

Twokends



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

STRANDED



Well...

I've got good news and bad news.

The good news is the girls are stable. At least for now. Whatever the assassin used, it isn't killing them.

RUMMMMMBLE...



It's just... keeping them asleep. And that's the bad news.

Without knowing exactly what he used, there's nothing I can do to help them.



I've tried some simple remedies, but the sisters just won't wake.

WHIMPER...

We need a cure, and the only one who might know it... is the assassin.

So in short, we're totally boned.

That isn't helping!



What we need to do is think up a plan!

A plan, from you? Now I know we're doomed.

Be careful not to strain yourself.

Shut it, furball.



Raine! Your mother was the former Grand Templar! You must have powerful magic!

Right?



Well, yes... I... I do have magic, but like I said, I was never trained.

And it wouldn't matter anyway.

As long as I'm trapped in this Keidran body, I'm stuck with all the biological issues that comes with being Keidran.

I can't cast magic without mana crystals!



Well, what about this shackle thing?

It turns you human, right? Then you can use magic without crystals.



This doesn't "turn me human."

This is a **magic suppressor**. It keeps my curse in check.

But it also cuts off my magical abilities.

If I managed to fix it, I then wouldn't be able to use magic voluntarily.

It's lose-lose, either way.



Well, alright, maybe...
Maybe the two of us could just carry the girls?

Okay, first, *how*?
We can't exactly defend ourselves while carrying two women.
And Raine can't carry them. Not for miles.

Second, *where*?
The nearest villages are either the one that was destroyed or the one who's neighbour was just destroyed... **by wolves**.
Which, if you hadn't noticed, *two of us currently are!*



Oh, believe me, *I've noticed!*
I've also noticed I'm the only one making any suggestions here!
While all you do is complain!

Yeah? Well so far my complaining seems to be about as effective!
Maybe I wouldn't need to poke holes in your plans if they weren't all stupid!



Would you two cut it out!

We're all tired and stressed, but this arguing isn't helping any of us!
So knock it off!



Hmph. Fine. Whatever.
I'll just stand guard in silence, then, since that's all I'm good for.
Maybe if I'm lucky, that assassin will have an extra sleep dart waiting for me.



You do that, fleabag.
Tch! Keidran!
What did I do to deserve being stranded out here with these animals?



Mother was right. Once people see me like this, it's all they ever see.





Ugh... why is fur so itchy?
Is this normal?
I hope the guys don't think I have—
Hey, Raine.

Just checking to make sure you're
I don't have fleas!
...Huh?

Er, I mean... *h-hey!*
I, uh... thought you needed to be out there to watch Sythe's back?



Eh, he's right outside, and I can see him from here.
He's still being pissy.

I can hear you...



So what are you working on?

Sigh...
Well, since I'm no help to the girls, I figured I might as well try and see if I can fix this thing.
It's just a crack, so hopefully it won't be impossible.



Oh, I thought you said it wouldn't help?

Maybe not with this situation, but...

Well, right now it's my only hope of being human again.

Oh, gotcha.

I can see why you wouldn't want to look like **that** any longer than necessary!

...



Er, I mean—! Not that there's anything wrong with... how...
Wow, this stuff really does just fall out of my mouth, doesn't it?



Hey, look, it's cool, alright?

I'm used to it.

My mother was the same way. She could barely look at me.

You don't have to keep pretending we're still friends.

I know I'm not the girl you thought I was.

No! That's not how it is!

I'm not pretending! I'm not clever enough to pretend!



I admit, the way you look now is still something I haven't gotten used to.

But...

Ugh, I'm just an idiot, and I'm sorry.

We are still friends, alright? I promise.





Thanks.

I know how you normally feel about... non-humans, so that means a lot.

Even if I'm not sure I believe it...



Are you sure you're alright? You still don't seem like it.



Huh? N-no, I'm fine, why?

Well, I'm no expert on Keidran facial expressions, but...

Your ears...

Oh.



Right, these stupid things.

Don't mind them. They don't listen to me.



...They only listen for you, right?

Snrk!

Get it? Because they're ears.



Aw, now they're back down again!

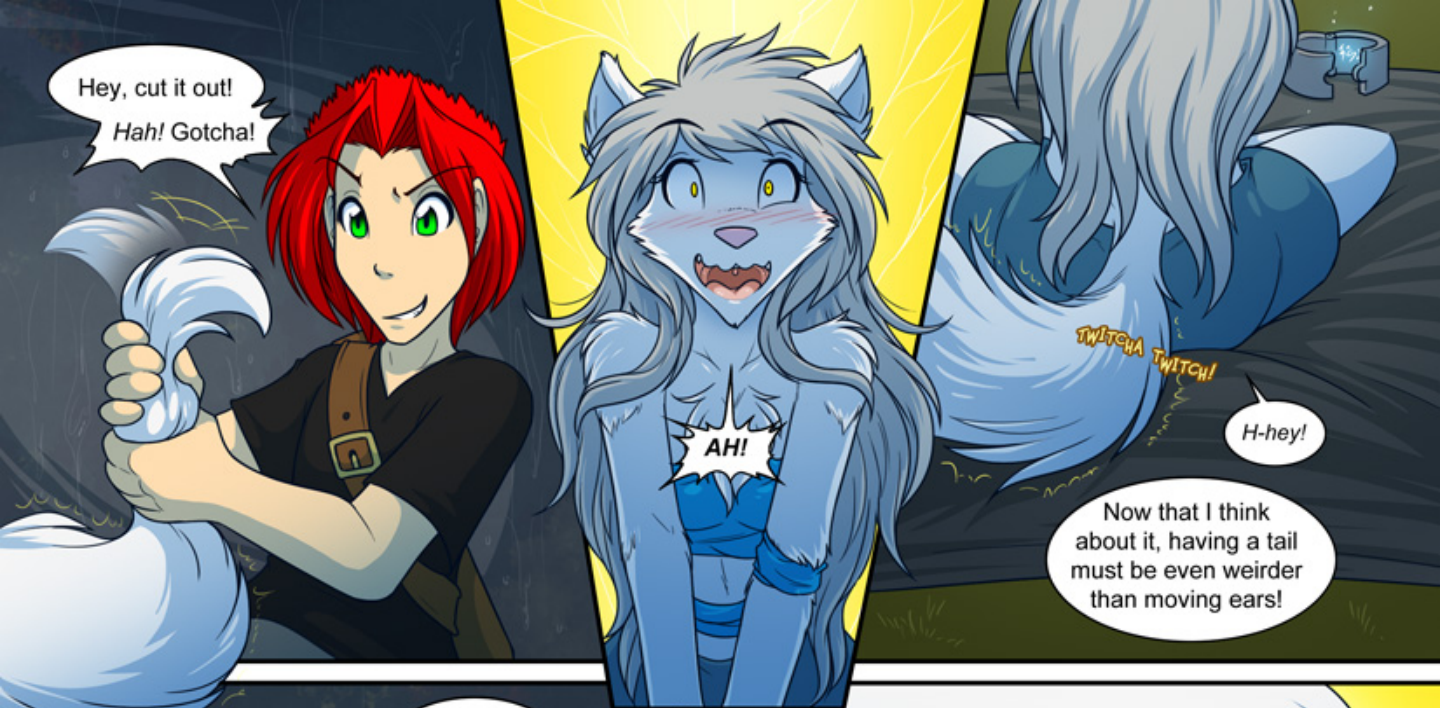
That's kinda cute.



WOOMP!!

Ack!

Sorry, sometimes my tail has a mind of its own too.



Hey, cut it out!
Hah! Gotcha!

AH!

TWITCH! TWITCH!

H-heh!

Now that I think about it, having a tail must be even weirder than moving ears!



C-could you please not...

We already have ears, but tails are a completely new limb altogether!

N-no really, you shouldn't-

SWIRRRRRP!

Eep!

Can you really control how it moves? I can't even imagine how that would feel.



You know, despite my misgivings about other races, I admit I've always wondered just how you can

Stop!

SLAM!

THUD!



Are you sure you're alright?

Just a bit winded, eheh.

Sorry for the tail thing.

How can those two fool around at a time like this?

We're stuck out here in this hopeless situation and they're still acting like we're on a picnic in the woods.

Meanwhile, there's an assassin lying in wait, just looking for an opportunity to strike.



Where are you?! Why don't you just get it over with, coward!

Hoping I drop my guard, no doubt. Well it ain't happening!

I am the embodiment of vigilance... constantly on alert. He could be anywhere...

He could be lurking in the trees... He could be hiding in the bushes...



He could even be...

Right behind me!



Ugh... keep it together, Sythe. You're really losing it.



Unless...



You're not another one of his illusion tricks, are you?



Well, you could still be one of his minions. I'm watching you.



Feh! What does it even matter?

This is my life now apparently. What am I doing out here?

Standing around in the rain waiting to be attacked while defending people who hate my guts.

.....

Well, okay, maybe not all of them. Raine's alright.

We're certainly not "friends" though. So why am I risking my life for humans who don't even appreciate me?




Um, i-is he talking to that... squirrel?

Yep. Wolf boy's finally snapped.



Hey Nutcase, what's going on?


I don't think I can take any more of this.



I hope he can talk some sense into Sythe... and not start another fight.


Hmph...

It's strange.




I was so sure once the truth was out, my friends would end up turning on me.

And yet... one of the most anti-keidran of people I've ever met now knows... and he's still attempting to be nice to me!



Sure he doesn't look at me in the same way as before, but he is *trying*, I can tell.

And if he of all people can act civil...



Maybe... maybe mother was wrong.

Maybe there is hope for humans and keidran to coexist!




**THAT'S IT!
I'VE HAD IT!**

CRACKOOW!



Hey!

Where you do think you're going? We had an agreement!



We agreed to a *truce!* But so far you've *still* done nothing but treat me like dirt!

Well I'm done!
I'm out of here!

You're leaving *now?* What are you, a moron? You *can't!*



Are you seriously telling me you'd abandon the girls to try and save your own hide?!

To think I almost considered that Keidran might not *all* be bad, but I was right all along! You're all the same! **Backstabbing cowards!**

I'd rather be thought a coward and live to tell about it than die out here in this hopeless situation for a racist asshole like you!



What did you call me!?

Stop! Something's not right! Sythe, what's gotten into you?

You can't go! What about Maren and Karen? They need you!

And leaving will just make everyone an easier target! You know that!

...Yes. I know. Leaving will make an easier target... out of both of us.

And I'm sorry, Raine. But if I had to choose between your lives and mine...

Well...

...It's every wolf for himself.



Sythe!



Hey! I don't need you sitting there silently judging me!

I know this is crazy!

But you saw what it was like back there. This was the only choice!

NIBBLE!
NIBBLE!

Still...

Maren... Karen...

Sure, they were both irritating, but they don't deserve to be left defenseless.

SPLASH!

THUMP!

THUMP!

THUMP!

And without me... if the assassin decides to come back...



No!

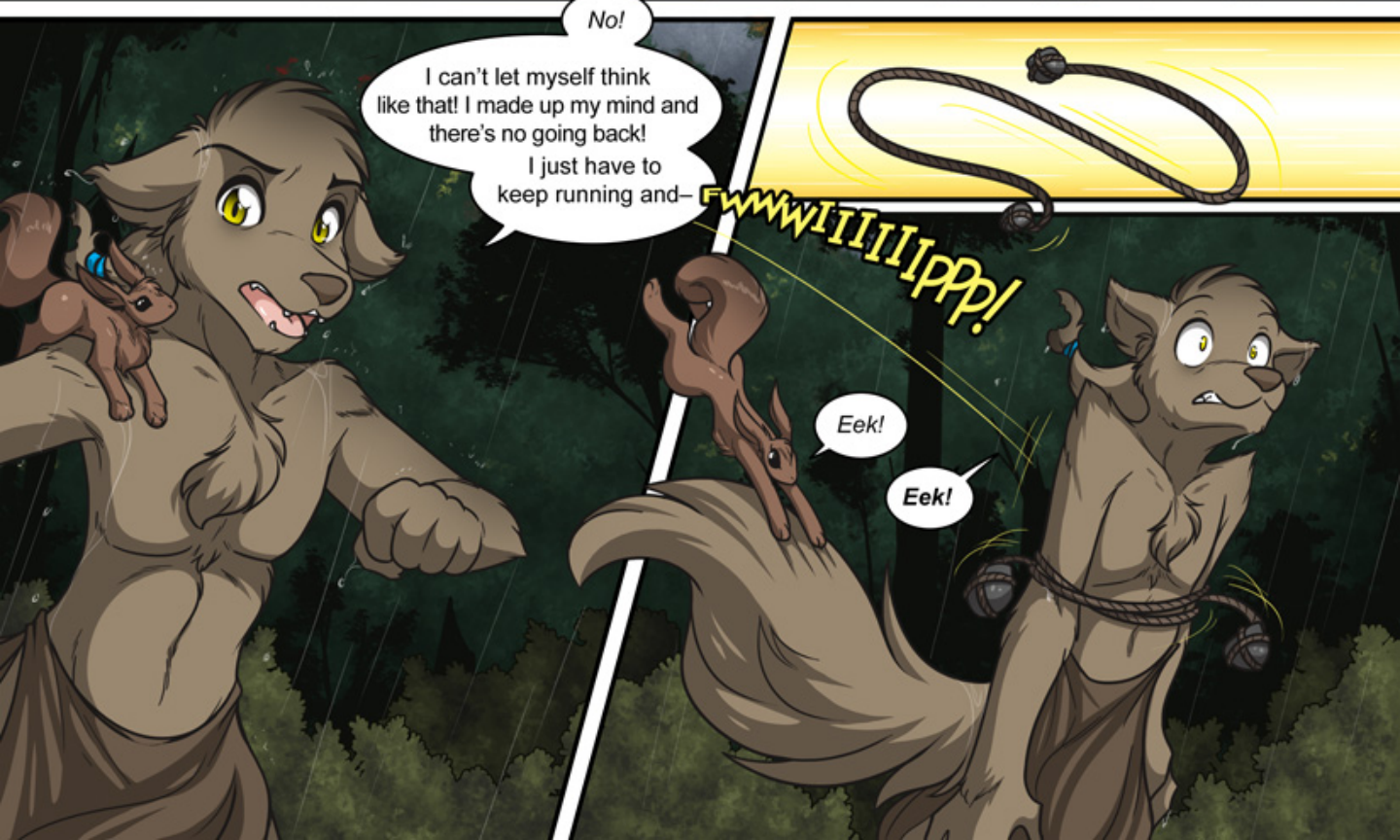
I can't let myself think like that! I made up my mind and there's no going back!

I just have to keep running and—

FWWWIIIIIPPP!

Eek!

Eek!





A few minutes later...

Ah, that's better.
Thanks, Raine.
And you too,
little one.

Is he going
to be okay?

He'd better be
if we're going to get the
antidote out of him.

I can't believe you
two planned that whole
fight back there!

Yeah, well I can't believe it
actually worked. I was sure Red's
acting would give us away.

Pretending to be
angry at a Keidran wasn't
exactly a challenge.

Besides, back when I
was a trainee, I was in the
Templar theatre troupe!

Yeah, well...
wait, what?!

What?

The Templar had
a *theatre troupe*? And
you were in it?!

Yeah... why?

Well, it's just...
you don't seem like
the type, is all.

Hey. I love the
theatre. You better not
be dissing it.

No, no, I was
just... you know what,
nevermind.

NIBBLE!
NIBBLE!

NUZZLE!



Meanwhile, halfway across the ocean—

SNRRRKK!



Urrgh...
my... everything.
Where am I? What's that awful noise?



SNORT!



Geh! And who's breathing on me?!



SNRRRAAKK!

Oh.

Right, this is my room.
Natani carried me here.
...Guess I wasn't the only one to fall asleep.



I—I'm sure it was just by accident.



Still, I should probably get up before Natani wa—
Erk!

CRUNCH!



Alright! I'll stay a little longer!

J-just... let me breathe!



Alright, maybe if I turn my body to the side and pull away slowly...

...I might be able to escape from Natani's freakish wolf strength.

FLICK!

FLICK!



It's a good thing Natani's such a heavy sleeper. I should be able to just slip out **NOW!**



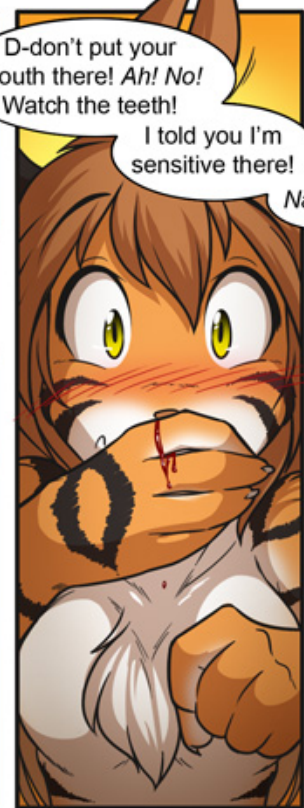
I hope Kathrin isn't mad at me... she seemed upset when I told everyone about my condition- **KYAAAAAAH!!**

Huh? Keith?



N-Natani, stop! Cut it out!

What's going on? Is Natani hurting him?!



D-don't put your mouth there! Ah! No! Watch the teeth!

I told you I'm sensitive there!

Natani!



Don't think about it, don't think about it...

Ow! Quit gnawing on it! It's not a dog bone, damn it!

Don't think about it!



Erg! Just... need to... get...

Mmmrph?

Free-waaaah!

FLUUMPH!

....



...Hi Keith.

Hullo, Natani.

I'm in your bed, aren't I?

Yes, Natani. Yes you are.



Right. Sorry. Don't suppose we can pretend this never happened?

Like usual? Eh, it's alright, no harm done. Save for my poor ear...



And anyway, I appreciate you being here.

I... I was in a real bad way after... well, you know. So, thanks. I needed this.



Now, I think what I could really use is a long bath.

Uuh...



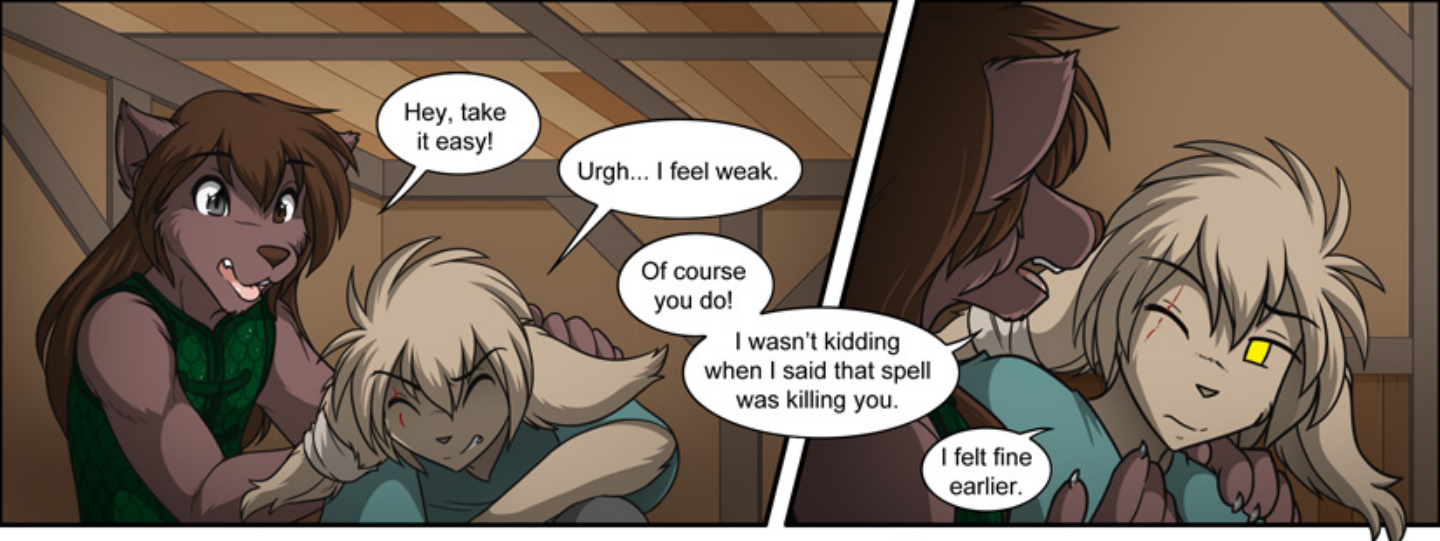
Ngh!

Huh? Keith!



Oh... sure, no problem.

I'm glad I could help.



Hey, take it easy!

Urgh... I feel weak.

Of course you do!

I wasn't kidding when I said that spell was killing you.

I felt fine earlier.



Your body was likely still numb to the damage. Now that you've had a chance to rest, it's catching up with you.

I doubt it's permanent, but you're probably going to feel like crap for a couple days.



Hey! You cut that out right now!

Huh?

Stop kicking yourself like you always do. You'll be fine, alright?

And in the meantime, you've got me to lean on. So cheer up, that's an order!



...Great...



You know, now that I'm a general I don't take orders from anyone but my king.

Well then, General Keiser, you'd better start calling me king, because I'm taking care of you whether you like it or not.

...Heh.

I guess you're tall enough.



Sigh... Alright, then, Your Highness.

I'll try.

Good. Now come on, soldier. Let's go.



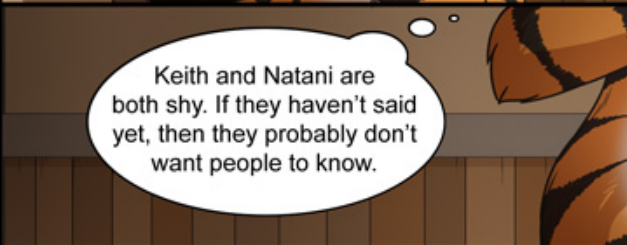
Ack! There they are. Don't look, don't look!

Oh, my... Keith and Natani...
I mean, I should have figured. after the whole bath incident.
But still. They both just seemed so... *prudish!*

And so soon after Laura... well, everyone grieves differently, I suppose.
I wonder what Trace will think of this?



No, no, no!
Bad Flora!
Don't gossip about your friends!



Keith and Natani are both shy. If they haven't said yet, then they probably don't want people to know.



I certainly wouldn't want people gossiping about me, especially now that they know...



Hey! Watch it, Sister! Comin' through!

Oh, sorry!



Hey wait, what are you two up to?

Uh...



Nothin'.



Right...
A whole crate
of "nothin'" huh?



What? Oh,
these things?

Naw, they're just...
ya know, some stuff
Eric wants moved.

Really, it is! You could
ask him, but... might as well
take our word for it!

And if you don't
buy that, it was all
Mike's idea.



Hey, relax. I'm
not going to go and
tattle on you.
But don't expect me
and Trace to come bail you
two out a second time doing
something stupid.

Aw, thanks, Stripes!
I knew you weren't the killjoy
Mike said you were!

See, the way I see it,
we helped Eric earn this
stuff. So now we're simply
collecting our dues!



Say! I never did
thank you properly for
getting us out from under
Eric's thumb. Here!

A gift! Congrats
on the new kid!

Just be careful. I
think it explodes if you
drop it too hard.



Evals! You can't
give an expecting mother
hard liquor!

Well, what else am I
going to give her? I don't
own anything else!



It... it explodes?

Just a little. It's mostly harmless. If you can't drink, give it to your boyfriend.



By the way...

I don't know how you convinced him that kid was his, but don't worry!

Me and Mike won't spill the beans on ya!

Us ex-slaves gotta stick together!

W-what?!



What are you implying?!

It *is* his! I've never even been with anyone else!



It's the truth, you jerk!

You know what, maybe I will go to Eric after all!

Nah, ya won't! You're too nice!

Later, Stripes!

Meerr... You... you... **Canines!**



Hey, relax! I get it! Those uptight humans are completely obsessed with their "monogamy".

They can't understand that we Keidran have different needs. But don't worry, your secret's safe with me!



Sigh...

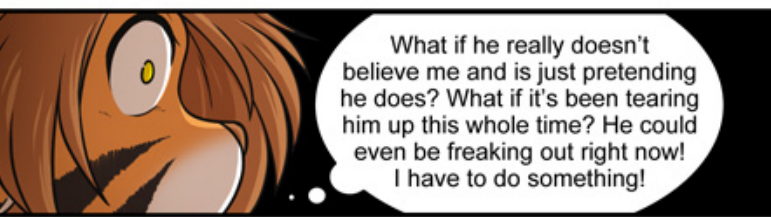
Is this really what everyone thinks of me?

That I'm just lying to Trace? What if he...

I know he said he believed me... he's always trusted me, ever since we first met.

But if enough people start questioning it... will he stay by my side?

What if...



What if he really doesn't believe me and is just pretending he does? What if it's been tearing him up this whole time? He could even be freaking out right now! I have to do something!



Meanwhile...

And if it's a girl... Nora... Maren... Saria... Flo- hang on...

These are just names of people I've met.

.....

...I don't know any other names...



Welp... here we are.

R-right... there it is.



So...

...Yeah...

Alright, look. We both knew this was coming. Let's not pretend otherwise.

Now, I know you'll want to say you can handle it...

But this is going to take at least *some* effort... and you had to take a break just walking down the steps to get here.

I just don't want you passing out and drowning on me after all this.



So I think we should just act like adults here and get it over with.

Right... yeah, I guess we have no choice but to go in together... *for safety reasons.*

Right! Safety.

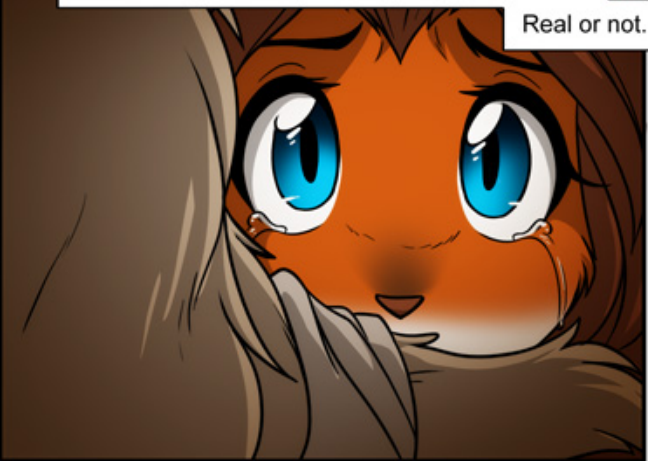
Not as though this is the first time, after all...

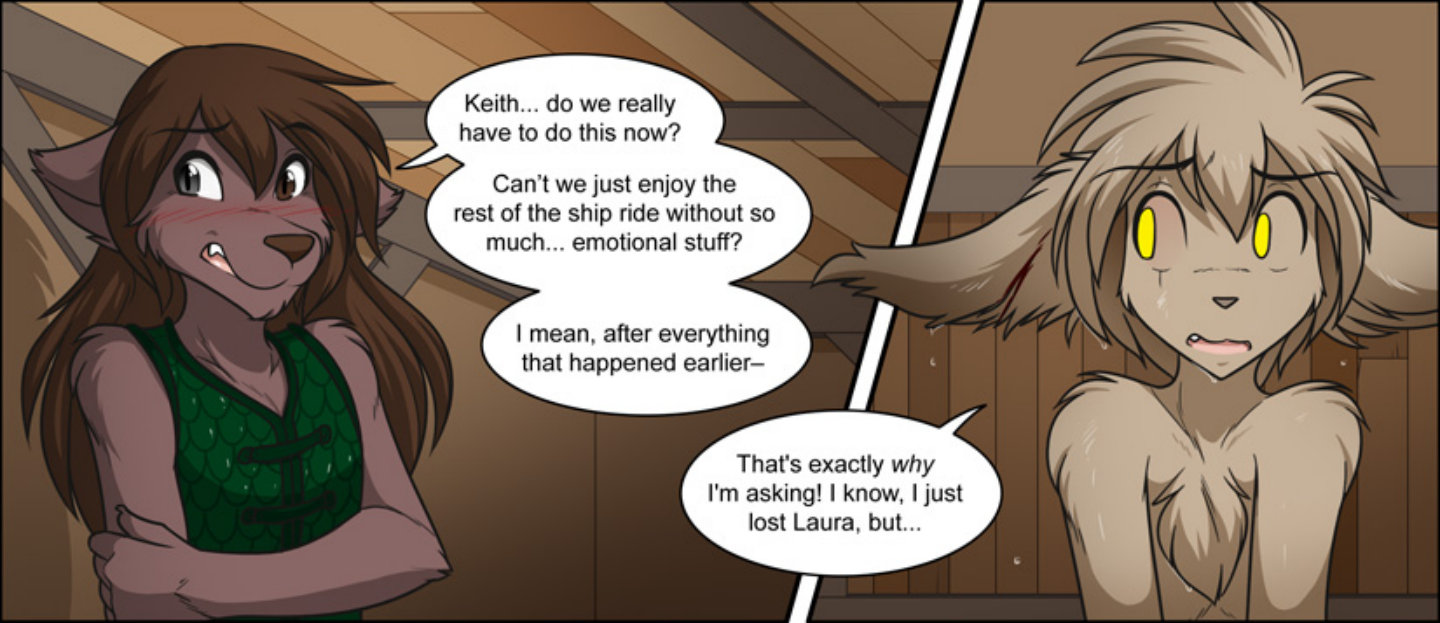
Just the first time it hasn't been an accident. So why does that make this feel more awkward?



Laura... the way she looked right at me - like she was pleading for me to take care of him. I don't know... maybe I was just imagining it, but...

Real or not...



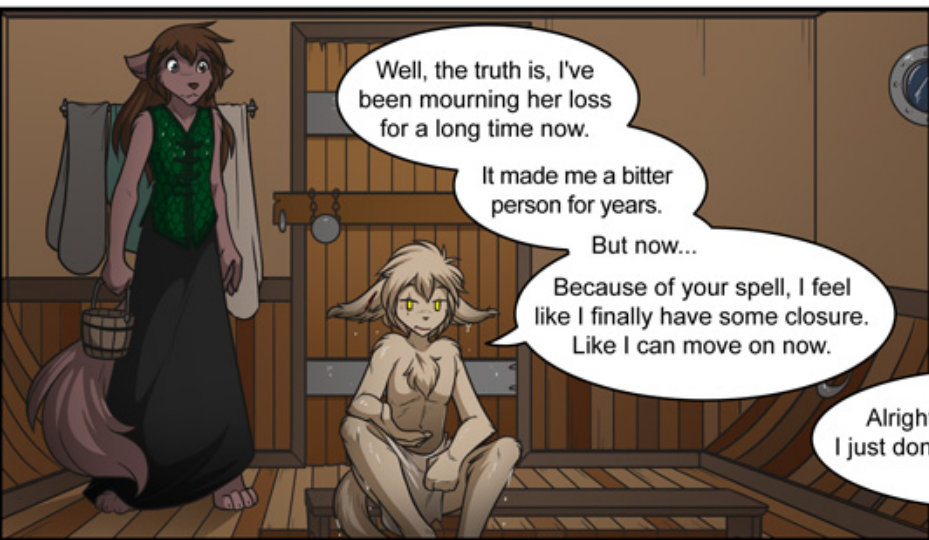


Keith... do we really have to do this now?

Can't we just enjoy the rest of the ship ride without so much... emotional stuff?

I mean, after everything that happened earlier—

That's exactly *why* I'm asking! I know, I just lost Laura, but...



Well, the truth is, I've been mourning her loss for a long time now.

It made me a bitter person for years.

But now...

Because of your spell, I feel like I finally have some closure. Like I can move on now.

Alright, I get that, but... I just don't know what to say.



You want a straight answer?

Then fine. Yes, there is a... *small* part of me that... has feelings for you.


But I can't tell if that's really *me*... or the female body making me feel that way.

Tell me this, Keith: if we had never ended up in the same bath that night we first met, and I was still a guy to you, would you even be asking me this right now?




Um... I can't say for sure, but considering you kissed me back at the tavern, I think I might question it even more.

We agreed not to look into that!




I'm just saying, it's a little weird for a guy to kiss a friend out of the blue like that.




I was under a lot of stress, okay?!

The tavern was on fire, you had just saved my life from... well, admittedly **you**, and after all that... it was the heat of the moment!



Well if you think about it, we were in a similar situation now.

I was under a lot of stress, the ship was on fire apparently, and you ended up saving *my* life earlier from something that came from **you**.



But I know you wouldn't like **me** suddenly kissing **you** for no reason and saying it was the "heat of the moment"!

Well maybe I would!





Keith,
wait, I—!

No, no, it's okay!
I know what you're
going to say.

I wasn't serious either!
You know me, I'd never just
up and... do that to you.

You know, not unless
you asked me to... which I
know you never would, so
it's a moot point.

Heheh...



...Natani?



Are... are
you okay?

This is the part
where you're supposed
to deny it too.



Sigh...

In that case...



Then I'm
asking you.

Asking me
to what?

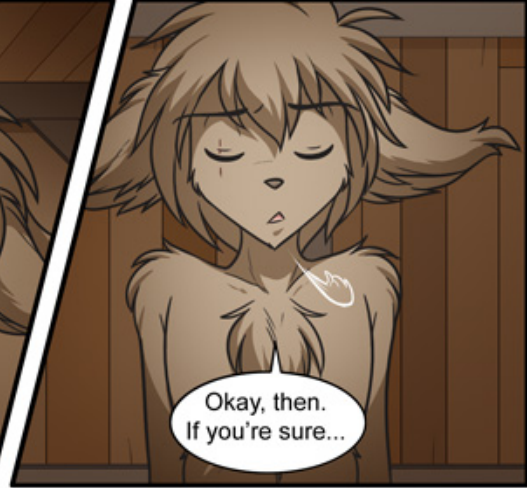




N-Natani, are you sure? This seems so fast, maybe we should wait until—

It's up to you, Keith, but it's now or never.

I know myself, and in another minute, I'll try to laugh it off as a joke.



Okay, then. If you're sure...



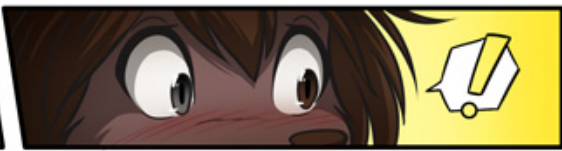
Then I will. Ready?

Y-yes?

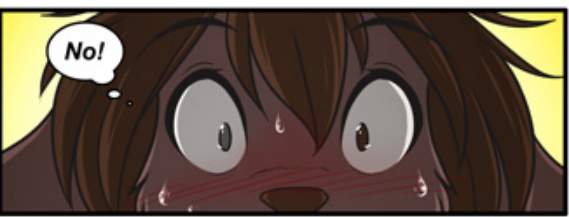
THUMP!
THUMP!



THUMP!
THUMP!



THUMP!
THUMP!



No!



THUMP!
THUMP!



PECK!



Was... was that really it?

Uh... I guess?



Was it that bad?

No! Not bad, it's just... after all of that build up, I was expecting it to be more...

I dunno... eventful? Momentous? Just... *anything* to help me sort out my feelings once and for all, but it was just...

Brief.



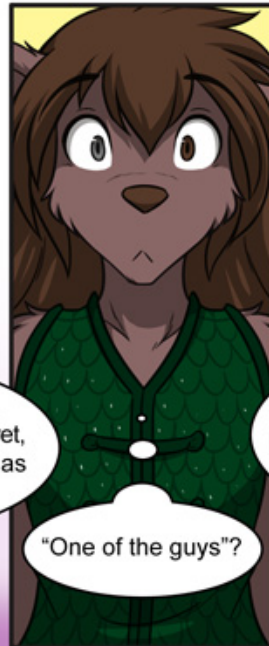
Sigh, I know...

I tried, but I was probably almost as reluctant as you.

Not that I didn't want to, but...

I think deep down... even knowing your secret, I really have seen you as one of the guys!

So this change was a bit strange for me too.



"One of the guys"?



I guess I can see now how you must feel, at least a little, kissing someone you view as a guy.

It must have been really hard for you. Sorry it ended up being disappointing.



Keith...

Huh- *Mmph!*

Well it wouldn't hurt to try again!

Mmph...

CLUNK!

ROLL ROLL!

Meanwhile...



Sooooo...
How long do you think he's going to be out?



You hit him pretty hard. The rock may have given him a concussion.

Well I had to be sure he'd stay down.



Yeah, better safe than sorry.
Still, we need him to tell us what kind of poison he used on the girls, so he can't die on us yet.



You know, I expected an assassin to be a lot scarier in person, but he's actually kind of cute, for a wolf boy.



Raine! Don't go complimenting the guy trying to kill us!

I know. I'm not being serious.



It's just nice to finally feel safe again! We make a pretty good team.
Especially now that you two have put aside your differences.
We're all friends now!

Well, we're friends with you, but I don't think Sythe and I will be **Friends!**

Alright, alright! For now...



Huh?

Raine, you're—!

Wae! Wae!

Wae! Wae!



You're changing again! Look!

Huh?
I am?



I am! I'm finally turning back into me again!

It's just like mom said, if I stay calm, I can change back even without the suppressor!

This is the best day ever!



Well... it was.

Sigh...

Back to being the only keidran in the group again. It was fun while it lasted.



Now for the rest!



Aw, come on!

What's wrong now?! I can't be stuck like this! It's worse than before!



Uh... Raine?



Hey, look on the bright side, at least you don't have the face of a—*nmph!*

What?

Nothin'!

Caught it that time.



Sigh...

It... it's really not that bad, you know? If you ignore the legs, it kinda looks like you're wearing a Keidran costume.

Heh. Yeah.
I'm sorry for spoiling the mood. I'm still glad we're safer now.

It's just a little frustrating, is all. But you guys don't have to worry about me, I'll be okay.



YAWN!

If you're sure.

Well, I don't know how long that guy's going to be out.

But this is the first chance we've had to get some sleep. I think now's a good a time as any.

Red, why don't you and Raine get some rest. We'll take first watch.

"We?"



I don't think so. How about I watch him while you get some sleep.

What?!
Seriously, after all that happened, you still don't trust me? Because I'm a wolf?



No, I don't trust you because you just referred to that rodent like it's a person.

Hey! You leave Mrs. Nibbly out of this!



Hey, boys! Hello?
I'm still here, and I've actually slept recently. Why don't I watch him?



Raine, I don't think you watching him alone is such a good idea.

I mean, no offense, but you're already hurt, and if he broke out...

I know. You're right I certainly wouldn't stand a chance in a fight.

But if one of you guys falls asleep on watch, there won't be any fight at all.



She's got a point.

Hmph, yeah, I guess.



Alright. I don't like it, but I agree, this is the best choice. Here.

Don't worry, I'll call out if he wakes up.



Good. Once he does, we can trade his life for the name of the poison, and then be long gone from here.

Right! Don't worry, us girls will hold the fort. Isn't that right, Mrs Nibbly?

Oh no, not you too! There's something off about that thing.



Hey... We're not really letting that guy go after this, are we?

Of course not! But Raine doesn't need to hear that.



Once we have what we need, I'll take him away from here and...

"Let him go."

Even without any weapons or crystals, he's still dangerous.



TWITCH



I shouldn't feel bad. I know they're just trying to shield me.

It's just a little hard not to feel hurt.
I might be a little naive sometimes, but I understand the situation we're stuck with.



It would be a bad idea to give this guy another opportunity to try and trick us again in the future.



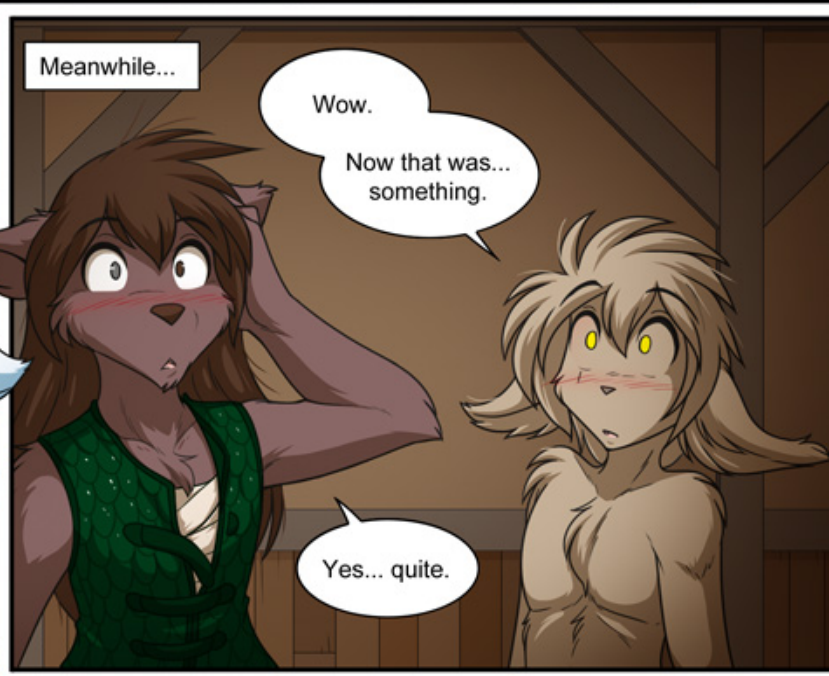
And I'm all too aware of how dangerous someone with magic can be.



Still, I wish there was another way.

Even someone like this guy must have friends or family out there waiting for him to come back home.

I wonder where they might be.



Meanwhile...

Wow.
Now that was... something.

Yes... quite.



I am never going to hear the end of this from Zen whenever he decides to finally wake up today.

Thank goodness his mind still seems to be asleep at the moment.



So... where do we go from here?

"From here?"

W-well, I was thinking we should probably go down to our usual sparring spot!

Get to work building your strength up before we hit the mainland again.



Natani, you know what I mean!
Are we... are the two of us in a relationship?

Don't say it!

Mmph?

We're just... really good friends, okay?!

Do we need to put a label on it?

Can't we just... see where things go without thinking about it too much right now?

Mmmgh...



So, just let it happen as it happens?
...Alright, I can do that.

Good... good. That's much easier on my psyche.



WIFE

TWO KINDS  ANNIVERSARY



REFLECTIONS



You were right, Flora.
Getting out of the cabin for a while was a good idea.

Sigh...
Yeah, this is nice.
After everything that's been going on lately, all I want to do right now is kick up my paws and relax.



Well, you've been under a lot of stress lately. You deserve it.

You know, looking up at the stars like this, it almost reminds me of the first night we met.



Do you remember that night in the forest?



How could I forget? It's the very first day I have any memory of.
From my perspective, that night was the first night I had ever experienced.

That night, long ago...

Alright, that should be enough to last for now.

Oh, hey!

You're still up. I didn't wake you, did I? I just left to gather more firewood.

No. I've been awake.

Oh... okay.

So, um... since we're both still up, there's something I wanted to ask you earlier, but... I wasn't sure if it'd be rude to do so.

That guy from before called you a "Keidran."

Is that the name of your... species?

...Do you really not know? This isn't some elaborate trick or something? Playing dumb to bring me back?

What? No, no!

I'm not trying to "bring you back" anywhere. I was just curious.

All I know for sure about Keidran so far is that they have orange fur and stripes.

What? We don't all have... wow, you don't know much, do you?



Okay, let me get this straight... there are tiger Keidran, wolf Keidran, dog Keidran, and fox Keidran...

Right.

And then... rabbit Keidran, and lizard Keidran, and fish Keidran.

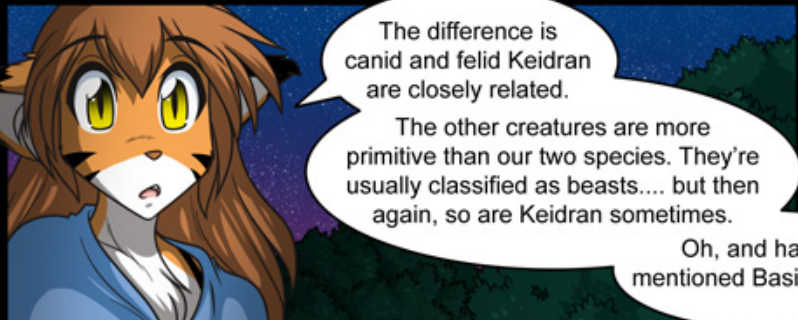
No, no, no! That's wrong. I mean, yes, there are supposedly merfolk in the sea and I had heard stories from people about a species of reptiles in the mountains... but none of those count as Keidran. Just canids and felids.



Well... what's the difference? If both canids and felids count as Keidran, why not the others?



I'm so confused.



The difference is canid and felid Keidran are closely related. The other creatures are more primitive than our two species. They're usually classified as beasts.... but then again, so are Keidran sometimes. Oh, and have I mentioned Basitins yet?



Sigh...
It's alright, Trace. The only ones you'll need to know are us Keidran. All the rest are either far away or might not even exist.

And I can guarantee you'll never have to worry about meeting a Basitin. They live far off on some weird island or something.

Well, I'm sure glad I have you here to teach me about this stuff. I'd be totally lost right now without you.



Oh... erm, you... you're welcome.



Heehee! You were so clueless!

Hey! Gimme a break! It was my first day. I was experiencing everything all over again!

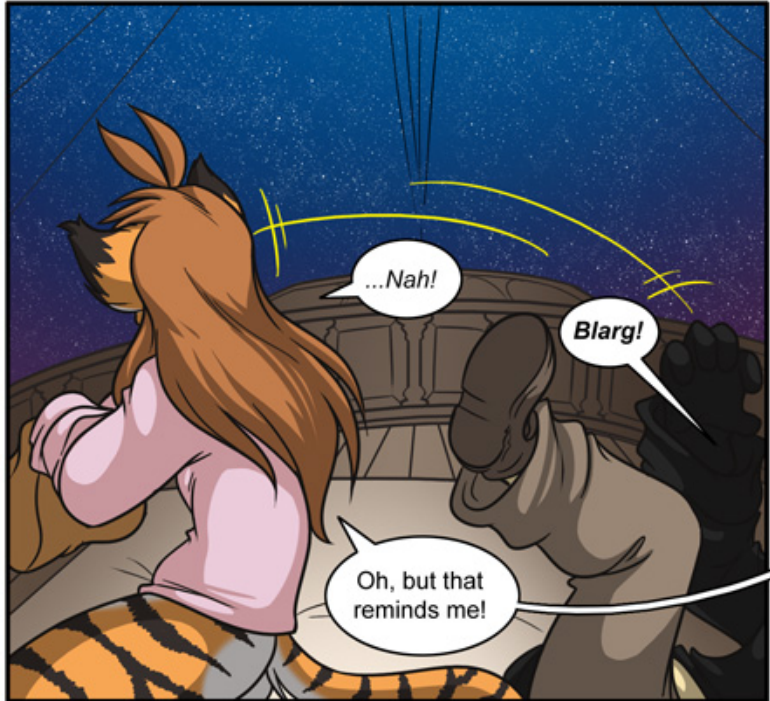


Well, you're lucky I found your cluelessness so cute, then, *human!*

Because that whole night while you were asleep I was up debating whether or not it would be safer for me to just...
...eat'cha.

GRAB!

R-really?



...Nah!

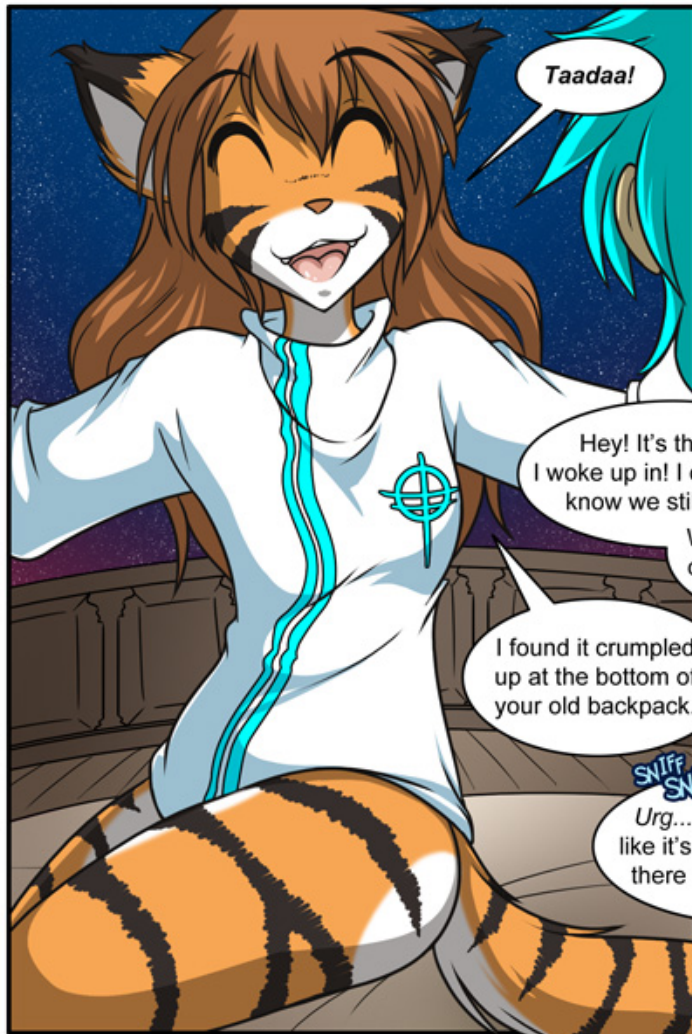
Blarg!

Oh, but that reminds me!



There's something I wanted to show you!

Huh? What is it?



Taadaa!

Hey! It's the shirt I woke up in! I didn't even know we still had it.

Where did it come from?

I found it crumpled up at the bottom of your old backpack.

SNIFF
SNIFF

Urg... certainly smells like it's been stuck down there all this time, too.

Say, how come you stopped wearing it?



What, you mean *other* than that big Templar emblem right on the front?

Well, have you seen the back yet?

...Oh.

The victim of one too many of your pounces, if I recall.



Right... sorry. I really need to be more careful with my claws.





I've been thinking about what you guys have been telling me.

About letting... certain things go.

So I brought up this.



Ooo! It's the bucket helmet!

What were you going to do with that?

If you must know, I was planning on dropping it into the ocean.



You...

...what?!

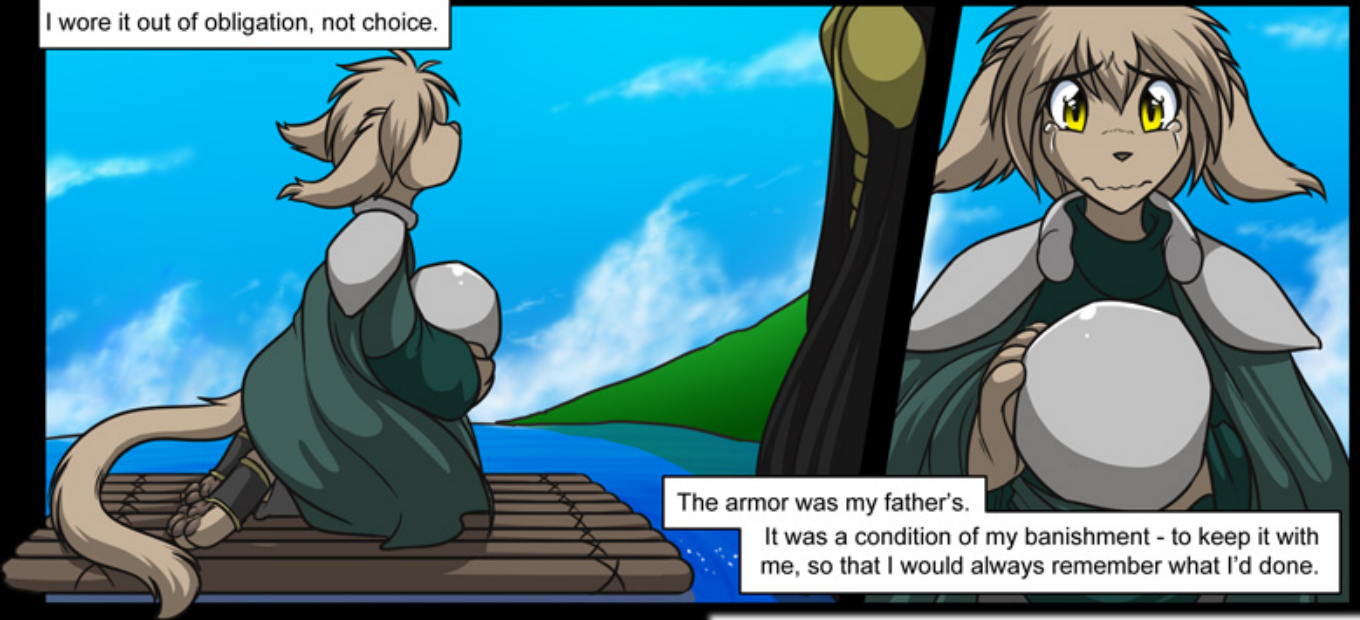


You can't just throw away Ol' Buckety!



Flora, do you even know why I wore that thing in the first place?

I wore it out of obligation, not choice.



The armor was my father's.

It was a condition of my banishment - to keep it with me, so that I would always remember what I'd done.

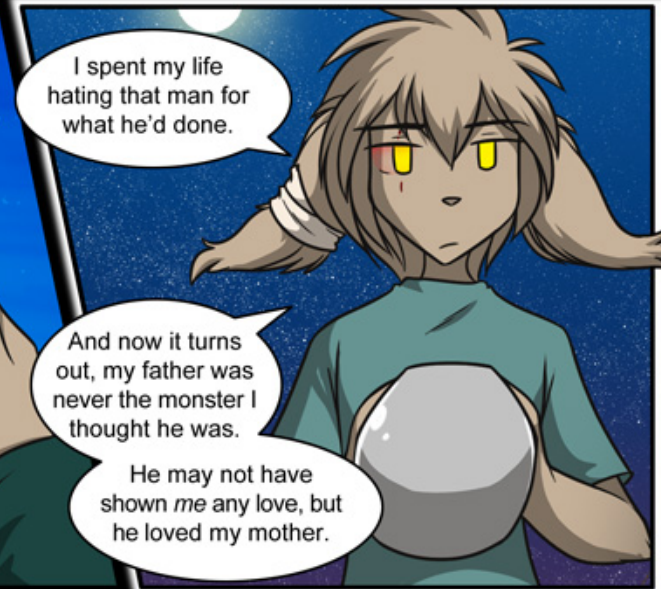
It worked. Every night, I would look into my helmet and see myself, alone. It was a constant reminder of what my father had done, and how I could never truly be rid of him.



I spent my life hating that man for what he'd done.

And now it turns out, my father was never the monster I thought he was.

He may not have shown me any love, but he loved my mother.



And I killed him.

Either way, I don't deserve to wear this helmet anymore!







<But I get what you're saying.
I appreciate that you didn't take my head off way back then.>



<Yeah, well, at the time I would have been more than happy to do so.
It wasn't exactly my intention to spare you.>



<But yeah, like I said, I'm... certainly glad that didn't happen.
If I had known at the time that you were...
I mean...
I never imagined that one day I'd...
Um... well, you see... I really like having you around ...a-as a good friend, and... stuff, so I->



BRUSH!



Eep!
<It's okay, Natani.>



<I know. And...>
<Maybe you're right about this thing.>



Yeah, Keith,
he's right!

Besides, think of all
the good times we've had
with Ol' Buckety!

Oh no...



Like that one time,
when I stole all your clothes
while you were bathing...

...and then sent them
floating down the river as
payback for attacking me
that one time!



I knew I never
should have trusted a
bloody *Keidran*!

I'll get you
for this, Flora!

**That wasn't
funny at all!**

It took me nearly
half an hour before
I got them back!

They went over a
waterfall!



Aw, come on now, Keith. Don't be mad at me.

I only tease you out of love.

Hmph!

Look, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you feel uncomfortable.



Sigh...
Fine. Since you apologized.

And... I suppose I can admit that it was, in hindsight...

...just a tiny bit funny.



That's the spirit!



But honestly... I know in the past you had a lot of bad memories associated with this helmet.

But things have changed for you since then.

You're no longer banished and your father wasn't a monster. And I think when you look at it now...



You'll see things differently than you did before.



Alright, alright!
I get what you're both saying. I'll keep the dang helmet!

Good!
<And now that that's all settled, why don't you two lie down and watch the stars with us?>



<Well...>
<I suppose I don't have anything better to do right now.>
<What about you, Natani?>

<Eh, if you're going to, then sure, why not?>



...You know what, Flora? You were right.

This is nice.

End.



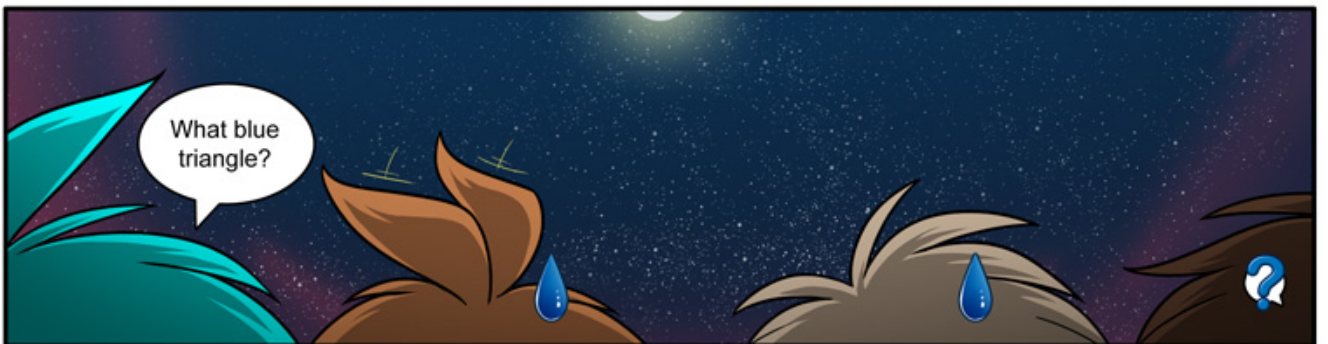
Hey, wait. Since we're all sharing... There's something I've always wanted to ask you, Trace.

Hm? Me? Sure, what?



What's the deal with that blue triangle you have on your face?

Is it some kind of Templar tattoo? Birthmark? A magic seal, maybe?



What blue triangle?



Later that night...

Trace and I should sit out in the stars more often.

Even with the cold, it does help to destress.

I wonder if Kat would be willing to fix this?

I mean... I know it's a Templar shirt, but, I still associate it with Trace.

Maybe Kat could change the embi—

Get back here!

Huh?

WOOSH!

Maddie?

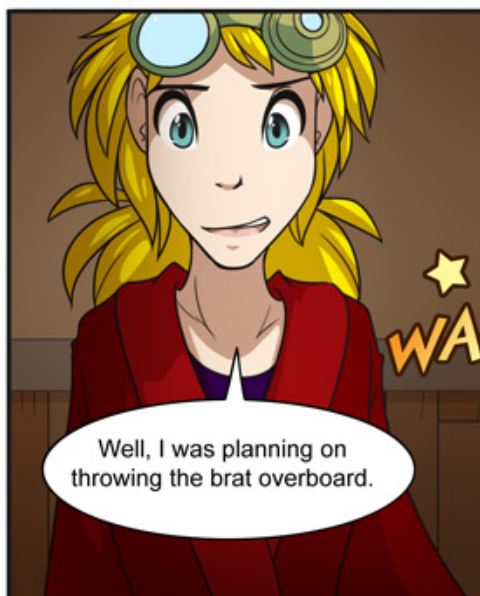
Hah! I've got you now!

I knew this thing would come in handy!

You might be sneaky, but you can't hide from magic!

SLAP!

Eric!





We are **not** going to throw an innocent girl into the sea!



Not too innocent if you ask me.
And it's not as if it's a foreign concept to the Basitin.
Just ask Keith.

What the Basitin did to Keith was just as cruel!



It's not like I enjoy tossing kids into the ocean or anything, but we can't just keep her here!

She's not a stray cat!

Meow!



Look, we're still well within Basitin waters, and the Basitin have the largest fleet in this area.

All I'm suggesting is giving her a boat, some supplies, and leaving her here before we drag her any farther!

Otherwise, all we're doing is kidnapping her!



You won't be kidnapping me, silly!



I probably should have brought this up earlier, but you see, I have...



A permission slip!

TA-DA!



Why didn't you show us this before?!

Well, you seemed awful busy at the time.

So I thought I'd just explore the ship a little... you know, look around, check out the crew...

...Find some parchment...

(Honestly, what ship doesn't have parchment in its storage hold?)

What was that?

Nothing! Here ya go!



Huh? What the-?

ONE FREE ADMITION

I'M SORRY. PLEASE DON'T THROW ME OVERBOARD.



MY NEW FRIENDS!



Alright, I don't really have anything official.

I snuck on board to support General Keith, but this is my first time away from my island, and I was a little scared.

And when I get scared my first instinct is to cause a distraction and run away.

That's usually my job in the military. It's why my nickname is madness.

Madness, huh?



I remember you from earlier.



K-Keith, I'm—!



Gasp!



T-tails... touching...



But... both... boys...

Oooooooh...



Sir!
We met briefly in person on the docks, and earlier at your trial.

Lt. Madelyn Adelaide,
East Basin Recon Division,
Infiltration class!
Reporting for duty!



Infiltration class? So is that what you're doing here? Infiltrating?



Er... n-no...
Well... I guess technically, yes, Sir.



Sigh...

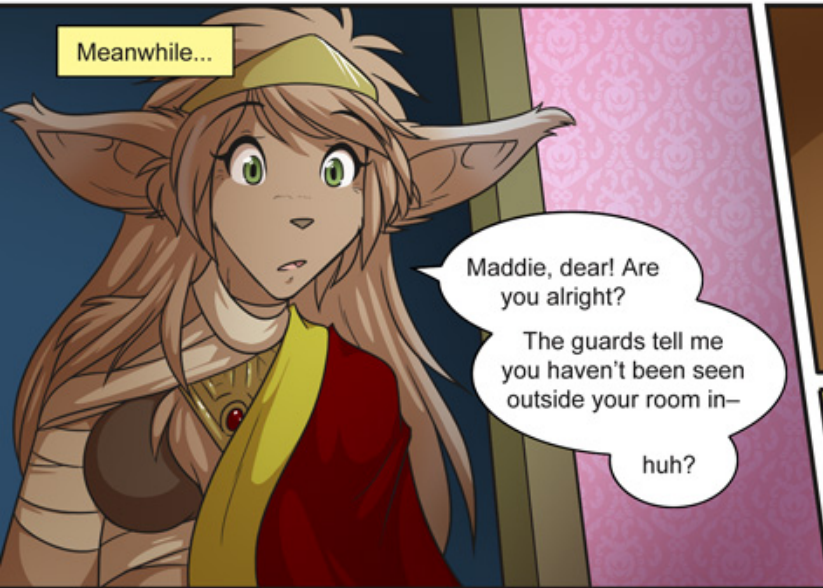
Alright, so you snuck aboard the ship to follow me.

Please tell me someone on the island knows you're here.

Oh, of course!

I wouldn't leave without informing my **superior officer!**

(Or at least... if she doesn't know yet, she soon will...)



Meanwhile...

Maddie, dear! Are you alright?

The guards tell me you haven't been seen outside your room in-

huh?



TO MOMMY ♥

What's this?



MAADELYYYYYYN!!!



Did you hear something?



Well, if those on the island know she's here...

Eric, could you please let her stay on board?

I doubt I have much choice in the matter.

As long as you're responsible for her. We'll have to find room for her.

Say... that's a good point. We've been at sea for days. Where have you been sleeping all this time?

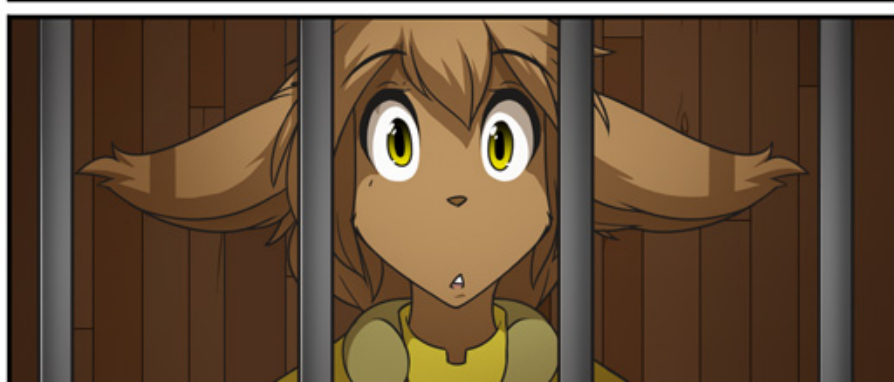
In the store room?

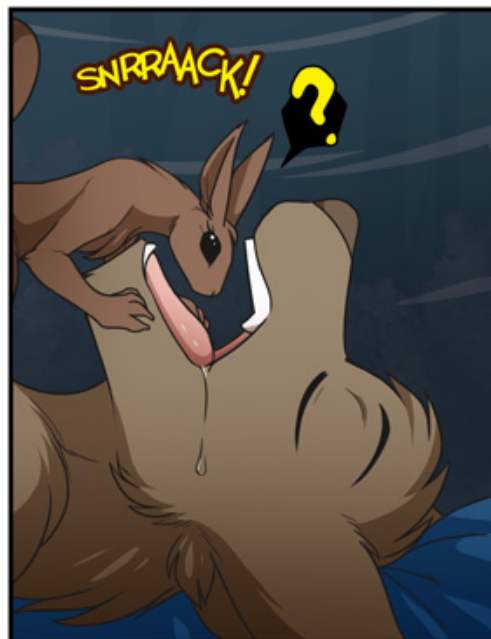
Oh, I slept all over!



Hm... I think I know just the place to put you.

The only place in the ship with a spare bed.







Raine!

What's wrong?
Did he escape?! Are we
under attack?!



Oh...

Everything
okay, Raine?



I have a
muzzle again.

Ah... yeah.
So you do.

Mmmgh...

I was getting frustrated
trying to fix this stupid magic
inhibitor, and... well...



Losing control of my
emotion seems to make me
lose control of my form.



Still, I appreciate
you keeping an ear
out for me.

Sorry to wake
you for nothing but
my problems.



Don't worry about
it, Raine. I'd already
been woken up.



I'm glad to see our "friend" is still here.

Yes. He hasn't moved since last night. Lots of drool, though.



Hm?
Hey, what are they doing out here?



Oh, I decided to move the girls out here so I could care for them while keeping an eye on him.

I'm worried. They haven't had anything to eat or drink in over a day.



Don't worry. I'll make sure this bastard tells us how to wake them up.



I hope you're right.
Thank you for staying with us. I know the others hadn't exactly been... grateful.
But if it weren't for you, we'd all be dead back when our village was attacked.



Oh! Uh... thanks!

It's not really a big deal. I couldn't let you guys die.



It is a big deal!

It's because of us you were labelled a traitor!

We haven't been very kind to you in return. Yet you're still here caring over two human girls.

You're a good person, Sythe.



Thanks. I appreciate that, Raine.



Though, to be honest, the choice wasn't as hard as you might think.

Oh?

I wasn't exactly thrilled to be on the front lines acting as fodder in the first place.

Believe it or not, before all this war nonsense got started I had my hopes of being a diplomat.



A diplomat? Really?


Is that so hard to believe?

Well... I mean, you must admit, most of the times I've seen you, you've been in a loin cloth.



Hah! I see your point.


I guess I don't quite look the part. But I wasn't always like this!



When I was young, I was fascinated by human culture. I wanted to get to know everything about our weird hairless neighbours.


Even spent a summer living in a human village once, if you can believe it. This was back when the borders were more open, of course.

Even just a decade ago, things were lot friendlier between our kind and theirs.



Er... I mean, b-between **my** kind and theirs! Not... of course you aren't...

Sorry.



It's alright, Sythe.


Honest mistake.

Ahem! Anyway...

I learned everything I could about humans.

That's **not** to say I didn't care about my own culture, mind you!


I am a proud wolf, through and through!



But there were certain things I admired about humans. Freakishly long lives, education... attitudes regarding women.

Even my name. Originally, it was the Keidran word for the same tool, but humans couldn't pronounce it.

So I changed it to the human equivalent:



Uh... Sythe... you know it's spelled wrong, right?

W...what?

It normally has a "c" in it. S-c-y-t-h-e.

N-no, no it doesn't! It...





Then again, it's your name. If you wanted to spell it that way, it's fine.

Are... you alright, Sythe?

Sythe?



Yes!
I meant to spell it that way!

Yip!



Sorry...
Uh... where were we?

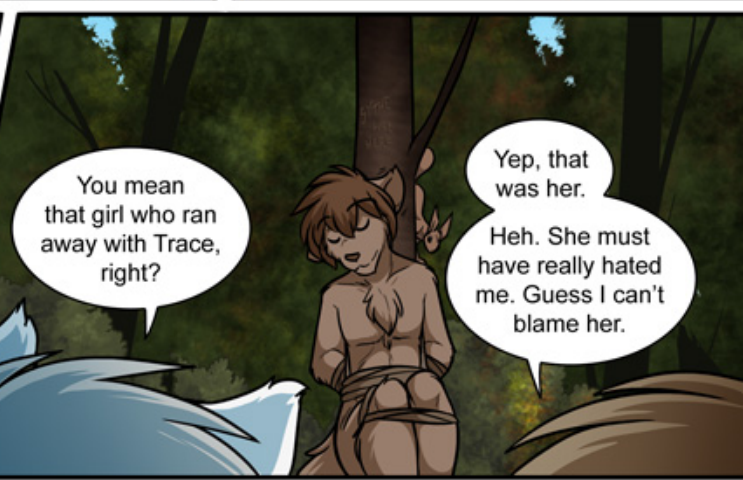
Y-you being a diplomat?

Did I just bark?



Right, right.
Well, not much else to say. Obviously it didn't pan out.

Templars had a coup. borders were closed. I got sent off on an arraigned marriage with a tiger.



You mean that girl who ran away with Trace, right?

Yep, that was her.
Heh. She must have really hated me. Guess I can't blame her.



I sometimes wonder what happened to Flora.
The last time I saw her, she was running off with Trace and that Basitin toward the coast.

Sadly... I'm afraid she might not even be alive anymore.

What? Why?

Well...
Last I heard, two assassins were sent after their group.



<Wait a minute!>
<You guys are talking about Keith's group of friends!>



<You were awake this whole time?!>

<It was your fiancée we were sent after?!>

<You were one of the assassins my uncle sent to kill Flora?!>

<Your uncle sent assassins after your own fiancée?!>

Hey! Guys!

Calm down!

What's he talking about, Sythe? You're both speaking Keidran too fast for me to keep up.



This is the guy!

When Flora ran off with Trace, the wolves thought the humans might be forging an alliance with the felines in secret.

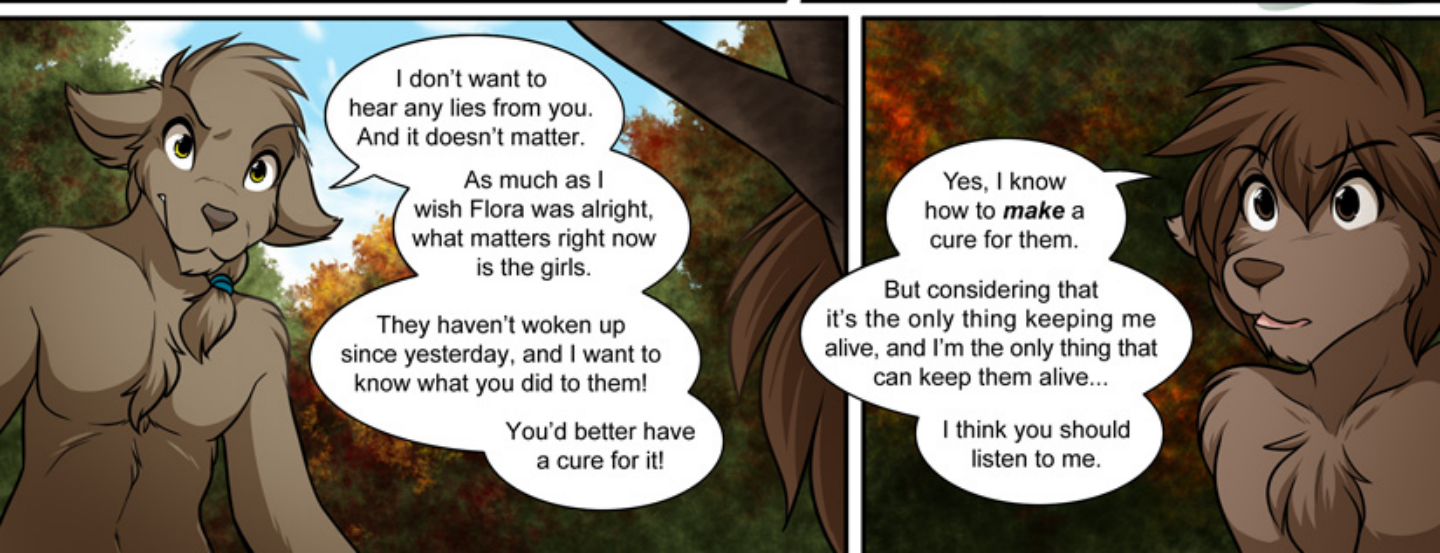
This is one of the bastards they sent to kill her!

"Kill"?

<No, wait! We did not kill them!>

<I can explain—>

Save it!



I don't want to hear any lies from you. And it doesn't matter.

As much as I wish Flora was alright, what matters right now is the girls.

They haven't woken up since yesterday, and I want to know what you did to them!

You'd better have a cure for it!

Yes, I know how to **make** a cure for them.

But considering that it's the only thing keeping me alive, and I'm the only thing that can keep them alive...

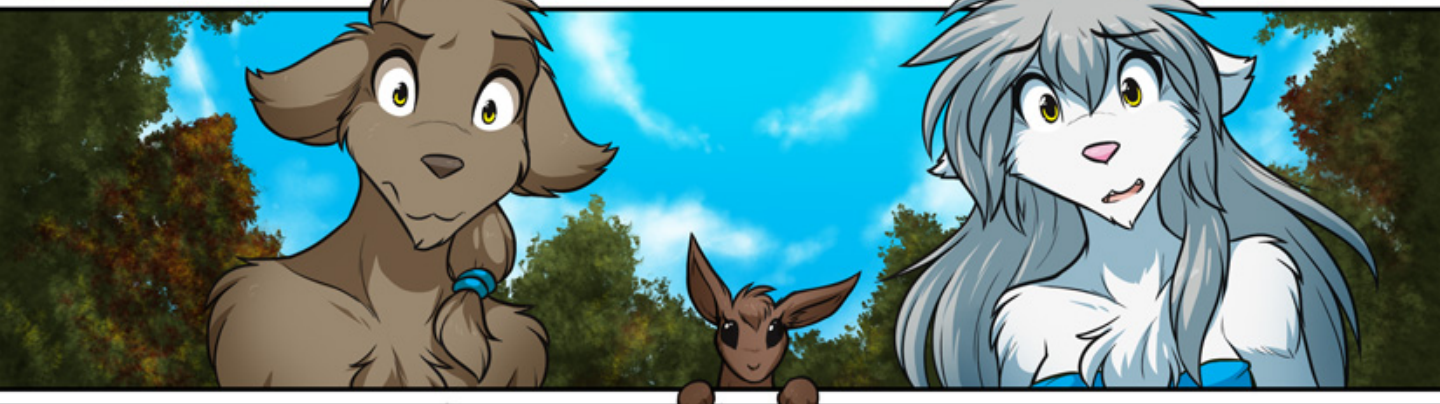
I think you should listen to me.



<...And then, the white dragon flew off after defeating the shadow dragon! That's when my brother joined up with your friends.

From there, they stumbled upon a guy who happened to have a ship to sail them across the ocean to the lands of the Basitin!>

<And I know all of this because of the special telepathic mental connection that my brother and I share!>



<Okay, that... didn't sound quite as good as it did in my head.>



I... suddenly have the strangest urge to hit my ex-fiancé.

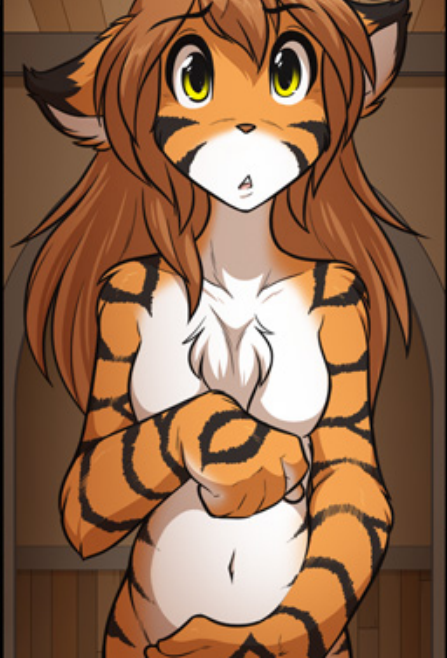


<It sounded **completely insane!** Did you honestly expect us to buy that nonsense?

Your brother joining them doesn't even make sense!

Think about it: what kind of complete half-wit would just let a guy join them right after that person tried to **kill** them?

That person would have to be pretty stupid. Like, **really dumb.**>



Meanwhile, on the other side of the link...

Natani, I really don't think all this is necessary.

I feel fine!

Yeah, right.

Not long ago you could barely walk. We have a lot of work to do.

I mean, just look at these flabby arms!

My arms look exactly the same!

Exactly! I know you have that natural girly figure, but you're supposed to be a "general" now.

I do *not* have a girly figure!

Then throw a punch already! Or are your poor, girly arms just too weak to be sparring right now?

BAM!

Gah! My face! Why the face?!

I- I thought you were ready!

I'm sorry! I didn't mean to

WUMPH!!

Gotcha!



Oldest trick in the book. 'Eh, Keith?

...Keith?

Ah! I forgot you were weakened!

I... I didn't mean to hit you that hard, really! Are you okay?

Y-yeah...

I'm alright.



Oh, good, for a minute I thought I'd—

Argh!
CRUNCH!

You're right! Oldest trick!



Not sure why I'd think about Sythe now of all times...

Mrrrow?



Hey! What's going on?! Stop it, you guys!

Whatever's wrong, you don't have to fight!



Huh? "Wrong?"

I... uh... isn't there?

No?



Well... uh... nevermind, then, I guess.

SIGH...
Boys.



I guess maybe we did overdo it.

Er, yeah, maybe... just a bit...



...Natani?

Ah!



Argh!

Oh, Zen!
H-hey! Listen, I
can explain...

Whatever it is,
it can wait! I'm in a bit of
a bind at the moment...

...literally.



What do you mean?
What's been going...



Snrk...

Natani, don't...



Well well well, look
who's finally lost his
clothes this time!

Oh,
har har!

Fine, I deserve
that! But how 'bout we
save it for when I'm not
in mortal danger?



Mortal danger?
Why didn't you call
for me sooner?!

I didn't want you
to worry unless you
could help.

It'd take too long
to explain, look through
my memories. But for now
I need to talk to someone
through you! Quickly!



Flora, wait!



I know this is going to be really weird, but I need you to help me with something, quickly!

Yeah, sure, Natani. What is it?
And... wait, didn't one of your eyes used to be grey before?



That... nevermind that. Just listen!

I forgot how cute Flora was in person.
Focus, Zen.



Great. Now he's just staring off into space. I don't know what he hopes to gain from this act.

He probably just wants a reason for us not to hurt him.

A crazy story about imaginary friends isn't helping his case.
He's a magic-user. He's dangerous.



Sure, we only found drained mana crystals in his stuff, but who knows what else he might have hidden?



Wait! You found mana crystals when you searched him?!

Well... yeah, but they were dead. Why?

Even an "empty" mana crystal is useful! The crystal itself can be ground up for runecrafting, circles...

I might be able to fix my shackle! I'll be right back!



Well... at least she's happier. But it still doesn't help our current situation!

Maybe I should just wait and let Red handle this guy. I'm sure he'd love to...



Your ponytail looks stupid!



Alright, *that's it!*
I've had it with that
attitude of yours!

Wait, wait!
That wasn't me!



I was
quoting Flora.

W...what?

It's what she
said, wasn't it?
When you two first
met. She was angry at the
arranged marriage.
She called your
ponytail stupid.

But that...
y-you could have
guessed that!



She also says the whole
way back she tried knocking
it off your shoulder when you
weren't looking.
And that the first night,
she stole your fancy clothes
and made you go the rest of
the way in a loincloth. Guess you
still haven't found them?

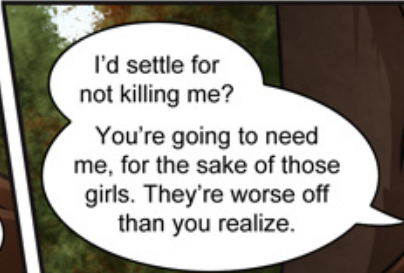
Alright, stop it!
How could you
possibly know that?!
Did you torture
her for information before
you killed her?



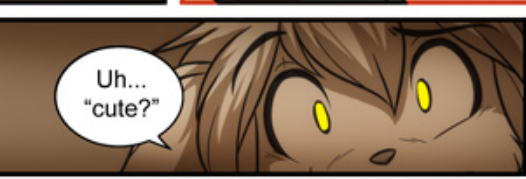
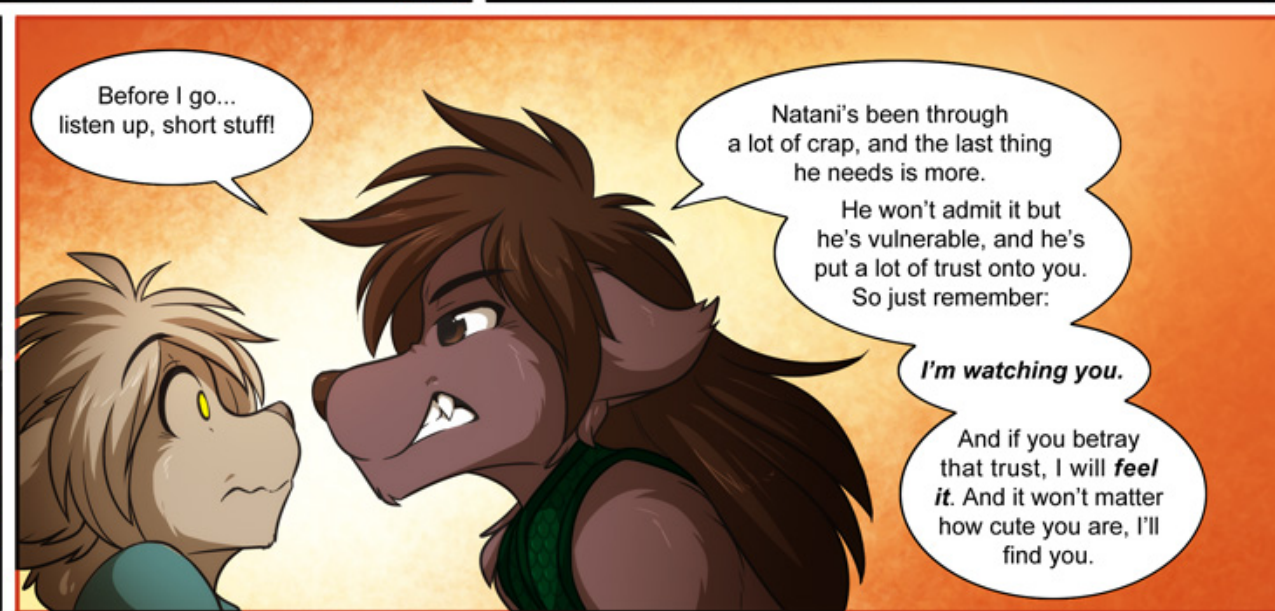
Oh, yeah, sure!
We always ask our targets
irrelevant trivia questions about their
pasts before we take them out.
It's in the assassin's
handbook, under "pointless".



Enough with
the sarcasm!
Even if there's
some truth to all of this,
you still attacked us!
Do you expect me
to just let you go?!



I'd settle for
not killing me?
You're going to need
me, for the sake of those
girls. They're worse off
than you realize.



Some time later...

YAAAWWN!

I slept like a rock!

Man!

Ah! You out here, fur-face?

Did I miss anything while I was out?



He's awake and you didn't tell me?!

Uh...
Morning. Coffee?

And you untied one of his hands to give him coffee?!

Relax, Red.

He told us where to find his stuff nearby, including the coffee.

And his hand is only untied because he just finished making what we needed.

Wait, you mean...?

Yeah. Raine's over with the girls treating them right now.

What, really?! He just gave it up just like that?!

I can't believe it! I was sure we'd have to beat it out of him!

What a sucker!

Now we can take care of this guy and finally get on the road again!

No. We can't yet. There's a new complication.

Huh? What do you mean by that?

He's made some odd claims while you were out. He says he knows our friends, but more importantly...

This guy - Zen - claims the poison he used on the girls isn't something that can just be fixed with some plants.

They need a real healer.

While his quick fix will wake them up for now, unless they continue to take it regularly they won't wake up again by the next morning.

In other words, we need him.



<And now they're back to arguing in Human again.>

<I don't think the red one is buying your antidote story.>

<Well what else could I do? I had to make the cure!>



<They would have woken up eventually.>

<I'm lucky that second-rate "eternal sleep" poison lasted as long as it did!>

<At least this way, they think they need me to keep making it, and all those phony steps will keep them guessing how it's done.>

<I just have to buy myself a little more time!>



Just give me ten minutes with him!

Red, think for a minute. It's the only thing keeping him alive, and he knows it!

He might just give us another poison recipe if he thinks he'll die either way!



Greah!

Let's just see if the girls really wake up first.

Where are they anyway? Their tent was empty.

Well, they were out here earlier, but we wanted to wake them up away from... him.



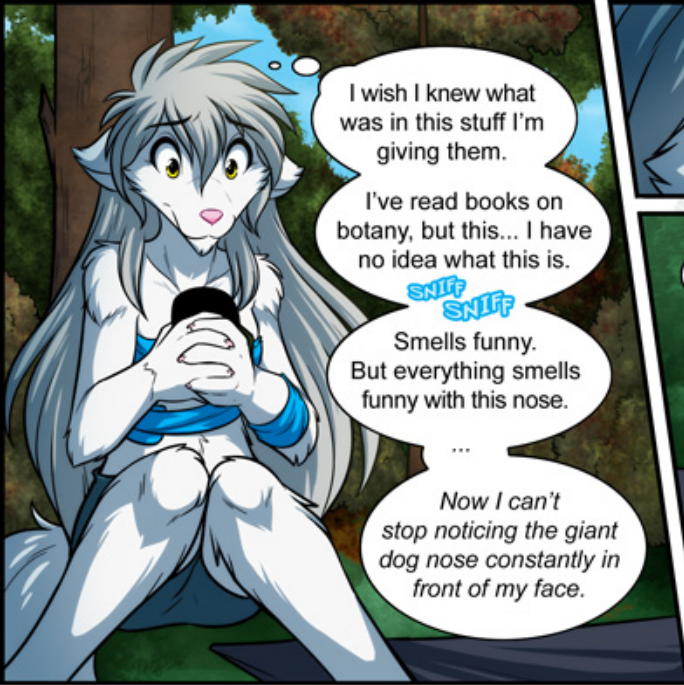
That's a good idea.

Maren dislikes Keidran probably as much as I do!

Good thing Raine's at least got most of her humanness back.

Can't imagine how she'd react otherwise!

Uh...



I wish I knew what was in this stuff I'm giving them.

I've read books on botany, but this... I have no idea what this is.

SNIF SNIF

Smells funny. But everything smells funny with this nose.

...

Now I can't stop noticing the giant dog nose constantly in front of my face.



Ah!

Uuuurgh...



I-it's working!

Maren?

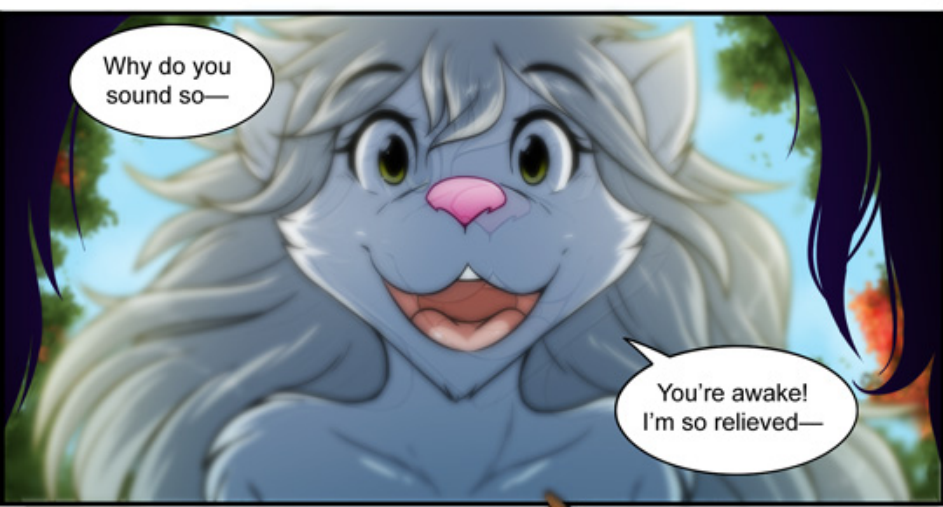
Ugh~! My head...

What did I drink last night? And why does it taste like I just chewed on a bag of tea leaves?

Just relax, Maren. Take it slow.



Raine?
Is that you?



Why do you sound so—

You're awake!
I'm so relieved—



Maren, wait!

Get back! Back! You filthy beast!

Think you can sneak up on us?!



I'll teach you to try and—

Woah woah woah! Relax! She's okay!

"Raine"?

You expect me to believe that?

I know it sounds crazy...

But just look at her!

The frumpy blue clothes?
That weird accent?

And do you know anyone else with freakishly long silver hair?

It's Raine!

It's true.

I'm sorry I didn't tell you before. You were the first friends I ever had.

I was afraid of how you'd react if you knew I was really like... *this*.

I had so much fun travelling with you guys. I... I'd hoped

WAAAAAHHH!

Eh?

DOGGY!!

BLARG!

Karen!

Look at how fluffy she is! Can we keep her?!

No, you can't keep Raine! She's not a pet!

So you admit it's her.

Even her tail is floppy!

Karen, no! Don't grab that! Trust me!

See, she's nice, Maren. And we owe her.

She saved all of us, seeing through that assassin's illusion.

And she took care of both you girls while you were poisoned.

Eh, fine. Whatever.

Wait... We were poisoned?

Yeah, if it weren't for Raine stepping in, you two probably would have been left out here to die.

D... die?



Well, I'll let you girls freshen up.
I'm sure you need it.



What's that supposed to mean?

Er, uh... I didn't mean...



No, you're right. We'll be back.

Come on, Karen.



Well... That went better than expected.

I don't know... Maren barely looked at me after you explained the situation.



I don't think things will ever be the same between us.

Nah! That's just how Maren is.

Emotional one minute, distant the next.

Don't take it personally. She's always been like that since Tan— er...

Since... we were kids.



Really?

I knew you guys grew up together in that village. You've known each other a long time.



...Were the two of you ever...?

What? Together?

Ah-hahaha! Me and Maren! A couple!

I can't even picture that! That would just be... weird!



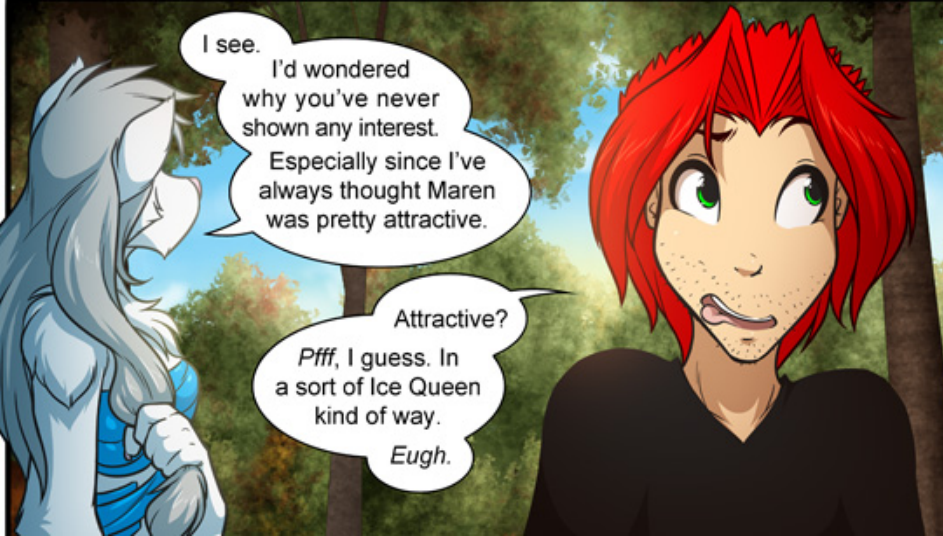
Plus, I'm pre-e-etty sure we're cousins.



Cousins?!

Probably. It was a small village.

But even if we're not... I could never look at her in that way.



I see.

I'd wondered why you've never shown any interest. Especially since I've always thought Maren was pretty attractive.

Attractive?

Pfff, I guess. In a sort of Ice Queen kind of way.

Eugh.



...

Proop



My shackle.
I... I fixed it.

What?
Really?!



It's working
again? That's
awesome!



Maren will
come around,
you'll see.

Huh?
Oh, no. It's not
that. I was thinking
about... well...

This:



Yeah. It was
simple, once I
had access to
Zen's stuff.



...

And why
are you still all...
uh... wolfish?

Okay... if it's fixed,
why don't you seem
happy about it?



Do you remember
what I said this does?
It suppresses magic.

I know you don't
want us to keep Zen.
We can't trust him.

Well...



This can suppress
Zen's magic just as
well as mine.

It won't make him
harmless, but—

—Even if he pulls
magic out his ass he won't
be able to use his little tricks
on us again! *Brilliant!*



But... wait,
that means...



Yes.

SLUMP!

It means I'll be
stuck... like this.



Raine, you don't have to do that.
If we just keep the guy away from crystals—

—Even without crystals, **black magic** is *always* an option for the desperate.
And besides...



...Maybe this way, it'll be safe enough to let him live.

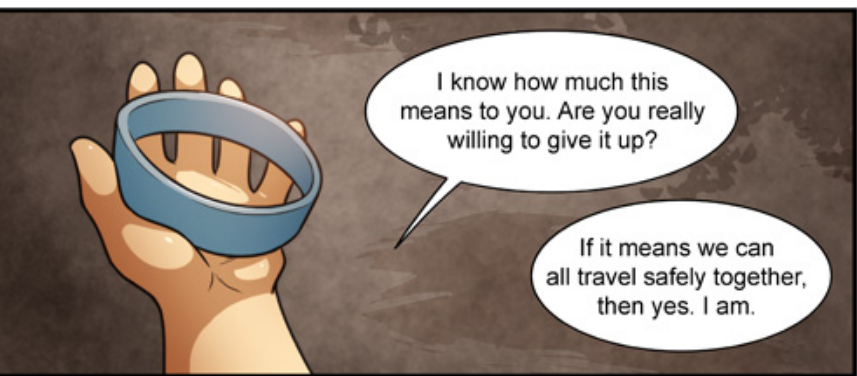


SIGH... You really are too nice, even when it comes to someone who doesn't deserve it.



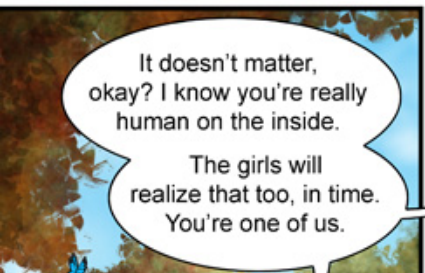
You're a braver person than me.
Being stuck as a Keidran... I don't think I'd be willing to do the same.

Listen Raine...



I know how much this means to you. Are you really willing to give it up?

If it means we can all travel safely together, then yes. I am.



It doesn't matter, okay? I know you're really human on the inside.
The girls will realize that too, in time. You're one of us.



We won't think less of you just 'cause you've got some fur and a tail now. And if anyone does, I'll beat some sense into them, alright?



Now come on, no moping.

Let's go tell the others to pack up. I think it's about time we finally hit the road again.



Hey! We're back!
And it worked!

The girls are
washing up now. I think
we're just about ready
to leave this dump.

How's our
"guest" doing?



He's hasn't given
me any trouble.

In fact, he—



<You know...



You guys *really*
need to learn how
to tie a rope.

That, and keep
better track of your
squirrels.>



Don't
move!



<Hey, relax!
I could have run,
but I didn't!

As I said
before, I have every
intention of travelling
with you!

I just saved
you the trouble of
untying me!>

<The whole point
of taking this job was so I
could afford safe passage
to reach my brother.

But since we're
all going the same
direction, there's no
need now!>



Wha-?!

Mrs. Nibbly,
you traitor!



I still think breaking
free was stupid. They'll
trust you *less* now.

You'd be surprised.
A little roguish charm can go
a long way towards building
trust in the long run.



<It's going to be a long journey, and it'll be hard to carry me hog-tied the entire way.

I swear on my life that I will not cause you or your friends any trouble along the way, Miss Raine.>

I'd like to believe that.
If you truly wish to build trust with us, you can start by letting us put this on you.



<Going to shackle me, huh? I suppose that's reasonable, though not very effective with just one.



But very well!
If you insist, shackle me!>



Put it on his ankle, so he can't mess with it while we walk.

And you, don't move!



Zen, wait!
There are runes on that thing!

Are you sure this is—



Zen?!

SNAP!
SNAP!

Ah...!

Hey! What's
the matter?

Natani?

THUMP!

CRASH!

Natani!

End.