

Last Exile ?????

The anime Last Exile from 2003 is good, I'd give it 4 stars out of 5. I came for the exciting dogfights, I stayed for the complex politics and commentary on war and power. The ending is maybe a bit cheaper than I would have liked, but I don't think they flubbed it or anything. It's hard to bring in a show like this for a satisfying ending, when you have set up so many moving parts. They made sure they hit all the big points, even if it felt like a bit too easy of a win, it still felt earned.

All that's good, go watch the show! I want to rant about the romantic subplot of this show. Because it was very weird, and I think they were going for a certain kind of romantic tension, but I don't think they quite hit it. This was my second time watching the show, and I even still have memories of thinking about how weird it was for decades after watching it for the first time about 20 years ago. I have some ideas about how the plot could be improved, so I'm going to summarize the plot in the show, and then I will offer my modifications. So major spoilers ahead.

Claus Valca and Lavie Head are our main characters of the show, and also the main romantic plot. About halfway through the show, we learn their backstory. Their dads were best friends, and they were couriers who used vanships to deliver messages across the world of Prester. Vanships are little World War II style planes, except instead of using wings to fly, they use a basically magical element called Claudia. Importantly, vanships have two seats, one in front for the pilot, and one just behind this seat for the navigator. Vanships are often used to demonstrate relationships between characters, but I'll get to that. Claus and Lavie's dads head out on an important mission, to deliver a message from Anatoray to Disith.

The world of Prester is divided into two parts, Anatoray, and Disith, connected only by a dangerous area know as the Grand Stream. The dads are assigned a mission to deliver a peace offering from Anatoray to Disith, who have been at war due to Disith's weather getting to cold to survive in, and generally there not being enough resources to go around. Unfortunately, the mission fails, and both dads die in the Grand Stream when Claus and Lavie are just 7 years old. Lavie's mother was already dead, and Claus' mother dies 6 months later, leaving them orphaned. They have to sell their house in order to keep their dads' vanship, which they learn how to fly and take care of as they grow up. Soon they both become naturals in the sky, with Lavie as navigator and Claus as pilot. They survive on courier work, just like their dads, and the main story starts when they are both 15.

They take on a dying courier's mission to deliver a girl named Alvis to a flying air ship called the Silvana. Claus particularly feels responsible for her safety, and does not trust the Silvana or her crew to take care of Alvis. So he and Lavie stay aboard, at first in an adversarial position, but eventually they learn to trust the crew and feel that Alvis is in fact safest on board the Silvana and especially under the captain of the Silvana, Alex Row, and his second in command, Sophia.

Claus and Lavie's vanship is damaged, but the Silvana has its own vanships on board, kind of like an aircraft carrier. We meet another vanship pilot, Tatiana, and her navigator, Alis. Tatiana is initially cold with Claus and Lavie, partially because she feels that compared to her, Claus and Lavie are not very capable. This is due to the fact that the first time they fly in a combat mission, Lavie passes out, and decides that she does not want to fly in combat situations. Lavie says that she will continue to be a mechanic for Claus, and hopes that someday they will still fly together across the Grand Stream, just as their fathers tried to do 8 years ago. This is the start of my dissatisfaction. I think the messaging they are going for here is that everyone is forced to be in a war, and fighting is an evil necessity, so Lavie sees the evil part, and Claus sees the necessity part. But unfortunately, it weakens Lavie as a character.

Alex Row sees talent in Claus, and orders him to run an escort mission with him. He needs a navigator, and Alis volunteers. Alis has been dissatisfied flying with Tatiana, because she does not feel as free with her. Remember when I said that vanships demonstrate relationship dynamics? Tatiana and Alis feel like they are in a lesbian coded relationship. Given that this is an anime from 20 years ago, you couldn't just outright say it, but it would have been pretty cool if they did. So Alis wants to fly with Claus, and Tatiana takes this as a slight toward her, and the next time there is a combat mission, Tatiana orders Claus to be her navigator. During the fight, Tatiana and Claus get separated from the Silvana, and crash land in a desert. There's a sort of bizarre subplot here. Before the fight, Lavie gives Claus a set of clothes to take with them just in case, and in the crash, Tatiana's clothes get some engine liquid spilled on them, so Claus gives her the clothes that Lavie gave him to wear. When they return to the Silvana, Lavie is upset because she feels that it may mean that Tatiana and Claus were intimate with each other. It's true that Claus and Tatiana are much closer after the mission, and Tatiana seems to feel that Claus giving her clothes was an intimate act in its own way, but to me, it reads like Claus is just being the nice and pragmatic person he always is, and does what needs to be done for both of them to survive. But Lavie can't get over it so easily, but she also can't bring herself to ask Claus outright if he slept with Tatiana.

Eventually she tells him that she doesn't see the same sky as he does anymore, and that she doesn't like who her is becoming with him getting more into combat rather than peaceful flying. There is also one more bizarre thing that happens romantically. The first officer, Sophia, is revealed to be the daughter of the Emperor, and she is going to leave the Silvana to take her place as the new Empress. Before she leaves, she has a conversation with Claus, and with no prior build up, she kisses him on the lips, and he seems to like it, and becomes mildly obsessed with her. I fully thought she was a 30 year old woman who was kissing a 15 year old boy, so it felt really weird and bad. Apparently she's only 19, but that's still quite the age gap, still a rather problematic power gap, and also there's nothing in the story that really supports her liking him in that way. She seems to like Alex Row, who is too obsessed with his own revenge arc and his own dead lover to even notice that she's interested in him. I think maybe the idea the writers had was to show that she was using Claus as a substitute for Alex, but it simply doesn't work for me.

Anyway, of course the romantic tension between Lavie and Claus resolves by...I guess time just goes by, and they both agree that combat sucks, but it has to be done in order to make the skies free again. So in the end, stuff happens, and Claus and Alvis are in Anatoray, while the Silvana is in the Grand Stream, on its way to Disith, and it's very important for Alvis to get to the Silvana in Disith for reasons I won't go into, so Claus and Alvis make their way to the Grand Stream. The

Silvana sends several vanships to relay Claus and Alvis to their destination, and of course it's Lavie who navigates for Claus in their dad's old vanship, and they make it through the Grand Stream just like they always dreamed of.

Okay, some things I love about Claus and Lavie. Their story is so tragic, and yet it's wonderful to see how they bonded together to survive through their childhood. They mean so much to each other, and they have good chemistry with each other because of it. I like the idea of them having some romantic tension. I can see how they would grow up with each other, and maybe they just assumed they would be together forever without thinking about the ramifications of that. I just think that in the story that was presented to me, there was no earned growth in their relationship. Things happened, and then they just moved on. So here's how I would have done it.

Everything happens as normal until about the middle of the story, when Claus and Lavie come back to the Silvana from their combat mission, which is a failure, just like in the original story. However, this time, it's not just Lavie's fault. Claus is also not a very good gunner. (This is actually kind of true in the original story. He wastes a lot of the very limited ammunition in trying to hit the enemy.) They fight a little, and blame each other for the failure. Later, Lavie comes to Claus and says that she wants to learn how to be a pilot. She's been stuck in the back seat too long, literally and metaphorically. Claus is skeptical, and says he would be worried about her passing out in the pilot's seat. Lavie goes away fuming. Lavie starts to realize that she's never put herself first in their relationship, and she doesn't know who she is without Claus, but she wants to find out.

Claus flies the escort mission for Alex with Alis as in the original, and then Claus flies as navigator with Tatiana. They crash land together, but there's no subplot with the clothes though. Instead, they come back, and clearly Claus is closer to Tatiana. Lavie is acting distant from Claus, but then she asks him if something happened between him and Tatiana. Angry at her, he says nothing happened. He goes to find Tatiana, and unexpectedly, Tatiana gives him a kiss. He can't stop thinking about it. Claus is unsure how he feels. Meanwhile, Lavie asks if Alis will help her learn how to pilot a vanship, and they train together. Though Lavie isn't as good of a pilot as Claus, it turns out she is a natural at being a combat gunner. In the original, Alex acquires a map of the Grand Stream, and I think it would make sense if Lavie were to study this map, and start to show that she is dedicated to learning the ins and outs of this dangerous place, full of fickle, deadly strong winds.

Tatiana and Claus kiss again, but this time Lavie spots them. Lavie goes and talks to Alis, and Lavie even tries to kiss Alis in revenge. Alis draws back, however, and tells Lavie that Lavie needs to talk to Claus because she can't expect him to read her mind. Eventually Lavie goes to Claus, and says that she was hurt seeing him kiss Tatiana, and she was hurt because she loves Claus, she wants to be with him forever, and if he's with anyone else, they won't be together. Claus awkwardly says that he hasn't thought of Lavie that way. Lavie runs away crying at this rebuff. Claus almost immediately stops feeling attracted to Tatiana, as he realizes that he's been suppressing his feelings for Lavie, subconsciously not wanting them to lose their childlike, innocent bond. Eventually, after several episodes of doubt and awkwardness, Claus goes to Lavie, and expresses this. Lavie directs Claus to hold her tightly, and they kiss for the first time. For the rest of the show, it should be clear that the two of them are more intimate with each other, with a lot of touching and holding each other. There is only one last thing to do, and that's to demonstrate their relationship in their vanship. Just like in the original, Claus and Alvis will be separated from the

Silvana, and need to get to back in order to win the fight. The Silvana is in the Grand Stream, being attacked by the enemy, the Guild, who has their own super dangerous equivalents to vanships. Lavie realizes that she needs to go back to get Claus, but Alex won't let her, because it's too dangerous. But she and Alis defy his order and go anyway, and Lavie proves that she deserves to be a combat fighter by expertly punching through the enemy's ships. They make it back to Claus, and Alis stays behind while Lavie and Claus fly back through the Grand Stream. Claus does the flying, but Lavie instructs him on the fly how to be a better gunner when they need it most.

And they make it through the Grand Stream, as was always their goal. And now they've advanced their relationship from that sweet childhood bond to a strong bond of respect for each other.

Well hopefully this made sense and was entertaining. At the very least, it's now out of my head, so I can go watch the next perplexing anime series.

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