

# **Life Of My Own**

By Bartan Tirix

An earth-splitting roar shocked him awake, trapped in a thick darkness that nearly locked him in place save for a small light below him. Heart racing and pressing those paws up to his surroundings, finding wall after wall as those claws scraped the metal in several small shrieks. Attracting the beast outside as every step quaked the very ground his back rested on.

A couple of strikes against the metal frames were enough to display it's thin frame, but the cell was still locked heavily and every moment that behemoth was getting closer. Slamming against the other walls, causing his arms to hurt and desperately attempting to find other areas to use as a natural hammer. Ending up using the back of his hand which suddenly caused his paw to clench in a tight fist as several long claws moved between the bones within that paw.

It stung and braced that wrist tightly, but it might just help him get out of this prison. Scratching the metal sheet in front of him made the thing shriek loudly again, cutting four gashes into the plated metal quite easily and giving him the leverage to start bending it open. Finding more darkness, but a faint bit of light cautiously entered the area as he pried himself out of the...

It was difficult to tell exactly what it was at first glance, let alone when damaged. Finding the rather spacious area to have dozens of identical metal boxes nearby in a large neat pile, but those heavy steps returned. Coming from the outside of the large... 'Tunnel' as the small feral one hid behind the boxes. Listening closely to the heavy breaths and low growls as he peered over into foggy outside, gazing over a large shadowed figure towards the entrance as it once again growled.

The sounds of something ripping out of it's flesh were soon heard as it roared, then the sounds of something spinning to warm up. His instincts demanded that he take cover and lay as low as possible, barely getting flat on the ground before bullets hailed through the large tunnel. Tearing through many of the old storage containers, machinery, and ripping his coffin into shreds before stopping. Staying completely still before hearing the behemoth outside snort, drop something heavy, and move on.

He waited until the quakes could barely be detected before slowly moving out of cover. Scanning his feral brown body to make sure he wasn't hit, other than the stress on his paw with the extended claws, he appeared to be okay. Pressing down on the dull ends carefully to try to get them to retract just seemed dangerous, eventually tending to the strain on his locked wrist

and getting them to suddenly slip back into his arm. Releasing a grunt and several pants as relief was felt.

For the life of him, he couldn't remember much. How he got into... This damaged abandoned warehouse. Why he was locked into a metal coffin. His identity was patchy, but the letters R and K did come to mind. Initials? The answers would come to him later. Once again keeping perked ears out for anything possibly dangerous as he moved out into the light. Looking over the bullet filtered metal cases and pulling a loose one out a bit to open it, hoping no one was inside. Struggling with the twin locks on opposite ends as he lifted it and found-!

Styrofoam. Thousands of black strips of straw-like packaging used to keep whatever was shipped safe. The occasional divider or wood brace to keep the shipment still- and then it hit him. Weapons. These were weapon crates, discarded and left out here not to be traced. All very likely empty, if not damaged by now. Closing it slightly in defeat, he traced over the three large letters that were printed over it.

"E.K.D. Ethir Kovel Development." He whispered as his instinct translated such a thing. His reasons for recalling such a thing was still currently painted in white, but slowly lifting off over time. Looking over the rest of the warehouse contents, nothing else really looked familiar. The opposite end held a dense darkness while the front wall towards the foggy light seemed to have been completely torn off.

But the brown one couldn't stay here. Stepping carefully across the cement flooring while those ears scanned for any threat. Once in a while hearing a distant growl, roar, or gunshots that made him freeze in place. These... Things were hunting something. Following trails of a supernatural scent, and he knew that there was a target painted on his back.

Moving outside carefully, he made out the large object that fell. Long and thick, especially towards one end. The fog keeping it unclear until he could almost touch the dozen barrels of a still warm chain gun, a design that looked so familiar to him. Until he got closer to the stock, replaced by a chunk of flesh that was giving the entire metal weapon a red tinted shine as it continued to bleed.

The feral one's grey mane started to raise up from discomfort and shock, as if to sense more danger out in this area. However, it was the only direction he had. Taking another moment to scan his surroundings within the dense cloud of white, the brown one moved on down the dirt path. Still hearing the occasional roar in the distance, the cries of pain and assistance. Heavy gunfire, quakes from the ground, and the most worrisome of all: silence.

The dirt road narrowed more and more with every minute, coming up to a large tree that blocked the way. One painted yellow, serving as a guard to ward those along the path not to fall into the gash in the earth just beyond it. Still covered in a blanket of mist and unable to see the bottom, he tossed a rock and waited... Not getting any feedback from such a thing and no sign of the ledge beyond.

His ear flicked when he heard the giggle of a young one within the forest. About to call to it only to hear a roar in the distance, then a responding one across the fissure. Deeming it more of a deathtrap than a salvation. Making the brown one sigh before moving towards where he heard the childish laughter, off the dirt path and into the forest. Following the slight scampers within the fallen leaves, as if the little one was leading him.

The fog started to lift, but only slightly. Every tree he came across was painted one of several different colors: red, black, white, blue, green, purple, pink, grey, gold, and the yellows. Saved for the most deformed and broken trees around, many of which were derooted and laid to rot within the forest. A sight that sank his heart when he noticed the pattern, like it was something he personally witnessed or exposed to.

More sounds caught his ear, once again leading him aimlessly through the woods to find it. The closer the feral one got, the more he started recognizing the noise... As something feeding. The tearing of flesh and muscle, the snapping of bones once in a while, once again puffing out his mane as he drew closer. Though caution did echo within his instinct, he needed to see what it was...

The smells of a fresh kill was definitely detected, as he started to see something... Metallically golden. Long and large, spotting the tail of something scaled at first. Then soon the attention of a brassy T-rex like muzzle, a coating of deep red under its chin while a pair of equally red eyes locked onto the much smaller feral one.

Yet, there wasn't a tension from the dinosaur. As if it didn't consider the brown one to be a threat in the slightest, only snorting at him before returning to its meal. Getting him to look over the white lab-coat, now realizing why it almost seemed camouflaged to him at first: being the same shade as the very mist around them. "...Where are we?" He asked, getting the large one to stop and swallow before turning to him. "How did I get here?"

"You don't remember." She muttered, barely asking a question before sighing through her nostrils. "And you think for some reason I would."

"Well, you are the first thing I've seen so far that hasn't tried to kill me."

"Good to know your standards of friendship are set so low." She moved around the mutilated corpse of something furred and exhaled again. "There's not much left, but you're welcome to scavenge." Even a glance of it was enough to turn his stomach, aside from the gore there was something else... Wrong with such an idea.

"No... No thanks." He looked away, almost getting spooked by his own reflection within a nearby pool of water. Causing him to take a breath to calm down and overlook his brown self; a strange mix between canine and feline. A small grey flame at the end of his tail, a shade brighter than his messy mane. Yet, that white look felt like it fit him much more than the chestnut brown that coated him.

"What are you?" The Allosaurus' question startled him for a moment, causing the small one to stare into space for several seconds before looking at his reflection. Reading it as if it were written on the surface of the water.

"Tirix." He nearly whispered, as if suddenly realizing it himself before shaking his head a little. "Sorry, I'm... My memories are really patchy."

"Have people been trying to control or suppress them?" She barely asked, but the cold tone was not directed at him per say. That much he could tell.

"I... Don't know. I don't remember too much." He once again looked over her form, catching a logo on her white coat that made his throat tighten at first, but misreading the letters at first glance: C.F.W.D. "Who are you?" Those red eyes studied the panther calmly for a few moments before she adjusted herself to sit up easier.

"Xakoda. And you are?"

"Ryoko." It came out so naturally, like a crack in that foggy glass that covered his memory. Actually causing his mind a little bit of pain as he held the side of his head.

"Another memory that resurfaced?" A slow nod in response then she snorted. "Seems like we met for a reason then."

"What do you mean?"

"You're not afraid or don't look like it. Yet, you are the most lost person I've ever laid eyes on." Those red discs never lifted off him. "I can also tell when someone is lying to me."

"...And?"

"As well as how unsure of yourself you are by your own answers." The dinosaur crossed her arms. "I'll comfort you with this: you are who you say you are." The tirix' gaze fell, soon returning to his reflection. "And you don't believe this to be true."

"It's... Not that, Xakoda." The small one took a breath. "...A tirix is a... Vessel, so to speak. A body for a soul bound for reincarnation to occupy." She calmly nodded, not looking a bit surprised in the slightest. "I'm just having a difficult time to discover my own identity, or is the information I'm coming up with...?"

"Someone else's." The allosaurus finished, getting Ryoko to nod sadly. "And you're certain that you've collected a soul, is that right?" Such a thought ached his chest.

"...I'm not certain. If so, I cannot separate or distinguish who's memories are who's." He took a breath as a roar was heard in the distance, getting both of their attentions. But again, the dinosaur was calm. "Let alone why I feel... Hunted by those things. Like, they're not killing everything that moves, just what..."

"They're being told to kill. I got the same impression." Xakoda looked over the tirix. "But they're not after me. I've just seen the aftermath of the massacre." That statement worried him, but those blue eyes fell down towards what was left of the allosaurus' meal. "I didn't hunt this. They were ripped in half by gunfire, clean through as well." A thick and hard nervous swallow from the panther. "I've been forced to eat worse."

"What... Was it?"

"I don't know. I've never seen them before." Xakoda stated rather calmly, lifting up the stained green fur coat from the ground. Attempting to identify such a thing without its front end was difficult enough, more so when it made the tirix feel unusually uncomfortable about such a thing. But why...? "What do you remember?" It was barely a question, making him gaze into those red eyes sadly before a breath. Attempting to get his mind off the carnage.

"A weapon development company. I woke up in one of their shipping boxes."

"I see. Were you a designer as well?" A double take from the brown one, as once again that pain returned. "I believe you were." She almost smirked, looking closer at Ryoko. "Tester?" An uneasy look from those blue discs. "...No. But you have witnessed such a thing. No doubt on inanimate objects rather than live targets." His mane started to raise again when the dinosaur started to raise up, towering over him with her golden form. "Did you sell them?"

"...I don't know."

"...Not illegally, anyway. You were being told to make them, is that it?" No response as she started to circle around the Tirix. "Were you at war?" His gaze fell, trying to remember. "...No. But you were worried about being invaded. Hunted." That white mane puffed out. "Have you killed anyone?" A slow look into those red eyes as she came around his side. "Oh... Quite the conflict we have here, both a yes and no." His look morphed into worry. "So, you most likely have another within you, the question does lie: who did it?"

"...I..."

"I sense guilt." The theropod lightly smirked at the smaller one. "Was it a single person?" Ryoko's gaze moved to his reflection again. "...Or was it so extreme, a Genocide?" A double take from him, recalling the word vividly. Getting a rather surprised look from the dinosaur as well, one that morphed into a full and sly smirk. "We are not so different then, are we? A little kitten, lost in more ways than one. Having so much in common with a galactical terrorist." Fear ran through his heart as that brown jaw tensed up. Watching her start to leave within the fog, those golden scales slowly turning into a shadowy grey as another roar was heard from behind. Much closer than the previous ones. "I would move if I were you. Those who remain still are easy prey."

The tirix watched as the dinosaur disappeared into the mists, letting his gaze once again return to the waters soon after. There was no time to remorse for such actions, taking a much

needed drink before heading outwards into the woods. Already feeling like he was losing his location with every step forwards, like his imprint on the world was being washed away and forgotten the moment his paw left the ground.

Such a concept ached his chest but was soon interrupted by his ear flicking, picking up that giggle once again. This time much closer nearby, getting the tix to stop in place for a moment and hear it again. Like a child trying to hide within the colorfully painted woods, making the brown one take cautious steps towards the noise.

A tiny glimpse of something furred and gold was seen behind a tree, but when Ryoko got closer it seemed to disappear. Another chuckle and call towards possibly other children echoed through the air in an entirely different direction. Turning the panther's head to barely catch the white end of a gold tail. Once again leading him deeper into the woods following chuckle after giggle, glimpse after glimpse that was just barely seen with the corner of his eye.

What made matters worse was the fact that voice sounded so damn familiar! Tugging at his heartstrings as the tix started to rush towards each sighting. Every clue he could find, getting so close to where this small one was vanishing! Until-

The sounds stopped. Getting the tix to halt in place beside a large tree, catching his breath while his senses scanned the area. His white mane puffed out, knowing that child was around here somewhere. Slowly making his way around the base of that large tree, spotting the same gold furred tail with a white tip. Connected to a rather slender and tall body, then those eyes locking onto the quadruped's with a dense fear.

Only for Ryoko to then be grabbed by the shoulders and slammed against the tree, bracing his back against it by that same gold creature! A mix between a mouse, fox, and rabbit, now fully grown and dressed somewhat fancy... Only with a massively deep cut from his throat down past his sternum, causing his insides to be spilled out and dripping with red as one of those bloody golden paws caught that brown muzzle of the panther's and lifted it up to eye level. To a pair of golden discs that screamed *Family* to his fragile mind. "This..." The creature wheezed out calmly, his voicebox either damaged or torn out. "Was only... The Beginning."

And then he vanished, dropping the brown one back onto the grounds and letting him catch his breath. Heart racing with fear as all his senses heightened with danger, quickly scanning his surroundings but finding nothing. No blood anywhere, no child terrified and hiding. Nothing but a dark silhouette in the fog, something huge and canine-like.

It released a deafening roar all at once and started charging towards the tix, causing his flight response to kick in and attempt to sprint through the forest while several loud *thumps!* were heard. Leading to explosions after before the beast behind Ryoko began to charge towards the brown one. Breaking through trees like they tall toothpicks and causing splinters to rain down everywhere as it roared again, shaking the very grounds he was trying to stay off of!

A violent rip and growl of pain from the behemoth behind him before those whirls began to return, charging up and triggering an instinctive warning to the tirix as he tried to move more within the trees rather than the opened path. A constant duet of heavy gunfire filled the air, stinging his brown ears as bullets scattered wildly in his direction. Drastically inaccurate while the massive canine was chasing him, but a few bits of lead did nick the lower part of his ear. Then shaving a clean spot or two along that neck, actually getting him to feel the cold air much more viciously there.

The trees did slow the beast down, providing some cover for the tirix but most were being mowed down by the hail of bullets alone. Seeing a small arc made of solid rock up ahead, Ryoko pushed his body to keep moving and slip under it. Forcing the behemoth to go around, or so he expected. Only for it to shoulder tackle and break the solid rock into debris, breaking it into a rain from golf ball stones to boulders, some of which nearly cut in front of the fleeing panther.

Suddenly, the mounted guns went half silent. Unable to hear the hissing of heated metal barrels over the sounds of his own huffing and the slight damage to his own hearing. Though, able to pick up the ripping and discardment of such heavy weapons, then the replacement *thumps!* soon after as they started running uphill. Causing the launching explosives to detonate on contact with the ground, creating a bomb blast that nearly caused the tirix to trip and lose balance as he climbed!

Spotting a tunnel within the mountain up ahead as the beast behind him jumped in desperation, swinging a paw that almost made contact with the brown one! Then lunging after for a bite that caught the final hairs of his flaming tail! Pushing his exhausted body to the near limit as more of those explosives were heard, hitting nearby rocks and dirt! Trees and breaking them into a hail of splinters that covered his dark coat as Ryoko clawed up the mountainside! Scratching into the rock to the mouth of the cave as that behemoth roared loudly behind him, actually hitting him with another paw attempt, launching the tirix inside as he was thrown into some stationary rocks with a whimper.

It stun his side greatly, but he still staggered away from the flailing giant grey limb. Unable to fit into the entrance to the tunnel and roaring in frustration before pulling out, gazing inside with yellow eyes of madness before throwing explosive after explosive at the cave to make it wider! Shaking the entire path as the brown one scurried up the narrow rocky path, nearly deafened by the shockwaves, but still feeling the vibrations of every detonation and furious roar as it started to ram against the very mountain!

Exhausted and spent, his body pressed on! Regardless of the pain in his chest! Regardless of how sore his limbs and muscles felt, Ryoko needed to escape! Barely seeing a light up the path a ways from a rather reflective ground, he pressed on! Soon picking up the scent of liquid metal, soon starting to see the stains of red on the rocks and corpses of those who attempted to escape these beast's wrath! Trying not to think about it and just keep moving up! Scampering to his feet after every slip of that thick syrup! Every claw into what felt like fresh

meat-!

He pulled himself out of the hole with a heavy gasp, coughing out the burning sensation in his lungs that stung with debris and dirt. Huffing and laying in the grass that was likely once straw-yellow but was now completely painted red, afraid to study such a thing further until he could see clearly. But... He knew.

As much as his body still burned from such an experience, the panther knew he had to keep moving. There's no telling if that thing would simply walk around the side of the mountain, but those ears didn't detect anything besides distant roars and gunfire. Forcing himself up and scanning his surroundings...

The remains of bodies were everywhere. The very same that the allosaurus was eating, each torn apart by a hail of hot bullets. Causing a few fires in the dozens upon dozens of painted trees, unable to spread due to the amount of blood that was running down the mountain. Many of the streams were being dammed and forced to flow in the certain direction, leaving evidence of the grass' true colors, but only faintly.

It disturbed him, beyond just a gruesome sight. Feeling a strange connection with every one of these people as he slowly attempted to piece together their anatomy in his mind, foraging from the dozens of bodies all with missing parts. Some just scattered nearby, others completely trampled by something of a much larger scale... Much like those dogs.

What made matters worse for him was that many of their eyes remained opened, reflecting the very terror they went through as they attempted to flee for their lives. Making Ryoko wonder if he would've looked like that if he wasn't lucky enough to find a form of shelter or escape. Looking back towards the direction of the tunnel he climbed through, now completely covered by a white mist as a roar was once again echoed through the surroundings.

What were those things? Where did they come from? The golden dinosaur stated that they were being commanded, and the panther could feel it as well. They were hunting something... His gaze fell to the gore surrounding him. They were hunting... These.

With a painful swallow, he turned over one of the late one's heads, only for it to be separated from the rest of its body. Nearly making the tirix sick, but he kept it down with a few breaths. Closing the creature's eyes so he could study it without being haunted, it was the same as that child. Only instead Blue furred; a mix between fox, mouse, and rabbit. Longer ears, a very light feeling weight. Slender and likely skirmish. "...Stratacaster." He whispered, coming back to him. A label that ached his heart terribly, like he was... One of them?

Did he cause this carnage? Slowly setting down the severed head in respect as he looked around once again. No. Ryoko would never have done such a thing... But the one inside him? The one he was carrying? He recalled the letters that came to mind in the beginning: R and K. R for Ryoko... Did K do this? Was he responsible for such an act?



All the panther could do is gaze around and observe, search for anymore clues that might reveal a shattered memory. Dozens of the fallen he almost recognized, either by their clothing or jewelry. Many of their faces the tirix half knew, but couldn't quite place a name, location, or even occupation-

But there it was... Not specifically an occupation, but a structure of their society: their jobs and professions were destined. Forcefully chosen depending on something they could not change... Color. Their naturally born coats would determine a stratacaster's fate, able to slowly recall them the longer he stared at their colors. Reds for emergency response teams: fire fighters, paramedics, and nurses. Browns were... Growers. Farmers, foragers, or even lumberjacks. Whites were scientists. Specialized doctors, biologists, architects and designers- ...Weapon designers.

That's what he was, remembering it so vividly now. Just like Xakoda said, the tirix designed weapons of war. But was it Ryoko that did, or was it K? Did he design these dog monsters? Give them the command to hunt down his own kind? His chest once again sank, it was one thing to remember that the tirix was likely hosting another life, it was another to recognize that such a thing was a monster in its own right. What would happen if K took control of him?

Worry filled his head as he continued to stroll up the red mountainside, spotting a strange orange glow within the mists up the path. The smell of smoke soon after, but only that of a small fire. Beckoning him to press on for more answers... Even if those answers would haunt the tirix forever.

Every step he took held a warm squish to it, deepening the hue of those now red paws as he continued up. Glancing at the bodies even though he knew it would only harm his psyche, until one got him to stop: a yellow one. Still torn apart like the rest, but something about the color always... Made him sad. Like he pitied them, because they were... Beneath society?

His blue gaze moved back the way he came, recalling the painted trees in the forest he was chased out of. How every other colored one seemed to be relatively healthy, while the yellows were beaten and broken. Deformed as if they were lesser than many of the others, let alone expendable. These yellow stratacasters were... Slaves and laborers. And he remembered one being in his home, as well as a neighboring one.

Not just living in his home, but they belonged there. It was K's slave? His and his significant other? Pain shot into the panther's head, getting him to tend to it while painted his fur crimson. They were parents to... That golden one! That golden child he seen! It looked familiar to him because it was K's son! And he was murdered? By one of these yellow ones?

Speculation wasn't helping him, only causing more pain and panic to the tirix as he attempted to stabilize himself. Doing his best to just move on and bypass this grave sight before Ryoko forgot who he was. But was it already too late? What did the tirix have to hold onto that

was specifically his? A mere name? Perhaps an instinct?

The blood in the grass started to fade with every step he took, nearly symbolizing that there was no true escape for that species. One that was no doubt the one Xakoda meant about genocide, but was it possible there was more than one under K's belt?

The crackles of a campfire caught his ears, still minding his surroundings as another large object was seen through the fog. Close to the light and faintly moving with the slight groan of ropes, as well as... Music? Not truly able to identify what type but the shadow slowly formed into an occupied hammock, one lightly swinging while a couple of appendages seemed to be conducting along with the sounds. The heavy clouds slowly separating to reveal another theropod, this time shades of green with some large headphones on.

Once again, the panther did not recognize the dinosaur. Though he did start to question a pattern, which was interrupted when the faint music stopped and the large one started to take off his headphones. "I know you..." The rex mumbled with an old age, taking a deep breath before opening those eyes. Still not looking at the smaller one, but taking a deep breath. "I seen you at the very end, and I know... Part of you rather well."

"...I'm guessing K?" A slow nod from the theropod, taking a few moments before looking at the brown panther; his underside soaked in red with some along the side of Ryoko's head as well. Exhausted, tired, and lost.

"Most tix do not recall the ones they host." The old one exhaled through his nostrils. "You may rest easy, friend. You are safe here." It was actually a comforting thing to hear, something unusual about this place as the whistle of a teapot started to be heard over the fire. The rex carefully rolling off the side of the hammock before the panther moved over to assist. "Thank you. As difficult as these may be to climb in and out of, a normal bed is too hard for this form."

"Form?"

"Aye. I used to have a much smaller body before I was given this task to write the history of Veritas." Another slight pain was felt in the tix' head, one that the rex did not seem to pay attention to. However, the expression on his face as he poured the tea into a couple of bowls told Ryoko that he was expecting such a result. "How much do you remember about it?"

"Veritas...?" A slow nod from the green one as that pain returned, beckoning that paw to aid his head to make it stop. Not even realizing how long it took to calm such an ache as an old paw offered him a bowl. Getting the two to gaze at each other for a few moments and the rex nodded at him again.

"Drink. It will help the memories." Slowly the brown one took the clay pottery with both hands, absorbing it's warmth as if not to realize how freezing the panther was in such a place. Taking a breath and waiting for the dinosaur to have a sip before he did, flicking a tongue at the

heated beverage as it stung slightly. "The warnings do hurt, but the warmth will help. Try to drink it while it is hot."

A faint nod from the small one as he took another breath and a large drink from the bowl, almost painful going down but it warmed his core to a cozy temperature. Taking a few moments before feeling his body start to relax, the tension of his sore muscles finally letting go and his mind clear for the first time. "Veritas... It was a universe... A home to me, yet... Not?"

"Indeed. Veritas was the first one of its kind: a multiverse. One that held three major universes within it. Designed by our Counterweight: Vyit-... Vyitri-... Vyitritvu-" A sigh but chuckle from the old dinosaur. "I can spell it, but I could never pronounce his name."

"I know who you're talking about though."

"Yes, you have seen him before." The green one smiled, watching the tirix slowly piece together the memories with every breath.

"...Blue. White underside. Purple... Stripes?" A nod in confirmation from the rex. "He was like a large... Four armed wolf-thing that stood upright. Heavily built yet was... Unusually kind and...?"

"Curious?" A nod from Ryoko. "You did not meet him directly, nor did... K." A sad look from those blue eyes as the old yellow ones turned slightly saddened. "Yes, I do know who K is, but it is best for you to remember on your own." A sigh from the small feline, but he nodded. "What else do you recall about C. Weight?" A look in question, but he understood soon after: Counterweight.

"...He was taken. Imprisoned by something... For breaking a law, involving Veritas." Another slow nod from the theropod. "But he was freed by someone."

"Yes. An allosaurus named Xakoda." A double take from the tirix as the larger one took a slow sip. "Sadly, she was outside of Veritas, so I never got a good look at her-"

"She was a Terrorist." Those old yellow eyes gazed at the panther. "A weapons developer, much like K." The smaller one looked up at the curious rex, nearly whimpering at such a stare. "I... Met her earlier."

"What was she like?"

"Frightening, but... Calm. She seemed to know more about me than I did... Still do." Ryoko took another sip, letting the tea warm his body. "I felt some strange... Connection with her, even though I don't remember ever meeting Xakoda prior." A deep sigh from the panther as he glanced at the old rex. "I... Feel the same way about you, and I don't even know you."

"I apologize for that. I'm so used to knowing everyone that I forget to introduce myself, I am Felix. I see the history of Veritas and record it."

"And K is from Veritas..." The brown one half asked, seeing the old dinosaur nod slowly. "...Which means I'm meeting you for a reason. Because you knew him."

"Aside from today, we have never met. You, Ryoko, or... K." A slight pain as the tirix took a heated breath. "Are you alright?"

"K... Ken...?" A paw was felt in his grey mane, attempting to comfort the feline.

"Kenis." A slightly sharp gasp of pain as the panther breathed heavily. "You were so close, I thought I would..."

"It's... Alright. Just..." A few breaths as the pain started to fade. "I'm okay. I'm..." A worried look from Felix as he waited patiently.

"How much do you remember about Kenis?"

"...He was a stratacaster. White, and forced in the development of weapons."

"A stratacaster's society is..." The rex trailed off sadly, seeing the brown one nod faintly in response. "There is not much one could do about it, especially when they do not know any different."

"...He had a son too. I've... Seen him."

"But you cannot remember his name?" Ryoko shook his head slowly.

"I don't know if I want to, considering his fate." A slight strain was felt in that paw against the tirix' mane, getting the small one to look at Felix. The grim expression on his aging muzzle said it all. "...He wasn't just murdered... It was only the beginning..." A slow nod in confirmation.

"Much like me, their society created... I don't really want to call them a monster, but a very powerful being." A worried look from the panther as the dinosaur took a sip. "You are not wrong, me and Kenis had something in common. Very similar... Lives and roles."

"Tell me." Ryoko calmly asked, getting a nod in confirmation from the green one. "It might not hurt so badly if..."

"You hear a familiar story. Familiar to Kenis, that is." A deep breath from the rex. "I won't go into too many details, but we were at war with another. Battling a stalemate that legends say that one of two beings could break and finally put an end to such a catastrophe. There were rumors that the other side obtained theirs, so naturally our leaders began to worry."

The rex continued. "I never approved of the testings. In my previous life I was given the job to attempt to artificially make our Legend using many different subjects. Prisoners, lawbreakers, even some innocents. And one day I just could not take it anymore." A sad look from those blue eyes as the theropod took another sip.

"...You set them free." A slow nod in response.

"All of them, but I was caught. That decision alone destroyed so much data and nearly killed the project that could've saved our lives... And I was okay with that. I know it wasn't a good decision for the rest of our kind, but I..." A brown paw of comfort as the old one took a few breaths. "But the project had one last attempt left. As punishment for my crimes, I was requested to use it on my first born son."

"No..."

"...I couldn't do it. I told my family what had happened, but I could not give up my oldest son... My second born volunteered though, and I don't know what possessed me to agree to such a thing..." A few tears left those yellow eyes as the old one attempted to hold himself together. "...The results were an astounding success. Much better than they could have hoped, but there was something... Taken in the process. It was like he was no longer my son."

"...I'm sorry." Another slow nod as the large one took a drink.

"It is a pain I wish upon no one; to watch your own child become-" A grunt of pain from the tirix interrupted him, releasing deep breaths to deal with the pains in his head. Once again, the old one attempted to comfort him.

"It... Wasn't my son..." A low growl from the panther. "Kenis' son, but... His wife?" The rex slowly shook his head. "His... Daughter-?" Another sharp jolt of pain that nearly put the brown one into sobs, once again feeling that dreadful loss.

"...I'm not sure how to answer that."

"She was a daughter to me... A yellow coat, but..." A few breaths as the small one looked back the way he came. "...She did this. But I did nothing to stop it." A defeated breath nearly deflated Ryoko. "If anything, I aided her. I... I made her a weapon to fight them. Because... How they treated her. But I didn't think she would push it so far." A deep breath as he attempted to collect himself. "...My Sweet Zoe Jane..."

"...There were a lot of hardships within Veritas." Felix mumbled, breaking the silence. "Many of which were very difficult to write, but things happened for a reason." Those wet blue eyes slowly looked up at the dinosaur's. "This is not your task."

"...Then what is...?"

"Like mine, Kenis' story did not end there." Ryoko's gaze fell. "For now, you should rest. A tirix is a formidable body, but even it cannot continue on without slumber." The brown one nodded slowly. "You are safe here, and the tea will relax you. Sleep while you can." With a heavy breath, the brown one got comfortable on the warm grounds. Closing his eyes, it was but a few minutes before his thoughts vanished into darkness.

When he awoke, the fog still surrounded him. The campfire was on its final embers, and the air felt this darkened... Dusk start to set in. Taking a few moments to remember what happened then look for the old dinosaur, one that seemed to disappear entirely. Making Ryoko wonder if Felix was just a figment of his imagination... If all this was a creation of his own mind, regardless of how real everything felt.

The brown one paused, gazing at his own bloodstained paws for a few moments. Realizing quite easily that for the moment he knew more about Kenis than he did himself. Is that what his plan was? For Kenis to take over the body and lock Ryoko in darkness until he faded away? If it was... Such a ruse was working.

A deep sigh of near despair as the tirix flopped his head down on the cooling grounds. Getting several old leaves to fly away from the impact to leave the panther to his depression... Only for him to notice white markings on the ground beneath them. Not paint nor chalk, but... Something more magical?

He brushed a few more out of the way, finding a large trail underneath the blanket of leaves. Sweeping them further and further, finding white line after connected white line around the campfire. Desperately clearing the area of the debris until he could see it as a whole; a large painted glyph that was drawn where the tirix had slept.

It looked so familiar to the panther... No... It looked familiar to *Ryoko*! Like he seen these before, *Drew* these before! Recalling the very book he read about them in, practicing for hours upon hours to do them. Drawing these symbols with traditional methods... But learning how to do without them.

With a few breaths the tirix placed a paw on the white lines, feeling a near hum within the small grid that circled their camp. Letting Ryoko's instincts take over and activate the symbol... Only for it to fade away. Did he break it? Somehow do it wrong-?

A massive roar was heard not far from him, followed by several others at a distance responding to such a thing. Instantly getting the brown one's heart to race, knowing exactly what it was. Quickly gazing at where the symbol was, he realized... It was already active! It was a warding, a shelter of sorts that made the camp unable to be sensed by threats!

Panic overtook him, causing his mind to trip over itself while attempting to recall how such a glyph was drawn! Instead bailing on the idea of restoring it and just running into the forest, alongside the uphill slant that likely took the tirix to the top! Picking up those heavy stomps of chase not too long after he started moving and swearing it was catching up!

They paused, but only for a moment before the behemoth roared again. As if easily picking up Ryoko's direction and giving pursuit. The echoes of trees being turned into showers of splinters or being rooted out of the grounds completely, doing nothing to stop the canine's chase. To the point where Ryoko knew he could not outrun this thing, barely doing so when

going uphill and even then...

Several large objects were seen through the fog, causing his fur to puff out in warning at first, but soon realizing they were just large rocks. If he couldn't escape the beast, could he hide instead? This would be the only chance he had to try it, being far enough ahead for the thing to lose the trail. Maybe it was a dumb plan, but he needed to try something! Diving behind one of the larger rocks, then a second one as he pressed his side towards it. Attempting to slow down his pants when the thing came close, rushing passed the field of stones as the tirix got a decently good look at it for the first time...

It was a giant grey bulldog, at least 30ft tall and covered in wounds. Something red in its chest was barely seen but it disappeared into the fog too quickly to make out what it was... Only for it to slide to a stop and roar loudly in frustration, triggering that fear response once again but he braced himself to keep still. Though that feeling only amplified when those quakes and that large shadow returned through the fog.

The tirix kept his head down and avoided looking at the beast as it seemed to scan the area. Hearing those ripping noises once again and firing shots of large machine guns into the fields of stones. Bullets hailing down and causing the dirt and leaves to fly upwards in dozens of fountains as some were ricocheted off the boulders themselves. A few getting very close to the panther, but nothing fatal.

The weapons fired until they were empty, once again being discarded after the sounds of ripping flesh as the large beast began to prowl around. Getting Ryoko to move along with it to remain unseen. This... Thing could still detect him. Be it through scent or some other supernatural means, which meant that there was no real escape from it... No wonder they hunted down the stratacasters so easily...

A growl of frustration echoed through the air as it started to stalk through the fields. Ryoko had to do something, he couldn't hide forever here and the longer he waited... But Kenis wasn't a combatant! He only developed weapons, never tested or used them for anything! ...Yet, why did this danger feel so familiar to the tirix? Most would completely freeze up in such a situation, much like the chase before...

Thoughts of those glyphs returned earlier, getting the brown one to gaze at his forepaw. Like it was... Holding a kind of supernatural ink within, as well as a series of claws that would do nothing to something that size. But what if...?

With a quiet breath, he carefully looked to see if he could spot the behemoth, catching it much closer than he expected but still remaining unseen. Carefully, Ryoko reached out and touched the ground between two boulders, concentrating and witnessing a circular symbol begin to form. Then several details around it, ones that look so familiar to him like an old trick. Finishing up and then fading, but not completely. Just enough to stay hidden as the panther did the same. Retreating back to his shelter and taking a small rock, tossing it across where the glyph

was drawn-

The beast growled, nearly casting a shadow in the dusk over the brown one as it searched the area. Placing a massive grey forepaw where the glyph was drawn and instantly triggering an ethereal bear-trap that reached up to its bicep! A deep yelp of pain was heard as gushes of blood launched from the limb, early breaking the bone of the thing's leg as it roared in both pain and anger.

The panther escaped, keeping out of its view and rushing outside of the fields and back into the woods. Still hearing the painful growls, whimpers, and roars as they caught up with him. Eventually catching the bone snap loudly as more flesh started to rip through the forest air, the brown one nearly feeling what happened... In order to escape the trap, it probably ripped its own limb off at the wound.

Such suspicions were confirmed as the quaking footstomps were heard, though a bit softer and oddly timed. Still hot in pursuit on the tirix as he kept running deeper into the forest, starting to see the air and area get darker and darker as the sun was moved behind the mountain. Trees continued to be pushed down, though not keeping up enough speed to shatter them like before. Ripping noises were still heard as bullets fired wildly in Ryoko's direction, unable to truly tell where the tirix was and just spraying the area. Forcing the brown one to take cover regardless when a few got too close for comfort.

A series of molded land and depressions within the mountain were enough to avoid the line of sight with the gunfire, attempting to navigate them like half dug trenches as the beast continued to fire wildly. When one weapon overheated or ran out of ammo, it would just discard them and rip out two more. Roaring loudly over the ballistics in both pain and anger, desperately attempting to end Ryoko's life like its own depended on such a thing. Yet, the hailstorm tactic was working enough to slow him down. Every attempt to another trench was interrupted by a spray of dirt when several bullets showered around his cover.

The heavy steps grew closer as the brown one's ringing ears nearly went deaf from the gunfire, barely picking out several *thumps!* nearby each exploding soon after and shaking the very grounds underneath the tirix. Then a few more launchers as several canisters were lobbed into Ryoko's cover, instantly forcing him to dive out of it before they exploded in a heavy chain reaction! Getting spotted by the behemoth soon after as it roared again, ripping out more chainguns and causing the barrels to whirl up quickly as the panther attempted to find more cover-!

Only for a loud impaling sound to come just before the heavy weapons fired! Forcing the canine to slip onto its chest as a large blade of sorts was thrown through its good forelimb! The weapons sprayed inaccurately before being severed one by one, allowing Ryoko to finally hear another voice over the heavy growls: "Run!!" Though concerned who it was, the tirix bolted across the fields. Attempting to ignore the sounds of a battle behind him; gunfire, flesh being cut opened, painful roars that were also filled with intense hatred! Explosions and heavy quakes as



the feline dove behind another large rock found in the fog!

...And then silence. Aside from the thick ringing and heavy pants of his body attempting to gain more energy. Trying to calm down, but his chest kept racing. His muscles stiff and still nearly in shock, ready to move at any moment or any sound... Which might just be needed, as quick footsteps were soon heard, though much smaller than the behemoth chasing him.

Looking in the direction of the steps while still hiding, a bulky white anthro wolf came to view and slid to a stop. Staring at the brown one and nearly growling. "You call this running!?" He harshly whispered, getting the tirix's ears to lower. "Come on! We don't have time for this! Move!"

"But... Didn't you kill-?"

"These things don't stay dead for long, you know this!" A rather shocked expression from Ryoko that made the white one's gaze narrow and exhale through that muzzle. "How injured are you?"

"What?"

"Can you walk?" Those blue eyes looked at the tall one with a bit of confusion, only for a white paw to gesture the panther's side. Getting him to look over his coat and instantly feel the warmth start to leak out of him... Shrapnel from the explosives piercing his body several times, but nothing that looked too serious... From afar. "Come. I'll carry you if I have to."

"I..." He started to feel weak, exhaustion overtaking his form once again as those muscles strained. Implying the tirix shouldn't move while the large wolf examined his other side, picking him up with both arms quite easily as he continued up the mountain.

"It wouldn't be the first time." The canine grumbled, giving the smaller one time to catch his breath as they kept moving for several minutes. The two picking up an angry roar not long after, causing the panther to brace while the wolf casually looked in the direction. "...It shouldn't follow us just yet, but if I have to put that thing down again, I will."

"It'll be harder..."

"Considering I had a distraction earlier yes, but I don't intend to put your life into danger. Kenis or not." A guilty look from those blue eyes, while the wolf's familiar yellow ones stayed forwards.

"...How did you know?"

"Well, you've been looking at me like you don't know who I am. You managed to tear off a Houtainion's leg solo. But the big one is that you're not in your wheelchair." Ryoko's gaze morphed into a sadder one as the canine exhaled. "Your back legs didn't work. You kept who you were, but at a cost. At least, that's how I always seen it." He grumbled. "Soul Transferring was a

stupid idea, but you were desperate." Finding a nearby flat area, he set the tirix down on his good side. Taking out a knife from a sheath along his blank pantleg, the wolf peeled off some bark from a nearby tree. Offering it to the brown one. "Bite on this." A bit of a sour look, but Ryoko did.

He knew what was coming, but that still didn't help against the pain that shot through his side. The sting of the blade wedging through his flesh wound, prying out the shrapnel until those claws could get a hold of it. The panther's fangs nearly pierced through the fresh bark, getting deeper and deeper into it with every wound as he attempted to hold back any whimpers. Ears flicking wildly with adrenaline whenever a distant roar was heard, but the wolf didn't seem to bothered by it in the slightest.

Soon enough, the white one put the knife away. Yet those blue discs couldn't help but look at the red tint that covered the blade, eventually meeting up with the yellow ones which seemed both calm and angry at the same time. "It's clean. Or was." The large one helped take the bark out of the tirix' maw, prying the wood out of the grooves his teeth have dug and then tossing it. "Regardless, we should still dress those. I've seen a tent not far from here, I'll see what I can salvage from it." A slow and shaky nod from the brown one. "Stay here and rest. I'll be back soon."

Not waiting for a response, the canine stood up and walked away. Yet, something caught Ryoko's eye along the wolf's arm; what he thought was just a black metal bracer of sorts was actually underneath the large one's silvery fur coat. Displaying an eerie shine to it when the low light hit it, a light that held... Fear behind it. Causing his mane to puff out as the panther was suddenly made uneasy.

Did he trust the canine? So far he didn't really have a reason not to, but he seen that... Metal before. On some other creature that his instinct identified as a terrible threat, one of the worst ever encountered. Yet... The color was off? Usually he remembered them being more of a reflective or platinum toned, he just couldn't place what it actually was... Besides 'Enemy'.

Attempting to get up was a slight mistake, his body still too exhausted to move much. His muscles sore and stiff, burning with the very act of just breathing. At this point, he had no choice but to trust the wolf. Not only to care for the tirix but to even defend him if needed. Thinking back to when he recently walked away from Ryoko and spotting three short greatswords carried on his back. Sheathless, like they were being held there by some other means other than straps. And of course... Freshly Stained.

Odds are it was just what he fought with. A little bit of a strange choice, but he's always been a little on the strange side, hasn't he-? A hiss of pain while Ryoko held his head, soon hearing those footsteps return. "You okay?" The white one asked, making it difficult to tell if he was concerned or not.

"Yeah... Just..." The brown one trailed off, seeing a few makeshift rags and some... Spider

webs in the wolf's hands. "No luck?"

"Not much, but this should keep you from being infected here." A faint noise in confirmation as the panther took a few breaths.

"...Ragin." The wolf stopped for a moment. "You're... Felix' son."

"...Not the popular one." He grumbled in reply, continuing to wrap the bandages. "What else do you remember?"

"...There was a second one." The canine went quiet. "And I..." A brown paw reached over on Ragin's arm and touched the dark metal. "I... Did this to you-"

"No, you didn't." The white one replied thickly. "You keep saying that, but it was my choice." A sad look from the tirix as Ragin took a breath. "You don't remember how, do you? Or even why?" That blue gaze fell, then turned in the direction of another roar. A bit closer by. One that even half got the white one's attention before he moved around to the panther's good side and lifted him up again. "You came to me. Saying you needed to find a way out of Veritas."

"Out of... The universe?"

"It's not the only one around. Your method was foolish, but I was so willing to prove that I could fight those things so easily..." A low growl from the wolf's throat. "Just like my brother."

"You're brother..."

"Onix. Or after that damn experiment; Xion." Another slight sting in Ryoko's head, getting him to quietly grunt but feel that yellow gaze on him for a moment as Ragin continued to walk uphill. "At first, I was thinking you wanted to just save yourself. Find a way out and escape before whatever was destroying planets would get to you." The brown one's head lowered, nearly in defeat as the wolf exhaled and looked away. "...I understood later on though. You were looking for your daughter."

A double take from the tirix. "...Daughter?"

"Yes. She was taken by some... Army. Past that and some white flashes they fought with, I don't know. It didn't seem to affect me, but..." A heated exhale. "...I couldn't take it on by myself. I didn't even know they were arresting people and escorting them outside of Veritas."

"Arresting?"

"Aside from that, I don't know. What I do know is that they were not Unborn or anything-" A sharp pain and a whimper from the brown one, getting the wolf to stop in place for a moment. The tirix' breaths increased while he held his head, getting the large one to almost frown at him. "...Sorry."

"It's..."

"I'm not sure what you do remember or..." Ragin carried on up the mountain. "...Do you remember the Unborn?"

"They were... Metallic creatures. Almost like humanoid insects...?"

"Kind of. More blades and less mandibles, let alone wings."

"But they came from... Outside." Ryoko took a few breaths. "From something that was trying to get into Veritas. Attempted to for eons..." The panther looked at the white canine. "Faulted time and time again by... You guys."

"I hardly consider myself one of that league, but I've fought my fair share of Unborn."

"...Which is why you can stand up against those... Dog things." No response. "But I..." An enormous amount of guilt suddenly fell over the brown one. "...I'm sorry."

"It wasn't your choice, it was mine."

"I was just desperate to find her-"

"Shut up." Ragin growled. "You had your reasons, I had mine. Even if it meant I became half-Unborn in the process, I didn't care."

"But it cost-" A white paw snatched Ryoko's muzzle, keeping it shut rather strongly and making him whimper.

"...Don't. Say his name." He slowly let go, though the sting of his grip lingered. "It was his dumbass sacrifice, and that's why you've felt guilty after since seeing me. We got the job done, you got out. After that, you tell me." A thick yellow stare at the tirix as he attempted to avoid it's gaze. "That's why you're here, isn't it? To remember the damn past? What you've lost and what's left for you to fight for? Even if it is no longer your life, it was the thing that brought you here. What you were missing in your next life, or Ryoko's." A double take from the panther that time. "It's what's giving him, giving **you**, purpose."

The roars got closer, getting the attention of the wolf. Setting the tirix down on his own feet before turning around and facing the direction of the roars. "Everyone has to face a conflict at some point in their lives, even a pacifist like you. You find something to fight for, be it pride and ability, family and friends, or your own self-preservation and vision. Even Kenis realized this, which is why he aided her in that genocide." The quakes started to be felt in the ground. "Go. I'll fight them back, but you're better off not being seen."

As much as Ryoko didn't want to leave behind another friend, he nodded and took off. Even against his body's warnings, trying not to run at top speed in case it did more overall damage. However, gunfire was soon heard close by, even a few bullets whizzing overhead somewhat close to the panther's location. Causing his adrenaline to once again kick in while that fear response made him push harder up the hill.

But he could only muster so much in an exhausted and slightly wounded body. His mind still concerned about Ragin's wellbeing, much like it always was. His and... Xerodose... The name ached his chest harshly, enough for Ryoko to slow to a stop and just grieve while panting. Picking out the constant quakes of both gunfire, explosives, and stomps... Ones starting to get closer to the tirix.

...All at once, he was sick of running. Angry at himself for not being able to do more, for the lives his decisions took. The allies he's made and lost, changed and cursed...! Nearly snarling at the roar behind him as that energy once again was felt in that brown paw, slamming it down on the ground can quickly carving a glyph around him. Letting the light pulse brightly as he turned around and stared at that grey bulldog charging through the fog, weapons deployed...

Only for it to slide to a stop, just outside of the bright circle that took its paw before. One now regenerated, but leaving quite the scar. Chest cut opened and leaving its heart exposed, pulsing loudly with adrenaline and rage. The beast roared at the brown one as the panther walked to the very edge, staring at the thirty foot behemoth in the face. Staring it into those yellow eyes... Yellow eyes that nearly held a familiar gold tint to them.

Ryoko's anger quickly melted away into shock, while the very beast did the exact same. Taking a step back while the tirix took one forwards outside of the glyph, as he whispered in disbelief. "Belmont...? My son?" The grey one growled at him, as if to reject such a thought. Yet, it still did not attack him. Only taking another step back before gazing past the tirix, far up the mountain as it started to lay down. Bowing its head and closing its eyes as the panther turned about to look in the same direction.

A glance at the massive dog before he continued up the steep, dead grass covered mountainside. Finally reaching the cloudy flat top and taking few breaths... Seeing a silhouette of that now doomed species, her backed turned to him as the brown one crawled to her. Barely making out that yellow furred tail before coming to a complete stop. Faded and worn, patches of it missing as barbed wire seemed to choke it in several areas. Touching it's now rough strands as a tear fell out of Ryoko's eyes, not getting a reaction out of her.

"...I know you're not her." He whispered, knowing somehow the stratacaster could listen. "You were just the... Result of what they did to her. What they did to many of the yellows." No response. "Yet, you were still my Zoe Jane... Deep down inside, I could feel that you still were..." Another roar was heard in the background and he glanced at it. "I didn't create these... I have you a weapon of light to use, not an army of darkness and despair."

Slowly, he reached up and hugged her from behind, finally getting her attention with a paw over his. "You did what you had to do... Even if it was eradicating them for the future of others... I seen what they were planning for the future, how it could be easily manipulated in the wrong hands." A sigh in defeat from the brown one. "At least that's what I keep telling myself... I don't know if it was the correct decision or not, I can't... But I am partially responsible for this Genocide, I know that and I will shoulder that weight."

"Yet..." He continued. "I am also responsible for what you became. What they turned you into... Though many will, I will not say Monster. No matter how many lives you've taken." Still no verbal response, but a yellow paw squeezed his. "...I should've done more. I made weapons that harmed people, but the social structure of the Stratacasters created a weapon that destroyed themselves... That's why I helped you. That's why I was willing to give myself up to your bloody art." A heavy wind was felt around the two, finally blowing the dense fog away from the cliffside in the late dusk and revealing...

An army of behemoths below them. Much like the ones chasing him, roaring at the two above as if... Waiting orders. Letting go of his daughter, the tirix moved to her side instead to gaze upon the sight. Finally meeting her rust and gold colored eyes, her fur messed up and tainted. Wounds and scars covering what was no longer clothed, letting the panther's gaze fall to the ground. "...I am no longer Kenis, but he isn't gone. He wants you to know this... As tragic as this whole life was, the struggles you've gone through time and time again... Those recorded in his eyes and memories and those not, he is still proud of what you made out of it."

The stratacaster blinked slowly at Ryoko. "...What will you do now?" It was barely a question, making him double take at her... Then look over the army again.

"...I still have to find you. Not for my sake, or even just Kenis'... Others sacrificed so much to get me out of Veritas, I won't disappoint them." That blue gaze returned to her more determined than ever. "I will find you. All of you."

*"And I will find a way to get you back home safe."*