

THE MADNESS OF CHARTRULEAN
A Gardeka Story

S1:E10
"STARBRINGER'S BANE"

Written by

H.M. Radcliff

TMOC EPISODE 10: STARBRINGER'S BANE

AWKWARD STARBRINGER FAMILY DINNER

[Nighttime sounds]

KING STARBRINGER

(sarcastic)

So nice to have my children join me
for dinner for a change. It wasn't
like pulling teeth at all.

[Imsep sighing]

KING STARBRINGER (CONT'D)

And Cythaelia. And Loam, you're
welcome to sit down with us, you
don't have to stand guard all
night.

IMSEP

Good luck trying to get him to do
anything normal.

KING STARBRINGER

I heard he took a fall.

IMSEP

By the time Tomlin got to him, he
was back to his usual lumpy self.
Couldn't find anything wrong.

SOPHROSYNE

Where's Yoba this evening?

KING STARBRINGER

Taking his dinner in his apartment.
Still feeling unwell I think. Did
you make it to Astreus today?

SOPHROSYNE

I did.

KING STARBRINGER

Care to discuss?

SOPHROSYNE

I was going to talk to you about
this once there was more of a plan.
But they asked me to help with the
new Jhardekai recruits.

KING STARBRINGER

(disarmed)

Ah! As much as I like your spunk,
we need to talk these things
through before you go breaking
those kinds of doors down.

SOPHROSYNE

As if you'd even care to hear about
what *I* want to do.

KING STARBRINGER

(probing)

Does this have anything to do with
you giving Chartrulean your
mother's brooch?

SOPHROSYNE

It's not what you think. He's just
helping me learn more about it.
I've even asked for it back
already.

KING STARBRINGER

Good. I'll talk to Lapadine. The
kind of help they need is all about
connections. It'll be hard given
the climate, but I think you're
ready.

IMSEP

Pfsh.

KING STARBRINGER

Imsep, are you not hungry?

IMSEP

I would rather have dinner with my
friends. I'm tired of this bland
food.

KING STARBRINGER

You can thank your sister for that.

IMSEP

Why?

SOPHROSYNE

I've requested a commoner's diet
for us after the garish display
that was the banquet. Rations and
all.

KING STARBRINGER
 You can return to the countryside
 if you'd like.

IMSEP
 I don't want to go back there
 either. It's so isolating.

[Aggravated dad sounds]

SOPHROSYNE
 Don't be ridiculous.

IMSEP
 You seem to be getting on here just
 fine, Phrosy. Of course you have a
 strapping older man to flirt with,
 so I suppose that's to be expected.

[King Starbringer chuckles]

SOPHROSYNE
 That's not true. And he's not that
 much older than me.

IMSEP
 He must be *twice* as old as you!
 Have you seen him?!

SOPHROSYNE
 That's not true.
 (beat)
 Besides, I don't flirt.

KING STARBRINGER
 I have to agree with your sister on
 this one. If she did, she'd be
 married by now.

SOPHROSYNE
 Ugh. Can we find something else to
 talk about? *Anything*. Cythaelia
 aren't you hungry?

CYTHAELIA
 It's a little...

IMSEP
 See, it's the food! Loam isn't
 eating either. Isn't that right,
 guardian?

[Loam grunts]

SOPHROSYNE

I don't think this is his diet...

KING STARBRINGER

(confused)

His diet?

IMSEP

Why is Phrosy's guardian a normal girl, and mine is a big dumb rock?

KING STARBRINGER

You always ask not to be bothered. Loam doesn't speak, so I thought it was the perfect fit.

IMSEP

He's barely human. I mean look at him. He looks like a shaved wild animal.

SOPHROSYNE

Maybe you should try treating him like a human. I'm sure he's completely fascinating if you'd just try. For once.

IMSEP

Not interested. Have you smelled him?

KING STARBRINGER

I'd like to talk about Imsep and his friend, Josquin.

IMSEP

How long do you plan on keeping him locked up?

KING STARBRINGER

Until I can discuss it with my cabinet. As you can imagine, we've been busy with more important things.

IMSEP

Do they even know what's going on? What Yoba's accusing him of?

KING STARBRINGER

They'll be informed. But that matter has no place at the negotiation table. In the meantime, don't you go doing anything stupid.

IMSEP

(sarcastic)

Oh don't you worry about it, it's me. What could *I* do?

KING STARBRINGER

Yoba seems to have some wild ideas. If Loam could speak, I'd ask *him* where you've been sneaking off to at night.

IMSEP

He's dumb, but he'd never betray me, even if I was up to something nefarious. Isn't that right, Loam?

LOAM

(annoyed)

Hmmmm....

KING STARBRINGER

Josquin may be your friend, but his antics cannot be tolerated. Do you understand me? I want to hear you say that you understand.

IMSEP

Oh, I understand, Father. I understand loud and clear.

[Transitional music]

CHARTRULEAN DREAMS

[Nighttime sounds]

NARRATOR

As the evening hours wore on, Arcas's sister moons sank below the horizon, leaving Simitu in uncomfortable darkness. The silhouette of a boy carried a thin silver blade through Astreus' gardens, stopping at a bed of violets. The boy picked out a good one with broad petals, pinched it at the stem, and recoiled when he felt sharp pain. He pulled a small thorn from his thumb, and a droplet of blood formed where it had been. The droplet rolled over the side of his hand and fell to the slab of stone between his feet. It writhed as it hit the stone, turning from red to black and arcing into a tortured shape, as if reacting to the vibration of some mysterious force. The boy didn't seem to take notice of this, and continued cutting the flower with the blade.

[Transitional music]

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

At the other end of the complex, wind carried salt into the gymnasium through a gaping hole in the wall left by the day's sparring accident. It swirled and coalesced in piles along the wall and in every corner as if it were long abandoned.

The dull thudding of footsteps broke the eerie silence. The desert wolf ambled in, its giant salt-caked paws straining with each heavy footfall. The beast's head glided close to the ground as it followed the scent of its prey.

In the foyer, Chartrulean jolted awake from his prolonged nap. He was surprised to find himself alone, and sitting in complete darkness. Strange. Borsha always left a light on somewhere, but not this night. He pushed himself upright and stretched his aching back. His fingers moved to his temples, where the sensation of Sophrosyne's soothing touch lingered. For a moment he thought he could still pick up traces of her scent, but then it was overcome by a heavy musk, mixed with the briny scent of salt, and sweet metallic scent of blood. It was out of place, and invoked such fear in him that he was unable to move.

He felt eyes on him from somewhere far off in the darkness and reluctantly followed the sensation. That's when he saw the monstrous silhouette of the wolf, lurking at the end of the hall, glowering at him with not two but four ghoulish red eyes. Saliva dripped from its snout, making pools on the floor. Strings of it clung to long wiry hair.

Black void mists emanated from the back of the monster wolf, creeping towards Chartrulean along the walls like blind, probing tentacles.

CHARTRULEAN

This is a dream. You're not really here.

[Deep growling voice]

WOLF JHARDEKAI

Is it a dream? Or is it something more?

CHARTRULEAN

What are you?

WOLF JHARDEKAI

You know what I am. You're just afraid to say my name.

CHARTRULEAN

Jhardekai.

(beat)

What happened to the moss boar?

WOLF JHARDEKAI

I lost my patience. They were destroyed.

CHARTRULEAN

That's not how you operate.

WOLF JHARDEKAI

Did you let your herd, the ones you'd sworn to protect, destroy you? No. I think you and I both know that the need to survive trumps duty.

CHARTRULEAN

Why are you here?

WOLF JHARDEKAI

To finish what the berserker could not.

[Sound of rushing liquid]

CHARTRULEAN

A river of blood. Carrying violets. Hundreds of them. Wh--

WOLF JHARDEKAI

Shaaaaame.

CHARTRULEAN

Ditran. Homena. I won't let you hurt them.

WOLF JHARDEKAI

You are powerless to stop me, Etruvian.

CHARTRULEAN

I will find a way.

WOLF JHARDEKAI

You could rejoin with me.

CHARTRULEAN

Rejoin? How?

WOLF JHARDEKAI

By letting me devour you.

CHARTRULEAN

No.

WOLF JHARDEKAI

I'll give you a head start. If you value your life, you will run!

[Snarling, jaws snapping, running, heavy door closing, heart beating, panting]

CHARTRULEAN

The vacuum chamber. The--the door has been shut behind me.

[Chamber activates]

CHARTRULEAN (CONT'D)

No! Wait!

[Struggling, choking]

JHARDEKA

(distant, echoey)
Chartrulean...

CHARTRULEAN

Jhardeka! Help me!

[Sounds of suffocating. Music crescendos, then breaks. Chartrulean jolting awake, normal nighttime sounds.]

CHARTRULEAN (CONT'D)

(breathing heavily)
A nightmare. What did she do to me?
(realizing)
Sophrosyne...she wants me to return the brooch.

FLASHBACK - CHARTRULEAN DRAWS A CONNECTION

[Echoey voices]

CHARTRULEAN

Where did you get this?

SOPHROSYNE

It's been a part of my family for a long time, and I'd like to know why.

CHARTRULEAN (V.O.)

In giving it to me, she expected something I failed to deliver.

SOPHROSYNE

I had this expectation that something big would happen.

CHARTRULEAN (V.O.)

She never said anything until just now.

SOPHROSYNE

It'd be best if I just took it back.

BACK TO PRESENT - CHARTRULEAN GETS A NOTE

CHARTRULEAN

(thinking)

Is there still time to correct it and save myself from one more disappointment?

(beat)

Someone's left a note.

[Paper sounds]

BORSHA (V.O.)

The princess wanted me to tell you that she will return tomorrow to discuss Idrica plans with Havelion and Admiral Lapadine. The gym fire was minor, no damage to report. Also, Havelion took care of the bug in your room, but apologizes for the burning smell. I'm afraid to ask. Happy to see you getting some rest. P.S. I left you a tonic for the headache in case it persists.

[Sound of drink being lifted from table in heavy glass]

CHARTRULEAN

Curious.

[Sounds of glass, and drinking, wincing]

CHARTRULEAN VISITS HOMENA, TALKS TO SHAN

[Shan humming, door shutting softly. The distant door bursts open, brisk footsteps approaching]

CHARTRULEAN

Is she all right? Did anything happen?

SHAN

Shhh. Calm down, no need to panic.
Just a bad dream. Havelion is in
there with her now, let's not
disturb them more than we have to.

CHARTRULEAN

How many nights does he spend here?

SHAN

Most, all or part.

CHARTRULEAN

Have there been any changes in
Ditran?

SHAN

Not that I've observed. Why?

CHARTRULEAN

Just a feeling.

[Beat]

SHAN

Maybe it's time.

CHARTRULEAN

Time for what?

SHAN

To let others weigh in. You're
going to Idrica. Take them with
you. They need more than I can
give.

CHARTRULEAN

Who can help them there? Yulia? The
Mystics? So they can say what --

SHAN

You could seek out Artedemis.

CHARTRULEAN

Assuming he's still alive.

SHAN

He is. *And* he's returned to Idrica.

CHARTRULEAN

I would rather not involve him if
it can be avoided.

SHAN

I sure hope Fillion is having fun
digging around in the ice.

[Beat]

SHAN (CONT'D)

Something else is bothering you.
What is it?

CHARTRULEAN

If Havelion asks, let him know I've
stepped out.

SHAN

Stepped out? Where are you going?

CHARTRULEAN

I need some air.

SHAN

Well, wherever you're off to, may
Jhardeho guide and protect you.

CHARTRULEAN

Where I'm going, I will need it.

[Transitional music]

JHARDEHO TEMPLE

NARRATOR

Chartrulean held his breath as his foot crossed the threshold of the side gate of the agora. The hood of a dark gray shawl was pulled low over his face. Watchmen patrolled the area, floating red diamonds in the shadows and the subtle sound of mechanisms giving away their positions.

The Jhardeho temple towered over him like a sleeping giant. Whatever temporary insanity had brought him there was beginning to wear off.

The agora itself was a labyrinth of lush gardens where figures in long robes promenaded among rare and exotic plants and insects. The azurea gifted it with magical properties that could not fully be understood. It was hard to imagine a place bringing so much peace to a place so imbued with corruption. It all seemed too easy. He'd expected an invisible force field to knock him back, for an alarm to sound. But none of that happened.

Three large, domed prayer chambers stood at the heart of the labyrinth. There was one dedicated to each of the starmakers. Jhardeka, Jhardekai, and Jhardoestra. Jhardeka's prayer chamber was the tallest of the three, and occupied the center. As Charturlean neared it, he stepped around and over a handful of monks lost in their meditation. Some of them had most likely been like that for days. It wasn't uncommon to come across a lesser Jhardeka who had died while in the void, due to distortions to the passage of time.

Chartrulean entered the chamber, fighting an unwelcome rush of nostalgia. Inside the chamber was a deep pool of turquoise water. The top of the dome was completely open to the night sky. A stone bridge cut through the middle, and an effigy of Jhardeka, half the height of the chamber, reached for the heavens above, open tome in hand.

As Chartrulean's eyes met Jhardeka's cold lifeless ones, the memories overcame him. The first took him all the way back to when he was just a baby. He had lived out the first years of his life suspended in a similar turquoise fluid, deep in the vaults of Boethema.

CHARTRULEAN TELLS HIS CHILDHOOD STORY

CHARTRULEAN

(thinking)

I was a motherless child in a strange world. Then the Jhardeho Order took me in and called me their Messiah. I was destined to change the world.

NARRATOR

Nestled in the base of the effigy was a low, flat bowl filled with large crystals of azurium salts. Chartrulean dipped his hand into the bowl and let the grains fall between his fingers. He loved the sensation. It reminded him of when he was a young boy, exploring the temple grounds, absorbing the planet's rich history, and reveling in the agora's beauty.

CHARTRULEAN (CONT'D)

(thinking)

Right here, where I stand, is where Jhardeka was invoked within me. I was just a boy. In retrospect, it was cruel. There were so many things that I looked forward to enjoying about the world. I never stopped trying to find beauty where I could, but it was difficult to see past the pain.

(MORE)

CHARTRULEAN (CONT'D)

The only solution was to become something that was no longer human. But to no longer feel pain, was to also no longer be able to truly appreciate beauty.

NARRATOR

He was ten years old again when he pulled his hand from the bowl. The void came crashing into consciousness, and suddenly the effigy was animated. Those cold lifeless eyes were suddenly one giant eye on a featureless face. That one eye had something greater than life in it, something incomprehensible. Something terrifying.

CHARTRULEAN (CONT'D)

Jhardeka helped me reach into the void and showed me the many different paths I could take, but I wasn't satisfied.

So instead I looked to the past. It was there that I found Jhardekai. Despite the advice of my mentors, I chose to become something different than what was expected of me. An abomination.

NARRATOR

Chartrulean released the memory of his first encounter with Jhardeka and continued past the effigy towards the back of the chamber. It opened up into a long narrow stone gallery. Moss dangled from the ceiling like jewelry and stone pedestals displayed various ancient artifacts. Lining the walls were statues of all the Etruvians throughout recorded history. He paused at the foot of the statue of a woman with sharp, unpretty features, and his eyes filled with knowing.

CHARTRULEAN (CONT'D)

It was Jhardekai who showed me lost ancestral knowledge -- how the Etruvian Rankusha harnessed the power at the source, and developed incredible technologies. But back then, the world wasn't ready to go down that path, and civilization was nearly destroyed for it. All her work is now lost to history-- destroyed by fire then buried in ice, or perhaps hidden away intentionally.

(MORE)

CHARTRULEAN (CONT'D)

I thought history wouldn't repeat itself under my watch. But I have brought the hour of the wolf upon us once again.

NARRATOR

Finally, Chartrulean reached a statue of himself. The word "abomination" was written across the forehead, and had only been partially erased. Either whoever was cleaning it last agreed with the message, or just gave up.

CHARTRULEAN (CONT'D)

This man is not me. He looks so...confident. I would trust this man.

(sigh)

My visions of the future were far too broad to see any of this coming. Never once did I think to look at my own life. Now I wish I had. I was naive, and the berserker is the price I have to pay. But if this is the way it has to be, do I wholly despise being just a man?

[Footsteps approaching]

MAGOGOSO FINDS CHARTRULEAN

MAGOGOSO

There are people here who wouldn't be happy to see you, Chartrulean. So, on their behalf, let me welcome you.

CHARTRULEAN

I'm surprised this thing is still standing.

MAGOGOSOC

Well, he doesn't come this way much anymore because of it, so you should be relatively safe here.

[Beat]

CHARTRULEAN

It's a relief to see you, Magogoso. How did you recognize me?

MAGOGOSO

Your walk. You do this thing where you put one foot perfectly in front of the other. It drives me crazy.

CHARTRULEAN

How should I walk?

MAGOGOSO

I don't know, with a little less purpose. Speaking of which, I hope you had a good reason to risk coming here.

CHARTRULEAN

I need your help with something.

MAGOGOSO

I'm listening.

CHARTRULEAN

I need you to get me into the archives.

MAGOGOSO

The archives? I thought you had them all stored forever up in that impressive noggin of yours.

CHARTRULEAN

I am still having some...difficulty.

MAGOGOSO

That bad, eh? I've never heard of an Etruvian losing their abilities.

CHARTRULEAN

Well maybe I'm the exception.

MAGOGOSO

Yeah, maybe. I guess if you piss off a god badly enough...

CHARTRULEAN

About that. Tonight I had my first nightmare in a long time. Something about it didn't feel right.

MAGOGOSO

What was it about?

CHARTRULEAN

I was being chased by a monstrous
wolf that spoke to me as Jhardekai.

MAGOGOSO

How'd you escape?

CHARTRULEAN

I don't think I did...

MAGOGOSO

Not much need for interpretation,
here. That sounds to me like a very
literal manifestation of recent
events.

CHARTRULEAN

Maybe. But it left me with this
fear that we may be in more danger
than we realize. That we're running
out of time.

(beat)

Shan wants me to take them to see
Artedemis.

MAGOGOSO

I like Shan, but she exhausts
easily.

CHARTRULEAN

But she is right. I cannot help
them.

MAGOGOSO

Well, maybe Artedemis can help *you*
aw well.

CHARTRULEAN

I doubt it. He barely tolerates me.

MAGOGOSO

He's almost two hundred years old.
He barely tolerates himself, let
alone anyone else.

CHARTRULEAN

Good point.

[Beat]

MAGOGOSO

I can get you into the archives,
but the kind of stuff you probably
want has been locked away, and I
don't have the key. They Don't trust
me anymore? What are you needing
exactly?

CHARTRULEAN

I've come into possession of
something odd. Can you take a look?

MAGOGOSO

(resigned)

All right. Follow me. But do me a
favor.... walk stupid.

[Transitional music]

MAGOGOSO AND CHARTRULEAN USE A KIOSK

[Door opening on cramped room]

MAGOGOSO

Here we go. I can only get you this
far. This old kiosk is useful for
analyzing trinkets. And thankfully
this room is relatively private.

CHARTRULEAN

I remember it well.

[Computer sounds]

MAGOGOSO

I hate using computers. While the
speed is nice, I prefer books. A
slow life is a good life.

CHARTRULEAN

Unfortunately, there's no time.

MAGOGOSO

Computers were meant to aid human
progress, not replace it
completely.

CHARTRULEAN

The Order's admonishment of
technology is a mistake.

MAGOGOSO

Don't get all pithy on me. Just put whatever that thing is that you've got there on the pedestal. I'll need to get a good rendering of it.

[Sound of jewelry]

MAGOGOSO (CONT'D)

Here we go. This thing is miserably slow.

CHARTRULEAN

So a slow life is only good when computers work as expected?

MAGOGOSO

Shut up.

[Beat, digital sounds]

MAGOGOSO (CONT'D)

Computers. Heh. A world that makes its own gods wouldn't need the starmakers anymore. Then there'd be no reason for any of us to exist, and we'd all be back at square one.

CHARTRULEAN

(exasperated)

Mago, we've had this debate hundreds of times.

MAGOGOSO

So?

CHARTRULEAN

Aren't *I* playing god by your definition?

MAGOGOSO

It's a cycle. A new technology gets introduced, and everyone panics. But over time, it loses shock value, and we eventually find some usefulness in it. Every piece of technology we see today was at one time considered abominable.

MAGOGOSO (CONT'D)

Even the tools that carved the stone that makes up this very temple.

CHARTRULEAN

"Even the tools that carved the stone that makes up this very temple."

MAGOGOSO

She was a descendant of an ancient Jhardoestra bloodline. In fact, they thought for a while that she would make an Etruvian. Then her health turned.

CHARTRULEAN

Health turned?

MAGOGOSO

Nobody was ready for it, and nobody understands it. One day, she was just dying.

(beat)

After her death, Maldoro had audacity to have the body taken to Boethema. King Starbringer was beside himself he was so furious.

[Beat, Magogoso sighs]

MAGOGOSO (CONT'D)

It's a shame Hona's children didn't inherit her more wild characteristics. Especially the prince...what a dud.

CHARTRULEAN

This image is older. Who is this?

MAGOGOSO

Relative, most likely. Looks like the jewel changed hands more than a few times.

CHARTRULEAN

She said it's an heirloom...

MAGOGOSO

She? Oh. I think I see what's going on here.

(beat)

If the princess is even half the woman her mother was, you're in for a wild ride, my friend.

CHARTRULEAN

How do you mean?

MAGOGOSO

Not all of Jhardeho's woohoo magic is woohoo. The Jhardoestra have strange ways about them.

[Magogoso laughing. Clicking]

CHARTRULEAN
Nothing about the inscription here.

MAGOGOSO
You shouldn't need a computer for that.

CHARTRULEAN
I can read seventeen dead languages. If it was that easy, I wouldn't be here.

MAGOGOSO
Well, then let's put it to the test.

CHARTRULEAN
I think so.

MAGOGOSO
Let's put it to the test.

[Sounds of book]

CHARTRULEAN
What's this?

MAGOGOSO
Just pick a page and read me a passage.

[Sounds of flipping pages]

CHARTRULEAN
"At noon on the eleventh day, taketh the beast and beateth until dead with a flat stone doused in sacred oils." What is this nonsense?

MAGOGOSO
A cookbook!

CHARTRULEAN
Where are you going to find a beast to "beateth"?

MAGOGOSO
One can dream.

[Sounds of book snapping shut]

MAGOGOSO (CONT'D)
This is about the quality of
literature you can find around here
these days.

CHARTRULEAN
How bad is it?

MAGOGOSO
The level of censorship is
unprecedented. Not much work for an
archivist to do these days if no
one can get to the books.

CHARTRULEAN
It's a good thing you have hobbies.

MAGOGOSO
Shhh...the last thing I need is
anyone around here finding out
about my so-called hobbies.

[Kiosk sounds]

MAGOGOSO (CONT'D)
Looks like that's the end of the
results. But take it with a grain
of salt. Like the stacks, these
archives have been heavily edited.

[Chartrulean sighs]

MAGOGOSO (CONT'D)
Don't look so disappointed.

CHARTRULEAN
This is just...very frustrating.

MAGOGOSO
Well, if old age has done anything
for me, it's taught me that some of
the greatest truths are the most
difficult to find. And the answers
is never anywhere you'd expect.

[Beat]

CHARTRULEAN
Sometimes I miss temple life.
Astreus comes with far too many
distractions.

MAGOGOSO
You do enjoy your work, though?

CHARTRULEAN

Immensely. But being a mentor wasn't something I was ready for. Having to think of others makes me feel so heavy.

MAGOGOSO

I'm going to say something that you'll probably kick me for. But I believe that your compassion is what makes you the best Etruvian we've seen in several millennia. Look at me. I don't see an abomination. I see a treasure.

CHARTRULEAN

I doubt history will be that kind to me.

MAGOGOSO

That depends. The Order may have tried to destroy you, but that doesn't change what you are.

[Beat]

CHARTRULEAN

Is Maldoro already plotting his revenge?

MAGOGOSO

Of course he is. He wouldn't be Maldoro if he wasn't. On that note, let's get out of here before either of us get caught.

[Transitional music]

MALDORO SEES CHARTRULEAN AT A DISTANCE

NARRATOR: JHARDEKAI

From a high balcony, Maldoro watched Magogoso emerge from the galleries with a stranger. The stranger exhibited excellent posture, moving one foot in front of the other. Not many walked with such a deliberate gait. In fact, he knew only one. A wave of heat exploded from his core at the recognition.

MALDORO

Chartrulean is playing with fire by coming here, and Magogoso is doing little to douse it. Perhaps it's time to bring his crimes against the Order into the spotlight, before he gives my enemies any advantage.

[Transitional music]

THE RAU HEAR IMSEP SNEAKING OUT AGAIN

[Door opening and closing, followed by gate]

DRECHEN

There he goes. Like clockwork.

GROBIEN

Cydar has not checked in. The transition may not have been successful.

DRECHEN

I have every confidence that it was. Most likely there's nothing to report. He knows not to take any unnecessary risks coming to us for idle chatter.

GROBIEN

This better not be a disappointment.

DRECHEN

Patience. We'll find out soon enough where the prince runs off to in the dead of night.

IMSEP GOES TO THE SPEAKEASY

[Loud noise music]

NARRATOR

Loam followed Imsep through a sea of young, sweaty bodies, writhing and flexing in unison under the dim lights of the speakeasy. His unblinking eyes glistened eerily in the intense blue light. Only one man in the crowd seemed to notice the out-of-place giant as they passed. Everyone else had completely tuned out the world around them.

Imsep pushed his way through a narrow corridor into a private room, where a young man practiced mixology with an assortment of brightly colored liquors. A small group of people had gathered to witness his art and drink the glowing concoctions.

After drinking, their heads tilted back in ecstasy as they fell into the cushions that covered the floor, and let the sensation overcome them. Only a few people were left sitting upright at the bar. One of them was Abraset.

ABRASET

Back so soon?

IMSEP

I can't stand being in the capitol right now.

ABRASET

You're making this a dangerous place for us to be, you know.

IMSEP

What do you mean?

ABRASET

You're being shadowed. Didn't you notice?

IMSEP

(growling)
Yoba. He must have--

ABRASET

That's no good, is it?

IMSEP

What do I do?

ABRASET

(sighing)
Subtlety has never really been your thing.

IMSEP

I can't help it. Loudness is a family trait.

ABRASET

When we're done here, just keep him off my back. This is the last time you'll find me here.

IMSEP

Loam will take care of it.

(beat)

Did you get what you asked for?

ABRASET

We did. Thank you for your contribution. I would say go take a look for yourself, but I'd rather not alert the capital guard to our little operation out back.

IMSEP

Fine by me. I'd rather not lose my appetite.

ABRASET

Your heart may be in the right place, but your stomach is still weak.

IMSEP

I upset easily. Another family trait it seems.

ABRASET

So, what brings you here?

IMSEP

Something's just come up that you might find interesting.

ABRASET

Concerning...?

IMSEP

The shipbuilder and my sister. It seems all too convenient that my father would start pushing the idea of marriage just as he commissions him to build a ship for her.

ABRASET

The king is ordering expensive toys for his daughter while the people struggle to survive? Did the shipbuilder agree to this madness?

IMSEP

I don't actually know. But she's been spending an awful lot of time at Astreus lately. I wouldn't be surprised if there was more than meets the eye.

ABRASET

The Etruvian doesn't marry.

IMSEP

This one does a lot of things the other Etruvians didn't do, doesn't he? Anyway use the information as you see fit.

ABRASET

We agreed not to slander Chartrulean. But maybe we don't have to? Public opinion of him is favorable, as it is for your sister.

IMSEP

Just because she's a girl. It's not fair.

ABRASET

You've been more useful to us in a short time than the city's most notorious mover of information. We should paint you as a hero.

IMSEP

Mmmmmm, it's not for me.

[Beat]

ABRASET

Has anything else changed?

IMSEP

Father has no intention of releasing Josquin.

ABRASET

Why would he? Besides, Josquin is exactly where he wants to be.

IMSEP

You keep saying that, but I still don't get it.

ABRASET

The people are sympathetic to Josquin. When it gets out that your father is trying to censure him, it won't sit well, now will it? But we have to time everything just right.

[beat]

IMSEP
So now what?

ABRASET
We're working on an plan to ally
with The Order.

IMSEP
What?!

ABRASET
Enough has happened recently that I
think they'll actually go for it.

IMSEP
How do we do that?

ABRASET
*I can't do anything. So far I've
been able to maintain relative
anonymity, and it should stay that
way a little longer. You, however,
you can do more. If you're serious
about taking down your own family.*

IMSEP
I *am* serious.

ABRASET
Good.

IMSEP
What would you need me to do?

ABRASET
Talk to Maldoro. Convince him to
join us.

IMSEP
I don't know how that would go
over.

ABRASET
You have *information*. Insider
access to everything that happens
in the capitol. *And* Astreus. It's
gold, there's no way he'd be able
to turn you away.

IMSEP
I guess. What should I say then?

ABRASET

Tell him everything you told me last night about Astreus. Anything having to do with Chartrulean makes him see red. The more severely he reacts, the better our odds of striking a deal.

[Silence]

IMSEP

The Starbringer family makes him see red! What makes you think I can just walk in there without causing a scene?

ABRASET

If that's what it takes.

IMSEP

(beat, resolved)

Father has Josquin now. I guess I can't waste time pondering the dangers.

ABRASET

Glad you see it my way.

(beat)

Although...Sorry. The gears are turning on what you just told me. Maybe Josquin isn't the champion we need?

IMSEP

You'd *abandon* him? No.

ABRASET

He may be all for show, but not expendable. Not just yet anyway.

(energetic)

It's time for me to make an exit. Now about that shadow or yours...

IMSEP

I'll have Loam give him a good scare.

ABRASET

Scare? Is this still some passing fancy for you to get back at *daddy*, or are you ready to get your hands dirty with us?

IMSEP
Hands dirty, but I hope that's
hypothetical.

ABRASET
Then don't take a risk. It has to
be spotless.

IMSEP
Fine then. We'll make it spotless.

ABRASET
You really are a treasure. It's a
shame your father can't see you the
way we do.

[Beat]

IMSEP
Loam, find the man who watched us
enter. And make him disappear.

LOAM
Hmmm...

[Heavy footsteps moving down corridor]

NARRATOR

For someone of Loam's height, scanning the dance floor of the speakeasy was fast work. He spotted the man who watched them enter within seconds, and made eye contact. The man's surprise at the recognition was palpable. He quickly pushed his way deeper into the crowd, moving at a casual pace at first, then picking up speed as Loam began to trail him. Loam's strange unblinking eyes looked hungry, as if some repressed hunter instinct had kicked in. Or perhaps he was acting outside his own volition.

[Door opening, music fading]

LOAM KILLS IMSEP'S SHADOW

[Heavy footfalls and sounds of running, panting]

SHADOW
No. No! NO!

[Man's screaming quickly truncated with sound of knife
slashing flesh]

ABRASET SLIPS OUT THE BACK DOOR

NARRATOR

On the other side of the building, Abraset slipped out through the back door of the speakeasy, hood pulled low over his face. A long queue of people waited there, but weren't trying to enter. They were civilians. Elderly, women, and children. Men in black cloaks were handing them parcels of food and medicine out of the back of a transport.

NEW REGIME OPERATIVE
 Jhardeho save you. Now go with speed. The watchmen are on the prowl tonight.

CIVILIAN
 Thank you.

ABRASET
 We've been compromised.

NEW REGIME OPERATIVE
 How do you know?

ABRASET
 The prince returned. With company.

NEW REGIME OPERATIVE
 Poor thing wants to help, but doesn't fully grasp what's at risk, does he?

ABRASET
 He's doing the best he can. Don't linger and be careful not to leave a trace. After tonight, we're on the move again.

[Transitional music]

LOAM/CYDAR FINALLY VISITS DRECHEN AND GROBIEN

[Nighttime sounds. Climbing on vines]

DRECHEN
 This must be him. Careful not to be seen.

[Heavy footsteps on balcony]

DRECHEN (CONT'D)

(in awe)

What a sight to behold. Do I smell blood?

GROBIEN

We really picked a fine specimen.

DRECHEN

Agreed. It couldn't be more perfect.

GROBIEN

Well, Cydar. How are you adjusting to your new host?

LOAM

[indistinguishable]

GROBIEN

How annoying.

DRECHEN

Is he missing a tongue? What's going on?

GROBIEN

Seriously, we'll be here all night at this rate.

[Gross shapeshifting sounds, the strange polyphonic voice]

LOAM/CYDAR

The young prince goes to the temple on the morrow to plead with one Maldoro, head of The Order. He is working with the New Regime to dethrone his own father. What's more is that the princess and her guardian have intimate access to Astreus.

GROBIEN

What have you learned about Astreus? Can we get in?

LOAM/CYDAR

Astreus is more vulnerable than it appears. I have yet to learn more.

GROBIEN

Hmmm....interesting.

DRECHEN

This could be a lot easier than we thought.

GROBIEN

We should leave the princess and her guardian uncorrupted, I can see her being used differently. There must be another way in.

DRECHEN

For now, we focus our attention on this Maldoro character. Would you be so kind as to deliver a message to him on our behalf? I hope to reinforce the critical nature of our request. Your old host is fading quickly, and I think meeting you in your current form could be just the motivation they need to come to a decision.