

This is, like, read-only or whatever. The book itself is constantly getting updated, but this is what I have so far. /u/Rytho is editing it, so you might see his notes in here.

Fantasy Novel! The Novel

Part 0: Introductions

Prologue: The (First) Final Battle

In the Valley of World's Death, a highly menacing spire rose from the earth. Black, pulsating vines spread out from the structure's base, a warning that this building came from Hell itself. Flames licked at the sides of the valley, the screams of tortured souls filled the air, and dark, red, viscous liquid oozed down the decrepit stone walls. The Heroes had a vague suspicion that this was the final boss's lair.

Raughnold, known as the Honorable Mountain to the citizens of Eykeia, pointed his Warhammer at the highest level of the tower. "Our target rests there, my friends. All we must do to end the evil plaguing this land is to breach the walls, defeat the hopefully many worthy opponents inside, and slay the Mean Mean Baddie Bad before he claims the surface world."

Piycechoo, the Annoyed Archmage sighed, annoyed. "Couldn't I just cast Fly on us and go straight to the top?" He muttered. "And why does he have such a stupid name?"

"Oh, come now, Piycechoo! Charging through his defenses will be fun!"

Anana, the Pineapple Paladin and Love Interest to Raughnold, interjected. "I relish the chance to fight."

Aelf the Elf skirted over to Piycechoo. "I'm with you, man. C-can you, like, I dunno, blow up the tower before we even have to get close?"

Raughnold swung around. "Aelf! Where is your sense of adventure?"

Aelf gulped. "I-it's just, every time you guys start fighting, someone gets a lucky shot and hits me in the carotid, so I have to spend the rest of the fight bleeding out."

Anana scoffed. "With all the gashes your throat has taken, it's surely calloused! You'll be fine!" She rushed forward, her chainmail bikini glinting in the bright sun. Raughnold followed, gaining and passing her as creatures of darkness materialized around the Spire. No flesh covered their forming skeletons, veins, sinew and muscle. Their shapes were vaguely human, but their glowing eyes and putrid flesh - fuck. They do have flesh, never mind - betrayed their true nature.

Pycechoo handed Aelf a bag. "Here's 43 staves, they all cast Fireball. If anything gets close to you, just point the bag and cast."

"Th-tha-thanks. I'll try not to die."

"It's just pointing a bag, Aelf." Pycechoo strolled toward the Spire.

Near the entrance, dozens of creatures formed a circle around Raughnold. One lunged forward, but Raughnold parried its strike. Another darted towards him, but he leaped clear over its raking claw and decapitated it with a kick. Another tried to bite him, but he grabbed it by the throat, and bit back. The Shadow Creatures flinched back at seeing this, and Raughnold laughed. "IS THAT ALL?!" Another went for him, but he did this sick spin and didn't get hit. Then, like, another went for him, but he also dodged that, and then a bunch of others attacked, but Raughnold was way too cool, so, like, he totally was safe and didn't even get a scratch on his sick-ass armor.

Anana dashed through the crowd of Shadow Creatures, poking them with her Holy Dagger. Holy Light poured through their bodies, spreading through them and turning their foul beings to dust. This mechanic totally isn't bullshit, it's a real thing.

Anyway, Anana and Raughnold realized that for each Creature they defeated, two more poured out of the entrance to the Spire. Raughnold splattered one more fiend with his Warhammer then pointed at the horde rushing towards them, cackling as blood dripped down across the plasma-coated jewels embedded in his now crimson-stained weapon. "Conjured reinforcements! Our battle grows ever more glorious!" He and Anana stood back-to-back, and watched as they became completely surrounded by the Shadowlings. That's their name now, Shadowlings.

Anana spat at them. "We have faced worse odds before, and we shall face worse-"

"I have to do everything myself. Chain Lightning." Piycechoo lifted his arm, his body glowing silver, his eyes shining yellow. Brilliant blue bolts blasted from his hand, arcing through the air towards the Shadowlings. One Shadowling was struck between the eyes, and its skull exploded. Two more lightning bolts exited through what once were the Shadowlings earholes, striking the Shadowlings on either side of the Shadowlings. The effect stacked across the rest of the crowd of Shadowlings, and the Lightning carried into the Spire. A Mage fell into the doorway, shrieking.

Approaching, Raughnold raised his Warhammer. "Dishonorable cur! Fight us yourself!"

"But that's how Summoners are supposed to-" The Mage was cut off when his chest caved in. Raughnold and Anana cheered. The Heroes ran up the stairs to face the next enemy. Their war cries were loud, but Piycechoo heard only his own sighs as he climbed towards the final battle.

Aelf stood on the mountain, shivering with fear. There wasn't a single battle he'd been in where he wasn't immediately defeated, no fight where he wasn't in need of a fresh kidney, liver, or lung. *I-is this really what I want?* He mused. *The others... They're powerful enough to defeat any enemy they set their mind to conquer... a-and here I am, a lowly ranger with a few weak spells. Can I muster no pride? Can I ever hope to match their confidence, let alone their prowess? 43 staves retrieved from the corpses of our foes... T-here's enough destructive power here to level a city. It's a good thing our enemies only ever attacked us in small groups rather than as one organized force, or I doubt even Piycechoo would have survived. But if these can level a city... What hope does a single measly structure have?* Aelf aimed the bag upwards. *This is my chance to reclaim my lost pride, to prove that anyone can achieve great things if they just put their minds to it and receive a massive amount of magic weapons from a friend.* Aelf fired the staves. As he noticed the back of the bag igniting, he realized he should have checked where the staves inside were pointing.

Raughnold cut through a Black Knight, and found himself in front of a door. The wood was carved with ornate glyphs, and glowed with a dark energy. Piycechoo strolled up to it, and began examining. "Yeah, there are about fourteen enchantments here. Ten of them would be lethal, three would be annoying, and one would change your hair color to blue permanently. It'll take me four minutes to get rid of them all." Piycechoo's arms started glowing, and he began doing what Raughnold could only describe as an interpretive dance.

Anana had found a chest behind a statue with a note attached: 'Mackie's College Fund. No drinking, no smoking!' Four or so locks were all tangled together. Anana broke out her

lockpicking tools - one of her best-kept secrets - and went to town. As she broke through the locks, her blood started pumping with adrenaline. Finally, as the final latch was finally done, she opened the chest revealing four copper pieces and some passports. Disappointed, Anana took the copper and ran back to her boyfriend.

Raughnold tapped his foot, his impatience growing. "That should be good enough! Prepare to breach!"

Piycechoo looked at him, annoyed but unsurprised. "Raughnold, it's been thirty seconds."

"RIGHTExactly!" Raughnold picked Piycechoo up, placed him to the side, and kicked down the door. Fire, ice, and lightning all burst out to attack Raughnold, setting him on fire, freezing him, and turning his hair blue. "OH, YEAHH!"

Inside the room, a tall figure in a massive suit of armor sat atop a throne. Raughnold gritted his teeth through the flames, stopping to yell, "Foul Demon! We have come to end your reign of terror!" Raughnold raised his weapon, and struck a pose. "My name is Raughnold, the Honorable Mountain! I have journeyed far to ensure the safety of the world, and your death shall secure that future!"

Anana poked her head around Raughnold. "What he said!"

Piycechoo walked into the chamber, scowling. "Are we almost done?"

Aelf crashed through a window, landing in front of Piycechoo. He wheezed.

The Mean Mean Baddie Bad rose up, purple energy forming in his right hand. A sword sprung from the abyssal portal he had formed. The blade radiated flecks of energy, cutting the air and leaving scars on reality. "Do you fools truly think you can defeat me? You are a thousand years too inexperienced to even gaze upon my visage!" His left hand readied a spell.

Raughnold braced himself to charge the Mean Mean Baddie Bad. "He's going to shift reality! We must stop him before he has a chance to!"

"You are too late, mortals! The land shall be cast into darkness, whether you will it or not! The only law shall be that I, the Mean Mean Baddie Bad, rule!" He raised his left hand up, and brought it down toward the floor.

Pycechoo sighed. "Counter-spell." The energy in the Mean Mean Baddie Bad's hand dissipated.

"Now, my friends! Our foe is weak!" Raughnold rushed at the enemy, swinging his Warhammer into his jaw. The sheer force of the blow knocked him into the air. Anana used Raughnold's head as a stepping stone, and leaped. She plunged her Dagger into his eye, and kicked off, doing, like, four backflips before landing.

The Mean Mean Baddie Bad landed on the floor, and the two fighters cheered and hugged. Pycechoo began stabilizing Aelf, who squeaked out a "thank you" before passing out. However, the battle was far from over.

The Mean Mean Baddie Bad's armor burst open, and a shadow appeared in midair. "You fools! No physical attack can defeat me! You shall-"

"Dispel Spirit."

"Fucking Mages."

The Shadow disappeared, and the Fighters cheered and hugged. Again.

Exiting the spire, the heroes looked out at the world. The grass around the Spire returned to life, the scorched earth un-scorching before their very eyes. Anana's eyes shone with hope.

"Inspiring, isn't it? The new world we helped create."

Piycechoo sighed. "It's literally just the world before that 'bad' guy started destroying it, it's not new. There's still evil all over the place."

Aelf stepped forward. "I can return to my people, knowing that even if just in a small way, I made a difference."

Piycechoo eyed him. "Who are you talking to?"

Raughnold took Anana in his arms. "My dear, I promised that if we survived, we could be together. If we battle and love together, there is no foe we cannot defeat together."

"Oh, Raughnold... do you mean it?"

Piycechoo walked away. "At least you're finally getting to that part. Come get me next time you need somebody to do most of the work." With that, he drew a teleportation sigil, and teleported to his Mage tower. Though he prayed daily for a different outcome, he would journey with the Heroes of Eykeia many times in the years to come.

Deep in the pits of Hell, the spirits of the damned congregated en masse near Hell's Palace. News was spreading fast that the Mean Mean Baddie Bad, rival to the mysterious ruler of Hell, had just had his spirit removed from existence. To normal creatures, the permanent death of such a powerful figure would inspire awe, fear, perhaps even a celebration of sorts. To the residents of Hell, this development was nothing more than an opening, a chance to seize power. A supernatural job opportunity, if you will.

As the crowds of the damned chattered, an ominous presence spread across the fiery hellscape of... Hell. The residents all ceased speaking to each other as the Guildmasters approached the Palace. Lesser Demons were obliterated by the sheer force of their auras, the

Guildmasters never caring to look at the inferior creatures around them. The surviving Demons all backed away in fear, fleeing whatever plot the forces of evil were plotting. No matter their machinations, they were sure to destroy everything in their path. Who could hope to stop them? Definitely not the protagonists, that would just be silly.

NEXT CHAPTER IN, FANTASY NOVEL! THE NOVEL!

Here are my end of chapter comments, this stuff is more things that you can ignore. The only real problem is it 1) ofc needs editing, and 2) Anana. Everyone else stands out and has personality, but she is too much like Ronald for me. It's very likely you develop her later, but come back to here and let that show, because your characters are great and she is a weak link.

If I could encourage you to be artsy... Well, here's where my mind immediately went. As the comedy tour continues, it's all a joke haha, only things start getting harder and more serious, and this spirit, the big bad, actually turns out to be a mastermind end boss, that is actually dark and shit. You could have him from this point manipulating the stupid MCs playing a game into doing his bidding. The comedy is on point, good job.

My current self-defense, though I do agree that you make solid points:

1) On the 'artsy' stuff: the next few chapters are all about setting up the rest of the plot points for the rest of the book, with more and more serious stuff gets thrown in over time. I'd say read them before we get around to story structure stuff, because I'm interested in your thoughts on the direction I'm taking this so far.

2) Anana is absolutely a work in progress. I do think she'll get better as time goes on, ultimately developing an actual personality distinct from Raughnold, but for the opening chapter I do personally believe that her basically being Raughnold Lite™ is poking fun at the general trend of Fantasy novels to just straight up not develop their female characters. I think my options here are to a) lean even harder into that joke, or b) revamp the character (using 'character' loosely here in the opening chapters) into a completely separate entity.

My endgame for developing Anana is a custody battle that ends in a trial by combat.

So... Yeah. And the daughter gets to watch her parents beat the shit out of each other! Fun!

3) Told you there were a lot of editing errors.

PART 1: Exposition and Such

Chapter 1: Wedding Hells

The song of trumpets filled the air in Myytb'l, Eykeia's capitol. It wasn't every day that the greatest villain the land has ever known is slain, and to top it off, Raughnold and Anana were to be wed the day the news reached down. Though he wouldn't attend, the King himself sent the heroes his best wishes. There was a joy in the air, an aura of pure happiness that shielded the town from any rainclouds trying to soak their parade.

In the Church of Cherchèe, Anana prepared to walk down the aisle. Her 3 sisters, identical triplets, were busy decorating her bright green wedding dress with deep orange pineapples, an ornate pattern that would dazzle the crowd and show her pride as the Pineapple Paladin. In the main hall, citizens from all over Eykeia brought gifts for the heroic couple. Soon, the Church held more furniture than any manor, and the Priest replaced the pews with easy-to-assemble chairs.

At a nearby pub, Raughnold, Aelf, and Raughnold's childhood friends engaged in a Bachelor Party. Aelf sat on a shelf above the burly men below, in case a bar fight broke out.

A black gauntlet clapped Raughnold on the back. He immediately recognized the scoundrel who dared touch him. Any hint of a smile disappeared from the face of Raughnold. MakDaughnold the Darkblade, his rival since childhood, grinned wickedly.

"What do you want, fiend?" Raughnold's words were cutting to MakDaughnold.

"Raughn, you just saved the world! Can't I say thank you without getting insulted?"

"I know your plots, Darkblade! Where were you during our righteous quest, anyway?"

"I was coordinating the city's defenses. I'm a better strategist than soldier."

"Spoken like a coward! Bretheren, let us away!" Raughnold and his friends marched out, leaving Aelf behind. He dropped down carefully, making sure not to land on anything sharp.

"You are Aelf the Elf, yes? I understand you were instrumental in the fight."

"Yeah, I was the drum all the enemies kept beating."

"Even if all you did was try, you still did more than most."

"That... means a lot. Thank you."

"Always happy to help." They both walked out of the bar into the cheering crowd.

Raughnold stood at the altar. On the stained glass windows were pictures of his heroic ancestors, One window was un-stained, and Raughnold hoped his image would occupy that space. Outside, Anana and her sisters helped dress a very confused Aelf. "I'm sorry, what's going on?"

The triplets spoke in unison, harmonizing to create a melody. "We could not decide which of us would be flower girl, and the aisle will not fit three of us. You shall take our place."

"Do I get a vote in this?"

"Yes, but we outnumber you."

Aelf did the math before conceding that three was greater than one. *Besides, even my poor luck can handle throwing flowers around. Right? ... Right?* The Triplets put a flower basket in his hand and pushed him into the church.

Composing himself, Aelf went down the aisle, spreading the flowers. Like most elves, Aelf loved nature, and he wanted to spread that love across the land. Anana walked behind him, her sisters all walking with her, making sure the pineapple dress wasn't damaged.

Soon, the ceremony began. Aelf sat next to Piycechoo sat in the front row. The Wizard wore his fine hooded robes so he could sleep without anyone noticing. The Priest made a special announcement about love and triumph, and it was all super boring and some people started crying, as is tradition.

"Citizens of Eykeia, the couple has written their own vows," the Priest announced. The crowd cheered, waking Piycechoo up. He sighed, annoyed.

Raughnold's voice boomed. "Anana, my dear, I swear to protect you until my breath no longer flows, until the flow of time ceases my blood flow, until Heaven calls us from this world." Anana nodded, a tear of joy in her eye. "I swear to do the same, and I vow to raise the life that even now grows in my womb, so that we may keep the next generation safe as well." Upon hearing that Anana was already pregnant, the crowd cheered again.

Piycechoo chuckled, and leaned over to Aelf. "Now we know what the rush was about." Aelf frowned. "Wait... Was she fighting while pregnant? A pregnant woman can fight better than me?" Piycechoo stifled a laugh.

The Priest continued. "Then, in this most holy hall of our holy heroes, past, present, and future, I join these two in holy matrimony most holy. You may now make out on stage." The ground trembled as Raughnold and Anana shared a kiss, the crowd standing and clapping at the sight. What they didn't realize, though, was that the ground was shaking because of the plant monster that broke through the floor of the church. Naturally, the crowd stopped clapping.

Raughnold's Best Man, Taughm, passed Raughnold his Warhammer. He pointed at the foul beast. "Who are you, foul beast, that dares interrupt this most joyous of occasions?"

The Plant Monster cackled vilely as purple, thorned vines spread from its arms, ensnaring the citizens lining the pews. "I am Klorofill, the Demon of Plants! Since you killed the Demon of War, I am free to conquer this pathetic world!" The citizens trapped in her grasp gasped as their nutrients were drained, their bodies shriveling as they lost the ability to even shriek in pain.

"Your arrogance blinds you to the truth!" Anana carefully removed her carefully made wedding dress, revealing cut-off leather hot-pants and a similarly cut-off leather breastplate. There were, like, 43 daggers woven into the chest piece, but she specifically drew her Holy Dagger in the center of her chest, baring a tasteful amount of cleavage. Piycechoo remained in his seat, looking over his shoulder at the Demon. Aelf ran next to the married couple, wielding the basket in a defensive stance the only weapon he had.

Klorofill flew into a rage and loomed over Aelf. "You! How dare you wield the remains of my children! Just as you strip my children of their petals I shall strip you of your skin!" The wall behind Aelf broke open, and vines reached out for him. Aelf evaded every vine as he stepped back into the aisle. However, his foot came down right on a pile of flowers on the

ground, tripping him. As he fell, he smashed his head on the corner of a pew, knocking him unconscious.

Piycechoo exhaled in an exasperated manner. The Wizard pointed at Klorofill. "Shocking Rays." Beams of electricity blasted from Piycechoo's hand, severing the vines draining the citizens.

Klorofill shrieked. "Just for that, I'll absorb you first!" The earth around Piycechoo split, and trees sprung up around him. Piycechoo fled as the branches reached out to grab him.

"NOT SO FAST, PLANT SPAWN!" Raughnold burst through one of the trees, charging through the several foot thick wood with ease. He screamed a battle cry as he crashed through another, heading right for Klorofill. He jumped high into the air, bringing his hammer down on the creature's head. Anana deftly leaped over the trees surrounding Piycechoo, throwing her Holy Dagger into Klorofill's chest, then did this tite 360 degree spin, then kicked the hilt of the dagger to bury it deeper in Klorofill's breast. She cried out in pain, before ensnaring the two fighters. Klorofill's voice turned into a laugh. "Insolent fools! My regeneration negates any damage you could do to me in a single assault!"

Anana resisted futilely. "Damn! We were hopeless against-"

Piycechoo materialized in front of Klorofill as several balls of lightning suddenly appeared and detonated across Klorofill's body, her guttural scream piercing the cacophony of the explosions. Plant matter splattered across the church, shattering the stained glass windows, but leaving the window Raughnold desired for himself intact. That's probably symbolic.

As leaves and bark rained across the ordinary people, their strength was returned to them. A cheer went up as they realized they weren't dead. MakDaughnold the Darkblade rushed into the church, several doctors and white mages following behind him.

Piycechoo stabilized Aelf with practiced motions, then walked out of the church without a word. He passed Raughnold and Anana, who were making out atop the corpse of Klorofill, the plant demon. Outside, Piycechoo saw Klorofill's severed head gasping for air and picked it up

"Hey, Plant Monster. Who were you again?"

Klorofill coughed up auburn sap. "A herald of the horrors to come, Sorcerer. Though you defeated me, the others will learn from my mistake. They'll surely defeat your pathetic group."

Piycechoo considered for a second. "Okay. Who are these others?"

"Forces of nature with strength beyond compare. Your measly lightning can't best them."

"Doesn't answer the question."

"Oh, you want names. Yeah, that would make sense. Well, first, there's-"

Raughnold screamed from in front of Piycechoo, bringing his Warhammer down between Piycechoo's hands. His hammer smashed Klorofill's severed head on the ground.

Piycechoo stared at Raughnold. "Are you serious?"

"I know, her yet-living severed head surprised me! Good thing I was here to save you, or you could have been hurt!" Raughnold walked back into the cheering crowd, and started making out with Anana again.

Piycechoo sighed, annoyed, and walked back towards his tower. He had work to do.

Anana's lack of personality continues to be a problem. It seems like when you wrote this chapter and the last one you didn't have the more detailed view of her character you would later gain. I know literally nothing about her personality. Fixing this in the last chapter and adding minor changes to reflect that in this chapter would make it much better. Also, I don't yet see where you are going with the pineapple sisters, if that was a one off joke you should cut it. Perhaps that is another casualty of anana's lack of characterization. In addition, Ronald is less funny the second time and seems more asshole-ish. I would make him a good guy that is just an idiot fighter.

PAIGE here... I kinda agree with Bobby, though I think it can be tackled through the narrator commenting, then her trying to say something smart or thoughtful to the Hammer, who disregards her words for her sexiness, and the narrator saying Told you so... Even if her line is just a tiny hint of the big story that's to come for her.

Chapter 3: Baby's Blues

Piycechoo woke up at 5 AM on a Wednesday. Outside, birds were chirping, flowers bloomed, and nobody was around to bother him with their unnecessary grunting or propensity to bleed on everything. He made his way to his personal library, and resumed the book he'd been reading the night before. Astral Threats and How to Defeat Them: A Guide for Lightning Mages. A little pedantic for his tastes, but necessary if Klorofill's threat was true. Though, in the eight months since the wedding, not a single threat worthy of Piycechoo's abilities had surfaced. Perhaps he'd finally be able to put energy into-

A brutish scream at the front door interrupted Piycechoo's train of thought. He sighed, annoyed, and walked downstairs. Opening the door, he found Raughnold. He closed the door on him and walked back toward his library. Raughnold's incoherent shouts of disapproval made him open the door again. Piycechoo figuratively shot daggers from his eyes at the Fighter as he opened the door. If he wanted to, he could do that literally. Mages. "What do you want, you idiots?"

Raughnold beamed with joy. "I wish to show you what my love with Anana has borne!" With that, he pulled a baby from his pack, and showed it to Piycechoo.

Piycechoo eyed him carefully. "Is... That your child that you just pulled out of your backpack?"

Raughnold laughed. "Meet my daughter, Aughraughna, named for my mother. We call her 'Arcie' for short."

"That's... Great. Wait, don't you keep magic artifacts in your bag?"

"Dozens! We must be ready for everything, after all!"

"Okay, give me the baby." Piycechoo took and held Arcie away from the incredibly moronic fighter. "By the Gods, is that Pixie Dust on her? Do you know how unsafe it is to ingest this?"

Raughnold laughed, entering Piycechoo's sanctum without permission, or even asking. "What's the worst that could happen? Pixie Dust is 100% organic!"

"Yes, Pixies naturally generate this dust, but they use it as spell components! Arcie could very easily have cast fly on herself, or polymorphed into a newt!"

"She'd have gotten better!"

"By the 53 Divine Justicars... Where are Anana and Aelf?"

"My love has decided to go on a solo quest, believing that she needs to prove herself as a warrior and a mother. She took Aelf with her."

"It isn't a solo quest if she brings someone."

"It's Aelf." Piycechoo nodded. "She left me in charge of keeping our daughter safe, and I realized that there is nobody better suited to determining her potential than my best friend Piycechoo!"

Piycechoo eyed him. "You consider me your best friend?"

Raughnold laughed. "My friend, our friendship is legendary! Our friendship is a friendship that will be spoken of by friends as the model of friendship for centuries!"

Piycechoo sighed, annoyed. He'd have to rectify this later, when there wasn't a child present. "What's this about potential?"

Raughnold clapped down hard on Piycechoo's shoulder, almost making him drop Arcie. Piycechoo cast Mage Armor on himself and Arcie, to avoid any potential mishaps. "My friend, my daughter's destiny is surely to be the greatest warrior the land has ever known! I would hate it if I forced her into a class that she was not adept at, however. Please, look into her soul, and tell me what her heart desires!"

Piycechoo looked at Raughnold sideways, and held Arcie away from her father. "You want me to invade your daughter's personal thoughts? There's probably going to be nothing but dreams of... I don't know, do kids eat candy at her age? What is her age?"

"She's a child, she doesn't have rights!"

Piycechoo sighed. "I guess we're doing this. Sorry, Arcie. I'll buy you a caramel apple when you're older." Piycechoo put his hand on Arcie's forehead, and his eyes glazed over. The faint outline of a third eye appeared on his forehead, and he peered into Archie's mind. The land inside was murky, undeveloped. Vague continents shaped like trebuchets, holy symbols, and charred hills stretched out around him. The symbolism was too thick for Piycechoo to not notice that Arcie's life would not be a happy one. I mean, just look at her parents.

"Well, my friend? What do you see!"

"The unmistakable desire for her mother to hold her instead of an Archmage she just met." Piycechoo noticed a faint glow in the back of her mind, a blue specter that was approaching his vision rapidly. I didn't just trigger a surge, did I? No, Raughnold and Anana are complete idiots, they'd never be able to have a kid with actual mental acuity...

"Anything else? Any lances or flails floating around?"

"Flails are a completely ineffective weapon, Raughnold."

"Nonsense, you haven't seen the schematics I've been drawing up! My friend, when our next threat rears its head, I have a design that will destroy any enemy we encounter!"

"Yeah, that's great... Raughnold, do you have a family history of magic?"

"Of course not!"

"And do you know Anana's family's magical records?"

"Nonexistent. Anana's parents were doctors, they would have said something before they died."

"Hm... This is highly unusual, but..." Piycechoo's eyes reverted back to their normal state. He placed Arcie on a table and snapped his fingers. In a flash of purple light, an armoire appeared next to him. Rummaging through it, he found a small twig, and handed it to the baby.

"What is this? Are you saying my daughter has some magical ability? Is the magical ability to be the best fighter that ever lived?"

"That's not how magic works... Usually. But she does have magic potential, and I want to see if-"

A knock at the front door drew the room's attention. Piycechoo waved his hand, and it opened. Aelf and Anana walked in, Aelf bleeding profusely from his leg. "H-hey, guys. It happened again.

"Anana, my love! What happened!"

"Raughnold, my dear! We were walking through Goblin territory, when suddenly a Gremlin appeared and tried to bite me in the throat! Naturally, I threw it away from me, and it sunk its teeth into Aelf's... What did you call it Aelf?"

"F-femoral vein..." Aelf was struggling to hold back tears as he dragged his limp leg behind him. "I think I might lose this leg..."

Piycechoo sighed. "Don't worry, you're going to be-"

A blast of ice shot out from behind Piycechoo, going under his arm and striking Aelf directly in the femoral artery. The icicle sticking out of Aelf's vein was stained crimson, and he fully began crying like a little bitch. The entire Party turned to look as Arcie's wand stopped glowing blue, the baby giggling at the shiny stick she held in her hand.

Aelf's leg was now fully bending the wrong way, held on by a thin strip of muscle and sinew. "Of course it's the stupid baby..."

Anana glared at him. "If my daughter is a simpleton, Aelf, then you are the biggest fool the world has ever known. My impossibly intelligent child defeated you with a single shard of ice."

Piycechoo sighed. "Anana, that was clearly an accident. Aelf, you need to start wearing actual armor, the street clothes you're wearing aren't going to do anything." Aelf nodded, trying in vain to hold back the tears Piycechoo took the wand from Arcie, and tossed a healing potion at Aelf. "Congratulations, Raughnold. She's a bouncing baby Ice Mage."

Raughnold scoffed. "Elemental magic? That's it?"

Piycechoo replied "You know I'm a Lightning Mage, right?"

"I know, I know. It's just... Were there no pikes in her future? No heavy armor?"

"If I tell you she'll be a champion swordmaster, will you three leave me to my work?"

Aelf finished the healing potion, and watched as his nerves and tendons rapidly regrew, but they would not connect to the rest of the leg. He screamed in pain. "OWOWOWOW!
WHAT'S GOING ON?"

Piycechoo waved his arm, and an ice chest appeared next to Aelf. An ornate pattern of skeletons adorned the obsidian metal, with a faint purple glow spilling out from the opening on top. "Your leg's not fresh enough to heal properly. Lucky for you, I've got a spare." As Piycechoo opened the icebox, a clawed, spectral hand held up a leg. "Thank you, K'voreki'n." Piycechoo took the leg, black energy swirling around it. "Now, you might hear voices for a week or so after

this leg is bonded to you, but I doubt you'd be able to kill anyone, so I'm not worried. Just ignore the Dark Whispers, and they'll go away."

The leg began to float above Piycechoo's hands, then shot towards Aelf. He screamed as the wisps of pure shadow swallowed the blood and excess flesh in the wound. It was pretty disgusting, all told. Piycechoo dispelled the ice box, and K'voreki'n's Leg gained color as it fed on Aelf's former left foot.

"T-this... this doesn't feel so bad." Aelf flexed his leg, and it moved perfectly. In fact, he felt strength course through his body that he'd never known before.

Of course it feels good, a voice in his head told him. **You know what else feels good? Murder.** Aelf nodded, worried about offending his new appendage.

Raughnold turned to Piycechoo. "My friend, you said something about swords and my daughter?"

Piycechoo sighed, annoyed. "Yes, no swordsman in the world will stand a chance against her, her destiny is bright, now get out of my tower and let me work."

"Very well, my friend! If we find any threats that we need a Mage for, we'll be sure to send for you!"

"Great."

"But, if you want to train our daughter at all..."

"Yes, yes, as much as it pains me, you know where to find me."

"Excellent! Then, allow me-"

Piycechoo cast Deafen on himself, and Raughnold's voice - as well as the rest of the world - fell silent to him.

"Sorry, Raughnold, can't hear you, you're going to have to leave until I can fix this. What? You're completely silent for once."

Raughnold shrugged, and picked up Arcie. He went to put her in his pack, but Anana stopped him. They seemed to get in an argument, before Raughnold gave his wife the child, and the three heroes left Piycechoo's tower for what would, unbeknownst to them, be the last time. Piycechoo picked up a book, dispelled the Deafen spell, and listened to the sounds of nature outside. The wolves feasting upon deer outside his window was infinitely more relaxing than his three 'friends' ever could be.

Good chapter, very funny, no major problems, Anana still has yet to stand out with any measure of personality, but she wasn't so obnoxious so it didn't hurt, and Ronald is getting more developed so she's a little more distinct.

Chapter 4: Walk of Fame

Raughnold, Anana, Arcie, and Aelf were walking back to Myytb'l. Anana pulled a pineapple shaped pacifier from her pocket, and put it in Arcie's mouth. The ring of the pacifier frosted over, and Arcie giggled. Aelf's new leg left dead grass every time it stepped on a patch, but after a few miles, the grass started to be slightly less dead.

Hey, new guy. The leg's demonic rasp pierced directly into Aelf's mind, rummaging for any information it could find.

Uh, m-my name's Aelf. Aelf the Elf. Aelf, still off guard, was stuttering in his own mind.

You seem to already be an important figure in this world. My last owner was nothing more than a beggar, and he still became a Lord. Imagine how far we can go if we work together...

Didn't Piycechoo say your voice went away after a while? Because it's hard to focus on the road when you're attacking my mind...

My voice only leaves when I'm satisfied that my influence has taken root. After that, my spirit returns to the ice box. No mind has ever resisted me for longer than a month.

Oh... Okay, then. Can you stop digging through my head now?

NO! I am the spirit of K'voreki'n, the Surgeon of Slaughter! You foolish mortals are unprepared for my genius!

If you say so... I just don't want to trip and hit my head or anything.

Imbecile, I will not allow my vessel to fall, not until I am certain your murderous intent and unstoppable ambition has manifested.

Well, I have another leg, and you're taking up a lot of my brainpower...

Silence! The sooner you let me do my work, the sooner I can leave you to your pathetic walking.

Okay. Can you be quiet so I can talk to my friends?

Yes, they *are* your friends... For now...

Raughnold was busy using his Warhammer as a machete, except instead of clearing away leaves, he was clearing away trees. "Anana, my love, make sure to remind me to send Piycechoo the designs for my ultimate weapon! I will be able to protect you and Arcie forever when they are completed!"

Anana was busy dodging the falling trees Raughnold was launching into the air. A few times, trees nearly landed on her, but she felt a burst of speed hit before her and Arcie were crushed. Aelf, despite taking no such precautions, was walking straight forward, mouthing words at his leg, but uncharacteristically untouched by the danger around him. "My love, Raughnold, please take care. I know you are in a good mood, but we must protect our child. Also Aelf is talking to his leg."

"Her destiny has been revealed to me, Anana! I don't need to worry about her safety until she becomes the greatest swordsman in the land."

Aelf cocked his head, finally back in the land of the living. "When she becomes the greatest, will you have to worry then?"

"No, my Ranger friend! Therein lies the beauty of the situation! I will never have to worry for my daughter! What more could a father ask?"

"A mother asks that you do not trust a secondhand report, and instead keep your daughter safe from yourself!" Anana spoke with fury in her voice, directed at the man she had never felt anything but love and adoration for.

"Dearest, do not be so angry! You simply have to ask!"

"Please stop throwing trees at Arcie!"

"Very well! I will hit the trees to the side!" He smashed a Redwood tree, but the Warhammer bounced off. "What? This tree dares doubt the power of Raughnold, the Honorable Mountain!"

"Uh, R-Raughn, I think it's just a thick tree. You've mostly been hitting saplings-" The woods stirred, and Aelf leaped behind Raughnold, an instinct Aelf hoped would protect him.

Anana cradled Arcie, and pulled her Holy Dagger from her belt. The high-waisted pants she was wearing, known colloquially as Mom-Trousers, fell, revealing a battle skirt decorated with, you guessed it, pineapples.

Raughnold raised his Warhammer. "Who goes there? We have a baby on board this party, so if you dare to attack, know that her parents will strike you down!" The woods chattered, the rustling surrounding them completely. What sounded like a child's laugh emanated from the underbrush around them, their enemy invisible.

Why do you cower, Elf Ranger? You wield spells and bows, yes? Prepare one or the other, and attack!

See, I used to think that, too, but I don't think the God of Luck likes me too much...

Bah! I know La'Terry well. He determines everything randomly, as is his way, and no boon or detriment he offers lasts very long. More likely, your own lack of confidence is what holds you back. Take control of your destiny, and slaughter the foe in front of you!

I thought you were trying to control my destiny?

The bush behind Aelf broke open, and a purple-furred wolf, known to the townspeople as a Purple-Furred Wolf, leaped at Aelf, its teeth aiming for his throat.

Fine! If you refuse to make the effort, I'll just have to show you how it's done! Aelf's new leg began moving on its own, and struck the Purple-Furred Wolf's neck. The wolf's teeth went off course, instead latching on to the side of Aelf's face, the canine's canines digging into either side of Aelf's eyes. **You incompetent! If you'd taken a fighting stance, I would have snapped that wolf's neck!** Aelf replied with a scream of pain and fear.

Anana poked the puppy in its now slightly damaged neck with her Dagger, and its throats unleashed a torrent of blue blood. Anana dodged expertly, keeping her own clothes from being stained, but she could not stop Arcie from being splattered slightly. The baby began crying, and Anana's face grew cold. "How dare these creatures make my child cry?"

Raughnold let out a loud cry, and he struck the Redwood again. A massive crack appeared in it, dull orange light spilling out from it. Though Raughnold could not notice it, the creatures nearby did, and the woods switched from laughing to growling. Raughnold growled back: "I will slaughter all of you for your transgressions against my daughter! Face us if you dare, cowards!"

The forest went silent, and shin-high creatures with coned hats emerged from the woods. Their garbs were decidedly Dwarven, but they were about a tenth of the size of an average Dwarven child. Their apparent leader stepped forward, her tiny face bursting with fury. "All right, dickbag, we're here!" Snarling purple-furred wolves followed behind. Aelf's bloody face, with the wolf still attached, seemed to make them hungrier and hungrier as they looked at him.

Aelf, realizing this, began removing the wolf's limp body, tooth by bloody tooth. "H-hey, I-I-I know you guys. Guard N'noms, right? Y-you're vassals of th-th-the Elf Kingdoms." He let out a sigh of relief as the wolf finally dropped from his face, and he cast Healing Touch, a low-level spell he'd learned recently, on his open wounds.

"Most of our people are, cockweed, but some of us - that's our crew, in case you're too Gods damn stupid to figure it out - worship the Plant Demon Klorofill! You're attacking the oldest Redwood in the forest, our shrine to her!"

Upon hearing the word 'Demon,' Raughnold adopted a defensive stance, excited about facing a new threat. "N'noms! What's a Klorofill?"

"What d'ya mean, 'What's a Klorofill?' You're the tittytalker that killed her!"

Anana glared at the N'noms, a cold stare that would shake any human to the core. "Watch your mouth, you vulgar creature. There is a child present."

"I don't care about your crack ass kid, you dysfunctional fucking sapling! You killed our God's body, and we're gonna get our revenge!"

Aelf tilted his head. "Wait, 'her body?' That's weirdly specific-"

"Cuntstick, I'm not talking to you!"

Raughnold laughed. "You gremlins are adorable! If any of you should survive, I would like to take you as a pet!"

"I don't know if you noticed, witless dickless, but you're pretty heavily outnumbered!"

Raughnold crouched down, but still towered several feet above the Head N'nom. "Oh, child... if we killed your God, and she wasn't strong enough for us to even remember it... what

hope do you have?" The N'nom's all stopped to consider this, and everyone but the Head N'nom ran back into the woods. "Tell me, little one, what is your name?"

The Head N'nom swallowed, now nervous about her odds. "Lily Puddin."

"Lily Puddin... It has a nice ring to it." He grabbed Lily, and threw her into his pack. "Be careful, I'm told it's dangerous for small beings to be in there."

"Screw you, hammer humper! I'll kill you!"

Raughnold laughed. "I adore this being! Anana, let us finish our journey, then see if any of the many furniture stores in Eykeia have a piece that could house this creature!"

"Dearest, I don't think she's a good addition to our household..."

"Nonsense, my love! We have so much shelf space, and we need something to put on it! What could be better than a trophy of our battles, especially since I don't remember the one Lily speaks of!"

"You will refer to me as High Druid Lily!"

"Uh, Raughn... Klorofill attacked you on the day of your wedding."

"Oh! Yes, that was a plant demon, and an excellent way to ring in our union!"

"Wolves! Wolves, I order you to-" Raughnold clamped his hand over the bag, muffling her.

"Now, now, Lily. If you want to make animal friends, I will secure a goldfish for you to speak to! Now, my wife, my daughter, and my friend, let us away!" Raughnold and crew walked towards Myytb'l, leaving the shrine glowing and the wolves confused. As the wolves walked away, a single leaf grew menacingly out of the Redwood.

What's gucci

Yo boi

To be blunt, I don't quite understand the point of this story, and it wasn't up to the quality of your other work. Read it over, and see if you think the jokes hit, because there doesn't seem to be that much substance here, but maybe I'm just not in a funny mood from being sick.

Fantasy Novel! The Novel

Chapter 5: Fuel Inefficient

Piycechoo conjured himself a red mug filled with Hot Chocolate as he opened the latest book in his quest for information titled *Mediocre Minions and How to Kill Them*. It was a bit more punctilious than the books he typically enjoyed, but work comes before pleasure. His adventuring group had been gone for four days, and he could still smell their presence in his tower... Or maybe that was Aelf's blood, since he never was able to get the stain of it out of the floorboards.

Taking the cup in his hand, he noted that it was a bit warmer than he'd intended. Taking a sip, he found the cocoa inside cooler than the cup. Strange, but then most magic is. He read through a few pages before going to take another sip. He touched the side of the mug, before immediately retracting his hand. He hadn't noticed it, but the cup was red hot. I mean, it was red before, but... Whatever, you get the point.

Curious about just what was going on, Piycechoo cast Magnetism on his hands and the mug. Pushing the book out of the way so as not to stain it, he made the mug hover in mid-air. He took it over to the window, and poured the hot chocolate out. Though he was disappointed, he had to make sure. Holding the mug out the window as well, he watched the metal melt into a puddle. Sighing, he dispelled the mug entirely, as well as the hot chocolate trying to water the grass.

He walked into the main chamber, annoyed. "All right, who's there?" He was met by silence. He sighed, thoroughly vexed. "Come on, I'll find you eventually. I don't sense a lot of arcane energy in the air, so you're not that skilled with magic, and I've already cast a barrier around myself. All you're going to do is annoy me, so you might as well..." He felt a flicker of unease. With a flick of his wrist, his eyesight and hearing enhanced tenfold, and his eyes flicked from left to right, checking for any motion. He heard the sound of splashing water from his bathroom, and he went to look.

Inside, he found the floor had flooded, and an acrid smell permeated the room. There was no evidence of a break in, and there were no footprints leading out. Since he had enhanced his eyesight, he was able to peer into the space between the wood panels of his medicine cabinet and see that the bottles inside were arranged differently from how he'd had them. He walked through

the water on the floor, opened the cabinet, and saw that the rubbing alcohol containers were all empty. He looked down at the floor, and his eyes widened as he heard a match strike from down the hall.

The alcohol ignited as a stream of flame from more alcohol leading from the hall caught fire. As the flames rushed toward him, he waved his arms, and the world around him seemed to slow down as he amplified his speed by a factor of ten. Seeing no other option, he jumped out his bathroom window. If he hadn't buffed his motion, he would've fallen several stories to his probable death, but he did do that, 'cause he's just that cool. The Archmage landed on a nearby branch as time recalibrated around him. His bathroom exploded in a storm of flame, and so soon after he'd retiled it. As the flames died down, he saw a hooded figure amidst the inferno unconcerned with the flames. With his enhanced senses, Piycechoo could just make out a smile beaming from inside the smoke.

"Whoever you are, you're good. I've got questions for you."

The figure let out a decidedly feminine chuckle, and snapped her fingers. Sensing Arcane energy from the trees behind him, Piycechoo turned just in time to see the forest ignite. A complete ring around his tower, creeping ever closer to his sanctum. "Damn it, I should have counter-spelled that..." The flames in his bathroom were roaring ever greater, and smoke poured from every other window in his tower. It seemed the intruder planned to destroy everything he'd been working toward, and she was succeeding. Piycechoo had to make the Intruder to come to him.

Clenching his hand into a fist, Piycechoo formed a cube of lightning behind the enemy. With a slight gesture of his fist, he pulled the lightning towards the window, forcing the Intruder

to retreat. She giggled, and started to move her arms in a way that Piycechoo immediately recognized as Counter-Spell. Before she could disable the spell, Piycechoo began focusing energy into his free hand. Vines of pure electricity coiled tightly around his fingers, forming springs. Piycechoo sent an electrical charge to his hand, and the vines launched together, forming whips that fired at the speed of a lightning bolt at the Intruder. The vines tangled around her wrists, keeping her from using Counter-Spell. Piycechoo rolled the wrist of his clenched hand, and the cube approached her ever faster. Now, it was her turn to leap out the window. As she fell, she pulled with unexpected strength on the whips Piycechoo had conjured, pulling him off the tree he'd been standing on: they were falling together, now.

"Not bad, handsome," an eerily seductive voice called out from behind the hood. As her words pierced Piycechoo's mind, he felt his entire body grow cold with discomfort. "What's your next move?" Grimacing, Piycechoo dispelled the cube of lightning. His clenched hand was now free to ready a spell, and Piycechoo wasted no time. Forming and launching a fresh set of electric tendrils, Piycechoo halted. The Intruder now hung forty feet off the ground, Piycechoo fifty feet above her.

"Who are you? Who sent you?"

The Intruder laughed, a sickly sweet sound that gave Piycechoo chills. "You're so full of questions, fair Mage! I do love a man that lets a woman talk about herself."

"If you're going to be cute about it..."

"So, you think I'm cute-" Electricity blasted through her body as the whips attached to her wrists surged with energy. She screamed and writhed in pain, before she started laughing again. Steadying her body, she grabbed the vines and pulled herself up. Though Piycechoo was clearly

doing substantial damage to her body, she was nearly unfazed. "We have a kinky one here. I like kinky."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

The Intruder freed one of her wrists. In Piycechoo's confusion over the 'kinky' line, he'd lost concentration for a brief instant, and the Intruder didn't let it go to waste. Freeing her wrist, she pulled a knife from her boot and threw it. For a brief instant as it rushed past him, Piycechoo saw a Fireball glyph carved into the Silver blade. Piycechoo felt safe for a moment, believing the Intruder had missed him. He grinned slightly, and prepared to make his move, shifting his gaze to her and readying a Laser Eye spell. Almost in response to his grin, the Intruder winked at him. Piycechoo realized an instant too late that the wink itself was the trigger for the Glyph. The glyph activated, detonating inside the branch Piycechoo's whips hung from, sending the two combatants careening toward the ground.

Piycechoo's concentration was now completely broken - the heat, smoke, and sudden drop were each enough to force lesser magicians to make mistakes, and even the Archmage couldn't hold out against all three. The electricity he'd conjured all dissipated into the air, The assassin used her arms to blast fire towards the ground, slowing her descent. She landed gracefully, and in the brief second she had, raised her arms and launched a fireball at Piycechoo. With no options left, Piycechoo crossed his arms across his chest, and blasted himself with electricity, launching himself away from the fireball. He spun across the ground, slicing his body open on the dirt, twigs, roots, you know, forest stuff. The impact broke both legs and his right arm as he landed on the ground. The tree the fireball struck was enveloped in flame - surprise - and splintered apart.

The heat and pain was getting to Piycechoo - his breath was ragged, his throat was dry, he was sweating profusely - but the Intruder seemed fine. She pulled her hood back, but Piycechoo couldn't see her face through the blood and sweat in his eyes until she crouched next to him. Her thin face and long crimson hair - of course she had red hair, why wouldn't she - seemed to meld into the oppressive light of the fire behind her. Her blood red lips - again, red, dude, it's fire - grinned wickedly. An earring shaped like flames (shocker) hung from her left ear, and her green eyes - didn't see that one coming, did you? - stared straight into his soul. "You put up a delightful fight, sweetheart." Her sing-songy tone chilled his body to the core - if the heat wasn't already making him sweat, her voice would have done the job. "I've never met a boy who held out against my moves for so long."

Piycechoo coughed up blood - it seemed he'd broken more bones than he initially thought - but remained defiant. "Is everything an innuendo with you?"

She giggled. "Just like a boy to not let me finish."

"I take it that's a yes?" Piycechoo's mind turned only to strategy now. His right arm, though broken, was still just mobile enough to shift towards a rock next to him. If he could get one good shot in-

Her foot came down hard on his arm, nearly disintegrating the bones in his wrist. Too much power to be natural. He tried to contain his reaction to a wince, but he could feel tears welling in his eyes as she frowned at him. "Oh, no, no, no. You weren't thinking of using that arm to hurt pretty little me, were you?"

It was Piycechoo's turn to laugh. The distraction had worked. "Whoever heard of a Mage using a rock as a weapon? I'd rather use something like Piercing Beam."

The Archmage channeled his magic energy until his arm trembled with magical power. Suddenly shooting his hand out at the girl, he released the energy directly into her face. Realizing at the last moment what was happening, she moved her head to the side. The beam struck the Intruder in the cheek, slamming into the tree behind her with enough force to blow a hole clear through the thick bark. Stepping away from Piycechoo, she held her cheek, a cut deep enough to scar marring her visage. Blood dripped down her face, and the flames glinted in the reflections they cast.

"You... Hit me." She touched her wound with her index finger, looked at the blood, and licked the blood away. She giggled, her eyes gleaming with some kind of insanity. Piycechoo had... Complicated feelings about the situation. "I've never been hit in the face before. And to think it was some pushover..."

"Pushover? Who told you that?" The Intruder walked back to him, and wiped Piycechoo's face, smearing the blood. Piycechoo's mind began racing, desperately trying to come up with a strategy, *any* strategy, that didn't make him use...

"The Guild, of course. Didn't Phill tell you anything? She always did have a big mouth..." She smeared Piycechoo's blood over her wound, mixing the two. Piycechoo had no idea *what* the fuck she was doing. All he could focus on was his own survival.

"No, Raughnold killed her before I could ask her anything." Ash fell from the sky, soon to be the only remnants of the home he'd spent so long cultivating and purifying. What a bummer.

"Raughnold... He's the leader of your group, yes? If I had to go to this much effort for just one of his lackeys, and one I don't even want to kill anymore... Maybe I'll have to rethink this

plan of mine. The Guild has time, after all..."

Piycechoo stayed silent. If this assassin could do this much damage to *him*, his... 'friends' were all-but doomed. He looked at his tower, now completely falling apart from the damage. He was in no condition to use *that* option, meaning there was only one strategy left.. His good arm began drawing a symbol in the ash next to him. He had to move fast and keep her talking, even if it cost him his hard-won pride. "Yeah... All this effort just for me. Raughnold's the strategist, he's..." His stomach churned as he forced the words out. "He's the strongest one. And he's always with his wife, Anana, who's at about equal strength to him. They've faced worse than pyromaniac assassins, and they'll face worse again after they kill you."

The Intruder crouched next to Piycechoo, then straddled his stomach. She pulled a dagger out of her jacket, and held it to Piycechoo's throat. "Go on, dear. Tell me everything you know about them, and I won't keep you on the edge here very long." Piycechoo found it harder and harder to focus on the glyph he was drawing, in more ways than one, but he had to keep going.

"The one you really have to look out for, though, is Aelf. I've never seen anyone, Human, Dwarf, Elf, even Dragon, take so much punishment and survive. You think you've almost killed me? You'll have to do triple this to even come close to fazing him. At this point, I'd call him nigh unkillable." Complete lies, but Piycechoo estimated there was too much blood on his face to see his expression.

The Intruder considered for a second, then smiled. "I know you're doing something with your arm, Piycechoo, and I hope it's what I think it is." She looked at the now finished glyph, and felt Piycechoo's body disappear beneath her. Standing at attention, she looked around, but saw only smoke and devastation. She pouted. "Way to make a girl feel unwelcome." The forest fire

roared around her, but she didn't mind. If anything, it calmed her nerves. Moving quickly, she drew her own glyph. She licked the blood she'd mixed together one last time before disappearing in her own teleport spell.

Piycechoo materialized in front of Myytb'l's front gate, bleeding and broken. Raughnold, Aelf, and Anana, who held Arcie, walked up to him, confused.

"What happened, my friend?" Raughnold asked, concerned. "Why are you here? Why are you so badly hurt? Why do you have an erection?"

Piycechoo coughed up yet more blood. "There was... A woman..." He coughed more.

Raughnold laughed as he bent down to treat his friend's wounds. "There is always a woman, my friend! I'm glad to see you're finally reaching out to society, at least!"

Aelf crouched to Piycechoo, looking over his injuries. "By the Gods, Piyche. Who was it? I've never seen you this hurt. I don't think I've ever seen you hurt at all."

"A Mage, but she acted more like an assassin... I let down my guard, I didn't think anyone could get through my failsafes. She didn't use magic until I was already cornered, and that's how I... Got like this."

Piycechoo sat up, the guards bringing in White Mages to help Piycechoo. MakDaughnold the Darkblade rushed out, holding a medical kit. "Archmage! Are you well?"

Raughnold glared at the Darkblade. "This concerns you not, MakDaughnold!!"

"Raughnold, I'll decide who this is or isn't for, and this seems like something the CAPTAIN OF THE GUARD should know. MakDaughnold, have your men look out for a woman with red hair, blood red lips, green eyes, and a penchant for fire and innuendo."

Anana eyed Piycechoo. "Are you asking for us to look into finding you a wife? Has our child made you yearn for your own family?"

Piycechoo glared at her. "No, you idiot, this is the woman who attacked me. Darkblade, can you organize the guards and look for her?"

MakDaughnold nodded. "Red hair and green eyes are a rare combination, and innuendos are nigh unheard of here. What should we do if we find a person that matches that description?"

"Don't engage her. She's too strong."

Raughnold laughed. "Yes, she would be too strong for a weakling like the Darkblade!"

MakDaughnold shrugged, embarrassed. "Yeah, I'm not a physical powerhouse like you. Don't worry, if I run into her, I'll notify you four."

Aelf looked from side to side. "I-I was actually planning to take a b-break from this."

Piycechoo now stood, though his wounds were not yet fully healed. "Aelf, she knows about us. About our group. Your fate's locked in with all of us. We can't walk away, not now. We need every piece of information we can get."

"W-well, I just... I don't... You..." Aelf hung his head. "okay..."

Worry not, imbecilic Elf. Raughnold clapped Aelf on the back, almost dislocating the Elf's shoulder. "Do not worry, my NAKAMA(nakama means friend)friend! All we must do is train you to be the strongest Elf Warrior you can be!"

"B-but, I'm a Ranger... I don't want to be in the center of a fight..."

Too bad, that's where the killing is.

Aelf looked down at his leg, his brow furrowed. "... Hey, Piycechoo? I have some questions about this leg..."

"Not now, Aelf. Raughnold, Anana, find a babysitter for Arcie. Someone you trust, someone who can handle it if her powers develop more. Aelf, contact your contacts in the Elf Kingdom, see if they know anything about a 'Guild.' Darkblade, do the same with the Eastern Kingdom. Raughnold, Anana, start training. We need strength... We all do." Piycechoo stood tall despite the fractures, lacerations, and assorted other wounds. "This is the new threat, everyone. Let's go kill it." He took a step forward, then fell over, unconscious. He'd had a long day.

Interlude 1: Hell-o

Klorofill's soul sat in Hell's waiting room. Though only a ball of incandescent energy, her aura's shifting colors gave away her emotions. Around her sat the souls of pedophiles, serial killers, and politicians. Had she really been cast in with the same lot as these pathetic mortals? She was a High Demon, for the Gods' sake! Well, not a High Demon. She wasn't quite a Lesser Demon, either. Ever since the Mean Mean Baddie Bad was erased from existence by the Knights of Eykeia, the entire ranking system for Divine and Unholy beings had been thrown off balance. Not that there was much order to it in the first place... new Demons appeared every day, it seemed, and Hell could barely hold all the exorcised ones as it was.

It was those damned Knights, Klorofill decided. They'd ruined everything. After they

succeeded, every mortal who could create a spark with their fingers or swing a sword in a vaguely proper way thought they could be Heroes. Hope and inspiration... Bah. When the Guard N'nom's resurrected her, Klorofill planned to slaughter the Spirits who governed those two mortal failings herself.

Finally, the horned receptionist who looked like she was a Dwarf in a previous life, called out to the room. "Klorofill, you're up for review."

"Finally," the Plant Demon spat. She walked to the massive double doors, and they opened into a massive chamber.

On either wall, giant pillars of lava flowed from on high, held back by thin cases of glass. Legend said that any who dared offend the Lord would be trapped in the glass, forced to burn for all eternity, a fate only slightly worse than the one most residents faced. The ceiling was almost impossibly high, and no divination could identify what rested above, waiting to devour any who would challenge the Lord. And at the far end of the hall, He sat.

Inside sat the Lord of Hell, a bright red aura of malice surrounding him. Nobody knew exactly how to describe him, but he was a creature with no defined form. It was difficult to look directly at him, and his voice was obscured by the evil aura he emanated. Many theorized that the Lord of Hell was not even male, and that this was an assumption brought about by centuries, even millennia of subtle reinforcement of stereotypes in Angelic, Demon, and Mortal society, but others thought the Lord simply chose to obscure his unsightly visage and voice to protect what little sanity the residents of his realm had.

Klorofill, for her part, bent down on one knee and bowed her head. She was angry and petulant, but she was not an idiot. She would voice her grievances, but not in a way that would

trap her plant-based soul in a fiery hell. Not that He'll wasn't already Fiery, but...

"So, Phill, can I call you Phill?"

The Lord stood up. Klorofill could not tell how tall he was, but his presence alone bore down on her, making her feel mere inches tall to his towering aura.

"Of course my Lord." Klorofill's aura briefly flashed indigo, indicating she was repressing a strong negative emotion. Only imbeciles would shorten her name so haphazardly... But the Lord of Hell knew how much she hated it, and capitalized it.

"Cool. You have failed me, Phill, you have failed us all. You barely took a bite out of the Mortal World, when you were supposed to have a feast."

"I understand, my Lord."

A ring of pain encircled Klorofill's soul, and she screamed. "I am not your Lord, sapling. You are not worthy to reside in my Kingdom."

Klorofill's soul briefly glowed red with anger. This dick! This douche dick! The Mighty Klorofill is not to be trifled with! Then, blue with sadness. How did it get like this? Why did this happen to me? Finally, it reverted to its natural green. I suppose this is my life... well, death, for now. "As you say... Sir." The pain subsided. She'd found the right word, it seemed.

The Lord stepped toward her, and the pressure his presence exerted almost hurt Klorofill as badly. "You made the mistake of assaulting a group that even I consider dangerous. You believed that absorbing their strength would amplify yours immeasurably... And you would have been right." Klorofill's soul blinked white in surprise. The Lord of Hell never gave out such high praise as being 'correct.' Klorofill's soul switched from a light blue 'hopeful' to a deep, black

'scared.' The Lord laughed. "Oh, Klorofill, do hide your emotions better. You're as easy to read as the Necronomicon."

"A-as you wish, Sir. But... Why did you wish to meet with me? And why am I lumped in with those mortals?"

"You are in no position to ask questions. Now, how were you defeated?"

Klorofill took a moment to think. "I had 2 of them in my grasp, ready to feast on their energy. A third, the Elf, had knocked himself unconscious. And then... I just exploded. It was too fast for me to even see. Then, as I was injured, their leader crushed my head with his Warhammer."

The Lord considered. "The Mage. I had my personal Guild dispatch their finest assassin to deal with him, but he escaped, wounding Eyjafjallajökull's (should be even wounding Eyja) face. He seems to be the most talented one, though I don't doubt the raw power of his associates." The Lord considered again. "One of the Knights of Eykeia knocked himself out during the battle?"

"My reaction as well, Sir."

The Lord walked back to his throne. "Interesting. The audacity, the confidence..."

Klorofill felt a tug on her soul. The shrine in the woods was taking effect. Soon, she'd be back in the realm of the living. "Sir, what would you have me do?"

The Lord laughed. "Nothing. You have proven yourself a completely useless pawn. When you exit, I will have lost nothing."

Klorofill's soul shrank as she was pulled from Hell. "Then, by your leave..."

The Lord turned around. "Yes, make like a tree and all that. I anticipate nothing but

failure. Do try to disappoint me there." Klorofill disappeared completely, and the hall was filled with the sweet colorless aura of silence. The Lord's voice boomed as he called out to the Waiting Room. "Darla, send in my next appointment."

Part 1: ... And Look For Clues

Chapter 6: Dwarf Wharf

Raughnold and Anana stood at the docks, looking at the H.S. (Human Ship) Doorowthee, the cruise ship that would take them to the Dwarven Kingdom of Shi'kal. Though it would cost a normal married couple several thousand pieces of Gold to take this luxury cruise liner, Raughnold and Anana were heroes of the land. As such, they were allowed onboard with a 5% discount, which would be bumped up to 8.5% should they defend the boat from any threats, including but not limited to pirates, krakens, and implosion.

As Raughnold and Anana boarded, they waved goodbye to Anana's sisters, the Triplets. They all held Arcie collectively, and called out in 3-part harmony, "Worry not for your child, sister. We will always fiercely protect her."

"Thank you, my sisters-in-law! Our minds are at peace!"

Anana shook her head. "Raughnold, we just learned of a threat that could destroy the world last month! How can you be at ease in this situation?"

Raughnold laughed heartily. "Because, my dear, we have begun our journey to new lands! We have opened the path to a glorious future that stretches before us! Destiny is ours, if we only reach out and take it!" The boat sounded its horn, and the passengers all cheered in anticipation. A fair percentage of the Eykeian nobility was on board, and with two of the land's most famous Heroes traveling with them, there was no threat they could reasonably fear.

"Darling, could I put some of these clothes into your pack? I can barely keep mine closed..." Raughnold had packed excessively as usual, carrying more weapons than any logic would ever dictate necessary. To his credit, he had not packed extra clothes; he only ever wore the one suit of Full Plate and enchanted clothes underneath them that allowed him to never sweat or make his clothing smell bad. Anana, however, packed very, very lightly. Only three extra suits of armor, all fashionably impractical. Given how fast and dexterous she was, there was little chance of her being hit by anything other than an area of effect spell.

"Of course, Raughnold. Just be careful, my sisters spent a long time crafting this armor-" Raughnold took a javelin, two falchions, and a scimitar, and haphazardly threw them into Anana's pack. Throwing the mass of weapons in his own pack over his massive shoulders, he walked to the nearby cabins. The doors barely fit his massive frame, and his massive thighs barely squeezed their mass through the frame. Anana, her frame being roughly a third the size of her husband's, had no such trouble.

In their cabin, Anana began organizing. She shook her head in frustration at the holes Raughnold had made in her outfits, but she'd packed extra leather and sewing materials in case

he did something like that. Raughnold took a different strategy, and dumped his entire pack onto the bed. Several flails, taped together, spilled out onto the floor, making a small hole in the wood.

"Raughnold, why do you have so many flails? They aren't even effective weapons."

"My dear, worry not! This is for Piycechoo... For my Ultimate Weapon!"

Anana gave her husband a hug. "You still haven't told me what this super-weapon of yours is supposed to be."

Raughnold chuckled. "My love, there has never been anything like it. I will protect you and our daughter with it until my dying breath!"

"Well, I await with bated, still-living breath." They both leaned in for a kiss, but a knock at their door killed the moment.

Raughnold sighed, disappointed at being cockblocked, and opened up their room to a Dwarf wringing his hat. "What business do you have with Raughnold and Anana, Heroes of the Realm?"

The Dwarf gulped. "Well, sir, this is a bit unusual, but... We're flying."

Anana cocked her head at the Dwarf, already frustrated at being clamjammed. "What do you mean, flying?"

The Dwarf gulped again. "You see, there's some sort of Wizard on the deck of the ship, and he's threatening to launch the ship into the side of a mountain if you two don't meet him in combat."

Raughnold's face lit up at that. "Combat? So soon into our journey? This is shaping up to be a fun trip!"

Anana pulled her Holy Dagger from her Leather Sweatpants with polka-dots shaped like

pineapples adorning it. "If it's the two of us facing him, he has no chance at all!"

Raughnold and Anana both ran to the deck of the ship, and were treated to a magnificent view of Eykeia's coastline and the O'shun Ocean. Raughnold laughed. "What a sight to behold!"

Anana nodded. "Yes, it truly is breathtaking to see the land from up here."

Raughnold took his wife's hand. "I was speaking of you, my dear. Is there something else I should be looking at?"

"Yes, actually," A foppish voice called from behind them, and they turned to face their new opponent. A smiling man with a rose in his mouth floating next to the mast. He bit the rose in half, and took a piece in each hand. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance, fair Heroes. My name is Mikael. I am the third most powerful officer of the Guild, and your opponent for today."

Raughnold pointed his Warhammer at Mikael. "I know not why you specified 'third most powerful,' and I demand that you clarify!"

Mikael began to giggle. "You see, my organization has a betting pool where we see how far Adventurers such as yourself get when investigating us. The farther you advance, the

Anana nudged Raughnold. "My love, we're here to gather information about the Guild. Find out who they are, what they want, where we can find them... Do you remember?"

Raughnold's face never betrayed even a hint of recognition. "Yes. Of course I do."

Mikael chuckled, and lowered himself down to the deck of the ship. "It seems we've got a bit of a spat here. Married couples shouldn't fight each other... Or should they?" Mikael snapped the pieces of rose he held, and deep pink clouds rose from them.

Mikael licked his lips as the clouds slowly began to take shape. "Tell me, heroes... How often have you looked in the mirror and disliked what you saw?" The pink clouds formed perfect

replicas of Raughnold and Anana from their wedding day. Mikael began cackling maniacally as the replicas drew their weapons. "In the Guild, strength and magical talent are second to raw ability. We pride ourselves on our individualized talents, and we typically practice a single skill until it is as strong as its potential allows. Members of our Guild call these unmatched abilities 'Gimmicks.' You've already encountered Klorofill, the Plant Demon with the Gimmick 'PlantLife,' and Eyja, who has mastered the gimmick 'Pyromania.' My Gimmick is called 'Mirror,' and I will enjoy watching it take your lives."

Mikael threw his head back in laughter, but his good mood came to a halt when he saw that Anana and Raughnold were uninterested. "What's wrong?"

Raughnold scratched his head. "Did you not wish to come up with something original?"

Mikael blinked in surprise. "Original? What?"

Anana sighed, and twirled her Holy Dagger. "You're not the first person to come up with us fighting dark versions of ourselves. It's painfully obvious to tell the difference. All we need to do is tear a piece of clothing or put chalk on our face... really, any identifying mark will do. You did that for us by making them wear our wedding outfits."

Mikael frowned, and glared at the two heroes. "Well, I suppose I would rather be effective than original."

Raughnold laughed. "Dear Sorcerer, did you not hear the part where we said you weren't the first to come up with this idea? Even I can tell that it isn't effective. It's never worked before!"

Mikael's jaw clenched tightly. "Don't you dare doubt me! These Mirrors are copies designed to completely overpower you! They have at least double the strength, speed, and

intelligence you displayed at the fight you had on your wedding day!" Raughnold and Anana started dying laughing, just absolutely humiliating Mikael. For a brief moment, the Evil Wizard considered jumping off the boat. "What do you imbeciles find so funny?"

Raughnold wiped away a tear as Anana spoke. "We were *seventeen!* I was three months pregnant! I've grown an inch since then, and Raughnold is three and a half inches taller!"

Mikael's eye began to twitch. "You were... Seventeen? You defeated multiple God-level threats... At seventeen years old?"

Raughnold calmed himself slightly. "No, no, we had help! Piycechoo, Aelf, all the friends we made along the way... And now, you're our first enemy on our first quest as husband and wife! How exciting for us! This will be a great warm up."

Anana clutched her Dagger tightly, and a glint appeared in her eye. "Congratulations, lackey. You've made a good opening match for us to get back into the swing of things with!" The two again began laughing again at the Sorcerer again.

Mikael flew into a rage, and began floating slightly above the ship. "Attack, my minions! Eliminate your doppelgangers!" The copy of Anana leaped into the air, spinning several times before almost landing on Anana's head. Anana stepped to the side, stabbed her copy in the eye with her Holy Dagger, and started laughing again as the shade disintegrated.

Raughnold's double charged forward, and swung at the original. Raughnold ducked under the swing, and punched the Mirror's exposed face with enough force to blow the top half of its skull clean off. Raughnold blew on his knuckles, and the blood from the Mirror disintegrated with the rest of it.

Mikael took a step back, suddenly terrified. "You... How could I underestimate you so greatly?"

Raughnold pointed his Warhammer at Mikael. "Because, villainous scum, you are stupid! A true idiot! Laughably unintelligent!"

Mikael began running for the side of the boat. If he could reach the water, he could reflect the light so nobody would find him. Anana's Dagger cracked a mirror Mikael conjured just before it struck him down, and bounced back at her. She spun quickly, retrieving The world around the boat twisted back into place, the illusion of being in the sky dissipating as Mikael's mirror images were shattered.

"Look, Raughnold! We're still on the ocean! It's just as he said: his Gimmick was literally smoke and mirrors!"

Raughnold lowered his Warhammer. "You know, he didn't need to pretend the boat was in the air. We would have fought him if he'd just asked."

Anana smiled, and leaned in to Raughnold. "He was probably trying to intimidate us into thinking he was stronger than he actually was."

"Intimidate us? Ha! Nothing can intimidate us or our love! Nothing, I say!"

"Raughnold... Now that nothing's attacking the ship, maybe we can get back to..."

"Yes, my dear! Now, it is time for us to feast! Where is the dining hall?" Raughnold walked towards where he assumed the mess hall would be. Anana followed behind, shaking her head, humoring him.

Chapter 7: Mystery Theater

Aelf the Elf was trimming the nails on his left foot. He knew better than to try to groom K'voreki'n's leg; whenever he made even a passing attempt, the leg screamed obscenities at him until he stopped. Besides, the leg kept itself relatively trimmed and clean-shaven, so there wasn't much point in bothering it.

Aelf was in a carriage taking him back to his home, the Kingdom of Qi-Blur. An ancient land shrouded in mystery, Qi-Blur was known throughout the world as a utopia several millennia in the making. No citizen ever knew want from food, water, or entertainment, and the only necessary work was trading and negotiating with the nearby kingdoms.

Aelf looked forward to visiting his father after so many years. Being several hundred years apart in age, Aelf didn't get along terribly well with his father, but there was still a warmth and familiarity between the two that Aelf cherished. No one had been more encouraging of Aelf branching out into the adventuring game, and despite all the pain and suffering Aelf had endured because of his decision, Aelf couldn't begrudge his father. Besides, if the reports were true, Aelf was something of a local legend in Qi-Blur's capital city, Sandta.

Also in the carriage was Raughnold's trophy for his victory over Klorofill, Lily Puddin. Lily sat next to Aelf, her arms crossed over her chest. "I don't understand why you're doing this."

"Because, Lily, you're the right hand of Klorofill, right? My dad's a pretty tough interrogator, so he'll be able to grill you good."

"I meant why you don't have me shackled. At any point, I could summon dozens of wolves to this carriage and slaughter you and the driver."

Aelf gulped, and looked at Lily. "S-so why don't you?"

Lily looked at Aelf, raising an eyebrow. "'Cause I want a good answer before I kill you."

Aelf clucked the bow on his back, his throat going dry at the threats from the 9-inch tall creature next to him. "Raughnold kept you in a glass case designed for a gerbil. Th-th-that's no way to live, a-and nobody d-d-deserves that. Also, i-if you kill me, please don't tell Raughnold I let you out."

Lily's mouth hung open for a second, then closed as she turned her head to look forward. "I didn't expected kindness and cowardice from someone who killed my God. Takes all sorts."

Aelf was now white-knuckling the bow. "Th-th-then, you're not going to kill me?"

Lily looked away from Aelf, doing her best to appear stately. "Not today, but I promise nothing of the future."

Aelf exhaled, relieved. *Man, I didn't want to get in a fight today... I'm still sore from last week when Arcie threw a straw at me and it turned into an icicle mid-flight.*

Bah. Must you always cower so in front of creatures so much smaller than you?

Take initiative, and smash this N'nom before she kills you for sport!

Well, I don't want to... Why are you even still here? It's been over a month.

Submit to my influence and you never have to hear my voice again!

But if I got influenced by you, that'd basically be like you being in my head 100% of the time.

You infuriating craven! I've never battled against such a stubborn, unyielding beast!

... This is a battle?

Of course it is! In life, all things are a battle, be it physical or mental!

Are you saying I'm winning a fight?

Don't you dare twist words in a way other than the way I will you to!

The carriage stopped, and Aelf stretched his leg and his Leg. Standing up, he felt a rush of excitement. Lily climbed into his shoulder, yawning. "So, this is Sandta. Not as big as I'd heard," she muttered sarcastically.

Aelf chuckled. "W-well, it's not much, but it's home." In front of the two passengers was a 500 mile wide wall, and inside was a metropolis unlike any other. Aelf walked up to the 700 foot high gate, and knocked.

"Oi, cockrot, you can't get in without proper verification. Everything in this city is tightly regulated. I couldn't even get in with a bribe. Who doesn't accept 200 Gold when offered?"

"That's because gold pieces are useless here. All you need do is ask for food, lodging, anything, and it will be provided."

"Ugh. I've lived in the forest my entire life, and even I think that sounds like hippy shit."

An eye-slit in the gate opened up, and a guard peered through. "Who goes there? State your name and business!"

Aelf cleared his throat. "Prince Aelf Inn, heir to the Benevolent Dictatorship of Qi-Blur, seeking information about a group that threatens our stability." Lily turned to look at him, extremely confused.

"I'm sorry, did you say 'Prince?'" Aelf gulped, hoping the guard didn't hear that.

The guard considered for a second. "Tell me something only Prince Inn would know."

"My father believes any chocolate higher than 40% cacao is distasteful."

The guard considered another second. "I don't have a way to verify that."

"Good point, good point... Oh! What if I show you this?" Aelf held up his Medallion of

Dictatorship, proof of his birthright, for the guard to see.

The guard nodded. "Oh. Medallion of Dictatorship. One second..." The eye-slit closed, and a muffled argument was heard behind the gate. Aelf waited patiently. After several hours, the eye-slit opened again, and the guard looked back at him. "Cool."

The gates cracked open, and a brilliant silver light spilled out from inside the city. Cheers erupted from inside, and Aelf walked in to find a crowd of Elves and Guard N'nom's chanting his name. Aelf was very embarrassed, but he was still glad to hear that someone believed in him. He shook hands with the fair, thin Elven faces on each side of the street.

Ryat Polis in full-plate fell in beside him, forcing him away from the crowd, keeping him safe. The Ryat were Qi-Blur's elite fighting force, designed to immediately neutralize any domestic threat. Their armor was adorned with boars of all different shapes and sizes. As such, the local populace had taken to affectionately calling them 'Pigs.' Aelf appreciated their sentiment in sheltering him, but wished that the safety measures weren't so restrictive to those they wanted to protect.

Subtle social commentary.

After an hour or so of being cramped, Lily noticed that some of the Ryat Polis were also keeping citizens away from a nearby structure. "Hey, dicklick, ask what's up with that building. And give me some legroom."

"O-oh, sorry. Ahem... Kind sirs, could you tell me what happened in that building over there?"

The Pig on his left eyed him through their several inch thick helmets. His voice was unusually gruff for an Elf. "Forgive me for telling you, your highness, but forty or so citizens all

simultaneously committed suicide."

Aelf gasped. "But committing suicide is punishable by death! Why would anyone bring such tragedy on themselves?"

The Pig shrugged. "Evidence is weak right now, Prince Aelf, but your father believes that it has something to do with this 'Guild' you're hunting."

Aelf's eyes lit up. "There's no danger there right now, is there?"

"Of course not, Prince Aelf."

Aelf stopped walking, and the Ryat around him stopped, too. "Thank you for taking me this far, everyone, but I have a responsibility to help wherever I can. I have to get to that crime scene."

The Pig in front of him grabbed him, and forced him to keep walking. "My Prince, don't worry about it."

"Sir, worrying is my specialty." A glyph on Aelf's wrist began to glow as he concentrated as hard as he could, and he disappeared from the middle of the guards. Aelf appeared 20 feet deep into the crowd. The glyph he'd tattooed on himself stopped glowing, and Aelf gasped for air. Piycechoo's teleportation tattoo worked, it seemed, and Aelf's natural ability with magic was just strong enough to get him where he'd needed to go, even if he'd just burned through his arcane energy for the next month. In fact, if he wasn't so used to being brutalized, he probably wouldn't have enough energy to stand.

Thankfully for Aelf, the guards couldn't see through the thick mass of Elves and N'noms to find him walking away at a brisk pace. Since this section of the crowd hadn't seen him through the Ryats, they cheered the idea of Aelf, not the physical version now in their midst. Using this

natural camouflage, since even Elves think all Elves look similar, which is pretty racist if we're being honest, Aelf made his way towards the crime scene.

Lily, luckily for her, had Aelf's scent, and was slowly making her way to him. Unfamiliar with typical N'nom culture, she passed by several of her species without so much as a nod. The angry stares she got embarrassed her, so she pulled her hood up and kept walking.

Arriving at the hotel, he found two Detectives, members of Qi-Blur's Detective division. Aelf flashed his Medallion of Dictatorship to the Detectives. "Hello, sirs and ma'ams."

The Detectives' eyes widened, clearly surprised to see him. They fell to their knees and bowed to him. The Detective nearest Aelf cleared her throat: "Prince Aelf, my lord, you should not be here. The stench of death looms heavy, and-"

Aelf shrugged. "Y'know, that would've bothered me a year and a half ago, but now it's not so bad. Humans don't bathe that often while adventuring, so..."

The Male Detective kept his eyes fixed on the ground. "Yes, my Prince. We've heard the tales of your adventures, of how you single handedly slaughtered entire armies to save the land!"

Aelf's eyes shrunk in the back of his head. "W-who s-s-said that? That's just..."

"Yes, milord, it does paint you in a bit of an unsympathetic light, but we all know you only killed those thousands to save millions."

Aelf wanted to vomit. "I-I-I've n-n-never k-k-k-killed a-anyone in my life!"

"Nonsense, sire. How else would you have developed that stutter but by biting your tongue while you were biting through enemy throats?"

Aelf felt a fury unlike any he'd ever felt before flow through him. He imagined this was what Berserkers felt when they entered a Bloodrage, but this was a Wordrage. **"NOW SEE**

HERE! I am a man of peace, first and foremost! I have never won a battle in my life, and the idea that I would - or even could - kill any creature of this plane of existence makes me want to retch. Now, stand up and answer my questions!" The Detectives jumped to their feet, oddly frightened by his speech.

Aelf felt his senses return to him as the feeling passed, and he realized what he'd done. "T-t-that was r-r-rude of me." The Detectives coughed, unwilling to tell their Prince that he had, in fact, pulled a dick move. "A-anyway, can I get your names?"

The two Detectives gulped. The man stepped forward, and bowed his head. "Mold Air, seventeenth son of the House of O'Shun. Forgive me if we started off on the wrong foot."

"Oh, no, I should be apologizing." The Detectives' mouths pursed slightly, as though they didn't want to openly admit they agreed with the statement. "And your name, ma'am?"

The female Detective bowed her head and stepped next to Mold Air. "Skull E, of House Bonehead. I have a Master's Degree in Criminomancy."

Aelf cocked his head. "Criminomancy? I've never heard of that before."

"No, I don't imagine so. It's a very new field of magic, my Prince."

"Oh, just Aelf is fine."

"No it isn't, Prince Inn. If any one person breaks from the formality and tradition, what stops the rest of the populace from revolting against the government?"

"You think being on a first-name basis is that detrimental to a government?"

"It's a slippery slope, sire."

Aelf decided to believe that she knew what she was talking about, and moved on. "So, what do we know so far?"

Mold Air spoke first. "Almost nothing. Forty-seven Elves all stabbing themselves in the throat at about thirty-four minutes before high noon, with no connection except that they all traveled to this building this morning."

Skull E. went next. "Another connection we've found is that the knives they used were all the same type, and they all disappeared before we could investigate properly."

Aelf nodded. "Interesting. Awful, but interesting. Were they together or apart when the incident happened?"

Mold nodded. "All congregating in one room, all facing one wall. The way they were stabbed indicates they didn't have any hesitation about killing themselves, either. Not a single one left a note saying why they did it, either."

One of Aelf's eyebrows rose. "Are you sure these were suicides?"

Skull nodded. "We confirmed that before you got here, Prince Aelf. We ruled murder out immediately."

Aelf closed his eyes, thinking. He felt his left wrist start to warm up where the tattoo of the glyph was, and he scratched it. It didn't help. Aelf scratched harder, the distraction not helping his concentration. Looking down at the fresh ink, he saw small, nearly imperceptible particles of energy flowing into the glyph. Looking around, he realized that there were such particles everywhere. "Have you guys noticed those bits of energy?"

Skull looked around, confused. "My Prince, these weren't here before."

Aelf shook his head, realizing where these particles came from.. "They were always here, Detective, you just couldn't see them. These are remnants of magic, they type only found when a Mana Bottle breaks."

Mold took a step back. "A Mana Bottle? Impossible, Ordinance 181,818 prohibits substances like that!"

Aelf shook his head. "There's something strange about this mass suicide... Well, apart from being a mass suicide. We should take a trip to the Qi-Blur Department of Importation and see if we can't figure out where this Mana Bottle came from, or who smuggled it in."

Skull took a step forward. "You really think there's crime afoot in our land?"

"Well, there's crime everywhere... You can't really completely remove it."

Mold laughed nervously. "Milord, you've been out of Sandta too long. We're a completely crime-free city!"

"Then... Why do you have Detectives?" The Detectives' eyes shrunk into the back of their heads as their entire worldview was shattered in an instant. Aelf coughed awkwardly, then clapped his hands together. "Well, let's get to work, people! We've got justice to... Justice out. Is there a verb for justice?" The Detectives were too busy re-evaluating their lives to respond. Aelf nodded, having been there himself a few times, and pulled them outside.

Ch. 8: Ouib Ooh's

MakDaughnold and Piycechoo walked through the downtown of Oui'Abu City, the capital of Ouib. Market stalls selling clay sculptures of teenagers with absurdly large swords lined the streets, with the occasional noodle shack staffed by a low-skilled fire mage interrupting the homogeny. Piycechoo wouldn't have minded so much, if every single sculpture of a kid with a sword wasn't exactly the same with a slight variation to the color scheme. MakDaughnold looked around nervously, watching for any potential threat that might befall the pair. Piycechoo sighed when he saw how tense the Darkblade was.

“Mak, calm down. We're not going to be attacked on the street, certainly not during the day.”

The Darkblade relaxed slightly, but not entirely. “Forgive me, Archmage, but you don't become Captain of the Guard by not being vigilant.”

Piycechoo sighed, annoyed. “What you should look out for are spies, not assassins. People meant to observe and report.”

“Would spies and assassins not fall in the same realm?”

“In a normal society, yes, but we're in Ouib territory. Here, those who are especially observant and can watch everything are given a unique status. For example, see that idiot in the striped robe?”

MakDaughnold looked around, and saw a man in an amazing technicolor dream robe. Dozens of stripes lined his garment, and a trashy silver headband covered his forehead. “I see him. What do you know of him? Have you been here before?”

“Yeah, I was big into Ouib shit when I was a teenager. That guy’s commissioned by the government to seek out threats from Ninja clans nearby. Each stripe on his robe indicates a threat he identified that was eliminated. Different headwear indicates different threats they look out for. For example, a woman wearing a cat ear headband would be assigned to watch for threats from beasts and were-creatures, while a man wearing a pirate’s hat would look out for, well, pirates.”

“Fascinating. So, a robed person wearing a helmet would be watching out for...”

“Threats from other nations, particularly commissioned forces. So, us, basically.”

“Ah. Well, I believe I’ve found our potential contact.” MakDaughnold pointed towards a man walking towards them, with three teenaged girls wearing color-coded mage robes and wielding similarly color-coded mage staves. The man with a helmet removed his helmet, and bowed to Piycechoo. “Archmage Piycechoo, my friend, it has been entirely too long. On behalf of the Waifu, I welcome you back to our fair city.”

The red-robed, red-staved woman bowed to the foreigners. “My name is Detona, Lead Fire Mage.”

The blue one bowed next. “I. C, Supreme Ice Mage.”

The white mage bowed third. “And I’m Hila, the Healer.”

Piycechoo bowed towards the group, then all five stood upright. “MakDaughnold, meet Hyun Dai and the Magical Girls, leaders of the OuibGuard.”

Makdaughnold cocked his head. “This is a very... Unique group to defend a city.”

Piycechoo grabbed MakDaughnold, and pulled him towards the direction Hyun came from. “It’s an interesting culture, Mak, you’ll get used to it. Right now, we’ve got work to do. Hyun, I assume our audience is confirmed?”

“Of course, Archmage. The Waifu awaits your presence.”

“Cool.” The six of them walked through the streets.

Hyun nudged Piycechoo. “So, I heard you were nearly defeated by a Fire Mage. Detona’s jealous.”

Detona shot Hyun a look. “I am not *jealous*. I’m just upset that there exists a stronger fire mage than I.”

Piycechoo rolled his neck, feeling the joints crack. He started rolling his wrist as well. “I don’t think she was a stronger mage than you. In a straight-up fight, I wouldn’t be surprised if she couldn’t even land a hit. Her success was in stealth. I’ve never faced an enemy with a better sense of strategy.”

I. C. looked at him in shock. “Not even The Strategist?”

“Especially not The Strategist. Guy was a complete moron.”

Hila grinned softly. “He still almost killed Aelf.”

Hyun rolled his eyes. “That’s not a real accomplishment. Honestly, that boy has no sense of self-preservation.”

MakDaughnold nudged Piycechoo. “Archmage, when did you and Aelf develop such a strong friendship with this country?”

Piycechoo looked at the Darkblade. “Mak, Aelf is a 300 year-old Elf, and I don’t spend all my time sitting in my tower or adventuring. I have a life outside of defending the realm from monsters.”

MakDaughnold considered this. “Forgive me, my lord. I of all people should know better.”

Piycechoo shrugged. “Eh, I’m used to it. By the way, when you see Princess, tell her I said hello.”

Exiting the city, the group of six entered a path through the countryside. After several hours of walking, they came to a mountain trail. The trail went up the mountain. Obviously. The top of the mountain was obscured by dark clouds, and rain poured down in torrents mere inches in front of the group. An imperceptible barrier seemed to protect the countryside from the punishing downpour that those seeking an audience with the Waifu would have to experience.

Piycechoo sighed, annoyed. “I imagine I’m still not allowed to avoid this?”

Hyun chuckled. “You never change, my friend. Don’t worry, it’s easier the second time.”

The Darkblade pulled an umbrella from a scabbard on his hip. “Don’t worry, my lord. I came prepared for rain.”

Piycechoo eyed him. “I thought that was a knife. What weapons did you bring?”

“None, my lord. This is a mission of peace.”

Piycechoo buried his face in his hands. “You didn’t think they’ll send more assassins?”

“Of course they’ll send more. I just don’t believe we should give this fair land any reason to distrust us.”

Piycechoo sighed, annoyed. “Delightful. Well, let’s get going...” He walked into the rain. His body glowed white, and sparks flew across his body, evaporating the raindrops before they hit him. Makdaughnold followed close behind, his umbrella barely withstanding the onslaught of rain. The Magical Girls all hid under a barrier of ice I. C. made, and Hyun opted to just walk under the rain.

Hyun smiled wide as they walked along the mud-soaked path. “Don’t you all just love the smell of rain?”

Piycechoo shivered, even though the sparks surrounding him were zapping every raindrop. “No, Hyun, nobody likes the rain. It’s taking all my body heat not to lose all my body heat.”

Detona waved her staff, and a ball of flame appeared next to Piycechoo. “Does that help, Archmage?”

Piycechoo nodded, his teeth still chattering. “I still hate this walk. I swear, the universe conspires against me to give me the least convenient road to travel every. Single. Time.”

Hyun and the Magical Girls all laughed at the Archmage. MakDaughnold held his umbrella over both himself and Piycechoo, giving the Lightning Mage a brief moment of respite. After another hour and a half of travel, the group finally made it to the cloud of darkness.

Hyun walked in front of the group, speaking to all of them, but mostly to the Darkblade. “Now, this is the difficult part. To get through this cloud, we’ll have to-“

Piycechoo fired a wide beam of energy from his palm, and carved a swath through the cloud and part of the mountain, giving the group a straight shot to the palace on top of the mountain. “Sorry, Hyun, tell us more about the traps and rock-climbing.

Hyun shook his head, smiling. “Classic Piycechoo. Well, it’s a lot safer now, at least. Come on, we’ve only got a few minutes before the clouds reform and Piycechoo has to take another chunk out of our sacred mountain.”

A few minutes of hiking later, the group arrived at the peak, and stood in front of an ornately designed palace. Seriously, this palace was gorgeous. Like, so pretty. Like, imagine the

most beautiful palace you've ever heard of. This was, like, ten times better than whatever crap you thought up. A massive gate in front of the palace opened up, and a platoon of guards emerged. They formed two lines on either side of the gate, and bowed. A woman wearing what appeared to be a school uniform emerged from the gate, and waited. Hyun, the Magical Girls, and Piycechoo all bowed to her. MakDaughnold, taking the cue, followed suit. Standing up, they met the gaze of the Waifu, the traditional leader of the Ouibs.

The Waifu smiled at the visitors, and Piycechoo walked up to her, also smiling. "Lady Yukako, it's good to see you again. How long has it been?"

Yukako giggled. "Any amount of time is too long, Archmage. And now you have assassins attacking you? Their audacity amazes me."

"Ugh, I know. They didn't just attack my tower, they destroyed it."

Yukako's smile began to fade. "I didn't mean the audacity in attacking you. I meant in impersonating you."

Piycechoo's smile also began to fade. "What are you talking about?"

Yukako began to frown. "You see, we already had a visitor today. Don't you know how rare that occasion is?" She snapped her fingers, and the guards all stood suddenly at attention while rage flashed across Yukako's face.. "To think that you would be stupid enough to try to imitate one of my closest friends." Yukako's guards all stood, and pointed their spears at the group. Piceychoo was about to protest, when he saw a man step out from behind Yukako. The man had Piycechoo's face.

Chapter 9: Fog Hornless

Raughnold and Anana were sunbathing on the deck of the cruise ship. Despite wearing nothing more than a leather one-piece swimsuit and a matching leather choker, Anana still made attempts to hide the coin purses she was pickpocketing. Her solution was simple: instead of hiding them on her person, she simply had to sneak them into the pockets of Raughnold's armor, which he wore even when sunbathing. After the third Eykeian Noble began to panic at losing his booze budget, Anana scolded herself. Swearing up and down to steal nothing else, a silver goblet on the table next to her caught her gaze. Catching herself, Anana turned to her husband.

“Raughnold, dear, could you do me a favor?”

Raughnold turned to his wife. “Of course! You must only ask.”

Anana smiled. “Could you reaffirm that my path is the light, and that I must do good in this world?”

Raughnold chuckled. “My love, your path is the light, and you are doing exceptionally well!”

Anana shook her head. “No, Raughnold, I don't mean I must have success, I mean...”

“Ah! Yes. Yes, I knew what you were going for. You have been nothing but a boon on this world, and I am sure you will continue to do so. I thank the Gods every day to have you in my life.”

Anana cuddled up next to her husband. “Thank you, dear. You know, if you ever need positive reinforcement, I'm here.”

Raughnold laughed heartily. “Yes, my love. And if-“

The boat suddenly stopped dead in the water. Out of nowhere, fog began to envelop the ship, shielding it from the sun that the Heroes had been enjoying. Raughnold and Anana jumped to their feet, and began scanning for any danger. Raughnold cracked his knuckles, raising his Warhammer. Anana slipped into the shadows, all traces of her disappearing from the world. The deck of the ship became crowded with noblemen and noblewomen, all looking for an answer as to what was going on. Anana’s voice called through the shadows, the sound coming from everywhere and nowhere all at once; “Everyone, go below deck! Stay safe until we have identified and defeated the threat!”

The Nobles did no such thing. One man stepped forward, his face scrunched up in anger with a dash of fear. “Who goes there? Who dares give orders to *us*?”

The sound of a bow being drawn reverberated through the air, in the same formless way that Anana’s voice had been; no direction, just volume. An arrow cut through the fog, striking the Nobleman in the throat. His life was gone before he even hit the ground, his finery stained by the blood spurting out of his neck. As it formed a puddle on the ground, another Nobleman screamed and fainted. Another bow was drawn, and as the Noblewoman fell, the arrow flew over his head, directly where the Noblewoman’s throat had been seconds before. The arrow then struck a second Noblewoman in the stomach, and she fell to the ground screaming. The entire deck began screaming, and the Nobles ran below decks, toward their hopeful safety.

Raughnold gulped, kneeling down to examine the arrow that had pierced the Nobleman’s throat. The fletching was made of some type of blood-red feathers, and the shaft was made of some material Raughnold had never seen before. Raughnold double-checked for a pulse, but felt

nothing. His mind briefly flashed to Aelf, who had found himself in the Nobleman's position many times before, though he'd miraculously survived every time. His next thought was of Piycechoo, and how his friend would have this mess cleared up in a moment. Raughnold's mind wandered, and he didn't notice the Nobleman's body withering away, the shaft of the arrow glowing a dull purple.

Standing up, Raughnold gritted his teeth and cursed himself for never wearing his helmet. Fashion. Looking around, he saw the fog closing in around him. Raughnold raised his Warhammer. "You! Murderer! Or perhaps Murderers! You shall-" The sound of a knocked arrow silenced the Knight, though from where it came from, Raughnold could not tell. The arrows had both been fired from different directions, and Raughnold's intelligence wasn't capable enough to triangulate a position or examine clues. That was what Piycechoo, Aelf, and Anana were for. All Raughnold could do was hit things with his unbeatable strength, and there wasn't anything for him to hit.

Raughnold knew he was out of time, so he defaulted to his instincts: he swung the Warhammer at the floor, shattering the wood and sending pieces of debris flying up. The arrow flew through the debris, catching several pieces of oak. Knocked off course, the arrow didn't pierce Raughnold's brain stem. Instead, the arrowhead nicked the side of his neck, cutting him but leaving him alive. The arrow flashed purple in the brief instant it moved through his body. Raughnold grinned, believing he'd made it through the attack. He ducked behind a wall, and held the side of his neck. His breathing grew ragged, and he double checked to make sure his... What had Aelf called it? His 'carroted' artery wasn't cut. Checking his hand, he saw that there wasn't

much blood. So, why...? He fell to his knees, exhausted. A wave of fatigue flowed through him, washing away any strength he had.

Falling on his face, Raughnold felt his strength start to return to him, but it wasn't enough to get him back in the fight. He'd been completely outmaneuvered by a stealthy archer. For the first time in his life, Raughnold had found a fight that he had to admit he never had a hope of winning. He just hoped that Anana was able to escape in time.

Anana looked at the deck of the ship, anger flowing through her. The Nobleman's death was unfortunate, but the audacity of the attacker to try and kill her husband? Unacceptable. She knew Raughnold wasn't smart enough to figure out that the assailant was attacking them based on sound cues, but she knew better. Part of her training before she became a Paladin was learning how to 'see' enemies based on the noises living creatures make just by existing - speech, heavy breathing, footsteps, even a growling stomach can give one an accurate assessment of an enemy's location, height, even weight. Anana immediately recognized the enemy as doing just that, so she held her silence. She was just thankful that Raughnold had defended himself, or else he...

Moving like water flowing through a river, she made her way to Raughnold, and knelt down to make sure he still lived. Hearing him breathe and feeling his heartbeat relieved her immensely, giving her a jolt of determination. She scanned for any opening in the fog. Not finding one, she began to drag her husband towards a door to below decks. She was going to

protect him if it was the last thing she did, and she needed every tool available to do that. Her body shivered from the cold - her sunbathing attire was ill-suited for this cold fog - and she froze. Anana waited for a moment, never hearing a bow be drawn. She made note that the attacker couldn't hear everything.

Finding the stairwell, she began to pull Raughnold's body down the stairs. As she did, she heard the unmistakable clinking of coins, and her eyes widened in horror. The coins she'd stolen and hid in Raughnold's armor had given away her position. An arrow was drawn, and Anana hthrew Raughnold down the stairs, his body ragdolling all the way down. The cacophony echoed through the staircase, and no arrow was fired. Anana sighed in relief, glad her plan of throwing her husband down a flight of stairs had worked. Reaching the bottom of the staircase, she made sure she hadn't accidentally killed him, then carried him the rest of the way to their room.

As Anana closed the door to their honeymoon suite, she saw that the fog was beginning to spread through the ship. It seemed the enemy had decided to enter the ship itself. Anana locked the door, and began to dig through her clothes. Anana grabbed her Holy Dagger and the least revealing leather armor she had - though, it still had a fashionable hole around her belly button - and put them on as fast as she could. She kissed her husband on the cheek, and exited the room.

In the hallway, Anana was met with complete silence. She couldn't hear a stir in any of the rooms around her, and the sound of the ocean was nonexistent. After a moment, Anana could hear her own heartbeat pounding in her head. Her breathing was almost deafening, and she thought she heard her muscles tensing up. The fog became ever thicker around her, and a chill passed through the room. She stopped breathing entirely as her right side grew cold, and the cold

front passed from one side to the other, the fog becoming impossible to see through for an instant. Anana looked to her left, and clenched her Dagger. The cold stopped moving for a brief instant, before moving on. Anana's eyebrows raised. Stepping into the middle of the hallway, she called out to the figure. "You! Villain! How dare you attack our honeymoon cruise?" Her voice as faint as it had ever been, though she was certain she had yelled at the top of her lungs.

The cold stopped moving once again, and the sound of an arrow being knocked was impossibly close. Anana ducked, and the arrow whizzed over her head, coming from directly in front of her. She lunged forward with her Dagger, but felt the cold break apart and reform behind her. Another arrow was knocked. She dodged to the side as an arrow flew past, glancing off the choker she still wore. She rolled away, running down the hallway as she heard the attacks ready another attack. As she ducked behind a wall, an arrow flew past. Anana slowed her breathing, and realized that the further she was from the cold mass, the more she could hear. Anana grinned, and twirled her Dagger.

Stepping around the corner, Anana felt the cold front backing away from her. The bowstring growing taught echoed louder and louder as she sprinted towards the cold front. The fog was too thick to see through, and the only hope she had was to pray her body didn't go numb before she could find the source of the chill. Though she couldn't tell for sure, she had a vague idea of where the heat was completely absent, and she slashed at it. She felt the front break apart again, and she smiled, her anger filling her with fire that burned hot enough to counter the frost effects of the fog.

Knowing where the enemy would appear next, Anana threw her dagger behind her as the sound of one last arrow flying through the air filled Anana's mind. Ice formed on the blade, and

Anana hoped her aim would remain true as the blade disappeared. An instant felt like an eternity - and the sound of steel embedding itself in flesh was deafening, and a scream almost shattered her eardrums as the fog burst apart. Anana's ears were ringing worse than they ever had before, but she could just make out The heat slowly began to return to the hallway, and Anana saw a small woman with a knife buried in her throat gasping out her last breaths. Anana knelt down to her, and punched the assassin in the face. The sound of her enemy's nose breaking was sweeter than she'd expected.

Anana tried to stand, but found that she didn't have the strength. She became aware of a dull ache in her side, and she grabbed an arrow that had become embedded in her kidney. Pulling the arrow out with the last fragments of energy she could muster, she felt her body lose the last of its power, as well as her ability to stay upright. A doctor rushed to help her as she slipped from consciousness, her thoughts drifting to her daughter, and how glad she was that she hadn't brought Arcie on this cruise.

Raughnold and Anana woke up at the same time in the boat's infirmary. They sat up simultaneously, and looked around. A quiver of arrows was laid against the wall. Two corpses with sheets laid over them were on beds opposite the Heroes. A nurse stood between their beds, looking over their charts, clearly confused. "Good morning, Heroes. Am I to understand that your previous physician was a frog?"

Raughnold rolled his shoulders, trying to remove the stiffness he felt in them. It almost felt like he'd taken a fall, but the last thing he remembered was "Yes, the Frog Kingdom was a bit... Not right. Do we have you to thank for saving our lives?"

The nurse shook her head. "Not really. Anana here's the one you should be thanking. Single-handedly saved the entire boat... Well, except that one guy, but no one really cares, so it's okay."

Anana felt her side, and found that the wound was completely healed. "Odd... Is there a White Mage on this ship?"

The nurse shrugged. "Okay, that one *was* me. I'm Nörse, the Nurse. I've been looking after you guys for the last week."

Anana's eyes widened. "We've been unconscious for a week?" Anana's brain started working in overdrive.

"Yup. Those arrows had some weird enchantment on them. I've been studying them, but I don't really get how it worked..."

"And speaking of 'how it worked,' how come the only thing I could hear when I was next to our enemy was her arming her bow? Why wasn't that silenced?"

Nörse shrugged. "Who knows? The secret," she tapped the body opposite Raughnold, "died with her. There was a note on her that said 'Fog Control.' Any idea what that means?"

Raughnold nodded. "That must have been her Gimmick!"

Nörse cocked her head. "Gimmick? What?"

Anana's eyes focused with determination, her path clear. She grabbed her husband's arm. "Dear, we've missed an entire week of the pleasure cruise. We don't have time to waste."

Raughnold nodded. “We must make haste if we’re to experience everything! Quickly, to the dance hall!” The two Heroes ran out of the room, leaving Nörse alone with the other patients. She shrugged, and picked up the Ouij book she’d been reading before.

Chapter 10: Dinner and a Murder-Suicide

Aelf and the Detectives

Chapter 11: Za Hazubando

Piycechoo stood next to a Cage of Lightning that held the Imposter. Yukako smiled and shook her head. “Well, I’m glad we got that intruder” “I just find it hard to believe that you failed to put him through any kind of personality test.” “I thought maybe you were just having a particularly good day or something.”

Chapter 12: Yo-Ho, Yo

Nörse dug through the cabinets in the infirmary, looking for her bottle of Fortress©®™ brand Dwarf Vodka. It had disappeared sometime in the last week, and none of the other crew members seemed to know where it was. Other people on-board had been reporting their belongings going missing, be they clothes, silverware, or various Cruise-assigned decorum from inside passenger's rooms. Locks were picked, safes were cracked... But always only one thing at a time was taken. Never the most valuable thing, never something that could be anything more than an inconvenience, but always, at any time of day, something was stolen. Tensions were starting to grow, and an investigation was being held to determine just what was going on.

Anana walked into the infirmary, wearing a leather sundress, fastened to her shoulders with pineapple-shaped pins. She sat down on a bed across from Nörse. "Hello, Nörse. How are you doing today?"

The nurse shook her head, angry. "Whatever asshole thief has been stealing from the boat went too far this time. That bottle was a gift from my sister, who I only get to see twice a year." A single bead of sweat formed on the back of Anana's neck, as Nörse kept ranting while digging through the cabinets. "I swear to the Gods, if I catch the craven bastard that did this... You're a Paladin, yes? What's your typical punishment for capturing a thief?"

Anana considered for a second. "I normally just use the law of the land, since I don't really have a written code. Pineapples aren't known for their religious texts. Typically, for every 50 gold stolen, the thief is thrown in jail for another month."

“But you’re on the road most of the time. What if you find a thief in the woods? What do you do to those guys?”

A second bead of sweat formed on Anana’s neck, and her brow grew cold. Anana really wanted to be friends with Nörse, but she didn’t know if it would work out, especially considering... “Well, we usually leave them bloodied, or we drag the criminal with us to the next town. If they try to attack us, we’ll usually put them down.”

Nörse nodded. “Well, I know how to hurt people and leave them alive. Medical school’s not easy to get into, and it’s even harder to graduate. Most nurses and doctors don’t have official degrees, but they usually know how to operate and work on at least one race. Me, though... I can make sure the one who crossed me would live long enough to tell me where they put that bottle.”

Anana didn’t think Nörse could be a threat, but she still worried that the woman would hate her for... Anana stood and moved to a cabinet, opening it. “Are you sure you didn’t just misplace it? Nothing that’s been stolen has had any real value...”

Nörse snorted. “Come on, Anana, have you ever heard of a thief that didn’t take anything of value? They’re motivated by greed, nothing else. Why else would anyone steal?”

Anana’s heart sank. She kept her face neutral, never betraying how Nörse’s words hurt. Using a burst of speed and her considerable talent with sleight of hand, Anana pulled the bottle of Fortress©®™ from the cabinet. “I don’t know what lurks in the hearts of thieves, but it seems the one onboard didn’t take your sister’s gift.” She handed the bottle to Nörse, whose face lit up in happiness.

“Oh, thank you, Anana! I was so worried,” the nurse sighed in relief. “Good, good. My point stands that the thief needs to be brought to justice, though. Could we enlist yours and Raughnold’s help, by chance?”

Anana’s face remained calm, but her mind raced, trying to come up with something, *anything* that could get her away from this situation. “Well, Raughnold and I, we-“

“Anana! My love!” Raughnold burst through the doorway, sending debris flying as his shoulder smashed through the wall. “Dearest, I require your help! We have another battle to engage in!”

Anana breathed easy, and started rushing out the door. “SO sorry we couldn’t finish this, I’ll be back soon, have fun drinking alone!” Nörse eyed Anana with suspicion as she ran out, but ignored the feeling.

Anana and Raughnold faced down Hydras, Krakens, and Whales, oh my! They bested slavers and pirates and assorted fishermen as they sailed towards the Dwarven Kingdom. Nothing could stand in their way, and every evening when they were exhausted from the battles, they would sit around the top deck and tell their stories to the Nobles onboard. Tales of their battles, recounting the discussions their group would have after fights, detailing what the innards of monsters look like... Anything was fair game.

One fateful night, a Noblewoman stood up, clearly tipsy. Complimentary bottles of liquor were scattered across the floor around her, and the crowd drew in a breath, hoping she wouldn’t

make the night awkward. “Tell us how you met!” She shouted, breaking the timid silence, A sigh of relief went through the crowd, most of them just pleased that she’d given a cohesive sentence. Raughnold stood high above the seated crowd.

“To tell that story, my friends, we have to go back a very, very long time, a whole two years ago...” Raughnold pointed to a crew member holding a harp, giving her the cue to play an ascending chord to indicate that the story about to be told took place in the past.

Raughnold Mountanus III was always a behemoth. His mother, Aughrcaughna the AxeMaster, was 8 feet tall, and his father, Raughnold Mountanus II, was the same. The two had met when they both journeyed to the same dungeon to recover a cursed artifact. Aughrcaughna challenged the elder Raughnold to a competition: whoever slew the most goblins within the cave would claim the artifact. By chance, the two reached the center chamber at the same time, having killed the exact same number of goblins; the two agreed to split the treasure, which wound up being a pair of wedding rings owned by a Lich that had taken up residence in the grotto. Killing the Lich and claiming the rings, Aughrcaughna and Raughnold proposed marriage on the spot. According to legend, they both said ‘yes’ at the same time.

As it happens, wearing cursed wedding rings is a bad idea, due to the curse. Go figure. Shortly after they were wed, patches of skin began falling off of the happy couple, each patch in the same location on the other.. Local wizards confirmed the curse to be both fatal and

unbreakable; it was all the White Mages could do to keep them alive and comfortable. The couple cried for a moment when they learned the news, but they both composed themselves.

The joke is that they're always doing the exact same thing. I don't know if you got that.

Knowing they didn't have much time, the married couple had a child as fast as possible. Dropping him off at the local Myytb'l orphanage - called the Dei Cer - they rode off into the wilderness, planning to die together on a quest far from their home. They left Raughnold with nothing but their legacy.

As a result of this, Raughnold grew up with nothing but his name and his size. The owners of the Dei Ker were kind and nurturing, but they could not understand the young Raughnold. His rate of growth alone was baffling: at four years old, he was four feet tall. His personality was... Interesting. The other children used to say that muscles grew where his brain was supposed to go, but that was only half of the story. He would spend hours reading stories about noble heroes who fought against the odds, and from these, Raughnold learned what he was supposed to do. He understood not 'why' the Heroes in the stories acted as they did; he just knew that Heroes were supposed to be just, righteous, all that nonsense. Proclaiming himself Protector of the Orphans, Raughnold took great care to keep his fellows in line, no matter how annoyed they got at him for doing so.

Another permanent resident was Anana, a girl with many talents, all of them related to thievery. Her father had been executed for stealing the crown jewels and trying to sell them back to the king saying he found them; her mother died giving birth to triplets, who were also staying at the Dei Cer. I know it's easy to forget about them, especially since they don't have much to do with this story, but try to remember that they exist.

Anana was what her teachers liked to call ‘a non-presence;’ in class, she would never volunteer to answer questions, and her tutors found it incredibly easy to pass over her. Often, she had to ask the kindly women who ran the Dei Cer to serve Anana her meal at lunchtime. The one person that always seemed to notice her was Raughnold, and she adored him for it. Nobody had ever been attentive enough to her to recognize that she existed, and at the young age of six, she knew that she was in love with the absurdly large child.

One day, Anana gathered up some courage, and tapped Raughnold on the shoulder. She had to stand on her tip-toes and reach all the way up, but she was just able to reach his shoulder blades. Raughnold turned, and as he moved, the shadow he cast on her disappeared, letting her into the light. This is symbolism. Gulping, Anana met his gaze. “Raughnold, do you want to marry me?”

Raughnold cocked his head. “Why would I do that?”

Anana’s heart sank, but she refused to give up so easily. “Because I like you. I mean, *like* like you.”

Raughnold paused a second to consider. “Why?”

Anana had to think a moment. “Because you make me feel nice.”

“But you’re always nice, Anana.”

“No, it’s just... You don’t get it, I...” Anana started to walking away, tears welling up in her eyes. Raughnold grabbed her shoulder, and spun her around.

“I don’t know if I’ll marry you, but I do want to go on an adventure sometime. How does that sound?”

Anana's heart fluttered. She was on cloud nine. "That sounds great, Raughnold! Thank you!" She ran away, giggling like a little girl. Because she was a little girl.

Raughnold relayed the story to the Nobleman, painting himself in a slightly more intelligent light, and Anana supplemented the story with false anecdotes about how she was always drawn to the holiness and light that Pineapples cast.