

ELANCIA CHRONICLES

THE ORDER OF NEW GODS

BY WOOFLE

SEASON I

BLISTERED SKIES

EPISODE X

DEVASTATION

— ILLUSTRATIONS BY FORTUNA, CAINE, THE LONGSHOT AND SORCERER LANCE —

♪♪ [The Desert Shuffle \(or Prelude to a Shootout\)](#) ♪♪

“Are you all right?” Basil asked, having to shout to be heard over the wind, and still holding Xan after hauling him back onto the car.

“Been better,” the rabbit admitted, not quite as loud due to having the wind knocked out of him.

Verse watched the cars from further back on the train slow to a halt in what little light there was, as the front cars continued on deeper into the darkness of the long tunnel, before glancing back to the pair, and finally hauling himself up to his feet again.

Bands of light rushed across the much shorter train, coming from lanterns up above towards the roof of the tunnel. In one of these, Verse saw Karina and Ryza returning, and Basil, Xan and Cecelia climbing to their feet. The fox hurried to their side to help the three of them stand.

“Easier than I thought that would be,” Karina said, dusting her hands as she and Ryza returned.

“Yeah, but we're in a fine mess now!” Ryza growled, “How the hell are we going to keep the train from stopping?”

Verse shifted his lips off to one side, looking at the two girls before an idea struck him.

“Le' me go 'ave a word with the conductor!” he offered.

“You're going to make things worse!” Ryza called back, but Verse was already on his way.

He had to shimmy around the side of the coal car, and it was frightening, for sure, but the idea of being blown sky high—or possibly worse yet, failing the mission if the train stopped—was scarier.

Ryza was right behind him, but he ignored her and hauled himself up into the train's cabin.

“Evenin', gents,” said **the fox**, placing one hand on his hips, lips shifted off to the other side now.

The conductor, who was lizard-kin like Ryza, had already begun to apply the brakes, and the coal man, a human, had stopped shoveling.

“What's going on back there?!” the conductor demanded.

Verse took a breath, and then held it. He had to try very hard to suppress his accent here. “Ease off the brake, would you? If we don't reach the cannon soon, we'll encounter some difficulty sending help back to those on the cars we just lost. Some intruder bugged everything up—no idea who she was working for, but she's dead now. There are a lot of wounded back there, and she broke most of the cars free. The faster we get to the cannon, the faster we can send help.”

The fox folded his arms, eyeing the conductor, whose hand was now easing up on the brake.

“You heard her!” said Ryza to the coal man, who was still staring at Verse. “Get shoveling!”

Verse suppressed a vindicated smile, “I've got a few wounded to take care of on the cars that're still attached. How long until we reach the cannon?”

“About five minutes if we really book it,” said the conductor. “Do you know if the intruder was working alone?”

“No idea. When you send reinforcements back, make sure to send a *ton*,” the fox remarked, as another idea struck him. “It could be a surprise attack. We may need to send out several garrisons worth.” *Y'know, so no one asks us what we're doing in the cannon.*

It was also so that the structure didn't collapse atop thousands of soldiers and technicians per a request Charlemagne had made of Regando, of course, but that part wasn't as immediately important to Verse.

The tunnel ended rather abruptly in a flash of afternoon light, and the train roared out into an expansive, flat valley, mostly covered with dead grass and shrub brush. Verse nearly fell off the coal car when the light and vision came, but managed to hold on. Ryza, who hadn't said a word since Verse had headed towards the coal car, grabbed the fox to make sure he didn't fall.

"Not bad," she said, when she was sure he had his balance once more. "You may have just salvaged this mission."

With that, she hopped back down onto the flat car where the crate of explosives sat, along with the rest of the group.

Here's hoping, thought Verse, following suit.

The cannon dominated the skyline on this side of the tunnel. It could be seen from Gizdich Ranch, sure, but here, one really got an idea of the scale of it. It could be seen from Mt. Kizzen, and basically all corners of Dascillia, but being up close to it was something else entirely. It was easily the largest piece of Star Junk in the world.

"It's something, isn't it?" Ryza asked, seeing that most of the group was now looking at the looming tower that was drawing closer by the moment.

"Yeah..." said Xan, shaking his head slightly. "Dis thing been here a while?"

"Probably about a hundred years or something," said Ryza. "Junkers were all crazy about it a while back, when they started coming to Basker. No one ever knew what to do with something so big 'til the Aegiys came along. They seem to know more about Star Junk than even junkers do... They told us it was a weapon. After that, junkers stopped taking pieces off of it, a city was built around it, and now all we do is haul parts in to try and get it ready. It's kind of funny. It's just been this big *thing* you see looming on the horizon if you live here, and now it's... this."

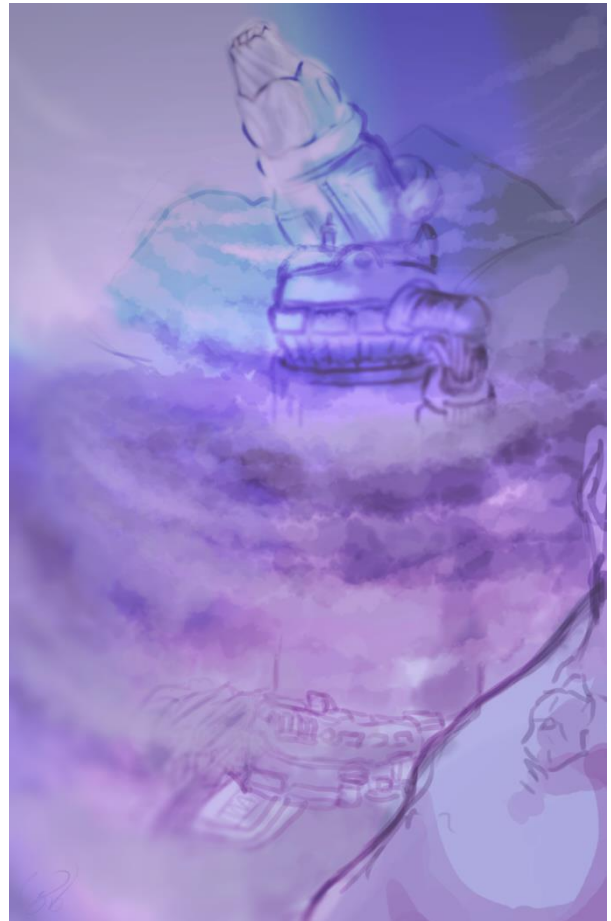
"So the rumor was true," said Cecelia staring up at the cannon. "...It's even bigger this close..."

"That's what *she* said," Xan whispered to Verse.

Cecelia was still talking, though, "Wonder what kind of magical energy it'll put out with so many people channeling through it..."

The city was coming into view now. It was mostly wooden like Gizdich, hastily constructed, and surrounded by a wall made out of logs piled high. The buildings looked like toys around the base of the cannon. The structure itself, though, looked quite rusty in some places, and Verse could make out some Elian writing on the side. It was just random letters and numbers from what he could tell, though. A lot of it was rusted over, meaning it had not been painted on in recent times. Some symbols *had* been painted over the rust though. Verse recalled seeing them on various Aegiys uniforms. Likely, they were symbols of the Gods the Aegiys worshiped.

Ryza spoke again, "Once we pass through the gate and into the warehouses, we need to unload this thing fast. Fox-kid, I need you on point doing the talking, since you did so well up front. I'll be



taking the others with me to set up the explosives in the tower's base. I need you right on our tails as soon as the situation is laid out.”

Verse swallowed, lowering his ears. His tail tried to sneak between his legs. “Jus' 'cause I did well tolkin' to one person doesn't mean I can convince the 'ole base,” he pointed out.

“Shut up,” said Ryza, and that was that.

♪♪ In Trouble Again ♪♪

The shadow of the cannon blocked out the late afternoon sun soon after, bathing the round valley they'd entered in shadow. The city looked large enough now, two and three story buildings still dwarfed by the wall of metal before them. The wall of logs surrounding the city was patrolled by guards, and a massive iron gate that normally must have sat closed, lay open for the train to speed right through.

By the time Cecelia saw the gate, they were already through it though, and the rest of the sunlight disappeared, replaced by the roof of a warehouse. The train was slowing quickly now, almost fast enough for her to lose her balance—and then rather suddenly, exactly fast enough. She tumbled, landing against Verse, who also fell over, with a yelp.

As quickly as their journey had begun, it was over.

“Sorry,” Cecelia groaned, trying to peel herself free from him, although he said nothing. He simply helped her free, and then helped her up. His golden eyes were distant just now, and he was looking around the warehouse, sniffing, his ears erect.

The room was massive, and continued on for what looked like a mile. There were many, many flags hung from the wall, each pertaining to one of the Gods of the Aegiys. Cecelia knew this because she read. A lot of the symbols were adaptations from those of older Gods, dead ones, sealed ones, and ones who had gone into exile. None of them looked like they *should* have, or *did* hundreds of years ago. It was very irksome that someone had purposefully gone to the trouble of changing these ancient designs. Who would do that?

It was incredibly hot inside the warehouse, too, and rather dusty. It was not a comfortable place to be, and Cecelia already felt naked without her coat on. This just made her even *more* uncomfortable.

“Let's move!” Ryza was saying. She'd said some other things, but they weren't important.

Already, Karina and Xan had eased the crate towards the edge of the car, where confused dock workers were awaiting them, questions flowing from their mouths. Cecelia couldn't make most of it out, because her ears were still hurting from how loud the wind had been, and the brakes of the train, too. She could hear Ryza though.

“I don't know how many. You'll have to ask Puddingstone. She went to the cab, but right now, we need your help unloading. This crate is top priority. The test firing is next week, and we're behind schedule!”

Xan had already hopped down onto the warehouse floor, and was staring off into the distance. The building seemed to go on literally forever. Piles of star junk were here and there, unidentifiable masses of metal and materials Cecelia hadn't ever seen before, along with row upon row of neatly stacked boxes, all marked with different designations. Of particular interest were the ones marked “channeling devices.” She'd read a little about those, but—

“Yo! Booksworth! Let's roll!” said Xan, having turned to face her now. He was offering a hand up to her. She realized that the crate and everyone else had already disembarked. Quickly, she took his hand, and let him help her down to the warehouse floor, and the dock workers had already headed back to inspect the train cars that were still attached. She could hear a lot of shouting from towards the front of the train. Perhaps Verse had done a good job raising the alarm.

Karina had already pushed their crate quite a long ways with Ryza's help. The two of them were just about to disappear between two rows of boxes. Verse was quickly jogging in their direction.

“Hoo boy, here we go,” said Xan, looking over his shoulder at her. “We should be fine, just stick close, okay?”

“Yeah,” Cecelia said—only because she knew Xan expected an answer. Oh, how desperately she wanted to see inside those boxes of channeling devices. It was a shame they'd all be blown up soon.

“Yo!” Xan shouted from a few feet away, before tugging Cecelia by the sleeve. She'd only wanted to touch one of the boxes. They still had a few minutes before everything would explode, didn't they?

At the other end of the warehouse, was a large, wide doorway that led onto a catwalk that sloped up and away, towards the base of the cannon. Xan, Karina, Ryza, and Basil were all pushing the crate now as best they could. It wasn't that large of a crate by any means, and it looked rather comical watching four people try to push it all at once. There wasn't any room for her or Verse though, and besides, the fox was hanging back near the doorway, ears still erect, one hand nervously fidgeting about at his side.

She wanted to say something to him, but more recently, she'd learned, that during tense situations such as these, no one really wanted to talk much about anything other than what they were doing. It was annoying, but that was probably something they would grow out of eventually.

Verse had stuffed a cigarette between his lips and lit it, still standing in the doorway, although when he noticed her standing right up next to him, he made a face.

“You should 'elp tha' lo' ge' the box moved on up, luv. I'm jus' keep an eye on fings 'ere, makin' sure nobody follows us. Looooooooooks loike most of 'em are gonna 'ead on back to the tunnel, bu' you can never be sure,” he said through some smoke, glancing in her direction for a moment.

Cecelia nodded her head, because she figured that would make him stop interrupting her. He continued though.

“Cece, I uh...” he started, before pausing, shaking his head, and continuing, while looking away. “I know this ain't ... somethin' you're probably to um.. pleased about.”

He was talking to her about *that* again. She decided to organize and lay out her thoughts in such a way that he would never ask again.

“Verse,” she said, “you're right, but if we don't do this, a whole lot of people are going to die—including us. The Aegiys are fighting Elia, and I hate Elia. A lot. ...but this cannon isn't going to kill her or even really stop her. It's just going to make people hate the Aegiys even more, and be afraid of them... So it has to go. They're making a really bad choice for their future, and the future of Elancia.”

Verse made a strange face, and sputtered for a moment.

“Fair enough..?” he finally said, “Didn't really expect tha' sort've uh... rational thought from you.”

Cecelia wasn't sure what he meant by that. She was always rational.

Turning, the bat girl followed the rest of the group up the catwalk. Outside, the city was a maze of criss-crossing catwalks, some wooden, some metal, all leading to the base of the cannon tower, which dovetailed out, and allowed the cannon to stand firmly on the ground without tilting. It looked as if a lot of that had been constructed recently. Cecelia remembered seeing the cannon in the distance when she was very small, and her grandfather had tried to give her away to someone else... back then, the tower had leaned precariously, although now, it did not. She was pretty sure it must have taken a lot of people to straighten it out, but it wouldn't take too many people to bring it down.

Either way, the tower's base now spread out for quite a ways, until it was horizontal. Their catwalk would take them over a few buildings (from what Cecelia could tell, a lot of the buildings in town were barracks. This was a military base after all, and in *An Affair by Moonlight* such places had been described in great detail. This place couldn't be too different.

...Only it was. The air was dirty with smoke from various factories around the edges of town. The place was dirty also and looked uncomfortable to live in. All the buildings looked rickety. Even the catwalk was. Cecelia didn't profess to know much about this sort of thing, but she'd assumed the place

would be better built, and had no idea what the factories were for. Not like it really mattered, they were going to be dust, just like the poor boxes filled with channeling devices.

She paused for a moment on the catwalk, but a sudden loud clang from the direction of the tower nearly knocked her over the railing. For a split second, she thought more time had passed than she'd realized, and the tower was exploding, but a frightened glance in that direction showed she was wrong.

“W-What was that!?” she squeaked at the empty air before her.

“Tha's the alarm bell,” Verse said, slowly backing his way up the cat walk. He'd reached her a few moments prior. “From wot Royza said earlier, 'at should clear this place ou'. Means no one's going to bother us whoile we plant these things, if they think they're s'posed to leave.”

The fox pointed, after turning Cecelia around, showing her a spot up on the more narrow part of the tower, where a hole had been cut. She could just barely see something metallic catching the sun's dying rays inside. It was not too far above where the other four had entered with the crate. Looking down from there, to the doorway, she could see Xan tugging on a chain hanging from the ceiling energetically. He seemed to be enjoying himself.

Soon, the bell's sound was joined by many many others all across the ramshackle town.

“Well, tha' should ge' things movin',” Verse said just loud enough for her to hear, before tugging on her sleeve, and hurrying after the others.

The bat-girl looked over her shoulder one last time at the warehouse behind them, and then hurried after him.

♪♪ Eye of Fate ♪♪

“Alright, will everyone shut up for a second?” Lionel's voice sounded both tired and aggravated at the same time. This didn't surprise Rellin, as the general had spent the past several days getting battered on the eastern front, where Celestionese forces and the Holy Army broke through into Dascillia.

“I wasn't even talking...” said Rellin, although Lionel missed it as several others were. Rellin knew most of them in passing. Bjorn was a feeble old man who had worshipped the God of Fate long before Rellin, Lionel and the other Aegiys had become involved. Holger was a seasoned veteran within the Aegiys not unlike Saytor, though he lacked the drinking problem. Saitos was a young Dascillian who had embraced worshiping the God of Fate with open arms.

The three of them were Disciples of Fate. Rellin was one, too, but not by choice. He wanted to serve his own Goddess, but in order to spread the “good will” of the God of Fate, he'd had to take up the guise. Orders were orders. He'd signed the papers.

There were three other voices coming through the firelight. One was Prince Filn, the buffoon who Lionel and the High Aegiys Order had seduced with a High Aegiys Priestess. As soon as Filn fell for her and his father fell ill, it wasn't hard to wrest power from the prince. He was too lazy to rule and disliked the responsibility, which now fell to Lord Ryadel, the former Lord of the Rukruos Region who was just as devout as Bjorn and supported Lionel... mostly. Honestly, it was a timebomb, all of it. Their foothold here was feeble and relied entirely on the war continuing until the cannon was ready.

The last two voices, Rellin did not recognize, but he knew better than to ask questions. One was very deep and sounded tired. The other sounded bored and had a posh Kerlynzian accent.

“I suppose that answers my question,” said the Kerlynzian. Rellin swore that voice's owner was yawning. “Remind me not to ask so many people for a status report at the same time.”

Bjorn, who was sharing a fire with Holger, had already started carrying on again. “We need more reinforcements if we are to banish Elia from this world once and for all!”

Rellin rolled his eyes. Bjorn went on about this every time he thought anyone might listen.

“I'm here,” said Lionel. “I don't know what more you need.”

“What about someone better to defend us?” said Saitos. “Vendel City is already nearly under siege, and Prince Filn is still there!”

“Things are quite fine here,” said Filn from the other side of the fire. “Our walls are impenetrable, and my army will be here as a whole to defend me soon.”

Rellin had to suppress an annoyed sigh. The sooner Prince Filn was dead and gone, the better. Ryadel was easier to deal with.

“What about the Cannon?” said the Kerlynzian. “Are you still planning to use it in such an awful way?”

Holger spoke, having to speak over Bjorn, “Nearly done. As Fate has foreseen, it will not be more than a week before it is operational. It is already pointing toward Mt. Kizzen, and should be able to blast a hole in it large enough to vaporize Kalandla. At that point, the Church of Elia will see the error of their ways and we shall save the world once and for all!”

“How cliché...” said the Kerlynzian. “I can't believe you people.”

“I GET THE IMPRESSION YOU ARE NOT TAKING THIS VERY SERIOUSLY,” said the deep, tired voice.

The Kerlynzian snorted before he spoke, as if in disbelief. “I think the Cannon can be put to better use than blowing away towns full of potential converts, but I suppose you aren't a very forward-thinking lot, are you? Have your fun, I guess. Just remember the papers, Lionel. Remember what you signed.”

“Oh, it'll definitely be fun,” said Lionel, sounding somewhat eager. “I've been looking forward to this for a long time. A few more days, and it doesn't matter *what* the Holy Army does.”

The Kerlynzian sighed audibly, but said nothing.

“DO YOU HAVE SOME SORT OF PROBLEM WITH OUR METHODS?” said the deep voice.

“No,” said the Kerlynzian, “I merely have something I must attend to. I must depart, but do not forget our cause.”

On cue, Rellin and all the others recited the line they'd all learned from their patron Gods. “To restore and heal Elancia! To create a peaceful world for our children!”

The Kerlynzian seemed to disengage his spell after that, although the others remained. The deep voice spoke. “BJORN, HOLGER, I EXPECT THAT YOU HAVE TAKEN THE NECESSARY PRECAUTIONS REGARDING THE TRAIN?”

“Yes, sir,” Holger confirmed, “the new security should be on board by the next trip.”

The deep voice was silent for a few moments, before it spoke up, sounding almost as if it were in agony. “YOU WERE WARNED ABOUT THIS. THE IMPOSTERS WERE GOING TO ARRIVE THIS WEEK—QUITE PROBABLY TODAY. YOU KNOW HOW THAT PROBABILITY PLAYS OUT, AND WHAT IT MEANS.”

“Yes, we do,” said Bjorn, “we are a very large army, but we are stretched very thin. There is much going on at once, and we can only do so much so quickly. With all due respect, your holiness, we're doing all we can.”

Rellin had to wonder who this deep voice was. He suspected perhaps some high priest serving under Fate, but he had a creeping suspicion he was more than that.

“LIONEL!” said the voice they'd called “holy.”

Lionel said nothing. Rellin realized Lionel had left when the Kerlynzian had. That was interesting, to say the least, as he hadn't said he was leaving. None of this boded well. Things were falling apart.

“He isn't here,” said Rellin. “I can relay a message, though. What would you like to tell him?”

“THE AEGIYS DO NOT MEAN FOR THE CANNON TO BE USED. LIONEL'S AGENDA DIFFERS FROM THAT OF HIS SUPERIORS, BUT HE WILL KOWTOW TO THEM,” said the deep voice. “IF YOU KNEW WHAT I KNEW, YOU WOULD KNOW ANY MESSAGE I SENT WOULD FALL UPON DEAF EARS. THE CANNON AND THIS WAR ARE LEFT TO DASCILLIA ITSELF. THE INTERLOPERS HAVE OUTLIVED THEIR USEFULNESS.”

An odd sound came through the flames then. A distant, echoing ringing.

Rellin knew the sound. The Cannon was fitted with alarm bells in case of an emergency, since it was a rather unstable structure. There were many drills for the crews working on it, to make sure they could escape in the event of a disaster, only, there was one problem.

“Didn't we already have a drill today?” Bjorn asked. Rellin remembered hearing it a few hours previous, during a point when he'd been nearly bored listening to Lionel prattle on.

“Yes, but perhaps we have two today,” said Holger. “It is of no matter. It's just a drill. We have more important things to discuss.”

♪♪ Emergency [2] ♪♪

The scaffolding bowed and warped in the wind, feeling as if it would fall at any second. By this point, the wind was the loudest thing he could hear.

Verse shook his head slightly, getting his hair out from in front of him. The charge had been placed, but the stop watch definitely appeared to have stopped. Sunlight filtered in through a hole in the wooden structure he was in, which propped up the bad side of the cannon. No matter how he tilted the watch, it looked stopped.

His tail twitched. If his charge didn't go off, the cannon would most definitely fall in the wrong direction, and there was no telling which direction that was.

The alarm bells were so loud by this point that their droning was tuned out. He could hear rushed footsteps and shouting, one near, the other distant. From his vantage point so high up on the support scaffolding, it was easy to see most of the workers were still filing out of town. This was good, because it meant that his group heading out the gate in a hurry wouldn't look suspicious. The downside was, he might not be able to rejoin them until after the explosion—if the cannon fell the right way.

He hit the watch with a couple of fingers, although this did not cause it to restart. Gritting his teeth and growling, he shook the dynamite slightly, before realizing this was a terrible idea. Carefully, he set it back down against the metal wall of the cannon.

It was then that he realized he wasn't alone.

“Hey, you! Don't you hear the alarm!?” a fierce voice called out from behind him. The only way onto this part of the scaffolding was through a hole cut into a rusted out part of the cannon's wall to this structure. Verse wasn't going to be able to slip out past whoever it was.

The fox peered over to his left, squinting through his hair at whoever this intruder was. They looked to be Dascillian, as their outfit matched his disguise. Lizard-kin if Verse had to guess. The tattoo of a third eye on his forehead meant he was faithful to the God of Fate.

“Wait... what's that you've got there?” the soldier asked a few moments later.

Shit, better think up a good lie for this one.

“A bomb,” the fox said, blowing his bangs out from in front of his face.

...Shit.

Verse had already drawn his gun by the time the soldier went for his.

“No funny business!” Verse hissed through his teeth, slowly standing up. The stop watch wasn't going to work, but everyone else's charges would be going off any minute, and Verse didn't want to be stuck here any longer than he had to be.

“Don't shoot!” the soldier said, although his hand remained behind his back. Verse was pretty sure that he had a second firearm or a knife back there, either of which could be embedded into the fox's skull if he missed. It was a good twelve or thirteen feet between he and the soldier, and the structure was creaking and shifting in the wind yet again.

The fox jerked with his wrist slightly, motioning for the soldier to move away from the door.

“Did you come up 'ere alone? Tell me, take a step back, and I don't fill you full'a dayloigh,” said the fox, puffing his chest out.

"I don't know what you're doing, but you aren't getting away with it!" the soldier shouted, as if he could be heard over the bells or the wind.

"Bullshit I ain't, I'm bein' paid good money for this," Verse huffed, "Did anyone come up 'ere with you? Yes or no?"

"Wouldn't you like to know!" the soldier shot back.

Verse took two steps forward, "Step away from the door, 'en!" he growled.

The soldier took two steps back.

Verse took two more forward.

The soldier took one more step back, and promptly fell right off of the scaffolding with a yelp.

Verse squeaked, frantically trying to comprehend what had happened. Of course, this meant he was in the clear now. It was time to go, and he could laugh about it later.

Putting the Man-Ender away, he jogged the last few feet to the door, taking one last look towards the charges, as he stepped through the door.

...and right into a fist.

Scrambling wildly, the fox tried to claw at the edge of the scaffolding's wooden floor, but missed. The next thing he knew, the wind was a lot louder, and there wasn't anything underneath him.

Suddenly, there were leaves. Branches. The snapping of branches. His descent was slowed but filled with pain. Pain in his back, his sides, his chest. A moment later, there was solid ground under Verse's face.

Scrambling to his feet and drawing the Man-Ender again, the dizzy fox-kin ended up stumbling and falling back down onto his rear at the base of the tree that had saved him. He was on the ground level of the base at least, amidst a small forest that had sprung up at the base of the cannon. The road ahead was mostly empty, many wagons full of soldiers already having departed. Other than him, and what was left of the soldier who had fallen before him, he couldn't see a soul.

That was when a great shadow loomed over him.

My luck. What is with my luck?

"Why are you just sitting there!?" Karina demanded, from where she'd appeared. As usual, he hadn't even heard her walk up.

"Karina, shut your stupid face," Xan said, pushing past her and crouching in front of the fox. "Took you ten fuckin' minutes to place your charge!"

"The bloody timer stopped! I was trying to fix it!" Karina snarled.

"Damn, you look pretty messed up," the rabbit said, wincing slightly. "Can you run? We're kind of behind schedule. Basil and Cece already are at the gate waitin' on us."

That was a relief, although the fox *did* have one question.

"How much time've we go'?" he managed, struggling up to his feet again.

"I don't know, all our timers stopped," Karina said with a scowl. "Our friend Arrow maaay have fucked up. Bad."

Xan made a face that was almost a grin, but almost a wince, "From what Ryza told me, that means they could go off just... whenever, basically. Might go off right now. I don't know."

Verse's stomach sank, and his heart leaped into his throat. "L-Le's ge' ou've 'ere!"

As the group of six ran from the base, and broke free from the groups of soldiers evacuating, Verse began to get the impression they would not be far enough from the cannon when it exploded—if it did at all.

He and Xan brought up the rear of the group. This of course, gave the fox time to get a jab in.

"Since we're about to die, 'ow come you aren't doin' the 'ole 'walk away loike a cool guy' thing?!" the fox panted, his legs still feeling weak after the tumble he'd taken a few moments previous.

"Hey, fuck you, dude! I don't know when it's gonna blow up! I can't plan for this!" Xan shot back. Verse had never seen the rabbit's eyes so wide.



“C-Confession toime!” Verse squeaked, nearly tripping over one of the small desert shrubs that coated the valley floor. The shadow of the cannon still loomed over them, even as they ran. It seemed as if Ryza, at the front of the group, had a plan, because she was racing back to the train tunnel.

“What is this? Fuckin' deathbed confessions!?” Xan demanded, his short legs working very hard to keep up with Verse's longer ones. “The hell you gonna admit I don't already know? I mean, I check out asses and tits, and you check out *feet*. That's pretty fuckin' weird. How are you going to beat that?”

“Oi! Low blow! Feet are very aesthetic!” Verse growled, having to throw his arms out to catch his balance.

“Yeah, if you're a fuckin' weird pervert!” Xan replied. “Anyway, fine, I'll go first! I kind've wanted to get married at some point.”

Verse nearly fell on his face, but managed to stagger back into a run. “T-To me!?” he squeaked, glancing towards Xan.

Xan scoffed, looking over his shoulder at the fox as they ran, “No, faggot! That's illegal! Shit! I mean, just in general! Your fuckin' turn!”

Just before Verse embarrassed himself even worse than he could have possibly imagined, several deafening concussions went off in succession far behind them both, and suddenly, a white-hot flash that looked like lightning blotted everything out for a few moments. That is when the tremors started.

“I told you,” said Bjorn, “it's just a drill.” He sighed. “They happen every day.”

Through Rellin's flame, shouting came from Holger and Bjorn's side of the fire. Most of it was incoherent, and soon, a loud concussion sounded out from that side of the fire, and then nothing.

"Bjorn! Holger! Report!" said Saitos. The deep voice had grown silent. No reply came from either disciple.

"Where were they stationed?" said Rellin when he found his voice. He wasn't sure just what he had heard.

"They were stationed at the Cannon's base!" said Saitos, aghast. "I'm going to the telegraph station to see if I can learn anything. Goodbye!"

Saitos disengaged.

"There is always some sort of reason they can't listen. Be it logistics or distrust. It will always end the same way. Soon, we will lose much more." The deep voice sounded as if its owner were ready to fall asleep.

Rellin disengaged, too, sitting back on the floor of his room in stunned silence for a few seconds. Something had happened to the Aegiys Cannon.

"HERE!" Ryza shouted from up ahead, before she rather suddenly dove for the ground. Verse had expected she was just going to lay down and hope the explosion blew past them all, but he realized there was a ditch ahead—a small creek winding its way through the desert. Verse loved water in all its forms, but it had never looked as good as it did now. Only, there was one problem.

Verse had already dived over the edge as the rumbling grew louder, only to glance towards Xan. Just before the fox tumbled into the water, he saw Xan hit its surface, and bounce right back up into the air, spring-boarded the instant more than half of his body was submerged. The wave of destruction that had surely been looming behind them blasted overhead, ripping the bank of the creek apart, and half uprooting a tree above the rippling surface. Verse held his breath helplessly, as this was followed by the most violent tremors Verse had felt in his life. The cannon was hitting the ground, and it was close.

Blackness blotted out the sun.

Xan!

♪♪ Elancia Chronicles Main Theme ♪♪

"DON'T YOU REMEMBER?" SHE USED TO ASK ME. OF
COURSE I REMEMBERED. IT WASN'T LIKE I COULD EXACTLY
FORGET. STILL, EVERY TIME SLEEP TOOK ME AND I RETURNED,
I FORGOT A LITTLE BIT OR A LITTLE BIT CHANGED.
SOMETIMES I WONDER IF THE PLACE I GO IN MY DREAMS IS
EVEN THE PLACE WHERE I GREW UP.
HONESTLY, I GUESS IT ISN'T.

—Versearrun's Diary, 11th month, Elian Year 1876

The gentle currents carried Verse a long way before he dared open his eyes. There was debris all around him, but he could breathe once more. His head had to be above water, but he knew if he opened his eyes, he might see Xan—or what was left of him, likely.

He bumped into something though. Something wooden, that was rather solid, and did not move when his body touched it, like the other debris had.

He opened his eyes to the late dusk he'd left behind in the explosion, only the sky he looked up into was not Dascillian. The sunset shone off of dappled clouds above, through the branches of sea wood trees.

Sitting up in the water, Verse realized it was not very deep at all. She was standing at the base of the dock on her favorite beach on Qaimusu island. Her dress was a ruined mess, but since she was dreaming, and she knew it now, she did not care, and it changed without her giving it much thought.

Her body ached—especially her legs, although she'd bruised herself pretty good falling through the tree, too. She touched each bruise and cut with her fingers, like Lyrikos had always taught her to do. The older vixen had always told her to hum a song quietly when she did, and it had become reflex by this point, both in dreams and reality, although the latter, only when no one was looking.

One by one, her cuts closed up under the touch of her fingers. Disoriented from the explosion and the fall still, this took several moments to register on her mind.

...The fuck?

Gasping, she turned her hands up, staring at her palms, as if expecting to see something. There was nothing to see but calloused pads and soft fur.

It's just a dream. It's just some illusion.

Even though she'd closed her cuts, her bruises still ached, her legs still were sore, and she couldn't think straight. Worse yet, for some reason, she felt very, very tired.

She sagged down into the water for a few moments, holding her head, waiting for it to stop aching.

Pretty sure I dislocated my ear, and my eye, and my nose, and my everything... I don't even know where I'm sleeping right now, or if I'm alive. Or Xan...

Maybe I'm dead... I didn't expect it would be so fast.

Squinting out across the familiar waters, she could see signs of reality off on the horizon. The smoking factory towers of Pulf, the skyline of Kalandla, the Aegiys Cannon, Mt. Kizzen. They all loomed in the direction of the setting sun.

She tried to force herself to wake up. This did not work, however.

She then tried to get to her feet again, using the dock to haul herself up. This worked somewhat better. Her vision darkened for a moment, but she fought against the darkness, and looked across the dreamscape before her once more.

Something disturbed the surface of the water nearby. Bubbles...

Verse knew it must be Lyrikos, here to ease her pain, perhaps. Seeing Lyrikos right now would be a Godsend.



Out of the water popped a stranger, yawning, and looking as if he'd just rolled out of bed. He stretched, during this yawn.

For a few brief, fleeting moments, Verse thought she'd dreamed her father back. The same warm colored fur, and white belly, the same general build... only the hair wasn't curly enough, and no, this was a completely different person. He had a scar across his nose, was skinnier, and he wore clothes her father had never worn. His fur was darker, too. She had no idea who this was or how he'd gotten here.

"Oooooooooohhhhhh, wot a lovely day," the stranger groaned.

She hadn't invited him here, and although she dreamed up lovely boys at times, she had not dreamed this one up. This was not something that belonged in her dream.

"THIS IS MY DREAM!" Verse screamed at the stranger. "GET OUT! GET OUT! GET OUT!"

The stranger opened one eye, making a face, and lowering his arms from his stretch.

"Eh?" he asked.

This stranger was being persistent and annoying. Lyrikos had taught her how to dispel bad thoughts and nightmares. Sometimes it worked. Usually, it did not.

Verse growled.

"Oof... good mornin', sunshoine," the stranger said.

By this point, Verse's blood was boiling. She decided to stop growling and speak. Surely, she could banish this phantom from her dream. "WHO ARE YOU!? WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE!? THIS IS MY DREAM! GET OUT! I COMMAND YOU!"

"You fuckin' wot, mate?" the strange man asked, squinting at her, before shaking his head. "Nevermoind. Wot're you doin' 'ere? Say, this is your dream, is i'?"

"Yeah, i's me fuckin' dream, n' you can roigh' fuck roigh' off ou' of i'!" Verse spat.

"OH GREAT, SOMEONE ELSE'S DREAM. I GUESS I DIDN'T MAKE YOU UP, EITHER," the stranger said in Kerlynzian, before giving her a once over. "THAT'S A SHAME. YOU'RE PRETTY CUTE, I GUESS."

Verse reached for her gun, but the stranger held up a hand just as she did.

"DO YOU SHOOT EVERYONE YOU MEET? THAT SOUNDS LIKE AN AWFULLY LONELY LIFESTYLE," he said. "ANYWAY, I'M HERE TO MEET SOMEONE, AND I CAN'T DO THAT IF I'M DEAD, NOW CAN I?"

"MEET SOMEONE? IN MY DREAM? FUCK RIGHT OFF, MATE!" Verse said exasperatedly, flapping her arms trying to make him understand how urgent the sanctity of her dreams was to her.

"TO BE FAIR, I DIDN'T KNOW IT WAS YOURS," he pointed out, before trudging his way through the water towards shore—*her* shore, that she shared only with Lyrikos.

"LOOK, I MAY HAVE JUST DIED! OKAY? I DON'T HAVE TIME FOR THIS SHIT!" Verse said.

"SETTLE DOWN. IF YOU WERE DEAD, YOU WOULDN'T BE HERE, TRUST ME. YOU'RE UNCONSCIOUS, BUT YOU AREN'T DEAD."

I'm not sure that makes me feel much better.

"WELL, WHO THE HELL ARE YOU MEETING!?" Verse demanded, flinging up water as she took off after him. By the time they made shore, he had stopped again, though.

The fox-kin looked down at himself for a few moments, before finally flopping down on the log Lyrikos often sat on with Verse. He pulled his soggy boots off, dumping water out of them. A fish fell out of one, flopping around uselessly on the beach for a moment, before he spotted it, picked it up, and hurled it back past Verse into the water.

Propping his bare feet up on the log, he sighed, muttering in dismay about his lack of a shirt. "DON'T EVEN KNOW WHERE I FELL ASLEEP," he finished, trying to wring out his coat.

"HELLO!? I ASKED YOU A BLOODY QUESTION!" Verse said with a scowl, before squatting in front of him.

The male fox turned away from her. She'd expected he was going to bat at her with his tail, but she suddenly realized he lacked one. All there was at the base of his spine was a little stub. He was either deformed, or it had been cut off.

"WHERE IS THIS, EXACTLY?" he asked, ridding himself of his coat for a moment, and placing it beside himself on the log.

"MY DREAM!" Verse screeched. She hadn't a clue why he wasn't listening to her.

"YEAH, BUT I MEAN WHERE IS YOUR DREAM. DID YOU MAKE THIS PLACE UP, OR..."

"CLIMUSU ISLAND!" Verse seethed. "MY TURN! HOW DID YOU GET INTO MY DREAM, AND WHO ARE YOU MEETING?"

"THAT'S TWO QUESTIONS," the fox-boy said, holding up a pair of fingers, and peering over his shoulder at her with the hint of a smile. He seemed to be enjoying annoying her.

He looked ahead once more, and ahead at the forest atop the bluffs. "CLIMUSU, HUH? MORE OF A SHIT HOLE THAN I EXPECTED. I GUESS IT'S WHAT YOU'D EXPECT FROM A PILE OF DRIFTWOOD ON TOP OF A BUNCH OF RUINS INHABITED BY COUNTRY FOLKS..."

Seeming satisfied that his coat was dry, he stood once more, even as Verse sputtered behind him, trying to collect her thoughts. Xan was missing, she was possibly adrift amidst a sea of debris, and she had no idea who, if anyone, had survived, and then *this* prick had shown up in *her* dream!

The tears started before she could stop them.

"STOP!" she managed to finally say. "DON'T CALL MY HOME SHIT. DON'T IGNORE ME! JUST. STOP!"

Her legs felt weak, and she gave in to that, falling to her knees in the sand. She was sobbing uncontrollably a few moments later.

The fox-boy stood, but then turned around, looking towards her for a few moments.

"HEY... WHAT'S WITH YOU?" he finally asked, sounding almost worried.

"EVERYTHING..." she managed to sniffle. "I JUST... I... YOU WOULDN'T UNDERSTAND, MOSTLY BECAUSE YOU'RE A HORRIBLE, HORRIBLE PERSON."

"I'M HERE TO MEET LYRIKOS," the boy finally said after a few moments.

She glanced up at him, sniffing once, her ears both twitching where they lay down aside her head. He couldn't be more than a few years older than her, if that.

"YOU KNOW LYRIKOS?" she asked quietly.

"YEAH," he said, sounding distant. He made a very strange face a few moments later. "OF COURSE I KNOW HER. WHY THE FUCK WOULD I BE MEETING SOMEONE I DIDN'T KNOW?"

Verse shrugged, huddling into herself, trying not to cry loud enough that he would hear. She didn't want him to know she wasn't really all that tough.

"YOU MUST BE VERSEARRUN, THEN," he said with a long, drawn out sigh, his shoulders sagging slightly.

Verse's ears shot up, and she sat rigidly straight up, peering at him past her hair. "YOU KNOW MY NAME?"

"I HAVEN'T BEEN THIS DISAPPOINTED SINCE... MAYBE EVER? THIS IS ON PAR WITH THE TIME I SOBERED UP AND SHE WAS WAYYYY FATTER THAN I REMEMBERED," the fox-boy said, wincing and rubbing his forehead.

"WHAT?" asked Verse.

"NO, WAIT, IT'S MORE LIKE THAT TIME IN PENTALA WITH THE... MMH. NO, I GUESS THIS ISN'T THAT BAD... CLOSE, BUT NOT THAT BAD."

The fox-boy didn't reply directly; he just turned and headed towards the spot where the path from the beach climbed the bluffs.

Verse managed to drag herself to her feet and followed him.

♪♪ Memory ♪♪

"WHERE DO YOU THINK SHE IS?" said the male fox, hands tucked into his pockets, as Verse fell into step with him. They were walking along the pathway that led from the island's interior out to this special little beach Verse liked to frequent with Lyrikos. In here, the mountains were less visible, at least, and she felt less strange. However, something was wrong. Shapes were moving in the trees of the normally tranquil woods. There weren't supposed to be monsters on Qaimusu, but Verse swore she saw the tall, skinny outline of a Hidebehind move between two trees.

Drawing her revolver, she turned in that direction, ears perked and tail flicking. She sniffed the air. The male fox paused, sighing, and turned toward her, hands in his pockets.

"HELL?" he said.

"SOMEWHERE ON THE ISLAND, PROBABLY," said Verse, looking askance at the purple-eyed stranger.

"Wow, NO SHIT. YOU'RE REALLY STUPID, YOU KNOW THAT?" he said with a sigh, looking not very terribly enthused. "I MEANT WHERE ON THE ISLAND DOES SHE LIKE TO GO? SOMEWHERE WITH LOTS OF FOOD, I'D IMAGINE."

Verse gasped. "WHAT DID YOU CALL ME?" she shouted, her tail bottle brushing again. She was still searching the woods with her eyes and her nose, but couldn't pick anything up.

"ARE YOU GOING TO SHOOT ME?" he said without looking at her.

The smells were familiar. Like rain, and like fall. The fruits growing on some of the trees closer to the road looked wrong. One held the prickly fruits that she'd seen on cacti on the Rukruos Peninsula. That couldn't be right. Those didn't grow here.

"N... MAYBE!" she said. "ESPECIALLY IF YOU TALK ABOUT ME THAT WAY ONE MORE TIME!"

The male fox rolled his eyes and began to walk again, not seeming to care if she was keeping up. The trail wound, ducked and weaved here, crossing a creek on a fallen tree and traversing a clearing filled with flowers. The flowers at least belonged on Qaimusu. She was thankful for that, given how odd everything else had grown.

Just as she caught up to the fox, she saw another shape move in the trees. Whipping around to the side, she aimed for the movement, although it was gone after only a moment. That time, it looked more like a person. It looked like Karina. Her shape was gone in an instant though. She simply melted into the fog.

She turned to face the male fox again. He came to a stop when she did, just like last time. He looked to her right instead of at her, though, and when she looked to that side, Basil was standing beside her. She could just see him out of the corner of her eye.

When she turned, it was as if he moved to remain out of her sight.

"DID YOU FORGET HOW DREAMS WORK?" said the male fox. "YOU CAN KEEP LOOKING, BUT YOU'LL NEVER CLEARLY SEE HIM. WHO IS HE?"

"NONE OF YOUR BUSINESS," said Verse folding her arms across her chest and glaring at him. "ALSO, I KNOW HOW DREAMS WORK! DON'T TREAT ME LIKE A CHILD!"

"CALM DOWN, COWBOY," said the other fox cocking his head to the side. "HOW OLD ARE YOU?"

"THE HELL DO YOU WANT TO KNOW FOR?"

"YOU'RE A FEISTY LITTLE THING, AREN'T YOU?" he said, before turning and walking. Verse fell into step with him this time, but kept her gun out. She still swore there were monsters lurking in the woods.

"YOU'RE PROBABLY A DREAM, TOO," she said, glancing over to him.

He met her eye out of the corner of his own, a mild grin forming on his face, "YOU CAN SEE ME CLEARLY, CAN'T YOU? WHEN IS THE LAST TIME YOU SAW SOMEONE CLEARLY IN A DREAM? OTHER THAN YOUR SISTER, OF COURSE. DON'T BE STUPID. IT'S TROUBLESOME."

Verse opened her mouth to speak, and then closed it. She blinked. He knew about Lyrikos.

"BUT... SHE'S A DREAM, TOO," the younger fox finally said, her ears lowering down. Even she knew how pitiful and small her voice sounded when she said that.

"IS SHE NOW?" said the brown fox, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. He fished around in his coat for a moment, not missing a step as the two of them crossed another little creek. He produced... something. It looked like one of Verse's cigarettes, but it smelled odd. He stuffed it between his lips before pausing, patting himself down again and finding a match in his coat. Then he lifted his foot and struck the match off its pad before mating it to the stick in his mouth. A few puffs later and he was coughing, a smile fixed on his face.

Verse wrinkled her nose. That wasn't a cigarette. It smelled weird and made her feel slightly lightheaded.

"IT'S THE WAY I STAY SANE AROUND ANNOYING PEOPLE LIKE YOU," he said as he started walking again. "PLUS, IF THOSE MONSTERS YOU KEEP DREAMING UP GET ANY CLOSER TO US, IT HELPS ME FOCUS IN A FIGHT."

"IT MAKES ME FEEL..." said Verse, her ears shifting to one side and a little grimace forming on her face. "WEIRD. WEIRD AND HUNGRY."

The male fox shrugged and continued on his way.

Verse had to light herself a cigarette just to get rid of the smell, but it didn't work too well.

The pair eventually made it to where this road merged with the path from the village to the Temple of the Sea Goddess.

"TWENTY ONE," Verse finally said, as the male fox turned, heading toward the temple.

"HUH?" said the other fox.

"MY AGE."

"YOU'RE A TERRIBLE LIAR," he said over his shoulder as she sped to catch him once more,

"YOU LOOK ABOUT FOURTEEN, *MAYBE* FIFTEEN. YOUR TITS ARE THE SIZE OF GRAPES. YOU EVEN HAD YOUR PERIOD YET? I MEAN SERIOUSLY. I GET THAT YOU WANT TO BE GROWN UP, BUT DON'T LIE TO ME. I HAVEN'T LIED TO YOU."

Verse growled. "YOU LOOK LIKE YOU SPEND TIME SUCKING DICKS AND... H-HAVING THEM IN YOUR BUTT! YEAH!"

"I HEAR I'M PRETTY GOOD AT THOSE THINGS," the fox-boy said through another yawn.

Dumbfounded, Verse managed a squeaky, "W-WHAT?"

"WELL, YOU WERE RIGHT," he said with a shrug. "NOW THAT WE'VE TALKED ABOUT MY PERSONAL LIFE, LET'S TALK ABOUT YOURS. ARE YOU EVEN OLD ENOUGH TO HAVE KISSED ANYONE YET?"

"I'VE KISSED MORE PEOPLE THAN YOU'VE SUCKED DICKS!" she retorted, her hands on her hips.

"PROBABLY NOT POSSIBLE," he remarked with a smirk, and continued on his way. "I KISS GIRLS, TOO, BUT THANKFULLY, YOU'RE NOT MY TYPE."

"GET OUT OF MY DREAM, YOU SLUT!" she hissed at him, but nothing happened. She then tried yet again to force herself to wake up.

She expected darkness to swallow her and awaken her, but nothing happened.

"WHAT THE HELL?" she squeaked a few moments later, grabbing at the fox's coat. She tried to shake him, but he twirled, loosening her from his coat with a motion of his arm.

"I'M NOT GOING ANYWHERE," he said. "WELL, ANYWHERE OTHER THAN UP THE MOUNTAIN. IF YOU'RE SICK OF ME, WHY DON'T YOU JUST GO BACK TO THE BEACH?"

"LYRIKOS ISN'T AT THE BEACH! SHE'S THE ONLY REASON I'M HERE AT ALL," said Verse folding her arms and wrinkling her nose, a raindrop falling onto it and causing her to look up. There wasn't a cloud in the sky and the sun was shining, but rain was beginning to fall amidst a rainbow that loomed up in the sky.

"WELL, I'M LOOKING FOR HER, TOO. I'M PRETTY SURE I KNOW WHERE SHE IS," said the other fox, gazing toward the mountaintop.

"WELL, AT LEAST TELL ME YOUR FUCKING NAME, SO I DON'T CALL YOU 'MANWHORE,'" Verse said a few moments later. She was defeated. Stuck with this stranger.

He rolled his eyes. "YOU CAN CALL ME... ARIA, I GUESS."

Verse found herself laughing, in spite of everything. "THAT'S A GIRL'S NAME!"

"I HAVEN'T HEARD THAT ONE BEFORE," he said with a sigh. "LOOK, IF YOU DON'T WANT TO GET KILLED, STICK CLOSE. THERE'S BOUND TO BE A LOT OF NASTY THINGS ROAMING ABOUT HERE WITH THE MOOD YOU'RE IN. DO YOU HATE YOURSELF OR SOMETHING? THERE ARE MONSTERS EVERYWHERE."

"HUH?" said Verse, her ears falling down. "LYRIKOS NORMALLY GETS RID OF THOSE..."

"NO SHE DOESN'T, SHE JUST KILLS THEM ALONG WITH THE REST OF YOUR NIGHTMARES."

"...WHAT?"

He had little to say after that. She followed him up the winding trail to the Sea Goddess' temple. She tried to remember the last time she'd made this climb. It would have to be *years* ago now. Ten years, at least. Probably eleven now. The island hadn't changed even a little, other than the Dascillian and

Celestionese plants that took refuge on it, the mountains and city in the distance, and the smell of the air. It was also warmer than it should've been, and the sun was still hot despite the rain soaking her.

A railway now wound itself up the side of the mountain, which was odd. There never needed to be one here. Why was it here now? She followed Aria into a tunnel she didn't remember, and on the other side, they emerged on a tall trestle that reminded her far, far too much of the railway that lead from Gizdich Ranch to the Cannon, even if it was Qaimusu Village she saw down at the bottom instead of an unfamiliar river. She squeaked, clinging to Aria rather suddenly, hiding her snoot against the back of his coat, and that mess of disheveled red hair of his.

"Gerrof!" he shouted in Elian, but Verse still clung to him, her legs quivering. "WHAT'S WITH YOU?"

"We're gonna foll..." she said in a small voice. She wasn't sure why she said it in Elian; perhaps it was because he spoke it.

Aria groaned, rolling his eyes skyward. "YOU'VE NEVER ONCE HAD A NIGHTMARE, HAVE YOU?"

"N-No..." said Verse. "IS THIS WHAT THEY'RE LIKE?"

"No, THEY'RE USUALLY MUCH WORSE. CAN YOU LET ME GO?"

"No," Verse said, holding onto him tight. He smelled like the sea, but that was little surprise given he'd climbed out of it. Underneath that was the familiar scent of a male fox, as well as the odd stuff he smoked, and various forms of incense. It was an intoxicating mix, if she was honest. She had to wonder what sort of things this Aria *did*, anyway.

"I DON'T WANT TO FALL," she remarked simply.

"OH, FOR FUCK'S SAKE," he lamented, before whipping about, and suddenly sweeping her right off her feet. Before she could protest, he was carrying her across the bridge, a look of sheer annoyance fixed to his face. He didn't look at her, but the intensity in his eyes kept her from talking.

He put her down on her feet once they entered the tunnel on the opposite side. He didn't struggle much to hold her, and it felt rather nice to be held like that. Normally, she didn't like anyone touching her, but something about Aria seemed "safe," even if he was weird and mean. She stuck closer to him after that even if he did not speak.

There were Aegiys Guardsmen and soldiers from Celestionese, Dascillian and Holy Armies standing on the sides of the tunnel, weapons drawn. They were unmoving, and if Verse looked too hard at them, they just faded into clothing and weapons, without people wearing or holding them.

On the other side of the tunnel, the pair emerged into some of the woods that overlooked the rest of the island. In the distance, Verse could see the silhouette of the Aegiys Cannon dark against the blue horizon, just over the Kruyschek range. It looked far bigger than it ever had before. Closer yet was the bridge leading to the Paldo weapons facility. The facility was on fire and Verse could see Cecelia walking across the bridge to it. The second she looked away, though, the bat girl was gone.



♪♪ Enmity ♪♪

Verse saw motion in the trees again, and went for the Man-Ender once more. This time, Aria had drawn his sword as well. His coat twitched slightly, above his rump. She came to realize that stub of a tail must have been twitching just like hers was. They both sniffed the air.

"SMELLS LIKE AN ARGOPELTER," said Aria, the blade held in his right hand. The vixen took a glance. It was Al'ressian, although that particular style was popular in parts of Kerlynzia, too. It was a long, thin, straight blade with a small hand-guard and a colorful tassel. It looked well used and well cared for.

"THOSE AREN'T SUPPOSED TO LIVE ON QAIMUSU," said Verse uneasily.

She could smell the monster as well as he could, and soon enough, it made itself known by hurling sharpened branches at them. Verse and Aria both dove out of the way, as the sticks embedded themselves in the ground right where the pair was standing.



"WOULD YOU START THINKING ABOUT HAPPY THINGS!?" shouted Aria, lifting up onto one foot and holding his sword over his head. Verse recognized the stance: it was called the "Dancing Blade" in Kerlynzia. It was rather odd to think that a pirate fought this way, though.

"I CAN'T! WE'RE UNDER ATTACK!" Verse called back to him, looking around, and pointing her gun everywhere she looked.

Like a flash, the argopelter leaped from one of the trees near the burning facility. It hurled a stick at Verse. The vixen pushed off from the ground, bent her back and just barely cleared the projectile as it whistled past before embedding itself in a tree. She landed on her feet just in time to see Aria twirl past another hurled branch.

The beast, with its long, gangly arms, skinny body, and ape-like face, was charging at Aria at full speed now. Verse fired at it, but it was so fast, she only hit it twice out of her six shots. The second six that came from her reserve revolver, the AIO, didn't fare much better.

They distracted the monster, however—enough that the argopelter made an abrupt turn in her direction. Without thinking, she flipped the AIO in her hand and raised it like a knife as the monster leaped at her. She stepped to the side and the blade sank in the beast's flank as it fell.

The monster fled as Verse hopped away. Now she knew she and Aria had more of a chance against it. She holstered the AIO and raised a hand in front, with the other by her side. She was ready to take the monster down and finish it off, in the manner that Lyrikos had taught her. If that didn't stop it, Aria would.

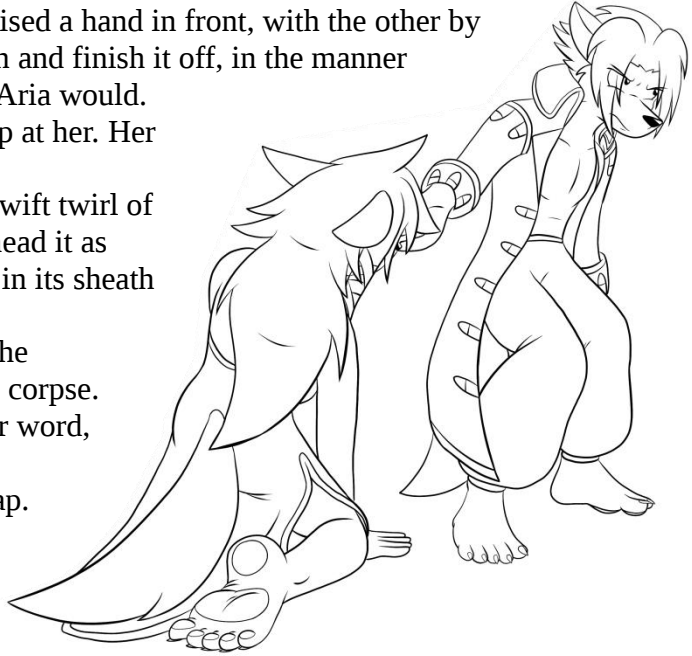
Fangs bared, the creature coiled up to leap at her. Her fists clenched, Verse prepared to—

Aria slid in front of her. With a smooth, swift twirl of his body, Aria used the beast's momentum to behead it as Verse leaped out of its way. His sword was back in its sheath before the monster's body hit the ground.

Aria dusted his hands off and sighed, as the argopelter's head landed and rolled far behind its corpse. He seemed rather annoyed, but didn't say another word, other than the phrase, "LET'S GO ON."

Verse, of course, had toppled from the leap. She was feeling increasingly useless as the day wore on. Perhaps Aria had been sent here to torture her.

...but he offered her his hand.



♪♪ Memory ♪♪

The Sea Goddess' temple was just around the next turn.

At the massive aquamarine doors to the temple stood four Aegiys Guardsmen and two Dascillian soldiers. Verse couldn't see their faces, and they did not move or speak when she and Aria arrived. In fact, they didn't move in the slightest even when Aria pushed the doors open. He and Verse slid into the darkness within the temple.

Suddenly, they were outside again, warm morning light dappling their fur through leaves. Verse realized they were now *above* the temple on an overhang that overlooked most of the island and the temple, among trees and flowers. Aside from the beach, this was Verse's favorite place on the island.

Lyrikos stood near the edge of the overlook. She turned upon seeing them both. Aria sheathed his sword, still covered in monster blood, and crossed his arms. Verse stepped closer, her tail wagging, before she embraced her sister.

"LYRI? WHAT'S GOING ON?" said the younger vixen softly, her face buried in Lyrikos' pelt.

"I'M GLAD YOU BOTH MADE IT!" said the chubby vixen happily. "ARIA, CAN YOU GIVE US JUST A MOMENT?"

"WHATEVER," said Aria, and he simply disappeared from behind them.

"LYRIKOS, WHAT THE ACTUAL FUCK EVEN IS GOING ON HERE?" said Verse, her ears flattened.

The older vixen touched her nose to Verse's ear. "FIRST OF ALL, UNDERSTAND THAT I DON'T LIE, AND I WILL NEVER LET YOU COME TO HARM. IT'S JUST, THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT. SO I NEEDED TO REMIND YOU OF ALL THAT BEFOREHAND."

"WHAT'S VERY IMPORTANT?" said Verse incredulously.

Sighing, Lyrikos continued. "THIS IS SOMETHING I NEED THE WHOLE FAMILY TOGETHER FOR, THOUGH... IT'S A MATTER OF THE SAFETY OF THIS ENTIRE REGION OF THE WORLD."

"THERE YOU GO AGAIN..." said Verse. "I KNOW THIS WAR IS A BIG DEAL, AND LOTS OF PEOPLE ARE GETTING KILLED. I GET THAT, BUT THIS IS TWO COUNTRIES AND TWO CHURCHES, WHICH, I GUESS, SINCE THESE CHURCHES ARE A MULTI-NATIONAL ORGANIZATION—"

"VERSE!" she said. "YOU'VE GOT TO SNAP OUT OF THIS, OR THEY'LL FIND YOU BEFORE I CAN, AND RIGHT NOW, I REALLY, REALLY CANNOT. NOW, LOOK, I'VE GOT SOMEONE HIRED TO PROTECT YOU ONCE YOU GET TO KERLYNZIA—"

"YOU WHAT, MATE?" said Verse. She just sort of stared at her. Lyrikos looked the same as ever. One of her fox ears flopped over a bit; her narrow golden eyes were sharp, alert, and beautiful; and her blonde hair fell in front of them, the greenish tips glinting in the sunlight. She wasn't smiling though, like she normally did. She looked both concerned and stern.

She was saying more crazy things. Verse wasn't sure what was going on with her own brain. Her dreams were breaking apart and nothing made sense anymore. "...IS THIS THE CONVERSATION YOU PROMISED WE'D HAVE? LYRIKOS, I... LOOK, I JUST GOT KIND OF BLOWN UP. WELL, NOT BLOWN UP, BUT SOMETHING BLEW UP. I THINK I HIT MY HEAD, AND I'VE NO IDEA WHERE I AM RIGHT NOW... AND XAN..."

Lyrikos' jaw dropped.

"I THOUGHT YOU WERE SLEEPING! WHAT BLEW UP? YOU AND KARINA BOTH SAID YOU WERE SAFE! IS KARINA OKAY?! WHERE ARE YOU TWO?!"

♪♪ Elancia Chronicles Main Theme ♪♪

The male fox appeared again, arms still folded. Verse looked over her shoulder at him with a glare, her lip curling. Sure, Aria looked a little like her father, although this fox was more feminine in appearance than him, and that scar definitely set them apart, too. Sure, he'd helped her as well, but he'd treated her pretty badly during most of it, and no one would tell her why he was here.

"SO, THIS MIDGE IS WHAT YOU'VE GONE THROUGH ALL THIS TROUBLE FOR?" said Aria.

"AND WHO THE FUCK IS THAT?" said Verse. "WHY IS HE HERE?"

"VERSE, THIS IS SOMEONE I WANTED YOU TO MEET, BUT..." Lyrikos trailed off, Verse had never seen an expression of fear on Lyrikos' face until this moment. "SWEETIE... PLEASE, TELL ME YOU'RE ALRIGHT. WERE YOU WOUNDED WHEN YOU SHOWED UP HERE? DID YOU—"

"SO, IT REALLY IS VERSEARRUN, HUH?" said Aria. "YOU HAVE GOT TO BE KIDDING ME. I MEAN, SHE'S TINY, LYRIKOS. IS SHE A RUNT? IS SHE LIKE, TWELVE? SHE LOOKS KIND OF LIKE YOU, BUT..."

Lyrikos put a finger to her lips giving him a stern look, before she eyed Verse.

Verse, flabbergasted, continued her questioning. "WHAT IS HE DOING HERE? WHY'D YOU BRING HIM HERE? THIS IS OUR PLACE. I DON'T KNOW WHO THIS IS! I DIDN'T CREATE HIM!"

"OH, BY THE WAY, Lyr," said Aria, "SHE STILL THINKS WE'RE NOT REAL. YOU DIDN'T TELL ME SHE WAS SO SPASTIC. I ALREADY HAVE TO DEAL WITH ALLEGRO ON A REGULAR BASIS. I'VE NO INTENTION OF—"

"ARIA, HUSH!" said Lyrikos.



"WHAT ARE YOU SUPPOSED TO BE, ANYWAY? LYRIKOS SAID YOU WERE A PIRATE, BUT YOU'RE TOO SCRAWNY. YOU WOULDN'T LAST A DAY IN LOS MARINEROS." Aria put a hand on his hip, jutting that one out to one side. "LYRIKOS, LOOK AT HER. YOU'RE GOING TO GET HER KILLED. SHE'S JUST A KID! WHY THE HELL WOULD YOU SUBJECT A KID TO WHAT WE'RE DOING?"

"SPEAKING OF WHICH, I MAY SERIOUSLY BE FUCKING DEAD!" Verse added helpfully. "CAN WE PLEASE ACKNOWLEDGE THIS FACT?! IF I'M NOT, THEN MY BEST FRIEND IS, AND—"

Lyrikos hadn't heard her.

"I AM LOOKING AT HER! I'M GLAD IT'S 'WHAT WE'RE DOING' NOW, AND NOT 'FAT LYRIKOS AND HER STUPID PLAN' ANYMORE!"

"I NEVER CALLED YOU FAT, BUT YOU ARE STUPID," said Aria, fidgeting with his coat in an absentminded fashion. "YOU'RE GOING TO GET HER KILLED. SHE'S JUST A CHILD. DO YOU WANT THAT BLOOD ON YOUR HANDS ALONG WITH MINE AND YOUR OWN? AT LEAST WHEN IT WAS JUST US, WE WERE RESPONSIBLE ADULTS."

Verse let go of Lyrikos and turned toward Aria, her ears laid flat, and her lips quivering with anger. She marched toward him. "I'M AN ADULT, YOU KNOW!"

"VERSE, CALM DOWN!" said Lyrikos. "ARIA, WHY ARE YOU BEING SO BELLIGERENT? ARE YOU HIGH?" Lyrikos' questioning stopped Verse in her tracks, but she remained near Aria, hands on her hips, a glare fixed to her face.

"INCREDIBLY," said Aria. "A PINCH DRUNK, TOO. NICE OF THE MIDGE TO KEEP HER MOUTH SHUT WHILE THE ADULTS ARE TALKING, THOUGH."

"ARE YOU HAVING A GIGGLE, MATE?" said Verse cracking her knuckles. "I'LL BASH YOUR HEAD IN! I SWEAR ON MY MOTHER!"

Aria scoffed, rolling his eyes. "I WOULD END YOU."

"FUCKING TRY ME, BITCH. I'M APPARENTLY NOT DEAD ENOUGH YET," said Verse.

"YOU AREN'T DEAD... PROBABLY JUST WOUNDED." Lyrikos pointed out helpfully.

Aria ignored her and just rolled his eyes letting out a sigh. "LYRIKOS, YOU CAN'T LET A KID MARCH OFF TO GET KILLED. DON'T YOU HAVE A CONSCIENCE?"

"ARE YOU HAVING A GO? I'M TWENTY ONE YEARS OLD!"

Aria cracked his knuckles as well. "PLEASE MAKE MY DAY BETTER. I DARE YOU. I'M LOOKING OUT FOR YOUR INTERESTS HERE, YOU ANGRY MIDGE. I DON'T WANT YOU DYING!"

"NOBODY TELLS ME WHAT TO DO!" shouted Verse. "YOU COME IN HERE TALKING ALL HIGH AND MIGHTY, DOWN TO LYRIKOS AND I—"

"THAT'S BECAUSE THIS IS STUPID," said Aria, "AND LYRIKOS IS BEING STUPID."

Aria turned to Lyrikos. "LYRIKOS, THINK ABOUT THIS. CAN YOU PLEASE THINK ABOUT THIS FOR ONE MINUTE? THIS ISN'T WORTH IT. IF WE GO THROUGH WITH IT, SHE ISN'T THE ONLY ONE WHO'S GOING TO DIE. WE WILL KILL EVERYONE. YOU DIE, I DIE, SHE DIES—EVEN IF WE'RE SUCCESSFUL! WHY DO YOU THINK I LEAVE WELL ENOUGH ALONE? YOU'RE MESSING WITH A SLEEPING DOG HERE, AND I DON'T CARE HOW MUCH PEACE IT WILL BRING."

Aria leaned in Lyrikos' direction, narrowing his eyes. "WE LEAVE THE AEGIYS ALONE, AND WE MIGHT LIVE. WE KEEP THIS UP, AND OUR ACTIONS WILL END. THIS. WORLD."

Verse saw sunlight. Lyrikos and the stranger were gone. There was dust, and there were rocks, and there was a creek, and there was blood (his own, he realized, after touching a wet spot on his face). The light had grown orange, and was darkening quickly to dusk. The fox fished for his pocket watch.

No way. Three hours!?

He was laid on a creek bed, near a small bit of water. Rocks and debris littered the canyon, and as it was narrow and deep, he could not see much beyond.

Someone was laid on the ground not far from him, beneath a few rocks. It was Basil, face-down in the mud. One of his wings looked to be... not pointing the proper way.

Verse crawled to him quickly and rolled him onto his side, careful of the wings. He wasn't sure how bat-kin lived with those bloody things.

"Leave me," the bat rasped.

Verse ignored him, feeling his forehead—lukewarm, his pulse—surprisingly normal—and then waving a hand in front of the bat's face. Basil's eyes followed the motion.

"Do you think you broke anything?" asked the fox.

Basil shook his head. "I do not know how long we have laid here, but no one has come," he said. "We may be safe for now."

"Did you find anyone else?" asked Verse.

Basil shook his head. "They can't be far, but I do not feel I am in any condition to get up."

"There you are!" someone called—Verse knew the voice already, it was Cecelia.

She looked to actually be in far better condition than Verse or Basil. A little dusty, yes, but even her glasses were still on. She'd just rounded a large boulder a few feet from Basil.

"Ms. Karina got hurt, and Ms. Ryza can't walk," said the bat-girl. "They're maybe like, a half mile from here."

"Have you seen anyone else?" Verse asked, "Dascillian, Aegiys or otherwise?"

Cecelia shook her head.

“...did you see Xan?” asked Verse hesitantly.

Cecelia shook her head again.

“Can you walk?” Verse asked Basil, who nodded weakly.

Verse was able to help him up to his feet. Basil seemed shaky on his legs though, so he had to hold the bat-kin up as they made their way towards Cecelia.

“Sir Verse, about your friend...” Basil started.

“Shut up,” said Verse, and that was that.

ON THE NEXT EPISODE...



PLANS GO AWRY.

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