

ELANCIA CHRONICLES

THE ORDER OF NEW GODS

BY WOOFLE

SEASON I

BLISTERED SKIES

EPISODE XI

WINE AND CIGARETTES

— ILLUSTRATIONS BY SORCERERLANCE AND FORTUNA —

♪♪ [Holy Army](#) ♪♪

The medical tent was an unpleasant place to be at times for General Charlemagne, although she visited often. She preferred to be visible and accessible no matter where the Holy Army set up camp—she also liked to visit the wounded and give them encouragement. Sometimes, a few kind words could help pull a soldier through. Other times, it would at least give them closure.

Today, though, was different. She was flanked by her husband and chief intelligence officer (Aliester, or Alie as she called him—he hated it when she did that in public), and one of her top colonels (Matthias Brohaugh, who acted tougher than anyone normal should), the former of which was oddly smug and quiet today, and the latter of which was smoking a cigar.

She'd already spoken to the wounded today, but there had been some fresh arrivals—ones who the Holy Army chose to treat, although they were technically enemies. Aegiys and Dascillian troops took up most of the tent, many asleep or unconscious, but all handcuffed to their beds—just in case.

They'd washed down the Rukruos river following the successful destruction of the Aegiys Cannon a day prior. There was one oddity among them, though. A mercenary that Charlemagne knew about... one who had information she could really use.

“So, Colonel,” said Aliester, “you found this one washed up on the banks of the Rukruos, huh?”

“Yes,” said the Colonel, “along with a load of other trash. Almost couldn't tell him apart.” He was surlier today than he usually was. It was likely he still remembered being ridden down the stairs by this prisoner—a green-dyed rabbit-kin. Short in stature, large on muscles.

“He doesn't look too worse for wear,” said the hyena-kin. “Has he been behaving himself?”

“For the most part,” said Aliester. “That's only because he's been unconscious the whole time.”

“Been a while since I've seen this one...” said Charlemagne quietly, tapping her lower lip.

Brohaugh tensed his brows. “Same here... unfortunately. I read his crimes to him at the forward base a few weeks ago.” He then eyed Aliester. “Can you *believe* he's got 1,024 counts of assault?”

Aliester shook his head. “Oh, that's right. He rode you down the stairs like a bitch.”

The colonel made a face. “That's not exactly—oh, fuck off. Anyway, now that I think about it, I think that was 1,024 counts of murder? This guy's got a rap sheet longer than The Way of Elia.”

“Most likely false reports.” Aliester shrugged. “He probably filed them himself. Small-time wiseguys do that a lot.”

“Wouldn't surprise me,” said Brohaugh rolling his eyes, and then glaring at his fellow rabbit.

“He's a Dunnite who claims he's Brobragarian. He'd report himself for *genocide* if it made him look tough. I'm just glad we've got his green ass caught again. I can't believe he tackled me down the stairs!”

“You've been talking about him non-stop for the past like, month, we've heard the story like, a hundred times,” Aliester murmured. Chaz spoke over him, growing tired of the ribbing he was giving the colonel.

"It wasn't your fault, Matt," said Charlemagne, "We picked a *terrible* room to hold them in. We were disorganized, and—"

"No, General," said Brohaugh turning to her with a frown, "it *was* my fault. I turned my back on him. If I did that to a *real* barbarian, I'd be dead."

"What's the difference between a real and a fake barbarian?" said Aliester.

Brohaugh shrugged. "A real one would have killed me first."

The General looked back to him. "Real or not, he is more intelligent than you take him for."

"Maybe." Brohaugh flinched with a grunt. It seemed the bruises from his fall still lingered.

Charlemagne focused back on the prisoner. "Either way, he is one of the ones Basil took with him... or rather... well, I suppose the truth of that matter is out already. I guess this confirms the message I received from Regando—Basil and company *were* sent to deal with the Cannon."

"You're serious?" said Aliester, arms folded. "He's one of them?"

"Yes, I remember seeing him," she said tapping her lower lip again, "but I'm not sure if he was the only survivor from his group. A lot of junk came down the Rukruos River after that explosion... Matt, you didn't see any of his friends around?"

The colonel shook his head. "Other than a bunch of Dascillians and Aegiys, he was alone. I didn't see Sir Basil or either of the kids he had with him."

"That's not good..." the General remarked quietly, her brows upturning. Regando and the Blades of Light did have plenty of manpower, but she didn't like the idea of Basil being dead—nor Karina, nor even the kids they'd run off with.

"Well, whatever," said Aliester. "We'll lock him up." The snow leopard turned to Brohaugh. "I'm hungry. Are you headed to the mess hall, Colonel?"

"Sure am, 'pal'," said Brohaugh, "I think my stomach's pissed."

The feline smirked, turning on his heel, "Let's do it."

The Colonel and Lieutenant General exited the tent together.

As they left, Charlemagne could hear Brohaugh talking. "Maybe when he wakes up, he'll actually *be* Brobragian."

"Do you have a hard-on for this guy or something? Who cares about—" Aliester was out of earshot now.

The green rabbit-kin stirred almost as soon as Aliester and Matthias left the tent.

"You're awake?" said Charlemagne kneeling beside the bed.

He grunted. "Been awake. Just waitin' for those dicks to leave."

A moment later, the rabbit tried to sit up, only to find the cuffs around his wrists. He scoffed before sighing and opening his eyes.

"So, it's like *that*, huh?" he said.

"Essentially," Charlemagne said gently. "Do you feel alright?"

"I feel handcuffed."

Charlemagne sighed—he was going to be difficult, she could already tell.

"So... I'm here alone, huh? Nobody else washed up near me?" he said groggily. "Verse, Cecelia? Anybody?" He tugged on his cuffs, as if he could slip or break free.

"Who? No, I'm afraid it was just you and a number of Dascillians and Aegiys. Mostly wounded, some dead, unfortunately. We thought you were Aegiys, too, until we could see your color."

"Shit!" He growled, kicking the bed he was laying in. "Did you see a trick-ass bitch in red pirate-ass clothing near where y'all found me?"

Charlemagne tilted her head slightly, an ear folded sideways. "I heard nothing about a, uh... 'trick-ass bitch' of any kind."

"Thank God! Stella's prob'ly dead, then." he said. "Where am I?"

"A Holy Army cam—"

"I *know* dat shit. I meant *where*? What country, yo?"

“Dascillia. We're outside Vendel City by the lower Rukruos River.” Charlemagne lifted her glasses to rub the top of her snout for a few moments.

He grumbled, rolling over onto his side in annoyance. “Well, I gotta go. I got some people I gotta find. Look, I ain't done nothin' wrong, anyway. Y'all gotta let me go! Otherwise, I'm'a go all Xan on this place.”

Charlemagne wasn't sure what to make of that either. “Xan? That's a Kerlynzian word for— Why would... How... What would that even entail?”

“Yeah, I know it do, and don't worry about it,” he said, “s'why it's my name. Where the hell's my shit, anyway?”

“It is all under your bed,” said Charlemagne, “including your weapon. We kept it for you as we promised.”

Something seemed to widen the rabbit's eyes. “Oh... right, the rendezvous point. Cannon blows up, and we were supposed to meet someone—that was with you guys, huh?”

“It was. I had to come to positively identify you before we could let you go, though.”

Xan tried to lean over to look under the bed but couldn't. “Y'all got my coat, then?”

The General nodded.

“Kay, great.” He flopped back on the bed and sighed. “Anyway, y'all gonna let me up outta here? I didn't do nothin'.”

“Yes, but not before I talk to you about a few things...” the general's voice trailed off, before she briefly chewing on a lock of her hair.

“Oh, right,” said Xan. “Sorry about threatenin' you during the whole Basil thing and shit.”

Charlemagne wasn't sure how to take *that*, either. However, she had little intention of keeping him here. She leaned in closer, whispering so only he could hear.

“I know you're working with the Blades of Light,” she said. “I'm fine with letting you go, but I need two things from you. One, I need you to take a message to Regando once we find a way to get you back there—”

The rabbit cut in, “I can't go back?”

Charlemagne shook her head, “The battlefield has shifted. You can't get anywhere near Pulf just yet... Anyway, aside from that, I need your help right now on a special project.”

“I'm listenin'...” he muttered, although he looked away. Clearly, he hadn't taken the news well.

♪♪ Symphony of Blistered Skies [Dascillia Field] ♪♪

Five hours later, Xan and Charlemagne stood at the gates to Vendel City alone. Although they were both armed, the pair of them did not draw their weapons. Xan hadn't quite expected this caliber of favor, but it meant his freedom, and since he had no idea where Vendel City was compared to where the Aegiys Cannon was stationed, he decided to go along with it. He could have tried to run, but he had a feeling her army would locate him quicker than he could get away, and ask for directions. Besides, this would be interesting...

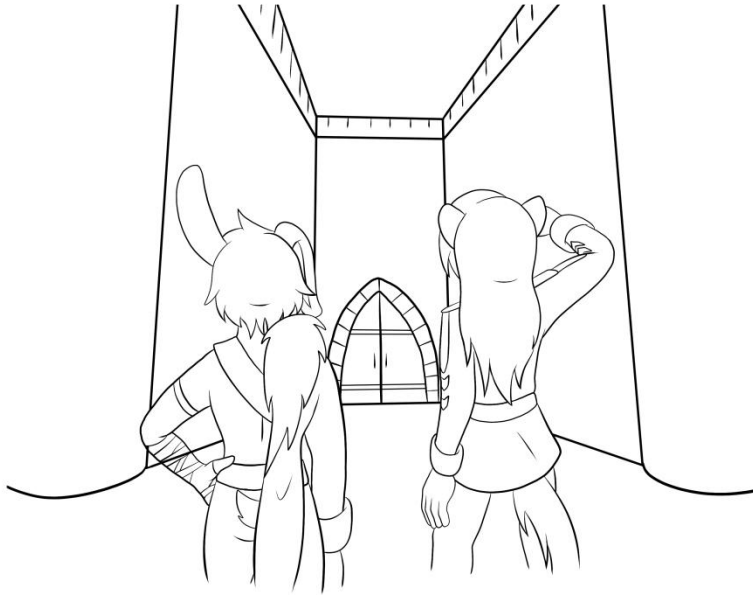
“How long y'all had this place under siege?” he said turning to Charlemagne.

“A little over a week.” she said, her gaze still on the walls above. “The place was virtually unguarded. The Aegiys Guard is surprisingly light on the eastern front.” She was clearly waiting for someone... *anyone* to show up and either let them in or turn them away. “I could tell you why.”

“I'm guessin' the Aegiys don't think much of the monarchy,” said Xan, “and want Prince Film outta the way to make their operations a bit easier in Dascillia. There's a lot'a rumors flowin' around in Pulf... This dude, Regando, he knows shit, so when he talks, I listen.”

Charlemagne looked impressed, lifting her brows a bit. “Yes, actually. That's very wise of you.”

“I keep my ear to the ground.”



“Ho there!” someone called from above the gate. He was armed with a rifle, and dressed in Dascillian military regalia, although he wasn't very big. He looked to be wolf-kin.

“Hello!” Charlemagne called back, waving an arm. “I am General Charlemagne. We need to talk to Prince Filn!”

“I know who you are! Who is your partner, and why should we let you in?”

“I wish to discuss the terms of our departure with him,” said the General. “You want us to stop camping out around your city, don't you? We know you're running low on food... With a few agreements, we can leave you in peace.”

“He ain't gonna buy that,” whispered Xan.

“Oh, sounds great!” said the guard. “We were hoping you'd be ready to deal! I'll go down and get the gate, just a minute!”

Xan made an odd face, but bit his tongue. *Man, guess he doesn't really care who I am at all.*

“The city doesn't have enough military might or food to outlast us,” whispered Charlemagne. “We basically have them in a bind. They'll have to give up or give in eventually. Filn's been complaining non-stop from what Aliester tells me.”

“Aliester?” said Xan. “Oh, the asshole guy...”

“My husband...” said Charlemagne, perhaps trying to remain polite. “He's snuck into the city more than once now.”

“Why didn't we just go in his way?”

“We're being diplomatic, Xan. This isn't about sneaking and stabbing. It's a mission of peace. I just need you here as insurance that we will both get out alive. They know better than to attack me, because they know what could happen if they do, but they'll *really* think twice with you here, and I wasn't about to walk in with an entire regiment. You're a neutral party, anyway... It should keep things civil.”

The gate began to open.

“Just me?” said Xan.

Charlemagne shook her head. “Aliester will be here, too, you're just not likely to see him. I'd like to resolve this without killing anyone, though. If this falls through, we'll have to take the city by force.”

“Y'all been camped out here a *week* just so ya didn't have to kill nobody? Couldn't you be usin' your time more efficiently?”

"I've been very efficient," she said walking toward the gate before Xan fell into step with her. "I'm commanding many, many more soldiers than just these in this camp, you know."

"Well, whatever." The rabbit shrugged as they walked.

"With the Aegiys Cannon destroyed, I don't think Filn has much left to bargain with," the hyena woman said quietly enough for only Xan to hear.

Xan twitched. "Hey, how long ago did the cannon blow up, anyway?" Verse and the others were already finished with their task long enough for news to spread?

"A day and a half ago," said Charlemagne. She then fell silent as they stepped through the gate. *...Shit. If they didn't wash up with me, and they haven't shown up yet...*

♪♪ Evilest Aristocrats ♪♪

Vendel City was rather large, but had no factories. There were heater plants like in other cities, but this place lacked industry. It made up for that with the size of its buildings. Mansions of great size and glamor, opera houses, auction houses, and all sorts of other things Xan didn't have a terrible lot of interest in (although auction houses could be pretty fun when he actually had money to burn).

The mansions almost seemed larger than those, however. About the only normal-sized things in town were the shops, but most of them looked a little too fancy for the rabbit-kin's blood. He felt decidedly uncomfortable in a place this aristocratic.

Although the two of them were let into town, they were being watched by a pair of Dascillian soldiers. The streets were mostly empty though, especially in the early evening as it was now. Still, even though there were many soldiers out patrolling the town and its walls, there was no doubt in the rabbit's mind that the city would fall to the Holy and Celestionese Armies within a day.

From what Charlemagne had told him before the two approached the gates, the citizens of Vendel City spent most of their time up on the walls, or in their taller towers watching the battle between the Dascillian military and Charlemagne's forces. Apparently, it was a form of high entertainment for them, until the Dascillian army retreated into the city itself. Now there wasn't much cake left, and the many rich who had come to Vendel City for its warm, pleasant climate and plentiful water now likely felt more uncomfortable than they ever had in their fortunate lives.

As the pair and their guards made their way up and along the cobblestone road that lead toward Filn's mansion, Xan eyed some of those windows, although there wasn't much to see other than a few faces looking back out at him and the hyena woman.

Passing under a stone archway, the duo arrived at a large garden surrounded by hedges on all sides. The grass was immaculate, as were the small patches of flowers. A large, circular fountain shot water up into the air at the center of the garden. Behind it stood an enormous wooden mansion that appeared to have been added to several times. It was a thoroughly modern structure compared to the castles Xan saw on Basker, which was a nice change of pace.

It took longer than expected to get to the mansion, which seemed to grow further away with each step. Still, when they arrived underneath the roof over the porch, Xan felt tenser than he had when they arrived.

There were not two, but four guards posted in front of the large wooden and glass door to the mansion.

"This is General Charlemagne, and this is... some guy," said one of their two escorts, indicating Xan.

"We're here to speak to Prince Filn," said the hyena, "about the terms of peace that would allow us to move on from your city gates."

Silently, the guards moved aside, but Xan noticed that as they all moved inside the foyer, the door guards were following them too. This made him a little more uneasy, especially since most of them were resting their hands on sword hilts or the grips of their guns.

They followed a massive spiral staircase up around a multi-tiered chandelier, traversed a hallway with red carpeting, and numerous paintings of a pudgy, red-haired human man posed heroically in various positions, including but not limited to on a horse, on a throne, looking over a balcony, and on top of a downed Celestionese soldier with a sword in hand.

That must be Filn. Man, that is not what I expected. Then again, I don't know what I expected. Maybe someone imposing? Then again, he sounded kind of like a bitch, and lo, he's a bitch.

Up another set of stairs with even more carpeting and two more chandeliers overhead, and they finally came to a pair of wooden doors which were slightly ajar. The doors were pulled open from behind as Charlemagne and Xan approached. The rabbit looked apprehensively toward her. If it were Verse, he would have looked back, but the hyena woman just continued on ahead.

Beyond that first set of doors was a long hallway, followed by another set of doors.

The room beyond those doors was rather simple and small. There was a desk; a few couches; a few shelves of odd trinkets that looked occult-related; and a fancy set of curtains before the window, which overlooked the plains that were still scarred from battle near the city's gates.

Prince Filn was lounging upon a large couch between two busts of himself, facing toward the doorway. Xan looked to the side to see that two well-dressed servants had opened them, before looking back to Filn. He'd looked more athletic in the paintings, to say the least (which was somehow possible). He was dressed very well at least, although that did little for his image.

"Ah, General Charlemagne!" he said happily. "I hear tell that you're going to leave our fair city, or at least allow food through our gates once more! That is very generous of you!"

Chaz knelt, as Filn was royalty. Xan made a face, and earned a nasty look from Filn and a swat in the rump from one of the guards. He knelt as well, although he'd rather have put his sword through the face of whoever had touched him.

"Indeed, I'll be moving my troops away from town if a few conditions are met," she said, rising once more. "Those terms are what I came here to discuss."

Prince Filn made a prompting gesture. He looked eager. "Everyone in town is uncomfortable and upset, you see. I can't entertain my guests! Everyone is afraid to leave their homes!"

The guards shifted uncomfortably and silently behind Charlemagne and Xan.

"Leave us!" the Prince prompted. The rabbit heard the doors close a few moments later. A few moments after that, the second set of doors was opened, and then closed as well.

Huh. They must be pretty trusting to leave us in here with him... Or pretty stupid. Not like we're going to do anything though.

"That must be terrible," said Chaz, somehow managing not to sound crass in doing so. "Either way, my terms are as follows: One, I would like Dascillian troops pulled out of Kettleman and Celeport."

"C-Certainly, I can do that..." said Filn, wringing his hands slightly, and looking worried.

"Two," said Charlemagne, "I would like you to banish Lord Ryadel from the throne. He is not the rightful ruler of this country." Xan knew why, even if it took him a little while to figure it out. Filn was a pushover. He would probably try to stop the war once he was actually hearing what was going on across his country, instead of holed up in Vendel City on his own.

"I'd... rather not..." said the Prince still wringing his hands. "That sounds terribly unpleasant..."

"Three, I would like you to put an end to this Aegiys nonsense. Your country is being torn apart by their hands. Many of your people are against them, and everyone is suffering. A rift is growing between your own men and the Aegiys. Can't you see that?" Charlemagne hadn't balked at his last answer.

Xan stood up again, watching several emotions play across the Prince's face.

"No!" bellowed Filn, standing up. "I won't do it! They're making Dascillia a stronger nation! We're going to be the greatest nation on the planet!"

"Then we'll have to stay," Charlemagne shrugged. "I'll give you one more chance. Banish the

Aegiys, send them back to Follin, and take the throne.”

“I’d rather die than do that!” said Filn. “That would turn us back into a nothing nation with no food! This is our chance to finally be recognized as an important nation!” He put his right hand over his heart. “If you want the Aegiys gone,” he flung that arm out, “strike me down, because I will not yield!”

♪♪ Emergency ♪♪

“I can arrange that,” someone said.

Bang.

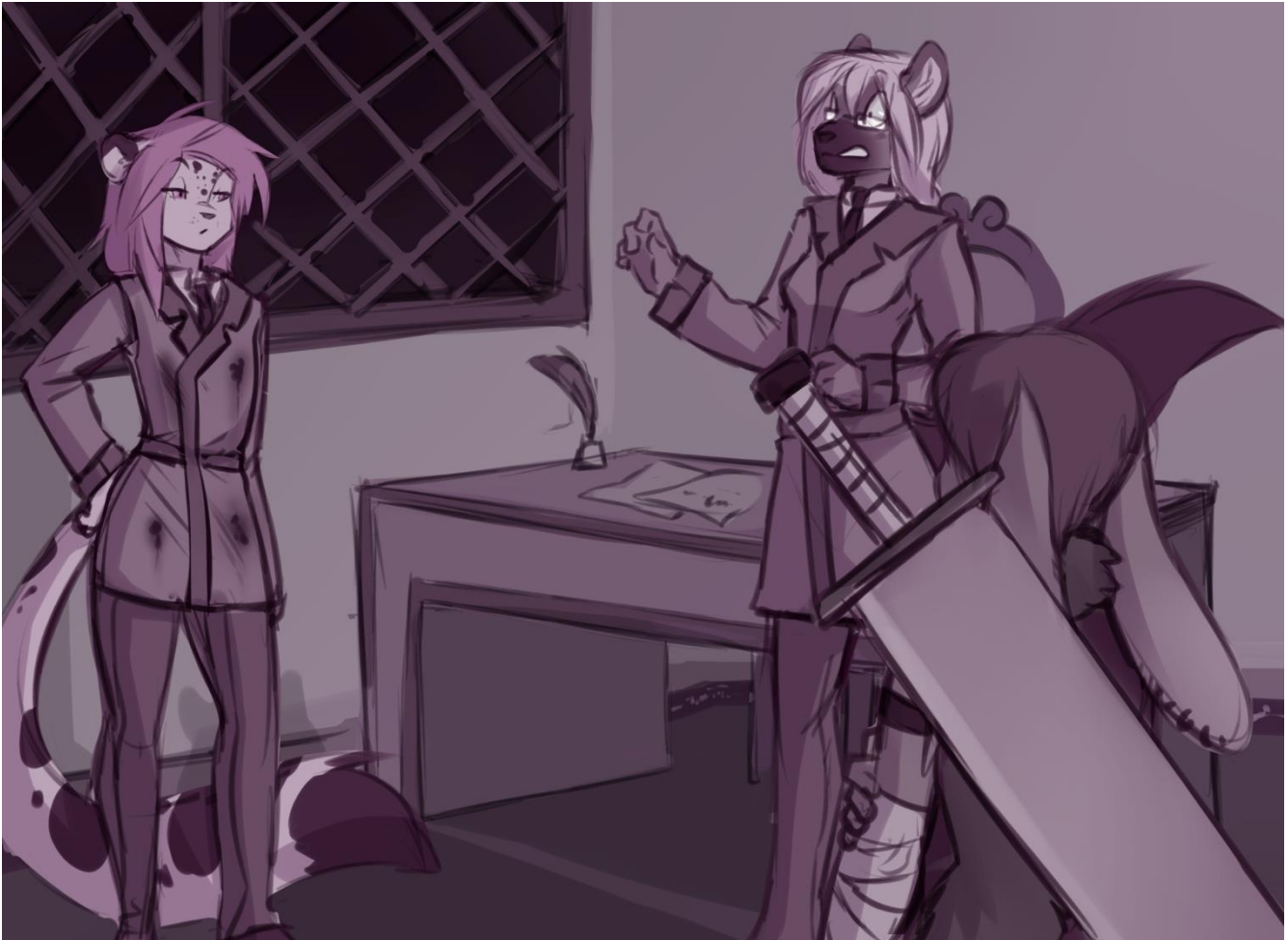
Blood splattered all over Filn's fine purple robes, as he grabbed at his chest where he was bleeding—where his heart really was. He stumbled for a moment, falling to his knees with a gasp.

“I-I didn't mean that literally!” he said staring down at himself. “H-How could you?”

Filn sputtered and choked and coughed, and then curled up on the floor.

Xan could see the barrel of a revolver sticking out from behind one of the book cases, along with the arm holding it. Aliester stepped out from his hiding spot, blowing the smoke from the barrel.

“Okay, so quick update, the Aegiys had an assassin in route to knock you and Filn off. I took care of him, and uh... My trigger finger slipped just now.”



“What!?” Xan demanded, as Charlemagne did the same.

“Dude, you just killed the fucking prince!” Xan continued.

"He was going to die regardless," "Aliester pointed out. "I just save you two from joining him. You're welcome."

"Not my fuckin' point, bro!" said Xan. "Now what the fuck do we do!?"

Charlemagne found her voice a few moments later. "What were you thinking?" she screamed.

The feline shrugged, stepping closer to Filn, before kicking the prince over, so that he fell on his face. "Well, he said he'd rather die," the feline remarked, "soooooo I killed him."

"All you were supposed to do was move our men in closer to mount an attack, and come in and observe!"

"I observed some chucklefuck saying he was going to kill my wife and the prince," said Aliester. "We don't really have time to discuss this right now. We need to make this look like they got Filn but not you guys."

"Aliester!" Charlemagne shrieked in rage.

"Yo!" shouted Xan over them both. "He's right. We got maybe a couple minutes before this gets fucked up. What's the plan?"

"Relax," said Aliester.

The cat-kin tugged something out from behind the book case: a body. It was an Aegiys Guard watchman. Xan could tell that much from his regalia. The cat shoved the body to the floor, placing the revolver he'd been holding in the watchman's hand. "This was the guy. He killed the guards outside the door before I got to him. The Aegiys are killing Dascillians now, so that's a thing. Anyway, he's taking the fall for us."

"Things have gotten that bad?" Xan said.

"We'd better jump out the window," he said, before drawing his own gun and shooting a few holes in the panes. "It has to look like he was shooting at us, after all. Rabbit, if you'd be so kind as to break both sets of doors for us, we can be out the window. That should make this look right."

"Da fuck?" said Xan, but then decided now wasn't the time for debate. He took a few steps from the doors and barreled through them, knocking one off of its hinges, and continued into the second set, past two dead servants, before breaking one of them open. He then turned and ran as fast as he could for the window. Charlemagne was already climbing out, and Aliester had left.

Aliester slid down the slope of the roof outside the window, Charlemagne and Xan were quick to follow him. The cat then leaped off the edge of the roof and into the hedges below. Charlemagne followed with a cry of dismay, and Xan looked back over his shoulder at the window they'd come out of before he jumped over the edge, too.

♪♪ In Trouble Again ♪♪

Huddled in the bushes behind the mansion, the hyena, the cat and the rabbit gathered their wits.

"How are we going to explain this?" said the hyena woman in shock. "This could jeopardize everything we've set out to do."

Xan took a few moments to collect himself. "I know the Aegiys didn't like the idea of Filn bein' around, but they were gonna straight up merc him?"

Aliester nodded. "...and they were going to pin it on us. Once the 'truth' of this matter comes out, how do you think the Dascillians are going to react to their prince dying at the hands of the Aegiys?"

"...Not too great," said Xan.

Not my problem anyway. Guess I'd be pretty freaked out in the General's shoes though.

"Basically," said the feline. "If anything, it could ultimately get the Aegiys run out of Dascillia, which is a win for us."

"Are you *out of your mind*?" shouted Charlemagne.

"Not so loud, dear," said Aliester wide-eyed, holding a finger to his lips. "Anyway, you two hang out here for a while. Let the guards find you. We're already taking the city, anyway. Oh yeah!

Remember, some Aegiys assassin tried to kill you both, okay? You feared for your lives and jumped out the window.”

“Aliester...” Charlemagne began, but stopped herself. “We're going to have a long, long talk about this.”

“You feared. For your lives. And jumped. Out the window. Got it?”

Charlemagne's glare spoke volumes. Xan knew better than to say a word, so he held his tongue. Soon, Aliester rose and fled. Xan could hear confused yelling and see the light of lanterns approaching.

Fierce Arbiter

Karina hadn't seen Kiryl in days. She'd been quick to regain her strength and return to fighting form, but it was difficult going this long without seeing her. It had a way of making the dog-woman feel uneasy.

It was foolish to hold onto childish notions of being able to speak directly to a lost, beloved relative. It was these sorts of flights of fancy she did her best to guard herself against. A few hours of training generally kept her feet firmly planted on the ground, and her head out of the clouds. It was still annoying that the part of her brain that refused to grow up was so intrusive.

Wiping some sweat from her brow, she decided to give her hands and feet a rest. She'd been mercilessly beating on trainees for a few hours now, and although Pulf's army might be growing quickly as the date of secession neared, she had her doubts that any of them could hold their own in a fight.

Worse yet, this workout had done nothing to rid her of these strange, childish thoughts. Then again, they never stayed away long. None of them did.

“Enough,” she said simply, to the poor armor clad trainee she'd knocked flat onto the courtyard ground.

“I-I can still fight!” the trainee managed. Karina could hear the weakness in her voice.

“I'd end your career,” said Karina. “Go. Practice not leaving your entire left side open.”

The girl tried to stand but struggled. There was a time, Karina supposed, she'd have left the trainee there to squirm, but today was not that time. She extended a hand, and with a quick pull, she had the girl on her feet.

“Thank you, teacher!” said the trainee, although she still sounded weak.

The group of trainees around the impromptu ring were applauding. She knew they were eager. Each and every one of them had been wanting to prove their mettle. She wanted to do her part to make them stronger, as well, but she felt she'd done enough for one day—especially considering she was still recovering.

She made her way towards the row of trainees between her and the doorway back into the castle. Each of them looked eager. Some wore street clothes, some were Dascillian deserters (like Rolf and Ryza, although the latter was hardly a trainee), and others had hopped the border from Lurafelle to fight for Elia. It was a hardy bunch, and thus, would be annoying to teach.

“Move,” she said when she got close enough to the two at the center. The row parted for her, and she walked through, and back into the warmer air inside the castle. It had been miserable outside. Rainy, dark and cold.

It was quieter inside, too. Less incessant, unimportant questions, and less distractions. It would be quite nice to perhaps find a quiet corner to meditate in. That generally felt good to do after training. Before training, too, she supposed. It was a peaceful place for her. One where she did not have to wear her own skin, and endure the looks she was given. Some looked at her with admiration, yes, as the trainees had, or Verse did. Most though, looked upon her with the disgust a creature like her rightfully deserved.

She knew what she was, and as such, nothing anyone said to her could hurt her more than she'd

hurt herself, but it still managed to linger, nipping at her heels like a tired, dying monster.

She passed the dining hall where Regando held strategy meetings after the trainees had arrived and quietly retook the city. The safety of the city was a nice notion—a just notion, but one she couldn't grasp onto to center herself. Normally something like this was enough to improve her mood, but seeing the room—even empty—was enough to bring back that stab of pain she'd felt in her neck when she'd heard Basil talking alone with Regando in there. When he'd thought she wasn't nearby and couldn't hear him.

“You mean to wed her, then, Basil?” Regando had asked. “...and in this many years, you've never once told her that?”

“I would assume she knows,” said Basil. “It is just difficult. With her erm... condition, it is possible I would have no heir. Perhaps worse yet, she is a foreigner.”

“Is any of that really important?” asked Regando. “You love the girl.”

“You are a Lord, Sir Regando. You should well understand the meaning of an heir and the importance of bloodlines.” said Basil. “I cannot just—”

“Are you promised to someone?” said Regando.

“A cousin,” said Basil. “I am not terribly fond of her. She is also a child. Not figuratively. Literally.”

“Well, you're set to be a goddamn war hero, Basil. I don't think anyone is going to tell you what you can and can't do,” said Regando.

It had been dark that night, and despite her size, it was easy for Karina to be invisible in the hallway, just outside of the range of the flickering lantern light. She could see Basil hunched over the table, hands folded. His eyes were hidden in shadow, but he was agitated. His wings were stiff again, and his chin was practically touching his hands. She could tell he was drunk, too, but when wasn't he.

That's when the pain had started. A stabbing pain—enough to make it hard to look at Basil, or Regando, but anything but the darkness around her.

“I need an heir, but moreover, I want one, Sir Regando. The line cannot end with me. Karina's condition may have rendered her barren. I would not wish such a fate upon anyone—woman or man.” said the bat, speaking almost into his hands.

Regando, who was reclined in his own seat, wearing his sleepwear, shrugged a shoulder. “I honestly feel love should come first. It did for me.”

Basil was quiet for a few moments. “What would the people of Celestion say? Her gigantism is... quite a subject within the walls of Kalandla. She's bigger and stronger than most men. What would they say about me? What then, would they say when she bore no children?”

“You care so much only about yourself, and things said about yourself?” said Regando. “Your father would be very disappointed in you.”

“Do you speak for him? You don't know what he'd say.” Basil said. “I love her, but I cannot do this thing. You must understand my pain.”

“I understand you're subjecting yourself to a life of torment at your own hands,” said Regando. “I'm old enough to know it's all bullshit. All of it. Heirs, lineage... Eh. You know what? Marry that cousin. Have a thousand heirs. It's your life.”

“You don't understand!” Basil said.

“I understand you've put your feelings before anyone else's,” said Regando. “I need to sleep. Goodnight, Basil.”

With that, Regando rose, and Karina melted deeper into the shadows.

Even earlier on this day of training, she'd heard two trainees talking about her.

“...The size of a house, arms like treetrunks!” one had whispered to another in the barracks.

“...could probably crush your head between her thighs,” had said another to a friend.

Some just stared. She'd grown used to it in the past twenty some odd years, but that hadn't exactly made it easier.

The rain had let up by the time she'd made it to the roof. The sun was setting somewhere beyond the haze, turning the clouds yellow clear across the sky.

She found her favorite spot, and sat, legs crossed. Meditation tended to let these thoughts wash off of her, at least for a few hours. Of course, she'd be lucky to have a few hours.

She managed to get one, at least, before Cecelia appeared. She'd bathed at least, but Karina still knew her scent. It was honestly rather pleasant—at least when she was clean.

The girl sat next to Karina, perhaps attempting to be quiet while reading or doing whatever it was she was doing, but her constant wiggling was too much distraction for Karina.

"Do you need something?" Karina asked quietly, opening one eye enough to look down at the pink mop Cecelia called hair.

Theme of Love

"I have some questions about my story," said Cecelia, "You're really smart and you've read a lot of the same stuff as me! So I wanted to ask some questions about the motivations of K'selia and um... y-your character, too."

Karina sighed softly, trying not to let any laughter sneak into her breath. Cecelia's story was... definitely in need of work. Karina was not religious enough to be terribly offended by its subject matter like Basil would have been. She worshiped, yes, but who didn't?

"If I recall, your charact—err.. K'selia was grappling with issues of love, yes?" said the dog woman.

"Yeah!" said Cecelia.

"She was in love with those two mercenaries, right? You're not sure which she should pick?"

Cecelia was quiet for a few moments, before she put her hat back on, and huddled up in her coat. Karina wasn't sure why the bat did such things—it made her look like she was in a cocoon.

"Ms. Karina, do you think it's possible for a woman to fall in love with a woman?" Cecelia asked, voice muted by her scarf.

That came out of nowhere.

Karina turned her head a bit, regarding the smaller girl. Honestly, despite her oddness, Karina found her quite pleasant. Quite innocent, too. Perhaps that was what had drawn Karina closer to the younger girl. She wasn't sure, really. From the moment they'd first met one another, Karina had felt a strange attachment that hadn't made sense until very recently. Although they were very different, Karina saw a lot of herself in Cecelia in a way. Someone outcast from the rest, who was strange, perhaps not by their own choice.

This was someone Karina needed to protect. More so than anyone else. Even Basil. Sure, she was a magic-user, but like with other matters of religion, Karina did not particularly care one way or the other. They were on the same side of this conflict, and that was all that was important. The dog-woman had felt very uneasy when Cecelia had left with Verse and Xan so many weeks ago, as if a door somewhere had closed, and would never open again.

"Elia does not condone such things," said Karina. "You know this."

"Elia fucking goshdamn sucks," said Cecelia. "I asked you a question! Can a woman fall in love with a woman?"

It was an awkward question with a simple answer—one which she wasn't sure books could prepare Cecelia for. No one wrote about these things.

Karina looked at poor innocent Cecelia in her cocoon. Stubborn, strong-willed and forceful, but

delicate, and in need of someone strong to protect her.

"Yes," said Karina. "It is rare, but I knew a woman like that... It was very strange to everyone who knew her. I suppose it's strange, then. There are men who love men as well, but it is not something you will ever read about. It is not something most would talk about. It is considered improper among society. How would two women have a child, or two men?"

"Okay, that's good, because I think K'selia is going to fall in love with your character. My book's going to be the first book of its kind," said Cecelia with the same straightforwardness she said everything. She had ignored almost everything Karina had so carefully worded.

Karina's face felt hot. "Pardon me. What?"

Cecelia actually smiled when she looked at Karina, which was honestly rather rare. The girl didn't tend to smile. Next thing Karina knew, Cecelia was hugging her far too tight for a creature so small, and then she was up and walking away, leaving Karina alone with her thoughts.

She called a "Thank you Ms. Karina!" over her shoulder, at least, as if she'd only remembered to do so at the last moment.

That was bizarre. Does that mean she's like ... that?

...What does it matter? I'm 'like that' some of the time, too. How couldn't I be?

I suppose if I were to love a woman... if Cecelia were just a little bit older, I'd take her away from all of this. Maybe I should regardless. She isn't safe here, and perhaps in time...

Am I that lonely?

Karina couldn't believe her own line of thinking, and it was enough of a shock that she gave up on meditation for the day. Walking would be better. The most upscale boutique in town had re-opened after the city had liberated itself. The latest fashions would be in, and it would be nice to take a look at them, and see what Dascillians thought was fashionable this year.

Since the assassination of Prince Filn, things had grown strange in Dascillia. Lord Ryadel, who was now the official defacto ruler of Dascillia, had pulled all his troops back from the front lines and abandoned the Aegiys, who had now struck far enough south that they were across Mt. Kizzen. The Holy Army had been looking near to losing the war until Filn's death, but now, it seemed Dascillians generally blamed the Aegiys for Filn's death, and perhaps no longer wanted them around. That was a pleasant thought to entertain. That alliance would likely soon implode.

<MAP GOES HERE>

At night, the city was rather active with patrols. Any day, the Aegiys would perhaps swoop down upon it, or the Dascillians would attempt to take it back. At current, it existed as a city-state, or a territory, depending on who one asked. It hadn't officially declared independence, but it had certainly made a show of opting out of the war about two weeks after the Aegiys Cannon had fallen. Regando had slowly been moving the chess pieces within his city and within Dascillia to rotate sympathizers to him. When the reinforcements from Lurafelle came, she'd helped them run the Aegiys and the Dascillians who still wished to fight out of town.

It wasn't really her concern whose jurisdiction the city fell under. All that mattered was that the people who lived in it were safe, and that those that wanted to flee the war had a place to go.

Laws and regulations were not true justice. They were a form of justice, yes, and one put in place to keep all of sentience in check, but they were really just guidelines. True justice was what she saw in Pulf this night. Shops and pubs reopened, children playing in puddles, and... the fashion boutique. There it was, like an oasis in the desert before her, at the end of the road that followed the river.

Its lanterns were all lit, and four beautiful dresses and one rather dapper suit were on display.

The suit was off to one side, and she eyed it for only a moment as she approached the window.

Basil would look good in that.

...I don't want to think about Basil, though.

There was someone else standing near the window to the shop, up on its brick and wood porch, but Karina ignored them for now.

One of the dresses was Kerlynzian, like she'd worn in her youth. The designs on it were authentic, meaning it was likely an import, perhaps brought on the Ironclad at some point. She could only see the front where it rested upon a mannequin from here, but she wouldn't go inside to look at the back. No, she'd just have to imagine that. Someone like her walking into such a place would be... improper. The jokes would practically write themselves, and she could imagine the horror on the shopkeepers' faces.

She sighed heavily, cupping her chin, and letting her eyes drift over to a rather frilly pink dress next to the Kerlynzian one.

There, someone had their hand against the glass as they studied the dress. That person looked up when they heard the sigh, and that was when Karina realized it was Verse. She hadn't seen him all day.

"I ain't doin' nuffin' funny," the fox immediately said.

Karina glanced from him to the dress he'd been looking at through the window. His breath had fogged up the glass slightly.

He was definitely doing something funny. Karina just wasn't sure what. He wasn't doing anything obscene. He just seemed to really like dresses perhaps. His tail was wagging, although he seemed to be trying very hard to make it stop.

Karina couldn't hide her smirk, nor did she care to. "I haven't accused you of anything, fox," she said. "Surely, you've incriminated yourself."

Verse curled his lip a bit, and scoffed. "At least I could fi' into the fing if I wan'ed to."

That hurt.

"Sadly, you couldn't afford it," said Karina, "although you certainly do seem the type to wear women's clothing."

"Oi! Tha' was a disguise!" said the fox, his tail stiffening. "Wot, did you come 'ere to be oll loike, 'OI OI OI. McDowell. You are a worthless piece of shit. I will laugh at you now. Ha ha ha' again? 'cause tha' act's real old..."

"You've already taken care of that bit for me," said the dog woman. "With that out of the way, tell me, which of these dresses is the most beautiful?"

Verse, who like her, was used to the insults by this point, turned to look back at the window. "I'm partial to the Kerlynzian one. The embroidery onnit is jus'... impeccable, really."

"Yes, I think it is perhaps an import," said the dog woman, chin cupped once more.

"Looks loike 'ome..." said Verse, his tail giving a little wag, and then laying still.

"Home..." said Karina, looking at the dress once more. She remembered before her disease, and before she'd become a monster. She remembered wearing things like that. When she was little, she'd been considered the most beautiful child in her city. With her family's standing, too, she would have had so many suitors.

It was a nice thought to imagine what life would have been like if she hadn't become this way. She couldn't imagine a life where she didn't have any blood on her hands though. It was a fairy tale, just like the Kiryl dreams.

"Guess it ain't either of our 'omes anymore," said the fox, his ears sagging.

"Speak for yourself," Karina started to say, but only got the "s" out before changing her mind.

"So it would seem," she said instead. "Heard anything about Hayfarer?"

"Xan? No." said the fox. His tail stopped moving.

For a while, they were simply two people looking at dresses through a window.

"Karina..." said Verse, but he trailed off. His voice had quavered a bit like it had that day they'd spoken on the bridge. The day he'd brushed whatever had been on her face off of it. She'd almost liked that. She liked it when he was an asshole, too. No one stood up to her. Not even Basil (at least when he knew she could hear him). No one challenged her except this stupid little fox. It was... honestly rather nice in a strange way.

She'd let him hold his hand there for a moment. He was the only one other than Cecelia that didn't look at her like she was a monster.

"McDowell?" said Karina.

"I don't really 'ate you," he said.

"Speak for yourself," she said.

Verse continued, "I-I fink tha' dress'd look noice on you. You know, you could 'ave them make you one. I-I'll go in with you."

Karina's eyes widened for a moment, and in that moment, she entertained the notion of going in with him and doing just that.

"I am in need of a dress as much as you are. Besides, McDowell, they could not import one in my... size. Even if they could, the wait would be long and pointless. Who would I wear it for?"

Verse scratched behind one of his ears, and then looked over his shoulder at her. "Yourself," he said.

Karina hadn't thought about that. She liked wearing strong and protective clothing. Warrior's clothing. It was what she'd always done since the disease set in, and since her training started. It was how someone like her should dress. Even more people would stare if she didn't.

"What good would that do me?" Karina said.

"More than you'd know..." the fox said softly. "More than I can say."

"What would you have me do? Wear it and look in the mirror at myself?" she said.

"Yeah..." said the fox. "I think maybe you'd see um..."

He grew quiet then, as if searching for words.

"ow... um... 'ow you look to me," he said very quietly.

It took Karina several moments of going back over what he'd said in her head to realize what he'd meant. For the second time that day, her face grew hot.

"You're a lovesick, lonely fool," said Karina.

"Y-You too," said Verse.

Karina sighed. Other than Verse's little outburst a few moments prior, this was pretty normal for their conversations. "See you tomorrow?"

"Sure," said Verse. "Can I ask you somethin' before you go?"

"No," said Karina, and turned to leave.

She'd made a few steps away from the porch, her sandals leaving imprints in the mud, when Verse said something that made her ears stand on end.

"Kiryl 'emana," said the fox.

Karina stood stone still.

"How do you know that name?" Karina asked evenly. It wasn't out of the realm of the possible that Verse would have heard of her, depending on when he'd left Kerlynzia. She was in charge of the Huliyah Prefecture, after all.

Verse was completely silent, until Karina turned around. The fox had lit himself a cigarette, and was puffing away on it. He finally spoke up though.

"She's an old friend," he said simply.

"Why would someone like you know a prefect?" said Karina.

Verse just shook his head. "Look... I don't know 'ow to explain it. I just wan' to know if you've spoken with 'er recently."

"Why?" said Karina, a hand on her hip. "How would I? She's on another continent."

The fox was beginning to look very awkward, as he had on the bridge. He was being weird again.

“She told me to protect you,” said the fox.

“You’re trying to lead me to believe that you’ve spoken to her more recently than I?” said Karina.

“Very recently,” said Verse. “She said you and I should stick together.”

“And where did this conversation take place, exactly?” Karina asked. This was getting too uncomfortable and too weird for her. She was positive the fox was lying. Absolutely positive, until he spoke again, softer this time.

“In a dream,” said the fox, able to look her in the eye from on the porch’s steps.

Karina met his eye for a few moments. He wasn’t bluffing, and she knew now he wasn’t lying. She suddenly felt very uneasy, and very ill. She felt as if perhaps she were dreaming now.

“Nonsense,” she said, and turned to leave, slower than she had before. She wasn’t even sure which direction she was going.

“You’re going to walk into the river,” the fox said helpfully.

Karina changed direction, and headed that way. He didn’t follow her.

Tomorrow they would be leaving again. Cecelia had begged and begged Karina to take her down south to Celestion in search of some sword or something like that. Some weapon that allegedly had once belonged to the God of Fate himself. Karina hadn’t devoted much time to thinking about a God or Gods aside from Elia, but Cecelia was insistent. She’d blathered on about how Fate was “really making himself look bad and dumb,” and how she was going to “save him from making a terrible mistake,” and how she “totally needed the sword to do that.”

Right now, Karina’s options were to stay in Pulf and beat the shit out of an ever growing group of trainees until the war ended, or to take a short vacation back to Celestion while the armies were scattered and it was safe. Cecelia really wanted to go, and to Karina, that was what was important. She sure as hell wasn’t about to let Cecelia go alone and undefended.

Surely the bat had talked Verse into it as well, so she’d have to endure his presence. It would be, perhaps nice, to spend some time away from Basil though. She hadn’t told him they were going, and if all went well, he wouldn’t find out. She wasn’t going to be gone that long anyway.

Beside that, he was safe here.