



Founding a Court

No Fandom · Original Work · Koraz · Not Rated · 4249 words

by Arukir

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Thanks to his girlfriend's pushing, the master thief Eric Starborn has realized that his chosen life of karmic trickery is taking more from him than he thought it was. What's a trickster to do when the price of his pranks begins to get higher than he can afford to pay?

Find someone to help pay it, of course! And who better to handle prices than a criminal accountant? Now he just needs to convince said accountant to help...

Almost perfect AI art of Eric and Hen. The main problem with Hen is that he's missing his lower two arms, which should be attached to his waist just below his croptops, and he maybe looks a little too young.

Eric did not like the area he was in. It was a dingy, rundown place he had tried to help many times, but its own people tore it back down to its dilapidated state every time. He hadn't given up on it, exactly, so much as he'd just put it low on his to-do list.

But considering that his to-do list included cleaning up nearly every kingdom, city, or town on Mênland and a few beyond it... he might as well have given up on it.

Which was why he didn't like being there. His skin prickled with the need to help, to do something to bring joy to the sad, angry, scared people that lived there. But at this point, their misery was their own making, and he knew better than to try to fix the lives of people who *wanted* to be miserable. He didn't understand it, but he knew he couldn't change it. Even he wasn't *that* good of a manipulator (yet), and he had more important things to focus on.

He always had something more important to focus on, Eric mused as he balanced across a worm-rotted board of wood laid loosely over a giant hole that maybe led to the sewer and maybe somehow actually led to a Voidrealm. The fact that his shadow-adapted eyes couldn't make out anything through the darkness within it was not a good sign.

He scrambled off the board as it made a alarming creaking sound as if it would break, his movements somewhat odd and unnatural. He didn't have a set act on right then, he was trying to psych himself up for the amount of honesty he was about to force

himself to experience, so he was more-or-less randomly cycling through his different acts. Nobleman #6 with a dash of Baker #3 had gotten him off the board, while Mercenary #24 had stared back at it in feigned cool disinterest.

He still needed to figure out a baseline act, something to be when he wasn't being anything else. It would've been easy, except he was determined to make sure the baseline was really, truly himself. Not fully himself, as he was pretty sure his true nature was too contradictory to embody all of it at once, but something undeniably him.

He walked right behind a group of bat-wielding guards, making silly faces behind their backs just because he could, before slipping straight into their home base. This is where the guy he needed to see had shacked up? With these people? They were so easy, it almost wasn't even funny.

Almost.

The Jester was clear in his voice when he giggled at that, and he mentally clamped down on it as hard as he could, switching to Peasant #13 in a panic. He couldn't afford to be silly right now, he needed more wits about him than he typically had when giving into the more entertaining side of himself.

The Jester wasn't an act. Neither was the Thief. Or the Brother. That's why they didn't get variation numbers in his head, because they were the variations. The different sorts of Him. He wasn't quite sure how many there were; one had to understand themselves to understand their variations, and Eric had only recently managed to figure out he genuinely preferred apples over most other fruit, so...

Yeah. Eric didn't understand himself. But he was learning. And what he'd learned was that as much as he loved his life and his chosen profession, it had taken a lot from him. The price was becoming higher than he was willing to pay. But the idea of just quitting, of doing something else, something calmer... he'd rather pay every ounce of blood and sweat and tears the universe demanded from him, than stop being the Trickster.

But Lyla was getting sad over the price he had to pay, and because of her the other people close to him were starting to actually notice how broken he was and they didn't like it either. Then Mischief started getting worried, even though his dear Spirit couldn't actually understand what the problem was (she was the only reason he'd been able to keep it up this long, he knew, her deception-based cognition balancing his mind through all the tricks and lies), so now Eric had no choice. He was a workaholic and his

loved ones were demanding an intervention, so he needed to find a reliable way to lessen his workload.

Which was why he was sneaking into the hideout of a gang he detested to speak to a guy he loved. Not loved like he loved Lyla, nor like he loved his family, nor really like any other sort of love Eric had felt before. But he had seen Eric at his worst and helped him back to good, and Eric had done the same for him, and it hadn't even just happened once. Their bond was accidental and weird and built on coincidence, but Eric cherished it deeply. This was one of the only people Eric was willing to go to with this, if he said no then the plan just wouldn't work, no matter the fact that Eric would try anyways.

Eric took a deep breath, listening for a moment to make sure his target was alone, before spinning into the grungy office space with Charming But Troublemaking Friend #5 firmly in place. "Hey, Hen! Bit bright in here, isn't it?" He glanced at the room's one lamp, which was technically a bit dim but definitely not made with night-sensitive eyes in mind. Couldn't Hen's boss steal him something a little better?

The Vampyr looked up from where he had been dully doing paperwork. Though his 'what are you doing here, you idiot?' glare was as sharp as ever, there was something missing. Eric winced, first internally before deciding to let it happen externally as well, at the sight of his friend. Hen had a spark of life in him that Eric loved, one that Eric felt kinship towards, though it unfortunately only ever shone through in small bursts — but this was the duller he'd ever seen the other.

"What are you doing here, you idiot?" Hen hissed quietly, getting up to check the hall and shut the door before anyone could notice them. His actions lacked any heat, though Eric was displeased to note that every movement carried a trace of fear. "Do you even know how bad of a time this is?"

Somewhere deep inside Eric, a part of him — a part that one could easily visualize sitting in a darkened room, surrounded by photos and files connected by far too much string — thought that this was a *great* time, actually. Hen was at a low, and not one brought by a sudden hardship but by many hardships wearing at him, and therefore was all the easier to convince to join Eric's cause.

Eric didn't hate that part of himself, even if he shivered at its lack of compassion sometimes. It was the Mastermind, the Manipulator, and it was a part of him that was more genuine than most. But he did ignore all of the ways to manipulate his friend that suddenly popped into his brain. Hen would join because he was convinced by plain truth, or he wouldn't join at all — no tricks, this time, Eric swore to himself.

Well... almost no tricks. Eric understood words and psychology and manipulation too well to ever be 100% guileless, and technically trying to convince anyone of anything was manipulation. But Eric would do the best he could to leave the decision truly up to Hen.

Right after he was done messing with him a bit.

"What, I can't just drop in to see an old buddy?" Eric tsked in a faux scold, plopping onto Hen's desk both to avoid the chair that looked like it would break apart if a *Leafling* sat on it and to block Hen's papers. Hen frowned sharply when he realized the latter. Eric yelped when Hen swatted the side of his head without warning, though it was mostly out of surprise and for show — Hen often whacked at him in annoyance, but he'd yet to actually hit Eric even once.

"Don't take me for a fool—" and Eric was glad he hadn't let himself be the Jester, else he'd be rolling on the floor cackling at that one —you don't just 'drop in' in an area like this. This place is dangerous, kid. I'm used to it, but it's no place for a child."

"Eh, I can handle a bit of dangerous." Eric waved a dismissive hand. He frowned when he registered the last part of what Hen had said. "And I'm not a pup anymore, Hen, I can take care of myself— yipe!"

"You sure about that pup thing, kid?" Hen asked with a smirk, using an upper arm to hold Eric up by the back of his neck. Vampyr were short, but they had long arms and he managed to keep Eric off the ground as his other three arms started straightening his papers.

Eric huffed, struggling as much as he could with a hand squeezing the back of his neck and activating his freeze instinct. Okay, okay, so he still had a scruff, big deal! Some Spirikin didn't outgrow their scruff until their twenties, Eric wasn't that late of a bloomer...

No. He wasn't doing that, he wasn't lying to himself. Eric prided himself on being such a great actor without ever telling himself a single lie. But he'd discovered a few lies he'd convinced himself of lately, discovered that he wasn't as in control of himself as he thought he was, and he was determined to reclaim his status of zero self deception.

Eric was a pup. It was a weird thought, he'd stopped acting like one years ago, but he was still a pup. A child that had seen something shiny once and grabbed onto it with both hands, and was only now realizing that it was covered in spikes. But it was his and he wasn't letting go; he was just going to find a less bloody way to hold it.

Hen dropped Eric into the rickety old chair (which thankfully held after all) before taking his place on the slightly sturdier one behind the desk. He returned to his paperwork, his tension well hidden from anyone who wasn't Eric's particular insane brand of hyperobservant. But Eric was Eric, and he knew Hen was stressed.

Eric sat in the dirty chair in the dirtier office in the even dirtier building that sat in the center of the worst part of a messed up town. He studied Hen, who *did not* belong in a place like *that*, and began to calculate.

Conversation was manipulation if you knew how to use it. Honesty was as manipulative as deception. Eric didn't know how to be plain, open, honest.

But he'd come here intending to tell Hen the truth. And he'd stalled long enough on that.

Eric visibly crumpled, face seeming to almost physically shatter apart, and Hen recoiled. It was still an act, technically, but Eric couldn't help that — he was still at the point where the only thing *not* acting would achieve would be his face awkwardly twitching between random expressions. He was acting how he actually felt, though, so he thought it still counted as being honest. Probably.

"You're right, Hen, I'm a kid." Eric sighed, letting himself sound tired. He forced his words out slowly, being careful that no lies slipped in between the truths. It was harder than it should've been, lies were always easier than truths for him, and he didn't think that part of how his mind worked would ever really change. "I'm a kid who decided he was going to change the world all by himself. Just me and Mischief against corruption and villainry. Now I'm almost grown and I'm realizing that *maybe* I don't want to miss the last bit of my puphood. That's why I'm here, Hen, I've got an idea to have the best of all my worlds and I need your help to do it."

"...stop it with the Hen stuff, kid," Hen muttered, rubbing his head with two hands and not looking at Eric. "I haven't used Henry as an alias in months. I'm Petri here. I'm different here, do you get that? I'm... Oh, moons, kid. I want to help you. But I have work to do, and if they catch me talking to a trespasser without turning you in—"

"They'll what, beat you?" Eric snorted, a part of him ashamed that he actually found that funny. Part of the price of his bond with Mischief, one he'd very happily pay no matter how steep it got, was the near constant amusement he felt. But there was sadness beside the amusement, hurt on behalf of his friend, and he focused on those. He summoned up the most serious tone he could manage without leaving his current act as he added, "You shouldn't be hanging with these guys, Hen. You're better than this, better than them. You aren't a bad guy, but if you keep helping the bad guys..."

"You really are a zapping optimist, aren't you?" Hen scowled. "Kid, look at me. I'm a twig. I've got more enemies than even you could keep track of — no don't take that as a challenge. I will drag you back to your parents myself and make sure you are grounded for life if you even try."

Eric grinned sheepishly. "Well, I can keep track of a lot, you know."

"Kid..."

"Fine."

"The point is," Hen continued, taking a second to breathe deeply, "I need protection. And the only protection I'm getting outside prison is with a gang. It's not a great deal, kid, but that's reality."

"But what if it didn't have to be?" Eric pressed. "What if there was a gang that could rival any of these ones, but that you could be proud to be in? One that helped people instead of hurting them? One that... ran on my code? You like my code." That was part of why they liked each other — they shared nearly the same moral code, and the parts that differed still didn't cross each other's big lines.

"You're starting a gang?" Hen asked incredulously. "Kid, you're twelve."

"I am not! I'm nearly at maturity, you fennec-eared ass."

"I am a bat-eared ass, excuse you, you wannabe Loki."

"HOW DARE YOU."

The two glared at each other, both standing at that point, for several tense moments. Then Hen smiled and Eric giggled and both sat back down.

"...I can't keep on by myself, Hen," Eric whispered, tracing a stain on the wall with his eyes rather than looking at the Vampyr. "I need help. But the work that goes into running a gang, especially with the kinds of restrictions I'm planning... I can do it, but it would stop being fun rather quickly. I have to keep things fun, Henny, it's what keeps me sane."

"I wish I'd met you when you first went into this life, kid," Hen lamented. "I would've kept you out of it."

"So let's do that!" Eric was careful not to raise his voice too much, well aware that his friend would suffer if the rest of the gang heard them. Well, and he'd suffer too, but he'd taken that risk knowingly. Hen hadn't. "Let's make a way to keep street kids out of all this, or at least let them have fun with it while adults deal with the rough bits. I can handle gathering people, building our reputation, making an example out of those that try to use us to hurt people... But funneling money, making aliases, all that paperwork stuff I can barely manage to tolerate doing just for myself — I need you for that, Hen."

"It's a good dream, kid—"

"So let's make it come true," Eric cut in. "We have the chance to build something beautiful, Hen. What's the worst that could happen?"

"We all go to jail," Hen supplied dryly. "You know my rule, kid — I do not get caught. Ever."

"And how many gang leaders have actually respected that?" Eric asked sharply, watching impassively as Hen was visibly struck by the question. Hen had complained to him once that he was often used as a scapegoat and then expected to join back up after he escaped custody. But Hen hated getting caught on a level Eric had never seen in anyone else before, and he'd personally spit in the face of a guy twelve times his size than work with someone that let him get caught again. "You know I wouldn't do that to you."

"I know," Hen admitted quietly. Eric had ended up in a healer's wing for nearly a month, once, as a result of making sure Hen wasn't caught by a relatively safe system. The kind of system Eric would normally let someone get caught by and then rescue them later. Because Hen didn't do getting caught, no matter how harmless the situation, and Eric respected that even if he couldn't quite understand it. The Vampyr sighed deeply. "I've seen people try to do good like this, Eric. But gangs are gangs, and they all end up the same."

"So we'll be something new," Eric told him, chuckling breathlessly. Hen was arguing against it, sure, but he was taking it seriously enough to argue about it. "I've got a name for it already — the Court of Fools."

"Oh stars."

"Yes, I get it, it's ridiculous." Eric rolled his eyes. "But that's the point. We're not street thugs — we're tricksters. We aren't here to bust up shop windows or mug people. We're here to do what I've been doing for years, to drag the corrupt and the monstrous

down into the muck where they've pushed everyone else. But this time it won't be one runaway jester's laughter they'll have to face, but the Judgment of the Court."

"If the gangs are all the same, then let's not make a gang, Hen," Eric finished with a grin. "Let's make a legend."

Hen looked as if he was actually considering Eric's words, what they meant, but he didn't get a chance to respond. Loud footsteps were suddenly audible in the hall. Hen looked up in pure fright, mouth opening to tell Eric to *scram*, but the kid was already gone by the time he looked back to where he had been sitting.

Hen chuckled, thumping his head lightly on the desk. Ah Voidrealms, but the kid really was good at this. Too good. Maybe even good enough to pull this crazy idea off...

Eric tended to avoid Spirikin methods of speech when he wasn't actually around his own kind, but he made a *mine/hurt/protect* growl without hesitation when he next saw Hen. It was possessive, admittedly, but Spiripa were a possessive species when it came to people they cared for. The Vampyr was limping, one of his arms *terribly* wrapped in loose bandages and held to his side, his face covered in enough bruises that one eye couldn't open all the way.

"Tell me I didn't leave something behind," Eric pleaded, whimpering as he looked over the injuries. He hoped Hen wasn't in a paranoid mood, maybe he could convince him to let Lyla patch him up...

"This ain't from you, kid," Hen assured him, snorting. Smiling bitterly, he added, "The brute I was calling a boss decided he didn't like how much money he was pulling in lately, and didn't seem to understand that none of my fancy math tricks could make more of it than was there. Admittedly, calling him dumber than a horse's ass probably didn't help my case."

Eric gave him a startled-sounding laugh. "You didn't!"

"I did," Hen confirmed, gleefully, eyes shining at the memory despite his injuries. "You know, kid, I'm getting tired of being nicer than I really am in the hopes no-one punches me around too badly. I was thinking about it, and maybe having protection that didn't *hurt* would be nice."

"You're in?" Eric asked excitedly. He'd been trying to figure out how to build his Court without Hen, but there was just no-one else with his skills that Eric trusted

enough. They'd have to change that, he thought, train up some people. But that would come later, after he made sure Hen knew that he could lose every bit of value he had tomorrow and Eric wouldn't dream of kicking him to the curb. It wouldn't do to make his friend feel expendable, though hopefully someday the Court would self-sufficient enough that even Eric himself was expendable.

"I've got some ground rules first," Hen told him, looking around the old cave that Eric had commandeered as the Court's first lair, still trying to press on even without a logistics guy. Water was actively dripping from stalagmites, and the only light was the pathetic amount that managed to filter through the curving entrance. Hen nodded in approval.

"Lay them on me," Eric told him, leaning against a damp stone wall.

"Everyone abuses power in some way, even small, petty ones," Hen started, listing one of his and Eric's main disagreements. "I know you well enough to know that you're going to make everyone dress up like clowns or something, so rule one is that I will not be doing that under any circumstances whatsoever."

"Every organization needs a uniform," Eric began, pointedly not looking at the loose, gauzy pink crop top Hen was wearing over a sturdier one. Or at the swim goggles Hen was using as sunglasses. Or at the rainbow umbrella hat that Hen had worn to get through the sunlight outside. No, Hen would most certainly never dress ridiculously, definitely not.

"No."

"But—"

"No."

"...fine."

"Rule two," Hen continued, holding up two clawed fingers and looking more serious than he had with the first rule, "I get caught once, I'm out. No second chances. I mean it."

"I know you do." Eric gave Hen a soft smile that was as close to genuine as he knew how to get. "I'll keep you safe, Hen. I promise."

"Hmm, well..." Hen trailed off, rubbing one of his arms. He took a second to gather himself before finishing, "Last rule, I say what I want to who I want. Not outside the..."

'Court' (I still *cannot* believe you actually named it that), and not secrets or anything, but just niceties or insults as I please. To our members, to you, to whoever. And no-one gets to hit me over it."

"Oh, Hen," Eric breathed out softly, surprised by the last rule perhaps a bit more than he should've been. "I told you, we're making something better here. Pain isn't going to be used to enforce anything unless someone actually threatens the rest of us, okay? You already call me an idiot, there's no reason for that to change. Stars know I've been called worse!" Eric laughed at that. He was letting more of his laughter out lately, as part of his new 'figuring his true self out' thing, though he still suppressed most of it.

He wasn't sure he'd ever stop laughing if he didn't, and wasn't that just hilarious? He laughed harder at the thought.

"Well, now that that's settled." A sharp, sly smile slowly spread across Hen's face. "I guess I'm officially in, Boss."

Eric cheered, jumping high up and flipping in the air like a little Spiripuppy after receiving a new toy. "Then welcome to the Tea Party, Hen!"

"The *what*?"

"The inner circle, the main group!" Eric explained giddily. "The ones that know what's up at the highest level."

"And you're calling it the Tea Party?"

"Ye-p!" Eric confirmed shamelessly, popping the 'p'.

"...I actually just signed on with a child king, didn't I?"

"Yep!"

"Is it too late to go back to the guy that was beating me up? Because that's suddenly looking a lot better..."

"Oh, come on, Hen," Eric said lightly, throwing an arm around Hen's shoulder and leading him deeper into the cave. "Cheer up; this is going to be *fun*."

"If you say so, Boss."

Upon seeing what counted as Eric's books, Hen immediately took advantage of ground rule three, because how the actual zap did Eric manage to operate even as a solo act?! Is that a juice store sticker mixed in with this mess??? He thought he could run a GROUP with this?? No, go away, this belongs to Hen now you moron. No crazy trickster children get to touch it anymore. Well if you didn't want to get your hand whacked, you shouldn't have tried to touch it, crazy trickster child...

And thus something beautiful was born.

— end of "Founding a Court" —