

Chapter 7

Instincts



After a few hours...

It's getting pretty dark.

I think we should just set up camp now. We'll get there in the morning.

This looks like a nice little clearing. As long as we follow the stream, we shouldn't get disoriented tomorrow.

Flora, could you set up the lantern?

I'll get some wood for a fire.

Oh, could you also get some fresh water? I think we're out.


Trace...?

Trace... I don't think we should camp out here.

Huh? What's wrong, Flora?


Keidran have been here... I can smell their scent.






I can smell... lots of scents here... one familiar... but...


...none of them are recent...



Maybe there's some more over... no, none here.




Wait.. what am i doing?



I should be happy I'm not finding anything...

More Keidran is the last thing we need.

Sigh...




I'm happy with Trace.

Why would I want to put that at risk?

Why do I want to go home?

Is it just because I'm a Keidran?

Meanwhile, in the trees...



<Flora... You've been a slave to the humans for too long, my dear.>

<Not used to these feelings, are you?>

<Without the power from those Templar buildings, your instincts are slowly becoming unsuppressed.>





I don't care what all those old grey-furs arranged for us. Neither of us really have feelings for each other. I want to lead my own life. It might be foolish, but it's my own decision.

Sigh... fine, go then. I'll tell them I... couldn't find you or something.



I didn't want to be your enemy, Flora. I still care about you... But.. I can't risk my own life by coming back empty handed.

I will bring you back, as ordered, but I can't do it alone.



At the camp...

Trace, I'm back!



Huh, oh, hey Flora. You're back sooner than I expected.

Yeah, I... got tired. I saw some blue light while I was coming back... was that you, Trace?

Uh, blue light? No... I... um... I have no idea.



Ah, okay. -SIGH- I'm just exhausted. It seems like all we do is travel around.

After all this is over... I just want to go back home and settle down.



...Yeah... I know... I think I'm going to go to bed. Is that my tent over there?

Yeah. I wouldn't mind doing that myself. But we'll have to go our separate ways when that happens.

Actually, that's Keith's.

Oh.. but... then where am I supposed to sleep?




Well, I haven't actually set up your tent yet. And I'm kinda tired myself. So, I was thinking...


If you wanted to... you could always...



Y-you mean.. you don't mind if I sleep in your tent with you...?




But... you always yell at me when I try to sleep in your bed...




Well, it was a little soon...

But we've known each other for a while.. and I think it's okay now.



Ah, okay...




It's about time, Trace!

Heh, I'm still not really sure what's going on.

I assume this goes against all the codes of the Templar.


But... I don't remember any of that life I once had. and I don't want to.

I know. I don't want to be involved in this war. I just want to be happy.



...hey, Trace?

Hm, what's up?



Are we gunna.. well... you know...?

Erm, well...



Huh, Trace?
Now where'd that stupid human go?

Ugh, finally.
Trace, it's your turn to go on watch, I'm exhausted.



Hm?

Sorry, sorry.. never done this before.. how about now?

Ow, hey, that's my tail, Trace!

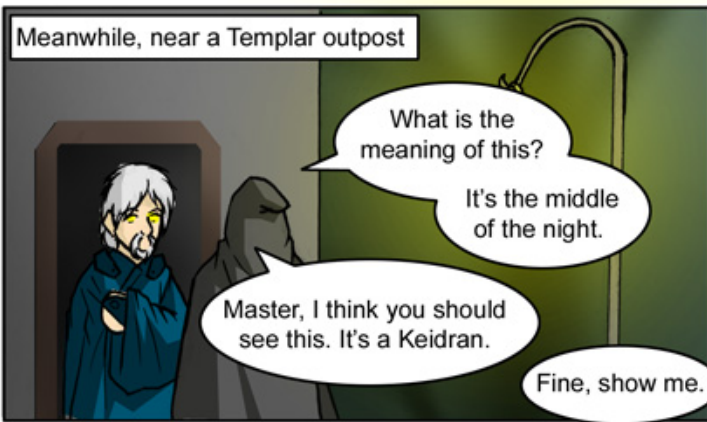
I know, me nei- eep! mm.. that's nice..



...



On second though, I think I'll go scouting for a while longer.



Meanwhile, near a Templar outpost

What is the meaning of this?

It's the middle of the night.

Master, I think you should see this. It's a Keidran.

Fine, show me.



A dead Keidran? What does this thing have to do with me? Get rid of it!

He's not dead, though I don't know how. He has a huge stab wound.

I still don't understand why you needed me.



He mentioned your name. Your... other name. Do you recognize him?



Ah! It's... it's Euchre!

You know him?

Yes.. he was a slave.. from long ago...

Quick, get him inside.

Yes, Master.

It's been a long time, old friend.

Ow.. my head...
Where.. am I?

What the...?

My hand! I
have... skin..?

Wha.. what's going on?

I'm... human!

I don't believe it!
I look like a human!

It is what you wish
you were, is it not?

Gah!

My feet.. what's going
on, I'm changing back!

No no no!

Please, let me
stay human!

Why would you want to be
something that you are not?

I.. I don't want
to be an animal!

You are not an animal, Flora.

But neither are you human.

No!

You cannot change who you are.

You can't hide
your true nature..

..forever.

-gasp!

Oh.. thank goodness.
Just a dream...

Merrr, Trace? Oh yeah,
I'm in Trace's bed.

I still can't believe
we actually...

Hm..? Are those claw
marks... from me?

Oh, I hope I didn't
hurt him. I have to be more
careful next time.

Hm... claw marks...
Animal.. ah, now I
can't remember what
that dream was.





Welcome back, Ephemeral.

It's been a while since you've come to this realm.



You've fallen apart.

Just like your little race.

It was a bold move, altering the mind of my warrior.

You knew if you killed him, more would just take his place.

Instead you had him fall for the enemy. Now that's clever.



Unfortunately, that little Keidran fell in love as well.

When the time came, you couldn't split them up.

Now, without Flora, the Tiger and Wolf Clans have no alliance.

Already, the wolves have chosen not to join the others, so sure that they can defend themselves.



One by one, the clans will fall.

Until only my race shall rule this earth.



He may be speaking the truth. The outcome lies on the mortals now.

My powers are weakened. I cannot risk attempting to enter the world again for some time.


But perhaps there is something I can do... there is another race...

One that I have not allowed for many, many years.



I have no choice. I must ensure at least some Keidran blood survives.

From this point forth...




Flora, you asleep?

No, just resting.

I think we should probably start getting dressed soon.


It's the middle of the day.



Mmm, five more minutes.

...Flora, do you think what we're doing is wrong?

There's nothing wrong with sleeping in once in a while.



Flora, you know what I mean.

The sex?

No, not just that, Flora. This whole relationship. It's just not... you know, normal.

What if it just doesn't work out?

Trace, I knew what I was getting into when I chose you.




But where will we live?

And what about children?


We'll never be able to experience parenthood.

There's so much we'll miss!



Trace, are you saying you don't want me anymore?

What? No, no! I didn't mean that...



Trace, I know... we'll have to think about it eventually.

But for right now, I'd rather just lie here with you.

Everything else will work itself out.

Meanwhile...

<You sent assassins to kill Flora too? Why!?!>

<There's no need to shout. I may be old, but my hearing is fine.>

<Nephew, you know I have never liked this arrangement with the tigers. We wolves don't need help.>

<So, we have decided to take this opportunity to break off from them.>

<The tigers believe the girl to be lost. They will not miss her.>

<A-are you mad? The humans would destroy us without the tiger's aid!>

<You impudent youth! I will not have you questioning me! Be quiet and know your place.>

<And why do you seem concerned about the girl?>
<You always said you didn't like her anyway.>

<Damn it, he's been sitting there all day!>
<The targets have been in their tent for hours!>

<Patience, brother.>
<I told you, he's a Basitin. Military people. They don't get tired like we do.>

<...yeah... I did say that...>

<Why doesn't he go in his?>

<If we try to kill him here, it might attract the others. We can't risk being outnumbered.>

<But, there's always a weakness.>
<We need to lure him away from the camp. I'm sure a little... persuasion will do the trick.>

<I'm curious to see what his heart's desire is.>

Keith?
Keith...?

huh?

L-Laura?

Keith, it's been so long...
Why don't you come over here?

Laura... how did you... I thought I'd never find you...



Would you get back here!? This isn't a game!

Heheh, come on! Catch me!



Damn it! Stop, you stupid Keidran!



You...

Finally... how... how did you find me?

You promised not to call me that...



<What the- why would his heart desire be a Keidran?>

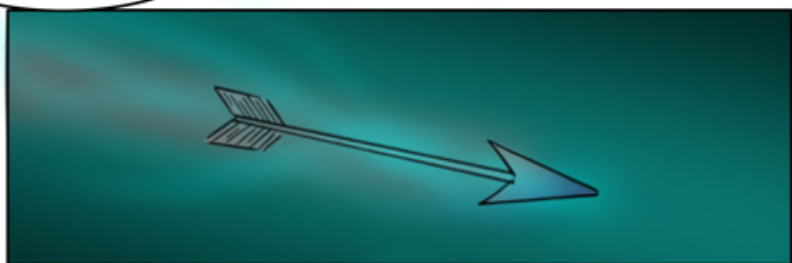


<That's not important. Just make sure you take him out, got it?>

Hey! Hey! Don't you dare start crying!

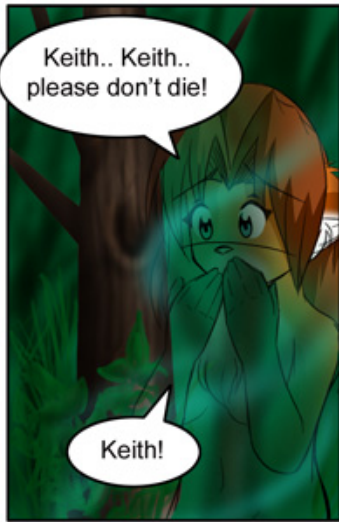


<Oh, don't worry. I'm not taking any chances this time. I'll use the poison.>





No, oh no!
Keith!



Keith.. Keith..
please don't die!

Keith!



Did.. you just
hear something,
Flora?

Yeah, that sounded
like a girl's voice.



<Good job, Natani,
that illusion of yours gave
us away for sure.>

<The illusion only stays until
the target is taken out.>

<If your "Instant Death" poison
worked better, the illusion would
have vanished sooner!>



Hello? Who's out here?

Keith? Where
are you?

Flora, stay in the tent.

I have a bad
feeling about this.



<Great, the crippled
Templar is on guard.>



<Heh, you know what?
I'm glad. I've always wanted
to see his power.>



<Nata- hey!>

<Y-you idiot! We have
to fight together!>



Keith...? Hey, whoever you are, show yourself.
 ...Maybe my imagination's just getting the better of me.
 Yeah, yeah... no one's out here.



SHING!



Ack! Hey!

THOCK!
 TINK!

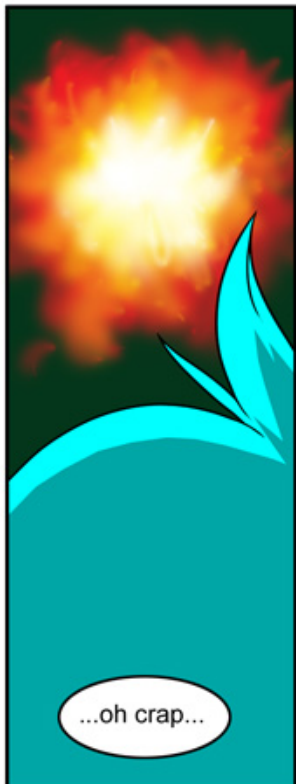


SHUNK!



Aaah! Who the- gaah!
 Throwing knives?

Igniras!



...oh crap...



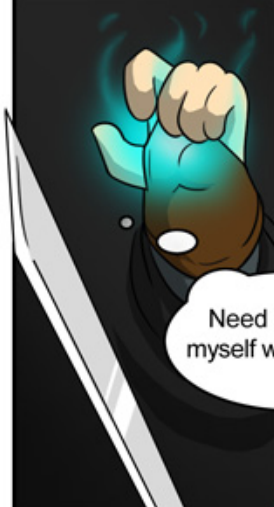
Uh... shield!
 Come on...!
 Shield!



Erg!

<So it's true!>
 <Even without a reserve of mana, he can still gather it almost instantly...>

<That's how the Templar do it, they can draw the mana straight out of the ground.>



<Clever, Templar,
very clever.>

<You have better control
of your power than I thought!>

Ugh...

Need to... heal
myself while I can...

<Not so fast, Human!>

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No! It...
didn't work?!

<Let's see how
well you fight without
your magic!>

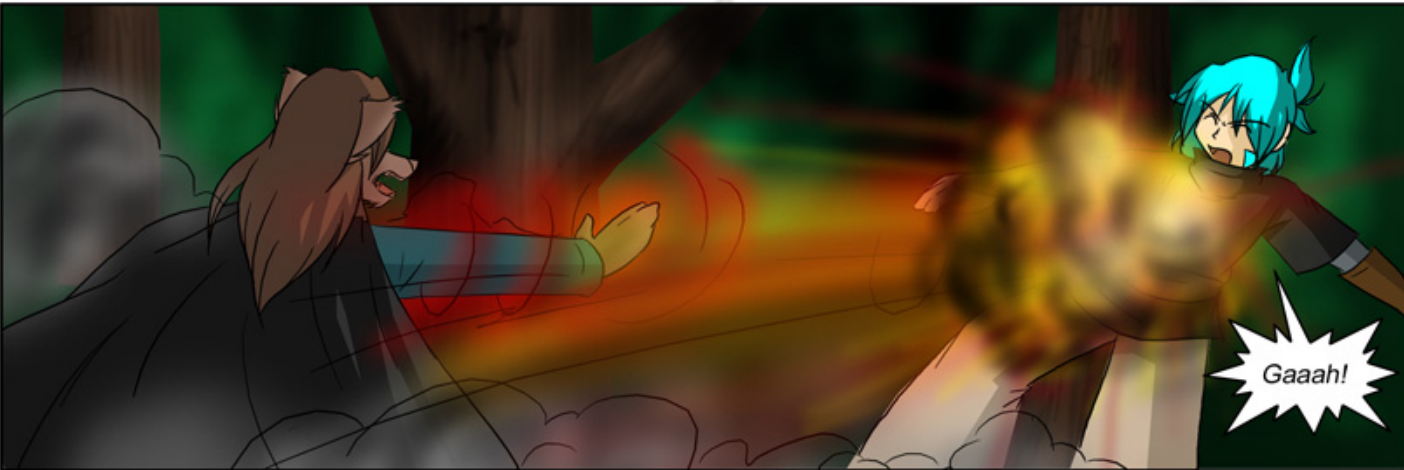
Ah!

Grrr!

<Pretty clumsy
without your right hand,
aren't you?>







Throughout my travels, I've heard a lot of things said about the Basitin.

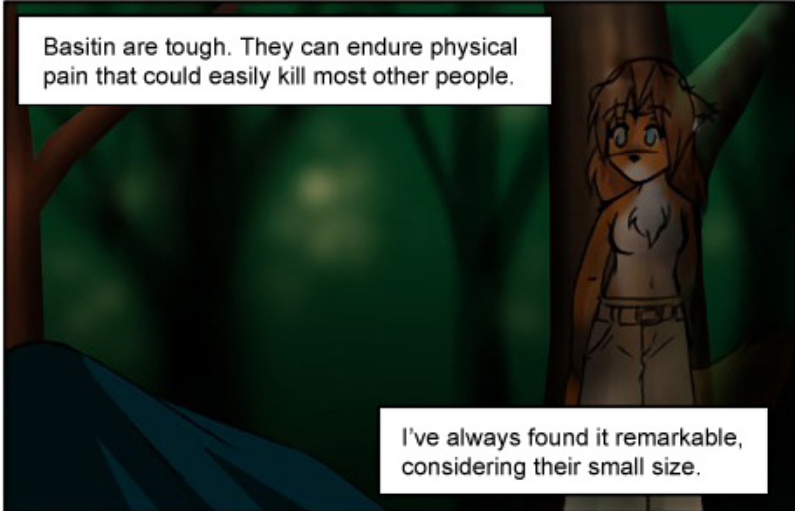
Most of them weren't too flattering.



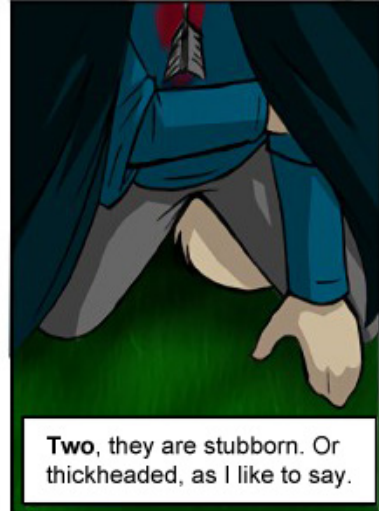
But after the battle in the forest, three things I knew were certain.

One...

Basitin are tough. They can endure physical pain that could easily kill most other people.



I've always found it remarkable, considering their small size.



Two, they are stubborn. Or thickheaded, as I like to say.



And probably most important of all, **three**: either by a gift from the gods or simply from thousands of years of living on an island full of deadly toxins, Basitin are, in fact, immune to most poisons.

Oh, they also seem to have a bit of a temper when aggravated.





Ooof!

Jeez, when they mentioned the girl, I never imagined her like this!



Hey, hold on a minute!

Ah!



Graaahh!



Wait, listen... listen to me!

We don't have to fight!

Come with us willingly!

We were hired to kill you, yes.

But... but! We also support the merging of our clans.

We don't believe the Keidran can stand up to the humans without it!

If you go through with the marriage as planned, there's nothing our leader can do to stop it.

I will not marry Sythe! I'm not going anywhere with you!

You selfish girl! Think of your people!



Oh, for goodness sake, we don't have time for this, Zen!



We'll deal with her later.



For now... *sleep!*

Nya-!



N-no, I... can't...
I won't...



Shouldn't she have fallen asleep by now?

She's resisting the spell!
She has a stronger will than I thought. You'll have to take care of her the old fashioned way.
I've got to finish off Trace.

Kill her?
But Natani...



Save it, Zen.
I know how you feel about the alliance of the Clans, but let's face it...

It's not our job to question things. It's our job to kill things.



And you know we really need this job.

So just pick up your sword and finish her so we can get out of here.



Sigh... alright.

I'm sorry about this, girl. I really am.

N-nyeh...



But as much as I hate it, Natani is right.

We Keidran are strong. We will survive against the humans.

I will be sure to pray for your spirit's release from this world.



Now hurry up and take care of her while I finish this one.



I've waited a long time for this, Trace.
This is for all of my people- my family that you murdered in cold blood.

...



I'm not going to kill you. I'm just going to make it look like I've killed you.



N-nya?



Listen, I know that spell is making you weak.

Just be sure to lie still.
I became an assassin to fight humans, but I cannot kill someone like this.



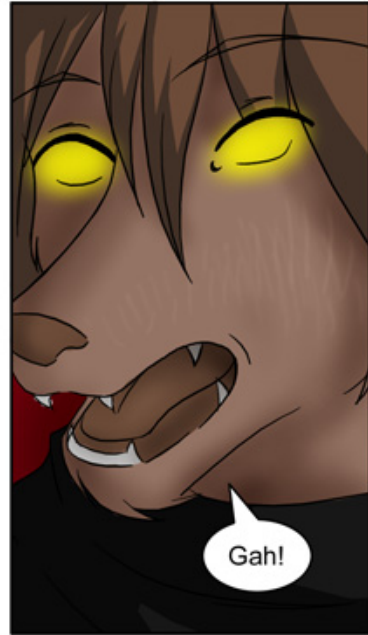
This has to work. Flora must survive.

W-what about Trace...

It's too late for him. Natani is about to finish him off. He's just a human anyway.



Prepare to die!



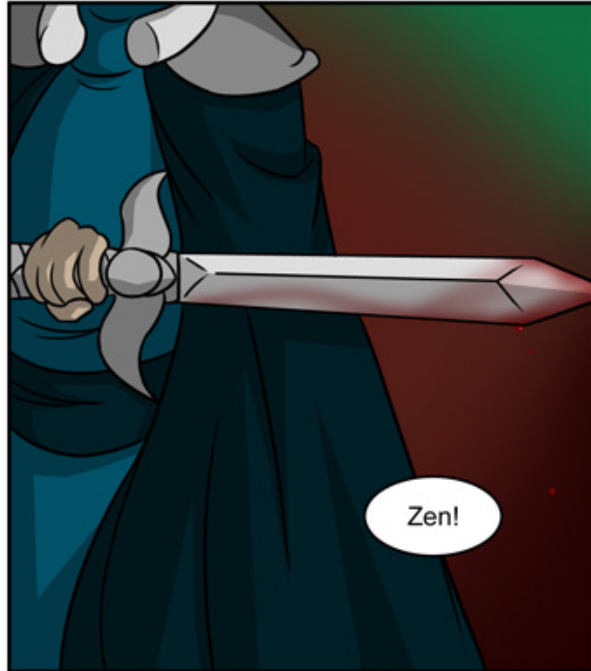
Gah!



G-graah!



What... Zen?



Zen!



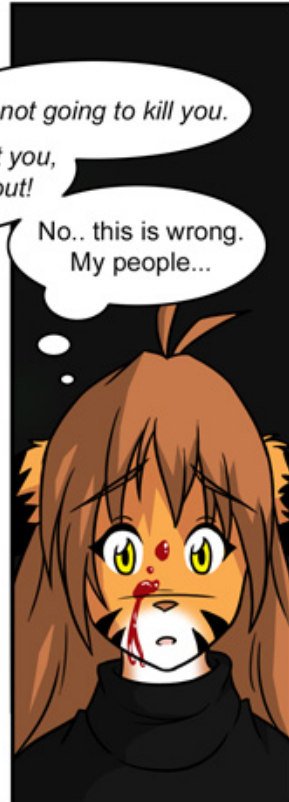
Grah.. nlah!

*You selfish child!
Think of your people!*

*I believe that without you,
our race may die out!*

I'm not going to kill you.

*No.. this is wrong.
My people...*



Journal entry, May 9th, 477

Mana is the basis of all magic in this world.

Ugh...

Unlike Keidran, who must use mana stored in stones...

Grraah!

Templar have the unique ability to draw mana directly from the earth. However, once all the mana from one location is drained without time to replenish, it is the earth's life-energy that begins to be drawn out.

This is also known as black mana...

It is a very power energy... but most refuse to use it.

For there is always a consequence.

<Teleport!>

Augh...!

What the...?

You...

<How dare you harm my older brother. You'll pay for that, Basitin.>

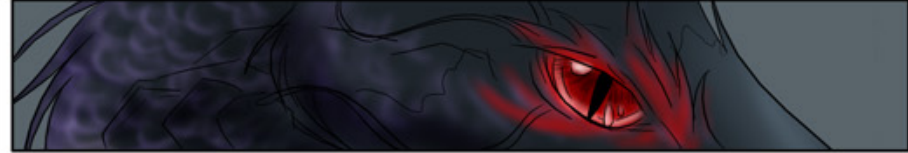
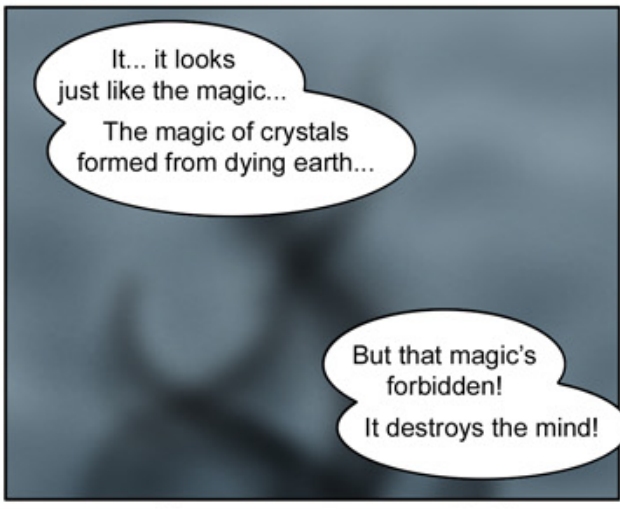
Need more.. more mana...

<I took out the great Trace Legacy. I don't think you'll be much of a...>

<...What is this? Why... is the grass dying?..>

From what I've seen, taking life-energy from the earth often causes nervousness, violence, delusions, loss of memory, insanity and sometimes death. It worsens the more it's used. I must be careful how much I use, I can already feel some of these effects taking hold on me....

I'm taking Saria to our house near the Border this afternoon. She always loves it down there.



Man, everyday is the same thing...

I get up, I work, and I go to bed.

It's so boring... I feel like the character in a storybook that only shows up in one scene, doesn't have a name, and is only used as a literary device in order to momentarily break-away from the action.

In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if there's a group of people somewhere out there right now fighting a... dragon or something.

While I'm stuck here *working* in order to show another angle of the story.

SHRCK!

This sucks...

Why can't something exciting happen to me for once in my life!

BZZZAT!

Gah!

Woah, what the heck was that...

Storm clouds?

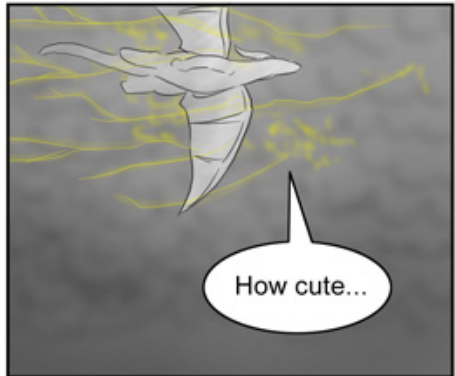
But what's that moving in them?



Ah, there you are,
my dear Trace...
Into trouble as
always, I see.



A man-made
dragon...



How cute...



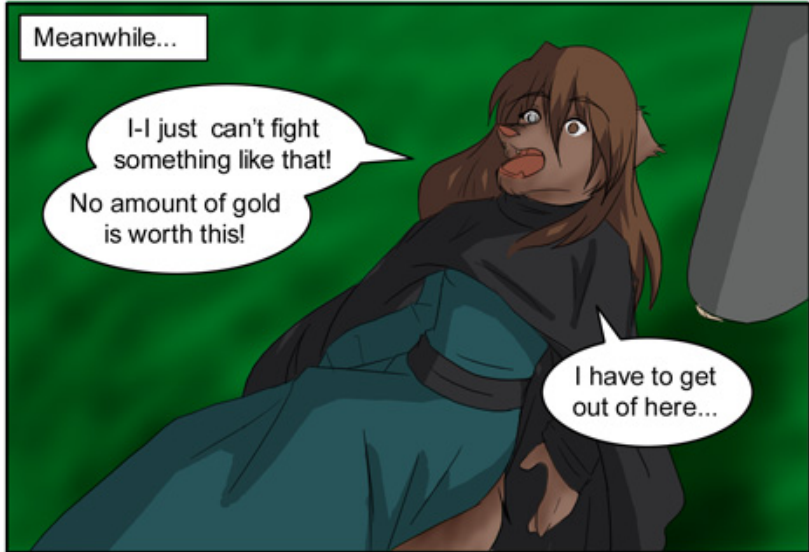
Trace, come on!
Snap out of it!
Before that thing
kills us all!
Trace!
Don't let it
control you...



Fight it, Trace!
Can't you hear
me? It's me, Flora...



Uuh... F-Flora...
I'm here, Trace.
I'm right here
with you, always.



Meanwhile...

I-I just can't fight
something like that!
No amount of gold
is worth this!
I have to get
out of here...



Gah...!
Going somewhere?



Trace! Hey, get up!
You can't pass out now!
This is bad...!



I've got to do
somethi... huh?



Oh no, not
again...



<Going to finish
me, eh Basitin?>
<Then do it!>

There's no way
I can win against that
demon, but...
I've still got two mana
crystals left. If I can just
get away from here...

They're going to
kill each other.



Keith, stop it!

This is my fight,
Flora, stay out of it.
And tell Trace to
back off to, I don't need
his help to fight.



The dragon! I don't
think Trace is in control
of it anymore!



Actually no, they didn't have to!





Keith, we have to get out of here!

I'm sure that spell of his attracted the dragon's eye. Can you carry Trace?

Of course. What about-?

<Forget about him, just go!>



Uh...

<That slice hit deep.>

<I'm not going to make it out of here.>



<I guess this is my fate...>
<I can't seem to find my last crystal, could have sworn I had another...>

<Not that it'd matter, I can't concentrate long enough to cast a spell...>
<At least my last hours ended in battle...>



<Here it comes...>
<I guess this is the end....>



<Come on! Get up! Stop being so melodramatic!>

<Hey, I'm trying to give my dying monologue!>

<Oh please, ya big baby. That other guy had a sword go through him, get up!>

<Hey- what are you doing?>

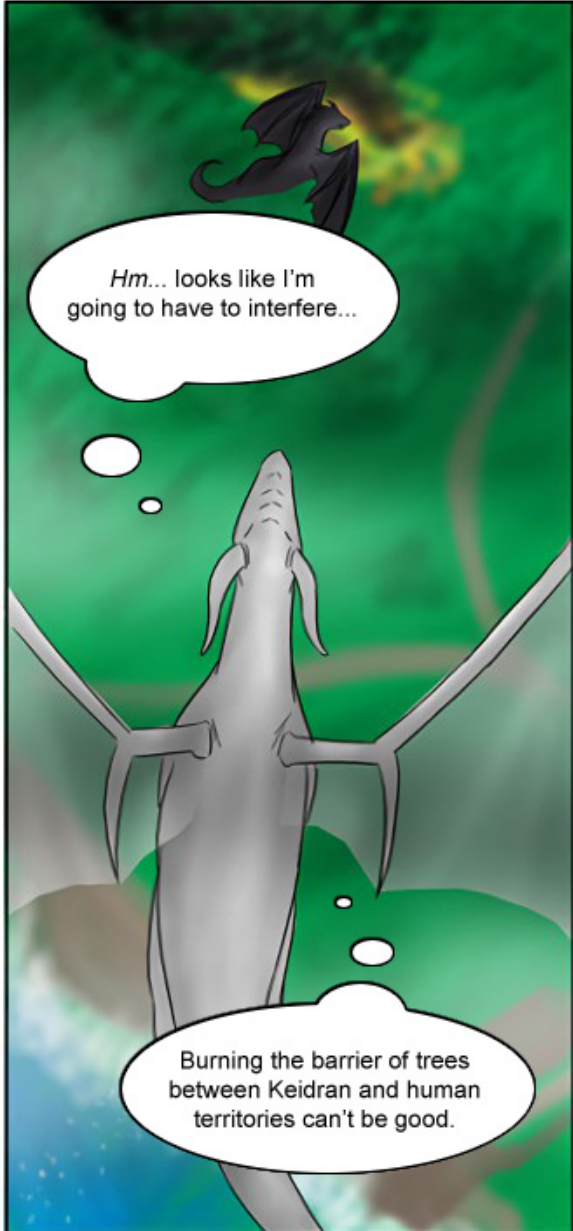


Huff... If it wasn't for the fact that I still need you for my mission...

Well...

I'd probably still save your ass.

But then I wouldn't have an excuse for it.



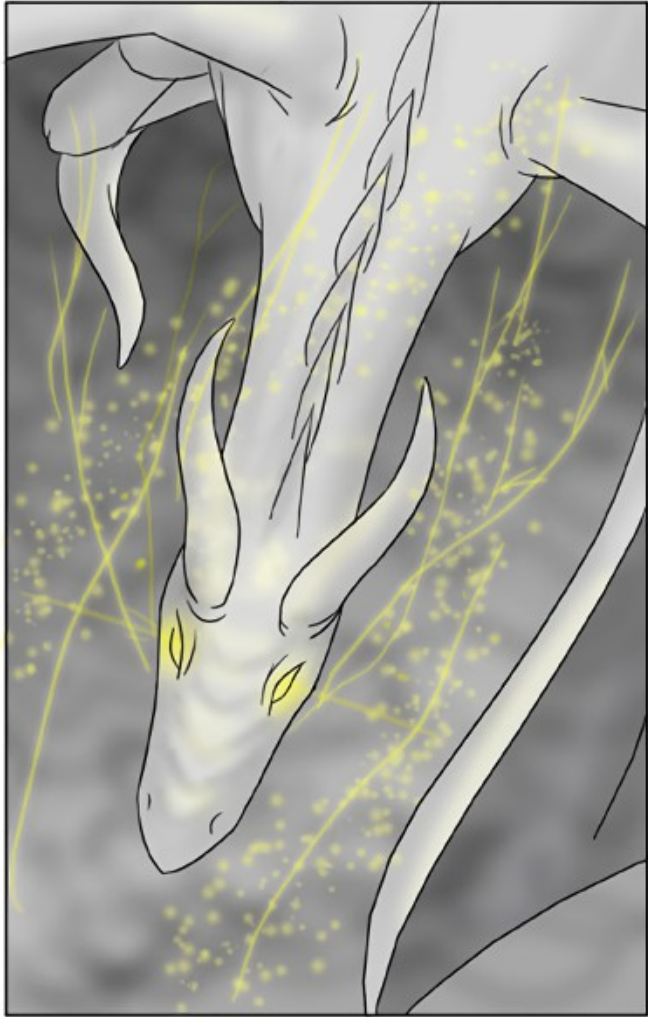
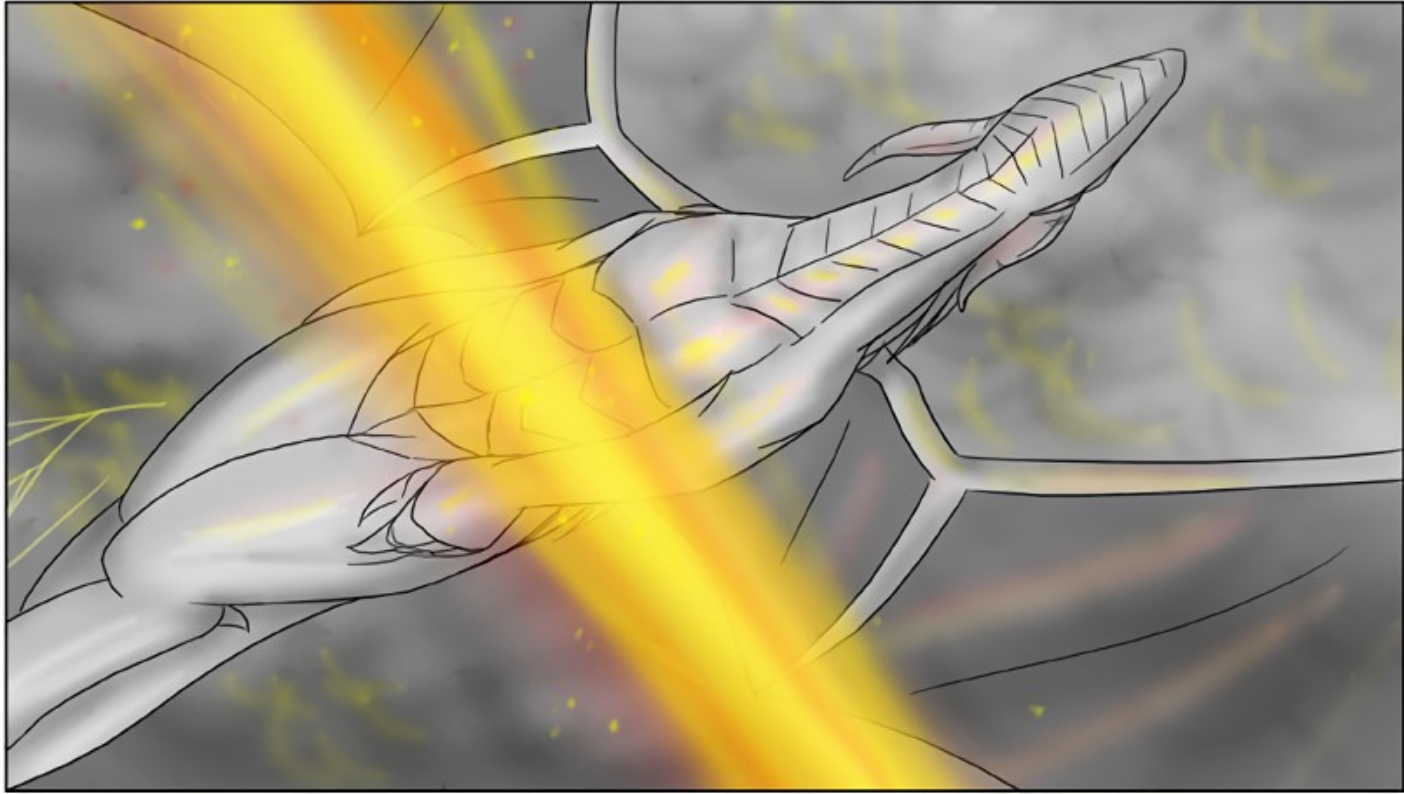
Hm... looks like I'm going to have to interfere...

Burning the barrier of trees between Keidran and human territories can't be good.



Oops, I think he noticed me.







Come on,
Let's go!

The forest...
my home, it's
burning!

There's nothing
we can do. I see the river
over here, come on!

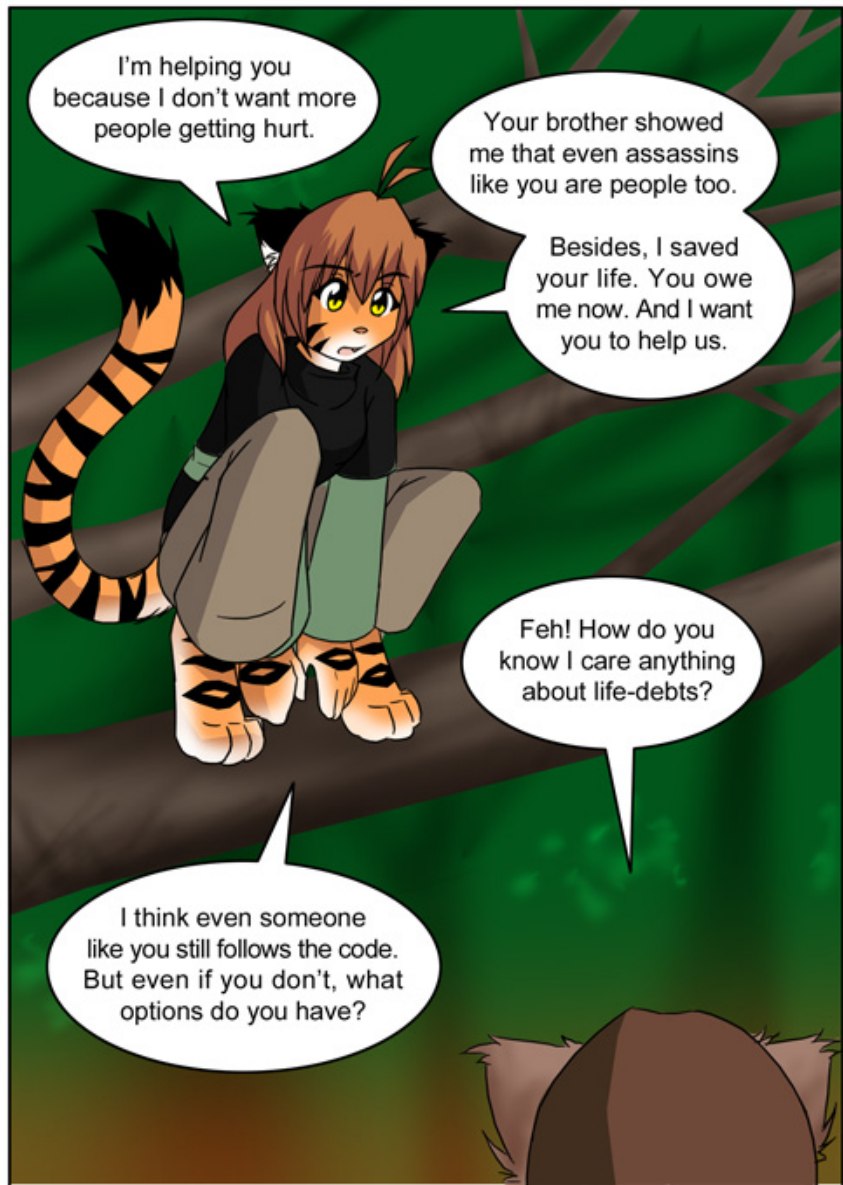


Grrr... I don't need
your help! Why are you
helping me anyway?

I was just trying
to kill you!



Huh? Where
did she go?



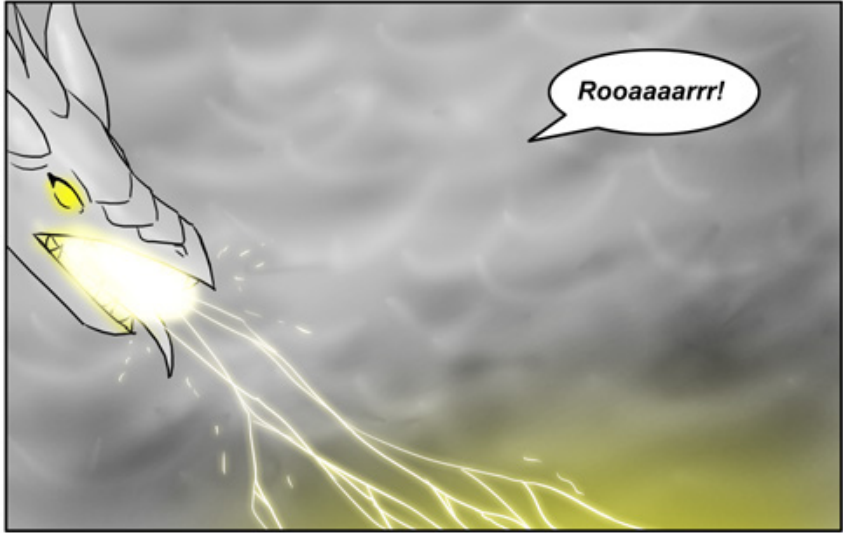
I'm helping you
because I don't want more
people getting hurt.

Your brother showed
me that even assassins
like you are people too.

Besides, I saved
your life. You owe
me now. And I want
you to help us.

Feh! How do you
know I care anything
about life-debts?

I think even someone
like you still follows the code.
But even if you don't, what
options do you have?



Rooooaarrr!



Ahhhh!

Trace, what's wrong? Trace!



Heheh...



Keith, we're here!

Flora! You- why is he with you?!

<What'd he say?>

<Nevermind that now.> what's wrong with Trace?



Ugh...

I don't know, I can't get through to him. maybe you should try.

He seems to be in pain.



Trace, what's wrong?

Flora... where are you...



I... I can't see...



Finally, -huff- a break.

Now if only I could find that darn crystal, I could get out of this forest...

This wound is still bleeding... I need to hurry before those three notice I'm still here...



Ah, here it is!

I knew I had one left...



Now I can... transport myself...

I do feel sorry for her. Such an odd group of people.



She'll most likely be killed out here.
Not that I wasn't about to kill her anyway.

But considering they fought off both me and Zen, it's a shame they have to die now...



My magic might help, but then I'd be stuck here too!



No, no! I can't be feeling sorry for them now!

No, I'll just go home...
They probably won't die in the fire anyway. They could just get eaten.



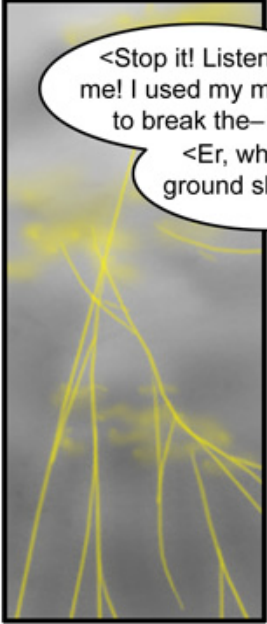
Yeah, that really made me feel less guilty.
I must be insane... but she did save my life. The code says I must do the same...
-sigh- fine...

I will break the human's mental link to the demon!



Ah! What's happening to him, Keith?

It's that Keidran!
I knew you shouldn't have helped him!





Trace, you're awake!



Yeah, I guess. My head hurts, though.

And I think I'm seeing things... is that Keith... on top of that guy?

Oh, so it is. Wow, I had no idea Keith was... ya know, "that way."



Hey, shut up! I'm not... erm... "that way!"



Hm, and I always thought he had a crush on me... But I guess that can't be possible...

What?! No, it can! I do!



Er... wait... no! I don't...

HA!
HA!

Geh... I'm not gay!



<I can't understand a word they're saying, and something tells me I don't want to know...>

Shouldn't we still be worried about the dragons overhead?



What a wonderful day!

I've finally got that whole tower explosion incident under control and back on schedule.

And I hear they're serving beansprout soup in the kitchen today!



Where is he!?

Hey, get over here!



Where is he?

Where is who...?

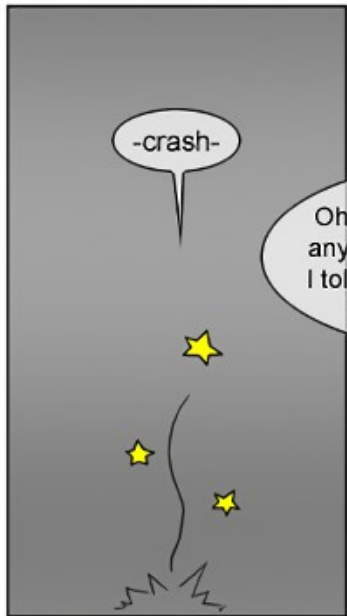
You know who I'm talking about, you stupid, dress-wearing scrivener! Your master!

That fool you call the Grand Templar!

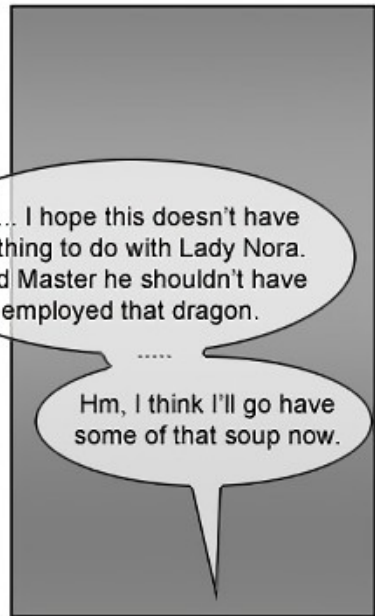


I... I'm not sure M-mr. Baron, sir.

I think he might still be in his chambers.



-crash-



Oh... I hope this doesn't have anything to do with Lady Nora. I told Master he shouldn't have employed that dragon.

Hm, I think I'll go have some of that soup now.



Trace, come on!

You have to get rid of the dragon you summoned!



Hey, get off me...

Wha- where the hell did that come from?



I told you, you summoned it!

Did I?



Well... I guess if I summoned it, I can unsummon it.

Come on. Let's go, get up.

Trace, you sound different...

Merry Christmas!





Trace, what are you-

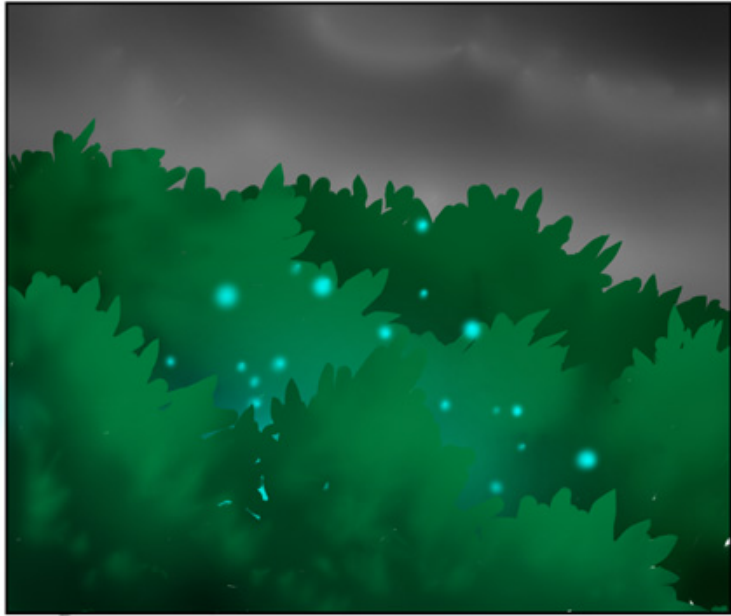
I need to concentrate!

I don't really know what I'm doing...
But if I cast that thing, I think I can take the energy back!



What's this? I sense more magic...

Trace's magic...



Something's happening!
The false dragon's energy is being drained... but where is it going? Surely...



Surely Trace wouldn't be foolish enough to draw all that dark magic into himself!





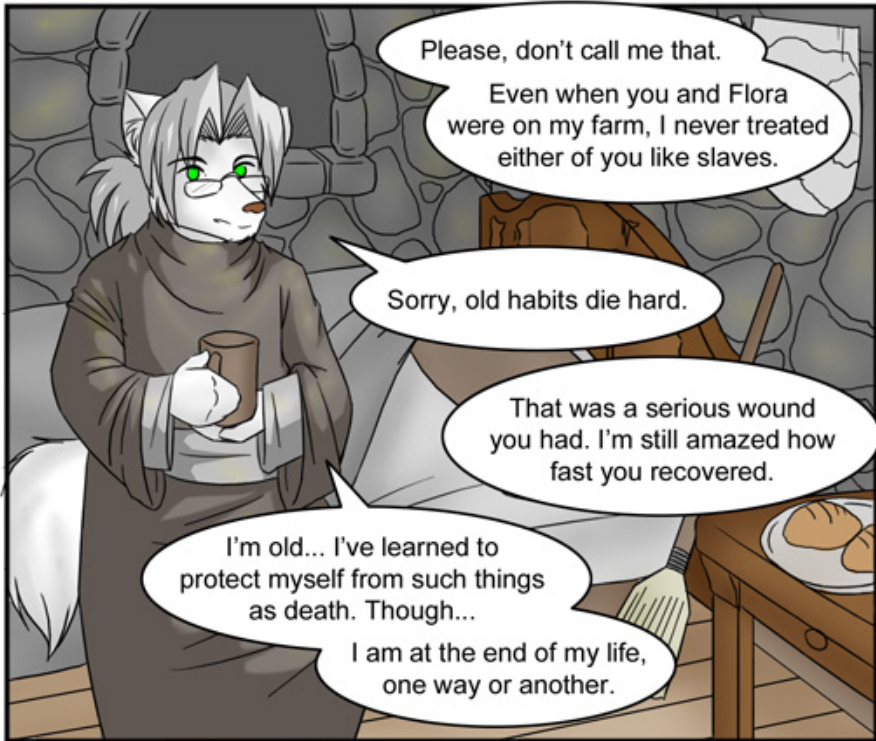
It's good to see you again, Euchre.

....

I think it's... landing...

Stay behind me!

As it is to see you, old master.



Please, don't call me that. Even when you and Flora were on my farm, I never treated either of you like slaves.

Sorry, old habits die hard.

That was a serious wound you had. I'm still amazed how fast you recovered.

I'm old... I've learned to protect myself from such things as death. Though... I am at the end of my life, one way or another.



Yes... Aren't we all.

All of Keidran kind will be at its end if the final Tower is allowed to be completed.



Clever, you Templar are. Using our own instincts against us... a great tragedy is approaching.



Yes, I'm afraid it is.





Bleh! You taste like a Keidran.
Smell like one too!

What have you been doing?

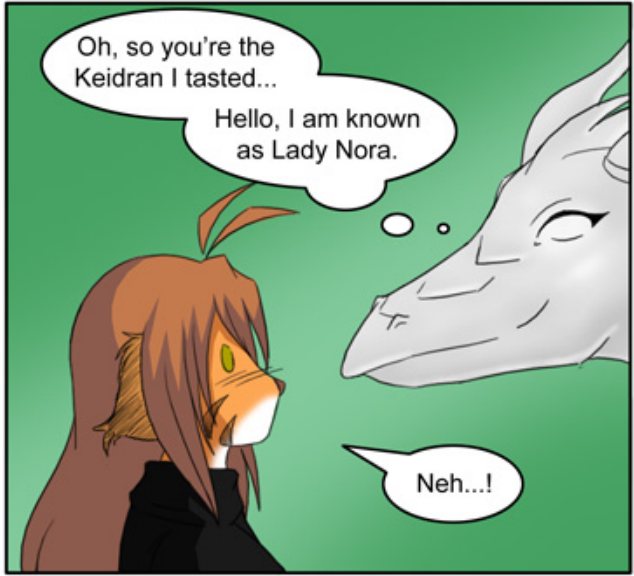


Trace...?
Are you okay?
You look a bit pale.
Trace?



Gah!

Ack! Trace!
Ah... I've gotcha.
Are you okay?



Oh, so you're the Keidran I tasted...
Hello, I am known as Lady Nora.

Neh...!



Nyaaa....



Ugh... where am I?

Gah... my mind's like sludge...

I remember that dragon...

Nora? Wait... how do I know that name?

Eh... can't think... ah, well...



Neh...?



What's this.. oh, Flora. Thank goodness.

I wonder where Keith is?

Well, Flora's here. That's all that matters.



Trace!

Wha... who said that?

Good, you're awake! I went hunting, I'll be right there, Little One.

I decided to transport you to Haven Fields, just outside the forest. Town is just beyond that hill.

Meanwhile...

I've found you at last,
Head Councilman.

So you have.

Herph, you Templar are all the same.
You think your magic puts you above the law.
Don't think we aren't aware of you!

Dragons in the west, fires along
the border, and war at our gates!

Have you forgotten that
you still serve under the King?

The Templar cannot
simply take action on its
own accord as it has!

The King will certainly
see to it that you-
....what is this thing
doing in here?

N-neh... food?

Does it *look* like I want
food right now?

nya... mehbeh...?

Please, don't mind her.

She hasn't been thinking
clearly since being exposed
to the Tower's magic.

Hmph, yes, the Towers.
Anyway, the King wishes
to see you immediately.

.....