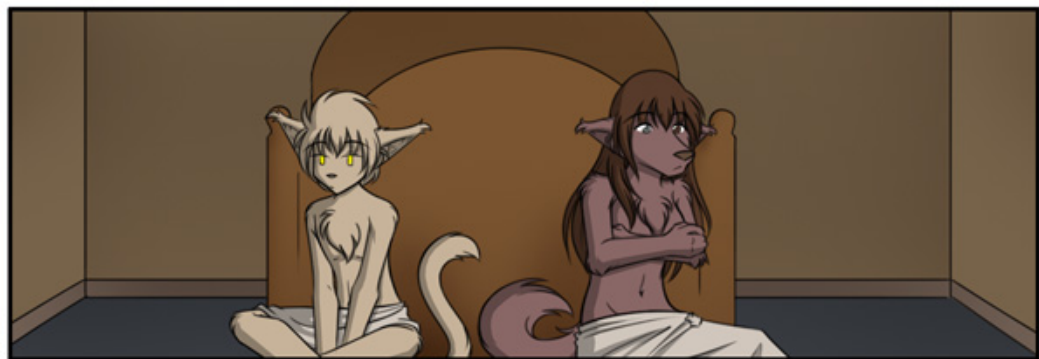



Trace has been kidnapped, everyone is in danger, and everything hinges on the decisions of a single banished Basitin.

Chapter 11

No Pressure









Hm, did you say your brother?




Ow!




Oh, right...
The one I... stabbed through the chest...
I'd almost forgotten.
...Sorry. Is he-?



Oh, don't worry, he's fine. Healed and lazing about back at our village...




Though he spends all his days bugging me now. I think you should have stabbed him harder...



Speaking of which...

You've mentioned that "link" before, but you didn't say much about it.

Is it something all you assassins have?



...no. It's not.

It was because of our job as assassins, yes. But we were not linked by choice.

I became linked with my brother after our very first "solo" mission for the Brotherhood.



It was supposed to be easy. Just kill an old wolf named Issac as he traveled alone between villages.

THOK!
THOK!

Assassins!



I've got him!

Natani, wait!

What we didn't know was that Issac knew forbidden magic, and was willing to use it.




The curse I was hit with was a terrible one. It did not hurt me physically, but instead rended my mind and damaged a portion of my soul.

Although physically fine, I was as good as dead.

Natani!

Aaaagh!






I'm sorry... there's nothing physically wrong with her.


It's part of her soul that's missing. We cannot heal something like this.

Please... there must be something...

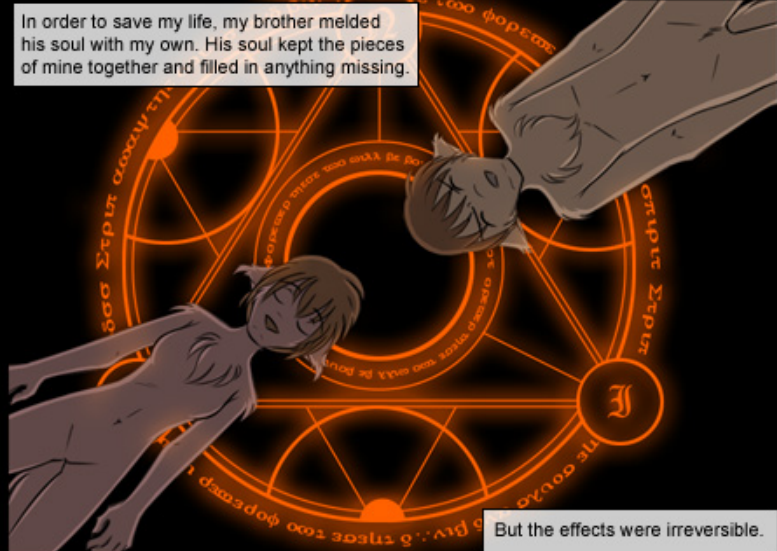


I swore I'd watch over and protect her.

She's all I have left... I beg you, anything!




I... -sigh- there is one possibility... But... it would require your own sacrifice.



In order to save my life, my brother melded his soul with my own. His soul kept the pieces of mine together and filled in anything missing.


But the effects were irreversible.



And having his spirit in my body changed me. His mind filled in my missing pieces...

One happened to be my gender... so I copied his.

Zen and I became permanently mentally linked.



And... that's how I ended up being male in mind, and female in body.

It took a while to adjust to being mentally linked to my brother. In the beginning, we didn't know how to block out thoughts and sensations from each other.

When he felt pain, I felt pain.

Be more careful!

When I had a hangover, so did he.

When he went to the bathroom, I... well, you get the idea.

It... wasn't pleasant.

Ironically, Issac, the wolf we were supposed to kill, died casting that curse. It's forbidden magic for a reason...

It tends to kill its user.

So our mission was considered a success.

Rumor spread that we were such skilled assassins we had caused a powerful mage to kill himself.

The story became more and more exaggerated – mostly by us while we were drunk – until we eventually became known as the "Magi Brothers."

He took one look at us and kill himself right on the spot! Honest!

That's amazing!



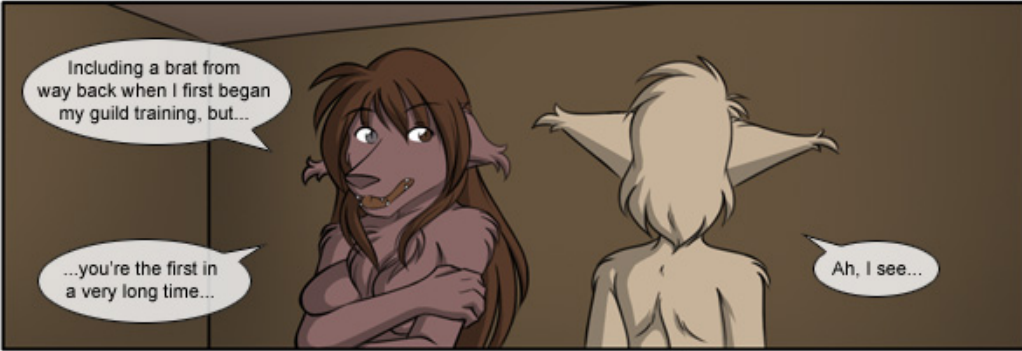
And that's the whole story.



You know, I've never told anyone that before.

Am I the only one to find out about you?

Well, there were a few others early on...



Including a brat from way back when I first began my guild training, but...

...you're the first in a very long time...

Ah, I see...



...Keith, um...listen...

Although I would have... rather no one found out about me...

...how do I say this?...

I'm... glad it was a person like you, at least. I appreciate you keeping my secret.

It means a lot to me to know that, if for no one else, I can trust you.



...don't mention it...



Hey, Keith?



Er... wait...

J-just a second...
Hang on!



Ah, uh, what
do you need, Flora?



Keith, have you
seen Trace?

We kinda got into a fight,
and I kicked him out...

I felt bad about it,
though, and I wanted
to apologize, but...

I can't find
him anywhere!



Have they taken
him already?

I thought that
they were going to be
waiting for me.



Sorry, Flora...
I... don't know
where he is.



Lying to my
friends, now...
There's no honor
in any of this...



Alright, the coast is clear, Natani.



Say, Keith, while you're up, could you get me another towel? I'm still damp.

What? I'm not wearing anything!

The closet's just down the hall! Please?



Oh, alright...
Hmph...
At least it'll give me some time to think...

I'm telling you, something strange is going on...



Haven't you noticed it?



Ever since that tower began lighting up, the Generals have all been behaving strangely. They've been giving weird orders and acting erratically...

And did you see that statue General Alaric made?!

Actually... I think Alaric's always been like that.

But I know what you mean. I've noticed it too.



Also, I heard something from the inner guards...

They say the king is sick with an unknown illness...

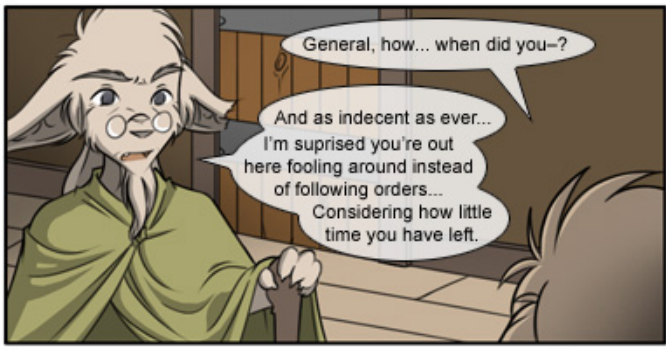
And that the whole reason for the tower being built in the first place was to keep the king alive.

I mean, attacking someone from behind... it just doesn't feel right.

Hey, don't speak so loudly about that-



Evesdropping, I see. How like you...

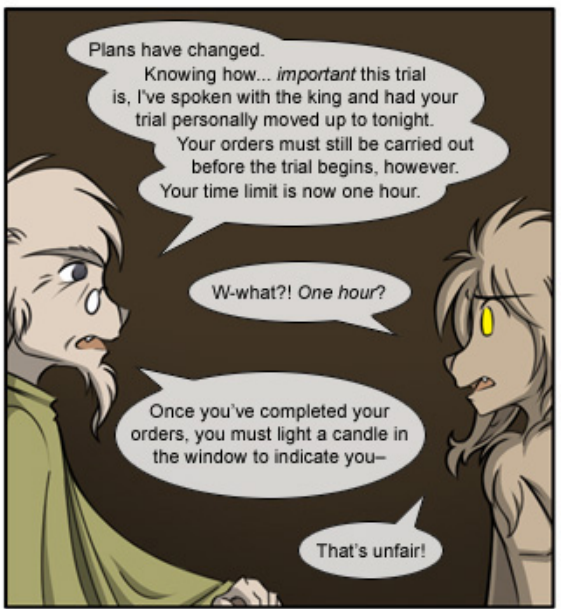


General, how... when did you-?

And as indecent as ever... I'm suprised you're out here fooling around instead of following orders... Considering how little time you have left.



W-What are you talking about? I have time... I have until tomorrow-



Plans have changed.

Knowing how... *important* this trial is, I've spoken with the king and had your trial personally moved up to tonight.

Your orders must still be carried out before the trial begins, however.

Your time limit is now one hour.

W-what?! *One hour*?

Once you've completed your orders, you must light a candle in the window to indicate you-

That's unfair!



No, you returning from banishment is what's *unfair*! It's a mockery of our laws and our judicial system. You will do as you are ordered to do! You have **one hour**!

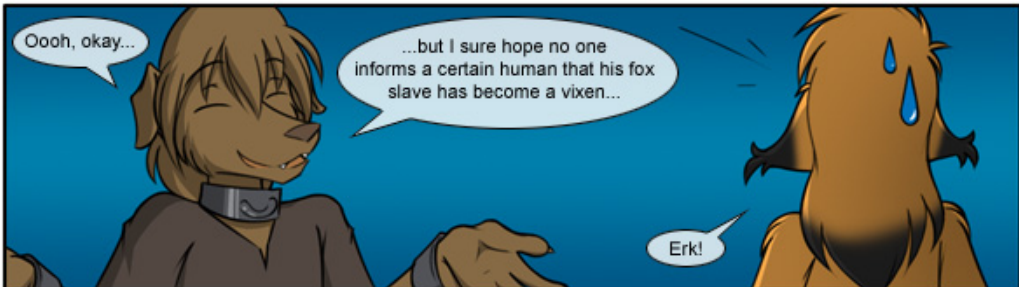


...well, happy?

Yes, very!
Um... now,
turn around!



Hey, that wasn't
part of the deal!
All you ask for
was a peek, an' that's
what you got!



Oooh, okay...

...but I sure hope no one
informs a certain human that his fox
slave has become a vixen...

Erk!



Okay, okay!
You're a real
dog, you know?



-snerk!-

Huh? What?



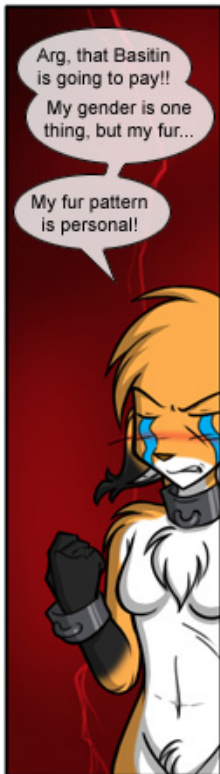
Mike, have you
seen yourself from
behind? Heh...



What are you...?

You've got a
heart on your butt!

H-hey!!
That's not my
fur pattern!



Arg, that Basitin
is going to pay!!
My gender is one
thing, but my fur...

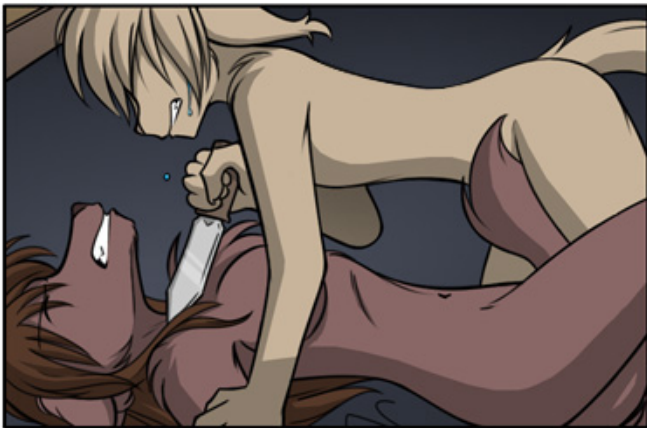
My fur pattern
is personal!



...I don't know...









All my life, all I've ever wanted was to come home. I wanted to be with my people... my friends... and I came so close...



But now... I'm going to lose it all... because of you!

What?!



I thought I could just let myself do it...

We Basitins are biologically predisposed to follow orders. The urge is... overpowering.

What are you talking about?

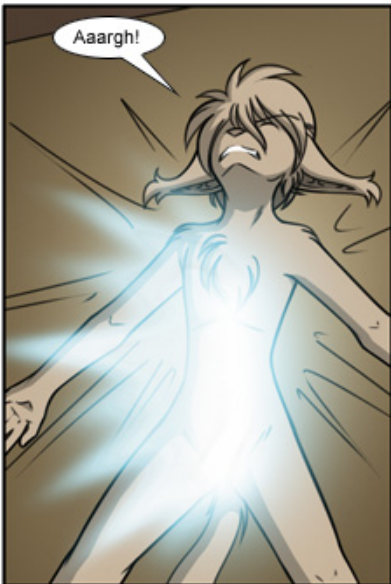
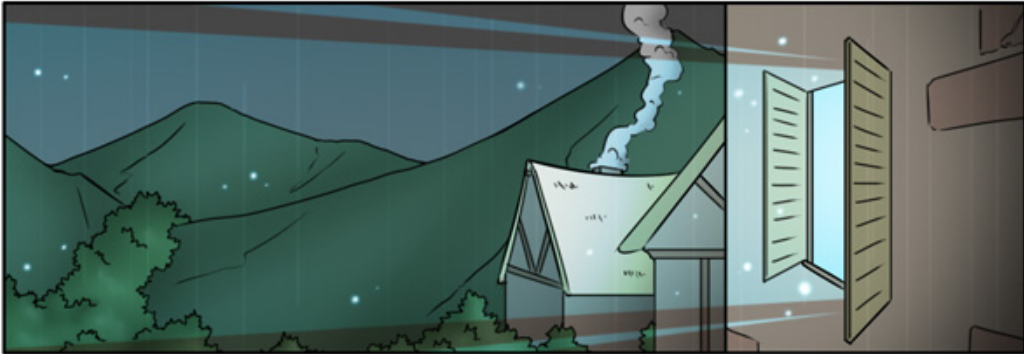
It would have been the easy way... but I can't...

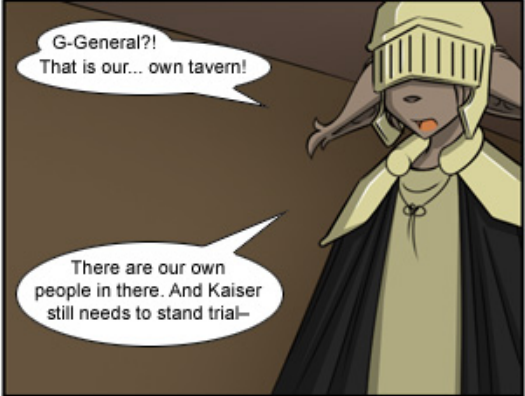
I can't...



I won't!









Are you sure it's safe leaving him out in the open like this, Randal?

Oh, not to worry. He's essentially harmless. That platform he's lying on is of my own invention.

It creates an effect I call a mana sink.



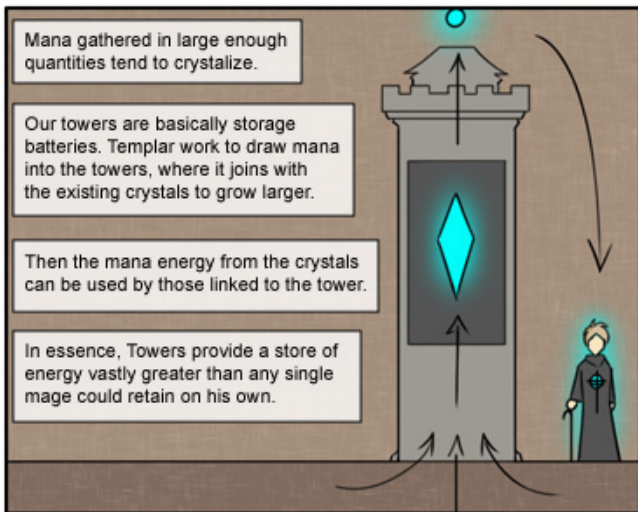
You are familiar, of course, with the basic fundamentals of magic and how our Towers function.

Mana gathered in large enough quantities tend to crystallize.

Our towers are basically storage batteries. Templar work to draw mana into the towers, where it joins with the existing crystals to grow larger.

Then the mana energy from the crystals can be used by those linked to the tower.

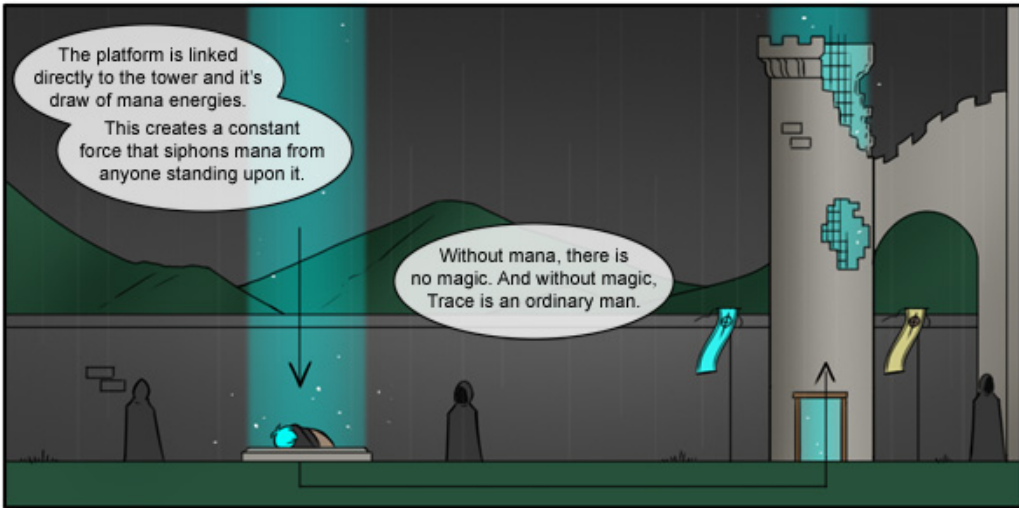
In essence, Towers provide a store of energy vastly greater than any single mage could retain on his own.



The platform is linked directly to the tower and it's draw of mana energies.

This creates a constant force that siphons mana from anyone standing upon it.

Without mana, there is no magic. And without magic, Trace is an ordinary man.



One explanation later...

...and that's about it, I guess.

Keith... he... he gave up everything to save me!

He had the chance to get back all he lost as a child, but he chose my life instead...

And risked losing it all...

If I was given the chance to get back my village and all my friends and family I lost as a child...
...would I have been willing to do the same as Keith, and give it all away to save his life?

I don't know if I could, but Keith... he did. He cared about my life that much...

Natani? I told you everything... why are you staring at me like that?
I still have to report my failure at my trial.

Can you let me go now?

...


No.
Since you can't move, there's something I've always wanted to do to you...

W-what?!


W-wait, stop! Don't touch me there!

Those are sensitive!

They're so soft!




Enough, already!
Why are you acting so strange all of the sudden?




I-I'm not really sure...
I should still be furious at you for attacking me, but... you risked your life to save mine.

...Keith. I think there is something that...




that I have to admit to you... and to myself, before it's too late...




Even though I know you're a guy... I can't help feeling this...

Keith... I...



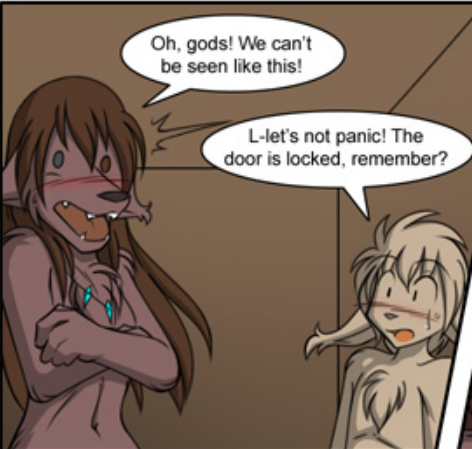
FIRE!




Keith! The tavern's on fire! We have to get out!



It's locked!



Oh, gods! We can't be seen like this!



L-let's not panic! The door is locked, remember?

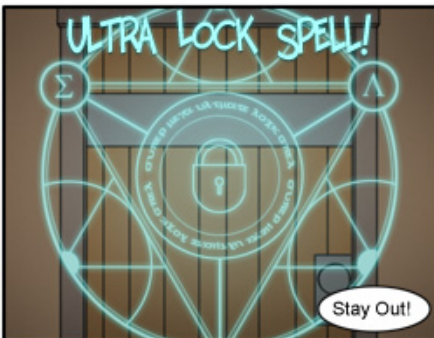
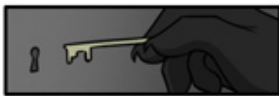
Some weird guy just gave me the master key!
Can this help?



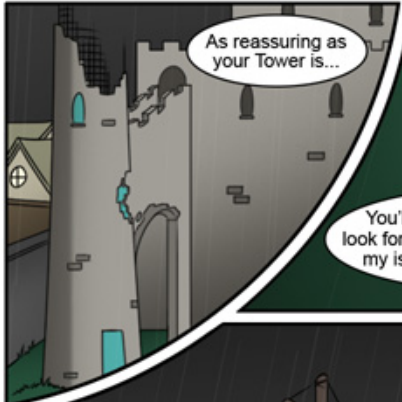
SIGH...



Alright, let's panic...







As reassuring as your Tower is...

I have heard many rumors of the destructive nature of Trace's power.

You'll understand when I say I look forward to you Templar leaving my island as soon as possible. No offense.



I understand. We shall depart as soon as the storms die down. Our ship is being prepared to contain Trace at this very moment.

But you have nothing to be concerned about.

I am quite confident in my ability to contain Trace's power, if necessary.

Your castle and people are in no danger.



As the Master Architect, I can guarantee you:



My technology is infallible.





<Alright, is everybody here? Where's the humans?>



Present!
Is it just me,
or are all the exits
sealed off?



<I'm here, but I
can't find Trace!
<And the whole first
floor is on fire!>



<Trace isn't in the tavern!
<I'll explain later, but right
now I need to concentrate.

<I've never done this
many people before!>



<Done what?
Wait a minute!>



<What are you doi--!>

BWOOSH!



BWOOSH!

Oh. We're back at my ship. Fascinating!



<I set a waypoint on the ship in case anything happened on the island.>



<So what may I ask *did* happen back there?>



<And Trace is still missing! Where is he, Natani?>



...



<I think Keith should be the one to answer those.>



...Keith?





A Tower on the island?

But I feel like I've heard this before...

Why would the Templar do that? Doesn't sound like the Templar I knew...

Basitins... Magic...



Roderick, is that a Basitin?

Oh, yeah, that's Vehra, Master Templar's personal pet.

Where can I get one of those? I've never heard of a Basitin slave.



She's the only one that I know of. She was a failed experiment. The Master Mage found some way to give Basitins the ability to wield magic.

But apparently after a while forcing magic makes 'em go soft in the head.

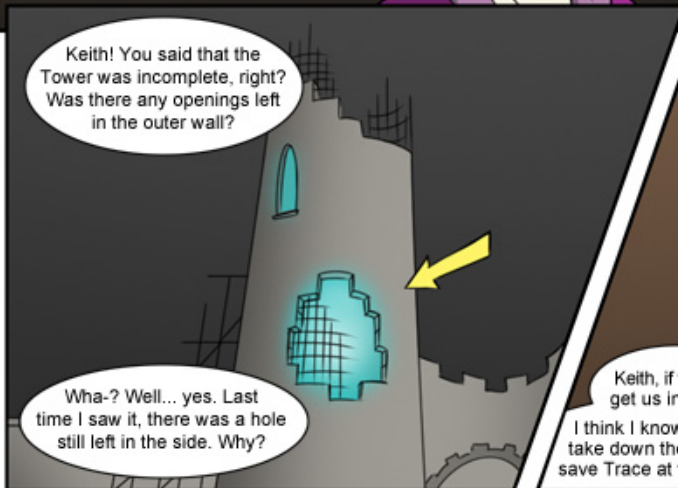
She used to be pretty skilled, but now she can hardly speak in full sentences.



This is all just a ruse... They're fooling the Basitins into lobotomizing themselves.

That sounds exactly like the Templar I knew.





Completed Towers are very resilient to attack,

because its core is protected by a strong crystalline barrier.

However, if the Tower wall is still incomplete, the core will be exposed.

With enough force, a strike to the core will begin a catastrophic chain-reaction, causing the crystals to release all their mana energy at the same time.

This will take out the Tower... and likely half the castle with it. That'll give us the distraction we'll need to escape.

<So, if - and this is a big if - we can get into the castle courtyard, we then grab Trace, snipe the Tower, and run for our lives.>

<Natani, you're our only magic user. Do you think you can hit the Tower with a magicked arrow?>


<I don't know how I feel about saving a human, but he's better out of Templar hands.>

<I've only got one shot, but if you can get me up to it, I can take it out!>

<A-actually, I-I can->


Alright, let me get a map...

<O-oh, okay...>




There are three bridges leading up to the castle. A central bridge, and two lesser bridges to the north and south.

Reaching the bridges shouldn't be a problem. It's after curfew, and I don't hear any alarms going off. So they probably don't know we escaped the fire, yet.




But getting across those bridges will be a lot harder without being detected. The castle side will be well defended.

Ah!




You guys take the north and south bridges. They are out of the way and easier to cross.

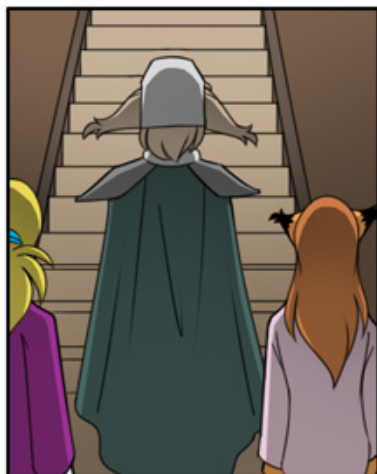
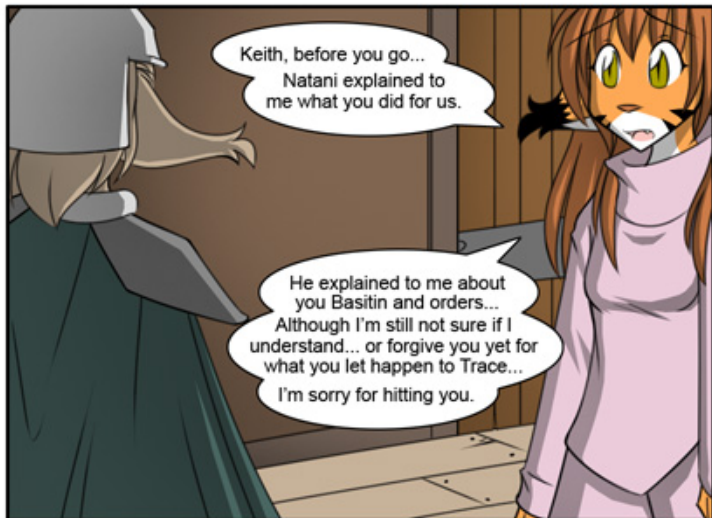
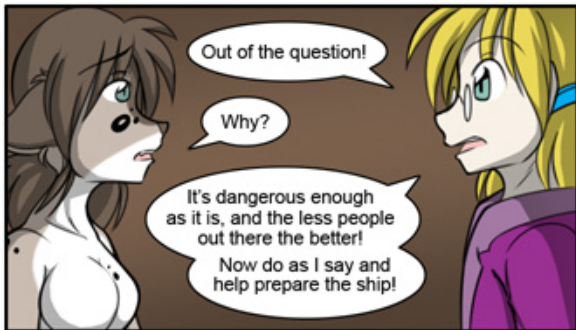
I will take the central bridge alone and draw their attention away.



Keith! No, you can't go by yourself!



I have to... even if destroying the tower means saving my people, I will still be marked as a traitor for aiding you. I must face them alone, but at least I can serve as a distraction.

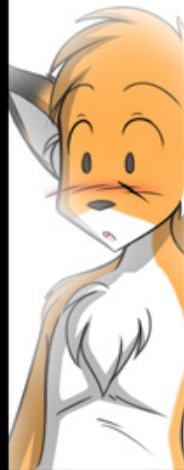
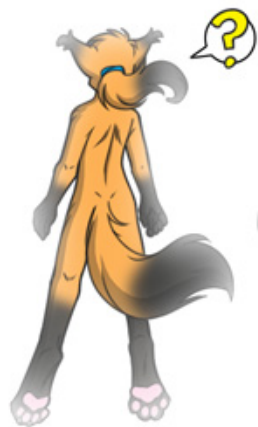
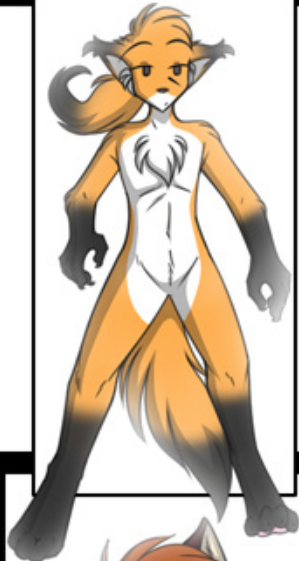


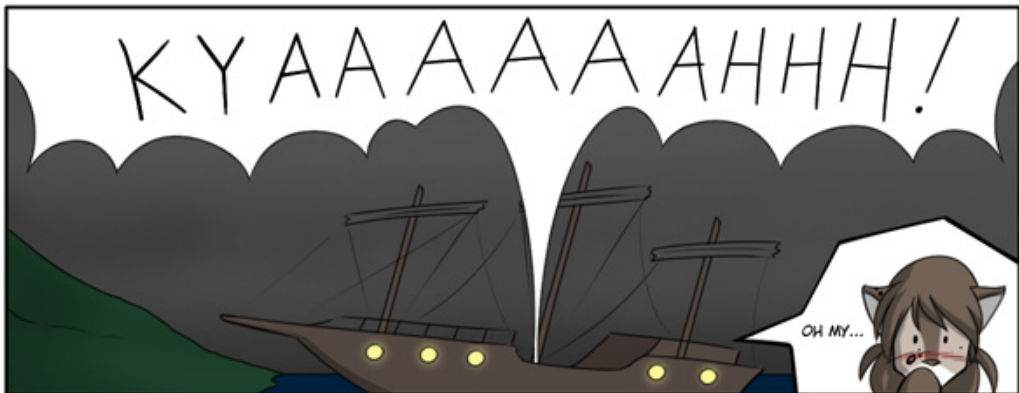
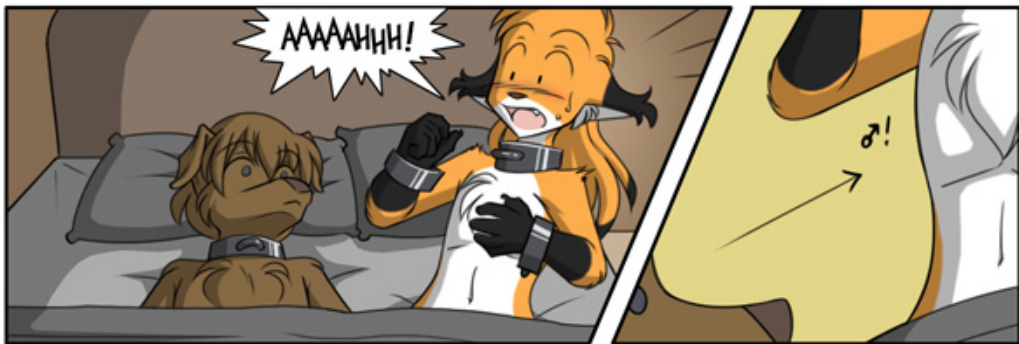
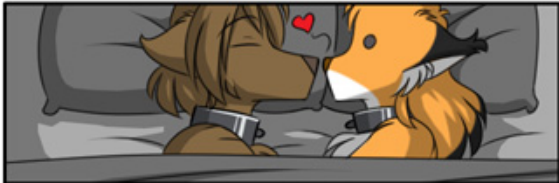


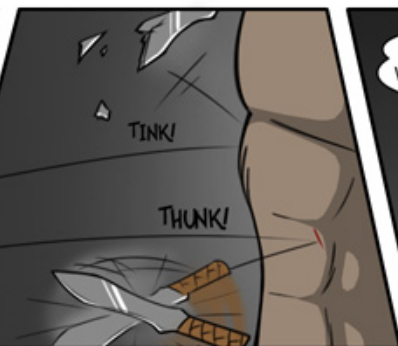
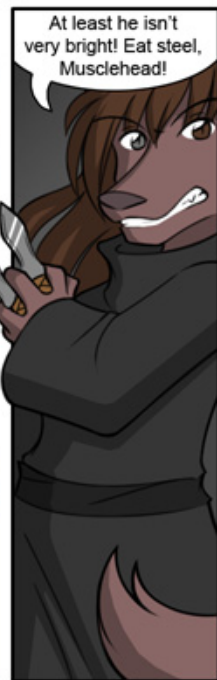


















So you see! The Templar set you up! It's slowly driving you insane.

...I see...
I had my suspicions that the Templar might have been trying something...



So now you see why I have to stop them!

You have to let me through-

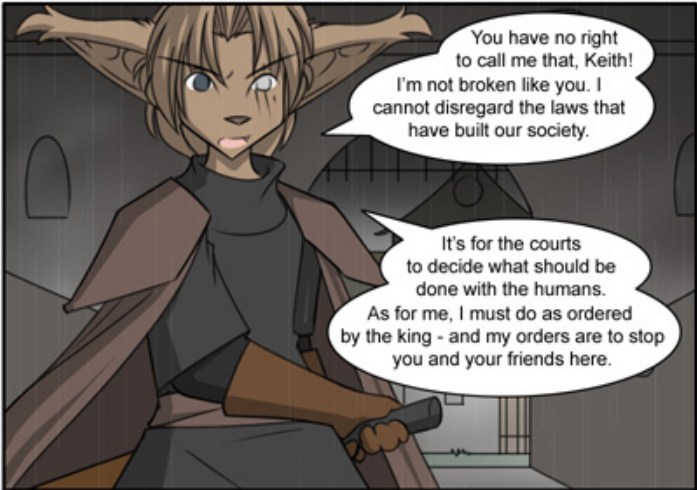


No!




What?

I told you everything! The Humans, The Templar... you know now....
Nick, you should be helping me...



You have no right to call me that, Keith!
I'm not broken like you. I cannot disregard the laws that have built our society.

It's for the courts to decide what should be done with the humans.
As for me, I must do as ordered by the king - and my orders are to stop you and your friends here.

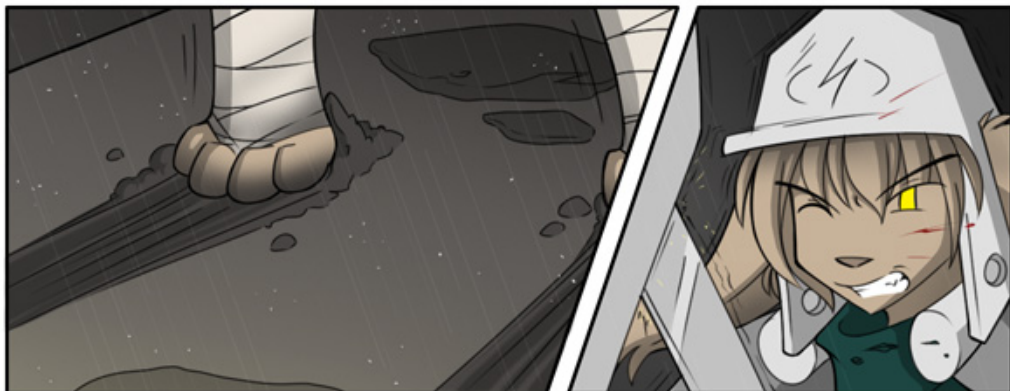


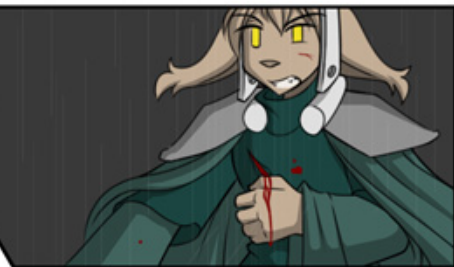
I do what's commanded, even if I feel it's wrong. That is what it means to be a Basitin.

RAAAWWWR!



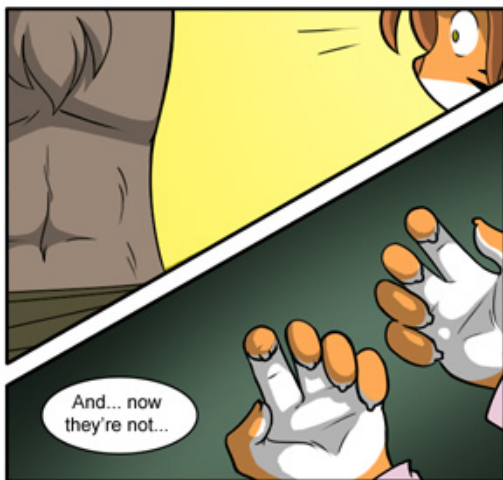
WHINE...













There!

Don't worry. The courts will probably just have you two deported.



Our laws are not cruel. Tough but fair is the Basitin way!

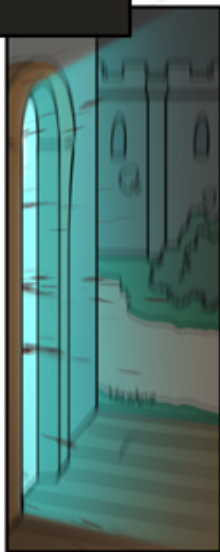


These two are needed elsewhere.



Eh? Who are you? It's after curfew, you shouldn't—

Ah? There's something strange about you... you're not Basitin...
What are you?



Meanwhile...

Well, is that all you've got, Boy?

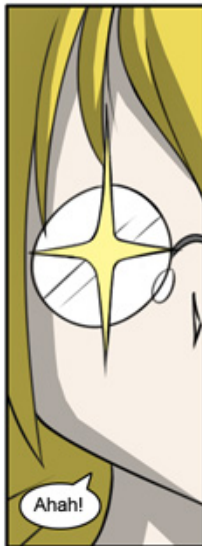
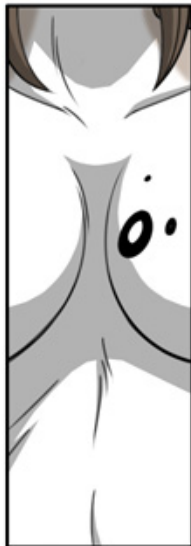
Ugh... this is hopeless... I can't outwit him!

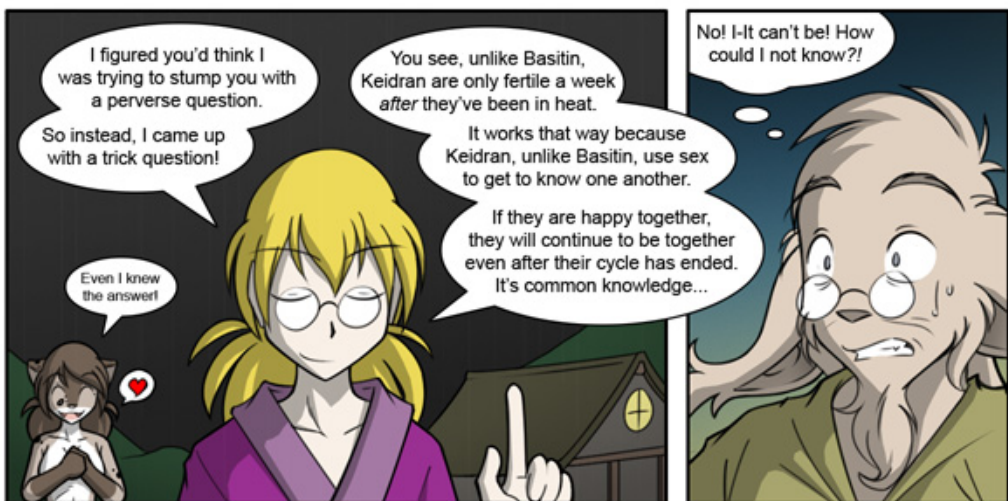
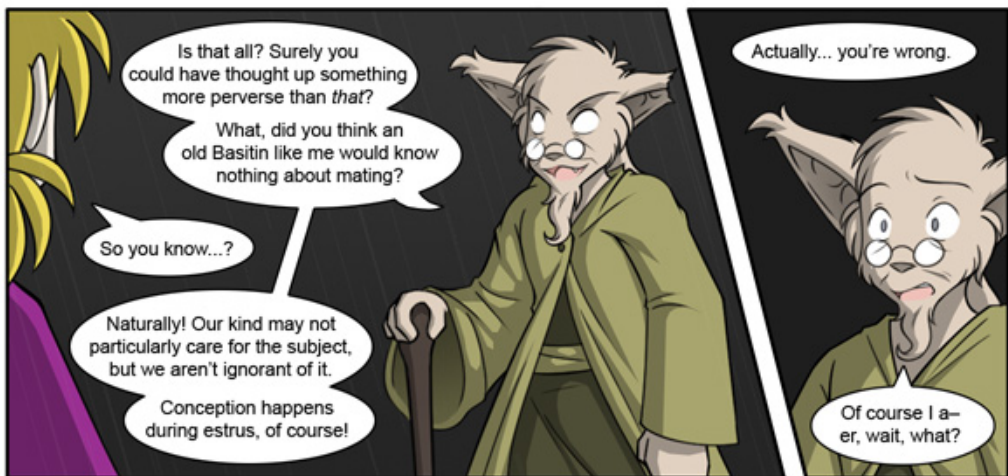
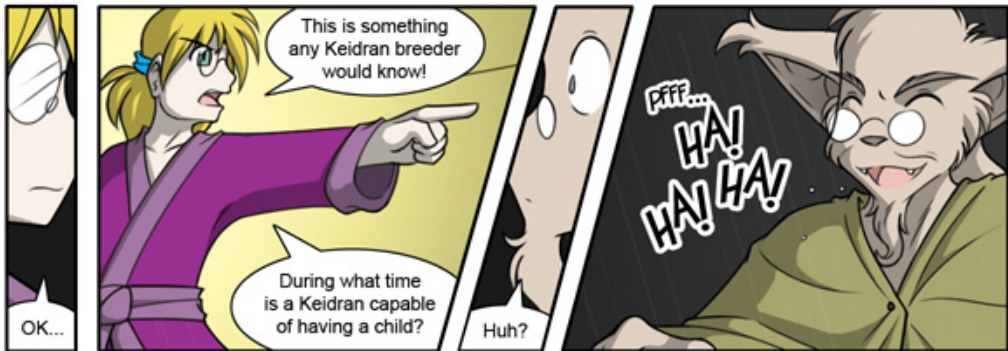
Don't give up, Master!

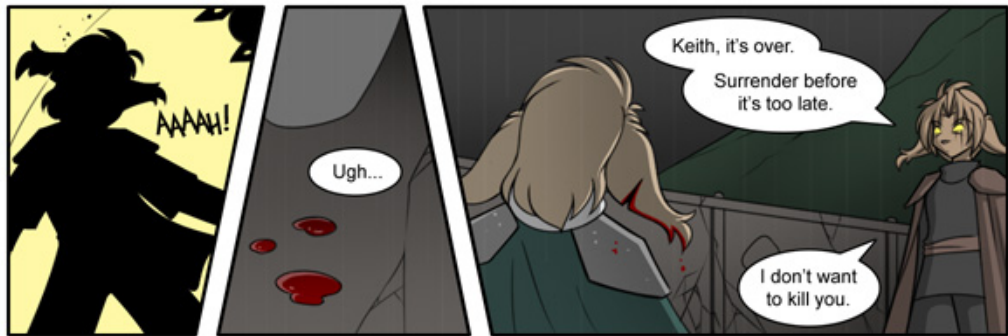
Kathrin? I told you to stay on the boat!

I just couldn't! I had to see that you were okay!

Come on, Eric! There must be something you know that the old goat doesn't! Think! You're the smartest person that I know!









CRACK!



No, the castle...
it was a trick!



I'm standing on
the section of the bridge
I damaged...!

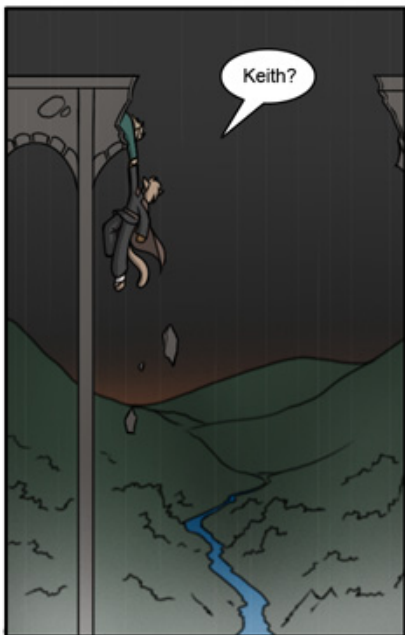
If I keep backing
up, I'll lose him!



Alaric, no!



I won't let
you get away!









Meanwhile...

Flora, wake up.



You alright?
We need to go.

Natani?



! GASP! !



Oh, gods...
Natani? D-did
you do...?

No.
I woke up just before
you. He was like this.

...but whoever *did*
do it was much more
powerful than me.



T-this is terrible...

Why would someone
do something like this? Even
in order to help us...


He didn't deserve to
die... not like this...



Hey! We don't
have time for that!
We have our own
lives to worry about!


We've got to
get to the others!






Wow, that was a close one, wasn't—
Hey! Don't open that! It's not yours!

Hmph...
I can't read it anyway.




It's all in what I assume is Basitin... though with a... disturbing number of hearts drawn on it...



Well, she's gone now. Let's go.


Oh!
Natani!



You almost dropped the note! We don't want Keith to miss out reading this!

He always seems unhappy, maybe settling down with a nice Basitin girl will do him good.

Don't you think?



Oh, sure... that would be...

...great...





Er...



Oh, whatever.
I'll deal with the gay rumors later.

Keith, can you hear me?

Natani...

I... I killed him...



I've killed them
all... my mom, my dad...
my best friend...

They're all dead...
dead because of me.



Don't talk like that. I
remember what you said
at the graveyard.

It wasn't your
fault...



Natani, is there
anything you can
do for him?



Even if I could spare the
magic, healing wounds
like this is beyond me.

We don't have time
enough anyway.
I'll carry him.





You whelps have made a lot of trouble tonight.

But now it's time for me to finish what I began at the tavern.



And what exactly was that, General?



Your Majesty!



I... thought you were still bed-ridden. You shouldn't be out here... in this rain—



I am not yet too weak to stand with my men when the time calls for it.




Woah, that's a... big Basitin. But... I thought they had a king?

They do...




...and that's her, King Adelaide.



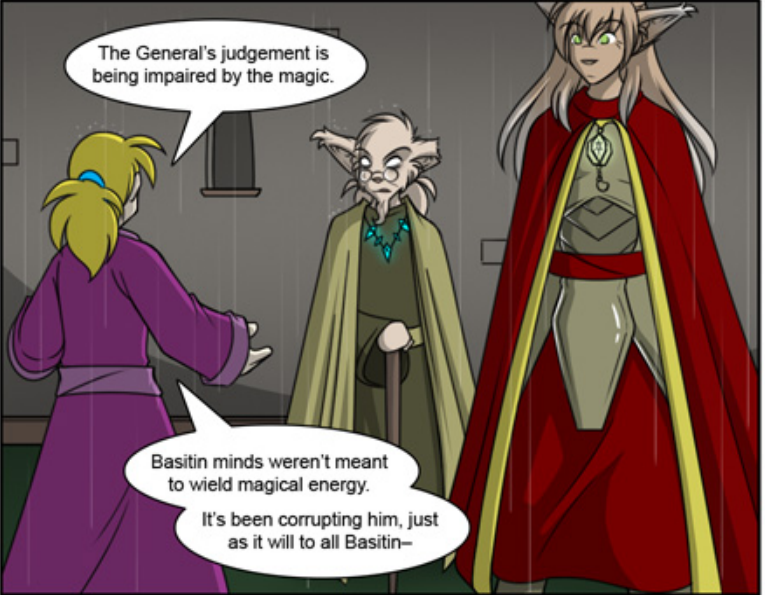
I've been hearing disturbing reports of your activities, General.

Killing a fellow soldier...
Burning down a Basitin tavern...
Manipulating a legal trial...

What is making you act in such a way?



Your Majesty!
if I may...



The General's judgement is being impaired by the magic.

Basitin minds weren't meant to wield magical energy.

It's been corrupting him, just as it will to all Basitin—

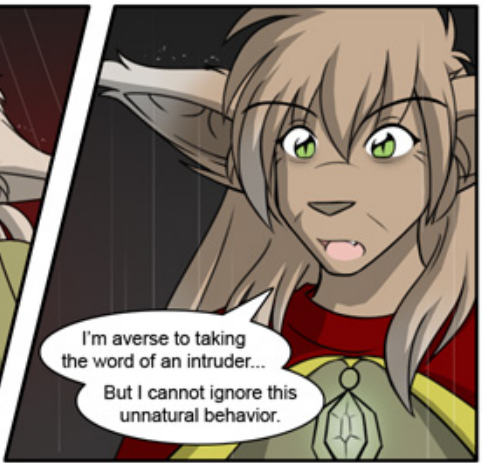


Lies! Nothing but lies!

He's working with the Keidran; trying to keep the magic to themselves!

My mind has not been changed!

My mind has never been clearer; my body never stronger!

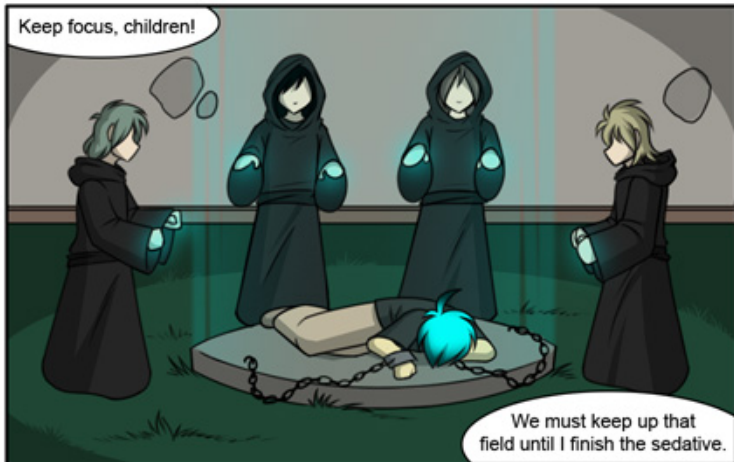


I'm averse to taking the word of an intruder...

But I cannot ignore this unnatural behavior.



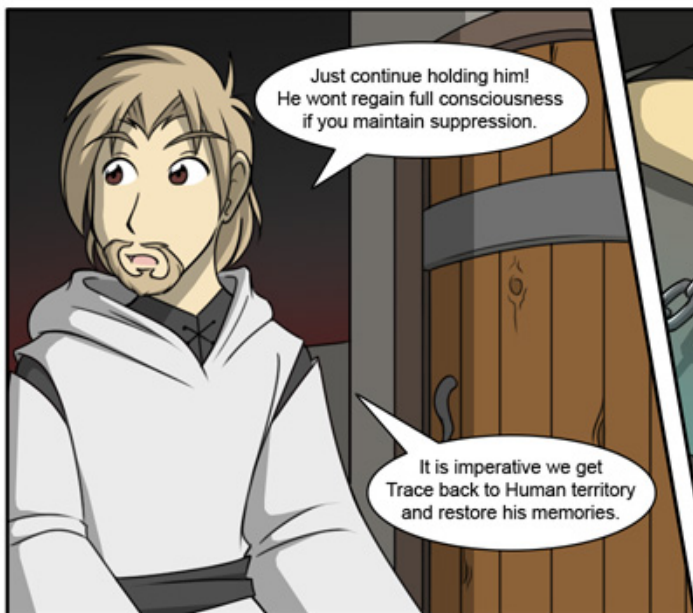
Keep focus, children!



We must keep up that field until I finish the sedative.



S-Sir, he's moving!



Just continue holding him!
He wont regain full consciousness
if you maintain suppression.

It is imperative we get
Trace back to Human territory
and restore his memories.

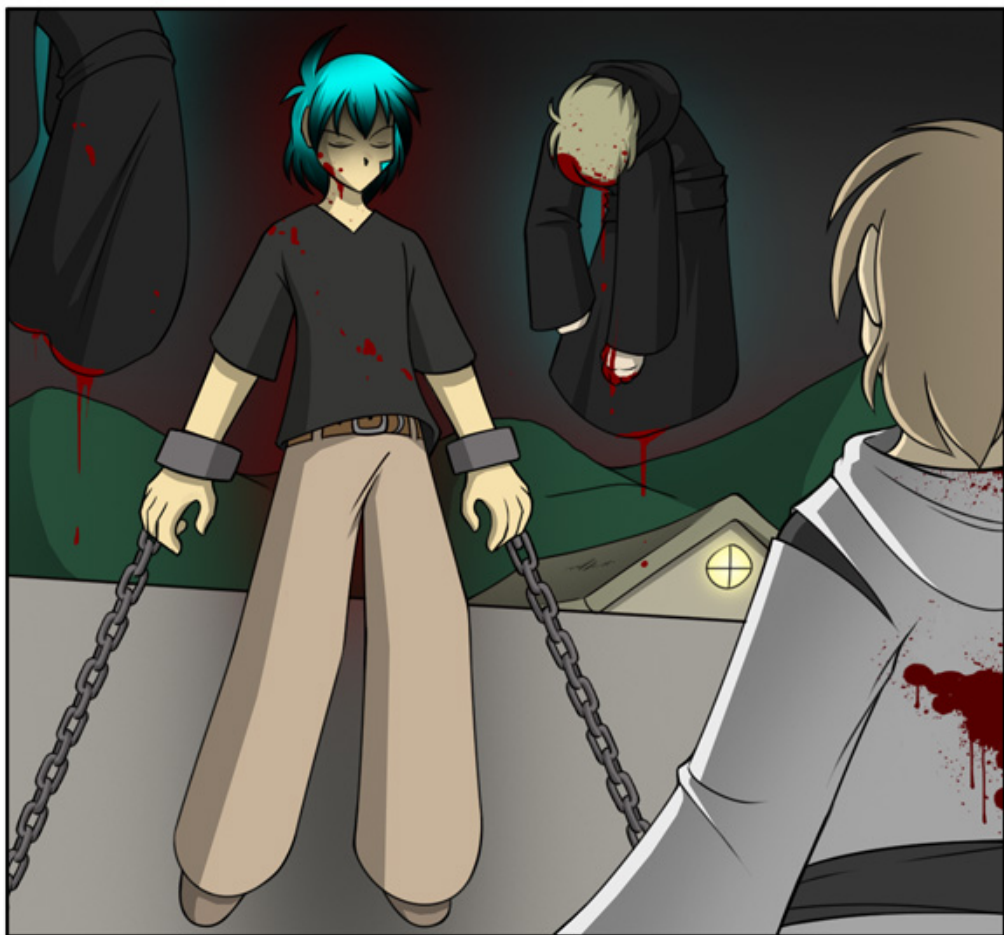
We must find out what he
discovered before he was taken.



There, finished.



Aaaaah!







Tra...Trace!

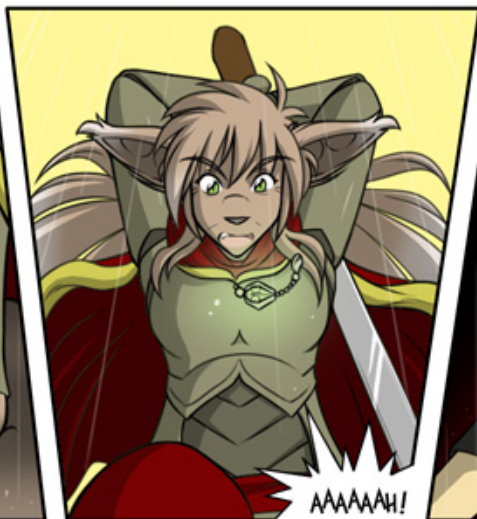


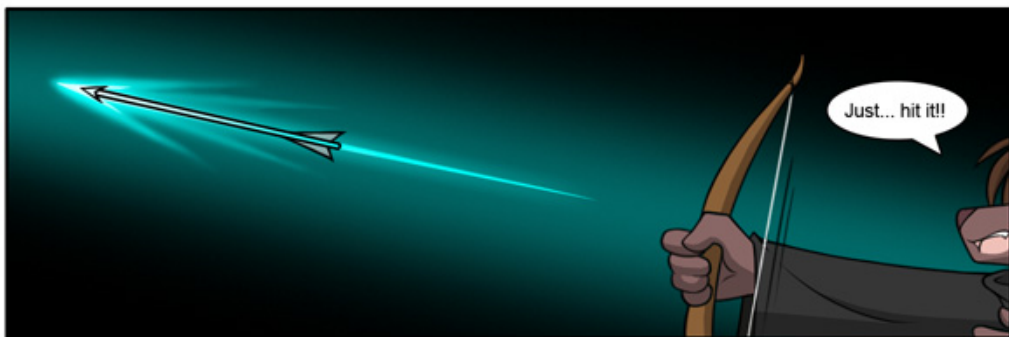
Flora?

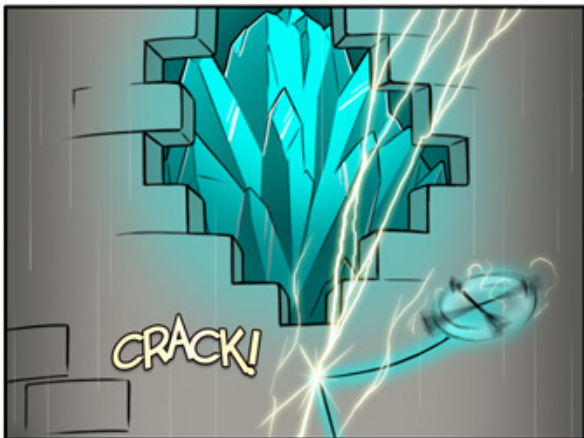


You, Basitin!
Are you the one
harming Flora?











Natani, I t-think you have another chance.

You... you might be able to use my locket as a s-source of mana.



What? Why didn't you tell me that before?



I-I'm sorry...

It's... very important to me. I.. I was hoping you wouldn't have to use it.



Well with the way things are going now, this won't do us much good, anyway.



I'll never get a clear shot so long as that idiot's pinning us down!



Got anything else that might—

Laura? ...where did she go?

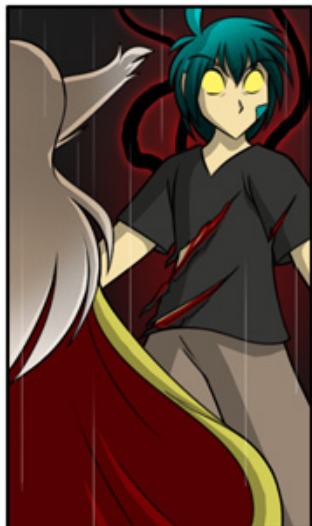


Laura! What is she doing?!

If I can take his attention away... just a few seconds...



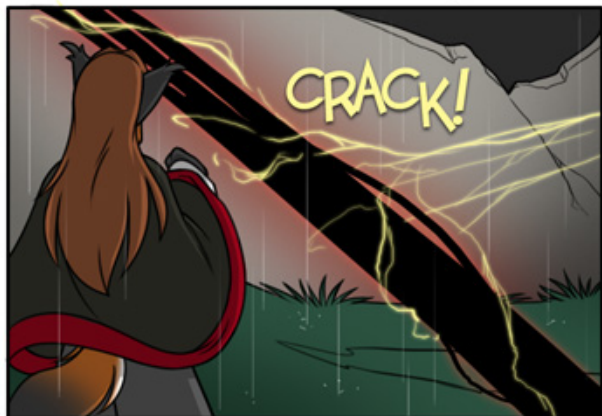
...please, don't let it hurt...



Ah...!




Eh?



CRACK!




What?!




The Templar should have put you down when they had the chance.


You Humans are nothing but trouble!



I won't let you hurt Flora... or... the others!



Don't think I'm afraid of you, Boy.



You may have once been a skilled mage, but now you're just a child with power beyond your control!


I'll show you true magic—!



Erk...!

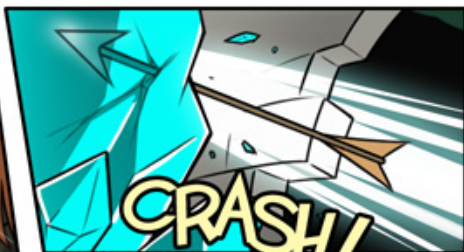
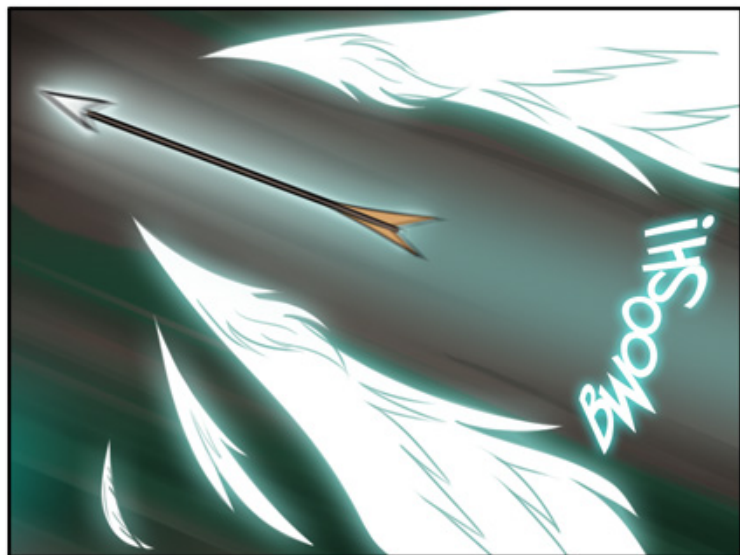



GWACK!



I... I'm sorry I'm hurting you!







No! All my work...!

What have you done?!
What... have I done?



Come on!

Laura!



Run!

K-Keith...

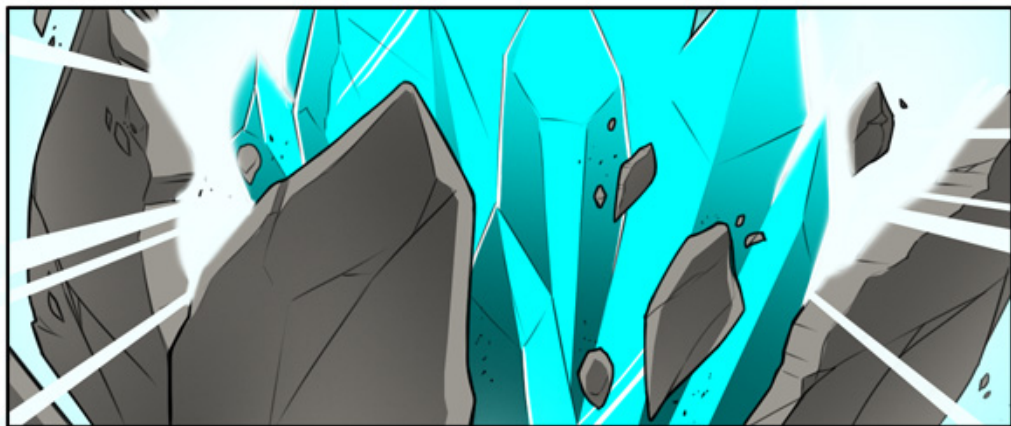


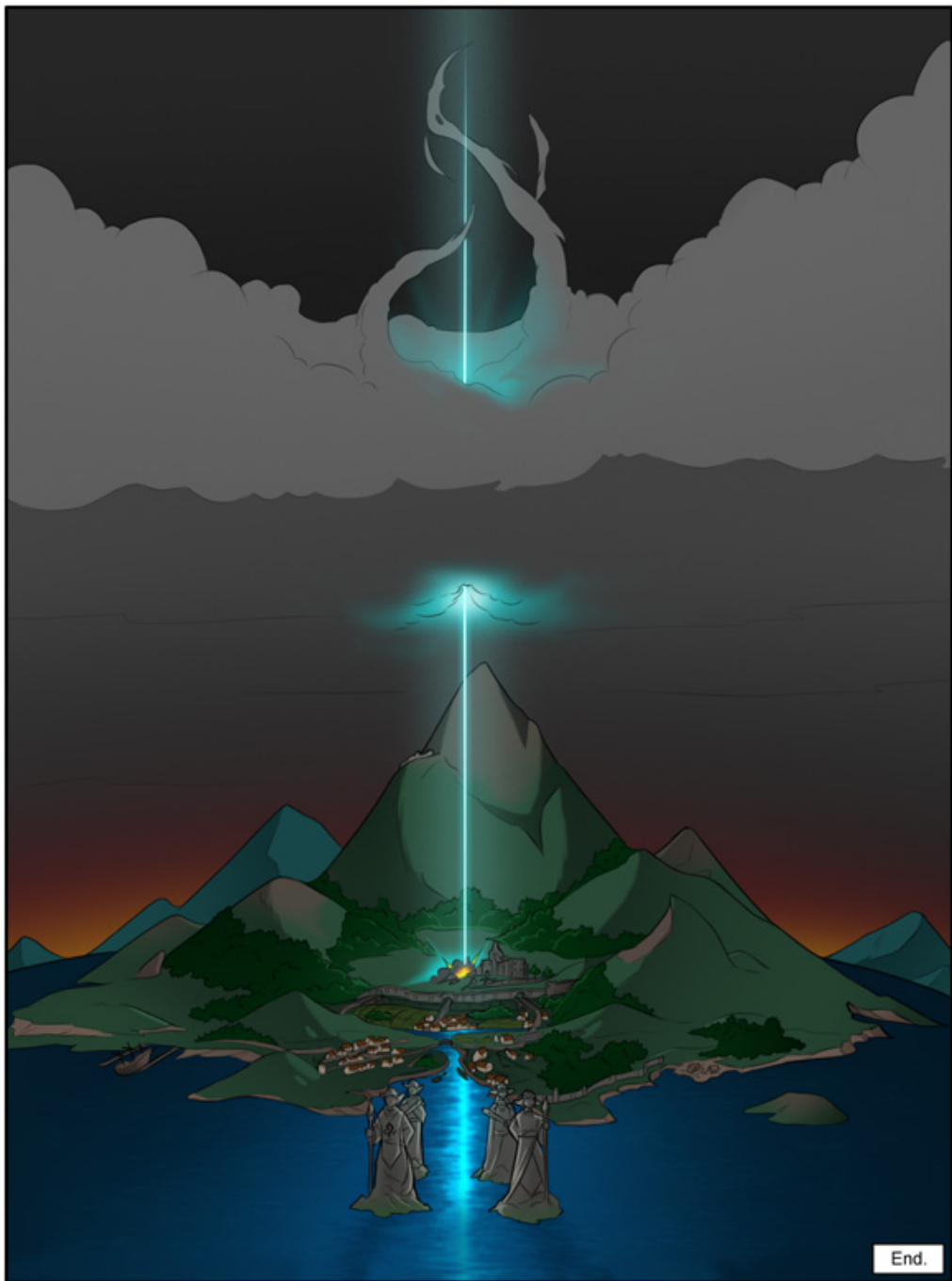
AAAAH!

FWOON!









End.







I didn't stand up to him...

I wasn't strong enough back then.

But after that day, I set out to change things.



The old generals manipulated the system...

So I did as well!

...I hope you're still alive.
I've made one last scheme...

A practical joke on all those who were responsible for six years ago...

Keith...

