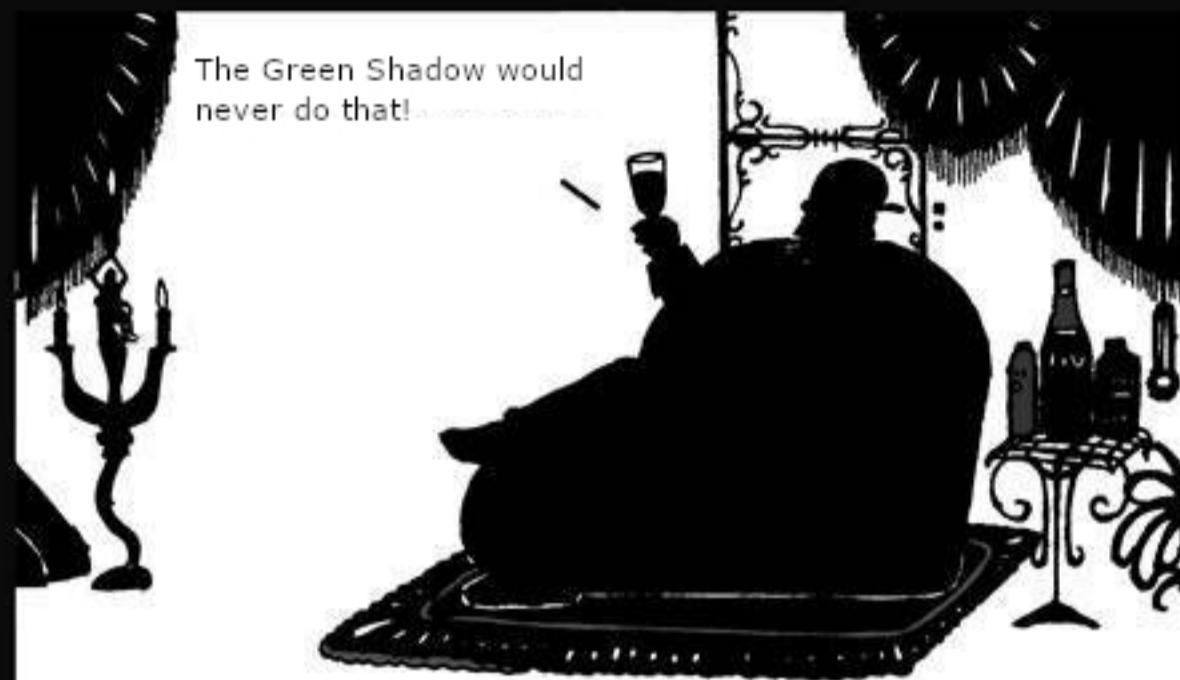
That's correct, son.



It's simple. The baron bought the ore directly from the merchants, instead of buying the more common pigment.



The Green Shadow would never do that!



If he were a member of the Green Shadow, there's no way the boss's spy network wouldn't have known.



Their trade agreements were forged in steel only after long periods of trust-building and negotiation. The goods can only be sold after many long hours of work, so they would never sell the raw materials, especially if they came from the dwarves. You might think it's simple, but let me tell you, there's no way the Green Shadow would sell the original ore to the baron -- unless he was one of them himself!

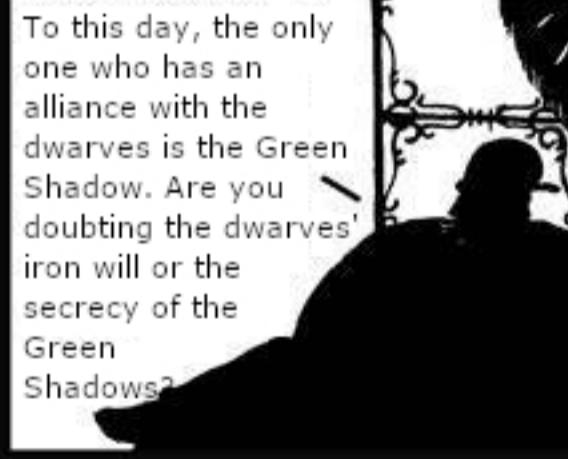
So there are no grounds for your theory.



What if he got it directly from the alliances in the north?



To this day, the only one who has an alliance with the dwarves is the Green Shadow. Are you doubting the dwarves' iron will or the secrecy of the Green Shadows?



The Green Shadow's trade route is just on the other side of the mountain. If some of their members... This studio is full of paintings. The baron had a large and consistent need...



Let's pause this investigation for now. This line of reasoning isn't getting us anywhere...



The Green Shadow can investigate for themselves if they want.



Sir, I just did a circuit of the castle. I found 6 secret drawers, 2 hidden rooms, and a treasury that contains...



It contains gold
chunks the size of
your head, right?



There's probably at least
100,000 gold pieces worth in
there.



Mr. Gopher. When I
am appreciating art,
you'd do well
to not interrupt.
Remember that.



But sir...

Let me ask you a
question. What do
you think the most
important skill for
a great thief to
have?



Intelligent,
cautious,
loyal...also
tenacious.



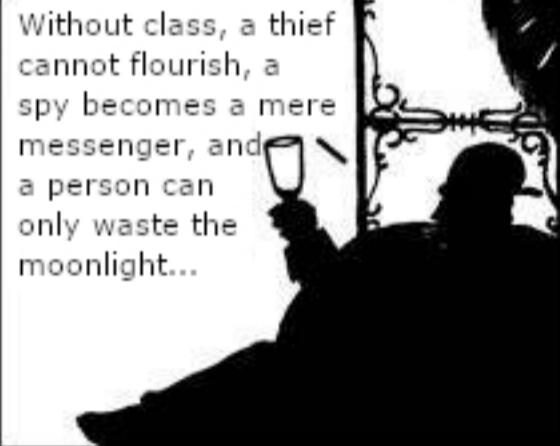
That's enough to
be a petty thief, or
a foot soldier.



But to be a member
of the Smiling Hand,
the most important
thing is class.



Without class, a thief
cannot flourish, a
spy becomes a mere
messenger, and
a person can
only waste the
moonlight...



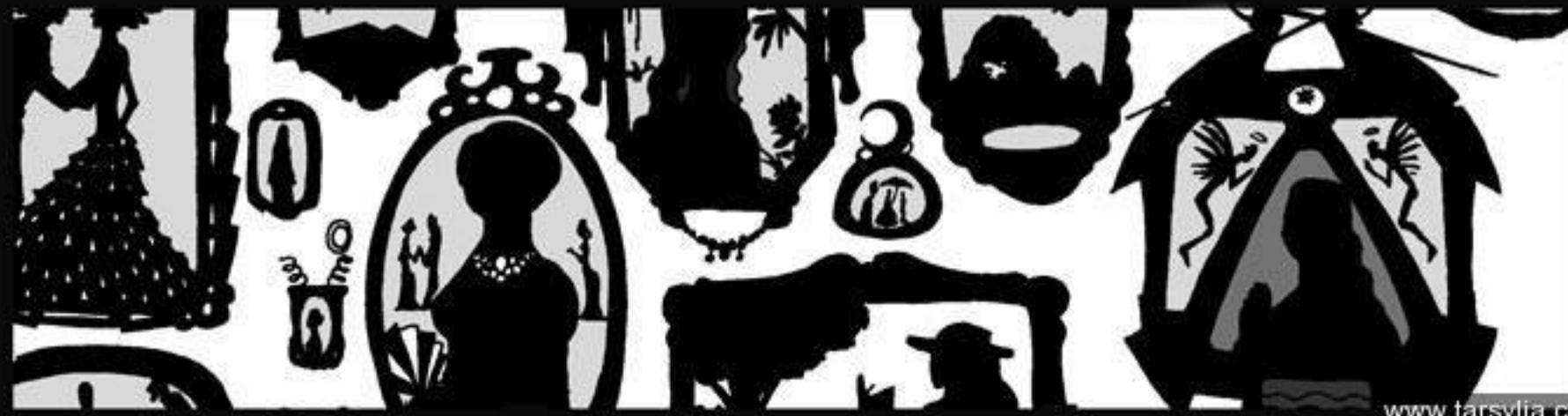
Take a look
around. What
do you see?



We hung all the baron's
art on one wall...



Then tell me,
what does the art
tell you?



He was a very skilled artist. Even I can tell, and I don't understand art.



And what makes you think he's skilled?

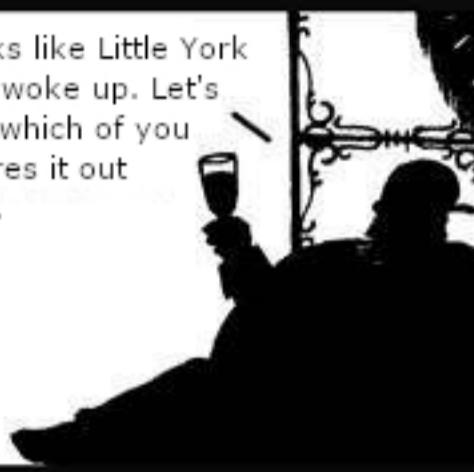


The people are lifelike. Even though I don't know the people he painted, I feel like I can guess their personalities.

You certainly don't disappoint.



Looks like Little York just woke up. Let's see which of you figures it out first.



Figures what out?



Clues, suspicions, secret treasure, mysteries, anything of interest really...

I've searched all these portraits. I swear on my hand there is nothing hidden in them!

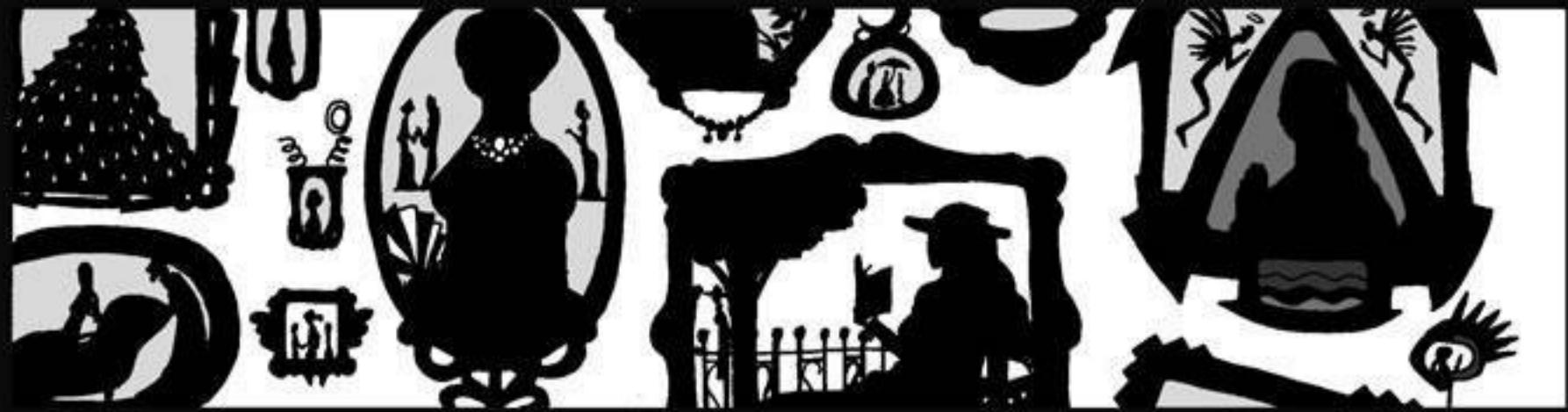
I'm asking you to look at the art, Gopher!



I knew that portraits were his specialty, but I didn't realize he was this good.

I agree. Even though I've been up all night, I feel as young as ever.

To be able to appreciate these masterpieces while drinking this beautifully aged wine...



He's like me. Every work has the mark of the Pai style from Jesper's academy.



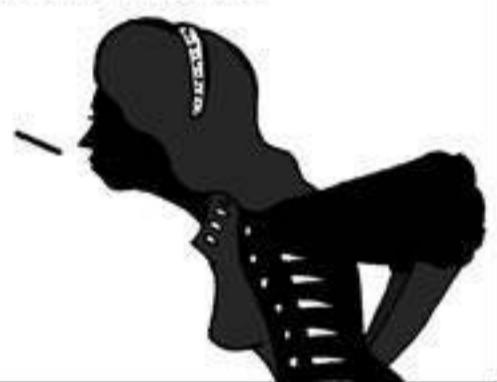
All you really got from the academy those 7 years was the basics of shapes. By now, you have your own style. You're not that stereotypical academy artist anymore.



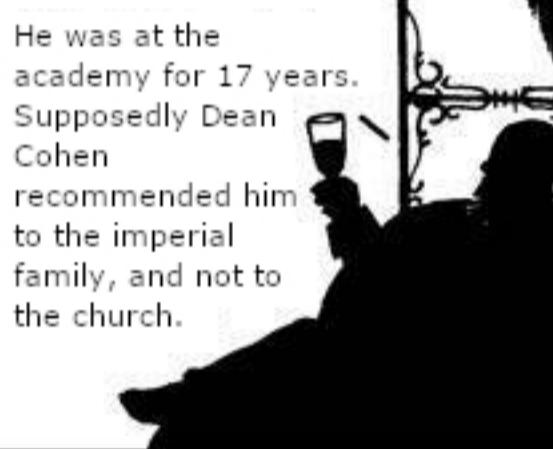
Stop with the platitudes. I know my own art.



But still, this baron is...



He was at the academy for 17 years. Supposedly Dean Cohen recommended him to the imperial family, and not to the church.



The imperial family? The old man must have really liked this guy.. But look at all his art. Every one is drenched in a certain religious style.

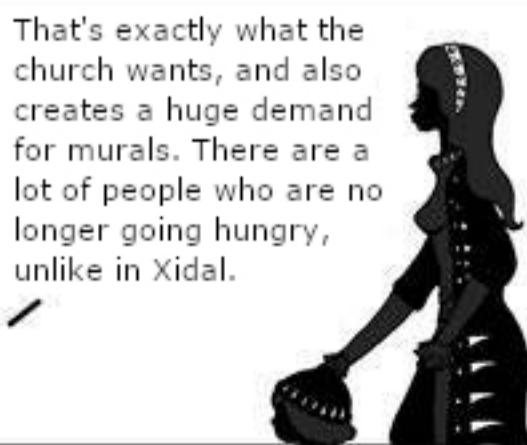


Mama, what religious style? You never taught me that!



It's a shackle. It forces you to obey the so-called Gold Standard. For example, the highest ranking person must be in the top left corner of any painting. The head must be tilted 15 degrees up, the light must cast down from the top center. There are also regulations on color usage. By the time you've learnt it all, you draw the exact same paintings as anyone else. Do you want to learn, son?

Stop scaring the kid. You have to admit, paintings that follow those guidelines always have an air of holiness.



Did I scare him? If I wanted to scare him, I would tell him the old men also forced us to attend church and get baptized, determined to stomp out any original thought.



Fiaht will inspire artists to get more filial art. This is obvious. The church needs religious works, and so the academy will prioritize that.



Oh? A head full of dogshit religion can still produce quality art?



Painting is a way to express one's heart. It should be free, natural, filled with ego!



Religious devotion also comes from the heart, and similarly is a source of pride. You can't deny the religious style's success.



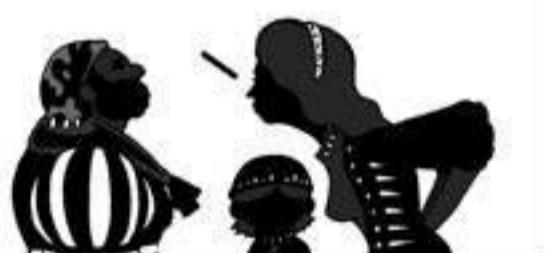
Then you're suggesting I return to Jesper and finish those 10 years of education I missed?



Of course not. I only think you should be more respectful of the imperial academy, be more objective. It's been 10 years.



I don't get it. Why are you always sticking up for that rotten prison? You were only there for one year!



If it weren't for the academy, how would I have met you? And how would we have had Little York?



True...



So when I remember that place, it feels like a blessing.



Mama, was I born at that academy?



That's right, you were born in the Jesper Imperial Academy.



And then they threw me out like I was trash!





Actually, he was like you, filled with thoughts of rebellion.



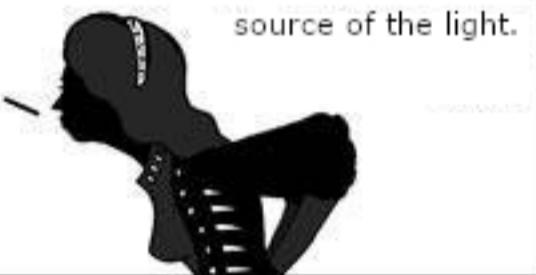
What did you say?



On the surface it looks like obeyed those rules, but on inspection....



I see it, haha. That fox. He's clearly up to some mischief. Look at this one, he purposefully made this man's bald head the source of the light.



This one's worse. In order to place the priest in the top left, he drew stilts below his robes!



Hahaha, this guy!



Higher, Papa! I want to see the ones on the top!



Haha, ok...



He must have been lonely...



I see it, I see it!



You...you see it, York?



This lady! Her hairstyle and age change, but she appears in every painting! And she's always in a conspicuous spot.



You're right...hell. Now that you say it, this woman's face jumps out from every image!



That's right, because each picture follows the style guides so strictly that at first glance, it obscures your perception.



It's hard even for me to do. And now, Little York has beaten you out of the trap, bursting the illusion.



But why would he do that? I know a lot of nobles have their own quirks, but this...



His mistress? Of course, this is his studio, and the secret passage leads straight to the village. This must be his model...



And after time, ended up sleeping with her! A lot of artists do that...



Oh? Have you done that, Poblan?



Of course not! Don't bring this up in front of the kid!



Sorry...



She wasn't one of those cheap 'models' from a bar. And she wasn't his mistress. At least, he had never seen her body.



How do you know?



Experience, intuition. He drew this girl from memory. There's minute differences than if he had drawn her in person. The more talented the artist, the less apparent...



But I can tell.



You can tell, because he has feelings for her. When you're in love...ahhh...



There will always be differences. My teacher used to say, "No one can draw from memory the face of a loved one."



You've got a lot of experience with that. I'm sure you're right.



Look, even though she's standing in the shadows, he would draw a small candle next to her. It's not obvious, but if you're careful, every painting has it.



Hold on! Why are we gossiping about these noble liaisons?



Even surrounded by all this moving art, you just can't let go of that tasteless ambition?



If possible, I'd like to put this art in my gallery. But you all just can't appreciate fine arts...



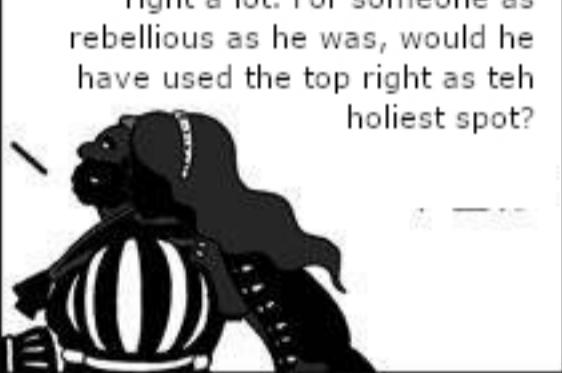
I feel like...is it possible?



What is it? Speak.



This girl shows up in the top right a lot. For someone as rebellious as he was, would he have used the top right as teh holiest spot?



It's very likely. But why would he insist on painting this girl as a shadowy goddess? It was a good thought.



Goddess? No matter how you look at it, she's just a village woman. With his status and education, how would she be unattainable?



Hey, did you see the portraits he did of his wife?



What do you mean?



I saw those, and looked them up before this. She looks fierce. Her father is the Cobra Traders' primary sponsor!



The baron's good-standing reputation outside of Jesper is entirely due to this woman's power, including his ridiculous title.



But these kinds of aristocratic families are all like that. The small fry will always find a way to steal the thunder. You know what I'm talking about.



You're impulsive, but your analysis was correct.



In any case, we also just saw a demonstration of the baron's guts! I don't believe he couldn't get a single woman!



All you confirmed was one possible explanation. And what if he was the reason for his own lovelorn state?



These portraits depict her aging over ten years. She couldn't have been far from the baron!



What are you suggesting? That he would rather play hide-and-seek in his paintings than go and woo the woman he loved?



How wonderful it is to be young...without a care in the world....



Then how would you explain this?



I don't know. Not everything has an answer. Anyway, I can't objectively analyze it right now.



What?



I admired his art, and now I know his heart. I have felt how he poured out the pent-up feelings into his art, bit-by-bit.



Even when it was within reach, he forced himself to hold back. I am drunk on his pain...The why isn't important. What matters is that he knew what he was doing.



Excuse me, it seems like I drank too much. I'm going to sleep. We can continue once I've woken.



This crazy old man...every time, he gets in the head of the person we're trying to investigate.



Geez, he drank four bottles all by himself..



Mama, look at this painting. It looks familiar.



Which one?



This one with a lot of forest sprites and old tree spirits.



Where have you seen it before?



I haven't seen it before. It's almost like I've copied it...but that's quite not right either.



Impossible. I've selected every painting you've copied. How would I not recognize it?



I can't remember what it was called, but I remember saying the grandpa with the crown looked so old, like his whole body was covered with bark.



I thought there were too many people, so I skipped a few uncles in the back. You found after, and...



It's "Coronation of the Holy King"! It's a huge mural in the Papal Hall. I remember now!



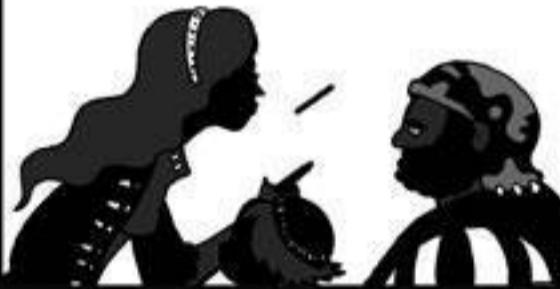
How's that possible? These are a bunch of wood elves playing around in water.



Think about the composition of people. The flowering tree spirit is the pope, and everyone else fits in from there!



Not a single person is missing, and their positions are perfectly accurate!



He changed the setting of the original painting from a palace to a forest, and turned the palace and church servants into elves and satyrs.



He really is an interesting fellow! Look, what's that girl wearing on her wrist, blocked by the trees?



Did he draw half a bracelet?



No, he drew it, and then covered it up with the green.



The paint coat is thick. Bring the tools -- I want to see what that face looked like!



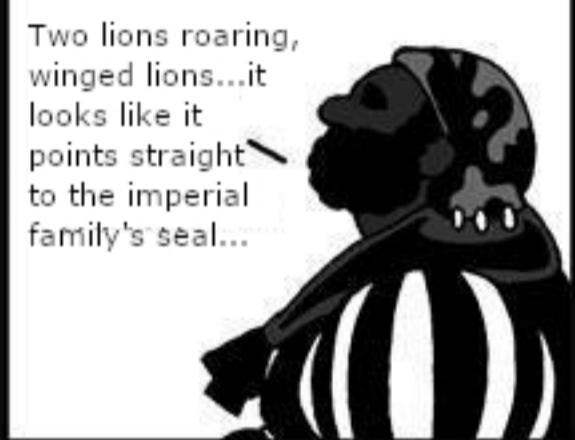
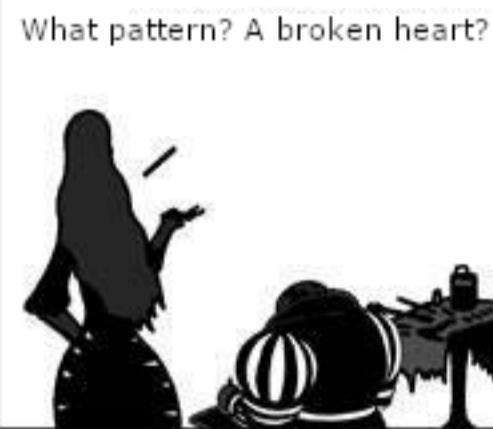
Go, Papa!



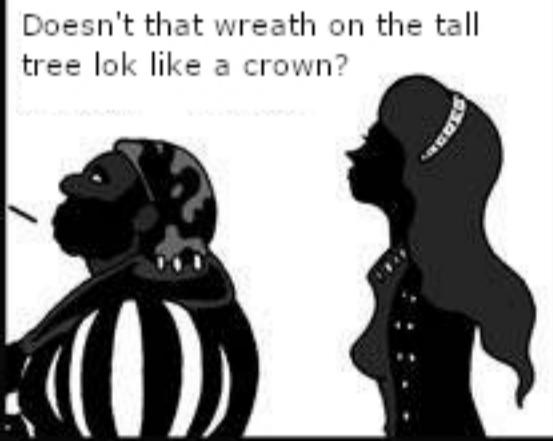
Stop distracting your dad...



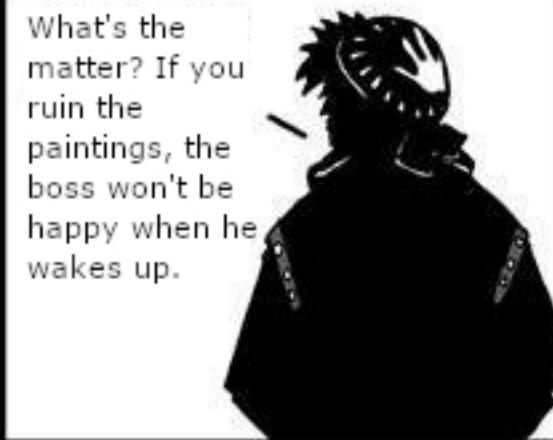
Lok! It's an old silver bracelet...but there! Heavens, this pattern...



Doesn't that wreath on the tall tree look like a crown?



What's the matter? If you ruin the paintings, the boss won't be happy when he wakes up.



Shut up! I outrank you right now. I order you to carry that drunkard. We're getting out of here, immediately!

Let's go back to Xidali Poblan, bring the painting! We're leaving...



5 a.m. Foot of Halwen Mountain

Charge!!

Huh?

THUD!



Everyone!

Hahaha!
Your scalps are mine!

Hold your
ground!

Shields up!

Follow orders!



Hey! Watch my hand! Are you
getting dizzy? How about you die?



Once we're done here, we'll live
well off the spoils!



That full body armor is
mine! I'll kill whoever
takes it from me!



What? You think you can
challenge me? We'll see how
much blood is left in your neck!
Killing Jesper soldiers is
too much fun!

Hi...YA!
BANG...
WOOSH...
DIE! HAHA...
WOOH!
AHA!

YAAAHH!

AHHHH!!

WOMP!



This sound...

Solan!
My poor friend
Mantle. You
became a
soldier, and still
didn't get any
smarter! Just
like always, ,
one step behind.

Tricky bastard! Drop your
weapons!



Don't have
anything to say to
me?



I thought you
were good at
saying nonsense.

This is Solan's captain?
You're still alive?

The legendary
archer of Squad 7?

Great!

The looting is
complete, captain.

How much do
you know of our
movements?

I only knew that
a general from
the fortress was
leading this
assault, and that
the Broken
Blade Fortress
only had two
generals...

...and of those
two, one would
never leave the
fortress. So all
that was left
was you
scumbag...

I don't care who you
are. Drop your
weapon!

Don't be stupid, Solan! If you
kill the general, we can't let
you leave here alive!

Give the order!
General!

Then we have
no reason to
hold you up.

Everyone else
-- protect the
earl and return
to the fortress!

No matter what
happens, do
not lay a hand
on Solan!

Y...yessir! I will see your orders
through!

Solan, do you want to betray
your country? You're an
honored paladin! You cannot
do this!

It's time to do
your duty...

Alright...

CLANK

Then Lofan,
you...

CLANK

...answer me...

...one question!

Am I...Solan
Klossanger...

...just a coward afraid to die?!

BAM!

Were my brothers in Squad 7?! Answer me!!

哐!

WHO GAVE YOU THAT RIGHT!

TO DENY OUR LOYALTY AND COURAGE!

**WHO GAVE YOU THE RIGHT
TO TRAMPLE ON OUR
HONOR?!**

YOU....ANSWER US!!



Huff...huff...





I ... I



I can't!....
When I
received the
orders...
But then
when I saw
you all...



Goodbye...



Captain!



Don't worry, General. None of us will speak of what we just saw.



Solan died on the battlefield.



Reporting to the general, we have nine men left. We are in good condition, and ready to set out!



The earl is safe!



We stand ready for your orders!



Rest in the forest. Bandage up your wounds...

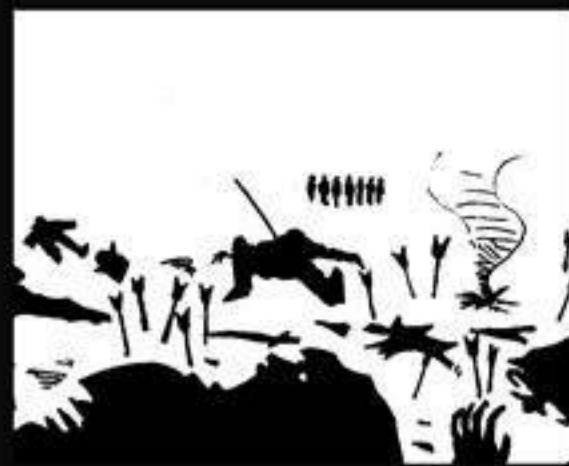


Yessir!

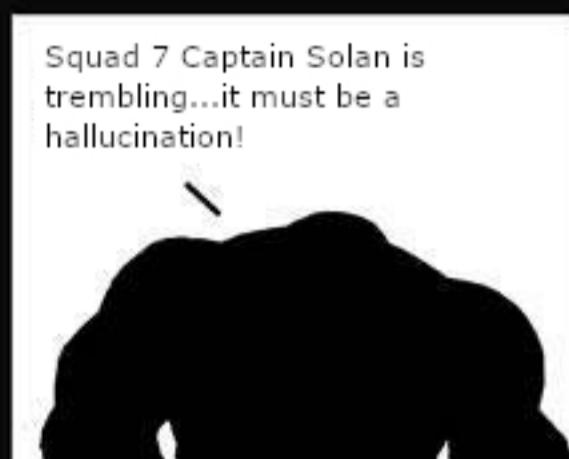


Yessir!

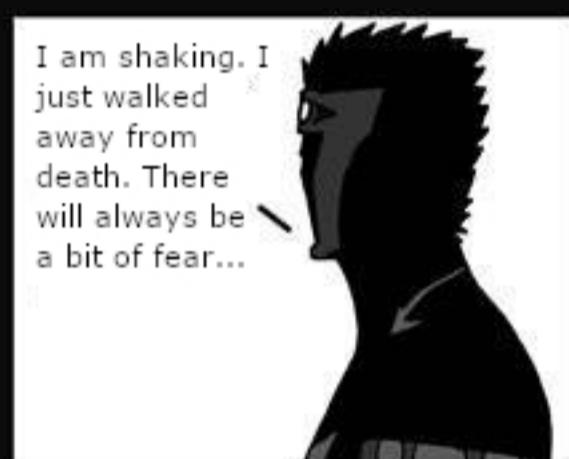




Did I lose too mose blood, that I'm hallucinating now? Did our awesome and brave Jesper Iron Warrior...



Squad 7 Captain Solan is trembling...it must be a hallucination!



You didn't look scared just then. You spat in death's face!



Just now? All my brothers were with me...



I've dreamt about it, but it was nothing like I imagined.



This isn't important anymore. My brothers...they've left. I'm free now!



I also didn't think you'd actually lead those pieces of crap into attack. Sorry, I've destroyed your little group...



I already told you, we were just a small group of insects banding together for mutual gain....

In a mercenary troop, there is no such thing as brotherhood!



Oh yeah, when the general shouted "Shields up"...why did everyone switch their shield to their dominant hand?



This is a defensive warfare trick, known as the 'Sacrifice' Strategy: appear weak to draw out the enemy...



And then get them all in one go! But to use this tactic...they can't have been in good condition.



So I've always said, a regular army isn't easy to provoke... they're a bunch of idiots!



On that topic, Cayman...you just got hit by a broadsword...



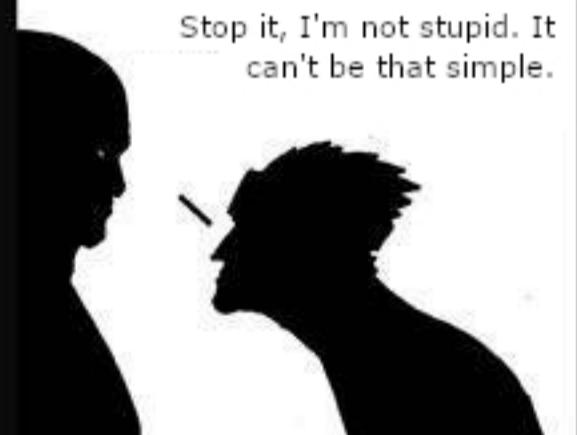
...and the wound has already stopped bleeding? You really are something...



Did you really think I got the name Cockroach for no reason? Add in my ability to play dead, hehe...



Stop it, I'm not stupid. It can't be that simple.



Where is all this curiosity coming from?



I'm thinking about my future...



That's got piss-all to do with me! Now that your debt's paid, shouldn't you go back to your adventuring friends?



If you're feeling indebted to me, forget about it. Mercenaries don't speak of such things.



I don't owe you anything! This is all for my own benefit!



Fine, I'll satisfy your curiosity!
You're a Jesperite, so you must
know of the evil god Terena's
rebellion!



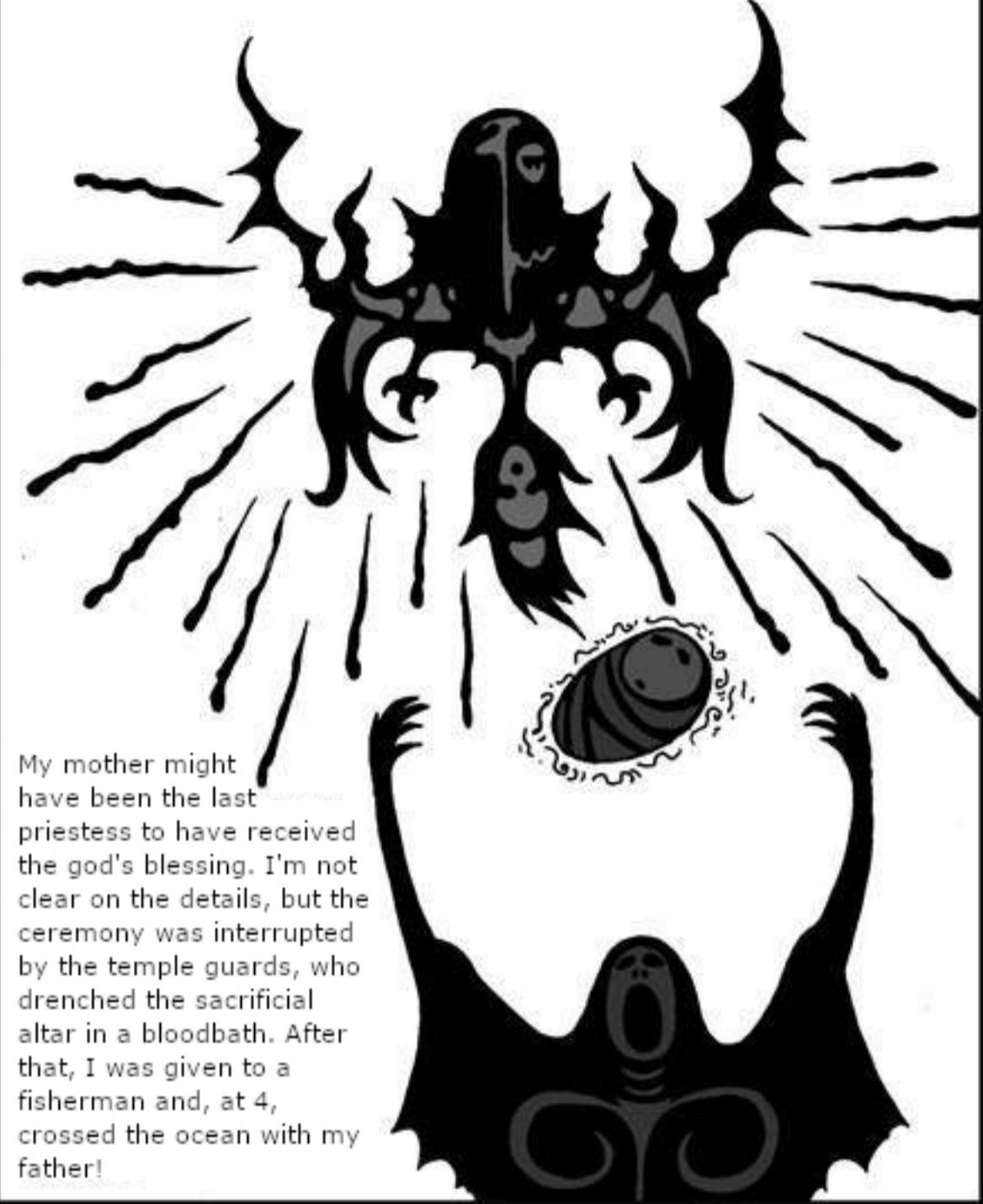
I do. It was a small religious sect ,
that opposed the church. 20
years ago the pope
sent temple troope
to annihilate it....
that's all...



Terena's doctrine didn't align
with the empire's
major gods.
Apparently, high
priestesses had
to sacrifice their
own flesh and
blood in order to
receive the
god's blessing!



My mother might
have been the last
priestess to have received
the god's blessing. I'm not
clear on the details, but the
ceremony was interrupted
by the temple guards, who
drenched the sacrificial
altar in a bloodbath. After
that, I was given to a
fisherman and, at 4,
crossed the ocean with my
father!



I later went to Narsolis's priests,
where they told me that a powerful
magic ceremony had been
interrupted, and so I
was cursed...
Basically, there's no cure. I can
only spend the rest of
my life thanking my mother
for this wonderful gift!



Like I believe
that nonsense!
You must have
been tricked!
Those evil sects
will only use
black magic and
lies to bewitch
people!

How could my
father have
tricked me? Why
would he have? If
you don't believe
it, then how
would you
explain what
happened to me?



Maybe your
adoptive father
was also tricked!
I just don't
believe any
mother would
sacrifice her
son! Especially if
she was a
Jesperite!



If we get a
chance, I'll take
you back to that
island. We can
properly
investigate then.
I'm convinced
there's another
explanation!



What's this got to do with you?
Who said I wanted to go back to
the cursed place? Who do you
think you are?



Us Jesperites have a saying:
people cannot live hating their
family, or their whole life will be
hell!



How could you doubt your own
mother like that? Aren't you
ashamed?



Little bunny, you've known me
for how long? How dare you!



If you don't let go, I'll shoot!



Ughh....hnhh...



Did you hear that? It was a
breath. Someone's still alive?
This sound's familiar...as if..



It's that dumb fatso! Over
there, by the trees!



Hedgehog, wake up!
He's not hurt. Did he
fall asleep before the
fighting began?



Charge...charge....huh?



I was charging downhill...and
suddenly felt very sleep, and
then I...



I see now, so it was like that!
Clanmore, get out here! I know
you're around!



If you don't come out, you'll get
none of this bounty! Stop hiding!



Boss, I'm back! Haha!



You're very wise. Now, the bounty will only be split among the 4 of us!



The castle certainly did have a lot of treasure. I called the extraction team. We'll probably make ten times our usual profit here...



You don't have anything you want to explain to me?



I realized what you intended at the last moment, hehe. This dumb pig still owes me a lot of money



So I kept him alive to get the money back. You must get it, oh wise and brave leader!



Forget it, I'm too tired to argue with you.



Brother, do I owe you something?



Brother??



Are you two actually related?
No way!



Wait a moment, believe me, I can explain everything...



I remember now. When you first joined, you said you needed money to give your mentally disabled brother a home. That was true?



I'm touched. Turns out you've actually told me something true in these past two years...

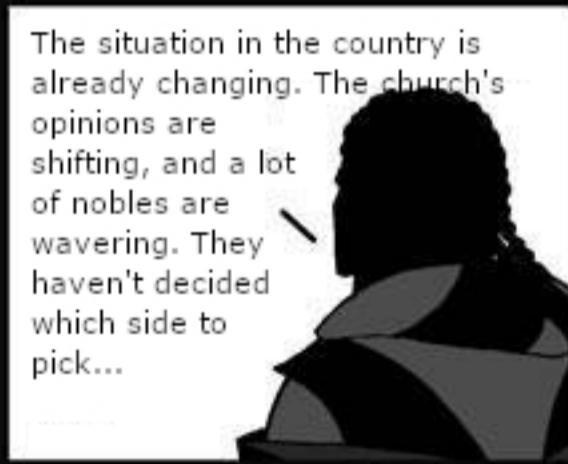
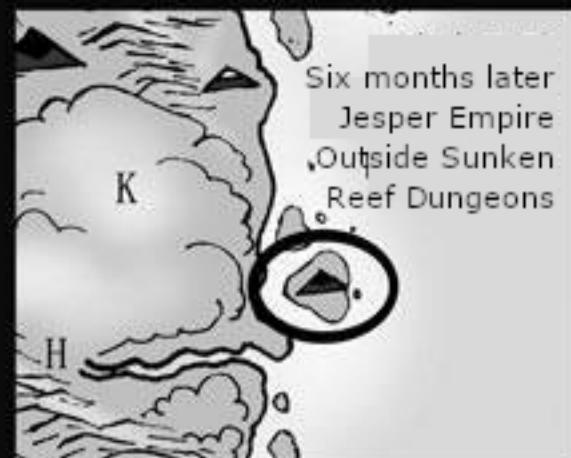


Brother, I'm hungry! I want to eat roast beef!



Give me the bones. I'll take double! No problem!







Six months later
Some corner of Xidal

You've been upset for
so many days already.
Young people should be
happier! Didn't you
get a commendation?



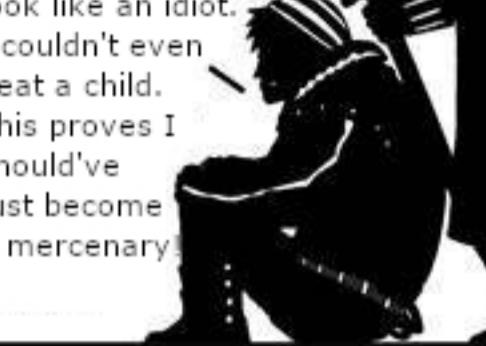
The mission would've gone
exactly the same without me,
wouldn't it? I was useless.
I couldn't do anything!
During the Maze's
trainings, I would
so desperately...



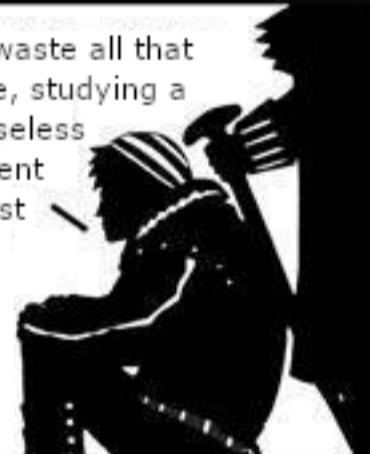
I'll just say it. In our cave, I
ranked at the top in nearly
every skill. I
always looked
forward to leaving
the Maze.



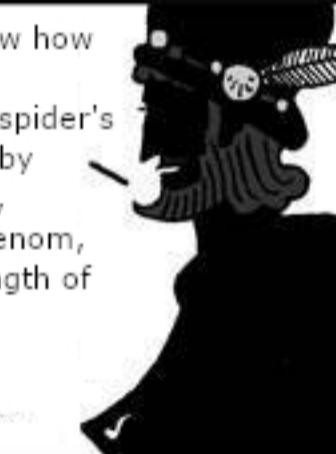
I don't doubt
your talent. To
be honest, a lot
of instructors will
rate you
similarly...



What's the point?
Compared with you, I
look like an idiot.
I couldn't even
beat a child.
This proves I
should've
just become
a mercenary!



Why did I waste all that
time before, studying a
bunch of useless
tricks! I spent
7 years, just
for this?



Do you know how
the druids
measure a spider's
worth? Not by
their shape,
strength, venom,
or the strength of
their web...



They look at how fast they repair
their web once it's been ripped.
By the time you exhale, some
might have
already fixed it!



The world isn't the web we weave
ourselves. It's the wild storms,
the thunder and
lightning....or miles
of clear sky!



Young man, it's time to go!