

Irrational Things, Mostly

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Irrational Things, Mostly

by [rlucine](#)

Summary

Elster and Ariane finally give in and fuck each other for hours on end.

Notes

This is a character study about flawed, sexually frustrated women with unresolved emotional baggage having flawed, impulsive sex. They make mistakes because they are human, and move past them because they are deeply and unconditionally in love.

Also a relationship study of lesbian first times that just keep going and then it's 6 hours later and you've had like at least 3 orgasms and everything is so fucking silly and cute.

Creator skin is necessary to view this work properly. Significant content warnings for Elster remembering Lilith and Alina's war trauma, their hard kink involving guns, and Lilith's bereavement grief, all of which are hidden beneath ~~redacted text boxes~~ that can be revealed by hovering above (on desktop) or touching them (on mobile).

Sex-repulsed readers should be aware that sex scenes are written in second person and could be activating.

Additional content warnings for flawed consensual sex arising from 1. being too enthusiastic to try new things, 2. inexperienced first times, 3. consenting with indirect answers and implications due to trauma-avoidant communication styles, 4. sex triggering dissociation, and 5. experimenting with kink without prior explicit negotiation. None of this causes distress beyond "maybe we need to talk about this more." This is still a depiction of flawed kink so please don't take it as sex education.

► Specific details of content warnings can be spoiled by clicking here.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

So you dance with Ariane again.

You're getting better, she says, grinning like this isn't all an excuse to mask the desire to touch each other under a veneer of classical art.

It usually works like this:

1. Right foot backward—she finds you alone at some odd time, having fallen into your thoughts,
2. Left foot back sideways—and Ariane being Ariane, she insists on sharing whatever artistic impulse has most recently struck her,
3. Right foot next to left—because *you might like it* (true), and *you deserve to take a break and have fun* (debatable), and *I just really like your company, anyway*,
4. Left foot forward—and it's a veneer because the desolate islands she paints could only be windows into her heart,
5. Right foot forward and sideways—and it's an excuse because you both know you want so much more than proximity,
6. Left foot next to right—and tension condenses in the space between your mouths, and you don't find the courage to kiss her, and the cycle continues—

—a cycle, you think, which is itself a dance. Dancing together, dancing around feelings, ruminating on every possible disastrous outcome. Last cycle you sorted Ariane's Tarot deck because you needed to do something with your hands. The hardware and pantry are also sorted perfectly; the ship is spotless. You are crewmates, coworkers, bodies calling out for the warmth of another. You can see your reflection in the walls.

The first time Ariane invited you to dance, you were too shy to properly look at her. It's rare that you'd share time in anything other than uniform. Even when Ariane roams the halls as a specter of insomnia, she throws a Gestalt blazer or that ratty old jacket over her nightgown—the Penrose is cold, and (as you've arranged it) its nights are colder. It's rarer still that you'd see Ariane's shoulders bare, or encroach upon the detail of her chapped lips, or navigate the worry that perhaps it's lecherous to observe her more intimately. She is not an object for your pleasure, you'd known, and it's probably wise not get carried away.

You'd done well with that. A dozen vicious cycles until your tongues were in each other's mouths. Mistakes are the currency of being human.

It was passionate. Of *course* it was passionate. There is passion in every aspect of how you interact—*Define carried away* is what she'd asked, and so your composure took the form of glass and shattered. Transparent pieces still litter the floor like caltrops, and you've spent this entire subsequent cycle tiptoeing around them. Another form of awkward dance, perhaps. *Fuck it. Avoidance. Please kiss me.*

In the aftermath, the shores of oblivion dried in shades of burnt umber beside her bed. Your lips parted and the waves remained frozen. Her desolate paintings, with the same two figures in their tiny boat, depict exactly the kind of guaranteed landfall Penrose missions don't have. Paintings are her soul, and you'd looked there instead of her eyes. Found desperate loneliness and desperate adjacency. Left the room covered in spit, and learned from the bathroom mirror that she wore lipstick on purpose.

Your persona isn't so much "unstable" as it is "the happiest you've ever been." Deviation from the norm is unstable. Outliers extend the boundary of what options might be allowed, and change is unstable. Worlds in collapse are unstable. Unstable equilibrium of this dress that barely covers her. Hearts change in decaying bodies, and for now there is all of her, and all of her, and—

Persona stabilization. You spent this cycle (the cycle after the kiss) with a stack of service requests that all have Ariane's name on them. Nine-hundred cycles in and she's gleefully descended into unprofessionalism (gratefully, no one reads these but you and the autopilot): service request, Ariane Yeong, regarding the flight computer, quote "im not in the sudoers file and she has reported me to the state :/"; service request, Ariane Yeong, regarding that rattling noise, quote "elster please deliver us from this evil"; service request, Ariane Yeong, regarding last night, quote "ok aphrodite now i cant fucking weave"—you are both, as Ariane might say, a couple of damn fools.

So in the vein of a damn fool, you spent this cycle being normal and doing your job. In fact, this was certainly the right time to do the request you've been putting off for eight-hundred cycles, hop in the spacesuit, get the neodymium magnets, get stuck to three separate surfaces in the maintenance airlock as you laughed with Ariane about how transparently you were avoiding your feelings, offer a flimsy justification that it was your fault that the left upper rudder had (as you so elegantly put it in your own service note) "departed the spacecraft during a challenging gravity assist," and now it was finally time to start the process of riveting the Penrose's aerodynamic stability back together from inside. Because who knows when you might next encounter an atmosphere. Who knows when you might watch Ariane descend the cargo ramp, barefoot into volcanic sand, and tumble into a world undiscovered.

So that's what you did. Excursions into weird unpressurized empennage bulkheads are a good way to take distance, a good way to plan how not to act on your rashest impulses, an excellent way to keep thinking, in the back of your mind, about the texture of her.

Ariane was wearing that dress when you got back.

"Hey," she'd said, casually obstructing the motion sensor of a confused sliding door as she leaned forward, "dance with me tonight?"

In leaning forward, cloth shifted loose from her chest. There is a fraught calculus to your active imagination, and you'd arrived, awkwardly stilted, at an incredibly descriptive response: "Please." Please kiss me again, please dance with me over these broken shards of composure until our feet bleed, *please*—and surely Ariane intends to play with fire. There is nothing more thrilling to her than taking enormous risks for no reason—she has made you fold when she held (and deliberately maintained!) nothing but a seven high card, so surely nothing else is out of the question. She is a scourge to computational models of probability.

Knows every one of your tells—and it is mortifying to be known and understood. It makes you feel like a person; makes you detest your polyethylene skin that much more.

So now you're dancing. Doing better (Ariane says). Not stepping on her toes as often. You still feel robotic in intent and execution, but spontaneity blurs the edges of your logic; you take a few steps on instinct sometimes, let your hand slip further down her back.

"On Rotfront," you ask her, "is there a special meaning to dance?"

Ariane shifts her body flush to yours and looks into your eyes. It answers your question well enough, but after a few more steps she says, "you get to stare at the girl you like."

Left foot next to right. Exposed skin against your frame. "I was under the impression," you say, measured, "that staring was considered uncouth."

Ariane cocks her head. "And I was under the impression that I'm wearing this dress for you."

Your kneecap bumps hers. Distraction. Dancing, you think, is an unsubtle excuse—even a means to an end—but it would be uncharacteristic for either of you to avoid savoring the journey and the space between. Impatience so easily upsets the tenderness of moments shared, and you'll have none of it.

"Do you really think I'm so innocent?" Ariane asks. Still pressed together, you touch her hair briefly; think about what trials her body and mind have endured to arrive here with you. *Fucked off into the distance*, she might say, understanding the strength of vulgarity. You forget to respond and so Ariane returns to her explanation: "Dancing on Rotfront," she says, "is considered very, very intimate. So intimate, in fact, that the state has conspired limit its practice."

You scoff lightly. The Nation has no place in this moment, yet here it arrives. You meet it with curiosity. "How could this be dangerous to the state?"

"Divide and conquer," Ariane says. "When people dance with each other" —she spins your shared box step, and your vision becomes a shifting archipelago— "they understand each other. Empathy and intimacy build love and community, and solidarity is anathema to fascism, so the Nation rips it all out."

"Oh, so this is all about dissension, then?"

"No, it's all about intimacy," she jabs. "But we can cloak it in dissent if you'd like. Call us a specter haunting Eusan."

Right foot next to left. You think about intimacy again, and how your body isn't designed to handle it—so badly designed, in fact, that it often leaves you helplessly disappointed. Exploring yourself has been so unsuccessful that it can barely even be called masturbation; your body is an inert object trying desperately to be something more—or more accurately, something more, trying desperately to overcome inertia.

"Surely the Great Revolutionary cowers in fear of us having fun in her Navy," you say.

"She does. We have dark intentions," Ariane says. "High risk thoughtcrime, likely to reoffend; and isn't dancing just a synthesis of marks and angles, stalling and leaning in—"

"Goddamn it, Ariane," you curse, stumbling. She laughs gleefully.

"See? Look at you," Ariane says. She gets this sparkle in her eye whenever she's being insufferably adorable. "Look how dangerous I am—I've pushed you so far left that now you've got two left feet."

"What does that even mean?"

"Means you're off-balance, and dancing with an insufferable poet," she says. "It means I'm utterly delighted by you and I never want to let you go."

I never want to let you go, either; your hands agree, but physical touch is a language you aren't yet fluent in. Not dissimilar from you and your terrible handwriting and the five or ten Chinese characters Ariane has finally managed to teach you.

"It's always the idioms that get me," you say. "Always changing that M to a T."

Ariane laughs again. "You're a joy, magpie." She stands on her tiptoes to plant a kiss on your lips, chaste—but surely, you think, she would not have chosen to wear this dress without knowing how it would shift with her body; would not have chosen to dance with you unless she enthusiastically enjoyed the risk. Sometimes the most you can predict is her unpredictability. Gestalt memories flicker at the edges of your vision, ghosts in a CRT television set. Flashes, perhaps, of a love more complete.

Left foot forward. You fall deeper into a tension your frame can't express. Undeserved, perhaps, for a copy thrown into space—but tonight you've made up your mind.

"Spin me?" Ariane asks.

You spin her. Her dress slips off her shoulder; the revealed skin has no bite marks. Restraint is a word with multiple definitions, and both were options last night. In the end you decided not to get carried away, but composure is a fragile crystal, and things are made to be destroyed.

You spin her again, because it is fun, because she is pretty, because this is a temporary moment that might be prolonged. Tension and posture reshape her body under thin fabric; centripetal force tosses her skirt away from her thighs. She laughs. Pulls her dress back onto her shoulder *Oops*. A carefree shrug.

Back together. Fingers interlace. "You stared," she praises you, shameless.

"I did," is all you say. Verbosity is not possible when you are this intoxicated (which, to her, is cute). Rash decisions are not how you operate, but they're all you can think of, like: it would be so easy to push her against the wall behind you to kiss her, or pull her into your lap (to kiss her); easy to concede to your most unspeakable intentions; easier still to brush her dress aside, or press it flush to her skin so that color might show through.

Instability. Insatiability, even. You match her steps. Left foot back sideways; right foot next to left. One for one. It's funny—you so rarely find a reason to shut up around her, and now tension has your voice in a slipknot with one end tied to reason and common sense, and the other held blithely in Ariane's hand.

She notices; the knot tightens. "Tell me how you feel, little bird."

"Mindlessly happy," you say. Intoxicated. "Uncertain how much longer I can hold back."

Sometimes telling the truth is a misstep.

Ariane smiles: she knows you, and it is warm and terrifying. "Because you didn't only want to kiss me again?" she says, taking your wrists, sliding both of your open hands down to her hips. You keep them there. She is too short to whisper in your ear: "Because you can't endure the tension any longer?"

"Because," you say, "your consent is inviolable."

"Elster," she says, gentle fingers on the nape of your neck. She tilts your head down so you're staring at her body. "Look at me."

So you look. Technical details, technical mind. Pink flushed across her cheeks and across her chest; the shape of her nipples through fabric. Simple compassion in her eyes, lips slightly parted, breathing deep and steady. A balance of desperate arousal equivalent, perhaps, to your own.

"Do you sincerely think I don't know what I'm doing to you?" Eye contact makes you shrink, not from fear but from raw thrill. Ariane is gambling. "There are very few outcomes I haven't already fantasized about."

Whatever uncertainty lingered in your mind ends—but as in games of chance and deception you've shared over the most loathsome chores, you call her bet. When you speak, your voice is unsteady. "Are you asking me to lose control?"

You feel Ariane shiver; watch her composure fracture. "Because," she says, "if you tore this off of me, pushed me down, and had your way with my body, it would somehow be losing control and not just giving me what I want?"

The dance ends. Impatience wins. "Fuck," you whisper. "Fuck, fuck, fuck—you really just said that. Fuck."

"I did," she says, separating. Eye contact does not always sting. "And I'm not asking, to be clear. Just begging desperately."

Gestalt memories. You, out of breath, reckless—this is a dangerous game, you and her. As with the mass driver that shot the Penrose into the unknown, there is not an easy way back to the safety of where you are—and similarly, neither of you care.

You're helpless. You throw your bodies together and kiss.

Ventilation and fluorescent lighting hum around you. This temporary home; a speck in the distance.

You kiss her deeper. Yesterday, Ariane was excited to learn that you had a tongue; to learn that you had teeth—even now, she wears healing bite marks that line up in the ways you fit together. At this stage, it is absurd—it is absolutely *miraculous*—that you have not abandoned restraint entirely.

"How are you this perfect," Ariane whispers, holding your face between her hands. "How are you so fucking pretty—"

"How are *you* so fucking pretty," you say. Uncreative, but it makes her blush, and both of you would rather shut up and kiss again.

It's easy to get distracted by her lips. Easy to get lost in the repetition of how they fit together with yours; easy to keep breathing air she exhales with an awareness that it was just inside of her. Differences: you don't sweat, and she does. You don't have a pulse, and she does. Blood does not flush under your skin as a response to pressure; your eyelashes tend not to flutter; you barely feel anything and yet the slightest touch makes her tremble—

Maybe you should communicate, you think. In fact you should definitely communicate, because quite honestly you still aren't sure what the fuck you're doing.

"Hey," you say, releasing her, "what the fuck are we doing?"

Ariane stumbles backwards, her chin wet with shared spit. "We're being very rash, and very impulsive, and—fuck, why am I ever not kissing you?"

"I think we should—never mind" —you need to kiss her again— "how am I supposed to—"

"What if we didn't overthink what feels good?"

"Then" —she kisses you while you're talking— "then we'd never look back."

"I want that," Ariane says. Kisses you again. Vicious. Pushes you into a wall and pins each of your wrists beside your head. You let her. Questions: are you allowed to want this? Are you allowed to renege so deeply against a fundamental of how you were built? Will your artificial body ever be enough? Isn't she your *commanding officer*?

Conversation moves into the language of physical touch. Perhaps your questions might be better quelled through the forthright answers of your bodies, but you still manage to ask, "what am I allowed to do to you?"

"Make out with me," Ariane says. She kisses you. "Play with me." Another kiss. "Deny me until I beg, or" —this time, the kiss is your interruption— "make love to me as sweetly as you want—"

"And what do you want?"

"I want you to fuck me" —she lifts the hem past her hip, flashing nothing but skin underneath — "and I'm wearing this correctly, by the way."

The last vestige of your restraint burns away.

Back together. Her tongue in your mouth, hands and fingers interlaced, your graceless, submissive body between hers and the spacecraft hull. All of your words—those beautiful, unnecessary things—catch and jumble in your throat. There is no premeditation here, no consistency in exchanges of power and submission, just impulse and the look in her eyes.

Her thigh ends up between yours. Accident. You slip down the wall, accident, and she kneels across your lap, legs interlaced, her dress spread between her thighs and riding up. Kisses turn to bites, accidentally and then on purpose. It feels good to leave marks on her body, to pull her hair and make her gasp into your mouth.

"I need you in my bed," Ariane says. Her tone is urgent, but she doesn't get up or allow you to stand. There is no judgment here: no logical judgment, no judgment to get the better of. Neither of you can make plans or execute them. Ideas disappear into kisses as soon as you speak them, either swallowed or dripped onto your chest in spit. Mouths are a way to be inside of each other. The floor is uncomfortable, but separating for even a few seconds is, by both of your standards, so much worse that neither of you even try.

"You're so pretty," you tell her—this is perhaps the only thing you can say. She kisses your mouth shut. *No more talking. I need you too badly.*

Compromise. You slide your leg up between hers and she collapses into your chest, gasping in relief. *Yes.* Teeth find space between your neck and your shoulder to bite. It's inert metal and polyethylene, but Gestalt memories; you can practically feel it—and unlike the threat of other memories, the movies and the photographs and the ugly post-traumatic breakdowns you've had in this same section of floor—this memory is warm, quiet, raw. Real.

"Elster," Ariane chokes out. The name of a magpie not quite yourself, the only thing in this secret moment that she bothers to hold onto. Ariane is so small, you think: her skin betrays the shape of her ribs and vertebrae under tension, her fragile body is warm and reckless against yours, her hips are so easy to grip and push and pull.

You kiss her until you can't, until she can only breathe an unfocused rhythm and her voice frays around the edges. Chewed fingernails, if you had skin, would gouge crescent moons into your back or tear swaths of parallel red—but you have no need for scars. Watching her give in to pleasure is enough; feeling her grind against your thigh is enough. Knowing her desire is so authentic, so uncontrolled, so visible that it shows through in shapes and stains—it ruins you. It leaves you as nothing but a person next to the disintegrating ideas you once held about her: that your perceptions might be wrong, that your wishes might be incongruent, that you might be too opaque, too insensate, too artificial for this.

Ariane makes herself come on your thigh. Neither of you expect it. Your name is a sound and then a fluid moaned into your chest. Her body shatters: breathless, whimpering, tension reverberating up her spine, into her arms, through shaking legs; sobbing in pleasure, her cunt

wet against you, her gentle fingers and her vicious, vicious mouth—it's too much, so you hold her, and hold her, and—

"God *fucking* damn it," Ariane finally gasps, laughing. "I am such a *fucking* whore."

Unsure where to move your hands, you leave them on her hips. Bruises will certainly bloom here in the shape of your fingers. You are not coherent in this moment. "That..." you eventually manage (and your voice is very thin), "that was adorable. That was so adorable."

"Fuck," she replies, still shaky. "I did *not* mean to do that."

You shrug, exhilarated. "I did."

She collapses into you. Ariane uses headbutts to show affection. Exhaustion is a quiet intimacy, and you finally observe (without interacting) the sweat and tiny hairs, the flashes of her red eyeliner, her inaccuracy in shaving behind her knees. The back of this dress is a lace spiderweb: intricate, but not so intricate that she couldn't have made it by hand. Perhaps, like her namesake, she is also a seamstress—or, perhaps she boarded the Penrose having planned for unlikely outcomes. Maybe she just wanted to feel sexy sometimes. Certainly she knew she'd masturbate here, and you thrill considering what other secrets she has.

Surely there are times where secrets spill. There is a reason, for example, why orgasm compelled Ariane to call herself a whore, and perhaps it is benign, but perhaps it is something more. Reasons behind behaviors tend to have thorns, and (despite their complexity and meaning) it is sometimes best to leave them alone.

You let Ariane kiss you again. More sensual, less desperate, leaving room for the texture, the join and separation, the sometimes-not-closed eyes. Her hand reminds you that you do not have breasts and continues to your insensitive stomach and hip, your ass. Lazy and slow. Unnecessary.

Touch is not a sensation you are designed for. Separately from your face and hands, Ariane's presence on your body is a binary yes-or-no with no nuance or eroticism. Shades of grief color what you're missing, both from Replika and Gestalt perspectives, and it's a tragic irony: the enigmatic soldier whose trauma you've absorbed would certainly have longed for smoothness between her legs, in the same way that you might conversely long for a dysphoric body like hers, if only to feel *anything*.

So, perhaps like that Gestalt, you'll set these feelings aside and make do living vicariously through your partners, and all will somehow be well.

Ariane succumbs to no such delusion. "I need you in my bed," she tries again. Her voice is quiet and spent. She moves aside and crumples, still weakly trembling, legs folded in such a way that her dress doesn't cover arousal smeared on her thighs.

You curse under your breath. "Okay. Ariane?"

"Ariane?" Ariane says.

You open your mouth and no sound comes out. Speaking bluntly and clinically about sex probably isn't the best for overall momentum, but it has to happen. "Okay. I need to know—and it's fine if this is too much of a leap, but" —you gesture like you're explaining a math problem. Your dirty talk is abjectly mediocre— "may I—and in the context of Replika spit, physically *can I*—give you cunnilingus without protection?"

She gives an incredulous laugh. *How cute that you'd even think to ask.* "Just look at me." Her voice quivers. "Look at what you did to me—Elster, *please*, I'm *dripping*—"

Awkward forays into self-consciousness end. Impulse is an ocean and you slip under the surface. You want to taste her. You want to scoop her off the floor, fling her into her bed and feel her cunt throb around your tongue. Now is not the time to improvise a strapon, so when you fuck her your fingers will have to be enough—an insufficient approximation of those aching Gestalt memories where you can feel yourself inside of—

—something changes.

"Wait," Ariane interrupts when you stand. "Let me get that for you."

She makes eye contact, and then she's kneeling to lick her own come off your thigh.

You break. The sound echoes. The room for subtlety—if any remained—ends. Slow, romantic sex is fun and inaccessible and no longer what you want—even with your unfeeling body you can grind your psychology against hers until friction sparks. Sex is communication; sex is fucking *with* someone as much as it's *fucking* them. The game changes; the cacoëthes of passion encroaches. You take a fistful of Ariane's hair. "Such a fucking" —perhaps you should not call her a slut, but your intention (embarrassingly) shines through, and she grins.

"Elster?" Ariane asks, her voice lilting heavy and playful. She looks good on her knees. "Physically, can I give you cunnilingus without" —she interrupts herself with a choked laugh, and you laugh with her, genuine and absurd. Embarrassment without bite, knowing and being known. You are both fools; sex is inherently silly, and that's exactly how you'll have each other.

"Yes," you consent—and now you are both improvising, gambling on caprice and trembling in anticipation. "Yes, please *yes*."

Roles reverse. Ariane licks the place where your clit isn't. She lingers excessively, kisses wet and real. Arousal is gravity and you pass the event horizon, succumb to its inexorable pull.

This is a believable fiction. Ariane's expression, when you can see it, is one of such curiosity that it lets you set aside the deficiencies of your body, leaving them in the physical form of your cap on her nightstand. You'll retrieve your insecurities later, when you have the time.

Ariane separates to take a breath. Her chin is smeared wet (another believable fiction), strands of drool having spilled (perhaps purposely) down from her mouth to her chest, soaking skin and fabric. The slipknot that earlier held you silent returns to your throat, manifesting a different tension.

"I love how you taste," Ariane tells you (believable fiction)—although perhaps she does. Fantasies rarely include you in a Replika body (and this speaks to the magnitude of your dysphoria); however, if Ariane loves you—and she hasn't said it, but deep down you know there couldn't be another explanation—but if she loves you, that love is for you, Elster, not you, ~~Lilith~~.

A gate appears. The notion of an event horizon returns, and you do not consider it further. Now is not the time to remember your name.

"Elster," Ariane whimpers against you. "You're trembling—"

Names are tethers; memories are memories. Elster is you and Ariane is the girl you make constellations with in the cockpit by tracing breath on glass. She wears no ribbon in her hair, but perhaps holds a love comparable to what ~~Alina~~ did—

The gate returns. You refocus on the present. Ariane has a hand under her dress to finger herself. Shameless helpless indulgence, pitifully adorable; she probably couldn't hold back if she tried. It occurs to you that this is what it actually looks like for her to go down on you: genuine want for your body as it is. For you.

It's complicated. You want more.

"May I?" Ariane asks, her middle finger tapping where your vagina isn't.

You are breathlessly laconic in response. "Please." Uncreative, perhaps, were it not for how genuinely you're wearing expressions. This is you begging, an elevated squeak, birdsong. "Ariane, please." *Please what?* Please fuck me. Do you actually say that?

Ariane shuffles on her knees and your back collides with the wall. Her finger does not penetrate you. Moans are a form of communication.

You don't feel anything (you mean, it makes you shiver; you mean—it affects you). Her, kneeling with spit covering her décoletage, wearing that dress that's so much more intimate than simply being naked. In what's sure to be another calculation of hers, you still haven't seen much of anything underneath. Perhaps cruelty is the point. Hearing how wet she is while she touches herself is excruciating, like she's only doing this to remind you of how achingly slowly you might fuck her—but no, you realize, it matches the motion of her other hand between your legs—

"Can you take another finger?" she asks.

You nod pitifully. *Yes*. The boundary between yourself and fiction blurs. It is easy to fall into, like a crevasse or a hole in the ground.

"Talk to me, little bird," Ariane says. "Do you want this?"

"I do, I do," you say, and so she doesn't find a spot inside of you that makes you squeal (you mean, you squeal—

The slipknot draws tighter. Tension reshapes your spine; makes you recall how it might arch in orgasm if you ever had the unlikely experience of having one through fantasy alone. That incomplete collection of biocomponents—little more than recycled meat—might still recall their origin, and perhaps some unlikely flaw in your construction enables you, in some vestigial way, to find it.

"Good girl," you say to Ariane, stroking her hair. She doesn't expect this, and it makes her moan aloud, makes her body shudder. Surely she is enjoying this as much as you, but she somehow finds moxie to deny herself further. *For you, Elster*, she might say, or have said. *This is all for you.*

You want her so badly. You want to be inside of her so badly. To taste, to touch, to feel, to swallow.

"Whatever you're thinking," Ariane says, her voice layered and hazy, "hang on to that. Fall into it. Let it happen."

So you approach the gate. It is an incoherent place, grand and ephemeral and extending in no discernible direction: a monument to the incorporeal woman you might have been. Occasionally, you've seen memories bleed from here unprompted, activated by some chance encounter or another, and you bleed beside them. Love and joy and personhood, juxtaposed with the ~~stab of a knife, bloodsoaked mud and rot~~, an agony so visceral that it still only takes the shape of a Vinetan lily. It is an essential gamble to be here—but true pleasure is always a risk.

Past the threshold, the separation between you (observer) and ~~Elith~~ (the metric of your pleasure) waxes and wanes; it is on this subjective divide that you balance knowing and becoming. It is once again a dangerous game, but with Ariane you have the most unlikely confidence; with her, you are allowed to want, and want more. Her name is a tether you haven't previously held, anchoring you from this headworld to her hands on your body and her mouth on your—

"Oh fuck, right there," you moan. A believed fiction said and heard in reality. Ariane's eyes are so pretty like this, red, adoring, perfect. You cherish so many of her expressions, and here is another to keep.

(Whatever you're thinking, ~~Alina~~ had said, fall into it.)

"Keep me safe," you beg of her. A whisper as vulnerable as sex. "Please keep me safe."

Ariane removes her mouth for an awful second. "Anything for you, little bird." Surely you're going to fall in love with her, but for now it's a foregone conclusion, an answer without a question. To fuck is to live in savoring the present, to dance with no more grace than an amateur. You are going to make an awful, joyous mess of yourselves. You are going to stumble, and gracelessly fall.

Gestalt memory: (~~Viktoria five one two Juliet union~~) ~~mayday mayday mayday~~—a trusted ~~safeword~~ born from the first time you truly wanted to be alive. You taste ~~jet fuel~~ in a kiss.

Quiet nights in a playful ~~warzone~~. You have had crushes before but they never burned so deeply.

Gestalt memory: three inches of water cover a city ~~flattened to concrete~~. A perfect landing; the life-affirming relief of ~~nightmares~~ left behind. Both of you tumble from the cockpit into the sea, swimming in dizzy exhilaration. You push ~~Alina~~ onto her back, watch her hair spread into saltwater halo, pretend you are not drowning while you kiss her and kiss her and kiss her bleeding reckless scared fire in her eyes & when you're inside of her you both still feel like women

Gestalt memory: you and ~~Alina~~ in the atrium of a ~~burned~~ library—for just a moment, all of your ~~broken pieces~~ are simply a multitude: your transgender body next to her transgender body; the sound of ~~wharf roaches scuttling~~ through poetry. You think, maybe, this is what love feels like

and you think, ~~don't cry. don't cry. don't cry. don't cry. don't cry. don't cry~~

Gestalt memory: her fingernails ~~tear into~~ your back the same way yours did to her shoulders. You are going scar and to keep these forever and that's okay. You'll match. ~~War~~ never asked consent to ruin your body but ~~Alina~~ always does, with that wild concern in her eyes. The desperation, the ~~Russian roulette~~

Gestalt memory: she grinds the most sensitive part of her cock into yours until you scream; ~~ashes~~ settle on the table. There is a ~~hole in your face~~ and an ~~exit wound~~ in your heart

Gestalt memory: ~~acid smoke in a city of death; boredom and bomb shelters~~. Concrete abrades your back; her mouth is vicious against you (there has never been a time you've fucked that wasn't desperate). She's flicking her tongue across your frenulum, sucking you into the roof of your mouth and all you want is to please her, to share this, to revel in the similarities and differences of your reactions, to finger her prostate until she cries, to call her *my good girl*—

"My sweet little bird," she says, briefly substituting her mouth with her hand, "it's okay. You get to feel this. This is all for you."

She's read your mind. You look at her; let yourself trust her (maybe for the first time so deeply). Let her fuck you so slowly that the intricacies of your body spill out: the gradual rise and fall of your moans, the flow of tension through your ~~damaged~~ nerves, how you shift into pleasure or curl away from it. The devastating missing and the wild unknown.

"Lili," ~~Alina~~ says again. Quiet, soft. She taps a cruel finger into the groove under your tip and you sob. Edging you again would be violent even by her standards, but the thrill of it is so close. She taps her finger again, and you're dripping; tears welling at the corners of your eyes. "Beg for it," she whimpers—surely more self-serving than not.

"Please," you cry. "I can't—I can't take this anymore, just please—" and she taps her finger again, and then once more for each time you say *please* and you're squirming, back arching, luxuriating in sex, choking on your own spit when she finally takes mercy and finishes you in her mouth.

The tether snaps tight. *Ariane*. Your body crumples, first into her shoulders, then gradually to the floor beside her. Clenched fists on soft skin. The slipknot tears and your voice falls out, cursing almost as much as Ariane does during a normal conversation (you adore her for this)—and this is all so silly, and so delightful: the triumph of exploring your body's memories without getting stuck (fuck yes), the desperate wish of sharing this with Ariane (*fuck* yes). Curiously, there's no discernible reason among your nominal systems that explains why you're cumming your brains out on the floor, but *fuck* it's indulgent—and fuck, you wonder distantly, that must have taken a *while*.

How grateful you are, then, to have been lavished under Ariane's attention for so long. To have drawn that attention from the electric start: the very first cycle belted into the Penrose's cockpit staring down the rails of the mass driver with her bright smile coloring the distance ahead; to have joined in constructing the continuity of you; to be, in this microcosm of two, one.

Gestalt memory: ~~"Hey," Alina says, offhand, casual, like it doesn't matter that she's crying. "I think I'm in love with you."~~

The unlikeliness makes you laugh in disbelief. "Ariane," you cry. She is sprawled over you, feeling your body convulse under hers, and you are still on the floor (because you're impatient, impetuous, desperate women) and the floor is *not* comfortable and "Ariane," you cry again, "How am I still coming—how is this happening?"

"Shh. Just feel," Ariane says. Breath is warm on your ear. "Fuck, how are you this hot? How are you this fucking perfect?"

You keen helplessly, searching for something—*anything*—to hold your hand, and Ariane obliges her own just as desperately. Her fingers are wet from fucking herself; cruelly, you're too overwhelmed to suck them dry. All you can do is tremble in her arms while she pets you, calms you down, holds you close and gentle.

"What did you do to me?" you whine—your voice is not normal. It's the girliest you've ever felt.

"Sublimated your brain," Ariane guesses. "Just—whoosh. Right out the ears."

"No fucking *shit*," you sob. There's an element of absurd awareness to your response: the fact that you just fucked on the floor, that you fucked *Ariane* on the floor; that you fucked your *coworker* on the floor; that you fucked your *commanding officer* on the *fucking floor*—it's humbling, and you groan in delight. "What time is it?"

Ariane looks at you incredulously, because you have an internal clock and never need to ask this. "It's been a couple hours," she laughs under her breath. Cute. "Could go a few more."

"Could go all night," you say. You shudder violently. "Fuck, if we were responsible, we might even take a break first."

"Scandalous," Ariane whistles. Again, she makes no attempt to get up. You luxuriate together in a tender, simple afterglow. It is cliché to compare sex to a sunset or compare orgasms to

waves, but surely the shores of oblivion are not so desolate when they're shared between you.

You gently poke Ariane's stomach. "Your tummy is growling."

"I know," she says. Kisses you again. Bodies are warm and heavy. "How cruel is it that I'm this turned on, and I'm too hungry to do anything about it?"

You hum in response, idly licking your fingers in the hope that her taste somehow transferred. "Too cruel," you manage. "Sisyphean, even."

"Little *bird*," Ariane breathes. "You have no idea how much restraint this is taking."

"I know exactly how much restraint this is taking," you say.

Ariane answers by kissing you on the head and staggering to her feet. Her self-control is so much more admirable than yours—all you manage is to stay motionless to avoid pulling her back down. Floor perspective lets you see the state of Ariane's knees for the first time: red and sore, liable to spend the next few cycles wearing the shape of what you did to each other. You do not throb, but you throb.

"Please don't help me up," you say, answering the question in Ariane's expression before she makes the mistake of asking it. "If you don't immediately go to the mess hall, one of us *will* give in, and then you'll be sad and hungry and the sex will be worse and we'll both regret it."

Ariane nods briefly, shuddering under tenuous self-control. "We are not going to sleep tonight."

"Yay," you giggle. "Ariane, you're so pretty. Have I told you that you're pretty?"

"Loopy magpie," she replies taking a dangerous step closer—surely both of you know another touch would be reason enough to forego basic needs and fuck each other senseless. "Damn it, damn it, damn it, no." Again, she is stronger than you. "Self-control. I have to eat, I have to hydrate, *then* we go to bed—

"—then I get to taste you?" you say. Your voice turns into a whimper: "I want to taste you so badly."

Ariane trips and catches herself gracelessly in the hallway. "You" —she points a finger— "are so fucked out, and *so* cute—and yes, *please*—and also, I'm *so* hungry. And I'm a functional adult" —her volume decreases as (thankfully) she walks down the hall— "with an enormous capacity for self-control, Elster!"

"That you are, my dear," you call after her (intentionally, vulnerably using that pet name for the first time—but perhaps the door closes too quickly).

You're left to collect your bearings. Quite a few things have happened that merit reflection, and perhaps it's fortunate that you've started a long project in the bowels of the ship (although repairs to flight controls should be made in a clear mind). Persona stabilization, you think distantly—how gloriously that bridge has burned. The pervasive sexual tension of will-you-

won't-you is over, and so, perhaps, are the exhausting mental gymnastics of holding back. A future of reckless abandon and derelict duty looms.

Now the tension is this: how long does that future sustain itself? Is this romance, or comfort, or just fucking for the sake of fucking? Has the tension migrated to wondering how long until another encounter happens, or whether one of you will finally confess something more? What about Ariane sharing her art? Does the art continue or was the art an elaborate replacement for time that would otherwise have been spent fucking? It would be a shame if it was—you really like her creations. They're evocative. Give you places to be.

More maybes: would she ever paint you? How would you look in a painting by her? Would it be a mirror, an interpretation, an expression, a more complete version of you? If you asked her to paint you like a Gestalt, would you look like ~~Elith~~? What about those Gestalt memories, anyway? Who the fuck *are* these people, and who the fuck are *you*, and why (in all of these why's) does ~~Alina~~ look like Ariane?

In any case, you're fucked out of your mind. Or ~~Elith~~ is fucked into your mind. Or your mind is fucked. One of the three.

You give Ariane a few more minutes to to be responsible before you make the terrible decision to walk to the mess hall. Your mess hall, you might call it. Shared space. Couples do that, you think distantly.

You arrive normal and well-regulated.

"Hey," you say to Ariane, offhand, casual, walking into the doorframe because of how pretty she is. Might as well just say it. "How are you so pretty? Seriously. How?"

Ariane is by the console drinking a glass of water, her skin shiny with sweat and spit, her dress coyly (and frustratingly) in place. She responds with a shrug. "Always thought I was pretty plain, to be honest. At least that's what people said I was."

"People tend not to have accurate perceptions of you," you remind her. Tenuous balance of your unstable thoughts. "Except for me, because you're ~~everything to me? the light of my life? gorgeous.~~"

She scoffs. "You're saying that you accurately perceived I was a slut before tonight?"

Things simply cannot escalate again. Ariane is still eating, and as poorly as you've followed orders recently, it is unacceptable to forego her basic needs. You proceed mindfully: "No. Also that begs a tangent—"

"Ooh, we love our tangents," Ariane indulges. You notice she is inexplicably eating a block of uncooked instant noodles, occasionally sprinkling seasoning directly into her mouth. You elect not to question this. A thousand cycles in space with the same ration pantry have left her desperate for foods that are not boring, and—well, you simply elect not to question this.

"Come on," Ariane prompts you, noticing hesitation. "Hit me with the trig, Elster."

She's unbearably cute. "Right," you say normally. Composure is broken glass and you are barefoot and you don't even have feet. "So—and I'm saying this with willingness to enthusiastically degrade you" —Ariane raises an eyebrow—you are not doing well at keeping this tangent chaste, are you— "but is calling you a whore, or a slut, or like—"

"What I am?" Ariane helpfully interjects.

"—okay, is any of that in *any* way bad for you?"

An awkward pause. "I mean, my bullies called me a whore—and to be fair, maybe I *was* kind of a whore," she says. She picks a crumb out of her cleavage and eats it. "I used to write erotic fiction about my classmates and teachers, and" —she laughs bitterly— "they found out."

"Which does *not* mean you were asking for it," you interject.

"And I wasn't! But it made me think: if that was what people who aren't whores are willing to do to a whore—what's so bad about whores, and who's really in the wrong here? Maybe I'd *rather* be a whore. Then I was conscripted into the most sexually frustrating position in the Navy" —she shoots you an accusatory glance, which you innocently pretend not to notice— "and I'm just saying you did things to me."

"You are going to finish eating before we fuck again," you remind her.

"Make me."

"I *will* hydrate those for you, I *will* add vegetables, and it *will* make you disappointed."

She pouts, crunching another bite. "Fine. So anyway—fuck bullying. Calling me a slut or a whore is a compliment, and as for whether I actually am one" —she glances at you again— "I mean, I came on your thigh and then licked it off. Look at the state of me. Look at how" — she briefly slips a hand under the bodice of her dress, showing how transparent it is when wet — "aw shit, it's drying out."

You *see* gears turning in her head, then watch her drink and spill water on her chest. "There," she shrugs. "Fixed it."

Briefly, you consider giving in, pushing her down and fucking her over the system console. She is a mess. You are also a mess, but you could stand to make her more of a mess. She would look good with her come dripping down the cabinets—and like most tangents, this one is asymptotically diverging. You are both foolish, foolish women with utterly predictable desires. Technically you are supposed to have done a reactor check by now, but you sincerely can't be bothered with something so menial if it means another moment spent with her.

"You're—unbelievable," you manage.

"I'm a slut," she says. "The evidence is on the table. It's been peer reviewed. My pussy is out and I *will* defend my dissertation."

"I" —you stutter— "okay, so I'm going to proceed as if you didn't say that, but I *am* putting it on the cursed spreadsheet."

"You think I have shame? Do it." Ariane laughs. "Goddess, we're so fucked out."

"I'm entirely stable," you claim. "Unflappable, even. No clue what you're talking about."

"Bullshit. You know how hard I made you cum," she says (you shudder at the memory).

"Here. Objective test to prove how fucked out you are. Eat this."

You catch a prepackaged lychee jelly out of the air. Technically it is not efficient for you to eat most foods, but you can do it in a pinch—perhaps Aeon does deserve credit for recognizing that food is improvised fuel, and that taste is a simple Gestalt-compatible means of molecular analysis. A darker part of you wonders whether someone (or someones) in Aeon was disturbingly invested in sexual uses of Replika technology—or, conversely, whether someone else fought tooth and nail to gift you as much humanity as possible. You're unsure whether to be happy or off-put, but such is the nature of Replika ethics. None of this is relevant right now. You eat the fucking lychee jelly. Or—you try to. A significant half ends up stuck in the bottom of its small plastic container, requiring a tricky combination of suction and tongue to—

"Okay, so I'm fucked out," you say.

"Aww, poor magpie," Ariane says. "You should eat another one."

"I'm not eating more of your personal rations," you say. It is unconscionable. No more than 3.7% of any ration may be expended every 111 cycles (so calculated because Ariane has insisted on using odd numbers ever since she ugly-cried about how they *must be so lonely*—and you'd understood why). In the worst case, you'll prolong the lifespan of those rations until the 3000th cycle, just before you execute the aphelion maneuver and cryosleep all the way back to the heliosphere. At the end of all that: a couple cycles finagling interplanetary astrophysics, and then you hit the rails on Rotfront and spend the evening making out in the alley behind the nearest ration depot. All her favorite things are replenished, and you fail the mission successfully.

Tangent tangent tangent. The sine over cosine of how your thoughts aren't stable. Technical asides are a good distraction from fantasies of fucking her—it was a mistake to follow Ariane to the mess before she finished eating, but it isn't like you had a plan. You are a fool guided by whimsy and desire and you want your best friend to come in your mouth and so you're here next to her thinking about groceries while you both grapple with the insurmountable barrier of basic needs. Normal behavior. ~~Lith~~ would approve.

"Elster," Ariane says (your name sounds wonderful when she says it), "you're allowed to take up space, and that includes on the ration spreadsheet. This isn't more of that stigma that resources are wasted on you, is it?"

You think about that. "It's mostly wanting you to have more nice things, because" —you pause here— "I like when you're happy. But maybe there's a grain of truth there."

"Just a grain? Just a few tiny little carbohydrates?"

"Or, maybe a kernel—"

"Magpie goddess kernel?" Ariane interrupts.

"No. That is a multi-gigabyte grain—I'm talking medium to moderate, like a first to second quartile sized grain."

"Oh, so like a bowl of rice."

"That's *many grains* next to each other, not *a grain*—whatever. I'm—we're dropping this. We are far too loopy. Magpies get nice things sometimes."

"They do!" Ariane agrees. Looks dead at you. "And you deserve *so* much more than you think—and I wanna give you everything." Now her voice is lower. "I should make you a collar. You'd look so good in a collar."

"Fuck," you spit. Arousal is a mineshaft and you hit every edge on the way down. "Fuck! Do you even know how—God *fucking* damn it, Ariane. Fuck!"

Ariane scoffs. "Fuck me yourself, puppy."

Logic ends. Impatience wins another bet. You rush across the room and hurl her up onto the counter and—

"Ah, ah, ah," Ariane stops you with a finger on your nose before you push your tongue into her mouth. Her voice is stern, almost mocking, disproportionate to how heavily she's breathing. "I'm still eating."

You blink. She is an excellent actress, playing you like an instrument, controlling you like her pet. "Ariane," you whimper. "I am losing my *fucking* mind."

"Shh," she dismisses. "Dogs don't talk. Sit."

You step away from her, trembling, trembling, trembling, broken. This was not a part of the calculus of what might happen in this mess hall. This is not something you thought she was even *capable* of—

You collapse back into your chair. Ariane slides down from the counter, carelessly flashing you in the process. She grins, breaking the spell with a giggle. "Just kidding." *Bullshit*, you think, *bullshit bullshit bullshit*. "You can chirp all you want, magpie. I just wanted you to know what I can do to you."

Opening your mouth to respond takes time. "Yeah, right," you sputter. Another tangent is probably a good idea. "And on that note" —your avoidance is once again transparent— "there's something of a thought I've been having."

Ariane cracks open a can of processed wheat protein. Something Pavlovian happens in your brain; you ignore it. The fragile psychology of this moment will not survive another

encounter with raw impulse. "You can still have thoughts in this state?" she responds. "I'm impressed."

"Yes. I'm an adult with an enormous amount of self-control."

That makes her snort laughing. "Right. Pouncing on me like a bitch in heat—"

"I will not compromise your basic needs," you repeat to her. "I will not. Compromise."

"You were *so* compromised, Elster" —your expression must shoot daggers, because she relents— "but have it your way. I *am* taking care of myself, not compromising—and you claimed to be having a thought?"

"Tenuously. I've remembered a woman I—" you stop yourself. Calm calm calm. You are calm women having dinner together—you have done this *hundreds* of times, and this is a relatively important conversation that should happen gracefully. "Right," you recover, "so Gestalt memories are... things that exist."

"Ah," she grins. "I was hoping you'd remember something hot."

Well, that dispels with the anxiety that Ariane doesn't have a clue what happened earlier, but there's more: "I did, and it's why I enjoyed... *that*—"

"Aww, are you shy about it?" Ariane says. "The orgasm? The mind-melting sex—"

"Look, I'm trying to be serious. If I think about it I get too turned on, and" —you hesitate, thinking through how abrupt this really needs to be— "whatever. What I'm trying to say is that in the process of *that*, I became aware my Gestalt was deeply in love with another woman."

"Fuck yeah! Good for her," Ariane says, undeterred. "And they fucked, right?"

"Intensely, and I feel like playing with those memories is kind of like playing with fire. Because whoever this is" —you gesture to the shape of your body— "and I know her name, but whoever this is feels intensely private, and I'm beginning to feel odd about involving her memories in *our* sex."

"Wait," Ariane interrupts, swallowing a chunk of the protein (it is supposed to be an ingredient, but again, you don't comment. *It's about the texture, Elster*, she'd surely explain if you asked). "Have I blundered into something that's genuinely upsetting?"

"Partially, but mostly not." Ariane's concern softens. It's reassuring that (for all the sexual tension you've built) she doesn't hesitate to abruptly set it aside if she knows of a problem. You endeavor to explain yourself: "The point is that earlier, I came—"

"—and I saw and conquered," Ariane says.

"And I relied on dissociating about my Gestalt, instead of being present, in this body, with you."

"I'm not remotely upset by that, if you're concerned. We're working with what we've got. I never expected this to be uncomplicated."

"Right, and I'm not too upset either," you say. "That felt *unbearably* good—and yeah, my Gestalt's body is my metric for pleasure, and pleasure is fun and sex is fun and I'm trans and she's trans so it connects and makes sense, but none of that is authentically mine—and yes, I remember the ship of Theseus paradox, Ariane, I see how you're looking at me. I'm just... curious."

"Well," Ariane takes another bite, "we can break out the manuals. Maybe we sit down and explore every part of you to see what feels good?"

A deep breath helps you maintain a shred of composure, as in you *need* to be collared, pinned down—but not now. "The LSTR Non-Normal Checklist and Maintenance Manual is not sex education. You are not supposed to be fucking your LSTR unit," you say, swallowing. "It will be undocumented and potentially adverse territory."

"Well, shoot," Ariane says. She preemptively laughs at her own joke (incredibly endearing): "If only we knew some professionals at exploring and documenting potentially adverse unknowns—"

"We're unprofessional," you dismiss (Ariane matches your smug smile). "But it's promising. If I can come from memories with you, the principle of induction—"

"—oh, this is so sexy—"

Your persevere: "The principle of mathematical induction suggests that I can adapt each subsequent time we have sex" —you immediately recognize and recant an assumption— "I mean, *if* we continue having sex—"

Ariane scoffs. "Does this feel like a one-night stand to you?"

"No," you say, possibly too quickly. *It feels like I'm falling helplessly in love with you*, you think—and having had that thought, you hurry along. "I don't know. I want you so badly that I'm having cognitive problems. Can you *please* hurry up and eat?"

"You want me *so* badly? Can't wait to throw me on the counter again?" Ariane teases. "You know you'll be a good girl and wait. You like suffering too much."

Being known and understood is another form of nakedness, and it leaves you stripped cold. Shivering is a vestigial Gestalt instinct. Nighttime—or, the arbitrary period of each cycle which Ariane insists you call nighttime—is a vestigial ritual. There is no reason to program the Penrose's ambient temperature to drop, but you have. *It's almost like we're on a planet*, Ariane had said, shivering in the willful discomfort you've created, and later you'd implemented seasons, weather, imagined dancing in the rain, even went as far as to surreptitiously install a warm light beside her bed so that it might approximate sunshine over her face in the morning—a spontaneous gift that left her (almost distressingly, at the time) in tears.

So—wanting her so badly. Being unable to wait. Knowing how easily everything could change. Hindsight is often a perfect mirror, and you find yourself reflecting humorously (not quite cursing yourself) about how slowly your relationship with Ariane has burned. One time she declared something like *I'm so terrible at knowing when women are flirting with me*, and you agreed, and then you sat together on the flight deck inventing constellations—friendship, obviously. There were so many times could have kissed and didn't.

Time spent with her is not wasted, but hesitation has a cost. You are both always getting older. The failure rate of Penrose missions is uncomfortable, and so are your truncated Replika lifespan and truncated Replika human rights. Perhaps dehumanization is to blame for these missed opportunities—but then again you *are* a person, and you *do* make choices autonomously, even if it took Ariane and all the antiquated ideals in her antiquated books to prove it. *Do you know the play R.U.R. by Čapek?* she'd asked once, and so as night fell you read to yourselves in Miss Glory's voice: *I'm a stupid girl. Send me back by the first ship*, and the stars had gradually changed outside.

Ariane looks at you—you have failed to continue the conversation. "What's the matter?" she asks. "Gestalt memories again?"

Through some wordplay, yes: she is a Gestalt, and you are remembering her, but perhaps this is too cloyingly romantic. "Wondering why I didn't kiss you sooner," you decide to answer.

"Probably because we're both messy, messy women," she answers. Appropriately, she places garbage on the counter. "Wanna do something about it?"

"If by—"

"Yes. Get over here," she says, as if you haven't been waiting for a cue to pounce for half an hour. It probably startles her that you don't, that instead you walk over at an ordinary pace to kiss her quietly. There is no simple way back to the exhilaration of her on the counter with your neck in her metaphorical leash (a tether, now that you make the connection), and it would be easy to physically hoist her up again, but something emotional has changed.

The kiss is long. From your perspective it is romantic; from hers—you couldn't say. Her skin radiates heat into the night you've built. Goosebumps rise under your touch.

"I am having so much fun with you," you say, forehead against forehead. She smiles; skin creases in the corners of her eyes. *Good*. Past impulses swirl to the surface: her needing you in bed, the nearly comic way you proceeded to fuck desperately on the floor beside it. You needing to taste her; both of you needing touch, needing sensation, needing the warmth of each other's bodies, needing to hold onto something at the end of everything—

Even now, Rotfront is a speck in the distance. The red eye stares the opposite way, but the privacy of being unwatched comes with the dagger of being alone. Whatever impulse brought Ariane here has likely settled in the years since, and you wonder, distantly, if she regrets it. If this moving Penrose-island is a horrible compromise. If her desire for home has only grown with distance.

You kiss her again. Soft lips and battered hearts. Perhaps a Gestalt memory or two: a trauma stalking the perimeter of something sacred, a realization that love is a living thing, and that you have (perhaps) ~~watched it die~~ in your arms.

"Tell me what you want," Ariane says.

Bodies want to touch closer; kisses long to be deeper. "Irrational things, mostly," you say. That's too abstract. "I want to feel you against me." Polyethylene makes this impossible. "I want us to lose ourselves in sensation and not look back." Cloyingly romantic. "I want us to make love until our bodies give out" —and there it is again, that hesitant *I want to fall in love with you* that you don't say. You first kissed less than a cycle ago, so perhaps you sincerely are being rash—but then why does being rash feel so good?

Brief flashes of intention and desire bleed into your heart, mixing with tendrils of ~~Lilith's~~ unreality. Spilling from under the gate you find the thrills of ~~burning halfway to death~~ with her when you ~~ditched~~ into the ocean, of placing a ~~revolver against each other's heads~~ and hearing only the ~~hollow click of the trigger~~, of all the ~~quiet horrors~~ you made and shared so tenderly.

Gestalt memory: ~~you follow Alina to the end of the earth and arrive at a place just past. She offers you a cigarette, offers to dance with you. Your chest is a birdcage and shrapnel perches between your ribs. Sometimes you think about her and don't cry. Her ribbon lives around your neck and the smell of her hair is gone~~

Gestalt memory: ~~grief is love with nowhere left to go. It scatters away from you, thousands of magpies in a radially expanding constellation, touching the stars for her, perhaps finding something of their own to love and keep~~

"I want that too," Ariane whispers. You have lapsed what she's replying to, but intent colors her face. You shut the gate quietly, leaving ~~Lilith and Alina to cuddle~~ in the space just past. Their intimacy is not yours, and neither is yours beholden to them. You are idly moving together with Ariane, holding her in a rhythm that's not quite a dance, kissing her over and over, and for now it's enough.

"I just want you to be happy," you tell Ariane. *Non sequitur* perhaps, but tenderness is honest, and the desire that brings to you caressing each other at the dining table is even more so. Your hand returns to her hip. Escalation. Her hair should go behind her ear: another escalation. It is easy to delight her.

"I didn't expect you to show restraint," Ariane says—and this isn't restraint, but maybe you can proceed as though it were. What was it she said those precious few hours ago? *Play with me. Deny me until I beg.* Whether or not she recalls her phrasing, it certainly spoke to desire.

You trace your fingertips on her inner thigh, feeling give, feeling tension. "Do you trust me?" you ask, knowing what the answer must be, but yearning (and only appropriate word is yearning) for her to say it.

"Yes, I do—just please," Ariane answers. *Please touch me*, but you tease her more instead. Submission isn't always a game of relinquishing power, and playing with her doesn't require

you to take it. You watch her eyes, attentive to her reactions in this gentle exchange. A loose arm around her waist causes her to pull herself closer of her own accord; the slightest pressure against her side lifts her into your lap. She acquiesces readily and absolutely, and it fills you with responsibility—she must know the game you're playing, and despite that it has her breathless, she goes along: "Tell me what more you want."

"I want you to keep showing me paintings," you say. None of these answers are chaste. "I want to spend more time playing games. More of those nights stargazing from the flight deck" —this is sappy, but it makes her grin despite her arousal. There is an inexorable honesty that brings you together, and while you remain in trepidation of naming its details, you whisper, "please dance with me again," and perhaps they name themselves anyway.

"Dancing is just fucking with our clothes on," Ariane says, calling your bluff. "It's a veneer of classical art." This makes you smile, makes you take yourself less seriously. How silly is it that you would rather explore your bodies than the cosmos—but her brief form is so plain and so beautiful and so close. The ridge of her collarbone, the mild imperfections on her skin, scattered acne between her breasts, peach fuzz; the edge of her nipple where her dress has slipped aside.

"May I?" you ask; she brings your hand to her breast instead of answering. Fingers slip under fabric and squeeze, exploring the shape of her while she squirms helplessly. "May I?" you ask again, to be infuriating, not quite pinching her nipple, toying with her.

"Stop fucking *asking* things," she whimpers. "If I have to make myself come before you do, I will—"

She cuts herself off when you pinch, gently twisting, pulling, a prelude to what your mouth might do here. "Because watching you finger yourself in my lap would be so horrible?"

"I can masturbate to you whenever I want," she whimpers. "I have literally already fucked this table fantasizing about you walking in and finishing me off—"

"What?" you exclaim, breaking character. "But it's—how?"

"What do you—no. I fucked the *corner*; not the legs, Elster! Goddess fuck—"

You laugh breathlessly. "When did you do that?"

"I don't know. Hundreds of cycles ago. Read my diary," she exasperates. "Please just shut up and touch me."

You trace a hand up her thigh, across her ass, her stomach, her ribs—gentle curves and pointy bones. "Tell me more," you say, insatiable. "What was the fantasy?"

"That you'd walk in and need me as much as I needed you," she says. "Then maybe you'd use me, and throw me over the table with a fist in my hair pinning me down, and just" —her voice falters— "*fuck* me. Please—"

Mouths together. It's a mistake that you've been talking instead of kissing. Lost attention, lost opportunities, and it is humbling to admit you have no idea what you're doing. Caressing her is a skill, you figure. There is a probably some topological function that explains how to optimally traverse her surface—this is not relevant right now. You touch her. She is soft and her sweat gradually increases the friction between—why the fuck are you intellectualizing this? It is pleasure. It is just pleasure.

"Elster," Ariane whines when she breaks the kiss. "Please just" —and begging has proved ineffective, so her impatience wins. She fucks herself and returns with wetness threaded between two fingers. "Look at me," she says, pitiful. "This is what you're denying yourself." And, knowing your intent, she pushes those fingers into your mouth.

Everything stops. You moan, tasting her, sucking her fingertips. This isn't fair—this is so *fucking* unfair. Ariane's expression is indecipherable: awe, perhaps, or control, or ruin, or simple adoration. Your priorities switch. Being outsmarted and defeated feels good. If Replika are meant to be useful tools that work properly, what are you when you do neither? Ariane fucks her fingers slowly, in and out, curling to stroke the roof of your mouth while your tongue flicks gently in return.

"Get on the table," Ariane orders, a whisper revealing another new side of her. Prior to this cycle you'd observed she had no confidence in her authority and even less will to wield it over you—and it is exhilarating to have been wrong.

You get on the table. Face-up. Ungraceful magpie perch. Ariane's fingers slip briefly and drool spills over your breastplate. Replika spit is the bare minimum; it is unimportant to Aeon to afford you a more acute sense of taste, but maintaining biocomponents necessitates a mechanism. This is the one way your body cooperates; the one way you can respond to attention with wetness. She climbs on top of you, bends down, and you see all the way to her belly button through her neckline.

"Fuck," Ariane whispers in your ear. "You're so easy."

She fucks your mouth harder. Fingers against your tongue, thighs straddling your lap. This cannot go on for much longer when you need, so desperately, to please her in return. To keep her safe. To watch her fall apart. So you bite.

"Ow!" Ariane recoils, giving a dangerous glare. She is having fun, and you can escalate further.

"What do I deserve for that?" you ask.

"Oh, little bird, I might be" —she's faltering. Here is the lack of confidence you know, and she needs encouragement.

"Did you just imagine slapping my spit across my face?"

Ariane shrinks. "Is that too mean?"

"No. You're weak. It'll be cute."

Without hesitation, she strikes. She isn't weak. She even puts in shoulder and back to extend her moment arm and optimize the force, and the result is loud and metal and embarrassing—

"Fuck!" you exclaim. "Oh, wow. Oh, you *know*—"

"Ow, my hand," Ariane squeaks.

You have to pull her into a hug for that. "So adorable," you say. "Ariane, you're just—you're so precious."

"Are you okay?" she whimpers.

"Wonderful," you manage. There is concern in her voice that you can't ignore. "We're definitely being too rash right now—"

"But we're learning," she says. "Elster, we're going to have *so* much fun together."

"We can take our time," you manage to say. Expressions say whatever voice can't. You're far too loopy to speak more, so you compromise by sliding your hand up her dress ("fuck, fuck, fuck" she says, unable to control her anticipation, each word more breathless than the next). Her hands brace against your chest—it is also adorable that such little contact has her reacting so intensely, whimpering and gasping while you trace her cunt. The tone and pitch of her voice change. Your priorities switch again. Even after nine hundred cycles there is more to know about her, and you are insatiable

You learn how she jolts in surprise when you unexpectedly touch her clit. Tap once, a wonderful mistake. Tap twice—you keep learning; she is water between your fingers.

Tap again. "You *fucking* tease," she moans into your shoulder, biting down for her own sake. You wonder how far you can push her; how you can best oblige her vulnerability. Again: she shudders, and then again—from only the slightest touch. Surely contact any more intense could finish her off, and you have half a mind to do so, to lift her onto your face and suck until her thighs clench. It would be so vicious—perhaps as vicious as the ending of her fantasy of being fucked over this table—but for now, you stay gentle. Tap her clit again, like an accident, feeling how she throbs under your fingertip.

"Ariane," you tell her (it's so exhilarating to say her name like this), "it's okay. You get to feel this. This is all for you."

Now is not the time to think about synchronicity. The chaos of you is neatly encapsulated in a single form: this Elster, this magpie, her little bird, and your intentions are uncomplicated. You slide a finger into her. *Fuck yes*. Her body shakes in response to penetration; her expressions are delightful. She should make more of them.

For now, it's easy to stay present. Kissing her head, tugging her hair so that your mouths might meet, gently twisting or curling your finger, *right there, right there, right there*—you are playing a tension you cannot measure, inexpert, trying learning failing. "Can you take

another finger?" you ask: a cheeky repetition of what she said earlier, but her consent is so enthusiastic that bantering about it is pointless. You add another finger, spread and scissor them apart, and leave her gasping even before the friction.

"Good girl," she moans. "Push them in a bit deeper."

You oblige, and she comes the next time you touch her clit. She does not announce it, but you feel the shape of her orgasm in her cunt, feel her arching back and clawing hands; how spit changes the texture of her moans, how your bodies no longer fit together softly. "Keep going," she begs, "please keep going, please don't stop, please—"

"I'm just picking you up," you reassure, hoisting her from your lap to the edge of the table. It is graceless and undignified: your foot slips where you brace yourself, carving two talon-scratches into metal floors; Ariane nearly tumbles over; a chair obstructs the place where you might dismount the table to kneel between her legs. This is funny, but you are both too desperate to laugh. You pull her to another side, pull her tits out of her dress, pull her legs apart, press your tongue inside of her.

For now, you are inexpert. You suck slightly too hard, fuck her slightly too abruptly, and she laughs it off. Neither of you are inexperienced in sex, but then again, so are both of you: you, with fragments of Gestalt memories and the grief of a body that was never yours; her, with whatever intimacies she's shared in the past (or a lack thereof) that she's never spoken of. The closest you've come to broaching the topic was during one of those late conversations on the flight deck, where she answered the question of how her past led her here with *I mean everyone I loved died, so there wasn't much reason to stay, you know?*

Even now, there is an incomplete painting of one of the dead in this room, set aside the pantry so Ariane can paint standing up while she eats. ~~Erika~~ is a sensitive topic, and it would be devastatingly disruptive to draw attention to her by walking over to invert the frame. There is an ugly coexistence on this spacecraft of the life Ariane has lived and the life she hasn't, not unlike yourself, not unlike you and ~~Lilith~~ and ~~Alina~~ and the things they carried. There is baggage here, and you are fucking each other in its midst.

Ariane's hands clench into your hair. Her touch is a tether once again, pulling you away from dissociation and back between her thighs. Perhaps it isn't just ~~Lilith~~ that threatens your attention during sex; or, perhaps this is what it always feels like to lose yourself in a woman's body.

"Elster," she moans—and you remember who you are, again. Your fingertips curl upwards the same way hers did in your mouth—this was an ingenious way (on Ariane's part) to have communicated what feels good without reminding you that don't have a vagina. Communication between you is simple and flawed: you're well aware that Ariane answers questions indirectly or not at all, and that even now the specters of her past lurk in loud noises or around corners; you're similarly well aware that your own avoidance is an obstruction built from shadows of an oppressed mind; but at the end, things sometimes make sense.

Perhaps you should ground yourself in physical space. Ariane is a beautiful, flawed woman and you (an equally, if not more flawed woman) are in love with her and can't admit it. Blood

does not color your knees from pressure; your body does not wear exhaustion the same way hers did. There is not a way to pleasure yourself while maintaining focus, so both of your hands rest on her inner thighs, holding her legs apart, spreading her open for your tongue. Her taste is ordinary, warm, dripping down your chin. You recall an earlier incident where Ariane looked up from her book and said, entirely without context, *why the fuck is erotica like this? I would be so disappointed if a girl's pussy tasted like lavender instead of like pussy* and you'd proceeded to have an incredibly silly and bewildering conversation—and here you go dissociating again.

Physical space. With some degree of smugness, you note that bruises are indeed forming on Ariane's hips. They are cute light purple decorations that suit her sensibilities, speaking more to passion than a true impact. She deserves more. Bites on her inner thighs, bruises in the shape of your mouth: you leave as many as you can so that she'll see them the next time she's naked from changing clothes or bathing. Perhaps, upon seeing the state of herself, she'll only be able to masturbate to relieve the tension.

How everything has changed in just a night, you think. Nothing between you will ever be the same again. Both of you will leave this room as muted echoes of what you once were: something more whole, perhaps, and more unknown. The nape of her neck will become a place you can kiss unprompted; you will learn the scent of her shampoo, and kiss her when her lips are bitten. She might permit you to cut her hair, to aid in the maintenance and construction of her body as a vicarious replacement for what you cannot have—and then, perhaps, she will give it to you anyway, and you will have her again. This memorized and lonely spacecraft might, once again, be new.

Ariane moans particularly hoarsely; her thighs clench around your head. Grounding yourself in reality is not possible, you observe, and so you stop fighting. Inattention like this is not negligent. Memories take the shape of waves, thawing, tracing an encroaching boundary of wet sand into the volcanic beach before you. This island belongs to both of you, and you are not afraid to drown here.

"Make that sound again," you beg of her.

"Make me," is her response.

She falls apart with a curl of your fingers. Disarray, in the form of paint running down a palette. Her bravery is admirable, that she might suggest she's capable of restraint when you can so easily ruin her.

You fuck her harder, because she begs you to. Gestalt memories are unclear, and so are your own. Haze descends into your thoughts like radiation static, even as your vision remains unblemished. There is an instant, you recall, where the sky flashes from blue to pink and ~~a third of the creatures in the sea die~~. Moments of a love past and present. You are whole, here, and unclear in ways that make you yourself. Blemishes and wear characterize copies when they might otherwise grow the same. It is absurd that eating her out would become such an experience of vastness—that you'd be unable to remain in the confines of an unwanted body in this stubborn and destitute and beautiful home—but this is what you're working with. She never expected this to be uncomplicated, and you believe her.

She moans, and you have heard that sound before. "Again," you encourage, before you lose it. If her hand wore a leash and your neck wore a collar, perhaps you could remain present. The fragments of you would persist in the form of memory, and not tear apart in cubes to reveal the selfish monsters lurking beneath.

Please keep me safe, you remember begging her—it was a warm fantasy to believe that she could, but even now, you believe it.

Ariane throbs around your fingers. She gets tighter whenever you play with her clit—adorably predictable—and you can barely remember any of the kanji she taught you.

Gestalt memory: you ~~vandalize~~ the wall of a ~~bombed-out~~ hospital: Sappho 147, a plea that any of this ~~senseless violence~~ might matter, that your ~~deaths~~ might matter too—and you share a kiss, then, as a ~~prayer~~ to whatever ~~God might live behind~~ the stars, and you share another kiss, and another, and another, and—

—a kiss ends; your tongue leaves Ariane's mouth. You know she can taste herself, know her soft lips, know how easily you might tumble into her heart. Her eyes are just eyes, and she sees you as you are. It is terrifying to be known, terrifying to be accepted, terrifying to both be alone, and not be alone—but terror is not a bad feeling. It is only love speaking in the voice of the missing. Not unlike your Vinetan accent—you cannot say ship, can't say roof, can't say milk or bag or dawn but maybe wish.

It is all so silly.

Perhaps one day you will tumble down the inclined cargo ramp and make love to her on the beach. You will have to be careful, with sand and wind—but you will know her by then. Acts of love will be simple things, unfastened from trauma and proxy. Neither logic nor reason will remain to stop you.

For now, she tells you "don't stop." So you don't. Your tumultuous memories are not unlike the souvenir snowglobe of a Rotfront antenna that Ariane keeps on her desk: shaken, obscured, encapsulated and submerged as a facsimile. There are probably ways to engage with sex more healthily, but those are ideals. You will only ever fuck as who you are, and who you are swirls, the gentle ~~death throes~~ of a ~~burning jet fighter~~ and the quiet finesse of that moment where you and ~~Alina~~ didn't die, where ~~Dutch roll~~ and ~~phugoid~~ cycles slammed your bodies together and a spiderweb entangled your hearts.

"Can you come again?" you ask Ariane, concerned.

"I'm going to be so sore," she pants, "but I'm so fucking curious if I can, and I'd be damned if I didn't try—"

You fuck your fingers back into her. You are not gentle—she never wanted you to be, but sex is always a game and always a compromise. The sound of her cunt is shameless, and you hear her get wetter before she squirts in your hand. Liquid collects in your palm, in her belly button, runs down the crease of her thigh and drips on the floor.

"Ariane, *fuck*", you choke out. She cannot respond—she's biting into her upper arm, twisting helplessly into sensation. Surely her teeth will draw blood, and you will disinfect and bandage her carefully in the aftermath. No amount of dissociation will stop you from proper aftercare, not for any reason—and separately from that—you might as well trust her and say it: "Come for me again, you fucking whore." Sometimes love is vicious. You don't give her time to respond before your mouth returns to her clit.

She cries out your name; the shape of its written form is on the tip of your tongue and it makes her come in your mouth before you complete the sun radical. She screams briefly and then chokes on spit—you almost feel guilty for how brutal this is, were it not for how obviously she's enjoying it. You have to pin her down with your arms so she doesn't hurt herself falling off the table, and her legs pin your head to her cunt; you feel every throb and every contraction and pain is human and your jaw hurts and your tongue hurts and that place where you irresponsibly let her slap your face hurts—

"That's it. I'm done," she cries. "I can't—I fucking can't—I physically *cannot* continue—"

So you relent immediately, and it ends. Elements of romance linger: you are holding her to calm her down (not unlike those nights of the worst uncertainties; the micrometeorites and the what-ifs), using your body weight, using what warmth it knows how to produce. It is easy to stay with her, easy to remain in parallel without demanding each other's attention, easy to accept all of her next to all of you. The crushing realization that perhaps she's all you have left returns—and, as usual, you allow it to pass. Storms like that need not be named or feared.

"You called me a whore," Ariane whimpers. "Oh, *fuck*—"

"Did it help?"

"Yes, *thank you*," she trembles. "Just thinking about it is—oh fuck, oh fuck, oh *fuck*" —she clenches her thighs together and mumbles— "oh, you made me feel so good."

"Good. I like doing that," you smile. She cradles your head; kisses you soft and sweet. This is what exhaustion looks like: by your calculation, you've had sex for at least four nonconsecutive hours within the six since you started dancing, and the intensity never quite abated until now. Sweat is imprinted onto the table in the shape of Ariane's back and shoulder blades; her knees are bruised, her ass, all of those *bites*—

Ariane squeezes her wrist and the skin blanches. "I'm so dehydrated," she giggles.

"The tap is right there."

She looks above her head. This makes her come to terms with how you've just fucked on the table in the mess hall. Silly. There are several used cups she's left and pushed up towards the liquid ration machine, and you watch her make a decision. Sometimes sex is a compromise.

"This table sucks," Ariane bemoans. "Why can't we fuck in normal places?"

"Uncontrolled want?"

"Uncontrolled want for my back not to feel like shit," she says, clawing her way up your arm to sit upright. "Twenty-six is decay, Elster. You know what twenty-six is? It's two fucking thirteens together. It's like if death was dead."

You snort, refocusing on the task. "So, between cleaning you up, and getting you to bed, which should happen first?"

"Feel my fucking legs," Ariane says. "Do you think I can walk on this? You think I have *bones*, Elster? What the fuck did you do with my fucking *skeleton*, Elster?"

"I'm going to take you to bed," you decide.

It is easy enough to scoop her into your arms. The state of her makeup—those cute little red wings she adds whenever she wants you to make a fool of yourself—suggests that you did actually make her cry, and as attractive as that is during sex, she looks kind of miserable.

"Are you all right?" you're compelled to ask.

"I am an invertebrate now," she says. "Or no. More like an amorphous ball of flesh. I feel very fleshy."

"This is horrifying. Please stop," you tell her.

"Yeah, I'm all right," she grins. "Just—drenched in sweat, and my own come, and your spit, and tears, and—"

"We cannot get horny again," you say, setting her down in her bed. Despite all the times you intended to go here tonight, this is the first you've actually made it. Little steps, small victories.

"Hey," Ariane says, preventing you from leaving the room. "We had sex."

"Yes. We did do that. Repeatedly."

"How do you feel about that?"

You think about it. "Wet and tired and amazing."

"Right? Me too. And sore—"

"And sore."

"Fuck, I feel fucking *great*," she says. "We should do you again—"

"There is an *imminent* risk of this happening. Can I *please* go get something to clean you up?"

"Fuck no. I mean—just grab my soap. I don't want you to not be here."

This afterglow is different from the previous. It is quieter, more sensual, and it is excruciatingly painful to make the diversion into the Gestalt bathroom (especially when you leave your foot stretched out of the door so she can see you). Nevertheless, you manage to find soap and towels before you settle into her room for good—and, you've made an assumption.

"Hey," Ariane says. She's slipped out of her dress, and you see her naked for the first time. "Are we sleeping together?"

"Did you want to sleep together?"

"Desperately. Follow-up question. *Can* we sleep together?"

You think. "I'd rather find out than assume not?"

"Same page," she nods. "Fuck, we should have fucked here. My back hurts from that table."

"I'm so sorry." You sit on the edge of her bed. Soapy towels clean bites. "We'll be wise in the future."

Ariane scoffs. "No we fucking won't—I *know* us. Since when are we wise?"

"We can start new habits."

"Habitually fucking," she says, drinking water. "I doubt there will be a place left in this ship where we haven't fucked in like, a couple dozen cycles."

"I refuse to fuck in the reactor room." You giggle preemptively. "But I know a few places that could make you see stars."

"What, the flight deck?" she snorts. "That'd be fun, though. It'd feel a little romantic, even."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I mean, I would date you," she says.

So you figure out that you can cry. It is not a dignified experience, especially when you're on her bed clutching a towel covered in soap and your combined bodily fluids. Replika eyes do not have tear ducts, but Gestalt reflexes nevertheless push their way to the surface and manifest in your breathing.

"Hey," she says, softer. Hands on your hands. "Are you alright?"

You hesitate. "I don't know how to answer that?"

"What are you feeling right now?"

"Trust. Grief that probably isn't mine, and... a lot of change." you choke. "Can we please just —"

Ariane understands and allows you further into her bed. It is a new perspective of a much-too-small bunk, showing even more facets of her: the clouds painted on the alcove's ceiling, the stain of menstrual blood on white sheets.

"We've never cuddled before," Ariane realizes

"It's okay. I know how."

"Gestalt memory?" she asks.

You press your head into her neck, cover her with a leg. *Is this comfortable for you?* An arm wraps around you in nonverbal response. It makes you feel safe. "Gestalt memory," you agree. "Like my emotions aren't mine, and I'm finding closure for someone else, if that makes sense."

Ariane shrugs. "Glad you found it."

She kills the lights. Knows well enough what you'd rather keep private. You're the endpoint of a star-crossed wish, after all.

Eventually, you kiss her again in the dark.

~~Gestalt memory: the first time you meet Alina, a dead bird oozes out of your chest and decides to live halfway to the ground. Somewhere on Vineta you might kiss her again through a rusted cockpit voice recorder; sit in the wreckage of all the damage you caused and paint your love over the bombs before gentle sharks drag you back to the surface. Perhaps an ocean will show you how deep roots can grow; perhaps silt will fill the hole in your heart~~

~~Gestalt memory: "Hey. I love you too," you say. Both of you cry for the first time in a war. Your trauma kisses hers, and you watch the world burn~~

You find a way to laugh about it. Sleeping in Ariane's bed is absurd and untenable. Blankets obstruct ventilation; pillows are insufficient and there is a lot of shit in here that should be somewhere else. She has no knowledge of how Replika sleep routines actually work. She is an astrophysicist, not a computer scientist, and it shows. There is a reason why you had to write ESC :WQ in pen on most of the console keyboards—but really, she's just so cute.

"You and your little magpie teeth," Ariane says. She grabs your chin next. "Little magpie beak."

"How are you feeling?"

"Sore as *fuck*," Ariane bemoans. "And it was hubristic because now there's no way I can get fucked tomorrow."

"You pushed yourself. How many times did you come?"

"Like, three and a half," she says. "Give or take. Probably give. You should savor it because I doubt this will happen again—actually, no, I don't doubt it. You have wicked intentions and I've seen into your soul."

You giggle. Giggling like a little girl is not a programmed reaction of yours, and the looseness is almost concerning. Being guarded keeps you strong, but with Ariane you are melting melting melting. It is not a permanent change—tonight has an ephemeral psychology that will surely dissipate over the next few days. A relationship is not built in one night, you know, but that doesn't stop you from looking forward to it.

"What did you see in there?" you ask. "Me gnashing my teeth? Or just sex?"

"Nah. Just a girl who wants to be a girl," she says. A pause. "Wouldn't you give anything to just... be girls together?"

You also pause, laying back. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, a better world. Maybe one where nothing is fucked up, and neither of us have anything to run from, and we get to share the simple parts of a simple life in a way that makes sense and doesn't end."

You think about it. "No," is your answer. "We're not us in that world."

"I knew you'd say that." It is dark, but you know that she smiles. "I've always been too much of a dreamer. Never knowing what to do, never knowing what to say or who to become. I stay stuck a lot."

"You should keep dreaming," you tell her. ~~"It's what made me fall for you like this."~~ "It makes me happy when you do."

She curls into your chest, sleepy. "Good," she says. "Watch me."

And another moment passes with her.

End Notes

Written in second person because I'm fascinated by how using an abstract "you" involves the reader into a sort of intimate identity blur with Elster that parallels the dissociation of discovering Gestalt memories as a Replika. It also creates a situation where the identity of "you" is exclusively validated by other characters using "your" name; paralleling how Ariane is the one who externally validates Elster as a person before Elster can hold that for herself.

Themes of miscommunication, mistakes, lack of clarity, misunderstanding, and opaque intentions pervade the canon of this relationship, and it's my interpretation that our inability to objectively decipher Signalis as a narrative is directly tied to how Elster and Ariane communicate as people. Ariane often seems to be a needlessly frustrating riddle, and Elster is a deeply avoidant person who nevertheless motivates the plot of the game by repeatedly succumbing to intense (and often impulsive) emotion. It follows, to me at least, that their sex would play out in a similar way—and be subject to the same pitfalls. Also similarly, it's through careful inference and unconditional love that they might push through.

In any case, my thesis as an erotica writer is that sex is a form of communication, and writing characters having sex is inseparable from studying those characters' most fundamental relationships to self, to body, and to each other. It's very intentional that Ariane always responds to direct questions indirectly (a trauma response one might develop due to bullying); and that Elster always copes with intensity by fucking off into space, or burrowing into her own head (even just in the form of monologue). The foreshadowing of tragic game events is similarly intentional: Elster telling Ariane "please dance with me again" being the standout. Sex is a microcosm and here, all the little things have meaning.

That's all the scholarly stuff, I'm also just a lesbian who's down bad orally fixated on body fluids horny as fuck for transgender robot women and I think Elster deserves to cum her brains out and Ariane deserves to get railed in a sundress.

T4T Lilith/Alina stuff may be forthcoming. I have... intense thoughts and feelings about them.

I always feel kinda weird commenting on erotica so here's blanket consent to be horny in the comments; I will simply not be off-put.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!