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Special thanks to everyone who helped spread the word!

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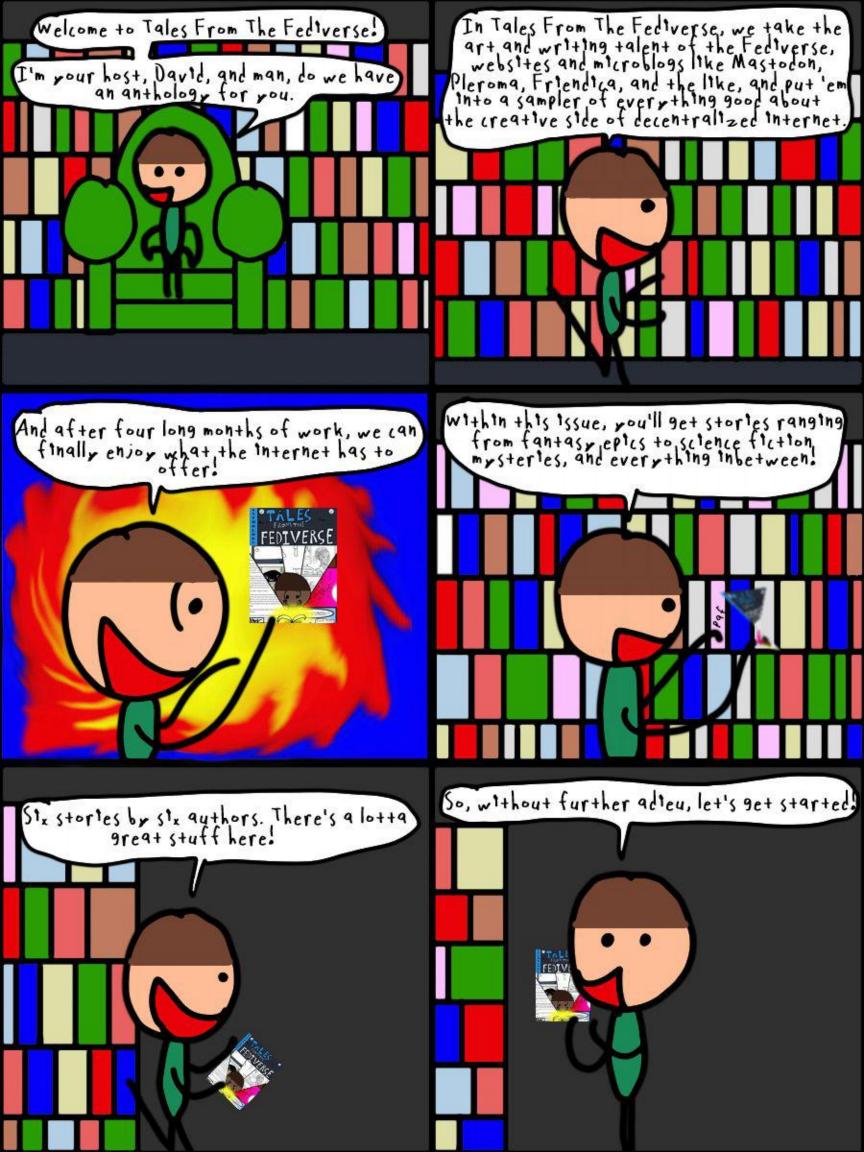
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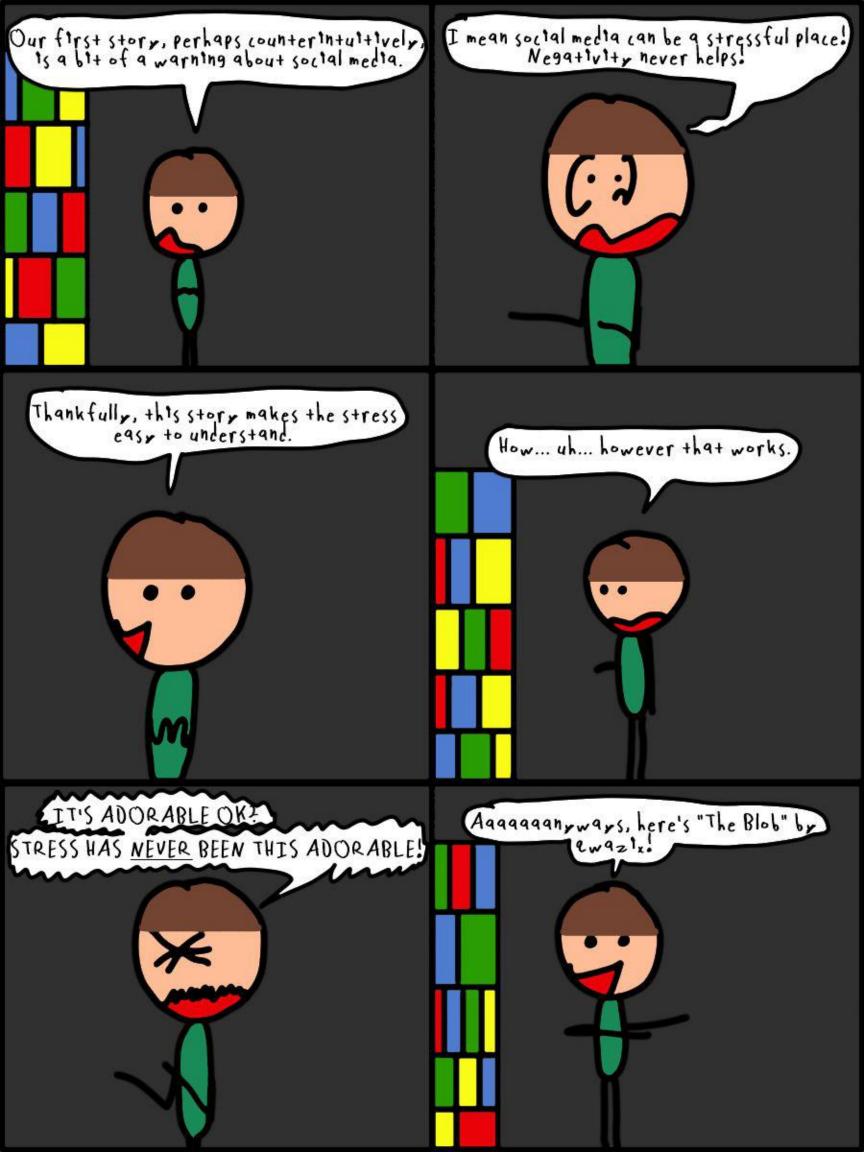
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Editor. David

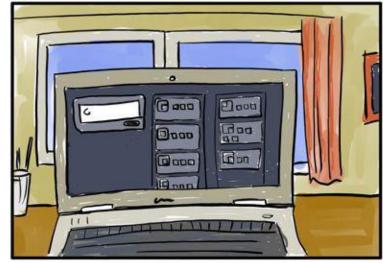
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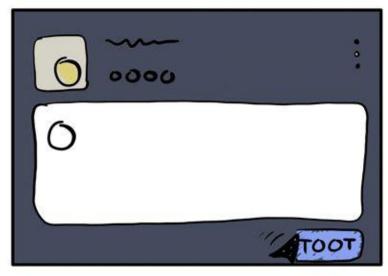
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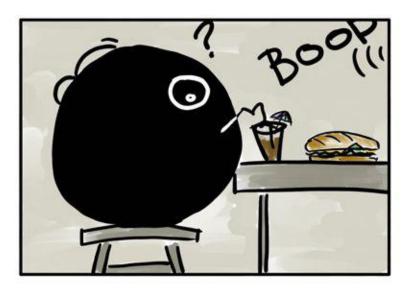


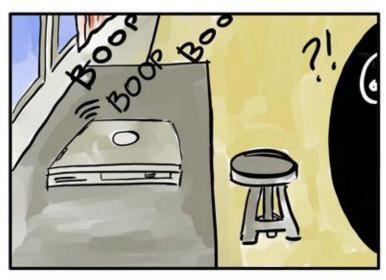














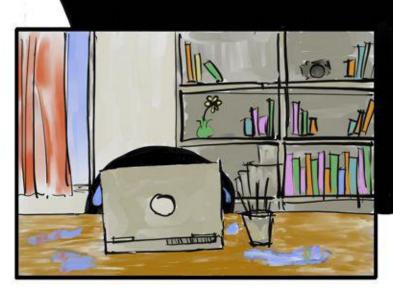


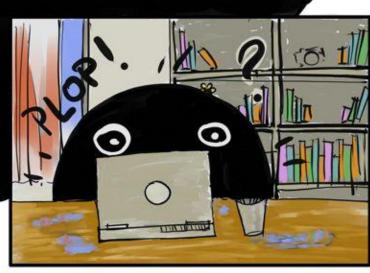






















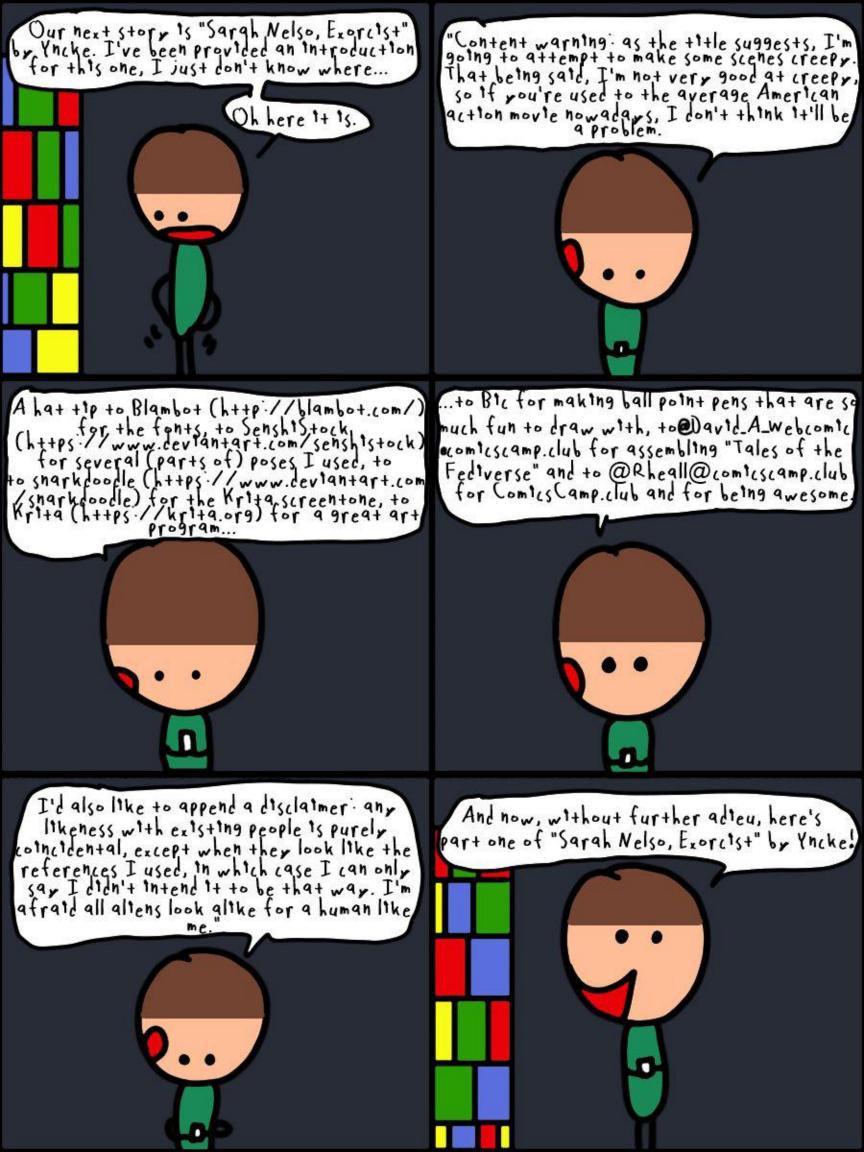
































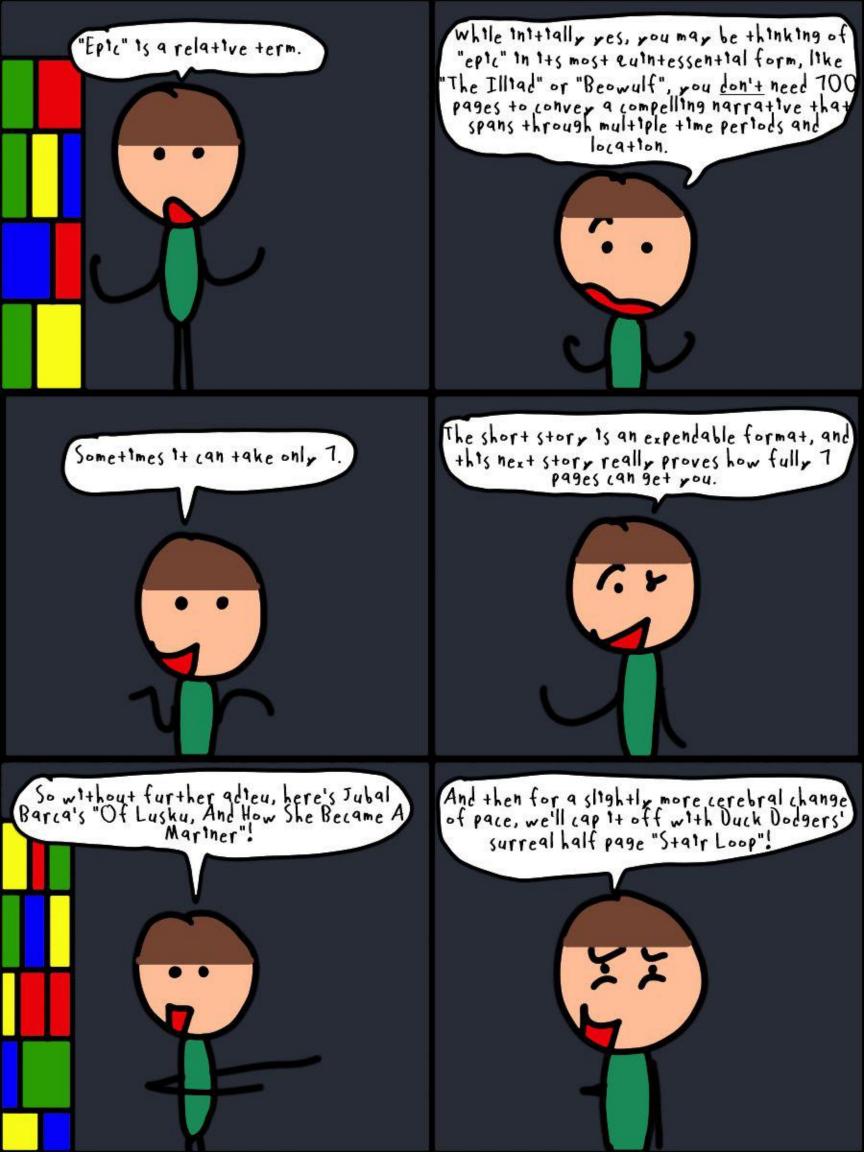












Of Lusku, And How She Became A Mariner

By James Baillie

The ship slipped the last few feet into the dock, and started to bump gently against the soft piles of netting that lined its berth as the island swam on through the open ocean.

Lusku saw two figures alight on the dock, as a small crew scurried, ant-like, across the low deck behind. The vessel was low-slung for an ocean voyage, and looked a little the worse for wear, but the two travellers were well dressed and gazed up past the palm trees to the cluster of houses that sat upon the island's peak. Shaking her hair, Lusku shinned down the tree she had been sitting high upon, and ran sandalfooted into the village to let folk know of the arrival.

It was a little while after sunrise, and her long storm of wind-flailing hair was the only restless cloud in sight. The clicks and whistles of dolphins sounded in the distance. Beams of light shot and danced across the water. A gentle heave of the isle beneath and a heavy wave crashing on the forward shore gave the comforting knowledge that the great beast was breathing, and it slowly, eternally pulled them onwards, with nothing to be seen around except one other moving island, just on the horizon in the far, far off distance, even further out into the open ocean.

"Surku! Tiakai! Esul! Travellers!" she called. "Mother! Father!"

The newcomers had already been welcomed by the group of families who lived by the dock, and were making their way in a procession up the path, the crew carrying boxes of goods in their arms. The atmosphere was not unfriendly but nor was it yet warm, except perhaps with the two leaders who had alighted first and who were trying to talk with the aid of wide sweeping hand gestures to amused islanders; the ordinary sailors meanwhile clearly did not understand the conversation, and grunted, sweating beneath their loads.

They came to the gates of the village, which swung open before them, and a smiling Lusku was at the front of the crowd that greeted them.

"Now I have seen it all," declared the man, in a passable attempt at the trading tongue that the sea folk used (not the whalesong tongue; that was only for the home and the community's sacred days, passed on from mother to son and father to daughter). "I, a far off traveller from the port of Taravel, reaching one of the lands of the Cheloniad, this great moving island that is but a fabled tale in our shallow seas. What a sight!"

It struck Lusku that the man had no need to say such things. The people of the isle were well aware that there were peoples who lived on unliving, unmoving shores, and seas where their great floating homes had no wish to pass.

The man had a thick accent, and a wispy little beard, and quick little brown eyes set into an olive face. His hair was tied back, and his shoulders were broad, and he smiled all to one side, like half of his face was happy and half of it sad. His companion was a small woman with big, mud-pool eyes and a wide, flat nose, and she wore a huge cloth that was wrapped robe-like around her, slung over one shoulder at the top.

Then again, Lusku thought, perhaps the need of these people's words was not to tell anyone anything, at least not directly. It told a story: an idea of who these strangers were or could be to one another. Even the smallest child was aware of the People of Dust, of how long ago the first Isle had been found by Kukht Skuai, the first *Kuesh*, of how heroes like Cunning Surku had returned to the People of Dust and tricked from them a thousand treasures, of how great *Kuesh* had taught the People of Dust the sea-ways and the art of trade. They were good stories, stories that told you who you were, what you were doing here.

The two leaders of the travellers bowed low and signalled their men to place the goods in the central plaza of the village, with the white and purple paint of its clay houses reflecting the climbing sun ever brighter towards them.

"Perhaps you should go with them when they leave," said Lusku's mother, who had joined the crowd. "They'll like as not find other isles you could move to, and you're old enough to go out into the world now."

Lusku tilted her head, and considered. She already knew that she could not stay much longer on the isle: their village was strong, which meant too many people, which meant sending young women and men to other isles. The ship would be safer than building her own raft; it was worth the thought, but she had little wish to leave at that moment.

For the rest of the day, the newcomers traded. They brought iron and steel tools, hard and cold and able to stand the toil of work for longer than the bone knives and spears that the islanders used the rest of the time. Arrul, the island's leader, their *Kuesh*, even bartered a whole casket of fine seal-oil for a long, sharp, heavy blade of the kind that the man and woman who led the ship's crew both carried. It made the Kuesh look warlike, with her knot-grass helmet and chestplate on as well, though Lusku knew that Arrul would be far more likely to use the weapon to cut up particularly large fishing catches than ever wield it in anger.

They brought cloth, too, soft and warm, kinder than the rough grassweaves that most of the islanders wore, and in enough quantity that the ordinary islanders could trade for them. In return, the travellers received just a single bolt of cloth from the island – but this was a bolt of sea-silk, a cloth fit for emperors, a cloth it had taken the whole island weeks to make, woven fine from the filaments through which great shells clung to their slow moving home as it carried ever on through the foam.

And the third thing they brought, as the afternoon came to a close, was stories. Some of it was news, that Lothar (a name that Lusku knew not) had taken the throne of Alasia (a place that Lusku knew not), and that there was war in the Oak Islands, and a hundred other things of peoples and seemingly whole worlds that seemed very distant from the familiar, slow-lurching back of the island-creature that had provided her whole world up to that point.

"And of course I must tell you of our own adventures," said the man, making a wide sweeping gesture with his hands.

It was getting towards evening, and the sun was sinking low. The villagers gathered in one of the larger buildings, and passed around food and drinks, as the man began to tell a tale.

"Let me tell you," said the man, "about our escape from the Giant Blood Baron of Ecarath! He ravaged the isle of Gendrog for twenty winters, stamping around in his great fur cloak, in a land where the winter is so cold that the very waters themselves turn hard and pale.

We were shipwrecked on that accursed ice, and I went inland and was captured by the Baron, a mighty giant, twelve feet tall and more than willing to eat a man's heart out with a single bite! His teeth stained red, his great fur cloak huge and heavy, he found us and cornered us all. He grabbed me and threatened to kill me there, eating me raw with his terrible teeth."

The crowd breathed in, hanging on the man's words.

"But he did not know where our ship was", said the man, "and he desperately wanted to know. He wanted to get our silks and the rest of my crew, and our swords to use as butter-knives and our daggers to use as tooth-picks.

Now, there was a lake nearby, deep and cold, frozen as all things were in that barren land, and I had an idea. I bet him that whichever of us could cause the most breakage in the ice would get our desire – I my freedom, or he my ship.

He agreed, thinking his strength would save him, and with a huge fist he punched a hole in the ice, whilst I whittled a smaller one with my sword.

Ha! said he. I see my great breaking of the ice is by far the larger.

Ah, said I. But had I not challenged you to the contest, you would not have made a hole at all. As such, I caused your hole in the ice, plus my own, and submit that I have won the contest.

The giant was angry at realising he had been tricked, and he stamped, and he gnashed his teeth, and he tore a tree from the ground without even realising it in sheer fury.

I'll show you! he said. I'll break the biggest hole in the ice that you've ever seen!

And he stomped out into the middle of the lake and he stamped and stamped until the ice broke right through – and sunk him with it. He bobbed up and down for a moment, but he was so heavy and his huge fur cloak so wet that he was pulled down and down to the lake's very bottom, where for all I know he is to this day.

I think that the giant might have won the contest, at that point, but he was in no position to make use of it, so we repaired our ship with the help of some grateful locals and made our way back out to sea and freedom."

Lusku was entranced. These were new stories that roamed in her head, stories not from ancient times but right here, right now. This strange man with his heavy accent and his lopsided grin was... well, he was a hero. She looked around the room to where the other villagers were sitting, their eyes wide.

"When we had escaped," said the man, "I sang a prayer for our wellbeing, and we boarded ship again. We had a fair wind to the south, for a while – but we were waylaid, for a terrible sea-spirit rose up before us, shaped like a man of rolling, ever-stormy wave.

Who are you that would travel my domain? Roared the spirit.

1? Palavan, I said.

And why should I not crush you? Said the Spirit.

I know things, I said, trying to think of something that could save us. Things you will never know if you crush me and my ship.

Foolish sailor, said the spirit. I can answer any question you ask me.

Give me three questions, I said, and I am sure I can find one you will answer wrongly.

Very well, laughed the spirit cruelly. If you can, I will let you go – but if you cannot, your ship shall be mine. Now, ask your question.

Who rules Maghkedel, furthest of cities from the sea, upon the desert edge? I asked, hoping that a sea-spirit would have no knowledge of such a land.

Such a question being of lands far off makes no difference to me, said the spirit, for I know well that the city of Maghkedel is ruled by the Brass Lions, terrifying in battle and vengeful in defeat and victory alike.

I cursed my misfortune to have run into such a creature, but thought to myself to find a second question.

Where in the world is the finest bread to be found? I said, trusting that such a water spirit would have not known the ways and needs of humankind.

Such a question being of things I have not felt makes no difference to me, said the spirit, for I know the ways of human folk. It is always said that the finest bread is that from one's own hearth, for the taste of homecoming sweetens each mouthful.

I cursed and cursed again, for the spirit had indeed seen through the trick of my question, but there was nothing for it but to think of a third thing to ask the creature.

It was then that I realised the question that could save my life, and I asked it.

What is my name?

Such a question so close to your own self makes no difference to me, said the spirit, for you are Palavan! The spirit roared with laughter. You already told me!

I bowed. I am indeed Palavan, but that is, in my people's tongue, the word for a mariner. It is not my name, and you have answered me wrongly.

You tricked me! Cried the spirit.

But your promise stands, I said, knowing that such fey creatures were bound by their word above all else.

And so the spirit was defeated by my cunning, and bowed his head, and turned into a school of dolphins that rushed around our ship as it sped on through the water. We were free at last to travel onwards."

The man paused in his story, and sipped from a round bowl that one of the villagers had passed to him. His audience were silent, waiting, listening. Lusku did not move, but watched, but listened, but thought.

The sun had dipped below the horizon outside, and candles of whale-fat lit the room, puffing heady smoke out into the rafters of the hut. Through the haze, the man's voice came for a third story, rolling like candle-smoke across the audience.

"We at last came," said the man, "to a place where the sea was calm and there was no wind at all. We were forced to row through the silent water, until we came to an island upon which two gods lived. They were powerful beyond measure, for it was they who had commanded the calm of the sea and they who had brought our ship to those waters. Their power was greater than the cold fires of moonlight, the deep tides of the ocean, the strength of the great mountains.

Travellers! They called to us. Come and tend our fires.

Each of them sat before a great burning fire, and this was their hope – that we should be kept upon that island forever to keep their fires burning, and cut their trees, so that they should never have to lift a finger to do it themselves. There was a forest nearby, and they commanded us to cut some trees and bring them to the fire.

I commanded my sailors to cut fifteen trunks, and we dragged them up to their two fires.

Hail, gods, I said. Here is a log for each of your fires. I have cut only the finest trees from your forest – no wood is better than this. And my men threw a log onto each fire.

Give us more, they said, and so I called my men to throw two logs onto each fire, so that each fire had three great trunks burning upon it. Now you have three of the finest logs each, I said. Is that not satisfying to your greatnesses?

No, each of them replied in turn. No, I want more, I want more. So my men threw four more logs onto each fire, and they had seven trunks burning each, a great pyre that blew sparks high into the darkening sky. Is that not the greatest fire you have seen? I said. Seven each of the finest fifteen trunks in your forest.

But it is in the nature of Gods to want more and greater, just as it is in the nature of ourselves. No, they roared, more, bring more. But there was – as I had planned – only one trunk left. Which of you will then have the last trunk? I said. For there is only this last of the finest trunks in your forest. Tell me, which of you is the greater, who shall have the last fine wood for your fire?

Of course, neither of them could possibly admit that he was the lesser, and so they began to argue. The first God roared of how he had sunk a castle, and the second of how he had sunk a city. The second God roared of how he had raised a hill, and the first of how he had broken a mountain. And back and forth they went, and back and forth, until they were not just shouting but standing, and not just standing but fighting.

And there, as two Gods raged, neither of them noticed that we had crept back to our ship, and heaved on our oars, and by the time they knew what was what we were far, far gone from that strange place with the calm waters, and vowed to ensure we never sailed that way again."

He bowed to signal the end of his tales, and Lusku called and whooped with the rest of the islanders as they slapped their thighs and knocked on the floor to show their appreciation for the storyteller's crafts.

Lusku stepped out of the door of the hut for a moment, and found the woman standing there, the one who had come along with the traders. She breathed the darkening air, and it was cool where the inside of the room had been sweat-fumed and hot.

"I would come with you, when you leave," she said to her. "If you will take me on your ship."

"And why would you do that?" said the woman, looking sideways at her.

"Because I am ready, and I am old enough," said Lusku.

"I do not doubt your age, or your strength," said the woman, "but age and strength are not a reason to become a mariner."

"I can be useful, too," said Lusku. "I can fish, and fight, and mend ropes: I am strong enough to haul goods, and sharp-eyed enough to scout for land."

"I do not doubt your usefulness," said the woman, "but I still want to know why you want to travel with us, if we are to take you aboard our ship."

"You know those stories better than I," said Lusku, finally. "Who would not want to live life as you do? I have grown up hearing tale after tale of long ago when people did greater deeds and greater things, but you come doing those things today. I have heard enough stories about who I am. I want to make stories about who I will be."

"You should not come," said the woman, "because you want to live a life like a fairytale. What has my companion told you, after all, if not that he spins words like a weaver spins thread? All his tales tell you not what he did, but who he is, and he is a good man, and he is a brave man, but he is a moonlight-tongued rogue just the same."

Lusku paused, and looked out across the water, which was darkening with twilight. "You mean those are all... just stories?"

The woman smiled a smile like a little twist of knot-grass, that grew sideways across her face, just a little like the lopsided smile of her companion. "Nothing is ever just a story," she said, "But stories are both more and less than truth, and truth is the only place you can live in. You cannot live our life based just on stories. Think on that."

The woman turned away, and into the building, and left Lusku outside.

As she walked home, her shoulders were slumped, and the sea's last glimmers in the far distance seemed to tantalise her, made half-real and yet untouchable. At last, the night wrapped around Lusku, and fell, soft across the dark water.

Dawn cracked like an egg, golden across the world and water.

The boat bumped gently against the side of the dock. The beast below opened a weary eye, and the isle rumbled gently as air surged through the great hallways of cavernous lungs beneath the surface.

Standing by the dock was a young woman, and Lusku was her name. She had a tight knot-grass helmet upon her head, and carried a bag of clothes and a fishing spear. She had said farewell to her parents before dawn had even broken. She was ready.

"Why have you come," said the woman aboard the ship, "after what I told you yesterday?"

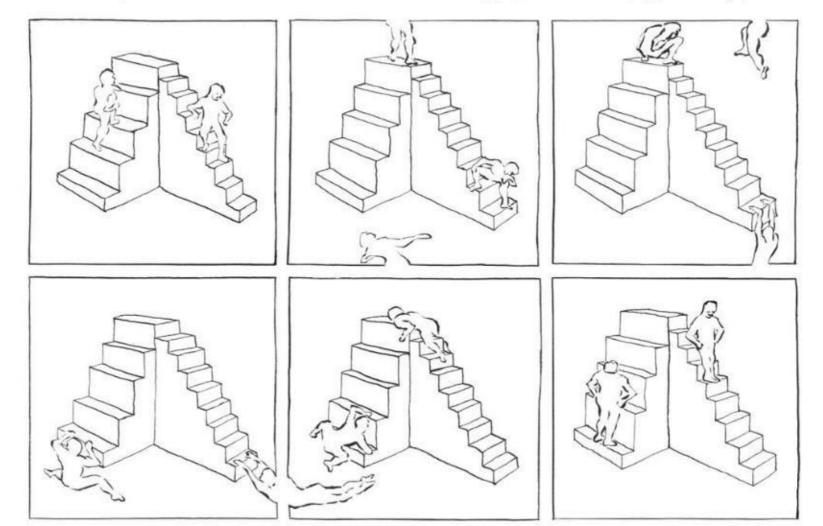
"Perhaps I will never live a life worthy of such stories as your companion told", said Lusku, "but I want to know what sort of life lets you tell stories like that, all the same."

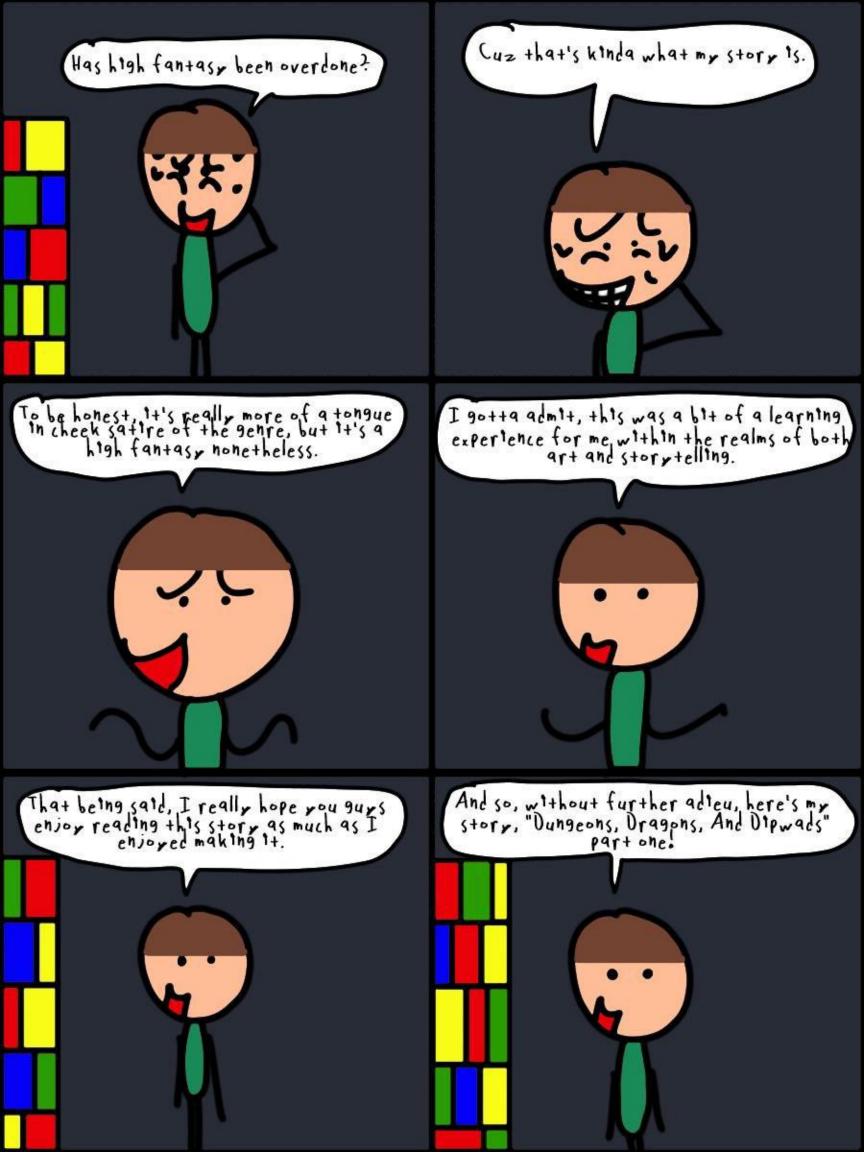
And then the woman on the ship nodded, smiled, and let her aboard, and that is the story of how Lusku became a mariner.

The ship flew out of the dock, its sail a swan-wing, its prow a dolphin beak to cut through the waves, and it began to slip through the peaks and troughs of the wide and sunlit sea. Behind it, slowly, gently, as it had done for a hundred years and would do for a hundred more... the island moved, ever on, ever on and away, across the glittering ocean.

State Loop

Duck Dodgers @duck_dodgers@+able+op.social

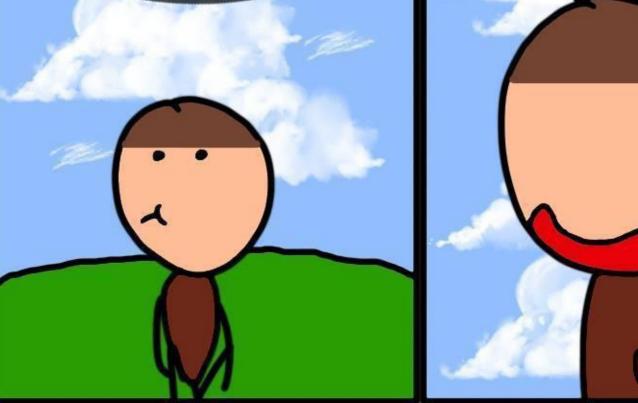




Dungeons, Dragons, and Dipwads

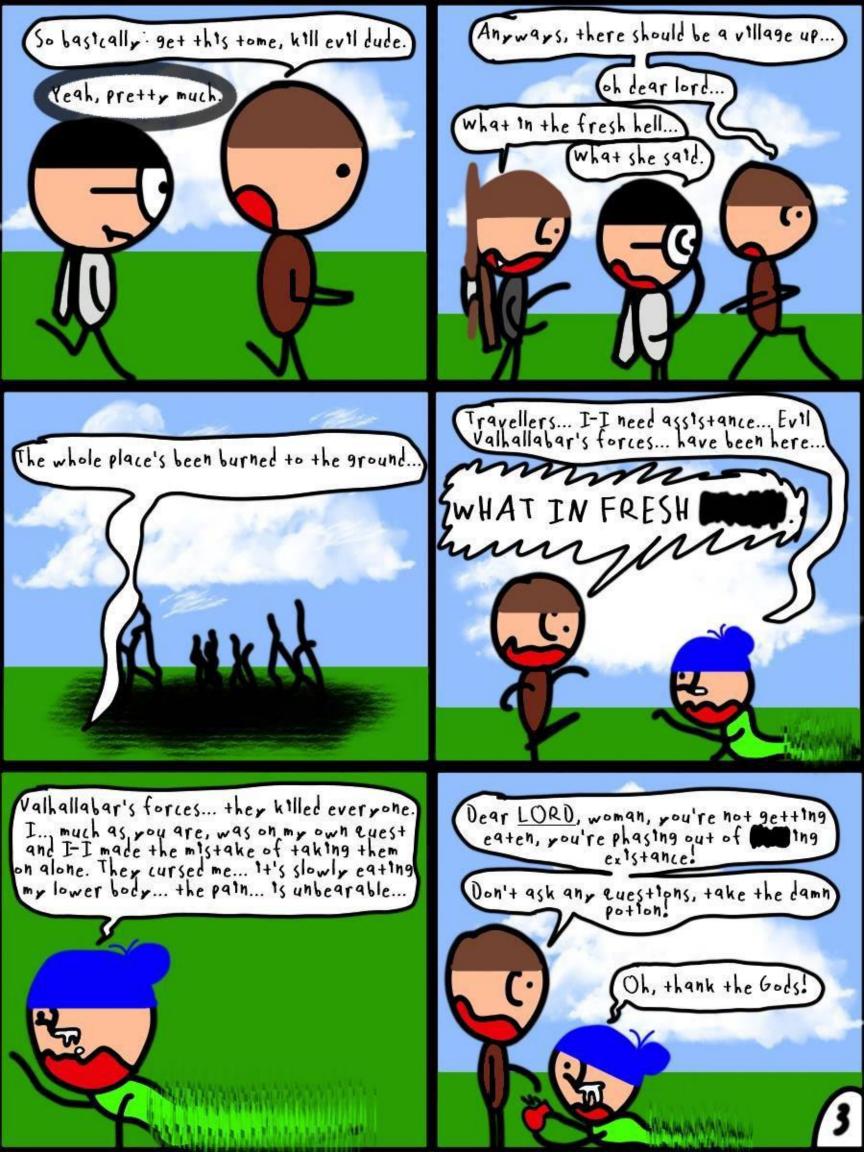
Chapter 1: Fellowship of the Dingus

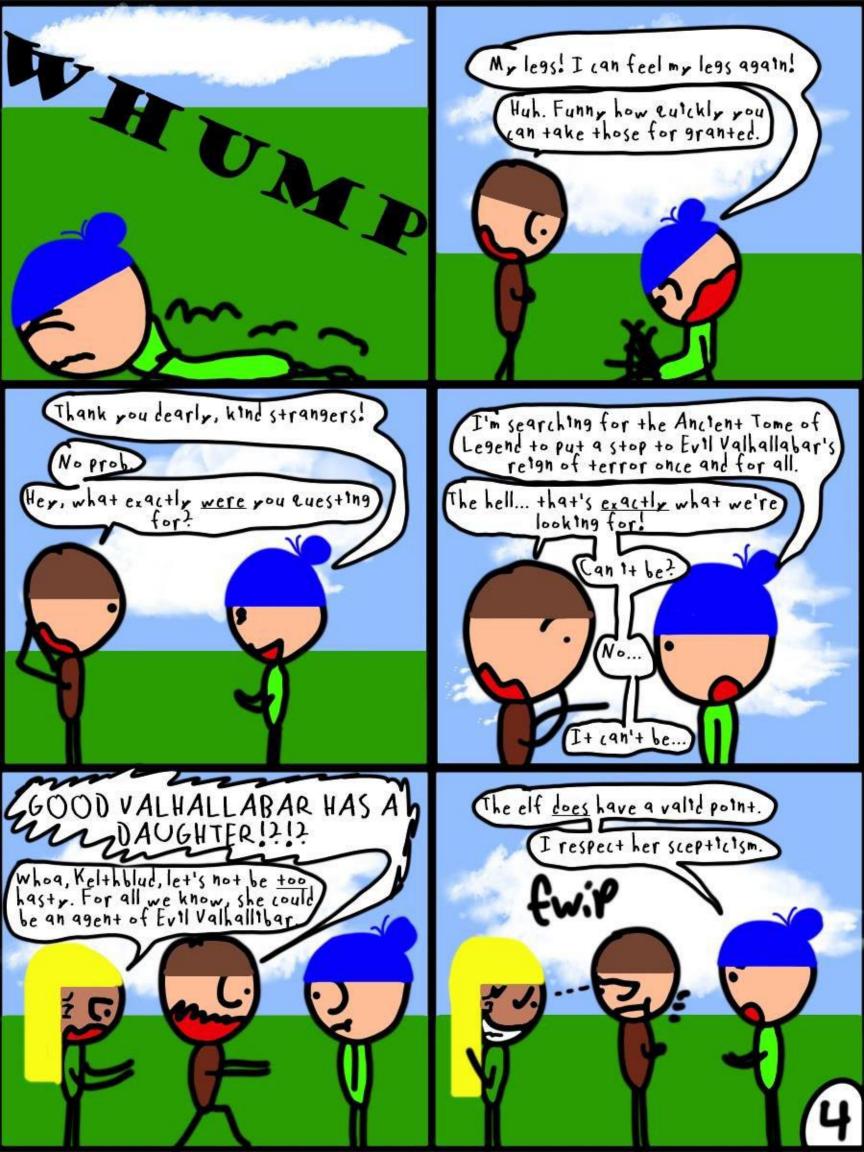




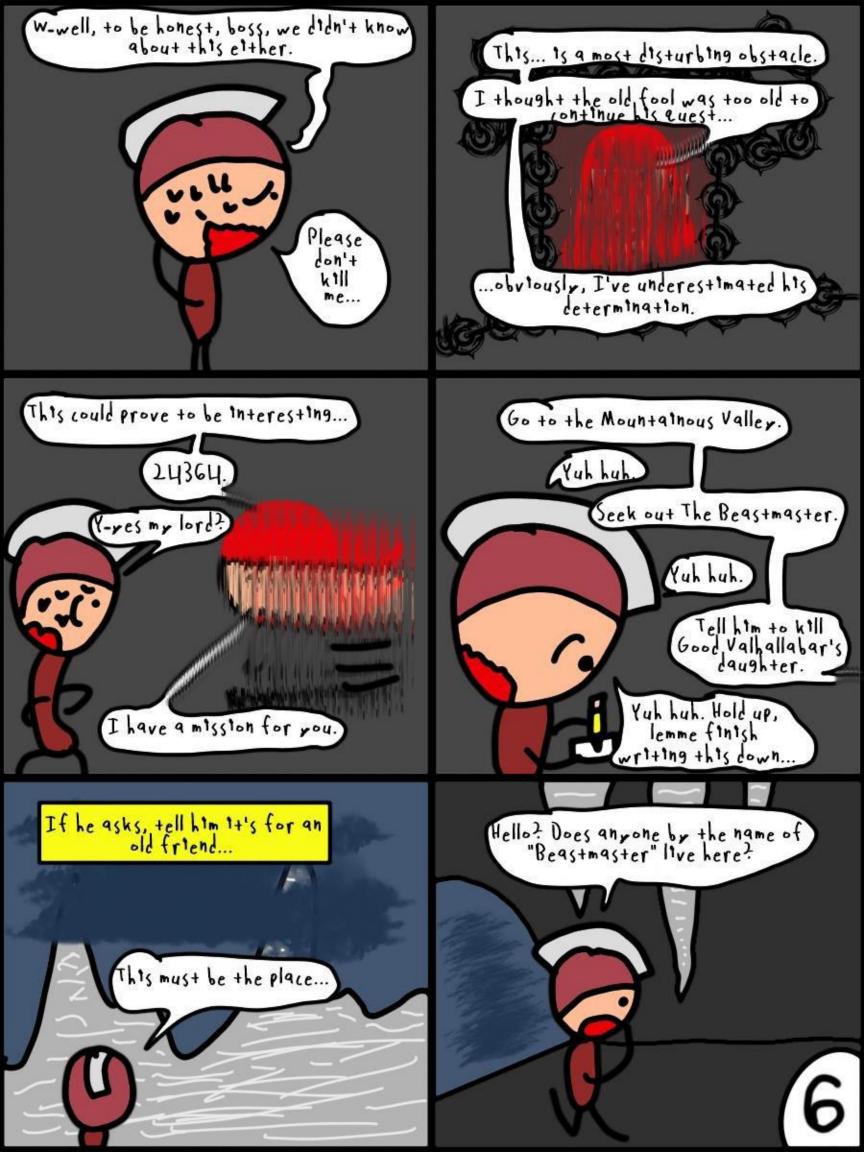




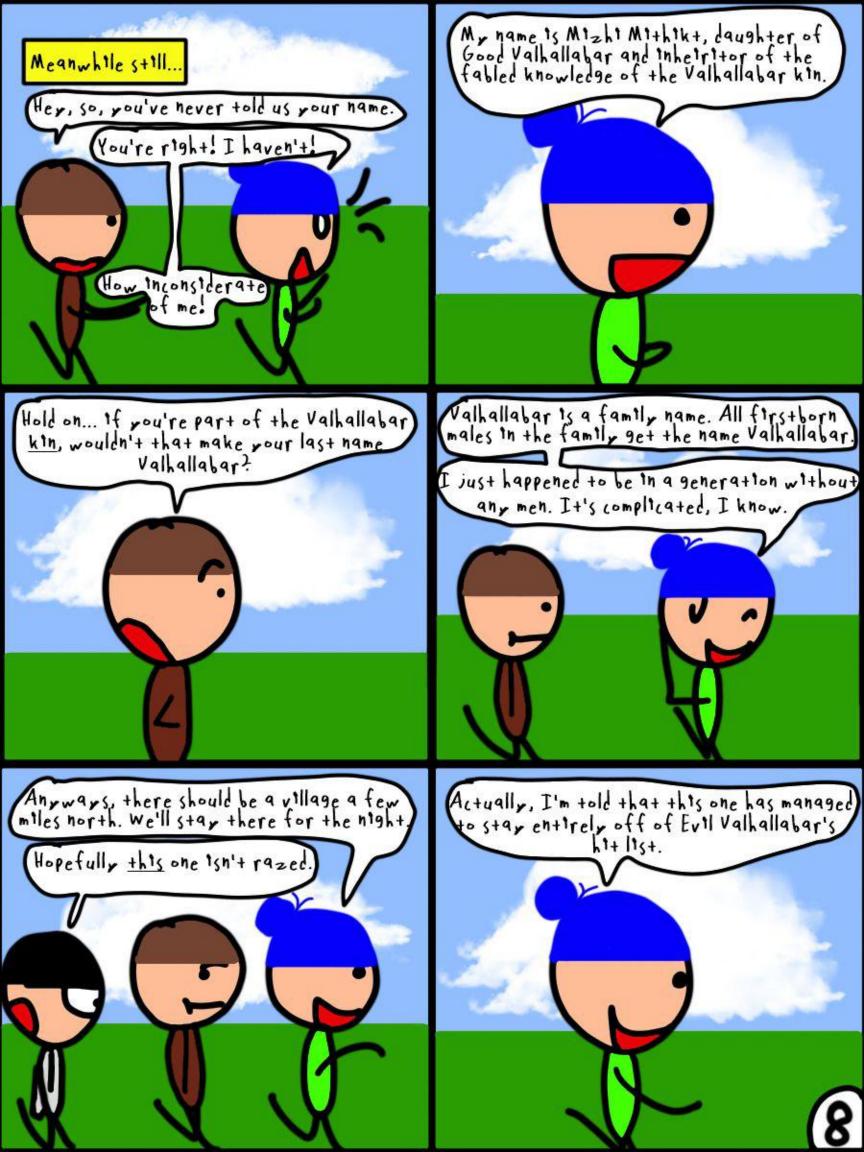


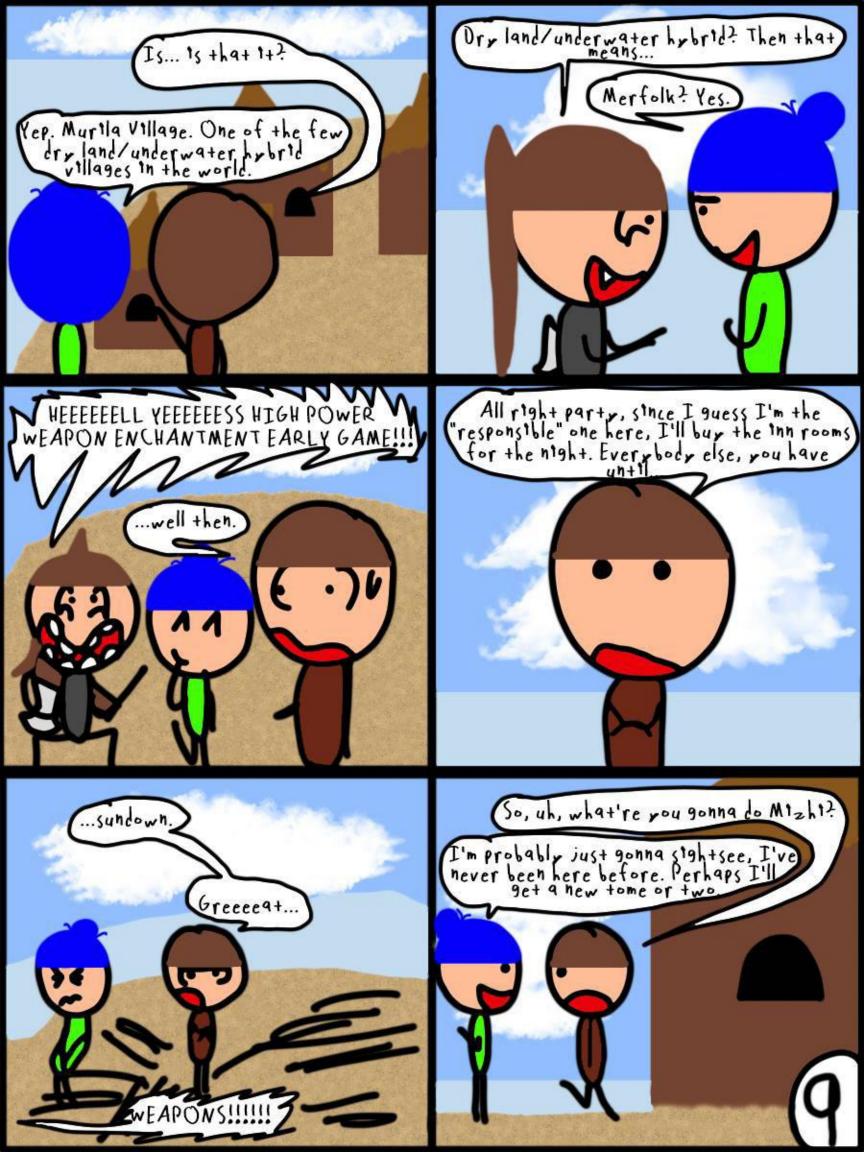


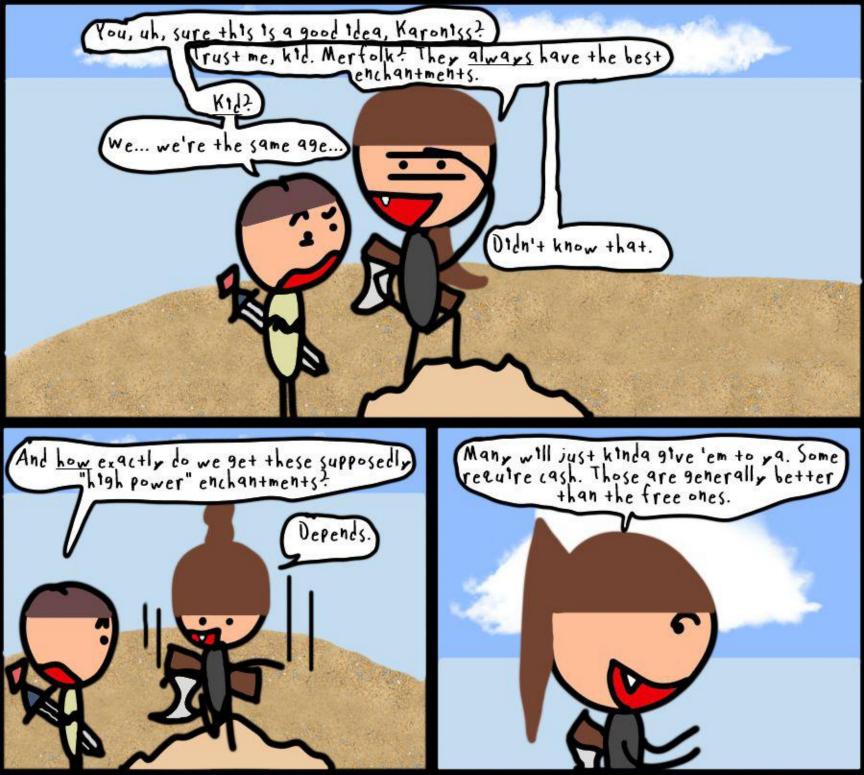


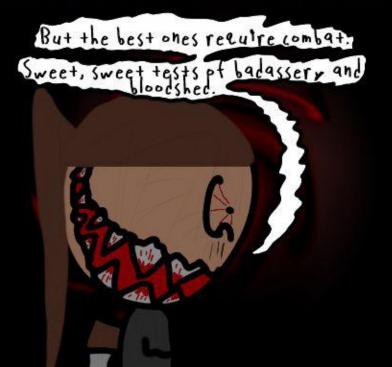










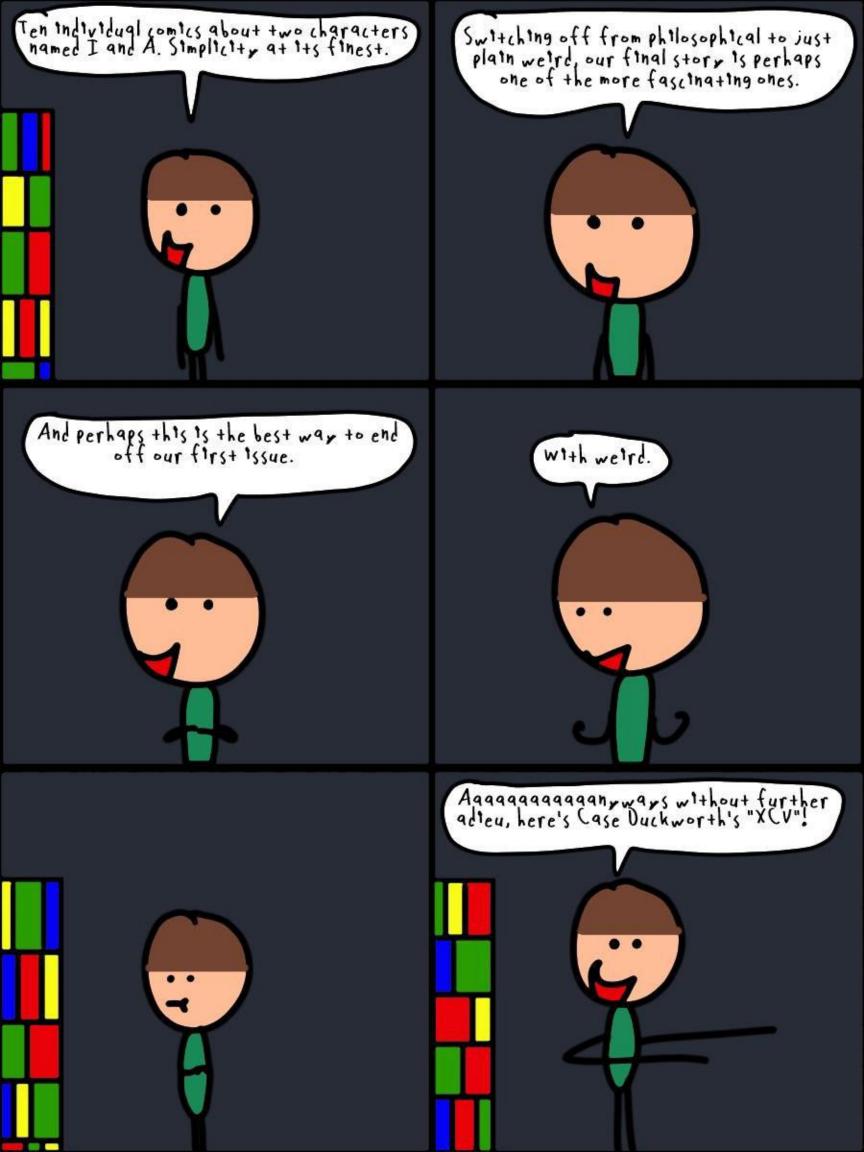








The Beastmaster? Find out next issue (we hope)!



Do you ever think about how



No.

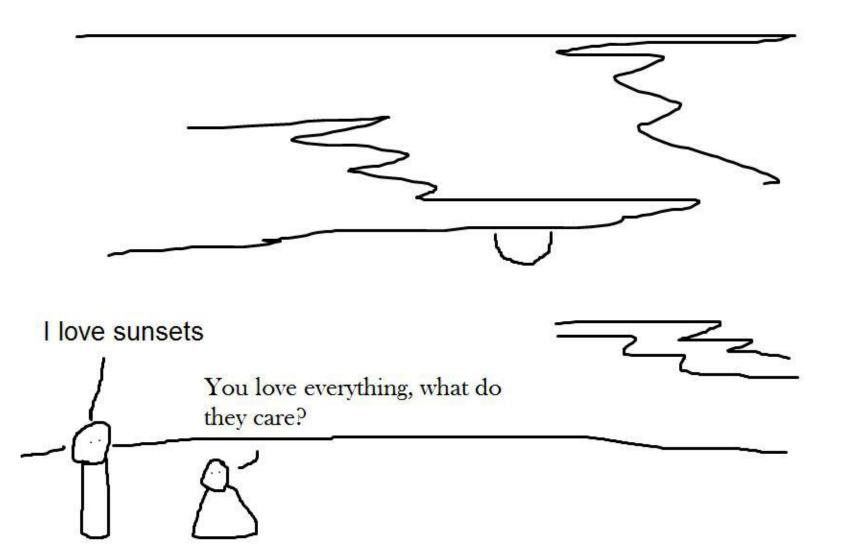


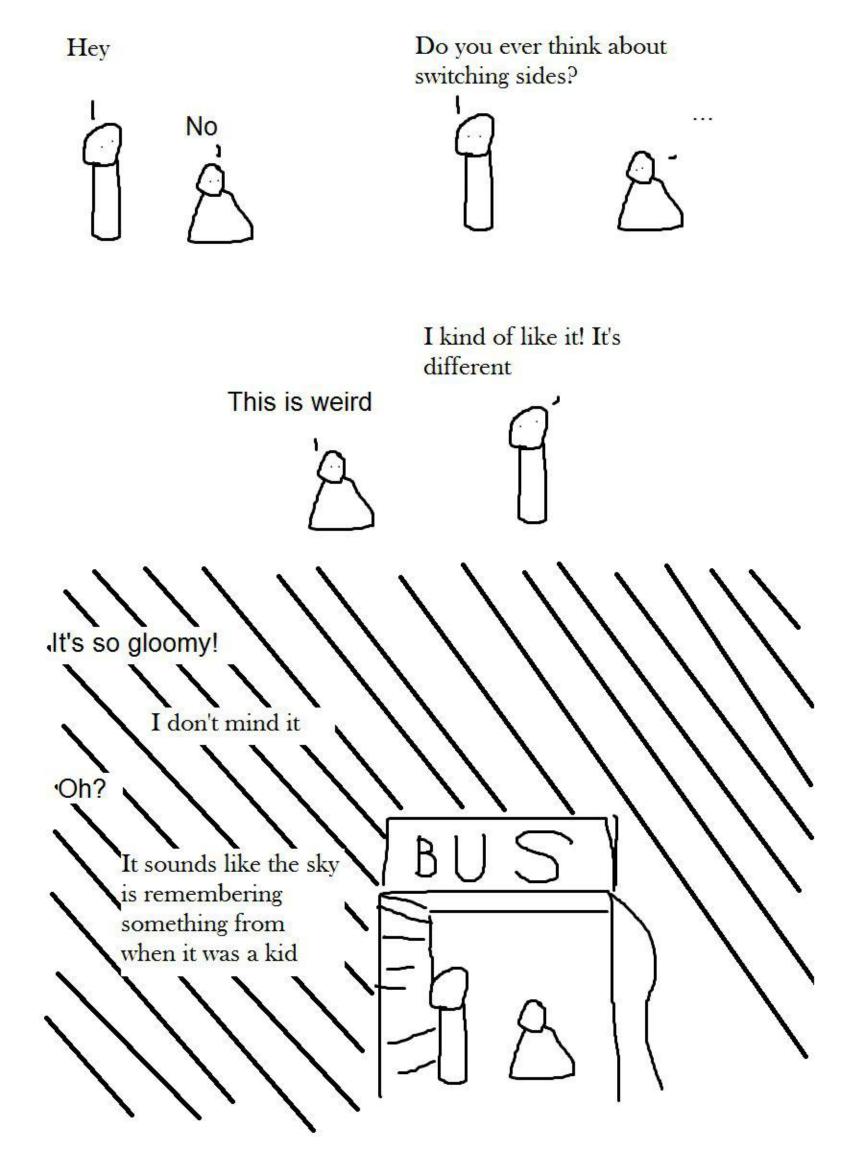
I don't think. I only act.

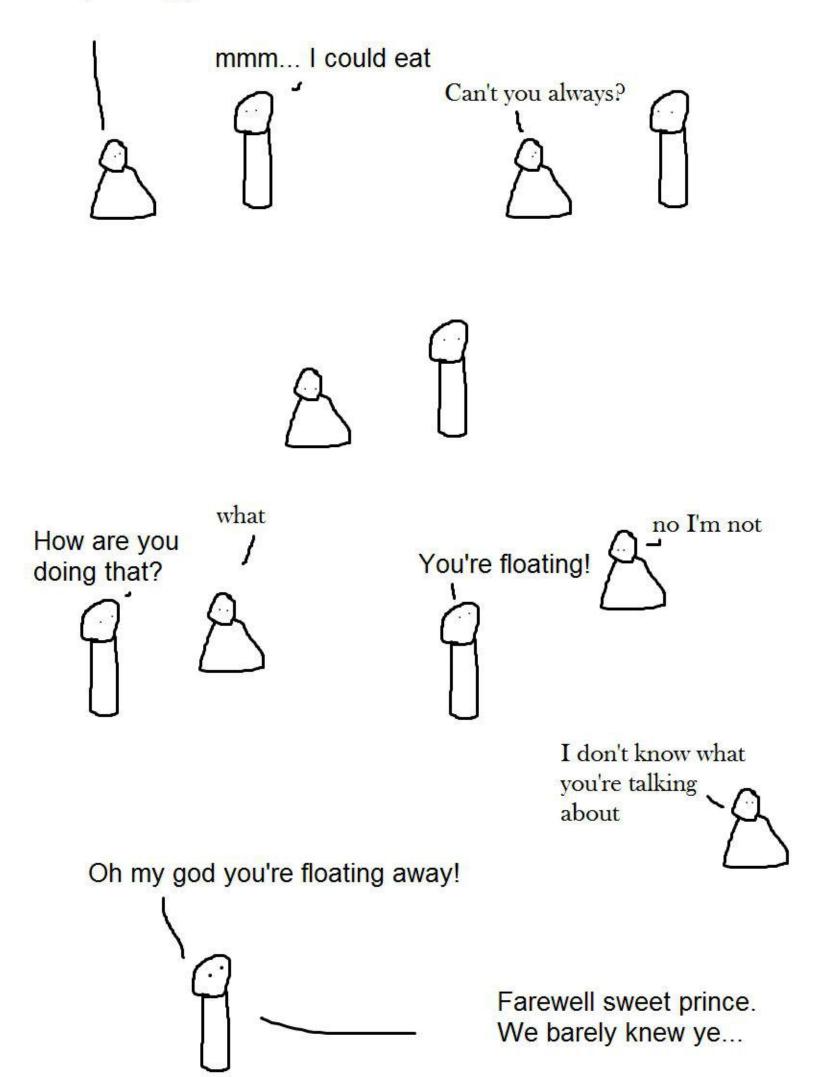
Thinking is for the weak.

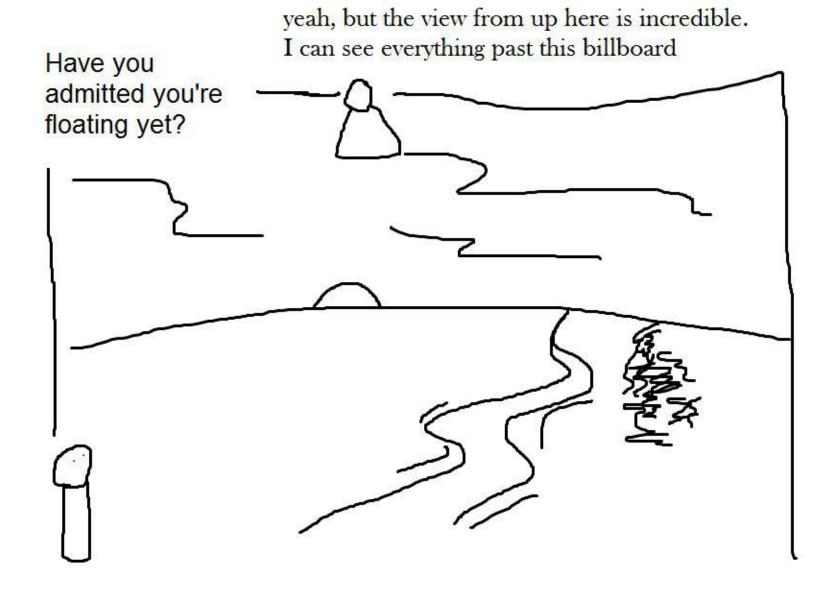
Well that's ridiculous.

I don't care.

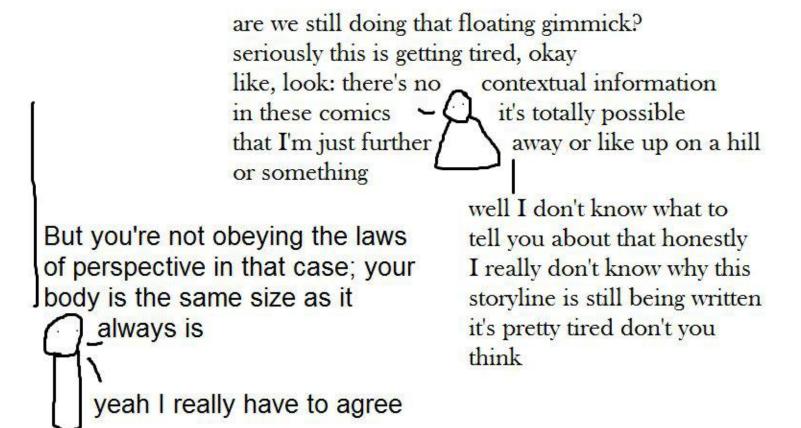


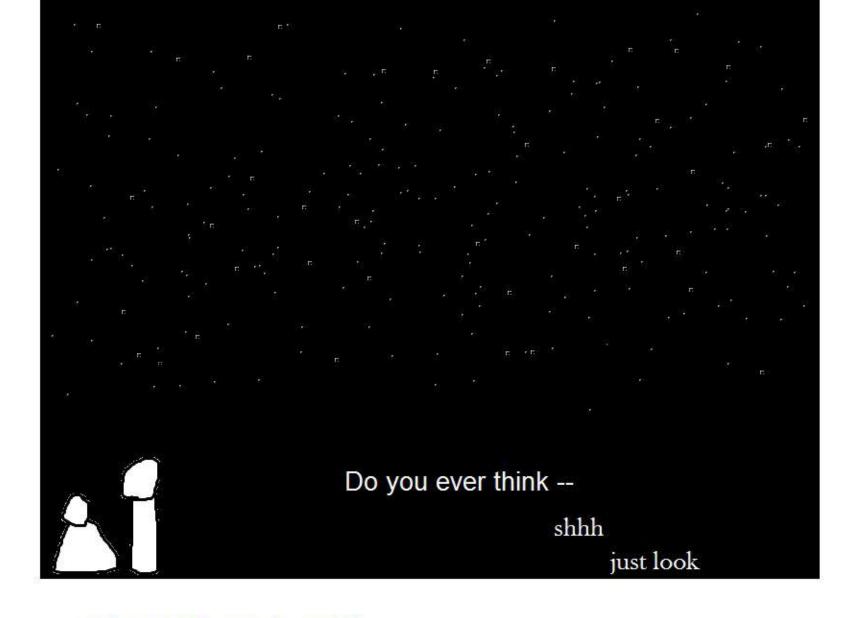




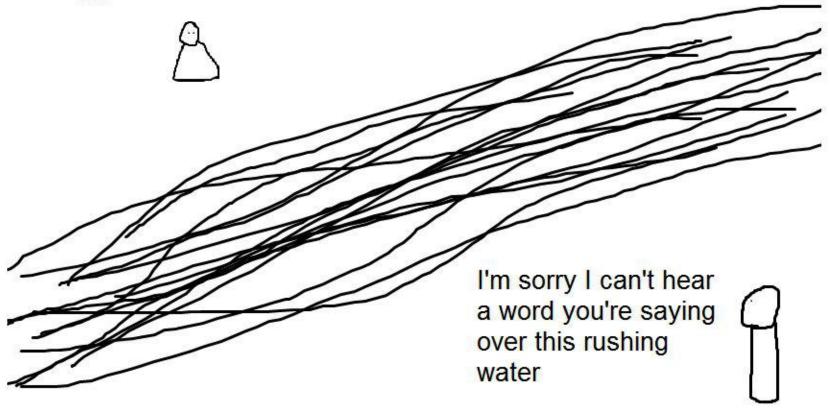


Have you figured out how to come down yet?





We are separated by a river of time; what was lost can no longer be found. There is no meaning beyond which that we place on the world, like hands on a corpse before burial. We are born, we grow old, we die, and for what? There is no organizing principle to the world, no tether that holds anything down. Yeats was half-right: "mere anarchy" has been the operating state of the universe since its conception shrouded in mystery and irrelevance. God is not merely dead; he was never born.





Are you an artist or writer on the Fediverse?

Well do we ever have the chance for you!

Join the fun for the next issue of Tales From The Fediverse and submit your ideas to me at

@David_A_webcomic@ComicsCamp.Club and show the world your comics and stories! We can't wait to see your work!



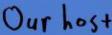
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So, If you're ready to check out what the Fediverse has to offer, step right in and enjoy the show!

If you like what you're seeing, consider supporting the writers and artists that made this possible!

Writers and artists.
Yncke
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