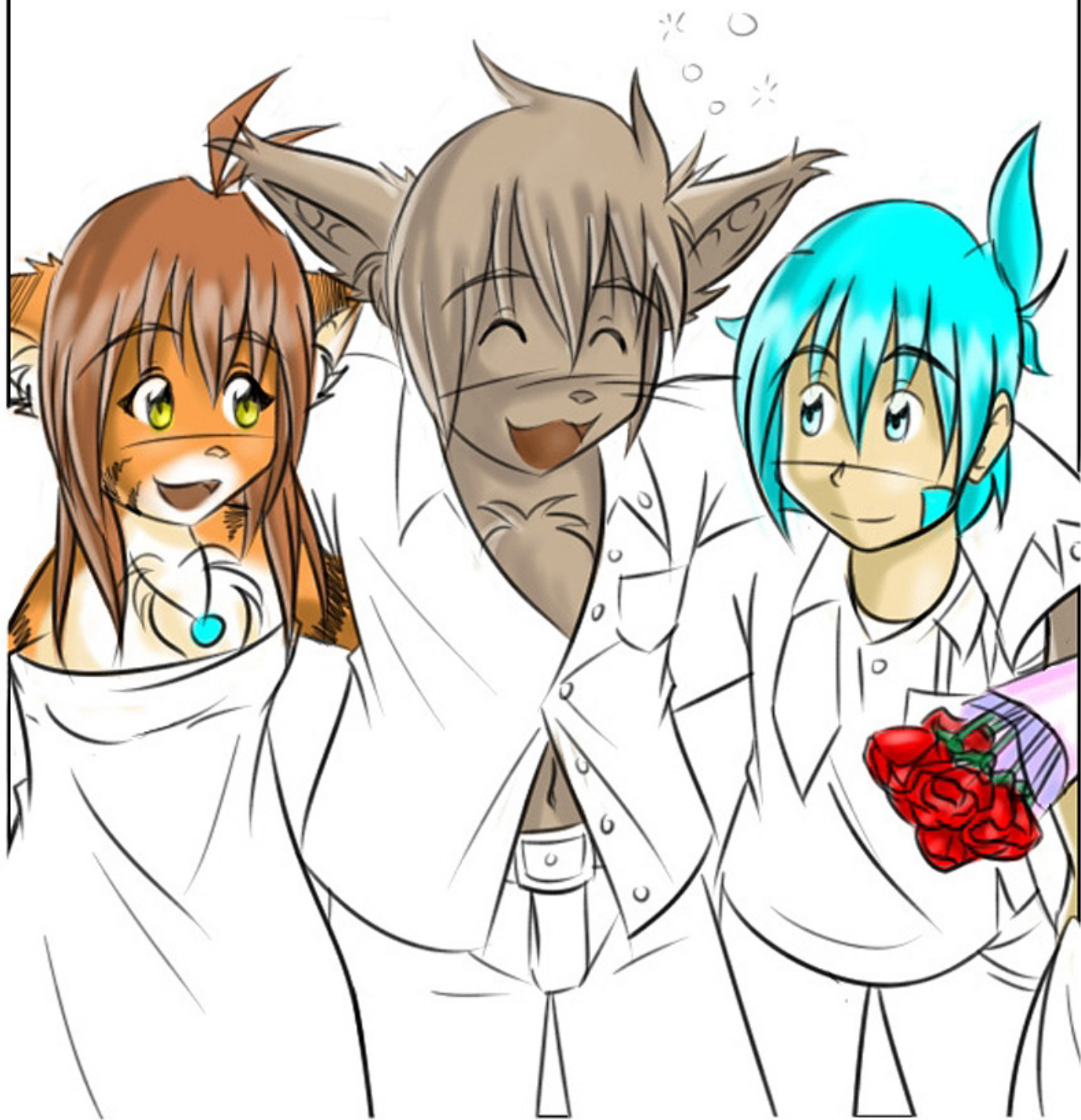


Chapter 8

A Peaceful Retreat





Trace, I'm here.
Take it easy
this time.

W-where are the others?

I considered eating them - I was rather
hungry, to be honest. But I assumed you want
them alive. They're just over here.

I put them in the same magical sleep
as she's in right now, in order to transport
you all here one at a time.

Set her down - I'd like
to speak with you about
your recent travels.



Here, Flora. Rest.



You're a different person
then you used to be, Trace.
I've never seen you so gentle with
a Keidran... she is your mate?



Mate!? Eh, no. Of course not!
What would give
you that idea...

Well, for one thing, you're
practically covered in her scent.



And well...
I... may have taken a quick
peek into your mind...

What?!
You saw...?

Not on purpose!
Though, it was quite
interesting...



Relax, Trace.


It matters little to me who you choose to be with.

I find it humorous how devoted that thing is to you, however.

One look into her mind and it's obvious her attraction to you.

No, what concerns me is the relationship itself. What do you plan to do after this little adventure is over?

Having a Keidran for a wife wouldn't look good, you know?




Wife? Oh, no...

Marriage is... um.. I wasn't planning on that.

Is that so?

You could always go back to the Templar... you could keep her as a slave, if you wanted.

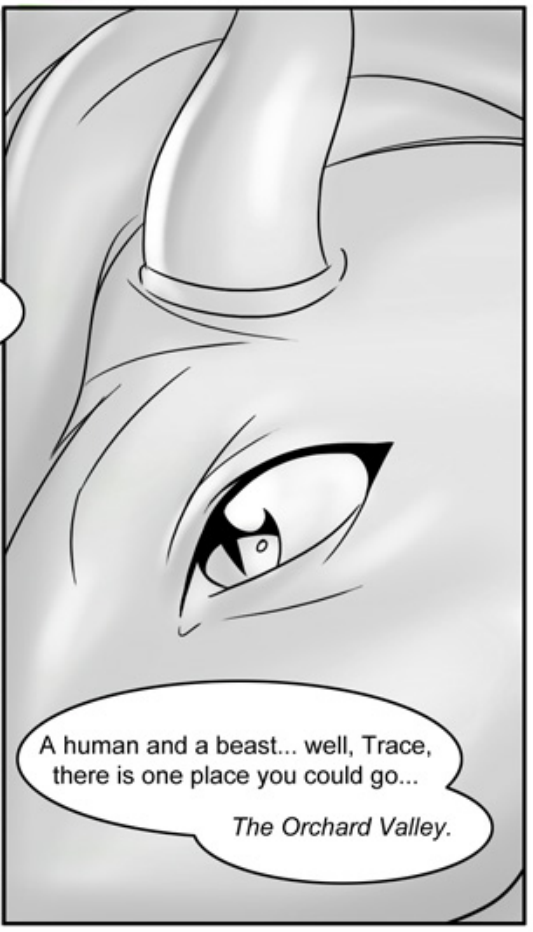


N-no... I couldn't do that to Flora. She told me about her childhood and growing up.

She wouldn't stand for it, I'm sure.

I'm don't know what we're going to do. I really care about Flora, but...

The more I think about it... the more I realize there's really no place for us.

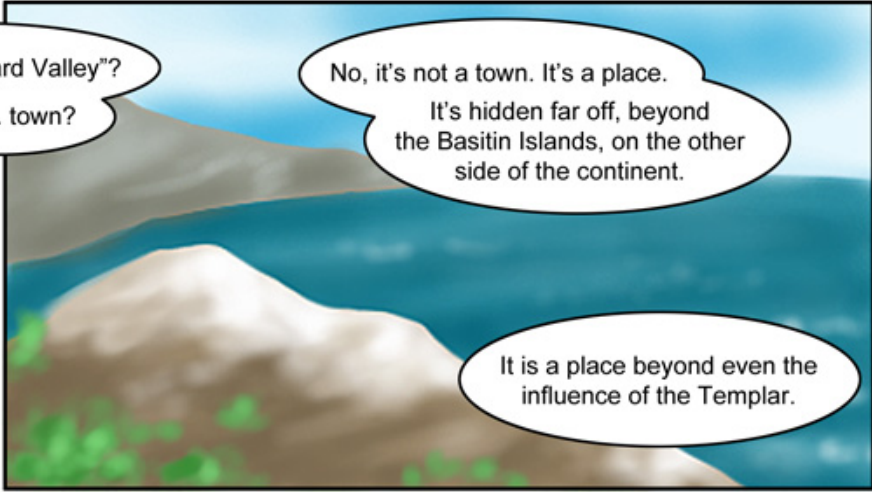


A human and a beast... well, Trace, there is one place you could go...

The Orchard Valley.

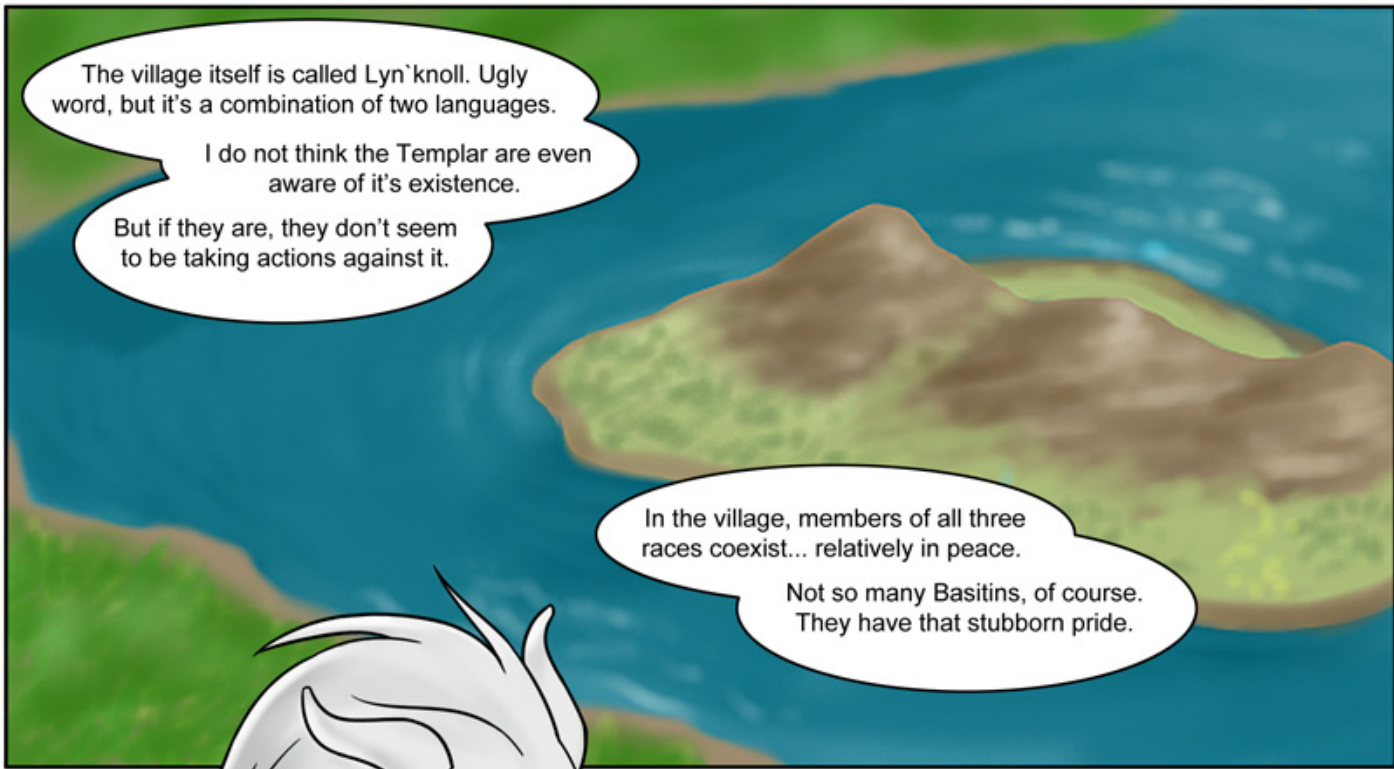


What is the "Orchard Valley"?
Some... town?



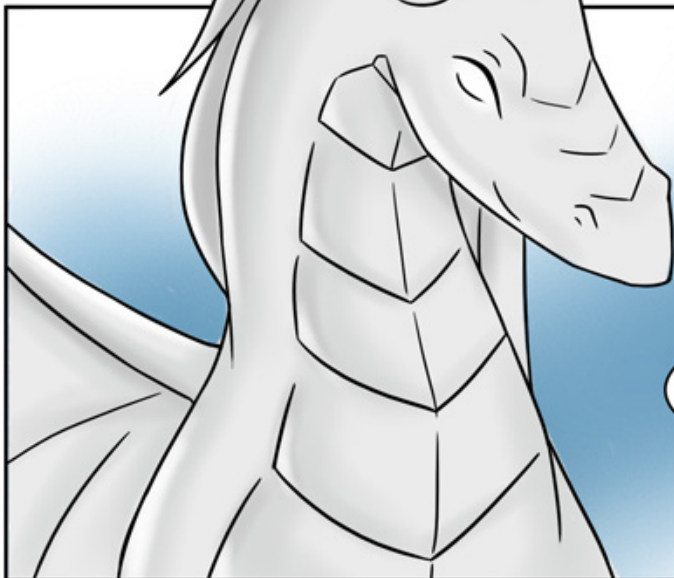
No, it's not a town. It's a place.
It's hidden far off, beyond the Basitin Islands, on the other side of the continent.

It is a place beyond even the influence of the Templar.



The village itself is called Lyn'knoll. Ugly word, but it's a combination of two languages.
I do not think the Templar are even aware of it's existence.
But if they are, they don't seem to be taking actions against it.

In the village, members of all three races coexist... relatively in peace.
Not so many Basitins, of course. They have that stubborn pride.



I only know of the village because I had happened across it on one of my flights.
They've paid me quite well to keep their secret to myself, and make sure no one but the right people find it.
But if you are looking for a place to get away from it all, that would be where to go.
Simply travel beyond the shores of the Basitin Islands, once you're done there, and you'll reach the Orchard Valley.

Trace, I wish I could stay and help you, but I'm needed elsewhere.

Remember what I've told you. There is still much you need to know.

For now, I take my leave. I've released your... bestial companions from their sleep.





Heh, it's been a while since I've done that...



Yeah, I was almost beginning to miss the feeling of being crushed.

Come on, get up, we've got to find Keith and get going.
I want to get into town and find a boat before dark.

Sounds good! I'd rather not stay overnight in a human city again.



AAAAHHH!

What the heck was that?
Sounded like it was...

Keith?



Meanwhile, nearby...

Hey, get off me!
Jeez, wake up! Don't rub against me like that!

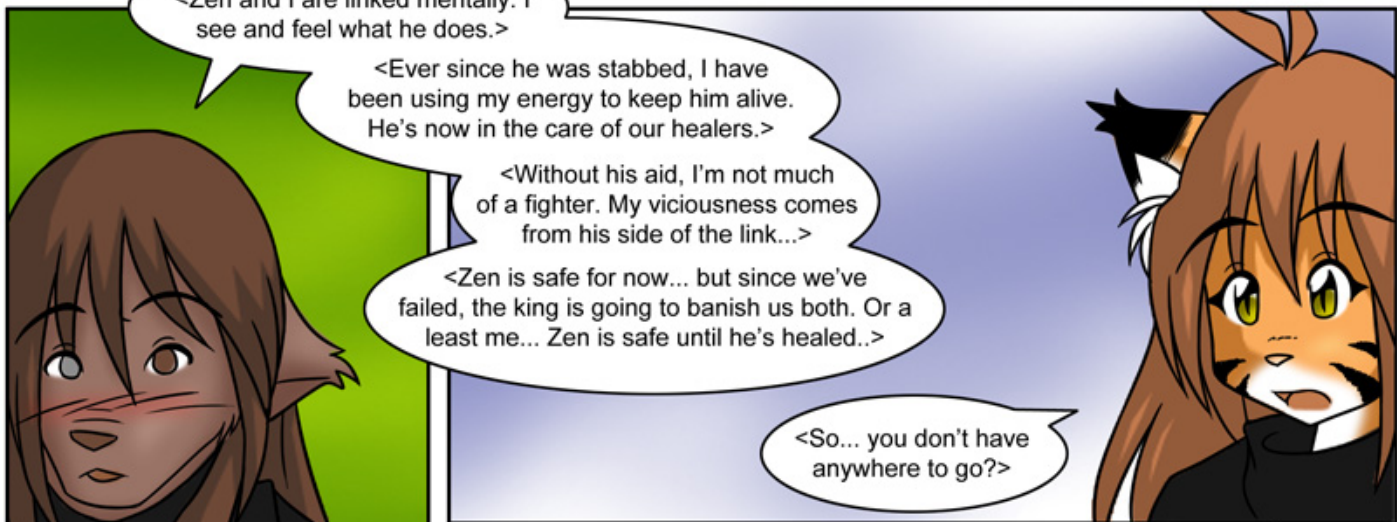
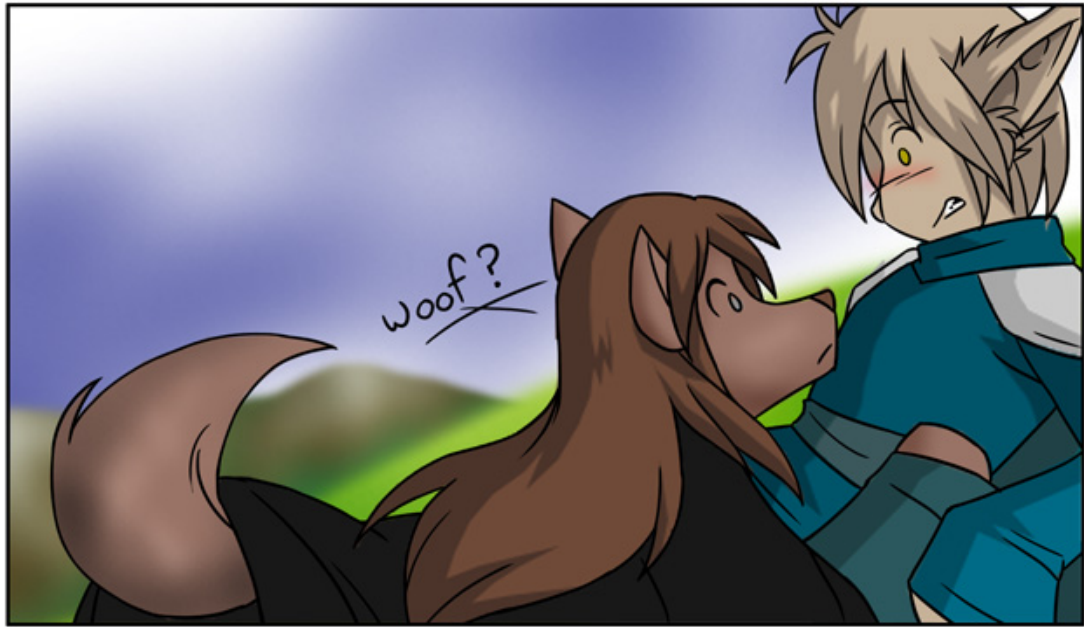
NUZZLE
NUZZLE

Z Z Z



Hm... I just realized I forgot to check if those other two were a couple before I set them down...

...oh well... I'm sure they'll sort it out.





<No... no, I'm going back. I'll face my banishment.>



<But.. we can.. um...>

<Do you have a death wish?>

<W-wah?>



<Listen, I just told you I was sent to kill you guys. I'm a killer, obviously. And so is Trace, now that I think about it. Sure, you're protected from me, because you saved my life, the Code, bah..>

<But there's nothing stopping me from killing that human or that.. other guy in their sleep.>

<What makes you think you can just trust me all of the sudden?>



<I.. I dunno.>
<I've just.. always believed that everyone has some good in them.>

<You're a fool if you think that.>



I can't understand a word they're saying.

Oh, Flora's trying to get us killed in our sleep.

What?!



<Good bye, Flora.>

<Tell Trace to watch his back from now on.>



<Good luck, Natani.>

Feh, more like good riddance.

<Now why did you do that, Natani? You were supposed to go with them. They were about to trust you.>

<Oh shut it, Zen. I don't care what the King's offered, I'm not wasting my time on some crazy adventure.>



<Aw crap, what are humans doing way out here? They must be scouting out the fires.>

<I'm injured and have no weapons. There's sure to be more humans in the forest.. well, I guess I'll go around.>



Hey, there's a Keidran! I bet it has something to do with this! Skin it alive!



<I've changed my mind!>

<I'll waste my time on your crazy adventure!>



Hey, these Keidran belong to me.

Oh, sorry, we didn't realize.

You should really have them collared, and stay with them at all time.

We're close to the border, you know?



Hey, wait a minute!
I've seen this guy before!
He's the one on the wanted posters set up two days ago!
That Templar who went crazy!

And that's the Keidran on the other ones!



Buh?

♦ WANTED ♦

500,000 Gold
Runaway Templar Trace Legacy. Blue hair, blue eyes. No memory - harmless



Hey!
Flat-chested!?

♦ WANTED ♦

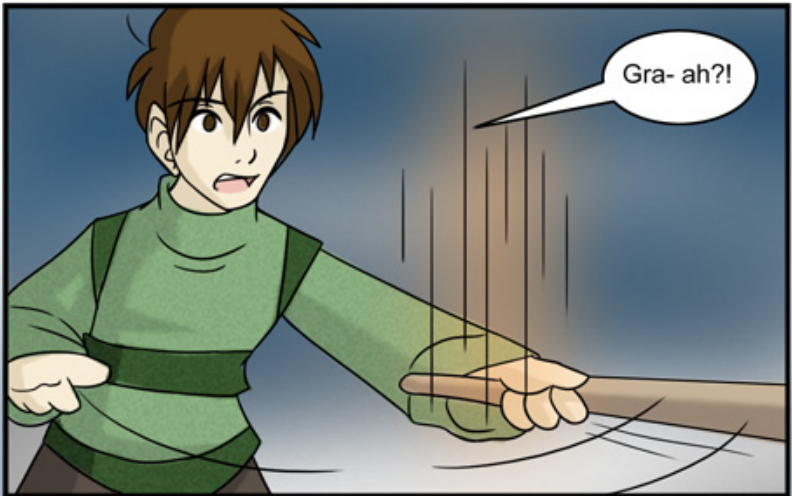
25,000 Gold
Runaway slave known as Flora. Tiger-patterned. Brown hair, flat-chested.



Oh, for goodness sake, not another fight already!

Maybe we should try getting away?

Might be a good idea this time.





We've finally made it.
...for real, this time.

I don't like the looks
of that tower, though.

Let's spend as little
time as possible, Trace.

Bad things always seem
to happen to us when we're
in these human cities.

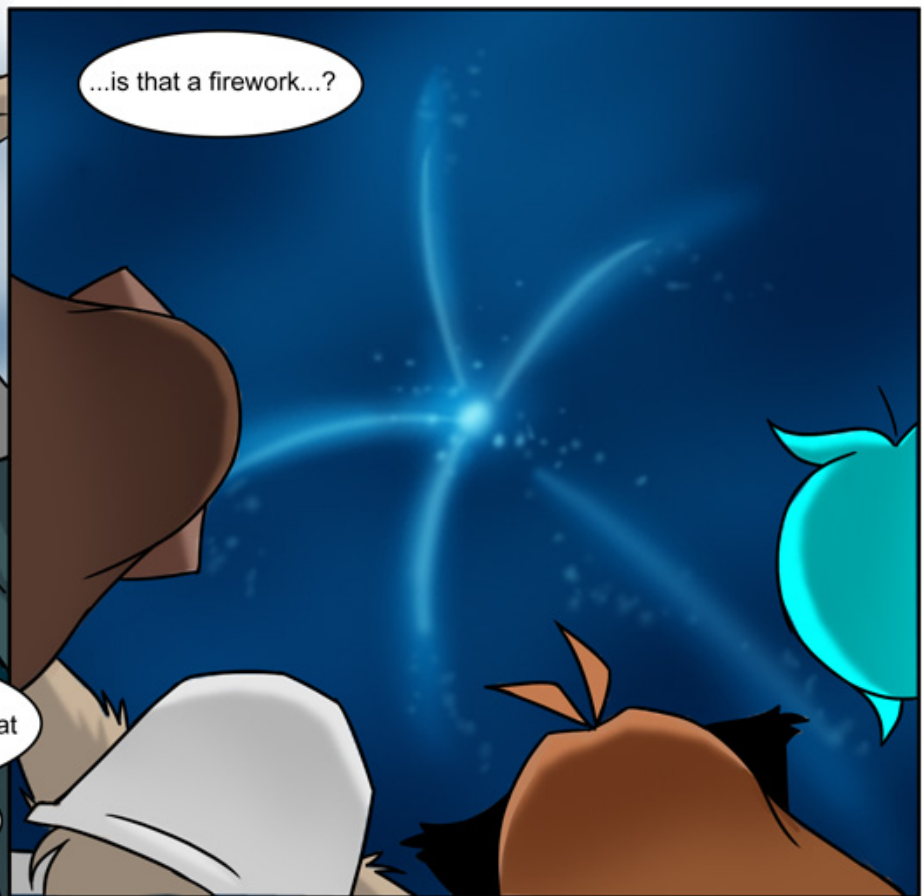
That's the least of our
problems! How do you guys
expect to get to a ship?



You're both wanted
by the humans.

And a traveling group of 'animals'
and a guy with blue hair isn't exactly what
I would call "inconspicuous."

Unless there's some huge distraction,
I don't see how we're getting in.



...is that a firework...?



Greetings, citizens!

Today marks the 171st annual Festival of the Beasts.

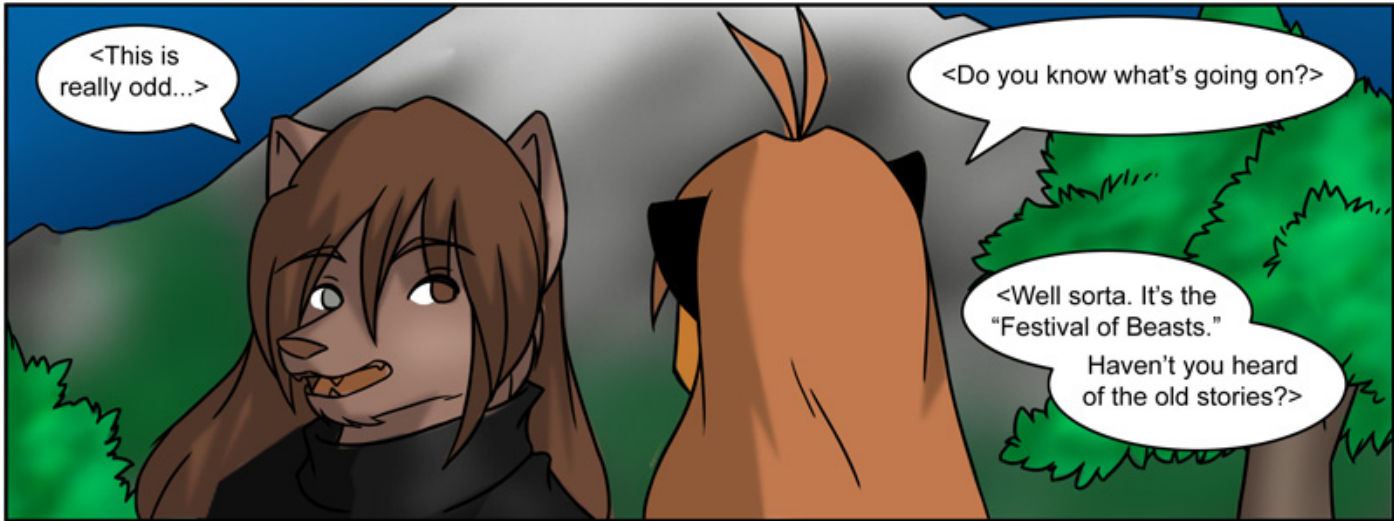
As you can tell, I am not Guild Master Tarron. He has suddenly fallen... ill, and wont be joining us. I will be taking his place. My name is Edmund Sirius Templar VIII.



It has been over three hundred years since our ancestors first met and feasted with the Keidran, right here in this very village. And though the rest of the nation would rather forget this event, we embrace it.



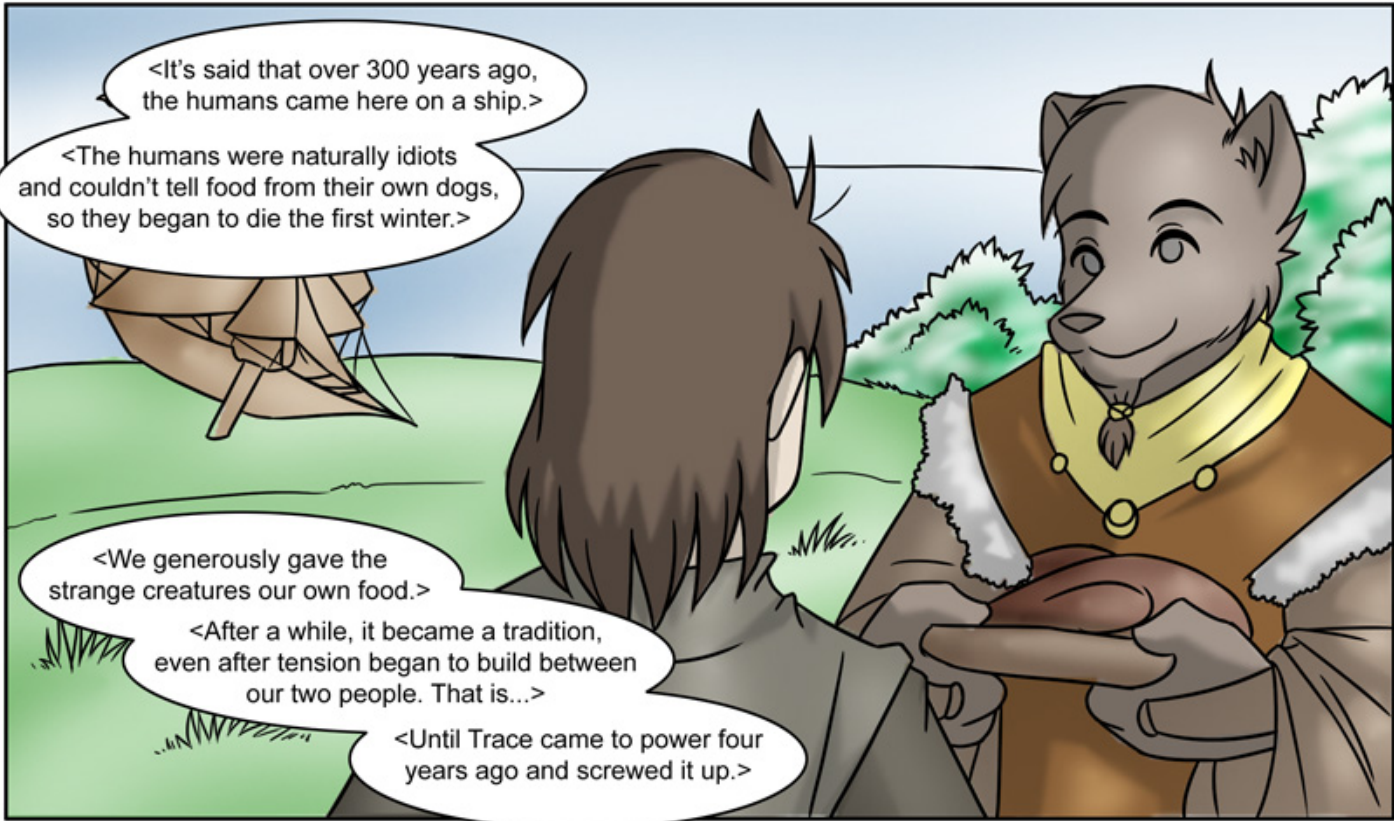
For tonight, we welcome our bestial brethren to join us once again, and for one night only, in our joyous celebration and feast! Let the festivities begin!



<This is really odd...>

<Do you know what's going on?>

<Well sorta. It's the "Festival of Beasts."
Haven't you heard of the old stories?>



<It's said that over 300 years ago, the humans came here on a ship.>

<The humans were naturally idiots and couldn't tell food from their own dogs, so they began to die the first winter.>

<We generously gave the strange creatures our own food.>
<After a while, it became a tradition, even after tension began to build between our two people. That is...>
<Until Trace came to power four years ago and screwed it up.>



<We haven't had a festival in four years. What I find odd is that it's started up again...>
<The human's Guild Master, appointed by Trace himself, put a stop to them, much to the disappointment of both sides..>

<I don't see how they're getting away with it this year, unless... Guild Master Tarron is no longer in command.>



Wow, everything's so colorful!

I don't think we'll be noticed if we're quick. Just blend in with the crowd and head to the docks.

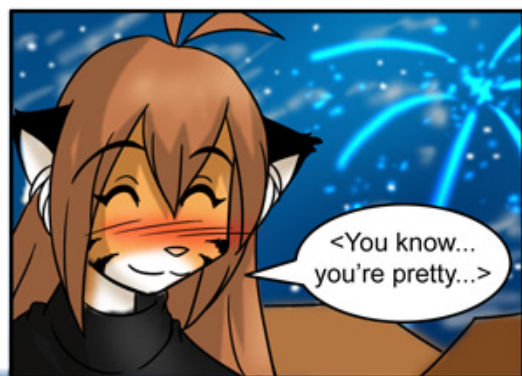
I still don't like this... That guy said there were wanted posters put up...

But I haven't seen a single one...



<Hey, watch out.>
<Some idiot's burning Subleflower incense.>

<Don't breathe too deeply.>



<You know... you're pretty...>



<Oh perfect, too late.>

<Get a hold of yourself, we don't have time for this.>

<And I'm not pretty!>



<...you shouldn't be so hard on yourself...>

<Oh no, not you too!>



The coast is clear, guys.
Come on, pick up the pace...

Huh?



Flora? Guys?
Where'd ya go?



Trace!
Look, look!

Ribbons!

Pure breed,
for sure!

What a
beautiful
Keidran!



Flora, what are
you doing?
You're naked... why did you
take off your clothes!?

Hehe, I'm
having fun!



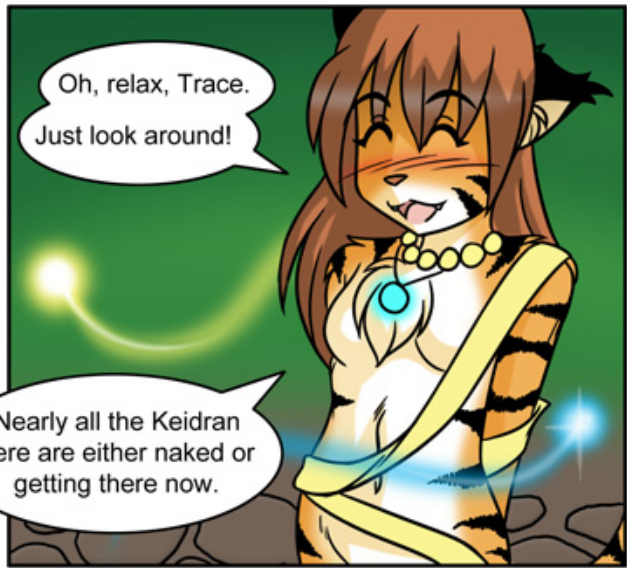
<Trace! We must leave now!>
<We can't think straight! It's the
scents! I... I'm becoming increasingly
attracted to random people!>

I can't understand
what you're saying...



Flora, we're trying *not* to attract attention!

You being naked isn't going to help!



Oh, relax, Trace.
Just look around!

Nearly all the Keidran here are either naked or getting there now.



In fact, I think you're making us look suspicious!

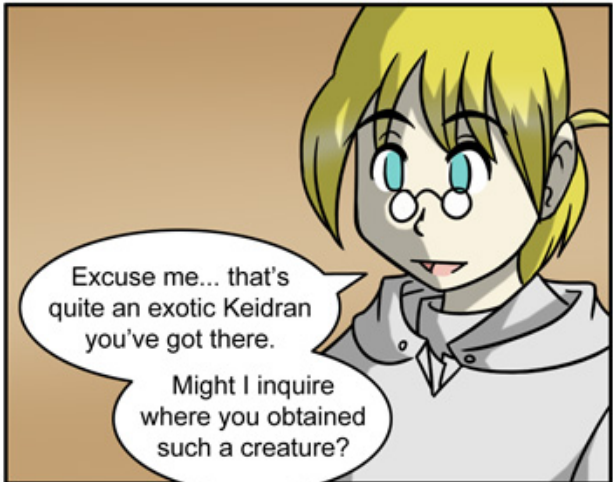
Let's see what you have under those robes, Mr. Wolf!

<Hey, stop! I can barely control myself as it is!>



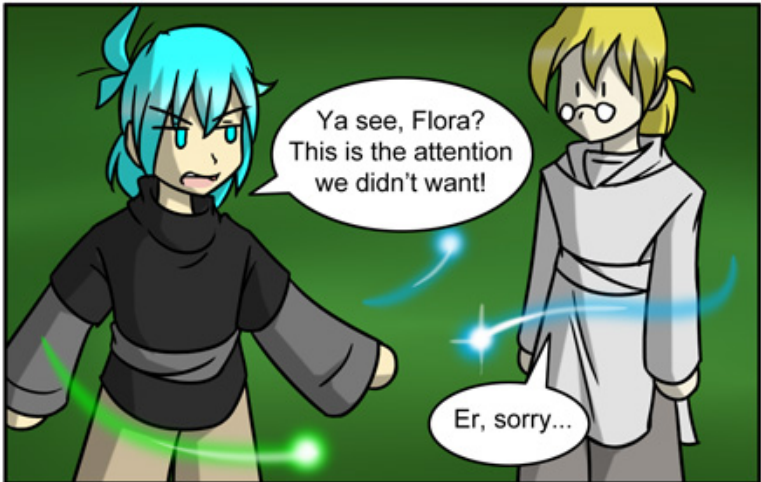
Exactly!

Flora, don't-! Oh, what's the use...



Excuse me... that's quite an exotic Keidran you've got there.

Might I inquire where you obtained such a creature?



Ya see, Flora? This is the attention we didn't want!

Er, sorry...



Would you and your Keidran consider joining me for a drink?
I'd love to learn how you acquired such a variety of Keidran.



Er, no, sorry. We really can't. We've got to get to the docks.



Flora, leave Natani alone!

Looks to me like you wont be getting there very fast.

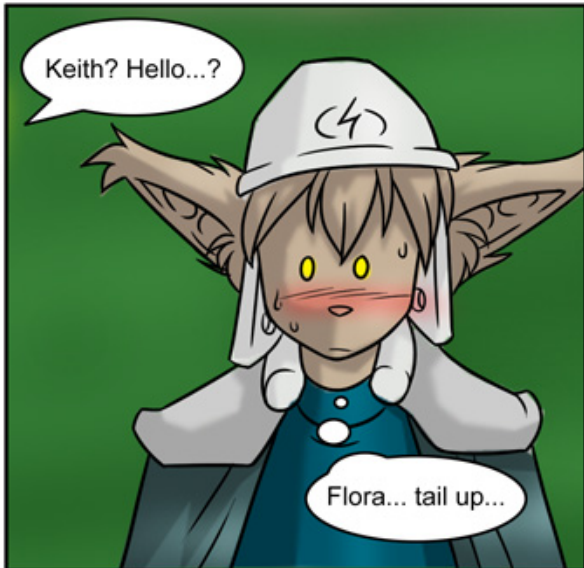
<Stop! Hey, don't tear the robes!>

Trust me, a few minutes out of the scented air will do them some real good.
And maybe I can help you get to the docks.



Oh, alright...
But just for a minute, then we've gotta go.

Keith, come on. Give me a hand at breaking those two up.



Keith? Hello...?

Flora... tail up...



Come on, Flora...

Oh, Trace!
Sorry, I don't know what came over me...



Hey, hey!

No nuzzling!



<Well, that was certainly interesting.>
<Nothing like being molested by a horny tiger.>

<That was really close, too. I gotta control myself.>
<If she had gotten my robes off in front of everyone...>



<Hey, you, uh...
Need a hand, or.. something?>



<No, no, I'm fine!>
<I don't need your help!>
<...and I don't need more temptation...>
<Come on, let's go!>





So, we're inside.

We appreciate the help, but we're in a hurry. We need to get to my island.



Ah, yes, the Basidian Islands.

Don't see too many of your type here these days.



Allow me to formally introduce myself.

If you haven't guessed, I am a slave trader.

My name is Eric. I'm what you'd call.. a collector.

Obviously, my occupation gives me many opportunities to travel to far off places.



I don't believe our encounter was chance.



I think that I can help you.

You see, you'll have a very hard time trying to find any kind of boat during this festival.

But perhaps if you're willing to stick around 'till tomorrow, I think I could arrange one of my own ships.

Aw man, we have to spend the night here? I have a bad feeling about this...

Something bad always happens to us when we're in a human city...



Trace, I don't trust this guy at all.
Someone is organizing these events, I'm sure.

You think it's a trap?

I'm actually not sure...
Somehow, I think someone knows what we're after.

What are the chances that we'd meet a guy who happens to have a ship?

I dunno...
this guy seems pretty harmless.



Erm, thank you... I think...

You have the most wonderful fur pattern, my dear!

I mean it! Your fur is absolutely lovely.
It's neat and clean, perfectly even...



Ah yes, the white fur goes all the way around.

lip!

Mer...!!



Ouch...
And now... he seems pretty injured.



Flora, stop!

Did you see what he did?

P-please forgive my rudeness.

I truly did not mean to offend you.

I'm just used to inspecting my slaves in that way...

You see, most of the slaves I deal with are traditionally much more subordinate than you...



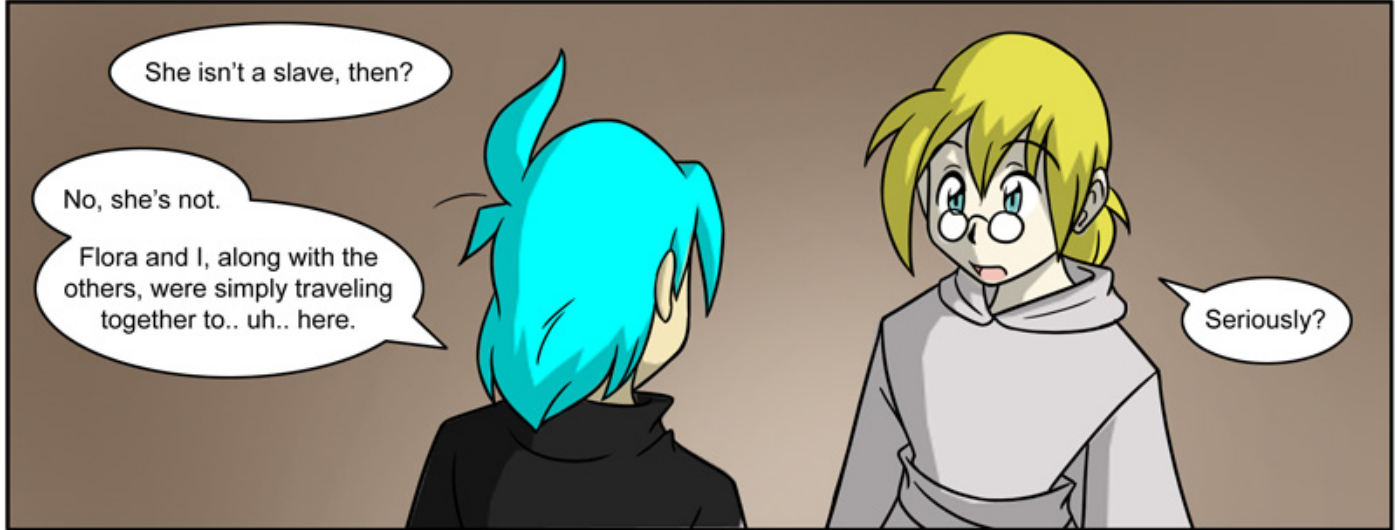
I'm not a slave!

I was one once, a long time ago, but I'll die before I'm a slave ever again!



Oh... I'm sorry...

But.. I don't understand...

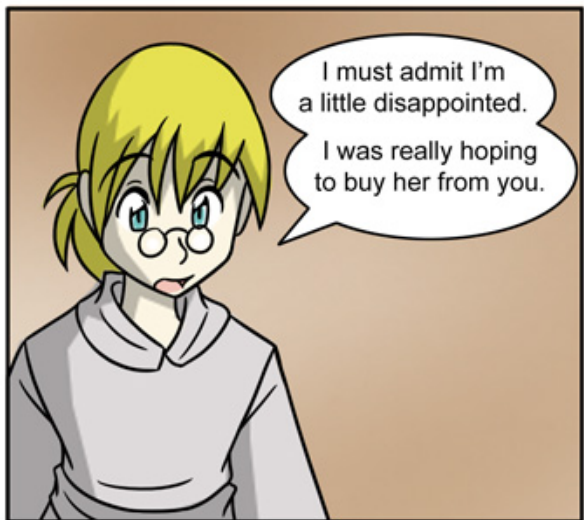


She isn't a slave, then?


No, she's not.

Flora and I, along with the others, were simply traveling together to.. uh.. here.

Seriously?

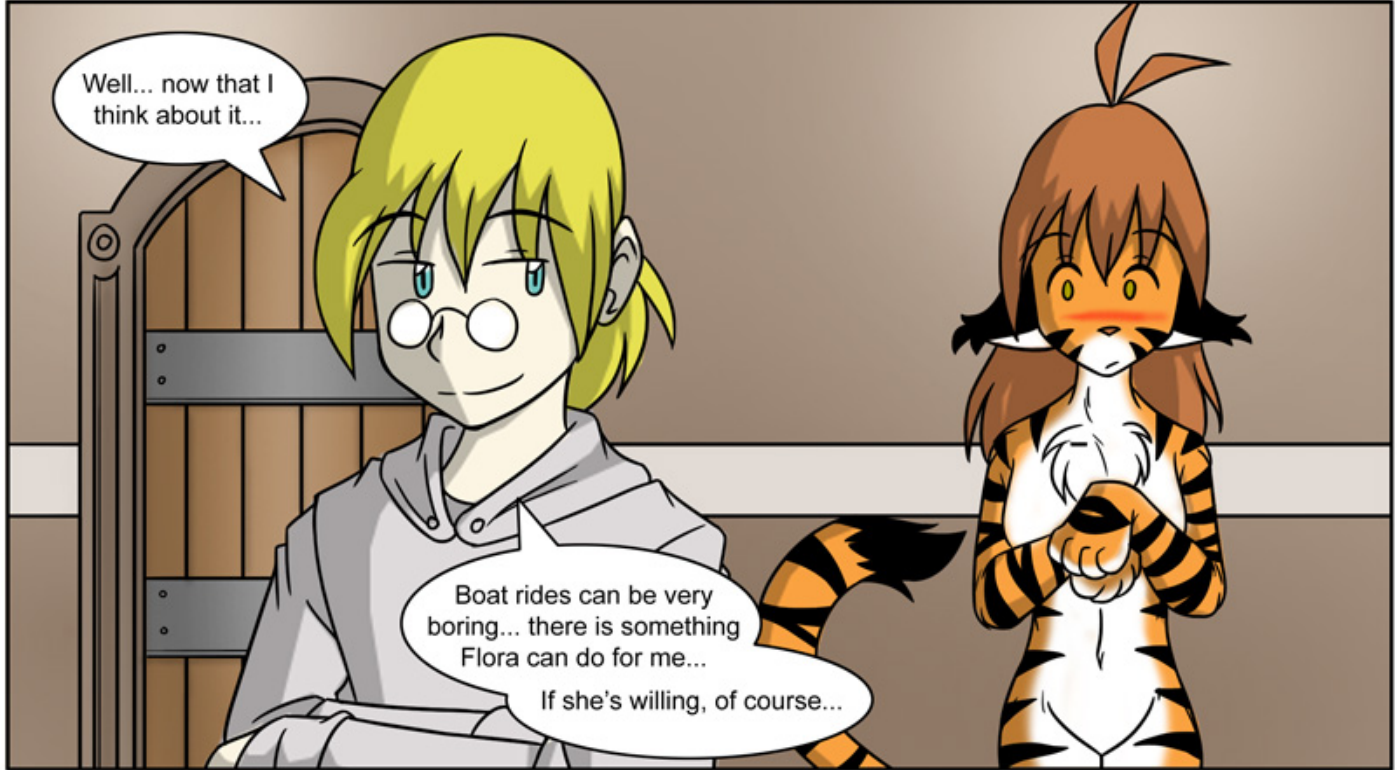


I must admit I'm a little disappointed. I was really hoping to buy her from you.



Well, selling Flora is out of the question, even if I was able to.

But we really need your boat... is there anything else you want in return?



Well... now that I think about it...

Boat rides can be very boring... there is something Flora can do for me...

If she's willing, of course...

Voilà!

These are my paintings!

As I told you, boat rides can be long and quite boring.

If you would model for me, I would love to paint your image.

Wow, these are really good... you want me... to model?

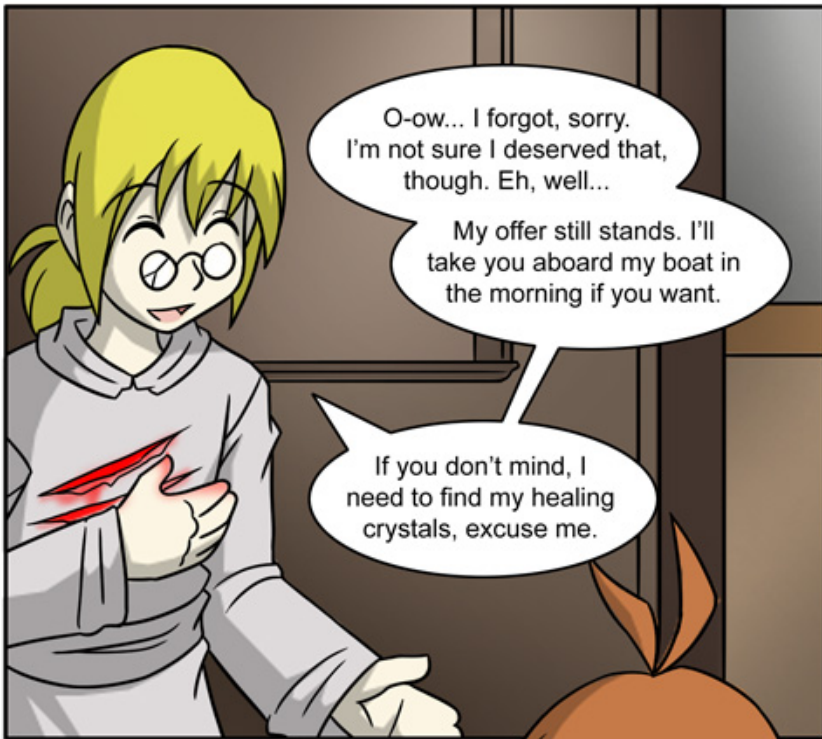
Sure, you have quite an exotic look to you.

Oh... thanks, I guess...

...and if you want, we can, ya know, have some fun afterwards.

A little... private entertainment...

SLASH!



O-ow... I forgot, sorry.
I'm not sure I deserved that,
though. Eh, well...

My offer still stands. I'll
take you aboard my boat in
the morning if you want.

If you don't mind, I
need to find my healing
crystals, excuse me.



Well, what do you think, Flora?
Should we trust him...?



Eh, as much as I hate
to admit it, we need him.
It's the perfect opportunity...

But I'm not going to enjoy
posing in front of him.
You'd better make sure
he doesn't try anything.



I'll make sure...
And hey, we might as well
make the most of tonight.

We get to take a bath,
sleep in a real bed...
And in the morning, we'll
be sailing across the seas!

Yeah, that does sound
kinda nice... mrr...



Well, looks like things have finally died down outside.

-Sigh- I wonder if I used to enjoy things like this.

Feh, not likely. From what I can tell, this would probably be something I would try to shut down.

Still haven't worked up the nerve to read the rest of my old journal.



...they should have a festival for me...

These Keidran don't deserve anything.

Hey Trace...



Come on, they finally got the water warmed up.

Hey, what are you doing out here?

Oh, nothing... just thinking, you know.



....murr...

Don't be so moody, Trace.



Why, hello Mr. Trace.

I am a servant of my master, Eric.

I have finished preparing your bath.

Shall I stay and help you with your bath?

You'll find that I can provide you with a variety of... services.



Hey, you hussy!

Back off, he's mine!
Right, Trace?



...Trace?



Oh, quit gawking
You don't know where she's been.

Hey! You don't have to be rude...



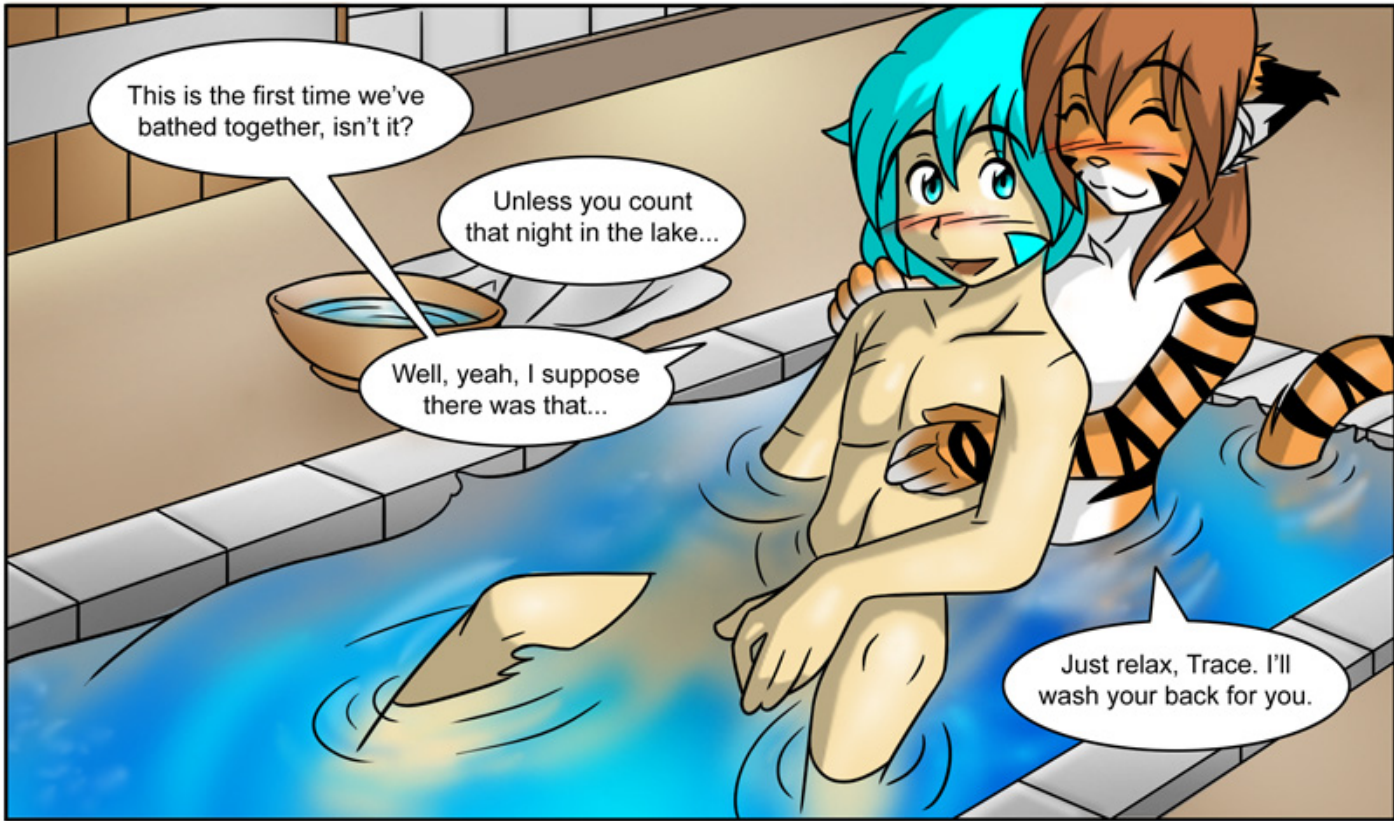
Nyah~!



Come on, Trace, get in here!

Take that off, I've already seen it all.

Alright, alright...



This is the first time we've bathed together, isn't it?

Unless you count that night in the lake...

Well, yeah, I suppose there was that...

Just relax, Trace. I'll wash your back for you.

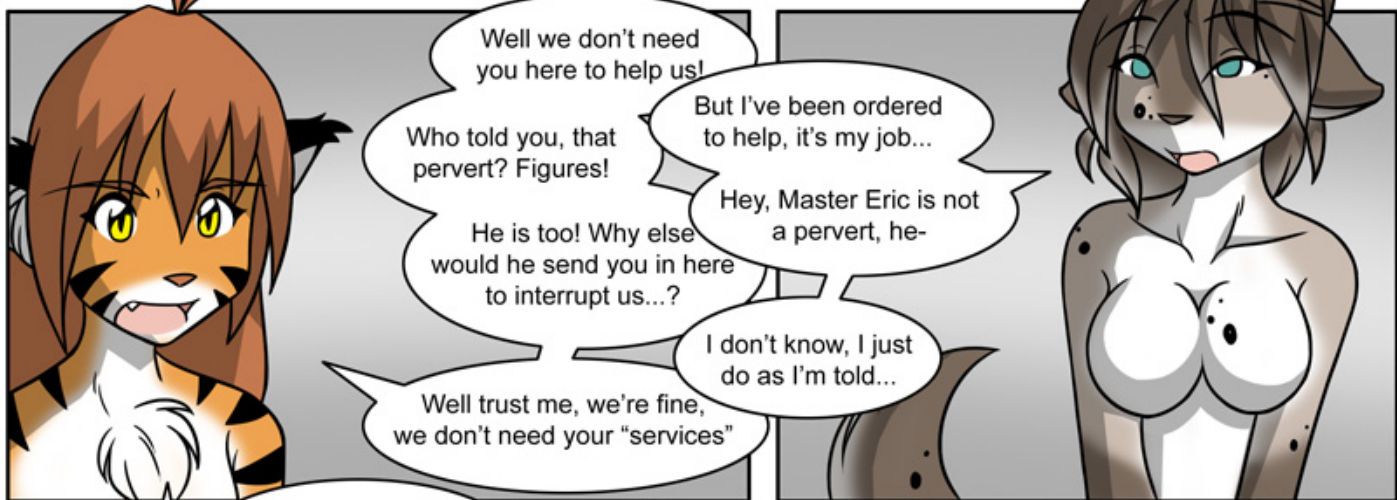


Ah, now this is the life...



Ah, hello again Mr. Trace!

If she's got your back, I'll wash your front for you!



Meanwhile, in the second bath...

I can hear yelling in Trace and Flora's bath. What's going on?

Feh, well, it's not my problem.

Finally, a chance to really relax.

This is much better than the forest...

click...

I think I'll just soak for a while.

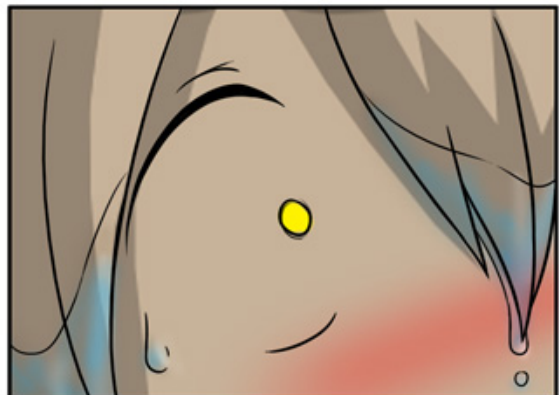
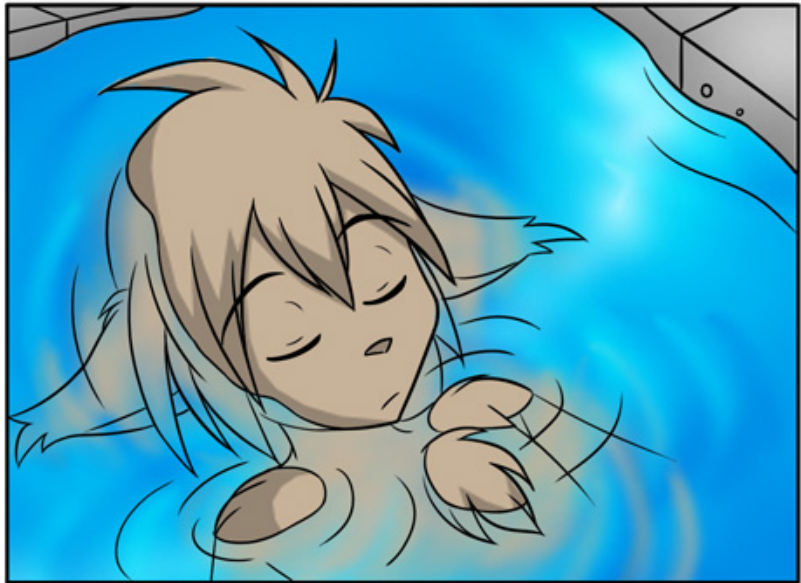
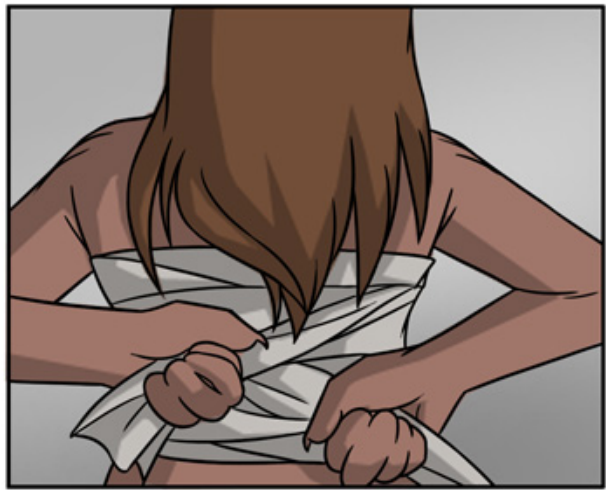
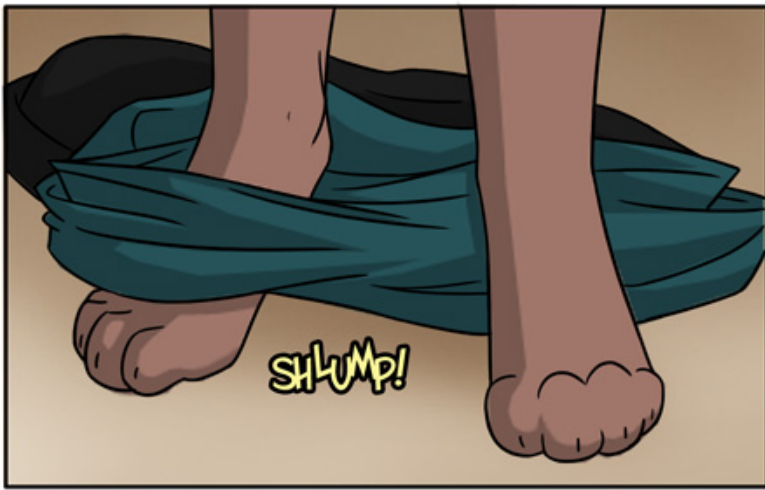
Trace and the others are in the first bath.

I think this one is mine...

It's really steamy in here...

I can hardly see anything.

Ah, but it's nice to finally get these heavy robes off.









If she see's my chest, she's going to think I'm a girl too!



Hey, what-

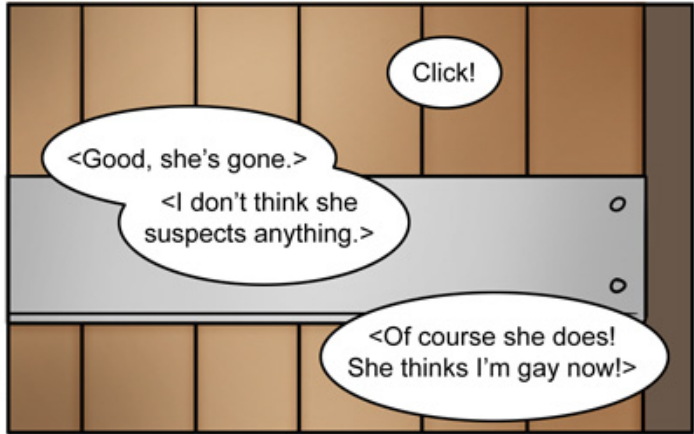
<Do you mind, Flora?>

<We're just two normal guys.. uh... doing what guys do in a bath, you know.>



Oookay...

<Well, I gotta go... do the thing... so, see ya later...>



Click!

<Good, she's gone.>

<I don't think she suspects anything.>

<Of course she does! She thinks I'm gay now!>



<Well, that's not important.>

<What's important is that she doesn't think I'm a girl.>

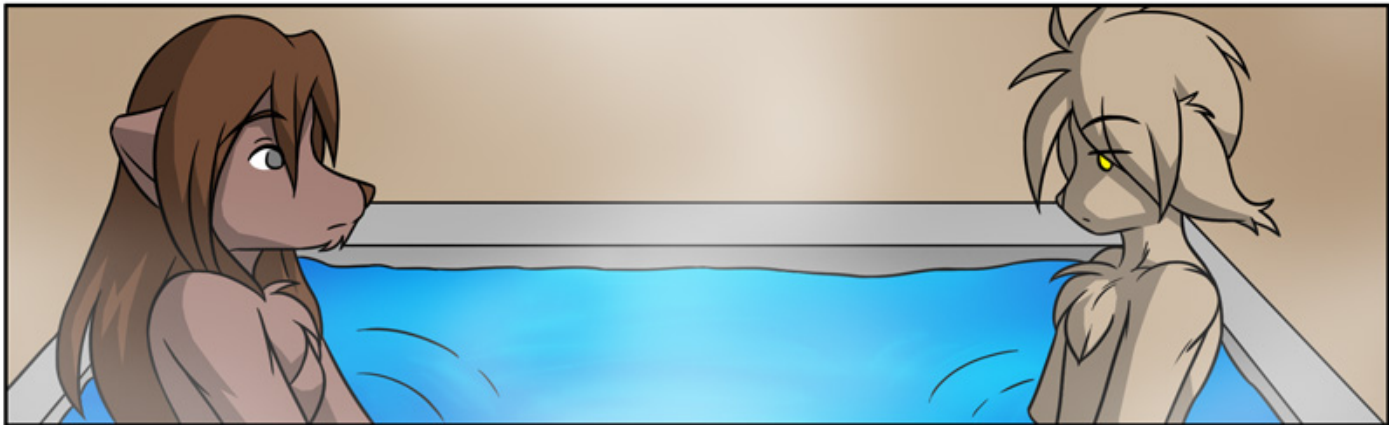
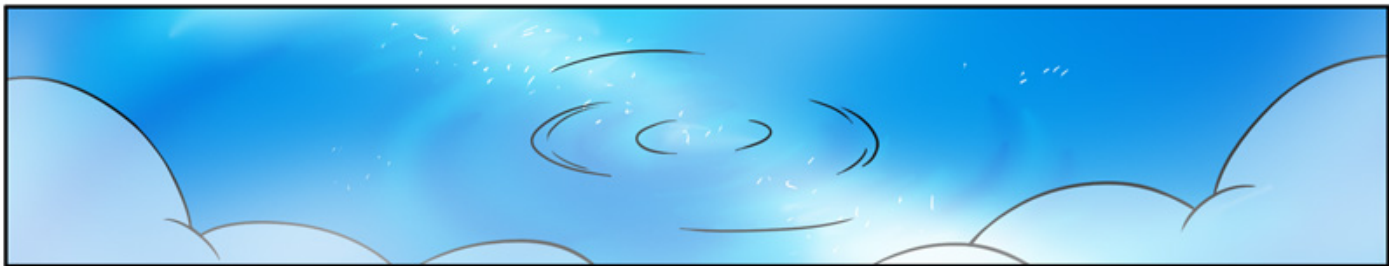
<But you are— oh, forget it.>

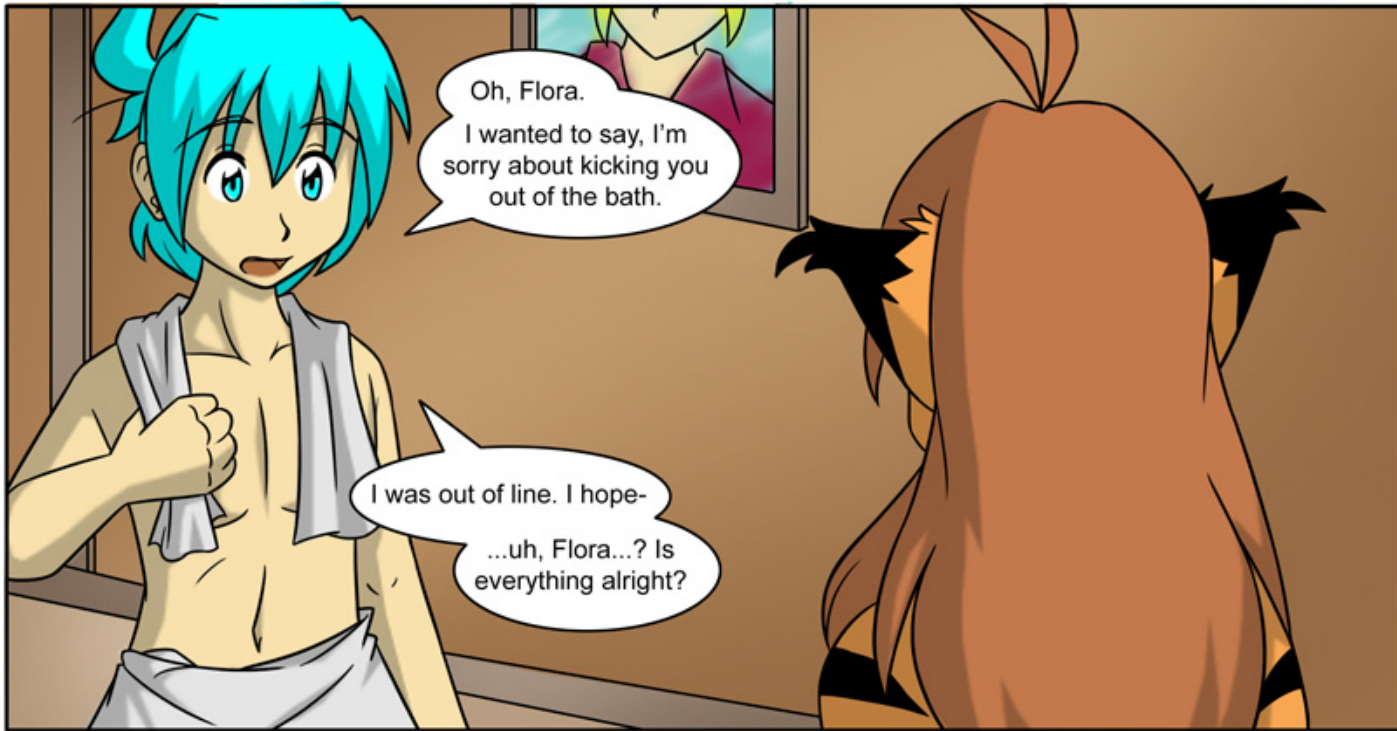
<W-would you get off me now? Your rubbing is.. uh..>



Yip!!

<Please tell me that's your tail between my legs!>





Oh, Flora.
I wanted to say, I'm
sorry about kicking you
out of the bath.

I was out of line. I hope-
...uh, Flora...? Is
everything alright?



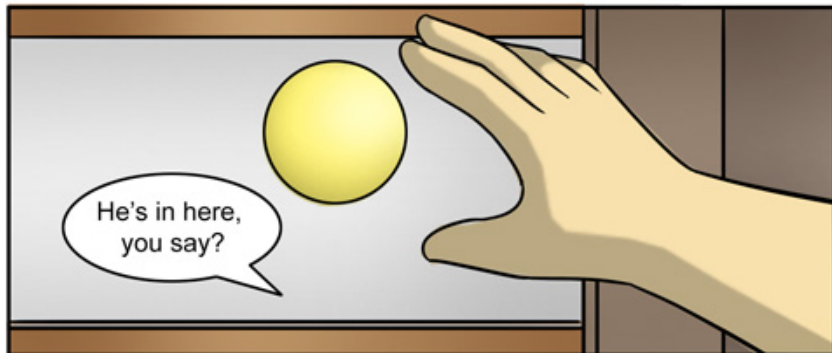
Keith... the wolf guy...
In bath... together...

Keith is... he's...



Flora, what are you saying?
You're not speaking clearly.

What's wrong with Keith?



He's in here,
you say?



Trace, wait!



Uh... I think we should just let Keith alone.

Oh.. okay. If you say so.



Come on, Flora.
Let's figure out from Eric where we're going, then find out where we're sleeping.



Good, it feels like this day has lasted for months.



Mr. Trace? Miss Flora?
Where did you go?

I am here to assist you in anything you need!



Mr. Trace?

Are you in here?



W-what are you guys doing?!

Close the door!!

End.