



The Dementia of Magic

CHAPTER TWO

By Nicholas Killewald

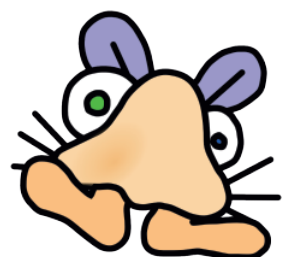


The Dementia of Magic

Chapter Two

(the eBook)

(the second edition)



This book is dedicated.

No matter what happens, it will continue to be a book until the bitter end.

QUICK NOTES ON THE SECOND EBOOK EDITION

This is the second edition of the eBook version of the Chapter Two book. It's slightly different from the physical version (either edition) or the original eBook version. Most of these notes, therefore, are just the second edition notes mashed together with the eBook version notes, even though the physical book hadn't been released at the time this went up.

It turns out that 8"x10½" isn't really a "standard" size for a book (I'm seeing it labeled as "US Government Letter", so it's apparently a known size, just not generally for books, I guess?), which in turn made the original edition a bit trickier to shop it around to other print-on-demand services, as I would've needed to find one that accepts "custom" book sizes, and that seems to be harder than you might imagine. The short story is that when I first made the book, I was going to go with a service that specializes in comic stuff, one whose largest size was 8"x10½". Since I needed extra breathing space for the commentary and sketches, I aimed at said largest size. Then that service closed up shop right when I had the first draft done. I didn't want to go back and redo the layout at the time, so the weirdly-sized book is what I got, as well as a print-on-demand service that would accept it.

Now, however, it's early 2021, and in the grips of a global pandemic and looking for things to do to avoid going stir crazy in my apartment, I decided to finally take the time and do an 8½"x11" layout, which is apparently more "standard" in that it's US Letter size, not US Government Letter. Sorry, A4 fans.

That's the main way in which this edition differs from the first one: All the content has been re-laid-out to better suit US Letter pages. In general, this means most of the comics are a teensy bit bigger and there's slightly more space for the commentary and sketches. Fortunately, the two-page spread of the Alex/Stephanie fight was already at a high enough resolution that it still works without much change. Most of the cases where I had to smash down the line spacing a bit were resolved, too, which should make those easier to read.

Of course, as you're reading the eBook version right now, none of that's really important, as paper size isn't all that much of a concern in the digital domain. However, it's been around seven or eight years since the first edition came out, and as I went through redoing layouts, I updated some of the commentary, too. Some parts I just cleaned up a bit, others I simplified, but most importantly, I updated some of them to refer to things that've happened in the comic since 2013. So, I also redid the eBook version to include these updates. Also, if you see things that don't make sense for a book that should've been made back then, you now know why.

Neither the comics themselves nor the sketches were changed amidst all this. Those are the same as they were in the first edition, apart from some being slightly larger than before. Some of the sketches were designed to cover fully into the old bleed lines, though, and most of those now just... don't. There's little I can do there, but I tried to make it not look hideous.

Plus, the written introduction (the real one, not the one you'll see on the immediate next page) has been extended slightly so that it ends at 2021, not 2013 like it did before. I considered updating some of the text in the illustrated introduction to reflect this, but nah. I also cleaned up a few other parts of it regardless, though I still don't have proper comics for Trevor Turducken or Suki Sashimi, so that's a bust.

Regarding the eBook (well, okay, PDF) conversion, there's a few other changes that seem logical for something digital. Empty physical pages (including the left sides of the fake intro) have been removed since they don't make structural sense on an electronic reader, some text has been changed to not reference the dimensions of a physical book, and the two-page spread of Alex attacking Stephanie in the hidden lab should be a single double-wide page, which I really hope looks right on your reader (otherwise it'd be split in half). Little things like that. In fact, I probably missed a few spots where I should've been paying better attention, even after doing this twice.

In addition, the sketchbook sketches included were added with the intent that they would be printed on physical media where the natural scratchiness of the scans from sketchbook paper wouldn't be quite so apparent. Unfortunately, that doesn't hold true when you're viewing this on something that can give you a "perfect" white background. They were still scanned at 300dpi regardless, so it's not like we're dealing with the low-res stuff from the first chapter and all.

Oh, and if you're keeping track, the page numbers still line up with the first print edition. There's extra pages now, given this addendum, but the numbering still starts at the real introduction (with lowercase Roman numerals; traditional numbering starts with the actual comic content).

Finally, if you're reading this and still look forward to new DoM strips, well, thanks. It means a lot to me. At time of writing, I'm doing all right, other than working on undoing a horrible year's worth of stress and such, but everyone's having to deal with that. New stuff is still coming along.

Again, thanks for sticking around with me on this rather silly ride. I... um... now realize I sort of don't have a DoM-specific catchphrase with which I can sign off. Oops.

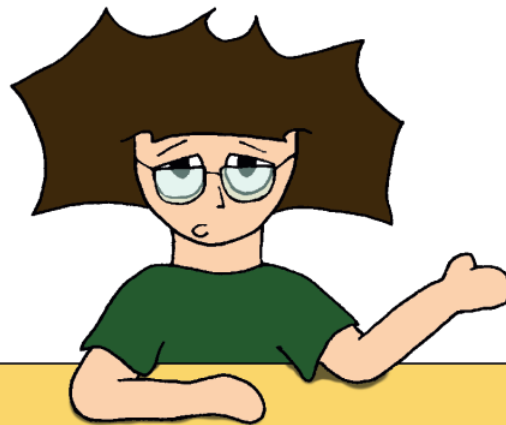
-Nicholas Killewald

INTRODUCTION

So, here it is. After years of waiting, after many chapters, adventures, events, and characters, after delays and misfires of all sorts, after months of hard work laying out, retexting, organizing, and reflecting on everything I did in Chapter Two, there's finally an eBook of DoM comics. Can you believe it? I sure can't.

In fact, you know what? Let's just forget the whole thing.

-Nicholas Killewald





INTRODUCTION

1998 was a glorious year in the world of webcomics. Though there were comics published solely electronically before then, both on Usenet and over HTTP, 1998 was when the entire concept started to take off, establishing itself as not only a means of distribution, but as an artform in and of itself. Stories could be written under the assumption that the entire comic's archive could be read freely from the very beginning instead of having to constantly bring new readers up to speed every other week. Artists openly talked with each other and discussed technique, establishing professional and personal artistic networks spanning the globe. Crossovers and fan-made works were not only more common than in the print world, they were encouraged and sometimes rewarded. The very concept quickly turned into a movement with properties and qualities only rarely before seen in the world of sequential art, if ever at all. 1998 was the year many well-known webcomics began and grew popular, some of which were still going strong as per the original edition of this book. In those days, readers were treated to comics featuring such diverse themes as the exploits of two guys sitting on a couch playing video games, the trials and tribulations of the IT departments of fictional ISPs, college life as told by humorous yet poignant exaggerated stories of dorm students, and the exploits of two totally different guys sitting on a totally different couch playing totally different video games, because those first two guys were really stupid and the video games they played on their couch were stupid and their couch was also stupid, all of which are solid reasons to start a webcomic.

And the readers eagerly enjoyed every moment of it. Webcomic artists of the day quickly became internet legends. Their fans fawned over their daily, weekly, or three-times-a-weekly stories with celebrity-like abandon. Artists were invited to conventions large and small all over the world. The private jets in which they arrived were greeted by throngs of fans and press alike before they were quickly whisked away in sports cars made of only the purest of gold and diamonds and stocked with every manner of both fine liquor and cheap booze imaginable, all depending on the whim of the artist that day. The global network of webcomic artists held an iron grip on the global economy, their slightest desires deciding the fates of millions worldwide. It was a great time to be in webcomics, despite the fact that in those days, even someone who came up with a webcomic featuring a food-monstrosity-themed hero who fought evil using a magic accordion that got its powers from playing polka covers of German opera songs could've gathered such a fanbase. Then again, if you could truthfully say you're the guy they're talking about whenever anybody asks "whatever happened to the guy who wrote The Tales of Trevor Turducken and the Teutonic Terror of Tannhauser?", you'd most likely be set for life by now.

2002

, by comparison, was a dark year. After a generation of absolute domination, the market became saturated by artists looking for their pieces of the webcomic world. Everyone had a comic to throw around. Some had several. But, alas, the money was long gone. This new breed of artists had to make do with an audience weary of being forced to use convenient technology to read comics, comic descriptions in the vein of "like Trevor Turducken, but this time in Japan*!", and second-hand hatchbacks merely made out of silver and sapphires. Ill-conceived sprite comics dotted the land, countless webmanga covered entire buildings almost overnight, stickfigures contended for dominion over the last pieces of free comic land available, and mentioning you had a new webcomic was a solid, reliable way to meet new and interesting people who would promptly beat you ruthlessly. It was during this period that I felt it was a great idea to start a new webcomic.

And in the year beforehand, I started drawing. I drew faces. I drew hair. I drew hands. I gave up on drawing hands and drew mitten-like appendages instead. I drew on printer paper. I drew on grocery store receipts. I drew in notepads. I eventually bought actual sketchbooks and drew in them, too. Soon, most flat surfaces in my bedroom were awash with the comforting, familiar shade of Strathmore Yellow. I drew with pencils. I drew with writing pens. I drew with drawing pens. I drew with blue pencils for reasons only discussed in hushed whispers using the ancient forbidden language of Real Artists, but I just played along and it seemed to work out well enough. I bought a scanner. I obtained a lap desk. I bought a pen bag. I even abducted my brother's drawing table (my family always thought he was going to be the artist).

But most importantly, I had the internet. And I was in a small art community kinda-sorta made as a splinter group of a fan site for a video game that never sold well in the US. I picked up a few tricks, learned a few of the finer points of beginner-level art, mashed them all together into a weird style, and put samples of it up for the community to peruse. They were mostly ignored, but a few of my friends took note and happily discussed my characters with me at length**. And they asked questions. They asked lots of questions. And I answered them. I had to answer them, even if I didn't know all the answers beforehand.

Because of that, long before the first page was made, the Landis Kingdom and its inhabitants were being fleshed out and revised repeatedly until they became somewhat kinda similar to who they are now. Alex went from a snide prankster to a more headstrong apprentice

*: Of these, the only such webcomic that stood the test of time was the much-beloved The Saga of Suki Sashimi and the Shinto Shame of the Shakuhachi Singers. Tragically, its artist died in a freak tongue-twister accident when she was pronouncing her comic's name at a convention. She will be missed.

mage. Matt used to be a soldier in the Landis Royal Army before I realized he might be more interesting as a skilled thief. Sapphire Squad was just another patrol team until Cy was given a connection to Phinn and Yuulor Forest. Salthalus's backstory kept gaining more depth every time I told it, and Alex's childhood interest in magic kept taking different turns as I found myself giving better answers when different people asked. Over the course of a year or so of drawing and talking with friends and forcing myself to have answers to their questions, I found myself with a world filled with characters, many of whom had stories to tell. Which, all told, is a pretty good thing with which you can start a webcomic.

And so, armed with a mid-level understanding of HTML and a couple months of weekdaily strips drawn up, on July 10, 2002, a scratchy, pencil-drawn comic appeared on KeenSpace, starting with the words "This is a story".

It wasn't really that good, but I got better.

In time, people outside my small circle of friends found it. For a while, a modest amount of people talked about it. I found more artist friends, many of whom I still talk to today. I garnered a small group of fans who enjoyed my characters, liked my stories, and have made thankfully few requests for disturbing fanservice drawings of my female cast members. I knew I'd never reach the hypothetical levels of fame that I completely made up for Trevor Turducken in the second paragraph of this introduction, but people liked my stuff, and I felt great.

Then these same people wondered when they'd be able to buy a book of it.

At first, I didn't have an answer to that. Sure, it'd be nice, but I never really thought about it. And, what I had wasn't really ready to be printed. I had 90-ish dpi comics that I'd need to re-scan, re-edit, and re-text in order to make that work, and the originals were all drawn in pencil, which faded pretty badly over time. But, people kept asking, and I kept stalling. I mean, if they keep on asking, I must be doing SOMETHING right, right?

In **2013**, I finally had an answer. That answer started with me re-texting all the comics in Chapter Two, after I had switched to using pens, coloring everything in the digital realm, and keeping nice chunky 300dpi originals. It involved me typing up page after page of commentary on every comic I made back then. Along came more input from my friends, new

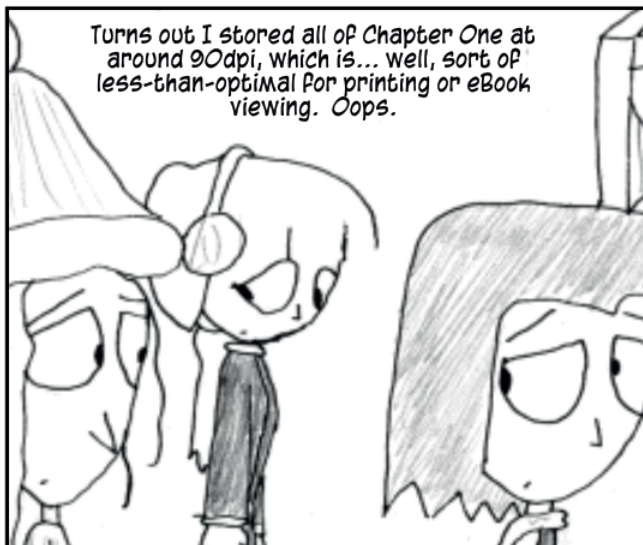
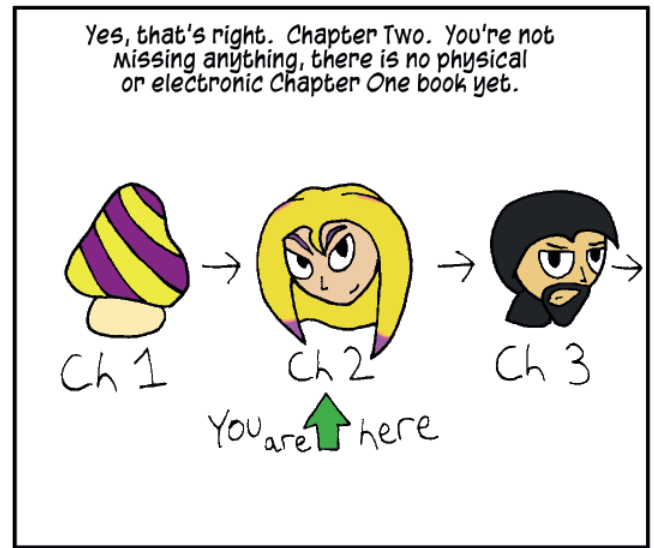
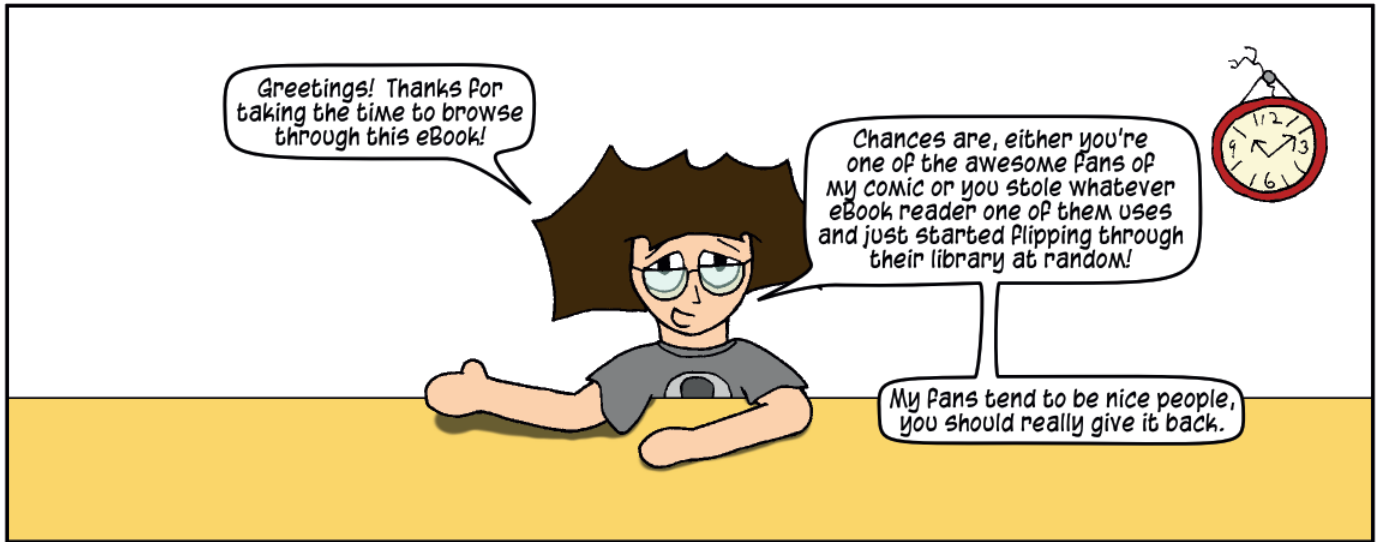
**: For those who read ahead, I mean the DoM characters. The Adventures of Captain Spam were made years beforehand. Oh, and this part's more real than that last part with Trevor Turducken.

sketches from the depths of yet another spiral-bound Strathmore Yellow sketchbook, and a long, rambling story about grossly exaggerated and absurd versions of 1998 and 2002 in the world of webcomics, versions that partially involved a food-monstrosity-themed hero I made up who fought evil using a magic accordion that got its powers from playing polka covers of German opera songs. And then, a couple hundred or so megabytes of PDF data later, it existed in people's hands.

And then in **2021**, in the shadow of a global pandemic and under a perhaps nontrivial amount of cabin fever, I stopped to ask myself if I needed to go back over the books I made for second revisions. It turned out that 8"x10½" isn't a particularly standard page size for books, there were some parts I felt I could clean up, and maybe I could get a better-quality product regardless. I considered all of this is despite the fact that very few people bought the first edition of the book, but I still think it's cool to have a physical thing I can hold in my hands and say, "I made this", even if that wasn't the question people were asking about it and they tend to back off nervously afterward, and even if this is the eBook version and chances are you're not holding a paper version of it regardless.

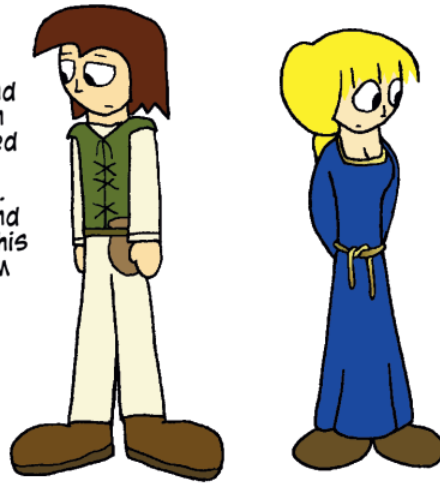
There's more to this story, of course, but I don't want to keep you waiting. Maybe I'll tell you later. Anyway, let my cartoonish avatar on the next page start things off.

-Nicholas Killewald



Let's start with a few characters we saw in Chapter One who show up at some point here. First are the comic's main characters, two peasant siblings named Matthew and Alexandria. They live in the Landis Kingdom in a sort of pseudo-medieval European-style Fantasy world.

Matt's a thief. He and his sister tend to a small amount of farmable land in a village somewhere, but he's a skilled rogue who sometimes likes to... help supplement their finances, let's say. Humble and cynical, generally calm and reasonable, we're going to learn in this chapter just what it takes to get him rather mad.



Alex is an apprentice mage. Magic exists in this comic; maybe I should've mentioned that. She studies under Salthalus's tutoring, is genuinely curious about magic, eager to learn it, and tends to catch on quickly-ish. She's a nice girl, though with a bit of a hotheaded streak from time to time.



Jacob is Matt's best friend and frequent partner in crime. Taught Matt most of what he knows, in fact. Jake's far more snide than Matt, and, thanks to numerous accidents (both real and in quotes) back when she was first studying magic, does not like Alex much at all.

Salthalus is Alex's mentor. She hails from the Healing Springs far to the north. Salth is one of the wisest and most powerful mages in the known world, and she's surprisingly patient in teaching Alex what she knows. She also keeps up a weak spell to slightly hide her age for complicated reasons that get explained in Chapter Five. Never mind for now.



Phinn is a sweet girl who runs a library in the village in which Matt and Alex live. She's a cheerful, kind, and quite geeky elf from Yuulor Forest. She has more than a bit of a crush on Matt. Matt remains one of the few people irritatingly unaware of that last part.



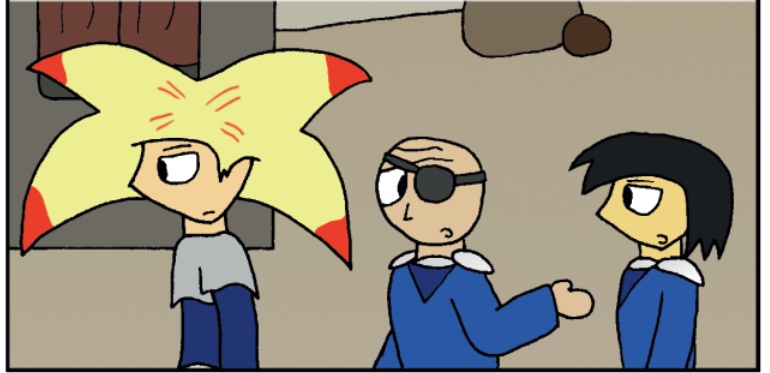
Cy is the captain of Sapphire Squad back at Castle Landis. He's one of the better patrol captains they've got. Not pictured are his patrolmates, Eddie and Winslow. He's a tall sort of guy, which is something that gets explained in this chapter, in fact.

There's a few others, too, like Howard the dollmage, Ethyl the ganglord, Cesol the dwarf, and King Landis, but they only show up briefly in this chapter. Come to think of it, so does Jacob.

A lot happened in Chapter One, but the relevant part to this started during the winter, when Matt and Alex were stuck in the dwarf nation of Terakol and found a guy named Vince.



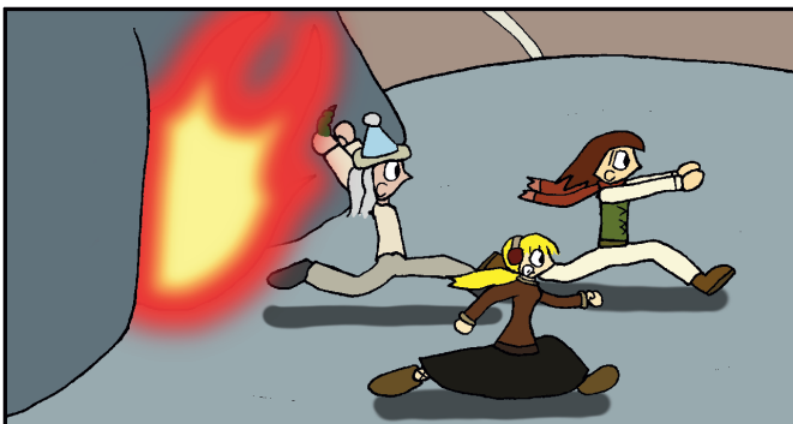
They were stuck in Terakol due to a military draft back in Landis. Matt sort of got caught by the last one. Vince was assigned to supervise him, but for reasons I won't get into, he thought Matt was killed, and he panicked. Regardless, the three of them were evading Sapphire Squad, one of Landis's patrols who happened to be assigned to the Terakol border that season to look for draft dodgers. It happens a lot.



The dwarves, though, dealt with this a lot and brought Matt, Alex, and Vince to a refugee camp deeper in Terakol territory. There, they were free to wait out the draft in relative safety.



All would've been well had they not been clued in to the existence of Marzos, a powerful mage who moved into a nearby cave and who had a powerful grudge against the Healing Springs region far to the north. The three of them decided to investigate, and soon regretted it.

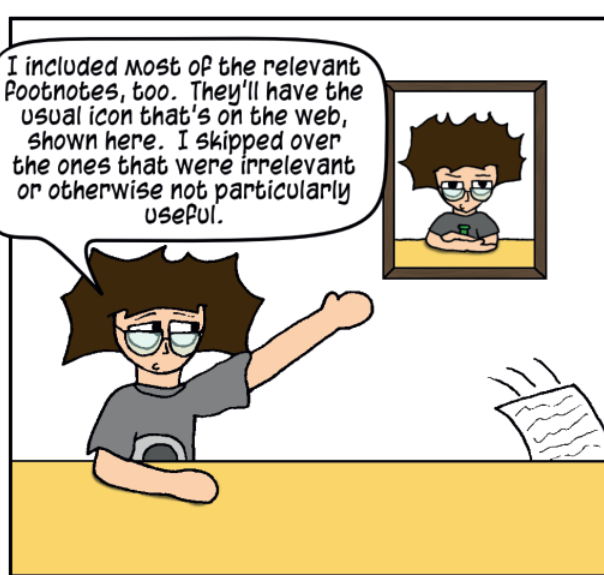
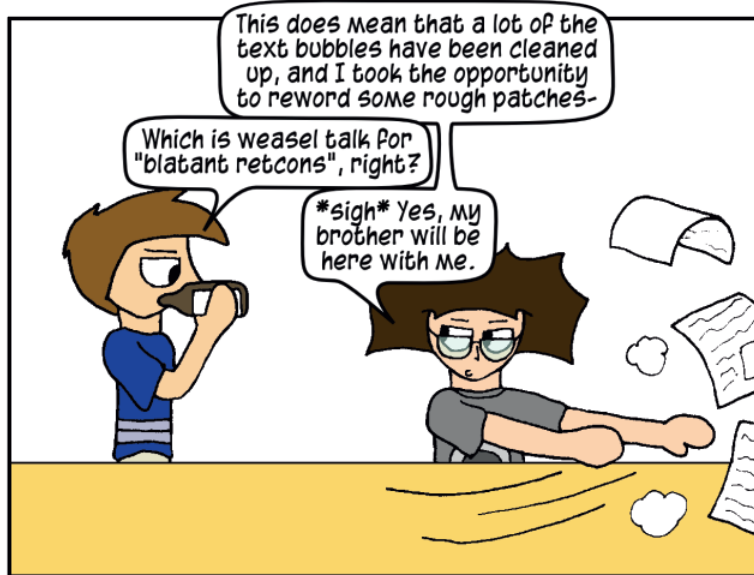
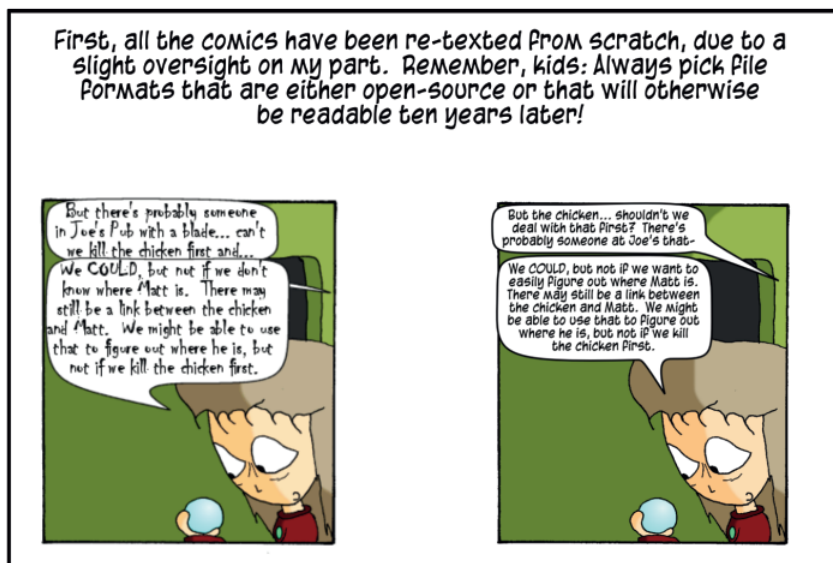


Fortunately, Sapphire Squad, acting on the same clue, also arrived at the cave, found what Marzos was up to (long story), and, thanks to Marzos being distracted by Matt, Alex, and Vince, stopped his plans. The three of them made their escape.

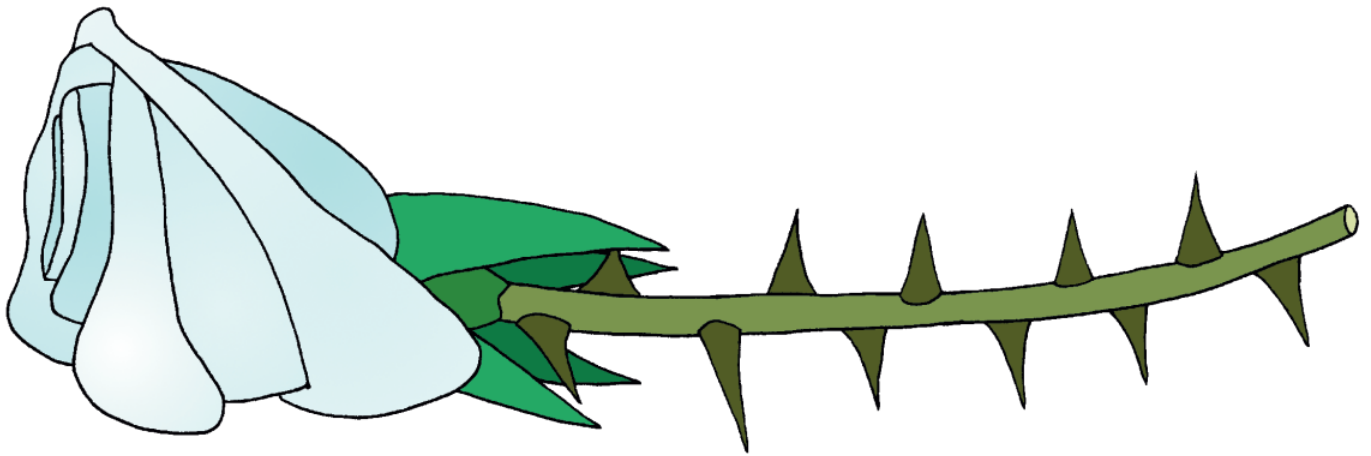
But, before the dwarves showed up to get them to safety, Marzos caught up with them and cast a half-finished spell on Matt. He seemed okay at the time, but now it's spring...



I think that's the important bits. Maybe.



CHAPTER TWO: THE PERFECT EQUINOX FESTIVAL

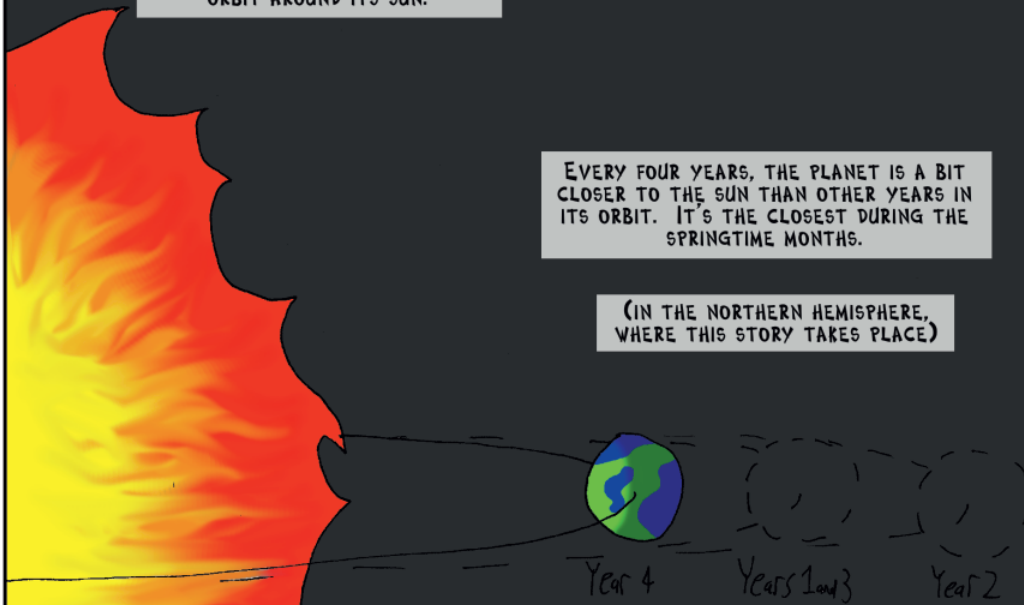




IT SO HAPPENS THAT THE PLANET ON WHICH THIS STORY TAKES PLACE FOLLOWS A BIT OF AN IRREGULAR ORBIT AROUND ITS SUN.

EVERY FOUR YEARS, THE PLANET IS A BIT CLOSER TO THE SUN THAN OTHER YEARS IN ITS ORBIT. IT'S THE CLOSEST DURING THE SPRINGTIME MONTHS.

(IN THE NORTHERN HEMISPHERE, WHERE THIS STORY TAKES PLACE)



(Not to scale)

THIS TIME IS CALLED PERFECT EQUINOX.

Oh, this isn't our Earth, by the way. I probably should've mentioned that.

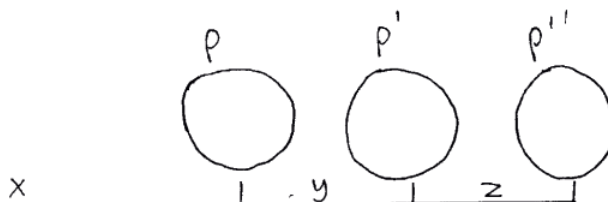


I'll admit to not being very well-versed in fantasy literature. I mean, I'm a bit of a fan of the Discworld books, but that's about it. Even so, I have to imagine that the idea of introducing real-world astrophysics not seen on Earth — such as a planet that follows a slightly irregular orbit round its sun — and introducing them in a way that isn't governed by the world's magic HAS to have occurred to some high fantasy author before, just to shake things up. I just don't think it's happened too often, and most of the time it HAS happened, most professional authors who did so would have probably checked to see if that's even possible the way I describe it. I was a computer engineering major. I'm not even sure my college had an astrophysics program.

Check out the size of my head! Wow! Oddly, while I gradually drew heads smaller as I went on, I don't think my hair ever shrank with it.



AS YOU CAN EXPECT, THIS SORT OF COSMIC PHENOMENON HAS SOME SIGNIFICANT IMPACT ON THE PLANET'S ECOLOGY.



$$x+y > x$$

$$x+y+z > x+y > x$$

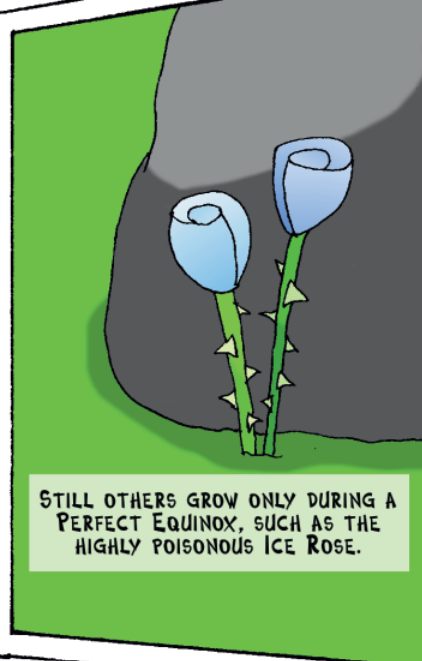
FOR INSTANCE, CROPS THAT THRIVE IN THE SUN TEND TO GROW BETTER.



OTHER CROPS, OF COURSE, DO NOT.



STILL OTHERS GROW ONLY DURING A PERFECT EQUINOX, SUCH AS THE HIGHLY POISONOUS ICE ROSE.



OF COURSE, PLANTLIFE ISN'T THE ONLY THING AFFECTED. AMONGST OTHER THINGS...

A FEW ASSORTED STANDARD-ISSUE CULTISH MAGIC RITUALS AND OTHER RIGAMAROLE HAPPEN ONLY DURING THIS TIME.



THE TIDES ARE SOMEWHAT SIGNIFICANTLY ALTERED.



GESOL ACTUALLY TAKES A SHOWER.



Oi, it's hot out!

Oh, and horticulture. That's another of my weak subjects. Though chances are this would work, with some crops growing better and others drying up with the excess sun in this climate. Climates that are normally warmer to begin with would probably fare worse. Jacob probably should've known this was a Perfect Equinox year and planned accordingly.

Someday I should figure out what those cultists in the lower-left are up to each Perfect Equinox. Then again, it's probably nothing. Major population centers have antidotes on-hand for Ice Rose poisoning, yet they don't have anything prepared for every-four-year cultists, so I guess they don't worry about them. Maybe it's just an elaborate John Cage-esque performance piece that takes four years, and that's as good a time as any to start.



VEGGIES



NOW, OBVIOUSLY, THIS SORT OF THING HAS A MAJOR IMPACT ON A KINGDOM WITH LOTS OF AGRICULTURAL TRADE, LIKE LANDIS. SPECIFICALLY, IT MEANS EARLY HARVESTS, MORE OF THEM, AND LARGER YIELDS.

THUS, THE KINGDOM CELEBRATES.



Random
cheering
noises

AND THIS CELEBRATION IS NOW.

CHAPTER TWO:

THE PERFECT EQUINOX FESTIVAL

Nick, your theory also implies that the southern hemisphere has a Perfect Solstice, plus there are respective Imperfect Solstices and Equinoxes on the opposite ends of the cycle...

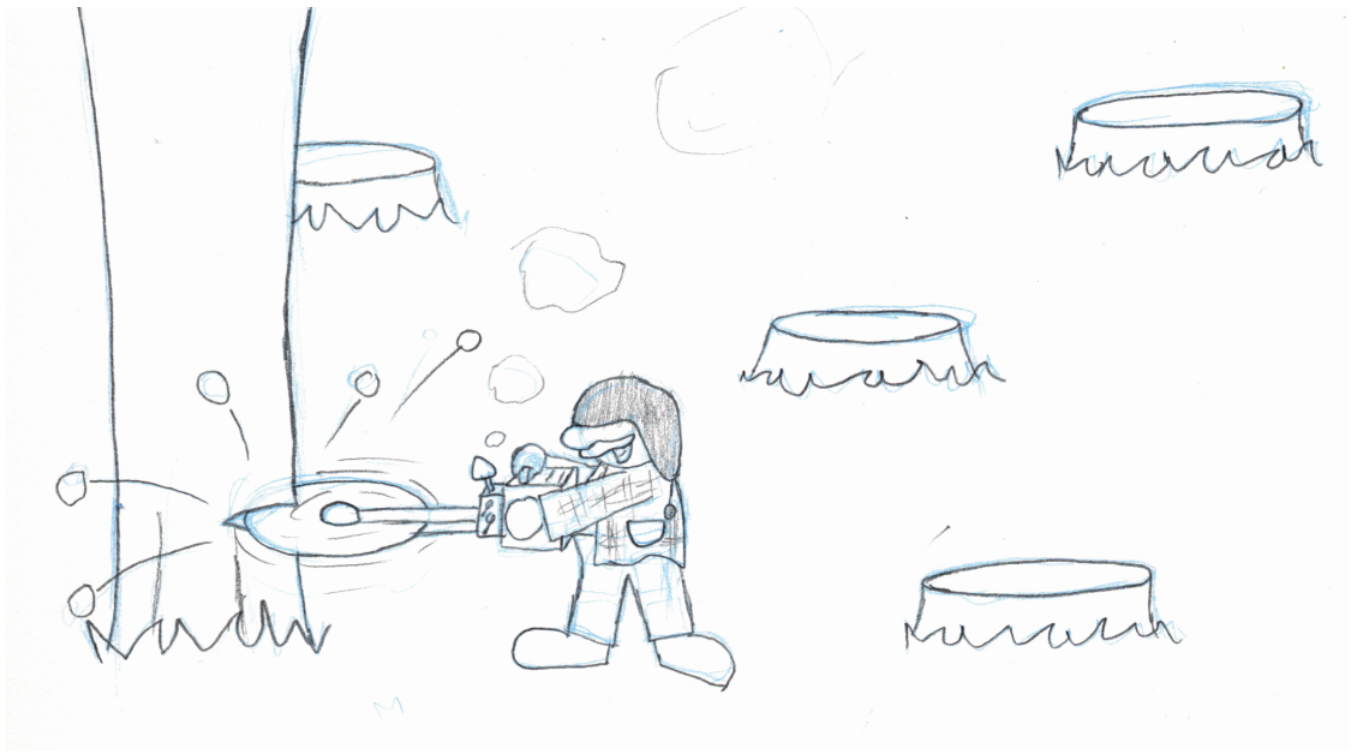
Well, yeah, but those are boring and nobody talks about them.

I like how it's pretty clear that right here I started drawing the background and then stopped. I mean, there's hills there, but not even a tree in sight, nor the mountains of Terakol in the distance. The Landis clear-cut forestry program must've been a success!

When I started making comics, I had this idea that I would switch back and forth between short strips and full-page comics like these as the storytelling demanded. Only, moreso, in that the full-page comics wouldn't necessarily end with some sort of "hook" every page, like you could extract spans of full-page comics into a single continuous sequence, and do so right in the middle of otherwise "normal" strips, and...

Y'know, that idea made sense in my head a couple decades or so ago. Now I don't know why it did. In the end, the general concept wound up becoming the intro pages for each chapter, where it sort of does make sense. And then I started using the webcomic medium more by changing the size of each strip as need be, sort of like what I was initially going for (and which makes a printed layout tricky). So what happened is I got half of what I had in mind. And I still don't know what I had in mind.

I'm not sure why I brought that up, really. I guess going through all these comics from way back when brought up parts of my state of mind at the time. Just not enough of it to figure out why.





I've had at least one person accuse me of completely glossing over what Alex and Matt do for a living, given Matt can't really be a full-time thief and, in this world, magic is simply a talent, not a job. And, well, fair enough, I don't really bring up their day-to-day lives much, since it's not nearly as interesting as what they do otherwise, and I'm bad at writing slice-of-life comedy. But, just to clarify, they tend to a small amount of farmable land near their house, which is what they're doing here. They get by.

I still can't get over how huge everyone's heads were back then.



If you're coming at this from reading later chapters, it might amuse you to note a curious change in Alex's character over time, exemplified in part here by her gut reaction to what happened to Matt. Around this point, I still wrote her as "clumsy, somewhat inept mage who accidentally caused problems", which, in hindsight, I really shouldn't have. I definitely prefer "inexperienced yet genuinely curious mage, always willing to learn", as she evolved later. Makes for a stronger character.

Not to say she never causes problems, of course. That just shouldn't be the *first* assumption.

Hey, look, the windows lost the vertical crossbar since the last strip! And here I thought I was being meticulous with details like that (and wasting an awful lot of time making sure of it back then). Arrg.



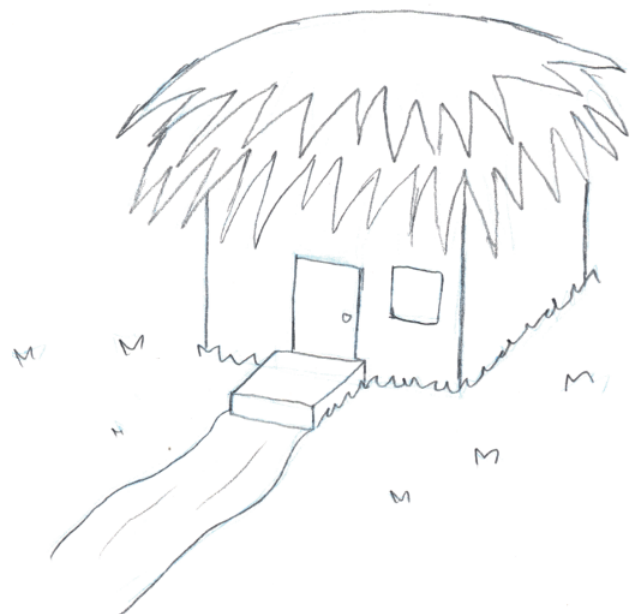
Chickens are inherently funny creatures. The look, the movement, the behavior, even the name "chicken". You're not going to stop me from believing that. Ever.

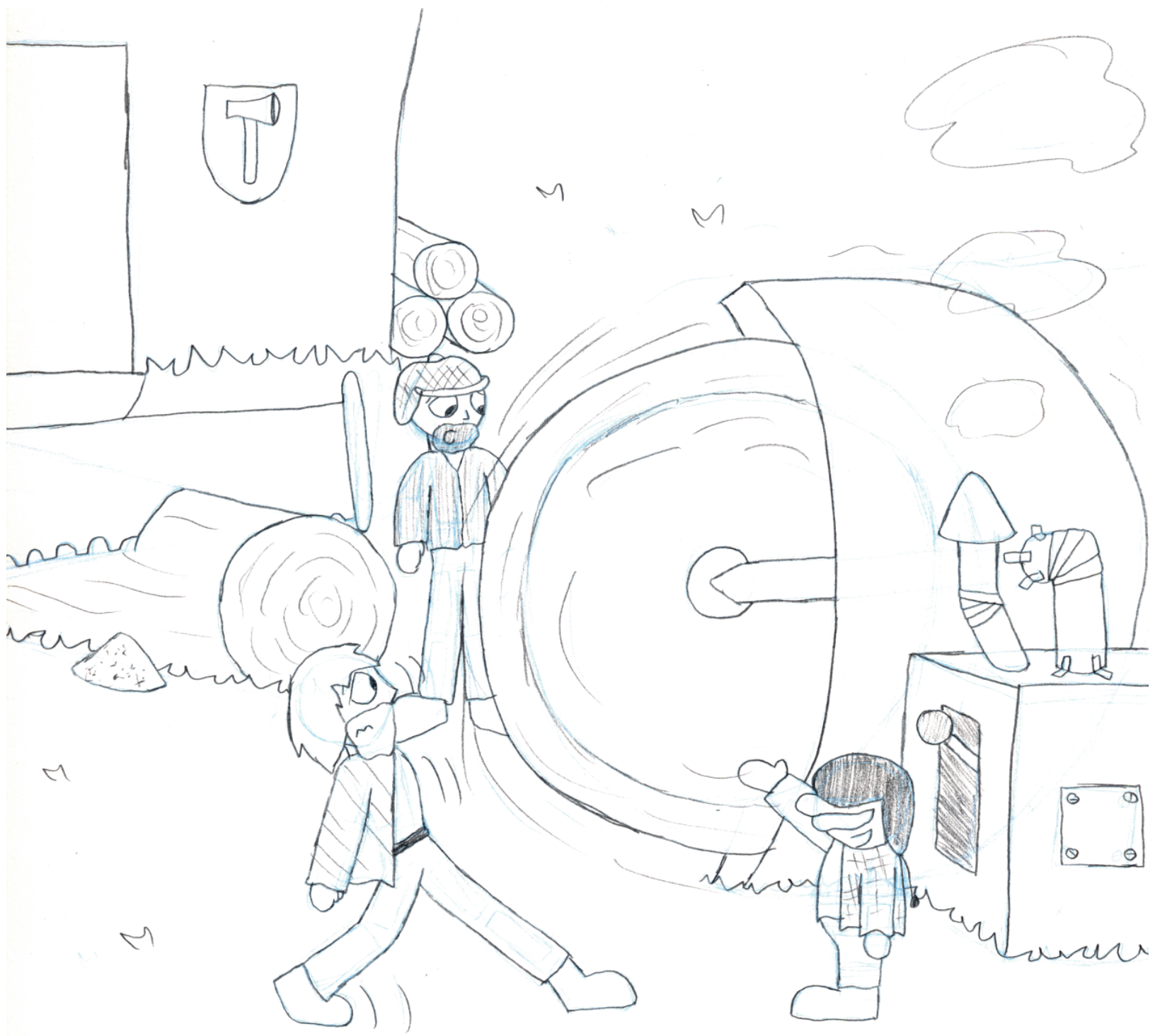
While I do regret initially envisioning Alex as a clumsy and inept character, I certainly don't regret her acting like this. This is the exact reaction most people would have to this situation, especially if it didn't appear to be causing any immediate harm. And happened to an older sibling. Chickens are comedy gold.



I like how I apparently thought thatched-roof huts were all that common in areas with immediate access to lumber. It's even more interesting in that when I recreated Salth's hut in Chapter Five, I gave it a more solid roof instead.

That reminds me, I should draw a sawmill or lumber yard in the village sometime. Someone's got to have built one.







Readers who saw Salthalus explain how Alex first started to learn magic may notice how the hut I presented later bears no resemblance to the one you see here. This one's green, for starters, it has a distinct corner right next to the door, and I guess it has a thatched roof. The later one is red, round, and has a better roof. I'm just saying, the later one is canon.

It's also more canon in that the hut is a lot more of a mess as I draw it later. I'm of a firm belief that people of a creative and/or constructive mindset, including people who teach magic and research it themselves, are natural magnets for clutter. They do not seek it; rather, it seeks them. And thus, a symbiotic relationship is formed between the creator and the clutter.

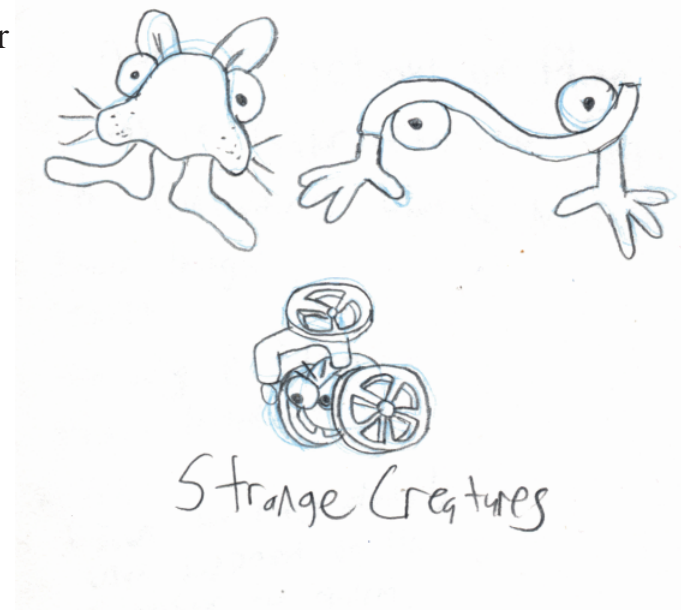


Look! In the bookshelf! It's Bean Man! Bean Man, everyone!



The nasal fly was originally made from a small doodle in one of my high school notebooks (a notebook of which I don't know the whereabouts anymore). At the time, I was trying to see if I could draw a nose and feet. Two separate things. I don't know how they wound up being the same creature. All I know is that I quickly gave the resulting doodle eyes and wings.

When I originally looked this thing over, trying to find a use for it, my first idea was to try to make other creatures like it and make a comic out of a bunch of mismatched, entirely non-humanoid thingamabobs (little-known fact: After getting their first taste of the power associated with drawing comics, all budding comic artists will, for a period of time which will they will later identify as "embarrassing", first attempt to answer any problem with "I should make a comic out of this"). So I immediately tried again and all I came up with was a tilde with hands and something that resembled a water faucet with wagon wheels attached to it (pictured are new sketches of the three, as far as I remember them). This was my first lesson in the cold reality that you can't force creativity, which is also the point at which the answer to any problem to a budding comic artist stops being "make a comic out of it".



Anyway, the nasal fly wound up being the only one of the three I somehow thought had much of a future, so I eventually brought it in as a DoM creature. Now it's a convenient shorthand for "magic just failed", something that would be sort of difficult to represent otherwise, so the little critter's done me a fine literary service after all. It also does a good job in making it clear that Salth's been a bit rattled by Matt having met Marzos, enough that she completely lost focus on what to her should be a relatively simple spell.



Although some would call me out as something of a cheater for doing so, I've altered some of the text from the original comics as I was re-texting everything, as mentioned in the intro. Salth explaining to Matt just who Marzos is was one of the more heavily-revamped sections to this effect. Here, for instance, I made it more clear that the cloak Marzos wears is considered ridiculous-looking even to the people of the comic. I sort of like that running joke.

This also cements the fact that Salth is much older than she looks and keeps up a spell to make herself look younger, a spell that is now fading because she can't concentrate on it any more after the shock of learning Matt and Alex have met Marzos. We'll learn in a later chapter that this is a really weak spell, so for Salth to lose it like this is a sign she's really stressed over this news.



Did you know there exist these magic devices called "rulers"? It's true! They even come in both imperial AND metric versions! You can also use them as straight edges when drawing so you can come up with decently straight lines! I know! It's hard to believe, especially given I clearly didn't know about them at this point in time!

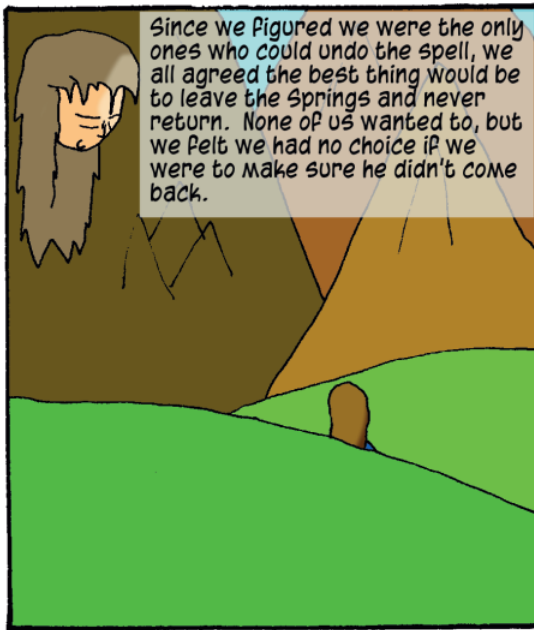
Note that bookshelf behind Matt there. I do hate drawing bookshelves. Sure, if I do them right, I like the end result. This wasn't "right", but I take some satisfaction from drawing a shelf full of a variety of mismatched books of all shapes and sizes. I just dread drawing them in the first place. Especially if the bookshelf has to be in multiple panels and I have to keep track of each book I drew in the shelf the first time around so I can draw them all over again to maintain some manner of continuity. It got better when I started using more digital tricks to repeat background elements as panels go by, but still.



I brought up the bookshelf in the last strip because we're now in a section of Salth's hut where you can't see the bookshelf at all. Single shelves with various magic doodads, on the other hand, I like drawing those.

The original version of this made Marzos's plans even more vague. The general threat of "distorting reality" and such. And it didn't quite fit into the attitude we saw from him in the previous chapter, nor did it line up with what he tells Alex and Howard *next* chapter about WHY he wanted to make an otherworld portal. I'm not sure what I was thinking.

Man, I wish I could remember how I made that effect on the tear in reality Marzos is summoning. I could probably tweak that into something crazier nowadays.



I've always liked the idea of the Healing Springs (the overall inhabited municipality). Whereas the majority of the world seems to be the standard pseudo-medieval European-ish fantasy world of kingdoms and such under strict monarchical rule, the inhabitants of the Springs are a more progressive people run by an elected senate. It's a more affluent region, trade is more free, it's second only to Lineta Hall in terms of education, and it houses things like the Jarlsen-Barteltran Theatre in Chapter Five. There's something I like about working out some of the long-term effects of differences in culture like that.

Of course, sometimes it also leads to people like Marzos. So, hey, you win some, you lose some, right?

I'll note at this point that I prefer to avoid discussing my own personal political beliefs in the construction of the DoM world.



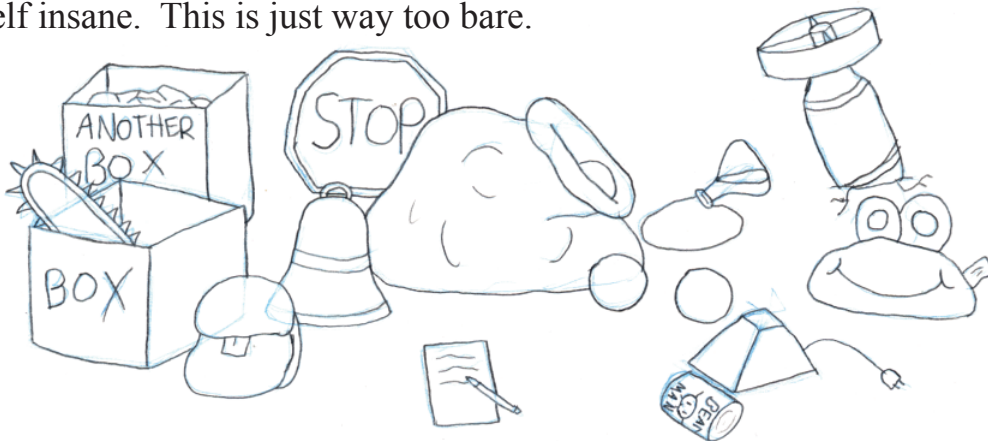
A lot of how magic in the DoM works is based on a very abstract version of how programming works, from a high level perspective. A very, very abstract version. A version that seems better-suited to magic, in fact. For instance, the idea of magic spells being built out of smaller, more simple "commands", for a lack of a better term. The larger spells, like Marzos's otherworld portal, are simply very very large combinations of these "commands". So I guess it's more like UNIX command piping, really. But still, a very abstract view of it.

No, I'm not making a list of commands.



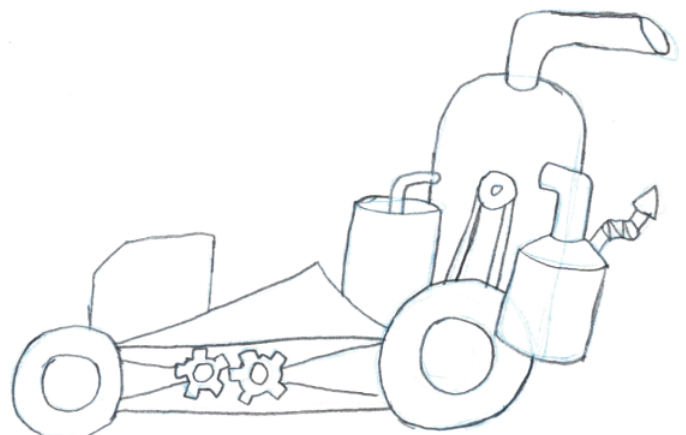
Ha HA! Bookshelf successfully avoided again!

Looking back at this, I'm so glad I eventually learned how to apply clutter to a room without driving myself insane. This is just way too bare.





Here's the first appearance of Cesol's trusty(ish) steam cart (and you can't even see it that well). In most respects, the steam cart has come to act as a makeshift horse, in that it later tends to be the primary method of long-distance transportation for the main characters. This is only partly because I can't draw horses.

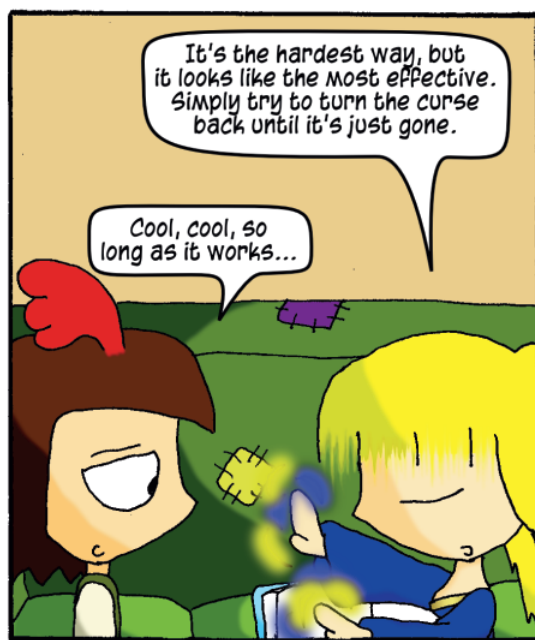




I prefer to believe Cesol never noticed Alex walking off like that, and instead got distracted by something he needed to repair on the cart.

Just to be clear, Alex is left-handed, and she has been since day one of the comic. This is something I try to pay very close attention to, since I never explicitly state it in the comic, and it's a subtle detail that makes me feel better when people pick it out on their own (which I guess I've ruined by pointing it out here). I've made a few mistakes with that, though. In general, if I'm ever in doubt over how she'd be holding something or performing some hand gesture, I go the manual route of miming the action out myself and reversing what hand I use.

Unfortunately, this doesn't work quite so well for things I can do with either hand, like holding a book. That always confuses me when Alex is reading something like this.



Remember when I could get away with a series of gag strips like this that didn't advance the plot much? Man, those were the days. Though I did enjoy Alex methodically working out how to deal with this from basic theory, step by step, even if I was making the theory up as I went along.



I prefer not to think too hard about what a nasal fly attached to what is technically a current part of Matt's head feels like.

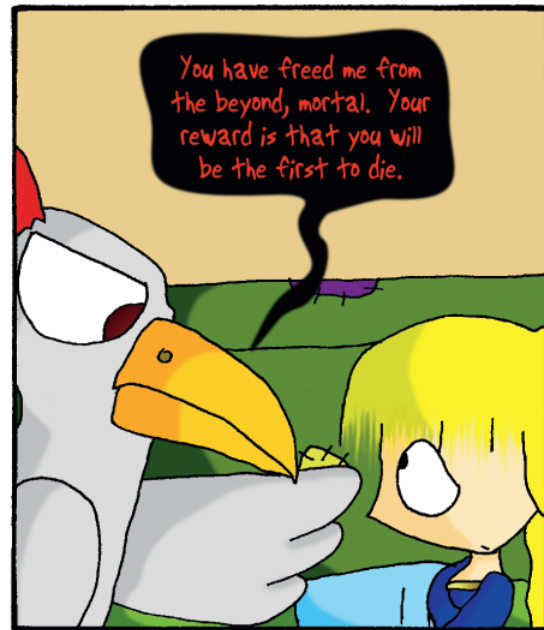
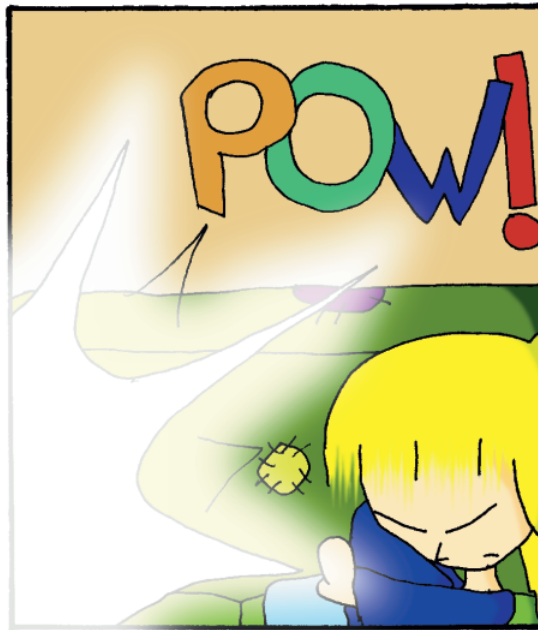
In the earlier comics, I sometimes had a difficult time figuring out just how eyes were supposed to be pointed. I'll get more into the shapes later, but here, in the first and third panels, you can just make out that both of Alex's eyes seem to be tapering in the same direction. I got better with that. Matt's eyes in the third and fourth panels, though, that's pretty well the response I would expect someone to have when suddenly finding a banana growing out of their head.

Bananas are also inherently funny. They're a lot like chickens in that regard.



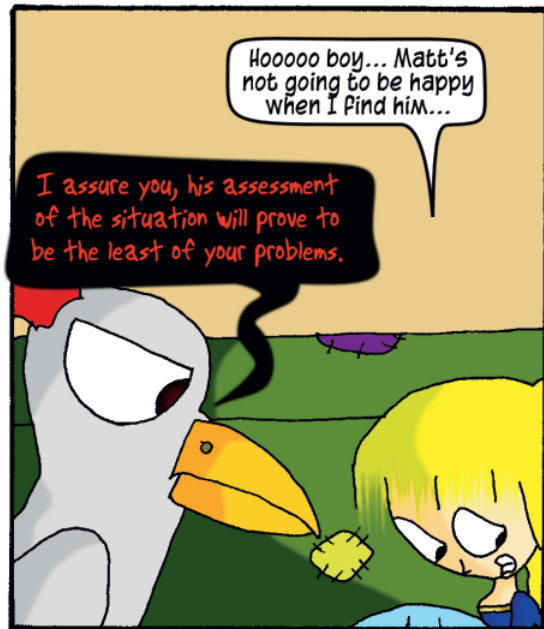
Of all the buildings and areas I've had in the comic over the years, I've spent surprisingly little time putting Alex and Matt in their own home. Not too much goes on there, and regardless, they're usually out in other parts of the kingdom, if not world, doing more interesting things. As I recall, the main room of their home was far more cluttered in the first chapter, and it'll probably be cluttered again next time I use it. But at the very least, it'll definitely have that couch.

For any concerns about why there's a modern-day patched-up green couch in their home, please remember that I don't mind a good anachronism now and then.



Something that's really fun when dealing with a constructed world is coming up with analogies and casual internal cultural references that only truly make sense in the context of that world. The real challenge is making them make *SOME* sense in the real world, too. It just makes sense to me that dragon eggs would be nearly indestructible, but a baby dragon wouldn't be, and thus why Alex trusts the analogy she's reading.

So you have a chicken. That's funny. But what you *ALSO* have is a convenient comedy vehicle with which you can make *further* funny concepts via simple combinations! A demon chicken is a great example! But seriously, I had no idea right here that a demon chicken was a bit of a plot point in a specific adventure game series, a series which I hold in high regard nowadays. And really, I went off in a different direction with it anyway.



At one point, I did consider making each character have different speech bubbles. You know, each one a different color, maybe each one being a different font, that sort. I've seen that used to good effect in other comics. It never really fit in for me, though, probably because I don't have that many good fonts for the job, plus most of my characters are human (or similar), so giving them different bubbles might look a bit out of place.



But, when I have creatures like the demon chicken who probably should be speaking in an unnatural manner, then I get to be more creative. Because when I think "chicken-based abomination communicating in a demonic parody of human speech", I don't think "white speech bubbles", I think "misshapen black blobs with dripping tails". Ah, the glorious abuse of vector tools.



This, to me, encapsulates two vital aspects of Alex's personality. First, her initial instinct is to not back down from this creature. She sees a giant chicken directly threatening her, and she isn't going to just sit there and take it. She's got the means to fight back, and that's exactly what she's going to do, without hesitation, looking it straight in the eye.

Second, however, is that though she may be headstrong, she's not stupid. She's not above running away if her plan has proven ineffective and she's run out of options. Fighting back is one thing; knowing when to run is equally important.



Look! Going into Salth's sack! It's Bean Man! Bean Man, everyone!

The mental image I have of a demonic-sounding "Buckaw" is one that never stops amusing me. Try it yourself!

Let's talk about Bean Man. We'll start with Captain Spam. Let's head back to the crazy age of the mid-to-late 90s for a sec, back when I was in junior high (or "middle school") and high school. Back then, in my spare time between classes (well, okay, DURING classes), I liked doodling in my notes. One doodle looked vaguely humanoid and almost like a superhero, and for some reason I grew attached to it. Reaching into my undeveloped creative mind, I gave this character a name by ramming together a generic superhero prefix and a word that sounds funny. And thus, Captain Spam was born.

During high school, I eventually cobbled together a few small comics of The Adventures of Captain Spam. Spam took on the demeanor of perhaps one of the most easygoing superheroes I've ever seen. Somewhat underpowered and mostly relying on his wits (and minor spam-based weaponry), he fought the forces of evil which, entirely by coincidence, were also frequently food-themed. I'll never recall why I thought it made sense to give a tofu-themed archduke of a faraway country ANY time travel vehicle, let alone TWO. Please don't ask for the comics; I drew them on whatever cheap printer paper we had at my school using whatever cheap pencils I could find and stuffed them in the back of my binder for a decade or so. Did you know that cheap pencils fade quickly on cheap paper? My family also never owned a scanner until I started drawing stuff with more dedication a few years later.

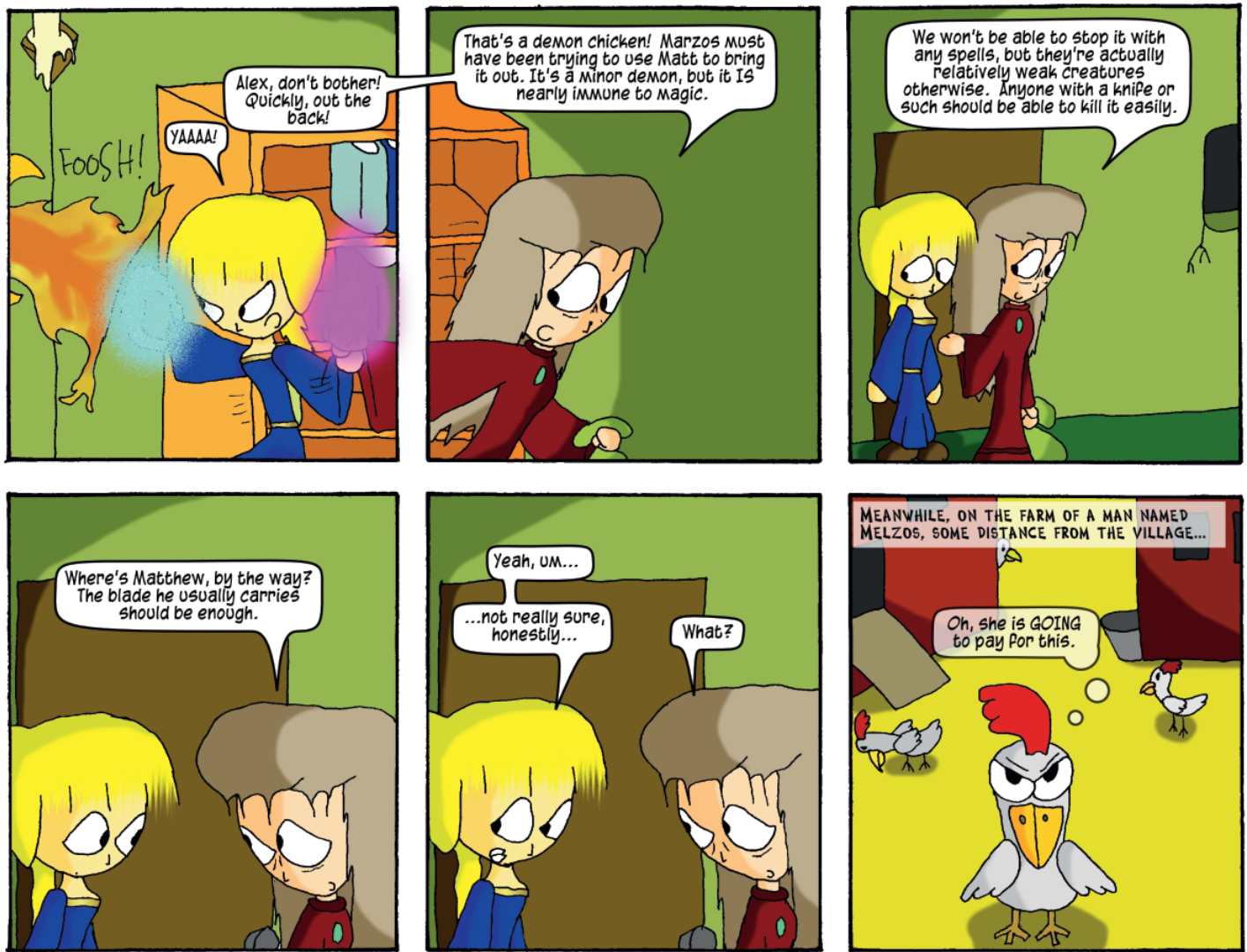


Captain Spam's world had a series of oddball characters and locations, such as the Temple of Bad Fashion Sense, the High-Impact Boomerang Thrower's Club (their motto: "If it comes back, you didn't throw it hard enough"), and Steve's Top Secret Scientific Research And Weekend Taco Bar. One of them was going to be Bean Man Brand Beans. I say "was going to be" because I came up with that idea after I sort of stopped making Captain Spam comics. And I was almost done with the fourth episode, too.

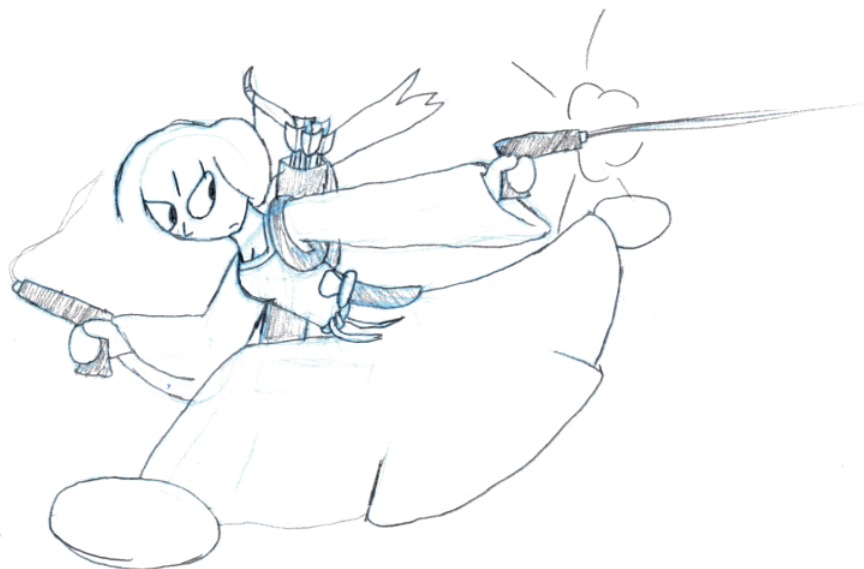
So I had this mascot for a produce company, Bean Man. I mean, just look at him. I had to do SOMETHING with him, right? So, in a series of single-panel comics, I killed him. Repeatedly. Well, almost. I mean, in "Bean Man Gets Hit By A Meteor", the meteor didn't QUITE hit him yet, nor did he get to the saw blade in "Bean Man Is Trapped In A Sawmill", but I just kept coming up with new and cartoonish ways in which Bean Man would be amusingly dead within a few seconds. Then he gradually started showing up in my other sketches as a background joke, and, well, there he is again, going into that sack.

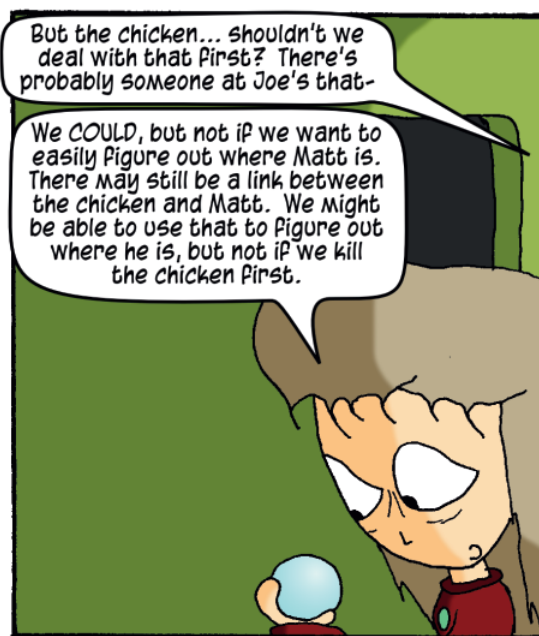
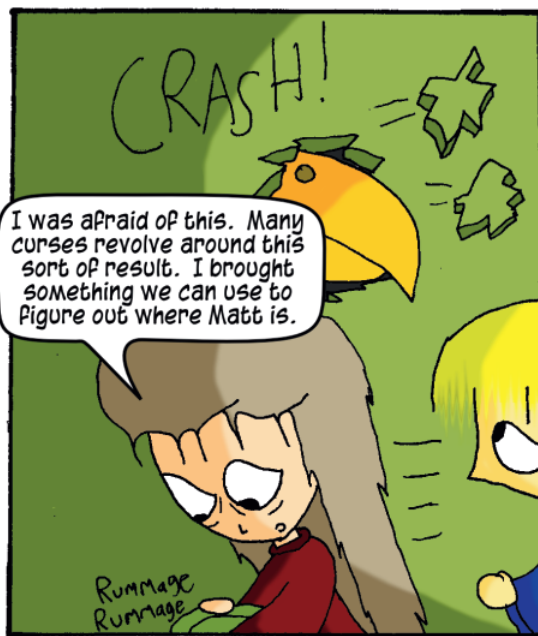


So now you know. Still doesn't mean anything, though.



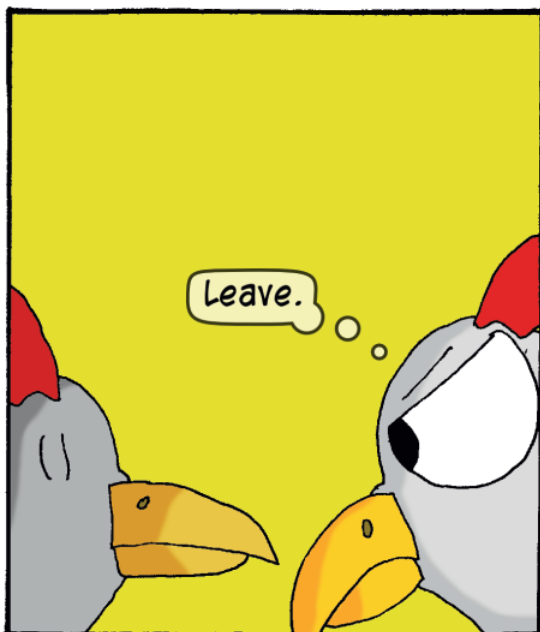
Here we learn that magic has limits in the DoM world, and some things are immune to magic. Thus, if your main intent is to keep mages away, summoning demon chickens is the way to go. Assuming the mages in question aren't otherwise armed. Most mages aren't otherwise armed.





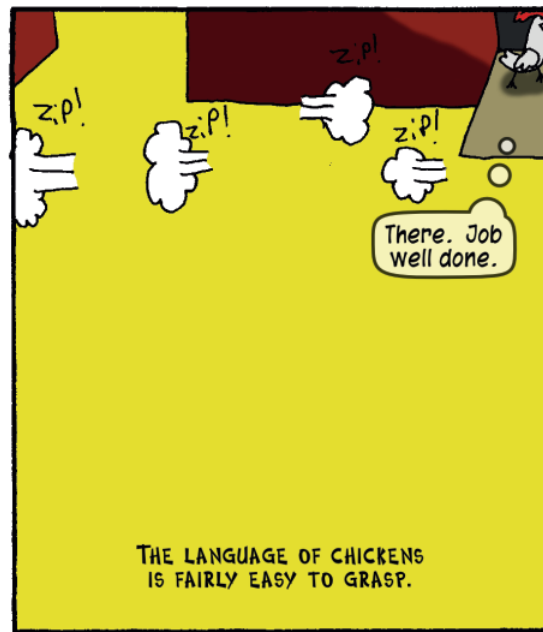
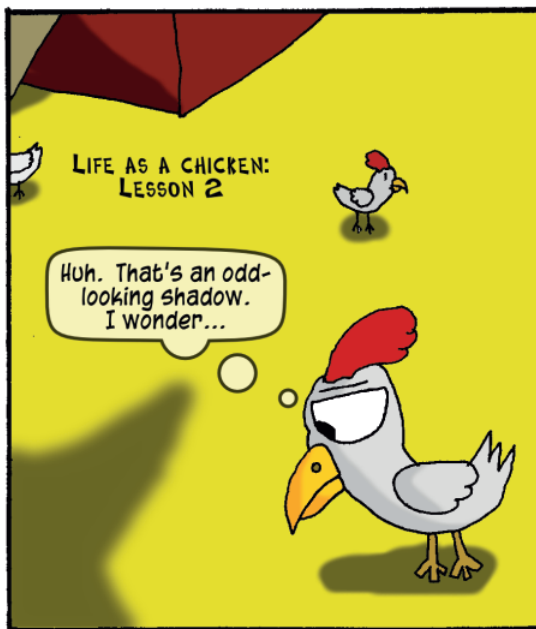
See that offhand mention of Joe's Pub in the second panel? This was back when I thought Joe and his pub were going to come more into play as the comic went on. Turns out I was wrong, as codified in Chapter Four. But, it's still convenient to have a nearby pub to call by name, like the Drunk Boar in Breznial.

Joe's Pub had an extensive lost-and-found, too.



Ah, another series of gag strips. I kind of miss these. I actually don't know if chickens are easily intimidated by others of their kind, or at least by human minds inhabiting others of their kind. Chances are they aren't. Chickens are a bit more hardcore than you'd think.

Yes, that most definitely is a guy in green being attacked by irate chickens in the back. Hooray for obvious background gags! You young whippersnappers with your smartphones and your mobile games, we knew what made a bird angry back in my day!



Matt is surprisingly calm about this entire ordeal. He also catches on surprisingly fast.

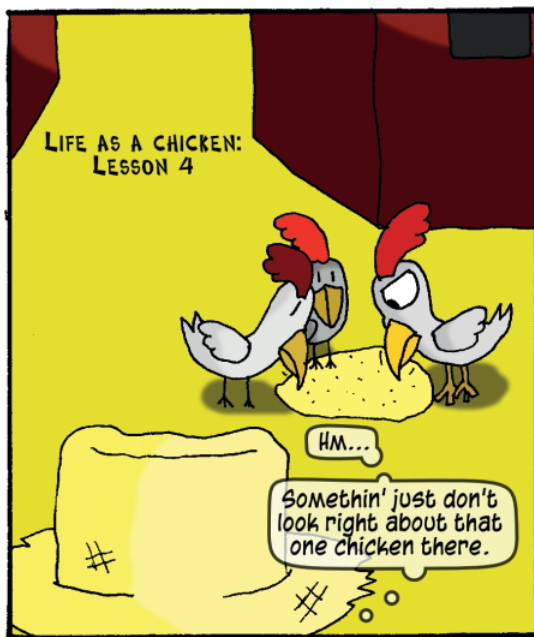
I clearly only have a very, very loose grasp on how much time's passed at this point. I got better at that as I went along, which is really weird when so much real-world time passes between chapters and comics nowadays.



Hey, can you tell I was in college when I wrote this one? Huh? Can you? Can you can you can you? 'Cause I was. Note Phil "drinking" from a bucket of fried chicken here in a comic involving chickens. That's acceptable-quality early-in-a-writing-career comedy!

The issue of family names rarely comes up in the DoM. I've sort of decided that most peasants either don't have them or they're irrelevant anyway, which, as I was told by a friend of mine, is actually relatively accurate to the medieval period. Royalty and nobility, though, they have family names. Or, for that matter, people from places where non-noble individuals are treated more like human beings, such as the Healing Springs. I don't know why I haven't given a family name to Salthalus yet, though.

Of course, Matt took a guess to connect Melzos and Marzos, so maybe family names just work differently in the Springs and Matt's familiar with said conventions.



The idea of making chicken-Matt stand out by having human-esque eyes (insofar as I draw them) in a crowd of simple-eyed chickens seemed at first to just be a convenient way for the reader to tell him apart, but it suddenly made sense to me that Melzos, being an experienced farmer, would be able to quickly tell a "real" chicken apart from something like Matt. It's even better that Mel's clearly seen this before and has a pretty good idea what to do.



One may wisely wonder how Salth could be in any condition at her age to keep running from the Demon Chicken like that. Not only does she keep herself moderately healthy for her age via elixirs, a few spells, and just plain good eatin', but it is also possible Alex helped her out with a spell or two to keep her stamina up as they hunted Matt.

Of course, if that was one's first question, one would miss the more obvious question of how either of them could keep up with running the few miles on end to get to Melzos's farm. Since one didn't wonder that, I don't need to answer it.

I've said before that I only have a very rough idea of how the village and surrounding areas are laid out. For instance, Mel's farm is defined in my head as "a distance from the village". Exactly what that means isn't clear. What's less clear is how Salth can keep running in her advanced age like that. This is why my footnote thingies exist.



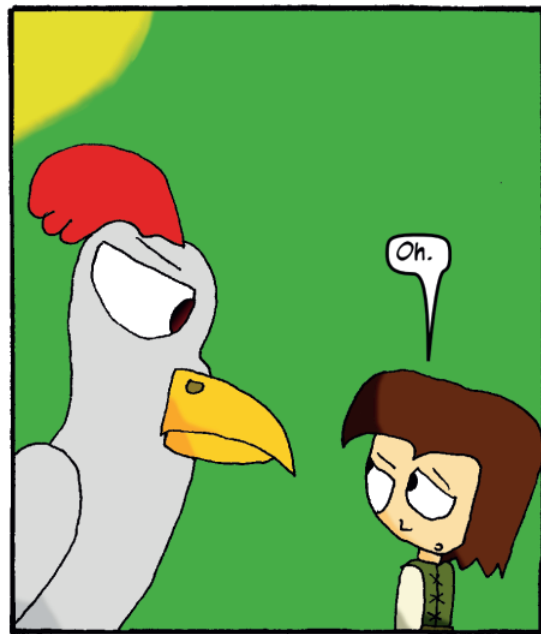
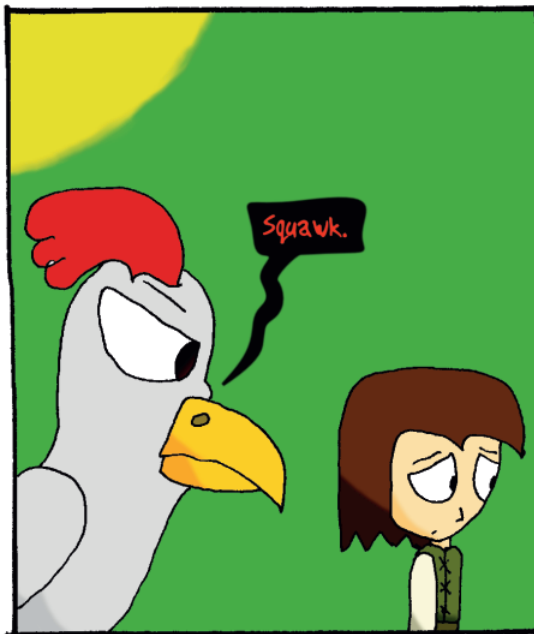
Seriously. What sort of cruel monster would kick a chicken? I mean, look at them. They're chickens! You just don't kick them!

As much as I like the look of well-shaded characters once in a while and the satisfaction of managing to pull it off properly, I eventually stopped doing shading in cases where there should be enough ambient light to make it inconsequential. Like what I should've done here. It's clearly a bright, sunny day out, the shadows shouldn't be anywhere near that strong.

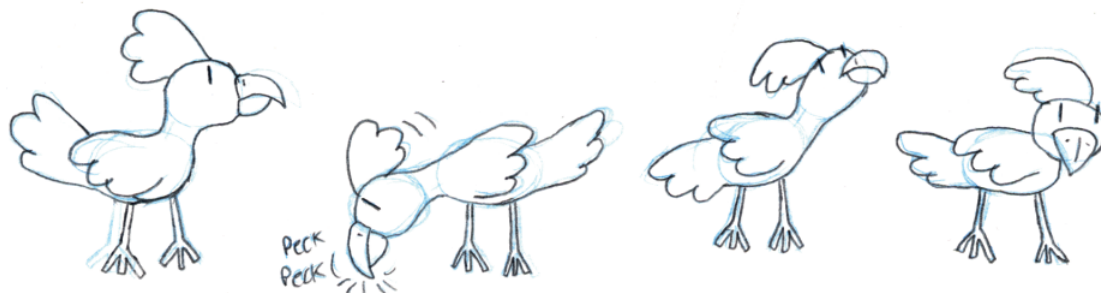


The shadows should also probably be consistent, too. I'm not sure you understand how much it hurts having to go through my older works like this. I might wind up bringing it up again later.

Hey, here's a fun game to play! Go find a cartoonist friend of yours who's been drawing stuff for around, say, twenty years or so. Then, show them some of their earlier work and ask for comments. Guaranteed hilarity! I deny any responsibility for increased strain on friendships as a result of performing this activity!



Nah, I still like "Buckaw" better.



Modern Chicken Drawings



As I got better at drawing, I got more confident in being able to represent more active poses. Or rather, I got confident enough that I didn't feel the need to add in quite so many action lines or not-really-sound-effects like "Sideways Leap!". But, early on, when the thought of more complex poses than simple standing or walking made me nervous, I felt I had to back up my artwork with SOME sort of explanation. The vital comic theory of "show, don't tell" didn't come to me until later.

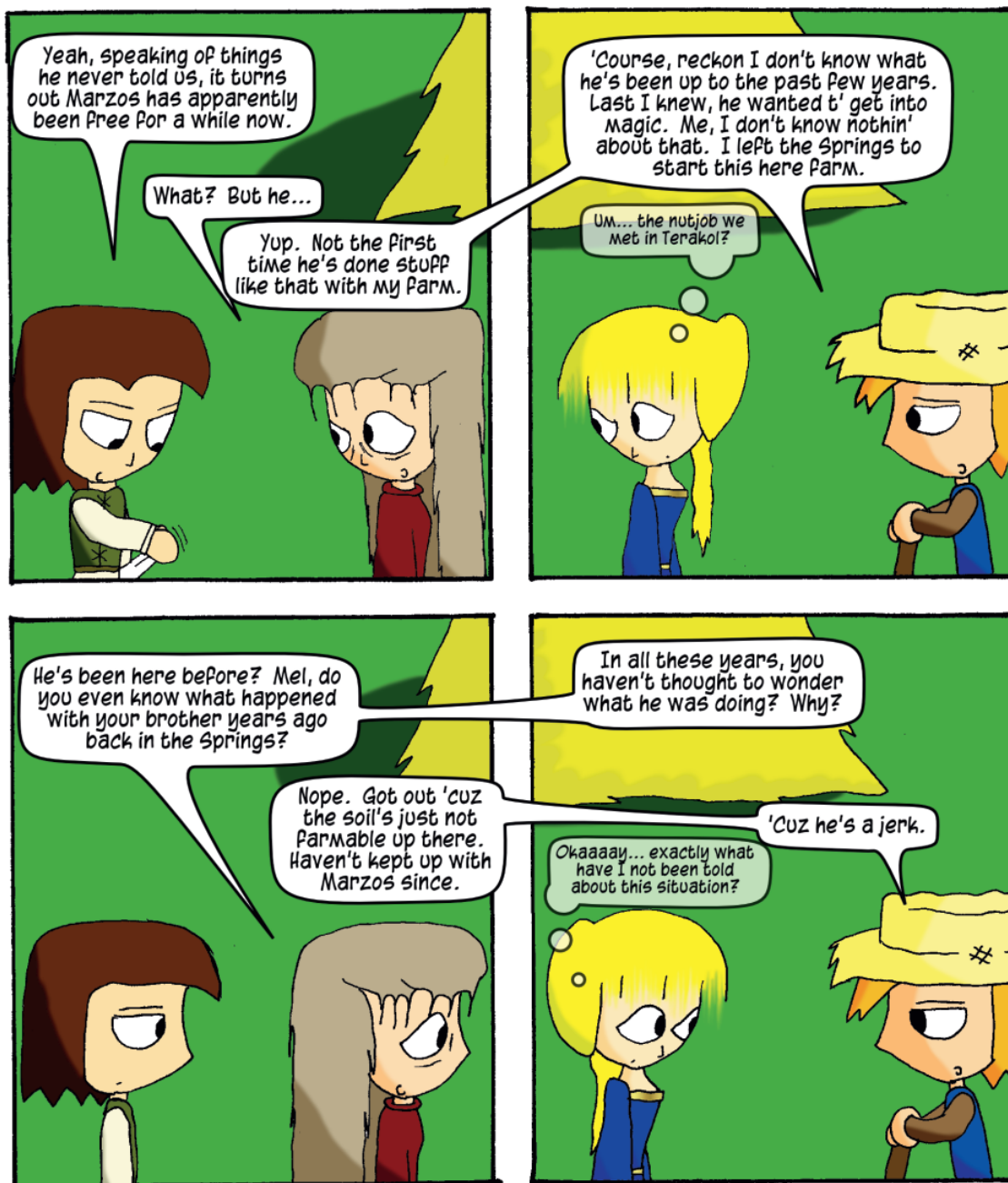
GESTURE!

THOUGHT!



Mel's can be a bit of a jerk sometimes. It apparently runs in the family.

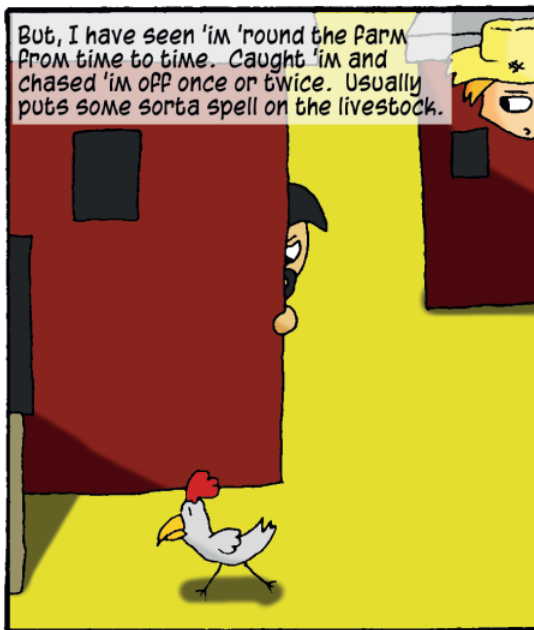




The original text here implied that Salthalus didn't know that Melzos and Marzos were brothers. But, that clearly doesn't make any sense; if Marzos was a contemporary of Salth's back in the Springs for so long, you'd think she would've at least noticed Mel before he moved out to Landis to start his farm. After all, she and the others up there DID repeatedly try to talk Marzos out of the otherworld portal, so she was definitely talking to him.

One thing I think I do well is keep track of who knows what. For instance, Matt just brushed off explaining who Marzos was back at the house, so Alex is a little bit out of the loop here. Until Matt and Salth presumably explain this to her on the walk home, she only knows him as a crazy old man with a ridiculous-looking cloak they met in Terakol.

And yes, Marzos is more of a jerk than Melzos.



It was back in Chapter One that we first met Marzos. Matt and Alex found Vince, the guy who was supposed to be watching over Matt when he was drafted into the Landis Royal Army (Matt's recalling him now), and the three of them confronted Marzos. In the end, Marzos put the demon chicken curse on Matt, but was interrupted in the process. So, there were three people there at whom Marzos was a bit angry, meaning that if he WASN'T interrupted, he most likely WOULD have had two additional subjects for a cow and a pig. THAT'S why Matt's nervous.

Absolutely none of that is made clear by this comic. In fact, it's probably more confusing why Matt's suddenly worried at all without that paragraph above this one. And for that, I apologize.

Someday I'll define the basic properties of a demon cow and demon pig.

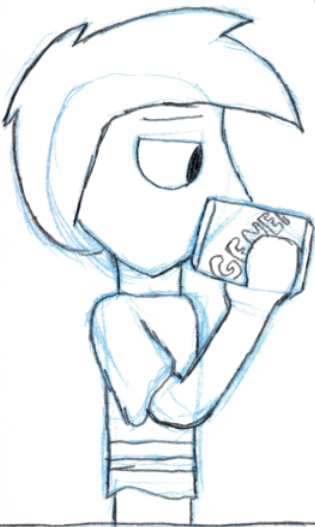


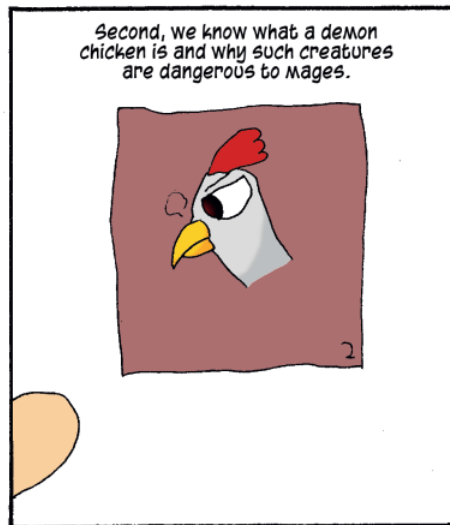
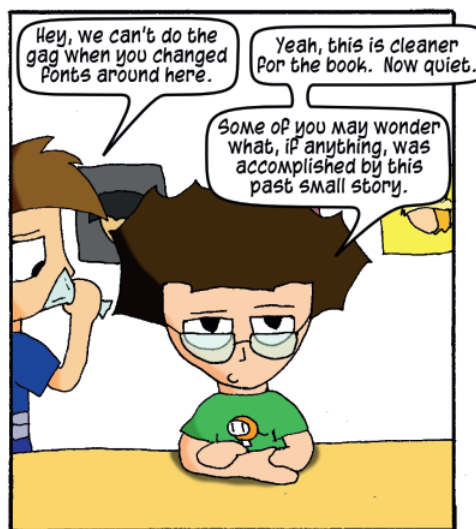
Well, look, after all that, wouldn't YOU at least try?



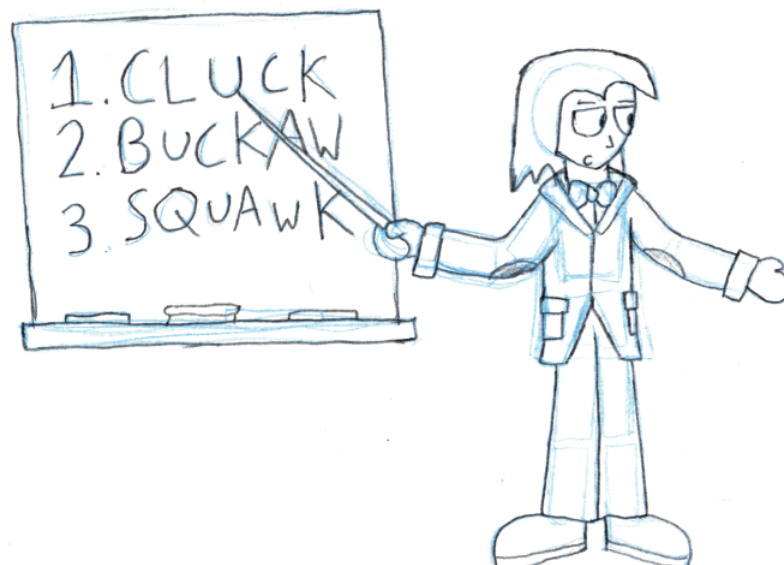
No, actually, I
don't think I
would try.

Please be quiet.





I really, seriously have to bring up the fact that Matt can talk to chickens later. Of course, it was demonstrated earlier that chickens are less "talked to" and more "intimidated or alarmed", so maybe it's not quite so impressive.



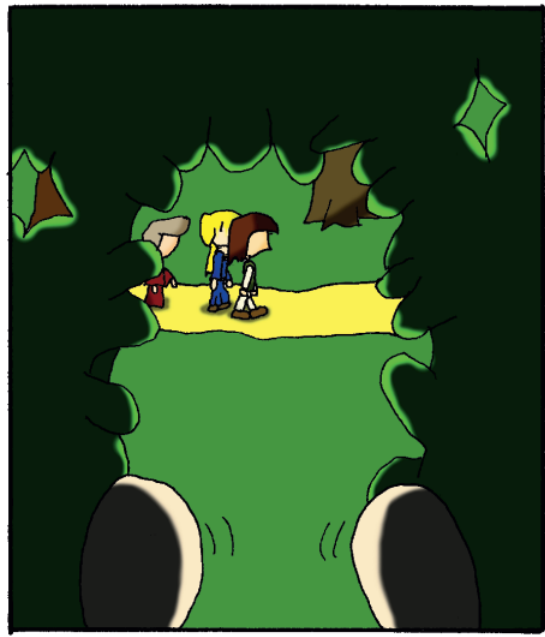
The comics I made of the Adventures of Captain Spam way back when were entirely texted by hand. I most certainly do not have good handwriting. Not a bit. You can see it in the handwritten sound effects and in some of the sketches in this very book. I was actually rather infamous for my horrible handwriting back in school. I suppose it's good that I'm a software engineer today. It was either that or become a doctor.

I mostly made Captain Spam for myself. When I made the DoM and decided to put it up on the web and all, however, I knew my handwriting wasn't going to cut it. I figured that out shortly after I tried texted the original opening comics for Chapter One, meaning I had a few comics with handwritten text I had to fix. Since the text bubbles were a part of the art at that point, I couldn't replace the bubbles without redrawing things (and I didn't have a drawing tablet at the time). Thus, my idea was to pick a font that closely matched the spacing and sizing of my handwriting so the text bubbles wouldn't look wrong. Scouring my limited font collection, the closest I found was a font called Chiller I picked up somewhere. That's why the early comics use it.

The obvious problem there, of course, is that a font that matches my handwriting's going to be just as unreadable as my handwriting is in the first place. But, at least it was more consistent, right? And since I was really concerned about consistency, I kept the same font for all of Chapter One.

I gave up on that line of thought **and licensed Blambot Casual right around this point.** That worked out so much better. It continues to work out now, in fact, which is why, when I re-texted all of this chapter, I used it entirely. But, Phil's original first line here was commenting that the font changed. That doesn't work out so well now.

Oh, and **THE FONT FOR NARRATION BOXES IS CALLED COSMICTWO.**



HI PHINN WE CAN ALL SEE YOU BACK THERE.



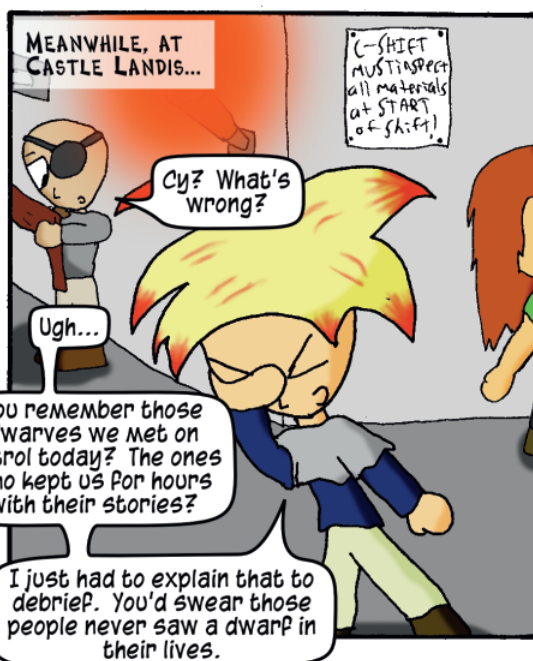
You might wonder how Phinn can so quickly move around the trees like this, until you remember she's an elf. They tend to have experience in things tree-related.

Well, maybe besides the beach elves. Forest elves, definitely.



Phinn's idea of following Matt back to the village to find the perfect moment to catch him off-guard before inviting him to accompany her down to the ports of Sornil seems like the exact sort of geek-with-a-crush thing I'd do if I were more prone to the levels of giddiness Phinn is. That's probably why it doesn't seem creepy at all to me.

Matt's hobby of thievery is one where a consistent air of mild distrust is vital to day-to-day life. Sure, you have your friends, but if you don't learn to resist the charms of other thieves trained to use said charms in the same line of work, you're not going to be a particularly good thief. This is why Matt is perhaps the only person he knows who isn't at all aware that Phinn has a huge crush on him. Alex can't help but laugh at him.



It should be noted that C-Shift's responsibilities are far more reaching than simply inspecting all materials at the start of their shift. C-Shift is also responsible for securing the castle at night and, more often than not, receiving briefing from the preceding shift's patrol captains, in addition to normal patrolling duties common to any shift. But, while Castle Janitorial Services takes care of most cleanup and Blacksmith & Weaponcraft (or, as they are more commonly known to most troops, "Yalro and his Merry Band") takes care of any necessary repairs to materials, inspection of materials at the start of the shift is nonetheless a very vital responsibility for C-Shift.

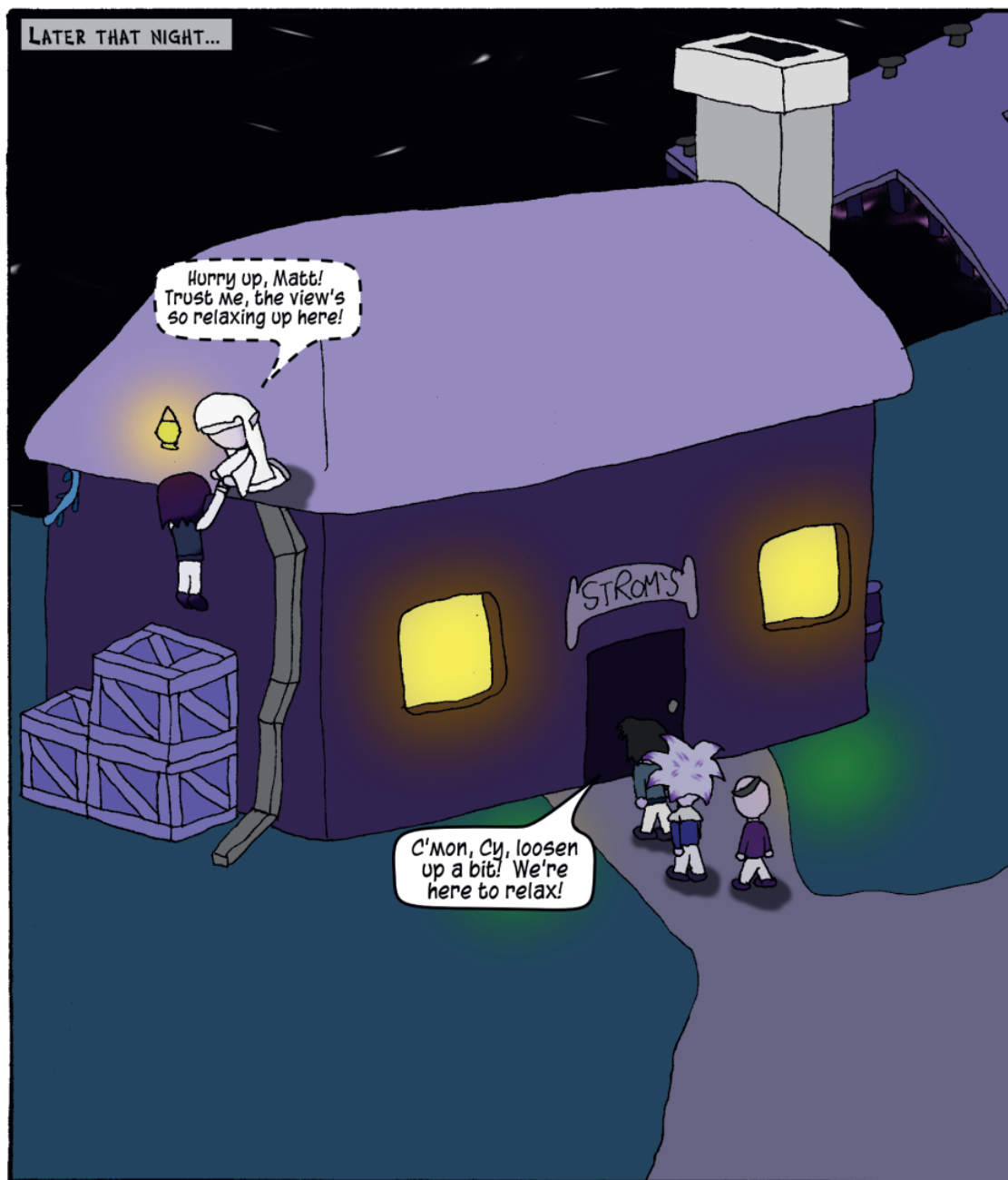
It is for this reason that most troops prefer staying off C-Shift.

Look! Behind the rock in panel three! It's Bean Man! Bean Man, everyone! And there's Sapphire Squad! Say hi again to Sapphire Squad!



I used to put actual text in background signs and posters more often. But, as you can see, my handwriting still just doesn't cut it. Shame, too. It adds a certain something to see actual, readable notices about C-Shift on the walls and such, rather than the scribbly lines I later use. Remember, a sharp sword IS a safe sword!

Now, we know from later that Cy's actually an elf and he's been hiding it since he became a patrol captain. And I know that, in most interpretations of the relations between elves and dwarves, the two of them don't get along. At all. "Constantly at each others' throats" is actually more apt a description in most cases. But, as I write them, they're typically more ambivalent of each other. Elves are more tradition-minded and live in forests, while dwarves are frequently eccentric and live in mountain areas. The two races just don't care much about each other. So really, what Cy's complaining about is that dwarves can get rather long-winded, forcing him to later explain to debrief why they're late reporting back in.

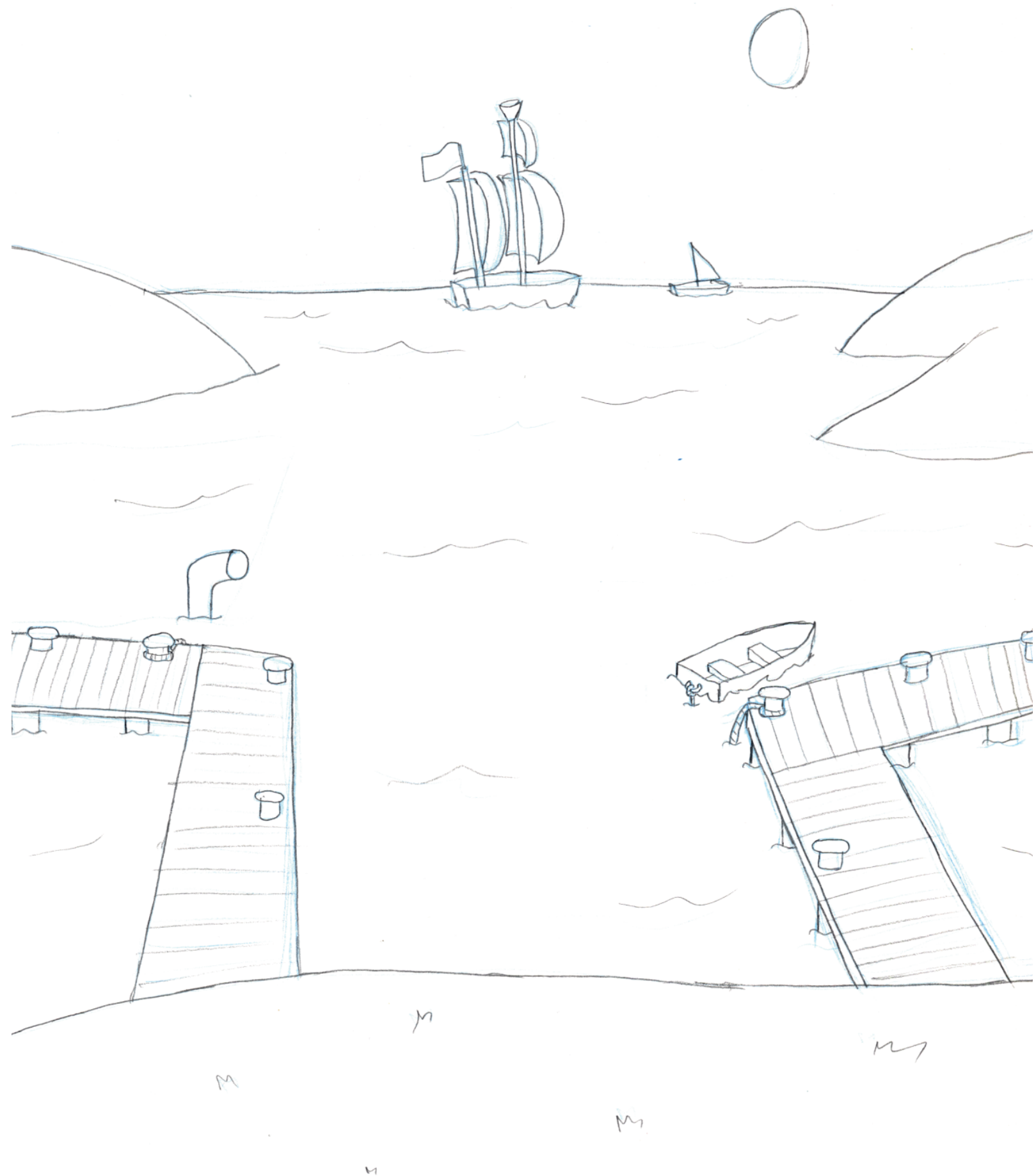


Although there's something about the old Hollywood-style blue-for-night filter I used at this point, as well as the way I pulled it off on these scenes, I'm glad I later just darkened things. Now it sort of looks silly. For instance, I actually tried to have the light from inside the pub spill onto the ground in front of the windows. That's something I should try again sometime in more detail. And without the blue-for-night filter; cutting holes out of the filter there (thus letting the green of the grass show) just leaves me with radioactive-looking ground.

I have no idea what that downspout is connected to. Maybe there's a gutter system under the roof. Because that makes... sense.



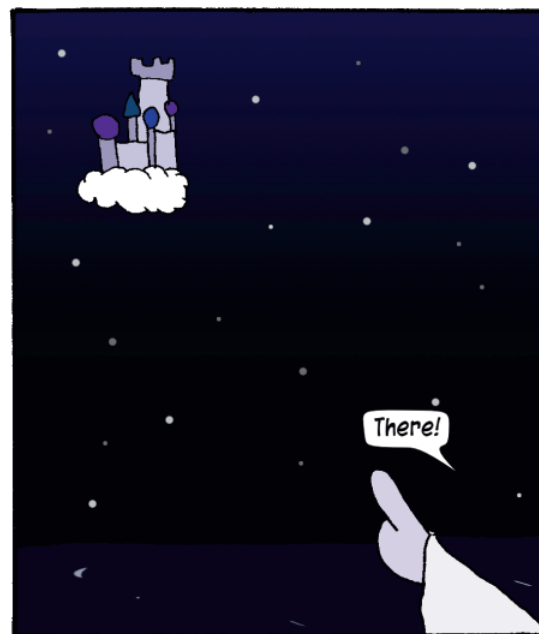
I remember it taking me a while to get the water effect looking right (or as right as it is). I think I made a conscious decision at that point to dig into as many GIMP filters as I figured I needed. And, ultimately, I think it looked "right", all things considered. A hefty "all things considered", of course, but it added a nice flair this early on. Not a single boat in view, though.





Neither Cy nor Matt really know how to relax. Well, okay, later on we learn Cy DOES have a keen grasp on how to relax if he's back home, but in general, I mean.

I'm glad I later learned how to do backgrounds better. It looks like Cy and Winslow are sitting next to a wall in the last three panels. But back then, one of my biggest artistic fears was drawing a deep background like what would have to be shown from that angle to show the whole pub, as that meant I'd have to redraw that same background over and over again for each panel in which it's needed. So, I punted with a zero-background look. Maybe if I didn't make the solid color be the same as the wall...



When I think of Phinn, I think of someone charmingly cheerful and friendly, yet geeky and somewhat awkward in conversation, like right here. This winds up being really convenient, as I'm similarly terrible at waxing eloquent and even worse at writing someone else doing so. "Write what you know", that's always the ticket.

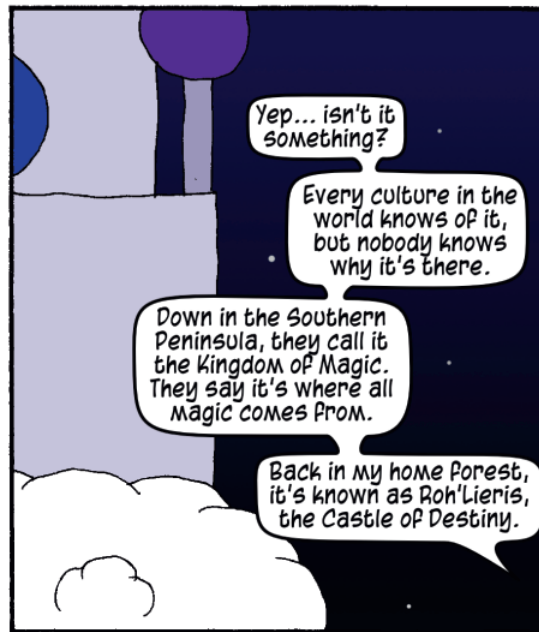
Well, besides the charming part. Really, it's just the awkward and geeky parts that are me writing what I know.





I actually do have plans for Bnorm later. Trust me. In fact, by the time this book gets in your hands, that section may already be in progress.

Again, the fact that Cy's actually an elf doesn't factor into him locking up a gang of violent dwarves. It's just his job in this case. There's probably a lot of criminals, thugs, and general ne'er-do-wells who have a thing against most of the Landis patrol squads, if not Cy specifically.



No, Roh'Lieris is not elven for "Castle of Destiny". "Castle of Destiny" is a subtitle. Please don't get confused.

As an additional note, please do not confuse the Castle of Destiny with the Castle of Density. There have been many an unfortunate elven adventurer seeking their destiny only to find a castle with a very large value for d . While important in many scientific operations, it more often than not has no bearing on one's destiny.

Except for the adventurer dense enough to confuse destiny and density.

The Castle of Dreams (etc, etc) is one of my favorite ideas. Look, these are MY commentary writeups, so I get to indulge my own ego once in a while.

Much to the possible confusion and irritation of everyone reading Chapter Four, I like making a world that exists outside the local culture of the main characters. That's what the Castle of Dreams is there for: It's an occurrence nobody understands, something that's been there as long as anyone can remember, and as such, the exact sort of thing upon which rumors, stories, legends, and traditions would be based. Except, if it's something common to all cultures (as the castle seems to appear around the world at random), but every culture has different things they value and respect, then every culture's going to have completely different traditions for the same thing. Moreso if it's something they can't possibly understand or explain, but is just undeniably THERE once in a while.

We actually see some researchers in Lineta Hall analyzing it in Chapter Three, and Matt even joins them for a while out of curiosity. Then there's the farmer in Chapter Four who knows it as where the stars come from. I'm not saying who's right yet (or, as appropriate, who's closest).



Bnorm's friendly greeting to Cy here is different than what it was on the web. I like this one. Flows better.

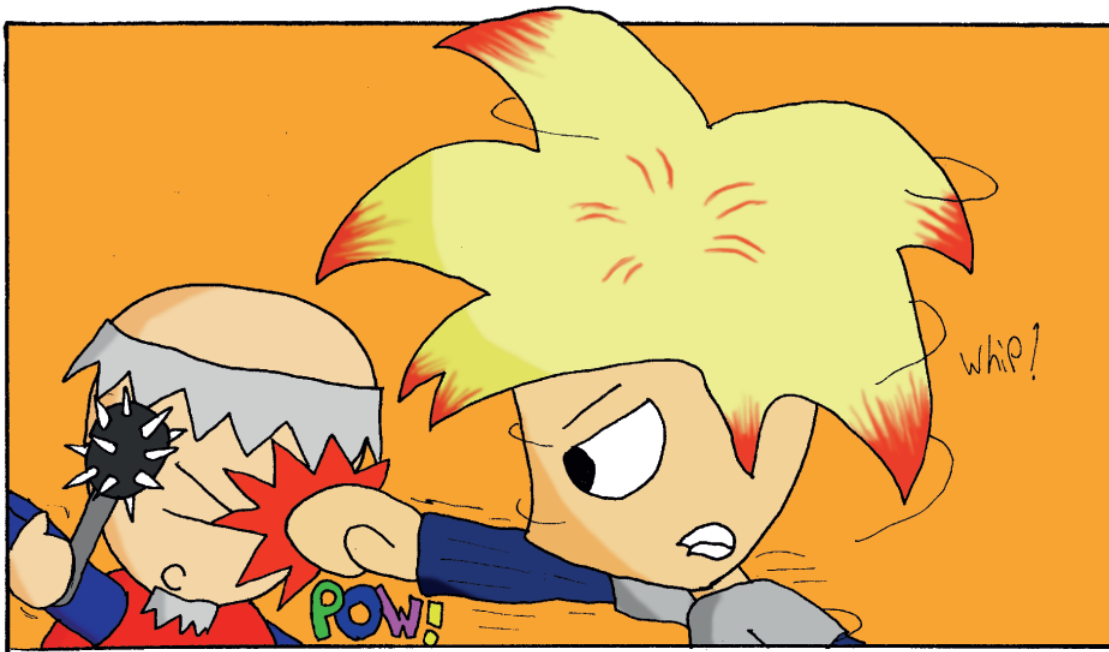
Are there any Mystery Science Theater 3000 fans reading this who'd understand what I mean when I say "Help, we've fallen into another dimension!" in regards to the fourth panel? Man, I grew up with the strangest pop culture references. I mean the bestest pop culture references. EVER. That claim seems to be all the rage these days with people my age, because we're old.



Most of the bits where I appear in the comic are me acting as an additional narrator as the situation calls for it. Others, like here, are me just riffing on myself. I got slightly more subtle as time went on.

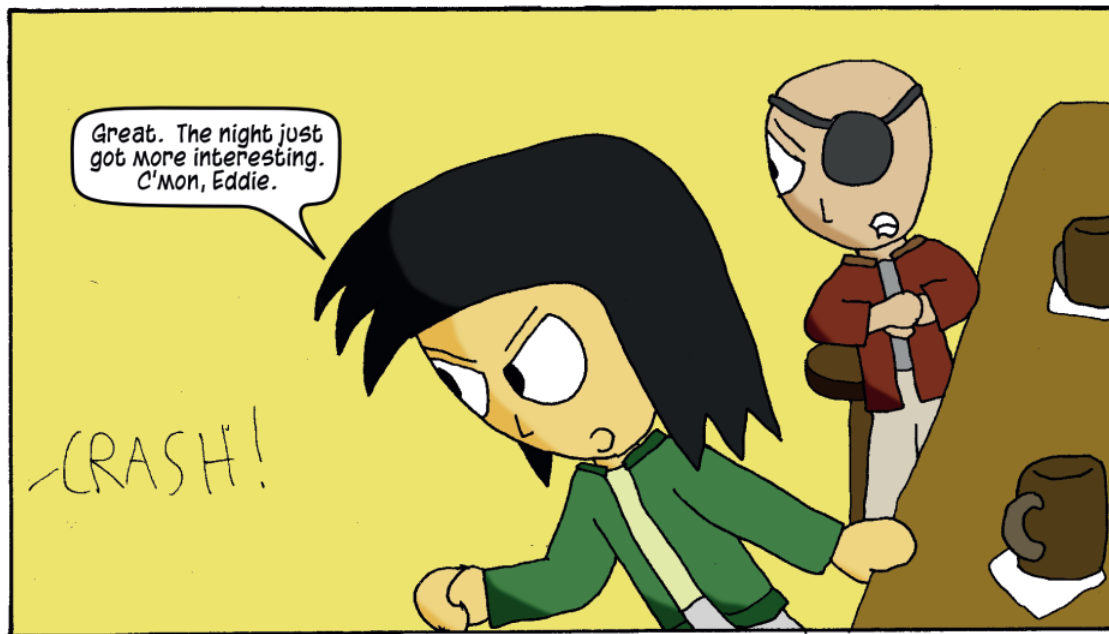
Thing is, though, regardless of what the characters may believe, one very specific element I write in the comic is a distinct LACK of "heroes", "destined people", or "chosen one(s)". Matt and Alex, for instance, are just normal people. Though he's got an interesting history, Cy's really just another Landis patrol captain. Phinn's just a nerdy elf girl. It's more a matter of what they do with their lives and what they get themselves into that matters, not destiny or prophecies by ancient dead guys or whatnot.

Of course, there may yet be more to Phinn that WILL lead to greatness. Or at least something interesting. It's just not destiny, is all.

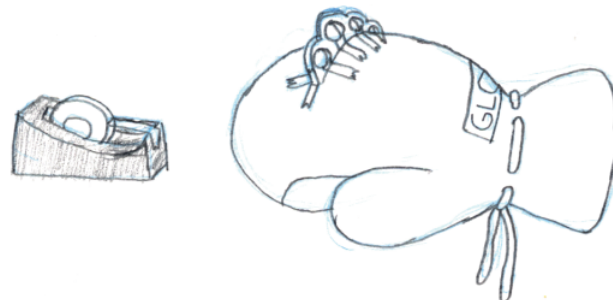


Round, fingerless hands don't work well for punches. You get the visual idea, of course, but I just can't help but think Cy's decking one of Bnorm's thugs with an overstuffed boxing glove.





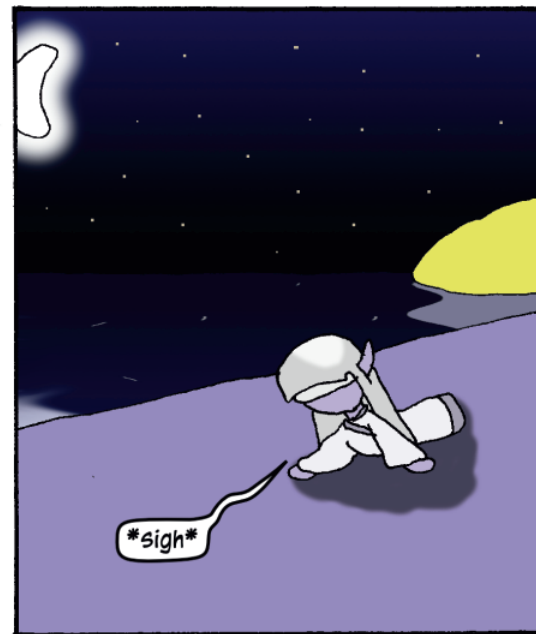
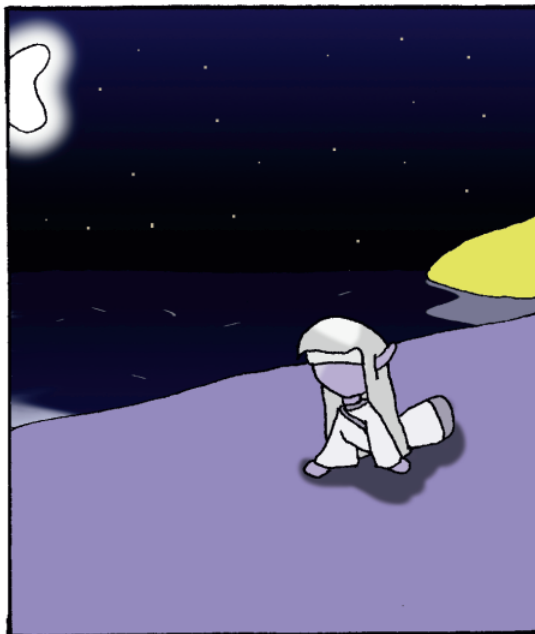
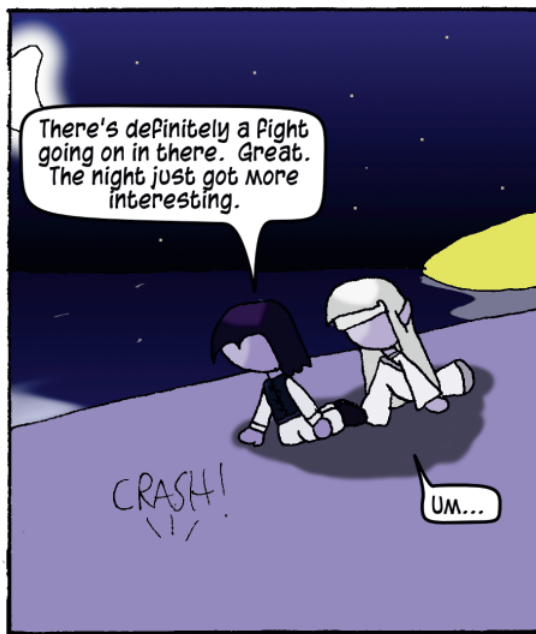
Round, fingerless hands also don't work well for cracking knuckles. In fact, just about anything involving the specific use of knuckles is going to have a hard time coming across if the knuckles look soft and round.



There was someone I used to know who got increasingly upset with me that Matt didn't fall for Phinn right away (and still hasn't). She apparently didn't have any faith whatsoever in me having long-term plans for the two of them, so she saw fit to angrily lecture me regarding this. Repeatedly, in fact. You know, all in all, the usual sort of fan-of-romance stuff. And honestly, I'll admit that there are times it seems cruel how circumstances and coincidences turn out to completely throw the two of them off (not to mention Matt's cynical nature making it hard to get anything through to him, plus the fact that I, by definition, wrote said circumstances and coincidences), but like I said, this is long-term planning.

It also doesn't help this person's case that I was first getting these lectures back in the first part of Chapter One before much of anything happened in the larger story, which seriously helped me build up a resistance to them.

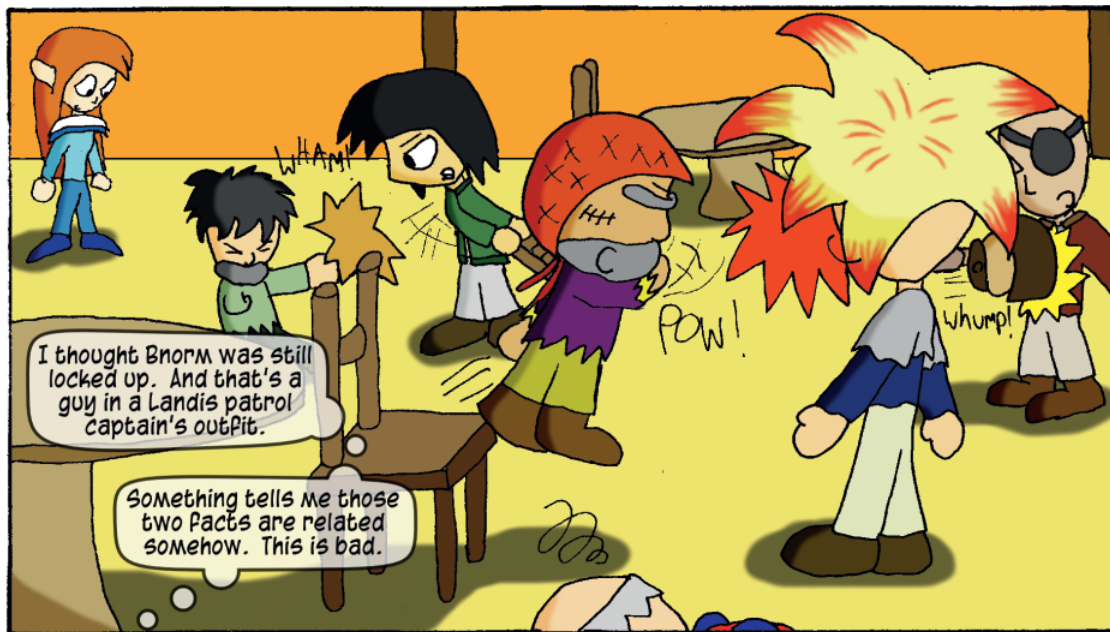
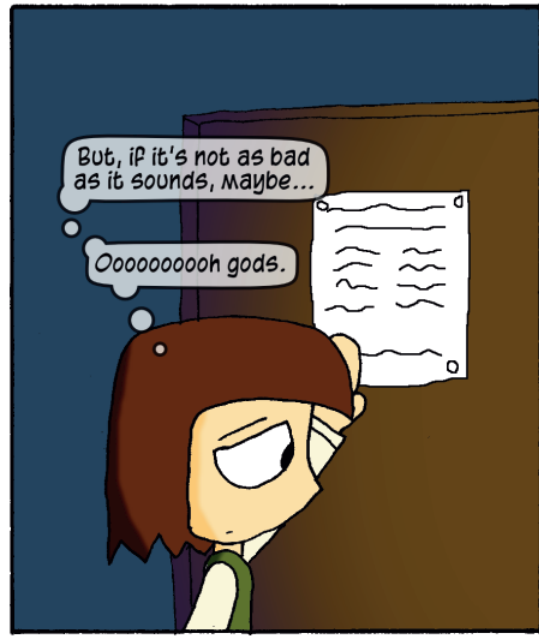




Ho HO! See what I did there with Matt's text, coming right after Winslow's like that? You didn't? Oh. Well, it was neat. Really it was! Come on! You've gotta believe me!

Matt knows very well that the best strategy in a pub fight is to stay the hell away from a pub fight. But hey, you've got to investigate it first, right?

Phinn just looks so sad here, even though I didn't draw her face. I'm impressed I got the entire logical progression of her pose as right as I did over the past few strips, going from sitting next to Matt, to leaning into him, to being interrupted by the sounds of the fight, to here.



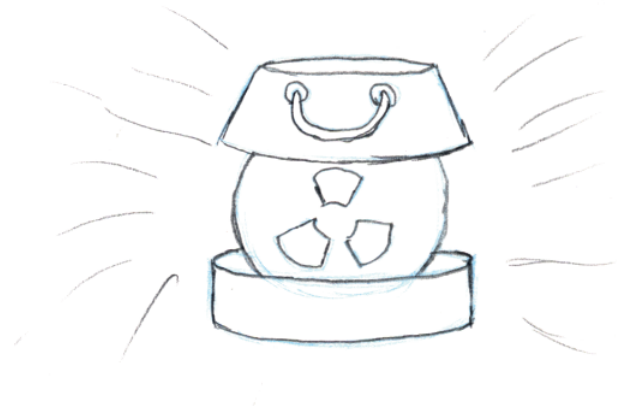
I'm not sure why Cy didn't change out of his patrol captain uniform before coming out to the pub like this. Not that it would've helped; Bnorm would've recognized the hair anywhere. I guess Cy just really DOESN'T know how to just relax at the moment.

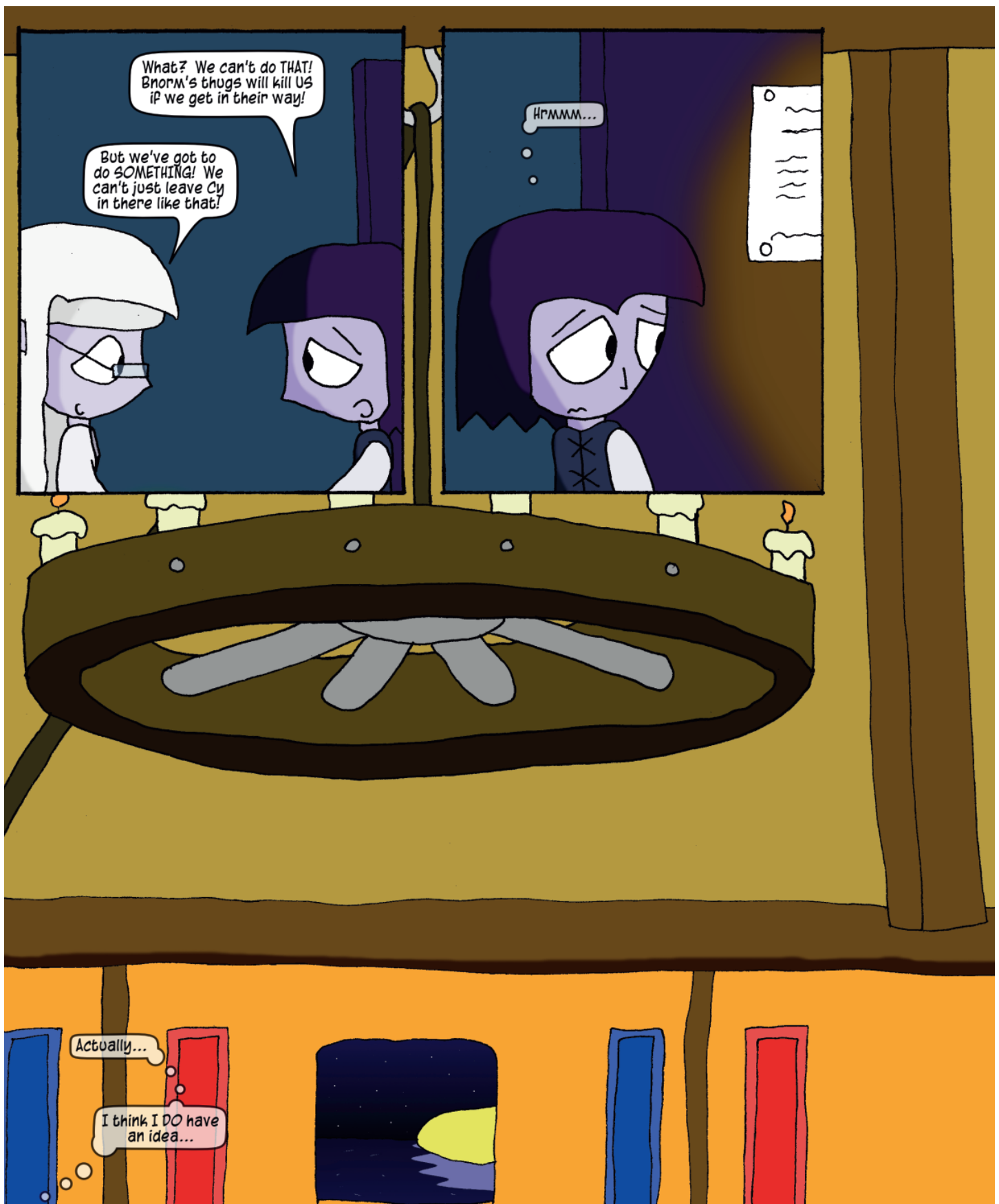
I kind of like that elf girl in the back. I should make her a background character more often. And draw her better.



Yes, Eddie's engaging in some good-natured dwarf tossing. I am filled with shame.

There's the blue-for-night failure again. Phinn! That lamp's clearly radioactive! Put it down already!



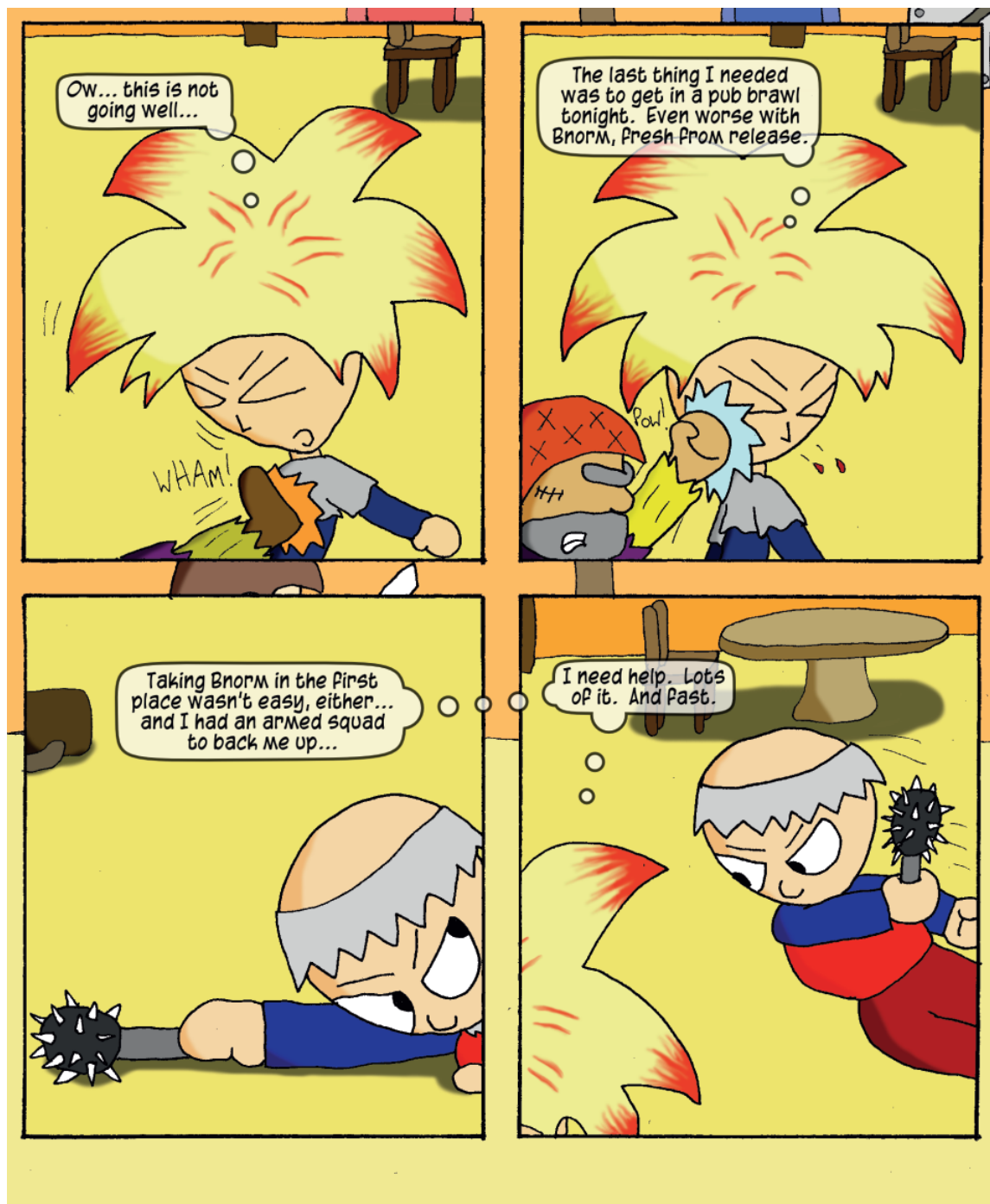


Matt might not be falling head over heels for Phinn, but she's still one of his best and most trusted friends back in the village. He does highly respect her and value their friendship, which is the only reason he's looking for a plan here. Were it most other situations, he'd certainly rather much more wisely leave. Especially when Bnorm is involved.



A recurring element with Matt is that, while he does have his own knife (as evidenced with the demon chicken earlier), he doesn't always carry it with him, and he's more than willing to "borrow" swords as he needs them. This just seems logical to me. He's not really a swordfighter (more on that during the fight with Stephanie later) and doesn't feel it's beneficial to look conspicuous with a large sword on his person at all times, but he can at least use one to help with evasive action if need be. Or if he just needs something sharp. Turns out it doesn't take much swordplay skill to cut a rope with a sharp object.

The guy with the green hair in the foreground looks a lot like he scalped a giant apple and is wearing it as a trophy of his conquest. Vegetarian headhunters!



Nope, that punch still doesn't look any more threatening. Hey, Bnorm! How do you type with boxing gloves as your hands?

I don't draw blood in the comic often. So when I do draw it, I try to make it count. I failed to make it count here. Hrmph.

Elf or not, Cy and his troops are Landis soldiers. They're well-trained in combat situations and are there to keep the peace. But, Bnorm's thugs are also well-trained in combat situations, and they sort of outnumber Sapphire Squad.



Someone told me they were glad I put those arrows in the comic. I agree. I also wish I didn't have to put them in, but the flow of the actions here just doesn't line up with how comics are read. In any culture. Ever.



In my head, the physics of the scene worked out. The chandelier crashes down, pinning anyone directly underneath it. Everyone else is caught off-guard, thrown off-balance in the middle of a chaotic activity like a brawl, and knocked around the room. Difficult to believe? Eh, sure. But I'd say it's plausible.

Given Cy's outrageous hair, it's not hard to believe he could hide his telltale ears in it for this long. And, though elves tend to be taller than humans and somewhat skinnier, it's not too much a stretch for the Landis Royal Army to just assume he's a tall, skinny human.

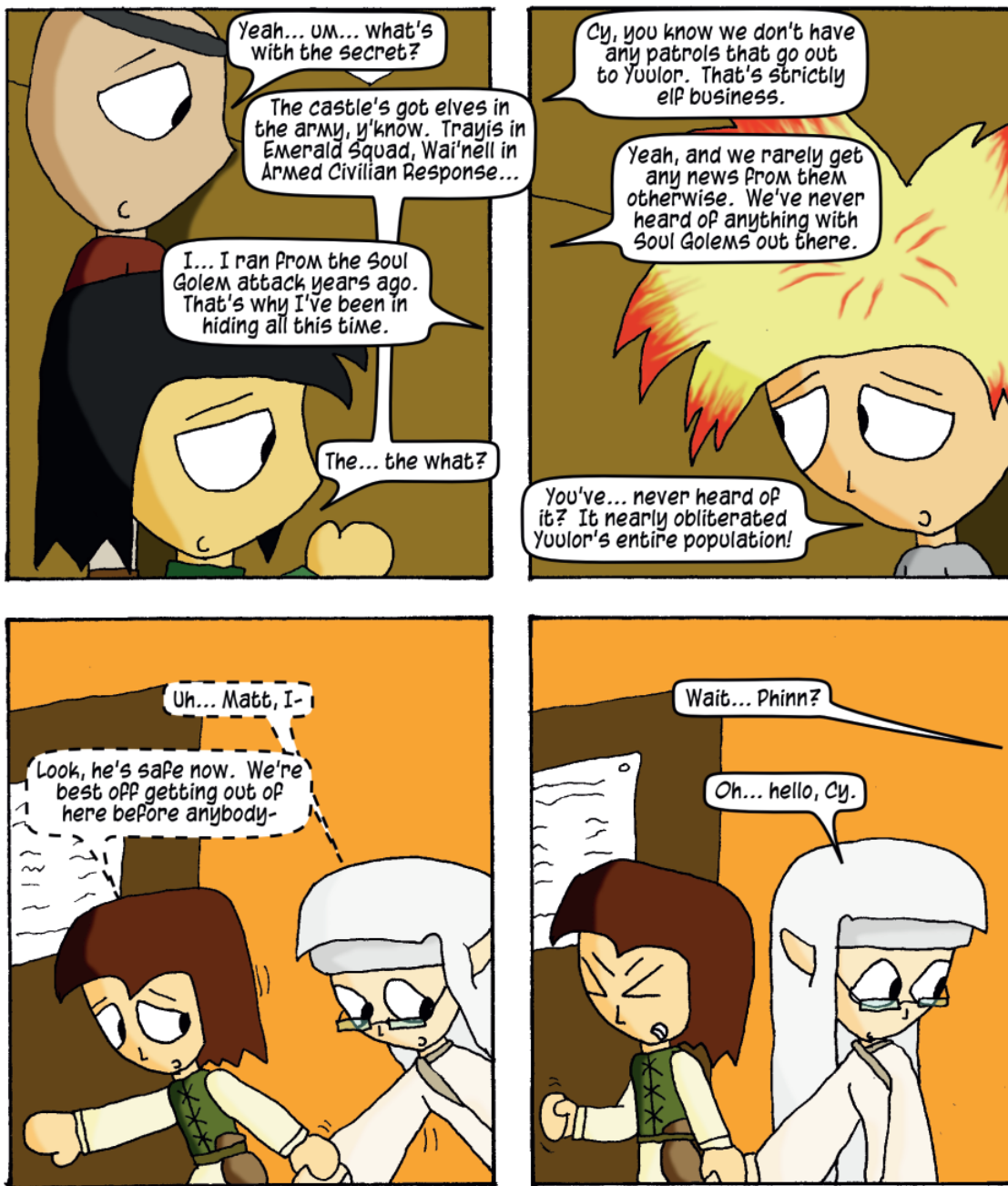


Of course, it's equally likely nobody questioned whether Cy was an elf because nobody was really wondering in the first place.

FORM AA-WLR095

Please check your race:

- ☐ Human
- ☐ Forest Elf
- ☐ Beach Elf
- ☐ Dwarf
- ☒ Meh, whatever



The concept of someone holding an embarrassing secret from friends is a common one, to be sure, both in real life and in story writing. The same can be said if it turns out the embarrassment stemming from that secret was due to something easily resolvable by simple communication. I just wanted to explore how much more awkward it gets when secret was one that none of the character's friends even understand, let alone know why it would be embarrassing.

Elf nations aren't governed by human kingdoms. That's to be expected. Here, we get a quick glimpse into how people who work for a human municipality view this arrangement: "That's elf business, you know we don't deal with anything that goes on out there".

Matt even stayed long enough at the scene of a violent brawl to make sure Phinn's friend was okay! That's dedication to your friends, right there!



The idea behind a soul golem is a rather confusing mess. Whereas the typical definition of a 'golem' would imply otherwise inanimate material animated and controlled via magical means, a soul golem can be any of a wide variety of objects controlled by a person's very soul, generally leaving little to no direct control in the hands of said soul. Said object does not necessarily need to be inanimate or animated via magic, per se. The soul is the main factor in naming it.

Why this apparent lack of consistency in naming exists is unknown. Though it is well known that mages specializing in necromancy are an eccentric bunch, to say the least.

See the guy in purple in the extreme lower-left of the second panel? That's Captain Spam. He doesn't show up as often as Bean Man does, largely because it's easier to hide Bean Man in various locations and make him not stand out. Captain Spam, on the other hand, looks a bit out of place amidst DoM characters.

Though it may not seem like it at times, I do have a lot of the major, long-term DoM story arcs planned out far in advance. The Soul Golem attack on Yuulor is one of the big ones. For instance, we learn a couple chapters later that Cy was quite the popular character around town, which is why he spent the time since the attack feeling like a coward for running away and being forced to abandon his fellow people, as explained here. That was one of the earlier ideas I had when I started doing long-term planning.

But, there's still the little issue of getting TO the important parts of those arcs, and that tends to involve a lot of fine-tuning as I go along...



However, all things considered, my original ideas didn't involve Cy being as important to the Soul Golem arc as he's turning out to be today. But, every mystery needs someone investigating what happened, someone who might not think all the facts quite add up.

From what we learn of Cy later and what we just learned now, it makes perfect sense to me that he'd seek out a life of trying to keep the peace and protect others. Guilt-based employment doesn't always work out, but at least it sometimes makes sense. And besides, Cy seems to be doing a good job at it. Got promoted to a patrol captain, at least. So it's probably for the best after all.

I'd have to imagine that somewhere in Castle Landis's bureaucracy there's SOME arcane form to fill out for an update of race on employee records. Either that, or it's another thing that, deep down, nobody at the castle cares about.

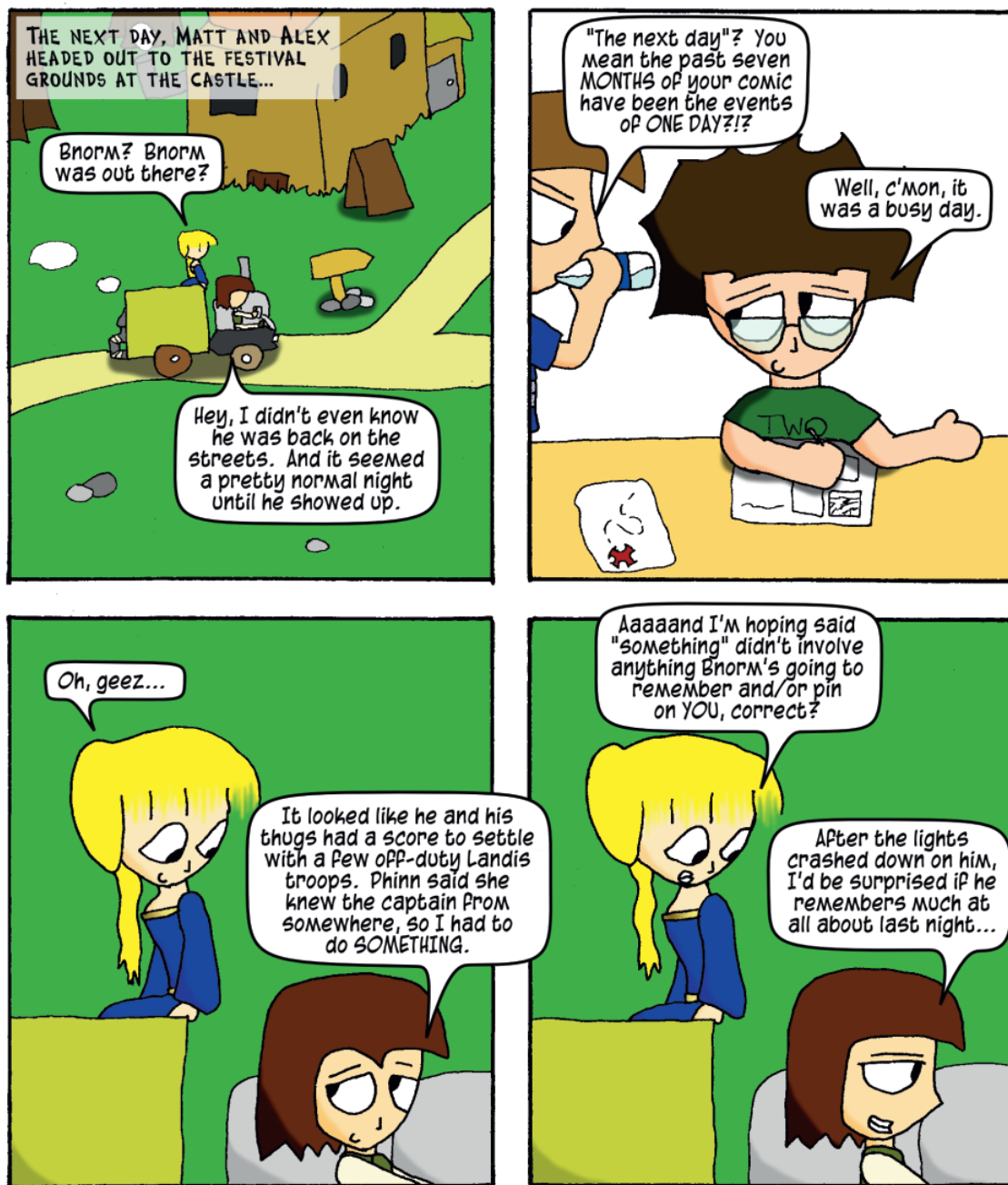


Cy would only know possibly know Matt from Terakol in Chapter One. Only vaguely, though, as he never got a solid look at him. Which is good, as Matt clubbed him unconscious with a candlestick, as I recall. And then Eddie and Winslow were stunned cold by one of Alex's spells, and...

Hey! Eddie! Winslow! Stop leering over Phinn like that! She's a sweet girl! That's just wrong!



Heh heh heh. Heh heh heh heh heh...

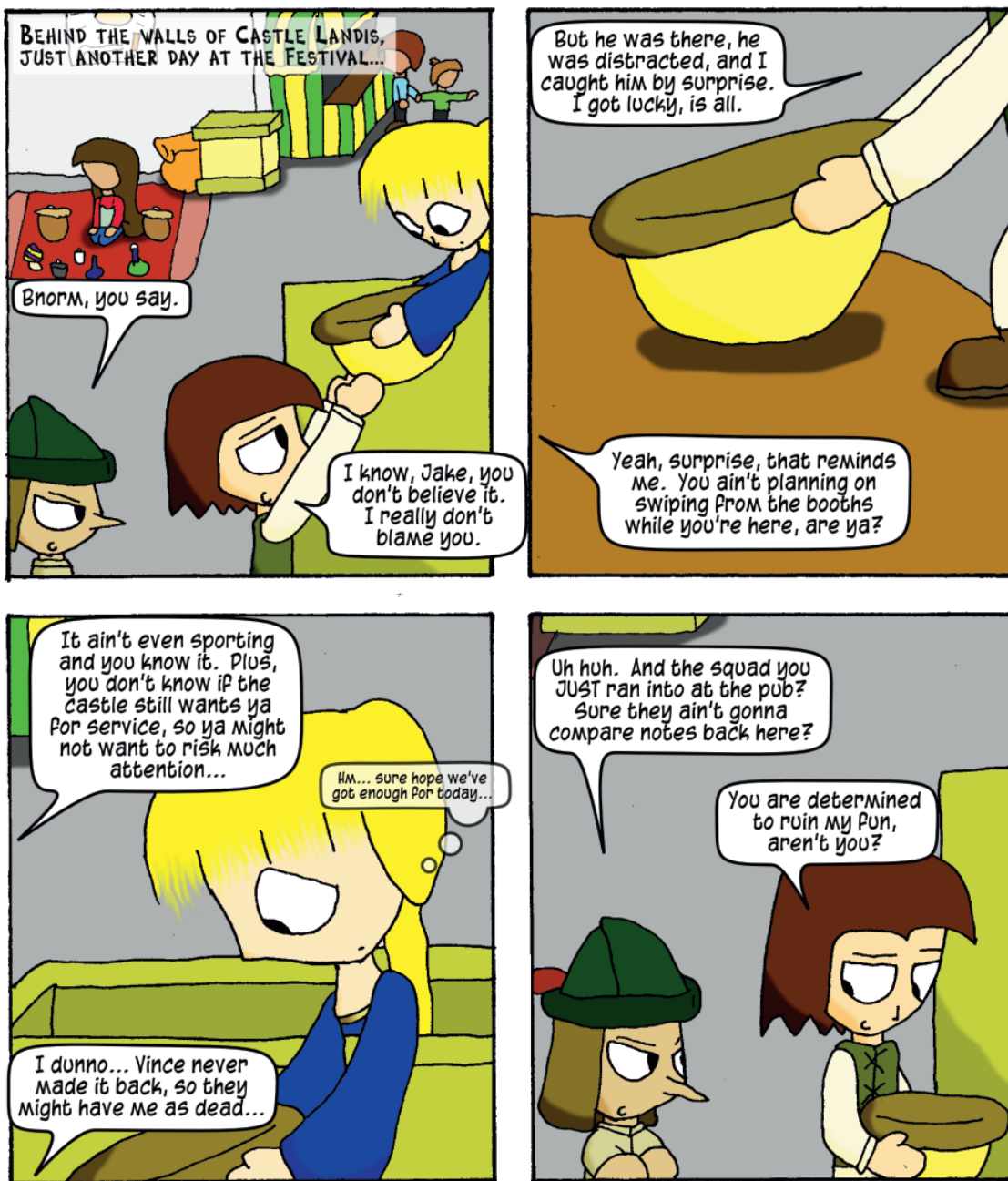


The idea of "Comic Time" is my very close and trusted friend.

This is the only time (so far) in which we see someone other than Cesol driving his steam cart. Matt (and presumably Alex) also seem to be much better at driving it than he is. Though really, they're just SAFER at it. Cesol's much, much FASTER.

This is also one of the few times we'll see Alex for the rest of the chapter. Shame, too, as it's a lot of fun writing two siblings bantering with each other. But, something in me said that this chapter was mostly going to be Matt, much like how the next chapter is almost all Alex. Exactly how Stephanie would have been handled by Alex (who is a far superior mage) is a thought exercise left to the reader.





Jacob's a character we don't see all that often. I like to think of him as Matt's version of Salthalus, only more snide and nowadays roughly at a similar skill level with Matt. So less a mentor anymore and more a straight-up partner in crime. Though Jake still does rein Matt in once in a while. You've gotta have SOME standards, after all.

When I first started drawing the DoM cast, color wasn't my main concern. Everything was black and white, sometimes with shading. Because of this, some characters made use of more negative space in their initial designs. Alex is one of the major examples, specifically her hair. The four lines that make up her bangs (or whatever those are), in a black and white environment, were all I needed to convey "hair". And it was simple, and it worked.

But then color came along and I needed something more concrete to separate skin from hair. At this point in the comic, my idea was, obviously, to plop down a solid block of color and use the smear tool to make fuzzy hair strands poking out from said block. With nothing but a mouse to draw this, this was tedious, time-consuming, and highly error-prone (one false move and I was smearing in background elements or the black outlines into the hair). Worse, given the simple, solid colors of the rest of the character designs, it stands out, especially when Alex is the only one whose hair has that property (Vince would probably have had the same problem, had he shown up around now).



Nowadays, as pictured to the right, I simply draw jagged lines as the color fill boundary. It's much cleaner, it's more consistent with the rest of the art style, and I don't have to fight with pinpoint smearing to make sure I don't absorb colors I don't want. It also just looks better when reduced to web size.



The same can be said about Cy's hair tips; a lot of smearing went into it before, but now it's down to a solid color line.



And we're back to a few gag strips. It's a festival at the castle. I've got to show some of the fun times going on, right?

Note carefully that in each performers' case (the fire dancer and ice forger), their outfits seem horribly inappropriate to their chosen craft. The fire dancer's loose shirt would seem likely to quickly go up in flames easily should something go wrong, and it doesn't seem like the ice forger would be all that comfortable working with ice all day with her midriff exposed like that. But, it's all part of the showmanship in the end. You're more likely to pay attention to a guy who seems dangerously close to a hilarious fire-based disaster, as well as a girl who works with ice with her midriff exposed.

Well, okay, most men would also be more likely to pay attention to a girl who guts fish if she did so with her midriff exposed, but that's besides the point.



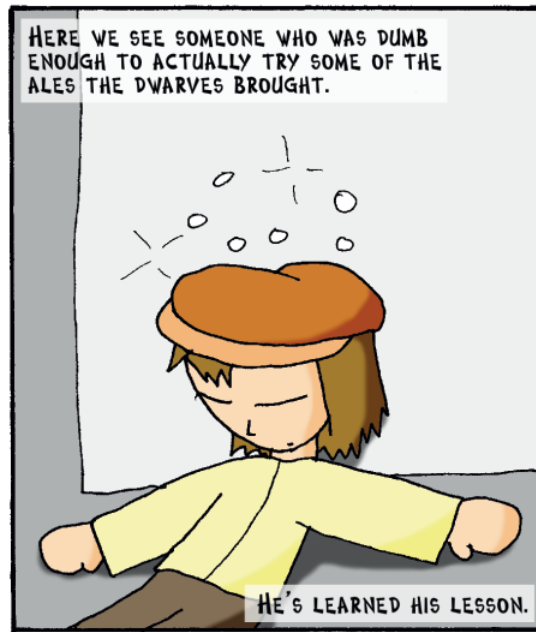
FOODS AND OTHER DELICACIES ARE ALSO BROUGHT TO THE FESTIVAL FROM ALL OVER. THE DWARVES, FOR INSTANCE, BRING SOME OF THEIR FINEST ALES.



HERE WE SEE A DRUID WITH SOME SAMPLES OF NATURAL FOODS CAREFULLY CULTIVATED FROM HER FOREST.



HERE WE SEE A FISHER FROM THE FRIGID NORTHLANDS WITH SOME OF HIS BEST CATCHES OF THE SEASON.



HERE WE SEE SOMEONE WHO WAS DUMB ENOUGH TO ACTUALLY TRY SOME OF THE ALES THE DWARVES BROUGHT.

HE'S LEARNED HIS LESSON.



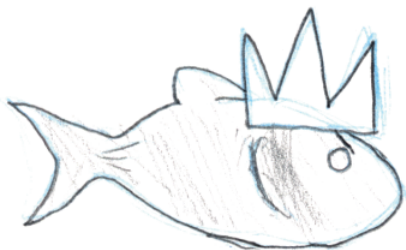
One may note the light blue fish with a yellow crown-like growth on its head behind the fisherman from the North. This is a particularly rare species of fish known to most seafarers as "King Phil". This fish, despite its size, is a fighter. It has been known to viciously attack various seafaring vessels that pass through its waters. Worse, it seems to be a leader fish (hence, "**King Phil**"), quickly rallying other fish to help in its attack.

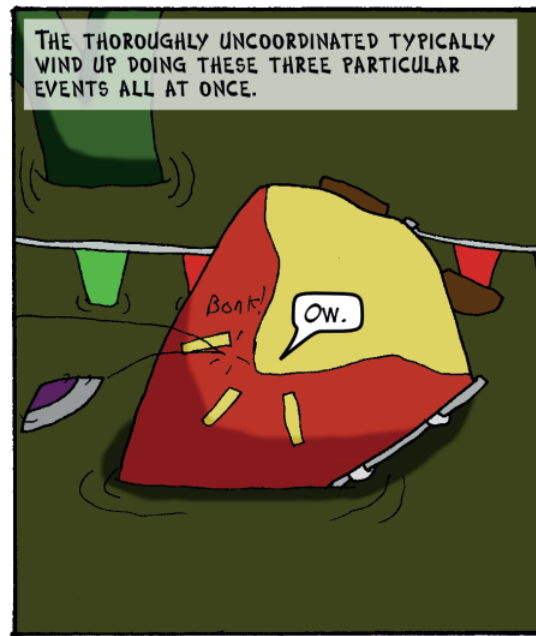
This fisherman was very lucky indeed to have caught one. Most likely he was using a consecrated net, blessed by clerics. Or he cleverly distracted him. The King Phil is easily distracted.

Druids are a subcategory of mage I haven't explored much. I like the irate look she's got, though. It just screams "get off my lawn, as my magic study and dedication to nature has made me effectively one with it".

King Phil hails from Turing's Folly (later Turing's Folly II), a webcomic by a good friend of mine, Robin Armstrong. Shame he stopped making it; despite its intentionally cut-and-paste appearance and minimalistic art, he did a great job with the writing, and he had a lot of stuff you had to pay attention to. It looked simple and wholly random if you just glanced at it, but it definitely had subtle nuances. Pity that the original Captain Galaxy plotline was lost to a server failure way back when...

At any rate, the man knew his meta humor. I even gave him a picture of my brother (with my brother's permission) as another cut-and-paste character for him to use, and Robin managed to add him right into the scatterbrained plot nicely. Good times, man.





The concept of the world being one that keeps happening outside the influence of the main characters is one that goes both ways: Here, we see Matt as, effectively, a background character partaking in the festival's activities.

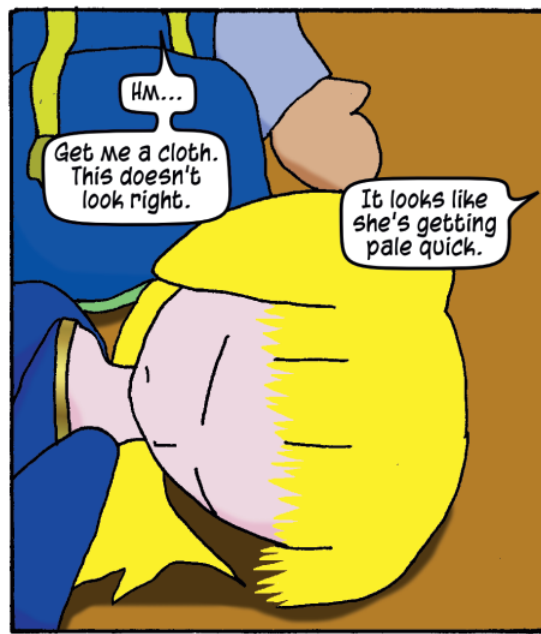
I'll admit I came up with the three events first, then had to figure out how to ram them together to make the fourth panel, after I drew the first three. Sometimes I don't plan ahead, is the point.



Jacob's sort of a jerk to Alex.

In the back in the first panel, you can see a small sign propped up in the muck. You can also see, in addition to the scribbles that represent small text you can't read from that far away, a set of odd glyphs above them, presumably the header to the sign. First, don't try to translate them. They're nonsense. They're not even a language, invented or real. Any resemblance to a real, fake, or real fake language is complete coincidence.

Second, much in the same vein as the small-print scribbles are just assumed to be "some sort of text goes here", those sorts of glyphs are "some sort of larger print text goes here". Or in other words, whoever put that sign there is supposed to be boldly advertising *something*, but I just wasn't sure what. To be honest, I should find a less-distracting way to represent that.



The Ice Rose was glossed over at the beginning of the chapter. In more detail, it is a plant that grows only during Perfect Equinox. It gets its name from the icy appearance of its petals and its cool temperature to the touch.

It is not advised to touch the Ice Rose, however, as the petals contain a very powerful poison. Said poison also grimly contributes to the name of the plant, rendering its victims unnaturally pale and cold as it infects. Under normal conditions, the poison takes somewhere around a week to run its course, killing its victim in the process. Recovery depends on how quickly a cure can be administered, and can run anywhere from a few days in bed with dizzy spells to an almost paralyzing exhausted sensation for weeks.

Given the predictable seasonal growth of the plant, King Landis always has a full staff of clerics on-duty at the Festivalgrounds. In addition to their normal duties, during the Perfect Equinox Festival, the clerics are also expected to have a supply of antidote for the Ice Rose poison on hand at all

times. Sabatoge involving the poison or the plant is not uncommon during this time, and the kingdom has to be prepared.

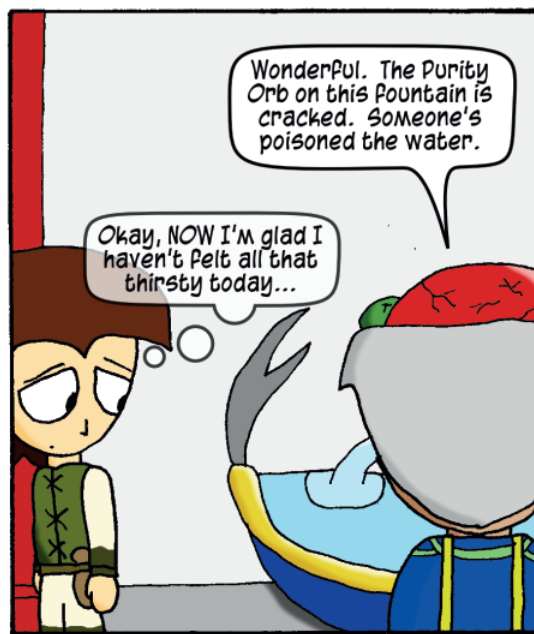
Also, the cloth that the cleric in this comic asked for is a standard enchanted clerical cloth. These cloths have a magic-repulsive and sanitizing aura around them (not unlike a moist towelette), making them ideal for handling things otherwise infectuous or cursed. They're far from perfect, but they sometimes get the job done.

It would have most likely taken weeks to explain all that in-comic. But like this, we can jump back to the plot right away, right? Right.

I know I frequently put larger-than-normal hair on people's heads (even if you don't count Cy), but wow, that girl's hair is gigantic. And then I put a flower in it to ACCENTUATE this. Geez.

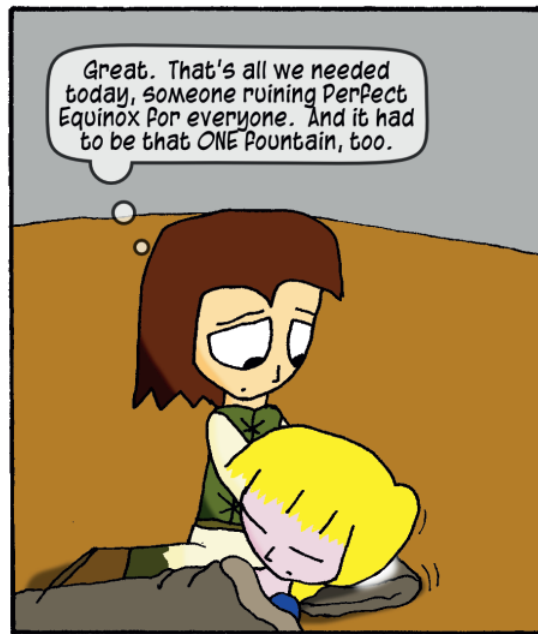
The clerical cloth (what the cleric is using to hold Alex's head in the third panel) is a sort of tool that I'd expect to be invented in a world like this, in that it's really just a sterilized medical cloth, only sterilized against magical afflictions rather than infectious disease. And I'd expect it to have been invented many years before now AND mass-produced (by pseudo-medieval standards), making them easily available to clerics and an ordinary part of everyday life to everyone else.

Though, mundane or not, we learn later that they can be incredibly useful.



The purity orb is another thing I'd expect a culture to invent if they had access to a means to treat a stone such that it would react to hazardous impurities like that. Magic! And technology! In harmony!

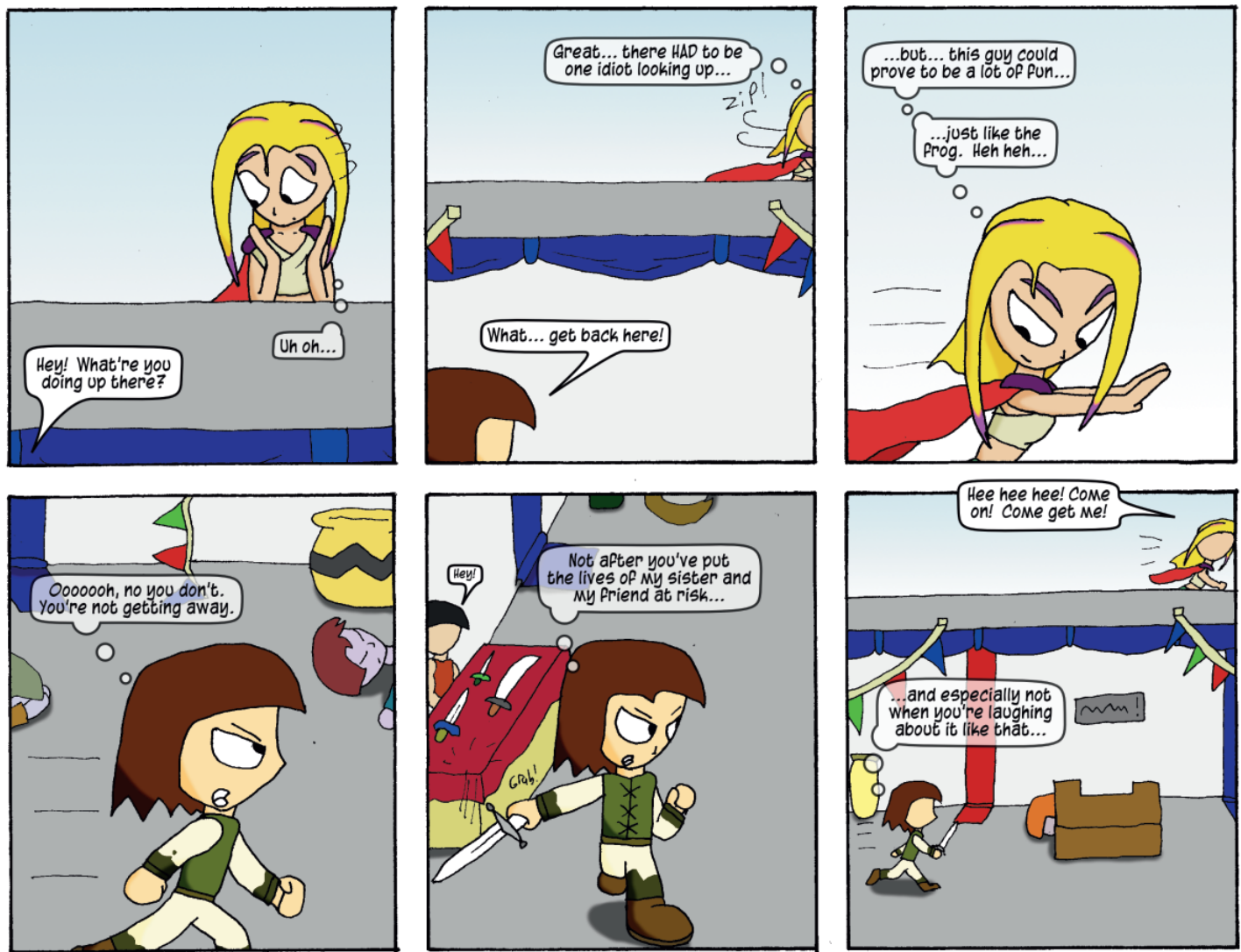
I try to write the comic in a way that magic and other fantastic elements are more or less mundane to the setting, but also avoiding making a Flintstones-like "just like modern times, but medieval-ish!" sort of world. For instance, there's nothing analogous to a television or radio in the DoM world, nor any instant global communication system (mail couriers bring correspondence to distant locations, and that takes time). Traffic is mostly by foot on barely-marked paths, is sometimes dangerous, and is only occasionally punctuated by a runaway steam-powered contraption. I try to keep things at least somewhat within the bounds of a kinda-sorta medieval world if they had the benefit of a procedural magic system, if you ignore the fact that my actual medieval knowledge is limited at best.



The clerics seem to be among the most competent of Castle Landis's employees. Well, *somebody* has to be.

Hi, Stephanie! Man, her appearance really changed as I went along. I'd say subtlety isn't her strong suit, but she really didn't expect anyone to look up that quickly. Honestly, this is a fair assumption; in real life, people just don't look up unless given a reason to do so. Even after I just pointed it out to you like that, in a few days, you're going to walk out of a room and suddenly realize you never DID look up the entire time.

Stephanie just made a bit too much noise, is all.



Once again, Matt runs off with a sword. Don't worry, that guy won't recognize him later. Never saw it coming.

This is one of the few times we see Stephanie's thought bubbles. I think I like it better when we can't see what she's thinking. Makes her more menacing of a threat.

This is also the closest we'll ever get to seeing just how her original outfit's top connects in the back. Note very carefully that in all other cases, her cape gets directly in the way. I actually don't have any idea how that would work, given how I drew the front of it.

And good grief, check out the Charlie Brown jar in the background!



I had a different idea of how I was going to connect the last strip to the chase, but as soon as I wrote myself saying "So they ran", I couldn't get this out of my head. So, in came Phil.

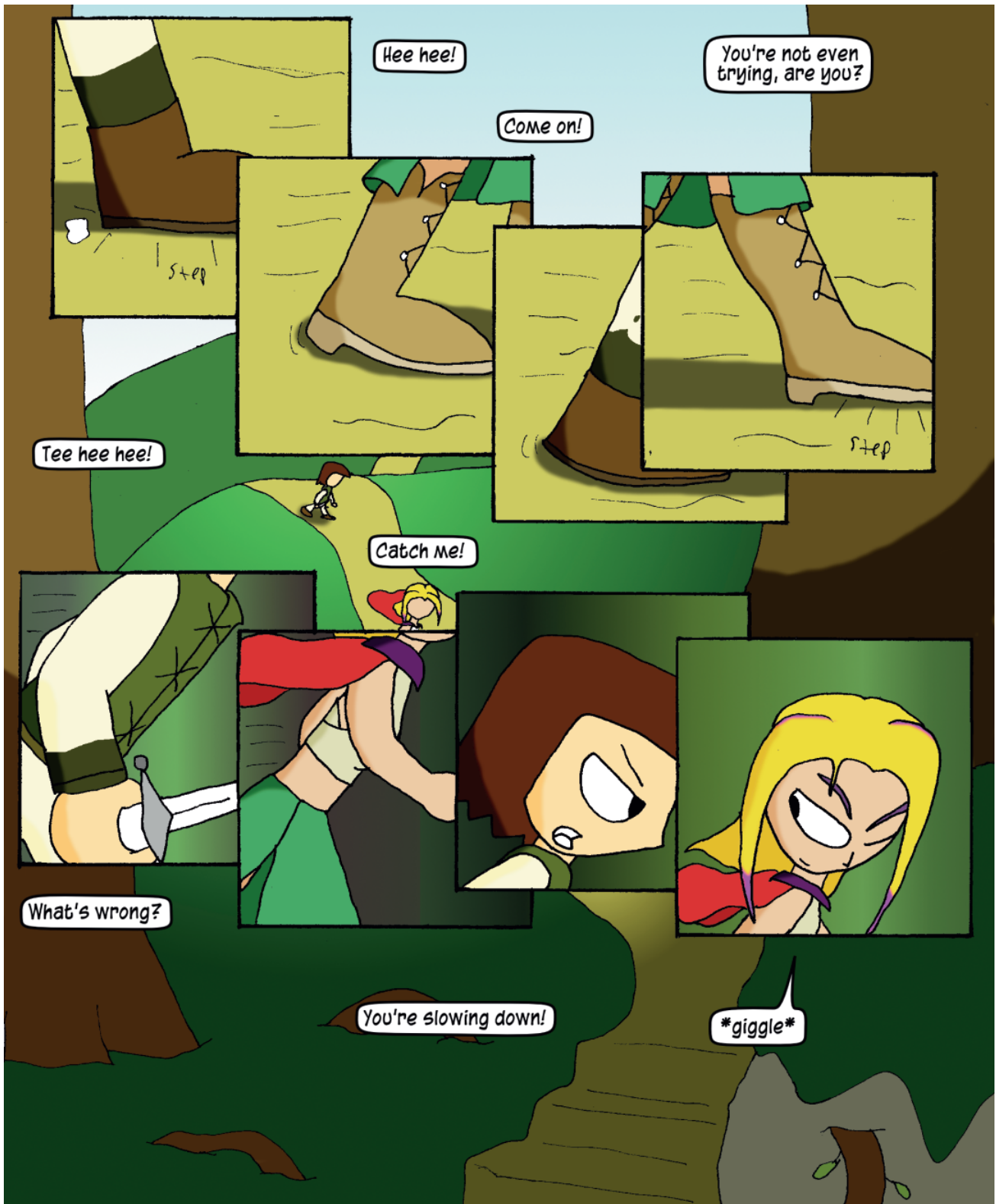


This is seriously the
best flock of seagulls
haircut you could come
UP with?

Well, it's not like
it's my fault you —
always stand like that.

Yes, actually,
it is.

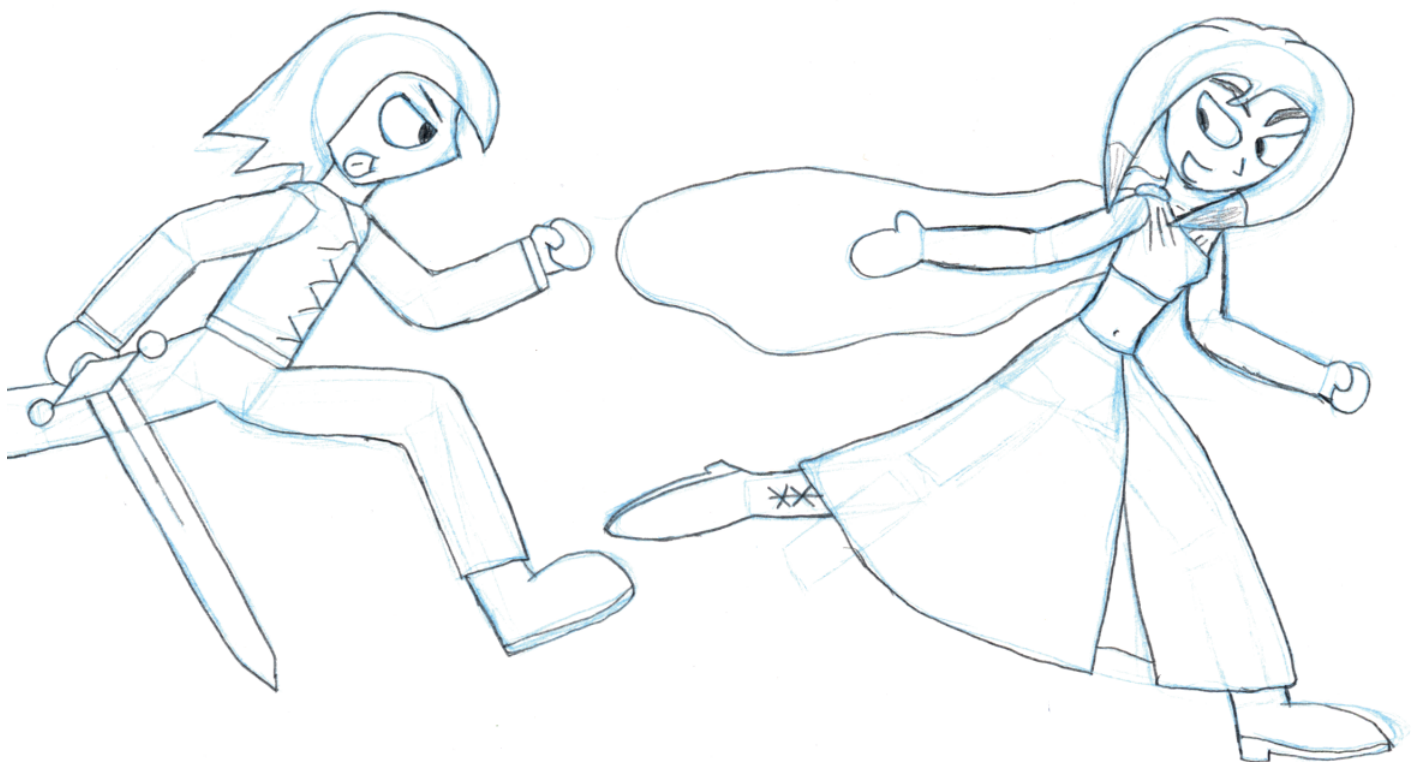
Touché. —



Just to be perfectly clear, writing Stephanie is unbelievable amounts of fun.

There was another friend of mine, one Jessica Regenbrecht, who used to talk to me about the comic from time to time. In parts of these discussions, she caught on to some of the subtle points that I didn't explicitly spell out in the comic (and also couldn't spell out without breaking flow). She did notice that Alex was left-handed, for example. And, more relevant to the comic at hand, she also correctly noticed that, while Stephanie otherwise seems to act a lot like a standard femme fatale sort of character, she was never actually flirting with Matt or Simon the entire time they were in the grove. Or in other words, I actually came up with a power-mad female villain who ISN'T fighting back a repressed desire to get in the pants of any male who tries to stop her. It's people noticing those things that really makes me feel like I'm doing something RIGHT when I write this.

The last inset panel here is, in fact, the closest she ever gets to flirting with Matt, though not really at all. Otherwise, she's more out for pure sadistic glee. Of course, it's not like Matt has any place in his heart for a girl casually laughing over the fact that she just poisoned a section of Castle Landis, part of which includes his sister.





Hey, I've got
an idea!

Let's play a game!
This'll be fun!

Hee hee hee...

crack
ZOOOF!

How about I go hide
and you come get me?

Come on! I'll bet you
can't find me!

Hee hee hee ha ha ha HA HA HA HA...

Good gravy, did I seriously draw and color each of those blades of grass in the inset panels? Seriously? Wow, I must've been crazy back then.

I like to think I did the inset panels right, and that they add something to the chase (something good, at least). I also like to think there's reasons I don't do that more often.

Also, once again, around this point in writing, I only had a vague sense of distances. The grove in which Stephanie lives is some distance away from Castle Landis, I guess. Some distance which Matt can run? I get better with that sort of thing as time goes on.





Look! In the grass in the first panel! It's Bean Man! Bean Man, everyone!

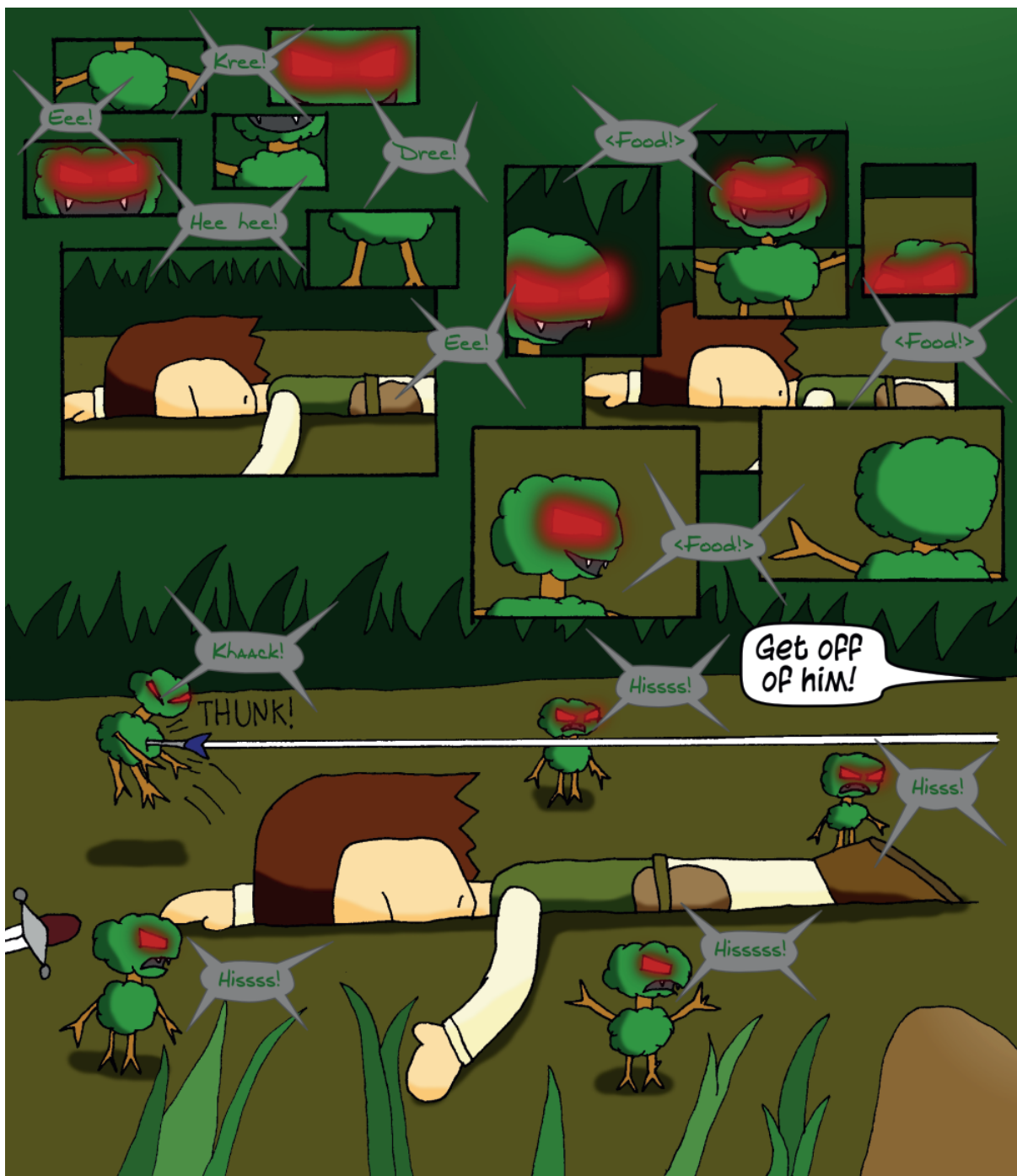
I really like drawing backgrounds like these. Full of neat junk like weird tree branches, foreground grasses, and inexplicable giant mushrooms. I don't get to do that often when the cast are in more populated areas.

I think I was finally getting the entire "gigantic heads" thing under control around now. Still big, but that's more just the cartoony style at this point.



I've used that text effect in other places to represent loud, horrible noises. Simply draw the text in a vector tool, clone it, blur the clone, and scale/rotate it off-center from the original. Instantly makes anything more terrifying! Granted, I didn't have those tools available to me when I first made this strip (this effect here was added for the book), but hey.

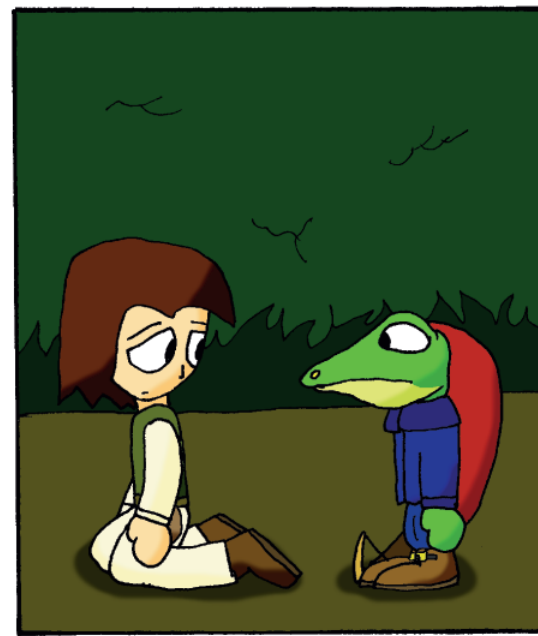
TACOS



Much like demon chickens, Nyerts get their own misshapen text bubbles. Sharp, pointy bubbles, for a sharp, pointy hissing noise that generally comes in large groups.

The concept of the Nyert is similar to that of the walking stick insect, only on a larger scale and infused with magic. It's a creature that, over time, has evolved to be an effective predator/scavenger in its surroundings. Whereas the walking stick has evolved to look like the branches or leaves it inhabits, the Nyert looks like a small shrub on the side of a forest path. These are the sorts of creatures I come up with when I stop to think about the setting too long.





A Nyert, sometimes called a Topiary Goblin, is a nasty little creature. Its body looks very similar to common bushes and shrubs and its limbs resemble branches. These features allow them to easily hide in said bushes, waiting to ambush an unwary traveller. They usually attack in bunches, as the darn things just aren't big enough to really do much damage on their own. A pack of larger ones, though, can be a significant danger.

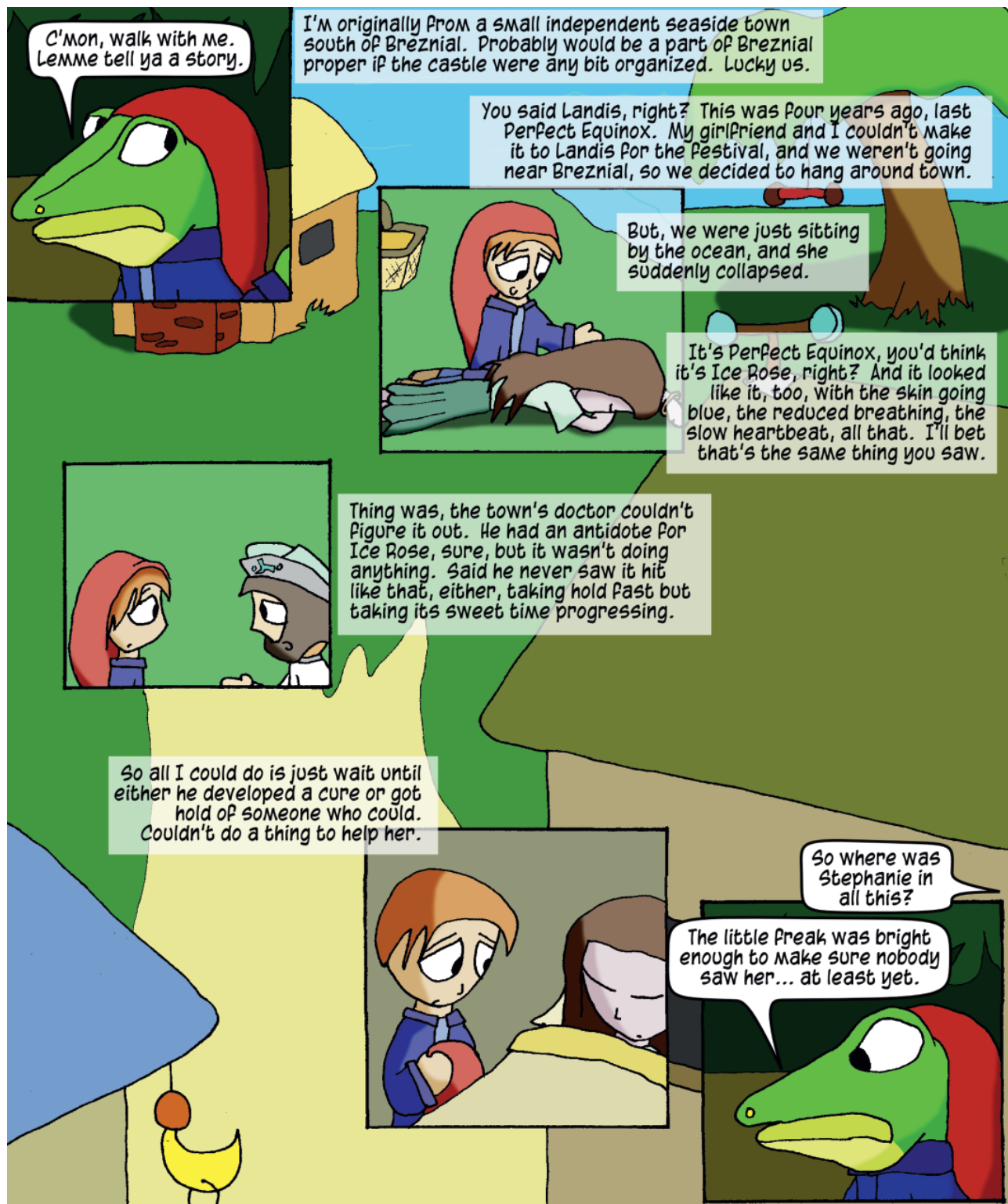
Fortunately, Nyerts are easily scared by attention or groups of people. They don't hide near towns or attack travelling parties, for instance. They're also quick to run if they feel threatened. They look like bushes, for crying out loud. If you had a body and head that a horse could easily mistake for food, you'd probably be quick to run from most things, too.

You have to admit, Simon probably isn't the strangest thing Matt's seen in the past day or so. Not after the demon chicken.

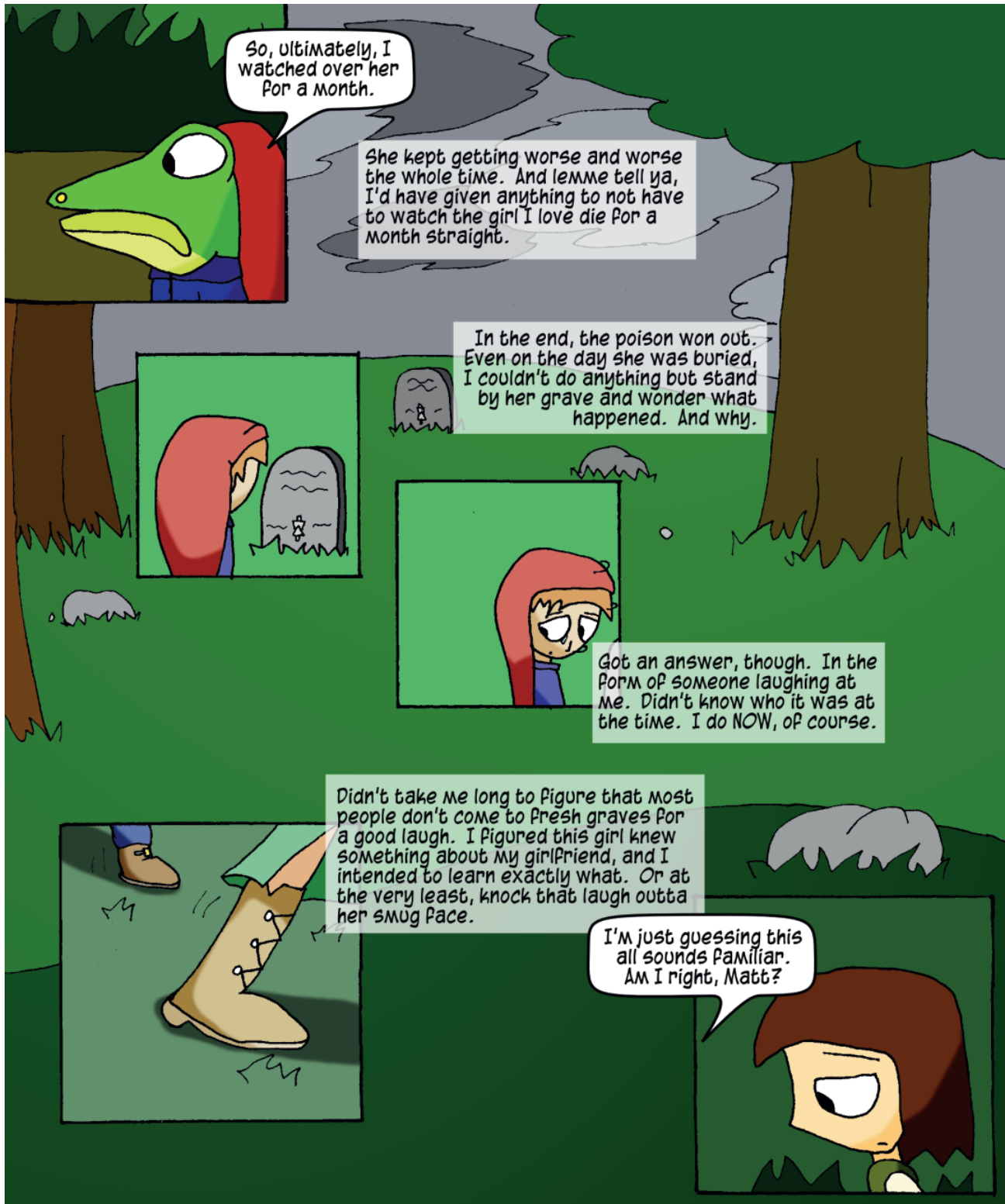


Simon also has no place in his heart for Stephanie.

When I thought of "someone who was a victim of Stephanie's, trying to hunt her down for revenge", I don't have the slightest clue why "humanoid frog wearing pantaloons and a stocking cap while brandishing a crossbow" came to mind. But, that's Simon.



Well, okay, if he was previously a *human* who wore pantaloons and a stocking cap while brandishing a crossbow, then I guess it's understandable.



So, ultimately, I watched over her for a month.

She kept getting worse and worse the whole time. And lemme tell ya, I'd have given anything to not have to watch the girl I love die for a month straight.

In the end, the poison won out. Even on the day she was buried, I couldn't do anything but stand by her grave and wonder what happened. And why.

Got an answer, though. In the form of someone laughing at me. Didn't know who it was at the time. I do NOW, of course.

Didn't take me long to figure that most people don't come to fresh graves for a good laugh. I figured this girl knew something about my girlfriend, and I intended to learn exactly what. Or at the very least, knock that laugh outta her smug face.

I'm just guessing this all sounds familiar. Am I right, Matt?

As you may have guessed, the icon on the tombstone is that of one of the deities in the DoM, similar to what you'd see on some tombstones in real life, beliefs and denominations permitting. I don't mention the DoM deities all that much. This is because it's a story centered around the mortals *not* living up in the heavens or whatnot, and besides, the first word of "deus ex machina" means, well...

The other two deity icons I've shown in the comic are those of Lineta (despite the non-existence of Lineta, seen all over Lineta Hall in Chapter Three) and Promalle (seen once in a while around the Healing Springs in Chapter Five). I just noticed I seem to keep to a pattern of simple symbols (triangles, circles, rectangles, etc) when I make them up. Mostly triangles. Keeps them simple and easy to remember.

Actually, no, it doesn't, given I had to look back in the archives just to remember which way which triangles pointed for which deities. It sort of makes them more confusing, come to think of it.



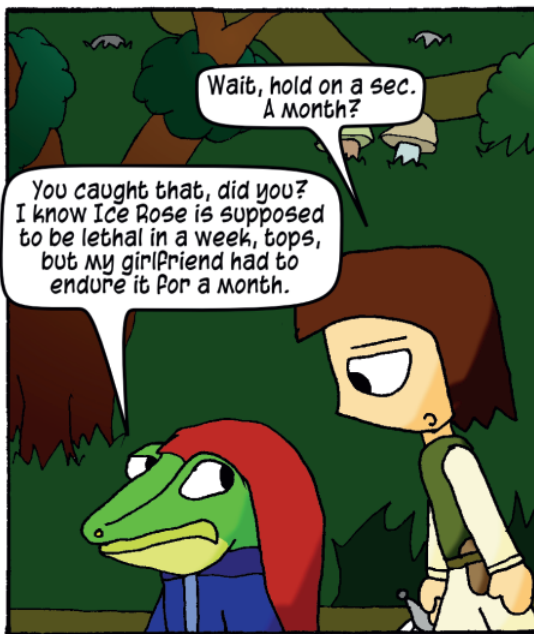
Lineta



Promalle



Whoever's on
that tombstone



You may have noticed I tend to avoid drawing my characters head-on facing the reader. The reason why, apart from me not being all that good at it, is that I don't make my characters aware of the fourth wall, so they rarely have any reason to look directly at the camera.

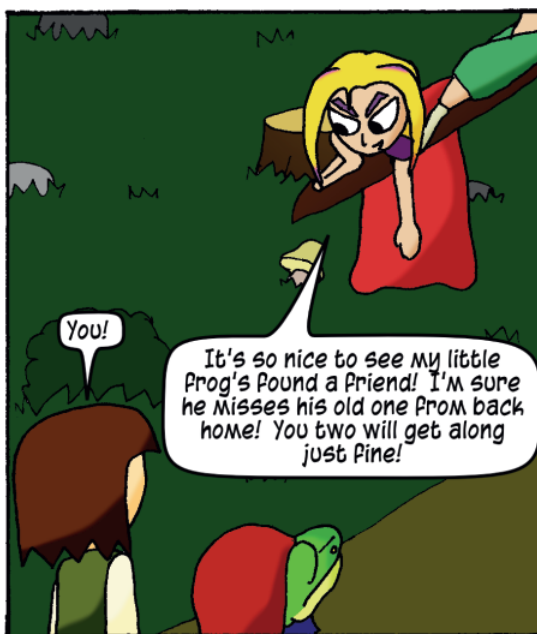
Now, the obvious exception to this is my own character, as I live behind the fourth wall, and thus I have good reason to address the reader quite frequently. So, I designed myself looking straight ahead. Most other characters I design from the 3/4 and side views.

Stephanie, however, is a rare non-fourth-wall character in my gallery, as I actually made her from the ground up looking straight towards the camera. This is because, clearly, I knew I'd have reason to pose her in dramatic menacing shots like the one in the fourth panel.



Right there! Stephanie's cape prevents me from having to figure out the back of her top yet again!

The original sequence explaining who Simon is never mentioned any village nearby. I apparently didn't think it odd that I was implying he was out there in the grove for four straight years, non-stop. If anyone's wondering why he didn't get help from the people in this newly-revealed village... um... they... didn't believe him. Stephanie hid from them. Yeah, that's it.



The art of drawing poses other than plain standing and walking was a problem for me back then. Although I had a lot of Stephanie's story and personality planned out ahead of time, a good amount of her poses and demeanor came from an active effort on my part to get over that. Her lying on that tree branch, for instance; that's something the rest of the cast just aren't going to have any need to do. It was good practice, apart from her being one of the very few characters I have who actually NEEDS poses like that. Nonetheless, it did pave the way for more complex poses later on.

I'm not saying it wasn't fun to experiment, of course.



I've never liked the concept of the villain just poofing away seemingly arbitrarily like this, or otherwise escaping by increasingly improbably-planned-ahead means. I know it's a somewhat common trope, but it's always seemed like a cheap, lazy way to keep a villain alive, for definitions of "never" and "always" that probably start at some point beyond when I was a kid happily watching Saturday morning cartoons. Eventually, you start wondering why nobody else has this manner of transportation available to them, or why the villain even bothers sticking around in the first place if they can enjoy the benefits of just popping away to safety ALL THE TIME.

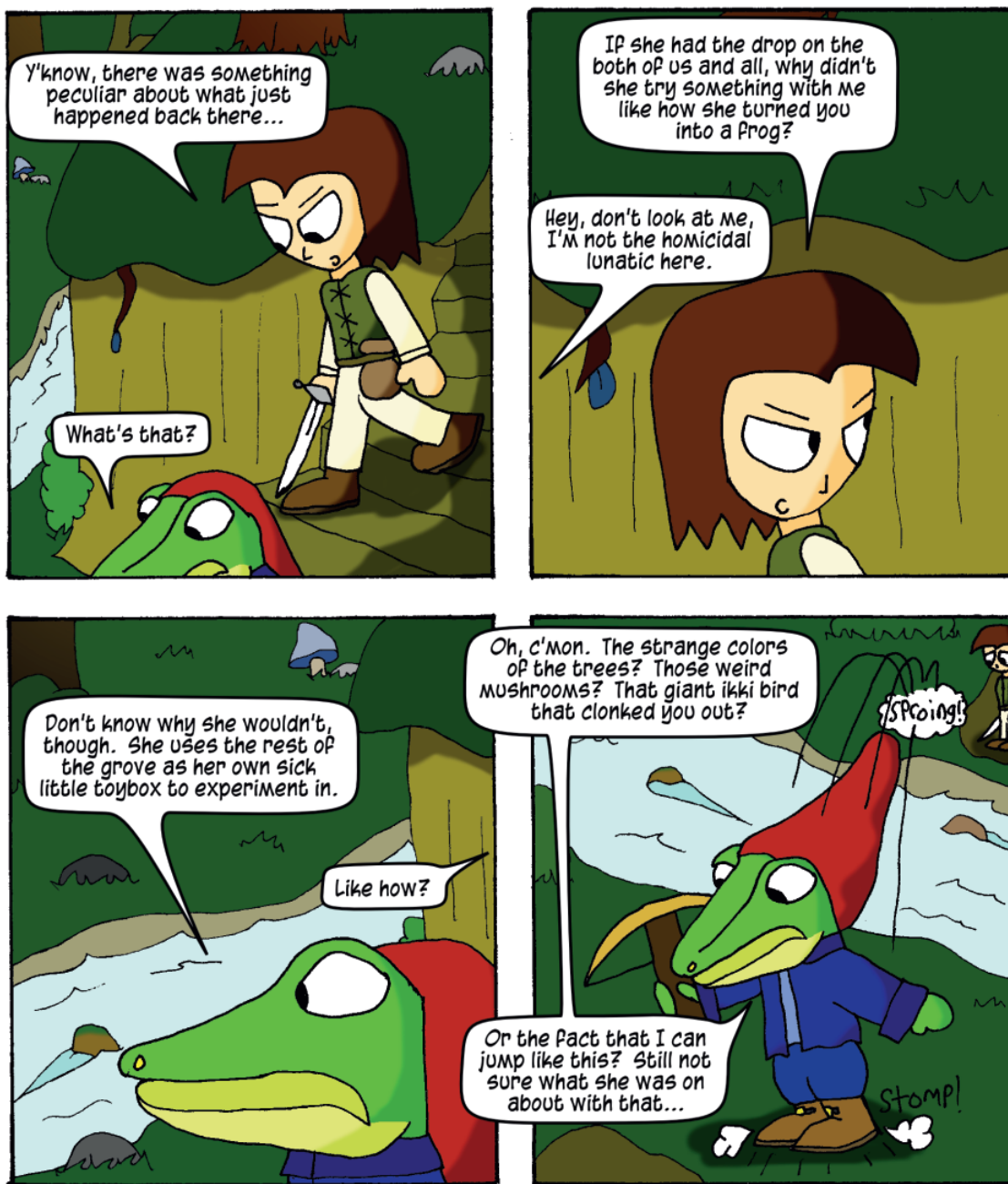
But, I had an idea with this that comes in later. And besides, ZOOOF!



Simon shares my disdain for the disappearing practice as well.

I used to draw every background by hand, in-panel. In comics like these, I tried to make sure I had a few elements in the background to help me keep things lined up. Here, for instance, there's the bush near Matt's head or the stump and shrub under the branch Stephanie was lying on (you can see it peeking out from behind the text bubble here, or go back a strip or two).

Nowadays, I tend to cheat and draw backgrounds separately, combining them later in the digital domain. And I use these previously-mentioned magical devices known as "rulers" to keep things lined up. What crazy, crazy things will the art supply world think of next?



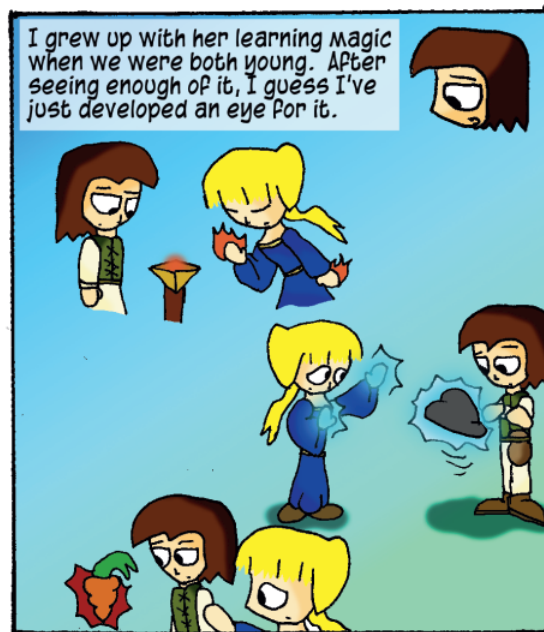
Most of the time, when I think of a scene, unless I've got a specific reason to do otherwise, the scene's layout is flat. The ground is relatively flat, towns are built on flat ground, and pathways, though sometimes curved, generally offer little incline. I don't really like that, to be honest, but that's just how I think, having been born and raised in suburban southeast Michigan. It's kinda flat there. So I try things like this, with the small ledge they're walking down. It adds at least some amount of interesting topography.

I should go back and walk around my alma mater once in a while for inspiration. Oakland University was built straight into hills with a few interesting engineering decisions built into the buildings. It was a common joke that no building there had its main entrance on the first floor. Hamlin Hall's main entrance is the fourth floor. I think Hill and Van Wagoner Houses both had their entrances on the third.



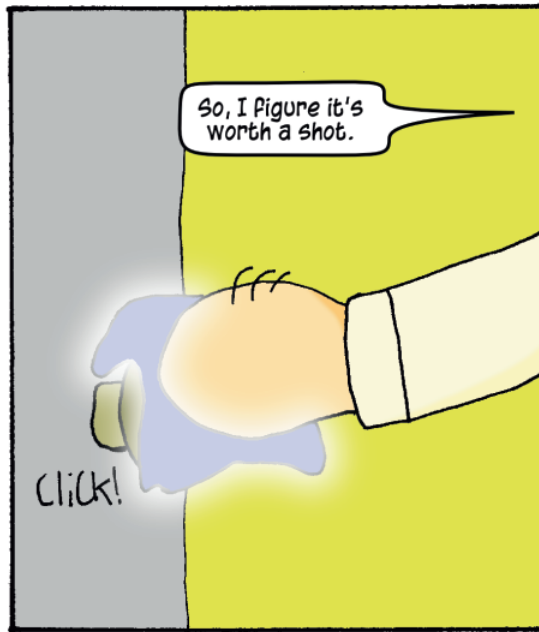
Well, where did you THINK she lived? An expansive dungeon of horrors where her half-finished creations lurk? Come now!

Oh, wait, right...



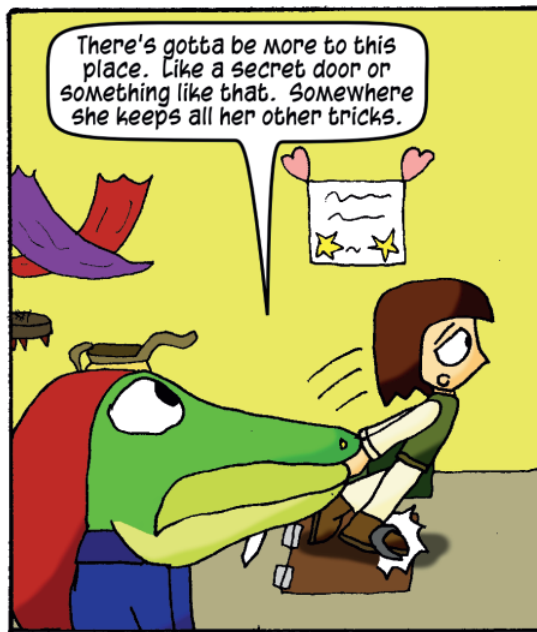
So you live in a world of magic. And you've grown up and lived with your sister, and she's been studying magic most of her life. Chances are, even if you're not interested in learning magic, you're going to pick up on something. Like seeing the invisible magic enchantment on a doorknob applied by someone who isn't very slick with magic to begin with.

Woah, check out the carnivorous carrot in the fourth panel. I guess the vegetarian headhunter back in Sornil might have a more challenging job than I thought.



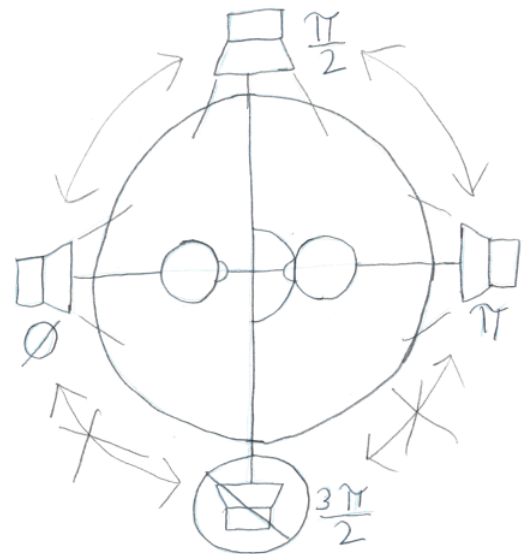
I try to make the contents and size of Matt's pouch be believable. That is, it's just a plain pouch without any sort of enchantments or whatnot to make it hold more than it looks like it should. Besides, a cloth explicitly designed to neutralize magic would have very nasty effects on a pouch with magic capacity, if my days playing Nethack have taught me anything.

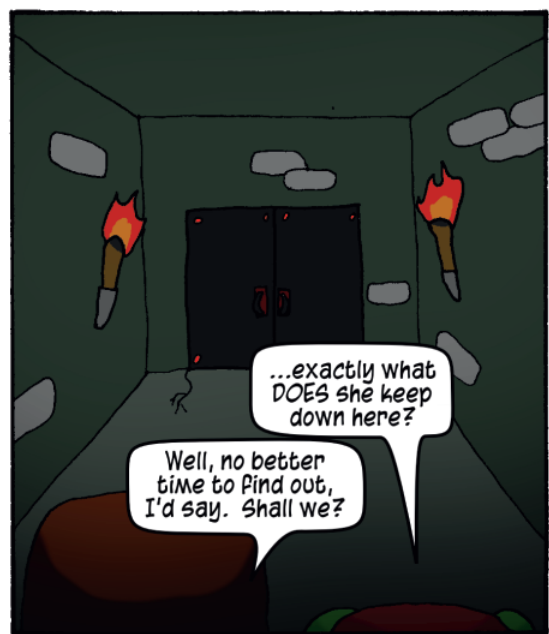
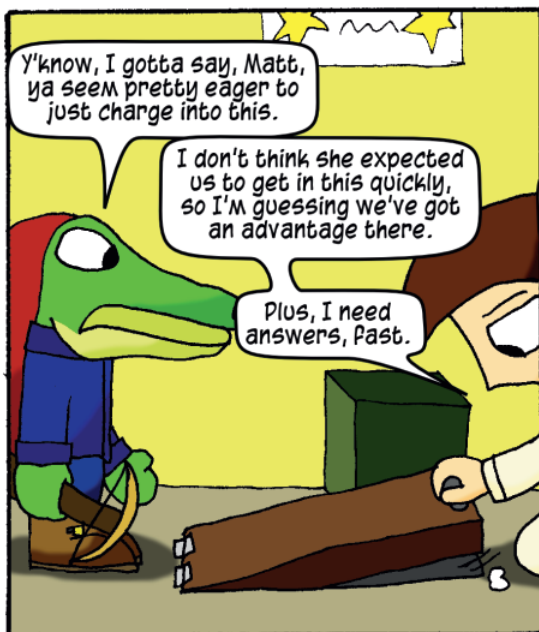
Matt gets his second clue. Stephanie is surprised to find a worthy adversary for the first time in four years. Well, more "worried" than "surprised", I guess.



Matt fails a spot check!

There are reasons the 180 Degree Rule exist, and only some of them revolve around the fact that the "Pi Radians Rule" doesn't roll off the tongue as well. Though I guess this was limited to 180 degrees, it's still disorienting to whip around the angle like that.





The entire idea of there being an expansive dungeon under Stephanie's house grew from me wondering where she was keeping things like the poison itself or other experiments she worked on. You'd think someone would've noticed them earlier if they were out in the open, even to people just passing by the grove. It leads one to wonder how she dug out the dungeon in the first place, but given what we know about her and what we learn later, she probably managed to take it over from someone else. Somehow. She's smarter than she looks.

No, seriously. She may not be a very good mage, but she's still deviously clever. If you've read ahead to Chapter Five, you know what I mean.



I like the reflective gold floor. It would've been better had I known that the blur filter in GIMP acts both on and in a selection and doesn't automatically feather itself, leading to the truncated blurs under Stephanie in the second panel and all the various objects in the third. But still, I liked the effect.



At least I was smart enough to know not to make the sound effect reflect in the floor as well.

Despite everything, Stephanie's probably just happy that she can finally use all these great traps and such she's made over the years. The good ones, that is, not just the annoying ones she's been using on Simon all this time.



Try not to think too hard about frogs having teeth to grit in pain and frustration. At least, not teeth like that.

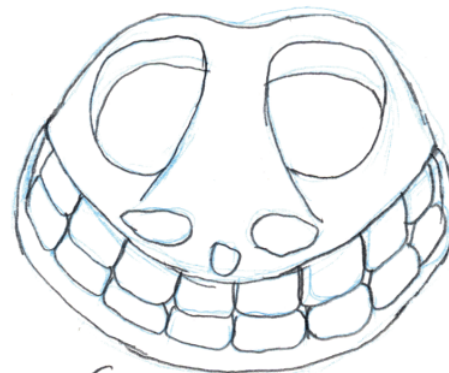
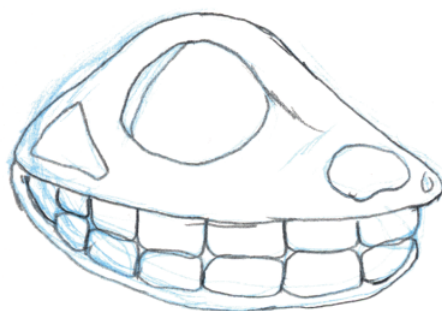
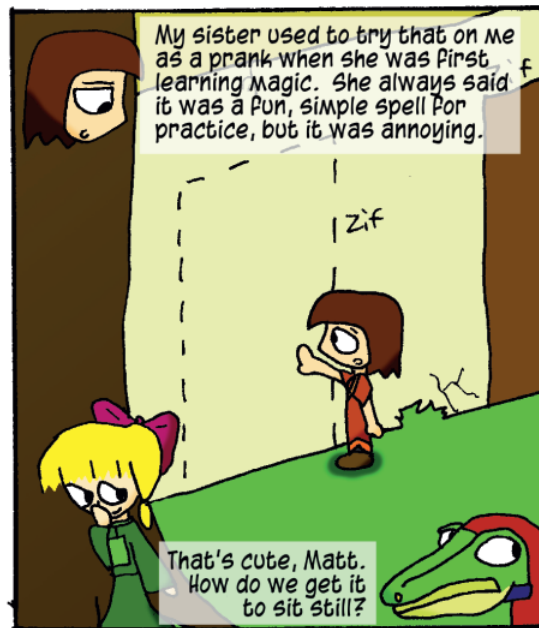


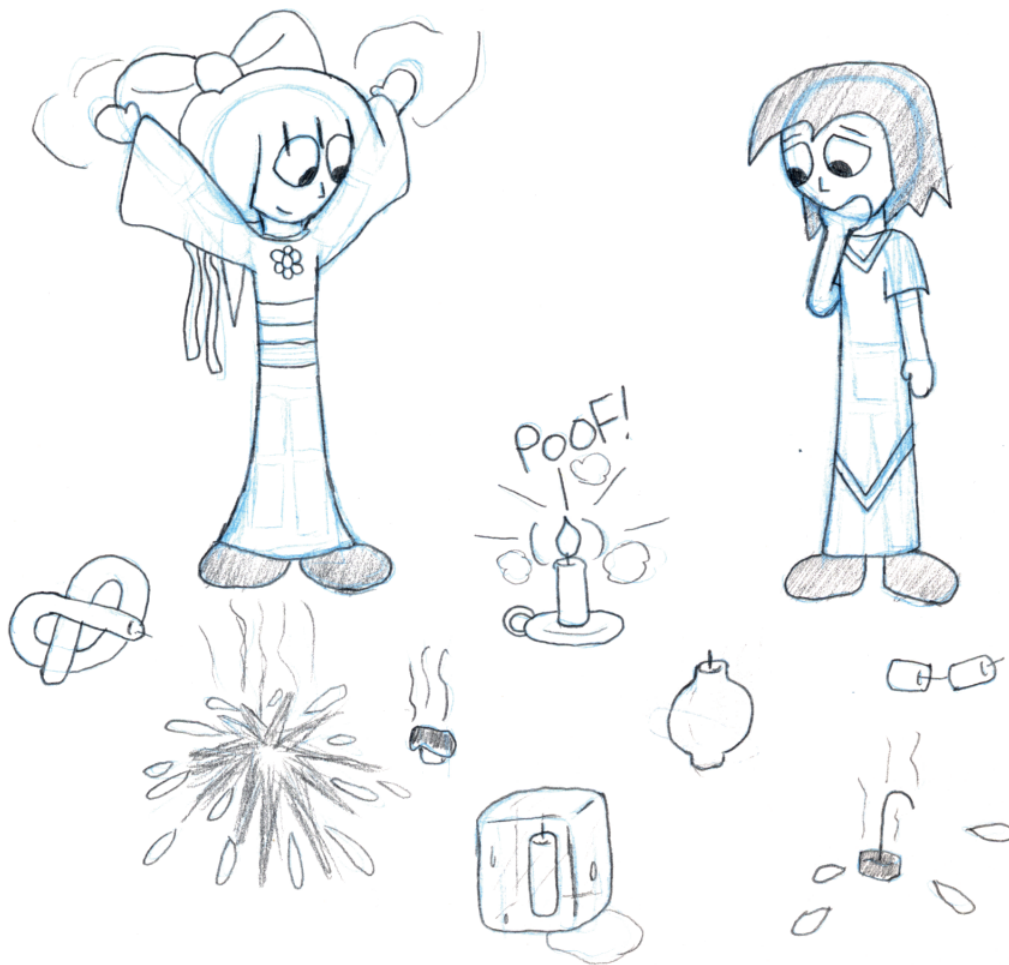
Fig. 44a: Frog Skull



If you've read Chapter Five, remember the part where Salth details Alex first coming to her to learn magic? I actually went back to this one, single comic, the sole time I ever drew Matt and Alex at this age, to get their childhood outfits. Bet you never even noticed that, did you? Which makes me wonder why I did it in the first place, but hey, someone probably went back and checked. Like me.

Magic in the DoM is just another talent. It's something literally anyone can learn, if they've got the right mind for it. I don't mean "have the right mind for it" as in "chosen or blessed to be a mage", I mean it in the same way you might or might not just have the right mind to understand computer science or some other talent like that. I sincerely hope you don't say I'm chosen or blessed just because I understand computers and computer science. That would just be weird.

So, since magic is, to some extent, "understandable" in this world (in a very general sense of the term), it makes sense that Matt can catch on to certain things over time, like the enchantment on the doorknob earlier, or this sort of illusion, even if he doesn't study magic himself. It helps that it's a simple prank, one which Alex played on him when she was first learning magic, which counts as the third clue.





I clearly have a very odd relationship with sound effects, especially those intended to represent some sort of magic effect. Zif!

My impression of crossbows was that of a relatively small ranged weapon, like shown with Simon. It wasn't until later that I learned they were actually considerably larger and usually not drawn back solely by hand similar to how you'd draw back a rubber band gun. In fact, if I'm not mistaken, they're really more like full-size bows with a more convenient way to hold the bolt back than solely by your arm. Oh, well.



Well, good try anyway, Simon.

I don't know what Stephanie's plan was here. She was previously all about keeping her distance, so if they hadn't scared her off like this, I'm not sure what she had in mind when they came through the hole in the wall.



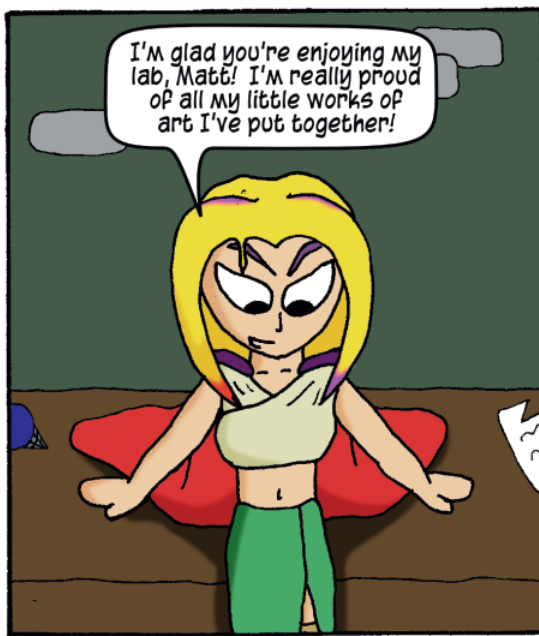
Look! Drawn on the chalkboard! It's Bean Man! Bean Man, everyone!

Ah, a cluttered room of junk. Now we're talking. Much better than how I drew Salth's hut earlier. The spilled potions, the scattered books, the straw dummy hanging in the middle there... I like this. There is, however, a distinct lack of a stuffed alligator. Sorry.

Next time Matt has to carry a sword with him and not have him actively holding it, I'll be sure to draw a sheath, or at least some way he's storing it.



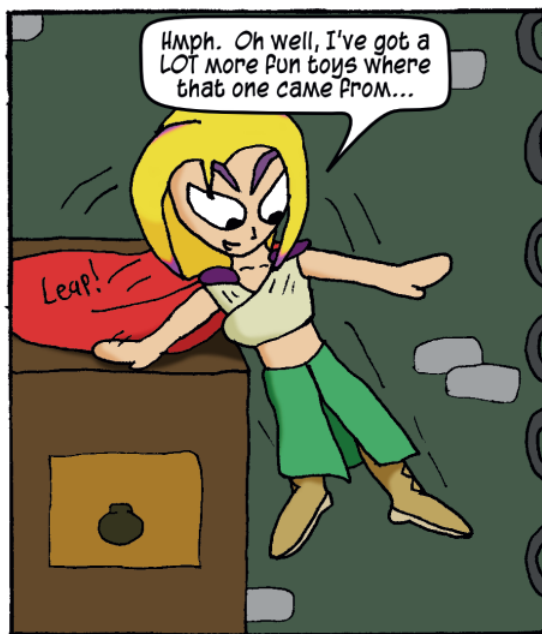
I prefer to keep magic relatively consistent, yet still vaguely-defined. Magic shouldn't have too many surprises in terms of power or capability that just come out of nowhere, but it should be undefined enough that I have the flexibility to write things that need to be done. That always makes things like notes on magic (the stuff pinned to the wall) or books on magic difficult to represent, as I don't want to give realistic clues as to how this all works. It's really not SUPPOSED to work, at least not in any way we'd ever understand. But, pages full of nondescript squiggles would get a bit dull really quickly (as I am acutely aware from my college days), so adding in entirely unhelpful diagrams helps spice things up a bit while not actually helping anyone figure out what's going on (as I am also acutely aware from my college days).



Stephanie's also one of the few female DoM characters with defined eyebrows. At some point, I just decided that, in general, male characters have half-circle eyes with eyebrows and female characters have rounder eyes with more emphasis on shape and no eyebrows. I don't know why. Nowadays both are more flexible, but still, female characters tend to lack eyebrows.

Also, that hand in the bottle has fingers! That MUST be magic!





Oh, if only we had a camera angle from behind Stephanie right there, looking towards the rest of the lab, as she leapt down and her cape was billowing upwards! Then we'd be able to figure out what the back of her top looks like! Drat!

A chain-driven escape hatch like that isn't something you use very often, but when you do need it, it's good to have.



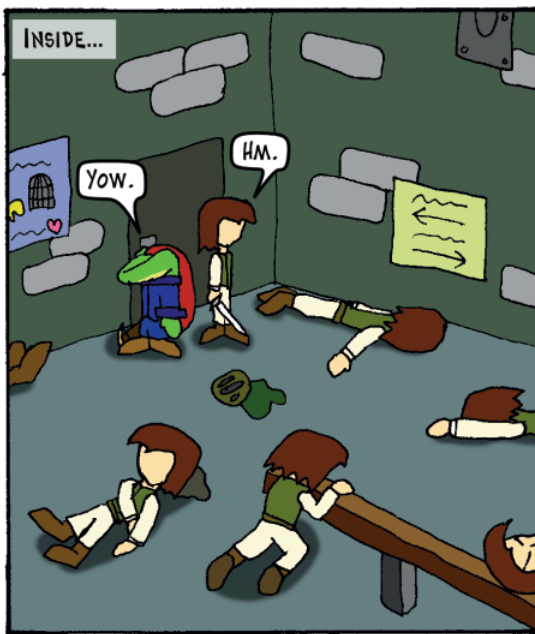
Matt's quickly getting more and more frustrated. That's another unique thing about Stephanie: She's one of the few people who really get under Matt's skin and truly enrage him. So enraged and frustrated, in fact, that we get a good look at how deceptively difficult it is to draw folded arms.

No, seriously. That's another difficult sort of pose for me to work out. Matt's arms are nowhere near any sort of natural pose in the third panel there.



Right here, I bid a fond farewell to the blue-for-night effect and all its terrifying radioactive grass and lanterns, and just go straight for a translucent black overlay when a scene needs limited lighting. It looks way less goofy that way.

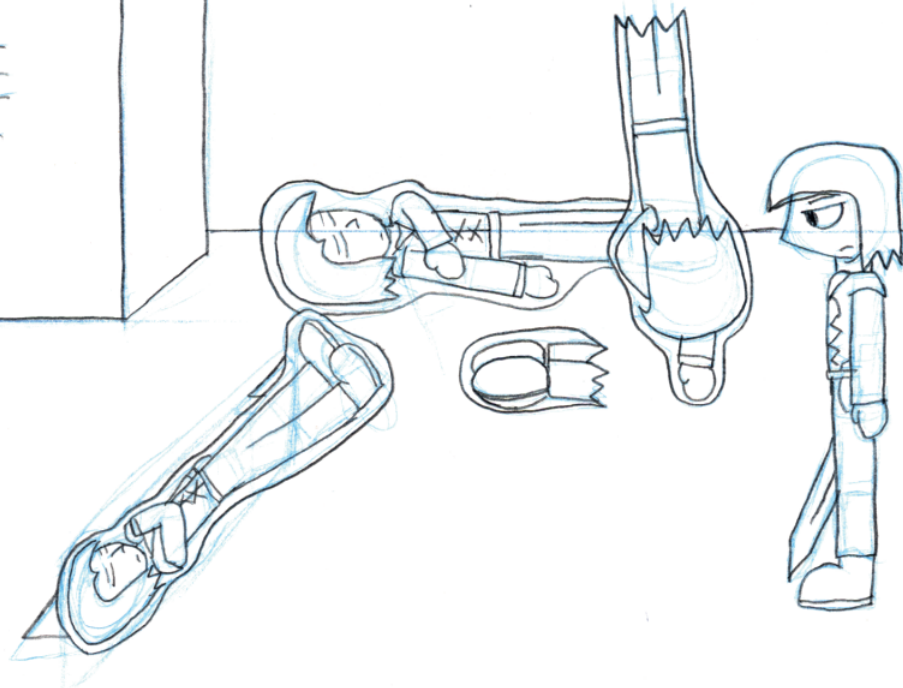
Matt's starting to piece together the clues he's been noticing. Won't he be thrilled when he finally figures it all out! Oh boy!



I got disturbingly good at drawing Matt in various states of being dead.

Shortly before starting on making this book (2012), I was saying to myself how much I needed to improve on my walking poses. I sort of only have a couple, and they get repetitive quick if characters are walking over the course of several panels and you can see their legs the entire time. I just haven't found anything yet that I'm comfortable with and that looks right in a static context. Sure, looking over animation frames can give me more of a clue on the key elements of walking, but taking a single frame in an animation walking cycle, freezing it, and putting it in a still picture devoid of the rest of the sequence... I dunno, I just haven't been able to pull that off convincingly.

But regardless, then I started looking back over this chapter's worth of comics (2003-2004). I now realize I've actually come a longer way than I thought in that respect. It's like Matt's legs aren't even moving here.





Right, this one. This is another one of those things that apparently made sense only to me and only in my head and only at the time I wrote it, and for that, I apologize.

So you've got magic illusions, right? And you've got mages. Mages who've been studying magic for quite some time, in general. And also in general, mages also develop a keen eye to pick out the invisible telltale signs of magic spells and such in effect. It's just something you start to see after a while, frequently by instinct as you get better and see more.

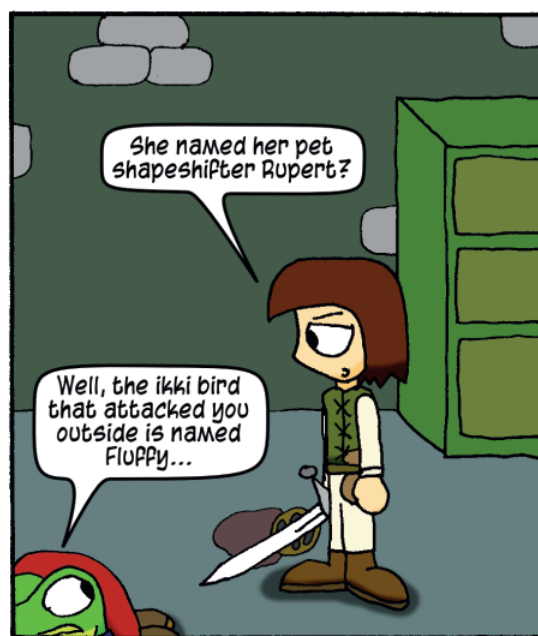
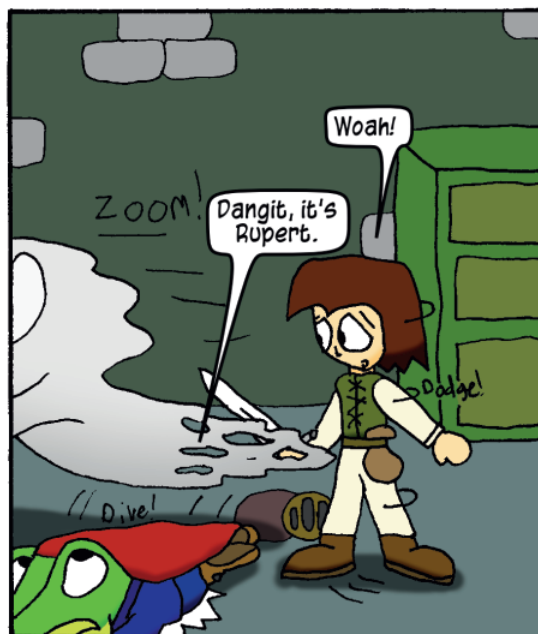
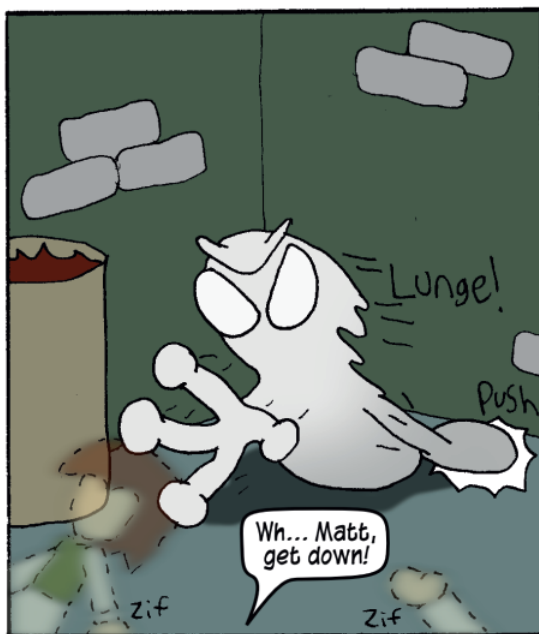
These magic illusions, they come in all shapes, sizes, and most importantly for our discussion, strengths. "Strength", for our purposes, refers to how easy it is to identify the illusion. Exactly what that means is impossible to fully explain, owing to the fact that it depends on something that doesn't exist in reality, but we can simplify it to the assumption that a weak illusion can be identified easily and a strong one might take a keener eye to pick out. Sounds fair so far?

Now, the key here is the meaning of "pick out". In this context, it can mean at least one of two things: Either simply identifying that something you're seeing is fake, and/or being able to see *through* something that's fake to see what's *really* there. For instance, let's say someone conjured a large, illusionary army to intimidate you. You don't know the person, so you can't say for sure if they *would* have an army at their command. In the first case, you'd be able to tell that the army (or at least most of it) is fake. In the second case, you'd be able to ignore what you see and recognize the limited army that's actually there (Matt confronting Stephanie in Chapter Five when she had the Theatre Orb is a good example of using illusions to mask what's really going on, even if the illusions themselves are obvious).

Let's add everything together, then. Matt definitely isn't a mage. He DOES, however, have second-hand experience with magic, having grown up with his sister. Thus, he's developed a bit of an eye for identifying magic, if only in a very limited sense. This is how he saw the enchantment on the doorknob earlier. These illusions, however, are very weak. So weak, in fact, that Matt is *reflexively* able to see *through* them. And, without actual magic knowledge to properly control what he sees, he needs Simon to clue him in that there's *something* there to begin with. He just didn't notice the one in the corner until the end of this strip.

That's the best I can explain it. If that doesn't help, well, I tried.

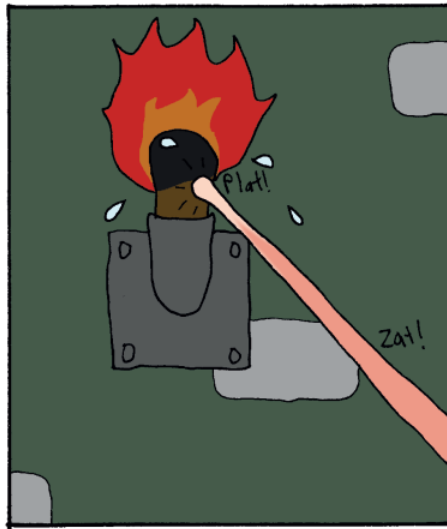
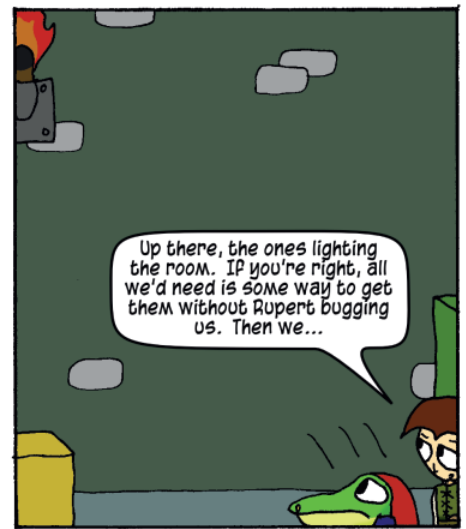
Side note, though, this same theory applies to Salthalus's magic disguise. Matt can see through it trivially.



I brought Fluffy back with Stephanie in Chapter Five. Rupert, on the other hand, didn't come back until Chapter Six, and even then just for a throwaway gag. Given the circumstances, Stephanie wasn't able to get back to it after Fluffy took her away from the grove, though it's also believable that she just doesn't care, as we'll see in the menagerie later. She's like that.

My idea of the "natural form" of a shapeshifter is that of a mute, featureless blob that simply assigns physical properties to parts of itself as needed. That's how I worked out Rupert's movement: To lunge at Matt and Simon, it pushes a solid part of itself off the ground with a large amount of force. To stop itself, it plants itself on the ground and alters its landing blob to absorb momentum. And then makes a sharp, metal-like protrusion that looks a lot like a sword.

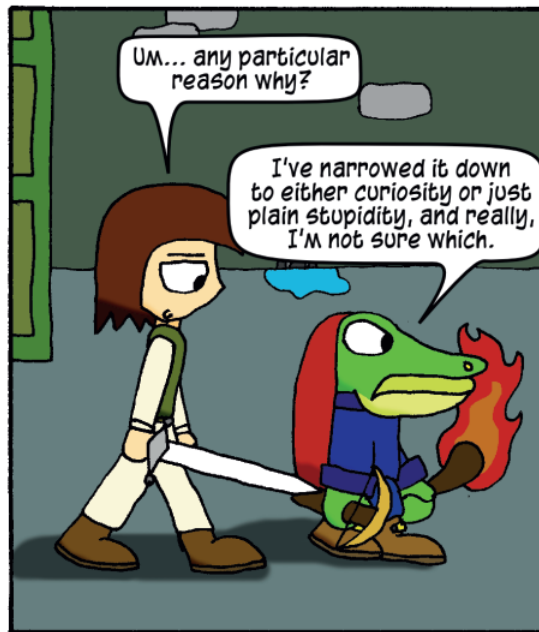
Someday I should take on drawing a more-than-two-armed creature in that same respect. There are probably exactly three or four people I know who are sensibly chuckling at that last sentence for reasons I don't care to get into.



Finally, one of those torches is good for something more than just ambiance!

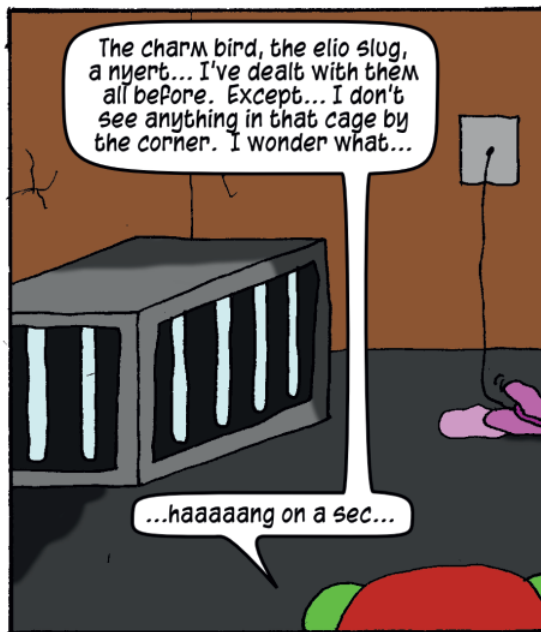
And in a complete mockery of thermodynamics, Simon's tongue is apparently undamaged by latching on to the part of a torch that has clearly turned to ash due to being burning and all!





And apparently shapeshifters are flammable. Who knew?





Matt's almost figured it out now! Just a little more!

Here, I take a relaxing spin through inventing random magic creatures. Though again, I try to stick to creatures that A) fit the world in a way, and B) Stephanie could reasonably be expected to capture. Oh, and a Nyert. Needed some continuity, after all.

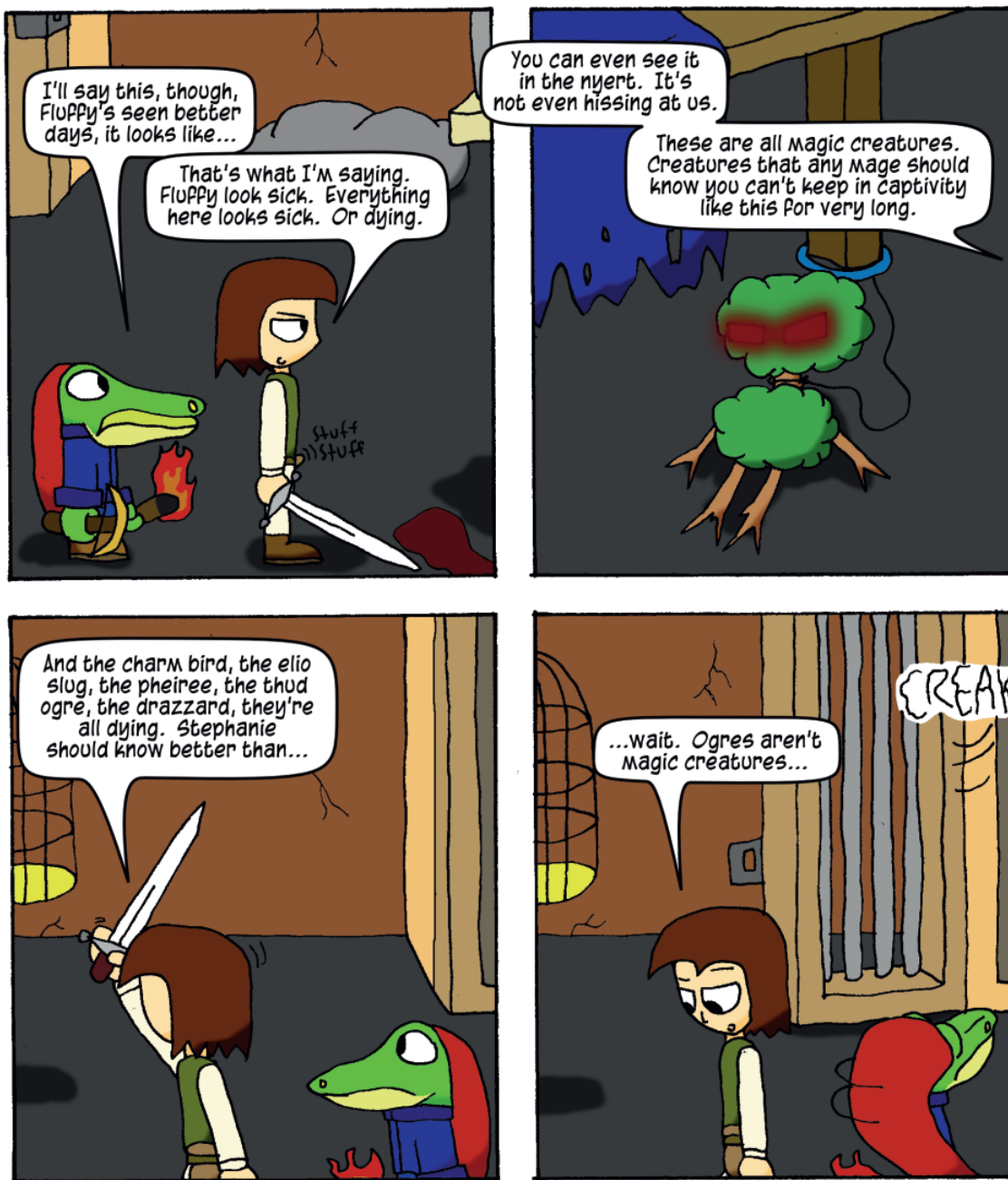
No, none of them look like a tilde with hands or a water faucet with wagon wheels.



I really like the pheiree. Not so much the look of it as the name. At least around the time I made these strips, there was a somewhat... enthusiastic subculture on the internet devoted to "faeries". Very specifically with that spelling. Honestly, it wouldn't have been annoying if they weren't really, seriously picky about their "more magical" spelling of what most people would call a "fairy". Yes, I think "faerie" IS a legitimate modernization of a Middle English term, but making a big deal out of it sort of doesn't help.

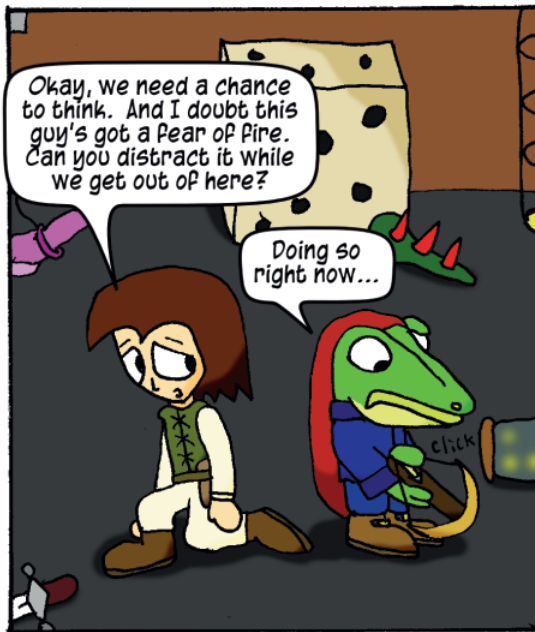
So, I made the term "pheiree" just for fun. Which is a really huge shame, since I haven't yet had a reason to feature pheirees in the comic.

I like to think the living rock is functionally little more than a pet rock. I never said Stephanie only captured GOOD creatures.



Ikki bird features are supposed to be soft. Hence how it smashes down enough to fit in Matt's pouch like that.

Ogres and other common fantasy "villain" elements (orcs, trolls, etc) also don't show up much. I like that, though, since it makes more of the conflict be between the characters and less by random brutish creatures who just happened to be around.



No, wait, the ogre has fingers, too, and Matt just established it's not a magic creature. So I guess the fact that the hand-in-the-bottle had fingers wasn't magic after all.

I know it's common to give cartoon characters four-fingered hands (three fingers and a thumb), but I actually did want to imply that ogres in this world really only have four fingers, and that this is different from normal. "Normal" supposedly meaning five-fingered hands, not mitten-hands. I'm terribly unhelpful art-wise, you know that?





I have a hard time writing someone shouting "Get down!" without mentally adding "Get funky!".



Ogres are easily distracted by shiny lights. And jars being smashed over their heads. This makes perfect sense. And the jar with fireflies (or similar) HAS been in the scene since they walked in. I just never called attention to it. Okay, fine, maybe it was sort of a cheap shot.

Note that the ogre still has Simon's ineffective crossbow bolt stuck in his forearm. And note that huge gut on the ogre, too! That's a detail that doesn't come up often! Okay, you can stop noting it now if you want.





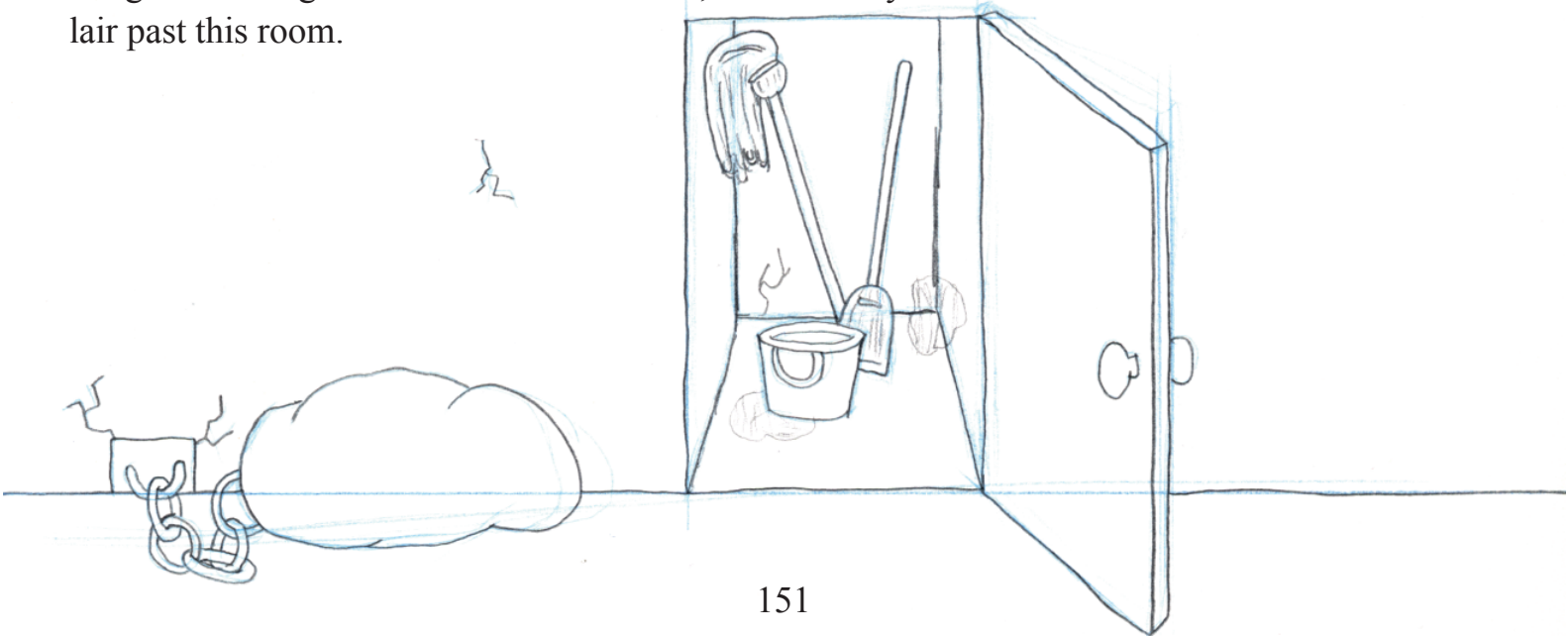
Ogres also have black blood. Black blood that is much more viscous than human blood.

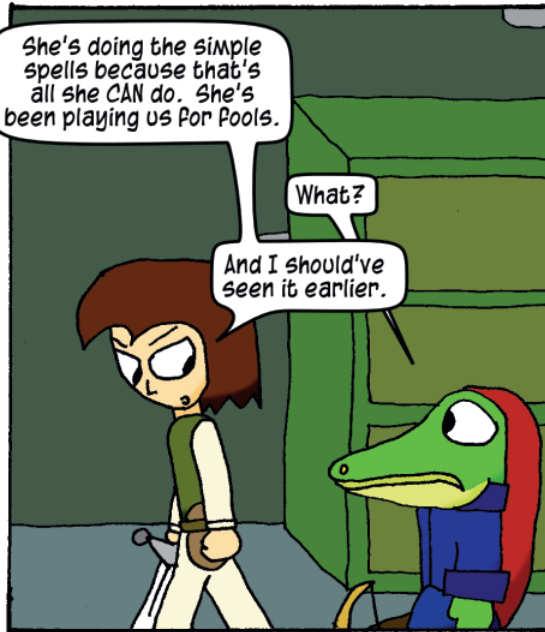
Maybe I should've mentioned to keep an eye on the elio slug during this entire sequence. It reacts to a lot that's going on, including being quite nervous over a very angry Stephanie suddenly appearing in the menagerie.





I'm glad Matt figured it all out around now; I don't really know what else would've been in the lair past this room.



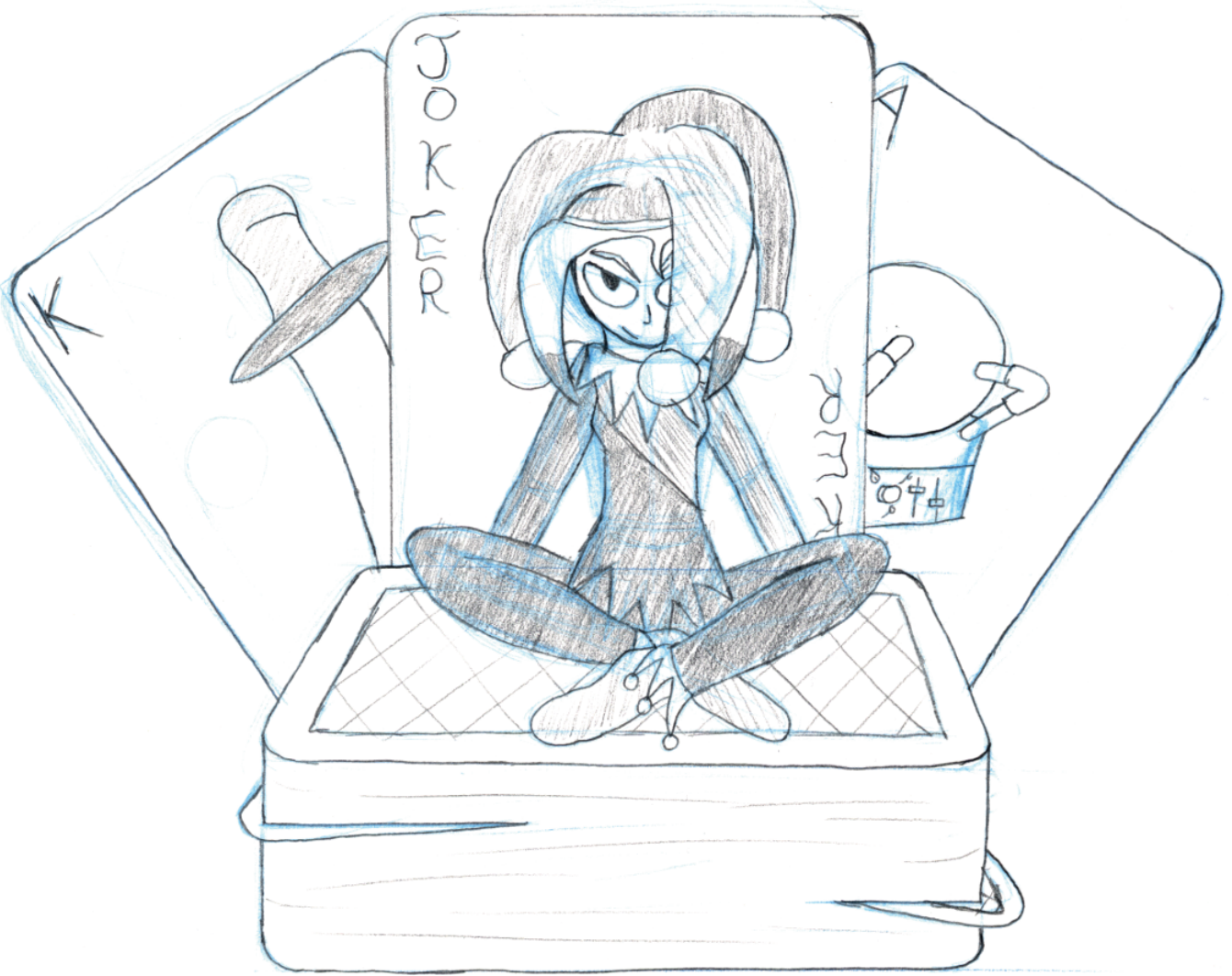


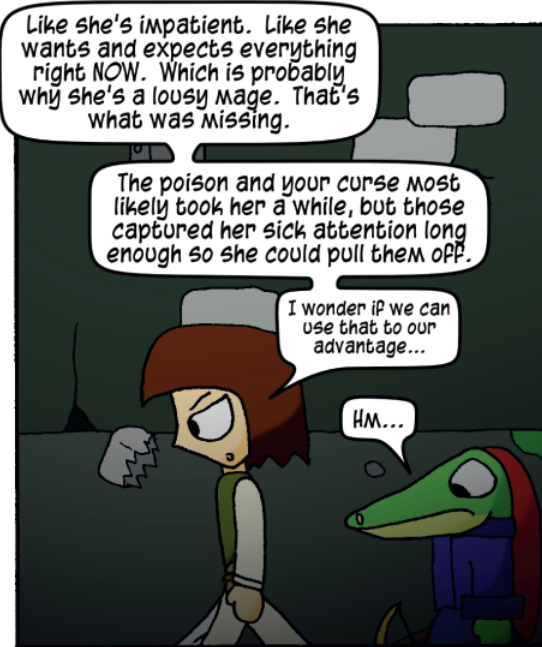
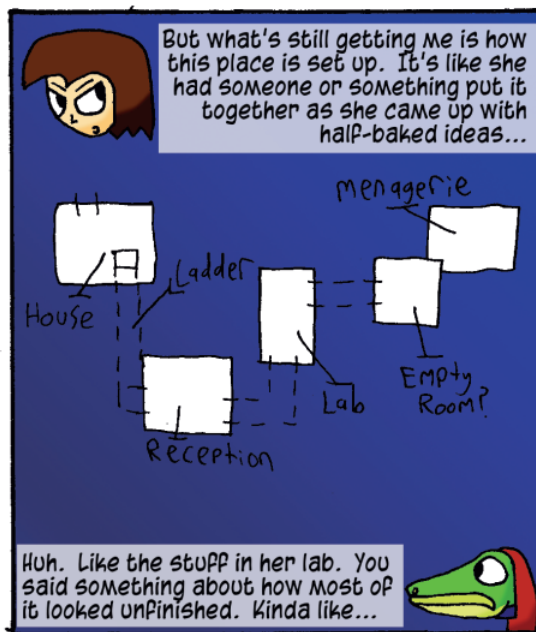
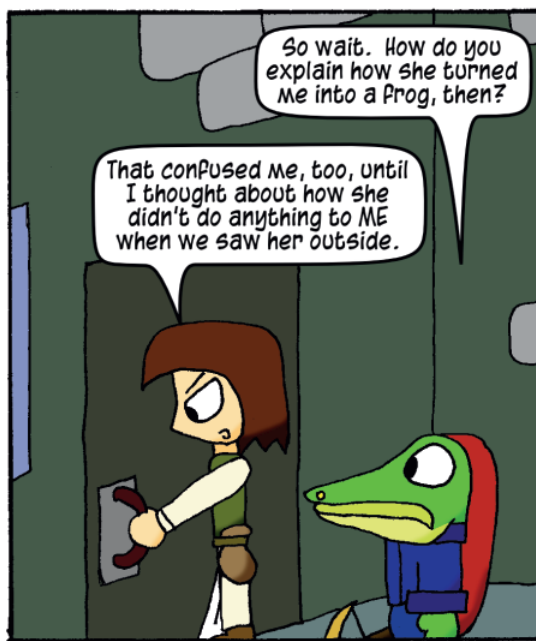
As you may have figured out by now, I tend to overthink things if left to consider them for too long. Most of the time, this leads to confusing parts like the reason why Matt couldn't see the dead illusions of himself at first. I've been trying to cut back on that.

But, sometimes it produces characters like Stephanie. I had the idea for her for quite a while, going back to sometime in Chapter One. If I recall correctly, though, she started out as a more standard-issue femme-fatale-style magic jester/harlequin character. Then, as I couldn't find a way to put her into the story until this point, I started overthinking her.

Then she started becoming a less-capable mage, yet more and more deviously intelligent otherwise. She got less and less femme fatale-ish and more plain sadistic and insane. The jester part I originally had was kept around as backstory and the source of her acrobatic talent. And most importantly, this entire plot arc eventually emerged, including all the clues Matt pieced together to finally figure this out. After enough reworking, she became the exact sort of person who would play her victims for fools for her own personal amusement. Matt doesn't appreciate being played for a fool.

As a side note, overthinking things is also what led to the beach elves. More on them in the Chapter Four book.





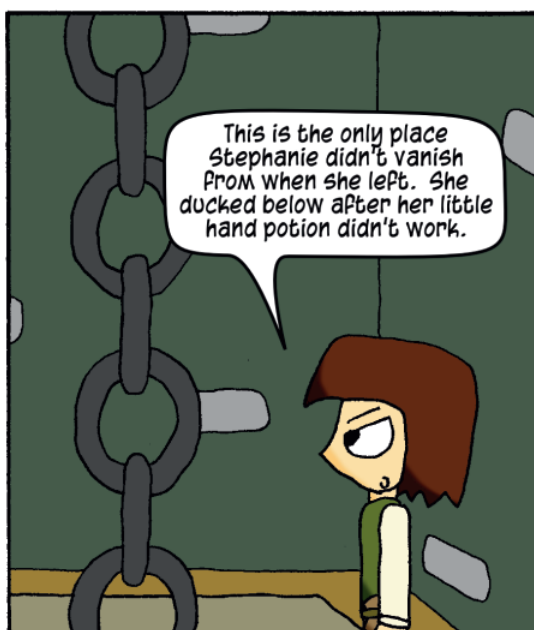
As established earlier in this chapter with the demon chicken, transformative curses like Simon's, while uncommon, aren't TOO hard to undo. And, though Stephanie is generally not a very skilled mage, she can still pull something together with enough determination and focus, like Simon's condition and the poison. In theory, removing this curse should be relatively easy, especially if Matt just asks Salthalus about it. If she could undo a curse created by Marzos, she can undoubtedly undo something Stephanie put together.

But, of course, Simon's gotten a bit used to being shorter, having superhuman jumping legs, and having a utility tongue. And with his beloved murdered by Stephanie, he's not too concerned about his looks anymore. Have to consider that.



I guess the magically-repulsive enchantment on a clerical cloth is similar to rubbing alcohol, in that it can be rubbed off onto another surface, like Matt's sword. Of course, now there's a wad of cloth with a glob of viscous ogre blood on the floor. That can't be pleasing.

I think I was trying to see how much fun I could have with lighting and shading here. The answer was "sufficient amounts of fun".



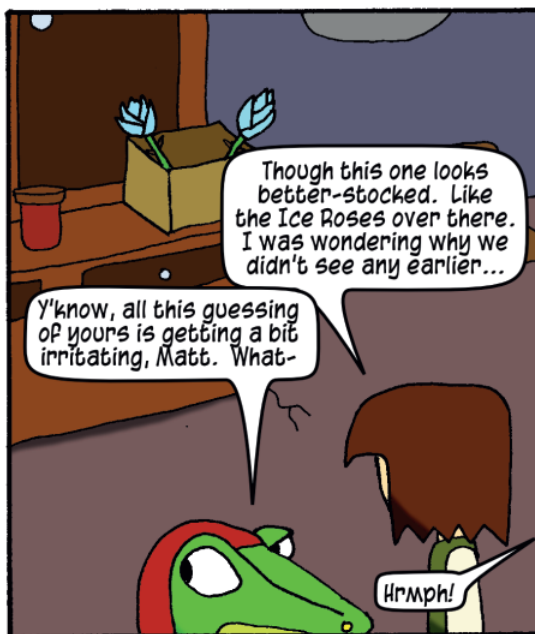
I tend to draw candles as both used and uncleaned. So, you get blobs of wax buildup near the top and pools of wax underneath. Also, Stephanie wasn't too interested in that particular book.

I'll admit that, given the presence of magic, it'd be effectively impossible for the reader to figure out what Matt figured out without him explaining everything to Simon. Simon is acting kinda-sorta like an audience surrogate in that respect right now. That's a slight challenge I have in making magic make sense in the DoM, in that I don't actually have any proper audience surrogates to which the characters can explain things. In a way, I like that, as it helps me make a more coherent world, but it means I have to find different ways to explain things, since it doesn't make any sense for characters to explain what should be intrinsic, natural elements of the world to people who already know that as well. Simon just came in handy for that, and it made sense to use him like that, given the sole reason Stephanie got away with tormenting him all this time is because he WASN'T familiar with magic in the first place.



When I first planned out this part of the story arc, I thought the color of the capsule was going to be more noticeable. Turns out it wasn't, and it only looks like a grey blob. Dangit.

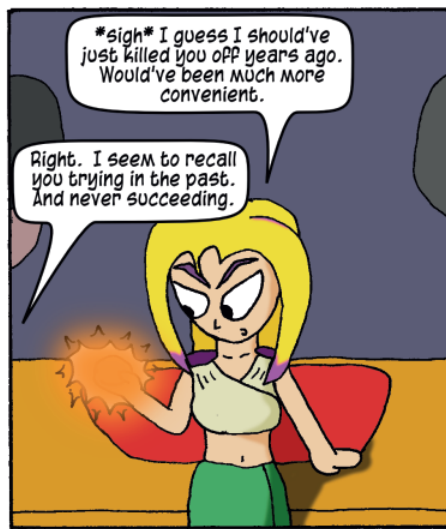
Also when I first planned out this entire story arc, I thought I would be giving more clues that could be back-referenced to show that Stephanie wasn't just poofing around on her own. Turns out I only had one such reference: An additional "crack" effect back when Stephanie first vanished when Matt was chasing her. Also dangit.



ZOOOF!

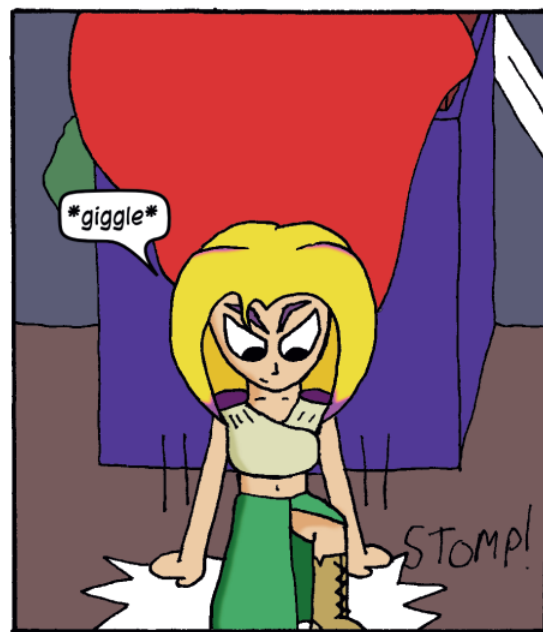
This is an amazingly large lair for one person to maintain, you know that? Sure, Stephanie's had plenty of time out here, between tormenting Simon, murdering his girlfriend, and poisoning Castle Landis, but still, I do have to wonder just who USED to live here, someone from which we assume she took over this entire place.

Hey, wait, I know. It was a sect of those once-every-Perfect-Equinox cultists back in the intro pages. Yeah, that's the ticket. They used to have a large dungeon for their cult activities, the cult eventually got bored and burned itself out (figuratively, not literally), they built the small cottage over the entrance to the underground, and then they moved out. Then Stephanie found it and took it over. That works.



Here we see the next step in Stephanie's attitude progression from the first time we met her, in that she's steadily degraded from a maniacal girl with a sadistic playful streak to genuinely angry and not playing around anymore. Unfortunately for her, Matt's not only at that same point, he's been waiting at that point for a while, and he never passed through "playful" first.

Have I mentioned yet how much fun it is to write Stephanie? I have? Good, good, because here comes the part where it got significantly less fun...

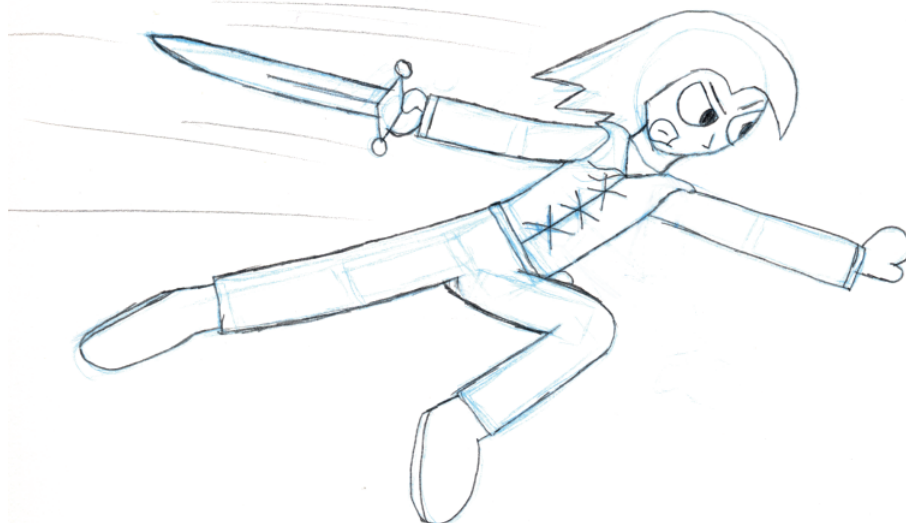


Well, here it goes. The really badly-paced fight sequence at the end. My characters tend to stick more to wit and reasoning to solve problems in the DoM, and this is sort of a good indicator as to why, apart from it being more fun to write clever answers to things. But, I had two characters quite ticked off at each other, neither of which was going to be taken by surprise, and the only answer was that they were going to wind up in head-to-head combat. I just wasn't very experienced in the matter, and it wound up like what you're about to see.

Worse, this was originally spaced out over numerous days. In hindsight, I guess it might look better in a book like this where you can read it all quickly.



Then again, I'm proud of some of the poses I managed to draw back then.



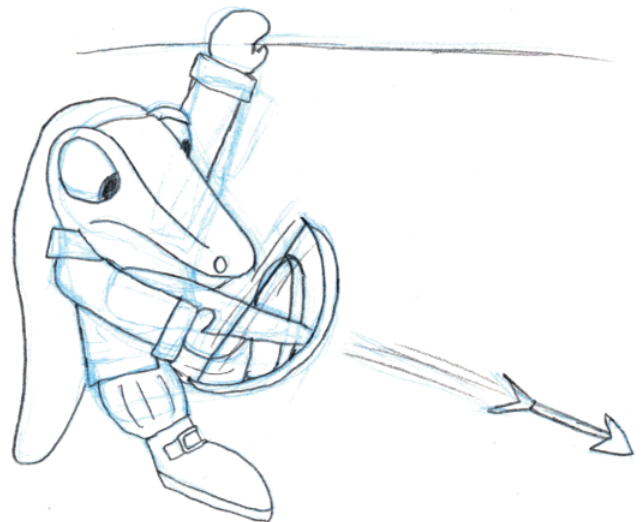


Hey, that looks like the same chain from the other lab! How 'bout that? Wonder how that'll factor in...

Stephanie might be a lousy mage, but there's still some simple spells she understands. Simple application of a pushing force, for instance. Throwing around comparatively weak energy bolts, for another. Crude, yes, but it works. Usually.



Simon understands the concept of friendly fire, hence why he's not taking shots at Stephanie when Matt might be nearby. It's just common sense, people.





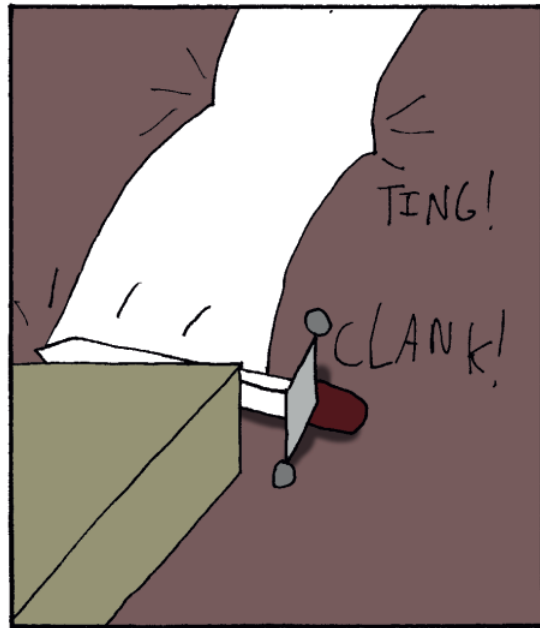
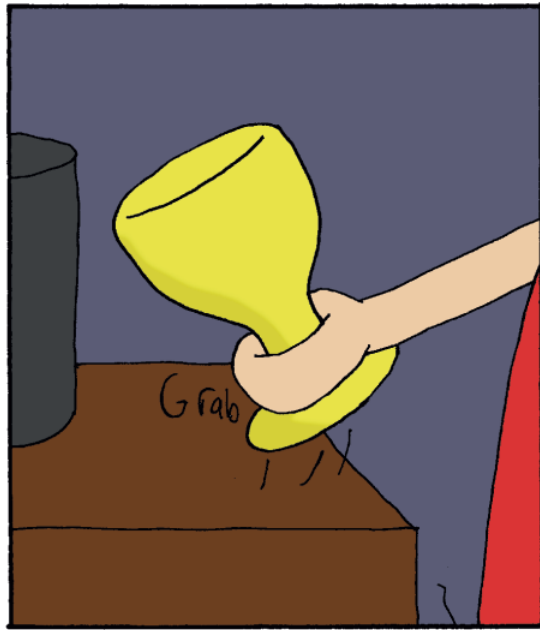
I've seen lots of stories where the villains have a cure or antidote to whatever biological or poisonous horror they've wrought on the world. In general, if the villain uses them at all, they're used as bargaining chips in some sort of ransom situation, but in nearly all cases, they're ultimately there for the benefit of the heroes as a means of fixing everything after the villains are defeated. That's nice and all, but in the case where they're NOT using it as a bargaining chip, it's generally never explained why they have such an antidote in the first place. Hence Phil's comment in the last panel. Now you know. So, for me putting your mind at ease if you were ever confused by a situation like that: You're welcome.



This was a minor clue to something we'd learn later: Note how Stephanie lacks any magic glow when she's jumping around like that. That is, all her acrobatics are her own natural talent, not magically-backed.

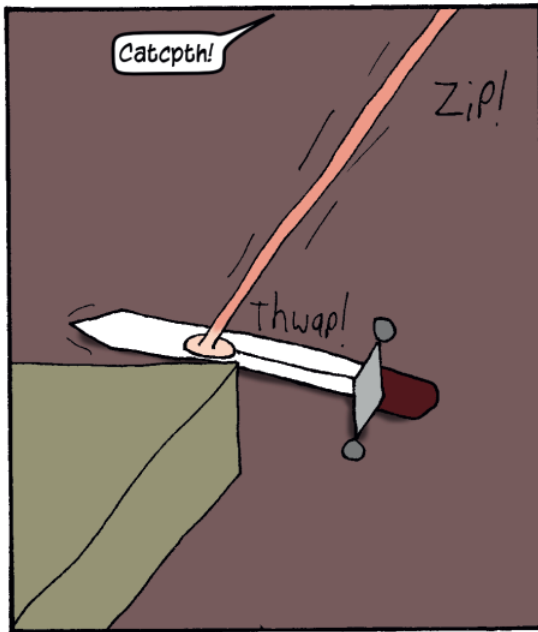
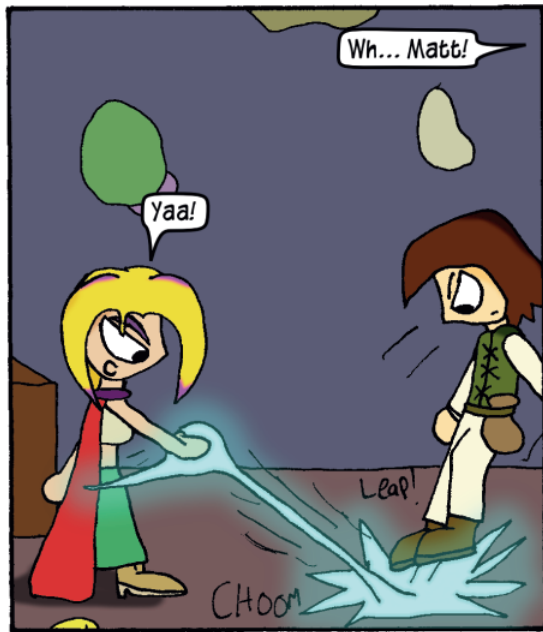
Truth be told, if she'd settle more on using THAT instead of trying to control magic to gain power, then she might be a much more terrifying threat. Then, Matt would be in quite serious trouble. Matt may be agile, but he's absolutely no match for Stephanie in that department.

Guess it's a good thing most villains suffer from crippling greed, huh?

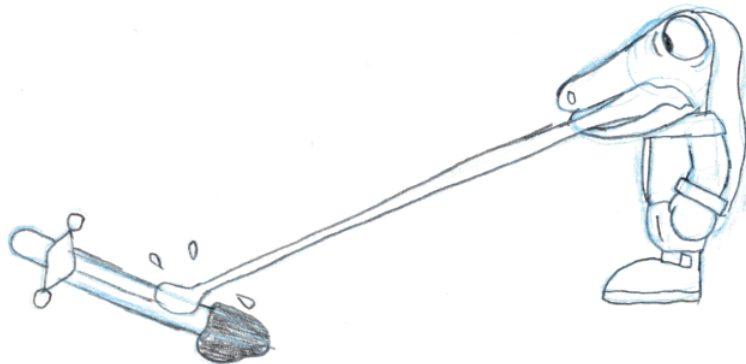


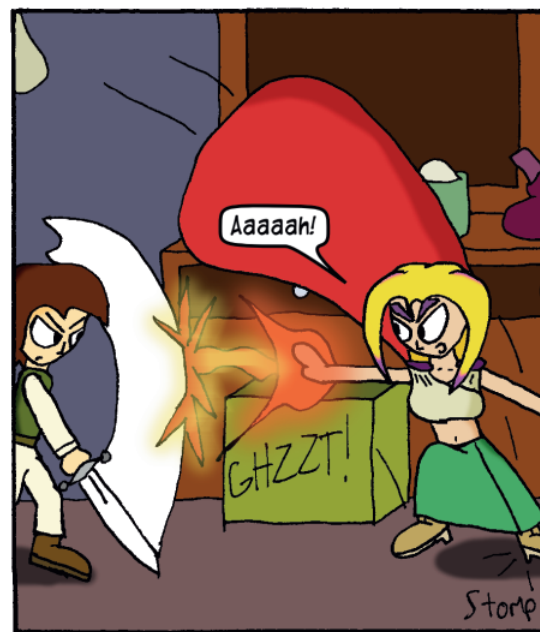
Whoops! Thought that goblet was just a background object, didn't you?

Really, despite her over-reliance on magic she's not particularly familiar with, Stephanie still IS a serious threat. Just because she's bad at magic doesn't mean she's incompetent at all.



I'll bet Simon's glad Matt wiped the ogre blood off the blade now.

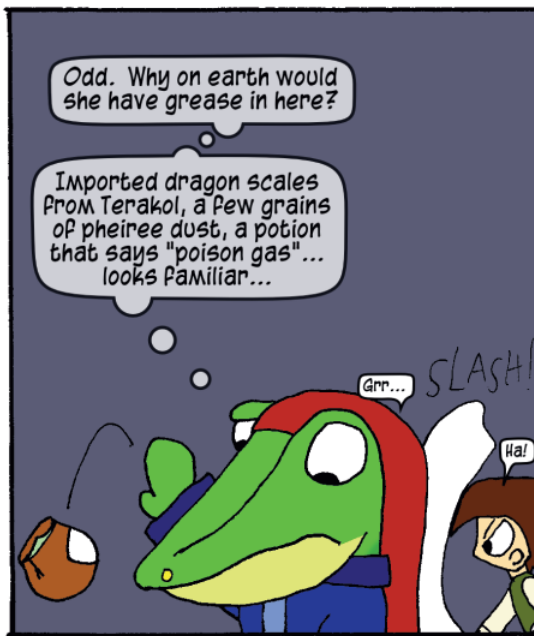




I know, I know, Matt isn't swordfighting accurately. Hollywood-style swordfights are actually considerably ineffective in real life, and highly dangerous and counterproductive at worst. The wild slashes and thrusts like that wouldn't get him far in a real fight.

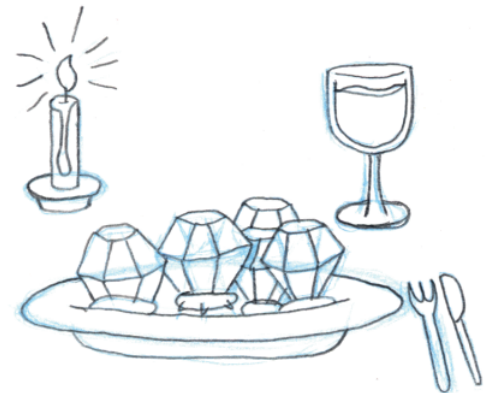
But, he's not fighting an opponent with another sword right now. He's blocking magic spells while trying to stop an otherwise-unarmed enemy. And besides, he's not much on straight fights anyway, as I mentioned back in the pub in Sornil.

Quick note, though: Stephanie is kicking off the wall, not off Matt's sword. Hooray for perspective failure!



Yes, Simon, ordinary grease. That chain mechanism in the back doesn't keep ITSELF running, you know.

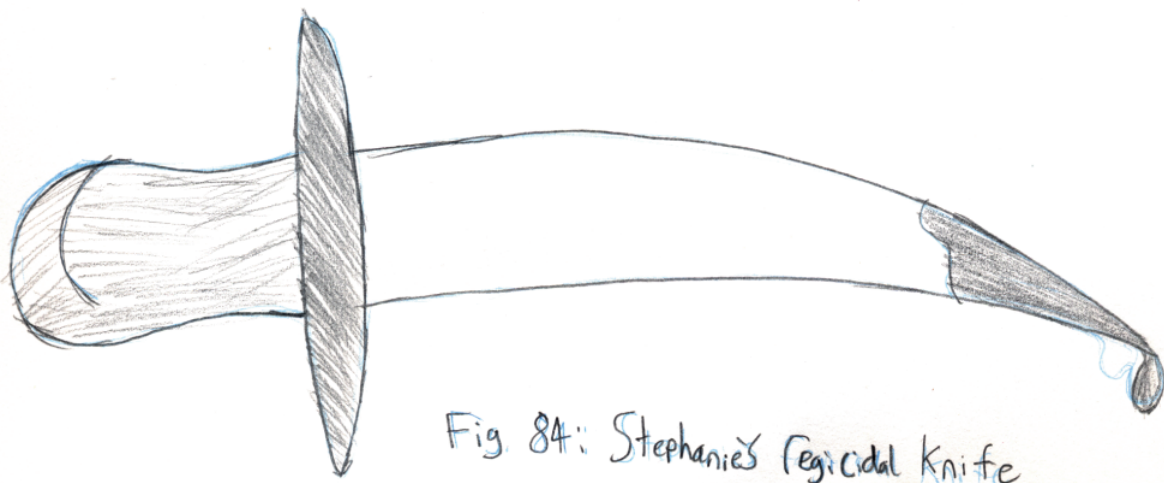
Jewelbugs are seen in mass quantity in Chapter Three. I guess they're tasty to frogs.

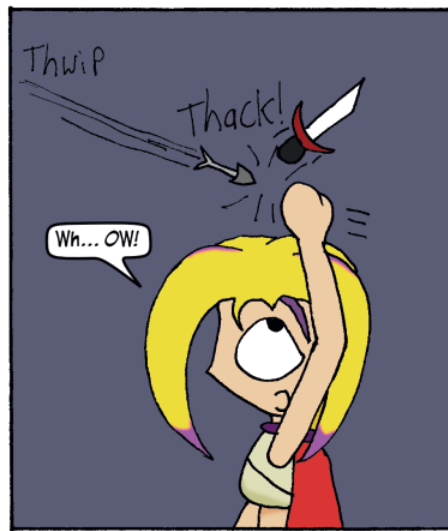




Okay, maybe "otherwise-unarmed" wasn't the best choice of words to describe someone actively throwing magic flames and energy at someone, but hey, now she DOES indisputably have a weapon, and this is a weapon she's got some experience with.

I really should've remembered this scene and made the knife she uses in Chapter Four the same one. I'll bet she was proud of her major accomplishment in the past with that one.





NOW it's a good idea for Simon to provide some cover fire.

Again, in a swordfight, this wouldn't work. Bladelock does little more than dull blades. But hey, things change when you're actually bladelocked with someone simply magically pushing the blade back rather than physically holding it up with another blade. I just hope I remember all of this once I have to draw an *actual* swordfight.

Also, please take note: At no point during all of Stephanie's acrobatics is her back ever exposed to the camera without the cape in the way. The next time I gave her an outfit, I made SURE I had it drawn from the back in my notes.



Well, Stephanie, don't YOU feel foolish now in your bare-midriff top like that? Maybe you should've taken up gutting fish instead.

Here's an interesting detail: Stephanie doesn't know Alex at all. As far as she's concerned, Alex is just another nameless victim currently dying at Castle Landis. She doesn't know Matt is not only trying to save the castle, but specifically also his sister. Which is good, else she would've REALLY started making it personal with teasing and mocking Matt.

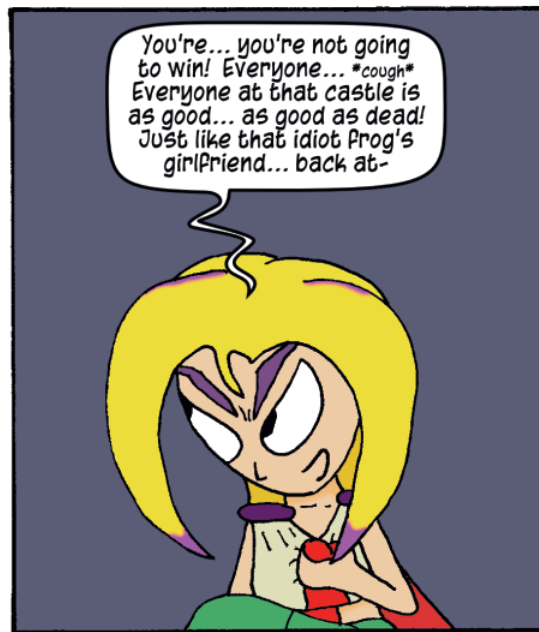
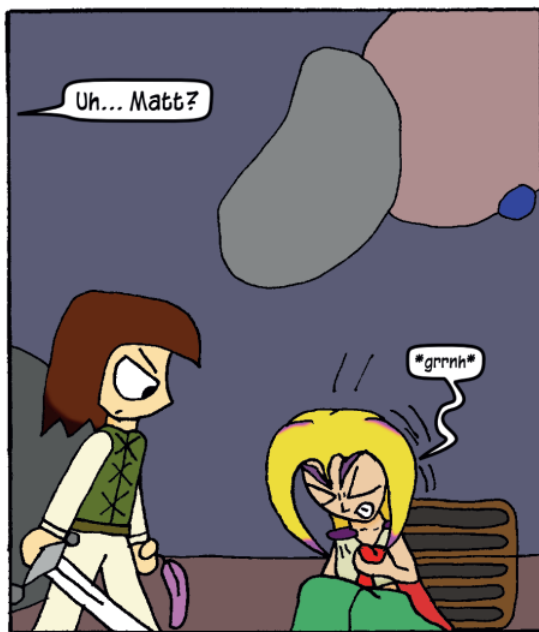
I'll just leave it ambiguous whether I mean that Matt would've made more mistakes out of rage or if he would've been far, far more brutal with her.



Whoops! Better luck next time, Stephanie!

When this one first went up, I put a small click-through warning up. The ending was pretty inevitable from the previous comic, and it's not like we're seeing blood spraying out like a geyser or whatnot, but it's still not exactly the sort of thing I add to the comic very often. Still, in retrospect, I probably should've just let it go without any warning.

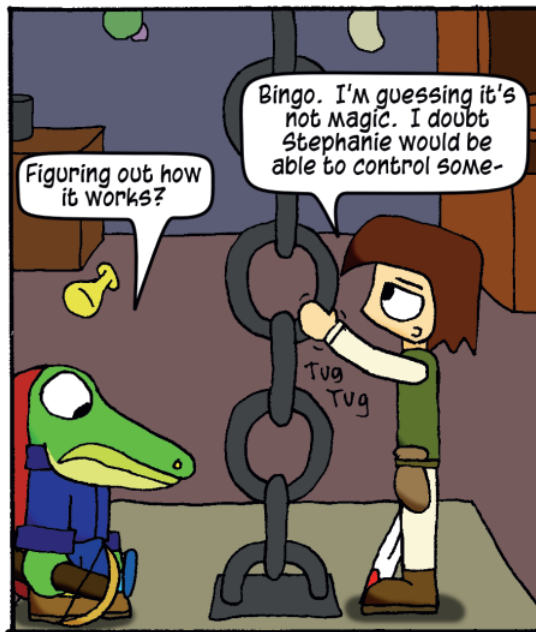
But hey, THIS time when I drew blood in the comic, at least I made it count!



Always in the last place you look, huh, Simon?

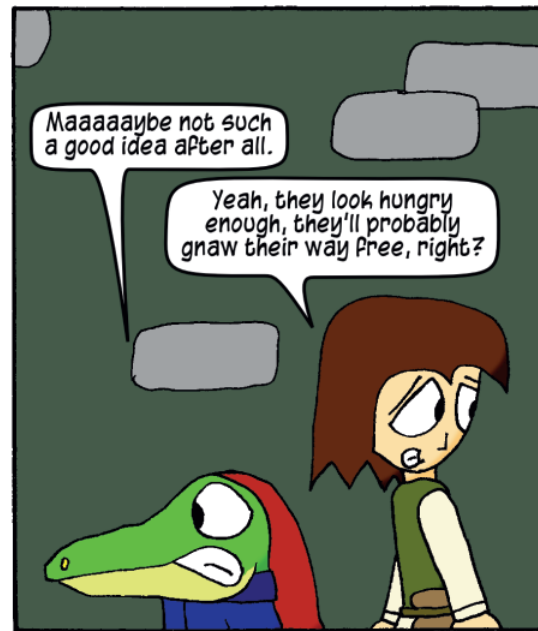
So ends Stephanie. For now. A horrible, horrible person to the end, despite the fact it's pretty obvious this wasn't going to be her end.

Also, it's somewhat creepy writing text of someone's last mocking words as they're quickly dying. Glad I don't do that very often.



Since most of the magic vanishing capsule thingies lead TO the lab, Stephanie needed some way OUT without using them (in theory; some of the capsules could've led to, say, the menagerie where she appeared behind the ogre, or she's just really good at hiding). And here's that way. The same way she got there when she dropped the capsule earlier (the one Simon found).

The chain mechanism's really well-made, though, given it didn't trigger at all when Matt was thrown into it. Those every-Perfect-Equinox cultists sure knew what they were doing!



This is what's known as "wrapping up loose ends". Or, for that matter, just leaving them for someone else to wrap up. They were at least GOING to help, but, well, wild creatures, tormented for most of their lives, potentially dangerous... yeah, that's when you leave the job to professionals.

I'll have to remember each and every one of these text bubbles if I never have need to bring these types of creatures back again.



Each and every thing Phil's asking is something I asked myself when all I wanted to do was get Matt and Simon out of the house and on their way back to Landis. Yes, the door actually IS supposed to look like it's slightly off its hinges after the two of them kicked it open. Not "down", I guess, but "open". Close enough, they didn't need to touch the doorknob.

Why they didn't just go for the windows instead is another matter.



Still didn't have much in the range of walking poses at this point. That's the exact same "both feet on the ground" walking pose they've had all chapter! Arrg!

This comic is what happens when your characters aren't "heroes", per se. Matt's concern is precisely what would happen to normal people who brought in an antidote like that. It's also an example of Simon simply assuming a key bit of information he wasn't told.

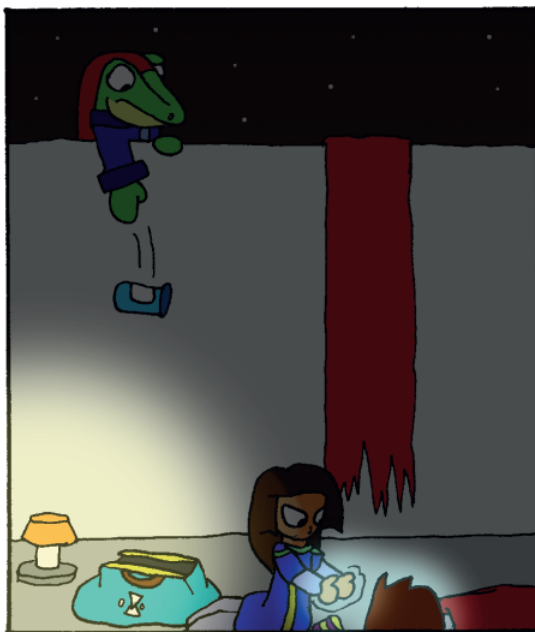


Right there, just barely visible above Cy's head? There's Captain Spam again! You can see the little can-of-Spam deely bopper thingamajig on the helmet.

Yes, that's Cy, sure enough. The king wanted a quarantine, so who's going to enforce it? Why, the patrol squads, of course. In this case, the captains. Cy's just another Landis patrol captain, and he's just here doing his job, alongside the captains of Emerald and Ruby Squads. I've always liked artists and writers who can pull that sort of thing off in their stories, making it seem like there's actual consistent people in the world, not just randomly-generated background characters.

Matt just ditches the sword in the alley here. He'd rather not be recognized by the guy from whom he stole it. Good thing forensic analysis isn't quite as advanced in a pseudo-medieval world!

The crossbow's legitimately Simon's, though. He'll get it back after he's done.



The icon on the bag is that of Lineta. The intro of the next chapter explains why that's regarded as a universal clerical/medical icon in the DoM world. More triangles!

Ultimately, there's far fewer inconvenient questions asked if it's someone *actually* from the castle who "discovers" the antidote. And, like most people, she's not going to think to look up until long after Simon's had a chance to duck down. Try it at home with your friends!



Of course, that's not to say this cleric is going to be believed right away, but she's at least going to have a far easier time convincing the rest of the medical team there's something to that jar.

Wow, this scene would've looked terrible if I were still doing blue-for-night. I'm glad I stopped doing that.

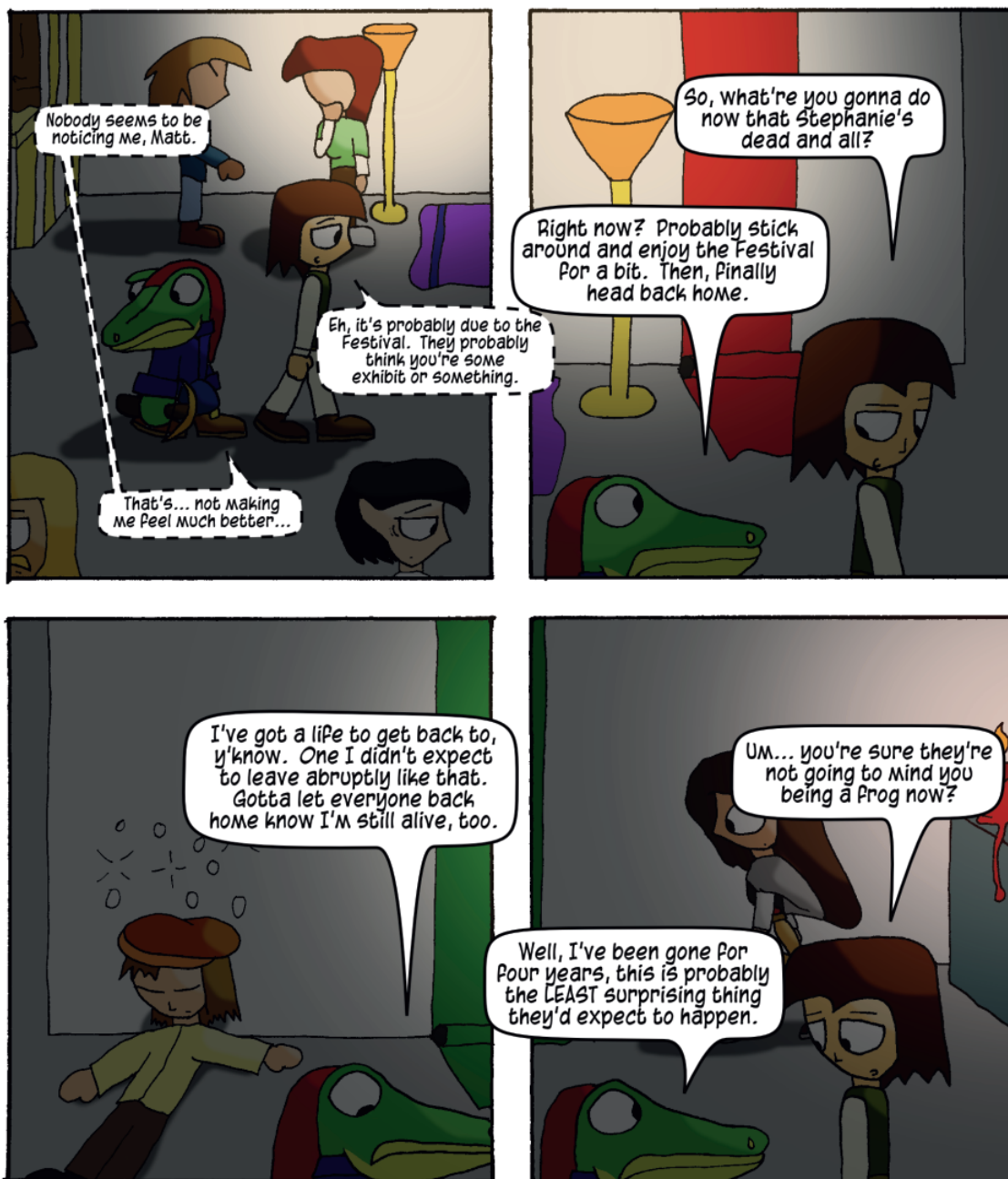
A long time ago, I got complaints from one webcomic reviewer, chastising me for Matt being a thief. Well, not so much him BEING a thief. The general complaint was that if everyone KNEW Matt was a thief to begin with (that is, if he identified that as his profession), it'd be impossible for him to remain a thief for very long for what should be fairly obvious reasons. In fact, as I recall the reviewer saying, this was a problem in nearly any story that strongly revolves around one or more characters being thieves or other manner of ne'er-do-wells while still interacting in normal society.

And really, that's a fair statement, all things considered. But, the problem with it in this case is that I don't recall any point at which Matt openly mentions to anybody he doesn't know that he's a thief. Alex knows this, of course, as does Jacob. Salthalus seems to understand this, having known him as long as she has, and chances are Phinn is simply overlooking it. But, even at that, Matt doesn't tend to talk about his side job out loud, and if he does, he either couches it in ambiguous terminology or quick, offhand references where nobody else is paying attention (i.e. when Alex and Jacob each were chastising him earlier this chapter for planning on swiping stuff from booths during the Festival).

Now, I could be wrong, of course. Maybe I did have him mention this out loud to someone back in Chapter One and I just forgot I did so (I'm pretty sure not even Howard and Tilly know what Matt does on the side). Someone please let me know if I did.

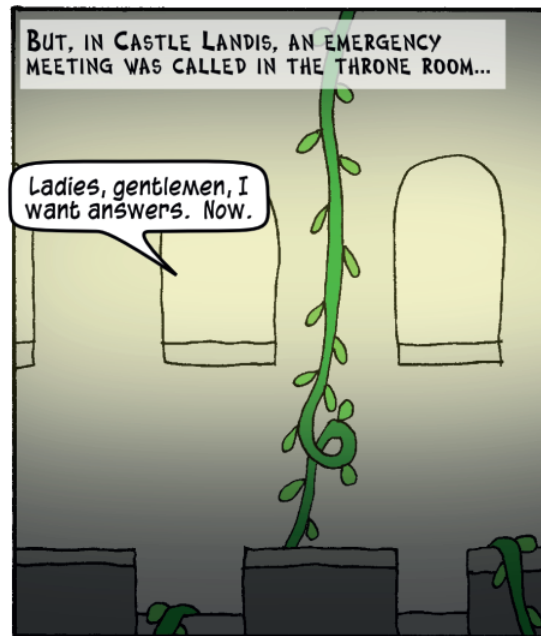
But, regardless, Simon DEFINITELY doesn't know this. He might have his guesses, but Matt certainly isn't going to help.





As our good friend there from earlier in the chapter now knows, when the dwarves bring ale to a festival, they don't mess around.

In the same vein that he doesn't say he's a thief, neither Matt nor Simon are explicitly saying that they killed Stephanie, just that she's presently dead. One has to choose one's words very carefully in cases like these.



Hey, there's the ice forger on the left in the first panel! I guess her show's over now.

A large part of the DoM is that it's a serial comic. As such, I sort of try to avoid reset switches. So, after the assailant's neutralized, the antidote's found, and the problem's apparently averted, I just HAD to bring up the fact that the castle doesn't really know what happened, and they're not going to just leave it at that.



Here's Cy as a background character again. And the captain of Emerald Squad, too. Jump ahead to Chapter Four, and that's the same guy in the all-captains meeting at the beginning. The only recurring captain we don't see here is Sally, captain of Topaz Squad.

We also see Carl the page for the first time since the last chapter. Good ol' Carl. We've all worked with someone like Carl. At one point, I had an idea to eventually reveal that King Landis was part psychic, but really, that'd ruin it, I think. Of course, that idea also involved King Landis being assassinated and having all this revealed at his funeral, which I've since decided isn't where I'm going with this.

Remember, as we know from earlier, if you're on C-Shift, all materials must be inspected at the START of the shift!

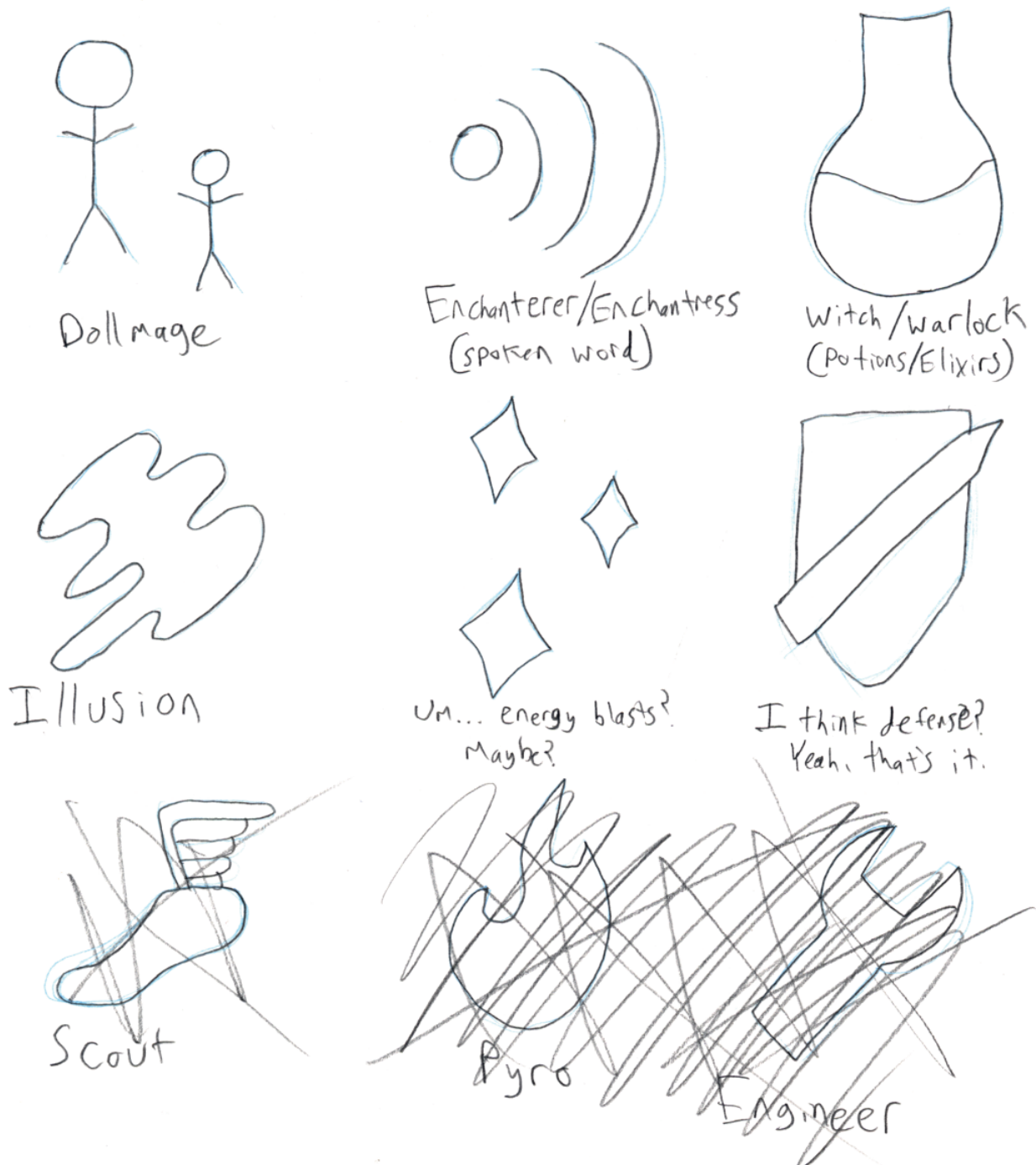


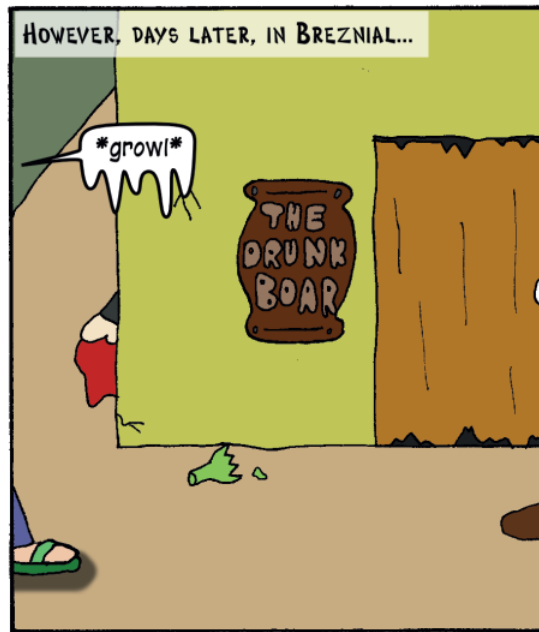
Did I say it was fun writing Stephanie? It's also lots of fun writing Tilly.

Much like how things like demon chickens get different fonts and text bubbles, animated dolls get different-colored text bubbles. Harriet also gets one of her own when we meet June later. Reason being, animated dolls are supposed to have a slightly unnatural-sounding voice (being entirely alive by magic and all). Not much; you'd get used to it real quick, but it's still just unnatural enough to stand out.

So when do the armored thugs start beatin' up these nerds?

I had all the icons in the Landis Royal Army Mage Department written down in those mythical notebooks I can't find (as soon as this goes to print, I'll probably find them). Each one is the mage's specialty. Howard's is obvious (dollmage), as is the red-haired girl with the ponytail (potions/elixirs). I want to say the guy in the back in the second panel is an enchanterer (spoken-word spells). And the one in front of the potion girl is... um... illusion? The guy on the extreme left in the fourth panel is probably protective shielding, and the leader... I don't know, energy blasts? General magic? I dunno. Something like that.

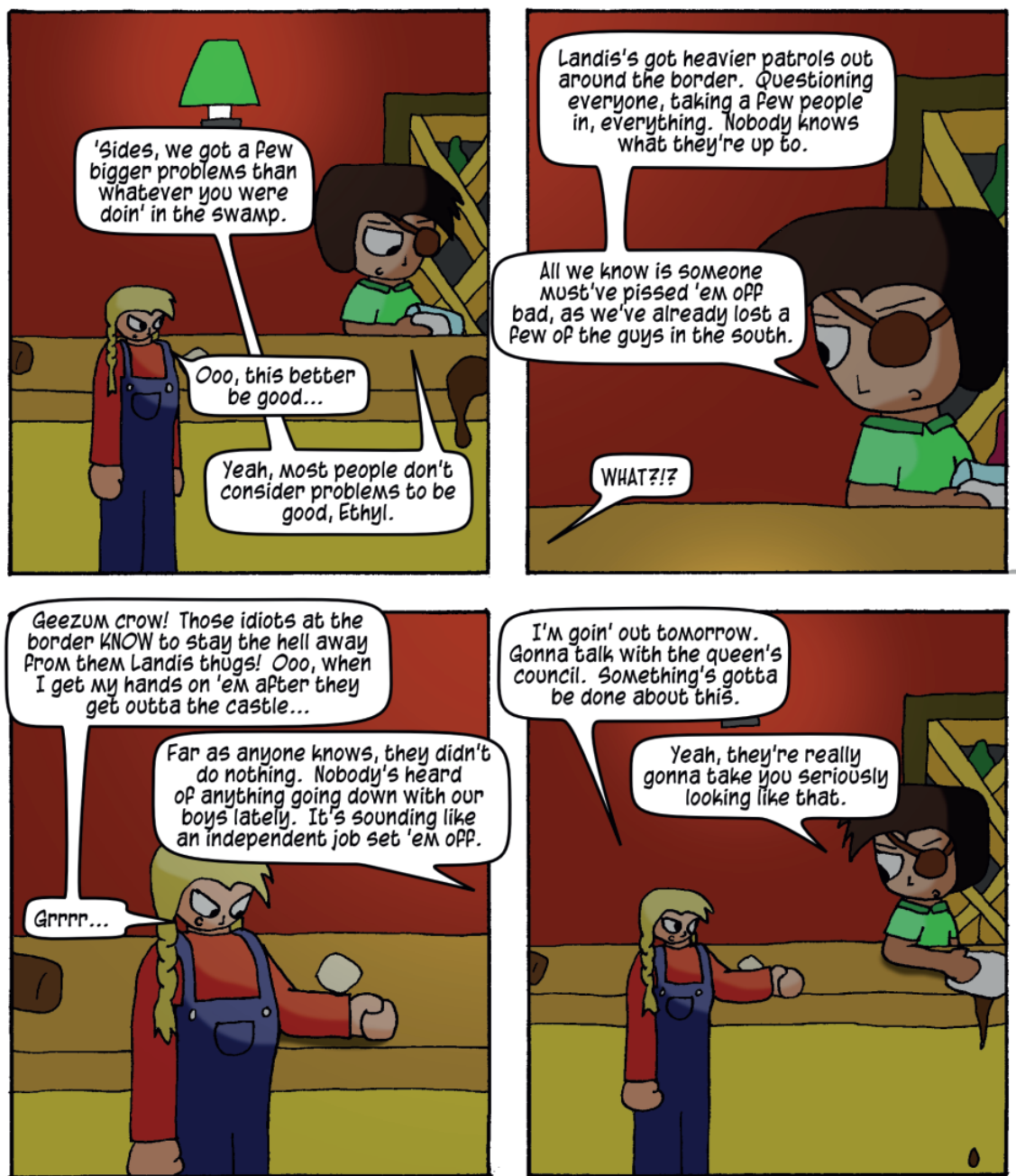




No, Yalro, Cy is not interested in a battle axe roughly his own size.

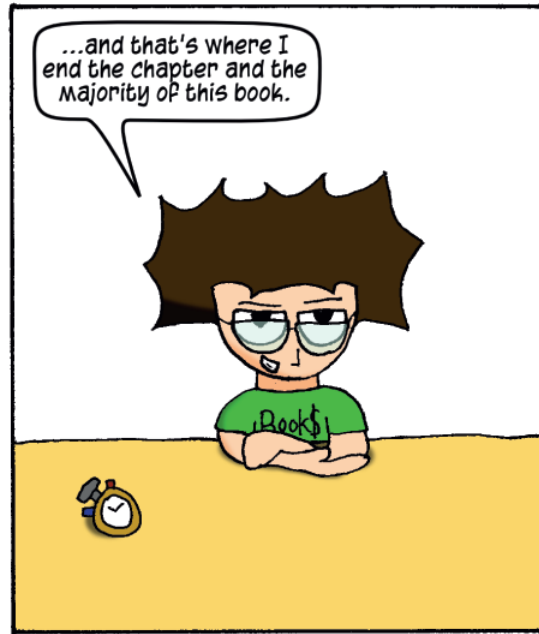
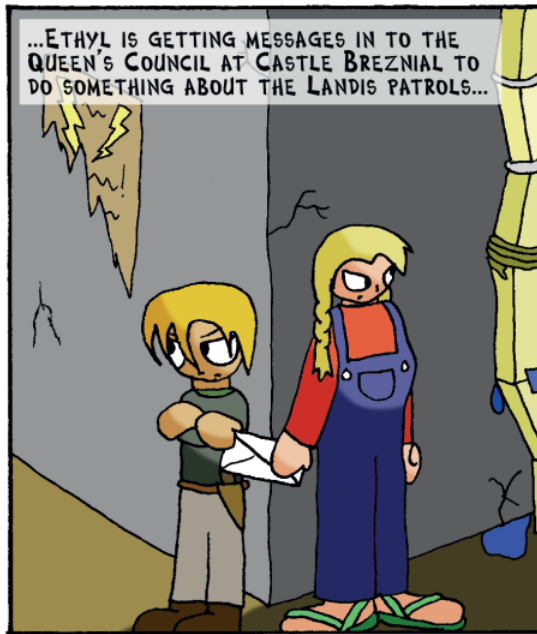
When we last left Ethyl, the leader of the largest crime syndicate in Breznial, she was indeed floating down a river into the swamp border between Landis and Breznial a chapter and a half ago. And there she met Quertia, one of the swamp hags. Now THAT'S a callback that even I don't want to touch anymore.

You can add "wine racks" to the list of things I hate drawing, right near the entry for "bookshelves".



I infused Ethyl with a sort of folksy, southeast US accent and demeanor overall (trickier than it sounds when I'm originally from the Detroit area). "Geezum crow", though, is a phrase I directly picked up from one Walter Shumate, a chemistry PhD friend of mine from the University of Alabama. It came up a lot in his sadly defunct webcomic, Labgoats (not so much in his later webcomic, girl/robot). I can't quite remember how I met him; he was definitely a follower of the webcomic world back then, back in the days when everyone traded links and friendships could be forged over website referrer logs. I want to say he found my comic as he was trawling through KeenSpace to find new stuff to read, but I honestly can't say for sure.

You'd think I could just ask him. And actually, I did, so chances are this is just placeholder text that we both decided was best to keep around because he didn't have a better answer, either.

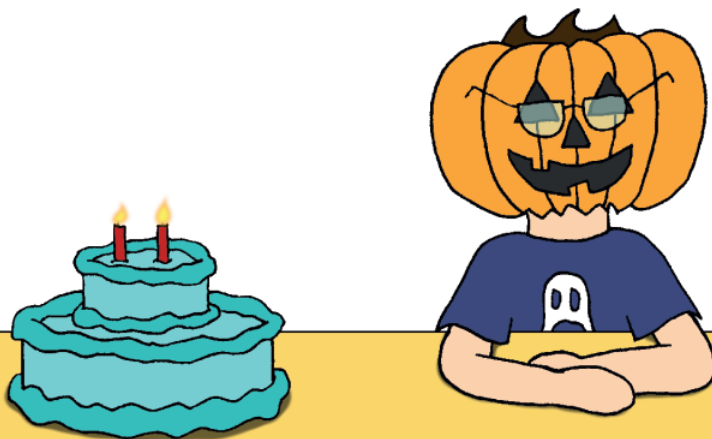


And so, Chapter Two draws to a conclusion, complete with the promise that a reset switch actually HASN'T been pulled, and that things are going to get interesting in the near future. And hey, look, there's Sally! I guess she did show up in this chapter after all!

I think back when I worked at my college's bookstore, we did have bright green bookstore t-shirts we had to wear around the fall and winter rushes to advertise buyback. Very few of my in-comic shirts are based on real shirts I've worn, but that's one of them.

But anyway, that's it! That's all the commentary for the main comics in Chapter Two! I hope you found this all at least amusing, if not a little bit informative. And maybe you've got a clearer idea of what goes through my head when I'm making this. Or, y'know, maybe you didn't. How long have I been typing this up? The commentary file alone is up to 98kB of pure plaintext now? Good gravy.

APPENDIX: HOLIDAY AND OTHER BONUS STRIPS





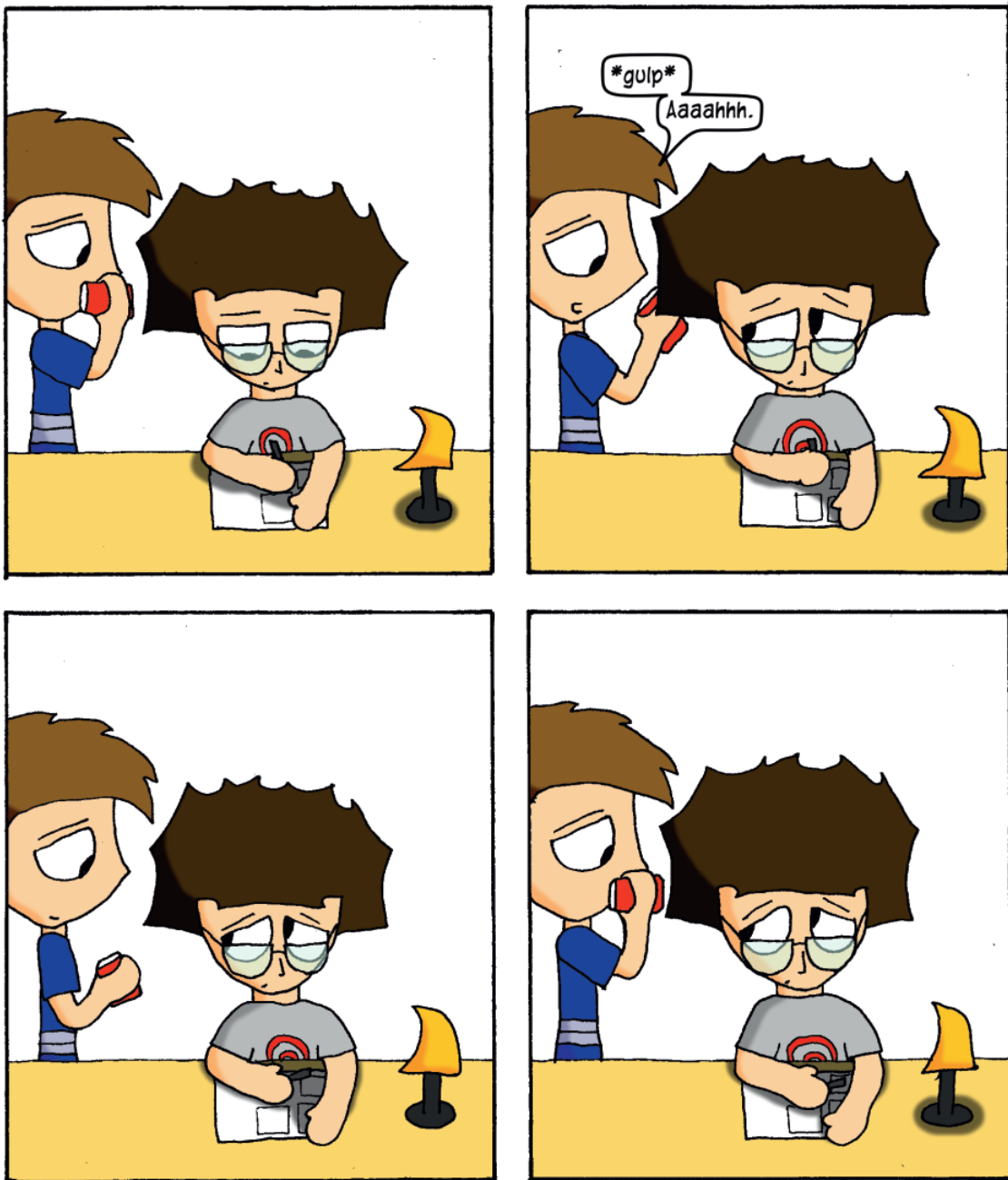
Avast! Be it written in the logs that upon the twentieth day o' September, a special version o' this comic rose over the horizon in honor o' the landlubber celebration o' the sailin' and pillagin' life, International Talk Like A Pirate Day! While it be fun t' go gallavantin' about like a salty sea dog, this comic vanished into the mists o' time and the archives, much like the festivities o' the holiday itself. It be here, though, preserved for all time on the good ship the S.S. Actual Physical Copy Of The Comic!

The piratical nature did come back but once again for the third o' these chapters, but it's since faded to legend. Perhaps once this scurvy sailor sets out to the comic seas with more speed...



Geez, my head is still huge!

I used to do Halloween comics like these. I know the common rule with this sort of thing is to put the main characters in costumes for a laugh (or, depending on the artist and characters, fanservice), but back then I was pretty bad regarding my ability to believably change my characters' outfits. So I went the route of giving myself and Phil cheap costumes. I think Frankenstein's Monster suits Phil quite nicely.



This was an April Fool's Day comic. Notably, other than the not-an-April-Fool's-Day-Comic in Chapter One, this is the only such one I've ever done. And this was seriously the best I could come up with.

I find it somewhat odd that I apparently give more attention to International Talk Like A Pirate Day than April Fool's Day. Arr.

The thing on my desk, if I'm not mistaken, is supposed to be the Oakland University sail emblem. It looks more like a gold shark fin there. Hrm.



Yay July 10th! In case anyone's trying to keep track, July 10, 2002 was the official start date of the Dementia of Magic. Everything said by the two of us here is absolutely accurate. And check out the sword-and-martini-guy Kingdom of Loathing shirt I'm wearing! Somehow in blue. They never sold a blue sword-and-martini-guy shirt.



I spent two Halloweens in this chapter? Even back when I was slightly more on schedule? Wow.

Yes, the intent was a costume/wig of Ben Wallace, part of the Detroit Pistons team that got them a title back around this point. I look absolutely nothing like him, nor have I ever. And yes, this same year, Strong Mad had a Ben Wallace costume. That was seriously a coincidence.

OUTRODUCTION

It's been a long time coming, I know. I mean, Chapter Two was around nine or ten years ago at the time I originally wrote this book, and it's been, what, seventeen or so when I got the second edition out? And sadly, "a long time coming" has been a theme in my updates as of late. As I write this, it's been over a year since my last update (to be fair, it was a rough year), and it's right at the point when things are about to go down in Chapter Eight. It's embarrassing, really, and I'm sorry for that. You deserve better than that out of me. I guess life sort of gets in the way.

But, I don't plan on stopping any time soon. I've got way too many stories about the Landis Kingdom (and surrounding lands) bouncing around in my head, and I'm not giving up on them. This book you're reading right now is a product of my stubborn refusal to give up, in fact. I enjoy writing these comics and I like drawing them. I've never been a big name in the world of webcomics, but I've had a lot of fun, met cool people, and chatted with great fans.

So, thanks. I went into making this book sort of blind. I never laid out a book before, didn't know how this was going to look in the end, and wasn't completely sure I knew what my readers wanted in a book besides the comics themselves. I still don't really know that part. This was an experiment of sorts, and I hope you enjoyed these two hundred or so pages of drawings and silly rambling and things and whatnot. Thanks for reading, thanks for sticking around with my little comic, and rest assured I'm not done yet.



SPECIAL THANKS

Thanks to Robin Armstrong, Dave Perry, Jessica Regenbrecht, Walter Shumate, and Laura Taylor, among others, for various bits of advice, reading, re-reading, and/or giving me all sorts of interesting and fun stories to tell throughout this book. Maybe later I'll tell you the story about the concert in Vancouver.

Also, thanks to the respective teams behind GIMP, Inkscape, and Scribus. Their programs followed me home one day, lost and looking for a home. I looked deep into their big, open-source eyes, took pity on them, took them in, offered them homes on my computer, and ruthlessly enslaved them all to color the comic, text the comic, and lay out this book (respectively).

Plus, thanks to Nicholas Knight for co-writing the update script I use, which in turn helped me move to the small hosting thingamajig he's been doing since I think midway through Chapter Two.

And of course, thanks to the few, the proud, the fans of my comic, those of you who read it, enjoy it, and occasionally talk about it, whenever I can get it updated. I couldn't do any of this without you. And someday I'll figure out which of you added the few entries in TV Tropes related to the DoM, because I know I didn't. Maybe I should've asked that first, really. Can I start the book over? I'll get it right eventually.

